

CHAPTER XVII

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CHRISTMAS dawned, if such could be truly said about it, to find ditches obliterated, and all minor irregularities on the face of the landscape brought to a common level. During the previous day and night the air had been weighted with a dense mist of snow thick as dust in a sunbeam. The houses on the west side of the long street which contained the bulk of the population of Kilbaan being open to the drift, were snowed up, most of them above the horizontal bar of the half-door. All outside labour in forest and field was arrested, but there was ample employment at home. Man, woman, and child, capable of wielding spade or shovel, had been busy from early morn liberating themselves or their neighbours from the white drift that blocked windows

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and doors. It was twelve o'clock before the last prisoner was free. But a fresh excitement was kindled in the village mind when the beadle came ploughing along the lee-side of the road, driving the dry snow from his knees, shouting and gesticulating. The men were standing upright resting on the implements they had been using, in the spaces they had cleared; women and children, eased in their minds as to their own personal safety, hurried to the door at this new note of alarm.

"It's a tragedy," said the drainer, shading his eyes to survey the approaching figure.

"Od, I'll no say but the mail-coach is coupet," Sam'l Filshie remarked, forcing definiteness into Whammond's exclamation.

"I had a terrible dream," Mrs. Warnock came out to the middle of the road to say — she had lost her temper in the kirk the day before because her man had not joined in the singing of the last Psalm; but no one had patience to listen to her dream with the beadle yelling — "Come on wi' your spades fast, lads, or Maister Breckenridge will be smooored."

Seeing he was understood Carruthers turned

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and retraced his steps as fast as such an impossibility could be performed, followed by a miscellaneous band of armed workers headed by Jeems Warnock and Willie Whammond. How the minister had got into this trouble puzzled them much. The manse stood high, and was protected on the windward side by a mound of fir-trees. Such snow as had whirled past to the garden wall, had been mostly dissipated by the high wind of the early morning, so that the manse itself suffered little.

After an early breakfast the minister, from an upper window, looked out over the village to see how it fared with his flock — they were busy, he saw, helping one another, which was true Christian work. But while watching their activity, there was another house to which his mind naturally reverted, less safe, because more isolated and exposed, and that was the small homestead at the parish march occupied by his predecessor. As Providence allowed it, at that moment he saw the head of his trusty beadle rising above the stile on the east wall of the glebe.

Carruthers had been busy all morning cutting

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an outlet from his own door, and it was only after the job was done that he thought of his late master and his helpless family of women folk. By the time the beadle reached the manse the minister had girded on his leggings, and in a few minutes the former, armed with a spade, and the latter with a shovel, were hurrying along to the parish march on their mission of mercy. They kept the lown side of the road, which was protected by a matted hedge. On the other side snow was piled against an embankment as high as the kirk gable. The plantation on the right, so well known to them, was storm-beaten almost out of recognition. During the night the wind and snow had pelted the trees till the upright poles assumed enormous girth, one part wood and three parts snow. How this mysterious element had transformed the landscape! All familiar landmarks were obliterated — dykes, hedges, burns were muffled and undistinguishable. Even the loch, with its fringe of reeds and seggans, was swallowed up in the prevailing whiteness. At an intersecting loaning a great bar of soft snow had got impounded while the conflicting currents fought for supremacy.

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When they had cut their way through this barrier and reached the turning of the road, the minister gave a sudden whistle of exclamation. The cottage in which the aged minister and his family lived was situated in a hollow, below the level of the turnpike road, which modern engineering skill had made up to save gradients. The space between the road and the front of the cottage was entirely filled, the snow-wave not seeking pause till it climbed half-way up the roof. It was probably this sight that perturbed the minister and made him incautious, for, taking a false, and as it seemed to the beadle, a fatal step, he stumbled over the embankment and disappeared in the devouring abyss beneath.

This was the occasion of the beadle's lamentable outcry for succour. It was not long till willing helpers were on the scene. The first thing that Sam'l Filshie did was to fall down the slope himself, taking the drainer, whose sleeve was within reach, along with him. Andra Carruthers, though overwhelmed at the moment by this additional mishap, declared, when the upshot was known, that it "wis a per-

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fect providence o' the Almichty." The descent of the two men made a considerable opening in the snow-wreath. Moreover, they tumbled on the top of the minister, who, overcome by cold, lay unconscious at the bottom. Agitated by so much healthy and militant life, the yielding element soon gave way, and left Filshie and Whammont space to breathe. They lifted the minister between them till his head was above the snow; the shock he had received by their fall, and the subsequent handling combined with the keen fresh air soon restored consciousness, and enabled him to stand on his own feet.

