

THE WONDERFUL FLOWER OF WOXTON.

An Historical Romance of the Times of Queen Elizabeth.

BY REV. JOSEPH SPILLMAN, S. J.

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CHAPTER XIX.—(Continued.)

She gave me a questioning look out of her blue eyes, and went on silently and busily with her work, Frith handing her the leaves and blossoms as she required them.

The wreath was soon finished and we got up to go. I lifted Frith into the saddle and put the reins into his hand, for my horse was so gentle I knew he could be trusted with him.

At first the boy rode along the narrow path at a foot's pace, in accordance with the injunctions of his sister, who followed with him.

But as I had anticipated, this was too slow a mode of procedure for the active little fellow, who contrived with hand and foot to urge his steed into a trot, so that he was soon some distance ahead of us, for all Miss Mary might do or say.

I was not going to let slip the opportunity that thus presented itself, and with a beating heart I craved my companion's indulgence, begging her to listen to me for a few moments.

She dropped her eyes with a conscious look, and began toying with my pony which she was carrying. When I tried to deliver the speech that I had prepared, I could not bring out a single sentence, although I am not generally at a loss for words.

I stammered out a kind of apology, saying I was well aware that the present moment, when her father was only just laid in his grave, was no fitting time to speak on such a subject, but it was a question of now or never, as I was on the eve of leaving London for a long period, and perhaps should shortly quit the country for good and all.

I was much gratified to perceive how startled Miss Mary was at this intelligence, for it showed me that I had been right in believing that she was not indifferent to me.

Thus encouraged, without further preamble, I asked her could she love me a little, and might I cherish the hope, that when I was in a position to offer her a home, I might claim her for my bride?

She changed color, and two large tears rolled slowly down her cheeks, as she timidly answered: "Perhaps I ought not to reply to such a question in this season of bereavement, but if I am to ask my own heart, it will not say nay."

At these words heaven seemed open to me, and in my delight I wanted to take her in my arms. But this she would not allow; indeed she said perhaps she had already said too much, for she must make the stipulation that the consent of her grandmother should be asked, and until it was obtained there should be no more talk of love between us.

To this I was obliged to agree; and little more was said until we reached the garden gate, where Frith, who had already taken my horse round to the stables, met us with the garland. We took it from him, and together went to hang it on the cross under the great oak.

Shortly after I repaired to the house and asked to see Mrs. Bellamy. I found her at needlework in a small built-out room; she received me very kindly, and asked me to sit down. After the exchange of the usual civilities I summoned up courage, seeing my nosegay in a glass on the table, to ask whether Miss Mary had received a message from me when she brought the flowers.

The old lady laid down her work, and said her granddaughter told her that I had a word to say to her. Thereupon I opened my heart to her. She replied that as I remarked, within a week of her son's funeral, one would hardly choose to speak of love and marriage; but the exceptional circumstances under which we lived in England must be our excuse.

"I tell you quite openly," she said, "that I have personally not a word to say against you. Our acquaintance is not one of long standing, but the events under which it is made, and all that has since occurred, have given me an insight into your character, showing you to be a staunch adherent of the Catholic faith, and possessed of all the qualities of heart and mind which I should wish to see in the husband I should choose for Mary.

Since therefore you tell me, what indeed I have already found out for myself, that she loves you well enough to join her lot to yours, I will gladly consent to your union, as soon as you can provide her with a comfortable, though not a luxurious home."

I kissed the hand of the venerable dame, thanking her for her kind expressions in my regard, though I must acknowledge that in the goodness of her heart she much overrated my gifts and qualities. I stated it to be my determination to wait until my future was fully secured, before making Miss Mary a formal offer of marriage. Then I spoke of my project of settling abroad, on account of the difficulties that beset Catholics

in the practice of their religion in England, difficulties that every year became greater. I said I had deposited a considerable sum of money with a merchant in Cologne, and if later on matters took a turn for the better in our country, as I confidently believed they would, there would always be the small estate I had inherited from my mother in Cornwall to which to return.

