

HIS MOTHER'S SERMON.

He was an ingenious lad, with the callow simplicity of a theological college still untouched, and had arrived on the preceding Monday at the Free Kirk manse with four cart-loads of furniture and a maiden aunt. For three days he roamed from room to room in the excitement of householding, and made suggestions which were received with hilarious contempt; then he shut himself up in his study to prepare the great sermon, and his aunt went about on tiptoe. During meals on Friday he explained casually that his own wish was to preach a simple sermon, and that he would have done so had he been a private individual, but as he had held the MacWhammel scholarship a deliverance was expected by the country.

He would be careful and say nothing rash, but it was due to himself to state the present position of theological thought, and he might have to quote once or twice from Ewald.

His aunt was a saint, with that firm grasp of truth, and tender mysticism, whose combination is the charm of Scottish piety, and her face was troubled. While the minister was speaking in his boyish complacency, her thoughts were in a room where they had both

stood, five years before, by the death-bed of his mother.

He was broken that day, and his sobs shook the bed, for he was his mother's only son and fatherless, and his mother, brave and faithful to the last, was bidding him farewell.

"Dinna greet like that, John, nor break yir hert, for it's the will o' God, and that's aye best.

"Here's my watch and chain," placing them beside her son, who could not touch them, nor would lift his head, "and when ye feel the chain about yir neck it will mind ye o' yir mither's arms.

"Ye'll no forget me, John, I ken that weel, and I'll never forget you. I've loved ye here, and I'll love ye yonder. Th'ill no be an 'oor when I'll no pray for ye, and I'll ken better what to ask than I did here; sae dinna be comfortless."

Then she felt for his head and stroked it once more, but he could not look nor speak.

"Ye'll follow Christ, and gin He offers ye His cross, ye'll no refuse it, for He aye carries the heavy end Himsel'. He's guided yir mother a' thae years, and been as guid as a husband since yir father's death, and He'll hold me fast tae the end. He'll keep ye too, and, John, I'll be watchin' for ye. Ye'll no fail me," and her poor cold hand that had tended him all his days tightened on his head.

But he could not speak, and her voice was failing fast.

"I canna see ye noo, John, but I know yir

there, and I've just one other wish. If God calls ye to the ministry, ye'll no refuse, an' the first day ye preach in yir ain kirk, speak a guid word for Jesus Christ, an', John, I'll hear ye that day, though ye'll no see me, and I'll be satisfied.

A minute after she whispered, "Pray for me, and he cried, "My mother, my mother!"

It was a full prayer, and left nothing unasked of Mary's Son.

"John," said his aunt, "your mother is with the Lord," and he saw death for the first time, but it was beautiful with the peace that passeth all understanding.

Five years had passed, crowded with thought and work, and his aunt wondered whether he remembered that last request, or indeed had heard it in his sorrow.

"What are you thinking about, aunt? Are you afraid of my theology?"

"No, John, it's no that, laddie, for I ken ye'll say what ye believe to be true without fear o' man," and she hesitated.

"Come, out with it, auntie; you're my only mother now, you know," and the minister put his arm around her, "as well as the kindest, bonniest, goodest aunt ever man had."

Below his student self-conceit he was a good lad, and sound of heart.

"Shame on you, John, to make a fule o' an auld dune body, but ye'll no come round me wi' yir flattery. I ken ye ower weel," and as she caught the likeness in his face, her eyes filled suddenly.

"What's the matter, auntie? Will ye no tell me?"

"Dinna be angry wi' me, John, but a'm concerned about Sabbath, for a've been praying ever syne ye were called to Drumtochty that it might be a great day, and that I might see ye comin' tae yir people, laddie, wi' the beauty o' the Lord upon ye, according tae the auld prophecy 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace,'" and again she stopped.

"Go on, auntie, go on," he whispered; "say all that's in yir mind."

"It's no for me tae advise ye, who am only a simple auld woman, who ken's naethin' but her Bible and the Catechism, and it's no that a'm feared for the new views, or aboot yir faith, for I aye mind that there's mony things the Speerit hes still tae teach us, and I ken weel the man that follows Christ will never lose his way in ony thicket. But it's the fook, John, a'm anxious aboot; the flock o' sheep the Lord hes given ye tae feed for Him."

She could not see his face, but she felt him gently press her hand, and took courage.

"Ye maun mind, laddie, that they're no clever and learned like what ye are, but juist plain country fook, ilka ane wi' his ain temptation, an'a' sair trachled wi' mony cares o' this world. They'll need a clear word tae comfort their herts and show them the way everlasting. Ye'll say what's richt, nae, doot o' that, and a'body 'ill be pleased wi' ye, but, oh, laddie, be sure ye say a guid word for Jesus Christ."

