

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

BY WILLIAM BLACK.

Author of "A Princess of Thule," "A Daughter of Heth," "In Silk Attire," "The Strange Adventures of a Phaeton," "Kilmeny," "The Monarch of Mincing Lane," "Madcap Violet," "The Three Feathers," "The Marriage of Moira Fergus, and The Maid of Killeena," "Macleod of Dare," "Lady Silverdale's Sweetheart," etc.

CHAPTER XVII.

VILLAINY ABOARD.

It is near midday; two late people are sitting at breakfast; the sky-light overhead has been lifted, and the cool sea-air fills the saloon.

"Dead calm again," says Angus Sutherland, for he can see the rose-red ensign hanging limp from the mizzen-mast, a blaze of colour against the still blue.

There is no doubt that the *White Dove* is quite motionless; and that a perfect silence reigns around her. That is why we can hear so distinctly—through the open skylight—the gentle footsteps of two people who are pacing up and down the deck, and the soft voice of one of them as she speaks to her friend. What is all this wild enthusiasm about, then?

"It is the noblest profession in the world!"—we can hear so much as she passes the skylight. "One profession lives by fomenting quarrels; and another studies the art of killing in every form; but this one lives only to heal—only to relieve the suffering and help the miserable. That is the profession I should belong to, if I were a man!"

Our young Doctor says nothing as the voice recedes; but he is obviously listening for the return walk along the deck. And here she comes again.

"The patient drudgery of such a life is quite heroic—whether he is a man of science, working day and night to find out things for the good of the world, nobody thanking him or caring about him, or whether he is a physician in practice with not a minute that can be called his own—liable to be summoned at any hour—"

The voice again becomes inaudible. It is remarked to this young man that Mary Avon seems to have a pretty high opinion of the medical profession.

"She herself," he says, hastily, with a touch of colour in his face, "has the patience and fortitude of a dozen doctors."

Once more the light tread on deck comes near the skylight.

"If I were the Government," says Mary Avon, warmly, "I should be ashamed to see so rich a country as England content to take her knowledge second-hand from the German universities; while such men as Dr. Sutherland are harassed and hampered in their proper work by having to write articles and do ordinary doctor's visiting. I should be ashamed. If it is a want of money, why don't they pack off a dozen or two of the young noodles who pass the day whitening quills in the Foreign Office?"

Even when modified by the distance, and by the soft lapping of the water outside, this seems rather strong language for a young lady. Why should Miss Avon again insist in such a warm fashion on the necessity of endowing research?

But Angus Sutherland's face is burning red. Listeners are said to hear ill of themselves.

"However, Dr. Sutherland is not likely to complain," she says, proudly, as she comes by again. "No; he is too proud of his profession. He does his work; and leaves the appreciation of it to others. And when everybody knows that he will one day be among the most famous men in the country, is it not monstrous that he should be harassed by drudgery in the meantime? If I were the Government—"

But Angus Sutherland cannot suffer this to go on. He leaves his breakfast unfinished, passes along the saloon, and ascends the companion.

"Good morning," he says.

"Why, are you up already?" his hostess says. "We have been walking as lightly as we could, for we thought you were both asleep. And Mary has been heaping maledictions on the head of the Government because it doesn't subsidize all you microscope men. The next thing she will want is a license for the whole of you to be allowed to vivisection criminals."

"I heard something of what Miss Avon said," he admitted.

The girl, looking rather aghast, glanced at the open skylight.

"We thought you were asleep," she stammered, and with her face somewhat flushed.

"At least, I heard you say something about the Government," he said, kindly. "Well, all I ask from the Government is to give me a trip like this every summer."

"What," says his hostess, "with a barometer that won't fall?"

"I don't mind."

"And seas like glass?"

"I don't mind."

"And the impossibility of getting back to land?"

"So much the better," he says, defiantly.

"Why," she reminds him, laughing, "you were very anxious about getting back some days ago. What has made you change your wishes?"

He hesitates for a moment, and then he says—

"I believe a sort of madness of idleness has

got possession of me. I have dallied so long with that tempting invitation of yours to stay and see the *White Dove* through the equinoctials that—that I think I really must give in—"

"You cannot help yourself," his hostess says promptly. "You have already promised. Mary is my witness."

