

THE WILD BIRDS OF KILLEEVY

BY ROSA MULHOLLAND (LADY GILBERT)

CHAPTER XIII—CONTINUED

By this time the signora had ceased to speak to Fan, and was communing with herself; and the little girl, who only half understood her, and was rather afraid of her in this mood, curled herself into a corner out of the path of the tiny woman beating up and down the room with her impatient feet.

"I thought my poor mother sweet and good, but blind, blind to the beautiful life that was before her child. Love? Why that was of course! That I could have without asking. Every one loved me; some people loved me too much."

"She stopped and wailed a little between her hands; then went on: 'Ah, how happy I was! The dear old town, I see its narrow, deep-coloured streets, with their long shadows and waves of light; the soft blue atmosphere lying all round it like a heaven! In the heart of the town, like jewels in a dark shrine, were my idols, the paintings of the great masters. Out of my window I could see the enchanting tints of the landscape floating beyond the old red-and-brown tiled roofs of our neighbours' houses. My easel was in my window; my head was full of dreams; the stars made music for me in the sky at night; the flowers sang to me when I roved alone in the woods looking for the scented violets with which I crammed my little chamber. Love! were not all things love? Did not some one call my face a flower, my speech a song, the rapture in my eyes a light from paradise? How could I ever dream that I should live to feel the want of love?"

"She broke off again, flung herself into a chair, and wept passionately. 'Some one said I was cold, and got tired of hoping and praying to me, and went away from our place. Then my mother died, and health broke, and dear father lost his fortune, and I had to wake up out of my dreams and earn money for him any way I could. Where were the beautiful works of mine which were to brighten the world? I had to drudge, and teach, and struggle, only for a little money to keep us alive, to give father comfort. But I did it; yes, I did it. I am glad I did not fail in that also. I am thankful he died in these arms without knowing what. That is the only success I have ever achieved.'"

"Fan, hearing that she was crying, could no longer stay in her corner. She stole out and put an arm round the little woman's neck. 'Dear Mamzelle,' she said, 'don't fret any more. I am going to bring up your coffee; it's hot and hot; and you must drink it.'"

"Ah, you are there, are you, my darling? And I have been so far away and had quite forgotten about you; although you have been the cause of it all. Yes, I will have your coffee. Light the lamp and let me look at you. So young and fresh as you are, with all the possibilities alive in you that are withered and dead in me. And you are strong and healthy as I never was. Oh! how I could envy you if I did not love you?"

"Shall I fetch the coffee now?" asked Fancha, beginning to feel half afraid again; and, removing herself gently from the signora's straining embrace, she fitted down stairs and up again with the beverage, which always acted like a charm upon Mamzelle in her moments of excitement.

"Yes, that has done me good," she said, having drained the ample cup presented to her. "Ah, me! I fear I have been raving again. You must not get afraid of me, child. Don't let me turn into an ogre for you."

"She took up her brushes, and Fancha, nestled beside her, watched their magic effect as they passed lightly here and there over the canvas."

"Mamzelle," she said, "why did you say I did it? Do I bring trouble into your mind?"

"No, carina, you must not think that. You bring me pictures and memories by the power of your song."

"How strange!" said Fancha, darning busily at Mrs. Wynch's stockings. "That is like what Kevin always told me."

versation. Mamzelle was unhappy, while she, Fancha, was not. Mamzelle had no Killeevy to return to presently, no Kevin to come for her and carry her home. Therefore must Fancha be tender to her lonely little friend.

"Mamzelle," she said, softly, "I don't know quite what you mean. I don't want to sing to the world. The gipsies made me do it. I only want to sing to make Kevin happy."

"Ah, that Kevin?" thought Mamzelle, impatiently. "How I wish she could put him out of her mind! Some coarse country lout, who, if he finds her, will drag her back into a sordid and commonplace life. But no! the heaven that watches over genius will shield her from such a fate."

