

Munro Neil

Erchie, My Droll Friend



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PREFACE

The majority of the following chapters are selections from “Erchie” articles contributed to the pages of the ‘Glasgow Evening News’ during the past three years. A number of the sketches are now published for the first time.

I INTRODUCTORY TO AN ODD CHARACTER

On Sundays he is the beadle of our church; at other times he Waits. In his ecclesiastical character there is a solemn dignity about his deportment that compels most of us to call him Mr MacPherson; in his secular hours, when passing the fruit at a city banquet, or when at the close of the repast he sweeps away the fragments of the dinner-rolls, and whisperingly expresses in your left ear a fervent hope that “ye’ve enjoyed your dinner,” he is simply Erchie.

Once I forgot, deluded a moment into a Sunday train of thought by his reverent way of laying down a bottle of Pommery, and called him Mr MacPherson. He reproved me with a glance of his eye.

“There’s nae Mr MacPhersons here,” said he afterwards; “at whit ye might call the social board I’m jist Erchie, or whiles Easy-gaun Erchie wi’ them that kens me langest. There’s sae mony folks in this world don’t like to hurt your feelings that if I was kent as Mr MacPherson on this kind o’ job I wadna mak’ enough to pay for starchin’ my shirts.”

I suppose Mr MacPherson has been snibbing-in preachers in St Kentigern’s Kirk pulpit and then going for twenty minutes’ sleep in the vestry since the Disruption; and the more privileged citizens of Glasgow during two or three generations of public dinners have experienced the kindly ministrations of Erchie, whose proud motto is “A flet fit but a warm hert.” I think, however, I was the first to discover his long pent-up and precious strain of philosophy.

On Saturday nights, in his office as beadle of St Kentigern’s, he lights the furnaces that take the chill off the Sunday devotions. I found him stoking the kirk fires one Saturday, not very much like a beadle in appearance, and much less like a waiter. It was what, in England, they call the festive season.

“There’s mair nor guid preachin’ wanted to keep a kirk gaun,” said he; “if I was puttin’ as muckle dross on my fires as the Doctor whiles puts in his sermons, efter a Setturday at the gowf, ye wad see a bonny difference on the plate. But it’s nae odds-a beadle gets sma’ credit, though it’s him that keeps the kirk tosh and warm, and jist at that nice easy-osy temperature whaur even a gey cauldribe member o’ the congregation can tak’ his nap and no’ let his lozenge slip doon his throat for chitterin wi’ the cauld.”

There was a remarkably small congregation at St Kentigern’s on the following day, and when the worthy beadle had locked the door after dismissal and joined me on the pavement, “Man,” he said, “it was a puir turn-oot yon – hardly worth puttin’ on fires for. It’s aye the wye; when I mak’ the kirk a wee bit fancy, and jalouse there’s shair to be twa pound ten in the plate, on comes a blash o’ rain, and there’s hardly whit wid pay for the starchin’ o’ the Doctor’s bands.

“Christmas! They ca’t Christmas, but I could gie anither name for’t. I looked it up in the penny almanac, and it said, ‘Keen frost; probably snow,’ and I declare-to if I hadna nearly to soom frae the hoose.

“The almanacs is no’ whit they used to be; the auld chaps that used to mak’ them maun be deid.

“They used to could do’t wi’ the least wee bit touch, and tell ye in January whit kind o’ day it wad be at Halloween, besides lettin’ ye ken the places whaur the Fair days and the ‘ool-markets was, and when they were to tak’ place-a’ kind o’ information that maist o’ us that bocht the almanacs couldna sleep at nicht wantin’. I’ve seen me get up at three on a cauld winter’s mornin’ and strikin’ a licht to turn up Orr’s Penny Commercial and see whit day was the Fair at Dunse. I never was at Dunse in a’ my days, and hae nae intention o’ gaun, but it’s a grand thing knowledge, and it’s no’ ill to cairry. It’s like poetry-’The Star o’ Rabbie Burns’ and that kind o’ thing-ye can aye be givin’ it a ca’ roond in your mind when ye hae naething better to dae.

“Oh, ay! A puir turn-oot the day for Kenti-ger’n’s; that’s the drawback o’ a genteel congregation like oors-mair nor half o’ them’s sufferin’ frae Christmas turkey and puttin’ the blame on the weather.”

“The bubbly-jock is the symbol o’ Scotland’s decline and fa’; we maybe bate the English at Bannockburn, but noo they’re haein’ their revenge and underminin’ oor constitution wi’ the aid o’ a

bird that has neither a braw plumage nor a bonny sang, and costs mair nor the price o' three or four ducks. England gave us her bubbly-jock and took oor barley-bree.

"But it's a' richt; Ne'erday's comin'; it's begun this year gey early, for I saw Duffy gaun up his close last nicht wi' his nose peeled.

"Am I gaun hame, or am I comin' frae't, can ye tell me?" says he, and he was carryin' something roond-shaped in his pocket-naipkin.

"Whit's wrang wi' ye, puir cratur?" I says to him.

"I was struck wi' a sheet o' lichtnin', says he, and by that I ken't he had been doon drinkin' at the Mull o' Kintyre Vaults, and that the season o' peace on earth, guid-will to men was fairly started.

"MacPherson," he says, wi' the tear at his e'e, 'I canna help it, but I'm a guid man.'

"Ye are that, Duffy," I says, 'when ye're in your bed sleepin'; at ither times ye're like the rest o' us, and that's gey middlin'. Whit hae'ye in the naipkin?"

"He gied a dazed look at it, and says, 'I'm no shair, but I think it's a curlin'-stane, and me maybe gaun to a bonspiel at Carsbreck.'

"He opened it oot, and found it was a wee, roond, red cheese.

"That's me, a' ower," says he – 'a Christmas for the wife,' and I declare there was as much drink jaupin' in him as wad hae done for a water-'shute.'

"Scotland's last stand in the way o' national customs is bein' made at the Mull o' Kintyre Vaults, whaur the flet half-mutchkin, wrapped up in magenta tissue paper so that it'll look tidy, is retreatin' doggedly, and fechtin' every fit o' the way, before the invadin' English Christmas caird. Ten years ago the like o' you and me couldna' prove to a freen' that we liked him fine unless we took him at this time o' the year into five or six public-hooses, leaned him up against the coonter, and grat on his dickie. Whit dae we dae noo? We send wee Jennie oot for a shilling box o' the year afore last's patterns in Christmas cairds, and show oor continued affection and esteem at the ha'penny postage rate.

"Instead o', takin' Duffy roon' the toon on Ne'erday, and hurtin' my heid wi' tryin' to be jolly, I send him a Christmas caird, wi' the picture o' a hayfield on the ootside and 'Wishin' you the Old, Old Wish, Dear,' on the inside, and stay in the hoose till the thing blows bye.

"The shilling box o' Christmas cairds is the great peace-maker; a gross or twa should hae been sent oot to Russia and Japan, and it wad hae stopped the war.' Ye may hae thocht for a twelvemonth the MacTurks were a disgrace to the tenement, wi' their lassie learnin' the mandolin', and them haein' their gas cut aff at the meter for no' payin' the last quarter; but let them send a comic caird to your lassie – 'Wee Wullie to Wee Jennie,' and they wad get the len' o' your wife's best jeely-pan.

"No' but whit there's trouble wi' the Christmas caird. It's only when ye buy a shillin' box and sit doon wi' the wife and weans to consider wha ye'll send them to that ye fin' oot whit an awfu' lot o' freen's ye hae. A score o' shillin' boxes wadna gae ower half the kizzens I hae, wi' my grandfather belangin' to the Hielan's, so Jinnet an' me jist let's on to some o' them we're no' sendin' ony cairds oot this year because it's no' the kin' o' society go ony langer. And ye have aye to keep pairt o' the box till Ne'erday to send to some o' the mair parteeclar anes ye forgot a' thegither were freen's o' yours till they sent ye a caird.

"Anither fau't I hae to the Christmas cairds is that the writin' on them's generally fair rideeculous.

"May Christmas Day be Blythe and Gay, and bring your household Peace and Joy,' is on the only caird left ower to send to Mrs Maclure; and when ye're shearin' aff the selvedges o't to mak' it fit a wee envelope, ye canna but think that it's a droll message for a hoose wi' five weans lyin' ill wi' the whoopin'-cough, and the man cairryin' on the wye Maclure does.

