

Title: A Doctor of the Old School, Part 3

Ian Maclaren

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A DOCTOR OF THE OLD SCHOOL

by Ian Maclaren

Book III.

A FIGHT WITH DEATH

PREFACE

It is with great good will that I write this short preface to the edition of "A Doctor of the Old School" (which has been illustrated by Mr. Gordon after an admirable and understanding fashion) because there are two things that I should like to say to my readers, being also my friends.

One, is to answer a question that has been often and fairly asked. Was there ever any doctor so self-forgetful and so utterly Christian as

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William MacLure? To which I am proud to reply, on my conscience: Not one man, but many in Scotland and in the South country. I will dare prophecy also across the sea.

It has been one man's good fortune to know four country doctors, not one of whom was without his faults--Weelum was not perfect--but who, each one, might have sat for my hero. Three are now resting from their labors, and the fourth, if he ever should see these lines, would never identify himself.

Then I desire to thank my readers, and chiefly the medical profession for the reception given to the Doctor of Drumtochty.

For many years I have desired to pay some tribute to a class whose service to the community was known to every countryman, but after the tale had gone forth my heart failed. For it might have been despised for the little grace of letters in the style and because of the outward roughness of the man. But neither his biographer nor his circumstances have been able to obscure MacLure who has himself won all honest hearts, and received afresh the recognition of his more distinguished brethren. From all parts of the English-speaking world letters have come in commendation of Weelum MacLure, and many were from doctors who had received new courage. It is surely more honor than a new writer could ever have deserved to receive the approbation of a profession whose charity puts us all to shame.

May I take this first opportunity to declare how deeply my heart has been touched by the favor shown to a simple book by the American people, and to express my hope that one day it may be given me to see you face to face.

IAN MACLAREN. Liverpool, Oct. 4, 1895.

A FIGHT WITH DEATH.

III

A FIGHT WITH DEATH

When Drumsheugh's grievance was brought to the gates of death by fever, caught, as was supposed, on an adventurous visit to Glasgow, the London doctor at Lord Kilspindie's shooting lodge looked in on his way from the moor, and declared it impossible for Saunders to live through the night.

"I give him six hours, more or less; it is only a question of time," said the oracle, buttoning his gloves and getting into the brake; "tell your parish doctor that I was sorry not to have met him."

Bell heard this verdict from behind the door, and gave way utterly, but Drumsheugh declined to accept it as final, and devoted himself to consolation.

"Dinna greet like that, Bell wumman, sae lang as Saunders is still living'; a'll never give up houp, for ma pairt, till oor ain man says

the word.

"A' the doctors in the land dinna ken as muckle aboot us as Weelum MacLure, an' he's ill tae beat when he's trying tae save a man's life."

MacLure, on his coming, would say nothing, either weal or woe, till he had examined Saunders. Suddenly his face turned into iron before their eyes, and he looked like one encountering a merciless foe. For there was a feud between MacLure and a certain mighty power which had lasted for forty years in Drumtochty.

[Illustration: "GAVE WAY UTTERLY"]

"The London doctor said that Saunders wud sough awa afore mornin', did he? Weel, he's an authority on fevers an' sic like diseases, an' ought tae ken.

"It's may be presumptuous o' me tae differ frae him, and it wudna be verra respectfu' o' Saunders tae live aifter this opeenion. But Saunders wes awe thraun an' ill tae drive, an' he's as like as no tae gang his own gait.

"A'm no meanin' tae reflect on sae clever a man, but he didna ken the seetuation. He can read fevers like a buik, but he never cam across sic a thing as the Drumtochty constitution a' his days.

"Ye see, when onybody gets as low as puir Saunders here, it's juist a hand to hand wrestle atween the fever and his constitution, an' of coorse, if he had been a shilpit, stuntit, feckless effeegy o' a cratur, fed on tea an' made dishes and pushioned wi' bad air, Saunders wud hae nae chance; he wes boond tae gae oot like the snuff o' a candle.

