

A Doctor of the Old School, Part 4

Ian Maclaren

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A DOCTOR OF THE OLD SCHOOL

by Ian Maclaren

Book IV.

THE DOCTOR'S LAST JOURNEY

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 William MacLure? To which I am proud to reply, on my conscience: Not one

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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.

THE DOCTOR'S LAST JOURNEY.

IV

THE DOCTOR'S LAST JOURNEY

Drumtochty had a vivid recollection of the winter when Dr. MacLure was laid up for two months with a broken leg, and the Glen was dependent on the dubious ministrations of the Kildrummie doctor. Mrs. Macfayden also pretended to recall a "whup" of some kind or other he had in the fifties, but this was considered to be rather a pyrotechnic display of Elspeth's superior memory than a serious statement of fact. MacLure could not have ridden through the snow of forty winters without suffering, yet no one ever heard him complain, and he never pled illness to any messenger by night or day.

"It took me," said Jamie Soutar to Milton afterwards, "the feck o' ten meenuts tae howk him 'an' Jess oot ae snawy nicht when Drums turned bad sudden, and if he didna try to excuse himself for no hearing me at aince wi' some story about juist comin' in frae Glen Urtach, and no bein' in his bed for the laist twa nights.

"He wes that carefu' o' himsel an' lazy that if it hedna been for the siller, a've often thocht, Milton, he wud never hae dune a handstroke o' wark in the Glen.

"What scunnered me wes the wy the bairns were ta'en in wi' him. Man, a've seen him tak a wee laddie on his knee that his ain mither cudna quiet, an' lilt 'Sing a song o' saxpence' till the bit mannie would be lauchin' like a gude are, an' pooin' the doctor's beard.

[Illustration]

"As for the weemen, he fair cuist a glamour ower them; they're daein' naethin' noo but speak aboot this body and the ither he cured, an' hoo he aye hed a couthy word for sick fouk. Weemen hae nae discernment, Milton; tae hear them speak ye wud think MacLure hed been a releegious man like yersel, although, as ye said, he wes little mair than a Gallio.

"Bell Baxter was haverin' awa in the shop tae sic an extent aboot the wy MacLure brocht roond Saunders when he hed the fever that a' gied oot at the door, a' wes that disgusted, an' a'm telt when Tammas Mitchell heard the news in the smiddy he wes juist on the greeting.

"The smith said that he wes thinkin' o' Annie's tribble, but ony wy a' ca' it rael bairnly. It's no like Drumtochty; ye're setting an example, Milton, wi' yir composure. But a' mind ye took the doctor's meesure as sune as ye cam intae the pairish."

It is the penalty of a cynic that he must have some relief for his secret grief, and Milton began to weary of life in Jamie's hands during those days.

Drumtochty was not observant in the matter of health, but they had grown sensitive about Dr. MacLure, and remarked in the kirkyard all summer that he was failing.

"He wes aye spare," said Hillocks, "an' he's been sair twisted for the laist twenty year, but a' never mind him booed till the year. An' he's gaein' intae sma' buke (bulk), an' a' dinna like that, neeburs.

"The Glen wudna dae weel withoot Weelum MacLure, an' he's no as young as he wes. Man, Drumsheugh, ye micht wile him aff tae the saut water atween the neeps and the hairst. He's been workin' forty year for a holiday, an' it's aboot due."

Drumsheugh was full of tact, and met MacLure quite by accident on the road.

"Saunders'll no need me till the shearing begins," he explained to the doctor, "an' a'm gaein' tae Brochty for a turn o' the hot baths; they're fine for the rheumatics.

[Illustration]

"Wull ye no come wi' me for auld lang syne? it's lonesome for a solitary man, an' it wud dae ye gude."

"Na, na, Drumsheugh," said MacLure, who understood perfectly, "a've dune a' thae years withoot a break, an' a'm laith (unwilling) tae be takin' holidays at the tail end.

"A'ill no be mony months wi' ye a' thegither noo, an' a'm wanting tae spend a' the time a' hev in the Glen. Ye see yersel that a'll sune be getting ma lang rest, an' a'll no deny that a'm wearyin' for it."

As autumn passed into winter, the Glen noticed that the doctor's hair had turned grey, and that his manner had lost all its roughness. A feeling of secret gratitude filled their hearts, and they united in a conspiracy of attention. Annie Mitchell knitted a huge comforter in red and white, which the doctor wore in misery for one whole day, out of respect for Annie, and then hung it in his sitting-room as a wall ornament. Hillocks used to intercept him with hot drinks, and one drifting day compelled him to shelter till the storm abated. Flora Campbell brought a wonderful compound of honey and whiskey, much tasted in Auchindarroch, for his cough, and the mother of young Burnbrae filled his cupboard with black jam, as a healing measure. Jamie Soutar seemed to have an endless series of jobs in the doctor's direction, and looked in "juist tae rest himsel" in the kitchen.

