CHAPTER XI

A JOURNALIST ON FURLOUGH

GEORGE CONGALTON had returned from London on a working furlough. He had a retaining fee, and a white card, to write on any subject he thought would be interesting; but he was to hold himself in readiness, in the event of being required for foreign service. His book — *Sketches of a Special Correspondent in the Recent War* — was daily attracting fresh notice, and drawing forth golden opinions from the reviews; but though his name was in all the journals, his fame had not yet reached Kilspindie. Mr. Lonen, the school-master, had read the book and passed it on to the minister; but to all others he was simply — Dr. Congalton's brother. Though a Scotchman by birth, he had spent most of his life in connection with the metropolitan press. It is true he began his

journalistic career in Scotland, but at an early period he was removed from the Scottish weekly on which he was engaged to manage a news-agency in London. It was the early days of such agencies, and Congalton distinguished himself by doing most of the work with his own hand. They had numerous correspondents who sent in the dry bones on which he put the literary flesh. His pen was facile; his imagination impressive. Humour he had, but it was serviceable only for private use. He knew too well the limits of a news-agency to try it there. Congalton had a wonderful instinct for the space value of news. He understood the lines on which public interest could be roused, and the amount of sentiment that might safely be used to satisfy it. Let it be a fire, a colliery accident, a railway disaster, or an item from the seat of war — anything picturesque or appalling, six lines of a telegram in his hands was good for half a column that would stir the emotions and hasten the blood. On the other hand, a column of well-written matter would fall into a paragraph, without regret, or the sacrifice of an essential fact, if

the public wanted it not. His readiness of resource procured him a tempting offer for service in troublous times abroad. There were marvellous stories told of him as a war correspondent — under what difficulties he wrote — his long and exhaustive rides to post and telegraph office. These things were chronicled afterwards, but no one dreamed of them on reading the brief but comprehensive telegrams, and the brilliant descriptive articles that followed; there was grasp, generalship, a sense of military dash and movement in his writing which drew the eyes of Europe to the war columns of the *Morning Despatch*. Yet this clever pressman was the most unmethodical of men. He made notes at all times and everywhere — on the backs of old envelopes, on blank pages of letters, margins of newspapers, or indeed on any scrap of paper that lay to his hand in camp or battle-field, but how these were reckoned with afterwards and brought to useful account remained his own secret. While enjoying change of scene at Kilspindie, and freed from the exigencies of daily responsibility, he did not remain idle. He amused himself with

rod and gun, but true to his training, his eye and ear were ever on the alert for "copy." Indeed he was himself astonished at the wealth of material that lay around him. When once his curiosity was aroused he was not slow to question and investigate, and this came to be talked of at the Brig-end.

The candle-maker declared he would "speir the bottom oot o' a kitty byne," but the cartwright had a ready and enlightened defence, which received the adherent applause of Jaik Short and Tilly Brogan the merchant. "Na," the cartwright had said, "I am nane again looking into things — the man that has the courage to speir questions is aye learnin'. Some folk'll no ask questions for fear o' showing their ain ignorance; we're a' i' the schule yet. Even I'm no abune carrying a satchel mysel'."

Congalton's northern contributions to the *Despatch* were remarkably clever, and attracted the attention of literary London. Some of them found their way into the county paper, and were read in Kilspindie. The studies were from life, and touched familiar ground, but no

one recognized himself, and so far as the writer could discover nobody suspected their authorship.

