

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XX.

CHASING A THUNDERSTORM.

"All on board, then—all on board!" the summons comes ringing through the wonder-land of dreams. And then, amid the general hurry and scurry throughout the house, certain half-bewildered people turn first of all to the windows of their rooms: a welcome sight! The glory of the summer dawn is shining over the mountains; the *White Dove*, with nearly all her sail set, is swinging there at her moorings; best of all, a strong breeze—apparently fresh from the north-east—is ruffling the dark blue seas and driving a line of white surf on the further shores. The news comes that Master Fred, by darting about in the dingy since ever daylight began, has got the very last basket on board: the red caps are even now bringing the gig in to the landing slip; John of Skye is all impatience to take advantage of the favourable wind. There is but little time lost: the happy go-lucky procession—*dona feracitas*—set out for the beach. And if the Laird is pleased to find his nephew apparently falling into his scheme with a good grace; and if the nephew thinks he is very lucky to get so easily out of an awkward predicament: and if Mary Avon—unconscious of these sacred designs—is full of an eager delight at the prospect of being allowed to set to work again—may not all this account for a certain indecorous gaiety that startles the silence of the summer morning? Or is it that mythical hero Homesh who is responsible for this laughter? We hear the Laird chuckling; we notice the facetious wrinkles about his eyes; we make sure it must be Homesh. Then the final consignment of books, shawls, gun-cases, and what-not is tossed into the gig; and away we go, with the measured dash of the oars.

And what does the bearded John of Skye think of the new hand we have brought him? Has he his own suspicions? Is his friend and sworn ally, Dr. Sutherland, to be betrayed and supplanted in his absence?

"Good-morning, sir," he says, obediently, at the gangway; and the quick Celtic eyes glance at Howard Smith from top to toe.

"Good-morning, captain," the young man says, lightly; and he springs too quickly up the steps, making a little bit of a stumble. This is not an auspicious omen.

Then on deck: the handsome figure and pleasant manner of this young man ought surely to prepossess people in his favour. What if his tightly-fitting garments and his patent leather boots and white gaiters are not an orthodox yachting rig? John of Skye would not judge of a man by his costume. And if he does not seem quite at home—in this first look round—every one is not so familiar with boating life as Dr. Sutherland. It is true, an umbrella used as a walking-stick looks strange on board a yacht; and he need not have put it on the curved top of the companion, for it immediately rolls over into the scuppers. Nor does he seem to see the wickedness of placing a heavy bundle of canvases on the raised skylight of the ladies' cabin; does he want to start the glass? Dr. Sutherland, now, would have given the men a hand in hauling up the gig. Dr. Sutherland would not have been in the way of the tiller, as the yacht is released from her moorings.

Unaware of this rapid criticism, and unconcerned by all the bustle going on around, our new friend is carelessly and cheerfully chatting with his hostess; admiring the yacht; praising the sailing in such weather. He does not share in the profound curiosity of his uncle about the various duties of the men. When John of Skye, wishing to leave the tiller for a minute, to overhaul the lee tackle, turns naturally to Mary Avon, who is standing by him, and says with a grin of apology, "If ye please, mem," the young man betrays but little surprise that this young lady should be entrusted with the command of the vessel.

"What!" he says, with a pleasant smile—they seem on very friendly terms already—"can you steer, Miss Avon? Mind you don't run us against any rocks."

Miss Avon has her eye on the mainsail. She answers, with a business-like air—

"Oh, there is no fear of that. What I have to mind, with this wind, is not to let her gibe, or I should get into di-grace."

"Then I hope you won't let her gibe, whatever that is," said he, with a laugh.

Never was any setting-out more auspicious. We seemed to have bade farewell to those perpetual calms. Early as it was in the morning, there was no still, dream-like haze about the mountains; there was a clear greenish-yellow where the sunlight struck them; the great slopes were dappled with the shadows of purple-brown; further away the tall peaks were of a decided blue. And then the windy, fresh, brisk morning; the *White Dove* running races

with the driven seas; the white foam flying from her sides. John of Skye seemed to have no fear of this gentle skipper. He remained forward, superintending the setting of the top-sail; the *White Dove* was to "have it" while the fresh breeze continued to blow.

