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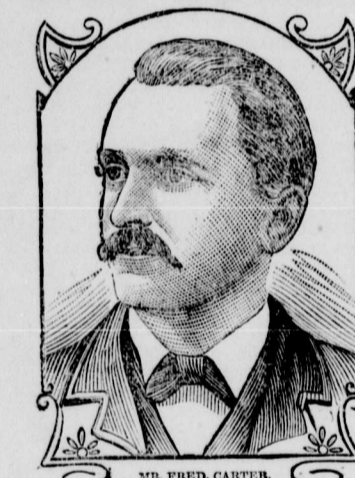
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BAD BLOOD



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FLORENCE O'NEILL,

The Rose of St. Germain; OR, THE SIEGE OF LIMERICK.

By AGNES M. STEWART, Author of "Life in the Cloister," "Grace O'Halloran," etc.

CHAPTER IV. TRUE TO PRINCIPLE.

Early the next morning, Sir Reginald met his host at the breakfast table, but Florence was not visible, and he easily accounted for her absence, conscious that she must be aware that his visit to the Grange had been made to answer some political purpose or end of the Dutch monarch. A long and anxious conference it was, which the baronet held with his guest later in the morning in the privacy of his own apartment.

He was a timid, quiet country gentleman, caring not one jot about State affairs, scarcely heeding whether James II., or the usurping William sat upon the throne, so that he could be quiet, and yet he was about to be dragged from his own home to have the questionable honor of an audience with the king, who would not get rid of the idea that the baronet, leading the life of a country gentleman, had it in his power to be of great service, if he would but conquer that absurd timidity, which he had been told had grown up with him from his youth. The time was come then when it appeared he must abandon his seclusion, and though until now, when he was turned sixty years of age, he had never adopted any definite time of action; he was required to do so instantly, for his sovereign required the aid of all well-wishers to the present Government.

"An honor, I faith," he muttered to himself, "it is an honor then I would be very glad to decline accepting; his Majesty will make me pay dearly for it one way or another."

Sir Charles was, however, of a very hesitating disposition, and so in the end, Sir Reginald gained his point, and it was agreed that the baronet should in a very few days leave the Grange for London, where he would have the audience which the king wished to give him. In the evening, St. John was to take his leave, and as the day wore on he began to entertain some apprehension lest he should not see Florence before his departure.

In this idea, however, he was mistaken, for chance brought that about which solicitation would not have procured. He had missed his way through the interminable galleries of the old house, and instead of returning to the room in which he had at last succeeded in extorting the unwilling consent of the baronet to appear on the scene of public life, he entered the library, the door of which stood ajar. Florence was seated at a table, unmindful of his presence, till he stood beside her, and, extending his hand, he exclaimed:

"Dearest Florence, have I offended you beyond forgiveness? Is that loyalty a virtue in you, and a sin in me? Grant me, least, a hearing before we part, and say may I not be allowed to feel some attachment for the king whose very name displeases you, even as you feel love for James Stuart and Mary of Modena?" Do not shrink from me, Florence," he added, as with averted head she gazed abstractedly out on the scene beyond the Grange.

"But do believe me, my betrothed one, William of Orange is not so vilely bad, James Stuart not so impeccable as you consider them to be."

"I beg you, sir, not to offend my ears by your pleadings for this Dutch usurper," said Florence, with an expression of sorrow on her features. "In my eyes it is rank heresy to pollute the name of the lawful King of England by mentioning it with that of his traitorous and usurping nephew. Oh, Reginald," she added, in a tone of mingled softness and sorrow, "you know not how I grieve that you should have bound yourself to the service of this man, and if you remind me of my betrothal, sanctioned years since by my departed mother, say if you think that those to whom I owe all I possess, those in whose service my kinsfolk have

fought and died, and for whom I, too, would peril my own life, can you, for one moment, think, dear Reginald, that I could ever hope to win their consent to our union?"

