

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XXII.

"UNCERTAIN, COY, AND HARD TO PLEASE."

There are two people walking up and down the deck this beautiful morning; the lazy ones are still below, dawdling over breakfast. And now young Smith, though he is not much more than an acquaintance, talks quite confidentially to his hostess. She has his secret; he looks to her for aid. And when they do have a quiet moment like this together there is usually but one person of whom they speak.

"I must say she has an extraordinary spirit," he observes, with some decision. "Why, I believe she is rather pleased than otherwise to have lost that money. She is not a bit afraid of going up to London to support herself by her work. It seems to amuse her on the whole."

"Mary has plenty of courage," says the other quietly.

"I don't wonder at my uncle being so fond of her; he likes her independent ways and her good humour. I shouldn't be surprised if he were to adopt her as his daughter, and cut me out. There would be some sense in that."

"I am glad you take it so coolly," says our governor-general, in a matter-of-fact way that rather startles him. "More unlikely things have happened."

But he recovers himself directly.

"No, no," says he, laughing. "There is one objection. She could not sit on any of the parochial Boards of Strathgovan. Now I know my uncle looks forward to putting me on the Police Committee and the Lighting Committee and no end of other Committees. By the way, she might go on the School Board. Do they have women on the School Boards in Scotland?"

On this point his hostess was no better informed than himself.

"Well," said he, after a bit, "I wouldn't call her pretty, you know; but she has a singularly interesting face."

"Oh, do you think so?" says the other, quite innocently.

"I do, indeed," answers the ingenuous youth. "And the more you see of her the more interesting it becomes. You seem to get so well acquainted with her somehow; and—and you have a sort of feeling that her presence is sort of necessary."

This was somewhat vague; but he made another wild effort to express himself.

"What I mean is—that that suppose she were to leave the yacht, wouldn't the saloon look quite different? And wouldn't the sailing be quite different? You would know there was something wanting."

"I should, indeed," is the emphatic reply.

"I never knew any one," says the Youth, warning to his work of thorough explanation, "about whose presence you seem so conscious—even when she isn't here—I don't mean that exactly—I mean that at this moment now, you know she is on board the yacht—and it would be quite different if she were not. I suppose most people wouldn't call her pretty. There is nothing of the Book of Beauty about her. But I call it a most interesting face. And she has fine eyes. Anybody must admit that. They have a beautiful, soft expression; and they can laugh even when she is quite silent."

"My dear Mr. Smith," says his hostess, suddenly stopping short, and with a kind of serious smile on her face, "let me talk frankly to you. You acted very sensibly, I think, in coming with us to honour your uncle. He will come to see that this scheme of his is impracticable; and in the meantime, if you don't mind the discomfort of it, you have a holiday. That is all quite well. But pray don't think it necessary that you should argue yourself into falling in love with Mary. I am not in her confidence on such a delicate matter; but one has eyes; and I think I might almost safely say to you that, even if you persuaded yourself that Mary would make an excellent wife—and be presentable to your friends—I say even if you succeeded in persuading yourself I am afraid you would only have thrown that labour away. Please don't try to convince yourself that you ought to fall in love with her."

This was plain speaking. But then our admiral-in-chief was very quickly sensitive where Mary Avon was concerned; and perhaps she did not quite like her friend being spoken of as though she were a pill that had to be swallowed. Of course the Youth instantly disclaimed any intention of that kind. He had a very sincere regard for the girl, so far as he had seen her; he was not persuading himself; he was only saying how much she improved when you got better acquainted with her.

"And if," said he, with just a touch of dignity, "if Miss Avon is—is—engaged—"

"Oh, I did not say that," his hostess quickly interposed. "Oh, certainly not. It was only a guess on my part—"

"—or likely to be engaged," he continued,

with something of the same reserve, "I am sure I am very glad for her sake; and whoever marries her ought to have a cheerful home and a pleasant companion."

This was a generous sentiment; but there was not much of a "wish-you-may-be-happy" air about the young man. Moreover, where was the relief he ought to have experienced on hearing that there was an obstacle—or likelihood of an obstacle—to the execution of his uncle's scheme which would absolve him from responsibility altogether?

