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

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(From the Catholic Mirror.)

CHAPTER III.—MERVILLE GRANGE.

Towards the close of a dreary October evening two travellers, spent with a long day's toilsome journey, wended their way across a fertile tract of land on the borders of Gloucestershire. The sky was of that heavy leaden hue which betokens a storm, and hollow gusts of wind ever and anon swept across their path, carrying with them clouds of dust, while the serene and withered leaves whirled in circling eddies beneath the hoofs of the jaded beasts, who had not, as yet, finished a hard day's work.

The closing in of the late autumn day was, indeed, wild and black enough to authorize the far from causeless fears entertained by the travellers. At the time of which we write, when not only reckless bands were well known to infest the highway, but also some marauding party likely to be encountered on the road, joined to the fearful state of the weather, the prospect of passing a night on the wilds of Gloucestershire was far from pleasing, should the travellers not reach speedily the place of their destination. The younger of the two might, perhaps, have numbered some thirty years. His dress, a garment of simple black velvet, was made in some sort after the fashion of the day, though, at the same time, it retained, somewhat carefully, the excessive simplicity which formed so prominent a character, even in the outward garb, of the Puritans of old and their immediate descendants, betokened him, together with a certain air of nobleness which marked his demeanor, to have come of gentle blood.

His companion, though with a form unbecoming with age, might, perhaps, have seen nearly eighty winters; his hair, white as silver, was combed over his forehead, and the naturally morose expression of his features now wore a sterner expression than usual, from the very fact that his creature comforts had been most cruelly interfered with. This aged man was dressed in a suit of sober brown cloth; the style of his attire, and his general sanctified demeanor revealing, without a doubt, the fact that Joshua Benson, whose appellation, in his early days, was, "Firm in Faith," was really one of the veritable Puritans of the generation then rapidly passing away.

Sundry exclamations of impatience now broke forth from Benson, as his companion, Sir Reginald St. John, suffered his horse to trot slowly on, while he took a brief survey of the country around him, and wiped away the drops of perspiration which had gathered on his brow, for he had ridden long and rapidly.

"It is a great shame to drag my old bones so far," burst forth the testy old man. "I wonder why you did not put up at the White Bear; it was a comfortable inn, good enough for jaded man and beast. I shall wonder if the Lord does not punish us for running into danger, for, verily, those who love the danger shall perish in it." Moreover, I have no liking for the place you are going to. I, Firm in Faith Benson, as I used to be called in the good old times, do not like even to enter the house of an ungodly man like this papist, De Gray."

"Nonsense, Benson," replied Sir Reginald, impatiently, notwithstanding the respect he still felt for his former preceptor; "have I not already told you that I bear Sir Charles a letter from the king? He has never allied himself to those disaffected to the present government, but always maintained a strictly neutral position. Sir Charles is immensely rich; he has broad lands in this county of Gloucestershire and in the wilds of Cumberland, and if we can but win him over to join the forces of King William, he will bring many others with him, and may well afford to aid our royal master with purse as well as counsel, and instruct him of much that he ought to know, if all report says be true."

"May be as you say," replied the old man, copying the example of his companion, who set spurs to his horse and galloped briskly onwards. "May be so," he continued, in a tone inaudible to his companion, who was again buried in thought; "but if I had you again in my power, young man, as I had when you were a boy, the Lord knoweth you should never have dared drag me on as you have done this cold, bleak night. I could almost strike you now as in old times," he continued, his always thin, compressed lips more compressed than usual, whilst his hand nervously clutched the bridle of his horse. "If I had power over you now, I would soon see if you should take me to the house of this Papist, but I have borne the Lord's yoke from my youth, and though it is hard the once submissive lad should now be my master, I may live to see him a more worthy disciple yet."

At this moment a sharp turn in the road

brought them to a fence, enclosing what, in the fading light of the October evening, rendered still more dim by the thick mist that was now falling, seemed to be a thickly wooded park, whilst between the branches of the fine beech and oaks, which lined the avenue, appeared the red brick walls, with copings of freestone, of a fine old mansion, built probably about the Elizabethan era.

An exclamation of gratified surprise burst from the lips of Sir Reginald, as, allowing the reins of his horse to fall over its neck, he let it canter slowly up the avenue which led to the principal entrance of the mansion, whilst Benson, with sundry exclamations of impatience, followed, moodily, behind his companion.

