THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

BY GEORGE DOUGLAS.

CHAPTES XXIII.

Young Gourlay spent that winter in in Edinburgh pretty much as he had spent the last. Last winter, however, it was simply a weak need for companionship that drew him to the Howff. This winter it was more, it was the need of a formed habit that must have its wonted satisfaction. He had a further impulse to conviviality now. It had become a habit that compelled him.

The diversions of some men are merely subsidiary to their lives, externals easy to be dropped; with others they usurp the man. They usurp a life when it is never happy away from them, when in the midst of other occupations absent pleasures rise vivid to the mind, with an irrisistible call. Young Gourlay's too-seeing imagination, always visioning absent delights, combined with his weakness of will, never gripping to the work before him, to make him hate his lonely studies and long for the jolly company of his friends. He never opened his books of an evening but he thought to himself, "I wonder what they're doing at the Howff tonight?" At once he visualized the scene, imagined every detail, saw them in their jovial hours. And, seeing them so happy, he longed to be with them. On that night, long ago, when his father ordered him to College, his cowardly and too vivid mind thought of the ploys the fellows would be having along the Barbie roads, while he was mewed up in Edinburgh. He saw the Barbie rollickers in his mind's eye, and the student in his lonely rooms, and contrasted them mournfully. So now, every night, he saw the cosy companions in their Howff, and shivered at his own isolation. He felt a tugging at his heart to be off and join them. And his will was so weak that, nine times out of ten, he made no resistance to the impulse.

He had always a feeling of depression when he must sit down to his books. It was the start that gravelled him. He would look round his room and hate it, mutter "Damn it, I must work"—and then, with a heavy sigh, would seat himself before an outspread volume on the table, tugging the hair on a puckered forehead. Sometimes the depression left him, when he buckled to his work; as his mind became occupied with other things the vision of the Howff was expelled. Usually, however, the stiffness of his brains made the reading drag heavily, and he rarely attained the sufficing happiness of a student eager and engrossed. At the end of ten minutes he would be gaping across the table, and wondering what they were doing at the Howff. "Will Logan be singing 'Tam Glen?' Or is Gillespie fiddling Highland tunes, by Jing, with his elbow going it merrily? Lord! I would like to hear 'Miss Drummond o' Perth' or 'Gray Daylicht'—they might buck me up a bit. I'll just slip out for ten minutes, to see what they're doing, and be back directly." He came back at two in the morning, staggering.

On a bleak spring evening, near the end of February, young Gourlay had gone to the Howff, to escape the shuddering misery of the streets. It was that treacherous spring weather which blights. Only two days ago, the air had been sluggish and balmy; now an easterly wind nipped the grey city, naked and bare. There was light enough, with the lengthening days, to see, plainly, the rawness of the world. There were cold yellow gleams in windows fronting a lonely west. Uncertain little puffs of wind came swirling round corners, and made dust, and pieces of dirty white paper, gyrate on the roads. Prosperous old gentlemen pacing home, rotund in their buttoned-up coats, had clear drops at the end of their noses. Sometimes they stopped—their trouser-legs flapping behind them—and trumpetted loudly into red silk handkerchiefs. Young Gourlay had fled the streets. It was the kind of night that made him cower.

By eight o'clock, however, he was merry with the barley-bree, and making a butt of himself to amuse the company. He was not quick-witted enough to banter a comrade readily, nor hardy enough to essay it unprovoked; on the other hand his swaggering love of notice impelled him to some form of talk that would attract attention. So he made a point of always coming with daft stories of things comic that befell him—at least, he said they did. But if his efforts were greeted with too loud a roar, implying not only appreciation of the stories, but also a contempt for the man who could tell them of himself, his sensitive vanity was immediately wounded, and he swelled with sulky anger. And the moment after he would splurge and bluster to reassert his dignity.

"I remember when I was a boy," he hiccuped, "I had a pet goose at home."

There was a titter at the queer beginning.

'I was to get the price of it for myself, and so when Christmas drew near, I went to old MacFarlane the poulterer in Skeighan. 'Will you buy a goose?' said I. 'Are ye for sale my man?' was his answer."

Armstrong flung back his head and roared, prolonging the loud ho-ho, through his big nose and open mouth long after the impulse to honest laughter was exhausted. He always laughed with false loudness, to indicate his own superiority, when he thought a man had been guilty of a public silliness. The laugh was meant to show how far above such folly was Mr. Armstrong.

