

BLACK WILLIAM

WHITE WINGS: A
YACHTING ROMANCE,
VOLUME II

William Black

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Romance, Volume II**

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CHAPTER I. VILLANY ABROAD

It is near mid-day; two late people are sitting at breakfast; the skylight overhead has been lifted, and the cool sea-air fills the saloon.

"Dead calm again," says Angus Sutherland, for he can see the rose-red ensign hanging limp from the mizen-mast, a blaze of colour against the still blue.

There is no doubt that the *White Dove* is quite motionless; and that a perfect silence reigns around her. That is why we can hear so distinctly – through the open skylight – the gentle footsteps of two people who are pacing up and down the deck, and the soft voice of one of them as she speaks to her friend. What is all this wild enthusiasm about, then?

"It is the noblest profession in the world!" we can hear so much as she passes the skylight. "One profession lives by fomenting quarrels; and another studies the art of killing in every form; but this one lives only to heal – only to relieve the suffering and help the miserable. That is the profession I should belong to, if I were a man!"

Our young Doctor says nothing as the voice recedes; but he is obviously listening for the return walk along the deck. And here she comes again.

"The patient drudgery of such a life is quite heroic – whether he is a man of science, working day and night to find out things for the good of the world, nobody thanking him or caring about him, or whether he is a physician in practice with not a minute that can be called his own – liable to be summoned at any hour – "

The voice again becomes inaudible. It is remarked to this young man that Mary Avon seems to have a pretty high opinion of the medical profession.

"She herself," he says hastily, with a touch of colour in his face, "has the patience and fortitude of a dozen doctors."

Once more the light tread on deck comes near the skylight.

"If I were the Government," says Mary Avon, warmly, "I should be ashamed to see so rich a country as England content to take her knowledge second-hand from the German Universities; while such men as Dr. Sutherland are harassed and hampered in their proper work by having to write articles and do ordinary doctor's visiting. I should be ashamed. If it is a want of money, why don't they pack off a dozen or two of the young noodles who pass the day whittling quills in the Foreign Office? – "

Even when modified by the distance, and by the soft lapping of the water outside, this seems rather strong language for a young lady. Why should Miss Avon again insist in such a warm fashion on the necessity of endowing research?

But Angus Sutherland's face is burning red. Listeners are said to hear ill of themselves.

"However, Dr. Sutherland is not likely to complain," she says, proudly, as she comes by again. "No; he is too proud of his profession. He does his work; and leaves the appreciation of it to others. And when everybody knows that he will one day be among the most famous men in the country, is it not monstrous that he should be harassed by drudgery in the meantime? If I were the Government – "

But Angus Sutherland cannot suffer this to go on. He leaves his breakfast unfinished, passes along the saloon, and ascends the companion.

"Good morning!" he says.

"Why, are you up already?" his hostess says. "We have been walking as lightly as we could, for we thought you were both asleep. And Mary has been heaping maledictions on the head of the Government because it doesn't subsidise all you microscope-men. The next thing she will want is a licence for the whole of you to be allowed to vivisect criminals."

"I heard something of what Miss Avon said," he admitted.

The girl, looking rather aghast, glanced at the open skylight.

"We thought you were asleep," she stammered, and with her face somewhat flushed.

"At least, I heard you say something about the Government," he said, kindly. "Well, all I ask from the Government is to give me a trip like this every summer."

"What," says his hostess, "with a barometer that won't fall?"

"I don't mind."

"And seas like glass?"

"I don't mind."

"And the impossibility of getting back to land?"

"So much the better," he says defiantly.

"Why," she reminds him, laughing, "you were very anxious about getting back some days ago. What has made you change your wishes?"

He hesitates for a moment, and then he says —

"I believe a sort of madness of idleness has got possession of me. I have dallied so long with that tempting invitation of yours to stay and see the *White Dove* through the equinoctials that — that I think I really must give in —"

"You cannot help yourself," his hostess says, promptly. "You have already promised. Mary is my witness."

The witness seems anxious to avoid being brought into this matter; she turns to the Laird quickly, and asks him some question about Ru-na-Gaul light over there.

Ru-na-Gaul light no doubt it is — shining white in the sun at the point of the great cliffs; and there is the entrance to Tobbermorry; and here is Mingary Castle — brown ruins amid the brilliant greens of those sloping shores — and there are the misty hills over Loch Sunart. For the rest, blue seas around us, glassy and still; and blue skies overhead, cloudless and pale. The barometer refuses to budge.

But suddenly there is a brisk excitement. What though the breeze that is darkening the water there is coming on right ahead? — we shall be moving any way. And as the first puffs of it catch the sails, Angus Sutherland places Mary Avon in command; and she is now — by the permission of her travelling physician — allowed to stand as she guides the course of the vessel. She has become an experienced pilot: the occasional glance at the leach of the top-sail is all that is needed; she keeps as accurately "full and by" as the master of one of the famous cuptakers.

"Now, Mary," says her hostess, "it all depends on you as to whether Angus will catch the steamer this evening."

"Oh, does it?" she says, with apparent innocence.

"Yes; we shall want very good steering to get within sight of Castle Osprey before the evening."

"Very well, then," says this audacious person.

At the same instant she deliberately puts the helm down. Of course the yacht directly runs up to the wind, her sails flapping helplessly. Everybody looks surprised; and John of Skye, thinking that the new skipper has only been a bit careless, calls out —

"Keep her full, mem, if you please."

"What do you mean, Mary? What are you about?" cries Queen T.

"I am not going to be responsible for sending Dr. Sutherland away," she says, in a matter-of-fact manner, "since he says he is in no hurry to go. If you wish to drive your guest away, I won't be a party to it. I mean to steer as badly as I can."

"Then I depose you," says Dr. Sutherland promptly. "I cannot have a pilot who disobeys orders."

"Very well," she says, "you may take the tiller yourself" – and she goes away, and sits down in high dudgeon, by the Laird.

So once more we get the vessel under way; and the breeze is beginning to blow somewhat more briskly; and we notice with hopefulness that there is rougher water further down the Sound. But with this slow process of beating, how are we to get within sight of Castle Osprey before the great steamer comes up from the South?

The Laird is puzzling over the Admiralty Sailing Directions. The young lady, deeply offended, who sits beside him, pays him great attention, and talks "at" the rest of the passengers with undisguised contempt.

