

THE WILD BIRDS OF KILLEVEY

BY ROSA MULHOLLAND (LADY GILBERT)

CHAPTER XXX—CONTINUED

"Still higher, still higher," said Fan, with two bright red spots burning on her cheeks.

The air was now getting cooler, the sunlight paler, and the pines had diminished in size.

Snowy peaks began to rise around them, and a few vivid stars appeared in the sky.

"This is not exactly the gate of heaven, my dear," said the signora, "but to me it is almost as welcome as that."

"I do not want to go down into the world any more," she reflected. "No one needs me there, and this place suits me exactly."

Excitement began to give way before bodily fatigue, and Fanchetta crept into the little bed provided for her.

"Now I am going to be happy," said the signora, "with joy, hope, have all been frozen out of me in colder climes; yet I am bringing back my soul into the sunshine of my native land."

"I am bringing my Italy an offering worthy of her acceptance," she continued, embracing Fanchetta.

"Here is a treasure which proves I have not quite thrown away my years. If I have failed to develop my own genius, I have at least found a substitute."

Herr Harfenspieler nodded assent, and bade their chariotier stop, and all three travellers alighted and sat by the roadside while the professor produced his violin and poured forth one of his most impressive reveries from its strings.

It was a greeting, he said, a homage, a love-song, the land of music. The signora shed copious tears and Fan stood by, gazing down into half-disclosed vistas of Italy.

Descending the strange staircases down the mountain sides, alighting in lower and still lower valleys, each one richer than the last in teeming fruit-trees and luxuriant vegetation, Fanchetta dropped down out of the clouds into Italy.

burned and dark-eyed, carried long baskets of fruit upon their backs. A draught of new-made wine, procured from the makers at a roadside cottage, gave the travellers strength to press on and catch the steamer proceeding down the lake to Como.

Established at Milan in apartments not far from the Duomo, Fanchetta threw herself into the musical studies awaiting her, yet was allowed time to explore the great city with its treasures.

"After he had been gone a few minutes she overcame her weakness, and, starting up, hurried as fast as she could in the direction he had taken."

"Who would have dared to say it?" She could not see him anywhere; crowds were coming into the cathedral, the morning was advancing, and she ought to be at home at her work.

"The Duomo was a perpetual delight to Fanchetta. 'Ah, Mamzelle!' she exclaimed, 'if you had seen our little church at Killevey—four bare, white-washed walls, a wooden altar, and a crucifix!'

"She was never weary of walking round the aisles on solemn tip-toe, basking in the enchanted light that fell through the jeweled windows, scrutinizing the grave or benignant faces of the saints that clustered round the tabernacles on the summits of the majestic columns."

"Excitement began to give way before bodily fatigue, and Fanchetta crept into the little bed provided for her. In her dreams she continued to explore the white valleys, holding the angel fast by the hand. And now the angel had got Kevin's face."

"She left the hotel at dawn, her imagination still filled with snowy fields, lit by the stars and tracked by spirit feet; but in a few hours afterwards the first sight of Italy had coloured her brain with vivid pictures of life and set the warm blood tingling in her veins."

"I did not do it," she thought, "I had no part in making it, but the delight I have in it makes me feel it entirely my own. And I rejoice to lay it all at the feet of God!"

"She would rise with the very first light, so as to have an hour to spend in the cathedral before the work of her morning began, and return to her tasks saturated to the very finger-tips with the sweetness and holiness that lurk, as lurks incense, in this marvellous sanctuary."

"Leaning against the wall, out of light, she saw a gentleman come round from the other side of the choir, and pause, dazzled by the splendour of the sunlit windows. He walked forward into the light, and then stood quite still. His figure was tall and well-knit, and had a certain manly grace, but there was nothing about it to remind Fanchetta of anyone she had ever known."

"At first sight of the slight, dark-haired figure, Kevin felt a quiver of agitation for which he was not unprepared. The old thought would occur to him, 'Should this be Fanchetta?' When she spoke of her hair he had said, 'She is an Italian, of course. They will get her a fair wig by-and-by, if she proves worthy of it.'

Fan's first impulse was to utter such a scream of joy as would have startled the echoes of the mighty Duomo, and to fling herself forward into the light; the next was to stay quite still in her corner, unseen, till a sudden faintness which had seized her should have passed away. Then, as she hesitated, gazing at him with half-blind eyes, he moved, still with upraised face, and, turning his glance aloft, hither and thither, he passed before her and out of her sight.

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"So I am all alone and thirty-three years old," murmured Mary. "It never occurred to me before, I am no longer young; I had no youth. The dear cares that absorbed it are gone now. What shall I do with my idle hands, my empty life? I could not be religious; I have no vocation. No one has ever thought of loving me, although I—"

"It was dusk when she reached Chisholm. She hailed a cab, huddling at the prospect of going alone into her empty home, and spending the evening amid its silences, to her so eloquent of the sighs and laughter of other days."

