

SWEETHEART MINE.

(Continued.)

"You need not wait for me, Stella; I shall be ready directly," Miriam answered, without attempting to open the door; and when her sister's steps had flitted down to the hall she passed out into the wide corridor, her white robe trailing over the oaken floor with a rustling sound, her daintily-shod feet scarcely awakening any other echo as she passed down the dimly-lighted stairway.

Barbara—the devoted nurse who had almost entire charge of little Dora—started, and stared at her in open-eyed wonder as she came suddenly face to face with what seemed to be the luminous spirit of some long-forgotten mistress of White Towers, and instinctively she clutched Dora's hand tighter and drew her closer to her side.

With a shout of delight the child broke away and rushed towards Miriam, clasping her arms about the girl's slender waist and laying her face against the soft folds of shimmering satin, that reflected all the light falling from the candelabra above.

"Oh, Mollie, Mollie, where did you find the fairy-godmother—how did she turn you into such a beautiful princess? Lift me up and let me feel the pearls in your hair. Did the angels bring you these beautiful things, or was it all the fairy-godmother?"

"Not the angels," Miriam answered, holding herself aloof from the child's caressing hold. "There, Dora, let nurse take you to bed. I will show you everything to-morrow."

"But now—now," Dora pleaded, clinging fast to the folds of Miriam's dress, "let me kiss you, Mollie—only once—just because you are a real princess."

Miriam bent and touched the child's flushed cheek lightly with her lips.

"There, there, Dora; there are lots of pretty things in my room. Barbara can show them to you, and to-morrow I will tell you all about them."

"And pearls—shall I find beautiful pearls like your necklace?"

"Yes; lots," Miriam answered, pushing the child gently aside. "Don't keep me now; they are expecting me in the dining-room."

"Lor, Miss Mollie, what will Sir Harcourt say when he sees you like that?" Barbara exclaimed, recovering from her first surprise, and staring at Miriam with bewildered admiration. "You look like one of the pictures in the gallery come to life. No wonder Miss Dora thinks you've been turned into a princess."

Miriam smiled, and held her stately head higher, as she continued her way down to the hall.

To her, these were moments of supreme triumph, and the burst of admiration, coming spontaneously from the nurse and the child, gratified her not a little.

"What will Sir Harcourt say?"—she did not care. She was sick of drab homespun and grey cotton, sick of the long, thick braids of hair coiled heavily about her head; and she felt a thrill of conscious pride as she recalled the image that had been reflected back to her in the pier-glass, while she twisted the pearls amid the rich, dark waves gathered high above her brow.

She was prepared to meet Lionel Lyndoch as a foe, and in this guise she felt fully equipped for war—ready to vanquish him with one glance of her disdainful eyes; to show him that in Miriam Denavon, at least, he would find no meek schoolgirl, forced to submit quietly to his guidance.

She felt her eyes gleam, and her heart throbbed to quicker time, as she descended the last flight of stairs. Somebody had just come from the library, and was making his way across the hall to the dining-room, when the rustle of silk against the carved bannisters attracted his attention, and made him glance up to where the graceful, white-robed form moved in the full glare of the huge lamp.

He gave a slight start of surprise as his gaze fell upon Miriam, and halted at the foot of the staircase for her to pass.

Almost at the same moment a white hand-bag rose dropped from her waist and fell at his feet. He stooped, and picking it up held it towards her with a stiff, cold bow.

Miriam did not attempt to take the flower in her hand. This stranger, with his chill, penetrating eyes, his grave, pale face, was Lionel Lyndoch, the new secretary, the man who was to have been her master, but whom she was determined to treat with the utmost scorn and derision.

"The stem is broken," she said, looking with a frown at the unoffending rose. "I will thank you to let the flower remain where it fell."

Without waiting to note the effect of her words, Miriam swept into the dining-room, leaving Lionel Lyndoch standing at the foot of the staircase with the rose lying in the open palm of his hand.

She had expected to find Sir Harcourt already at the head of the table; but he did not make his appearance until both Lydia and Stella had got over their amazement at the sight of the tall, stately form with its shimmering array of pearls and satin, and then he entered arm-in-arm with Lionel Lyndoch.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, my dears," he said, with a look towards the side of the room where Lydia and his youngest niece were standing. "I had a letter of importance to answer, otherwise this delay would not have happened." Then, glancing round with a touch of anxiety, as he missed his more troublesome charge, he added:

"Where is Miriam; I should like to introduce Mr. Lyndoch to her at once and get all formality over. The fact is," turning directly to Lyndoch, "my niece, Miriam, is inclined to be more self-willed than I could desire, and I look to you to make her understand the advisability of becoming more docile and tractable. She has tired out the patience of more than

one governess, and her education is not nearly so perfect as it should be at her age."