"It is all haphazard, the sailing of a yacht," she says to him, though we can all hear. "Anybody can do it. But they make a jargon about it to puzzle other people, and pretend it is a science, and all that."

"Well," says the Laird, who is quite unaware of the fury that fills her brain, "there are some of the phrases in this book that are verra extraordinary. In navigating this same Sound of Mull, they say you are to keep the 'weather shore aboard.' How can ye keep the weather shore aboard?"

"Indeed, if we don't get into a port soon," remarks our hostess and chief commissariat-officer, "it will be the only thing we shall have on board. How would you like it cooked, Mary?"

"I won't speak to any of you," says the disgraced skipper, with much composure.

"Will you sing to us, then?"

"Will you behave properly if you are reinstated in command?" asks Angus Sutherland.

"Yes, I will," she says, quite humbly; and forthwith she is allowed to have the tiller again.

Brisker and brisker grows the breeze; it is veering to the south, too; the sea is rising, and with it the spirits of everybody on board. The ordinarily sedate and respectable *White Dove* is showing herself a trifle frisky, moreover; an occasional clatter below of hairbrushes or candlesticks tells us that people accustomed to calms fall into the habit of leaving their cabins ill-arranged.

"There will be more wind, sir," says John of Skye, coming aft; and he is looking at some long and streaky "mare's tails" in the south-western sky. "And if there wass a gale o' wind, I would let her have it!"

Why that grim ferocity of look, Captain John? Is the poor old *White Dove* responsible for the too fine weather, that you would like to see her driven, all wet and bedraggled, before a south-westerly gale? If you must quarrel with something, quarrel with the barometer; you may admonish it with a belaying-pin if you please.

Brisker and brisker grows the breeze. Now we hear the first pistol-shots of the spray come rattling over the bows; and Hector of Moidart has from time to time to duck his head, or shake the water from his jersey. The *White Dove* breasts these rushing waves and a foam of white water goes hissing away from either side of her. Speine Mor and Speine Beg we leave behind; in the distance we can descry the ruins of Aros Castle and the deep indentation of Salen Bay; here we are passing the thick woods of Funeray. "*Farewell, farewell, to Funeray!*" The squally look in the south-west increases; the wind veers more and more. Commander Mary Avon is glad to resign the helm, for it is not easy to retain hold in these plunging seas.

"Why, you will catch the steamer after all, Angus!" says his hostess, as we go tearing by the mouth of Loch Aline.

"This is a good one for the last!" he calls to her. "Give her some more sheet, John; the wind is going round to the north!"

Whence comes the whirling storm in the midst of the calm summer weather? The blue heavens are as blue as the petal of a crane'sbill: surely such a sky has nothing to do with a hurricane. But wherever it comes from, it is welcome enough; and the brave *White Dove* goes driving through those heavy seas, sometimes cresting them buoyantly, at other times meeting them with a dull shock, followed by a swish of water that rushes along the lee scuppers. And those two women-folk – without

ulsters or other covering: it is a merry game to play jack-in-the-box, and duck their heads under the shelter of the gig when the spray springs into the air. But somehow the sea gets the best of it. Laugh as they may, they must be feeling rather damp about their hair; and as for Mary Avon's face – that has got a bath of salt-water at least a dozen times. She cares not. Sun, wind and sea she allows to do their worst with her complexion. Soon we shall have to call her the Nut-brown Maid.

Brisker and brisker grows the breeze. Angus Sutherland, with a rope round the tiller, has his teeth set hard: he is indeed letting the *White Dove* have it at last, for he absolutely refuses to have the topsail down. The main tack, then: might not that be hauled up? No; he will have none of John of Skye's counsels. The *White Dove* tears her way through the water – we raise a cloud of birds from the rocks opposite Scallasdale – we see the white surf breaking in at Craignure – ahead of us is Lismore Lighthouse, perched over the whirling and struggling tides, shining white in the sunlight above the dark and driven sea.

Ahead she goes; the land she knows!

– past the shadowy ruins of Duart, and out and through the turbulent tides off the lighthouse rocks. The golden afternoon is not yet far advanced; let but this brave breeze continue, and soon they will descry the *White Dove* from the far heights of Castle Osprey!

But there was to be no Castle Osprey for Angus Sutherland that evening, despite the splendid run the *White Dove* had made. It was a race, indeed, between the yacht and the steamer for the quay; and notwithstanding that Mary Avon was counselling everybody to give it up as impossible, John of Skye would hold to it in the hope of pleasing Dr. Sutherland himself. And no sooner was the anchor let go in the bay, than the gig was down from the davits; the men had jumped in; the solitary portmanteau was tossed into the stern; and Angus Sutherland was hurriedly bidding his adieux. The steamer was at this instant slowing into the quay.

"I forbid any one to say good-bye to him," says our Admiral-in-chief, sternly. "*Au revoir – auf Wiedersehen* – anything you like – no good-bye."

Last of all he took Mary Avon's hand.

"You have promised, you know," she said, with her eyes cast down.

"Yes," said he, regarding her for an instant with a strange look – earnest perhaps, and yet timid – as if it would ask a question, and dared not – "I will keep my promise." Then he jumped into the boat.

That was a hard pull away to the quay; and even in the bay the water was rough, so that the back-sweep of the oars sometimes caught the waves and sent the spray flying in the wind. The *Chevalier* had rung her bells. We made sure he would be too late. What was the reason of this good-natured indulgence? We lost sight of the gig in at the landing-slip.

Then the great steamer slowly steamed away from the quay: who was that on the paddle-box waving good-bye to us?

"Oh, yes, I can see him plainly," calls out Queen T., looking through a glass; and there is a general waving of handkerchiefs in reply to the still visible signal. Mary Avon waves her handkerchief, too – in a limp fashion. We do not look at her eyes.

And when the gig came back, and we bade good-bye for the time to the brave old *White Dove*, and set out for Castle Osprey, she was rather silent. In vain did the Laird tell her some of the very best ones about Homesh; she seemed anxious to get into the house and to reach the solitude of her own room.

