

THE WILDBIRDS OF KILLEEVY

BY ROSA MULHOLLAND
(LADY GILBERT)

CHAPTER XXII—CONTINUED

"That is a pity, for the signora is terrible when she makes up her mind."

In the meantime Herr Harfenspieler had arrived at the Castle to give Fan her lesson, and found the signora alone, bending with feverish face over her picture.

"At work again, signora," he said, entering. "A large canvas this time; and, *ach, Himmel!* an ambitious subject also!"

The signora winced at the word ambitious. "One is not necessarily ambitious when one longs to do something great," she said, pettishly.

"Then you still expect to do something great?"

"You are severe, maestro. I am honest, *fraulein*. Raphael, Francis, and their kindred are dead. It is folly for a little woman in the nineteenth century to dream that her mantle has descended on her."

"Has the fountain of genius, then, been sealed to the world for evermore?"

"Genius is of many hues and textures, signora. There is much beautiful work being done in this day; yet the genius whose mission it was to bring the smile of Divinity before mankind, that genius is vanished from the earth."

"I have prayed over this picture, Herr Harfenspieler."

"And prayer is never lost," said the musician, drawing his bow across the strings of his violin.

"But the spirit bloweth where it listeth; and the answer to your prayer will shine out of the eyes of the next anemone you paint."

"Is the picture such a failure, mein herr?"

"It is a handsome woman masquerading as a madonna. There is much of your own grace scattered about the whole, but the heavenly message is wanting in the faces. Look in the mother's eyes; she knows as well as we that she is only a pretence."

With a bitter cry the signora seized her brush and blotted out both the faces.

The Harfenspieler was a little startled at her vehemence. "I am sorry," he said, "but perhaps it is for the best. That picture would have tortured you more a month hence than it is torturing you now."

"It is true," said the poor little artist, weeping.

"Let us solace ourselves with music. I will play you one of Mozart's divine movements. How I have struggled and fretted to rival it! But let us worship only what is true!"

He touched the violin and played like one inspired, his dark eyes glowing, his gaze fixed far away, till the signora had sobbed herself into a more peaceful mood.

When he ceased, she took up the picture and placed it with its face to the wall.

"My friend," said the Harfenspieler, taking her hand, "forgive me. You and I are so much alike that I deal with you as I deal with myself. Now, let us get to our real work. Where is the child who is to give voice to our thoughts?"

"She went out into the Park two hours ago. She was in too joyous a mood, too full of her young life to sit down here quietly with me."

"Do you often send her rambling about alone?"

"Since I have been at yonder painting, yes," said Mamzelle.

"But what then? She loves her liberty, and she will meet no one in the Park, except the children of her friend Nancy, or Captain Wilderspin."

"You have been neglecting your duty, signora."

"What do you mean, mein herr?"

"His lordship's heir is a person of many attractions, and he admires our little girl, as who could help it?"

"You fear," said the signora, turning pale, "that she may become the lady of Wilderspin, instead of the singer who is to give our message to the world."

"That is one danger," said the Harfenspieler. "But even should that be escaped, harm may be done. Our child has a fervent heart, and she must put it all into her music. A broken dream might be a sad disturbance to her career."

"But her heart is with her people," gasped the signora, appalled at such a view of things.

"We have blotted them out of her memory," said the Harfenspieler, sadly, "only, it seems, to prepare the way for a more complete frustration of our plans."

"Your imagination runs away with you, mein herr," said the signora, trembling.

"You have sat here, *fraulein*, impudently trying to steal fire from heaven while you neglected your only duty—endangered the chief hope, the real work of our lives."

"Pardon, maestro, pardon. I will instantly go in search of her."

CHAPTER XXIII

FAN'S PROPOSAL

While Herr Harfenspieler lectured the signora over her painting, Fan and Captain Rupert continued their walk homeward through the woods.

"The signora is terrible when she makes up her mind," Fan had said, laughing, and Rupert answered:

"That is why you are afraid to say all you think before her. You half promised to tell me more about yourself, if she were not by."

"I should be glad to talk to anyone about my old friends and my long ago," said Fan. "Nobody here, but you, would listen to me."

