

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## DONALD'S DOWNFALL.

By Theodore Thearle.

## Chapter I.

"Can a man be both a gentleman and a minister?" was the question Harold Armstrong asked himself, as he leaned back in his study chair. He was in the mood to answer with an emphatic negative, though the dog collar that he wore revealed that he was the one, while an indefinable something in face and manner convinced the stranger at once that he was also the other. Around him he saw men, whom at heart he knew to be fine fellows, allowing the edge to be taken off their nobility by a padding to popularity; others he noted with disdain drifting into the loathsome vulgarity of becoming gossips and busybodies.

Would he ever come to that? The very thought made him give his shoulders a shrug of horror. Yet the kind of visitation people liked forced temptation into his way; while if he was ever to court a call, it looked as if self-interest would have to take precedence of self-respect.

A heavy step on the gravel walk without roused him from his disagreeable reverie.

"Here he comes, the old curmudgeon; I was sure yesterday's temperance sermon would bring him post-haste. I will either have to put wax in my ears or chain up my fists if he begins his insolence again. The congregation were mad to make an ox like that session clerk."

The words were bitter, but the vicious poke he gave the fire showed that they were not too strong for his feelings. He had suffered much from this bumptious, over-bearing elder, to whom a sensitive nature was an absurdity. He had just time to turn up the lamp and wheel round the chair when the latter entered.

He was a heavy-made, bull-headed man; his mass of tousy hair and unkempt beard was turning gray. Fat, puffed-out cheeks gave his face a broad unintelligent appearance. But it was his eyes that made Armstrong liken him to an ox. They stood out from their sockets; and when inflamed with anger, which was their chronic state, glared with a fiery glow. In his early days he had been a blacksmith, but latterly had gone into business as a grocer, and it was his wine cellars that brought him the most of his money.

"Ye're a young man, Mr. Armstrong, an' I dinna want to be over severe; but I gied ye a plain warnin' afore, an' ye maun now jist bide the consequences," he said, as he seated himself in a chair, and very deliberately removed his hat.

"Well, Mr. McGaw, is it my sermon that is wrong this time?" asked the minister, with a slight smile, placing emphasis on the last two words.

"Ye ken as well as I dae what's the matter," rejoined the indignant visitor, fanning his wrath. "Ye're no' to read ony mair sermons in oor pulpit. I am tellin' ye that for the last time; we'll no hae it."

"Pardon me, but you found fault with your last minister because you said he never wrote his sermons, but just hivered."

The ex-blacksmith was a little nonplused at being checkmated by a former complaint.

"Weel, I thoct at the time that thar couldna be a waur preacher; but I hae larned my mistak' since you cam'. We canna stand it ony longer."

"Then it is the manner, and not the matter, that you have taken exception to?"

"Baith; the one is as bad as the ither."

"I am glad to hear that. It is the first sign of encouragement I have got

since I came here," replied the minister, still smiling.

"Thar's no' muckle o' that in it, I can tell ye."

"More than you think. Unless I had hit your conscience yesterday you would not have been here to-night. There is hope yet. I am glad I have got the range."

"It is the road ye'll be gettin', my lad, if ye talk like that, an' the sooner the better; that's what I have come to say. I am hearin' that you are goin' to get mairre. Weel, I wad be advisin' you no' to be in a hurry, or else you'll no hae a manse to bring a bride tae. It will be a poor weddin' for her, I'm thinkin'."

Armstrong was guilty of two unpardonable sins in McGaw's eyes. First, he had proved a strong temperance man, and that did not suit the session clerk's wine cellars; and, second, he had not married his eldest daughter, which was perhaps the gravest offence. Out of the list of probationers who had preached a year before the vacancy, McGaw had specially chosen Armstrong, not because of his preaching abilities—the others excelled in that—but because he was the only unengaged man on the list. The ex-blacksmith's social ambition was to see his daughter lady of the manse, and having put Armstrong in for that reason, he felt that he was entitled to his due. That the young minister might have a mind of his own on such a subject never occurred to this stubborn-willed, muscle-hardened man. He was beginning to learn his mistake, and it was this that maddened him. Besides, if another disengaged cleric was to be brought on the field before Matilda had passed her prime, there was little time to spare; the present incumbent must be got to shift at once.