But in the meantime there was a notable bundle of letters, newspapers, and what not, lying on the hall-table. This was the first welcome that civilisation gave us. And although we defied these claims – and determined that not an envelope should be opened till after dinner – Mary Avon, having only one letter awaiting her, was allowed to read that. She did it mechanically, listlessly – she was not in very good spirits. But suddenly we heard her utter some slight exclamation; and then we turned

and saw that there was a strange look on her face – of dismay and dread. She was pale, too, and bewildered – like one stunned. Then without a word, she handed the letter to her friend.

"What is the matter, Mary?"

But she read the letter – and, in her amazement, she repeated the reading of it, aloud. It was a brief, business-like, and yet friendly letter, from the manager of a certain bank in London. He said he was sorry to refer to painful matters; but no doubt Miss Avon had seen in the papers some mention of the absconding of Mr. Frederick Smethurst, of – . He hoped there was nothing wrong; but he thought it right to inform Miss Avon that, a day or two before this disappearance, Mr. Smethurst had called at the bank and received, in obedience to her written instructions, the securities – U.S. Funded Stock – which the bank held in her name. Mr. Smethurst had explained that these bonds were deliverable to a certain broker; and that securities of a like value would be deposited with the bank in a day or two afterwards. Since then nothing had been heard of him till the Hue and Cry appeared in the newspapers. Such was the substance of the letter.

"But it isn't true!" said Mary Avon, almost wildly. "I cannot believe it. I will not believe it. I saw no announcement in the papers. And I did give him the letter – he was acting quite rightly. What do they want me to believe?"

"Oh, Mary!" cries her friend, "why did you not tell us? Have you parted with everything?"

"The money?" says the girl – with her white face, and frightened pathetic eyes. "Oh, I do not care about the money! It has got nothing to do with the money. But – but – he – was my mother's only brother."

The lips tremble for a moment; but she collects herself. Her courage fights through the stun of this sudden blow.

"I will not believe it!" she says. "How dare they say such things of him? How is it we have never seen anything of it in the papers?"

But the Laird leaves these and other wild questions to be answered at leisure. In the meantime, his eyes are burning like coals of fire; and he is twisting his hands together in a vain endeavour to repress his anger and indignation.

"Tell them to put a horse to," he says in a voice the abruptness of which startles every one. "I want to drive to the telegraph-office. This is a thing for men to deal wi' – not weemen."

CHAPTER II. AN ULTIMATUM

When our good friend the Laird of Denny-mains came back from the post-office, he seemed quite beside himself with wrath. And yet his rage was not of the furious and loquacious sort; it was reticent, and deep, and dangerous. He kept pacing up and down the gravel-path in front of the house, while as yet dinner was not ready. Occasionally he would rub his hands vehemently, as if to get rid of some sort of electricity; and once or twice we heard him ejaculate to himself, "The scoondrel! The scoondrel!" It was in vain that our gentle Queen Titania, always anxious to think the best of everybody, broke in on these fierce meditations, and asked the Laird to suspend his judgment. How could he be sure, she asked, that Frederick Smethurst had really run away with his niece's little property? He had come to her and represented that he was in serious difficulties; that this temporary loan of seven thousand pounds or so would save him; that he would repay her directly certain remittances came to him from abroad. How could he, the Laird, know that Frederick Smethurst did not mean to keep his promise?

But Denny-mains would have none of these possibilities. He saw the whole story clearly. He had telegraphed for confirmation; but already he was convinced. As for Frederick Smethurst being a swindler – that did not concern him, he said. As for the creditors, that was their own look-out: men in business had to take their chance. But that this miscreant, this ruffian, this mean hound should have robbed his own niece of her last farthing – and left her absolutely without resources or protection of any kind in the world – this it was that made the Laird's eyes burn with a dark fire. "The scoondrel! – the scoondrel!" he said; and he rubbed his hands as though he would wrench the fingers off.

We should have been more surprised at this exhibition of rage on the part of a person so ordinarily placid as Denny-mains, but that every one had observed how strong had become his affection for Mary Avon during our long days on the Atlantic. If she had been twenty times his own daughter he could not have regarded her with a greater tenderness. He had become at once her champion and her slave. When there was any playful quarrel between the young lady and her hostess, he took the side of Mary Avon with a seriousness that soon disposed of the contest. He studied her convenience to the smallest particular when she wished to paint on deck; and so far from hinting that he would like to have Tom Galbraith revise and improve her work, he now said that he would have pride in showing her productions to that famous artist. And perhaps it was not quite so much the actual fact of the stealing of the money as the manner and circumstance of it that now wholly upset his equilibrium, and drove him into this passion of rage. "The scoondrel! – the scoondrel!" he muttered to himself, in these angry pacings to and fro.

Then he surprised his hostess by suddenly stopping short, and uttering some brief chuckle of laughter.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said he, "for the leeberty I have taken; but I was at the telegraph-office in any case; and I thought ye would not mind my sending for my nephew Howard. Ye were so good as to say – "

"Oh, we shall be most pleased to see him," said she promptly. "I am sure he must have heard us talking about the yacht; he will not mind a little discomfort – "

"He will have to take what is given him, and be thankful," said the Laird, sharply. "In my opeenion the young people of the present day are too much given to picking and choosing. They will not begin as their parents began. Only the best of everything is good enough for them."

But here the Laird checked himself.

"No, no, ma'am," said he. "My nephew Howard is not like that. He is a good lad – a sensible lad. And as for his comfort on board that yacht, I'm thinking it's not that, but the opposite, he has to fear most. Ye are spoiling us all – the crew included."

"Now we must go in to dinner," is the practical answer.

"Has she come down?" asks the Laird, in a whisper.

"I suppose so."

In the drawing-room we found Mary Avon. She was rather pale, and silent – that was all; and she seemed to wish to avoid observation. But when dinner was announced the Laird went over to her, and took her hand, and led her into the dining-room, just as he might have led a child. And he arranged her chair for her; and patted her on the back as he passed on, and said cheerfully —

"Quite right – quite right – don't believe all the stories ye hear. *Nil desperandum*— we're not beaten down yet!"

She sate cold and white, with her eyes cast down. He did not know that in the interval her hostess had been forced to show the girl that paragraph of the Hue and Cry.

"*Nil desperandum*— that's it," continued the good-hearted Laird, in his blithest manner. "Keep your own conscience clear, and let other people do as they please – that is the philosophy of life. That is what Dr. Sutherland would say to ye, if he was here."

