

Choice Literature.

HEATHER BELLES.

A MODERN HIGHLAND STORY.

CHAPTER XIV.—AT MENTONE—AN EXCURSION.

On the following day (Monday), almost at the very hour when Mr. Craig and his family circle were attending the thanksgiving services in the Free Church of Glenartan, Archibald Graham and Roderick McKay met with a surprise—pleasant and yet unpleasant—at Mentone. They had strolled along the promenade skirting the waters of the West Bay in order to hear the band play in the public gardens. The sun was bright and warm, and there was not a ripple on the blue Mediterranean. For a time they watched with curiosity and interest the operations of some brown-legged fishermen on the beach. Their method of ensnaring the bright spoils of the deep was new to both young men. A boat shot out from the water's edge, paying out a net, of which one end had been left fixed on shore. The course described was a great loop of which the wider sweep was some hundred yards from the beach; and then the other end of the net was brought to land at the very spot from which a start had been made. The boat was then hauled up on the gravel, its part in the novel operations over for the present. By and by five or six strong men, pulling on the extremities of the net, slowly dragged its entire circuit to shore. The catch consisted of multitudes of little fish of the sardine species, which lay in a gleaming mass upon the stones. There they leapt and sparkled in the sunlight, many of them springing clear out of the meshes into delusive freedom. No sooner had the spoils been poured into suitable receptacles than the men prepared to repeat the same course of procedure for another catch. Pursuing their way, Graham and McKay reached the public gardens, to find, notwithstanding the lateness of the season, a considerable concourse of people. All ranks and classes and nationalities were represented there; Mentonese workmen and townspeople and children; nurses with groups of little ones under their charge; pale invalids in their chairs who had come to bask in the sun; gay visitors from the great hotels; French and Italians, Germans and Russians, Britons and Americans. For a time the two young men sat on one of the seats to listen to the music and study the varied characters and costumes of the crowd. All of a sudden they were hailed by a friendly and cheery voice which cried:

"Hullo, what in the world are you two doing here? When did you come?"

The speaker was Lieutenant Ashby, and before they could reply to his inquiries he had shaken each of them heartily by the hand. Graham, as will be understood, was considerably embarrassed by the situation, for he dreaded exposure as to the reason for his presence on the Riviera; but Roderick McKay threw himself into the breach.

"How do you do? We are glad to see you. We might in Scotch fashion retort your question upon yourself; but I shall answer first. Both Graham and I have been travelling a bit, and have come to see Mentone."

For the time being the answer was sufficient, for the Lieutenant went on to say, in a sort of apologetic, bashful tone:

"The Misses Wyatt are here and their uncle. It was the young ladies who noticed you first. 'Cute of them, wasn't it? You must come and see them. There they are, a little beyond the band stand."

So saying, he led his newly-found friends through the labyrinth of loungers to the place where the young ladies and their uncle were sitting.

"How do you do, gentlemen?" said Mr. Wyatt, "I think somehow we have met before. This is an unexpected pleasure. So many people have gone within the last few weeks that we scarcely expected to meet any one we knew."

The ladies cordially greeted the two young men, who in a short time answered as fully as was safe and possible all their kind inquiries about friends at home, from Mr. and Miss Craig down to Dannie, the minister's man. Miss Wyatt expressed their deep concern at the sad intelligence of Mr. Graham's illness. It was then the turn of Graham and McKay courteously to ask how long the banker and his nieces had been in Mentone. In reply they were told that Miss Nesta had been far from well, and had been ordered to the south of France. She was now convalescent, however, and intended leaving in about a week for some watering place in Germany—probably Wiesbaden. Leaving the public gardens, the whole party turned up the valley of the Carrei, and walked as far as the mills. On the way they were amused to observe the proceedings of the washerwomen, who knelt in shallow baskets close by the scanty waters of the stream. Every article of dress, whether white or coloured, whether for use by night or by day, was vigorously squeezed and rubbed and pounded on the flat stones, till the wonder was whether a single button could possibly remain unbroken, and how long the various threads and fibres were likely to wear and hold together. The only advantage the ladies could see in such a system was that the dirty water ran by, so that there was a fresh supply for every dip of the clothes; and they admitted that nowhere had they ever known linen made so faultlessly white as on the Riviera. On returning from their walk they parted at the bridge near the Promenade du Midi, having arranged to meet again next day, and, indeed, every day as long as they remained in Mentone.

That evening Roderick McKay wrote to Mr. Craig, and, as the letter conveyed important intelligence in brief and appropriate language, we transfer it entire to our pages.

"PENSION BEAUJEU, MENTONE.
June 11, 1887.

"DEAR SIR,—I received your last letter on Saturday, and was glad to hear 'good news from home.' I was specially delighted to know of the young communicants, to

whom I trust that yesterday proved a day of rich spiritual blessing. The various little business matters referred to in your communication shall have my scrupulous attention. I have little time to write this evening, but I know you will hail with gladness what I have to tell.

