

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE SPAE-WIFE AND HER CUPS

ALEC BRODIE, the cartwright, lived about a quarter of a mile from Kilspindie, at the junction of the crossroads. The situation was such as to command the work of two parishes. The building of which he was proprietor was of one storey with a frontage to two roads. He and his family lived in one end, and his workshop and wood-yard were at the other. Behind the house there was an elevation commanding the west, on the top of which grew a few scraggy fir-trees with a strong inclination northward. This was locally called the "Hill of Man," but William Lonen, who was skilled in topography, said the name was originally "Helm-end," resembling as it did the hindermost part of a vessel. The light growing dim in the

### THE SPAE-WIFE AND HER CUPS

workshop, Alec had retired to the Hill of Man with a book. He was a great reader, a scholar his wife called him. He was known at times to write verses—he drew the line at sonnets, thinking of the school-master—but books could not be read nor verses made in a small cottage literally overflowing with bairns. He did not at once take to his book, for he was thinking of work that might probably require to be done before morning. The near landscape, lined with grey dykes, and fringed at intervals with trees and hedges, was blurred and dim, but, having the poetic temperament, he was beguiled into strange imaginings by what he saw beyond the line of the material horizon. The sun itself had disappeared, and in the wonderful after glow there was sufficient to afford diverting interest to an imaginative mind. The dark and distant margin of wood and moor seemed to constitute the near boundary of a mighty sea, while a remote bank of cloud, well up in the heavens, served the fancy for a horizon. What a fairy picture for a homely man, but nature is no respecter of persons. She opens her picture galleries and her concert chambers



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

impartially to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear. The cartwright was enraptured with this mysterious liquidity of colour, this primrose softness, varying in tone from salmon-tint to lightest azure. There were capes and islands, purple and rosy with sunset, great bays fringed with golden sand, and argosies that might be freighted with the treasured glories of oriental climes. Towards the nearer shore, marling the straw-toned water, long streaks of wavy grey rolled inward, and in combination with a light intermittent wind in the pine-trees over the cartwright's head, completed the illusion of motion and sound.

"Most mortal," he said, thoughtless of the incongruity of the exclamation, "I ken fine it's no real, but it's terrible naitral-like. A body never could put that sea-picture in words; but if I was an artist I'm thinking I'd have a bash at it wi' a brush. After a', when a body thinks o't, the colours were never made that could clap doon on paper or canvas either, the onspeakable beauty o' a scene like that." He turned to his book—it was already almost too dark to see, but he had read the passage

#### THE SPAE-WIFE AND HER CUPS

before he left the workshop, it had struck his fancy —

"As doctors give physic by way of prevention,  
Mat alive and in health of his tombstone took care;  
For delays are unsafe, and his pious intention  
May haply be never fulfilled by his heir.

"Then take Mat's word for it, the sculptor is paid;  
That the figure is fine pray believe your own eye;  
Yet credit but lightly what more may be said,  
For we flatter ourselves and teach marble to lie."

Brodie had accidentally come across a selection of old Matthew Prior's poems, and being, from the exigencies of his business, in the undertaking line himself, it was natural his fancy should go out to a man who had such provident forethought as to supply his own tombstone, and take care that his Epitaph was honestly carved on it, while yet in life. These reflections, however, were broken by the approach of his eldest son, whose head was seen in the dim light as he waded up hill among the tall brackens.

"Weel, Alickie," he inquired, stepping down to meet him, "what's the news? Is she ony better?"



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

"No; she's fast sinking, they ettle she'll hardly win by the turn o' the nicht."

"Did ye see Winny himsel'?"

"No, he was sitting owre his bible at the fire-en, but Nance tell'd me."

"Weel, laddie, we canna stay the gaun fit o' death. We maun be stepping doon to the shop — ye can look oot the strauchtin' brod, and I'll get the timmer put in order." He had a contract for the parish coffins at 13s. 6d. each, but this one could afford a fuller margin of profit. "It'll no hurry the puir body nane, Alickie, still ther's nae hairm in being ready for death when it comes."

The cartwright was a man of fine sentiment, but being the responsible head of a large and needy family, he couldn't afford it much indulgence when profitable work came his way. Brodie and his son sawed and planed till midnight, but no summons came — a "strauchtin' brod" for the poor shattered demented mind was what the mistress of Windy-yett required just then. As to the covering for her mortal remains, Alec Brodie need not have been in such oracular haste.

