

The  
Inglenook

## FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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### CHAPTER XIX.

(Continued.)

It was understood before Mr. M'Iver left that such an arrangement would fall in with Ronald's own plans, as, in view of his approaching marriage, he wanted to visit Oban on his own account. But the young crofter's projects had been upset by Sybil's resolve that the marriage must be postponed until the following spring. Her lover was exceedingly disappointed. Several times his pretty sweetheart had thrown out vague hints of delay, and had made feeble protests against hurrying on things too fast; but Ronald, not judging them serious, had gone on with his preparations. He had built an addition to his cottage, and was furnishing it in a style which his mother thought extravagant and above their station, though she said nothing. Ronald probably shared her views, but he had not been allowed to court Sybil without many reminders from Mrs. Grant that in her opinion her daughter was making a sacrifice, and would not find the comfort at Fas-Ghlac she had been used to at Sruthan: Ronald thought otherwise, and freely spent a part of the money Mrs. Waldegrave had given him in providing Sybil with a home which would more than bear comparison with the one she would leave. It was now almost ready, and when Sybil passed from vague hints to the open and serious declaration that the marriage must be put off, and to suggest that, if he would not consent, then she would break off the engagement altogether, Ronald grew hot and angry, and all but said that he would accept the alternative.

That, however, did not exactly suit Sybil. So when Ronald went the next time for the letters, she was unusually gracious, and assured him that he had made her very unhappy by going away in such a temper. Yet, as she kept to her resolve about the marriage, he was not appeased, and still less so when, on reaching home, he found Nancy Bell there, and listened to her gossip while his mother was milking the cows. She said nothing against Sybil, yet she contrived very adroitly to confirm his suspicion that there was something behind his sweetheart's hesitation not altogether commendable, and that he ought to put up with no more trifling.

So Ronald resolved that he would call at the post-office while on his way to Oban, and come to an understanding with Sybil. He was very fond of her, and believed that she cared for him; and if she would keep her promise, well and good; but he would stand no more nonsense. Mrs. Grant was the cause of all the mischief and misunderstanding, and he had no doubt that it was to her Nancy's vague hints pointed. Sybil herself was a dear, sweet little thing, as clever as she was pretty. She might be rather too fond of dress and did not always speak so kindly about his mother as he would like; but she was true at heart, and when once she was away from her mother's influence all would go smoothly and happily. And then it was only natural for a young lass like Sybil to hesitate a bit, and to feel half afraid at the thought of marriage. He had not been nearly enough considerate. Now he

came to think of it, how often there had been an anxious, thoughtful look on her dear face, a wistfulness in her eyes like one pondering an important step. And had he not seen her start and change colour when he walked unexpectantly into the post office? Had he not seen her eyes sometimes filled with tears. Yes, men did not think about these things as they ought. They were too hard and impulsive. But he would go and see her again, and he would convince her that there was nothing she had to fear no, nothing whatever, and he would win her round, and get her promise that she would keep to what had been arranged, and then he would go into Oban and buy the ring.

Thus, on the day appointed by Mr. M'Iver, he left home in the morning, and hurried toward so fast that he was within a mile of Sruthan Post Office long before Sybil was likely to be free from her duties. So he halted. It would be a pity to arrive too soon, for as the day was fine he hoped to entice her out for a walk. He would take her down to the shore, where they could sit in a sheltered corner among the rocks, and have a good long talk without any fear of being disturbed. As he would have to wait for half-an-hour or more, he stepped off the road, and walked a little way into the wood, and sat down amid a thick undergrowth of hazel bushes.

He had not, however, been seated long, before a light step in the wood caused him to raise his eyes, and turning half round he saw a lady hurrying along a bypath not twenty yards way. A second glance caused him to half rise to his feet, hardly believing his own eyes. But there could be no doubt about it. It was Sybil—dressed more like a lady than he had ever seen her before. Her name was on his lips to hail her, and then he checked himself with a sudden feeling of misgiving. What could this mean? Where could she be going dressed like that? To the Castle? Why then not by the open, direct path? He was so dumfounded and bewildered that, instead of calling or going after her, he sank back again and tried to put his thoughts and fears into shape. For some reason or other Nancy Bell's ambiguous words flashed back upon him with a new meaning. Could it be? Surely not! Somewhere in the depth of that wood there was a secret retreat or den to which Nial Mor Duff often resorted. He had never seen it, did not know where it was, but he had heard of it. Oh, it could not be that. Oh no, Sybil was not a girl of that sort. But now the idea was once started, other suspicious circumstances pressed upon his thoughts. There was that ring he had once seen, and the little gold locket.

He felt his brain begin to reel, and he trembled violently; still he sprang to his feet with something like an oath upon his lips, and hurried after Sybil. He could not, he would not, believe his suspicions, but he would know the truth. He had not gone very far before he came to a point with the path diverged. He took the one that seemed the most likely, and ran along, expecting at every turn to come upon his sweetheart. But it opened into a long, straight avenue leading direct to the Castle, and Sybil was

not there.

As fast as he could he hastened back and turned into the other path. It was more lonely; it led into a deeper and more secluded part of the wood. But he could not shake off the suspicion that Sybil had come that way, a suspicion which was fully confirmed when, on making a sudden turn, he saw her just disappearing at the extreme end.

He pulled himself up and walked more leisurely now, but with feelings such as he had never experienced before. There was a great sinking of heart: grief, disappointment, wounded love, and then the surging up of anger, wrath, and bitterness. He had little doubt as to where the path would lead to, and the question was now: what should he do?

It was as he expected. On reaching the end of the path he came upon the old ruin, of which he had heard as the place of Nial Mor's retreat, into which he had no doubt Sybil had passed. He walked round it reconnoitring, and found several entrances. Sybil, he felt sure, was somewhere within, but in what part of the building, or how to reach her, he could not tell. Also he experienced a certain shrinking from anything that looked like spying or trespassing. So he sat down to await her return. If she was alone, she would have to tell him what she had come there for, and if the young laird was with her—well so much the worse for him. He sat down in the open pathway, not attempting to hide himself or play the eavesdropper, but watching the ruin, and waiting for any sign that would reveal Sybil's whereabouts, or the purpose of her presence there. And so he sat on, until in the dead silence of the wood he heard the crash of falling timber, Sybil's loud shriek, and immediately after, the firing of a shot.

He leaped to his feet, and made for the first entrance into the ruins. All his love for Sybil returned. She had been inveigled into that lonely place for some bad purpose, and was now in trouble, was being murdered, for anything he could tell, and he sitting there within sound of her voice.

'I am coming, Sybil; where are you?' he shouted, plunging into dark passages which seemed to lead nowhere. But there was no response, and if any one heard his call it was not Nial Mor or Lachlan M'Cuaig. In this way he was delayed, and only reached the right entrance as the old keeper was being hurled out.

Thinking only of Sybil, and that she was in trouble somewhere within, he sprang up the steps, and had almost passed into the tower when Nial Mor recovered from his surprise, and swinging the door to behind his back, seized Ronald by the collar and endeavoured to thrust him down again.

'Stop,' he cried fiercely; 'where are you going? What have you come here for?'

'Let go, sir,' answered Ronald; 'hold off, or I will be doing you an injury.'

'You dare to speak to me like that, you dog,' raged Nial, striking out with his fist.

Ronald parried the blow and shook himself free. The next moment he had grasped Nial by the throat.

'You call me a dog!' he cried, shaking