

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE OF THE Times of Queen Elizabeth.

The Wonderful Flower of Woxindon,

By Rev. Joseph Spiltman, S.J.

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CHAPTER XXXIII. CONTINUED.
 "One, two, three, four, five," she said. "This one for grandmother, these two for Babington and me." Then turning to me, she went on: "Good sir, you have been kind to us to-night; do me the favor to break off this wonderful flower! See, I cannot reach it with my fettered hands. Grandmother took so much pleasure in this plant; she thought it a portent of some great good; and listen—when the first flower opened, father died; when it was in full bloom, Mary was betrothed to Windsor and I to Anthony; when the first berry was ripe, my brother and sister had fled from home; and now that all the fruits are matured, and the plant is withering, we shall all be taken as prisoners to the Tower, and from thence to the gallows. A marvelous, fateful flower! Reach it down, sir, and may it bring you too good luck and a blessing!"

I confess that a shiver ran over me at the strangeness of the thing, as I complied with her request, and placed the plant in her hands. She began again: "One for me, one for these, one for Remy and one for Barth, and the large one for Granny. O the beautiful red berries! Let us take these to them, sir—they will luck and a blessing!"

It was now only too evident that the trouble had turned the poor girl's head. I was horrified; it was a relief when Topcliffe, having discovered the secret cell that he was in search of, brought out from thence a gold chalice, and other things appertaining to the mass. He swore a round oath, designating them as implements of devilry and idolatry, while he consigned this valuable booty to a capacious pocket. He then declared himself ready to leave Woxindon with his prisoners.

A heartrending scene was yet to be enacted before our departure. The enacted, before our departure. The down, and was sitting in the hall, feeble in body and broken in health, but courageous of heart, and resigned to the will of God. Patiently she waited, in a large armchair by the hearth, for the moment when she must bid, what she knew full well would be her last farewell, to her beloved home. When her unhappy granddaughter came in, and her restless eye and unnatural gaiety showed that her mind was deranged, a deep sigh escaped from the aged lady's breast. "More troubles, O Lord!" she murmured, raising her eyes to heaven; "yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt; give me strength to bear this cross." But when Babington's wife coming up, exhibited the wonderful plant, assigning to each of the prisoners one of the five sprigs with its blood-red berry, wishing them joy for the lucky plant, and finally asking her grandmother to fasten the plant to her bosom, since the fetters on her wrists prevented her from doing so, then tears filled the poor lady's eyes, and fell fast on the red berries in her trembling fingers. Thereupon the mood of the wretched girl suddenly changed; with a child's unreason, from silly laughter she fell to uncontrollable weeping; a pitiful sight, the more so as all the retainers of the family took part in her woe.

I was glad to hear Topcliffe give the signal to depart. The prisoners were mounted, their feet being chained together under the horses' belly. In the same way the blessed Campion was taken to London, as one of the Bellamys remarked, the thought apparently affording him no small satisfaction; the two ladies were placed on some straw in a cart, and off we went at a quick pace by torchlight through the wood to London.

Immediately upon Babington's arrest, Topcliffe had despatched a messenger to apprise Walsingham of the fact. Hence on our arrival soon after midnight we found the greatest excitement prevailing in the city. With beat of drum the town criers had announced to the citizens that through the vigilance of the Secretary of State and the Council, a detestable conspiracy against the life of Her Gracious Majesty, against the religion and liberty of the country, had been discovered. The rumor, with endless exaggerations, spread like wildfire; it may be imagined what sort of reception our cavalcade met with. The populace, waxed to fury, met the prisoners with shouts of execration; while the ringing of

bells and the lighting of bonfires announced far and wide that the Queen and the evangelical cause were saved, and the traitors in custody.

That the prisoners were conveyed to the Tower. I observed that the aged lady, who, by my request, had not been fettered, made the sign of the cross on herself and her grandchild as the iron gate of the pastern closed behind them.

Deeply moved by all that I had witnessed, I turned my horse's head homewards. My uncle greeted me in good spirits. He had just heard that Salisbury and two others had been overtaken in Cheshire. All the ring-leaders, excepting Windsor, were now in his hands. He expressed the wish that I should accompany him to Court on the morrow, to lay a formal report of all that had been done before the Queen.

