

THE WILD BIRDS OF KILLEEVY

BY ROSA MULHOLLAND (LADY GILBERT)

CHAPTER IV—CONTINUED

"Twas I that brought her here," said Fan softly. "I must try and bring her back..."

"Don't touch me, Judy, till I tell you," she said, and managed to squeeze herself securely on to the narrow resting place beside the terrified child.

"You must just go home and tell Kevin," cried Fan, "and then you'll see whether he is stupid or not."

"But can you hold on till he comes?" shrieked Mary.

"I'll try," shouted Fan; "only be sure to make haste."

The children set off as fast as their little feet could carry them, each trying to outrun the other.

In the meantime, Fan held on bravely to her lonely perch. Her attitude was a painful one, but she knew that if she could keep from trying to change it she should be safe.

"O God!" she whispered, "I will go to heaven if you like; but I would rather stay in this world a little longer."

And later on, when endurance was becoming difficult, and dizziness was beginning to take possession of her, she moaned, "Oh, my God, wait till I say good-by to Kevin!"

A few minutes afterwards she heard Kevin's voice calling to her from the crags overhead.

"I am throwing you a rope," he shouted, "a rope with a strong loop on it. Put the loop over your head and round your waist, and hold on to the rope."

Fan silently did as she was told, and quickly found herself by Kevin's side. He snatched her up in his arms and covered her with kisses.

"My darling!" he said. "You have nearly killed me as well as yourself."

The child nestled her head on his broad shoulder and sobbed heartily.

"I know it was very bad," she said; "I nearly killed Judy first. But I wanted to see the world; and it was such fun."

"I wanted to see the world!" echoed Kevin. "Why, Fan, are you not content with the mountain where we live? What is it that you want to see?"

"The world," said Fan; "the places in the stories. Don't you ever want to see them yourself?"

Kevin looked at her in surprise, and pondered. Did he not want to see them really; or was it only in dreams that they fascinated him?

He marched on in silence, carrying his beloved burden, and revolving Fan's words in his mind. What if he were now bound for new lands, he with Fan in his arms; the two travelling together in search of heroic tasks and an ideal life, somewhere in the regions of story and song? The thought was new and puzzled him.

What should he do in those new lands, he who was thought so little of here? And how could he turn his back upon the old people? And yet his heart stirred strangely as the idea lingered with him.

"What put such a thought in your head, Fan?" he said.

"You put it there," said Fan. "Your stories put it there."

"But it is you who bring the stories into my head," said Kevin. "So it must have come from yourself in the beginning."

"No, it couldn't," said Fan. "It is your singing that brings me the stories."

"I only sing of the things I see all around me; and then you turn them into stories about things that I never saw."

Kevin pondered again as he strode along.

"Then there is something in your voice that you don't know about," he said, at last; "for the thoughts all come to me from you."

"And I don't know what I sing about till you tell me," said Fan. "So I think we must somehow be the same."

The same. Kevin's heart thrilled with joy at the simple words, and he kissed the little brown hand that lay on his shoulder.

"Yes," said the child, "I know you love you better than anything in the world."

"Yes," said the child. "And it will always be the same as long as I live."

"I am not going to stop," said Fan. "I love you, Kevin, for there is no one so good to me."

"I want to be good to you, and I shall always want. And you won't run away from me, out into the world?"

"Oh, no," said Fan, earnestly. "If I went away out to the world, I'd like you to be holding me by the hand all the way."

CHAPTER V A SONG OF THE SEA

"I never seen a child so improved," said Kevin's mother.

"She's downright giving up her wild ways. I'm beginning to hope she'll turn out a proper hard-working girl yet."

It was Saturday evening, and Kevin laid the spade and other emblems of labour in the corner of the outhouse and came in for his evening meal, the tea and hot bannocks with which his frugal mother regaled him on the eve of the day of rest.

She shifted a needle in the stocking she was knitting as she spoke, and pointed to Fan, who, mounted on a little wooden stool, was up to the elbows in flour, as she made ready the last batch of cakes for the griddle.

"She's able to do all that for me now," said the strong, hard-featured housewife, with a quizzical look in her kind, shrewd eyes.

"There'll be no need of an old woman about the house after this. She is taking all into her own hands."

"I made the tea, too," said Fan, looking up at Kevin for approval.

"At least I can't pour in the boiling water, but I did all the rest. And she deposited her last cakes on the griddle and touched up the little bits of red turf ember that were keeping the teapot warm."

Then she began tugging out a table from the wall, but this Kevin took out of her hands.

"We mustn't allow you to kill yourself with hard work," he said, laughing.