The last words were spoken in a tone of inexpressible sadness. That short word of endearment, too, almost unconsciously used, encouraged St. John, and he replied:

"We do not need the consent of the ex-king, or his consent to our nuptials, my Florence. William and Mary will prove to us friends equally as dear, and will grace our bridal with their presence. Your uncle, too, will not frown upon our union, for by the end of the week he will be admitted to the favor of an audience with the king on affairs connected with the State."

For one moment Florence was silent; the tear of human tenderness, the tribute to the weakness of woman's nature, which a moment since had trembled in her eye, was proudly dashed aside, and she exclaimed:

"Reginald, are you playing with the fears of my woman's heart, or are you speaking in earnest? My uncle, timid as he is, is still true to the Stuart cause, though he had persistently held aloof from mixing in any political cabal. Surely your errand here has not been to lead him from his allegiance. Have you spoken the truth, Reginald?"

"I have spoken the simple truth, and rejoiced that the good baronet yielded, because I regarded the idea of his adhesion to William's government as an incentive to induce my beloved Florence to cast away her prejudices."

"You are bold as well as insolent," said Florence, bitterly. "Do you think this a seemly way to win my consent to our union? You do not know me, I think, but understand that yonder sun is about as likely to fall from the heavens as I to unite my fate with that of so devoted an adherent of the Dutch king. No, not a word more," she added, wrenching her hand from his grasp, "my heart may break at witnessing the mistaken prejudices, harbored under the name of loyalty, of those I love, but never shall it forswear, whatever be its struggles, its allegiance to the Stuarts."

As she spoke these words she rushed out of the room, and hurrying to her own chamber, wept long and bitterly over the defection of her uncle, and the mistaken line of conduct pursued by Reginald, to whom the whole wealth of her affections had long been devoted; nor did she leave her room till she had seen Sir Reginald and the fanatical Benson gallop down the avenue leading from the Grange. Then, with tears in her eyes, she sought her apartment, the secret of admission to which was known only to herself and Sir Charles de Gray.

Florence had turned her steps to an almost uninhabited wing of the mansion, and entering a small ante-room, to which she obtained admission by a pass-key which she kept in her possession, she entered a spacious apartment, which had not been tenanted for a long series of years. Its antique oaken furniture, with cushions of Utrecht velvet, was covered with dust; spiders had woven their webs in every nook and corner of the room, and the tapestry hangings were in many places falling to pieces.

Advancing to the further extremity of the room, she raised the tapestry, and pressing her finger on a spring which lay concealed in the wall, the panel flew back, and disclosed a recess large enough to allow a person passing through in a stooping posture. This was, in fact, one of those places of concealment known by the name of "priests' hiding holes," and which are still to be found in many of our old mansions.

For a few moments Florence stood in a musing attitude, then she exclaimed, with a smile on her face, "Yes, it may be as well, for in London I, too, shall have my part to play. I will see Ashton, and who knows, weak as I am, I may have it in my power to aid my royal mistress."

CHAPTER V. THE CONSPIRACY.

The shades of the early December evening were fast deepening into night, and a misty rain, which had been falling for several hours, had now resolved itself into a determined heavy shower, gradually emptying the streets in the neighborhood of Covent Garden of the few wayfarers whom business or other needful occupation drove from the shelter of their homes, to encounter the miseries of the inclement weather. Closely veiled, and her form shrouded in heavy folds of a dark mantle, a lady passed rapidly along, accompanied by a young man, whose dress and bearing betokened him to be of the middle class. His hat was drawn low over his forehead, evidently with a wish to shun observation, and with a swift step, his companion leaning on his arm, these two persons emerged from the friendly shelter afforded by the garden wall of the Earl of Bedford's mansion.

The house in question was a wooden building, erected on the site now occupied by the lower end of Southampton street, and the garden traversed that very spot where the southern row of the buildings of Covent Garden is now situated.

"Have we got far to walk, my good friend," said Florence, who, accompanied by Ashton, had on this evening left her uncle's house, in the village of Kensington, thus involving herself in the perilous enterprise entrusted to Ashton.