"At the Grange at last, then," said Reginald, "for surely this must be Merville, the place I have often heard Lady O'Neill describe, as that in which she spent some time of her widowhood. Ah, yes," he added, as his horse trotted slowly on. "The description closely tallies, and, after all, I have reached the end of my journey sooner than I expected. There is the noble flight of steps I heard her speak of, with a spacious portico opening to the entrance hall, and, if I do not mistake, the ruddy, glaring light which streams from those narrow windows proceeds from an apartment in which the warmth and refreshment I sorely need may be obtained."

As he finished his soliloquy he found himself at the bottom of the steps leading to the grand entrance of the mansion, and, dismounting, he rang the heavy bell, the summons being at once answered by the hall porter.

It was in the power of Sir Reginald to procure a speedy audience of the baronet at whose mansion he had introduced himself, by means of a sealed packet which he placed in the hands of the servant, and a moment later he found himself seated with Sir Charles in that same apartment, the windows of which had shone so cheerily without, from the united glow of lamp and firelight, on that chill October night. But Benson and the knight both start alike, though each from different causes, as they enter the spacious dining room of Merville Grange. The former sees the figure of an aged man pass hastily across the room, and disappear behind the tapestry with which the walls are hung, and a strange fancy possesses him that in that hasty, fleeting glance he has recognized, in the face and form of the venerable ecclesiastic, one of the hunted down priests of Rome whom he had known in other and far distant times, and whom his heart rejoiced to see again, and in England, doubtless acting up to the calling of his office, for was he not in the house of the papist De Gray? The start of Sir Reginald proceeded, however, from a very different cause. As he returned the salutation of Sir Charles, who still held in his hand the missive which the servant had delivered, the dark eyes of Sir Reginald, now unusually animated, fell on the figure of a beautiful girl, who for a moment gazed in surprise and mute astonishment on the new comers; who, indeed, should the zealous adherent of William of Orange behold but his betrothed, the loyal and ardent Florence O'Neill, who would have willingly shed the last drop of her blood in defence of the rights of the Stuart race!

Habited in an evening robe of pale blue silk brocade, the sleeves, according to the fashion of the time, narrow at the shoulders, where they were fastened with loops of ribbon, widening as they descended, and turned up at the cuffs, to show the under sleeve of rich point, the neck, also, heavily trimmed with point. Her single ornament consisted of a necklace of large pearls: her hair, perfectly unadorned, and rebelling against the prevailing fashion, fell negligently over her shoulders. Pale almost as the pearls she wore, now stood the fair O'Neill, gazing in strange bewilderment on Sir Reginald, who thus unexpectedly had crossed her path. For one moment their eyes met in mute surprise, but brief as was that space, it attracted the notice of Sir Charles, on observing which, Sir Reginald, recovering from his astonishment, exclaimed, advancing to Florence:

"Your fair niece, Sir Charles, and my humble self are old friends, or, not to use such a term where Florence is concerned, I would rather say my betrothed, and tell you, if you are ignorant of our secret, that we spent together much of our early childhood, especially during part of the widowhood of Lady O'Neill, who was my own mother's warmest friend.—Delighted, indeed, am I to meet Florence here, for I believed her to be at St. Germain's."

It were hard to say whether Florence was pleased or not to meet with St. John, for the smile that had lighted up her countenance on the recognition that had taken place had so soon faded away. A painful foreboding of impending evil fastened itself upon her heart, in short, that sad feeling which we all experience at times, and are so wont to term presentiment, filled her mind with strange forebodings of coming sorrow. She gazed long and eagerly, scarcely noticing St. John, on the letter in her uncle's hand. The one word of astonishment which Sir Charles had uttered on receiving the carefully folded paper from the hands of the domestic, coupled with the baronet's significant

look, and the words "William of Orange," had set all her fears alive as to the cause of the unlooked-for appearance of Sir Reginald. Florence would rather see the wreck of her own dearest hopes than become disloyal, yet the color fled from her cheeks, and scarce returning the greeting of Sir Reginald, she met the warm grasp of his hand with the faint pressure of one as cold as marble, and almost mechanically resumed her seat.