And still the squally north-easter bears her bravely onward, the puffs darkening the water as they pass us and strike the rushing seas. Is that a shadow of Colonsay on the far southern horizon? The tight-house people have gone to bed, there is not a single figure along the yellow-white walls. Look at the clouds of gulls on the rocks, resting after their morning meal. By this time the deer have retreated into the high slopes above Craignure; there is a white foam breaking along the bay of Innismore. And still the *White Dove* spins along, with foam-diamonds glittering in the sunlight at her bows; and we hear the calling of the sea-swallows, and the throbbing of a steamer somewhere in among the shadows of Loch Aline. Surely now we are out of the reign of calms; the great boom strains at the sheers; there is a whirl of blue waters; the *White Dove* has spread her wings at last.

"Ay, ay," says John of Skye, who has relieved Miss Avon at the tiller; "it is a great peety."

"Why, John?" says she, with some surprise; "is he vexed that we should be sailing well on this fine sailing day?"

"It is a great peety that Mr. Sutherland's not here," said John, "and he was know so much about a yacht, and day after day not a breeze at ahl. There is not many gentlemen will know so much about a yacht as Mr. Sutherland."

Miss Avon did not answer, though her face seemed conscious in its colour. She was deeply engaged in a novel.

"Oh, that is the Mr. Sutherland who has been with you," said Howard Smith to his hostess, in a cheerful way. "A doctor, I think you said?"

At this Miss Avon looked up quickly from her book.

"I should have thought," said she with a certain dignity of manner, "that most people had heard of Dr. Sutherland."

"Oh, yes, no doubt," said he, in the most good-natured fashion. "I know about him myself—it must be the same man. A nephew of Lord Foyers, isn't he? I met some friends of his at a house last winter; they had his book with them—the book about tiger-hunting in Nepal, don't you know?—very interesting indeed it was, uncommonly interesting. I read it through one night when everybody else was in bed."

"Why, that is Captain Sutherland's book," said his hostess, with just a trace of annoyance. "They are not even related. How can you imagine that Angus Sutherland would write a book about tiger-hunting—he is one of the most distinguished men of science in England."

"Oh, indeed," says the young man, with the most imperturbable good humour. "Oh, yes, I am sure I have heard of him—the Geographical Society, or something else like that; really those evenings are most amusing. The women are awfully bored, and yet they do keep their eyes open somehow. But about those Indian fellows; it was only last winter that I heard how the—manages to make those enormous bags, all to his own gun, that you see in the papers. Haven't you noticed them?"

Well, some of us had been struck with amazement by the reports of the enormous slaughter committed by a certain Indian prince; and had wondered at one of the gentle natives of the East taking so thoroughly and successfully to our robust English sports.

"Why," said this young man, "he has every covert laid out with netting, in small squares like a dice-board; and when he has done blazing away in the air, the under-keepers come and catch every pheasant, hare, and rabbit that has run into the netting, and kill them, and put them down to his bag. Ingenious, isn't it? But I'll tell you what I have seen myself. I have seen Lord Justice—deliberately walk down a line of netting and shoot every pheasant and rabbit that had got entangled. 'Safer not to let them get away,' he says. And when his host came up he said, 'Very good shooting; capital. I have got four pheasants and seven rabbits there; I suppose the beaters will pick them up.'"

And so the Youth, as we had got to call him, rattled on, relating his personal experiences, and telling such stories as occurred to him. There was a good sprinkling of well-known names in this desultory talk; how could Miss Avon fail to be interested, even if the subject-matter was chiefly composed of pheasant-shooting, private theatricals, billiard matches on wet days, and the other amusements of country life?

The Laird, when he did turn aside from the

huge volume of *Municipal London*—which he had brought with him for purpose of edification—must have seen and approved. If the young man's attentions to Mary Avon were of a distinctly friendly sort, if they were characterized by an obvious frankness, if they were quite as much at the disposal of Mr. Smith's hostess, what more could be expected? Rome was not built in a day. Meanwhile Miss Avon seemed very well pleased with her new companion.

And if it may have occurred to one or other of us that Howard Smith's talking, however pleasant and good-natured and bright, was on a somewhat lower level than that of another of our friends, what then? Was it not better fitted for idle sailing among summer seas? Now, indeed, our good friend the Laird had no need to fear being startled by the sudden propounding of conundrums.

