o' the kind ance happened in Houston parish when ——"

"That's no likely noo," he interrupted; "the hoose is taen."

"What hoose?"

"Bet Inglis' bothie."

"Keep and guide us, did ever onybody hear the like o' that? And ye never let on."

There was no sentiment wasted at this betrothal. They drank their toddy, and had an hour's sensible talk about ways and means, at the end of which they agreed to exchange beds for the night. Mistress Izet thoughtfully brought the lobby bell, and placed it on a chair within his reach.

"Ring it lood," she said, "if ye need me," then she assisted him to the bedside.

"Efter a', Janet," said Isaac, with a twinkle in his eye, "it's a peety ye should leave yer ain bed."

"Ye auld futar," she cried, with a laugh, seizing the candle and running off to the door. "I micht 'a sleepit in my ain bed a' my days, and you in yours, gin yer legs had cam hame sober."

CHAPTER XIX

NATURE'S NURTURING AND PAIRING TIME

THE wine-coloured tassels of the flowering currant, as yet unaccompanied by leaves, drooped healthily under a gentle rain. Elm and chestnut trees were bursting into leafage. Even the tardy ash was awakening under the pressure of inward nourishment, but there was not a shimmer of green as yet among the network of branches. Against the milky back-ground of sky, however, there stood forth dark, tightly-shut fists of life, whose fingers would unfold by and by, and hold out a soft palm-like hand to the sun and rain. The brown earth of the fields was seen as through an emerald mist, with straight lines of deeper green, where the harrow-tooth had given strength to the nurturing soil. For weeks the lark had been heard over Coultarmains, and the cushet was already pouring forth his five love-

notes in Crosby Glen. It was nature's replenishing and pairing time, when the invisible forces above and beneath work towards summer; and the awakening impulses of love and hope begin to stir in the human breast. While sitting in his own pew Willie Mitchell's eye caught Bell Cowie's as the minister proclaimed for the first, second, and third time that there was a purpose of marriage between Thomas Maughan and Lizzie Colquhoun. The whole congregation might have been gazing at Bell without seeing anything peculiar in her glance at the moment. The congregation, however, was not in love. The magnetic message he felt was for him alone, and taken in conjunction with the time and circumstances it thrilled him into such ecstasy of absent-mindedness that William Caughie, thinking the young man had got "cauld and was hard o' hearing!" touched him on the shoulder from behind with his horn specs, and whispered reverently that the text was in "Matha seeventh and fourt." Mitchell mechanically turned up the passage, but heard nothing of the elaborate chastisement which the preacher administered to his flock. The young

farmer had frequently met Bell since that fair-day in autumn, when she incautiously promised to give him an answer in a twelve months' time; and while he never failed to show that his regard for her was as true as ever, he kept his conversation on the honourable side of the compact. Bell herself was rather tired of waiting for proposals. The utter dearth of these left her already biassed mind free to think more and more of the one open to her. Protracted thinking on one subject is known to narrow the mental horizon, but in this case the affections went arm-in-arm with meditation, the final result being that the only male person seen on the horizon was Willie Mitchell. Her mother had contributed in a kind of passive way to this consummation. Mrs. Cowie's aspiration for a marriage with Mr. Congalton had undergone considerable modification since the death of his daughter. She did not know of his engagement to the governess, but she felt that his removal abroad and the subsequent sale of Broomfields rendered his return to Kilspindie exceedingly doubtful. Since he had resisted all her own persuasive skill, the library, and Bell's charms,

she thought it unlikely he would ever marry. Consciousness of failure left her gloomy and reticent. Bell, meantime, was allowed to dream her own dreams, and nibble the sweet cake of her own knowledge in secret. But Mrs. Cowie could not long remain in ignorance of how matters were drifting in the absence of competing wooers. Her daughter's tell-tale face was too ingenuous to conceal her feelings when her lover was near, or when his name was mentioned in her hearing. Mitchell, on the other hand, acting on Bell's advice, was always on his guard in Mrs. Cowie's presence. Since Congalton had eluded her, and no other star was in the firmament, Coultarmains appeared to her as not such an undesirable match for Bell. But what if he also was growing indifferent? Men could not be trusted for constancy. She sought her daughter's confidence with such unwonted kindness of manner that Bell told her all.

"And ye said ye would gie him an answer in a twelvemonths' time."

"Yes," whispered Bell, not daring to lift her eyes.

"That was richt prudent o' ye."

She recalled the proposal Mr. Sibbald had made. Probably it might still be open to them to accept it. If so, her daughter would yet have the half of Dr. Congalton's money, and marry the man of her own choice.

"Willie Mitchell is a weel-principled lad," she said. "It is true your edication and manners fitted ye to be ony gentleman's wife; after a' ye may perhaps find as much happiness in a farmer's kitchen as in a gentleman's ha'. But haud Willie Mitchell to his bargain for the present, and if things can be arranged within a year he'll maybe no have to wait a' that time for his answer."

