

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

By *Marquise Bouvet.*

CHAPTER IX.—A DARING VENTURE.

"Just like a living person whose face is ever smiling, and whose eyes are always looking straight at you. Some of them are very beautiful. Great men whom the world calls artists paint them; and you would not believe it, cousin, but with a few bright colors and a long brush they fashion faces that look like some one you love. My dear father is fond of lovely portraits, and he has many of them at the castle, of all the lords and ladies that have lived at Mount St. Michael. And there is one of my father too—a great glorious figure in shining armour, and the mighty look in his eye that I love so well. When he is far away and I long for him, I sit and watch the painted face, and it is almost like seeing him."

"What a wonderful thing a portrait is!" said Sweet William, in astonishment.

"Tell me, dear Constance, would I know and love my lord as you do, if I saw his face in the portrait?"

"I am sure you would, Sweet William. My father has a brave face; it is stern and terrible sometimes, but it is always kind when it looks at me. And I know that he would love you, cousin dear, just as he loves me, if he only knew all about you."

Sweet William had no doubt of this. Indeed he knew of no reason why my lord should do otherwise than love him. Had he met with aught but the deepest and tenderest devotion from the few faithful hearts that, so far, had come within the scope of his little life? Yet a gentle sigh rose to his parted lips, and suddenly the look of yearning came into his great soft eyes.

"Dearest Constance," said he, "I wish something very much."

"And what is that, Sweet William?" inquired Constance eagerly.

"That I might, just for one little moment, go with you to the castle and look upon the face of my lord."

It was so very seldom that Sweet William wished for anything very much, or at least so seldom that he spoke of his wishes that Nurse Mathilde and old Guilbert were quite startled by this sudden avowal. And to little Constance, who had but to speak in order to obtain what she wanted, it seemed a great wrong that Sweet William should be suffered to long for anything in vain.

Constance had been wise and docile beyond expectation even of the good nurses. She had helped to make Sweet William's life in the Great Tower happier and brighter than it had ever been. But it could hardly be hoped that even the gentle William could listen day after day to the wonders of the great free world, and hear of the kindred of whose rightful love he had mysteriously been robbed, without feeling now and then a secret longing to see and share them all.

Constance no sooner heard the words than her own heart unconsciously felt their tender pathos. Her ingenious little brain responded at once, and in a twinkling she had surmounted all difficulties.

"Sweet William, dear," she said, "why should you not come to the Great Hall with your nurse and me and see the portrait? We should be gone but a little while; and if you returned to the tower in safety, what harm would be done? Guilbert is such a good kind keeper, he must surely let you go just for one little moment."

But Guilbert, who happened to overhear this dangerous praise of himself, began to gesticulate so wildly, cutting off his head with an imaginary sword, falling on his knees and imploring mercy from some invisible tyrant, and otherwise manifesting such signs of inward perturbation, that one might easily have doubted whether he were the kind keeper that Constance thought him, or the most ferocious of custodians.

Sweet William's eyes lighted up strangely at the sound of his cousin's words. The thought of leaving the tower chamber even for a single moment had never presented itself to him, or indeed to any one else, in the light of a possibility. He started and ran to his nurse, his dark curls blown from his fair forehead, and his face faintly flushed with excitement.

"O good Mathilde, could we—could we, do you think?" he cried, throwing himself

on the little stool at her feet, and resting his clasped hands on her knees.

What did make poor Nurse Mathilde falter and tremble so? What is it that makes us all weak and yielding at the sight of a pleading child? She forgot her own peril and his—she forgot everything when her darling sat there looking up with his great yearning eyes; and taking his dear face between her hands, she said,—

"Yes, sweetheart, if the good Guilbert will let us."

But here the good Guilbert gave an alarming gasp which might have been taken



"She was my mother."

for his last breath, and went through such another evolution of strange grimaces that Constance was fain to laugh outright at him, and call him a simple old soul. No one understood as he did, however, the great risk he would run in allowing even for one short hour a prisoner of my lord's to go from beyond his watch. A dungeon keeper's duty was very serious in those days and Guilbert plumed himself on having been a just and faithful servant all his life.

