

THE WILD BIRDS OF KILLEVEY

BY ROSA MULHOLLAND
(LADY GILBERT)

CHAPTER XXVII

In the meantime the years had spent by Mr. Honeywood and Kevin in travelling over the greater part of the known world. On a certain summer day they turned their backs upon the Rhine, the banks of which they had thoroughly explored, and set their faces towards Italy.

Arrived in Innsbruck, they felt already the exhilarating spell of the mountains. Passing down the street where the famous gold-roofed house glitters against an Alpine wall of purple, they turned into the church, where furred-capped peasant women knelt at prayer, and a strange brown company occupied the centre of the nave.

"Who are all these people?" asked Kevin, hardly distinguishing between the brown-checked peasants in their wild head-dresses and the weird bronze figures, as large as life, that stood as if engaged in some solemn ceremony.

"These in the middle are royal personages," said Honeywood, "and they are standing around a tomb. One would think they had come here to witness the burial, and had forgotten to go away again. The others are mere common-place peasants, who are so accustomed to the presence of all this splendor that they do not stop to wonder at it as we do."

"It is like a witch-meeting, a Walpurgis-nacht," said Kevin. "Fancy this church in the dead of night, with the moon glimmering through the windows, and all these bronze people standing gazing at each other."

"You think they take chase and skip over the tombs and chase each other through the aisles?"

"They are too ponderous for that," said Kevin. "They seem to me riveted to the earth with the weight of their own experience. Look at these massive robes of bronze, these jewels and headgear which they wear here still, long after they have been stripped even of their flesh, and have gone destitute into eternity. Knowing all they know, they are standing here agast at the dreadful pageantries of life."

A magnificent thunderstorm came on while our friends were on their way to Verona; the train sped through fire; the ancient city was weirdly illuminated for their arrival. As they drove through the streets at midnight the lightning furnished a royal torch-light; by it they could fitly discern the yawning Roman arches, under which the horses passed, and which seemed to soar suddenly into a sky of flame and vanish; the black pile of the amphitheatre; the lofty towers; the tall medieval houses, with their shutters and balconies, their quaint roofs, and their long, deep shadows that lie about their base, surrounding them with grandeur and mystery. The great courtyard of the hotel was like a wall of shadow covered in overhead with dark, intense purple, till a flash of lightning discovered the airy balconies hanging out above, with their clumps of flowering plants, and all the tiled intricacies of the roofs and chimneys, and the upper windows with their fantastic hoods and cowls.

Who can tell the delights of a first walk through Verona—the rare old medieval city, strong and beautiful in its antiquity, though so hacked at and notched by time; set like a jewel among blue hills and mountains; its towers and spires hanging so high in the bright air, that one almost reels to look up at them; with its gigantic Roman gates and arches, its sumptuous tombs and palaces, its Gothic fountains and faded frescoes, and its solemn and venerable churches.

Kevin awakened in the morning with a thrill of recollection, and rose in great excitement. "I am in Verona," he thought, "where Juliet loved and Dante dreamed, and where the grand signori of the Middle Ages held their court. Here walked the poet of the Paradiso, guarded and watched by the mighty Mastiff lord."

It was very early, some hours before his friend was likely to appear, and he went out alone to ramble about the city. As he passed through the courtyard of a flock of pigeons swooped across it, and the flash of their white wings startled him, like a message from the past. It had not needed this to bring Fanchetta's little form to his side; he always called upon her in spirit to share any new joy that fell to his share; and now, side by side, he and the ghost of his childhood travelled through the streets.

In the Piazza delle Erbe business was already going forward; the Square, with its rich ancient architecture, its Palace of Justice, its old Market House and House of Merchants, looked as if the contents of a hundred gardens had been emptied into its lap, while countless huge, white umbrellas spread their grotesque wings over the treasures of fruit and flowers set forth for the buyer. Under the umbrellas sat brown-checked, dark-eyed women in brilliant kerchiefs, guarding their juicy merchandise, and making striking groups against the background of the surrounding

buildings with their dim, rich frontage of time-worn sculpture and faded fresco. It was a gay, brilliant, noisy scene; loud clatter, ringing laughter, flashing colours, and above the heaps of green melons and groves of glowing cleanders, the squat forms of the quaint umbrellas, and the animated figures that moved among them, rose the marble sanctuary-column, the Gothic fountain, with its exquisite pinnacles, the soaring arches and lofty towers solemnly looking down, as on children at play, and tragically mindful of other scenes.