However, the subject could not be continued just then; for at this moment a tightly-brushed small head, and a narrow-brimmed felt hat, and a shapely neck surrounded by an upstanding collar and a bit of ribbon of navy-blue, appeared at the top of the companion, and Mary Avon, looking up with her black eyes full of a cheerful friendliness, said—

"Well, John, are you ready to start yet?"

And the great, brown-bearded John of Skye, looking down at this small Jack-in-the-box with a smile of welcome on his face, said—

"Oh, yes, mem, when the breakfast is over."

"Do you think it is blowing outside, then?"

"Oh, no, mem, but there is a good breeze; and may be there will be a bit of a rowl from the Atlantic. Will Mr. — himself be for going now?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," she says, with a fine assumption of authority. "We are quite ready when you are ready, John; Fred will have the things off the table in a couple of minutes."

"Very well, mem," says the obedient John of Skye, going forward to get the men up to the windlass.

Our young Doctor should have been there to see us getting under way. The Sound of Ulva is an excellent harbour and anchorage when you are once in it; but getting out of it, unless with both wind and tide in your favour, is very like trying to manoeuvre a man-of-war in a tea-cup. But we had long ago come to the conclusion that John of Skye could sail the *White Dove* through a gas-pipe, with half a gale dead in his teeth; and the manner in which he got us out of this narrow and tortuous channel fully justified our confidence.

"Very prettily done, Captain John!" said the Laird—who was beginning to give himself airs on nautical matters—when we had got out into the open.

And here, as we soon discovered, was the brisk fresh breeze that John of Skye had predicted; and the running swell, too, that came sweeping in to the mouth of Loch-na-Keal. Black indeed looked that far-reaching loch on this breezy, changeful morning—as dark as it was when the chief of Ulva's Isle came down to the shore with his runaway bride; and all along Ben-Mor and over the Griban cliffs hung heavy masses of cloud, dark and threatening as if with thunder. But far away in the south there was a more cheerful outlook; the windy sea shimmering in light; some gleams of blue in the sky; we knew that the sunshine must be shining on the green clover and beautiful sands of Iona. The *White Dove* seemed to understand what was required of her. Her head was set for the gleaming south; her white wings outspread; as she sprang to meet those rushing seas we knew we were escaping from the thunder darkness that lay over Loch-na-Keal.

And Ulva: had we known that we were now leaving Ulva behind us for the last time, should we not have taken another look back, even though it now lay under a strange and mysterious gloom? Perhaps not. We had grown to love the island in other days. And when one shuts one's eyes in winter, it is not to see an Ulva of desolate rocks and leaden waves; it is a fair and shining Ulva, with blue seas breaking whitely along its shores; and magical still channels, with mermaid's halls of seaweed; and an abundant, interesting life—all manner of sea-birds, black rabbits running among the rocks, seals swimming in the silent bays. Then the patch of civilization under shelter of the hills; the yellow corn-fields; the dots of human creatures and the red and tawny-gray cattle visible afar in the meadow; the solitary house; the soft foliage of trees and bushes; the wild-flowers along the cliffs. That is the green-shored island; that is the *Ool-a-va* of the sailors; we know it only in sunlight and among blue summer seas; it shines for us forever!

The people who go yachting are a fickle folk. The scene changes—and their interests change—very few minutes. Now it is the swooping down of a solan; again it is the appearance of another island far away; presently it is a shout of laughter forward, as some unlucky wight gets drowned in a shower of sea-spray; anything catches their attention for the moment. And so the *White Dove* swings along; and the sea gets leavier and heavier; and we watch the breakers springing high over the black rocks of Colonsay. It is the Laird who is

now instructing our new guest; pointing out to him, as they come in view, Staffa, the Dutchman, Fladda, and Lunga, and Cairnaburg. Three is invisible at the horizon; there is too wild a whirl of wind and water.

The gloom behind us increases; we know not what is about to happen to our beloved but now distant Ulva—what sudden rumble of thunder is about to startle the silence of the dark Loch-na-Keal. But ahead of us the south is still shining clear; blow, winds, that we may gain the quiet shelter of Polteriv before the evening falls! And is it not full moon to-night?—to-night our new guest may see the yellow moon shining on the still waters of Iona Sound.

