

Elder ‘Machiavelli-er’

By H. Pease

I

On the evening after the stained-glass ‘windie’ had been set up in the new kirk and dedicated to the memory of Saint Cuthbert, the Reverend Alexander Macgregor and his elder, Ringan Telfer, the ancient ‘herd,’ sat together in the manse’s little ‘sanctum’ or library, enjoying a ‘crack,’ a glass of whisky, and a pipe of tobacco.

‘It’s a gey an’ useful thing a ghaist,’ said Ringan meditatively. ‘It fleys folk fine an’ stirs up their conscience grund. I aince thocht I caught a keek o’ “Parcy” mysel’, but I wasna muckle gliffed, for though I ken fine I’m a sinner, I’ve naethin’ particular on my conscience.

‘Mind ye, I dinna ken whether ’twas a wraith I saw or no—for I’d been first footin’, ye ken, an’ maybe I had a wee drappie i’ my e’e.’

‘Gey an’ likely,’ assented the Minister, nodding his head sympathetically, and drawing deep upon his pipe.

‘Onnyway, naethin’ came o’t,’ continued Ringan, imbibing thoughtfully from his glass, ‘but what I’m thinkin’ the noo is that aiblins anither ghaist-gliff nicht do a body I ken o’ a guid turn.’

‘There’s many a body that nicht be the better of a bit “ghiff,” but it disna always last, and it’s a daungerous game to play at. But wha is the body?’ inquired the Minister.

‘It’s a lang story,’ replied the other, as he extracted a document from his pocket, ‘but gey easy to understand. Weel, this document is a bit codicil to the will of a far-off cousin o’ mine, but it wasna signed, as ye’ll note, and i’ the eye o’ the law, as they call it, o’ nae value. Noo the testator, Mistress Wallace, was a widow wi’ a bit heritable property the whulk she ‘d but a life interest in, but she had a bit suer i’ the bank, an’ ’twas this she was leavin’ awa different frae her will by this bit codicil.

‘The siller was twa hundred pounds, an’ it was lyin’ at the bank, and the bank manager got it for various advice—ceevihity an’ attention paid to Mistress Wallace.

‘Weel, there was anither puir widdie—a far-off cousin o’ hers, that had a bairn born till her after her man died, and the puir widdie juist askit Mistress Wallace to be its godmither.

‘Noo Mistress Wallace had nae bairns o’ her ain, ye ken, an’ it pleased her fine to be a godmither to the fatherless bairn, but bein’ verra frail i’ body, she didna get the codicil signed an’ witnessed before her “stroke.”

‘Weel, the doctor, he kenned aal about the hail matter, an’ he gied the puir widdie the bit paper since he was managin’ her bit affairs. He thocht aiblins if the bank manager saw it he nicht “pairt”—but deevil abodle wull he hand ower though the doctor saw him himsel’.

The Minister nodded his apprehension, then taking the pipe out of his month, inquired, ‘Wha was the puir widdie woman?’

‘Ye’ll ken my sister?’ replied Ringan, gazing fixedly at the fire, ‘Effie that was marrit on puir Jock Ord—a fine laddie h was—verra knowledgeable wi’ sheep, wha perished in a snowstorm, mindin’ his hirsel.

‘She was left gey ill aff, an’ noo wi’ a bairn to provide for, hard pit till’t. Twa hundred pounds will provide for his upbringing’, an’ aibhins turn him into a meenister at the finish.’

‘Ay,’ replied the Minister., ‘I mind Effie well, puir decent body, for didna I marry them? An’ I heard tell o’ her man’s death, but I hadna seen nither since they wert herdin’ ower the Carter Bar. But whaur aoes the “ghaist” come intil the story?’ inquired the speaker in conclusion.

Ringan continued to contemplate the fire with fixed attention, then slowly delivered himself as follows:

‘I’m hearin’ that the Burnside Field Club wull be comin’ up the water to hold their meetin’ here shortly, an’ to view the Roman Camp. I mind they were here ten years before, an’ this year the president is the bank manager doon at the auld toon, wha has gruppit the siller I’ve tell’t ye about. Weel, ye’ll ken him, an’ amblins,’ here the speaker took up the bellows and thoughtfully assisted the fire’s respiration, ‘aiblins it wud be a ceevil matter to offer to gie him a night’s lodgin’, for it’s a gey lang way up frae the auld toon, an’ the manager’s gettin’ gey white about the pow.’

Here the speaker laid down the bellows, then took up his glass thoughtfully, drained it oil slowly, and resumed his contemplation of the fire.

The Minister also refreshed himself, then, keenly watching his companion from the tail of his eye, admitted an acquaintanceship with the bank manager.

‘Ay, I ken him. He’s a verra decent body—a bit near maybe, an’ terribly superfecial i’ antiquarian knowledge. I mind I had a bit differ wi’ him the time he was last up at the Camp.

