

THE WILD BIRDS OF KILLEEVY

BY ROSA MULHOLLAND (LADY GILBERT)

CHAPTER IX

FAN AMONG THE GIPSIES

On the outskirts of an English village, under trees just fringed with autumnal gold, the gipsies were encamped, and in a recess of the tents Fancha was being dressed for a performance. Naomi, the sad-faced gipsy, plaited her long hair, laced her scarlet bodice, and arranged her gaudy beads glittered on her neck; round her waist was clasped a belt of imitation jewels, and tawdry ornament was heaped on her till she looked like some bird of strangely brilliant plumage from which no song could be expected.

Outside, in the sunshine, a crowd was expecting the appearance of the little dancing and singing girl, the greatest attraction of the show, and among the villagers and country people stood a group of ladies and gentlemen who had ridden from a neighbouring watering-place, and passing the encampment had dismounted from curiosity to see what was going on.

Fancha bounded out of the tent into the sunny open, and rattling her castanets, had already begun her dance. At first the little figure dazzled the eyes with its glowing colours, flying draperies, and glittering tinsels, but soon the graceful motion of the slim, brown limbs became noticeable, and gave an artistic value to sandals and bangles, to streaming scarves of scarlet, and purple and gold.

Thistleton Honeywood, one of the riders who had dismounted to look on, was captivated by the brilliant little apparition even before the beauty of the child's countenance was discerned by him.

"It is the poetry of dancing," he said, "as only a child can render it. Exuberant life and joy in every movement, unconscious grace in every attitude!"

He pressed through the crowd, and drew nearer to the dancer. Fancha's little oval face, glowing like a promise-grate, was turned towards him. The dark eyes burned with excitement; lips and cheeks were rippled over with a smile of glee. She looked at no one, but seemed laughing at the moving clouds above the heads of the people as if she described her own fitting counterparts among their bright and fantastic shapes. She looked the very ideal of picturesque joy and ideal of picturesque looks carried to their extreme. Her blouse lay under her garments, for little Fan had had a beating since she left Killeevy mountain, yet her delight in her dancing was as real as her life. The free movements in the open air gave her liberty for the moment, the clashing of bizarre music exhilarated, the breezy scudding of the autumnal clouds overhead inspired her. Her dance under the sky was the short-lived rapture of a too-often miserable day.

The dance came suddenly to an end, and Mr. Honeywood was startled to see how quickly the look of joy vanished from her face, the buoyant expression of the limbs disappeared, and as the little dancer fell into an artless childlike attitude of waiting, he noticed how heavily the mouth and eyelids drooped.

"Poor little thing!" mused he, "her face is too good for her fortunes. Only a child could endure such a life, and a year or more she will be too old for it. What is this? She is going to sing!"

A gipsy had brought her a guitar, and she was all animation once more. Seating herself on the grass against a background of waving sombre-hued trees, this bird of glowing plumage began to pour out a song that startled the hearts of her hearers. It was a wild, stirring gipsy ditty, with a refrain of mirthful and impassioned by turns; and the little songstress sent it forth with head well thrown back (as of old she had held herself vying with the thrush), eyebrows elevated in droilery or disdain, foot and shoulders helping to give fierceness to the wrath, or humour to the gaiety of the theme. Mr. Honeywood listened attentively, with his face leant forward, a keen light in his eye, and an unusual colour in his cheek.

"Brava! brava!" he murmured quickly under his breath.

"Poor little thing!" he said, pityingly, as his eyes rested on her where she sat drooping as before with the guitar on her knees.

"Ask her to sing again," he called to the gipsy near him, holding up a piece of gold as he spoke, and observing with interest how quickly energy waked up again in the sorrowful face.

Fancha considered for a moment and then there rose suddenly from her lips a sacred strain, curiously in contrast with her former song, sweet, solemn and thrilling, a hymn that alternated between triumph and the Virgin Triumphant, sung in every cabin on Killeevy mountain; the words were in Irish and incomprehensible to her listeners.

"The music is as delightful as the voice," said Honeywood, when she had finished. "Of what language are the words of the song?" he asked of the gipsy.

"Romany, our own language," said the gipsy.

"A lie," said Honeywood to himself, and then glancing at Fancha again he was struck by the paleness that had crept over her face. She sat with her small hands clasped on her knee, white and weary, and looking lonely and forlorn in the crowd. Her eyes were looking at Killeevy mountain, and it taxed all her young strength to hold back the tears which were threatening to fall.

