



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XXIII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, AUG. 1, 1873.

NO. 50

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THE LIMERICK VETERAN; OR, THE FOSTER SISTERS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "FLORENCE O'NEILL."

(From the Baltimore Catholic Mirror.)

CHAPTER XVIII.—BETWEEN NIGHT AND MORNING.

A stormy night had succeeded to a day in which there had been an incessant down-pour of rain, but as short hours following midnight advanced, the weather became calmer, and the moon rose at intervals from behind the clouds which still drifted across the horizon, occasionally lighting up the chambers of the old chateau and again enveloping them in obscurity.

Three days had passed since Isabel's parting with the stranger. Busy preparations were being made for the return of the family, and while Margaret, whose customary indolence nothing could dispel, frittered away her time, Isabel's fingers were busily employed in sundry matters connected with the decoration of the principal apartments in honor of the arrival.

It was to her a labor of love, and Grace was glad to see that she found a pleasure in the work, though her observant eye detected that the smile on the once bright and happy countenance was now as fleeting as the sunshine on an April day, and that often a weary sigh, half-stifled in its utterance, would escape her lips.

In fact the feelings with which poor Isabel regarded the return of her best friends were rather those of fear than pleasure.

That her movements had been watched by her foster-sister she was well aware; that she had discovered and stolen a letter meant for herself and abstracted another from the book I have alluded to she was quite certain; and she also felt confident that, like a thunder-cloud bursting over her head, so would the arrival of those she loved lead to disclosures which would perhaps deprive her forever of their friendship and break off her proposed union with Maurice.

On the night in question, the mind of the poor girl was so harassed, that for a long while sleep was banished from her pillow. One o'clock had struck before she lost herself in a somewhat heavy sleep, the last sound in her ears that of the rain beating against her casement, mingled with the dull sough of the wind; the darkness, also, was intense.

When she was awakened, it was with a sudden start; she did not feel as one usually does on opening one's eyes after sleeping, but had a consciousness that she had been disturbed by some unusual and accidental sound.

The storm had ceased, a bright flood of silvery light illumined the chamber, and she heard the clock in the turret strike the hour of two.

She felt alarmed, she knew not why, for all was still, but the idea was strong on her mind, ere she was awake enough to be fully conscious that some person had made a noise in her own room, close even to the head of the bed.

Trying to think she had been mistaken, she again laid her head on her pillow to compose herself to sleep, when a light footfall struck upon her ear, and she distinctly heard a sharp click, as of a key turning in a lock, very near to her, but not in her own apartment. Much

alarmed, she rose up in the bed and strove to suppress the shriek that was rising to her lips. Then she heard a person say in a whisper:

"What a confounded mistake; we had got into the wrong room."

"We are right now, however," was the reply, "and must lose no time; though, fortunately, we did not awake her; she was too sound asleep for that."

The pallor of death was on the face and lips of Isabel, as with cold hands she gently raised the curtain of her bed and looked out in the corridor beyond, her alarm increasing as she found, by the wintry blast which swept across her face, that her casement was open, as also the chamber door, which gave admittance to the corridor, out of which the principal apartments opened.

Then she heard the chink of money, and remembering that the room immediately opposite to her own was that of the Lady Florence, and that it contained an antique cabinet, in which were articles of great value, together with a considerable sum of money, she at once resolved, let come what would of peril to herself, to alarm the house.

But fear and horror combined rendered her powerless to move, for once again struck upon her ear the tones of a voice with which of late she had become painfully familiar, and a bright ray of moonlight streaming into the corridor and the chamber beyond discovered to her the face of the stranger with whom she had held so many stolen interviews.

"To keep silence now is to be a partner in an act of dire villainy," said she to herself, and springing out of bed she rushed into the adjoining room.

"For God's sake, desist," she exclaimed, as she laid her cold grasp on the hands of a man who was employed in emptying one of the drawers of a cabinet of a portion of its contents.

"Desist, I say, or I will alarm the house." "Fool, begone! What is it to you?" said the man, dashing her hand aside. "Do not lay my blood on your soul; for, by all the saints of heaven, if you utter one word," he added, drawing a pistol from his pocket, "I will shoot myself dead before your eyes."

"Be quick, be quick, Monsieur; that dog will alarm the house, together with this squeamish damsel. Shoot yourself indeed! Rather shoot the woman, I should think," and as he spoke the man, who had escaped Isabel's observation, threw his powerful arm around her waist, and effectually prevented her from screaming by gagging her mouth.