This chance reference to Angus Sutherland was surely made with the best intentions; but it produced a strange effect on the girl. For an instant or two she tried to maintain her composure – though her lips trembled; then she gave way, and bent her head, and burst out crying, and covered her face with her hands. Of course her kind friend and hostess was with her in a moment, and soothed her, and caressed her, and got her to dry her eyes. Then the Laird said, after a second or two of inward struggle —

"Oh, do you know that there is a steamer run on the rocks at the mouth of Loch Etive?"

"Oh, yes," his hostess – who had resumed her seat – said cheerfully. "That is a good joke. They say the captain wanted to be very clever; and would not have a pilot, though he knows nothing about the coast. So he thought he would keep mid-channel in going into the Loch!"

The Laird looked puzzled: where was the joke?

"Oh," said she, noticing his bewilderment, "don't you know that at the mouth of Loch Etive the rocks are right in the middle, and the channel on each side? He chose precisely the straight line for bringing his vessel full tilt on the rocks!"

So this was the joke, then: that a valuable ship should be sunk? But it soon became apparent that any topic was of profound interest – was exceedingly facetious even – that could distract Mary Avon's attention. They would not let her brood over this thing. They would have found a joke in a coffin. And indeed amidst all this talking and laughing Mary Avon brightened up considerably; and took her part bravely; and seemed to have forgotten all about her uncle and his evil deeds. You could only have guessed from a certain preoccupation that, from time to time, these words must have been appearing before her mind, their commonplace and matter-of-fact phraseology in no way detracting from their horrible import: "*Police-officers and others are requested to make immediate search and inquiry for the above named; and those stationed at seaport towns are particularly requested to search outward-bound vessels.*" The description of Mr. Frederick Smethurst that preceded this injunction was not very flattering.

But among all the subjects, grave and gay, on which the Laird touched during this repast, there was none he was so serious and pertinacious about as the duty owed by young people to their parents and guardians. It did not seem an opportune topic. He might, for example, have enlarged upon the duties of guardians towards their helpless and unprotected wards. However, on this matter he was most decided. He even cross-examined his hostess, with an unusual sternness, on the point. What was the limit – was there any limit – she would impose on the duty which young folks owed to those who were their parents or who stood to them in the relation of parents? Our sovereign mistress, a little bit

frightened, said she had always found her boys obedient enough. But this would not do. Considering the care and affection bestowed on them – considering the hardly-earned wealth spent on them – considering the easy fortune offered to them – was it not bounden on young people to consult and obey the wishes of those who had done so much for them? She admitted that such was the case. Pressed to say where the limit of such duty should lie, she said there was hardly any. So far good; and the Laird was satisfied.

It was not until two days afterwards that we obtained full information by letter of what was known regarding the proceedings of Frederick Smethurst, who, it appears, before he bolted, had laid hands on every farthing of money he could touch, and borrowed from the credulous among his friends; so that there remained no reasonable doubt that the story he had told his niece was among his other deceptions, and that she was left penniless. No one was surprised. It had been almost a foregone conclusion. Mary Avon seemed to care little about it; the loss of her fortune was less to her than the shame and dishonour that this scoundrel had brought on her mother's name.

But this further news only served to stir up once more the Laird's slumbering wrath. He kept looking at his watch.

"She'll be off Easdale now," said he to himself; and we knew he was speaking of the steamer that was bringing his nephew from the south.

By and by – "She'll be near Kerrara, now," he said, aloud. "Is it not time to drive to the quay?"

It was not time, but we set out. There was the usual crowd on the quay when we got there; and far off we could descry the red funnels and the smoke of the steamer. Mary Avon had not come with us.

"What a beautiful day your nephew must have had for his sail from the Crinan," said the Laird's gentle hostess to him.

Did he not hear her? Or was he absorbed in his own thoughts? His answer, at all events, was a strange one.

"It is the first time I have asked anything of him," he said almost gloomily. "I have a right to expect him to do something for me now."

The steamer slows in; the ropes are thrown across; the gangways run up; and the crowd begins to pour out. And here is a tall and handsome young fellow who comes along with a pleasant smile of greeting on his face.

"How do you do, Mr. Smith?" says Queen T., very graciously – but she does not call him "Howard" as she calls Dr. Sutherland "Angus."

"Well, uncle," says he, brightly, when he has shaken hands all round, "what is the meaning of it all? Are you starting for Iceland in a hurry? I have brought a rifle as well as my breechloader. But perhaps I had better wait to be invited?"

This young man with the clear, pale complexion, and the dark hair, and dark grey eyes, had good looks and a pleasant smile in his favour; he was accustomed to be made welcome; he was at ease with himself. He was not embarrassed that his uncle did not immediately answer; he merely turned and called out to the man who had got his luggage. And when we had got him into the waggonette, and were driving off, what must he needs talk about but the absconding of Mr. Frederick Smethurst, whom he knew to be the uncle of a young lady he had once met at our house.

"Catch him?" said he with a laugh. "They'll never catch him."

His uncle said nothing at all.

When we reached Castle Osprey, the Laird said in the hall, when he had satisfied himself that there was no one within hearing —

"Howard, I wish to have a few meenutes' talk with ye; and perhaps our good friends here will come into the room too —"

We followed him into the dining-room; and shut the door.

"— just to see whether there is anything unreasonable in what I have got to say to ye."

The young man looked rather alarmed; there was an unusual coldness and austerity in the elder man's voice.

"We may as well sit down," he said; "it wants a little explanation."

We sat down in silence, Howard Smith looking more concerned than ever. He had a real affection, as we knew, for this pseudo-uncle of his, and was astounded that he should be spoken to in this formal and cold manner.

The Laird put one or two letters on the table before him.

"I have asked our friends here," said he, in a calm and measured voice, "to listen to what I have to say, and they will judge whether it is unreasonable. I have a service to ask of ye. I will say nothing of the relations between you and me before this time – but I may tell ye frankly – what doubtless ye have understood – that I had intended to leave ye Denny-mains at my death. I have neither kith nor kin of my own blood; and it was my intention that ye should have Denny-mains – perhaps even before I was called away."

The young man said nothing; but the manner in which the Laird spoke of his intentions in the past sense might have made the most disinterested of heirs look frightened. After all, he had certainly been brought up on the understanding that he was to succeed to the property.

"Now," said he, slowly, "I may say I have shown ye some kindness – "

"Indeed you have, sir!" said the other warmly.

