

The Late Mrs. Fowke

By Amyas Northcote

The Reverend Barnabas Fowke, though he live to reach a century, will never forget the death-bed of his wife. Most widowers can probably say the same thing; though few, it may be hoped, have similar cause to recollect it.

Mr. Fowke, at the time of the event referred to, was a man of middle age, and the incumbent of G., a small agricultural town on the edge of one of our Northern moors. He was a hard-working, honest parson, of no great strength of character and of no particular ability, nor had he had any special experience with the more subtle side of life. He had been educated at a good second class public school and a small Oxford College, whence he had gone in due course to take up a curacy in one of our lesser manufacturing towns.

After serving some years in this capacity, he had been promoted, on the death of the Vicar, to take charge of the living, in which position he had remained till a few weeks before his marriage to Stella Farnleigh, at whose instigation he had exchanged his town living at R. for the country one at G. which he still occupied at the time of this story. The reverend gentleman's history is thus commonplace and uninteresting, as, I fear, are the histories of many of our clergy, which it resembled save that, unlike most of his cloth, he had remained unmarried till he fell a victim at the age of forty to the charms of Miss Stehla Farnleigh.

This lady requires a closer study. She was the only child of a certain Mr. Farnleigh, who for many years was a merchant of and acted as British Consul in Z., a town in Hungary, where by hard work and close attention to business he amassed a fair-sized fortune. Somewhat late in life he had met a beautiful and attractive woman, whose nationality even was uncertain, but who boasted of a considerable admixture of gipsy blood in her veins. Exactly who she was or where she came from is at this distance of time impossible to ascertain. At the time she met Mr. Farnleigh she was giving music lessons, by which she gained a small pittance, and her marriage to the well-to-do English merchant may well be considered a very fortunate event for her.

However, her married life did not last long, for Mr. Farnleigh died very suddenly within six months of the wedding day, leaving his widow his sole executrix and legatee. It is not known whether Mrs. Farnleigh had any relatives; if she had she never kept up any connection with them, and after her husband's death she acquired a small and lonely estate on the banks of the River Theiss and removed thither to dwell in complete retirement. Here in due course Stella was born and here the child lived with her mother until about the age of twenty-five, when Mrs. Farnleigh died, leaving her fortune entirely to the girl.

The latter at first appeared to be inclined to remain on in her old home, but it would seem as if neither she nor her mother had been popular in the district, and apparently some pretty strong hints were conveyed to the young lady that she had best betake herself elsewhere. Mr. Fowke knew nothing of all this at the time he married Stehla, and for reasons which will transpire he did not care to make any investigations into the matter later on. Therefore the history of mother and daughter in Hungary and the reasons why the latter left that country are buried in an obscurity which will never be lightened. Whatever they may have been, Stella no doubt felt that it would be difficult for her to settle down by herself in any new country, and she accordingly put herself into communication with the only relative she knew herself possessed of, a Miss Farnleigh, the elderly sister of her father, with a view to taking up her abode with her as a paying guest.

The elder Miss Farnleigh was a poor woman, living in solitude at R. She was a worthy soul, narrow-minded, unintelligent, devoted to clergymen and church work; in fact, an absolute type of thousands of middle-aged, middle-class English spinsters. The proposal of her niece, whom she had never seen and with whom she had but rarely corresponded, was a welcome one, as the young lady would certainly provide some much needed cash for the household, and would probably, as she fondly believed, provide a pleasant companion for herself also. Besides, she was sorry for the orphaned girl, and altogether it was with pleasure she made the preliminary arrangements and welcomed the arrival of the traveller.

However, these high hopes were doomed to disappointment. Stella and her aunt quickly found that they were uncongenial in nearly every respect. Miss Farnleigh I have described, and when I say that Stella was a young woman of considerable though rather peculiar literary accomplishments, and that she had a strong will which she frequently exercised in the pursuit of some highly unconventional purpose, I think it will be clear why the two ladies did not agree together. Stella had brought with her from Hungary a considerable library of foreign books, none of which her aunt could understand, but which actually dealt largely with occult subjects, and she also brought with her a habit of going away alone every few weeks for a night on the moors not far from R., a custom which she said she found necessary for her health and happiness. To these occasional expeditions Miss Farnleigh at first took great exception, but after a stormy scene with her niece the elder lady felt herself worsted and, as she had ceased to take any affectionate interest in the younger woman, she also ceased to care greatly as to what she did or thought. Stella, therefore, went on her own way undisturbed but conscious of perpetual criticism, and no doubt was eager to escape from an atmosphere so uncongenial to her. At the same time she realized the conventions that bound her and that her best hope for the future lay in marrying some man, weaker than herself, whom she could bend to her will. This, no doubt, actuated her in encouraging the somewhat timid suit of Mr. Fowke, and in astonishing as well as delighting that gentleman when she accepted his rather diffident offer of marriage.

