

SWEET WILLIAM,

OR THE CASTLE OF MOUNT ST. MICHAEL.

By *Marquerrite Bowet.*

CHAPTER XV.—HAPPY HEARTS.

A dreadful stillness followed this command, and for many long minutes no sound was heard in the great hall but the quick and fitful breathing of my lord, while his heart beat so fiercely that he thought it must be freeing itself from his breast. He sat motionless and deadly pale, gazing fixedly at the portrait of the beautiful lady that hung on the opposite wall; and unconsciously every eye followed him.

Presently the great door swung open, and a little figure appeared from behind the parted tapestries—a lithe and graceful figure, straight and slender as a young oak—and the next moment Sweet William stood before the duke! His young head was thrown back, and his curls hung in rich, loose rings about his shoulders. He looked up, and his eyes were innocently fearless; they were dark, luminous eyes, like those in the portrait. His face was fair and delicate, but it was strong in its angelic purity. And as he stood there alone in the face of so many strange people, with the same look of sweet, unconscious dignity on his childish countenance, a murmur of admiration ran through the astonished crowd. The instant Duke William laid his eyes upon him, he felt himself grow weak and powerless. There was no mistake; Sweet William wore, indeed, his mother's look, and he saw reflected in every feature of the beautiful child the face of his young wife, her tender smile, and the earnest, trustful look that had won his cold heart to her.

Then the good Nurse Mathilde, who had followed him, threw herself upon her knees—not before the mighty Duke of Normandy whose anger she no longer dreaded, but before Sweet William, her brave, beautiful darling, for whose love she would have given her life. She spoke to him alone, and begged his forgiveness alone, when she told him how on that dreadful night she and Lasette had looked on the twin-babes sleeping in the little white cradle, and thought to keep the tender girl, their beloved Geoffrey's babe, safely at the castle as my lord's child, and send his own son William to the dingy tower instead. They feared lest this boy might grow up like his father, cruel and heartless; and they thought the Great Tower a more fitting place for him than for a helpless little maid. They dreaded, as they had good cause to do, a son of my lord; and yet as the good Mathilde had carried him in her arms to the dreary tower that night—then but an innocent and harmless babe—she had felt her heart full of pity for him, and had wept bitterly her own share in his sad fortunes.

But Sweet William had inherited not only the beautiful face, but also the gentle spirit, of the fair young mother who had faded at his birth; and, contrary to all their fearful expectations, he had grown up the dearest and loveliest boy in all Normandy, and Mathilde loved him with all her heart. They had kept their secret bravely, she and Lasette, even from the old keeper, who had shared Sweet William's love; and they had prayed and trusted earnestly that the good God would forgive them and right their wrong, and in his own good time restore the little one to his liberty; and now that this time had come, and some one was near to protect the little Constance, Mathilde felt that she was ready to die for her darling's happiness.

What a terrible blow was this to the proud old duke, to see his own wicked and cruel deeds turned back upon himself; to find that the sorrow he had caused for those he should have loved was now his own! Something stronger than anger laid hold of his heart, remorse for the evil he had done, but still more for the evil he had meditated. He recalled with a shudder the many, many times he had been tempted to take this child's life—this fair, lovable William, his own flesh and blood, the son he had so often wished! But God is merciful even to the ungodly, and Duke William had been stayed, and his hand mysteriously withheld from committing so frightful a sin.

And his beloved Constance—his no longer—the true object of all his fear and hatred,—he had learned to love her as he

had never loved any one or anything in all his life before. Now that his love was about to be taken from him, he felt how strong it was, how it rose above every other feeling in his heart—even that of his bitter disappointment, and the indomitable envy which had ruled him all his life.

"Constance is free to go," he said in a strange hoarse voice; and laying his hand on Sweet William's shoulder, he murmured brokenly, "My son! my son!"

But Constance sprang forward, her little heart overflowing with love and compassion.

"Never without you!" she cried—"never without you, my dear, dear father! I know no father but you, and you shall always be mine as well as Sweet William's." And she threw her arms about his neck in her fond and loving way.

This perfect childish trust, this undeserved love, so beautiful and true now in his hour of greatest need, completely disarmed my lord. For a moment it seemed as if great tears stood in his eyes. Every one was moved; even those who had hated him most were touched at the pitiful sight of this wilful old man, so broken down and miserable in the face of a power mightier than he. Every one felt kindly towards him; for there is nothing like the sight of grief to make a noble heart forget its wrongs. The generous young count and the tender-hearted William both forgave him; and when at last my lord rose to go, weak and overpowered, it was no other than Count Philippe and Sweet William who supported his unsteady steps to the door of the great hall.