Gourlay scowled. "Damn Armstrong!" he thought, "what did he yell like that for? Does he think I didn't see the point of the joke against myself? Would I have told it if I hadn't? This is what comes of being sensitive. I'm always too sensitive. I felt there was an awkward silence, and I told a story against myself to dispel it in fun, and this is what I get for't. Curse the big brute, he thinks I have given myself away. But I'll show him!"

He was already mellow, but he took another swig to hearten him, as was his habit.

"There's a damned sight too much yell about your laugh, Armstrong," he said, truly enough, getting a courage from his anger and the drink. "No gentleman laughs like that."

"'Risu inepto res ineptior nulla est,'" said Tarmillan, who was on one of his rare visits to the Howff. He was too busy and too wise a man to frequent it greatly.

Armstrong blushed; and Gourlay grew big and brave, in the backing of the great Tarmillan. He took another swig on the strength of it. But his resentment was still surging. When Tarmillan went, and the three students were left by themselves, Gourlay continued to nag and bluster, for that blatant laugh of Armstrong's rankled in his mind.

"I saw Hepburn in the street today," said Gillespie," by way of a diversion.

"Who's Hepburn?" snapped Gourlay.

"Oh, don't you remember? He's the big Border chap who got into a row with aul Tam on the day you won your prize essay." (That should surely appease the fool, thought Gillespie.) "It was only for the fun of the thing Hepburn was at college, for he has lots of money; and, here, he never apologized to Tam! He said he would go down first."

"He was dammed right," spluttered Gourlay. "Some of these Profs. think too much of themselves. They wouldn't bully me! There's good stuff in the Gourlays," he went on with a meaning look at Armstrong, "they're not to be scoffed at. I would stand insolence from no man."

"Aye, man," said Armstrong, "would you face up to a professor?"

"Wouldn't I?" said the tipsy youth, "and to you, too, if you went too far."

He became so quarrelsome as the night went on that his comrades filled him up with drink, in the hope of deadening his ruffled sensibilities. It was: "Yes, yes, Jack; but never mind about that! Have another drink, just to show there's no ill-feeling among friends."

When they left the Howff they went to Gillespie's and drank more, and, after that, they roamed about the town. At two in the morning the other two brought Gourlay to his door. He was assuring Armstrong he was not a gentleman.

When he went to bed the fancied insult he had suffered swelled to monstrous proportions in his fevered brain. Did Armstrong despise him? The thought was poison! He lay in brooding anger, and his mind was fluent in wrathful harangues in some imaginary encounter of the future, in which he was a glorious victor. He flowed in eloquent scorn of Armstrong and his ways. If I could talk like this always, he thought, what a fellow I would be! He seemed gifted with uncanny insight into Armstrong's character. He noted every weakness in the rushing whirl of his thoughts, set them in order one by one, saw himself laying bare the man with savage glee when next they should encounter. He would whiten the big brute's face by showing he had probed him to the quick. Just let him laugh at me again, thought Gourlay, and I'll analyse each mean quirk of his dirty soul to him!

The drink was dying in him now, for the trio had walked for more than an hour through the open air when they left Gillespie's rooms. The stupefaction of alcohol was gone, leaving his brain morbidly alive. He was anxious to sleep, but drowsy dullness kept away. His mind began to visualize of its own accord, independent of his will; and, one after another, a crowd of pictures rose vivid in the darkness of his brain. He saw them as plainly as you see this page—but with a different clearness—for they seemed unnatural, belonging to a morbid world. Nor did one suggest the other; there was no connection between them; each come vivid to its own accord.

First it was an old pit-frame on a barren moor, gaunt against the yellow west. Gourrlay saw bars of iron, left when the pit was abandoned, reddened by the rain; and the mounds of rubbish, and the scattered bricks, and the rusty clinkers from the furnace, and the melancholy shining pools. A four-wheeled old trolley had lost two of its wheels, and was tilted at a slant, one square end of it resting on the ground.

"Why do I think of an old pit?" he thought angrily; "curse it, why can't I sleep?"

Next moment he was gazing at a ruined castle, its mouldering walls mounded atop with decaying rubble; from a loose crumb of mortar, a long, thin film of the spider's weaving on the crazy brink—Gourlay saw its glisten in the wind. He saw each crack in the wall, each stain of lichen; a myraid details stamped themselves together on his raw mind. Then a constant procession of figures passed across the inner curtain of his closed eyes. Each figure was cowled; but when it came directly oposite, it turned and look at him with a white face. "Stop, stop!" cried his mind, "I don't want to think of you. I don't want to think of you, I don't want to think of you! Go away!" But as they came of themselves, so they went of themselves. He could not banish them.

