

BLACK WILLIAM

WHITE HEATHER: A
NOVEL (VOLUME 2 OF 3)

William Black

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Novel (Volume 2 of 3)**

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CHAPTER I

A FURTHER DISCOVERY

It can hardly be wondered at that these suddenly presented ambitious projects – this call to be up and doing, and getting forward in the general race of the world – should add a new interest and fascination, in his eyes, to the society of the American father and daughter who had wandered into these distant wilds. And perhaps, after all, he had been merely wasting his time and throwing away his life? That solitary, contented, healthy and happy existence was a mistake – an idle dream – an anachronism, even? The common way of the world was right; and that, as he heard of it in the echoes brought by these strangers from without, was all a pushing and striving and making the most of opportunities, until the end was reached – independence and ease and wealth; the power of choosing this or that continent for a residence; the radiant happiness and glow of success. And then it all seemed so easy and practicable when he heard these two talking about their friends and the fortunes they had made; and it seemed still more easy – and a far more desirable and beautiful thing – when it was Miss Carry herself who was speaking, she seated alone in the stern of the boat, her eyes – that had a kind of surface darkness and softness, like blackberries wet with rain – helping out her speech, and betraying an open friendliness, and even conferring a charm on her descriptions of that far-off pork-producing city of the west. Mr. Hodson, as he sate upright in his easy-chair before the fire, spoke slowly and sententiously, and without any visible enthusiasm; Miss Carry, in the stern of the coble, her face all lit up with the blowing winds and the sunlight, talked with far greater vivacity, and was obviously deeply interested in the future of her companion. And it had come to this now, that, as she sate opposite him, he quite naturally and habitually regarded her eyes as supplementing her meaning; he no longer rather shrank from the directness of her look; he no longer wished that she would sit the other way, and attend to the tops of the salmon-rods. As for their speech together, the exceeding frankness of it and lack of conventionality arose from one or two causes, but no doubt partly from this – that during their various adventures on the loch there was no time for the observance of studied forms. It was 'Do this' and 'Do that,' on his part – sometimes with even a sharp word of monition; and with her it was 'Will that do, Ronald?' or again, – when she was standing up in fell encounter with her unseen enemy, both hands engaged with the rod – 'Ronald, tie my cap down, or the wind will blow it away – No, no, the other strings – underneath!'

Indeed, on the morning after the evening on which they had been urging him to make a career for himself, there was not much chance of any calm discussion of that subject. The proceedings of the day opened in a remarkably lively manner. For one thing the wind had backed still farther during the night, and was now blowing briskly from the north, bringing with it from time to time smart snow showers that blackened the heavens and earth for a few minutes and then sped on, leaving the peaks and shoulders and even the lower spurs of the hills all a gleaming white in the wintry sunlight.

'Salmon-fishing in a snow-storm – well, I declare!' said she, as she stood on the shore of the lake, watching him putting the rods together.

'The very best time,' said he, in his positive way (for he had assumed a kind of authority over her, whereas with Meenie he was always reserved and distant and timidly gentle). 'None better. I would just like to find a foot of snow on the ground, right down to the edge of the loch; and the flakes falling so thick ye couldna see a dozen yards ahead of ye.'

'Do you know where I should be then?' she retorted. 'I should be warming my toes in front of Mrs. Murray's peat-fire.'

'Not one bit,' said he, just as positively. 'If ye heard the salmon were taking, ye'd be down here fast enough, I'm thinking.'

And presently it seemed as if this early start of theirs was to be rewarded, for scarcely were both lines out – and Miss Carry was just settling herself down for a little quiet talk, and was pulling the collar of her ulster higher over her ears (for the wind was somewhat cold) – when a sudden tugging and straining at one of the rods, followed by a sharp scream of the reel, upset all these little plans. She made a dash at the rod and raised it quickly.

'That's a good fish – that's a good fish!' Ronald cried, with his mouth set hard. 'Now let's see if we canna hold on to this one. Let him go, lassie! – I beg your pardon – let him go – let him go – that's right – a clean fish, and a beauty!'

Beauty or no, the salmon had no hesitation about showing himself, at least; for now he began to lash the surface of the water, some fifty yards away, not springing into the air, but merely beating the waves with head and body and tail to get rid of this unholy thing that he had pursued and gripped. Then down he went with a mighty plunge – the reel whirring out its shrill cry, and Miss Carry's gloves suffering in consequence – and there he sulked; so that they backed the boat again, and again she got in some of the line. What was the sound that came across the lake to them, in the face of the northerly wind?

'They're waving a handkerchief to ye, Miss Hodson,' said he, 'from the other boat.'

'Oh, bother,' said she (for the strain of a heavy salmon and forty yards of line was something on her arms), 'here, take the handkerchief from this breast-pocket, and wave it back to them – stand up beside me – they won't see the difference –'

He did as he was bid; apparently she paid little attention; she seemed wholly bent on getting the fish. And clearly the salmon had somewhat exhausted himself with his first escapades; he now lay deep down, not stirring an inch; so that she got in her line until there was not more than twenty yards out: then they waited.

And meanwhile this strange thing that was overtaking them? The bright, windy, changeable day – with its gleaming snow-slopes and sunlit straths and woods darkened by passing shadows – seemed to be slowly receding from them, and around them came a kind of hushed and stealthy gloom. And then the wind stirred again; the gusts came sharper and colder; here and there a wet particle stung the cheek or the back of the hand. Of course, she was in a death-struggle with a salmon; she could not heed. And presently the gathering blackness all around seemed to break into a soft bewilderment of snow; large, soft, woolly flakes came driving along before the wind; all the world was shut out from them; they could see nothing but a short space of livid dark water, and feel nothing but this choking silent thing in the air. And then again, with a magical rapidity, the heavens and the earth seemed to open above and around them; the clouds swept on; there was a great deep of dazzling blue suddenly revealed in the sky overhead; and all the dancing waters of the lake, from the boat to the farthest shores, were one flashing and lapping mass of keen, pure cobalt, absolutely bewildering to the eyes. The joy of that radiant colour, after the mystery and the darkness! And then the sunlight broke out; and Clebrig had a touch of gold along his mighty shoulders; and Ben Loyal's snow-slopes were white against the brilliant blue; and it seemed as if the fairest of soft summer skies were shining over Bonnie Strath-Naver.

To her it meant that she could see a little more clearly. She shook the snowflakes from her hair.

'Ronald, you are sure it is not a kelt?'

'Indeed I am. There's nothing of the kelt about that one.'

'If it is,' said she, 'I'll go home and tell my ma.'

She was clearly feeling a little more secure about this one. And she did capture the creature in the end, though it was after a long and arduous struggle. For he was a strong fish – fresh run up

from the sea, and heavy for his size; and again and again, and a dozen times repeated, he would make rushes away from the boat just as they thought he was finally showing the white feather. It was the toughest fight she had had; but practice was hardening her muscles a little; and she had acquired a little dexterity in altering her position and shifting the strain. By this time the other boat was coming round.

'Stick to him, Carry!' her father cried. 'No Secesh tactics allowed: hold on to him!'

The next moment Ronald had settled all that by a smart scoop of the clip; and there in the bottom of the boat lay a small-headed deep-shouldered fish of just over sixteen pounds – Ronald pinning him down to get the minnow out of his jaw, and the lad Johnnie grinning all over his ruddy face with delight.

Miss Carry looked on in a very calm and business-like fashion; though in reality her heart was beating quickly – with gladness and exultation. And then, with the same business-like calmness, she took from the deep pocket of her ulster a flask that she had borrowed from Mr. Murray.

'Ronald,' said she, 'you must drink to our good luck.'

She handed him the flask. She appeared to be quite to the manner born now. You would not have imagined that her heart was beating so quickly, or her hands just a little bit nervous and shaky after that prolonged excitement.