[Illustration]

"But Saunders hes been fillin' his lungs for five and thirty year wi' strong Drumtochty air, an' eatin' naethin' but kirny aitmeal, and drinkin' naethin' but fresh milk frae the coo, an' followin' the ploo through the new-turned sweet-smellin' earth, an' swingin' the scythe in haytime and harvest, till the legs an' airms o' him were iron, an' his chest wes like the cuttin' o' an oak tree.

"He's a waesome sicht the nicht, but Saunders wes a buirdly man aince, and wull never lat his life be taken lichtly frae him. Na, na, he hesna sinned against Nature, and Nature 'ill stand by him noo in his oor o' distress.

"A' daurna say yea, Bell, muckle as a' wud like, for this is an evil disease, cunnin, an' treacherous as the deevil himsel', but a' winna say nay, sae keep yir hert frae despair.

"It wull be a sair fecht, but it 'ill be settled one wy or anither by sax o'clock the morn's morn. Nae man can prophecee hoo it 'ill end, but ae thing is certain, a'll no see deith tak a Drumtochty man afore his time if a' can help it.

"Noo, Bell ma wumman, yir near deid wi' tire, an' nae wonder. Ye've dune a' ye cud for yir man, an' ye'll lippen (trust) him the nicht tae Drumsheugh an' me; we 'ill no fail him or you.

"Lie doon an' rest, an' if it be the wull o' the Almichty a'll wauken ye in the mornin' tae see a livin' conscious man, an' if it be ither-wise a'll come for ye the suner, Bell," and the big red hand went out to the anxious wife. "A' gie ye ma word."

Bell leant over the bed, and at the sight of Saunders' face a superstitious dread seized her.

"See, doctor, the shadow of deith is on him that never lifts. A've seen it afore, on ma father an' mither. A' canna leave him, a' canna leave him."

[Illustration: "BELL LEANT OVER THE BED"]

"It's hoverin', Bell, but it hesna fallen; please God it never wull. Gang but and get some sleep, for it's time we were at oor work."

"The doctors in the toons hae nurses an' a' kinds o' handy apparatus," said MacLure to Drumsheugh when Bell had gone, "but you an' me 'ill need tae be nurse the nicht, an' use sic things as we hev."

"It 'ill be a lang nicht and anxious wark, but a' wud raither hae ye, auld freend, wi' me than ony man in the Glen. Ye're no feared tae gie a hand?"

"Me feared? No, likely. Man, Saunders cam tae me a haflin, and hes been on Drumsheugh for twenty years, an' though he be a dour chiel, he's a faithfu' servant as ever lived. It's waesome tae see him lyin' there moanin' like some dumb animal frae mornin' tae nicht, an' no able tae answer his ain wife when she speaks."

"Div ye think, Weelum, he hes a chance?"

"That he hes, at ony rate, and it 'ill no be your blame or mine if he hesna mair."

While he was speaking, MacLure took off his coat and waistcoat and hung them on the back of the door. Then he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and laid bare two arms that were nothing but bone and muscle.

"It gar'd ma very blood rin faster tae the end of ma fingers juist tae look at him," Drumsheugh expatiated afterwards to Hillocks, "for a' saw noo that there was tae be a stand-up fecht atween him an' deith for Saunders, and when a' thocht o' Bell an' her bairns, a' kent wha wud win."

"Aff wi' yir coat, Drumsheugh," said MacLure; "ye 'ill need tae bend yir back the nicht; gither a' the pails in the hoose and fill them at the spring, an' a'll come doon tae help ye wi' the carryin'."

It was a wonderful ascent up the steep pathway from the spring to the cottage on its little knoll, the two men in single file, bareheaded, silent, solemn, each with a pail of water in either hand, MacLure limping painfully in front, Drumsheugh blowing behind; and when they laid down their burden in the sick room, where the bits of furniture had been put to a side and a large tub held the centre, Drumsheugh looked curiously at the doctor.

[Illustration.]

"No, a'm no daft; ye needna be feared; but yir tae get yir first lesson in medicine the nicht, an' if we win the battle ye can set up for yersel in the Glen.

