

THE RED ASCENT

BY ESTHER W. NEILL

CHAPTER XV—CONTINUED

"Fair?" repeated Jeff defensively. "Miss Fielding did the most of it herself. Did I tell you that I had been here all the time? Well, that was a lie. I went to Texas; was gone ten days. I found out the amazing fact, one that even the Colonel begrudgingly acknowledged—that this Mr. Fielding is an honest man. It required neither my brilliant intellect, nor my forensic ability, to convince him that we had a clear case. You see the old letters that you had proved your grandfather wasn't in Texas at the time and Jessica had sent her father a peck of special deliveries with Miss Fruney's story in them. We spent the best part of a day digging out the old deed, and the signature was a sort of caricature on your grandfather's. The trouble was old man Mike couldn't cart the blackboard copy around with him. Then there was another point: Mike was your grandfather's overseer, and acting as his agent, and according to the laws of Texas—well, I won't go to the legal aspect—I learned a lot. Claims are different down there. The fact that Texas was a republic, and came into the union owing its own land, seems to make a difference, and I tell you the rights of women and minors are respected."

"Go on," said Richard, anxiously. "Well, Mr. Fielding, who proved to be a very pleasant, fair-minded person, said he thought the matter could be arranged out of court. Nobody had gobbled up your land. It was still there, and he proposed to give it back to you. He said that he had never questioned his father's legacy; that the ground had given him his start; he was down and out when he went there eighteen years ago and began raising cattle. Every time he made an extra dollar, if he didn't buy cows, he bought land. Then he struck oil, not on your land, but on his. Now—well, his best way would even make Wall Street sit up and take notice. There was a syndicate wanted to buy your ground; offered half a million. I nosed round there long enough to find that that was a good price for it. Colonel wired me to close the deal."

"Then—then what did Miss Fielding mean by saying that she would have to work for a living?" "I don't know. Maybe she thought so, maybe she didn't. That girl would keep anybody guessing. She's been here since the accident. I heard her ask Betty what she thought you would do next?" "Jefferson paused. The question was very vital to him, and he had chosen this way of asking it. "I'm going back," said Richard simply. "I'm going back. They won't need me now. I've been lying here half-awake wondering if the way wouldn't open somehow. I didn't speak because it hardly seemed worth while. I believe I've been vaguely conscious for a long time. I seemed to feel people moving around me, waiting on me. I seemed to hear voices without being able to understand what they were saying. My soul, the spirit part of me, seemed to be caught in a trap—trapped in my body. I believe suffering makes people feel like that, unless they are wide enough awake to take the transcendental view. As soon as I'm free I'm going back."

"Do you want to go?" "Want—what do you mean, Jeff?" "I mean do you want to go, or do you feel that you must?" "Both," he smiled feebly. "The want seems to make the must. In my dreams I've felt the old force pushing me on. Down in that mine helping that poor little sinner to the daylight, I felt that I would have to go back to the seminary. That mine seemed to symbolize what I wanted to do—lifting people out of the blackness to a glimpse of the supernatural. Since I've been home I've been too tired to think. I even fancied I might have been mistaken in my purpose in life. I dreamed of settling down here and living forever, writing a thing now and then to settle world-wide questions."

Jefferson sat up waiting eagerly for his next words. His hands crumpled his hair nervously. "It was only a passing mood," continued Richard. "My grandfather's extravagant love letters set me wondering why I didn't have some sentimental emotions of my own. But a wife—I wouldn't know what to do with one. If I married a girl I should always feel that she deserved some consideration, and I wouldn't want to consider her. I have always wanted to be free."

"Poor girls!" said a mocking voice in the doorway, and looking up they saw Jessica standing in the dim light of the sick room, her arms full of flowers. "I'm glad you've waked up at last!" "Betty came bustling in behind her. "Oh, Dick—Dick—did you know that we were really going to Washington? I'm so excited I can neither eat nor sleep." she knelt down beside the bed and clasped Richard's hand. "I feel like a fairy princess."

Jessica came nearer and scattered the flowers over the bed. "They count you a hero, even if you are a woman hater," she said. "I feel more like a corpse," said Richard humorously, viewing the flowers.

"Nonsense," said Jessica, "you look like Sleeping Beauty in my fairy book." "I'm sure I do." "And I'm sure you must all get out of here," said Jefferson. "I hear the nurse coming. If she sees you she will blame me for letting you in."

Richard made no protest as Jefferson hurried his visitors to the door. His attempt to think, to adjust his mind to his new situation, had exhausted him, and when the nurse came in a few minutes later she found that he had fallen into a restful sleep.

