

SWEETHEART MINE.

(Continued.)

"Dray must have locked the stable and taken the key with him," he suggested, in rather a crest-fallen tone. "He seemed nervous about any one going near the animal, and I suppose thought it best to take this precaution. Perhaps Sir Harcourt gave him these orders; or Mr. Lyndoch may know about the key. If you do not mind the delay, Miss, I will make inquiries at once."

With an impetuous movement, Miriam stopped him.

"I do not wish to disturb either Sir Harcourt or Mr. Lyndoch," she said, her hopes sinking at the thought of this interruption. "If you are sure the horse is in the stall, force the lock. We can send somebody to mend it on our way, and there need be no further waste of time."

This morning Miriam's every order was a command, and although the man was conscious of a heavy misgiving as he contemplated the task before him, he shrank from again rousing her displeasure.

Dray was head-groom, looked up to by all others connected with the stables, and Drew felt some unwillingness in acting against his orders; not that Drew knew the temper of the horse; no one but Lionel Lyndoch had ridden him, and, after the groom had forced open the door, and saddled Warrior, he began to think the reports he had heard had been mostly exaggerated.

The horse was brought round to the foot of the steps quickly enough, with only an ugly show of the whites of his eyes and a laying back of the thin-veined ears to give warning of his restive temperament.

Miriam sprang slightly into the saddle and took the reins, her eyes shining with more than their usual brilliancy, as she thought how, in spite of Lyndoch's precautions, she had succeeded in getting possession of the horse.

The groom looked on admiringly. He knew Miriam to be a fearless and skilful rider, and the misgivings he had felt disappeared as he saw the perfect self-possession with which she arranged the bridle.

"All right," she called, motioning Drew to mount the grey standing in readiness. "Prepare to follow at a hard gallop."

The man touched his hat, and obeyed; then Miriam made an attempt to lead off.

Warrior stood quite still, his eyes rolling back, his lip curling away from the bit.

Gaining confidence with every moment, Miriam touched the glossy neck with her whip. The horse reared itself on its haunches, plunged back a few paces, and then again remained quiet.

Miriam pressed her lips firmly together, and, gathering the reins closer in her hands, prepared for victory.

"He shall go!" she muttered, between her teeth, unable to bear the humiliation of having to dismount, "I will not give in!"

Leaning well forward, she raised the whip, intending to bring it down sharply across the horse's ears.

At that moment a voice rang above the silence—one word, uttered with swift, stern command:—

"Stop!"

Miriam recognized the deep tones, and tightening the grip on the reins, touched the horse to escape. Too late. There was an iron hand on the bridle, and Lionel Lyndoch was in her path, his face deadly white, and great drops of moisture standing out on his brow.

"Come down, for God's sake!" he exclaimed, his voice broken with agitation. "Get clear of the brute before he bolts; another instant and it may be too late, you will be dashed to pieces!"

Miriam tried to wrench the bridle from his grip, her eyes burning darkly, her hands trembling with passion.

"Let go!" she said fiercely. "How dare you try to detain me!"

Lyndoch did not pay any heed to her words. Drew had dismounted, and, motioning him to hold Warrior's head, Lionel went to Miriam's side and tried to lift her from the saddle.

A mad fury took possession of Mollie as she looked into his calm, pale face. She was hardly conscious of her actions; she only knew that he was thwarting her at every turn, that his will was put incessantly against her's; and, as she met the look in his haggard eyes, her heart grew hard and pitiless, and, clutching her whip tightly, she dealt him a sharp, cruel blow across the brow.

He winced, and his face grew whiter, save for the livid mark upon his brow; but he only tightened his hold on Mollie, and, without uttering another word, lifted her to the ground.

"Leave the horse to me," he said, addressing Drew, after a dull pause. "I will put him back in his stall; and if Miss Denavon still wishes to ride, you had better see about getting her a fresh mount."

CHAPTER III. FOOTSTEPS.

Mollie did not want to ride; she was trembling from head to foot, and when Drew asked for fresh orders, she motioned him silently away.

What had she done? Of what horrible deed had she been guilty?

She saw Lyndoch walking towards the stables leading the horse, who, by this time, had grown furiously restive; yet she seemed to see nothing but the deep cruel scar, called up by her own blind passion, and a sick feeling came to her heart, making her giddy and faint.

The slender little whip had dropped from her hand, and lay at her feet, and all the unyielding light had died out from her eyes.

She had dealt him a fierce blow, had left a mark on his brow that must

remain there for many days, and still no word of complaint had passed his lips.

She turned, and went slowly towards the house, and then to her own room, there to pass the bitterest hour which had yet darkened her life.