" – and I have asked nothing from ye in return. I would ask nothing now, if I was your age. If I was twenty years younger, I would not have telegraphed for ye – indeed no, I would have taken the matter into my own hands – "

Here the Laird paused for a second or so to regain that coldness of demeanour with which he had started.

"Ay, just so. Well, ye were talking about the man Smethurst as we were coming along. His niece, as ye may be aware, is in this house – a better lass was never seen within any house."

The Laird hesitated more and more as he came to the climax of his discourse: it was obviously difficult for him to put this restraint on himself.

"Yes," said he, speaking a little more hurriedly, "and that scoondrel – that scoondrel – has made off with every penny that the poor lass had – every penny of it – and she is left an orphan – without a farthing to maintain herself wi' – and that infernal scoondrel – "

The Laird jumped from his seat; his anger was too much for him.

"I mean to stand by her," said he, pacing up and down the room, and speaking in short ejaculations. "She will not be left without a farthing. I will reach him too, if I can. Ay, ay, if I was but twenty years younger, and had that man before me!"

He stopped short opposite his nephew, and controlled himself so as to speak quite calmly.

"I would like to see ye settled at Denny-mains, Howard," said he. "And ye would want a wife. Now if ye were to marry this young leddy, it would be the delight of my old age to see ye both comfortable and well provided for. And a better wife ye would not get within this country. Not a better!"

Howard Smith stared.

"Why, uncle!" said he, as if he thought some joke was going forward. We, who had been aware of certain profound plans on the part of Denny-mains, were less startled by this abrupt disclosure of them.

"That is one of two things," said the Laird, with forced composure, "that I wished to put before ye. If it is impossible, I am sorely vexed. But there is another; and one or the other, as I have been thinking, I am fairly entitled to ask of ye. So far I have not thought of any return for what I have done; it has been a pleasure to me to look after your up-bringing."

"Well, uncle," said the young man, beginning to look a little less frightened. "I would rather hear of the other thing. You know – eh – that is – a girl does not take anybody who is flung at her, as it were – it would be an insult – and – and people's inclinations and affections – "

"I know – I know – I know," said the Laird, impatiently. "I have gone over all that. Do ye think I am a fool? If the lass will not have ye, there is an end to it: do your best to get her, and that is enough for me."

"There was another thing – " the young man suggested timidly.

"Yes, there is," said the Laird, with a sudden change in his manner. "It is a duty, sir, ye owe not to me, but to humanity. Ye are young, strong, have plenty of time, and I will give ye the money. Find out that man Smethurst; get him face to face; and fell him! Fell him!" – the Laird brought his fist down on the table with a bang that made everything jump, and his eyes were like coals of fire. "None o' your pistols or rapiers or trash like that! – no, no! – a mark on his face for the rest of his life – the brand of a scoondrel between his eyes – there! will ye do that for me?"

"But, uncle," cried the young man, finding this alternative about as startling as the other, "how on earth can I find him? He is off to Brazil, or Mexico, or California, long ere now, you may depend on it."

The Laird had pulled himself together again.

"I have put two things before ye," said he, calmly. "It is the first time I have asked ye for a service, after having brought ye up as few lads have been brought up. If you think it is unfair of me to make a bargain about such things, I will tell ye frankly that I have more concern in that young thing left to herself than in any creature now living on earth; and I will be a friend to her as well as an old man can. I have asked our friends here to listen to what I had to say; they will tell ye whether I am unreasonable. I will leave ye to talk it over."

He went to the door. Then he turned for a moment to his hostess.

"I am going to see, ma'am, if Mary will go for a bit walk wi' me – down to the shore, or the like; but we will be back before the hour for denner."

CHAPTER III. THE NEW SUITOR

It is only those who have lived with her for a number of years who can tell when a certain person becomes possessed with the demon of mischief, and allows sarcasm and malignant laughter and other unholy delights to run riot in her brain. The chief symptom is the assumption of an abnormal gravity, and a look of simple and confiding innocence that appears in the eyes. The eyes tell most of all. The dark pupils seem even clearer than is their wont, as if they would let you read them through and through; and there is a sympathetic appeal in them; the woman seems so anxious to be kind, and friendly, and considerate. And all the time – especially if it be a man who is hopelessly dumfounded – she is revenging the many wrongs of her sex by covertly laughing at him and enjoying his discomfiture.

And no doubt the expression on Howard Smith's face, as he sat there in a bewildered silence, was ludicrous enough. He was inclined to laugh the thing away as a joke, but he knew that the Laird was not given to practical jokes. And yet – and yet —

"Do you really think he is serious?" he blurted out at length, and he spoke to this lady with the gentle innocent eyes.

"Oh, undoubtedly," she answered, with perfect gravity.

"Oh, no; it is impossible!" he said, as if arguing with himself. "Why, my uncle, of all men in the world, – and pretending it was serious – of course people often do wish their sons or daughters to marry a particular person – for a sensible reason, to keep estates together, or to join the fortunes of a family – but this – no, no; this is a joke, or else he wants to drive me into giving that fellow a licking. And that, you know, is quite absurd; you might as well drag the Atlantic for a penknife."

"I am afraid your uncle is quite serious," said she, demurely.

"But it was to be left to you," he answered quickly. "You were to say whether it was unreasonable. Surely you must see it is not reasonable. Neither the one thing nor the other is possible – "

Here the young man paused for a moment.

"Surely," he said, "my uncle can't mean, by putting these impossible things before me, to justify his leaving his property to somebody else? There was no need for any such excuse; I have no claim on him; he has a right to do what he pleases."

"That has nothing to do with it," said Queen T. promptly. "Your uncle is quite resolved, I know, that you should have Denny-mains."

"Yes – and a wife," responded the young man, with a somewhat wry smile. "Oh, but you know, it is quite absurd; you will reason him out of it, won't you? He has such a high opinion of your judgment, I know."

The ingenious youth!

"Besides," said he warmly, "do you think it very complimentary to your friend Miss Avon that any one should be asked to come and marry her?"

This was better; it was an artful thrust. But the bland sympathetic eyes only paid him a respectful attention.

"I know my uncle is pretty firm when he has got a notion into his head," said he, "and – and – no doubt he is quite right in thinking that the young lady has been badly treated, and that somebody should give the absconder a thrashing. All that is quite right; but why should I be made responsible for it? I can't do impossible things."

