

Choice Literature.

HEATHER BELLES.

A MODERN HIGHLAND STORY.

CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

As they rapidly strode onwards up the glen, they could not forbear reverting to the subject of the letter; and Mr. Craig asked Roderick the meaning of certain allusions it contained. The student, however, firmly declined to enlighten him, and knowingly referred him to Archie and Carrie themselves for any further explanation he might desire.

The day was beginning to fall into the serene and yellow leaf ere they reached the sheep-farm of Glenartan. They found Mr. Graham's two daughters standing by the front door; for Florence had now been at home for fully a week. When their friendly greetings were over, the younger sister invited Mr. Craig to accompany her round the garden, and see the flowers ere the darkness should set in. When they had gone, Martha drew the student after her to a shady walk by the gable of the house, and there revealed the concerted purpose of these movements.

"Mr. Roderick, I want to speak you before you go in to see my father. I have something important to say, but it will not detain us long."

"Very well, Miss Martha," said the student, with some apprehension. "But, remember, if you think it better I should not see your father at all, don't be afraid to say so, and I shall return home at once."

"Don't be alarmed, Mr. Roderick," replied Miss Graham cheerily. "My communication is of quite another nature. You must know, first of all, that during this illness my father's temper has been softened and sweetened in many ways. He looks at almost everything in a different light now. Toward yourself, for example, his feelings have undergone what I may almost call a revolution. He understands now what you have done for Archie, and he is deeply grateful for your willing and loving services. Well, today, when we were quite alone, he told me that he no longer desired to put any restriction whatever on your intercourse with Florie."

Before she could say more, Roderick started from her side. Standing a few steps back, he looked her straight in the face, astonished, bewildered. She returned his gaze with an amused but cheery smile, which seemed to say, "There now, what do you think of that?" All he could stammer out was the words—

"Is it possible?"

"Possible!" said Miss Graham, still enjoying his confusion. "It's not only possible, it's actual! The truth is, I think my father was too proud to tell you himself, and chose me as a medium. You must just accept the assurance from me. Is not that enough?"

"Quite enough, Miss Martha," said Roderick. "But—does Florie know about this?"

"Of course she does, you stupid man. Do you think I could keep it from her for an hour? Besides, why has she enticed Mr. Craig away just now? Don't you see our little game? But hush! Here they come."

Just then Mr. Craig and Florence joined them, and they entered the house together. Archie met them in the lobby; and they passed, one by one, into the dining-room. They found Mr. Graham seated in a chair by the fire—paler and thinner than when the student had last seen him, but ready to give them a cordial reception. When, after Mr. Craig, Roderick advanced to greet him, the farmer clasped McKay's hand in both his own, and in a tremulous voice said—

"God bless you, Mr. Roderick. I am glad to see you."

There is no need to detail the further events of the evening. Miss Graham's housewifely skill and care had provided an excellent tea, to which full justice was done. Roderick McKay was in a maze. He could scarcely venture to look in the direction of Florie, and actually seemed to avoid her. Moreover, he both said and did, during the course of the evening, many foolish things, which provoked again and again a smile at his expense. Mr. Craig, especially, was astonished at him—it was, he thought within himself, so unlike Roderick—but he said nothing. He understood it all afterwards. At a late hour they parted, after an invitation to spend the evening of the following Tuesday at Altbreac House.

When Roderick reached home, family worship was over, and his father had retired to rest. William had not returned from a late errand to the village; and Ellen sat reading in the little parlour. Her younger brother and she had frequent and long talks together when left alone as they now were; and on this occasion Ellen was anxious to hear Roderick's news as to the proceedings of the day. The record he had to give proved more interesting than she had expected. The walk home in the cool night air had stilled her brother's excited feelings, and he was able calmly to tell Ellen all that had happened.

"Well, Nelly," he began, "I have great news to-night. Do you think you can bear them?"

"If they are good as well as great," replied Ellen, "I shall bear up to the best of my ability."

"That's right. Well, I shall begin with the best of all, but I must break the matter quietly, lest the shock should be too much for you. Mr. Graham received me most kindly and graciously to-night."

"I am glad to hear it," said his sister. "I have always hoped that he might come some day to regard you more favourably."

"He has given to-day a proof of his changed feelings such as I never ventured to look for. What do you think? He commissioned Miss Martha to tell me that he no longer desired to put any obstacles in the way of the freest intimacy between Florie and me. Isn't that good news?"

"Good news!" said Ellen, as she clapped her hands for joy. "It's wonderful—simply wonderful! What has done it?"

"Hush, Nelly," said her brother. "Don't speak so

loud, and don't make such a noise. You'll waken father; that's what you'll do."

"I can't help it, Roderick. There is almost nothing on earth I could be more overjoyed to hear. But you haven't answered my questions. What has brought about the change?"