Good luck seemed to follow the Duke's boat this morning. Within the next three quarters of an hour they had got hold of another salmon – just over ten pounds. And it was barely lunch time when they had succeeded in landing a third – this time a remarkably handsome fish of fifteen pounds. She now thought she had done enough. She resumed her seat contentedly; there was no elation visible on her face. But she absolutely forbade the putting out of the lines again.

'Look here, Ronald,' she said seriously. 'What do you think I came here for? Do you think I came here to leave my bones in a foreign land? I am just about dead now. My arms are not made of steel. We can go ashore, and get lunch unpacked; the other boat will follow quickly enough. I tell you my arms and wrists have just had about enough for one morning.'

And a very snug and merry little luncheon-party they made there – down by the side of the lapping water, and under the shelter of a wood of young birch-trees. For the other boat had brought ashore two salmon; so that the five handsome fish, laid side by side on a broad slab of rock, made an excellent show. Miss Carry said nothing about her arms aching; but she did not seem to be in as great a hurry as the others to set to work again. No; she enjoyed the rest; and, observing that Ronald had finished his lunch, she called to him, under the pretext of wanting to know something about sending the fish south. This led on to other things; the three of them chatting together contentedly enough, and Ronald even making bold enough to light his pipe. A very friendly little group this was – away by themselves there in these wintry solitudes – with the wide blue waters of the lake in front of them, and the snows of Clebrig white against the sky. And if he were to go away from these familiar scenes, might he not come back again in the after days? And with the splendid power of remaining or going, just as he pleased? – just as these friendly folk could, who spoke so lightly of choosing this or that quarter of the globe for their temporary habitation? Yes, there were many things that money could do: these two strangers, now, could linger here at Inver-Mudal just as long as the salmon-fishing continued to amuse them; or they could cross over to Paris, and see the wonders there; or they could go away back to the great cities and harbours and lakes and huge hotels that they spoke so much about. He listened with intensest interest, and with a keen imagination. And was this part of the shore around them – with its rocks and brushwood and clear water – really like the shores of Lake George, where she was so afraid of rattlesnakes? She said she would send him some photographs of Lake Michigan.

Then in the boat in the afternoon she quite innocently remarked that she wished he was going back home with them; for that he would find the voyage across the Atlantic so amusing. She described the people coming out to say good-bye at Liverpool; and the throwing of knives and pencil-cases and what not as farewell gifts from the steamer to the tender, and *vice versâ*; she described the scamper round Queenstown and the waiting for the mails; then the long days on the wide ocean, with all

the various occupations, and the concerts in the evening, and the raffles in the smoking-room (this from hearsay); then the crowding on deck for the first glimpse of the American coast-line; and the gliding over the shallows of Sandy Hook; and the friends who would come steaming down the Bay to wave handkerchiefs and welcome them home. She seemed to regard it as a quite natural and simple thing that he should be of this party; and that, after landing, her father should take him about and 'see him through,' as it were; and if her fancy failed to carry out these forecasts, and to picture him walking along Dearborn Avenue or driving out with them to Washington Park, it was that once or twice ere now she had somehow arrived at the notion that Ronald Strang and Chicago would prove to be incongruous. Or was it some instinctive feeling that, however natural and fitting their friendship might be in this remote little place in the Highlands, it might give rise to awkwardness over there? Anyhow, that could not prevent her father from seeing that Ronald had ample introductions and guidance when he landed at New York; and was not that the proper sphere for one of his years and courage and abilities?

When they got ashore at the end of the day it was found that each boat had got two more salmon, so that there was a display of nine big fish on the grass there in the gathering dusk.

'And to think that I should live to catch five salmon in one day,' said Miss Carry, as she contemplated her share of the spoil. 'Well, no one will believe it; for they're just real mean people at home; and they won't allow that anything's happened to you in Europe unless you have something to show for it. I suppose Ronald would give me a written guarantee. Anyway, I am going to take that big one along to the Doctor – it will be a good introduction, won't it, pappa?'

But a curious thing happened about that same salmon. When they got to the inn the fish were laid out on the stone flags of the dairy – the coolest and safest place for them in the house; and Miss Carry, who had come along to see them, when she wanted anything done, naturally turned to Ronald.

'Ronald,' said she, 'I want to give that big one to Mrs. Douglas, and I am going along now to the cottage. Will you carry it for me?'

He said something about getting a piece of string and left. A couple of minutes thereafter the lad Johnnie appeared, with a stout bit of cord in his hand; and he, having affixed that to the head and the tail of the salmon, caught it up, and stood in readiness. She seemed surprised.

'Where is Ronald?' said she – for he was always at her bidding.

'He asked me to carry the fish to the Doctor's house, mem,' said the lad. 'Will I go now?'

Moreover, this salmon was accidentally responsible for a still further discovery. When Miss Carry went along to call on the Douglasses, little Maggie was with her friend Meenie; and they all of them had tea together; and when the little Maggie considered it fitting she should go home, Miss Carry said she would accompany her – for it was now quite dark. And they had a good deal of talk by the way, partly about schooling and accomplishments, but much more largely about Ronald, who was the one person in all the world in the eyes of his sister. And if Maggie was ready with her information, this pretty young lady was equally interested in receiving it, and also in making inquiries. And thus it came about that Miss Carry now for the first time learned that Ronald was in the habit of writing poems, verses, and things of that kind; and that they were greatly thought of by those who had seen them or to whom he had sent them.

'Why, I might have guessed as much,' she said to herself, as she walked on alone to the inn – though what there was in Ronald's appearance to suggest that he was a writer of rhymes it might have puzzled any one to determine.

But this was a notable discovery; and it set her quick and fertile brain working in a hundred different ways; but mostly she bethought her of one John C. Huysen and of a certain newspaper-office on Fifth Avenue, Chicago, 111.

'Well, there,' she said to herself, as the result of these rapid cogitations, 'if Jack Huysen's good for anything – if he wants to say he has done me a service – if he wants to show he has the spirit of a man in him – well, *now's his chance*.'

CHAPTER II

CONFESSIONS

It was but another instance of the curiously magnetic influence of this man's personality that she instantly and unhesitatingly assumed that what he wrote must be of value. Now every second human being, as well she knew, writes verses at one period of his life, and these are mostly trash; and remain discreetly hidden, or are mercifully burned. But what Ronald wrote, she was already certain, must be characteristic of himself, and have interest and definite worth; and what better could she do than get hold of some of these things, and have them introduced to the public, perhaps with some little preliminary encomium written by a friendly hand? She had heard from the little Maggie that Ronald had never sent any of his writings to the newspapers; might not this be a service? She could not offer him a sovereign because he happened to be in the boat when she caught her first salmon; but fame – the appeal to the wide-reading public – the glory of print? Nay, might they not be of some commercial value also? She knew but little of the customs of the Chicago journals, but she guessed that a roundabout hint conveyed to Mr. John C. Huysen would not be without effect. And what were the subjects, she asked herself, that Ronald wrote about? In praise of deerstalking, for one thing, and mountain-climbing, and out-of-door life, she felt assured: you could see it in his gait and in his look; you could hear it in his laugh and his singing as he went along the road. Politics, perhaps – if sarcastic verses were in his way; for there was a sharp savour running through his talk; and he took abundant interest in public affairs. Or perhaps he would be for recording the charms of some rustic maiden – some 'Jessie, the Flower o' Dumblane' – some blue-eyed and rather silent and uninteresting young person, living alone in a glen, and tending cattle or hanging out things to dry on a hedge? Well, even a song would be something. The *Chicago Citizen* might not pay very much for it, but the great and generous public might take kindly to it; and if Jack Huysen did not say something friendly about it, then she would know the reason why.

But the stiffest struggle Miss Carry ever had with any salmon was mere child's play compared with the fight she had with Ronald himself over this matter. At first he was exceedingly angry that she should have been told; but then he laughed, and said to her that there were plenty of folk in Scotland as elsewhere who wrote idle verses, but that they had the common sense to say nothing about it. If she wanted a memento of her stay in the Highlands to take back with her to America, he would give her her choice of the deer-skins he had in the shed; that would be appropriate, and she was welcome to the best of them; but as for scribblings and nonsense of that kind – no, no. On the other hand she was just as persistent, and treated him to a little gentle raillery, wondering that he had not yet outgrown the years of shyness; and finally, when everything else had failed, putting her request as a grace and courtesy to be granted to an American stranger. This was hardly fair; but she was very anxious about the matter; and she knew that her demand was founded far less on mere curiosity than on an honest desire to do him a service.