‘But supposin’ I was inclined to be ceevil till him—what then?’

‘Then aiblins,’ replied the elder, stooping and knocking the ashes from his pipe against the fender, ‘there micht be a bit gliff, an’ this bit micht come in gey useal by way o’ stirrin’ up his conscience the whilk, I’m thinkin’, has been growin’ stiff i’ his auld age. If it disna there’s nae harm dune.’

The Minister thrust out his legs, and gazed up at the ceiling.

‘Was it Dr. Thomson that tended Effie, an’ that saw the manager?’

‘Ay, ’twas him,’ replied his companion. There was a pause of silence after this response, the elder gazing abstractedly into the fire, the Minister surveying his ceiling, yet all the while out of the tail of his eye keeping watch on his elder.

Ultra sardonic he was, refected the watcher affectionately, intolerant, *plus Calviniste que Calvin même*—sceptical of the world, with uptwisted eyebrows that seemed to signify a perpetual interrogation, yet faithful unto death to his duty and his own ideals. He minded well assisting to dig Ringan out of a snowdrift wherein he was seated, calmly tending a ewe and her two tiny lambs.

‘Aweel,’ said the Minister, breaking the silence, ‘I micht—be offerin’ hospitality to Macmanus, the banker; ’twould be the ceevil thing to do, but if he comes he’s my guest, ye ken—I maunna hae ony “frightfulness”; an’ the cuddy wull be locked up.’

‘Ay,’ responded the jbther, ‘an’ sae wull the goat be.’

‘I ken naethin’ aboot that,’ retorted the other, bringing his gaze down from the ceiling to rest upon the swag-bellied green bottle on the table beside him.

It’s gettin’ on intil the “wee sma’ hours ayont the twal,” he added; ‘ye mun hae a “deoch-andoruis” afore startin’ “aff.”’

‘Deed, an’ I wull,’ replied Ringan, as he rose up and held out his glass, whilst wrapping his plaid about his shoulders.

II

Fergus Macmanus, bank manager, amateur antiquary, and President of the Burnside Field Club, accepted the invitation from the Reverend Alexander Macgregor, and returned with him from the Roman Camp to the manse for the night after a successful meeting, whereat he had given an address on Castrametation and the Roman Wall, which had abundantly satisfied himself, if not his host.

Macmanus was a short, thick-set, well-preserved man of some seventy years of age, with a complexion reminiscent of Harvest Festival. His Pauline motto of 'All things to all men' was a little impeded by an assurance of infallibility which he founded upon his 'common-sense view of things.' Hence after supper he proceeded to demonstrate to his host that all the theorists were wrong; that he had walked along the line of the wall and satisfied himself that wall and vallum were not contemporaneous, and that if Hadrian had made any use of the vallum—an early dyke or *limes*—it was merely 'for the screening of his troops whilst the wall was building.

'Common sense,' retorted the Minister, 'wilna tak ye verra far. Common sense assures me the world is flat, an' stands stock still in the centre o' things.'

'Common sense,' echoed his companion; 'man alive! why it includes the use of all the rational faculties. What I mean is that folk get wedded to a theory and disregard the practical side o' things. Noo the Romans were first and foremost a practical people, as a'budy kens. They made sure o' their conquest, an' then built their wall, sae that the popular theory that the vallum was a protection against the south is a' stuff an' nonsense.'

'Isna the result,' queried the Minister, 'that ye haud ane theory, ither folks anther?'

'If a thorough excavation were carried out many secrets might be discovered, but moo folks prefer to travel an' dig i' the remotest pairts o' the earth, an' no' at home.'

'Aweel,' the Minister continued, with a sudden deft twist to the conversation, 'it's no excavation o' the earth that's interestin' me the noo—it's *the excavation o' the mind*. I have been readin' o' what a clever doctor chield has accomplished i' Edinbro' by the poer o' mind upon mind—'

'Ye mean Christian Science—Faith-Healing?' queried his companion scornfully.

'Na, na,' returned the Minister, 'he ca's it Psycho-therapeutics—an' has worked miracles by it. For an instance, he actually operated wi' the knife on a puir body without any chloroform, ether, or anæsthetic whatever—an' the patient ne'er had a wink o' pain under it. His consciousness was under control, ye ken, directed clean awa from thocht o' pain—'

'I'd like to see the man that could mak me believe he'd gien me security for his overdraft when he hadna.' interrupted his companion satirically.

'I think I hae heard o' the thing haein' been accomplished, natheless,' returned the Minister with a twinkle in his eye.

'Man!' acknowledged the banker with a smile, 'but ye're gleg.'

The two men surveyed each other silently, like fencers awaiting feint or lunge, when suddenly a peal of thunder echoed on the air and shook the windows of the sanctum.

