

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XLIV.

"YE ARE WELCOME, GLENNOGIE!"

When, after nearly three months of glowing summer weather, the heavens begin to look as if they meditated revenge; when, in a dead calm, a darkening gloom appears behind the further hills, and slight puffs of wind come down vertically, spreading themselves out on the glassy water; when the air is sultry, and an occasional low rumble is heard, and the sun looks white; then the reader of these pages may thank his stars that he is not in Loch Hourne. And yet it was not altogether our fault that we were nearly caught in this dangerous cup among the hills. We had lain in these silent and beautiful waters for two or three days, partly because of the exceeding loveliness of the place, partly because we had to allow Angus time to get up to Isle Ornsay, but chiefly because we had not the option of leaving. To get through the narrow and shallow channel by which we had entered we wanted both wind and tide in our favour; and there was scarcely a breath of air during the long, peaceful, shining days. At length, when our sovereign mistress made sure that the young doctor must be waiting for us at Isle Ornsay, she informed Captain John that he must get us out of this place somehow.

"Deed, I not sorry at all," said John of Skye, who had never ceased to represent to us that, in the event of bad weather coming on, we should find ourselves in the lion's jaws.

Well, on the afternoon of the third day, it became very obvious that something serious was about to happen. Clouds began to bank up behind the mountains that overhung the upper reaches of the loch, and an intense purple gloom gradually spread along those sombre hills—all the more intense that the little island in front of us, crossing the loch, burned in the sunlight a vivid strip of green. Then little puffs of wind fell here and there on the blue water, and broadened out in a silvery gray. We noticed that all the men were on deck.

As the strange darkness of the loch increased, as these vast mountains overhanging the inner cup of the loch grew more and more awful in the gloom, we began to understand why the Celtic imagination had called this place the Lake of Hell. Captain John kept walking up and down somewhat anxiously, and occasionally looking at his watch. The question was whether we should get enough wind to take us through the Narrows before the tide turned. In the meantime mainsail and jib were set, and the anchor hove short.

At last the welcome flapping and creaking and rattling of blocks! What although this brisk breeze came dead in our teeth? John of Skye, as he called all hands to the windlass, gave us to understand that he would rather beat through the neck of a bottle than lie in Loch Hourne that night.

And it was an exciting piece of business when we got further down the loch, and approached this narrow passage. On the one side, sharp and sheer rocks; on the other, shallow banks that shone through the water; behind us, the awful gloom of gathering thunder; ahead of us, a breeze that came tearing down from the hills in the most puzzling and varying squalls. With a steady wind it would have been bad enough to beat through those narrows; but this wind kept shifting about anyhow. Sharp was the word indeed. It was a question of seconds as we sheered away from the rocks on one side, or from the shoals on the other. And then, amidst it all, a sudden cry from the women:

"John! John!"

John of Skye knew his business too well to attend to the squealing of women.

"Ready about!" he roars; and all hands are at the sheets, and even Master Fred is leaning over the bows, to watch the shallowness of the water.

"John! John!" the women cry.

"Haul up the main tack, Hector! Ay, that'll do. Ready about, boys!"

But this starboard tack is a little bit longer, and John manages to cast an impatient glance behind him. The sailor's eye in an instant detects that distant object. What is it? Why, surely some one in the stern of a rowing-boat, standing up and violently waving a white handkerchief, and two men pulling like mad creatures.

"John! John! Don't you see it is Angus Sutherland?" cries the older woman, pitifully.

By this time we are going bang on to a sand-bank; and the men, standing by the sheets, are amazed that the skipper does not put his helm down. Instead of that—and all this happens in an instant—he eases the helm up, the bows of the yacht fall away from the wind, and just clear the bank. Hector of Moldart jumps to the main-sheet and slacks it out, and then, behold! the *White Dove* is running free, and there is a sudden silence on board.

"Why, he must have come over from the Caledonian Canal!" says Queen Titania, in great excitement. "Oh, how glad I am!"

But John of Skye takes advantage of this breathing space to have another glance at his watch.

