

THE FOUR MACNICOLS.

BY WILLIAM BLACK.

(Author of "Mashed of Bone," "A Daughter of Health," "Madcap Violet," etc.)

CHAPTER I.—JUVENUS MUNDO.

It was on a bright and glorious morning in July that the great chieftain, Robert of the Red Hand, accompanied by his kinsmen and allies, put to sea in his war-galley, resolved to sweep the Spanish Main free of all his enemies, and thereafter to hold high revel in the halls of Eilean-na-Rona.

At least, that was how it appeared to the imagination of the great chieftain himself, though the simple facts of the case were a trifle less romantic.

This Robert of the Red Hand (more familiarly known as Rob MacNicol, or even as plain Rob) was an active, stout-sinewed, black-eyed lad of seventeen, whose only mark of chieftainship, apparently, was that, unlike his brothers, he wore shoes and stockings; these three relatives constituted his allies and kinsmen; the so-called Spanish Main was in reality an arm of the sea, better known in the Hebrides as Loch Scrone; and the war-galley was an old, ramshackle, battered, and betarred boat, belonging generally to the fishing-village of Erisaig, for, indeed, the boat was so old and so battered that nobody now seemed to claim any special ownership of it.

These four MacNicol—Robert, Neil, Nicol, and Duncan—were, it must be admitted, an idle and graceless set, living for the most part a hand-to-mouth, amphibious, curlew-like kind of life, and far more given to aimless voyages in boats not belonging to them than inclined to turn their hand to any honest labor.

But this must be said in their excuse, that no boy or lad born in the village of Erisaig could by any means whatsoever be brought to think of becoming anything else than a fisherman. It was impossible to induce them to apprentice themselves to any ordinary trade.

They would wait until they were old enough to go after the herring, like the others; that was man's work; that was sometimes like that; that was different from staying ashore and twiddling one's fingers over a pair of somebody else's shoes, or laboriously shaping a block of sandstone for somebody else's house.

This Rob MacNicol, for example: It was only for want of a greater career that he had constituted himself a drenched sea-rover, a stern chieftain, etc., etc.

His secret ambition—his great and constant and secret ambition—went far farther than that. It was to be of man's estate, broad-shouldered and heavy-bearded; to wear huge black boots up to his thighs, and a blue flannel jersey; to have a peaked cap (not forgetting a brass button on each side by way of smartness); and then to come along in the afternoon, with a yellow oil-skin tied up in a bundle, to the wharf where the herring-fleet lay, the admiration and the envy of all the miserable creatures condemned to stay ashore.

In the mean time—in these days of joyous idleness, while as yet the cares and troubles which this history will have to chronicle were far away from him and his, simply because they were unknown—Rob MacNicol, if he could not be a fisherman, could at least be an imaginary chieftain, and in that capacity he gave his orders as one who knew how to make himself obeyed.

As soon as they had shoved the boat clear of the smacks, the jib was promptly set; the big lumps of stone that served for ballast were duly shifted; the lug-sail, as black as pitch and full of holes, was hoisted, and the halyards made fast; then the sheet was hauled in by Nicol MacNicol, who had been ordered to the helm; and finally the shabby old nondescript craft began to creep through the blue waters of Erisaig Bay.

It was a lovely morning; the light breeze from the land seemed steady enough; altogether, nothing could have been more auspicious for the setting out of the great chieftain and his kinsmen.

But, great as we are, we are not above fearing the criticism of people ashore on our method of handling a boat. Rob, from his proud position at the bow, darted an angry glance at his helmsman.

"Keep her full, will ye?" he growled, in an undertone. "Do ye call that steering, ye gomerl! Run her by Daft Sandy's boat! It is no better than a cow-herd you are at the steering."

This Daft Sandy, who will turn up in our history by-and-by, was a half-witted old man, who spent his life in fishing for flounders from a rotten old punt he had become possessed of.

He earned a sort of living that way, and seldom went near the shore during the day except to beg for a herring or two for bait, when the boats came in. He got the bait, but in an ignominious way; for the boys, stripping the nets, generally saved up the "broken" herring, in order to pelt Daft Sandy with the fragments when he came near. That is to say, they indulged in this amiable sport except when Rob MacNicol happened to be about.

That youth had been heard to remark that the first he caught at this game would pay a sudden visit to the dead dog-fish lying beneath the clear waters of the harbor; and it was very well known among the urchins of Erisaig that the eldest MacNicol had very little scruple about taking the law into his own hands.

When he found a bigger boy thrashing a smaller one, he invariably thrashed the bigger one, just to keep things even, as it were; and he had invented, for the better guidance of his brethren and associates, a series of somewhat stringent rules and punishments, to which, it must be said, he cheerfully submitted himself.