I asked if she would be prepared to take up her abode with us on the Rhine? She smiled sadly and shook her head, saying she was too old a tree to be transplanted, and she hoped her last resting place would be on English soil. Yet she approved of my plan.

We then spoke of the more immediate future. I told her that in a week's time I was going to Chartley as body physician to the Queen of Scots, at which she was very much astonished, instantly inquiring how I had obtained the post. She also put a great many other questions to me. I did not give her a hint of our plot, for I was sworn to secrecy; but she suspected the truth, and warned me against Babington, and any foolhardy schemes he might devise on behalf of the captive Queen.

She also warned me against trusting Walsingham, in almost the same words Father Weston had employed. I promised to be very guarded in pledging myself to any design of which my conscience did not approve. Finally she said she would speak to her granddaughter, and give me a decided, she hoped a favorable answer, before my departure from Woxton.

I thanked her, and was about to leave the room, when my little friend Frith came running in, to say that Babington had arrived, and had brought him a new beautiful velvet cap with a heron's feather. I then remembered that the host of the "Blue Boar" told me when I stopped there on my way out, that Babington had been there only a few hours before. Thinking of other things I had forgotten all about it, and did not in the least expect to meet him at Woxton. The reason of his coming was to be explained later on.

Before supper time I went into the garden to take a few turns upon the terrace, to enjoy the fresh air and watch the setting sun. Just as I got out I saw Miss Anne coming from the outbuildings, very much heated, as if she had been walking quickly. She started on seeing me, and appeared at first as if she wished to avoid me; but the next minute she advanced to meet me with a pleasant greeting, while she stroked from her brow her somewhat disorderly hair.

She had been for a ramble in the woods, she said, and had a beautiful view from thence, would I like to accompany her thither, to see the sunset? We should just have time before supper.

I willingly assented, and she guided me through the copses, already out in full leaf, to the old castle. We clambered over the ruined walls, covered with moss and all sorts of plants, until we reached the foot of the principal tower, whose massive stone walls, notwithstanding various cliffs and fissures, still bid defiance to wind and storm. I could perceive no means of gaining access to the tower, the doors of which were, as is frequently the case, at a considerable height from the ground, only to be reached from one of the adjacent buildings by means of a draw-bridge. The place where this had been was plainly discernible, amid the ivy that clothed the ancient edifice.

My companion solved the difficulty by leading the way through a thicket to another side of the tower, where one could climb to a

considerable height on one of the outer walls of the castle, and thus reach a loophole, the sides of which had crumbled away, and which was almost concealed by a curtain of ivy. Thus we gained ingress to the interior; beneath our feet lay a vaulted chamber. Father Weston's hiding case, in a state of tolerable preservation, constructed in the masonry of the tower, conducted to the platform of a projecting turret.

When we reached the summit we let our gaze wander over the fair landscape spread out before us like a panorama, beautified by the golden rays of the setting sun. Anne told me the names of the different villages that lay on the banks of the Thames, and on the far reaching plains of Middlesex. Then we stood for some time without speaking, contemplating the peaceful scene, no sound disturbing the silence except the shrill cries of the swallows as they whirled in wide circles round the tower.

When the sun disappeared below the horizon, and the distance grew hazy, Miss Anne warned me that it was time to return. As I reluctantly moved away, after a last lingering look, my eye fell upon a little pocket-book, elegantly bound in parchment, that lay upon the stone parapet. I immediately recognized it as belonging to Babington; I had frequently seen it in his possession, besides, it bore his initials stamped in gilt on the cover.

"Why, this is Babington's pocket-book! However came it here?" I exclaimed, as I took it in my hand.

At these words Miss Anne, who had already reached the stair steps, turned back with a hasty ejaculation, and snatched it from me. Then, aware that she had betrayed herself, she colored violently, saying: "For God's sake, dear Mr. Windsor, do not let my grandmother or my sister know of this!"

