

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

FOURTH COUSINS.

(A Shetland Story. By Gordon Stables,
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In the early summer of 1860 I went upon a visit to a distant relative of mine, who lived in one of the Shetland Islands. It was early summer with myself then; I was a medical student with life all before me—life and hope, and joy and sorrow as well. I went north with the intention of working hard, and took quite a small library with me; there was nothing in the shape of study I did not mean to do, and to drive at: the flora of the Ultima Thule, its fauna and geology, too, to say nothing of chemistry and therapeutics. So much for good intentions, but—I may as well confess it as not—I never once opened my huge box of books during the five months I lived at R—, and if I studied at all it was from the book of Nature, which is open to every one who cares to con its pages.

The steamboat landed me at Lerwick, and I completed my journey—with my boxes—next day in an open boat.

It was a very cold morning, with a grey, cold, choppy sea on, the spray from which dashed over the boat, wetting me thoroughly, and making me feel pinched, bleary-eyed, and miserable. I even envied the seals I saw cosily asleep in dry, sandy caves, at the foot of the black and beetling rocks.

How very fantastic those rocks were, but cheerless, so cheerless! Even the sea birds that circled around them seemed screaming a dirge. An opening in a wall of rock took us at length into a long, winding fiord, or arm of the sea, with green bare fields on every side, and wild weird-like sheep that gazed on us for a moment, then bleated and fled. Right at the end of this fiord stood my friend's house, comfortable and solid-looking, but unsheltered by a single tree.

"I shan't stay long here," I said to myself, as I landed.

An hour or two afterwards I had changed my mind entirely. I was seated in a charmingly and cosily furnished drawing-room upstairs. The windows looked out to and away across the broad Atlantic. How strange it was; for the loch that had led to the front of the house, and the waters of which rippled up to the very lawn, was part of the German Ocean, and here at the back, and not a stone's throw distant, was the Atlantic! Its great, green, dark billows rolled up and broke into foam against the black breastwork of cliffs beneath us. The immense depth of its waves could be judged of by keeping the eye fixed upon the tall, steep-like rocks which shot up here and there through the water a little way out to sea—at one moment these would appear like lofty spires, and next they would be almost entirely swallowed up.

Beside the fire, in an easy chair, sat my grey-haired old relation and host, and, not far off, his wife. Hospitable, warm-hearted, and genial both of them were. If marriages really are made in heaven, I could not help thinking theirs must have been, so much did they seem each other's counterpart.

Presently Cousin Maggie entered, smiling to me as she did so; her left hand lingered fondly for a moment on her father's grey locks, then she sat down unbidden to the piano.

On the strength of my blood-relationship, distant though it was, for we were really only third or fourth cousins, I was made a member of this family from the first, and Maggie treated me as a brother. I was not entirely pleased with

the latter arrangement, because many days had not passed ere I concluded it would be a pleasant pastime for me to make love to Cousin Maggie. But weeks went by, and my love-making was still postponed; it became a sine die kind of a probability. Maggie was constantly with me when out of doors—my companion in all my fishing and shooting trips. But she carried not only a rod but even a rifle herself; she could give me lessons in casting the fly—and did; she often shot dead the seals that I had merely wounded, and her prowess in rowing astonished me, and her daring in venturing so far to sea in our broad, open boat, often made me tremble for our safety.

A frequent visitor for the first two months of my stay at R— was a young and well-to-do farmer and fisher, who came in his boat from a neighboring island, always accompanied by his sister, and they usually stayed a day or two. I was not long in perceiving that this Mr. Thorforth was deeply in love with my cousin; the state of her feelings towards him it was some time before I could fathom, but the revelation came at last and quite unexpectedly.

There was an old ruin some distance from the house, where, one lovely moonlight night, I happened to be seated alone. I was not long alone, however; from a window I could see my cousin and Thorforth coming towards the place, and, thinking to surprise them, I drew back under the shadow of a portion of the wall. But I was not to be an actor in that scene, though it was one I shall never forget. I could not see his face, but hers, on which the moonbeams fell, was pained, half-frightened, impatient. He was pleading his cause, he was telling the old, old story, with an earnestness and eloquence I had never heard surpassed. She stopped it at last.

