

**Crockett's writing inspired by the Mauricewood Pit Disaster, 1889**



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## **In the Matter of Incubus and Co.**

*(first published in 'Vox clamantium: the gospel of the People' by Andrew Reid, in 1894.)*

THIRTY years ago Carronbrae feared God. A year ago it feared the Incubus Coal and Iron Company. To-day the fear of the Lord is getting a second chance. The originator of the Incubus Company was a far-seeing German analyst from Dusseldorf, who, upon departing this life for parts unknown, left his daughter to the senior of the present partners in the business, and his Latinized name to the great concern which had grown up at Carronbrae in the Scottish westlands.

It was thirty years since Carronbrae entered upon its present career of prosperity. Mining contracts were made. Royalties were arranged; the railway brought to the works; and the tall stagings, with the swiftly spinning wheels, were set up on the hillside, where for generations only the gowan had bloomed.

McKill and Grindlay were the sole partners in the Incubus Coal and Iron Company. It was Hector McKill who had wedded Sophia, the serious-minded daughter of Fritz Inkob, the Dusseldorf chemist, and settled himself down to rule Carronbrae with a firm but indubitably pious hand. Grindlay, on the other hand, was an unmarried man who attended to the worldly side of the connection, and did the swearing in the office. He was a red-faced man with a massive watch-chain of shining gold, and was not particularly attached to any of the Carronbrae kirks. But he was known at every drinking-bar within fifty miles of the pithead.

Hector McKill was ruling elder in the Kirk of the Valley, and a great hand at all the prayer-meetings. Indeed, it may be said, he kept them up; for if his foremen did not come out to hear their ruling elder and master jerking petitions out of himself much as though he were working a ship's pump, they might discover some fine morning that at the works of Incubus and Company, there was no further use for their services.

The Valley Kirk was not the fashionable kirk of Carronbrae. The county families did not frequent it, and perhaps that was one reason why it seemed to offer fairer scope for the peculiar talents of Hector McKill than the Kirk of the Hill. For one thing, the Kirk of the Hill did not believe in prayer-meetings. But it had an admirable and eminently aristocratic Primrose League attached to it, and the minister was said to be shaping for candles on the altar and the eastward position. Also most of its elders were better judges of whisky-toddy than of prayer-meetings. Grindlay, for instance, was a member of the Hill Kirk, for he was a man of no pretensions to religion, and he found himself at home there. But Hector McKill

wrought the piety end of the business to perfection. It does not do, in a thriving business, to overman any department. Yet in the Incubus pits this division of labour wrought well. If it were desired to get rid of a man who belonged to the Valley Kirk, and was a regular attendant at the prayer-meetings, Partner Grindlay dismissed him. He had been taking up with ranters, to the neglect of his proper business. If the man attended the High Kirk (or, what was very much the same thing, if he attended no kirk at all), Partner Hector McKill called him into his office, wrestled with him in the spirit, prayed with him for his soul's good and then dismissed him without a character. The men on the whole preferred Grindlay's rough 'We've no use for you. Get out of this!' to the suaver methods of Hector McKill. Now, so long as the Reverend Silas Sleekman was the minister of the Valley Kirk of Carronbrae, all things went according to the will of Hector McKill. Incubus and Company had the rule all its own way. The Valley Kirk, with a splendid history of protest against the oppression of king and state, had become only the ecclesiastical arm of Incubus and Company.

McKill was indeed not so imperious and autocratic in the pits of the Carronbrae hillside as he was in the session of the Valley Kirk. The minister, Mr. Sleekman, was an admirable man of unblemished character, a great authority upon the typology of the Book of Numbers in his way, both a gentleman and a scholar.

But he was so thoroughly under control of the blatant personality of Hector McKill, that at all meetings he confined himself to saying, 'I think what our dear friend has proposed will be best!' The rest of the session murmured and abode their time, for they were not men to be thus set aside. The congregation seethed in silent and helpless discontent. But there was no mistake that the arm of Incubus and Company reached far in Carronbrae, and the man who openly opposed it in the long run went to the wall.

Yet somehow Incubus and Company, with all their graspings, did not seem very greatly to prosper. They paid the poorest wages, and, as a consequence, they had only good men in the most indispensable situations. But there was no manner of doubt that in Job Henderson, their underground manager, they had an excellent man. He was firm with the men under him, and, in consequence, at first he was not over-well liked. But as the men of the Carronbrae pits grew to know Job Henderson, they found how often his calm, mild strength came between them and the wrath of the partners of Incubus and Company.

It was at this time that the Act of Parliament was passed requiring all pits whatsoever to provide themselves with a second exit within a certain time, under pains and penalties to be enforced by the newly appointed Government inspectors. Job Henderson openly rejoiced, and started the construction of the spare shaft at once. McKill and Grindlay were not often down the workings, and it was some time before Hector McKill knew that the work was

proceeding.

But as soon as he heard of the matter, he ordered such nonsense to be stopped at once. It was a waste of money. Besides, there had never been any accident in the Carronbrae pits, and the whole thing was wholly unnecessary and uncalled for. Surely a pit which was under the protection of the prayers of so noted a vessel as Hector McKill could come to no harm. The ruling elder of the Valley Kirk did not put this last into words, but his whole manner inferred it. Job Henderson went to lay the matter before the junior partner, Walter Grindlay. He found him at the bar of the Royal, telling a sultry story, which was causing uproarious laughter.

To him he stated the necessity, and what had been ordered. Grindlay, in a very brief manner, condemned the expense.

‘But the Government inspector?’ said the underground manager.

‘Leave him to me. I know how to work such cattle,’ said Walter Grindlay, returning to the bar.

So Job Henderson went back to the works and wrote out his resignation. He was a man with a family, and he did it painfully. But he could not consent to play with the lives of men. He stated the reasons for his resignation in his letter to the firm of Incubus and Company. Walter Grindlay laughed as he read it.

‘Risk to the lives of men!’ he said. ‘Well, I suppose we pay them for taking the risk, and they know it as well as we do. I never did read such cant.’

But the senior partner spoke seriously of it at his prayer-meeting. He had been that day, he remarked, wounded in his tenderest feelings by one whom he had trusted a serpent whom he had taken from the gutter, and warmed in his bosom. Yet he was eminently sustained in his affliction, and enabled to bear it all meekly.

