

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE
—OF THE—
Times of
Queen Elizabeth.

The Wonderful Flower of Woxindon,

By Rev. Joseph Spillman, S.J.

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CHAPTER XXIX. CONTINUED.—
"It is not very likely that you will require a ladder, when you go to your own place," I interposed impatiently. "We want the letter, not to hear about your preachers."

"I pray you have a little patience, sir," he rejoined. "Do not be hard on a good Christian, who has given up this world and the next in the service of Her Majesty and the pure Gospel."

"At any rate," I replied, "you make a good thing of it as far as money goes. Give us the letter and leave us alone."

He went on grumbling about the evil times, and how much it took to pay the hungry preachers with their wives and families; meanwhile he slowly unbuttoned his doublet, and drew forth a thick packet of letters, tied up in parchment. As soon as he had carefully counted and pocketed the price of his treachery, he left the apartment.

Quickly and deftly Gregory loosened the silken string, leaving the seal intact, and I was able to read the superscription of the various missives. They were addressed to the French ambassador, and to different prelates, princes, personages of note both in France and Scotland.

But with these I was not concerned, the one of interest and importance was the last, addressed. "To our trusty and well-beloved Anthony Babington, Esquire. Lord of Dethick etc." I looked closely at the seal. It bore the impress of the Queen's ring; a square shield, quartered with the Scotch lion, the English leopards, the Irish harp and the French lilies. On each side of the shield were the letters M. R. (Maria Regina.) I handed the letters to Gregory, and watched him first touch the seal with a little oil, then cover it with a soft substance, which speedily hardened. "I do that for fear lest the sealing wax should break, or give way. In that case I could seal it afresh with this mould, and get as good an impression as the original one," he explained. His next act was to pass a thin, sharp-edged blade betwixt the seal and the paper, detaching the former with such consummate adroitness that no mark remained either on seal or paper.

"So far, so good," he said. "Now I must beg that in reading and copying the letter, great care be taken not to hurt the seal. Then with a little hot wax we can easily re-seal it, so that the sharpest eye will be unable to detect any trace of its having been tampered with."

The letter was a long one, the contents showing that the whole scheme had been expounded to her. It was in French, for Mary Stuart preferred that language to English, and was written by one of her secretaries in cipher. Philipps had deciphered so many of her letters that he was able to read it as fast as I could write from his dictation.

The letter—as far as I can recall its contents at this distance of time—began with an eulogium of the zeal Babington displayed for the cause of religion in general, and of the captive Queen in particular. The number and weight of the Catholic party was daily dwindling, and unless measures were soon taken by the Catholic potentates, it would be too late to prevent the extinction of the faith in England. The interests of religion were the determining motive that induced her to sanction the scheme; she was content to waive her own rights, except in so far as they were bound up in those interests. She impressed upon her friends the importance of attempting nothing rashly, without due deliberation and careful arrangement. It was necessary to ascertain what forces on foot as well as on horse could be raised, and who were to be the captains appointed for them in every shire; which towns, ports and havens could be depended upon to grant succour to auxiliaries from the Low Countries, Spain and France; what place might be thought fittest for landing the troops; what monies, armor, ammunition and provisions were at their disposal; by what means did the six gentlemen intend to proceed in the work of liberation. All this must be well considered; she advised them to consult Mendoza, the Spanish ambassador in France, in whom she had the greatest confidence. Not until they had the certain promise of adequate succour from abroad, would she give her consent to the enterprise, otherwise the

result would be as disastrous as that of the recent rising in the North. Another thing to be thought of was that she should be provided with a sufficiently strong escort, or conveyed to some fortress where she would be in safety, for were the Queen to get her again into her power, she would thrust her into a dungeon whence there would be no chance of escape, if she did not dispose of her in a yet more summary manner. And far more than her own evil fate, would she deplore, in case of failure, the misfortunes that would befall her faithful adherents.

