

*THE STAIRHEID MANAWDGE.*

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EVERY Scottish housewife of the working-class order knows what a manawdge is; but for the information of all and sundry, a Stairheid Manawdge may be explained as a sort of

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fireside accommodation bank, into which weekly payments are made and which is conducted on lottery principles in the "drawing" for the accumulated money. The manawdge may include all the housewives in a certain tenement, or may, for that matter of it, extend its operations so as to include a whole district. Thus, if ten housewives agree to pay in to the manawdge wife, say 2s. per week, that puts at her disposal a weekly bonus of £1, which is to be drawn for by lottery—priority in the use of the money being regarded as a stroke of good fortune. "Contributions" and "draws" are thus made every week, until each member of the small circle of financial investors has been paid out in full, the transaction repeating itself as often as the investors wish.

Mrs. Gruppy was a manawdge wife who had considerable experience in the business. She was a sort of accepted stair-head banker and chancellor of the local exchequer.

She was a most managing woman, Mrs. Gruppy, and managed among other feats, to live on the profits of her numerous little money transactions with her neighbours. Her man had been a sodger in his youth, and had lost his left leg at the battle of the Alma, for which mishap he was granted a Government pension, and a widden leg. The said leg was not much to walk with, but when its owner got drunk—which happened every "pension day"—it evinced a vicious propensity for kicking, as Mrs. Gruppy knew to her cost. Fireside fechts were thus of frequent occurrence, but the advantage was never long on the side of the sodger; for Mrs. Gruppy, watching her chance, would quickly bear down point-blank on the enemy, seize and screw aff the widden leg and hide it below the bed, or "plank" it on the highest shelf in the house, leaving the one-legged hero to hop about the floor like a hen on a rainy day, or to tumble into bed and sleep aff the drink, while she was busy "rypin' his pooches" for the melancholy remains of his pension-money.

In addition to her other transactions, Mrs. Gruppy was

reputed to sell a wee drap on the sly to drouthy housewives especially on the Monday mornings when the manawdge was met. But ye couldna ca't a sheeben. Oh, no! It was merely to accommodate the neebors that Mrs. Gruppy kept a twa-gallon jar in her benmost press, and for nae other purpose. Oh, no!

Monday mornings were the paying and "drawing" days in Mrs. Gruppy's assembled circle, and the scene I have to depict relates to one of these interesting Monday mornings, as witnessed in the manawdge wife's house.

Mrs. Gruppy's domestic domicile was an airy one-roomed garret, four stairs up, the last yin, like her man's left leg, being a widden yin, which skrecht and whussle't under the feet like disordered fiddle-strings.

It was ten o'clock by the ring of the little Swiss clock that wagged industriously against the kitchen wall. Business was in near prospect, and Mrs. Gruppy was knittin' by the fireside, waiting with expectancy the first welcome "rap" at the door.

Presently, a heavy step was heard ascending the top-stair, which creaked and screamed aloud under the extra pressure with startling distinctness.

"Eh," quoth Mrs. Gruppy to herself, "I ken fine wha's this comin'; it's auld Kirsty, the tripe-wife. Oh, I jist hate the wearisome pech o' her. She's a fair palaver o' a woman and never weary bummin' about her stootness o' body, an' her want o' breath. I'm fair sick o' baith her an' her bodily troubles. But here she comes, blawin' like a blast-furnace. Welcome, Kirsty; come awa' in; I'm rale glad to see ye—hopin' ye're as weel's I'd like ye to be, an' then ye'll dae!"

"Eh, Mrs. Gruppy—(pech)—thir awfu' stairs o' yours!—(pech)—I declare, I'm fair knockit clean oot o' breath—eh, me!—(pech). It's nae ord'nary wark to yin o' my stootness o' body—(pech)—an' shortness o' breath, I can tell ye—eh,

sirs-the-day!—(peeh). Is—is—is there onything in the jar, Mrs. Gruppy?”

“Weel, Kirsty, my woman, that’s mair than I’m strictly aware o’, but I hope there’s a thimblefu’ left for you.” And without further waste of words, Mrs. Gruppy went over to the cupboard and took out the jar.

“Hoo much, Kirsty, my dear?”

“Oh, jist say a nate sixpence worth—that’s a taste to the piece o’ us before the folks gather.”

“Oh, ye ken, Kirsty, lass, I dinna taste—unless wi’ a frien’.”

“An’ am I no’ a frien’, Mrs. Gruppy?”

“I would like to ken wha wad daur to say ye wisna! Ay, an’ a rale particular frien’ tae,” promptly replied Mrs. Gruppy, pouring a portion of the spirits into a tea-cup, and handing it to the tripe-wife. “Yes, Kirsty, I’ll taste wi’ you when I wadna consent to dae’t wi’ anither. Here’s your vera guid health, Kirsty, wishing the tripe-trade prosperity, an’ yersel’ every comfort!”

“The same to you, Mrs. Gruppy; an’ lang may ye mak’ the bawbees clink. (Drinks.) Eh, me, that’s refreshin’! D’ye ken, Mrs. Gruppy, I fair thocht I wad hae lost my heart a’thegither, comin’ up thir awfu’ stairs o’ yours; I’m sae plagueystoot, ye see—although I was yince on a time jimp enough about the waist, though ye maybe wadna think it.”