I felt for the poor girl's confusion, and as I did not doubt that Babington's intentions were honorable, I did not feel called to play the preacher or act the informer. However, I was not a little annoyed with him for having persuaded the innocent, but rather giddy child to meet him clandestinely at the old tower, and I begged Miss Anne to be guilty of no such imprudence in future, since she knew how much her relatives would object to them.

She was very penitent, and entreated me not to reveal her secret, but as I was Babington's friend, she did not mind telling me that she had secretly engaged herself to him before her father's death. Her grandmother was so terribly prejudiced against Babington, that she would never consent to their betrothal; yet they suited one another so well, and Babington was such a dear, pleasant fellow, she would never give him up. If I would only keep my own council, and not say a syllable to any one, she would help me in my courtship of her sister, for she had seen very plainly that I was in love with Mary.

Thus she ran on while we wedded our way homewards, and I gave her to understand that all was pretty well arranged between her sister and myself, and her grandmother approved of the match. She looked very much surprised, and said what a hypocrite Mary was, for she had told her nothing about it; and when I turned the tables on her, by asking if she had confided anything about the view from the tower to her sister, she said the case was different, as in this instance concealment was necessary, on account of the unreasonable dislike her grandmother had for Babington.

We got back just in time for supper. Nothing noteworthy happened till after morning prayers on the following day: Uncle Barby acted as chaplain, for Father Weston had gone on a mission to the midland counties.

I was walking in the garden, chatting with Frith, when I heard a horse led round from the stables, and wondering who could be going out riding on Sunday morning, I went round to the front door. To my surprise I found it was Babington. He was evidently in a state of great irritation; when he saw me, he shook his riding-whip at me angrily, exclaiming: "You tell-tale, you old tell-tale!" Then he struck his mare so violently that she reared and nearly threw him. I called to him to stop and tell me what was the matter; but he was off like a shot and soon out of sight in the forest.

A few moments later I encountered Miss Anne, in tears and much agitated. She taxed me with my treachery; this explained the mystery. The old lady had been told of the meetings in the old tower, and had taken Babington to task about it; and finding he had made light of her reprimand, had forthwith forbidden him the house. I was suspected of having been the mischief-maker.

I could not help feeling much annoyed, for my friendly relations with Babington were not merely disturbed, but permanently destroyed by this untoward incident. Even when at a later period he discovered that the old serving-man John, had carried the information to his mistress, he held aloof from me still, and thus I lost all opportunity I might have had of influencing him for good.

But my vexation was almost wholly forgotten in the happiness that awaited me that same Sunday. In the afternoon I was called up into

the upper chamber, that I knew so well. There I found the venerable dame, and my dear Mary. The former called my attention to the wonderful flower; I had often looked at it before, now it was fully developed, and all the fine rosy blossoms were unfolded. I had never in all my life seen the like of it, nor could I conceive how the plant could possibly draw sap and moisture out of the dry cement in which its roots were fixed. When I made this remark to the old lady, she replied that she regarded the wonderful growth of this plant as a special mark of divine favor, and on that account it was to be a source of continual consolation.

For although in itself it was a natural flower, it could not have sprouted and grown in such a place without supernatural interference. That was why she had asked me to come up thither; she wished that beneath God's little flower, as she called it, Mary and I should pledge our troth and seal our engagement with a kiss.

For although a public engagement was not to be thought of in consequence of their recent bereavement, yet Mary had decided upon giving me the promise I desired without further delay.

There is no need to describe the happiness I felt, when my love and I clasped hands, and our lips met for the first time. Standing beneath the wonderful flower, the white-haired grandmother laid her trembling hand upon the shoulder of each of us, and made the sign of the cross upon our foreheads; for it was not within thoughtful levity, but as becomes children of the saints, that we entered upon the contract which was the first step towards the union we looked forward to in the solemn Sacraments of marriage.

Thus our betrothal took place on "Jubilate" Sunday, A. D., 1586. How many tears were yet to be shed before the joyous day of our nuptials!

(To be continued.)

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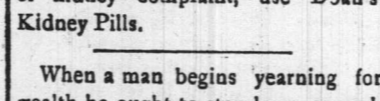
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