"Well, you see," said his sage adviser, with a highly matter-of-fact air, "your uncle may not regard either the one thing or the other as impossible."

"But they are impossible," said he.

"Then I am very sorry," said she, with great sweetness. "Because Denny-mains is really a beautiful place. And the house would lend itself splendidly to a thorough scheme of redecoration; the hall could be made perfectly lovely. I would have the wooden dado painted a dark bottle-green, and the wall over it a rich Pompeian red – I don't believe the colours of a hall can be too bold if the tones are good in themselves. Pompeian red is a capital background for pictures, too; and I like to see pictures in the hall; the gentlemen can look at them while they are waiting for their wives. Don't you think Indian matting makes a very nice, serviceable, sober-coloured dado for a dining-room – so long as it does not drive your pictures too high on the wall?"

The fiendishness of this woman! Denny-mains was being withdrawn from him at this very moment; and she was bothering him with questions about its decoration. What did he think of Indian matting?

"Well," said he, "if I am to lose my chance of Denny-mains through this piece of absurdity, I can't help it."

"I beg your pardon," said she most amiably; "but I don't think your uncle's proposal so very absurd. It is the commonest thing in the world for people to wish persons in whom they are interested to marry each other; and very often they succeed by merely getting the young people to meet, and so forth. You say yourself that it is reasonable in certain cases. Well, in this case, you probably don't know how great an interest your uncle takes in Miss Avon, and the affection that he has for her. It is quite remarkable. And he has been dwelling on this possibility of a match between you – of seeing you both settled at Denny-mains – until he almost regards it as already arranged. 'Put yourself in his place,' as Mr. Reade says. It seems to him the most natural thing in the world, and I am afraid he will consider you very ungrateful if you don't fall in with his plan."

Deeper and deeper grew the shadow of perplexity on the young man's brow. At first he had seemed inclined to laugh the whole matter aside, but the gentle reasoning of this small person had a ghastly aspect of seriousness about it.

"Then his notion of my seeking out the man Smethurst and giving him a thrashing: you would justify that, too?" he cried.

"No, not quite," she answered, with a bit of a smile. "That is a little absurd, I admit – it is merely an ebullition of anger. He won't think any more of that in a day or two I am certain. But the other – the other, I fear, is a fixed idea."

At this point we heard some one calling outside:

"Miss Mary! I have been searching for ye everywhere; are ye coming for a walk down to the shore?"

Then a voice, apparently overhead at an open window —

"All right, sir; I will be down in a moment."

Another second or two, and we hear some one singing on the stair, with a fine air of bravado —

A strong sou-wester's blowing, Billy; can't you hear it roar, now?

— the gay voice passes through the hall —

Lord help 'em, how I pities all un —

— then the last phrase is heard outside —

— folks on shore now —

Queen Titania darts to the open window of the dining-room.

"Mary! Mary!" she calls. "Come here."

The next instant a pretty enough picture is framed by the lower half of the window, which is open. The background is a blaze of scarlet and yellow and green – a mixture of sunlight and red poppies and nasturtiums and glancing fuchsia leaves. Then this slight figure that has appeared is dark in shadow; but there is a soft reflected light from the front of the house, and that just shows you the smile on Mary Avon's face and the friendliness of her dark soft eyes.

"Oh, how do you do?" she says, reaching in her hand and shaking hands with him. There is not any timidity in her manner. No one has been whispering to her of the dark plots surrounding her.

Nor was Mr. Smith much embarrassed, though he did not show himself as grateful as a young man might have done for so frank and friendly a welcome.

"I scarcely thought you would have remembered me," said he modestly. But at this moment Denny-mains interfered, and took the young lady by the arm, and dragged her away. We heard their retreating footsteps on the gravel walk.

"So you remember her?" says our hostess, to break the awkward silence.

"Oh, yes, well enough," said he; and then he goes on to say stammeringly – "Of course, I – I have nothing to say against her –"

"If you have," it is here interposed, as a wholesome warning, "you had better not mention it here. Ten thousand hornets' nests would be a fool compared to this house if you said anything in it against Mary Avon."

"On the contrary," says he, "I suppose she is a very nice girl indeed – very – I suppose there's no doubt of it. And if she has been robbed like that, I am very sorry for her; and I don't wonder my uncle should be interested in her, and concerned about her, and – and all that's quite right. But it is too bad – it is too bad – that one should be expected to – to ask her to be one's wife, and a sort of penalty hanging over one's head, too. Why, it is enough to set anybody against the whole thing; I thought everybody knew that you can't get people to marry if you drive them to it – except in France, I suppose, where the whole business is arranged for you by your relatives. This isn't France; and I am quite sure Miss Avon would consider herself very unfairly treated if she thought she was being made part and parcel of any such arrangement. As for me – well, I am very grateful to my uncle for his long kindness to me; he has been kindness itself to me; and it is quite true, as he says, that he has asked for nothing in return. Well, what he asks now is just a trifle too much. I won't sell myself for any property. If he is really serious – if it is to be a compulsory marriage like that – Denny-mains can go. I shall be able to earn my own living somehow."

There was a chord struck in this brief, hesitating, but emphatic speech that went straight to his torturer's heart. A look of liking and approval sprang to her eyes. She would no longer worry him.

"Don't you think," said she gently, "that you are taking the matter too seriously? Your uncle does not wish to force you into a marriage against your will; he knows nothing about Adelphi melodramas. What he asks is simple and natural enough. He is, as you see, very fond of Mary Avon; he would like to see her well provided for; he would like to see you settled and established at Denny-mains. But he does not ask the impossible. If she does not agree, neither he nor you can help it. Don't you think it would be a very simple matter for you to remain with us for a time, pay her some ordinary friendly attention, and then show your uncle that the arrangement he would like does not recommend itself to either you or her? He asks no more than that; it is not much of a sacrifice."

There was no stammering about this lady's exposition of the case. Her head is not very big, but its perceptive powers are remarkable.

Then the young man's face brightened considerably.

"Well," said he, "that would be more sensible, surely. If you take away the threat, and the compulsion, and all that, there can be no harm in my being civil to a girl, especially when she is, I am sure, just the sort of girl one ought to be civil to. I am sure she has plenty of common sense –"

It is here suggested once more that, in this house, negative praise of Mary Avon is likely to awake slumbering lions.

