

## CHAPTER IV

SAUNDERS M'PHEE

THE REV. MR. HAZLET had preached his last sermon, and young Mr. Breckenridge, the newly-appointed successor, was to hold spiritual rule over the parishioners of Kilbaan in his stead. The elder man's hearers had no need to be shamed by their tears that day, for thirty-four years' tenure of the ministerial office had given him opportunities of being with them in the supreme moments of their lives. He had christened many of them and married most. He had followed the young and hopeful as well as the old and weary within the churchyard wall, and now the evening shadows were falling on his own autumnal day, and he felt the light had grown too dim for work. The hand-shaking was done mostly without words at the vestry door. Saunders M'Phee the school-master was

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the last to shake hands, and Andra Carruthers the beadle had come out bareheaded, having forgot to lock fast the Bible in the vestry press. They were standing side by side at the angle of the gable watching the diminishing figures of the minister and his daughters as they paced slowly down the brae past the cartwright's shed.

"Ay, ay," sighed Andra.

"Oh, ay," replied the school-master. There was a world of meaning in these simple words that required no explanations. There was no man in the parish like Saunders to Andra. They went back to the vestry before either spoke. The beadle closed the gown press with a bang and locked it to hide his feelings; then he went over to the Bible, opened it at the mark, and took out a small slip of paper — "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass" — 1 Peter i. 24. He held it out to the school-master.

"No hauf a sheet o' paper," he said admiringly, "and yet he spoke for an hour and acht meenints."

"Man, man!" Saunders was not thinking of this feat of extempore eloquence, for he was



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advanced enough to approve of more paper and fewer words. His feelings at the moment were profoundly mixed, but what appeared to be uppermost in his mind had no concern with the sermon.

"Did he say anything about the degree?" Saunders inquired rather anxiously.

"Man, he did that; he showed me a letter from the Principal with the college seal on it. He seemed unco prood o't; but when I ca'd him doctor, he smiled wi' a kina thin smile and said, 'No, no, Andra, ye mauna change my name at this late hour o' the day. Sic honours *noo* are like dainties to a body in sickness, pleasing as a mark o' regaird, but like maist o' our worldly successes, come when the appetite to enjoy them has passed away. Besides, Andra,' says he, and the smile faded frae his lips, 'this honour costs siller, and is no to be thoct o' by steependless man.'"

The school-master walked through the village and up to the school-house with his hands behind his back and his head down. He was reviewing the elders one by one. Brinkburn, Meikle-Whifflet, Kilbeg, all men of substance, but they

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lacked his reverence for academic distinctions. What would they care for a short-lived honour that involved a siller payment. Saunders went indoors. The thing must not go abegging. He warmed his kail and took a frugal meal. He always made as much vegetable soup on the Saturday with the help of a shank bone as served for Sunday's dinner.

"Doctor Hazlet," he repeated several times, as if the sound gratified him. He took his Greek Testament and walked across the field behind the school-house, seeking the meditative seclusion of Balgrey Glen.

In some men kindness is like seed cast into an unresponsive furrow, apparently dead, but in point of fact only awaiting the springtime of opportunity. Twenty years before M'Phee, a broken and disheartened man, applied for the post of school-master to the parish of Kilbaan. He had the reputation of scholarship, but his views were reckoned unsound. Mr. Hazlet, then an able debater, fought his case through the Presbytery, and succeeded in carrying him to the dominie's desk. They had often differed since — at times bitterly, for Saunders was a



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strong-headed man and dour in his opinions, but deep down in his memory and out of human sight he treasured this generous act of succour. M'Phee read the Sermon on the Mount in the original tongue, and returned with a set countenance for tea. He was a man of method, as became a householder who had to do his own turns. He washed the dishes, putting the delf carefully away on the dresser, then he wound up the clock, a duty he performed weekly after sermon time. A look down the brae towards the village was almost a needless precaution, for the heads of families who were on visiting terms with him always spent an hour in harkening "questions" before taking "the books." Still he wanted to make sure of privacy. Hearing the voice of singing in Sam'l Filshie's satisfied him. He went in and shut the door — the sederunt might be a long one, so he brought his stuff-bottomed arm-chair and placed it in front of the chest which sat in the window recess. The westering sun glinted green among the shiny folds of his well-worn Sunday coat, which he had carefully put away before dinner. The body of the chest served as his wardrobe, but

