

The
Inglebrook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER VI.

(Continued)

The disadvantage of an apprehensive and desponding disposition is that it seldom escapes from self-torture. It will persist in calling up difficulties even when it can bring no fresh thought for their solution. The same weary path is trod and re-trod with monotonous iteration. The mind is like a mill grinding on when there is no grist in the hopper, fatiguing and exhausting itself to no purpose.

There are many people who have never learned the habit of facing the facts of life resolutely, and of deciding on the best course open to them, and then of turning to the duty that lies nearest to hand in the confidence that to do it well is their best preparation for whatever may follow. And so they not merely meet trouble half way, but apprehend dangers and sorrows that never come.

Torquil M'Iver was one of these. He was a man of sterling integrity and sincere piety, but he wanted to see the whole path of life straight before him.

And thus when Waldegrave quietly opened his eyes, and gazed silently into the face of his host, he was struck with his appearance. He sat bending towards the fire, and over his refined and pathetic face there hung a cloud of care. Already his mind had begun to hark back upon old anxieties, and to conjure up grim spectres of coming evil.

But the cloud disappeared when he observed that Waldegrave was awake. He rose with a courtly smile, and walked towards the bedside, preceded by the hound. The latter had already made friends with the stranger, and now began licking his hand with all the signs of canine affection.

'You've had a long sleep,' said M'Iver, pushing aside the dog, 'and it will have done you good.'

'It's a sick man's best medicine,' replied Waldegrave, 'and I feel ever so much better.' He shifted his position as well as his broken leg would allow, and then added, as he patted the dog's head, 'This is a handsome young hound; I never saw a finer.'

'Yes; and it was given to my daughter by Nial Mor Duff—I was glad to hear that you know him.'

'Ah?' exclaimed Waldegrave, recalling to mind that Ronald Campbell had associated Duff somewhat significantly with Miss M'Iver. 'It is rather odd, is it not? But we went out to Canada together about two years ago and naturally saw a good deal of each other during the voyage.'

'Did you?' said M'Iver, brightening up. 'I'm sorry he's not at home now, very sorry indeed.'

'Is his father's place far from here?'

'Oh, no; Nial never considered it far. When a boy he thought nothing of riding through the Pass, or sailing round in his boat. He was often here, and I was always glad to see him. He would have been over before now, had he been at home.'

Waldegrave stroked the dog's head thoughtfully. 'I'm confident, now I think of it, that he spoke of you and Miss M'Iver while we were crossing the Atlantic.'

'It is a great pity he is not at home,' repeated M'Iver. 'He would have been a good companion for you. This is a very lonely place for a stranger to be laid up in, and I'm afraid you'll be very weary of it before you can get away.'

'You musn't think of that,' answered Waldegrave eagerly, 'though I do feel troubled about my mother. She'll imagine me worse than I am. I was summoned home from Canada owing to my father's death; and as I am a military attaché to Lord Perceval, the Governor General, and his private secretary, I must return almost immediately. My mother has arranged to go back with me. I wish I could have left to-day with the captain and crew. My being laid up in Liverpool would not have mattered so much, as my mother could have come and stayed with me there.'

'That is unfortunate,' remarked the laird sympathetically; 'but it might cost you your leg, if not your life, to attempt the journey too soon. And this is such an inaccessible region, else your mother might come here.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' said Waldegrave, roused by a new idea. 'I believe she'd face the difficulty of getting here, only she might fear giving you more trouble. There's no other place where she could stay, and you've done so much already.'

'It will be no trouble, no trouble, whatever,' replied M'Iver, quite won by the young fellow's eagerness and filial anxiety. 'I'll ask my daughter to come up, and we'll talk it over,' he said, turning towards the door.

But he had hardly crossed the room before his ear caught the sound of her familiar step upon the stairs.

'Ah,' he exclaimed, 'here she is; I was just coming to seek you, Fiona.'

'And I,' she replied, 'knew Mr. Waldegrave was awake, for I heard you talking, and I've brought him something to eat.'

The room was deeply shaded, and everything indistinct; but placing a small tray on the side-table, she turned to the patient.

'I'm so glad you're better, she said very quietly, though her father detected in her voice an undertone of suppressed excitement.

After a moment's pause, during which Waldegrave gazed steadfastly on the tall, gracious figure, so unlike anything he had imagined, he said with deep feeling:

'I've so much wished to see and thank you, Miss M'Iver; and yet, indeed, I find now that I've no words to convey my sense of what I owe to you; you risked your life to save mine.'

'It's the young fishermen that deserve your thanks most,' she answered, 'My efforts would have availed nothing without theirs.'

And then anxious to divert the conversation from herself, she placed a basin of soup before him, remarking that Highland people didn't believe in starving their guests.

'And I'm sure,' she added cheerily, 'that after such a long imprisonment in the Priest's Cave, you'll be glad of a little sunshine.'

She drew back the heavy winter curtains,

and raised the blinds. A flood of mellow light immediately fell full upon her, and revealed her perfectly to him.

'Good Lord!' he thought, 'I never dreamt of this. What a splendid girl!'

What stirred him was not so much the mere beauty of figure and features, as an undefinable suggestion of inward grace and power. There was something in the liquid depths of those wonderful eyes, in that thoughtful brow and finely chiselled mouth, which raised a tumult of feeling in his breast, such as he had never experienced before—a bewildering sense of reverence, admiration, gratitude. And then, swift upon these emotions, came the thought, 'No wonder Nial Duff was a frequent visitor here, and if he has won this glorious creature for his bride, he's a lucky beggar. But further reflections of that sort were cut short by an exclamation from Fiona:

'Look, father,' she said, 'there's a ship in full sail coming out of Lock Tooth; no doubt the crew of the "Montreal" will be on board.'

'Assuredly, and if you draw the curtains back a little further, Mr. Waldegrave will be able to see too.'

'Yes, and look on a very different scene to what you did three days ago,' remarked Fiona, turning to the patient with a smile.

To her, his face was not wholly strange. There was one intense moment that would ever live in her memory, when she had caught a glimpse of it, white and ghastly, as the great waves roared over them. But now she saw it distinctly for the first time. It was a face that might inspire any girl with confidence and respect, but for her he had an altogether unique interest. She had saved this man's life. 'How ill he looks,' she thought. 'How much he must have suffered.'

Then their eyes met in a long steady gaze. A strange new bond of sympathy drew them together, and they silently, almost unconsciously, hailed each other as kindred spirits.

Then they turned to view the ship slowly sailing away on a sea of glass mingled with fire.

'A wonderful change,' said Waldegrave quietly. 'I'm thankful they were all saved.'

That evening Fiona wrote to Mrs. Waldegrave and invited her to Fas Ghlac.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EAVESDROPPER.

Sybil Grant was getting ready to accompany her lover, to Fas Ghlac. From her bedroom window she could see his boat tacking up the loch. He would be at Struthan in half-an-hour, and the thought sent a flush of animation into her doll-like face, distinctly adding to her charms.

Ronald's brave deed had swept away all indecision from her mind. He and his companions had suddenly become the heroes of the Western Isles, and she had accepted him without further hesitation. This was to be their first outing as acknowledged lovers, and Sybil would have been a cold-hearted girl indeed, had she felt no thrill of new emotion.