

Greenock Writers' Club  
*Short Story Inspired by a Picture [Picture from **A Window in Thrums**]*

# The Longest Night

'TICK TOCK TICK' goes the wag-at-the-wa'. 'Tick tock tick. Must get on! Things to do!'

He's not like Auld Tam in the next hoose up. Seven foot six with his finial he is; and he's slow. 'Tock; tock.' Time passes slow in that abode, but Jamie Slessor is auld and his wife lang awa'.

We are at the hoose at the tap o' the brae in Thrums and the Wag is not getting his way despite his muckle ticking. Time hangs heavy. It's twenty to three in the morn of February the second, nineteen sixteen. It's not a good time for a Scot. Mons has passed away with its fairest but they say at the Front there will be much mair.

A gibbous moon casts its pale light across a fine snowy covering. Flakes whirl in eddies around the bridge. The earth is quiet inside its thin shroud under the moon's quiet eye. Waiting. Waiting.

The house waits, tick tock tick quiet.

Boards creak across the ceiling as nurse Agnew crosses the floor to apply another hot damp towel and take off the old one. Doctor's been. No change. 'Keep the treatment going. The child's worrisome coughing has passed but watch the breathing, mind. If it worsens, send Leeby for me and I will come quick but the crisis will come soon. Diphtheria's like that. Just a matter of time now'

With that he was away in his galoshes back up the road.

*Time like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away:  
They fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.*

Isaac Watts. Guid man that. Strong! Hymn 601. Often sang with vigour at the Auld Kirk up on the hill. Auld Licht, ye ken!

Wee Angus was only four. A few days ago he came back from beside Tannowheid's byre with a wee bitty cough. It got worse. Two days later it was sair to swallow and sair tae hear him. Now he had a swollen neck like a bull. He was in pain and bubbling quietly, poor laddie. The doctor came and gave him a draught of special bitch's milk, an injection in his arm and left some lemon juice extract to take three times a day. Auld remedies with the new. That was three days ago. Now the croup has gone but the breathing still rasps. One could hear it occasionally in the room down below. It would sound worse if it wasn't for the wag-at-the-wa'. Tick-tock-tick. Must get on!

Hendry presided in the room below with glazed eyes staring at the Guid Book open large in front of him, dark against the tablecloth. Its front leaf held the birth days of three generations. This family bible was the Murdoch's consolation in times of strife – a very presence in times of trouble. This was such a time. Hendry's mouth constantly worked, sometimes quietly without syllable, sometimes loud, crying out

urgently to *The Lord God of Hosts*. There were small flecks of white at the corners of his mouth but this would not concern him even if he had known it. He was a man who had constant need of Jehovah.

Pages were often turned over with a bump. It was the Old Testament that consoled Hendry – Abram and Isaac; Gideon and Jael; David, Job and Jonah; The Kings; Amos, his favourite, and sometimes Revelations from the New Testament. He read out as it pleased him. His family listened in quietness except for the Wag who had to get on. Unlike the Wag they remained mum – and numb – except for the occasional blubberings of Jamie.

Hendry was a tired old man with a deeply etched face. A master tailor was a fine craft but he was well beyond his zenith – just old, white haired and bearded. In truth he could be taken for Amos himself, but he was beginning to lack the fiery rhetoric that had marked him out for years as a stalwart in the Temple of God..

The paraffin lamp sat polished and shining in front of Leeby, facing her father. She looked after all polishings and was the power of the household. It was aye such in Scotland. Although the Wag showed it to be a quarter to three they both knew that Leeby would be up at half past six heating the water and scrubbing the clothes, tables, floors and anything that needed it. Her face, relaxed and sad in front of the lamp would be pore-shiny in the morn. The real morn, that is; well before sun-up.

In the corner darkness sat poor Jess. She had been ‘poor Jess’ for nigh on twenty years; always a sickly child but Hendry had loved her. She had produced two offspring at the same time – twins Leeby and Jamie: the strong and the weak. Jess sat in the comfy armchair lost in thought. Things should have been so different but having the twins was difficult and she had never been right after that. Hendry had done his best, as had Doctor Hogg who had been called in late, but she never properly recovered and Hendry had to maintain the household as well as working in his weaving room.

Jess was not in her normal chair. Generally she sat on the straight-backed one in front of the window looking down on the bridge and the people coming up the brae from the lang stracht west from Forfar. In the morning when she looked into the dazzling sun she got a wave from many of the passers-by: the bridie man pedalling his bicycle up over the bridge with his still-warm pies in the handlebar basket under the cloth. Jess’s face with steel-rim glasses over her strong neb and her lace headdress was a kenspeckle figure to the locals passing up and down on their journeys. The Murdoch family worked around her for most things, although Jess still made a rare pot of mutton broth and her steak-and-kidney puddings were always in demand.

Today things were different. She had to console Jamie who lay collapsed on the floor in front of her. Jamie was as poor a beast as she was. Poorer even! Only ten minutes younger than his twin but there was a huge gulf in their capabilities.

He went to Thrums school and Forfar Secondary but his capacity for knowledge was limited. Sadly he seemed to prefer it that way. ‘Och James,’ cried Jess often enough, ‘ye’ll never make anything of your life if you carry on the way you’re doing.’ It didn’t make any difference. Tannowheid kindly gave him a job at fifteen looking after the sheep and any odds and ends that needed doing around the farm, but his work was as different to his son Robbie’s labours as chalk and cheese. Robbie was

gentle to him, however, as he was guy keen on Leeby since they were at the primary together.

Wee Angus was Jamie's mistake. He had got a tinker girl into trouble at the tatty-howking and the girl was quickly married off to him which was the way of the time. The girl could not settle in the house and the gypsy tribe would not take Jamie as they didn't think he could cope with the roving life. The girl ran off leaving Angus to be brought up by his father's family.

