

FIONA M'IVER.

The
Inglenook

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER V

(Continued.)

'I hear ye acted bravely in saving him. I'll send an account o' it to the papers, an' let the world see there are darin', courageous lads in the Highlands yet.'

'Oh, it iss nothin' I hef done,' replied Ronald proudly, 'nothin' at all. It was Miss M'Iver that I was afraid about, that she would be drowned. The only chance was for all o' us to go after her.'

'It was a brave deed,' said Mackenzie, enthusiastically, 'an' I'll stand a mutchkin o' whiskey amang ye myself.'

'But it was Miss Fiona that was the bravest,' persisted Ronald. 'It was her put the courage into all o' us.'

'Aye,' said the doctor, 'she is a right brave lassie; there are no mony like her in the world.'

They now came within sight of the sea. Although the wind had somewhat abated its violence, there was still a fierce tumult of waters. The moon, almost at the full, was up, but only cast weird and fitful gleams between the flying clouds. Two hundred feet below them the shore lay in gloomy obscurity. Nothing could be seen except the dim outline of rockbastions against which the billows fell with a sullen, muffled roar. The doctor leaned for a moment over the cliffs, and gazed with an instinctive shudder into the blank depths below and the vast colourless beyond.

Then the moon shone out full and clear, and Ronald pointed seawards and said:—

'Look, doctor, there are the black gulls; it was there the beautiful, fine ship was wrecked.'

'The black gulls!' exclaimed the doctor, giving his head an emphatic shake; 'they luik mair like twa muckle black deevils wi' spread-oot wings an' open jaws.'

'Aye, and fery often I wonder who made them, and put them in the way o' brave men,' said Ronald. 'All that Got made was fery good; then who made the black gull rocks, Dr. Mackenzie? I will be thinkin' Got did not mak' them at all, but the taffe.'

'Ah, Ronald, an' often I wunner at a guid mony things. Look at Jock MacRae—the auld skinflint! Never in his life did he gie a thought for onybody but hissel. Yet there he is slippin' awa in his aughty-fifth year wi'oot an ache or a trouble o' ony sort. He has great peace o' mind, an' he's at peace even wi' the Almighty, so he says. And then there is puir Jean M'Bain, one o' the best women that ever lived, aye ready to dae a neebor a guid turn, an' she's dying o' a sair, sair trouble, an' fears she's no ane o' the elect. The fac' is, Ronald, life is tu' o' "whys" and "wherefores" we canna understand. I gie up tryin' lang syne. We maun dae as muckle guid, an' as little harm as possible, an' leave all thae ither things to the ministers an' sic-like folk, wha think they ken a' the mysteries o' creation an' providence.'

'It is true, the words ye say,' remarked his guide. He scrambled down to a lower ledge of rock, and then he turned to assist the doctor.

'Ye must be careful o' your steps, for if ye slip here, doctor, ye will neffer come up again alive.'

'Ay, ay,' was the reply.

They reached the shore by the track already described.

The tide was on the ebb, and like a garment slowly withdrawn from a scar one would fain hide, the sea retreated lingeringly. Between the oceanbed and the cliffs a space was laid bare, which, under the most favourable circumstances, was one of appalling desolation, and now looked a ghastly horror, as the pale moonlight revealed the ruin wrought by the storm. It was one of Nature's scars, one of her ancient wounds disclosed, bearing witness to the wild, unreasoning forces that for untold ages had striven there in mad, ruthless warfare.

There in the uncertain light lay the fruits of the tempest—broken spars and wreckage—a tangled mass huddled among black reefs and chasms, with nothing to hide the disaster except long streamers of slimy seaweed.

In the face of a gigantic cliff confronting the retreating breakers, yawned the entrance to the Priest's Cave. It was an archway rising like a grotesque imitation of the great doorway of some old religious edifice, and was not entered without difficulty.

On each side of the channel vast boulders, smooth as ice, lay scattered, and at every step the feet sank deep among the sodden, slippery sea-weed.

Dr. Mackenzie had never been here before, and he felt a chilly horror creep over him as he passed within. How large the cave was, how far it extended, and what winding recesses or secret passages it might have, he could only imagine. He found Ronald leading him up a long subterranean path, black as midnight and cold as the grave.

'This is no the best o' places for a sick man,' he began, and then he checked himself, so strange and unearthly was the sound of his own voice.

'It iss true,' answered Ronald, speaking low, 'and it will chill you to the fery bones. And then there iss the whispering and moaning o' voices that ye will hear. Strange things were done in this dark place long ago, Dr. Mackenzie, and the old folk will say that many came into the Priest's Cave that never went out again. But we hef made the young shentleman as comfortable as possible. This iss the place.'

The doctor was now conscious that they had entered some sort of vast underground chamber; but so utter was the blackness and formless immensity of the chasm, that the fire kindled in it, and the lamp burning against one of its rocky walls, only intensified the feeling of intolerable darkness, vagueness, and mystery.

Here he found Morag Campbell and another woman attending to the injured man, and with a rapid glance he saw that nothing better under the circumstances could have been done for him.

Round a wide ledge of rocks, elevated somewhat from the floor, they had fixed upright posts, and attached old sails to them.

Within this enclosure they had made a bed of straw and blankets. A lamp was suspended to one of the posts, and not far off a fire was burning brightly.

'Weel, noo,' said the doctor, 'this is no sae bad, after a'; I hae seen mony a man in waur quarters.'

The women made way for him, and lifting down the lamp, he gazed at the stranger.

'Oh,' exclaimed the latter, opening his eyes, and speaking somewhat feebly, yet with a bright tone, 'you're the doctor? I'm glad you've come.'

His features bore signs of much suffering and anxiety, but were intelligent, cultured, with a decidedly military cast.

'Yes,' replied the doctor. And realising that his patient was not only an entire stranger, but a gentleman, he dropped his familiar broad Scotch for the nonce. 'I'm Norman Mackenzie,' he said in perfect English, 'the only medical practitioner within twenty miles. You've had a narrow shave for your life, Lieutenant Waldegrave, but we'll soon pull you round, I hope.'

The young soldier observed him keenly with his dark brown eyes, and was evidently satisfied.

'Indeed, yes,' he said, 'it's a marvel I'm here.' A sharp spasm of pain made him compress his lips for a moment, and then he went on: 'I never expected such luck. And they tell me I'm the only one saved; but I've a hope that the crew got safely away in the boat. They were launching it when I was washed overboard.'

'I hear that no bodies have been found,' answered Mackenzie, 'so there's a hope, if a slender one; but just now I must see what I can do for you.'

'Well,' said Waldegrave with considerable nonchalance, 'my leg is broken, whatever else is wrong.'

The doctor proceeded to examine him carefully, and to set the fractured limb, operations that were borne with soldier-like spirit. It was found that although he was much bruised and knocked about, there were no signs of serious internal injury.

'It's really a wonder you've got off so easily,' Mackenzie began. And then he checked himself, for the young soldier looked too exhausted to listen, and seemed inclined to sleep. So he drew aside to mix a draught, and to give a few directions to Morag Campbell.

But Waldegrave roused himself and said: 'There's an important matter I want you to do for me, doctor. Send a message to my mother in the quickest way possible—never mind expense. Tell her I'm alive, and shall soon be all right. Her address is Waldegrave Manor, Northumberland.'

'I'll do that; a special messenger shall start immediately.'

Waldegrave closed his eyes.

'I want you to take this draught now,' said the doctor, 'and I'll come and see you again in the morning; and we'll get you out of this place as soon as the sea has gone down.'

'Ah, where will you take me? I'm told there's no inn about here.'

'Inn! you're right, there's no inn.