MacLure had been slowly taking in the situation, and at last he unburdened himself one night to Jamie.

"What ails the fouk, think ye? for they're aye lecturin' me noo tae tak care o' the weat and tae wrap masel up, an' there's no a week but they're sendin' bit presents tae the house, till a'm fair ashamed."

"Oo, a'll explain that in a meenut," answered Jamie, "for a' ken the Glen weel. Ye see they're juist try in' the Scripture plan o' heapin' coals o' fire on yer head."

[Illustration: "TOLD DRUMSHEUGH THAT THE DOCTOR WAS NOT ABLE TO RISE"]

"Here ye've been negleckin' the fouk in seeckness an' lettin' them dee afore their freends' eyes without a fecht, an' refusin' tae gang tae a puir wumman in her tribble, an' frichtenin' the bairns--no, a'm no dune--and scourgin' us wi' fees, and livin' yersel' on the fat o' the land."

"Ye've been carryin' on this trade ever sin yir father dee'd, and the Glen didna notis. But ma word, they've fund ye oot at laist, an' they're gaein' tae mak ye suffer for a' yir ill usage. Div ye understand noo?" said Jamie, savagely.

For a while MacLure was silent, and then he only said:

"It's little a' did for the puir bodies; but ye hev a gude hert, Jamie, a rael good hert."

It was a bitter December Sabbath, and the fathers were settling the affairs of the parish ankle deep in snow, when MacLure's old housekeeper told Drumsheugh that the doctor was not able to rise, and wished to see him in the afternoon. "Ay, ay," said Hillocks, shaking his head, and that day Drumsheugh omitted four pews with the ladle, while Jamie was so vicious on the way home that none could endure him.

Janet had lit a fire in the unused grate, and hung a plaid by the window to break the power of the cruel north wind, but the bare room with its half-a-dozen bits of furniture and a worn strip of carpet, and the outlook upon the snow drifted up to the second pane of the window and

the black firs laden with their icy burden, sent a chill to Drumsheugh's heart.

The doctor had weakened sadly, and could hardly lift his head, but his face lit up at the sight of his visitor, and the big hand, which was now quite refined in its whiteness, came out from the bed-clothes with the old warm grip.

[Illustration: "WITH THE OLD WARM GRIP"]

"Come in by, man, and sit doon; it's an awfu' day tae bring ye sae far, but a' kent ye wudna grudge the traivel.

"A' wesna sure till last nicht, an' then a' felt it wudna be lang, an' a' took a wearyin' this mornin' tae see ye.

"We've been friends sin' we were laddies at the auld school in the firs, an' a' wud like ye tae be wi' me at the end. Ye 'ill stay the nicht, Paitrick, for auld lang syne."

Drumsheugh was much shaken, and the sound of the Christian name, which he had not heard since his mother's death, gave him a "grue" (shiver), as if one had spoken from the other world.

"It's maist awfu' tae hear ye speakin' aboot deein', Weelum; a' canna bear it. We 'ill hae the Muirtown doctor up, an' ye 'ill be aboot again in nae time.

"Ye hevna ony sair tribble; ye're juist trachled wi' hard wark an' needin' a rest. Dinna say ye're gaein' tae leave us, Weelum; we canna dae without ye in Drumtochty;" and Drumsheugh looked wistfully for some word of hope.

"Na, na, Paitrick, naethin' can be dune, an' it's ower late tae send for ony doctor. There's a knock that canna be mista'en, an' a' heard it last night. A've focht deith for ither fook mair than forty year, but ma ain time hes come at laist.

"A've nae tribble worth mentionin'--a bit titch o' bronchitis--an' a've hed a graund constitution; but a'm fair worn oot, Paitrick; that's ma complaint, an' its past curin'."

Drumsheugh went over to the fireplace, and for a while did nothing but break up the smouldering peats, whose smoke powerfully affected his nose and eyes.

[Illustration: "DRUMSHEUGH LOOKED WISTFULLY"]

"When ye're ready, Paitrick, there's twa or three little trokes a' wud like ye tae look aifter, an' a'll tell ye aboot them as lang's ma head's clear.

"A' didna keep buiks, as ye ken, for a' aye hed a guid memory, so naebody 'ill be harried for money aifter ma deith, and ye 'ill hae nae accoonts tae collect.

"But the fook are honest in Drumtochty, and they 'ill be offerin' ye siller, an' a'll gie ye ma mind aboot it. Gin it be a puir body, tell her tae keep it and get a bit plaidie wi' the money, and she 'ill maybe

think o' her auld doctor at a time. Gin it be a bien (well-to-do) man, tak half of what he offers, for a Drumtochty man wud scorn to be mean in sic circumstances; and if onybody needs a doctor an' canna pay for him, see he's no left tae dee when a'm oot o' the road."