"Where did you get your little girl?" asked Honeywood, of the gipsy mother who was now hovering about him, not noting all his movements. "She does not appear to be one of you."

"She is a gipsy. That is her mother who is taking her into the tent."

"Falsehood number two," said Honeywood aside.

"She has a very remarkable voice."

"It goes in the blood," said her mother had the same voice," said the gipsy.

"My dear fellow," said a friend, "my wife sent me a quarter of an hour ago to hurry you away. If we do not come we shall hear of it."

Thistleton Honeywood turned on his heel and accompanied his friend, mentally resolving to return to the spot next morning and make such discoveries as he could concerning the charming little creature that had interested him so much, and the party remounted and rode home.

The performance over, Fan was despoiled of her finery, and, habited in an old woollen garment, was soon busy among the gipsy children, and she was her duty to nurse and amuse all the infants of the camp, by turn or in flocks, being well watched herself while by many a vigilant eye. As evening advanced the little swarthy babies were, one after another, sung by her to sleep, outside the tents, away from the clatter of their scolding mothers' tongues. Even here she was closely watched, and yet she did not want to run away.

She had tried it once, indeed; but now she would wait patiently for Kevin to come for her. All the children were asleep except one, who persisted in keeping his black eyes open till the trees hid their gold under mists of gray, and finally became a solemn dark mass against the sky. The high road glimmered in the distance, and Fan watched it while she sang, pouring out her heart in a monotonous chant that served for a lullaby, while the Irish words betrayed none of her secrets, no more to the men and women who passed her to and fro than to the child into the wrinkles of whose chubby neck she shed her secret tears between the stanzas. Her broken and fitful song, half complaint, half lullaby, ran something like this:

"Are you coming along the road, Kevin? The world is bigger than we thought it was, and I am always afraid you will pass us by in the dark. But they are lighting the great fire now outside the tent, and you will see it as we saw it at Killeevy. Hush, baby, sleep. Avourneen, avourneen!"

"Kevin, don't think I am dead. I awakened in a vessel, and we were far away at sea. The sea was beautiful, but I cried the whole day. And they did not put me in a light-house! The trees here are lovely, and the fields are sweet, and I was walking by your hand and would be glad to see the world.—Sleep! acushla, sleep!"

"Sometimes I am happy when we are travelling through the trees, and sometimes I am merry when I am dancing in the wind. But when I stop quite still, oh, then I am so lonely! Once I ran away and they gave me a beating; not Naomi at all, but the big cruel gipsy herself. I can't bear it again, and so I will stay with them, and be good till you come."

"Aron, come quickly, for they quarrel, and I am frightened.—Hush, little darling!—Sleep!"

"I try to see Killeevy mountain, but the gipsies' faces get in between. Sometimes I am afraid there is no Killeevy any more. Has the sea washed it out, and is there now only England? Oh, Kevin, are you there, are you anywhere? Is there Killeevy, is there Kevin any more?"

Ending thus in a burst of grief, Fan buried her face in the baby's fat shoulder.

"Don't you see the child is asleep?" said its mother, shaking her.

Fan delivered up her charge, and being called to eat her supper, joined the gipsy circle round the fire. She sat full in the light of the blaze, thinking Kevin will be able to see me if he comes by."

After supper she lay on the grass, half hidden in Naomi's gown, trying to walk with all her might to "see Killeevy." But it was not to be seen. The frelight flashing over swarthy faces, and backed by the inky masses of the trees, extinguished the mellow landscape that she struggled to descry. Neither could her fancy catch murmurs from her home because of noisy oaths and shouts of laughter. Her last thought was a fear that the fire was getting low, and that Kevin might pass by in the dark without seeing them. And then she fell asleep.

Out of her sleep she was roused by the order to march. The camp was on the move. The gipsy mother had no desire to be questioned next morning by the gentleman who had taken an interest in her little singing girl. Her shrewd-

ness suspected that he would return to have his curiosity gratified. So the tents were folded and the horses were yoked, and after much noise and clamour the caravan moved away into the stillness of the night.