CHAPTER XXXIII.—The next morning my uncle and I repaired betimes to Windsor, where the Court then was. Tidings of the discovery of a formidable conspiracy had already reached the Queen's ears, and she was impatient to hear further particulars. We were therefore ushered without delay by the Black Rod into the royal presence. Elizabeth was in a state of great irritation, and inclined to blame her faithful Secretary of State for having kept her in ignorance of the existence of the plot. Walsingham expounded to her the whole history of Babington's conspiracy; the design of the six young noblemen, to release the Queen of Scots from prison, and place her, with foreign succour, on the throne of England; the proposal of Savage to assassinate Her Majesty, a proposal known to and sanctioned by Babington and his associates; the stratagem he had employed, watching the progress of the conspirators by introducing two of his spies into their company and affording them the means of corresponding with the royal captive in such a manner, that every scrap of writing should pass through his hands, and he should thus be enabled to lay bare the root and source of the whole mischief, as he now did to Her Majesty.

The ladies and gentlemen in waiting, who, having withdrawn to a distance by Elizabeth's command, had not heard Walsingham's communication, witnessed with astonishment the outburst of rage which it elicited. And when he went on to speak of Mary Stuart's participation in the conspiracy, reading to her, or placing in her hands, portions of the letters he had intercepted especially the long letter addressed to Babington, the Queen's wrath was terrible to behold. "Is death," she exclaimed, "we hold the sword of justice, and it shall be wielded so as to strike terror to the heart of all our enemies. As for the conspirators themselves, do you see, Walsingham, that whilst they are lodged in the Tower, every sort of torture be applied to them, until they make a full confession, and reveal the names of all their accomplices. These vipers shall be trodden down; and after they have confessed, the manner in which they shall pass from life to death shall be a foretaste of the pleasures of hell. I will devise for them tortures to which the usual penalty—too lenient by half—which the law prescribes for traitors, shall be child's play in comparison."

When Elizabeth's fury had somewhat subsided, Walsingham proposed that, since sufficient evidence of Mary Stuart's guilt could not be produced, the Queen should send a confidential messenger to Chartley, before the news of the miscarriage of the plot was known there, to seize the Queen of Scots' papers. He felt no doubt that it would then be easy to prove her complicity in Savage's murderous design; in which case she must be condemned to death, and thus the life of the Queen, the security of the Protestant religion and the peace of the country would no longer be endangered, as it must needs be, so long as the breath was in that woman's body.

In this opinion—that the death of the Queen of Scots was necessary for the welfare of the Sovereign and the State, all the courtiers who were present coincided, to Elizabeth's evident gratification; although she thought good to protest that nothing would induce her to sign the

death-warrant of her rival. Still, she desired that her guilt should be made manifest to all Europe, and she therefore commissioned her private secretary, Sir William Wade, and myself, to repair at once to Chartley, and seize all the correspondence and papers of her royal sister.

I should have been glad, before starting, to have asked my uncle a few questions. How could he have deduced from Mary Stuart's letter that she was a party to the design against Elizabeth's life? A falsified copy must have been given to him, or had he other letters, of which I was unaware? But he remained with the Queen, and before half an hour had elapsed, Wade and I were on our way to Chartley.

We reached the castle on the next day but one, our road leading us through Aylesbury and Buckingham. Old Sir Amias smiled grimly, when we acquainted him with the instructions we had received, and the preacher whom we found with him, invoked, in the Puritanical cant of the day, the aid of the Lord of Hosts on behalf of the royal Debora, to the confusion of all her Popish foes.

Arrangements were forthwith made for the execution of our orders on the morrow. Paulet announced to his prisoner that on the representations of her physician, permission was given for her to take exercise on with him the next morning to Fixall, the house of Sir Walter Aston, some horseback; and he invited her to ride a few miles distant, to see a buck-hunt in the park. This was done lest, suspecting something, she should at the last moment destroy any document of importance.

