

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 XXXV.

TO ABSENT FRIENDS.

Next morning, however, every one perceived an extraordinary change in the appearance and manner of the girl. Mary Avon had come back to us again, with all the light and life of her face, and the contented gentleness of the soft black eyes. What had wrought the transformation? Certain confidential assurances in the silence of the night that Angus Sutherland, so far from not forgiving her, had insisted that she was not to blame at all! Or the natural reaction after a long strain of anxiety? Or merely the welcome fresh breeze of the morning, with the cheerful wooded shores, and the white houses shining in the sunlight? Anyhow, there was quite a new expression in her face; and we heard the low, sweet laugh again. It is true that, once or twice, as she walked up and down the deck with the Laird, her eyes grew pensive as she looked away along the hills on the southern shores of the loch. That was the direction in which Angus had left in the morning. And these hills were somewhat overcast; it seemed to be raining inland.

Moreover, there was something else to make our breakfast party a glad one. The two men who had rowed our young doctor across the loch at break of day had had the curiosity to pierce inland as far as the village of Clachan; and the scouts had brought back the most glowing accounts of the Promised Land which they had discovered. They had penetrated a fertile and deeply-wooded valley, and they had at length come upon a centre of the highest civilization. There was a post-office. There was a church, the clock of which struck the hours.

"Just fancy that!" exclaimed our hostess, "a clock that strikes the hours! and a telegraph office! We might send a telegram to ask whether the country has been invaded anywhere, or whether the Prime Minister has committed suicide."

"I would like to hear about the steam fire-engine," said the Laird, almost to himself.

"However, breeze or no breeze, seals or no seals," she says, with decision, "we must stay over a day here, to have the yacht thoroughly provisioned. We cannot go on skating on the edge of tinned meats. We must have a plentiful supply of fresh vegetables, and fresh milk, and eggs and butter; and then two or three joints are always so serviceable—cold, I mean, for luncheon; and if Fred cannot get any game, at least he must get us some fowls. What do you say, Mary? Shall we walk over to this place, and clear the way for Fred?"

"Oh no," says the other, lightly; "you and I are going with the seal-shooters. They never get near anything, so we cannot be in the way. I assure you, sir, we shall be as quiet as mice," she adds, addressing the Laird.

"Ye will come with us, and ye will speak just as much as ye please," said the Laird, dogmatically. "What signifies a seal? The creature is good for nothing. And the idea of you two going away by yourselves into the country! No, no. Come away, and get ready, Howard. If ye cannot shoot a seal with two leddies in the boat, ye will never do it without. And the sea-breezes, Miss Mary," he added, with an approving air, "are better for ye than the land-breezes. Oh, ay; ye are looking just fine this morning."

A short time thereafter he was on deck, looking around him at the pleasant trees and the blue waters, when Miss Avon joined him, fully equipped for the expedition; and just at this moment they began to hear a sound of music in the stillness of the morning air. And then they perceived a rude old rowing-boat, pulled by a small boy of twelve or so, coming nearer and nearer; while another small boy of about the same age was peacefully reclining in the stern, his head thrown back so that it met the full glare of the morning sun, while he played vigorously, but rather inaccurately, "The Campbells are Coming," on a tin whistle.

"Look at that!" said the Laird, with delight; "is not that perfect happiness? Look at his pride and laziness—having another boy to pull him about, while he shows off on the penny whistle. Dear me, I wish I was that young rascal!"

"He seems happy enough," she said with a sigh.

"That is because he does not know it," remarked the Laird, profoundly. "If you proved to him that he was happy, it would immediately vanish."

"You cannot be consciously happy, but you may be consciously unhappy—that is rather hard," said she, absently.

However, these two philosophers were withdrawn from this occult point by a summons from the Youth, who had already got the rifles and cartridges into the bow of the gig. And, indeed, as we rowed away from the yacht, in the direction of the rocks at the mouth of the loch, Miss

Avon seemed determined to prove that, consciously or unconsciously, she was happy enough. She would not even allow that Angus Sutherland could have felt any pang of regret at leaving the *White Dove* and his friends.

