

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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By Arthur Jenkinson
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CHAPTER XI.

(Continued.)

'Ay, I dinna ken that. Maybe the housekeeper, or maybe the young laird hissel', telt her to tak' them.'

'Which way did she go?'

'As ye didna meet her, she maun hae gane by the shore and through the wood. But I telt her to return by the drive, an' the road, as I would gae an' meet her. An' gin ye gang hame that way, Mr. M'Cuaig, an' meet the lass, ye micht tell her I shall hae to 'bide the house, an' clear awa' a' that mess the auld sow has made in the kitchen. An' gin ye would no consider it too much trouble to see her a bit on the road yersel', it would be a muckle obligation.'

The keeper departed only partially mollified by the prospect of meeting Sybil and walking home with her. The intimacy with the new housekeeper at the Castle did not seem to him very natural; it was an unexpected development, and he was keenly interested in finding out what it might portend.

He had not long left the post-office when Ronald entered.

'Mercy me! an' it is yersel', Mr. Campbell?' exclaimed Mrs. Grant with feigned surprise. 'Wha would hae thoct o' 'seem' ye the nicht?'

They had never got beyond the stage of cold civility. Ronald was not invited into the back parlour; and Mrs. Grant stood stiffly behind the counter, waiting for him to tell his business. He would have been much better pleased to see Sybil, and was hoping that she would appear at the sound of his name. There was an awkward pause.

'Av, it iss myself, Mrs. Grant, and it iss a fery fine evening, and are you all fery well?'

Mrs. Grant replied in the affirmative, and then hinted that her presence was much needed in the kitchen.

The young crofter gave her a glance that made her feel decidedly uncomfortable; but she speedily recovered herself.

'Where iss Sybil?' he asked, after another unpleasant pause.

'She's oot,' replied her mother sententiously.

'And will she be back soon?'

'Na, na; ye'll no see her the nicht. She's awa' at the Castle drinkin' tea wi' the new housekeeper, an' I'm thinkin' that's owre guid company to hurry awa' frae.'

Ronald was disappointed. He loved Sybil very much, and had persuaded himself that the girl was equally fond of him. If she sometimes appeared cold and indifferent, it was all her mother's doing. Colin Grant was all right, and Sybil was a dear, affectionate lassie when she was alone with him. Mrs. Grant did not like him, he knew that; but he was not going to marry her, so that did not matter much. Very soon Sybil would be all his own, and he must, for the present, put up with her mother's rudeness.

Still he was disappointed and annoyed. He had counted on seeing his sweetheart that evening, and had even hoped to persuade her to return to Fàs Ghlac with him in the moonlight. He would have brought

her back in good time the next day. But if that was impossible, he had quite expected to spend a pleasant hour with her before he left. And yet though he was sorry that he could not see Sybil, he was still more angry with Mrs. Grant. She was treating him with scant courtesy, and he felt it, but had too much self-respect and spirit to show it.

'Neffar mind, Mrs. Grant, Sybil did not expect me to-night; but I am fery glad she iss out enjoying herself—it must often be fery dull here—and I am thinkin' that there iss no company in the world too good for Sybil. And I will not keep you any longer, Mrs. Grant. Ye will be fery busy in the kitchen gettin' the supper ready for Mr. Grant. I saw him still workin' hard wi' the hay. Give him my best respects; and now if ye will give me the letters I will be goin'.'

'Oh, it's letters ye're after!' said Mrs. Grant, nettled with Ronald's quiet dignity, as well as by what was implied in some of his remarks. 'Weel, ye dinna let them bide here lang noo. I hae kent the time when they would be stickin' here half the week, an' naeboddy would tak' the trouble to ca' for them. But nae doubt the young leddy is mair carefu' noo. Weel, here they are. There's ane for yersel', an' four for yersel', an' four for Mr. M'Iver, an' naethin' for his gran' dochter.'