"But you must let me set out the tea-things."

"Well, run away and wash your hands, and we'll see."

"She's that changed I wouldn't know her eyes since she gave you the fright," said Kevin's mother when the child had vanished up the little ladder-like stairs to her own particular nest under the thatch.

"I couldn't ha' thought a child would have taken it so much to heart. The tears come into her eyes whenever she thinks of it."

"Mother," she said to me the other evening, quite sudden, 'he did look so sorry. If I had been killed, he would have been too sorry.'"

"Kevin," she said to her, "I will never do it again," she said, as serious as an old woman. "And tell me, she says, 'what I can do to make him happy.'"

"I just looked up at her, sitting there with her eyes as big as tea-saucers, and she thinkin' and thinkin' all over, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot."

"Well, I said, for I couldn't help humourin' the seriousness of her, 'you must give up a bit of your wildness, and not be hopplin' and skippin' so much about dangerous places; and you mustn't go rovin' so far away from home, pretendin' to be a bird and singin' unairthly songs; for you haven't got any wings when your two feet fail you, and it'll be time enough to be a bird when the wings begin to grow.'"

"Mother," said Kevin, "you couldn't be so cross to her."

"Couldn't I? And she didn't take it for crossness. But she says 'I'll try,' with her eyes lookin' straight at mine as if they were askin' something more nor I could well understand. 'But you don't know how my feet do keep dancing,' she says, 'and how hard it is to stop them, and to keep from singing.' 'I don't want to keep you from singing, my dear,' I said, 'only I would rather hear you oftener at your hymns. And if you want to make Kevin happy—' I do, said she. 'Well then, I says, 'I'll show you how to work for him, to make his supper, and knit his stockings, and I declare she set to like lightning, and she learned more in one week than most children would do in a year.'"

At this point down came the little girl again in her Saturday evening attire, a clean print wrapper reaching half-way down over her crimson petticoat, grey stockings and well-black shoes. Her thick hair was brushed smoothly into a darkling mass upon her shoulders, leaving a short curly undergrowth to cluster about her temples; her brunette cheeks were glowing after a scrubbing, and the grey eyes which were the charm of her young face shone with the consciousness that she was a good girl at last.

She brought in her arms a coarse white cloth which she spread on the table, and on which she arranged the cups and plates, buttered her bannocks with fresh sweet butter, well-smoked butter, and finally filled the tea-cups, with a little assistance from Kevin.

"She'll do yet," murmured the mother, sitting up in state and allowing herself to be helped like a visitor. "Maury needn't ha' been so uneasy about her, nor Connor neither."

When tea was over, Fan brought her stool to the good housewife's knee and produced the beginning of a stocking, over which she bent her brows, glancing up now and again to see the effect of her good conduct upon Kevin, who sat watching her with all the interest her heart could desire.

"Oh, Kevin! I wish your foot wasn't so big. I'll never get down to the heel."

"Put it away, and sing us the Ave Maria," said the mother; and the child gladly obeyed, folding her hands and fixing her eyes dreamily on a large bright star that was shining through the doorway.

The sweet, clear refrain rang and fell as the twilight deepened, and the soft Gaelic words seemed to grow holier every time they were uttered, intoned in notes of such power and fullness as made the listeners gaze in astonishment at the little creature who gave them forth.

Kevin walked to the door before it was done and drew the back of his brown hand across his eyes.

"Fan," said he, after a silence of some minutes, "there will be a holiday next week, and I will take you to the island."

Fan's eyes suddenly burned with delight, and flinging her knitting into the corner, she threw up her arms and danced across the floor.

"Well, well, well!" said the mother, "but she's as wild as a hare yet."

"I'll knit six rows every day until then," sang Fan, "and when I get to the island I may do what I like. I'll earn my wildness, and then nobody must scold me."

An hour later, when Fancha was fast asleep, with her small hands crossed on her breast, as Maury had taught her to place them, and when the mother had taken her knitting into the next cottage for a chat with a neighbor, Kevin followed a winding path up-hill and knocked at Father Ulick's door.

The old priest looked surprised to see him.

"No one ill at home, Kevin, I hope?" he said.

"No," said the youth; "no, thank God. And then, after a struggle to shake off his shyness, he made his business known."

"I've come to ask you to help me, sir. You know I was always stupid at my books at school, and now I keep wishing that I had learned more than I did. I can't go to school for the people would laugh. I have got such a name upon me. You know it yourself, sir."

"Ay, Kevin, they say you are dull."