"Nae fear o' that as lang as a'm livin', Weelum; that hundred's still tae the fore, ye ken, an' a'll tak care it's weel spent.

"Yon wes the best job we ever did thegither, an' dookin' Saunders, ye 'ill no forget that nicht, Weelum"--a gleam came into the doctor's eyes--"tae say neathin' o' the Highlan' fling."

The remembrance of that great victory came upon Drumsheugh, and tried his fortitude.

"What 'ill become o's when ye're no here tae gie a hand in time o' need? we 'ill tak ill wi' a stranger that disna ken ane o's frae anither."

"It's a' for the best, Paitrick, an' ye 'ill see that in a whilie. A've kent fine that ma day wes ower, an' that ye sud hae a younger man.

"A' did what a' cud tae keep up wi' the new medicine, but a' hed little time for readin', an' nane for traivellin'.

"A'm the last o' the auld schule, an' a' ken as weel as onybody that a' wesna sae dainty an' fine-mannered as the town doctors. Ye took me as a' wes, an' naebody ever cuist up tae me that a' wes a plain man. Na, na; ye've been rael kind an' conseederate a' thae years."

"Weelum, gin ye cairry on sic nonsense ony langer," interrupted Drumsheugh, huskily, "a'll leave the hoose; a' canna stand it."

"It's the truth, Paitrick, but we 'ill gae on wi' our wark, far a'm failin' fast.

"Gie Janet ony sticks of furniture she needs tae furnish a hoose, and sell a' thing else tae pay the wricht (undertaker) an' bedrel (grave-digger). If the new doctor be a young laddie and no verra rich, ye micht let him hae the buiks an' instruments; it 'ill aye be a help.

"But a' wudna like ye tae sell Jess, for she's been a faithfu' servant, an' a freend tae. There's a note or twa in that drawer a' savit, an' if ye kent ony man that wud gie her a bite o' grass and a sta' in his stable till she followed her maister--"

"Confoond ye, Weelum," broke out Drumsheugh; "its doonricht cruel o' ye to speak like this tae me. Whar wud Jess gang but tae Drumsheugh? she 'ill hae her run o' heck an' manger sae lang as she lives; the Glen wudna like tae see anither man on Jess, and nae man 'ill ever touch the auld mare."

[Illustration]

"Dinna mind me, Paitrick, for a" expeckit this; but ye ken we're no verra gleg wi' oor tongues in Drumtochty, an' dinna tell a' that's in oor hearts.

"Weel, that's a' that a' mind, an' the rest a' leave tae yersel'. A've neither kith nor kin tae bury me, sae you an' the neeburs 'ill need tae

lat me doon; but gin Tammas Mitchell or Saunders be stannin' near and lookin' as if they wud like a cord, gie't tae them, Paitrick. They're baith dour chiels, and haena muckle tae say, but Tammas hes a grund hert, and there's waur fouk in the Glen than Saunders.

"A'm gettin' drowsy, an' a'll no be able tae follow ye sune, a' doot; wud ye read a bit tae me afore a' fa' ower?"

"Ye 'ill find ma mither's Bible on the drawers' heid, but ye 'ill need tae come close tae the bed, for a'm no hearin' or seein' sae weel as a' wes when ye cam."

Drumsheugh put on his spectacles and searched for a comfortable Scripture, while the light of the lamp fell on his shaking hands and the doctor's face where the shadow was now settling.

[Illustration]

"Ma mither aye wantit this read tae her when she wes sober" (weak), and Drumsheugh began, "In My Father's house are many mansions," but MacLure stopped him.

"It's a bonnie word, an' yir mither wes a sanct; but it's no for the like o' me. It's ower gude; a' daurna tak it.

"Shut the buik an' let it open itsel, an' ye 'ill get a bit a've been readin' every nicht the laist month."

Then Drumsheugh found the Parable wherein the Master tells us what God thinks of a Pharisee and of a penitent sinner, till he came to the words: "And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner."

"That micht hae been written for me, Paitrick, or ony ither auld sinner that hes feenished his life, an' hes naethin' tae say for himsel'.

"It wesna easy for me tae get tae kirk, but a' cud hae managed wi' a stretch, an' a' used langidge a' sudna, an' a' micht hae been gentler, and not been so short in the temper. A' see't a' noo.

"It's ower late tae mend, but ye 'ill maybe juist say to the fouk that I wes sorry, an' a'm houpin' that the Almichty 'ill hae mercy on me.

"Cud ye ... pit up a bit prayer, Paitrick?"

