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“SUCH a rickle of furniture I never saw!” said the Provost.

“Whose is it?” said Brodie.

“Oh, have ye noat heard?” said the Head of the Town with eyebrows in air. “It belongs to that fellow Wilson, doan’t ye know? He’s a son of oald Wilson, the mowdie-man of Brigabee. It seems we’re to have him for a neighbour, or all’s bye wi’t. I declare I doan’t know what this world’s coming to!”

“Man, Provost,” said Brodie, “d’ye tell me tha-at? I’ve been over at Fleckie for the last ten days—my brother Rab’s dead and won away, as I daresay you have heard—oh, yes, we must all go—so, ye see, I’m scarcely abreast o’ the latest intelligence. What’s Wilson doing here? I thought he had been a pawnbroker in Embro.”

“Noat he! It’s *whispered* indeed, that he left Brigabee to go and help in a pawmbroker’s, but it seems he married an Aberdeen lass and sattled there after a while, the manager of a store, I have been given to understand. He has taken oald Rab Jamieson’s barn at the bottom of the Cross—for what purpose it beats even me to tell! And that’s his furniture——”

“I declare!” said the astonished Brodie. “He’s a smart-looking boy that. Will that be a son of his?”

He pointed to a sharp-faced urchin of twelve who was busy carrying chairs round the corner of the barn, to

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the tiny house where Wilson meant to live. He was a red-haired boy with an upturned nose, dressed in shirt and knickerbockers only. The cross of his braces came comically near his neck—so short was the space of shirt between the top line of his breeches and his shoulders. His knickers were open at the knee, and the black stockings below them were wrinkled slackly down his thin legs, being tied loosely above the calf with dirty white strips of cloth instead of garters. He had no cap, and it was seen that his hair had a “cow-lick” in front; it slanted up from his brow, that is, in a sleek kind of tuft. There was a violent squint in one of his sharp grey eyes, so that it seemed to flash at the world across the bridge of his nose. He was so eager at his work that his clumsy-looking boots—they only *looked* clumsy because the legs they were stuck to were so thin—skidded on the cobbles as he whipped round the barn with a chair inverted on his poll. When he came back for another chair, he sometimes wheepled a tune of his own making, in shrill disconnected jerks, and sometimes wiped his nose on his sleeve. And the bodies watched him.

“Faith, he’s keen,” said the Provost.

“But what on earth has Wilson ta’en auld Jamieson’s house and barn for? They have stude empty since I kenna whan,” quoth Alexander Toddle, forgetting his English in surprise.

“They say he means to start a business! He’s made some bawbees in Aiberdeen, they’re telling me, and he thinks he’ll set Barbie in a lowe wi’t.”

“Ou, he means to work a perfect revolution,” said Johnny Coe.

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“ In Barbie! ” cried astounded Toddle.

“ In Barbie e’en’t,” said the Provost.

“ It would take a heap to revolutionize *hit*,” said the baker, the ironic man.

“ There’s a chance in that hoose,” Brodie burst out, ignoring the baker’s jibe. “ Dod, there’s a chance, sirs. I wonder it never occurred to me before.”

“ Are ye thinking ye have missed a gude thing? ” grinned the Deacon.

But Brodie’s lips were working in the throes of commercial speculation, and he stared, heedless of the jibe. So Johnny Coe took up his sapient parable.

“ Atweel,” said he, “ there’s a chance, Mr. Brodie. That road round to the back’s a handy thing. You could take a horse and cart brawly through an opening like that. And there’s a gey bit ground at the back, too, when a body comes to think o’t.”

“ What line’s he meaning to purshoo? ” queried Brodie, whose mind, quickened by the chance he saw at No. 1, The Cross, was hot on the hunt of its possibilities.

“ He’s been very close about that,” said the Provost. “ I asked Johnny Gibson—it was him had the selling o’t—but he couldn’t give me ainy satisfaction. All he could say was that Wilson had bought it and paid it. ‘ But, losh! ’ said I, ‘ he maun ’a’ lat peep what he wanted the place for! ’ But na; it seems he was owre auld-farrant for the like of that. ‘ We’ll let the folk wonder for a while, Mr. Gibson,’ he had said. ‘ The less we tell them, the keener they’ll be to ken; and they’ll advertise me for noathing by spiering one another what I’m up till.’ ”

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“Cunning!” said Brodie, breathing the word low in expressive admiration.

“Demned cute!” said Sandy Toddle.

