

Selected Short Stories

II.—The Tragedy of Duncan Duncanson, Schoolmaster¹

Sometime Minister of the Parish of Shaws: Deposed for Drunkenness

By S. R. Crockett



S. R. Crockett

Mr. S. R. Crockett, the author of "The Stickit Minister" and "The Raiders," was born almost exactly thirty-five years ago, at a small farm-house called Duchrae, in the district of Galloway in Scotland. Galloway is the scene of almost if not quite all of his stories, whether they are written about present-day people or are romances of the old times. Mr. Crockett, as a boy, attended a little school near by, and later went to the excellent academy at Castle Douglas, known as the Free Church Institution. It was at this latter school, we believe, that he said the other day, in a speech to the boys, that a Scotch boy needed three things—oatmeal, the catechism, and a birch rod. From this training, he said, had resulted such men as Thomas Chalmers, David Livingstone, MacKay of Uganda, and Paton of New Hebrides. Later on Mr. Crockett was a pupil-teacher in this school for some years, leaving it for the Edinburgh University, where his education was completed; then followed some years of travel. Mr. Crockett has written verse for the last ten years or so, but the little character-studies which have now become famous under the title of one of them, "The Stickit Minister," were begun as late as 1891, and form the author's first prose writings. The stories appeared at first quite obscurely in religious and local papers of no very great circulation, but their remarkable merit was at once discovered by literary judges, and upon their publication in book form they were hailed by all the critics as worthy of being placed side by side with the stories of Mr. J. M. Barrie, which they resemble in subject and spirit, but not in method of treatment. This book of stories has already passed through at least six editions in England, and has had a large sale here. Mr. Crockett's second book, "The Raiders," is a semi-historical story of romance and adventure, and, while thoroughly original, suggests comparisons with Mr. Stevenson's "Kidnapped," Mr. Conan Doyle's "Micah Clarke," and other books of that class.

The success of "The Raiders" has been extraordinary, and it is well deserved; still, we think many will agree with us in finding in the little stories of modern Scotch life, such as that here reproduced, a quality so singularly attractive, a humor so strong and bright, and a pathos so sincere and sympathetic, that the union of these things makes "The Stickit Minister" the author's best book. Mr. Crockett has just published a third book, a short story of the days of the Covenanters, with a legendary and supernatural element; it is called "Mad Sir Uchtred of the Hills." The tale is slight and hardly to be compared with his other work. A new romance is now being written by Mr. Crockett. A review of "The Raiders" will be found in The Outlook for March 31, 1894.

DUNCAN DUNCANSON, parochial schoolmaster in the parish of Nether Dullarg, stood at the door of his school-house, shading his eyes with his hand. He looked down the road and up the road, but no one was in sight. Not a leaf moved that breathless July morning. It was yet too early for the scholars to come, and, indeed, being high haytime, the dominie did not expect a large attendance. He was not watching the stray collie-puppy which made noisy demonstrations against the bluebottles near the water-spout at the foot of the playground. He was looking out for a tall girl carrying a black bag. To his mind she had delayed too long, and he was muttering what seemed by the gruff tones to be threats, but which was in reality something much milder.

"Never was there sic a lassie; she canna even come straight back from the heid o' the street!" he said, complainingly. "There's no' a dowg in the Dullarg but she maun clap, an' no' a pussy sleepin' in the sun but she maun cross the road to stroke. She gets hersel' fair covered wi' dirt playin' wi' the laddies; she'll even set doon the black bag to play for keeps wi' the boys at the bools, an' her comin' on for fifteen."

He sighed as though this were a deep grief to him, and a tear stood, with a kind of melancholy entirely unsuited to the slightness of the occasion, in his unsteady eye of watery blue. But it was not at all the shortcomings of the "lassie" that filled his heart. He kept muttering under his breath:

"If my Flora had but had her ain—shame to you, Duncan Duncanson, shame to you, shame to you—she micht hae been a dochter o' the manse."

