

WHITE WINGS: A YACHTING ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

ONLY A HEADACHE.

Stornoway Harbour, indeed! The weather was laughing at us. The glass had steadily fallen, until it had got about as low as it could go with decency; and yet this morning was more beautiful, and bright, and calm, than ever. Were we to be forever confined in this remote Loch of the Burying-Place?

"Angus! Angus! where are you?" the Admiral calls out, as she comes up on deck.

"Here I am," cries out a voice, in return, from the cross-trees.

She raises her head, and perceives the ruddy-faced doctor hanging on by the ratlines.

"Where is the fine sailing weather you were to bring us—eh?"

"I have been looking for it," he replies, as he comes down the rigging; "and there is not a breath anywhere."

"Very well," she says, promptly: "I'll tell you what you must do. You must get everybody who can handle a gun into the gig, and go away up to the head of the loch there, and shoot every living thing you can see. Do you understand? We are on the brink of starvation! We are perishing! Do you want us to boil tarred rope into soup?"

"No," he says, humbly.

"Very well. Away you go. If you can't bring us any wind to take us into a civilized place, you must provide us with food. Is that clear enough?"

Here Captain John comes aft, touching his hat.

"Good-morning, mem. I was never seeing the like of this weather, mem."

"I don't want to see any more of it," she says, sharply. "Did you bring us in here because there was a convenient place to bury us in? Do you know that we are dying of starvation?"

"Oh, no, mem!" says Captain John, with a grin, but looking rather concerned all the same.

However, her attention is quickly called away by the sound of oars. She turns and regards this small boat approaching the yacht; and the more she looks, the more do her eyes fill with astonishment.

"Well, I declare!" she says. "This is about the coolest thing I have seen for ages."

For it is Miss Mary Avon who is rowing the dingy back to the yacht; and her only companion is the Youth, who is contentedly seated in the stern with his gun laid across his knees.

"Good-morning, Mr. Smith," she says, with the most gracious sarcasm. "Pray don't exert yourself too much. Severe exercise before breakfast is very dangerous."

The Youth lays hold of the rope; there is a fine blush on his handsome face.

"It is Miss Avon's fault," he says, "she would not let me row."

"I suppose she expected you to shoot. Where are the duck, and the snipe, and the golden plover? Hand them up."

"If you want to see anything in the shape of game about this coast you had better wait till next Sunday," says he, somewhat gloomily.

However, after breakfast, we set out for the shallow head of the loch; and things do not turn out so badly after all. For we have only left the yacht some few minutes when there is a sudden whirling of wings—a call of "duck! duck!"—and the doctor, who is at the bow, and who is the only one who is ready, fires a snap shot at the birds. Much to everybody's amazement, one drops, and instantly dives. Then begins an exciting chase. The *hiorlinn* is sent careering with a vengeance; the men strain every muscle; and then another cry directs attention to the point at which the duck has re-appeared. It is but for a second. Though he cannot fly, he can swim like a fish; and from time to time, as the hard pulling enables us to overtake him, we can see him shooting this way or that through the clear water. Then he bobs his head up, some thirty or forty yards off; and there is another snap shot—the charge rattling on the water the fifth part of an instant after he disappears.

"Dear me!" says the Laird; "that bird will cost us ten shillings in cartridges!"

But at last he is bagged. A chance shot happens to catch him before he dives; he is stretched on the water, with his black webbed feet in the air; and a swoop of Captain John's arm brings him dripping into the gig. And then our natural history is put to the test. This is no gay-plumaged sheldrake, or blue-necked mallard, or saw-toothed merganser. It is a broad-billed duck, of a sooty black and gray; we begin to regret our expenditure of cartridges; experiments on the flavour of unknown sea-birds are rarely satisfactory. But Captain John's voice is authoritative and definite. "It is a fine bird," he says. And Master Fred has already marked him for his own.

