

SWEET WILLIAM,
OR THE CASTLE OF MOUNT ST. MICHAEL.

By *Marquerite Bouvet.*

CHAPTER XI.—THE TOURNAMENT.

In one thing, certainly, Sweet William was distinguishing himself. He was becoming a good archer. He must have inherited the gift or else been a wonderfully apt pupil; for with but a few instructions from Guilbert, he soon learned to handle my lady's little cross-bow as gracefully as any Robin Hood, and to send his arrow flying as swiftly and skilfully as many a practised sportsman. Constance always admired and applauded his successes; for she, too, was a fair archer, and capable of appreciating his skill. There was nothing they enjoyed more than standing together at one of the tower windows and throwing out little pebbles which Nurse Mathilde had previously sewed up into deceiving little round bundles, to see which one could send an arrow quickly enough to split the little bag and release the pebbles.

In these shooting-matches the hawk Ixe was always a lively spectator. He would sit perched upon one of the projecting bars of the window, and eye the little farce half disdainfully and half approvingly; and when a victory was won, and the merry laughter of the two children rang out upon the quiet landscape, he would fly down with a great show of enthusiasm, and return bearing the little woollen trophy in his beak.

It was thus that the little twin-cousins were engaged on one of the first long spring afternoons. Constance stood beside Sweet William, flinging out the little targets; but either my lady was in a playful mood, and tried some of her little witcheries to baffle him, or else luck was not on his side, for he missed them every one.

"Oh, come, Sweet William, try just once, do! You must not be discouraged yet," said her ladyship, with an engaging smile, as the little boy laid down his bow with a disappointed look. "See! I will throw this one very straight. Hold your bow long and steadily—so; and do not move until I give the word."

Sweet William retreated a step or two, threw back his curly head with a resolute air, and held his bow at arm's length for a long second or two.

"Fly!" cried my lady.

At the word which she had always used in hunting with her falcon, Ixe sprang from his perch as swiftly as the arrow itself and crossed it just in time to receive its harp point in his black breast.

Constance uttered a piercing cry, and covered her face with her hands. Mathilde fell back in her chair with a smothered groan; and the little cross-bow dropped from Sweet William's helpless hands, and his face was as deadly pale as if the arrow had been in his own heart.

My lady's feast-day was not for a fortnight to come, and the bird Ixe lay dead beneath the tower window, with Sweet William's arrow buried deep in his black plumes.

The death of the black hawk was regarded in the light of a great calamity at Mount St. Michael—by Constance, who had been so fond of him and spent so many pleasant hours in his company; by Sweet William, who bewailed his wretched luck, and could not forgive himself for bringing sorrow to his dear cousin; but more especially by the good people at the castle, who remembered Mother Anne's words, and plainly saw that this event foreshadowed some great evil.

Mathilde and Lasette were in frequent consultation together, and wore such anxious faces that Sweet William wondered secretly if the loss of the poor bird could really make his nurse act so curiously at times. She had never shown any remarkable affection for the creature; indeed she had spoken of him once or twice as a wild, audacious thing, as like to pick my lady's eyes out or do any other dangerous mischief. And then, too, Lasette had wept almost as much as my lady, and bidden her return no more to the tower that day, but spend the hours of play in giving her favorite due and honorable burial. Ixe, like most of fortune's pets, had many envious enemies in his lifetime; but when he died every one seemed to mourn for him. It is a strange world, and Sweet William was greatly puzzled.

Nor was the general consternation at all lessened when, some days later, intelligence was brought that my lord the duke was actually on his way to Mount St. Michael, with a great company of lords and ladies. This, to the anxious people, made every imaginary evil possible.

But, on the contrary, my lord came home, in an unusually benevolent frame of mind. For the wars were ended for a brief season and peace reigned throughout France. It was a happy time. Great victories had been won, and men had distinguished themselves and were on their way homeward rejoicing. Every one seemed disposed to make merry—even the surly Duke of Normandy, who was returning on purpose to prepare for a great joust given by his king.

It was always so in those days—men were either fighting one another in good earnest or doing so in jest. The most popular amusement of the day was the tournament, where valiant knights wrestled with one another, and went through all the mimicry of real combat for the entertainment of royal beholders. And this was thought a fitting way to celebrate any joyous event even the close of a fierce warfare and the reconciliation of two great nations.

