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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.

(From the Catholic Mirror.)

CHAPTER XXX.—(Continued.)

The beams of the wintry moon streamed through the curtains, partially drawn aside at the foot of the bed. The room was flooded with its strong light; she could see around it, all was perfectly still and safe.

But again she heard that noise, and again she fears, for she remembers the night at Whitehall.

A few moments more and a deep sigh breaks upon the dead stillness around, and then she hears the rustling of paper, and becomes aware that some one whose chamber is very close to her own, is keeping watch that cold December night. And, moreover, that their occupation must needs be the examination and destruction of papers of importance. Then Florence began to think what rooms were between her own and the queen's bed-chamber, and she remembered that the bed-room gave admittance to a private closet used by the queen, and that the corner of her own room, near the head of her bed, must run parallel with this very closet.

A thrill of horror ran through her veins, and she still listened attentively, hoping she might hear the murmur of the king's voice or some other person's. It seemed so very terrible to her to think, that ill as she was, the queen was sitting up alone, forgetting the folly of such a step. She had partially thrown aside her bed-clothes with the idea of going to the queen's room and urging her to go to rest, and allow her to perform the work on which she was engaged.

Again a deep sigh, and a moan as of a soul in anguish, as it looks over the records of the past. It is followed by sound of paper being crushed or torn; she hears, too, the queen's low cough, and shudders, for she knows well what her occupation must be that long cold winter's night.

She was alone, quite alone; of that Florence was now perfectly convinced; nor is it likely she was at all incorrect in surmising that the queen's occupation was that of destroying important papers connected with her usurpation of the crown.

Florence remembered having heard the late king speak of the pains he took before he left Whitehall, to preserve every document or paper which could inform posterity as to his conduct, whilst his more fortunate and guilty daughter was evidently destroying with her own hand, every paper that could speak with certainty of her own personal history.

"She does then entertain an idea that she will not live," said Florence; "and how terrible must such an occupation be."

One, two, and three o'clock struck, and though she fought against it for a long while, Florence at last fell asleep, but not for long. She dreamed she was sitting with the queen looking over old letters; old letters that had passed between herself and the Princess Anne, when they were villainously plotting about their best of fathers. Old letters from her father to herself, old records of the times forever gone, in which she had taken so prominent a part. Having taken which, if she would retreat one step, she could not any more than

that the dead can come to life again. And the queen sat opposite to her, looking, as perchance she really did look, as she must have looked on that terrible night, unless she was more than human, for the fever of death was even then, be it remembered, coursing madly through her veins. One after another, one after another, she glanced at those old letters and documents, then tears them, or crushing them in her hot hands, throws them beneath the stove, watching the blue flame play over them, with a smile of infinite satisfaction at the thought that she has robbed posterity of much it would have liked to know.

One after another, have rolls of papers been opened, patiently scanned, and the greater portion of them committed to the flames. And Florence in her vision of the night, sees she grows weary of her task; she leans forward, pressing the throbbing head with the hot hand, and says to herself: "Three hours and not yet done," for the crowing of the cock in a distant farm-yard, tells the unhappy queen how long into the night, or rather the morning, her watch has extended; and Florence fancies she hears her say, "and if I die now it was all done, but for *sic short years* of restless ambition."

She awakened at first scarcely conscious till a smothered exclamation, alike of bodily and mental suffering, followed by a sound as if the unhappy occupant of the adjoining cabinet were sobbing violently, burst upon her ear. All was then perfectly quiet. The dream of Florence, you see, was but the recitation of what she had heard whilst she was awake. It was hard to think the sight, if mortal eyes could have beheld it, were one whit less pitiful than she had dreamed it to be. If you bear in mind what such a sight would be to you, if death were coming on with rapid strides, and if earnest to destroy records of your past life, instead of the rest so necessary, such occupation as I have described was yours, and if you closed it too, as Mary did with a letter to her boorish, brutal husband, reproaching him with his love for the notorious Elizabeth Villiers. She had sinned very deeply in her idolatrous love of him, and this was the last letter she ever wrote, endorsing, "Not to be delivered except in case of my death," then she locked it up in an ebony cabinet, where, of course, it was found after all was over.

Now it very probably was this letter she was writing, when all was still beyond the heart-rending sobs Florence had overheard, for there was no more rustling of papers, and a very little time afterwards, after the clock had struck four, she heard the queen pass into the adjoining bed-chamber, and you may suppose that Mary was worse, as she really was after such a watch as this. The following day she was declared to have the small-pox; think, I beg you, how her previous night had been spent.

