CONCERNING SKINK.

A HUNDRED years ago "skink" was still a current word in Scottish country speech. It is probably now in every nook and cranny of the ancient kingdom, and even among old people, a word obsolete and all but unintelligible. Pronounce it in the hearing of an old-world rustic, and he will need a minute's reflection to attach to the sound its meaning. To readers of Burns, who know the word with only a vague idea of its true signification, it brings with it a notorious unsavoury association—the result of a misprint, probably a blundering correction, in one of the editions, or rather impressions, of the famous poems published in Edinburgh in 1787. Yet it is an innocent enough word, ill-deserving to suffer from the vile companionship into which it was wickedly or stupidly thrust. There can be no reasonable doubt that Burns wrote "skinking" in the well-known address "To a Haggis." Documentary evidence apart, the context requires a word with the meaning of "skinking." The contrast drawn by the poet is between thin liquid fare, such as is favoured by foreigners, and the solid and substantial home haggis.

> "Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware,
> That jaups in luggies:
> But, if ye wish her gratefu' pray'r,
> Gie her a haggis!"

In this quotation the second line is explanatory of "skinking"—it is the bard's own gloss on the word.

It is to be noticed that Burns is not here depreciating any national dish in order to assert the superior claim of the chieftain of puddings. "Skinking ware" is not skink; it is a Scottish rustic's name for some unmentionable French or Italian cat-lap. Skink itself was a good old Scottish dish, still called for, but not by that name. It was a species of soup, or rather broth, of unusual strength, made from the *shank* or shin of an ox. John Barleycorn may, or may not, have been an ingredient, but it is certain that Burns sings the praises of a very near relation of skink's incidentally in his eulogium of "Scotch Drink:"—

> "On thee aft Scotland chows her cood
> In souple scones, the wale o' food;
> *Or tumblin' in the boiling flood*
> *Wi' kail an' beef;*
> But when thou pours thy strong heart's blood,
> There thou shines chief."

Perhaps the most exhaustive enumeration of old Scottish dishes outside a cookery book is to be found in the joyous rant attributed (I think correctly) to the youngest of the three Sempills, and generally known from the first line as "Fy, let us a' to the Bridal." Haggis is, of course, in the list; and skink holds an honourable place. From the way in which it is mentioned one may infer that it was a favourite

dish, likely to be indulged in to excess. Here is part of the *menu* card prepared for Jockey's wedding:

> "There will be partans and buckies,
> Speldens and haddocks eneu,
> An' singit sheep-heids an' a haggize,
> An' scadlips to sup till ye're fou."

Scadlips, a kind of fat soup, was well named, for it retained its pot heat, from its very nature, long after it ceased to send up an appetising steam. But it would need Meg Dods herself to differentiate it from powsowdie and skink.

> "There will be good lapper'd-milk kebbucks,
> An' sowens, an' farles, an' baps,
> An' swats, an' clean-scrapit paunches,
> An' brandie in stoups and in caps.
> And there will be meal-kail an' castocks,
> And *skink* to sup till ye rive,
> An' roasts, to roast on a brander,
> Of flouks that were taken alive."

Skink was not confined to Scotland. It is a good old English word, not uncommon in Chaucer, though it was never probably applied as a name to soup in the southern kingdom. "To skink" was to draw and serve ale or wine, and Shakespeare refers to the waiters and pot-boys of Eastcheap as "skinkers." They were probably so called from drawing the liquor through a pipe, which resembles a hollow shank-bone. Dr Skeat favours this derivation.

It would seem as if "skink," in its southern form of "schenche," was used for liquor; at least it was customary in old London, as set forth in Riley's *Memorials*, to have the "none-schenche," or "noon-

skink," as duly as the shopkeepers and lawyers of old Edinburgh had their mid-day dram of strong waters on the stroke of the "gill-bells" of St Giles'. It is curious to note the somewhat disguised survival of "none schenche" in the modern word "nuncheon." Properly speaking, nuncheon is a drink at mid-day; but we have confounded the word with luncheon, both in sound and in signification.

It seems that in at least one edition of Burns's poems the line in the haggis poem, which, correctly given, runs—

> "Auld Scotland wants nae skinking ware,"

is made to read—

> "Auld Scotland wants nae skinkling ware."

