

In the Blackfriars Wynd

By H. Pease

“*Twill be a black day for auld Scotland when she ceases to believe in the muckle Deil,*” commented ‘the Meenister’ of the Tron Kirk, when I had explained to him my troubles and sought his ‘ghostly counsel and advice,’ as the English service has it, ‘to the quieting of my conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.’ My father had been English, but my mother was Scotch, and she had sent me to my uncle, Deacon Abercrombie, to be entered as apprentice to his craft of the gold-smiths. He was a widower, lived alone, and was reputed to be eccentric, but as far as worldly gear was concerned the Deacon was a highly responsible citizen; as burgess, guild brother, and deacon of his craft he could hold his head as high on the causeway as any other, be he who he might, in the city.

Not even the ‘stairhead critics,’ who, as Auld Reekie’s poet writes,

*‘wi’ glowering eye
Their neighbours’ sma’est faults descry,’*

could point at any speck in his general repute.

The Reverend Andrew Geddes was somewhat stricken in years; his beard was white as snow, his thrapple loose below his chin, and the flesh had ebbed from his bones, but his mind was as alert as ever, and his goodness stood manifest in his face.

We were sitting in his lodging, situate in a high ‘timberland’ in the Canongate, just without the Nether Bow, on the same side as the Tron Kirk, and from his little *tourelle* we could survey as from an eyrie the coming and going of the citizens upon the street.

‘Ay,’ said he again, ‘it will be a gey evil day for Scotland when she ceases to believe i’ the muckle black Deil. Whatten temptations he can offer is oft forgot. Ye’ll hae heard tell o’ Major Weir—the whilom “Bowhead Saint,” as they callit him—ye’ll hae heard tell o’ him, laddie? I mind my father talkin’ o’ his ain greetin’ sair for bein’ ower young to gang to his hangin’.’

Had I no? Ay, and of his staff that went before him like a link boy, and of the coach with six black horses that carried him and his sister backwards and forwards from hell!

‘Eh, laddie, what a sermon I could preach to ye on this tremendous problem!’ he said regretfully, bethinking him of my youthful years.

‘Aweel,’ he kidded discreetly, ‘I dinna ken uncle—the responsible Deacon—save by sight and repute, as ane that disna spend, an’ isna verra sociable; yet he attends the Great Kirk, “comes forrit,” does he not, to Holy Table?’ I nodded assent.

Is as reputable a citizen as any that treads on the High Street, and yet for a’ that he may hae a canker o’ the soul. Aiblins Davie Hume sappit his belief, and the muckle Deil, kennin’ that, is thrawin’ a flee ower him as for saumon the noo.’

As I sat there shivering all down my spine, my companion looked upon me very kindly from his thoughtful, gentle eyes of blue that faded to grey at the marge, and said, ‘Stop up your ears, laddie, like the adder, to any temptin’ o’ your uncle. Keep watch and ward, and, if need arise, run for me instantly, for, though I’m auld the noo, I’m aye ready for a warsil wi’ auld Hornie.’

Heartened by the minister's sympathy and courage I returned to my uncle's lodging in Blackfriars Wynd, and continued to devote myself to his craft in the back of his booth in the High Street, which appealed to me greatly for ingenuity and skill.

In accord with my mother's advice I had endeavoured to cherish an affection for my uncle, yet withal there was something about the man that misliked me much, and, to speak straight to the point, that actually 'fley'd' me, for he would gloat o' night over his glass of toddy on any scandal afloat concerning the 'unco guid,' and would speak with tongue i' the cheek of virtue in general, as if indeed hypocrisy were the true king of this world. I thought at first his purpose was to tease me and draw me out, but I soon came to believe it was all a part of the horrid nature of the man himself.

Further again than this, he seemed to exercise a dreadful and secret power over 'Brownie'—his pathetic little serving boy, orphan and mute.

I had realised that 'Brownie' lived in terror of his employer, though I never saw him the victim of any physical ill-treatment; one night indeed he came shivering and terrified into my bedroom, and by signs gave me to understand that my uncle was hunting for him, and it was not till I had bolted my door that he grew somewhat calmer.

He would not leave me, but insisted on lying down at the foot of my bed throughout the night.

I thought possibly the poor lad might labour under some hallucination, but I felt fear myself, for I distinctly heard some one attempt to open my door very stealthily a short time after 'Brownie' had taken refuge in my room.