“Very thmart!” said the Deacon.

“But the place has been falling down since ever I have mind o’t,” said Sandy Toddle. “He’s a very clever man if he makes anything out of *that*.”

“Well, well,” said the Provost, “we’ll soon see what he’s meaning to be at. Now that his furniture’s in, he surely canna keep us in the dark much loanger!”

Their curiosity was soon appeased. Within a week they were privileged to read the notice here appended:

“Mr. James Wilson begs to announce to the inhabitants of Barbie and surrounding neighbourhood that he has taken these commodious premises, No. 1, The Cross, which he intends to open shortly as a Grocery, Ironmongery, and General Provision Store. J. W. is apprised that such an Emporium has long been a felt want in the locality. To meet this want is J. W.’s intention. He will try to do so, not by making large profits on a small business, but by making small profits on a large business. Indeed, owing to his long acquaintance with the trade Mr. Wilson will be able to supply all commodities at a very little over cost price. For J. W. will use those improved methods of business which have been confined hitherto to the larger centres of population. At his Emporium you will be able, as the saying goes, to buy everything from a needle to an anchor. Moreover, to meet the convenience of his customers, J. W. will deliver goods at your own doors, distributing them with his own carts either in the town of Barbie or at any convenient distance from the same. Being a native of the district, his business hopes to secure a due share of your esteemed patronage. Thanking you, in anticipation, for the favour of an early visit,

Believe me, Ladies and Gentlemen,

“Yours faithfully,

“JAMES WILSON.”

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Such was the poster with which "Barbie and surrounding neighbourhood" were besprinkled within a week of "J. W.'s" appearance on the scene. He was known as "J. W." ever after. To be known by your initials is sometimes a mark of affection, and sometimes a mark of disrespect. It was not a mark of affection in the case of our "J. W." When Donald Scott slapped him on the back and cried "Hullo, J. W., how are the anchors selling?" Barbie had found a cue which it was not slow to make use of. Wilson even received letters addressed to "J. W., Anchor Merchant, No. 1, The Cross." Ours is a nippy locality.

But Wilson, cosy and cocky in his own good opinion, was impervious to the chilly winds of scorn. His posters, in big blue letters, were on the smiddy door and on the sides of every brig within a circuit of five miles; they were pasted, in smaller red letters, on the gateposts of every farm; and Robin Tam, the bellman, handed them about from door to door. The folk could talk of nothing else.

"Dod!" said the Provost when he read the bill, "we've a new departure here! This is an unco splutter, as the oald sow said when she tumbled in the gutter."

"Aye," said Sandy Toddle, "a fuff in the pan, I'm thinking. He promises owre muckle to last long! He lauchs owre loud to be merry at the end o't. For the loudest bummler's no the best bee, as my father, honest man, used to tell the minister."

"Ah-ah, I'm no so sure o' that," said Tam Brodie. "I foregathered wi' Wilson on Wednesday last, and I tell ye, sirs, he's worth the watching. They'll need to stand

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on a baikie that put the branks on him. He has the considering eye in his head—yon lang far-away glimmer at a thing from out the end of the eyebrow. He turned it on mysell twa-three times, the cunning devil, trying to keek into me, to see if he could use me. And look at the chance he has! There's two stores in Barbie, to be sure; but Kinnikun's a dirty beast, and folk have a scunner at his goods, and Catherwood's a dru'eken swine, and his place but sairly guided. That's a great stroke o' policy, too, promising to deliver folk's goods on their own doorstep to them. There's a whole jing-bang of out-lying clachans round Barbie that he'll get the trade of by a dodge like that. The like was never tried hereaway before. I wadna wonder but it works wonders."

It did.

It was partly policy and partly accident that brought Wilson back to Barbie. He had been managing a wealthy old merchant's store for a long time in Aberdeen, and he had been blithely looking forward to the goodwill of it, when jink, at the old man's death, in stepped a nephew, and ousted the poo-oor fellow. He had bawled shrilly, but to no purpose; he had to be travelling. When he rose to greatness in Barbie it was whispered that the nephew discovered he was feathering his own nest, and that this was the reason of his sharp dismissal. But perhaps we should credit that report to Barbie's disposition rather than to Wilson's misde-meanour.