He turned on his side, but a hundred other pictures pursued him. From an inland hollow he saw the great dawn flooding up from the sea, over a sharp line of cliff, wave after wave of brilliance surging up the heavens. The landward slope of the cliff was gray with dew. The inland hollow was full of little fields, divided by stone walls, and he could not have recalled the fields round Barbie with half their distinctness. For a moment they possessed his brain. Then an autumn wood rose on his vision. He was gazing down a vista of yellow leaves; a long, deep slanting cleft, framed in lit foliage. Leaves, leaves; everywhere yellow leaves, luminous, burning. He saw them falling through the lucid air. The scene was as vivid as fire to his brain, though of magic stillness. Then the foliage changed suddenly to great serpents twined about the boughs. Their colors were of monstrous beauty. They glistened as they moved.

He leapt in his bed with a throb of horror. Could this be the delirium of drink? But no; he had often had an experience like this when he was sleepless; he had the learned description of it pat and ready; it was only automatic visualization.

Damn! Why couldn't he sleep? He flung out of bed, uncorked a bottle with his teeth, tilted it up, and gulped the gurgling fire in the darkness. Ha! that was better.

His room was already gray with the coming dawn. He went to the window and opened it. The town was stirring uneasily in its morning sleep. Somewhere in the distance a train was shunting; clank, clank, clank went the wagons. What an accursed sound! A dray went past the end of his street rumbling hollowly, and the rumble died drearily away. Then the footsteps of an early workman going to his toil were heard in the deserted thoroughfare. Gourlay looked down and saw him pass far beneath him on the glimmering pavement. He was whistling. Why did the fool whistle? What had he got to whistle about? It was unnatural that one man should go whistling to his work, when another had not been able to sleep the whole night long.

He took another vast glut of whiskep, and the moment after was dead to the world.

He was awakened at 8 o'clock by a monstrous hammering on his door. By the excessive loudness of the first knock he heard on returning to consciousness, he knew that his landlady had lost her temper in trying to get him up. Ere he could shout she had thumped again. He stared at the ceiling in sullen misery. The middle of his tongue was as dry as bark.

For his breakfast there were thick slabs of rancid bacon, from the top of which two yellow eggs had spewed themselves away among the cold gravy. His gorge rose at them. He nibbled a piece of dry bread and drained the teapot; then shouldering into his great coat he tramped off to the University.

It was a wretched morning. The wind had veered once more, and a cold drizzle rain was falling through a yellow fog. The reflections of the street lamps in the sloppy pavement, went down through spiral gleams, to an infinite depth of misery. Young Gourlay's brain was aching from his last night's debauch, and his body was weakened with the want both of sleep and food. The cold yellow mist chilled him to the bone. What a fool I was to get drunk last night, he thought. Why am I here? Why am I trudging through mud and misery to the University? What has it all got to do with me? Oh, what a fool I am, what a fool!

"Drown dull care," said the Devil in his ear.

He took a sixpence from his trouser pocket, and looked down at the white bit of money in his hand, till it was wet with the falling rain. Then he went into a flashy tavern, and, standing by a sloppy bar, drank sixpennyworth of cheap whiskey. It went to his head at once, owing to his want of food, and with a dull warm feeling in his body, lurched off to his first lecture for the day. His outlook on the world had changed. The fog was now a comfortable yellowness. "Freedom and whiskey gang theither, Tak aff your dram," he quoted to his own mind. "That stuff did me good. Whiskey's the boy to fettle you."

He was in his element the moment he entered the classroom. It was a bear garden. The most moral individual has his days of perversity when a malign fate compels him to show the worst he has in him. A Scotch University class—which is many most moral individuals—has a similar eruptive tendency when it gets into the hands of a weak professor. It will behave well enough for a fortnight, then a morning comes when nothing can control it. This was a morning of the kind. The lecturer, who was an able man but a weakling, had begun by apologizing for the condition of his voice, on the gronnd that he had a bad cold. Instantly every man in the class was blowing his nose. One fellow, of a most portentous snout, who could trumpet like an elephant, with a last triumphant snort, sent his handkerchief across the room. When called to account for his conduct, "Really, sir," he said, "er-eroom—bad cold!" Uprose a universal sneeze. Then the "roughing" began, to the tune of "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave"—which no man seemed to sing, but every man could hear. They were playing the tune with their feet.

The lecturer glared with white repugnance at the tormentors.

Young Gourlay flung himself heart and soul into the cruel baiting. It was partly from his usual love of showing off, partly from the drink still seething within him; but largely, also, as a reaction from his morning's misery. This was another way of drowning reflection. The morbidly gloomy one moment, often shout madly on the next.