She then proceeded to name several Catholic noblemen, who might be enlisted in the project; adding a warning against traitors, who might even be found under the disguise of Catholic priests. Finally she said that in all probability at the end of the summer she would be removed to Dudley Castle; they might find out when that would be, and arrange for her to make her escape then. Or if she remained at Chartley, one of three plans might be pursued. If she were allowed to ride out on the lonely moor between Chartley and Stafford, a body of some 50 or 60 horsemen could carry her off, as her guard seldom exceeded 20 men-at-arms. It would be possible to set fire to the granary near the castle in the middle of the night, and in the confusion that ensued, it would not be difficult for the conspirators to penetrate into the castle and carry her out. It might be so contrived, that one of the wagons which bring provisions to the castle in the early morning, should be overturned in passing through the gateway, so that the gates could not be closed, when a troop lying in ambush close by might enter and make themselves masters of the castle.

Promising to reward Babington's loyal devotion to the best of her ability, and commending him and his comrades to the protection of Almighty God, the captive Queen ended and signed this lengthy epistle, Maria R.

Such, then, was the purport of the letter. My feelings as I transcribed it may be imagined. It was a political intrigue on a large scale, every detail of which had been carefully considered, for a rising of the Catholic party in England, Scotland and Ireland, simultaneously with the landing of Spanish or French forces on our shores. In concert, and only in concert with this, was the project of her release from captivity to be entertained.

It is true, that she had, as Walsingham anticipated, laid open "her very heart." But nowhere was there a syllable that suggested the existence of any design on Elizabeth's life; nowhere a hint, which betrayed any suspicion of Savage's proposal. On the contrary, the only mention that was made of Her Majesty, clearly showed that the possibility of such a design had not entered into her calculations.

Once more I carefully collated my copy with the original making Philipps repeat it word by word, in case a line, an expression might have been passed over. But no; it was impossible to detect the slightest omission.

I was at a loss now how to act, since the letter afforded no ground for proceedings against Mary Stuart. It showed that she participated in a conspiracy to dethrone Elizabeth, but not to take her life. Should I arrest Windsor, as I was commissioned to do, if the contents of the letter were what my uncle expected, or would he make another attempt to cause her to incriminate herself? As the result of my reflections, I determined to despatch Philipps and his comrades to London that same night, with the whole batch of letters, and one from me begging for further instructions without delay. This announcement was anything but welcome to the two men. Philipps coughed significantly, and said: "Excuse me, sir, but it appears you have not found in this letter all you wished to find. Well, when anything is written in cipher like that, it is nothing wonderful, if, on closer examination, one remarks one or two words which one might have overlooked just at first." He emphasized his words with a sly wink.

"But we went through it line by line," I answered; for I thought he could hardly have the audacity to propose to make interpolations.

"So we did," he rejoined with a disagreeable smile. "But sharp eyes—eyes sharpened with a purpose—can read between the lines, you have only got to tell me what you would like—"

"You rascal," I exclaimed, "how can you venture to propose such a thing to me? Walsingham shall hear of that!"

"Tell him, and welcome," was the insolent answer. "One would have thought you had known enough of the secrets of statecraft, and learnt enough in your uncle's school, not to make an outcry about a simple little artifice. For what do you suppose the prudent Secretary of State keeps us in his pay, if not to make use of us?"

"As spies, not as forgers," I replied. "At any rate you shall not falsify this letter, on which the life of a Queen depends, if I can prevent it. I am heartily glad that I have a correct copy, and thus possess the means of detecting alterations and exposing falsifications. Mark that, Mr. Philipps; and now give orders for your horses; for in an hour's time you must be in the saddle. Gifford shall follow in the morning."

I leave it to my friend Windsor to relate what occurred in the course of the next few days, before the return of my messengers from London.

CHAPTER XXX.—No sooner had my betrothed with his little brother, their uncle, who had just escaped from prison, and Miss Cecil, been taken on board the Jeanette, than she weighed anchor, and put out to sea. Meanwhile our boatmen rowed us across to the opposite side of the river, where we landed. It was with considerable difficulty that we got out of the hands of the coastguards, who, on the lookout for seminary priests and Jesuits, made sure that they had a prize in us. At length we succeeded in convincing them with the aid of a douceur, that we were not the persons they wanted, and we were allowed to go. Uncle Remy directed his course over Barking to Woxindon; I proceeded through Bedford and Leicester to Burton, which I reached without any mishap. The morning after my arrival, I had rather a stormy encounter with St. Barbe, as he has already stated. I was astonished to hear him accuse me of having seduced the affections of his lady-love, and at first thought he meant my Mary; afterwards I concluded that he referred to Miss Cecil, to whom I was not aware that he was engaged. I wrote a note to explain the misunderstanding, but he returned the billet unopened, and there the matter rested.

