

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XXVII.

AN UNSPOKEN APPEAL.

"What have I done? Is she vexed? Have I offended her?" he asked, the next morning, in a rapid manner, when his hostess came on deck. The gale had abated somewhat, but gloom overspread earth and sky. It was nothing to the gloom that overspread his usually frank and cheerful face.

"You mean Mary?" she says, though she knows well enough.

"Yes, haven't you seen? She seems to treat me as though we had never met before—as though we were perfect strangers; and I know she is too kind-hearted to cause any one any pain."

Here he looks somewhat embarrassed for a moment; but his customary straight-forwardness comes to his rescue.

"Yes; I will confess I am very much hurt by it. And—and I should like to know if there was any cause. Surely you must have noticed it?"

She had noticed it, sure enough; and in contrast with that studied coldness which Mary Avon had shown to her friend of former days, she had remarked the exceeding friendliness the young lady was extending to the Laird's nephew. But would she draw the obvious conclusion? Not likely; she was too staunch a friend to believe any such thing. All the same, there remained in her mind a vague feeling of surprise, with perhaps a touch of personal injury.

"Well, Angus, you know," she said, evasively, "Mary is very much preoccupied just at present. Her whole condition of life is changed, and she has many things to think of—"

"Yes; but she is frank enough with her other friends. What have I done that I should be made a stranger of?"

A strange answer comes to these idle frettings of the hour. Far away on the shore a number of small black figures emerge from the woods, and slowly pass along the winding road that skirts the rocks. They are following a cart—a common farm-yard cart; but on the wooden planks is placed a dark object that is touched here and there with silver—or perhaps it is only the white cords. Between the overhanging gloom of the mountains and the cold grays of the wind-swept sea the small black line passes slowly on. And these two on board the yacht watch it in silence. Are they listening for the wail of the pipes—the pathetic dirge of "Lord Lovat," or the cry of the "Cumhadh na Cloinne?" But the winds are loud, and the rushing seas are loud; and now the rude farm-yard cart, with its solemn burden, is away out at the point, and presently the whole simple pageant has disappeared. The lonely burying-ground lies far away among the hills.

Angus Sutherland turns round again with a brief sigh.

"It will be all the same in a few years," he says to his hostess; and then he adds, indifferently, "What do you say about starting? The wind is against us; but anything is better than lying here. There were some bad squalls in the night."

Very soon after this the silent loch is resounding with the rattle of halyards, blocks and chains; and Angus Sutherland is seeking distraction from those secret cares of the moment in the excitement of hard work. Nor is it any joke getting in that enormous quantity of anchor chain. In the midst of all the noise and bustle Mary Avon appears on deck to see what is going on, and she is immediately followed by young Smith.

"Why don't you help them?" she says, laughing.

"So I would, if I knew what to do," he says, good-naturedly. "I'll go and ask Dr. Sutherland."

It was a fatal step. Angus Sutherland suggested, somewhat grimly, that if he liked he might lend a hand at the windlass. A muscular young Englishman does not like to give in, and for a time he held his own with the best of them; but long before the starboard anchor had been got up, and the port one hove short, he had had enough of it. He did not volunteer to assist at the throat halyards. To Miss Avon, who was calmly looking on, he observed that it would take him about a fortnight to get his back straight.

"That," said she, finding an excuse for him instantly, "is because you worked too hard at it at first. You should have watched the Islay man. All he does is to call 'Heave!' and to make his shoulders go up as if he were going to do the whole thing himself. But he does not help a bit. I have watched him again and again."

"Your friend, Dr. Sutherland," said he, regarding her for an instant as he spoke, "seems to work as hard as any of them."

"He is very fond of it," she said, simply,

without any embarrassment; nor did she appear to regard it as singular that Angus Sutherland should have been spoken of specially as a friend.