Wilson might have set up for himself in the nippy northern town. But it is an instinct with men who have met with a rebuff in a place, to shake its dust from

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their shoes, and be off to seek their fortunes in the larger world. We take a scunner at the place that has ill-used us. Wilson took a scunner at Aberdeen, and decided to leave it and look around him. Scotland was opening up, and there were bound to be heaps of chances for a man like him! "A man like me," was a frequent phrase of Wilson's retired and solitary speculation. "Aye," he said, emerging from one of his business reveries, "there's bound to be heaps o' chances for a man like me, if I only look about me."

He was "looking about him" in Glasgow when he foregathered with his cousin William—the borer he! After many "How are ye, Jims's" and mutual spierings over a "bit mouthful of yill"—so they phrased it, but that was a meiosis, for they drank five quarts—they fell to a serious discussion of the commercial possibilities of Scotland. The borer was of the opinion that the Braes of Barbie had a future yet, "for a' the gaffer was so keen on keeping his men in the dark about the coal."

Now Wilson knew (as what Scotsman does not?) that in the middle-fifties coal-boring in Scotland was not the honourable profession that it now is. More than once, speculators procured lying reports that there were no minerals, and after landowners had been ruined by their abortive preliminary experiments, stepped in, bought the land and boomed it. In one notorious case a family, now great in the public eye, bribed a laird's own borers to conceal the truth, and then buying the Golconda from its impoverished owner, laid the basis of a vast fortune.

"D'ye mean—to tell—*me*, Weelyum Wilson," said James, giving him his full name in the solemnity of the

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moment, "d'ye mean—to tell—*me*, sir"—here he sank his voice to a whisper—"that there's joukery-pawkery at work?"

"A declare to God A div," said Weelyum with equal solemnity, and he nodded with alarmed sapience across his beer jug.

"You believe there's plenty of coal up Barbie Valley, and that they're keeping it dark in the meantime for some purpose of their own?"

"I do," said Weelyum.

"God!" said James, gripping the table with both hands in his excitement, "God, if that's so, what a chance there's in Barbie! It has been a dead town for twenty year, and twenty to the end o't. A verra little would buy the hauf o't. But property 'ull rise in value like a puddock stool at dark, serr, if the pits come round it! It will that. If I was only sure o' your suspecion, Weelyum, I'd invest every bawbee I have in't. You're going home the night, are ye not?"

"I was just on my road to the station when I met ye," said Weelyum.

"Send me a scrape of your pen to-morrow, man, if what you see on getting back keeps you still in the same mind o't. And directly I get your letter, I'll run down and look about me."

The letter was encouraging, and Wilson went forth to spy the land, and initiate the plan of campaign. It was an important day for him. He entered on his feud with Gourlay, and bought Rab Jamieson's house and barn (with the field behind it) for a trifle. He had five hundred of his own, and he knew where more could be had for the asking.

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Rab Jamieson's barn was a curious building to be stranded in the midst of Barbie. In quaint villages and little towns of England you sometimes see a mellow red-tiled barn, with its rich yard, close upon the street; it seems to have been hemmed in by the houses round, while dozing, so that it could not escape with the fields fleeing from the town. There it remains and gives a ripeness to the place, matching fitly with the great horse-chestnut yellowing before the door, and the old inn further down, mantled in its blood-red creepers. But that autumnal warmth and cosiness is rarely seen in the barer streets of the north. How Rab Jamieson's barn came to be stuck in Barbie nobody could tell. It was a gaunt grey building with never a window, but a bole high in one corner for the sheaves, and a door low in another corner for auld Rab Jamieson. There was no mill inside, and the place had not been used for years. But the roof was good, and the walls stout and thick, and Wilson soon got to work on his new possession. He had seen all that could be made of the place the moment he clapped an eye on it, and he knew that he had found a good thing, even if the pits should never come near Barbie. The bole and door next the street were walled up, and a fine new door opened in the middle, flanked on either side by a great window. The interior was fitted up with a couple of counters and a wooden floor; and above the new wood ceiling there was a long loft for a store room, lighted by skylights in the roof. That loft above the rafters, thought the provident Wilson, will come in braw and handy for storing things, so it will. And there, hey presto! the transformation was achieved, and Wil-

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son's Emporium stood before you. It was crammed with merchandise. On the white flapping slant of a couple of awnings, one over each window, you might read in black letters, "JAMES WILSON: EMPORIUM." The letters of "James Wilson" made a triumphal arch, to which "Emporium" was the base. It seemed symbolical.