"A' haena the words," said Drumsheugh in great distress; "wud ye like's tae send for the minister?"

"It's no the time for that noo, an' a' wud rather hae yersel'--juist what's in yir heart, Paitrick: the Almichty 'ill ken the lave (rest) Himsel'."

So Drumsheugh knelt and prayed with many pauses.

"Almichty God ... dinna be hard on Weelum MacLure, for he's no been hard wi' onybody in Drumtochty.... Be kind tae him as he's been tae us a' for forty year.... We're a' sinners afore Thee.... Forgive him what he's dune wrang, an' dinna cuist it up tae him.... Mind the fouk he's helpit

.... the wee-men an' bairnies.... an' gie him a welcome hame, for he's sair needin't after a' his wark.... Amen."

"Thank ye, Paitrick, and gude nicht tae ye. Ma ain true freend, gie's yir hand, for a'll maybe no ken ye again.

"Noo a'll say ma mither's prayer and hae a sleep, but ye 'ill no leave me till a' is ower."

Then he repeated as he had done every night of his life:

"This night I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take."

He was sleeping quietly when the wind drove the snow against the window with a sudden "swish;" and he instantly awoke, so to say, in his sleep. Some one needed him.

"Are ye frae Glen Urtach?" and an unheard voice seemed to have answered him.

"Worse is she, an' suffering awfu'; that's no lichtsome; ye did richt tae come.

"The front door's drifted up; gang roond tae the back, an' ye 'ill get intae the kitchen; a'll be ready in a meenut.

"Gie's a hand wi' the lantern when a'm saidling Jess, an' ye needna come on till daylight; a' ken the road."

[Illustration]

Then he was away in his sleep on some errand of mercy, and struggling through the storm. "It's a coorse nicht, Jess, an' heavy traivellin'; can ye see afore ye, lass? for a'm clean confused wi' the snaw; bide a wee till a' find the diveesion o' the roads; it's aboot here back or forrit.

"Steady, lass, steady, dinna plunge; i'ts a drift we're in, but ye're no sinkin'; ... up noo; ... there ye are on the road again.

"Eh, it's deep the nicht, an' hard on us baith, but there's a puir wumman nicht dee if we didna warstle through; ... that's it; ye ken fine what a'm sayin.'

"We 'ill hae tae leave the road here, an' tak tae the muir. Sandie 'ill no can leave the wife alane tae meet us; ... feel for yersel" lass, and keep oot o' the holes.

"Yon's the hoose black in the snaw. Sandie! man, ye frichtened us; a' didna see ye ahint the dyke; hoos the wife?"

After a while he began again:

"Ye're fair dune, Jess, and so a' am masel'; we're baith gettin' auld, an' dinna tak sae weel wi' the nicht wark.

"We 'ill sune be hame noo; this is the black wood, and it's no lang aifter that; we're ready for oor beds, Jess.... ay, ye like a clap at a time; mony a mile we've gaed hegither.

"Yon's the licht in the kitchen window; nae wonder ye're nickering (neighing).... it's been a stiff journey; a'm tired, lass.... a'm tired tae deith," and the voice died into silence.

Drumsheugh held his friend's hand, which now and again tightened in his, and as he watched, a change came over the face on the pillow beside him. The lines of weariness disappeared, as if God's hand had passed over it; and peace began to gather round the closed eyes.

The doctor has forgotten the toil of later years, and has gone back to his boyhood.

[Illustration: "SHE'S CARRYIN' A LIGHT IN HER HAND"]

"The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want," he repeated, till he came to the last verse, and then he hesitated.

"Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me.

"Follow me ... and ... and ... what's next? Mither said I wes tae haed ready when she cam.

"A'll come afore ye gang tae sleep, Wullie, but ye 'ill no get yir kiss unless ye can feenish the psalm.'

"And ... in God's house ... for evermore my ... hoo dis it rin? a canna mind the next word ... my, my--

"It's ower dark noo tae read it, an' mither 'ill sune be comin."

Drumsheugh, in an agony, whispered into his ear, "'My dwelling-place,' Weelum."

"That's it, that's it a' noo; wha said it?

"And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling-place shall be.

"A'm ready noo, an' a'll get ma kiss when mither comes; a' wish she wud come, for a'm tired an' wantin' tae sleep.

"Yon's her step ... an' she's carryin' a licht in her hand; a' see it through the door.

"Mither! a' kent ye wudna forget yir laddie for ye promised tae come, and a've feenished ma psalm.

"And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling-place shall be.

"Gie me the kiss, mither, for a've been waitin' for ye, an' a'll sune be asleep."

The grey morning light fell on Drumsheugh, still holding his friend's

cold hand, and staring at a hearth where the fire had died down into white ashes; but the peace on the doctor's face was of one who rested from his labours.

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