letter that neither you nor me understands." She bounced from her seat. "See, here's paper and ink for ye," she said; "just you sit doon and answer it when ye're i' the tid, and tell the wily lawyer that we'll e'en bide by the Doctor's will."

CHAPTER XIV

LOVE-MAKING

SOME days after Richard Cowie had sent his reply to Mr. Sibbald, Willie Mitchell, desiring to test the reasonableness of his hopes before commencing the harvest, came home early from Kilburnie fair, where he had left Cowie and his wife. He repaired to Windy-yett, and found Bell picking fruit in the garden all alone. He had thought so intensely on his journey over, and had made so many finely-worded proposals to the encouraging air, that on arriving he was mentally exhausted and confused. This big, strong-limbed man was afraid, from Mrs. Cowie's manner on several occasions, but particularly during the recent visit when he had the felicity of dining with the family, that she was not quite favourable to his honest intentions. Bell, however, had at least not discouraged him, and it

was his wish to see her alone and have a quiet hour with her without interruption before her parents returned. Bell's eyes sparkled, and her teeth shone as she saw the weather-bronzed "wooer" stalking down the gravelled path, between the high box-wood borders; but when she saw the unnatural gravity of the youthful face, and the pallor of suppressed feeling about the lines of the mouth, she felt inclined to run away. Willie Mitchell, as a bantering beau, frisking suggestively, but with unformed intentions, on the no-man's land between fun and sentiment, was delightful. But Willie Mitchell with a mind made up and a body charged to the lips with pent-up passion that might explode at any moment, while there was no one near to encourage by-play, made her wish she had accompanied her parents to the fair.

"You are home soon," she said, throwing the ribbons of her sun-bonnet behind her back that she might show the dainty earrings her mother had purchased in anticipation of the first money product of the legacy. Then she remembered that she did not look her best when her face was serious — and smiled.

"Ay, I'm home soon," he said, being in no mood to waste words.

"Were there many at the fair?" she inquired, stooping over her work.

"Oh, a heap o' folk as usual — you're unco' busy the day."

"No that busy."

"Ye'll get sunstroke, Bell; come awa' into the summer-house here, and rest ye."

"I'll run up to the hoose first wi' the berries," she cried, laughing, and tripped off through the garden gate with the fruit. What Bell wanted was time to think. Was this her first conquest? Was it not her mother's teaching that a young woman of her attractions should have many such before she made choice? Nanny Sutherland made no secret of the fact that she had three — and she was plain. Why should she think of Nanny Sutherland just then? Nannie had turned real religious before her marriage. At the "kirkin'" she had left a plum-pudding in the pot to simmer, and all the way to the kirk she had it on her mind for fear the water should boil in; but, as she said, the minister's text was "richt heartnin" "Cast thy burden on the Lord."

"Weel, I just did that, and let the pudding tak' its chance." Bell laughed at the thought of thus relieving herself of Willie Mitchell, and her white teeth gleamed in her own looking-glass. At the moment she was up in her little bedroom adjusting and pinning up her refractory back hair. She was not quite convinced that Nanny's text applied to her present circumstances. If burden there were, she inclined to take it on her own plump shoulders. Bell tried her smile in varying degrees of broadness until, becoming conscious of the absurdity of her conduct, she laughed at her own reflection — that, she concluded, — mockingly, the fresh, red lips just revealing her white teeth — will be enough for Willie Mitchell. But what was there to laugh at? Who could dare to laugh or smile either at a man with a tragic face like yon? It was enough to bring tears to one's eyes. Then she laughed once more at the thought of tears for a young and hale man such as she had left in the summer-house. "Ay," she said, coming within hail, "and ye didna like the fair."

"Oh, I liket the fair weel enough."

"And why did ye hurry awa' frae't?"

"Because — because, Bell, to tell ye the honest truth, I liket something else far better. Bell, will ye come and sit doon?" She started back from his strong arm, her left hand instinctively feeling if the hairpins were likely to hold.

"No, I'll no sit doon."

"Are ye afraid?"

"Yes; I dinna like the look o' ye." Then with quick prudential qualification she added, "Ye look so serious."

"So I am serious, Bell — desperate serious. Come, I want to speak to ye."

"But I dinna like serious talk at this time o' day." She flung her arm round the gnarled oak pole of the summer-house and tapped the gravel with the point of her outstretched foot. At this moment remembering her countenance had fallen, she cleared up and added, "When folk are serious, they whiles say disagreeable things; and if you say disagreeable things I'll run away."

