CHAPTER VII

WINDY-YETT MAKES A MISTAKE

It was Sunday afternoon before the news of the accident reached Mrs. Cowie. There was little else talked of by the men in the kirkyard before sermon time. It was not the habit of the women-folk to palaver in this outer court. They went at once to their high-backed pews to compose their minds, and see what their neighbours had on. Mrs. Cowie's active mind took in all that was worthy of observation at a glance, and her eye travelled out of the loft window to where the cadger's horse was cropping the scant grass. She was marvelling at the absence of Janet Izet, and her "so set up wi' her mournings," but this was made plain to her afterwards at "skarling" time, on their way down to the inn where they had "lowsed."

"Just you taigle awee in yokin'," she said, when her husband had finished his story. "I'll run up to Broomfields and see if the bairn has been hurt."

"Tschah woman, ye needna fash, for they tell me she won aff withoot scaith."

"Will ye no do as I tell ye?" she replied hotly, "some men'll never learn sense. Wud it no look gey heartless efter what has come and gane if I didna see till the bairn in her father's absence? Whare's Bell?"

It occurred to Mrs. Cowie at the moment that her daughter's company on such an errand might serve a good purpose. But Bell had preferred to walk home with some young friends, and Richard Cowie, hurrying on to overtake the carrier, felt there was leisure and opportunity for a dram while his wife was making her ceremonious and diplomatic call.

"There's that woman Cowie," exclaimed Mistress Izet, jumping to her feet and all but overturning a plate of hot "kail." She, Isaac, and Jenny Guililand had sat down to dinner in the kitchen (Isaac always dined there on Sundays). "Jenny, rin and shut the door of

the drawing-room. Show her into the parlour and dinna open your lips, guid or ill, till I come; we'll gi'e her no occasion to clype."

When the housekeeper returned she reported what had taken place as she served out the sheep's head.

"Speirin' body," grunted Isaac, helping himself to potatoes.

"Guid forgie me for leein," said Mistress Izet, the spur of remembrance touching the side of her conscience. "When she asked to see Miss Hetty hersel', I said she hadna sleepit a wink a' nicht wi' the pain in her fit, and that the bairn and her had just lain doon thegither and were fast asleep. That was an awfu' lee to tell on the Sabbath day, Isaac, when they were baith sitting at their denner i' the next room. Jenny Guililand," cried the speaker, suddenly realizing her indiscretion, "if you tell a word I'll — oh, I dinna ken what I wud do — I'll — I'll just — tak' the haed aff ye!"

"Um," interjected Isaac, ignoring the intimidating parenthesis, "what said she syne?"

"Oh, she then commenced to black-ball Miss

Hetty for her want o' sense in taking the bairn into places o' danger; but I coupet the tables by saying it wud be wicer like if she got her ain guid-brither to put a halter on sic vicious bruits, and tie them i' the byre-en', instead o' letting them rampage aboot terrifyin' the lives oot o' simple folk. Nothing wud do but that the wee lassie should be sent up to the farm for a few days to settle her nerves."

"To get the news, and breed mischief," said Isaac, taking a trotter in his fingers — having exhausted the capabilities of knife and fork.

"Just to breed mischief, Isaac, ye never said a truer word. I was mortal angry, but contained mysel'. I thanked her dryly, and said that though the governess had raxed her fit she was still able enough to gie the bairn her lessons."

"Um! — I see through't," said Isaac, delivering the exclamation through his nose.

The gardener was more than usually communicative, and Janet, an earnest student of his demeanour, helped him to a favourite piece of the cheek. Her respect for his perspicacity was unbounded.

"Jenny Guililand," she said, "if you're through wi' your denner rin doon to the candle-maker's and speir for the guidwife's rheumatics — see, gie the dug these banes i' the by-gaun."

It was clear to her Isaac had some idea in his mind that was verified or vivified by Mrs. Cowie's visit, which he might be loath to reveal in the presence of a third party.

