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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 XVIII.—(Continued.)

No wonder that he hesitated, and that the glow of shame mantled his cheek.

"Speak out, my lord, or the consequences of your obstinacy be on your own head," said the queen. "We have resolved to have recourse to the severest measures to establish peace and root up these plots against our government. I command you to speak, or Ashton's fate shall be yours; remember, a jury of your country have declared you guilty."

"Forgive me, your Majesty; if I faltered, it was out of compassion for what they will have to suffer."

"Leave that consideration to us, my lord; all reasonable clemency will be shown to those who choose to avail themselves of it. Give me up the names at once."

"I have talked on the subject of the late king's restoration with Lord Clarendon" (the queen started, though she knew long since there was disaffection very near herself,) "the Bishop of Ely, William Penn, and many others whose names I will give in to your majesty this very day."

"And what know you of this Ashton?"

"He made every arrangement connected with the conspiracy; arranged the meetings at his own house, engaged the boat; he has been in the habit of conveying letters to and fro to St. Germain's under assumed names."

"And has any lady been connected with this conspiracy, a young lady," added the queen, "who is warmly attached to the late queen? Can you tell me if such an one has been in any way worked up with this rising?"

Lord Preston again hesitated to betray a woman, it was against all the rules of gallantry; but the generally even-tempered queen was getting exasperated, and she exclaimed:

"Speak, sir; has Florence O'Neill had anything to do with this affair, is she privy to it?"

"I met her once at Ashton's house, your Majesty; but, then, you know, she has known him for years. He brought her over to England, and she was to go back to France under his protection."

"To the Tower, rather," muttered the enraged queen. Then turning to Lord Preston, she said: "You may go, my lord; I have signed your pardon, and let this act of clemency on our part teach you not to offend again; see that you do not abuse it."

The noble lord, who had thus basely purchased his own forgiveness by the betrayal of those of whom he had himself been a willing accomplice, and by so doing saved his life, was profuse in his thanks, and then, bowing profoundly, left the queen to her own reflections.

"And so it is just as I thought; this disaffection is, indeed, widely spread," she murmured. "My Lord Bishop of Ely, and you, my Lord Clarendon, uncle or no uncle, in the Tower you shall remain; but we dare not meddle with others of the nobility of whom he has promised to send in the names, but, as the king said before he left, we must win them over by a seeming clemency to our interests. As for Ashton, he shall be made an example of, and that within a day or two. He will be the first to suffer capital punishment for rising against us, and his death will strike terror into others. As for you, my young mistress Florence, I will clap you up in the Tower before the week is out."

During that morning a letter came to Florence from her uncle, intimating that he was much worse, and expressing a wish that she immediately pay him a visit.

Taking the letter with her, Florence sought the queen. The latter had not long since closed the interview with Lord Preston, but was too great an adept in the art of disguising her real feelings, to discover what they were, and without any difficulty, Florence obtained permission to be absent from the palace during the day.

Within an hour of her leaving Whitehall, where the queen was then staying, she had reached her uncle's home at Kensington, and though distressed to see him looking far from well, she was, nevertheless, rejoiced that he was not as bad as the tenor of his letter had led her to expect.

The chief cause of his disquiet appeared to be his prolonged absence from the country.

"Losing all this glorious weather for hunting, too," he said, "moored up here in this dreary place instead of being out with my hounds and my fellow-sportsmen, and my money dragged from me to a pretty tune to help this Dutch prince to carry on his wars and butcher his neighbors, whilst I never helped my good sailor king with a pound. Ah, Florence, Florence, 'twas a bad day for us both when Sir Reginald persuaded me to come up to this vile London, and—"

Here, however, poor Sir Charles came to a stop, and made a grimace indicative of severe pain.

"My dear uncle," said Florence, "what difference can it make to you whether you are at Morville or near me, you are as well attended to here, and occasionally I can have the comfort of seeing you. Besides, uncle," she added, trying to repress a smile, "how could you hunt with that gouty leg?"

