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“Is he in himself?” asked Gibson the builder, coming into the Emporium.

Mrs. Wilson was alone in the shop. Since trade grew so brisk she had an assistant to help her, but he was out for his breakfast at present, and as it happened she was all alone.

“No,” she said, “he’s no in! We’re terribly driven this twelvemonth back, since trade grew so thrang, and he’s aye hunting business in some corner. He’s out the now after a carrying affair. Was it ainything particular?”

She looked at Gibson with a speculation in her eyes that almost verged on hostility. Wives of the lower classes who are active helpers in a husband’s affairs, often direct that look upon strangers who approach him in the way of business. For they are enemies whatever way you take them; come to be done by the husband or to do him—in either case, therefore, the object of a sharp curiosity. You may call on an educated man, either to fleece him or be fleeced, and his wife, though she knows all about it, will talk to you charmingly of trifles, while you wait for him in her parlour. But a wife of the lower orders, active in her husband’s affairs, has not been trained to dissemble so prettily—though her face be a mask, what she is wondering comes out in her eye. There was suspicion in the big round stare

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that Mrs. Wilson directed at the builder. What was *he* spiering for "himsell" for? What could he be up to? Some end of his own, no doubt. Anxious curiosity forced her to enquire.

"Would I do instead?" she asked.

"Well, hardly," said Gibson, clawing his chin, and gazing at a corded round of "Barbie's Best" just above his head. "Dod, it's a fine ham that," he said, to turn the subject. "How are ye selling it the now?"

"Tenpence a pound retail, but ninepence only if ye take a whole one. Ye had better let me send you one, Mr. Gibson, now that winter's drawing on! It's a heartsome thing, the smell of frying ham on a frosty morning—" and her laugh went skelloching up the street.

"Well, ye see," said Gibson with a grin, "I expect Mr. Wilson to present me with one, when he hears the news that I have brought him."

"Aha!" said she, "it's something good, then," and she stuck her arms akimbo. "James!" she shrilled, "James!"—and the red-haired boy shot from the back premises.

"Run up to the Red Lion, and see if your father has finished his crack wi' Templandmuir. Tell him Mr. Gibson wants to see him on important business."

The boy squinted once at the visitor, and scooted, the red head of him foremost.

While Gibson waited and clawed his chin she examined him narrowly. Suspicion as to the object of his visit fixed her attention on his face.

He was a man with mean brown eyes. Brown eyes may be clear and limpid as a mountain pool, or they may

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have the fine black flash of anger and the jovial gleam, or they may be mean things—little and sly and oily. Gibson's had the depth of cunning, not the depth of character, and they glistened like the eyes of a lustful animal. He was a reddish man, with a fringe of sandy beard, and a perpetual grin which showed his yellow teeth, with green deposit round their roots. It was more than a grin, it was a rictus, semicircular from cheek to cheek, and the beady eyes, ever on the watch up above it, belied its false benevolence. He was not florid, yet that grin of his seemed to intensify his redness (perhaps because it brought out and made prominent his sandy valance and the ruddy round of his cheeks) so that the baker christened him long ago "the man with the sandy smile." "Cunning Johnny" was his other nickname. Wilson had recognized a match in him the moment he came to Barbie, and had resolved to act with him if he could, but never to act against him. They had made advances to each other. Birds of a feather, in short.

The grocer came in hurriedly, white-waistcoated to-day, and a perceptibly bigger bulge in his belly than when we first saw him in Barbie, four years ago now.

"Good morning, Mr. Gibson," he panted. "Is it private that ye wanted to see me on?"

"Verra private," said the sandy smiler.

"We'll go through to the house then," said Wilson, and ushered his guest through the back premises. But the voice of his wife recalled him. "James!" she cried. "Here for a minute just!" and he turned to her, leaving Gibson in the yard.

"Be careful what you're doing," she whispered in his

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ear. "It wasna for nothing they christened Gibson 'Cunning Johnny.' Keep the dirt out your e'en."

