

CHAPTER XV

TROUBLE AT BROOMFIELDS

THE smith had got a good story about Farmer Nicol (there was a miller of the same name) which he was relating to the candlemaker between the wicks of the dipping-frame. The sappers and miners were busy in the neighbourhood of Gushetneuk making a survey, and were trespassing freely, and beyond need, without saying by your leave. The farmer, as Pringle said, got "kina nettled," and challenged them, whereupon they showed him "a bit thing ca'd a permit that entitled them, they said, to gang ony gate they liked."

"That wud be a kina leeshins frae the government," said the candlemaker, speaking into his tallow vat.

"Ay, they were mighty big aboot it, but wait till ye hear — awa' gaes Gushets and lets oot the bull."

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"Gran'!" cried Brough. "Na, but that was richt brawly dune; the bull wudna care a docken for government paper. — Weel?"

"Man, they took to their heels as if the Foul Thief himsel' was efter them."

"And what happened syne?"

"Oh, they cam' roon the back o' the drystane dyke, to the march yett, and keekin' owre, ordered Nicol to tie up the bull. 'Na,' quoth he, quite ceevil and canny-like, 'the beast maun have exercise. I have no right to hinder ye trespassing and neither has the bull, but ye maun satisfie him ye have a permit.' While the gossips were laughing over Farmer Nicol's strategy, a carriage and pair passed at great speed over the brig, and the candlemaker followed his friend to the door to learn who it might be that was travelling in such unaccustomed haste.

"It's Maister Congalton," cried the smith, having the earlier and the fuller view, ere the horses spanked up the brae. "He has the wee lassie in his arms. I'll wager she's ill; maybe she's got hurt or something."

This surmise was strengthened when, a quarter of an hour later, Isaac Kilgour was seen hurry-

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ing across Nanny Welshe's garden as a near cut for the doctor. Ritchie Kilruth stopped his work and called after him as he passed; and Babby Lawson hailed him from her kail-yard, but the earnestness of his purpose had deafened him. Isaac had never been seen in such perturbed haste before. When he had delivered his message he took his way homeward by the loan end, crossing over the stepping-stones to avoid curiosity. Nevertheless, it was known that evening, both at Brig-end and at Elsie Craig's well, that there was fever at Broomfields. To the rustic mind the name was synonymous with the plague — not yet having been differentiated. At the former meeting-place there was genuine alarm, for some of the older memories could go back to the cholera, and they had it on the authority of Kilruth, who had been in foreign parts, "that some o' thae fevers were that mortal they wud kill a horse."

Meantime the same carriage which had passed up during the day with Mr. Congalton and his daughter, returned in the evening with Miss Hazlet. The excitement in the household went down at her presence. Her calm self-possession

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and practical ways surprised even the doctor. The case, in medical parlance, was one of scarlet fever, but Hetty had no fear: moreover, she was not without experience, having volunteered to nurse a companion who suffered from the same ailment in the cottage hospital at school.

Congalton spent the afternoon and evening between the sick-room and the study. He had looked on and written about Miss Nightingale in the extemporized hospital at Balaklava, but even she had not filled his mind with greater admiration than he felt for this purposeful and considerate young person in whose presence everything fell into methodical and appropriate order.

When Isaac Kilgour, at Hetty's request, brought up the chair-bed and placed it near that of the patient, Congalton remonstrated, and proposed to engage the services of a nurse from the County Hospital. The remonstrance, however, was in vain. No one knew the temperament of the child as she did — and that was much in such cases. The mother of the maid-of-all-work had tapped at the kitchen window and spirited her daughter away in panic. Hetty

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knew that the employment of a nurse would simply be adding more trouble to a house already undermanned. Isaac hung about in a kind of anxious daze, courting usefulness; when there was no more to do, he volunteered to help in the kitchen.

During these preliminaries, the patient looked on with flushed cheeks and glistening eyes. Strange thoughts were passing through the ever active mind, but she harboured them till the flurry was over.

"Papa," she whispered, looking in his face with earnest gaze, as he stooped over her to say good-night, "papa, don't people have headaches, or something, before they die?"

"My darling," he replied, with simulated cheerfulness, "why do you think of such things? Miss Hazlet is kindly taking all these precautions to make you well."