During the early night hours Fan was kept under cover for the sake of her voice, but by daybreak she was released from her moving prison and allowed to trudge along the road by Naomi's side. How sweet to see the gray mists part on the brow of the hill, disclosing the brown fallow, the dim hedges dashed with red, the russet grove and the emurped dale! Autumn was far advanced; a faint, sweet smell that hinted of decay hung with the mists upon the morning air; the throats sang his last song upon a branch bare, but for a few gray tassels of foliage that, even as he piped, kept fluttering one by one to the earth. Fan was glad and hopeful moving through the invigorating air, and her heart beat high with expectation as she pressed forward between the berried hedges.

CHAPTER X

KEVIN RUNS AWAY

But Kevin never appeared upon the road, and Fancha's heart began to fail. Could it be possible that he thought she was dead, and would never come to look for her at all? If this were so, how unhappy he must be, and how dreadful for her to live for ever with the gipsies! But a bright idea came to her. Why could she not write him a letter? She wondered she had not thought of it before.

It seemed impossible to carry out such a scheme. Materials were beyond her reach and she had no means of communicating with the post; yet Fancha kept her purpose in mind.

It chanced one day that some school children visited the gipsies, and Fan made overtures of friendship to a bright-eyed boy.

"Oh, but it's nice to be a gipsy!" said the boy, gazing admiringly at Fan. "Your frock is splendid. Tell me what they have in their cooking pot."

In an instant Fan saw her way. "Everything good," she said, smacking her lips. "Would you like to have a taste?"

"Aye!" said the little gourmand with sparkling eyes.

"Well, then," said Fan, "will you bring me a clean piece of paper and a pencil tomorrow, and I will keep you a share of my dinner? But you must not be seen giving it to me, nor taking anything from me, because—"

"Why?" asked the boy, lowering his voice as Fan's eyes grew wide and mysterious.

"The gipsies might burn your father's house."

This was a daring stroke on Fan's part, but having been beaten herself, she thought the gipsies capable of almost any vengeance.

"Laws," said the boy, "we must mind what we are about," but he did not think of relinquishing the enterprise.

Fan got what she wanted, and the lad was rewarded with the succulent and savoury leg of a fowl that had probably come out of his father's farmyard.

"Now," said Fan, "you shall have more tomorrow if you will bring me an envelope and a postage stamp."

"I'll do it," said the young glutton; and as good as his word.

Fan's letter was scrawled in trepidation and secrecy.

"Dear Kevin,—I am not dead. I know you will be looking for me as if I was the princess. I am not in a lighthouse. I am in England. The gipsies took me and we are always going about. If you keep walking on the road you will be sure to meet us.—FAN."

The envelope being addressed as well as she was able to do it, the letter was delivered with great care to her friend; and Fan returned to her dancing with glee. The sequel of her little adventure was unknown to her. As the boy gnawed his bone under a hedge in the fields on his way home he was overtaken and interrupted by a gipsy who took possession of the letter. The child fled home, crying that his father's house would be burned. The father hearing that such a threat had been uttered by a girl among the gipsies immediately communicated with the police. But when the police arrived the next morning on the spot, the common was deserted, the gipsies were gone.

After this Fan's hopes ran high; but as weeks passed on and the berries vanished from the hedges, the pleasant excitement began to ebb away. Even perpetual wandering and movement could no longer amuse her into forgetfulness; and the poor little heart grew chill as the wintry wind grew keen. The novelty of the life was gone, the school-crowd of children at the gate was staying. She would watch and see. Perhaps some day the big sister would come out and recognize her, waiting there so patiently, and say, "Lo, Minnie Belle! Come on here now and behave yourself!" It was what she had heard other big sisters say, straightening a hair ribbon importantly or buttoning up the smaller child's coat with a care-fulness that somehow made Minnie Belle feel infinitely lonely. Even to have a big sister to scold her would be something, thought Minnie Belle. Mrs. Crossen sighed again as the child gave her a brief "g'bye," still without turning, and all the

way home the small, pathetic figure haunted her, watching so wistfully for the big sister who would never come. She wondered who the child was, and if the Ransomes had adopted her. She was neatly dressed and looked well nourished. No doubt she was well cared for. It was foolish, Mrs. Crossen told herself, to worry about anyone in whom the Ransomes were interested. They were wealthy and reputed to be very charitable. Nevertheless she did think about her often, and once again as she drove by in her car she glimpsed the small form at the corner of the academy grounds, watching, and watching.

Another day she found herself walking again merely to see if the child were there. The little one seemed to remember her and was a little more communicative.

