

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XLVI.

"FLIEH! AUF! HINAUS!"

This splendid scene of life, and motion, and brisk excitement! We flew through the narrow like a bolt from a bow; we had scarcely time to regard the whirling eddies of the current. All hands were on the alert, too, for the wind came in gusts from the Skye hills, and this tortuous strait is not a pleasant place to be taken unawares in. But the watching and work were altogether delightful after our long imprisonment. Even the grave John of Skye was whistling "Flir a bhata" to himself—something out of tune.

The wild and stormy sunset was shining all along the shores of Loch Alsh as we got out of the narrows and came in sight of Kyle Akin. And here were a number of vessels all storm-stayed, one of them, in the distance, with her sail set. We discovered afterward that this schooner had dragged her anchors and run ashore at Balmacara: she was more fortunate than many others that suffered in this memorable gale, and was at the moment we passed returning to her former anchorage.

The sunlight and the delight of moving had certainly got into the heads of these people. Nothing would do for them but that John of Skye should go on sailing all night. Kyle Akin—they would not hear of Kyle Akin. And it was of no avail that Captain John told them what he had heard ashore—that the *Glencoe* had to put back with her bulwarks smashed; that here, there, and everywhere vessels were on the rocks; that Stornoway Harbour was full of foreign craft, not one of which would put her nose out. They pointed to the sea, and the scene around them. It was a lovely sunset. Would not the moon be up by eleven?

"Well, mem," said John of Skye, with a humorous smile, "I think if we go on the night, there not much chance of our running against anything."

And indeed he was not to be outbraved by a couple of women. When we got to Kyle Akin, the dusk beginning to creep over land and sea, he showed no signs of running in there for shelter. We pushed through the narrow straits, and came in view of the darkening plain of the Atlantic, opening away up there to the north, and as far as we could see there was not a single vessel but ourselves on all this world of water. The gloom deepened: in under the mountains of Skye there was a darkness as of midnight. But one could still make out ahead of us the line of the Scalpa shore, marked by the white breaking of the waves. Even when that grew invisible we had Rona light to steer by.

The stormy and unsettled look of the sunset had prepared us for something of a dirty night, and as we went on both wind and sea increased considerably. The southwesterly breeze that had brought us so far at a spanking rate began to veer round to the north, and came in violent squalls, while the long swell running down between Raasay and Scalpa and the mainland caused the *White Dove* to labour heavily. Moreover, the night got as black as pitch, the moon had not arisen, and it was lucky, in this labourious beating up against the northerly squalls, that we had the distant Rona light by which to judge of our whereabouts.

The two women were huddled together in the companionway; it was the safest place for them; we could just make out the two dark figures in the ruddy glow coming up from the saloon.

"Isn't it splendid to be going along like this," said Miss Avon, "after lying at anchor so long?"

Her friend did not answer. She had been chiefly instrumental in persuading Captain John to keep on during the night, and she did not quite like the look of things. For one thing, she had perceived that the men were all now clad from head to foot in oil-skins, though as yet there was nothing but spray coming on board.

Our young doctor came aft, and tried to get down the companion-way without disturbing the two women.

"I am going below for my water-proof and leggings," said he, with a slight laugh. "There will be some fun before this night is over."

The tone of the girl altered in a moment.

"Oh, Angus," said she, grasping him by the arm. "Pray don't do that! Leave the men to work the boat. If there is any danger, why don't they make away for the land somewhere?"

"There is no danger," said he, "but there will be a little water by-and-by."

The volume of the great waves was certainly increasing, and a beautiful sight it was to mark the red port light shining on the rushing masses of foam as they swept by the side of the vessel. Our whereabouts by this time had become wholly a matter of conjecture with the anaesthetists, for the night was quite black; however, Rona light still did us good service.

When Angus Sutherland came on deck again, she was on the port tack, and the wind had moderated somewhat. But this proved to be a lull of evil omen. There was a low roar heard in the distance, and almost directly a violent squall from the east struck the yacht, sending the boom flying over before the skipper could get hold of the main sheet. Away flew the *White Dove* like an arrow, with the unseen masses of water smashing over her bows.