So the spare shaft was stopped on the morrow, and a new manager came to the pit whose conditions of service were that he obeyed orders without question, made no complaint, cut down the working expenses, and increased the profits. He was a good man, this new manager, according to his lights; but his lights were the conditions of his managership, and the continued good-will and favour of Incubus and Company.

The shifts came and went with great regularity. The pit filled and emptied, and the narrow twin air-shaft, which ran alongside the main incline or ‘dock,’ was half filled with steam-pipes; for it was, according to Incubus and Company, a great pity to have an empty space which could be filled with what was useful.

But one or two men who spent their lives down there in the deeps of the earth tightened their lips, and said a prayer for wife and bairns that had little in common with the laboured

paragraphs of which, on the evenings of the prayer-meeting, the senior partner delivered himself before going home to arrange for cutting down his men's wages ten per cent, all round.

Then came the Government inspector. The men had heard of his coming, and looked for great things. The obstructions were cleared away from the bottom of the abortive second exit, which had been carried so far and then abandoned at the end of the rule of Job Henderson.

But Mr. Grindlay had the inspector well in hand. He had treated him generously before he came, and Grindlay was the best of good company, and made himself liked when he chose. The inspector descended, admiring, as he did so, the perfect working of the cage, and feeling the strong draft of air. He walked along the working faces; he saw the men at their tasks. He passed the end of the partially constructed tunnel, which Grindlay indicated with a wave of his hand.

'Our new exit,' he explained generally.

'Ah, indeed; that is right!' said the Government inspector, for who could look too narrowly into the affairs of so pleasant and hospitable a man of the world as the junior partner of the great firm of Incubus and Company?

Alas that there was none to tell him that the tunnel ran up to within a hundred yards of the surface, and there stopped where, on the day of Job Henderson's resignation, the last hole had been driven, and the work dropped to cut down working expenses!

'Now,' said Mr. Walter Grindlay, hospitably, 'we had better go up to dinner. It is hot and stuffy here; and I told them to ice the champagne. You are to dine with me, of course; I arranged that. Our old man is a teetotaler, and I thought you would prefer it.'

And the Government inspector did prefer it.

This was all that the inspection of the Carronbrae pits accomplished, and the report was enough to certify that there was no health-resort in Britain so entirely salubrious in climate and appliances as the pits of Incubus and Company.

But, in the mean time, the senior partner was having trouble considerable in his ecclesiastical relations. The Reverend Silas Sleekman was laid quietly away to rest from his labours in the graveyard in the valley, and there was a vacancy in 'McKill's kirk,' as the commonalty named it irreverently. This meant the reaching of candidates, and an exceeding interest among all the members in the election. But it was generally thought indeed, taken for granted that, though patronage had been abolished, Hector McKill would get in his man. Mrs. McKill (nee Incubus), for her own part, meant to have a young man with at least some tendencies to ritual. Hector did not much care one way or the other, but he was resolved like iron to have a man who would do as he was bidden, and who knew his place. In fact, he had

found the very man. Providence had brought him to hand.

There was yet another Sleekman, and it was thought that the people would like a second of the breed one of the same meekness and ineffectiveness as that Silas who had recently laid himself down to rest from labours which apparently ought not to have tired him very much.

The Reverend Alexander Sleekman was a probationer of some standing, meaning thereby that he had been out of college several years without finding a resting-place for his foot in kirk or manse. But he had preached several times for his relative during the summer holidays; and Mr. Hector McKill, with that interest in the young for which he was famous, had sounded the lad, and found him of a very adaptive and facile disposition. The senior partner thought that this would be most suitable in a minister of the Valley Kirk, who, above all men, ought to be a model of humility. Mr. McKill liked all his sermons from the Old Testament, and especially rejoiced in denunciations of the wicked which, being interpreted, meant those who did not agree with Hector McKill. On the other hand, Mrs. McKill loved expositions of 'the little horn,' and the settling of the exact year and day of the end of the world. She subscribed to the Prophetic Herald, and questioned all young preachers as to their views on the literal fulfilment of prophecy.

So the Reverend Alexander Sleekman satisfied both the chief inhabitants of Gripp Castle, which stood among sprouting larches over the hill out of sight of the pits. He was asked there to lunch. He stood with his hat in his hand on the gravel walk when he spoke to Hector McKill, and he expressed the most lively delight at finding a copy of the Prophetic Herald, 'my favourite journal,' on the drawing-room table.

Mr. Sleekman did not mean to miss the good things of this life if he could help it. He was altogether a suitable young man, and Hector McKill said, 'He'll do fine!'

Now, the senior partner in the great firm of Incubus and Company had not the least doubt that he should be able to carry the congregation of the Valley Kirk along with him. Indeed, that was a factor which he had not so much as considered. Were not most of the members his own employees? Hector loved the word. He was their employer, their master; and it would be a strange thing if he could not hire them to think as he thought as well as to do as he bade them.

Yet it will hardly be believed that there was rank treason and rebellion against so good a master being freely mooted in the pits themselves, and preparation was being made for the congregational meeting, with a view to disappointing his earnest and just expectations. This was a matter to which it is eminently painful to allude. We hardly like to enter into the depths which are to be found in human nature. Hector McKill made it a matter of public prayer that he should get his own way, and Mrs. McKill frequently consulted the Prophetic Herald. Who

would dare to gainsay two such single-minded and powerful Christians ?

Now, in the Presbyterian Kirk of Scotland, a selected number of those who have been proposed as candidates for the pastorate have to preach on one or more Sabbaths before the congregation, so that the people may judge as to the merits and popular gifts of the man whom they elect to rule over them in spiritual things.

Accordingly, the Reverend Alexander Sleekman reached first. He had a plaintive and monotonous voice, and he selected his text from the Prophet Daniel to please Mrs. McKill. But he was far from pleasing the rank and file of the free and independent members of the congregation. They complained that he whined whenever he did not snivel.

'That craitur can never preach. He can only peep and mutter!' said Angus Gilruth, gardener and theologian.

'That piece o' machinery wad na work bena (except) when Hector McKill turned the handle!' said Sandy McClymont. And so the word ran through the congregation.

But Hector went about the next day, saying to every member and adherent he met, 'You were at the kirk yesterday, John. Wasna yon a grand sermon ?'

And John thought that it was, having regard to the fact that he was speaking to his master. But he relieved himself when he sat on his hunkers at the pit-bottom, waiting for the cage.