Florence, with the other ladies of the court, wondered much what steps the Princess Anne would take (of course I need not tell you she said nothing of what she knew respecting the queen's frame of mind on the previous night).

The princess did her duty; she was ill and confined to a couch; nevertheless, she sent a message to her sister entreating her to allow her the happiness of waiting on her. She would, notwithstanding the condition she was in, run any hazard. The message was delivered to her Majesty, and the messenger sent back with word that "the king would send an answer the next day."

No kind sisterly message was returned; no reconciliation could have been desired. Have we not seen all along that Mary's heart was almost dead to human feeling except for her husband? And even to him she left a letter of rebuke.

It happened the next day that Florence was with two other ladies in the queen's bed-chamber; the queen was sinking fast into unconsciousness, when Lady Fitzharding, who undertook to express to all the concerns of the Princess Anne, forced herself into the queen's bed-chamber; the dying queen gasped out one word "Thanks." That single word was, indeed, all she was able to utter.

At length a terrible erysipelas spread itself over the queen's face, and a frightful carbuncle settled immediately over the heart. The king was in despair, he ordered his camp-bed to be placed in the chamber of his dying consort, and remained with her night and day.

She received the communication that she was dying with calmness, said, "that she had wrote her mind on many things to the king," and spoke of the escreteiro which he would find in her closet; and avoided giving herself or her husband the tenderness a final parting might have caused to them both. This idea is, however, much at variance with the rebuking letter she wrote to him a few nights since in her closet.*

After receiving the Sacrament, she composed herself solemnly to die. She slumbered some time, but said her soul was not refreshed by it and that nothing did her good but prayer. Once or twice she tried to speak to the king, but could not go through with it. For some hours she lay silent, then when she spoke she wandered very wildly and her hallucina-

tions led those who were around her to believe that there was something still upon her mind.

"I have something to tell the Archbishop; leave me alone with him," said the queen, and the room being immediately cleared, Tension awaited in breathless impatience, the expected communication.

He afterwards said that the queen's mind was wandering, "she had fancied Dr. Radcliffe, her Jacobite physician, had put a Popish nurse upon her, and that she was lurking behind a screen. One who lived in the time of the queen on speaking of her last moments uses these words.

"But whether she had any scruples relating to her father, and they made part of her discourse with Tension, and that arch-divine took upon his own soul the pressures which, in those weak unguarded moments might weigh upon hers, must now remain a secret until the last day."

At that most solemn hour between night and morning, the spirit of the queen went forth, without one word of reconciliation or remorse with regard to her injured father, either to ask his forgiveness or to express sorrow for her conduct.

Father Lawson was yet lingering in the vicinity of the palace when the queen's death took place. There were others, besides Florence and her handmaid, secretly of the prescribed faith, and by one of these, the tidings was conveyed to James, who though he would not put himself in mourning for her death, shut himself up in his apartments and refused all visits. His horror was great on finding that one he had loved so dearly had expired without sending him the slightest expression of sorrow, at the misery she had been the means of causing him.

To the great honor of that primate, Dr. Ken, who had been Mary's chaplain in Holland, we may add, that he wrote indignantly to Tension respecting his conduct at the queen's death-bed, charging him with not acting up to his position as primate, in failing "to call on the queen to repent on her death-bed of her sins towards her father," reminding him in very strong language of the horrors Tension had expressed to him of some circumstances in the queen's conduct at the time of the revolution, affirming that they would compromise her salvation, without individual and complete repentance.

Three times had the king swooned when word was brought him that the queen was no more. He persisted in remaining at Kensington, and as no one dared intrude on his grief, Florence was at a loss how to convey to him the letter of the queen; chance, however, threw her in his way.

The queen's funeral had taken place, and she was beginning seriously to think of addressing herself to the Princess Anne, when, wandering down one of the galleries of the palace, she met the king advancing toward her; to retreat was impossible. He would have passed her by, for his head was bent downwards, and he seemed lost in thought.

Her step, however, aroused him, and he seemed about to pass on, when, as if a sudden idea struck him, he paused.

"I will speak of you to the Princess Anne," he said, and was walking on, when summoning courage by the thoughtfulness he had expressed, she knelt down, and gracefully presented to him the dead queen's letter. A flush akin to anger, it might be, passed like a momentary shadow across his countenance; and in somewhat harsh tones, he exclaimed:

"You may go."

She scarcely understood his meaning, and rising, and turning as to leave the gallery, looked enquiringly in his face.

"You may go," he repeated; "go from here; go where you will, with your maid; read, and go quickly."

