

## A WISE WOMAN.

### I.

#### OUR SERMON TASTER.

A Drumtochty man, standing six feet three in his boots, sat himself down one day in the study of a West-End minister, and gazed before him with the countenance of a sphinx.

The sight struck awe into the townsman's heart, and the power of speech was paralyzed within him.

"A'm frae Drumtochty," began a deep, solemn voice. "Ye'll hae heard of Drumtochty, of coorse. A've jined the polis; the pay is no that bad, and the work is naethin' to an able-bodied man."

When these particulars had been digested by the audience:

"It's a crooded place London, and the fouks aye in a tiravie [commotion], rinnin' here and rinnin' there, and the maist feck o' them dinna ken whar they're gaein'.

"It's officer this and officer that frae mornin' till nicht. It's peetifu' tae see the helplessness o' the bodies in their ain toon. And they're freevolous," continued the figure, refreshing itself with a reminiscence.

"It wes this verra mornin' that a man askit me hoo tae get tae the Strand.

"'Haud on,' I says, 'till ye come tae a cross street, and dinna gang doon it, and when ye see anither pass it, but whup round the third, and yir nose 'ill bring ye tae the Strand.'

"He was a shachlin bit cratur, and he lookit up at me.

"'Where were you born, officer?' in his clip-pit English tongue.

"'Drumtochty,' a' said, 'an' we hev juist ae man as sma' as you in the hale Glen.'

"He gied awa' lauchin' like tae split his sides, an' the fac' is there's no ane o' them asks me a question but he lauchs. They're a light-headed fouk, and no sair educat. But we maunna boast; they hevna hed our advantages."

The minister made a brave effort to assert himself.

"Is there anything I can do——" but the figure simply waved its hand and resumed:

"A'm comin' tae that, but a' thocht ye wud be wantin' ma opeenion o' London.

"Weel, ye see, the first thing a' did, of coorse, after settlin' doon, was tae gae roond the kirks and hear what kin' o' ministers they hae up here. A've been in saxteen kirks the last three months, an' a' wud hae been in mair had it no bin for ma oors.

"Ay, ay, a' ken ye'll be wantin' ma judgment," interpreting a movement in the chair, "an' ye'll hae it. Some wes pur stuff—plenty o' water and little meal—and some wesna sae bad for England. But ye'll be pleased to



know," here the figure relaxed and beamed on the anxious minister, "that a'm rael weel satisfied wi' yersel', and a'm thinkin' o' sittin' under ye.

"Man," were Drumtochty's last words, "a' wish Elspeth Macfadyen cud hear ye, her 'at prees [tastes] the sermons in oor Glen; a' believe she wud pass ye, an' if ye got a certee-ficat frae Elspeth, ye wud be a prood man."

Drumtochty read widely—Soutar was soaked in Carlyle, and Marget Howe knew her "In Memoriam" by heart—but our intellectual life centred on the weekly sermon. Men thought about Sabbath as they followed the plough in our caller air, and braced themselves for an effort at the giving out of the text. The hearer had his snuff and selected his attitude, and from that moment to the close he never moved nor took his eyes off the preacher. There was a tradition that one of the Disruption fathers had preached in the Free Kirk for one hour and fifty minutes on the bulwarks of Zion, and had left the impression that he was only playing round the outskirts of his subject. No preacher with anything to say could complain of Drumtochty, for he got a patient, honest, critical hearing from beginning to end. If a preacher were slightly equipped, the audience may have been trying. Well-meaning evangelists who came with what they called "a simple gospel address," and were accustomed to have their warmer passages punctuated with rounds of spiritual applause in the shape of smiles and nods, lost heart in face of that

judicial front, and afterwards described Drumtochty in the religious papers as "dead." It was as well that these good men walked in a vain show, for, as a matter of fact, their hearers were painfully alive.

"Whar did yon wakely body come frae, Burnbrae? It wes licht wark the day. There wes nae thocht worth mentionin', and onything he hed wes eked oot by repetition. Tae sae naethin' o' bairnly stories."

"He lives aboot England, a'm telt, an' dis a feck o' gude in his ain place. He hesna muckle in his head, a'll alloo that, Netherton, but he's an earnest bit cratur."

"Ou ay, and fu' o' self-conceit. Did ye hear hoo often he said, 'I'? A' got as far as saxty-three, and then a' lost coont. But a' keepit 'dear,' it cam' tae the hundred neat.

"'Weel?' a' says tae Elspeth Macfadyen. A' kent she wud hae his measure.

"'Gruel, Netherton, juist gruel, and enuech tae scunner [disgust] ye wi' sugar.'"

It was the birthright of every native of the parish to be a critic, and certain were allowed to be experts in special departments—Lachlan Campbell in doctrine and Jamie Soutar in logic—but as an all-round practitioner Mrs. Macfadyen had a solitary reputation. It rested on a long series of unreversed judgments, with felicitous strokes of description that passed into the literary capital of the Glen. One felt it was genius, and could only note contributing circumstances—an eye that took in the preacher from the crown of his head to the sole of his



foot; an almost uncannie insight into character; the instinct to seize on every scrap of evidence; a memory that was simply an automatic register; an unfailing sense of fitness; and an absolute impartiality regarding subject.