"That's prime!" he exclaimed, leaning back in his chair, and wiping his mouth with open hand after the girl had retired. His colloquist, however, was in dubiety as to whether the adjective referred to the sheep's head or some coincident thought in his own mind.

"Ye have a wonnerfu' head for putting this and that thegither though ye hain yer speech."

"Umph'm — I see her game."

"I'm sure ye see clean through her for a' sic a clever woman as she is." The housekeeper spoke with stimulating emphasis.

"I see her game," Isaac reiterated, not yet ready to capitulate. He was vain of his reticence as garrulous people are of speech.

"I was sure o' that," confirmed Mistress Izet,

"I saw it in your face while I was telling ye what passed."

"I jaloused a while sin," progressed Isaac — "but I never let on."

"Think o' that. Folk that are aye talking seldom learn muckle. Ye think and ken heaps o' things that wud be worth listening to, I'm sure."

"Maybe." The dawn of a grim smile increased while he fingered his lips. "Maybe — but ye should ken this ane — she wants to put her daughter Bell in Miss Hetty's place."

Isaac did not give his authority for this remark, indeed it is doubtful if ever he heard even a hint of Mrs. Cowie's intentions. Probably it was due to the wonderful head he had for putting this and that together. Mrs. Cowie it is true had not at first thought of her daughter going to live at Broomfields in the capacity of a governess, but on after consideration she inquired of herself why not? Bell had got an educational finish which cost "a bonny penny," and it was lost at the farm. Girls as well off as she went out to genteel places; but the prevailing motive in her mind was that of

uniting the fortunes of Broomfields and Windy-yett, however that might be brought about. She cleared the point to her own satisfaction that the situation was not one of servility; it was a move in a game of skill. Rumour gave forth that Mr. Congalton was returning with the intention of settling, for a time at least, in Kilspindie. If her daughter got the place of governess she would have opportunities of impressing him with her worth. She would doubtless sit at table with him, and Mrs. Cowie could not believe that any man situated as he was, and living the lonely life he led, could resist a well-favoured young woman like Bell. Mrs. Cowie had looked at the subject out and in. Eva need not be a standing incumbrance. The question was one of generalship. After marriage the child could be sent to a boarding school. That would leave Bell's hands free for the responsibilities that might follow; she felt it would be unfair that a second wife in the early days of her married life should be hampered by the presence and care of a first wife's bairn. Mrs. Cowie was too earnest to see the humour of the situation. She had turned these and kindred

matters over in her own mind, but would keep them to herself till the issues were ripe. She felt the tenure of the present governess need not be a long one, indeed so far as her own designs went, she hoped and believed that it would not be so. She passed a condescending "Guid day" to Nancy Beedam and William Caughie, who stood at their respective doors as she sailed down to the inn.

Meantime Windy-yett and his friend the carrier had "yoked" to their second gill. The latter was carried away, and had magnified the incident of the previous afternoon into an act of heroism beyond reasonable proportions. It was an adventure in which he had borne part: there was reflected glory.

"It was smart o' the bit craitur tae," admitted the farmer, thinking of the mere physical aspect of the occurrence, "brocht up on book-diet."

"Book-diet!" repeated McLennan, "man Windy-yett, that's just it." The carrier brought down a solid fist on the table, making the pewter measure gyrate. "It's edication that dis't."

The farmer missed the relevancy of this re-

mark, and asked what "edication" had "to do wi't." He was normally slow in the up-take, but had the reputation at market of being able in the course of the second gill to see as far as his neighbours into a "logic argyment."