Yes her name was Minnie Belle. She was four. She liked candy. She accepted the offering with a smile, but the strange lady really held only the smallest portion of her attention. Her eyes were on the girl.

"Won't you open the candy and have some?" the strange lady asked.

"Minnie Belle thrust the box into her hand. "You open it," she insinuated gently. "Give Minnie Belle choc'let." As for herself she pressed her face more closely against the palms of her hands at that moment there was something more vital than even chocolates.

Almost in spite of herself, for it wronged Mrs. Crossen's heart with the old unbearable pain to see the children, she found herself passing the academy oftener and oftener and stopping to talk with the watching child, who never seemed to miss a day. Gradually she won the little girl's confidence and, sometimes when the children had all disappeared, she would yield her hand to Mrs. Crossen and allow herself to be escorted to the Ransome gate.

Her very smile was restrained as though unused to play about the small features, and a wistful dignity in her childish figure. There was something about her that tore at Mrs. Crossen's heart.

"What of that child at the Ransomes?" she asked a friend one day. "Is she a relative, and have they adopted her?"

"Oh, I don't think so," was the reply. "She's from the Children's Home, I believe. They had her and a couple of others for Christmas, and she got sick. They got a nurse for her and gave her every care, of course. They don't seem to be particularly fond of her, for neither of them really cares for children, but they just let her stay on because they do want to be good to her, and then she's such a little mouse, they hardly know she's in the house."

"A lonely little mouse, I'm afraid," was Mrs. Crossen's comment.

"Oh, I don't know," indifferently. "Children are happy playing around with dolls and things."

Mrs. Crossen wondered if the Ransomes intended to keep the child, but she did not wish to ask. It might indicate an interest which she was not exactly sure she herself wished either to display or foster. There was no doubt the little girl made a strong appeal to her, but this might be attributed to her own condition of loneliness and sadness. She felt sorry for the child, she experienced a desire to dispel the unchildlike gravity of the sober little face, but she harbored no wish to take her herself, even if the Ransomes should not keep her. In fact, she shrank away from the mere thought. No, no! Her heart was dead, her affections bruised and broken. What could she do for a child, she whose heart was in the grave with her dear ones? Besides, she was in travelling, and she could not hamper herself with a child, who was, after all, in good hands.

It was a bright spring day when Mrs. Crossen told Minnie Belle that she was going away. The children had all dispersed and the child was just leaving her place at the fence. She ran to Mrs. Crossen, slipping her little hand confidently into that of the tall lady whom she had come to love. She had brought the child a doll and a box of candy, and she watched with a curious mixture of pleasure and pain Minnie Belle's quiet delight in the pretty doll. She lifted it out of the box and clasping it close in her two little arms, looked up at the giver with shining eyes.

"My dolly!" she murmured, hugging it close. "My dolly. My dolly."

A choke came into Mrs. Crossen's throat. "You like her, don't you?" she asked. "I'll have to bring you another one when I come back."

The child tore her entranced eyes from the doll and looked up doubtfully. Another one? She was not sure there was room in her heart for another one, this one so filled up every nook and cranny of her starved little being. It was her first doll, for it so happened that Mrs. Ransome did not hold with make-believes, and the joy was somewhat bewildering.

"Tomorrow" she asked with her slow baby lip.

"No, not tomorrow. I'm going away, dear, and I can't come to see Minnie Belle for a long time."

The child seemed to catch some of the finality in the "long time,"

and the delight in her new possession faded a little. Her hold on the doll relaxed and the old absent-widfulness came into her gaze. Did people always go away, and leave Minnie Belle? She remembered the day her mother had called her to the bed and had told her she was going away. She had kissed Minnie Belle and cried and told her to be a good girl always and to pray for mother and father every night. Father, it appeared, had gone away, too. Minnie Belle did not remember him. Maybe, her small mind struggled on, maybe everybody went away.

The strange lady on whom she had fixed lately the hidden affections of her lonely little heart now spoke cheerfully.

"You mustn't forget me, will you, dear, while I'm gone?"

The child's lips quivered. "And pray for you ev'ry night?" she managed to whisper interrogatively.

Mrs. Crossen drew her into her arms and held her there. "You dear child!" she murmured. "Yes, do pray for me every night, and I'll come to see Minnie Belle as soon as I come home."

