

Truthful Tammus Taggart

By CHARLES PROCTOR.

DOWNWARDS Forfield folk, particularly the rising generation, are inclined to ridicule Tammus Taggart and to place his plain tales in the same category as the stories of Baron Munchausen. Their fathers, however, who had the stories direct from Tammus himself, were compelled to believe them, or, at least, to accept them without any show of doubt, for Tammus Taggart was an elder of the kirk and an ill man to quarrel with.

Looking back, I begin to suspect now that everyone was a little afraid of him; but, maybe, that is hardly to be wondered at, for Tammus had such a way with him, such a commanding and impressive presence, that sometimes even the very minister himself seemed to go in awe of him. Tammus left Forfield a big, wild, loose-limbed lad of twenty; he came home some forty years later a big, weather-beaten man with a bald head and a patriarchal grey beard. Sometimes I have thought that it was just because of his beard that he was made an elder, or, maybe, it was merely because nobody had the courage to oppose him; but there is no denying that he was an impressive figure when he stood at the plate on Sabbath.

There were few great undertakings in which Tammus Taggart had not had a hand, and if all he said were true his name should be writ large in history's page. He had sailed the seven seas, helped to open up new countries, helped to enumerate the things Tammus had been everywhere, seen everything, and at last had retired to rest on his laurels, as it were, and to become a Forfield institution. He was a widower with one daughter, a bonny lass of two-and-twenty, who kept house for him and was sought after by half the young men in the village. Her favourite suitor, however, was Davie Logan, the wheelwright's son; indeed, matters were almost as good as settled between Jessie Taggart and Davie, when Davie put his foot in it by offending Tammus. But I am running ahead of my story, and must begin at the beginning.

Cities have their clubs and institutes and public houses, where men assemble to expound their views on questions of the hour and talk with their fellows, and Rob Anderson's smithy serves the same purpose in Forfield. The hotel bar is not without patrons, but, save on market days and special occasions, Forfield men do not linger over a dram unless they are trying to strike a bargain. They will, maybe, call in at the hotel after the evening session at the smithy is over, but the smithy is the real place for stories and arguments. Forfield has no need of a local paper, since anyone can get all the news of the district—and some that wouldn't appear in a paper forbye—by dropping in at the smithy or the post office.

By general consent the one stool in the smithy was reserved for Tammus Taggart, the other men contenting themselves with an uneasy seat on an old plough, or simply by standing against the walls, while the smith himself usually sat on his anvil.

There was quite a crowd in the smithy the evening that Alec Duncan came home, for Alec had been away in Edinburgh for two days, attending the funeral of a relative, and naturally had much to tell. "And I was across the Forth Brig," he announced, when he had given the full history of the deceased and described the funeral. "My, but yon's a grand piece o' work."

"Ay, you're richt, Alec," assented Tammus Taggart. "Man, I helped to lay the foundations o' it. I was the foreman bwe the divers, and it was a hard job, I can tell ye."

"I can weel believe that, Tammus," commented the smith.

"Ay, I had some queer experiences doon under the watter," said Tammus, stroking his beard. "I mind since I gaeed doon to see hoo the men were gettin' on. Sir William Arrol wana satisfied wi' the progress they were makin', and asked me to gang doon mysel'."

"He wana blate," remarked Alec, with unconcealed irony.

"Och, he was awyakin' my advyce!" said Tammus modestly. "Well, I was

havin' a smoke at the time, but I put on my diving dress and gaeed doon, and I forgot I had my pipe in my hand. Well, there I was walkin' about at the bottom o' the Forth, hurryin' on the men, when aw swim the biggest codfish ye ever saw. It swum round me aince or twice; then it made a dash at me, and before I ken what it wis after it snatched the pipe out o' my hand."

"Man!—man!" ejaculated Alec and the smith together.

Everyone was staring hard at Tammus, who paused and looked round the smithy as if to see the effect his story was producing.

"Ay, awa' it went, swoomin' like mad, wi' my guid pipe—it was a new one and cost me aye-and-sixpence—I've got it at hame noo," resumed Tammus. "But I wis after it in a tick, and—ay, but I had a chase! It's a queer job chasin' fish under watter, I can tell ye!"

"Did ye catch it, Tammus?"

"Ay, but it wis awa' doon by the Bass Rock before I got a grip o' it," answered Tammus; "and when I got it the pipe wis toom (empty). Ay, I got my pipe and the cod as weel, but I gaeed Sir William a sair fleg (fright), for he thoct I wis drooned."

He paused, stroking his grey beard and glancing round the smithy again. For a full minute there was silence, then Rob, the smith, knocked the dottle out of his pipe.

"Dod! A queer story that, Tammus," he said thoughtfully; "but it's easer enough to believe when we mind o' the story o' Jonah and the whale. We canna doot that—it's in the Book—and I dinna see whit for onybody could doot your story."

"It was just presence o' mind, Rob, and my natural anxiety, as you might express it, no' to lose my pipe," said Tammus with dignity, glancing keenly at the smith, who was now engaged in cutting up thick twist to rell his pipe.

