

The Misty Morning

Described by Lesley MacIver

Mysie Artichoke and Kirsty Curmuddie are well-known residents of Bramble-Green and they are addicted to gossip. Mrs Artichoke lives near the centre of the village and gets the news first, then relays it to her friend. And so we meet them, Mrs Artichoke arriving at Mrs Curmuddie's door in a great state, one morning – one misty morning. She has to be plied with a drink first, to settle her nerves, and many topics come under discussion including the fact that her dear husband hasn't come home yet though this is not the main cause of her concern. Mrs Curmuddie only hears much later in the day the shocking news that their local doctor, Dr Boltpill, has been found murdered in cold blood, right by his own front door.

This leaves them with one other doctor to call, a Dr Plyphleme. He's better than nothing – but his remedy is often worse than the disease, as he's given to old-fashioned methods such as bleeding the unfortunate patient, either with a lancet or with leeches. The search is on for a new doctor, and a selection committee is formed, a group of gentlemen who meet in the local hostelry, the Cheerie Farmers, including Mr Tawse, the self-opinionated and unpopular dominie, Mr Butterscales, the grocer and Mr Chizzle, the builder. A great deal of drink is taken, and it is left to the redoubtable Mrs Butterscales to break up proceedings when she forcibly removes her hapless husband.

The outcome is the engaging of one Dr Hornie Golloch, who arrives in Bramble-Green and sets up house with his sister Sarah to manage his household, with young Willie Artichoke to see to the horses and Katie Curmuddie as the maid. Their mothers, being best friends, harbour dreams of these two marrying eventually! The new doctor is *single* so is a magnet for the local unmarried ladies and their mothers, of course, determined to 'do the right thing' by their daughters, by snaring him as a son-in-law. And he's wonderful. Not only is he that rare commodity, an eligible bachelor, but he can dance divinely, sing beautifully and is never at a loss for conversation! But, how best to get to know him ...? Make friends with his sister, of course.

Which is what Jeanie Skeldrin does. Her father William, who farms Thistle Ha', has an accident to his hand. Dr Plyphleme is called in to treat him, which he does with much enthusiasm and not a little ignorance. Eventually young Dr Golloch bumps into the older doctor when visiting Thistle Ha', and challenges him about Mr Skeldrin's treatment. Dr P is sent off while Dr G diagnoses a sprained wrist. Mr Skeldrin has been encouraging the attentions of a young farmer, Mr Gobbler, towards his daughter Jeanie, but he now declares the doctor to be a better prospect.

He holds a dinner party (gentlemen only) for the doctor, and Mr Tawse who has considered a match between the doctor and one of his own daughters now falls out with him and decides to turn his daughters' attention towards Mr Gobbler now that Dr Golloch is clearly spoken for. Mr Gobbler is therefore

inducted into the Tawse family and he comes to tea and eats all the cookies in a most uncivilised manner, but when Mrs Tawse and the girls pay a return visit to old Mrs Gobbler at the farm at Blawdreary, they are made very unwelcome.

So, Jeanie is to marry Dr Golloch! Sarah is going home to visit her parents, and Jeanie is going with her, to meet her prospective family. They go off in the train, and spend so long away enjoying themselves that the Skeldrins begin to wonder what they are doing. The girls come home at last, and are met at the station by Dr Golloch and Mr Skeldrin. When they arrive at the Gollocks' home, the doctor invites the Skeldrins in for refreshments and indeed Mr S is easily persuaded in 'the belief that he might be none the worse of a little something or other'. But, there's no sign of life at the house. Willie eventually turns up but Katie is nowhere to be seen. Sarah goes to the kitchen to get candles, and comes back with a letter for her brother. Imagine the astonishment when it proves to contain a hank of human hair! Seeing her brother's distress, Sarah reads out the letter, apparently from Katie, pleading love and affection and hinting that she is going to kill herself for unrequited love. Mr S is appalled and makes Jeanie leave instantly with him, in spite of the doctor's protestations. Poor Jeanie! She has never been in love before, and now it's all in ruins. Mrs S takes a more pragmatic view of the business, pointing out that it's Jeanie who is being hurt by it all. Mr S claims that Mr Gobbler would have been a better match in the end. He blames Mrs S for encouraging Jeanie with the doctor; Mrs S's reply, 'Oh yes, of course I get the blame of all that takes place' echoes down the years....

Meanwhile, Willie is despatched home to see if his sister is there, but Mrs Curmuddie hasn't seen her. Questioned by the doctor, he admits that Katie hasn't been herself. Miss Golloch is wrapped in silent distress. Dr Golloch sets off to inform the police officer, Watty, who has been playing cards with Charlie the gravedigger and has to rush to get into his uniform for this official call, which consists of writing notes on a slate. He and Charlie then set off to scour the neighbourhood for signs of Katie.