"Oh! Magnus," she cried. "Oh! Magnus Thorforth, I never dreamt it would come to this. Oh! what grief you cause me, my poor Magnus, my more than friend!"

What more was said need not be told. In a few moments he was gone, and she was kneeling on the green sward, just on the spot where he had left her, her hands clasped, and her face upturned to heaven.

Next day Magnus Thorforth went sadly away; even his sister looked sad. She must have known it all. I never saw them again.

One day, about a month after this, Maggie and I were together in a cave close by the ocean—a favorite haunt of ours on hot forenoons. Our boat was drawn up close by. The day was bright, and the sea calm, its tiny wavelets making drowsy, dreamy music on the yellow sands.

She had been reading aloud, and I was gazing at her face.

"I begin to think you are beautiful," I said.

She looked down at me where I lay with those innocent eyes of hers, that always looked into mine as frankly as a child's would.

"I'm not sure," I continued, "that I shan't commence making love to you, and perhaps I might marry you. What would you think of that?"

"Love!" she laughed, as musically as a sea-nymph, "love! Love betwixt a cousin and a cousin! Preposterous!"

"I dare say," I resumed, pretending to pout, "you wouldn't marry me because I'm poor."

"Poor!" she repeated, looking very firm and earnest now, "if the man I loved were poor, I'd carry a creel for

him; I'd gather shells for his sake; but I don't love anybody and don't mean to. Come!"

So that was the beginning and end of my love-making with Cousin Maggie.

And Maggie had said she never meant to love any one. Well, we never can tell what may be in our immediate future.

Hardly had we left the cave that day, and put off from the shore, ere cats' paws began to ruffle the water. They came in from the west, and before we had got half-way to the distant headland, a steady breeze was blowing. We had hoisted our sail, and were running before it with the speed of a gull on the wing.

Once round the point, we had a beam wind till we entered the fiord, then we had to beat to windward all the way home, by which time it was blowing quite a gale.

It went round more to the north about sunset, and then, for the first time, we noticed a yacht of small dimensions on the distant horizon. Her intention appeared to be that of rounding the island, and probably anchoring on the lee side of it. She was in an ugly position, however, and we all watched her anxiously till nightfall hid her from our view.

I retired early, but sleep was out of the question, for the wind raged and howled around the house like wild wolves. About twelve o'clock the sound of a gun fell on our ears. I could not be mistaken, for the window rattled in sharp response.

I sprang from my couch and began to dress, and immediately after, my aged relative entered the room. He looked younger and taller than I had seen him, but very serious.

"The yacht is on the Ba," he said solemnly.

They were words to me of fearful significance. The yacht, I knew, must soon break up, and nothing could save the crew.

I quickly followed my relative into the back drawing-room, where Maggie was with her mother. We gazed out into the night, out and across the sea. At the same moment, out there on the terrible Ba, a blue light sprang up, revealing the yacht and even its people on board. She was leaning well over to one side, her masts gone, and the spray dashing over her.

"Come," cried Maggie, "there is no time to lose. We can guide their boat to the cave. Come, cousin!"

I felt dazed, thunderstruck. Was I to take an active part in a forlorn hope? Was Maggie—how beautiful and daring she looked now!—to assume the role of a modern Grace Darling? So it appeared.

The events of that night come back to my memory now as if they had happened but yesterday. It is a page in my past life that can never be obliterated.

We pulled out of the fiord, Maggie and I, and up under lee of the island, then, on rounding the point, we encountered the whole force of the sea and wind. There was a glimmering light on the wrecked yacht, and for that we rowed, or rather were borne along on the gale. No boat save a Shetland skiff could have been trusted in such a sea.

As we neared the Ba, steadying herself by leaning on my shoulder, Maggie stood half up and waved the lantern, and it was answered from the wreck. Next moment it seemed to me we were on the lee side, and Maggie herself hailed the shipwrecked people.

"We cannot come nearer," she cried; "lower your boat and follow our light closely."