"In with the mizzen, boys!" called out John of Skye, and there was a hurried clatter and stamping, and flapping of canvas.

But that was not enough, for this unexpected squall from the east showed permanence, and as we were making in for the Sound of Scalpa we were now running free before the wind.

"We'll tek the foresail off her, boys!" shouted John of Skye again, and presently there was another rattle down on the deck.

Onward and onward we flew, in absolute darkness but for that red light that made the sea shine like a foaming sea of blood. And the pressure of the wind behind increased until it seemed likely to tear the canvas off her spars.

"Down with the jib, then!" called out John of Skye; and we heard, but could not see, the men at work forward. And still the *White Dove* flew onward through the night, and the wind howled and whistled through the rigging, and the boiling surges of foam swept away from her side. There was no more of Rona light to guide us now; we were tearing through the Sound of Scalpa; and still this hurricane seemed to increase in fury. As a last resource, John of Skye had the peak lowered. We had now nothing left but a mainsail about the size of a pocket-handkerchief.

As the night wore on, we got into more sheltered waters, being under the lee of Scalpa; and we crept away down between that island and Skye, seeking for a safe anchorage. It was a business that needed a sharp look-out, for the waters are shallow here, and we discovered one or two smacks at anchor, with no lights up. They did not expect any vessel to run in from the open on a night like this.

And at last we chose our place for the night, letting go both anchors. Then we went below, into the saloon.

"And how do you like sailing in the equinoctials, Mary?" said our hostess.

"I am glad we are all round this table again, and alive," said the girl.

"I thought you said the other day you did not care whether the yacht went down or not?"

"Of the two," remarked Miss Avon, shyly, "it is perhaps better that she should be afloat."

Angus was passing at the moment. He put his hand lightly on her shoulder, and said, in a kind way,

"It is better not to tempt the unknown, Mary. Remember what the French proverb says, 'Quand est mort, c'est pour longtemps.' And you know you have not nearly completed that great series of *White Dove* sketches for the smoking-room at Denny-mains."

"The smoking-room!" exclaimed the Laird, indignantly. "There is not one of her sketches that will not have a place—an honoured place—in my dining-room; depend on that. Ye will see—both of ye—what I will do with them; and the sooner ye come to see, the better."

We this evening resolved that if, by favour of the winds and the valour of John of Skye, we got up to Portree next day, we should at once telegraph to the island of Lewis (where we proposed to cease these summer wanderings) to inquire about the safety of certain friends of ours whom we meant to visit there, and who are much given to yachting; for the equinoctials must have blown heavily into Loch Roag, and the little harbour at Borva is somewhat exposed. However, it was not likely that they would allow themselves to be caught. They know something about the sea and about boats at Borva.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AFTER THE GALE.

"Well, indeed!" exclaimed the Laird, on putting his head out next morning. "This is wonderful—wonderful!"

Was it the long imprisonment in the darkness of the equinoctials that made him welcome with so much delight this spectacle of fair skies and sapphire seas, with the waves breaking white in Scalpa Sound, and the sunlight shining along the Coolins? Or was it not rather our long isolation from the ordinary affairs of the world that made him greet with acclamation the picture of brisk and busy human life, now visible from the deck of the yacht? We were no longer alone in the world. Over there, around the big black smacks—that looked like so many hens with broods of chickens—swarmed a

fleet of fishing boats; and as rapidly as hands could manage it, both men and women were shaking out the brown nets, and securing the glittering silver treasure of the sea. It was a picturesque sight—the stalwart brown-bearded men in their yellow oil-skins and huge boots; the bare-armed women in their scarlet short gowns; the masses of ruddy brown nets; the lowered sails. And then the Laird perceived that he was not alone in regarding this busy and cheerful scene.

Along there by the bulwarks, with one hand on the shrouds, and the other on the gig, stood Mary Avon, apparently watching the boats passing to and fro between the smacks and the shore. The Laird went gently up to her, and put his hand on her shoulder. She started, turned round suddenly, and then he saw to his dismay, that her eyes were full of tears.

