



A Child of Sorrow.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

After waiting for another hour in increasing impatience, she concluded that some accident had happened to Robert—that his horse had slipped and thrown him—it did not seem likely; but it was the only thing she could think of; and, tying her bunch of flowers to her saddle, she mounted with some little difficulty and rode off in the direction of Milda Wolda. But at the spur of the valley she suddenly became uncertain as to the right way, and, as is usually the case, took the wrong one.

She rode on for some distance before she was struck by the unfamiliarity of the scenery, and she pulled up and looked about her with something like dismay, for she felt that she had lost her way. She sat looking about her helplessly for some minutes, then deciding that it would be better to go on than spend the night in the open, she continued her course, ignorant of the fact that she was going at right angles to Milda Wolda. The sun was sinking fast—darkness would soon be upon her; the road, too, was rugged and broken, and her horse seemed, for some reason or other, uneasy and unsettled in his mind. Carrie had plenty of pluck, but her dismay was beginning to grow large in proportions. If she did not return before Robert, Maida would be anxious and alarmed. This seemed the worst feature of the situation to Carrie.

Presently she sent up a shout which rolled across the plain in a weird, eerie fashion, but evoked no response; indeed, the silence began to weigh very heavily upon her spirits, and it was with a joyful bound of the heart that suddenly she heard, or fancied she heard, the sound of a horse's hoofs coming in her direction. She pulled up and listened intently, and heard the sound more distinctly; of course it was Robert coming in search of her. She called to him as loudly as she could, and, to her immense relief, was answered by a distant coo-ee.

It was repeated again, and much nearer to her, and she presently saw a horseman riding towards her at something like a hand-gallop. She spurred her own horse, and was surprised and startled to see that, though the approaching steed was Robert's, the man who rode it was a stranger.

Had anything happened to Robert? She thought this man as a messenger? She sent it best to pull up and wait.

Smythe, as he rode towards her, regarded her with as much surprise and doubt as she regarded him. The man was a ne'er-do-well; but he was not altogether bad, and, during the course of a more or less disreputable life, had contrived, Heaven knows how, to retain some of the instincts of a gentleman, as was proved by his refusal to do Robert's bidding. It was evident to him that Robert had some piece of villainy in hand, and he concluded that it was better for him to

clear out: after all, it was a less sin to steal a horse than to marry a woman against her will to such a man as Robert Broseley.

He raised his hat as he came up to Carrie and checked his horse close by her side, and Carrie scanned him with a natural anxiety; but something in the man's appearance—perhaps his quasi-clerical cut—reassured her, and she said, calmly enough:

"Good-evening. Can you tell me where I am?"

He looked at her with increased surprise, and Carrie made haste to add:

"I have lost my way; I want to get to Milda Wolda. Mr. Robert Broseley and I came out riding, and we have lost each other. You don't happen to have seen him?"

The Reverend Ronald Smythe eyed her with secret amazement: here was an unexpected thickening of the plot.

"I know Mr. Robert Broseley," he said, guardedly. "May I ask your name?"

"Carrie Carrington," replied Carrie. "My sister and I are staying at Milda Wolda."

"Ah, I understand then!" murmured Smythe, almost to himself. "How did you come to miss Mr. Broseley?"

"We dismounted; I went to gather some flowers, and when I came back Mr. Broseley was not there—I mean, not at the place where I had left him. I waited, rather foolishly, as I see now, thinking that he would come back, then I rode on and lost my way."

"There are no other young ladies at Milda Wolda?" asked Smythe.

"No. Why?" said Carrie, opening her eyes.

"Nothing—nothing," replied the Rev. Ronald Smythe.

But he saw the whole thing, for, though something of a knave, he was no fool; Robert Broseley had landed one sister in a lonely spot, and so got her out of the way, while he had lured the other to the hut.

"It is very fortunate I have met you," he said. "My name is Ronald Smythe—the Reverend Ronald Smythe."

He raised his hat again. "I have just seen Mr. Robert; in fact, I have just left him. He is at the shepherd's hut in the valley beyond here. Your sister is there—"

"My sister!" cried Carrie. "Oh, you are mistaken. I left her at Milda Wolda."

"I don't think I am mistaken," said Smythe, blandly. "She is at the hut with Mr. Robert. She has met with a slight accident, and I volunteered to ride over to Milda Wolda and inform you that it was only of a very insignificant character, and need cause you no alarm."

"But why is she there—why did Robert ride away and leave me?" Mr. Smythe shrugged his shoulders.

"I really cannot explain. I would suggest that she went out for a ride, rode in your direction, and was met by Mr. Robert. They may have lost their way, she may have had some reason for going to the hut—in fact, my dear young lady, I am quite unable to explain. But it is very certain that she is there."

"But you are not going the way to Milda Wolda," said Carrie.

The Reverend Ronald Smythe was equal to the occasion.

"Am I not?" he exclaimed, with an air of bland, child-like innocence. "Dear me! I am afraid that I, like you, have lost my way. However, no doubt I shall find it. This horse, as you no doubt observe, is Mr. Robert's. I shall let him have his head. I will ride over to Milda Wolda and tell them that you are quite safe. You, no doubt, will like to join your sister at the hut."

"Of course," assented Carrie.

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promptly. "I must go to her at once. I do hope she has not hurt herself much! It is very kind of you to take so much trouble; and we are very grateful to you, and I am sure Mr. Robert will be."