"Everything," cried McLennan extravagantly, "at ony rate mair than ye think. Tak your common five-eicht woman, or man either, and spring sudden danger on them, nine oot o' ten o' them'll tak to their heels — self-preservation is the first law wi' them; but here is a lassie, weel brocht up, weel schuled, wi' her wits under control. Her training has gi'en her the whip-hand o' hersel', so to speak. Man, she didna even squeal, and that showed edication. She had been taught to think o' ithers before hersel', and crying oot couldna work a miracle. It wud have been a waste o' breath, and she needed a' her puff to rin to the dyke and drap the wee thing safe on the ither side. D'ye see?" The carrier was getting into form. "It's the same thing i' the British army — the rank and file will stick and kill stracht-foret like deevils, but what wud come o't if this bruit-force wasna under the guidance o' a calm mind? It's the

officers that win the battles. Man, edication will ——"

But what more this wonderful agency was capable of achieving, according to the appraisement of this advocate whom it had neglected, remained unexpressed, for Mrs. Cowie had thrown the door back forcibly to the wall, and stood in the opening. She was annoyed at the impatient and curt treatment received at the hands of Mistress Izet, but the annoyance developed into wrath on finding that her husband had not only forgotten her, but had so far forgotten himself as to consort with and treat a common carrier for the purpose of hearing about the "silly on-gauns o' a glaikit woman." This was what she said afterwards, but at the moment she stood in the door, an alarming embodiment of impatience, and only remarked, "Are you ready? I'm waiting for ye."

As her husband in unheroic haste "clamped" past to the stable the carrier asked politely if he could treat her to a "gless o' sherry wine."

"No, thenk ye," she said, raising her chin. "I'm much obleeged to ye, but I dinna approve

o' women or men either drinking in a common change-hoose on the Sabbath day." She turned on her heel and metaphorically shook the dust of connivance from her feet.

Cowie held the horse's head meekly until she was solidly settled in the gig, then he mounted beside her and drove up the brae, bracing himself for what might ensue. They passed Broomfields in silence. The dram and the carrier's words were still buzzing in Richard Cowie's head. His wife's eyes were turned away from him as if she were studying nature amongst the weeds and wild flowers at the roots of the hedge. He felt that his forgetfulness had given her "mortal" offence. In ordinary circumstances he would have waited humbly and let her have her say, but his share of two gills hadn't been taken for nothing; he would have the first word, let who might have the last. He sucked his tongue encouragingly to the horse and applied the whip.

"I agree wi' McLennan that edication's a gran' thing," he began, as if his wife had been a listener to their interrupted discussion.

"D'ye though," she retorted, shifting her eyes

from the hedge-roots. "It's a pity but ye baith had mair o' t."

His valour was rising.

"Tak ony ither common lassie," he continued, "ten to ane wud 'a' ta'en to their heels and ran withoot thinking o' the bit bairn; but that's whare edication comes in. It's the same with the British army, the men will rin ram-stam and stick this ane and the ither ane, but it's the offishers that wins the battles."

His wife turned to him at first with concern, then a withering look contorted her face.

"The whisky has gane to yer head," she said.

"Na, it's sober truth, McLennan and me had a prime crack aboot it. He saw the governess rinnin' wi' the wee lassie in her arms and the bull at her heels. He puts it a' doon to edication, and I'm inclined to favour his opinion. They tell me the woman got badly hurt hersel', did ye hear ocht o't?"

Richard Cowie's audacity had surprised even himself. He did not know his wife's designs, if she had confided in him probably he would not have gone so far.

"Ay," she remarked dryly, "so you're agreed that edication's a gran' thing, baith o' ye, and that the British army wins battles by it; weel, weel, yer an uncommon pair, but ony subject will serve men when there's whisky i' their insides."

"Ye needna flyte, it didna cost that muckle siller," he said humbly.

"Ay, ay; it's the cock's guidwill wi' the hen's corn, but it wud have been a heap wicer-like gin ye had been talking owre the heads o' the day's discoorse, than exposing the silly on-gauns o' a glaikit woman in a public change-hoose."

Windy-yett began to consider as he drove along that he had somehow started on the wrong "headrigg." He certainly had the first word, and it might be as well he thought now to let his wife have the last, because it came to his memory that there was another subject that had to be broached with pacific carefulness before he reached home. During the day, while cracking thoughtlessly in the kirkyard, he had taken the liberty of inviting Willie Mitchell of Coultarmains to dinner. This hospitable impulse had come into his mind on learning that the young farmer's sister-housekeeper had gone to visit a

friend at Kingsford, and would not return till the Monday.