But there was one of those who came to preach whose name was David Oliphant. He certainly did not peep and mutter. He had a message to deliver, and, at least, he stood and gave it forth like a man. He had long been wrestling with a poor district, where sin was the handmaid of poverty, and where prayer was not so divorced from the brotherhood of helping as it was in the theology of Hector McKill. He prayed with the people in the evening, and saw that they got milk for their babes in the morning.

In the Valley Kirk he preached on the address of Paul to the men of Athens, from the Hill of Mars.

'This agitator,' he called him, 'this inciter of the populace, this socialistic lecturer, proclaimed his message, and the Athenians listlessly hearkened.' For God hath made of one blood all the nations of men that are upon the face of the earth.' And the citizens smiled at one another as they heard the new doctrine. Did the little swarthy Jew think himself of the same race as themselves? And the Roman centurion smiled behind his hand like a stalwart British policeman in his pride of place. The slave-owner shrugged his shoulders and turned away. But on the skirts of the crowd, here and there, one listened and set his head nearer to catch every word. The helot heard a new thing. Of the same blood; equal in the new faith; neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free; all free and equal in Jesus Christ the

new Prophet. Swart Ethiopian and flaxen-haired Goth, they paused ere they went to their task, hearing of 'a new burden and easier yoke,' a brotherhood of man! There was hope for them in the new faith. No wonder the common people heard him gladly, and the rich and increased in goods passed him by, for it was a helot's faith, this of the Nazarene, and once more to the poor the gospel was preached.'

David Oliphant's words rang through the Valley Kirk like the accents of a new inspired prophet. Such things had never so been spoken there. The workers had been dulled into apathy. Use and wont alone took them to their accustomed places on the morning of the Sabbath day; but the words of the preacher had fallen dully on their ear as something with no possible bearing upon their daily life.

And as the kirk emptied itself, there were many who whispered one to the other, 'We have heard a new thing to-day!'

But they said little aloud, for Hector McKill was condemning the unhallowed doctrine in no measured tones. He would write to the officers of the Kirk about the men whom they sent out to preach to vacant congregations. He never had heard the pulpit so prostituted before. It was all he could do to keep still in his place. There was not a word of spirituality in the whole discourse. The young man was a disgrace to the presbytery that licensed him.

'But he'll no get off with the like of that!' said Hector McKill.

Yet he took him over the hill to Gripp Castle for dinner, and tried to overwhelm him with his importance. But David Oliphant was not overwhelmed. He had not met the great ones of the earth in vain, and he could give a reason for the faith that was in him. He told Mrs. McKill several things about Christ and his religion which considerably astonished Hector. More than that, he had the passages at the end of his tongue to bear out his doctrine.

'He said to me in the smoking-room,' said Hector to his astonished wife, 'that there was no doubt that Jesus was a working-man, and His followers Socialists.'

'But you surely did not sit and listen to such doctrine?' queried his wife, aghast.

Hector McKill looked uneasy. He shrugged his shoulders and played with his watch-chain.

'But, Sophia, in a manner he proved it that was the awkward thing.'

'Nonsense,' said Sophia, sharply; 'I wish I had had him through my hands. I would puzzle him with the 'little horn' and the 'time and a time and half a time.'"

Which indeed was likely enough, for David Oliphant devoted most of his attention to the vials of wrath which were being poured on the earth at the present time, and the horn that he was interested in was mostly to be found on the palms of the workers with whom he consorted, and in the hearts of such firms as Incubus and Company, whose employees they

were.

So it was decided at Gripp Castle that Alexander Sleekman was to be their minister, and that Hector McKill should write to all the vacant churches, and warn their committee against the life and doctrine of David Oliphant.

‘I owed this duty to the Church at large,’ said Hector; ‘such a wolf ought not to be allowed to masquerade in fleecy clothing among the silly sheep.’

But at the congregational meeting a sharp and horrid surprise was waiting for this worthy and notable follower of the apostles. He proposed the Reverend Alexander Sleekman. He lauded his likeness to his worthy predecessor. He called him ‘a chip off the old block’ (an irreverent person in the back benches interjected the syllable ‘head’ at this point, which raised a laugh among the unthinking). Hector McKill repeated his observation with greater emphasis, and again the objectionable syllable came from the back of the church. Then he went on to advert to the excellent doctrine which they had heard in the discourses of Mr. Sleekman, and the admirable manner in which the preacher had settled disputed points in the prophetic interpretation of Daniel. It would be a blessing of no ordinary calibre if they were privileged in the Valley Kirk to listen Sabbath after Sabbath to such teaching. For his part (Hector McKill's part), he asked nothing better than an eternity of such Sabbaths. He concluded by proposing the name of Mr. Sleekman, and he said that, were Mr. Sleekman elected, he should personally make it his business to give him all the assistance and advice in his power in fulfilling his onerous ministerial functions in their midst.

It will hardly be believed, yet it is a fact that at this point a deliberate wink was observed to pass round the congregation. Hector McKill caught Sandy McClymont in the act, and Sandy coughed and pre- tended that some obstruction in his throat was bringing the water to his eye. Man is by nature depraved.

Then there was a pause in the proceedings, till one of the firemen at the Carronbrae pits seconded his master's motion, as he had been ordered that morning to do. He kept his head down, and appeared very unhappy. But he had ten of a family, and was two quarters back with his rent. Then, without note or comment, Angus Gilruth stood up and moved the election of David Oliphant. A member at the back of the hall, believed to be another of the pit firemen an unmarried man swiftly seconded the motion. The worthy moderator, who was minister of a neighbouring church, all innocent of the complication of interests, rose to put the matter to the vote; but Hector McKill, choking with anger, was before him.

He fell upon David Oliphant, his character and doctrine, with tooth and nail. His doctrine was unspeakably bad. His opposition to constituted authority showed what manner of man he was better than anything else. His character, also, was more than doubtful. He

would be a disgrace to the parish, and, for one, Hector McKill would give no support to a congregation which would call such a man to rule over them.

‘I and my wife,’ said Hector, speaking after his manner, ‘have had opportunities of diagnosing his character denied to the others here present, and we can vouch that our impressions were not favourable.’

Mrs. McKill nodded her head violently. David Oliphant's views on the ‘little horn’ had been very unsatisfactory indeed.

‘But I do not doubt that this factious opposition to such an admirable man as Mr. Sleekman, against whose character and doctrine there is no breath of suspicion, is confined to one or two irresponsible persons of no particular standing.’

Mr. McKill paused for a reply.

