

THE WILD BIRDS OF KILLEEVY

BY ROSA MULHOLLAND (LADY GILBERT) CHAPTER XX

One summer day Captain Rupert, nephew and heir of Lord Wilderspin, made his appearance at the Park, and finding his uncle absent from home, had an interview with Mrs. Browne, who was informed that the new visitor would stay the night, being not very well and feeling over-tired. He had returned unexpectedly from India on sick leave; though there was little sign of ill-health about him, unless it might be detected in the languor of his manner and in the swallowness of his handsome face.

"And so there is no one here?" he said, wishing he had stayed in London, for few hated solitude more than Captain Rupert Wilderspin.

"No one but the young lady and her governess, sir, and they are gone to town to a concert."

"The young lady?" "Yes, sir; the young lady his lordship has adopted."

"Adopted?" "Yes, sir; adopted to educate for the musical profession. That is 'ow I have heard it expressed."

"Oh, hobbyhorsing as usual!" Captain Rupert relaxed his stare and walked to the window with a slight laugh. "And does the young lady live at the Park?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Browne, though longing to pour into a multitude of details, felt rather in awe of the gentleman's level eyebrows which changed their expression so often as to bewilder her, and surprised herself by giving short answers."

While he sat at dinner in solitary state, a sound of wheels on the gravel suggested to him the return of the young lady and her governess, whom Mrs. Browne had described as being harboured in some corner of the Hall. He began to wonder what the young girl was like, and feeling sadly in want of society, he wished he had any excuse for presenting himself to these ladies, whose company might be more amusing than solitude. He revolved the idea of inventing a message from his uncle, but after entertaining himself for a while with imaginary scenes which might follow upon the indulgence of such a freak, dismissed the fancy as unworthy of being put into practice. No great wine-drinker, he was soon out of doors smoking his cigar on a leafy terrace, and listening to the nightingales beginning their nightly song. How long was it since he had heard a nightingale? Certain thoughts of grace were associated in his mind with the delicious nocturnes of the romantic bird; they had their way while he paused and listened, and he listened, and he finally they became troublesome, and were cast rudely off as he flung away his cigar with an impatient sigh and turned indoors, resolved rather to go to bed than sit down alone in the great solitary rooms. In this mood he took his way upstairs, lighted by the mellow moon.

Fan and the signora had finished their evening meal in their retired apartment, and, with the lamps lowered and banished to a remote corner, were enjoying the pale lustre of the outside world, and the music that came in fitful waves through the open window out of a black screen of trees looming near. The signora lay in her chair, weary with her late exertions, but her pupil walked restlessly about the room as if the day's share of energy and life had not yet been exhausted in her young veins. Fan at seven-teen had grown to her full height, but her face was little changed since the days when she sang in the gipsies' tent. A deeper and sweeter meaning in the white-lidded eyes of Irish blue, a richer yet more delicate rose-tint under their black, curling lashes, a fuller symmetrical outline of cheek, chin, and lip, with a few added dimples, made nearly all the describable difference between the maiden and the child. She had evidently not yet cared to enter on the period of life wherein dress and manner are called on to announce that all lingering simplicities of childhood are left behind. Though her white gown almost covered her little feet, it was innocent of all the coquettish of fashion; her long hair still hung from the nape of her slender neck in one massive braid almost too heavy for her shoulders; and her voice had the same artless ring in it with which she had rattled to Lord Wilderspin about Shawn and the birds.

"No, I am not tired, Mamzelle," she was saying. "I am thinking of the scolding our maestro gave me today. He says that though I improve in my singing, I no longer act with spirit. When you were a child," he said, "you could forget your own identity and throw yourself into every part, but now you grow abashed and self-conscious. He says a woman's vanity is taking possession of me, and if I do not conquer it I shall bitterly disappoint his own and Lord Wilderspin's expectations."

"He makes a mistake, my dear," said the signora, warmly. "You will never do that."

"I do not know, Mamzelle. I feel that there is truth in what he says. I hate the thought of performing in public. I hated it in the gipsies'

tent, and I shall hate it much more on the stage."