Indeed it seemed more and more likely to Fan's benefactress, as the days passed by that the child had been forgotten by her distant friends. The signora exalted in the hope that it might be so; Mrs. Wynch was more pleased than she could have imagined it possible for her to be from such a cause. Neither dared to hint of her own expectations; but each had her own plans for the girl's future. The signora's were vague, lofty, enchanting to the imagination that built them up; those of Mrs. Wynch soared no higher than her own attic, placed no magic wand in her protegee's hands more potent than the duster or the sweeping-brush.

"You see 'tis not as if they had been her own flesh and blood," said Mrs. Wynch, in one of their many consultations over the child's fate. "She is an orphan, and they took care of her out of charity. When they heard she had got into a good place here, they thought better to let her stay in it, and I don't blame them."

"They might have written her a letter, poor little tender heart!" flashed Mamzelle, angrily; but as the latter did not come she rejoiced more triumphantly every day. She began to pinch and save so that she might have a little money to spend in taking Fan about from time to time to see the world. She brought her round the picture-galleries, instructing her lovingly as they went along, and taking a keen pleasure in Fancha's apt remarks and inquiries; and she was very careful to arrange with Betsy the charwoman beforehand, so that Mrs. Wynch should not be inconvenienced by her little maid's holiday. She bought books which she thought useful for her to read, such as would stimulate her imagination and foster her love of the arts, and she made her read them aloud in the evenings. At last on one memorable day she brought her to a concert, and Fan's delight and enthusiasm surpassed even the signora's expectations. Mamzelle then bought one of the songs she had heard charmingly rendered by a first-rate singer, and taught it to her with an accompaniment on the guitar. And after that Fancha's music lessons rapidly progressed.

All these projects of Mamzelle's were not carried out without serious remonstrances from Mrs. Wynch. She was fond of her little lodger, who had always been kind and helpful with her, and though she looked on her as in one sense a childish creature to be pitied, yet she stood in some awe of her artistic powers. With all her kindly regard for the signora, the good woman thought she was bound to interfere to prevent the destruction of the child.

"I know you're far cleverer and more learned than I am," she said. "I'm sure I could not more paint one of your pictures than I could ride on a broomstick. Where you get it from I can't tell, with nothing before you but blank canvas and a little nasty sticky paint. How you can make eyes look out of it, and how you show places miles away when it's all as flat as your hand, all that is past guessing about; and I'm sure I give it up to you. But when it comes to training a maid-servant, Mamzelle, I believe I may say that I ought to have the best of it there. And I do say that taking her to concerts and picture-galleries, and setting her up to real poetry and play-acting books, is not just the way as how I would set about the training of a housemaid."

"Is she not doing very well?" asked Mamzelle, trying to evade the difficulty. "Do you not find her industrious and obedient? You allow her to have holidays, and why need you care how they are spent?"

"I'm not finding fault with her," said Mrs. Wynch. "I believe the little creature does her best. But she will not be always a child, and she will be ruined by having stuff put in her head. There you are always drawing and painting her pretty face, enough to turn her brain. And what with singing, and playing, and reading, I'm sure I can't think what a maid-servant can want with such foolery. No offence, Mamzelle. What's fit for you is foolery for her. I don't know how you can take it on your conscience!"

"Well, Mrs. Wynch, perhaps if I looked on her as you do, I should feel it wrong to treat her as I do. But how do you know that it is her destiny in life to be a maid-servant?"

"Fiddestick!" cried Mrs. Wynch. "Who ever heard of a girl in her station in life with a destiny? She has got to get her bread."

"My friend," said the signora, pleadingly, "try and be patient with me if I tell you a little of what I think about this child. She has uncommon gifts, and if she can only find means to develop them she will turn into a shining star in the world. She is not vain, nor frivolous, nor conscious of her own powers; it is I who have found them out. You said just now that in matters of art you would allow me to judge, and this is a matter of art."

"Law, Mamzelle, you do take my breath away! My little maid a shining star, a matter of art! What part of the world is she to shine in, I wonder, and will you be able to keep her as a lady all the time?"

"I know I am taking a responsibility upon me," said the signora, in great agitation; "but if all foresee comes to pass she will be able to do much more than keep herself. She will be more than a lady."

"Well, I never!" cried Mrs. Wynch. "There, my friend, I fear I have gone too far. I do not want to rob the girl of your care and good-will. Indulge me a little in my fancies, and I will see that the child does not disappoint you."