The Queen of Scots was as joyous as a child when she was lifted on to her palpy in the castle court the next morning. When she saw me, she beckoned me to her side, and thanked me in the most gracious manner, for having, as she supposed, used my influence with my uncle to obtain for her this alleviation of her captivity. A blush of shame rose to my cheek, and I really should have told her the true nature of my errand, had not her attention been diverted by the sound of the hunting-horns giving the signal to start. She only asked me if I knew what had become of Windsor, whom she had not seen for some time; I answered that I did not; and we set off, out at the gate and across the fields where the corn stood in sheaves, through wood and over moor, towards our destination. Everywhere the Queen was greeted by the peasantry with affectionate veneration. At one place a number of beggars had assembled, expecting to partake of her usual bounty; "Alas!" she said to them with a tearful smile, "I have nothing to give you; though a queen, I am as poor as our Lord Himself, the King of kings, when He was on earth."

As we approached Tixall Park, a party of horsemen, about 250 strong, were seen in a bend of the road near the gates. It was the sheriff of the county, to whom we had the evening before, intimated the Queen's pleasure that he should await us there. Mary Stuart attached a different signification to the presence of the troopers. Her heart bounded at the sight of them, for she thought her friends had come for her deliverance. She was soon undeceived. On a sign from Sir Amias Paulet, the troop rode forward and surrounded us, the leader producing a royal warrant for the arrest of the two secretaries, Nau and Curle, who were taken into custody under their royal mistress' eyes, while she was told she must remain for a time at Tixall. The prisoner naturally expressed the just indignation she felt at the mean, underhand trick that had been played her, of which she did not think Sir Amias, much less myself to be capable. This she did in such a dignified, queenly manner, that I was ready to sink into the ground with confusion. She wept, indeed, but less over her own lot than at the fate of her secretaries, and others who had sacrificed themselves fruitlessly for her sake. Moreover she took all present to witness that Nau and Curle had only followed her directions, and we in no wise responsible for the letters bearing her signature. She bade a kind farewell to these two, who later on, were to betray her, through human frailty, it is true, and under stress of torture.

Then she accompanied the sheriff to Tixall without a murmur.

Sir Amias and I returned immediately to Chartley, where the two secretaries were confined in separate cells, whilst we, with Wade and a locksmith from Burton, proceeded to break open all Mary Stuart's cabinets and drawers. Every repository was ransacked, every letter and scrap of writing being placed under seal to be examined by the Privy Council. One of the first documents that I lighted upon was the draft, in French, in the Queen's own handwriting, of her letter to Babington. I was as fully resolved as ever to prevent, as far as lay in my power, the falsification of the Queen's letters which would be done, I strongly suspected, if not by my uncle, at least by his emissaries. I therefore read this draft all through with the greatest care; the copy I had made in the tavern at Barton was, through frequent perusal, so impressed on my memory, that I had no difficulty in recognizing it to be word for word the same. Not a single syllable was there which implied complicity in the design on Elizabeth's life. Wade, also, to whom I showed both the letter and my copy, declared the latter to be a facsimile of the former. I therefore sealed it up in a separate envelope, to be handed over to my uncle on my return to London, as a means of detecting any interpolations Phillips might make. The next day it was with a light heart that I took the road to London in the company of the two prisoners, for I was convinced that I carried with me indisputable proof of the Scottish Queen's innocence.

I found my uncle sitting in his cabinet, sunk in thought. Although it was the month of August, yet the weather was chilly, and a fire was burning brightly on the hearth. Roused from his reverie by my entrance, Walsingham made me a sign to sit down opposite to him. I did so, and, as succinctly as possible, gave him an account of our proceedings. Placing upon the table before him a thick packet containing the documents that had been seized, I inquired what was to be done with the two secretaries.

"They are to be confined in separate apartments here in my house, to be strictly watched, and allowed to hold no communication whatever with one another," he replied. "Otherwise every consideration is to be shown them. I hope by this means, to elicit from them the information I want, without having recourse to the rack. It is the old story; one catches more flies with a drop of honey than with a barrel of vinegar! We have experienced the truth of that lately, nay, this very day in the Tower. Good Heaven! how unmercifully Topcliffe tormented and tortured that man Ballard! For five consecutive hours he was hung up by rings attached to cords round his fingers, with two stones of a hundredweight each fastened to his feet, till the blood spouted from under his finger-nails, and he fell into one swoon after another. Topcliffe restored him to consciousness by holding a flaming torch under his armpits. The horrid sight haunts me still. And what was the result? Absolutely nothing upon the main point, with which we are concerned. The man acknowledged himself guilty of high treason, for seeking to dethrone Elizabeth and set the Queen of Scots at liberty; but he denied having plotted against her Majesty's life, or that Mary Stuart had been a party to any such design.