Her eyes fell on the few lines the dying queen had written, and which, passing on without further word or comment, the king left in her hand. They ran thus:

"In remembrance of my maid of honor, Florence O'Neill, having saved my life during the fire at Whitehall, and also of her submission to our will respecting the overtures of marriage from the Count Von Arnheim, I beg that you will allow her to leave the palace, with her maid, whenever she pleases to go, wheresoever she shall see fit; and as she has now turned her twenty-first year, that she may have the full and entire management of her late uncle's property, as well as of the Irish estates inherited from her aunt, Catherine O'Neill.

MARIE R.

Florence was alone in the gallery, and, for two or three minutes after reading the paper, remained in the position in which William of Orange had left her. Joy is near akin to grief in its manifestations, and her tears fell abundantly over the paper as she proceeded to her own chamber, her mind busily weaving a thousand delightful images by the way.

When she reached her rooms she immediately summoned Grace. When that imperturbable hand-maiden made her appearance she was seated with that small piece of paper open on the table, her hands clasped, and an expression of joy on her countenance.

"Grace," she said, "I am going to France. Will you accompany me thither?"

* Kennet.

"To France, madam," said the astonished woman, and her eyes fell on the open letter of the queen.

"I have permission of the king. A voice from the grave, which he dared not refuse, has spoken to him. You may read if you wish," and, with a something of reverence, she put the dead queen's letter in her attendant's hand. You must make your election, Grace, and make it quickly."

"It is already made, madam," said Grace. "I love the queen better just now than I ever loved her in her lifetime. When shall we go?"

"Pack up my clothes and books at once, Grace; let us go as speedily as possible."

Then Florence withdrew to her private apartment, and you may be quite sure that for some little time she felt like one in a dream, dazed, bewildered. Should she go straight to St. Germain's? Oh, no; she should act upon a hint the Queen Mary Beatrix had given her. She should seek out King Louis, and beg him to redeem his word; because you will please to remember that when she met the king at Marly, more than four years since, he had told her he would grant any boon she at any time wished to ask of him.

I shall not say what boon she meant to ask, but her thoughts might be thus construed into words.

"I shall go to Paris, and then enquire where King Louis holds his court. If I can get speech of Madame de Maintenon I will, because the king will refuse her no favor she asks of him, though he has already passed his word to me to grant whatever boon I solicit. I shall then go to St. Germain's. How surprised they will all be to see me again; and he, to whom I have been so long betrothed, what will he say when I give him the message I am sure to take him from King Louis."

Do not blame her, too, that when her soliloquy was ended, her tears fell to the memory of Queen Mary. How little did she think that the queen, on that morning her hand had traced those lines, was thinking how she should at least remedy one wrong. She had decided on speaking to her husband, as it were, from the grave. Thus she secured to Florence her property, as well as her freedom. Probably when she begged her so earnestly to give the king the paper the day after her death, the thought may have occurred to her that permission would be refused, if time were allowed to pass over, so as for the wound, occasioned by her loss, to heal up before the request was made.

There was no small surprise evinced by the ladies of the court at the departure of Florence; but with persons of greater importance, even as with Mary herself, she speedily passed out of the minds of those amongst whom she had moved.

Half fearing to put herself in the way of the king, and yet not liking to leave the palace without craving an audience, she begged one of the ladies in attendance on the Princess Anne to ask if she might have an interview with him. The king's boorish and uncouth message was worthy of himself:

"Tell her I do not want to see her."

CHAPTER XXXI.—THE KING'S PLEDGE REDEEMED—ST. GERMAINS.

Well was it for Florence O'Neill that she was able to be chaperoned into France by one as staid and faithful as Grace. The young lady, as we have intimated, by no means intended to visit St. Germain's first. It was not her intention to go thither till she had first armed herself by receiving the boon concerning which she was about to throw herself at the feet of the French king. Perhaps she was not unconscious that she was performing a rather daring feat in being under no protection, when presenting herself at the court of the gallant monarch, beyond that of Grace, a woman of middle age, whom Florence had insisted on raising from the humble calling of an attendant to the position of a friend and companion, and which, by her education and good breeding, she was eminently calculated to fill.

On arriving in France she heard that the king was holding his court at Marly, and she immediately proceeded thither. She had resolved, first, to gain an interview with Madame de Maintenon. She knew well that that lady was the bosom counsellor of the king. Moreover, under her patronage, notwithstanding her doubtful rank, she should present herself before Louis with less diffidence.

It was more than four years since that pleasant summer day, when she had accompanied the king and queen to Marly. The place, and persons, and times, are altered now.

