

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER VII.

(Continued.)

'Ay,' answered Colin, 'she will be savin', and it iss my opinion that Sybil will no save much. But neffer mind, Ronald iss a careful man, and has put by a wee bit, I'm thi' kin'. And it iss a good thing it iss settled, a fery good thing. Ronald will be here fery soon, and I will have a talk with him about the young shentleman he saved.'

'Then ye can hae yer clash wi' him by yersel'. I'm gaen to the byre, an' ye needna ca' nie. He'll very likely smell o' stinkin' fish, an' I wish ye muckle joy o' his company.'

But Mrs. Grant loved gossip, and was determined to hear Ronald's news without giving her husband the satisfaction of thinking that she had repented of her hasty retreat to the byre.

Attached to their cottage was an outhouse used for the stowage of empty barrels, boxes and oil cans. At the far end of it, high up in the wall, there was a little disused window imperfectly boarded up, which lighted the kitchen before this addition had been erected. Here it was not difficult to see and hear all that was going on, and yet to remain unobserved.

No sooner, therefore, did Mrs. Grant see Ronald arrive, than she slipped out of the byre and into the outhouse. She closed the door softly behind her, and barred it securely, so that she might not by any chance be caught in her eavesdropping. Then she turned an empty potato-barrel upside down, and mounted it. This was not the first time she had made use of such a contrivance for finding out who was in the kitchen, and what they were talking about, when she did not want to put in an appearance.

Her first glance showed her Ronald in the act of holding up a white woollen shawl, which, he said, his mother had sent for Mrs. Grant. That angry dame's temper somewhat subsided as she eyed the gift from her awkward position on the potato-barrel, and she began to think that after all she had done a rather foolish thing in sulking away.

Colin, being a peace-loving man, and thinking that the present would restore his wife to good-humour, said that he would go and show it to her. She was very busy that morning, and had begged Ronald to excuse her absence.

While he was away, Sybil entered the kitchen, looking, her mother thought, fit to be the wife of a lord, and again her anger flashed up that the foolish girl should throw herself away upon a fisherman. Very soon Colin returned, saying that he could not find his wife, but was sure that she would be proud of the shawl.

Then Ronald told them about Lieutenant Waldegrave, and of the arrival of his mother, who was one of the grandest ladies he had ever seen. Even the servant she had brought with her was quite a lady, and very good-looking, though not half so pretty as Sybil (a sudden frown on his sweetheart's face had suggested the latter remark), and she had a sweet, soft voice. Above all, he told them how Mrs. Waldegrave had made him a present of £50 for rescuing her son and

attending to him in the cave, and had also given the other fishermen £25 each.

As Mrs. Grant listened to this story, and felt that there were twenty questions she wanted to ask, she began to blame herself in downright earnest for giving way to her foolish temper.

Besides she was a stout, heavy woman, and was getting very tired of standing tip toe in that cramped attitude—stretching her neck almost to dislocation, and straining her ears to catch every word. She tried to change her position so as to rest herself, but in so doing there came a sharp cracking noise from beneath her feet, so startling and ominous that she exclaimed aloud:

'Lord hae mercy on us; what's happenin'?

Without further warning the bottom of the potato barrel, groaning beneath its unaccustomed load, gave way, and down fell stout Mrs. Grant with a crash, overturning the barrel, and upsetting half-a-dozen more that had been piled one above the other.

For a second she lay half-stunned in her ridiculous position, and then she tried to extricate herself. But her feet and legs were held fast in the broken potato barrel, like one imprisoned in the stocks. The upper part of her body was wedged among a lumber of goods, so that she could not rise; while to add to her discomfort two or three half-empty oil cans, which she had upset, dribbled their contents over her.

'Help! help!' she cried. 'Colin, man, mak' haste, or I'll be smoor'd wi' soap boxes an' ch' ked wi' paraffin.'

At the first exclamation the inmates of the kitchen had started to their feet in alarm.