"Supper's ready, Miss Mary," she said, after the first mild bustle had subsided. "Supper!" repeated Mary. "Yes. You didn't have it on the train, did you?"

"No," Mary answered. "I forgot about it. I suppose it is past the time."

"It's well on to 8 o'clock," Jane rejoined, leading the way to the dining room, where a bouquet of roses ornamented the table, on which a bountiful repast was temptingly spread."

"Oh, Jane!" Mary exclaimed, her face brightening a little. "Mr. Phil brought you the flowers, and he himself brought those oranges, besides Aunt Charlotte left this box of candy for you," Jane paused.

"Oh, yes," she added, after a little consideration. "I found some letters and a magazine in a box. I put them on your desk. And I was to tell you Mr. Phil said that he'd drop in during the evening if he can get away from some meeting he has to go to."

"Feeling more cheerful than she would have believed possible an hour before, Mary ate her supper. Jane hovered about the table chattering incessantly, but never referring to Julia or the occurrences of the day, though she was eager to hear whatever was to be told. Mary understood her kindness, and was grateful. She tried to lead up to the subject, but her courage failed her, and she quickly changed the course of the conversation, deciding to wait until the following morning to tell Jane the last news of Julia."

"Supper finished, Mary went into the library, carrying with her the vase of roses. She stood at the window looking out on the slumbering garden, wondering how she could support the bare new life confronting her. Minute after minute passed, and still she stood there. That hour was one of the dreariest of her whole life. Two lovers passed, arm in arm, then an old man and woman whom she knew. They had celebrated their golden wedding the week before. Two boys, brothers, ran down the street, followed at some little distance by their father, mother and three little sisters. Mary saw them all—and she was alone! There was nothing to look forward to, no one to plan for, and she was but thirty-three years old!"

"She did not notice the clang of the door bell, but hearing footsteps presently, she turned quickly to find Phil entering the room. Forcing a smile she welcomed him. 'Thank you very much for the flowers,' she said—in spite of herself her words were tremulous—'you are always thoughtful. It was like you to come tonight.' 'I knew you would be lonely,' he said sympathetically. 'I'll have to become accustomed to that,' Mary faltered, and was sorry as soon as the words were uttered. 'They sat down, and a long silence followed. Mary tried to think of something commonplace to say, but could not. Phil tried to remember some interesting news to tell her, but the sight of her piteous, pale face struck him dumb. When he spoke it was to say what had been in his mind a long time, though he had not thought to utter it for many a day. 'I have always hoped, Mary that if it ever came to this—' He broke off, and bending over her continued softly: 'The children were always first with you—I understand that. But they are gone now. You are alone. I have loved you long and tenderly. I ought not to trouble you tonight. I had not meant to, but the words came in spite of me.' Mary pressed her face in her hands for a moment. Then she looked up and smiled faintly. 'I did try to put the children first, Phil, but for years I—I've loved you best, though I didn't know—I never guessed that you—' Very tenderly she held out both hands to him. 'I thought I was going to be so lonely and all the while God has been in store for me,' she said softly and happily. — Florence Gilmore.

"THE PROTESTANT CONFESSIONAL"

It would have been surprising, indeed, if the article by the Rev. Dr. Charles M. Sheldon, Congregationalist minister and author, in a recent number of the Atlantic Monthly, suggesting the general adoption of a "Protestant confessional," did not arouse dissentient opinion in various sectarian organs throughout the country. An innovation so subversive of Protestant tradition and so "Romish" in its implications and tendencies, could not have failed to provoke opposition. And yet the suggestion has met with favor in some unexpected quarters. The Baptist for instance agrees with Dr. Sheldon in maintaining that there should be "a place in the ministry of every live Church where men and women may pour out their hearts and be sure of a sympathetic hearing and a Christ-like ministry."

The Episcopal Churchman, on the contrary, disapproves of Dr. Sheldon's suggestion, although many of the High Church members of its ministry have already put it into practice. There are, it says "a good many psychologists, moralists and ministers who have a well-founded conviction that to reduce confession to a 'practice'—regular practice—to whisper month by month all one's petty misdeeds, or even grosser ones, into the ear of a priest is spiritually profitless and may become morally debasing. That has been the age-long Protestant conviction, or prejudice, if we will." The Churchman expresses the hope that this "conviction" or "prejudice" will be retained in Protestant tradition.

Dr. Sheldon, however, does not share in the opinion of these "psychologists, moralists and ministers," his practice of confession "is spiritually profitless and may become morally debasing. That has been the age-long Protestant conviction, or prejudice, if we will." The Churchman expresses the hope that this "conviction" or "prejudice" will be retained in Protestant tradition.

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WHEN MARY WAS ALONE

Mary sank back into her seat, glad that there were few passengers in the carriage and none seated near her. Resolutely she dried the tears streaming down her cheeks, took her ticket from her purse with an air of grim determination, then opened the magazine she had brought with her. All to no purpose. She could not see the letters for the tears that filled her eyes. The guard came, and her lips trembled and her voice quavered as she answered his stereotyped remark about the weather.