"But I have no headache at all, papa; see, I could sit up quite well — my throat is only the least little bit sore — that is all."

Next day the patient was more prostrate physically, but her mind was abnormally active. Memory was undoing her lock-fast places, and

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flashes of things that had been seemed to fall athwart her mental vision. She was back in the seminary of the "scarlet woman," as Mistress Izet had no hesitation in calling her.

"Oh, Miss Hazlet," Eva opened her eyes as the soft hand of the nurse stole under the clothes seeking the pulse, "you should have seen how angry Miss Vanderbilt was with Flo."

"Flo?"

"Yes, Flo Tregartan, she was the little servant — the kitchen girl, you know — she took pennies out of the young ladies' pockets. Wasn't it naughty to take pennies that were not her own?"

"Yes, dear, it was very naughty; but the doctor says you must try to sleep."

The patient put a hot hand obediently under her cheek and closed her eyes again, but these early school-days had possession of the little brain.

"Flo had a grey laugh," she said, by and by with some degree of mental continuity — "a funny grey laugh, just like a boy's. Miss Vanderbilt had a yellow laugh. Papa's laugh is grey, but different from Flo's. Most of the girls had a white laugh; but none of them had such a nice, sweet, white laugh as yours."

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Three days elapsed, and the fever ran its exhausting course. Hetty was with her charge constantly. Mrs. Cowie, honestly anxious about the child's condition, had come in person, and thrown gravel at the kitchen window, receiving the housekeeper's report, with the privet hedge between them.

"Mind and tell the maister I ventured doon bye to speir," she admonished.

The minister did not call, his moral cowardice in the face of infectious trouble was well known, but he charged the doctor not to belittle his anxiety about the patient. The school-master forbade the attendance at school of the kitchen-maid's brother.

"It was sentiment," he explained apologetically to the merchant who kept a limited supply of medicines, "but having the care of youth public sentiment must be respected."

Zedie Lawson complained of a sore throat, and his mouth had a more pronounced exclamatory look ever since the postman returned to tell his wife he had delivered the message to her sister that she was not to call. Only Nancy Beedam would come near the house. She had buried

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three bairns, and knew what trouble was. On the fourth day, the doctor was not beyond admitting that the case puzzled him.

"Had it not been such a pronounced case of scarlet fever," he said, after a prolonged diagnosis, "I would say the child had measles." True enough, when he next returned measles had developed. A neighbouring practitioner with a long record was summoned for consultation. He had only known one case of the kind in his varied experience. There was a private putting of heads together. Medical science gave measles fourteen days to show itself, and scarlet fever three. On further sifting, it was found to be exactly fourteen days since the flower-show at Kilmory, and measles were known to be rife there. The deduction was inevitable—scarlet fever must have been contracted after the other virus had begun to operate—probably in some highland conveyance or hotel. How beautiful and precise were the deductions of medical science!

Meantime the little sufferer's strength, sorely wounded by the first attack, was but indifferently able to withstand this cruel complication. She suffered from a rasping cough that gave her

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little rest. Strange thoughts and fancies would come across the patient's mind, finding imperfect expression in broken phrases. At night-time, feeling the needless pang of a tender conscience, she would start up, and kneeling on the bed with her hands and head resting on Hetty's bosom, repeat the little prayer she fancied she had forgotten to say. Though Congalton retired to his room down-stairs after nightfall, it was not to sleep.

These thoughtful vigils revealed to him how tenderly he loved his child. Her quaint sayings and doings, the delightful memory of the intimate companionship of the week they had passed together, haunted him, while overhead on the uncarpeted floor the audible evidence of ministration told of the exhausting sleeplessness of the patient, and the anxious tendance of the nurse. And so this eternity of days and nights rolled slowly on, till the doctor's anxiety became equally divided between the two; the former did not gain strength, and the latter had been by the bedside all the time practically without sleep or rest. Worn at length to submission, Hetty retired, leaving father and child together,

