

The Bloomfield Times.

FRANK MORTIMER,
Editor and Proprietor.

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The Stolen Sovereigns.

AN ENGLISH STORY.

WHEN I was sixteen years of age, I was sent for a couple of years' superior polishing, to an establishment for young ladies, kept by a very distinguished lady whom I will call Mrs. Furnival.

Mrs. Furnival prided herself on receiving pupils of the first-class only, and of educating them in such first-rate style as to render them polished ornaments of the most fashionable drawing-rooms on passing from her school-rooms. The horror of her life was not ignorance, but *gaucherie*; the object of all her teaching not so much wisdom as elegance. To be awkward or vulgar was, in Mrs. Furnival's eyes, almost criminal.

We naturally took kindly to life at Maldon Lodge, and I think there were none who looked forward with any eagerness to the time of leaving school.

A rebel, however, found her way into the orderly ranks of Mrs. Furnival's young ladies—a daring little rebel of seventeen, fresh from the wilds of Australia, the daughter of some distinguished person out there, and the heiress, we were told, of an almost fabulous fortune.

I remember her well, in spite of this lapse of years: I remember vividly every feature of her beautiful young face, I seem to see her before me again, with the ever-changing light in her glorious wild eyes, the rose-color coming and going on her delicate cheeks, the sunlight losing itself in the rich red gold of her wavy hair. To look at her springing about in her daring disregard of all rule, grace in every movement; to listen to her sweet fresh voice singing in the very luxuriance of gay-heartedness, who would have guessed the miserable future, or the doom hanging over her?

And yet, with all her airy loveliness, all her wild sweet grace, Myra Richardson won few hearts. She was my room-mate, and I was certainly the most affectionately-disposed toward her; nevertheless I never reached the point of loving her—I never felt my heart thoroughly warm toward her. There was something uncanny in her wild eyes, something that repulsed me in the tones of her voice, even in her quietest and most affectionate mood. Amongst the rest of the girls she was regarded with a mixed feeling of jealousy and wonder; jealousy of her wild beauty, wonder at her wild ways.

It was a bright soft evening in early June—a Saturday, I recollect, for both Myra Richardson and myself had been spending

the afternoon with my cousin, and we were sitting in Mrs. Furnival's library, where we had gone, as was customary, to report ourselves to the principal on our return, when the doors were opened quickly, and the head-teacher entered.

"Where is Mrs. Furnival?" she demanded, sharply, and closing the door carefully behind her.

"We are waiting for her now," I answered, surprised at her abruptness, for Miss Morton was one of the slowest and most apathetic of creatures. "Is anything the matter?"

"Matter!" she repeated, in an unusually sharp tone. "Only that the house has been robbed, and most mysteriously so, within the last hour."

"Robbed! What in broad daylight? Impossible!" I exclaimed.

"If the principal had only been at home!" continued the teacher in the same anxious tone; "but now, of course, I am responsible. I was sitting in the room, too, but an hour ago, correcting the first-class themes, and everything was quiet enough. I can't imagine how it happened."

Before I could begin questioning the poor lady so as to understand what had happened, and how, the door opened, and in came Mrs. Furnival, and accompanied by the inspector of police, whom, to her astonishment, she had met on entering the house.

The calm manner and precise questions of the official soon drew a comprehensible statement of facts from the not too clear-headed Miss Morton.

This was the story: Mrs. Furnival had the habit of drawing, on the Saturday morning, sufficient cash to pay the rather heavy weekly bills. This cash, amounting to over thirty pounds, she invariably deposited in the drawer of an old-fashioned escritoire standing in her own private room; and the key of this drawer she wore attached to her watchguard, as the money remained from the Saturday till the Monday morning, when she paid it out regularly.

Miss Morton declared that she had seen her put the money in the drawer as usual, lock it, and take the key; she had noticed it particularly, because the whole sum happened to be in very bright gold sovereigns, and it almost filled the small drawer. Miss Morton had then gone to the study, occupying herself with her usual duties, until about six o'clock, when the principal still being absent, she had availed herself of her privilege to see her room; and thither she had gone, and remained till she quitted it to head the tea-table. On her return she found the room exactly as she left it, and it was only by a mere chance that on passing the escritoire she saw the important drawer open and the money gone. The lock had not been tampered with; there was no sign of any one having entered the room; but every one of the golden sovereigns was gone.

Mrs. Furnival, on her part, said she had certainly locked up thirty-four pounds, and taken the key, which had remained safely in her possession all day, and that she had not entered the room since.

The lock was very peculiar. It would have been easier to break it than unlock it with any key but its own. It was, however, quite right, and the key turned in it easily as ever.

