

The
Inglebrook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER IV.

(Continued.)

Torquil M'iver rose from his chair, and stood before the fire. As was usual with him, he was thinking about the future, and wondering what Fiona would do if she were left alone in that old house.

'Ah,' he murmured plaintively as she turned from the window, 'this is a very desolate place for you, my child; nothing but cares and storms. I wish you could fly away like the swallows to the south.'

'What, and leave you alone, father? that would never do,' she replied brightly, pushing back his thin, grey locks, and kissing his forehead.

'I am an old man,' he answered sadly, 'and age is not a good companion for youth. I would like you to be where you would have young friends, and amusements, and things to interest you.'

Fiona was about to say that no place was so interesting to her as by her father's side; but the door was flung open unceremoniously by Ronald Campbell.

'A ship iss in danger,' he cried. 'She will be trying to get in to Loch na Keal.'

'God pity the poor sailors,' exclaimed Torquil M'iver. 'It is not possible in such a storm, unless they know the coast well.'

He raised his hands despairingly.

'Wait for me, Ronald,' called Fiona, as she ran for something to put on.

'You will be drenched, child, and get your death of cold,' said her father, as she returned, 'and you can do no good.'

'That's the pity of it; we can render no help; still I must go.'

They ran across the fields towards the shore.

'This way, Miss Fiona,' cried Ronald, making towards a promontory where the cliffs broke down precipitously to the sea.

There, under the shelter of a towering crag, was a small group of men, women, and children—the whole population, in fact, of Fas-Ghlaic, with the exception of a few sick and elderly people.

Every eye was fixed on a vessel endeavouring to beat up against the hurricane that was sweeping her among the fierce whirlpools and black jagged reefs of that inhospitable coast. It was a steamship, but her fires were out. One of her masts was broken at the cross trees, and another supported only a torn sail and a signal of distress. The rain had ceased, and from the west a sickly reddish-yellow light gleamed through the hurrying storm clouds, and revealed her hapless plight.

'Sorrow! sorrow!' wailed old Morag Campbell as Fiona came and stood by her side; 'it iss Himself that must save them; they are jast the help o' man.'

'A hard fight they will have for their lives, mother,' said Ronald, 'but she iss a fine ship, a beautiful ship, and well handled, whatever. If the wind would go round another point, and she had any one on board that knew the rocks, she might win in.'

'Sure! and this iss the last voyage she will ever make,' remarked another fisher-

man; 'and it iss not in Loch na Keal they will cast their anchor to-night.'

A breathless silence fell on the little group as they watched the ship fluttering like a wounded bird for life. On she came, now mounting on the back of a huge wave, now sinking in the trough of the sea. At one moment the breakers made a clean sweep over her and she seemed gone; and then again she staggered out of the foaming mass, the light struck her torn sails with a red stain, and the broken mast hung like a fractured limb.

Each blast of the tempest drove her nearer to her doom.

For extending far into the sea were black reefs whose sharp serrated edges gaped amid the surf like the horrid jaws of sharks. The shore consisted of an irregular line of black and grey boulders, covered with slimy weeds, and piled one above the other in dreadful confusion. Behind them rose gaunt cliffs with dark, yawning caverns, within which the winds and waves roared with fearful clamour. Upon this appalling coast the Atlantic flung itself with wild commotion. It writhed and tossed in sudden whirlpools, plunged down in black hissing gulfs, and spouted up again in white foaming torrents.

As the vessel drifted nearer, and it was inevitable that it must strike on one of the reefs, Ronald and several other young fishermen climbed down the face of the cliff.

There was no regular path, but they were able to scramble from ledge to ledge, until they reached a rough sheep track. It was a precarious descent, but they were sheltered somewhat from the wind, and strong and sure-footed. The rocks shelved sheer down to the sea, and the breakers below churned themselves into foam. No one could escape who slipped and fell there.

Along this narrow track they proceeded until they reached a gloomy cavern called the Priest's Cave, up to the mouth of which the sea ran at very high tides. Tremendous walls of rocks that formed its outer sides ran up in ridges to a giddy height, while their bases extended towards the sea, forming a wide, broken channel, uneven and rock strewn, where the tide boiled and spouted in a hundred roaring cataracts.

Here they stopped and watched the ill-fated ship with eyes full of pity and fear. There was nothing they could do: no boat of theirs could live in such a sea.

They had not to wait long. For hardly had they reached the cave before a heavy sea struck the ship and tore away her rudder.

All hope was now gone. She fell on one side, helpless and beyond control. Another wave lifted her and flung her on the rocks called the Black Gulls. There she lay, showing her graceful lines, except when the sea made a clean sweep over her. Nothing now could save her from becoming a wreck, and yet she was within a few hundred yards of safety.

How those on board fared could not be seen because of the way she had lurched over, but there were signs that they were trying to launch their boats. Whether they succeeded, and safely reached Loch na Keal

or one of the near islands, those who were watching could not tell, for a driving mist had suddenly swept down and obscured their view.

It seemed only too likely that every one of the crew had perished; for when the atmosphere cleared again, she was breaking up, and not a soul could be discovered upon her. Ronald and his companions saw her tremble from bow to stern, then her decks burst open, she rolled over, and within a few moments nothing could be seen beyond tangled wreckage tossing amid the white foam.

'Ochone! ochone!' wailed Morag Campbell in Gaelic, the tears running down her venerable cheeks. 'Sorrow! sorrow! the cruel storm reaps another harvest o' brave men and handsome lads. The sea wins them with gentle whispers and false smiles, and then flings them on the sharp rocks and buries them in her sunless caves. And it is their mothers and wives that will see them no more, no, never again. Was it not this way with my own brave lads long ago? Ochone! ochone!'

'It is sad, it is sad,' said Fiona pitifully, trying to comfort the old woman, but death is sure whether men stay at home or go to sea. It is Himself that has done it, and they are at peace.'

'Ochone!' cried Morag, 'it is not for the men and the lads my heart is so sad. Sure! they are in the hands of the Lord. It is for the mothers that bore them; it is for the wives and children that will wait and watch and look for them, and will never see them again, no, never again.'

'Let me help you down, Morag,' said Fiona soothingly. 'We shall know what all this sorrow and trouble is for by and by.'

She linked her arm with the old widow's to lead her away. As she did so, she cast a lingering, searching glance over the weltering mass of heaving waters. And then she started.

'Look! look! Morag,' she cried. 'What is that? Surely there is a man struggling in the surf! I can see his arms moving.'

Morag turned and gazed wistfully seawards.

'Ochone,' she wailed again. 'My eyes are old and full of tears; I see no man.'

But as Fiona continued to watch, a whirlpool that roared round one of the black reefs, again flung a man out of its seething current towards the shore. He was alive, and struggling desperately to keep his head above the waves.

Without a moment's delay, she scrambled down the face of the cliff, and ran along the rough sheep track by which the young fishermen had descended. When about halfway down, she met them returning. They were no longer watching the sea, and so had observed nothing.

'Back! back!' she cried. 'There is a man; he is living; we must save him.'

They turned and sprang down the path like wild goats, Fiona closely following them.

'This way,' she called when they reached the cave, and climbing over the rocks, she hurried along until the clouds of flying foam