Suddenly there was a glint as of sunshine in a shady place among the trees at the foot of the inclined slope of beaten earth which was called the playground. So steep was it that when a scholar fell anywhere upon it he rolled over and over till brought up by the dyke. A tall girl

came up the steps with a hop, skip, and jump, took the dominie round the neck in a discomposing manner, swung him on his heels as on a pivot, and pushed him into the school.

"There," she said, "that's the last time that I gang for your bag. I wonder that you are not ashamed to sen' your daughter to the public-hoose for a black bag that every bairn kens what's in, every Tuesday and Friday, an' you the maister!"

Duncan Duncanson stood knitting his broad smooth brow, and clasp and unclasp his hands nervously. But he said nothing. His attention was irresolutely divided between his daughter, who stood before him with arms akimbo, the image of a petty tyrant, and the black bag which more and more strongly drew his gaze. "I'll slip ower," he said, "an' see gin there's a big eneuch coal on the fire to keep it in!" So, taking the black bag in his hand, he went out like a chidden child glad to escape from observation. The girl maintained her dignified position till he was out of sight, then threw herself down on the hacked and ink-stained desk and cried as if her heart would break.

"Oh, my faither, my faither," she sobbed, "an' him yince a minister!"

When the dominie returned, with a flush on his cheek which slowly ebbed away, he found his girl in the midst of a riotous game of "steal the bonnets," which was played at only by the aristocrats of the school. Flora Duncanson was easily empress both in the school-house and in the school of the Nether Dullarg; and except when her father took one of his occasional turns of wild and ungovernable temper, after too close devotion to the black bag which he had returned from locking in its skeleton cupboard, she was also the mistress of the master.

Every one in Nether Dullarg knew the history of Duncan Duncanson. He had taught nearly all the younger portion of them, for it was many years since he was appointed parish preacher in Nether Dullarg, long before Mr. Pitbye came to be minister. Duncan Duncanson was college-bred. More than that, he had been a minister, and

¹This story is published by special permission of the publishers of "The Stickit Minister," Messrs. Macmillan & Co., of New York. The portrait has been redrawn from one in "The Bookman."

no "stickit" minister either, but duly licensed, ordained, and inducted—also, alas! *deposed*. There had been a black bag even in those early days, as Duncan Duncanson knew to his cost. His had been the good seed sown among the abundance of thorns. These two, thorns and wheat, grew up together into a deadly crop, and together were cut down in that terrible day of reckoning when the presbytery of Pitscottie solemnly deposed Duncan Duncanson, sometime minister of the parish of Shaws, from the office of the ministry of the Kirk of Scotland.

Then the presbytery of that day adjourned to the Gordon Arms to wash down their presbyterial dinner with plentiful jorums of toddy, and Duncan Duncanson sat for the last time in his study in the manse of the Shaws, sipping and filling the demon bottle which he carried like a familiar spirit in his black bag. This was his Day of Judgment; and the hopes of his youth, the aspirations of his middle life, the forecasts of a quiet age, were all consumed in the flaming wrath of it. This was all because the Reverend Duncan Duncanson had fallen down one Sabbath day at the front door of the Shaws manse. There were those in the presbytery who had often fallen down at their back doors, but then this made a great difference, and they all prayed fervently for the great sinner and backslider who had slidden at his front door in the sight of men. The moderator, who in the presbytery had called Duncan everything that he could lay his tongue to, reflected as he drove home that he had let him off far too easily. Then he stooped down and felt in the box of his gig if the two-gallon "greybeard" from the Gordon Arms were sitting safely on its own bottom. So much responsibility made him nervous on a rough road.

Duncan Duncanson, no longer Reverend, at once returned to his native village to the house of his father and mother, the daily cause and witness of their gray hairs whitening to the winter of the grave. They had a little house of their own, and it had not taken all their slender store to put their lad through college; for, save in the matter of the black bag and its inmate, Duncan Duncanson was neither spendthrift nor prodigal. Before he left the Shaws he was to have been married to the daughter of the neighboring minister, but in the wild upheaval of that earthquake shock she obediently gave Duncan up as soon as the parish had given him up; and in time married a wealthy farmer who did not come sober home from market for twenty years.

