

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XXXIX.

A RELEASE.

We had a long spell ashore at this time, for we were meditating a protracted voyage, and everything had to be left ship-shape behind us. The Laird was busy from morning till night; but it would appear that all his attention was not wholly given to the affairs of Strathgovan. Occasionally he surprised his hostess by questions which had not the least reference to asphalt pavements or gymnasium chains. He kept his own counsel, nevertheless.

By and by his mysterious silence so piqued and provoked her that she seized a favourable opportunity for asking him point-blank whether he had not spoken to Mary Avon. They were in the garden at the time, he seated on an iron seat, with a bundle of papers beside him, she standing on the gravel-path, with some freshly cut flowers in her hand. There was a little colour in her face, for she feared that the question might be deemed impertinent; yet, after all, it was no idle curiosity that prompted her to ask it. Was she not as much interested in the girl's happiness as any one could be?

"I have," said he, looking up at her calmly. Well, she knew that. Was this all the answer she was to get?

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said he, after a second, "if I seem to be making a mystery where there is no mystery. I hate all foolishness like that. I do not myself believe there is anything of the kind; but I will just ask ye to wait for a day or two before speaking to the lass herself. After that, I will leave it all in your hands. I trust ye will consider that I have done my part."

"Oh, I am sure of that, sir," said she; though how could she be sure?

"There is not much I would not do for that lass," said he, somewhat absently. "She has a wonderful way of getting a grip of one's heart, as it were. And if I could have wished that things had turned out otherwise—"

The Laird did not finish the sentence. He seemed to rouse himself.

"Toots! toots!" said he, frowning. "When we are become men, we have to put away childish things. What is the use of crying for the moon? There, ma'am, is something serious and practical to consider—something better worth considering than childish dreams and fancies."

And then, with much lucidity, and with a most dispassionate parade of argument on both sides, he put before her this knotty question: Whether it was a fit and proper thing for a body like the Strathgovan Commissioners to own public-house property? That was the general question. The immediate question was whether the William Wallace public-house, situated on the Netherbiggins road, should be re-let or summarily closed. On the one hand it was contended that the closing of the William Wallace would only produce a greater run on the other licensed houses; on the other hand, it was urged that a body like the Commissioners should set an example, and refuse to encourage a mischievous traffic. Now the Laird's own view of the liquor question—which he always put forward modestly, as subject to the opinion of those who had a wider legislative and administrative experience than himself—was that the total suppression of the liquor traffic was a chimera, and that a practical man should turn to see what could be done in the way of stringent police regulations. He was proceeding to expound these points, when he suddenly caught sight of the Youth, who had appeared at the gate, with two long fishing-rods over his shoulder. He dropped his voice.

"That just reminds me, ma'am," said he. "I am greatly obliged to ye—my nephew equally so—for your great kindness to him. I think it will not be necessary for him to trespass on your forbearance any longer."

"I don't quite understand you."

"I think I will let him go back to his own pursuits now," said the Laird.

"Oh no," she said. "By all means let him come with us to Stornoway. He has been very good in not grumbling over any inconvenience. You would not send him away just as we are going to start on our longest cruise?"

She could not say any further at the moment, for the Youth came up the gravel path, and threw the two huge rods on the lawn.

"Look there, uncle!" he cried. "I don't care what kind of lithe you get on the line, I'll bet those rods won't break, anyway. Sutherland used to be lamenting over the big fish you lost up in the north; try them with those things." Here their hostess passed on and into the house with her flowers. Uncle and nephew were left by themselves.

"Howard, lad," said the elder of the two men, "bring that chair over, and sit opposite me. I do not want my papers to be disturbed.

There are one or two matters of business I would like to put before ye."

The Youth did as he was bid. The Laird paused for a second or two; then he began:

"When I asked ye to come to the Highlands," said he, slowly, "I put an alternative before ye, with certain consequences. There were two things, one of which I wanted ye to do. Ye have done neither."

Howard Smith looked somewhat alarmed; his hostess was not there to put a jocular air over that bargain.

