

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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The
Inglenook

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CHAPTER XXV

(Continued.)

Again the gun was heard, and Ronald, whose keen eyes were ranging the cliffs, exclaimed:—

'Oh, my Kott, there she iss! Stop, men! Back water! There iss Miss Fiona waving to us. She fired the gun.'

He pointed into a bay which they had nearly passed.

'Where?' asked Waldegrave huskily.

He was looking beyond the bay into the island.

'There, sir, on yon rock, where I found the starnag's eggs in the spring.'

He saw her and waved his cap.

'Thank God! she's safe.'

What was to be done? How could they most quickly rescue her? The plank was gone. The situation was grasped at once. Fiona had made her escape to the rock, and hidden there.

'We must go to the base of yon crag,' Ronald explained to the rowers. 'I can climb up on this side, and I'll let Miss Fiona down with a rope. But slow and steady, men, for this place is the fery jaws o' hell.'

He sent the most experienced man to the bows, and kept a keen eye himself on the long, jagged reefs, more or less submerged, whose sharp teeth would tear the boat open like a saw. A heavy swell from the Atlantic rolled into the gloomy bay, sending angry cross currents tossing and boiling among the black boulders. Gaunt cliffs rose up on either side overhung with chilly vapours. Anxious as they were to reach Fiona, they were compelled to go at a snail's pace, and though Waldegrave was too absorbed with other interests to take in the particulars, he unconsciously felt the sullen horror of the spot. Ronald had rightly called it the jaws of hell.

They had not worked their way far before Waldegrave turned pale and clenched his fists.

Nial Duff had just appeared climbing over the cliffs towards the bay.

'Neffar mind,' said Ronald, 'Miss Fiona hass the gun; he cannot reach her.'

'She can't have loaded again, or we should have seen her,' replied Geoffrey.

'Like enough she's got nothing to load it with,' suggested one of the rowers.

Waldegrave ground his teeth with rage, for there was nothing he could do. He clutched his revolver, but Nial was far beyond its range. The silent faces of the men grew stern and terrible. They began to grow quicker, and Ronald, though he knew the danger, did not hinder them. The boat was now cutting through the water like a knife.

'I fear he'll reach the rock,' groaned Waldegrave. 'I never saw a man run along the cliffs like that before.'

Nial was leaping down precipices and springing across gorges with the reckless fury of a madman.

'It iss not possible, sir,' replied Ronald, too intent on steering the boat among the swarm of rocks to look up. 'There iss no man in Mull that could jump across.'

Waldegrave was not sure. He sprang to

his feet, and shouted to Fiona. She did not understand him; for she doffed and waved her cap in response.

'He's going to try it,' exclaimed Geoffrey, with a sickening dread that he would succeed.

He saw Nial reach the edge of the cliff opposite the rock. He paused, measured the chasm with his eye, made a step or two back, and then flung himself forward across the chasm.

'There he goes, oh, my God, he's over. No; he has slipped; he's falling down; he's gone. No; he has clutched hold of something. He'll do it; he's climbing up on his hands and knees. He'll reach her in another minute.'

But the boat was nearer now. Again Waldegrave shouted to Fiona, who was standing in the recess, watching the efforts of the rowers, and unaware of the danger at her back.

'Look behind!' he cried.

She stepped to the edge of the recess, and stepped to the shoulder of the crag. Then she gave a low cry. Nial had hurt himself in his last spring, but he was creeping towards her like a wild tiger, his eyes aflame with the fire of madness.

'At last I have you,' he cried with a demoniacal laugh; 'we shall die together.'

It was a moment of supreme agony. A struggle with a madman on the side of that crag would inevitably end in both being dashed to pieces on the rocks beneath. Quick as thought her decision was made. She turned to the sea, gave one careful glance below, raised her hands, and dived from the perilous height into the surging waters.

With a terrible oath Nial sprang recklessly after her. He fell with a crash among half-submerged rocks, and disappeared in one of the pools, or was drawn under by strong currents, and swept into unknown depths. He was never found.

