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The Life of Mansie Wauch - Tailor in Dalkeith, written by himself by David Macbeth Moir Home - Random Browse I thought they would never have come, for my shoeless feet were all bruised, and bleeding from the crunched lime and the splinters of broken stones; but, at long and last, a ladder was hoisted up, and having fastened a kinch of ropes beneath her oxters, I let her slide down over the upper step, by way of a pillyshee, having the satisfaction of seeing her safely landed in the arms of seven old wives, that were waiting with a cosey warm blanket below. Having accomplished this grand manoeuvre, wherein I succeeded in saving the precious life of a woman of eighty, that had been four long years bedridden, I tripped down the steps myself like a nine-year-old, and had the pleasure, when the roof fell in, to know that I for one had done my duty; and that, to the best of my knowledge, no living creature except the poor cat had perished within the jaws of the devouring element. But, bide a wee; the work was, as yet, only half done. The fire was still roaring and raging, every puff of wind that blew through the black firmament, driving the red sparks high into the air, where they died away like the tail of a comet, or the train of a skyrocket; the joisting crazing, cracking, and tumbling down; and now and then the bursting cans playing flee in a hundred flinders from the chimney-heads. Being a man of method, and acquainted with business, I could have liked to have given a finishing stitch to my work before descending the ladder; but, losh me! The voice of Benjie especially pierced through and through my heart, like a two-edged sword, and I could on no manner of account suffer myself to bear it any longer, as I jealoused the bairn would have gone into convulsion fits if I had not heeded him; so, making a sign to them to be quiet, I came my ways down, taking hold of one in ilka hand, which must have been a fatherly sight to the spectators that saw us. After waiting on the crown of the causey for half an hour, to make sure that the fire was extinguished, and all tight and right, I saw the crowd scaling, and thought it best to go in too, carrying the two youngsters along with me. When I began to move off, however, siccan a cheering of the multitude got up as would have deafened a cannon; and though I say it myself, who should not say it, they seemed struck with a sore amazement at my heroic behaviour, following me with loud cheers even to the threshold of my own door. From this folk should condescend to take a lesson, seeing that, though the world is a bitter bad world, yet that good deeds are not only a reward to themselves, but call forth the applause of Jew and Gentile; for the sweet savour of my conduct on this memorable night remained in my nostrils for goodness knows the length of time, many praising my brave humanity in public companies and assemblies of the people, such as strawberry ploys, council meetings, dinner parties, and so forth; and many in private conversation at their own ingle-cheek, by way of two-handed crack; in stage-coach confab, and in causey talk in the forenoon, before going in to take their meridians. Indeed, between friends, the business proved in the upshot of no small advantage to me, bringing to me a sowl of strange faces, by way of customers, both gentle and semple, that I verily believe had not so muckle as ever heard of my name before, and giving me many a coat to cut, and cloth to shape, that, but for my gallant behaviour on the fearsome night aforesaid, would doubtless have been cut, sewed, and shaped by other hands. Indeed, considering the great noise the thing made in the world, it is no wonder that every one was anxious to have a garment of wearing apparel made by the individual same hands that had succeeded, under Providence, in saving the precious life of an old woman of eighty, that had been bedridden, some say, four years come Yule, and others, come Martinmas. When we got to the ingle-side, and, barring the door, saw that all was safe, it was now three in the morning; so we thought it by much the best way of managing, not to think of sleeping any more, but to be on the look-out as we aye used to be when walking sentry in the volunteers in case the flames should, by ony mischancy accident or other, happen to break out again. My wife blamed my hardihood muckle, and the rashness with which I had ventured at once to places where even masons and sclaters were afraid to put foot on; yet I saw, in the interim, that she looked on me with a prouder