"Well, sir," he stammered, "I—I could not do what was impossible. I—I have done my best."

"Nevertheless," said the Laird, in a matter-of-fact way, "neither has been done. I will not say it has been altogether your fault. So far as I have seen, ye have been on very good terms with the young lady; and—and—yes, paid her all what attention was expected of ye; and—"

"Well, you see, uncle," he interposed, eagerly, "what was the use of my proposing to the girl only to be snubbed? Don't I know she cares no more about me than the man in the moon? Why, anybody could see that. Of course, you know, if you insist on it—if you drive me to it—if you want me to go in and get snubbed—I'll do it. I'll take my chance. But I don't think it's fair. I mean," he added, hastily, "I don't think it is necessary."

"I do not wish to drive ye to anything," said the Laird—on any other occasion he might have laughed at the Youth's ingenuousness, but now he had serious business on hand. "I am content to take things as they are. Neither of the objects I had in view has been accomplished; perhaps both were impossible; who can tell what lies in store for any of us, when we begin to plan and scheme? However, I am not disposed to regard it as your fault. I will impose no fine or punishment, as if we were playing at theatre-acting. I have neither kith nor kin of my own; and it is my wish that, at my death, Denny-mains should go to you."

The Youth's face turned red; yet he did not know how to express his gratitude. It did not quite seem a time for sentiment; the Laird was talking in such a matter-of-fact way.

"Subject to certain conditions," he continued. "First of all, I spoke some time ago of spending a sum of £3,000 on a steam-yacht. Dismiss that from your mind. I cannot afford it; neither will you be able."

The young man stared at this. For although he cared very little about the steam-yacht—having a less liking for the sea than some of us—he was surprised to hear that a sum like £3,000 was even a matter for consideration to a reputedly rich man like his uncle.

"Oh, certainly, sir," said he. "I don't at all want a steam-yacht."

"Very well, we will now proceed."

The Laird took up one of the documents beside him, and began to draw certain lines on the back of it.

"Ye will remember," said he, pointing with his pencil, "that where the estate proper of Denny-mains runs out to the Coulter-burn road, there is a piece of land belonging to me, on which there are two tenements, yielding together, I should say, about £300 a year. By and by, if a road should be cut so—across to the Netherbiggins road—that land will be more valuable; many a one will be wanting to have that piece then, mark my words. However, let that stand by. In the meantime I have occasion for a sum of ten thousand three hundred pounds—"

The Youth looked still more alarmed; had his uncle been speculating?

"—and I have considered it my duty to ask you, as the future proprietor of Denny-mains in all human probability, whether ye would rather have these two tenements sold, with as much of the adjoining land as would make up that sum, or whether ye would have the sum made a charge on the estate generally, and take your chance of that land rising in value? What say ye?"

The Laird had been prepared for all this; but the Youth was not. He looked rather frightened.

"I should be sorry to hear, sir," he stammered, "that—that you were pressed for money."

"Pressed for money?" said the Laird, severely. "I am not pressed for money. There is not a square yard of Denny-mains with a farthing of mortgage on it. Come, let's hear what ye have to say."

"Then," said the young man, collecting his wits, "my opinion is that a man should do what he likes with his own."

"That's well said," returned the Laird, much mollified. "And I'm no sure but that if we were to rousp that land, that quarrelsome body Johnny Guthrie might not be trying to buy it; and I would not have him for a neigh-

bour on any consideration. Well, I will write to Todd and Buchanan about it at once."

The Laird rose and began to bundle his papers together. The Youth laid hold of the fishing-rods, and was about to carry them off somewhere, when he was suddenly called back.

"Dear me!" said the Laird, "my memory's going. There was another thing I was going to put before ye, lad. Our good friends here have been very kind in asking ye to remain so long. I'm thinking ye might offer to give up your state-room before they start on this long trip. Is there any business or occupation ye would like to be after in the south?"

The flash of light that leaped to the young man's face!

"Why, uncle," he exclaimed, eagerly, diving his hand into his pocket, "I have twice been asked by old Barnes to go to his place—the best partridge-shooting in Bedfordshire—"

But the Youth recollected himself.

