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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 XV.—CHAELLOT—THE EXILES.

In a spacious apartment, with oaken wainscot and flooring, a few uncushioned chairs of the same, a long table in the wide alcove, and a row of deep recesses in the wall, leafless boughs of the trees covered with hoar-frost, for it is mid-winter, two ladies are seated; one is still in the prime of life, the other is middle-aged. The younger of these ladies is tall and elegant in form, her complexion is fair, her hair as black as the raven's wing, the arched eye-brows and long silken lashes that veiled the fine dark eyes were of the same hue, the contour of the face was of a delicate oval, the expression sweet and winning.

The companion of this lady is robed in the garb of a nun. She has not her charm of personal beauty, but the frank, open countenance is pleasing, her figure is upright as when thirty, since she made the vows that bound her to religion. She is the abbess of Chaellot, and the other lady is the beautiful and hapless queen of England, Mary Beatrice of Modena.

A great consolation in her very sorrowful life must have been her affectionate intercourse with the nuns of Chaellot.

"Is your majesty well assured that your information comes from a correct source?" asked the abbess, after a pause in their conversation. The calm resignation with which the queen generally bore her great trials had on this occasion given way to the indulgence of a burst of uncontrollable grief. "May we not hope," she continued, "that there may be some mistake in the assertion that your favorite, Florence O'Neill, is really detained at the court of Queen Mary?"

"Alas, no; the news of my informant may be too well relied upon; there can be no doubt of that," was the reply. "Our greatest grief arises from the fact that those most devoted to our interests are, through that devotion, visited with penalties, imprisonment, and death; but when I suffered Florence to leave me to make a short visit to England, I certainly had not the faintest idea that she would ever approach the court, but the message we have received tells us that not only is she detained there, to all appearances merely as one of the queen's ladies, but that she, in fact, feels herself a kind of prisoner; whilst immediately after Ashton had sailed from London with papers of the utmost importance for the king. The whole plot was discovered, it is suspected, through the instrumentality of the humble persons from whom he hired the vessel. Those tidings, in fact, have reached us through my friend, Lady Bulkeley, whose husband writes her that Ashton's wife has adopted some means to make my poor Florence aware that she is surrounded by danger; nay, she must herself be aware that should Mary's suspicions be excited, there is but one step from her presence, and that may be either to the Tower or the grave."

"But," replied the abbess, "with regard to Ashton, it does appear that he had really left London. Then let me beg your majesty to hope the best."

The poor queen shook her head sadly, saying:

"Alas, my good mother, I cannot divest myself of the idea that I shall never more see my brave, good Ashton. I fear that the fury of Mary may be the means of stopping him before he has made way sufficiently to escape the emissaries doubtless on his track. If so, death for himself, Lord Preston, and others concerned in this rising, must pay the penalty of their loyalty. It does, indeed, seem as if the will of God were against us. That Florence, too, should have fallen into the power of the queen fills my hearts with fear. How little did I think when I suffered her to leave me she would ever incur such a risk!"

"That young lady has committed an act of imprudence, no doubt," said the abbess. "I wonder she was aware that Sir Reginald had become one of the king's adherents at the time she placed herself in Mary's power?"

"Certainly not. That knowledge, if, indeed, she be acquainted with it, will of itself increase what she must now be suffering."

"Was not Sir Reginald one of William's favorites; will not his property suffer for his disaffection?"

"Yes, undoubtedly, with all whose loyalty leads them to follow our fortunes," replied the queen; "his property will be confiscated to the crown. Many have followed us to France, and William has, in every instance, outlawed them and confiscated their property. Yet they have preferred exile rather than traces for their allegiance to William and Mary, while amongst those who have remained in England many have rendered proofs of their friendship by refuting the slanders heaped upon my name."

The vile calumnies disseminated by the king's worthless daughters respecting the legitimacy of her son, the Prince of Wales, filled the thoughts of the queen, and those full dark eyes, which Madame de Maintenon described as being always tearful, overflowed as she alluded to this scandal.