"Gout, or no gout, I tell you I hate the place," was the Baronet's reply. "I was dragged up here, I now see, for nothing but to open my purse to help that boorish, uncouth Dutch prince, who only cares for this country for the money he can get out of it; and who will draw the nation into misery and debt enough before it has done with him. But serve the people right; serve them right," he continued, with increasing irritation, "they got their Protestant liberty, they have got their accursed penal laws, which they hated poor James for trying to put down, and they've got William and Mary, and the country loaded with debt into the bargain; they've got the lash in the army and navy, and all sorts of villainies besides, and I wish I was a young man again. I would,"—and here the exasperated Baronet shook his stick defiantly in the air—

"I would not lead the sluggish life I have led, but would be one of the first to fight for the good old stock. By the way," he added, after a pause, and suddenly becoming more placable, "hath heard anything of that unfortunate fellow, Reginald; that descendant of a cross-eyed, puritanical, canting knave, who has now become a roystering Jacobite?"

"Not a word, dear uncle," said Florence; and dropping her fair head on her uncle's shoulder, she gave free vent to her long pent-up feelings by a violent burst of tears.

"Halloo, halloo, what means this, my poor child?" said the old man, kissing her feverishly, as he spoke. "Why, what an old fool I am, to forget she was betrothed to the poor fellow. Come, cheer up, Florence, remember the old saying, the darkest hour is nearest the dawn."

"But uncle, dear," and, as if afraid the very walls should hear, the girl lowered her voice almost to a whisper, "I am almost in a state of captivity at the palace; I had to get permission even to see you. I cannot hear from any of those I love, it is impossible; nor can I get to them, and I fear, uncle, poor Ashton has fallen into trouble, for the other night I saw Mrs. Ashton in the grounds beneath my window, and she flung a little packet in my room, in which was written the word: 'Danger!' The queen, too, has said strange things, questioning me about him, so that I think he can never have got off to France."

"Dear child, you can do no good, the action was wrong; Mrs. Ashton should not have come near you. Promise an old man, who has seen much of the world, that you will not meddle with these matters. In His own good time, God will lead you out of this Babylon into pleasanter places. Promise me this, Florence," and as the old man spoke he stroked her golden hair with his withered hand, saying, as if to himself, "How like her mother at her age; God rest her soul," and then the hand of the aged man was raised to make the holy sign of redemption.

"Yes, I will be very careful, uncle dear, and now tell me at what hour do you dine?"

"At all hours, at any hour, my darling; good Mrs. Walton is so very careful a nurse that she is bringing me delicacies all day long. What shall I order for you, love? A fowl and ham, and a nice pasty? A hamper of venison came up from Morville last night, and they tell me it is in fine condition. But why anxious about the dinner hour, did you not say you could spend the whole day as you pleased?"

Florence flushed up a little at her uncle's question, and replied not without a little hesitation:

"Yes, uncle dear, but I have a call to make in Covent Garden, and I get out so rarely alone. See now, I will not be away more than two or three hours; your carriage can take me back to the palace about nine at night, and shall drive me now as far as I am going. It is just noon, and if I get back, as I will, between two and three, we have still many hours together."

"Well, I suppose it must be as you say; but mind, Florence, take my advice, be very prudent in all your actions," here the Baronet gazed steadfastly at his niece, as if he doubted her on that point, and then added: "never forget that you are at the Court of Mary, the daughter who has not spared her own father in her restless ambition. You she would crush as a worm beneath her feet; heads as fair and young as thine, my love, have fallen beneath the headman's axe, as you well know. Such an end to you would bring those who love you in sorrow to their graves."

For a moment Florence faltered in her purpose; but only for that brief period of time did the picture of the old man had so graphically drawn lead her to waver. The next her resolve was taken; she was supported by the heedlessness and daring spirit of youth.

A death-like chill came over Florence when she again took her seat in the chair; the shock

CHAPTER XIX.—THE CONDEMNED CELL.