"We are watched," she whispered, before he had time to reply, as she observed a man, evidently disguised, accompanied by another whose features she well knew, now standing beneath an archway on the opposite side of the road. "I have heard distinctly," she continued, in a whisper, "the sound of footsteps following our own for some time past. Tell me, Ashton, are we near your home?"

"Be not alarmed, dear lady," said Ashton, in a voice as low as her own; "a few moments more, and I shall have the pleasure of seeing you safely lodged."

Almost immediately, indeed, a turn in the road brought them in front of the house occupied by Ashton's family, and glancing warily round he perceived, not without sharing in the uneasiness of his companion, that the persons he had alluded to were evidently still on the watch, they having left the archway in which they had concealed themselves.

By means of a pass-key Ashton introduced his companion within the house. Their arrival, however, had been expected, for as he closed the door, a young and pretty woman, her countenance bearing traces of intense anxiety, as also of joy at seeing him again, welcomed his return. Then turning to Florence, she said:

"I fear, madam, you have suffered much during your long and hasty walk this inclement night. Let me at once afford you all the assistance in my power."

Then, accompanied by Ashton, she led Florence to a small parlor on the ground floor, the genial warmth of which afforded a pleasant contrast to the inclement weather she had recently braved. A huge log of wood hissed and crackled cheerily, as it lay in the large fire place, beside which Florence beheld herself quickly installed, whilst on a table, in the centre of the room, a snow white cloth was spread, covered with several dainties, not the least substantial of which was a huge venison pasty. Covers were placed for six persons, and Florence was cogitating already as to who the other visitants might be, when a low tap was heard at the window. Ashton immediately rose, and, advancing gently to the door, admitted two gentlemen, in one of whom Florence recognized a disaffected noble attached to the court of William, but whom she was aware, from a conversation she had heard between himself and her uncle, was playing an active part in the efforts now being made to re-establish James on the throne of Great Britain.

This nobleman, in whom the reader will recognize Preston, who played so conspicuous a part in a plot which involved some of the best and bravest of the nobility, as also not a few of the most estimable of the clergy, was accompanied by a gentleman named Elliot, to whom Florence was a stranger. Then drawing near, Lord Preston said to her, in a tone of surprise:

"My dear young lady, is Sir Charles aware of your presence among us? He has become almost a favorite with the king, and I should not think would approve of his niece joining our ranks; but if, as Ashton informs me, you have sufficient courage, we shall duly value the accession."

"I am not likely to lack courage in the cause of our gracious king and queen," said Florence, "and have already told Master Ashton, who escorted me to England by her Majesty's command, that I am willing to lend my help in any way in which it may be made useful."

Ashton then begged his guests to partake of the substantial fare his hospitality had provided, and drawing round the table, they did amply justice to the viands before them, conversing meanwhile, in an undertone, of the attempt about to be made in favor of King James. A heavy gloom, however, hung over the spirits of poor Mrs. Ashton. Her attempt to smile, when rallied by her guests, was perfectly ludicrous, and more than once Florence observed she was in tears, and on her husband bidding her keep up her spirits, she replied:

"A deadly apprehension of approaching evil rests upon me; I cannot shake it off."

Somewhat hastily, Ashton replied: "Repress such foolish forebodings, Janet. As for us, who have the work to perform, it is essentially necessary to set about it in a hopeful state of mind."

The cloth then removed by an elderly maid servant, too deaf to listen to their conversation, even if she had had the will to betray them, the real business of the evening commenced—that business which had brought together, in such close converse, the noble and the esquire, the simple Ashton and the high-bred Florence, with his wife Janet, formerly the richly dowered and handsome daughter of the wealthy citizen and craftsman, Richard Dawson.

"Now that we have at last met, my lord," exclaimed Ashton, "let us decide as to what will be the best course for us to pursue. In less than a month Christmas will be at hand, before which time we must be out of

England. Mistress Florence, also, must again be at St. Germain, and if we defer any longer we shall find it impossible to dare the hazardous stake we have to play."

"And what plan would you adopt?" asked Lord Preston. "How can we best arrange, in secrecy and silence, to convey to those who languish at St. Germain news from friends devoted to their interests? I marvel, Ashton, if even your ready wit has yet seen the way by which we can effect our object. I fancy you have thought the matter more easy than we may chance to find it."