The people did not reply; but every man and woman made ready to vote.

Yet when the election proceeded, and a show of hands called for of those favourable to the candidature of the Reverend Alexander Sleekman, only eleven could be counted; and there was even a considerable uncertainty about some of these, for as soon as Hector McKill took his eyes off several of those who voted for his candidate, strangely enough their hands instantly dropped to their sides. These were all married men with large families and in the upper places about the Carronbrae pits. The moderator, indeed, declared that he could only count seven at any one time.

Then came the vote on behalf of David Oliphant. A whole forest of hands arose. The moderator thought there were about two hundred. Hector McKill was on his feet all the time, turning round like a teetotum, trying to focus his attention upon those of his employees as were voting against him; but it is a strange thing that for every one of these whom he really got his eye upon, and by dint of frowning prevailed upon to keep his hands beneath the pew, at least two others who were not so focussed held up their hands, so that the moderator could not in any way make the numbers of those voting for David Oliphant less than two hundred and ten. He rose to give his decision, and was interrupted by Hector McKill. But the moderator was not under the thumb of Incubus and Company. He lived in another parish, and so he made short shrift of the ruling elder, who only managed to say that he washed his hands of the responsibility of bringing such a man into their midst.

When David Oliphant came to Carronbrae, he was welcomed with a great assembly in the Valley Kirk to do him honour, and down in the pits and along the working faces there was joy which did not readily find expression. And, what pleased these swarthy miners as much as anything, their owner, the senior partner in the great firm of Incubus and Company, was explosively indignant, and refused to have anything to do with the ceremony. This was a

capital introduction to the confidence of the workers of Carronbrae, and there was a larger contingent of them at church on Sabbath than had ever been there before. But the McKills' pew was empty, and the congregation whispered to each other that Hector McKill, lord of Gripp Castle, and of the serfs of the Carronbrae pits, had left the Valley Kirk, and betaken himself to the Kirk on the Hill. The 'little horn' went with him.

But this was not yet decided. Hector and his wife were that day deep in debate as to their future action. Should he secede forthwith, or remain to be a thorn in the side of the new minister? He could not hope to have the same authority in the Kirk of the Hill. On the other hand, the Reverend Septimus Easiman was ready to have any views or none upon the 'little horn,' and he was entirely sound on the question of the rights of employers; so that it was finally decided by the conclave at the Castle that immediate withdrawal from the tainted and disgraced Valley Kirk was absolutely necessary. So Hector McKill 'lifted his lines' and removed his Bibles during the week.

Then, being without employment for his facility in petitioning, he started a prayer-meeting at the offices of the company, and invited those who attended to send in notices of requests for prayer. But the notes received showed the evil minds of the senders. One stated that the sepulchres of the neighbourhood stood much in need of a new coat of whitewash, and urgent prayers were asked for the same. Another remarked upon the tattered condition of the hypocrites' cloaks, and suggested a fresh supply. Another referred to the 'second exit' at the Carronbrae pit as a subject for Mr. McKill's petitions; while yet another suggested a rise of ten per cent, and an examination of the insanitary condition of the company's houses. The proposed prophetic prayer-meeting in Mrs. McKill's drawing-room was abandoned, and in the town of Carronbrae all things went on as they had done before.

The Government inspector came every three months, and strolled along the mains of the pit accompanied by the junior (drinking) partner. The senior (whitewashed) partner kept out of the way. Then at a certain fixed point Walter Grindlay proposed a return to the surface in time for dinner. So, with a magnum of champagne before him, the inspector rested from his labours and found all things very good.

And David Oliphant, cleared of Incubus and Company and all their works, preached the gospel as it was given to him, and instructed his people, among other things, that the fatherhood of God meant the brotherhood of man.

But on a day unforgotten in Carronbrae, swift and unexpected as lightning, fell the terror of great darkness.

At Carronbrae pit No. 1, the day shift had turned out at six in the morning, stolidly taking its way to the it to do the day's darg. In the little red houses the men and boys

breakfasted mostly with little said; and as silently rose to go, each with his dinner-can along with him, into the still sunshiny morning. The men went to labour. The women abode at home, worked, and waited. The laddies followed their fathers as soon as it was time for them to leave school and go to work.

'Weel, I'm awa'!' was the more effusive greeting heard as the men shut to the doors. Yet some of the younger of them took a look at wives and bairns ere they went forth, for to all who win the coal from the deeps of the mine, there is the grim risk that they who go forth in the morning with head erect, may be brought home before ever evening come with drooping head and feet that are carried first through the door.

So in scattered groups, fathers with their boys walking manfully by their side, sometimes running a few steps to keep up, and single men in silent companionship with their mates, they took their way up the hill to the pit-mouth.

The wheels spun round opposite ways on the tall scaffolding. The cage sank and rose. The engineman pulled his levers and tested his throttle-valves. Down to the bottom of the long dark shaft and along the 'incline,' the parties of men and boys sped to their work. Tools clinked as the men lifted them to their shoulders.

Fifteen hundred feet beneath the yellow cornfields, fifteen hundred feet beneath the great house of Gripp Castle, where Hector McKill, senior partner in the firm of Incubus and Company, was not yet out of bed, lay the workings where the picks began to play a merry tune. The pony-boys brought the waggons quickly along the dark underground ways. Here and there the lamps glimmered and danced over the mounds of rubbish. From the abandoned workings there came strange faint smells, and the lamp-flame sometimes forsook the centre wick and seemed to cling strangely to the wire of the Davy frame.

Few of the men in that great pit remembered as they wrought that the yellow sunshine of the autumn day slept above them. For the pit hummed like a hive, and there was little enough time for thought.

The door-boys heard the whistle of the men running the coal-trucks through the dark passages, and threw back their doors. Then with a yell and a gust of wind, a long line of cars rushed through the open doorway. Sometimes one of the men upon them would wave a hand kindly to the lonely boy, left by himself in the darkness. And the flames of their hat-lamps streamed back like the smoke-track behind a railway engine.

Suddenly that day in August, as the boys were bringing their loads of coal to the bottom of the 'dook,' John Roy, the 'bottomer,' looking upward, saw thick volumes of smoke pouring down the shaft of the long incline.

'The pit's afire!' was his quick and terrible cry.

There was but one way to the surface; but one to the outer air, and the flame had gripped it, as John Roy well knew when he saw the red glow in the heart of the smoke.

