

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

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

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

and a formal meeting with his brother's trustees effected this. Broomfields was to be sold or let; and as he would now have to live entirely by his profession, it was necessary that he and his wife should reside in London. It was not without a secret pang of regret that Hetty acquiesced in this proposed separation of herself from her family and the scenes and friends of her early years, but that she felt was nothing in the balance against the sacrifice he was making for her. These important matters settled, Congalton bade an affectionate good-bye to the little household, and set forth with a light heart and fresh hopes on his eventful mission.

Snow and frost with iron grip held undisputed possession of hill and vale, loch and stream, till the last week in February. There had not been such a severe and lasting winter within living memory. Between dozing in his chair and reading such literature as fell within his reach, consisting of odd volumes of Tait's *Edinburgh Magazine*, Herdman's *Guide to Horticulture*, seasoned by an old book of sermons, Isaac Kilgour crept through a somewhat somnolent and enervating season. He was aware that the

ISAAC ARRIVES AT A DECISION

master had gone abroad, and that Broomfields was in the market. This information had been conveyed to him and Mistress Izet by the same post. They were also informed that Mr. Congalton had provided a small annual pension for each of them, to be remitted in quarterly payments during his lifetime. Meantime they were to remain at Broomfields as heretofore, keeping the house and garden in order till the property passed to other hands. Isaac had a dreamy notion in his mind that something would have to be done in the ordering of his own affairs, but as the place was not yet actually sold there was time to dream and drift.

With the advent of March the snow disappeared before the influence of balmy winds and gentle rain. The fearless snowdrop wagged a defiant head, and the crocus cleft the moist earth and opened its gleaming petals in response to the gracious but tardy smile of spring. Exercise was beginning to lubricate the joints and remove the numbness which long inaction had produced in Isaac's limbs. All morning he had been digging and pottering about the rhubarb roots with a vague feeling of appre-

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

hension on his mind. About ten o'clock he paused with a foot on the shoulder of the spade which he was about to strike into the loamy earth. His dull eye seemed riveted on the garden hedge, where a knitted tracery of stems and branches sparkled at every joint with luminous buds of rain. He was not considering this poetic aspect of nature; his activity was arrested by hearing rather than by sight. It was the approaching jog of the carrier's cart in the ruts, and the masterful "hap-back then" of the carrier himself that caught his ear. This useful functionary had made an early start that morning from the county town, where, the day before, Broomfields, according to advertisement, was to be exposed for sale. Isaac waited with his foot on the spade till the carrier was on the other side of the hedge, then he coughed. He did not wish to show his feelings, and if there was bad news — if the place was really sold, it might be as well that he should hear the tidings while he himself was out of view.

"Is that you, Isaac?"

"Umph'm."

"Come to the yett, I have news for ye."

ISAAC ARRIVES AT A DECISION

"No, I dinna want Janet to hear, cry't owre."

The horse did not pause, but McLennan's form darkened the network of branches, and gave opaqueness to the gems.

"Broomfields was knocket doon at the roup."

"Wha till?"

"Some lawyer body, they tell me."

"Umph'm."

This was all the news Isaac wanted, and the colloquy ended. The gardener resumed his digging with furious energy. The candle-maker made boast that his ideas flowed fastest in the kirk, during sermon time, but Isaac's were always most active when he was hard at work. Two hours later, when Mistress Izet came to call him to dinner, there was a bead of perspiration on the point of his nose, and a rim of shifting moisture under his chin. She had been cooking the dinner, and did not know what had perturbed him.

"Eh, Isaac," she remonstrated, "ye'll be having the rheumatics again, slaving yersel' that gate. Somebody may buy the place that'll no thank ye for yer pains. I declare ye mind me o' a wumman in Houston parish —"

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

But Isaac was in no mood to hear about the additional foolishness of this old friend in Houston parish, to whom he was supposed to bear some resemblance. He plunged the spade into the soft earth, took out his red pocket-handkerchief, mopped away the perspiration, and went up the stair for dinner. Even the parrot noticed that he had a disturbed mind, and urged him in tones that seemed to imply genuine desire to "let the bruit awa'."

He ate his lonely meal mechanically, changed his boots, put on his blue Kilmarnock bonnet, and slipped quietly out by the back gate. There was a loaning skirting the plantain which led down through the holm to the river. Isaac took this path, crossed the stream on the stepping-stones, and ascended the brae on the other side, leading to the manse. About half-way up this brae, on the left, there was a small deserted house with a few square yards of garden ground in front. This space was protected by a low beech hedge, to which last year's leaves still clung, whispering expressions of hopefulness to the timid March buds. Isaac paused, and looked long and wistfully at the

ISAAC ARRIVES AT A DECISION

place. The door was weather-beaten, and had not made acquaintance with paint for many a day. There was one red chimney can at the apex of the gable, but the irregular embrasures round the top showed that it had been a tempting target for the school-boys in their destructive leisure. Some of the missiles had evidently missed the higher mark, but had not altogether been thrown in vain, as the glass and astragals of the window plainly set forth. The garden plot was frouzy and fetid with decayed vegetation. There was no need to push open the gate—the hinges, wearied and worn by the irritating and unchecked antics of the wind, had at last dropped it to rot amongst the mouldy undergrowth. Although Isaac knew the place well, he stepped up to the window and looked in. It was a single apartment, with an earthen floor. There was a large open fire-place with a good hobbled grate, a dresser and a cosy set-in bed. The gardener had spent many a couthie gloaming hour at that fire end, while Betty Inglis was in life. Betty held the tenure of this house (being on glebe ground) in virtue of her services to the parish. She assisted the beadle

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

in the menial work of keeping the kirk in order. This duty had originally devolved on his sister, but having married a tailor she felt above such servitude.