"Ah, my lord," replied the brave and gallant Ashton, with a sigh, "trust me; love and loyalty know nought of obstacles, or if prudence demands caution and care in their dealings with those around them, still they pass on fearlessly to their work. Do not let us grow depressed at the very outset, my lord, for, as I just warned my wife, it will most effectually prevent our success."

As Ashton spoke, Florence noted the sigh which accompanied his words, and observed a scarcely perceptible flush mantle the cheek of Lord Preston; she knew it to be the flush of rising vexation of spirit, at the contrast which the bold, enthusiastic daring of the intrepid Ashton presented, to his own vacillating humor. A shade, too, had passed over Ashton's features, and a something of fear possessed him as to whether the noble lord was an instrument quite fitting for himself and those whose interests he had at heart, to deal with; and it may even be, that with that sigh came a sad foreboding of impending evil, and he could not but look with contempt on this nobleman, who having put his hand to the plough, was yet half minded to look back and retrace his steps. Ah, could he have seen the sad future which loomed so darkly over and around, could he have foreseen that his own head would fall, and the ignoble peer be saved, as the page of history shows, and saved, not because more innocent than Ashton, for in the sight of the ruling powers each was alike guilty, but merely because, coward like, he screened himself from the punishment he had equally merited, by disclosing all the windings and ramifications of a plot, which compromised not only persons of rank and consideration in England, but also in Scotland! But Ashton's vigorous mind had planned things much more cleverly than Lord Preston surmised, for he had said truly that where either foe or loyalty are concerned, obstacles are only thought of as things that must be overcome, and he then narrated how through a person named Burdett, with whom he had become acquainted, he was about to be introduced to a woman whose husband possessed a snack which would carry over to France His Lordship, Ashton himself, Florence, Mr. Elliott, and if required, also any other persons who might wish to join them.

"I shall offer," continued Ashton, "100 guineas, for the amount of money to be agreed on shall not be an object, and if I do not meet the master of the vessel at Burdett's house, we have arranged to appoint an evening to see him at the Wonder Tavern on Ludgate Hill, and I hope, my lord," he added, "to be able to set sail at the latest, early in December. These are my present arrangements," he added, "and as Your Lordship has honored my poor house so far as to make it a place of our meeting to-night, I shall be glad to know if these, perhaps, still undigested plans meet your approval; for if they satisfy Your Lordship, they will also have the kindly favor of those in whose behalf you have come here to-night."

"Really, Ashton, I do not see you could have arranged better," replied Lord Preston, "and now, gentle lady," he continued, turning to Florence, "will you let me know at what time you intend to seek the presence of Queen Mary? Your worthy uncle," he added, "has so easily fallen into the toils spread for him by the flatteries of William, that the task of introduction will not be a difficult one, but trust me, you may as soon think of turning the lion's whelps as softening the queen's heart, if such should be your idea. Indeed, putting aside Mary's own evil inclinations, has not her husband made it his study since the fatal day on which King Charles decreed that she become the bride of the then Prince of Orange; has it not, I say, been his constant effort to steel her heart against every natural emotion of filial love, to deny in her presence all that she has been taught to consider holy, for his own vile purposes, to make her utterly unmindful of house and home affections? Ay!" continued Lord Preston, now carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, and by his dislike of William III., so as to forget the minor considerations of self-love or self-preservation by which he was generally distinguished, "have I not myself heard him dare to speak disparagingly of her royal father even when in public, and revile all that she was ever taught to love."

Florence, as Lord Preston spoke thus, remembered also a certain speech which was said on good authority to have been uttered by Mary; for when the unfortunate James wrote after his coronation, reproaching her for having suffered this ceremony to have been performed whilst himself and the Prince of Wales lived, William vindicated himself declaring that he had done nothing but by her advice, when this most dutiful of daughters replied with irritation, that if her father regained his authority, her husband might thank himself, for letting him go as he did.

