

THE BRAVE GIRL OF GLENBARR.

BY CUTHBERT BEDE.

CHAPTER I.

OLD DONALD'S DECISION.

'If Mary Morrison will wed wi' me, I'll wed no other!' This was young Donald's decision. And the handsome, stalwart young Highlander looked as though he intended to carry into effect those few words that he had spoken to his father in Gaelic.

Donald Macbane was his father's only child; and, as his mother had died within a few days of his birth, he had never known any other parent than his stern father. A hard man was the elder Donald, ruling those about him with an iron will, and intent only upon improving his small farm to its utmost capability, so that he might leave it to his son as a goodly heritage. By its aid, young Donald might, in time, be so raised above the humble surroundings of his father's early days, that he might almost pass as a laird. But that this scheme might be fully carried out, it was needful that his son should be married to a girl who had money or land of her own, and who would not come to him empty-handed and without a dowry. A 'tocherless lass' was not to be thought of; and the future owner of the small farm on the hillside in the Barr Glen must be mated with a maiden who was similarly circumstanced as regarded property.

And such a girl was to be found within a mile or two. For, on the opposite side of the glen, on the other side of the Barr river, where it tripped down its rocky staircase to join the great Atlantic, there lived a girl, named Janet Baillie, who was the only survivor of the once large family of old Hugh Baillie, and who would inherit his farmstead, which was a place called Clachanaigs, and was about as large as old Donald Macbane's farm at Glenbarr. The two families had always been intimate and on good terms; and Janet had ever a sweet smile and a pleasant word for young Donald whenever they met, whether it were at home, or at kirk or market; and there seemed to old Donald no possible reason why these two young people should not make a match of it. There was no discrepancy either in years or in position; and there was no obstacle in their way; for Donald Macbane had sounded Hugh Baillie on the subject, and found the old man quite agreeable to the match. They were 'a fine stand-up couple,' as old Donald often told himself; and there could not be a more appropriate proceeding than to marry them to each other, and look forward to the time when the two farmsteads of Glenbarr and Clachanaigs should belong to one proprietor. Old Donald had dwelt so much on the idea, that he considered it as good as settled. He was so much accustomed to have his own will carried out, that he did not anticipate the disagreeable novelty of any opposition coming from his son; especially when so favourable an arrangement was made for him, and such a nice girl as Janet Baillie was (as he supposed) ready to make him her husband. And now, to his surprise, when he had spoken to his son on the subject, and had suggested to him that he might go to Janet, and ask her to name the day for the wedding, young Donald had replied to him with those astounding words: 'If Mary Morrison will wed wi' me, I'll wed no other!'

Now, this Mary Morrison was the girl who lived at the farm, and whose daily work was about the house and its surroundings; and all her earthly riches were the wages that old Donald paid her. Therefore, it was an utterly upsetting notion to him, that his son should ruin his prospects by throwing himself away on a mere farm-servant, when he might have the heiress of Clachanaigs for the asking. The old man could not understand it; he could not comprehend that his son and heir should take up, as he phrased it, with a girl who was not worth a single soum,—a soum being an extent of hill-pasture that would be sufficient to keep a cow or ten sheep. He could not imagine how such a thing could be. And yet, he had to confess to himself that such a thing would have to be; for he knew that his son followed his father in having a determined will of his own; and that when he had made that resolution regarding Mary Morrison, he would most assuredly abide by it, and carry it into effect. Yes, it would have to be, and all his dearly loved plans would be thwarted, unless he could devise some scheme to get the girl out of the way.

He had much talk with his son on the subject; he pleaded the cause of Janet Baillie, and sang the praises of Clachanaigs; but he found, as he had expected, that all his talk and all his pleadings led to no further result than making young Donald the more resolved in his intention to wed no other than Mary Morrison. 'We are plighted to each other,' he said in Gaelic; 'and we are only waiting till next May, when her time of service will be over. We shall then be married; and, if you do not like us to live here and help you on the farm, we shall turn our backs on Glenbarr, and go away to a home of our own. We are strong and healthy, and we love one another; and, please God, we can earn our livelihood quite as well together as if we were apart. I have nothing to say against Janet Baillie. She is a good girl, and I hope will get a good man for her husband; but she is not Mary Morrison.' Then old Donald said no more; but he hardened his heart against his servant, and he was determined, by fair means or by foul, to prevent her from marrying his son. There was at least six months for him wherein to plot and plan, and something might occur, in that interval, to favour his wishes. Until next May, Mary Morrison would be his servant, and she could not leave her situation without his consent.

The long evenings of winter had now come on, and the year was hastening to its close. The range of hills that stretched their length to Beinn-an-Tuirc were covered with snow, and it lay deeply down in the hollows of the glen. In the last week of the year the younger Donald had left Glenbarr to go to a great cattle fair that was to be held in the northern part of the county, which fair lasted over the two last days of the old and the first day of the new year, which day went by the name of Hogmanay, and was celebrated with much rejoicing and many old-world customs, including those of the 'first foot,' the wassail bowl, and the guizards. Donald's attendance at this Hogmanay Fair necessitated his absence from Glenbarr during several days, and was one of the few important events of the twelve months that made a change in the ordinary monotony of their every-day life. He had said good-bye to Mary, promising

to bring her a Hogmanay fairing, and hoping that his next gift to her would take the form of a plain gold ring.

