

Ian Macquoid.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS.

CHAPTER III.

It was a wild and stormy day in October; the rain dashed against the windows in sudden violent squalls that almost threatened to break them in, and the wind howled in fitful gusts round the old house, in a way that Isabella declared was calculated to give anyone the 'blues.'

But in the intervals of storm the sun shone out warm and bright, and the effect of varying light and shade from the quickly scudding clouds, and the brilliant, over-changing tints on the rocks and hills, and the distant islands, made a scene so beautiful and new to me, that I could not resist the temptation to go out and enjoy it to the utmost.

I waited until a lull in the storm and a cheery burst of sunshine seemed to promise an hour of fine weather, and then arming myself with a waterproof and a pair of strong boots, I went out alone.

The wind was strong, but deliciously fresh and keen, and brought a warm glow to my face and a sense of exhilaration that made it a real delight to battle with the strong gusts which, at times obliged me to stand and gasp laughingly for breath.

In my keen enjoyment, I took but little notice of how the time was passing, or what direction I was taking, but walked on and on until I found myself on the top of a high steep Craig, and on looking around me, was surprised to find that Ardnavaich must be very far away, for my most familiar landmarks were out of sight.

I thought little about it, however, and my rocky pinnacle affording a wide and glorious view of the foaming, tossing sea, with its many tinted islands, I sat down to rest, and feast my eyes with the prospect.

The noise of wind and wave was in my ears, deadening every other sound so that I heard no steps approaching, and started a little when a short, delighted bark close at my side told that my old friend Collie was there, and his master appeared at the same moment.

'I could not quite believe that it was you, Miss Freers,' he said, after the first greeting, 'though Collie was convinced of it; but it is a long way from Ardnavaich, and the day is stormy.'

'But the storms are so beautiful,' I answered. 'The lights and colors on the hills and islands are so exquisite. I could not help coming out to feel it all nearer.'

Ian Macquoid's grave face relaxed, and he smiled with sudden brightness and sympathy.

'Ah,' he said, 'you have found out one of the greatest beauties of our country, but one that not every young lady coming from the life of London drawing rooms would appreciate.'

'Such a life as you speak of should make them appreciate this doubly,' I replied. 'For myself, I would rather spend a lifetime of storm here, and one of sunshine in London.'

'I can understand that,' said Ian Macquoid, as he threw himself down on the rocks, and Collie stretched himself delightedly between us. 'Though,' he went on, thoughtfully, 'there is a great deal that is grand and beautiful, and many things to interest one, in London.'

'You know it well?' I said enquiringly.

'Yes,' he answered. 'I have been there often when—years ago, and had good friends there, but—'

'But you do not care to go there again?' I questioned.

'I have no money to go to London, or anywhere,' he said, simply. 'My travels now are all done in spirit with my books.'

There was silence for a moment, while I summoned courage to say what had all along been in my mind.

'I am glad that I saw you to-day,' I began, awkwardly, 'because I wanted to explain what you must have thought so very strange the other night. I did not know then—I had never been told—that Ardnavaich belonged to Sir Robert Crawford, and that he had lent it to my mother; and I, of course, supposed that she had rented it.'

'I thought it most likely that there was some such mistake,' said Ian Macquoid, quietly, without looking at me. 'I suppose

you know Sir Robert Crawford well?'

'My father knew him,' I answered. 'I have not seen very much of him, and had never heard him speak of Ardnavaich.'

My companion did not answer, and there was silence for some moments, I watching the great foam-flecked waves that broke with increasing fury at the foot of the rocks.

Suddenly he sprang up, and pointed to the north.

'Do you see that, Miss Freers?' he asked quickly.

And I turned, to see, with surprise, the heavy bank of dark, unbroken, inky-looking cloud that had gathered in the short time I had been resting.

'There is a bad storm coming,' said Ian Macquoid, 'and you must go home at once or it will overtake you; and it will be dark so soon that you must walk as quickly as you can, unless—' he hesitated a moment—'unless you will let me go with you.'

'It is very good of you,' I said gratefully, 'but there really is no necessity. I can find the way quite well, and, if the squall overtakes me, I shall most likely be able to shelter until it has passed.'

'No, you must not do that,' he said. 'This will not be a squall, and will not pass over as the others have done today. I believe that we shall have snow—we often have sudden snowstorms quite early here—and you must hurry home before it comes. Are you sure that you know the nearest way?'

