

## More lovely than a lyrebird

by Charlotte Fairbairn

With the notable exception of Celidonia, he had never seen anything or anyone more lovely. Her golden throat, her tourmaline eyes, her long, honey hair, the way she brought her hand to her mouth in one sinuous flow of her wrist, the drift of her steps, the faint perfume of white hyacinths which seemed to hang in her wake ... when she had gone, he had to ask himself whether or not he had been dreaming. When she had gone, all he could think about was how he might see her again.

He saw her at the market. He caught sight of her from behind and he had to peer through a flower-stall and another that was hanging with hams because she was at the far side of the square so there he was bent double and his neck was craned and there she was, this radiant paragon of all things lovely. Then she moved through the stalls towards his own and now he was able to admire her in detail, to bathe in the glow from her syrup-golden eyes, to revel in her gorgeous Spring aroma.

That night, when he took to his bed, he dreamt of her. He was sixty-four. He was deeply smitten.

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You would not think it but for Leopoldo, this was the first time. Never before had his heart beat faster at the sight of a woman - for until that day, Leopoldo had only ever had one passion and that was for birds. You might call him an ornithophile, an aviculturalist, an aviarist. You might say he was a bird-lover, a bird-collector, a bird-breeder but for Leopoldo it all came to the same - birds were his life. They filled his heart. Always, until that day in the market-place, he had felt sure he had no need for anything else.

No-one could recall - ask any member of his family - quite how the passion began. His mother would say it was something to do with his Great Uncle Alberto who had

always kept doves; his younger brothers would roll their eyes in horror, Pah they would say, if you asked them because they were men, serious men with muscles and responsibilities, with businesses and large families and Leopoldo with his finches was little more than a *loco*; the women in the village, they did not know, they had long since dismissed him from their minds because he had never given them so much as a passing glance, because always, for as long as they could remember, he had been the tall one, the clumsy one, the bird-boy.

Not even Leopoldo himself could remember because it had all started so long ago, when he was so young that the first moments of his passion were buried in some deep recess of memory. All he knew was that throughout his life, he had dedicated himself to the acquisition of all things bird and that, by the time he came to see the woman with tourmaline eyes, his every waking moment was consumed with thoughts of plumage, bills, nests, fledglings. Books on birds, paintings of birds, statues, models, drawings of birds - of these he had so many that his cupboards would not shut and his shelves were close to collapse. As for birds themselves, you could not move for them. He kept them in cages, he kept them in runs, the shrubs in his garden seethed with them. If you entered his house, your ears rang with the sounds of birdsong, the hairs on the back of your neck rose because here it was bird-land, here you were in the clouds or among the flocks, up a swarming tree, in among birds. To come near Leopoldo was to grasp the myth of flight, to feel the freedom bestowed by feathers, to know the words that they sang, to speak and dream and breathe and love Bird.

Perhaps, when you saw him with them, it was easier to understand the reason for his obsession. Leopoldo was tall, he had large hands, his long limbs made him clumsy - but place an injured wren or a hummingbird or a gasping thrush in his palm and co-ordination came to him, he was in his element, gentle, confident, centred. His body became whole. His hands were strong and large and in the cage of his fingers, he could enclose even a sparrow fledgling without causing it any harm. At feeding-time, all his birds would come, dance on his wrists, take the grain from his hand, from the rim of his lips, from the top of his bald pate as though it were the most natural thing in the world for tiny ruby-throated hummingbirds to eat from the hand of a two-metre Castillian giant. Had the

women been allowed to see him at these moments, perhaps they would have loved him then.

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Of all his birds, of all the linnets and finches, pipits and sparrows and thrushes and songbirds of every sort, of all his hens - from guinea-fowl to partridge, from Rhode Island Reds to plain old farmyard chickens - Leopoldo was most attached by far to Celidonia.

Celidonia was a quail. Tiny, the size of the palm of your hand with a pale fleck of chestnut over her eye, dark throat, delicate herringbone patterns curving down to her tail. Leopoldo had found her in the cage of an old woman who lived up in the hills behind the village. Someone had said *hey Leopoldo there are some birds need your help* and Leopoldo had rushed up to the hills, to the tiny cottage where the old shepherdess lived and he had seen them lying in a cage on her verandah, dying because the old woman was blind now, no longer able to tell when the birds needed water. She said there had been six of them and Leopoldo, who was almost too distraught to speak, he did not tell her that now there was just one. Instead he said to her I will help you, I will take them and care for them and he lifted the cage off its hook and he opened the door and he rescued the gasping quail, the only surviving hen, from within and he tucked the creature for warmth into the recesses of his tunic.

