

TWENTIETH CENTURY WITCHCRAFT

“Your vessels and your spells provide,
Your charms and everything beside.”

H. L. HASLAM

IN this day and generation, belief in witchcraft is looked upon by the mass of the people as a relic of the dark ages. We read *Macbeth* with wonder or amusement, dependent upon the mood we are in, and lightly relegate it to the past. When we associate Glamis Castle with her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, endowed as she is with grace and a sound mentality, well may we exclaim, How could such superstition as that surrounding her ancient home ever have existed? The burning of witches at Salem seems so remote that it almost passes into the realm of fiction.

However, the narrative which follows belongs not to the Shakespearean age, nor to the eleventh century when *Macbeth* was Thane of Glamis, and those eerie wenches foretold such dire disasters, but to the present day of enlightenment and supposed freedom from dark superstition. Dust is still close to glory. Light is still set off by darkness.

The scene of this tale is in South Western Nova Scotia, a fishing village hard by a town that has been noted for its erudition and intellectual culture. The couple referred to live only a stone's-throw from a school and a church. Yet they are living in the darkness of the long ago, slaves to superstitions of ages almost unremembered.

Picking up the local newspaper one day, I read that Alec Schmidt had lost one of a pair of fine oxen. These cattle named Lion and Spark were used by their owner for “working on de land”. On my next visit to the old fisherman and his good “Frau”, I expressed my concern for their serious misfortune. The response was quite unexpected. “The loss of an ox don't make or break us, but it vas de vay de old ox died.”

Knowing something of their superstitious mentality, I was all attention, and awaited Mrs. Schmidt's account with interest. It is only by a sympathetic listening that one can glean such information as she had to give. The least indica-

tion of incredulity would make her shut up like a clam. Therefore I told Mrs. Schmidt that I would like to hear all about the incident.

"Vell it vas dis vay?" said my narrator. "Von day Alec took de ox out to vater him." It was in the depths of winter and the ground was covered with snow. "Alec noticed dat as he led de ox to de vell he lifted von foot, shook it, and put it down again, den he lifted another foot, shook it and put it down again. Every time he lifted his feet he shook dem and put dem down again. After Alex had vatered de ox, he put him back into de baan, and after dat he carried vater to him in his stall. For seventeen days and nights Alec tended dat ox as if he vas a child."

"On de seventeenth night, Alec vas valkin up and down de baan floor, ven de old ox opened his mouth and talked. You know de Bible says dat oxen talk." In her childhood days she had evidently learned the Christmas carol, "Good Christian men rejoice," which contains the words, "Ox and ass before Him bow", and she felt that she was doing no violence to the Bible when she said "De Bible says oxen talk".

I asked her what the ox said, and she replied, "I asked Alec dat same question, but he said, 'Clara, I would not tell you dat by no means in de vorld. All I can say is dat de ox opened his mouth, talked and den he laid down and died.'

"Some time after dat, Alec came in von day, took off his boots and laid down on de sofa behind de kitchen stove. I vas sittin in dis chair right by dis vindow, ven I heard Alec moanin and talkin all by his self. I said, 'Alec Schmidt, vat is de matter mit you? Vat are you sayin?' He got up quick, came into dis room, and said, 'My Got, Clara, I didn't know you vas in here. I vas sayin over to myself dem vords de old ox spoke de night he died. Vell you have heard so much, you might as vell hear it all. Vile I vas valkin up and down de baan floor dat night, I heard de ox say, 'Because of devils I stand here and suffer, Because of devils I stand here and suffer. Because of devils I stand here and suffer, tree times, and ven he spoke dem vords he laid down and died.'" "You see" she said, "someone had put a spell on dat ox, and dat vas vat killed him." I asked her if she had any idea who had done so, and she replied, "Vy de old voman down on de corner."

The person to whom she referred was an intelligent, strong-minded woman for whom I had the highest respect, and I have

often wondered what her reaction would have been, had she known this imputation.

When I asked Mrs. Schmidt her reason for this suspicion, her answer was, "Ven Jimmy vas a little baby, she put a spell on him, and I know dat it vas her dat killed our ox." Quite naturally, I was anxious to hear her story, and finding me a sympathetic listener, she continued.

"Jimmy vas de sweetest little baby in de whole world. I used to feed him his pap out of a John Vesley cup dat I had in de house." It seems that some enterprising pottery firm, in the days of Wesley's ascendancy, had manufactured cups and saucers bearing the great evangelist's photogravure, and it was one of these that she possessed. "I always fed my baby out of dat cup. Von day, vile I vas feedin de baby his pap, and he vas eatin it as sweet as any little baby in de world, dat old voman came in. She sat down and talked for a vile, den she said, 'Mrs. Schmidt, vat do you feed dat baby out of de John Vesley cup for?' I told her dat Jimmy vas de best baby in de world, and as dat cup vas de best ting I had in de house, I always used it for him."

"I didn' tink dat dere vas anyting wrong at her askin me dat question, but ven she asked me de second time, dat seemed queer to me. Den if you'll believe me she said de tird time, 'Mrs. Schmidt, vat do you feed dat baby out of de John Vesley cup for?' I couldn't do nothing. Jimmy opened his mouth and bawled and cried till I thought he would kill his self. I knew den dat she had cast a spell on him."