"Let me listen to you, then. I am longing to hear."

Then Fan began her little history, and told him all she remembered about her childhood. Her simple recital fell on the ear of the man of the world less like the details of real experience than like a tender idyl, the creation of a poet's fancy; and he became more in love with the speaker than ever.

"Thank you for your beautiful confidence," he said, with a tremor in his voice and an unusual mist in his eyes.

"Is it who must thank you. It has done me good to be allowed to speak."

From the review of her past Captain Rupert passed quickly to the consideration of her future.

"None intend to obey my uncle, and go upon the stage?" he asked, anxiously.

"I cannot but obey, he is so good to me. Besides, I have a reason of my own."

"For becoming a public singer?"

"Yes."

"You desire the excitement, the freedom?" said Captain Wilderspin, regretfully.

"Or you are willing to make a fortune?"

"None of these motives are anything like mine, though it is true I have a wish to be independent. But I will tell you what I hope. When I am a famous woman, as they say I am to be, Kevin will hear about it, and come to me."

"Ah, of course, Kevin!" Captain Wilderspin frowned and then smiled.

"And what do you think he will look like when he comes?"

"Only like himself," said Fan, her eyes flashing. "I don't want him to look like anyone else."

"I shall make her hate me!" thought Captain Rupert. "Yet I must try to awake her out of this childish dream. Forgive me," he said, gently. "Why do you attribute unkind meanings to me? I cannot be your friend, I cannot accept your confidence, without asking you to look the truth in the face."

"What truth? There is always something cruel when people talk like that about the truth."

"I do not want to be cruel," Captain Wilderspin paused; but he was a man of his word, and he had promised himself that Fancha should be enlightened. He thought that having first ventured to wound her he might afterwards be able to cure and console her. "Will you answer me a few questions?" he said.

"Kevin was twelve years older than you. He was a full-grown young man when you saw him last?"

"Yes."

"Where had he received his education?"

"At the school."

"The village school of an obscure mountain district? He had no other means than this of informing his mind?"

"No," faltered Fancha, remembering that Kevin had always been dull at his books.

"He was then an uneducated laborer toiling at his spade; and what do you think seven or eight years of such a life as you describe, fishing, digging, associating with his fellows, have done for him?"

"You and he were once on an equality, and you had many pretty thoughts between you; but circumstances lifted you, a child, out of the state in which you were born, while they left him, a man, in his original condition. He has probably now got a peasant wife and children, and whatever he may have once promised to be, they have by this time dragged him down to the ordinary level of such husbands and fathers as dwell around them. Imagine his sun-burned face; features and expression coarsened by the years that have passed by since you saw it, his rough, clay-soiled hands, his rude brogue, his uneducated manners and ignorance of all the refinements of living. Believe me, if you ever become a famous woman, and he then comes, as he probably may, to claim you, you will not find him one with whom you could bear to associate."

Fan had kept her gaze fixed on her companion's countenance from the beginning of this speech, and as he proceeded her eyes became darkened and her mouth set with grief. When he finished, a thrill of pain passed over her face, and she turned away quickly to hide her tears.

"Fan, little Fan," said Rupert, tenderly, "I have hurt you; I have made you weep. Forgive me, listen to me."

"Go away," said Fan, angrily. "You have broken my heart."

A great sob swallowed her last word; and Captain Wilderspin thought from her distress that her mind had assented to the truths of the picture he had drawn.

"I cannot go away," he said, "without your forgiveness. I would not have hurt you but in the hope of setting you free."

"Free?" cried Fan, piteously. "Of all that is beautiful and bright in my life!"

"Of an illusion that is threatening to overwhelm you with the bitterest disappointment. Fancha, listen to me and do not speak as if there was no other love for you but what lives in a dream. A hundred such Kevins could not love you as I love you. Nay, do not look so

astonished. You must have seen it in my face and heard it in my voice. You must have known long ago how I love you."

"I knew that you liked me very much," said Fancha, abashed, and forgetting her anger, "but not so much as this."

