CHAPTER XII

KILSPINDIE

To a writer with an observant eye and a cosmopolitan mind Kilspindie parish and village really had many features that were worthy of notice. The front of the candle-maker's workshop at the Brig-end was the place where, in genial weather, the mature village mind was nurtured by the mutual exchange of such ideas and inspirations as might move it under the passing influences of the hour. From this point the eye had an unembarrassed survey of the river, to the stepping stones leading from the Holm to the Manse brae. Between these points and below Lippy Barbour's bleachfield there was a deep pool, which used to be a favourite resting place for the salmon, but Lippy's acid had spoiled all that. Any one coming across old Bowlie Dempster, in the

lapse of rheumatics, at Brig-end would be sure of one fishing story at least. Bowlie would lay his chin on the parapet, with one eye fixed on the salmon pool, and the other on the projecting bleachfield wall — for he could see two ways at a time — and tell about the "burning of the waters" in the days when leistering was thought no sin. In a fair round of poaching experience this pool was the central glory, for it nearly cost him his life. But it was a story he loved to set Angus Pringle, the smith, to tell.

"I was just kenlin' the smiddy fire in the grey o' the mornin'," — Congalton had brought the two worthies together, and Bowlie was smirking and fidging to hear his friend tell the exploit once again, — "when my frien' Bowlie here comes in a' oot o' breath, wi' een as big as saucers."

"Hear till him," interrupted Dempster, "canny before the gentleman." — "'Dod,' says I, 'ye have surely risen aff yer wrang side this morning;' but the long and the short o't was the man had seen a salmon i' the Parkyett pool."

"Tell the size o't," cried Dempster with

anticipating eagerness; but the smith waved the interruption aside as premature.

"So efter gien his leister twa turns on the grun-stane, Bowlie took to his heels and I followed at my leisure. I stood back and waited on the brig, but could see fine frae the twist o' the man's body that the beast was still there."

"Just whaur I left it," said Dempster, "wi' its side again' a bit stane, thinking it was holed; but the funny bit 's coming; go on, smith, and tell what happened syne."

"Weel, while I was looking I sees him taking aim — and — bang gangs the leister."

"Clean through the fish," was Bowlie's eager interpolation.

"Oh, through the fish fair eneugh," the smith admitted without a qualm. "Things were slack efter-hin for aboot the space o' four ticks o' the nock, when a steer begude that ended in a deevil o' a turry-wurry between man and beast; but I saw fine frae the first hoo it wud be — there was a rive, and in plunges Bowlie head first still haudin' on by the leister." Here Dempster slapped Congalton on the shoulder and laughed till the tears dropped on the

smithy floor. Then he turned to the smith with the eagerness of a first hearing, and implored him to go on.

"Thinkin' the craitur wud droon," the smith resumed, "I dreeped frae the brig and eased the gallacies frae my shouthers as I ran, for I kent Bowlie couldna soom a stroke. There they were — fish, leister, and man — ragin' round and round the pool. Nanny Welsh, who had come oot to the garden wi' some hen's meat, says I cried till 'm to let go, but whether I did or whether I didna, he held on. Thinks I, my man, ye have carried war into the enemy's country. Gin yer so thrawn that ye winna let go, I'm no gaun to wat my skin for ye. Wi' that the beast gets kina tired."

"And still I hauds on," cried Dempster proudly.

"Yes, still ye hauds on, and I sees a bit smile on yer face as if ye were saying, 'Noo I've got the upper hand o' ye, wha's got the rynes noo?'"

"That's the smith's fancy," interrupted Dempster, rubbing his hands; "at times ye wud think he could mak' a po'm."

"Weel, at lang and last, the beast cam near the surface and turned his glittering belly to the rising sun, — the current brocht them into shawl watter, — and Bowlie, feeling the gravel under his knees, sprachled oot and brought his prize safe to the bank."

"What wecht?" demanded the poacher.

"Twenty-fower pound," responded the smith, "a' barrin' twa unces; it was weighed that morning on the merchant's scales."

