

FLORENCE O'NEILL;

OR, THE SIEGE OF LIMERICK.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAÏLOT—THE EXILES.

"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 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 heart 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, was she 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 defection?"

"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 transfer their allegiance to William and Mary, whilst 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 all means to the same end, and those who call the king a *weak man*, because that he abdicated the throne—if that were the only proof of his weakness—do forget that it wanted some courage to go to rest as calmly as he did that night at Whitehall, with the Dutch guard 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 Gray, 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'Neills 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 orisons, 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 Chaillot. 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 a while 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 sough 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, and almost in her present depression of spirits, experienced a feeling akin to fear, as she again seated herself in the large dimly-lighted room, the further end 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 Chaillot.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITHOUT HOPE.

The day following the indisposition of Florence, she was summoned to attend the queen; the latter having vainly endeavored to ascertain if she were at all acquainted with, or had taken part in, the conspiracy. Of the 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 imaginary 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 behaviour; 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."

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 that 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.

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 Scripture saith, '*The powers that be 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 him, 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 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 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 solicitations 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, 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 hidden 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.