

HER ONLY SIN.

BERTHA M. CLAY.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

"Part," she repeated—"part—you and I?"

"Yes," he answered, coldly, "if it broke my heart a hundred times over. You do not suppose that I, a man of honor, could marry a woman who had deliberately destroyed the will of a dead man? I would not marry such a one even if the loss of her killed me."

"I never thought of that," she said, clasping her hands.

"I should imagine not," replied Sir Marc. "I could never look at you without remembering what you had done. I should be wretched, miserable. We must part."

"Part!" she repeated, faintly. "O Marc! I thought you loved me so."

"Loved you! I love you dearly, even now, despite what you have done; but marry you I cannot, Veronica. Your own conduct has parted us."

"You must not leave me, Marc," she said, holding out her arms to him. "You are more than my life; you must not go!"

"I could never trust you," he said, holding back her arms lest they should clasp his neck unawares. "There is no help for it, Veronica. Unless you can explain away this mystery, we must part. Think it over, and give me the answer yourself."

She stood quite silent before him, her white face drooping from the sunshine, her hands clasped in mortal pain. Was there any chance, any loop-hole of escape? Could anything absolve her from her solemn vow? No, there could be no release. It was for Katherine's sake, for her father's memory—the same urgent reasons that had influenced her before existed now. Were she to be induced to break her vow, Katherine would suffer tenfold. She would keep it.

"Must we part, Veronica?" he said; "we who have loved each other with so great a love,—must we part?"

"Unless you can trust me and let me keep silent," she replied.

"I cannot trust you; I can only say good-bye. Good-bye, Veronica. You have broken the heart of the man who has loved you as few have ever loved. Farewell!"

He did not touch her hand or kiss her face, or stop to utter one more word. Perhaps if he had done so, his strength would have failed him. He left her standing there in the sunshine, with the bitterness of death hanging over her.

He at once went in search of Lady Brandon. He found her in the pretty morning-room alone. She cried out when she saw his pale, set face.

"What is the matter, Sir Marc? What is wrong?"

"I want to speak to you, Lady Brandon," he said. "Veronica and I have had some unpleasant words. We have had a quarrel that can never be healed, and we have parted forever."

Lady Brandon held up her hands in dismay.

"Can it be possible, Sir Marc, that you have parted with Veronica? Why, she will break her heart! It must not be. Let me go to her; let me talk to her. If she has offended you, she will, I am sure, be very sorry; let me go to her. I know how she loves you, my poor Veronica."

"It is quite impossible," he said, hurriedly. "This quarrel can never be healed; even if Veronica wished it, I could not."

"You are angry, Sir Marc," asserted Lady Brandon; "and when your anger subsides, you will be sorry for this."

"I shall regret it all my life," he said; "no one knows that better than I do. There will never dawn another happy day for me. Lady Brandon, I am a lost, a ruined man."

"You will think better of it," she told him. "How could you quarrel with Veronica? I know no one like her; she is so good, so tender of heart, so true so loyal."

"No more!" he cried, shuddering. "I can hear no more!"

"You must hear me," Lady Brandon persisted. "I cannot have Veronica sacrificed to a mere fit of temper."

"It is worse than that," he declared.

"Have you thought what the world will say, Sir Marc? Her wedding-dress is ordered—the *trousseau* is prepared. Everything is being put in a state of readiness for the wedding. What am I to say?"

"There is nothing to say," he replied, gloomily, "except that Veronica has dismissed me. I will take all the blame, all the shame, all the disgrace. But, Lady Brandon, there is one thing I should like to ask of you. Do not talk to her about our disagreement. Do not ask her any questions. That which we have quarrelled about lies between us a dead secret. Promise me that you will not ask her any questions; it will only distress her and do no good."

"But, Sir Marc, will you not trust me and tell me something, at least?"

"No," he replied. "You have been very kind to me, Lady Brandon; let me say good-bye to you, and thank you heartily for all your goodness to me."

"You will surely stay and see Katherine?" cried Lady Brandon.