"There are times," she added, after a pause, "when we have very little hope; for such is the temper of the nation, my good mother, that it was impossible for the king to do anything in favor of religion and fail to give disgust. The time was ripe for the invasion of William; the aspersions cast on the birth of the prince by his half-sisters were all means to the same end, and those who call the king a weak man, because that he abdicated the throne—if that were his only proof of weakness—do forget that it wanted some courage to go to rest as calmly as he did that night at Whitehall, with the Dutch guards of his traitor son-in-law and nephew about him. It is but a step for kings from the palace to an untimely end. Had he not the fate of his own father present to him, who shall dare say," said the queen; "for a time carried away by her feelings, 'who shall dare say that private assassination, or imprisonment for life, in one of William's Dutch castles, might not have been his fate? But, my dear mother, I have rambled on without fully replying to your question. Sir Reginald's property will all be confiscated. At present Florence has nothing to lose, but she is the heiress of her uncle, the Sir Charles de Grey of whom you have heard me speak. He is far advanced in years, and it appears he also has managed to get introduced at court. She is also the heiress of the O'Neill's, so that one way or another, should she give offence, no small sum will fall into the hands of William and Mary, as well as landed property to bestow on their parasites. But, hark; there is the bell for Vespers. I will follow you," she added, as the nun rose.

"I beg you, in your prayers, not to forget to offer up your prayers for the success of the king's arms at Limerick, and for the welfare of all my family."

"That is an unnecessary injunction, your majesty," and the abbess pressed the queen's hand to her lips as she spoke. "Nowhere are more fervent prayers offered for your prosperity and welfare than by our humble Community of Chaellot. It is growing dark; I will hasten and send a sister with lights for your Majesty."

For a few moments after the nun had departed, the queen still lingered lost in melancholy thought. The embers of the wood fire had burned low in the ample stove, leaving the further end of the apartment enveloped in obscurity, save when ever and again a ruddy glow broke forth, playing for awhile on the dark oaken wainscot and flooring, and then fading away, leaving the obscurity deeper than before.

She walked to the casement and looked out on the scenery beyond the abbey. The whole earth was covered with a snowy garment, the evening wild and stormy, the boughs of the trees around the abbey bent beneath the weight of the snow, which was drifted from their leafless branches by the wind, the sullen sigh of which was audible between each peal of the Vesper bell.

The wintry scene was gloomy in the extreme, and the queen, whose heart was sorely oppressed at the news she had received from England, turned away with a weary sigh, a feeling akin to fear, as she again seated herself in the large dimly lighted room, the further extent of which she could not distinguish in the fast increasing darkness.

It was with a feeling of intense relief that, a few moments later, she heard the footstep of the Sister Mary Augustine, who had come with lights. She replenished the fire, and bearing a lamp in her hand conducted the queen to her own apartments, before she went to the abbey chapel, for she was a constant attendant at the devotional exercises of the nuns when at Chaellot.

CHAPTER XVI.—WITHOUT HOPE.

The day following the indisposition of Florence, she was summoned to attend the queen; the latter had vainly endeavored to ascertain if she were at all acquainted with, or had taken part in, the conspiracy. Of one thing she felt assured, and that was, that Florence had really intended to return to France in the vessel hired by the conspirators; had she then been able to discover that she was mixed up with that fatal attempt, her Majesty would have sacrificed her to her wrath with all imaginable calmness.

"I hear that Sir Charles is about to return to the country," she said, after expressing regret at the indisposition of Florence, "I have invited him to the palace in order to spare you, as you are still poorly, the trouble of going thither. The king has been much pleased with his loyal behavior; he has given freely of his wealth towards the defraying of the expenses brought upon our government by these risings of foolish people who wish to overthrow our rule in these realms. How fortunate it is for you, young lady, you did not return to France under the conduct of John Ashton and his colleagues."

* J. S. Clarke's Life of James II.

Florence started and her face turned pale, Mary divined her agitation and its cause.