"I mean," said he, "Barnes, the swell solicitor, don't you know—Hughes, Barnes & Barnes. It would be an uncommonly good thing for me to stand well with them. They are just the making of a young fellow at the bar when they take him up. Old Barnes' son was at Cambridge with me; but he doesn't do anything—an idle fellow—cares for nothing but shooting and billiards. I really ought to cultivate old Barnes."

The Laird eyed him askance.

"Off ye go to your partridge-shooting, and make no more pretence," said he; and then he added: "And look here, my lad—when ye leave this house I hope ye will express in a proper form your thanks for the kindness ye have received. No, no; I do not like the way of you English in that respect. Ye take no notice of anything. Ye receive a man's hospitality for a week, a fortnight, a month; and then ye shake hands with him at the door, and walk out—as if nothing had happened! These may be good manners in England; they are not here."

"I can't make a speech, uncle," said the Youth, slyly. "They don't teach us those things at the English public schools."

"Ye gowk," said the Laird, severely, "do ye think I want ye to make a speech like Norval on the Grampian Hills? I want ye to express in proper language your thankfulness for the attention and kindness that have been bestowed on ye. What are ye afraid of? Have ye not got a month? From all that I can hear, the English have a wonderful fluency of speech, when there is no occasion for it at all; blethering away like twenty steam-engines, and not a grain of wheat to be found when a' the stour is laid."

CHAPTER XL.

"WHILE THE RIFPLES FOLD UPON SANDS OF GOLD."

The days passed, and still the Laird professed to be profoundly busy; and our departure for the south was further and further postponed. The Youth had at first expressed his intention of waiting to see us off; which was very kind on his part, considering how anxious he was to cultivate the acquaintance of that important solicitor. His patience, however, at last gave out, and he begged to be allowed to start on a certain morning. The evening before we walked down to the shore with him, and got pulled out to the yacht, and sat on deck while he went below to pack such things as had been left in his state-room.

"It will be a strange thing," said our gentle admiral-in-chief, "for us to have a cabin empty. That has never happened to us in the Highlands all the time we have been here. It will be a sort of ghost's room; we shall not dare to look into it for fear of seeing something to awaken old memories."

She put her hand in her pocket, and drew out some small object.

"Look," said she, quite sentimentally.

It was only a bit of a pencil; if it had been the skull of Socrates, she could not have regarded it with greater interest.

"It is the pencil Angus used to mark our games with. I found it in the saloon the day before yesterday," and then she added, almost to herself, "I wonder where he is now?"

The answer to this question startled us.

"In Paris," said the Laird.

But no sooner had he uttered the words than he seemed somewhat embarrassed.

"That is, I believe so," he said, hastily. "I am not in correspondence with him. I do not know for certain. I have heard—it has been stated to me—that he might perhaps remain until the end of this week in Paris before going on to Naples."

He appeared rather anxious to avoid being further questioned. He began to discourse upon certain poems of Burns, whom he had once or twice somewhat slightly treated. He was now bent on making ample amends. In especial, he asked whether his hostess did not remember the beautiful verse in "Mary Morison," which describes the lover looking on at the dancing of a number of young people, and conscious only that his own sweetheart is not there.

"Do ye remember it, ma'am?" said he; and he proceeded to repeat it for her:

"Ye'reen, when to the trembling string
The dance gaed through the lighted ha'
To thee my fancy took its wing;
I sat, but neither heard nor saw."

"Though this was fair, and that was braw,
And yon the toast of a' the town,
I aighed, and said, among them a'
Ye are na Mary Morison."

