

CHAPTER XLII. - MARGARET, THE PRECENTOR. AND GOD BETWEEN.

Unless Andrew Luke, who went to Canadas be still above ground, I am now the only survivor of the few to whom Lang Tammass told what passed in the manse parlor after the door closed on him and Margaret. With the years the others lost the details, but before I forget them the man who has been struck by lightning will look at his arm without remembering what shrivelled it. There even came a time when the scene seemed more vivid to me than to the precentor, though that was only after he began to break up.

"She was never the kind o' woman," Whamond said, "that a body need be nane feared at. You can see she is o' the timid sort. I couldna hae selected a woman easier to speak bold out to, though I had ha'en my pick o' them."

He was a gaunt man, sour and hard, and he often paused in his story with a puzzled look on his forbidding face.

"But, man, she was so mighty windy o' him. If he had wanted to put a knife into her, I believe that woman would just hae telled him to take care no to cut his hands. Ay, and what innocent-like she was! If she had heard enough, afore I saw her, to make her uneasy, I could hae begun at once; but here she was, shaking my hand and smiling to me, so that aye when I tried to speak I gaed through ither. Nobody can despise me for it, I tell you, mair than I despise mysel'.

"I thocht to mysel', 'Let her hae her smile out, Tammass Whamond; it's her hinmost,' Syne wi' shame at my cowardliness, I tried to yoke to my duty as chief elder o' the kirk, and I said to her, as thrawn as I could speak, 'Dinna thank me; I've done nothing for you.'

"'I ken it wasna for me you did it,' she said, 'but for him; but, oh, Mr. Whamond, will that make me think the less o' you? He's my all,' she says, wi' that smile back in her face, and a look mixed up wi't that said as plain, 'and I need no more.' I thocht o' saying that some builds their house upon the sand, but--dagont, dominie, it's a solemn thing the pride mithers has in their laddies. I mind aince my ain mither--what the devil are you glowering at, Andrew Luke? Do you think I'm greeting?"

"'You'll sit down, Mr. Whamond,' she says next."

"'No, I winna,' I said, angry-like. 'I didna come here to sit.'"

"I could see she thocht I was shy at being in the manse parlor; ay, and I thocht she was pleased at me looking shy. Weel, she took my hat out o' my hand, and she put it on the chair at the door, whaur there's aye an auld chair in grand houses for the servant to sit on at family exercise.

"'You're a man, Mr. Whamond,' says she, 'that the minister delights to honor, and so you'll oblige me by sitting in his own armchair.'"

Gavin never quite delighted to honor the precentor, of whom he was always a little afraid, and perhaps Margaret knew it. But you must not think less of her for wanting to gratify her son's chief elder. She thought, too, that he had just done her a service. I never yet knew a good woman who did not enjoy flattering men she liked.

"I saw my chance at that," Whamond went on, "and I says to her sternly, 'In worldly position,' I says, 'I'm a common man, and it's no for the like o' sic to sit in a minister's chair; but it has been God's will,' I says, 'to wrap around me the mantle o' chief elder o' the kirk, and if the minister falls awa frae grace, it becomes my duty to take his place.'

"If she had been looking at me, she maun hae grown feared at that, and syne I could hae gone on though my ilka word was a knockdown blow. But she was picking some things aff the chair to let me down on't.

"'It's a pair o' mittens I'm working for the minister,' she says, and she handed them to me. Ay, I tried no to take them, but--Oh, lads, it's queer to think how saft I was.

"'He's no to ken about them till they're finished,' she says, terrible fond-like.

"The words came to my mouth, 'They'll never be finished,' and I could hae cursed mysel' for no saying them. I dinna ken how it was, but there was something; pitiful in seeing her take up the mittens and begin working cheerily at one, and me kenning all the time that they would never be finished. I watched her fingers, and I said to mysel', 'Another stitch, and that maun be your last.' I said that to mysel' till I thocht it was the needle that said it, and I wondered at her no hearing.

