Docherty

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The year came and receded like any other, leaving its flotsam of the grotesque, the memorable, the trivial. On the first day the Coronation Durbar at Delhi saw King Edward established by proxy as Emperor of India. In the same month 5,000 people died in a hurricane in the Society Islands and 51 inmates were burned to death in Colney Hatch lunatic asylum. In July Pope Leo XIII died at ninety-three. In November the King and Queen of Italy visited England. Rock Sand was the horse, running up to his fetlocks in prize-money: 2,000 Guineas, Derby, St Leger. In Serbia King Alexander and Queen Draga were murdered, Peter Karageorgevitch became King, and dark conspirators regrouped around the throne, like actors obsessed with their roles although the theatre is on fire. In London Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show made genocide a circus. In Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, two brothers put a heavier than air machine into flight for fifty-nine seconds. In High Street, Graithnock, Miss Gilfillan had insomnia.

She called it 'my complaint', not unaffectionately. It grew as the year waned, so that by December her eyes seemed lidless. Most nights she nursed her loneliness at her window, holding aside the lace curtain to stare at the tenements across from her, to judge the lives that lay in them, to think that she would die here. The thought was

pain and comfort. She would die among strangers, hard faces and rough voices, hands that hadn't much use for cutlery, drunken songs of Ireland's suffering in Scottish accents, swear-words in the street, children grubbing out their childhoods in the gutters. But her death would be a lifelong affront to her family, an anger in her father's grave. So each night she would perfect her disillusion, her regret was a whetstone for her family's, and High Street was the hell they would inherit.

Late at night on 26th December one circumstance accidentally gave a special poignancy to her self-pity. Across the cobbled street two upstairs windows were still lit. Behind one window, Mrs Docherty was near her time. This would be her fourth. She would be lucky if it was her last. Here, where hunger and hopelessness should have sterilised most marriages, people seemed to breed with an almost vengeful recklessness. It appeared to her that the sins of the fathers *were* the sons.

Behind the other window, Mr Docherty would be sitting in the Thompson's single-end, banished to that uselessness which was a man's place at such times, sheepish with guilt, or perhaps just indifferent with usage. Some of the folklore of High Street concerned the martyrdom of women: wife-beatings, wages drunk on the journey between the pit-head and the house, a child born into a room where its father lay stupefied with beer.

With Mr Docherty, she felt, it would be different. She knew him only as someone to pass the time of day with, as it was with everybody here. She preferred to form no friendships. Pity, contempt, or sheer incomprehension, were the distances between her and everyone around her, so that she knew them by their more dramatic actions. Her vision of their lives was as stylised and unsubtle as an opera, and even then was distorted by those tears for herself that

endlessly blurred her thinking, as though something had irreparably damaged a duct.

Her impression of Mr Docherty was not of one man but of several. It was as if among all the stock roles to which she assigned the people of the street, wife-beater, drunkard, cadger, or just one of the anonymous chorus of the will-less poor, he had so far settled for none, played more than one part. She knew him coming home from the pit, small even among his mates, one of a secret brotherhood of black savages, somebody hawking a gob of coaldust onto the cobbles. Cleaned up, dressed in a bulky jacket and white silk scarf, a bonnet on his black hair, he looked almost frail, his face frighteningly colourless, as if pale from a permanent anger. Yet shirtsleeved in summer, his torso belied the rest of him. The shoulders were heroic, every movement made a swell of muscle on the forearms. Below the waist he fell away again to frailty, the wide trousers not concealing a suggestion that the legs were slightly bowed.

She had watched him in the good days of summer, when chairs were brought outside the entry doors on to the street, playing with his children. At such times his involvement with them was total. But what impressed her most was the reflection of him that other people gave. The men who stood with him at the corner obviously liked him. Yet she had often sensed in passing them a slight distance between him and anybody else. It was a strange, uncertain feeling, as if wherever he stood he established a territory. She half suspected it might mean nothing more than that he was physically formidable. In High Street the most respected measurement of a man tended to be round the chest. But her own observations kept crystallising into a word, one she admitted grudgingly: it was 'independence'.