“What! Kirsty, is that the rale truth ye’re tellin’ me?—*you thin!*”

“Ay! me thin, Mrs. Gruppy, muckle as it surprises ye to hear’t. I never grew stoot till I got married.”

“That’s the way wi’ the maist o’ us women folks, Kirsty. But here comes auld Mrs. Toddler frae the street-fit. Glad to see ye, Mrs. Toddler; come awa’ ben.”

Mrs. Toddler sat down with a pleased smile, and was quickly succeeded in that act by Mrs. Haiver, a talkative body, from the stairhead below.

In a few minutes further additions were made to the graphic circle, in the persons of Peggy Gundy, the glessie-wife, and young Mrs. Safty, a newcomer to the tenement.

Salutations were freely exchanged, in that particularly homely style so very characteristic of the auld-fashioned, west-of-Scotland housewife.

By-and-by, Mrs. Snappy, the baker's wife, came in, in a sort o' hurry, as if she was fear't she would lose something if she didna rin for't.

She was quickly followed by Washin'-Maggie, as she was commonly called, who was "cleaner" in general for the whole district, and washer-wife for Mrs. Gruppy's manawdge-circle in particular.

Other arrivals speedily succeeded, and Mrs. Gruppy's house before long was as ringing fu' o' clatter as a boat-yard on the Clyde.

Mrs. Haiver, who always had a lot to say, and who usually spoke with her eyes half shut, like one in a trance, proceeded to assure the circle, with great gravity of voice, that she had just "gotten her man oot to his wark that mornin' after a twa-weeks' complicated attack o' short-time an' naething to dae." And "richt thankfu' she was," she said, "to hae the fireside yince mair to hersel', wi a week's full pey in prospect. It was a blessin' to be thankfu' for baith ways."

Mrs. Snappy, the baker's charmer, next threw a bomb among them, by prophesying a hap'ney on the loaf before this time next month, if no three-fardins!

"A hap'ney on the loaf!" exclaimed the whole circle in chorus.

"Eh, me!" said Mrs. Toddler, "what's things comin' to? It'll be naething for us puir women folks noo but turning oor auld bonnets into new yins for twa years to come: wiser-like they'd put the hap'ney on the unce o' tobacco."

"Ye're about richt there, Mrs. Toddler," put in Kirsty,

the tripe-wife; "at the same time, folks are no bound to exist on flour-bread a'thegither. The Scripters say—' Man shall not live by bread alone.'"

"N—no," retorted the baker's wife, who accepted the remark as a gentle cut at loaf-bread in general and herself in particular; "wantin' the bit loaf, we could, of course, fa' back on biled tripe!"

A general laugh was the answer, and Mrs. Snappy rather believed in her own mind that she had effectually shut-up the tripe-wife and her Scriptural quotation as well.

"Weel, weel, leddies, there's waur than a jug o' guid tripe," said the manawdge wife, with a mollifying laugh. "What think you, Mrs. Safty?"

"Me? I think I'll need to hurry doon the stair, for I've left my wean sleepin' in the cradle, an' if yon big Irish bowl-wife comes rappin' to my door, she'll no leave aff till she has the wean up."

"In that case, ye'd maybe better pey up an' draw, leddies," said the manawdge wife, placing her lottery-bag on the table.

The request was at once acted on. Small squares of paper, bearing the names of each member of the circle, were thrown promiscuously into a green cloth bag, and the bag, having been well shaken, like a doctor's bottle, Washer-Maggie was deputed to draw.

She consented, with a smile which connected her two ears with her mouth, and putting her hand into the bag, she pulled forth a piece of paper bearing the name of—Mrs. Safty!

"Eh, me! the lucky woman!" sang out the whole party; "a paper pound in her hand, nae less!"

"Noo, noo, Mrs. Safty," began the manawdge wife, with persuasive manner, "ye're no' to be rinnin' awa' as fast ye can wi' a hale pound-note in your hand, an' an exkase on your tongue about a waukrife wean in the cradle. Ye maun be neiborly, an' stan' a bit treat a' roond."

"Of course she will; an' without coaxin' tae," put in the baker's better-half. "It's the custom, ye ken, Mrs Safty."

"An' ye maunna be odd, or mair stickin' than your neibors," added the manawdge wife, producing at the same instant the whisky jar. "Is't to be glasses roond, Mrs. Safty?"

"Weel, I suppose sae—if that's the standin' rule," said Mrs. Safty.

"Oh, yes!" replied the lot in one unanimous voice.

So the twa-gallon whisky jar was brought out, and very soon any amount of cups were clinking on the table.

"Your verra guid health, Mrs. Safty!" was thereupon the order of the evening; "no' forgettin' yours, Mrs. Gruppy, an' yours, Mrs. Snappy! an' yours!—an' yours!—an' yours!" And so on, round the merry circle the dram went, till they had emptied the manawdge wife's whisky jar, and drank twelve shillings' worth of simple Mrs. Safty's pound-note.