#### THE SPAE-WIFE AND HER CUPS

The crops had been safely gathered at the Mains, under favourable weather conditions. The harvest had been abundant, and the sun, well pleased with the completion of his work, was smiling out of the west on Willie Mitchell's well-filled stack-yard. Bell sat knitting alone in her sanded kitchen. A kettle was singing on the hob, and the black Persian cat in front of the fire lay winking with dignified satisfaction as it contemplated the antics of the kitten playing with the young housewife's worsted. The kitchen-maid had been sent over to Windy-yett to inquire for the invalid. Physically there had been a partial recovery, but the strong will was broken and the memory gone. Marriage and this home-trouble had sobered Bell. Her flightiness had toned down. She had come to understand by the patient teaching of her husband that happiness was an attitude of the mind arising out of a sense of duty honestly done. Providence had given her a comfortable home, the best of husbands, a sufficiency for all her wants, and she was content. At times her school days in Edinburgh, the girlish dreams of making conquests



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

and marrying into social position, stimulated by the inordinate ambition of her mother, came back to her mind, but only to convict her of folly. Could the artificial atmosphere of society in which, from her superficial education and rustic training, she was ill-fitted to live, afford her the solid and simple happiness she now enjoyed? In her clean sanded kitchen she could receive her country friends and neighbours like a queen. In the drawing-room both she and they would have been out of place, ill at ease, and—such things have happened—she might have been coward enough to be ashamed of them and their ways. There was a matronly seriousness about the plump comely face as these reflections flitted through her mind. Then she smiled, for she remembered her poor mother's injunctions. She had smiled many a time to order, but the resultant conquest happily, as she now thought, had not been made. What lasting happiness could come of conscious acting? Her husband had been drawn to her before she had thought of him as a lover. Indeed, and this made her wonder, it was when she showed the greatest

#### THE SPAE-WIFE AND HER CUPS

indifference that he became most vehement in his attachment. How delightful, she thought, for the lover to find out when he became a husband, that his wife had a reserve of charms; but what must it be in the severe disillusionment of married life when the actress has been found out? Bell raised her eyes from the twinkling wires and gazed out of the window with softly parted lips. The wistful face was beautiful. Her eyes, dreamy and expectant, wandered over the foreland of heath and furze, and the grey stubble of shorn fields, to the long white ribbon of a road that lay beyond. This was the way by which her husband would return from Kilburnie market. She did not really expect him for an hour yet, nevertheless her hungering eyes had several times traversed this meandering road fondly, as if to anticipate her own expectations. A shadow darkened the window for a second, and passed ere she could focus her vision to the nearer object, next moment a small black-eyed woman, in a drab cloak that draped the figure to her ankles, stood in the doorway.



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

"Guid e'en to ye, Mistress Bell," said the visitor, dipping her body till the hem of her cloak touched the doorstep. The apparition was Nan Pinkerton of the Haugh.

"Good-evening," replied Bell with a slight look of trouble in her eyes. The house-maid had told her that Matty Semple blamed her neighbour, the hen wife, for casting the evil eye on her cows. Bell had said she did not believe it. Only people who were without education fancied such things; yet she did not appreciate this visit all alone by herself in the gloaming. Bell had known Nan from her own childhood. She was peculiar, reserved, and made pretence of sibylline knowledge. She was excommunicated by the Rev. Dr. Someril for spae-craft and contumacy, after spaeing Beeny Wauchops' fortune (Beeny was a light creature and went wrong with black Will Gibb the gamekeeper), but though Mr. Maconkey — Dr. Someril's successor, wished to restore to her the privileges of the Church, she refused to be reinstated. Nan was an authority on the concoction of herbs, and her specific for "chin cough" was believed in by not a few matrons in

#### THE SPAE-WIFE AND HER CUPS

her own and neighbouring parishes. In theory Bell was not superstitious, but she was alone, and it was as well to be civil.

"Wont ye come in owre and rest?" she said, setting a chair with a straw-matted seat in front of the fire. "Now that the harvest is in, the evenings are getting cauld."

Nan in her moods had the abruptness of masculinity.

"I had a dream aboot ye last night," she said, "and cam' owre to drink a cup o' tea wi' ye to see gin it be true."

"I hope it wasna an ill dream," replied Bell, smiling only with her lips. The spae-wife was silent for a moment, her dark glittering eyes fixed on the glowing fire.

"Guid or ill, true or fause, I daurna tell till I see it i' the cups."

"I winna grudge ye a cup o' tea," said Bell, taking her keys and going to the corner cupboard — "but" — should she tell her visitor she did not believe in spae-craft? After all would such a statement be absolutely true? "I'm afraid I don't want my fortune told," was all she said.



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

"Ay," remarked the Sibyl grimly, "ye have gotten your guid man, and think there is nothing in life worth kennin' after that; ye want things to go on as they are, but that canna be. Fortunes will whiles forecast themselves without our speiring. If my dream reads right ye have nothing to fear, but it maun be in your ain cup I read it."