Such a tournament it was that Duke William was making ready for, so gorgeous and festive and splendid in every way that it has not its like in all history. It was to be held in a beautiful valley of France near the famous city of Calais; and for months before, great ships loaded with the costliest and rarest luxuries were sailing into this great port, and leaving their cargoes to array the chosen camp. Thousands of workmen were there, busy erecting temporary palaces and gay pavilions and richly-furnished tents for the king and his nobles, who were now gathering from all the country round; and scarcely anything else was talked of for weeks beforehand.

But at Mount St. Michael, so far out on the lonely sea, where the only nobleman was a little boy shut up in a great tower, no news of all this had come, until Duke William himself brought the tidings. And the elaborate preparations that were then made threw the good castle-folk into such a state of excitement that they quite forgot the little episode of the Great Tower.

Now Duke William did not mean to be outshone by any knight in France in the coming festivities. He accordingly gave orders that a ship should be fitted out—a ship magnificent enough to bear so mighty a lord as he to the grand tournament. The fair vessel was brought to the shores of the rocky Mount, and for days nothing was done at the castle save to prepare for the eventful journey; and nothing was left undone that could in any way add glitter and glory to its pageantry.

It had been a whim of my lord to take his little daughter with him on this festive tour, and he was pleased to think that her beauty and spirit would be greatly admired by all his noble friends. It was a very uncommon thing, an extraordinary thing, I might say, for a little girl like Constance to share the amusements of older people, much less to travel about for pleasure. True, she had been especially favored as a child, but she had never dreamed of such a privilege as this. Therefore, when her father made known his intention, and told her of all the gorgeousness that would be displayed there, and of the feasting and merry-making, and of all the royal personages that were to be present, she could scarcely contain her rapture.

That night she went straight to the Great Tower, and confided her good fortune to Sweet William. In her own animated way she related all the wonders her father had described to her. She made such a long and impressive story of my lord's achievements, and the bravery he had displayed in the late conquests, that ingenious William was inclined to believe that the great feast was being held chiefly in honor of my lord.

"And think of it, Sweet William," cried my lady, clapping her little hands excitedly: "I shall see a real tournament, and the king himself, and the bravest knights and loveliest ladies of Europe, and, cousin dear, the most beautiful horses in the land—horses, my father says, that would make even Roncesvalles hang his head! But he says that only to try me, for he knows that my Roncesvalles is the dearest horse in all the world. Oh, I shall miss

him, I fear!" she added pensively; "and you, too, my sweet cousin." And she laid her hand ever so gently on the little boy's cheek.

Sweet William looked up at her, and a little shade of trouble filled his eyes.

"And must you go away and leave me?" he asked.

"Yes; but not for long, William dear. And I shall have so much to tell you when I return; we shall talk about it for days. Will you not like to hear about all the wonderful things I am going to see?"

Something in the little boy's tender nature told him he must not mar his dear cousin's happiness with any regrets of his own; and though his heart was heavy at the thought of parting from her for a few short weeks, he answered quite cheerfully,—

"Oh, I will, indeed, Constance; but I shall like better than all to see you coming home again. When does the ship set sail?"

"Not for a fortnight," returned my lady—"time enough for nurse to teach me courtly manners and how to make a pretty reverence. She cautions me every day about my good behavior, and says I must not prattle much, as I do here; for in the big world children are wont to sit and listen while their elders speak. I have much to learn, Sweet William, and I am such a wilful child that poor Lasette will be quite gray, I fear, before she has made a good lady of me."

Sweet William was about to interpose, but she put the tips of her rosy fingers on his lips, saying,—

"No, no, William! you must not contradict me. I am a very naughty child. I am always making nurse cry. But yesterday I said to her that my father would take you to the tournament too, if she would let me tell him you were here. But she looked at me with such sad eyes, and said 'Constance, Constance,' so reproachfully, that I had to promise again and again I would keep our secret from him. Oh, I wish that wanting to be good could make one so!" And Constance rested her little chin on her hands and was silent for a moment, as if quite overwhelmed at the thought of her iniquities.

"I ought to be good," she added after a pause, "for I have much to make me happy."

"You are very good, I think," added Sweet William seriously; "and that is why you are so happy."

"Oh, my dear, dear cousin," cried my lady, in surprise as well as pleasure, "do you really think so?" And she ran up to him and embraced him heartily.

In all their little scenes Sweet William's fondness, unlike that of Constance, was always evinced in a quiet and gentle dignity which contrasted singularly with the little girl's ardent and captivating demonstrations; and a stranger looking in upon them would hardly have taken them for children of the same hour.

