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FLORENCE O'NEILL,
THE ROSE OF ST. GERMAINS,
OR,
THE SIEGE OF LIMERICK.

By Miss AGNES M. STUART, author of the "World and Cloister," "Life in the Cloister," "Grace O'Halloran," &c.

(From the Catholic Mirror.)

CHAPTER VIII.—(Continued.)

Seymour then narrated in his own way those circumstances with which the reader is already acquainted, relative to the capture of Benson, or Layton, as for the sake of disguise, he had chosen to call himself, together with an account of the summary punishment inflicted on him at the hands of the mob.

It were, of course, vain to attempt to describe the wounded pride, mortification and anger with which St. John listened to all he had to say, or his pleasure on hearing of the punishment of his villainous ex-preceptor Benson. For a few moments he was silent, then he said:

"Farewell, Seymour, for awhile, before an hour is over I shall be on my way to Limerick." "To Limerick!" ejaculated his friend, "why is it the head-quarters of General Sarsfield?"

"Exactly so, and also the dwelling-place of the General's cousin, Miss O'Neill."

"And in your present mood, I shall not be surprised to hear of a defection, for it is not unlikely you may find your way to Sarsfield himself," said Seymour, with a significant glance at St. John's dejected countenance.

"Keep your surmises to yourself Seymour, I have been foully wronged as you well know, and—"

"True enough," was the reply, "and as I am your sworn friend, I say nothing and keep my thoughts locked within my own breast, but I tell you, Reginald, I am morally certain that in a very short time hence King William will hear that the cousin of the aged St. John, the supporter of the commonwealth, hitherto so devoted to his interests, has passed over with many others to the ranks of the exiled James."

CHAPTER IX.

With an unusual degree of outward calmness and composure, which she was, however, far from feeling, Florence prepared to accompany her uncle to the palace: on arriving at which she was at once shown into a small ante-room, communicating with the boudoir of the queen.

This, the favorite sitting-room into which Mary had been ushered, was hung with pale blue silk, the draperies and curtains festooned and looped with silver, the ottomans and couches being also of the same color and material. Tables of curiously inlaid wood supported vases of precious metals; some were filled with the choicest exotics, others exhaled an almost oppressive odor from the perfumes burning within them, so that as Florence entered the apartment a sense of faintness stole over her, but she remembered the necessity there was for calmness and composure in the presence of the queen; and, leaning on the arm of Lord Clarendon, with a check only a shade paler, perhaps, than usual, the heiress of the O'Neills approached Mary with a firm step, and gracefully kneeling, pressed to her lips the small white hand so graciously extended, though her heart was all with Mary of Modena.

Still there was a something in the presence of Mary of England which fascinated Florence in spite of herself. "She is a Stuart certainly, notwithstanding her grievous sins; she is so like our beloved king, her father," mused the girl for one short moment, during which the queen, with sweet soft words, requested her to be seated.

"Yes, there were the features of the unfortunate line of the Stuarts strongly delineated on Mary's oval countenance, and as the eyes of Florence fell on her tall and still graceful form, her pleasing and regular features, and air of quiet dignity, they fell beneath the scrutiny of those dark, sparkling eyes, bent so curiously and with so strict a scrutiny upon herself.

"I wish I might dare to love you," thought Florence, as her eyes met those of the queen.

"I must be wary, and use you for my own ends, for you are my step-mother's favorite," was the thought of Mary of England.

Graciously, too, did the queen welcome the baronet. Then, after a few common-place observations, she hazarded the remark: "You have been some time at St. Germain's; how did it with my father when you left France?"

"Then, as if suddenly recollecting herself, continued that her words might seem to bear a different meaning than that which she wished to express, she added, whilst the slightest perceptible color mantled her cheek, "I mean is to health good, as also that of his consort?"

"His majesty was well, and also my gracious mistress," said Florence; "and pleased, indeed, will they be to hear that I, already so honored by their notice, should also have been honored by your majesty's gracious reception of my poor self."