But the humiliating truth must be told. The heavy sea has been trying to one unaccustomed to life on board. Howard Smith, though answering questions well enough, and even joining voluntarily in conversation occasionally, wears a preoccupied air. He does not take much interest in the caves of Bourg. The bright look has gone from his face.

His gentle hostess—who has herself had moments of gloom on the bosom of the deep—recognizes these signs instantly, and insists on immediate luncheon. There is a double reason for this haste. We can now run under the lee of the Erisegier rocks, where there will be less danger to Master Fred's plates and tumblers. So we are all bundled down into the saloon, the swell sensibly subsides as we get to leeward of Erisegier; there is a scramble of helping and handing; and another explosion in the galley tells us that Master Fred has not yet mastered the art of releasing effervescent fluids. Half a tumblerful of that liquid puts new life into our solemn friend. The colour returns to his face, and brightness to his eyes. He admits that he was beginning to long for a few minutes on firm land—but now—but now—he is even willing to join in an excursion that has been talked of to the far Dubhartach light-house.

"But we must really wait for Angus," our hostess says, "before going out there. He was always so anxious to go to Dubhartach."

"But surely you won't ask him to come away from his duties again?" Mary Avon puts in hastily. "You know he ought to go back to London at once."

"I know I have written him a letter," says the other demurely. "You can read it if you like, Mary. It is in pencil, for I was afraid of the ink-bottle going waltzing over the table."

Miss Avon would not read the letter. She said we must be past Erisegier by this time; and proposed we should go on deck. This we did; and the Youth was now so comfortable and assured in his mind that, by lying full length on the deck, close to the weather bulwarks, he managed to light a cigar. He smoked there in much content, almost safe from the spray.

Mary Avon was seated at the top of the companion, reading. Her hostess came and squeezed herself in beside her, and put her arm round her.

"Mary," said she, "why don't you want Angus Sutherland to come back to the yacht?"

"I?" said she, in great surprise—though she did not meet the look of the elder woman—"I—I—don't you see yourself that he ought to go back to London? How can he look after that magazine while he is away in the Highlands? And—and—he has so much to look forward to—so much to do—that you should not encourage him in making light of his work—"

"Making light of his work!" said the other.

"I am almost sure that you yourself told him that he deserved and required a long—a very long—holiday."

"You did, certainly."

"And didn't you?"

The young lady looked rather embarrassed.

"When you saw him," said she, with flushed cheeks, "so greatly enjoying the sailing—absorbed in it—and—and gaining health and strength, too—well, of course you naturally wished that he should come back and go away with you again. But it is different on reflection. You should not ask him."

"Why, what evil is likely to happen to him through taking another six weeks' holiday? Is he likely to fall out of the race of life because of a sail in the *White Dove*?" And doesn't he know his own business? He is not a child."

"He would do a great deal to please you."

"I want him to please himself," said the other; and she added, with a deadly frown gathering on her forehead, "and I won't have you, Miss Dignity, interfering with the pleasures of my guests. And there is to be no snubbing, and no grim looks, and no hints about work, and London, and other nonsense, when Angus Sutherland comes back to us. You shall stand by the gangway—do you hear?—and receive him with a smiling face; and if you are not particularly kind, and civil, and attentive to him, I'll have you lashed to the yard-arm and painted blue—keel-haul me if I don't."

Fairer and fairer grew the scene around us as the brave *White Dove* went breasting the heavy Atlantic rollers. Blue and white overhead; the hot sunlight doing its best to dry the dripping rocks. Iona shining there over the smoother waters of the Sound; the sea breaking white, and spouting up in columns, as it dashed against the pale red promontories of the Ross of Mull. But then this stiff breeze had backed to the west, and there was many a long tack to be got over before we got quit of the Atlantic swell and ran clear into the Sound. The evening was drawing on apace as we slowly and cautiously steered into the little creek of Polteriv. No sooner had the anchor rattled out than we heard the clear tinkling of Master Fred's bell; how on earth had he

managed to cook dinner amid all that diving and rolling and pitching?