On the last evening of the old year, old Donald was sitting by the peat-fire on the hearth, in front of which Luath, his faithful collie, had stretched himself in luxurious ease. On the other side, seated on a low stool, was Mary Morrison, busily engaged in knitting. The wind was howling outside, and the drifting snow was clogging the doorways. Old Donald broke the silence that had been long reigning between them by making some remarks about his son's absence at the cattle fair,—a theme which had its full interest for his servant. They spoke in Gaelic: for the English language was but little used by the natives, except when they went to a market town, and even there many people could be met with who had 'got no English.'

'My son seems bent upon making you his wife,' at length said old Donald; 'but I don't like to give my consent, unless I am quite sure that he is going to be married to a brave girl.'

'But,' pleaded Mary, 'I think that I am a brave girl, Mr. Macbane.'

'If you think so,' said the old man, 'are you ready to prove it by your actions?'

'If it is anything that a girl may do, Mr. Macbane, I am ready to do it for the love that I bear your son.'

'It is nothing more than to walk to the old church at Saddell.' Old Donald referred to the ruins of Saddell Monastery.

'Oh, I can easily do that, Mr. Macbane. You know that I have often walked there, in the summer or spring. It is no more than six miles as the crow flies.'

'Yes; but the road is a bad one, and is made longer by the high hills and the deep glens. And there is snow on the ground.'

'But it may be clear to-morrow, or the next day.'

'If you want to win my son by proving yourself to be a brave girl, you must not wait for a fair-weather walk that could be taken by Janet Baillie, or any other girl in the glen; but you must do something out of the common way.'

'I am ready to do it for Donald's sake. Whatever Janet Baillie may do, I will try to do more.'

'I shall require you to go to the old church at Saddell this very night, and to be back here by breakfast time in the morning.'

'I think Janet Baillie would not do that! but I will do it, or try to do it; though it is a wild night for such a walk and to such a place.'

'That is not all,' said the stern old man, though his voice trembled somewhat, as he made known to her his resolve. 'I must have full and certain evidence that you have been to the old church; and though I never knew you to tell me a falsehood, yet, in this case, I must have further proof than your mere word. There is an old tomb inside the church: it is at the farther end from the door, on the right-hand side, and stands under an arch. It is the great Macdonald's tomb; and on it there is a skull—the skull, they say, of a murderer.'

'Yes! I have seen it,' she said, with a shudder.

'Are you brave enough to make your way alone, and through the snow, to that church, this very night; and, in proof that you have been there, to bring me back from thence the skull?'

'And what if I do so?'

'In that case I will withdraw my opposition to your marriage with my son; and I will not only give my free consent, but I will also make over to him the half of all that I have, so that he may marry you in comfort, and before May-day, if he chooses to do so.'

'That will be grand news for him when he comes home from the fair.'

'Yes! if you have performed your part of the bargain; but it will take a brave girl to do what I have set you.'

'And am not I a brave girl, Mr. Macbane?'

'That will depend upon your own showing. I shall certainly consider you to be very brave, and deserving of my son, if you will do as I propose, and go to Saddell Church this night, and show me, by breakfast time to-morrow, the skull that you have brought from there. In that case, your bravery shall have its reward.'

'Then I will do it! at least, I will try my best; for I know that I bring Donald no dowry, except a pair of willing hands and a loving heart; and I should be loth to wed him without his father's blessing. So I will do your bidding, Mr. Macbane, though it is a wild, fearsome night to go on such a strange errand.'

Mary Morrison put aside her knitting, wrapped a plaid about her head and shoulders, and, with a silent prayer for safe guidance on her perilous path, went out into the wild winter's night. Luath, the collie, would have gone with her, and she would have been deeply thankful for his company and protection; but old Donald called him back into the house, and barred the door. Then the stern man listened to the howling of the wind, and thought: 'She will not return. On a night like this the way is too perilous for safety, and one false step may send her to her death. If it is a wrong deed of mine, it was wrong of her to win my boy's love. If I do evil, I do it that good may come. Once rid of her daily presence, Donald will forget his fancy for her; and my darling wish of marrying him to Janet Baillie may be carried out.'

But although he tried to reconcile his conduct to his conscience, he could not do so. As he sat over the fire, and placed more peats upon it, he endeavoured to lull to rest his unquiet fancies with such specious arguments as these: She has gone of her own free will. She might have stayed here, if she chose. She is well acquainted with the road, and she can turn back if the storm is too strong, or the snow too deep for her. If she persists in going on, and comes to any harm, it will be through her own folly. It is a madcap adventure; but it is her own doing—not mine—no, not mine.

Yet old Donald, notwithstanding these arguments and special pleadings, could not lay that ghost of terror that was beginning to alarm him; and as he lay on the upper shelf of the wooden cupboard that is known as a box-bed, and huddled the bed-clothes around him, he could not shut out the visions that took possession of his mind and drove away sleep. The wind whistled shrilly through the ill-fitting door, and whirled sparks from the slumbering peats on the hearth; their flickering light came and went on the platters and jugs that

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