## CHAPTER III

### MRS. COWIE OF WINDY-YETT

RICHARD COWIE returned from the reading of Dr. Congalton's will with his ideas, as has been shown, strangely mixed. The invitation to meet the lawyer at Broomfields after the funeral naturally led his wife and himself to infer that they had somehow been named in the doctor's settlement. While the remark frequently made by the latter over his toddy at Windy-yett, that he would find a "guidman for Bell some day," only gave an evanescent brightness to the roses on Bell's cheek, and a passing fillip to the farmer's hilarity, it conveyed a deeper significance to the provident wife and mother. His sudden death had grievously marred her hopes. Yet here was a new element in the development of events which vastly stirred her curiosity. Mrs. Cowie was born to rule. As to management, she would have faced the National Debt;





but at obstructed crossings of purpose she was subject to sudden ebullitions of temper. The fibre of country life was not fine enough for her; she felt she had thrown herself away in entering the nuptial state with a farmer who had no ideas beyond the rotation of crops. More than once her husband learned from her own lips that she could have married a wool-broker, and "might have had a leddy's life in town"; and more than once he secretly wished she had. Her early desire, to atone for being a farmer's wife, was that she might have a son. Her plans were simple and clear. He was to be a minister, and marry an heiress. His college learning would make him equal to the best in the land, and, being his mother's son, would ensure a good marriage. She thought of sitting in the manse pew, or driving about the country side receiving the respectful salutations of the parishioners. The advent of a daughter, combined with the abandonment later on of all hope as to a male successor, was cruelly disappointing, and, while not modifying her aspirations, gave pungency to her activities. When she got up in the morning, and "put the nocks foret" — this

was Nance the dairymaid's way of stating the case —"ye might be sure there was a touch o' north i' the wind." The same authority, often tired of unreasonable and vexatious service, said, "If she (Nance) could only get into heaven by a back yett she would be happy; but as for the mistress, a front seat and a croon wud har'ly serve her."

Mrs. Cowie had sent Bell to her cousin's at Brackenbrae with some "swatches" for summer dresses, in order that she might have composure to digest the news.

The smith's story at the candle-maker's workshop was no great exaggeration of Richard Cowie's mental condition; and the leisurely walk home between the fresh hawthorn hedges had not materially aided the elucidation of the doctor's intentions. The prevailing thought in his mind was what he had communicated to the smith, namely, that the doctor had bequeathed "his brither and the feck o' his siller" to Bell. He knew there was some complication about the money being left in parts; but if Mr. Congalton was to marry Bell, the litle girl would be Bell's step-daughter, and consequently the whole of the money would be in the family. This was





the sum of the information which, with much mental dubiety and confusion of terms, he conveyed to his wife. She was irritated, in her eager thirst for facts, at having to ask so many questions, and to find that he was either uncertain or in entire ignorance of many things she was dying to know.

"Supposing there is no marriage in the case," she said, after trying to encompass the idea of her daughter marrying a "widow-man." "Ye'll be able to tell me, I suppose, in round figures hoo muckle Bell's share is likely to be?"

"No; the lawyer didna say."

"But did ye no speir?"

"There wud be no gain in speiring, seeing the doctor's siller's in property and stocks. I suppose she'd get a third."

"Ay, and wha's to divide and see that justice is dune till'r?"

"Oh, it's to be boun' up some gate. Noo when I mind, it's to be i' the hands o' daers."

"Guid life! did ever onybody hear sic havers; if it's to be in the hands o' daers, the siller's no to come into oor hands after a'."

"Dod, I am fair bamboozled. I wis' ye had

been there yersel', that's what I said to the smith, but the minister 'll tell ye, he's ane o' them."

"And wha may the ithers be gin ye ken as much?"

"There are twa ithers in Airtoun besides the writer body himsel' — but bide awee, guid wife, whare are ye gaun?"

"Stracht to the manse, where I'll get the leeze o' things."

She was donning her mantle. Her keen desire for information had stirred the impulse which her husband's cooler nature checked, by reminding her that such eagerness "wud be gey ondecent, seeing the doctor's corp had only that day been laid i' the mools." That evening in the kitchen she made Nance long once more for a back entrance into heaven, but she judiciously avoided her husband and Bell.

Next day Mrs. Cowie repaired to the manse, and excused her own precipitancy by reflecting first on the lawyer for not being more explicit, and then on her husband for not duly inquiring after their lawful rights. She learned to her dismay that the minister had declined to act as one of the trustees. He knew the terms of the will





generally, however, and explained that the remaining executors would hold the property in trust so long as Mr. Congalton and her daughter remained single, and that the interest only would be paid to the parties concerned. It was estimated that the doctor's estate would be worth about £20,000, at current prices of property and stocks. Her apprehension that the trustees might "make away wi' the siller amang them," was allayed by the minister's assurance that the will was registered, and that they would be bound to give count and reckoning whenever they might be called upon to do so.

