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FLORENCE O'NEILL,
THE ROSE OF ST. GERMAINS,

OR,
THE SIEGE OF LIMERICK.

By Miss ANNE M. STUART, author of the "World and Cloister," "Life in the Cloister," "Grace O'Halloran," &c.

(From the Catholic Mirror.)

CHAPTER XII.—A GILDED PRISON.

Little did the fair fiancée of Sir Reginald imagine why it was that his return, which she so much dreaded, was delayed far beyond the time the king and queen had expected him.

The events of the last few weeks had told immensely on her health and personal appearance, for though, as yet, open restraint had not been resorted to, she yet felt herself the victim of a species of espionage exceedingly painful to bear. The queen insisted on her presence at court, and her thoughtful countenance not infrequently drew forth many a sally from Mary, who was by no means deficient in the art of making cleverly pointed sarcastic speeches, which showed Florence that the great condescension of the queen was little else than assumed.

The thought of St. John's return, too, whose betrothed bride she was, filled her with consternation, for then, unless she had strength of mind to resist, and Mary would well know why she refused to fulfil the contract into which she had entered, what a life she must eventually lead? A hanger-on at the court of Mary, with the image of the queen's betrayed father ever before her eyes, never again to see her adored mistress, but ever to bow before the throne of the queen and pay her homage and obedience. This was the life Florence pictured to herself would be hers, and yet she had no power to break the bonds which bound her.

As to her sentiments, not a word escaped her lips by which Mary could be guided, but her clever, penetrating mind was not far wrong. She saw daily the smile become more languid, the color on the cheek grew paler, the violet eyes would tell a tale of recent tears, and the queen would exult in the power she thought she possessed of forcing on a marriage between parties with whom, strangely enough, the deepest affection was interwoven with strong political feeling, which had hitherto bid fair to destroy that warmer emotion to which we have alluded.

Spitefully, then, did Mary note the changes in her countenance, and on one occasion when Florence seemed buried in deeper thought than usual, Mary observed, as she leant over the embroidery frame, the unbidden tears fall on the gay silks she was forming into flowers.—The tones of the queen's voice sounded sharp and imperious, and quickly recalled Florence to the remembrance, for the moment forgotten, of the royal lady in whose presence she sat, and who now commanded harshly rather than requested her to leave the room on a commission she wished her to execute.

"Minion," she angrily exclaimed as the girl's form vanished from her sight, "I will punish you yet for the folly with which you are acting. She positively dares to brave me to my very face, to tell me as plainly as if she did so in words, 'I am betrothed to St. John, but I will not marry him, and I dread to see him because he is true to you and yours.' Well, well, we shall see who will be mistress yet, Lady Florence," said Mary aloud, tapping the floor angrily with her foot, and a small red spot glowing on her cheek, for her exasperation was now at its height, "to St. Germain's you never shall return, and it will be well for you, should you refuse to wed St. John on his arrival, if the home at Kensington, which our condescension has awarded you, be not exchanged for a chamber in the Tower, if all we hear of this conspiracy, and in which your name is worked up, be found to be correct."

Then the queen laughed and smiled with pleasure at the thought that she held Florence at her mercy in her gilded prison, and that if she really had meditated a return with Ashton and the others to France, that all her plans were circumvented, and even as her light steps sounded in her ear in the anti-chamber without, she murmured to herself:

"Yes, yes; I will force her to own the truth, and should my will be resisted, there can be torture inflicted, my dainty Mistress Florence, even on limbs as delicate as yours." Forcing a smile to her lips, for she felt strangely nervous and uneasy, Florence re-entered the queen's closet, and gracefully bending her knee presented the queen with the article for which she had been sent. For one moment their eyes met, and just for that moment the fine features of Mary wore an expression strikingly like to her unfortunate father, and for a brief space the girl's fears were lulled to rest, for in that glance there was assumed kindness; and as if anxious to erase from the mind of her protegee all remembrance of her recent harshness, the queen endeavored to amuse her by an account of the fine doings with which the New Year would be ushered in at Kensington.

"Alas," thought Florence, the New Year at hand and I not at St. Germain's."

