

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE WISDOM OF LOVE.

BY IAN MACLAREN.

It was the custom in the Free Kirk of Drumtochty that the minister should sit in the pulpit after service till the church was emptied. As the people streamed by on either side, none of them would have spoken to him, or shown any sign of recognition, for that would have been bad manners. But their faces softened into a kindly expression as they passed and they conveyed as by an atmosphere that they were satisfied with the sermon. If the minister on his part had descended from the pulpit, and stood below in his gown and bands, shaking hands with all and sundry and making cheery remarks, the congregation would have been scandalized, and would have felt he had forgotten the dignity of his office. He was expected to keep his place with gracious solemnity, as a man who had spoken in the name of the Lord, and not to turn the church into a place of conversation. If he rose, and leaning over the side of the pulpit asked a mother how it fared with her sick daughter, or stretched out his hand to bid a young man welcome after years of absence from the glen, this rare act was invested with special kindness, and the recipients, together with their friends, were deeply impressed. When old Bell Tobh, who brought up the tail of the procession, used to drag a little in the passage with simple art, arranging her well-worn shawl or replacing the peppermint leaves in her Bible, in order that she might get a shake of the minister's hand, no one grudged her his word of good cheer, for they knew what a faithful soul she was and how kind she was to blind Marjorie. And if the minister's hand, no one grounded her his home to Marjorie, and Bell boasted that she never went empty-handed, the glen was well content, for no one in its length and breadth had suffered so much as Marjorie, and none was so full of peace. Donald Menzies would sometimes boldly stand at the pulpit-foot upon occasion till the minister descended, but those were days in which his soul had just come out of prison, and he rejoiced upon his high places. Otherwise they departed quietly from the house of God. Then the minister went up through the silent church to his little vestry, and it was his custom to turn at the door and look down the church to the pulpit, imagining the people again in their pews, and blessing in his heart the good men and women who were now making their way by country roads to their distant homes.

Today John Carmichael sits in the pulpit with his head bent and buried in his hands, for he has been deeply numbed. When he was appointed to the Free Kirk he knew that he could not preach, for that had been faithfully impressed upon him in his city assistantship; but it was given him during his first six months, face to face with the critics of the glen, to learn how vast was his incapacity. Unto the end of his ministry he never forgot the hours of travail, as he endeavored to prepare an exposition and a sermon for the Sabbath service. He read every commentary on the passage which he possessed and every reference in the book of dogma; he hunted literature through for illustrations, and made adventurous voyages into science for analogies. There was no field from which he did not painfully gather, except conventional religious anecdote, which in even his hours of despair he refused to touch. Brick by brick he built up his house, and then on Sunday it would tumble to pieces in his hands, and present nothing but a heap of disconnected remarks for the consideration of the people. This morning he had come to a halt try-

ing to expound the dispute over meat offered to idols in the first epistle to the Corinthians, and he had omitted one head of his sermon and the whole of the practical application. Simply because he was nervous and his memory had failed. But he could not conceal from himself that if there had been any real unity in his thinking, and if he had been speaking at first hand, he would not have been so helpless. The people were very patient, and had made no complaint, but there was a limit, and it must have been reached. Besides, it was not honorable or tolerable that a man should undertake the duties of a profession and not be able to discharge them. It was now evident that he could not preach, and it did not seem likely he would ever be able to do so; and as in the Free Kirk no man can even have the most modest success or the narrowest sphere of labor unless he can produce some sort of sermon, his duty seemed plain. He had not chosen the ministry of his own accord, but had entered it to please one whose kindness he could never repay; his action had been a service of piety, but it had been a mistake in practice, and one thing only remained for him. During the week he would consult the only person affected by the step and resign his charge. The people trooping up with nothing but friendly thoughts of him could not guess how bitter a cup their minister was drinking, but the sound of their footsteps fell upon his heart like drops of fire. There were other fields open to him, and he might live to do good work in his day; but his public life had started with a disastrous failure, and as long as he lived he would walk humbly. When the last of the congregation had left, and there was not a sound except a thrush welcoming spring with his cheerful note, and caring not that winter had settled down upon a human soul, Carmichael rose and crept up the forsaken church a broken man.

