

THE FOUR MACNICOLS.

BY WILLIAM BLACK.

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CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

"Well, it seemed easier to dismiss superstitious fears out here in the sunlight. Perhaps it had been only bats after all. Warlocks did not whirl in the air—at least, they were understood not to do so. Witches were supposed to reserve their aerial performances for the night-time. Perhaps it was only bats, as Rob asserted. Indeed, it would be safer—especially in Rob's presence—to accept his explanation of the mystery. At the same time the younger boys occasionally started a stealthy glance backward to that gloomy apartment that had so suddenly become alive with unknown things.

Then the games began. Rob had come to the conclusion that a wise chieftain should foster a love for national sports and pastimes; and to that end he had invented a system of marks, the winning of a large number of which entitled the holder to pecuniary or other reward. As for himself, his part was that of spectator and arbiter; he handicapped the competitors; he declared the prizes.

On this occasion he ensconced himself in a niche of the ruins, where he was out of the glare of the sun and gracefully surrounded by masses of ivy; while his relatives hauled out to the middle of the green plateau several trunks of fir-trees of various sizes that had been carefully lopped and pruned for the purpose of "tossing the caber."

Well, they "tossed the caber!" they "put the stone;" they had wrestling-matches, and other trials of strength; Rob the while surveying the scene with a critical eye, and reckoning up the proper number of marks. And now some milder diversions followed. Three or four planks, radeily nailed together, and forming a piece of rough flooring about two or three yards square, were hauled out from an archway, placed on the grass, and a piece of tarpaulin thrown over them.

Then two of the boys took out their jews-harps—alas! alas! that was the only musical instrument within their reach, until the coveted bagpipes should be purchased—and gayly struck up with "Green grow the rushes, O!" as a preliminary flourish.

What was this now? What but a performance of the famous sword-dance by that renowned and valiant henchman, Nicol MacNicol of Erisaig, in the kingdom of Scotland! Nicol, faling a couple of broadswords or four dirks, had got two pieces of rusty old iron and placed them crosswise on the extemporized floor.

With what skill and nimbleness he proceeded to execute this sword-dance—which is, no doubt, the survival of some ancient mystic rite; with what elegance he pointed his toes and held his arms akimbo; with what amazing dexterity, in all the evolutions of the dance, he avoided touching the bits of iron; nay, with what intrepidity, at the most critical moment, he held his arms aloft and victoriously snapped his thumbs, it wants a Homeric chronicler to tell.

It needs only be said here that, after it, Neil's "Highland Fling" was comparative failure, though he, better than most, could give that outlying quiver of the foot which few can properly acquire, and without which the dancer of the "Highland Fling" might just as well go home and go to bed.

The great chieftain, having regarded these and other performances with an observant eye, and having awarded so many marks to this one and to that, declared the games over, and invited the competitors one and all to a royal banquet.

It was a good deal more wholesome than most banquets, for it consisted of a scone and a glass of fresh milk apiece—butter being as yet beyond the means of the MacNicol. And it was a good deal more sensible than most banquets, for there was no speech-making after it. But there was some interesting conversation.

"Nicol, what did ye find in the dungeon?" Duncan said.

"Oh man, it was a grewsome place," said Nicol, who did not want to make too little of the perils he had encountered.

"What did ye see?"

"How could I see anything? But I felt plenty on the way down; and I'm sure it's full o' creepin' things and beasts. And then, when I was near the foot, I put my hand on

something leevin', and it flew up and bit me; and in a meenit the whole place was alive. Man, what a noise it was! And then down came the rope and I fell; and I got such a clour on the head!"

"Nothing but bats!" said Rob, contemptuously.

"I think it was houlets!"* said Duncan, confidently; for there was one in the wood when I was gaun through, and I nearly ran my head against him. He was sitting in one of the larches—man, he made a noise!"

"Ye've got your heads filled with nothing but witches and warlocks the day!" said Rob, impatiently, as he rose to his feet. "Come, and get the things into the basket. We maun be back in Erisaig before the *Glenara* comes in."

Very soon thereafter the small party made their way down again to the shore, and entered the war-galley of the chieftain, the halvards being restored to their proper use. There were no more signs of any squall, but the light, steady breeze was contrary; and as Robert of the Red Hand was rather anxious to get back before the steamer should arrive, and as he prided himself on his steering, he himself took the tiller, his cousin Neil being posted as lookout forward.

It was a tedious business this beating up against the contrary wind; but there was nothing the MacNicol delighted in so much as in sailing, and they had grown to be expert in handling a boat. And it needed all their skill to get anything out of these repeated tacks with this old craft, that had a sneaking sort of way of falling away to leeward.

