

SWEET WILLIAM,

OR THE CASTLE OF MOUNT ST. MICHAEL.

By Marguerite Bouvet.

CHAPTER VI.—(Continued.)

The little boy remained silent. He was thinking what a happy, happy child his cousin must be, and what a score of things she had to make her so, and what Mathilde had said of her goodness, and how so many people loved her, and above all, how beautiful she was.

"Tell me, dear nurse," he said at length, "when shall I see my sweet cousin again? If I could but look on her every day, as I did this morning, I could think of her all the day and dream of her all the night, and I should be so happy;" and his lip quivered, and his dark eyes grew sadder. For with the sight of that fair picture of happiness and beauty, there rose suddenly a great yearning in his hungry little heart.

The good nurse saw this, and her soul grew sick at the thought of this first ripple in the quiet contentment of his little life. The fear that he should come to know his wretched lot, or long for something which she could not give him, made her miserable. Alas! she could make no promise. She could only encourage him with tender, hopeful words, and fondle him in her arms and try to make him feel that much love was his, though it came but from her own old heart.

She coaxed him to go and have a game with Guilbert, feeling grieved that she had not been able to draw his thoughts away from the events of the morning. But Sweet William had no wish to be amused, and would only sit in her lap and talk of all that was in his heart. And all that day they two sat quietly together, building many hopes, talking of many things, but principally of the little girl at the castle—of all that she did and said; of her pretty winning way that made every one love her so; of her fondness for Roncesvalles, the noble creature to whom she had given such a brave name; of her nurse, Lasette, who had brought her up just as Mathilde had Sweet William; of the great castle where she lived; and indeed of everything that now bore a new charm in his eyes because of its association with the little girl.

And at dusk Sweet William stood again at his Bower and watched for the coming home of the hunters, hoping to get another glimpse of his dear cousin; but night fell all too soon, and no train of riders crossed the lonely road again, nor were the notes of the bugle sounding their return heard about the walls of the Great Tower any more.

That night Sweet William had no play with Guilbert; and when he took up his little harp to sing with Nurse Mathilde, his fingers wandered idly over the chords, and she was more than once left singing alone, while he asked some distracted question about my Lady Constance. And when at last he laid his young head down to rest and his eyelids drooped with sleep, the wondering smile that swept over his fair features and the broken words that fell from his unconscious lips, told of the subject of his dreams.

And Mathilde, the good devoted nurse, what was she thinking of that night as she bent over the sleeping William? and why did she hold her heart, and weep and kiss him over and over again, and lay her old cheek against his young one, and entreat him pitifully to forgive her and to love her always, as though his young ears had not been deaf to all but the voices of dream-land? And what dread was in her heart as she looked into the pure white face of her boy, and saw the same patient, gentle look steal back again, and the same sweet smile that made it infinitely more sad to her, now rest upon it like the bitterest reproach? She knelt beside him a long, long while, holding his little hand, winding his dark curls lovingly about her fingers, kissing his closed eyes, and calling him her darling, her heart's dearest, and praying Heaven to spare him; until at length Guilbert, who from his post without had been watching her, came noiselessly to her side, and inquired what now fears she had for her little one.

"Oh, my kind friend," said Mathilde, recovering herself a little, "is my heart not always full of fears for him! Can I see him growing day by day in grace and loveliness, and not grow sick with wondering what is to become of my darling?"

"Nay, nay, you lose hope," returned the old keeper almost reproachfully, "and we must never do that. The dear one has not been unhappy with so good a mother as you, Mathilde, and he may never know his ill-luck till he is out of it."

"Ah, Guilbert, I fear he will know it too soon, too soon. Saw you not the change in him to-day after seeing his cousin Constance? He would talk of nothing else; think of nothing else; and I have strange misgivings that this is the beginning of something—I know not what—for my poor lamb." And Mathilde fell to sobbing and weeping bitterly.

This was terrible to the good keeper, who, besides cherishing a secret fondness for Nurse Mathilde, dreaded tears, next to my lord's anger, more than anything else in the world. Finding he could administer but little comfort, he entreated her to go and consult with Lasette, as she always did when especially concerned about Sweet William; and he himself sat beside the little couch, as he had done many a time before, watching the sleeping boy as tenderly and lovingly as any woman.

A moment later, Mathilde was speeding down the great staircase of the tower, through narrow passage-ways and gloomy corridors, and out into the wide courtyard where the moonlight fell so peacefully upon the slumbering world. Away, away she sped toward the old gray castle, where another child lay sleeping in that stately bedchamber where the twin babes had slept years ago. There the two nurses held a long and animated converse, speaking in hushed voices, confiding to each other the many hopes and fears which none but themselves could know. Lasette had much to tell Mathilde concerning my lady's discovery of the little boy in the Great Tower, of her eager questions about him, and of her own apprehensions lest that little lady's impetuous interest might lead to the good saints only knew what harm for them all.

It was far into the night when the nurse reached the tower chamber again, and found Guilbert gently nodding over his young charge, and Sweet William still sleeping and dreaming of bright little fairies with flying golden hair and rosy smiles that beckoned to him from afar.

CHAPTER VII.—A JOYFUL SURPRISE.

