

CHAPTER XVII.

THE KAILYARD.

“There is naething in the Hielan’s
But lang kail and leeks,
An’ lang-legged laddies
Gaun wanting their breeks.”

OLD LOWLAND RHYME.

THE fame of “the kail-suppers of Fife” was not confined to their native county; their abilities in kail consumption are acknowledged to far surpass that of any county in Scotland. We are now familiar with what the critics call kailyard literature. The books referred to describe the humble, every-day life of Scottish folks in general, and the critics who have given them this designation are perhaps unaware how much the “kailyard” at one time ministered to the daily diet of Scottish families. Before the introduction of the potato and the turnip, kail and leeks were almost the only potable vegetables they possessed. In some form or other kail was a daily dish. It is remarkable how often they are alluded to in the old ballads and songs of the country. In an old song at one time very familiar to north-country folks reference is made to two ways of cooking kail—

“There is caul’ kale in Aberdeen
And castocks in Stra’bogie;
Every lad maun hae his lass,
An’ I maun hae my cogie.”

The cogie was a wooden dish into which the kail was poured. After being chopped fine and mixed with the “bree” in which they had been boiled, a little oatmeal added made “caul’ kale” a very relishable dish. “And castocks in Stra’bogie.” Very few are perhaps aware that the stems of kail contain a pith resembling the marrow in a beef bone. In his “Hallowe’en” Burns says—

“Then first and foremost thro’ the kail
The stocks maun a’ be sought anes;
They steek their e’en and graip and wale
For muckle anes and straight anes;

An' gif the castock's sweet or sour,
 Wi' jocktelegs they taste them ;
 Syne cozily aboon the door
 Wi' canny care they place them
 To lie that nicht.

The marrow in the castock tastes sweet and sugary, and no doubt the folks of Strathbogie had a more refined taste than the Aberdonians, and knew more of culinary science. In another popular old song we get a lesson in kail cookery. By way of explanation, it was the custom when the family gathered round the fireside on a winter's night that the kail pot was hung on "the crook." It was the special duty of one of the women folk to watch the pot and to keep "the kail doon in't" with a long wooden "spurtle." The rest of the women folk employed their time in spinning or knitting, while the guidman and the lads drew out their gully knives and made halters and crooks from fir and hazel tree roots to spin raips for the corn stacks. On such occasions it was customary for neighbour lads to drop in to spend the night "an' crack wi' the lasses." It must have been upon such an occasion that the lass neglected her duties and allowed the kail to rise above the rim of the pot and get "reekit." Her delinquency is set forth in the wailing words of the song—

"Oor kail's reekit an' oor kail's raw,
 I wat it's nae fairly,
 For a' the hale lang winter's nicht
 She clappit the cheek o' her Charlie."

It was very likely upon a similar occasion that a farmer's son played off a nasty trick upon an unsuspecting maiden, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer. He was her accepted lover, and he paid, along with a companion, a weekly visit to the farm. They never failed to find the daughters busy at the wheel. The mother in the pride of her heart was wont to show them the fine linen that her daughters had spun. But it was whispered to the lover that his sweetheart never turned the wheel between the times of his visits. The device that he fell upon to test the truth of the story deserves to be recorded. In passing through the farmyard he took the key from the barn door and kept it in his pocket until the maiden "spun aff her rocks." When she began to roll new lint on her distaff, he gallantly took it from her hand and rolled it for her. In the midst of it he placed the barn door key. Supper being ready, the wheels were laid aside

for that night. On their next visit the young men had hardly seated themselves by the fireside when the farmer greeted them with, "Dod, lads, hae ye seen onything o' oor barn door key? It disappeared the nicht ye was last here, an' we thocht in passin' the door ye had drawn it oot an' hidden't for a trick." "Weel, Mains, I did hide the key, but in a place far I thocht ye wud hae fun't lang afore this time," replied the young farmer. Very soon his sweetheart's "rock" began to shrink, and from it down rattled the barn door key. The young farmer lifted it from the floor and handed it to the farmer with the remark, "That's yer barn door key, Mains, it's deen gweed service for me; it has opened my e'en. Gweed nicht." The young farmer did not stop for his kail that night.

We turn from this untoward incident in lovemaking to the happy couple that have left a record of their meeting "at Carlisle Ha'"—

"There grows a bonnie brier bush in oor kailyard,
And sweet are the blossoms on't in oor kailyard;
And 'neath that bonnie brier bush a bonnie lad and lass
Are busy, busy coortin' in oor kailyard."

We know that in many kailyards in Scotland lovers meet beneath the honeysuckle bower and the bourtree bush to tell the old, old story. And it is pleasing to note that when the escort went to Germany "to bring hame the wee, wee German Lairdie," they found him "plantin' kail and dibblin' leeks in his wee, wee German yardie," no doubt in anticipation of his coming to rule the land of "lang kail and leeks."

There is perhaps no more useful or ornamental plant grown in our gardens than the curled greens. It is hardly possible to over-estimate its value at one time to the inhabitants of Scotland. They cooked it in various ways, and had it not been for its extensive use amongst cottar folk scurvy and skin disease would have been far worse than they were. If cottars possessed a good kailyard they were never at a loss for a family meal. There was at one time a man in the parish of Aberlour who had such an inheritance. He was known far and wide as "The Laird of Kailtack." His house lay between the house of Kinermony and the Spey. All trace of it and the famous kailyard has been swept away by the ruthless hand of Time; but happily the name

and the tragical end of the old laird and his famous capacity as a kail-supper is preserved to us in the traditions of the parish:—

- “The Laird o’ Kailtack
 Had kail in galore ;
 The diel siccan kail
 Was e’er seen before.
 As big as an apron
 The blades could be seen,
 O’ a’ kind o’ colours
 Frae purple tae green.
- “The laird aye rose early,
 Before it was licht ;
 On one winter’s morning
 He saw a sad sight—
 The yard door was open,
 He heard the pigs grunt ;
 They had stripped every kail blade
 Close to the runt.
- “The laird got a stick,
 Then he closed the yard door ;
 He frothed at the mouth,
 He cursed and he swore
 That every pig o’ them
 For that night’s work
 He wud hang by the heels
 And eat them as pork.
- “The laird in his wrath
 Flew at the auld soo,
 But she fought like a tiger,
 If history speaks true ;
 Her pigs in their terror
 Ran squealin’ about
 Until the laird’s wife
 In her nichtmutch cam’ oot.
- “She rushed to the kailyard,
 Not a moment too soon :
 The soo was the victor,
 The auld laird was doon ;
 Wi’ her great muckle tusks
 She clung like a cleg,
 An’ held the auld laird
 By the calf o’ the leg.
- “To lift up the laird
 Was nae easy task,
 Wi’ suppin’ o’ kail
 He was round as a cask.
 When carried indoors
 And laid on his bed,
 ‘I’ll get nae mair kail porridge’
 Were the last words he said.

“ If the legend’s correct
And history speaks true,
It was believed that the diel
Was in the auld soo :
When the laird breathed his last
She fled from the door
To the hill o’ Benrinnes,
And was never seen more.”