Was the glad light that flashed in Bell's eyes from the front seat of the loft the offspring of this welcome assurance? The interview between mother and daughter took place on the previous Saturday afternoon, and had left behind it in the girl's heart a radiant memory. When they met after sermon-time Bell was bright beyond her usual, and winsomely coquettish. Mrs. Cowie saluted the young farmer with uncommon warmth, and then stepped solidly on with her husband. Had Mitchell decreed to take the most direct

way to his own farm he would have passed the road leading to Windy-yett, and taken the next turning. Indeed, it had been customary for Mrs. Cowie, if he was of their company, to stop and practically dismiss him here with, "Weel, ye'll be steppin' foret." On the present occasion, however, the farmer and his wife turned into the loaning without even looking round. Mitchell thought this was exceedingly opportune, for he had something on his mind to say to Bell — a secret it was, in the meantime — the disclosure of which might lead to confidences more suited to this quiet path than to a public road thronged with home-going friends and neighbours. Bell paused at the turning with a testing gleam of humour in her face.

"Na," he said seriously, "I'm going on; I've something to tell ye."

"Something to tell me?" she inquired, looking up in his face soberly now. "Is't some ill news?"

"Weel, I can hardly ca' it by that name."

The light faded in Bell's eye. Was he going to give her up? Was he also — this indispensable factor in her life, about to dis-

solve into a shadow? He did not keep her long in suspense.

"My sister is leaving Coultarmains."

"Leaving — have you quarrelled?"

"Na, she's getting merrit; but it's a secret yet."

The colour returned to Bell's lips, and her teeth sparkled as she replied —

"Deed, Willie, I thought by your face ye had met wi' some misshanter. Wha is she getting?"

Bell's boarding-school manner and speech came and went with circumstances. A homely farmer liked the vernacular best.

"Peter Main, the teacher at Kingsford. He has been seeking her for a while, and they have settled it at last; it's no to be named to onybody for a month yet."

Bell walked on a short space in silence. But thought is rapid, and defiant of time. Susie Mitchell and she had been school-fellows under Mr. Lonen at the parish school. Susie was little and plain, with rather a sallow complexion, yet she — Susie — had attracted the attention of an educated man; Peter Main, however, had dis-

covered qualities in his sweetheart that were to him before outward comeliness of face.

"And when is't to be?" she inquired at last, baffled in thinking of the inscrutable ways of men.

"Lammas," he replied. "It will be gey awkward for me wi' the hairst just beginning. Bell, will ye let me put foret the nock?"

"What do ye mean?"

She was rather a shallow young person, this Bell; neither mother-wit nor boarding-school education had taught her the significance of figurative language.

"I have promised no to speak to ye of marriage for a year," he said, "and I would have kept my word even in the changed circumstances, but I thocht frae the glint o' yer ee as ye looked at me frae the laft the day, that ye micht let me speir your answer earlier."

Bell held down a crimson face to hide its joy. His heart was still true to her. But what was this had taken his head — this "glint" he spoke of? Had she revealed prematurely to the sharp eye of her lover the transport she experienced at her mother's altered attitude towards himself?

"Tell me this ony-wye, Bell," he remarked, rather desperately, "do ye like me ony waur than when I first spoke o' marriage to ye?"

"No," she replied, with emphatic readiness — "far better!"

He drew a long breath of the nourishing spring air, then their eyes met.

"Bell," he said rapturously, "that's gran' news — wi' that answer I could maist wait oot the year."

They were nearing the farm; she laid a hand quietly on his sleeve, and spoke modestly and low.

"Ye'll maybe no have to wait sae lang, Willie. I'll tell ye mysel' when the time comes, but dinna you say anither word till I gie ye leave."

Mrs. Cowie and her husband had paused at the gable-end, and were contemplating with satisfaction a brood of raw-framed turkeys that had come into being during the preceding week, when the young people came up flushed and confused with their love-talk. Bell ran into the house at once, seeking shade from both outward and inward heat.

"Will ye no step in and rest a minute out of the sun?" Mrs. Cowie said, in her most engag-

ing manner. "I declare it's like a day in June."

Mitchell thanked her, but gave signs of proceeding up the loaning. His heart was too palpably in his face, and his feelings at the moment were not in harmony with the commonplaces of farmyard talk. He required solitude, air, and largeness of prospect to encompass this wealth of pleasurable emotion. He was scarce out of earshot, so incomprehensible are the antics of lovers, when he commenced to whistle a psalm tune to unreasonably quick time. The leafy hollows of Endrick wood were vocal with the liquid notes of a wooing blackbird, but the grey lark of love in his own welkin was drowning all other sounds with palpitating melody. Further on he put his right hand on the top of a double-barred gate, and leaped over with the agility of joyous health. Before him, at the other side of the field, stood Coultarmains. The old steading, with the fleecy column of smoke above the kitchen chimney, and sheltered by the protecting arm of a bourtree hedge, seemed already to smile with the radiant presence of Bell.

CHAPTER XX

FATEFUL INTELLIGENCE

On the morning of the day on which Isaac Kilgour and Janet Izet entered their humble dwelling on the glebe land as man and wife, Richard Cowie, dressed in his Sunday clothes, drove through the village on his way to Airtoun. His object was to induce Mr. Sibbald and Dr. Congalton's trustees to revert to the arrangement which, a few months before, his wife had instructed him to decline. For days he had been irresolute about the journey. He had even confided his doubts to the smith, who agreed with him that the plan could not now be carried through in Mr. Congalton's absence; but Mrs. Cowie held that a majority of the "daers" was sufficient to settle the matter, and the stronger will at length prevailed. No one, however, was prepared for the news which Windy-yett brought