In his own village Duncan was looked upon with an odd kind of respect. He was thought to have been led astray, though this was not the case—the devil, together with the weak chin and unstable eye, having been leading enough. He was looked on as "byordnar' clever," "a dungeon o' learnin'." So, after some years, when the parochial school fell vacant, the minister who had baptized him, and who had helped him lamely with his rusty scraps of Latin and Greek (Latin as far as "Omnis Gallia"—Greek, the alphabet merely), put Duncan into the school, sure that he would teach the children well and conscientiously, and hopeful that he might ultimately be led to reform; for ministers are sanguine men, at least all who do any good among other men.

And the new schoolmaster had indeed done his duty, though with abundance of the rod and some detriment to his own temper and the cuticle of his pupils. But no such scholars went up from three counties as those who matriculated straight from the hedge-school of the parish of Dullarg during the reign of the deposed minister of the Shaws. By and by Duncan picked up other little bits of patronage—the precentorship, as a matter of course, the inspectorship of poor, and ultimately the registrarship of births, deaths, and marriages. In the Dullarg it is a saying that we "keep oor ain fish-guts for oor ain sea-maws." This is not an expression common in the higher circles, but the thing itself is common enough there. Duncan married a village girl, who had made him a good wife during her short life, but had not been able to master the bottle-imp. She had left him one daughter, our imperious beauty of the yellow locks.

But we have gone afield from our school. The whole

building, a long narrow barn, built of rough ashlar-work with many small windows, never all whole at once, was sleepily droning with the morning lessons. Flora Duncanson, within a yard of her father, was making paper arrows to throw at Andrew Tait, the son of the wealthy farmer who had married Duncan Duncanson's old sweetheart. Andrew was a long-limbed lad, known as "the fathom o' pump-water." He was shy and thoughtful, prone to moon in corners, a lad in whom could be perceived no tincture of the bucolic clumsiness of the one parent or the faded and selfish gentility of the other. He liked to be teased by Flora Duncanson, for it gave him an opportunity of looking at her hair. He had never heard of Rossetti, but he said in his heart, "Her hair that lay along her back was yellow like ripe corn!"

The ex-minister sat at his high desk, and the hum of the school acted soothingly upon his unsteady nerves. A vision began to assert itself of something that he knew to be on one shelf of his private cupboard in the little dominie's house adjoining the school. Without a word he rose and stepped out. Before he could get round the school, Flora was out and after him. Thereupon the school resolved itself into a pandemonium, and Andrew the smith, shoeing his horses in the old "smiddy" at the foot of the lane, said to his apprentice, "The dominie'll be oot to wat his thrapple. Oor Wull will be keepin' the schule the noo!" "Wull" was a good-natured clever elder boy who was supposed to take charge of the school in the absence of the dominie. This he did usually by stopping the promiscuous fighting and scuffling which went on all round the school and organizing a stated and official combat in the middle of the floor between a pair of well-matched urchins. "Let all things be done decently and in order" was Wull's motto.

In the height of the turmoil a great brown head presented itself at the door. It was the head of big red "Trusty," the half-collie half-St. Bernard which sometimes accompanied Andrew Tait to the school, and played about outside till that youth got free of his bondage, when the pair went joyously homewards.

No sooner was he spied than fifty voices invited him to enter. He came in, nothing loth, and crouched beneath the desk which stood against the wall by the window where sat his master with some bosom cronies. There he was lying concealed by a rampart of legs and slates when the master entered, with an angry frown on his brow, and his hat jammed over his forehead in a way that boded no good to the school. "It's gaun to be a lickin' day," said Andrew Tait, with an air of grim foreboding. All was quiet in a moment, for the fear of Duncan Duncanson with the black dog on his back was heavy on every young heart. Duncan was a good and a kindly man, and would go anywhere to help a neighbor in trouble, but he was undoubtedly savage in his cups. The imp of the black bag was in possession.

