

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER XI.

(Continued.)

'And I don't know why I've come,' she answered, across the chasm, rather penitently; 'but when I was only a child I used to say that whatever Ronald dared to do, I would do.'

She climbed up and over the crag to the seaward side, and Ronald, when he saw her, looked more amused than surprised.

'I am thinkin', Miss Fiona, ye hef given the lieutenant a fright,' he said.

'I fear I have; but what a strange place, Ronald,' she remarked, gazing round on the jagged summit, which formed a kind of recess turned seawards. 'Have you been here before?'

'Nefter, Miss Fiona; nor any other man, I am thinkin',' he replied, and then added with an inward laugh, 'And I am thinking you will be the first young leddy—and maybe the last.'

Fiona laughed, and then turned and retraced her steps.

Again Waldegrave felt his heart stand still as she put her foot on the plank. He heard the tide roaring forty feet below through the awful chasm, and knew that one false step would mean instant death. The moment she was over, he clasped her hand and led her away. His face was white, almost stern.

'Why did you run that risk, Fiona? You ought not to be so reckless.'

'Are you very angry?' she asked, looking up ruefully. 'It was rather a wild thing to do.'

'You're a brave girl,' he answered proudly, 'and I love you too well to be angry.'

Then they turned and watched Ronald crossing with his find. He had, so he declared as he removed the plank, been more than repaid for his trouble, and he meant to return again another season.

The afternoon was now well advanced, and it was quite time they were on their way back to Fas-Ghlac.

The sail back through Loch Tuath was delightful; and then the time sped away all too swiftly, and then came the sad moment when Fiona, with tear-dimmed eyes, saw her lover ride away through the Pass of the Red Deer.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE SRUTHAN POST OFFICE

The afternoon was well advanced, and the little crowd drawn round Sruthan Post-Office by the arrival of the mail had dispersed. Those living in the immediate neighbourhood expecting letters had called for them, and the brief weekly hum of life was over.

It was then that Lachlan M'Cuaig, who had been watching all that was going on from the window of the M'Lean Arms, drank off his glass of spirits, and crossed over for his master's letters.

He had not been pleased that on more than one occasion of late Mr. Nial had dispensed with his services in this matter, and renewed his old custom of calling for them himself. It was all very well for him to do that when he was only the young laird; and

seldom at home, but it would not do now that he was in full possession of the estate.

And besides, Lachlan did not want to forego an opportunity of visiting the post-office. Mrs. Grant was always pleased to see him; and even if Sybil did profess to dislike him, and had promised to marry Ronald Campbell, pretty lasses often changed their minds, and there was many a slip in love affairs, as in other business.

Moreover, whatever the little flirt might say, he was generally invited into the back-parlour, where, if she contrived to worm out of him an account of all that was going on at the Castle, he was more than repaid with news which only the person who handled all the correspondence of the district could impart.

So, as nothing had been said about the letters that afternoon, Lachlan had made it his duty to call for them.

No one observing him as he stepped across the road with his dog at his heels, could wonder that a girl of Sybil's spirit and attractiveness should decline the honour of his hand. He was a short, squat, round-shouldered man, with reddish hair and bandy legs. His small, wolfish face was of the colour of dirty yellow parchment; his fingers were like claws, and he had lost the use of his left eye through a gunshot wound. The living thing in creation that most resembled him was the snarling cur that followed him everywhere. He was usually dressed in a coat with capacious pockets, and shambled along, peering, poking and sniffing right and left, as though ever in search of game or vermin.

He had hardly swung his ungainly figure through the doorway when Mrs. Grant hailed him from the back parlour.

'Ay, Mr. M'Cuaig, an' is it yersel'? Hoo are ye? hoo are ye? Come ben the hoose; it's lang since I had a glimpse o' ye.'

She drew the big arm-chair a little for ward, and dusted it with the corner of her apron. Lachlan M'Cuaig was known to be well-off, an old aunt having left him a good bit of money, and, moreover, he seldom came with empty pockets.

