

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XI.

DRAWING NEARER.

She is all alone on deck. The morning sun shines on the beautiful blue bay, on the great castle perched on the rocks over there, and on the wooded green hills beyond. She has got a canvas fixed on her easel; she sings to herself as she works.

Now this English young lady must have he-guiled the tedium of her long nursing in Edinburgh by making a particular acquaintance with Scotch ballads; or how otherwise could we account for her knowledge of the "Song of Ulva," and now of the "Song of Dunvegan?"

"MacLeod the faithful, and fearing none!—
Dunvegan!—oh! Dunvegan!"

she hums to herself as she is busy with that rough sketch of sea and shore. How can she be aware that Angus Sutherland is at this very moment in the companion way, and not daring to stir hand or foot lest he should disturb her?

"Friends and foes had our passions thwarted,"

she croons to herself, though, indeed, there is no despair at all in her voice, but perfect contentment—

"But true, tender, and lion-hearted,
Lived he on, and from life departed,
MacLeod, whose rival is breathing none!—
Dunvegan!—oh! Dunvegan!"

She is pleased with the rapidity of her work. She tries to whistle a little bit. Or perhaps it is only the fresh morning air that has put her in such good spirits.

"Yestreen the Queen had four Maries."

What has that got to do with the sketch of the shining gray castle? Among these tags and ends of ballads, the young doctor at last becomes emboldened to put in an appearance.

"Good morning, Miss Avon," says he; "you are busy at work again?"

She is not in the least surprised. She has got accustomed to his coming on deck before the others; they have had a good deal of quiet chatting while as yet the Laird was only adjusting his high white collar and satin neckcloth.

"It is only a sketch," said she, in a rapid and highly business-like fashion, "but I think I shall be able to sell it. You know most people merely value pictures for their association with things they are interested in themselves. A Yorkshire farmer would rather have a picture of his favourite cob than any Raphael or Titian. And the ordinary English squire: I am sure that you know in his own heart he prefers one of Herring's farm-yard pieces to Leonardo's 'Last Supper.' Well, if some yachting gentleman, who has been in this loch, should see this sketch, he will probably buy it, however bad it is, just because it interests him—"

"But you don't really mean to sell it?" said he.

"That depends," said she, demurely, "on whether I get any offer for it."

"Why," he exclaimed, "the series of pictures you are now making should be an invaluable treasure to you all your life long—a permanent record of a voyage that you seem to enjoy very much. I almost shrink from robbing you of that one of Canna; still the temptation is too great. And you propose to sell them all?"

"What I can sell of them," she says. And then she adds, rather shyly: "You know I could not very well afford to keep them all for myself. I—I have a good many almoners in London; and I devote to them what I can get from my scrawls; that is, I deduct the cost of the frames, and keep the rest for them. It is not a large sum."

"Any other women would spend it in jewelry and dresses," says he, bluntly.

At this Mary Avon flushes slightly, and hastily draws his attention to a small boat that is approaching. Dr. Sutherland does not pay any heed to the boat.

He is silent for a second or so, and then he says, with an effort to talk in a cheerful and matter-of-fact way:

"You have not sent ashore yet this morning; don't you know there is a post-office at Dunvegan?"

"Oh yes; I heard so. But the men are below at breakfast, I think, and I am in no hurry to send, for there won't be any letters for me, I know."

"Oh, indeed," he says, with seeming carelessness. "It must be a long time since you have heard from your friends."

"I have not many friends to hear from," she answers, with a light laugh, "and those I have don't trouble me with many letters. I suppose they think I am in very good hands at present."

"Oh yes; no doubt," says he; and suddenly he begins to talk in warm terms of the delightfulness of the voyage. He is quite charmed with the appearance of Dunvegan loch and

castle. A more beautiful morning he never saw. And in the midst of all this enthusiasm the small boat comes alongside.

There is an old man in the boat, and when he has fastened his oars he says a few words to Angus Sutherland, and hands him up a big black bottle. Our young doctor brings the bottle over to Mary Avon. He seems to be very much pleased with everything this morning.

"Now, is not that good-natured?" says he. "It is a bottle of fresh milk, with the compliments of ———, of Uginish. Isn't it good-natured?"

