

‘Meenister’ Machiavelli

By H. Pease

The soul of the Minister of Bleakhope was disquieted within him, for he had just been ‘up the water’ and seen the new stained-glass windows which had recently been put in and dedicated to Saint Cuthbert in the English church “beside the Knowe.’

The Reverend Alexander Macgregor was tall and spare, oval-faced, eyed like a hawk, yet with a humorous twinkle behind his keen glances that were equally alert whether for the rising of a ‘troot’ or a sinner.

A bequest from a wealthy parishioner, who had died, as the result of a motor-car accident, had enabled his ‘brother’—the Episcopalian ‘priest’—to decorate his church with three single lights, illustrative of Saint Cuthbert’s life, and the Minister grieved as he thought of his own little grey kirk on the bare bill which badly wanted a ‘bit colour’ in its wee apsidal east window.

He regarded his frayed sleeves and his wrinkled black trousers unhelpfully.

If he were to save every penny till the end of his days he could never achieve his desire. He had no wealthy parishioner whom he might persuade into buying a motor-car after seeing that ‘the Kirk’ had been duly remembered in his will.

His flock consisted chiefly of small farmers and herd laddies, and unless one of them emigrated and made a fortune in Canada he saw no prospect of achievement in the parish itself.

As he walked up the road towards the manse on this particular October evening after his return from the Knowe he came nigh to breaking the tenth Commandment into pieces, for the three light windows seemed to flaunt themselves before his eyes in the gathering mist, and to ask tauntingly, ‘What wull ye gie for us? What wull ye gie for us?’

As he plodded onward he was suddenly hailed by a voice from behind. Turning about, he recognised one of his flock—a small fellside farmer—who, coming up with him, informed him that an old acquaintance was staying at the little inn close by who had been inquiring about him.

‘Wha is ’t?’ ‘inquired the Minister.

‘Ye’ll mind Tam Elliot,’ replied the elder, ‘him that was nevvie to auld Sandy o’ the Ratten Raa farm that died and left him part money. Aff he went when he got the siller, and a bit later an auld great-aunt left him a bit mair, sae he took a muckle big farm doon sooth, and noo he’s at the inn cracking crouse about his pedigree beasts and sheep, and swankn’ awa as to what’s he’s done syne he left these parts, just as if we didna ken the sort o’ man he was, and aye will be. Howsoever, he’s askin’ after ye, and maybe ye’d like a crack wi’ him.’

The Minister was on his way home, but he liked his ‘crack’ as well as another, so he turned eastwards to the little wayside hostelry some quarter of a mile back to forgather with Elliot, who used to attend the kirk ‘whiles’ in company with his deceased uncle. The ‘Sign of the Wool Pack’ was a very quiet county inn; in the little ‘snug’ there would not be above half a dozen customers—the landlord, probably, presiding over them—so the Minister thought no harm in joining them for a glass, a pipe, and a ‘crack.’

‘Hoo’s aal wi’ ye?’ he inquired, as he entered the door of the ‘snug,’ and, having nodded to the company, held out his hand to Tam Elliot. ‘We hae heard that ye are increasing your flocks like Abraham, doon sooth i’ the land o’ Canaan!’

‘You are welcome, Minister,’ cried Tam in reply, as he rose up and took him by the hand; ‘“wag a paw,” as we used to say, and take something for a sore throat. Yes,’ he continued, as he

sat himself down again and took a pull at his own long glass, 'I'm building up a pedigree stock at my new place—gave £500 for a bull t' other day, and that's a fact.'

'Dod, man!' said the Minister, bethinking him of the stained-glass window, 'why, that's a small fortune.'

''Tis that,' replied Tam complacently, stretching a leg to the hearth, 'but pedigree blood's worth the money.' He caressed a little imperial he had grown since he left the north, stretched out his other leg to the fire, and with a smile of satisfaction that seemed to ooze from his vintage cheeks, continued to talk of his own pedigree.

'Yes, blood's the thing,' he said, 'for beasts and humans alike. Why, take my family—every one knows the clan of Elliot's been on the Border for centuries, and one of my forebears was married on a Stuart lass, so likely enough I may have a bit royal blood i' my veins, even though it comes from the wrong side o' the blanket.'

Here an ancient, bearded shepherd—an elder of the kirk—with a tongue of caustic, Ringan by name, who was sitting behind the Minister, winked derisively at the company and muttered *sotto voce*, 'He's forgot aal the little yins. I mind fine his granddam—the merry-begot of a pitman's lass doon the water.' The Minister himself could not resist a smile at this, and the visitor added somewhat hastily, 'Yet I say wi' Robbie Burns—"a man's a man for a' that." Have another touch o' this mountain dew,' he ted magnanimously to the scornful herd.

