DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

CHAPTER I

THE READING OF THE WILL

THE click and purr of the shuttle had ceased. No line of weft had been laid in the furrowed woof during that still and sultry afternoon. Tinny Walker's mallet was at rest beside squares of white metal on the workshop bench, and there was not even a quiver of heat at the chimney-head of the smithy. Nature, too, seemed in sympathy with the general cessation of human industry. It may have been the apathy of the listless air, but the twisted silver lines of the waterfall at the Brig-end, held together by a blue liquid film, fell more drowsily than usual among the lichened rocks. Sliding past, the river lipped its loamy banks with lingering gentleness, and fretted less than com-

mon at the intrusion of the bleachfield wall. From nests that had served the season's purpose, and that were now well hidden by the deepening greenness, youthful and impressionable crows, not having heard the kirk bell, rose and circled over the scene in silent but questioning observation. No wonder, for being a healthy parish, such occasions of week-day inactivity were not frequent. The village of Kilspindie was scattered on two sides of the river Garnet, and was held together by a three-arched bridge. The bulk of it, including the kirk and the manse, was on the same side as the general store. The candle-maker's workshop stood at the corner of the bridge on the other side, and was so situated that Robin Brough, leaning over his half-door, and looking up the acclivity to right or left on such days as Gingham John, the packman, paid his visits, could see him, with ell-stick in hand, moving from door to door, and could guess with a fair degree of certainty where he made sales; and judge, from the houses at which he paused, what the nature of the purchase might be. The candle-maker was by habit a leisurely man, and nothing loath at any time to suspend his frame

over the dipping-vat and indulge in surmises as to other people's affairs or gather the news from a passing neighbour.

The central situation of Brough's workshop, combined with the social disposition of its occupant, made the place a favourite rendezvous for such as had leisure to exchange views on the topics of the hour.

Robin pushed on with his tea without loss of time, and repaired across the bridge to the workshop in his white shirt-sleeves. Once inside, he closed the lower half of the door, and placing his elbows on it restfully, turned his eyes to the left. The mellow air was charged with the fragrance of hawthorn and apple-blossom. Ch-ch-ch-chir-ee, chir-ee sang the robin among the chestnut spikes overhead; but the candle-maker was not a thinking man, and did not bother with nature. His eye listlessly followed the white ascending road which ran for a space between green hedges. Further on to the right the sylvan wall was broken by a modest thatched building, in front of which swung a sign-plate, illustrating in appropriate colour that the designation of the place was the Wheat-

Sheaf inn. Higher still, a row of cottar dwellings, with green house-leek shining among the grey thatch, challenged notice, until at Nancy Beedam's cottage on the one hand, and Broomfields on the other, the narrowing road cut into another at right angles, and was lost to view. At first there was no human object in sight, but a flash of moving colour brought the gazer back to the inn, from which a woman emerged with a number of labelled bottles in a small yellow basket. For a moment the unusual sight of Mistress Izet, the housekeeper at Broomfields, trafficking at the inn puzzled him. "The lawyer will be biding for his denner," he said. "I'se warrant the doctor's will has been dry wark." Inference played an important part in the knowledge they possessed of each other's affairs in Kilspindie. As the housekeeper passed, the sonsy form of David McLennan appeared outside his own door, and seeing the candle-maker at his post, he dashed the superfluous ham gravy from his mouth with the back of his hand, and stepped down the brae. At the lower end of the row he was joined by William Caughie, who wore his Sunday stock,

and displayed one leg of his trousers partially caught up in the hurried fastening of his Blucher boot. William was a tall, slim, cold-rife man, who bore his head above the burly form of the carrier, and seemed to breathe a chillier air. Satisfied as to the approach of company, Brough glanced to the right without disturbing his pose of body. At the same moment Tinny Walker and Zedie Lawson made their appearance at the merchant's corner, and so they came, singly or in pairs, these rustic gossips, and planted themselves at the end of the bridge in front of the candle-maker's workshop. Each wore some remnant or other of his Sunday attire. Their manner, both of speech and movement, was characterized by Sabbatic leisure. That day they had laid the mortal remains of a notable member of the community in their last resting-place. A funeral in Kilspindie meant a day's idle-set to the male heads of families. On these occasions, there being time, the Seventh day's grace was said in full at breakfast. Adult male faces, lengthening for the melancholy duty in prospect, took a proportionately longer period to

shave. Dressing afterwards was done in leisurely stages, for on this particular day they did not "lift" till one. While these preparations engaged the attention of the men, the womenfolk with needle and scissors prepared crape-bands for the hats, and "weepers" for the coat-sleeves, with subtle appraisement in crape and book-muslin as to the degree of respect to which the deceased was entitled at the hands of the wearers and their families. Work, as a rule, was not resumed after returning from a funeral. No native could account for this custom — it had lasted as long as the memory could stretch, and even steam and electricity had not altered it much.