The minister's face whitened, and his arm relaxed. He rose hastily and went to the door, but in going out he gave his aunt an understanding look, such as passes between people who have stood together in a sorrow. The son had not forgotten his mother's request.

The manse garden lies towards the west, and as the minister paced its little square of turf sheltered by fir hedges, the sun was going down behind the Grampians. Black massy clouds had begun to gather in the evening and threatened to obscure the sunset, which was the finest sight a Drumtochty man was ever likely to see, and a means of grace to every sensible heart in the glen. But the sun had beat back the clouds on either side, and shot them through with glory, and now between piled billows of light he went along a shining pathway into the Gates of the West. The minister stood still before that spectacle, his face bathed in the golden glory, and then before his eyes the gold deepened into an awful red, and the red passed into shades of violet and green, beyond painter's hand or the imagination of man. It seemed to him as if a victorious saint had entered through the gates into the city, washed in the blood of the Lamb, and the after-glow of his mother's life fell solemnly on his soul. The last trace of the sunset had faded from the hills when the minister came in, and his face was of one who had seen a vision. He asked his aunt to have worship with the servant, for he must be alone in his study.

It was a cheerful room in the daytime, with

its southern window, through which the minister saw the roses touching the very glass and dwarf apple trees lining the garden walks; there was also a western window that he might watch each day close. It was a pleasant room now, when the curtains were drawn, and the light of the lamp fell on the books he loved, and which bade him welcome. One by one he had arranged the hard-bought treasures of student days in the little bookcase, and had planned for himself that sweetest of pleasures, an evening of desultory reading. But his books went out of his mind as he looked at the sermon shining beneath the glare of the lamp and demanding judgment. He had finished its last page with honest pride that afternoon, and had declaimed it, facing the southern window, with a success that amazed himself. His hope was that he might be kept humble, and not called to Edinburgh for at least two years; and now he lifted the sheets with fear. The brilliant opening, with its historical parallel, this review of modern thought reinforced by telling quotations, that trenchant criticism of old-fashioned views, would not deliver. For the audience had vanished, and left one careworn, but ever beautiful face, which gentle eyes were waiting with a yearning look. Twice he crushed the sermon in his hands, and turned to the fire his aunt's care had kindled, and twice he repented and smoothed it out. What else could he say now to the people? and then in the stillness of the room he heard a voice, "Speak a guid word for Jesus Christ."

Next minute he was kneeling on the hearth, and pressing the *magnum opus*, that was to shake Drumtochty, into the hearth of the red fire, and he saw, half-smiling and half weeping, the impressive words "Semitic environment" shrivel up and disappear. As the last black flake fluttered out of sight, the face looked at him again, but this time the sweet brown eyes were full of peace.

It was no masterpiece, but only the crude production of a lad who knew little of letters and nothing of the world. Very likely it would have done neither harm nor good, but it was his best, and he gave it for love's sake, and I suppose that there is nothing in a human life so precious to God, neither clever words nor famous deeds, as the sacrifices of love.

The moon flooded his bedroom with silver light, and he felt the presence of his mother. His bed stood ghostly with its white curtains, and he remembered how every night his mother knelt by its side in prayer for him. He is a boy once more, and repeats the Lord's Prayer, then he cries again, "My mother! my mother!" and an indescribable contentment fills his heart.

His prayer next morning was very short, but afterwards he stood at the window, for a space, and when he turned, his aunt said:

"Ye will get yir sermon, and it will be worth hearing." "How did ye know?"

But she only smiled, "I heard you pray."

When he shut himself into the study that Saturday morning, his aunt went into her room

above, and he knew she had gone to intercede for him.

An hour afterwards he was pacing the garden in such anxious thought that he crushed with his foot a rose lying on the path, and then she saw his face suddenly lighten, and he hurried to the house, but first he plucked a bunch of forget-me-nots. In the evening she found them on his sermon.

Two hours later—for still she prayed and watched in faithfulness to mother and son—she observed him come out and wander round the garden in great joy. He lifted up the soiled rose and put it in his coat; he released a butterfly caught in some mesh; he buried his face in fragrant honeysuckle. Then she understood that his heart was full of love, and was sure that it would be well on the morrow.

When the bell began to ring, the minister rose from his knees and went to his aunt's room to be robed, for this was a covenant between them.

His gown has spread out in its black silken glory, but he sat down in despair.

"Auntie, whatever shall we do, for I've forgotten the bands?"