The witness seems anxious to avoid being brought into this matter; she turns to the Laird quickly, and asks him some question about Ru-na-Gaul light over there.

Ru-na-Gaul light no doubt it is—shining white in the sun at the point of the great cliffs; and there is the entrance to Tobbermorry; and here is Mingary Castle—brown ruins amid the brilliant greens of those sloping shores—and there are the misty hills over Loch Sunart. For the rest, blue seas around us, glassy and still; and blue skies overhead, cloudless and pale. The barometer refuses to budge.

But suddenly there is a brisk excitement. What though the breeze that is darkening the water there is coming on right ahead!—we shall be moving anyway. And as the first puffs of it catch the sails, Angus Sutherland places Mary Avon in command; and she is now—by the permission of her travelling physician—allowed to stand as she guides the course of the vessel. She has become an experienced pilot; the occasional glance at the leach of the top-sail is all that is needed; she keeps as accurately "full and by" as the master of one of the famous cup-takers.

"Now, Mary," says her hostess, "it all depends on you as to whether Angus will catch the steamer this evening."

"Oh, does it?" she says, with apparent innocence.

"Yes; we shall want very good steering to get within sight of Castle Osprey before the evening."

"Very well, then," says this audacious person.

At the same instant she deliberately puts the helm down. Of course the yacht directly runs up to the wind, her sails flapping helplessly. Everybody looks surprised; and John of Skye, thinking that the new skipper has only been a bit careless, calls out—

"Keep her full, mem, if you please."

"What do you mean, Mary? What are you about?" cries Queen T.

"I am not going to be responsible for sending Dr. Sutherland away," she says, in a matter-of-fact manner, "since he says he is in no hurry to go. If you wish to drive your guest away, I won't be a party to it. I mean to steer as badly as I can."

"Then I depose you," says Dr. Sutherland, promptly. "I cannot have a pilot who disobeys orders."

"Very well," she says, "you may take the tiller yourself"—and she goes away, and sits down in high dudgeon, by the Laird.

So once more we get the vessel under weigh; and the breeze is beginning to blow somewhat more briskly; and we notice with hopefulness that there is rougher water further down the Sound. But with this slow process of beating, how are we to get within sight of Castle Osprey before the great steamer comes up from the South?

The Laird is puzzling over the Admiralty Sailing Directions. The young lady, deeply offended, who sits beside him, pays him great attention, and talks "at" the rest of the passengers with undisguised contempt.

"It is all haphazard, the sailing of a yacht," she says to him, though we can all hear. "Anybody can do it. But they make a jargon about it to puzzle other people, and pretend it is a science, and all that."

"Well," says the Laird, who is quite unaware of the fury that fills her brain, "there are some of the phrases in this book that are verra extraordinary. In navigating this same Sound of Mull, they say you are to keep the 'weather shore aboard.' How can ye keep the weather shore aboard?"

"Indeed, if we don't get into a port soon," remarks our hostess and chief commissariat-officer, "it will be the only thing we shall have on board. How would you like it cooked, Mary?"

"I won't speak to any of you," says the disgraced skipper, with much composure.

"Will you sing to us, then?"

"Will you behave properly if you are reinstated in command?" asks Angus Sutherland.

"Yes, I will," she says, quite humbly; and forthwith she is allowed to have the tiller again.

Brisker and brisker grows the breeze; it is veering to the south, too; the sea is rising, and with it the spirits of everybody on board. The ordinarily sedate and respectable *White Dove* is showing herself a trifle frisky, moreover; an occasional clatter below of hair brushes or candlesticks tells us that people accustomed to calms

fall into the habit of leaving their cabins ill-arranged.

"There will be more wind, sir," says John of Skye, coming aft; and he is looking at some long and streaky "mare's tails" in the south-western sky. "And if there was a gale o' wind, I would let her have it!"

Why that grim ferocity of look, Captain John! Is the poor old *White Dove* responsible for the too fine weather, that you would like to see her driven, all wet and bedraggled, before a south-westerly gale? If you must quarrel with something, quarrel with the barometer; you may admonish it with a belying pin if you please.