Back in the village, Leopoldo took one of the pipettes that he used for hand-rearing orphans and he dripped a delicate mixture of milk, water and whisky into the bird's opening beak. Then he held her in the palm of his hand, waiting until the cocktail worked its magic, waiting until some warmth reached down into the depths of her. He guessed she was young, a few weeks old, because there were still flecks of fluff around her feathers. Later that night, he lay down on the rug in front of the hearth and he rested her in the nest of his throat and she stayed there all night as he slept.

Many weeks later and by now Celidonia was healthy, she could feed herself, survive among the heaving birdy throng. Alone of Leopoldo's birds, she roamed free night and day and when he came in from buying corn or mending the cages or running his market-stall, Leopoldo would sit down in a chair and drink a long glass of cold mint tea - and she would always find him, she would always come and flutter up into his lap, perch on his shoulder, rest in the cup of his hand, so tiny and crouching and perfect.

Leopoldo found Celidonia when he was sixty years old. Maybe he thought in my old age I am becoming soft. Nevertheless he loved her as you might love a sister, he worshipped her, he treated her as a friend, not an animal and he saw in her a beauty that he did not see in his more exotic birds, in his bee-eaters or rollers, in his hummingbirds or lyrebirds or his collection of shrikes. By the time he had had her for a year or so, she came to live almost permanently inside his tunic and the villagers thought they had seen it all when every morning Leopoldo was observed walking the streets with a tiny quail peeping out of his clothes.

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Three months and one week after he first saw the woman with tourmaline eyes, sixty-four year old Leopoldo Alas saw her again. Once again, it was market day. It was the last before Easter and the market was busier than usual, the women chattering as they filled their baskets in preparation for the celebrations about to take place. Pascua! Leopoldo had almost given up hope of seeing her again. For the past months, he had scanned every single buyer, every black shawl, every drape of hair hoping that it might be her. He had taken to arriving early, Celidonia tucked neatly in his shirt, to setting up even before dawn so that he could be sure of not missing a single visitor - but still he had not seen her.

Then today, of all days, when he is at his busiest by far, she comes to his stall and she looks him in the eye with her bewitching tourmaline gaze and she asks for a willow cage, like the one he has hanging at the back. Leopoldo is bedazzled. She says and how beautiful that bird is. She says and by the way would you mind, if I pay you a little more, would you bring the cage to my house? And she writes down

her address, her long wrist draping across the front of his stall and Leopoldo can scarcely count out her change because his hands are trembling so much and his heart thumping so loud in his chest. Later that afternoon, Leopoldo packs up his stall an hour, two hours earlier than normal. He makes his way home, he runs through to his bedroom, he sits down on the bed in front of his tiny mirror, he brushes the finches out of his hair, he runs his fingers along the lines that have grooved into his cheeks, sharp like plough-lines. He places Celidonia on the bed beside him. He says to her I am an old fool, he changes his shirt and soon he, his quail, the new willow-cage are on their way to the widow's house on the corner of the Church square and the road that leads up to the hills.

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Many years later, when Leopoldo is sitting out on his verandah under the canopy of twigs, nests, flowers that brings his old eyes shade from the sun and the heat, he thinks back upon those visits to her house. Remembers the big black door, the growing intoxication of the hyacinth scent as you approached the courtyard, the sound of heat and silence, the smells of a life that had been and gone. Leopoldo on that first 'date' as he dared to think of it did not have the courage to state his feelings out loud. Indeed all at once he did not have the courage to enter the house at all for at 64, he suddenly felt too old for this game. He left the willow cage upon the door-step, he wrapped his hand around Celidonia's warmth, he withdrew and walked home cursing himself for being an *idiota*.

But that night, Leopoldo dreamt of her again - with her tourmaline gaze and the soft wrap of her dark veils. She seemed to be calling him. She liked birds, he knew that. She seemed to be talking to him in a language he understood and the next day, Leopoldo could scarcely wait, he called again and though he did not knock or even go further than the courtyard gate, he left a note written on amber-coloured vellum in which he poured out all his feelings, in which he extolled her beauty, her virtue, their destiny together.

Leopoldo remembered how the torrent of his letters grew, how they became increasingly passionate, how he told her of his life, of his birds, how he talked

about the heat and the mountains, the village and the market-stalls and all the while there came no reply, not one hint that any of his words had been noticed. For months, his correspondence continued. Leopoldo's life was thrown into a certain disarray. His visits to the market became sporadic and for one continuous week - the only time in his life - he forgot to feed the hens. As his passion reached its apogee, he even forgot to shut up the finches and once (but only once) he closed his bedroom door without first bringing Celidonia to sleep on his chest.

