

HER ONLY SIN.

BERTHA M. CLAY.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued

"Burn the will!" she repeated, faintly. "You cannot mean that? How can I? I dare not." She was bewildered; no such idea had occurred to her. "Burn the will!" she said again. "O Lady Brandon! how can I?"

"You can do it easily enough if you wish, if you will," declared Lady Brandon. "Who knows of it except you and me? No one. Who knows the secret except you and me? No one. O Veronica! if you would be true to your promise true to your work, burn the will and forget it."

"But that would be to disobey the wishes of the dead," said Veronica. "It seems to me I am not my own mistress. My father's commands, his wishes, surely I must obey them; surely I must carry out all his plans!"

Lady Brandon stood before her erect, her face eloquent with the passion of her words.

"Veronica, make no scruples, raise no doubts. Are you capable of this great sacrifice for Katherine's sake, for her love's sake? It is much to ask, I know. Have you the generosity, the nobility, the grandeur of soul to make it? You said you would die for her, my fair haired darling. Would you give life yet without it?"

"I am bewildered," replied Veronica. "I do not know how to answer you."

"Come with me," said Lady Brandon. "Step lightly, Veronica, my darling is asleep. Come with me."

And the two ladies passed out of Veronica's pretty room together.

Lady Brandon led the way to Katherine's room; she opened the door gently and they entered together. Katherine had exhausted herself with weeping. Her father's death was the first trouble of her life, the first cloud that had ever darkened her sky, the first sorrow that had brought burning tears to her eyes. She had exhausted herself with weeping, and then she had thrown herself onto the pretty white bed and was sleeping the sleep of utter weariness. She was too exhausted for any sound to reach her now. Lady Brandon took Veronica's hand and led her to the bedside.

"Look," she said, "Veronica; see how innocent and helpless. Think how she has been loved and cherished. Do not throw her on the mercies of a cold world. Think of her life; do not blight it. Think of her love; do not take it from her. Veronica, if above this tender white breast you saw a sword hanging, you would not let it fall. If you saw a hand clutching a dagger and pointing it at that tender heart, you would thrust it aside. Look at her, Veronica, so unconscious of this tragedy. Will you wake her to tell her that you are going to take her inheritance, her fortune, her happiness—ah! even her love from her?"

Veronica turned away with a shudder.

"Come with me again," said Lady Brandon, and this time she led the way to the room where the dead statesman lay. She closed the door, and, holding Veronica's hand tightly clasped in her own, she led her to his side. "I have brought you into the presence of the dead. He who lies there called this sin of his a gilded sin. Veronica, he did not foresee, he could not know, the suffering and the sorrow that would fall upon us. O Veronica! is it just? Is it fair? Is it right? Why should this disgrace fall now upon me? Have I deserved it? Is it honorable that we should so suddenly be deprived of our own, our position, our inheritance, all that life holds most dear? Did you love him, Veronica—this dear dead father?"

"Yes," she answered. It seemed to Veronica that all power of speech had left her, that she could not utter the words that rose to her lips.

"You did love him; then spare him. You could do nothing so hurtful to his memory as to let this secret be known. All England reveres him now—all England does homage to him. He is numbered among the great ones of the nation. O Veronica, how they would denounce him, those who have loved him best, if they knew that in your truth he had left his wife and child to bear the brunt and burden of his concealment! They would blame where they have praised. You will take a hero for his pedestal. You will shadow a grand memory, detract from a fair fame, if you tell his secret. And you will gain—what? A fortune that you will never enjoy, an inheritance that will prove more of a curse than a blessing, an inheritance that will be almost a fraud. Veronica, burn that cruel will!"

"But others must know of it," she said.

"No," asserted Lady Brandon; "the lawyer who drew up that will is dead—dead I tell you. I remember that Sir Jasper went to a strange lawyer whose name was Matthews, and that some days afterward he said that a strange thing had happened. He had asked Matthews to attend to some little business for him, and a few days afterward he had died suddenly. I remember it so well. One never misses what one has never had, Veronica. You have never been considered or treated as the heir of Queen's Chace. You would not miss the distinction. But Katherine

has. Katherine has grown up with the thought; it has formed part of her life. My dear, I plead to you, I pray to you—burn that will. For Katherine's sake, by your love for her, by your promise to shield her, for your dead father's sake, to save his name from rude comment, to shield his memory from all stain of reproach, I, your father's widow—I, Katherine's mother—kneel to you—I beg of you to grant what I ask!" And Lady Brandon knelt before Veronica with outstretched hands.

