

## THE SECRET OF THE HEATHER-ALE.

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DOWN Glenaora threescore and ten of Diarmaid's stout fellows took the road on a fine day. They were men from Carnus, with more of Clan Artair than Campbell in them; but they wore Gilleasbuig Gruamach's tartan, and if they were not on Gilleasbuig Gruamach's errand, it makes little difference on our story. It was about the time Antrim and his dirty Irishers came scouring through our glens with flambeaux, dirk and sword and other arms invasive, and the country was

back at its old trade of fighting, with not a sheiling from end to end, except on the slopes of Shira Glen, where a clan kept free of battle and drank the finest of heather-ale that the world envied the secret of.

“Lift we and go, for the Cattle’s before!” said Alasdair Piobaire on the chanter of a Dunvegan great-pipe—a neat tune that roared gallant and far from Carnus to Baracaldine; so there they were, the pick of swank fellows on the road!

At the head of them was Niall Mor a’ Chamais—the same gentleman namely in story for many an art and the slaughter of the strongest man in the world, as you’ll find in the writings of my Lord Archie. “God! look at us!” said he, when his lads came over the hill in the grey mouth of day. “Are not we the splendid men? Fleas will there be this day in the hose of the Glenshira folk.” And he sent his targe in

the air in a bravado, catching it by the prong in its navel, smart and clean, when it whirled back.

Hawks yelped as they passed; far up on Tullich there was barking of eagles; the brogues met the road as light as the stag-slot; laughing, singing, roaring; sword-heads and pikes dunting on wooden targets—and only once they looked back at their women high on the brae-face.

The nuts were thick on the roadside, hanging heavy from swinging branches, and some of the men pulled them off as they passed, stayed for more, straggled, and sang bits of rough songs they ken over many of on Lochowside to this day. So Niall Mor glunched at his corps from under his bonnet and showed his teeth.

“Gather in, gather in,” said he; “ye march like a drove of low-country cattle. Alasdair, put ‘Baile Inneraora’ on her!”

Alasdair changed his tune, and the good

march of Clan Diarmaid went swinging down the glen.

The time passed; the sun stood high and hot; clucking from the fir-plantings came woodcock and cailzie; the two rivers were crossed, and the Diarmaids slookened their thirst at the water of Altan Aluinn, whose birth is somewhere in the bogs beside tall Bhuidhe Ben.

Where the clans met was at the Foal's Gap, past Maam. A score of the MacKellars ran out in a line from the bushes, and stotted back from the solid weight of Diarmaid moving in a lump and close-shouldered in the style Niall Mor got from the Italian soldier. Some fell, hacked on the head by the heavy slash of the dry sword; some gripped too late at the pikes that kittled them cruelly; and one—Iver-of-the-Oars—tripped on a root of heather, and fell with his breast on the point of a Diarmaid's dirk.

To the hills went a fast summons, and

soon at the mouth of the gap came twoscore of the MacKellars. They took a new plan, and close together faced the green tartan, keeping it back at the point of steel, though the pick of Glennaora wore it, and the brogues slipped on the brae-face. It was fast cut and drive, quick flash of the dirk, with the palm up and the hand low to find the groin, and a long reach with the short black knife. The choked breath hissed at teeth and nose, the salt smell of new blood brought a shiver to birch-leaf and gall. But ever the green tartan had the best of it.

“*Bas, bas, Dhiarmaid!*” cried Calum Dubh, coming up on the back of his breaking twoscore with fresh lads from Elerigmor, bed-naked to the hide, and a new fury fell on the two clans tearing at it in the narrow hollow in between the rocky hills. So close they were, there was small room for the whirl of the basket-hilt, and “Mind Tom-a-Phubail and the shortened steel!” cried

Niall Mor, smashing a pretty man's face with a blow from the iron guard of his Ferrara sword. The halberts, snapped at the haft to make whittles, hammered on the target-hides like stones on a coffin, or rang on the bosses; the tartan ripped when the stuck one rolled on his side before the steel could be twisted out; below the foot the grass felt warm and greasy, and the reason was not ill to seek.