At the same time, he was aware that even the most moral and high principled government has occasionally to assert itself with rude physical force; and although his hand was not particularly red, as might have been expected, it was uncommonly hard, and a cuff from it was understood to produce the most startling lightning effects in the region of the eye.

Well, as they were nearing Daft Sandy's punt Rob called out to him,

"Sandy, have ye had any luck today?"

"The little, bent, blue-eyed old man looked up from his hand-lines.

"No, mich."

As the boat was gliding past Bob flung a couple of herring into the punt.

"There's some bait for ye."

"Ay; and where are ye for going, Robert?" the old man said as they passed.

"Tak' heed, it's squally outside."

There was no answer; for at this moment the quick eye of the chieftain detected one of his kinsmen in the commission of a heinous crime.

Tempted by the light and steady breeze, Nicol had given away to idleness, and had made fast the main-sheet, instead of holding it in his hand, ready for all emergencies.

This, and not unnaturally, on such a squally coast, Rob MacNicol had constituted an altogether unforgivable offence; and his first impulse was to jump down to the stern of the boat and give the helmsman a sounding whack on the side of the head. But a graver sense of justice prevailed. He summoned a court-martial.

Nicol, catching the eye of his brother, hastily tried to undo the sheet from the pin; but it was too late. The crime had been committed; there were two witnesses, besides the judge, who was also the jury.

The judge and jury forthwith pronounced sentence: Nicol MacNicol to forfeit one penny to the fund being secretly stored up for the purchase of a set of baggies, or to be lowered by the shoulders until his feet should touch the ground in the dungeon of Eilean-na-Rona Castle.

He was left to decide which alternative he would accept; and it must be said that the culprit, after a minute or two's sulking, perceived the justice of the sentence, and calmly said he would take the dungeon.

"Ye think I'm feared?" he said, contemptuously, to Neil and Duncan, who were grinning at him.

"Now, if any proof had been needed that Rob MacNicol's stringent sailing rules were a matter of stern necessity, it was quickly forthcoming. On this beautiful summer morning, with the sea smooth and blue around them, they were sailing along as pleasantly as might be. But they had scarcely got through the narrow channel leading from the harbor, and were just emerging into Loch Scrone, when a squall of wind came tearing along and hit the boat so that the lug-sail was almost flattened out to the water.

"Run her up? Haul in your sheet!" yelled Rob to the frightened steersman.

Well it was at such a moment that the main-sheet was free to be hauled in; for as the bow was put up to the wind the varying squall caught her on the other beam and

threw her over, so that she shipped a bucket or two of water.

Had the water got into the belly of the sail, the weight would have dragged her down; but Rob instantly got rid of this danger by springing to the halyards and the next moment the crank craft strove to right herself, bringing sail and yard rattling down into the boat.

By this time, so fierce was the squall, a pretty heavy sea had sprung up, and altogether things looked very ugly. When they allowed the jib to fill, even that was enough to send the boat over, and she had already a dangerous lot of water surging among the ballast; while, when they were forced to put her head to the wind, she drifted with a heavily running tide, and right to leeward was a long reef of rocks that would inevitably crush her into matchwood.

The younger brothers said not a word, but looked at Rob, ready to obey his slightest gesture, and Rob stood by the mast calling out from time to time Nicol.

Matters grew worse. It was no use trying merely to keep her head to the wind, for she was drifting rapidly, and the first shock on the rocks would send her and her stone ballast to the bottom.

On the other hand, there was no open sea-room to let her run away before the wind with a straining jib. At all hazards it was necessary to fight her clear of that long ledge of rock, even if the wind threatened to tear the mast out of the boat. So Rob himself sprung down to the stern and took the tiller.

"Duncan, Neil, stand by the halyards, now. When I sing out to ye, hoist her half-mast high—be ready, now!"

He had his eye on the rocks all this time. On the highest of them was a tall iron perch, painted scarlet—a warning to sailors; but from that point long shelves and spurs ran out, the yellow surface of barnacles growing greener and greener as they went deeper into the sea. Already Rob MacNicol could make out some of these submarine reefs, even through the turbulent water.

"Now, then boys; up with her! Quick, now!"

It was a venturesome business; but there was no help for it. The moment the sail was hoisted a gust caught the boat and drove her over until her gunwale again scooped up a lot of hissing water. But as she righted, staggering all the while, it was clear there was some good way on her; and Rob, having had recourse to desperate remedies, was determined to give her enough of the wind.

Down again went the gunwale to the hissing water; and the strain on the rotten sheets of the old boat was so great, that it was a wonder everything did not go by the board.