'What t' tiffle is that?' said Colin, looking up and round to see where the voice had come from.

But the noise of falling barrels had enlightened him, and he rushed out of the house followed by Ronald, and more leisurely by Sybil. They found him shaking the door of the outhouse with all his might.

'Woman!' he cried, 'iss it here that ye are? What iss the matter? And why hef ye got the door barred? and why do ye no open it?'

'I canna open it,' answered Mrs. Grant piteously. 'Dae ye think I wouldna open it gin I could? I hae tum'led doon among the pitata barre's, an' the soap boxes, an' oil cans; an' the paraffin is runnin' doon my neck; an' I shall be deid in a minute if ye dinna help me oot.'

'Och! no; ye will no die yet, whate'er,' replied Colin, walking leisurely into the house for a big hammer. 'Then with two or three sharp blows the door gave way.'

As they rushed in, Mrs. Grant succeeded in scrambling to her feet, a pitiable object, with cap awry, flushed face, and gown dirty, torn, and dripping with oil.

'Gang awa', every one o' ye,' she cried in a voice that suggested both anger and tears. 'I can attend to mysel' richt weel noo. Dae ye no see I'm no just exactly presentable!'

'And you hef come to see me,' said Morag Campbell, as Ronald somewhat nervously presented his pretty fiancée. 'That iss fery kind of you, and you are fery welcome to Fas-Ghlaic.'

She bent and kissed the cheek which the girl offered.

Morag was a true Highland woman, beautiful in her old age, though not without the scars of many a struggle and sorrow. She wore a white mutch with snowy bands and frills, beneath which her soft white hair peeped and curled in little tendrils round her forehead. Her blue eyes were still clear, and full of flitting lights and shadows, as if they had caught and retained some of the mystery and beauty of the sea that ever broke before her dwelling. She welcomed Sybil with a sweet, motherly smile.

The girl thanked her shyly, putting up her hand at the same time to steady her hat, which Morag's demonstration had slightly disarranged. In so doing she was not sorry that her slender wrist was displayed to full advantage. Then she slipped her arm through the old woman's—like one taking warm y to her—and tripped into the cottage.

'The wind disorders one's hair so,' said Sybil, as she removed her hat, and passed her hand over her curls to feel if all were in perfect order. 'I'm sure I must hef looked a perfect fright in the boat.'

Sybil was sure that was the correct thing to say; for she had heard an English lady use that expression.

'It iss not a fright you could offer to k,' said Mrs. Campbell, watching all the girl's movements, and not sorry that she was so pretty. Oily she hoped that Sybil had something else beside good looks to recommend her. 'The wind wass strong to day; and I find that a shawl over my bonnet iss the best thing in the boat.'

'Sybil could not do that, whate'er,' laughed Ronald; 'it would hef spoiled her new hat. She put it on specially to visit you in, mother.'

The afternoon was already well advanced, and tea was soon ready. A looking glass hung on the wall, and as Sybil sat she could without a very perceptible effort catch glimpses of herself in it; and, of course, it was only by chance that her eyes wandered from the tea-table that way very frequently.

But Morag noticed the movement, as also, that when they gathered round the fire, Sybil drew her dress back so as to show off her small foot and her pointed shoes with their large glittering buckles.

Very soon Ronald went out to make his boat quite secure against the rising tide, and to attend to some small matters on his croft.

'We had a lovely sail here,' said Sybil smiling, and speaking her very best English; 'but the storm was fery wick'd to keep me waiting so long. I wanted to come and see you so verry much.'

'The storm hass left some hearts waitin' for effer,' replied Morag wistfully. 'They will neffer see those whom they hef lost, no neffer again in this world. Your time of waitin' was fery short, my dear; but now you hef come, and I hope you will like the place. It is fery dear to me, and I remember when Ronald's father brought me here first to see Fas-Ghlaic. It wass more than forty years ago, and I wass a young lass just like you