"There is no one on the watch; so far well," said Florence to herself, as she stepped into her uncle's carriage, having ordered one of the footmen to see that she was set down at a certain spot in the Strand, at the same time signifying that the carriage need not wait.

"The place is wofully near to the palace," thought she, as she stepped out of the carriage at the spot she had named; and at that moment observing a couple of men pass with a sedan chair, she without hesitation stepped in and drew the curtains closely to, having first given the direction to Ashton's house.

The street in which it was situated was perfectly empty when she arrived at her destination. A heavy winter rain had begun to fall, and driven to the shelter of their homes all who were not compelled to be on foot.

The men who had carried the chair she desired to wait, telling them she would pay them liberally for their time and trouble.

The old servant whom she had seen on her former visits answered the door. She was bathed in tears, her whole appearance betokening excessive grief, whilst from the partially open door of a small parlor came forth the sound of sobs and lamentations.

"Is Mrs. Ashton within?" said Florence, in a loud voice, remembering that this woman was very deaf.

Her voice was recognized, the mistress of the house herself appeared; her eyes were swollen with weeping, her hair was disordered, her limbs trembled with excessive agitation.

At her side, clinging to the skirt of her dress, was a little girl, about the same age as Lord Preston's child, but alas, the nobleman's life was spared to betray his accomplices and show up the windings of the plot, whilst the more humble-minded and upright Ashton was to be made the victim to strike terror into the hearts of others.

"Dear Mrs. Ashton, what is the matter?" said Florence, a chill striking to her heart, though she was very far from guessing at the worst, her fears only pointing at present to betrayal and imprisonment.

"Oh, madam, madam, my poor husband," was the only reply; but the little girl looked up in the face of Florence and filtered out between her sobs:

"They are going to kill my poor papa."

"Good God, ah! no, Mrs. Ashton," said Florence, "do not tell me this!"

"Madam," said Mrs. Ashton, endeavoring to speak through her sobs, "my poor husband was arrested before he got out of the river. By his own request, I apprised you by the only means in my power of our danger. He was tried on the 14th, and Oh! my God, on the morning of the 20th, has the queen decreed I am to be widowed, and my children left without a father."

It was sometime before Florence could speak. To offer comfort at such moments as these is worse than useless; the blows coming, too, so suddenly on Florence had the effect of, for a time, throwing her in a state of bewilderment.

Suddenly she rose from her seat.

"I must see my poor friend once more, Mrs. Ashton," said she.

"What, madam, what was it you said? Ah, no, my good young lady, it is impossible for you to see him. Ashton has been in the greatest distress for you amidst his own sorrow, since he found you were detained at the Court of that wicked woman. Indeed, indeed, you must not think of such a thing."

"But indeed I shall, Mrs. Ashton," said Florence. "A chair waits for me at the door of your house; I have little time to lose, by three I must be back at Kensington."

"My dear young lady, if ill consequences follow this visit, as is more than likely, you must take them on yourself. Will you promise that you will tell my dear ill-fated husband that I dissuaded you by all the means in my power?"

"Certainly, I will, and now where is he; every moment is of consequence to me?"

"Stay, madam, have a little regard for your own safety. A thought occurs to me; you have the advantage of me in height, nevertheless, you can wear one of my black dresses. As I am in mourning, it will be a nice disguise. Let me go out in the blue dress you wear and tell the men you will the sedan chair for a friend; then put my veil and cloak over the black dress, such as I wear when I visit my poor husband, lest there should be any evil-disposed person near my house, for, I have no doubt the emissaries of the queen watch it closely. When you can return, you can slip on your own dress, and I will see that a carriage be in readiness by half-past two to take you back to Kensington; and may God, my dear young lady, preserve you from danger."

As Florence had purposely kept her veil down since she left her uncle's house, she succeeded with the men, and she entered her chair unquestioned. Mrs. Ashton had desired them to drive to the Old Bailey, and then wait there till again wanted.