At this thought her countenance again wore the look of abstraction which so annoyed the queen, and a severe reprimand already trembled on her lips when William of Orange entered the apartment. Instantly rising on the king's entrance, Florence quitted the boudoir.

"Something has disturbed you," said the queen meeting William as he advanced towards her. "Tell me quickly what or who it is that has occasioned you annoyance."

"St. John has gone over to Sarsfield," was the reply, and William's voice was guttural from suppressed passion; "he, the recreant, whom I had the most favored; he, on whom I have lavished every mark of esteem, has ungratefully deserted to those who fight for your father."

"No my beloved, it cannot be possible that you have met with such ingratitude," exclaimed the queen, forgetful in her indignation at the defection of Sir Reginald, of her own and her husband's ingratitude to her father. "Where is he? Has he arrived in England? If so, let him at once be arrested."

"In England, indeed!" replied William; "I would that he were, we would make him feel the weight of our vengeance; it may reach him yet. No, he is with Sarsfield, who has named him his lieutenant, and whose sworn friend he has already become, so says my informant, adding that St. John was indignant at the way in which his name had been used and by the mischievous wretch, Benson, having been placed as spy on the actions of Sarsfield."

"And think you he had received our summons to return to England before he threw off his allegiance?" and the voice of the queen was husky and tremulous as she spoke.

"I should think not," was the reply. "Nay, it is almost certain that he must have left headquarters very quickly after his arrival, perhaps immediately. What had we best do with this girl—this O'Neill—on whose account we have summoned him here?"

"Detain her at the palace till we see the issue of the present plot. You, my beloved husband, are obliged almost immediately to leave England. Confide to me the task of unravelling this knotty web, and of severely punishing its ringleaders, however lofty and exalted may be their rank. I shall regard this Florence as a prisoner, but treat her as a favored protegee—not allow her to feel her imprisonment in its true light, but watch her very closely nevertheless. I note every change in her expressive countenance and have read every secret of her heart; she only feared St. John's return because she was resolved not to wed him, minion as she is, whilst he was loyal to us. Now she shall know of his disloyalty, because the pleasure she would otherwise feel will meet with a sting in the reflection that she is with me, and that he dare not now claim her for his wife. Really, I enjoy," added the queen, "the thought of the new sorrow in store for this young fool with a fair face who has presumed to make herself the judge as to whether Mary of Modena or myself should be her queen, but enough of her; St. John is rich, is he not? of course you will see that his estates be instantly confiscated to the crown."

"Steps shall be at once taken for that end," said William, his usually grave and calm countenance disturbed as he mused over the defection of St. John, whom he had really favored beyond many others, "and now be wary and not over-indulgent in my absence," he continued, "for I leave you at the helm of government again, and above all crush this conspiracy immediately; do not hesitate to single out for capital punishment the principal offenders, whoever they may be."

"I will not be wanting my beloved lord," said Mary, "nor shall I fail to count the days and hours of your absence. Truly," and Mary sighed wearily as she spoke, "my spirits are out of tune at these constant defections, but we must hope the best; our work cannot but be good, as God never fails to send us some little cross."

It is laughable enough certainly, but nevertheless perfectly true, that this princess, at the very moment when she was really engaged in promoting her own interest and that of her fondly-loved consort, by means which were often far from good, and at times positively sinful, would quiet her conscience, or perhaps strive to do so, by endeavoring to believe that it was not her own work she was about, or her own empire she was striving to establish, but rather the work of Almighty God Himself.

Then turning to the king, the usual affectionate parting took place between them, and Mary sought, in the solitude of her own apartment, to devise schemes for bringing wholly within her power those who were at the head of the present conspiracy, amongst whom she numbered, not entirely without foundation, the fair descendant of O'Neill's.

CHAPTER XIII.—THE CAPTIVE.

When Florence left the presence of the queen, she little thought still greater anxiety was in store for her in the fact that Sir Reginald, whose arrival she so much dreaded, whilst she believed him the adherent of the Dutch Monarch, aware that the queen would hurry on her nuptials and retain her at her own Court, was really still in Ireland, and,

moreover, that he was fighting in behalf of the rights of James under the command of Sarsfield.