Dr. Congalton, whose remains had that day been laid in the kirkyard, was one of the oldest inhabitants. He had been for some time out of practice, but was justly held in respect, for he had stood single-handed by the portals of birth and death of his rural constituency for over thirty-five years, bidding welcome and saying good-bye. The doctor was a bachelor, and a person of uncommon individuality. Native gossip averred that he was once on the eve

of marriage, but the match was broken off on sanitary grounds. The lady's dresses were too long for his taste, and the chain of mutual regard could not stand the strain of his ineffectual desire to shorten them. Her feet had no need to shame her, 't was said, but he declined to bind himself for life to a person who not only trailed good things in the dirt, but made herself at the same time a circular receptacle for the seeds of trouble. Dr. Congalton's death was the result of an accident. Since his retirement from practice gossip whispered he had lived rather freely. At all events it was a fact, that one night, on returning from Windy-yett with his head full of whisky toddy, he drew rein for his own gate prematurely, was thrown heavily against a stone wall, and arrived home bearing injuries from which he never recovered.

Dr. Congalton, having enjoyed a long, undisturbed practice, was known to be wealthy, and while it was naturally supposed that what he possessed would go to his brother George, a journalist in London, an element of uncertainty had come on the back of this supposition by the news that Windy-yett had been invited to

the reading of the will. Richard Cowie, the tenant of Windy-yett, was a keen and fairly successful farmer, but outside of practical farmwork he was, as his wife said, but a "puir stock," and needed "haudin' in." Mrs. Cowie possessed the power of doing this, and exercised it. But those who were observant said she could slacken the reins at times when it served her purpose. Alec Brodie, the cartwright, whose workshop was situated about half-way between Broomfields and Windy-yett, and who had opportunities of knowing, was responsible for saying that it was her hospitality and her management that drew Dr. Congalton so frequently to the farm, and her toddy, though she could not be blamed for it, that "dottlit" him on the night of the accident. A consuming but smouldering desire to know something of the destination of Dr. Congalton's belongings had brought the neighbours to the Brig-end that afternoon in considerable numbers.

Want of directness was one of the parish failings. Tilly Brogan, the merchant, who came from Motherwell as successor to Matha Spens, was at first put off his guard by it. When

neighbours came to his store to purchase, their desires were shrouded by a seeming of indifference, as if they were simply indulging a curiosity to price things — beginning with articles they had no mind for, and ending with what they actually wanted — offering for it so much less than was asked, as if shamed into purchasing for decency sake, after giving trouble. As yet the gossips were in the outer courts of inquiry regarding what they had met to discover. Zedie Lawson (his kirk name was Zedekiah, and he knew this when his wife was angry) was sitting on the edge of a candle-crate, looking skyward over the bleachfield chimney, directed thither owing to meteorological observations made by the carrier some minutes previously. Zedie was a stunted, timorous man, with a tilted nose, and a mouth like the letter O. The expression was apologetic, but to a stranger conveyed the idea that he was whistling a tune; being short-sighted, he was said to observe things with "mouth and een." The look skyward, however, was mechanical rather than indicative of exhaustive contemplation, for at the moment he was in confused wonderment as to whether the new

laird of Broomfields would continue the services of his sister-in-law, Janet Izet, who had long acted as housekeeper to Dr. Congalton.

"Look nane anxious," was the masterful injunction given to him on leaving his own doorstep; "fin' oot things by degrees; let the crack come roun' nait'ral, and no clyte intil't as if we feared Janet wud tyne her place." In the sequence of discourse the carrier had passed on to remark that the hay was requiring the sun "after that lang blash o' rain." Hairmyres had been telling him that the "feck o' his was cut this time last 'ear." He remembered it by "the bursting o' the dam, that carried half the meadow fu' o't into the Garnet."

"Hairmyres should mind it for better reasons than that," the little tinsmith took liberty to remark through his tin-trumpet of a voice. "His wife dee't a week after the dam broke — I have heard tell it was wi' fricht."

"It was fricht nane," remonstrated Brough, declaiming confidently from the half-door. "It was Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* that killed Jean Lowry. Dr. Congalton telt the schulemaister, and Mrs. Lonen made no secret o't to

my wife, that Jean Lowry read that book till she had a' the troubles it speaks o', ane after the ither, and whiles she had twa're three on her at ae time."

"And like enough she wud be takin' med'cins and stuffs that her system couldna staun'," deplored William Caughie, looking sapiently through his horn specs. William was great on human organs and ailments. "Just that — she took whatever the book said was guid for the trouble she had on her mind at the time. What mortal woman, or man either, could thole that? I alloo the fricht wud help, but the doctor said when he opened her it was nothing but Buchan here and Buchan there, a' through her inside."

"It was mortal skilly o'm to fin' that oot," Lawson ventured, fondly hoping the colloquy might now set on Broomfields.

"The doctor was an eccentric being," the carrier said.