The boys trembled, but the great red dog lay quiet as pussy with his immense faithful head pillowed on his master's knees. The dominie went to his desk, and as nothing seemed to come of his ill humor, the school gradually returned to its condition of lazy inattention. Fred Graham, the boy next to Andrew Tait, whispered, "Let me stroke the doggie's heid."

"What'll ye gie's?" promptly replied Andrew, with the truly boyish commercial spirit.

"A peerie," said his friend.

"An' the string?" added Andrew, who had a corner in dogs and could force the market. So for five minutes the big head was transferred to Fred Graham's knee, and the stroking performed to the satisfaction of all parties. Then the next chance had been for some time disposed of to young Sanny M'Quharr, of Drumquhat, who, being a farmer's son, would never have thought of stroking a dog save in school, for the laudable purpose of killing time and doing what was forbidden.

School currency was changing hands and finding its way into Andrew Tait's pockets at a great rate. The various claimants for next turn were so clamorous that they created some little disturbance, so that the master, seeing

a cluster of heads together, noiselessly opened the lid of his desk and sent the "taws" whirling down into their midst with hearty good will. They took Fred Graham round the neck, and he at once rose to receive his "paw-mies," the price of his general amusements. He had not been the guilty person, but he hardly denied it even *pro forma*, so accustomed were they in that school to the Spartan code that the sin lay, not in the action, but in the stupidity of being found out.

Through the gap formed by the absence of Fred on his melancholy errand, a gap like that made by the drawing of a tooth, the master saw the orange skin and solemn eyes of "Trusty Tait," boys' dog to the parish school of Nether Dullarg.

His wrath turned instantly on Trusty and his owner, and his resentment burned with a sullen, exaggerated fury. He imagined that the animal had been brought into the school in order directly to insult him.

"Who brought that dog in here?" he asked.

"Please, sir, he juist cam'," said Andrew Tait.

"Put him out instantly!" he commanded.

"Please, sir, he'll no' gang."

The dominie then went for the poker and approached the big dog, whose eyes began to shine with a yellow light curiously different from that which had been in them when the boys were stroking his shaggy coat. But he lay motionless as though cut in stone, nothing living about him except those slumberous eyes with the red spark flaming at the bottom of them. His great tail lay along the floor, of the thickness of a boy's arm, with which it was his wont to beat the floor as a thresher beats his sheaves at the approach of his master. "Trusty Tait's" dignity lay in his tail. His tenderest feelings had their abode there. By means of it he communicated his sentiments, belligerent or amicable. When his master appeared in the distance, he wagged it ponderously; when a canine friend hove in sight, it waved triumphantly; at the sight of a gypsy or a tramp it grew oratory with the expressiveness of its resentment. As the dominie approached with his weapon of warfare, Andrew Tait drew the iron shod of his clog, which he would have called his "cakkar," across Trusty's tail. The dog instantly half rose on his fore paws, showing a seam of teeth like a row of danger-signals, and gave vent to a thunderous subterranean growl, which so intimidated the master that he turned his anger on the victim who promised less resistance. He dragged Andrew Tait by the collar of his jacket into the middle of the floor, and, forgetting in his beclouded condition what he held in his hand, he struck him once across the head with the heavy iron poker, stretching him senseless on the ground. The whole school rose to its feet with a dull, confused moan of horror, but before any one could move, Trusty had the dominie by the throat, threw him backwards over a form, and now stood guard, growling with short, blood-curdling snorts, over the prostrate form of his young master. Through the open door Flora Duncanson came flying, for the noise had told her even in the cottage that something unusual was happening.

"Go home at once!" she called to the children, and though there were many there older than she, without a murmur they filed outside—remaining, however, in whispering, awestruck groups at the foot of the playground.