"Poor chap!" said the Laird, with some compassion, as he turned his head and looked away toward those gloomy hills; "it must have been a lonesome journey for him this morning. And he so fond of sailing, too. I'm thinking, when he saw what a nice breeze there was, he was rather sorry to go away. I should not wonder if it was with a heavy heart that he went on board the steamer."

"Oh no, sir! why should you think that?" said Mary Avon, quickly and anxiously. "If Dr. Sutherland had nothing to consider but yachting, he might have been sorry to go away. But think what lies before him; think what calls him! Look at the position he has won for himself already, and what is expected of him! And you would have him throw away his splendid opportunities in yachting? There is not a university in Europe where he is not known; there is not a man of science in Europe who does not expect great things of him; and—and how proud his father must be of him!"

She spoke eagerly and almost breathlessly; there was a pink flush on her cheek, but it was not from shamefacedness. She seemed desperately anxious to convince the Laird that our doctor ought to have left the yacht, and must have left the yacht, and could not do anything else but leave the yacht. Meanwhile her friend and hostess regarded her curiously.

"A man with such capacities as he has," continued the girl, warmly, "with such a great future before him, owes it to himself that he should not give way to mere sentiment. The world could not get on at all if people—I mean if the great people, from whom we expect much—were always to be consulting their feelings. Perhaps he was sorry to leave the yacht. He does like sailing; and—and I think he liked to be among friends. But what is that when he knows there is work in the world for him to do? If he was sorry at leaving the yacht, you may depend on it that that had passed away before he stepped on board the steamer. For what was that trifling sentiment compared with the consciousness that he had acted rightly?"

Something about the precision of these phrases—for the girl but rarely gave way to such a fit of earnest talking—seemed to suggest to the silent person who was watching her that this was not the first time the girl had thought of these things.

"Idle people," said this youthful controversialist, "can afford to indulge in sentiment, but not those who have to do great things in the world. And it is not as if—Dr. Sutherland,"—she always faltered the least bit just before pronouncing the name—"were only working for his own fame or his own wealth. It is for the good of mankind that he is working; and if he has to make this or that sacrifice, he knows that he is doing right. What other reward does a man need to have?"

"I am thinking of the poor old man in Banffshire," said her friend to her, thoughtfully. "If Angus goes away to Italy for some years, they may not see each other again."

At this the girl turned strangely pale, and remained silent; but she was unnoticed, for at this moment all attention was attracted toward the seals.

There they were, no doubt, and in large numbers. We could see the occasionally moving forms, scarcely distinguishable from the brown seaweed, on the long projecting points of the low rocks; while here and there one of the animals could be made out, poising himself in a semicircle—head and tail in the air—like the letter O with the upper four-fifths cut off. But the problem was, how to get anywhere within shot. The rocks, or small islands, had no doubt certain eminences in the middle, but they were low and shallow all round. Obviously it was no use bearing straight down on them from our present position; so it was resolved to give them a wide berth, to pull away from the islands altogether, and then approach them from the south, if haply there might in this wise be some possibility of shelter. It was observed that Queen Titania, during these whispered and eager consultations, smiled gravely, and was silent. She had been in the Highlands before.

Seals are foolish animals. We were half a mile away from them, and we were going still farther away. The rocking of the water made it impossible for us to try a hap-hazard shot, even if we had had a rifle that would have carried anything like eight hundred yards with precision. There was not the least reason for their being alarmed. But all the same, as we silently and slowly paddled away from them—actually away from them—the huge boat—only by one fopped and waddled, and dropped into the water with a splash. In about a minute or

so there was not a seal visible through our best binoculars. And Queen Titania calmly smiled.

But, as everybody knows, there are two sides to an island, as to everything else. So we boldly bore down on the shores nearest us, and resolved, on getting near, on a cautious and silent landing. After many a trial we found a creek where the stern of the gig could be backed into fairly deep water, along a ledge of rock, and then two of us got out. The ladies produced their knitting materials.

