

THE WASHING-HOUSE KEY.

MRS. PEASCONE was a Gleska housewife, and her man Patie was a journeyman baker. She lived in the top flat of a five-story East-end tenement, and had for a "below-neibor" a certain Mrs. Sooty, whose worthy guidman was "daein' for himsel'," as a thriving sweep.

Now Mrs. Peascone and her neibor-housewife, Mrs. Sooty, were about as like each other in temper as their worthy husbands were opposite in trade-colour, and that's no saying little.

They were both badly afflicted with uppish notions, were jealous of each other "getting on" in the world, and had tongues in their head that went without greasing.

A fortnight back, the worthy pair had a bigger row than usual, and it a' riz oot o' the disputed possession o' that vexatious article o' domestic need—the washin'-hoose key.

Last Monday mornin', it was clearly somebody's "turn" o' the washin'-hoose, but, the day being fine, twa o' the tenants claimed it, and hence the awfu' row.

"Can I get that washin'-hoose key frae ye the day, Mrs. Peascone?" asked Mrs. Sooty, resting her hands on her twa stout hainches, as she defiantly confronted her rival, the baker's better-half.

"No, indeed, Mrs. Sooty, I'm needn't mysel'; what's mair, it's no your turn," answered Mrs. Peascone.

"But it is my turn," replied the sweep's charmer

"But it's no, an' ye'll no get it," retorted Mrs. Peascone

'But it is, an' I will," persisted Mrs. Sooty.

"But I'm tellin' ye, ye'll no," snapped Mrs. Peascone, her words tasting of temper.

"An' what am I to dae, then This is my day o't; my things are a' turned oot an' ready for the biler; tell me, what on a' the earth am I to dae, Mrs. Peascone?"

"Oh, jist dae withoot it, Mrs. Sooty, as mony a better woman has often had to dae before noo," snapped Mrs. Peascone.

"Ye impident woman!" returned Mrs. Sooty, "to presume to talk to yer betters in that fashion! There's peascone conceit for ye! H'm! peascones, five for tip-pence!"

"My betters!—h m! I'm or mair account than an auld pock o' soot, onyway," retorted Mrs. Peascone.

"Weel, maybe, Mrs. Peascone, but let me tell ye this: you, above onybody, should never be in a hurry to expose your poverty-stricken washin'; for it's weel ken't there's no a rag ye hing oot but has a hole in't a craw could flee through; an' as for your puir man's shirts, they're jist fair greetin' apologies!"

"An' what business ha'e ye to meddle wi' my man, or what he pits on his honest back, ye arrant jaud that ye are! He's aye white an' clean onyway, an' that's a deal mair than

can in common conscience be said o' your dirty auld pock o' soot!" and Mrs. Peascone slapped her hands together by way of enforcing her sarcastic taunt.

"My dirty auld pock o' soot! Weel, a sweep's as guid as twa floury bakers ony day. What's mair, Mrs. Peascone, oor Johnny's no nearly sae auld as your floury Pate; an' that's tellin' ye to your face, Mrs. Peascone!"

"Ay! ou, ay! an' I suppose, according to that, ye'll be for makin' oot that ye yoursel' are really younger than I am, Mrs. Sooty?"

"By a guid dizzen o' years onyway, auld peascones, five for tippence!"

"Weel, if ever I heard the like o' that!" exclaimed Mrs. Peascone, lifting her two hands as if in supplication, "an' me jist twenty-five next Martimas!"

"Twenty-five next Martimas, Mrs. Peascone! Ye're fifty, if ye're a day! an' that's tellin' ye to your faded face!"

"My faded face! Weel, of course, it's no sae puffy as your puddin' face—that's understood, Mrs. Sooty. We're no a' sae dooble-faced as ye are, feedin' a' day on ham and eggs behind your puir man's back; while he has to hing thegither on parritch the hale week! It's no what a woman mak's o' hersel', Mrs. Sooty—it's what she mak's o' her man. Compare oor twa men, Mrs. Sooty!—compare oor twa men! Ah! ye're sair hit there, my woman!"

A shout of derisive laughter was Mrs. Sooty's tantalising response.