"Old friends, old favourites, Joy be with you at this Season,' says the caird for the MacTurks, and ye canna but mind that every third week there's a row wi' Mrs MacTurk and your wife aboot the key o' the washin'-hoose and lettin' the boiler rust that bad a' the salts o' sorrel in the Apothecaries'll no tak' the stains aff your shirts.

“Whit’s wanted is a kin’ o’ slidin’ scale o’ sentiment on Christmas cairds, so that they’ll taper doon frae a herty greetin’ ye can truthfully send to a dacent auld freen’ and the kind o’ cool ‘here’s to ye!’ suited for an acquaintance that borrowed five shillin’s frae ye at the Term, and hasna much chance o’ ever payin’t back again.

“If it wasna for the Christmas cairds a lot o’ us wad maybe never jalouse there was onything parteecular merry aboot the season. Every man that ye’re owin’ an accoont to sends it to ye then, thinkin’ your hert’s warm and your pouches rattlin’. On Christmas Day itsel’ ye’re aye expectin’ something; ye canna richt tell whit it is, but there’s ae thing certain – that it never comes. Jinnet, my wife, made a breenge for the door every time the post knocked on Thursday, and a’ she had for’t at the end o’ the day was an ashet fu’ o’ whit she ca’s valenteens, a’ written on so that they’ll no even dae for next year.

“I used to wonder whit the banks shut for at Christmas, but I ken noo; they’re feart that their customers, cairried awa’ wi’ their feelin’ o’ guid-will to men, wad be makin’ a rush on them to draw money for presents, and maybe create a panic.

“Sae far as I can judge there’s been nae panic at the banks this year.”

“Every Ne’erday for the past fifty years I hae made up my mind I was gaun to be a guid man,” he went on. “It jist wants a start, they tell me that’s tried it, and I’m no’ that auld. Naething bates a trial.

“I’m gaun to begin at twelve o’clock on Hogmanay, and mak’ a wee note o’t in my penny diary, and put a knot in my hankie to keep me in mind. Maist o’ us would be as guid’s there’s ony need for if we had naething else to think o’. It’s like a man that’s hen-taed – he could walk fine if he hadna a train to catch, or the rent to rin wi’ at the last meenute, or somethin’ else to bother him. I’m gey faur wrang if I dinna dae the trick this year, though.

“Oh! ay. I’m gaun to be a guid man. No’ that awfu’ guid that auld freen’s’ll rin up a close to hide when they see me comin’, but jist dacent – jist guid enough to please mysel’, like Duffy’s singin’. I’m no’ makin’ a breenge at the thing and sprainin’ my leg ower’t. I’m startin’ canny till I get into the wye o’t. Efter this Erchie MacPherson’s gaun to flype his ain socks and no’ leave his claes reel-rail aboot the hoose at night for his wife Jinnet to lay oot richt in the mornin’. I’ve lost money by that up till noo, for there was aye bound to be an odd sixpence droppin’ oot and me no’ lookin’. I’m gaun to stop skliffin’ wi’ my feet; it’s sair on the boots. I’m gaun to save preens by puttin’ my collar stud in a bowl and a flet-iron on the top o’t to keep Erchie’s Flitting it frae jinkin’ under the chevalier and book-case when I’m sleepin’. I’m gaun to wear oot a’ my auld waistcoats in the hoose. I’m – ”

“My dear Erchie,” I interrupted, “these seem very harmless reforms.”

“Are they?” said he. “They’ll dae to be gaun on wi’ the noo, for I’m nae phenomena; I’m jist Nature; jist the Rale Oreeginal.”

II ERCHIE'S FLITTING

He came down the street in the gloaming on Tuesday night with a bird-cage in one hand and a potato-masher in the other, and I knew at once, by these symptoms, that Erchie was flitting.

"On the long trail, the old trail, the trail that is always new, Erchie?" said I, as he tried to push the handle of the masher as far up his coat sleeve as possible, and so divert attention from a utensil so ridiculously domestic and undignified.

"Oh, we're no' that bad!" said he. "Six times in the four-and-forty year. We've been thirty years in the hoose we're leavin' the morn, and I'm fair oot o' the wye o' flittin'. I micht as weel start the dancin' again."

"Thirty years! Your household gods plant a very firm foot, Erchie."

"Man, ay! If it wisna for Jinnet and her new fandangles, I wad nae mair think o' flittin' than o' buyin' a balloon to mysel'; but ye ken women! They're aye gaun to be better aff onywhaur else than whaur they are. I ken different, but I havena time to mak' it plain to Jinnet."

On the following day I met Erchie taking the air in the neighbourhood of his new domicile, and smoking a very magnificent meerschaum pipe.

"I was presented wi' this pipe twenty years ago," said he, "by a man that went to California, and I lost it a week or twa efter that. It turned up at the flittin'. That's ane o' the advantages o' flittin's; ye find things ye havena seen for years."

"I hope the great trek came off all right, Erchie?"

"Oh, ay! no' that bad, considerin' we were sae much oot o' practice. It's no' sae serious when ye're only gaun roond the corner to the next street. I cairried a lot o' the mair particular wee things roond mysel' last nicht – the birdcage and Gledstane's picture and the room vawzes and that sort o' thing, but at the hinder-end Jinnet made me tak' the maist o' them back again."

"Back again, Erchie?"

"Ay. She made oot that I had cairried ower sae muckle that the flittin' wad hae nae appearance on Duffy's cairt, and haein' her mind set on the twa rakes, and a' the fancy things lying at the close-mooth o' the new hoose till the plain stuff was taken in, I had just to cairry back a guid part o' whit I took ower last nicht. It's a rale divert the pride o' women! But I'm thinkin' she's vex't for't the day, because yin o' the things I took back was a mirror, and it was broke in Duffy's cairt. It's a gey unlucky thing to break a lookin'-gless."

"A mere superstition, Erchie."

"Dod! I'm no' sae shair o' that. I kent a lookin'-gless broke at a flittin' afore this, and the man took to drink a year efter't, and has been that wye since."

"How came you to remove at all?"

"It wad never hae happened if I hadna gane to a sale and seen a coal-scuttle. It's a dangerous thing to introduce a new coal-scuttle into the bosom o' your faimily. This was ane o' thae coal-scuttles wi' a pentin' o' the Falls o' Clyde and Tillitudlem Castle on the lid. I got it for three-and-tuppence; but it cost me a guid dale mair nor I bargained for. The wife was rale ta'en wi't, but efter a week or twa she made oot that it gar'd the auld room grate we had look shabby, and afore ye could say knife she had in a new grate wi' wally sides till't, and an ash-pan I couldna get spittin' on. Then the mantelpiece wanted a bed pawn on't to gie the grate a dacent look, and she pit on a plush yin. Ye wadna hinder her efter that to get plush-covered chairs instead o' the auld hair-cloth we got when we were mairried. Her mither's chist-o'-drawers didna gae very weel wi' the plush chairs, she found oot in a while efter that, and they were swapped wi' twa pound for a chevalier and book-case, though the only books I hae in the hoose is the Family Bible, Buchan's Domestic Medicine, and the 'Tales o' the Borders.' It wad hae been a' richt if things had gane nae further, but when she went to a sale hersel' and bought

a Brussels carpet a yaird ower larig for the room, she made oot there was naethin' for't but to flit to a hoose wi' a bigger room. And a' that happened because a pented coal-scuttle took ma e'e."

"It's an old story, Erchie; 'c'est le premier pas que coute,' as the French say."

"The French is the boys!" says Erchie, who never gives himself away. "Weel, we're flittin' onywee, and a bonny trauchle it is. I'll no' be able to find my razor for a week or twa."

"It's a costly process, and three flittin's are worse than a fire, they say."

"It's worse nor that; it's worse nor twa Irish lodgers."

"It'll cost jist next to naethin'," says Jinnet. "Duffy'll tak' ower the furniture in his lorry for freen'ship's sake, an' there's naethin' 'll need to be done to the new hoose."