Brisker and brisker grows the breeze. Now we hear the first pistol-shots of the spray come rattling over the bows; and Hector of Moidart has from time to time to duck his head, or shake the water from his jersey. The *White Dove* breasts these rushing waves and a foam of white water goes hissing away from either side of her. Speine Mòr and Speine Beg we leave behind; in the distance we can descry the ruins of Aros Castle and the deep indentation of Salem Bay; here we are passing the thick woods of Funeray; "Farewell, farewell, to Funeray!" The squally look in the south-west increases; the wind veers more and more. Commander Mary Avon is glad to resign the helm, for it is not easy to retain hold in these plunging seas.

"Why, you will catch the steamer after all, Angus!" says his hostess, as we go tearing by the mouth of Loch Aline.

"This is a good one for the last!" he calls to her. "Give her some more sheet, John; the wind is going round to the north!"

Whence comes the whirling storm in the midst of the calm summer weather? The blue heavens are as blue as the petal of a crane's bill; surely such a sky has nothing to do with a hurricane. But wherever it comes from, it is welcome enough, and the brave *White Dove* goes driving through those heavy seas, sometimes cresting them buoyantly, at other times meeting them with a dull shock, followed by a swish of water that rushes along the lee scuppers. And those two women folk—without ulsters or other covering; it is a merry game to play jack-in-the-box, and duck their heads under the shelter of the gig when the spray springs into the air. But somehow the sea gets the best of it. Laugh as they may, they must be feeling rather damp about their hair; and as for Mary Avon's face—that has got a bath of salt water at least a dozen times. She cares not. Sun, wind, and sea she allows to do their worst with her complexion. Soon we shall have to call her the Nut-brown Maid.

Brisker and brisker grows the breeze. Angus Sutherland, with a rope round the tiller, has his teeth set hard; he is indeed letting the *White Dove* have it at last, for he absolutely refuses to have the topsail down. The main tack, then; might not that be hauled up? No; he will have none of John of Skye's counsels. The *White Dove* tears her way through the water—we raise a cloud of birds from the rocks opposite Scalladale—we see the white surf breaking in at Craignure—ahead of us is Lismore Light-house, perched over the whirling and struggling tides, shining white in the sunlight above the dark and driven sea.

Ahead she goes: the land she knows!

—past the shadowy ruins of Duart, and out and through the turbulent tides off the lighthouse rocks. The golden afternoon is not yet far advanced; let but this brave breeze continue, and soon they will descry the *White Dove* from the far heights of Castle Osprey!

But there was to be no Castle Osprey for Angus Sutherland that evening, despite the splendid run the *White Dove* had made. It was a race, indeed, between the yacht and the steamer for the quay; and notwithstanding that Mary Avon was counselling everybody to give it up as impossible, John of Skye would hold to it in the hope of pleasing Dr. Sutherland himself. And no sooner was the anchor let go in the bay, than the gig was down from the davits; the men had jumped in; the solitary portmanteau was tossed into the stern, and Angus Sutherland was hurriedly bidding his adieux. The steamer was at this instant slowing into the quay.

"I forbid any one to say good-bye to him," says our Admiral-in-chief, sternly. "*Au revoir*—auf Wiedersehen—anything you like—no good-bye."

Last of all he took Mary Avon's hand.

"You have promised, you know," she said, with her eyes cast down.

"Yes," said he, regarding her for an instant with a strange look—earnest, perhaps, and yet timid—as if it would ask a question, and dared not—"I will keep my promise." Then he jumped into the boat.

That was a hard pull away to the quay; and even in the bay the water was rough, so that the back-sweep of the oars sometimes caught the waves and sent the spray flying in the wind. The *Chevalier* had rung her bells. We made sure he would be too late. What was the reason of this good-natured indulgence? We lost sight of the gig in at the landing-slip.

Then the great steamer slowly steamed away from the quay; who was that on the paddle-box waving good-bye to us?

"Oh, yes, I can see him plainly," calls out Queen T., looking through a glass; and there is a general waving of handkerchiefs, in reply to the still visible signal. Mary Avon waves her handkerchief, too—in a limp fashion. We do not look at her eyes.

And when the gig came back, and we bade

good-bye for the time to the brave old *White Dove*, and set out for Castle Osprey, she was rather silent. In vain did the Laird tell her some of the very best ones about Homesh; she seemed anxious to get into the house and to reach the solitude of her own room.