"And you do not meditate a return to St. Germain's?" said Mary, fixing her eyes with a

penetrating glance on the features of Florence, as though she would read her very thoughts. "But no, that cannot be, if rumor speaks correctly, for it is said that you are betrothed to Sir Reginald St. John, one of the most favored of our beloved lord and consort; nay, our royal favor has been sought in this matter; but of that later. We know that Sir Reginald is of himself deserving, and we see that the lady he has chosen has even more than her fair share of woman's charms: but, as we have already said, we will speak of this later, at a more fitting time, and then devise measures for your nuptials, and make arrangements, it may be, for your future well-being near our own person."

Then turning to her uncle, Lord Clarendon, Mary entered into a long and animated discussion respecting the contemplated departure of the king, leaving Florence a prey to any but pleasurable emotions. Had she dared to express the feelings of her heart she could not have done so, for Mary had purposely contrived her speech cunningly enough, leaving her no room to expostulate, assuming for granted that she was graciously furthering the most ardent desires of the girl's heart, and so closing her speech as to afford Florence no chance of escape, without being guilty of the most flagrant breach of etiquette by interrupting the queen whilst speaking, or rudely breaking in when she was addressing the Earl. In fact, Florence was marvelously like some wretched fly, when securely trammelled in the spider's web, and every effort was now exerted to throw a veil of dissimulation for the present over her own conduct, and to govern well her outward bearing, in order that no trace of the inward anxiety she endured should escape her, and be evidenced in the expression of her features.

But Mary was far too penetrating in her judgment, and too clear-headed to be at all deceived. Her speech had been artfully contrived. She knew well one of the most ardent admirers of the unfortunate Mary of Modena had knelt unwillingly at her feet, that she had broken off her proposed union with Sir Reginald solely because the latter was attached to her court, that the girl's whole heart was centered in the weal of the exiled James, and that she was anxiously looking forward to the time of her return to St. Germain's.

But the queen had resolved she should not see St. Germain's again if she could help it, that she should marry Sir Reginald, and, moreover, little by little, she would manage to exert, having first gained access to her heart by the exercise of all those blandishments of which she was mistress, a full account of all that was passing in France.

It remained, however, for time to show whether the queen could so easily manage her new prey as she supposed; but be that as it may, the later felt, when too late, that she had played a rather dangerous game in coming to London, or, being there, by failing to preserve the strictest incognito; and still more embarrassed was she when, at the moment of parting, Mary, with the same gracious tone and manner, addressing herself to the baronet, said:

"You will not forget, Sir Charles, that we shall use all our influence to promote this affair of the nuptials of your niece. We have felt much interested in the Lady Florence, in consequence of the reports which have reached our ears of her beauty and worth; and ascertaining from the king that Sir Reginald has but recently left the metropolis for Ireland, have obtained his promise that he shall be at once summoned back to England."

Much as Florence wished to speak she dared not, but merely bowed her acknowledgments, whilst the baronet was profuse in his thanks for the interest the queen evinced in her welfare; and with a heart full of gloomy apprehensions for the future, Florence accompanied her uncle back to his residence.

Alone in her boudoir, the queen moodily watched their departure, accompanied by her uncle, the Earl of Clarendon, and with compressed lips and fingers nervously clenched together, she exclaimed, aloud:

"Well met, a pretty trio I'faith. In the girl I take some little interest, and will mould her to my will; but if she prove rebellious—well, ay, what then? Suppose she is of a stubborn nature. Yet, no; with this St. John daily, hourly beside her, she will become all I wish to see her, a willing tool in my hands.—She does not like my proposal, however, for I saw the color in her cheeks come and go when I spoke of her staying here, and of my hastening her nuptials. And as to you, my beautiful niece," continued the queen, with increased irritation, as she beheld Lord Clarendon passing through the court-yard beneath her window, "I have you fast, and will take care you are safely caged in the Tower, if in the slightest way you are found to have any share in this new conspiracy, a rumor of which has reached us, and in which your name is coupled with that of fair mistress Florence and others we had thought affected to our persons, and if"

"Aye, indeed, if they are guilty let them have such mercy as they deserve," said the voice of William of Orange, who, unobserved,

had entered the boudoir and overheard the soliloquy of the queen. "I tell you, Mary," said William, "to watch Clarendon well, and do not suffer his relationship to yourself to mar the ends of justice. Trust me, he is not faithful to our interests."