Jefferson walked through the shadowy woods with Jessica. He had formed the habit of seeing her home every afternoon that she came to inquire for the invalid. Usually they rode on horseback, but to-day they walked leading their horses through the fern-bordered path. It was Jefferson's suggestion that they dismount. It was easier "to talk," he said. Jessica had demurred at first. With a woman's quick intuition she had guessed his reason.

"We have known each other for six weeks," he began after a long silence. "Seven," she corrected him. "It is a long time." "Wouldn't it be more flattering to consider it a short time?" she teased.

"Oh, it's no use to play with words," he said hopelessly, and his eyes looked careworn and afraid. "During those weeks we've talked about birds, and bushes, and the Lord only knows how many other things in which I did not feel a particle of interest. I believe you know what I want to say, Jessica, and you know, too, that I don't know how to say it."

She stopped beside a big oak, and let her horse walk deliberately between them. "Is this intended as an ardent proposal?" she asked. "It is—it is," he cried, pushing the horse aside and clasping both her hands. "You know that I love—love—you, and I did not feel free to tell you so until today."

Her soft eyes had lost their look of mischief now. "Why?" she asked. "Because—I thought Dick Matter—son—I thought perhaps—" "Go on," she urged. "I thought perhaps you cared for him."

"And suppose—suppose, Jeff, I confessed that under some circumstances I might have cared?" "His face looked haggard in the sunlight. "What circumstances?" "She hesitated. "Perhaps—the most important circumstance: if he had cared for me."

"You are in love with him?" "No—no," she contradicted. "I only had symptoms—you see—he was indifferent."

"How could he have been?" "Of course it was amazing," she smiled. "But he wanted something else in life. I knew it all the time. That was one reason I cared."

task. All his movements were steady and determined, if a little slow; every stroke of foot or arm was well-directed and produced results, while they kept a quiet, rhythm-like regularity that would have suited well with an accompaniment of music. "What are you listening for Kevin?" his father would cry, as the boy paused sometimes, throwing back his head, as if arrested by sudden sound; and though he only laughed at this question, Kevin had told Shawn Rua, in a moment of confidence, that he "heard things" which he could not describe. This listening habit of his annoyed people at times, and caused them to look on the strong, somewhat clumsy lad as tiresome and stupid.

The sun set, the crags glowed crimson, Kevin's spade turned into the semblance of a warlike weapon, blood-red in his hand, a whistle from the next field warned him to gather up his tools and join his father on the homeward path. Connor Mor owned one of the best of the scattered homesteads which nestled on the mountain-side, a long, low-roofed, tiny-windowed house, with a straw thatch, and strong stone walls stolen out of the overhanging crags; a few large trees at one gable, a little garden, a golden hay-cock, and many brown pyramids of turf clustering behind the little farmyard.

Maury Oge has got a little daughter, said Connor to his son, speaking in Irish, the language of the mountain. "Shemus is wild with delight: we must call in and give them joy." Maury and Shemus were a young pair in whom Kevin's parents had a particular interest, and at whose wedding Kevin had amused himself a year ago. At their door the happy father was now beckoning, and Kevin felt very awkward as an old woman thrust a bundle of flannels into his arms, out of which a little round, red face was seen to blink.

"Her eyes are open," said Kevin, uncomfortably. "Of course they are," said the old woman, insulted. "Did you think it was a kitten?" "Oh, no!" said Kevin, and got out of the house as fast as he could. "I never saw such a little knowing baby," he said to his mother, when he went home. "She looked at me as if she had got something to tell me!"

"It must be something good, then," said his mother; "for newborn babies come straight from heaven." Kevin ate his supper in silence, and when he had done, mended his mother's old spinning-wheel, the long wheel on which she spun wool for the family clothing; till Shawn Rua came in with his story-telling face, pipe in mouth, finding, as usual, the warmest chimney corner for did not his presence make the fire-sprits leap out of the turf logs and fly laughing up the smoke-ladders?

