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FRANCIS OF VALOIS;

OR, THE LADIES' PEACE.

By Agnes Strickland.

THE beams of the setting sun stole beneath the heavy velvet curtains, that partially shaded the barred and grated windows of the apartment occupied by Francis I. of France, during his long and weary imprisonment in the gloomy fortress of the Alcazar, at Madrid, and tinged with deceitful brightness the sunken temples and faded cheek of the illustrious tenant of this lugubrious abode, as he reclined in a state of listless languor on his embroidered couch.

Francis had pined away many months since his disastrous overthrow at Pavia, in that restless fever of hope deferred, which maketh the heart sick. One day excited by the deceitful professions of his imperial rival, Charles V., and another, plunged into utter despondency, by the vexatious delays and disappointments to which he was doomed, till the mental travail which he endured, produced bodily illness of an alarming character.

It was at this critical period that his accomplished and amiable sister, the celebrated Marguerite of Valois, the widowed Duchess of Alencon, with a degree of generous self-devotion, which, even in those days of chivalrous romance, was regarded by the princes of Europe with admiration and surprise, demanded and obtained from the Emperor Charles permission to visit her royal brother in prison.

An indefinite hint of the possibility of such an event as her arrival had been conveyed to Francis; but the more eagerly the presence of this beloved sister was desired by him, the more was he disposed to regard the idea of her coming as an improbable chimera, which was held out to amuse and cheer his drooping spirits by his faithful attendants.

On the present evening he was roused from his feverish languor to a state of intense excitement, by hearing his inexorable jailor, Don Ferdinand Alarcon, summoned by the centinel who had been parleying with a lady, at the door of the anti-room.

"How now!" cried Don Ferdinand, stepping to the portal.

"It is a lady and her page, who are desirous of an interview with the King of France," was the reply.

"My duty to the emperor will not permit me to accede to their request," said Alarcon.

"We bring an order from the emperor," said the page, presenting a paper to Alarcon.

"This order," observed Alarcon, after he had carefully perused the pass, "empowers me to admit the Duchess of Alencon and her attendant, into the presence of my illustrious prisoner; but I must first be convinced of the identity of the persons specified. Will you condescend to let me see you without your veil, madam?" continued he, addressing the lady.

She removed the enveloping screen for a moment, with a look which caused Alarcon to recede three paces backward in surprise, as she significantly observed, "The emperor's order is not then sufficient warrant for my admittance?"

"Pardon me, madam; but you can scarcely expect one, who has the honour to be so well acquainted with your voice and features, to mistake you for the sister of the King of France."

"Have you then the audacity to dispute the written words of your imperial master?" inquired she.

"If there be any little underplot among the ladies," muttered Alarcon, "I trust the reckoning will be settled by the parties concerned."

"I will exonerate you from all blame," replied the lady, "except that of disputing the pass of which I am the bearer."

"Then, madam, I am to announce you, I suppose, as her grace the Duchess of Alencon," said the sullen official, flinging open the jealously guarded door of the inner room.

The sick monarch started from his couch, at the sound of that dearly loved name, and extending his arms with passionate emotion, as Alarcon ushered the lady into his chamber, exclaimed,

"I am not then wholly abandoned of Heaven! God only knoweth how I have panted to embrace thee, my sweet sister. What, not a single word, or look, or kiss to bestow on thy unfortunate brother, Marguerite?"

"I fear I am the cause of disappointment to your majesty," said the lady, seating herself beside the couch; "I am not the lady of Alencon, but I come to cheer you with the tidings of her approach. Your royal sister greeteth you lovingly by me, and will be with you this present evening, God and the emperor willing."

"Blessings on the sweet voice that whispers such joyful news in the sick ear of a woeful captive," said Francis; "but I must

be permitted to look on the face of my gentle visitor," pursued he, removing the mantilla in which the lady's face and figure had hitherto been enveloped. The features on which he gazed were unknown, and yet appeared familiar to the royal scrutinizer; they were noble, beautiful, and expressive both of dignity and goodness. Her age, which is a difficult point to ascertain in a fine woman, did not appear to exceed two-and-twenty; but the self-possession and easy grace of her manner might have belonged to a more advanced period of life.

"Your name, fair lady?" said the king.

"I am called Mademoiselle de Heilley," replied the lady, looking down, while a suffusing blush mantled her delicate cheek.

"You are then my subject, my charming friend," rejoined the king, with great animation, taking her hand.

"Is it your custom, sir, to make so free with the ladies of your court?" asked the lady, with a smile.

"I am always proud to offer my homage to beauty," replied Francis, gallantly raising the hand which he held to his lips.

"Are you quite sure," pursued he, looking into the lady's eyes "that my sister did not make you the bearer of some tender token of her love to me?"

"This ruby heart," replied the lady, taking the richly wrought gold chain to which the gem was suspended from her neck.

"I shall wear it for the sake of her from whose lovely hands I receive the precious pledge," exclaimed Francis, bending one knee before his fair visitor. "Come, invest me with the order of which I perceive you are the grand mistress."

"What order does your majesty mean?"

"That of St. Cupid," returned the king.

"Your majesty has, I fear, been long a practised votary of that mischief-loving little traitor," said the lady, throwing the chain about his neck.

"You hold me now your lawful captive," said the king, kissing the glittering links of the chain.

"For how long?" asked the lady.

"For ever."

"Or till you see a fairer face than mine."

"It is impossible."

"You are a perilous wooer, sire, and for my own peace, I have resolved never to see you again, till you are the husband of the Queen Dowager of Portugal."

"I will marry her to-morrow, then."