"I know it," said Mary, fixing her eyes reproachfully on her husband, "but do not speak to a wife devoted and tender as myself of any thought of family connections being suffered to clash with the duty which I owe to you. Ah, my beloved one," she continued, clasping her husband's hand tenderly within her own, "cared I ever for my own kindred when you were concerned: cared I even for the father of whom I was the most indulged and favored child; have I not ever been the most dutiful and submissive wife, and when I had left home and kindred for you, did I not soon tear from my heart, whether at your bidding or not, every emotion of old home affection, not given to you, so that I might be more truly and entirely yours?"

"Well, yes, I must give to you the praise you have deserved, and own you have done your duty in my regard, said William. "I have found you generally faithful in these points, and when renies a few words of admonition have set you in the right path again, though remember, for your caution, if ever tempted to err again in this regard, that I encountered difficulty with you in days gone by."

The fine eyes of Mary filled with tears as again she gazed reproachfully on her husband.

"Ah, my best beloved," she said, "reminde me not of my former shortcomings, which, God knoweth, I have long since bitterly atoned for by many a tear in the long hours of your absence from my side. I tell you once more that Clarendon shall suffer severely should we find him in the slightest way implicated in this rising. Small mercy shall he meet with, any more than if he were an alien to my blood; or, indeed, the fair Florence O'Neill either, should she be involved or mixed up with mischief, as the *protégée* of my gracious step-mother is most likely to be."

"Ah, indeed, and pending that matter of the girl," said the king, "I have sent to Ireland to require the immediate return of St. John, and if it be true that she has dared refuse him for his known fidelity to myself, it will be matter for conjecture as to what course she will now pursue."

"Poor fool," said Mary, laughing, "did I not dislike her for the unwarrantable prejudice she presumes to entertain against us, I could almost have pitied the agitation she suffered when I spoke of our interesting ourselves to hasten her wedding, and that you had summoned St. John hither. She played her part well, but is too unsophisticated to have gained the mastery over her features. Indeed, the mistress whom she almost adores, for she regards Mary of Modena, I have been told, with feelings little short of veneration, has taught her no lesson on that point, for she herself is the creature of impulse, as your majesty well knows, and by look, or word, or hasty exclamation, is sure to discover to the world all she feels; and no small wonder that this minion, who holds her in such veneration, imitates the idol at whose shrine she bows. But I will watch her well and closely, and if I find foul play to your interests, my liege, depend on it, your loving wife will not spare her power to avenge and punish, whether the transgressor be Clarendon, in whose veins my own blood flows, or the fair descendant of the O'Neills, on whose face I never looked till now."

Thus spoke the wife of William of Orange, now bidding adieu for a few hours to the man at whose word she had forsworn every other tie, and trampled under foot the holiest affections of our nature. It is a historical fact that it was the constant aim of William to root out of her heart every natural emotion; and well did he succeed, for she soon imbibed the naturally cold, apathetic disposition of her husband, and centred all her ambition in deservng the epithet of a humble and obedient wife.

It is hard to look back into the records of the time at which we write and not feel indignation at the subservient devotedness of this misguided princess, who whilst she deliberately crushed every emotion of filial affection beneath her feet, carried her attachment to her husband on a maudlin sentimentality, servile in her submissiveness, and idolatrous in her love of one who, cold as was his nature, had a warmer spot in his heart for another than his wife, and who, to say the least, was but a cold and indifferent husband.

CHAPTER X.

A bitterly cold night was that of the 29th of December, in the year 1691. A cutting northeast wind, united to a fall of snow, which had become heavier as the short winter day waned on, and to which, in the earlier part, was added a somewhat thick fog, had conspired to render the previous day as bitterly inclement and unpleasant to the good citizens of London as could be imagined.

The wind sighed in long and fitful gusts, and cut across the face of the wayfarer as he turned the corner of the streets; it howled amongst the chimney-pots in the old city, and

made the windows rattle in their frames, and the sign-board suspended over the door of the Dog Tavern, on Ludgate street, creaked and flapped heavily as it swayed to and fro in the bitter night blast.

But within the hotel all was warmth and comfort; the huge fire in the kitchen burned brightly in the ample fire-place, before which hung a huge sirlin, and the red flame flickered cheerily on the bright culinary utensils which garnished the kitchen wall. A goodly array of choice smoked hams hung suspended from huge hooks in the rafters that supported the ceiling, and the apparently freshly-sanded floor as yet showed not the print of a step from the dreary scene without.