Veronica rose, sublime in her emotion; a light that did not seem to be of this world shone on her face.

"For your dead father's sake, Veronica!" sobbed Lady Brandon.

"I will do it," she replied. "I will burn the will, and I will keep the secret till I die; and in death I will keep it still."

Lady Brandon rose and drew the girl to her father's side.

"Swear it here," she said; "lay your hands on his breast—above his heart here. Now swear to me that you will never take Katherine's inheritance from her; that you will never lay claim to it; that you will never betray the secret of your birth and parentage!"

Veronica swore it.

"Kiss his lips!" cried Lady Brandon; "they would open to bless you if they could."

Veronica kissed his lips.

"It will lie between us, father," she said, "this secret of ours."

Then she started up in alarm. The struggle had been too much for Lady Brandon; she had fallen to the ground. The servants who came to her help thought she was ill from grief, and they bore her with pitying words to her chamber, while Veronica went back to her room like one in a trance. Not for long had she been heiress of Queen's Chace, not for long had she called herself Veronica Brandon, Sir Jasper's daughter. All the nobler, higher, better part of her nature had been aroused by Lady Brandon's passionate appeal. She forgot in her enthusiasm all that the sacrifice would cost her. She remembered only that she was securing Katherine's happiness and saving her father's fair name.

She sat quite still and silent, while the birds sang outside her window, and the sunlight brightened the whole glad earth—how many hours she never knew. She reflected that her golden dream was over, that she would be Veronica di Cynthia now until she died. Then she roused herself. The will must be burned before she saw Lady Brandon again. She would not read it. That would simply renew her pain and could not benefit her. She must destroy it at once. She went to the box in which she had put it away, and took it out. She read, "The last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon, Baron of Hurstwood, etc." She kissed the name and her tears fell on it. How could she destroy it? Curiously, instead of being written on paper, it was written on thick parchment that she could neither tear nor cut. On this June day there was no fire anywhere. She could not go down to the servants' offices to burn it there, for she would be noticed, and harm might come of it. The only way was to have a fire made in her sitting-room and burn it there. The bell was answered by Clara Morton, a pretty girl whom Sir Jasper had advised her to take as her maid. She carefully placed the will out of sight and then, when the maid entered, she asked her to light a fire in her room.

"A fire," repeated Clara Morton—"a fire here miss?"

"Yes," said Veronica.

"But," objected the girl, "it is so warm—it is quite a hot day, miss. I am afraid the heat will be too much for you."

"There is no warmth here," said Veronica.

And the maid, seeing the shudder that made her young mistress's graceful figure tremble, thought perhaps she was really cold. Still it was a strange thing to ask for on a June day; and more than once, as Clara Morton lighted the fire she said to herself that it was unnatural, and that there must be some reason for it. Still she obeyed. But the fire would not light. Three or four times it went out, and each time Veronica had to ring again.

"How bent she is on it!" said the girl to herself. What can she want a fire for? There is something mysterious about it.

At last the fire burned brightly; and then Veronica fastened the door and took out the will again. She held it in her hands, looking first at the parchment roll and then at the flames. It seemed to her as though she held something living. Wealth, honor, fortune, position, the honor of a noble name—these would all perish with the document when she laid it on the flames. Should she destroy it? Was it not like taking the life of some living thing?

"I will do it," she said, "not by halves, but generously. I make this sacrifice and Heaven sees me. I make it to secure my sister's happiness and to save my father's memory. I make it with all my heart in return for their love for me, and I shall never regret it."

Then she parted the coals and placed the parchment between them. In a few moments there was a thick smoke, and, seeing no more of the parchment, she thought it was destroyed. She watched the thick smoke as it rose; what did it bear with it of hers?

There was some one at the door; who

could it be? She cried out, "Who is it?" And Clara Morton answered:

"I want you very particularly, if you please, Miss Di Cynthia." Veronica opened the door, and the girl looked wonderingly into her pale face.

"I have brought you a cup of tea, miss," she said; "I thought you wanted something." Her quick eye noted the heavy smoke in the fireplace; she withdrew without a word. In a few minutes she was back again. "Miss Di Cynthia," she cried, "I wish you would come to my lady's room; I have knocked at the door several times, and can get no answer. I am afraid there is something wrong."

And Veronica hastened away, not noticing that she had left the girl in the room behind her.

CHAPTER VIII.