When the alarm was first raised that the minister was smooored, Davit Winterbottom the joiner, who was reckoned the best man in the parish at drawing an inference, jaloused, as he said to Filshie on the way back, that Maister Breckenridge had fan doon the Minister's Brae; and if so a leather micht be a serviceable thing. So just as the young minister's head came above the snow for fresh air, Davit and his apprentice appeared at the bend of the road, carrying the ladder between them. The opportuneness of this sight was recognized by a cheer from those

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who stood by communing with themselves as to how the men were to get out. In a few minutes by the aid of the ladder the imprisoned trio stood on the road among their neighbours, little the worse of their immersion. Meantime the villagers without pause attacked the unresisting snow with such weapons as they had at hand.

While this work was going forward, the minister had time to reconnoitre and think. At one end of the cottage roof a thin wreath of smoke began to ascend languidly. He had remarked on the absence of smoke a moment before the accident.

"They are taking hert, sir, and mending the fire," said the beadle; "no doubt they will hear by this time that we are trying to howk them out."

The question of hearing was seriously troubling the minister; they probably had heard too much. He was afraid that the alarm as to his own personal safety might have been heard by them; his voice no doubt could reach and reassure them if he spoke loud enough, but the thought of shouting to the empty air bordered on comedy.

"Would ye like to speir if they're a' richt

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inside?" inquired Winterbottom, with the ladder on his shoulder.

"The very idea that was on my mind; but how is it to be done?"

"Oh, easy."

The joiner was a man of resource. In a couple of minutes, by the aid of the ladder, he had bridged the gleaming gulf, and was speaking down one of the smokeless chimneys. It was some time before the ghostly voice reached the inmates, who were, at the moment, gathered together round the kitchen fire for warmth.

"Are they all safe?" Mr. Breckenridge had a lover's impatience.

"I havena reached them yet."

"Call louder, they——" the minister did not proceed, for he saw from the attitude of his friend's head that he was listening.

"They're a' richt, sir, but they've been mortal anxious about yoursel'—they heard the beadle's cries when ye tumelt owre the bank."

"Who is answering you?"

"Miss Hazlet."

"All right; if you come down and hold the ladder, I will go up and speak to her."

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The household had never had serious anxiety for their own safety, but, as the joiner reported, they were greatly alarmed about the accident which they knew had befallen the minister. Winterbottom's stentorian voice had assured them of his safety, and Hetty returned to the kitchen to convey the news to her parents, leaving her sister to listen by the fireplace.

"Violet!" She started. Could it be? — yes, it was Mr. Breckenridge's voice. The name was repeated more audibly.

"I am here. Oh, Will, take care; are you much hurt?"

"Not at all hurt."

"Are you there alone?"

"Yes, the joiner is at the other end of the ladder. Are you all comfortable inside?"

"Quite comfortable, thank you. Oh, Will dear, it is so kind of you — Here's Hetty, she thinks it so awfully good of you and the neighbours."

"Are you in utter darkness?"

"Oh, no, the upper half of the back windows are clear of snow."

"Now that we know you are all safe and

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in comparative comfort the situation dawns upon me as rather funny; don't you think so?"

The vibration of a soft musical laugh ascended the chimney. Was it Hetty's?

Miss Hazlet, with a smile in her reply, admitted that it was "certainly a little odd."

"Advise him to get down," whispered Hetty, "the minister sitting on the rigging — it is too ridiculous."

The picture to the imagination of the girls was more grotesque than it appeared to the sense of the busy workers outside.

"Shall I speak, Violet, and tell him to get down?"

"No, please don't," Violet pleaded, holding her sister back. "Think, he has risked his life for us. He would be offended if he suspected we were laughing at him. Will?"

"Yes."

"Do you think it will take long to reach us?"

"Perhaps an hour, the drift has been frightful. — A moment —" he said, and they heard his voice travelling through the clear, thin air to some one at a distance. "It is the post-lad from Muirtown," he resumed. "The poor fel-

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low has made a most heroic struggle. The post-cart was utterly useless; he has taken five hours to get over the three miles. There is a letter for Miss Hetty. Shall I take delivery of it?"

"Yes, please."