"Be thankful I have taken you under my protection," she said, "that the Lord, in his mercy, has spared you the sin of mixing yourself up with these evil-doers, and of bringing yourself, perhaps, to the fate which awaits them."

Here the queen paused, and Florence, too shocked, as well as too intimidated, made no reply. Well she knew that in some way the attempt of the brave Ashton had fallen through, that he was probably even now under arrest, with many others sharing his own fate.

The queen again spoke:

"You will not be able to return to France for some time, perhaps never; were you still inclined to marry St. John, you would wed an outlaw and a beggar, whose estates are already confiscated to the crown. Here, under my patronage a better destiny awaits you; there must, however, be no ostentatious display of the principles in which you have been brought up. You will learn in time, I hope, to imitate the example of your aged relative, Sir Charles, who remembers that the Scriptures saith, 'The powers that be are ordained of God, wisely render them obedience.'"

"Time server," thought Florence, the words almost trembling on her lips; but the consciousness of her own danger kept her silent, and the next moment she remembered that her uncle had not the power to resist William's demands. The moments passed on like so many hours, sorrow for her uncle, for herself, for Ashton, pressing like a weight of lead upon her heart. The queen was busy at her everlasting knotting of fringe, and Florence almost mechanically proceeded with her embroidery, her eyes blinded by the tears she vainly tried to force back, so that, on laying down her work for a moment, the queen sharply called her attention to the fact, that she had chosen the wrong shades of silk in a Forget-me-not she was embroidering in her scarf, saying, with a touch of irony in the tones of her voice, as she noticed the particular flower in which the mistake was made.

"The sooner you get rid of sentiment, maiden, the better, in this world we are forgotten much sooner than we think for, or than one's self-love likes to admit; depend on it, the traitor St. John has forgotten you ere now, as well as others, whom your heart vainly aches to see."

Florence had not become a reluctant visitant at the queen's palace, and failed to discover that Mary was arbitrary, exacting, and severe. She had first become aware of these points in her new mistress' character, by her treatment of the princess Anne, which she did not care to disguise even before her ladies, for just at this time the former had given the queen mortal offence by her solicitation for a pension, so as to free her from being the mere dependent on the bounty of her sister and the king, as also in her obstinately keeping her unworthy favorites, the Marlboroughs about her person.

Impulsive and haughty as was the nature of Florence, the restraint imposed on her liberty was fast becoming insupportable, yet she was without hope, humanly speaking; unless Providence interposed in her behalf, she could see no help; to escape to France was out of the question, to seek an asylum with her friends in Ireland, equally impossible; to ask permission to return with her uncle to the country, to the last degree, impracticable; for, by so doing, she should be dragging him into trouble, even brought over as he now seemed to be to the interests of the Prince of Orange. Were he inclined to further her wishes, knowing as she did that, as the queen chose it to be assumed that she kept Florence near her from kindly motives, the offence would be instantly taken, and her departure visited on herself, perhaps, by the incarceration the queen so often inflicted on those who offended her.

Meanwhile, to her astonishment, the morning passed over without that visit of the old baronet which Florence had been bidden to expect, and in lieu thereof, came a letter to the queen full of humble apologies, alleging as an excuse that he was confined to his chamber by an attack of the gout, which would necessarily delay his return to the country. When at length she received her dismissal, it is doubtful if the queen's frame of mind were happier than her own. It was one of those days in which, as she remarked in one of her letters to William, "she must grin when her heart is breaking."

She was distressed at the news of the conspiracy which had broken out just as the absence of the king had left her at the helm of the government. The quarrel with the Princess Anne was at its height, and she felt an aversion to Florence, whom, nevertheless, she had determined on keeping at her own court. Though under a species of surveillance, hoping later to extract from her tidings of the movements at St. Germain, and also enjoying the thought that she had separated her from the ex-queen as well as from Sir Reginald.

CHAPTER XVII.—CONDEMNED.

The agreement concerning the hire of the vessel had been a successful one. The thirtieth of December was agreed upon as the day

* Dalrymple's Memoirs.

on which the little party would leave London, and as time went on, Ashton became extremely anxious at neither seeing nor hearing from the young lady, whom he stood pledged to Mary Beatrice to chaperone safely back to St. Germain.

