

The
Inglebrook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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By Arthur Jenkinson
and
Emily J. Jenkinson

CHAPTER IX.

THE BEST LAID SCHEMES.

Waldegrave closed his book and listened. Fiona was playing, and the mellow notes of the 'Skye Boat Song' floated up from the drawing room.

'You might place the door ajar, mother,' he said, with a touch of impatience.

A stately dame rose from her chair and complied with his request.

And now a rich, well-cultivated voice was heard singing:

'Speed, bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing,
Onward, the sailors cry:
Carry the lad that is born to be King
Over the sea to Skye.'

Mother and son endeavoured not to lose a note: the former, bending her head—on which the silken hair had begun to whiten—a little forward, while a wistful look flitted across her handsome features; the latter, quite enchanted, moving his hands as if beating time.

The song having ended, there were a few moments of silence; then the piano was struck again, and the wild, passionate wail of the 'Lament for MacLean of Ardgour' reached their ears. And so song followed song until, at last, the music ceased.

'A lovely voice and a lovely girl,' murmured Waldegrave with a sigh. And then he roused himself, and began talking eagerly, almost passionately, about Fiona—her beauty, character, accomplishments.

'Why, Jeff,' interposed his mother, 'I never heard you speak so eloquently before—and all in praise of a young lady!'

She tried to speak jocularly, but it was not a success.

'I've not said half what I feel,' he answered gravely; 'and you know, mother, until quite lately, you shared my admiration. You were as enthusiastic as I. Why have you changed? I've been wishing to ask you that for several days. Has Miss M'Iver displeased you in any way?'

'Jeff,' replied Mrs. Waldegrave, closing the door again, and speaking seriously; 'how can you ask such questions?'

'Because you've changed, mother,' he persisted. 'I feel it and see it. At first you were continually talking about her, admiring her, and everything she did. You were always glad when you could prevail on her and her father to come up here. Now it is nearly a week since she crossed the threshold, and I want you to tell me why you've changed.'

He fixed his brown eyes steadily upon her.

Mrs. Waldegrave knew her son too well to attempt to evade a straightforward reply. She had noticed his growing restlessness and silence, and had suspected what he was brooding over.

'My answer, Jeff, is very simple,' she replied quietly, but with a nervous movement which showed that she was not at ease. 'When I arrived here, I understood that Miss M'Iver was engaged, or all but engaged. I saw at a glance that she was a true-hearted girl who wouldn't trifle with a man, and I knew you wouldn't trifle with her. We could make free with her, and it

brightened the time for us all. It's different now we've heard that she's not betrothed to Nial Duff and doesn't care for him.'

'Why?' asked Waldegrave. 'I'm very glad.'

'You ought not to say that, Jeff. It's been her father's long-cherished wish that she should marry him,' replied his mother somewhat sharply. 'And when I was a girl, a parent's wish on such a matter was almost a command. Besides, the young fellow loves her and hopes to win her—he confessed as much to you in his letter last week. When he returns she may change her mind. She wouldn't be the first girl to say "no" to a man, and afterwards marry him, and make him a good wife too. Miss M'Iver is a fine girl, and we must be careful and not make her path unnecessarily difficult.'

'Assuredly not, my dear mater, how could we?'

'Well, you see, Jeff,' answered Mrs. Waldegrave archly, 'I don't want to flatter you, but you're rather a chivalrous fellow, and it's the way of a woman to feel a special regard for a man whose life she has saved. But in a few days we leave here. You've promised to return to Canada, and will be absent for two years. Need I say more to show how careful we should be?'

Waldegrave broke into a mirthless laugh, which he quickly checked.

'Ah, mother,' he said, 'you're quick, but not quick enough. What Miss M'Iver's feelings are for me I cannot tell—I hope they are such as you suggest—but I had seen little of her before I was conscious of sentiments such as I've entertained for no other woman. When, however, I thought that she was engaged to Nial Duff I buried them. Neither by word or look have I betrayed myself. But when the truth came out, that altered matters. I don't see why I should hide my love any longer.'

'I had begun to fear as much,' said his mother with cold severity, 'but I do hope you'll do nothing imprudent.'

'Why "fear as much" and why "imprudent"?' he asked in rising tones. His eyes began to kindle.

'It's no use getting angry, Jeff,' she replied nervously. 'You know quite well that it would upset all expectations. We shall always be deeply indebted to Miss M'Iver. I confess that she's a noble and beautiful girl, but for you to fall in love with her would be a serious mistake. It would blight all your prospects.'

'Ah, mater,' he said, controlling his voice and speaking gently—for he knew that what he was about to say would scatter finally many pleasant visions, and bitterly disappoint her—'I'm sorry to spoil so many nicely-arranged plans. You and Lady Perceval have been life-long friends, and you've both hoped that I and Laura would make a match. To further that, Lord Perceval was persuaded to invite me to join his staff and appoint me his private secretary, and you consented to my going out to Canada. But the best laid schemes, you know, mother, of great personages, as of less distinguished mortals, get upset. I've seen much of Laura during the last two years. She's a nice little thing, pretty and all that, but I could never care

for her as I do for Fiona. By the way,' he added with a harder look, as a sudden thought struck him, 'I hope you've said nothing about Laura here.'

His proud, ambitious mother looked vexed and discomposed, but there was no escape from his searching eyes.

'A day or two ago, Mr. M'Iver was asking about Lord Perceval and his family, and I showed him their portraits.'

'And Miss M'Iver was present?'

'Yes.'

'And you hinted—'

'Only as a wish of my own, and then so vaguely that I'm sure they would attach no importance to it. I mean there's no fear that they will ever mention it again.'

'I do wish you hadn't,' he replied in a tone of displeasure.

Possibly I was wrong. I'd half begun to fear—from the tone of your letters—that you didn't care for dear Laura. But apart from her, you surely can't have weighed the consequences of what you appear bent on doing. Miss M'Iver is penniless, unknown, and unused to society; she has an aged father to care for, and the world would look upon it as almost a *mesalliance* for one in your position to marry her. And to seek her hand just when you are on the verge of leaving the country for two more years, seems to me the height of madness.'

'I don't share your view at all,' he answered doggedly. 'No doubt there are difficulties. Miss M'Iver may refuse me, and even if she accepts me, we must wait until I return, that's clear. But as to her becoming a sort of drag on the wheel, the idea is absurd. She's cut off from the world here, but you must allow that she's fit for any society, and would hold her own brilliantly. She's of good family, though its fortunes are just now under a cloud. She would urge me to make the best of my life as one of your society girls never could. And then, to crown all, she saved me from a watery grave. Remember, mother, that but for her you would have no son to-night. Will you not wish me success in my wooing?'

His mother rose to her feet.

'It's all a surprise to me,' she replied with quivering voice. 'Although I'd begun to dread some such complications, I cannot reconcile myself to it to-night. I'll make no rash promises, and I hope you'll reconsider the matter carefully.'

Then she withdrew to her own room, to give way to emotions which she could no longer control.

When Fiona rose from the piano, she drew a chair before the fire and began to read. But she turned the pages mechanically, her thoughts occupied with other interests, and very soon the book was cast aside, and she gazed absently into the red embers.

Scene after scene of the last few weeks passed before her mind; it had been a stirring time, full of novelty and interest.

The arrival of Mrs. Waldegrave had brought unlooked-for pleasure. She was a lady of large experience, accustomed to the