It goes without saying that Mrs. Macfadyen did not take nervous little notes during the sermon—all writing on Sabbath, in kirk or outside, was strictly forbidden in Drumtochty—or mark her Bible, or practise any other profane device of feeble-minded hearers. It did not matter how elaborate or how incoherent a sermon might be; it could not confuse our critic.

When John Peddie, of Muirtown, who always approached two hours, and usually had to leave out the last head, took time at the Drumtochty Fast, and gave, at full length, his famous discourse on the total depravity of the human race, from the text, "Arise, shine, for thy light is come," it may be admitted that the Glen wavered in its confidence. Human nature has limitations, and failure would have been no discredit to Elspeth.

"They were sayin' at the Presbytery," Burnbrae reported, "that it hes mair than seeventy heads, coontin' pints, of coorse, and a' can weel believe it. Na, na; it's no tae be expectit that Elspeth cud gie them a' aifter ae hearin'."

Jamie Soutar looked in to set his mind at rest, and Elspeth went at once to work.

"Sit doon, Jamie, for it canna be dune in a meenut."

It took twenty-three minutes exactly, for Jamie watched the clock.

"That's the laist, makin' seeventy-four, and ye may depend on every ane but that fourth pint under the sixth head. Whether it wes the 'beginnin' o' faith' or 'the origin,' a' canna be sure, for he cleared his throat at the time."

Peter Bruce stood helpless at the Junction next Friday—Drumtochty was celebrating Elspeth—and the achievement established her for life.

Probationers who preached in the vacancy had heard rumors, and tried to identify their judge, with the disconcerting result that they addressed their floweriest passages to Mistress Stirton, who was the stupidest woman in the Free Kirk, and had once stuck in the "chief end of man." They never suspected the sonsy, motherly woman, two pews behind Donald Menzies, with her face of demure interest and general air of country simplicity. It was as well for the probationers that they had not caught the glint of those black, beady eyes.

"It's curious," Mrs. Macfadyen remarked to me one day, "hoo the pulpit fashions change, juist like weemen's bonnets."

"Noo a' mind when auld Doctor Ferintosh, him 'at wrote 'Judas Iscariot the first Residuary,' would stand twa meenutes facing the fouk, and no sit doon till he hed his snuff."

"But thae young birkies gie oot 'at they see naebody comin' in, an' cover their face wi' ae hand sae solemn, that if ye didna catch them peekin' through their fingers tae see what like



the kirk is, ye wud think they were prayin'."

"There's not much escapes you," I dared to say, and although the excellent woman was not accessible to gross flattery, she seemed pleased.

"A'm thankfu' that a' can see withoot lookin'; an' a'll wager nae man ever read his sermon in Drumtochty Kirk, an' a' didna find him oot. Noo, there's the new meenister o' Netheraird, he writes his sermon on ae side o' ten sheets o' paper, an' he's that carried awa' at the end o' ilka page that he disna ken what he's daein', an' the sleeve o' his goon slips the sheet across tae the ither side o' the Bible.

"But Doctor Ferintosh wes cleverer, sall it near beat me tae detect him," and Elspeth paused to enjoy the pulpit ruse. "It cam' tae me sudden ae Sacrament Monday, hoo dis he aye turn up twal texts, naither mair nor less, and that set me thinkin'. Then a' noticed that he left the Bible open at the place till anither text was due, an' I wunnered a'd been sae slow. It was this wy: he askit the beadle for a gless o' water in the vestry, and slippit his sermon in atween the leaves in sae mony bits. A've wished for a gallery at a time, but there's mair credit in findin' it oot below—ay, an' pleasure tae; a' never wearied in kirk in ma life."

Mrs. Macfadyen did not appreciate prodigal quotations of Scriptures, and had her suspicions of this practice.

"Tak the meenister o' Pitscourie noo; he's

fair fozzy wi' trokin' in his gairden an' feedin' pigs, and hesna studied a sermon for thirty year.

"Sae what dis he dae, think ye? He havers for a while on the errors o' the day, and syne he says, 'That's what man says, but what says the Apostle Paul? We shall see what the Apostle Paul says.' He puts on his glasses, and turns up the passage, and reads maybe ten verses, and then he's aff on the jundy [trot] again. When a man hes naethin' tae say he's aye lang, and a've seen him gie half an oor o' passages, and anither half oor o' havers.

"He's a Bible preacher, at any rate," says Burnbrae tae me laist Fast, for, honest man, he hes aye some gude word for a body.

"It's ae thing," I said to him, 'tae feed a calf wi' milk, and anither tae gie it the empty cogie tae lick.'

"It's curious, but a've noticed that when a Moderate gets lazy he preaches auld sermons, but a Free Kirk minister taks tae abusin' his neeburs and readin' screeds o' the Bible.

"But Maister Pittendreigh hes twa sermons, at any rate," and Elspeth tasted the sweets of memory with such keen relish that I begged for a share.