Shawn was a man who could read both Gaelic and English, and had in his house a strong chest in which were treasured certain Gaelic manuscripts, containing, as Kevin believed, all the precious lore of the world. These books had been bequeathed to Shawn by his father, and were the pride of the mountain. Where they had come from originally nobody asked. Kevin had a vague belief that they had grown up out of creation, like the rocks and trees; but, at all events, poetry exhaled from their yellow leaves, and was scattered by the breath of Shawn into the daily thoughts of a simple and imaginative people. When it was known that Shawn was at Connor Mor's, people came dropping in to spend the evening. Sibbie, the aged singer, arrived with a hundred ballads on the tip of her tongue; Rosheen, a buxom maiden, who had already earned some reputation for telling homely fairy tales, and was thought to be slyly stealing lessons from the great master himself, brought her laughing face and an apron full of wool which she carded while she listened; mothers of families unfolded their knitting, and fathers lit their pipes. The kitchen filled, and was at once lighted and perfumed by a fish-oil lamp; the turf blazed and mingled its fragrance with that of the luminary on the table; a few pet hens in the rafters, roused out of their first sleep, clucked their terror to each other, but, recognizing Shawn and his audience, recovered their composure, and retired behind their wings and among the bacon-ditches.

Shawn had a long, thin face, with large, lumpy temples, about which the "foxy" hair grew scantily. He had an exceedingly sonorous voice, and when he made a telling period, he had a way of lifting his eyelids and overlooking his audience with a moonstruck gleam in his long grey eyes, which movement had a thrilling effect and always caused a sensation among his listeners. Shawn knew his power and gloried in it and was more proud of the audience he could command at any moment than a king might be of his standing army. Mighty and heroic was his narrative: kings and queens figured in it; battles were fought and feasts spread; or his theme was wild and weird; spirits walked the earth, ghostly phantoms flitted across the firelight; or he suddenly became playful and fantastic; fairies sported around him, happy mortals laughed, danced, and sang.

"Kevin, my boy," said his father, when Shawn had ceased, and Kevin sat immovable, "if you were as good at book-learnin' as you are at listenin', you'd do for us all to be proud of some day."

"Let the boy alone," said Shawn, loftily. "It isn't every man that is born to book-learnin', Connor Mor. The boy is well enough. What he hears gets further than his ears."

"I don't see that," said Connor; "but as he handles the spade we can't complain of him."

Kevin blushed, and his head sank on his breast. He knew that a dull lad, disliking book-study, slow of speech, confused and wandering in his mind, always missing points, passing some things over, and pondering amazed upon other things which most people accepted as matters of course. He brightened up, hearing his father praise his skill with the spade, but dropped back into his listening dream, while rosy-cheeked Rosheen took her turn as story-teller, and, later, Sibbie, the ballad-singer, poured forth a shrill ditty, the lament of the enchanted swans, unfortunate children of Lir, who wandered so many ages on the stormy waters of the sea of Moyle. The wind roared and whistled round the cabin, the thunder of the sea boomed up from the distance, and the last high note of the keen wailed itself away and was lost in the crash of Nature's orchestral music.

As often happened Kevin went home with Shawn for the night, as the latter had a long, lonely way to walk; and he cannot say that the book-learned man was quite free from a certain superstitious dislike to the desert mountainside at the hour of midnight. His way lay past the churchyard, and Shawn loved not the glimmer of its pale gable in the moonlight, nor the grey streaks made by the tombstones against the darkness, nor the peculiar minor key into which the wind was sure to fall as it swept around the spot. Arrived at his cabin, he roused with a few artful touches the fire that slumbered in the ashes, showing by its light a clean-swept earthen floor, a window garnished by a little green curtain, a basket of unwashed potatoes, and an object which was the pride of the mountain-side, to wit, a carved oak chest, which had been thrown up among the rocks after a wreck, and now held the treasure of ancient manuscript that made Shawn Rua the delight of his fellowmen.

Shawn placed two large potatoes on the embers to roast, lighted his pipe, and sat down by the hearth, while Kevin opposite watched the smoke curl, and gazed curiously at the meditative face of the book-learned man. The storm still strove outside, and the boom and splash of the sea could be heard more plainly than at Kevin's home.

"Shawn!" he said, "tell me about the sea-king Olaf!" "Well, boy, his ghost has enough to do if it's out on the ocean tonight. Have I ever told you how he sailed to Red Bay among the Antrim hills and carried off the Irish wolfhound?"

"Yes!" said Kevin, eagerly, "in his gayety of the sea-serpent, with his banner of the ravens, and in his armour of green and gold. He came at night and walked on the strand till daylight. I wish I had been alive to see him."

"That was a queer meeting of his with Jarl Thover and Rand the witch in the middle of a mystic wind. I'd rather have seen that," said Shawn, with a meditative puff. "Do you think, did he ever see Hy-Brasil when he was sailing about the seas?" said Kevin, anxiously. "Most likely he did," said Shawn. "Why should he not as well as another?"