One day while in search of something in his daughter's school-room he came across the local paper containing copious extracts from one of his own sketches. It was marked on each side of the headline by a cross, and the name, written on the paper itself, was "Miss Hetty Hazlet." Of the governess herself Congalton had seen but little. His daughter paid him daily visits, and he was pleased with the progress she was making. Her manners were gentle and lady-like, and he felt sure this was the result of contact with a refined and cultured mind. Having discovered this marked newspaper he proceeded to speculate on the coincidence. To Congalton this fresh departure in journalism was a species of recreation which lay in the line of his own liking. The new power was a discovery which surprised and pleased him. Following this revelation there came a desire for sympathy — for a confidant who could stand on the other side of the hedge, as it were, and cry things over to him. The feeling be-

trayed a strange vanity amounting to feebleness, and was a curious trait in the character of a reserved and self-trustful man. At one time he had thought of confiding his secret to the school-master. Mr. Lonen was in some ways a colourless man. He held the opinion that there was little prose writing since the Elizabethan period worthy of the name of literature. He himself wrote sonnets. He laughed and wept in sonnets. There was no occasion too blithe or sacred for them, though they were mostly in the minor key. He called them "fourteen line epics," and covered the landscape with them; even Dr. Congalton's memory did not escape. Yet it was not wholly on this account that this mighty trust was withheld from him; however wrong his views and however wretched his verse might be, he could keep a secret from his neighbours — his wife could not. The crossed newspaper had arrested Congalton. What about this Miss Hazlet? She was an educated person, and had read portions of at least one of these articles.

He had reached this point when Mistress Izet knocked at the study door and announced the

Rev. Mr. Maconkey. The minister had made a ceremonious call once before after his brother's death, but they had not met since Congalton's return. Maconkey was a tall, cadaverous man with a limited mental horizon, fairly suited as a frame for his orthodoxy. Natural bias of conscience almost brought him out at the Disruption, but his mother put him on a preparatory course of spare diet which wrecked his determination. Later in life he was at times inclined to be dolorous in his preaching, but as the manse maid (she was a woman of fifty) told Mrs. Lonen, the "mistress always gied him a Collisen's pill on the Fridays to lichten his liver."

Maconkey's habits of study were peculiar. For one whole day in every seven he darkened his study window and lay on his stomach on a couch arranging his sermon for the following Sunday. He was what was called a doctrinal preacher, and one of his favourite doctrines was infant baptism. Congalton could not help recalling an incident narrated by the schoolmaster bearing on this subject while listening good-naturedly to the solemn, formal, introductory words of his visitor. The previous

ploughman at Mossfennan, having an imperative reason for visiting the manse, was inadvertently shown into the study on one of the minister's "dark days." It was an "eerie reception," he said, "in the licht o' day," but he was trying to compose himself "i' the mirk," when suddenly a tall masterful figure gathered itself from the couch into stern and interrogative erectness The frightened ploughman was retiring in undignified haste, fearing that the prince of darkness, from whom he had been taught to flee, was at his heels. The pursuing voice, however, was the minister's.

"Weel, Saunders?"

"Dod, sir, ye gaed me a deev — an — an — unco fricht, I assure ye."

The minister opened a wing of the shutters and let the light in temperately on the ploughman's scared face.

"It was very inconsiderate of the maid. But state your business briefly, Saunders, for, to speak truly, I am busy to-day."

"Have ye no heard the steer?" Saunders inquired.

"Steer about what?"

"Aboot the guidwife. Ye kent, of course, that she was wechty i' the fit, but she brocht hame a bonny bit wean a week by on Tuesday."

"Then ye'll be thinking about the solemn rite of baptism," said the minister.

"That's aboot it," replied Saunders. "The wife's no strong, and I thocht a waff o' fresh air frae the sea wi' her mither at Troon wud gie her heartin, but she'll no budge a fit till the bit thing's kirstened."

"Weel, Saunders, I hope your views are quite clear on this all-important question of infant baptism. Do you not think your wife was right?"

"I canna say she wis, sir, but then ye see weemen hinna minds like you and me — it's clean supersteetious a'thegither, but it doesna do to thraw wi' them when they're in her state. I thocht ye wud maybe come owre by i' the gloamin, and scale a drap or twa o' watter on the bit face."