But just as the heavy clock of St. Paul's tolled the hour of nine, two persons entered, clad in large cloaks whitened with the heavy snow-storm, and followed by a woman, whose dress betokened her to move in the humble walks of life, and advancing to the fireside, they stood for a few moments enjoying its genial warmth, the men conversing in an undertone with the worthy and somewhat buxom hostess, Mistress Warner, who had just entered the kitchen to deliver various orders concerning her expected guests.

"You have a private apartment for me, Mistress Warner," said our old acquaintance, John Ashton, whom it were easy to recognize, despite the slouched hat drawn over his eyes, and the cloak closely buttoned up to the throat, with its huge collar pulled up to the chin.

"Yes, the green-room is ready," replied the woman, "and supper shall be on the table at the appointed time. Would it not be well, good Mr. Ashton," she added, "to repair thither immediately?" And sinking the already low tones of her voice to a whisper, she continued:

"See you not my party who have just arrived; I do not like the air of curiosity with which they regard yourself and friend."

In fact, two persons had closely followed on the heels of Ashton; in the one, a well-formed, handsome young man, we recognize the page, Harding; in the other, the villainous ex-preceptor Benson, not yet by his late reconce in Ireland sufficiently afraid of meddling with the affairs of others to abstain from playing the part of the informer. Acting on the suggestion of the worthy hostess, Ashton made sign to his friend, and bade the woman who had accompanied him hither follow him to the apartment which Mistress Warner had spoken of.—Having closed the door, stirred the fire into a cheerful blaze, and handed some wine to his companions, Ashton introduced the female to his friend, Burdett, by the name of Mrs. Pratt, saying: "You are aware that mercantile matters require me, with two of my friends, to go immediately to France to purchase some bales of French silk for one of our city merchants. In order to expedite this business, then, Mrs. Pratt, who is a friend of the master of a vessel I wish to engage, has met us here to-night, and the owner, Mr. Paseley, will not be long ere he arrives, and you, Burdett, will, therefore, be a witness of the bargain which we shall make." Ashton had scarce finished these few words when a low tap at the door announced the arrival of the person for whom he was waiting.

The man Paseley was of unprepossessing appearance, short and thick set, and an unaccountable impression of impending evil shot across Ashton's heart, as his eyes met those of this person fixed on his countenance with a scrutinizng, sinister expression, and which, when they encountered those of Ashton, immediately fell beneath his glance. Paseley was, in short, one of those persons who cannot look you in the face from an innate consciousness of their own villainy.

At length he said: "You want to engage my smack, Sir, at least, so I understand from my friend, Mrs. Pratt: may I ask to what port you wish to conduct her?"

"To some one of the seaports of France," replied Ashton "I suppose you already know, from your friend, that myself and some two or three other persons are about to go thither, to purchase silk and other articles of French merchandise."

Again Ashton noticed the man's eyes fixed curiously on his face, as though he questioned the truth of what he said, and he replied: "Well, sir, you shall have the use of my vessel, but really I shall expect a large sum for the hire, under existence circumstances."

"Under existing circumstances?" repeated Ashton, laying a stress on the words the man had used; "What do you mean? I want to hire your vessel, and you will be glad to have a large sum for its use; name the amount you require."

"One hundred and fifty pounds," was the unhesitating reply.

Anxious as Ashton was to secure the vessel, even he started at the mention of the enormous sum, and after much haggling, the stipulated sum was brought down to the still enormous amount, if we consider the value of money at the time of which we write, of one hundred guineas. It was then arranged that Mrs. Pratt, with Burdett and Paseley, were to meet

on the following morning at the Seven Stars, in Covent Garden, an hotel near to Ashton's place of residence, and there conclude the bargain, by depositing the money in Paseley's or Mrs. Pratt's hands, should the former not be able to be there; and the two friends were then left to refresh themselves, after a long walk in the inclemency of the weather, by the goodly sirlin which Mistress Warner served up, flanked by a substantial pastry and a flagon of strong home-brewed ale, succeeded by hot spiced wine.