Nothing occurred for some time to break the monotony of the weeks that followed. To me they seemed to pass slowly, for I was daily expecting to hear that the preliminary arrangements for our enterprise were completed. I, on my part, was ready, the forester's cottage having been prepared to serve as a hiding place for the Queen of Scots in case of need. The end of July had come; hot, sultry weather had succeeded the long period of rain, and the peasants were busy with gathering in the crops. The sun on the open moorland was scorching, so that I was fain to betake myself to a shady nook that I had discovered, beside a stream which meandered through the wood flowed into the neighboring river Trent.

Now it happened one day when I was angling for trout in this staid stream. I was fortunate enough to be the means of doing St. Barbe a good service. Whilst bathing in the Trent hard by, he got out of his depth, and was in sore peril of his life. Attracted to the spot by his cries, I arrived just in time to rescue him from drowning, at no slight risk to myself, and conveyed him to my rooms at the Mayflower. Thus we were brought together again, and an opportunity was afforded me of clearing up the misapprehension between us. Nevertheless he did not appear at his ease with me, and in spite of his gratitude for the service I had rendered him, there was still some coolness in his manner towards me.

Three days subsequent to this adventure, when St. Barbe was quite recovered from the shock he had received, he came to my room at the inn towards evening, and sat talking with me over a tankard of ale.

He seemed very restless, and every time a horse's hoofs were heard on the road, he sprang up and went to the window. His conversation all the while consisted of an eulogium of his uncle Walsingham's astuteness, and the clever manner in which he had discovered and exposed various political plots. I began to suspect that his intention in dwelling on this subject was to give me a friendly hint, when our talk was broken short by the arrival of a horseman, dusty and travel-stained, who pulled up at the inn-door, and asked if St. Barbe were there. My companion instantly rose, and pale with excitement, rushed down stairs. He exchanged a few words with the rider, who then handed him a letter, which he drew from his breast-pocket. Hurriedly breaking the seal, St. Barbe ran his eye over the contents. They cannot have been lengthy, for almost immediately he folded the epistle again, and thrust it into his pocket. In doing so, he glanced up at the window where I was standing. That one glance told me as plainly as words could have done, that our conspiracy was discovered. The messenger received orders to go on to the castle, and a few moments later St. Barbe re-entered my room, closing the door behind him carefully. I thought he had come to arrest me, and instinctively reached out my hand for my rapier, which hung on the wall, for I was resolved to sell my life dearly.

"Let the sword alone, Windsor," he said gravely. "You cannot think I should be so basely ungrateful, as to send the man who saved my life to the gallows. Besides, I should be all the more reluctant to do so, because I feel certain that you would never agree to any dishonorable design, whatever your confederates might propose. Yes, you have guessed right, Walsingham has long been cognizant of this conspiracy; he has intercepted the Scottish Queen's last letter, and now gives me orders to arrest you quietly, and send you to London, as soon as your fellow conspirators are in his hands. Take care, therefore, to be well out of the way, when the soldiers surround the Mayflower to-night. If you ride hard and take the road through Loughborough and Spalding, you might reach the Wash to-morrow, and get out of the country before I can overtake you. If you want money, I will gladly lend you the amount you require."

Deeply touched by his kindness, I thanked him with all my heart. I had money, but I owed my life to him.

"Now we are quits," he said, shaking my hand. "Farewell, we are not likely to see one another again on earth." Thereupon he left the room quickly, and disappeared in the direction of the castle.

