



A Child of Sorrow.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"Oh, how long it seems," said Maida, with an impatient sigh. "It must seem ages to Carrie, lying there in pain and counting the minutes, the hours. I do not think we have been separated so long before. My sister and I have been more than sisters, we have been all in all to each other—nearly always," she added, as she thought of Heroncourt who had indeed been all in all to her.

"We shall soon be there," said Robert, in a low voice; for as they entered the hut, approached the critical moment, when he should be forced to reveal himself to her in blackest colours as a common abductor, a trickster, and a fraud, his heart momentarily forsook him.

They came in sight of the hut and Maida, with excited exclamation, touched her horse with her heel. It bounded forward and Robert spurred beside her.

"Better dismount here," he said, as they came within a hundred yards of the hut. "I will go and prepare Carrie—it wouldn't do to give her a shock. Do you mind holding the horses?"

"No, no," said Maida; "but be quick, please, I am all in a fever to get to her."

He put the horses' bridles in her hand, stole a glance at her eager, rapt face, and strode to the hut. He found the Reverend Ronald Smythe asleep on a bundle of sheep-skins, and woke him roughly.

"Wake up!" he said. "Wake up and clear out. Get out through the window and go down into the valley. Come to me when I coo-ee. I shall want you to do the job for me that I engaged you for. Wake up, man!"

The Reverend Ronald Smythe rose to his feet, stretched himself elaborately, and yawned.

"Is it a baptism?" he asked.

"Baptism be hanged," replied Robert, roughly. "It's a marriage."

The tramp parson eyed Robert with sudden gravity.

"But that's something serious," he said.

"Marriage is always serious," retorted Robert, sententiously. "What's the matter with you? You don't object? Because, if so, your objections come too late. You'll do what I want, or I'll put a bullet through you. Do what I want, and I'll give you a ten-pound note. Do you understand? I'm Robert Broseley, a man of my word; a few words at that. A ten-pound note—I don't mind making it twenty; you clergy like to be highly paid."

Smythe considered for a moment, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"Where is the lady?" he asked, looking over Robert's shoulder.

"Never you mind the lady," said Robert, with suppressed anger and impatience. "You be on the spot when I call to you; and until I call, keep out of sight, mind, or I'll put a bullet through you. Get out of the window, sharp!"

"My dear young friend—" began the Reverend Ronald Smythe; but Robert motioned to wards the window and significantly fingered a revolver which he had concealed under his jumper.

"Get!" he said; and Smythe promptly insinuated himself through the window of the hut and disappeared. Robert looked round. It was a rough place for his bride. For cooking purposes, Mr. Smythe had made a fire; there was the heap of sheep-skins, a box containing tinned meats and condensed milk, with the usual supply of tea, without which your Australian considers life unfurnished. But no matter. Maida would soon listen to reason when she found herself completely in his power. He went to her where she was holding the horses.

"She is all right," he said. "I have prepared her. She is in no particular pain; but, of course, she is glad enough that you are here. Give me the horses."

He fastened their bridles to the solitary tree which stood near the hut; and, as he did so, Maida hurried forward and entered the hut. In the gloom, lightened only by the fire, she could distinguish nothing, but she went towards the pile of sheep-skins, saying, gently and encouragingly: "Carrie, I am come; I am here!"

There was no answer, she felt the sheep-skins with her hand, and, meeting nothing, no warm shape of Carrie, shrank back and looked round her with surprise, but, as yet, with no suspicion. She turned her head and saw Robert Broseley standing in the doorway; his tall, broad figure silhouetted against the waning light.

It was only for a moment that she saw him thus, for he closed the rough door, and, leaning his back against it, folded his arms and regarded her steadily. But, for all his outward calm, his heart was throbbing tumultuously. The man loved her to the best of his ability, with all the force of which he was capable; and not only loved her, but worshipped her with the reverence which his mad passion had overpassed, broken down, so to speak, but which was still there, a latent force.

"Where is Carrie?" she asked. "I do not see her. She cannot have left the hut, with a sprained ankle. Where is she? How dark it is!"

She went to the fire and raised the burning wood and looked round her; but the illuminating flame showed her no Carrie, and, with the stick with which she had stirred the fire still in her hand, she looked enquiringly at Robert Broseley. The fire-light played on her face and form, giving her a mystic charm which increased his passion. He drew himself up and extended a hand towards her, half in appeal, half in command.

"She is not here," he said.

"Not here?" echoed Maida, with surprise, but still with no fear or suspicion. "I thought you said that she was at the hut? She cannot have left it—with a sprained ankle."

Her eyes sought his with eager, anxious questioning. Her love for Carrie, for the sister whom she supposed to be in pain and perhaps in peril, absorbed her, to the exclusion of any other emotion.

"She is not here," said Robert; "she has not been here. We rode in another direction—she has not been near the hut—there is nothing the matter with her—she has not sprained her ankle."

"Not! Then why—why did you tell me so?"

"This is absurd, Mr. Robert," she said. "You cannot intend to keep me here, to prevent my going back to Milda Wolda. Please let me pass."

She took a step forward. He stood motionless with folded arms.

"You cannot go, you cannot pass," he said. "Don't you understand? You are in my power. Did you think that my love was so small a thing that it would die out because you said 'no'?"

You don't know me. I have never loved any woman before, I have never seen any woman worth caring for until I met you. I swear that to you. But when I saw you I knew what women meant, I knew what love was. You've taken up all my life, all my thoughts. I can't live without you. You thought that I had forgotten, that I had given up all thought of you because I was so quiet, because I seemed to take no notice of you. But I've been thinking of you all the time, I've been longing for you."

He took a step towards her and actually went down upon his knees, his big hands extended imploringly.

"Milda, listen to me. I love you, I want you to be my wife, I'll do all I can, all any man can, to make you happy. I can't live without you. Just say that you'll be my wife, that you'll try to love me, and I swear that you shall be happy; you shall have everything that a woman can desire—I am rich, I shall be richer; that house in England—you shall go there, you shall do what you please; I'll be your slave, just a dog to follow you, to obey your wish."

His voice broke and died away in a hoarse, inarticulate murmur.

Milda shrank from him until her back touched the log wall.

"You are mad," she said. "I am sorry—sorry! Remember—remember your mother—Oh, let me go! I will not say a word, I will tell no one. Let me go back to Milda Wolda. I will leave there in the morning, you shall never see me again. You will forget me—you will be sorry that you ever gave a thought—Oh, let me go!"

He rose to his feet and folded his arms again.

"It is you who are mad," he said. "Mad in your pride and coldness. You don't know what love is."

"Oh, do I not?" broke from her quivering lips as she thought of Heroncourt.

"You don't," he said, thickly. "You don't know what sort of a man I am. I have always had my way; I mean to have it now. Come, be sensible. What more do you want? I tell you I am rich. I can give you all you English women want. You shall do what you like, go where you please, when you are my wife. Be sensible. If Carrie were here she'd give you the same advice, say what I say."

"No, no! Oh, Carrie, Carrie!" exclaimed Milda, piteously.

Then she drew herself up and looked at him with sad reproach, with the dignity which womanhood can attain to so easily.

"I cannot give you what you ask," she said. "My heart is not mine. I have never told you—but my great sorrow—there is someone else—someone I can never forget."

The blood surged to his face which had been white up to this moment.

(To be Continued.)

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