Angus Sutherland himself comes rapidly aft, loosens the tiller-ropes, and jams the helm over. And now the anchor is hove right up; the reefed mainsail and small jib quickly fill out before this fresh breeze, and presently, with a sudden cessation of noise, we are spinning away through the leaden-coloured waters. We are not sorry to get away from under the gloom of these giant hills; for the day still looks squally, and occasionally a scud of rain comes whipping across, scarcely sufficient to wet the decks. And there is more life and animation on board now; a good deal of walking up and down in Ulsters, with inevitable collisions; and of remarks shouted against, or with, the wind; and of joyful pointing toward certain silver gleams of light in the west and south. There is hope in front; behind us nothing but darkness and the threatenings of storm. The Pass of Glencoe has disappeared in rain; the huge mountains on the right are as black as the deeds of murder done in the glen below; Ardour over there, and Lochaber here, are steeped in gloom. And there is less sadness now in the old refrain of "Lochaber," since there is a prospect of the South shining before us. If Mary Avon is singing to herself about

"Lochaber no more, and Lochaber no more—
We'll maybe return to Lochaber no more,"

it is with a light heart.

But then it is a fine thing to go bowling along with a brisk breeze on our beam, it is very different when we get round Ardshiel, and find the southerly wind veering to meet us dead in the teeth. And there is a good sea running up Loch Linnhe—a heavy gray green sea that the *White Dove* meets and breaks, with spurts of spray forward, and a line of hissing foam in our wake. The zigzag beating takes us alternately to Ardour and Appin, until we can see here and there the cheerful patches of yellow corn at the foot of the giant and gloomy hills; then "Bout ship" again, and away we go on the heaving and rushing gray-green sea.

And is Mary Avon's oldest friend—the woman who is the stanchest of champions—being at last driven to look askance at the girl? Is it fair that the young lady should be so studiously silent when her faithful doctor is by, and instantly begin to talk when he goes forward to help at the jib or foresail sheets? And when he asks her, as in former days, to take the tiller, she somewhat coldly declines the offer he has so timidly and respectfully made. But as for Mr. Smith, that is a very different matter. It is he whom she allows to go below for some wrap for her neck. It is he who stands by, ready to shove over the top of the companion when she crouches to avoid a passing shower of rain. It is he with whom she jokes and talks—when the Laird does not monopolize her.

"I would have believed it of any other girl in the world rather than of her," says her hostess, to another person, when these two happen to be alone in the saloon below. "I don't believe it yet. It is impossible. Of course a girl who is left as penniless as she is might be pardoned for looking round and being friendly with rich people who are well inclined toward her; but I don't believe—I say it is impossible—that she should have thrown Angus over just because she saw a chance of marrying the Laird's nephew. Why, there never was a girl we have ever known so independent as she is!—not any one half as proud and as fearless. She looks upon going to London and earning her own living as nothing at all. She is the very last girl in the world to speculate on making a good match—she has too much pride; she would not speak another word to Howard Smith if such a monstrous thing were suggested to her."

"Very well," says the meek listener. "The possibility was not of his suggesting, assuredly; he knows better."

Then the Admiral-in-chief of the *White Dove* sits silent and puzzled for a time.

"And yet her treatment of poor Angus is most unfair. He is deeply hurt by it—he told me so this morning—"

"If he is so fearfully sensitive that he cannot go yachting and enjoy his holiday because a girl does not pay him attention—"

"Why, what do you suppose he came back here for?" she says, warmly. "To go sailing in the *White Dove*? No, not if twenty *White Doves* were waiting for him! He knows too well the value of his time to stay away so long from London if it were merely to take the tiller of a yacht. He came back here, at great personal sacrifice, because Mary was on board."

"Has he told you so?"

"He has not; but one has eyes."

"Then suppose she has changed her mind, how can you help it?"

She says nothing for a second. She is preparing the table for Master Fred; perhaps she tosses

the novels on to the couch with an impatience they do not at all deserve. But at length she says:

"Well, I never thought Mary would have been so fickle as to go chopping and changing about within the course of a few weeks. However, I won't accuse her of being mercenary; I will not believe that. Howard Smith is a most gentlemanly young man—good-looking, too, and pleasant tempered. I can imagine any girl liking him."

Here a volume of poems is pitched on to the top of the draught-board as if it had done her some personal injury.

"And in any case she might be more civil to a very old friend of ours," she adds.