"Oh, ye may lauch, but it's what a' body kens," persisted Mrs. Peascone.

"Ay, I may weel lauch," sneered Mrs. Sooty; "an' dae ye really ca' puir, wander't-lookin' Patie Peascone a 'man'? If ye dae, ye're a darin' woman, Mrs. Peascone!"

"Weel, he's certainly something better than a twisted-lookin', bowley-leggit, wee handfu' o' humanity like your insignificant bit object o' a man!" thrust in Mrs. Peascone.

“An’ wad ye really ha’e the cheek to compare for a moment yon lang, thin, shilpit, pipe-shankit, white-chaff’t drink-o’-soor-milk-an’-cauld-gruel to oor Johnny? Na, na! Patie Peascone will never for one moment compare wi’ Johnny Sooty; for if Johnny is a thocht bowley in the legs, he’s no in-knee’d, thank guidness!”

“H’m! a bonnie airmfu’ atweel!” sneered Mrs. Peascone; “set her up wi’ a black sweep!”

“He’s as guid-lookin’ as your lang, white, deein’-lookin’ streak-o’-cauld-dough, onyway!” snapped Mrs. Sooty. “An’ if I but ken’t the bake-house he tramps the dough in wi’ his big splay feet, I wadna alloo mysel’ to carry a single loaf oot o’ the premises—neither for love nor money! D’ye hear that, Mrs. Peascone?”

“An’ if I ha’e to tramp five miles when next I need my kitchen lum soop’t, your man’ll no dae’t; dae you hear that, Mrs. Sooty? The last time he pretended to soop my kitchen vent, he chaarged me sixpence for twa minutes’ wark, an’ it was smokin’ waur than ever three days after’t!”

“Sixpence, did ye say, Mrs. Peascone? It’s ninepence that’s the professional price. But oor Johnny’s a rale feeling man, an’ if he only chaarged you sixpence, it’s been because he took fair pity on your cauld nose an’ starved-lookin’ face, puir woman!”

“I want nane o’ your insultin’ remarks, ye ill-tongued sweep’s wife!” replied Mrs. Peascone, warming up a bit.

“Nor I your’s either, ye lang, ill-filled bag o’ flour!” retorted Mrs. Sooty.

“G’wa oot o’ my presence, ye black-lookin’ pock o’ soot!” rejoined Mrs. Peascone, making to shut her door.

“Deliver me up that washin’-hoose key, then, ye peascone-lookin’ fricht!” demanded the wroth Mrs. Sooty.

“Ay, when it’s your turn o’ the washin’-hoose; but no till then, if ye were to bring the lan’ doon aboot my lugs!”

and with a loud *bang* Mrs. Peascone slammed her door in the face of her defeated rival.

Mrs. Sooty, though thus severely handicapped, was not to be so easily done. She wanted the last word, and she had it. Bending down, she placed her mouth at the key-hole of the closed door, and shouted in—

“Ye’re a’ there, Mrs. Peascone ; but tell me, if you please, wha was’t put a bawbee in the kirk-plate, an’ lifted oot the fourpenny bit, eh ? Answer me that, auld taurrie fingers ?”

Mrs. Sooty waited an answer, which, however, never came ; so, having thus spiked the enemy’s cannon, she considered herself free to withdraw with honour from the field of strife.

The “row,” however, was not yet ended. About eight o’clock that same evening, a loud assertive knock brought Mrs. Sooty to her door with unusual promptitude, and, on opening the door, she was slightly taken aback to find herself confronted with the worthy man of flour himself—Patie Peascone.

Mrs. Sooty took in the situation at a glance, and awaited impending hostilities.

“Did you ca’ my wife a thief this mornin’, Mrs. Sooty ?” solemnly asked the baker, his eyes rolling in his head with nervous excitement.

“No ; I never used siccan words, Mr. Peascone.”

“Did ye no say Mrs. Peascone drap’t a bawbee in the kirk-plate, an’ pick’t up a fourpenny bit ? Answer me that.”

“Johnny, come here a moment ; Mr. Peascone wants to see ye,” was Mrs. Sooty’s adroit reply.

In two seconds the veritable Johnny was at the door, still unwashed, like his toiling brother Patie, who had come down to settle the row in his shirt-sleeves.