"There's no fear of that," he assured her pompously. It was a grand thing to have a wife like that, but her advice nettled him now just a little, because it seemed to imply a doubt of his efficiency—and that was quite onnessar. He knew what he was doing. They would need to rise very early that got the better o' a man like him!

"You'll take a dram?" said Wilson when they reached a pokey little room where the most conspicuous and dreary object was a large bare flowerpot of red earthenware, on a green woollen mat, in the middle of a round table. Out of the flowerpot rose gauntly a three-sticked frame, up which two lonely stalks of a climbing plant tried to scramble, but failed miserably to reach the top. The round little ricketty table with the family album on one corner (placed at what Mrs. Wilson considered a beautiful artistic angle to the window), the tawdry cloth, the green mat, the shiny horsehair sofa, and the stuffy atmosphere, were all in a perfect harmony of ugliness. A sampler on the wall informed the world that there was no place like home.

Wilson pushed the flowerpot to one side, and "You'll take a dram?" he said blithely.

"Oh, aye," said Gibson with a grin, "I never refuse drink when I'm offered it for nothing."

"Hi! hi!" laughed Wilson at the little joke, and produced a cut decanter and a pair of glasses. He filled the glasses so brimming full that the drink ran over on the table.

"Canny, man, for God's sake canny!" cried Gibson

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starting forward in alarm. "Don't ye see you're spilling the mercies?" He stooped his lips to the rim of his glass, and sipped, lest a drop of Scotia's nectar should escape him.

They faced each other, sitting. "Here's pith!" said Gibson—"Pith!" said the other in chorus, and they nodded to each other in anity, primed glasses up and ready. And then it was eyes heavenward and the little finger uppermost.

Gibson smacked his lips once and again when the fiery spirit tickled his uvula.

"Ha!" said he, "that's the stuff to put heart in a man."

"It's no bad whiskey," said Wilson complacently.

Gibson wiped the sandy stubble round his mouth with the back of his hand, and considered for a moment. Then, leaning forward, he tapped Wilson's knee in whispering importance.

"Have you heard the news?" he murmured, with a watchful glimmer in his eyes.

"No!" cried Wilson glowering, eager and alert. "Is't ocht in the business line? Is there a possibeelity for me in't?"

"Oh, there might," nodded Gibson, playing his man for a while.

"Aye man!" cried Wilson briskly, and brought his chair an inch or two forward. Gibson grinned and watched him with his beady eyes.—"What green teeth he has!" thought Wilson who was not fastidious.

"The Coal Company are meaning to erect a village for five hundred miners a mile out the Fleckie Road, and they're running a branch line up the Lintie's

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Burn, that'll need the building of a dozen brigs. I'm happy to say I have nabbed the contract for the building."

"Man, Mr. Gibson, d'ye tell me that! I'm proud to hear it, sir; I am that!" Wilson was hotching in his chair with eagerness. For what could Gibson be wanting with *him* if it wasna to arrange about the carting? "Fill up your glass, Mr. Gibson, man; fill up your glass! You're drinking nothing at all. Let *me* help you!"

"Aye, but I havena the contract for the carting," said Gibson. "That's not mine to dispose of. They mean to keep it in their own hand."

Wilson's mouth forgot to shut, and his eyes were big and round as his mouth in staring disappointment. Was it this he was wasting his drink for?

"Where do I come in?" he asked blankly.

Gibson tossed off another glassful of the burning heartener of men, and leaned forward with his elbows on the table.

"D'ye ken Goudie, the Company's Manager? He's worth making up to, I can tell ye. He has complete control of the business, and can airt you the road of a good thing. I made a point of helping him in everything, ever since he came to Barbie, and I'm glad to say that he hasna forgotten't. Man, it was through him I got the building contract—they never threw't open to the public. But they mean to contract separate for carting the material. That means that they'll need the length of a dozen horses on the road for a twelvemonth to come; for it's no only the building—they're launching out on a big scale, and there's lots of other things forbye. Now Goudie's as close as a whin and likes to

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keep everything dark till the proper time comes for sploring o't. Not a whisper has been heard so far about this village for the miners—there's a rumour, to be sure, about a wheen houses going up, but nothing *near* the reality. And there's not a soul, either, that kens there's a big contract for carting to be had 'ceptna Goudie and mysell. But or a month's bye, they'll be advertising for estimates for a twelvemonth's carrying. I thoct a hint aforehand would be worth something to you, and that's the reason of my visit."