"What, what?" said he, with a quick doubt and fear coming over him. Had all his plans failed, then? Was the girl still unhappy?

"What is it, lass? What is the matter?" said he, gripping her hand so as to get the truth from her.

By this time she had dried her eyes.

"Nothing—nothing," said she, rather shamefacedly. "I was only thinking about the song of 'Caller Herring'; and how glad those women must be to find their husbands come back this morning. Fancy their being out on such a night as last night. What it must be to be a fisherman's wife—alone on shore—"

"Toots, toots, lass!" cried the Laird, with a splendid cheerfulness, for he was greatly relieved that this was all the cause of the wet eyes. "Ye are just giving way to a sentiment. I have observed that people are apt to be sentimental in the morning before they get their breakfast. What! are ye peetying these folk? I can tell ye this is a proud day for them, to judge by the heaps o' fish. They are just as happy as kings; and as for the risk o' their trade, they have to do what is appointed to them. Why, does not that doctor friend o' yours say that the happiest people are they who are hardest worked?"

This reference to the doctor silenced the young lady at once.

"Not that I have much right to talk about work," said the Laird, penitently. "I believe I am becoming the idliest creature on the face of this world."

At this point a very pretty little incident occurred. A boat was passing to the shore, and in the stern of her was a young fisherman—a handsome young fellow, with a sun-tanned face and yellow beard. As they were going by the yacht, he caught a glimpse of Miss Avon; then when they had passed, he said something in Gaelic to his two companions, who immediately rested on their oars. Then he was seen rapidly to fill a tin can with two or three dozen herrings, and his companions backed their boat to the side of the yacht. The young fellow stood up in the stern, and with a shy laugh—but with no speech, for he was doubtless nervous about his English—offered this present to the young lady. She was very much pleased; but she blushed quite as much as he did. And she was confused, for she could not summon Master Fred to take charge of the herrings, seeing this compliment was so directly paid to herself. However, she boldly gripped the tin can, and said, "Oh, thank you very much;" and by this time the Laird had fetched a bucket, into which the glittering beauties were slipped. Then the can was handed back, with further and profuse thanks, and the boat pushed off.

Suddenly, and with great alarm, Miss Avon remembered that Angus had taught her what Highland manners were.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she called out to the bearded young fisherman, who instantly turned round, and the oars were stopped. "I beg your pardon," said she, with an extreme and anxious politeness, "but would you take a glass of whiskey?"

"No, thank ye, mem," said the fisherman, with another laugh of friendliness on the frank face; and then away they went.

The girl was in despair. She was about to marry a Highlander, and already she had forgotten the first of Highland customs. But unexpected relief was at hand. Hearing something going on, John of Skye had tumbled up from the fore-castle, and instantly saw that the young lady was sorely grieved that those friendly fishermen had not accepted this return compliment. He called aloud, in Gaelic, and in a severe tone. The three men came back, looking rather like schoolboys who would fain escape from an embarrassing interview. And then at the same moment Captain John, who had asked Fred to bring up the whiskey-bottle, said, in a low voice, to the young lady,

"They would think it fery kind, mem, if you would pour out the whiskey with your own hand."

And this was done, Miss Mary going through the ceremony without flinching; and as each of the men was handed his glass, he rose up in the boat, and took off his cap, and drank the health of the young lady, in the Gaelic. And Angus Sutherland, when he came on deck, was greatly pleased to hear what she had done, though the Laird took occasion to remark at breakfast that he hoped it was not a common custom among the young ladies of England to get up early in the morning to have clandestine flirtations with handsome young fishermen.

Then all hands on deck; for now there are two anchors to be got in, and we must not lose any of this pleasant sailing breeze. In these sheltered and shining waters there are scarcely

any traces of the recent rough weather, except that the wind still comes in variable puffs, and from all sorts of unexpected directions. In the main, however, it is north-by-east, and so we have to set to work to leisurely beat up the Sound of Raasay.