'I did not take special notice of the way I came,' I answered; 'but, perhaps the simplest plan would be to follow, roughly, the coast-line?'

'No; that is too far, and would take you too long,' he said. 'I will show you a more direct way, that will save you half an hour's walk.'

He climbed upon the highest point of the rocks where we stood, and helped me to get up beside him, while he pointed out carefully the route I was to take.

Then, with one more injunction to walk quickly and not be tempted to take shelter on the road, he shook my hand hastily, and I started quickly on my walk home.

Presently I began to fear that I must have mistaken the way after all, though it had seemed so plain.

I was just beginning to wish that I had accepted Ian Macquoid's offer to show me, when his prophecy was verified, and the first snowflakes fell.

Soon I felt convinced that I had mistaken the road, and, after stopping to consider, I deemed to take a course bearing more to the right, since it seemed to me that Ardnavaich must lie in that direction.

However, after half an hour of quick walking I seemed to be no nearer than before, and, to my horror, I found that it was rapidly growing dark; while I could not discover even one familiar land mark in all the country round to guide me.

I walked on, hesitating and searching anxiously through the gloom on every side for something to remind me of my whereabouts, but found nothing, and the snow came down so thick and fast as almost to blind me.

The ground I was on was rough and rocky, and I stumbled several times, and at last, stepping into what must have been a rather deep hollow filled with snow, I fell forward, and struck my head against the rock.

I got up quickly, and tried to go on, but the pain in my temple was so acute that my head reeled, and I found it impossible to walk.

I must sit down, if only for one moment, to rest and still its throbbing.

Where was I? My eyes opened slowly, and stared dazedly around, but could make nothing of the dim, shadowy outlines that met them.

I tried to raise my head, but it ached badly, and a vague sense of warmth and safety and content, made me lay it down and close my eyes again in dreary abandon.

Something was stirring close to me—something that throbbed with strong, steady, unceasing beats, and gradually borne in on me a consciousness of movement, of quick but gentle motion, that I could not understand; and what was that strong, close clasp that held me, and inspired that sense of safety and repose?

I put out my hand, gropingly, and it encountered another hand, larger, warmer, but harder than itself.

A smothered cry of wondering enquiry escaped my lips, and the voice of Ian Macquoid roused me to full consciousness.

'You are better at last,' he said. 'Thank Heaven for that!'

'I am quite well now,' I answered, 'and I can walk if you will let me try.'

He put me gently on the ground, and held my arm while I tried to walk a few steps, but my limbs were so stiff and painful, and my head so dazed, that I was obliged to submit helplessly when he assured me it was impossible, and I must not waste time in the attempt.

It was still snowing thickly as he strode on, carrying me again.

'How did it happen?' I asked, suddenly.

'How did you find me?'

'I was looking for you,' he answered, 'for the snow came so quickly that I was sure you could not have reached home before it began; and I was afraid you might mistake the road. I found your footprints, and tried to follow them, but the snow filled them up so quickly that I

called Collie, and told him to find you for me. He started off, looking very knowing but led me such a very erratic course, that I began almost to doubt him. I had no choice, however, but to trust to him, and at last, he brought me to you. But what had happened to make you lose consciousness? I tried all I could to revive you, but could not succeed, so thought it best to take you to shelter as quickly as I could.'

'I fell down,' I explained, 'and struck my head, and when I tried to walk I could not, and, if you had not come, I must have lain there until morning. I wish I knew how to thank you!' I added, gratefully.

'Please don't try to,' he said.

'Are we still far from Ardnavaich?'

'From Ardnavaich!' he repeated. 'We are quite three miles from the house, and I am afraid you cannot reach there tonight. I am taking you to Mary Faa's cottage, which is close at hand.'

'Three miles from Ardnavaich!' I gasped in astonishment. 'Then where could I have been when you found me?'

'You were about two miles from here, and five from your home.'

'And you have had to carry me all this long way? I went on, penitently.

'Two miles is not far to me,' he said, quietly, and I could find no words of thanks, so there was silence for a time.

A sudden bark of delight from Collie, who ran on in front of us, told us that we had arrived at the cottage, and, a moment later, Ian Macquoid set me gently down at the door.

The cottage was in complete darkness, and a chill of disappointment struck me.

He knocked at the door, but no one answered.

Then he called loudly, but got no reply, and went and tapped sharply at the window of the room he knew that Mary slept in, but still no one appeared.

'Mary cannot be at home,' he said, at last.