"That's about it," Jaik Short announced, with approval. Short was the engine-driver on the branch line. Trains had to be run, as he said, in spite of fairs and funerals, and he had come over from the junction, after stabling

his steed, to hear the news. "Eccentric's the word — a wheel wi' a hole in it nearer the tae side than the tither, put it on a rinnin spin'le, and, my word, it'll waggle. Lod, McLennan, ye never said an apter thing — the doctor was eccentric. Had ye a gran' funeral the day?"

"A big gathering," answered Robin Brough; "Gushets, and Harelaw, General Alexander, the factor, Robert Thomson, frae Glenbuckie, and ither big-wigs. The minister spoke real feeling."

"The accident was enlarged on — telt us to prepare, and the like," said William Caughie, working his nose. He was an elder.

"Talking o' big-wigs," interposed the tinsmith, attitudinizing to check sentiment, "the biggest in yon company the day, to my mind, was the undertaker's man. Gor! even the minister daurna open his lips till he says the word. At his nod the whisky gangs roun'. Everybody looks to him; but the tap rung o' his greatness is reached when he clears his throat and says, 'If ony body wants to see the corp before it's screwed down, come this wye.' Dod, Robin, if I wasna a maister tinsmith, I wud be an undertaker's man."

"There's no enough o' ye," said McLennan unfeelingly. The tinsmith, like some other little people, required keeping down. "That job wants a big, presentable, sober-looking man, like William Caughie. Still-an-on Walker, yer a decent wee fellow compared wi' yon shirpet body, the factor, wha walked wi' his nose i' the air as if he was immortal. It was oot o' place behind a corp. If that man was half as big as he thinks himself, he wud let oot for a saullie" (hired mourner).

Short had reason to have a different opinion of the factor, and changed the subject by asking bluntly if anything had been heard about the doctor's will. The engine-driver was not a native. Zedie Lawson jumped from the crate as if shot up by a spring. He felt things would be redd up now.

"I suppose the brither gets a'?" Short presumed.

"Windy-yett was invited to the reading," answered Brough. "There's no saying."

"He'll be a daer" (trustee), the engine-driver concluded. "Cowie and the doctor were great frien's. It'll no astonish me if he has left

his siller to build a college for watching the staurs, or for telling what airt the win' blaws."

"Think ye Maister Congalton wud settle in these pairts gin he got the doctor's siller, as ye say?" Lawson's opportunity had come.

"Settle!" Short retorted, "did ye ever hear o' a newspaper man settling at the tail o' a junction? Na, na, if he settles it'll be somewhere on the main line, but Edinbro' or Lunnon's a mair likely place."

Lawson resumed his seat dolefully. The sister-in-law after all was to be thrown on them; surely she had as much saved as would pay them a weekly allowance for board and lodging till she got another place. This thought occupied him heavily till the smith arrived with startling news. That functionary had been driven off in Harelaw's gig after the funeral to see a beast that was suffering from pneumonia — peenumonia the parish called it; the schoolmaster had kept the smith right, being a professional man, but somehow the conviction remained even with him that the initial letter of the word was needlessly thrown away. He was telling how, when passing the cross roads near

the cartwright's workshop on his way home, he met Windy-yett "swinging alang the gate in a terrible swither." The carrier planted his shoulder doggedly against the candle-maker's door-post.

"Ay, man."

"His mind wud be fu' o' the will," said Short.

"He was like a man clean oot o' the body," continued the smith. "Whiles he wud gie a hotch o' a laugh, syne he wud gang on a piece wi' his head doon, cracking to himsel' ——"

"But ye buckled to him?" interrupted the candle-maker.

"Man, he didna see me till I was three pairts into his long shadow that hurried on before him, but I stood; then he looked up at me wi' an eerie face. 'Getting foret, Windy-yett,' quo' I, wondering if he was in drink. Wi' that he raised his richt hand, brocht it doon on his knee, and hotched till the tears trinkled owre the nose o' him. 'Man smith,' says he to me at last, 'were you ever at the reading o' a will?' 'Na,' quo' I, 'but it maun be fine when ye're named in it.' 'Dod, I dinna ken, I can hardly say I've got the leeze o't yet; man, yon lang-nebbit, auld-

farrant words are by-ord'nar for senselessness. It was first party this, and second party that, and aforesaid the ither, till I was clean dumfoonert. Lord, I wis' the mistress had been there; but somehoo it rins in my head that the doctor has left his ain brither and the feck o' his siller to oor Bell.'"

CHAPTER II

THE OPINION OF COUNSEL

BROOMFIELDS was a substantial baronial building erected within about an acre of ground. It commanded a view of the village and the valley of the Garnet. There was a patch of lawn in front, broken at intervals by crescents and squares, in which pansies and white lilies were in the meridian of blossom. An old-fashioned garden behind, with gnarled fruit trees, common vegetables, and herbaceous plants justified the inference that the gardener, to be fully employed, must have other duties to perform. It was a beautiful June morning some days after Dr. Congalton's funeral. A soft shower had raced over the landscape, leaving a perfume of white clover and sweet-briar on the relapsing air. A blackbird out of sight somewhere among the blue-green palms of the