"But if ye ever flitted yersel', ye'll ken the funny wyes o' the waxcloth that's never cut the same wye in twa hooses; and I'll need to be gey thrang at my tred for the next month of twa to pay for the odds and ends that Jinnet never thought o'."

"Duffy flitted us for naethin', but ye couldna but gie the men a dram. A flittin' dram's by-ordinar; ye daurna be scrimp wi't, or they'll break your delf for spite, and ye canna be ower free wi't either, or they'll break everything else oot o' fair guid-natur. I tried to dae the thing judeecious, but I forgot to hide the bottle, and Duffy's heid man and his mate found it when I wasna there, and that's wye the lookin' gless was broken. Thae cairters divna ken their ain strength."

"It's a humblin' sicht your ain flittin' when ye see't on the tap o' a coal-lorry."

"Quite so, Erchie; chiffoniers are like a good many reputations – they look all right so long as you don't get seeing the back of them."

"And cairters hae nane o' the finer feelin's, I think. In spite o' a' that Jinnet could dae, they left the pots and pans a' efternoon on the pavement, and hurried the plush chairs up the stair at the first gae-aff. A thing like that's disheartenin' to ony weel-daein' woman."

"Hoots!" says I to her, 'whit's the odds? There's naebody heedin' you nor your flittin'.' "Are they no'?" said Jinnet, keekin' up at the front o' the new land. 'A' the Venetian blinds is doon, and I'll guarantee there's een behind them."

"We werena half-an-oor in the new hoose when the woman on the same stairheid chappet at the door and tellt us it was oor week o' washin' oot the close. It wasna weel meant, but it did Jinnet a lot o' guid, for she was sitting in her braw new hoose greetin'."

"Greetin', Erchie? Why?"

"Ask that! Ye'll maybe ken better nor I dae."

"Well, you have earned your evening pipe at least, Erchie," said I.

He knocked out its ashes on his palm with a sigh. "I hiv that! Man, it's a gey dauntenin' thing a flittin', efter a'. I've a flet fit, but a warm hert; and efter thirty years o' the auld hoose I was swear't to leave't. I brocht up a family in't, and I wish Jinnet's carpet had been a fit or twa shorter, or that I had never seen yon coal-scuttle wi' the Falls o' Clyde and Tillitudlem Castle."

III DEGENERATE DAYS

The tred's done," said Erchie.

"What! beadling?" I asked him.

"Oh! there's naethin' wrang wi' beadlin'," said he; "there's nae ups and doons there except to put the books on the pulpit desk, and they canna put ye aff the job if ye're no jist a fair wreck. I'm a' richt for the beadlin' as lang's I keep my health and hae Jinnet to button my collar, and it's generally allo'ed – though maybe I shouldna say't mysel' – that I'm the kind o' don at it roond aboot Gleska. I nichtna be, if I wasna gey carefu'. Efter waitin' at a Setterday nicht spree, I aye tak' care to gie the bell an extra fancy ca' or twa on the Sunday mornin' jist to save clash and mak' them ken Mac-Pherson's there himsel', and no' some puir pick-up that never ca'd the handle o' a kirk bell in his life afore.

"There's no' a man gangs to oor kirk wi' better brushed boots than mysel', as Jinnet'll tell ye, and if I hae ae gift mair nor anither it's discretioncy. A beadle that's a waiter has to gae through life like the puir troot they caught in the Clyde the other day – wi' his mooth shut, and he's worse aff because he hasna ony gills – at least no' the kind ye pronounce that way.

"Beadlin's an art, jist like pentin' photograph pictures, or playin' the drum, and if it's no' in ye, naethin' 'll put it there. I whiles see wee skina-malink craturs dottin' up the passages in U.F. kirks carryin' the books as if they were M.C.'s at a dancin'-schule ball gaun to tack up the programme in front o' the band; they lack thon rale releegious glide; they havena the feet for't.

"Waitin' is whit I mean; it's fair done!

"When I began the tred forty-five year syne in the auld Saracen Heid Inn, a waiter was looked up to, and was well kent by the best folk in the toon, wha' aye ca'd him by his first name when they wanted the pletform box o' cigauers handed doon instead o' the Non Plus Ultras.

"Nooadays they stick a wally door-knob wi' a number on't in the lapelle o' his coat, and it's Hey, No. 9, you wi' the flet feet, dae ye ca' this ham?"

"As if ye hadna been dacently christened and brocht up an honest faimily!

"In the auld days they didna drag a halfplin callan' in frae Stra'ven, cut his nails wi' a hatchet, wash his face, put a dickie and a hired suit on him, and gie him the heave into a banquet-room, whaur he disna ken the difference between a finger-bowl and a box o' fuzuvian lights.

"I was speakin' aboot that the ither nicht to Duffy, the coalman, and he says, 'Whit's the odds, MacPherson? Wha' the bleezes couldna' sling roon' blue-mange at the richt time if he had the time-table, or the menu, or whatever ye ca't, to keep him richt?"

"Wha' couldna' sell coal," said I, 'if he had the jaw for't? Man, Duffy,' says I, 'I never see ye openin' your mooth to roar coal up a close but I wonder whit wye there should be sae much talk in the Gleska Toon Coouncil aboot the want o' vacant spaces.'

"Duffy's failin'; there's nae doot o't. He has a hump on him wi' carryin' bags o' chape coal and dross up thae new, genteel, tiled stairs, and he let's on it's jist a knot in his gallowses, but I ken better. I'm as straucht as a wand mysel' – faith, I nicht weel be, for a' that I get to cairry hame frae ony o' the dinners nooadays. I've seen the day, when Blythswood Square and roond aboot it was a' the go, that it was coonted kind o' scrimp to let a waiter hame withoot a heel on him like yin o' thae Clyde steamers gaun oot o' Rothesay quay on a Fair Settu'rday.

"Noo they'll ripe your very hip pooches for fear ye may be takin' awa' a daud o' custard, or the toasted crumbs frae a dish o' pheasant.

"They needna' be sae awfu' feart, some o' them. I ken their dinners – cauld, clear, bane juice, wi' some strings o' vermicelli in't; ling-fish hash; a spoonfu' o' red-currant jeely, wi' a piece o' mutton the size o' a domino in't, if ye had time to find it, only ye're no' playin' kee-hoi; a game croquette that's jist a flaff o' windy paste; twa cheese straws; four green grapes, and a wee lend o' a pair o' silver nut-crackers, the wife o' the hoose got at her silver weddin'.

“Man! it’s a rale divert! I see big, strong, healthy Bylies and members o’ the Treds’ Hoose and the Wine, Speerit, and Beer Tred risin’ frae dinners like that, wi’ their big, braw, gold watch-chains hingin’ doon to their knees.

“As I tell Jinnet mony a time, it’s women that hae fair ruined dinner-parties in oor generation. They tak’ the measure o’ the appetities o’ mankind by their ain, which hae been a’thegether spoiled wi’ efternoon tea, and they think a man can mak’ up wi’ music in the drawin’-room for whit he didna get at the dinner-table.

“I’m a temperate man mysel’, and hae to be, me bein’ a beadle, but I whiles wish we had back the auld days I hae read aboot, when a laddie was kept under the table to lowse the grauvats o’ the gentlemen that fell under’t, in case they should choke themsel’s. Scotland was Scotland then!

“If they choked noo, in some places I’ve been in, it wad be wi’ thirst.

“The last whisk o’ the petticoat’s no roon’ the stair-landin’ when the man o’ the hoose puts the half o’ his cigarette bye for again, and says, ‘The ladies will be wonderin’ if we’ve forgotten them,’ and troosh a’ the puir deluded cratur’s afore him up the stair into the drawin’-room where his wife Eliza’s maskin’ tea, and a lady wi’ tousy hair’s kittlin’ the piano till it’s sair.

“‘Whit’s your opinion about Tschaikovski?’ I heard a wumman ask a Bylie at a dinner o’ this sort the ither night.

“‘I never heard o’ him,’ said the Bylie, wi’ a gant, ‘but if he’s in the proveesion tred, there’ll be an awfu’ run on his shop the morn’s morn’.’