"I see," said Wilson briskly. "You're verra good, Mr. Gibson. You mean you'll give me an inkling in private of the other estimates sent in, and help to arrange mine according?"

"Na," said Gibson. "Goudie's owre close to let me ken! I'll speak a word in his ear on your behalf, to be sure, if you agree to the proposal I mean to put before you. But Gourlay's the man you need to keep your eye on. It's you or him for the contract—there's nobody else to compete wi' the two o' ye."

"Imphm, I see," said Wilson, and tugged his moustache in meditation. All expression died out of his face while his brain churned within. What Brodie had christened "the considering keek" was in his eyes; they were far away, and saw the distant village in process of erection; busy with its chances and occasions. Then an uneasy thought seemed to strike him and recall him to the man by his side. He stole a shifty glance at the sandy smiler.

"But I thought *you* were a friend of Gourlay's," he said slowly.

"Friendship!" said Gibson. "We're speaking of busi-



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ness! And there's sma-all friendship atween me and Gourlay. He was nebbly owre a bill I sent in the other day; and I'm getting tired of his bluster. Besides, there's little more to be made of him. Gourlay's bye wi't. But you're a rising man, Mr. Wilson, and I think that you and me might work thegither to our own advantage, don't ye see? Yes; just so; to the advantage of us both. Oom?"

"I hardly see what you're driving at," said Wilson.

"I'm driving at this," said Gibson. "If Gourlay kens you're against him for the contract, he'll cut his estimate down to a ruinous price, out o' sheer spite—yes, out o' sheer spite—rather than be licked by *you* in public competition. And if he does that, Goudie and I may do what we like, but we canna help you. For it's the partners that decide the estimates sent in, d'ye see? Imphm, it's the partners. Goudie has noathing to do wi' that. And if Gourlay once gets round the partners, you'll be left out in the cold for a very loang time. Shivering, sir, shivering! You will that!"

"Dod, you're right. There's a danger of that. But I fail to see how we can prevent it!"

"We can put Gourlay on a wrong scent," said Gibson.

"But how though?"

Gibson met one question by another.

"What was the charge for a man and a horse and a day's carrying when ye first came hereaway?" he asked.

"Only four shillings a day," said Wilson promptly.

"It has risen to six now," he added.

"Exactly!" said Gibson; "and with the new works coming in about the town it'll rise to eight yet! I have it for a fact that the Company's willing to gie that!"



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Now if you and me could procure a job for Gourlay at the lower rate, before the news o' this new industry gets scattered—a job that would require the whole of his plant, you understand, and prevent his competing for the Company's business—we would clear"—he clawed his chin to help his arithmetic—"we would clear three hundred and seventy-four pounds o' difference on the twelvemonth. At least *you* would make that," he added, "but you would allow me a handsome commission of course—the odd hundred and seventy, say—for bringing the scheme before ye! I don't think there's ocht unreasonable in tha-at! For it's not the mere twelvemonth's work that's at stake, you understand, it's the valuable connection for the fee-yuture! Now, I have influence wi' Goudie; I can help you there. But if Gourlay gets in there's just a chance that you'll never be able to oust him."

"I see," said Wilson. "Before he knows what's coming, we're to provide work for Gourlay at the lower rate, both to put money in our own pocket and prevent him competing for the better business."

"You've summed it to the nines," said Gibson.

"Yes," said Wilson blankly, "but how on earth are *we* to provide work for him?"

Gibson leaned forward a second time and tapped Wilson on the knee.

