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

By Miss AGNES M. STEWART, author of the "World and Cloister," "Life in the Cloister," "Grace O'Halloran," &c.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—GRACE WILMOT'S STORY.

I was the only and beloved child of a rich citizen; he was a wealthy goldsmith of Cheapside, and his name was Edward Mayfield.—Unfortunately for my future welfare, my mother died when I was but fourteen years of age. Up to that time, I had been carefully and religiously brought up in the tenets of our proscribed faith.

Personally, I had no reason to be proud. As I advanced towards womanhood, I saw that my glass reflected only the face of a girl, plain even to ugliness, with large, hard features, and a swarthy complexion.

I had soon sense enough to discover, when amongst the young beauties of my sex and age, as years passed on, that the more plainly I dressed the better, so far as my personal appearance was concerned. I chose only dark colors, and except a costly gold chain which my dear father presented me with on my sixteenth birthday, I scrupulously abstained from wearing any ornament beyond, perhaps, the occasional use of a ring.

Jewels, I might have had in abundance; the costliest gauds of fashion might have been mine in profusion; satins, and velvets, and laces, and exquisite scents, I abjured them all. There was an inordinate pride in my studied simplicity. I saw that I was plain even to ugliness, and at last Edward Mayfield's only daughter was pronounced a devotee, because she never dressed but in sombre garments, and ordered them to be made with extreme simplicity.

Sometimes that inward voice which speaks interiorly to all of us, seemed as though calling me from a world for which I was scarcely fitted, to bury myself in the retirement of a religious life; well would it have been for me had I followed the call.

I stifled it, saying to myself: "My father is growing aged; for my sake, and in order to endow me with all his wealth, he has never extracted a second marriage. When he dies, I will leave the world; alas, an earthly love soon filled my heart. I felt within me an insatiable thirst for knowledge; my dear father helped me to gratify it at any cost. I devoted myself to the study of Latin and French. I made myself mistress of the best authors of our own country. I played well on the guitar, and filled up my time with various ornamental works.

Here Grace for a few moments paused, and I expressed my astonishment that a gentleman, highly educated, should fill the position she occupied.

"You will not be surprised," she said, "when you have heard my story to the end."

At length she continued:

Mixing but little with others of my sex, more from an indomitable vanity on account of my want of beauty than for any other cause, I reached my twenty-fourth year, about the time that all London was busy with preparations for the marriage of the present queen with the Prince of Orange.

One evening I was seated with my dear father, when the arrival of a gentleman from the palace was notified. His errand was to consult my father about some jewels which the

king intended to give as a wedding present to his niece. Charles Wilmot, for such was the name of the messenger, was shown into the room where I was seated; the conversation betwixt my father and himself was a long one. He was offered refreshments, of which he partook, and departed shortly afterwards, promising to call again the next evening.

He came about the same hour, and brought the order from the king for a set of jewels composed of pearls and diamonds.

On this evening he conversed much with myself. He looked over my books, spoke of his tastes as similar to my own, and fascinated me with his witty and animated conversation.

That visit was the prelude to many others; at last, we read, and sang, and played together, and I had arrived at that point at which a dead vacuum seems to take place when the missing friend is absent.

At length, from being merely a visitor in the evening, when my father and myself shared one common apartment, Wilmot not unfrequently called when I was alone in the morning; frequently, the pretext for these visits would be to bring me a new book or a piece of music.

Gradually the attachment sprang up in my heart which sealed my future life with misery.

He made me an offer of marriage. What did I care for his poverty? I knew I should have money, and I was told he was a spendthrift, a gambler. No matter, I could reform him, and for the first time in my life, when he asked me in marriage and was refused, I had words with my father.

I have told you, madam, that I made a point of never entering into company. Alas for me, I overcame my reluctance; female vanity even whispered to me, that as my hand was sought with such pertinacity, I was, perhaps, less plain than I had considered myself to be.

During the Christmas festivities of that year, there was to be a large gathering at the house of John Golding, a rich citizen. I had fancied his daughter Alice was my friend; she was one of the very few of my own sex with whom I had been on terms of intimacy.

On the night in question, I was standing apart from the gay throng of young people talking with Wilmot, when turning faint, he left me to fetch a glass of water. I had drawn aside, and had thrown myself on a couch in a small ante-room opening out of that which I had left, when I heard the murmur of voices of persons evidently standing by the spot I had vacated.

"It is true, Elinor, quite true; he has proposed to that ugly woman Grace, and they are going to be married."