'I am afraid she will have gone to nurse a sick neighbor, or something of the kind.' My heart sank, but I tried to put a brave face on the matter, in spite of my frozen limbs and chattering teeth.

'Never mind,' I said, as cheerfully as I could; 'I daresay I can walk now, and I will try to go home if you will take me there.'

'No, I will not take you any further in this snow to-night,' he said. 'You must go to a fire at once; old Mary would be only too glad to receive you were she here and she will readily forgive me for dispensing hospitality in her absence.'

'But if the door is fastened?' I objected.

'That is not likely,' he said; 'it would be the first time, indeed.'

He tried the latch as he spoke, and as he had expected it yielded at once, and he pushed the door open.

The cottage was quite dark inside, but Ian Macquoid produced matches and lit a remnant of candle which he found, then drew up an old wooden armchair and seated me in it.

He seemed to be quite familiar with the ways of his foster-mother's home and quickly produced a bundle of wood and blocks of peat, with which he made a cheery, blazing fire.

A further search discovered a jug of milk and a small iron porridge pot, which he proceeded to put on the fire, and soon produced a cup of steaming milk, which he insisted on my drinking.

'You must be careful to keep a good fire while I am out,' he said, as I handed back the cup, very much refreshed.

'But,' I said, a little surprised, 'must you go home now? It is still snowing heavily.'

'I am not going home,' he answered, 'though the snow is nothing to me, and—yes, I must go out; but Collie shall stay to take care of you. You will be quite safe with him, and Mary will, perhaps, be coming home before long, so try to rest now and get thoroughly warm.'

The door closed after him, and a great loneliness crept over me as I listened to the storm that raged outside, and remembered that there was no other habitation within miles of me, until Collie thrust his soft head into my lap, as if to reproach me with having forgotten him.

The day was dawning grey and chill when a gentle knocking woke me, for I had been sleeping in my chair before the fire, and Collie's delighted bark announced that his master had returned.

I opened the door, and Ian Macquoid came in, after shaking some of the moisture from his dripping clothes.

The snow had ceased falling, and was rapidly disappearing from the sodden ground.

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'So Mary has not come back?' he asked. 'I was hoping that she would be here before me. You will have had a very unpleasant night, I am afraid.'

'No, indeed,' I said. 'I have rested well, and feel so much better, that I am quite ready to go home.'

'You cannot go without eating something first, and your brother is coming to fetch you at nine o'clock.'

'My brother?'

'I should, perhaps, have said your half-brother, Dick.'

'You have seen him, then?' I exclaimed, full of wonder.

'Yes, I saw him.'

'Then understood, and with a sudden impulse, went up to him and grasped his hand.'

'I know now,' I said, gently. 'You went out on purpose, to Ardnavaich, to tell them, and I was so stupid that I did not guess in time to prevent you!'

'Why should you wish to prevent it?' he asked, very gently, his hand closing over mine with a strong firm clasp.

'Because you had done so much already, and they did not deserve it of you!' I exclaimed with a sudden dire misgiving as to the manner in which his kindness had been received.

'You did,' he answered, very low.

'I don't know that,' I said, 'but I do know that you have been kinder to me than anyone since poor dad died, and I have no words to thank you.'

'You have done so, more than you know already,' he said; 'and it will be greater gratitude than I have merited if you will think a little kindly sometimes of the last Macquoid of Currachmore.'

I glanced up quickly, with a wondering question on my lips, and his face looked grey and set in the dim half-light, but he dropped my hand, and turned away abruptly, just as the door was opened, and Mary Faa came in.

Her look of half-scared astonishment at the sight of us caused us to laugh, and the situation was quickly explained to her.

She had, as we had guessed, gone on a charitable errand to a sick neighbor, and had stayed the night.

It seemed very soon after this that Dick arrived to take me home, and his face bore an expression that said plainly to me, 'You'll catch it,' but I only smiled back at him serenely, feeling for some mysterious reason, that the scolding and reproaches inevitably awaited me did not matter so very much after all.

Our stay was rapidly coming to an end, and, as the weather had quite 'broken up,' and storms and squalls were daily occurrences, my step-mother and Isabella both declared that the day of departure would be very welcome, and that nothing on earth should induce them to spend another week in this dull and dreary place.

My last day at Mull I reserved for paying a farewell visit to Mary Faa.

