

THE REALITIES OF YACHT-RACING.

BY A LANDSMAN.

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It had always been my ambition to take part in a yacht-race. I had often felt my heart bound with excitement and enthusiasm at the sight of a snow-winged fleet flying before the breeze amid showers of glistening spray; and although I had never been on board a vessel of any kind except a Thames steamer and the *Calais-Douvres*, I was convinced that the deck of a smart yacht was the sphere whereon I should excel if I could only get an opportunity. I had an opportunity this summer, and I have changed my mind.

I don't know whether some remarks I let fall to my old friend Macstane, when he was spending a few days with us at Tooting, prompted the invitation or not; but my delight literally knew no bounds when he wrote asking me to join his yachting party on the Clyde to witness the regatta, in which his cutter the *Rosebud* was to make her first appearance as a racer. Of course I accepted the invitation. I positively jumped at it; and in spite of a good deal of covert sarcasm on the part of Mrs. Jones, I decided to make my debut as a yachtsman in proper style—blue serge coat, straw hat, and canvas shoes, as one sees the fellows got up on the pier at Dover.

'It's very absurd to go to such unnecessary expense,' said my wife, when I presented myself habited in nautical garb for her inspection the evening before I left home. 'It's simply ridiculous. A man of your figure too. I am really surprised at you.'

I didn't think that Mrs. Jones's reference to my size was in the best possible taste; but I passed it over. Between ourselves, I think she was annoyed at our friend's omission to include her in his invitation; but he always said that ladies was in the way on board a yacht during a race; and of course I agreed with him.

'I am sorry that Macstane didn't ask you, too, my dear,' I said, blandly ignoring her remark; but perhaps you would not have enjoyed the trip.

She had been studying my costume with a critical eye, and took up her needlework again, giving me a final dig as she transferred her attention to it. 'No; I don't care about the sea,' she said. 'I do hope you won't be sick.'

Sick! The idea of *mal-de-mer* as a possible result of bearing a hand on board a racing-yacht had never crossed my mind; it was so incongruous. To be sure, I had suffered agonies crossing the Channel, but that was a different thing altogether; everybody allows that passage to be the most trying known to travellers. But on board a ten-ton cutter in the Clyde! I laughed pleasantly at Mrs. Jones's forebodings, and said that I feared she did not know much about yachting.

'I dare say you will know more in a day or two, Algernon,' she said dryly. 'All that glitters isn't gold, you know.'

Mrs. Jones has a somewhat irritating habit of combining prophecy and proverb; but justice compels me to admit that she is very often right. I was foolish enough to tell her the details of a day's fishing I had with Bilston up in Yorkshire once, and she has never ceased reminding me how she warned me not to go. My troubles on that occasion have furnished her with texts for many a lecture, and now she seems to take a placid satisfaction in contemplating the discomforts which may attend my present expedition. It is not reassuring; and I go upstairs to change my clothes, harassed by unsailor-like doubts as to the unqualified pleasures of the prospective cruise.

Two days later I am standing on the *Rosebud*'s deck, enjoying the magnificent scenery of the Clyde at Wemyss Bay. It is a lovely morning, and there is enough wind to send the yacht quietly through the waves without making her lean over too much. Macstane, a very pleasant young fellow called Baynes, a weather-beaten old tar answering to the name of Sandy, and my humble self, compose the crew. I have helped them as much as I can in getting up the sails; but the number of ropes are so awfully confusing, that I contented myself with pulling and hauling just when I was told, so as to avoid getting into scrapes.

'We must get out the spinnaker, Sandy,' says Macstane, who is steering to the ancient mariner. 'Will you fellows give him a hand?' he adds addressing Baynes and me.

Of course I am delighted to assist, and should be even more so if I had the faintest notion what a spinnaker is. It's a sail of some kind, no doubt; but where it is to go I confess I am quite unable to see; however, I follow Baynes forward, and wait in readiness to act upon orders.

'Can you swim, Mr. Jones?' says Baynes in a half-whisper, as I help him to let down a thing he calls a boom.

'Not very well,' I reply, a little anxiously. 'Why?'

Mr. Baynes glances at Macstane to see that he isn't listening, and says very gravely: 'Macstane oughtn't to have brought you if you're not a good

swimmer; he'll cram on every inch of canvas, irrespective of the boat's ability to bear it, if he takes it into his head. He's a perfectly reckless man himself, you know.'