The others said just the same when examined under torture. It is astonishing what steadfastness Babington and his associates display. Some of them whimpered and cried for mercy, but not a word could be wrung from them to criminate that woman, or at any rate they retracted it immediately, when released from the rack. One of them Bellamy, a poor imbecile, whom it was really useless to arrest, broke a blood vessel and was removed in a dying state. His niece too, Babington's youthful spouse, has gone out of her mind. Savage, a gloomy fanatic, confesses that it was his intention to have slain the Queen, but declares he was solicited thereto by that wretch Gifford, who assured him, by way of incentive, that Dr. Allen and other divines approved the act as one of great merit. He denies however most emphatically that the Scottish Queen knew of or sanctioned it. Thus they all deny what it is essential to me to assert; Mary Stuart's complicity in the plot against Elizabeth's life."

"It is my conviction that they all speak the truth on that point," I rejoined.

"What!" exclaimed my uncle angrily. "Have we not her letter and Babington's, both of which prove the contrary?"

"It may be so if you have other letters of which I know nothing, in addition to the long letter of the

17th of July, and I conclude you have, from what I heard you say to the Queen on the terrace at Windsor. That letter of the 17th of July certainly contains nothing to incriminate the writer," I replied.

My uncle gave me a searching look. "I hope, Francis," he said after a moment's pause, "that you do not mean to infer that I intended to mislead the Queen on that occasion." "Certainly not willingly," I replied, "but the wisest man may be deceived by a rogue. But I will not call in question the sagacity and knowledge of the world for which you enjoy so widespread a reputation. Doubtless you possess other documents besides those to which I refer."

"And supposing we had no other written evidence save that letter and Babington's answer, what should you—assuming that you were the appointed counsel for the Queen of Scots—allege against it?" asked my uncle, in a half contemptuous, half angry manner.

"In the character of counsel for the Queen of Scots, I should naturally first of all request to see the letters on which the whole charge against her rests."

My uncle rose, and unlocking a strong box, he took out two letters written in cipher, together with a deciphered transcript in Phillip's hand. These letters he showed me, retaining them in his possession the whole time; then he deposited them again in the place when he took them, locked it, and put the key in his pocket. "One cannot be too careful in preserving documents of such importance," he said. "But here are faithful copies, whose accuracy can be tested by a court of law by comparison with the originals. Now I must beg the learned counsel to note the passages in both letters which are marked with red ink, and tell me what can be said in his client's defence."

Walsingham threw himself back in his chair, and occupied himself apparently in watching the dancing flames and the expiring embers on the hearth. I applied my whole mind to the examination of the letters. In Babington's there were certainly two very unfortunate passages. After speaking of Parma's meditated incursion, and of Mary's release, he mentioned as a part of the scheme "the despatch of the usurping competitor." Another passage, also marked by my uncle, ran thus—the words are deeply impressed on my memory—"Myself, with ten gentlemen of quality, and a hundred followers, will undertake the deliverance of your person from the hands of your enemies; and for the despatch of the usurper, from obedience to whom, by the excommunication of her, we are made free, there be six noble gentlemen, all my private friends, who for the zeal they bear the Catholic cause and your Majesty's service will undertake the tragical execution."

On reading this, I was compelled to own, that if this letter was, indeed, as was alleged, genuine, Mary Stuart must at any rate have been privy to the murderous design. I then took up the letter which she had written in answer. If this copy, placed by Walsingham in my hands, were as accurate as he considered it, she not only knew of it, but approved of and sanctioned it. In Phillip's transcript mention was frequently made of "the undertaking of the six noble gentlemen." For instance, one of the questions she put to the conspirators was, "By what means do the six gentlemen deliberate to proceed?" Further on there was a request that the six gentlemen would not set to work until the affairs were prepared, and forces in readiness within and without the realm; finally a long passage to the intent that it would be well for the said gentlemen to have always at Court sundry scoutmen provided with good horses, to bring tidings with all diligence to Chartley as soon as the design be executed, that she might be apprised of it and set free, before her keeper should have warning of the existence of the said design. And the reason given for this request was, that there could be no certain day appointed when the plan could be carried out at Court, and that it was imperative that she should be set at liberty immediately after its accomplishment. Wherefore two or three courtiers should be despatched to Chartley by divers ways, at the same time it would be needful to endeavor to cut off the ordinary post, etc.