"Ay, just that, Tammus; I admire ye for it," responded Rob, looking embarrassed, and one or two of the other men grunted as if in support of the smith's sentiments.

"Mair than aince I've owed my life to my presence o' mind," said Tammus, settling himself more comfortably on his stool and clearing his throat. "I dinna want to boast, but it's a great help to any man is presence o' mind. When a lion pounces at ye—"

"I thoct ye said it wis a codfish?" interrupted Willie Peacock, the baker, who was leaning against the wall near the door.

Somebody sniggered at the interpolation, and Tammus rose wrathfully to his feet, his eyes blazing.

"Wha asked ye to think?" he demanded fiercely. "Whit dae ye ken about lions or codfish, ye that's never seen anything but hawbee rolls. Man, I doot if ye wad ken the difference between a lion and a cod gin ye saw them the gither!"

He was a terribly sarcastic man when he was roused, was Tammus Taggart, and could blivel up a doubter or a scoffer in two minutes. Willie Peacock was a wee, perky man, but he looked sorry for himself when Tammus had finished.

"Maybe I didna tak' ye up richt, Tammus," he said hurriedly and apologetically. "I could hae sworn ye said it wis a codfish that stole your pipe."

"So it was, but that story's feenished," retorted Tammus, slowly resuming his seat after glowering at Willie a moment longer. "Did ye ever hear tell o' a codfish in an African jungle? Man, I wonder at ye makin' sic a fule o' yersel'!"

"Hoote, Tammus! Ye needna be aye doon on Willie," said the smith soothingly, lighting his pipe with a red-hot cinder. "He's no very gleg at the uptak, and he thoct we wis still at the Forth Brig. Let that fleg stick to the wa', man, and tell's about the lion."

"Ay, tell's about the lion, Tammus," said one or two of the other men together, and Tammus stroked his beard and looked mollified.

"Maybe I was owre hasty wi' Willie," he said with deliberation; "but when a man's had my experience and been on the best o' terms wi' men like David Livingstone and Sir William Arrol and the

Prince o' Wales, he's no' accustomed to being interrupted by a baker. No' that I'm denyin' that bakers are usefu' members of the community, but they canna be expected to ken anything about lions."

"It was presence o' mind ye were talkin' about, Tammus, was' no'?" prompted Alec Duncan, anxious to swick Tammus on to his story again and to save Willie Peacock from further humiliation.

"Ay, presence o' mind was the topic," agreed Tammus, swallowing the bait. "If it hadna been for my presence o' mind I wouldna be here noo. There was that lion, for instance. It was when I was awa' oot in Darkest Africa wi' David Livingstone, thousands o' miles frae onywhere. David wana very shair o' his road and wana feelin' very weel, so he asked me to gang on by mysel'."

He paused and glanced round as the door of the smithy opened and young Davie Logan entered.

"A fine nicht," said Davie, with a nod, and crossed to warm his hands at the forge.

"Weel, I went awa' by mysel'," continued Tammus, frowning at the interruption, "and I was awa' for twa days, awa' in the lonely jungle, and lost mysel' for a while. I was tryin' to find the road back when I heard a maist fearsome roar abint me, and I turned round like lichtnin' to see the biggest lion I've ever seen springin' at me. I'd got nae gun wi' me, but I didna lose my presence o' mind. I could see the brutt was famished and meant to hae me, sae as it sprung I jouk it (dodged) it; then, hefore it could recover itsel', I pounced on it and grippit its jaws."

"Man, Tammus!" ejaculated Rob in wondering admiration.

"Ay, I had a fell wrastle wi' the fearsome brutt," continued Tammus impressively, "but I managed to keep a grip o' its jaws, and I just held it there a day and a nicht, and starved it to death!"

"An original idea that, Mr. Taggart!" commented Davie Logan smilingly when the sensation Tammus had created had subsided.

Tammus being the father of Davie's "intended," Davie always called him "Mr. Taggart."

"Ay, maybe you're richt, Davie," responded Tammus with a somewhat suspicious glance, for Davie seemed unduly amused. "It was just presence o' mind."

"An amazin' story, Tammus!" said the smith, rubbing his chin abstractedly and glancing round the smithy. "Ay, a providential escape! It min's me o' the story o' Daniel in the den o' lions. Yours was a kind o' parallel experience, as ye might say, only it wis faith that saved Daniel, and just presence o' mind that saved you, Tammus. Quay!"

"I mind the meenister aince praised ye yersel' for your presence o' mind, Rob," remarked Sandy Feigus, the grocer, speaking for the first time. "Ay, he praised ye frae the poopit on Sabbath."

"Och! That's an auld story, Sandy," said the smith, looking uncomfortable; but Sandy was not to be denied, although he must have been aware that everyone except Tammus knew what he was going to say.

"It was when Whimbree's dog went mad," he continued. "You were up at the post-office, I mind, postin' a letter, and ye'd cam' oot wi' your wee hammer in your hand. Whimbree's dog cam' racin' doon the End and intae the square yowlin' and foam'in', and lowk just lost their heads. It was makin' for a barn—Jess McKie's laddie—when you cam' oot o' the post-office, and you, wi' great presence o' mind, as the meenister himsel' said, ran forrit and killed it wi' your hammer. Ay, you was presence o' mind, Rob!"

