CHAPTER XXIII

BELL COWIE'S WEDDING

ISAAC KILGOUR had a three days' job at Kilbaan, but on the morning of the fourth day important news arrived, and Miss Hetty Hazlet gave him an early dinner, charging him to convey the intelligence with all haste to the Manse of Kilspindie. It was a lovely morning in the last week of July — the day on which Bell Cowie was to marry Willie Mitchell — and everybody thought the sunshine was a good omen. Isaac started with ordinary activity about noon, but, for reasons of his own, did not wish to reach Kilspindie in a hurry, so when he got round the elbow of the road he went leisurely. It was four o'clock when he reached the point where the Garnet comes in view, four miles from the manse. He might have been at Kilspindie by that time with

moderate walking. Isaac left the dusty high road, took a sheltered loaning leading to the river, and settled himself on a thymey seat at the tail of a pool where the sun was making liquid honeycomb above the gravel. On the opposite side a clump of marsh-mallows, with great yellow cups, leant down to the edge of the still water, and doubled its beauty. Flies flickered in swarms up stream, their shadows darting here and there on the amber bottom, deceiving the fish with unsubstantial fare. The gardener was curtained from the heat by kindly trees. A balmy wind coming down the valley rippled softly across a field of wheat, and toyed with the blue-green tassels of the firs on the opposite bank. Isaac appeared to be counting the moving dots of fleece on the green hill-side beyond the clover meadow. But who can tell the ferlies that may pass through the mind of a taciturn man, or gauge the mystery of his thought when he never lets on? He had mused and rested an unreasonable time for a person charged with urgent news, and was apparently half-dozing when the smooth water beyond the willows was violently split, and a great bull-trout leaped in the air, shook a

stubborn head, and fell back with a sonsy splash. The spectator was no fisher, nor did he know the ways of fish; but on turning his head to watch the rings of the pool widening towards the shore, he saw something, like a fine wire, slicing the water in different directions. Following this upwards, for the sun was gleaming on it, he observed above the intervening willows the graceful bend of a strong rod, whose rings and joints glittered in the light. He was interested mildly, but did not alter his posture. Once again the captive fish sought unavailing freedom in the air, but the unseen fisher handled him with absorbing skill, and it was not until he had laid the fish on the grassy bank, and contemplated the prize from different standpoints, that he observed Isaac.

"That was a game fight," he cried over the water, proudly. "He's a beauty — six pounds at the very least." Then he lifted the captive by the gills displaying his solid shoulders and speckled sides, as if challenging the spectator or the light of day to take an ounce off the liberally estimated weight. Indifferent people take things for granted to save concern. Isaac

nodded, and turned away, but next moment he was conscious that this well-dressed sportsman was ploughing across the swiftly-running stream with a goodly-sized flask in his hand. Isaac watched the young man pensively as he splashed towards the bank on which he sat. He might be admiring the generous social impulse of the youth, but more probably he was wondering who had made the money — his grandfather or his father — which had paid for that flashing diamond ring, and that faultless outfit he wore.

"By Jove!" (he spoke with an English accent, nobody swore by those foreign gods in these northern by-ways) "that is a fine fish! Don't you think so? At any rate you must drink my health." He stood in the water and poured a libation that would have cheered the heart and been welcome to most men in the gardener's station, but Isaac remained seated and shook his head.

"No!" exclaimed the young man in honest surprise. "It's the best old brandy; no questionable stuff; has been in our cellar for over twenty years."

Perhaps Isaac concluded it was his grandfather who had amassed the money; they generally made ducks and drakes of it in the third generation, but he said simply —

"I canna stand it, sir. I wish ye weel."

"Ah," said the fisherman sympathetically, "head easily touched?"

"No," replied Isaac; "it's the legs, and I'm fower miles frae hame."