"I will speak to you to-morrow, Sir Reginald, about this matter," said Sir Charles, as he refolded the letter; "we will have no business conversation to-night; you are fatigued and weary, and shall partake of such hospitality as the Grange can furnish. Yours must have been dreary travelling for some hours past, and your aged friend looks, too, as if he sorely needed both rest and refreshment."

Weary enough was Benson; but had the poor baronet been cognizant of all that was passing in the mind of his guest, he would have known that it was the evil passions which filled his mind far more than natural exhaustion, that gave to his countenance that restless, distracted expression. Notwithstanding, he managed to do full justice to the tempting viands placed before him, and demitified with tolerable rapidity a portion of a cold capon flanked with ham, and a good allowance of venison pasty, with a quantity of fine old wine, which the hospitable baronet had directed to be placed before his guests.

Vain were the efforts of Sir Reginald to induce Florence to throw off the air of cold restraint that hung over her, and he observed, somewhat uncessly, that it was only when he introduced the subject of the Court at St. Germain's that her spirits seemed to recover their wonted tone. For a time it appeared as if she yielded to the indignation she felt, for her eye kindled, and a bright flush suffused her lately pale cheek, when she spoke of Mary Beatrice and the ex-king. Then words of scorn rose to her lips, which she would not repress, as she spoke contemptuously of those worthless ones who had risen on the wreck of their own fathers' fortunes, of deep, unswerving love of the Stuart race, of her resolution, if needs be, to give up her life's dearest hopes and affections for them, and to shed her blood, if necessary, in their service, and Sir Reginald felt that she for whom he would have given up all he held dear, save his honor, which was pledged to William and Mary, was, indeed, lost to him, that his own hopes were levelled with the dust; that drawn together by the holiest bonds of affection which had grown up between them from childhood, the hand of the high souled kinswoman of the great Tyrconnel, the loyal Florence, never would be given in marriage to himself, even did her heart break in the rejection she would most assuredly make of all overtures of an alliance. But if St. John was disturbed and uneasy from the cause we have mentioned, not less so was the timorous baronet, who, in the fluctuations of political opinions, had determined to keep himself and his fortune perfectly safe, by maintaining a strictly neutral position. It was in vain that by sundry impatient gestures, and ever and again by an impetuous "pshaw," that he attempted to allay the storm which was rising in the breast of the excitable Florence. In her own heart she ridiculed the timid fears of the old man, though respect for his age and the tie which existed between them, kept her silent where he was concerned. Moreover, Sir Charles had noted what Florence, in her storm of impetuous feeling had failed to observe, that Benson scarce ever removed his keen, light grey eye from the maiden's countenance, that ever and again an almost basilisk glance darted from beneath heavy eyelids, varied by a fierce expression of anger, which seemed as if it could scarce restrain itself. Sir Charles was an acute observer; he had failed in his endeavors to silence the incautious Florence, whose imprudence was thus exposing herself and him to danger, and the baronet resolved to put an end to the conversation by commanding a domestic to conduct Sir Reginald and Benson to the apartments destined for their use.

A weird-looking, gloomy chamber was that into which St. John was at length ushered, together with the ex-tutor, after having passed up a spacious stone stair-case with heavy oak-balustrades, and crossed several corridors with apartments branching off both to right and left; but the cheerful blaze of a bright wood fire which burned in the ample stove gave an appearance of comfort, and the small inner apartment, communicating with that of the knight, had also been duly attended to. With a feeling of weariness and dissatisfaction, Sir Reginald threw himself into a chair beside the fire, and folding his arms, remained for some time lost in a gloomy reverie, not noticing the observant air of Benson, who desirous of imparting to his companion the good advice he so much needed, now determined to abide by Sir Reginald as closely as in the days of his boyhood.

Do not suppose, however, that St. John put himself willingly under the surveillance of Benson, or patiently bore the infliction of his advice: the fact simply was, that he paid him that amount of respect and deference which one

is wont to yield to those under whom we have been placed for a series of years, ranging from early youth to mature age. Moreover, Benson, introduced at first by the young knight to the notice of the Dutch king, had rapidly ingratiated himself in the service of the prince, so that the former friend and preceptor was converted, for the time being, into something very like a spy on the actions of Sir Reginald.