However, they had the constant excitement of putting about; and the day was fine; and they were greatly refreshed after their arduous pastimes by that banquet of scones and milk. Nor did they know that this was to be the last day of their careless, boyish idleness; that never again would the great chieftain, heedless of what the morrow might bring forth, hold these high frolics in the halls of Eilean-na-Rona.

Patience and perseverance will beat even contrary winds; and at last, after one long tack, stretching almost to the other side of Loch Scrone, they put about, and managed to make the entrance to the harbor, just weathering the rocks that had nearly destroyed them on their setting out.

But here another difficulty waited them. Under the shelter of the low-lying hills the harbor was in a dead calm. No sooner had they passed the rocks than they found themselves on water as smooth as glass, and there were no oars in the boat.

For this oversight Rob MacNicol was not responsible, the fact being that oars were valuable in Erisaig and not easily to be borrowed, whereas this old boat was at anybody's disposal. There was nothing in it but to sit and wait for a puff of wind.

Suddenly they heard a sound—the distant throbbing of the *Glenara's* paddles. Rob grew anxious. This old boat was right in the fair-way of the steamer; and the question was whether, in coming round the point, she would see them in time to slow.

"I wish we were out of here," said he. As a last resource, he threw the tiller into the boat, took up the helm, and tried to use it as a sort of paddle. But this was scarcely of any avail; and they could hear, though they could not see, that the steamer was almost at the point.

The next moment she appeared, and it seemed to them in their fright that she was almost upon them—towering away over them with her gigantic bulk. They heard the scream of the steam-whistle, and the sharp "ping ping" of the indicator, as the captain tried to have the engines reversed.

It was too late. The way on the steamer carried her on, even when her paddles were stopped; and the next second her bows had gone clean into the old tarred boat, cutting her almost in two and heeling her over.

She sank at once. Then the passengers of the steamer rushed to the side to see what should become of the lads struggling in the water, the mate threw overboard to them a couple of life-buoys, and the captain shouted out to have a boat lowered. There was a great confusion.

Meanwhile all this had been witnessed by the father of the MacNicol, who had stood for a second or two as if paralyzed. Then a sort of spasm of action seized him; and apparently not knowing what he was about he threw open the gangway aloft the paddle-box and sprang into the sea.

*Anglice, owls.

CHAPTER III.

ALTERED CIRCUMSTANCES.

Even with this big steamer coming right down on them, Rob MacNicol did not lose his head. He knew that his two brothers and his cousin Neil could swim like water-rats; and as for himself, though he would have given a good deal to get rid of his boots, he did not fear being able to get ashore.

But there was no time to think. "Jump clear of the boat!" he shouted to his companions.

The next second came the dreadful crash. The frail old boat seemed to be pressed onward and downward, as if the steamer had run right over her. Then Rob found himself in the water, and very deep in the water too.

The next thing he perceived was a great, greenish-white thing over his head; and as he knew that that was the hull of the steamer he struck away from it with all the strength at his disposal. He remembered afterward experiencing a sort of hatred of that shining green thing, and thinking it looked hideous and dangerous, like ashark.

However, the next moment he rose to the surface, blew the water out of his mouth, and looked around.

There was a life-buoy within a yard of him and the people on the steamer were calling to him to lay hold of it; but he had never touched one of these things, and he preferred to trust to himself, heavy as he felt his boots to be.

It was the others he was looking after. Neil, he perceived, was already off for the shore, swimming hand-over-hand, as if a sword-fish were after him. Nicol was being hauled up the side of the steamer at the end of a rope, just as he had been hauled up from the Eilean-na-Rona dungeon; and his brother Duncan had seized hold of the helm that had been cast loose when the boat went down.

Satisfied that every one was safe, Rob himself struck out for the side of the steamer, and was speedily hauled on board, presently finding himself on deck with his two dripping companions.

The strange thing was that his father was nowhere to be seen, and even the captain looked round and asked where John MacNicol was. At the same moment a woman, all trembling, came forward and asked the mate if they had got the man out.

"What man?" said he.

She said she had been standing by the paddle-box, and that one of the sailors, the moment the accident had occurred, had opened the gangway and jumped into the water, no doubt with the intention of rescuing the boys. She had not seen him come up again, for just as he went down the steamer backed.

At this news there was some little consternation. The mate called aloud for John MacNicol; there was no answer. He ran to the other side of the steamer; nothing was visible on the smooth water. They searched every where, and the boat that had been lowered was pulled about, but the search was in vain.

