

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

"SOUNDING BRASS."

By A. Fraser Robertson.

The Reverend Maxwell Farquhar was polishing his sermon. It was Saturday, the day dedicated to the revision of his Sunday discourse. Those duties of his profession of a strictly pastoral nature played a secondary and subservient part to the sacred business of his sermon.

"The pulpit is the place of power!" was a favorite aphorism of his.

As it happened, the sermon in question had a peculiar interest attaching to it, for by the train from the North, due to arrive in Mudbury that evening, the minister expected his mother, and she had not heard him preach for years—not since that to her memorable occasion when, fresh from the Divinity Hall, he had visited the old home church in the far-off Scottish glen. "A poor, immature affair!" he had many a time reflected, looking back pityingly on that early production.

His mother had never been to Mudbury. Only the echo of her son's remarkable popularity had reached her in her distant Highland home. She had, to be sure, followed his brilliant career with closest interest. Her maternal heart had beat high as he had climbed rung after rung of the ladder to fame. Recognizing that the world held slippery places for his feet, from her quiet side-eddy in life she had prayerfully committed him to God as he struck out in mid-stream.

Now, as Maxwell realised her near presence, he suddenly yearned for her approbation, her appreciation, her sympathy. His wife, it is true, was by his side to wonder and admire. Her attitude was as it should be. She worshipped him blindly, openly showing her pride in him. Tenaciously she counted the crowds who flocked to hear him. She accepted all he did with unquestioning faith, and was touchingly content to shine with his light. Till he had known of his mother's coming, it seemed to the minister he had been conscious of no want. Though too loyal to admit even to himself that he missed anything, now suddenly his wife's admiration seemed incomplete.

With eager anticipation he pictured his mother's rejoicing in his popularity—her shining eyes; the tremor in her dear voice: above all, her understanding!

For, shunted away as she was, in her quiet corner of existence in the far North, she had yet not been content to stagnate. She had reached out to the large world, with broad sympathies and an open mind. She had raked in what part of its surging life she could, by means of books. She had kept abreast of the intellectual and religious thought of the day. She had exercised her keen insight into human nature upon what materials lay at her hand.

The Reverend Maxwell Farquhar was the shining pulpit light in Mudbury. The crowds in St. Cuthbert's bore abundant testimony to this fact. All sorts came to hear him—the elite of the adjacent county, set down in smart carriages and motors; the well-to-do trades people of the town; even the humble-factory "hands." Week by week the capacity of the building was strained to its utmost.

To the eminence, Sunday was ever the pulse of the week-preaching, as the breath of his nostrils. Upon his sermon he grudged no labor. He committed it to memory that the dramatic effect might thereby be enhanced. He estimated a fine literary taste. He was endowed with a deep-chested, musical intonation. He had the trick of oratory. He made dramatic points that startled

his hearers—it might be an abrupt final, a subtle raising or dropping of his voice. There was no point too minute, too insignificant, to master, if thereby he might acquire the reputation for which he thirsted.

His progress had been a sort of triumphal onward march, promoted as he had been from charge to charge. Upon only one occasion had anyone attempted, so to speak, to bar that progress. One day he had been the recipient of that "snake in the grass"—an anonymous letter. He had opened and read the vile thing, instead of committing it to the flames, as had been his first impulse. And this is how it had run: "Give us less of your spread eagles and more of the Gospel!"

He had reddened as he crumpled the paper into a ball—cheap, flimsy note-paper it was, the contents penned in an illiterate hand—and tossed it into the fire, but the vulgarly worded phrase had lodged disagreeably in his mind.

On the following Sunday, however, the church had been as well filled as usual, proving conclusively that that scurrilous note had not in the least voiced popular opinion.

The minister's mother came. Odd how, after years of mixing with his prosperous fellows, she should strike her son, as she stepped from the train, as strangely homely in figure, antiquated in dress, provincial in accent—far removed, in short, from the accepted ideal of a fashionable preacher's mother! But he put the notion from him as soon as conceived. His heart, not yet overlaid with success, thrilled to the thought that she was his mother. His home—poor, humble, unpretending—still dwells in his memory, in the odor of sanctity, and she had been its essence.