"More than this; more than you can imagine, you simple child; more than I can prove to you, except by a life-long devotion. I would not bribe you to be my wife; but look round you, Fancha, and see the home that I am able to provide for your future. You need not appear upon the hated stage, where I have always felt that I should not bear to see you; but you shall go wherever you fancy to go, and do whatever you please. To make you happy shall be the object of my life, and I shall be amply repaid if you will only give me the best love of your pure little heart."

Captain Rupert's manner and words became more impassioned as he saw the glow of surprise gradually fade in Fancha's face and noticed the pale, perplexed, half-frightened look in her face which had caught the attention of his lordship.

"My child," she said, "there is something strange about you. You look as if you had got a shock."

"So I have, Mamzelle."

"What, can it have been since the morning," said the signora, in great agitation. "I hope Captain Wilderspin has not been saying anything foolish. Military men are so peculiar."

"He is very good, but I am greatly surprised. He wants me to marry him, Mamzelle."

The signora gave a little shriek. "You would not like it?" said Fan, tremulously.

"Like it! My dear, do you know what you are saying? The idea is simple madness. You are only a poor protégée of his lordship, and he is Lord Wilderspin's heir."

"Then it really could not be?" said Fan, with a long sigh of relief.

Mamzelle mistook the sigh for one of pain, and her kind heart smote her.

"How dare he be so cruel?" she murmured. "My love, is it possible your happiness is in his hands?"

"I do not know," said Fan, musingly, and with an air of trouble.

"It cannot be—if what you say be true."

"Oh, me, oh, me! what a mess we have made of our affairs!"

"Do not grieve, Mamzelle; indeed, I am quite satisfied."

"Good, obedient child," murmured the signora, a little disappointed in spite of herself. She should not have expected to find her wild gipsy maiden so tame in a matter where her affections were concerned.

"I must not leave you under a mistake. If I were to marry Captain Wilderspin, it would only be for the sake of something he promised me."

The signora's heart grew cold. "A title, diamonds, or what other gew-gaw?" she asked, severely.

"Nothing of that kind," said Fan, with a sad little smile, "and yet something that you would not approve of. I will not vex you by even mentioning it."

Herr Harfenspieler here appearing, the conversation was at an end; and Fan's voice was soon pealing through the room, and her heart unbending itself of some of its longings and perplexities by means of the utterances of her song.

Lord Wilderspin and his nephew were meanwhile in earnest conversation in the garden.

"I think you hardly understood me just now," the old lord had begun, trying to be patient and reasonable. "It is my desire that everyone in my house be kindly inclined to the young girl. But there are limits to be observed. There are certain lines to be drawn."

"You mean that no man is to dare to fall in love with her?"

"Exactly. Such conduct would be inexcusable."

"Why?"

"Why—why—why? What a question to ask. The world is full of reasons why. Because in the first place she is only a child."

"A girl of seventeen cannot long remain a child, no matter how peculiar she may have been brought up, no matter how simple she may be in herself."

"I intend her to remain a child till it pleases me to introduce her to the world."

"Suppose Nature has undermined your plans; is it fair to rob her of her woman's inheritance of love?"

"Her woman's rubbish! Confound it, Rupert! To think of you coming to talk to me like this; you who were always the first to sneer, who professed to have no belief in that kind of thing."

"I believe in it now. A child (as you say) has taught me. Excuse me, uncle, for trying your patience so severely. I do not wonder you are surprised; I have been astonished at myself."

"You mean to say that you have fallen in love with this girl, who has been practising her music in my house?"

"I am determined to make her my wife."

"You audacious jackanapes!"

"Come, come, uncle; a man is not a jackanapes at thirty-five."

"He may be a jackanapes at a hundred. How dare you come here to rob my house of my back?"

"I have been behind my back?"

went from one to another of the faces at the board, he was startled by something in the face of his nephew which he had no way expected to see; and he in his turn surprised that gentleman by leaning across the table and saying in an undertone:

"This is only a child, do you see, Captain Wilderspin!"

The brusque words and scowl neither disconcerted nor annoyed Captain Rupert, nor did they make him smile. He returned his uncle's fierce glance with a meaning look that seemed to say he knew all the circumstances and had thoroughly made up his mind. No one was aware of this by-play but themselves, for the signora and her pupil were attending to Herr Harfenspieler, who had improved the occasion by delivering a lecture upon idleness.