"In the tail o' the day I says, 'You needna bother; he'll never wear them,' and they sounded sic words o' doom that I rose up off the chair. Ay, but she took me up wrang, and she said, 'I see you have noticed how careless o' his ain comforts he is, and that in his zeal he forgets to put on his mittens, though they may be in his pocket a' the time. Ay,' says she, confident-like,

'but he winna forget these mittens, Mr. Whamond, and I'll tell you the reason: it's because they're his mother's work.'

"I stamped my foot, and she gae me an apologetic look, and she says, 'I canna help boasting about his being so fond o' me.'

"Ay, but here was me saying to mysel', 'Do your duty, Tammas Whamond; you sluggard, your duty, and without lifting my een frae her fingers I said sternly, 'The chances are,' I said, 'that these mittens will never be worn by the hands they are worked for.'

"'You mean,' says she, 'that he'll gie them awa to some ill-off body, as he gies near a' thing he has? Ay, but there's one thing he never parts wi', and that's my work. There's a young lady in the manse the now,' says she, 'that offered to finish the mittens for me, but he would value them less if I let ony other body put a stitch into them.'

"I thocht to mysel', 'Tammas Whamond, the Lord has opened a door to you, and you'll be disgraced forever if you dinna walk straucht in.' So I rose again, and I says, boldly this time, 'Whaur's that young leddy? I hae something to say to her that canna be kept waiting.'

"'She's up the stair,' she says, surprised, 'but you canna ken her, Mr. Whamond, for she just came last nicht.'"

"'I ken mair o' her than you think,' says I; 'I ken what brocht her here, and ken wha she thinks she is to be married to, and I've come to tell her that she'll never get him.'"

"'How no?' she said, amazed like.

"'Because,' said I, wi' my teeth thegither, 'he is already married.'

"Lads, I stood waiting to see her fall, and when she didna fall I just waited langer, thinking she was slow in taking it a' in.

"'I see you ken wha she is,' she said, looking at me, 'and yet I canna credit your news.'

"'They're true,' I cries.

"'Even if they are,' says she, considering, 'it may be the best thing that could happen to baith o' them.'

"I sank back in the chair in fair bewilderment, for I didna ken at that time, as we a' ken now, that she was thinking o' the earl when I was thinking o'

her son. Dominie, it looked to me as if the Lord had opened a door to me, and syne shut it in my face.

"Syne wi' me sitting there in a kind o' awe o' the woman's simpleness, she began to tell me what the minister was like when he was a bairn, and I was saying a' the time to mysel', 'You're chief elder o' the kirk, Tammas Whamond, and you maun speak out the next time she stops to draw breath.' They were terrible sma', common things she telled me, sic as near a' mithers minds about their bairns, but the kind o' holy way she said them drove my words down my throat, like as if I was some infidel man trying to break out wi' blasphemy in a--kirk.

"'I'll let you see something,' says she, 'that I ken will interest you .' She brocht it out o' a drawer, and what do you thitik it was? As sure as death it was no more than some o' his hair when he was a litlin, and it was tied up sic carefully in paper that you would hae thocht it was some valuable thing.

"'Mr. Whamond,' she says solemnly, 'you've come thrice to the manse to keep me frae being uneasy about my son's absence, and you was the chief instrument under God in bringing him to Thrums, and I'll gie you a little o' that hair.'

"Dagont, what did I care about his hair? and yet to see her fondling it! I says to mysel', 'Mrs. Dishart,' I says to mysel', 'I was the chief instrument under God in bringing him to Thrums, and I've come here to tell you that I'm to be the chief instrument under God in driving him out o't.' Ay, but when I focht to bring out these words, my mouth snecked like a box.

"'Dinna gie me his hair,' was a' I could say, and I wouldna take it frae her; but she laid it in my hand, and--and syne what could I do? Ay, it's easy to speak about thae things now, and to wonder how I could hae so disgraced the position o' chief elder o' the kirk, but I tell you I was near greeting for the woman. Call me names, dominie; I deserve them all."