"Oh, I have no doubt," says he readily, "that she is a very nice girl indeed. One would not have to pretend to be civil to some creature stuffed with affectation, or a ghoul. I don't object to this at all. If my uncle thinks it enough, very well. And I am quite sure that a girl you think so much of would have more self-respect than to expect anybody to go and make love to her in the country-bumpkin style."

Artful again; but it was a bad shot. There was just a little asperity in Madame's manner when she said —

"I beg you not to forget that Mary does not wish to be made love to by anybody. She is quite content as she is. Perhaps she has quite other views, which you would not regret, I am sure. But don't imagine that she is looking for a husband; or that a husband is necessary for her; or that she won't find friends to look after her. It is your interests we are considering, not hers."

Was the snubbing sufficient?

"Oh, of course, of course," said he, quite humbly. "But then, you know, I was only thinking that — that — if I am to go in and make believe about being civil to your young lady-friend, in order to please my uncle, too much should not be expected. It isn't a very nice thing — at least, for you it may be very nice — to look on at a comedy —"

"And is it so very hard to be civil to a girl?" says his mistress sharply. "Mary will not shock you with the surprise of her gratitude. She might have been married ere now if she had chosen."

"She — isn't — quite a school-girl, you know," he says timidly.

"I was not aware that men preferred to marry school-girls," says the other, with a gathering majesty of demeanour.

Here a humble witness of this interview has once more to interpose to save this daring young man from a thunderbolt. Will he not understand that the remotest and most round-about reflection on Mary Avon is in this house the unpardonable sin?

"Well," said he frankly, "it is exceedingly kind of you to show me how I am to get out of this troublesome affair; and I am afraid I must leave it to you to convince my uncle that I have done sufficient. And it is very kind of you to ask me to go yachting with you; I hope I shall not be in the way. And — and — there is no reason at all why Miss Avon and I should not become very good friends — in fact, I hope we shall become such good friends that my uncle will see we could not be anything else."

Could anything be fairer than this? His submission quite conquered his hostess. She said she would show him some of Mary Avon's sketches in oil, and led him away for that purpose. His warm admiration confirmed her good opinion of him; henceforth he had nothing to fear.

At dinner that evening he was at first a little shy; perhaps he had a suspicion that there were present one or two spectators of a certain comedy which he had to play all by himself. But, indeed, our eyes and ears were not for him alone. Miss Avon was delighting the Laird with stories of the suggestions she had got about her pictures from the people who had seen them — even from the people who had bought them — in London.

"And you know," said she quite frankly, "I must study popular taste as much as I fairly can now, for I have to live by it. If people will have sea-pieces spoiled by having figures put in, I must put in figures. By and by I may be in a position to do my own work in my own way."

The Laird glanced at his nephew: was it not for him to emancipate this great and original artist from the fear of critics, and dealers, and purchasers? There was no response.

"I mean to be in London soon myself," the Laird said abruptly; "ye must tell me where I can see some of your pictures."

"Oh, no," she said, laughing, "I shall not victimise my friends. I mean to prey on the public — if possible. It is Mr. White, in King Street, St. James's, however, who has taken most of my pictures hitherto; and so if you know of anybody who would like to acquire immortal works for a few guineas apiece, that is the address."

"I am going to London myself soon," said he, with a serious air, as if he had suddenly determined on buying the National Gallery.

Then Howard Smith, perceiving that no one was watching him, or expecting impossibilities of him, became quite cheerful and talkative; and told some excellent stories of his experiences at various shooting quarters the previous winter. Light-hearted, good-natured, fairly humorous, he talked very well indeed. We gathered that during the last months of the year the shooting of pheasants occupied a good deal more of his time and attention than the study of law. And how could one wonder that so pleasant-mannered a young man was a welcome guest at those various country-houses in the south?

But it appeared that, despite all this careless talk, he had been keeping an eye on Mary Avon during dinner. Walking down to the yacht afterwards – the blood-red not quite gone from the western skies, a cool wind coming up from the sea – he said casually to his uncle —

"Well, sir, whatever trouble that young lady may have gone through has not crushed her spirits yet. She is as merry as a lark."

"She has more than cheerfulness – she has courage," said the Laird, almost severely. "Oh, ay, plenty of courage. And I have no doubt she could fight the world for herself just as well as any man I know. But I mean to make it my business that she shall not have to fight the world for herself – not as long as there is a stick standing on Denny-mains!"

CHAPTER IV. CHASING A THUNDERSTORM

"*All on board then – all on board!*" the summons comes ringing through the wonderland of dreams. And then, amid the general hurry and scurry throughout the house, certain half-bewildered people turn first of all to the windows of their rooms: a welcome sight! The glory of the summer dawn is shining over the mountains; the *White Dove*, with nearly all her sail set, is swinging there at her moorings; best of all, a strong breeze – apparently from the north-east – is ruffling the dark blue seas and driving a line of white surf on the further shores. The news comes that Master Fred, by darting about in the dingy since ever daylight began, has got the very last basket on board; the red caps are even now bringing the gig in to the landing slip; John of Skye is all impatience to take advantage of the favourable wind. There is but little time lost; the happy-go-lucky procession — *dona ferentes* – set out for the beach. And if the Laird is pleased to find his nephew apparently falling into his scheme with a good grace; and if the nephew thinks he is very lucky to get so easily out of an awkward predicament; and if Mary Avon – unconscious of these secret designs – is full of an eager delight at the prospect of being allowed to set to work again – may not all this account for a certain indecorous gaiety that startles the silence of the summer morning? Or is it that mythical hero Homesh who is responsible for this laughter? We hear the Laird chuckling; we notice the facetious wrinkles about his eyes; we make sure it must be Homesh. Then the final consignment of books, shawls, gun-cases, and what not is tossed into the gig; and away we go, with the measured dash of the oars.

And what does the bearded John of Skye think of the new hand we have brought him? Has he his own suspicions? Is his friend and sworn ally, Dr. Sutherland, to be betrayed and supplanted in his absence?

"Good morning, sir," he says obediently, at the gangway; and the quick Celtic eyes glance at Howard Smith from top to toe.

"Good morning, captain," the young man says lightly; and he springs too quickly up the steps, making a little bit of a stumble. This is not an auspicious omen.

