

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER XIII.

(Continued.)

Yet her very gentleness and sympathy—awakened by the thought of his late bereavement—only threw a deeper shadow upon his mind. That she should so completely and manifestly believe in him as at least a man of honour and a gentleman, quickened his sense of moral degradation. He had entered on a course of treachery and meanness of which until lately he would have scorned the thought. Daily he felt himself sinking deeper into mental and moral confusion. An accusing conscience haunted him. It enveloped the present in deep gloom, and pointed still more ominously to the future. While resolved to marry Fiona—if not by fair means then by foul—he was appalled at the moral gulf that now divided them. What would happen when she found him out, as he instinctively knew she would some day? When he thought of these things he was puzzled and tortured by the contradictions of his own mind. And then as the inward torment became insupportable, he broke into a wild laugh that had something of a maniacal ring in it, and rose from his chair and walked to the window.

The prospect was not inviting or likely to draw a man away from miserable reflections. For the last ten days the rain had fallen incessantly, and though it had now ceased, the hills were wrapt in mist, and the land lay sodden beneath lowering clouds. Through an opening among the trees he could see a strip of the far distant road, and there were Lachlan M'Cuaig and Colin Grant wending their way into Sruthan.

He was still gazing in a self-absorbed manner on their slowly disappearing forms when a thought seized him that made his eyes kindle. Torquil M'Iver was from home, and was expected back that evening. If the bridge across Bronach Water was gone, he would be unexpectedly stopped. There would be no other way of reaching home that night, and he would be almost compelled to accept of his hospitality.

Here was a chance not to be lightly cast aside. Nial had learned that Torquil M'Iver was exceedingly disappointed and angry at Waldegrave's apparent silence, and was just in the right mood to look favourably on a renewal of his own attentions to Fiona. Here was an opportunity for a long quiet talk during which he could gain the old laird completely over to his side. It was worth trying, and in a few minutes he was on his way to see what could be done.

Bronach Water was a mountain stream which in the course of ages had won for itself a deep channel down a wild, rocky gorge. In very dry weather it shrank up, and its stony bed lay baking in the sun, with here and there dark pools overhung by a thick growth of vegetation. At most seasons it could be easily crossed on stepping stones, and horsemen, before the bridge was built, rode through at a place called the Old Ford. But when there were heavy rains, Bronach Water rose rapidly and roared and swirled with mighty violence among the huge boulders that obstructed its course. More than one story was told of horsemen who ventur-

ing to cross the ford when the stream was in flood, had been swept over a wild, rocky chasm and drowned in what was known as the Kelpie's Pool.

A brief examination of the bridge convinced Nial, in his present mood, that it was not worth while attempting to repair it. In any case, it had been up a good many years, was only a rough structure, and might now give place to something more substantial. Lachlan M'Cuaig had left a man to warn any chance passenger against attempting to cross it, and to him Nial turned and gave instructions that it was to be knocked down at once.

'But the pair bodies goin' to the Fas-Ghlaic, sir, what'll they dae?' asked the man. 'Lachlan was talkin' o' patchin' it up till the storm is by.'

'No, no,' answered Nial emphatically, 'that's not to be done. It must come down. We can't afford to patch things up for the Fas-Ghlaic men,' and he turned away.

'Umph!' said the man to himself, 'he's a sair man to anger, that Nial Duff. He'll no lift a finger for ony ane on M'Iver's estate, an' a' because the laird's dochter wouldna be his wife.'

A few hours later, as Colin Grant and two other men trudged back to Sruthan, the breaking down of the bridge started them, also, on a somewhat animated conversation.

'Yes, it iss strange,' said Colin, 'it iss fery strange that the young laird would break down the Bronach Bridge. We could hef mended it, and it could hef been used till the spate was by. Now there iss no brig, and it would be fery dangerous to try the ford.'

'No so fery strange, Colin, answered Duncan Black. 'The brig was done, and the spate will be past in the morn. It would not hef been so easy as ye think to patch it up. It might hef given way while we were on it, and then I'm thinkin' there would not hef been much chance for us Colin Grant.'