She returned to the farm with a mind somewhat relieved, but diverted into new channels of activity. It was a comfort that Bell was provided for, though she should never marry; but, after all, what was to hinder her marrying as the doctor had planned? There were manifest advantages to her mind in such a union of interests. Mr. Congalton was a comparatively young man, and a gentleman; Bell would naturally rise to the position in society which she, the mother, had missed. At all events there was this £20,000. The man was used to a

roving life. A person called upon to follow armies and write about great battles was engaged in a hazardous occupation, but that was his affair. She could see that proper settlements were made for Bell. There was also this tender "slip o' a wean," town-bred and puny, with no great legacy of health. If anything happened to her the siller would fall to the father.

Mrs. Cowie, for prudential reasons, only told her daughter that she had been remembered in the doctor's will. These dawning designs must be kept, even from her husband. She was not insensible to the fact that they were sordid and selfish. They had crossed her own mental survey of the situation naturally enough, however, and Bell's future was to be looked to. Mr. Congalton might be annoyed that any part of his brother's money was left past himself, but if any such feeling did exist she was sure it would pass away when he knew what good friends they had been to his brother, and how fond the doctor had been of Bell. Mrs. Cowie let the subject germinate, making mental estimates of the possibilities, and then set out for Broomfields. The question required management and





delicacy of handling, but want of personal assurance in such matters could not justly be charged against her. Isaac Kilgour, whom she met at the gate, told her the lawyer was in. That was fortunate. She would ask a private word with him; there were questions still requiring explanation, which neither her husband nor the minister could make clear. She had asked Mistress Izet to announce her name; surely the lawyer would wish to be introduced to her as the maternal relative of one of the legatees.

There was a long pause, then she saw the man of law marching hurriedly away, and immediately Mr. Congalton came into the drawing-room, where she sat fondling his little daughter on her knee. For the moment she was disconcerted. Had these two men been conspiring against Bell? It looked like it. Mr. Sibbald had walked guiltily away instead of offering congratulations. The present was a crucial moment, and justified polite simulation. She acknowledged Congalton's greeting with her most captivating smile and her finest English. She was afraid her husband, who was rather shy, and at times absent-minded, had overlooked his

duty, but it might be none the less fitting that she should call and put in words their satisfaction that any kindnesses they had been able to show to his late lamented brother had not been forgotten by him. It was an especial pleasure to her, that the remembrance of their long and neighbourly friendship had fallen in this sensible form on her daughter, whom he had known from bairnhood. Such a minding was altogether unexpected, and if there was any way in which they could show their gratitude to him or his daughter he was welcome to their services. Mr. Congalton was too well-bred to smile; he received these diplomatic sentences in a manner suitably gracious. He himself, he informed his visitor, was going immediately to London, and should be absent for some time on business.

He would not be taking his daughter along with him to such a place as London, she was sure. No; how glad she was of that. London was an ill place for tender, motherless bairns. Nor was Broomfields suitable either, with nobody but Janet Izet at its head. If he would leave the child in her care till he returned, it would give them some chance of showing the





great respect they all cherished for the doctor's memory. Then she addressed the round-eyed, wondering child on her knee. "Ye'll see the horses and moos, and get a wee lammie to rin at your heels; the caller air o' the farm will bring flesh and colour to your bonny wee cheeks. Wudna ye like that?" Then the child would have in her daughter a refined and lady-like companion. Bell was daft about bairns, having no brothers or sisters of her own. Her daughter's boarding-school education in Edinburgh (she had been six months there "finishing" the scant tutelage begun and carried on for a time at the parish school) would enable her to foster and keep up the lady-like manners which nature and good upbringing had given her, but which she would be sure to lose if left to the housekeeper's unaided care. In thinking back on this interview, which she could not but regard as providential, her belief was unhesitating that a serviceable impression had been left, and that on the whole she had made the most of accidental circumstances. She remembered, but misunderstood what she called "the pleased glint" that came into his eyes at the mention

of her daughter's name; and the thoughtful way in which he acknowledged the offer of their services to his child. The intimation that he had arranged to put Eva under the care of a governess stimulated regret that she had not been earlier in the field; but it did not last. There was no harm in his having a brief trial of a governess — her daughter had told her what they were. At all events he knew now that she and Bell were willing to assist and befriend him in the upbringing of his daughter; and a crisis was sure to come.

Mrs. Cowie lost no time in magnifying Mr. Congalton's good qualities to her daughter. "Such a ceevil-spoken gentleman, and such nice soft eyes." Bell was like herself, impressionable, and might be led, but certainly would not be driven. Ignorance of the doctor's intentions towards Bell and his brother must, for a time at least, be strictly maintained. She knew the "contrairiness" of youth — a blunt intimation of the facts might spoil all. The mother expressed her belief that he was sure to marry soon, and if she, Bell, cared for a grand marriage, with her education and natural charms, there was n't a





young lass in the parish would have any chance against her. The boarding school alumnus smiled at these flattering confidences. She was not yet conscious of having worked great havoc amongst the hearts of men. Willie Mitchell, a neighbouring farmer, and she had been casting "sheep's eyes" at each other of late behind backs. There was no positive love-making as yet between them, but she was on the seductive borderland of ideals, in which the sedate widower and the fresh young farmer could not fail to take places in striking contrast. This was apparent in her reply — she spoke laughingly.

"A proposal from Mr. Congalton would be a very funny thing," she said; "but when my time comes I want a young man or nane. If the doctor has left me siller, as ye say, I can afford to wait."