

## The Misty Morning A TALE

*By Richard Watt*

A village of clowns, drunkards and gossips, by turn quarrelsome, envious, ignorant, superstitious, conceited, spiteful and scheming; such are the worthies of Bramble Green satirised in *The Misty Morning*, a nineteenth century novel published anonymously in 1857, but thought to be by Thomas Finnie, grandson of the local poet, James Thomson. Internal evidence, especially the murder of the doctor by a madman released into community care from a mental hospital, which happened in Juniper Green exactly as described in the second chapter, to say nothing of the thinly disguised village name, with Bramble substituted for Juniper, indicates that this portrait of the community may be taken as an unflattering representation of our forebears of 160 or more years ago.

Much of the story is told through the medium of vigorous Scots dialogue, a language in which the author seems to be quite at home, but which is spoken only by the low-life, uneducated characters. Unfortunately, as in this book's companion novel, *The Dark Night*, also reviewed on this website, Finnie gets so carried away by his own enjoyment of the vernacular that he just doesn't know when to stop. This is well seen when the tale opens with two gossips, Mrs Kirsty Curmuddie and Mrs Mysie Artichoke, meeting to exchange the latest tattle while lubricating their tongues with "speerits". Mrs Curmuddie has portentous news to impart, but at the end of the first chapter we still don't know what it is, the joke being that Mrs C. can talk and talk without ever coming to the point. By page 22 the joke is wearing pretty thin, and the reader is groaning, like Hamlet, for more matter with less art. This is the author's besetting sin and throughout the novel the narrative is padded out with largely irrelevant extraneous material in the form of comic business or songs, designed to show how ridiculous the villagers are, (and perhaps how clever the writer is at poking fun), but without much bearing on the story.

The ludicrous names of many of the characters set the tone: clearly we are expected to laugh at the antics of Charlie Spades the gravedigger, Mr Tawse the teacher, Watty Baton the policeman, Benjie Artichoke the gardener and so on - names that echo *Happy Families* and childhood stories. Similarly the first incident of the tale in which Mrs Curmuddie's son is thrown by a donkey head first into a barrel of water is slapstick in *Beano* or *Dandy* vein and serves only to delay even further her account of Doctor Boltpill's murder, the device the author uses eventually to launch his plot. This violent and sensational episode is out of keeping with the overall comic tone and is quickly passed over. However it provides a means of introducing a new doctor, the young, single and socially accomplished Dr Hornie Golloch (an old Scots name for the earwig) who innocently sets the unmarried maidens of Bramble Green into catty competition for his attention, especially the daughters of the venal, creepy schoolmaster, Mr Tawse, who fully backs their efforts. It is their bad luck that, immune to the charms of the village girls and the wiles of their parents, Dr Golloch falls for Jeanie Skeldrin, the daughter of a local farmer. The two young people become engaged.

The course of true love gets the usual bumpy ride, however, thanks to paternal opposition and a scandalous event. Jeanie's father is determined that she must marry his previous choice and her previous suitor, Grinton Gobbler, oafish and repulsive, but wealthy and the owner of Blawdreary Farm, who spends much of his time lurking helplessly and with brooding jealousy

outside the Skeldrin home while Dr Golloch is visiting his fiancée. More complications ensue when Katie Curmuddie, the doctor's servant girl, disappears one evening leaving a suicide note on the kitchen table professing undying affection for her employer. The village jumps to the pleasurable conclusion that Katie has taken her own life because the doctor has made her a promise of marriage, or pregnant, or both, and most turn against him in smug indignation. Feeling vindicated, Mr Skeldrin is triumphant in his judgement that Gobbler has to be the ideal man for his daughter and far preferable as a son-in-law to the scoundrelly seducer she has been engaged to.

Now there is, apparently, a body to be found and we follow Watty Baton's and Charlie Spades' clownish antics in their inept search for Katie's corpse. The village fiddler, Cockie Cheeper, thinks he saw Katie with a man on the night of her disappearance, but is not taken seriously because the drams he downed that evening lend haziness to his recollections.

Meanwhile at Thistle Ha', the Skeldrin farm, Gobbler is in the ascendant, Mrs Skeldrin sides eventually with her husband, Jeanie buckles under parental pressure, and Dr Golloch has a nasty shock when he hears the banns read in church. From this point on events become more and more melodramatic. On a dark and stormy night Watty Baton informs the doctor that a body has been found in the river which is bound to be that of Katie Curmuddie. He and Charlie will fetch it in the morning. Shortly afterwards an Irish voice demands admission to the doctor's house and, in the end, one Larry O'Grunter is allowed in to insist on the doctor's attendance at his wife's bedside. Doctor Golloch mounts his horse and gallops off into the storm. Later that night the horse returns, riderless and exhausted, to the great consternation of young Willie Artichoke, the doctor's stable lad.

Now, after the storm, we come to the misty morning of the title. Willie Artichoke and his father, Benjie, resolve to search for the doctor, tracing his route over the wild moorland he had traversed in the night to reach Larry O'Grunter's house. The mist is all enveloping and the disoriented pair start singing to keep up their spirits, or perhaps because of the spirits Benjie has swallowed the night before. They are startled by the sudden appearance from the fog of Larry O'Grunter who has heard their singing and at first takes them for sheep stealers. Much comic business ensues.