"We'll maybe beat this yet," says he, confidently.

And who is this who comes joyously clambering up, and hauls his portmanteau after him, and throws a couple of half-crowns into the bottom of the black boat?

"Oh, Angus," his hostess cries to him, "you will shake hands with us all afterward. We are in a dreadful strait. Never mind us—help John if you can."

Meanwhile Captain John has again put the nose of the *White Dove* at these perilous narrows; and the young doctor—perhaps glad enough to escape embarrassment among all this clamor—has thrown his coat off to help; and the men have got plenty of anchor chain on deck, to let go the anchor if necessary; and then again begins the manoeuvring between the shallows and the rocks. What is this new sense of completeness—of added life—of briskness and gladness? Why do the men seem more alert? and why this clearness in Captain John's shouted commands? The women are no longer afraid of either banks or shoals; they rather enjoy the danger; when John seems determined to run the yacht through a mass of conglomerate they know that with the precision of clock-work she will be off on the other tack; and they are laughing at these narrow escapes. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that only one of them laughs. Mary Avon is somewhat silent, and she holds her friend's hand tight.

Tide or no tide, we got through the narrow channel at last; and every one breathes more freely when we are in the open. But we are still far from being out of Loch Hourne; and now the mountains in the south, too—one of them apparently an extinct volcano—have grown black as thunder; and the wind that comes down from them in jerks and squalls threatens to plunge our bulwarks under water. How the *White Dove* flies away from this gathering gloom! Once or twice we hear behind us a roar, and turning we can see a specially heavy squall tearing across the loch; but here with us the wind continues to keep a little more steady, and we go bowling along at a welcome pace. Angus Sutherland comes aft, puts on his coat, and makes his formal entry into our society.

"You have just got out in time," says he, laughing somewhat nervously, to his hostess. "There will be a wild night in Loch Hourne to-night."

"And the beautiful calm we have had in there!" she says. "We were beginning to think that Loch Hourne was fairy-land."

"Look!" he said.

And indeed the spectacle behind us was of a nature to make us thankful that we had slipped through the lion's jaws. The waters of the loch were being torn into spendrift by the squalls, and the black clouds overhead were being dragged into shreds as if by invisible hands, and in the hollows below appeared a darkness as if night had come on prematurely. And still the *White Dove* flew and flew, as if she knew of the danger behind her; and by-and-by we were plunging and racing across the Sound of Sleat. We had seen the last of Loch Hourne.

The clear golden ray of Isle Ornsay light-house was shining through the dusk as we made for the sheltered harbour. We had run the dozen miles or so in a little over the hour, and now dinner-time had arrived, and we were not sorry to be in comparatively smooth water. The men went ashore with some telegram—the sending off of which was the main object of our running in here; and then Master Fred's bell summoned us below from the wild and windy night.

How rich and warm and cheerful was this friendly glow of the candles, and how compact the table seemed now, with the vacant space filled at last! And every one appeared to be talking hard, in order to show that Angus Sutherland's return was a quite ordinary and familiar thing; and the Laird was making his jokes; and the young doctor telling his hostess how he had been sending telegrams here and there, until he had learned of the *White Dove* having been seen going into Loch Hourne. Even Miss Avon, though she said but little, shared in this general excitement and pleasure. We could hear her soft laughter from time to time. But her eyes were kept away from the corner where Angus Sutherland sat.

"Well, you are lucky people," said he. "If you had missed getting out of that hole by half an hour, you might have been shut up in it a fortnight. I believe a regular gale from the south has begun."

"It is you who brought it then," said his

hostess. "You are the stormy petrel. And you did your best to make us miss the tide."

"I think we shall have some sailing now," said he, rubbing his hands in great delight—he pretends to be thinking only of the yacht. "John talks of going on to-night, so as to slip through the Kyle Rhea narrows with the first of the flood-tide in the morning."

"Going out to-night!" she exclaimed. "Is it you who have put that madness into his head? It must be pitch-dark already. And a gale blowing!"