But let us leave the brave and unfortunate Ashton, whose life sacrificed, as our readers will know, in the cause of the exiled Stuart race, and in the present ill-conceived enterprise, and follow the ill-conditioned Paseley and the woman Pratt into the room beneath, in fact, the kitchen of the hotel, in which still remained Benson and the page Walter Harding.

No sooner were the advancing footsteps of Paseley and his companion heard, than the two former personages hurried to meet them, and the sinister countenance of Paseley lighted up with a smile full of meaning as he approached, and touching Harding on the shoulder, he whispered:

"I have news for her Majesty, follow me."

Out into the cold dark night, with the keen north-east wind blowing full in their faces, together with the driving sleet, the crisp snow crackling beneath their feet, and the sky as dark as their own hearts, walked the page and the preceptor, the master of the smack and his friend, Mrs. Pratt, and scarcely had the doors of the hotel closed behind them, than the man Paseley advancing to Harding, whispered:

"He is prepared to give even as much as a hundred pounds for the hire of the vessel; I asked one hundred and fifty, thinking it would go far to show whether it were wanted for purposes of merchandise or not; as if so, he would entertain no idea of hiring it, instead of which he demurs a little, and then coolly offers a hundred guineas, as if the guineas were but as many shillings, and now I will leave Mrs. Pratt to tell her tale, which I am sure will strengthen the idea we entertain. Then rejoining the woman, Paseley whispered a few words in her ear, she nodded assent, and advanced to Harding, while Paseley and Benson conferred together in a low tone of voice.

"Look you, Mr. Harding," said she, "Mr. Ashton offered me one thousand pounds, to be paid down before Lady-day, if I helped him to the hiring of this vessel. One thousand pounds!" she repeated. "This is a large sum, and would make a rich woman of Martha Pratt; yet out of love to her gracious Majesty, I give it all up. What do you think, Mr. Harding, will Queen Mary do for me? for 'tis I and Paseley chiefly, more than yourself and Benson, who have helped to the unfolding of this plot."

"Now do not alarm yourself, Mistress Pratt," said Harding; "I will take care to represent to her Majesty what you have lost in her service, and depend on it, she will not forget you. Count on me for standing your friend, and rest assured we shall all of us, receive a rich reward. I have dogged Ashton repeatedly, I know that he was on terms of friendship with Nevill Payne, who suffered torture, and has since died from its effects. I deed, I remember Ashton was with him last April at a Jacobite meeting, held at the Globe Tavern, near Northumberland House, and I feel convinced that the plot now hatching has some connexion with the last, and—"

"And Ashton is a poor man, remember," interrupted Benson; "Verily friend Harding, the Lord is making use of us, His elect ones, as instruments in His hands for the punish-

* Queen Mary and her ministers strove very hard to make the honorable and high-minded Payne, Jacobite tutor to the young Earl of Mar, legal inquirer regarding this conspiracy, in which many of the nobility in Scotland, as well as England, were involved some months before it had reached its present height. And later, Mary wrote several letters to the privy Council in Scotland, making ominous inquiries as to what had become of him. The following, in answer to some of these inquiries, was written to the principal minister of her Majesty for Scotland, who was then at Court.

"To Lord NEVILLE:

"Yesterday, in the afternoon, Nevill Payne was questioned as to those things that were not of the greatest concern, and had but gentle torture given him, being resolved to repent in this day, which accordingly, about six this evening, we inflicted on both his thumbs and one of his legs, with all the severity that was consistent with humanity (I) even to that pitch that we could not have preserved life and have gone further; but without the least success, for his answers to all our interrogatories were negative. Yes, he was so manly and resolute under his sufferings, that such of the Council as were not acquainted with all the evidence, were bungled (hesitated), and began to give him charity that he might be innocent. It is surprising to me and others, that flesh and blood could, without fainting, endure the heavy penance he was in for two hours. My stomach is truly out of time by being witness to an act so far cross to my natural temper, that I am fitter for rest than for anything else, but the dangers from such conspirators to the person of our incomparable king, have prevailed over me in the Council's name, to have been the prompter of the executioner to increase the torture to so high a pitch."

The unfortunate Nevill Payne soon afterwards died from the effect of these barbarities.—Strickland's Life of Mary.