

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER XVIII.

(Continued.)

'It is fery ill you are looking,' she was saying as they entered. 'Is your head bad again? Is there something troubling you very much?'

'Sybil iss a real leddy, whateffer,' thought the keeper, 'and what good English she will be speakin'.' The thought seized him that after all she was more suitable to be his master's wife than his own.

'Oh, it is nothing—nothing. I shall be better soon,' answered Nial gloomily, as he led her to the sofa and sat down by her side.

'But will you not tell me what is the matter?' Will you not trust me?' she pleaded.

The tears gathered in her eyes, and her voice sank into an unaccustomed sweetness of appeal. Either there must be some genuine feeling prompting her, or Sybil was a consummate actress. She looked like one of those sweet, innocent, loving creatures sent expressly to soothe away pain,—one a man was bound to take into his arms and draw to his heart. And then when Nial made no reply, but sat with downcast eyes and bent brow, she went on:—

'There iss nothing I would not do to help you, sir, if I only knew how. And if you will not speak to me and be kind to me, I will be breaking my heart.'

As she spoke the lines deepened about his face. In the early days of their intrigue, he had assumed that he could easily satisfy Sybil, and recompense her for all that she had done. Some gold trinkets, a fine dress or two, a handsome present when she married, and she would be more than rewarded. But he had slowly learned how deeply he was entangled. This pretty lass, whom he occasionally kissed and chuckled under the chin, had come to love him very much, or to persuade herself that she had, and was not going to be set aside and disappointed without a serious struggle. And yet he could not move another step without arranging matters with her. All his plans were laid. Every support to which Fiona could cling was swept away. There were the only alternatives of marriage with himself, or crushing and overwhelming disaster. But Sybil had his fate in her hands, and he could do nothing more until he had put matters right with her.

'Ah!' he exclaimed, at last rousing himself, 'you are a dear, good lassie, Sybil, and you have been my friend. But you take things too seriously. You must drink a glass of wine with me, and then we will talk over our affairs like two practical sensible people.'

He poured out the wine, but Sybil did not touch it. She turned pale, very pale, and Lachlan, looking down with his one eye, thought what a fool she was not to drink the good sherry wine.

'Come,' said Nial, raising the glass to her lips, 'you are as pale as a ghost. I declare I shall be afraid to say another word unless you look brighter.'

'I am waiting to hear what you hef to tell me,' she replied in a faltering voice.

'Well,' he went on, attempting to speak in

an easy, matter-of-fact tone, 'it is just this, my dear Sybil: it will never do for us to continue meeting in this way. I have sent away Nancy Bell, though she was not to be feared; but others will be taking notice of it, and then there would be trouble. In two months time you will be the wife of Ronald Campbell, and what do you think he would say if he were to hear of your coming to my den in this manner? Would he not be very angry? Might he not believe that you were a bad lass and refuse to marry you? And what would all the folks say when they heard of it? Your character would be gone and so would mine. And what is the life of a Highland laird worth if his people do not respect him? And who would marry a Highland lassie, however beautiful, if her good name was gone? I ought never to have brought you here. We have met too often, Sybil, but this must be the last time—the very last—here all alone.'

Sybil started to her feet, speechless, and the glass of wine—emblem of all her hopes—dropped from her hand and fell to the floor, the wine spilt, and the glass shattered. Then she sank back again with a subdued cry.

Lachlan's yellow parchment face puckered up into a fearful grim of satisfaction, and he bent down and strained his ears to catch every word.

Nial Mor went on:—

'Do not think, dear Sybil, that I shall forget you. I intend to do much to make you happy. You shall go to Glasgow and choose whatever beautiful dresses for your marriage you would like. But you belong to Ronald, not to me. I must guard your good name.'

'I hef no love for Ronald Campbell,' said Sybil, so quietly as to suggest a coming storm.

'Oh, but you must not say that. You are engaged to be married to him, and Ronald is such a good fellow—I wish I were half as good—and he is a fine, handsome man, hard-working and courageous. When you are his wife you can come to the Castle, and I shall often see you, and no one will think anything of that.'

'But I do not want to marry Ronald, and the marriage iss put off.'

Certainly Sybil was very quiet. Nial began to anticipate an easy victory.

'Now, my dear Sybil, you will show yourself the reasonable little woman you are. Do you not see how much more I can do for you when you are Ronald's wife? Why, there is the Home Farm. Donald Mac-laine's lease will be out in two years. I could put you and Ronald into it, and lend you all the money to stock it.'

Lachlan M'Cuag, lying flat upon his stomach, forgot all about his cramped limbs as he heard this suggestion. After all there might be something better in store for him than keeping a public-house. He crouched lower down upon the rotten trap door, and in his amazement applied his blind eye to the hole.

As to Sybil, whatever she may have thought of the offer in the event of higher ambitions failing, she only shook her head and said in a quavering voice:—

'I hef no mind to be mistress of the Home

Farm. I will do anything you wish, Mr. Nial; but I will not marry Ronald Campbell.'

'Not marry Ronald Campbell!' exclaimed Nial in feigned astonishment. 'Then whom will you marry, Sybil? What will you do? You must see that we cannot go on meeting here. We shall be discovered, and your character will be lost; who would marry you then?'

Sybil burst into tears.

'I thought you loved me,' she sobbed. 'You hef often told me you did, and I believed you.'

'Silly child!' he replied, still endeavouring to control his vexation. 'I know that I've often said I was very fond of you, and so I am. You have been my dear little friend, and have I not told you that I shall never forget you?'

'I thought,' sobbed Sybil—'I thought that as you loved me—you would marry me.'

'Why, Sybil, a man very often cannot marry the lass he loves.'

'But you hef made me love you,' she continued, nestling closer to him, 'and now you tell me to marry a man that I do not care for at all. And what will be the good of the rings, and the bracelets, and the fine dresses, and the Home Farm if you are not there? Are you not everything to me? And if you would marry me, I would be a good wife to you, and I would soon learn your ways, and I would never disgrace you, no, not by a single word.'

And then she broke down and wept bitterly.

Nial pushed her from him rudely. There came a wild look into his eyes. The situation was fast becoming unbearable. But through all his baffled rage one idea remained, one resolve, that nothing should hinder him from carrying out his purpose. It was now less an intelligent resolve than a blind, unreasoning passion.

'It is impossible, you little fool,' he blurted out. 'I've never promised to marry you. Why don't you be reasonable, and accept what it is in my power to give?'

Now, but for that rude push and cruel little speech, it is just possible that Nial Mor would have achieved his wish. Sybil, with her shrewd, calculating, diplomatic nature, failing in her highest ambitions, might have made an uncommonly good bargain. But now the latent Celtic fire broke out, and casting prudence to the winds, she sprang to her feet and confronted Nial like a young tigress.

'I see, I see,' she cried; 'I understand what you mean: you are ashamed to marry me. I am only a poor crofter's lass; but you are no ashamed to use me for your own bad purposes. What right, sir, hef you to talk about your honour and character and good name? Who would respect you and love you as I do, if they knew the secrets I know? You hef gone too far, whateffer. I hef you in my power. You hef deceived me; you hef made me your tool. But I can tell what will spoil all your plans. You told me that you hated Miss M'Iver, and now you are seeking to marry her. But I will go to Miss M'Iver and tell her all I know.'