The signora started out of her resting attitude, and sat bolt upright in dismay.

"But you will follow Herr Harfenspieler's advice. You will conquer this unfortunate feeling!"

"I will," said Fan, firmly. "Only thus can I repay Lord Wilderspin for his goodness. Only thus can I hope to find those I have lost," she added softly. "That is why I am running about the room tonight, Mamzelle; because I am in a state of excitement and want to have a tussle with my woman's vanity at once. I want to practise my acting to make amends to poor Gretchen for my stupid misrepresentation of her this morning. Herr Harfenspieler was orchestra and audience all in one, and he almost wept at my tameness."

"My dear, you show the spirit I expected to find in you," said Mamzelle, comforted, and laughing at the imitation of the Herr Professor's scowl and gesture with which her pupil wound up the account of his displeasure. "Believe me, every great artist has had this nervousness to contend with: the finer and more delicate the genius, the more keenly does it suffer in giving itself at first to the gaze of the world. Look on this difficulty as the cross of your vocation," said the little woman trembling with the earnestness of her belief in what she said.

"Dear Mamzelle, it is you who ought to have been given to this career," said Fan, coaxingly. "You know all about it so well, and are always so ready for sacrifice. For my part, I feel that my only vocation is to be faithful to those I love. You mustn't preach against those you know," she continued, stopping the signora's exclamations with a kiss, "because you are included in 'those.'"

"You keep me in a state of perpetual alarm," said Mamzelle, excitedly.

"Do I? Then I won't. For though I may not feel the stir of ambition in my veins, I have pretty good will of my own; and I intend that it shall march me to the cannon's mouth. So now for some thrilling scenes before I sleep!" (She began pushing away a table to have more room for her movements.) "The nightingales are firing me with emulation; my blood is up! Margaret shall be righted and Herr Harfenspieler pacified!"

"It is a pity you have such a limited audience, my love. Never any but the maestro or me. It is more difficult to perform before one than before a crowd."

"I have it!" cried Fan, clapping her hands. "I will run down to the picture-gallery, where I shall have a hundred eyes upon me."

"You will have no light."

"Quite sufficient. The moonlight will inspire me. No, you must not come, unless you can get into a picture-frame. Your fish and blood presence would make my audience seem too shadowy. My interloper in the pit would interfere with the reality of the people in the boxes."

"Let me loosen your hair, my dear; it must fall about your shoulders."

"But Margaret's is not loosened till she is mad. She wears it like mine as long as she is in her senses."

"No matter; it is well for you to get accustomed to it." And the signora proceeded to let loose the abominable hair that, shaken well back from the young head, fell like a dark mantle about the slim white figure.

"There will have to be a fair wig, I suppose," said Fan, making a little face over her shoulder at her own dusky tresses. "Nobody would listen to a black Gretchen."

Captain Wilderspin had pursued his way upstairs in the manner of a person in no hurry to reach his destination. He stopped and looked into old familiar rooms, and finally left the main staircase altogether, proceeding down a passage which led him to the picture-gallery. It was not that he had any particular taste for art, but he knew the value of ancestors and liked to pay after long absence a certain homage to the respectable people who had provided him with so goodly an inheritance in life. The moonlight entered from the glazed ceiling and filled the place with a ghostlike radiance, by which the countenances of the portraits could be faintly discerned. Here a visage looked sullenly or mournfully peered roguishly out of the shadows.

"Here shall I hang one day," mused the future Lord Wilderspin. "One particular frown or grin (according to the humor in which my artist may catch me,) all that shall be left of me! Well, it is not every man who is sure that his face will be seen anywhere above ground after a hundred years! By Jove, how ghostly they look. It is hard to believe they ever strode about here moralising like me! It makes a fellow feel like a ghost already to think of it."

