

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER VI—(Continued.)

But at dinner the Laird got on very well with our new guest; for the latter listened most respectfully when Denny-mains was demonstrating the exceeding purity and strength, and fitness of the speech used in the South of Scotland. And indeed the Laird was generous. He admitted that there were blemishes. He deprecated the introduction of French words, and gave us a much longer list of those aliens than usually appears in books. What about *conjee*, and *que-vee*, and *fracare* as used by Scotch children and old wives?

Then after dinner—at nine o'clock the wonderful glow of the summer evening was still filling the drawing-room—the Laird must needs have Mary Avon sing to him. It was not a custom of hers. She rarely would sing a song of set purpose. The linnet sings all day—when you do not watch her; but she will not sing if you go and ask.

However, on this occasion, her hostess went to the piano, and sat down to play the accompaniment; and Mary Avon stood beside her, and sang, in rather a low voice—but it was tender enough—some modern version of the old ballad of the Queen's Maries. What were the words? These were of them, anyway:

"Yestreen the Queen had four Maries;
This night she'll hae but three:
There was Mary Beaton, and Mary Seaton,
And Mary Carmichael, and me."

But, indeed, if you had seen that graceful, slim figure—clad all in black velvet, with the broad band of gold fringe round the neck—and the small, shapely, smoothly-brushed head above the soft swathes of white muslin; and if you had caught a glimpse of the black eyelashes drooping outward from the curve of the pale cheek; and if you had heard the tender, low voice of Mary Avon—you might have forgotten about the Queen's Maries altogether.

And then Angus Sutherland, the Laird was determined—in true Scotch fashion—that everybody who could not sing should be goaded to sing.

"Oh, well," said the young man, with a laugh, "you know a student in Germany must sing, whether he can or not. And I learned there to smash out something like an accompaniment also."

And he went to the piano without more ado, and did smash out an accompaniment. And if his voice was rather harsh—well, we should have called it raucous in the case of East Wind, but we only called it manly and strenuous when it was Angus Sutherland who sang. And it was a manly song, too—a fitting song for our last night on shore, the words hailing from the green woods of Fuinary, the air an air that had many a time been heard among the western seas. It was the song of the Biorlinn that he sang to us; we could hear the brave chorus and the splash of the long oars:

"Send the biorlinn on careering;
Cheerily and all together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!"

"Give her way and show her wake,
Mid showering spray and curling eddies—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!"

Do we not hear now the measured stroke in the darkness of the morning? The water springs from her bows; one by one the headlands are passed. But lo! the day is breaking; the dawn will surely bring a breeze with it; and then the sail of the gallant craft will bear her over the seas.

"Another cheer, our Isle appears!
Our biorlinn bears her on the faster—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!"

"Ahead she goes! the land she knows!
Behold! the snowy shores of Canna—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!"

A long, strong pull together, indeed; who could resist joining in the thunder of the chorus? And we were bound for Canna, too; this was our last night on shore.

Our last night on shore. In such circumstances one naturally has a glance round at the people with whom one is to be brought into such close contact for many and many a day. But in this particular case what was the use of speculating, or grumbling, or remonstrating? There is a certain household that is ruled with a rod of iron. And if the mistress of that household chose to select as her summer companions a "shilpit bit thing," and a hard-headed, ambitious Scotch student, and a parochial magnate haunted by a heresy case, how dared one object? There is such a thing as peace and quietness.

But however unpromising the outlook might be, do we not know the remark that is usually made by that hard-worked officer, the chief mate, when on the eve of a voyage he finds himself confronted by an unusually mongrel crew? He regards those loafers and outcasts, from the Bowery, and Ratcliffe Highway, and the Broomielaw—Greeks, niggers, and Mexicans—with a critical and perhaps scornful air, and forthwith proceeds to address them in the following highly-polished manner:

"By etcetera-etcetera, you are an etceteraed rum-looking lot; but etcetera-etcetera me if I don't lick you into shape before we get to Rio."

And so—good-night!—and let all good people pray for fair skies and a favouring breeze! And if there is any song to be heard in our dreams, let it be the song of the Queen Maries—in the low, tender voice of Mary Avon:

"There was Mary Beaton and Mary Seaton,
And Mary Carmichael, and me."