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eyeâ€”knowing herself the helpmate of one that had courageously risked his neck, and every bone in his skin, in the cause of humanity. I saw this as plain as a pikestaff, as, with one of her kindest looks, she insisted on my putting on a better happing to screen me from the cold, and on my taking something comfortable inwardly towards the dispelling of bad consequences. No sooner said than doneâ€”and off Nanse brushed in a couple of hurries to make the het-pint. After the small beer was put into the pan to boil, we found to our great mortification, that there were no eggs in the house, and Benjie was sent out with a candle to the hen-house, to see if any of the hens had laid since gloaming, and fetch what he could get. In the middle of the mean time, I was expatiating to Mungo on what taste it would have, and how he had never seen any thing finer than it would be, when in ran Benjie, all out of breath, and his face as pale as a dishclout. On this subject, howsoever, I shall say no more in this chapter, but merely observe in conclusion, that, as to our het-pint, we were obligated to make the best of a bad bargain, making up with whisky what it wanted in eggs; though our banquet could not be called altogether a merry one, the joys of our escape from the horrors of the fire being damped, as it were by a wet blanket, on account of the nefarious pillaging of our hen- house. The situation of me and my family at this time affords an example of the truth of the old proverb, that "ae evil never comes its lane;" being no sooner quit of our dread concerning the burning, than we were doomed by Providence to undergo the disaster of the rookery of our hen-house. I believe I have mentioned the number of our stockâ€”to wit, a cock and seven hens, eight in all; but I neglected, on account of their size, or somehow overlooked, the two bantams, than which two more neat or curiouser-looking creatures were not to be seen in the whole country-side. The hennie was quite a conceit of a thing, and laid an egg not muckle bigger than my thimble; while, for its size, the bit he-ane was, for spirit in the fechtin line, a perfect wee deevil incarnate. Most fortunately for my family in this matter, it so happened that, by paying in half-a-crown a-year, I was a regular member of a society for prosecuting all whom it might concern, that dabbled with foul fingers in the sinful and lawless trade of thievery, breaking the eighth commandment at no allowance, and drawing on their heads not only the passing punishments of this world, by way of banishment to Botany Bay, or hanging at the Luckenbooths, but the threatened vengeance of one that will last for ever and ever. Losh keep us all, what a spectacle of wreck and ruination! The roof was clean off and away, as if a thunderbolt from heaven had knocked it down through the two floors, carrying every thing before it like a perfect whirlwind. Nought were standing but black, bare walls, a perfect picture of desolation; some with the bit pictures on nails still hanging up where the rooms were like; and others with old coats hanging on pins; and empty bottles in boles, and so on. Indeed, Jacob Glowr, who was standing by my side with his specs on, could see as plain as a pikestaff, a tea-kettle still on the fire, in the hearth-place of one of the gable garrets, where Miss Jenny Withershins lived, but happened luckily, at the era of the conflagration, to be away to Prestonpans, on a visit to some of her far-away cousins, providentially for her safety, grievously, at that very time, smitten with the sciatics. Having satisfied my eyes with a daylight view of the terrible devastation, I went away leisurely up the street with my hands in my breeches-pockets, comparing the scene in my mind with the downfall of Babylon the Great, and Sodom and Gomorrah, and Tyre and Sidon, and Jerusalem, and all the lave of the great towns that had fallen to decay, according to the foretelling of the sacred prophets, until I came to the door of Donald Gleig, the head of the Thief Society, to whom I related, from beginning to end, the whole business of the hen-stealing. Not only did Donald send through the drum in the course of half an hour, offering a reward for the apprehension of the offenders of three guineas, names concealed, but he got a warrant granted to Francie Deep, the sherry-officer, to make search in the houses of several suspicious persons. The reward offered by tuck of drum failed, nobody making application to the crier; but the search succeeded; as, after turning every thing topsy-turvy, the feathers were found in a bag, in the house of an old woman of vile character, who contrived to make out a way of living by hiring beds at twopence a-night to Eirish travellersâ€”South-country packmenâ€”sturdy beggars, men and women, and weans of themâ€”Yetholm tinklersâ€”wooden-legged sailors without Chelsea pensionsâ€”dumb spaewomenâ€”keepers of wild-beast showsâ€”dancing-dog folkâ€”spunk-makers, and suchlike pickpockets. After some little ado, and having called in two men that were passing to help us to take