We need hardly say that Captain Wilderspin, having served eight years in India, did not believe in ghosts, and yet, having got on the subject, and having nothing else to do, he was pleased to amuse himself by dwelling upon it. There was a certain full-length portrait of a fair ancestress, whose charming face and flowing chevelure had in early days captivated his boyish imagination; and as he stood before it now he felt the return of a share

of his youthful admiration. "By my holdname, fair lady," he muttered, "I have not seen anything so lovely since we parted. Had the women of the present day the wit that sparkles on your lip, I were not to this hour a bachelor! Wore they your flowing tresses instead of three hairs screwed into a snail-shell point, a rival might have disputed your empire over my heart. As it is, would your ghostship but favor me with its presence, I would put the proverb at defiance and marry my grandmother!"

Scarcely had he completed this unusual flight of fancy when the door at the distant end of the gallery flew open and a white figure with long floating hair entered lightly. Overwhelmed by so unexpected an answer to his summons, Captain Wilderspin stood for a moment amazed, then recovering himself, he retreated backward into the shadows of a doorway behind him.

A few warbling notes from the apparition betrayed to him that he was in the presence of his uncle's ward; as Fan, tripping down the gallery and shaking forth the most delicious roulades, made mocking courtesies before the pictures, as if craving the patronage of the great folks on the wall.

And then, at ease in the completeness of her fancied solitude, she began the rehearsal of such scenes as found so difficult in the presence of witnesses. No longer oppressed by the slight cloud of shyness that had lately begun to embarrass her in her performances, she gave full vent to her imaginative powers, and poured out her song with a passion that startled herself. Pleased with her success she warmed more and more to her work, and presently forgot her own identity as thoroughly as the Professor could have wished. Making shift for a seat upon a table, she went through Margaret's spinning scene in the garden, singing with the utmost tenderness and sweetness, and making such a picture as outshone the lovely grandmother who stood gazing over her head upon the wall. As she proceeded through the entire opera, imaginary voices answered her, and imaginary companions delighted or troubled her; sometimes with altered voice she sang the part of another person, while in the more tragic situations the fervor of her acting seemed to call up the living reality of the creatures she addressed.

Captain Wilderspin, having retreated to the door, was arrested by the first notes, and remained standing concealed by the shadows beyond the threshold. The sudden apparition of this young creature to whose beauty the moonlight gave the most exquisite and ethereal character, the unexpected splendor of her voice, the grace and delicacy of her acting, the pretty sense of humor she showed when, at the end of an act, a mournful note having first died away, she would toss her head and in the drollest way reproach her audience for not applauding her; all this took the languid soldier by surprise, fascinated his fancy, and gave his used-up sense of enjoyment a most invigorating shake. He forgot his own identity as though thoroughly as Fan had forgotten hers; and it was many years since such forgetfulness had seized upon him.

"She is too good for the stage," he muttered, "much too good for the stage. What can my uncle be thinking of? What a voice she has! How charming she is! By Jove, what a sensation she will make!"

Fan's performance being finished, she swept round the gallery, court-eying again and singing little catches of thanks to the silent audience for their patience in listening to her. Then unfastening from her waist a long white shawl which had served her as a train, she threw it over her shoulder, and giving her hair a shake, she laughed a sudden bright laugh and disappeared.

"What had she laughed at?" Captain Rupert asked himself. "Had she known of his presence, and was her outburst of merriment at his expense? Or was she only girlishly amused at her own little play?" The first suggestion made him hot and uncomfortable, the second delighted him. He felt he did not deserve her ridicule; for had he not gallantly resisted a desire to come forward and make her acquaintance by thanking her for the treat she had given him? He had restrained himself, fearing to embarrass and scare her away, and it annoyed him to think of her as conscious of his observation all the time. But the idea of her laughing at her own play of performing to the pictures gave her a charm of simplicity in his critical eyes.

"I shall find out all about it tomorrow," he said, remembering with pleasure that the fascinating singer was abiding under the same roof with him, and resolving to find some means of making her acquaintance. His determination to leave the Hall early in the morning had vanished, and he reflected that nothing could be better for his jaded health than a few days' sojourn in Sussex.

I must say it was a treat for eye and ear which I little expected, was his last thought on the subject before falling asleep. "There is no mistake about the voice, but I am curious to see what she will look like by day. Moonlight is a wonderful beautifier."