The voice was that of my friend Alice. I know not why I should have wished to hear more than that painful, for a deadly feeling had seized on my heart. I lay perfectly still, anxious to hear the reply.

"Grace Mayfield going to be married, I do not believe it," ejaculated another person in a tone of astonishment.

"Yes Elinor, and Grace Mayfield has made me the most unhappy of women. Wilmot's attentions to me before he met her, have made me the talk of the whole city, but I am not an heiress," and the words fell with great bitterness from the lips of Alice, "but one of a large family. No one, however, can imagine for a moment, that Grace, ugly as she is, is married for anything but her father's money. She must be one of the vainest of women if she fancies, for a moment, that she is married for love of herself."

Scalded tears of wounded pride and indignation fell from my eyes. At that moment I heard the voice of Wilmot, my fair enemies addressed him. I heard him say, "Miss Mayfield has been taken ill and has gone to the ante-room, while I went to fetch her some wine and water."

Of course, they well knew I had overheard their conversation, and had the good sense rather to be condemned for unkindness by him, than to insult me by following him into the ante-room.

I made my adieu early. I was ill; and anything in short, to get home. Why was I made so ugly, asked I, in the bitterness of my soul, for the barbed arrow had entered very deeply. I would not hear of Wilmot accompanying me; he saw me safe in my chair, and I cried the whole way home.

Wilmot never came again after the quarrel with my father, well would it have been for me had I never seen him after that night.

The old, old happy days had forever fled; my books had lost their charm; my music its melody; my father his love; rather ought I not to say, I had lost my love for him.

On one of these days, Father Lawson, an old friend of my father's, called at the house in Cheapside. He was vested as a clergyman of the Church of England as a disguise.

Poor father, he opened his whole heart to his early friend. At length I was summoned; my father had gone to his shop; I found the priest alone.

"Grace, my child," he said, "your father is unhappy, it is in your power to restore peace to his heart and home."

"How!" said I, "has he complained that I have robbed him of it?"

"Listen to me, Grace." Priest though he was, I yielded but a sullen compliance. "For your sake to make you, child as you were when your mother died, the entire mistress of his home, your dotting father remained a widower; for you, to leave you the heiress of his wealth. He put no woman in your dead mother's place; he does not wish to forbid you to marry subject to his better sense and experience, he only forbids you to marry this man Wilmot. Your old father loves you, Grace, and knows that man unworthy of your love, and that he seeks you only for what you will inherit. Tell me child, you will do your father's will."

Here Grace paused, and covered her face with her hands; I saw the tears trickle through her fingers. She then continued; I exclaimed with bitterness of tone and manner:

"Oh yes, I see and understand it all. Edward Mayfield's daughter is so ugly, so repulsively ugly, that she has no single attraction beyond that of her father's money bags."

"You shock me child," said the priest; "God made you what you are, thank Him that He made you not blind and deformed; thank Him that He gave you fine mental powers, a pious home, a loving Father; how dare you hurl the gifts of your Creator in His face."

"For a moment I was awed, and I burst into tears.

The good Father fancied my heart was touched; ah no, it had to be purified in the furnace of long years of tribulation and suffering, ere that heart of adamant was softened.

"You will break off this match, Grace?"

"No, I will not break it off; my father is unjust and cruel; I will marry Charles Wilmot."

Father Lawson rose from his seat.

"And you will live to rue the day you lay your hand in his. Misguided girl, your father loves you; you are breaking his heart; it is because he loves you with a matchless love, that he forbids this union."

"Then is he selfish," I dared to say, "and he would keep me ever with him, forgetting that the old have to die, the young to live."

Ah, shall I ever forget that day. Father Lawson drew aside for a moment, too shocked to speak. I buried my face in my hands, but I heard him say:

"Oh my God, just and merciful, why is it that parental love flows downwards with so strong a current, and oftentimes returns in so thin a stream; visit thou this soul with suffering in thy mercy. Lord, purify it in the furnace of tribulation, so that thou call it back to thee at last."

He turned to leave the room; I called him back, awed by the words he had uttered; but no, what more could he do? He left me to myself and went to seek my injured father. To me, Wilmot only showed the fair side of his character; if he spoke of my dear father it was not with contempt or anger, but rather with a feigned forbearance.

He met me the evening after my interview with Father Lawson, asked me if it was in vain to hope for my father's permission to marry, and on my replying in the affirmative, suggested marriage in spite of his refusal.

In an evil hour I acceded to his wish.—There was a small annual income to which I had succeeded in right of my deceased mother, of which my father could not deprive me. We agreed to lend to time to heal the breach that was sure to ensue, and be married at once.