With much painful stooping and crawling we at length reached the middle ridge, and there laid down our rifles to have a preliminary peep round. That stealthy glance revealed the fact that, on the other side also, the seals had been alarmed, and had left the rocks; but still they were not far away. We could see here and there a black and glistening head moving among the lapping waters. Of course it would have been madness to have risked our all on a random shot at sea. Hit or miss, the chances were about equal we should not get the seal, so we quietly retired again behind the ridge, and sat down. We could see the gig and its occupants. It seemed to one of us at least that Queen Titania was still amused.

A dead silence; while we idly regard the washed-up stores of sea-shells around us, and patiently await the return of the seals to the rocks. Then a sudden noise that makes one's heart jump; a couple of terns have discovered us, and the irate birds go wheeling and shrieking overhead with screams that would have aroused the Sleeping Beauty and all her household. In their fright and wrath they come nearer and nearer; at times they remain motionless overhead; but ever continues the shrill and piercing shriek. The face of the Youth is awful to see. Again and again he puts up his rifle; and there is no doubt that, if he were to fire, he might accomplish the feat which is more frequently heard of in novels than elsewhere—shooting a bird on the wing with a rifle. But then he is loth to throw away his last chance. With a gesture of despair, he lowers his weapon, and glances toward the gig. Queen Titania has caught his eye, and he hers. She is laughing.

At length we venture to hazard everything. Furtively each rifle is protruded over the ledge of rock; and furtively each hand creeps up by the stock, the hand on the trigger-guard. The caution is unnecessary. There is not a sign of any living thing all around the shores. Even the two sea swallows, alarmed by our moving, have wheeled away into the distance; we are left in undisturbed possession of the island. Then the Youth clambers up to the top of the rocks, and looks around. A skart, perched on a far ledge, immediately takes flight, striking the water with his heavy wings before he can get well on his way; thereafter a dead silence.

"It was the tern that did that," says the Youth, moodily, as we return to the gig. "The seals must have known well enough."

"They generally do contrive to know somehow," is the answer of one who is not much disappointed, and who is still less surprised.

But this wicked woman is all a-laughing when we return to the gig!

"Come, children," says she, "we shall barely be back in time for lunch; and we shall be all the longer that Angus is not here to sing his 'Ho, ro, clansmen!' But the quicker the sooner, as the Highlandman said. Jump in!"

"It was all owing to those sea-swallows," remarks the Youth, gloomily.

"Never mind," says she, with great equanimity. "Mary and I knew you would not shoot anything, or we should not have come. Let us hasten back to see what Fred has shot for us with his silver sixpences."

And so we tumble into the gig, and push away. And have a long swinging pull back to the *White Dove*.

There is still some measure of justice meted out upon the earth. The face of this fiend who has been laughing at us all the morning becomes a trifle more anxious when she draws near the yacht. For there is Master Fred idling up at the bow, instead of being below looking after the vast stores he has got on board, and, moreover, as we draw near, and as he comes along to the gangway, any one can perceive that our good Frederick D'or is not in a facetious frame of mind.

"Well, Fred, have you got a good supply at last?" she cries, taking hold of the rope, and putting her foot on the step.

Fred mumbles something in reply.

"What have you got?" she says, when she is on deck. "Any game?"

"No, mem."

"Oh, never mind; the fowls will do very well."

Fred is rather silent, until he explains that he could not get any fowls.

"No fowls? What butchers' meat, then?" says she, somewhat indignantly.

"None."

"None? Nothing?" says she; and a low titter begins to prevail among the assembled crowd. "Have you not got a joint of any sort?"

Fred is almost unwilling to confess—he is ashamed, angry, disconcerted. At last he blurts out,

"I could get nothing at all, mem, but fower loaves."

At this there was a roar of laughter. What had become of all her fresh milk, and butter, and eggs; her mutton, and fowls, and cutlets; her grouse, and snipe, and hares? We did not care for our privation; we only rejoiced in her discomfiture.

"That is just like a Scotch village," says she, savagely; "spending all its money on a church bell, and not able to keep a decent shop open! Do you mean to say you could not get a carrot, or a cabbage, or a pennyworth of milk?"

"No, mem."

"John," she says, in a domineering way, "why don't you get the sails up? What is the use of staying in a place like this?"