"Have you ever been here, little Fanchetta?" asked Kevin. "These buxom, black-eyed women are like sisters of the fiend in human shape who took you out of my life. Are you lurking behind their baskets, under their absurd umbrellas? Will you come forward presently, and ask me in bad Italian to buy a melon?"

He almost felt inclined to ask some of them if they had seen a little girl, with blue eyes and long dark hair; but with a sigh shook off the folly, and passed under the mighty arch into the Piazza dei Signori.

This piazza was comparatively silent and empty, and Kevin leaned against a column and surveyed in peace the gorgeous palaces of the great Mastiff race, with their lofty cortices, and gigantic Gothic arches; with their massive pillars, delicate, graceful loggias, and the huge, towering campanile that pierces the clouds and once threw its solemn shadow upon Dante's exiled head.

Thrilling with excitement, Kevin gazed on the rows of frowning and sculptured windows. "What eyes have looked out from them?" he thought. "At which of them did Dante's strong, sad face come and gaze on the form of his beloved lady in the golden blue of the morning sky? He was happier than I, for he knew that his love was in heaven. He looked to her on high; I search for her vainly on earth. Come along, little imaginary Fanchetta," he continued, "and we will pass on through this wonderful city; and I will tell you as we go of all the good things that have fallen to my share since I saw you; you are only a pale little ghost, but you are all I have to console me for the Fanchetta I have lost. As Beatrice was to Dante, so you have been the inspiration of my life. The great Master, who knew so much of human weakness, will forgive me for my audacity in drawing the parallel."

Climbing the steps of the great amphitheatre, he sat down, and gave himself up to the imaginations it suggested. His thoughts were the dreams of a poet, and took forms that may hereafter give delight to the world; his eyes had wandered away to the deeply coloured horizon against which, wrapped in ether, stood up the great fortress towers of the Scaligeri, and the dark cypresses like sombre sentinels, ghostly streaks of shadow in the glowing landscape. He marked the paradisaical hills and the transfused mountains, the rushing Adige with its bridges, and the rude, grand, lovely and picturesque masses of the city at his feet. Suddenly sounds from below caused him to look down, and see that some vulgar show was going on in the arena of the amphitheatre. A tent had been erected and gipsies were holding an entertainment for the benefit of some straggling spectators; a girl with floating hair was dancing and singing, and shaking a tambourine. A few notes from her fresh young voice rang up to where he sat; but he could not see her face. Startled out of his dreams, he thought he beheld the scene that was so often present to his thoughts; he rushed downward to claim and take possession of Fanchetta.

The people gave way, and stood back, as the pale-faced gentleman advanced within the ring, with his eyes fixed upon the graceful little figure of the dancer. They thought he was going to give her money.

"Fan, little Fan!" he said, tremulously, "do you not know me?" A child's face with a bright brown skin, and white grinning teeth flashed suddenly round upon him; a flood of eager Italian was poured into his ears, and an outstretched hand was held out to him, to beg. He dropped some coin into it, and turned away to hide the tears in his eyes. What freak of madness was this that had surprised him? Seven long years ago Fanchetta might have looked, from a distance, like this. He saw tall, coarse looking young women standing round, with beads round their throats, and rude laughter on their lips; "Oh, Heaven! could she grow into one like these!" he thought, with horror, and hurried away from the spot.

All the way home to the hotel a little song, Goethe's, rang in his ears:

"Sie aber ist weggezogen
Und weit in das Land hinaus."

Yes; she was, indeed, gone far out into the world of time and space; and how could he any longer hope to follow her?

In the afternoon Mr. Honeywood and Kevin walked to see the tombs of the old lords of Verona, with almost a stone's throw of the palace, where successively they held Court and made their home. There in the Piazza dei Signori they lived and ruled; here, as if in the next chamber, they lie in death.

An extraordinary Gothic pile of the richest beauty, crusted over with sculpture, and gilded and ornamented by screens of wrought metal, the tombs of the Scaligeri present an entirely unique appearance, startling and enchanting to the beauty-loving eye. One over another the rich piles of stone work soar into the azure air, having their roots, along with an ancient church, in a lonely and deserted graveyard. There is a magnificent weirdness about the conception of the whole thing, and a barbaric splendor that takes away one's breath.

"Who were these wonderful Scaligeri?" asked Kevin.