Fiona had dived where she saw that the channel ran deep and clear. Before she reappeared, Waldegrave had plunged in after her, and when she rose to the surface his strong arm was round her. With a great cheer Ronald and his companions drew them both safely into the 'Fionnaghal.'

CHAPTER XXVI

EPILOGUE.

'Weel, Mr. Campbell, this is a braw simmer day for the 'Sea Swallow' to win into Loch-na-Keal.'

Dr. Mackenzie looked very hot. He had just ridden up to the gate of 'Tigh-an-Fhasaich, where Ronald was superintending some men who were putting the last touches to a triumphal arch, and hoisting a row of flags.

'Sure it iss,' he answered, 'and every heart in Fas-Ghlac is as bright as the day. Grace was tellin' me all the folk in the glen hef had a fine cleaning and doing up o' their houses. They'll be lookin' for a visit from Mrs. Waldegrave soon. She will be here in an hour or two, and everybody will be at the quay to welcome her.'

'Weel, weel,' mused the doctor aloud, 'mony a time I feared things wadna hae sic

a gude end. They lookit gay black ance. But a's weel that ends weel.'

'Ay, that iss a good saying, whateffer.'

'An' ye'll hae no cause to complain o' dame fortune, Ronald. She's smiled on ye gay often lately, mair especially in gien ye sic a bonnie wife. Faith, man, I wad be glad to get marrit mysel' gin I could win ane like her.'

'There are not fery many, doctor,' replied Ronald, with a bright laugh; 'ye'll hef to seek a long time afore ye'll find another Grace Armstrong.'

'Ye're richt, as ye aye are. I ken every man canna hope to pick up a diamond; sae I shall hae to bide single. Ye say the yacht is expekkit sune?'

'Ay, and ye'll stay, doctor; we will be givin' them a real Highland welcome home.'

'I will that. Ye ken I haena seen Fiona—I mean Mrs. Waldegrave—sune the day she was marrit, nearly twa years by noo. But here comes the bonniest bride to be found in a' Mull.'

'Oh, doctor, you're incorrigible; you're turning a most inveterate flatter,' exclaimed Grace in a clear, soft voice with a ripple of laughter.

'Not I,' he answered, as he clasped her hand warmly and gazed at her with half-envious admiration. 'Your ain man will up-haud me. He just said it himsel'.'

'Ah, then I shall have to lecture him for using such extravagant language,' she answered, blushing and shaking her finger at Ronald, who was hurrying away to help his men. 'But you'll come and see mother, doctor, and have some tea with us.'

'Richt gladly, Mrs. Campbell. I hae been in the saddle a' day, an' I'm no sae young as I ance was, I get tired suner than I used to dae. I was joking Ronald aboot gettin' marrit, gin I could fin' anither Grace Armstrong; but the fac' is I sud hae thoct o' that thirty years ago, only I had aye sae mony sick folk to look after. An' I couldna think o' a wife sittin' alae a' day an' half o' the night feared lest her man sud be drowned in crossing Eronach Water, or break his neck with his horse tumbling owre the Black Craggs in the dark. An' noo I'm too auld, an' naun bide my time a wee bit langer, an' slip awa quietly, when ma day's wark is done.'

'Oh, but you will be with us for many, many years yet, I hope. I don't know what we should all do without you.'

'Ay, weel, we shall see; but ma heart is young, Grace, an' I'm richt glad to see this day. Sae after lookin' in on Jean M'Bain, who has got owre her trouble fine since the operation, I thoct I wad come by this way, and welcome the Fas-Ghlac folk hame. Faith, an' a fine hame it is noo,' he remarked, as he gazed at the house, on which a host of workmen had been employed for more than a year, turning it into a stately pile worthy of the noblest traditions of the M'Ivers. 'Mrs. Waldegrave willna ken her auld hame. An' they are a' coming in the yacht thiegher?'

'Yes; the whole family.'

'Weel, weel, it beats a'. An' your husband tells me that the auld laird has ta'en a new lease o' his life, an' looks better than he has done for years. An' Mrs. Waldegrave is