It was, indeed, to sound the opinions of the case-seeking, comfort-loving, timorous old baronet, that St. John had been deputed by the king with a gracious message, commanding his presence at Kensington, and, likewise, was bade to express a hope that, in the event of his aid being required, should there be real cause for apprehension of a rising in favor of James, that he would not fail to be ready both with men and money, according as circumstances might require.

William was cognizant of far more of his favorite Reginald's intentions, than the latter was at all aware of, for Benson had apprised the king of his long-cherished attachment for Florence O'Neill; thus it was then, that the knight was closely watched, for the advancement of a certain purpose in view, had Benson been requested openly by the king to accompany him into Gloucestershire, and his proud spirit continually chafed under the infliction of the constant presence of one for whom he was fast ceasing to feel the slightest regard.

Long and patiently did Benson regard the man whose disposition he so well knew, and the feeling of whose heart at that moment, he could so clearly read; so deep, however, was the abstraction of the latter in his own melancholy musings, that his attention was at last only roused by a movement purposely made by his companion.

"Are you grieving, man, because the Papist girl with the fair face will not have you; you, the favored friend of our gracious king," said the fanatic, in harsh, low accents, "what can you be thinking of to seek a mate from such a nest as this? Did I not see to-night, with my own eyes, the Romish priest, Lawson, pass swiftly through the apartment by another door than that at which we entered, and I know he recognized me too, for we were school-mates together before he had anything to do with Rome and her corruptions? That he was once my friend, matters not, for his superstitious creed makes him now my foe. And this fair-faced girl with the mawkish blue eyes," he added, his voice sinking to a whisper, "it is a pity but that the gracious Mary knew not the treasonable things I have heard her say this night. I warrant me the Papist crew at St. Germain's would stand little chance of beholding her again; but as to you, the favorite of King William, and the beloved son of my adoption, you can surely think of her no more, for the Lord loves not to see his chosen ones wed with the daughters of Belial."

"Silence, Master Benson," said Reginald, rising as he spoke, his handsome countenance full of indignation, "remember I am no longer the boy whom you can lecture as your fancy pleases, but a man who does not choose to regard or listen to offensive speeches; I tell you there lives not in the Court of Mary and William, a more pure or noble woman than she of whom you dare speak so lightly. Do not presume to mention her name again, and please to keep your fanaticism, do not trouble me with it, nor meddle about affairs with which you have nothing to do."

"Verily," replied Benson, rising and taking a lamp from the table in order to withdraw to the inner apartment destined for his own, "I tell you St. John, you do not know what is for your own good, and in your mad fondness for this girl, treat very ill one who loves you as well as I do; I fancy you must be aware King William will not long show you his favor if you aim no higher than to win the hand of this girl of a Papist brood, who is devoted soul and body to the miserable and besotted James."

"How dare you presume to taunt me with the interference of the king," exclaimed St. John, his temper now gaining complete mastery over him, "now understand once for all, Joshua Benson, our long friendship ends from this moment if you continue by word or action to presume to interfere with my affairs."

"Well then, dear St. John, pardon me if the love I bear you has made me too zealous, I promise you I will not give you offense again, but at the same time, I shall strive with the Lord earnestly before I seek my rest this night, I will wrestle with Him in prayer, that you may escape the perils which I am certain will fall on you if you dally a moment longer than is requisite in this abode of Satan."

Benson spoke thus as he withdrew from the room, but entering the inner chamber he closed the door, stood for a moment warming his withered hands over the fire, and then said in a low voice: "I cannot help loving the man as I loved the boy; the evil which I feared years since has come to pass, and out of the very affection I bear him, I will place a barrier in his way which he will not be able to remove. He would not let me force him when a youth, surely not now; but never fear, I know how to gain my point by other means; once in London I can easily gain speech of the king, and if I

do not mistake, all his fine plans will soon end in nothing."

Thus trying to gloss over his villainy under the specious pretence of affection for his benefactor and former pupil, Benson betook himself to bed falling asleep whilst cogitating over the means he should adopt to carry out his schemes.

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 the Second, or the usurping William sat upon the throne, so that he could but 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 line 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 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, at 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 impregnable 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 our 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 consort's 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 has persistently held aloof from mixing in any political cabal. Surely your errand here has not been to lead