"But ye have led me to ettle that what I am going to say will no' be distastefu' to ye."

"Have I? Then I would like to hear it."

Her heart gave a great leap. What was this she had said? Had she actually invited the man to make a proposal? Deliberately she did not mean it, and, indeed, was sorry for it afterwards; but for the moment she could not resist the temptation of being sure of one conquest.

"I want ye to marry me."

Bell laughed an almost hysterical laugh. Here it was at last — her first offer. Her head was in a whirl, and she had to cling to the hard-hearted oak pole for lack of kindlier support. This was the beginning of her victories. But what about the wan face before her? His whole nervous energy was spent in words and feelings. She did not run away, yet he had not strength enough left to embrace her. He had shot for the prize — had he hit or missed the mark?

"I'm awfu' serious," he said. They were both standing limp, and needing mutual succour at the summer-house door.

"I see that," she replied, contemplating the toe of her light shoe; "but I'm owre young." In her heart she was dearly fond of the young man, but the momentary weakness which he

had failed to take advantage of was past. She could not throw herself away to the first bidder, nor could she explain that when other offers came she might place him on the short leet.

"You're no' that young," he said.

"Is it fair to remind me of advancing years?" If she had not been at the Edinburgh boarding-school she would not have answered so pertly.

"I didna mean that, Bell; but you are auld enough to be my wife. We have grown up thegether in a sense."

"That's true; but I'm — I'm barely twenty."

"Is't the siller, Bell — Dr. Congalton's siller that has ta'en ye frae me? If so I wish to God ye had never heard tell o't, for I have enough wi' honest farming to do our turn."

Bell paused; the siller truly had made little difference to her, but she felt it had stirred her mother's desires to set the family on a higher level.

"No, Willie," she said kindly, "it's no' the siller I'm minding about — it makes no odds in my feelings to you; but my mother canna spare me. Na, I wouldna advise ye to ask her." Bell did not wish to lose him absolutely.

"Tell me this," he implored, "has onybody else speired ye?"

"Oh, no." Her vanity returned: she hoped in her heart the next one who came would not ask this embarrassing question. "No one has ever asked me."

"Then ye winna say no to me, Bell?"

"I canna say yes — at present — I would need time."

"What time?" he inquired eagerly — "a month?"

"No, no — a year," she stammered, "at — at — least."

"Let it be a year, then," he said with resignation. "I'll wait."

She was beginning to feel the seriousness of the situation, and was pondering in her mind whether she had done right in being so definite, when her lover, awaking to a sense of what was appropriate, seized her unresisting hand, drew her to him inside the summer-house, and kissed her lips. At the moment she could have returned the kiss warmly, and said, "No, not a year hence, but now." In consonance with the consistency of her sex, however, she struggled from

his embrace. The hairpins had held nobly. This was but one — surely there would be other triumphs. Were not these, according to her education, the heritage of well-favoured maidenhood?

"Is it an engagement?" he inquired, contemplating her flushed face, three yards from him now.

"No, no!" she cried, "no engagement on either side. Ask me again in a year, but till then we are both free."

When Richard Cowie and his wife returned from the fair Bell was busy in the kitchen, but her heightened colour and glittering eyes were attributed to the heat of the jam-pan. Willie Mitchell had been prudently instructed to keep out of the way, and show no sign, or she, Bell, would not be answerable for the consequences. Other proposals might come, or, if not, her mother's mind might alter — a year was a long time.

On the Wednesday following there was to be a flower-show at Kilmory, and Mrs. Cowie resolved to be there. She sent her compliments to Mr. Congalton — would he allow his little girl

and the governess to accompany her daughter and herself to the show? She knew that an invitation including both would be more likely to find acceptance. It would also have the look of greater disinterestedness, while she and Bell could take stock of this much-talked-of young person, and, if necessary, by their manner at least set her in her place. To Mrs. Cowie's surprise Eva was allowed to accompany her, but the governess was not. Was it a retributive circumstance in the irony of events that this masterful scheming spirit was unconsciously instrumental in taking the child out of the way while the father made a declaration of love, and a proposal of marriage to the lady whom she deliberately designed to humble? The world is too good for such coincidences to occur often, though when we do find a Haman suffering mortal defeat on his own gallows, it would be contrary to our wicked nature to be deeply sorry for him.