“Anither thing that has helped to spoil oor tred is the smokin’ concerts. I tak’ a draw o’ the pipe mysel’ whiles, but I never cared to mak’ a meal o’t. Noo and then when I’m no’ very busy other ways I gie a hand at a smoker, and it mak’s me that gled I got ower my growth afore the thing cam’ into fashion; but it’s gey sair on an auld man to hear ‘Queen o’ the Earth’ five or six nights in the week, and the man at the piano aye tryin’ to guess the richt key, or to get done first, so that the company’ll no’ rin awa’ when he’s no’ lookin’ withoot paying him his five shillin’s.

“I’ve done the waitin’ at a’ kinds o’ jobs in my time, – Easy-gaun Erchie they ca’ me sometimes in the tred – a flet fit but a warm hert; I’ve even handed roond seed-cake and a wee drap o’ spirits at a burial, wi’ a bereaved and mournfu’ mainner that greatly consoled the weedow; but there’s nae depths in the business so low as poo’in’ corks for a smokin’ concert. And the tips get smaller and smaller every ane I gang to. At first we used to get them in a schooner gless; then it cam’ doon to a wee tumbler; and the last I was at I got the bawbees in an egg-cup.”

IV THE BURIAL OF BIG MACPHEE

Erichie looked pityingly at Big Macphee staggering down the street. “Puir sowl!” said he, “whit’s the maitter, wi’ ye noo?”

Big Macphee looked up, and caught his questioner by the coat collar to steady himself. “Beer,” said he; “jist beer. Plain beer, if ye want to ken. It’s no’ ham and eggs, I’ll bate ye. Beer, beer, glorious beer; I’m shair I’ve perished three gallons this very day. Three gallons hiv I in me, I’ll wager.”

“Ye wad be far better to cairry it hame in a pail,” said Erchie. “Man, I’m rale vexed to see a fine, big, smert chap like you gaun hame like this, takin’ the breadth o’ the street.”

“Hiv I no’ a richt to tak’ the breadth o’ the street if I want it?” said Big Macphee. “Am I no’ a ratepayer? I hiv a ludger’s vote, and I’m gaun to vote against Joe Chamberlain and the dear loaf.”

“Och! ye needna fash aboot the loaf for a’ the difference a tax on’t’ll mak’ to you,” said Erchie. “If ye gang on the wye ye’re daein’ wi’ the beer, it’s the Death Duties yer freends’ll be bothered aboot afore lang.”

And he led the erring one home.

Big Macphee was the man who for some months back had done the shouting for Duffy’s lorry No. 2. He sustained the vibrant penetrating quality, of a voice like the Cloch fog-horn on a regimen consisting of beer and the casual hard-boiled egg of the Mull of Kintyre Vaults. He had no relatives except a cousin “oot aboot Fintry,” and when he justified Erchie’s gloomy prediction about the Death Duties by dying of pneumonia a week afterwards, there was none to lament him, save in a mild, philosophical way, except Erchie’s wife, Jinnet.

Jinnet, who could never sleep at night till she heard Macphee go up the stairs to his lodgings, thought the funeral would be scandalously cold and heartless lacking the customary “tousy tea” to finish up with, and as Duffy, that particular day, was not in a position to provide this solace for the mourners on their return from Sighthill Cemetery, she invited them to her house. There were Duffy and a man Macphee owed money to; the cousin from “oot aboot Fintry” and his wife, who was, from the outset, jealous of the genteel way tea was served in Jinnet’s parlour, and suspicious of a “stuckupness” that was only in her own imagination.

“It’s been a nesty, wat, mochy, melancholy day for a burial,” said Duffy at the second helping of Jinnet’s cold boiled ham; “Macphee was jist as weel oot o’t. He aye hated to hae to change his jacket afore the last rake, him no’ haein’ ony richt wumman buddy aboot him to dry’t.”

“Och, the puir cratur!” said Jinnet. “It’s like enough he had a disappointment ance upom a time. He was a cheery chap.”

“He was a’ that,” said Duffy. “See’s the haud o’ the cream-poorie.”

The cousin’s wife felt Jinnet’s home-baked seedcake was a deliberate taunt at her own inefficiency in the baking line. She sniffed as she nibbled it with a studied appearance of inappreciation. “It wasna a very cheery burial he had, onyway,” was her astounding comment, and at that Erchie winked to himself, realising the whole situation.

“Ye’re richt there, Mistress Grant,” said he. “Burials are no’ whit they used to be. ‘Perhaps – perhaps ye were expectin’ a brass band?’” and at that the cousin’s wife saw this was a different man from her husband, and that there was a kind of back-chat they have in Glasgow quite unknown in Fintry.

“Oh! I wasna sayin’ onything aboot brass bands,” she retorted, very red-faced, and looking over to her husband for his support. He, however, was too replete with tea and cold boiled ham for any severe intellectual exercise, and was starting to fill his pipe. “I wasna saying onything aboot brass bands; we’re no’ used to thae kind o’ operatics at burials whaur I come frae. But I think oor ain wye o’ funerals is better than the Gleska wye.”

Erbie (fearful for a moment that something might have been overlooked) glanced at the fragments of the feast, and at the spirit-bottle that had discreetly circulated somewhat earlier. "We're daein' the best we can," said he. "As shair as death your kizzen – peace be wi' him! – 's jist as nicely buried as if ye paid for it yersel' instead o' Duffy and – and Jinnet; if ye'll no' believe me ye can ask your man. 'Nae doot Big Macphee deserved as fine a funeral as onybody, wi' a wheen coaches, and a service at the kirk, wi' the organ playin' and a' that, but that wasna the kind o' man your kizzen was when he was livin'. He hated a' kinds o' falderals."

"He was a cheery chap," said Jinnet again, nervously, perceiving some electricity in the air.

"And he micht hae had a nicer burial," said the cousin's wife, with firmness.

"Preserve us!" cried Erbie. "Whit wad ye like? – Flags maybe? Or champagne wine at the liftin'? Or maybe wreaths o' floo'ers? If it was cheeriness ye were wantin' wi' puir Macphee, ye should hae come a month ago and he micht hae ta'en ye himsel' to the Britannia Music-ha'."

"Haud yer tongue, Erbie," said Jinnet; and the cousin's wife, as fast as she could, took all the hair-pins out of her head and put them in again, – "They think we're that faur back in Fintry," she said with fine irrelevance.

"Not at all," said Erbie, who saw his innocent wife was getting all the cousin's wife's fierce glances, "Not at all, mem. There's naething wrang wi' Fintry; mony a yin I've sent there. I'm rale chawed we didna hae a Fintry kind o' funeral, to please ye. Whit's the patent thing about a Fintry funeral?"

"For wan thing," said the cousin's wife, "it's aye a rale hearse we hae at Fintry and no' a box under a machine, like thon. It was jist a disgrace. Little did his mither think it wad come to thon. Ye wad think it was coals."

"And whit's the maitter wi' coals?" cried Duffy, his professional pride aroused. "Coals was his tred. Ye're shairly awfu' toffs in Fintry about yer funerals."

The cousin's wife stabbed her head all over again with her hair-pins, and paid no heed to him. Her husband evaded her eyes with great determination. "No' that great toffs either," she retorted, "but we can aye afford a bit crape. There wasna a sowl that left this close behind the corp the day had crape in his hat except my ain man."

Then the man to whom Big Macphee owed money laughed.

"Crape's oot o' date, mistress," Erbie assured her. "It's no' the go noo at a' in Gleska; ye micht as weel expect to see the auld saulies."

"Weel, it's the go enough in Fintry," said the cousin's wife. "And there was anither thing; I didna expect to see onybody else but my man in weepers, him bein' the only freen' puir Macphee had but –"

"I havena seen weepers worn since the year o' the Tay Bridge," said Erbie, "and that was oot at the Mearns."

"Weel, we aye hae them at Fintry," insisted the cousin's wife.

"A cheery chap," said Jinnet again, at her wits'-end to put an end to this restrained wrangling, and the man Big Macphee owed money to laughed again.

"Whit's mair," went on the cousin's wife, "my man was the only wan there wi' a dacent shirt wi' Erbie tucks on the breist o't; the rest o' ye had that sma' respect for the deid ye went wi' shirt-breists as flet as a sheet o' paper. It was showin' awfu' sma' respect for puir Macphee," and she broke down with her handkerchief at her eyes.

