

1 The Rag Boiler

Scotland's Carron River rises in the beautiful, heather-covered Campsie Fells and flows eastward to the Firth of Forth passing the town of Denny on its right hand side. Its banks fringed with bushes, bellflowers and ferns, it trickles over stones or gushes between huge boulders; passes fields of barley and turnips, cattle and black faced sheep. Its brown trout try to dodge the ducks and the bushy tailed, green-eyed minks creep from their burrows in its banks to search for food. It flowed past corn fields too and powered the wheels for the corn mills. Farmers trundled their grain to be ground and trundled home again with their flour.

The idyllic scene was gradually distorted as Scotland met the demands of the industrial age. The water flowing past Denny became sullied by the distillery, the dye works, the iron works and the mills producing fine quality paper. Nearly half of Denny's population worked in paper mills, slaving for countless hours with aching backs and vacant eyes.

Janet Gilliland was one of those toiling daily amongst a maze of pipes, steam, unbearable heat and ear splitting noise. The huge waterwheel of the Carron Paper Works drove the clanking, whirring machines mercilessly; the enormous boilers hissed unceasingly. And though the walls were for the most part glass, no one could see out through the grime to admire the River Carron even if they had the time, energy and inclination to do so.

Inside the mill, the air was dense with steam. Generally it was impossible to recognise one's co-workers even when they stood right beside you. They were like so many faceless spirits, doggedly trudging the same route through the thick fog, day after day.

Janet had worked in one paper mill or another since she was nine, starting out as a printer's tearer. Two of her sisters were among the labourers at the Carron Works now, dusting, sorting and cutting up rags and wheeling them on carts to the enormous boilers. Janet worked at a boiler, feeding rags into the heaving water, standing over them to poke and stir with a long pole. Perspiration poured down her face and arms and her dark hair hung limp and permanently wet.

On a particular morning, she began work at seven o'clock as usual. The baby in her belly felt very low but Janet was sure it wasn't due yet. Walking was hard that day and she was nervous of slipping on the wet flagstones. She panted, struggling even more than usual to extract enough air through the steam.

About midday she realised she was in labour. The sudden convulsive pain was agony. She crouched on the floor, head pressed hard against a cart, eyes closed tight, her face contorted. She moaned, clutched both arms round her knees and pulled them towards her body. It wasn't until the contractions became unbearable that she screamed for help.

The steam was nearly impenetrable that day. It was a while before her workmates found her, there in the wet, behind the cart. They told her sisters who informed the overseer that he was about to lose at least one of his workers for the rest of the day. The man growled and grudgingly gave one of them permission to take Janet home. He'd have to answer to his superior.

There was no other transport than a rag cart, so in that rough vehicle, Janet Gilliland was wheeled over the railway tracks and over the cobblestones to her tenement home. Neighbours helped carry her up the stairs and put her on the bed.

2 The Rag Boiler's Daughter

Although this was a first pregnancy, the baby came quickly. That same day, on a warm spring evening in Denny in 1865, Maggie Gilliland was born to her rag boiler mother.

The young woman lay exhausted and looked down at the child.

"Maggie Gilliland," she thought to herself but didn't say the name aloud. One never says a bairn's name before it's christened. Never give the fairies a chance to practise their evil ways.

"Wee Maggie," she thought - of course naming her after her own mother. She wished that lady were still alive to cherish the moment.

Her sister immediately set about binding the baby. She knew how to do it; she'd watched many a midwife. That done, she handed the child to the young mother and gathered up the blood-soaked bed covers.

"Take them along to the road pump," Janet said wearily. "For the faucet in this building is no' very strong."

"Aye," her sister replied. "Then I'll go tae meet William as he comes frae the mine."

Left alone with her child, Janet heard the mill's eight o'clock whistle. She lay back, thankful she didn't have to return to work. That morning seemed an eternity ago. Another age...

She'd sometimes wondered, as she toiled in the paper mill's steam, how it would be to live as a fine lady who could read and appreciate a book made of paper. She wondered if fine ladies knew how hard rag boilers worked. She thought it would be nice to finger fine paper and be able to read the letters printed on it.

She did own a book. Her father had given it to her and she loved to turn the pages and look at the pictures. Sketches of fields and rivers and people were nearly as marvellous to her as writing. She wondered if she'd be able to make pictures if she had paper of her own and a pen and ink to draw with.

Her father was a printer (an engraver) so of course he understood how to make pictures. He understood lettering too, but he hadn't shared that knowledge with his daughter. Janet looked down at her baby and thought how wonderful it would be if this child could learn to understand writing.

She and her Irish husband, William, tried to follow the 'Respectable Culture'. There was even a book about it, written to help the lower classes achieve their aims of temperance, thrift, hard work and ultimate self-improvement. One of the main obstacles to the attainment of Respectable Culture would seem to have been that most members of the lower classes weren't able to read the book.

Then of course, the good ministers at church preached loud and long about Respectable Culture and if one had a spare penny for the offertory, one might go to church and hear the sermon. If a man did have a spare penny though and was offered the choice between a dressing down by a churchman or a nice pot of ale, it was often the ale that won. William and Janet always went to

church, listened assiduously and tried to remember the preacher's admonishments.

As Janet lay with the baby already suckling at her breast, she determined that her father, the printer, would teach this child to read and write. She smiled tiredly but contentedly to herself and pulled more covers round her little daughter. Maggie might even become a pupil-teacher!

William left the iron mine that evening and, making his way home and turning a corner, glimpsed Janet's sister running towards him along the road.