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them prisoners, in case of their being refractory, we carried them by the lug and the horn before a justice of peace. Except the fact of the stolen goods being found in their possession, it so chanced, ye observe, that we had no other sort of evidence whatsoever; but we took care to examine them one at a time, the one not hearing what the other said; so, by dint of cross-questioning by one who well knew how to bring fire out of flint, we soon made the guilty convict themselves, and brought the transaction home to two wauf-looking fellows that we had got smoking in a corner. From the speerings that were put to them during their examination, it was found that they tried to make a way of doing by swindling folks at fairs by the game of the garter. Indeed, it was stupid of me not to recognise their faces at first sight, having observed both of them loitering about our back bounds the afternoon before; and one of them, the tall one with the red head and fustian jacket, having been in my shop in the fore part of the night, about the gloaming like, asking me as a favour for a yard or two of spare runds, or selvages. I have aye heard that seeing is believing; and that youth might take a warning from the punishment that sooner or later is ever tacked to the tail of crime, I took Benjie and Mungo to hear the trial; and two more rueful faces than they put on, when they looked at the culprits, were never seen since Adam was a boy. It was far different with the two Eirishers, who showed themselves so hardened by a long course of sin and misery, that, instead of abasing themselves in the face of a magistrate, they scarcely almost gave a civil answer to a single question which was speered at them. Howsoever, they paid for that at a heavy ransom, as ye shall hear by and by. One of them, as I said before, had a red pow and a foraging cap, with a black napkin roppined round his weasand; a jean jacket with six pockets, and square tails; a velveten waistcoat with plated buttons; corduroy breeches buttoned at the knees; rig-and-fur stockings; and heavy, clanking wooden clogs. His trowsers, I dare say, had once been nankeen; but as they did not appear to have seen the washing-tub for a season or two, it would be rash to give any decided opinion on that head. In short, they were two awful-like raggamuffins. It was a humbling sight. My heart was sorrowful, notwithstanding the ills they had done me and mine, by the nefarious pillaging of our hen-house, to see two human creatures, of the same flesh and blood as myself, undergoing the righteous sentence of the law, in a manner so degrading to themselves, and so pitiful to all that beheld them. But, nevertheless, considering what they had done, they neither deserved, nor did they seem to care for commiseration, holding up their brazen faces as if they had been taking a pleasure walk for the benefit of their health, and the poukit hens, that dangled before them, ornaments of their bravery. Their chainsâ€”the things, ye know, that held their cuffs togetherâ€”were by this time taken off, along with the poukit hens, which I fancy the town-offishers took home and cooked for their dinner; so they shook hands with the drummer, wishing him a good-day and a pleasant walk home, brushing away on the road to Edinburgh, where their wives and weans, who had no doubt made a good supper on the spuilzie of the hens, had gone away before, maybe to have something comfortable for their arrival, their walk being likely to give them an appetite. The creature almost grat himself blind, when he heard of our having seen it roasting in a string by the legs before the fire, and found its bonny muffed head in a corner. But let alone likings, the callant was otherwise a loser in its death, she having regularly laid a caller egg to him every morning, which he got along with his tea and bread, to the no small benefit of his health, being, as I have taken occasion to remark before, far from being robusteous in the constitution. The names of the two Eirishers were John Dochart and Dennis Flint, both, according to their own deponement, from the county of Tipperary; and weel- a-wat the place has no great credit in producing two such bairns. Often, after that, did I look through that part of the Advertizer newspapers, that has a list of all the accidents, and so on, just above the births, marriages, and deaths, which I liked to read regularly. Howsoever, it was two years before I discovered their names again, having it seems, during a great part of that period, lived under the forged name of Alias; and I saw that they were both shipped off at Leith, for transportation to some country called the Hulks, for being habit and repute thieves, and for having made a practice of coining bad silver. But of all months of the yearâ€”or maybe, indeed, of my blessed lifetimeâ€”this one was the most adventurous. It seemed, indeed, as if some especial curse of Providence hung over the canny town of Dalkeith; and that, like the great cities of the plain, we were at long and last to be burnt up from the face of the earth with a shower of fire and brimstone.