Then among the shallows at the head of the loch there is many a wild pull after broods of flappers, and random firing at the circling curlew. The air is filled with the calling of the birds; and each successive shot rattles away with its echo among the silent hills. What is the result of all this noise and scramble? Not much, indeed; for right in the middle of it we are attracted by a strange appearance in the south. The dark line beyond the yacht; is it a breeze coming up the loch? Instantly the chase after mergansers ceases; cartridges are taken out; the two or three birds we have got are put out of the way; and the Laird, taking the tiller-ropes, sits proud and erect. Away go the four oars with the precision of machinery; and the long sweep sends the gig ahead at a sweeping pace. Behold! behold! the dark blue on the water widening! Is it a race between the wind and the gig as to which will reach the *White Dove* first?

"Give me your oar, Fred!" says the doctor, who is at the bow.

There is but a momentary pause. Again the shapely boat swings along; and with the measured beat of the oars comes the old familiar chorus:

"Cheerily, and all together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
Soon the flowing breeze will blow:
We'll show the snowy canvas on her—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
Wafted by the breeze of morn,
We'll quaff the joyous horn together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!
A long, strong pull together—
Ho, ro, clansmen!"

"We'll beat! we'll beat!" cries the Laird, in great delight. "Give it to her, boys! Not one halfpenny worth o' that wind will we lose!"

The bow cleaves the blue water; the foam hisses away from her rudder. It is a race of the North against the South. Then the chorus again—

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

Hurrah! hurrah! As the gig is run alongside, and guns and birds handed up, that spreading blue has not quite reached the yacht; there is no appreciable stir of the lazy ensign. But there is little time to be lost. The amateurs swing the gig to the davits, while the men are getting in the slack of the anchor chain; the women are incontinently bundled below, to be out of the way of flapping sheets. Then, all hands at the halyards! And by the time the great white wings are beginning to spread, the breeze stirs the still air around us; and the peak sways gently this way and that; and they who are hard at work at the windlass are no doubt grateful for this cool blowing from the south. Then there is a cessation of noise; we become vaguely aware that we are moving. At last the *White Dove* has spread her wings; her head is turned towards the south. Good-bye! you lonely loch, with the silent shores and the silent tombs—a hundred farewells to you, wherever we may be going!

And slowly we beat down the loch, against this light southerly breeze. But as we get further and further into the open, surely there is something in the air and in the appearance of the southern sky that suggests that the glass has not been falling for nothing. The sea is smooth; but there is a strange gloom ahead of us; and beyond the islands that we visited yesterday nothing is visible but a wan and sultry glare. Then, afar, we can hear a noise as of the approach of some storm; but perhaps it is only the low sound of the swirling of the tides round the shores. Presently another sound attracts attention—a murmured hissing, and it comes nearer and nearer; dark spots, about the size of a threepenny-piece, appear on the white decks. The women have scarcely time to send below for their sun-shades when the slight shower passes by—the decks are not even left damp. Then further and further we creep away toward the south; but where we expected to catch some far glimpse of the Irish coast—the blue line of Rathlin or the Antrim cliffs—there is only that dim, sultry haze.

Then another sound—a dull *lop! lop!*—in the distance; and the stragglers who have remained below after luncheon are hastily summoned on deck. And there, far away in the haze, we can dimly descry the successive curved forms of a school of dolphins, racing each other, and springing twenty or thirty feet in the air before they come down with that heavy thud on the water. Those of us who have watched the beautiful lithe fish racing and chasing by the side of an Atlantic vessel, would fain have been somewhat nearer; but we can only see the dim forms springing into the haze. Then the dull pistol shots in the south slowly cease, and we are left alone on the low murmuring sea.

"But where is Mary?" says the Laird, suddenly becoming aware of the absence of his chief companion.

"Oh, she is in the saloon," says his hostess, quickly and anxiously. "She is doing something to one of her water-colours. I suppose we must not disturb her."

"No, no; certainly not," returns the Laird, lightly. And then he adds, with a smile which is meant to be very significant: "There is never any harm in hard work. Let her go on; she will have a fine collection of sketches before she leaves the *White Dove*."

