

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER X.

(Continued.)

Mrs. Waldegrave saw that she could put her opposition too far. It would be a serious thing to turn Geoffrey from the woman of his choice—even if she could succeed in doing it, which was not likely. Many men, by yielding to such advice as she was giving him, had wrecked their lives. After all, mothers could not select wives for their sons. Still she was disappointed, and would probably have ventured to renew her opposition but for her sense of obligation to Fiona, and the genuine admiration she was compelled to feel for her. For several days, however, she had feared what was coming, and if Geoffrey was still determined, she would, no doubt, have to submit with what grace she could.

And the next day she saw that he was quite determined.

'Mother,' he said coaxingly, yet with a glance that showed he was not to be gained. 'Mr. M'Iver will be coming up soon to pay me his usual morning call. I hope you'll ask them to spend this evening with us.'

She yielded, and gave the invitation, and on his part he begged Mr. M'Iver to ask Fiona to bring the songs they had heard her singing the previous night.

But when the time came the Highland laird appeared without his daughter. She asked to be excused as she had letters to write, and the weekly mail left the next day.

A dreary evening was the result. Waldegrave retired early and had another sleepless night.

His mother began to fear a relapse, and complained unreasonably that Fiona was reserved, and held herself aloof.

'You don't understand the Highland character,' replied Geoffrey rather sharply. 'She'll not come again unless you ask her yourself, and you'll have to do it very graciously too.'

So Mrs. Waldegrave found. But her long experience had given her tact in overcoming little differences; her anxiety about her son made her unusually gracious, and so Fiona was drawn back again.

Geoffrey now improved daily, and devised every imaginable excuse for alluring Fiona to their sitting room and prolonging her stay. Would she play over this song? Would she help him with this sketch, etc., etc. He made no attempt to conceal his pleasure in her society, and was in a manly way ever showing her deference and homage. And therefore as the days passed, there came a softer light into Fiona's eyes, a richer glow on her cheek, a more elastic spring in her step.

Mrs. Waldegrave understood it all. But the more she brooded over what had been planned, or tacitly understood between herself and Lady Perceval, the less she was able to suppress her vexation. She had promised to return with Geoffrey to Canada, but the reunion that had been looked forward to with so much pleasure, was now anticipated as a painful ordeal. She would doubtless have withdrawn from the promise had she not feared complications adverse to her son's interests, and thought that she had better go,

if only to smooth matters over. And so, unable further to oppose, nor yet willing to give a hearty sanction to what was going on at Fàs-Ghlaic, she prepared to leave immediately, so as to hasten on the arrangements for a lengthened absence from Waldegrave Manor.

Ronald Campbell went with her and her maid, Grace Armstrong, as far as Oban, to look after the luggage and facilitate their movements. Geoffrey was to follow more leisurely, when he was stronger.

On the evening of the day of Mrs. Waldegrave's departure, Fiona was no sooner seated at the piano than there came a tap at the door, and Geoffrey, supporting himself on his crutches, entered.

'Oh!' ejaculated Fiona, 'have you ventured the stairs alone?'

'Yes, and I intend to throw aside these sticks in a day or two,' he replied with a bright laugh. And then he added, as the first excuse he could think of for coming down, 'My mother has carried off nearly all my books. Will you lend me something to read?'

It took some time to make a choice even with Fiona's help, and then he showed no desire to depart. For after drifting into a long conversation with Mr. M'Iver about the Highland Clans, he asked Fiona to sing, and then he sang and so the evening passed all too quickly.

The following day he reached a sheltered nook among the cliffs, and he and Fiona spent some happy hours sketching.

For May had come and the weather was perfect. The lambs were leaping in the fields, the cuckoo was telling his name to all the hills, and from the golden chalice of the sun there poured a glory of living light over sea and shore.

As soon as Ronald returned from Oban the 'Fionnaghal' was got out and overhauled, cushions and rugs were carried down, and plans were laid for exploring some of the less distant lochs and islands.

Their first sail, however, was naturally to the Black Gulls and the Priest's Cave—places that could never henceforth lose their interest for Fiona and Waldegrave.

It was a lovely morning, and Ronald, chanting an old Gaelic song, pulled slowly towards the scene of the wreck.

'What a marvellous change to that fateful afternoon when I was flung on this shore like a helpless log!' said Waldegrave thoughtfully.

He turned to Fiona, who sat at the stern looking as bright and charming as the morning in her simple blue gown and red Tam o' Shanter.

'Yes,' she replied, 'and it seems now like a shadowy dream though not two months ago. Usually life here is so quiet, so uneventful, day following day with nothing to distinguish them—particularly in winter. But you broke in on our humdrum existence and gave us new interests. It has made the old order of things look very far away. We shall have a difficulty in reconciling ourselves to it when you're gone.'

She spoke lightly, but her heart sank at the thought of the coming separation, and a pensive shadow flitted across her face.

'You can't feel that more deeply than I do. My own past seems very far away; life will never again be the same for me as it was before we met.'

Then there was silence. His words were weighted with meaning. She could not meet his eager gaze, but she was sure that he had spoken sincerely.

All was calm around them, and Ronald still chanted his song and worked leisurely at the oars.

They floated through a scene of surpassing loveliness. The gulls folded their white wings and slept on the glassy sea. The sapphire sky and the fleecy clouds were reflected in its polished breast, together with the mighty cliff the green islands, and the wild, rocky shore. Even the long, deep under swell that for ever sets in from the Atlantic was crystal smooth, and heaved over the treacherous reefs without a murmur.

So clear was the water, that deep below, through fathoms of transparent green, they gazed down on shadowy sea-caves and sea-gardens—on a region of untroubled calm, as it seemed that day, where delicately-shaped plants, resplendent in gold and purple and emerald green, might bloom for ever in fadeless beauty.

'And there are the Black Gulls,' said Ronald; "'black telfies" Dr. Mackenzie was calling them.'

'They don't look very ugly or dangerous to-day,' remarked Waldegrave gravely, as Ronald rowed the 'Fionnaghal' round them.

The crisp wavelets rippled gently against them, and the seaweed, clinging to their sides shone in masses of tangled gold.

But nature had conspired that day to hide their errors.

Even the wild desolation of the approaches to the Priest's Cave was suffused with soft gleams or hidden beneath dark shadows. The ivy clinging to the precipitous cliffs shone with a silvery brightness, and the gorse on every ledge burst into a golden flame. White mists, like delicate folds of drapery, hung round the mysterious recesses, from which there came no muffled roar, but weird whisperings, soft and low, as though lonely sea-maidens were chanting a love-lorn song. Near to the cave a cascade leaped over the shelving rocks; it streamed downwards, a transparent, silvery veil with wavering rainbows, and then fell to the sea, shattered into a torrent of flashing crystals and snowy foam flakes.

Ronald now advanced, cautiously avoiding the jagged reefs with which the channel was strewn, and finally brought the 'Fionnaghal' alongside a ledge of rock, from which there sprang a huge, natural buttress, supporting the giant archway that led from the glad sunlight into a region of flitting shadows and of black midnight darkness.

But even now the attempt to cross those slippery rocks and beds of slimy seaweed would have been hazardous for Waldegrave, who had not yet completely recovered from his injurious. Ronald, however, had provided for this, by bringing several long planks, and while he was placing them in position, Waldegrave surveyed the spot where he had so nearly lost his life.

'Where is the reef on which you saw me