

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

Published by Permission: All Rights Reserved.

The
Inglebrook

By Arthur Jenkinson
and
Emily J. Jenkinson

CHAPTER XV.

(Continued.)

'Ah, Mr. M'Iver,' exclaimed Nial Mor, linking his arm with the old laird's, and speaking in his blandest tones, 'you've been down to the old ford to look for your pocket-book, and I can see that you've been unsuccessful. You oughtn't to have gone out so early. You run great risks after last night's accident. How have you passed the night? Have you much pain in your head?'

'I had as good a night as I could expect,' answered M'Iver, thanking the young fellow for his kind inquiries, 'and the wound on my head is not at all serious—just a scalp wound—and it has given me very little pain.'

'Of course, I'm awfully sorry about the loss of the money. It was a large sum, but Lachlan may find it yet—if any one can, he will. After all, you know, the accident might have been much more serious. It is a pity you didn't take my advice, and not attempt the ford. You had a close shave for your life. But we'll say no more about that. All's well that ends well, and I am sure that things will come all right.'

So he ran on; even M'Iver noticed something strange and extravagant in his tone and manner.

'But I fear the pocket-book is lost,' said the laird of Fas-Ghlac. 'Fortunately, however, the numbers of the notes are known, and I've written a letter to stop them.'

'Ah, the usual precaution, though quite unnecessary in this case,' answered Nial jauntily, and with an airy sweep of his hand. 'All my men may be trusted—especially Lachlan M'Cuag—but we can post the letter as we go through Sruthan. I suppose you're still quite determined to sail home, as the morning is fine? It will certainly be easier for you.'

'Yes.'

'And you must not take your loss too seriously to heart,' he proceeded in yet more confident tones. 'Of course it's a pity; but I'll tell you what it is, Mr M'Iver, you must let me have the pleasure of helping you. I've always had the will since I first heard of your losses through that scoundrel Martin Brown. By the way, speaking of him, there's no fathoming that fellow's iniquity. He has had to flee the country, and yet he has had the coolness and audacity to write and ask me for £500. I replied that it would give me great pleasure to administer to his back five-hundred lashes with a horse-whip. But as I was saying, I've always had the will to assist you, and now I've both the will and the power. I can easily tide you over all your difficulties. There is, to begin, the interest on your bonds. It can stand as long as ever you like. And then there is Gordon. He will require a large sum if that contract entered into three years ago for drainage, fencing and improvements is to be completed. He was speaking to me about it a few days ago, and was suggesting that you might be glad to break the contract. But he can wait for his money and the work can go on, for I have undertaken to back him up. So you need have no anxiety on that score. You see, Mr. M'Iver, I'm

speaking freely, for I really want you to see that I shall be delighted to help you.'

Help proffered in such a tone of patronage and confidence would have been exceedingly distasteful to the laird of Fas-Ghlac had it not occurred to him, while Nial Mor was speaking, that the young fellow had only just come into full possession of his large means, and was, not unnaturally, a little vain of his power. A vague uneasiness, also, for a moment flashed through his mind—Nial must have been thinking a great deal about his affairs—but it passed away and was gone. He had always had a warm side for Nial, always been inclined to excuse his faults, and believe in him. He had no intention of accepting the offers, if he could possibly avoid it; but for all that he grasped Nial's hand warmly and thanked him heartily and said he would think over all he suggested.

Nial Mor's spirits rose higher than ever, and he hesitated as to whether he should not sail round to Fas-Ghlac for the sake of seeing Fiona. But on the whole he was inclined to think that it would be better first of all that she should see her father, and hear of all that had occurred from him. He would ride over or sail round in a day or two.

He was confirmed in that decision on reaching Sruthan Post-office. Another letter Sybil whispered to him, had come from Lieutenant Waldegrave. She had hidden it in her bedroom, and could not get it without awakening her mother's curiosity. But if he would be in his den that afternoon she would bring it to him.