"Weel, ye see he's terrible prood o' his feenishes, and this is ane o' them:

"Heaven, ma brethren, will be far grander than the hoose o' ony earthly potentate, for there ye will no longer eat the flesh of bulls nor drink the blood o' goats, but we shall sook



the juicy pear and scoop the loocious meelon. Amen.'

"He hes nae mair sense o' humour than an owl, and a' aye haud that a man without humour sudna be allowed intae a poopit.

"A' hear that they have nae examination in humour at the college; it's an awfu' want, for it wud keep oot mony a dreich body.

"But the meelon's naethin' tae the goat, that cowed a' thing, at the Fast tae.

"If Jeems wes aboot a' daurna mention 't: he canna behave himsel' tae this day gin he hears o' it, though ye ken he's a douce man as ever lived.

"It wes anither feenish, and it ran this wy:

"'Noo, ma freends, a' wull no be keepin' ye ony longer, and ye'll a' gae hame tae yir ain hooses and mind yir ain business. And as sune as ye get hame ilka man 'ill gae tae his closet and shut the door, and stand for five meenutes, and ask himsel', this solemn question, "Am I a goat?" Amen.'

"The amen near upset me masel', and a' hed tae dunge Jeems wi' ma elbow.

"He said no a word on the wy back, but a' saw it west barmin' in him, and he gried oot sudden aifter his dinner as if he had been ta'en unweel.

"A' cam' on him in the byre, rowing in the strae like a bairn, and every ither row he took he wud say, 'Am I a goat?'

"It wes na cannie for a man o' his wecht, besides bein' a married man and a kirk member, and a' gried him a hearin'.

"He sobered doon, and a' never saw him dae the like since. But he hesna forgot, na, na; a've seen a look come ower Jeems' face in kirk, and a've been feared."

When the Free Kirk quarreled in their vacancy over two probationers, Mrs. MacFadyen summoned them up with such excellent judgment that they were thrown over and peace restored.

"There's some o' thae Muirtown drapers can busk oot their windows that ye canna pass without lookin'; ther's bits o' blue and bits o' red, and a ribbon here an' a lace yonder.

"It's a bonnie show and denty, an' no wunner the lassies stan' and stare.

"But gae intae the shop, and peety me, there's next tae naethin'; it's a' in the window.

"Noo, that's Maister Popinjay, as neat an' fikey a little mannie as ever a' saw in a black goon.

"His bit sermon wes six poems—five a' hed heard afore—four anecdotes—three aboot himsel' and ain aboot a lord—twae burnies, ae floo'r gairden, and a snowstorm, wi' the text thirteen times and 'beloved' twal: that was a'; a takin' window and Netherton's lassies cudna sleep thinkin' o' him.

"There's ither shopmen in Muirtown that fiar scunner ye wi' their windows—they're that ill set out—and inside ther's sic a wale o' stuff that the man canna get what ye want; he's clean smooored wi' his ain goods.

"It's a grand shop for the old fouk that hae



plenty o' time and can turn ower the things by the oor. Ye'll no get a young body inside the door.

"That's Maister Auchtermuchty; he hes mair material than he kens hoo tae handle, and nae-body, hearin' him, can mak head or tail o' his sermon.

"Ye get a rive at the Covenants ae meenut, an' a mouthfu' of justification the next. Yir nae suner wi' the Patriarchs than yir whuppit aff tae the Apostles.

"It's rich feedin', nae doot, but sair mixed an' no verra tasty."

So the old and young compromised, and chose Carmichael.

Elspeth was candid enough on occasion, but she was not indiscreet. She could convey her mind delicately if need be, and was a mistress of subtle suggestion.

When Netherton's nephew preached the missionary sermon—he was a stout young man with a volcanic voice—Mrs. MacFadyen could not shirk her duty, but she gave her judgment with care.

"He's a fine lad, and 'ill be sure to get a kirk; he's been weel brocht up, and comes o' decent fouk.

"His doctrine sounds richt, and he'll no gang aff the track. Ye canna ca' him bashfu', and he's sure to be heard."

Her audience still waited, and not in vain.

"But the Lord has nae pleasure in the legs o' a man," and every one felt that the last word had been said on Netherton's nephew.

## II.

## THE COLLAPSE OF MRS. MACFADYEN.

Carmichael used to lament bitterly that he had lost his Gaelic, and laboured plans of compensation for our Celts, who were understood to worship in English at an immense reduction of profit. One spring he intercepted a Highland minister, who was returning from his winter's raid on Glasgow with great spoil, and arranged an evening service, which might carry Lachlan Campbell back to the golden days of Auchindarroch. Mr. Dugald Mactavish was himself much impressed with the opportunity of refreshing his exiled brethren, speaking freely on the Saturday of the Lowlands as Babylon, and the duty of gathering the outcasts of Israel into one. He was weaned with difficulty from Gaelic, and only consented to preach in the "other language" on condition that he should not be restricted in time. His soul had been much hampered in West End churches, where he had to appeal for his new stove under the first head, lest he should go empty away; and it was natural for one escaping from such bondage to put a generous interpretation on Carmichael's concession. So Maister Dugald continued unto the setting of