Of course he yielded; and a terrible time he had of it the night he set about selecting something to show to her. For how could she understand the circumstances in which these random things were written – these idle fancies of a summer morning – these careless love songs – these rhymed epistles in which the practical common sense and shrewd advice were much more conspicuous than any graces of art? And then again so many of them were about Meenie; and these were forbidden; the praise of Meenie – even when it was the birds and the roses and the foxgloves and the summer rills that sang of her – was not for alien eyes. But at last he lit upon some verses supposed to convey the sentiments of certain exiles met together on New Year's night in Nova Scotia; and he thought it was a simple kind of thing; at all events it would get him out of a grievous difficulty. So – for the lines had been written many a day ago, and came upon him now with a new aspect – he altered a phrase here or

there, by way of passing the time; and finally he made a fair copy. The next morning, being a Sunday, he espied Miss Carry walking down towards the river; and he overtook her and gave her this little piece to redeem his pledge.

'It's not worth much,' said he, 'but you'll understand what it is about. Burn it when you've read it – that's all I ask of ye – ' Then on he went, glad not to be cross-questioned, the faithful Harry trotting at his heels.

So she sat down on the stone parapet of the little bridge – on this hushed, still, shining morning that was quite summer-like in its calm – and opened the paper with not a little curiosity. And well enough she understood the meaning of the little piece: she knew that the Mackays¹ used to live about here; and was not Strath-Naver but a few miles off; and this the very Mudal river running underneath the bridge on which she was sitting? But here are the verses she read – and he had entitled them

ACROSS THE SEA

In Nova Scotia's clime they've met
To keep the New Year's night;
The merry lads and lasses crowd
Around the blazing light.

But father and mother sit withdrawn
To let their fancies flee
To the old, old time, and the old, old home
That's far across the sea.

And what strange sights and scenes are these
That sadden their shaded eyes?
Is it only thus they can see again
The land of the Mackays?

O there the red-deer roam at will:
And the grouse whirr on the wing;
And the curlew call, and the ptarmigan
Drink at the mountain spring;

And the hares lie snug on the hillside:
And the lusty blackcock crows;
But the river the children used to love
Through an empty valley flows.

Do they see again a young lad wait
To shelter with his plaid,
When she steals to him in the gathering dusk.
His gentle Highland maid?

Do they hear the pipes at the weddings;
Or the low sad funeral wail

¹ Pronounced *Mackise*, with the accent on the second syllable.

As the boat goes out to the island,
And the pibroch tells its tale?

O fair is Naver's strath, and fair
The strath that Mudal laves;
And dear the haunts of our childhood,
And dear the old folks' graves;

And the parting from one's native land
Is a sorrow hard to dree:
God's forgiveness to them that sent us
So far across the sea!

And is bonnie Strath-Naver shining,
As it shone in the bygone years? —
As it shines for us now – ay, ever —
Though our eyes are blind with tears.

Well, her own eyes were moist – though that was but for a moment; for when she proceeded to walk slowly and meditatively back to the inn, her mind was busy with many things; and she began to think that she had not got any way near to the understanding of this man, whom she had treated in so familiar a fashion, as boatman, and companion, and gillie – almost as valet. What lay behind those eyes of his, that glowed with so strange a light at times, and seemed capable of reading her through and through, only that the slightly tremulous eyelids came down and veiled them, or that he turned away his head? And why this strain of pathos in a nature that seemed essentially joyous and glad and careless? Not only that, but in the several discussions with her father – occasionally becoming rather warm, indeed – Ronald had been invariably on the side of the landlord, as was naturally to be expected. He had insisted that the great bulk of the land given over to deer was of no possible use to any other living creature; he had maintained the right of the landlord to clear any portion of his property of sheep and forest it, if by so doing he could gain an increase of rental; he had even maintained the right of the landlord to eject non-paying tenants from holdings clearly not capable of supporting the ever-increasing families; and so forth. But was his feeling, after all, with the people – he himself being one of the people? His stout championship of the claims and privileges of Lord Ailine – that was not incompatible with a deeper sense of the cruelty of driving the poor people away from the land of their birth and the home of their childhood? His natural sentiment as a man was not to be overborne by the fact that he was officially a dependant on Lord Ailine? These and a good many other curious problems concerning him – and concerning his possible future – occupied her until she had got back to the snug little parlour; and there, as she found her father seated in front of the blazing fire, and engaged in getting through the mighty pile of newspapers and illustrated journals and magazines that had come by the previous day's mail, she thought she might as well sit down and write a long letter to her bosom friend in Chicago, through whose intermediation these verses might discreetly be brought to the notice of Mr. Huysen. She had reasons for not asking any favour directly.

'DEAREST EM,' she wrote – after having studied a long while as to how she should begin – 'would it surprise you to know that I have at last found my *fate* in the very handsome person of a Scotch gamekeeper? Well, it aint so; don't break the furniture; but the fact is my poor brain has been wool-gathering a little in this land of wild storms and legends and romantic ballads; and to-morrow I am fleeing away to Paris – the region of clear atmosphere, and reasonable people, and cynicism; and I hope to have any lingering cobwebs of romance completely blown out of my head. Not that I would call it romance, *even if it were to happen*; I should call it merely the plain result of my father's

theories. You know he is always preaching that all men are born equal; which isn't true anyhow; he would get a little nearer the truth if he were to say that all men are born equal except hotel clerks, who are of a superior race; but wouldn't it be a joke if I were to take him at his word, and ask him how he would like a gamekeeper as his son-in-law? But you need not be afraid, my dear Em; this chipmunk has still got a little of her senses left; and I may say in the words of the poet —

"There is not in this wide world a valet so sweet" —

no, nor any Claude Melnotte of a gardener, nor any handsome coachman or groom, who could induce me to run away with him. It would be "playing it too low down on pa," as you used to say; besides, one knows how these things always end. Another besides; how do I know that he would marry me, even if I asked him? — and I *should* have to ask him, for he would never ask me. Now, Em, if you don't burn this letter the moment you have read it, I will murder you, as sure as you are alive.

'Besides, it is a shame. He is a real good fellow; and no such nonsense has got into his head, I know. I know it, because I tried him twice for fun; I got him to tie my cap under my chin; and I made him take my pocket-handkerchief out of my breast-pocket when I was fighting a salmon (I caught *five in one day*— monsters!), and do you think the bashful young gentleman was embarrassed and showed trembling fingers? Not a bit; I think he thought me rather a nuisance — in the polite phraseology of the English people. But I wish I could tell you about him, really. It's all very well to say he is very handsome and hardy-looking and weather-tanned; but how can I describe to you how respectful his manner is, and yet always keeping his own self-respect, and he won't quarrel with me — he only laughs when I have been talking absolute folly — though papa and he have rare fights, for he has very positive opinions, and sticks to his guns, I can tell you. But the astonishing thing is his education; he has been nowhere, but seems to know everything; he seems to be quite content to be a gamekeeper, though his brother took his degree at college and is now in the Scotch Church. I tell you he makes me feel pretty small at times. The other night papa and I went along to his cottage after dinner, and found him reading Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*— lent him by his brother, it appeared. I borrowed the first volume — but, oh, squawks! it is a good deal too stiff work for the likes of me. And then there is never the least pretence or show, but all the other way; he will talk to you as long as you like about his deerstalking and about what he has seen his dogs do; but never a word about books or writing — unless you happen to have found out.