Congalton could not discover that Kilspindie figured conspicuously as the scene of any great historical event. An incident occurred in the "Forty-five," but the Wheat Sheaf inn had the monopoly of it. This hostelry stood well back from the road, and had an open space in front for the convenience of vehicles on Sundays and market days. The building was single storey and thatched, with a window on one side of the entrance and two on the other. It was said Prince Charlie and a limited retinue had partaken of refreshment in the room with the two windows, and that he had kissed the great-aunt of Mrs. MacFarlane, the present occupant, in settlement of the "lawin." John Kidstoun,

the village wright of the time, being a fair judge of morals, made a large kist when he heard the Pretender was in the vicinity into which he and his neighbours put their valuables. This they buried in the manse garden till he and his needy followers had passed into the next parish.

These facts were not written in any history, but they were on the mental tablets of the school-master, who had them from the lips of Kidstoun's son. In the cold, dark evenings of winter, when there was anything to talk about (as a rule little served), the men foregathered in the room with the single window. It was in this room Francie Dyack fainted and never came to; the belief was that this untoward event happened because they gave him a drink of water after his race without thinking to put either meal or whisky in it. Francie had been visiting his sweetheart in the Haugh at the back of the Braes on halloween, and for a near cut was returning through the plantain where Granny Dalap hanged herself. On nearing the ominous spot a human skull seemed to kindle into awesome vividness among the bare

branches of the tree from which the suicide's body had been cut down. The eyes were glazed and motionless, the nose a corrupt hole, and the mouth, from which the tongue protruded, had a ghastly grin. Francie was heard singing the 121st Psalm as he raged down the school brae, but on reaching the inn he had only breath left to mumble out what is now known of the event before he fainted. Only William Madden and Andrew Frame knew the secret, and they had it on their conscience as a crime to their dying day. They had hollowed a turnip, made a frightsome face on it, put a lighted candle inside, and hung it on Granny Dalap's tree to amuse or hasten the step — as might happen — of any one who chanced to pass that way. Andrew Frame went to the antipodes afterwards, but his companion settled down soberly at home — to drink. It was William Madden, who when the minister checked him for being under the influence of whisky at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, said, "Man, if ye tak' it early ye'll fin' the guid o't a' day."

The rendezvous of the young people of Kilspindie was Elsie Craig's well at Millend.

This well was shaded in summer by an ancient chestnut-tree, whose flower-spikes were unequalled for size and beauty for ten miles round, taking the candle-maker's workshop as the centre of the circumference. This precise way of stating the case was due to Matha Fairley, the Yorkhill forester, and as no better informed man ever contradicted him his way of putting it became the settled belief. The water in Elsie Craig's well had many good qualities, but it was said to take the fullest cleansing virtue out of soap in its application to baby linen and weaver's aprons. On summer evenings village maidens went forth to draw it. The well, being deep, cans and stoups had to be let down by a rope and cleek, and as strength and nerve were required for this, it was not unnatural that chivalrous swains should be by to help the maidens in their task. The half of the male villagers who had entered the fold of matrimony had commenced their wooing here; and, as might be expected in such a precarious world, not a few love-lights, that had been kindled under the chestnut-tree had been quenched in shame. When the men-folk mar-

ried they said good-bye to the well, and met afterwards at the Brig-end or at Mrs. MacFarlane's change-house. Some of the older men, whose years gave them confidence of speech, used to delight in telling their courting exploits at the well. Robin Brough had fought the merchant's salesman for the hand of Teeny Middlemas. The vanquished salesman, not feeling equal to the continuance of a militant courtship, sought employment in the Old Victualling Store at Galston, leaving the prize to the victor. After this Robin's candle frames were kept busy, for Teeny was what was called a "dressy buddy," and on first days even eclipsed the minister's lady herself. Indeed the confidence of being better dressed than anybody else on the Sabbath day was said to give her a feeling of inward tranquillity that religion itself was powerless to bestow. Chronic rheumatics, however, had been the instrument in the hand of an admonishing Providence of tempering her vanity, and affording her husband the meditative and conversational leisure he now enjoyed.