"There's twa dangers--that Saunders' strength fails, an' that the force o' the fever grows; and we have juist twa weapons.

"Yon milk on the drawers' head an' the bottle of whisky is tae keep up the strength, and this cool caller water is tae keep doon the fever.

"We 'ill cast oot the fever by the virtue o' the earth an' the water."

"Div ye mean tae pit Saunders in the tub?"

"Ye hiv it noo, Drumsheugh, and that's hoo a' need yir help."

"Man, Hillocks," Drumsheugh used to moralize, as often as he remembered that critical night, "it wes humblin' tae see hoo low sickness can bring a pooerfu' man, an' ocht tae keep us frae pride."

"A month syne there wesna a stronger man in the Glen than Saunders, an' noo he wes juist a bundle o' skin and bone, that naither saw nor heard, nor moved nor felt, that kent naethin' that was dune tae him.

"Hillocks, a' wudna hae wished ony man tae hev seen Saunders--for it wull never pass frae before ma een as long as a' live--but a' wish a' the Glen hed stude by MacLure kneelin' on the floor wi' his sleeves up tae his oxters and waitin' on Saunders.

"Yon big man wes as pitifu' an' gentle as a wumman, and when he laid the puir fallow in his bed again, he happit him ower as a mither dis her bairn."

Thrice it was done, Drumsheugh ever bringing up colder water from the spring, and twice MacLure was silent; but after the third time there was a gleam in his eye.

"We're haudin' oor ain; we're no bein' maistered, at ony rate; mair a' canna say for three oors.

"We 'ill no need the water again, Drumsheugh; gae oot and tak a breath o' air; a'm on gaird masel."

It was the hour before daybreak, and Drumsheugh wandered through fields he had trodden since childhood. The cattle lay sleeping in the pastures; their shadowy forms, with a patch of whiteness here and there, having a weird suggestion of death. He heard the burn running over the stones; fifty years ago he had made a dam that lasted till winter. The hooting of an owl made him start; one had frightened him as a boy so that he ran home to his mother--she died thirty years ago. The smell of ripe corn filled the air; it would soon be cut and garnered. He could see the dim outlines of his house, all dark and cold; no one he loved was beneath the roof. The lighted window in Saunders' cottage told where a man hung between life and death, but love was in that home. The futility of life arose before this lonely man, and overcame his heart with an indescribable sadness. What a vanity was all human labour, what a mystery all human life.

[Illustration]

But while he stood, subtle change came over the night, and the air trembled round him as if one had whispered. Drumsheugh lifted his head and looked eastwards. A faint grey stole over the distant horizon, and suddenly a cloud reddened before his eyes. The sun was not in sight, but was rising, and sending forerunners before his face. The cattle began to stir, a blackbird burst into song, and before Drumsheugh crossed the threshold of Saunders' house, the first ray of the sun had broken on a peak of the Grampians.

MacLure left the bedside, and as the light of the candle fell on the doctor's face, Drumsheugh could see that it was going well with Saunders.

"He's nae waur; an' it's half six noo; it's ower sune tae say mair, but a'm houpin' for the best. Sit doon and take a sleep, for ye're needin' 't, Drumsheugh, an', man, ye hae worked for it."

As he dozed off, the last thing Drumsheugh saw was the doctor sitting erect in his chair, a clenched fist resting on the bed, and his eyes already bright with the vision of victory.

He awoke with a start to find the room flooded with the morning sunshine, and every trace of last night's work removed.

The doctor was bending over the bed, and speaking to Saunders.

"It's me, Saunders, Doctor MacLure, ye ken; dinna try tae speak or move; juist let this drap milk slip ower--ye 'ill be needin' yir breakfast, lad--and gang tae sleep again."

