

Choice Literature.

HEATHER BELLES.

A MODERN HIGHLAND STORY.

CHAPTER X.—A JOURNEY AND A DISCOVERY.

Soon after four that morning the student was on his way. After a meagre breakfast and a farewell from the minister and his sister, the black horse and high-wheeled dog-cart wended their way up the glen. Gray sheets of heavy cloud bore their masses of vapour over the glen, but were impeded and gathered in denser folds over the mountain-tops. For a time little was said by either of the travellers. Roderick was wrapped in thought, for, despite the weighty nature of his mission, there was a delightful excitement in the prospect of the new experience before him. So chequered is this life that oftentimes its darkest shades are combined with such experience of the novel and the strange, as almost to obliterate the sharpness of sorrow, or the keen strain which entangled circumstances may produce. The student was anxious and burdened; yet the lively anticipation of new sights and circumstances made him feel light indeed both the solitude and the load. The silence which lasted for a time was not at all to the mind of the wily old Highlander who sat beside him. Dannie was as curious and as garrulous as any elderly representatives of the other sex could possibly be. There was no small mystery about their present journey, which he was resolved if possible to fathom; and he was specially anxious to find out, by the slyest and canniest arts of innocent talk which he could command, if McKay's departure had any connection with Archibald Graham. A few far-off shots, to which Roderick replied in curt and general terms, prepared the latter for the attack; and then the pawky-veiled bombardment began. It may be needful to explain that the conversation which follows is not translated from the Gaelic. The medium used was the English language, because Dannie prided himself on his acquaintance with that tongue. He had got the length of reading the Bible in its Saxon dress, although reflections might be cast on the correctness of his apprehension. To his mind there were no doubts and no difficulties; for, whenever he came to a word of several syllables whose face he did not recognize, he without hesitation pronounced it "Leviathan," and boldly passed on. He was, however, really anxious to improve his knowledge of English; and on the present occasion could not miss the opportunity of conversing in that tongue with a "college-bred" man.

"Ye'll no be gaun far, are ye, Maister Roderick?"

"As far as Edinburgh, at least," said the student, cautiously.

"Edinburrie, are ye? Eh, it's awfu' ta wey that fouks traivils noo-a-days. I wudna mind a bit jaunt at a time to a saycrament or a funeral, but there's thae tourer bodies, they gang o'er a' the country selimmin' hills like as they were gamekeepers or gaygers. They're swarming like rabbits noo-a-days."

"Maybe, Dannie, but people must travel sometimes for other good reasons, as well as sacraments and funerals."

"Ye're no gaun farrer nor Edinburrie, surely? I thoct that was as far as any daycent body wud care ta gang onywey."

"I am going to Edinburgh, at any rate, though it's not quite the end of the world," was all Roderick's reply.

"Eh, laddie! ye're no gaun forrin, are ye?" said Dannie in a tone of anxiety and commiseration. "It's an awfu' place that forrin."

"What's awfu' about it?"

"Is that no whar they send ta bad fouk tae female servitude?"

"Female servitude! What do you think that is?" said the student with a broad smile.

"Deed, I dinna ken very weel—an' it be na to mak' them tak' wives whether they will or no."

"Well, Dannie, I don't mean to let them force me that way. It's best to choose a wife for one's own self, isn't it?"

"They tell me that's what even ta Queen's sons and dochters canna dee. They maun tak' some ane that ta big folks wale out for them. Man, it'll jist be like suppin' cauld parritch. But there's Mr. Greeme's dochters noo—ta like o' Miss Florince whatever. She wud be muckle the better o' some ane to look efter her like—if Airchie doesna come hame a'richt. Ye wudna like to see ta likes o' her without a pectector, wud ye? They're tellin' me ye was awfu' guid to her yersel when ye wis a kind o' haffin'."

"Oh, there's no fear of them; I hope Mr. Graham himself will get better, and then Mr. Craig is a sort of guardian to them at present."

"A sort o' garden. Gi'e wae wi' ye. That's no what a wumman needs, it's a husband. They're like the lempits, they need somesing to haud on by."

"You have never taken any poor lempits under your own wing, Dannie; you should have shown me an example long ago."

"Ah, well, ye see, I was aye kin' o' saft ways wi' ta wimmen. I aye got kin' o' feared when it cam' near ta bit. Ye see it's a kin' o' solum sing to get mayrit."

"Yes, but haven't you heard what an old maid said to her minister about that?"

"A'll no ken."

"She said it was far solemner not to be."

Dannie looked in his companion's face with a kind of bewildered stare. The war was like to be carried into his own camp, and that was not in harmony with his tactics. Just then, however, he discovered that "Donald" required a reminder with the whip, so he applied it vigorously, though there was not one whit more need than at any time during the previous half hour. There was a short pause, but they were now within a few miles of the station, and Dannie resolved to make another more direct attempt to find out where the student was going. He had got absolutely nothing to talk about when he got home again; and to return

no wiser than he came would be neither satisfactory to his craving for knowledge nor creditable to his skill as a news collector. He began a fresh skirmish.