"Many things combined, I suppose," replied the student. "His own improved health, and the softening influence of trial, have had something to do with it. Besides, he is grateful for the services which I have tried to render to Archie."

"These are very likely causes, and I am sure I am so glad they have had their effect. I hope the results—"

"Come now, Nelly," interposed her brother sharply, "never mind the results. It's too soon to speak of them; let us enjoy the happy present."

"I'll tell you what, Roderick, I know some one who will be almost—almost as glad as I am."

"Who is that?" asked her brother.

"Carrie Craig, to be sure. She will be rejoiced for Florie's sake and for yours as well. She thinks you were made for one another."

"Tuts, that's her good nature," said Roderick impatiently. Then he changed his key, and said gaily, "But do you know that I myself was taken for Carrie's betrothed to-day? What do you think of that?"

"For Carrie's betrothed," said Ellen in astonishment. "How, and by whom?"

"The how is a long story," replied her brother. "The whom was Miss Morrison."

"Miss Morrison! What ever put such a notion into the dounce old lady's head?"

Roderick detailed the story of the scene in the Manse, and gave his sister the substance of Carrie's oracular letter. When Ellen's curiosity had been satisfied, and her merriment had subsided, her brother started a new theme.

"I say, Nelly, you are in all the secrets, and some of them need be secrets no longer—at least to me. Can you tell me how Mr. Craig found out about the engagement between Archie and Miss Carrie?"

"The simplest thing in the world," replied Ellen. "You yourself had a hand in it, in a far-off way. You gave Carrie the ring from Archie. Well, would you believe it? The foolish girl would not be content but to wear it. She kept it on her fingers all night, and wore it during the day as well, when no one was present but Florie. Two or three times she narrowly escaped detection; and then at last she was caught. One of the flues took fire, and Florence and she were frightened out of their wits by the smoke. Mr. Craig hurried into the room to calm their fears, and when Carrie held out her hands beseechingly to ask what had happened, didn't he catch sight of the ring on her finger?"

"Girls will be girls to the end of the world," said Roderick with all the sobriety of a sage. "What next?"

"Oh the rest is soon told. When the fire was over, Mr. Craig returned to the room, and poor Carrie had to confess all. Her uncle, however, was very gentle and kind, and wound up by saying that he was neither surprised or a bit angry. I have no doubt your report about Archie helped to make things easy for Carrie."

"Well, well," said her brother, "I hope it will be a warning to you, my dear sissy; your day is coming."

"What do you mean, Roderick? I'm a long way off from anything of that kind. The chances are I shall live and die an old maid, and I shall be quite content. What would father do without me?"

"Don't be too sure, miss," said the student, as if he held the secrets of the future in his hands. "There's a fine young man coming here one of these days; and who knows what may happen?"

"Coming here!" said Ellen, with surprise. "Who is coming?"

"My college companion, Stewart. You know I sent him some letters to despatch when I wanted them to bear another postmark than Glenartan. Well, I promised to let him see in the flesh some of those to whom he had rendered that secret service, and also to show him some of the beauties of our scenery. I have got a letter from him today saying he will be here on Friday—so you must have the best room ready."

"How long is he to remain?" said Ellen.

"A fortnight at least—perhaps more," replied her brother. "Now you go off to bed—I see your eyes are heavy—and be sure you don't dream about a tall young man with neat whiskers, and what you ladies would call a 'love of a moustache.'"

"You're a wicked tease, Roderick! That's what you are. Good-night."

On the day named by Mr. Craig when inviting his guests, a gay company assembled at Altbreac. There were Mr. and Miss Morrison, from the Manse; Colonel Craig and his son Richard, the barrister, from the shooting-lodge; Roderick McKay and his sister Ellen; and Archibald and Florence Graham, from the farm. Miss Graham excused herself on account of the watchful care still needed by her father, though he himself had been anxious she should go. After an ample repast, the evening was spent in genial and happy social intercourse. The ladies in turn discoursed music on the piano, while at intervals Archie Graham made the staircases and lobbies echo with the shrill screech of the pipes. Roderick McKay showed some beautiful photographs and pressed flowers from the Riviera, and Mr. Craig found occasion more than once to fire off scraps of old story and poetry from the inexhaustible stores of his antiquarian memory. At length they parted for the night. Mr. and Miss Morrison drove down to the Manse; the Colonel and his son took a path by the river side which led to the bridge; and the others passed through the avenue to the main road which ran up and down the glen.

There, again, there was a parting; for Archie Graham generously offered to escort Ellen McKay and see her safe under her father's roof, and Roderick as gallantly promised to accompany Florence home to the farm. We shall gratify at least the fair portion of our readers by following the latter two only, premising that it was by no means the first time

they had enjoyed a stroll together since the night Mr. Craig and Roderick visited the farm.