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while Mistress Izet kept temporary watch in her own domain, within call. Congalton's masculine and active habits of life had left little time for introspection, but as he sat there, hour after hour, looking at the unnaturally flushed face and swollen lips, between which the light breath passed in fitful pulsations, memory had many backward glances. His wife died when he was on foreign service. The news had broken him for weeks, but he had been spared the sight of her suffering, and the pain of articulate farewells. In his daughter he had recently seen, at unexpected moments, startling glimpses of resemblance to her mother. In smile, in glance, in gesture, in the sudden pose of her head. Poor Eve, as he loved playfully to call her, pain-worn and fever-tossed, how his heart melted in tender desire — what suffering would he not have endured if suffering were vicarious? It is at such moments strong men pray, in their utter helplessness. Towards midnight the patient became uneasy; the parched lips moved as the little head turned in the golden sheen of her hair. He stooped reverently, to catch the half-uttered words —

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"Jesus . . . tender . . . Shepherd, hear me . . ."
Her lips still moved, but there was only the sound of lisping breath; with an access of earnest entreaty, however, she continued more audibly —

"Through . . . the . . . darkness . . . be
Thou . . . near me . . ."

Tears came to this strong man's eyes as his own heart went from him in fervent supplication for the fulfilment of the child's prayer. Congalton was not a praying man, and he was heathen enough not to know the little prayer Eva had been taught to utter devoutly at Hetty's knee; the appropriate simplicity and pathos of the words, however, struck him. The "little lamb," unconscious of his presence, was calling out of the darkness for succour. He took her small burning hands in his, and held them soothingly, but even in this intense wish to be near and help his own child, he felt how helplessly far he was removed from her — the fevered head still continued restless, and the dry lips moved with the sibilant lisplings of inarticulate words. Congalton had seen the furious surge of battle; the thinning of solid ranks, the

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brilliant charge at the cannon's mouth, with comrades and acquaintances falling all around, but the blood was coursing in militant madness, imagination and reflection had no nook in which to brood. Nothing in the red front of war was ever half so unmanning to the paternal heart as the fevered restlessness of his suffering child. While he watched, and compassionated, Eva opened her eyes: they glittered for a moment, but not with recognition.

"Miss Hazlet, Miss Hazlet, is it a long way to the Happy Land? — see — I forgot to say my prayers."

She started to her knees, but he took her in his arms and tried tenderly to control her.

"My darling, my darling," he whispered in her ear, "you have said your prayers already," but she did not regard his words. Putting her finger-tips reverently together, she rested her hands on his shoulder, while he pressed her gently to his breast. He could not mistake the burning, but imperfectly lisped words now —

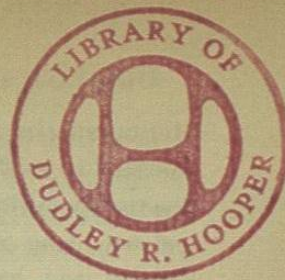
"Jesus — tender Shepherd — hear me,
Bless — thy little lamb — to-night,
Through the darkness — be Thou near me,
Keep me safe till morning light. — God bless papa . . ."

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Her over-exerted strength had collapsed — but she had prayed for herself and — for him. It was the last supreme effort. He laid her down tenderly, and was smoothing her head on the pillow, when Hetty stole noiselessly into the room and slipped to his side. The breathing was not so laboured now. Hetty stooped to listen. It was no time for womanly tears. She raised her head without looking in his face, and murmured a few words brokenly.

He did not answer. He stooped and kissed the small, pale brow that had lately pressed his shoulder. "My poor Eve!"

"God's Eve," was the amended response.



CHAPTER XVI

HETTY HAZLET AT HOME

It was five weeks, luckily, before Barbara Lawson would allow her sister, Mistress Izet, to enter her door. Even then she conversed with her over the kitchen table. Though Zedie knew of his sister-in-law's visit, he kept eidently to his loom. Mistress Izet had sat in his chair, and the poor man thought so much about it that he took catarrh in the head, and on the third day a rash appeared on his chest. The smith, who had some skill of ordinary troubles, said it was "fancy, complicated wi' thinness o' bluid," and ordered him some "openin' medicine." The kitchen-girl had returned to do "orra jobs" at Broomfields, but slept at home. Mrs. Cowie regarded the recent dispensation very much in the light of how it would bear upon her own plans. She felt the death of the child swelled the total of her daughter's tocher, but it had