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THE LIMERICK VETERAN; OR, THE FOSTER SISTERS. BY THE AUTHOR OF "FLORENCE O'NEILL." (From the Baltimore Catholic Mirror.)

CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.) Then she turned quickly away, and retraced her steps till she came to the road leading to the blind woman's cottage. Having thus, she was quite convinced, made the discovery of what she so much desired to know, Margaret did not trouble herself any more about her foster-sister's movements that day, but returned home, blithe and gladsome at the thought that she added another most important link to the chain of evidence she was so industriously collecting together, by which Isabel's reputation would forever be ruined in the eyes of her protectors and of Maurice St. John. On the same evening on which Margaret had for the second time played the spy on the actions of her foster-sister, the latter had made a long and fruitless search for the note which Margaret had abstracted from the leaves of the volume in which Isabel had thoughtlessly placed it. Her first duties of the day discharged, she had withdrawn to the boudoir which the kindness of Lady St. John had assigned to her use, and remembering that she had forgotten to destroy the letter in question, she opened the book, which apparently remained as she had left it, for the purpose of doing so. In a moment she divined her loss, and, mechanically, with a pale face and cold and trembling fingers, she turned over the leaves again and again with the vain hope of finding it; then, scarce knowing what she was about, she ransacked all possible and impossible places in the narrow range of her chamber and boudoir in search of so important a document, and at length, after the lapse of two hours, realized the terrible fact that the letter had been abstracted from the place in which she had so incautiously deposited it. It required no great discernment to make her aware that Margaret, and none other, had procured a paper the possession of which would prove destructive to her character even in the eyes of her dearest friends; and bitterly reproaching herself for her want of prudence, she endeavored to school her features into an expression of calmness she was far from feeling interiorly. Mingled with the distress, too, which she experienced at the loss of this little billet, was the consciousness that, in all human probability, every one of her movements had been watched; movements, respecting which, those who loved her best must, of a necessity, hold her guilty, seeing that by a perhaps rash oath her lips were sealed to secrecy. On the morning to which I have alluded, when Margaret watched her take a letter from the trunk of the old oak, she hastened home, after having visited the blind woman, shut herself in her room, and perused the note; it ran as follows: "DEAREST ISABEL: I write these lines from a sick bed. It is, unfortunately, quite impossible for me to return to England, and, in the present juncture of affairs, and

in the danger which would inevitably result to me if my whereabouts were discovered, I have accepted the offer of my man Jacques and removed to the dwelling of his parents, honest people, but very poor, and ill able to afford the attention I really require. I am, indeed, so reduced as to be obliged to avail myself of the promise you made to come to my assistance, as far as you possibly could, when I required help. Jacques will await your coming this evening at the customary spot. Do not fail to meet him. As you love me, prove yourself true and faithful, my beloved Isabel, and convey to my trusty valet whatever help you can afford me." For a few moments after the perusal of an epistle which, much as she strove to conceal the fact from herself, betrayed the cold, calculating spirit of its writer, Isabel sat with her eyes still fixed on those lines, and a world of misery in her gaze; then she arose, clasped her hands together, and paced the room as one laboring under great mental excitement. "Does he really care for me," she said, half aloud, "does he really love me as he has protested he does, and, at the same time, pen a letter which he knows must cause me pain? Alas! alas! what shall I do? I have expended in six weeks the handsome allowance the Lady St. John makes me for half a year, the presents of valuable jewelry the good Marshal has given me have gone in the same way, perhaps never to be returned to me. What can I do now? to grant what he asks is torture, and yet I cannot refuse; and then this awful vow which seals my lips, and Margaret, perhaps, aware of my stolen meetings. I cannot seek the good Cure, I cannot pour my sorrows in the ear of dear old Grace; Maurice I never heard from, alas! perhaps he has already learned a lesson of suspicion from Margaret. Oh, my God! what shall I do, how shall I bear this trouble?" As Isabel uttered the last words, she sank into a seat, and burying her face in her hands, she wept long and bitterly. "It was her gift," she said, at length, "but, like all that has preceded it, it must go, and perhaps I am selfish, perhaps I should be glad that, at any personal cost, I can relieve his sufferings." Then opening a small, antique casket, she took from thence a bracelet, richly set with diamonds and emeralds, and carefully placing it in a small case, she took up her pen and wrote the following note: "I would that I could satisfy the longing desires of my heart and send you sufficient to sustain you under your present misfortunes, not the least of which is your present illness, for it detains you in a spot fraught with danger. Money I have none, but I send you, by the