When the signora was alone she reproached herself passionately for her imprudence. "What a fool I am, blurring out my thoughts like that!" she said to herself. "We were getting along so well; but we begin to quarrel over her, what will be the end of my dreams? Ah, dreams, dreams, dreams, Lucrezia Dolce! Always dreams and never the fulfilment of any hope! And yet the materials always lay ready at my hand. There must be something in my own breath that blights the bud of promise. Already I have run a risk in this case. Will I caution for the future repair what I have undone?"

Mrs. Wynch also communed with herself over the cause of disagreement between her and her little lodger. "The wonderful," she mused, sitting in her easy chair at her fireside, "low like mad folks clever people do sometimes be! To think of all that Mamzelle can do, and has her wits about her besides, and is punctual with her rent; and then to hear her talking about a little charity girl being a shining star and a matter of art! I suppose it's all about her singing; and I won't say but what it's a voice that goes to your heart; made me cry she did, which I hadn't done since then I loved her. But law! what comes to a poor girl of singing? Theatres, perhaps, or only nasty saloons! I was brought up serious, and I never did go with theatres, and sure I am that a girl's better out of them than in them. Well, I suppose it runs in Italian blood, always breaking out in operas, singing to a degree that English folks could never be got to condescend to. All of them are Italians; you may know it by their outlandish names in the newspapers. I do think Mamzelle's English mother might have put a little common sense into her, but I suppose she did what she could, poor dear, and I will say she is honest and honourable in spite of her notions. And of course all those black-eyed, black-haired, singing and painting people that went before her on her father's side, all of them were bound to have a hand in her too."

Here Fancha appearing in the doorway with her tea-tray, Mrs. Wynch sat bolt upright and surveyed her young foundling with critical eyes. "Don't tell me," she thought, "that the girl is made for anything but what she is about. She is born to be a neat little maid, as anybody can see. How nicely she puts on her little apron, and what a pretty way she has of carrying a tray. That will do, my dear. Stop a minute, Fan, and speak to me. Mamzelle is very kind, but don't let her put it in your head to want to be a play-acting girl in a crowd."

"Oh, no, ma'am," said Fan, brightly; "it was the gipsies that did that. Mamzelle teaches me to sing, but she knows I will only sing for Kevin."

"Good girl!" said Mrs. Wynch. "Stick to your housework."

"Kevin, indeed!" she reflected afterwards, hearing Fan's fresh voice carolling overhead to the soft accompaniment of the guitar. "Much the young scapgrace is thinking about her or her songs. But it is a right feeling in the girl, and will do to keep her safe while it lasts."

CHAPTER XIV. KEVIN'S SEARCH GOES ON

Kevin's reading continued. History, travels, biographies, works on art, and, above all, the poets were his study. He slept little, and burned a great deal of oil. Poetry he kept for the dead of night when no chance could break the spell that enthralled him. More sober books were reserved for the corner of the little dusty shop, where they were promptly laid aside when a customer appeared.

As soon as he received the first instalment of his salary he set about following the policeman's advice, and began his visits to the play.

"Were you there?" asked Kevin. "I was there, and I saw you. My, what a seventh heaven you were in altogether! I don't mean the gallery, only, though that's high enough to make one dizzy thinking of it. I don't intend ever to go with you to the theatre unless you take me to the boxes."

"This hint and the pretty little toss of the head which accompanied it were lost upon Kevin. His thoughts were with Hamlet and the scenes of last night."

"I was greatly delighted," said he, simply. "Were you? Then I gave you credit for better taste. If that's Shakespeare I've done with him. All that I've heard about that play, and when I go what do I find? Such frowning, and speechifying, and dying all about the stage. Scolding and brow-beating his mother, and all on the word of a ghost! I don't believe in ghosts. I'll bet you a pair of gloves it was somebody dressed up. Then because one man had been killed everybody else had to be killed, till I wonder he wasn't afraid to die himself; even Ophelia, poor dear, and she the only hope we had of a wedding to wind up with. I will say the dresses and scenery were pretty, but that was all to keep your blood from curdling, no dancing, no singing, no anything, to rouse up your spirits."