I packed up the fine trinkets my dear father had, from time to time, forced on my acceptance, together with my wearing apparel, and sent it away privately the night before I left my home.

My father scarcely spoke to me that memorable evening; he was ill and care-worn; he was in delicate health, and I felt a pang as I stole a glance at him when in the act of handing him a silver cup containing his evening draught of hot spiced wine.

Tears stood in his eyes; they looked dim and bloodshot, and his hand trembled as he took the cup from mine, as if he had the palsy.

"Read to me some good book, Grace, before you go to bed," he said, speaking as he used to do before we quarrelled. "Ah yes, here is my favorite, The Following of Christ; let it be that chapter—True comfort is to be sought in God alone."

I did as he desired, and read on till I came to the verse: "All human comfort is vain and short." He repeated these words after me twice, as though he pondered over them.

I had constituted all his human comfort. I did not think of it at the time, but later those words remained indelibly engraved on my memory.

"God bless you my child," he said, as I pressed my lips to his forehead, and drawing down my face to his he kissed me long and passionately.

Had he a presage of what was about to take place, or a foreshadowing of personal misfortune, to be brought on by the cruelty of his own child?

Fond, indulgent, betrayed father!

I had left the house before the servants were down in the morning.

An hour later I was the wife of Charles Wilmot.

After we were married we went to Soho,

where we engaged a lodging commensurate with our present position, till as he jestingly remarked,

"Your father shall have come to his senses." These words were the first which annoyed me; it was not so much the words themselves as the tone and manner in which they were uttered.

The following morning I wrote to my father petitioning for his forgiveness.

I had no reply.

Weeks passed on and lengthened into months. I had become a mother. Again and again I wrote; no answer ever came.

I had long become used to cruel insult from the lips of my husband. At first I rebelled, and repaid insult with insult, scorn with scorn. "Fool," he would oftentimes say, "to fancy such a gorilla-like face was acceptable except for money." The staff of well-paid servants in my father's home had prevented the necessity of household duties on my part. Thus I was ignorant of many things which I should have known had my mother lived. This was a source of bitter invective on my husband's part. I quickly found that I must learn many things of which I was ignorant, and moreover, that I must work hard, and save, and economize, that he might spend, and gamble, and drink. I had united myself to one who added the grossest brutality to his other vices. When the birth of my first child occurred, it brought the expenses incidental to my situation, deteriorating from the comforts I had managed to procure him. My pretty babe was but two months old—pretty as his wretched mother was the reverse—when I received the greatest indignity a man can inflict on a woman, a heavy blow on the face.

"That blow cannot well make your face darker than nature has made it," he said. My eyes filled with water, my old spirit had died out, I said not a word. I was beginning to see that I was about to pass through the ordeal of tribulation Father Lawson had spoken of.

A few days later I passed down Cheapside in a sedan chair. I had not dared to seek my father's face from the time of my shameful flight. I drew aside the curtain of the chair to look again at the old house. It was shut up; the shop was closed, the business then had not been sold.

A sickening dread seized on my heart.—My father, was he dead? Ah, my God, grant that I may see him once again.

I ordered the man to enquire of the neighbors if Mr. Mayfield were yet alive, and if so, if they could tell where he lived.

He had suddenly vacated the house; they believed he had retired to Highbury with one servant, who was to keep house for him. He had become imbecile, the neighbors said, after his daughter left him.

I hurried to the village of Highbury, and from enquiries I made I ascertained that my dear father rented a small house insignificant for a man of his ample means, the direction of which I obtained. The cottage stood a little way back from the high road; a trimly kept garden, gaily adorned with flowers, stretched in front of the house.

I knocked at the door, predetermined to trust no longer to letters. It was answered by a middle-aged woman, who had been cook in my father's house at the time of my marriage. She started when she beheld me. "Mrs. Wilmot!" she exclaimed with an accent of surprise.

"How is my father, Deborah?" I said; "I must see him at once."

"It is impossible, ma'am; the sight of you would make him worse than he already is."

"Woman, stand aside," I exclaimed; and pushing past her, I entered the parlor. What a sight met my eyes! My beloved father, attenuated, worn almost to a shadow, was seated on a couch, talking incoherently to himself.

"Father, father," I said, "do you not know me; I am Grace, your daughter Grace."

"Grace, Grace," he repeated; "yes, I had a daughter of that name once, long years ago; but she died, and then I was left all alone."