Congalton's later life had been a lonely and self-reliant one. The deeper springs of sentiment seemed dried up, or, if they existed, were sealed. For many years solitude had been his

choice, and when drawn into society his associates were principally men. The few women he had met remained entirely outside of his life — they did not awaken affection. He had frequently smiled at his brother's Quixotic wish to will him away in marriage to a farmer's daughter. What thought had he of marriage? Yet under his apparently frigid manner there was, unknown to himself, a spring of latent passion ready to well forth in response to the appropriate touch. Since confiding his literary secret to the governess, that little person had been an object of enlarging interest to him. He had created occasions, contrary to his nature, of being in her society. She was practical, helpful, and never by any means obtrusive. Her presence brought light and warmth into his rather sunless life; her necessary absence awoke the poetry of reminiscence. In fact, she conquered him without scheme or intention as she had conquered and won Mistress Izet and Isaac Kilgour. The result was not of his seeking, nor of hers. You ask what draws the bee to the flower, or the swallow to the South — what answer do you get? Nature is a subtle

worker, and will not be questioned. It was not the outward beauty of face or elegance of form, though the governing influence of mind gave a charm to both. It was the inevitable and irresistible outcome of natural affinity. Did she love him? In very truth she had never thought of him as a lover. She had her ideals, like other women, but Congalton was not one of them. She admired his ability, his power of absorbing, transforming, and ennobling the rude materials with which he worked. He was intensely interested in the occupations of the hour, as all who turn them to lasting account must be; but she felt that existence, in the pauses of his activity, must be dull and monotonous; Eva was too young to bestow the quickening sympathy it lacked. Were her preconceived girlish notions of a lover suffering change? It is impossible to tell the precise moment of time at which the unlikely object or person takes form to fill the ideal niche in the human mind. In her own heart there had sprung up, knowing his needs, an increasing desire to shed something of her own natural brightness on his path. She did not know —

nor did she, in her eager desire to help him, pause to think — that this in itself might be the precursor of a deeper sentiment. The declaration of Congalton's feelings, and the proposal which ensued, while entirely unexpected, revealed to her the true state of her own heart. The occasion was too solemn for laughter. There was no humour in the face of this man, who with his pen could be so daintily humorous. Yet she felt an impulse to laugh — not at him, but at herself. After their day-dreams and their confidences what would her sister Violet think? Did she not already stand among the ruins of her broken gods? Nevertheless, the feeling immediately following was one of joyful acquiescence. For the moment she was oblivious to the future, but only for the moment. No, no, no — it could not be. She was serious now, and had no thought of laughter. Mrs. Maconkey had told her of Dr. Congalton's will. His marriage with her would involve the sacrifice of his interest in it. If that were all — and she was not insensible to its magnitude — she would gladly enter into his life and aid him to retrieve that loss;

but it meant more — it meant also the sacrifice of his daughter's portion: this was insuperable.

It was in vain he assured her that his present means and his capacity for work were ample guarantee that no one should suffer. She felt it was an injustice to the child who was not of age to protect her own interests, and an act to which it would be both dishonest and disloyal on her part to consent.

There was a russet memory of sunset on the shoulder of the Baidland hill as Mrs. Cowie and her daughter took form at the head of the dusky loaning and placed their charge, flushed with the agitation of entertainment, in the kindly arms of Mistress Izet, at Broomfields gate. Neither father nor governess appeared; but Mrs. Cowie derived comfort from the reflection that the child had been much made of, and that she would not be long in reporting to the proper authority the attentions she had received from herself and Bell. Indeed, Eva carried a souvenir of the occasion home with her, for Mrs. Cowie, with the excellent tact for appropriation which distinguished her, laid hands on the bouquet that had carried off the first prize, in order that

the child might have in her possession a "minding of the show."

Next morning Hetty announced in the schoolroom that her pupil was to have some holidays, her father having arranged to take her to the seaside for a change.

"Oh!" cried Eva, clapping her hands with delight, "shall I see the Atlantic Ocean?"

"Yes, my dear, you will see the Atlantic, and the great sands of Machrihanish — won't that be charming?"

"And you will put me on a pony?"

"I fear there are no ponies at Machrihanish; but, Eva dear, I shall not be there. Your father has granted me a few days' leave of absence to visit my own home."