No, it was not surprising, I reflected, that 'Brownie' should be 'feared' of my uncle when I was myself in the like case, for there 'no milk of human kindness' in him. His were shielded by a *chevaux de frise* of bristles and when one caught a glint from them 'twas as if one had encountered the malevolent gleam of a ferret intent upon his own ruthless schemes.

He was short of stature, possessed abnormally long arms, had a heavy moustache, and very hairy, flexible fingers, with which he performed wondrous feats of craftsmanship, but to my fearful imagination he seemed to resemble at times a tarantula spider of alarming proportions.

There had been of late an epidemic of crime in the city, which had seriously perturbed the good burgesses; various shops had been broken into, and cash and valuables had been 'lifted,' but as no arrests had been effected a general feeling of insecurity was rife in Auld Reekie; all which was a constant theme of merriment on my uncle's sardonic lips.

What had led me to approach 'the Meenister' and confide my apprehension to him, as I have shown above, was the mute, appealing look in poor 'Brownie's' eyes. But as 'Brownie' looked much brighter and happier during the next few weeks I regained my own equanimity, and grew somewhat shamed of my first nervous fears. This being so I thought it only right that I should visit 'Meenister Geddes' once more and report to him my belief in the groundless nature of my vague imaginations. I had found him at home, and stayed 'cracking' on with him till past ten of the clock.

Then as I returned somewhat in haste and doubtful how to effect my entry into my uncle's lodging undiscovered, or how, if discovered, to explain my absence, I brushed against a wayfarer at the corner of the Blackfriars Wynd.

'Tis a footpad,' I thought, for he was velvet-footed, and I heard no tread on the pavement. I glanced narrowly at the swift-passing stranger, and beneath the smouldering 'bowet' I had borrowed from the 'Meenister' I recognised with a start the slight, shrunken figure of 'Brownie' with his white, pathetic face. It was the swiftest of visions, yet I had seen enough to give me a 'gliff,' *for the eyes were not those of 'Brownie,' but of my uncle.*

This chance encounter reawoke all my previous apprehensions. The very fact that I had only an eerie suspicion on which to build increased my mental discomfort. There was something behind to which my watch and ward had afforded no clue.

Nothing more transpired for another few weeks when one night as I lay awake meditating I heard a footstep on the stair without. It was late, for my uncle had been out, and I had sat up reading, and had forgotten how time was passing. As I continued to listen I heard a strange moaning proceeding, I felt sure, from 'Brownie's' attic, which was situate a foot or two above my chamber on the top turn of the newel stairway. I had recognised, I thought, the tread on the stairs, for my uncle's footstep was peculiar, since he had a slight limp; it was this that had aroused my attention and reawakened my apprehension.

The moaning had been that of a dumb animal, and I had heard it once or twice before when poor 'Brownie' had been in pain.

Stealing out of my room a-tiptoe I very gently laid my hand on the 'sneck' of 'Brownie's' den and tried to lift it without noise.

But, though it lifted, the door was 'steekit' from within.

There was no sound to be heard therein; I stood there with pricked ear, but could learn nothing by listening. Perhaps I might be able to discern somewhat through the aperture above the pin of the 'sneck.' 'Brownie's' den had, as I knew, a window in its *tourelle*, and as the night was moonlit though stormy, I might in a flitting moonbeam perhaps espy somewhat.

Stooping, I placed my eye to the tiny slit, and waited impatiently for a gleam of white light that might penetrate from the westward airt which it faced.

A quarter of an hour, perhaps, elapsed; I could see nothing, and my patience was almost exhausted, when on a sudden the beam of moonlight so earnestly expected filtered fitfully into the den, and there, though faintly, was revealed to me the form of my uncle lying motionless upon the truckle bed—apparently in deep slumber.

Where then was 'Brownie?' I searched the small den for him, but nowhere could I discover him. The window was open. Just as I made this discovery the moonlight faded away and left me in darkness, filled with a horrid suspicion. I waited on in hope of the moonlight returning, but rain set in, and I returned to my own chamber much perplexed as to what to do. Leaving the door ajar I determined to sit up and listen for any further sound, or the creak of a footstep on the stair, but though I listened till grey dawn came I heard no sound at all.