'Now I'm coming to business. I have never seen any writing of his until this morning, when, after long goading, he showed me a little poem which I will copy out and enclose in this letter when I have finished. Now, darling Em, I want you to do me a real kindness; the first time you see Jack Huysen — I don't want to ask the favour of him direct — will you ask him to print it in the *Citizen*, and to say something nice about it? I don't want any patronage: understand — I mean let Jack Huysen understand — that Ronald Strang is a particular *friend* of both my father and myself; and that I am sending you this without his authority, but merely to give him a little pleasant surprise, perhaps, when he sees it in print; and perhaps to tempt him to give us some more. I should like him to print a volume, — for he is really far above his present station, and it is absurd he should not take his *place*, — and if he did that I know of a young party who would buy 500 copies even if she were to go back home without a single Paris bonnet. Tell Jack Huysen there is to be *no patronage*, mind; there is to be nothing about the peasant poet, or anything like that; for this man is a *gentleman*, if I know anything about it; and I won't have him trotted out as a phenomenon — to be discussed by the dudes who smoke cigarettes in Lincoln Park. If you could only talk to him for ten minutes it would be better than fifty letters, but I suppose there are *attractions nearer home* just at present. My kind remembrances to T.T.

'I forgot to say that I am quite ignorant as to whether newspapers ever pay for poetry — I mean if a number of pieces were sent? Or could Jack Huysen find a publisher who would undertake a volume; my father will see he does not lose anything by it. I really want to do something for this Ronald, for

he has been so kind and attentive to us; and before long it may become more difficult to do so; for of course a man of his abilities is not likely to remain as he is; indeed, he has already formed plans for getting away altogether from his present way of life, and whatever he tries to do I know he will do – and easily. But if I talk any more about him, you will be making very *very* mistaken guesses; and I won't give you the delight of imagining even for a moment that I have been caught at last; when the sad event arrives there will be time enough for you to take your cake-walk of triumph up and down the room – of course to *Dancing in the Barn*, as in the days of old.'

Here followed a long and rambling chronicle of her travels in Europe since her last letter, all of which may be omitted; the only point to be remarked was that her very brief experiences of Scotland took up a disproportionately large portion of the space, and that she was minute in her description of the incidents and excitement of salmon-fishing. Then followed an outline of her present plans; a string of questions; a request for an instant reply; and finally —

'With dearest love, old Em,
'Thine,
'Carry.'

And then she had to copy the verses; but when she had done that, and risen, and gone to the window for a time, some misgiving seemed to enter her mind, for she returned to the table, and sate down again, and wrote this postscript:

'Perhaps, after all, you won't see much in this little piece; if you were here, among the very places, and affected by all the old stories and romantic traditions and the wild scenery, it might be different. Since I've been to Europe I've come to see what's the trouble about our reading English history and literature at home; why, you can't do it, you can't understand it, unless you have lived in an atmosphere that is just full of poetry and romance, and meeting people whose names tell you they belong to the families who did great things in history centuries and centuries ago. I can't explain it very well – not even to myself; but I feel it; why, you can't take a single day's drive in England without coming across a hundred things of interest – Norman churches, and the tombs of Saxon Kings, and old abbeys, and monasteries, and battlefields, and, just as interesting as any, farm-houses of the sixteenth century in their quaint old-fashioned orchards. And as for Scotland, why, it is just steeped to the lips in poetry and tradition; the hills and the glens have all their romantic stories of the clans, many of them very pathetic; and you want to see these wild and lonely places before you can understand the legends. And in southern Scotland too – what could any one at home make of such a simple couplet as this —

"The King sits in Dunfermline town,
Drinking the blude-red wine;"

but when you come near Dunfermline and see the hill where Malcolm Canmore built his castle in the eleventh century, and when you are told that it was from this very town that Sir Patrick Spens and the Scots lords set out for "Norroway o'er the faem," everything comes nearer to you. In America, I remember very well, Flodden Field sounded to us something very far away, that we couldn't take much interest in; but if you were here just now, dear Em, and told that a bit farther north there was a river that the Earl of Caithness and his clan had to cross when they went to Flodden, and that the people living there at this very day won't go near it on the anniversary of the battle, because on that day the ghosts of the earl and his men, all clad in green tartan, come home again and are seen to cross the river, wouldn't that interest you? In America we have got nothing behind us; when you leave the day before yesterday you don't want to go back. But here, in the most vulgar superstitions and customs, you come upon the strangest things. Would you believe it, less than twenty miles from this place there is a little lake that is supposed to cure the most desperate diseases – diseases that the

doctors have given up; and the poor people meet at midnight, on the first Monday after the change of the moon, and then they throw a piece of money into the lake, and go in and dip themselves three times, and then they must get home before sunrise. Perhaps it is very absurd, but they belong to that same imaginative race of people who have left so many weird stories and poetical legends behind them; and what I say is that you want to come over and breathe this atmosphere of tradition and romance, and see the places, before you can quite understand the charm of all that kind of literature. And perhaps you don't find much in these verses about the poor people who have been driven away from their native strath? Well, they don't claim to be much. They were never meant for you to see. But yes, I do think you will like them; and anyhow Jack Huysen has got to like them, and treat them hospitably, unless he is anxious to have his hair raised.

'Gracious me, I think I must hire a hall. I have just read this scrawl over. Sounds rather muzzy, don't it? But it's this poor brain of mine that has got full of confusion and cobwebs and theories of equality, when I wasn't attending to it. My arms had the whole day's work to do – as they remind me at this minute; and the Cerebral Hemispheres laid their heads, or their half-heads together, when I was busy with the salmon; and entered into a conspiracy against me; and began to make pictures – ghosts, phantom earls, and romantic shepherds and peasant-poets, and I don't know what kind of dreams of a deer stalker walking down Wabash Avenue. But, as I said, to-morrow I start for Paris, thank goodness; and in that calmer atmosphere I hope to come to my senses again; and I will send you a long account of Lily Selden's marriage – though your last letter to me was a fraud: what do I care about the C.M.C.A.? *This* letter, anyhow, you must burn; I don't feel like reading it over again myself, or perhaps I would save you the trouble; but you may depend on it that the one I shall send you from Paris will be quite sane.

'Second P.S. – Of course you must manage Jack Huysen with a little discretion. I don't want to be drawn into it any more than I can help; I mean, I would just hate to write to him direct and ask him for a particular favour; but this is a very little one, and you know him as well as any of us. And mind you burn this letter – instantly – the moment you have read it – for it is just full of nonsense and wool-gathering; and *it will not occur again. Toujours a toi. C.H.*'

'What have you been writing all this time?' her father said, when she rose.

'A letter – to Emma Kerfoot.'

'It will make her stare. You don't often write long letters.'

'I do not,' said she, gravely regarding the envelope; and then she added solemnly: 'But this is the record of a chapter in my life that is now closed for ever – at least, I hope so.'

CHAPTER III

HESITATIONS

The waggonette stood at the door; Miss Carry's luggage was put in; and her father was waiting to see her off. But the young lady herself seemed unwilling to take the final step; twice she went back into the inn, on some pretence or another; and each time she came out she looked impatiently around, as if wondering at the absence of some one.

'Well, ain't you ready yet?' her father asked.

'I want to say good-bye to Ronald,' she said half angrily.

'Oh, nonsense – you are not going to America. Why, you will be back in ten days or a fortnight. See here, Carry,' he added, 'are you sure you don't want me to go part of the way with you?'

'Not at all,' she said promptly. 'It is impossible for Mary to mistake the directions I wrote to her; and I shall find her in the Station Hotel at Inverness all right. Don't you worry about me, pappa.'

She glanced along the road again, in the direction of the keeper's cottage; but there was no one in sight.

'Pappa dear,' she said, in an undertone – for there were one or two onlookers standing by – 'if Ronald should decide on giving up his place here, and trying what you suggested, you'll have to stand by him.'

'Oh yes, I'll see him through,' was the complacent answer. 'I should take him to be the sort of man who can look after himself; but if he wants any kind of help – well, here I am; I won't go back on a man who is acting on my advice. Why, if he were to come out to Chicago –'

'Oh no, not Chicago, pappa,' she said, somewhat earnestly, 'not to Chicago. I am sure he will be more at home – he will be happier – in his own country.'

