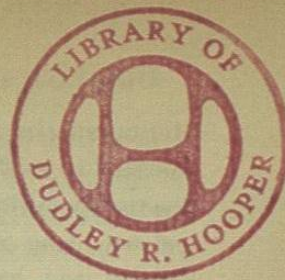


DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

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

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

minimized the chances of an alliance which would have soothed her ambition and made her practically mistress of the whole. The library had not done much for her, but as yet the chances had been against it, owing to the "smittal" trouble in Broomfields. On this subject she was angered by William Lonen, the school-master. William was not a humourist, nor was he a lover of light literature, but he laughed right out when he glanced at the miscellaneous collection of antiquated and obsolete tomes, and with the brutality of a man not accustomed to respect feelings, said they would be handy on the counter for small parcels if she ever started shopkeeping. To do her justice, whatever her motives were, Mrs. Cowie was the first to visit Broomfields to offer sympathy.

"Na, but ye set thae mourning things brawly," her husband had remarked, coming in hot from the harvest-field as his wife was preparing to depart. "Will ye say onything anent the wee thing's siller?"

"It'll depend on hoo the crack turns," she replied, looking in the glass for justification of her husband's compliment. Compliments were not rife with him.

HETTY HAZLET AT HOME

Congalton was neither blind nor deaf to Mrs. Cowie's shallow pretensions. The conversation did not turn as was desired, and she could not force confidence, though she tried bravely. As a result of her interview, it was somehow, though not without resistance, borne in on her mind that he would never marry Bell.

Her visit to Broomfields was so barren in everything, even in news, that she halted at the school-house to have a gossip with Mrs. Lonen. There she learned that the governess had returned to her own home. The minister had told the school-master, and the school-master confided to his wife, that the young doctor was fair off his head about the little woman who had nursed his patient.

"The sly piece! She kens fine hoo to set her feathers for the men."

"Na, but they tell me she was by-ord'nar at the nursing."

"May be that," said Mrs. Cowie dryly; "but the wean dee't; there's no muckle to show for guid nursing. I suppose the maister packed her aff when her work was dune. I'm thinking he'd have been better ser't wi' a proper nurse from the first."

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

"As to packing her off, I'm no clear about that. Mistress Izet is said to alloo that either the doctor or Mr. Congalton will marry her."

"Mr. Congalton!" cried Mrs. Cowie.

"Ay, or the doctor, she doesna ken which o' the twa's daftest aboot her."

On her way home Mrs. Cowie forgathered with Nanny Pinkerton, the spae-wife. On ordinary occasions she would have given this woman the go-bye, but disappointment had provoked impatience. She invited her civilly to tea, if peradventure spae-craft might be able to forecast some glimpse of the future. It was a pitiful pass to which this strong-willed woman had come, but she knew that neither Bell nor her husband would be at home to see it. The sibyl tossed her cup and plied her art according to custom, but by her own confession only groped in the dark.

The revelation she had to make was all about the sea. Nan cast the cup many times with similar results. The marine disaster, repeatedly foretold, was tantalizingly irrelevant to the situation, and afforded Mrs. Cowie but small portent of good. Her brother-in-law was a sea-faring man — the captain of a sailing vessel, with a wife

HETTY HAZLET AT HOME

and four small children, living from hand to mouth in Saltcoats. The women, however, had not exchanged words since the funeral of Mrs. Cowie senior. The old lady lived and died in the house of her daughter-in-law in the seaport town, and naturally left all she possessed to her. There was not much to differ about, but Mrs. Cowie said the old lady had promised her silver spoons to Bell, and threatened to break the will. That night there were high words, needlessly, at Windy-yett, after Bell and the servants retired to bed. Mrs. Cowie had brooded all afternoon and evening over the spae-woman's forecast, and at length settled down to the unwavering conviction that disaster had overtaken Captain Cowie, and that somehow the legal burden of those dependent on him would fall on her and her husband. The farmer could not understand his wife's sudden and unexpected interest in the captain and his affairs. She put many leading questions, and elicited that her brother-in-law was on his way home from Jamaica to the Clyde.

"If onything happened till him, wud the law throw the burden o' his wife and weans on us?"

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

"But what puts it into your head that anything has happened? Have ye heard ill news?"

"I'm just speirin'," she said curtly.

"Speirin'," he replied, with uncommon heat; "you're just blethering like a young canary."

Had her wedded husband been a wool-broker, as might have been, Mrs. Cowie felt she would not have been treated with such indignity.

"As to the law," her husband continued, "I kenna what it could mak' us do; but if anything happens to Jack, I suppose we couldna stand bÿ and see them withoot bite and sup, so lang as we had it to spare."

"Ay, ye'll bring them in and set them doon i' the best corner o' the house without speirin' leave, I suppose."

"Wha has asked ye to tak' them in?" cried Windy-yett, in a higher tone than was natural to him. This subject was a tinder-box which had often been ignited before, and was therefore easily kindled. "You're surely running aff wi' the harrows a' thegither."