Further discourse on this matter is impossible; for our Friedrich d'or comes in to prepare for luncheon. But why the charge of incivility? When we are once more assembled together, the girl is quite the reverse of uncivil toward him. She shows him—when she is forced to speak to him—an almost painful courtesy; and she turns her eyes down as if she were afraid to speak to him. This is no flaunting coquette, proud of her wilful caprice.

And as for poor Angus, he does his best to propitiate her. They begin talking about the picturesqueness of various cities. Knowing that Miss Avon has lived the most of her life, if she was not actually born, in London, he strikes boldly for London. What is there in Venice, what is there in the world, like London in moonlight—with the splendid sweep of her river, and the long lines of gas-lamps, and the noble bridges? But she is all for Edinburgh; if Edinburgh had but the Moldau running through that valley, and the bridges of Prague to span it, what city in Europe could compare with it? And the Laird is so delighted with her approval of the Scotch capital that he forgets for the moment his Glaswegian antipathy to the rival city, and enlarges no less on the picturesqueness of it than on its wealth of historical traditions. There is not a stain of blood on any floor that he does not believe in. Then the Sanctuary of Holyrood; what stories has he not to tell about that famous refuge?

"I believe the mysterious influence of that sanctuary has gone out and charmed all the country about Edinburgh," said our young doctor. "I suppose you know that there are several plants, poisonous elsewhere, that are quite harmless in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh. You remember I told you, Miss Avon, that evening we went out to Arthur's Seat?"

It was well done, Queen Titania must have thought, to expose this graceless flirt before her new friends. So she had been walking out to Arthur's Seat with him, in the summer afternoons?

"Y—yes," says the girl.

"Ay, that is a most curious thing," says the Laird, not noticing her downcast looks and flushed cheeks. "But what were they, did ye say?"

"Umbelliferous plants," replied Angus Sutherland, in quite a matter-of-fact manner. "The *Enanthe crocata* is one of them, I remember; and I think the *Circuta virosa*, that is the water-hemlock."

"I would just like to know," says the Laird, somewhat pompously, "whether that does not hold good about the neighbourhood of Glesca also. There's nothing so particular healthy about the climate of Edinburgh, as far as ever I heard tell of. Quite the reverse—quite the reverse. East winds, fogs—no wonder the people are shilpit-looking creatures as a general rule—like a lot o' Paisley weavers. But the ceety is a fine ceety. I will admit that; and many's the time I've said to Tom Galbraith that he could get no finer thing to paint than the view of the High street at night from Prince's street—especially on a moonlight night. A fine ceety; but the people themselves!"—here the Laird shook his head. "And their manner o' speech is most vexome—a long sing-song kind o' yaumering, as if they had not sufficient manliness to say outright what they meant. If we are to have a Scotch accent, I prefer the accent—the very slight accent—ye hear about Glesca. I would like to hear what Miss Avon has to say upon that point."

"I am not a very good judge, sir," says Miss Avon, prudently.

Then on deck. The leaden black waves are breaking in white foam along the shores of Kingairloch and the opposite rocks of Eilean-na-Shuana and we are still laboriously beating against the southerly winds; but those silver-yellow gleams in the south have increased over the softly purple hills of Morvern and Duart. Black as night are the vast ranges of mountains in the north; but they are behind us; we have now no longer any fear of a white shaft of lightning falling from the gloom overhead.

The decks are dry now; camp-stools are in requisition; there is to be a consultation about our future plans, after the *White Dove* has been beached for a couple of days. The Laird admits that, if it had been three days or four days, he would like to run through to Glasgow and to Strathgovan, just to see how they were getting on with the gas-lamps in the Mitherdrum Road; but, as it is, he will write for a detailed report; hence he is free to go wherever we wish. Miss Avon, interrogated, answers that she thinks she must leave us and set out for London; whereupon she is bidden to hold her tongue and not talk foolishness. Our doctor, also interrogated, looks down on the sitting parliament—he is standing at the tiller—and laughs.

"Don't be too sure of getting to Castle Osprey to-night," he says, "whatever your plans may

be. The breeze is falling off a bit. But you may put me down as willing to go anywhere with you, if you will let me come."

