CHAPTER XXI

SETTLEMENTS

PETER MAIN, the teacher at Kingsford, was over at Coultarmains, spending the week end, and had to make an early start on Monday morning to be in the school at ten. Willie Mitchell having a commission from his sister took down his gun, put the powder flask in his pocket, and convoyed him as far as Moorburn Toll. There was a dewy freshness in the fields. A soft rain was falling with gracious and reviving gentleness. Over the near landscape there seemed to come a sough of bursting life — a sensible stirring of summer energy in the misty greenery of wood and lane. Mitchell on his return, was tempted off the highway, and got a couple of rabbits while rounding the upper shoulder of Ferleigh Glen. The rain had ceased

by this time, and the sullen canopy overhead parted revealing spaces of azure, from one of which the sun made sudden emergence, giving gem-like radiance to the raindrops on the grass. He mounted the stile and took the mossy foot-path through the wood. The sun was shining warmly now on the blossomed gorse; spruce and larch, with dripping tassels of tender green, spread their protecting fan-like branches above him, cooling the air with their graceful motion. The path was strewn with the ripe brown fruit of the fir. On either hand daffodil, primrose, and may-flower held up prophetic heads with morning freshness. An early starling with a lobe of the earlier worm swinging from its bill ran defiantly across his path, eagerly regarded from above by the expectant brood. But neither beast nor bird, flower nor tree, engaged his thoughts. He was thinking soberly just then, what a change it would make for him when Susie went down to the school-house. His step grew more elastic and a light came into his eyes, for his thoughts had darted forward under the quickening influence of hope. Bell loved him, and had spoken encouraging

words — but he must wait. His lengthening step, impelled by the energy of health, carried him swiftly down the mossy slope to the high arched bridge, under which the black water from the upper moorland was increasing its pace for a leap over the linn. Further down, this hissing and plashing flood filled the branchy chasm, then plunged into the rocky caldron beneath. Thus dreaming with bent head, and the gun barrel, upon which he had slung the rabbits, on his left shoulder, he reached a sudden turning of the path where the road dips deeper into the glen. Was there human magnetism in the air? His dreams gave place to the consciousness of a living presence. Behind the dripping branches of a bonny broom, golden with blossom, he caught sight of the swaying drapery of a fresh print gown, and ere he knew, he was face to face with eyes that widened with welcome, and unmistakably glad lips that smiled.

"Bell," he exclaimed, his own heart leaping to his eyes with answering joy. At the same moment she cried, "Willie," and both expressions meant the same thing — unspeakable, unexpected pleasure. Bell had no need to be

admonished to smiles now, for love itself brings the best expressions of beauty to the face.

"Whare have ye been so early?"

"The ploughman's ill," she replied. "I was doon at Glenside speirin' for him. Your a guid bit oot o' your ain gate."

"I was convoying Peter Main a piece, and then I took a turn round by Ferleigh to get a couple o' rabbits for Susie — she's aye at a loss for Monday's denner."

Bell was looking up at him with admiration, this tall, weather-bronzed giant with the happy hungering eyes. Something in her look encouraged him.

"Bell," he said with subdued rapture in his voice, "I never saw ye looking sae bonny." She struck him playfully on the arm with her small empty basket, lighter now for her visit to the ploughman's bothie, and turned aside her head to hide the increasing colour. "I wish —" her happy eyes were back to his face expectantly.

"What d'ye wish?" she inquired encouragingly.

"Oh, there's no use wishing," he replied; "I maun be patient, my lips are sealed."

"Willie," she said solemnly, then pausing—the situation was delicate. She plucked a spray of broom and commenced to undo the patient efforts of nature, by pulling the golden blossoms to pieces. Her face was rather serious, and the long brown eye-lashes seemed to be lying on her cheek from excess of modesty. But she drew heart of grace, his lips were sealed, but hers were not. "Willie," she repeated, as if the liquid syllables afforded her pleasure, "I told you it might not be so long — and — I would let you know when you might speak."

"Yes," he said eagerly, "weel? — weel?"

She was contemplating the bottom of her basket now.

"If ye are still o' the same mind — I — I — think ye might speak to father and mother now."

"And, Bell," he had taken both her hands in his, "are ye sure what their answer will be?"

"I think the answer will be — yes," she said.

. . . . . .

When Mitchell returned to the farm, his porridge was cold; and Bell's mother saw plainly that some happy circumstance had "taigled" her daughter by the way.