As Congalton sat listening with an air of respectful attention to the deep tones of the minister's voice, he thought of the indignant interruption which ensued, and of the severe

course of disciplinary handling which ultimately brought the humble ploughman with trembling to the pulpit steps to enrol his child in the register of the Church Militant. To speak with candour, the Rev. Mr. Maconkey did not relish the duty which had brought him to Broomfields, but a sense of justice impelled him to perform it. The story of Miss Hazlet's secret meeting with her cousin had lost none of its disreputable characteristics by passing through the augmentive mind of Mrs. Lonen. She told her husband, but was so vexed by his indifference that Nancy Beedam and Mrs. Caughie, as her next neighbours, got it under monitorial restrictions, "Dinna say a word, but watch for yoursel's."

After this she let two days pass, but seeing no outcome, she confided it to the minister's wife. The manse was a kind of central telephonic exchange (though such an institution was then unknown), to which all tales involving the parish morals travelled, and Mrs. Maconkey was the person to whom the gossips contrived to get switched on. In point of fact, Mrs. Lonen was not the first to convey the story to the manse. Mrs. Maconkey had already questioned

the governess and discovered the truth. Poor Hetty was dreadfully shocked at the construction put upon her simple cousinly act.

What if Mr. Congalton had already heard the story? If he believed it he could not consider her a fit teacher or companion for his daughter. How could she live in the place? She must tell him, and resign her situation. These were her first thoughts while her face burned with shame and indignation, but her prudent, matronly adviser deprecated hasty action, so that the duty of defending the innocent and rectifying this wrong fell upon the minister. Mr. Maconkey narrated the incident with needless gravity. This village life seemed of huge importance to his mind. Such defection, if true, would to him have had almost tragical significance.

Congalton acknowledged the minister's good offices with becoming courtesy. He saw his visitor to the gate, and returned to put the closing sentences to the article on which he was engaged. There was humour even in the so-called tragedies of these rural communities. He thought of the friendless girl, however, and admitted that the humour would be more appar-

ent when the tragedies were impersonal. He heard Eva's silvery laugh in the hall, and knew the governess and she had returned from their afternoon stroll. In truth, Hetty had passed the time with Mrs. Maconkey in the manse garden till the minister's return. Congalton rang the bell, and asked to see Miss Hazlet.

Hetty came in pale, but self-possessed. She had the bravery of an honest conscience.

"I am sorry you have been vexed about the gossip of these silly neighbours of ours," he began lightly. "Mr. Maconkey has told me all, and I think it was very proper of you to see your cousin; the misfortune for both was that you had to see him under circumstances that permitted of misunderstanding."

"I did not dream of misunderstanding," Hetty said. "The poor boy sought my help, and I was anxious to do the best I could for him."

"Naturally. Mr. Maconkey tells me of your cousin's return to his father; he seems to have profited by your advice. It was worth running some risk to bring about that. But do not think ill news travels fastest. I might not have

known of this apprehension but for your minister, whereas I heard from several lips immediately on my return of your courage in saving my daughter at your own peril. The poor parochial mind has few resources — it is natural that the affairs of others should bulk largely in it for good or evil. You must bear with and forgive it. Now let us speak of something else. I was in the school-room by accident to-day and saw a local paper addressed to you with an article marked."

"Yes," she replied, looking at him with clear eyes, "my sister sent it, and several others; I have read them all."

"May I ask if they interested you?"

"They did." Congalton was carried forward by a smile that had more behind it.

"Now, I am unreasonably inquisitive," he said, laughing; "but had you any suspicions as to the authorship of these articles?"

"Well," she said frankly, "I knew your connection with the *Despatch*, and inferred from internal evidence that they were yours."

"You know Scottish life and character well?"

"I am a daughter of the manse," she said simply.

"Ah, that means much. Well, I have a curious interest in this queer place and its people, but when writing I come to a dead wall at times over difficulties of dialect, and other matters about which I may take the liberty to consult you. Having found me out, I shall trust you to keep the secret."

The interview closed with a formal assurance that he was well satisfied with her work as Eva's instructor. Hetty went to her bedroom and found relief in tears, but they were the tears of April, with the sun and a brief space of blue behind; for the crisis of resigning her situation and leaving a child she really loved had been averted.