"Do you not know me, father?" I said, and I kissed the thin, shrivelled hand; and then, bending down my head, I laid his hand upon it. Alas! alas! he was not conscious of the act.

Then he rambled on again, but of me he took no heed. It was another phase in the punishment I so well deserved. What should I do was then the question. To leave the house was madness. Deborah looked daggers at me, and I involuntarily trembled at hearing the voice of a man below stairs.

I had noticed, too, a wedding ring on her finger, and nothing doubted but that the sudden disappearance of my father from the city was owing to the machinations of this woman.

I was standing at the window, and seeing a boy asking an alms, I beckoned him to me.

I showed him half a crown. "Will you earn this?" I said. His eyes sparkled with delight.

I tore out a leaf from my pocket-book, and scrawled in pencil these words:

"Come to me directly; I am with my father; for pity's sake do not delay."

I gave the boy a shilling, told him to seek the address written on the card, and to bring

the gentleman back with him, when I would give him eighteen pence more.

I then sat down as patiently as might be to await his arrival, ever and again trying to awaken in my father's darkened mind some memory of the past. A signal failure attended my exertions.

At length I sang the first stanza of a song which had been a favorite of his in the old times.

He started, pressed his forehead with his hand, and exclaimed:

"Sing it again; my dead daughter, Grace, used to sing that song."

"I am Grace," I said. "Now bless me, father, I have come back to live with you and take care of you." Alas! alas! his last blessing was bestowed on me the night before I left him to the mercy of hirelings. And why should I speak thus; were they more merciless than his own child?

I drove back my tears because I found it pleased him to hear me sing. (One after another I sang all the old songs which I know he had liked the best.)

"Stay with me," he said "do not go away again, I like to hear you sing," and he put up his dear aged face and kissed me, and I felt wondrously happy, though he knew not I was his own Grace.

And so we sat hand in hand, and I sang the time away, I never thinking of the woman Deborah, but looking for my husband, because I should not fear confronting her when he was with me.

I saw a man leave the house, and then return with a coach, into which many parcels and boxes were placed, and the man getting in, the coach drove away.

I had my suspicions, and as I sat by the window I marked down the number of the coach.

At last I saw my husband and the boy hasten up the garden, I flew to the door and admitted him, detaining the boy till I should see if he wanted him.

To my infinite pain, my husband looked coolly at my dear father.

"Is this the end of his wealth?" he said, with a contemptuous glance round the room, adding, "a clear case of lunacy that, I should imagine."

God forgive me, how I did hate him just then.

I arose and closed the door.

"Deborah, the former cook, is here," I said; "she is now married. The house in the city is closed. Do you not see some villainy has been practised. It is our business to look into the state of my father's property, to enquire if his valuable stock was sold before he left the city."

The wretch whom I addressed at first looked at me with back-lustre eyes. He was generally under the influence of liquor, and either half stupid or in a state of semi-intoxication.

After a short time he recovered sufficiently to resolve on calling up the woman. We rung the bell three times; there was no answer. We went down stairs, above all over the house. We were the sole inmates, and the open drawers and boxes showed they had been rifled of their contents. We then discovered that there was a back entrance to the house, by which the woman Deborah had evidently decamped.

My husband sent the boy to Soho with a letter to our landlord, bidding him bring to Highbury the servant and baby, and he himself went to the nearest magistrate, laid the case before him, and gave the number of the hackney coach, so that some of the property might be traced.

I made a comfortable meal for my beloved father. It was sweet to serve him, though he did not know me. Then while he partook of it I examined the house. I recognized many well-remembered articles, though the best had disappeared. There was a good stock of linen, a small quantity of silver, but none of the fine old silver services. I then put him to bed in a room evidently intended for his use. He followed me about docile and submissive as a child. I sang to him meanwhile. It was the happiest moment I had known since I had left him when, for the second time, he drew me to him and kissed me.

I moved about his room after he was in bed. I heard him speak, and turning round, I saw his hands joined. I listened; he was saying the Our Father, but not correctly. Then he made a recommendation of himself to God—this he repeated many times; prayed for his dead wife and child, and awakening me to the sinful past, he repeated the words I had last read to him:

"All human comfort is vain and short."

At last my husband returned, and a little while later the servant and child. The officials of justice were on the track of Deborah.

The result of their enquiries ended in the recovery of many valuable articles and their committal to prison. My father, it appeared, had never recovered the effect of my guilty flight, and had very shortly fallen into a state in which he was irresponsible for his actions. Thus he was easily the tool of this artful woman. They induced him to convert much of his costly stock into cash, of which, between fast living and what they plundered him of, the