"Ye've said enough," she replied firmly. "I ken your mind, Ritchie Cowie, but let me tell ye this, if ever Nancy Cowie or ane o' hers enters this door to bide — then guid-bye to ye."

HETTY HAZLET AT HOME

She snapped her fingers in a passion, and went off to bed. For the moment Congalton and his concerns, as well as her own matrimonial schemes, were out of mind. The reading of the cups had brought no comfort. Those who, perforce, would compel prevision, will, as like as not, miss their immediate aim, and probably, as in this case, find that revealed to them which it is not for their peace of mind to know.

Meantime the call for Hetty Hazlet at Broomfields had come to an end. She had fought and prayed for the life of the child, but all had been in vain. She resolved to give no occasion for speculation as to the relationship between Mr. Congalton and herself by lingering under his roof when her work was done. How dreadfully strange and mysterious that the child in whose interests she had declined to marry Mr. Congalton should be so suddenly removed. This thought was on the mind of both at parting, but the grief was so fresh and overmastering that neither dared to touch it.

Hetty enjoyed the rest at home among her own people. Her sojourn at Kilspindie had ripened and broadened her mind in many ways, but it had told on her health. Autumn was at

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

its best in fruit and colour. The parish of Kilbaan was then, and is reputed to be still, one of the best-wooded districts in Ayrshire. The over-ripe woods in Balgrey Glen, and along the valley of the Arne to where it issues from Loch Sheen, seemed as if they had burst into flame of various degrees of intensity. With her absorbing love of nature, it was delightful to roam alone among the woods in the first days of her freedom, and in her communings with the soothing objects around, to exclude from her mind the scenes which overclouded the immediate retrospect. As a child she knew these age-worn and mouldy paths, now noisy to the feet by reason of the heavy pile of the varied leaf-carpet which a couple of nips of frost had laid for her. To these woods her father used to conduct her in spring and teach her, as far as he himself knew it, the mystery of bursting bud and uncurling frond. Later, she would steal out by herself, this timid little girl, with the wide, inquiring eyes, and watch this object-lesson, while the wild hyacinth developed a cerulean sheen above the young grass, and primroses like golden stars twinkled in bosky places. Then, ere she knew, soft yellow whorls

HETTY HAZLET AT HOME

would appear on the chestnut; and the great pillared glen, cut off from the sun by its ample happing of leaves, would drowse in the insect hum of summer. But when the robin piped among the mellowing fruit on the ancient pear-tree, and blood-red foils spotted the decaying green of the hedge round the manse garden, it was then her pulses tingled with delight, for she knew the brown nuts were on the hazels, the red rowans on the mountain-ash, and that the woods were aglow with transforming colour. These and other memories recurred to her during these meditative rambles. There were also visits to pay to old friends in bien farm towns, whose hospitality, always hearty, was broadened by an abundant harvest early and safely gathered.

Miss Hazlet often accompanied Hetty in her excursions. It was a really happy time for both girls, for they had mutual confidences to exchange in the quiet loanings. The young minister, Mr. Breckenridge, their father's successor, had proposed to Miss Hazlet since Hetty and her sister last met. They were engaged, but the engagement had not yet been formally announced. There was to be a sale of work for

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

repairs on the manse, and the ladies young and old in this and the neighbouring parishes were working for it with might and main, and such news prematurely spread would have been detrimental to this laudable energy—they were pawky, these worldly lovers. Even Andra Carruthers, the beadle, who knew most of the manse secrets, had to be kept in ignorance of this one. The beadle was at first rather jealous of the sudden activity of the congregation under the new minister, but he was not slow to put the proper appraisal upon it.

"Wait," he said to Hetty one day, when they were talking over church matters, "wait till the minister marries—it'll mak' a lock o' difference. He may add ae willing worker to the manse, but my certie, there'll be a heap fewer workers i' the congregation."

Being great friends, Hetty gently sounded this mighty official as to his opinion of her father's successor as a preacher.

"Weel, ye see, Miss Hetty, a buddy that's no bigoted comes roun'. At first, I confess to ye, I was sair exerceest. He writes every word o' his sermons, but it wasna a' thegither that. I

HETTY HAZLET AT HOME

dare say ye'll have heard tell o' the day when he tauld us that Heaven wi' its golden streets, and its pearly gates, and Hell wi' its fire and brimstane, were mere feegurs o' speech intended, so to speak, for carnal minds. That as gold and pearls were precious things, and much to be desired, so fire and brimstone were commodities, as it were, folk would keep faurest awa' frae. That in their leetleral sense these things were monstrous conceptions o' Heaven and Hell. Weel, as sure as death, Miss Hetty, I was mortal shocked. Thinks I to mysel', this is awfu'. Is it my duty to carry the books to a man that's spoilin' the profession for baith o' us by rakin' the very hert oot o'—the bad place. Miss Hetty, I'm just telling ye the honest truth hoo I felt. I did not ken what wye to look, till my e'e fell on the face o' Saunders M'Phee, i' the front o' the laft. Ye ken the wye Saunders has o' aye nod, noddin' when a thing pleases him? Weel, I didna see him noddin', but there was a bit smile at the corners o' his lips that maistly follows his nods when he's satisfect. Thinks I, I'll do nothing rash till I've seen Saunders. It'll maybe be a Presbytery business: they can easily send