'You will surely be coming back Miss Agatha?' she said, wistfully, when I unwillingly prepared to go. 'Your folk will be taking holiday every year, and where better could they spend it than here at Mull?'

'Yes, we shall surely come again,' I answered, hopefully, for I could not bear even, to myself, to admit that it was not likely.

'Come soon, my bairn,' said Mary, softly stroking my hand as I stood before her; and do not forget that there are those at Mull that will watch for your coming.'

'Mary,' I said, suddenly, after a moment's thought, 'there is something I want to ask you. Why is it that Ian Macquoid calls himself the last Macquoid of Currachmore?'

A shade of pain passed over the brown and wrinkled face.

'Did he say that to you, Miss Agatha?'

'I nodded.'

'And did he say no more?' she asked softly.

'No more,' I said. 'And if it is anything that he would rather not speak of, do not tell me.'

Mary shook her head.

'He would not mind my speaking to you of this,' she said. 'You are English, my bairn, and maybe never heard much of the Macquoids of Currachmore. For nigh six hundred years have they been there, and held wide lands besides, and followers and servants by the score, but little by little all has gone from them but just the bare rock and the falling house, and of all the Macquoids there is none left but Ian, and old Dougald is all the following he has.'

'But, Mary,' I said, wistfully, for the story touched and saddened me, 'surely

there will be some way of improving things; perhaps the missing will may be found, or—

—he—may marry a rich woman?'

Mary shook her head energetically.

'The will will not be found,' she said, decidedly, 'and the wife he would have is not rich, and, if she were, my bairn would be too proud to ask her.'

'You mean,' I said, slowly, after a pause, 'that there is one whom he wishes to ask, but cannot, because of his poverty?'

'Just that, Miss Agatha, but you will surely have guessed it without my telling you.'

'How could I guess it?' I asked. 'I have spoken very little with him, after all. I am very sorry.'

'You have a good heart, dearie, and will think kindly of him sometimes?' said Mary with a very wistful look up in my face, 'and if ever the chance should come, you would be kind to my bairn?'

'If I ever have the power to help him, I will gladly do it, but I am afraid it is not likely,' I answered.

'We cannot tell—we cannot tell!' said Mary, little dreaming of the power her words would have.

CHAPTER IV.

A thick, murky November fog hung heavy in the raw, cold air, hiding the tall old houses opposite and the bare, straggling trees of Preston Square, and making the thought of bright, sunny, sea-girt Mull a bitter sweet remembrance to me as I sat curled up on the hearthrug in the dingy drawing-room, before the cheery fire which had been lit in deference to the expected visitor.

I was alone with my thoughts, for my step-mother and Isabella, after a long and unnecessary dissertation on the woeful state of our finances, and many injunctions to prove my gratitude to them and my good sense generally, and accept at once the flattering and, as they hinted, quite unmerited offer about to be renewed to me, had gone out, and left me to receive and entertain Sir Robert Crawford alone.

All their persuasions had been unable to make me promise that my answer to him should be the one they wished, for I did not choose to confide in them the fact that my consent must depend entirely on Sir Robert's acceptance of the condition I had resolved to exact.

Now, as the time drew near to put my plan into execution my courage almost failed me, and doubts—which had been scarcely doubts before—grew stronger and more assertive.

What if I should be wrong after all, and all my suspicions unjust.

My face flushed hot and crimson at the thought and for a moment I almost resolved that my answer must be an uncompromising 'No' after all. A sense of relief and freedom came with the mere suggestion, but the thought of Currachmore, and of the happiness of two loving hearts that perhaps depended upon me, drove it back ruthlessly, and once more I tried to brace myself for an interview that I knew would require all my courage.

I got up from the rug, and was pacing up and down the room in a fever of expectation and dread, when Sir Robert Crawford was announced and came forward eagerly to greet me.

He was a slight man of medium height, and pale rather weak looking face, with no touch of resemblance to his Scottish cousin, indeed no greater contrast could be imagined than these two men, sons of sisters though they were, and a feeling of dislike began to take the place in my heart of what had hitherto been only passive indifference for the man before me.

I had not seen Sir Robert since our return from Mull, for I think he knew that the less frequently we met the better I was disposed toward him.

A slight suggestion of nervousness in his manner seemed to put me a little more at my ease, as I signed to him to take a chair and, going over to the fire-place, I took my stand by the mantle shelf.

'It is very nice to know that your at home again,' began Sir Robert, awkwardly. 'I hope you are pleased to come back as

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