A death-like chill came over Florence when she again took her seat in the chair; the shock

itself had been so sudden, the risk she was herself running of no light nature, and, unfortunately, she had motioned aside the glass of wine Mrs. Ashton had pressed her to take, and now felt in want of a restorative. She felt marvellously as if she was about to faint, but by a violent effort rallied, so as to be able to continue her journey.

At length she reached the prison, and giving the men a handsome fee, bidding them wait her return, she obtained admittance. Never removing her veil, and avoiding too close a scrutiny, as well as obtaining a pass by the most easy way, that of money, she was the more readily mistaken for Mrs. Ashton, and passed unquestioned, a painful sense of terror and depression on her mind as, attended by the warden, she hastened through the long narrow stone passages, through which the grey dusky light of the winter day scarcely penetrated.

At length they stopped at a low-arched door, similar in appearance to many they had passed by, and unlatching it, the man said:

"Now, Mrs. Ashton, you must not exceed half an hour; you have already been here once to-day; I shall come for you when the half hour is up."

Her disguise, then, was complete; she had not been taken for other than she whom she personated.

"Elizabeth, my wife, why here again?" said poor Ashton, himself deceived; "remember our poor children, and leave me, love, to the resignation I have implored God to bestow."

"Oh, Ashton, Ashton, has it then come to such a pass as this," said Florence, throwing aside the long thick veil which had screened her features. "Alas, alas, I feared you had not got to France, but never dreamed of such woe as this."

"Madam, is it possible you are here? Oh, leave me, leave me; one such step as this is known, and you are undone. My poor Elizabeth, I see, has lent you her clothes. Oh, my Elizabeth, that was indeed wrong."

"No, Mr. Ashton, it was right. Your wife found I was obstinate in my wish to see you once again. I would take no denial, Ashton. What will they say when they hear you have died in their cause?"

"They will say, young lady, that the will of God was against us, and they will try to be resigned. I shall pray for my dear master and for my beloved mistress with my latest breath. But, dear young lady, this is no fit place for you. I do beg you again to return home as speedily as possible."

Florence did not speak for a few moments. She sat down upon his miserable truckle bed, and burying her face in her hands, her tears fell fast.

Ashton saw them trickle through her fingers, he beheld her whole frame shook by the violence of her emotions. Again he essayed to arouse her: her grief unmanned him it was so violent, it was pitiable to behold it.

"Madam, dear young lady," he said, in a whisper, "for God sake, for the sake of the unfortunate man who stands before you, command your feelings, and leave this terrible place. It will soothe my last moments the remembrance of the friendship of a lady filling the position you occupy, and it pleases me to believe that the day will come when you will be able to tell the king and queen that I was true to them to the last, and that by reason of my truth I am called on by the world to suffer. But it is ever thus, young lady, yet in a few short hours all will be over, this mortal coil will be violently wrested away by the hands of others, and, Oh! glad thought, I shall have put on immortality."

Florence ceased weeping, and fixed an admiring gaze on this martyr of loyalty, as the non-jurors justly considered him.

His countenance was wan and haggard by the distress of mind he had suffered; his dark hair hung in tangled locks over his open brow, his voice was hollow and his eyes sunken by the tears he had shed, not for himself, but for his helpless wife and children, and the failure of the cause in which he had been engaged.

But resignation, fortitude, magnanimity, heroism then remained, and the power of the undying mind survived the wreck of the shattered mortal frame.

"And now, young lady, I have something to give you, and also something to ask, as you have honored my dismal cell with a visit, to your own imminent danger. I have here a copy of a paper I have drawn up to leave in the hands of a friend. I beg you to read it, and when at length you revisit St. Germain's give it to the king. As to the request, I scarce know how to make it; it is a bold one to ask of so young a lady."

"Name it, my good Ashton; if anything within my power I will gladly comply with it."

"You are a rich heiress, madam; dare I ask you if you will pay for the education of my little daughter, Maud?"

"Right gladly, my dear friend. Moreover, I pledge myself to her brave and suffering father to look to Maud's well-being when the years of childhood shall have passed; Maud shall be with me, shall live with me. My friend, have no care for her. The boy, too, shall not be left unprotected, and—your wife,

that Elizabeth you love, have you any request to make on her behalf?"

