

The  
Inglenook

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.  
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## FIONA M'IVER.

By Arthur Jenkinson  
and  
Emily J. Jenkinson

### CHAPTER XVII.

(Continued.)

'He wass so restless and unsettled, I told him to go; but there wass no letter from Grace Armstrong again, and none at all from Canada. There wass nothing to mak' the heart glad and the eyes shine bright. There hass been plenty of time for Miss Armstrong to hef answered the letter Ronald wrote for me. She promised to write; and if effer there wass a woman to keep her word I thought it wass Gracc Armstrong.'

'But, Morag, I gather hope from this; every one cannot have forgotten us so quickly.'

'Why then hef they not written?'

Fiona shook her head.

'Ye will pardon the boldness of an old woman; but I will be thinkin' it iss all Mrs. Waldegrave's doin'. She wass a fery grand leddy, and aye free with her money; but fery high-minded and proud. She will hef persuaded every one to forget us Highland folk.'

'No, no,' answered Fiona eagerly; 'it cannot be that.'

'Well, mem, ye will know best; but I will be fearing that the saying of the old wise folk iss true. Ye saved Lieutenant Waldegrave from the sea, but he hass brought you more sorrow than joy whateffer.'

'You must not say that, Morag; if necessary, I would do it again gladly,' replied Fiona proudly. 'But I must go. Did Ronald bring any letters?'

'Yes, mem; he left them on his way home. And he hass got one himself from the laird—your father. Ronald iss to meet him at Oban next Tuesday.'

'Oh, then there will be a letter from my father for me also.'

She walked home with a sad heart, occupied with many thoughts, from none of which comfort was to be drawn.

First of all, Nancy Bell's strange story regarding the movements of Nial Mor came back to her mind.

'What mistakes men make,' she thought. 'He wants me to be his wife, though I could never make him happy, and because I've refused him he is going to brood over his disappointment in a lonely island. If he would only leave these solitary places, and go into society, he would soon meet with some one far better suited to become mistress of Sruthan Castle than I could ever be.'

Then her thoughts turned to her father. He had been suddenly called away to Edinburgh in connection with his affairs. There wass something inexplicable astir, but whether it would turn out for their benefit remained for the present unknown. Fiona had almost lost hope. But her father would be in Oban in less than a week—she had learned that from Morag; so she would have him with her again before long.

But very soon it wass Geoffrey Waldegrave that occupied her whole soul. Wass there any way of explaining his silence save that which her father and Morag had accepted? She had asked that question many thousands of times, but arrived at no answer. She had racked her brains with every possible suggestion, but nothing satisfactory had been

evolved. Since Waldegrave left Liverpool in May she had not heard a word. Her father had written both to Geoffrey and Mrs. Waldegrave. She herself had written; Morag Campbell had written to Grace Armstrong, but there wass an absolute silence. What could it mean? She had thought of possible loss of letters, illness, sudden calls of duty away in the far west, but none could satisfy her. Against the explanation which all others had accepted, Fiona had nothing to urge but her own instinctive faith in Geoffrey.

And now that faith wass to receive its rudest shock—he submitted to the severest test. Ronald had brought from the post-office a copy of a Glasgow newspaper addressed to herself. She picked it up, and glanced down its columns to discover, if possible, why it wass sent. Presently she saw something which transfixed her gaze. It wass a short paragraph stating that Lieutenant Waldegrave, a military attaché to Lord Perceval, wass about to be married to a lady of high social rank in Canada.

She gave a stifled sob, and sank, barely conscious to the floor.

### CHAPTER XVIII.

#### THE BURSTING OF THE BUBBLE.

'Ye were askin' aboot Nancy Bell, Mistress Grant,' said Lachlan M'Cuaig, as that worthy dame returned to the back parlour after serving a customer.

'Really noo!' she replied with a semi-incredulous air, 'weel, it had gane clean out o' ma heid; but maybe I wass jist spierin' at ye whaur she's gane awa to, for naeboddy has seen her since her auld uncle wass put awa.'

'I hef no notion, whateffer, Mistress Grant. I wass speakin' to the laird aboot her to-day, and he does not know either.'