"Och! ta bleezes! Jessie, ye're spilin' a' the fun," her husband remonstrated.

Erbie pushed back his chair and made an explanation. "Tucks is no' the go naiter, mistress," said he, "and if ye kent whit the laundries were in Gleska ye wadna wonder at it. A laundry's a place whaur they'll no' stand ony o' yer tucks, or ony nonsense o' that kind. Tucks wad spoil the teeth o' the curry-combs they use in the laundry for scoorin' the cuffs and collars; they're no' gaun awa' to waste the vitriol they use for bleachin' on a wheen tucks. They couldna dae't at the money; it's only threepence ha'penny a shirt, ye ken, and oot o' that they hae to pay for the machines that tak's the

buttons aff, and the button-hole bursters – that’s a tred by itsel’. No, mem, tucked breists are oot o’ date; ye’ll no’ see such a thing in Gleska; I’m shair puir Macphee himsel’ hadna ane. The man’s as weel buried as if we had a’ put on the kilts, and had a piper in front playin’ ‘Lochaber no More.’ If ye’ll no believe us, Duffy can show ye the receipted accoonts for the undertaker and the lair; can ye no’, Duffy?”

“Smert!” said Duffy,

But the cousin’s wife was not at all anxious to see accounts of any kind, so she became more prostrate with annoyance and grief than ever.

“Oot Fintry way,” said Erchie, exasperated, “it’s a’ richt to keep up tucked shirt-breists, and crape, and weepers, and mort-cloths, and the like, for there canna be an awfu’ lot o’ gaiety in the place, but we have aye plenty o’ ither things to amuse us in Gleska. There’s the Kelvingrove Museum, and the Wax-works. If ye’re no’ pleased wi’ the wye Macphee was buried, ye needna gie us the chance again wi’ ony o’ yer freen’s.”

The cousin’s wife addressed herself to her husband. “Whit was yon ye were gaun to ask?” she said to him.

He got very red, and shifted uneasily in his chair. “Me!” said he, “I forget.”

“No ye dinna; ye mind fine.”

“Och, it’s a’ richt. Are we no’ haein’ a fine time,” protested the husband.

“No, nor a’ richt, Rubbert Grant.” She turned to the others, “Whit my man was gaun to ask, if he wasna such a sumph, was whether oor kizzen hadna ony money put by him.”

“If ye kent him better, ye wadna need to ask,” said Duffy.

“He was a cheery chap,” said Jinnet.

“But was he no’ in the Shepherds, or the Oddfellows, or the Masons, or onything that wye?”

“No, nor in the Good Templars nor the Rechabites,” said Erchie. “The only thing the puir sowl was ever in was the Mull o’ Kintyre Vaults.”

“Did I no’ tell ye?” said her husband.

“Good-bye and thenky the noo,” said the cousin’s wife, as she went down the stair. “I’ve spent a rale nice day.”

“It’s the only thing ye did spend,” said Erchie when she was out of hearing. “Funerals are managed gey chape in Fintry.”

“Oh ye rascal, ye’ve the sherp tongue!” said Jinnet.

“Ay, and there’s some needs it! A flet fit, too, but a warm hert,” said Erchie.

V THE PRODIGAL SON

Jinnet, like a wise housewife, aye, shops early on Saturday, but she always “leaves some errand – some trifle overlooked, as it were – till the evening, for, true daughter of the-city, she loves at times the evening throng of the streets. That of itself, perhaps, would not send her out with her door-key in her hand and a peering, eager look like that of one expecting something long of coming: the truth is she cherishes a hope that some Saturday to Erchie and her will come what comes often to her in her dreams, sometimes with terror and tears, sometimes with delight.

“I declare, Erchie, if I havena forgotten some sweeties for the kirk the morn,” she says; “put on yer kep and come awa’ oot wi’ me; ye’ll be nane the waur o’ a breath o’ fresh air.”

Erchie-puts down his ‘Weekly Mail,’ stifling a sigh and pocketing his spectacles. The night may be raw and wet, the streets full of mire, the kitchen more snug and clean and warm than any palace, but he never on such occasion says her nay. “You and your sweeties!” he exclaims, lacing his boots; “I’m shair ye never eat ony, in the kirk or onywhere else.”

“And whit dae ye th’ink I wad be buyin’ them for if it wasna to keep me frae gantin’ in the kirk when the sermon’s dreich?”

“Maybe for pappin’ at the cats in the back coort,” he retorts. “There’s ae thing certain shair, I never see ye eatin’ them.”

“Indeed, and ye’re richt,” she confesses. “I havena the teeth for them nooadays.”

“There’s naething wrang wi’ yer teeth, nor ony-thing else about ye that I can see,” her husband replies.

“Ye auld haver!” Jinnet will then cry, smiling. “It’s you that’s lost yer sicht, I’m thinkin’. I’m a done auld buddy, that’s whit I am, and that’s tellin’ ye. But haste ye and come awa’ for the sweeties wi’ me: whit’ll thae wee Wilson weans in the close say the morn if Mrs MacPherson hasna ony sweeties for them?”

They went along New City Road together, Erchie tall, lean, and a little round at the shoulders; his wife a little wee body, not reaching his shoulder, dressed, by-ordinar for her station and “ower young for her years,” as a few jealous neighbours say.

An unceasing drizzle blurred the street-lamps, the pavement was slippery with mud; a night for the hearth-side and slippered feet on the fender, yet the shops were thronged, and men and women crowded the thoroughfare or stood entranced before the windows.

“It’s a wonnerfu’ place, Gleska,” said Erchie. “There’s such diversion in’t if ye’re in the key for’t. If ye hae yer health and yer wark, and the weans is weel, ye can be as happy as a lord, and far happier. It’s the folk that live in the terraces where the nae stairs is, and sittin’ in their paurloirs readin’ as hard’s onything to keep up wi’ the times, and naething to see oot the window but a plot o’ grass that’s no’ richt green, that gets tired o’ everything. The like o’ us, that stay up closes and hae nae servants, and can come oot for a daunder efter turnin’ the key in the door, hae the best o’t. Lord! there’s sae muckle to see – the cheeny-shops and the drapers, and the neighbours gaun for paraffin oil wi’ a bottle, and Duffy wi’ a new shepherd-tartan grauvit, and Lord Macdonald singin’ awa’ like a’ that at the Normal School, and – ”

“Oh, Erchie! dae ye mind when Willie was at the Normal?” said Jinnet.

“Oh, my! here it is already,” thought Erchie. “If that laddie o’ oors kent the hertbrek he was to his mither, nI wonder wad he bide sae lang awa’.”

“Yes, I mind, Jinnet; I mind fine. Whit for need ye be askin’? As I was sayin’, it’s aye in the common streets that things is happenin’ that’s worth lookin’ at, if ye’re game for fun. It’s like travellin’ on the railway; if ye gang first-class, the way I did yince to Yoker by mistake, ye micht as weel be in a hearse for a’ ye see or hear; but gang third and ye’ll aye find something to keep ye cheery if it’s

only fifteen chaps standin' on yer corns gaun to a fitba'-match, or a man in the corner o' the cairrage wi' a mooth-harmonium playin' a' the wye."

"Oh! Erchie, look at the puir wean," said Jinnet, turning to glance after a woman with an infant in her arms. "Whit a shame bringin' oot weans on a nicht like this! Its face is blae wi' the cauld."

"Och! never mind the weans," said her husband; "if ye were to mind a' the weans ye see in Gleska, ye wad hae a bonnie job o't."

"But jist think on the puir wee smout, Erchie. Oh, dear me! there's anither yin no' three months auld, I'll wager. It's a black-burnin' shame. It should be hame snug and soond in its wee bed. Does't no' mind ye o' Willy when I took him first to his grannie's?"

Her husband growled to himself, and hurried his step; but that night there seemed to be a procession of women with infants in arms in New City Road, and Jinnet's heart was wrung at every crossing.

"I thoct it was pan-drops ye cam' oot for, or conversation- losengers," he protested at last; "and here ye're greetin' even-on aboot a wheen weans that's no' oor fault."

"Ye're a hard-herted monster, so ye are," said his wife indignantly.