She lay powerless in his arms for perhaps five minutes, though the time seemed an age in its duration. The bay of the watch-dog kept in the courtyard on the other side of the chateau still resounded, she heard footsteps approaching, voices sounded in her ear, together with the ringing of the alarm bell, then the strong arms that encircled her relaxed their grasp, and she fell senseless on the floor.

When she recovered she found herself in her own bed, the wintry sun was streaming into the room, and Mrs. Wilmot and the nurse were leaning over her.

"Dear Mistress Grace," said she, "I do pray you tell me what has happened?"

"Could you not tell Mistress Wilmot better than she can tell you, foster-sister?" And Margaret came forward from the spot at which she had been stationed, and fixed her keen black eyes with a searching glance on the trembling Isabel, saying as plainly as eyes could speak:

"I know your secret; at least I know enough of it to ruin you; me you cannot deceive."

"I pray you remember, Miss Margaret, that your foster-sister had a gag forced into her mouth. The fact of her being in the chamber of the Lady St. John showeth nothing but that she is courageous beyond the average of her sex," said Grace, supporting on her bosom the head of the unhappy Isabel, whose eyes sank beneath the fierce and insidious gaze of Margaret.

Then, after she had wholly recovered, came the recapitulation of the scene of the previous night, she merely omitting to mention the terrible fact that she had many times seen and conversed with the principal actor in the present outrage.

But across the mind of the shrewd and amiable Grace shot a sentiment of surprise that a young and timid woman, incapable of the power of resistance, should, of her own accord, have left her chamber in the dead hour of the night and have placed herself, without any chance of being able to effect good, in the power of ruffians such as those who had burglariously entered the chateau.

"Let those believe the tale who will, I will not give credence to it," said Margaret, scornfully and half aloud, as she left the room.

Then Grace acquainted Isabel with the extent of the robbery, which was far from inconsiderable. A large sum of money, which Grace knew had been deposited in the cabinet, had been removed, as well as a set of diamonds

from a casket belonging to Lady St. John; at the same time Grace mentioned that several articles of great value had been left behind, which must positively have laid under the very hand of the robber when he took away the other jewels and the money.

A heavy load lay at the heart of this aged woman as she gazed on the sad, altered face of her favorite, and vainly strove to account in her own mind for much that had long been inexplicable in the conduct of the once frank and light-hearted Isabel, whose confidence she found herself quite unable to obtain; and, at the same time, she felt assured that Margaret was acquainted with much that would be brought to light when the Marshal and his family arrived home.

CHAPTER XIX.—MISGIVINGS.

"Rather unfortunate matters to herald our return," said Madame St. John, the morning after the return of the family to their home, "the murder of Count de Foix, the bosom friend of Maurice and the King's favorite, and the robbery of some of your most costly jewels, Lady Florence."

"That robbery is, to say the least, inexplicable," was the reply, "so much that was valuable left untouched, at the same time, leads me to believe that it was no common thief who invaded our dwelling."

As the lady spoke she involuntarily raised her eyes to the countenance of Isabel; it was deadly pale.

Leaning against the window stood Margaret, bravely beautiful; her morning dress of primrose-colored padoasay, with apron of flowered lawn, set off her slender figure, and as Lady Florence spoke, she, too, fixed her gaze on Isabel's pale face.

"The King has ordered strict search to be made for the man who killed De Foix, but, hitherto, without avail," observed the Marshal. "I will set the emissaries of justice to find, if possible, the men who have committed this robbery, perhaps, also, without success. Maurice will keenly feel the death of De Foix, slain, one may say, in cold blood. I have small hopes myself, after the lapse of nearly two months, that the murderer will be found."

In accordance with the desire of Lady St. John, Isabel, pale and trembling, prepared to leave home on a mission of charity. During the early part of this, the first day of her return home, Grace had been closeted more than an hour with Lady St. John, and had given her a faithful account of all those circumstances which had appeared inexplicable respecting the conduct of Isabel, ever putting a favorable construction, when possible, on her actions, but acknowledging the whole tenor of her life and disposition seemed absolutely changed.

A wall of separation, in fact, seemed suddenly to have sprung up between three loving natures. If Grace was at fault, though Lady St. John, how could she herself hope to penetrate through the mystery, unless by the full and entire confidence which had been denied to the former?

Isabel was scarce out of sight when her foster-sister requested the favor of a private interview. The bold bearing of Margaret denoted that she was conscious of the dread power she possessed, but, with all the cunning of her character, aware of the love with which Lady St. John regarded Isabel, she approached the topics of her misdeeds with much caution and many expressions of heartfelt sorrow that she was the person whose painful duty it was to disclose the failings of her foster-sister.