"Oh, indeed it is," says she, plunging her hand into her pocket. "You must let me give the messenger half a crown."

"No, no; that is not the Highland custom," says the doctor; and therewith he goes below, and fetches up another black bottle, and pours out a glass of whisky with his own hand, and presents it to the ancient boatman. You should have seen the look of surprise in the old man's face when Angus Sutherland said something to him in the Gaelic.

And alas! and alas! as we go ashore on this beautiful bright day, we have to give up forever the old Dunvegan of many a dream; the dark and solitary keep that we had imagined perched high above the Atlantic breakers; the sheer precipices, the awful sterility, the wail of lamentation along the lonely shores. This is a different picture altogether that Mary Avon has been trying to put down on her canvas—a spacious, almost modern-looking, but nevertheless picturesque castle, sheltered from the winds by softly wooded hills, a bit of smooth blue water below, and further along the shores the cheerful evidences of fertility and cultivation. The wail of Dunvegan? Why, here is a brisk and thriving village, with a post-office, and a shop, and a building that looks uncommonly like an inn; and there dotted all about, and encroaching on the upper moorland, any number of those small crofts that were once the pride of the Highlands, and that gave to England the most stalwart of her regiments. Here are no ruined huts and voiceless wastes, but a cheerful, busy picture of peasant life; the strapping wenches at work in the small farm-yard, well built and frank of face; the men well clad; the children well fed and merry enough. It is a scene that delights the heart of our good friend of Denny-mains. If we had but time, we would fain go in among the tiny farms, and inquire about the rent of the holdings, and the price paid for those picturesque little beasts that artists are forever painting—with a lowering sky beyond, and a dash of sunlight in front. But our doctor is obdurate. He will not have Mary Avon walk further; she must return to the yacht.

But on our way back, as she is walking by the side of the road, he suddenly puts his hand on her arm, apparently to stop her. Slight as the touch is, she naturally looks surprised.

"I beg your pardon," he says, hastily, "but I thought you would rather not tread on it—"

He is looking at a weed by the wayside—a think that looks like a snapdragon of some sort. We did not expect to find a hard-headed man of science betray this trumpery sentiment about a weed.

"I thought you would rather not tread upon it when you knew it was a stranger," he says, in explanation of that rude assault upon her arm. "That is not an English plant at all; it is the *Mimulus*; its real home is in America."

We began to look with more interest on the audacious smaller foreigner that had boldly adventured across the seas.

"Oh," she says, looking back along the road, "I hope I have not trampled any of them down."

"Well, it does not much matter," he admits, "for the plant is becoming quite common now in parts of the West Highlands; but I thought as it was a stranger, and come all the way across the Atlantic on a voyage of discovery, you would be hospitable. I suppose the Gulf Stream brought the first of them over."

"And if they had any choice in the matter," says Mary Avon, looking down, and speaking with a little self-conscious deliberation, "and if they wanted to be hospitably received, they showed their good sense in coming to the West Highlands."

After that there was a dead silence on the part of Angus Sutherland. But why should he have been embarrassed? There was no compliment levelled at him, that he should blush like a school-boy. It was quite true that Miss Avon's liking—even love—for the West Highlands was becoming very apparent; but Banffshire is not in the West Highlands. What although Angus Sutherland could speak a few words in the Gaelic tongue to an old boatman. He came from Banff. Banffshire is not in the West Highlands.

Then that afternoon at the great castle itself:

what have we but a confused recollection of twelfth-century towers; walls nine feet thick; and ghost chambers; and a certain fairy flag, that is called the *Bratach-Sith*; and the wide view over the blue Atlantic; and of a great kindness that made itself visible in the way of hot-house flowers and baskets of fruit, and what not? The portraits, too: the various centuries got mixed up with the old legends, until we did not know in which face to look for some transmitted expression that might tell of the Cave of Uig or the Uamh-na-Ceann. But there was one portrait there, quite modern and beautiful, that set all the tourist folk a-raving, so lovely were the life-like eyes of it; and the Laird was bold enough to say to the gentle lady who was so good as to be our guide, that it would be one of the grandest happinesses of his life if he might be allowed to ask Mr. Galbraith, the well-known artist of Edinburgh, to select a young painter to come up to Dunvegan and make a copy of this picture for him, Denny-mains. And Dr. Sutherland could scarcely come away from that beautiful face; and our good Queen T— was quite charmed with it; and as for Mary Avon, when one of us regarded her, behold! as she looked up, there was a sort of moisture in the soft black eyes.