"Have you never considered what a chance for building there's in that holm of yours?" he asked. "You've a fortune there, lying undeveloped!"

That was the point to which Cunning Johnny had been leading all the time. He cared as little for Wilson as for Gourlay; all he wanted was a contract for cover-

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ing Wilson's holm with jerry-built houses, and a good commission on the year's carrying. It was for this he evolved the conspiracy to cripple Gourlay.

Wilson's thoughts went to and fro like the shuttle of a weaver. He blinked in rapidity of thinking, and stole shifty glances at his comrade. He tugged his moustache and said "Imphm" many times. Then his eyes went off in their long preoccupied stare, and the sound of the breath, coming heavy through his nostrils, was audible in the quiet room. Wilson was one of the men whom you hear thinking.

"I see," he said slowly. "You mean to bind Gourlay to cart building material to my holm, at the present price of work. You'll bind him in general terms so that he canna suspect, till the time comes, who in particular he's to work for. In the meantime I'll be free to offer for the Company's business at the higher price."

"That's the size o't," said Gibson.

Wilson was staggered by the rapid combinations of the scheme. But Cunning Johnny had him in the toils. The plan he proposed stole about the grocer's every weakness, and tugged his inclinations to consent. It was very important, he considered, that he, and no other, should obtain this contract, which was both valuable in itself and an earnest of other business in the future. And Gibson's scheme got Gourlay, the only possible rival, out the way. For it was not possible for Gourlay to put more than twelve horses on the road, and if he thought he had secured a good contract already, he would never dream of applying for another. Then, Wilson's malice was gratified by the thought that Gourlay, who hated him, should have to serve, as helper and

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underling, in a scheme for his aggrandizement. That would take down his pride for him! And the commercial imagination, so strong in Wilson, was inflamed by the vision of himself as a wealthy house-owner which Gibson put before him. Cunning Johnny knew all this when he broached the scheme—he foresaw the pull of it on Wilson's nature. Yet Wilson hesitated. He did not like to give himself to Gibson quite so rapidly.

“You go fast, Mr. Gibson,” said he. “Faith, you go fast! This is a big affair, and needs to be looked at for a while.”

“Fast!” cried Gibson. “Damn it, we have no time to waste. We maun act on the spur of the moment.”

“I'll have to borrow money,” said Wilson slowly, “and it's verra dear at the present time.”

“It was never worth more in Barbie than it is at the present time. Man, don't ye see the chance you're neglecting? Don't ye see what it means? There's thousands lying at your back door if ye'll only reach to pick them up! Yes, thousands! Thousands, I'm telling ye! Thousands!”

Wilson saw himself provost and plutocrat. Yet was he cautious.

“*You*'ll do well by the scheme,” he said tartly, “if you get the sole contract for building these premises of mine, and a fat commission on the carrying forbye!”

“Can you carry the scheme without me?” said Gibson. “A word from me to Goudie means a heap.” There was a veiled threat in the remark.

“Oh, we'll come to terms,” said the other. “But how will you manage Gourlay?”

“Aha!” said Gibson, “I'll come in handy for that,

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you'll discover! There's been a backset in Barbie for the last year—things went owre quick at the start and were followed by a wee lull; but it's only for a time, sir, it's only for a time. Hows'ever, it and you thegither have damaged Gourlay—he's both short o' work and scarce o' cash, as I found to my cost when I asked him for my siller! So when I offer him a big contract for carting stones atween the quarry and the town foot, he'll swallow it without question. I'll insert a clause that he must deliver the stuff at such places as I direct within four hundred yards of the Cross, in ainy direction—for I've several jobs near the Cross, doan't ye see, and how's he to know that yours is one o' them? Man, it's easy to bamboozle an ass like Gourlay! Besides, he'll think my principals have trusted me to let the carrying to ainyone I like, and, as I let it to him, he'll fancy I'm on his side, doan't ye see?—he'll never jalouse that I mean to diddle him. In the meantime we'll spread the news that you're meaning to build on a big scale upon your own land—we'll have the ground levelled, the foundations dug, and the drains and everything seen to. Now, it'll never occur to Gourlay, in the present slackness o' trade, that you would contract wi' another man to cart your material, and go hunting for other work yoursell. That'll throw him off the scent till the time comes to put his nose on't. When the Company advertise for estimates he canna compete wi' you, because he's preëngaged to me, and he'll think you're out o't, too, because you're busy wi' your own woark. You'll be free to nip the eight shillings. Then we'll force him to fulfill his bargain and cart for us at six! ”