The minister straightened himself up in his chair, and cast a searching glance at his visitor.

"You want me to go?" he said.

"Aye, that is about the size o't," remarked the other dryly. "It wad be better to come frae yersel', an' as the annual so'ce is on Friday night I thoct it only richt o' me to gie ye the chance o' withdrawin' like a gentleman, an' no' compel me to gie ye yer marching orders afore a' the folk. But mind ye, if ye dinna dae as I say—"

He got no further. Armstrong had risen to his feet. The battle blaze of his ancestors was in his eyes. He had come of a stock who had been born to command, and though he had chosen the gown instead of the sword the blood was the same. His veteran grandfather, who had fought and bled under Wellington, would have turned in his grave had one of his race submitted in meekness to such insolence. Perhaps it was this ancestor that looked out for a moment from his eyes. Once single-handed, at the battle of Albuera, he had saved the day by diving the Frenchmen headlong from the captured British guns. It was the same glare the grocer saw that moment, and never before or since has he seen anything like it. Clutching his hat and stick, he backed to the door.

"Begone, and never enter this house again."

The door slammed in the session clerk's face, and he was left standing in the night, while the minister went slowly back to his room, gave his fire a poke, and sat down on his chair.

He was cooler now and he began to realize what he had done. Of course, after this the place would be unbearable. The ejected elder had a genius for twisting facts, and would soon invent a most damaging story out of this incident. The

people were like reeds shaken with the wind, ever ready to accept the latest tale, if only it was bad enough and had thrill in it. Their moral digestion had long since got out of order through their craving for the tidbits of gossip, just as children's physical organs are run d by sweets.

Armstrong's spirit would never let him condescend to correct the false statements that were coined in the grocer's shop, and so the likelihood was that in this instance, as before, the popular prejudice would be cleverly fanned into opposition.

To ask a lady of breeding to come to such a place was, of course, impossible. He must write Gertrude at once, and break off the engagement, though it would tear his heart out. He was a man of rather impulsive action; resolution with him was equivalent to deed.

He took out at once his writing materials, and though his cheeks paled and his fingers trembled slightly, yet the lines about his mouth remained firm, and he finished the short letter that spelled misery to two lives. His pride would not let him explain the whole circumstances. She belonged to another Church, and he shrank from revealing the type of character his own had honored with the position of office-bearer, even to her.

For a while he sat staring vacantly at the written page, when suddenly a knock at the door brought him to his senses. Hurriedly he placed the sheet in its envelope, and faced round to meet his second visitor.

It was Jamie Scott, a shy youth who had just emerged from his teens, and who seated himself gingerly on the edge of the proffered chair, while he nervously fingered his cap, and seemed unable to begin his message. But the minister knew the signs; even a year had taught him many things.

"Why, you look as if you had come to ask me to marry you, Jamie," he said, with a good-natured smile.

"Yes, sir; you have guessed right. Me and Betsy Green have made it up, and we would like if you could marry us a week come next Tuesday."

They talked for a few minutes, and soon this raw youth forgot his bashfulness, and bubbled over with boyish enthusiasm about his future prospects. The minister's sad heart did not keep him from entering into the other's joy; but the strain had been great, and he was beginning to feel sick. So when his visitor rose to go, he asked him if he would be good enough to post his letter, as the office was over half a mile away.

When he had seen him out at the door, he stumbled up to his bedroom.

"I am glad I have got it off," he murmured. "I could not have slept another night without letting her know. Her life must not be wasted. In time she will get over the blow, and meet in with some one more worthy, who will be able to offer her a more fitting position, but not—oh no—not the same passionate love."

## CHAPTER II.

Jamie had so much to think of that, perhaps, it is little to be wondered at that he forgot about the minister's letter as he sped to Betsy's house. On entering, he flung his overcoat over a chair, and the envelope slipped from his pocket on to the floor.

His sweetheart, to tease him, snatched it up, and springing behind the table, said, with a laugh,—

"So, so, Jamie, you've got another lass, I see."

The minister in his excitement had scarcely wet the gum, so that the flap opened, and before Jamie could inter-