

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. Funival'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. Funival, 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 dare say 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 the exact 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 dumbfounded by the intelligence. At length I said impetuously—“You much 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 dancers." 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 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-cloak 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 the 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 party; but I pleaded headache, and got up to my room. To tell the truth, I was anxious to be there before Myra, for I wanted to think quietly as to what I should do. It was a horrible secret for a woman to be burdened with, and I could not decide what to do with it. I sat on my bed there thinking and still perplexed, gradually unfastening my ornaments and ball-dress, when Myra's step approached quietly, and in another instant she

entered.

“Then you are not in bed after all, Ethel,” she said throwing herself carelessly on the sofa, and beginning to tear-off her bracelets in her usual impatient fashion. “What have you been doing?”

“Thinking,” I said gravely.

“Thinking! and of what? What Captain Tayler was saying with such *empressment* as he took leave?”

“No, Myra, of something more—more” And then my courage failed me, and I could say no more; but hurriedly beginning to undress, I threw myself into bed and drew the curtains, to hide the view of that beautiful figure in white satin which still sat by the toilet-table.

Whether I went to sleep I know not; if I did my dreams must have been vivid as reality, for I was haunted by the strange secret I had discovered; and at length, sitting up in bed, I drew back the curtains. The moonlight was streaming into the room, and I could distinctly see the form of Myra lying with open eyes, her face turned toward the open window.

Some impulse seized me, whether good or bad I know not, but I sprang up, and crossed the room in my bare feet, knelt down by my school-fellow’s bed.

“Hush, Myra,” I said, laying my hand upon her arm; “don’t speak, don’t move. I want to tell you a secret.”

“A secret!” she said in a frightened voice.

“Yes; listen. Down under the lilies in your garden, Myra, lie all Mrs. Furnival’s sovereigns.”

It seemed as if I were sleeping in my sleep; but before me Myra’s figure rose slowly, and with a horror that was awfully life-like. I shall never forget her face; for a moment it worked till it was all distorted; then it calmed down.

“How did you find it out?” she said in a whisper.

“By chance,” I answered.

“When?”

“This evening.”

“And who have you told? Does Mrs. Furnival know.”

“Not yet.”

“And you will tell her?”

“Myra, I must.”

She sank back on her pillow and moaned; and I buried my face in the coverlid and began to cry quickly, for that moan was so horrible to hear.

“Why did you do it?” at length I said, clasping hold of the soft white fingers and holding them to my cheek. “O Myra, Myra! why did you do it?”

“I do not know,” she answered quickly; and then she turned away her face, and would not speak for all my questions and sobs.

She lay perfectly still, with the moonlight playing on her face, now and then she gasped quickly, and her hands were clenched, but other wise she seemed to bear the accusation more quietly far than I could make it. At length, however, she roused herself, and pushed back her auburn hair, pressed her hands tightly to her temples.

“You will tell them all tomorrow, I suppose, Ethel, and I shall be sent to prison?”

“I don’t think Mrs. Furnival will send you to prison.”

Again we were silent; and then she said, “Ethel, it is very hard to be burdened with the sins of one’s parents: this is a hard world, is it not?”

I had not found it so as yet; and answered faintly, “I do not know.”

Then she laid her hand on my head in a quaint old-fashioned manner, and said—“I am quite sane tonight, Ethel mind that. When I took that—that gold, I was not perhaps; but tonight I am. I keep my secret too—no one knows?” And then she lay back, covered herself up with the sheet, and turned away; and though I knelt by her for nearly an hour, she would say nothing more.

I sobbed a good deal quietly, and then I grew weary, for I was very young, and crept back to my own bed and there fell asleep. It was a long sleep too; for when I woke, the sun was shining in my eyes and it was four o’clock.

I raised myself from the pillow with a dim uneasy consciousness of something wretched having happened, and looked towards Myra’s bed. Was I still dreaming, or was the bed really empty? In an instant I was up and feeling with my hands to satisfy my eyes. Myra was gone!

I turned to the window; It was open!

I do not know how it was, but in a moment I seemed to understand what had happened, and to take in all the horrors of the reality. To put on my boots and dressing-gown was the work of a moment, and then climbing out of the window, I let myself fall on to the soft mould beneath. I knew I should see the print of small feet there. Then bare-headed and shivering in the cold morning air, I ran down the garden.

No idea of going to Mrs. Furnival, or alarming any one, entered my head. I went immediately to Myra's garden, and when I was there I turned from the flower-border to the bank, at the foot of which runs the river.

I shall never forget the scene of golden light white mist, and shiny water, that I there looked on. I seemed to note every detail, though I was looking for one object. But no; I could not see it. Thank heaven, it was—I was turning away thinking that, when my eyes happened to fall on the flags below me. There was something white at the verge—something like a human hand caught in the green weeds that grew so thickly just there.

I did not exclaim, I did not utter a sound; but I slid down the bank, and heedless of danger, entered the water.

Up to my knees, then up to the waist clinging desperately to the rushes; and then under the water, held down by the entangling weeds, I found what I sought.

Though with all my strength, I battled to bring her to land, I knew that she was dead—drowned. I knew that she succeeded, and then my misery burst silence and, winding my arms around the poor dead form, I uttered wild cries.

There was an inquest, a funeral, and then Myra Richardson disappeared from amongst us. The girl's strange death was talked of as a nine-day's wonder: "temporary, insanity," had been the verdict returned, and, for a time, all the odd ways of the poor child were talked of and commented on, and she was forgotten. That she was concerned in the mysterious robbery was never known; and no one but Mrs. Furnival ever heard the story of the stolen sovereigns from my lips.

It was not until months afterwards that I heard some details of Myra's history. It appears that she was the daughter of a wealthy Australian merchant, who had married a female convict, whose history was scarcely clearer than her daughter's. Though well-born and educated, Mrs. Richardson had been convicted of some theft and, in spite of the evidence that insanity was in the family, and had before exhibited itself under this form, was transported for seven years. At the end of the time, still retaining magnificent beauty, she had won the affections of a trader and married him. The secret of her mother's disgrace had been kept from Myra for some time; but, by some chance, she came to know it, and whether insanity was really already in the blood, or her vivacious nature was too strongly impressed with the story, was not known—but from that

time the wild-elfishness of character took possession of her, and her father terribly troubled, hoped to mend matters by change of scene and climate, resolved on sending her to England.

The wild Australian had probably made up her mind that her mother's evil fate should never be hers. Still, after all we can but surmise; for as her last words which sounded in mortal ears declared—no one knew her secret. It was hers and hers alone; and till she rises from her quiet forgotten grave, and tells out the sad story to One who will not judge her harshly, it will remain forever a mystery.

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