But in the meantime there was a notable bundle of letters, newspapers, and what not, lying on the hall-table. This was the first welcome that civilization gave us. And although we defied these claims—and determined that not an envelope should be opened till after dinner—Mary Avon, having only one letter awaiting her, was allowed to read that. She did it mechanically, listlessly—she was not in very good spirits. But suddenly we heard her utter some slight exclamation; and then we turned and saw that there was a strange look on her face—of dismay and dread. She was pale, too, and bewildered—like one stunned. Then without a word, she handed the letter to her friend.

"What is the matter, Mary?"

But she read the letter—and, in her amazement, she repeated the reading of it, aloud. It was a brief, business-like, and yet friendly letter, from the manager of a certain bank in London. He said he was sorry to refer to painful matters; but no doubt Miss Avon had seen in the papers some mention of the absconding of Mr. Frederick Smethurst, of ——. He hoped there was nothing wrong; but he thought it right to inform Miss Avon that, a day or two before this disappearance, Mr. Smethurst had called at the bank and received, in obedience to her written instructions, the securities—£1,500. Five Twenties—which the bank held in her name. Mr. Smethurst had explained that these bonds were delivered to a certain broker, and that securities of a like value would be deposited with the bank in a day or two afterwards. Since then nothing had been heard of him till the Hue and Cry appeared in the newspapers. Such was the substance of the letter.

"But it isn't true!" said Mary Avon, almost wildly. "I cannot believe it. I will not believe it. I saw no announcement in the papers. And I did give him the letter—he was acting quite rightly. What do they want me to believe?"

"Oh, Mary!" cries her friend, "why did you not tell us? Have you parted with everything?"

"The money!" says the girl—with her white face, and frightened pathetic eyes. "Oh, I do not care about the money! It has got nothing to do with the money. But—but—he—was my mother's only brother."

The lips tremble for a moment; but she collects herself. Her courage fights through the stun of this sudden blow.

"I will not believe it!" she says. "How dare they say such things of him? How is it we have never seen anything of it in the papers?"

But the Laird leaves these and other wild questions to be answered at leisure. In the meantime, his eyes are burning like coals of fire; and he is twisting his hands together in a vain endeavour to repress his anger and indignation.

"Tell them to put a horse to," he says, in a voice the abruptness of which startles every one. "I want to drive to the telegraph office. This is a thing for men to deal with—not women!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ULTIMATUM.

When our good friend the Laird of Denny-mains came back from the post-office, he seemed quite beside himself with wrath. And yet his rage was not of the furious and loquacious sort; it was reticent, and deep, and dangerous. He kept pacing up and down the gravel-path in front of the house, while as yet dinner was not ready. Occasionally he would rub his hands

vehemently, as if to get rid of some sort of electricity; and once or twice we heard him ejaculate to himself, "The scoundrel! the scoundrel!" It was in vain that our gentle Queen Titania, always anxious to think the best of everybody, broke in on these fierce meditations, and asked the Laird to suspend his judgment. How could he be sure, she asked, that Frederick Smethurst had really run away with his niece's little property? He had come to her and represented that he was in serious difficulties; that this temporary loan of six or seven thousand pounds would save him; that he would repay her directly certain remittances came to him from abroad. How could he, the Laird, know that Frederick Smethurst did not mean to keep his promise?

But Denny-mains would have none of these possibilities. He saw the whole story clearly. He had telegraphed for confirmation; but already he was convinced. As for Frederick Smethurst being a swindler—that did not concern him, he said. As for the creditors, that was their own look-out; men in business had to take their chance. But that this miscreant, this ruffian, this mean hound should have robbed his own niece of her last farthing—and left her absolutely without resources or protection of any kind in the world—this it was that made the Laird's eyes burn with a dark fire. "The scoundrel! the scoundrel!" he said; and he rubbed his hands as though he would wrench the fingers off.

We should have been more surprised at this exhibition of rage on the part of a person so ordinarily placid as Denny-mains, but that every one had observed how strong had become his affection for Mary Avon during our long days on the Atlantic. If she had been twenty times his own daughter he could not have regarded her