"Now, Constance, tell me more about the beautiful ship," Sweet William said, as they walked hand in hand to the window overlooking the sea.

So she made a vivid picture of the splendors she anticipated; for she was an imaginative little person, and William never wearied of listening to the lively prattle that Nurse Lasette had seemed to condemn.

"Our ship will sail past this very window," said she, "and you must stand here and smile at me; and I shall look up and remember you so all the while I am gone. Will you, Sweet William?"

Sweet William promised, and for the moment forgot his own disappointment in her happiness.

A little later, when my lady turned to say good-night, she kissed Sweet William tenderly, and whispered in his ear,—

"I am very happy, cousin dear; but I should be much happier if you were going with me."

At last the eventful day arrived; and my lady, looking her fairest in her pretty gown of white and the June sunshine lighting up her bright hair, stepped on board the splendid vessel, followed by Nurse Lasette, and then Duke William and all his retinue and a host of lords and ladies in gay and gorgeous costumes—the most brilliant company the rocks of Mount St. Michael had looked down upon for many a long day. There were music and dancing and feasting aboard, and merry laughter rang out on the sea, and high above all floated the white

banner of Normandy, with the lilies of France upon it, emblazoned in purple and gold. Then the anchors were loosed, and the sailors' glad shout rose from the waters and the fair ship set sail on a quiet sea.

All this Sweet William saw from the window of the Great Tower, and the promised smile on his young lips was very faint as he saw the last flutter of my lady's golden hair. He looked long and wistfully after the gallant ship—long after the last of her happy crew had faded out of sight, and her tall white sails looked like the wings of some great sea-bird; and then he turned away with a heavy heart, and fell into the arms of his nurse Mathilde and sobbed away all his bitterness.

Oh the memory of a first sorrow, a sorrow like this—to part from that we love best in all the world! How it lingers in the heart, how it hovers about us even in the happier moments! Sweet William never forgot this hour. He had enjoyed the love and companionship of so few people during his strange childhood, that to lose sight of one of them even for a brief season seemed like taking a part of his own life away; and a sense of dreary emptiness oppressed him, and filled him with vague fears.

Mathilde tried to comfort him, as she alone could do, with cheerful words and promises; and she cradled him in her arms as tenderly as in the days of his babyhood. But Sweet William could not help remembering that another ship had once gone from the shores of Mount St. Michael and never returned; and he wondered if he should have to watch and wait as the old Norman peasant had done.

The days were very long now without my lady's bright little person in the tower chamber; and Sweet William had so much leisure to think and ponder over his mysterious seclusion, and he was so much wiser than in the old days when his relations with Constance were only fanciful, that Nurse Mathilde plainly saw the end. Sweet William would awaken to his wretched lot. In spite of all her efforts, the tower would be to him what it had been to so many others—a dreary prison whose walls stood between him and all life's blessings. It would be unbearable, and his young soul would droop and sicken under it all; and this thought was so distressing to her that she could hardly keep a brave face for her darling. But she prayed, oh, so earnestly, in her heart that the good God would provide some way, any way, by which her precious boy might be spared from the evils that seemed threatening.

Long before the time appointed for my lord's return to Mount St. Michael, Sweet William was keeping a patient and faithful vigil at the tower window. He was never tired of looking out across the tranquil sea, though for many more days nothing was seen upon its bosom but the blue reflection of the summer heavens.

(To be Continued.)

THE RUDDER.

BY CELIA THAXTER.

Of what are you thinking, my little lad, with the honest eyes of blue,
As you watch the vessels that slowly glide o'er the level ocean floor?
Beautiful, graceful, silent as dreams, they pass away from our view,
And down the slope of the world they go, to seek some far-off shore.
They seem to be scattered abroad by chance, to move at the breezes' will,
Aimlessly wandering hither and yon, and melting in distance gray;
But each one moves to a purpose firm, and the winds their sails that fill
Like faithful servants speed them all on their appointed way.
For each has a rudder, my dear little lad, with a staunch man at the wheel,
And the rudder is never left to itself, but the will of the man is there:
There is never a moment, day or night, that the vessel does not feel
The force of the purpose that shapes her course and the helmsman's watchful care
Some day you will launch your ship, my boy, on life's wide, treacherous sea,—
Be sure your rudder is wrought of strength to stand the stress of the gale,
And your hand on the wheel, don't let it flinch, whatever the tumult be,
For the will of man, with the help of God, shall conquer and prevail.