"Did you ever see it, Shawn?" asked the boy, his eyes growing larger. "I can't say quite that I did," said Shawn, with hesitating honesty. "I thought I saw it often, but it was sure to turn out to be one of the real solid islands, or a shadow, or a cloud, or something. Once I was full sure I had spotted it: I spied it out far at the line of the sea with the loveliest pink hills and golden cliffs. I pulled off my hat, and I called on the name of God. 'Hy-Brasil!' cried I, and my heart leapt up and stood still. But in a moment afterwards the sun faded and the evening changed; and Hy-Brasil was only a lump of cloud that had strayed down from the sky a bit, and was lying on the sea!"

"Ah," said Kevin, "what a pity! And it only comes once in seven years." "Isn't your mind looking for it," said Shawn, shaking his head. "Many have wasted their lives in that search. Don't turn out a wild goose, but stick to your spade!" Kevin turned his head abashed, but presently raised it again with a new idea.

"Shawn," he said, "in King Olaf's country the storks bring the babies to their mothers. You told me that once. Do the storks come to this country?" "So," said Shawn, "I think not often. The storks come from Egypt, and it is long enough for them to fly as far as Norway and Denmark. They are tired by that time, and they have a long way to go back."

"Well," said Kevin, thoughtfully, "I am sure I saw a great bird flying away over the roof of Maury Oge's house, just as we came up to it and looked behind her back and her eyes fixed on a fat thrush that sat singing on a twig above her head. The beak of the thrush was open wide, so was the little maiden's mouth; the thrush swelled his throat and

barb when they are born. They are always rather rough-and-ready people to deal with; can bark a bit, too, when they like. Others are like cats, or like cows; and I have even known people with a likeness to asses. So this little stranger has got her friends among the birds, has she? I hope they'll give her a godmother's gift. They'll lay golden eggs for her; or perhaps she'll sing like her grandaunt, Sibbie. And, by the way, Shemus asked me to find a name for the little daughter—a real saint's name of the rich old Irish stock."

He got up and took some curious volumes out of the wonderful oak-chest, while Kevin held the fish-oil lamp, staring with admiration into the magic recesses which were the treasury of Shawn Rua's lore. The good man's spectacles were poised on his nose and the volume was coned.

"Fanchea is the name," he said, solemnly, at last. A real holy, delicate saint, great and grand as the rocks, mild as the dove, and as old as King Olaf himself. Father Ulick won't object to it, I think. We have Brides and Marys enough on the mountain."

Kevin went to sleep upon a bed made on the top of the oak-chest, and dreamed of King Olaf riding in his regal galley through the moonlit seas, with the little babe, Fanchea, in his arms. His armour gleamed; his long hair floated on the wind; the mystical island, Hy-Brasil, rose out of the waters on his path, and upon its pearly cliffs he laid the weeping babe; then steered northwards to meet the Vikings. Kevin had followed his track, borne on the wings of a great, strange bird, and made wild attempts to stoop for the little perishing creature whose wails mingled with the cries of the wind which beat him back and back again, till the wings of the brave bird drooped, and he sank upon the waves. Just as the waters were engulfing him, Kevin awoke, sobbing, and saw the dawn light peeping through the chinks of the door.

The following Sunday the little baby was brought to the church to be baptized. It was a fine, sunny, windy day in the very early spring, and the storm made military music round the whitewashed walls of the poor church. Piping reeds, the clash of gymbals, and the roar of drums were all to be heard in the mysterious music with which Nature celebrated the font. Fanchea's appearance at the font, a chorus of singing birds, who had their nests in the rafters, and were used to sing their hallelujahs undisturbed above the altar, whirred down from the roof and perched upon the edge of the old carved and mutilated font, where they chanted their silver psalms in the pauses of the storm. Kevin heard them with glancing eyes, and secretly strewed grain from his pocket upon the earthen floor that the choristers might have their festival a little later in the day. The grandaunt of the babe in her arms, and Shawn Rua was one of the sponsors. It was told that when the priest said "receive this burning light," the child grasped the candle in its little hand. The priest looked grave when some one objected that she did not cry when the water was poured over her. "Do not be superstitious," he said, "but leave the child to God." The sun shone through the little pointed windows; on the rough, wooden altar; the rude crucifix; the simple, sorrowful pictures of the Way of the Cross; on the damp-stained walls; the broken font and fluttering birds; on the venerable head of the priest, and the group of peasants with their scarlet and blue cloaks and kerchiefs, their earnest faces and faith-lit eyes. A tear was on Sibbie's withered cheek as she kissed the little new-made Christian and refolded it in her cloak.