Tammus Taggart felt that his glory had temporarily been eclipsed, and cleared his throat noisily as the company began to talk reminiscently of the mad dog sensation and Rob's prompt action.

"I mind since when I was in India," he began, and the talk ceased, "I had an encounter wi' a mad dog, but I didna kill it—na! It was an awfu' hot day, a hunder and seventy-five in the shade—and there wana ony shade—and folk were droppin' dead wi' sunstroke and heat a' round; ay, it was maist fearfu' hot. I was walkin' doon the street when I saw a' the folk boltin' intae houses and shops like rabbits intae holes, and I sees a mad dog comin' tearin' along, snappin', and howlin' 'Bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-wow!' A' the ither folk went awa' yellin', and the dog made strait for me, cryin' 'Bow-wow!' and lookin' desperate uncanwy. I had nae hammer nor naethin', but I didna lose my presence o' mind. I gaeed for me, wi' anither savage 'Bow-

wow,' and I just shoved my hand doon its throat and fliped it (turned it inside out). And awa' it ran, no' shoutin' 'Bow-wow,' but 'Wow-wow—Wow-wow!'"

Davie Logan burst into a roar of laughter, and so infectious was his merriment that even the smith joined in. Tammus Taggart rose to his feet, glowering. "What are ye laughin' at?" he demanded.

"What am I laughin' at?" cried Davie, and went off into another paroxysm of merriment. "Mr. Taggart, you're a genius!" he gasped, when he had found breath for speech again. "You're the maist amusin' leer I ever cam' across! That was a great aye about flipin' the dog. Ay, you're a terrible leer, but ye ken hoo to tell a funny story!"

"Amusin' leer!" ejaculated Tammus, as if doubtful if he had heard aright. "Amusin'! Hoo daur ye address me like that, ye whippersnapper!" His face darkened with passion, and his eyes glowed angrily. "Ye daur to ca' me leer—me, an elder o' the kirk, and a man auld enough to be your father, ye impudent insolent!"

"Stop, Mr. Taggart—stop!" cried Davie suddenly serious. "I didna mean to be disrespectful." The words just slipped oot, but you ken as weel as I dae that your stories are a' leas. You dinna expect onybody to believe them?"

"Lees! Ye daur to ca' me a leer!" thundered Tammus. "Ye knocked me doon for less."

"Wheesh! Tammus—wheesh! man!" interposed the smith, anxious to act as peacemaker; but Tammus, magnificently in his righteous indignation, waved him aside.

"You're the first that's ever dared to affront me, my lad," he went on indignantly, "and if ye hae the impudence to speak to me again I'll no' be responsible for the consequences. You'll never set foot in my hoose again, and I forbid ye even to speak to my dochter."

He strode haughtily out of the smithy, leaving the company in general dumbstricken for the time being, and Davie Logan feeling as if he had been excommunicated.

"Man, Davie, ye shouldna hae been sae disrespectful to Tammus," said the smith, at last. "He's an elder o' the kirk, and auld enough to be your father, as he said himsel'. An elder's entitled to respect, my lad."

"An elder and an auld man should ken better than tell sic leas," retorted Davie, smarting under a sense of injustice.

"You're richt, Davie!" chimed in Willie Peacock. "He's just haiverin', and he's daft to expect ony man to believe him."

"He was maybe just jokin' about flipin' the dog," said the smith, looking troubled; "and onyway there's maist things 'twixt heaven and earth that is dreamt of in your philosophy, Willie, as Shakespeare says, Tammus Taggart's an elder and a weel-respecta' man, and I'm no gann to say a word against him."

"Weel, if he means to come between me and Jessie, he's got a' his work afore him," said Davie doggedly. "I'll marry her in spite o' him, elder or no' elder."

During the next fortnight Forfield was split into two factions—pro-Taggarts and anti-Taggarts—the former, headed by Davie Logan and Willie Peacock, contending that Tammus was a romancer, to say the least of it; the latter expressing their belief in the truth of Tammus' stories, with the exception of the mad dog tale, which Tammus wisely had explained was just a joke.

There was mutiny in the house of Tammus, too, for Jessie had a will of her own, and was not at all prepared to accept the banishment of Davie meekly, or to obey her father's ultimatum that she must treat her lover as a stranger. Indeed, it was no secret that she had ranged herself on the side of the "antis," and met Davie clandestinely.

Tammus found to his dismay that the ranks of the doubters were swelling and his supporters were becoming lukewarm, and he played his trump card. He invited a friend from Glasgow, one Donald Fraser, of whom he had often spoken, to spend a week with him in Forfield. Donald Fraser arrived in due course, and proved to be a short, thick-set man with a red face, reddish hair, and twinkling eyes. The night after his arrival he accompanied Tammus to the smithy, and once he began to talk it soon became apparent that Tammus was a modest man who had not told half of the wonderful deeds he had done.

Donald, it appeared, had been Tammus' companion and friend for many years, had toured the world with him, and collected the incident of the starving to