Then on deck: the handsome figure and pleasant manner of this young man ought surely to prepossess people in his favour. What if his tightly-fitting garments and his patent-leather boots and white gaiters are not an orthodox yachting rig? John of Skye would not judge of a man by his costume. And if he does not seem quite at home – in this first look round – every one is not so familiar with boating life as Dr. Sutherland. It is true, an umbrella used as a walking-stick looks strange on board a yacht; and he need not have put it on the curved top of the companion, for it immediately rolls over into the scuppers. Nor does he seem to see the wickedness of placing a heavy bundle of canvases on the raised skylight of the ladies' cabin; does he want to start the glass? Dr. Sutherland, now, would have given the men a hand in hauling up the gig. Dr. Sutherland would not have been in the way of the tiller, as the yacht is released from her moorings.

Unaware of this rapid criticism, and unconcerned by all the bustle going on around, our new friend is carelessly and cheerfully chatting with his hostess; admiring the yacht; praising the beauty of the summer morning; delighted with the prospect of sailing in such weather. He does not share in the profound curiosity of his uncle about the various duties of the men. When John of Skye, wishing to leave the tiller for a minute to overhaul the lee tackle, turns quite naturally to Mary Avon, who is standing by him, and says with a grin of apology, "If ye please, mem," the young man betrays but little surprise that this young lady should be entrusted with the command of the vessel.

"What!" he says, with a pleasant smile – they seem on very friendly terms already – "can you steer, Miss Avon? Mind you don't run us against any rocks."

Miss Avon has her eye on the mainsail. She answers, with a business-like air —

"Oh, there is no fear of that. What I have to mind, with this wind, is not to let her gybe, or I should get into disgrace."

"Then I hope you won't let her gybe, whatever that is," said he, with a laugh.

Never was any setting-out more auspicious. We seemed to have bade farewell to those perpetual calms. Early as it was in the morning, there was no still, dream-like haze about the mountains; there was a clear greenish-yellow where the sunlight struck them; the great slopes were dappled with the shadows of purple-brown; further away the tall peaks were of a decided blue. And then the windy, fresh, brisk morning; the *White Dove* running races with the driven seas; the white foam flying away from her sides. John of Skye seemed to have no fear of this gentle skipper. He remained forward, superintending the setting of the topsail; the *White Dove* was to "have it" while the fresh breeze continued to blow.

And still the squally easterly wind bears her bravely onward, the puffs darkening the water as they pass us and strike the rushing seas. Is that a shadow of Colonsay on the far southern horizon? The lighthouse people here have gone to bed; there is not a single figure along the yellow-white walls. Look at the clouds of gulls on the rocks, resting after their morning meal. By this time the deer have retreated into the high slopes above Craignure; there is a white foam breaking along the bay of Innismore. And still the *White Dove* spins along, with foam-diamonds glittering in the sunlight at her bows; and we hear the calling of the sea-swallows, and the throbbing of a steamer somewhere in among the shadows of Loch Aline. Surely now we are out of the reign of calms; the great boom strains at the sheets; there is a whirl of blue waters; the *White Dove* has spread her wings at last.

"Ay, ay," says John of Skye, who has relieved Miss Avon at the helm; "it is a great peety."

"Why, John?" says she, with some surprise; is he vexed that we should be sailing well on this fine sailing day?

"It iss a great peety that Mr. Sutherland not here," said John, "and he wass know so much about a yacht, and day after day not a breeze at ahl. There iss not many chentlemen will know so much about a yacht as Mr. Sutherland."

Miss Avon did not answer, though her face seemed conscious in its colour. She was deeply engaged in a novel.

"Oh, that is the Mr. Sutherland who has been with you," said Howard Smith to his hostess, in a cheerful way. "A doctor, I think you said?"

At this Miss Avon looked up quickly from her book.

"I should have thought," said she with a certain dignity of manner, "that most people had heard of Dr. Angus Sutherland."

"Oh, yes, no doubt," said he, in the most good-natured fashion. "I know about him myself – it must be the same man. A nephew of Lord Foyers, isn't he? I met some friends of his at a house last winter; they had his book with them – the book about tiger-hunting in Nepaul, don't you know? – very interesting indeed it was, uncommonly interesting. I read it right through one night when everybody else was in bed –"

"Why, that is Captain Sutherland's book," said his hostess, with just a trace of annoyance. "They are not even related. How can you imagine that Angus Sutherland would write a book about tiger-hunting? – he is one of the most distinguished men of science in England."

"Oh, indeed," says the young man, with the most imperturbable good humour. "Oh, yes, I am sure I have heard of him – the Geographical Society, or something like that; really those evenings are most amusing. The women are awfully bored, and yet they do keep their eyes open somehow. But about those Indian fellows; it was only last winter that I heard how the – manages to make those enormous bags, all to his own gun, that you see in the papers. Haven't you noticed them?"

Well, some of us had been struck with amazement by the reports of the enormous slaughter committed by a certain Indian prince; and had wondered at one of the gentle natives of the East taking so thoroughly and successfully to our robust English sports.

"Why," said this young man, "he has every covert laid out with netting, in small squares like a dice-board; and when he has done blazing away in the air, the under-keepers come up and catch every pheasant, hare, and rabbit that has run into the netting, and kill them, and put them down to his bag. Ingenious, isn't it? But I'll tell you what I have seen myself. I have seen Lord Justice – deliberately walk down a line of netting and shoot every pheasant and rabbit that had got entangled. 'Safer not to let them get away,' says he. And when his host came up he said, 'Very good shooting; capital. I have got four pheasants and seven rabbits there; I suppose the beaters will pick them up.'"

And so the Youth, as we had got to call him, rattled on, relating his personal experiences, and telling such stories as occurred to him. There was a good sprinkling of well-known names in this desultory talk; how could Miss Avon fail to be interested, even if the subject-matter was chiefly composed of pheasant-shooting, private theatricals, billiard matches on wet days, and the other amusements of country life?

The Laird, when he did turn aside from that huge volume of *Municipal London* – which he had brought with him for purposes of edification – must have seen and approved. If the young man's attentions to Mary Avon were of a distinctly friendly sort, if they were characterised by an obvious frankness, if they were quite as much at the disposal of Mr. Smith's hostess, what more could be expected? Rome was not built in a day. Meanwhile Miss Avon seemed very well pleased with her new companion.

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