

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

BY GEORGE DOUGLAS.

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

"Metaphor comes from the power of seeing things in the inside of your head," said the unassuming disciple of Aristotle—"see them so vivid that you see the likeness between them. When Baldy Johnston said 'the thumb-mark of his Maker was wet in the clay of him,' he saw the print of a thumb in wet clay, and he saw the Almighty making a man out of mud, the way He used to do in the Garden of Eden. Language—so Baldy flashed the two ideas together and the metaphor came. A man'll never make phrases unless he can see things in the middle of his brain. I can see things in the middle of my brain," he went on cockily—"anything I want to! I don't need to shut my eyes, either. They just come up before me."

"Man, you're young to have noticed these things, John," said Jock Allan. "I never reasoned it out before, but I'm sure you're in the right of it."

He spoke more warmly than he felt, because Gourlay had flushed and panted and stammered (in spite of inspiring bold John Barleycorn) while airing his little theory and Allan wanted to cover him. But Gourlay took it as a tribute to his towering mind. Oh, but he was the proud mannikin. "Pass the water!" he said to Jimmy Wilson, and Jimmy passed it meekly.

Logan took a fancy to Gourlay on the spot. He was a slow wily covey man, with a sideward laugh in his eye, a humid gleam. And because his blood was so genial and so slow he liked to make up to brisk young fellows, whose wilder outbursts might amuse him. They quickened his sluggish blood. No bad fellow, and good-natured in his heavy way, he was a man who would call a "slug for the drink." "A slug for the drink" is a man who soaks and never succumbs. Logan was the more dangerous a covey on that account. Remaining sober while others drank, he was always ready for another dram, always ready with an oily chuckle for the spurious nonsense of his satellites. He would see them home in the small hours, taking no mean advantage over them, never scoring them because they "couldn't carry it," only laughing at their daff vagaries. And next day he would gurgie: "So-and-so was screwed last night, and, man, if you had heard his talk!" Logan had enjoyed it. He hated to drink by himself, and liked a spurling youngster with whom to go the rounds.

He was attracted to Gourlay by the manly way he tossed his drink, and by the false fire it put into him. But he made no immediate advance. He sat smiling in creasy benevolence, beaming on Gourlay but saying nothing. When the party was ended, however, he made up to him going through the door.

"I'm glad to have met you, Mr. Gourlay," said he. "You've come right to the point for a while."

"The Howff?" said Gourlay.

"Yes," said Logan, "haven't ye heard o't! It's a slug bit house, where some of the West Country billes foregather for a night at a wretched nothing to speak of, ye know—just a dram and a joke to pass the time now and then!"

"Aha!" laughed Gourlay, "there's worse than a drink, by Jove. It puts smould'ring you through!"

Logan nipped the guard of his arm in heavy playfulness, and led him to the Howff.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Young Gourlay had found a means of escaping from his foolish mind. By the beginning of his second session he was able to toper as a publican could wish. The somewhat sordid joviality of the ring, the fastidiousness of the were somewhat crude, appeared to him the very acme of social intercourse. To emulate Logan and Allan was his aim. But drink appealed to him in many ways besides. Now when his apprehensive nerves were frightened by bugbears in his lonely room he could be off to the Howff and escape them. And drink inspired him with false courage to sustain his pose as a hardy rickicker. He had acquired the kind of prestige since the night of Allan's party, and two of the fellows whom he met there, Armstrong and Gillespie, he had swaggared before them and he had swaggared at school both in Barbic and Skeighan—and now there was no Sweeney Broom to cut him over the coxcomb. Armstrong and Gillespie—though they saw through him—let him run on, for he was not bad fun when he was spurling. He found, too, when with his cronies that drink unlocked his mind, and gave him a flow to his ideas. Nervous men are often impatient of speech from very excess of perception—they realize not merely what they mean to say, but with the nervous antennae of their minds they feel the attitude of every auditor. Distracted by lateral perceptions from the point ahead, they blunder, where blunter minds would go forward untroubled. That was the experience of young Gourlay. If he tried to talk freely when sober, he always grew confused. But drink deadened the outer rim of his perception, left it left the clear in the middle for its concentration. In plainer language, when he was drunk, he was less afraid of being laughed at, and free of that fear he was a better speaker. He was driven to drink then, by every weakness of his character. As nervous hypochondriac, as would-be swaggarer, as a dullard requiring stimulus, he found that drink, to use his own language, gave him "smeddum!"

With his second year he began the study of philosophy, and that added to his woes. He had never read the Big Conundrum, but not the brains to solve it—small blame to him for that since philosophers have cursed each other black in the face over it for the last five thousand years. But when he read it, the strange and sinister detail of the world, that had always been a horror to his mind became more horrible beneath the staid and futile thought. But whiskey was the mighty

sure. He was the gentleman who gained notoriety on a memorable occasion, by exclaiming—"Metaphysics be damned; let us drink!" Omar and other bards have expressed the same conclusion in more dulcet wise. But Gourlay was quite sincere. How sincere is another question.