'Ay, gin it hadna kilt us oot richt, it might hae danged us into yon awfu' black pool,' said David Anderson, a Lowlander who had lately come into the district, 'an' we wad hae had oor wark set to hae gotten oot again.'

'Well, well,' replied Colin, 'I could hef mended it, but it iss down now. And I hef mind o' the puttin' up o' that bridge. It wass the year after Mr. Nial's mother wass found drowned in the Kelpie's Pool.'

'An' hoo cam' she to get drooned?' asked David. 'The auld wives hae mony tales to tell o' her guidness an' her beauty, but gin I spier o' her death they shake their heids, an' haena a word mair to say.'

For a moment or two there was silence, and then Colin answered:—

'It iss said she slipped on the rocks, and the burn carried her into the pool. Bronach Water wass rising at the time, and it wass thought she wass going over to see a poor sick body.'

'Ay,' said Duncan Black, 'that iss the common story, but I hef my doubts o' its truth.'

'Ye are aye havin' doubts o' somethin',' interjected David scornfully. 'Ye doubt mair, an' ye believe mair, nor ony ither body I ken.'

'And you, David Anderson,' retorted Duncan, 'doubt everything, and ye believe nothing at all. But the poor leddy had much sorrow, and I will be thinkin' she came to a sad end.'

'Whist!' cried Colin, 'they are not the things to talk about at all. The leddy lost her life in crossing the burn, and wass drowned.'

'Maybe, Colin, ye know best, for ye are older than me. I wass only a laddie at the time, but one night when I wass passing the Kelpie's Pool, I saw her on the side o' it, under a rowan tree. It wass a month or two afore Mr. Nial wass born, and she wass sittin' there all alone rockin' to and fro as if she wass in trouble. I went by quietly, thinkin' she would not hear me, but she started and looked up wi' a kind o' strange light in her eyes, and I wass so feared that I ran away. It wass the next year she wass found drowned.'

'She wass a good woman,' said Colin hotly, 'and ye hef no right to speak o' such things.'

But they were just the stories Duncan loved to tell, and he replied:—

'She wass a poor, unhappy leddy, and folks that know say she was like a body goin' out o' her mind—always wanderin' about her lone, and sighin'. And ye know that Mr. Nial's nurse, old Nancy Bell, saw her spirit the fery morn she wass drowned.'

'Ay,' laughed David, 'ye Hielan' folk ha' a wonderfu' gitt o' seein' ghaists.'

'It iss God's truth,' answered Duncan in an awed voice. 'The nurse wakened out of her sleep, and she saw the ghost with a face as white as the snow and it bent over Master Nial and kissed him, and then melted away. An hour after that she wass found in the Kelpie's Pool.'

'Mair likely it wass the lady hersel,' said David. 'Ye are superstitious auld carles, Why, I hae seen mony a ghaist in ma time, but I aye found it wass a white coo or an auld cuddie transmogrified by the moon-light.'

'There iss one thing, whatever,' said Colin Grant, anxious to change the subject, 'that I could neffer forgive the old laird for doin. And that iss for turnin' o' Sruthan burying-ground into a sheep fank. Many a poor crofter lies buried there, and it wass a shameful thing.'

'Weel noo,' remarked David, 'I wadna hae thoct ony waur o' him for daein' that. I'm thinkin' the sheep will no disturb their banes. It maun be cauld wiles wi' naithin' but a pickle o' damp earth owre ye. Maybe they will be glad o' winter nights when the north wind blaws cauld an' keen to hae owre them a warm coverin' o' wool.'

'Whist, man,' cried Colin indignantly, 'ye gye speak like a profane Lowlander. It iss not a manlike thing to joke about the dead. No good will effer come to them that do the like o' that.'

'The old laird found out that, whatever,' threw in Duncan Black.

'The auld laird!' exclaimed David. 'Why, I thoct he wass an unco guid man, aye ready wi' his tracks an' his prayers. An' noo will ye daur say that ill cam' to him?'

'Hef ye no heard?' asked Duncan.

'Heard what?'