"Time and time again I tried to feed him from dat cup, but it vas always de same, he just cried to break his little heart."

"Alec vas in de voods for a veek choppin fire-wood. Ven he came home on Saturday evenin, I mixed up some pap for Jimmy in dat precious cup and tried to feed him, but it vas just de same, he bawled and cried. Alec asked me vat vas de matter. I told him about de old voman. My, he vas mad ven he heard it. Jumpin to his feet, he said, 'Clara take dat baby out of de cradle. Now take out dem clothes and de tick! I took dem all out. He reached into his pocket and took out a fifty cent piece. Stooping over de cradle, he made de sign of de Cross mit it right on de slats. Den he said some tings something like dem chants you sing down in de church. He vaited a vile and den said, 'Put Jimmy back again into de cradle mit de clothes and de tick. Now mix up some pap in your John Vesley cup.' I made some pap and fed it to Jimmy, and he et

nature protects herself. That heavy sea hurls itself against the shore right outside my door, but the rocks keep it in its place and prevent it from washing away the land." To him all nature had an offensive and a defensive aspect, a fact that has often been stated by geologists.

Every fine day, John could be seen at his work, and I rarely passed his house without having a chat with him. Riding by one afternoon, I noticed that the boxes were still covering his fish, which meant that he had not been working during the day. Guessing that something was amiss, I went to his cottage and found him in a strange condition. Although he knew me, his conversation was disconnected and illogical. He described to me a walk he thought he had had during the morning, which took him over a wide stretch of ocean. I learned later that he had an attack of cerebral meningitis, and that his case was hopeless. Very soon he was unable to recognize anyone.

On one of my subsequent visits, I met a young woman of perhaps twenty-five years of age, bright, attractive, well-spoken, and intelligent. There was nothing in her conversation to suggest that she was a slave to any dark magic. Later in the afternoon, while I was visiting another family, a man said to me, "That is a terrible thing at Johnny Knaut's house." Thinking that he referred to John's illness, I expressed my sympathy for him, as he was a comparatively young man, and one of the most useful in the community. Great was my surprise when he said, "I don't mean that, but they have a witch doctor at that house." My surprise was greater when I learned that the young woman whom I had met earlier in the day was the person in question.

Visiting the "Sick House" the following day, I had some conversation with Miss _____, the alleged practitioner of the black arts. Again I was impressed with her manner. That she had bewitching qualities, no one would deny. But to associate her with witchcraft was almost beyond the realm of possibility. Jokingly I said to her,—“You are not the witch doctor I have been hearing about are you?” I have always pictured witches as toothless hags and croakers. My surprise was complete when she said, “I don't know whether I am a witch doctor or not, but I am here to do what I can for Mr. Knaut.”

Much as I would have liked to gain some information as to her methods, I didn't get very far. One thing, however, greatly interested me. "Witchcraft" she said, "must always

pass between the sexes when it is taught. No man can teach a man, and no woman a woman. A man must teach a woman, and a woman must teach a man."

When I asked her if she believed in her power to remove spells, she replied, "My belief or unbelief has nothing to do with its effects. My grandfather taught me what I know, and when I am sent for I pass on what I know, and that is all I can say."

It is hardly necessary to say that her offices were all in vain. My good old fisherman friend soon entered the haven of all toilers of the deep, having long since embraced a faith which is above all forebodings which witchcraft engenders.

How far witchcraft is general, would be difficult to say. To these more spectacular cases I could add many minor ones, some of which went deep, others held in a half-hearted way, swaying between belief and unbelief, but practising certain rituals or taking special precautions lest there should be any bewitching. In other words, they took no chances.

One case in particular I recall. While I was having supper with Mr. and Mrs. Alonzo ———, my hostess poured a cup of strong tea for me, and passed me the pitcher asking me if I cared to have some cream. When I added it to the tea, it immediately curdled, which my hostess noticed and for which she apologized most profusely. She appealed to her husband to do something about it. I had visions of his building a refrigerator, or placing the milk in cold water. At any rate I noticed that the couple were agitated to a degree quite out of proportion to milk souring in hot weather.

The next time I "took tea" with my friends, the cream was sweet, and I soon learned the reason why. The previous evening after I had left, Alonzo milked the brindle cow, set the milk away in a pan, but kept a good fire burning in the kitchen stove. About half past eleven o'clock he put the poker into the coals and at the stroke of midnight carried it red-hot into the cellar and thrust it three times into the pan of milk. After that no continuation of sultry weather would make Brindle's milk go sour. A good point for all dairymen to know(?)

One other incident, and one which I afterwards discovered was more general than I had at first thought. A mother, and her daughter, a girl of some eighteen years, always wore peculiar bracelets on their right wrists. They seemed to be made of some kind of woven parchment. One day, I made bold to ask what the material was, and was told that they were dried herring skins twisted into shape, and always worn to prevent spells

being cast on them. I also learned that most men and women wore them suspended from their necks near the heart. They were not taking any chances of witches assaulting them, so they lived in peace.

Many of these people have passed on carrying their superstitions with them. The younger ones who have taken their places have outlived such slavery to fear, and are an industrious God-fearing generation of men and women.