'Na, na, I'm awa,' replied the ancient herd, rising as he spoke; 'it's gettin' late, an' I dinna want to run the risk o' meetin' Wi' "Parcy" on my way hame.'¹

'Parcy!' exclaimed the visitor, raising himself in surprise from his arm-chair. 'Parcy, the ghost o' the murdered mosstxoooper, d' ye mean, the old wives talked of? D' ye mean to tell me ye still believe in ghosts up here?'

'Why not?' said the Minister. ''Tis good Christian doctrine to believe in departed spirits.'

'We don't believe in 'em in the towns,' retorted Elliot scornfully, 'so why should we in the country?'

'Will ye put your faith, or lack o't, tae the proof?' here inquired the caustic ancient herd. 'I'se haud ye a wager ye winna walk doon the burn the morrow nicht at the deid hour, past the stane where "Parcy" was slain, and up on beyond the kirkyaird, and on tae the manse. Maybe it's a mile, an' to-morrow's the nicht o' Hallow E'en when the deid walk. Here's my shilling against whatever ye like to lay doon,' and as the ancient spoke he drew a long, thin leathern purse from his trouser pocket, plucked forth a shilling, and set it down with a bang on the table.

'And there's my Sovereign alongside it,' cried the visitor vaingloriously.

'Aweel,' the ancient continued, 'the Meenister can be the stake-holder, an' the landlord can set ye awa as the clock strikes twalve the morrow nicht. If ye win through to the manse your lane ye'll hae won my shillin'; if no', the Meenister will hae a Sovereign i' the ladle next Sawbath.'

The landlord assented, the others all approved the suggestion, the Minister placed the stakes carefully into his waistcoat pocket, and the aged shepherd departed, chuckling to himself over his wager.

The Minister Continued to converse about ghosts for a minute or more, then he too rose, saying that 'the wife' would be getting nervous if she 'wanted' him much longer.

As soon as he was out upon the road he sped on after the retreating footsteps of the shepherd, and he hailed him through the gloom. As he came up with him he said quietly, 'Come awa to the manse and we'll hae a bit crack.'

¹ 'Parcy Reed,' the hero of the well-known ballad, was foully slain in Bakinghope above Cateleugh Laugh, but his wraith is said to haunt the Rede and to be visible about Rochester.

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Hallow E'en drew on stormy and dark, and lo't at the inn began to regret that he had ever accepted the wager, though for very shame he could not now withdraw from his forbidding task. At a quarter to twelve then precisely, having fortified himself with a final dram and lighted a cigar, he set forth upon his mission. He knew the path quite well, and could make no pretence at missing his way, but when he had crossed the burn by the shaking little wire suspension bridge sudden fear assailed him. There was a gusty wind sweeping drumly clouds athwart the sky—faintly illuminated by the dying moon; now a few stars appeared momentarily, then a swathe of darkness enveloped all. The old kirkyard, with its tottering headstones grouped around the black kirk, had an eldritch look in the murky night, and Elliot's heart sank into his boots as he drew nigh.

The clouds had lifted as he walked swiftly but unsteadily onward. What was that? He heard something move, and looked about him fearfully. Suddenly from beside the little kirkyard gate a monstrous form rose up—soot-black, horned, and threatening. It advanced upon him, tossing its horrid horns, but without speaking. *Could it be 'Auld Clootie' himself?*

Elliot's knees became as water; he staggered on, but at that very moment a terrible bray resounded from the hollow on his left, and Elliot, overcome with terror, fell to the earth. 'Minister Macgregor,' he yelled; 'O Minister, come help me! All the devils i' Hell are loosed about me.' The horned figure drew closer, brandishing his horns, and Elliot believing his last hour was come wailed forth his confession of sin.

'I hae done wrang,' he moaned aloud; 'I promised Jeannie to mak her an honest woman, but I haena done it. But I will, I swear it, by Heaven above. Minister Macgregor,' he yelled again, 'come, help me, or I 'll gang clean daft.' Shaking like an aspen leaf he lay upon the ground and covered his eyes with his hands, whilst he endeavoured to say a prayer.

Then he felt something touch him on the shoulder, and he broke into an agonised yell.

'Whisht, then, whisht!' said a kindly voice in his ear. A friendly hand gripped him below the oxters, and, peering up, he discerned the Minister.

'Eh, Minister,' cried Elliot in a paroxysm of joy, 'ye hae saved me—saved me,' then he burst into tears.

'Come awa, come awa,' said the Reverend Alexander Macgregor gently, 'come awa up wi' me to the manse.'

Clinging to his benefactor, Elliot rose to his feet and stumbled forward as swiftly as his shaking limbs permitted.

'Whaur is he?' he inquired tremulously, keeking about fearfully.