Bell brought out the brown tea-pot and caddie with trembling curiosity. "Do ye like it strong?" Nan took the spoon out of the young wife's hand and measured the "masking;" then taking a little box from her pocket containing a whitish powder she covered a small silver coin with the mixture and shook it in on the top of the dry tea. Bell was then directed to half fill the tea-pot with boiling water, and set the cups. The rite was impressive in its ceremoniousness.

"A year syne I drank tea wi' your mother."

"Did she believe i' the cups?" inquired Bell in astonishment. She had never heard of such a thing.

"Ay she was in a hurry to forecast something that was in her mind, but, as whiles happens,

#### THE SPAE-WIFE AND HER CUPS

the reading wasna clear, the same mischance aye turned up; something connected with the sea."

"Connected with the sea!" cried Bell, then she bit her lips and went over to the window. If the spae-wife herself did not know how fully that misfortune had been realized she would not betray the secret. Her poor mother! Bell was pale and her hand shook as she poured out the tea according to the directions of her guest. First the guest's cup was to be filled, then the tea-pot was to be shaken with circular motion from left to right, after that the person whose fortune fell to be revealed was to fill her own cup. They sipped the tea in silence. As Nan gazed thoughtfully into the fire a live coal fell on the hearth.

"Na, ye mauna touch it," exclaimed the elder woman, as Bell rose to replace it. "That's a coming guest that ye'll no wish to leave your hearth in a hurry. My dream is already half read, but we'll aiblins see the rest here." She lifted the cup which Bell had laid down, whirled the dregs round the sides, and then commenced her scrutiny of divination. The withered eye-



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

lids were puckered with a moment's concentration, but the wrinkles soon gave place to a look of satisfaction.

"It's e'en as I jaloused," she said; "I see your visitor coming doon frae the lift."

"From the lift?" cried Bell, "then it canna be man or woman either."

"It's neither man nor woman, it's an angel. I see ye baith lifting hauns till it wi' joy on your faces. There is gear and happiness to come — after-hin."

"Oh, Nan," cried Bell, interrupting, "here's my husband." The wheels craunched sharply into the yard as Bell with crimson face rushed to the door. In a moment Mitchell had leaped from his seat, and taking his wife in his arms kissed her. "I have heard something ye'll no guess," he said, leading her towards the kitchen door.

"What?" inquired Bell rather flurried.

"Mr. Congalton has come back, and, disappointed no doubt that ye were beyond his reach, has married the little governess. Have ye visitors?" He paused at the door, catching sight of the spae-wife and the cups, then a

#### THE SPAE-WIFE AND HER CUPS

visible shadow of displeasure settled on his face.

"It's only Nan Pinkerton," said Bell, "she has been bringing us good news."

"Ay," said the visitor, getting to her feet at the sight of the young farmer's frown, "men are owre wise to believe in auld wives' freits. I'm no welcome, I see, but I didna come up to the Mains to pleasure mysel'." Nan gathered her cloak about her, set her face to the door and disappeared in the gloaming. Mitchell's head fell on his breast as if stunned; then he took his wife again in his arms while his voice trembled with yearning solicitude.

"Bell," he said earnestly, "was this your seeking?"

"No, Will — no," she replied, seeing his meaning and trying to keep back the tears. "Nan came while I was waiting for you. She had a dream about us, and asked for a cup of tea. I couldna refuse, for I thought she was tired."

"I'm glad ye didna tryst her. What was her dream?"

"Some angel guest that would come wi' happiness for us baith — and gear." The young



## DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

farmer looked at his wife with wistful tenderness. There needed no spae-craft to predict the probability of a welcome visitant, nature had told him that; but the emphasis put on the gear vexed him.

"It's the old story, Bell," he said, putting his arm round her waist kindly, and smoothing her hair. "Some guid we hinna got that's coming. Oh lass, lass, we're gey happy for the present, but dinna put foret the nock as I ance asked leave to do, and try to force what's hidden from us. The wish to possess ither folk's gear has wrocht muckle ill. Thrift and work will bring a' worldly things we need, and happiness alang wi' them. Now," he said, holding her at arm's length and looking lovingly into the soft eyes that were ready to overflow with tears, "I'll put in the powny while you set the tea, and after that I'll tell ye a' about Mr. Congalton's marriage."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### CONCLUSION

It was late on a golden afternoon in the second month of autumn, a year after the events of last chapter, when Isaac Kilgour passed his brother-in-law on the road without recognition and climbed the hill slowly towards the kirkyard. He had a small basket in his hand filled with fresh-cut flowers. The gate to the sacred enclosure was massive and heavy. It had recently been donated to the parish by the laird of Templemains on the occasion of his being made an elder. It was curiously wrought and fashioned between two substantial pillars, and bore several suitable scriptural quotations amongst the fret-work of its design, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," "Dead yet speaketh," "Whoso believeth on Me shall