"No. Tell her that I had not the

courage to stay and see her, but that I hoped she would be kind to Veronica."

Then Lady Brandon broke down and wept passionate tears.

"You will break Veronica's heart," she cried; "you should not leave her."

"Heaven bless you for a kind-hearted, generous woman!" he said, bending down to kiss her hand. "I wish all women were like you. I shall go at once. You will see that all belonging to me is sent after me, Lady Brandon?"

But she only sobbed that he should not leave Veronica.

"Go to her," he said; "and, Lady Brandon, while you comfort her, do not speak to her of me." The next moment he was gone.

She was almost too bewildered to know how to act.

"I would give much to know what the quarrel has been about," she said to herself; "but I suppose I shall never learn." And then she went to Veronica's room.

The unhappy girl had fallen where her lover had left her, and lay like one dead on the floor. Lady Brandon raised her; she tried to bring back consciousness to her; and then she thought to herself, "If she really loves him so well, and they parted forever, it would be more merciful to let her die."

CHAPTER X.

Crushing the green leaves and the blossoms under his feet, trampling down the smiling flowers, beating aside the trailing sprays, his heart beating, his brain on fire, Sir Marc hastened across the park. It seemed to him that the whole world had suddenly crumbled to ruins. He muttered bitter, terrible words to himself. If the stars had fallen from heaven, it would have surprised him less than the fact that Veronica had done wrong—his ideal, the one pure, noble, gentle soul in whom he had placed all his trust. All that was beautiful, poetical, maidenly, charming seemed to be vested in her; and now his ideal had been rudely destroyed.

"I will never believe in any human being again while I live," he said to himself; "never!" So fair, so beautiful, so loving, so tender, yet so lost to all sense of what is right! I will never look again at woman's face!"

He reached the railway station at Hurstwood, and there, half hidden by a long black veil, he saw Clara Morton. She rose as he came up to her.

"It is well," he said, "that you are a woman; if you were a man, I would horsewhip you!" There was such fierce, hot anger in his eyes that she shrank back.

"You need not fear," he added, scornfully. "Give me your proofs, name the price, and then never let your shadow fall across my path again."

Dealing with a man was different from frightening a delicate, refined girl, Clara Morton found. She began a whole string of excuses.

"Not one word," he said. "Simply repeat the story. Let me hear all the details, and then give me your proofs and name your price."

"She told him the story, and then added:

"My proofs are the charred remains of the parchment that I took from the fire, on which you will see plainly these words: 'Last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon.'"

"What do you want for it?" he asked, contemptuously.

"It is not for myself, Sir Marc; it is not, indeed. I want five hundred pounds."

"You are modest in your demands, certainly, and you have ruined—But why should I waste words on such as you? If I give you the sum you name, you must not only surrender what you are pleased to call your proofs, but you must take an oath to keep the secret and leave England. If you return—listen to my threat—if you dare to return or address by letter that hapless lady, I will have you indicted for conspiracy, and your sentence will probably be hard labor for life. As to your conduct, it is so utterly, horribly base, I have not the patience to speak of it."

The woman murmured some words. He did not even listen to them.

"I have no wish to hear more," he said. "I will give you a check for five hundred pounds on condition that you give me your proofs and take the required oath. Tremble if you dare to break it; tremble if your false, wicked face is seen here again!"

He took out his check-book, and, going into one of the station-offices, made out a check for the sum named. On returning, he placed it quietly in her hands, and she gave him the packet containing the charred fragments of the will, and took the oath upon which he had insisted. Silently he pointed to the great open gates, and she passed out of them. They never met again.

Then Sir Marc went away to London. What to do with himself he could not tell. He felt that it was impossible for him to take up the broken thread of his life. In the first hot, angry flush of his disappointment he had not realized what life without Veronica would be. Now that it stretched out before him in all its chill, terrible reality, he was at a loss how to endure it. There were times even when he almost wished that he had forgiven her. Then he recoiled from the thought. How could he love a woman to whom the word "honor" was an empty sound!