Inspector S. examined lock, drawer, and room with great minuteness and official silence; then he examined the window beneath, then the servants, and finally the young ladies, with the exception of Myra Richardson and myself who had been out all day; but, in spite of his acuteness, he could find no clue to the robber.

He came back to Mrs. Furnival's boudoir before he left; and I heard him say in a low tone as he took his leave—"It is some one in the house, I am certain, or who at any rate, has an accomplice in the house. However, I daresay we shall ferret them out."

Mrs. Furnival dismissed him graciously; but his last words did not tend to smooth

the anxious ruffle that had been gathering on her face ever since the investigation of the officer tended only to increase the mystery.

I had been so engrossed with the thing itself that I had paid little attention to any one but the chief actors in it; so when I happened to go back to the library, to fetch the bonnet I had hastily thrown there, I was surprised to find Myra Richardson sitting in exactly the same attitude in which I had left her nearly an hour ago. She did not move even when I entered.

"Are you asleep Myra?" I exclaimed, flashing the candle across her face; and then I saw that it was ghostly white, though her beautiful eyes were shining like stars.

"Were you frightened?" I said, again holding the candle in front of her.

"I am very thankful we were out of the house," she answered, slowly, and apparently with an effort; for her lips trembled.

"You absurd child! Why, who would have suspected us? We are ladies."

"True," she said, softly; "but—" And then she rose and gathered her shawl round her as if she was very cold, and hurried out of the room.

A week and then a fortnight passed, and still no clue to the robber had been found neither had the police been able to throw suspicion on any servants in or about the house.

On the second Sunday after the robbery, I happened to walk home with Mrs. Furnival from evening service. I was a favorite of hers, and as we entered the grounds, she put her arm through mine, and, slackening her pace said—"It is a lovely evening, Ethel; let us have a turn round the rose-garden."

As we entered the beautiful little enclosure, where the rich odor of roses of all kinds came almost oppressively on the evening air, she said suddenly—"Ethel, I want to tell you a secret; you are the only girl I would trust. I have been robbed again."

I started with almost a scream.

"Hush!" said the principal; "hush! I must have this kept secret."

"Robbed again!" I repeated. "When?"

"Last night. Listen quietly. I did not put the money in the escritoire till ten o'clock in the evening, thinking it safe in my pocket; but being in a hurry, and tired, and never sleeping with money in my bedroom, I put it in the usual place. This morning, on going to take it out before going to church, I found the drawer empty, unlocked as before."

"Incomprehensible!"

"Some one has a key which opens the drawer, that is evident."

I was silent for a moment, perfectly dumb-founded by the intelligence. At length I said impetuously—"You must have us all searched, Mrs. Furnival; it is only just to the innocent."

"I can't Ethel," she replied quickly; "at least, not yet. I have told you this in confidence, remember. You must not betray my secret."

"But—"

At that instant, however, came the sound of a quick light step running along on the other side of the rose-hedge, and startled us both into silence. A very light step it was—light enough for only one pair of feet that we knew; and the next instant Myra Richardson ran by, looking neither to the right nor left, and with her head bent down in a peculiar fashion.

"Myra," whispered Mrs. Furnival. "What is she doing here? Why is she not with the others?"

"Shall I call to her?" I said.

"No, no, not for worlds!" answered the principal, in quite a pained tone; and then she took my arm again and began walking slowly back to the house.

A few of the girls were assembled in the supper-room as we entered, and among them was Myra, standing before the looking-glass decking her hair with lilies of the valley; and I must say I had never

seen a lovelier face than the glass reflected.

"Myra," said Mrs. Furnival, suddenly, "were you in the garden just now?"

"Yes; I went for these." And she came quickly, bringing a handful of lilies. "Are they not sweet?"

Mrs. Furnival looking earnestly in her face. "I wish you would remember rules Myra, and be less childish."

We went next into that boudoir which was already in bad odor, and then, after Mrs. Furnival had carefully closed the door she sat down—just within reach of the last rays of summer twilight.

"I am suffering from horrible suspicion," she said. "Ethel, can you guess it?"

"No," I answered stoutly; and in truth I could not.

She looked in my face for a moment, and then, growing stern, said, "Was Myra Richardson with you all that Saturday?"

"Yes," I returned stiffly; for I was so confused that I scarcely knew whether she meant to imply suspicion of me or Myra by the question.

"Most mysterious," muttered Mrs. Furnival, leaning back in her chair wearily; "I—"

But at that moment Miss Morton knocked at the door, and I was obliged to go away; but it was in a very disturbed frame of mind.