For many years Isaac's matrimonial thoughts, so far as he gave them play, swayed between Betty Inglis and Janet Izet. Bet was a rattling talker, and said indiscreet, albeit entertaining things. Her notions of hospitality were talk — continuous talk. To Isaac, who did little to lighten the monologue she was "gran' company," when the leisure of the evening led him across the stepping-stones. Betty, however, was at rest up yonder on the other side of the kirkyard wall, and her humble abode was now tenantless.

The gardener heaved a sigh, and stepped up the brae towards the manse. The doctor was just leaving as he reached the door. The minister received Isaac kindly; he had heard that Broomfields was about to pass into other hands, and was honestly sorry for this lone and taciturn man.

"I suppose you have come to tell me the news about the sale," said Mr. Maconkey, leading the way into the study, and setting a seat for his visitor.

ISAAC ARRIVES AT A DECISION

"Pairtly," said Isaac.

"It is the doctor who has bought the place; he has just called to tell me he gave his agent instructions to attend the roup and bid for it. I am truly grieved for you and Mistress Izet at having to leave such a comfortable home. The doctor tells me he will require your apartment for his own coachman, but as his man is a poor hand at garden-work, he may be able to give you employment now and then. I understand Mr. Congalton has generously given you both a small allowance to eke out a livelihood. Mistress Izet will repair to her sister's till she gets a place, I suppose?"

"Maybe," said Isaac curtly.

"As for you, perhaps I could find you a room with some of my people — William Caughie or —"

"No," said Isaac with decision — "I've been owre lang by mysel' to neighbour wi' William Caughie. What I cam to speir was the rent ye might be seekin' for Betty Inglis' bothie?"

"Good. The place is, beyond contradiction, going to wreck. You are welcome to it, Isaac — we'll not quarrel about the rent."

"Na, I want nae back-spangs," Isaac replied.

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

"Oh, well, let us say a couple of pounds a year; or better still, you'll give me a few days during springtime in the manse garden."

"I'll gie ye twa pounds," said Isaac, "but let's niffer about the garden-work efter-hin."

Isaac stepped out into the fresh afternoon air with new hope. He knew of at least half-a-dozen gardens in which he could get occasional employment, with the prospect of ampler reward than was likely to fall to him from his new landlord.

The candle-maker was resting on the parapet of the bridge, conversing with the carrier, as Isaac descended from the manse. The former was expatiating to the latter on the cleverness of a perambulating radical, named Parlane, who had held forth to the villagers the night before in the large room of the Wheat Sheaf inn. The carrier had not been present, but he knew something of the man.

"A man o' great pairts," Brough had designated him inconsiderately.

McLennan was not prepared to endorse this eulogium without qualification, but admitted that the orator was a "cool haun. Dod, we

ISAAC ARRIVES AT A DECISION

could a' speak fine if oor minds were cool," he said. "Think o' the ideas that pass through yer ain head, but what comes o' them when ye want to put them in words? A cool man's mind is just like that pool when there's no wind. He looks into it, and sees the ideas just as ye can look into the watter doon there and see the reflection o' that bank wi' the crocuses, thae bare branches, and the red bricks o' the bleach-field wa'. You and me could spout lang enough if oor heads were as clear as that. To say what ye see doon there is as plain as reading 't oot o' a book, but wait till a scuff o' win' comes —"

"Man, McLennan, that's awfu' fine," cried the candle-maker. "The scuff o' wind aye comes when I get to my feet, and blots oot every deil-haet I'm gaun to say —"

The discussion was interrupted by the gardener's passage over the bridge. The carrier had told Brough about the sale of Broomfields, and now Isaac was able to augment the information by naming the purchaser. The three men there and then came to the conclusion that the doctor was going to marry the governess, as Mrs. Lonen had said. Under the stimulus of this fresh theme they sauntered up the road as

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

far as the change-house. McLennan's sister was out delivering parcels, and the candle-maker's wife, owing to the sudden change of weather, was confined with rheumatics, so there was no hurry. The carrier, moreover, was a sympathetic man, and wished to give Isaac a consolatory dram.