But now there was a joyous hissing of foam at the bow; she was forging ahead; if she could only stand the pressure, in a minute or so she would be clear of the rocks. Rob still kept his eye on these treacherous shelves of yellow-green. Then he sung out,

"Down with her, boys!"

The black lug-sail rattled into the boat; there was nothing left now but the straining jib.

"Slack the lee jib-sheet!"

The next minute he had put his helm gently up; the bow of the boat fell away from the wind; and presently—just as they had time to see the green depths of the rocks they had succeeded in weathering—the war-galley of the great chieftain was spinning away down Loch Scrone, racing with the racing waves, the wind tearing and hauling at her bellied-out jib.

"Hurrah, my lads! We'll soon be at Eilean-na-Rona now, eh?" Rob shouted.

He did not seem much put about by that narrow escape. Squalls were common on this coast, and it was the business of one aspiring to be a fisherman to take things as they came.

"Come, set to work and bale out the boat, you lare-shanks lot! How'd ye think she can sail with the half of Loch Scrone inside her?"

Thus admonished, the younger brothers were soon among the stone ballast baling out the surging water with such rude utensils as they could find. But the squall was of no great duration.

The wind moderated in force; then it awoke up again, and brought a smart shower of rain across; then, as if by magic, the heavens suddenly cleared, and a burst of hot sunlight fell around them, the sea grew intensely blue, the far hills on the other side

of Loch Scrone began to shine green in the yellow light, and all that was left to tell of the squall that had very nearly put an end to the great chieftain and all his clan was a quickly-running sea, now all sparkling in diamonds.

The danger being thus over, Rob once more delivered the tiller into the charge of his brother Nicol, and went forward to his post of observation at the bow.

About the only bit of the imaginative voyage on which he had started that had a solid basis in fact was the existence of an old castle—or, rather, the ruins of what had once been a castle—on the island called Eilean-na-Rona; and now that they were racing down Loch Scrone, that small island was drawing nearer, and already they could make out the dark tower and ivied walls of the ancient keep.

Far darker than the tower itself were the legends connected with this stronghold of former times; but for these the brothers MacNicol, who had seized on the place as their own, cared little.

It is true they had some dread of the dungeon, and none of them would have liked to visit Eilean-na-Rona at night, but in the daytime the old ruins formed an excellent retreat, where they could play such high jinks or hold such courtly tournaments as they chose.

They ran the boat into a little creek of the uninhabited island, driving her right up on the beach for safety's sake, there being no anchor. Then—Neil carrying a small basket the while, and Duncan a coil of rope—they passed through a wood of young larches and spruce, the air smelling strongly of bracken and meadow-sweet after the rain, and finally they reached the rocky eminence on which stood the ruins.

There was no other way up, for tourists did not come that way, and the owner of the island, who was a farmer on the main-land, had but little care for antiquities. However, the lads found no difficulty. They swarmed up the face of the crags like so many squirrels, and found themselves on a grassy plateau which had once formed the outer court-yard of the keep.

Around this plateau were fragments of what in former days had been a massive wall, but most of the crumbling masonry was hidden under ivy and weeds. In front of them, again, rose the great tower, with its arched and gloomy entrance, and its one or two small windows, in the clefts of which bunches of wallflower were growing.

The only sign of life about the old castle or the uninhabited island was given by two or three jacksaws that wheeled about overhead, and cawed harshly in resentment of this intrusion.

The great chieftain, Robert of the Red Hand, having now assembled his kinsmen and allies in the ancient halls of Eilean-na-Rona proceeded to speak as follows:

"Nicol, my man, ye have been tried and convicted."

"I ken that," was Nicol's philosophical reply.

"Ye had no business to make fast the sheet of the lug-sail; ye might have drowned the lot of us."

Nicol nodded. He had sinned, and was prepared to suffer.

"Have ye naught to say against your being lowered into the dungeon?"

"I have not. Do you think I'm feared?" said Nicol scornfully.

"Ye will not pay the penny?"

"De'il a penny will I pay!"

"Nicol," said his cousin Neil with some touch of compassion—for indeed he knew that the dungeon was a gruesome place—"Nicol maybe you have not got a penny."

"Well, I have not," said Nicol.

"Will I lend ye one?"

"What would be the use of that?" said Nicol. "I would have to pay it back. Do you think I'm feared? I tell you I am not feared."

So there was nothing for it but to get the rope and pass it under Nicol's arms, fastening it securely at his back. Thus bound, the culprit was marched through the archway of the old tower into an apartment that was but feebly lit by the reflected glare coming from without.

The other boys, as well as Nicol, walked very carefully over the dank-smelling earth, until they came to what seemed to be a large hole dug out of the ground, and as black as midnight. This was the dungeon into which Nicol was to be lowered, that he might expiate his offence before the high revels began.