Now, doubtless it was his duty to bide by his signals, for the bottomer is the man at the helm, and only he can communicate up that long incline, nearly a third of a mile in length, with the men in the engine-house on the surface, whose levers and wire ropes control in turn the movements of the cage by which alone safety can be reached. But John Roy had little time to think. Bewildered, stunned, not knowing which way to turn for the blinding downpour of smoke and the crackling of the deadly fire among the timbers of the pit, he leapt into the cage, and stood with his hand on the bell-lever.

But before he 'belled himself away,' he called to the three boys who stood beneath with their loads ready for the trucks,

'The pit's afire, lads; come away with me!'

Then these three lads, whose names deserve to be written in golden letters, though no more than boys in years, returned to the bottomer the answer of brave men. They said

'No; we will gang and warn the men.'

John Roy jerked the lever thrice, and was whisked through the smoke and fire just in time, leaving the hundred men below to their fate.

But the three boys sped on their way. The weight of many men's lives was on their boyish hearts. Breathing deep to give them vigour, they ran through the gathering smother, which, instead of feeding the great pit with pure air, was carrying down the deadly smoke along all the faces of the pit. They raced with bent backs under the black archways. Every moment they were risking their own lives to warn their comrades.

'The pit's afire; run, men, run!' they cried, and at the word each man and boy dropped his tools and ran for the bottom of the incline.

But when they arrived there they found only the red fire glowing down from above on the dull waters of the 'sump,' and the cage gone, which ought to have been there to take them to safety. Some started for the air-shaft; but it was blocked with steam-pipes, and no man could climb thirty yards up it. The legal second exit had, as we know, never been driven, and a hundred yards of solid rock lay between. So down there men and boys were penned, with the great fire roaring in their only exit. They were no better than rats caught in the trap set for them by Incubus and Company, and baited with thirty shillings a week. But the senior partner was a pious man, and had often prayed for them only he had not finished the second exit. The thought must have been a comfort to them at that moment.

But on the plans of the pit, approved and passed by the Government inspectors, there were splendid exits, wide and clear. All was completely arranged on paper. It is a pity that

men cannot escape on paper.

And above in the sunlight women wailed and wept, and watched and waited. Through the long and anxious August night the women-folk, many of them with their babies, stood about the pit-head. Hector McKill, in a white waistcoat, moved among them, telling them that they had better go home; they could do their men no good.

Suddenly a woman broke down, and the weird, unforgettable sound of the Irish ‘keen’ went out on the air. It nearly broke the hearts of those that heard it. Grief among the Scottish women was quieter more patient, stiller.

But when the dead-carts began to rumble, and the bodies were brought home, the women broke loose from all restraint, and clambered on the waggons, crying for their husbands. Then David Oliphant, who had gone from house to house, ran along to meet each cart, and, reverently laying the cloth aside, he identified the poor clay, and so drove the husband home to his wife's fireside, which he had left sound and well that morning.

Yes, the boys had warned the men! The three heroes who thought of no Victoria Cross had done their deed, and now they lay quiet one in his father's house, with the deadly reek oozing stilly out of his nostrils; another as quiet, the only son of his mother, and she a widow. But one lay at the bottom of the black water of the ‘sump,’ so deep that even the ruddy fire scarce glimmered down upon him. But the boys had warned the men.

On a quiet Scottish Sabbath they were laid in their resting-graves on a breezy hilltop, looking down on the lace that had been their death-trap. The fields over them were yellow with the corn, but under the sheaves fifty men lay buried in a deep common grave. They had a service on the green, and the lift of the widowed and orphaned voices as they sang their psalm almost broke our hearts,

*‘Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale, Yet will I fear none ill; For Thou art with me, and Thy rod And staff me comfort still.’*

And at the open-air service, behind the rows of weeping women, the children played upon Carronbrae Green, or stood staring open-eyed as at a show, with never a father among them all. But Hector McKill went to the church with a conscience void of offence. He had subscribed a hundred pounds to the relief fund.

Now David Oliphant had a word to say, and he said it. ‘I do not stand here to apportion blame or to decide legal quibbles; but I say that the men who are responsible for failing to provide a way of escape for these men are responsible for the loss of these hundred lives, and one day shall have to answer for the murder before the bar of God.’

Two mornings after David Oliphant found on his table a legal letter from the solicitor of Incubus and Company. The letter informed him that he had laid himself open to an action for

libel, and requested the name of his solicitor. David Oliphant had no solicitor; but he had an answer, and his answer ran thus :

‘I specially declared in my address that I had nothing to do with apportioning blame before human tribunals; and I shall rejoice to meet your clients at the bar which I mentioned, on the great day when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed, when all wrong shall be righted, and all evil punished.’

David Oliphant's faith was simple; but, like many simple things, it wore well and carried him through. He heard no more of the action for libel.

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The water had filled the mine. It was seven months before it was again pumped out of the flooded pit. Then once more the explorers enter the dread place where the smoke choked, the fire burned, and the water drowned so many lives that were bright and young. They are again at the pit-bottom. They pass along the dripping passages, from which the great pump has sucked the water. They clamber over falls of rock which have thundered down from the roof. They shade their eyes and hold up their lamps as they go down the slope.

‘ Stop! what is that?’

This is what they see dark shapes, leaning against the wall, some sitting as if in thought, some resting at ease as if asleep, some lying prone on their faces.

‘I declare,’ said one of the searchers, ‘they were sitting there, after seven months under water, as if they were waiting for the oversman to call the next shift!’

He was right. The Great Oversman had called the next shift, and every man had answered to his name. One little lad had run upon the first alarm to find his father. The men who lifted him had strong arms, but the tears ran down their cheeks upon their grimy hands. And well they might, for the boy lay lovingly and confidingly with his head upon his father's knee. He had found his father. Perhaps so had they all. At any rate, it was better to die with them than to live with Hector McKill.

Incubus and Company still survives, but does not greatly prosper, though Hector's white waistcoat is broader and whiter than ever. But, though he got clear in the Government inquiry, the Great Court of Appeal has not done with him yet. There is a certain white throne to be set up; and even if there be no hell, as the new-fangled folk say, God is going to set about making one specially for Hector McKill.

S. R. CROCKETT.

Crockett writes another, more fictional version of the story in *'The Stickit Minister's Wooing'* first published 1900. The story is called 'The Respect of Drowdle.'

