

SCOTCH READINGS.

FIRST SERIES.

MRS. MACFARLAN'S RABBIT-DINNER.

JOHNNY MACFARLAN was a shaemaker's mechanic. He ca'd in the tacketts in the heels of the buits and shune, and was considered a crack hand at the job. Plenty of ordinary workmen might be able to do the plain work—that is, ca'in' the tacketts in the soles—but Johnny had a geometrical genius for curves, and, with his "specks" on, could walk roun' the edges o' the heels like an experienced Corporation scavenger sweepin' the circle o' a lamp-post.

Personally, Johnny was a wee man, but possessed—by way of effective contrast—a big wife, and an extra big sma' family. Johnny's weight corresponded with his size; he weighed seven stane in his stockin's—before breakfast. What additional weight he might have "scaled" after breakfast, consequent on the absorption o' a basin o' weel-biled parritch, an' a big floury baker's scone, wash't doon wi' a chappin o' sour milk, is a question touching atmospheric displacement in the stomach, which it would be kittle to guess at.

Regarding Mrs. Macfarlan, or Betty, as Johnny commonly styled her, she was the physical opposite of her "man" Johnny, and in point of bodily weight, was a perfect whistler.

Betty, in view of her size, ruled the domestic roast, of course; but Johnny seldom fell into her angry hands—he was sae plaguey wee and ill to catch. Even at the worst, their domestic rows were never very serious, and ended generally by Johnny sensibly capitulating to his angry spouse, and then gallantly sclimbin' up on a chair to tak' her twa rosy cheeks atween his hands and fondly kiss her.

Now, Johnny Macfarlan, although a good man in many ways, was, I fear, not a particularly religious man. Some said Johnny was at heart a Socialist, and believed very much in the good time coming, when nations all over the earth would fraternise and live at peace—when happy working men would put five-pound notes between their breakfast rolls instead of corn'd meat—when colliers would be let down pit-shafts by silver ropes, and so forth.

Anyhow, Johnny was the reverse of orthodox in his "views," and delighted in joking about Christianity and its exported adjuncts—hot rum and cold missionary. Johnny, it is true, had a "sate in the kirk," but the said "sate" was too often conspicuous by the owner's absence. His wife, Betty, however, was there every Sunday afternoon, and as she had a keen memory for passages in the sermon applicable to Johnny's "lost state," she made up for her husband's absence frae the kirk by flingin' lumps o' the sermon at his heid at the Sunday dinner-table, which annoying artillery practice Johnny humorously checkmated by shoving into her plate the toughest bits o' girsle he could pick oot o' the dinner stew, so as to effectively "jab up" her clackin' tongue.

But Johnny, altho' no a kirk-gaun man, was a capital hand at cooking a guid Sunday dinner. He could toast the breid to a fair hair, cut the ingans, minsh the "shooet" (suet), and saut and pepper the "stew" to perfection. Then, as for "maskin' the tea," there wasna a man nor an auld wife in Gleska could bate Johnny Macfarlan at that.

Weel, to come to the story of the grand rabbit-dinner; Maggie, their auldest bit lassie, had been "oot at service" for some short time, and having got her first three months' wages, was at hame frae Saturday nicht to Monday morning; and as the bit lassie had brocht hame some bawbees wi' her, the fond parents resolved on having a grand rabbit-dinner on Sunday. The proposition, which was made by Betty, was all the more readily assented to on account of Wee Mosey, their fifth auldest laddie, having had for some time a young rabbit in the cellar, and which had become awkwardly "in the road" on account of its removal to the house, consequent on a cairt o' coals having been put into the said cellar. The rabbit was therefore doomed, and its martyrdom was readily agreed to by all except Wee Mosey, who, unfortunately for the tragic sequel, had no voice—other than an appropriately small voice—in the matter.

"An' hoo will ye manage to cook it, Johnny?" inquired Mrs. Macfarlan, on the preceding Saturday nicht. "Ye ken it's an extra dish, an' ye hav'na had muckle experience that way, I'm certain."

"Never ye mind hoo I'll cook it," promptly replied Johnny. "I'll cook it, Betty, an' that's enough."

"But, Johnny——"

"No a word, Betty, if you please—no a single word. I'll cook the precious thing, dinna ye doot. Jist ye leave oot an ingan, a spunefu' o' floor, an' a pair o' shears. As for the rabbit, I ken whaur to get her," and Johnny yerked his head in the direction of the bed-pawn, signifying that the innocent subject of the sacrificial dinner was probably at that very moment sleeping under the kitchen bed, blissfully unconscious of the culinary fate awaiting it on the morrow.