In the meantime Watty Baton and Charlie Spades learn of the doctor's absence and of the Artichoke search and rescue mission, but stick with their plan of recovering Katie's corpse. Mrs Curmuddie and Mrs Artichoke discuss at customary and tiresome length the meaning of the latter's dream about the doctor and Katie beating a carpet together, before considering the doctor's death, which both assume to be a fact. The main purpose of all of this seems to be to create suspense and to delay the revelation of the doctor's less exciting fate which is that a mischievous Irish urchin had released the horse while Mrs O'Grunter was being delivered of a son, so that finally the doctor had set off to walk home. After Larry has revealed the truth, he and Benjie begin a singing contest in which each of the songs is given to us verbatim. Eventually the Artichokes, father and son, themselves set off for home, but, confused by Larry's directions and the thick mist, get lost on the moors.

After wandering and singing some more, they stumble upon a shepherd's cottage and ask for help. Benjie offers the shepherd (whose name is "Mawcum") tobacco, and the grateful recipient invites them in for milk and bannocks. Once inside, Benjie turns again to singing, an inner door opens and Katie Curmuddie bursts in crying, "Benjie, Benjie, is that you?" When the shepherd tries to drag her back, Benjie threatens him with jail and hanging, upon which he fingers "the maister", Grinton Gobbler, as the kidnapper and author of the suicide note. Katie confirms that

she was forcibly abducted, and so the trio set off for Bramble Green to restore Katie to her family and to confound Gobbler's heinous attempt to discredit his love rival.

On arrival at the Artichoke home, Benjie and Co. find the doctor already there and apprise him of Gobbler's crime. The doctor decides to confront the miscreant in his den at Blawdreary, but is interrupted by Watty and Charlie's return with the drowned corpse, in actuality a scarecrow. When Watty, Benjie and the doctor finally arrive at Blawdreary they are told Gobbler has already left to marry Jeanie. However, back at Thistle Ha' the marriage party has assembled but the bridegroom has not appeared. Jeanie alone is relieved at his absence. Mr Skeldrin goes to fetch the missing groom, meets the doctor's party and learns the real state of affairs. The shepherd, Mawcum, carrying a bloody and dying dog, then turns up and explains that he'd already told Gobbler of Katie's rescue. The horrified and frightened Gobbler had packed a bag and sought to escape by hidden ways which would bring him to the railway and a train to freedom abroad. As he and Mawcum had crossed a field they were attacked by an enraged bull which gored the dog and trampled Gobbler to death. Following this satisfying news, and after a decent time has elapsed, the doctor and Jeanie are wed, as are Katie Curmuddie and Willie Archibald.

Such in drastically condensed form is the main plot of the story, but there are numerous subplots also, the chief of which shows us the unprincipled manoeuvrings of the self-important, greedy Tawse and his daughters as he tries to marry them off advantageously to anyone who will have them, including the loathsome Gobbler. No one will, and in the end Mr Tawse and his spiteful daughters emigrate in a cloud of envy to Australia to test the marriage market down under.

Anyone familiar with Victorian novels knows how baggy they can be, with dozens of characters, lots of digressions and intricate plots and subplots. In the hands of a master like Dickens, whose mature novels present the reader with a tightly woven tapestry, this adds to the richness of the experience. Thomas Finnie, by contrast, leaves loose ends sticking out in all directions, especially in the form of minor characters' frequently pointless activities which are pursued well past the onset of tedium. Although he can handle language skilfully and entertainingly and often pithily - when he is not engaged in some laboured circumlocution - this alone fails to rescue *The Misty Morning* from the modern reader's intolerance of longwindedness.

Furthermore, the great Victorian novelists used their medium to explore the social and economic issues of the day or, like John Galt a little earlier in *Annals of the Parish*, to reflect upon the impact of the wider, changing world on a small community. Finnie's purpose is far more limited: his aim is only to entertain us with a story and to make a middle class readership laugh at the follies and ignorance of their social inferiors. While he has much in common with the once popular Kailyard school of writers, unlike them he does not idealise or sentimentalise rural life.

Nor is there any development of character which is unsurprising, given that the inhabitants of Bramble Green are caricatures in whom a limited number of personality traits are exaggerated for comic purposes. Even the doctor, his sister and Jeanie, the only ones who are not in some way ridiculous, and are intended to be sympathetic, are too flat to be interesting. Jeanie is vapid and devoid of spirit or personality, while Doctor Golloch is straight from the stock cupboard, the stereotypical conscientious young doctor without any real individuality to lift him from the page. The author is not hostile to most of his characters: only Mr Tawse and his family and Grinton Gobbler and his mother are thoroughly unpleasant and contemptible. The rest are made to seem foolish and their behaviour laughable, but there is a certain affection and sympathy in his presentation of them.

Why bother then? Perhaps as a literary text it is very dated and hardly worth the time and effort: there are better novels of the period and genre for the general reader. Possibly as a period piece it has curiosity value and it could interest the student of Scots language. On the other hand, what *The Misty Morning* does do is give us a picture of village life just beyond the edge of Edinburgh which, for all its exaggerations and grotesqueries, reveals much to interest the local historian. For instance, the social composition of the village, peoples' occupations and their status, health and education, to give a few examples, as portrayed in this book and in *The Dark Night*, hold up a mirror to a way of life that reflects not only a rural past but also the changes being made by industrial and scientific development. Really this is incidental to the novel. We examine it now as one looks at an old photograph of no special artistic merit, picking out period detail, which at the time was, for the photographer and the viewer, unremarkable background to be taken for granted, but which for us now holds a fascination that the subject itself no longer possesses.