The young lady showed herself of an obliging disposition in the arrangements made prior to the wedding, her only stipulation being that Mr. Fowke should change his present living for one nearer the moors. In accordance with this Mr. Fowke negotiated an exchange with the Vicar of G., and after a short honeymoon took possession of his new cure. Here he settled down to what he anticipated would prove a peaceful and happy life. He was devoted to his new wife, and she, while less demonstratively happy, appeared to be contented both with her husband and her new surroundings.

The first flaw in their married life showed itself a few months after their arrival at G., when one day, Mr. Fowke, having occasion to speak to his wife, went upstairs to the room which she had selected as her private sitting-room and in which she had installed her voluminous library. On reaching it he heard from within a sound of low chanting in a language that he did not understand, and at the same time became aware of a singular smell as of the burning of some aromatic herb. He tried the door and, finding it locked, called to his wife. The chanting ceased immediately and his wife's voice told him to wait a few minutes and she would admit him. On the door being opened he found the room filled with a pungent smell emanating from some herbs, which were burning in a small brazier set upon the table.

"Whatever are you doing, my dear?" he asked.

Stella replied that she was suffering from a severe headache, which she was trying to cure by inhaling the smoke; it was an Hungarian remedy, she added, but she did not explain the singing. Mr. Fowke remained somewhat puzzled, and his astonishment was considerably increased when

a little later his wife informed him that she intended to go to L—a tiny hamlet far up on the Fells—that afternoon and would spend the night there, returning the following day. It was the first time that Mr. Fowke had heard of Stella's solitary visits to the moorland and he not unnaturally sought an explanation of them, which his wife refused to give in any greater detail than the mere statement that she had for long been accustomed to make these periodical trips into solitude. He asked to be allowed to accompany her, but she positively refused to permit this, and it was with a heavy and worried heart that he watched her leave the house later in the day.

The following afternoon she returned, tired and with muddy clothes, but seeming exhilarated by her expedition. She refused all information about it, save that during these trips she was in the habit of staying at the *Three Magpies*, a small inn at I. and making thence expeditions on the higher Fells. With this slender explanation Mr. Fowke had to be satisfied.

A few weeks passed, when again one day Mr. Fowke detected the odour of burning herbs and again learnt that his wife was on the point of starting for I. She again declined his proffered company and left the house as before.

Mr. Fowke had never been to I., which is a remote hamlet, not distant as far as mileage is concerned from G., but only approachable by a branch line of railway with an infrequent service of trains. He was, however, acquainted with its Vicar, to whom he presently wrote to inquire as to the standing of the *Three Magpies*, since he was not over-pleased that his wife, a foreigner ignorant of our ways, should elect to stay alone at an absolutely unknown inn. The reply he received was not at all reassuring, for the Vicar of I. wrote that the *Three Magpies* was a public house of poor repute, kept by an old couple of more than doubtful respectability.

This letter decided Mr. Fowke and, when for the third time his wife announced her intention of proceeding to I. and for the third time refused his company, he determined to follow her there secretly and observe her movements and surroundings. It was not difficult for him to arrange to do this, since he could easily reach I. on his motor-cycle long before her slow train could land her there, even if he did not start until after she had left the parsonage. He carried out his programme and in due course reached I. and made his way to the *Three Magpies*. Here he found that the old man was very nearly bedridden and quite senile, whilst his wife regarded her clerical visitor with almost open hostility. However, the gift of a sovereign and the promise of another effected a great change and unlocked the old woman's tongue, so that she poured forth volubly all she knew.

Yes, she knew the lady quite well. She had been in the habit of coming to I. once every few weeks for a long time. No; she always came alone and had never spoken to anyone except herself, to her knowledge.

“What does she do?”

“Oh, she always goes straight up to her room and shuts herself in, then she sings to herself something I cannot make out and burns something that smells sweet and strong. about dark like, sometimes sooner, sometimes later, she comes down and goes out towards the Fells.”