## THE RESPECT OF DROWDLE

Most folk in the West of Scotland know the parish of Drowdle, at least by repute. It is a great mining centre, and the inhabitants are not counted among the peaceable of the earth.

'If ye want your head broken, gang doon to Drowdle on a Saturday nicht' is an advice often given to the boastful or the bumptious. Drowdle is a new place too, and the inhabitants, instead of being, like ordinary Scottish Geordies, settled for generations in one coal-field and with whole streets of relatives within stonethrow, are composed of all the strags and restless ne'er-do-weels of such as go down into the earth, from Cornwall even to the Hill-o'-Beith.

Most, I say, know Drowdle by repute. I myself, indeed, once acted as locum tenens for the doctor there during six hot and lively summer weeks, and gained an experience in the treatment of contusions, discolorations, and abrasions of the skull and frontal bones which has been of the greatest possible use to me since. The younger Drowdleites, however, had at that time a habit of stretching a cord across the threshold about a foot above the step, which interfered considerably with professional dignity of exit — that is, till you were used to it. But after one has got into the habit of scouting ahead with a spatula ground fine and tied to a walking-stick on darkish nights, Drowdle began to respect you.

Still better, if (as I did) you can catch a couple of the cord-stretchers, produce an occipital contusion or two on your own account, and finish by kicking the jesters bodily into Drowdle Water. Then the long rows of slated brick which constitute the mining village agree that 'the new doakter kens his business — a smart lad, yon! Heard ye what he did to thae trwa deils, Jock Lee an' Cockly Nixon? He catchit them trippin' him wi' a cairt rape at Betty Forgan's door, and, faith, he threw them baith into Drowdle 'Water!'

Such being the way to earn the esteem of Drowdle, it would have saved the telling of this story if, when young Dairsie Gordon received a call to be minister of the recently established mission church there, he had had any one to enlighten him on the subject.

He was so young that he was ashamed when any one asked him his age. They had called him 'Joanna' at college, and sent him recipes along the desk for compelling a beard and moustache to grow under any conditions of soil and climate, however unfavourable.

Dairsie Gordon was very innocent, very learned, very ignorant, and — the only son of a well-to-do mother, who from a child had destined him for the ministry. The more was the pity!

As a child he was considered too delicate for the rough-and-tumble of school. He had a tutor, a mild-faced young man who seldom spoke above his breath, and never willingly walked more than a mile at a time, and then with a book in his hand and a flute in his tail pocket. Under his instruction, however, Dairsie became an excellent classic, and his verse gained the approval of Professor Jupiter Olympus when he went up to the University of Edinburgh, where Latin verse was a rare accomplishment in those days, and Greek ones as extinct as the dodo.

When her son went to college, Mrs. Gordon came up herself from the country to settle Dairsie in the house of a friend of her own, the widow of a deceased minister who had married an old maid late in life. This excellent lady possessed much experience of bazaars and a good working knowledge of tea-meetings, but she knew nothing of young men.

So, being placed in authority over Dairsie, she insisted that he should come straight back to Rose Crescent from his classes, take dinner in the middle of the day alone with his hostess, and then — as a treat — accompany her while she made a call or two on other clerical widows who had married late in life. Then she took him home to open his big lexicons and

pore over crabbed constructions till supper-time. This feast consisted of plain bread and butter with the smallest morsel of cheese, because much cheese is not good for the digestion at night. A glass of milk accompanied these delicacies. It also was plain and blue, because the cream (a doubtful quantity at best) had been skimmed off it for Mrs. McSkirmish's tea in the morning.

After that Dairsie was sent to bed. He was allowed ten minutes to take off his clothes and say his prayers. Then the gas was turned out at the meter. If he wanted time for more study and reading he could have it in the morning. It is good for youth to rise betimes and study the Hebrew Scriptures with cold feet and fingers that will not turn the leaves of Gesenius till they are blown upon severally and individually. In this fashion, varying in nothing, save that on alternate Sundays there was something hot for supper, because Mrs. McSkirmish's minister — a severe and faithful divine — came to interview Dairsie and report on his progress to his mother, the future pastor passed seven winter sessions.

Scholastically his victories were many. Bursaries seemed purposely created for him to take — and immediately resign in favour of his proxime accessit, who needed the money more. The class never queried as to who would be first in the 'exams' but only wrangled concerning who would come next after Gordon — and how many marks below.

In summer Dairsie went quietly down to his mother's house in the country, where his neck was fallen upon duly, and four handmaids (with little else to do) worshipped him — especially when for the first time he took the 'Book' at family worship. There was a wood before the door, in which he passed most of his time lying on his back reading, and his old tutor came to stay with him for a month at a time.

Thus was produced the Reverend Dairsie Gordon, B.D., without doubt the first student of his college, Allingham Fellow, and therefore entitled to go to Germany for a couple of years by the terms of his Fellowship.

But by one of these interpositions of Providence, which even the most orthodox denominate 'doubtful,' there was at this time a vacancy in the pastoral charge of the small Mission Church at Drowdle. The late minister had accepted a call to a moorland congregation of sixty members, where nothing had happened within the memory of man more stirring than the wheel coming off a cart of peats opposite the manse.

Dairsie Gordon preached at Drowdle. His voice was sweet and cultivated and musical, so that it fell pleasantly on the ears of the kirk-goers of Drowdle, over whose heads had long blared a voice like to the trumpets at the opening of the seventh seal in the book of the Revelation.

So they elected him unanimously. Also he was 'well-to-do,' and it was understood in the congregation that his salary would not be a consideration. The minister-elect immediately resigned his fellowship, considering this a direct call to the work.

In this fashion Dairsie Gordon went to his martyrdom. Ignorant of the world as the child of four, never having been elbowed and buffeted and browbeaten by circumstances, never cuffed at school, snubbed at college, and so variously and vicariously licked and kicked into shape, he found himself suddenly pitchforked into the spiritual charge of one of the most difficult congregations in Scotland.

The new minister was introduced socially at a tea-meeting on the evening of the ordination, and then and there he had his first taste of the Drowdelian quality. There were plenty of douce and sober folk in the front pews of the little kirk, but at the back reckless, unmarried Geordies were sandwiched between a militant and ungodly hobbledehoyhood. Paper bags that had contained fruit exploded in the midst of the most solemn addresses. Dairsie's own remarks were fairly punctuated with these explosions, and by the flying shells of Brazil nuts. Bone buttons at the end of knitting needles clicked and tapped at windows, and a shutter fell inward with a crash. It was thus that Dairsie returned thanks:

'My dear people' (a penny trumpet blew an obligate accompaniment under the book-board of a pew), 'I have been led to the oversight of this flock' (pom-pom-pom) 'after prayer

and under guidance. I shall endeavour to teach you' - ('Catch - the - Ten!' 'All-fours!' 'Quoits!') 'some of those things which I have devoted my life to acquiring. I am prepared for some little difficulty at first, till we know one another.'