At last the lecturer plunged wildly at the door and flung it open. "Go!" he shrieked, and pointed in superb dismissal.

A hundred and fifty barbarians sat where they were, and laughted at him; and he must needs come back to the platform, with a baffled and vindictive glower.

He was just turning, as it chanced, when young Gourlay put his hands to his mouth, and bellowed "Cock-a-doodle-do!"

Ere the roar could swell, the lecturer had leapt to the front of the rostrum with flaming eyes. "Mr. Gourlay," he screamed furiously, "you there, sir, you will apologize humbly to me for this outrage at the end of the hour."

There was a womanish shrillness in the scream, a kind of hysteria on the stretch, that (contrasted with his big threat) might have provoked them at other times to a roar of laughter. But there was a sincerity in his rage to-day that rose above its faults of manner, and an immediate silence took the room—the more impressive for the former noise. Every eye turned to Gourlay. He sat gaping at the lecturer.

If he had been swept to the anteroom there and then, he could have been cowed by the suddenness of his own change, from a loud tormentor in the company of others, to a silent culprit in a room alone. And apologies would have been ready to tumble out, while he was thus loosened by surprise and fear.

Unluckily he had time to think, and the longer he thought the more sullen he became. It was only an accident that led to his discovery, while the rest escaped, and that the others should escape, when they were just as much to blame as he was, was an injustice that made him furious. His anger was equally divided between the cursed mischance itself, the teacher who had "jumped" on him so suddenly, and the other rowdies who had escaped to laugh at his discomfiture; he had the same burning resentment to them all. When he thought of his chuckling fellow-students they seemed to engross his rage; when he thought of the mishap he damned it and nothing else; when he thought of the lecturer he felt he had no rage to fling away upon others—the Snuffler took it all. As his mind shot backwards and forwards in an angry gloom, it suddenly encountered the image of his father. Not a professor of the lot, he reflected, could stand the look of black Gourlay. And he wouldn't knuckle under, either, so he wouldn't. He came of a hardy stock. He would show them! He wasn't going to lick dirt for any man. Let him punish all or none, for they had all been kicking up a row—why big Cuningham had been braying like an ass only a minute before.

He spied Armstrong and Gillespie glinting across at him with a curious look—they were wondering whether he had courage enough to stand to his guns with a professor. He knew the meaning of the look, and resented it. He was on his mettle before them, it seemed. The fellow who had swaggered at the Howff last night about "what he would do if a professor jumped on him," must'nt prove wanting in the present trial, beneath the eyes of those on whom he had imposed the blatancy.

When we think of what Gourlay did that day, we must remember that he was soaked in alcohol; not merely with his morning's potation, but with the dregs of previous carousals. And the dregs of drink, a thorough toper will tell you, never leave him. He is drunk on Monday with his Saturday's debauch. As "Drucken Wabster" of Barbie put it once, "When a body's hard up, his braith's a consolation." If that be so—and Wabster, remember, was an expert whose opinion on this matter is entitled to the highest credence—if that be so, it proves the strength and persistence of a thorough alcoholic impregnation, or as Wabster called it, of "a good soak." In young Gourlay's case, at any rate, the impregnation was enduring and complete. He was like a rag steeped in fusel oil.

As the end of the hour drew near, he sank deeper in his dogged sullenness. When the class streamed from the large door on the right, he [illegible] aside to the little anteroom on the left, with an insolent swing of the shoulders. He knew the fellows were watching him curiously—he felt their eyes upon his back. And, therefore, as he went through the little door, he stood for a moment on his right foot, and waggled his left, on a level with his hip behind, in a vulgar derision of them, the professor, and the whole situation. That was a fine taunt flung back at them!

There is nothing on earth more vindictive than a weakling. When he gets a chance he takes revenge for everything his past cowardice forced him to endure. The timid lecturer, angry at the poor figure he had cut on the platform, was glad to take it out of young Gourlay for the wrong-doing of the class. Gourlay was their scapegoat. The lecturer had no longer over a hundred men to deal with, but one lout only, sullen yet shrinking in the room before him. Instead of coming to the point at once, he played with his victim. It was less from intentional cruelty than from an instinctive desire to recover his lost feeling of superiority. The class was his master, but here was one of them he could cowe at any rate.

"Well?" he asked, bringing his thin finger-tips together, and flinging one thigh across the other.

Gourlay shuffled his feet uneasily.

"Yes?" enquired the other, enjoying his discomfiture.