When Sweet William awoke late the next morning, the warm summer air was blowing softly at his windows, and the little birds were chirping noisily from their vines, as if chiding him for idly sleeping away the fresh morning hours. Nurse Mathilde was busy over a little table in Sweet William's Bower, carefully setting forth his simple morning meal, and dressing it with dainty nosegays here and there to delight his eyes. Old Guilbert was mounting guard with a somewhat impatient step in the dark entry without, occasionally stopping to put his head between the bars of the great dungeon door, and to smile a droll sort of smile at Mathilde, and nod mysteriously at his little prisoner.

Sweet William wondered why he felt so strange, and what it was that made yesterday seem so very long ago. Dear little boy! he did not know that something had just come into his life that would make all his yesterdays seem like a distant and almost forgotten past.

As he sat at his small breakfast, quietly discoursing with his nurse on the strange and unreal happenings of the previous day, the old keeper's hearty laugh was heard outside; and presently the heavy door creaked on its rusty hinges, and Guilbert announced in joyful and excited tones,—

"The Morning Sunshine, come to see Sweet William."

In walked my little lady, dancing like a sunbeam, looking about her with round and curious eyes, and crying eagerly as she caught sight of William,—

"Oh, my sweet cousin, do you not know me? I am your cousin Constance. I saw you at this window yesterday for the first time, and I would not sleep till nurse had told me all about you. She said your name is Sweet William—I think it is a lovely name—and that we are twin cousins. Are you not glad?" she asked, embracing him in her prettiest and friendliest way.

Sweet William did not say he was glad but he looked radiantly happy, and for some time could only sit and gaze at her in speechless wonderment.

"I am very glad," Constance went on, "for I never had a cousin before; and I have scolded Lasette shamefully for not telling me about you sooner. I have never had a little comrade like you, Cousin William—no one but Roncesvalles. He is dear and good, and I love him. But he can never be my cousin nor yet my twin cousin; for though he is so big and strong, I am a year older than he. And so Lasette said if I would be very good and not ask her a score of questions, but do as I was bidden, I might come to see you to-day; and I promised, for I wanted to know my cousin very much."

"And I too," said Sweet William earnestly. "Lasette must be a good nurse, just like Mathilde."

"Yes; and I love her too. Oh, I love a great many people, cousin—old Jacques, and Francis, and nurse, and Roncesvalles, and the old, old peasant who lives at the foot of the mount, and has lost all his little grandchildren, and who says I look like my sweet young mother. But most of all I love my dear father. You have never seen my father, have you, Sweet William? Oh, no; nurse said you had not. He is a mighty lord, and I am sure you would love him as I do; for he is your dear uncle, as you are my dear cousin."

"And why did he not come with you?" inquired Sweet William.

"Oh, he is far away now in the great wars, fighting for his king. Had I only been a lad like you, cousin, I might have gone with him sometimes," added Constance with a little sigh.

"And will he return soon, and shall I know him then?" asked Sweet William eagerly.

"No; not for a long while yet. Nurse says we must never speak of you to him. I do not know why, and that is one of the questions I may not ask. But some day we shall surprise my lord, as I was surprised, and show him the little boy in the tower, and then we shall all be so happy. But this is all a secret. Have you ever had a secret, Cousin William?"

"Truly, I think never," answered Sweet William, with a puzzled look.

"Nor I, until now," rejoined my lady. "Nurse said to me, 'Constance, can you keep a secret?' and I said, 'Yes, nurse, if it is not made of sweet stuff—I love comfits too well to keep them long, you know.' Here are some I saved for Roncesvalles; he is very fond of sweets, but I will give them to you instead. Then she told me

all this—that my little cousin had lived in a Great Tower since he was a babe, and that no one ever saw him save his nurse and Guilbert the keeper; not even my lord. And she said he was a sweet and lovely child, never fretting naughtily like a little maid she once knew whose name was Constance. Then she wept a little when I was not looking, and said, talking to her needlework more than to me, that 'Oh, it was a thousand pities!' Then I was very angry—I am a wicked child sometimes, Sweet William—and I scolded dreadfully, saying I would straightway take you from the tower, as I did the poor captives. But nurse wept all the more—she always does when I am wicked—and said I would make you very unhappy if I did, and bring great trouble upon her. I fancied you must be wretched in a dungeon and would wish to leave it. But this is not at all like the gloomy prison where I saw the two noblemen. It was a dreadfully cold, dark place, and very strange to them, I should think, for they had never been in a prison before."

"But this is not a prison, surely, dear cousin?" said the little boy questioningly. "I think it is a pleasant place, and have never wished to leave it."

"And are you quite happy here, Sweet William?"

"Yes, quite; but I shall be more so if you will come to see me often. We have great games, Guilbert and I together; and nurse teaches me so many nice things, and at twilight we sing together, and in the evening Guilbert tells the longest story of the times when he was young. Oh, you should hear some of them, cousin!"

"I will surely come every day. Indeed, Sweet William, I like your nurse Mathilde greatly. Her cap is a little queer, and different from Lasette's," she whispered confidentially, "but she has the same good face. And Guilbert must be a truly good friend," she added, as she studied the old keeper attentively; for she had never seen any one just like him, she thought. His eyes were so very sharp and bright, though his hair was as white as snow; and there was a smile of good nature in every wrinkle of his face. Then he looked so short and fat, with his wide ruff around his short neck, and his wide trousers caught in at the knees, and his quaint shoes with their great buckles and long pointed toes, that her little ladyship thought him the drollest creature she had ever seen.

(To be Continued.)



"The Morning Sunshine, come to see Sweet William."