This is rather disquieting; the breeze is freshening already; and when we have succeeded in setting the spinnaker, the yacht heels over in a manner which is very alarming. I begin to wish that I hadn't come; but Macstane is smoking his pipe so coolly that I don't like to do more than hint at the very unnecessary danger we are incurring.

'Do you think she can carry so much quite safely? I ask with assumed carelessness.

'Carry it! My dear fellow, you don't know what the *Rosebud* can do if she tries. I've got a lovely flying jib to set next—a thundering big one. Wait till we get that up.'

Baynes, who is standing behind him, gives a perceptible start, and looks at me with an expression of undisguised horror. Really, I didn't think that Macstane would have been guilty of such foolhardiness, and I feel myself turning pale.

'Beginning to feel queer?' asks Baynes, looking at me as he lights a huge cigar and sits down at my side. 'We shall find it a good deal livelier down at Largs.'

I do not quite understand Mr. Baynes. I feel perfectly well, and he ought to know that my change of color is the echo of his own natural apprehensions. I suspect that he dreads giving offence to Macstane, who is very touchy, and the most obstinate man on earth. Perhaps it will be wisest for me to take my cue from him and say nothing about the sails; but I confess that I don't like the prospect before us at all.

We are tearing along through the water at an extraordinary pace, and if I could only be sure that Baynes's fears are unfounded, my highest ideal of yachting would be realised; but I cannot forget that we are in momentary peril of our lives. Presently, we sweep smoothly round a headland, and a sight bursts upon my view which reawakens my old enthusiasm. We are entering Largs Bay; the blue stretch of water is swarming with white-sailed yachts of every size, from the pyramids of canvas, which Baynes tells me are sixty tonners, to boats smaller than the *Rosebud*. They are dashing and flitting in all directions, wheeling round with the graceful ease of seabirds, threading their way amid the fleet like things of life. The strains of the band on board the flag-dressed steam-yacht which belongs to the Commodore add to my rising excitement. It is glorious; and if the wind would moderate a little, I would light a cigarette; but as Baynes foretold, it is 'livelier' here than at Wemyss Bay; and before long I began to remember that last trip I made across the channel.

Macstane gives Baynes charge of the tiller and hails a rowing-boat. He says he must go and pay his respects to the Commodore, and invites me to go with him. I should like to be presented to the great man, who seems to be a kind of yachting Admiral; but the boat is pitching so frightfully that I wouldn't attempt to get into her from the *Rosebud*'s deck for any consideration; so Macstane swings himself over the side and goes alone. I wish Mr. Baynes's tobacco was not so dreadfully strong; if he were not almost a stranger, I should ask him to stop smoking, for I'm certain it is the smell which is causing my otherwise unaccountable disinclination to move. The breeze, which is very unsteady, drops to the lightest breath by-and-by; and as soon as the yacht is on a decently even keel, I pull myself together and go forward to escape the smoke and have a chat with Sandy, who looks a very intelligent person.

'How long do you think it will take us to go round the course to-day, Sandy?' I asked with the air of a pupil addressing a professor.

'That,' says the ancient mariner thoughtfully, 'will depend on the wind.'

I ought to have known that, of course; but Sandy gives me the information in a tone that implies that he doesn't expect much common-sense from me; and I do not feel flattered.

'I suppose you know most of the yachts on the Clyde, Sandy?' I say presently with great respect.

'Ou ay, amais a'.

'Do you think, then, that the *Rosebud* has a chance of winning?'

Sandy gives me a look which says as plainly as speech, 'I never answer riddles,' as he replies: 'That will depend on what other boats are gun.'

I feel thoroughly snubbed this time. I have heard a great deal about Scotch caution, and perhaps I ought not to have expected him to commit himself to an opinion; but I do think that he might be a trifle less patronising in his manner. I make one more attempt to abstract information from him on a point which is fraught with anxious interest to me. 'Do you think,' I say very confidentially, 'that the yacht is at all likely to capsize with the amount of canvas she is carrying?'

Sandy glances upwards carelessly. 'She might,' he says, 'if it were blowing hard eneuch.'

I will not try to get anything more out of Sandy; he appears to be a very hard, unsympathetic person.