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Her shoon were terrible bauchles, and her grey worsted stockings, to hide the holes in them, were all dragooned down about her heels. On the whole, she was rather, I must confess, an out-of-the-way creature; and though I had not muckle faith in these bodies that pretend to see further through a millstone than their neighbours, I somehow or other, taking pity on her miserable condition, being still a fellow-creature, though plain in the lugs, had not the heart to huff her out; more by token, as Nanse, Benjie, and the new prentice Mungo, had by this time got round me, all dying to know what grand fortunes waited them in the years of their after pilgrimage. Sinful creatures that we are! Is it not clear, that had it been for our good, all things would have been revealed to us; and is it not as clear, that not a wink of sound sleep would we ever have got, had all the ills that have crossed our paths been ranged up before our een, like great black towering mountains of darkness? How could we have found contentment in our goods and gear, if we saw them melting from us next year like snow from a dyke; how could we sit down on the elbow-chair of ease, could we see the misfortunes that may make next week a black one; or how could we look a kind friend in the face without tears, could we see him, ere a month maybe was gone, lying streiked beneath his winding-sheet, his eyes closed for evermore, and his mirth hushed to an awful silence! No, no, let us rest content that Heaven decrees what is best for us: Having taken a piece of chalk out of her big, greasy, leather pouch, she wrote down on the table, "Your wife, your son, and your prentice. I never kenned he had ony inkling for the seafaring line; and I thought, Mansie, you intended bringing him up to your ain trade. She then pointed to my wife, writing down, "Your name is Nancy"â€”and turning to me, as she made some dumbie signs, she chalked down, "Your name is Mansie Wauch, that saved the precious life of an old bedridden woman from the fire; and will soon get a lottery ticket of twenty thousand pounds. The doing so might not only set them to the sinful envying of our good fortune, as forbidden in the tenth commandment, but might lead away ourselves to be gutting our fish before we get them. We must not be in ower great a hurry. Some, on hearing siccan sums mentioned, would have immediately struck work, but, even in the height of my grand expectations, I did not forget the old saying, that "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush;" and being thrang with a pair of leggins for Eben Bowsie, I brushed away ben to the workshop, thinking the woman, or witch, or whatever she was, would have more freedom and pleasure in eating by herself. I could scarcely credit the callant, though I knew he would not tell a lie for sixpence; and I said to him, "Now be sure, Benjie, before ye speak. The tongue is a dangerous weapon, and apt to bring folk into troubleâ€”it might be another woman. Do you think I didna ken in a minute our cheese-toaster, that used to hing beside the kitchen fire; and that the sherry-offisher took out frae beneath her grey cloak? This was really and truly a terrible business, but the truth for all that; the cheese-toaster casting up not an hour after, in the hands of Daniel Search, to whom I gave a dram. Nevertheless, it seemed at the time gey puzzling to me, to think how a deaf and dumb woman, unless she had some wonderful gift, could have told us what she did. On the next day, the Friday, I think, that story was also made as clear as daylight to us; for being banished out of the town as a common thief and vagabond, down on the Musselburgh road, by order of a justice of the peace, it was the bounden duty of Daniel Search and Geordie Sharp to see her safe past the kennel, the length of Smeaton. Howsoever, they got her to understand their meaning, by giving her a shove forward by the shoulders, and aye pointing down to Inveresk. Thinking she did not hear them, they then took upon themselves the liberty of calling her some ill names, and bade her good-day as a bad one. But she was upsides with them for acting, in that respect, above their commission; for she wheeled round again to them, and, snapping her fingers at their noses, gave a curse, and bade them go home for a couple of dirty Scotch vermin. The two men were perfectly dumfounded at hearing the tongue-tied wife speaking as good English as themselves; and could not help stopping to look after her for a long way on the road, as every now and then she stuck one of her arms a-kimbo in her side, and gave a dance round in the whirling-jig way, louping like daft, and liling like a grey-lintie. From her way of speaking, they also saw immediately that she too was an Eirisher. Perhaps, since I was born, I do not remember such a string of casualties as happened to me and mine, all within the period of one short fortnight. These were awful signs of the times, and seemed to say that the world was fast coming to a finis; the ends of the earth appearing to have combined in a great Popish plot of villany. Every