Again she tried to read, but, succeeding no better than at first, closed her magazine and surrendered herself to her dreary thoughts. "I shall be all alone," she repeated to herself. "I ought to be glad—and I am—a little, Julia is happy. A vocation is a stupendous grace, but—she was my baby. She was only three years old when mother left her in my care. She has been so dear and sweet; she was all I had left. I wished I had not promised to go and see her when she takes the veil, I don't know how I can."

Again she furtively wiped away her tears. Turning to the window, she looked out over the flat, treeless country through which they were passing, making an effort to be interested. In a few minutes she forgot the landscape and was saying to herself: "Seventeen years. How long they were in passing, though they seem like a swift dream! What a child I was to have been left to care for others!"

She stared vacantly at the corn fields and broken fences; at the lazy muddy streams and bare bushes, thinking not of them, but of a scene in the past. She saw herself seated in the big sombre library a few weeks after her mother's sudden death—a frail girl dressed in black. Near her stood her brother Charles, two years older, "the flower of the flock." It had been arranged that he should go to College at Rome to study for the priesthood. He had planned to leave home two weeks from the very day their mother died. How well Mary remembered!

"You must go, Charlie," she had insisted. "Don't think of me or of the children. John will soon be old enough to help. He is fourteen now and our money is securely invested. All I shall have to do will be to spend it." She remembered she had tried to smile as she added, "I shall not find that hard to do."

Charles still remained troubled and undecided. So she urged further: "Aunt Charlotte will be behind me with all her kindness and good advice." Charles had laughed at this. He well knew how Aunt Charlotte loved to dispense her wealth of advice. "Phil will always be a good friend, too, and a wise one, although he is young," she said earnestly, having entire confidence in the grave, kindly man, her brother's friend, who was proving himself a tower of strength to them all in their time of trouble.

After much further discussion and hesitation, Charles finally decided that there was no reason why he should not go at once to the seminary. Even now Mary shrank from the remembrance of the desolate weeks following his departure. She could never forget her lively old aunt's officious goodness at that time, nor the unobtrusive kindness of her brother's friend.

Then, by slow degrees, life became easier. No later days had ever been so hard, unless during that one dreadful year when John, a man grown disappointing to all their hopes, had given himself up to dissipation, so that his death, repentant, loving, and at peace with God, had left only thankfulness.

The little girls became women in seventeen years, Laura married and went West to live, and now Julia was gone to devote her life, with all its fair promise, to the only Spouse perfect enough for the love of her child-like but beautiful soul.

CHAPTER XXXI THE PRIMA DONNA

"I hear that a new prima donna makes her debut tonight," said Mr. Honeywood, "at the Teatro della Scala. Let us go and hear her sing."

"It will probably be a disappointment," he added. "All kinds of people make their debut here, who are utter failures, and never heard of again."

Kevin heard these words with a strange mixture of feelings. He remembered the old days when his mighty haunt was the theatre, when he never entered one without a hope of seeing Fanchetta, and never left it without despair in his heart. He had long since made up his mind that not in such a place was he to look for the reappearance of the lost one. If Fanchetta had been all these years receiving a musical education in Italy, he must have discovered the fact, considering all the inquiries he had made. Now the idea that this debutante might prove to be the little singer of Killevey just presented itself to his mind to be coldly put aside. He had been too often beguiled by such fancies, too often and too bitterly disappointed to be able to tolerate such vagaries of hope any more. Yet he was not unwilling to pay this visit to the theatre. Music had always a powerful fascination for him.

As they took their seats, our friends had no expectation of a brilliant entertainment; the vast house seemed but imperfectly lighted, and was still more imperfectly filled. They had not thought of inquiring what the opera was to be, and found it was Wagner's great opera in London, and expected but little excitement from the long performance.

Mr. Honeywood grumbled a little, but Kevin declared he was willing to sit it out. "The scenery, the accessories will all be so bad," said the fastidious Thistleton, "even if the debutante be equal to the part of Elsa."

The performance began. The great crowd of chorus singers did their duty well; the scenery was better than might have been expected. Evidently every effort had been made to bring out this young debutante with éclat. Elsa herself was a slight youthful figure in white, with a mantle of dark hair hanging upon her shoulders. "A fair Elsa would have been better," said Honeywood. "She is fair enough, except her hair," said Kevin. "Exceedingly fair and pale. Actresses generally put a little colour on their cheeks, but she has none."

"Probably we should see it if we had a glass," said Honeywood. So little had they intended visiting theatres during their travels that they had not thought of putting an opera-glass among the baggage. Of so little importance was their present visit that they had forgotten the desirability of procuring one. "She turns her face too much from the audience," said Honeywood. "I can scarcely see what she is like." At first sight of the slight, dark-haired figure, Kevin felt a quiver of agitation for which he was not unprepared.

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