And now let us conceive Sunday morning as having arrived. Betty has gotten herseif, and some six or eight of

the auldest of the bairns ready for the kirk, and is now tormenting Johnny with her final instructions—the proper disposal of the rabbit, as was natural, coming largely to the front.

“Noo, Johnny dear,” she said, “I’ve tell’d ye a’ that’s necessary for the richt bilin’ o’ the rabbit——”

“An’ a great deal mair,” interrupted Johnny, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice. “Pey ye attention to auld Mr. Orthodoxy’s sermon, Betty; an’ I’ll pey attention to the richt bilin’ o’ the rabbit.”

An’ now that Betty was gone, it was the dinner Johnny had to do with; but the first principle of it—the rabbit—was curiously amissing. Everything, in fact, was waiting on the rabbit. There was the spunefu’ o’ floor, the ingan, the pepper and saut, alang wi’ the knife an’ the shears for the skinnin’ o’t. Besides all that, there was a glorious fire burning—in fact, a rare special fire, which visibly endangered the safety o’ the “lum;” the pat was also sittin’ ready, an’ so also was the tureen to “dish’t” in. But the Hamlet of the play, the rabbit, was conspicuously amissing!

Ay, where was that blessed rabbit hiding itself? Apparently scenting murder in the air, it had for the last two hours been strangely absent from even accidental sight.

“Clearly,” thought Johnny, “it’s time I was setting to work. The kirk’s barely in twa hours a’thegither, an’ the pat needs an’ hour-an’-a-half’s guid bilin’! I maun buckle up my sleeves, an’ fa’ to in richt earnest!”

This said, Johnny got on his “specks,” as his sight was a trifle fail’t, and began rummagin’ about the odd corners o’ the hoose in search o’ the missing rabbit. If it had only been the cat he wanted, he could have begun skinnin’ operations at once, as he was fa’in’ owre’t every ither minute in his search for the missing rabbit. In fact so often did the poor cat come in his way that Johnny finally dealt it a smart kick, which sent it flying below the kitchen-bed like a streak of greased lightning.

No; that rabbit couldn't be got—it was simply nowhere! He looked here, he looked there; he looked high, he looked low; he looked over the bed, and he looked under it; he looked within presses, and on shelves; in drawers, under chairs, and, as a final climax, in the wean's cradle! But no; there was no trace of the missing rabbit to be found anywhere.

At his wit's end, Johnny, as a last shift, set the hale o' the remaining weans who had not been taken to the kirk by their mither to help him in the search. Their united efforts, however, completely failed to discover the missing rabbit's place of hide.

The search being thus at all points a failure, Johnny, be-thinking himself for a moment, suddenly remembered that he had looked both in and under every place—except under the cradle.

The cradle was sitting before the fire; he shifted its position, and out leapt the missing rabbit, and with a nervous jump-jump-jump, was in at the back of a big kist in a second, pursued by Johnny and the hale jing-bang o' the shouting weans! Reaching doon his hand at the back o' the kist, Johnny picked up the trembling victim, and carried it into the scullery for instant "despatch," without, I fear, the least Christian, or even Socialistic compunction.

Pausing for a moment to consider what way, and at what part he would begin the work of death, the rabbit, apprehensive of danger apparently, gave a sudden wriggle, and getting freed from Johnny's grip, it scurried across the floor, and was presently hid from sight below the kitchen-bed.

Uttering an angry expletive, Johnny dashed after it, and in less than no time brought it out of quarters, and hurriedly despatched it. The rabbit fought toughly for its little life, and proved a "fell thief" to master, as Johnny afterwards

admitted. But he managed it at last, and, in the inside o' five minutes, had it skinned and thrust holus-bolus into the dinner-pot.

The fire did the rest, and it did its work well. In twenty minutes the pot was "bilin' like onything," and Johnny hoped to save his reputation as a grand Sunday cook, by having the dinner "dish't" in proper time for Betty's return frae kirk. In fact, he hoped for even more than that. His reputation would not only be sustained by the "dish" which he was now preparing, but would be very much enhanced thereby, he fondly hoped. If the cooking of the rabbit-dinner proved a success, he would, in common justice, be entitled to some extra credit. There were many, no doubt, who could cook professional rabbit-dinners, but whaur was the man (Johnny asked himself) wha could mind five or six steerin' weans, nurse a "screamer" in the cradle, and cook at the same time a rabbit-dinner, including the killin' an' the skinnin' o't? Yes, John Macfarlan proudly looked round the kitchen, and boldly asked the walls—"Where was that gifted man?" and defeated Echo promptly answered—"Nowhere!"