"I have thought about it, Florence, and my word is pledged to meet the king. Do not look. I will call him the Dutch usurper then, as that is the term you like best, my loyal one. But, look you, Florence, because I have an audience with William of Orange, I do not, for this reason, forswear my fealty to King James."

"It is, uncle, a tampering with honor that is not strictly honorable," said Florence, "and may lead to great dissatisfaction in the usurper's cause, when all your life you have been inactive for your royal kings. How can I tell my lawful master at St. Germain that my own uncle has acted thus?"

"Silence, Florence," said the old man, in a playful voice, yet half annoyed at the pertinacity with which Florence pressed her point: "I will give you no cause for shame. And, now, I have a question to put to you. If you feel my acquiescence with William's wishes for an audience, which I could not well excuse myself from, as king's requests are akin to commands, you simple one, then how do you like the knowledge that your future husband is the favorite of the Dutchman, as you scornfully call him? He left me full of sorrow at your anger towards him, and begged me to intercede in his behalf."

"Let him win my love by deserting the court of the usurper," said Florence, a bright glow of indignation mantling her cheek. "My heart may break under the trial, but I will never marry St. John, while he is the sworn friend and favorite of William of Orange; and as far as you are concerned, my dear uncle, I shall see you enter the precincts of that hateful court with dread and abhorrence, lest unlooked-for evil may befall you. When we are in London I shall count the days till I leave France."

"We begin our journey to-morrow, Florence; when we meet next try and put a brighter face on things," said Sir Charles, who then left the room, anxious to close the conversation.

"I fear, Florence," said the priest, "that evil will come of the visit of Benson, for, unfortunately, he caught a glimpse of me the night of his arrival. I did not like his manner when we last met. You have heard me speak of the man. He was not always the fanatic which he has become for some years past. In our youth and before my own conversion to the Catholic faith, we were college-mates together, and though, even then, he had a tinge of moroseness in his character, no one would have imagined he would have become one of the most fanatical of men. I fancy it was first adopted to ingratiate himself with Sir Reginald's father, whose preceptor he, unhappily, became, much to the horror and distress of the worthy Lady St. John, who was far from an illiberal woman in her religious views. However, my child, the narrow mind of Benson has never forgiven me the step I took in joining the Church of Rome; and I am positive that if he can bring me into trouble he will not hesitate to do so. In order, therefore, not to be the cause of anxiety to Sir Charles, I shall, for a short time, leave this place and go to the metropolis, for I am quite sure the recognition was mutual on the part of Benson as well as my own."

When the priest had concluded, Florence acquainted him with the story of her own trouble, touching lightly, however, on the portion of her

story relating to Sir Reginald, but dwelling bitterly on her uncle's contemplated defection. The Jesuit, however, knew the history of her betrothal, and he warned and exhorted her against the evil that would infallibly attend her nuptials should she become the wife of one now the avowed favorite of William. "You must suffer with others, my child," said he, "for our lot is cast in troublous times. There is nothing to be done but to wait, and watch, and pray lovingly and trustingly that, in God's own time, if He seeth fit, these clouds may pass away, and as far as you are yourself concerned, that Sir Reginald, to whom you are betrothed, may become wise in time, and cast away his allegiance to the usurper, for fealty to his exiled king. As to the news about your uncle, I, indeed, grieve to hear such tidings, wondering that William of Orange can lure him from his life of peaceful idleness, now to him a second nature from the mere force of habit, to the busy scenes of public life. But we shall see, Florence," he continued; "we can, as I have just told you, only watch and pray."

Then giving her his blessing, the good Father, ever her comforter and adviser in the time of trial, bade her farewell, and gliding through the long passages and open apartments, she replaced the panel and hastened to the library, in which, as she expected, she found her uncle seated, clad in a robe of pale green brocade, made in the simplest manner. Florence looked exquisitely lovely. She needed no extraneous aid to add to the charms which nature had endowed her with, and, advancing to the old man's seat, even before he was aware of her approach, her golden hair had waved upon his withered cheeks, and a tear fell on the forehead she reverently kissed.