"What could you mean, Clara?" said Veronica, when, some ten minutes afterward, she returned to her room. "Lady Brandon was not even asleep, and she says that you have never even touched the door."

"Is it all right, miss?" asked the girl as though she was in a state of breathless suspense.

"Right!" Yes, Lady Brandon never even heard you," said Veronica.

Clara answered that her ladyship must have been asleep but did not like to say so.

Veronica noticed that the girl's face was flushed and her manner strange, but she did not think much of it at the time. Presently Clara quitted the room, after saying a great deal more about the fright and relating an anecdote of a lady who she knew had been found dead of grief soon after her husband's death. Then Veronica wondered just a little that she should talk so much. As a rule, the girl was respectful and docile. Left alone again, Veronica would not think of what she had done; that was all forgotten, all past. She was Veronica di Cynthia—had never been anything else. She looked into the smoldering fire; the last vestige of the parchment had disappeared. The papers she had kept; they could not hurt, and she felt that she would like to look at them from time to time. She went back to Lady Brandon's room, and clasped her arms around her.

"I have burned it," she said—"it is all destroyed; and I am come to mention it for the last time—to tell you that you may trust me as you would yourself."

Lady Brandon fell weeping onto her neck, telling her that she was blessed, thrice blessed, for that she had saved herself and her child from what was far worse than the bitterness even of death.

"You may intrust your future to me, Veronica," said Lady Brandon. "I have two thousand a year of my own, and I will settle the half of it on you."

So the matter was never mentioned again by Veronica or her father's widow. The next day they buried him, and his place knew him no more. All England mourned for the dead statesman, and never wearied of praising him, while the mantle of his greatness fell upon Lord Wynleigh.

* * * * *

A year had passed since the death of Sir Jasper. Lady Brandon had spent it at Queen's Chace. Some had advised her to go away, to take her daughter abroad; but the Chace seemed to have an attraction for her. When the year which she had given to seclusion had passed, their first visitor was Lord Wynleigh. They were delighted to see him; it was such a bright, cheerful change. Lord Wynleigh was growing anxious now about the time of his probation. He had made Veronica his confidant.

"I know that I can trust you," he said, "because you love Kate so dearly. I have worked hard this last year and a half. I have made a position. I have laid the foundation of future fame and fortune. I grant that I have made no money, but that does not matter, Kate and I understand each other so well. She knows that if she had not one shilling in the world I would love her just the same—more, if possible; but we should have to wait for years. As it is, I do not see why we should not be married at Christmas. Do you, Veronica?"

How she thanked Heaven, in her heart, that she had done as she had—that she had sacrificed herself! If she had kept her inheritance, then Katherine could not have been married. Lord Wynleigh wondered at the light that came into the girl's beautiful face. How little Veronica dreamed at that moment of all that would come to pass before Christmas-time!

There had not been the least difficulty in the settlement of Sir Jasper's affairs; the will that he made when Katherine Brandon was an infant was still in the hands of the family solicitor; everything was perfectly straight-forward. Lady Brandon explained that she understood Miss Di Cynthia's affairs, and should continue to act as her guardian.

She had loyally kept her word, and had settled one thousand a year upon Veronica. She showed her gratitude to her in a hundred other ways; she was most kind to her; but the one subject was never mentioned between them again.

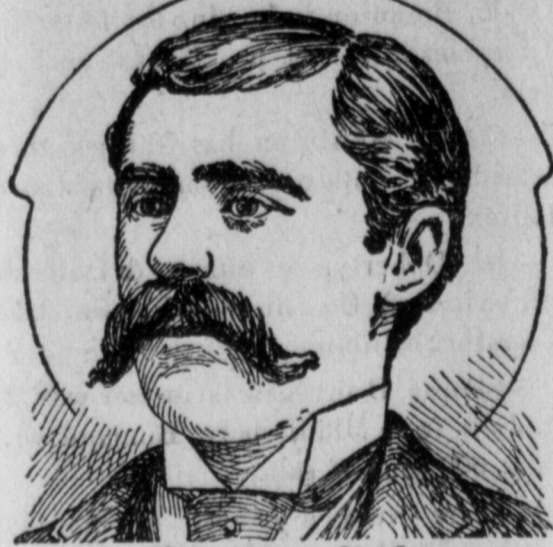
Sir Jasper's fair-haired daughter had become Baroness of Hurstwood; she was called Lady Katherine at home, and the

(Continued on Page 5.)

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