Sir Marc was most unhappy. He read with a stony face all the paragraphs which said that there was no foundation for the rumor of the approaching marriage of Sir Marc Caryll; that he was going abroad. He made no complaint—no moan; but he owned to himself that his life was ended. He would close Werwehust Manor, and spent the remainder of his days where nothing could remind him of the love he had lost. There was to be no angel in the house for him. He knew that he must love Veronica until he died; that no one else could ever take her place; that no one else could ever be to him what she had been.

He had freed Veronica from her bondage; of that he was pleased to think. No one could frighten her now. She was quite safe, and the terrible secret was dead and buried. He locked away the charred fragments; he did not destroy them; he could never tell why; and that one simple proceeding altered the whole destiny of his life. Had there been a fire in his room when he reached home, he would have tossed the little packet into the flames; as it was, the door of his iron safe was open, and he flung the packet into it.

Then he set about making arrangements for going abroad; but he found that it would be impossible; that he could not leave England until after Christmas without neglecting duties that his conscience would not allow him to neglect.

He said to himself that he must be content. There was no help for it. He must shut himself up in the old Manor-house, where Veronica's sweet face would never shine.

So the time wore away; he bore patiently all comments and remarks. It was supposed by the world in general that he had been dismissed by Miss Di Cynthia; no one had even an inkling of the truth. Two days before Christmas day all his arrangements were made and he was ready to sail. He bethought himself then that it would only be right to destroy the charred fragments of the will, for if they fell into other hands there would be danger.

One wild day in December, when the wind was wailing and roaring round the house, he went to the safe and took from it the little parcel. With some curiosity he went to the window to examine the charred fragments; quite distinctly he saw the words: "The last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon."

He took it to the window, and as he examined it his face grew white, great dark shadows came into his eyes, and he cried:

"Great Heaven! How is it that I have never even thought of this before?"

CHAPTER XI.

Great had been the consternation at Queen's Chace when Lady Brandon, in a few curt words, said that Miss Di Cynthia's wedding was postponed indefinitely. The worst of it was there came no solution to the mystery—whether there had been a quarrel or not, no one could say. All that was known was that Sir Marc had left quite suddenly one day, and that two or three days afterward those interested had been told to cease all preparations for the wedding.

No one was more astonished than Katherine when her mother told her the news; and at first she refused to believe it.

"There is some mistake, mamma!" she cried. "I would more readily believe that Alton did not care for Veronica."

"Unfortunately there is no mistake," said Lady Brandon, sadly.

"I will go to her myself," said Katherine, impulsively.

"It is useless, Katherine," returned Lady Brandon. "She will only be more miserable than ever."

But Katherine would not be controlled. She hastened up to Veronica's room and found her favorite standing by the window.

"My darling, you have been ill!" she cried. "Mamma says that you fainted."

Then she started, for Veronica had turned round to greet her, and the change that had come over her was so terrible that the young heiress was shocked. Veronica's face was pale and worn, the dark eyes were tearless, but there was in them a look of fathomless woe.

"Veronica," cried the girl, "it is true then! I can see from your face that it is true; there is no need to ask a question. You and Sir Marc have parted."

"Yes," she said, drearily, "we have parted, Katherine—not for an hour, a day a year, but forever."

"I will not believe it! What has come between you who loved each other so well?"

"I cannot tell you," replied Veronica, with a long, low sigh.

Her voice had in it a ring of weary despondency, her eyes were fixed with a strange, dazed expression, her hands were folded, and lay on her knees. She looked up at Katherine.

"Kate, give me one promise," she said—"just one. Tell me that you will never renew this subject. To renew it will be simply to give me bitter pain. Promise me that you will never do so."

Her face had such an imploring look that the young heiress could not resist.

"I do promise," she said, and then for one minute the dreary calmness of the beautiful face was broken.

"Kate, come and sit by me," she repeated.

(Continued on Page 5.)

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