He was startled by something else. Coming up from luncheon, we found that an extraordinary darkness prevailed in the western heavens—a strange bronze-purple gloom that seemed to contain within it the promise of a hundred thunderstorms. And as this fair wind had now brought us within sight of the open Atlantic, the question was whether we should make for Skye or run right under this lurid mass of cloud that appeared to lie all along the western shores of Mull. Unanimously the vote was for the latter course. Had not Angus Sutherland been anxious all along to witness a thunderstorm at sea? Might it not be of inestimable value to Miss Avon? John of Skye, not understanding these reasons, pointed out that the wind had backed somewhat to the north, and that Mull would give us surer shelter than Skye for the night. And so we bore away past Quinish, the brisk breeze sending the *White Dove* along in capital style; past the mouth of Loch Cuan; past the wild Cailleach Point; past the broad Calgary Bay; and past the long headland of Ru Treshanish. It was a strange afternoon. The sun was hidden; but in the south and west there was a wan, clear, silver glow on the sea; and in this white light the islands of Lunga, and Fladda, and Staffa, and the Dutchman were of a sombre purple. Darker still were the islands lying towards the land—Cometra, and Ulva, and Inch Kenneth; while the great rampart of cliff from Loch-na-Keal to Loch Scridain was so wrapped in gloom that momentarily we watched for the first quivering flash of the lightning. Then the wind died away. The sea grew calm. On the glassy gray surface the first drops of the rain fell—striking black, and then widening out in small circles. We were glad of the cool rain, but the whispering of it sounded strangely in the silence.

Then, as we are still watching for the first silver-blue flash of the lightning, behold! the mighty black wall of the Bourq and Gribun cliffs slowly, mysteriously disappears; and there is only before us a vague mist of gray. Colonsay is gone; Inch Kenneth is gone; no longer can we make out the dark rocks of Erisgair. And then the whispering of the sea increases; there is a deeper gloom overhead; the rain-king is upon us. There is a hasty retreat downstairs; the hatches are shoved over; after dinner we shall see what this strange evening portends.

"I hope we shall get into the Sound of Ulva before dark," says Miss Avon.

"I wish Angus was on board. It is a shame he should be elated out of his thunderstorm. But we shall have the equinoctials for him, at all events," says Queen Titania—just as if she had a series of squalls and tempests bottled, labeled, and put on a shelf.

When we get on deck again we find that the evening, but not the *White Dove*, has advanced. There is no wind; there is no rain; around us there is the silent, glassy, lilac-gray sea, which, far away in the west, has one or two gleams of a dull bronze on it, as if some afterglow were struggling through the clouds at the horizon. Along the Gribun cliffs, and over the islands, the gloom has surely increased; it were better if we were in some shelter for this night.

Then a noise is heard that seems to impose a sudden silence—thunder, low, distant and rumbling. But there is no splendid gleam through the gathering gloom of the night; the Gribun cliffs have not spoken yet.

John of Skye has carelessly seated himself on one of the deck-stools; his arm hangs idly on the tiller; we guess, rather than hear, that he is regaling himself with the sad, monotonous "Farewell to Foinery." He has got on his black oilskins, though there is not a drop of rain.

By and by, however, he jumps to his feet, and appears to listen intently.

"Ay, do you hear it?" he says, with a short laugh. "And it is off the land it is coming!"

He calls aloud—

"Look out, boys! it is a squall coming over, and we'll hev the topsail down whatever."

Then we hear the roaring in the dark; and presently the headsails are violently shaken, and the great boom swings over as John puts the helm up to get way on her. The next instant we are racing in for the land, as if we mean to challenge the heavy squall that is tearing across from the unseen Gribun cliffs. And now the rain-clouds break in deluges; the men in their black oilskins are staggering this way and that along the slippery decks; the *White Dove* is wrestling with the sudden storm; another low murmur of thunder comes booming through the darkness. What is that solitary light far in there towards the land?—dare any steamer venture so near the shore on such a

night! And we, too; would it not be safer for us to turn and run out to sea rather than beat against a squall into the narrow and shallow channels of Ulva's Sound? But John of Skye is not afraid. The wind and sea cannot drown his strident voice; the rain cannot blind the trained eyes; the men on the look-out—when the bow of the boat springs high on a wave, we can see the black figures against the sombre sky—know the channels too; we are not afraid to make for Ulva's Sound.