"I shall be glad to help Miss Denavon with her studies, as far as it is in my power," Lyndoch replied, glancing from Lydia's fair face to Stella's sunburnt cheeks, and wondering when he was to make the acquaintance of his third pupil—evidently the one black sheep beneath Sir Harcourt's lordly roof.

It was strange that Lionel Lyndoch should not think of associating this wayward, unruly pupil with whom he was threatened, with the daintily-robed girl, whose dazzling eyes had flashed over him with such infinite disdain when she had passed him in the hall.

As she stepped forward now a dull silence fell over the room, and some seconds elapsed before Sir Harcourt could realize the meaning of the fair apparition which had come in his presence.

"Miriam—Miriam! Is this some practical joke?" he exclaimed, his first feeling of admiration giving place to one of anger. "Why are you masquerading in this fashion?"

Miriam drew herself up proudly, the rich carnation deepening in her cheeks, her eyes darkly radiant, as stars, while the light from the shaded lamps tinged her dress with a soft amber glow.

"I beg your pardon, uncle," she said coldly. "I thought it was your wish that we should pay all due respect to Mr. Lionel Lyndoch."

"Respect!" Sir Harcourt repeated with an angry shrug of his shoulders. "I am surprised, Miriam, that you do not know yourself better than to appear in such guise. I never saw such an outrageous get up in all my life!"

"I am sorry the dress is not to your taste," she replied coolly. "Myself, I thought it rather handsome: perhaps you will like it better when you get used to it? I thought my appearance would create quite a pleasant surprise."

"Enough of the subject," Sir Harcourt muttered impatiently. "I look over the affair as a mere childish folly." Then, turning to Lionel Lyndoch, he continued in the same unbending tones:

"Allow me to introduce you to my eldest niece, Miss Denavon: Miriam, Mr. Lionel Lyndoch."

Miriam bowed frigidly; yet Lyndoch saw the mocking light in her eyes, as she shot one swift glance in his face, and instinctively he felt this scene was a challenge to an open battle between them.

"What power shall I have with her?" he thought, recalling Sir Harcourt's first words regarding Miriam. "He does not understand—they do not, any of them, seem to understand; she is something more than a child, she is beautiful."

Beautiful! Ay. Who could have looked upon her that night without becoming conscious of the rare loveliness with which Miriam was endowed?

"I never knew dress could make such difference," was Stella's inward comment, as she contemplated her sister across the wide table. "Who could have imagined she would come down looking like that? No wonder she has been all the afternoon locked in her room—it is just like Mollie to do all she can to get into disgrace, when we are expected to be on our best behaviour."

Poor Stella had felt her uncle's displeasure far more than Miriam had done. Mollie was always so self-willed—so headstrong—so ready to rebel against every form of discipline, this last freak did not in the least surprise her.

"It might have been something worse," she thought, philosophically, as a dozen of Mollie's most daring ventures passed before her mind.

"She does such dreadful things; but this wouldn't have mattered at all, if it had not been for the new secretary."

In Lydia's breast there was room for none of the admiration that thrilled through Stella, as the pale light from the lamps flooded the slender, girlish form, with its costly array of clinging satin; Sir Harcourt Melville's daughter was bitterly angry at this, her cousin's freak, and, in comparison, she felt plain, dull, and even insignificant.

Dinner proceeded with rather gloomy formality.

Sir Harcourt could not get over his annoyance, while Miriam's sweet, dazzling face smiled at him with such scornful defiance; and for the first time he awakened to the full responsibility he had called upon himself in becoming guardian to his two nieces.

Once or twice he spoke severely on the subject of vanity—pointing out to Miriam what he hoped would be a profitable lesson; but the beautiful eyes only sparkled with a more rebellious determination, and, with a sigh, he turned to Lionel Lyndoch.

"Miriam has been allowed to have her way too much," Sir Harcourt remarked in an undertone, "she must be broken in before this vanity takes root in her nature. Besides, look at the example to the others."

Miriam overheard, and a fiery retort rose to her lips.

"I do not act for the example of others," she said indignantly, "nor do I wish to be treated as one of them—you seem to ignore the fact that I have ceased to be a child."

"You behave very like one," Sir Harcourt replied, dryly. "How old are you, Miriam?"

"Eighteen; many girls become wives at that age."

Sir Harcourt passed over the remark as though he had heard only her answer to his question, and let his gaze rest upon his daughter.

"And you, Lydia?"

"Eighteen, too, papa; but four months younger than Mollie."

"And Stella?"

"Sixteen; I shall be grown up soon, but I am glad to remain as I am for the present."

Once more Sir Harcourt appealed to Lyndoch.

What is your opinion, Lionel? Do you think these young ladies are