It was some moments before I could collect my thoughts sufficiently to decide upon the course of action. In such cases my habit is to say a decade of the rosary, and I did so then. I had not got far before I saw my way clearly. Walsingham had not had my comrades arrested yet, because he wished to take them all at once, and that before two days are over, otherwise he would have had me sent to London in custody at once. There was still a possibility that I could warn them in time; consequently it was not to the Wash, but to London, that I must ride as fast as my horse could carry me.

A few things were quickly put together, and leaving on my table a sum sufficient to pay my host, I slipped down to the stables, saddled my mare, and led her out by a back way through the lanes into the country. There I mounted, and walked for a short distance at a foot's pace. Not a soul met me. On reaching the nearest wood, I turned and looked once more at Chartley, and thought with a sigh of the unhappy prisoner within the castle walls. Then I put spurs to my horse, and rode forward on my errand of life and death.

At nightfall the next day I reached London, and entered the city by the Highgate, through which a drove of bullocks were passing. Perhaps the guard took me for one of the cattle dealers, for I was covered with sweat and dust, and bestrode a nag that no gentleman would care to own. It was the only substitute I could obtain when my beautiful mare broke down, halfway between Stratford and Enfield. Wending my way through a labyrinth of alleys and ill-lighted streets, I reached Fleet street and the Strand. Our house by the Anchor Inn looked deserted; passing it by I proceeded to Babington's residence at Temple Bar. The servant who appeared at my call informed me that his master and the other gentlemen were gone by Pooley's invitation to an entertainment. He thought, at the Paris Garden. I asked if anything special had occurred? Yes, the man replied; Captain Fortescue, the officer who was staying with Mr. Babington, was arrested

the day before yesterday. His master had been a good deal alarmed by this at first; but all was quiet again now.

I felt not a moment was to be lost. Fortescue, or rather Father John Ballard, in prison, and all our confederates invited by Pooley to a banquet, manifestly with the intention of arresting them one and all! But I could not make my appearance at the Paris Garden as I then was, without arousing suspicion; I therefore stopped at an inn near the Temple, put up my horse, and got myself into somewhat better trim. Taking a slip of paper, I wrote on it the words: Fly, fly immediately; W. knows all; the last letter from Ch. is in his possession. You are surrounded by his emissaries; fly for your life. No signature was needed, as Babington knew my handwriting. With this billet in my pocket I left the inn, after ordering supper to be ready on my return, and hastened in the direction of the river.

My way led past our house. I got over the hedge into the garden, and finding the back door ajar, I entered, shouting the names of Barbara and Tichbourne. At first there was no answer; then a door upstairs was heard to open, and a voice called out, in harsh and grating tones: "Come up, sir; Mr. Tichbourne will be back directly."

The voice was a peculiar one, and I instantly recognized it as Topcliffe's. Quick as thought I sped through the door and down to the river. Our boat lay as usual, moored at the foot of the steps; I sprang into it and pushed off from the bank. Before I got far, I fancied myself pursued; but I pushed my little craft between some others of a larger size, and, favored by the darkness, reached the southwest side in safety.

The Paris Garden was a blaze of light; the sound of musical instruments rang through the still night air. To elude observation, I avoided the principal entrance, and made my way in through a side gate. The curtains of the largest tent being drawn up to admit the cool air, I obtained a view of the interior, which was profusely decorated. There the gilded youth of London were displaying themselves, decked out in gay habiliments of the latest French fashion. They stood and sat in groups at the tables, taking refreshments, playing cards, or chattering merrily as they watched the dancers, moving in stately measure to the sound of clarinet and fiddle. The festive scene, the rich dresses, the sparkling jewels and nodding plumes, the songs and laughter, were little in harmony with the care and anxiety that filled my heart. I surveyed the guests for some time in vain; at length at a distant table, laid apparently for a party of about twelve, I descried Babington, easily recognizable by his cloak of light blue velvet, trimmed with gold. Next to him sat a broad shouldered man, unknown to me; on the opposite side of the table I saw Salisbury and some other acquaintances, not members of our association; Pooley himself was seated at the other end. Several places were empty, as if the full number of guests had not yet arrived.