Jean Templeton, a shy maiden, thinking the

lads had gone, went out one evening to draw water. Her stoup was slipping from her hand, and she herself might have gone down after it, had not William Caughie, who had hidden behind the chestnut, hopeful of seeing Jean, caught her in his arms, and restored her equanimity. He kissed her without trouble, so he said, though her explanation that she was useless with fright was reasonable. It was known that before this Jean preferred the foreman bleacher, but the marriage took place on the fifth Friday thereafter. In early days William used to tell this story with some pride; advancing years, however, had taken the glamour out of it. He ceased entirely to refer to the matter when he took to the wearing of horn specs after the introduction of the Reform Bill. Though generation after generation of the villagers had paused for a time at this oasis, and amused or refreshed themselves before graduating into the dual state, the old well was still surrounded in the summer gloaming, as before, by the young of both sexes, feeling after the fuller life — the well-spring of love being as inexhaustible as its own crystal waters.

When Congalton found his articles on Scottish rural life and character had awakened public interest, his old instinct of knowing how to give what was wanted revived under the sense that the field from which he could draw was wide and full. His pictures were cameos — embracing the colour, form, and atmosphere of Scottish scenery. Deftly thrown forward on this picturesque, natural background were the characters, actions, and thoughts of men and women, giving human interest to the whole. Though his men inclined to politics, and an occasional dram, and his women to gossip and, at times, scandal, they were on the whole a religious people. Any one going through the village street at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning could not get beyond the voice of psalms in the exercise of worship.

Old Jeames Goudie, who lived by himself in a single apartment at Millend, represented an earlier time, for he had this salutary exercise every morning. Jeames was very deaf, and before singing always "read the line." He had brought up a large family of sons, who vexed him with their extravagant, idle habits.

He used to complain that they were "brisk at gaun oot at nicht, but aye lost their gate comin' hame." Nancy Beedam once heard him say — "It wud have been mair profitable gin I had buried the lot o' ye when ye were young — aye spend-spending and never dune." This remark had been made under provocation, but Nancy never forgot it, they had all gone to the kirkyard before him.

While making free with contemporary life and character Congalton was not unmindful to draw on senile memories for customs and beliefs that had now become effete. Oddities in the marriage, baptismal, and burial services were to his liking. Belief in the supernatural, even in the younger generation, was not yet entirely stamped out. Death warnings — the ticking of a watch or a knock at the bed-head in the sick-room — were held as unerring portents of approaching death. The wild horse with the clanking shoon had been heard on the hillside at midnight above Mossfennan by several of the older inhabitants before the plague of cholera visited the village. Davit Saunders, the Blacklaw shepherd, returning

from the uplands one night late saw Tammas Scougall with a bundle of mole-traps over his shoulder. Tammas passed silently, and made no response to his neighbour's "guid e'en," but remembering afterwards that Tammas had been in bed ill for several days, Saunders took to his heels and ran home in fright. Next morning he heard that the mole-catcher had passed away at the very hour he encountered him on the hillside. Lexie Findlater had seen a whole "cleckan" of fairies one moonlight night "loupin' the ragweeds" in a field in front of the farm where she was at service. Her cousin, Nan Pinkerton, now known as the "spae-wife o' the Haugh," also in service at an adjoining farm, was for a time shadowed by a "brownie" who did the rougher housework for her while she was sleeping. One night—meaning kindly — Nan left a dish of sowens and milk by the fireside for the considerate worker, but he never returned.

With these and similar materials of fact and folklore available, Congalton had little need to go beyond the parish. According to habit, his study table was littered with old envelopes

embracing scraps of scenery done on the spot, sketches of character, superstitious customs and beliefs, together with odd sayings and idioms of local growth. The governess, now in full sympathy with his work, and in possession of his secret, thinking his manner of proceeding might be improved, suggested the classification of his notes by the aid of an index. This method she initiated for him, but it was not a success. In theory he admitted it was correct and business-like, but it led to constraint and formality. These scraps had their own individuality of suggestion, recalling the thought or inspiration of the moment. While the governess's business-like system commended itself to his judgment, it led him by a process of self-analysis to the conclusion that changes either in his habits of life or in his methods of work could not now safely be made.