'A thunderstorm,' said the banker, 'i' the 'distance. Well, there's ane thing I'd be glad to hear o' frae your new doctor, an' that is no' to be gliffed by thunner an' lightin'. I was verra nigh struck by a flash when I was a bairn oot' fishin' for troots—an' I caana get the better o't.'

'Tis a lang way off,' replied the Minister, rising and looking out o' window; 'weel, it's bedtime, I'm thinkin'. Ye mum juist have a night-cap before retiring.'

Nothing loath, his guest fortified himself handsomely, and was escorted to his bedroom by his host.

Entering his own room, which was opposite the other, the Minister proceeded to undress, leaving the door ajar advisedly, in the event of any strategy of Ringan's contriving.

He lay awake some while in watchful expectation, but as the thunderstorm had passed over and no other sound was audible, he shortly fell sound asleep.

Suddenly he was roused by the most extraordinary noise. The manse seemed to be shaken to its foundation.

He started up in bed. Could a flash of lightning have hit the chimney?

Then he saw a light without on the landing, heard footsteps, and a voice calling him by name.

'Minister Macgregor,' it called. 'The house has been struck wi' lightnin', I'm certain.'

The Minister hurried out on to the landing, and seeing his guest, by the light of the candle which he held in his shaking hand, to be much perturbed, endeavoured to comfort him.

'It was a fearfu' noise yon; it wakened me up oot o' the sleep o' the just,' he said. 'I thocht the chimney mum have been stricken, but if sae, stanes wud hae come through the roof. Maist likely the auld ash-tree by the door has been stricken. Hark!' he added, 'I think the storm's past, for it's rainin' hard enoo.'

Somewhat reassured, his guest was induced to return to bed, and after the Minister left him he heard the door bolted behind him.

The Minister went back to his own bed, but this time he refused to lie down, for he felt assured that Ringan was up to some fresh cantrip or other, and he wished to forestall him.

The rain shortly ceased, and a faint moon-light showed itself through the window. Almost at the same time the Minister was aware of stealthy soft footings on the stairs without. Noiselessly he approached his open door, and there he saw by the dim skylight a tall figure moving on stocking feet at the stair-head. Was it a burglar? he thought fearfully. 'No, it was Ringan. But what on earth was he carrying?'

Before he could interfere the tall figure set a dark object rolling down the stairs with infernal reverberation, then sat himself down on what seemed a tea-tray, and shot clattering into the gloomy deep.

The Minister turned and leaped into his bed, annoyed, yet shaken with laughter.

Another moment and he heard the door opposite unbolted, and a perturbed but angry voice rose outside his door:

'What the devil are ye up to? Are ye playing a trick on me, Minister? What was that fearfu' noise?'

'I'm playin' nae tricks on ye,' replied the Minister, as he opened the door and stood face to face with his guest, whose face was plainly agitated by fear and anger. 'It's either the storm, or aiblins a ghaist, or else some one's playin' tricks on baith o' us.'

'Did ye no place this bit paper i' my room?' inquired his guest wrathfully, holding up a document with his hand accusingly.

'What bit paper is 't?' inquired the Minister. 'I hae pit mae bit paper i' your room.'

'Did Dr. Thomson o' the auld toon no' send ye this bit waste-paper——codicil he called it, or come to see ye about it?'

'No, he didna,' replied the Minister, 'neither he nor any ither doctor has been i' my manse yet, an' I hope never wull.'

‘On your hon—’ began the other. Then catching his host’s gleaming eye, said brokenly, ‘It’s the— Well—it’s the most extraordinary thing that ever happened to me i’ my life. The ghastly noise—then to find this bit paper lyin’ i’ my room.’

‘What is the paper?’ inquired the Minister. ‘Can ye no hae brocht it wi’ ye yoursel’?’

Macmanus looked about him stricken and unnerved, the anger had died down in his face, and he seemed to be seeking consolation.

‘I’ll tell ye the hail matter,’ he decided impulsively, ‘and what’s mair, I’ll abide by your advice.’

Thereon very briefly he set forth the tale of the codicil, justified himself on all legal grounds, and awaited the Minister’s decision. ‘Aweel, Macmanus,’ replied the Minister slowly but decisively, ‘as ye ask my opeenion, I can say is that if I was i’ your shoes I’d juist forego my legal rights an’ let the puir woman hae the twa hundred punds.’

‘I believe you’re richt,’ replied the other; ‘but if that ghastly noise happens again I’ll come and spend the rest o’ the night i’ your bedchamber.’

‘Come your ways in noo,’ responded his host, ‘and I’ll get ye a drop whisky.’

‘Aweel,’ murmured the listener with pricked ears who sat beside gong and tea-tray at the stair-foot, *‘I’m thinkin’ if the Meenister’s Macchiavelli, the elder’s Madiavelli-er.’*