She felt it was a ridiculous word in this place. For what claim could anyone who lived here have to independence? They were all slaves to something, the pit, the factory, the

families that grew up immuring the parents' lives, the drink that, seeming to promise escape, was the most ruthlessly confining of all. Whatever hireling they served, owed its authority to a common master: money, the power of which came from the lack of it. Poverty was what had brought herself to this room. It defined the area of their lives like a fence. Still, in that area Mr Docherty moved as if he were there by choice, like someone unaware of the shackles he wore and who hadn't noticed that he was bleeding.

Like an illustration of her thoughts, he came out of the entry at a run, still pulling on his jacket, and became the diminishing sound of his boots along the street. It was a bad sign. Earlier, she had seen Mrs Ritchie go in. A midwife should have been enough. Doctors were trouble. Poor Mrs Docherty. She was a nice woman. They called her a 'dacent wumman', which was High Street's VC. Given the crushing terms of their lives, decency was an act of heroism. Now she lay in that room, trying to coax a reluctant child out of her body. The reluctance was understandable.

Out of the thought of what that child was being urged to come out and meet poured her own frustrations, and she felt all the injustice of her life afresh. She remembered her father, the benign stability of his presence, the crisp, hygienic order of their lives. The solemn family outings. Miss Mannering's School for Young Ladies. Every memory of that time, no matter how fragmentary or trivial, from her father's moustaches to the flowers she had sewn on a sampler, was held in a halo of warmth and security. Everything else, dating from and including the death of her mother, was in partial darkness, merely another imperfectly glimpsed particle of a chaos from which she was still in flight. Even the cause of her mother's death was to this day obscure to her – she only knew it was a disease which had spread its contagion through all their lives. Much later she had understood that the coffin in the darkened parlour

contained the corpse of a world as well as a woman. Her father became someone else, the house developed the atmosphere of a seedy hotel where strangers met for meals. When the bakery business folded, her father's heart ran down as if it had been a holding company. He left her what money he had. Her two brothers (which was how her thoughts referred to them, disowning intimacy) wanted nothing to do with an unmarried sister. She had moved from Glasgow to Graithnock and then, as her capacity for pretence diminished with her capital, circumstances had brought her to High Street.

One solitary memory, the persistence of which suggested that it might not be as fortuitous as it seemed, stayed with her as a clue to the chaos that had overrun the serenity and order of her early life. It had happened in childhood: a family breakfast, herself, her mother, father and two brothers. The room, above her father's bakery, was brightly warm, although a November drizzle retarded the daylight outside. The table was heavy with food. They were talking and the boys were laughing a lot when she noticed her father glance at his watch. He sent a question downstairs to the bakehouse. The answer that came back pursed his lips.

Ten minutes later there was a knock at the door and a boy of fourteen or so was pushed into the room. He pressed against the door, as if he was trying to stand behind himself. The old jacket he wore was a man's, the cuffs turned up to show the lining, the pockets bumping the knees of his frayed trousers. His boots were a mockery, ridiculously big and curling up at the toes and misshapen by other people's feet. His scalp showed in white streaks through the hair where the rain had battered it. Hurry seemed to have sharpened every bone of his face to a cutting edge, and had left him hiccoughing for breath. In the warmth of the room he steamed slightly, the smell of him mixing

unpleasantly with the fresh cooking odours of the food. The boys giggled.

'Ah'm sorry, sur. Ah'm awfu' sorry. Whit it . . .'

Her father's raised hand stopped him. They all waited while her father chewed his mouthful of food.

'So you are late again.'

The boys were quiet now. The moment had acquired a terrible solemnity.

'Ah'm awfu' sorry, sur. It's ma wee brither. He's that no' weel. An' ma mither . . .'

'Excuses aren't reasons.' Her father was sadly shaking his head. 'This makes three times in less than a fortnight. I've warned you twice before. When you're late, my deliveries are delayed. When my deliveries are delayed, my customers complain. Then they take their custom somewhere else. And my business suffers. You'll have to learn responsibility to other people. Until you do, I can't afford to employ you. You're dismissed.'