"Amlet was a very arrogant young man," said Mr. Must. "I always thought it, and I have often intended to write to the papers and say so. Original thoughts are always valuable, I believe. There's a sort of a fashion set in 'Amlet, and, Lord, how the world does run after it! Ever since I remember it has been the same, and it's time things took a turn."

When his excitement had passed away, and reaction had come on, Kevin remembered that last night's marvellous experience had brought him no nearer to the object of his search. The mystery of "Hamlet" with all its wild-hunter-like troop of lights and shadows had passed, and offered him no suggestion as to the fate of Fan. The child's pathetic voice rose on his ear singing the song of the sea; the gulls soared and winged their white wings towards the sun; and his own share in the tragedy of life drew near and stared him in the face.

At first he had not ventured to confide in his master's daughter, not feeling sure how much good nature might lie, for him, under the town-bred flippancy of her manner, and shrinking a little from the thought of having his story treated with ridicule. But as he cast about, trying, with his imperfect knowledge, to lay plans for a systematic search, he felt more and more how valuable would be the advice of one so well informed on all the ways and fashions, merits and classes of the public amusements of London.

One evening a rare opportunity occurred. Mr. Must was out and his daughter was at home. Kevin sat on one side of the table with his book, and Bessie on the other with her work, making up some smart piece of millinery for her own adornment. The white curtains of the sun, and the lively girl cast frequent disdainful glances at the companion's book, showing her impatient desire for a little conversation. Kevin felt that if he ever meant to enlist Bessie's sympathies and engage her help now was the moment to make the attempt.

"Miss Bessie," he began, "there is something I am longing to say to you. Your good nature makes me hope that you will listen to me with patience."

"It was an unnecessarily formal beginning, but Kevin had felt so shy of speaking at all, and had so often thought of how he ought to do it, that stiffness of manner was the result. Miss Bessie opened her blue eyes with an expression of wonder, and then coloured into a little gratified blush, as she saw the young man's face bending towards her from the other side of the table, his lips quivering with suppressed agitation, and his eyes full of earnestness for Fancha's sake. Mr. Must's pretty daughter had been accustomed to the admiration of a succession of her father's assistants, and had snubbed them all severely as each in his turn had dared to fall in love with her. She saw a great deal of a prettier kind of life from her stall in the flower-market, and abhorred bookworms and men in shabby coats daubed with the dust of ages, which reminded her of the out-at-elbows covers of what she called "leathery old books." Seeing Kevin's manner, she did not doubt that his hour had come, and that she should have to put him down like the rest of his brethren. She tossed her little tawny head, and said lightly, and she regarded an embryo bonnet on her finger, critically, "Certainly, Mr. Kevin; say it by all means! It can't be worse than silence, whatever it is."

"I came to London to search for some one," said Kevin, with the bluntness of deep feeling, "and that search is the object of my life. I have reason to think you can help me with your advice."

Bessie started, let her bonnet fall, and picked it up with a sense of disappointment that would lead one to suppose the pastime of chastising assistants had been one not wholly disagreeable to her. But she was true at heart, under her little vanities, and righted herself at once.

"What kind of a some one?" asked she, putting down her work, and planting her elbows on the table with an air of giving all her attention to his case. "Rich uncle who has neglected you, swindler who owes you money, false-hearted sweetheart who has forgotten her vows? Don't I know them all in the plays?"

"None of those," said Kevin, smiling. "My, how interested I am getting! So nice to have met with this in real life. There, if it isn't an enemy you want to fight, I give it up."

"It is only a child, a little girl—"

ASKING AND GETTING

By Joseph E. Kerr in The Antidote

"I should like to report a half hour late in the morning, sir," said Paul Pringle to his boss, James Fortescue, proprietor and sole owner of the Hampden Woolen Mills.

"I suppose you want to go to Mass again," Fortescue responded with a sneer. "That is correct, sir," answered Paul; "tomorrow is a holy day in the Catholic Church and I have never missed going to Mass and Communion on that day."