The youth laughed good-naturedly, drank the old man's health, emptying the cup. "It comes of drinking that coarse national liquor of yours. I knew a man who was addicted to it; but nature in him was too gentlemanly, preferring to break down rather than be brutalized. You Scotch people know nothing of the delights of respectable inebriation. Champagne, followed by a glass or two of green Chartreuse, is the right thing, makes you comfortably magnanimous; if you are impelled to move, your motions are dignified and graceful, and there is no feeling of fiery discomfort, no sudden angular impulses of propulsion, such as one sees to be the result of your masterful Scotch whisky. By-by." The bibulous philosopher waved his hand, recrossed

the stream, and stalked gaily down the mossy bank on the opposite side. Isaac watched the pliant top of his finely-balanced rod twinkling above the willow branches after the fisher himself had disappeared.

"Daidlin ninycompook!" was all the gardener said. It was a home-made phrase, but served his purpose. He looked at his watch; whatever the record of time might be, it seemed that as yet there was no immediate necessity to move on.

All the afternoon there had been uncommon stir on the roads converging on Kilspindie. You could stand in front of the candle-maker's workshop and see the farmers with their wives and daughters (the sons found their way on foot), driving from south and west towards the scene of the afternoon festivities at Windy-yett. Those from the south passed over the bridge, while others, journeying from the westward, could be seen over the low hedge as they drove along the high road above Nancy Beedam's cottage. Harlaw, Sheersmill, Damhead, and William Purdon, the laird of Drumlaw, had all passed with their belongings, and waved their whips in

jovial salutation to the group of male gossips at Brig-end. William Lonen closed his school an hour earlier than usual, and after posting a sonnet to the editor of the county newspaper, he and his wife got a "cast foret" in Harlaw's gig. Harlaw was a well-to-do bachelor, with a bien farm, and that day many a glance had been bestowed on the looking-glass, and many a delicate touch given to the feminine toilet with him in view.

Everybody said the smith should have been invited, though some who made that remark considered they had an equal claim, and meant simply to provoke an expression of his disappointment. It was a sore point undoubtedly, but to the outer world he passed it off with grace. "There is sic a fell heap o' relations," he said modestly. At home, however, there was a different story.

Windy-yett, a month before, was over at the village consulting the smith about a "coo-beast" that was threatened with pneumonia. Without due consideration of his limited rule at home, he had told Mrs. Pringle that she maun practise her steps for a skip at Bell's wedding. Where-

upon there was a great stir in the smith's household. His wife made several discoveries. Indeed she was appalled as she turned out the wardrobe and exposed her things to the light of day. She had a cloak that was fashionable when Jenny was at the breast, but Jenny was now five years old. Her silk gown had been turned, and looked "sair tashed." She would not say a word about her bonnet. It was bought after the roup at Smiddy-yard, but she could get sprays, and a yard or two of cheap ribbon, and put them on with her own hands. That surely was economy sufficient to satisfy any man. But what man is there gifted enough to be reasonable in matters of female attire? When the smith inconsiderately asked if "the gown wudna turn again," she laid the things meekly past, and said it was "clean nonsense in her state o' health to think o' gaun to onybody's wedding." The smith said nothing more at the time, but this was the point at which he always gave in. He made up his mind that a new gown she should have — at least. Meantime his wife went about her duties meeker than ever, and kept on expressing the hope that they wouldn't waste an invitation on her. Never-

theless, for days before they were issued, she contrived to be about the Brig-end every morning as the postman passed.

"It's a cruel shame!" her husband exclaimed two days after Mrs. Lonen had shown her invitation to Mrs. Pringle. "They're nane slow to seek us when they want a favour. Ritchie Cowie should have held his tongue aboot dancing at Bell's wedding."

"It wasna his faut," his wife replied gently. "Besides, it'll save expense."

"Save expense!" he reiterated with reckless benevolence. "Wha cares for expense? — it's the affront! I was gaun to gie ye a silk gown, woman, but ye's get a new jacket too, and appear at the kirkin as fine as the best o' them."

"You're aye that kind," his wife replied with tears in her voice; "but ye manna think o' the jacket, Peter, we never could afford it. Besides ——" She hesitated.

"Besides what?" the imperious husband demanded.

"I'd be braw an' proud o' a silk goon," she said, looking up in the grim, kindly face; "but

dinna think o' onything mair, for a new jacket wud belittle the bonnet."