In the meantime, Fan had gone to rest satisfied with the effort she had

made. She was fully aware of certain powers that were in her, and was determined to make use of them for the attainment of the great object of her life. The sudden shyness that had come upon her, threatening to overthrow her hopes for more serious trouble than she had been able to confess. The publicity of the career that lay before her, though personally hateful to her, was yet the only means she knew of by which she could now hope to be discovered by the friends of her childhood. If she should find it painful, to be seen nightly in a theatre, would that Kevin (still of course in search of her, like the prince in his story) might at any moment stray by chance into so public a place and behold her. She had long since come to the conclusion that Kevin's mother and father must be dead, while he himself was a wanderer in search of her, travelling footsore in distant countries, perhaps, following one false clue after another, and out of all reach of those who could tell him anything about her. What other state of things could account for the fact that her letters to Killeevy had never been answered.

This idea of the probable break up of the old home had been placed before her by Lord Wilderspin, who thought the benefits he was conferring on the young girl and the prosperous future he was insuring her, were more than compensation for any passing pain she might feel. Of late she had ceased to speak much of her childhood's friends, and his lordship and others remarked the change with satisfaction. They believed the time had passed when happiness could be the result of a meeting with such people. A young girl of so refined a nature, carefully educated, and accustomed for seven years to the society of well-bred people, could not but feel dismay and embarrassment if called on to renew a familiar intercourse with uncultured peasants.

But Fan's thoughts were not his thoughts and her ways were not his ways. Accepting his explanation in thorough good faith, she had tried to be reconciled to the inevitable, and if she did not talk so much of Kevin as formerly, it was only because tact and good taste warned her not to obtrude on those who were otherwise so good to her and subjects personal to the society of which she felt so little interest. A few words spoken on one occasion by Lord Wilderspin had sunk deeply into her mind, and given a motive to her work and her life; and with the hope thus given her she was fain to be content.

"When you are a famous woman," he had said, "Kevin will hear of you. If you really want to meet him, make yourself known in the world."

She knew nothing of the secret reflection which followed his own speech in Lord Wilderspin's mind. "When that time comes," he thought, "she will have learned to be ashamed of him."

But the idea that she could ever live to be superior to Kevin had never entered the young girl's thoughts. That any amount of education and culture could raise her above a mind which had made her childhood a poem had never even crossed her imagination.

TO BE CONTINUED

THE BRIER ROSE

A light breeze stirred the white muslin curtains. The breath of the budding roses came into the quaint old parlor, where the high-nosed Peytonons of four generations frowned down from the wainscoted walls upon Angus Grafton, leaning against the tall man-el-shelf, his strong, grave face pathetic in its tenderness, its perplexity, pain.

For Dolly, a pretty brown-eyed Dolly, whose tip-tilted nose defied all the traditions of her race, was standing before him in one of those mutinous feminine moods that defy masculine comprehension.

"It is for the last time, Dolly," he said, with an odd catch in his deep voice.

"You have said that three times before," answered Dolly, mischievously.

"I know it," he continued, and his tone grew steeper and stronger. "I have been an absolute fool for the past six months. But I have determined to take my folly in hand, and—master it."

There was a ring in the words that an older and wiser woman would have heard and heeded. But naughty Dolly only flipped a rose-leaf from her ruffled gown.

"We must understand each other, Dolly."

"Oh, we couldn't," she answered, quite decisively. "At least I couldn't, I know. Understanding things always made my head ache, even at school. Sister Angela said it was because my mind had never been trained to think."

"Then, why didn't she train it?" asked Dr. Grafton, as he realized how very correct was Sister Angela's diagnosis.

"She tried," answered Dolly, "but it was no use. Aunt Betty had let me grow my own way too long—like her brier roses. She can't train them up the porch, they have done well. Sister Angela might have done something, but she had not time. I used to sit in the chapel in the evening and listen to

the nuns singing in the choir, and think—think—O dear!" said Dolly, dimpling into her naughty self again. "I often wish I was a nun now, with a pretty ruffled cap like Sister Angela's and no need to bother about hats and gowns."