"Oh no!" he said, laughing. "There is not much of a gale. And it cannot be very dark with the moon behind the clouds."

Here a noise above told us the men had come back from the small village. They brought a telegram, too; but it was of no consequence. Presently—in fact, as soon as he could—Angus left the dinner table and went on deck. He had scarcely dared to glance at the pale, sensitive face opposite him.

By-and-by Queen Titania said, solemnly:

"Listen!"

There was no doubt about it; the men were weighing anchor.

"That madman," said she, "has persuaded Captain John to go to sea again—at this time of the night!"

"It was Captain John's own wish. He wishes to catch the tide in the morning," observed Miss Avon, with her eyes cast down.

"That's right, my lass," said the Laird. "Speak up for them who are absent. But, indeed, I think I will go on deck myself now, to see what's going on."

We all went on deck, and there and then unanimously passed a vote of approval on Captain John's proceedings, for the wind had moderated very considerably; and there was a pale suffused telling of the moon being somewhere behind the fleecy clouds in the south-east. With much content we perceived that the *White Dove* was already moving out of the dark little harbour. We heard the rush of the sea outside without much concern.

It was a pleasant sailing night after all. When we had stolen by the glare of the solitary light-house, and got into the open, we found there was no very heavy sea running, while there was a steady, serviceable breeze from the south. There was moonlight abroad too, though the moon was most invisible behind the thin drifting clouds. The women, wrapped up, sat hand in hand, and chatted to each other; the doctor was at the tiller; the Laird was taking an occasional turn up and down, sometimes pausing to challenge general attention by some profound remark.

And very soon we began to perceive that Angus Sutherland had by some inscrutable means got into the Laird's good graces in a most marked degree. Denny-mains, on this particular night, as we sailed away northward, was quite complimentary about the march of modern science, and the service done to humanity by scientific men. He had not even an ill word for the *Vestiges of Creation*. He went the length of saying that he was not scholar enough to deny that there might be various ways of interpreting the terms of the Mosaic chronology; and expressed a great interest in the terribly remote people who must have lived in the lake dwellings.

"Oh, don't you believe that," said our steersman, good-naturedly. "The scientists are only humbugging the public about those lake dwellings. They were only the bath-houses and wash-houses of a comparatively modern and civilized race, just as you see them now on the Lake of a Thousand Islands, and at the mouth of the Amazon, and even on the Rhine. Surely you know the bath-houses built on piles on the Rhine?"

"Dear me!" said the Laird, "that is extremely interesting. It is a novel idea—a most novel view. But then the remains: what of the remains? The earthen cups and platters; they must have belonged to a very primitive race!"

"Not a bit," said the profound scientific authority, with a laugh. "They were the things the children amused themselves with when their nurses took them down there to be out of the heat and the dust. They were a very advanced race indeed. Even the children could make earthen cups and saucers, while the children nowadays can only make mud pies."

"Don't believe him, sir," his hostess called out; "he is only making a fool of us all."

"Ay, but there's something in it—there's something in it," said the Laird, seriously; and he took a step or two up and down the deck, in deep meditation. "There's something in it. It's plausible. If it is not sound, it is an argument. It would be a good stick to break over an ignorant man's head."

Suddenly the Laird began to laugh aloud.

"Bless me!" said he, "if I could only inveigle Johnny Guthrie into an argument about that! I would give it him! I would give it him!"

This was a shocking revelation. What had come over the Laird's conscience that he actually proposed to inveigle a poor man into a controversy, and then to hit him over the head with a sophistical argument? We could not have believed it. And here he was laughing and chuckling to himself over that shameful scheme.

Our attention, however, was at this moment suddenly drawn away from moral questions. The rapidly driving clouds just over the wild mountains of Loch Hourne parted, and the moon glared out on the tumbling waves. But what a

curious moon it was!—pale and watery, with a white halo around it, and with another faintly coloured halo outside that again whenever the slight and vapoury clouds crossed. John of Skye came aft.

"I not like the look of that moon," said John of Skye to the doctor, but in an undertone, so that the women should not hear.