Once it looked like the last of Calum Dubh. He was facing Niall Mor, sword and targe, and Niall Mor changed the sword to the other hand, pulled the *sgian-dubh* from his garter, and with snapping teeth pushed like a lightning fork below MacKellar's target. An Elerigmor man ran in between; the little black knife sunk into his belly with a moist plunge, and the blood spouted on the deer-horn haft.

"*Mallachd ort!* I meant yon for a better man," cried Niall Mor; "but it's well as it is,

for the secret's to the fore," and he stood up dour and tall against a new front of MacKellar's men.

Then the sky changed, and a thin smirr of warm rains fell on the glen like smoke ; some black-cattle bellowed at the ford in a wonder at where their herds could be, and the herds—stuck, slashed, and cudgelled—lay stiffening on the torn grass between the gap and MacKellar's house. From end to end of the glen there was no man left but was at the fighting. The hook was tossed among the corn ; the man hot-foot behind the roe, turned when he had his knife at its throat, to go to war ; a lover left his lass among the heather ; and all, with tightened belts, were at the old game with Clan Diarmaid, while their women, far up on the sappy levels between the hill-tops and beside the moor-lochs, span at the wheel or carded wool, singing songs with light hearts and thinking no danger.

Back went MacKellar's men before Niall

Mor and his sturdy lads from Carnus, the breeder of soldiers—back through the gap and down on the brae to the walls of Calum Dubh.

“*’Illean, ’illean!*” cried Calum; “lads, lads! they have us, sure enough. Oh! pigs and thieves! squint mouths and sons of liars!”

The cry gathered up the strength of all that was left of his clan, Art and Uileam, the Maam lads, the brothers from Drimlea and two from over Stron hill, and they stood up together against the Carnus men—a gallant madness! They died fast and hard, and soon but Calum and his two sons were left fencing, till a rush of Diarmaids sent them through the door of the house and tossed among the peats.

“Give in and your lives are your own,” said Niall Mor, wiping his sword on his shirt-sleeve, and with all that were left of his Diarmaids behind his back.

To their feet stood the three MacKellars.



Calum looked at the folk in front of him, and had mind of other ends to battles. "To die in a house like a rat were no great credit," said he, and he threw his sword on the floor, where the blades of Art and Uileam soon joined it.

With tied arms the father and his sons were taken outside, where the air was full of the scents of birch and gall new-washed. The glen, clearing fast of mist, lay green and sweet for mile and mile, and far at its mouth the fat Blaranbuie woods chuckled in the sun.

"I have you now," said Niall Mor. "Ye ken what we seek. It's the old ploy—the secret of the ale."

Calum laughed in his face, and the two sons said things that cut like knives.

"Man! I'm feared ye'll rue this," said Niall Mor, calm enough. "Ye may laugh, but — what would ye call a gentleman's death?"

“With the sword or the dagger in the hand, and a Diarmaid or two before me,” cried Calum.

“Well, there might be worse ways of travelling yont—indeed there could ill be better; but if the secret of the ale is not to be ours for the asking, ye’ll die a less well-bred death.”

“Name it, man, name it,” said Calum. “Might it be tow at the throat and a fir-branch.”

“Troth,” said Niall Mor, “and that were too gentle a travelling. The Scaurnoch’s on our way, and the crows at the foot of it might relish a Glen Shira carcass.”

Uileam whitened at the notion of so ugly an end, but Calum only said, “Die we must any way,” and Art whistled a bit of a pipe-tune, grinding his heel on the moss.

Niall Mor made to strike the father on the face, but stayed his hand and ordered the three in-by, with a few of his corps to guard

them. Up and down Glen Shira went the Diarmaids, seeking the brewing-cave, giving hut and home to the flame, and making black hearths and low lintels for the women away in the sheilings. They buried their dead at Kilblaan, and, with no secret the better, set out for Scaurnoch with Calum and his sons.

The MacKellars were before, like a *spreidh* of stolen cattle, and the lot of the driven herd was theirs. They were laughed at and spat on, and dirk-hilts and *cromags* hammered on their shoulders, and through Blaranbuie wood they went to the bosky elbow of Dun Corrbhile and round to the Dun beyond.