Gourlay lowered. "Whatna gate was this to gang on? Why couldn't he let a blatter out of his thin mouth, and done wi't?"

"I'm waiting!" said the lecturer.

The words "I apologize" rose in Gourlay, but refused to pass his throat. No, he wouldn't, so he wouldn't. He would see the lecturer far enough, ere he gave an apology before it was expressly required.

"Oh, that's the line you go on, is it?" said the lecturer, nodding his head as if he had sized up a curious animal. "I see, I see! You add contumacy to insolence, do you? . . . Imphm."

Gourlay was not quite sure what contumacy meant, and the uncertainty added to his anger.

"There were others making a noise beside me," he blurted. "I don't see why I should be blamed for it all."

"Oh, you don't see why you should be had up, indeed? I think we'll bring you to a different conclusion. Yes, I think so."

Gourlay, being forced to stand always on the one spot, felt himself swaying in a drunken stupor. He blinked at the lecturer like an angry owl—the blinking regard of a sodden mind, yet fiery with a spiteful rage. His wrath was rising and falling like a quick tide. He would have liked one moment to give a rein to the Gourlay temper, and let the lecturer have it hot and strong—the next, he was quivering in a cowardly horror, of the desperate attempt he had so nearly made. Curse his tormentor! Why did he keep him here, when his head was aching so badly? Another taunt was enough to spring his drunken rage.

"I wonder what you think you came to College for?" said the lecturer. "I have been looking at your records in the class. They're the worst I ever saw. And you're not content with that, it seems. You add misbehaviour to gross stupidity."

"To hell wi' ye!" said Gourlay.

There was a feeling in the room as if the air was stunned. The silence throbbed.

The lecturer, who had risen, sat down suddenly as if going at the knees, and went white about the gills. Some men would have swept the ruffian with a burst of generous wrath, a few might have pitied in their anger—but this young Solomon was thin and acid, a vindictive rat. Unable to cowe the insolent in present and full-blooded rage, he fell to thinking of the great machine he might set in motion to destroy him. As he sat there in silence, his eyes grew ferrety, and a sleek revenge peeped from the corners of his mouth. "I'll show him what I'll do to him for this!" is a translation of his thought.

He was thinking, with great satisfaction to himself, of how the Senatus would deal with young Gourlay.

Gourlay grew weak with fear the moment the words escaped him. They had been a thunderclap to his own ears. He had been thinking them, but—as he pleaded far within him now—had never meant to utter them; they had been mere spume off the surge of cowardly wrath seething up within him, longing to burst but afraid. It was the taunt of stupidity that fired his drunken vanity to blurt them forth.

The lecturer eyed him sideways where he shrank in fear. "You may go," he said at last. "I will report your conduct to the University."

Gourlay was sitting alone in his room when he heard that he had been expelled. For many days he had drunk to deaden fear, but he was sober now, being newly out of bed. A dreary ray of sunshine came through the window, and fell on a wisp of flame, blinking in the grate. As Gourlay sat, his eyes fixed dully on the faded ray, a flash of intuition laid his character bare to him. He read himself ruthlessly. It was not by conscious effort; insight was uncanny and apart from will. He saw that blatancy had joined with weakness, morbidity with want of brains; and that the results of these, converging to a point, had produced the present issue, his expulsion. His mind recognized how logical the issue was, assenting wearily as to a problem proved. Given those qualities, in those circumstances, what else could have happened? And such a weakling as he knew himself to be, could never—he thought—make effort sufficient to alter his qualities. A sense of fatalism came over him, as of one doomed. He bowed his head, and let his arms fall by his sides of his chair, dropping them like as pent swimmer ready to sink. The sudden revelation of himself to himself had taken the heart out of him. "I'm a waster!" he said aghast. And then, at the sound of his own voice, a fear came over him, a fear of his own nature, and he started to his feet and strode feverishly, as if by mere locomotion, to escape from his clinging and inherent ill. It was as if he were trying to run away from himself.

He faced round at the mirror on his mantel, and looked at his own image with staring and startled eyes, his mouth open, the breath coming hard through his nostrils. "You're a gey ill ane," he said: "You're a gey ill ane! My God, where have you landed yourself!"

He went out to escape from his thoughts. Instinctively he turned to the Howff for consolation.