"Yes, sir, I read very badly. Long ago I did not care. The little bits I got to read were all about nothing, and I liked better to be looking at the stars and the sea. But lately I've been longing to read fast and well. There are things I want to know about that I can only find in books."

The old man took off his spectacles, and shifted the turf sods on his primitive hearth; and then he looked up at the youth's kindling face, all flushed and excited with the effort he had made to give forth so much of his confidence.

"You are a good fellow, Kevin," he said, "to come and talk to me like this. But why are you so anxious to know the things that are in books?"

"I do not know, sir. I think I should be happier."

Father Ulick looked at him again and mused. Strange that this lad, who was looked on as the dullest on the mountain, should have suddenly been seized with a thirst for knowledge. Was it a freak that would pass away? Had the desire been roused in him by wounded pride; or was this the tardy awakening of some natural gift? The priest was puzzled and interested.

"Let us see, Kevin," he said. "There is the night school, of course."

"I could not, sir, indeed, I could not bear it."

"Well, we must think of what we can do. Suppose you come to read to me here of an evening."

Kevin's face blazed with pleasure.

"Oh, sir, you are so good. There is nothing I would like so well."

"Come tomorrow night, then. But before you go, my boy, let me talk to you a little. How is it that you speak so much better English, have a better accent, and are altogether more refined than most of the young men about the place, even than those who consider themselves better scholars?"

Kevin blushed up to the roots of his hair at the compliment, which took him completely by surprise.

"I do not know, sir; unless it may be talking to Fan, sir," he said, simply.

"Talking to little Fan!" "She is different from all the rest, sir, her voice is so like an angel's, and her words are so soft and fine. I don't know how to describe it, but nobody could be very rough, sir, who is always with her."

Father Ulick smiled an indulgent smile as he thought of little Fancha.

"Ah," he said, "I forgot about that wonderful friendship. She is, indeed, an uncommon little creature. And so she already repays you for your protection of her?"

"Sir, it is I—"

"Ah, well, cherish that holy and beautiful affection. The love of a child is a message from God."

Then Kevin went away, and as he walked down the hill again he thought of how he had been nearly led into trying to tell Father Ulick of all his thoughts about Fancha. And it was better he had not attempted it. Probably the good old man would have told him they were wild, exaggerated, and even superstitious. Such as they might be they were to him as his life; and it was better he should share them with no one. Looking back over his shoulder he saw Father Ulick still standing in his doorway, his white hair gleaming in the starlight. The old man was looking after the youth with some wonder and much interest in his heart.

"What a frank, handsome face the lad has," he thought, "and what a thrill in his voice when he speaks of that little creature. They are a very unusual pair, and I cannot but think that Providence has some purpose in their friendship. If the Lord should spare me I will be curious to see what comes of it."

serenely. "Why, some chap thought so much of my seeing Nellie home that he wrote a song about it years ago—just to save me the trouble!"

"Too bad," murmured John. "You could have done it so much better if he had only let it alone!"

A sofa pillow followed at that, which Mrs. Collins promptly rescued. In a few moments more the boys had gone off to their room and Rosalie, the pretty 16-year-old daughter, took up the needlework she was finishing for a Christmas gift. Maurice Collins, sr., leaning back in his capacious chair, stared thoughtfully into the open fire. His wife, on a hassock at his feet, put her hand across his fingers.

"What's the trouble, Maurice?" she asked. "Anything you can talk about?"

"Oh, yes," he said, and sighed. "I—I didn't go to confession tonight, Rose."

"I meant to. But I met Gilbert—coming out."

"Oh, Maurice!" "There was a note, almost of pain, in her voice."

"Yes. And then—somehow—I couldn't. His head dropped forward on his hand. 'I've never had any qualms of conscience where he is concerned—I've settled all that to my own satisfaction. But tonight he looked at me so... I can't describe it, Rose. It was an appealing look... it brought back the days when we were home... and I thought of Maurice and John here—our own—and wondered if ever they would meet as we two did...'"

His voice trailed off into silence. Her fingers tightened about his and she, too, looked into the heart of the fire, her sweet face saddened.

"Is there anything you'd like me to do, Maurice?" she asked.

"Christmas is but four days away from... and the children can call on him? He's so alone... so... well, I think he must be so unhappy."

"She felt the quiver in the fingers under her own."

"I hope he is, Rose," said Maurice Collins, quietly. "I hope from the bottom of my heart that he is unhappy."

"It's an awful thing to say—at Christmas time," she whispered.

"At any time," he amended. "Do you blame me?"

"Oh, no, no, dear. I don't blame you, I don't blame you." Again the note of pain in her voice.