Calum, for all his weariness, stepped like a man with a lifetime's plans before his mind; Art looked about him in the fashion of one with an eye to woodcraft; Uileam slouched with a heavy foot, white at the jaw and wild of eye.

The wood opened, the hunting-road bent

about the hill-face to give a level that the eye might catch the country spread below. Loch Finne stretched far, from Ardno to French Foreland, a glassy field, specked with one sail off Creaggans. When the company came to a stand, Calum Dubh tossed his head to send the hair from his eyes, and looked at what lay below. The Scaurnoch broke at his feet, the grey rock-face falling to a depth so deep that weary mists still hung upon the sides, jagged here and there by the top of a fir-tree. The sun, behind the Dun, gave the last of her glory to the Cowal Hills; Hell's Glen filled with wheeling mists; Ben Ime, Ben Vane, and Ben Arthur crept together and held princely converse on the other side of the sea.

All in a daze of weariness and thinking the Diarmaids stood, and looked and listened, and the curlews were crying bitter on the shore.

“Oh, haste ye, lads, or it's not Carnus for us to-night,” cried Niall Mor. “We have

business before us, and long's the march to follow. The secret, black fellow!"

Calum Dubh laughed, and spat in a bravado over the edge of the rock.

"Come, fool; if we have not the word from you before the sun's off Sithean Sluaidhe, your sleep this night is yonder," and he pointed at the pit below.

Calum laughed the more. "If it was hell itself," said he, "I would not save my soul from it."

"Look, man, look! the Sithean Sluaidhe's getting black, and any one of ye can save the three yet. I swear it on the cross of my knife."

Behind the brothers, one, John-Without-Asking, stood, with a gash on his face, eager to give them to the crows below.

A shiver came to Uileam's lips; he looked at his father with a questioning face, and then stepped back a bit from the edge, making to speak to the tall man of Chamis.

Calum saw the meaning, and spoke fast and thick.

"Stop, stop," said he; "it's a trifle of a secret, after all, and to save life ye can have it."

Art took but a little look at his father's face, then turned round on Shira Glen and looked on the hills where the hunting had many a time been sweet. "Maam no more," said he to himself; "but here's death in the hero's style!"

"I thought you would tell it," laughed Niall Mor. "There was never one of your clan but had a tight grip of his little life."

"Ay!" said Calum Dubh; "but it's *my* secret. I had it from one who made me swear on the holy steel to keep it; but take me to Carnus, and I'll make you the heather-ale."

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"So be't, and——"

"But there's this in it, I can look no clansmen nor kin in the face after telling it, so

Art and Uileam must be out of the way first."

"Death, MacKellar?"

"That same."

Uileam shook like a leaf, and Art laughed, with his face still to Shira, for he had guessed his father's mind.

"Faith!" said Niall Mor, "and that's an easy thing enough," and he nodded to John-Without-Asking.

The man made stay nor tarry. He put a hand on each son's back and pushed them over the edge to their death below. One cry came up to the listening Diarmaids, one cry and no more—the last gasp of a craven.

"Now we'll take you to Carnus, and you'll make us the ale, the fine ale, the cream of rich heather-ale," said Niall Mor, putting a knife to the thongs that tied MacKellar's arms to his side.

With a laugh and a fast leap Calum Dubh stood back on the edge of the rock again.

“Crook-mouths, fools, pigs’ sons! did ye think it?” he cried. “Come with me and my sons and ye’ll get ale, ay, and death’s black wine, at the foot of Scaurnoch.” He caught fast and firm at John-Without-Asking, and threw himself over the rock-face. They fell as the scart dives, straight to the dim sea of mist and pine-tip, and the Diarmaids threw themselves on their breasts to look over. There was nothing to see of life but the crows swinging on black feathers; there was nothing to hear but the crows scolding.

Niall Mor put the bonnet on his head and said his first and last friendly thing of a foe.

“Yon,” said he, “had the heart of a man!”