"Of course I am," he confessed blythely. "I'll throw aff a' disguise and admit my rale name's Blue-beard, but don't tell the polis on me. Hard-herted monster – I wad need to be wi' a wife like you, that canna see a wean oot in the street at nicht withoot the drap at yer e'e. The weans is maybe no' that bad aff: the nicht air's no' waur nor the day air: maybe when they're oot here they'll no' mind they're hungry."

"Oh, Erchie! see that puir wee lame yin! God peety him! – I maun gie him a penny," whispered Jinnet, as a child in rags stopped before a jeweller's window to look in on a magic world of silver cruet-stands and diamond rings and gold watches.

"Ye'll dae naething o' the kind!" said Erchie. "It wad jist be wastin' yer money; I'll bate ye onything his mither drinks." He pushed his wife on her way past the boy, and, unobserved by her, slipped twopence in the latter's hand.

"I've seen the day ye werena sae mean, Erchie MacPherson," said his wife, vexatiously. "Ye aye brag o' yer flet fit and yer warm hert."

"It's jist a sayin'; I'm as mooly's onything," said Erchie, and winked to himself.

It was not the children of the city alone that engaged Jinnet's attention; they came to a street where now and then a young man would come from a public-house staggering; she always scanned the young fool's face with something of expectancy and fear.

"Jist aboot his age, Erchie," she whispered. "Oh, dear! I wonder if that puir callan' has a mither," and she stopped to look after the young man in his cups.

Erichie looked too, a little wistfully "I'll wager ye he has," said he. "And like enough a guid yin; that's no' forgettin' him, though he may gang on the ran-dan; but in her bed at nicht no' sleepin', wonderin' whit's come o' him, and never mindin' onything that was bad in him, but jist a kind o' bein' easy-led, but mindin' hoo smert he was when he was but a laddie, and hoo he won the prize for composeetion in the school, and hoo prood he was when he brocht hame the first wage he got on a Setturday. If God Almichty has the same kind o' memory as a mither, Jinnet, there'll be a chance at the hinderend for the warst o' us."

They had gone at least a mile from home, the night grew wetter and more bitter, the crowds more squalid, Jinnet's interest in errant belated youth more keen. And never a word of the sweets she had made believe to come out particularly for. They had reached the harbour side; the ships lay black and vacant along the wharfs, noisy seamen and women debauched passed in groups or turned into the public-houses. Far west, into the drizzling night the river lamps stretched, showing the drumly water of the highway of the world. Jinnet stopped and looked and listened. "I think we're far enough, Erchie; I think we'll jist gang hame," said she.

“Right!” said Erchie, patiently; and they turned, but not without one sad glance from his wife before they lost sight of the black ships, the noisy wharves, the rolling seamen on the pavement, the lamplights of the watery way that reaches to the world’s end.

“Oh! Erchie,” she said piteously, “I wonder if he’s still on the ships.”

“Like enough,” said her husband. “I’m shair he’s no’ in Gleska at onyrate without conin’ to see us. I’ll bate ye he’s a mate or a captain or a purser or something, and that thrang somewhere abroad he hasna time the noo; but we’ll hear frae him by-and-bye. The wee deevil! I’ll gie him’t when I see him, to be givin’ us such a fricht.”

“No’ that wee, Erchie,” said Jinnet. “He’s bigger than yersel’.”

“So he is, the rascal! am I no’ aye thinkin’ o’ him jist about the age he was when he was at the Sunday school.”

“Hoo lang is’t since we heard o’ him, Erchie?”

“Three or four years, or maybe five,” said Erchie, quickly. “Man! the wye time slips bye! It doesna look like mair nor a twelvemonth.”

“It looks to me like twenty year,” said Jinnet, “and it’s naething less than seeven, for it was the year o’ Annie’s weddin’, and her wee Alick’s six at Mertinmas. Seeven years! Oh, Erchie, where can he be? Whit can be wrang wi’ him? No’ to write a scrape o’ a pen a’ that time! Maybe I’ll no’ be spared to see him again.”

“I’ll bate ye whit ye like ye will,” said her husband. “And if he doesna bring ye hame a lot o’ nice things – shells and parrots, and bottles of scent, and Riga Balsam for hacked hands, and the rale Cheena cheeny, and ostrich feathers and a’ that, I’ll – I’ll be awfu’ wild at him. But the first thing I’ll dae’ll be to stand behind the door and catch him when he comes in, and tak’ the strap to him for the rideeculous wye he didna write to us.”

“Seeven years,” said Jinnet. “Oh, that weary sea, a puir trade to be followin’ for ony mither’s son. It was Australia he wrote frae last; whiles I’m feared the blecks caught him oot there and killed him in the Bush.”

“No! nor the Bush! Jist let them try it wi’ oor Willie! Dod! he would put the hems on them; he could wrastle a score o’ blecks wi’ his least wee bit touch.”

“Erichie.”

“Weel, Jinnet?”

“Ye’ll no’ be angry wi’ me; but wha was it tellt ye they saw him twa years syne carryin’ on near the quay, and that he was stayin’ at the Sailors’ Home?”

“It was Duffy,” said Erchie, hurriedly. “I have a guid mind to – to kick him for sayin’ onything o’ the kind. I wad hae kicked him for’t afore this if – if I wasna a beadle in the kirk.”

“I’m shair it wasna oor Willie at a’,” said Jinnet.

“Oor Willie! Dae ye think the laddie’s daft, to be in Gleska and no’ come to see his mither?”

“I canna believe he wad dae’t,” said Jinnet, but always looked intently in the face of every young man who passed them.

“Weel, that’s ower for anither Setturday,” said Erchie to himself, resuming his slippers and his spectacles.

“I declare, wife,” said he, “ye’ve forgotten something.”

“Whit is’t?” she asked.

“The sweeties ye went oot for,” said Erchie, solemnly.

“Oh, dear me! amn’t I the silly yin? Thinkin’ on that Willie o’ oors puts everything oot o’ my heid.”

Erichie took a paper bag from his pocket and handed it to her. “There ye are,” said he. “I had them in my pooch since dinner-time. I kent ye wad be needin’ them.”

“And ye never let on, but put on your boots and cam’ awa’ oot wi’ me.”

“Of coorse I did; I’m shairly no’ that auld but I can be gled on an excuse for a walk oot wi’ my lass?”

“Oh, Erchie! Erchie!” she cried, “when will ye be wise? I think I’ll put on the kettle and mak’ a cup o’ tea to ye.”

VI MRS DUFFY DESERTS HER MAN

They're yatterin' awa' in the papers there like sweetie-wives aboot Carlyle and his wife," said Erchie. "It's no' the thing at a' makin' an exposure. I kent Carlyle fine; he had a wee baker's shop in Balmano Brae, and his wife made potted heid. It was quite clean; there was naething wrang wi't. If they quarrelled it was naeboddy's business but their ain."

"It's a gey droll hoose whaur there's no' whiles a rippit. Though my fit's flet my hert's warm; but even me and Jinnet hae a cast-oot noo and then. I'm aye the mair angry if I ken I'm wrang, and I've seen me that bleezin' bad tempered that I couldna light my pipe, and we wadna speak to ane anither for oors and oors."

"It'll come to nicht, and me wi' a job at waitin' to gang to, and my collar that hard to button I nearly break my thoombs."

"For a while Jinnet'll say naethin', and then she'll cry, 'See's a haud o't, ye auld fuitier!' I'll be glowerin' awfu' solemn up at the corner o' the ceilin' when she's workin' at the button, lettin' on I'm fair ferocious yet, and she'll say, 'Whit are ye glowerin' at? Dae ye see ony spiders' webs?'"

"No, nor spiders' webs," I says, as gruff as onything. "I never saw a spider's web in this hoose."

"At that she gets red in the face and tries no' to laugh."

"There ye are laughin'! Ye're bate!" I says.

"So are you laughin'," says she; "and I saw ye first. Awa', ye're daft! Will I buy onything tasty for your supper?"

"Duffy's different. I'm no' blamin' him, for his wife's different too. When they quarrel it scandalises the close and gies the land a bad name. The wife washes even-on, and greets into her washin'-byne till she mak's the water cauld, and Duffy sits a' nicht wi' his feet on the kitchen-hobs singin' 'Boyne Water,' because her mither was a Bark, called M'Ginty, and cam' frae Connaught. The folk in the flet abin them hae to rap doon at them wi' a poker afore they'll get their nicht's sleep, and the broken delf that gangs oot to the ash-pit in the mornin' wad fill a crate."