Here, though "skinkling" is a good old Scotch word, it has no point. It means "sparkling;" as a noun, "a small portion." In the former sense it is used by Burns in a poem—sometimes, but surely absurdly, denied to him—on "Pastoral Poetry:"—

> "But thee, Theocritus, wha matches?
> They're no' herds' ballats, Maro's catches;
> Squire Pope but busks his *skinklin'* patches
> O' heathen tatters."

The reference is to Pope's artificial pastorals in the classical style of ancient Rome.

THE LOTMAN.

"See him sweating o'er his bread
Before he eats it."—*The Task.*

THE entirely primitive occupation of the lotman only went out of fashion at the opening of the current century, and his name, ceasing to be used, is already all but forgotten. The lotman was the thresher, and he was to be found erewhile on every farm of the Lowlands. It was a small farm that employed but one. A farm that was worked by four pairs of horses required the services of two pairs of threshers. They were named "lotmen" from taking the stuff *by lot*—at so much per boll, the custom of the country-side regulating their charge. The phrase is still common: farm produce—chiefly potatoes, but even corn also—is still sold "in lots to suit purchasers." Though he thus worked by the piece, the lotman's time was not at his own making: if a farmer wanted a stack threshed—("taken in," as it was called, *i.e.* to the barn from the yard)—he wanted it done within a given limit; and the lotman had often to work extra hours. He was occasionally the first astir on the farm, in order to provide the necessary supply of straw for the day. In the case of a small farm or large croft, where the threshing was done by a member of the family, or, it

might be, a fee'd servant, it was often the practice to make provision for the day's use by threshing a few sheaves—or rather "thraves"—every morning. Mossgiel, as leased by the brothers Burns, was such a farm. It extended to a hundred and twenty acres, was worked by two pairs of horses—the very natures of which are on record: witness "the red-wud Kilburnie blastie"—and was managed by Gilbert and "three mischievous boys" serving under the poet's superintendence. The three farm lads were

> "A gadsman ane, a thresher t'ither,
> Wee Davoc hauds the nowt in fother."

The thresher here alluded to was not a lotman but a fee'd servant, whose first and perhaps principal duty on the farm was to keep the "town" supplied with straw and corn. The poet occasionally helped him, especially when farm-work of other kind was "at a stand." We know of at least one hard day's work at threshing in the barn at Mossgiel in the winter of 1785-86, when Burns toiled like a brownie, and had his reward in tired body and depressed spirits, followed by a glorious *Vision* in the evening:—

> "The thresher's weary flingin'-tree
> The lee-lang day had tirèd me;
> And when the day had closed his e'e
> Far i' the west,
> Ben i' the spence, right pensivelie,
> I gaed to rest."

On a big farm the lotman's work of threshing went on regularly from daylight to dark, and often both before the one and after the other by lantern light, during the whole of the winter. "Dichting" by means

of fanners went on, of course, at the same time. In his *Farmer's Ingle* (scene—East of Fife, near St. Andrews) Fergusson very properly conjoins the two occupations. It is "grey gloamin'" of a November day about the year 1770

> "When Thresher John, sair dung, his barn-door steeks,
> And lusty lasses at the dichtin' tire."

These lotmen were not farm-servants in the ordinary sense. They had probably been ploughmen, but stiffened with exposure or matrimony, had taken to threshing. When a ploughman married, and was not fortunate enough to secure the dignity of a foremanship, he thought of a more independent way of living, and when the chance occurred caught at the kind of work implied in the occupation of a lotman. It had many advantages, which either escaped the eye of the "single" ploughman, or were ignored by him in a kind of bravado. There was, for example, less exposure to "wind and weet," less of that kind of toil called "trudging," less "drudging" also at a variety of incidental duties; and if wages were not on a much more liberal scale than a ploughman's, payment was made at shorter and more convenient intervals. The lotman's house was in most cases a cottage by the road-side; but he might be a denizen of a town, probably near the outskirts, going out to his work at the farm in the morning and returning home in the evening. The Pleasance of Edinburgh used to be, and may still be, the home of many people who earned at least part of their livelihood by "day's work" among the neighbouring farms.