"Dagont!" he cried, striking his great black fist on the dresser. "I am so angert at their treatment o' us that ye'll get a new bonnet as weel, to spite them!"

"Oh, Peter, hoo could I ever gie in to that? — But you're sic a maisterfu' man."

Thus the affront was alleviated. It was agreed, however, on the suggestion of Mrs. Pringle, that they should defer making these purchases till after the wedding lest any one should suppose they had been provided for that occasion.

In the grey of the evening Kirdy's cairn, behind the change-house, became the absorbing point of interest. Here a tar-barrel and various inflammable faggots had been built into a compact pile, to which the younger and gayer spirits were adding the finishing touches. The more amorous and seriously-disposed swains took their places under the great chestnut-tree at Elsie Craig's well, where, in company with fresh and winsome maidens, chaperoned by "water-stoups," they could improve their time while waiting for the bonfire.

Isaac Kilgour turned into the loaning leading to his own house as the candle-maker gave the word of command to fire the cairn. This distinction naturally belonged to a man who had sacrificed a score of his rankest "dips" to speed on and intensify the conflagration. Zedie Lawson crept past his brother-in-law under the obscuring shadow of the hedge as Isaac went down the brae. He wondered if the mean whistling body had been at the bothie after the spiteful things he and his wife had been saying about their marriage. Janet was standing at the door, looking up between the hedges.

"Has he been in?" Isaac inquired.

"Na; the craitur wud be sent roon to spy ferlies. He's aye snokin' aboot. Come awa'; I have your supper ready."

Isaac went in and deposited the red pocket-handkerchief containing his travelling requisites on the small settle.

"Couthie Janet — irr ye there? — Come ben Isaac," cried the bird above the girnall, then its muffled voice ran into a cynical cackle of a laugh. Isaac turned, and was making for the door when his wife intercepted him.

"You're surely no gaun oot again wi' yer supper on the table?"

"I maun see the minister," he said doggedly. "I'll supper nane till I've seen the minister."

"But the minister's at the marriage."

"The marriage will be bye an hour syne; he doesna bide for the dancing."

"Then ye'll have ill-news, I'se warrant. Is onybody ailing?"

"Bide awee and ye'll hear; the news is no that ill."

It had occurred to her that she had seen "just sic anither dour man in Houston parish," when he pushed past her and walked leisurely up the loaning towards the manse.

From inquiry at the door he learned that the minister had not yet returned, but was expected immediately. The fire was now blazing nobly on Kirdy's cairn. The inn, the school-house, Broomfields, and the cottages between were smitten with the palpitating glow. The smithy and the candle-maker's workshop lay in comparative gloom, save when the flame lengthened fitfully, and caught sight of the red-tiled roof. The gleam from the cairn bridged the river

from hedge to hedge, lit up the loom shops on the right, and travelled on towards Millend, revealing the votaries at Elsie Craig's well, adding its cheerfulness even to the kitchen-gardens where the privet hedges were not too high. The merchant's modest one-storey building had no share in the rejoicing warmth owing to the masterful prominence of Tinny Walker's gable. It was not long before Isaac's expectant ear caught the crackle of wheels above Broomfields. Then he heard a few voices in the neighbourhood of the inn initiating a cheer which gradually spread until it was taken up by the larger concourse of villagers surrounding the cairn. This cheer was in honour of the minister, who, before the echoes were done with it, had reached the manse gate.

"Are they marrit, sir?" said the gardener, coming out of the shadow as Mr. Maconkey stepped down.

"Ay, Isaac; I've fastened a hasp the day they'll no unbuckle in a hurry."

"There's no doubt aboot it in a legal sense?" persisted Isaac.

"The case is beyond doubt both legally and

morally," laughed the minister. "But, Isaac, you are excited. Is there anything the matter?"

"Na," he replied, "there is nothing the matter wi' me; but I have news for ye. Noo that the marriage is bye, ye may preach it from the pulpit or the hoosetaps gin ye like, for it's richt gled gospel news — Mr. Congalton's saved!"