This decision seemed greatly to delight his hostess. She said we could not do without him. She was ready herself to go anywhere now—eagerly embraced the Youth's suggestion that there were, according to John of Skye's account, vast numbers of seals in the bays on the western shores of Knapdale; and at once assured the Laird, who said he particularly wanted a seal-skin or two and some skarts' feathers for a young lady, that he should not be disappointed. Knapdale, then, it was to be.

But in the meantime? Dinner found us in a dead calm. After dinner, when we came on deck, the sun had gone down; and in the pale, tender blue-gray of the twilight the golden star of Lismore light-house was already shining. Then we had our warning lights put up—the port red light shedding a crimson glow on the bow of the dingy, the starboard green light touching with a cold, wan colour the iron shrouds. To crown all, as we were watching the dark shadows of Lismore Island, a thin, white, vivid line, like the edge of a shilling, appeared over the low hill; and then the full moon rose into the partially-coloured sky. It was a beautiful night.

But we gave up all hope of reaching Castle Osprey. The breeze had quite gone; the calm sea slowly rolled. We went below—to books, draughts, and what not—Angus Sutherland alone remaining on deck, having his pipe for his companion.

It was about an hour afterward that we were startled by sounds on deck, and presently we knew that the *White Dove* was again flying through the water. The women took some little time to get their shawls and things ready; had they known what was awaiting them, they would have been more alert.

For no sooner were we on deck than we perceived that the *White Dove* was tearing through the water without the slightest landmark or light to guide her. The breeze that had sprung up had swept before it a bank of sea-fog—a most unusual thing in these windy and changeable latitudes; and so dense was this fog that the land on all sides of us had disappeared, while it was quite impossible to say where Lismore light-house was. Angus Sutherland had promptly surrendered the helm to John of Skye, and had gone forward. The men on the lookout at the bow were themselves invisible.

"Oh, it is all right, mem," called out John of Skye, through the dense fog, in answer to a question. "I know the lay o' the land very well, though I do not see it. And I will keep her down to Duart, bekass of the tide." And then he called out,

"Hector, do you not see any land yet?"

"Cha n'eil!" calls out Hector, in reply, in his native tongue.

"We'll put a tack on her now. Ready about, boys!"

"Ready about!" Round slews her head, with blocks and sail, clattering and flapping; there is a scuffle of making fast the lee-sheets, then once more the *White Dove* goes plunging into the unknown. The non-experts see nothing at all but the fog; they have not the least idea whether Lismore light house—which is a solid object to run against—is on port or starboard bow, or right astern for the matter of that. They are huddled in a group about the top of the companion. They can only listen and wait.

John of Skye's voice rings out again:

"Hector, can you not mek out the land yet?"

"Cha n'eil!"

"What does he say?" the Laird asks, almost in a whisper; he is afraid to distract attention at such a time.

"He says 'No,'" Angus Sutherland answers. "He cannot make out the land. It is very thick; and there are bad rocks between Lismore and Duart. I think I will climb up to the cross-trees, and have a look round."

What was this? A girl's hand laid for an instant on his arm; a girl's voice—low, quick, beseeching—saying "Oh, no!"

It was the trifle of a moment.

"There is not the least danger," says he, lightly. "Sometimes you can see better at the cross-trees."

Then the dim figure is seen going up the shrouds; but he is not quite up at the cross-trees when the voice of John of Skye is heard again:

"Mr. Sutherland!"

"All right, John!" and the dusky figure comes tumbling down and across the loose sheets on deck.

"If ye please, sir," says John of Skye; and the well-known formula means that Angus Sutherland is to take the helm. Captain John goes forward to the bow. The only sound around us is the surging of the unseen waves.

"I hope you are not frightened, Miss Avon," says Mr. Smith, quite cheerfully; though he is probably listening like the rest of us, for the sullen roar of breakers in the dark.

"No, I am bewildered—I don't know what it is all about."

"You need not be afraid," Angus Sutherland says to her, abruptly—for he will not have the Youth interfere in such matters—"with Captain John aboard. He sees better in a fog than most men in daylight."

"We are in the safe-keeping of One greater than any Captain John," says the Laird, simply and gravely; he is not in any alarm.

Then a call from the bow:

"Helm hard down, sir!"