But our Queen Tita does not respond to that careless joke. There is a curious, constrained look on her face; and she quite peremptorily negatives a suggestion of the Youth that he should go below for the draught-board. Then one of us perceives that Angus Sutherland is not on deck.

Has the opportunity come at last, then, for the clearing away of all secret troubles? What end is there to be to this momentous interview? Is it Stornoway Harbour? Is our frank-eyed young doctor to come up with a silent wonder and joy on his face—a message that needs no speech—a message that only says, "About with the yacht, and let us run away to the northern seas and Stornoway!" The friend of these two young people can hardly conceal her anxiety. She has got hold of the case of an opera-glass, and opens and shuts it quickly and aimlessly. Then there is a step on the companion-way; she does not look; she only knows that Angus Sutherland comes on deck, and then goes forward to the bow of the gig, and stands by himself, and looks out to sea.

There is silence on board; for a low rumble of thunder has been heard once or twice, and we are listening. The mountains of Jura are dark now, and the sultry mist in the south is deeper in its gloom. This condition of the atmosphere produces a vague sense of something about to happen, which is in itself uncomfortable; one would almost like to see a flash of lightning, or hear the thunderous advance of a storm breaking in upon the oppressive calm.

The Laird goes forward to Angus Sutherland.

"Well, doctor, what think ye of the weather now?"

The younger man starts and turns round, and for a second looks at the Laird as if he had not quite comprehended the question.

"Oh yes," he says, "you are quite right. It does look as if we were going to have a dirty night."

And with that he turns to the sea again.

"Ay," say the Laird, sententiously. "I am glad we are in a boat we need have no fear of—none. Keep her away from the shore, and we are all right. But—but I suppose you will get into some harbour to-night, after all!"

"It does not matter," he says, absently; and then he goes away up to the bow. He is alone there; for the men have gone below for dinner—with the exception of John of Skye, who is at the helm.

Presently the special friend of the young man puts aside that opera-glass case, and walks timidly forward to the bow of the yacht. She regards him somewhat anxiously; but his face is turned away from her—looking over to the gloomy Jura hills.

"Angus," she says, briskly, "are we not going very near Jura, if it is West Loch Tarbert we are making for?"

He turned to her then, and she saw by his face that something had happened.

"You have spoken to her, Angus?" she said, in a low voice; and her earnest, kind eyes regarded the young man as if to anticipate his answer.

"Yes."

For a second or so he seemed disinclined to say any more; but presently he added, scarcely looking at her,

"I am sorry that I must leave you the first time we get near land."

"Oh, Angus!"

It was almost a cry, uttered in that low, piteous voice. Then he looked at her.

"You have been so kind to me," said he, so that no one should hear. "It is only a misfortune. But I wish I had never seen the *White Dove*."

"Oh, Angus, don't say that!"

"It is my own fault. I should never have come from Edinburgh. I know that. I knew I was hazarding everything. And she is not to blame."

He could say no more, for one or two of the men now came up from the fore-castle. His hostess left him, and went aft, with a hurt and indignant look on her face. When the Laird asked why Miss Mary did not come on deck, she said, "I don't know," with an air which said she had ceased to take any further care in Mary Avon's actions. And at dinner what heed did she pay to the fact that Mary Avon was rather white, and silent, and pained-looking? She had been disappointed. She had not expected the friend of her bosom to act in this heartless manner. And as for Howard Smith, she treated that young gentleman with a cold courtesy which rather astonished him.

After dinner, when the men-folk had gone on deck, and when she was preparing to go too, a timid, appealing hand was laid on her arm.

"I would like to speak to you," said the low voice of Mary Avon.

Then she turned—only for a second.

"I think I know enough of what has happened, Mary," said she; "and it would not be right for me to intermeddle. Young people are the best judges of their own affairs."

The appealing hand was withdrawn; the girl retired to the saloon, and sat down alone.