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the "shuttle" was reserved for other purposes. This was his treasury — his sacred chamber — which was only approached half-yearly when he received his salary. He raised the hinged cover, and rested the lid of the chest on the upper edge of it. Here were the souvenirs of a lifetime, of little intrinsic value, but telling to those who could understand, of brief triumphs, tender hopes, and bitter disappointments. A gold medal, a packet of letters written in an ill-formed feminine hand, a lock of dark hair tied with a pink ribbon. He passed these reverently to one side, and came upon an old college Calendar lying beside some class tickets bearing the imprint of the University of Glasgow, a parchment certificate on which was written, "Alexandrum M'Phee," marked the place where the regulations for conferring degrees were printed. He had taken this M.A. degree after sore travail twenty-two years ago, and sold his Greek Lexicon to assist in paying the fees. The journey between M.A. and D.D. had at one time occupied his own day-dreams and seemed an attainable possibility, but it had ended at the desk of a parish school.



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"D.D." He came to the place at last. He had never previously arrived at the practical point of contemplating the fees payable for this honour. He felt it was a graceless ordinance, and unworthy of a college of learning that a man deserving such distinction should be placed in a position to decline it for a reason he would not own — his poverty.<sup>1</sup> He laid aside the Calendar and opened a little inner drawer; this was the strong room of his treasury, containing the savings of his later lifetime. Among the small heap of sovereigns there was a well-worn marriage ring and a brooch. These indicated more than sentiment: they belonged to his mother. There was also a newspaper cutting giving a report of Mr. Hazlet's defence of the school-master before the Presbytery. The paper was well worn and yellow with age. Its terms were burned into his memory, but he read them again.

"We've had our differences," he said; "he's a perfect fule body in mony things. To threep on me that the Theory of Ideas was formulated by Plato — and as for Arminius, the minister's

<sup>1</sup> The fees for honorary degrees in Scotland are now abolished.

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reasoning stands on feeble legs before Limborch, Le Clerc, and Welstein, still — an — on — " He thrust his hand in among the sovereigns and counted one, two, three, four, up to twenty. He shut the lid of his treasury and locked the chest. Then he rose and placed the sovereigns under his pillow.

Later in the dusk of that June evening, after he had sung four verses of the 2nd Pharaphrase, he addressed the Deity on his knees. It could hardly be called a prayer — it was rather an expository statement of his feelings, the intensity of which demanded the vernacular to give it fitting expression.

"It's no Plato — it's no Aristotle — though in spite of what the minister may say he has the richt grip o' the Theory of Ideas. It's no that man Calvin, nor yet Arminius, — still wi' reverence be't spoken, the latter, to my mind, understands Thee best, — but it's Thoo Thysel' we have to do wi', and in Thy sicht we are puir craiturs at the best, D.D. or no D.D. This worldly honour has fair ta'en my haed. I had early set my ain hert on't, but, as the Psalmist says, 'Remember not the sins of my youth;' since it canna come



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to me let it fa' to the minister. He canna tak' a broad survey o' truth like Arminius, but he was the instrument in Thy hand o' doing me a good turn when my enemies, perfect Bulls o' Bashan, were like to destroy me. As for Andra Carruthers, I like him weel, but he is a puir stock — naira, naira, even nairaer than the minister; but he'll maybe mend under this new Mr. Breckenridge — let us hope the best for him. Whatever happens, may 'Thy Kingdom come, and Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven,' and that'll mak' a mighty change. Amen."

#### CHAPTER V

##### THE GOVERNESS ARRIVES AT BROOMFIELDS

No one ever knew the sacrifice Saunders M'Phee had made, but the minister got his degree. He had relinquished the manse for a small cottage and a meagre retiring allowance. Such social catastrophes leave little room in practical minds for sentiment. The household consisted of the minister, his wife, and two daughters. Their slender income might with thrift serve for three, but a fourth would straiten it for all. This view had no place in the thoughts of the parents, but to the daughters it was present from the moment the door of the manse had closed behind them. Hetty, the younger, was the more accomplished of the two. She had a good English education, spoke French and German, played and sang, and had some knowledge of painting and drawing. As yet no