

SANDY MACDONALD'S FIRST-FOOT.

IN a modest little house, situated in one of the quietest streets in the north quarter of Glasgow, lived, many years ago, a family of Macdonalds. The household consisted of old Sandy Macdonald, his worthy wife Janet, and their ae dochter, Kate.

Old Mac was an industrious artisan, who had early left his native hills, and got settled down in the busy metropolis of the West. He was a native of Ballachulish—a small highland hamlet adjoining the great valley of Glencoe.

Besides those mentioned, a couple of friendly lodgers occupied between them the only spare room in the house.

The senior of the two—auld Geordie Jamieson, as he was commonly named—was a working dyer to trade, and a bachelor of well-nigh three-score years. He was simplicity personified, and committed himself in speech at times with an unstudied freedom and innocence which was quite delicious in its way. Geordie was sometimes wise, and

even witty, in his rejoinders, when teased on his mental softness, like so many reputed half-wits.

"Geordie, ye're crackit in the heid," a bench-mate once said to him.

"Maybe that's true," answered Geordie, "but there's whiles a wee bit blinkie o' licht shines thro' the crack."

"If I was to offer ye your choice o' half-a-croon, or half-a-sovereign," said another, "I'm no deid sure if ye'd ken which to tak', Geordie?"

"Weel, in that case," said Geordie, "I wadna be greedy—I'd tak' the wee yin."

The other lodger—Archie Macpherson by name—was a manly young city tradesman, who was supposed by all the guidwives on the stairhead to be "saft" on young Kate.

Archie was a young man of few words, but of deep and solid feeling, and when his betrothed bride fell ill, and took to her bed one foggy November night, complaining of a bad headache and a shiver in her blood, he had a strange mis-giving that his dream of matrimonial felicity would never be realised in the person of Kate Macdonald. The sick girl grew hourly worse. The doctor was sent for. He came, looked grave, said little, and went away. Next day he looked in again, shook his head, whispered something in old Janet's ear which brought the tears to her eyes, went away, and did not return.

Next morning the dreaded fever van came whirling almost silently, up the street through the deep-lying snow, and drew up at the "Black Lan' Close." A few minutes after, the ailing girl was put inside and removed to the Infirmary. Archie Macpherson had seen the last of Kate Macdonald.

The disease which had stricken down the poor girl was rife in the city, and the Infirmary wards were full of patients. Inquiries after her condition were of almost daily frequency. Her trouble was progressing favourably they were told, and had taken the "turn." She was recovering; was convaless-

cent; when a sudden relapse had set in! A few nights of anxiety to her friends, and Death came and placed its pallid fingers on the tremulous lips, and changed the burning brow to icy marble.

Two days more, and the body, wasted and wan, was taken from the hospital and conveyed to a neighbouring cemetery.

Four long weeks had passed heavily away, and the keen edge was wearing off the family sorrow. It was Hogmanay eve, and the Macdonalds, impelled by old-fashioned custom, sat round the kitchen table, along with Archie Macpherson and his fellow-lodger, Geordie Jamieson, awaiting the dawn of a New Year.

It was a fine, clear, cold, healthful night; the heavens were as blue as the sea, and as full of stars as an astronomer's map. In the street below, riotous voices were now and again heard, contrasting vividly with the muffled silence of the snow-clad pavements. In the centre of the room wherein they sat, stood a deal table scrubbed perfectly white, and nicely covered with the guidwife's New-Year dainties. A very considerable bit of "rale fine auld cheese" rested on a china plate of antique pattern, side by side with a "bing o' aitmeal cakes," all of "oor wife's ain bakin'." Then a second plate groaned under the weight of a whole currant bun, of perfectly Ben Nevis build, with great dark-ribbed ravines on the top of it, and with big boulders of raisins exuding from its scarred sides. Then there was also the indispensable New-Year's-Day "bottle," the seal of which was still unbroken, and which would not be opened until the little round faced wag-at-the-wa', high up in the corner yonder, had sworn to the birth of the New-Year. The little clock, by-the-bye, which was getting to be old, and had become somewhat irregular in its constitutional rambles round its daily orbit, had been set scrupulously correct with town-time "for this night only," so that when the bells in the old Cross steeple publicly proclaimed the birth of the New-Year,

Sandy Macdonald's little round-faced clock would clear its dusty throat and simultaneously tell the inmates of the house a precisely similar tale.

But stay! there you are! Hark! the small round faced clock has become suddenly garrulous. Its little heart is throbbing with excitement, and it is telling everybody in the room, that a bright and hopeful new year has arisen on the ruins of the old.

And see! the whole household have taken to their feet, and are shaking each other by the hand, and wishing for each other heart-warming comforts and every worldly prosperity, while old Janet, the guidwife, is busy with the big bread-knife, making glorious cuttings from the tempting sides of the big curran' bun. Nor is old Sandy behind-hand with the bottle. The seal is broken heartily, and "Lang John" comes tumbling bravely out, and presently rights himself in the gleaming glass with a bead of stars on his brow.

"Noo, I wonder wha'll be oor first-fit?" put in Geordie Jamieson, when the dram had gone round the house.