But this was such a peculiar case, Mathilde argued, and the children's design was such an innocent and harmless one, and my lord was so many miles away, that surely he need have no fears. And then Constance pleaded with him so prettily, and Sweet William looked at him so longingly, that very soon poor Guilbert began to yield. "If I did not love my prisoner so dearly and hate my master so heartily," he thought, "I would not, for the first time in my five-and-sixty years, fail in my trust. But there is no wrong in doing good, no wrong in granting a simple happiness to a child like Sweet William," he reasoned with himself; and after having recounted a multitude of instances in which the direst and most terrible consequences had resulted from a tower-keeper's allowing little boy-captives to go about and view their lordly uncles' portraits, he gave his consent with fear and trembling.

Mathilde made all sorts of promises, to appease the good servant's concern. She even went so far as to say she would give herself up as his prisoner for life, if she failed to return with Sweet William before the great bell of the abbey rang out another hour. And, if you will believe me, this proved so satisfactory that Guilbert immediately loosened the heavy bolts, albeit with a merry twinkle in his eye; and he was rash enough to hope secretly that Mathilde would not be quite true to her word.

It was Sweet William's turn to be surprised when, for the first time in his life, he stepped beyond the threshold of the Great Tower chamber; when he breathed the clear, frosty air of the Mount, and pressed with his little feet the pure, newly-fallen snow; when he saw the tall green pines swaying their loose branches so near that he could almost touch them; and when at last he beheld the gray old walls of the castle rising in stately grandeur before him.

O little children who love and enjoy the beautiful free world, with all its glorious wonders, who look up day after day to its great blue dome, and drink in freely the precious influence of its warmth and light and sunshine, think what it must have been to the little William when he saw and felt all for the first time! No wonder his little heart beat violently, and he held Mathilde's hand so tightly, as they sped in silence through the great court-yard, and into wooded paths, and up the narrow corridors and winding stairways, till the home that was so familiar to Constance, seemed to him like a delightful labyrinth.

But the Great Hall of the castle, in all its gloomy magnificence, surpassed everything that Sweet William had ever dreamed of. So many rare and costly things greeted his eyes; powerful-looking swords, whose hilts were of burnished gold, hung crossed upon the walls; soft silken curtains fell partly over the beautifully latticed windows, and richly embroidered tapestries hung on every side; while the dark oaken furniture, so massive and curiously shaped, was a source of bewilderment to William, who could only look his admiration and remain speechless. At one end of the hall was my lord's ducal throne, made of richly carved wood, and adorned with beaten brass; and overhead a canopy of gold and purple draperies, from which hung the heavy crown that had rested on the great dukes of Normandy for centuries. Opposite, at the end of a long colonnade of arching marble pillars, was the banqueting-table where the great feasts went on, and where the noblemen drank out of jewelled goblets and ate from golden plates; and above it hung the famous portrait of the duke, the great glorious figure that Sweet William had longed to see.

But there, too, over the tall chimney-piece hung another portrait, of such exquisite beauty that the moment Sweet William's eyes fell upon it they were blind to everything else. It was the portrait of a lady, young and beautiful, with a look of ineffable sweetness beaming down from dark, tender eyes that seemed to follow William and look straight at him wherever he stood.

"And who is this?" he asked in a voice that was almost tremulous.

"She was my mother," said Constance gently. "Was she not a lovely lady? She died, dear cousin, when you and I were babes. I often wonder why it was so, and think how dearly I should have loved her had she been spared to her little child. She was as good as she was beautiful, and every one loved her at Mount St. Michael; and my father once said to me that the light of the world went out for him when her dear eyes closed."

Sweet William put his arm around the little girl's neck, and his own eyes filled with tears.

"But he has you, dear Constance, and you are sunshine enough for all the world," he said tenderly.

"I am only a little maid, Sweet William, and but a poor companion for so great and wise a lord as my father. I have seen him many and many a time sit before the portrait and watch it long and earnestly and I knew he was thinking of her, and longing to have her back with him. O William, do you ever wish, as I do, that you might have known and loved your sweet young mother?"