I did not call Whamond names for being reluctant to break Margaret's heart. Here is a confession I may make. Sometimes I say my prayers at night in a hurry, going on my knees indeed, but with as little reverence as I take a drink of water before jumping into bed, and for the same reason, because it is my nightly habit. I am only pattering words I have by heart to a chair then, and should be as well employed writing a comic Bible. At such times I pray for the earthly well-being of the precentor, though he has been dead for many years. He crept into my prayers the day he told me this

story, and was part of them for so long that when they are only a recitation he is part of them still.

"She said to me," Whamond continued, "that the women o' the congregation would be fond to handle the hair. Could I tell her that the women was waur agin him than the men? I shivered to hear her.

"Syne when they're a'sitting breathless listening to his preaching,' she says, 'they'll be able to picture him as a bairn, just as I often do in the kirk mysel'.'

"Andrew Luke, you're sneering at me, but I tell you if you had been there and had begun to say, 'He'll preach in our kirk no more,' I would hae struck you. And I'm chief elder o' the kirk.

"She says, 'Oh, Mr. Whamond, there's times in the kirk when he is praying, and the glow on his face is hardly mortal, so that I fall a-shaking, wi' a mixture fear and pride, me being his mother; and sinful though I am to say it, I canna help thinking at sic times that I ken what the mother o' Jesus had in her heart when she found Him in the temple.'

"Dominie, it's sax-and-twenty years since I was made an elder o' the kirk. I mind the day as if it was yestreen. Mr. Carfrae made me walk hame wi' him, and he took me into the manse parlor, and he set me in that very chair. It was the first time I was ever in the manse. Ay, he little thocht that day in his earnestness, and I little thocht mysel' in the pride o' my lusty youth, that the time was coming when I would sweat in that revered parlor. I say swear, dominie, for when she had finished I jumped to my feet, and I cried, 'Hell!' and I lifted up my hat. And I was chief elder.

"She fell back frae my oath," he said, "and syne she took my sleeve and speired, 'What has come ower you, Mr. Whamond? Hae you onything on your mind?'

"'I've sin on it,' I roared at her. 'I have neglect o' duty on it. I am one o' them that cries "Lord, Lord," and yet do not the things which He commands. He has pointed out the way to me, and I hinna followed it.'

"'What is it you hinna done that you should hae done?' she said. 'Oh, Mr. Whamond, if you want my help, it's yours.'

"'Your son's a' the earth to you,' I cried, 'but my eldership's as muckle to me. Sax-and-twenty years hae I been an elder, and now I maun gie it up.'

"'Wha says that?' she speirs.

"I say it,' I cried. 'I've shirked my duty. I gie ap my eldership now. Tammas Whamond is no langer an elder o' the kirk;' ay, and I was chief elder.

"Dominie, I think she began to say that when the minister came hame he wouldna accept my resignation, but I paid no heed to her. You ken what was the sound that keeped my ears frae her words; it was the sound o' a machine coming yont the Tenements. You ken what was the sicht that made me glare through the window instead o' looking at her; it was the sicht o' Mr. Dishart in the machine. I couldna speak, but I got my body atween her and the window, for I heard shouting, and I couldna doubt that it was the folk cursing him.

"But she heard too, she heard too, and she squeezed by me to the window, I couldna look out; I just walked saft-like to the parlor door, but afore I reached it she cried joyously--

"'It's my son come back, and see how fond o' him they are! They are running at the side o' the machine, and the laddies are tossing their bonnets in the air.'

"'God help you, woman!' I said to mysel', 'it canna be bonnets-- it's stanes and divits mair likely that they're flinging at him.' Syne I creeped out o' the manse. Dominie, you mind I passed you in the kitchen, and didna say a word?"

Yes, I saw the precentor pass through the kitchen, with such a face on him as no man ever saw him wear again. Since Tammas Whamond died we have had to enlarge the Thrums cemetery twice; so it can matter not at all to him, and but little to me, what you who read think of him. All his life children ran from him. He was the dourest, the most unlovable man in Thrums. But may my right hand wither, and may my tongue be cancer-bitten, and may my mind be gone into a dry rot, before I forget what he did for me and mine that day!