

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER XL.

(Continued.)

They are now sweeping past the shores of Ulva and Gometra, and a hundred rocks and islets rising on every side demand watchfulness. But there is no danger, for the boat is in experienced hands, and Waldegrave gazes on the scene with delighted surprise. Never before had he found himself amid such a phantasmagoria of flashing lights and brilliant ever-changing hues. The picturesque bays are ablaze with colour—rich browns, golden yellows, emerald greens; while the sea, overarched with a myriad wavering rainbows, which vanish and reappear amid clouds of mist and spray, is here a crystal green, there a dark purple or pale blue, and breaks everywhere into smiles and laughter.

So they sail away into the dreamy west, singing song after song. Staffa is soon left far behind; and now they approach the Treshnish Isles. There is the Dutchman's Cap with its odd conical centre, and there are Lunga and Fladda, and the Cairnburghs, together with many another rocky pile on which fierce Northmen fought a thousand years ago, but now uninhabited and rarely visited. There they lie solitary and inviolate, the haunt and home of innumerable wild birds and of a few herds of Highland cattle. And around their rock-girt shores the Atlantic rolls, to-day, with glassy transparency, drawing low weird whispers from their gloomy caves; but to-morrow, will rise in white fury, and fling upon them all its terrors with a deafening roar.

At last they drew near to Eilean Dubh, and swept into a lonely bay. Waldegrave could see no place to land, but Fiona steered towards a jumble of black boulders between which there ran a narrow creek. Here the 'Fionnaghal' was made fast to a jutting rock.

It had been a long sail, and Waldegrave was quite ready to second the suggestion that as soon as possible they should make acquaintance with the contents of the luncheon basket.

Ronald gave a weather-wise glance, and remarked that there would soon be a shower. So instead of spreading out the store of good things which Fiona had provided, on the cliffs, they were carried up to the one solitary house in the island, a 'but' and a 'ben,' only used by men who came once or twice a year to look after the cattle.

While lunch was being got ready, Waldegrave strolled among the heather and bog-myrtle, and then seated himself on a grey boulder commanding a magnificent prospect.

Before him spread the whole island—irregular, wild, and rock-strewn, a mile or so in length, and less in breadth; and beyond it a glorious world of lofty mountains and lonely islands set amid the wide, wide, summer sea.

For some time he sat enchanted with the view. All nature seemed to him transfigured and drawn into mystic sympathy with his own mood. It thrilled with soul secrets and soul life. That immeasurable azure dome of sky, radiant with an inner gold, silently proclaimed immortal love and death-

less hope. Those everlasting hills breathed forth a secret joy. The longer he gazed, the more he was filled with a rapturous sense of eternal beauty, made speechless with the high glory of it, rapt into still communion with something fair and wise and good beyond all earthly seeming.

Such altitudes are not for long, and Waldegrave was brought down from his in the pleasantest way possible.

'I began to wonder whether a sea-nymph had beguiled you to her sea green halls,' said a clear, merry voice.

The spell was broken, and he turned. Fiona, looking a little flushed from her brisk climb, was advancing towards him.

'Ah! I hope I've not kept you waiting,' he said, rising. 'I seem to have been transported into a spirit-world, so you were nearly right.'

'Then I've come to conduct you back to something very mundane,' she replied gaily.

'I had no idea the scenery of these Western Islands was so beautiful,' he said, as he linked his arm with hers. 'And I feel strangely drawn to this spot. We must visit it again some day. It has thrown quite a spell over me already.'

'I'm so glad you love the Highlands,' she answered, turning half round, and gazing up at him. 'But you've been unusually fortunate as regards the weather. It is not always like this. You would find the winter long and dreary. You know we didn't stay here all the year when my dear mother was living.'

And then she cast her eyes down, wondering what would happen when he returned. Would he want her to go away and leave her father all alone? She could never do that. Ought she not to have told him so when he spoke to her in the Priest's Cave? After all, had she not done wrong in confessing that she loved him? It would be absurd to think that he could give up his position and estate and come and reside at Fàs-Ghlac. These questions had come to her during many sleepless hours, and now returned with double force. They threw into her face a shadow of perplexity.

Waldegrave noticed the sudden change, and divined its meaning.

'I will guess your thoughts,' he said, copying her pretty habit of turning half round and gazing straight into the eyes of her listener.

Fiona gave him a half-startled look.

'You're thinking that if your father sometimes finds life dull now, how could you ever go away and leave him all alone.'

She answered him with another glance.

'I've thought of that,' he went on, drawing her closer to his side, 'and I'll tell you my plan, and you must say what you think of it. As soon as I've fulfilled my promise to Lord Perceval, I propose to withdraw from the army. My mother doesn't care for Waldegrave Manor, she prefers our London house. I would like your father to live with us, and we would reside mainly in Northumberland and spend the summer months here. I've even thought that Ronald Campbell would be a first rate man to entrust with the place while we are away. So, Fiona, you wouldn't

have to leave your father. I've talked the matter over with him, and know that he'll consent. And now, what does my Fiona think of it?

'Are you not proposing to make too great a sacrifice?'

'In what way?'

'By giving up your profession.'

'No; I think not. A man's first duty is surely to his own people and property. The Northumberland estate is very large, and requires much attention. And then there is much I should like to do for Fàs-Ghlac. Have you any other criticism?'

She glanced at him again with eyes full of happiness and love.

'I think,' she replied, 'that it sounds like a lovely dream, almost too delightful to be true.'

The rough-and-ready luncheon in the old hut passed off without a hitch, interspersed with many a joke and merry laugh; and Ronald—who had suggested this particular excursion partly in view of some pursuits of his own—was satisfied that, so far, it was an immense success. He thought Miss M'iver looked happier than he had ever seen her before, and he was quite sure that Lieutenant Waldegrave was deeply in love with her. The shower, as he had predicted, came while they were under shelter; it was soon over, and then the sky cleared for a fine afternoon.

But though Waldegrave had told lively stories during the lunch, and Fiona had looked unusually happy, a more pensive mood fell upon them when they wandered off together, not so much to explore the island, as to enjoy one of their last opportunities for being alone. The shadow of the coming separation had fallen upon them.

They had, however, not proceeded far when they saw Ronald already ahead of them. A basket was strapped on his back, and he was moving cautiously among the rocks, peering into every hollow, climbing round each jutting crag, and evidently determined to leave no corner unexplored.

'What is he doing?' asked Waldegrave.

'He is a collector of all sorts of natural curiosities. He picks up everything that is likely to interest any chance tourist or naturalist. He will gather the eggs of rare birds, strange shells, or flowers, or bits of rock; and often he gets a good price for them.'

They walked on a little further and then sat down at a point where the shore presented a striking appearance because of the boldness and variety of the cliffs with which it was girt. For the most part they formed steep precipices shelving down to the sea. But here and there they yawned with gloomy caverns, or sprang into curious archways, or rose, sheer out of the sea, in isolated turrets and pillars, around which the tides and currents rushed with ceaseless clamour.

It was not, however, the cliffs, but the mighty Atlantic—so soon to divide them—that drew their gaze. Not a sail was in sight, and far, far away the great waters stretched, here streaked with silver, there a windy green, until away in the dim, purple distance sea and sky melted into one. So they sat with clasped hands, silent, dreading