

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 Photon," "Kilmory," "The Monarch of Mincing Lane," "Madcap Violet," "The Three Feathers," "The Marriage of Moira Fergus, and The Maid of Killeena," "Maid of Dore," "Lady Silverdale's Sweetheart," etc.

CHAPTER XIV.

EVIL TIDINGS.

We had indeed returned to the world; the first thing we saw on entering the saloon in the morning was a number of letters—actual letters, that had come through a post-office—lying on the breakfast table. We stared at these strange things. Our good Queen T. was the first to approach them. She took them up as if she expected they would bite her.

"Oh, Mary," she says, "there is not one for you—not one."

Angus Sutherland glanced quickly at the girl. But there was not the least trace of disappointment on her face. On the contrary, she said, with a cheerful indifference:

"So much the better. They only bother people."

But of course they had to be opened and read—even the bulky parcel from Strathgovan. The only bit of intelligence that came from that quarter was to the effect that Tom Galbraith had been jilted by his lady-love; but as the rumor, it appeared, was in circulation among the Glasgow artists, the laird instantly and indignantly refused to believe it. Envy is the meanest of the passions; and we knew that the Glasgow artists could scarcely sleep in their bed at night for thinking of the great fame of Mr. Galbraith of Edinburgh. However, amid all these letters one of us stumbled upon one little item that certainly concerned us. It was a clipping from the advertisement column of a newspaper. It was inclosed, without word or comment, by a friend in London who knew that we were slightly acquainted, perforce, with Mr. Frederick Smethurst. And it appeared that that gentleman, having got into difficulties with his creditors, had taken himself off, in a surreptitious and evil manner, inasmuch that this newspaper clipping was nothing more or less than a hue and cry after the fraudulent bankrupt. That letter and its startling inclosure were quickly whipped into the pocket of the lady to whom they had been sent.

By great good luck Mary Avon was the first to go on deck. She was anxious to see this new harbour into which we had got. And then, with considerable dismay on her face, our sovereign mistress showed us this ugly thing. She was much excited. It was so shameful of him to bring this disgrace on Mary Avon! What would the poor girl say? And this gentle lady would not for worlds have told her while she was with us—until at least we got back to some more definite channel of information. She was, indeed, greatly distressed.

But we had to order her to dismiss these idle troubles. We formed ourselves into a committee on the spot; and this committee unanimously, if somewhat prematurely, and recklessly, resolved—

First, that it was not of the slightest consequence to us or any human creature where Mr. Frederick Smethurst was, or what he might do with himself.

Secondly, that if Mr. Frederick Smethurst were to put a string and a stone round his neck and betake himself to the bottom of the sea, he would earn our gratitude and in some measure atone for his previous conduct.

Thirdly, that nothing at all about the matter should be said to Mary Avon; if the man had escaped, there might probably be an end of the whole business.

To these resolutions, carried swiftly and unanimously, Angus Sutherland added a sort of desultory rider, to the effect that moral or immoral qualities do sometimes reveal themselves in the face. He was also of opinion that spare persons were more easy of detection in this manner. He gave an instance of a well-known character in London—a most promising ruffian who had run through the whole gamut of discreditable offences. Why was there no record of this brave career written in the man's face? Because nature had obliterated the lines in fat. When a man attains to the dimensions and appearance of a scrofulous toad swollen to the size of an ox, moral and mental traces get rubbed out. Therefore, contended our F.R.S., all persons who set out on a career of villainy, and don't want to be found out, should eat fat-producing foods. Potatoes and sugar he especially mentioned as being calculated to conceal crime.

However, we had to banish Frederick Smethurst and his evil deeds from our minds; for the yacht from end to end was in a bustle of confusion about our going ashore; and as for us—why, we meant to run riot in all the wonders and delights of civilization. Innumerable fowls, tons of potatoes and cabbage and lettuce, fresh butter, new loaves, new milk; there was no end to the visions that rose before the excited brain of our chief commissariat officer. And when the laird, in the act of stepping, with much dignity, into the gig, expressed his firm conviction

that somewhere or other we should stumble upon a Glasgow newspaper not more than a week old, so that he might show us the reports of the meetings of the Strathgovan Commissioners, we knew of no further luxury that the mind could desire.