Then once again I stole a-tiptoe to 'Brownie's' door, and peeped through the aperture. Once again I was astounded, for I could now discern that 'Brownie's' figure lay upon the truckle bed instead of that of my uncle, which I had seen before.

Could I have been mistaken previously? No, I was certain my eyesight had not deceived me. How could it have? What I had descried had quite belied my expectation, and had been totally unforeseen.

I returned to my bed determined to investigate the open window at the first opportunity.

I slept ill, and when I rose I found the door of 'Brownie's' den open. Entering in, I saw that 'Brownie' had got up and the window was closed. Investigating further, I opened it cautiously and looked forth to see if there were any exit either to the ground or on to the roof.

Evidently there could be none to the ground, for the room was situate at the height of the tall 'land.' Nor was there any opening on to the roof, so far as I could discover, for the little *tourelle* overhung the wall, and no foothold was possible.

Yet there was one way out. The 'land' stood in the narrowest part of the wynd; right opposite, and not more than five feet away rose the opposite wall, finishing off into a gable end with corbie-steps affording easy access to the further roof.

Could 'Brownie' have leaped across? It was not impossible, as the space was so narrow, and though the window was small there was room to pass through. Then as I thus measured the spaces I caught sight of a plank below the window resting on the floor. 'Twas perhaps a foot and a half broad, in length about six feet—sufficient to act as a bridge across the wynd. I had discovered enough to excite my most vivid apprehensions as to its use, but nothing else in the little den gave any clue to the mystery.

Descending the stairs I found my uncle already engaged upon breakfast. He seemed in high good-humour, and roasted me heartily upon my unpunctuality. 'Brownie' came in at that moment carrying sonic scones, and I noted out of the tail of my eye that he looked extremely haggard and miserable.

Assuming a woebegone air I told my uncle that 'Auld Reekie' suited me poorly, and that the climate was too 'snell' for my southern constitution.

'Hae ye heard the sad bruit?' he asked suddenly, 'the causeway's fair ringin' wi't. Puir Tom Macalister, the rich shipper o' Leith, has been found wi' his throat cut lyin' ahint the dyke by the Leith walk. There's an unco scandel afoot anent it—some says a merry-begot o' his ain has done it oot o' revenge for bein' kep' short o' siller by his father.' He paused a moment, then added significantly, 'Ay, ay, Macalister was aye verra generous to the Foundlings' Hospital. Wha kens?' He heaved a sigh, but his eye twinkled satirically, 'The hairt o' man is deceitfu' an' daisperitly wicked,' and he lifted the whites of his eyes heavenward like a hound mourning.

'Was the poor man robbed? I inquired shortly.

'Ay, was he,' returned my uncle; 'he was seemingly stuffed wi' bank-notes for payin' his i men the day. He was gangin' hame after supper—gey fou, maist like. Eh, laddie!' he continued, 'sic an end to ane wha was regairded as belongin' to the Saints! Wae's me for the godly,' and again he lifted his eyes upward as hound crying u-lu-lu for his lost master. Then gave me a sharp look, somewhat askance, as he me swiftly, 'Whatten a discourse, think will ye get frae your meenister o' the Tron Kirk the morn?'

I blenched, I felt, at this sudden thrust. Had his familiar informed him of my interview?

'It will be a sair blow to him,' I said, with apparent unconcern, 'but it cannot affect him directly.'

'No affect him? ' returned my uncle, seemingly shocked at my indifference, 'not when he was aye hand an' glove wi' him?'

'He was no his bairn,' I retorted, hastily finishing off my "parritch" with a gulp. 'I'm late, as ye said,' I added, rising, 'I must be off to my work at the booth.'

'Ay, ay,' returned my uncle, 'wark's aye best in an evil day.'

As soon as my work was finished for the day I hastened to call upon 'the Meenister,' and, finding him at home, at once informed him of my discovery of the night, and of my uncle's satirical mention of poor Mr. Macalister's fate.

'Laddie,' he exclaimed earnestly as I concluded 'ye hae dune well to come to me. Puir Tom Macalister was just as decent, straight-leevin' a Christian man as could be found i' braid Scotland. There's somethin' gey wrang wi' your uncle, I'm fearin' sadly. I'll no let any one blacken the memory o' Thomas Macalister. Noo, laddie, keep ye a quiet watch—sayin' naethin'; but aye wait on wi'an' ear for onything further suspeecious at hame, an' if ye hear puir "Brownie" skreighin' come your ways straucht here for me—an' we'll see if we canna tackle the

evil—an' with the help o' Heaven, scotch it.' His eye lit, his mouth tightened; he clenched his fist, ready for immediate 'warsil wi' auld Hornie.'