"Do not speak in enigmas, Margaret, to the point at once; if any matters have come to your knowledge, which your conscience tells you it is right that I should know, disclose them, young Mistress, without hesitation."

Then Margaret detailed these circumstances of which you are aware, glossing over her espionage of Isabel, under the specious pretext of a friendly solicitude. The occasions on which she had so sedulously tracked the steps of the unfortunate girl were mentioned, and the stolen letters, which were irrefragable points in her evidence, were produced, and Margaret ended her strange story with the remark, that there were sufficient reasons for suspecting that one of the men who had broken into the chateau was none other than the person with whom her rash foster-sister had connected herself.

The Lady Florence heard the long recital with feelings of poignant sorrow. She doubted not the truth of Margaret's words; she felt they were, alas! too truly verified by the letters which lay before her; but well she divined the feelings which had led her to dog her foster-sister's steps, and, after a long pause, she remarked:

"And pray, Mistress Margaret, why did you not confide from the first in my friend, Mrs. Wilmot, a person, from her age and experience, fitted to guide you both? I like not the idea that you should have stolen forth to dog this misguided girl's steps, on dark winter evenings,

unattended by a servant; you, yourself, Margaret Lindsey, are sorely to blame."

Then, ringing a small silver bell that stood beside her, the Lady summoned Grace Wilmot to her presence.

"Grace, my dear friend," said she, when the latter made her appearance, "strange things have been done in your absence; repeat your tale, Mistress Margaret, and much I wish you had laid open your heart to my friend ere matters had gone this far."

"I deemed I was acting wisely, Madam, in not even bestowing my confidence on Mrs. Wilmot," replied the bold beauty, in a tone of voice that savored strangely of contempt; "she would doubtless have forbidden me to follow the course I pursued, but for which the mark of superior virtue would never have been stripped from my false foster-sister."

"I asked you not for your reasons, young Mistress," exclaimed the Lady angrily; "I can well surmise what you wished; your own conduct, understand, has in no way pleased me."

"In that I am most unhappy, Madam," replied Margaret, bowing with a mock humility; your Ladyship loved this Isabel, and as it is unhappy myself, not the favored one, whose lot it is to make manifest her guilt, I am doomed to bear your anger."

"Silence! maiden, and repeat to Mistress Wilmot what you have told myself," and the Lady rose and approached a window, which commanded a view of the valley beneath, for the purpose of concealing the tears which would rush to her eyes in spite of her efforts to restrain them.

She could just descry the form of her once beloved Isabel walking, with a weary step, towards the chateau. She appeared utterly and entirely changed; her step had lost the elasticity of youth, her eye its brightness, her cheek its healthful glow.

Grace never once interrupted the beautiful speaker in her long recital, but when Margaret had concluded, she said, gravely:

"Time will explain this mystery. I have a firm belief, Madam, in spite of the lies Mistress Margaret has placed before me, in the spotless innocence of Isabel; but had Grace Wilmot been some years younger and less infirm than she is, neither of your proteges, Lady St. John, had crossed the threshold of the chateau after the fall of evening."

"Give to me those letters, Margaret, and leave the room," said Lady Florence.

Then she begged of Grace to send Madame to her, to whom she detailed the startling revelations of Margaret Lindsey.

Madame St. John possessed a clear head and a good heart, but she was staggered, nevertheless, in belief as to Isabel's innocence, and mentally rejoiced that the love dream of her son had not ended in an irretrievable entanglement before these events occurred.

Lady St. John was resolved not to let the day pass without a private interview with Isabel, whom she sent for later in the day.

It is often said that the innocent have no cause for fear, but it is remembered that in this case the actions of Isabel, whatever the motives might have been from which those actions sprung, appeared in all the semblance of guilt, and with pallid face and trembling limbs, she approached the Lady Florence, whom she had always tenderly loved, and drawing a small ottoman to the Lady's side, she sat herself down at her feet, and raising her deep blue eyes, humid with tears, she fixed them on her face as if in deprecation of her just anger.

For a moment neither of the two spoke; then said Lady St. John:

"My dearest Isabel, on whom I have bestowed a mother's fondest love, for you have filled up the void in my heart caused by the death of my own beloved daughter, a strange, wild tale hath reached my ears. I try not to give credence to it; at least, I feel assured, that whatever there may be of seeming guilt in your conduct, you, my best beloved child, can explain away. Know you this handwriting?"

As the lady spoke, she laid before Isabel the letters Margaret had purloined, looking pityingly down the while upon the pale and almost frightened upturned face before her.

"Alas! alas! I do," she said, "those letters were stolen from me by my foster-sister, I believe."