What was she thinking of? That it must be a fine thing to be so beautiful a woman, and charm the eyes of all men? But now—now that we had had this singing-bird with us on board the yacht for so long a time—would any one of us have admitted that she was rather plain? It would not have gone well with any one who had ventured to say so to the Laird of Denny-mains, at all events. And as for our sovereign lady and mistress, these were the lines which she always said described Mary Avon:

"Was never seen thing to be praised derre,
Nor under black cloud so bright a sterre,
As she was, as they saiden, every one;
That her beelden in her black weed;
And yet she stood, full low and still alone,
Behind all other folk, in little brede,
And nigh the door, ay under sham's drede;
Simple of bearing, debonaire of cheer,
With a full and looking and manere."

How smart the saloon of the *White Dove* looked that evening at dinner, with those geraniums, and roses, and fuchsias, and what not, set amid the tender green of the maiden-hair fern! But all the same there was a serious discussion. Fruit, flowers, vegetables, and fresh milk, however welcome, fill no larder; and Master Fred had returned with the doleful tale that all his endeavours to purchase a sheep at one of the neighbouring farms had been of no avail. Forthwith we resolve to make another effort. Far away, on the outer shore of Dunvegan Loch, we can faintly descry, in the glow of the evening, some crofters' huts on the slopes of the hill. Down with the gig, then, boys; in with the fishing-rods; and away for the distant shores, where haply some tender ewe-lamb, or brace of quacking ducks, or some half-dozen half-starved fowls may be withdrawn from the reluctant tiller of the earth!

It is a beautiful clear evening, with a lemon-gold glory in the north-west. And our stout-sinewed doctor is rowing stroke, and there is a monotonous refrain of

"Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!"

"We must give you a wage as one of the hands, Angus," says Queen T.—

"I am paid already," says he. "I would work my passage through for the sketch of Canna that Miss Avon gave me."

"Would you like to ask the other men whether they would take the same payment?" says Miss Avon, in modest depreciation of her powers.

"Do not say anything against the landscape ye gave to Dr. Sutherland," observes the Laird. "No, no; there is great merit in it. I have told ye before I would like to show it to Tom Galbraith before it goes south; I am sure he would approve of it. Indeed, he is just such a friend of mine that I would take the liberty of asking him to give it a bit touch here and there—what an experienced artist would see amiss, ye know—"

"Mr. Galbraith may be an experienced artist," says our doctor friend, with unnecessary asperity, "but he is not going to touch that picture."

"Ah can tell ye," says the Laird, who is rather hurt by this rejection, "that the advice of Tom Galbraith has been taken by the greatest artists in England. He was up in London last year, and was at the studio of one of the first of the Academicians, and that very man was not ashamed to ask the opinion of Tom Galbraith. And says Tom to him, 'The face is very fine, but the right arm is out of drawing.' You would think that impertinent? The Academician, I can tell you, thought differently. Says he, 'That has been my own opinion, but no one would ever tell me so; and I would have left it as it is had ye no spoken.'"

"I have no doubt the Academician who did not know when his picture was out of drawing was quite right to take the advice of Tom Galbraith," says our stroke oar. "But Tom Galbraith is not going to touch Miss Avon's sketch of Canna—"

and here the fierce altercation is stopped, for stroke oar puts a fresh spurt on, and we hear another sound:

"Soon the freshening breeze will blow,
We'll show the snowy canvas on her—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!"

Well, what was the result of our quest? After we had landed Master Fred, and sent him up the

hills, and gone off fishing for lithe for an hour or so, we returned to the shore in the gathering dusk. We found our messenger seated on a rock, contentedly singing a Gaelic song, and plucking a couple of fowls, which was all the provender he had secured. It was in vain that he tried to cheer us by informing us that the animals in question had cost only sixpence apiece. We knew that they were not much bigger than thrushes. Awful visions of tinned meat began to rise before us. In gloom we took the steward and the microscopic fowls on board, and set out for the yacht.