With the panic despair of the weak, he abandoned hope of his character at its first collopse, and plunged into a wild debauch, to avoid reflecting where it would lead him in the end. But he had a more definite reason for prolonging his bout in Edingusbh. He was afraid to go home and meet his father. He shrank, in visioning fear, before the dour face, loaded with scorn, that would swing round to meet him as he entered through the door. Though he swore every night in his cups that he would "square up to the Governor the morn, so he would!" always, when the cold light came, fear of the interview drove him to his cups again. His courage zigzaggered, as it always did; one moment he towered in imagination, the next he grovelled in fear.

Sometimes, when he was fired with whiskey, another element entered into his mood, no less big with destruction. It was all his father's fault for sending him to Edinburgh, and no matter what happned, it would serve the old fellow right! He had a kind of fierce satisfaction in his own ruin, because his ruin would show them at home what a mistake they had made in sending him to College. It was the old man's tyranny, in forcing him to College, that had brought all this on his miserable head. Well, he was damned glad, so he was, that they should be punished at home by their own foolish scheme—it had punished him enough, for one. And then he would set his mouth insolent and hard, and drink the more fiercely, finding a consolation in the thought that his tyrannical father would suffer through his degradation, too.

At last he must go home. He drifted to the station aimlessly; he had ceased to be self-determined. His compartment happened to be empty; so, free to behave as he liked, he yolled music hall snatches in a tuneless voice, hammering with his feet on the wooden floor. The noise pleased his sodden mind which had narrowed to a comfortable stupor—outside of which his troubles seemed to lie, as if they belonged not to him but to somebody else. With the same sodden interest he was staring through the window, at one of the little stations on the line, when a boy, pointing, said, "Flat white nose!" and Gourlay laughed uproariously, adding at the end: "He's a clever chield, that; my nose would look flat and white aaginst the pane." But this outbreak of mirth seemed to break in on his comfortable vagueness; it roused him by a kind of reaction to think of home, and of what his father would say. A minute after he had been laughing so madly, he was staring sullenly in front of him. Well, it didn't matter; it was all the old fellow's fault, and he wasn't going to stand any of his jaw. "None of your jaw, John Gourlay!" he said, "nodding his head viciously, and thrusting out his clenched fist, "none of your jaw, d'ye hear?"

He crept into Barbie through the dusk. It had been market day and knots of people were still about the streets. Gourlay stole softly through the shadows, and turned his coat collar high about his ears. He nearly ran into two men who were talking apart, and his heart stopped dead at their words.

"No, no, Mr. Gourlay," said one of them, "it's quite impossible. I'm not unwilling to oblige ye, but I cannot take the risk."

John heard the mumble of his father's voice.

"Well," said the other reluctantly, "if ye get the baker and Tam Wylie for security? I'll be on the street for another half hour."

"Another half hour!" thought John with relief. He would not have to face his father the moment he went in. He would be able to get home before him. He crept on through the gloaming to the House with the Green Shutters.

CMAPTER XXIV.

There had been fine cackling in Barbie, as Gourlay's men dropped away from him one by one; and now it was worse than ever. When Jimmy Bain and Sandy Cross were dismissed last winter, "He canna last long now," mused the bodies, and then when even Riney got the sack, "Lord!" they cried, "this maun be the end o't!" The downfall of Gourlay had an unholy fascination for his neighbors. And that not merely because of their dislike to the man. That was a whet to their curiosity, of course, but, over and above it, they seemed to be watching, with bated breath, for the final collapse of an edifice that was bound to fall. Simple expectation held them. It was a dramatic interest—of suspense, yet certainty—that had them in its grip. "He's bound to come down," said Certainty—"Yes, but when, though?" cried Curiosity, all the more eager because of its instinct for the coming crash. And so they waited for the great catastrophe which they felt to be so near. It was as if they were watching a tragedy near at hand, and noting with keen interest every step in it that must lead to inevitable ruin. That invariably happens when a family tragedy is played out in the midst of a small community. Each step in it is discussed with a prying interest, that is neither malevolent nor sympathetic, but simply curious. In this case it was chiefly malevolent, only because Gourlay had been such a brute to Barbie.

Though there were thus two reasons for public interest, the result was one and the same, a constant tittle-tattling. Particular spite and a more general curiosity brought the garin merchant's name on to every tongue. Not even in the gawcey days of its prosperity had the House with the Green Shutters been so much talked of.

"Pride will have a downcome," said some, with a gleg look and a smack of the lip, trying to veil their personal malevolence in a common proverb. "He's simply in debt in every corner," goldered the keener spirits; "he never had a brain for business. He's had money for stuff he's unable to deliver! Not a day gangs by but the big blue envelopes are coming. Oh-ooh, I ken perfectly. Perfectly! It was Postie himsell that telled me!"