"Well, this is indeed like old times, Mary," Queen Titania cries, as she comfortably ensconces herself in a camp-chair; for Miss Avon is at the helm, and the young doctor, lying at full length on the sun-lit deck, is watching the sails and criticising her steering, and the Laird is demonstrating to a humble listener the immeasurable advantages enjoyed by the Scotch landscape painters, in that they have within so small a compass every variety of mountain, lake, woodland, and ocean scenery. He becomes facetious, too, about Miss Mary's sketches. What if he were to have a room set apart for them at Denny-mains, to be called the *White Dove Gallery*? He might have a skilled decorator out from Glasgow to devise the furniture and ornamentation, so that both should suggest the sea, and ships, and sailors.

Here John of Skye comes aft.

"I think," says he to Miss Avon, with a modest smile, "we might put the gaff-top-sail on her."

"Oh yes, certainly," says this experienced mariner; and the doctor, seeing an opportunity for bestirring himself, jumps to his feet.

And so, with the topsail shining white in the sun—a thing we have not seen for some time—we leave behind us the gloomy opening into Loch Sligachan, and beat up through the Raasay narrows, and steal by the pleasant woods of Raasay House. The Laird has returned to that project of the Marine Gallery, and he has secured an attentive listener in the person of his hostess, who prides herself that she has a sure instinct as to what is "right" in mural decoration.

This is indeed like old times come back again. The light cool breeze, the warm decks, the pleasant lapping of the water, and our steerwoman partly whistling and partly humming:

"They'll put a napkin round my een,
They'll no let me see to dew;
And they'll never let on to my father and mither,
But I am awn' o'er the sea."

And this she is abstractedly and contentedly doing, without any notice of the fact that the song is supposed to be a pathetic one.

Then our young doctor; of what does he discourse to us during this delightful day-dreaming and idleness? Well, it has been remarked by more than one of us that Dr. Angus has become tremendously practical of late. You would scarcely have believed that this was the young F.R.S. who used to startle the good Laird out of his wits by his wild speculations about the origin of the world, and similar trifles. Now his whole interest seemed to be centred on the commonest things; all the Commissioners of the Burgh of Strathgovan put together could not have been more fierce than he was about the necessity of supplying houses with pure water, for example. And the abuse that he heaped on the Water Companies of London, more especially, and on the government which did not interfere, was so distinctly libellous that we were glad no alien overheard it.

Then as to arsenic in wall-paper; he was equally dogmatic and indignant about that; and here it was his hostess, rather than the Laird, who was interested. She eagerly committed to her note-book a recipe for testing the presence of that vile metal in wall-papers or anything else; and some of us had mentally to thank Heaven that she was not likely to get test tubes, and zinc filings, and hydrochloric acid in Portree. The woman would have blown up the ship.

All this and much more was very different from the kind of conversation that used so seriously to trouble the Laird. When he heard Angus talk, with great common-sense and abundant information, about the various climates that suited particular constitutions, and about the best soils for building houses on, and about the necessity for strict municipal supervision of drainage, he was ready to believe that our young doctor had not only for his own part never handled that dangerous book, the "Vestiges of Creation," but that he had never even known any one who had glanced at its sophistical pages except with a smile of pity. Why, all the time that we were shut up by the equinoctials, the only profound and mysterious thing that Angus had said was this: "There is surely something wrong when the man who takes on himself all the trouble of drawing a bottle of ale is bound to give his friend the first tumbler, which is clear, and keep the second tumbler, which is muddy, for himself." But if you narrowly look into it, you will find that there is really nothing dangerous or unsettling in this saying, no grumbling against the ways of Providence whatsoever. It was mysterious, perhaps; but then so would many of the nice points about the Temple case have been had we not had with us an able expositor.

And on this occasion, as we were running along for Portree, our F.R.S. was chiefly engaged in warning us against paying too serious heed to certain extreme theories about food and drink which were then being put forward by a number of distinguished physicians.

"For people in good health, the very worst adviser is the doctor," he was saying; when he was gently reminded by his hostess that he must not malign his own calling, or destroy a superstition that might in itself have curative effects.

"Oh, I scarcely call myself a doctor," he said,