'It is a fine evenin', Mistress Grant, an awful fine evenin'. An' hoo are ye all?'

He gave a dry, harsh sniggle, and seated himself in the chair.

'Fine, the gudeman in partic'lar,' she replied, giving her head a toss towards the kitchen door. 'He's havin' a sleep noo by the chimley lue, an' it wad tak' an earthquake to waken him.'

'He is tired; he will hef been busy with the hay.'

'He's tired wi' daein naethin', the lazy loon—God forgie me that I, his wedded wife, should say it. But man, he's that fat that I hae had to tak' the paddin' oot o' his arm chair to let him sit doon in't. And his Sawbath claes winna meet by twa inches. He never sits doon but he tumles aff to sleep at ance; an' if ye gang to the door ye'll hear him noo snorin' awa' like a prize bull at Salen fair.'

'Ay, I can hear a noise whateffer, without goin' to the door,' replied Lachlan, with another snigger. 'But I am thinkin' it iss no Colin, it iss the old sow that hass got into the kitchen.'

Mrs. Grant listened a moment, and then, throwing up her hands rushed to the door. 'Lord preserve us!' she cried. 'An' I thocht it was Colin snorin'. Why did ye no tell me afore?'

It was as Lachlan M'Cuaig said. Colin Grant had returned to his work among the hay, and had left the door ajar, and the old sow had found its way into the kitchen, where it had already cleared off a basket of potatoes, and was now enjoying Mrs. Grant's newly-baked scones.

'Perdition on the doited loon!' exclaimed this much afflicted woman. 'I'll warm his lugs when he comes hame.'

And then seizing the long brush she went straight for the offending quadruped.

'OOT wi' ye, ye auld gomeril, ye dirty brute. Hoo daur ye come into ma clean kitchen? But Lord preserve us! what's this? If the ugly beast hassna swallowed up a' ma new pitatas, an' chawed up a' ma bannocks.'

There was vigour enough in her attack now. But everyone knows that a pig has a mind of its own, and that of all animals it is the most stubborn and determined, often yielding neither to blows nor entreaties, coaxing nor beating, and that when it does budge it is certain to go the opposite way to the one desired.

And thus with true porcine pertinacity this intruder resolved not to yield without a struggle. For a brief space blows only brought forth a deeper grunt of satisfaction. And when it did move, instead of making for the back yard, it dodged round the table, and was back again at the scones before its stout pursuer had half completed the circle.

Meanwhile Lachlan M'Cuaig was more interested in turning over the letters—and not a little surprised at finding none for the Castle—than in listening to what was going on in the kitchen. He also began to wonder what had become of Sybil. But now Mrs. Grant, hot and angry, called to him.

'Here, Mr. M'Cuaig, ye micht come an' help a body wi' this sow, whilk maun hae gotten bannocks on the brain. Bring yer stick an' gie us a hand to drive her oot.'

Lachlan, however, had hardly turned to render assistance, than the animal now thoroughly frightened, made a straight dash for the parlour door, and before the keeper could guard himself, he was thrown off his feet, and tumbled into Mrs. Grant's arms. And then while they were recovering from such unexpected proximity, the cause of all the commotion beat a safe retreat.

'Weel,' said Mrs. Grant, who found her tongue first, 'that beats a'. I do believe yon sow has gotten a' the Gadarene deevils in her inside. But gang into the parlour, Mr. M'Cuaig, an' I'll fetch a dram. We maun som-thin' comfortin'-like after a' that.'

Lachlan, nothing loth, returned to his examination of the letters, while Mrs. Grant was fetching the bottle and glasses. He hoped to see Sybil, but he also wanted to drop a few hints into her mother's ears alone.

'Noo, ye'll tak' anither dram, Mr. M'Cuaig,' urged Mrs. Grant in her blandest manner, pushing the bottle towards him for the second or third time. 'It will dae ye no harm; I'll warran' it's gude.'