There is a wild cry from one of the women; she has caught sight, through the gloom, of white foam dashing on the rocks.

"It is all right, mem!" John calls aloud, with a laugh; but all the same the order is shouted, "Ready, about!"—"Ready, about!" is the call coming back to us from the darkness. "Bout ship!" and then away she sheers from that ugly coast.

We were after all cheated of our thunderstorm, but it was a wild and a wet night nevertheless. Taking in the mizzen was no joke amid this fury of wind and rain, but that and the hauling up of the main-tack lessened the pressure on her. John of Skye was in high spirits. He was proud of his knowledge of the dangerous coast; where less familiar eyes saw only vague black masses looming out of the darkness he recognized every rock and headland.

"No, no, mem," he was calling out in friendly tones; "we not hef to run out to sea at ahl. We will get into the Sound of Ulva lery well; and there will not be any better anchorage as the Sound of Ulva, when you are acquaint. But a stranger—I not ask a stranger to go into the Sound of Ulva on so dark a night."

"What is this we hear!"—"Down fore-stil, boys!"—and there is a rattle on the decks. The head of the yacht seems to sway round; there is a loud flapping of sails. "Down chub!"—and there are black figures struggling up there at the bowsprit; but vaguely seen against the blackness of the sky and the sea. Then, in a second or two, there is a fiercer rattle than ever; the anchor is away with a roar. Some further chain is paid out; then a strange silence ensues; we are anchored in Ulva's Sound.

Come down into the cabin, then, you woman-folk, and dry your streaming faces, and arrange your disheveled hair. Is not this a wondrous stillness and silence after the whirl and roar of the storm outside! But then you must know that the waters are smooth in here; and the winds become gentle—as gentle as the name of the island that is close to us now in the dark. It is a green-shored island. The sailors call it *Chal-a-ra*.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHASING SEALS.

Next morning found the Laird in a most excellent humour. All was going well. Though nothing had been said or promised by the Youth, was not his coming away with us into these remote solitudes—to say nothing of the very pleasant manner in which he sought to entertain Miss Mary Avon—sufficient evidence that he had at least no great repugnance to his uncle's scheme! The Laird was disposed to chuckle privately over the anxiety that Mary displayed about her work. The poor young thing! she did not understand what higher powers were ordering her future for her.

"Let her work on," the Laird said, in great confidence, to his hostess, and there was a fine secret humour in his eyes. "Ay, ay, let her work on; hard work never harmed anybody. And if she brings her bit maul to the marriage—ye would call it her dowry in the south—in the shape of a bundle of pictures—just as a young Scotch lass brings a chest of drawers or a set of napery—she will not be empty-handed. She can hang them up herself at Denny-mains."

"You are looking too far ahead, sir," says Queen T., with a quiet smile.

"May be—may be," says the Laird, rubbing his hands with a certain proud satisfaction. "We'll see who's right—we will see who is right, ma'am."

Then, at breakfast, he was merry, complaisant, philosophical in turns. He told us that the last vidimus of the affairs of the Barch of Strathgovan was most satisfactory: assets about 35,000*l.*; liabilities not over 20,000*l.*; there was thus an estimated surplus of no less than 15,000*l.* Why, then, he asked, should certain poor creatures on the Finance Committee make such a work about the merest trifles? Life was not given to man that he should worry himself into a rage about a penny farthing.

"There is a great dale of right down common sense, ma'am," said he, "in that verse that was written by my countryman, William Dunbar—

Be merry, man, and tak not sair in mind
The wavering of this cretched world of sorrow;
To God be humble, to thy friend be kind,
And with thy neighbours glady lend and borrow;
His chance to-night, it may be thine to-morrow;
Be blythe in heart for any adventure,
For oft with wise men it has been said afore,
Without Gladness availeth no Treasure."

But we, who were in the secret, knew that this quotation had nothing in the world to do with the Finance Committee of Strathgovan. The Laird had been comforting himself with these lines. They were a sort of philosophico-poetical justification of himself to himself for his readiness to make these two young people happy by giving up to them Denny-mains.

And no doubt he was still chuckling over the