At last, courage got the better of Leopoldo. It was the eve of his 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and he was desperately anxious to know whether or not the widow returned his love. It was months since he had seen her - in fact, he had never seen her again since that last time when she ordered a willow-cage. Leopoldo put on his best shirt, drank a large measure of the whisky he saved for his ailing birds, took out his stick, popped Celidonia into the V of his buttons and marched off up towards the Church square. This time he dared to knock. When she opened the door, he could see she had been crying. Her hair was in a tangle and her eyes, though still tourmaline green in the centre, were red-rimmed. Her dress was dishevelled and though he guessed her only thirty-five, she looked on that evening closer to his own age. Leopoldo was struck with pain. He had meant it to be a meeting of minds, a gentle soft encounter. He had meant to take her long hands in his and tell to her face all the things he had dared to write in his notes. He had meant if he could to exact a confession from her, to make her see somehow that theirs was a love that was destined to be - and now all he had done was invade her privacy at the worst of moments. Leopoldo begged her pardon. He said I am so dreadfully sorry to intrude.

After that, the situation remained for a while at stalemate. The widow continued to ignore his letters and Leopoldo continued to confess his love to her on amber-coloured vellum. Timid now to visit her lest he disturb her grief again, Leopoldo could only contemplate his passion from afar. It drove him crazy - but what else was there to do? He took solace in his birds. He would walk for hours in the hills, through the lanes, down the long flat plain that reached out behind his house, Celidonia against his chest. He would go and sit in the cages, talk to the linnets, listen to the marvellous call of the skylark, watch the extraordinary displays of the

lyrebirds. He would run his fingers down the feathers. He would let the cockatiels peck his ears, the barn owls eat from his hands, the wagtails bob up and down over the cool of his naked toes. Gradually through worry and thwarted love, Leopoldo became ill. He had palpitations.

Finally one day, Leopoldo went to the doctor - his heart had been troubling him, he said. The doctor was sympathetic. He took some readings but everything sounded fine. He said you have any problems in your life? He said you wish to discuss them at all, any time, you come and see me. With such little prompting, Leopoldo told the doctor everything - about his love for the widow, about the letters, about the one unhappy visit to her house - and the doctor who by that time had four wives to his credit gave him the benefit of his advice. He said if you truly love her, you must show her you mean it, Leopoldo. He said if you truly love her, you must give her something you would never give to anyone else.

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So now we come to a Saturday evening, the eve of the day of Santa Teresa de Avila. The heat is intense and the ring of the crickets sits long on the sultry sundown air. Tonight, there has been a magnificent sunset - the colours have been red, scarlet, purple, black in a glorious, brilliant millefeuille. Leopoldo is getting dressed. Normally at this time he would be feeding, calling, ushering birds here and there throughout his garden - but Leopoldo instead is preoccupied with his wardrobe. He has a new shirt which he bought from the market - in the buttonhole, he sports a freesia which also came from the market. He has a whiff of mimosa about his person and all in all you would be hard-pressed to say that Leopoldo did not look younger than his 65 years. Celidonia, she too is part of Leopoldo's wardrobe - perched in the V of his buttons, today she too smelling slightly of mimosa.

Leopoldo gathers his stick, picks up his dreams, his courage, his heart, walks out into the brilliant array of the sky, makes for the courtyard and the big black door.

He stands on the doorstep. She opens the door and bids him come in but he stands on the doorstep, then he fumbles for a moment, rifling in the front of his shirt. She says do come in Leopoldo there is something I have been meaning to discuss with you and she is looking at her hands because she is nervous about what she has to say so she does not observe as Leopoldo lifts Celidonia from his shirt, as he cups her in the nest of his hands, as he goes to pass his beloved bird over to the widow. He says *have this as a token of my love*, he says, *take my Celidonia as a token of my love* - and his words blend into the winds, into the hot red air and all the while, the widow is whispering in return *It is time for all this to end*.

And their words, the words of the bird-man, quail in hand, uttering one last homily; and the words of the widow, tourmaline-eyes, tired of being besieged by a man almost twice her age when still she is grieving for the last; these words, they drift into the hot night sky, they merge with the clouds and the swarming currents, they blow back down to the courtyard and they lift up the wings of Celidonia, lift her up - and she flies away, Leopoldo's quail, out of the V of his buttons and up over the courtyard wall, away beyond the square to the hills above. She flies away.

And while the widow shrugs and closes the door, Leopoldo stands with his hands in prayer and says to the God above, to the saints of all things bird, to Santa Teresa de Avila herself, he cries out to the winds and the wings of his departing friend *She was the loveliest thing I ever saw, I swear to God, more lovely than a lyrebird*.