We have been gliding aimlessly about the bay, waiting for Macstane, who returns in half an hour and clammers on board in a state of raving frenzy. 'Such folly!' he exclaims as he resumes charge of the tiller and gesticulates with his right hand. 'We're to race in cruise trim! Spinnakers not allowed! Not even flying-jibs!'

Macstane's feelings have evidently overcome him: he began in a voice of thunder, and he speaks of the forbidden jibs in a wail of sorrow.

'I am so sorry to disappoint you, old man,' he says to me affectionately.

'Oh, don't mind it on my account,' I reply with great sincerity. 'I am not in the least disappointed, really.'

Macstane looks as if he didn't believe me, whereas, in fact, I am yearning to embrace the Commodore or whoever is responsible for the prohibition of spinnakers and flying-jibs. It has taken an immense weight off my mind; but Baynes's well-feigned expressions of regret warned me not to be too profuse in my assurances of contentment with the condition of affairs.

'What time does our race start?' I ask, when Macstane's growlings are beginning to subside.

'Half-past eleven,' he answers with a deep sigh.

'It's ten minutes after the hour now,' I say, looking at my watch. 'Perhaps we—that is, don't you think we ought to begin and take down the spinnaker? It's an awful pity,' I add with a tremendous effort.

'Take it in,' replies Macstane with gloomy resignation. 'I wish I could feel a little sorry for him, he does look so dejected; I can't manage that, but go forward with Baynes, trying to appear as sorrowful as he does, and help Sandy to stow away the sail and trice up the boom.'

There are seven other yachts in our race; and in spite of the crowding round what Sandy calls the 'boo-ey,' the *Rosebud* gets the best of the start, and passes the line (whatever that is) just as the gun is fired. The breeze has freshened considerably, and Macstane brightens up, whilst my spirits sink in proportion. I do hope I shan't be ill—it would look so foolish. By-and-by the wind drops again, and the boats lie idly in a clump, with flapping sails, while the owners shout greetings and chaff to each other. There appears to be a great lack of earnestness about yacht-racing. Our mainsail has been slackened out as far as it will go, and the boom waggles heavily over the water. Sandy and Baynes are lying flat on their backs enjoying the sunshine, and Macstane is nodding at the helm. 'It's a drifting-match,' he says sadly, 'a wretched drifting-match.' (Macstane seems very hard to please.)

'I wish I could be of some use,' I say eagerly. 'I really mean it, for this kind of thing is not my idea of racing at all.'

Macstane looks at the mainsail and then at me. 'You might sit on the boom,' he says at last.

I don't quite see what good I shall do by sitting on the boom, but I assent cheerfully, and take up my position under his directions. 'I'd like you to sit out,' he says, as far out as you can go, with your feet against the gun'le—it will hold the spar so much steadier. Can't you get out a little farther? Thanks; that's capital.'

If Macstane was given to practical joking, I should think that he was taking advantage of me. I am sitting gingerly on the round polished boom, with my toes against the edge of the yacht's gunwale. I am desperately uncomfortable; the slightest slip of hand or foot will result in my falling plump into the oily swell below. It isn't kind of Macstane to have asked me to do this; and I swear I won't attempt to get out an inch farther if he offers me a thousand pounds. I wonder how long he means to keep me here?

'Your weight is the thing,' he says with great cordiality. 'Baynes or Sandy would have been no use, they are so light. It's a pity your legs aren't a little longer; you could get out so much farther.'

For the first time in my life I thank my stars for a very short pair of legs; but I do not altogether appreciate Macstane's criticism of my personality. He speaks as though I was designed and sent to Scotland for no other purpose than to sit on the boom of the *Rosebud*. I can't take my eyes off the heaving water underneath, and a cold perspiration breaks out on my brow as I feel how dreadfully slippery the spar is.

'Does this do any good?' I ask Macstane after five minutes' silent agony.

'Not much,' he replies with brutal indifference. 'It's as nearly a dead calm as it can be; but you are as much use there as you could be anywhere else.'

It will be a very long time before I form one of a crew to man the *Rosebud* or any other vessel of the kind. I would not believe that Macstane was such a callous ruffian.

'I think we might have lunch now,' he says after a long pause; there's not a sign of wind in the heavens. Come along down to the cabin.'

We leave Baynes and Sandy in charge, and Macstane scrambles down the perpendicular ladder into what he calls his 'stateroom.' It is an age since