Mrs Curmuddie, furious that the policeman has been looking for her daughter, sets off for the doctor's house to find out what the fuss is about. She can't believe what the doctor tells her and he cannot persuade her that he's telling the truth.

Watty and Charlie set off the next day, taking Willie with them. They drag local pools and the quarry and question farm workers without success.

Soon everyone knows that Katie's disappeared and the (supposed) reason for it, although others hold that Katie has eloped and left a false trail. Dr Golloch continues to claim his ignorance, but the tide is turning against him, especially when the Butterscales engage Dr Plyphleme to attend the delivery of their twins [...the arrival of a two-volume edition of a contribution towards the replenishing of the earth']. But everyone is sympathetic towards Miss Golloch. The Misses Tawse become especially warm... perhaps a match could come about, after all.

Mr Skeldrin declares that Mr Gobbler is again to be viewed in the light of a prospective son-in-law, that this *will* happen no matter what and has a furious row with his wife over the matter. Jeanie of course is appalled at the idea! But, he is still fond of Sarah Galloch, so she is still welcome at their home, and Jeanie is able to explain to her that she still loves the doctor.

Mr Gobbler is now *persona non grata* in the Tawse household, but made welcome *chez* Skeldrin, being plied with whisky and told of Jeanie's many attractions. Unhappy Jeanie, what alternative could she have? Her father can't understand why she doesn't seem more enthusiastic, and he's getting exasperated with her. Jeanie turns to her mother for support, but Mrs Skeldrin dreads any further interference and says that Mr G might, after all, turn out to have possibilities as a husband. The future is looking bleak.

It is even bleaker on the following Sunday, when the banns are called in respect of a marriage between Grinton Gobbler and Jeanie Skeldrin! Now it is Dr Golloch's turn to be appalled. As far as he knows, from speaking to his sister, Jeanie had no word of any betrothal to Mr Gobbler or anyone else. He cannot concentrate on the Rev Mr Screevinscreed's sermon, and neither can many other people. The Tawse girls, however, knew about the announcement from their father and were dressed in their best finery, the better to catch the doctor's eye. The baptism of the Butterscales' twins makes the service even longer.

Mr Tawse is as determined as his daughters to snare the doctor, and when the girls suggest that 'some little thing in the party-giving way' might be a good idea, he agrees. The doctor is the first to be invited, but he declines with such icy politeness and Mr Tawse flies into a rage, the girls are reduced to floods of tears and lacy handkerchiefs, and Mrs Tawse upbraided for her contribution to the disgrace of the family, as he sees it.

Late on a wet and stormy evening, the unhappy Dr Golloch is sitting at home thinking about Jeanie, when the police officer, Watty Baton, arrives, starts asking him questions, and then tells him that a body has been found in the river in the neighbouring parish, and it could be Katie. The doctor is surprised that if it's Katie's body, it wasn't found earlier, but Watty is convinced. The doctor is left alone again, until even later when an Irishman – Larry O'Grunter - turns up wanting his services for someone out at the brickworks. He reluctantly agrees, because the man refuses to go to Dr 'Plyflame' instead.

Young Willie waits up for the doctor, and is alarmed when his horse comes back on its own in a distressed state. Willie sets out to look for the doctor, taking his father (drunk after a night out) with him. When they get to the brickworks they meet Larry O'Grunter, who says that the doctor had delivered his wife of a fine son, so they wet the baby's head with much singing. Willie and Benjie set off home to Bramble-Green but get lost on the moor. A shepherd points out that they are on the wrong road, they are on the far side of Blawdreary. His wife gives them breakfast – milk and pease-bannock. Suddenly, there is a noise from the other room, someone calling, "Benjie !

Benjie! Is that you?" and rushing past the shepherd, who tries to stop her. It's Katie.

The shepherd claims that she's some poor soul who needs to be locked up for her own good, while Katie begs them to take her away. He claims that she was entrusted to him by his master, whom he refuses to name. Benjie reasons that stealing an animal can lead to transportation, and also points out that he could hang for what he's doing.

The shepherd capitulates immediately. But if Katie was taken away from Bramble-Green against her will, why did she leave that note for the doctor? Katie does not know about any note.