“ If he refuses? ” said Wilson.

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"I'll have the contract stamped and signed in the presence of witnesses," said Gibson. "Not that that's necessary, I believe, but a double knot's aye the safest."

Wilson looked at him with admiration.

"Gosh, Mr. Gibson," he cried, "you're a warmer! Ye deserve your name. Ye ken what the folk ca' you?"

"Oh, yes," said Gibson complacently. "I'm quite proud o' the description."

"I've my ain craw to pick wi' Gourlay," he went on. "He was damned ill-bred yestreen when I asked him to settle my account, and talked about extortion. But bide a wee, bide a wee! I'll enjoy the look on his face when he sees himself forced to carry for you, at a rate lower than the market price."

When Gibson approached Gourlay on the following day he was full of laments about the poor state of trade.

"Aye," said he, "the grand railway they boasted o' hasna done muckle for the town!"

"Atweel aye," quoth Gourlay with pompous wisdom; "they'll maybe find, or a's bye, that the auld way wasna the warst way. There was to be a great boom, as they ca't, but I see few signs o't."

"I see few signs o't, either," said Gibson, "it's the slackest time for the last twa years."

Gourlay grunted his assent.

"But I've a grand job for ye, for a' that," said Gibson, slapping his hands. "What do ye say to the feck of a year's carting tweesht the quarry and the town foot?"

"I might consider that," said Gourlay, "if the terms were good."

"Six shillins," said Gibson, and went on in solemn

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protest: "In the present state o' trade, doan't ye see, I couldna give a penny more." Gourlay, who had denounced the present state of trade even now, was prevented by his own words from asking for a penny more.

"At the town foot, you say?" he asked.

"I've several jobs thereaway," Gibson explained hurriedly; "and you must agree to deliver stuff ainy place I want it within four hundred yards o' the Cross!—It's all one to you, of course," he went on, "seeing you're paid by the day."

"Oh, it's all one to me," said Gourlay.

Peter Riney and the new "orra" man were called in to witness the agreement. Cunning Johnny had made it as cunning as he could.

"We may as well put a stamp on't," said he. "A stamp costs little, and means a heap."

"You're damned particular the day," cried Gourlay in a sudden heat.

"Oh, nothing more than my usual, nothing more than my usual," said Gibson blandly.—"Good morning, Mr. Gourlay," and he made for the door, buttoning the charter of his dear revenge in the inside pocket of his coat. Gourlay ignored him.

When Gibson got out he turned to the House with the Green Shutters, and "Curse you!" said he, "you may refuse to answer me the day, but wait till this day eight weeks. You'll be roaring than."

On that day eight weeks Gourlay received a letter from Gibson requiring him to hold himself in readiness to deliver stone, lime, baulks of timber, and iron girders in Mr. Wilson's holm, in terms of his agreement, and in accordance with the orders to be given him from day to

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day. He was apprised that a couple of carts of lime and seven loads of stone were needed on the morrow.

He went down the street with grinding jaws, the letter crushed to a white pellet in his hand. It would have gone ill with Gibson had he met him. Gourlay could not tell why, or to what purpose, he marched on and on with forward staring eyes. He only knew vaguely that the anger drove him.

When he came to the Cross a long string of carts was filing from the Skeighan Road, and passing across to the street leading Fleckie-ward. He knew them to be Wilson's. The Deacon was there of course, hobbling on his thin shanks, and cocking his eye to see everything that happened.