As he stood in the vestry his chin sunk on his chest, and he resolved to wait there for a little lest a straggler should be loitering about the manse gate, someone knocked at the door. It was the elder, who, of all the session, was chiefly loved and respected. As soon as Carmichael saw his face he knew as by instinct why he had come, and what he was going to say. If there were any difficult task in the congregational life requiring both courage and delicacy, it was laid on Angus Sutherland, and he never failed to acquit himself well. Never had he come on a more unwelcome errand, and Carmichael felt that he must make the course as smooth as possible, for without doubt the elder had been sent to make a just complaint. It required a brave man to come, and Carmichael must also please the man, so he pulled himself together and gave a courteous, and so far as he could, a cheerful welcome to the good elder.

"It is good weather that we are having sir," began Angus, speaking English with the soft Gaelic accent, for he was a West Highlander, who had settled in the glen, "it is good to see the beginning of Spring. We will be hoping that the Spirit of God may spring in our own hearts, and then we shall also be lifting up our voices. But I must not be detaining you when you will be very tired with your work, and be needing rest. Maybe I should not be troubling you at all at this time, but I have been sent by the elders with a message, not because I am better than my brethren, but only because it is my fortune to be a little older.

Carmichael knew then that he was right in his anticipation, and he asked Angus to say what was given him frankly, and to make no delay. And he tried

to speak gently and humbly, for in truth his own conscience was with the elders, and, as he believed, their embassy.

"You may not know, sir, but I will be telling you, that after the service is over, and the people have gone out from the House of God, the elders speak together below the big beech tree, and their speech will be about the worship and the sermon. You are not to think," added Angus with a gracious smile, "that they will be criticising what is said, or hardening their hearts against the council of the Lord declared by the mouth of His servant. Oh, no, we will rather be storing up the bread of God, that we may eat thereof during the days of the week, and have strength for the way."

Carmichael assured Angus that he knew how fair-minded and kind hearted the elders were, both in word and deed. And braced himself for what was coming.

"This morning," continued Angus, "the elders were all there, and when we looked at one another's faces we were judging that the same things will be in our hearts. It was with us for weeks, and it was growing, and today it came to speech. We knew that we were not meeting together as the session, and it is not business I will be coming with; we met as the elders of the flock, and it is as your friend that I am here in much humility. But it is not easy for this man to say what has been laid upon him."

Carmichael was sorry for him, and signed to him to go on.

"You were chosen, I will be reminding you," said Angus with a gracious expression on his face, "by the goodwill of all the people, and it was a very proud day when the clerk of the Presbytery stood in his place and said that the call would be left with the elders, so that all the people might be having the opportunity of signing it, and I stood up and replied to the reverend gentleman, 'It is not necessary, they have all signed.' O yes, and so they had, every man and every woman that was upon the roll. And the young people, they had written their names too upon the paper of adherence, every one above sixteen years of age. And the very children would be wishing that day that they had something to sign, for the hearts of the people had gone out towards you and there was one voice in every mouth, 'Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.'"

Carmichael gave Angus to understand that he would never forget those things while he lived, and he prayed God that he might be a better man for the people's confidence in him. But his heart was beginning to break as he thought of their bitter disappointment, and the trust which had lapsed in his hands.

"It is three months since you entered upon your ministry among us, and you will not be angry with me if I am saying to you that you are very young to have so heavy a weight upon you, for there is no burden like the burden of souls. And the elders will be nothing and so will all the people, for they are not without understanding in Drumtochty, that you are giving yourself with all your mind and all your heart unto the work of the Lord. The people are seeing that whatsoever talents the Lord has been pleased to give are laid out at usury, and they are judging you very laudably, both in your study and in their homes. But," softening his voice till it was like a whisper at eventide, "you are very young, and the ministry of the Lord is very arduous."

And all his suffering Carmichael could not help admiring the courtesy and consideration with which Angus presented the petition of the session, which he was perfectly certain by this time was a sug-