"No doubt," said Mr. Smythe, blandly. "You keep a straight course, and you will sight the hut in less than half an hour. I will not detain you. Will you please tell Mr. Robert that I am glad to be of some service to him?"

"Yes, yes; I will," said Carrie. "Please tell Mrs. Broseley that we are all safe."

She rode off, and the Reverend Ronald Smythe watched her reflectively. "Now, I wonder which is the way to Milda Wolda?" he said to himself, "because that is the way I don't want to go."

Carrie went on her road, and presently the darkness fell; but just before the shades descended she, fortunately, caught sight of the hut. She was very anxious about Maida and very puzzled as to why Maida had gone to the hut, and why Robert should have deserted her—Carrie—and joined Maida.

As she approached she saw in the semi-darkness a stalwart figure pacing up and down outside and presently recognised it as that of Robert. His pacing ceased and he stood, erect and alert, waiting her approach; and as she came up he sprang towards her.

"Carrie!" he exclaimed. "Why are you here—how did you come?"

He spoke in a hushed voice, so that Maida should not hear.

"Robert!" cried Carrie. "What does it all mean? Why did you leave me—why are you here—why is Maida here? I met a man, a clergyman, a man named Smythe. He told me that Maida and you were here; that Maida had met with an accident!"

Robert Broseley bit his lip and frowned up at her in anger and perplexity.

"The man was a fool!" he said. "There is no one here but myself. One of the runners came up while you were gathering flowers and told me that there was something wrong with the herd here. I rode off at once—I called to you to ride back to Milda Wolda; but I suppose you didn't hear me. I am sorry you've been frightened. You've lost your way, I suppose. That man Smythe is a fool. Why should Maida be here?"

Carrie sat on her horse and looked at him in the semi-darkness with amazement, disquietude, doubt.

"It is all a jumble, a mystery," she said. "I don't think you are very polite to have set a herd of cattle above me. What did the man mean, why should he tell me such a story about Maida? Besides, he was riding your horse."

Robert had hard work to suppress an oath.

"The man is nothing better than a horse-thief," he said. "He stole mine. I shall follow him up. You'd better get home as soon as possible. I'll ride with you as far as Milda Wolda, or near enough for you to find your way. I must get back here—I ought not to leave—the herd."

"Oh, well, be quick!" said Carrie. "I am fearfully hungry and dreadfully tired already. Couldn't I have a cup of coffee before I go?"

"No," he said almost roughly. "There's nothing in the hut—I sent it all away."

He ran to Maida's horse, unstrapped the saddle and flung it from her and jumped on the animal's back.

"Come on," he said. "There's no time to lose." Carrie pouted.

"I don't understand it at all," she said. "No; notwithstanding your explanation."

At that moment a faint cry arose from the hut. It sounded like a cry for help. Carrie reined up her horse, her

heart beating with a sudden fear, a vague dread.

"What was that?" she asked. "There is someone in the hut." Then she raised her voice, and, obeying a sudden impulse, cried:

"Maida! Maida!" "Carrie! Carrie!" came the response from the hut.

Carrie swung round upon Robert, her face white, her eyes flashing.

"Why, it's Maida!" she cried. "She is there in the hut. I know her voice. I cannot be mistaken. Let me go to her!"

She slipped from her saddle and sprang to the door. Robert also dismounted and stood looking at her, frowning heavily.

"Let me into her!" cried Carrie. "She is here. What are you doing with her? I will go to her!"

Robert considered for a moment, then he said:

"See here, Carrie. Maida is going to be my wife—that hound Smythe is going to marry us; I will find him and bring him back. I love Maida—you are not blind, you must have seen it. This was the only way. I mean to marry her in spite of everything. You go in and tell her so."

He unlocked the door and Carrie rushed in and caught Maida in her arms.

"Oh, Maida, Maida!" she exclaimed. "What does this mean? Why, why did you come here?"

"He said you were ill—that you wanted me!" panted Maida. "Oh, Carrie, I am so glad that you are here! I am not afraid now. I do not care for anything now."

Robert regarded the two girls under his knit brows. Then he turned to Carrie.

"Don't you understand?" he said; "I love your sister. I asked her to be my wife and she refused. That's not enough for me; it doesn't baulk me; I mean to have her. That hound you met was to have married us—he's a parson. You say he met you: then I can find him and bring him here. You can be a witness to the marriage. No; don't talk!" for Carrie had turned a face full of passionate indignation upon him. "There is no time for talk; I mean to have my way. Stay here, you two until I come back. You will find plenty of food, everything you want in the hut here. I shall bring him back in a few hours. Talk it over, think it over. Carrie—he stretched out his hands to her—"I'll do the right thing by your sister; I'll do the best to make her happy. Have her for my wife I must and will."

He swung out of the hut, locking the door behind him, and flinging himself upon Maida's horse, rode off in Smythe's trail.

(To be Continued.)

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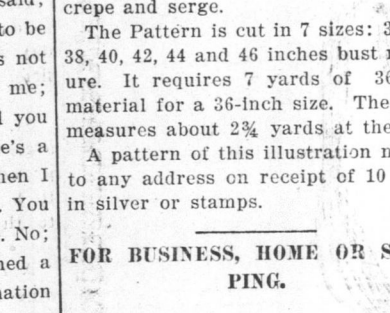


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