When every one had gone, and Sweet William was left alone in the stately chamber with his nurse, Mathilde, he stood once more before the lovely face that had so impressed him on his first visit to the great castle; and as he looked again at the portrait with the thought of this great new revelation stirring his young soul, a strange sweet rapture filled him, and he murmured in his heart, "She was my mother!"

There was great rejoicing at Mount St. Michael that night. But what was to so many the reward of years of patient waiting was to Duke William a terrible punishment. It fell heavily upon him—much more so than if he had been young and strong, instead of a broken-down and wretched old man. The shock was too great for him; and that night he lay very ill on his bed, feeling that he had but little time left in which to repent for the misdeeds of a long life. Until a late hour Sweet William and Constance stood on either side of him; and a look of quiet resignation, never worn in his life before, now rested on his face. He spoke lovingly to the little girl, more lovingly than he had ever done before he knew whose child she really was. But when he looked at William, his own sweet, comely boy, whom he might have known and loved these many years, his heart was full of yearning, and he longed to say something that would win the childish heart to him even at this late hour. For oh! there is no more bitter sorrow, in all life's sorrows, than the knowledge that those we love most have suffered wrongs at our unconscious hands.

He drew Sweet William's young head down to his, and said in a voice that was broken and tremulous,—

"My child, my son, I have loved you always, but I did not know it. In my heart there was a place for you, but unknowingly I have kept you from it. O forgive me! and Heaven forgive me, for I am in great need!" And he sank exhausted upon his couch.

At last he took a little hand in each of his own, and looked earnestly at the sweet and innocent faces of the two children; and as he did so the last vestige of bitterness vanished out of his heart, and lo! the love that had so long been divided was united once more. Oh, happy thought, that for one moment, even one short moment, his heart was moved to repentance, and that a life of selfish and wicked motives should close at last with only words of love! It was thus that, in the best and humblest spirit he had ever known, the surly and dreaded William passed away to his rest.

At first Sweet William did not know himself in his new condition, for he had been proclaimed the Duke of Normandy in truth, and had been feasted and welcomed and cheered so heartily by all the good people of Normandy that he was quite bewil-

dered. But otherwise Sweet William himself was unchanged by this great tide in his fortunes. He was still the same innocent little boy, with the wondering look in his great dark eyes, and the tender, loving heart that endeared him to all. The story of his strange captivity was a revelation to many; but to William, who had lived in mystery all his days, and who had learned to accept unaccountable happenings with sweet unquestioning submission, this new glory meant very little; and he remained quite undisturbed by it all. He was only a little sorry to leave the old gray tower—the home that had been made bright for him by love and kindness—and very happy to live in the splendid castle, to go about freely with his dear cousin Constance, to play in the open fields, to enjoy the warm and beautiful sunlight, and to see so many good, kind people who always greeted him with smiles. It was like living in a new world, and a world that was always beautiful. For in those days every one was happy at Mount St. Michael; and save for my little lady, who very naturally mourned the death of Duke William, whom she still called her dear good father, every one was light-hearted, and felt that things had come to a happy close, and rejoiced that so much good had come out of so great an evil. But I think the one who rejoiced the most, and who gave the most fervent thanks to Heaven, was the good nurse Mathilde, who had tried in her honest heart to spare both the dear little ones from any suffering. All her anxious fears and misgivings of past years were forgotten in the assurance of her darling's love, and the knowledge that his noble and generous nature approved of all she had done. For when she related to him, over and over again, the secret that had lain hidden from him in her heart, and as often entreated him to forgive her, he had only embraced her lovingly and said,—

"Dear nurse, you have only taught my father to love his brother's child, and to know his own before his death. If my living in the Great Tower has saved Constance from a day of unhappiness, then have you granted my dearest wish. I have been happy with you in the old place, Mathilde; and we love it, do we not?" And his little voice faltered, as it did many times afterward in remembering the scene of his strangely clouded childhood.

As for my lady Constance, when she realized all that had really happened, she was as much overcome by the thought of her little cousin's wrongs as by her own sorrow. For some singular reason she felt that all the blame rested upon her—that she had caused him to suffer untold miseries; and when she was with him alone for the first time after he had risen to the exalted position of Duke of Normandy, she stood almost in awe of him, and felt he could never love her any more.