Then roses, and lilies, and verbena, and sweet-scented heliotrope cast their balmy perfume on the air, and the fields and hedges were gay with the wild violet and peppy. Now, the hand of winter was spread over the scene; the hoar frost glistened on the trees and porticoes, and the miniature lakes of Marly were covered with a sheet of ice.

She, too, is changed; she had sprung from girlhood to womanhood; her almost matchless beauty matured, but in no degree lessened. Others have changed; she will find traces of the pressure of its hand on those from whom she has been separated, even as they will no longer behold in her the Florence of four years

since. Times, too, have altered. She had smiled when Louis had promised to grant her any boon she might wish for, wondering, in the proud recklessness of youth, what she could ever want to ask for herself in the way of a boon from Louis.

She was at Marly now as a suppliant to beg of the gallant king to make good his word. And why? Two fair estates are hers. Joyfully would she fling it all at the feet of him to whom she was betrothed; but well she knows his haughty temper, and that he will never complete that betrothal by marriage, unless he can retrieve his shattered fortunes.

"And you are the *petite* O'Neill, whom I have heard Madame de Beau-deploire deplore the loss of so bitterly," said Madame de Maintenon, in a tone not unmingled with surprise, as she fixed her eyes on the somewhat stately and elegant lady before her.

"You must be pleased to remember, Madame, that four years have passed since I left St. Germain's."

"Ah, *c'est vrai*, I had forgotten; the girl is now a woman."

"And lovelier far than when she was a girl, *mon Dieu*," said the king, coming forward from an inner apartment, in spite of the significant glances of Madame, who knew well he was near at hand. "My cousins at St. Germain's," he added, "will scarce recognize the runaway O'Neill again."

"Oh, sire, I am indeed unprepared to meet your majesty," said Florence, rising, with a blush upon her cheek; and Louis put out his hand to raise her from the kneeling attitude she had assumed.

"Never fear, maiden," he replied, "I passed my word as a king that I would grant any boon you should ask of me in the day of trouble or distress. What is the trouble, my fair O'Neill? Let me know, and I will right it for you."

A deep blush again suffused the face of Florence. She had not counted at all on meeting the king on this first visit. She had hoped to ingratiate Madame de Maintenon in her favor, and tell her story to her first, when the delicate portion of her visit would have been half got over.

At length she, with difficulty, stammered out:

"Oh, sire, I know not how to prefer my petition. It was to ask a boon for a brave English gentleman whom William of Orange has outlawed, and whose estates he has confiscated and—"

"Aye, prithee, what then?" interrupted the king. "Art pleading for a mate for yourself, maiden? We must see you do not wed a landless knight."

"Your majesty," replied Florence, blushing yet more deeply, "I have lands and estates in abundance, being heiress to the last of my kindred; but, alas, he to whom I am betrothed has lost his all, and it is for him I beg the performance of your kindly promise. If your majesty would allow him to fight under your standard, and—"

"Fair Florence," said the courtly monarch, interrupting her, "the boon I have promised you I will not fail to pay. Are you pleading for a certain Sir Reginald, who, on account of his poverty, shrinks from redeeming his troth with a maiden of good lineage till he can make good his ruined fortunes?"

"It is in behalf of Sir Reginald, St. John that I crave the fulfillment of your majesty's promise," answered Florence.

"Assuredly I will redeem it; nay, I have redeemed already to the full the promise I gave four years since. Rest content, Florence, I knew your secret before you came hither. The good queen has already mentioned your betrothal to me. But yesterday Sir Reginald was appointed to a command under one of my brave marshals."

Florence would have spoken her thanks, but could not. She was moved to tears at the delicacy with which *le grand monarque* had conferred the appointment.

"Nay, weep not, Florence," he said; "I am rejoiced I have had it in my power to serve you, and by so doing forward the nuptials of a brave gentleman with a fair and virtuous lady. Now, to turn to other matters. When do you return to St. Germain's?"

"As soon as possible, your majesty. I am most anxious again to see my dear mistress."

"Let the young lady partake of refreshments, madam," said the king, turning to Madame de Maintenon, "and a carriage shall be in readiness a little later to convey you to St. Germain's, fair Florence," added Louis, touching her forehead with his lips.

It was drawing towards the close of the winter afternoon ere our heroine arrived again at the well-remembered chateau of St. Germain's.

The king and his consort were together seated in the closet of the former. The light of the winter afternoon was fading away, but the bright, red glow of a large wood fire fell upon the antique panellings of green and gold, and gave a cheery appearance to the chamber and its surroundings. Beside the fire sat the queen, her hands folded on her lap. Time had left its traces on her fair face, but withal there was an expression of patience and resignation

* Barnett's History of His Own Times.