I promised faithfully, and withdrew with a heart somewhat relieved, though not relishing the thought of being alone with my uncle in the lonely house wherein either suspected the other.

My uncle that evening scarcely alluded to the murder again save to ask if I had had any news, and to mention that the funeral was to be the next day. Then he laughed uncannily, leering upon me over his spectacles.

'I'm tell't that he's left a muckle legacy to the Foundlings. What think ye o' that, laddie?'

'He might have done worse,' I replied, almost angrily, though inwardly I shivered. 'He might have left it to the cadies of the toon for drink.'

A fortnight perhaps passed without event; the City Guards were said to have found a clue, and the Town Council had offered a large reward for any information that might lead to apprehension of the murderer, but nothing definite had been discovered.

Gossip was rife, and in the taverns 'twas bruited that my uncle's conjecture had come nighest to the bull's-eye. For my own part I had quietly made what arrangements I thought feasible in case of any further suspicious act of my uncle. I kept watch and ward with eye and ear, as Minister Geddes had directed, but not till another fortnight had elapsed did I hear his footstep on the stair, by 'Brownie's' den. Then one night as I lay half-doing I was certain I did hear the lame footfall. Instantly I was broad awake, and waited in alarmed expectancy. Ha! there it was again—the low skreigh o' pain I had heard before. I was 'gliffed' indeed, horribly afeared, yet I must act, so a-tiptoe I stole out, and like a cat stealthily approached 'Brownie's' door. The hour was somewhat after eleven, for I had heard the Tron Kirk chap recently; the moon in her last quarter had risen, and I could dimly descry the interior of the den.

I shrank back after peering through the small aperture, for there was my uncle stretched out on 'Brownie's' truckle bed. The window was opened, and I could see that the board or plank I had previously measured lay on the sill.

Of 'Brownie' I could not see a sign.

I turned away on the instant. Now was the time to go fetch 'the Meenister.'

Noiselessly I descended the stairs, let myself out by a low side window in the cellar, and made straight for the lodging of 'the Meenister.' I dared not rouse the porter of the Nether Bow Port, but climbed the wall beyond even as Bothwell had done after the explosion at Kirk o' Field, and made my way down the Canongate. Minister Geddes was within, and fortunately had not yet gone to bed. He was ready in a moment to come with me. With a Bible under his oxter, and a 'bowet' new lit in his right hand, he accompanied me swiftly up the street. His courage was wonderful; he seemed like 'Great-heart'—valiant to meet Apollyon in battle. I caught hold of the end of his plaid, and followed him *non passibus æquis* like the *parvus Iulus*, for he hastened onward with his loins girded up. I do not know that more than twenty minutes had elapsed when we arrived at the cellar window and I had helped him through. Together we noiselessly mounted the stairs; then when we arrived at 'Brownie's' den he reached me the 'bowet' to hold while he peered through the aperture.

Then he turned to me and said in a whisper:

'Laddie, we mun just break doon the door. If it is as I'm thinkin' he winna hear us. His evil spirit is awa i' puir 'Brownie's' body, bent on Deevil's wark. Here's for it!' and as he spake he thrust swiftly with his foot and broke down the wooden bolt that fastened the door.

In we went—I holding the little 'bowet' on high to give us light. 'Ay,' whispered my companion in my ear, 'I'm richt. He's in a swoond; he disna see or hear us.' I gazed in horror on my

uncle's face. His eyes were not closed, but were as unseeing as a blind man's. There was, I thought, a hateful look as of triumphant evil on his lips, but his breath came regularly as of one in deep sleep.

'Noo, laddie,' said the good minister, 'we mun act. "Brownie" will be returnin' before daybreak, an' we hae to keep the twa o' them apairt. *His* evil spirit is awa wi' the puir laddie, and we mun prevent body an' spirit comin' thegither again. It is like to be a fearfu' warsil, but wi' the help o' the Bible an' our God we'll triumph.' I could see his eye glow and his brow light with inspiration, and I drew in courage as I looked upon him in his intrepidity.