And as we were being rowed ashore, we could not fail to be struck by the extraordinary abundance of life and business and activity in the world. Portree, with its wooded crags and white houses shining in the sun, seemed a large and populous city. The smooth waters of the bay were crowded with craft of every description; and the boats of the yachts were coming and going with so many people on board of them that we were quite stared out of countenance. And then, when we landed, and walked up the quay, and ascended the hill into the town, we regarded the signs over the shop-doors with the same curiosity that regards the commonest features of a foreign street. There was a peculiarity about Portree, however, that is not met with in continental capitals. We felt that the ground swayed lightly under our feet. Perhaps these were the last oscillations of the great volcanic disturbance that shot the black Coolins into the sky.

Then the shops: such displays of beautiful things, in silk and wool, and cunning wood-work; human ingenuity declaring itself in a thousand ways, and appealing to our purses. Our purses, to tell the truth, were giving. A craving for purchase possessed us. But, after all, the laird could not buy servant-girls' scarfs as a present for Mary Avon; and Angus Sutherland did not need a second waterproof coat; and though we reached the telegraph-office, there would have been a certain monotony in spending innumerable shillings on unnecessary telegrams, even though we might be rejoicing in one of the highest conveniences of civilization. The plain truth must be told. Our purchases were limited to some tobacco and a box or two of paper collars for the men; to one or two shilling novels, and a flask of eau-de-Cologne. We did not half avail ourselves of all the luxuries spread out so temptingly before us.

"Do you think the men will have the water on board yet?" Mary Avon says, as we walk back. "I do not at all like being on land. The sun scorches so, and the air is stifling."

"In my opinion," says the laird, "the authorities of Portree are deserving of great credit for having fixed up the apparatus to let boats get water on board at the quay. It was a public-spirited project—it was that. And I do not suppose that any one grumbles at having to pay a shilling for the privilege. It is a legitimate tax. I am sure it would have been a long time or we could have got such a thing at Strathgovan, if there was need for it there; ye would scarcely believe it, ma'am, what a spirit of opposition there is among some of the Commissioners to any improvement, ye would not believe it."

"Indeed," she says, in innocent wonder; she quite sympathizes with the public-spirited reformer.

"Ay, it's true. Mind ye, I am a Conservative myself; I will have nothing to do with Radicals and their Republics; no, no, but a wise Conservative knows how to march with the age. Take my own position: for example as soon as I saw that the steam fire-engine was a necessity, I withdrew my opposition at once. I am very thankful to you, ma'am, for having given me an opportunity of carefully considering the question. I will never forget our trip round Mull. Dear me! it is warm the day," added the laird, as he raised his broad felt hat and wiped his face with his voluminous silk handkerchief.

Here come two pedestrians—good-looking young lads of an obviously English type—and faultlessly equipped from head to heel. They look neither to the left or right; on they go manfully through the dust, the sun scorching their faces; there must be a trifle of heat under these knapsacks. Well, we wish them fine weather and whole heels. It is not the way some of us would like to pass a holiday. For what is this that Miss Avon is singing lightly to herself as she walks carelessly on, occasionally pausing to look in at a shop—

And often have we seamen heard how men are killed or undone,
By overturns of carriages, and thieves, and fires in London.

Here she turns aside to caress a small terrier; but the animal, mistaking her intention, barks furiously, and retreats, growling and ferocious, into the shop. Miss Avon is not disturbed. She walks on, and completes her nautical ballad—all for her own benefit—

We've heard what risk all landsmen run, from noblemen to tailors,
So, Billy, let's thank Providence that you and I are sailors!

"What on earth is that, Mary?" her friend behind asks.

The girls stop with a surprised look, as if she had scarcely been listening to herself; then she says lightly:

"Oh, don't you know the sailor's song—I forget what they call it:

A strong sou-wester's blowing, Billy, can't you hear it roar now?
Lord help 'em, how I pity all unhappy folks on shore now."

"You have become a thorough sailor, Miss Avon," says Angus Sutherland, who has overheard the last quotation.

"I—I like it better—I am more interested," she says, timidly, "since you were so kind as to show me the working of the ship."

