

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER XXIII

NIGHT.

When once beyond the red flare from the cottage windows Nial was compelled to pause. Mad as he was with drink and passion, he had sufficient sense left to perceive that he had no chance of finding Fiona by rushing blindly over the island.

'She has hidden in one of the caves on the shore,' he thought, 'but I'll find her before the night has passed.'

Then he remembered her remark in the morning about swimming to one of the rocks, and ground his teeth with rage; for if she had done that she was already beyond his reach.

But where was Nancy? Why should she run away? She must have gone off with Fiona, and if so, they were still on the island.

He climbed an eminence near the hut and shouted her name, but there was no response.

'Ah, the cursed old woman is in the plot, or she would answer. She cannot be far away.'

'Nancy, Nancy, you old hag! Come to me. Speak, if you're out of hell, or when I find you, I'll send you there.'

Still there was silence.

The moon, hitherto obscured by drifting clouds, began to clear. He could see better and springing down the hill he ran some distance, and then ascended the cliffs where he could see both along the shore below, and also the interior of the island.

A great flare now shot up into the sky. The fire had burst through the roof and windows of the hut, and leaped up in long tongues of flame and columns of white smoke. A strange rushing sound filled the air. The wind swept through the burning driving great sheets of fire among the scrub in the hollow, and in a moment it was in flames, crackling, roaring, and pouring forth vast showers of sparks. Long streamers of green and gold flame flashed and darted over the hillside. The dead heather and bracken caught, and for a time it seemed as though the conflagration would sweep over the whole island. The red light was reflected on the dark clouds, it crimsoned the stormy sea, and tipped the white foam with rose. Innumerable wild birds whirled up from their sleeping places, and circled round and round, screaming and calling to one another. The Highland cattle were roused, and gathering into a herd, rushed madly to and fro, bellowing and roaring in their fright.

The wild scene only increased Nial Mor's excitement. He ran hither and thither, now in the light and now in the darkness, swearing, cursing and shouting for Fiona and Nancy. The fire threw a brilliant but unsteady light around. It shifted and danced, rose and fell spasmodically. While some things were clearly revealed, others were enveloped in black shadows. As some fiery sword of flame quivered upwards, a rock or a cliff would for a moment stand out in bold relief, and then be shrouded in a deeper gloom.

In one of these fitful gleams a tall crag

was suddenly lighted up, and Nial saw Nancy Bell crouching in one of its chasms.

He leaped towards her.

'Go back,' she cried, 'Miss M'Iver is no here.'

'You limb of Satan, you damned witch!' he shouted, 'do you think you'll deceive me again?'

'Oh, go back, sir,' she called again imploringly. 'Gin ye value yer life dinna come here.'

'Value my life!' he laughed wildly. 'We shall all be dead before the morning; you and I and that proud queen. Tell me where she's hiding or I'll fling you into the sea.'

Fiona was not a hundred yards off, getting out the plank that Ronald had hidden in the spring—on the finding of which all her hope had been fixed. As she heard Nial approach and his threatening language, she thrust the plank back again, and crept nearer to Nancy. She would not forsake one who had proved so faithful to her, and was now almost as much an object of his wrath as herself. She could see neither the one nor the other, for the crag was again in darkness. So she gave the sign—a curlew's call—that was to summon Nancy. But Nancy was less intent upon saving her life than on keeping Nial and Fiona apart. And therefore, instead of obeying the call, and slipping away under cover of the darkness before Nial had reached the top of the crag, she waited for him.

He seized and shook her.

'Where is she?' he demanded again.

'I dinna ken whaur she is; an' ye'll no harm auld Nancy wha nursed ye, an' loe'd ye like a mither?'

She flung her arms round him.

Fiona heard a loud curse, a shriek, a clatter of falling stones down the crag's side, the dull thud of a heavy body falling below, and then a sound of hurrying feet along the shore.

After that there was silence. She could see nothing—nothing but impenetrable shadow veiling and hiding everything save the grey line of the surf; hear nothing but the loud moan of retreating waters.

For some moments she stood perfectly still, transfixed with horror, and speechless. Then clutching the gun in one hand, and with the other feeling her way, she began to climb cautiously and stealthily down the crag. When a little way down she heard footsteps again—evidently Nial's—returning. He was moving about, groping in the darkness, muttering to himself. A great bitterness and anger filled her heart; she raised the gun, her finger on the trigger. She dropped it again, for she could only guess his position, would probably miss him, might hit Nancy, and in any case shrank from firing upon him in the dark, though she knew now that he was seeking her to kill her. So she listened breathlessly, with beating heart, and at last heard him say: 'Dead, dead,' and then move away along the shore.

She waited until his steps had quite died away, and then continued her descent in search of Nancy. A deep groan guided her. Nancy was lying among the rocks, huddled up, like one dead.

Slowly the moon emerged from drifting clouds, and Fiona endeavoured to discover what injuries the poor old woman had received, and to help her into an easier position. But the attempt only elicited another groan. She was compelled to desist. Fortunately, among the food Nancy had passed into the shed during the afternoon was a flask of wine, and this Fiona now presented to her lips. The few drops she was able to get down revived her; she opened her eyes in a vacant stare, and then closed them again with a shudder. Again Fiona was able to administer a little wine, with the result that in a few minutes Nancy had so far revived as to give her a slight look of recognition and whisper her name.

'Could I not make you a little more easy, Nancy?'

She shook her head.

'Just a little move on to that grass plot?'

'Na, na, dinna touch me.'

'Have some more wine.'

Another mouthful was got down.

'Do you feel very much hurt?'

'Ay. I'm deeing, Miss M'Iver. Ma time's come. I thoct it wad be sae. But dinna wait. Awa an' hide yersel.'

'I shall not leave you, Nancy.'

'Na, na, ye maun gae. It's no muckle langer this auld body will need onything; but that wee while may be life or death to ye.'

'I must stay with you, Nancy, as you would have stayed with me. See, I will put this shawl under your head.'

She drew the shawl from her own shoulders, and rolled it into a pillow.

'That is a little better, is it not? Now, try and take a drop more wine.'

'Ye were aye kind to the puir, Miss M'Iver; but dae ye ken whaur Maister Nial is?'

'No; I heard him go awy. I hope he won't come back; but if he does I'm not afraid.'

'I wad be weel content gin ye wad leave me to dee alane. I wadna hae ye and Maister Nial meet.'

'I hope not, for his sake.'

'Ay, Miss M'Iver, ye maun think as kindly o' him as ye can. Gin ye kent a', ye'd be as sorry for him as I am.'

'He flung you down here.'

'Na, na; I slippit an' fell wi' ma arms round him. He tried to save, but he couldna. An' maybe ye'll no mak' an ill sang o' his dacin' here. Ye hae a kind heart, an' will no be owre hard on him. Maybe he'll gang awa and turn oot weel yet. Naeboddy has seen mair o' him nor I hae; an' for a' his fauts there was that in him I liket richt weel. I wad dee mair easy gin ye wad say that ye wad forgie him.'

Fiona hesitated a moment, and then she made the promise.

Nancy was satisfied, and slowly sank into a condition of only semi-consciousness. Now and then she gave a low moan, or muttered something inaudible. Fiona sank on the rock by her side, now and then moistening her lips with the wine and wiping the cold sweat from her brow. There was nothing more that she could do. But