She looked around once more; and then she stepped into the waggonette.

'He might have come to see me off,' she said, a little proudly. 'Good-bye, pappa dear – I will send you a telegram as soon as I get to Paris.'

The two horses sprang forward; Miss Carry waved her lily hand; and then set to work to make herself comfortable with wraps and rugs, for the morning was chill. She thought it was very unfriendly of Ronald not to have come to say good-bye. And what was the reason of it? Of course he could know nothing of the nonsense she had written to her friend in Chicago.

'Have you not seen Ronald about anywhere?' she asked of the driver.

'No, mem,' answered that exceedingly shy youth, 'he wass not about all the morning. But I heard the crack of a gun; maybe he wass on the hill.'

And presently he said —

'I'm thinking that's him along the road – it's two of his dogs whatever.'

And indeed this did turn out to be Ronald who was coming striding along the road, with his gun over his shoulder, a brace of setters at his heels, and something dangling from his left hand. The driver pulled up his horses.

'I've brought ye two or three golden plover to take with ye, Miss Hodson,' Ronald said – and he handed up the birds.

Well, she was exceedingly pleased to find that he had not neglected her, nay, that he had been especially thinking of her and her departure. But what should she do with these birds in a hotel?

'It's so kind of you,' she said, 'but really I'm afraid they're – would you not rather give them to my father?'

'Ye must not go away empty-handed,' said he, with good-humoured insistence; and then it swiftly occurred to her that perhaps this was some custom of the neighbourhood; and so she accepted the little parting gift with a very pretty speech of thanks.

He raised his cap, and was going on.

'Ronald,' she called, and he turned.

'I wish you would tell me,' she said – and there was a little touch of colour in the pretty, pale, interesting face – 'if there is anything I could bring from London that would help you – I mean books about chemistry – or – or – about trees – or instruments for land-surveying – I am sure I could get them –'

He laughed, in a doubtful kind of a way.

'I'm obliged to ye,' he said, 'but it's too soon to speak about that. I havena made up my mind yet.'

'Not yet?'

'No.'

'But you will?'

He said nothing.

'Good-bye, then.'

She held out her hand, so that he could not refuse to take it. So they parted; and the horses' hoofs rang again in the silence of the valley; and she sat looking after the disappearing figure and the meekly following dogs. And then, in the distance, she thought she could make out some faint sound: was he singing to himself as he strode along towards the little hamlet?

'At all events,' she said to herself, with just a touch of pique, 'he does not seem much downhearted at my going away.' And little indeed did she imagine that this song he was thus carelessly and unthinkingly singing was all about Meenie, and red and white roses, and trifles light and joyous as the summer air. For not yet had black care got a grip of his heart.

But this departure of Miss Carry for the south now gave him leisure to attend to his own affairs and proper duties, which had suffered somewhat from his attendance in the coble; and it was not until all these were put straight that he addressed himself to the serious consideration of the ambitious and daring project that had been placed before him. Hitherto it had been pretty much of an idle speculation – a dream, in short, that looked very charming and fascinating as the black-eyed young lady from over the seas sate in the stern of the boat and chatted through the idle hours. Her imagination did not stay to regard the immediate and practical difficulties and risks; all these seemed already surmounted; Ronald had assumed the position to which he was entitled by his abilities and personal character; she only wondered which part of Scotland he would be living in when next her father and herself visited Europe; and whether they might induce him to go over with them for a while to the States. But when Ronald himself, in cold blood, came to consider ways and means, there was no such plain and easy sailing. Not that he hesitated about cutting himself adrift from his present moorings; he had plenty of confidence in himself, and knew that he could always earn a living with his ten fingers, whatever happened. Then he had between £80 and £90 lodged in a savings bank in Inverness; and out of that he could pay for any classes he might have to attend, or perhaps offer a modest premium if he wished to get into a surveyor's office for a short time. But there were so many things to think of. What should he do about Maggie, for example? Then Lord Ailine had always been a good master to him: would it not seem ungrateful that he should throw up his situation without apparent reason? And so forth, and so forth, through cogitations long and anxious; and many a half-hour on the hillside and many a half-hour by the slumbering peat-fire was given to this great project; but always there was one side of the question that he shut out from his mind. For how could he admit to himself that this lingering hesitation – this dread, almost, of what lay await for him in the future – had anything to do with the going away from Meenie, and the leaving behind him, and perhaps for ever, the hills and streams and lonely glens that were all steeped in the magic and witchery of her presence? Was it not time to be done with idle fancies? And if, in the great city – in Edinburgh or Glasgow, as the case might be – he should fall to thinking of Ben Loyal and Bonnie Strath-Naver, and the long, long days on Clebrig; and Meenie coming home in the evening from her wanderings by Mudal-Water, with a few wild-flowers, perhaps, or a bit of white heather, but always with her beautiful blue-gray Highland

eyes so full of kindness as she stopped for a few minutes' friendly chatting – well, that would be a pretty picture to look back upon, all lambent and clear in the tender colours that memory loves to use. A silent picture, of course: there would be no sound of the summer rills, nor the sweeter sound of Meenie's voice; but not a sad picture; only remote and ethereal, as if the years had come between, and made everything distant and pale and dreamlike.

The first definite thing that he did was to write to his brother in Glasgow, acquainting him with his plans, and begging him to obtain some further particulars about the Highland and Agricultural Society's certificates. The answer that came back from Glasgow was most encouraging; for the Rev. Alexander Strang, though outwardly a heavy and lethargic man, had a shrewd head enough, and was an enterprising shifty person, not a little proud of the position that he had won for himself, and rather inclined to conceal from his circle of friends – who were mostly members of his congregation – the fact that his brother was merely a gamekeeper in the Highlands. Nay, more, he was willing to assist; he would take Maggie into his house, so that there might be no difficulty in that direction; and in the meantime he would see what were the best class-books on the subjects named, so that Ronald might be working away at them in these comparatively idle spring and summer months, and need not give up his situation prematurely. There was even some hint thrown out that perhaps Ronald might board with his brother; but this was not pressed; for the fact was that Mrs. Alexander was a severely rigid disciplinarian, and on the few occasions on which Ronald had been their guest she had given both brothers to understand that the frivolous gaiety of Ronald's talk, and the independence of his manners, and his Gallio-like indifference about the fierce schisms and heart-burnings in the Scotch Church were not, in her opinion, in consonance with the atmosphere that ought to prevail in a Free Church minister's house. But on the whole the letter was very friendly and hopeful; and Ronald was enjoined to let his brother know when his decision should be finally taken, and in what way assistance could be rendered him.

One night the little Maggie stole away through the dark to the Doctor's cottage. There was a light in the window of Meenie's room; she could hear the sound of the piano; no doubt Meenie was practising and alone; and on such occasions a visit from Maggie was but little interruption. And so the smaller girl went boldly towards the house and gained admission, and was proceeding upstairs without any ceremony, when the sudden cessation of the music caused her to stop. And then she heard a very simple and pathetic air begin – just touched here and there with a few chords: and was Meenie, tired with the hard work of the practising, allowing herself this little bit of quiet relaxation? She was singing too – though so gently that Maggie could scarcely make out the words. But she knew the song – had not Meenie sung it many times before to her? – and who but Meenie could put such tenderness and pathos into the simple air? She had almost to imagine the words – so gentle was the voice that went with those lightly-touched chords —

'The sun rase sae rosy, the gray hills adorning,
Light sprang the laverock, and mounted on hie,
When true to the tryst o' blythe May's dewy morning,
Jeanie cam' linking out owre the green lea.
To mark her impatience I crap 'mong the brackens,
Aft, aft to the kent gate she turned her black e'e;
Then lying down dowilie, sighed, by the willow tree,
"I am asleep, do not waken me."²

² 'I am asleep, do not waken me' is the English equivalent of the Gaelic name of the air, which is a very old one, and equally pathetic in its Irish and Highland versions.