"Indeed," says he, "I wish you would take command of her, and order her present captain below. Don't you see how tired his eyes are becoming? He won't take his turn of sleep like the others; he has been scarcely off the deck night or day since we left Canina; and I find it is no use remonstrating with him. He is too anxious; and he fancies I am in a hurry to get back; and these continual calms prevent his getting on. Now the whole difficulty would be solved, if you let me go back by the steamer; then you could lie at Portree here for a night or two, and let him have some proper rest."

"I do believe, Angus," said his hostess, laughing in her gentle way, "that you threaten to leave us just to see how anxious we are to keep you."

"My position as ship's doctor," he retorts, "is compromised. If Captain John falls ill on my hands, whom am I to blame but myself?"

"I am quite sure I can get him to go below," says Mary Avon, with decision—"quite sure of it. That is, especially," she adds, rather shyly, "if you will take his place. I know he would place more dependence on you than on any of the men."

This is a very pretty compliment to pay to one who is rather proud of his nautical knowledge.

"Well," he says, laughing, "the responsibility must rest on you. Order him below, to-night, and see whether he obeys. If we don't get to a proper anchorage, we will manage to sail the yacht somehow among us—you being captain, Miss Avon."

"If I am captain," she says, lightly—though she turns away her head somewhat, "I shall forbid your deserting the ship."

"So long as you are captain, you need not fear that," he answers. Surely he could say no less.

But it was still John of Skye who was skipper when, on getting under way, we nearly met with a serious accident. Fresh water and all provisions having been got on board, we weighed anchor only to find the breeze die wholly down. Then the dingy was got out to tow the yacht away from the sheltered harbour, and our young doctor, always anxious for hard work, must needs jump in to join in this service. But the little boat had been straining at the cable for scarcely five minutes when a squall of wind came over from the north-west and suddenly filled the sails. "Look out there, boys!" called Captain John, for we were running full down on the dingy. "Let go the rope! Let go!" he shouted; but they would not let go, as the dingy came sweeping by. In fact, she caught the yacht just below the quarter, and seemed to disappear altogether. Mary Avon uttered one shriek; and then stood pale—clapping one of the ropes—not daring to look. And John of Skye uttered some exclamation in the Gaelic; and jumped on to the taffrail. But the next thing we saw, just above the taffrail, was the red and shining and laughing face of Angus Sutherland, who was hoisting himself up by means of the mizzen boom; and directly afterwards appeared the scarlet cap of Hector of Moidart. It was upon this latter culprit that the full force of John of Skye's wrath was expended.

"Why did you not let go the rope when I was call to you?"

"It is all right, and if I was put into the water, I have been in the water before," was the philosophic reply.

And now it was, as we drew away from Portree, that Captain Mary Avon endeavoured to assume supreme command and would have the deposed skipper go below and sleep. John of Skye was very obedient, but he said: "Oh, ay, I will get plenty of sleep. But that hill there, that is Ben Inivaig; and there is not any hill in the West Highlands so bad for squalls as that hill. By and by I will get plenty of sleep."

But Inivaig let us go past its great, gloomy, forbidding shoulders and cliffs without visiting us with anything worse than a few variable puffs; and we got well down into the Raasay Narrows. What a picture of still summer loveliness was around us!—the rippling blue seas, the green shores, and far over these the black peaks of the Coolins now taking a purple tint in the glow of the afternoon. The shallow Sound of Scalpa we did not venture to attack, especially as it was now low water; we went outside Scalpa, by the rocks of Skier Dearg. And still John of Skye evaded, with a gentle Highland courtesy, the orders of the captain. The silver bell of Master Fred summoned us below for dinner, and still John of Skye was gently obdurate.

"Now, John," says Mary Avon, seriously, to him, "you want to make me angry."

"Oh, no, mem; I not think that," says he, deprecatingly.

"Then why won't you go and have some sleep? Do you want to be ill?"

"Oh, there is plenty of sleep," says he. "May be we will get to Kyle Akin to-night; and there will be plenty of sleep for us."

"But I am asking you as a favour to go and

get some sleep now. Surely the men can take charge of the yacht!"

"Oh, yes, oh, yes!" says John of Skye. "They can do that ferry well."