Yet all this was merely guesswork. For Gourlay had hitherto gone away from Barbie for his monies and accommodations, so that the bodies could only surmise; they had nothing definite to go on. And through it all, the gurly old fellow kept a brave front to the world. He was thinking of retiring, he said, and gradually drawing in his business. This offhand and lordly, to hide the patent diminution of his trade.

"Hi-hi!" said the old Provost, with a cruel laugh, when he heard of Gourlay's remark, "drawing in his business, aye! It's thin eneugh drawn a'readys!"

On the morning of the last market day he was ever to see in Barbie, old Gourlay was standing at the green gate, when the postman came up with a smirk, and put a letter in his hand. He betrayed a wish to hover in gossip, while Gourlay opened his letter, but "Less lip!" said surly John, and the fellow went away.

Ere he had reached the corner, a gowl of anger and grief struck his ear, and he wheeled eagerly.

Gourlay was standing with open mouth and outstretched arm, staring at the letter in his clenched fist with a look of horror, as if it had stung him.

"My God!" he cried, "had I not enough to thole?"

"Aha!" thought Postie, "yon letter Wilson got this morning was correct, then! His son had sent the true story. That letter o' Gourlay's had the Edinburgh postmark—somebody has sent him word about his son.—Lord! What a tit-bit for my rounds."

Mrs. Gourlay, who was washing dishes, looked up to see her husband standing in the kitchen door. His face frightened her. She had often seen the blaze in his eye, and often the dark scowl, but never this bloodless pallor in his cheek. Yet his eyes were flaming.

"Aye, aye," he birred, "a fine job you have made of him!"

"Oh, what is it?" she quavered, and the dish she was wiping clashed on the floor.

"That's it!" said he, "that's it! Breck the dishes next; breck the dishes! Everything seems gaun to smash. If ye keep on lang eneugh, ye'll put a bonny end till't or ye're by wi't—the lot o' ye."

The taunt passed in the anxiety that stormed her.

"Tell me, see!" she cried, imperious in stress of appeal. "Oh, what is it, John?" She stretched out her thin, red hands, and clasped them tightly before her. "Is it from Embro? Is there ainything the matter with my boy? Is there ainything the matter with my boy?"

The hard eye surveyed her a while in grim contempt of her weakness. She was a fluttering thing in his grip.

"Every thing's the matter with your boy.—And it's your fault, too, damn you, for you always spoiled him!"

With sudden wrath he strode over to the famous range and threw the letter within the great fender.

"What is it?" he cried, wheeling round on his wife. "The son you were so wild about sending to College has been flung in disgrace from its door! That's what it is!" He swept from the house like a madman.

Mrs. Gourlay sank into her old nursing chair and wailed, "Oh, my wean, my wean; my dear; my poor dear!" She drew the letter from the ashes, but could not read it for her tears. The words "drunkenness" and "expulsion" swam before her eyes. The manner of his disgrace she did not care to hear; she only knew her first born was in sorrow.

"Oh, my son, my son," she cried; "my laddie; my wee laddie!" She was thinking of the time when he trotted at her petticoat.

It was market day, and Gourlay must face the town. There was interest due on a mortgage which he could not pay; he must swallow his pride and try to borrow it in Barbie. He thought of trying Johnny Coe, for Johnny was of yielding nature, and had never been unfriendly.

He turned, twenty yards from his gate, and looked at the House with the Green Shutters. He had often turned to look back with pride at the gawcey building on its terrace; but never as he looked to-day. All that his life meant, was bound up in that house, it had been the pride of the Gourlays; now it was no longer his, and the Gourlays' pride was in the dust—their name a by-word. As Gourlay looked, a robin was perched on the quiet rooftree, its breast vivid in the sun. One of his metaphors flashed at the sight. "Shame is sitting there, too," he muttered—and added with a proud angry snarl, "on the riggin' o' my hoose!"

He had a triple wrath to his son. He had not only ruined his own life, he had destroyed his father's hope that by entering the ministry he might restore the Gourlay reputation. Above all he had disgraced the House with the Green Shutters. That was the crown of his offending. Gourlay felt for the house of his pride even more than for himself—rather the house was himself; there was no division between them. He had built it bluff to represent him to the world. It was his character in stone and lime. He clung to it, as the dull, fierce mind, unable to live in thought, clings to a material source of pride. And John had disgraced it. Even if fortune took a turn for the better, Green Shutters would be laughed at the country over, as the home of a prodigal.