"That's you an' me clear," said the manawdge wife, as she returned back Mrs. Safty her change; "an' thank you very much, Mrs. Safty."

Mrs. Safty took the money, and made for the door, remarking that she would now have "to rin," as she had to go into "the toon" to buy a bit fresh meat for her husband's dinner.

"A word wi' you, Mrs. Safty," said the baker's wife, "jist one word wi' you before ye gang. Dinna ye feed up your man wi' butcher meat; it's no proper feedin' for a workin' man. A plate o' ham an' eggs is needed for yoursel', but if ye want to get the upper hand o' your man, like ither clever hoosewives, feed him on parritch. If he kicks at parritch, try him wi' pease-brose. They're baith fine, cheap, economical dishes, an', ma certie, they tak' the up-settin' spunk oot o' the men!"

Having been primed with this advice, young Mrs. Safty was allowed to depart.

"She's a rale nice bit buddy that," remarked Mrs. Toddler. "I maun ken her better than I dae."

"She's saft awee," said the manawdge wife, "an' has a lot to learn yet, puir thing. Her man can rowe her roond his thoomb, jist like that."

"I wad alloo nae man to rowe me roond his thoomb," said the baker's charmer.

"Nor me either," added the washer-wife; "the women think owre muckle o' the men, an' faur owre little o' themselves. I mind the day my man was carried hame to me on a shutter, wi' a broken leg. I was washin' that day, as usual, when yin o' his fellow workmen said to me, wi' a frichtsme lang face:

"'I have a most painful duty to perform, my good woman. Your husband——'

"'He'll be on the spree again, I suppose?'

"'No, my good woman, he 's——'

"'Got lockit up in jail again, I'll be bound?'

"'No, no; he has had the misfortune to fall from a scaffold, and has broken his left leg.'

"'An', confound your nonsense, what gar'd ye come here frichtin' folks in that way, makin' a buddy think that something had happened. Bring him hame, an' tak' care that naething fa's oot o' his pooches.' That's what I tell't them. H'm, makin' a sang aboot naething."

"But the men-folks have sic wheedlin' ways wi' them," put in Mrs. Haiver; "for instance, there's oor John"—(here all the listeners began to cough in concert, knowing from experience that when once Mrs. Haiver trotted oot "oor John," it was domino with all the others, so far as getting in a word was concerned)—"ay, there's oor John, as I was jist sayin'; he has the awfu'est treaclely tongue in his heid ever ye kenn'd; it's as sweet as sugar whiles, an' could wile the



vera bird aff the tree. I mind fine o' the nicht he popped the question" (went on Mrs. Haiver, oblivious to the fact that the neibors were already rising and leaving the room, one after the other). "It was a bonnie, bonnie munelicht nicht, an' we were baith sittin' an' sighin' on an auld cairt-wheel before the smith's shop."

"'Katie,' says he, wi' a love-sick sigh, an' a look on his face as pathetic as a thrupenny finnan haddie; 'Katie, my dear.'

"'What?' says I, quite innocent-like, never jalousin' for one moment what the man meant.

"'Will ye be mine?' an' syne he kissed me sae ten erly. (He had been catin' a saut herrin', but that's neither here nor there.)

"Weel, d'ye ken," resumed Mrs. Haiver, "I coodna in my heart say 'No,' if I had been shot for't. An' mind ye, I had lots o' grand offers on hand at the time. I had yin frae worthy auld Mr. Geography, the village schulemaister. He was in a weel-dacin' way, Mr. Geography, an' cood speak grammar as easily as I cood knit a stockin'. Mair than that, a mate in yin o' the canal-boats was jist fair daft for me. An' a fine braw fellow he looked, wi' his sou'-wester an' his pilot-jacket on. But I was aye of a vera nervous habit, an' never cood have made a canal-boatman's wife. Oh, no. Every time I heard the win' beginning to rise, I wad have been thinking on my puir sailor laddie tossing on the raging main—no' to mention the danger o' his boat colliding wi' a canal-brig on dark nichts, or the tow-rope snappin' in twa. Oh, no; I never, never wad have dune for a sailor's wife—never! An' then, my third lover. He was a tailor lad—Lang Jaik-jag-the-Flae they ca'd him. Eh, but he was a clean-limbed, soople-jointed, licht-hearted, cahouchie-heeled chappie, the tailor lad. He cood threid a needle jist like *that!* an' as for shooin' up the legs o' a pair o' troosers, it was fair electricity."

“ Stop ! stop ! Mrs. Haiver,” here put in the manawdige wife ; “ d’ye no’ see the neibors have a’ left you an’ ‘ John ’ baith to your pleasure ?—they’re awa’ doon the stairs three minutes ago.”

“ Preserve me ; so they are ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Haiver, lifting her eyes from the floor, and looking about with a dazed expression of countenance. “ Weel, I’ll e’en need to toddle like the rest. Your ta, the noo, Mrs. Gruppy ; I’m awa’ ; for if oor John comes hame an’ finds me oot, an’ the fire in a similar condition, he’ll gang clean distracted. Ta-ta ! ”