

### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

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-



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

lands and had unusual ways. One day she fell in the scullery and twisted her back.

"I will lie down on my face," says this Highland girl, "and you will stand on my back and bring it right."

Nance, willing to be useful, did as she was told, but being a stout lass there ensued a succession of deep sonorous nasal exclamations that reminded the operator of what she had once heard from a gaelic pulpit on sacrament Sunday. Thereupon the mistress came in. Poor Nance's place on the neighbour girl's back was misunderstood. The mistress being sentimental called her a "horrid woman." She had previously intimated that as soon as the fires were off she intended to keep only one girl. This incident settled her choice — Nance must go — she would stand by the girl who had been trampled on.

Nance did not like the town. "The scenery wi' drunk men on a Setterday nicht," as she confided to the orra man "was just awfu'." Her desires were pastoral. She liked the soft eyes and balmy herbal breath of the cows, and never wearied of ministering to them. She was a good sort — Nance, and very willing to work;

#### NANCE M'WEE'S CONFIDANTS

but since the marriage was fixed, as she confided to the wash tub, "the day wasna hauf lang enough for what there was to do. Everything is dune in sic a hurry that naething is dune richt. The mistress is that unreasonable and gets into a pucker aboot naething. Just think o' her raging into my room at fower on Monday morning crying oot, 'Nance, Nance, get up ye lazy woman, the morn's Tuesday, the next day's Wednesday, the hauf o' the week gane and no a turn o' work dune yet.' There noo, I declare ye wud think I was amphibious and could be in twa places at ae time." Nance hurried away from the washing green at her mistress's call, and addressed her next remarks to the frying-pan.

"I'm no losing my memory nane, as she thinks, but I havena fower pair o' hauns. It's gey hard that she should be so snappy to me and so fair to thae dressmaking women ben the hoose; but they flatter her aboot her taste, her style and what-not, and tell her that a woman o' her position should have this, that, and the ither, till she's clean blawn up wi' vanity. They tell me it a' comes o' this lash o' siller she's gotten by the droonin' o' that gentleman she was so set on for Bell. But what's siller guid for if it



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

doesna bring rest and contentment to the mind?"

Nance hurried off to set the dinner in the parlour where the women folk were working among their silks, laces, and other bridal paraphernalia.

"Table naipkins!" she came back to the kitchen to say. "Did ever onybody hear the like o't? 'Nance,' says she, quite calm-like, 'ye've forgot the table-naipkins,' as if ever I had seen table-naipkins i' the hoose before. Then she gangs owre to the drawer and feches oot some fine towels, opens them at the fold, and cocks them doon, end up, beside each plate. No doot it was a reasonable enough thing to gie the women something to dicht their greezy fingers on so that they wudna fyle the things they were working wi'; but to blame me! It's a mercy I didna break oot and tell the truth. But Bell looked up and made a face at me — she is real decent that wye — as much as to say 'Nance, it's a trying time, but just you thole till this is by!'"

It was indeed a severely testing time for poor Nance during the six days the dressmaking went on, but she always found solace at evening milking time. The walk home through the

#### NANCE M'WEE'S CONFIDANTS

clover field with the cows and her communings with them afterwards was the one compensating experience of the day.

As Nance set off thoughtfully round the end of the byre to fetch her dumb friends in to the milking you might have fancied she was admiring the sunset or the soothing bird-melody in the neighbouring wood; but no, her heart was in her ears listening to the lowing welcome of the cattle. She knew the distinctive call of each, "That's 'Daisy' or 'Becky' or 'Buttercup,'" she would exclaim. Then as she reached the gate and put her shapely arm through the bars to undo the hasp, she would address the half-dozen moist noses about her shoulders, "Puir leddies, have ye been wearying for me?" Day by day she had something new to tell them, as the creamy froth rose higher in the luggie between her knees. When the orra man was there she spoke in general terms. "Beware o' siller, leddies." She was in a didactic mood, "Na, I needna name nae siccana thing to you, for ye wudna ken what to do wi' siller though ye had it, puir things, but siller whiles does mair hairm than guid, putting upsetting notions