It was quite possible that the more general mention of a design on the part of the six gentlemen might have escaped me when the deciphered copy was made at Burton. But this letter passage was not of a nature or of a length to be overlooked; it almost filled a whole page in Phillip's transcript. Nor was a word of it to be found in the original draft. There could be no doubt that

context, I wondered that my uncle's keen eye had not immediately detected so clumsy a deceit. His eager desire, on political ground, to connect Mary Stuart with this plot, must have led him to heed nothing but the passages marked, I said to myself. But the suspicion forced itself upon me, was he not aware that he was making use of a forgery? May it not even have been by his orders that the interpolation was made? I know that politicians were often unscrupulous as to the means they employed, but I did not like to believe that my uncle would resort to such unworthy expedients. Still the whole matter must be expounded to him; no agreeable task at the best, for no man would like the fabric he has carefully constructed, and on which so much depended, to be overthrown like a house of cards. However there was no help for it, since the honor and the life of an innocent person were at stake.

"You have been a long time deliberating," Walsingham said at length. "What is the verdict? Not very favorable to her Majesty of Scotland, to judge by the funeral countenance of her counsel."

"It is decidedly favorable for Mary Stuart," I replied.

Walsingham leant back in his chair with forced composure. "You surprise me," he said. "I am anxious to hear what can be urged in defence of the accused; for 'warned, forwarned, you know.'"

"To me it appears most simple and obvious. I can prove the falsification of both letters," I answered.

My uncle turned pale, but otherwise betrayed no emotion. Looking sharply at me, he said: "I must either be deceived or a deceiver. Neither opinion is flattering. But let me hear your proofs."

"I believe I can give direct and conclusive proof that the Queen's letter has been falsified; in regard to Babington's, the evidence is only presumptive. But if the Queen's letter is not genuine, the same will probably be true of his."

"It may possibly be so," Walsingham remarked. "This I concede, that finding the one spurious greatly weakens the evidence of the other. But now give me your proofs that the Queen's letter is falsified, and mind, the proofs must be incontrovertible!"

"The evidence is both internal and external," I resumed. "This long passage that you have marked is the one on which every thing turns, and it is plainly an interpolation."

My uncle interrupted me. There are other passages marked, which taken in connection with Babington's letter, clearly prove Mary Stuart's guilt."

"Undoubtedly," I replied, "supposing Babington's letter to be genuine, but if it is spurious, as I believe I can prove it to be, then the expression, the design of the six gentlemen has no special significance. It would simply mean the deliverance of the captive. I do not hesitate to affirm that this long passage is a forgery, for it is directly at variance with another part of the letter. Listen to this." I then read aloud the portion of the prisoner's letter wherein she gives strict directions that immediately after the accomplishment of the design upon Elizabeth's life, couriers should be sent to Chartley, and then, but not until then, her release be attempted. This I begged him to compare with the following words, which occurred somewhat later: "If you take me out of this place, be well assured to set me in the midst of a good army, or some very good strength, where I may safely stay until the assembling of your forces, and of the said foreign succours. It were sufficient cause given to the Queen, in catching me again, to enclose me in some hold, out of which I should never escape, if she did use me no worse, and to pursue with all extremity those that assisted me, which would grieve me more than all the unhappiness might fall upon myself."

"How," I asked, "are we to reconcile this passage with the one which precedes it! Mary directs that, on the successful accomplishment of the design, the news of her rival's death is to be the signal for her release from prison. A few lines further on, she commands that precautions be taken, lest the Queen—who has been assassinated, mark you—should catch her again, and treat her worse than before! If this is not a contradiction, I never saw one; one of the two passages is distinctly a forgery. Strike out the one that is marked, and it will appear perfectly natural that Mary Stuart should be anxious to be protected from the Queen's anger until the landing of Parma's troops."

Walsingham had listened to me with growing uneasiness. He could not contest the force of my arguments, so he tried to set aside with a sneer.

(To be continued.)

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