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man that had a heart to feel, must have trembled amid these threatening, judgment-like, and calamitous events. As for my own part, the depravity of the nations, which most of these scenes showed me, I must say, fell heavily upon my spirit; and I could not help thinking of the old cities of the plain, over the house-tops of which, for their heinous sins and iniquitous abominations, the wrath of the Almighty showered down fire and brimstone from heaven, till the very earth melted and swallowed them up for ever and ever. These added to the number, to be sure; but not that I had never before seen signs and wonders in my time. But, if I was much affected, the callant Mungo was a great deal more. From the days in which he had lain in his cradle, he had been brought up in a remote and quiet part of the country, far from the bustling of towns, and from man encountering man in the stramash of daily life; so that his heart seemed to pine within him like a flower, for want of the blessed morning dew; and, like a bird that has been caught in a girn among the winter snows, his appetite failed him, and he fell away from his meat and clothes. I was vexed exceedingly to see the callant in this dilemmy, for he was growing very tall and thin, his chaft-blades being lank and white, and his eyes of a hollow drumliness, as if he got no refreshment from the slumbers of the night. Perceiving things going on from bad to worse, I thought it as best to break the matter to him, as he was never like to speak himself; and I asked him in a friendly way, as we were sitting together on the board finishing a pair of fustian overalls for Maister Bob Bustle—a riding clerk for one of the Edinburgh spirit shops, but who liked aye to have his clothes of the Dalkeith cut, having been born, bred, and educated in our town, like his forbears before him—if there was any thing the matter with him, that he was aye so dowie and heartless? Never shall I forget the look he gave me as he lifted up his eyes, in which I could see visible distress painted as plain as the figures of the saints on old kirk windows; but he told me, with a faint smile, that he had nothing particular to complain of, only that he would have liked to have died among his friends, as he could not live from home, and away from the life he had been accustomed to all his days. Live in hope, though we should die in despair. I lived and lived on, never thinking that such days were to come to an end—but now I find it can, and must be otherwise. The thoughts of my heart have been broken in upon, and nothing can make whole what has been shivered to pieces. A heart of stone would have felt for him. I saw it was in vain to persist long, as the laddie was falling out of his clothes as fast as leaves from the November tree; so I wrote home by limping Jamie the carrier, telling his father the state of things, and advising him, as a matter of humanity, to take his son out to the free air of the hills again, as the town smoke did not seem to agree with his stomach; and, as he might be making a sticked tailor of one who was capable of being bred a good farmer; no mortal being likely to make a great progress in any thing, unless the heart goes with the handiwork. Some folks will think I acted right, and others wrong in this matter; if I erred, it was on the side of mercy, and my conscience does not upbraid me for the transaction. In due course of time, I had an answer from Mr Glen; and we got every thing ready and packed up, against the hour that Jamie was to set out again. Mungo got himself all dressed; and Benjie had taken such a liking to him, that I thought he would have grutten himself senseless when he heard he was going away back to his own home. One would not have imagined, that such a sincere friendship could have taken root in such a short time; but the bit creature Benjie was as warm-hearted a callant as ye ever saw. Mungo told him, that if he would not cry he would send him in a present of a wee ewe-milk cheese whenever he got home; which promise pacified him, and he asked me if Benjie would come out for a month gin simmer, when he would let him see all worthy observation along the country side. I could not help running up the stair, and pulling up the fore-window to get a long look after him. Away, and away they wore; in a short time, the cart took a turn and disappeared; and, when I drew down the window, and sauntered, with my arms crossed, back to the workshop, something seemed amissing, and the snug wee place, with its shapings, and runds, and paper-measurings, and its bit fire, seemed in my eyes to look douff and gousty. It was not for two-three days that we learnt these awful tidings, which greatly distressed us all; and I gave the driver of the Lauder coach threepence to himself, to bring us word every morning, as he passed the door, how the laddie was going on. I learned shortly, that his father and mother had arrived, which was one comfort; but that matters with poor Mungo were striding on from bad to worse, being pronounced, by a skeely doctor, to be in a galloping consumption—and not able to

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be removed home, a thing that the laddie freaked and pined for night and day. It was a cold cloudy day in February, and everything on the road looked dowie and cheerless; the very cows and sheep, that crowded cowering beneath the trees in the parks, seemed to be grieving for some disaster, and hanging down their heads like mourners at a burial. The errand I was going on, to be sure, helped to make me more sorrowful; and I could not think on human life without agreeing with Solomon, that "all was vanity and vexation of spirit.

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Chapter 6 : The Life of Mansie Wauch (page 1/2)

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