[Illustration: "A CLENCHED FIST RESTING ON THE BED"]

Five minutes, and Saunders had fallen into a deep, healthy sleep, all tossing and moaning come to an end. Then MacLure stepped softly across the floor, picked up his coat and waistcoat, and went out at the door. Drumsheugh arose and followed him without a word. They passed through the little garden, sparkling with dew, and beside the byre, where Hawkie rattled her chain, impatient for Bell's coming, and by Saunders' little strip of corn ready for the scythe, till they reached an open field. There they came to a halt, and Doctor MacLure for once allowed himself to go.

His coat he flung east and his waistcoat west, as far as he could hurl them, and it was plain he would have shouted had he been a complete mile from Saunders' room. Any less distance was useless for the adequate expression. He struck Drumsheugh a mighty blow that well-nigh levelled that substantial man in the dust and then the doctor of Drumtochty issued his bulletin.

"Saunders wesna tae live through the nicht, but he's livin' this meenut, an' like to live.

"He's got by the warst clean and fair, and wi' him that's as good as cure.

"It' ill be a grund waukenin' for Bell; she 'ill no be a weedow yet, nor the bairnies fatherless.

"There's nae use glowerin' at me, Drumsheugh, for a body's daft at a time, an' a' canna contain masel' and a'm no gaein' tae try."

Then it dawned on Drumsheugh that the doctor was attempting the Highland fling.

"He's 'ill made tae begin wi'," Drumsheugh explained in the kirkyard next Sabbath, "and ye ken he's been terrible mishannelled by accidents, sae ye may think what like it wes, but, as sure as deith, o' a' the Hielan flings a' ever saw yon wes the bonniest.

"A' hevna shaken ma ain legs for thirty years, but a' confess tae a turn masel. Ye may lauch an' ye like, neeburs, but the thocht o' Bell an' the news that wes waitin' her got the better o' me."

"THE DOCTOR WAS ATTEMPTING THE HIGHLAND FLING"

Drumtochty did not laugh. Drumtochty looked as if it could have done quite otherwise for joy.

"A' wud hae made a third gin a bed been there," announced Hillocks, aggressively.

[Illustration]

"Come on, Drumsheugh," said Jamie Soutar, "gie's the end o't; it wes a mighty mornin'."

"'We're twa auld fules,' says MacLure tae me, and he gaithers up his claithes. 'It wud set us better tae be tellin' Bell.'

"She wes sleepin' on the top o' her bed wrapped in a plaid, fair worn oot wi' three weeks' nursin' o' Saunders, but at the first touch she was oot upon the floor.

"'Is Saunders deein', doctor?' she cries. 'Ye promised tae wauken me; dinna tell me it's a' ower.'

"'There's nae deein' aboot him, Bell; ye're no tae lose yir man this time, sae far as a' can see. Come ben an' jidge for yersel'.'

"Bell lookit at Saunders, and the tears of joy fell on the bed like rain.

"'The shadow's lifted,' she said; 'he's come back frae the mooth o' the tomb.

"'A' prayed last nicht that the Lord wud leave Saunders till the laddies cud dae for themselves, an' thae words came intae ma mind, 'Weepin' may endure for a nicht, but joy cometh in the mornin'."

"'The Lord heard ma prayer, and joy hes come in the mornin',' an' she gripped the doctor's hand.

[Illustration]

"'Ye've been the instrument, Doctor MacLure. Ye wudna gie him up, and ye did what nae ither cud for him, an' a've ma man the day, and the bairns

hae their father.'

"An' afore MacLure kent what she was daein', Bell lifted his hand to her lips an' kissed it."

"Did she, though?" cried Jamie. "Wha wud hae thocht there wes as muckle spunk in Bell?"

"MacLure, of coorse, was clean scandalized," continued Drumsheugh, "an' pood awa his hand as if it hed been burned.

"Nae man can thole that kind o' fraikin', and a' never heard o' sic a thing in the parish, but we maun excuse Bell, neeburs; it wes an occasion by ordinar," and Drumsheugh made Bell's apology to Drumtochty for such an excess of feeling.

"A' see naethin' tae excuse," insisted Jamie, who was in great fettle that Sabbath; "the doctor hes never been burdened wi' fees, and a'm judgin' he coonted a wumman's gratitude that he saved frae weedowhood the best he ever got."

