

FLORENCE O'NEILL;
OR, THE SIEGE OF LIMERICK.

CHAPTER XII.

"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*—nor 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 at once 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 for 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 the O'Neills.

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 her 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 power 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 Nevill Payne had been engaged, conspired to ruffle and disturb 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, 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 at once transformed into the suppliant, exclaiming:

"To the Tower, gracious Madam, ah! no, no, what evil has 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 hither 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. 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 the 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 same 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 returned to 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 the 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," she added, "I am your best friend in not allowing you to remain 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—of the ex-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 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 at Christmas, but Mr. Ashton—"

"Had not completed his arrangements," interrupted the queen, in an ironical tone, "rumours 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 queen Mary 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 feigns 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 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 adhesion to James, himself removed the only obstacle that had existed to her union, as well as prevented from ever returning to St. Germain, whilst no small part of her suffering would arise from the necessity of 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 moment, too, when she would have joyfully yielded him her hand.

"A round of dissipation is before me," 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."