

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A Romance of the Western Isles.

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CHAPTER I.

FIONA AND LUATH.

'Down, Luath; down, sir! How dare you come up here?' cried Fiona, with a little stamp of her foot.

The dog obeyed slowly, descending to the foot of the stairs with many a backward glance. There he lay whisking his long bushy tail to and fro, and eagerly watching her bedroom door.

Presently she appeared drawing on her gloves, and he sprang to his feet with a short bark. He bounded half way up the stairs and then down again. He rushed round the entrance hall, sending the mats flying in all directions, and chased the old black cat into the kitchen. This preliminary outburst of youthful exuberance over, he ran towards the door in a quiver of excitement.

'Oh, shame, Luath! to frighten poor puss,' said the Highland girl, with feigned severity. 'I've half a mind not to take you with me.'

The handsome creature crept to her feet, and looked up penitently. She opened the door, and a flood of sunlight poured in. It brightened up the sombre old hall, sparkled in the dog's big brown eyes, and made his glossy coat shine like dusky gold.

'And Luath would very much like to go?'

He understood her changed tone, answered with another joyous bark, and dashing through the open door, raced across the lawn, on which a soft mantle of snow had fallen during the night. He cleared the gate with a bound, only to reappear the next moment on the top of the wall, where he impatiently watched the slower movements of his young mistress.

As she neared the gate, he sprang down and recommenced his frolic. The snow was a new, strange thing, which he could not quite understand. He sniffed it, ran his nose into it, and finding something delightfully soft, tossed it in the air, and rolled himself among it. Then he raced round and round, leaping and barking, mad with the prospect of a morning out of doors.

Fiona having gained the summit of a cliff, scanned the surrounding scene, and then called the dog from his gambols.

'Look!' she said, addressing him in Gaelic; 'you see your master?'

Luath turned his keen eyes in the direction indicated, and wagged his tail.

'Now go and ask him to come here,' she commanded, and like a flash of light he was off.

It was a lovely morning in February—a pet day, as they would call it in that bleak north; and the scene on which Fiona's eyes rested was one of lonely, awe-inspiring splendour.

The Atlantic spread before her, a wide, wide expanse of blue waters overarched with the glory of the illimitable heavens. Here and there the sunbeams splashed like a dropping shower of diamonds, or flooded the sea with molten silver. Fiona was wrapped in a grey haze; Staffa rose dream-like and showy; while far away the white shoulders of the Treshnish Isles glistened above the pearly veil. Nearer still the

Ulva and Mull appeared distinct and clear, their lower ridges—from which the snow had already melted—bare and brown, their upper corries and crags gleaming white, or flecked with cool grey shadows.

Turning round, she faced a region lying for the most part in shadow.

An elevated vale torn by angry torrents, yet affording good pasturage, extended along the coast. Fàs-Ghlac—the desolate valley, it was called, because of its lonely seclusion. From the sea it was shut off by an irregular line of precipitous cliffs, whose grey sides yawned with sombre caves, and stretched in bold headlands or black saw-like reef far into the deep. On the further side, it was flanked by a range of wild mountains, gashed and thunder-scarred by the storms of a thousand ages, which formed a well-nigh impassable boundary to the wide uplands of deep forest that swept inland.

Nestling at the base of one of these gaunt mountains stood her home. Tigh-an-Fhàsaich—the house in the wilderness, her Highland forefathers had named it; a big, rambling old place, not without an air of stateliness and refinement, but grey and weather beaten, and gazing down on a savage and iron shore.

Far, far away from the busy haunts of men, and difficult to reach even yet, at the time of our story this was an almost inaccessible region, isolated from the outer world by stormy seas, barren mountains, and dark, lonely glens, unvisited and unknown.

There life went on its old way, much as it had done for hundreds of years. There the long, strong arm of law and government ultimately penetrated, and great wrongs were avenged; but the movement was uncertain and tedious, and many acts of illegality and high-handed oppression were born in silence.

In this wild and secluded land Fiona M'iver lived. She had spent a few years in London for the sake of her education, and also had resided for a time with her father in Paris; but her heart was glad when she returned to the North.

She loved her Highland home, and lived much out of doors. There was not a glen, or cave, or mountain pass in the district whose inmost recesses she had not explored. She had sailed up the wildest lochs, visited the loneliest islands, climbed the steepest crags, and knew the haunts and habits of every wild thing.

Sometimes the appalling majesty of the scenes amid which she lived blanched her cheek. But for the most part it only enriched the mystical vein, naturally strong in her, until she had come to look on Nature with a 'superstitious eye of love'—to use Wordsworth's phrase—as the self-revelation of a spirit akin to her own.

The beauty of this February morning specially touched her. It seemed to come to her with dim suggestions of the nearness of something more in life than the senses could grasp, with hints of silent mystery of love, of a sweet secret to be revealed by-and-bye; and she was still standing rapt in deep reverie, when a familiar voice from behind cried—

'And where is my bonnie lassie going this morning?'

She started, and turned to the speaker with a smile.

'For a sail in the "Fionnaghal." Will you not come with me?'

A stranger looking into their faces would have needed no second glance to assure him that they were father and daughter. They had the same regular features, dark, well-defined eyebrows, and large expressive eyes. But there the likeness ended.

Torquil M'iver was an elderly gentleman, with a pale, pathetic face and stooping figure.

His daughter was about twenty-two, lithe, erect, strong and graceful as a young mountain pine. Her forehead was low and broad, eyes luminous and fringed with long, dark lashes, while her every movement was suggestive of rich, vigorous life. She wore a close-fitting gown of dark blue cloth, and a scarlet Tam-o'-Shanter cap. Evidently in her a nobler strain had been grafted on the old family stock, and it had blossomed forth into a shoot of surprising vitality and beauty.

'You see I have already taken advantage of this bright morning,' replied Torquil M'iver, with a slight Highland accent. He held up some wild ducks. 'But I am very tired now, and will be glad to go in and rest.'

'You've been too far for your strength, father,' exclaimed Fiona, with an anxious glance into his weary face. 'I'll return with you.'

'Not at all; on no account; my birdie. A sail will do you good, if you wrap up well. Where are you going?'

'To see my old nurse, Elspeth, and carry her some tea and a few other things. And while I'm there, Ronald will go to Sruthan, and enquire if there are any letters for us. I dare say he'll be glad of a word with Sybil Grant,' she added, with an arch smile.

'Ah! is that the way the wind blows? I should not have thought it. Well, I hope he has carried down plenty of warm things for you.'

'Yes; I've seen to that.'

'Well, well, good-bye, my child: don't forget that the days are short.'

He turned to go.

'Can Ronald bring you anything?'

'No, my lass;—stay, yes, I forgot. I would like him to bring me some good cigars, if Mrs. Grant has any; and if not, some of her very best tobacco.'

Fiona gave a glance of surprise. Her father did not smoke.

'Yes,' he proceeded with more than the ordinary hesitation of one accustomed mostly to think and speak in Gaelic. 'I have a notion that Nial Mor Duff will be coming over to Fàs-Ghlac very soon; and I would like to have a cigar to offer him.'

'Nial! has he come home again?' asked Fiona, as the colour mounted quickly to her cheeks, and then as quickly disappeared.

'Oh, yes; did I not tell you?' replied her father, watching her changing colour intently. 'Mr. Fergus Duff has not been so well, and may have to go away to the south of England. It was in Glen More I met Nial, yesterday.'

'Oh!'

'Yes, and a very fine young fellow he is.'