And then he paused—for he was great friends with this young lady, and did not like to disoblige her.

"You will be having your dinner now. After the dinner, if Mr. Sutherland himself will be on deck, I will go below and turn in for a time."

"Of course Dr. Sutherland will be on deck," says the new captain, promptly; and she was so sure of one member of her crew that she added, "and he will not leave the tiller for a moment until you come to relieve him."

Perhaps it was this promise—perhaps it was the wonderful beauty of the evening—that made us hurry over dinner. Then we went on deck again; and our young Doctor, having got all his bearings and directions clear in his head, took the tiller, and John of Skye at length succumbed to the authority of Commander Avon and disappeared into the forecabin.

The splendour of colour around us on that still evening!—away in the west the sea of a pale yellow green, with each ripple a flash of rose flame, and over there in the south the great mountains of Skye—the Coolins and Blaven, and Ben-na-Calleach—became of a plum-purple in the clear and cloudless sky. Angus Sutherland was at the tiller contentedly smoking an almost black meerschaum; the laird was discoursing to us about the extraordinary pith and conscientiousness of the Scotch phrases in the Northumbrian psalter; while ever and anon a certain young lady, linked arm-in-arm with her friend, would break the silence with some aimless fragment of ballad or old-world air.

And still we glided onwards in the beautiful evening; and now ahead of us in the dusk of the evening, the red star of Kyle Akin light-house steadily gleamed. We might get to anchor, after all, without waking John of Skye.

"In weather like this," remarked our sovereign lady, "in the gathering darkness, John might keep asleep for fifty years."

"Like Rip Van Winkle," said the laird, proud of his erudition. "That is a wonderful story that Washington Irving wrote—a very fine story."

"Washington Irving!—the story is as old as the Coolins," said Dr. Sutherland.

The laird stared as if he had been Rip Van Winkle himself; was he forever to be check-mated by the encyclopaedic knowledge of Young England—or Young Scotland rather—and that knowledge only the gatherings and sweepings of dusty books that anybody with a parrot-like habit might acquire?

"Why, surely you know that the legend belongs to that common stock of legends that go through all literature!" says our young Doctor. "I have no doubt the Hindoos have their Epimenides; and that Peter Klaus turns up somewhere or other in the Gaelic stories. However, that is of little importance; it is of importance that Captain John should get some sleep. Hector, come here!"

There was a brief consultation about the length of anchor-chain wanted for the little harbour opposite Kyle Akin. Hector's instructions were on no account to disturb John of Skye. But no sooner had they set about getting the chain on deck than another figure appeared, black among the rigging; and there was a well-known voice heard forward. Then Captain John came aft, and, despite all remonstrances, would relieve his substitute. Rip Van Winkle's sleep had lasted about an hour and a half.

And now we steal by the black shores; and that solitary red star comes nearer and nearer in the dusk; and at length we can make out two or three other paler lights close down by the water. Behold! the yellow ports of a steam-yacht at anchor; we know, as our own anchor goes rattling out in the dark, that we shall have at least one neighbour and companion through the still watches of the night.

CHAPTER XV.

TEMPTATION.

But the night, according to John of Skye's chronology, lasts only until the tide turns or until a breeze springs up. Long before the wan glare in the east had arisen to touch the highest peaks of the Coolins, we hear the tread of the men on deck getting the yacht under way. And then there is a shuffling noise in Angus Sutherland's cabin; and we guess that he is stealthily dressing in the dark. Is he anxious to behold the wonders of daybreak in the beautiful Loch Aish, or is he bound to take his share in the sailing of the ship? Less perturbed spirits sink back again into sleep, and contentedly let the *White Dove* go on her own way through the expanding blue-gray light of the dawn.

Hours afterwards there is a strident shouting down the companion-way, everybody is summoned on deck to watch the yacht shoot the Narrows of Kyle Rhea. And the laird is the first to express his surprise; are these the dreaded Narrows that have caused Captain John to start before daybreak so as to shoot them with the tide? All around is a dream of summer beauty and quiet. A more perfect picture of peace and loveliness could not be imagined than the green crags of the mainland, and the vast hills of Skye, and this placid channel between shining in the fair light of the morning. The only thing we notice is that on the grassy