The child watched her until she disappeared around the corner, the old, empty, lonely feeling stealing back into her heart. Minnie Belle would never see the kind lady again. Here she began to cry, not loudly as children do, but quietly in a piteous, unchildlike way, the tears dropping down on the pink cheeks and bright hair of the doll still cradled in her arms. Soon her gaze fell on the new treasure and her nervous little sobs grew less. Here was something to love, anyhow, not very responsive, it is true, but dear, and lovely, and her own.

"Dolly, dolly," she breathed between sobs as she trotted soberly toward the Ransome gate, "my dolly—my dolly!"

Mrs. Crossen went away in May, and it was September before she returned. The wistful figure of Minnie Belle had become somewhat dimmed in her mind, and it was two or three weeks before it occurred to her to drive by the academy and see if the child was still watching for her "big sister." She wanted to see her anyhow—she had promised her another doll. But there was no Minnie Belle at the corner, no wistful eyes yearning toward the bright stream of girlish figures rushing out through the tall gate. She stopped the car and called to one of the children who ran over eagerly.

"Where's the little girl who used to stand here every day watching the children?" she asked.

"Do you mean Minnie Belle? Oh, she's gone back to the Children's Home," answered the girl. "The Ransomes went away, traveling, and they sent Minnie Belle back."

Well, of all the selfish things to do, thought Mrs. Crossen, resentfully, as she drove away. To keep the child as long as it suited their own convenience, and then when they wanted to go away to decline any further responsibility and send her back to the Home!

Here a salutary reminder checked Mrs. Crossen. Was not that what she had done herself—gone away and evaded the distinct appeal which the child's lonely little figure had made to her? Gone away deliberately because she wished selfishly to forget the appeal and to escape from her heart the yearning that it was beginning to entertain.

"Oh!" she groaned, remorsefully. "I have no right to blame the Ransomes. They probably did all they intended to do, but I—I—was false to the poor little thing's affection—to my own best instincts."

It was still early, and following a sudden impulse Mrs. Crossen drove out to the Home. The sound of children's voices raised in play reached her as she guided her car up the drive, and as she stopped two children came slowly around the corner of the house, hand in hand. One was a slender girl of about twelve, and the other tot, clasping a doll in her arms was none other than Minnie Belle. As soon as she saw her Mrs. Crossen knew exactly what she intended to do.

"Well, Minnie Belle," she cried gaily, "here you are and I'm just looking for you! Have you forgotten me?"

The child's eyes widened for a moment, she stared unbelievably, and then she ran to Mrs. Crossen and was folded closely in her arms. Minnie Belle clung to her convulsively, as though she never wished to let her go. Tears of remorse and a curious new gratitude filled the woman's eyes.

"You're glad to see me, aren't you, dear?" Then as the child nodded mutely: "Would you like to come home with me and stay always and be my little girl? Would you, Minnie Belle?"

"Oh, yes!" said the little child from her safe shelter. Then she drew away and looked at her little friend who had been watching the scene interestedly and a shadow crossed her face. Here was herself or given to the lonely child the tenderness for which she had always yearned. Did it mean that Minnie Belle must leave now? Slow tears formed and began to roll down her cheeks. Truly for one small mite the strange problems of a strange life were proving too much.

"What is it, dear?" Mrs. Crossen asked, as the child raised piteous tear-filled eyes, at the same time

away from her companions became daily and vividly present to her mind. Yet she behaved with prudence. Nothing is more catching for a child than distrust, and though candid by nature, Fan was in a fair way to pick up the cleverness of cunning.

As the days grew shorter the quarrelling of the gipsy women increased. Even the slight confinement between canvas boundaries made necessary by the hours of darkness disagreed with their liberty-loving tempers, and loud voices rang fiercely from tent to tent from twilight until far in the night. Wild scenes sometimes took place around the fire in the open air, and on these occasions Fan was almost driven out of her senses with fright.

They were now encamped near a thick wood, and even the presence of this wood was a trouble to Fan. It surrounded them on every side but one, and it loomed upon them in the darkness after nightfall, making a fitting background for unholy firelit warfare. Fan's fairy lore supplied her imagination with troops of wolves that, even as he piped, kept fluttering one by one to the earth. Fan was glad and hopeful moving through the invigorating air, and her heart beat high with expectation as she pressed forward between the berried hedges.

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"No, not tomorrow. I'm going away, dear, and I can't come to see Minnie Belle for a long time."

The child seemed to catch some of the finality in the "long time,"

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