"They were the great lords of Verona in the middle ages," said Honeywood. "The first was a mere soldier of fortune, elected by people weary of the rule of a tyrant. He was called by a strange name, Mastino della Scala, the Mastiff of the Ladder; and where ever he went he carried this extraordinary ladder, which by the way, always reminds me of the story of Jack and the Beanstalk. He passed it on to his descendants along with his canine name, and you may see the dog and the ladder repeated all over these tombs. Mastiffs support each sarcophagus, and the ladder is everywhere; as indeed it is everywhere over Verona; so it is woven into these wrought-metal screens."

"What a curious startling design runs through these tombs!" said Kevin. "Below the solemn sepulchre with its reposing figure and the dark hollow of its Gothic arch; above the soaring pinnace bearing a proud horse and rider aloft in the blue. The sharp contrast strikes one indescribably. One seems confronted by restless spirits that will not lie in death; and having broken the bonds of the tomb, still dominate arrogantly the city that once bowed at their feet."

"It always seems to me pathetic," said Honeywood, "that a painful lie, one of those lies that never get unearthed, is walled up in these sumptuous graves. You see this monument, the most splendid of all? It is that of Can Signorio; and he is said to have murdered the father whose tomb is next to his; but dates prove the story grounded on a mistake. The people will tell you that Can Signorio died early, stricken by a disease which fell on him in punishment of the fratricide, and they will not part with their tradition. There lie the brothers between whom such cruel malice has been put by a mere freakish blunder. Near neighbors, they sleep in their splendor; and aloft under their ride like trophies in single file, following to some aerial battle in the blue. Each soul, locked within its own stone prison-house; have they ever come to an understanding while the stars have gone wheeling round their heads in the course of the ages?"

"With all their extraordinary and fantastic beauty," he continued, "a strange blight has fallen on the neighborhood of these wonderful tombs. By a strange fatality this graveyard round their base is now set apart for the burial of criminals. It seems as if that lie had wrought inward and made an evil thing of the entire place, attracting the wicked to its centre."

"I feel your idea deeply," said Kevin. "Hark! how near to us is the hum of life, and yet how deserted, how isolated are these shrines of death!"

"Before we go, look well at the resting-place of Cangrande," said Honeywood, "for you will find marks of him wherever you go in Verona. He was the greatest of this sovereign race. His monument forms the entrance to the church behind. See, the door opens within the columns that support his sarcophagus. The tomb is in three stages; first, the lower columns; then the sarcophagus, supported by great dogs, and bearing the sleeping lord, who even in his death robes is girt with the sword of State. His shield is decorated with the famous ladder, and the mastiff's head crests his helmet. The third stage rises fifty feet aloft, and ends in a pyramid, bearing on its pinnacle the statue of the full-armed warrior on his war-horse. His, as being the entrance of the church, is the most central monument, though it is not so sumptuous in sculptured ornament as that of Can Signorio, surrounded by his warrior saints."

TO BE CONTINUED

CHAPTER XXVIII
IN THE OLD CHURCHES

Besides the sensations produced by the mere presence of vastness enriched with beauty felt by the wanderer in foreign churches, he will often, if at all peacefully minded, be conscious of an influence which grows on him as he proceeds, and springs from the continual association with the large and gracious company of the saints, whose images people the walls. Gathered from all ends of the earth the faithful servants stand in God's house, their sculptured faces shining with the smile of the glorified spirit that is far away, sunned in the light of paradise. Enshrined high above our heads, clothed with strength, their feet lifted for ever out of horny ways, they would seem at first to be not of our kind, till presently the sword, the palm, the wheel remind us of the toils and wounds with which they fought the battle of life and sealed the heights of eternity. Cecilia, with sword and lyre, Vincent de Paul and his clinging babes, Dorothea blooming among roses, the great

Christopher stemming the torrent—who shall call the roll of the beautiful army? Far over our heads, merited by screens of wrought metal, the tombs of the Scaligeri, their ineffable secret, or they look down pityingly on pilgrims still faring below. Weary, poverty-stricken, heart-broken, they dragged themselves to God's gate, too feeble even to knock; what they knew when it opened to them is not told. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard," aught of the mystery whose sweetness lies locked behind the silence of their marble lips; but whither they have penetrated we too may come; the bliss they taste we also may share. Passing from church to church the Christian will find himself eagerly looking for certain angelic countenances, as the links of a living litany followed by his heart. Beauty, Fortitude, Meekness, Fearless, each embodied virtue lies locked behind the silence of their marble lips; but whither they have penetrated we too may come; the bliss they taste we also may share. 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