In the drawing-room, after dinner, the signora saw Fan fitting up and down in the twilight between the great windows, and noticed the pale, perplexed, half-frightened look in her face which had caught the attention of his lordship.

"My child," she said, "there is something strange about you. You look as if you had got a shock."

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A QUARTER'S WORTH OF FLOWERS

By Helen Moriaty

Before they had been in the city a month the Grahams realized that they had been unfortunate in the choice of a location. They had debated about a place further down town, but this had been recommended by the agent as having once been a flower shop, and this fact, coupled with the big difference in rent, naturally influenced their choice. But if it ever had been a good place for a florist it was no longer. Too far out of the downtown radius, it was yet not far enough to appeal to suburban patronage. Thus people who liked to select the flowers they were buying rode merrily down town past the Graham Flower Shop, nor paused for even a glance at the glowing window. Harriet always arranged the window and took great pride in making it attractive. But might as well be in the wilds of Africa for all the attention any one pays to it! she said bitterly one evening.

Her brother gave a sharp glance at her tired face. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," he made answer, drawing. "Don't forget the little woman in gray. Your window is a gem today, Miss Graham," he mimicked. And Harriet smiled as he wanted her to.

However, she went on to remark that one swallow didn't make a summer, though the little old lady's admiration was refreshing.

"She certainly loves flowers. She spends half an hour or more every day talking about the plants and looking at the cut flowers before she buys her little quarter's worth and tiddles away."

Walter nodded. "Yes, and in the way most of the time too. If she wasn't such an intimate friend of yours with a grin—" I'd have told her where she headed in long ago."

"Yes, you would," derided Harriet. "You like her as much as I do. I've heard you giggling back there when she says something funny."

"It's her amazing curiosity. When she asked you the other day how much profit you make on that faded bunch of violets you sold her, I almost went up in smoke!"

Harriet laughed and said, "She is a tartar for questions. But she's a dear nevertheless. I wonder who she is? She never seems to hear me when I ask her her name, and I'm not sure whether the deafness is intentional or accidental."

But Walter's interest in the old lady was exhausted and he changed the subject. Matters of more gripping importance demanded their attention, and having diverted Harriet a little he was ready for business. Things were growing rather serious for the Grahams, who had left a prosperous business in a small town for the allurements of a big city, only to find that in a sense they had exchanged their birthright for a mess of pottage. They had sold their Wooster place with its good will, so they could not go back even if they were inclined; and they had, foolishly enough, leased this room for two years. They might re-lease it and move down town, a plan that presented some difficulties, since they had already spent a good bit in the present move and had so far made no money. Their only hope was that business might pick up with the opening of spring.

"Meanwhile," remarked Harriet at the conclusion of their discussion, affecting a cheerfulness she did not feel, "we must hold on to one dependable customer. I'd have a fit if I lost my little lady. She's our mascot, you know."

"Looks more like a hoodoo to me," growled Walter as he said good night.

"Hoodoo or mascot, she was on hand early in the morning, always peering around with bright inquisitive eyes, chatting with cheerful inconsequence, and talking about flowers with a loving intelligence that delighted Harriet."

"Very few people who buy flowers know as much about them as you do, Mrs. Gray," she said to the old lady on one occasion. Harriet had begun to call her new friend Mrs. Gray, "because I have to call her something, you know," she said to herself whimsically. "And if Gray doesn't suit her I won't know what does. For she has gray hair, a gray dress and veil, and most likely no longer fits with a poor little bunch of flowers every day!" If the little lady understood the name she accepted it without a demur.

"I love them," she had answered Harriet simply. She was especially partial to wild flowers, it appeared. "I had a garden once," she went on rather absently, "and one corner was devoted entirely to wild flowers. I'm afraid," with her gentle smile, "they got a little bit tame in time. I prefer them wild, don't you?"

"Well, did you ever try to tame a wild grape vine?" the young florist wanted to know.

"They're very well as they are," was the quick response. "They make very nice swings. Let me see," musingly, "what bit of all this beauty shall I choose today?"

"You mean to say that you have fallen in love with this girl, who has been practising her music in my house?"