But the Laird did not lose his spirits. He declared that self preservation was the first law of nature, and that, despite the injunctions of the Wild Birds' Protection Act, he would get out his gun and shoot the first brood of "flappers" he saw about those lonely lochs. And he told us such a "good one" about Homesh that we laughed nearly all the way back to the yacht. Provisions? We were independent of provisions! With a handful of rice a day we would cross the Atlantic—we would cross twenty Atlantics—so long as we were to be regaled and cheered by the "good ones" from our friend of Denny-mains.

Dr. Sutherland, too, seemed in nowise depressed by the famine in the land. In the lamp-lit saloon, as we gathered round the table, and cards and things were brought out, and the Laird began to brew his toddy, the young doctor maintained that no one on land could imagine the snugness of life on board a yacht. And now he had almost forgotten to speak of leaving us; perhaps it was the posting of the paper on Radiolarians, along with other MSS., that had set his mind free. But touching the matter of the Dunvegan post-office; why had he been so particular in asking Mary Avon if she were not expecting letters? and why did he so suddenly grow enthusiastic about the scenery on learning that the young lady, on her travels, was not pestered with correspondence? Miss Avon was not a Cabinet Minister.

CHAPTER XII.

THE OLD SCHOOL AND THE NEW.

The last instructions given to John of Skye that night were large and liberal. At break of day he was to sail for any port he might chance to encounter on the wide seas. So long as Angus Sutherland did not speak of returning, what did it matter to us?—Loch Boisdale, Loch Seaforth, Stornoway, St. Kilda, the North Pole, were all the same. It is true that of fresh meat we had on board only two fowls about the size of wrens; but of all varieties of tinned meats and fruit we had an abundant store. And if perchance we were forced to shoot a sheep on the Flannel Islands, would not the foul deed be put down to the discredit of some dastardly Frenchman? When you rise up as a nation and guillotine all the respectable folk in the country, it is only to be expected of you thereafter that you should go about the seas shooting other people's sheep.

And indeed when we get on deck after breakfast we find that John of Skye has fulfilled his instructions to the letter; that is to say, he must have started at daybreak to get away so far from Dunvegan and the headlands of Skye. But as for going farther? There is not a speck of cloud in the dome of blue; there is not a ripple on the blue sea; there is not a breath of wind to stir the great white sails all aglow in the sunlight; nor is there even enough of the Atlantic swell to move the indolent tiller. How John of Skye had managed to bring us so far on so calm a morning remains a mystery.

"And the glass shows no signs of falling," says our young doctor, quite regretfully: does he long for a hurricane, that so he may exhibit his sailor-like capacities?

But Mary Avon, with a practical air, is arranging her easel on deck, and fixing up a canvas, and getting out the tubes she wants—the while she absently sings to herself something about

"Beauty lies
In many eyes,
But love is yours, my Nora Creina."

And what will she attack now? Those long headlands of Skye, dark in shadow, with a glow of sunlight along their summits; or those lonely hills of Uist set far amid the melancholy main; or those vaster and paler mountains of Harris, that rise on the north of the dreaded Sound?

"Well, you have courage," says Angus Sutherland, admiringly, "to try to make a picture out of that!"

"Oh," she says modestly, though she is obviously pleased, "that is a pet theory of mine. I try for ordinary everyday effects, without any theatrical business; and if I had only the power to reach them, I know I should surprise people. Because, you know, most people go through the world with a sort of mist before their eyes; and they are awfully grateful to you when you suddenly clap a pair of spectacles on their nose and make them see things as they are. I cannot do it as yet, you know; but there is no harm in trying."

"I think you do it remarkably well," he says; "but what are you to make of that?—nothing but two great sheets of blue, with a line of bluer hills between."

But Miss Avon speedily presents us with the desired pair of spectacles. Instead of the cloudless blue day we had imagined it to be, we find that there are low masses of white cloud along the Skye cliffs, and these throw long reflections on the glassy sea, and moreover we begin to