The remainder of the address was inaudible owing to the cries of, 'Rob Kinstry has stole my bag!' 'Ye're a liar!' All which presently issued in the general turmoil of a free fight towards the rear of the church.

Mrs. Gordon had come up to be present on the occasion of her son's ordination, and that night in the little manse mother and son mingled their tears. It all seemed so wrong and pitiful to them.

But Dairsie, with a fine hopefulness on his delicate face, lifted his head from his mother's shoulder, smiling like a girl through his own tears.

'But after all, this is the work to which I have been called, mother. And you know if it is His will that I am to labour here, in time He will give the increase.'

So somewhat heartened, mother and son kneeled down together, prayed, and went to bed.

On the forenoon of the next day two of the elders, decent pitmen, who happened to be on the night-shift, called in to give their verdict and to drop a word of advice.

'A graund meetin',' said Pate Tamson, the oversman of No. 4; 'what for didna ye tak' your stick and gie some o' the vaigabonds a clour on the lug? It wad hae served them weel!'

'I could not think of doing such a thing,' said Dairsie. 'I desire to wield a spiritual, not a carnal, influence!'

'Carnal influence here, carnal influence there,' cried Robin Naysmith, stamping his foot till the little study trembled, 'if ye are to succeed in this village o' Drowdle, ye maun pit doon your fit — like that, sir, like that!'

And he stamped on the new Brussels carpet till the plaster began to come down in flakes from the ceiling. Dairsie tried to imagine himself stamping like that, but could not. For one thing, he had always worn single-soled shoes, with silk ties and woollen 'socks' (which he had promised his mother to take out and dry whenever he came in), a fact which has more bearing on the main question than appears on the surface.

'A man has to assert hissel' in this toon, or he is thocht little on,' said Pate Tamson, the oversman. 'Noo, there's MacGrogan, the Irish priest — I dinna agree wi' his releegion, an' dootless he will hae verra little chance at the Judgment. But, faith, when he hears that there's ony o' his fowk drinkin' ower lang about Lucky Moat's, in he gangs wi' a cudgel as thick as your airm, and the great solemn curses, fair rowlin' aff the tongue o' him — and faith, he clears Lucky's faster than a hale raft of polissmen! Aye, he does that!'

'Aye,' assented the junior elder, Robin Naysmith, he whose feet had put the plaster in danger, 'what we need i' Drowdle is a man o' poo'er — a man o' wecht!'

'Quit ye like men — be strong!' saith the Scripture,' summed up the oversman. Then both of them waited for Dairsie, to see what he had got to say.

'I — I am sure I shall endeavour to do my best,' said the young minister, 'but I fear I have underestimated the difficulties of the position.'

The oversman shook his head as he went, out through the manse gate.

'And I am some dootfu' that we hae made a mistak!'

'If we hae,' rejoined Naysmith, the strong man, 'we maun keep it frae the knowledge o' Drowdle. But the lad is young — young. And when he has served his 'prenticeship to sorrow, he will maybes come oot o' the furnace as silver that is tried!'

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Now, neither Drowdle nor its inhabitants meant to be unkind. In case of illness or accident among themselves, none gave material help more liberally. What belonged to one was held in a kindly communism to be the right of all. But Drowdle was not to be handled delicately. It

was a nettle to be grasped with gloves of untanned leather.

Dairsie Gordon opened his first Sunday-school at three in the afternoon. At a quarter to four, as he stood up on the platform to give his closing address, he found boys scuttling and playing 'tig' between his legs. He laid down his hymn book, and on lifting it to read the closing verses, discovered that a certain popular bacchanalian collection entitled 'Songs of the Red, White, and Blue' had mysteriously taken its place.

The young minister had other and graver trials also. The pitmen passed him on the road with a surly grunt, and he did not know it was only because they were trudging home dog-tired from their long shift. The hard-driving managers and sub-managers, men without illusions and as blatantly practical as a Scottish daily paper, passed him by contemptuously, as if he had been a tract thrust under their doors. The schoolmaster, a cleverish machine-made youth of inordinate conceit, openly scoffed. He was a weakling, this minister, and he had better know it.

And, indeed, in these days, Dairsie gave them plenty of scope for complaint. His sermons might possibly have edified a company of the unfallen angels, if we can fancy such being interested in heathen philosophy and the interpretation of the more obscure Old Testament Scriptures. But to this gritty, ungodly, crass-natured, rasp-surfaced village of Drowdle, the young man merely babbled in his pulpit as the summer brooks do over the pebbles.

An itinerant evangelist, who shook the fear of hell-fire under their noses with the fist of a pugilist, and claimed in ancient style the power to bind and the power to loose, might conceivably have succeeded in Drowdle, but as it was, Dairsie Gordon proved a failure of the most absolute sort. And Drowdle, having no false modesty, told him plainly of it. At informal meetings of Session the question of their minister's shortcomings was discussed with freedom and point, only the oversman and Robin Nay smith pleading suspension of judgment on account of the young man's years.

For there were sympathetic hearts here and there among the folk of Drowdle. Women with the maternal instinct yet untrampled out of them came to their doors to look after the tall slim laddie who was so like the sons they had dreamed of when the maiden's blush still tinged their cheeks.

'He's a bonny laddie to look on,' they said to each other as, palm on hip, they stood looking after him. 'It's a peety that he is sae feckless!'

Yet Dairsie was always busy. He was no neglecter of duty. He worked with eager strained hopefulness. No matter how deep had been his depression of the evening, the morning found him contemplating a day of work with keen anticipation and unconquerable desire to succeed.

Today, at last, he would begin to make an impression. He would visit the remainder of Dickson's Row, and perhaps — who knew? — it might be the turning of the tide. So he sat down opposite his mother at breakfast, smiling and rubbing his hands.

'Today I am going to show them, mother,' he would say.

'Show them what, Dairsie dear?'

'That I am a man.'