Mrs. Cowie had not been idle since the news of Mr. Congalton's fate reached Kilspindie. After a reasonable pause she had herself driven over to Airtoun to find out their rights from Mr. Sibbald. The lawyer admitted that her daughter's claims on the late Dr. Congalton's estate were absolute. He was preparing a statement, which would be laid before the trustees probably by Martinmas, or as soon after that date as possible. It was not to be thought of, however, that she would leave Bell's affairs entirely in the hands of men who for aught she knew, might in spite of the minister's assurance, help themselves freely to her daughter's money. Accordingly, like a woman of prudence, she engaged a solicitor and directed Mr. Sibbald to account to him. In the next place, she took Bell into her confidence and told that young lady frankly of her fortune. That it all legally belonged to herself, but that morally she and her husband had certain claims on it for her upbringing, her expensive education, etc., which claims, the heiress frankly admitted, "There will be enough efter-hin to mak ye a catch for the best gentleman i' the land, or for that matter, to

mak ye independent o' men a' thegether." Bell had been led to believe that her own natural attractions were sufficient to bring gentlemen of birth and education to her feet, but so far they had failed to come. Moreover, she had no wish to occupy the proud position of being altogether independent of a man. In her then frame of mind, she did not see that such suitors as might be tempted by this fresh inducement would be worth waiting for. In fact, Bell had indulged of late in so many day dreams in which the cheery and industrious farm kitchen had a place that the thought of a "fine leddy life" had now no charms for her. Besides, had not Willie Mitchell loved her for herself alone? His love was entirely disinterested, for he had sued for her hand before it was known such good fortune was in store for her. Mrs. Cowie's matrimonial ambitions had been frustrated; she had even humbled herself so far as to admit that Providence had acted wisely in so doing. Notwithstanding, the ruling passion in the woman's nature was hard to extinguish. Bell was eminently fitted to be the wife of a superior man. She was not so over-mastering now with

her opinion, but she advised Bell after her return from Airtoun, to take a week to think about it. Bell was dutiful, and obeyed, but the result at the end of this period was that her mind was more and more made up. She had given continuous consideration to the question night and day, but the time was absorbed in rosy dreamings of farm life, of well-stocked byres and golden stack-yards, how bow-windows could be struck out here, and improved out-houses according to recent reading, erected there. She would have a garden laid off ever so much nicer than they had at home, with a green-house where they could grow vines. Then in the lownest and prettiest nook of this garden enclosure there would be a summer-house with a porch up which creepers would grow to keep her in mind of the place where she first learned how strong and deep and unselfish the love of a man could be. The outcome of this serious consideration of the matter was known to her mother for some days before the accidental meeting with her lover in the glen.

The exigencies of the season made it meet that the young farmer should remain in the

fields till the day's work was done; but the metaphoric wings Bell had placed on his heels enabled him to "lowse" early. His reception at Windy-yett later was cordial, but business-like — cordial in so far as the consent to marry Bell was concerned.

"But there maun be settlements," said Mrs. Cowie. She had talked the matter over with her husband, who remonstrated feebly. If there was to be any business talked she must do that herself; he would not interfere in the matter, "buff nor styme."

"Settlements," the young man repeated, not quite comprehending, for being unmercenary he had not thought of the necessity of such legal terms, "Od, I hinna thocht aboot nae settlements, a' I cam for was to ask your leave to settle doon wi' Bell."

"Prime," laughed Windy-yett with unbecoming levity. Mrs. Cowie's look, however, checked his merriment.

"It's no laughing matter, but serious business. If ye kent mair ye would jest less. It's what is common in the best society, and Bell is fitted to marrow wi' the best. It is true we have agreed

to her marriage, but the siller maun be settled on hersel'."

"When I sought your daughter," Coultarmains spoke with frankness and spirit, "I kent nothing aboot this siller, maybe we'd have been happier withoot it, for I've seen the like; do what you think right aboot settlements for it maks nae differs to me. We have enough to keep us as it is, and a' I want is Bell." This delicate but all-important duty having been settled to her satisfaction, Mrs. Cowie was disposed to make concessions in matters of less weight. Mitchell wished the marriage to take place as soon as possible. His sister was leaving him at Lammas, and with the harvest coming on, it was desirable that he should not be left without a housekeeper. Mrs. Cowie was too practical not to admit the reasonableness of this wish.

"I vote that the twa weemen be knocket aff at the ae time," the farmer remarked with forgetful jocoseness. The light-heartedness was untimely. His wife reminded him severely that such language was ill-fitted for the occasion of

her daughter's marriage, being more descriptive of an "unction mairt."

The idea of Bell being married side by side with Susie Mitchell!

"Na, na," she said firmly, thinking of the mixing of relations, "we'll have no double marriages. Bell will be ready before Lammas gin ye like; but as for the marriages themsel's we maun be content wi' ane at a time."

CHAPTER XXII

NANCE M'WEE'S CONFIDANTS

NANCE M'WEE, the dairy woman, as she was called at Windy-yett (the name, however, covered but a fraction of her duties), had a way of saying things to herself that sometimes gave her relief. The orra man helped her as a rule at milking-time, and when there was butter required Mrs. Cowie occasionally put to her hand. But she had cheese to make, the washing to do, and such cooking, between times, as the family required. Nance had come to Windy-yett three years by-gone without a character, and when Mrs. Cowie was in a mood not to be too particular about other people's feelings she was none loath to cast it up to her. This misfortune arose out of a misunderstanding. She had been in a town place previously where a neighbour servant was kept. This girl was from the High-