"Maurice, we were so happy. I wish you had not seen him."

"It has unnerved me," he said. "I seldom think of him—I try not to. And to meet him in that way brought up the old feeling. And remembrance of the past... of father, fretting and worrying over him... When he went to jail for forgery that second time, you recall?—it was the end of both father and mother."

"Oh, Maurice, I don't wonder," said Rose, shuddering. "If a thing like that were to happen to Maurice and John... And your father was so wrapped up in Gilbert—"

"Clever, talented... he could have made anything of himself. I've always been glad that our two are just ordinarily bright—I've seen the working out of one genius. He spoke bitterly, and she knew he was suffering. 'Gilbert was always erratic and queer—but his future is safe—poor father saw to that. He'll never actually want for anything.'"

He hesitated. Unpleasant memories had returned, were smarting. He was looking again into his father's sorrowful face when the jail door closed upon his beloved boy. "No use, Maurice," he had said. "No use, no use." And he was kneeling at his mother's bedside, hearing her broken pleadings.

"Oh, if Gilbert were here! If Gilbert were only here!" A deep sigh burst from him, and at the sound the young girl put down her needle and came forward, seating herself on the arm of his chair.

"What is it, dad?" she whispered gently. And then as she kissed him "Is it Uncle Gilbert?"

For an instant neither father nor mother answered her. Then he nodded, briefly.

"Yes, Rosalie. I met him tonight as I was going into church. I couldn't bear it, somehow."

"Poor dad." She touched his hair with her soft hand. "I met him, too, several days ago. And spoke to him."

"You met him, Rosalie—and spoke to him?" It was the mother who turned an astonished face upward.

"Yes," said the girl, thoughtfully. "I've always been thankful there has been nothing hid in this family. You see if I didn't know how you and dad felt about Uncle Gilbert, well... Maybe I'd want to act as his champion."

The father shrugged his shoulders.

"If you care to, Rosalie," he said. "She doesn't understand," said the mother. "Don't mind her."

"But I do," said the girl. "Father," she began seriously, "will it hurt you if I say I think I understand better than you do? Perhaps you and mother are too near to it. Can't a man be so sorry that his whole life expresses regret? That's what Uncle Gilbert looks like to me."

"Rosalie," said Maurice Collins, gently, "do you think you have a good father and mother?"

"The best in the world," said the girl. "I had better than the best, then," he returned. "My father and mother were very poor people. They had no education. My mother worked hard—for other people as

well as herself. My father was a day-laborer. And they had a troubled life, Rosalie. Four of my brothers and sisters died. Gilbert and I were the youngest—Gilbert younger than I. Oh, how they denied themselves everything so that we might have what they never had!" His voice trembled. "My father and mother worked the very flesh from their bones to help give my children this beautiful home, Rosalie. For this home was made possible only through their sacrifices in fitting me to fight the world and win my way."

"Father, father!" murmured the girl. There were tears in her eyes.

"Some time I begrudge myself the easy going, even if I do work for it," he continued, "when I remember. They never knew comfort, because when they could have had it, Gilbert—"

He could not go on. He arose abruptly from the chair and would have gone away from them. But the girl detained him.

"Father," she said, gravely, "just one thing—please let me say it. Supposing you were Uncle Gilbert—and felt all this?"

"She released his arm, then, and he went away without looking at her. The mother shook her head.

"Rosalie, darling," she said, "your father will have a sleepless night. You can't know, dear, his state of mind... about this."

"But supposing he were Uncle Gilbert," persisted the girl. "And how do you know but that he loves him as dearly as ever he did, only this idea—"

"Don't call it an idea," said the mother, and her voice broke. "I've suffered with him and I know. Every man worth the name loves his father and mother, but he saw them—the best, as he calls them—shamed and broken. He can't get that out. If he could he might let Gilbert in."

"Nevertheless, mother," said the girl stubbornly, "I must put myself in Uncle Gilbert's place. Our Blessed Mother's heart was broken at the foot of the Cross—but did you ever think how the mother of Judas felt? I'm sure Uncle Gilbert's father and mother have forgiven him, and dad could, too, if he'd just make up his mind."

"It's not a question of forgiveness, Rosalie," said the mother, patiently. "Why should your father torment himself further?"

"Well, I only hope that something will happen to make father open his heart to Uncle Gilbert once more, and before Christmas."

"As well ask the earth to stand still."

"That can happen," argued Rosalie. "I guess God can do just as He likes with the earth."

"Well," said the mother. "There was no answer to this."

"You've got to pray harder—have you been praying, mother?"