As he went by the Cross, Wilson (Provost this long while) broke off a conversation with Templandmuir, to yell "It's gra-and weather, Mr. Gourlay!" The men had not spoken for years. So to shout at poor Gourlay in his black hour, from the pinnacle of civic greatness, was a fine stroke; it was gloating, it was rubbing in the contrast. The words were innocent, but that was nothing; whatever the remark, for a declared enemy to address Gourlay in his shame, was an insult; that was why Wilson addressed him. There was something in the very loudness of his tones that cried plainly: "Aha, Gourlay! Your son has disgraced you, my man!" Gourlay glowered at the animal and plodded dourly. Ere he had gone ten yards a coarse laugh came bellowing behind him. They saw the color surge up the back of his neck, to the roots of his hair.

He stopped. Was his son's disgrace known in Barbie already? He had hoped to get through the market day without anybody knowing. But Wilson had a son in Edinburgh; he had written, it was like. The salutation, therefore, and the laugh, had both been uttered in derision. He wheeled, his face black with the passionate blood. His mouth yawed with anger. His voice had a moan of intensity.

"What are 'ee laughing at?" he said, with a mastering quietness. . . "Eh? . . . Just tell me, please, what you're laughing at."

He was crouching for the grip, his hands out like a gorilla's. The quiet voice, from the yawing mouth, beneath the steady flaming eyes, was deadly. There is something inhuman in a rage so still.

"Eh?" he said slowly, and the moan seemed to come from the midst of a vast intensity rather than a human being. It was the question that must grind an answer.

Wilson was wishing to all his gods that he had not insulted this awful man. He remembered what had happened to Gibson. This, he had heard, was the very voice with which Gourlay moaned: "Take your hand off my shoulder!" ere he hurled Gibson through the window of the Red Lion. Barbie might soon want a new Provost, if he ran in now.

But there is always one way of evading punishment for a veiled insult, and of adding to its sting by your evasion. Repudiate the remotest thought of the protester. Thus you enjoy your previous gibe, with the additional pleasure of making your victim seem a fool, for thinking you referred to him. You not only insult him on the first count, but send him off with an additional hint, that he isn't worth your notice. Wilson was an adept in the art.

"Man!" he lied bluntly—but his voice was quivering—"Ma-a-an, I wasn't so much as giving ye a thoat! It's verra strange if I cannot pass a joke with my o-old friend, Templandmuir, without you calling me to book. It's a free country, I shuppose! Ye weren't in my mind at a-all. I have more important matters to think of," he ventured to add, seeing he had baffled Gourlay.

For Gourlay was baffled. For a directer insult, an offensive gesture, one fierce word, he would have hammered the road with the Provost. But he was helpless before the bland quivering lie. Maybe they werena referring to him, maybe they knew nothing of John in Edinburgh, maybe he had been foolishly suspeecious. A subtle yet baffling check was put upon his anger. Madman as he was in wrath, he never struck without direct provocation; there was none in this pulpy gentleness. And he was too dull of wit, to get round the common ruse and find a means of getting at them.

He let loose a great breath through his nostrils, as if releasing a deadly force which he had pent within him, ready should he need to spring. His mouth opened again, and he gaped at them with a great, round, unseeing stare. Then he swung on his heel.

But wrath clung round him like a garment. His anger fed on its uncertainties. For that is the beauty of the Wilson method of insult: you leave the poison in your victim's blood, and he torments himself. "Was Wilson referring to me, after all?" he pondered slowly; and his body surged at the thought. "If he was, I have let him get away unkilled"—and he clutched the hands whence Wilson had escaped. Suddenly a flashing thought stopped him dead in the middle of his walk, staring hornily before him. He had seen the point at last, that a quicker man would have seized on at the first. Why had Wilson thrust his damned voice on him on this particular morning of all days in the year, if he was not gloating over some news which he had just heard about the Gourlays? It was as plain as daylight; his son had sent word from Edinburgh. That was why he brayed and ho-ho-ho'ed when Gourlay went by. Gourlay felt a great flutter of pulses against his collar; there was a pain in his throat, an ache of madness in his breast. He turned once more. But Wilson and the Templar had withdrawn discreetly to the Black Bull; the street wasna canny. Gourlay resumed his way, his being a dumb gowl of rage. His angry thought swept to John. Each insult, and fancied insult, he endured that day, was another item in the long account of vengeance with his son. It was John who had brought all this flaming round his ears—John whose colleging he had lippened to so muckle. The staff on which he leaned had pierced him. By the eternal heavens he would tramp it into atoms. His legs felt John beneath them.

(To be continued.)

A very small humming bird, not much larger than a house fly, is common in the East Indies.