"During the last few weeks a great change for the better has come over Archie Graham. I do not now refer to his bodily health—that has been improving steadily, as you know—but to his whole thoughts and feelings about divine things. I thought of writing you on this subject more than a fortnight ago, but feared to do so lest the apparent change should prove but temporary. Now, I firmly believe the salutary impressions made upon him to be real and great, and I hesitate no longer to speak of them. He realizes keenly his needy and helpless condition as a sinner before God, and is earnestly seeking the way of peace. I dare not say he has yet passed 'from death unto life'; so far as I can judge he has not; but he is deeply in earnest and most diligent in the use of means. For some time after we first met at Monte Carlo I studiously refrained from in any way forcing the subject of personal religion upon him. Knowing his temperament and ways of thinking, I thought it was better not to do so. Gradually, however, the subject slipped into our conversation; and a few days ago he told me to speak freely and unreservedly of divine things whenever I pleased. Perhaps I should add that one thing more than any other seems to have been used of God to bring about this change, but what that is I cannot inform you now; I may tell you some day by your own fireside. It has nothing to do with me. I think it better to say no more at present; I know we shall have both your sympathy and your prayers.

"I am also happy to say that Archie has expressed his readiness to return home in a short time, if the way is in any measure clear. This readiness has grown upon him *pari passu* with the better feelings I have spoken of above. If you can prepare those at home for our return, and make things as smooth as possible for Archie, I think we might leave here in a fortnight or so and travel by easy stages. Both of us would like to see something more of Paris as we go through it; but I trust that, for the present, a day may suffice for that purpose.

"We were surprised to-day to meet Mr. Wyatt, the Misses Wyatt and Lieutenant Ashby at the public gardens. Miss Nesta has been seriously ill, but is much better, and they leave in a week. We have planned some excursions together. Mentone has so many of those beautiful valleys, one can escape out of town from any part in five minutes; and then there are delightful drives to east and west along the sunny coast.

"I shall await your reply to this letter with anxiety, as its nature will decide the question of our returning home, or remaining abroad for some time longer.

"Give our united kind regards to all your home circle at Althreac—I am, yours most respectfully,

"J. M. Craig, Esq., W.S. Roderick McKay."

This letter the student posted the same evening, hoping to have a reply in ten or twelve days. The nearer came the possibility of an early return, the keener became his heart-hunger for home again.

After several minor excursions on successive days, to Montio to Capo Martina, to the Italian frontier, and Dr. Bennett's beautiful garden, Mr. Wyatt proposed that the whole party should make the ascent to the village of Gorbio and return home by Roccafranca. The doctor had said that even Miss Nesta, if she rode all the way, might join the excursion; and this consent, Mr. Wyatt held, fully covered the case of Archibald Graham as well. Gorbio is an ancient and picturesque town, some five miles from Mentone, perched on the crest of a ridge between the stream of the same name and one of its tributaries. It stands fully 1,400 feet above the sea-level, and is girded on three sides by lofty mountain-tops. Friday was chosen for the day's excursion; and the Ponte di Carrei was their appointed rendezvous. It was left to Mr. Wyatt, who spoke French fluently, to arrange for three or four donkeys, which the ladies and some of the gentlemen in turn might mount, as the pathways were known to be steep and trying, and the route proposed was at least ten miles long.

On Friday at ten o'clock the whole company, consisting of Mr. and the Misses Wyatt, Lieutenant Ashby and Messrs. Graham and McKay assembled at the trysting-place. There also four donkeys, with a boy and a girl to attend them, were ready, if not eager, for the journey. The boy's name was Andre; that of the girl Lisette. The latter told Miss Wyatt on the way that she belonged to Gorbio, that she came down daily to accompany ladies and gentlemen with the donkeys, and that after they had made the round proposed on this occasion, she would return from Mentone in the evening to her mountain home. The two donkeys ridden by the ladies rejoiced in the names of Helene and Cadichon respectively; and were, on the whole, willing and capable animals. Leaving behind them the pretty villas which lay on the outskirts of the town, their route lay at first up the lower reaches of the Val di Gorbio, the road running parallel to the stream. On either side of the highway they rode at varied intervals through clumps of sombre gray-green olives, which seemed to bear in patience and sadness the burden of life, and passed ruddy-soiled terraces, where the vine-stalks were rapidly shooting upward, and the elegant leaves wore a fresh and brilliant hue. Ever and anon came shady groves of orange and lemon, beneath which the scanty grass was richly interspersed with the sweetest of wild flowers. The sunshine, undimmed by cloud or haze, fell in sparkling scintillations on the pools of the river, and threw over hills and trees and fields its beautiful and bewitching brilliance. Ere long the highway came to an end, and was succeeded by a bridle-path, which led them to the foot of the arduous ascent in front. At length, crossing a torrent bed, now almost dry, they toiled up the sharp edge of a ridge whose sides sunk precipitously down to the streams on either hand. At times the pathway was moderately level, but in great part it consisted of broad rough steps, paved (if the word is not too suggestive of regularity) with shapeless stones large and small, over which it was impossible in any orderly manner to pick one's steps.