Kevin's withered cheek as she kissed the little new-made Christian and refolded it in her cloak. "I don't know what Maury will say to the name," she said, doubtfully, "but Father Ulick says it's a beautiful saint, and I made him tack Maury to it for fear. We can call her little Fan, as the mother is Maury."

From that day forth, neither the boy nor the birds forgot to have an interest in little Fanchea. As soon as she was able to walk and speak, Kevin used to call for her every evening to carry her on his shoulder, and sit with her on the green ditch under a certain thorn-tree which was haunted by fairies, and alive with birds. He instructed her early that she belonged to the birds, and put grain in her little fist that she might find favour with these friends and teach them to watch for her coming. Perched on Kevin's back, her dimpled face thrust through a hole in the foliage, she would peep breathlessly into a nest full of gaping fledglings, or sit contentedly among the daisies with the robins and sparrows feeding out of her lap. Before she could speak, she tried to imitate the piping and chirping of the swallow and wren, the cry of the curlew, and the wailing of the plover. As she grew older, she would measure her own voice with the voices that came down from her out of the trees and clouds, practising their warblings with an exquisite mimicry. Missing her from home one evening, Kevin found her standing on tip-toe on the ditch under the thorn-tree, in her small red petticoat, with her hands fixed on a fat thrush that sat singing on a twig above her head. The beak of the thrush was open wide, so was the little maiden's mouth; the thrush swelled his throat and

pouring forth floods of melody upon the air; the little scarlet-coated girl threw back her dimpled chin, and, taking up the key-note he dropped, uttered in the pauses of his song sounds as sweet and as ecstatic as his own. The bird heard her with astonishment, his head on one side in critical attention, and then, suddenly fired with a spirit of emulation, he distended his little heart, pointed his beak at the sky, and bursting forth again, hurled at his daring rival a whirlwind of song that ought to have swept her away.

TO BE CONTINUED

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL (By Zoe Marie Hager) The big city clock boomed the hour of eleven just as the lady of the house wiled into a rocker to mop her face. It was another of those sweltering, sizzling days when one wonders if life holds out anything beyond ice-water and an electric fan.

Just what effect all this had upon the family cat is unknown but Susan Jane opened one eye, blinked a second, stretched herself, and leisurely soft-footed it to the front door.

Whether it was the sound of approaching footsteps or Susan Jane scratching vigorously upon the newly painted screen that aroused Mary Martin to immediate action doesn't matter much, but certain it is that Mrs. Martin made one bound, pushed open the door and Susan Jane dodged out between the feet of the unsuspecting postman, who was in the very act of depositing two letters in the box.

"Why—good morning, what's up?" he cried. "I beg your pardon," laughed Mary, "that cat gets on my nerves; just look at that screen door," and she made a wry face.

The postman smiled good-naturedly—for such a hot day. "Well, now, forget the damage and read these." So saying, he handed her the letters and continued his journey down the street.

Mary turned them over to examine the postmarks, as she made her way to the inviting rocker. One she threw unopened to the table. The significant advertisement in the corner: "Apartments to Let, W. J. Hall, Agt., Boone, Iowa."

was reminder enough that \$90 must be forthcoming for the month's rent. The other letter proved more interesting. "Eureka Springs, California—I don't know anyone there," she mused. She tore open the envelope and immediately turned to the signature and read: Affectionately your friend, MARGARET KENT

What memories this called up! So this was Margaret Russell, the girl pal of other days. They had been raised together, as it were; they were both graduates of the little parochial school conducted by the Presentation Sisters down on Eighth and Harrison, for both had belonged to St. Catherine's parish in the good old days of Father Kenna. Later, she had become the wife of John Martin and moved to the South end of the city, and Margaret went West after her marriage to Henry Kent. With time and family cares, letters became less frequent until they had ceased to come at all.

Mary Martin read the letter through eagerly and then she turned to the beginning and read it through once more, this time with thoughtful care. It dropped to her lap and Mary was lost in the past—and the future, as well. Soon big tears coursed their way unheeded down her cheeks as she compared her lot with that of her old time friend, and finally she sobbed outright.

How long she had been crying, she couldn't have told, but when the city clock boomed twelve, she realized that she was very hot, that she had a headache and that Margaret's letter had made her very blue. What was worse, the children would soon be romping in from the near-by park where they had been playing, and there would be no lunch ready.

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