As Florence and the student passed up the glen together, a transformation-scene was in progress. It was midsummer; and the daylight, reluctant to leave the earth, lingered faintly and wearily first on the treetops, then on the pink and golden heights which girded the glen. The flowers, the stars of earth, as Goethe has called them, had withdrawn their shining; and their fair sisters of the sky crept one by one into sight, to keep their nocturnal vigils. The mellow moon lent gray shadows to the trees, and threw across the river a broad belt of silvery light, which glanced as with the sparkle of a myriad flickering diamonds. By the time that Night, emulating the departed brilliance of her sister Day, had fully assumed the sceptre of power, the student and the lady had quitted the highway, and sought a more secluded path by the banks of the stream.

"Do you love the moonlight, Roderick?" asked Florence as they strolled along the narrow footway.

"Not any more than the sunlight, Florie," replied Roderick. "Perhaps I have too little sentiment in my nature. The truth is, I like to see things as they are, not as they seem in the mysterious and uncertain lights and shades of moonlight. I am not what the Scandinavians call a Strömkarl."

"What is that, pray? Some dreadful thing surely, from the way you speak."

"Not at all," replied the student. "He is a fairy stream boy, or rather let us say stream laddie, who haunts the brooks and rivers. When the moon shines bright, he sits enthroned on the waves, and with his nimble fingers plies the strings of his harp. All the while the lithe little elves are delighted with his music, and dance gaily on the flowery banks."

"Perhaps we shall see them to-night," said Florence merrily, and then she suddenly changed her tone as she added, "But I am more afraid of meeting real solid human beings."

"No fear of them," said her companion. "Archie and Carrie are not on the war path to-night, and who else is there to come here? The working people are all at rest by this time, proving how sweet it is,

When labours close,
To draw around the aching head,
The curtain of repose."

But about the moonlight, tell me why you like it so well?"

"If you promise," replied the young lady, "not to laugh at me, I will. I am afraid you will call my ideas mere fancy or sentiment."

"I promise," said Roderick, lifting his hat, "to give respectful attention and consideration to what you may advance."

"Well," said Florence more confidently, "I shall tell you what I have been thinking. It seems to me the impressions we get of objects in clear moonlight are like the Christian's view of this present life. Thoughtless people like the glare and glamour of this world's day; but to the child of God everything here below is shaded and softened by mellow light from above. Moreover, he scarcely cares to grope after the beauties of earth at his feet, when the glories of heaven in wide expanse over his head are open to view. Do you think I am right?"

"There is certainly truth as well as beauty in your picture," replied the student. "Besides, I think you have high authority on your side. You remember what Newman says in his exquisite *Lux Benigna*—

I loved the garish day; and spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will; remember not past years."

At the same time, Florie, you will pardon me for saying, that I think it very likely that your view came upon you and grew upon you in Carrie's sick room. I confess it seems to me to convey a somewhat morbid and indefinite view of life. I remember once in harvest time when the weather was very wet, my father and the rest of us went out near midnight, and, with a fine breeze blowing, gathered a whole field into 'coles' before morning. But—we were working as in a dream; and when daylight came, I could scarcely realize that anything had been done at all."

"Well, but the work was done," said Florence triumphantly. "I have at least one who enters heartily into my view; that is Carrie Craig."

"Oh, that leads me," said the student, "to ask about something we have not spoken of since I came home. Florie, did you see the letter which Carrie Craig sent through me to your brother when we were at Mentone?"

"Not I," said Florence. "These letters—there were two of them, if you remember—were absolutely the only things, all the time I was with her, in regard to which she did not admit me to her full confidence. And quite right too. What business had I to see her letters, especially those to Archie?"

"None, Florie," replied the student; "of that I am well aware. Only I thought it possible she might have shown them to you. Well, Archie of course did not show them to me; and yet in one sense I should very much like to have seen or to see them. Florie dear, they were as the leaves of the tree of life to Archie. When he steps out of darkness into the light, as I believe he soon will, I expect to hear him confess that the truth contained in these letters of Carrie's, especially one of them, had been blessed of God to his salvation. It made my heart leap for joy to hear him speak as he did of Carrie's words, though he told me none of them."

"I am sure it gave us equal delight to hear through Mr. Craig your report about Archie's spiritual state. I believe they will yet be as happy as any earnest Christian husband and wife could be."

By this time they were more than a mile above Altbreac, and had reached the margin of a long dark pool on the river. A rough fence coming down from the slopes on the left crossed the pathway right in front of them, and ran out into the waters of the stream. They halted at this obstruction for a little, and leant against the bars. Roderick renewed their conversation, though in a new direction.