Not long was she allowed to remain in ignorance of his defection from the cause of William; the following morning the queen, who was a much better tactician than the unsophisticated Florence, chose the time when both herself and the captive, for such the latter really was, were engaged, Florence at the embroidery frame, the queen at the beloved occupation of her leisure moments, knotting fringe, to convey the startling intelligence to her.

Though Queen Mary was an inveterate worker, her busy fingers in no way weakened her powers of governing during the long and frequent periods of the Dutch King's absence, when engaged in carrying on his continental wars, or managing his trans-marine possessions.

But while the queen's head was bent over her everlasting work, the changes in her countenance could not be discerned. She had just parted with William, and her fond heart always ached when this was the case; moreover, day after day some startling intelligence, connected with a new plot, or fresh conspiracies springing out of the old one, in which the unfortunate Neville Payne had been engaged, conspired to ruffle an equanimity of temper which was too often assumed, as on this occasion, when her blood was at boiling heat, concerning the defection of Sir Reginald.

"I have surprising news for you," she said; "it is not likely Sir Reginald will return to London, if he does, he will be at once consigned to the Tower."

As the queen uttered these ominous words, she observed Florence start and turn deadly pale, the needle fell from her hand, affection at that moment gaining the day over loyalty to the exiled court at St. Germain's, and on the impulse of the moment, she arose, and casting herself at the feet of the queen, her eyes streaming with tears, she was as one transformed into the suppliant, exclaiming:

"To the Tower, gracious Madam, ah! no, no, what evil hath he done? in the whole realm of England you have not a more loyal supporter of your throne than he."

"Your betrothed is a traitor to our cause," said the queen bitterly, "he has taken up arms under the Jacobite General Sarsfield; but why these tears, you exhibited no signs of pleasure when I told you the king had summoned him thither for his nuptials, spare your grief now, I shall attach you to my own person, I do not intend you to leave the court, I shall not be long before I find a more fitting mate for the heiress of the O'Neill's than he would have been."

Then Mary's handsome face again bent over her frame, and a sickly smile sat upon her lips, for well she knew the woman she tormented was in secret pining to return to St. Germain's. She knew the news of Sir Reginald's defection could bring her no relief, as whilst she was in England it would enforce a separation, also that the quarrel between them had originated solely in one feeling, that of a deep-seated loyalty to her own dethroned and exiled father.

The queen then exulted in the power she possessed of detaining Florence at court, knowing that whilst she must at heart be pleased at what she had told her, she must sorrow more intensely than ever over her adverse fate that detained her so unwillingly in London.

"We are going to be very gay this winter," continued the queen, "so put a bright face on the change things have taken, nay do not look so lachrymose, child," and the queen put forth her hand to assist her to rise, "the king and myself were well pleased to further your interests, by pushing on your marriage with this ungrateful St. John, before he had thrown off his allegiance, so have we those some interests still at heart, consequently, I appoint you from this moment, one of my maids of honor, and promise you a far better spouse than the traitor you have lost; nay, nay, he is not worth your tears," she added, as they fell on the hand Florence raised to her lips ere she resumed her seat.

Scarce conscious, indeed, of what she did, she stood for a moment beside Queen Mary's seat, and forgetful of prudence and caution, was about to implore her to allow her to return to France, and have flung back in her face her proffered friendship, but even as the words trembled on her lips, the queen arose, saying:

"Poor Florence, I shall leave you to yourself for the next few hours, during which you must grow resigned to that which you cannot, by any means, amend, and I shall expect you to accompany me to the theatre to-night, as one of my ladies in attendance, nay, not a word it must be," she added, "I am your best friend in not allowing you to remain long brooding over your sorrow alone;" then as the queen reached the door, she suddenly paused as if a thought had occurred to her, saying:

"By the way, did you not come to England under the care of one Mr. Ashton, formerly one of the gentlemen of the household of—the late queen?"

As Queen Mary spoke, the expression of her features indicated what was passing in her mind; there was that about her which might

well intimidate a young woman trammelled as Florence now was. The name of Ashton awakened all her fears, and as she raised her eyes with a troubled expression on her countenance to that of the queen, the very enquiry seemed to paralyze her, besides, she was herself compromised, if the queen knew anything concerning the conspiracy, so she replied at once in the affirmative.