The boy was a wiry wee urchin and no mistake, and there was not a bad bone in his little body. He was the special spark that kept the Murdoch family together. Leeby adored him and was always making some special wee keepsake for him to play with. Together they would whittle some little ornament or plaything out of oddly shaped pieces of wood collected on their walks amongst the trees in the village.

A bell rang upstairs waking Leebie from her daydreaming over the paraffin lamp. She jumped up immediately and ran upstairs into the sickroom where Nurse Agnew had just replaced the handbell on the mantelpiece.

'Look, Leeby. I think the bairn is picking up.'

Together they scanned the wee face in hope.

The bull neck had certainly reduced and because of this the wee soldier was now breathing easy. His colour, at one time puce, had now paled to a gentle reddish hue. Leeby put her hand on his brow. It was still warm to the touch but not with the burning heat of six hours ago.

'I think we can say that things have turned round. Angus is sleeping easy now. No need to call out the doctor. I can just gather up my things the noo.'

'I'll tell them downstairs first, Nurse. Hendry will probably want to say something and thank you.'

'No need for that, Leeby. I'll wait till he comes up then I can just slip away before he starts up with his old time religion. That stuff is not for me.'

Leeby rushed down the stairs and told Hendry the news. Jamie picked himself off the floor and was first up. Jess remained in her chair whilst Hendry picked out a further part of the bible to read as an ode to the joy he was now feeling. Five minutes later he left the book open – there would be more tracts to read before bed – and went upstairs to see for himself. Leeby came back down to guide him in case he slipped on the stair.

Hendry was getting old now. Not long for this world perhaps, but now there was an alacrity in his step across the room to where the bairn lay. Such a pretty bairn! Such hopes for the future once these wars are finished! The Lord will rebuild us back into a strong, God-fearing Scotland. Pews need be filled and how better than by young shavers like this laddie. He was now thinking about St Simeon and his song of Nunc Dimittis. Simeon was at the end of his days and Hendry knew he was approaching his own. He started singing in a soft high lilt '*Lord now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word, for my eyes have now seen Thy salvation.*' He stopped abruptly as he realised that it would be blasphemy to carry on. This wee body was not the Christ. Hendry was happy, however, and went over to shake nurse Agnew awkwardly by the hand. 'Thank you, nurse, for all you have done under this roof tonight.'

The nurse smiled at him, then turned, lifted the materials she had re-stowed in her Gladstone bag and departed quietly down the stair and out into the moonlit snowy road, thankfully to make her way back home. No doubt her cat would greet her at the door and expect feeding.

Leeby took Nurse Agnew's seat beside Angus and watched quietly over him whilst Hendry made his way back down the stair. Soon she would hear *The Lord's my Shepherd* sung by three cracked voices giving thanks for this night's work. She smiled, wriggled down in her chair with her head on the bed and shut her eyes. She would make herself comfortable by-and-by, stripping off some of her clothes and quietly slipping in beside the young laddie. In another half hour the family will be in their own beds and at half past six she would be splashing her face in a basin of cold water getting things ready for the family's breakfast. No doubt the doctor would appear around nine and give Angus a quick going over. She liked Doctor Abercrombie for his good sense but he was a generation older with a family of his own.

Leeby knew that Jamie was no more a father to wee Angus than a fly on the wall. Angus was hers. She had sweethearts in the town, none more dear to her than Robbie Tannowheid. They had quietly talked things out at his aunt's wake six months back and they had very similar ideas. They would legally adopt him after they wed and that would not be until Hendry died, but they didn't like talking about it as it tempted providence.

Providence or not, it was under a year until Hendry died. Some said he died of a broken heart. Hendry had two young brothers. They were much younger and both had volunteered for the army. They were killed on the Somme within a month of each other. The War! That awful War!

After Hendry's funeral it was Jean who had called the two families together. Tannowheid was happy to agree things for his son's marriage in the Spring of nineteen-eighteen. Leeby was very concerned about leaving the house on the hill and moving into the farm with her bairn now registered as her own and her husband's, but it was all for the best. Jean held a council of war of a different sort with Jamie.

'Ye've got to get a grip of yourself. Thousands of men your age and younger have died at war and you have hidden in the belief that you are an essential farm worker. You are essential tae naebody d'ye ken and I won't have it. Noo that Hendry is gone you will have to buckle to and work to keep up this bit hoose. You can agree with Tannowheid to work half-days at the farm then half-days here with me. We will sell Hendry's loom – you were never very good at it anyway, and cottage weaving is now dead. You will learn a trade useful to the village. Take your pick. I won't step in on your choice. You might even think about opening up a repair shop for these motor cars and things. One thing is for sure. You will earn a wage to keep up this hoose. I for my part will become more active now that Leeby is gone. I will do the cleaning, and cook all meals.'

As for Leeby it was a strain leaving her abode at the tap o'the hill. Now Tannowheid's wife, Ella, and she are busy putting all their recipes to the test and employing Jamie to type up all their notes to sell to the village. Every Scot likes good food and they have lots in their notes to rival the Forfar bridie. But nothing stands still. Next winter Leeby will be expecting the first bairn of her own and a brother to Angus.

Their farm byre will still echo to the noise of visiting kids interesting in seeing animal husbandry.

If you come to Thrums up the lang stracht in the morning from Forfar you will probably not see Jean at the window regarding life. She will be too busy, what with cleaning, scrubbing, and a new interest in baking, she will be just as busy as the Wag-at-the-Wa' who is still complaining..

'Tick-tock-tick. Must get on! Things to do!'

[2490 words]

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