At length he decided on sending a note to Sir Charles, and then heard, to his surprise, that she was detained for an indefinite period at the Court of Queen Mary.

Meanwhile, the day drew nigh, and the perfect silence of Florence warranted the idea on Ashton's part, that she was under a degree of surveillance which forbade her from holding any correspondence with him.

There was no help but to leave Florence in England.

At last the thirtieth day arrived, a murky, gloomy day, a yellow fog laden with smoke hanging over London.

They were to set sail in the evening, if possible, and many earnest prayers were offered, that they might speedily arrive in safety on the coast of France.

One thing excited the surprise of Lord Preston and Ashton, it was that Mrs. Pratt had never appeared to claim her reward for her instrumentality in securing them the hire of the vessel.

At last they bade farewell to all they held dear, and during the first hours of the early winter evening they went on board.

The fog had cleared off, but there was an utter absence of wind, and as they paced the deck in company with a Mr. Elliott, a Jacobite gentleman, who had joined them, and counted the hour of six sound from the clocks of the city churches, they each invariably prayed that a strong wind might ere long wail them on their way. But, alas, there was not sufficient breeze to disturb the thick locks which clustered over Ashton's anxious brow.

After some time spent in earnest consultation they decided that it would be best to drop the anchor, and after a while, snatch a few hours rest until a favorable wind should perchance arise, either during the night or on the following morning.

Lord Preston's slumbers were deep and heavy, but the sleep of Ashton was far otherwise, his imagination being disturbed by frightful visions; now, he was in the torture chamber a witness of the cruelties inflicted on his old friend Neville Payne, then, he was himself writhing beneath the hands of the executioner; again the scene changed, and he beheld himself separated from his wife and children, and on the point of being led out to suffer capital punishment.

The horror of his dream awakened him, his face was covered with a cold perspiration induced by the terror he had suffered, and it was with no small satisfaction that he beheld the first dawn of morning stealing through the cabin windows. He was also aware by the motion of the vessel that they were on their way from London. Unwilling any longer to risk encountering again the horrors by which his rest had been disturbed, by yielding to the drowsiness he felt, he arose, dressed himself, and going upon deck, perceived to his gratification that they were some way beyond Woolwich. He had not been long on deck before he was joined by Lord Preston and Mr. Elliot.

"And so you could not sleep, Ashton," said his lordship in answer to Ashton's remarks, "as for myself, I rested right well. In case of any sudden surprise or mischance, I had before I left home tied a piece of lead to the package entrusted to my care, you know what I mean," he had significantly, "I put it under my head when I went to sleep, resolved that, on the first intimation of danger, I should throw it overboard, then I troubled myself no more about the matter, and had a good night's rest."

"I wish I could say the same, my lord," was Ashton's reply. "I know not why our natures should seem changed, but you now possess all the fearlessness which I thought you wanted in the earlier stage of this affair, whilst I am depressed and anxious."

"Nay, Mr. Ashton," said Elliott, "pluck up some of your usual spirits. See, a fair wind has sprung up; we shall soon be out of the river. What say you both to our going below to breakfast?"

"Agreed," replied his lordship and Ashton, and they remained in the cabin in conversation for some time after they had made their morning meal.

When they returned on deck, they found that the mist of the early morning was gradually dispersing, a fine wind had risen, and everything looked well as far as the weather was concerned, and the cloud on Ashton's brow began to pass away.

"We shall soon be clear of the river," thought he, for they were nearing Gravesend. As he turned in his walk along the short deck of the little bark, so as to face London, he suddenly started. A vessel of good dimensions, and with several men on deck, appeared in sight. He had previously observed it in the distance, but as it gradually became more distinct it assumed the proportions of a large vessel.

It seemed to be following in their own track,

and Lord Preston noticed the nervous restlessness with which Ashton regarded its movements.