"And you were to return to St. Germain's under his protection in about a week from the present time?"

"Yes, gracious Madam," said Florence, with somewhat more of calmness in her manner, "it was the wish of the queen, my mistress, that I should go back to St. Germain's at Christmas, but Mr. Ashton—"

"Had not completed his arrangements," interrupted the queen in an ironical tone enough, "rumors have reached my ears, implicating himself and others, be thankful that you are safely attached to the English Court, and have nothing more to do with such persons."

As the queen spoke, she hastened from the room, and for a moment Florence stood in the same position, as one dazed and bewildered under some heavy stroke.

Then, almost mechanically, she gathered together the gay silks and gold thread, with which she was embroidering a scarf for the queen, and hastened to her own room.

"Fatal fatal day," she murmured, "when the rash idea took possession of my poor weak woman's heart, leading me to think that I could benefit those I loved; alas, alas, I have but brought ruin on my own head, and failed to aid their cause. Ah, Reginald, and my royal master and mistress, what will be your feelings when you hear I am detained at Queen Mary's Court, in truth, but as a captive, whilst she reigns herself my friend!"

"Was there no way to escape," she thought, "no, none." Indeed, the only chance for her own personal safety consisted, she felt convinced, in patiently and quietly submitting to the will of the queen, aware that it was extremely possible she might soon find a home in the Tower, were it known that in the slightest way she had interfered in the contemplated rising. She knew too how ruthless and determined the queen had shown herself, that at the period of which we write, on mere suspicion of Jacobitism, it was no unusual thing to be apprehended on privy Council warrants, at a theatre, a ball, or a party, and be suddenly consigned to that gloomy fortress, the Tower.

Sensitive, haughty, and imperious, the young heiress of the O'Neill's felt acutely her position; she was to be the constant attendant of the queen, unless some fortuitous accident released her, compelled to dwell with her as her favorite protegee, but in reality a prisoner under no very mild surveillance, separated from Sir Reginald, who had now by his accession to James, himself removed the only obstacle that had existed to her union, as well as prevented from ever returning to St. Germain's, whilst no small part of her suffering would arise from the necessity she felt existed for hiding it under a cheerful exterior.

For the present, indeed, the queen would excuse her tears, as they might be naturally supposed to flow from her separation from Sir Reginald, this at the very moment, too, when she would have joyfully yielded him her hand.

"A round of dissipation is before me too," sighed she as she rose wearily from the couch, against which she had knelt whilst giving free vent to her anguish, "and poor Ashton, how will it fare with him and myself, and Lord Preston, if that conspiracy be detected?"

Shuddering at the thought of incarceration at the Tower, to which she knew many had been consigned by the queen for lighter suspicion than might rest on herself, Florence then busied herself in the difficult task of schooling her features into calmness, and bathing her eyes, strove to look her misfortunes in the face and bear them as bravely as possible.

CHAPTER XIV.—DETECTION.

The hands of Queen Mary's watch pointed to the hour of twelve; she had noted the progress of the last half hour very anxiously, as people do when they are expecting an interview with a person on important business. Royalty, however, is rarely kept waiting beyond the time it has appointed, thus it was that two minutes after twelve, a tap at the door of her closet made her aware that the person she had expected had arrived. Von Keppel, the page, entered and spoke to the queen, then left the room and ushered in Mrs. Pratt. Rather a comely woman she was, but with the awe royalty inspires in the uneducated classes, she appeared perfectly petrified when she found herself in the presence of the queen.

Mary, however, knew well how to ingratiate herself with the people, and putting on a smiling countenance, she said:

"I understand you have begged an audience of me, Mrs. Pratt, desiring to speak to me of one Mr. Ashton, who has hired a vessel of some friend of yours, for purposes against the government, though you are told that it is required to carry bales of silk to France; what has led you to disbelieve what you have heard?"

Here the queen paused and fixed her fall

dark eyes on the woman's face as if she would search the inmost recesses of her heart.