"Donna Eleanora will have cause to be flattered, when she understands the reason of your haste; but are you ready to perform the conditions on which your marriage with that lady depends?"

"My fair friend, we will not waste the sweet moments by discussing so painful a subject."

"Donna Eleanora has said that she would be prouder of being your wife, if you were only a landless knight, than of sharing any other crown in Christendom."

"And who empowered you to make this communication to me, sweet-heart?" inquired Francis, taking Mademoiselle de Heilley by both hands, and bending a searching scrutiny upon her face.

"Oh! my sister, the Duchess of Alencon was it? Mighty fine! I guessed as much when you began to talk of the Austrian; but I am not to be tricked by female diplomatists; I am of full age and understanding to judge for myself, and, therefore, when you next favour me with a visit, my fair plenipotentiary, I hope it will be to make love to me on your own account, in which case I will endeavour to make you a more grateful return than I at present feel disposed to do."

"It is said that your majesty's heart is in the possession of the beautiful Françoise de Foix, your own subject."

"I have had leisure to repent me of the guilt and folly of my conduct in that instance, during my weary hours of sorrowful captivity and sickness," returned Francis; "and this broken heart has now centered all its affections upon France, and my fair young sons, and that dear sister, who will, perhaps, only arrive to close these eyes in their last repose." He bowed his face upon his pillow as he spoke, and sobbed with deep and passionate emotion, unrestrained by the presence of a stranger. It was, however, no stranger's voice, but accents that had been sweetly associated with all the best and purest pleasures of his life, from childhood upwards, that now, with tenderest words of comfort, interrupted this pause of agony, while dear familiar arms enfolded his wasted form in the fond embrace of a sister's holy love.

Francis uttered an exclamation of surprise, for the mysterious *avant courier* of his royal sister had disappeared, and Marguerite

of Valois herself was hanging over his sick couch, mingling her tears with his. He tried to welcome her, but could only falter out,

"Marguerite, mine own true-hearted sister!"

"Rouse yourself, my prisoned eagle!" she replied; "your imperial jailor is at hand, and I would not for the honour of Valois, that the proud Spaniard should see that the victor-plumes that soared so triumphantly at Marignan, could droop in hopeless despondency under any reverse of fortune."

"It is the body, not the mind, that hath succumbed," said Francis, pressing his sister's hand to his throbbing temples.

"Let the ethereal and immortal principle, then, wrestle with the earthly load that cumbereth and oppreseth its energies," returned his sister. "Charles of Spain, alarmed by the account of your indisposition, comes this evening to visit you, and his foot is even now on the threshold."

"I will defy the cold-blooded fox to his teeth," exclaimed Francis, starting from his couch.

"Not so, my brother; fight him with his own weapons, diplomatic coolness and reserve."

It was not in the nature of Francis to follow this prudent counsel, and when his imperial rival, attended by his chancellor Gattinara, and his own physician, whom he had brought to visit his illustrious captive, entered, he reproachfully addressed him in these words:

"Your majesty has then come at last to see your unfortunate prisoner die!"

"Not so, my brother, and my friend," replied Charles, advancing to the foot of the couch; "but to speak of hope and speedy restoration to health and to liberty. I have also brought an old friend and faithful vassal to visit you, who will be only too happy to renew his homage."

"If your majesty means my traitor constable, Bourbon, I will not consent to be insulted with his presence. I trust there is none other subject or vassal peer of mine, over whom your majesty possesses the slightest influence," exclaimed Francis, passionately.

A smile of intelligence was exchanged between the emperor and the Duchess of Alencon at these words. "Be calm, my brother," whispered she, laying her hand on his arm; "no insult is intended." At the same moment, on a signal from the emperor, Pepin, the dauphin's foster-brother, advanced from the anti-room, leading by the collar his royal master's favourite dog Clovis. Instead of bounding joyfully to greet his captive lord, the sagacious animal, with that mysterious tact which is instinctive to his race, paused, and looking wistfully in the monarch's face, uttered a low piteous note of recognition and sympathy.

"No traitor in sooth, but the most faithful and devoted of friends art thou, my poor Clovis!" cried Francis; "but how came he at Madrid?"

"My sister, Donna Eleanora, understanding your majesty was suffering from indisposition, despatched an especial messenger to your royal sister the Duchess of Alencon, requesting her to make your favourite dog and his little attendant the companions of her journey, and I petitioned my fair and illustrious guest to permit me to have the pleasure of presenting Clovis to your majesty."

"You had a fairer companion on your journey than these, my sister," whispered Francis, to the Duchess of Alencon, as soon as the emperor and his followers had withdrawn.

"Whom does my royal brother mean?"

"Your charming attendant, Mademoiselle de Heilley. When shall I see her again?"

The countenance of Marguerite of Valois assumed an expression of uneasiness at these words. "If I had been aware that any previous acquaintance had existed between yourself and Mademoiselle de Heilley, I would have selected some other attendant," said she.

"My good sister," replied Francis, "I never saw your fair *sultane* till this evening, when you obligingly sent her to announce your kind visit."

"My brother, you are dreaming," said the duchess; "Mademoiselle de Heilley has never quitted me for a moment, till I left her in the anti-room just now."

"You did not then make her the bearer of this jewel?" demanded Francis, producing the ruby heart and chain.

"Certainly not. But it is plain that some fair lady has been your visitor, since the heart and chain are rather of too substantial a nature to be the creations of a feverish delusion. I will, however, summon my lady in waiting, that you may be convinced that you were mistaken with regard to its being Mademoiselle de Heilley."