Mrs. Collins looked dismayed.

"Selfishly, perhaps, Rosalie. I've prayed that your father might... forget. And that he might not be so unhappy. But I've never prayed for a reconciliation—in fact I couldn't see how it was possible, dear."

"I think Uncle Gilbert is praying for it with all his heart." The girl turned an eager face on her mother.

"In fact," he told me so. And I'm praying with him. I want something to happen now to bring it about."

"Rosalie, please!" protested the mother. "Don't talk like that. A great many things could happen to make us more unhappy than the Uncle Gilbert situation."

"Nothing can unless God wants it to," was the again unanswerable retort.

The next-day was a busy one in the Collins household, and Uncle Gilbert was seemingly forgotten. The young folks were enjoying every moment of their holidays and all were ready for the much-planned skating jaunt when Mr. Collins came home from his office. Even "Nellie" was there—a saucy, piquant, blue-eyed girl, who held her own with honors when it came to pertinent answers to the Collins' jibes. She occupied the front seat of the sleigh with Maurice, while the mother, Rosalie and John fitted comfortably into the back.

"We won't be home before midnight, dad," laughed Maurice. "And there's still plenty of room for you if you feel like coming."

"No, no," said the father. "Just take care of mother and set her a good example. Avoid the danger signs."

"No danger signs tonight. Too cold," said Maurice. And the father went back to his quiet room. He looked forward to a long and pleasant evening, spent over a favorite book. Everywhere about him were evidences of the daily occupants. Rosalie's work basket; his wife's knitting; John's hockey-stick; Maurice's—yes, there were his skates! If he did not miss them before he reached the lake he'd have to hire a pair or do without.

He sat before the fire, his fingers smoothing out the pages. Good children, surely. Maurice would graduate in February and come into the business with him. And John... well... John had a few more years to cover. Rosalie... Rosalie need not bother her pretty head about the future, though he often told himself she had more brains than either of her brothers. It was not likely she'd choose an indolent life. Rosalie wasn't that type—and he wouldn't stand in her way. She was like—she was like his mother. The old line of pain formed between his eyebrows. Rosalie was

TO BE CONTINUED

NOT EXPLAINED

By Grace Koon

"And though," said the older man, his eyes hard, his face like a piece of granite, and you and I are brothers in blood, I want you to keep away from me. Every penny our father left is yours, so invested that it will bring you a decent living. I give it as his last gift to you. I leave you your inheritance—and your memories."

His listener shrugged his shoulders.

"I thank you for the first," he said, flippantly. "Thank heavens, the last are my own."

That had been ten years before. Tonight, as the door swung open, the two were face to face—and their eyes met. The one leaving the church puffed out his hand as if he would touch the other, but almost instinctively the older man recoiled. The meeting was over in a second and both went on. One to eat his heart out in regret that seemed unavailing, repentance that seemed unending.

Memories can be steps to Heaven, or lashes of a bitter penance.

When Maurice Collins went to St. Peter's he intended to go to confession—but that chance encounter with his brother, Gilbert, upset him so completely that he did not enter the box. Instead, he walked up the aisle to the altar rail in a perturbed state of mind and knelt mechanically, his lips forming a few prayers. Presently he found his rosary beads between his fingers, and also became aware of the fact that he had been kneeling a long time. He rose stiffly, genuflected, and went out, past the now deserted confessionals. The cold air struck him and he buttoned his overcoat with some difficulty.

There was laughter, and the merry voices of young folk in the living room as he let himself into the house. They were waiting to greet him—his wife, Rose, their daughter, Rosalie, and the two boys, Maurice, Jr., and John.

"Phevy, dad, there must have been a crowd tonight, you've been so long," said John.

"Or perhaps dad's been raking up all his past sins," jibed Maurice, irrepressibly, at which Maurice, sr., made a pass at him, and for a few seconds there was an exhibition of the art of deference between the two.

"Don't be silly, you boys," said Mrs. Collins. "Come over to the fire, Maurice. You must be chilled. It's bitter cold."

"That's a cause for rejoicing," said John. "The lake will be thoroughly frozen for tomorrow night; the skating will be excellent; and the snow will be ideal for sleighing and Maurice—well, Maurice can see Nellie home!" He shot a teasing glance at his brother. "If Nellie is willing! Good old winter!"

"Well," said the father, kindly, "when boys earn their play-time they should enjoy it—even to the seeing of Nellie home!" he added, banteringly, for there was always a passage of words going on between Maurice, jr., the Collins' funny man? John had dubbed him, was in the room.

"I can see you're all jealous," announced the older brother,

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