He gave her a nod of acquiescence; for he was not only eager to obtain possession of the letter but bound also to humour the girl.

And yet he left the post office with a more clouded brow than he had shown for some hours. The truth is, he was beginning to realise that Sybil would be his great difficulty. He had been as judicious and guarded in his private interviews with her as the circumstances would allow. The girl was very pretty and winsome and very fond of him. She let him see that she loved him, and he might have been willing enough to amuse himself with her, had not the danger been too great. Her faithful co-operation, however, was essential to him, and to obtain it he must for the present give an apparent encouragement to her foolish dreams.

But what would happen when Sybil discovered she had been duped, and used as a tool to further his ends? Would she keep silent? Fortunately she could do nothing to expose him without implicating herself. If she became troublesome she must be frightened with threats. For the time being, however, Nial relied on his gifts, and on a mild encouragement of her hopes. So in the afternoon they met in his den.

Still they did not meet unobserved. Lachlan M'Cuag had his own reasons for watching his master's movements closely, and Nancy Bell, unknown to the keeper, was interested in Sybil.

Nancy had observed the girl's frequent presence in the wood, and had soon discovered that she came there to meet with the young laird in his secret retreat. And now

that she saw her turn to the old tower again, whither Nial Mor had gone a few minutes previously, she resolved to interfere.

Not that she had any love for Sybil, but for all her rough tongue, Nancy was true at heart, and had an old feeling of regard for Colin Grant. In their early days, before he had gone to Greenock, there had been kind looks and words between them which might have ripened into something deeper had not the poor man fallen under the blandishments of Sybil's mother. Nancy had never quite forgiven him for taking up with another woman and very cordially disliked Mrs. Grant. Yet she retained enough of the old feeling to wish to save Colin's name from reproach. What the end would be of Sybil's visits to Nial Mor's den, unless they were stopped at once, was only too clear to her. Already she feared it might be too late, but any rate she would delay no longer. It would be no use speaking to the father—he had no power over his daughter; besides it was specially a mother's business; so with her usual decision she set off at once to give Mrs. Grant a piece of her mind.

'It's a fine day,' she remarked blandly, on entering the shop.

The kitchen door was only ajar, and Mrs. Grant, supposing herself unseen, made no reply. The last time she had served Nancy Bell with meal she had not only given her short weight, but an inferior quality, and did not doubt that the old dame had now come to have it out with her.

Nancy, however, knew that the person she wanted was there, for her keen eyes had caught a glimpse of her in passing the window.

'It's a fine day,' repeated Nancy, 'a fine bright day.'

Still there was silence. Mrs. Grant was hoping that Nancy would go away.

'As I was sayin', Mistress Grant,' persisted her tormentor, 'it's a gude day. I ken richt weel ye're ahint the door, an' gin ye dinna come foort, an' speak to me like a ceevil woman, ye'll rue it.'

Seeing there was no help for it, Mrs. Grant made her appearance, and stood in the doorway, arms akimbo.

'Weel,' she exclaimed defiantly, 'an' gin it is a noe dae, naebody wants to contradict ye. Ye needna fash yersel' wi' tellin' folk what they ken as weel as ye dae; but maybe ye're warnin' somethin' oo to the shop? What can I serve ye wi' the noo?'

'Naethin', answered Nancy, keeping her temper wonderfully well.

'Then gang yer ways, an' dinna come wastin' honest folk's time,' replied Mrs. Grant hotly.

'I hae come to gie ye a warnin' whilk ye'll dae weel to heed,' said Nancy, with a quiet seriousness unusual with her.

'Lord preserve us!' cried Mrs. Grant, still thinking of the meal, and determined to put on a bold face. 'A warnin'! Wha wad hae thocht it? But maybe it's the preachin' ye hae taken to in yer auld days? Hae ye come to read a psalm to me, an' hear me say the carritches in place o' the minister? Faith, it isna often he comes ben ma hoose.'

'Mind yer tongue,' said Nancy, beginning to get nettled, 'it's ower lang, an' gin ye