Then there was silence. The little Maggie waited; for this song was a great favourite with Ronald, who himself sometimes attempted it; and she would be able to tell him when she got home that she had heard Meenie sing it – and he always listened with interest to anything, even the smallest particulars, she could tell him about Meenie and about what she had done or said. But where were the other verses? She waited and listened; the silence was unbroken. And so she tapped lightly at the door and entered.

And then something strange happened. For when Maggie shut the door behind her and went forward, Meenie did not at once turn her head to see who this was, but had hastily whipped out her handkerchief and passed it over her eyes. And when she did turn, it was with a kind of look of bravery – as if to dare any one to say that she had been crying – though there were traces of tears on her cheeks.

'Is it you, Maggie? I am glad to see you,' she managed to say.

The younger girl was rather frightened and sorely concerned as well.

'But what is it, Meenie dear?' she said, going and taking her hand. 'Are you in trouble?'

'No, no,' her friend said, with an effort to appear quite cheerful, 'I was thinking of many things – I scarcely know what. And now take off your things and sit down, Maggie, and tell me all about this great news. It was only this afternoon that my father learnt that you and your brother were going away; and he would not believe it at first, till he saw Ronald himself. And it is true, after all? Dear me, what a change there will be!'

She spoke quite in her usual manner now; and her lips were no longer trembling, but smiling; and the Highland eyes were clear, and as full of kindness as ever.

'But it is a long way off, Meenie,' the smaller girl began to explain quickly, when she had taken her seat by the fire, 'and Ronald is so anxious to please everybody, and – and that is why I came along to ask you what you think best.'

'I?' said Meenie, with a sudden slight touch of reserve.

'It'll not be a nice thing going away among strange folk,' said her companion, 'but I'll no grumble if it's to do Ronald good; and even among strange folk – well, I don't care as long as I have Ronald and you, Meenie. And it's to Glasgow, and not to Edinburgh, he thinks he'll have to go; and then you will be in Glasgow too; so I do not mind anything else. It will not be so lonely for any of us; and we can spend the evenings together – oh no, it will not be lonely at all –'

'But, Maggie,' the elder girl said gravely, 'I am not going to Glasgow.'

Her companion looked up quickly, with frightened eyes.

'But you said you were going, Meenie!'

'Oh no,' the other said gently. 'My mother has often talked of it – and I suppose I may have to go some time; but my father is against it; and I know I am not going at present anyway.'

'And you are staying here – and – and Ronald and me – we will be by ourselves in Glasgow!' the other exclaimed, as if this prospect were too terrible to be quite comprehended as yet.

'But if it is needful he should go?' Meenie said. 'People have often to part from their friends like that.'

'Yes, and it's no much matter when they have plenty of friends,' said the smaller girl, with her eyes becoming moist, 'but, Meenie, I havena got one but you.'

'Oh no, you must not say that,' her friend remonstrated. 'Why, there is your brother in Glasgow, and his family; I am sure they will be kind to you. And Ronald will make plenty of friends wherever he goes – you can see that for yourself; and do you think you will be lonely in a great town like Glasgow? It is the very place to make friends, and plenty of them —'

'Oh, I don't know what to do – I don't know what to do, if you are not going to Glasgow, Meenie!' she broke in. 'I wonder if it was that that Ronald meant. He asked me whether I would like to stay here or go with him, for Mrs. Murray has offered to take me in, and I would have to help at keeping the books, and that is very kind of them, I am sure, for I did not think I could be of any use to anybody. And you are to be here in Inver-Mudal – and Ronald away in Glasgow –'

Well, it was a bewildering thing. These were the two people she cared for most of all in the world; and virtually she was called upon to choose between them. And if she had a greater loyalty and reverence towards her brother, still, Meenie was her sole girl-friend, and monitress, and counsellor. What would her tasks be without Meenie's approval; how could she get on with her knitting and sewing without Meenie's aid; what would the days be like without the witchery of Meenie's companionship – even if that were limited to a passing word or a smile? Ronald had not sought to influence her choice; indeed, the alternative had scarcely been considered, for she believed that Meenie was going to Glasgow also; and with her hero brother and her beautiful girl-friend both there, what more could she wish for in the world? But now – ?

Well, Meenie, in her wise and kind way, strove to calm the anxiety of the girl; and her advice was altogether in favour of Maggie's going to Glasgow with her brother Ronald, if that were equally convenient to him, and of no greater expense than her remaining in Inver-Mudal with Mrs. Murray.

'For you know he wants somebody to look after him,' Meenie continued, with her eyes rather averted, 'and if it does not matter so much here about his carelessness of being wet and cold, because he has plenty of health and exercise, it will be very different in Glasgow, where there should be some one to bid him be more careful.'

'But he pays no heed to me,' the little sister sighed, 'unless I can tell him you have been saying so-and-so – then he listens. He is very strange. He has never once worn the blue jersey that I knitted for him. He asked me a lot of questions about how it was begun; and I told him as little as I could about the help you had given me,' she continued evasively, 'and when the snow came on, I thought he would wear it; but no – he put it away in the drawer with his best clothes, and it's lying there all neatly folded up – and what is the use of that? If you were going to Glasgow, Meenie, it would be quite different. It will be very lonely there.'

'Lonely!' the other exclaimed; 'with your brother Ronald, and your other brother's family, and all their friends. And then you will be able to go to school and have more regular teaching – Ronald spoke once or twice to me about that.'

'Yes, indeed,' the little Maggie said; but the prospect did not cheer her much; and for some minutes they both sate silent, she staring into the fire. And then she said bitterly —

'I wish the American people had never come here. It is all their doing. It never would have come into Ronald's head to leave Inver-Mudal but for them. And where else will he be so well known – and – and every one speaking well of him – and every one so friendly –'

'But, Maggie, these things are always happening,' her companion remonstrated. 'Look at the changes my father has had to make.'

'And I wonder if we are never to come back to Inver-Mudal, Meenie?' the girl said suddenly, with appealing eyes.

Meenie tried to laugh, and said —

'Who can tell? It is the way of the world for people to come and go. And Glasgow is a big place – perhaps you would not care to come back after having made plenty of friends there.'

'My friends will always be here, and nowhere else,' the smaller girl said, with emphasis. 'Oh, Meenie, do you think if Ronald were to get on well and make more money than he has now, he would come back here, and bring me too, for a week maybe, just to see every one again?'

'I cannot tell you that, Maggie,' the elder girl said, rather absently.

After this their discussion of the strange and unknown future that lay before them languished somehow; for Meenie seemed preoccupied, and scarcely as blithe and hopeful as she had striven to appear. But when Maggie rose to return home – saying that it was time for her to be looking after Ronald's supper – her friend seemed to pull herself together somewhat, and at once and cheerfully accepted Maggie's invitation to come and have tea with her the following afternoon.

'For you have been so little in to see us lately,' the small Maggie said; 'and Ronald always engaged with the American people – and often in the evening too as well as the whole day long.'

'But I must make a great deal of you now that you are going away,' said Miss Douglas, smiling.
'And Ronald – will I ask him to stay in till you come?'

But here there was some hesitation.

'Oh no, I would not do that – no doubt he is busy just now with his preparations for going away.
I would not say anything to him – you and I will have tea together by ourselves.'

The smaller girl looked up timidly.

'Ronald is going away too, Meenie.'

Perhaps there was a touch of reproach in the tone; at all events Meenie said, after a moment's embarrassment —

'Of course I should be very glad if he happened to be in the house – and – and had the time to spare; but I think he will understand that, Maggie, without your saying as much to him.'

'He gave plenty of his time to the American young lady,' said Maggie, rather proudly.

'But I thought you and she were great friends,' Meenie said, in some surprise.

'It takes a longer time than that to make friends,' the girl said; and by and by she left.