"I commend her fearlessly, Madam, to that God who chasteneth whom He loveth. Elizabeth will bend for a time beneath the stroke, but the same all-healing time will bring the consolation."

"When I return to St. Germain's, your Elizabeth shall go with me. Have you aught more of earthly care upon your mind?"

"No wish remains ungratified, dearest Madam; no care save the fear that evil will befall yourself."

"God will protect me. Hark, the half hour has expired, and the warden comes. Farewell, gallant John Ashton, a long farewell, and may the God of all peace support you."

The key turned in the lock, and Florence did not dare look on Ashton again. She heard him sob aloud as she left the cell, and with the tears falling thick and fast under her veil, she retraced her steps, passing out from the gloomy prison back to the clatter and din without its dismal gates.

For some time after she had regained her chair her tears continued falling; then, remembering the paper Ashton had given her, she opened it and read as follows:—

"Being suddenly called to yield up my accounts to the Searcher of all hearts, I think it a duty incumbent on me to impart some things which neither the iniquity nor interests of these times will, I conclude, willingly bear the publication of, and, therefore, not fit to be inserted in the sheriff's paper."

"Some time after the Prince of Orange arrived here, when it was expected that, according to his own declaration, and the king's letter to the Convention, an exact search and enquiry was to have been made into the birth of the Prince of Wales, there was a scheme of the whole matter drawn up, and of the proofs that were then and are still ready to be produced, to prove his royal highness' legitimacy; but no public examination being ever had, and the violence of the times, as well as interest of the present government, not permitting any private to move in it, these Papers have ever since lain by."

"But it being now thought advisable by some to have them printed, and as they were at first designed, addressed to the Lords and Commons, entreating them to enquire into that weighty affair, and to call forward, examine, and protect, for who else dares to appear, the many witnesses to the several particulars therein affixed to be legally proved, I was ordered to carry these Papers to the king, my master, for his inspection, that his leave and approbation might go along with the desire of his good subjects here, and they being taken with me, with some other papers of accounts in a small trunk, amongst my linen and other private things of our present governors."

"They waited the producing of them as evidence at my trial, yet have I just reason to believe my greatest crimes were contained therein."

Having read this document, Florence, concealed it in her bosom, wisely resolving to consign it to the care of Mrs. Ashton whilst she continued a resident at the court.

On her arrival at the house she speedily changed her dress, and told her that, sad as the interview had been, she felt gratified that she had seen her husband, also that she was to take what steps she pleased with regard to her children, for the expenses of whose education she would make herself chargeable, and requested her when she had any communication to make, to convey it to her through the means of her uncle.

Amidst many tears and the warmest expression of thanks, Florence then left the house in a coach which Mrs. Ashton had provided for her use. It was just three o'clock when she re-entered her uncle's chamber.

She was pale, tearful, dispirited; how could it be otherwise?

The only circumstance in the whole sad affair that cheered her up was the knowledge that she had been able to do an act of charity, and thereby to soothe poor Ashton's last hours.

It was impossible, however, to deceive her uncle. He handed her a glass of wine. She thankfully accepted it, but her hand shook as she held the glass, and then setting it down untasted, she burst into tears.

"Florence, my child, what is the matter?" said the old man, much alarmed. "You are faint and ill; you have waited too long for your food, I will order refreshments immediately. I have longed so to see you back. I have been wishing I could get you here to live with me, but without the chance of giving offence in high quarters; it cannot be done, however."

"Oh, that I could! Oh, that I could!" said Florence, passionately, wringing her hands.

"But what has happened to distress you so since you left me this morning?" enquired her uncle.

"Oh, uncle, Ashton is to be executed at the Old Bailey the day after to-morrow, and I knew nothing of it till I called on his wretched wife."

"But I did, my child, and I hid it from you purposely. But, my love, did you not tell me

\*Papers left by Ashton in the care of a friend.