Why had that small scene stayed with her? All it had meant to her at the time was the authority of her father – and the kindness of her mother, who had prevailed against her father's better judgement to let the boy have a full week's wages, which came to a shilling, she remembered. Yet compulsively that morning came back to her from time to time, tormentingly, as if that one skinny boy had been the cause of everything that had happened afterwards, as if his unhealthy presence had infected their lives like a microbe. Dimly she sensed herself being nearer to the solution of the enigmatic equation that morning had presented to her: the boy's misdemeanour plus her father's punishment was somehow equal to the disintegration that had taken place in their lives afterwards, was somehow a formula for the kind of chaos she had learned to live in, but not with. And that was as far as rationalisation took her – a vague feeling, not one

that she tried to examine, but one that she preferred to smother.

Faced with it, as she was now, her method was always the same. She took a dose of nostalgia, like a drug. In the special atmosphere of this room, she could indulge in a sort of retrospective trance like a religious ecstasy. There were certain passages of her life that she went over again and again, her personal beatitudes. Tonight she thought of the long walled garden at the back of their house, re-creating it flower by flower. It was as something of hallucinatory inconsequence that she was aware of Mr Docherty returning along the dark street with the doctor. The gas-lamp identified them for a moment, and then the close-mouth swallowed them.

Mr Docherty led the doctor up the dark stairway, knocked gently at the door of his house and let the doctor in. Then he himself crossed to Buff Thompson's and went in without knocking, in case he would waken his sons. Mick and Angus had been moved through to Buff's to sleep in the set-in bed nearer the door. Buff, on the chair by the fire, stirred and opened his eyes. Aggie Thompson must have gone back through to help Mrs Ritchie.

'It's yerself, Tam,' Buff said, sat up, coughed quietly, and put a spittle on the fire to fry. 'He's here, then?'

'That's him in noo.' Tam Docherty hung his jacket over a chair and sat down on the stool. 'Hoo's Jenny been?'

'The same, jist much the same. Aggie went through a wee while past.'

They sat watching the fire as if it were a lantern show. The wind was plaintive. One of the boys wrestled briefly with a dream. Water boiled in the kettle Aggie had put on the hotplate. Tam reached across and laid it on the hearth.

'It'll be fine, Tam,' Buff said quietly. 'Don't fash yerself. If it's like the world, that's everything.'

'Aye. As long as it's no' too like.'

Their silence was listening.

In the room across the lobby, the scene that met Dr Allan was like a tableau of all that High Street meant to him. Though the address might have been different, he had come into this room more often than he remembered, to find the same place, the same women, the same secret ceremony happening timelessly in an aura of urgency. It was as if everything else was just an interruption.

The gas-mantle putted like a sick man's heart. Dimmed to a bead of light, it made the room mysterious as a chapel. The polished furniture, enriched by darkness, entombed fragments of the firelight that moved like tapers in a tunnel. The brasses glowed like ikons. Even in this half-light the cleanliness of the room proclaimed itself. Jenny Docherty had scrubbed her house against the birth as if the child might die of a speck of dust. Beside the fire, where the moleskins lay ready for the morning, Aggie Thompson was standing, watching the water boiling, saying to herself, 'Goad bliss ye, dochter. Ye'll be a' richt, noo. Goad bliss you this nicht,' with the monotony of a Gregorian chant. Mrs Ritchie was leaning over the set-in bed, which was as shadowed as a cave, and was translating Aggie's sentiments into practical advice. Over the bedclothes an old sheet had been laid for Jenny to lie on, and under her thighs newspapers had been spread. Her gown was rumpled above her waist. Legs and belly, wearing a skin of sweat, were an anonymous heave of flesh, a primeval argument of pain against muscles.

'Turn up the light,' Dr Allan said.

'Oh, dochter. Thank Goad ye're here.'

'I'll want to wash my hands,' he said pointedly, hoping to soothe Aggie Thomspson's nerves with work. 'How long since the waters broke?'

'A good 'oor past, dochter,' Mrs Ritchie said, 'An she's had a show o' bluid. Ah hope ye don't mind comin' oot.

But ye couldny put a wink between 'er pains. An it's still no' showin'. An' knowin' the times she's had afore.'