hand of Jacques, the last and most treasured of the costly trinkets the love of my benefactress has bestowed on me, and I conjure you, my dear —, on no account to part with it. It is yours, for the present exigency, only to re-visit upon. I repeat the words you said when I gave you the other trinkets. I have reserved but those of small value, dreading to excite suspicion should I part with all. I seem to be tottering on the verge of a precipice, into the depths of which I may be at any moment hurled, and long for the moment of your departure from France; remember, I do not overrate the trouble which will fall on me should my stolen meetings with you be discovered. Such an event is more than possible, as, through an act of imprudence on my part, having merely concealed it within the leaves of a book, I have lost the last letter you sent me. Acknowledge the receipt of this letter and package immediately. I shall look in the customary place to-morrow for your reply. Let me beseech you not to linger in France a moment more than is absolutely necessary. "Your very affectionate, I. F." CHAPTER XVII. On the morning of the following day, whilst Margaret was yet lingering at the toilet table, Isabel hastened to the hollow oak, the repository of this most dangerous correspondence, having the previous night entrusted her most cherished souvenir, one of the many mementoes of Lady St. John's affection to herself, to the care of Jacques. In the trunk of the tree she found, as she expected, a letter, and it being one of the days on which it was her wont to visit the blind woman, she returned at once to the chateau, and in the privacy of her own apartment she read as follows: "I hasten, my beloved —, to thank you for the package which Jacques has just delivered to me. Do not fear that I shall part with your trinket irretrievably; it will merely remain in the custody of a Jew money-lender, residing in Paris, till I am able to redeem it. Of course, the little you have in your power to do for me, and my own utter want of funds, is one of the chief causes of my remaining in a spot so full of danger. Think, dearest, it is absolutely impossible for you to devise some plan by which you could once and for all obviate this difficulty, and by obtaining for me about one thousand francs once and for all help me out of my dilemma? "The perusal of your letter both grieves and annoys me. It grieves me to see how much I distress you, and it annoys me, because I cannot divest myself of the idea that you value the possession of your trinkets so as to feel distressed at allowing me the temporary use of them. Let me remind you that she who loves perfectly knows fear but by name; fear is known only to selfish souls. "The want of funds alone detains me in this detested place wherein I am doomed to vegetate against my will. "Keep up your courage. Remember, even should your intercourse with me cease and injure you in the estimation of those with whom you live, your

trouble will not last long, only till I write you from England. Till then, I charge you to keep sacred the promise you have solemnly made before heaven not to reveal my name." With mingled feelings of fear, indignation and outraged love Isabel read and re-read the contents of this precious missive. "Selfish, ungrateful" burst from her lips again and again, as her spirit rose at the coolness with which the writer treated her fear of discovery, and the evident selfishness which he exhibited. "Heaven support me, what shall I do?" said she, pressing her hands on her throbbing temples, "oh, this dreadful vow wherewith my lips are sealed; and yet, were there no sin in breaking it, would I dare to speak and have his blood upon my soul? Ah, indeed, indeed, there is nothing left for me but to suffer and endure." But poor Isabel was no philosopher, nay, she was even wanting in the first and most necessary of Christian virtues, patience; and now a perfect whirlwind of fear and grief swept over her soul, and tears were raining down her face, when she was startled by the voice of one whom she tenderly loved at her chamber door, asking admittance. Sympathy she could not seek, for her lips must be sealed as to the cause of her sorrow; to attempt to conceal her tears was equally vain, and she was fain to bid Grace enter, and to hope that her old friend would ask no questions. "I have such good news, dear child," said the aged dame, as she entered the room and seated herself beside Isabel, "the Marshal and the rest of the family leave Scotland to-morrow. It makes me quite blithe to think they will all be back soon. Mr. Edward, too, who has been spending some time at Lord Balmerino's, will come with them, so that we shall have quite a merry gathering for Christmas; but, my bonny bird, have you not a word to say in return for my good news?" and poor old Grace bent her eyes, bright as of yore in spite of her years, on Isabel's tearful face. "There was pity, love and wonderment in that gaze, which Isabel did not return, for her eyes were cast down; she answered never a word, but her pallid face and evident confusion increased the bewilderment of Grace. "My dearest and best-loved child, tell your poor old friend, who has always loved you as if you were her own, what it is that preys on your mind and makes you so unhappy?" "It is all nothing, dear Grace," was the reply, and Isabel nervously pushed backed the shower of golden curls which had fallen on her neck and shoulders, and made an effort to drive back the tears from her eyes. "I am very triste sometimes, you know. And so the Lady Florence and Madame St. John are coming back at last?" "But, my dear child, you are not triste for