

The
Inglenook

FIONA M'IVER.

A ROMANCE OF THE WESTERN ISLES.

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CHAPTER X.

(Continued.)

So they went on further and further into the darkness, feeling their steps slowly and cautiously, for the floor was uneven and rugged.

She could not see his face from the way he held the light, but she knew that he was profoundly moved. For he had taken her hand, and retained it in a clasp so warm, thrilling, magnetic, that an inner chord seemed touched, setting her heart beating wildly, and awakening her whole nature into responsive sympathy with his.

'There is one Highland superstition I hope you do not believe, Fiona,' he remarked, after a pause.

It was sweet to hear him use her Christian name—he had never done it before—though the nervous thrill in his voice almost startled her. 'Highland superstition!' she thought, 'what can it be?'

'What is it?' she asked.

'I had never heard of it until Dr. Mackenzie referred to it while I was lying here. He treated it lightly, and joked about it to Morag Campbell, but I think she was not very well pleased with his levity.'

'Oh!'

'You know the saying? It's to the effect that if you save a man from the sea, he'll do you a great wrong some day. I spoke to Morag about it when the doctor was gone, for I saw she was troubled. "Well," she replied, "you were saved from the water-death by those whom we love; and some of the folk will say that the time will come when you'll do them a great hurt." I assured her that that would never happen; but I'm not certain she was wholly convinced. I hope you've no such fears.'

He bent towards her, speaking manfully, yet in a tone full of respect and gentleness and anxious solicitude.

'Oh, no,' she replied warmly. 'It's only one of those absurd sayings that still linger among some of the crofters. I'm sure that Morag doesn't really believe it.'

'Then you can trust me, Fiona? without any secret dread lest I should ever bring you evil?'

The question put so eagerly, almost beseechingly, brought a lump into her throat; and she was glad that he could not see the tears glistening in her eyes as she looked up and replied bravely:—

'Oh yes, I have no fear, Mr. Waldegrave.'

'Thank God!' he ejaculated fervently.

They were pausing before the spot where he had lain for those three days and nights, where for hours he had hovered between life and death, and where he first learned how much he owed to her.

The candle threw a feeble glimmer round, lighting that corner of the vast subterranean chamber, but leaving all else in impenetrable night. The posts to which the old sails had been attached remained, the straw that formed his bed, and the dead embers of the last fire. Things were just as they had been left on his removal, and he cast over them a lingering, silent glance, with Fiona's last words still making music in his heart.

Then he turned to her, and the candle, which he had been holding high above his head, shone upon her features. Never before had she appeared to him nearly divine. Her inmost soul stood revealed in her glistening eyes; and the feeble ray of light, falling full upon her face, imparted to it a mystic, spiritual radiance and beauty, like the moon shining through a silvery mist. Words of love were trembling on his lips, but the vision awed him into momentary silence; love, gratitude, adoration blending in one emotion akin to worship.

And Fiona returned his gaze, looking up steadfastly into his grave, thoughtful face, that seemed kindled by an inner light, and reading a deathless passion in his eyes.

And so they clasped hands in silence, while the waters of the soul gathered to overflowing. It was a great moment of their lives—one which Fiona would recall again and again through days and months of misery and bewilderment, when the old Highland superstition would be flung in her face, and she would be sorely tempted to believe it true. It was a moment when soul leaped to soul, and life merged in life, and they felt the wonder, the joy, the sweet mystery of love that casteth out fear.

Whether they stood thus for a long time or short is immaterial. What is time to those touched with such ecstasy? May not a long life be curdled into an hour? There are days that mean more for us than years of common experience; it would be better to sacrifice half a lifetime than not to know them. But as their eyes met in that long, steady gaze, and the full consciousness of love given and love returned dawned on Fiona, her eyelids drooped in sweet, maidenly reserve, and a lovely colour mounted to her cheeks.

Not till then could Waldegrave break the golden silence. His words sounded to himself sadly confused and feeble compared with the strength of his passion; but what more or better could he say than tell her that he loved her, and that it would be the crown and glory of his life to hear her say that his love was returned.

And when he paused there was silence again only for a second. Then this brave girl—so independent and proud at times—let her head fall against his shoulder and answered softly:

'Yes, I love you, Geoffrey. You have made me very happy.'

Before another word could be spoken, he doffed his cap and kissed her.

'And you have made me,' he exclaimed, 'the happiest man on earth.'

Slowly they retraced their steps, Waldegrave now letting his soul overflow freely in speech. They passed from the darkness to a twilight glimmer, and then a few more steps and the sunlight streamed upon them through the great archway. They had not been away a quarter of an hour, but how much had happened in that brief space!

Waldegrave was reluctant to return to the boat immediately.

'Shall we sit down here?' he asked, pointing to a piece of timber that had been thrown into the mouth of the cave from the

wreck, and dragged up beyond the reach of the tide.

Fiona consented readily—she was in no hurry—and besides, there was something she must say, and say at once, though the thought of it made her grave and silent.

Waldegrave noticed her look of restraint. 'Something is troubling you, Fiona,' he remarked anxiously, seating himself by her side. 'Tell me what it is.'

'I hope you'll see it to be for the best,' she replied very gently, for she feared that she was about to say what would give him pain, 'but for the present we must enter into no binding engagement.'

A look of surprise and perplexity came into his face.

'Oh, surely! Why can you wish that?'

'Not because I doubt your love, Geoffrey, or am uncertain of my own, but for your sake.'

'For my sake?'

'Yes,' she answered proudly. 'Two months ago we were strangers to each other, and your friends must not think that you have been caught by some passing glamour, or induced to make promises through a sense of obligation.'

'No one could think that.'

'I'm afraid some would, and for your sake I cannot endure such a suspicion.'

'But, Fiona, why should you imagine such things?'

'I know,' she replied reluctantly, 'that your mother thinks so.'

He coloured, and had to admit that his mother had opposed him at first; but she had given her consent before going away.

'It was only half-hearted,' said Fiona, shaking her head. 'She thinks you are acting too hastily.'

Waldegrave tried hard to convince her that she was wrong, but she remained immovable. There was, however, an expression of great kindness in her eyes as she said:

'You can trust me, Geoffrey, and I you, without formal pledges. Go and fulfil your engagement with Lord Perceval. The time will quickly pass, and when you return I shall be waiting for you.'

And with that Waldegrave had to be content. It would have been more to his mind to have gone back to the boat and said, 'Ronald, you must congratulate me. Miss M'Iver has promised to be my wife. You may inform all the crofters and fishermen, and ask them to come to a grand supper before I leave.' He would have liked the news to spread to Bunessan, and Salen, and Tobermory; and for the men of Uva and Iona to have heard, and above all for Nial Duff to have heard. It would have pleased him immensely to have seen Torquil M'Iver's sad face grow bright and glad as his neighbours and friends congratulated him that his daughter was to be married to the young Englishman whose life she had saved.

All that, however, would have to wait, except that he was resolved that Mr. M'Iver should know the whole truth of the matter. But as Ronald slowly rowed the 'Fionnaghal' back to the measured cadence of his song,