Those on foot generally found the example of the donkeys a good one, and for their own comfort went zigzag from side to side of the path wherever the way seemed smoothest. No wonder the descent was toilsome. There were countless gaps and holes where stones should have been, but were not; while those which had been loosened, and many more from the banks above, lay scattered all over the track. The path, winding about, now on this side, now on that, now on the very crest of the ridge, mounted higher and higher, every broad step representing nearly a foot of elevation, to the height of 1,000 feet above the sea. From that *cogin de vantage* a beautiful view was obtained of Ste. Agnese, a village poised on the sharp peak of a serrated mountain-spur, its ancient Saracen Castle, a picturesque ruin, blazing in the sunlight. It was when gazing on this attractive object that a little mishap befell one of the party. At this time the Lieutenant, mounted on one of the donkeys, was leading the van, closely followed by Miss Wyatt on the fiery steed Cadichon. When the cavalcade halted, and the company, looking across the intervening valley to Ste. Agnese, were discussing the beauty of the scene, their thoughts and eyes were suddenly diverted by shouts and shrieks from the front. What had happened? Simply this: Cadichon, on which rode Miss Wyatt, was either a very reflective, or a very humorous, or a very vindictive animal. Whether it was that he pictured to himself the provender awaiting him in Gorbio, and was impatient at the delay; or whether he thought what he was about to do a remarkably good joke; or whether he was moved by revenge for some past offence, perhaps of a similar kind, it is probably beyond the power of man's poor mind to determine; but what he did was very simple and effective. He sharply bit the tail of the Lieutenant's donkey, which stood right in front of him! Instantaneous action followed. The victim promptly resented what was both an injury and an insult by flinging her heels high in the air behind her, quite regardless of consequences, and then started off at a rapid trot along the path. The brave Lieutenant was first thrown from his seat, then dragged along with one foot in the stirrup and one hand convulsively clutching the wounded tail, and at length deposited all in a heap in a bush of white heath which grew on the slope below the edge of the roadway. Lisette, the girl driver, was after the flying donkey in a moment, shouting, "Vilaine bete! vilaine bete!" (wicked beast! wicked beast!) at the top of her voice. By the time she had caught the fugitive and brought her back a captive, the officer was on his feet and on the path, receiving the congratulations, especially of the ladies, on his wonderful escape. Archie Graham was wicked enough to ask which he liked best—a plunge into the deep waters of a cave, or a dive into a great bush of heath? but this levity and lack of feeling were not encouraged by the company generally.

In due time the party, all alike fatigued with the journey (for the sun was baking hot), arrived at Gorbio. Dismissing the drivers and donkeys to obtain needed food and rest, they wended their way through the narrow streets, the admired of all admirers, and objects of special interest to a knot of idle urchins who followed them wherever they went. They visited the village school, where Mr. Wyatt said a few kind words to the dominie and his thirty pupils. They entered also the primitive old church, dedicated "Soli Deo," and were for a time prisoners within its walls, for the mischievous boys had run a stick through the outside handles of the main door to prevent their exit. In due time they quitted the village and ascended the rising ground behind.

Archibald Graham and Roderick McKay, for various prudential reasons, had been on the knoll long before them, and, by their active hands, a simple collation had already been tastefully spread on the grass. Just before the Wyatts and the Lieutenant arrived Roderick caught his companion in the brownest of brown studies. Graham was sitting on the sward with an elbow on each knee, and a closed fist at either side of his brow, gazing northward where the mountain peaks and ridges closed in the view. It was not just the time for a serious interview, so Roderick adopted another vein.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Graham. Judging from appearances, they would seem to be very valuable just at present."

"Indeed!" said Archie. "Am I very intellectual-looking? If so, I must not move a muscle till the young ladies come, and perhaps I may be able to cut out the Lieutenant yet, notwithstanding the way we have left him the field for the last half hour. As to my thoughts, my dear fellow, you would not give a cent, much less a decent British penny, for them, though I should tell you."

"Come now, rejoined Roderick, "your eyes were to the north, and your thoughts were in Glenartan. I think if I tried hard I could localize them still more exactly."

"You're a clever young man to-day," was all the response, cold and stiff, but neither cold enough nor stiff enough to check McKay in his course of banter.

"Yes, you are gazing now on the porch of Althreac, and, as for the foreground beneath your eyes, if you knew a little more French and could sing in that tongue as well as you do in your own, I should hear you chanting,

"Baisse toi, montagne,
Leve toi, vallou,
Vous m'envochez de voir
Ma Jeanneton."

"Which, being interpreted, is?" said Archie, turning his head with an inquiring look.

"Well," replied Roderick, "I can't give you a metrical translation all at once, or I would; so you must be content with prose:

"Sink thyself, mountain,
Raise thyself, valley,
Ye hinder me from beholding
My Jeanneton."

(To be continued.)