nothing, confide in me; believe me, Isabel, I have grieved to see you so sad and dejected; your step is heavy and your voice is still, instead of corolling as blithe as any bird. Are you not glad dear Lady Florence is coming back to us?" "I should be glad, Grace, should I not?" stammered forth Isabel, a deep flush dyeing her face and neck, for well she knew that the return of the family to St. Germain, with that seal upon her lips, would only increase her unhappiness. "Surely my birdie should be glad; has not my Lady Florence been more than a mother to you?" and here Grace paused and marveled more than ever at her favorite's strange words and absent manner. "How many days, think you, will pass before they return?" "Probably before this day week." "Less than a week; that will soon slip away." Grace started at the strange, undefinable expression which flitted across the face of her favorite. She could not divest her mind of the idea that, for some hidden cause, Isabel regretted the return of the family to the chateau, and a shadow passed over her aged face at the thought of the joy testified by Margaret, whose face had beamed with pleasure when she had told her the contents of the letter she had that morning received from Scotland, and contrasted it with the sadness and mystery by which Isabel was surrounded. "My bonny birdie," said the old lady, after a pause, "you have something on your mind, that I can plainly see, but I will not press you into a confidence which, mayhap, should be reserved for Lady Florence alone," and having, for a moment, folded her in her arms, Isabel giving vent to a weary sigh, she left the room without another word. But alone in her chamber, the usually sharp, penetrating mind of Grace Wilmot was absorbed in thought. "Strange," she muttered to herself, "the dispositions of these two dameels seems altogether reversed, she who once was all candor, and good temper and content appears to have changed places with Margaret and to have adopted her former morose and haughty con-

duct. I have noticed a change these last six weeks and am very glad the family are coming back; truly, it seems as if a glamour were cast over the girls. Margaret and Isabel have changed places, for all Margaret's cold and proud reserve has passed away to her foster-sister." Poor old Grace! how little did she know that Margaret's unbounded joy arose from the exultation she felt that Isabel was wholly in her power, that at last Dame Fortune, as she said to herself, was making compensation for the miseries attendant on her birth, which had thrown her on the bounty of the Marshal and his lady, and that the circumstances of which she had become acquainted were certain to degrade and lower Isabel in the esteem of her friends, and would probably end in exactly reversing their positions, for with such a shadow over her how could she ever become the bride of Maurice. On the next morning Margaret turned her steps to the old oak tree, just half an hour before the time at which Isabel was in the habit of visiting the blind woman. Within a small cavity in the hollow of the tree there was a little heap of withered leaves; she moved them aside—a sealed letter lay beneath them. She clutched it as greedily as a miser does his gold, and returned home by a circuitous route in order to avoid encountering Isabel. As soon as she had reached her own room she locked the door, tore open the letter, and read as follows: "DELOVED —: "I implore you to meet me to-night without fail. Jacques tells me he has heard a certain party are expected home in a few days. We must arrange matters for a speedy flight ere that takes place. "Your devoted —." Margaret Lindsey's youthful charms had developed; she was now a superbly beautiful woman; her handsome face was radiant with happiness; her eyes sparkled with the delight she really felt when she entered the apartment appointed for common use when the young ladies were not in their own rooms. It was also destined for Grace, but her increasing age and infirmities rarely allowed her to leave her own chamber. Isabel was already seated, sad and sorrowful, affecting to read, but her thoughts wandered far away, and she made a faint attempt to reply with spirit when her tormentor addressed her with some sarcastic observation, and then again relapsed into silence. To add to what she had formerly endured, a sharp pang seized her heart on finding no letter in the customary place, combined with a fear lest she had been watched and the letter removed ere she had arrived. "I am consumed with envy, Mrs. Wilmot," said Margaret, when Grace entered the apartment. "Really, Isabel, who used to have such a fine flow of spirits, is now so sad and taciturn that I cannot get a word out of her.— I am sure," she added, with a light, provoking laugh, "the Ladies St. John will charge me with having set her a bad example, seeing they always used to be severe on me for what they were pleased to term sullenness and discontent; has some elfin spirit, think you, changed us in the night? I sometimes ask myself if I am really Margaret and if she be Isabel, she has grown so pale, and sad, and silent, and I—well, the very tenor of my life is changed; I feel as happy as a little bird." "Your foster-sister is not well, Miss Margaret. She will be as of old when old times return, as they will full soon, please God," said Grace, her keen eyes riveted on the face of Isabel, now ghastly as death, and then flushed to the deepest crimson. "Old times!" retorted beautiful Margaret, scornfully. "Those old times you allude to, Mistress Wilmot, will never return to Isabel or myself. Mayhap I may be the gainer by her loss. I may seem to speak in enigmas, but time will show, time will show, and"— The proud beauty with eyes flashing fire, had risen from her seat, and was about to leave the room, when her yet unfinished speech was brought suddenly to an end by a heavy fall.