CHAPTER VII.

NORTHWARD.

We have bidden good-bye to the land; the woods and the green hills have become pale in the haze of the summer light; we are out here, alone, on the shining blue plain. And if Angus Sutherland betrays a tendency to keep forward, conversing with John of Skye about blocks, and tackle, and winches; and if the Laird—whose parental care and regard for Mary Avon is becoming beautiful to see—should have quite a monopoly of the young lady, and be more bent than ever on amusing her with his "good ones," and if our queen and governor should spend a large portion of her time below, in decorating cabins with flowers, in overhauling napery, and in earnest consultation with Master Fred about certain culinary mysteries—notwithstanding all these divergences of place and occupation, our little kingdom afloat is compact enough. There is, always, for example, a re-assembling at meals. There is an instant community of interest when a sudden cry calls all hands on deck to regard some new thing—the spouting of a whale, or the silvery splashing of a shoal of mackerel. But now—but now—if only some cloud-compelling Jove would break this insufferably fine weather, and give us a rattling good gale!

It is a strange little kingdom. It has no postal service. Shilling telegrams are unknown in it; there is no newspaper at breakfast. Serene, independent, self-centred, it minds its own affairs; if the whole of Europe were roaring for war, not even an echo of the cry would reach us. We only hear the soft calling of the seabirds as we sit and read, or talk, or smoke, from time to time watching the shadows move on the blistering hot decks, or guessing at the names of the great mountains that rise above Loch Etive and Lochaber. But oh! for the swift gale to tear this calm to pieces! Is there no one of you giants secretly brewing a storm for us, far up there among the lonely chasms, to spring down on these glassy seas?

"They prayed for rain in the churches last Sunday—so Captain John says," Mary Avon remarks, when we assemble together at lunch.

"The distilleries are stopped; that's very serious," continues the Laird.

"Well," says our liege lady, "people talk about the rain in the West Highlands. It must be true, as everybody says it is true. But now—excepting the year we went to America with Sylvia Balfour—we have been here for five years running; and each year we made up our mind for a deluge, thinking we had deserved it, you know. Well, it never came. Look at this now."

And the fact was that we were lying motionless on the smooth bosom of the Atlantic, with the sun so hot on the decks that we were glad to get below.

"Very strange—very strange, indeed," remarked the Laird, with a profound air. "Now what value are we to put on any historical evidence if we find such a conflict of testimony about what is at our own doors? How should there be two opinions about the weather in the West Highlands? It is a matter of common experience—dear me! I never heard the like."

"Oh, but I think we might try to reconcile those diverse opinions," said Angus Sutherland, with an absolute gravity. "You hear mostly the complaints of London people, who make much of a passing shower. Then the tourist and holiday folk, especially from the South, came in the autumn, when the fine summer weather has broken. And then," he added, addressing himself with a frank smile to the small creature who had been expressing her wonder over the fine weather, "perhaps, if you are pleased with your holiday on the whole, you are not anxious to remember the wet days; and then you are not afraid of a shower, I know; and besides that, when one is yachting, one is more anxious for wind than for fine weather."

"Oh, I am sure that is it!" called out Mary Avon, quite eagerly. She did not care how she destroyed the Laird's convictions about the value of historical evidence. "That is an explanation of the whole thing."

At this, Angus Sutherland—who had been professing to treat this matter seriously merely as a joke—quickly lowered his eyes. He scarcely ever looked Mary Avon in the face when she spoke to him, or when he had to speak to her. And a little bit of shy embarrassment in his manner toward her—perceivable only at times—was all the more singular in a man who was shrewd and hard-headed enough, who had knocked about the world, and seen many persons and things, and who had a fair amount of unassuming self-confidence, mingled with a vein of sly and reticent humor. He talked freely enough when he was addressing our admiral-in-chief. He was not afraid to meet her eyes. Indeed, they were so familiar friends that she called him by his Christian name—a practice which in general she detested. But she would as soon have thought of applying "Mr." to one of her own boys at Epsom College as to Angus Sutherland.