Dr. Grafton laughed outright. The picture of Dolly in conventional robe seemed an absurdity. And yet, even as he laughed, he realized that Sister Angela's efforts had not altogether failed. There had always been an indefinable charm about Aunt Betty's brier rose that had told of an uplifting touch. He had told of an uplifting touch. He had told of a better, truer nature under Dolly's most tormenting moods. It was this intangible, elusive spell that had held him captive for the last six months at the little cottage's feet.

"You could never be a nun, Dolly," he said softly. "But—but some day, when you are all my own, I know that you will believe and hope as I do."

"I don't promise," answered Dolly, with a willful shake of her curls. "I don't promise anything."

"You forget," he said, gravely. "There is one thing you have promised."

"No," persisted Dolly, like the naughty little brier rose she was, "I have not promised anything. I told you that I cared for you, and I do. I always like people that like me, and I tell them so, because I don't want to hurt their feelings."

"And—and—the speaker's lips had grown white—" you mean you tell all men the same thing?"

"Oh, no! Not all," answered Dolly, demurely. "I only wish me to understand that you have made me simply a puppet and a plaything with the rest."

"I never said anything like that, I am sure," replied Dolly, in a much aggrieved tone. "I've told you twenty times I liked you."

"Liked me, Dolly?"

"Well, loved you, then," corrected Dolly, in the softest of little whispers. "And you said that was enough."

But there was no answering smile in the grave, stern face to which she lifted her bewitching eyes.

"No, not enough," her companion answered, in a new, hard voice, "not enough when you tell twenty men the same pretty lie. Listen Dolly! I told you I had taken my folly in hand. If I can not bind you, I can at least master myself. Put your hand in mine, promise me in all truth and earnestness that you will be my wife or else—"

He paused as if he could not finish the sentence.

"Or else what?" asked Dolly, holding up her pretty head defiantly at this master tone.

"Else there must be an end to this maddening mockery. I shall leave you forever, Dolly."

A cold chill like a frost breath went through the heart of the little brier rose; then she put out all her pretty prickles to hide the shiver and the pang.

"Ah, well! I'll try to bear it," she said, with a little laugh. "Good-by, Dr. Grafton."

"Good-by," he answered, taking the hand she held out to him and nearly crushing it for a moment in his own. "Good-by, and God forgive you, Dolly."

Groping, like one almost blind, for his hat and cane, he turned from the room, leaving Dolly breathing the simpering portrait of another Miss Dorothy Peyton, who had played as recklessly with men's hearts and hopes one hundred years before.

"The horrid man!" gasped Dolly at last, shaking her pretty pink-tipped fingers. "He fairly crushed my hand—and—and—how white and queer he looked." Then she dimpled into roguish smiles again. "He will be at the ball tonight, and I know, just sure of her spell, tripped gaily upstairs to put fresh ribbons in the white gauze gown which Angus Grafton liked the best of all her dainty fripperies."

And a very fairy queen she looked as she floated through the dance that evening, her golden curls perked up in a jaunty coronet on her graceful head, her fluttering fan a scepter whose sway none dared dispute.

Never had she flashed and sparkled and dimpled more bewitchingly upon her train of admirers, who were ready to fight for a smile, a word, a glance.

But there was one who did not come; one whom her slightest whisper had hitherto lured from book, desk, fireside, from all but the path of duty, to follow her dancing spid, and still that strong, grave face failed to look upon her triumph. Dolly became deadly weary of it all, and felt that Dr. Herbert was the only sensible man in the room, when at the stroke of twelve he stopped beside her to say "good night."

"Awful sorry I have to leave so soon, Miss Dolly, but I must be on hand now for double work."

"Double work!" echoed Dolly, vaguely.

"Yes; of course you know Grafton leaves tonight. Foolish thing for a man like him to volunteer, I think. But I suppose that last call for surgeons at the front I intended to see him off—but—by George, there goes his train now!"

And over the sweet strains of the Strauss waltz rose the shrill shriek of the locomotive as it tore its way through the midnight darkness without.

"You mean that—he—has—gone!" panted Dolly, clutching her dainty little fan as if it could uphold her in a dissolving universe.

"Gone? Why, yes, surely he said good-by to you?" and the young doctor looked at her curiously.