— The unfortunate Isabel had sunk senseless on the ground. It was very long ere she recovered her senses, and whilst nurse and Grace were occupied in endeavoring to restore suspended animation, Margaret stood idly by, a cold, sarcastic smile on her beautiful lips, a cruel glitter in her eyes as she bent them pitilessly on the still unconscious Isabel. "My pretty colleen, it is ill she has been of late, sure, and it is my Lady Florence who will be setting things right, Mistress Wilmot," said the still buxom and comely wife of the worthy Denis. "Lady St. John," retorted Margaret, "will be surprised at much that has taken place since her departure. It is time that Isabel, the favored one of the whole household, should be watched by careful eyes." As she spoke, she swept out of the room,

leaving Grace and nurse at a loss to understand the meaning of her words. "Margaret Lindsey hath an undisciplined heart; she is a proud, imperious woman. As she was when a child, this poor Isabel has always been the object of her dislike," said Grace. "But see, she is reviving. Nurse, let us place her on the sofa." Pleading illness after her recovery from the swoon into which she had fallen, Isabel kept in her own room during the rest of the day and that which succeeded it. On the morning of the following day she rose as usual, visited the blind woman, notwithstanding the entreaties of Grace that she would not expose herself to the cold and damp, and on her way thither found in the customary place a letter expostulating with her on account of her silence, and expressing astonishment that she had not met the writer agreeably to the request contained in his last. "I am better in health," thus ran the letter, "but not well enough to travel. I must not incur the slightest chance of encountering Maurice, or indeed any of the family. Try and help me yet again, and in a very short time I hope to be far away, and shall be able to release you from your present obligation of secrecy." "The last time, the very last time," sighed she to herself, after she had read the letter.— "Yes, I will leave nothing undone to save him. I have gone too far to recede. One meeting more or less matters not. I will look upon his face again before nightfall." Thus, when the short winter afternoon had faded away, and Margaret had retired to the library, Isabel hastened on her ill-advised expedition, and once again stood by the hillside, awaiting the coming of one who was to be her fate. One moment she lingers by the hillside, and by the light of the moonbeams other eyes than those of Isabel scanned the appearance of the stranger narrowly. He was pale, as if recovering from recent illness; he wore his arm in a sling; his features were decidedly handsome, but their beauty was marred by a sinister expression. "You are come then, dearest, to meet me once again," he said, passing his arm tenderly around her waist, and kissing her her upturned face. "I rejoice, my Isabel, for it may be the last time for a long while. And now, love, what can you do for me yet more to help me out of the desperate trouble I have fallen into; above all to help me to England, as I have little doubt but that I shall be able to get away in a few days." "Alas! alas! I can do nothing beyond that which may still help you for the present;" and as Isabel spoke the wicked eyes which peered through the trees beheld her hand a very small package in the stranger's hand. "It was no doubt a trinket," thought the owner of the eyes, for the reply was, as he glanced carelessly, nay scornfully, at what he had received:—"Really, this is child's play, my love; some fifty francs perchance it may produce from that avaricious old user, Levi, and the old trouble goes on still and all your woman's gaw-gaws parted with. How much better it would be if you would but condescend to take the step I advised when I was lying perdu up yonder," and he pointed with his walking stick to the towers of the palace on the brow of the hill; "I could soon have returned you the amount, and both my trouble and your own would the sooner be over." With an emotion of horror, Isabel shrank from the stranger as he spoke these words I have recorded, which had failed to reach the curious ears of one who had bent forward farther than prudence had warranted. "Never, never," said Isabel. "Whatever be the consequence, I cannot, dare not, take such step as that." "I see you no not love me, Isabel. Love dares everything for the object of its affection." "Alas! alas! I would help you more effectually had I the means of doing so honorably," said Isabel, bursting into tears. "Some unforeseen help may yet turn up," said the stranger, drawing her to him and kissing her. "When next you hear from me, I shall be many miles from this place." But again he paused, and whispered a few words, with an expression of entreaty on his handsome face, but she turned angrily aside, as if disesteeming from some proposal he had made. A grasp of the hand, a parting embrace, and the two separated, she, with the fleetness of the fawn, in the direction of the chateau, whilst he for a moment lingered, and as the bright moonbeams played full on his face, the watcher by the hillside could see an expression akin to contempt on his handsome features, as he gazed after the retreating form of his companion; then he turned with a loitering step down a road leading to the adjacent town of —. To be Continued.