Then Meenie went up to her room again, and sate down in front of the dull, smouldering peat-fire, with its heavy lumps of shadow, and its keen edges of crimson, and its occasional flare of flame and shower of sparks. There were many pictures there – of distant things; of the coming spring-time, with all the new wonder and gladness somehow gone out of it; and of the long long shining summer days, and Inver-Mudal grown lonely: and of the busy autumn time, with the English people come from the south, and no Ronald there, to manage everything for them. For her heart was very affectionate; and she had but few friends; and Glasgow was a great distance away. There were some other fancies too, and self-questionings and perhaps even self-reproaches, that need not be mentioned here. When, by and by, she rose and went to the piano, which was still open, it was not to resume her seat. She stood absently staring at the keys – for these strange pictures followed her; and indeed that one half-unconscious trial of '*I am asleep, do not waken me*' had been quite enough for her in her present mood.

CHAPTER IV

'AMONG THE UNTRODDEN WAYS.'

Yes; it soon became clear that Meenie Douglas, in view of this forthcoming departure, had resolved to forego something of the too obvious reserve she had recently imposed on herself – if, indeed, that maidenly shrinking and shyness had not been rather a matter of instinct than of will. When Ronald came home on the following evening she was seated with Maggie in the old familiar way at a table plentifully littered with books, patterns, and knitting; and when she shook hands with him, her timidly uplifted eyes had much of the old friendliness in them, and her smile of welcome was pleasant to see. It was he who was diffident and very respectful. For if her mother had enjoined her to be a little more distant in manner towards this one or the other of those around her – well, that was quite intelligible; that was quite right; and he could not complain; but on the other hand, if the girl herself, in this very small domestic circle, seemed rather anxious to put aside those barriers which were necessary out of doors, he would not presume on her good-nature. And yet – and yet – he could not help thawing a little; for she was very kind, and even merry withal; and her eyes were like the eyes of the Meenie of old.

'I am sure Maggie will be glad to get away from Inver-Mudal,' she was saying, 'for she will not find anywhere a schoolmistress as hard as I have been. But maybe she will not have to go to school at all, if she has to keep house for you?'

'But she'll no have to keep house for me,' Ronald said at once. 'If she goes to Glasgow, she'll be much better with my brother's family, for that will be a home for her.'

'And where will you go, Ronald?' she said.

'Oh, into a lodging – I can fend for myself.'

At this she looked grave – nay, she did not care to conceal her disapproval. For had she not been instructing Maggie in the mysteries of housekeeping in a town – as far as these were known to herself: and had not the little girl showed great courage; and declared there was nothing she would not attempt rather than be separated from her brother Ronald?

'It would never do,' said he, 'to leave the lass alone in the house all day in a big town. It's very well here, where she has neighbours and people to look after her from time to time; but among strangers –'

Then he looked at the table.

'But where's the tea ye said ye would ask Miss Douglas in to?'

'We were so busy with the Glasgow housekeeping,' Meenie said, laughing, 'that we forgot all about it.'

'I'll go and get it ready now,' the little Maggie said, and she went from the room, leaving these two alone.

He was a little embarrassed; and she was also. There had been no *amantium irae* of any kind; but all the same the *integratio amoris* was just a trifle difficult; for she on her side was anxious to have their old relations re-established during the brief period that would elapse ere he left the neighbourhood, and yet she was hesitating and uncertain; while he on his side maintained a strictly respectful reserve. He 'knew his place;' his respect towards her was part of his own self-respect; and if it did not occur to him that it was rather hard upon Meenie that all the advances towards a complete rehabilitation of their friendship should come from her, that was because he did not know that she was moved by any such wish, and also because he was completely ignorant of a good deal else that had happened of late. Of course, certain things were obvious enough. Clearly the half-frightened, distant, and yet regretful look with which she had recently met and parted from him when by chance they passed each other in the road was no longer in her eyes; there was a kind of appeal for friendliness in her manner towards him; she seemed to say, 'Well, you are going away; don't let us forget the old terms on which we used

to meet.' And not only did he quickly respond to that feeling, but also he was abundantly grateful to her; did not he wish to carry away with him the pleasantest memories of this beautiful, sweet-natured friend, who had made all the world magical to him for a while, who had shown him the grace and dignity and honour of true womanhood, and made him wonder no less at the charm of her clear-shining simplicity and naturalness? The very name of 'Love Meenie' would be as the scent of a rose – as the song of a lark – for him through all the long coming years.

'It will make a great change about here,' said she, with her eyes averted, 'your going away.'

'There's no one missed for long,' he answered, in his downright fashion. 'Where people go, people come; the places get filled up.'

'Yes, but sometimes they are not quite the same,' said she rather gently. She was thinking of the newcomer. Would he be the universal favourite that Ronald was – always good-natured and laughing, but managing everybody and everything; lending a hand at the sheep-shearing or playing the pipes at a wedding – anything to keep life moving along briskly; and always ready to give her father a day's hare-shooting or a turn at the pools of Mudal-Water when the spates began to clear? She knew quite well – for often had she heard it spoken of – that no one could get on as well as Ronald with the shepherds at the time of the heather-burning: when on the other moors the shepherds and keepers were growling and quarrelling like rival leashes of collies, on Lord Ailine's ground everything was peace and quietness and good humour. And then she had a vague impression that the next keeper would be merely a keeper; whereas Ronald was – Ronald.

'I'm sure I was half ashamed,' said he, 'when I got his lordship's letter. It was as fair an offer as one man could make to another; or rather, half a dozen offers; for he said he would raise my wage, if that was what was wrong; or he would let me have another lad to help me in the kennels; or, if I was tired of the Highlands he would get me a place at his shooting in the south. Well, I was sweirt to trouble his lordship with my small affairs; but after that I couldna but sit down and write to him the real reason of my leaving –'

'And I'm certain,' said she quickly, 'that he will write back and offer you any help in his power.'

'No, no,' said he, with a kind of laugh, 'the one letter is enough – if it ever comes to be a question of a written character. But it's just real friendly and civil of him; and if I could win up here for a week or a fortnight in August, I would like well to lend them a hand and set them going; for it will be a good year for the grouse, I'm thinking –'

'Oh, will you be coming to see us in August?' she said, with her eyes suddenly and rather wistfully lighting up.

'Well, I don't know how I may be situated,' said he. 'And there's the railway expense – though I would not mind that much if I had the chance otherwise; for his lordship has been a good master to me; and I would just like to lend him a hand, and start the new man with the management of the dogs and the beats. That's one thing Lord Ailine will do for me, I hope: I hope he will let me have a word about the man that's coming in my place; I would not like to have a cantankerous ill-tempered brute of a fellow coming in to have charge of my dogs. They're the bonniest lot in Sutherlandshire.'

All this was practical enough; and meanwhile she had set to work to clear the table, to make way for Maggie. When the young handmaiden appeared with the tea-things he left the room for a few minutes, and presently returned with a polecat-skin, carefully dressed and smoothed, in his hand.

'Here's a bit thing,' said he, 'I wish ye would take, if it's of any use to you. Or if ye could tell me anything ye wished it made into, I could have that done when I go south. And if your mother would like one or two of the deer-skins, I'm sure she's welcome to them; they're useful about a house.'

'Indeed, you are very kind, Ronald,' said she, flushing somewhat, 'and too kind, indeed – for you know that ever since we have known you all these kindnesses have always been on one side – and – and – we have never had a chance of doing anything in return for you –'

'Oh, nonsense,' said he good-naturedly. 'Well, there is one thing your father could do for me – if he would take my gun, and my rifle, and rods and reels, and just keep them in good working

order, that would be better than taking them to Glasgow and getting them spoiled with rust and want of use. I don't want to part with them altogether; for they're old friends; and I would like to have them left in safe keeping —

She laughed lightly.

'And that is your way of asking a favour – to offer my father the loan of all these things. Well, I am sure he will be very glad to take charge of them –'

'And to use them,' said he, 'to use them; for that is the sure way of keeping them in order.'

'But perhaps the new keeper may not be so friendly?'

'Oh, I will take care about that,' said he confidently; 'and in any case you know it was his lordship said your father might have a day on the Mudal-Water whenever he liked. And what do you think, now, about the little skin there?'

