

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER XXI.

(Continued.)

'Come down,' he said; 'I swear I'll do you no harm.'

'Rather than do that,' she replied, 'I would spring into the sea, and take my chance of reaching one of those rocks; and there I would wait until deliverance came, or die, if so it were God's will.'

He laughed.

'No boat can reach us for days. Nobody knows you are here, or where to seek for you. I tell you that you're only fighting against fate. Heaven, that made us for one another, is on my side, else why were you put in my way? Why have I been able to bring you here? why didn't the boat sink among the breakers last night?'

'I don't believe in your notions of fate.'

'You may as well submit,' he said, with a cunning, sinister glance. 'Your character is gone. What will the world say when it hears that you consented to go away with me in my boat, and spend days and nights with me on this deserted island? Do you think that Geoffrey Waldegrave will marry you after that?'

A deep flush mantled her cheeks, but she answered proudly:—

'Oh, go away, Nial, go away. Don't insinuate things that only show how deeply you have fallen. Try to keep alive some faint spark of manhood.'

She glanced towards the sea, half inclined to end the discussion by leaping in and swimming away to one of the numerous rocks not far off. She knew that she was more expert in the water than Nial.

But just then Nancy Bell appeared on the cliffs above them and called loudly:

'Maister Nial! Maister Nial! I hae noo come frae the ither side o' the islan', an there's a ship in fu' sail bearing straight doon on us.'

Fiona gave an exclamation of delight, and Nial sprang up the side of the cliff, and hurried off in the direction Nancy indicated to him.

When he was well away, she beckoned to Fiona to ascend the cliff.

CHAPTER XXII.

EVENING.

'Come back to the shielin', Miss Fiona,' said Nancy, hurrying forward; 'ye'll be safer there.'

'But the ship, Nancy?'

The old woman gave a bitter laugh.

'Ay, there's a ship, but it's no comin' here; it's only beatin' up agin the wind.'

'Could we not signal to it?'

'Na, na, it's owre far awa. I telt him o' the ship to get him oot o' the way; sae ye could win into the cottage.'

Fiona gave a stifled sob of disappointment, and the light fled from her eyes.

'Oh, Nancy, Nancy, how will this end? Do you think we shall be able to hold out till somebody comes to seek us?'

'Sure, an' I canna telt, Miss M'Iver; but we maun dae oor best.'

'I know where we could hide; a place where he could neither find us nor reach us.

Will you go with me?'

'Na, na; I hae telt ye already that I winna leave ma maister; ye needa ask me again, Miss M'Iver. I'll no dae it. But gin I can help ye to escape frae him, ye may lippen to me. And noo I come to think o't, ye'd better no tell me whaur ye're gangin' to, for I wad hae to tell Mr. Nial I didna ken. An' I hae some strange feelings whilk I canna richtly get owre, that I haena lang to bide here. Ye see, Miss M'Iver, things are no gangin' weel, an' I'm no sure I'll win through. I'll dae a' I can for ye; but I wadna hae ony mair lees to rise up agin me in the ither world nor is just needful.'

'God bless you, Nancy!' said Fiona, with a choking voice, 'and reward you for your kindness to me in the day of trouble.'

She saw that Nial could no longer observe their movements.

'I'll hasten on to the cottage; I can run faster than you, and if Mr. Nial should appear he had better not see us together.'

Fiona started forward and ran as fast as she could. She had not spent the night in idle regrets, but in thinking out the whole situation. One plan of getting away had failed; she had another in her mind. She went direct to Nial's room and seized his gun—both barrels of which were already loaded.

'I must take this with me,' she thought. 'I dare not leave it with him.'

She glanced round for any other firearms, but there were none. The room had a dismal appearance; a half-emptied bottle of brandy stood on the table; Nial's breakfast was there untouched.

Fiona had hardly gained the kitchen when Nancy entered breathless.