Curiously, an utterance of "Auld Tam," one of his professors, half confirmed him in his evil ways.

"I am speaking now," said Tam, "of the comfort of true philosophy, less of its higher aspect than its comfort to the mind of man. Physically, each man is highest on the globe; intellectually, the philosopher alone dominates the world. To him are only two entities that matter, himself and the Eternal; or, if another, it is his fellow-man, whom serving he serves the ultimate of being. But he is master of the one and slave of the other. In its first blank outlook on life is terrified by the demonic force of nature and the swarming misery of man; by the vast totality of things, the cold remove of the heavenly bodies, the threat of the devouring seas. It is puny in their midst."

Gourlay woke up, and the sweat broke on him. Great heaven, had Tam been through it, too!

"At that stage," quoth the wise man, "the mind is dispersed in a thousand perceptions and a thousand fears; there is no central greatness in the soul. It is assailed by terrors which men sunk in the material never seem to feel. Phenomena are unknown by thought, bewildered and degenerate."

"Just like me!" thought Gourlay, and listened with a thrilling interest because it was "just like him."

"But the labyrinth," said Tam, with a ring in his voice as of one who knew—"the labyrinth cannot appal the man who has found a clue to its windings. A mind that has attained to thought lives in itself, and the world becomes its members. He firmly distrusts others rally home; it is central, possessing not possessed. The world no longer frightens, being understood. Its sinister features are accidents that will pass away, and they gradually come to be observed. For real thinkers know the value of a wise indifference. And that is why they are often the most genial men; unworried by the transient, they can smile and wait, sure of their eternal life, and of the man to whom the infinite beckons is not to be driven from his mystic quest by the ambush of a temporal fear—there is no fear; it has ceased to exist. That is the comfort of a true philosophy—if a man accepts it not merely mechanically, from another, but feels it in breath and blood and every atom of his being. With a warm surety in his heart, he is untroubled by the world. That, gentlemen, is what thought can do for a man."

"By Jove," thought Gourlay, "that's what whiskey does for me!"

And that, at a lower level, was what whiskey did. He had no conception of what Tam really meant—there were people indeed who used to think that Tam never knew what he meant himself. They were as little able as Gourlay to appreciate the mystic through the radiant haze of whose mind thoughts loomed on you sudden and big, like mountain tops in a sunny mist, the grandeur for their dimness. But Gourlay, though he could not understand, felt the fortitude of whiskey was somehow akin to the fortitude described. In the increased vitality it gave, he was able to tread down the world. If he walked on a wretched day in a wretched street, when he happened to be sober, his mind was hither and yon in a thousand perceptions and a thousand fears, fastening to (and fastened to) each thing around. But with whiskey humming in his blood, he paced onward in a happy dream. The wretched puddles by the way, the frowning rookeries where misery squalled, the melancholy noise of the streets were passed unheeded by. His distracted powers rallied home; he was concentrate, his own man again, the hero of his musings and mad. For, like all the rest of the world, he was constantly framing dramas of which he was the towering lord. The weakling who never "downed" men in reality, was always "downing" them in his head. He imagined triumphs, he consoled him for his actual rebuffs. As he walked in a tipsy dream, he was "standing up" to somebody, hurling his father's phrases at him, or "knocking" some work of imagination pale, and flushed tavern supplied a remedy, and nestled it to a radiant glow. Whereupon he had become the master of his world, and not its slave, and gave him a flow to his ideas. Nervous men are often impatient of speech from very excess of perception—they realize not merely what they mean to say, but with the nervous antennae of their minds they feel the attitude of every auditor. Distracted by lateral perceptions from the point ahead, they blunder, where blunter minds would go forward untroubled. That was the experience of young Gourlay. If he tried to talk freely when sober, he always grew confused. But drink deadened the outer rim of his perception, left it left the clear in the middle for its concentration. In plainer language, when he was drunk, he was less afraid of being laughed at, and free of that fear he was a better speaker. He was driven to drink then, by every weakness of his character. As nervous hypochondriac, as would-be swaggarer, as a dullard requiring stimulus, he found that drink, to use his own language, gave him "smeddum!"

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a fine one, too. Barbic, at least, your returning student is never met at the station with a brass band, whatever may happen in more emotional districts of the North, where it pleases them to shed the Year.

"An Arctic Night" was the inspiring theme which Tam set for the Raeburn. "A very appropriate subject!" laughed the fellows; "quite in the style of his own lectures." For Tam, though wise and a humorist had his pay hour. He used to lecture on the fifteen characteristics of Lady Macbeth (so he parcelled the unhappy Queen), and he would announce quite gravely, "We will now approach the discussion of the eleventh feature of the lady."