'I wouldn't miss it.' His jacket was off. He was rolling up his sleeves. 'Would I, Jenny? Have these sterilised, Mrs Ritchie.' She took the forceps. 'We didn't do so badly with the other three now, did we?' Her mouth was forming 'No, doctor' when a pain rubbed out the words. He felt her gently, watching. Surprisingly, in the moments of quiescence, she didn't look much more than her thirty, but when the pains came they were centuries passing across her face. Each would leave its residue. In High Street primes were not enjoyed for long.

'Yes I think so. Not long now.' Washing his hands in the basin, he kept talking, more for Aggie Thompson's sake than for Jenny's, who was beyond the use of words as a palliative.

'You must have a terrible comfortable womb in there, Jenny. Your wee ones are never anxious to come out. They need some coaxing. Towel. Thanks.'

In the street outside somebody had started singing. Aggie tutted in shock: 'Is that no' terrible.'

'I have heard better,' Dr Allan said, taking out the pad of chloroform. 'Well, that's enough pain you've been through for triplets, Jenny.'

His hand was a sudden coolness on her forehead. The bottom half of her face came against something soft that seemed to erase her jawline. She fought against a darkness that swooped and then billowed above her and left her falling. Out of emptiness looped one long sound like a rope at which her mind clutched till it snapped: a phrase of song.

'Josey Mackay,' Buff pronounced after a few attentive seconds, as if identifying the call of one of the rarer birds. 'He's late oan the road the nicht.'

The song diminished into garbled mutterings that suggested Josey was in loud and incoherent conference with

himself. It wasn't long before he had perfected a public statement, delivered through a megaphone of drunkenness: 'Yese don't know whit it wis like. Yese haven't lived. The lot o' yese. Ah saved yer bacon. Me an' the likes o' me. Mafeking. Ah wis there. For King an' Country. At Mafeking. Queen an' Country.'

'Christ, no' again,' Buff sighed. 'It's weel named the Bore War, eh?'

'The Boer War!' Josey said defiantly. And then more obscurely, 'Honour the sojer. Wounded in the service of his country.'

'Josey's only wound's a self-inflicted wan. He's dyin' o' drouth. An' it's like tae injure a few innocent bystanders. Such as his wife an' weans. There canny be mony gills o' his gratuity left.'

'Sleep soundly in yer beds this nicht,' Josey urged with unintentional irony. 'Thanks tae the sojer laddies. Asleep in foreign soil.'

The Last Post came through Josey's clenched hand. When it was over, they waited for further bulletins. But the silence was restored as abruptly as it had been broken.

'Ah doobt they've goat 'im,' Buff said at last. 'We'll bury 'im in the mornin'.'

Outside, Josey had ceremonially unbuttoned himself and was urinating against the wall below Buff's window. With a soldier's instinct his eyes scouted the winter street. He was conscious of a face somewhere. Cautiously, he didn't look back round but reconnoitred the street again in his mind, trying to locate whose face he had seen. Having decided who it was, he made his plan. Wheeling abruptly, he bellowed, 'Present – arms!' and presented something else. Then he shambled on up the street, buttoning his trousers.

Miss Gilfillan's hand jumped away from the window. The lace curtain fell between her and the street, an armour as

ineffectual as her gentility. Her heart protested delicately. She almost wept with shame and anger. She withdrew still further, feeling her privacy under siege, when she saw a dark shape at the Thompson's window.

'Ah canny see 'im,' Buff said. 'He must be away.'

He crossed and sat back down at the fire.

'Away tae yer bed, Buff,' Tam said. 'Ye'll be needin' yer rest.'

'Naw, naw,' Buff said. 'Ah'd like tae see the wean.'

Twenty-past eleven. The minute-hand seemed struggling through treacle. The fire, having forged itself to a block of embers, made the area around it molten with heat, and they sat steeping in warmth. They spoke little. Yet their silence was a traffic, more real than words. They had known each other for a long time and both were miners. Their friendship was fed from numberless tubers, small, invisible, forgotten, favours like help with shifting furniture, talk in the gloaming at the corner, laughters shared. Intensifying these was that sense of communal identity miners had, as if they were a separate species. When Buff coughed, it wasn't just an accidental sound disturbing the quiet of the room. It was part of a way of life, a harshness bred in the pits and growing like a tumour in his breathing. He was at sixty much of what Tam, in his early thirties, would become. And as Buff was Tam's future, so Tam was his past. The mere presence of one enlarged the other, so that now just by sitting here they were a dialogue, a way of ordering the uncertainty of this night into sense.