—Beautiful, beautiful, is it not? And that is an extraordinary business—and as old as the hills, too—of one young person wailing out another as the object of all the hopes of his or her life; and nothing will do but that one. Ye may show them people who are better to look at, richer, cleverer; ye may reason and argue; ye may make plans, and what not; it is all of no use. And people who have grown up, and who forgot what they themselves were at twenty or twenty-five, may say what they please about the foolishness of a piece of sentiment; and they may prove to the young folks that this madness will not last, and that they should marry for more substantial reasons; but ye are just talking to the wind! Madness or not madness, it is human nature; and ye might just as well try to fight against the tides. I will say this, too," continued the Laird, and as he warmed to his subject he rose, and began to pace up and down the deck, "if a young man were to come and tell me that he was ready to throw up a love match for the sake of prudence and worldly advantage, I would say to him: 'Man, ye are a poor crayture. Ye have not got the backbone of a mouse in ye.' I have no respect for a young man who has prudence beyond his years; not one bit. If it is human nature for a man at fifty years to laugh at sentiment and romance, it is human nature for a man at twenty-five to believe in it; and he who does not believe in it then, I say is a poor crayture. He will never come to anything. He may make money; but he will be a poor stupid ass all his days, just without those experiences that make life a beautiful thing to look back on."

He came and sat down by Mary Avon.

"Perhaps a sad thing, too," said he, as he took her hand in his, "but even that is better than a dull causeway, with an animal trudging along, and sorely burdened with the world's wealth. And now, my lass, have ye got everything tight and trim for the grand voyage?"

"She has been at it again, sir," said his hostess, interposing. "She wants to set out for the south to-morrow morning."

"It would be a convenient chance for me," said the girl, simply. "Mr. Smith might be good enough to see me as far as Greenock—though, indeed, I don't at all mind travelling by myself. I must stop at Kendal—is that where the junction is?—for I promised the poor old woman who died in Edinburgh that I would call and see some relations of hers who live near Windermere."

"They can wait, surely!" said the Laird, with frowning eyebrows, as if the poor people at Windermere had attempted to do him some deadly injury.

"Oh, there is no hurry for them," said she. "They do not even know that I am coming. But this chance of Mr. Smith going by the steamer to-morrow would be convenient."

"Put that fancy out of your head," said he, with decision. "Ye are going to no Greenock, and to no Kendal, at the present time. Ye are going away with us to the North, to see such things as ye never saw before in your life. And if ye are anxious to get on with your work, I'll tell ye what I'll do. There's our Provost McKendrick has been many a time telling me of the fine salmon-fishing he got at the west side of Lewis—I think he said at a place called Gametra—"

"Grimmersta" is here suggested.

"The very place. Ye shall paint a picture of Grimmersta, my lass, on commission for the Provost. I authorize ye; if he will not take it, I will take it myself. Never mind what the place is like—the Provost has no more imagination than a boiled lobster; but he knows when he has good friends, and good fishing, and a good glass of whisky; and, depend on it, he'll be proud to have a picture of the place, on your own terms. I tell ye I authorize ye."

Here the Youth came on deck, saying he was ready to go ashore.

"Do you know, sir," said his hostess, rising, "what Mary has been trying to get me to believe?—that she is afraid of the equinoctials?"

The Laird laughed aloud.

"That is a good one—that is a good one!" he cried. "I never heard a better story about Homesh."

"I know the gales are very wild here when they begin," said Miss Avon, seriously. "Every one says so."

But the Laird only laughs the more, and is still chuckling to himself as he gets down into the gig; the notion of Mary Avon being afraid of anything—of fifteen dozen of equinoctial gales, for example—was to him simply ludicrous.

But a marked and unusual change came over the Laird's manner when we got back to Castle Osprey. During all the time he had been with us, although he had had occasionally to administer rebukes with more or less solemnity, he had never once lost his temper. We should have imagined it impossible for anything to have disturbed his serene dignity or demeanour. But now—when he discovered that there was no letter awaiting any one of us—his impatience seemed dangerously akin to vexation and anger. He would have the servants summoned and cross-examined. Then he would not believe them, but must needs search the various rooms for himself. The afternoon post had really brought nothing but a newspaper—addressed to the Laird—and that he testily threw into the waste-paper basket, without opening it. We had never seen him give way like this before.

At dinner, too, his temper was no better. He began to deride the business habits of the English people—which was barely civil. He