All this was very perplexing and uncomfortable, and I became very miserable. Naturally I watched suspiciously my school-fellows, more especially Myra; but nothing could I discover which could at all help me to understand Mrs. Furnival's strange conversation. The girls were all looking forward to the breaking-up dance, and were much more occupied with toilet-matters than robberies; indeed, I doubted if any one of them but myself recollected the mysterious robbery at all.

There are some scenes that stamp themselves indelibly on the memory, why or wherefore we know not. I have been to many a gayer dance than that school-party, many a one I enjoyed more, and yet I think I remember that one more distinctly than any other.

I was just in the midst of a very animated conversation with one of my partners a tall young man whom I regarded with almost veneration as he rejoiced in the title of captain; when Mrs. Furnival touched me on the shoulder, and said, "Ethel, have you seen Myra?"

I turned sharply round.

"She was my *vis-a-vis* in the last set of lancers," I answered. "She can't be far off. Do you want her Mrs. Furnival?"

"No—that is, I do not see her in her room, and I do not want her to be wandering about in the grounds now the dew is falling heavily."

I knew the principal well enough to observe that she did not speak quite naturally; besides as she spoke she glanced again round the ball-room in a manner strangely anxious.

"I will go and see, if you like," I said. "I am not afraid of the dew; and if Myra is anywhere, she is sure to be in the rose garden."

I ran off as I spoke, wrapped my opera-coat round me. The night was clear but damp, and the starlight fell softly over the garden, making no unpleasant lounge for over-heated and imprudent dancers. There were but few, however, and those chiefly on the lawn just in front of the house, so I found the rose-garden quite silent and solitary.

I gave but one quick glance around, and was about to return to the ball-room and my interrupted conversation, when again that peculiarly light step, which had disturbed Mrs. Furnival and myself that Sunday evening, fell on my ear.

Before I saw her I knew it was Myra. She came along in the starlight, her satin dress glimmering in an almost ghostly fashion, and with her flower-wreathed head

again bent towards the ground. I do not know what prevented me calling to her, but I did not, I allowed her to pass on, whilst I stood watching her in silent wonder. And then a sudden impulse seized me whether impelled by some fate, or only actuated by the suspicions which had been so constantly sounded in my ears, I do not know; but instead of returning to the house, I passed out of the rose-garden, and ran quickly down to that part of the grounds where each of us girls were allowed to cultivate a piece of garden as she chose.

It was a long strip of ground, at the top of a high bank, at the bottom of which ran a small but tolerably deep river, not the safest perhaps that could have been selected for our gardening operations; but Mrs. Furnival was fanciful about her grounds, and superintended their cultivation herself with almost artistic taste.

Down this walk, lighted by the clear summer stars, I hastened till I came to Myra's garden.

It was easily distinguishable from the rest by the profusion of lilies of all sorts which grew there. They were her favorite flower; indeed, she had almost a passion for them, and would tend them with a devotion that made all of us laugh.

I looked eagerly round; what could have taken Myra to her garden at that hour? And then I stooped down and examined it carefully. But nothing remarkable appeared, nothing; and I was just about to give it up and go away, when it struck me some of the lily-roots looked more faded than others. I examined them, and only dimly in that light could I see that here and there one or two of them had apparently been freshly planted.

This looked strange, for it was not the time of year for transplanting, and then, as I touched one I found I could remove it easily, for it was only laid on the earth to look as if it was still growing.

Removing my white glove, I began digging up the soft mould with my hand, and then, not more than a few inches beneath the surface, I came against what I had expected. Yes, there in a little heap lay the golden sovereigns robbed from Mrs. Furnival's private drawer.

I shall never forget the shock of that moment. I got up in horror, as if I had come upon some poisonous serpent, and I exclaimed—"O heaven! O Myra, Myra!" in almost agony; and then, without giving myself time for reflection, I hastily covered the sovereigns again, replaced the roots and walked slowly back.

What should I do?

I was sorely perplexed; and as I walked back that short distance to the house, my imagination conjured up all sorts of horrors in the way of imprisonment and punishment this knowledge of mine would bring on my beautiful friend.

I went slowly back to the ball-room, but everything seemed changed; and when I saw Myra's form flying through the dance I could scarcely believe but that I was laboring under some horrible dream.

Mrs. Furnival came up to me, as I entered "What a time you have been, my dear! Miss Myra has re-appeared long ago."

"I know; I met her in the garden," I answered feebly.

"In the garden! She did not tell me that. Who was she with?"

"No one."

"She certainly is more extraordinary," and Mrs. Furnival again looked curiously round after Myra's beautiful face, and I turned away.

"No," I thought, "I can't tell yet—I can't in this scene; and there may be something—"

But I was very glad when that long evening was over. Never was I more thankful to see the guests depart one after the other and at length to stand saying good-night to my school-fellows.

They would remain talking over the