A little longer, and Gravesend was in sight. It was as fine a morning and as bright a sunshine as ever lighted up the blue waters of old Father Thames on a mid-winter day, and the white sails of the vessel fluttered gaily in the fresh, sharp breeze that wafted them on their way.

But Ashton heeds nothing but this vessel. He stands rivetted, as it were, to the spot, leaning over the deck, and watching intently the movements of the larger craft. He now counts four men on deck, and he fancies he saw many more than those, and that they must have gone below. He is quite convinced, too, that in one of these men he recognizes a Captain Billop, one of the government officers.

Nearer, yet nearer, in ten minutes, or less, they will pass Gravesend.

Nearer, yet nearer, too, comes the stronger vessel. Still, unless it is a feint to deceive those who man the smaller craft, she does not appear as though she were in pursuit.

Seven, five, three minutes, and Gravesend will be reached. A motley group are on the shore watching the vessels as they steer proudly on their way, or stop, it may be, to take up fresh passengers.

The larger vessel is now nearly alongside the smaller one, it is certainly following in her wake. A cold sweat breaks out on Ashton's forehead; Elliott and Lord Preston seem still cool and free from fear. Suddenly Ashton remembered the packet the latter had said he had placed beneath his pillow, and hastens to the cabin to see if he had secured it. There it still was in the spot Lord Preston had named, and securing it in his breast-pocket, Ashton again went upon deck, and signed his friends to follow him to the further end of the vessel.

One short moment of intense suspense, the little bark has stopped, she has touched at Gravesend, in obedience to a peremptory command issued by the master of the larger vessel.

Its occupants confer a few moments together. The next moment they are on board of Ashton's little craft, and he knows his hour of trial has come. Approaching the side of the ship, he thrusts his right hand within his breast-pocket, intending to drop over the edge of the vessel the dangerous papers he had unfortunately concealed on his person; but even as he nervously clutches the fatal packet, his arm is withheld by a powerful grasp, and he and his companions are commanded, in the name of King William and Queen Mary, to consider themselves under arrest.

Then came the search, and in Ashton's trunk, concealed amongst his clothes, were found papers containing evidence of the birth of the Prince of Wales.

The packet he had taken from Lord Preston's pillow included letters from the Bishop of Ely, Lord Clarendon, and other persons of rank and consideration, with proposals to King James to reinstate him on the throne if he would undertake to provide for the security of the Church of England, bestow employments on Protestants preferably to Catholics, live a Catholic in religion, but reign a Protestant as to government, and bring over with him only so much power as would be necessary for his defence, and to rid the country of the foreign power that had invaded it.

Under a strong guard the unfortunate Ashton and his friends were conveyed back to London as soon as the tide served, Lord Preston being sent to the Tower, Ashton and Elliott to a prison. An agonizing fortnight and two days elapsed, and then Lord Preston and John Ashton were tried at the Old Bailey, the indictment setting forth that they were compassing the deaths of their majesties, the king and queen.

In his defence Lord Preston urged that he had no hand in hiring the vessel, that no papers were found on him, that the whole proof against him rested on mere supposition. He was, however, declared guilty.

Ashton was confronted by Mrs. Pratt, she being the chief witness against him. Pale and care-worn, indeed, he appeared as he stood at the dock, hoping nothing that his life would be spared, when he found himself brow-beaten by the bench and the jury, and pretty confident, from the line of defence adopted by the craven-hearted nobleman, Lord Preston, that he was prepared to ensure his own acquittal, even if by so doing it procured Ashton's condemnation.

The counsel for the prosecution then set forth that on Ashton's body were found papers containing the whole gist of the conspiracy, being a design to alter the government by a French power and aid, that the letters would be found, when read, to contain a black and wicked conspiracy to introduce and, by means of a Popish interest, settle our laws, liberties, and properties by a French army; and if the plot had taken effect, of course we should have had any religion and laws the French king might be pleased to impose.

When the counsel had concluded, Mrs. Pratt and the other witnesses were called, and after they had given their evidence, Ashton was asked if he had anything to say in his defence?

* Clarke's Life of James II.