'He's comin'; he'll be here in a minute,' she said hastily. 'Ye canna get awa noo. Gang into yon shed an' bolt yersel' in. But, ay, he'll be ravin' mad when he finds ye hae gotten his gun.'

There was no time for another word.

Nial Mor entered the kitchen, and going up to Nancy gave her a rude shake.

'You've deceived me,' he cried angrily; 'the ship was not coming here.'

'Was it no?' asked Nancy incredulously. 'Weel, it's a pity it wasna; for I wad hae liked richt weel to hae gotten awa. It was soilin' straight enough for this place when I saw it.'

'Where is Miss M'Iver?'

'Sure, Maister Nial, ye can see yersel' she's no here. She maun hae gane into yon auld bield to rest hersel', an' ye mauna disturb her. She didna sleep a wink a' last night, an' she'll be weel through, an' worn oot wi' climbin' owre yon rocks.'

He went to the other room, but had hardly been absent a minute when he gave a loud exclamation and returned.

'Where's my gun?' he demanded.

'I dinna ken, sir,' replied Nancy, with a look of surprise. 'Is it no whaur ye left it?'

'No.'

'Weel, I swear I haena touched it.'

He gave a sharp rap at the door of the lean-to.

'Are you here, Fiona?'

'Yes.'

'I want to speak to you.'

'Well, I can hear.'

'Open the door.'

'I will not; I cannot trust you.'

'I swear I'll do you no harm. I was mad down there on the shore. A devil was raging in my heart. I did not mean what I said. This is not a fit place for you to stay in. I want to talk to you. Will you come come out?'

'No.'

'I'll take an oath, I'll not hinder you from returning if you wish to.'

'I shall stay here.'

The dull fire in his eyes began to blaze up.

'Well, give me my gun; you've got it.'

'And intend to keep it.'

'But I want it; I'm going shooting.'

'I shall not give it up as long as I'm on this island.'

'By God you shall,' he cried, turning white with passion. 'Give it to me at once, or I'll break the door open.'

'Take care, Nial; I warn you,' she answered in a clear, firm voice. 'You know that I can shoot straight and mean what I say. I have the gun, and I'll not hesitate to use it. The moment the door falls I'll shoot you.'

He turned away with a scornful laugh.

'Ah, ah, we'll see, my haughty queen! You're my prisoner, and you'll not escape again. If you'll not come when I would speak to you in words of love, you'll come the next time when I'll appeal to you with a tongue of fire. Before the night has gone you'll be glad to fly to my arms.'

Nancy followed him into the next room and began clearing the table, slipping the brandy bottle out of sight first of all.

'Mind, Nancy,' he said fiercely, 'you'll not speak to Miss M'Iver, or give her anything, if you value your life. I'm afraid you're not to be trusted. You're like everybody else, you're turning against me.'

'Ye're wrang, Mr. Nial, far wrang,' answered the old woman sorrowfully. 'The Lord kens I wad gie ma life to see ye happy. Did I no come here oot o' luve o' ye? There's naebady wad sae muckle like to see ye wedded to Miss M'Iver as auld Nancy Bell. But I doubt ye're no gangin' the richt way to wark to win her.'

'There's no other way now.'

'Tak' her hame, Mr. Nial, an' woo her an' win her in a decent fashion; an' gin she winna hae ye, are there nae ither leddies in the world? What guid can come oot o' this kind o' wark? Miss M'Iver will forgie ye for rinnin' awa wi' her. Why will ye no listen to reason, sir?'

He gave a wild, reckless laugh, and answered:—'You don't know what you're talking about, Nancy.'

'Maybe no; but come awa noo, an get yer dinner. I hae it a' ready to bring in.'

Nial assented sulkily.

Fiona sat in the shed, alert, watchful, attentive to every sound. The gun lay across her knees; she was ready to spring into an attitude of self defence at any moment. Nial Mor could not take a step, or utter a word, but she endeavored to understand its significance. His threat that he would speak to her that night with a tongue of fire had not fallen unheeded. She divined what