“Have you ever followed her?”

“No, never, nor anybody else as I know of. A shepherd once saw her walking all alone in a wild part of the moor but he did not follow her or speak to her.”

“How long is she out?”

“Well, that depends, but generally till near morning. She takes the key of the house with her and lets herself in, but I hear her come in once in a while.”

“What does she do then?”

“Why, goes up to her room and stays there quietly and has breakfast and then goes to the train.”

This was about all that Mr. Fowke could find out, except the curious detail that his wife never wore a hat on her nocturnal rambles, but went draped in a hooded grey cloak.

By the time this catechism was finished it was nearly time for Mrs. Fowke to arrive, and the Reverend Barnabas accordingly ensconced himself in a room into which he was ushered by the old woman, which commanded the front door of the inn. In a short time he saw his wife arrive. After exchanging a few words with the old woman she went upstairs, and husband and wife remained in their respective seclusions till dusk fell.

Then Mr. Fowke heard Stella descending the stairs and in a few moments he saw her emerge from the house clad, as described, in a long hooded grey cloak, and walking swiftly and resolutely. Giving her a short start, he followed, and as he left the inn the well-known smell of burning, aromatic herbs was in his nostrils. His wife was by now a few hundred yards away and had nearly cleared the little hamlet, heading for the open moor. As she proceeded a singular episode occurred. Mr. Fowke thought little of it at the time, but much, later.

A sheep-dog was lying asleep by the roadside and as Mrs. Fowke drew near it suddenly started up and, with back upraised and tail depressed, uttered a melancholy howl and darted through the hedge.

Mrs. Fowke paid not the least attention to the dog, but pursued her way steadily through the rapidly falling dusk. Her husband followed as steadily, and thins for a long time they wound their way upwards towards the loneliest and wildest part of the Fells. It was by now night, but the moon had risen and flooded the landscape with her rays. The couple, one about two hundred yards behind the other, were now mounting the side of a steep hill, and hitherto Mr. Fowke had remained in the pleasant belief that his presence was unsuspected by his wife. He was to be undeceived. The lady passed round a corner of the hill, thereby disappearing from sight; Mr. Fowke hastened after her and on passing the corner in his turn found himself confronted by his wife, who stood watching for his appearance with a sarcastic smile. She greeted him:

“Well, Mr. Spy, are you very much puzzled?”

He remained silent, dumb with astonishment and chagrin, and she went on:

“I have been wondering what to do with you ever since you left home, but I have decided at last. You shall see all there is to see; I don’t think you can do any harm and you may be useful by and by. Follow me.” And she turned and went on again.

Mr. Fowke followed silently and abashed. Presently he became aware of a rosy light shining in front of them, and after walking a few yards more he found himself standing by the side of his wife on the edge of a small, cup-shaped hollow in the hills. In the centre of this hollow a large fire was burning and near the fire Mr. Fowke could make out a pile of stones shaped like a rough altar. A group of about half a dozen people, all clad in the same grey, hooded cloaks, were sitting silently near the fire; and towards these his wife now began to descend, first telling him in a low, imperious voice to stay where he was. As Stella advanced down the declivity the group by the fire became aware of her approach and, rising, moved to meet her with gestures of greeting and respect. Stella passed through them, haughtily returning their salutations and slowly ascending the stone altar seated herself on a rock near its summit. As soon as she had taken up her position, she gave a signal, and the others forming round the fire commenced a slow and stately dance to the accompaniment of their own low chanting.

Mr. Fowke watched absorbed. Gradually the dance grew quicker and wilder and the chanting louder, the whirling forms flung themselves into grotesque attitudes and shrieked ejaculations,

the meaning of which Mr. Fowke began dimly to divine though the words were strange. Suddenly they were silent and still and at the same moment Stella rose from her seat and, throwing back her hood and turning towards the summit of the altar, began in her turn to take up the chant. As she sang and bowed towards the topmost stone, her face and figure seemed transformed. In the flickering firelight and pale moonshine she seemed to grow weirdly and horribly beautiful and to grow statelier and taller in her person. Slowly, too, as the song progressed the horrified watcher saw another change. A grey cloud formed on the summit of the altar, diminishing, thickening and turning into a Shape, a Shape of evil and fear. The silent group by the fire once more broke forth into wild gesticulations and cries, Stella prostrated herself, the Form on the altar grew clearer and with a cry of horror Mr. Fowke turned away and rushed madly across the moor.