While I was considering how I could possibly convey my warning to my friends without delivering myself into the enemies' hands, I saw my good Tichbourne approaching the tent. I sprang forward, plucked him by the sleeve, and drew him into the shade of a tree.

"You here, Windsor!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "I thought you were at Chartley!"

"There is no time for talking," I answered, under my breath. "We must all fly forthwith, without an instant's delay. Ask no questions, only tell me how I can warn Babington and the others in there, who do not suspect they are being caught in a snare. And do not you go home. Topcliffe is waiting for you there!"

"Is it so?" he calmly replied. "I have thought for the last half hour I was being followed. I only wonder that those two fellows there have not already apprehended me." "Their intention is to take us all prisoners at this banquet, to which that arch-traitor Pooley invited you. How are the others to be told? I have a billet here for Babington, but I fear it will be of no use. It is impossible for him to read it, and warn the others, without the pursuivants observing it, and cutting off their retreat. I have got our boat here close by; if we could but reach that, we might ply our oars to some purpose!"

"We must make the attempt," Tichbourne answered. "Give me the note, and do you take the boat to the landing-place just below. If I fail, at least you may be able to save yourself."

I wanted him to take the part he had assigned to me; but he said, and justly, that as he was watched,

it would be useless for him to try and take the boat to the place agreed upon. So we shook hands and parted; I contrived to get out of the garden unnoticed, and waited with the boat close to the landing place.

Half an hour passed in feverish apprehension. Suddenly the music ceased and a confused shout arose, in which I fancied I could distinguish the cry, "Traitors! Stop the traitors!" My warning came too late, I said to myself. Yet I waited awhile, in the hope that perhaps one of my friends might escape, and make for the riverside. And so it was; rapid footsteps were heard approaching; a man ran up, with another close at his heels. In an instant I had the boat's nose at the steps; Tichbourne leaped into it; his pursuer, a sheriff's officer, laid hold of the boat, shouting: "In the Queen's name! surrender!" I thrust him back violently with one of the oars, he stumbled and fell into the water.

"Where are the others?" I asked Tichbourne.

"They have all gone off in one direction or another, where they thought they could find safety," he replied. Then, while with rapid strokes we pulled out into the middle of the river, he told me in a few abrupt sentences, how Babington, when he read the note, made a sign to Salisbury, and leaving his hat and cloak behind, passed out quickly through the nearest opening in the tent. Pooley, evidently expecting them to return, made no movement until he (Tichbourne) and Barwell attempted, under some pretext, to quit the table. He then barred their way and gave his attendants the signal to arrest all the company. Tichbourne knocked Pooley down and with Donne and Travers made his escape, before the officers laid hands on him.

For a moment we rested on our oars, to discover whether we were pursued. There was no doubt of this; we heard shouting on either bank, and by the flickering light of the torches saw boats pulled off in pursuit. Away we rowed down the stream, in the hope that by getting among the ships lying at anchor below the bridge we might evade our pursuers. But swiftly as our boat flew, they gained rapidly upon us, and the cry: "Stop the traitors!" sounded nearer and nearer every moment. We soon saw our case was desperate. Tichbourne drew in his oars.

"We have no more chance," he said. "May God have mercy on our souls!"

"One chance remains," I replied, "throw off your cloak, friend; we will swim for our lives."

"That may do for you; for me it would be certain death. Give my love to my young wife, my poor Alice; I would fain have spared her this sorrow. Save yourself and pray for me, only be quick."

I lingered a moment, urging my companion to jump into the river and cling to an oar to keep himself afloat; he refused, so, as our pursuers were almost alongside, I let myself over the side into the water.

Fortunately for me, the officers did not see me, owing to the darkness, although when they boarded our skiff, I was not a boat's length off. Finding only one where they had seen two men, they began to search for me, lighting their torches for this purpose. Carried down by the force of the current, I struck out vigorously to the left, and thus succeeded in passing under a different arch of the bridge to my pursuers, whose torches cast a lurid glare on each side of the boat. "There he goes!" I heard one exclaim; and a long pole struck the water within a few feet of me.

"No, it is only a log of wood," another said.

"Look out for the pier ahead!" cried a third.

(To be continued.)

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