"Well, you know, Angus," says she, pleasantly, "you have definitely promised to go up to the Outer Hebrides with us, and back. The longer the calms last, the longer we shall have you. So we shall gladly put up with the fine weather."

"It is very kind of you to say so; but I have already had such a long holiday—"

"Oh!" said Mary Avon, with her eyes full of wonder and indignation. She was too surprised to say any more. She only stared at him. She knew he had been working night and day in Edinburgh.

"I mean," said he, hastily, and looking down, "I have been away so long from London. Indeed, I was getting rather anxious about my next month's number; but luckily, just before I left Edinburgh, a kind friend sent me a most valuable paper, so I am quite at ease again. Would you like to read it, sir? It is set up in type."

He took the sheets from his pocket, and handed them to the Laird. Denny-mains looked at the title. It was "On the Radiolarians of the Coal Measures," and it was the production of a well-known professor. The Laird handed back the paper without opening it.

"No, thank you," said he, with some dignity. "If I wished to be instructed I would like a safer guide than that man."

We looked with dismay on this dangerous thing that had been brought on board; might it not explode and blow up the ship?

"Why," said our doctor, in unaffected wonder, and entirely mistaking the Laird's exclamation, "he is a perfect master of his subject."

"There is a great deal too much speculation nowadays on these matters, and particularly among the younger men," remarked the Laird, severely. And he looked at Angus Sutherland. "I suppose now ye are well acquainted with the 'Vestiges of Creation'?"

"I have heard of the book," said Brose, regretfully confessing his ignorance, "but I never happened to see it."

The Laird's countenance lightened. "So much the better—so much the better. A most mischievous and unsettling book. But all the harm it can do is counteracted by a noble work, a conclusive work, that leaves nothing to be said. Ye have read the 'Testimony of the Rocks,' no doubt?"

"Oh yes, certainly," our doctor was glad to be able to say; "but—but it was a long time ago—when I was a boy, in fact."

"Boy or man, you'll get no better book on the history of the earth. I tell ye, sir, I never read a book that placed such firm conviction in my mind. Will ye get any of the new men they are talking about as keen an observer and as skilful in arguing as Hugh Miller? No, no; not one of them dares to try to upset the 'Testimony of the Rocks.'"

Angus Sutherland appealed against this sentence of finality only in a very humble way.

"Of course, sir," said he, meekly, "you know that science is still moving forward—"

"Science?" repeated the Laird. "Science may be moving forward or moving backward; but can it upset the facts of the earth? Science may say what it likes; but the facts remain the same."

Now this point was so conclusive that we unanimously hailed the Laird as victor. Our doctor submitted with an excellent good humor. He even promised to post that paper on the Radiolarians at the very first office we might reach; we did not want any such explosive compounds on board.

That night we only got as far as Fishnish Bay—a solitary little harbour probably down on but few maps; and that we had to reach by getting out the gig for a tow. There was a strange bronze-red in the northern skies long after the sun had set; but in here the shadow of the great mountains was on the water. We could scarcely see the gig; but Angus Sutherland had joined the men, and was pulling stroke; and along with the measured splash of the oars we heard something about "Ho, ro, clansmen!" Then, in the cool night air, there was a slight fragrance of peat smoke; we knew we were getting near the shore.

"He's a fine fellow, that," says the Laird, generously, of his defeated antagonist. "A fine fellow. His knowledge of different things is just remarkable; and he's as modest as a girl. Ay, and he can row, too; a while ago, when it was lighter, I could see him put his shoulders

into it. Ay, he's a fine, good-natured fellow, and I am glad he has not been led astray by that mischievous book, the 'Vestiges of Creation.'"

Come on board, now, boys, and swing up the gig to the davits. Twelve fathoms of chain!—away with her, then!—and there is a roar in the silence of the lonely little bay. And thereafter silence; and the sweet fragrance of the peat in the night air, and the appearance, above the black hills, of a clear, shining, golden planet that sends a quivering line of light across the water to us. And, once more, good-night and pleasant dreams!