At ten to twelve a sound came. It was a tear in the stillness of the night, high, cold and forlorn, seeming to pass on through the house as if it would unravel the silence of the town itself. Through the hole it made there bled a steady crying. Looking at each other across the sound, their eyes enlarged into laughter.

'Somebody's arrived,' Buff said.

Tam was on his way to the door when Buff stopped him.

'Hing oan noo, Tam.' Buff was on his feet himself. 'There's things tae be done yet. They'll send fur ye when ye're wanted.'

The next few minutes had no purpose in themselves but only as an anteroom. Tam walked up and down in them, rounding the stool, crossing to the window, and coming back again, making the room a landscape of his impatience. Every time he passed Buff he would nod and smile at him inanely, or wink, or say 'Eh!' as if Buff were several acquaintances and each had to be acknowledged, however absently. A couple of times he punched his right hand into the palm of his left and said, 'Come oan, then,' in a tone of brisk challenge. Once he stopped dead, muttering, 'It must be a' richt,' confidentially to the floorboards, and then went on with measured steps, as if pacing out the exact dimensions of his happiness.

'It's no' short o' lungs, onywey,' Buff said. 'Is it no' hellish, though. Ye go through a' that bother tae get born. An' the first thing they gi'e ye is a skelp on the erse.'

The remark opened a valve on the tension of the whole evening, and they started to laugh. Tam's worry ran out in a kind of controlled hysteria. 'Aye,' he said. 'Aye.' They nodded and smiled. The moment was a conspiracy, a compact sealed – two men agreeing that the fear of each hadn't been noticed by the other.

The door opened and Aggie came through.

'A' richt, then?' Tam had already started to go past her.

'Wait, wait. Fur Goad's sake, man.' She was flushed with the excitement of the sanctum. For a few seconds her experience worked an alchemy on her, made her incongruously almost girlish, a sixty-year-old coquette. 'Whit dae ye think she's been daein'? Passin' wind? Give 'er time. She's no' ready for ye yet.'

'Are things a' richt?' He knew from her face they were, but he felt a superstitious need for the humility of such a question, as if presumption would be punished.

'Everythin's fine, Tam. Jist fine.' Her reassurance became licence for more teasing. 'Nae thanks tae you. If ye saw whit your pleasure costs that lassie. We had an awfu' time bringin' that wee yin intae the world.'

He couldn't feel chastised. Everything that touched him was transmuted into pleasure, even his impatience.

'Whit is it?' he asked.

'It's a lassie. Naw. Ah mean it's a boay'. Her excitement had left her honestly confused.

'Hell, wumman!' Buff said. 'You're a handy messenger. If it's no black, it'll be white. Clear as mud.'

'Shut up, you.' The child was everybody's excuse for having a holiday from habit. 'Whit would you ken aboot it? When you rolled ower an' went tae sleep that wis your joab done, as far as you were concerned.' It was a bitterness fermented over years and only served up now when occasion made it palatable. 'Naw, Tam, that's richt, son. It's a boay.'

'It'll be an auld man before Ah get tae see it.'

A tap at the door refuted him. It was Mrs Ritchie. Going through they formed a little jostling cavalcade behind her, Buff being the tail of it. As soon as he entered the room, Tam took it over. His pride was the master of ceremonies. He flicked his right hand at his wife in a private tic-tac of affection and smiled at her. Freshly washed, her face was a gentle bloat of weariness on which her smile floated, fragile as a flower. Her eyes were already palling with sleep. Tam lifted the child in its sheet and, checking by the way that Aggie's second thought was right, held him up in his hands to inventory his perfection. He had hair, black, a rebellion of separate strands, going in all directions. One temple was badged with dried blood. His face made a fist

at the world. The twined remnant of umbilicus projected vulnerably. Hands, feet and prick. He had come equipped for the job.

The room was discreetly tidy. The debris of birth had all been spirited away. Dr Allan stood with his back to the fire, genteelly jacketed again, insulating himself against the walk back home.

'Thanks, dochter,' Tam said. 'Aggie, there's a drap whusky in the press there. Fur the dochter.'