Gourlay had a shot at the Raeburn. He could not bring a radiant fullness of mind to bear upon his task (it was fancy set to work of its own accord). He saw a loney little town far off upon the verge of Lapland night, leagues and leagues across a darkling plain, dark itself and little and lonely in the glory splendor of a northern sky. Ship put to sea, and Gourlay heard in his ears the skirl of the man who went overboard—struck dead by the icy water on his brow, which smote the brain like a tomahawk.

He put his hand to his own brow when he wrote that, and, "Yes," he cried eagerly, "it would be the cold would kill the brain! Ooh-oh, how it would go in!"

A world of ice groaned round on each other, and were rent in pain; he heard the splash of great fragments tumbled in the deep, and felt the waves of their distant falling like the sea beneath him in the darkness. To the desolate night came a desolate dawn, and eyes were dazed by the encircling whiteness; yet there flashed green slanting chasms in the ice, and towering mountains of blue and white, and far away. An unknown sea beat upon an unknown shore, and the ship drifted on the pathless waters, a white dead man at the helm.

"Yes, by heaven," cried Gourlay, "I can see it all, I can see it all—that fellow standing at the helm, frozen white and as stiff as an icicle!"

Yet, do what he might, he was unable to fill more than half a page, small pages. He hesitated whether he should send them in, and held them in his inkly fingers, thinking he would burn them. He was full of pity for their neighborhood whom he had often seen about Barbic. The sight of them made him mutter mournfully, "Ach, well, I'll try my luck," he muttered at last, "though Tam may gully me before the whole class, for doing so little o'!"

The professor, however (unlike the majority of Scotch professors, rated quite higher than quantity, "I have learned a great deal myself," he announced on the last day of the session, "we have learned a great deal from the papers sent in on the subject of an 'Arctic Night.'"

"Hear, hear!" said an insolent student at the back.

"Where, where," asked the Professor, "of your paper, sir!"

A gigantic Borderer rose blushing in view, and was greeted with howls of derision by his fellows. Tam eyed him, and he winced.

"I can apologize in my private room at the end of the hour," said Aquinas, as the students used to call him. "Learn that this is not a place to brag in."

The giant slunk down, trying to hide himself.

"Yes," said Tam, "I have learned what a poor sense of proportion some of you students seem to have. It was not to see who could write the most, but who could write the mystic, through the radiant haze of whose mind thoughts loomed on you sudden and big, like mountain tops in a sunny mist, the grandeur for their dimness. But Gourlay, though he could not understand, felt the fortitude of whiskey was somehow akin to the fortitude described. In the increased vitality it gave, he was able to tread down the world. If he walked on a wretched day in a wretched street, when he happened to be sober, his mind was hither and yon in a thousand perceptions and a thousand fears, fastening to (and fastened to) each thing around. But with whiskey humming in his blood, he paced onward in a happy dream. The wretched puddles by the way, the frowning rookeries where misery squalled, the melancholy noise of the streets were passed unheeded by. His distracted powers rallied home; he was concentrate, his own man again, the hero of his musings and mad. For, like all the rest of the world, he was constantly framing dramas of which he was the towering lord. The weakling who never "downed" men in reality, was always "downing" them in his head. He imagined triumphs, he consoled him for his actual rebuffs. As he walked in a tipsy dream, he was "standing up" to somebody, hurling his father's phrases at him, or "knocking" some work of imagination pale, and flushed tavern supplied a remedy, and nestled it to a radiant glow. Whereupon he had become the master of his world, and not its slave, and gave him a flow to his ideas. Nervous men are often impatient of speech from very excess of perception—they realize not merely what they mean to say, but with the nervous antennae of their minds they feel the attitude of every auditor. Distracted by lateral perceptions from the point ahead, they blunder, where blunter minds would go forward untroubled. That was the experience of young Gourlay. If he tried to talk freely when sober, he always grew confused. But drink deadened the outer rim of his perception, left it left the clear in the middle for its concentration. In plainer language, when he was drunk, he was less afraid of being laughed at, and free of that fear he was a better speaker. He was driven to drink then, by every weakness of his character. As nervous hypochondriac, as would-be swaggarer, as a dullard requiring stimulus, he found that drink, to use his own language, gave him "smeddum!"

diviner thought. It irradiates the world. Of that high power there is no evidence in the essay before me. To be sure there was little occasion for its use.

Young Gourlay's thermometer went down.

"Indeed," said Aquinas, "there's a curious want of bigness in the sketch—no large nobility of phrase. It is written in gaspings of the external, and each sentence begins 'and'—'and'—'and,' like a schoolboy's narrative. It's as if a number of impressions had seized the writer's mind, which he jotted down hurriedly, lest they should escape him. But, just because it's so little wordy, it gets the effect of the thing—faith, it's right on to the end of it every time! The writing of some folk is like a stream of words—lucky if it glissens without, like a blobber of iridescent foam. But in this sketch there's a perception at the back of every sentence. It displays indeed, from ten in gasps of the external, and each sentence begins 'and'—'and'—'and,' like a schoolboy's narrative. It's as if a number of impressions had seized the writer's mind, which he jotted down hurriedly, lest they should escape him. 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