And then, as we had hoped, it was a beautiful evening; and the long gig was got out, and shawls for the women-folk flung into the stern. The fishing did not claim our attention. Familiar as some of us were with the wonderful twilights of the north, which of us had ever seen anything more solemn, and still, and lovely than these colours of sea and shore? Half-past nine at night on the 8th of August, and still the west and north were flushed with a pale rose-red, behind the dark, rich, olive-green of the shadowed Iona. But what was that to the magic world that lay before us as we returned to the yacht? Now the moon had arisen, and it seemed to be of a clear, lustrous gold; and the cloudless heavens and the still sea were of a violet hue—not imaginatively, or relatively, but positively and literally violet. Then between the violet-coloured sky and the violet-coloured sea, a long line of rock, jet black as it appeared to us. That was all the picture; the yellow moon, the violet sky, the violet sea, the line of black rocks. No doubt it was the intensity of the shadows along this line of rock that gave that extraordinary luminousness to the still heavens and the still sea.

When we got back to the yacht a telegram awaited us. It had been sent to Bunnessan, the nearest telegraph station; but some kind friends there, recognizing the *White Dove* as she came along by Erisegier, and shrewdly concluding that we must pass the night at Polteriv, had been so kind as to forward it on to Fion-phort by a messenger.

"I thought so!" says Queen T. with a true delight in her face as she reads the telegram. "It is from Angus. He is coming on Thursday. We must go back to meet him at Ballahulish or Corpach."

Then the discourtesy of this remark struck her.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Smith," said she, instantly. "Of course I mean if it is quite agreeable to you. He does not expect us, you see; he would come on here—"

"I assure you I would as soon go to Ballahulish as anywhere else," says the Youth promptly. "It is quite the same to me—it is all new, you see, and all equally charming."

Mary Avon alone expressed no delight at this prospect of our going to Ballahulish to meet Angus Sutherland; she sat silent; her eyes were thoughtful and distant; it was not of anything around her that she was thinking.

The moon had got whiter now; the sea and the sky blue-black in place of that soft warm violet colour. We sat on deck till a late hour; the world was asleep around us; not a sound disturbed the absolute stillness of land and sea.

And where was the voice of our singing bird? Had the loss of a mere sum of money made her forget all about Mary Beaton, and Mary Seaton, and Mary Carmichael and me? Or was the midnight silence too much for her; and the thought of the dusky cathedral over there, with the grave-stones pale in the moonlight, and all around a whispering of the lonely sea? She had nothing to fear. She might have crossed over to Iona and might have walked all by herself through the ruins, and in calmness regarded the sculptured stones. The dead sleep sound.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SECRET SCHEMES.

The delight with which John of Skye heard that his friend Dr. Sutherland was coming back to the yacht, and that we were now setting out for Ballahulish or Corpach to meet him, found instant and practical expression on this fine, breezy, sunlit morning.

"Hector," says he, "we will put the gall topsail on her!"

What did he care though this squally breeze came blowing down the Sound in awkward gusts?

"It is a fine wind, mem," says he to the Admiral, as we slowly leave the green waters and the pink rocks of Polteriv, and get into the open and breezy channel. "Oh, we will make a good run the day. And I beg your pardon, mem, but it is a great pleasure to me that Mr. Sutherland himself is coming back to the yacht."

"He understands your clever sailing, John, is that it?"

"He knows more about a yat as any chentleman I will ever see, mem. And we will try to get a good breeze for him this time, mem—and not to have the calm weather."

This is not likely to be a day of calm weather, at all events. Tide and wind together take us away swiftly from the little harbour behind the granite rocks. And is Iona over there all asleep? or are there some friends in the small village watching the *White Dove* bearing away to the south? We wave our handkerchiefs on chance. We take a last look at the gabled ruins over the sea; at the green corn-fields; and the scattered houses; and the beaches of silver sand. Good-bye—good-bye! It is a last look for this summer at least; perhaps it is a last look forever. But Iona too—as well as Ulva—remains in the memory a vision of sunlight, and smooth seas, and summer days.

Harder and harder blows this fresh breeze from the north; and we are racing down the Sound with the driven waves. But for the rope round the tiller, Miss Avon, who is steering, would find it difficult to keep her feet; and her hair is blown all about her face. The salt water comes swishing down the scuppers; the churned foam goes hissing and boiling away from the sides of the vessel; the broad Atlantic