

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER III.

(Continued.)

When Fiona entered the room it was growing dark, and her father had fallen into a doze. The dog sprang to his feet with a sharp bark, and then, apparently liking her appearance, ran towards her, and thrust his long nose into her hand.

'Ah,' said her father, waking up, 'I see you are friends already. It is a very fine hound, is it not, Fiona?'

'Yes,' she answered, looking up searchingly, 'it is a fine hound, but where has it come from? Who has brought it?' And then, with rising colour, 'I hope Nial Mor has not sent it.'

'It is a gut,' replied her father, evading her question. And then he added with a rather nervous glance, 'I'm sure you like it.'

Fiona went and put her arm through his. The hound followed, licking her hand.

'You haven't answered my question, father. Does it come from Nial Mor?'

'He brought it himself,' was the reply, 'and he is more sorry for what he did yesterday than I can explain to you.'

'And does he think that Luath can be so easily replaced?' she said hotly. 'Send it back; I can't keep it. Whatever regard I had for Nial Mor is now dead.'

'But, Fiona, you would not speak so if you had seen him this afternoon. He is changed. It is quite a different man you would find him from what he used to be.'

'I can't accept his gift,' answered Fiona decidedly; 'it must go back.'

'You will think it over,' said her father, drawing her closer to him, and gazing wistfully into her face. 'I would not like you to offend Nial or his father.'

'Why are you so anxious I should not offend them? Nial will never be anything more to me than he is now. I don't love him; I never shall.'

'You will say that now, child; but time works many changes; for the present, at least be friends.'

As he spoke, she noticed that his face seemed to grow whiter and thinner.

'My dear father,' she said hesitatingly, 'tell me why you speak so. Has Nial Mor or his father any power over us? I'm no longer a child; tell me what you fear.'

The tears gathered in his eyes as he gazed into her beautiful face. She was the pride and joy of his heart, the apple of his eye. Since the death of his beloved mother, she was the one link that bound him to this world. He dreaded to think of her being left alone to bear the burdens and responsibilities of that great estate, so far away, and so solitary. His most fervent desire was to see her happily settled before his call came.

'Come and sit down,' he said, 'and I will tell you all; it is well that you should know.'

It was a long, sad story, and he ended it with a choking sob. Then he bent down his head with an expression of weariness and hopelessness that went to the girl's heart. She realised now, for the first time, what anxieties overhung her father's life, and how difficult her own position was.

For some moments they sat on in silence,

and then her pent-up feelings broke forth. She flung her arms round her father's neck and kissed him.

'Do not grieve over what is beyond recall,' she said, quickly controlling herself, 'nor yet be anxious about me. I've no dread of the future, none at all. Besides, things may turn out better than you fear. You know they generally do, father. But I'll keep the hound, and when Nial comes he shall see that I bear him no ill-will. As he's going away again, he can ask for nothing more now; and sufficient for the day—you know.'

That evening Torquil M'Iver did not feel well, and retired unusually early. And Fiona, not caring to sit up alone, put out the lights, and went to her bedroom.

It was a clear moonlight night, and the room was filled with a soft, mystic radiance. Fiona was restless and sleepless. So she drew on a warm wrap, and sat down by the window.

The moon was at the full, and so bright was the light that she picked up a book, and turned its pages. It was a volume of Tennyson's early poems, and either by accident, or by a half-conscious movement as of one fingering well-known pages, she opened upon 'A Dream of Fair Women,' and partly read and partly recalled the lines beginning with:

'The balmy moon of blessed Israel
Floods all the deep-blue gloom with beams
divine.'

She read to the end of the lovely lines telling of the fair Hebrew maid who died to save her father's vow, who sacrificed herself rather than that he should be put to shame; and then she laid down the book and gazed out of the window with tear-dimmed eyes.

'Ah,' she mused, 'life is full of painful riddles and dark mysteries. There's a cross in every lot, something to bear and to endure. Blighted hopes and broken hearts are not strange things in this world; and when my trial comes, I trust that I may learn how sublime a thing it is to suffer and be strong.'

She sat for a long, long time pondering these things, and the inexpressible beauty and peacefulness of the scene calmed and soothed her.

Snow had fallen during the evening, and the silent hills stood out grandly against the night blue sky. The sea sparkled and shimmered beneath the moonbeams. A broad pathway of light encircled the shining waters like a glittering silver girdle. Far away Ulva, Staffa, Iona, and a score of other islands were distinctly visible. Near at hand the few tall pines, grouped about the venerable house, stood like gaunt, patient giants clothed in white raiment. Everything spoke of peace, resignation, trust.

She was still gazing on this scene when a movement high up among the white-clad mountains, along the Pass of the Red Deer, arrested her attention. It was a horseman urging his steed swiftly along that dangerous way. Who could it be? What could he be doing at that hour?

Then her heart beat quickly, and she rose to her feet in a sudden excitement. It was Nial Mor; he was evidently coming to Fas-Gilac. Why should he come in this hurried

way? Even if his father were worse or dead no special purpose could be served in hastening to them.

She was troubled to know what she ought to do. Should she go and call her father, and awaken the servants? Should she descend herself and rekindle the lamp? She resolved that she would wait and see what Nial would do when he perceived that they had retired for the night. If there were anything of vital importance he would not hesitate to knock them up.

On he came riding rapidly, for it was getting late. But on reaching the gate, he looked up and hesitated. After a moment's delay, he sprang from his horse, and fastening the bridle to the gate-post, entered the grounds. He seemed uncertain what to do; for after proceeding half way up the drive he turned back, then he walked into the middle of the lawn, and surveyed the house.

Fiona trembled from head to foot. She had a strange feeling that there was something critical and decisive in that moment; but there was no guidance as to how she should act. If her father had been in his usual health, and not already in bed and asleep, she would have hurried to the door. But she was most reluctant to disturb him. If Nial Mor knocked, she would respond immediately. It did not, however, appear to be her duty voluntarily to bring about a private interview with Nial that night.

So she made no sign, but waited, and when he had satisfied himself that the household had retired, he retraced his steps, sprang upon his horse, and galloped off at full speed.

Fiona watched him ascend the pass, wondering whether she had done right or wrong; and then a thin white mist swept down the mountain sides, and filled all the valley; the sky became overcast, and she saw no more.

CHAPTER IV

THE WRECK ON THE BLACK GULLS.

It was a wild afternoon in the month of March, and the huge Atlantic waves were breaking on the rock-bound coast of Mull with thunderous roar.

For more than a week the storm had raged, and though experienced eyes might now detect that it had passed its height, there was little actual cessation of violence.

In Sruthan post-office pretty Sybil sat with a disconsolate look. The weather was just horrid, she thought. The mails were delayed, the lobster fishermen could not attend to their creels, and work on the land was suspended.

But Sybil's thoughts were seldom disinterested. What vexed her was that the storm kept away Ronald Campbell. No boat could brave such a sea, and even the road over the pass was not to be attempted without strong reasons.

After much weighing of pros and cons, she had almost decided to accept the young crofter.

Mr. Nial Mor Duff had severely wounded her self-esteem. Since shaking hands at the church door he had not spoken a word to her, and had gone away without so much as