

The  
Inglenook

## FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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### CHAPTER XVI.

(Continued.)

After a long period of bad weather—delaying all harvest operations—there fell in the late autumn—as is so often the case in the Western Highlands—a lovely Indian summer, and the day on which Nial Mor went to Fas-Ghlac was delightful. He sailed round; it was the first time he had done so since he carried the young stag-hound to Fiona as a peace-offering after shooting Luath.

On that occasion we saw much in him that would have inclined a thoughtful observer to presage auspiciously of his life. There were signs of disturbing forces, it is true; elements awakening doubt and mis-giving were there, but more favourable auguries were not wanting. The morning dawn might break into a noontide of lightning and tempest, but it might also orb into a perfect day. Just then his better nature seemed ready to burst into blossom; and had he met Fiona, who can tell what the issue would have been? Character, it has been said, is the product of will into circumstances; then how different would be the results could the circumstances be changed. Let us be charitable. No man knows how weak he is. Many a vessel has returned home with flying colours, which would have gone down on the dark seas had it been exposed to the storms that have wrecked even stronger craft.

It would be wrong to say that Nial Mor is now past redemption, but he is not the man he was. Between him and that rosy dawn there now lies a tortuous path, thunder-scarred, passion-haunted, God-forsaken. There is an indelible strain on his conscience. The fair fabric of this life is terribly torn and soiled.

He may by some desperate effort—as of a drowning man—recover himself; but the greatest hindrance is that he has lost the clean sense of right and wrong. Momentary fits of remorse and regret visit him—during which he verges on madness—but for the most part he sees everything in a false light, and is too intent on achieving his end to trouble himself about the means.

It is so with him as he approaches Fas-Ghlac. As he sits in his boat, his hand on the tiller, and with Fiona's home already in sight, there come to him a sudden flash of shame. He is troubled with the thought of how he is deceiving this noble girl and her simple-hearted father. But he can now brush it aside with the reflection that it is only a minor offence which Fiona will eventually condone. It is a mere episode in his life, not affecting its general tenor and scope; it is only an ugly bit of the road, to be forgotten as soon as it has been successfully passed. When once he has secured Fiona, he will turn over to a fresh, clean page; he will begin a new chapter in his life, make a new start. Torquil M'Iver will be lifted out of all his difficulties; Fiona will have everything her heart can wish, and ample amends will be done for any little wrong he has committed. He has persuaded himself that he has a right to Fiona's hand,

which heaven, by a series of favourable events, has ratified.

While Nial Mor was occupied with these reflections, it so happened that Fiona was thinking of him. She did not know that he was even then on his way to see her; and feeling restless after her various duties were finished, she put on her hat and went for a stroll in the garden. There she was reminded of him by a rose bush which he had given her years before, on which her eyes chanced to fall. A few blooms still lingered on it, and hardly thinking of what she was doing, she gathered a cluster and thrust it in her belt.

'Poor Nial!' she murmured to herself. 'I'm afraid I've not been so grateful to you in my thoughts as I ought. I believe it has made me jealous to hear you praised so much. But that is not fair. You've been very kind to my dear father, and it is very good of you to be so ready to lighten his burdens for him. I do wish, however, that we had not to remain indebted to you. It is more than I expected to find you so kind. Perhaps I've misjudged you hitherto; perhaps I've been blind to good qualities which others have seen. If so, I'm very sorry.'

And then she began to think of the strange rumors that were flying about, to which she could not wholly shut her eyes—vague hints about his fits of sudden passion, his habits of seclusion, his general discontent with his life, and lack of all interest in his estate and people.

'Morag says that the Sruthan folks are angry, and declare that it is all my fault,' she went on to herself. 'They say that I've spoiled his life. I know that my father is disappointed that I didn't consent to marry him long ago. I could hardly wonder at that, for he has always seen more in Nial than I have, and I suppose that if I had done as he wished me, all these weary troubles about bonds and interest that overshadow his life would have been unknown. I am very grieved. Oh, my dear father, don't you know that if I could brighten your life, and save you from sorrow by any mere sacrifice of my own happiness, I would do it without a moment's hesitation? But I cannot. I never loved Nial Mor. I could not think of him as he and you wished. And even if he wanted me now, it could not be, no, never, whatever may have happened.'

She sat down in a warm corner of the garden, and slowly the beauty of the autumn afternoon calmed and soothed her. The trees were clothed in their vast loveliness before the fall; beech, maple, and wild cherry blazing with green and gold and scarlet in the sunshine, their brilliant colours all the more striking in contrast with the dark foliage of the pines. Nothing could be heard except the plaintive notes of the robin, the occasional patter of a leaf to the ground, and mingling with all the soft murmur of the retreating tide. The sea spread a broad expanse of sapphire, quivering with sunlight, while away in the distance a dreamy haze, like a silver translucent veil, hid the distant islands from view.

But she had not been seated long before she was roused from her reverie by a sound

of footsteps on the dead leaves, and the next moment Nial Mor was beside her.

'Ah! I've startled you,' he said, clasping her hand, and thinking as he glanced at her that her face was more beautiful in its subdued sweetness than ever before. 'Let me sit down beside you here, as in the old familiar days of long ago.'

Very soon Fiona was speaking to him of that which had been so lately in her thoughts—her gratitude for his kindness to her father.

'I wish you would not mention it,' he replied, looking on the ground—it was difficult to meet those clear, honest eyes of hers. 'I don't want any thanks. Will you not believe me when I say that it is my greatest joy to serve you?'

'But I must thank you with all my heart,' she persisted with greater warmth, because of the feeling, of which she had become conscious, that she had not been quite just to him in her thoughts.

He saw himself more than reinstated in her good will and esteem. All her old pride and hauteur of manner—which had so often annoyed him—were gone. He saw that she believed in him. Not the slightest suspicion that he was the cause of all her unhappiness had ever crossed her mind. She must be secured without delay.

'Well,' he said, smiling, 'as you will speak of gratitude, I'll venture to ask you for a sign of it. Will you give me one of these roses? I recognise them. They come from the bush I gave you in days that are past, before even any estrangement or misunderstanding had come between us. Will you give me one as a token that all the past is forgotten and forgiven?'

'Yes; I'll gladly do that,' she answered, handing him the choicest bloom. 'And now we had better go into the house and see my father.'

She rose to her feet.

'Not yet; wait a few minutes longer,' he replied. 'You remember, Fiona, I once told you that I loved you; but you sent me away.'

'Oh, please don't,' she exclaimed in great concern; 'let us think only of the old days—long ago. Is not that what the token meant?'

'Yet I might say this,' he replied looking at her strangely: 'I know why you sent me away—you—'

'No, no; we mustn't go into that now; it is all past; but we can be friends, Nial.'

He disregarded her appeal and went on: 'You used to think I was not worthy of you. I daresay I was not; perhaps I'm not still. But I've had dreams of what I might be, of what I'm capable of being. Very often they came to me when I was away at Bath with my father. They were fair and radiant, and I felt that I had something in me that had never yet showed itself. Then they faded away, and others, black and dreadful, took their place. The bright visions may never come back, but I believe they would if you would give me hope. I should make a new beginning. It would be like life to the dead.'

He glanced at her more mysteriously;