'None for Miss M'Iver,' said Ronald, with a puzzled look, 'that iss fery strange.'

'Deil's in the man,' said Mrs. Grant in a temper; 'ye needna turn up yer een like that. She'll hae to bide anither week. She canna aye hae what she wad like only mair nor iither folk.'

'And iss it quite sure ye are Mrs. Grant, that there iss not a letter for Miss Fiona? See if ye hef not got one slipped away among the others.'

Man, dae ye think I'm haverin'? Thae letters hae been a' sorted by Sybil, an' she kens her wark richt weel, I can assure ye.'

'But it iss fery strange, whatever, that there iss no letter from Canada.'

'No strange at a', replied Mrs. Grant, with a toss of her head. 'Ye ken the proverb, "out o' sight, out o' min";' an' I doot the braw Englishman has got better fish to fry in Canada, gin that is where he is.'

Ronald departed, now thinking less about his own disappointment than about Miss Fiona's.

CHAPTER XIII.

NIAL MOR'S DEN.

Sybil uttered an exclamation of annoyance and stopped.

She was proceeding to Sruthan Castle by a path that led along the shore and through lonely woods, and was too occupied with her own thoughts to bestow more than a vacant glance around her.

There were lively fells overhung by the silver birch and mountain ash; there were bubbling springs, hidden among rocks and ferns, that sang a murmurous song; there were open glades disclosing views of the

distant mountains, and of the winding loch, resplendent in the glory of the afternoon sun.

But what were these scenes of natural beauty compared to the vague visions that dazzled and bewildered her inner eye? She saw nothing, as yet, very tangible or definite—only a formless golden haze, something very wonderful and delightful, of which she dared hardly ask herself the meaning, though it filled her vain little heart with a thousand foolish dreams.

And so she had gone on until she had reached a secluded part of the woods, when she was startled out of her reverie by a movement among the undergrowth of scrub. A turn in the path disclosed a female figure bending beneath the trees.

'It iss Nancy Bell,' she said to herself with a frown, 'and I hef no mind to hear her croaking tongue whatever. But what iss she doin'?''

The old woman's movements were suspicious, and Sybil—well pleased to discover something evil of one whom she cordially disliked—slipped behind a tree.

'Ah!' she mused after a few moments' observation, 'I thought so—setting snares for the game. Now I have somethin' to tell Lachlan M'Cuaig, if the ill tempered old hag should say any more nas'y things about me.'

Sybil had been often stung by the old dame's bitter words, and would have liked to have charged her there and then with poaching. That, however, she was afraid to do. Nancy Bell was a gaunt, strong woman, fierce and dangerous when roused. So after taking particular notice of the spot, she endeavoured to slip past unobserved. But she was unsuccessful. She set her foot on a dry stick; it snapped, and old Nancy springing to her feet with surprising alacrity, caught sight of her as she was hurrying down the path. Too shrewd to let the girl pass without a word, she cried out in a tone of unusual conciliation:—

'Noo, Sybil, ye'll no' pass a pair auld body wiout sae much as a "Guid'e'en to ye, Nancy!"'

'Lord preserve us!' she answered, borrowing one of her mother's expressions. 'And what will ye be doin' here, Nancy?'

A keen angry glance shot from beneath the old woman's shaggy eyebrows, as she responded in true Scotch fashion by a question of her own.

'An' whaur will ye be gaen to in yer braw Sabbath's claes?'

'You will please to mind your own business,' retorted Sybil hotly, and trying to air her finest English accent. 'Hef I not as good a right to walk in the woods as other folk?'

'That's richt,' hissed Nancy, 'spit, spit, an' stretch oot yer claws like yer minnie's tam cat. You'll be a nice ceevil woman in yer auld days,' Sybil.'

'Like you, then,' she answered, with a toss of her head.

'Ha, ha, ha,' croaked the old dame, 'like me! I love them that love me, and hate them t'at hate me. D'ye hear that?' she asked, giving a poke with her stick at the