By and by, when she had had time to fit into her unfamiliar setting, the sense of incongruity left him. Her eye kindled, her tongue unloosed, and again between mother and son there was the old rapport, the subtle oneness, the power to see eye to eye!

The next morning, among his fashionable audience, it was the quaint figure in the black "dolman," with its odd provincial cut, that appeared most vividly to the minister's inward eye. His head turned magnetically to his own pew as he wound up his discourse. He had a thrilling consciousness that he had surpassed himself. He sat down with a glowing conviction that she would be proud of him!

At the mid-day meal he waited with inward complacency for her verdict—her eulogy upon his sermon, on his church, on the goodly congregation. But she was silent on these heads, leaving all such comments to his wife, who dutifully purred approbation. At last even she was vaguely penetrated by her mother-in-law's silence.

"Isn't Max's church beautiful?" she asked her.

"—I suppose it is," assented the elder woman half absently, "but I am not one to set much store by the aesthetics of worship."

The minister went to his evening service vaguely disappointed, but concluding that his mother meant to wait till evening before she said her say. He knew her high ideal of the sacred office. She probably considered it unseemly openly to criticize his sermon. Or she might fear to distract his thoughts from his evening duty. His second service was even better attended than the morning one. Again he was acutely conscious of one listener.

After supper he drew up his chair to the fire and prepared for that communion of souls for which he secretly

yearned. But somehow it did not come! It might be, he thought, that his wife's presence prevented his mother speaking frankly, but presently she left the room, and still there was none of the confidential intercourse between them he had reckoned on.

A little hurt feeling rose like a cloud in his mind. A touch even of offence crept into his heart. He stiffened into silence or commonplaces. Wounded pride forbade his introducing a subject she plainly avoided.

But during the week that followed she was the same tender, sympathetic companion as of yore—the same clever woman who lent a tinge of inspiration to common talk, who illumined all she touched with the glow of her own vivid personality. Especially did she display a genuine interest in all connected with St. Cuthbert's.

"My dear boy," she objected more than once when the minister was lionizing her in Mudbury, "you must not let me distract you from your work. You have your sick to visit—your meetings. You must not neglect any of these for me."

"I leave the work outside the pulpit chiefly for my assistant," Maxwell had replied. "I think a minister is not called upon to dissipate his energies. I concentrate mine upon my sermon. The pulpit, you know, is the place of power."

"But, Max, you are a pastor as well as a preacher—a shepherd with a flock to tend."

"To every man his work!" the minister had responded. Then, with a touch of unconscious arrogance, he had added: "Some are apostles, some prophets. I am, before all else, a preacher!"

He looked at her with thinly veiled complacency. The smile she gave him in return was strangely wistful.

Sunday came round again. Again, on this second Sunday of his mother's stay, the usual crowds attended St. Cuthbert's. And never had the minister preached a more eloquent discourse. His graceful diction, his finished phrases, his flights of fancy, his wealth of imagery—these tickled his hearers' intellectual palates. It was gratifying to them to find that they could take their religious food thus without uncomfortable soul-searchings. Again, it was pleasant for those over whose heads the preacher soared hopelessly to feel that they were listening to something very grand and elevating, if not altogether lucid!

Following the service came again that perplexing silence on the part of his mother. Now, for the first time, in proportion as he was hurt, did the minister realize how he had been counting on the appreciation and understanding she would give him. But he proudly stifled the boyish impulse to confide. She who had joyed and sorrowed with him as long as he could remember—this attitude of hers was incomprehensible! But, in the end, as the day for her leaving Mudbury drew near, his wall of offended dignity—of wounded pride—crumbled. There never had been a shadow between them. There should be none now.

"Mother," he said to her, the last evening, "something has come between us. I cannot tell what it is. You have given me no word of commendation since you have come. My pride in my own success somehow lacks the crown of your approval."

The furrowed face before him flushed, then paled. It was evident its owner was deeply moved. At length she rose and came to him, sat on the arm of his chair, and smoothed his hair fondly as in the days of his boyhood,