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

in folk's heads, making them rideec'lous baith in their ain station and in the station they aim to fill. But, leddies, you're no to think that siller honestly come by is a bad thing. D'ye hear that, Danny lad? siller's guid if ye ken hoo to use it. Mony have heaps o't that are no rich ava, for they hinna the hert or winna tak' the trouble to do guid wi' 't. They only get their meat like the rest o' us, puir craturs, and a cauld bed i' the kirkyard when a's dune. But, leddies, gin I had siller I wud big ye a new byre, and buy a silver bell for the neck o' ilk ane o' ye. Ay, wud I; and ye wud sleep sweetly at night on a bed o' clean pea-strae. Then I wud send Danny here to the college, and mak' a minister o' him; and when he got a kirk I wud gar him tell me wha was in trouble and I wud gang and help them wi' my ain haun." The prospective minister having been summoned from the byre to run to the merchants, the confidence became more personal. "But heigh-ho! Daisy, my lass, I am but a poor servant like yersel' and barely as weel used. Here, even without a character, as the mistress never fails to remind me, though I'm sure ye dinna heed

#### NANCE M'WEE'S CONFIDANTS

aboot thae things so lang as ye have kind hauns aboot ye." Nance was summarily called from the milk-pail to find her mistress inveighing against slackness, and Bell in hot, but unsuccessful pursuit, of a brown hen whose restlessness had got the better of her maternal instincts. On returning she resumed her monologue, breathing rapidly, "Danny must have left that door open, though as usual, it was blamed on me. Ah, leddies, learning and pump-slippers put folk fair oot o' place in a farm-yaird. Boarding-schule edication! I wonder what guid a boarding-schule edication dis ye if ye canna catch a clockin' hen. I declare I'm clean breathless wi' that race. Na, Daisy, my dawtie, I wudna have tholed it so lang but for you and the ithers. Though if, gin this marriage is by, there's no improvement — weel, I winna break your kind herts by talking aboot what might happen at Marti'mas; but as my decent auld faither used to say, 'better a finger aff than aye waggin'.'"

Nance was in better spirits at a subsequent milking-time.

"This is the last day o' the dressmaking, and,



#### DOCTOR CONGALTON'S LEGACY

leddies, from what you've heard tell, I don't think onybody has reason to be sorry, for though the women were guid shewers they gied us a' a hantle o' work. But Becky, lass, ye'll no guess what I'm gaun to say — I got the present o' a new goon for the marriage. Yes, a new goon! Na, ye needna look roon for it's owre braw for the byre. But Sunday eight days is my day oot. If you're at the laich end o' the meadow-field keep your ee on the road as the folk come hame frae the kirk, but I assure ye you'll need to keep a sharp look oot or ense ye micht mistak' me for a fine leddy. Eh, it was an uncommon nice thing o' Mistress Bell to think o' the new dress. She took me aside and said her mother had come through an anxious time, but she wud calm doon and a' wud come richt when the marriage is bye. Eh, my leddies, gin that cam true it wud be guid news."

Two nights before the wedding the hearts of the bovine audience were fluttered by mysterious confidences; though the whisperings at times could not have gone much beyond Becky's well-elevated and back-turned ears. "Oh, leddies, I have something to tell ye, but ye maunna let on.

#### NANCE M'WEE'S CONFIDANTS

It's weel for you that Danny's no here, or ye wudna get a syllable o't frae me. But it's a secret, a dead secret, and if ye werena sic great friends I wud keep it to mysel'; still-an-on it's a comfort to have ye to speak till. I wis up at the junction station yestreen wi' a message frae the mistress, and I forgathered wi' somebody, but ye wudna ken his name if I tell'd ye. He's connected wi' the railway, and drives about in a great iron carriage that wud fricht ye to see, but he's unco quiet and kind himsel', and I've kent him sin' ever he cam' to the junction, and — and — noo when I think o't, I maunna tell ye the rest yet, just tak' time and try to mak' oot the leeze o' the thing among ye; and, leddies," — Nance raised her voice that all might hear, "if ye find oot the secret dinna vex yoursel's about me, for if it's ony comfort to ye, ye should ken he has got a bonny bit cottage — and a coo."

Whatever Nance's secret was, even the beef-witted listeners might have identified her friend as Jaik Short the engine-driver on the Junction Railway. Jaik was a widower with two pretty little mites of children, and as Nance had said he was possessed of "a bonny bit cottage and — a coo."