"It's jist delicious," soliloquised Johnny, as he tasted the savoury "brae" with an unctuous smack of the lips; "in fact, it's mair than merely delicious, it's jist perfectly exquisous! Saut an' pepper to taste pits the capstane on guid cookery," added Johnny, as he withdrew the tasting spoon from his lips, and prepared to dust a fresh sprinkling of pepper atop of the savoury soup.

Five minutes more passed, and—"I'll now venture to lift it," quoth Johnny, and forthwith he whipped the pot from off the fire, and presently "dish't" the rich morsel in full view of the admiring children.

"There! an' if Betty's no pleased wi that dish I'll eat my auld bauchels. It's weel cooked, carefully sautet an' pepper'd, an' bonnily 'dish't,' an' onything mair or better

than that it couldna weel be. But, guid sake, there's Betty at the door!"

And in two seconds thereafter, the veritable Betty, with her numerous family brood around her, stood on the centre of the kitchen-floor, admiring the "dish't" rabbit, and delightfully snuffing the savoury atmosphere which everywhere filled the homely apartment.

"Weel, Johnny dear, ye've managed to cook the rabbit I see, as ye said ye wad," was Mrs. Macfarlan's first salutation: "weel dune for you, Johnny!"

"Oo, ay, lass, I've cook't its goose nicely, an' I'm hopin' it'll prove a toothsome dish for us a'."

"Weel, Johnny, if it tastes hauf as weel as it smells, the pirnickiest mooth 'll ha'e naething to fin' faut wi'."

"I'll tak' my affy-davy on the taste o't, Betty; the taste o't 'll be, if onything, upsides wi' the smell o't, for it's cook't according to Cocker, ye may depend;—a spunefu' o' floor, a moderate-sized ingan, twa pints o' water to bile't in, an' finely sautet an' pepper't to taste."

"Weel, we'll jist sit doon an' taste it, Johnny, dear," said Betty. And having now denuded herself of her Sunday "braws," she got on a working wrapper, and sat herself down to "carve" the rabbit forthwith.

"Eh, Johnny, dear, d'ye ken, that rabbit brae's jist grand," remarked Mrs. Macfarlan, as she helped herself to a spoonful of the rich gravy.

Johnny said nothing, but only sat and complacently smiled, his twa thumbs stuck in the armpits of his waist-coat, and his hands spread out delightedly, like a man neck-deep in the warmest of domestic clover.

"An' the rabbit itsel's jist quite perfeckshous, Johnny—as tender's a bit o' chicken! Oh, Johnny, ye're jist a fair love o' a man—a perfeck auld sweetie—a rale wee dear!"

Johnny ventured nothing in reply; his soul was too full to speak; he could only alternately snuff up the rich flavour

of the rabbit, and the still richer flavour of Mrs. Macfarlan's flattering incense. His two thumbs, however, gradually slid round to the top of the armpits of his waistcoat, under the rise of his swelling feelings, until the tips of his fingers were level with the crown of his head, and this characteristic position he maintained till his well-pleased better-half had put down his share of the rabbit-soup, and told him to "enrich his bluid wi't," and to mentally "thank his Maker for the toothsome mercies bestowed."

Johnny, feeling in his heart that the "cook" had already been duly thanked, did not hesitate to inwardly thank the "bestower of the mercies" agreeably to Mrs. Macfarlan's request. Thereafter the whole family circle sat down to discuss their share of the grand rabbit-dinner.

"An' what was the minister sayin' till't the day, Betty?" asked Johnny, as he warmed to his savoury dinner.

"Oh, he was jist grand, Johnny, dear," joyfully responded Mrs. Macfarlan, as she "sooked," with evident relish, one of the "hint legs" of the rabbit.

"Was he as guid's the rabbit, Betty?"

"Eh, ye sly auld sweetie; ye're tryin' to fish anither compliment frae me?"

"Weel, then, Betty, tell me what was auld Mr. Orthodoxy's subject this afternoon—effectual calling? fore-ordination? foreign missions? local Dorcas societies?—"

"Nane o' them, Johnny," interrupted Mrs. Macfarlan.