He never knew where he went or what he did. When he once more recovered his senses it was broad day and he was alone and lost on the moors. It was late afternoon before, broken and exhausted, he reached his own home, where the first person to greet him was his wife, cool and collected as ever. She led him into his study.

“Well,” she said, “and what are you going to do now? Are you going to go about telling a cock-and-bull story of the moors, or are you going to be a good little man and hold your tongue? Don’t imagine I care,” she went on, “the Great One can protect his servants and destroy his enemies.”

Mr. Fowke groaned.

“It was true then,” he said, “not a horrid dream.”

“You had better call it that,” she answered with a laugh and left him.

Mr. Fowke was utterly perplexed and, like many men of weak character, could decide on nothing. So matters drifted on: he had little or no communication with his wife, who was, however, invariably civil and pleasant when they met with a kind of mocking courtesy, which maddened him. At last came the day when she announced her intention of again going to I.

“And perhaps you would like to go with me,” she said. “*You* will be ready for the grey robe soon.”

She went and he spent the night in an agony of prayer.

The next day Stella returned and came immediately to his study. This time, however, she had no look of exhilaration on her face, she was troubled and angry.

“How dare you interfere with us,” she began, “with your paltry little prayers and tears? You disturbed us last night. The Great One was angry—” She stopped and then went on, “I shall have to find a means of silencing you; it was a mistake to show you what I did.”

He looked at her.

“So it is not too late, is it?” he said. “I can perhaps save you and drag you away from—”

She interrupted him.

“Silence,” she cried violently, “or I will take steps to quiet you; I will blast you; I will call upon the Powers of the Air. I will—” she was going on madly in her excitement when suddenly she became rigid, her face blanched and she fell senseless to the floor in a fit.

Mr. Fowke raised the prostrate body, laid it on a sofa and summoned help. The unfortunate woman was carried to her bedroom, still unconscious, and the doctor sent for. He was an ordinary country practitioner and the case seemed to be clearly beyond his powers to deal with, but he emphasized the need of a trained nurse; and, one being fortunately available in the village, she was presently duly installed at the Parsonage.

After having seen all done that was possible, Mr. Fowke, utterly worn out, retired to rest. Towards midnight he was awakened by a knocking at his door and opening it found the nurse pale and trembling on the threshold. She instantly assured him that she must throw up the case and leave the house at once. She could or would give no clear reasons for her action, but repeated again and again that she would sacrifice her whole professional career rather than remain in that sick room. Things had happened there, she said, things she could not tell of, but the place was accursed. In vain Mr. Fowke tried to reassure her; she would not remain and so, bidding her go to her room till morning without disturbing the household, Mr. Fowke went to his wife's room to take up the vigil himself.

When he entered the sick room all was still. Stella was lying motionless, breathing gently and at intervals murmuring a few words in her native tongue. Mr. Fowke settled himself down in an arm-chair and gradually fell into a doze.

He woke suddenly as the clock struck three and glanced around him. The lamp had burnt low and the room was very cold. His wife still lay quietly in her bed, muttering softly to herself, but as Mr. Fowke watched her, by the dim light, he fancied he noticed a horrible change in her. Gone were the full rounded outlines of a woman's form, the figure on the bed had become angular and misshaped. Her hand and arm, which lay outside the coverlet, were also changed and looked like a claw. Her face, too, was changing. As he watched, her beauty faded, the features altered, they ran together, became distorted, misplaced and, with a shudder, he found himself gazing on the lineaments of an unknown, hideous beast. Paralysed with horror he could not stir.

All at once there was a movement. The figure on the bed shivered violently, lifted itself up and sat gazing out beyond the foot of the bed. Mr. Fowke followed the direction of its eyes and saw growing up slowly at the end of the room a grey, shapeless form, of which the burning eyes alone were distinct.

The creature on the bed moved and slipping back the bedclothes stepped suddenly to the floor. Mr. Fowke saw that the lower limbs and, in fact, every part of it save the face that he could see were covered with a thick, grey fur. It moved again and passed swiftly across the room towards the grim shape in the corner; he heard its hoofs tap on the bare floor as it passed. It reached the motionless watcher, whose eyes seemed to blaze as it approached, and with a swift movement the two forms met, intermingled and—Mr. Fowke could bear no more; he fainted.

It was daylight when he regained his senses. He glanced towards the bed; Mrs. Fowke lay there calm, beautiful and dead.