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

anither minister, but whare would they get a beadle? — no in this parish. So, efter denner, I daunners alang to the schulehoose, and meets Saunders at the door. 'Weel,' says I, 'what do ye think o' your minister noo?' Saunders was great on him. 'Better and better,' says Saunders. 'That was a grand discourse we had the day.' 'But did ye hear what he said aboot Heaven and — the ither place?' says I, thinking maybe the bit had slipped him. 'Man, he spoke oot weel at yon bit,' quoth Saunders, 'we maun get rid o' thae auld materialistic notions.' 'Ye were on the wye to be a minister yoursel,' says I — for it was because o' this I lippeden till him. 'True,' quoth he, 'that was lang syne; but I didna go foret, for I never could have dared to preach what I believed — they would have deposed me. Yet my views were then, what Mr. Breckenridge and other spiritually-minded ministers are preaching the day. Be thankfu' for this, and dinna vex yoursel,' he says kindly. 'In my young days I was taught that the devil was placed i' the world to tempt us to evil, while God was represented as standing owre us ready to detect and punish

HETTY HAZLET AT HOME

sin, and, being a thoctfu' callant, between the twa I had a mortal bad time o't. The tender and protecting fatherhood of the Almighty as revealed in His Son had no place in the auld theology. I tell ye, Sandy, I had no peace till I coupet the cairt, gied up John Calvin, and took to reading the Scriptures for mysel' wi' an open mind.' 'But dinna ye believe in fire and brimstane?' quoth I, laith to let the thing slip. 'No,' says he, 'I believe in an intellectual hell. Wrang-doing i' the end will have the same effect on mind and conscience as fire and brimstane has on the body.'"

"I have often thought Saunders should write a book," said Hetty.

"For mercy sake, dinna put that into his head. I ance heard o' a minister wha did that, but he wrote himsel' inside oot and then he was dune. It's a comfort hearing Saunders coming oot by degrees — being mysel' a man o' the auld schule, so to speak, he has helpet me owre a guid wheen prejudices — I am beginning to understan' the minister better. Sam'l Filshie thinks him owre broad, but broad or no broad, he has brocht a heap o' folk to the kirk that

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

never darkened the door afore — no disrespect, Miss Hetty, to your worthy faither. Jeems Warnock, the freethinker, Willie Whammond, the chartist, Dougie Brand, and ithers I could name, have now sittings, and what is mair, pay for them. Speaking o' that puts me in mind o' a guid story. Ye mind Habbie Steenston, the twister, Miss Hetty? Weel, Habbie was twa hauf years ahin-haun wi' his seat-rent. Habbie would cheat even the kirk if he could get aff wi't. So I tells the minister. 'Oh, ask him to speak to me in the vestry,' says he, taking aff his gown. So my man comes in, turning his bonnet round and round unco sheepish like, wi' ae ee looking stracht oot o' the window, and the other fixed o' the airm o' the minister's chair — ye mind hoo Habbie glee't? Aweel, but he aye glee't waur when he was excited. 'I'm glad to see you and the mistress so regular in your places on the Sabbath day,' says the minister, 'but they tell me you get behind wi' the seat-rent.' 'Ay,' says Habbie, 'twisting's gey bad the noo' — that was a story, but the man was never a great hand at the truth. 'Ye smoke?' says the minister. 'Ou-ay, I smoke,' quoth

HETTY HAZLET AT HOME

Habbie. 'How much will ye smoke in the week?' 'I never took thocht; it's the wife buys the tobacco.' 'Will you smoke a couple of ounces?' says the minister, pegging at him hard. 'Like enough,' says the man. 'Weel,' quoth the minister, 'most of us have to make sacrifices, suppose you knock an ounce a week off your smoking — and pay your seat-rents.' 'But ye forget, sir,' quoth Habbie quite innocently, 'ye forget I get some guid o' my smokin'.' Miss Hetty, ye could have tied the minister wi' a straw, as the sayin' is. He tauld the story right hertily efter-hin to Saunders M'Phee, though it was against himsel'. The minister thocht the twister was a humourist; but when I spoke to Habbie gaun up the Ell brae on the Monday, he seemed to think he had the worst o' the crack, especially when the minister laughed at him; in truth he was on his wye owre to the cork to borrow money to pay his seats."

Hetty entertained the little home-circle afterwards with the beadle's stories. As a brother-in-law she felt satisfied Mr. Breckenridge would do.