'No, thank you. I'll be getting back round. And we'd best all get away and let the lassie sleep. She's a far distance to come back from.'

'We'll no' be long. But ye'll hiv some. It's Hogmanay the nicht, as faur as Ah'm concerned.' Knowing that Tam Docherty didn't keep drink in the house, Dr Allan decided not to offend against the special provision he had made. 'An' wan fur Buff as weel.'

'Whit's he done tae deserve a whusky?' Aggie had found the whisky and two glasses Tam had laid ready.

'Ah've suffered you fur foarty year,' Buff said.

'Well.' The doctor raised his glass of whisky. 'Here's to . . . whoever he is. Have you got a name?'

Tam hoisted the baby round to face them: 'Cornelius Docherty to the company.'

The name seemed to drown him, like regal robes on a midget. The doctor sipped.

'That's a terrible size of a name for such a wee fellow.'

'He'll grow tae fit it. Don't you worry.'

'Whit aboot yerself, Tam?' Aggie asked. 'Ye could likely dae wi' a drap.'

'Naw. Thanks, Aggie. But Ah'm drunk enough already, withoot drink.'

'Ah'd oaffer ye mine, Tam,' Buff said, looking disconsolately at what wasn't so much a finger as a fingernail of liquor, 'if Ah could fin' it.'

The doctor took another sip, and spoke meditatively, as if whisky were philosophy: 'What are you going to make this one, then? A Hindu? You've got two religions in the house already.'

'He's a' Ah' wid want tae make 'im as he is. A perfect wee human bein'. Whit mair could ye want? Except fur him tae get bigger. Be mair o' the same.'

'He'll certainly have to get bigger. Before he's ready for the pits.'

'He'll never be ready fur the pits. No' this wan. He'll howk wi' his heid. Fur ideas.' He winked at the baby. 'Eh, Conn? Ah'm pittin his name doon fur Prime Minister. First thing in the moarnin'.'

Their laughter ebbed to a still contentment. Mrs Ritchie sat smiling in self-satisfaction by the fire. Buff took his whisky a meniscus at a time. Aggie had put temptation back into the press. Jenny was adrift in drowsiness, her body flotsam abandoned to her weariness. One white hand was being held in Tam Docherty's, while in his other arm he still cradled his son. Dr Allan leaned into the cushion of heat behind him. His professionalism being disarmed by tiredness, he saw the scene as a fortress of people built protectively and perhaps hopelessly round a child. He remembered how at the birth he had put the child to the bottom of the bed, a parcel of useless flesh, while he concerned himself with the mother. It was Mrs Ritchie who had skelped him into life. She would talk about that and it would swell in the telling, would become a story of a life stolen from the jaws of death. The child came trailing legends, became in the act of being born more than himself. For Tam Docherty he had existed before himself, had been a name, an idea, just waiting for flesh. He saw a tacit but deeply held sense of triumph in which all these people shared. No matter what their lives did to them, this was what they salvaged, this unsmirched new beginning.

Conn lay, hubbed in their middle, raw as a fresh wound, and seemed suddenly to Dr Allan impossibly burdened with the weight of all their lives. As the doctor lifted the glass again to his mouth, it was a private toast. With it there went a solemn wish for the kind of fulfilment to this beginning that they dreamt of. It was wished for all the more intensely because he could not for a second begin to believe in it.

Across the street Miss Gilfillan's figure glimmered tall and pale as a candle in her window. Around her, High Street, its tenement windows gutted by shadows, closes gaping like abandoned burrows, seemed as dead as Pompeii, a desolation where people were frozen into the sordid postures of their grovelling lives. In her mind there echoed still among them the sound of the child's cry from the lighted window. It came to her not as a birth but as a wail against dying. The ooze of hopelessness had already claimed it. None of them here had any chance. Watching a cliff of cloud slowly erode in the wind, she felt herself dwindle to a small helplessness, her heart contracting to a pebble. The comfort of the past dispersed like a vapour, leaving her shivering in a void inhabited by what people called 'progress'. She sensed it only as a malign presence, like a legendary monster, fabulous with the future, devouring the past, a self-begetting sequence of deformities. As this year died, what successor, more hideous than itself, would it be spawning?