"William, ye're a father!" the girl shouted excitedly from way, way off. "Janet has had a wee girl! Get ye back fast the now!"

The new father was just momentarily disappointed that his first child wasn't a son but he set off at a run. He raced home through the dark streets to their tenement, leapt two at a time up the rickety stairs beside the building, pushed past the children washing at the sink on the landing, hurtled into the hall and burst into their room.

He bent over the bed to kiss his wife and daughter.

"Sure and ye'll have many more bairns," he said happily, taking the baby in his blackened hands and holding her up high. "Listen well, little yen, ye'll soon ha'e a brother tae play wi'."

William gently gave the baby back to Janet and knelt for a while beside the bed to give his thanks to God. Then he went over to the shelf, picked up a tin and drew out the little silver threepenny bit he'd been keeping for this day. Without a word he offered it to the infant and Janet received it on the baby's behalf. This silent act of hanselling the newborn was essential; it kept the child safe from the evil eye.

The following Sunday, Janet went to the church to offer prayers of thanksgiving and having been churched, was ready to receive the friends and relatives who wanted to visit the baby.

“She’ll probably be a pupil-teacher,” Janet told them.

A few weeks later, baby Maggie, resplendent in the christening robe William’s own mother had worn, was taken to the church to be christened. Now everyone could safely say Maggie Gilliland’s name. William was still careful to fend off the wrath of any fairies though. He was all set with the christening piece, two buttered oatcakes in a paper bag and yet another silver threepence. As they walked home, he gave these gifts to the first little boy they met in the street.

Maggie grew into a garrulous toddler with a loud voice and a rollicking, infectious laugh. Her mother attempted to be strict with the little girl who must grow up to be a pupil-teacher but the attempts to discipline her to be ‘seen and not heard’ weren’t at all successful.

When Maggie was two, her mother gave birth to the next child. This baby came as a breached birth and Janet was in labour for days. When at last it was born, on that very grey, wet winter’s day, it was another girl. She would be named Mary, after William’s mother.

Janet, lying exhausted on the bed, could see the brooding sky through the window high up near the ceiling. They paid sixpence a week for the room they lived in now; it was expensive because of that window. There was generally no need of a candle in the daytime but this particular morning was so gloomy, they’d needed to light one. Now Janet could just dimly see the peeling white-washed walls and the smoke-stained ceiling. She chose to look through the window. She

listened to the *drip, drip, drip* into the bucket next to her bed, for they were on the topmost floor and the landlord hadn't maintained the thatched roof.

Baby Mary was born just before midday and Janet was soon on her feet. With an iron-miner for a husband and a toddler in their home already, she surely had to provide food. Her mother-in-law had said she'd bring barley broth for their supper but Janet considered that her husband deserved more. So she was up and cooking potatoes in the big black pot hanging over the fire. Potatoes were expensive but a man must have his meal!

She woke one night, a week and a half later, to find herself, the children and her husband utterly soaked in blood. At first she thought in panic that it was baby Mary who somehow was bleeding, then found it was her own blood that seeped through everything.

"William!" she whispered urgently. "William, wake up!"

William fetched rags to try to staunch the flow but they were no use. The haemorrhage kept up for six days. As he left for work every morning the poor young man hoped and prayed his wife would be better by the time he returned. Despite the ministrations of their relatives and neighbours, his wife bled to death at the age of 25, early in 1867.

Little Maggie, daughter of that rag boiler, found all this most difficult to comprehend. Her mother lay in bed and didn't wake up, even though Maggie tried hard to rouse her, calling to her and telling her when she was hungry. And other people came in too and looked at Janet and they didn't wake her up either. Maggie climbed onto the bed to touch her mother and leaning over to give her a kiss, found the woman's face was very cold. Maggie knew exactly what to do about that! She

climbed down, fetched another cover from the pile in the corner, dragged it over to the bed and climbed up again.

“Will ye put this over Mither?” she asked, looking round to see who was there to lend a hand. “Mither is awfu’ cold.”

A kind pair of arms lifted her down and held her tight. Maggie squirmed round and found it was Grandfather Gilliland.

The lykewake lasted two nights with people coming and going and drinking toasts. Maggie would wake up and wonder. She didn’t understand it at all. When it was morning and some strong men came into the room, coffined Janet, lifted her and took her downstairs, the toddler looked on in amazement and concern.

“But where are they taking my Mither?” she asked.

The reply was bewildering and quite worrisome: “They’re taking her tae Gentle Jesus, Maggie. They’re taking her tae Gentle Jesus.”

The coffin-bearers moved along the street very slowly. William followed, carrying baby Mary with Maggie by his side. Behind them came his parents and Janet’s heartbroken father, crying softly. Then, two by two, the long, sad procession of relatives and friends made their way to the burial service. It was such a long walk for Maggie’s little legs and she had to trot to keep up.

At the graveside, the preacher spoke some words she didn’t understand at all and she looked around, bewildered. Then to her utter dismay, the box with her mother inside it was lowered into the ground.

“When will Mither come out?” she asked, quite loudly.

Her granny knelt down on the grass beside the toddler.

“Mither is going to Gentle Jesus,” she whispered and pulled the little girl to her, lovingly.

Maggie looked at the hole in the ground and watched as people threw clods of earth on the coffin. Then she pulled away from her granny and looked skywards saying: “I thought Gentle Jesus lived up in Heaven. Does he come down and get in a hole?”

It was all very mystifying.