"My child, my Isabel, place your entire confidence in myself, your best and truest friend; I ask only this, I will repeat to you what I have heard and wait your refutation of the charges laid against you."

Then the Lady St. John repeated the story of Margaret, wishing, oh! how vainly, that she could see a flush of honest indignation mantle the cheek of her favorite; but no. Torrents of tears coursed down her cheeks, and ever, ever, to the interrogatories of Lady St. John, was such and such an assertion true? the fair head was bent in token of assent.

"And now, my child, the name of this stranger, the purpose of your meeting, the

manner of your first acquaintance with him; tell me all."

"Gracious Madam, oh, would that I could, but a solemn vow has sealed my lips to silence. Bear with me yet a while, dear Lady St. John; believe me most innocent, whilst I needs must seem most guilty."

"A vow! an oath of secrecy! who could have such influence over you as to bind your lips to silence? Bother you my child of the position in which you stand; those letters before you, will you not explain? words which must condemn you, Isabel, in the minds of others, if not of myself. The night of the robbery, too, when you, a young defenceless maiden, were known to have left your chamber; your jewels given away, the souvenirs my love hath bestowed upon you. Ah! Isabel, my child, heed not this rash vow, but tell me all; a direful change hath wrought upon you since we parted."

Isabel rose from her seat and threw herself on her knees before the Lady Florence.

"Gracious Madam," said she, with now tearless eyes, but her countenance marked with the deepest sorrow, "my heart is nigh broken with grief; on my bended knees I can but implore you to bear with me still; to try and believe that in thought, word, and action I am innocent and pure; to pray that the merciful God may, ere long, so order events that I may be suffered to explain away the mystery which now surrounds me."

"Alas! alas! Isabel, my child, the strangeness of your conduct passes my comprehension," said the gentle Lady, "but be it so; I will think the best myself, and do all in my power to lead others to do the same."

"Ah, Madam, dearest Madam, may God bless you for those loving words," and Isabel fixed on Lady St. John a gaze in which the extreme of sorrow was combined with love and despair. Then she said in a low voice:

"I would ask a boon, dear Lady St. John, if one in so unhappy a plight dare, indeed, make a petition."

"Speak on, Isabel."

"I am so very miserable as to be an object of distrust to those around me; let me shrink away, as it were, from the notice of others, till it shall please God to end my trial. Will you, dearest Madam, allow me to seek only the companionship of Mistress Wilmot, that wise and good woman, who seeing all things tell against me, with yourself, dear Lady St. John, hopes that I am still innocent?"

"No, Isabel; to allow such a proceeding would tacitly amount to a belief in your guilt. The Marshal would not allow such a step, nor would Madame St. John."

"Ah, Madam, you are all so good that you will faint believe me innocent, and not the wretch, dead to gratitude and virtue, which an unhappy line of circumstances makes me seem to be; but there is one whom I fear so much, who has no right or power over me, yet I dread her sarcasm, her insinuations, her hatred—in one word, I fear my foster-sister."

"Your foster-sister, indeed; but I will see that she presume not to become your judge," and the spirit of the O'Neills betrayed itself in the Lady's kindling eyes and flushed cheeks, as she spoke, and ringing her bell, she directed that Mistress Lindsey should attend her immediately.

Isabel had again resumed her first position beside Lady St. John, and her face, turned towards Margaret as she entered, betrayed the grief she felt. The bold beauty, nothing abashed by Lady St. John's late rebuke, swept past the unhappy girl with a cold superciliousness which did not escape her observation.

"Come hither, Mistress Margaret," she exclaimed, in a tone and manner which evinced displeasure; "I wish you to know that it is our will and pleasure that no allusion is made to your foster-sister concerning past events. Time, which often brings to light much that is hard to understand, will, I feel convinced, unravel all that is now hard to reconcile with the innocence of Isabel, save her want of discretion. I have no more to say to you, save to command you to square your conduct accordingly."

"Isabel has much cause to be thankful, Madam, for your leniency of judgment. There are few who would regard her as innocent with such conclusive proofs against her."

The vindictive expression of her features did not escape Lady St. John. She had hoped to behold Isabel deprived of the protection of her friends with every mark of contumely and scorn.

"Begone! maiden, this instant, and try to learn that mercy you so sorely need. Do not presume to bandy words with me again, and reserve your opinion till it is asked for." Humbled and silenced, but swelling with anger, Margaret curtisied to the Lady and left the chamber. For a few moments the latter remained silent, and a weary expression sat on the handsome features which still retained, in a striking degree, traces of their former exquisite beauty; then bending forward, she kissed, as lovingly as of old the brow of Isabel,