"Well, let this be the last time. I'm sick and tired of this Mass business. If you can't separate Mass and business then I have no further use for you," said Fortescue, slamming the door as he walked into his inner office.

He was a successful business man and had built up the Hampden Woolen Mills through his own efforts. He bulked large physically and wore his iron-gray moustache closely clipped. His complexion was florid and set off to good advantage wonderfully clear grey-blue eyes. He was not only successful, he looked it. One unconsciously gained virility through contact with him. He was positive in his opinions and in all he did. He brooked no opposition and did not trifle with suggestions. Staccato-like, he gave orders to subordinates, and answered questions, for the most part, in monosyllables.

Paul went home that night feeling rather blue, for he was possessed of an exquisite nature that felt rebuke keenly. He knew the "old man," as Fortescue was called, meant what he said and he did not relish the situation. Why should Fortescue talk like that, he kept asking himself, but he could find no consolation.

One thing was certain: he must not offend Fortescue, for he was the largest employer in Hampden and paid the highest wages. He therefore resolved to get to the office as early as possible.

His supper over, he went to confession, and retired early. He attended the half-past six Mass the following morning and received holy Communion with a devout prayer on his lips that his difficulties with Fortescue might be resolved as quickly as possible.

"And I know you will help me, O Lord," he prayed, "for you have said we have only to ask and we shall receive."

"That, really, was not necessary," he said, "but, in a way, I'm glad you are here. Bring in to me last month's balance sheet."

In the private office Fortescue and Paul pondered over rows of figures for a long time. Fortescue and Paul both telephoned home that they were unavoidably detained at the office and would not be home until late.

"I'm in a little bit of a hole," volunteered Fortescue; "I need fifty thousand cash and although Bradstreet and Dunn rate me as A-1 I can't raise a cent."

"May I ask why, sir? Surely, you have assets five times that amount," and Paul pointed out certain items to Fortescue.

"It's the banks," said Fortescue; "and they in turn pass the blame to the Federal Reserve. They've got a new word for it, called 'deflation.' But, goodness knows, there is no inflation in the Hampden Woolen Mills. I've conducted business honestly, and I don't see why I should be made to suffer inconvenience."

"It must be awful to realize you have money and can't touch it," said Paul.

"You're right," said Fortescue, "but the thing is worked in this way: the Federal Reserve is the moral policeman of the financial world, and you know you can't argue with a policeman. We innocent fellows have got to suffer with the guilty."

He got up and paced the floor, hands behind his back. Suddenly he wheeled around and faced Paul. "Now, you're a good Christian, how would you overcome a situation like this?" and he closed his eyes until they formed a narrow slit.

"I'd pray for relief, sir," answered Paul. "It may seem childlike to you but that is precisely what I should do. Just as your own boy takes his troubles to you so should I take mine to the Lord. You informed me this morning that you were in no mood to discuss the Catholic religion, but I am taking the liberty of saying that a Catholic business man, put in the position you are, would find immediate relief through prayer."

"Why? Does the Lord handicap those who are not Catholics?" queried Fortescue. "No," answered Paul; "the answer is simpler than that. The whole thing is reasonable, as I can illustrate. Suppose you advertise that you will do a certain thing, you keep your word, don't you?"

"Absolutely," said Fortescue. "Well, then, the Lord has said, 'Ask and you shall receive,' and surely you do not believe the Lord is more likely to go back on his word than you," said Paul.

"Your logic is irresistible," said Fortescue, "and I really wish I could believe like that. Think what it means to my reputation and credit if I cannot pay my bills. I've always discounted them, and yet I am worth a big pile of money and not one dollar of cash. I'm almost tempted to try that praying stunt."

"Well," said Paul, "it's all the same to me whatever you do. I know shall pray, regardless of what you do. It doesn't make a bit of difference to me what you do, as I told you, but I've got enough faith to feel that if you should pray you'll get something."

Fortescue drove Paul home that night, pondering the thought his clerk had left with him. It especially appealed to him that Paul had not become mushy about the thing, for he hated mushiness. He was beginning to see his clerk in a new light and he rather regretted his hasty and bitter words to Paul earlier in the day.

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