"Nor I either," said the other, in an equally low voice. "Do you think we are going to have the equinoctials, John?"

"Oh no, not yet. It is not the time for the equinoctials yet."

And as we crept on through the night, now and again, from amid the wild and stormy clouds above Loch Hourne, the wan moon still shone out; and then we saw something of the silent shores we were passing, and of the awful mountains overhead, stretching far into the darkness of the skies. Then preparations were made for coming to anchor; and by-and-by the *White Dove* was brought round to the wind. We were in a bay—if bay it could be called—just south of Kyle Rhea narrows. There was nothing visible along the pale moon-lit shore.

"This is a very open place to anchor in, John," our young doctor ventured to remark.

"But it is a good holding ground, and we will be away early in the morning whatever."

And so, when the anchor was swung out, and quiet restored over the vessel, we proceeded to get below. There were a great many things to be handed down; and a careful search had to be made that nothing was forgotten—we did not want to find soaked shawls or books lying on the deck in the morning. But at length all this was settled too, and we were assembled once more in the saloon.

We were assembled—all but two.

"Where is Miss Mary?" said the Laird, cheerfully; he was always the first to miss his companion.

"Perhaps she is in her cabin," said his hostess, somewhat nervously.

"And your young doctor—why does he not come down and have his glass of toddy like a man?" said the Laird, getting his own tumbler. "The young men nowadays are just as frightened as children. What with their chemistry, and their tubes, and their percentages of alcohol; there was none of that nonsense when I was a young man. People took what they liked, so long as it agreed with them; and will anybody tell me there is any harm in a glass of good Scotch whisky?"

She does not answer; she looks somewhat pre-occupied and anxious.

"Ay, ay," continued the Laird, reaching over the sugar; "if people would only stop there, there is nothing in the world makes such an excellent night-cap as a single glass of good Scotch whisky. Now, ma'am, I will just beg you to try half a glass of my brewing."

She pays no attention to him. For, first of all, she now hears a light step on the companion-way, and then the door of the ladies' cabin is opened and shut again. Then a heavy step on the companion-way, and Dr. Sutherland comes into the saloon. There is a strange look on his face—not of dejection; but he tries to be very reticent and modest, and is inordinately eager in sending a knife to the Laird for the cutting of a lemon.

"Where is Mary, Angus?" said his hostess, looking at him.

"She has gone into your cabin," said he, looking up with a sort of wistful appeal in his eyes. As plainly as possible they said, "Won't you go to her?"

The unspoken request was instantly answered; she got up and quietly left the saloon.

"Come, lad," said the Laird. "Are ye afraid to try a glass of Scotch whisky? You chemical men know too much; it is not wholesome; and you a Scotchman too—take a glass, man!"

"Twelve, if you like," said the doctor, laughing; "but one will do for my purpose. I'm going to follow your example, sir. I am going to propose a toast. It is a good old custom."

This was a proposal after the Laird's own heart. He insisted on the women being summoned; and they came. He took no notice that Mary Avon was rose red, and downcast of face; and that the elder woman held her hand tightly, and had obviously been crying a little bit—not tears of sorrow. When they were seated, he handed each a glass. Then he called for silence, waiting to hear our doctor make a proper and courtly speech about his hostess, or about the *White Dove*, or John of Skye, or anything.

But what must have been the Laird's surprise when he found that it was his own health that was being proposed! And that not in the manner of the formal oratory that the Laird admired, but in a very simple and straightforward speech, that had just a touch of personal and earnest feeling in it. For the young doctor spoke of the long days and nights we had spent together, far away from human ken, and how intimately associated people became on board ship, and how thoroughly one could learn to know and love a particular character through being brought into such close relationship. And he said that friendships thus formed in a week or a month might last for a lifetime. And he could not say much, before the very face of the Laird, about all those qualities which had gained for him something more than our esteem—qualities especially valuable on board ship—good-humor, patience, courtesy, light-heartedness—

"Bless me!" cried the Laird, interrupting the speaker, in defiance of all the laws that govern public oratory. "I mean stop this—I