The woman's story was the only explanation of this strange disappearance; but the sailors suspected more than they dared to suggest to the bewildered lads. They suspected that old MacNicol had dropped into the water just before the paddles had made their first backward revolution; and that in coming to the surface he had been struck by one of the floats. They said nothing of this, however; and as the search proved to be quite useless, the *Glenara* steamed slowly onward to the quay.

It was not until the next afternoon that they recovered the body of old MacNicol; and from certain appearances on the corpse it was clear that he had been struck down by the paddles in his effort to reach and help his sons.

That was a sad evening for Rob MacNicol. It was his first introduction to the cruel facts of life. And amid his sorrow for the loss of one who, in a sort of rough and reckless way, had been very kind and even affectionate to him, Rob was vaguely aware that on himself now rested the responsibility for the upbringing of his two brothers and his cousin.

He sat up late that night, long after the others were asleep, thinking of what he should do. In the midst of this silence the door was quietly opened, and Daft Sandy came into the small room.

"What do ye want at this time o' night?" said Rob, angrily, for he had been startled.

The old, bent, half-witted man looked cautiously at the bed in which Neil lay fast asleep.

"Whisht, Rob, my man," he said, in a whisper; "I waited till every one in Erisaig was asleep. Ay, ay! it's a bad day this day for ye. And what are ye going to do now, Rob? Ye'll be taking to the fishing!"

"Oh, ay; I'll be taking to the fishing!" said Rob, bitterly, for he had been having his dreams also, and had turned from them with a sigh. "Of course I'll be taking to the fishing! And maybe ye'll tell me where I am to get forty pounds to buy a boat, and where I am to get thirty pounds to buy nets? Maybe ye'll tell me that, Sandy?"

"The bank—"

"What does the bank ken about me? They would as soon think of throwing the money into Loch Scrone."

"But ye ken, Rob Coll Macdougall would give ye share in his boat for twelve pounds."

"Twelve pounds! Man, ye're just daft, Sandy. Where am I to get twelve pounds?"

"Well, well, Rob," said the old man, coming nearer, and speaking still more mysteriously, "listen to what I tell ye. Some day or other ye'll be taking to the fishing; and when that day comes I will put something in your way. Ay, ay, the fishermen about Erisaig dinna know everything; come to me, Rob, my man, and I'll tell ye something about the herring. Ye are a good lad, Rob. Many's the herring I've got from ye when I wouldna go near the shore for their mischievous bauns; and when once ye have a boat and nets o' your own I will tell ye something. Daft Sandy is no so daft, maybe. Have ye any tobacco Rob?"

Rob said he had no tobacco; and, making sure that Daft Sandy had come to him with a pack of nonsense merely as an excuse to borrow money for tobacco, he bundled him out of the house and went to bed.

Rob was anxious that his brothers and cousin and himself should present a respectable appearance at the funeral; and in these humble preparations nearly all their small savings were swallowed up. The funeral expenses were paid by the steambot company. Then, after the funeral, the few people who were present departed to their own homes, no doubt imagining that the MacNicol boys would be able to live as hitherto they had lived—that is, anyhow.

But there was a kindly man, called Jamieson, who kept the grocery-shop, and he called Rob in as the boys passed home.

"Rob," said he, "ye maun be doing something now. There's a cousin of mine has a whiskey-shop in the Salt-market, in Glasgow, and I could get ye a place there."

Rob's very gorge rose at the notion of his having to serve in a whiskey-shop in Glasgow. That would be to abandon all the proud ambitions of his life. Nevertheless, he had been thinking seriously about the duty he owed to these lads, his companions, who were now dependent on him. So he swallowed his pride, and said,

"How much would he give me?"

"I think I could get him to give ye four shillings a week. That would keep ye very well."

"Keep me?" said Rob. "Ay, but what's to become of Duncan and Neil and Nicol?"

"They must shift for themselves," the grocer answered.

"That wina do," said Rob, and he left the shop.

He overtook his companions, and asked them to go along to some rocks overlooking the harbor. They sat down there—the harbor below them, with all its picturesque boats and masses of drying nets and what not.

"Neil," said Rob to his cousin, "we'll have to think about things now. There will be no more Eilean-na-Rona for us. We have just about as much left as will pay the lodgings this week, and Nicol must go three nights a week to the night-school. What we get for stripping the nets 'll no do now."

"It will not," said Neil.

"Mr. Jamieson was offering me a place in Glasgow, but it is not very good, and I think we will do better if we keep together. Neil," said he, "if I had only a net, do ye not think we could trawl for coddies?"

And again he said, "Neil, do ye not think we could make a net for ourselves out of the old rags lying at the shed?"

And again he said, "Do ye think that

*Coddies is the familiar name in those parts of young saithe. Trawling, again, there means the use of an ordinary seine.