There was a pause during which the sisters speculated as to who the unexpected correspondent might be.

"Violet," from the chimney-top.

"Yes, Will."

"Is Miss Hetty there?"

"Yes."

"I've got the letter; it is in a literary hand, and bears the London post-mark. Shall I open it and deliver its contents *viva voce* down the chimney?"

Miss Hazlet clapped her hands and laughed. It was rare of Will to make such good fun for them in this odd situation.

"Please don't," cried Hetty, looking up and seeing a good-natured smiling face framed in the circle above. "The chimney is quite wide — look, I can see you. It will be perfectly safe to drop it down."

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"You will not blame me if it miscarries?"

"There is no fear of that."

"It may be very important."

"I will risk it."

The ridiculousness of the situation was not so apparent to Hetty now. The letter crinkled down the chimney and fell at her feet — she recognized the hand. Hetty ran off to her bedroom, where shortly afterwards Violet found her sitting alone. There was a happy light in her eyes, but the face was thoughtful.

"Hetty, dear, have you good news? Who is your correspondent?"

Hetty handed her the letter in reply, her eyes the while unconsciously reading her sister's face. Miss Hazlet read the first sentence, then, woman-like, turned to the signature —

"Mr. Congalton!" she exclaimed, and the sunshine brightened in her features as she read on. "Hetty, he is coming to renew his offer of marriage, and to ask papa to let you be his wife." Violet laid down the letter, took the little sister in her arms, and kissed her with true feeling. Hetty averted her face to hide the starting tears. "Do you not love him, dear?"

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"Oh, Violet, after what I have told you, how can you ask? It is not that."

"I know," said Miss Hazlet sympathetically; "but it is different for him now, and he is so lonely."

"There is still the will."

"Oh, bother that absurd will! Is Mr. Congalton to remain unmarried all his life, or marry some one he cannot love because of a stupid, capricious will? Has he not already told you he is independent of his brother's money? You do not treat him fairly, Hetty."

"Do you think so, Violet? I only thought of him. You do not know how good and clever he is — and, oh, how unselfish."

"Then give him the reward he desires; he is worthy of it, according to your own showing. Let me see —," Violet took up the letter again. "He expects to be here by the 24th or 25th at latest. The letter has been detained. Hetty, he may be here to-day."

Miss Hazlet returned with a light step to the kitchen, and broke the happy news to her parents.

The aged minister and his wife had had a

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long and, on the whole, a happy journey together. Their respect for and confidence in each other had never wavered. In all questions of interest affecting his daughters you might expect the father to say, "Well, have you spoken to your mother — she is always right?" While the maternal reply would run on similar lines—"You know I never decide anything without consulting your father, he is so wise." Now that they were both frail and reduced to limited means, their prevailing anxiety naturally was for the future of their girls. It is but truth to say that an intense feeling of gratitude filled their hearts as they saw a way opened up in the darkness to comfort and happiness for both. The mother sought Hetty in her room.

Few words were needed to reveal the condition of her daughter's heart: there are other ways than speech known to women in expressing sympathy. They held each other in the grasp of affection till arrested by a loud knocking at the outer door, which was opened by a frail, white-haired man in ministerial garb.

The good-hearted neighbours, their work done, stood respectfully on the gleaming road, with

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the implements of deliverance on their shoulders, ready to depart. In tones tremulous with emotion Dr. Hazlet thanked them for their timely deliverance. Then turning to his successor he shook his hand warmly. Behind the young minister, however, there was a stranger who was not personally known to the elder man, waiting for admission to the little family circle. Congalton had come on the scene under unconventional and romantic circumstances. The letter had been much retarded by the snow, but not the lover.

CHAPTER XVIII

ISAAC KILGOUR ARRIVES AT A DECISION

CONGALTON's visit to Kilbaan was necessarily brief, but Hetty's confession to her mother and sister procured for him a cordial reception, and rendered his mission an easy and successful one. There was great political disquietude in Peru, with the immediate prospect of serious trouble, for the Spanish Government, taking advantage of a quarrel between some Basque emigrants and the natives, in which many lives were lost, took forcible possession of the Chincha Islands, and Congalton was commissioned by the *Despatch* to proceed at once to the scene of action in the interests of that enterprising newspaper. It was arranged that his marriage with Hetty should take place on his return. In prospect of this new relationship his affairs had to be recast and put in legal order. A visit to Mr. Sibbald