'Wha d'ye mean?' replied the Minister. 'Is't "Parcy" ye hae seen?'

'Waur nor that; waur nor that,' replied the other. 'I believe 'twas *him*.'

'Anither fifty yards an' we'll be hame,' said Minister. 'See, there's the licht i' the windie showing fine.'

As soon as they were within doors the Minister placed his trembling companion in the old leathern chair in his little sanctum, made up the fire, and poured him out a glass of whisky with hot water from the kettle that was opportunely ready on the hob.

'And now, Minister,' said the rescued one, imbibing the goodly contents of his glass, 'what can I do for ye by way o' recompense for saving me the night?'

‘Did I hear ye confessin’ that ye had wranged lass—by name Jeannie?’ asked the minister, seriously, by way of answer.

‘Ay, ye did that,’ replied the penitent fervently, ‘and I swore to right her. I’ll mak her my wife at aince; I swear it again—before ye.’

‘I’ll haud ye to it, mind,’ said the Minister gravely; then he inquired thoughtfully, ‘What wull ye do by way o’ further recompense for being saved the nicht?’ He paused. ‘Weel,’ he continued, ‘there’s some that had sinned like ye i’ the auld times that desired to prove their repentance and their gratitude to Heaven for timeous rescue by some outward an’ visible symbol, sic, for example, as building a kirk or foundin’ an orphanage.’

‘Eh, but, Minister,’ ejaculated the penitent, turning white again, ‘yon’s a work for kings and suchlike, no’ for a poor farmer like me.’

‘A pair farmer,’ commented his mentor, ‘is no’ ane that gives £500 for a pedigree bull.’ There was silence for a while. The penitent groaned within himself as he regarded the implacable face in front of him. Then he said suddenly, ‘No a *kirk*, Minister,’ and further ventured wheedlingly, ‘tis impossible, but somethin’ *for* the kirk—a new pulpit, for instance, or a bit organ, or some heating for the winter.’ The Minister shook his head.

‘The kirk disna care aboot organs, and the folk hereawa are hardy and winna want ony heatin’,’ he replied slowly; then with the twinkle in his eye he explained further, ‘No, that is for *pleasure purposes*.’ He reflected a moment or two profoundly, then with a happy inspiration suggested an alternative. ‘A stained-glass windie might be a guid an’ righteous gift, I’m thinkin’.’

‘That’s mair like it,’ responded the penitent, almost with joy, finishing off his glass and holding it out suggestively for replenishment.

‘Hoo muckle would it come to, think ye—£100 belike?’

The Minister replenished his guest’s glass hospitably before replying.

‘We’d best mak it guineas,’ he said thoughtfully.

‘Right!’ cried the other, his spirits visibly ‘I’ve got a cheque-book on me, an’ I’ll write it out for ye this instant moment.’

The Minister took the cheque silently, dried it carefully on his blotting-pad, then tucked it safely away in his Bible.

‘An’ noo,’ he said to his penitent, ‘noo I’ll set ye awa for the inn.’

‘Ye’ll never be for turning me out into the darkness again?’ wailed Elliot, his face paling perceptibly.

‘I’ll gang wi’ ye,’ replied the Minister. ‘I’ll guide ye; and wi’ this,’ he took up his heavy crook, ‘I’ll fettle “Auld Hornie.”’

‘I don’t care about the wager,’ continued the other, desirous of putting off the evil moment; ‘here’s the sovereign—for yourself or the old shepherd.’

Serious as before, the Minister took the sovereign and laid it on the Bible as he said:

‘If ye dinna gang back to the inn the landlord an’ his lassies will be up a’ nicht seekin’ ye, an’ ye’ll be the talk o’ the hail countryside.’

His visitor sighed heavily and looked wistfully at the whisky bottle, but the Minister was adamant. ‘No’ anither sup till the windie’s in,’ he thought to himself.

‘Well, Minister,’ said his guest with resignation, as he rose slowly up from his chair, ‘I’ll go back, but keep a close tongue, ye ken.’

‘I’m used to daein’ that,’ replied the other, as he ushered his guest out into the darkness, and led him back to the ‘Wool Pack’ without mishap.

On his return the Minister paused by the kirk yett, and thus soliloquised:

‘I never cared muckle for that camsterie goat o’ Ringan’s, but he wis gey useful the nicht there’s no denyin’, whilst as for auld cuddy, dod! but he was in fell voice, an’ cam in punctual as the precentor.’

The Reverend Alexander Macgregor thrust out an arm on high, turned about on heel and toe, as though to secret piping. Then he resumed his way to the manse, pondering now what should be the subject of the stained-glass window. Suddenly he stood stock still. He had it! ‘It wull represent Palm Sunday—the entry of our Lord intil the Holy Ceety—ridin’ *in on an ass.*’