"I'm no' sayin', mind ye, that Duffy doesna like her; it's jist his wye, for he hasna ony edication. He was awfu' vexed the time she broke her leg; it pit him aff his wark for three days, and he spent the time lamentin' aboot her doon in the Mull o' Kintyre Vaults."

"The biggest row they ever had that I can mind o' was aboot the time the weemen wore the dolmans. Duffy's wife took the notion o' a dolman, and told him that seein' there was a bawbee up in the bag o' coal that week she thocht he could very weel afford it."

"There's a lot o' things we'll hae to get afore the dolman," says he; "I'm needin' a new kep mysel', and I'm in a menoj for a bicycle."

"I'm fair affronted wi' my claes," says she; "I havena had onything new for a year or twa, and there's Carmichael's wife wi' her, sealskin jaicket."

"Let her!" says Duffy; "wi' a face like thon she's no' oot the need o't."

"They started wi' that and kept it up till the neighbours near brocht doon the ceilin' on them."

"That's the worst o' leevin' in a close," said Duffy, "ye daurna show ye're the maister in yer ain hoose withoot a lot o' nyafs above ye spilin' a' the plaister."

"Duffy's wife left him the very next day, and went hame to her mither's. She left oot clean sox for him and a bowl o' mulk on the dresser in case he micht be hungry afore he could mak' his ain tea."

"When Duffy cam' hame and found whit had happened, he was awfu' vexed for himsel' and begood to greet."

"I heard aboot the thing, and went in to see him, and found him drinkin' the mulk and eatin' shaves o' breid at twa bites to the shave the same as if it was for a wager."

"Isn't this an awfu' thing that's come on me, MacPherson?" says he; "I'm nae better nor a weedower except for the mournin's."

“It hasna pit ye aff yer meat onywey, says I.

“Oh!’ he says, ‘ye may think I’m callous, but I hae been greetin’ for twa oors afore I could tak’ a bite, and I’m gaun to start again as soon as I’m done wi’ this mulk.’

“Ye should gang oot,’ I tells him, ‘and buy the mistress a poke o’ grapes and gang roond wi’t to her mither’s and tell her ye’re an eediot and canna help it.’

“But wad he? No fears o’ him!

“Oh! I can dae fine withoot her,’ he tells me quite cocky. ‘I could keep a hoose wi’ my least wee bit touch.’

“Ye puir deluded crature,’ I tell’t him, ‘ye micht as well try to keep a hyena. It looks gey like a collie-dug, but it’ll no’ sup saps, and a hoose looks an awfu’ simple thing till ye try’t; I ken fine because Jinnet aften tellt me.’

“He begood to soop the floor wi’ a whitenin’-brush, and put the stour under the bed.

“Go on,’ says I, ‘ye’re daein’ fine for a start. A’ ye want’s a week or twa at the nicht-schools, where they learn ye laundry-work and cookin’, and when ye’re at it ye should tak’ lessons in scientific dressmakin’. I’ll look for ye comin’ up the street next week wi’ the charts under your oxter and your lad wi’ ye.’

“For a hale week Duffy kept his ain hoose.

“He aye forgot to buy sticks for the fire at nicht, and had to mak’ it in the mornin’ wi’ a dizzen or twa o’ claes-pins. He didna mak’ tea, for he couldna tak’ tea withoot cream till’t, and he couldna get cream because he didna ken the wye to wash a poorie, so he made his breakfast o’ cocoa and his tea o’ cocoa till he was gaun aboot wi’ a broon taste in his mooth.

“On the Sunday he tried to mak’ a dinner, and biled the plates wi’ soap and soda to get the creesh aff them when he found it wadna come aff wi’ cauld water and a washin’-clout.

“Hoo are ye gettin’ on in yer ain bonny wee hoose noo?” I asks him ae dirty, wet, cauld day, takin’ in a bowl o’ broth to him frae Jinnet.

“Fine,’ says he, quite brazen; ‘it’s jist like haein’ a yacht. I could be daein’ first-rate if it was the summer-time.’

“He wore them long kahoutchy boots up to your knees on wet days at his wark, and he couldna get them aff him withoot a hand frae his wife, so he had jist to gang to his bed wi’ them on. He ordered pipe-clay by the hunderwicht and soap by the yard; he blacklead his boots, and didna gang to the kirk because he couldna get on his ain collar.

“;Duffy,’ I says, ‘ye’ll mak’ an awfu’ nice auld wife if ye leeve lang enough. I’ll hae to get Jinnet started to knit ye a Shetland shawl.’

“Efter a week it begood to tell awfu’ bad on Duffy’s health. He got that thin, and so wake in the voice he lost orders, for a wheen o’ his auldest customers didna ken him when he cried, and gave a’ their tred to MacTurk, the coalman, that had a wife and twa sisters-in-law to coother him up wi’ beef-tea on wet days and a’ his orders.

“Duffy’s mind was affected too; he gave the richt wicht, and lost twa chances in ae day o’ pittin’ a ha’penny on the bag wi’ auld blin’ weemen that couldna read his board.

“Then he ca’d on a doctor. The doctor tellt him he couldna mak’ it oot at a’, but thocht it was appen – what d’ye ca’t? – the same trouble as the King had, and that Duffy had it in five or six different places. There was naething for him but carefu’ dietin’ and a voyage to the Cape.

“That very day Duffy, gaun hame frae his wark gey shauchly, wi’ a tin o’ salmon in his pooch for his tea, saw his wife comin’ doon the street. When she saw him she turned and ran awa’, and him efter her as hard’s he could pelt. She thocht he was that wild he was gaun to gie her a clourin’; and she was jist fair bate wi’ the runnin’ when he caught up on her in a back coort.

“Tig!’ says Duffy, touchin’ her; ‘you’re het!’

“Oh, Jimmy!’ she says, ‘are ye in wi’ me?’

“Am I no’?” says Duffy, and they went hame thegither.

“‘There was a stranger in my tea this mornin’,’ says Duffy: ‘I kent fine somebody wad be comin’.’

“His wife tellt Jinnet a while efter that that she was a great dale the better o’ the rest she got the time she went hame to her mither’s; it was jist the very thing she was needin’; and, forbye, she got the dolman.”

VII CARNEGIE'S WEE LASSIE

Erichie sought me out on Saturday with a copy of that day's 'News' containing a portrait of Carnegie's little daughter Margaret.

"Man, isn't she the rale wee divert?" said he, glowing. "That like her faither, and sae weel-put-on! She minds me terrible o' oor wee Teenie when she was jist her age."

"She has been born into an enviable state, Erchie," I said.

"Oh, I'm no' sae shair aboot that," said Erchie.

"It's a gey hard thing, whiles, bein' a millionaire's only wean. She canna hae mony wee lassies like hersel' to play the peever wi', or lift things oot o' the stanks o' Skibo Castle wi' a bit o' clye and a string. I'm shair it must be a hard job for the auld man, her paw, to provide diversions for the puir wee smout. And she'll hae that mony things that she'll no' can say whit she wants next. I ken fine the wye it'll be up yonder at Skibo.

"It'll be, 'Paw, I'm wantin' something.'

"'Whit is't, my dawtie, and ye'll get it to break?' Mr Carnegie'll say, and lift her on his knee, and let her play wi' the works o' his twa thoosand pound repeater watch.

"'I dinna' ken,' says the wee lassie, 'but I want it awfu' fast.'

"'Whit wad ye be sayin' to an electric doll wi' a phonograph inside it to mak' it speak?' asks Mr Carnegie.

"'I'm tired o' dolls,' says the wee yin, 'and, besides, I wad raither dae the speakin' mysel'.'

"'Ye're a rale wee woman there, Maggie,' says her paw.

"'Weel, whit dae ye say to a wee totey motorcar a' for your ain sel', and jewelled in four-and-twenty holes?' says he efter that, takin' the hands o' his watch frae her in case she micht swallow them.

"'Oh! a motor-car,' says the wee lassie. 'No, I'm no carin' for ony mair motor-cars; 'I canna get takin' them to my bed wi' me.'