“What’s wrang ?” inquired the sweep. “Wha’s lum’s on fire ?”

"Mrs. Sooty, there, ca'd my wife a thief this mornin'; that's what's wrang wi' the batch o' bread!"

"I never did," answered the sweep's charmer; "I merely asked her. in a ceevil way, wha was't put the bawbee in the kirk-plate, an' syne lifted oot the fourpenny bit; that was a'!"

"An' is that no ca'in' my wife a thief in plain words?" asked the wroth baker.

"Well, not necessarily," put in the ingenious man of soot, sticking his two thumbs in the armpits of his waistcoat; "it simply implies that the points o' your wife's five fingers were unduly magnetised; that's a'!"

"I want nae nonsense, Mr. Sooty."

"Neither dae I, Mr. Peascone."

"Then what apology am I to cairry up to my abused mistress?" demanded the angry man of flour.

"Nane whatever," answered the self-assured man of soot.

"Then tak' that!" said the baker, slapping the sweep's begrimed "face-plate" with his floury bonnet.

"An' tak' you that!" as smartly replied the man of soot, leaving the black impress of his five sooty knuckles on the baker's floury countenance.

A free fight thereupon ensued. Consider the exquisite situation—*a sweep and a baker fechtin'!* The result in a pictorial sense was graphic and amusing in the extreme. In ten seconds the whole stairhead was turned out, including the rival housewives, and for some minutes nothing was to be seen but a great cloud of white and black dust, with the legs and arms of the combatants flashing through it like the spokes of a revolving wheel.

The alarm being raised, Dugal MacSporran, a Highland constable, who happened to be perambulating the back-court, came hurrying up, and seeing a great cloud of dust on the stairhead, with a wheel of human legs and arms revolving through it, he concluded that the house below

was on fire, and that the imprisoned tenants were struggling to burst their way up through the broken ceiling.

Clutching at a displayed hand, he quickly dragged out Mrs. Peascone, who made strong efforts to return, crying aloud,—

“My man! my puir murdered man!”

“Haud her back!” sang out the excited constable, while, quick as thought, he made seizure of a second arm, and dragged into view the veritable baker, who was spotted from head to heel with great black splairges of soot.

In a crack, the energetic constable had succeeded in hauling out from the heart of the supposed flames the two remaining victims, thus completing the noble work of rescue, and the cloud of dust having cleared away, the mistaken constable saw with astonishment the lobby floor whole and uninjured.

“Bless my heart!” he once more exclaimed, addressing the turned-out stairhead, “if I’ll no thocht there was a great fire raging in ta hoose below, wi’ six or twa o’ the tenants being burned to death in ta raging flames!”

“It’s waur than even that,” answered the man of dough, “it’s the murder o’ my wife’s character by that black woman there, an’ the attempted murder o’ mysel’ by that African man o’ hers!—that common lum-sweep!”

“An’ I’ve a counter chairge against that peascone lunatic there,” retorted the man o’ soot. “Look at the awfu’ mess he’s made o’ my ‘mournings’! I’ll need to be rubbed a’ owre wi’ a cake o’ Nixey’s black-lead to get back my lost trade colour. The floury rascal has spotted me like a Chinese panther. Look at the mess I’m in! Just look at that! Catch me gettin’ into grups again wi’ a baker! Not if Joseph knows it!”—(vigorously brushing off the white flour from his sable “mournings.”)

“I’ll see! I’ll see! It’s shist a common stairhead-fecht,” said the constable; “an’ when you’ll next fecht, my goot

friends, I hope that, like ta Kilkenny cats, ye'll no stop till there's naething left o' ta lot o' ye but six or fowr pairs o' auld bachelers. Coot night !”

Mrs. Sooty and the worthy Mrs. Peascone are far frae being close friends yet, but a few days after the diverting “row,” the twa husbands successfully “made it up” owre a snug dram, shaking hands with each other up to the very elbows.

As for the disputed washing-house key, it still remains a bone of contention on that same stairhead, and is likely to remain so, unless the disputants learn to think less of themselves and more of their neighbours—an advice worthy of the best domestic cultivation.