What followed later in the evening, while part and parcel of the gardener's plan, would probably not have taken practical shape so soon but for this accidental adjournment. In Kilspindie there was a code of honour in connection with treating uniformly observed by the independent mind. When the company was large this was fraught with danger to the units that formed it. Whatever their practice might be in paying off other forms of indebtedness, in convivial moments the debt of a dram was liquidated on the spot, by a dram all round. Though this company was not large, when the darkening fell, it proved to be large enough, for as the two men got to their feet, and Isaac essayed to follow, it was found he had lost the use of his legs. His mind was perfectly clear, but inebriation had paralyzed his nether limbs. His companions assisted him up the brae, and

ISAAC ARRIVES AT A DECISION

told Mistress Izet that the body had "taen a dwam."

"Eh, my," she cried, hooking on the kettle, "I'll no say but he has got his death o' cauld, for he was sweatin' at his work like a brock the day. Think o' that; and the place sell't to them 'at'll no thenk him for 't. Will I rin for the doctor?"

"Rin for the doctor nane," Isaac commanded.

"Na, the doctor 'll be here sune enough to claim his ain without your sendin' for him," said McLennan — thinking of the purchase. "Get him to his bed, and pit a het jaur till's feet."

With this safe advice, the two men, having discharged a neighbourly duty, withdrew.

Isaac sat in the cosy chair, and stretched out his gnarled fingers to the glowing fire.

"It's a peety," he remarked, as he watched the housekeeper filling the jar, which she corked tightly and buried at the foot of the kitchen bed.

"What's a peety, Isaac?"

"That I canna gang up to my ain bed."

"Dinna fash aboot that, ye'll be as weel here." She went to the parlour press, took out the family decanter, which had not been unstopped

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

since the funeral, and brewed a stiff glass of toddy. "Noo," she continued, "drink this like a man, and then get awa' till yer bed."

"And what's to become o' you?"

"I'll sit up wi' ye. It's maybe a shock, and ye'll need hauns aboot ye."

Isaac smiled grimly.

"Janet, ye'r a triumph," he said; "and it's maybe just as weel I hinna the power o' my legs, or I michtna bide to tell ye a' at's on my mind. I've had the thing often at the root o' my tongue afore, but I aye daunert aff or it cam to the bit. Bring me a gless."

"What are ye wantin' wi' a gless?"

"Never mind; bring't here and sit doon. Noo ye maun tak' the big hauf o' this toddy yersel', for I've had three drams already; and to tell you the truth — the honest truth, Janet — I'm leg-drunk."

"Oh, Isaac."

"It's true; my knees are like some auld macheen that has wrocht kina jachelt; but my head's richt clear. By the man, I never crackit like this in my life afore!" he cried, cracking his thumbs.

"Then it's no paralis?"

ISAAC ARRIVES AT A DECISION

"Hoot, woman, paralis, no. I had the same thing on the nicht o' Willum Ringin's waddin', but a sleep among the clean strae brocht my legs to their senses. As ye ken, I'm no used to the whisky; but the carrier and the candle-makker meant weel. Janet, I've thocht a real heap frae first to last."

"Deed have ye, Isaac, and I've often wonnert what ye were thinking," she said, raising her eyes, while her lips parted modestly, wondering what was to come.

"And I have as often jaloused that ye kent. Janet, it's late i' the day, and there's no use o' us palaverin' like young folk. We have been like brither and sister for many a year. Ye have washed for me, darned and clooted for me, made my bed and tidied up the hoose, but this canna gang foret langer unless ye become my wife. What do ye think o' that?"

"Deed, I think it's a gey sensible-like thing," she replied calmly.

"Then that's a bargain," he said, wetting his thumb.

"It's a bargain," she said, putting her thumb to his, "if ye dinna forget it the morn. A thing

DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

o' the kind ance happened in Houston parish when ——

"That's no likely noo," he interrupted; "the hoose is taen."

"What hoose?"

"Bet Inglis' bothie."

"Keep and guide us, did ever onybody hear the like o' that? And ye never let on."

There was no sentiment wasted at this betrothal. They drank their toddy, and had an hour's sensible talk about ways and means, at the end of which they agreed to exchange beds for the night. Mistress Izet thoughtfully brought the lobby bell, and placed it on a chair within his reach.

"Ring it lood," she said, "if ye need me," then she assisted him to the bedside.

"Efter a', Janet," said Isaac, with a twinkle in his eye, "it's a peety ye should leave yer ain bed."

"Ye auld futar," she cried, with a laugh, seizing the candle and running off to the door. "I micht 'a sleepit in my ain bed a' my days, and you in yours, gin yer legs had cam hame sober."

CHAPTER XIX

NATURE'S NURTURING AND PAIRING TIME

THE wine-coloured tassels of the flowering currant, as yet unaccompanied by leaves, drooped healthily under a gentle rain. Elm and chestnut trees were bursting into leafage. Even the tardy ash was awakening under the pressure of inward nourishment, but there was not a shimmer of green as yet among the network of branches. Against the milky back-ground of sky, however, there stood forth dark, tightly-shut fists of life, whose fingers would unfold by and by, and hold out a soft palm-like hand to the sun and rain. The brown earth of the fields was seen as through an emerald mist, with straight lines of deeper green, where the harrow-tooth had given strength to the nurturing soil. For weeks the lark had been heard over Coultarmains, and the cushet was already pouring forth his five love-