"It's an awfu' peety about Mr. Greeme. They tell me it's ta parallax he hes. It's no canny thae new troubles ta docters is bringin' in. It sud be pitten' a stop tae. A'm shure it wud help to gar him speak gin they could tell him about Archie. Ye'll no be seein' him in yer travils, wull ye?"

"That depends on where I may go," was the wary reply. "The world is wide, and one doesn't meet with people from Glenartan everywhere or every day."

"Maybe no. Bit ye micht kin' o' pit yoursel' in his way if ye kent whar he micht be. Ye micht ask efter 'im in Edinburrie. Surely onybody could tell ye gin they had seen 'im. There maun be clever fouk in Edinburrie, for it's there they mak' ta ministers. They could surely pit ye on ta wey o' findin' him. Hes he no sent ye ony word himsel'?"

This was a closer parallel than the speaker dreamt of; and the student felt he must take care how he met the assault. To delay an answer would be to reveal how nearly the bow at a venture had grazed the joint in his harness of reserve.

"Letters are dangerous things, Dannie, for one in his position. Don't you see they might reveal where he was, and I don't think he would care to have that known for the present? You seem to think that he would like to see—me for instance, if we should meet."

"What for wud he no? Ye're no a gayger or a polisman."

"No, but he knows quite well some of us have never thought much either of the company he kept, or the jobs they led him into."

"Man, ye're getting awfu' proud, laddie. Ye'll no ken yer ain father gin a while, no to speak o' ta likes o' me. As for ta makin' o' ta drap whusky, I dinna think it's ony waur nor yin o' thae daft picnics, as ye ca' them, dookin' folks in the water, an' gallantin' wi' the lassies ower the rocks."

Roderick's purpose was served so far; Dannie had lost the scent, and there was little time to recover it again. They had already crossed the water-shed, and their destination lay in full view little more than a mile off in the low bed of the valley. Dannie had still one cartridge which he meant to use.

"Ye'll no be long awa', will ye, Maister Roderick?"

"That I can't say. I may be some time."

"Ye see, if ye wisna gaun very far, an' were to be back maybe next week like, or the next whatever, a' could come for ye, an' ye wud say when."

"Many thanks, Dannie. I can't arrange that at present. I shall write Mr. Morrison."

"Maybe we micht need to get Maister Greem's bagonette, ye ken—that is if Master Archie was to be wi' ye. He'll hae bocht some kin' o' thing for haddin' 'is things, nae doot, an' we wud need to hae room for't."

"Very well, if that's the case, I will take care to write and say. There's somesing for yourself, Dannie, and if I can remember, I'll bring you some first-rate snuff from Edinburgh."

The gift and the promise were Dannie's only consolation in view of disappointment in another direction. As he returned home after parting with the student at the station, his speculations and conjectures were many, but they had at least no basis in anything he had elicited from Roderick McKay.

After the departure of McKay, Mr. Morrison and his sister had a second breakfast together about their usual hour, followed by family worship. Miss Morrison then went hither and thither about her household duties, and the girls were busy in the bedrooms upstairs. The minister had betaken himself to the study. Aggie, the housemaid, hearing Miss Morrison in the lobby below, came to the landing at the top of the stair, and asked if her mistress could speak for a moment. Miss Morrison wondered somewhat that the girl had not come down to say what she wanted, but the abrupt, half-frightened way in which Aggie had spoken seemed to indicate something unusual, and the lady at once went upstairs in response to the summons. Aggie had by this time retreated into the best bedroom which Roderick McKay had occupied over night, and thither she beckoned her mistress to follow her, and at once revealed the cause of her anxiety—no, not at once, for she stood for a few moments with a flush on her comely cheek, and a folded paper in her hand. Then she spoke.

"If you please, ma'am, this is a letter I found. I think Mr. McKay must have left it in the hurry this morning."

"Where did you get it?" said Miss Morrison, noticing some agitation in the girl's manner.

"I lifted the Bible on the toilet table there to dust it, and the letter fell out."

"Well, give it to me. We shall keep it for him. I hope you have not read it," said Miss Morrison, looking her keenly in the face.

"Please, ma'am, I couldn't help it. You see it was open, and there was no envelope, and it was a lady's hand-write, and I couldn't help seeing a little. I'm very sorry, I'm sure, ma'am." So saying, she lifted her apron with her hand, and pressed a fold into each eye with her thumb and forefinger respectively.

"It was very naughty of you, Aggie. You should have folded it at once. You know you have no right to pry into other people's things that way."

"If you please, ma'am, you mustn't be angry; but I think if you knew what was in it you would read it yourself. There's some people ought to be told about it. That's all I say."

"You're an impudent girl, Aggie, said Miss Morrison, warmly.

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, but I do wish you would read it yourself. I think you would forgive me if you did. I can't keep it to myself. If you don't read, it I must tell somebody," said the girl determinedly.