Sweet William made no answer; but as he looked more intently at the beautiful face above him, he felt for the first time in his life that there was hidden away somewhere in his heart a great love for some one he had never known.

"If she was like this," he said at length, without taking his eyes from the picture, "I could love her without seeing her. But, Constance, is there not a portrait of my mother in the castle?"

"I think I have never seen one, cousin dear," said she with a puzzled look.

The two children were silent for a moment while they stood looking up at the lovely face. Constance was thinking what a splendid thing it was to be a good and beautiful lady and to be loved and remembered always, and was hoping that she too might be so some day; while Sweet William was wondering, in his grave and quiet way, why Constance had never spoken of her mother to him.

But my lady had so many people about her to love and to talk of that it was not

strange she had apparently forgotten one who lived only in her fancy. Then the thought came to Sweet William, as it had sometimes of late, that Constance had been blessed in everything; even in her loss she had been blessed more than he. But there was no bitterness or regret in the passing thought; it came and went like an April snow-flake, leaving no trace of sadness in his unselfish heart.

"Tell me more of this lady," he said at last, turning to Constance. "I love her face dearly, it is so very beautiful."

"I know but little, Sweet William; it grieves my father to speak of her, and nurse cannot do so without weeping. But it never saddens me to think of her, for I know she is safe and happy with the angels, and that she looks down from heaven and sees us, just as she is doing from the portrait now."

Sweet William looked again at the painted face, and then at the little girl's, so fair, so full of life and light; and he thought there was a sweetness in it just then that showed her heart at least was like the beautiful lady's. But he wondered a little how his cousin came by her sunny looks and eyes of blue. Surely the old Norman at the foot of the hill was mistaken, or else sorrow and age had dimmed his memory; for my lady did not resemble her young mother. They were both beautiful, but as unlike as twilight and dawn.

The great bell on Mount St. Michael ringing out the close of this eventful hour in Sweet William's life, roused him from his meditation; and Constance ran to Nurse Mathilde, who had likewise fallen into a quiet reverie, and laughingly reminded her that Guilbert had now two prisoners instead of one; and furthermore, that he might be indulging in some dangerous pastimes at the thought of losing them both.

And in truth she was not mistaken, for they found the good keeper in a serious state when they returned. He declared this had been the longest hour in all his life, and that never before, not even when the chief of the fierce Kymry had held the battle-axe three days over his head, had he known such anguish as when the last stroke of the bell had died away and he found himself still alone in the tower. Indeed he had some notion of throwing himself from the tower window, but that Sweet William and Mathilde arrived just in time to prevent this undignified close to his brave career.

There was such a droll mixture of mirth and seriousness in his words, and such a look of triumph in his keen gray eye in spite of his feigned discomfiture, that Sweet William could not refrain from laughing; and clasping him around the neck he cried,—

"O Guilbert, you mistrustful Guilbert, to think we should ever desert you!—He does not deserve a kiss, does he, nurse?" But Sweet William gave him a great many nevertheless, as though they had been parted a weary time.

"Nay, nay, my little one! I had little fear of that; but, to tell you truly, the minutes were very long without seeing your sweet face. Now come and tell me all that has happened to make my little blossom's eyes so bright."

So, climbing upon the old man's knee, William related all his adventures, and told of the wonderful things he had seen; and even hinted, albeit very cautiously, that he might like to repeat the experiment at some future time. At which proposition Guilbert showed the whites of his eyes in a way that was quite alarming; but all the while there was such a light of pleasure in the boy's face that the good keeper felt well repaid for his few anxious and lonely moments.

But Sweet William, like all tender and sensitive natures, spoke least of the thing that was nearest his heart; and when the excitement of the day was over he grew quiet and pensive again, and no one but his ever watchful nurse caught glimpses of the sober thoughts that were busying his young brain. Until quite late that evening he sat in his favorite retreat, looking out upon the night. All was quiet and peaceful, and the cold bright stars looked down benignly upon the white earth below. A misty moonbeam came slanting through the Bower window, and fell full upon the graceful figure within. Mathilde heard a little sigh, and saw the thoughtful look steal again into his deep eyes.

(To be Continued.)