"O William, Sweet William," she cried, "what a sinful child I have been! I have robbed you of all that was yours; but I did not know it, indeed I did not. O pray, my lord, put me in the Great Tower now, if it will do any good!" And she fell on her knees at his feet quite stricken down by a sense of her deep guilt. She seemed for the moment to forget their long friendship, the great tie of love that had bound them—everything except that he had suffered a great injury, and, in some way which she could not fully understand, for her sake.

But Sweet William, Heaven bless him! did not forget the light and sunshine she had brought into his dingy home, the childish love she had so freely given him, the happy hours her presence had made for him; and of all the feelings that stirred his heart in those eventful days, none was so strong and so ardent as his love for Constance.

Dear children, there is no more precious thing on all God's earth than a loving and grateful heart—a heart that can forget its own wrongs, but never the love and kindness it has received. Such a heart is the noblest gift a man can possess—greater than beauty and wealth and talents—and it makes more real happiness in this world than all of these put together. It is like a blessed sunbeam, casting its generous warmth on the good and evil alike, and leaving its precious influence everywhere; and in such a heart as that of a little child, it is all the more beautiful because of its youthful ardor and purity.

"Dear, dear Constance," Sweet William said, raising her tenderly and putting his arm about her with an air of sweet protection and the new look of dignity that sat so well upon his youthful countenance, "we are cousins still, and we shall always be. No matter how far you may be from me, I shall always think of you and love you. And when I am a man, Constance, I will come for you, and we shall live again at Mount St. Michael." And although Constance had already learned to love her young uncle the count, and the thought of going back to France with him was not unpleasant, she felt just at that moment that she would rather be a prisoner in the Great Tower all her life than be parted from her cousin Sweet William.

But Count Philippe, who was good and kind, and cared most for these dear children's happiness, had no thought of parting them; and some days later, when they were all three together, he said to Constance,—

"Ask your cousin William if he will go to France with us, in a great and splendid ship."

"To live with us," cried Constance, looking up eagerly—"to be near me always?"

"Yes," said the count with a queer little smile, "always."

And Sweet William consented, saying he could think of nothing that would be more to his liking.

So for some weeks following the two little cousins roamed about Mount St. Michael together—he enjoying his new found liberty and all the delights it brought, and she learning to forget her first childish sorrow. And this was all such a perfect realization of their bright dreams that very soon the little Constance forgot her loss, and was as happy again as any one at Mount St. Michael. And this you will think is saying much, when I tell you that there were some very happy people at the castle just then—two in particular.

And my story would not be complete if I omitted to say that these were old Guilbert and Nurse Mathilde, who were bidden to accompany their young lord to his new home in France. In the excitement of the prospective journey it is said that Mathilde quite lost her head, and actually consented to keep the promise she had made some time before, to become the good keeper's prisoner for life indeed; and what is still more remarkable is that she seemed immensely pleased at the idea; though I think they never again lived in a Great Tower, but spent the remainder of their honest lives in the faithful and pleasant services of their young master.

When at last the day of departure arrived, and my lady had taken a tender leave of all her many friends at Mount St. Michael, not forgetting the noble Roncesvalles, promising to be true to him always and to love him, the two children stood in the vast court-yard of the castle, whither all the good castle-folk and Normans of the village had assembled to bid their little lord God-speed. While the air still trembled with the loving clamor of his name, Sweet William stepped forward, holding his little cousin by the hand, and of his own free will, like a true and brave little nobleman that he was, addressed them in his clear, childish voice.

"My good friends," said he, "do not think we are leaving you for always, and do not grieve at our going. Constance and I will come again—will we not, cousin?—to rule at Mount St. Michael, when I have learned in France how to be a good and brave Duke of Normandy."

And oh, the cheers that rang out after his young lordship's sweet farewell! And how the walls of the old gray castle echoed and re-echoed with the joyous acclamations of the good people! And how they all followed the merry party down to the white shore and waved their heartiest good-byes to the two happy children! It was then that another fair vessel left the shores of Normandy for Calais; and as it sailed out into the beautiful blue Channel and the glorious evening sunshine fell over it like a blessing, none but kind and loving wishes followed after it, and all hearts were merry and glad. For this time no little cousin was left behind, nor was the face of Sweet William ever again seen watching and waiting from the window of the Great Tower on Mount St. Michael.

THE END.