"If only he had spoken—if only he had given back blow for blow!" she thought, uttering the words aloud, as she crouched near the window with her face hidden in the curtains. "How he must have despised me all the time, to have taken this last outrage so calmly."

This thought passed continually through her mind; and, alone in her own room, remembrance of the many insults she had heaped upon him brought a shamed flush to her face, and a strange bitterness came to her eyes, as she realized how much deeper had been the reproach in his look, when she had only wounded him with some callous word.

How gently he had borne with her; and now there was that deep, purple scar across his brow, which nothing could efface.

All that day Mollie was not visible.

Nobody knew exactly what had happened. There had been a quarrel between Mollie and Lionel Lyndoch over the new hunter; but even Stella, in her wildest conjectures, failed to arrive at any conclusion as to how the scene had terminated, and Drew maintained an obstinate silence on the matter.

Once Stella went upstairs and called through the keyhole of Mollie's door:

"Do come down, Mollie. Mr. Lyndoch has met with an accident, and you know you are almost as good as a doctor when anyone is hurt. He looks so dreadfully ill, and he won't give himself a bit of rest."

Mollie started, and moved slowly to the door.

"An accident?" she asked, bending forward to catch Stella's answer, without unfastening the lock, "How did it happen?"

"I don't know, he will not tell anyone, but he looks as if something had struck him over the eyes. Come down and see for yourself, Mollie—he might take some advice from you."

"No, no! leave me alone," came the stifled answer from within, and in the strained, hard tones Stella scarcely recognized Mollie's bright voice.

"She doesn't care a bit," Stella thought, as she turned away from the door and went downstairs. "If I had told her he was dead, I do not believe she would have even said she was sorry."

Yet, could she have seen Mollie after that brief conversation through the closed door, would she have understood anything of what was at work within the girl's breast?

Mollie had drawn the curtains over the window, to shut out the sunlight, and she passed the time crouched forward on a chair with her head bent down on her clasped hands, or pacing the room with rapid, feverish steps.

She seemed to hear and know everything that was going on within the house. Several times one of the maids had been despatched to ask her to go down stairs; Mollie's door was closed against everybody, and each time the same message was taken to Sir Harcourt:

"Miss Miriam has a severe headache and wishes to remain quiet. She would rather not be disturbed by having anything taken up to her."

The hours dragged on and Mollie was left in peace.

Peace! Was it not rather torment that she endured in this self-imposed confinement?

She seemed to have passed through an agony of suffering. All the rich, glowing colour had gone from her face, and dark shadows had gathered under her eyes—eyes shining with hot, restless lustre—with tearless, bitter pain.

Miss Wilmott had recovered from her illness sufficiently to be able to leave her room, and in the cool of the afternoon she went for a drive, accompanied by Stella and little Dora.

Lydia was idling away the time in a hammock under a shady tree, with a book, and a big leaf serving as a plate for some ripe cherries.

Mollie heard Lionel Lyndoch go into the large, dreary schoolroom, the long window of which opened immediately under her own; then there came to her the slow, even echo of unceasing footsteps—footsteps that paced to and fro—to and fro, until they seemed well nigh to drive her mad, and, with a moan, she pressed her brow to stop the throbbing of her temples.

The sun was sinking amid the golden clouds, when Mollie crept down into the schoolroom. She had changed her riding habit for a dress of some sombre, grey material, fitting softly to her beautiful figure.

"If I could, I would clothe myself in sackcloth and ashes," she had reflected, bitterly, while attiring herself in this dark-hued garb. "I have done with fine dresses and jewels—with vanity, and waywardness; he has not thought fit to punish, even to reproach me; but I will atone—I will bow my head into the very dust at his feet, and he shall know that through all he has been my master."

He did not see her as she entered the room, her grey dress mingled with shadows, already wrapping the alcoves in gloom, and she could only see his profile, outlined against the crimson sky, as he leaned against the window, gazing out at the sunset.

His brow was clouded, and his lips coldly set; but as he looked out abstractedly, his face softened, and brightened with a half smile, and with an unconscious movement, he passed his fingers lightly over the cruel mark above his eyes.

Mollie stood still, scarcely daring to breathe as she watched him.

The expression on his pale, impassioned face was new to her, and she wondered if he had forgotten the scene of the morning in some pleasant dream—if the clouds held some fairer vision for him than what lay away over the golden-tinged trees.

They were the dark, sweet eyes Stella loved that watched him then; but had Stella ever seen the look which was on Mollie's face as she went nearer, and laid one small, trembling hand upon his sleeve?—the hand