Now, the shops of Barbie (the drunken man's shop and the dirty man's shop always excepted, of course) had usually been low-browed little places with faded black scrolls above the door, on which you might read in dim gilt letters (or it might be, in white)

"LICENS'D TO SELL TEA & TOBACCO."

"*LICENS'D*" was on one corner of the ribboned scroll, "*TO SELL TEA &*" occupied the flowing arch above, with "*TOBACCO*" in the other corner. When you mounted two steps and opened the door, a bell of some kind went "*ping*" in the interior, and an old woman in a mutch, with big specs slipping down her nose, would come up a step from a dim little room behind, and wiping her sunken mouth with her apron—she had just left her tea—would say, "What's your wull the day, sir?" And if you said your "wull" was tobacco, she would answer, "Ou, sir, I dinna sell ocht now but the tape and sweeties." And then you went away, sadly.

With the exception of the dirty man's shop and the drunken man's shop, that kind of shop was the Barbie kind of shop. But Wilson changed all that. One side of the Emporium was crammed with pots, pans, pails, scythes, gardening implements, and saws, with a big barrel of paraffin partitioned off in a corner. The rafters

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on that side were bristling and hoary with brushes of all kinds dependent from the roof, so that the minister's wife (who was a six-footer) went off with a brush in her bonnet once. Behind the other counter were canisters in goodly rows, barrels of flour and bags of meal, and great yellow cheeses in the window. The rafters here were heavy with their wealth of hams, brown-skinned flitches of bacon interspersed with the white tight-corded home-cured—"Barbie's Best," as Wilson christened it. All along the back, in glass cases to keep them unsullied, were bales of cloth, layer on layer to the roof. It was a pleasure to go into the place, so big and bien was it, and to smell it on a frosty night set your teeth watering. There was always a big barrel of American apples just inside the door, and their homely fragrance wooed you from afar, the mellow savour cuddling round you half a mile off. Barbie boys had despised the provision trade, heretofore, as a mean and meagre occupation, but now the imagination of each gallant youth was fired and radiant; he meant to be a grocer.

Mrs. Wilson presided over the Emporium. Wilson had a treasure in his wife. She was Aberdeen born and bred, but her manner was the manner of the South and West. There is a broad difference of character between the peoples of East and West Scotland. The East throws a narrower and a nipper breed. In the West they take Burns for their exemplar, and affect the jovial and robustious—in some cases it is affectation only, and a mighty poor one at that. They claim to be bigger men and bigger fools than the Eastern billies. And the Eastern billies are very willing to yield one half of the contention.

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Mrs. Wilson, though Eastie by nature, had the jovial manner that you find in Kyle. More jovial, indeed, than was common in nippy Barbie, which, in general character, seems to have been transplanted from some sand dune looking out upon the German Ocean. She was big of hip and bosom, with sloe-black hair and eyes, and a ruddy cheek, and when she flung back her head for the laugh her white teeth flashed splendid on the world. That laugh of hers became one of the well-known features of Barbie. "Lo'd-sake!" a startled visitor would cry, "whatna skirl's tha-at!" "Oh, dinna be alarmed," a native would comfort him, "it's only Wilson's wife lauchin at the Cross!"

Her manner had a hearty charm. She had a laugh and a joke for every customer, quick as a wink with her answer; her jibe was in you and out again, before you knew you were wounded. Some, it is true, took exception to the loudness of her skirl; the Deacon, for instance, who "gave her a good one" the first time he went in for snuff. But "Tut!" quoth she, "a mim cat's never gude at the miee," and she lifted him out by the scruff of his neck, crying, "Run, mousie, or I'll catch ye!" On that day her popularity in Barbie was assured for ever. But she was as keen on the penny as a penurious weaver, for all her heartiness and laughing ways. She combined the commercial merits of the East and West. She could coax you to the buying like a Cumnoek quean, and fleece you in the selling like the cadgers o' Kincardine. When Wilson was abroad on his affairs he had no need to be afraid that things were mis-managing at home. During his first year in Barbie Mrs. Wilson was his sole helper. She had the brawny

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arm of a giantess, and could toss a bag of meal like a baby; to see her twirl a big ham on the counter was to see a thing done as it should be. When Dru'cken Webster came in and was offensive once, "Poo-oor fellow!" said she (with a wink to a customer) "I declare he's in a high fever," and she took him kicking to the pump and cooled him.

With a mate like that at the helm every sail of Wilson's craft was trimmed for prosperity. He began to "look about" him to increase the fleet.