But within him he was saying, 'Work while it is day!' And yet deeper in his heart, so deep that it became almost a prayer for release, he was wont to add — 'The night cometh when no man can work!' Then to this he added, as he took his round soft hat and went out, 'O Lord, help me to do something worthy before I die — something to make these people respect me.'

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It was a hot September afternoon. Drowdle was a-drowse from Capersknowe to the Back Raw. Here and there could be heard a dull recurring thud, which was the dunt dunt of the

roller on the dough of the bake-board as some housewife languidly rolled out her farles of oatcake. For the rest, there was no sound save the shout of a callant fishing for minnows in the backwaters of Drowdle, and the buzz of casual bluebottles on the dirty window-panes.

Suddenly there arose a cry, dominant and far-reaching. No words were audible, but the tone was enough. Women blanched and dropped the crockery they were carrying. The men of the night-shift, asleep on their backs in the hot and close-curtained wall-beds, tumbled into their grimy moleskins with a single movement.

‘Number Four pit's On fire! The pit's on fire! Number Fower!’

It was a mile to the particular colliery where the danger was. The rows of houses emptied themselves simultaneously upon the white dusty road, women running with men and barefooted children speeding between, a little scared, but, on the whole, rather enjoying the excitement.

As they came nearer, the great high-mounted head-wheels of pit Number Four were spinning furiously, and over the mounds which led to it little ant-like figures were hurrying. A thin far-spreading spume of brownish smoke rose sluggishly from the pithead. At sight of it women cried out: ‘Oh God, my Jock's doon there!’ And more than one set her hand suddenly upon her side and swung away from the rush into the hedge-root.

A hundred questions were being fired at the steadfast engineer, men and women all shouting at once. He answered such as he could, but with his hand ever upon the lever and his eye upon the scale which told at what point the cage stood in the long incline of the ‘dook.’

‘The fire's in the main pit-shaft,’ he said. ‘They are trying to get doon by the second exit; but it's half fu' o' steam pipes to drive the bottom engine.’

‘Wha's gane doon?’

‘Pate Tamson and Muckle Greg are in the cage tryin' to put the fire oot wi' the hose.’

‘They nicht as weel spit on't if it's gotten ony catch!’

‘And Robin Naysmith and the minister are tryin' the second exit.’

‘The minister,’

The cry was very scornful. The minister, indeed — what good could ‘a boy like him’ do down there where strong men were dying helplessly?

So for half-an-hour Walter McCartney, the pithead engineer, stood at his post watching the cage index, and listening for the tinkle of the bell which signalled ‘up’ or ‘down.’

Suddenly the faces of such as could see the numbers blanched. And a murmur ran round the crowd at the long t-r-r-r-r-r which told that the cage was coming to the surface.

Had all hope been abandoned, that the rescue party were returning so unexpectedly? A woman shrieked suddenly on the edges of the crowd.

‘Who's that?’ queried the manager, turning sharply. And when he was answered, ‘Take her away — don't let her come near the shaft!’ was his order.

Out of the charred and dripping cage came Pate Tamson and his mate, blackened and wet from head to foot.

‘The cage is to be sent empty to the dook-bottom!’ they said. ‘Somebody has managed to get doon the second exit.’

With a quick switch of levers and a humming hiss of woven wire from the head-wheels, down sank the cage into the belching brown smother of the deadly reek.

Then there was a long pause. The index sank till it pointed to the pit-bottom. The cage had passed through the fire safely. It had yet to be proved that living men could also pass.

‘Tinkle tink.’

It was the bell for lifting. Walter McCartney compressed his lips on receiving the signal, and pulled down the shiny cap over his forehead, as if he himself were about to face that whirlwind of fire six hundred feet down in the bowels of the earth. He drew a long breath and opened the lever for ‘Full Speed Up.’ The cage must have passed the zone of flame like a bird rising through a cloud. The folk silenced themselves as it neared the surface. Then a great cry arose.

The minister sat in the cage with a couple of boys in his arras. The rough wet brattice cloths that had been placed over them were charred almost to a cinder. Dairsie Gordon's face was burnt and blackened.

He handed the boys out into careful hands.

'I am going down again,' he said; 'unless I do the men will not believe that it is possible to come alive through the fire. Are you ready, Walter? Let her go!'

So a second time the young minister went down through the furnace. Presently the men began to be whisked up through the fire, and as each relay arrived at the pit-bank they sang the praises of Dairsie Gordon, telling with Homeric zest how he had crawled half-roasted down the narrow throat of the steam-pipe-filled shaft, how he had argued with them that the fire could be passed, and at last proved it with two boys for volunteer passengers. Dairsie Gordon, B.D., was the last man to leave the pit, and he fainted with pain and excitement when all Drowdle cheered him as they carried him home to his mother.

And when at last he came to himself, swathed in cotton wool to the eyes, he murmured, 'Do you not think they will respect me now, mother?'

## Like what you've read? Why not try a whole novel?

'*Vida: The Iron Lord of Kirktown*' is volume 27 in The Galloway Collection published by Ayton Publishing in 2014 to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of S.R.Crockett's death.

In '*Vida*' Crockett revisits the Mauricewood Pit Disaster once more. The Incubus Mining Company is central to the story and many of the characters and scenarios will seem familiar if you've read the two stories above. It is interesting to note that '*Vida*' was serialised in *The People's Friend* magazine in 1907 prior to publication by James Clarke & Co in the same year. Nearly two decades after the disaster, it still had an importance for Crockett, and '*Vida*' is far above what perhaps one might expect of a story in 'The People's Friend' (but perhaps that is to do the magazine a dis-service!) But if you've already read and enjoyed the two stories above, you'll maybe have started to realise that it's worth taking a risk beyond what you think you know in order to find new and interesting reading material from the past!

You can find out more about Crockett by joining [The Galloway Raiders](#). It's free to join and offers you discounts on books as well as lots of information and events you can attend. And if you want to purchase '*Vida*' you can do so direct from the Raiders online store either as a [paperback](#) or as an [ebook](#). You can also buy them from Amazon, but if you understand the power of Incubus you may feel inclined to try purchasing from the Raiders instead.

Throughout September we're offering a special discount price for the ebook of *Vida* of £1.99 if you enter coupon code MAURICE126 at the checkout. To get the paperback at a discounted rate of £9.99 you will need to join The Galloway Raiders. This is because the balance of power is still held with the big corporations, making it very difficult for the 'niche' publisher to price-match and stay in business.

Thank you for reading.