'I think I will keep it as it is – just as you have given it to me,' she said simply.

In due course they had tea together; but that afternoon or evening meal is a substantial affair in the north-cold beef, ham, scones, oatmeal cake, marmalade, jam, and similar things all making their appearance – and one not to be lightly hurried over. And Meenie was so much at home now; and there was so much to talk over; and she was so hopeful. Of course, Ronald must have holiday-times, like other people; and where would he spend these, if he did not come back to his old friends? And he would have such chances as no mere stranger could have, coming through on the mail-cart and asking everywhere for a little trout-fishing. Ronald would have a day or two's stalking from Lord Ailene; and there was the loch; and Mudal-Water; and if the gentlemen were after the grouse, would they not be glad to have an extra gun on the hill for a day or two, just to make up a bag for them?

'And then,' said Meenie, with a smile, 'who knows but that Ronald may in time be able to have a shooting of his own? Stranger things have happened.'

When tea was over and the things removed he lit his pipe, and the girls took to their knitting. And never, he thought, had Meenie looked so pretty and pleased and quickly responsive with her clear and happy eyes. He forgot all about Mrs. Douglas's forecast as to the future estate of her daughter; he forgot all about the Stuarts of Glengask and Orosay; this was the Meenie whom Mudal knew, whom Clebrig had charge of, who was the friend and companion of the birds and the wild-flowers and the summer streams. What a wonderful thing it was to see her small fingers so deftly at work; when she looked up the room seemed full of light and entrancement; her sweet low laugh found an echo in the very core of his heart. And they all of them, for this one happy evening, seemed to forget that soon there was to be an end. They were together; the world shut out; the old harmony re-established, or nearly re-established; and Meenie was listening to his reading of 'the Eve of St. Agnes' – in the breathless hush of the little room – or she was praying, and in vain, for him to bring his pipes and play 'Lord Lovat's Lament,' or they were merely idly chatting and laughing, while the busy work of the fingers went on. And sometimes he sat quite silent, listening to the other two; and her voice seemed to fill the room with music; and he wondered whether he could carry away in his memory some accurate recollection of the peculiar, soft, rich tone, that made the simplest things sound valuable. It was a happy evening.

But when she rose to go away she grew graver; and as she and Ronald went along the road together – it was very dark, though there were a few stars visible here and there – she said to him in rather a low voice —

'Well, Ronald, the parting between friends is not very pleasant, but I am sure I hope it will all be for the best, now that you have made up your mind to it. And every one seems to think you will do well.'

'Oh, as for that,' said he, 'that is all right. If the worst comes to the worst, there is always the Black Watch.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, they're always sending the Forty-Second into the thick of it, no matter what part of the world the fighting is, so that a man has a good chance. I suppose I'm not too old to get enlisted; sometimes I wish I had thought of it when I was a lad – I don't know that I would like anything better than to be a sergeant in the Black Watch. And I'm sure I would serve three years for no pay at all if I could only get one single chance of winning the V.C. But it comes to few; it's like the big stag – it's there when ye least expect it; and a man's hand is not just always ready, and steady. But I'm sure ye needna bother about what's going to happen to me – that's of small account.'

'It is of very great account to your friends, at all events,' said she valiantly, 'and you must not forget, when you are far enough away from here, that you have friends here who are thinking of you and always wishing you well. It will be easy for you to forget; you will have all kinds of things to do, and many people around you; but the others here may often think of you, and wish to hear from you. It is the one that goes away that has the best of it, I think – among the excitement of meeting strange scenes and strange faces –'

'But I am not likely to forget,' said he, rather peremptorily; and they walked on in silence.

Presently she said —

'I have a little album that I wish you would write something in before you go away altogether.'

'Oh yes, I will do that,' said he, 'and gladly.'

'But I mean something of your own,' she said rather more timidly.

'Why, but who told you —'

'Oh, every one knows, surely!' said she. 'And why should you conceal it? There were the verses that you wrote about Mrs. Semple's little girl – I saw them when I was at Tongue last – and indeed I think they are quite beautiful: will you write out a copy of them in my album?'

'Or something else, perhaps,' said he – for instantly it flashed upon him that it was something better than a mere copy that was needed for Meenie's book. Here, indeed, was a chance. If there was any inspiration to be gained from these wild hills and straths and lonely lakes, now was the time for them to be propitious; would not Clebrig – the giant Clebrig – whose very child Meenie was – come to his aid, that so he might present to her some fragment of song or rhyme not unworthy to be added to her little treasury?

'I will send for the book to-morrow,' said he.

'I hope it will not give you too much trouble,' said she, as they reached the small gate, 'but it is very pleasant to turn over the leaves and see the actual writing of your friends, and think of when you last saw them and where they are now. And that seems to be the way with most of our friends; I suppose it is because we have moved about so; but there is scarcely any one left – and if it was not for a letter occasionally, or a dip into that album, I should think we were almost alone in the world. Well, good-night, Ronald – or will you come in and have a chat with my father?'

'I am afraid it is rather late,' he said.

'Well, good-night.'

'Good-night, Miss Douglas,' said he, and then he walked slowly back to his home.

And indeed he was in no mood to turn to the scientific volumes that had already arrived from Glasgow. His heart was all afire because of the renewal of Meenie's kindness; and the sound of her voice was still in his ears; and quite naturally he took out that blotting-pad full of songs and fragments of songs, to glance over them here and there, and see if amongst them there was any one likely to recall to him when he was far away from Inver-Mudal the subtle mystery and charm of her manner and look. And then he began to think what a stranger coming to Inver-Mudal would see in Meenie? Perhaps only the obvious things – the pretty oval of the cheek and chin, the beautiful proud mouth, the wide-apart contemplative eyes? And perhaps these would be sufficient to attract? He began to laugh with scorn at this stranger – who could only see these obvious things – who knew nothing about Meenie, and the sweetness of her ways, her shrewd common-sense and the frank courage and honour of her mind. And what if she were to turn coquette under the influence of this alien admiration? Or

perhaps become sharply proud? Well, he set to work – out of a kind of whimsicality – and in time had scribbled out this —

FLOWER AUCTION

Who will buy pansies?
There are her eyes,
Dew-soft and tender,
Love in them lies.

Who will buy roses?
There are her lips,
And there is the nectar
That Cupidon sips.

Who will buy lilies?
There are her cheeks,
And there the shy blushing
That maidhood bespeaks.

'Meenie, Love Meenie,
What must one pay?'
'Good stranger, the market's
Not open to-day!'

He looked at the verses again and again; and the longer he looked at them the less he liked them – he scarcely knew why. Perhaps they were a little too literary? They seemed to lack naturalness and simplicity; at all events, they were not true to Meenie; why should Meenie figure as a flippant coquette? And so he threw them away and turned to his books – not the scientific ones – to hunt out something that was like Meenie. He came near it in Tannahill, but was not quite satisfied. A verse or two in Keats held his fancy for a moment. But at last he found what he wanted in Wordsworth —

'A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye;
– Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.'

Yes; that was liker Meenie – who 'dwelt among the untrodden ways.'

CHAPTER V

A LESSON IN FLY-FISHING

Miss Carry Hodson returned from Paris in a very radiant mood; she had had what she called a real good time, and everything connected with the wedding had gone off most successfully. Her dress, that she had ordered long before she came to the Highlands, was a perfect fit; Lily Selden made the most charming and beautiful of brides; and no less a person than a prince (rather swarthy, and hailing from some mysterious region east of the Carpathians) had proposed the health of the bridesmaids, and had made especial mention of the young ladies who had travelled long distances to be present on the auspicious occasion.

However, on the morning after her return to Inver-Mudal her equanimity was somewhat dashed. When she went along the passage to the little hall – to see what the morning was like outside – she found waiting there a respectable-looking elderly Highlander, with grizzled locks, who touched his cap to her, and who had her waterproof over his arm. This last circumstance made her suspicious; instantly she went back to her father.

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