"Ye needna wonder at that, Geordie," said old Janet; "Uncle Saunders down by at the street-fit is trysted a fortnicht syne, an' he'll be here by-and-bye. He's been oor lucky first-fit, ye should mind, for I dinna mind hoo lang! Patience! Hoo the win's rising ootside!"

The friends looked at each other, and listened a moment to the sougning of the newly-awakened wind, as it swept round the gable of the old house and slammed the heavy iron gate in the court-yard below.

Old Sandy—whose mind was constitutionally superstitious, and whose feelings were rendered doubly sombre by his recent bereavement—broke in upon the stillness of the moment by relating in his own homely but graphic vernacular, a remarkable incident which he experienced one wild winter night in the loneliest part of the great Valley of Glencoe.

It happened when he was but a lad. He had been doing a job for a sheep farmer on the country side somewhere, and was returning home late o' night by way of the glen. The winds were high; the mists down; and the flooded cataracts of the glen were roaring like forest lions from the magnificent chain of hills. He had reached the deepest part of the great ravine, when a strange phenomenon arose before his eyes. He was thinking of his younger brother who had lately gone to sea, and was breathing a fervent "God help the poor mariner on such a night as this," when a light cloud of mist which seemed resting on the ground, slowly, but surely, took on a human shape, and lo! the face and the form of his brother! but cold, pallid, and lifeless! The illusion was so strong and commanding, that Macdonald rushed forward to touch him, to speak with him, to question him. But ere he had gone a step forward, the spectral illusion resolved itself into mist, and a sudden gust of wind swept it swiftly away up the steep hillsides.

"Ma conscience!" exclaimed Geordie Jamieson, "ye're makin' me a' grue."

"And what about the illusion?" interrogated young Archie Macpherson.

"Only this," said old Sandy, "that long after, when I received an intimation of my brother having been drowned at sea, I reckoned up and found that the dates tallied."

"Hand owre a toothfu' o' the whisky, Mrs. Mac; my nerves, I feel, are a' loused doon like a buttonless waistcoat," said Geordie Jamieson, drawing his chair nearer the fire. "But hey, lads! here's auld Uncle Saunders at last."

A mysterious "chapp" had indeed come to the door, and Geordie banged up to answer the summons.

The door was flung open, and lo! the pallid wraith of Kate Macdonald stood on the cold stair-head.

With a faint smile of recognition on its wan countenance, the spectral first-foot passed lightly in, and Geordie Jamie-

son, dumbfounded out of all ordinary rationality, flew down the old wooden stair and exploded his terror and surprise in the ear of Lucky Dow, an old maiden body who kept house on the ground flat of the building.

Now old Lucky, who was afflicted with a sore deafness, noticed not the demonstrative entrance of Geordie Jamieson, as she sat by the weel-happit fire awaiting the entrance of the traditional first-foot. Her astonishment was therefore all the greater when she turned her head and saw the scared look of her "first-foot."

Extending her ear towards her visitor for a word of explanation, Geordie caught her head between his hands and cried "ben" her lug—

"Kate Macdonald's wraith's on the stair-heid!"

"What, ye're sufferin' frae a sair heid, are ye? So am I," answered deaf old Lucky Dow.

"Kate Macdonald's wraith's on the stair-heid, I'm saying," Geordie cried ben her ear for the second time.

Lucky looked at the speaker dubiously, and making him understand, by a testy shake of the head, that he wasn't understood, she placed her hand behind her ear for a better hearing, and—

"Kate Macdonald's wraith's on the stair-heid!" Geordie shouted for the third time.

"Oo ay," responded Lucky, "it's geyan hard frosty weather atweel, but we canna look for ocht better than frost an' snaw at this time o' the year."

"Kate Macdonald's wraith's on the stair-heid!" Geordie once more shouted at the extreme top of his voice.

"Weel, I'm hauden rale strong, thankee; are ye keepin' ocht weel yersel'?" and honest old Lucky turned mechanically round to honour her first-foot with the usual favours. But she was too late with her kindly offering. Geordie had vanished like a sixpenny telegram!

"Weel, if that's no the driest and funniest first-foot I

ever saw ! I've had my fireside first-foot ever since I had a hoose o' my ain, an' I never was sair't that gaet before," and giving her mutch-strings a cynical toss, she resumed her lonely seat by the fire.

Let us follow Geordie Jamieson. Three or four nervous springs and he was back again on the stair-head, and had cautiously stepped within the door.

What a sight presented itself ! Archie Macpherson was clasping Katie Macdonald's wraith in his arms, and was covering it with happy kisses.

Kindly old Janet—Kate's loving mother—was fair greetin' with perfect joy. Old Sandy was snapping his thumbs, and energetically whistling out his delighted surprise. But why enlarge ? The sequel is easily guessed, and as easily told. Another female patient of like age and similar name had shared the same infirmary ward with Kate Macdonald. The other patient died, and the Macdonalds had buried the wrong woman in mistake. Any probable difference of feature observable in the corpse was set down to the wasting action of the fever, and the return of Kate Macdonald from the infirmary was an overwhelming surprise.

"And so," said old Sandy with beaming eyes, "we have had a 'first-foot' from the other world, an' a lucky one it's been ; for it has given me back my dead daughter, and Archie Macpherson his future wife."