Guided by the shepherd - who divulges his master's name eventually - they get back on the right road (Benjie delighted that he can surprise his wife by appearing home sober for once!), and Katie tells them the whole story. Dr Golloch is at the Artichokes' house when the little party arrives home. It transpires that Katie was kidnapped by none other than Mr Gobbler who is the mysterious 'master' that the shepherd had described to Benjie and Willie. Apparently, the night that the girls were coming home, Katie was standing looking out of the door when a man came past. He asked if the doctor was in, saying he had a letter for him. Katie didn't recognise him, as he was wrapped in a dark cloak, but she got the impression that he knew who she was. He told her that he'd just seen her mother, who wanted her to run over to the house for a minute. He was going that way, he would keep her company. Of course Katie worried about leaving the house, but it was only for a minute When they got to the road, there was a horse and cart, with a man standing by, who told her threateningly to get in and keep quiet. There was no-one around, so poor Katie, terrified, did as she was told. Then she saw no-one else until Benjie and Willie arrived. What were they planning to do with her, though? Katie thought that from what she had heard them say, she would have been eventually taken back to Bramble-Green blindfolded, so unable to say anything about where she had been.

Dr Golloch takes charge of the situation. He's waiting for Willie to bring his horse back from the blacksmith, but he calls round to Mrs Curmuddie, who thinks he's come offering condolences. She does not believe the good news, but then upbraids Katie for causing so much trouble when she sees her. Benjie remonstrates, telling her to wait until she hears the whole story, that it was a plot by 'that sloogin' hound' Gobbler. Whereupon Mrs Curmuddie rounds on the doctor, telling him to go round immediately and sort Gobbler out. But he can't go anywhere, not even to Thistle Ha', because the smith is too drunk to shoe his horse. And just then, Charlie and Watty roll up with an empty cart. The police officer in the next district, Humphrey Handcuff, had got so excited after hearing there was a body in the river that he sent a message to Watty immediately, without checking first, only later discovering that it was ..., a scarecrow. However, he cheers up immediately he hears the story which has been unfolding, especially as Dr Golloch asks him to accompany him to Mr Gobbler's place. They set off, with Benjie driving, while Mrs Curmuddie, Katie and Willie go round to the doctor's house to tell Miss Golloch the news.

Benjie reluctantly looks after the cart when they reach Blawdreary, while the doctor and Watty go in to tackle Mr Gobbler. Running the gamut of the unsavoury farmyard and a couple of curious employees, they find the shepherd's wife who takes them to speak to 'Tibbie'. Mr Gobbler isn't there, his old mother has locked herself in her room and has had a dreadful surprise as he is expected home very soon with a wife. Jeanie! Dr Golloch is stunned. Can the wedding be happening this soon?

Back at Thistle Ha', it's Jeanie's wedding day. Her mother believes that she's become reconciled to her fate, but this is far from the truth. When she goes in to wake Jeanie, the poor girl bursts into tears. She is feeling worse than ever, but there's no sympathy from her mother, who exhorts her 'for any sake try and keep from crying out against the man who is to be your partner for life!' Shuddering, Jeanie starts to get ready, helped by her bridesmaid, who wastes no time telling her about the finding of Katie's body in the water and the disappearance of the doctor. Downstairs, Mr and Mrs Skeldrin and Rev Mr Screevinscreed discuss the same things. Dr Golloch's reputation and fate are sealed.

Traditionally the bride may be a little late for her wedding, but in this case there is no sign of the bridegroom. Nearly an hour passes, with everyone wondering where he is. Mr Skeldrin decides to go off with the gig to look for him, but as he stands up to leave, there's a knock at the door and Jeanie faints.

Out at Blawdreary, Dr Golloch, Watty and Benjie have to decide what to do. Benjie suggests driving straight back to Thistle Ha', so Benjie promises to go as fast as possible. They get as far as the road junction when they see Mr Skeldrin's gig approaching. He stops, puzzled. Why are they there? Dr Golloch explains, and Mr Skeldrin's manner changes. Suddenly they can hear screaming, and a man appears, carrying a dying dog, covered in mud and blood, around his neck. It's the shepherd, who explains that he had gone round to tell Gobbler about what had happened to the girl. Gobbler's immediate rage turned to contrition and he decided to leave the country. He packed two bundles of belongings, and with the shepherd helping, sets off towards the railway. But crossing a field they are attacked by a black bull – the dog was tossed and badly injured, and what of Gobbler? Well, Gobbler was gored to death.

There was little mourning for Mr Gobbler; Mr Skeldrin was aghast at the realisation to what he had almost condemned his beloved daughter. His wonderful wife, always right in her assertions, was now to be believed on all fronts. The only person not pleased was of course Mr Tawse.

Shortly after, there was another party at Thistle Ha'. Very different feelings for Jeanie today surrounded by happiness; she is marrying her Doctor Golloch.

Mr Tawse lost his head completely, beating half to death those of his scholars who had dared to cheer the wedding coach as it passed, having been

instructed not to do so. Watty happened to be on hand though, and scared him into submission. Shortly afterwards, he and his family emigrate to Australia.

And the same day as the doctor married Jeanie, Willie married Katie, thus fulfilling their mothers' dearest wish. And at the wonderful party afterwards paid for by the doctor Benjie drank more free whisky than he had ever had before in his life.