"What does this mean?" Gourlay asked him, though he loathed the Deacon.

"Oh, haven't ye heard?" quoth the Deacon blithely. "That's the stuff for the new mining village out the Fleckie Road. Wilson has nabbed the contract for the carting. They're saying it was Gibson's influence wi' Goudie that helped him to the getting o't!"

Amid his storm of anger at the trick, Gourlay was conscious of a sudden pity for himself, as for a man most unfairly worsted. He realized for a moment his own inefficiency as a business man, in conflict with cleverer rivals, and felt sorry to be thus handicapped by nature. Though wrath was uppermost, the other feeling was revealed, shewing itself by a gulping in the throat and a rapid blinking of the eyes. The Deacon marked the signs of his chagrin.

"Man!" he reported to the bodies, "but Gourlay was cut to the quick. His face shewed how gunkit he was.



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Oh, but he was chawed. I saw his breist give the great heave."

"Were ye no sorry?" cried the baker.

"Thorry, hi!" laughed the Deacon. "Oh, I was thorry, to be sure," he lisped, "but I didna thyow't. I'm glad to thay I've a grand control of my emotionth. Not like thum folk we know of," he added sliily, giving the baker a "good one."

All next day Gibson's masons waited for their build- ing material in Wilson's holm. But none came. And all day seven of Gourlay's horses champed idly in their stalls.

Barbie had a weekly market now, and, as it happened, that was the day it fell on. At two in the afternoon Gourlay was standing on the gravel outside the Red Lion, trying to look wise over a sample of grain which a farmer had poured upon his great palm. Gibson approached with false voice and smile.

"Gosh, Mr. Gourlay!" he cried protestingly; "have ye forgotten whatna day it is? Ye havena gi'en my men a ton o' stuff to gang on wi'!"

To the farmer's dismay his fine sample of grain was scattered on the gravel by a convulsive movement of Gourlay's arm. As Gourlay turned on his enemy, his face was frightfully distorted; all his brow seemed gathered in a knot above his nose, and he gaped on his words, yet ground them out like a labouring mill, each word solid as plug shot.

"I'll see Wil-son . . . . and Gib-son . . . . and every other man's son . . . . frying in hell," he said slowly, "ere a horse o' mine draws a stane o' Wilson's property. Be damned to ye, but there's your answer!"

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Gibson's cunning deserted him for once. He put his hand on Gourlay's shoulder in pretended friendly remonstrance.

"Take your hand off my shouther!" said Gourlay in a voice the tense quietness of which should have warned Gibson to forbear.

But he actually shook Gourlay with a feigned playfulness.

Next instant he was high in air; for a moment the hobnails in the soles of his boots gleamed vivid to the sun; then Gourlay sent him flying through the big window of the Red Lion, right on to the middle of the great table where the market-folk were drinking.

For a minute he lay stunned and bleeding among the broken crockery, in a circle of white faces and startled cries.

Gourlay's face appeared at the jagged rent, his eyes narrowed to fiercely gleaming points, a hard, triumphant devilry playing round his black lips. "You damned treacherous rat!" he cried, "that's the game John Gourla can play wi' a thing like you."

Gibson rose from the ruin on the table and came bleeding to the window, his grin a rictus of wrath, his green teeth wolfish with anger.

"By God, Gourlay," he screamed, "I'll make you pay for this; I'll fight you through a' the law courts in Breetain, but you'll implement your bond."

"Damn you for a measled swine, would you grunt at me," cried Gourlay, and made to go at him through the window. Though he could not reach him Gibson quailed at his look. He shook his fist in impotent wrath, and spat threats of justice through his green teeth.

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“To hell wi’ your law-wers!” cried Gourlay, “I’d throttle ye like the dog you are on the floor o’ the House o’ Lords.”

But that day was to cost him dear. Ere six months passed he was cast in damages and costs for a breach of contract aggravated by assault. He appealed, of course. He was not to be done; he would shew the dogs what he thought of them.