"'Ye're weel aff there,' says he. 'I've had the hale o' the Pittsburg works to my bed wi' me,' he says. 'They were in my heid a' the time when I couldna sleep, and they were on my chest a' the time when I was sleepin'?'

"'Whit wye that, paw?' says the wee lassie. "'I was feart something wad gae wrang, and I wad lose a' the tred, and be puir again.'

"'But I thocht ye wanted to die puir, paw?' says the wee lassie.

"'Ay, but I never had ony notion o' leevin' puir,' says Mr Carnegie as smert's ye like, 'and that mak's a' the difference. If ye're, no' for anither motor carriage, wad ye no' tak' a new watch?'

"'No, paw,' says the wee lassie, 'I'm no' for anither watch. The only thing a watch tells ye is when it's time to gang to bed, and then I'm no wantin' to gang onywy. Whit I wad like wad be ane o' thae watches that has haunds that dinna move when ye're haein' awfu' fine fun.'

"'Oh, ay!' says her paw at that; 'that's the kind we're a' wantin', but they're no' makin' them, and I'm no' shair that I wad hae muckle use for yin nooadays eyen if they were. If ye'll no' hae a watch, will ye hae a yacht, or a brass band, or a fleein'-machine, or a piebald pony?'

"'I wad raither mak' mud-pies,' says the wee innocent.

"'Mud-pies!' cries her faither in horror, lookin' roond to see that naebody heard her. 'Wheesh! Maggie, it wadna look nice to see the like o' you makin' mud-pies. Ye havena the claes for't. Beside, I'm tellt they're no' the go nooadays at a'.

"'Weel,' says she at that, 'I think I'll hae a hairy-heided lion.'

"'Hairy-heided lion. Right!' says Mr Carnegie. 'Ye'll get that, my wee lassie,' and cries doon the turret stair to the kitchen for his No. 9 secretary.

"The No. 9 secretary comes up in his shirt sleeves, chewin' blot-sheet and dighting the ink aff his elbows.

“Whit are ye thrang at the noo?” asks Mr Carnegie as nice as onything to him, though he’s only a kind o’ a workin’ man.

“Sendin’ aff the week’s orders for new kirk organs,” says the No. 9 secretary, ‘and it’ll tak’ us till Wednesday.’

“Where’s a’ the rest o’ my secretaries?” asks Mr Carnegie.

“Half o’ them’s makin’ oot cheques for new leebraries up and doon the country, and the ither halves oot in the back-coort burning letters frae weedows wi’ nineteen weans, nane o’ them daein’ for themsel’s, and frae men that were dacent and steady a’ their days, but had awfu’ bad luck.’

“If it gangs on like this we’ll hae to put ye on the night-shift,” says Mr Carnegie. ‘It’s comin’ to’t when I hae to write my ain letters. I’ll be expected to write my ain books next. But I’ll no’ dae onything o’ the kind. Jist you telegraph to India, or Africa, or Japan, or wherever the hairy-heided lions comes frae, and tell them to send wee Maggie ane o’ the very best at 50 per cent aff for cash.’

“Early ae mornin’ some weeks efter that, when the steam-hooter for wakenin’ the secretaries starts howlin’ at five o’clock, Mr Carnegie comes doon stair and sees the hairy-heided lion in a crate bein’ pit aff a lorry. He has it wheeled into the wee lassie when she’s at her breakfast.

“Let it oot,” she says; ‘I want to play wi’t.’

“Ye wee fuiter!” he says, lauchin’ like onything, ‘ye canna get playin’ wi’t oot o’ the cage, but ye’ll can get feedin’t wi’ sultana-cake.’

“But that disna suit wee Maggie, and she jist tells him to send it awa’ to the Bronx Zoo in New York.

“Bronx Zoo. Right!” says her paw, and cries on his No. 22 secretary to send it aff wi’ the parcel post at yince.

“That minds me,” he says, ‘there’s a cryin’ heed for hairy-heided lions all over Europe and the United States. The moral and educative influence o’ the common or bald-heided lion is of no account. Noo that maist o’ the kirks has twa organs apiece, and there’s a leebrary in every clachan in the country, I must think o’ some ither wye o’ gettin’ rid o’ this cursed wealth. It was rale’ cute o’ you, Maggie, to think o’t; I’ll pay half the price o’ a hairy-heided lion for every toon in the country wi’ a population o’ over five hundred that can mak’ up the ither half by public subscription.’

“And then the wee lassie says she canna tak’ her parridge.

“Whit for no’?” he asks her, anxious-like. ‘Are they no guid?’

“Oh, they’re maybe guid enough,” she says, ‘but I wad raither hae toffie.’

“Toffie. Right!” says her paw, and orders up the chef to mak’ toffie in a hurry.

“Whit’s he gaun to mak’ it wi’?” asks the wee yin.

“Oh, jist in the ordinar’ wye – wi’ butter and sugar,” says her paw.

“That’s jist common toffie,” says the wee lassie; ‘I want some ither kind.’

“As shair’s death, Maggie,” he says, ‘there’s only the ae wye o’ makin’ toffie.’

“Then whit’s the use o’ haein’ a millionaire for a paw?” she asks.

“True for you,” he says, and thinks hard. ‘I could mak’ the chef put in champed rubies or a di’mond or twa grated doon.’

“Wad it mak’ the toffie taste ony better?” asks the wee cratur’.

“No’ a bit better,” he says. ‘It wadna taste sae guid as the ordinary toffie, but it wad be nice and dear.’

“Then I’ll jist hae to hae the plain, chape toffie,” says wee Maggie.

“That’s jist whit I hae to hae mysel’ wi’ a great mony things,” says her paw. ‘Being a millionaire’s nice enough some wyes, but there’s a wheen things money canna buy, and paupers wi’ three or four thoosand paltry, pounds a-year is able to get jist as guid toffie and ither things as I can. I canna even dress mysel’ different frae ither folks, for it wad look rideeculous to see me gaun about wi’ gold cloth waistcoats and a hat wi’ strings o’ pearls on it, so a’ I can dae is to get my nickerbocker suits made wi’

an extra big check. I hae the pattern that big noo there's only a check-and-a-half to the suit; but if it wasna for the honour o't I wad just as soon be wearin' Harris tweed."

"Upon my word, Erchie," I said, "you make me sorry for our philanthropic friend, and particularly for his little girl."

"Oh, there's no occasion!" protested Erchie. "There's no condection in life that hasna its compensations, and even Mr Carnegie's wee lassie has them. I hae nae doot the best fun her and her paw gets is when they're playin' at bein' puir. The auld man'll nae doot whiles hide his pocket-money in the press, and sit doon readin' his newspaper, wi' his feet on the chimneypiece, and she'll come in and ask for a bawbee."

"I declare to ye I havena a farden, Maggie," he'll say; 'but I'll gie ye a penny on Setturday when I get my pay.'

"I dinna believe ye," she'll say.

"Then ye can ripe me," says her paw, and the wee tot'll feel in a' his pooches, and find half a sovereign in his waistcoat. They'll let on it's jist a bawbee (the wee thing never saw a rale bawbee in her life, I'll warrant), and he'll wonner whit wye he forgot about it, and tell her to keep it and buy jujubes wi't, and she'll be awa' like a whitteruck and come back in a while wi' her face a' sticky for a kiss, jist like rale."

"Fine I ken the wee smouts; it was that wye wi' oor ain Teenie."

"Other whiles she'll hae a wee tin bank wi' a bee-skep on't, and she'll hae't fu' o' sovereigns her faither's veesitors slip't in her haund when they were gaun awa', and she'll put it on the mantelpiece and gang out. Then her paw'll get up lauchin' like onything to himsel', and tak' doon the wee bank and rattle awa' at it, lettin' on he's robbin't for a schooner o' beer, and at that she'll come rinnin' in and catch him at it, and they'll hae great fun wi' that game. I have nae doot her faither and mither get mony a laugh at her playin' at wee washin's, too, and lettin' on she's fair trauchled aff the face o' the earth wi' a family o' nine dolls, an' three o' them doon wi' the hoopin'-cough. Oh! they're no' that bad aff for fine fun even in Skibo Castle."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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