[Illustration: "I'VE A COLD IN MY HEAD, TO-NIGHT"]

"A' gaed up tae the Manse last nicht," concluded Drumsheugh, "and telt the minister hoo the doctor focht aucht oors for Saunders' life, an' won, and ye never saw a man sae carried. He walkit up and doon the room a' the time, and every other meenut he blew his nose like a trumpet.

"'I've a cold in my head to-night, Drumsheugh,' says he; 'never mind me.'"

"A've hed the same masel in sic circumstances; they come on sudden," said Jamie.

"A' wager there 'ill be a new bit in the laist prayer the day, an' somethin' worth hearin'."

And the fathers went into kirk in great expectation.

"We beseech Thee for such as be sick, that Thy hand may be on them for good, and that Thou wouldst restore them again to health and strength," was the familiar petition of every Sabbath.

The congregation waited in a silence that might be heard, and were not disappointed that morning, for the minister continued:

"Especially we tender Thee hearty thanks that Thou didst spare Thy servant who was brought down into the dust of death, and hast given him back to his wife and children, and unto that end didst wonderfully bless the skill of him who goes out and in amongst us, the beloved physician of this parish and adjacent districts."

"Didna a' tell ye, neeburs?" said Jamie, as they stood at the kirkyard gate before dispersing; "there's no a man in the coonty cud hae dune it better. 'Beloved physician,' an' his 'skill,' tae, an' bringing in 'adjacent districts'; that's Glen Urtach; it wes handsome, and the doctor earned it, ay, every word.

"It's an awfu' peety he didna hear you; but dear knows whar he is the

day, maist likely up--"

Jamie stopped suddenly at the sound of a horse's feet, and there, coming down the avenue of beech trees that made a long vista from the kirk gate, they saw the doctor and Jess.

One thought flashed through the minds of the fathers of the commonwealth.

It ought to be done as he passed, and it would be done if it were not Sabbath. Of course it was out of the question on Sabbath.

The doctor is now distinctly visible, riding after his fashion.

There was never such a chance, if it were only Saturday; and each man reads his own regret in his neighbor's face.

The doctor is nearing them rapidly; they can imagine the shepherd's tartan.

Sabbath or no Sabbath, the Glen cannot let him pass without some tribute of their pride.

Jess had recognized friends, and the doctor is drawing rein.

"It hes tae be dune," said Jamie desperately, "say what ye like." Then they all looked towards him, and Jamie led.

[Illustration]

"Hurrah," swinging his Sabbath hat in the air, "hurrah," and once more, "hurrah," Whinnie Knowe, Drumsheugh, and Hillocks joining lustily, but Tammas Mitchell carrying all before him, for he had found at last an expression for his feelings that rendered speech unnecessary.

It was a solitary experience for horse and rider, and Jess bolted without delay. But the sound followed and surrounded them, and as they passed the corner of the kirkyard, a figure waved his college cap over the wall and gave a cheer on his own account.

"God bless you, doctor, and well done."

"If it isna the minister," cried Drumsheugh, "in his goon an' bans, tae think o' that; but a' respeck him for it."

Then Drumtochty became self-conscious, and went home in confusion of face and unbroken silence, except Jamie Soutar, who faced his neighbors at the parting of the ways without shame.

"A' wud dae it a' ower again if a' hed the chance; he got naethin' but his due." It was two miles before Jess composed her mind, and the doctor and she could discuss it quietly together.

"A' can hardly believe ma ears, Jess, an' the Sabbath tae; their verra judgment hes gane frae the fouk o' Drumtochty.

"They've heard about Saunders, a'm thinkin', wumman, and they're pleased we brocht him roond; he's fairly on the mend, ye ken, noo.

"A' never expectit the like o' this, though, and it wes juist a wee thingie mair than a' cud hae stude.

"Ye hev yir share in't tae, lass; we've hed mony a hard nicht and day thegither, an' yon wes oor reward. No mony men in this warld 'ill ever get a better, for it cam frae the hert o' honest fouk."

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