"Why, Florence, my child, what ails you?" said the baronet, drawing her to his side. "Why are you in tears? Do you know I am going to London? Cheer up now, or I promise I will not please you by showing you the great city during the few weeks that will pass before you go back to France."

"Alas! it is that very journey that grieves me, for I have ascertained the cause that brought Reginald hither. Think twice, uncle, before you take this step."

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By means of a pass-key Ashton introduced his companion within the house. Their arrival, however, had been expected, for as he closed the door, a young and pretty woman, her countenance bearing traces of intense anxiety, as also of joy at seeing him again, welcomed his return. Then turning to Florence, she said:

"I fear, madam, you have suffered much during your long and hasty walk this inclement night. Let me at once afford you all the assistance in my power."

Then, accompanied by Ashton, she led Florence to a small parlor on the ground floor, the genial warmth of which afforded a pleasant contrast to the inclement weather she had recently braved. A huge log of wood hissed and crackled cheerily, as it lay in the large fire place, beside which Florence beheld herself quickly installed, whilst on a table, in the centre of the room, a snow white cloth was spread, covered with several dainties, not the least substantial of which was a huge venison pasty. Covers were placed for six persons, and Florence was cogitating already as to who the other visitants might be, when a low tap was heard at the window. Ashton immediately rose, and, advancing gently to the door, admitted two gentlemen, in one of whom Florence recognized a disaffected noble attached to the court of William, but whom she was aware, from a conversation she had heard between himself and her uncle, was playing an active part in the efforts now being made to re-establish James on the throne of Great Britain.

This nobleman, in whom the reader will recognize Preston, who played so conspicuous a part in a plot which involved some of the best and bravest of the nobility, as also not a few of the most estimable of the clergy, was accompanied by a gentleman named Elliot, to whom Florence was a stranger. Then drawing near, Lord Preston said to her, in a tone of surprise:

"My dear young lady, is Sir Charles aware of your presence among us? He has become almost a favorite with the king, and I should not think would approve of his niece joining our ranks; but if, as Ashton informs me, you have sufficient courage, we shall duly value the accession."

"I am not likely to lack courage in the cause of our gracious king and queen," said Florence, "and have already told Master Ashton, who escorted me to England by her Majesty's command, that I am willing to lend my help in any way in which it may be made useful."

Ashton then begged his guests to partake of the substantial fare his hospitality had provided, and drawing round the table, they did amply justice to the viands before them, conversing meanwhile, in an undertone, of the attempt about to be made in favor of King James. A heavy gloom, however, hung over the spirits of poor Mrs. Ashton. Her attempt to smile, when rallied by her guests, was perfectly ludicrous, and more than once Florence observed she was in tears, and on her husband bidding her keep up her spirits, she replied:

"A deadly apprehension of approaching evil rests upon me; I cannot shake it off."

Somewhat hastily, Ashton replied: "Repress such foolish forebodings, Janet. As for us, who have the work to perform, it is essentially necessary to set about it in a hopeful state of mind."

The cloth then removed by an elderly maid servant, too deaf to listen to their conversation, even if she had had the will to betray them, the real business of the evening commenced—that business which had brought together, in such close converse, the noble and the esquire, the simple Ashton and the high-bred Florence, with his wife Janet, formerly the richly dowered and handsome daughter of the wealthy citizen and craftsman, Richard Dawson.

"Now that we have at last met, my lord," exclaimed Ashton, "let us decide as to what will be the best course for us to pursue. In less than a month Christmas will be at hand, before which time we must be out of

England. Mistress Florence, also, must again be at St. Germain, and if we defer any longer we shall find it impossible to dare the hazardous stake we have to play."

"And what plan would you adopt?" asked Lord Preston. "How can we best arrange, in secrecy and silence, to convey to those who languish at St. Germain news from friends devoted to their interests? I marvel, Ashton, if even your ready wit has yet seen the way by which we can effect our object. I fancy you have thought the matter more easy than we may chance to find it."

"Ah, my lord," replied the brave and gallant Ashton, with a sigh, "trust me; love and loyalty know nought of obstacles, or if pr