In summer time the lotman changed his name with the necessity of a change in his occupation. He was then known as an "orra man"—one who turned his hand to any work that was "going about." He became a ditcher or a drainer, mended roads, or repaired fences. Sometimes the farmer for whom he had "threshed the barn" in winter found him occupation in working his "faugh land"—as a field lying in summer fallow was called. This he did by cleaning it of weeds and stones, ploughing or "stirring" it, draining its sour hollows, and generally preparing it for next season. Potato-growing has made summer fallow less necessary. Clearing or "redding out" ditches was work done in the heat of summer, between the hay-making and the grain harvest. Draining was winter work chiefly. Burns's famous *Cotter* filled just such a position, and discharged just such services to the farmers in his neighbourhood as our lotman. Spades, mattocks, and hoes were the emblems of his toil, and he was doubtless no stranger to the use of the flail.

Flail, though a word of French origin, was the name by which the thresher's tool was most generally known. There was no absolute want of a native name; but probably "the swinging tree," though well descriptive of the thing it named, was confined to the west country. The instrument consisted of three parts: the handle or staff, the "souple," and the "couplins." The last-mentioned were thongs of eel-skin or leather, by which the souple was loosely fastened to the staff. Eel-skin, as being tougher and more lasting than leather, was preferred. It was in its way a

special industry in some rural districts to catch and skin those eels that were destined to flourish in a barn. There was a decided prejudice against them as food: Jews could not have held them in greater abomination. The souple, like the handle, was round, made like it of ash or elm, but thicker. It was swung over the head, and delivered in such a manner that the whole length of the souple fell prone at once on the prostrate sheaf. A novice who had courage to venture a full swing as likely as not brought the whole barn about his ears, or—which was the same thing—landed himself a swinging blow on the chops. Yes; it was one of the fine arts to handle the flail as it deserved, and the art could not be painlessly learned in a day.

The lotman threshed the whole length of the sheaf, but especially, of course, the "crop" or the "heads," as the ears were commonly called. It was not only that some ears were in the body of the sheaf, but the corn-stalks made better fodder for being bruised and broken. The threshing was done in the barn between the fore and back doors, which were both kept open, at least the upper halves, to admit light. The lower halves were closed in stormy weather. The threshers were stripped to the shirt, but were of course out of the draught and quite within the barn. They worked opposite each other on the same stuff when they worked in pairs. The flails fell alternately with steady thump on the grain lying in the cross-lights between the two doors. When sufficiently beaten on one side, the sheaf of course was turned. The barn floor was commonly of clay, but in most instances that part of

it on which the corn was threshed was laid with wood.

Another way of separating seeds from stalk than by threshing was by whipping. By this process handfuls of the sheaves were smartly struck upon a large cross-tree or beam fixed in the barn, and in such a way that only the ears were shaken. The stalks remained unbroken, and were serviceable for thatching.

Threshing-mills began to come into general use pretty early in the century. There was opposition to them at first, just as a century previously there had been opposition to fanners. (Mause Headrigg's objection to them may be in the reader's memory.) But when their superiority to the flail as a money-saving agency was established their introduction became general and rapid. An old farmer of my acquaintance ventured £24 for a "second-hand" mill, and declared he saved the cost of it the first year. As late as 1832-33 the flail was still thumping with its first vigour on upland farms on the Ochils. Even yet in some crofter's barn the old-world implement fitfully smites the corn. These eyes saw it last wielded—not many years ago—by an old man on his knees. It is now almost entirely confined to the beating of carpets and the care of antiquarian collections.

In Andrew Meikle's invention the loosened sheaf is operated upon by the beaters of a revolving drum. The difference between the flail and his threshing-mill is the difference between the oar and the steam paddle-wheel. Meikle's machine was invented in 1787; by the year 1830 most farms, even in outlying regions had a Meikle mill at one end of the barn.

The motive power was at first that of horses. They turned the vertical shaft in a round red-tiled shed in the rear of the barn. These conical sheds are still conspicuous on many farm towns. But they have mostly fallen into decay through disuse: the idle and rotting beams which they protected may be dimly seen through the openings in the low walls; a nearer inspection reveals a tapestry of mould and "mouse-webs" filling the angles, and extending along the beams to which, in old-world days of this century, Bob, and Dick, and Demsel were yoked. The endless recurrence of their white and brown and black hides in the shed opening, as they pursued their monotonous round to the hushing hum within the barn, is no longer one of the sleepy emblems of rural life. The principle of Meikle's mill is still employed in the travelling mills which, drawn and worked by steam-engines, now perambulate the country from stackyard to stackyard, and supersede in their turn the mill in the barn-end and the sorely-tried energies of Bob and Demsel and Dick.