'Gang ye oot ower by the bit plankin', laddie,' he commanded me, pointing to the window. 'Gang, an' wait for "Brownie," then when he comes back grup him fast and pray tae Heaven. I'll shut tae the windie and grup the figure here on the bed.'

I could not disobey, but I trembled horribly as I crawled slowly forth upon the plank. The minister had sat himself down by the bedside, and was reading aloud by the light of the 'bowet' from out of Genesis of Jacob's wrestling all night long with the angel of God. I could hear his voice as I slithered slowly across my plank of dread.

'And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh . . .'

The faith of the old man alone in the den with the fearsome figure on the bed heartened me greatly. I reached the end of the plank, grasped firmly the coping of the corbie-step, pulled myself up and felt for firm footing in the lead gutter of the roof below.

There for a few minutes I lay still, my heart palpitating, and reflected on what was next to be attempted.

All was still about me. Save for a belated roysterer singing on his way homeward, and one or two nightbirds on the street below whose footfalls sounded fitfully, no whisper broke on the eerie night.

I looked around and about in the moonlight, and noted a passage behind me between the roofs of the 'lands.' Here surely would be the way by which 'Brownies would return from his nocturnal excursion. I sat crouched beside the gable end and waited fearfully for any sound of his returning. The Minister's 'bowet' had now gone out; the window was closed. I felt tremors assail me in my loneliness. Then I caught sight of Orion above the further roofs—advancing with glittering sword—as a champion to challenge of combat—and at once a great composure stole within my heart, for I too was engaged in a great combat against evil.

The good Minister had assuredly probed the problem to the quick; even as Elijah had breathed life into the body of the son of the Shulamite widow so had my uncle like a fiend from the pit breathed an evil spirit into poor 'Brownie's' body, and through him executed horrid deeds.

Our great task was to prevent body and spirit from coming together again. 'Twas certain that the Minister trusted to be able to prevent this re-union by prayer and exorcism, and I was his assistant therein.

I trembled at the struggle so imminent upon me, and prayed God for assistance in my hour of need.

Crouching quietly there, I noticed that the wind had now arisen from the west and was driving heavy spume of cloud across the moon so that she was overwhelmed and sank from sight. Soon

again, however, she emerged from her labours, and, clothed in white, paced serene as a Madonna faring to her churching.

Just then I heard a furtive sound behind me, and gazing swiftly backward I caught sight of a slight form in grey creeping prone upon the gutter.

The moment of trial had come. Drawing in my breath I crouched lower still and moved not till the grey form rose up as if to lay hold of the coping-stone. Then swiftly I turned and seized him by the waist, pulling him down backward.

Like a ferret—sudden as a flash—he bit my hand and we were down in the gutter together.

‘Brownie’ was of frail build, but he now seemed to be possessed of a demoniac’s strength, and my arms failed to hold him. I felt his hands upon my neck and grew dizzy.

I prayed then as I had never prayed before, and on the sudden a thought lit in my brain. I remembered one of ‘Brownie’s’ infirmities—his breathing through his mouth. I had strength to pluck at my bonnet, thrust it into his mouth, and leaned my chin upon the cloth with all my force.

I was still uppermost, and though he twined and twisted like a serpent, I held on while my head seemed almost bursting. The thought of Jacob wrestling through the night sustained me, and now at last ‘Brownie’s’ clutch upon my throat relaxed.

I shook my head free. I breathed again in the cold air—I felt all the energy ebb from the body beneath me. I had conquered at last. ‘Brownie’ lay quietly in the gutter, breathing gently as a babe.

I rose to my feet and peered across the chasm. There in the chamber opposite was the Minister wrestling on his knees with the figure on the bed. Just at that moment a cock crew from far below in the purple depth of the city. The silence seemed to shiver about me.

Thank God! Daybreak at last after the horror of darkness.

As I watched I saw the struggling figure fall suddenly backward on the bed. The Minister rose from his knees and came towards the window.

He opened it, and I saw his face shining in the moonlight—like a saint’s—haggard yet triumphant.

‘Gie thanks to God, laddie,’ he cried to me, as he bent his head reverently, ‘we hae striven like Jacob an’ hae prevailed. *There’s a deid man lies upon the bedstraw.*’