"But I've not forgot them, John, and here are six pair wrought with my own hands, and now sit still and I'll tie them round my laddie's neck."

When she had given the last touch, and he was ready to go, a sudden seriousness fell upon them.

"Kiss me, auntie."

"For your mother, and her God be with you," and then he went through the garden and underneath the honeysuckle and into the kirk, where every Free Churchman in Drumtochty that could get out of bed, and half the Established Kirk, were waiting in expectation.

I sat with his aunt in the minister's pew, and shall always be glad that I was at that service. When winter lies heavy upon the glen I go upon my travels, and in my time have seen many religious functions. I have been in Mr. Spurgeon's Tabernacle, where the people wept one minute and laughed the next; have heard Canon Liddon in St. Paul's, and the sound of that high, clear voice is still with me, "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion;" have seen High Mass in St. Peter's, and stood in the dusk of the Duomo at Florence when Padre Agostino thundered against the evils of the day. But I never realized the unseen world as I did that day in the Free Kirk of Drumtochty.

It is impossible to analyze a spiritual effect, because it is largely an atmosphere, but certain circumstances assisted. One was instantly prepossessed in favor of a young minister who gave out the second paraphrase at his first service, for it declared his filial reverence and won for him the blessing of a cloud of witnesses. No Scottish man can ever sing,

"God of our fathers, be the God
Of their succeeding race."

with a dry heart. It satisfied me at once that

the minister was of a fine temper when, after a brave attempt to join, he hid his face and was silent. We thought none the worse of him that he was nervous, and two or three old people who had suspected self-sufficiency took him to their hearts when the minister concluded the Lord's prayer hurriedly, having omitted two petitions. But we knew it was not nervousness which made him pause for ten seconds after praying for widows and orphans, and in the silence which fell upon us the Divine Spirit had free access. His youth commended him, since he was also modest, for every mother had come with an inarticulate prayer that the "puir laddie wud dae weel on his first day, and him only twenty-four." Texts I can never remember, nor, for that matter, the words of sermons; but the subject was Jesus Christ, and before he had spoken five minutes, I was convinced, who am outside dogmas and churches, that Christ was present. The preacher faded from before one's eyes, and there rose the figure of the Nazarene, best lover of every human soul, with a face of tender patience such as Sarto gave the Master in the Church of the Annunziata, and stretching out His hands to old folk and little children as He did, before His death, in Galilee. His voice might be heard any moment, as I have imagined it in my lonely hours by the winter fire or on the solitary hills—soft, low, and sweet, penetrating like music to the secret of the heart, "Come unto Me . . . and I will give you rest."

During a pause in the sermon I glanced up the church, and saw the same spell held the people. Donald Menzies had long ago been caught into the third heaven, and was now hearing words which it is not lawful to utter. Campbell, in his watch-tower at the back, had closed his eyes, and was praying. The women were weeping quietly, and the rugged faces of our men were subdued and softened, as when the evening sun plays on the granite stone.

But what will stand out forever before my mind was the sight of Marget Howe. Her face was as white as death, and her wonderful gray eyes were shining through a mist of tears, so that I caught the light in the manse pew. She was thinking of George, and had taken the minister to her heart.

The elders, one by one, gripped the minister's hand in the vestry, and, though plain, homely men, they were the godliest in the glen; but no man spoke save Burnbrae.

"I a' but lost ae fairm for the Free Kirk, and I wud hae lost ten tae be in the Kirk this day."

Donald walked with me homewards, but would only say:

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John." At the cottage he added, "The friend of the bridegroom rejoiced greatly because of the bridegroom's voice."

Beneath the honeysuckle at his garden gate a woman was waiting.

"My name is Marget Howe, and I'm the wife of William Howe, of Whinnie Knowe. My

only son wes preparin' for the ministry, but God wanted him nearly a year syne. When ye preached the Evangel o' Jesus the day I heard his voice, and I loved you. Ye hev nae mither on earth, I hear, and I hae nae son, and I wantit tae say that if ye ever wish tae speak to ony woman as ye wud tae yir mither, come tae Whinnie Knowe, an' I'll coont it ane of the Lord's consolations."

His aunt could only meet him in the study, and when he looked on her his lip quivered, for his heart was wrung with one wistful regret.

"Oh, auntie, if she had only been spared to see this day, and her prayers answered."

But his aunt flung her arms round his neck. "Dinna be cast doon, laddie, nor be unbelievin'. Yir mither has heard every word, and is satisfied, for ye did it in remembrance o' her, and yon was yir mither's sermon."