"What then, Betty?"

"The New Jerusalem."

"The New Jerusalem!—h'm."

"Ay, an' I wish we were a' safe there, Jchnny."

"Will there be ony biled rabbits there, Betty?"

"I hope sae, Johnny; an' if they taste as weel's this yin, there canna be owre mony, I think."

"Ay, but, Betty, ye maun' bethink yersel' a bit; a Scotch rabbit cooked owre a hamely coal-fire is a' right enough, but

what about a sidereal rabbit?—wha can tell the flavour of a sidereal rabbit, born an' bred amang the rolling spheres, an' cooked maybe by a stroke o' lichtnin'! Eh, ye wisna thinkin' on that, Betty?"

"Sidereal rabbits, Johnny; what sort of animals are they?"

"Inhabitants o' the spheres, Betty, inhabitants of the rollin' spheres—star rabbits, ye ken. Ye surely dinna suppose, Betty, that ye're to be the only immortalised being up yonder! For my pairt, Betty, I wad rather stay where I am on this roun' ball, than inhabit the New Jerusalem wi' some folks I ken."

"What roun' ball d'ye refer to, Johnny?" quite innocently asked Mrs. Macfarlan, looking at the same instant under the table; "what kind o' a roun' ball are ye referrin' to?—is't a ball o' worset, or what?"

"Oh, this earth, Betty. Ye ken as weel's me that it's jist roun', an' nae ither possible shape, although ye'll no admit it."

"Noo, Johnny, I want nae mair argie-bargiement about the circularosity o' the earth. I had mair than enough o' that subject frae ye the nicht afore yestreen. Besides, it's no a Sunday subject to argie about."

"Weel, d'ye admit it's roun', then?"

"No; an' I'll never admit ony sic nonsense. D'ye think I ha'e lost my e'esicht, Johnny Macfarlan, an' my senses along wi't? Does that flat table look roun'? G'wa' wi' ye, Johnny Macfarlan; it's even waur than your daft Socialism, an' that's daft enough."

"Weel, then, Betty, it maun be either roun' or flat; if it's roun'——"

"We wad rowe aff o't," triumphantly put in Mrs. Macfarlan.

"An' if it's flat, wad we no be in danger o' walkin' owre the edge o't, and fa'in' doon, doon, doon into naething, eh?"

"I ne'er heard tell o' onybody fa'in' owre the edge o't Johnny, lang as I've leev'd."

"There's maybe a muckle heich wa' built a' roun' the outer edge o't, then, Betty, to prevent accidents, eh?"

"I wadna wonder, Johnny; but the roun'ness o' the earth is jist aboot as hard to believe in as the nonsense ye talk o' the world spinnin' in space. Sic blethers! Jist imagine; if the world's spinnin' east at sic a rate, a body in Gleska wad never be able to get west the length o' Greenock, so they wadna!"

"Ha-ha-ha! 'Od, Betty, I never saw't in that licht afore. Betty, ye're an unappreciated genius—ha-ha-ha!"

"Oh, ay, jist lauch awa', Mr. John Macfarlan; but I've the richt en' o' the stick for a' that, ye unconverted Sawbath-breakin', Socialistic auld vaigabond that ye are! draggin' me into a heathen discussion on the Lord's Day aboot sidereal rabbits, the shape o' the earth, an' sic like nonsense! 'Od, if ever again ye bring up the question o' star-rabbits, or the earth's shape, in my hearin', Sunday or Setterday, I'll—I'll—I'll——"

'Wheesht, Betty, wheesht! mum's the word; ye've converted me; I see't a' noo as plain's a penny. If the earth's hurryin' east, it's impossible we can ever get faur west; ye nicht manage the length o' Paisley wi' a stress, but Greenock's quite oot o' the question. Ye were in the richt a' alang, Betty; the earth's clearly flat, and it's staunin' stock still. That was a bit guid' rabbit."

Ay, ye're speakin' sense noo, Johnny. If ye'd stick to the rabbits, an' let the stars alane, it wad be muckle better for my comfort an' yer ain peace o' mind."

Mrs. Macfarlan at this juncture rose from the dinner-table, and began putting aside the dishes, in which job she was handily helped by her auldest lassie, Maggie.