"I'm fell sorry I keepit ye waiting," he said by and by, in a preparatory way. "Edication efter a's no everything, though McLennan was gey dour on't." He was nearing the road-end, and he did not want Willie Mitchell to feel that he, Richard Cowie, had no standing in his own house. "I forgot to tell ye I had speired Coultarmains to denner the day." He had reined the pony to walking pace, and was mopping his head with a red pocket-handkerchief.

"Ye what?" cried his wife, almost bouncing off her seat, and stamping her foot with a force that to his innocent mind seemed out of all proportion to his indiscretion. But the look of vexation and anger on her face was even more alarming than her words or gestures.

Willie Mitchell invited to dinner! Were her plans and cherished hopes to be frustrated by the stupid intermeddling of a thoughtless man? This was the secret of Bell's absence; the reason of her desire to walk instead of drive home. Mrs. Cowie was not so insensible to the language of look and manner as to be ignorant

of the fact that the "Mains" lad had a fancy for Bell, and that her daughter, like a wayward, unsought girl, was none loath to receive his attentions. The farm of Coultarmains had been left to Mitchell and his sister, well-stocked, and free of debt; but for Bell, with her ladylike accomplishments, to go into a farm kitchen possessing simply a third partnership, with probably two to one against her, would be a folly which must be hindered. But beyond and above this, such a union would blight all her maternal ambitions, and involve the sacrifice of her interest in the doctor's will. These considerations flashed through Mrs. Cowie's mind in a moment, and emphasized the terrible peremptoriness of word and manner.

"Weel, ye see, I had no chance o' speirin ye i' the kirk," Cowie said deferentially, "for the precentor was half through the first psalm before I won up to the laft, and efter we were oot this meeserable governess story dang the thing clean oot o' my head."

"Sin' ye have invited Mains yoursel', ye maun een have him to yersel'; as for me and Bell, we'll denner i' the kitchen."

"Ye'll no do ony sic an onneebourly thing, surely," he said pleadingly. "His sister has gane to Kingsford, and as there was to be no set-doon denner for him at hame, I thought ye wudna mind me asking him to tak a bite wi' us o' what was gaun."

His wife did not reply. They had turned up the loaning leading to the farm, and she had need of the short space of time remaining to make up her mind. As they drove into the court she saw Bell with a pink rose in her hand sitting at one side of the parlour window, chatting gaily with a brown-faced, soft-eyed young farmer, who sat at the other. By the momentary glance inward she saw Bell had spread the damask table-cloth and put down the "company" knives and forks. It is not wronging her to say that Mrs. Cowie was pleased with Bell's forethought. She felt it was proper to impress this young man with their genteel manners, because their very "style" would show him how hopeless any matrimonial pretensions on his part would prove. She would not lower herself in the esteem of a neighbour by adhering to the inhospitable threat she had flung at her husband,

but she would take care that he had no chance of palavering privately with Bell. The embarrassment of the moment had also shown her the time had come when it was necessary that both her husband and Bell should understand her wishes, so that no family cross-purpose in future should interfere with the realization of her plans.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

"EVA, Eva, come fast and help me to catch this beautiful creature."

There was a rapid rustle of skirts in and out among the broom and boulders, quickening breath, and at last rippling palpitations of laughter as the pursuers dropped exhausted on a thymey knoll under the gracious shadow of a clump of hazels.

"I did not know pansies could fly," Eva said, with round eyes, when her breath had returned. "Oh, Miss Hetty, you had it in your parasol."

Hetty laughed at the dainty conceit.

"It was not a pansy, dear, but a lovely butterfly; see, there it is again, hovering above that wild rose bush, but it is safe, for we cannot follow it over the burn."