But here, on deck, an eager council of war was being held; and Angus Sutherland was as busy as any one with the extended chart—the soundings barely visible in the waning light—and proposals and counter-proposals were being freely bandied about. Night was coming on; dirty-looking weather seemed to be coming up from the south; and the mouth of West Loch Tarbert is narrow and shallow in parts, and studded with rocks—a nasty place to enter in the dark. Moreover, when should we get there, beating against this south-easterly wind? What if we were to put her head round, and run for some improvised harbour among the small islands under the shadow of the Jura hills, and wait there for daylight to show us across the Sound?

There was but one dissident. Angus Sutherland seemed oddly anxious to get to West Loch Tarbert. He would himself take the helm all night, if only the men would take their turn at the look-out, one at a time. He was sure he could make the channel, if we reached the mouth of the loch before daylight. What! with nothing shallower on the chart than four fathoms! How could there be any danger?

But the more prudent counsels of John of Skye at length prevail, and there is a call to the men forward to stand by. Then down goes the helm; her head slews round with a rattling of blocks and cordage; the sheets of the head-sails are belayed to leeward; and then, with the boom away over the starboard davits, we are running free before this freshening breeze.

But the night is dark as we cautiously creep in under the vast shadows of the Jura hills. Fortunately in here the wind is light; the *White Dove* seems to feel her way through the gloom. All eyes are on the look-out; and there is a general shout as we nearly run on a buoy set to mark a sunken ship. But we glide by in safety; and in due course of time the roar of the anchor chain tells us that we are snug for the night.

"But where is Miss Mary?" says the Laird, in the cheerfully lit saloon. He looks around him in an uncomfortable and unsettled way. The saloon is not the saloon when Mary Avon is out of it; here is her chair, next to his as usual, but it is vacant. How are we to spend the last happy hour of chatting and joking without the pleased, bright face, and the timid, gentle, shy, dark eyes?

"Mary has gone to her cabin," says her hostess. "I suppose she has a headache."

She supposes the girl has a headache, and has not asked! And can it be really Mary Avon that she is speaking of in that cold, hurt, offended way?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN THE DARK.

And then the next morning the Laird is infinitely distressed.

"What! not better yet?" he says. "Dear me! I wish I could be a woman for awhile, to take some tea in to her, and read to her, and coax her into better spirits. What a bad headache it must be!"

But this generous sympathy on the part of one who is little more than an acquaintance touches the heart of Mary Avon's particular friend. She reproaches herself for her cruelty. She not only gets the tea, and takes it into the cabin, but she adopts a dominating tone, and declares that until the young lady begins her breakfast she will not leave the place. And then she looks at the timid, worn face; and her hand is placed gently on the hand of her friend, and she says, in a lower voice:

"Mary, don't think I am angry. I am only a little bit disappointed. But I don't blame you; you could not help it. It is a pity; that is all."

The girl's face remains rather sad; but she is quite self-possessed.

"You will let me go away," she says, looking down, "when we get to some harbour?"

"There is no need," says her friend, regarding her. "Angus will leave us to-day, as soon as we get across to Cantyre."

"Oh!" she said, quickly, and looking up with a brief appeal in her eyes. "I hope not. Why should he go away? I must go; I would rather go."

"Oh, no, Mary," her friend said. "If there is any 'must' in the matter, it is on his side; for you know his time is very valuable, and you must have guessed why he has already far exceeded what he proposed to himself as his holiday. No, no, Mary; let us forget what has happened as soon as we can, and make the best of the rest of our sailing. The Laird would have a fit, if you seriously threatened to go. And I am sure you are not to blame."

So she kissed her on the cheek, by way of reconciliation, and left. And she told the Laird that Mary had been dutiful, and had taken some breakfast, and would be up on deck in course of time.

Meanwhile, those who had gone on deck had found the *White Dove* lying in a dead calm, some three miles away from her anchorage of the previous night; her sails hanging limp, a scorching sun on the white decks, and a glare of light coming from the blue sky and the glassy blue sea.

"Well, Angus," says his hostess, very merrily—for she does not wish to let the others guess the reason of his sudden departure—"you see the weather does not approve of your leaving."