Martha Pratt, while the queen was speaking, had time to overcome her fears, and did not blench beneath the queen's gaze; she replied:

"In the first place, your Majesty, our Ashton was too anxious about the vessel, for he called on me, who have the letting of it, three times; secondly, he offered me five hundred pounds to get my friend Pasely to let him have it at once; and thirdly, because I found from the king's page, that this Mr. Ashton used to be one of the members of the household of the late Popish queen, so when he had gone, after calling the third time, for Pasely had refused him his smack, wanting to send her to Hull, then said I—there's another Popish plot at work, and if Pasely doesn't think so, but after all let him have the vessel, then by all means don't take his money, Martha Pratt, but let the queen's Majesty know all about it."

"I commend your prudence, my good woman," said the queen, "meanwhile, I beg you to keep perfectly silent in this matter, and if it really be as you suspect, I will not fail to more than recompense you for what you will have sacrificed by your loyalty to the king and myself; now leave me, I will send for you again when I have seen further into this business."

Again alone, Queen Mary walked up and down her chamber, as one whose mind is ill at ease. Nearly six months since, she had consigned two of her uncles, the brothers of her late mother, to the Tower, along with a large number of the discontented nobility. As to the imprisonment of her own kindred, she talked as pleasantly over this "clapping up," as she did when she robbed her father of his crown.

The queen's position was beset with difficulties, she never possessed a real friend, whilst she was surrounded by enemies in disguise. Of partisans serving her for interest she had an abundance; she had a sister, it is true, a sister who shamefully conspired with herself to expel her father from his throne, and who had even given up her own place in succession to the Dutch Prince, but even-handed justice had brought the poisoned chalice to the lips of the princess Anne for the way in which she was treated by her sister and brother-in-law; so that with divided interests between the queen and the princess, there was no bond of sisterly affection on which she could lean when apart, as she so often was, from her uncouth and boorish husband.

"And he absent now," she says to herself, as she wanders up and down her spacious chamber, "on his way to the Boyne at the time that another plot is on foot for the subversion of our government. That woman Pratt shall be richly rewarded, one of the humbler classes she, but possessing a fund of shrewd penetration rarely to be met with; but now let me call a council without delay," she continued, "nip this plot in the bud, if possible, and prevent this glorious departure to St. Germain's, for that, and no other is the spot whither these traitors are bound." A very few hours later, the agents of the queen's government were on the track of Ashton, Lord Preston, and others connected with the plot for which the young Jacobite, Neville Payne, had been so mercilessly tortured some months previous.

Throughout the whole of that day the enraged queen did not summon Florence to her presence. It was passed partly in the company of her advisers, discussing the manner in which the ringleaders of this new plot, in favor of the restoration of her unfortunate father, should be captured, and in filling the Tower and other prisons with captives who were under suspicion, upon the queen's signature alone.

Slowly the hours passed away, but no summons came to Florence, who had expected to be in attendance on the queen that evening, but suspecting, from her conversation with Mrs. Pratt, that even now the conspirators might have made good their retreat, the queen had weightier matters to engage her attention than passing an evening at the theatre.

"The thirty-first of December," said she to herself, as the winter afternoon drew in, shutting out from her view the spacious gardens of the palace, and the then small village of Kensington in the distance. The snow had fallen heavily throughout the day, and the wind swept in hollow gusts around that wing of the palace in which her chamber was situated, and turning, with a shiver, from the window, she continued: "Ashton must surely have returned to St. Germain's, or be on his way thither, and I am here—here, and know not how to escape, for to leave without permission will be to own that I have cause for fearing I am detained in the light of a prisoner."

Now thinking of Sir Reginald, then of those she loved at St. Germain's, and a weary feeling at her heart on account of the queen's enquiries respecting Ashton, coupled with surprise at not having been summoned to attend her, she became full of apprehension of coming evil. She knew how tyrannical the sway of Mary had been since she had plucked the crown from her father's brow, to place it on her own; that there was not a warm spot in her cold, selfish heart, save for her Dutch husband; that she had trodden under foot every tender emotion, where the dearest ties were concerned, so that small