But what is this in the morning? There have been no pleasant dreams for John of Skye and his merry men during the last night; for here we are already between Mingafy Bay and Runa-Gaul Lighthouse; and before us is the open Atlantic, blue under the fair skies of the morning. And here is Dr. Sutherland, at the tiller, with a suspiciously negligent look about his hair and shirt collar.

"I have been up since four," says he, with a laugh. "I heard them getting under weigh, and did not wish to miss anything. You know these places are not so familiar to me as they are to you."

"Is there going to be any wind to-day, John?"

"Not much," says John of Skye, looking at the cloudless blue vault above and the glassy sweeps of the sea.

Nevertheless, as the morning goes by, we get as much of a breeze as enables us to draw away from the mainland—round Ardnamurchan ("the headland of the great sea") and out into the open—with Muick Island, and the sharp Scur of Eigg, and the peaks of Rum lying over there on the still Atlantic, and far away in the north the vast and spectral mountains of Skye.

And now the work of the day begins. Mary Avon, for mere shame's sake, is at last compelled to produce one of her blank canvases, and open her box of tubes. And now it would appear that Angus Sutherland—though deprived of the authority of the sick-room—is beginning to lose his fears of the English young lady. He makes himself useful—not with the elaborate and patronizing courtesy of the Laird, but in a sort of submissive, matter-of-fact shifty fashion. He sheathes the spikes of her easel with cork, so that they shall not mark the deck. He rigs up, to counterbalance that lack of stability, a piece of cord with a heavy weight. Then, with the easel fixed, he fetches her a deck chair to sit in, and a deck stool for her colours, and these and her he places under the lee of the foremast, to be out of the glare of the sun. Thus our artist is started; she is going to make a sketch of the after-part of the yacht with Hector of Moidart at the tiller; beyond, the calm blue seas, and a faint promontory of land.

Then the Laird—having confidentially remarked to Miss Avon that Tom Galbraith, than whom there is no greater authority living, invariably moistens the fresh canvas with megilp before beginning work—has turned to the last report of the Sempole case.

"No, no," says he to our sovereign lady, who is engaged in some mysterious work in wool, "it does not look well for the Presbytery to go over every one of the charges in the major proposition—supported by the averments in the minor—only to find them irrelevant, and then bring home to him the part of the libel that deals with tendency. No, no; that shows a lamentable want of purpose. In view of the great danger to be apprehended from these secret assaults on the inspiration of the Scriptures, they should have stuck to each charge with tenacity. Now I will just show ye where Dr. Carnegie, in detaching *Secundo*—illustrated as it was with the extracts and averments in the minor—let the whole thing slip through his fingers."

But if any one were disposed to be absolutely idle on this calm, shining, beautiful day—far away from the cares and labours of the land! Out on the taffrail, under shadow of the mizzen, there is a seat that is gratefully cool. The glare of the sea no longer bewilders the eyes; one can watch with a lazy enjoyment the teeming life of the open Atlantic. The great skarks go whizzing by, long-necked, rapid of flight. The gannets poise in the air, and then there is a sudden dart downward, and a spout of water flashes up where the bird has dived. The guillemots fill the silence with their soft kurrooing—and here they are on all sides of us—Kurroo! Kurroo!—dipping their bills in the water, hastening away from the vessel, and then rising on the surface to flap their wings. But this is a strange thing: they are all in pairs—obviously mother and child—and the mother calls Kurroo! Kurroo!—and the young one, unable as yet to dive or swim, answers, Pe-yoo-it! Pe-yoo-it! and flutters and paddles after her. But where is the father? And has the guillemot only one of a family? Over that one, at all events, she exercises a valiant protection. Even though the stem of the yacht seems likely to run both of them down, she will neither dive nor fly until she has piloted the young one out of danger.

Then a sudden cry startles the Laird from his heresy case, and Mary Avon from her canvas. A sound far away has turned all eyes to the north, though there is nothing visible there, over the shining calm of the sea, but a small cloud of white spray that slowly sinks. In a second or two, however, we see another jet of white water arise; and then a great brown mass heave slowly over; and then we hear the spouting of the whale.

"What a huge animal!" cries one. "A hundred feet!"

"Eighty, anyway!"