"Go home, father, this moment!" she said to her father, who had gathered himself together, and now stood shaking and uncertain like one awakened from a dream, groping stupidly with his hands. The old man turned and went heavily away at his daughter's word. He even thought of asking her for the key of the cupboard, the strife for the possession of which had been the beginning of his black humor; but a moment's thought convinced him of the hopelessness of the request. "But I would be muckle the better o't!" he said, and sighed—perhaps for a moment conscious of how much the worse he had been of it.

Flora Duncanson stood over the senseless body of Andrew Tait. Trusty was licking the face. A thin streak of blood stole from under the hair and down the brow. The dog growled as the girl approached, but ultimately allowed her to come to the lad's side.

"Oh, Andra, Andra!" she said, the salt water running silently down her cheeks.

The boy slowly opened his eyes, looked at the dog once more, and then fixedly at Flora Duncanson. He always liked to look at her hair, but he had never noticed till now how beautiful her eyes were. He could not think what it was they reminded him of—something he had seen in a dream, he thought.

"Dinna greet, Flora," he said. "I'll tell my father that I fell, an' I'll lick ony boy in the schule that says I didna! Oh, Flora, but yer e'en are terrible bonny!"

This is all a very old story in the Dullarg now, and Trusty is a Nestor among dogs. He spends all his fine afternoons on a broomy knowe by himself, for what with puppies and bairns the farm is not the quiet place that it used to be when he was young. Trusty overlooks a wide prospect were his faithful dim eyes able to see, but as it is he devotes himself chiefly to the flies which settle upon his nose. Over there on the slope glimmer in the haze the white stones in the churchyard. Trusty never was much of a scholar, in spite of so long frequenting the village academy, but had he been able to read he might have found this inscription on a granite tombstone down in the old kirkyard by the Dee water:

Sacred to the Memory
OF
DUNCAN DUNCANSON,
AGED 71 YEARS, SOMETIME
MINISTER OF THE PARISH OF SHAWS,
FOR THIRTY YEARS SCHOOLMASTER IN THIS PARISH,
ERECTED BY HIS AFFECTIONATE CHILDREN,
ANDREW AND FLORA TAIT.
"TO WHOM LITTLE IS FORGIVEN, THE SAME
LOVETH LITTLE."



A Summer Day's Observations

By John Burroughs

As Interviewed by Clifton Johnson

In Two Parts—II.

"Children get too much coddling nowadays. I think, in particular, all the wealthy people make the mistake of overdoing. The children of the well-to-do have such a multiplicity of things bought for their amusement; they are surfeited by them. I know boys who, it seems to me, are being altogether spoiled by their parents' mistaken care and kindness. If they were in my charge, they should be brought right down to first principles. They should have no guns, no bicycles; they should eat plain food and sleep on a hard bed at night, and be given plenty of farm-work. The desire is so strong among people to develop their children that they lose sight of the virtues of simplicity.

"I'm dreadfully afraid that all this catering to children in literature is unhealthy. They have too much. There are books by the hundred written especially for them every year. It is better to have few books than many. I would try to avoid exciting, stimulating, and unnatural stories. Dana's 'Two Years Before the Mast' is a book of the right sort. It's good for any boy who's not spoilt. It's written by a man who's not thinking about style; you feel the faithfulness of the man; he wants to tell you just how this thing was to him.

"You can't expect a child to have the same kind of feeling about nature that is possible to a grown-up person. A boy hasn't much sentiment. He's full of sap and activity. There's no ruin there, no scars, no regrets.

"The cruelty of the boy is something wonderful. He will kill birds, murder all sorts of creatures, without a pang. When I was a boy I had the common cruelty of boys. I get more tender-hearted as I grow older. I may come to the point where I can't even chop off the head of a chicken. Once I never saw a chipmunk but that I threw a stone at him. Now, when I see one, I always want to salute him, and say, 'Good-morning! come home with me and I'll give you a kernel of corn.'

"Children are mostly unthinking in their cruelty. They