"Oh, yes; of course," answered Dolly, feeling that all her world was gazing at her through those wondering eyes, and rising to the situation as only the born coquette and dancers seemed whirling in a dizzy circle around her. "He said good-by this morning. I did not know he was going quite so soon. As this is your waltz, I believe, Mr. Lawson, and Dolly bent a bewitching smile on the new-comer at her side, "would you mind sitting it out in the conservatory? And if you will get me one of those lovely little pink ices downstairs, I will hide away under that big oleander and wait for it."

And while Jack Lawson went for the pink ice Dolly got the five minutes to herself that she needed to steady her heart and brain and nerves, so that no night might see that she had played too recklessly with a strong man's love—and lost it.

It was a deadly August day. A brass sun was scorching the little southern seaport, whose tropic languor had been galvanized into unwonted life by the battle thrill quivering through the land. The white sands were alive with moving troops, wagons, hospital attendants. Transports laden with the sick, wounded, and dying were unloading their ghastly freight at the narrow wharves; doctors and nurses were hurrying from all parts of the world to help and to save those who had been stricken down.

In the long stretch of barracks that had been hastily transformed into a hospital lay Angus Grafton, trembling between life and death. Shattered by shot, wasted with fever, he was but a shadow of the stalwart man whose heroic services was on the lips of every soldier in his regiment.

But no echo of this grateful praise could reach the doctor's ear now. For more than five weeks he had lain in a dull stupor, broken only by faint gleams of consciousness, during which he had seemed wearily indifferent to life or death.

"He has a chance still," said the keen-eyed old surgeon, who watched with special interest over his brave young confrere. "A fighting chance still. But he must be roused to make the fight. It would be well to send for some of his people—mother, wife, sister, sweetheart—anybody very near and dear to him. This is no place for visitors, I know, but we must save a fine fellow like Grafton at any cost."

And the clear-eyed Sister who with many others, had been summoned from other fields of duty to hospital service looked through the pockets of the tattered blood-stained uniform for some letter or paper to guide her. She found no word, no line, only the surgeon's notebook, a little Vade Mecum, and a velvet case from which laughed a fair, sweet, roguish face that Sister Angela—knew.

Drifting through troubled dreams, clouded by dimly remembered horrors of blood and carnage, Angus Grafton became suddenly aware of a faint breath of perfume, that seemed to hold captive his wandering spirit.

What was it? The dulled brain stirred feebly with the question, and memory seemed to thrill with a waking pain. A rose! the breath of a brier rose! Ah, he was dreaming death-dreams, he thought, opening his heavy eyes wearily.

No, there upon the little table at his side stood a great white bowl, fairly brimming with bloom and fragrance. Roses, brier roses, thriving and sweet and fresh—the wayward blossoms that would not be bound or tied! And into the hollow, burning eyes that gazed upon the flowers there welled two great tears that told how weak the strong, proud man had grown.

"O look, Aunt Betty, look! I see, he knows! Oh, I can't wait another minute. I'll have to speak to him," and a little white-robed figure fluttered out from the screening curtain behind the cot—and Dolly!—was it Dolly or some mocking phantom? She was down on her knees beside his pillow, holding his wasted hands, sobbing out between smiles and tears: "Angus, dear Angus, it is I—I—your own Dolly—your little brier rose. Sister Angela sent me word that you needed me—and—I came with Aunt Betty this morning. Oh, won't you try to—live—for me, Angus? I have loved you all the time. I have cried every night since you left me. Don't leave me again, Angus; don't leave me again."

And at that sweet, low cry the shadow of death seemed to vanish and the light of life kindled the pale, wasted face.

"Never again," came the faint whisper through the parched lips. "My Dolly—never again."

And then Dr. Grafton proceeded to get well in a way that broke all professional records, and there was a wedding in the old Virginia home that eclipsed anything the four generations of high-nosed Peytonons had ever witnessed before.

The roses—the wayward brier roses—defied all the laws of Linnaeus by blooming under the very nose of Jack Frost for this auspicious occasion. They garlanded the rooms, they decked the table, they wreathed the cake, and—Dr. Grafton would have it so in spite

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