'Does he noo? Weel, I wass thinkin' maybe he couldna any longer be fash't wi' the auld crow aye spyin' an' keekin' aboot. I believe he couldna turn over in his bed at night, but Nancy wad ken a' aboot it. An ye yersel' ken wha sets snares in the wood. Sae I jist thoct he had sent her whaur she'll fin' anither occupation.'

'Oh no; not at all. Nancy can keep a still tongue in her head aboot whateffer she sees. She is a fery deep woman, and the laird trusted her.'

'Ah, weel,' said Mrs. Grant, with a toss of her head, 'I'm no carin'. Maybe the sly auld carlin found a guid wee bit o' siller in a stockin fit whilk her uncle had put by agin a rainy day, an' she's gane off to Glasca wi't. For a' ye can say, Lachlan M'Cuaig, she had an ill tongue in her head, an' I'm no' mindin' gin I never set een on her agin.'

Mrs. Grant wass not quite so gracious to the keeper as she had been. She still preferred him to Ronald Campbell for her daughter; but during the last few weeks her hopes had taken an ambitious flight, and now went for higher game. Sybil had remained discreetly silent about her visits to Nial Mor's den until Nancy had let out the secret. But those private assignations did not alarm Mrs. Grant. Sybil must be prudent, but if she would win so great a prize she must not be too scrupulous. And

when Sybil returned home, and having secured a pledge of absolute secrecy, showed her mother Nial Mor's presents, Mrs. Grant's dreams naturally began to take very definite shape. Her daughter had only to play her cards with skill, and she would be mistress of Sruthan Castle.

'Ye say ye were speakin' to the laird,' remarked Mrs. Grant, ever ready to talk about Nial Mor. 'I haena seen him for twa or three days. Sybil will be meetin' him to-morrow at the Castle. Hoo is he? Is he weel?'

'It iss no ill that I will speak of the laird,' drawled Lachlan, 'and yet I'm no altogether pleased with him.'

'An' what hae ye to find fault wi?' asked Mrs. Grant in rising tones.

'Och, woman! there iss no need to speak that sharply. I am puttin' no fault upon him, but I'm thinkin' it iss a pity for him to tak' no pleasure in the fishin' nor the shootin', a fery great pity whateffer. What is the good o' the game if a shentleman will no go after it?'

'An' what does he dae wi' himsel', then?' asked Mrs. Grant, with a seeming indifference that covered more than natural curiosity.

'Do wi' himsel'? echoed Lachlan in a sly whisper—Mrs. Grant had now given him the opportunity for which he had been watching. 'Do wi' himsel'? I will tell ye that, for I can depend on ye to keep it quiet, whateffer.' He bent towards her, and spoke beneath his breath. 'He spends all his days an' nights thinkin' aboot a proud lass whose father will not het a shillin' to gif to her.'

The colour rushed to Mrs. Grant's face. She hardly knew whether to be the more pleased or angry. So she answered diplomatically with a series of questions.

'Man, wha pit that notion intil yer heid? Wha could the laird be that mad on? An' hoo ken ye her father hasna a shillin' to gie her? Ye're jist haverrin', Mr. M'Cuaig.'

'Indeed, I'm no haverrin', whateffer,' answered the keeper, feigning offence. 'In fac', I wass thinkin' ye would hef got a hint of it from Sybil, now that she iss so often at the Castle. But why will the laird leave the deer, and the salmon, and the pheasants efferly day, and walk about all alone in the woods if it is no a woman he iss thinkin' aboot? And why will he go off in his boat whenever it is fine all alone? And I will ask you, Mrs. Grant, where he iss going to but to Fas Ghlaic? And I will also ask you this: iss it the old laird he will be going to see or his proud daughter?'

Mrs. Grant gave a loud guffaw. 'Ye contradic' yersel' fine, Mr. M'Cuaig. It's jist a month or twa syne ye ca'd him a woman hater, an' said he wad hae naethin' to dae wi' ony o' them. An' noo ye say he's gane clean daft owre auld M'Iver's dochter. I dinna believe a word o't.'

'It iss the truth I hef spoken, and I'm thinkin' the young lieutenant will hef to mak' haste back, or he will be losin' her.'

Mrs. Grant wass quite reassured.

'Hoots, man, 'tis weel seen ye ken naethin' aboot it. Nae doubt sic a bauld quean wad be glad to get haud o' the coat tails o' either ane or the other o' them, gin she had the