John comes forward timidly, and stroking his great beard; he half believes in these furious rages of hers.

"Oh yes, mem, if ye please, mem, I will get the sail set; but—but the tide will be turning soon, mem, and the wind she will be against us as soon as we get out of the loch; and it will be a long, long time before we get to Crinan. I not well acquaint with this place, mem; if we were up in our own part of the Highlands, do you think the people would let the *White Dove* be so long without the fresh cabbage and the milk? No; I not think that, mem."

"But we are not in our own part of the Highlands," says she, querulously; "and do you think we are going to starve? However, I suppose Fred can give us a biscuit. Let us go below."

Our lunch was, in truth, simple enough; but perhaps it was this indirect appeal to Fred that determined that worthy to surprise us at dinner that evening. First of all, after we had returned from another ineffectual seal hunt, we found he had decorated the dinner-table in an elaborate manner. There was a clean cloth, shining with the starch in it. There was a great dish of scarlet rowans in the middle of the table; and the rowans had a border of white heather—gathered at Loch-na-Chill; the rowans were for lovely colour, the heather was for luck. Then, not content with that, he had put all our available silver on the table, including the candlesticks and the snuffer tray, though the sun had not yet sunk behind the Jura hills. But the banquet defies description. The vast basin of steaming kidney soup, the boiled lithe, the fried mackerel, the round of tongue, the corned beef, the tomatoes, the pickles, the sardines, the convolutions of pudding and apricot jam—what Fish-monger, or Dry-salter, or Gun-maker, could have wanted more! Nor was there any Apemantus at the feast; there was the smiling and benign countenance of the Laird, who again and again made facetious remarks about the kirk bell of Clachan. Then he said, more formally,

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am going to ask ye to drink a toast."

"Oh, uncle!" said the Youth, deprecatingly; "we are not at a Commissioners' meeting at Strathgovan."

"And I will thank ye to fill your glasses," said the Laird, taking no heed of young England and his modern want of manners. "I have to ask ye, ladies and gentlemen, to drink the health of one who is an old and valued friend of some of us, who is admired and respected by us all. It would ill become us, now that he has been separated from us but by a day, that we should forget him in his absence. We have come in close contact with him; we have seen his fine qualities of temper and character; and I am sure no one present will contradict me when I say that, great as are his abilities, they are not more remarkable than his modesty, and his good-humour, and his simple, plain, frank ways. With a man of less solid judgment I might be afraid of certain dangerous tendencies of these times; but our friend has a Scotch head on his shoulders; he may be dazzled by their new-fangled speculations, but not convinced—not convinced. It is a rare thing—I will say it, though I am but a recent acquaintance, and do not know him as well as some now at this hospitable board—to find such powers of intellect united with such a quiet and unassuming manliness. Ladies and gentlemen, I give ye the health of Dr. Angus Sutherland. We regret that he has gone from us; but we know that duty calls, and we honour the man who stands to his guns. It may be that we may see him in these waters once more; it may be that we may not; but whatever may be in store for him, or for us, we know he will be worthy of the hopes we build on him, and we drink his health now in his absence, and wish him godspeed."

"Hear! hear!" cried the Youth, who was greatly amused by this burst of old-fashioned eloquence. But Mary Avon sat white and trembling, and quite forgot to put the glass to her lips. It was her hostess who spoke next, with a laugh.

"I think, sir," said she, "I might give you a hint. If you were to go up on deck and ask the men whether they would like to drink Angus' health, I don't think they would refuse."

"It is a most capital suggestion," said the Laird, rising to take down his wide-awake.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SUSPICIONS.

It was handsomely done on the part of the Laird, to pay that tribute to his vanquished and departed enemy. But next morning, as we were getting under way, he got a chance of speaking to his hostess alone, and he could not quite forego a little bit of boasting over his superior astuteness and prescience.

"What did I say, m'ann," he asked, with a confident chuckle, "when ye made a communication to me on the subject of our friend who has just left us? Did I not offer to make ye a wager, though I am but little of a gambler? A gold ring, a sixpence, and a silver thimble; did I not offer to wager ye these three articles