"Go on with your work. I shall perhaps tell the minister about it," was all her mistress found to reply.

So saying, Miss Morrison carried off the letter to her own room, where she locked it in a drawer, and then resumed her duties throughout the house. But the letter troubled her; she could not forget it; and in course of time she sought her own chamber again, quietly to think what she could do. Was it the near presence of the object of her thoughts, or mere feminine curiosity, or something else, or all together, that led her to do what she did? So far as her own consciousness was concerned, her motives were these. If Aggie had apprehended rightly what she read, there was evidently something important in the letter, though what it might be Miss Morrison could not conjecture. The girl had also declared that she could not keep it to herself, and there was reason to fear that even a threat might not ensure her silence. To consult the minister seemed best, but was it necessary to trouble him? He had plenty to think of at present, and was at that very time, in all probability, deeply immersed in preparation for the coming Sabbath. Was it not her duty to see what the letter contained, and do what she could to prevent any possible mischief from spreading further? While these conclusions were being slowly evolved, Miss Morrison opened the drawer, and, taking the letter in her hand, looked at it doubtfully. Some voice might have whispered, "Enter not into temptation," but was it temptation? She turned the folded paper from side to side between her fingers, glancing every now and again out through the window at the gray clouds beyond; then opened the page, and read as follows:

"ALTBREAC HOUSE, 14th May, 1867.

"DEAR RODERICK,—I hasten to acknowledge receipt of your kind letter, welcome for the intelligence it conveyed of my dear one, more welcome still for the precious gift it contained. The ring I shall prize and treasure as a remembrance of what occurred in the Bay of the Boulders, and of the undying love there confessed on both sides. What more need I say but this, that I trust you will hold to your promise, and keep it as inviolable as the one you heard from my lips.

"No more at present; I am feeling better to-day. I trust we shall meet very soon—I am, ever yours sincerely,
"CARRIE CRAIG."

Miss Morrison could not believe her eyes; the room swam round her. When she tried again to read the page the lines ran into one another, so that she could hardly follow the sense. When the first shock of bewilderment was over, she did her best, as any honest woman would, to find some explanation, other than lay on the surface, of the plain words before her; but none would come. That Roderick McKay was faithless to Florence Graham was at least possible. She had never understood that they were actually engaged; but that he should, unknown apparently to any one save themselves, have sought and won the heart and hand of Carrie Craig was staggering beyond measure. The allusion to the Bay of the Boulders was intelligible enough, for Miss Morrison had heard all the circumstances of the picnic the previous year, from the lips of enthusiastic narrators. The reality of the attachment between McKay and Miss Craig was evinced not only by the substance, but also by the very form of the epistle. "Dear Roderick," "Ever yours sincerely," taken in connection with all that lay between, made their relations one to another unmistakably plain. There was one feature of the discovery which intensified Miss Morrison's alarm in no small degree. The letter had lain in the pages of the Bible, which, presumably, he had been using for the purpose of private devotion before going to rest. Margaret Morrison's righteous indignation rose high at the thought of such a conjunction. It was the crowning sin of all; and put the poor student wholly outside the range of any charitable construction she might otherwise have put upon his conduct. As to present action on the revelations made by the letter, Miss Morrison had no hesitation. She went at once to the study and showed the letter to her brother. He was no less dumfounded than his sister had been, but ventured to say that, however strange McKay's conduct had apparently been, there was nothing in it amounting to moral guilt, though he foresaw that it would almost certainly embitter the pleasant relations hitherto subsisting between the leading families in the glen. The minister and his sister summoned Aggie into the study, and solemnly charged her to tell no one what she had seen. The girl, who had her own notions, and very proper notions too, regarding manly honour, was bent on informing Miss Florence Graham against McKay without delay, but was persuaded at least to say nothing for the present, Mr. Morrison engaging that, if necessary, the young lady in question should be warned in due season. There the matter rested for a time. Mr. Morrison and his sister did not, on reflection, think it wise to approach Roderick's father and sister on the subject; it could do little good; still less could they venture to hint what they knew, either to Mr. Craig or his niece. The letter was retained till McKay should return, and they hoped, though in the righteous soul of Miss Morrison the hope was faint, that in some way the future would contain at least a measure of release from the entangled relations it revealed. With reference to the student's journey one element gave Mr. Morrison comfort, though his sister refused to share it. It was pretty generally suspected that Graham had been an admirer, if not a suitor, of Carrie Craig; and the minister could not believe that Roderick would have gone on a mission of professed kindness to the fugitive, while at the same time supplanting him in the interest and affections of the girl. That was conduct more base than he could conceive of in one of whose high moral, not to say Cristian principle, he entertained a most favourable opinion. He might be deceived, of course—men often are in those of whom they think best; but he hoped against hope that Roderick McKay's character might yet be found, in the matter of honour, clear of every suspicion and stain.

(To be continued.)