She was nae mair than half thro' wi't, however, when Johnny, who was jist preparing himsel' for a leisurely

"smoke," was startled, doon to the length o' his very bauchels, by a terrific scream, which was instantly followed by the crash o' some delf, which Mrs. Macfarlan had nervously let fall to the floor.

"Oh!—oh!!—oh!!!"—yelled Mrs. Macfarlan, every expletive rising to a higher note of horror.

"In the name o' guidness, Betty, what's gaen wrang at a'? Ha'e ye swallowed a fork, or what?"

"Oh, Johnny Macfarlan, what's this ye've dune? In the name o' mercy, what's that I see?" and Mrs. Macfarlan, her eyes staring in her head, kept pointing at an object only half discovered under the pawn of the kitchen-bed.

Johnny looked as directed, and, horror! the head of the rabbit was peering out, its delicate nostrils twitching with nervous excitement.

Johnny, it must be confessed, was almost, if not altogether, as clean dumfoundert at the startling sight as was his wife, Betty.

The idea of the "biled-and-eaten" rabbit discovering itself below the pawn of the kitchen-bed! and it safe and snug, too, in the general family stomach! The thing was clearly impossible!—nonsense!

Johnny went nervously over to grup the "thing," as he called it, when fuff, it jump't briskly across the floor, in sight of the entire family circle.

"Oh, Johnny Macfarlan! Johnny Macfarlan! what's this ye've dune to me! What was it ye biled in the pat?"

"It was the rabbit, Betty, the—the—the rabbit!"

"Then tell me what's that?" retorted Mrs. Macfarlan, pointing pathetically at the still alive rabbit.

"It's—it's—it's, eh, an optical delusion!" gasped out Johnny, who was at as great a loss as his wife, Betty, to understand the startling situation.

"An optical delusion!—eh, Lord, what sort o' a thing was that to bile in a pat? An optical delusion! Ye've been

experimenting on me, ye heartless monster! Oh, I'm pushion't! I feel I'm pushion't! Rin for the doctor!—oh-oh! oh-oh! oh-oh!”

“Ay, Betty, an optical delusion! or .if ye—ye—ye'll no believe that, it must then have been a sort o'—sort o'—sort o' spiritualistic rabbit—the late article!—a kind o' rabbit medium, so to speak, that has got sort o'—eh—sort o'——sort o'—eh—materialised again, ye understand. Ye see, Betty, there's nae real reason, when ye look at it, why rabbits shouldna ha'e souls as weel as men and women folks—wee souls, ye ken, Betty, maybe the size o' hazel nits—an' granting that, Betty, the late biled-an'-eaten rabbit has maybe cam' back in the material flesh, so to speak, jist to kind o' bid us an affectionate guid-bye; though, I frankly confess, Betty, I'd much rather see the animal sittin' in a higher sphere the noo, chowin' a spiritualistic cabbage blade, than fuddin' about oor floor-heid, after being, to a' intents and purposes, baith biled an' eaten! It's a problem, Betty, the reappearance o't—an incomprehensible, mysterious, philosophic problem.”

“Tell me this moment what ye biled in that pat? ye low, reckless, experimenting vaigabond!”

“The rabbit, Betty; I bile't naething out the late rabbit; an' ye must allow it was carefully sauted an' pepper't to taste.”

“Whaur dia ye fling the skin an the feet o't? answer me that, Johnny Macfarlan, that I may see what in a' the earth ye biled in the pat? Whaur put ye the feet o't?”

“In the ash-bakey there,” frankly ad 'tted the puzzled husband.

In a moment Mrs. Macfarlan, fearfully suspicious of the awful truth, had caught up the domestic article of use named, and was anxiously peering inside of it.

A single brief glance assured her wavering mind of the shocking truth. There lay the cat's skin, and the cat's four

paws which Johnny had so cleverly snipped off. Horror of horrors! they had actually eaten the cat! which, through short-sightedness, Johnny had killed in place of the rabbit.

When the awful disclosure was thus made certain to poor Mrs. Macfarlan, she lifted up her voice afresh and—yelled, literally yelled! At the same moment, too, she dropped the “bakey” on the floor, and would the next instant have dropped bodily herself, if Johnny had not caught her in his heroic arms.

“Weel,” quo Johnny, “I’ve heard o men folks gettin’ the babby to haud; but och, it’s a sair morning when a man o’ licht wecht gets the wife to haud, an’ her seventeen stane, if she’s an ounce! Neither biled rabbits nor German sausages could lang withstand an armfu’ like that!”
