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questioned; "let us talk of you, not of me; of your bright life, your happy love." She took the young heiress caressingly into her arms. "Come and tell me, dear, how happy you are; it will comfort me a little. You are the world to me—it will comfort me so much to hear that you are really happy; talk to me about it." It seemed to the lonely, desolate soul and the aching heart that there would be some little support, some little comfort, in hearing that her great sacrifice had not been in vain—in knowing that Katherine would gain from her, Veronica's, sorrow.

"It seems so selfish for me to talk of happiness while you are so sad, Veronica." "It will comfort me," she pleaded; "you do not know why, but it will comfort me."

"Then," said the young heiress, "I am happy, Veronica. My life is so bright, so beautiful, that I would not change it for any other life." She paused.

"Go on," requested Veronica.

"I am rich," said the young girl, "and I am like a child—I love my position—I love my grand, beautiful inheritance."

Then Veronica raised her head, and a faint smile came over her white, troubled face.

"You are quite sure of that," she questioned, eagerly—"quite sure?"

"Yes, indeed, I am," replied Katherine.

"No one could even guess how dearly I love the Chace."

"Now tell me about your love," said Veronica.

"What can I tell you, dear, save that my love and my life are one—that I have no thought, or wish, or desire, that does not begin and end in Alton. Now, what comforted you?"

"Yes, more than anything you could have said. You could have thought of nothing that would have comforted me one half so much. You will leave me now, Kate—I am better for your coming, dear—and when we meet again all will be forgotten except that we love each other."

It had not been in vain then; the sun of her life had set in darkness and gloom, but she had made one at least happy. So the past was mentioned no more. She tried to bear her life. She never complained. She was like a devoted daughter to Lady Brandon. She was the most loving of sisters to the young heiress. But day by day she grew more and more sad; she grew pale and thin; she began to hope that Heaven would take pity on her and let her die soon.

So the winter months came round, and at Christmas preparations were begun for the marriage of the young heiress. Lady Brandon had invited a large circle of guests, and one of them, not knowing of the recent contretemps, having just returned from Spain, spoke of Sir Marc Caryll, and said he was going to take up his residence abroad.

Veronica overheard it. She did not speak; the lovely face grew paler, and a mist of unshed tears dimmed the beautiful eyes; but soon afterwards she went to Lady Brandon's room, her marvellous self-control gone at last. She stood before her with a look that Lady Brandon never forgot.

"You must let me go away," she said, "I cannot remain here. I cannot bear it. You must let me go to Venice to die."

Then she wept as she had never wept in her life before, as one who had no hope—she wept until Lady Brandon was alarmed and she herself was exhausted. Then Lady Brandon said to her:

"You shall go; I will take you. You shall go to Venice or where you will; only wait—wait for my sake until the wedding is over."

So for the sake of the woman who had influenced her so strongly she waited, but it seemed to her and to everyone else that those days brought her nearer death.

CHAPTER XII.

Queen's Chace was unusually gay. Outside in the deep woods the snow lay thick and white, the evergreens stood out like huge sentinels, the dainty laurel-leaves held little nests of snow, the fir raised its head with a stately air, for King Christmas never came in without it.

Lord Alton had arrived, and was so engrossed with his fair young love that Lady Brandon had ceased to expect anything from him. He had been, like everyone else, alarmed when he saw Veronica.

Her pale, shadowy loveliness had startled him, and many of the whispered words between Katherine and himself were about her.

On that Christmas night, she looked more fragile and more beautiful than ever. She was sitting watching Katherine's bright face, flushed into greater brightness by her lover's words, when one of the footmen, coming to her, said in a mysterious undertone:

"You are wanted, Miss Di Cynthia."

"Wanted!" she repeated. "Where? Who wants me?"

"I cannot say, miss—some one who has a message for you; some one who is waiting for you in the library."

Veronica had some poor pensioners to whom, on this Christmas day, she had been most liberal; it was one of these come to thank her, no doubt.

She was surprised to find the room badly lighted. There was a ruddy glow of fire-light, and one lamp was burning dimly; but it was a large, long room, and the

other half of it was full of soft, dark shadow.

She entered and stood for some minutes in silent expectation; there was no sound no movement, and she never glanced to where the soft, dark shadows lay. The red firelight fell full upon her fragile beauty, on the slender figure and the white, wasted arms; on the beautiful, passionate, restless face, and the rubies that gleamed on her white throat. Presently from where the dark soft shadows lay came a sigh. She looked up.

"Who is that?" she demanded. "Is any one here—any one who wants to see me."

Then she stopped abruptly and stood rooted to the ground, a low cry on her lips and a pain as bitter as death in her heart. Surely a figure she knew was coming to her from out the soft, dark shadows! She held up her hands as though to ward off an evil presence, and then they fell by her side as she uttered a low, passionate cry.

It was he—she had made no mistake—it was Marc Caryll, the man she loved better than her life the man whose stern decision was killing her. They stood in the red glow of the fire-light, looking at each other; but she saw there was no sternness in his face now—nothing but passionate love, passionate pity, and blinding tears.

"My darling, my beautiful sweetheart, have I been the cause of this?" he said touching the wasted arms. "Have I been the cause of this, Veronica?"

"I thought I was never to speak to you again," she said faintly. "Are you sorry that you were quite so hard? Have you come to tell me so?"

"I have come to tell you that I was a madman—a blind madman!" he cried. "I hate myself so utterly for my folly, Veronica! My darling—my noble, generous darling, I know why you burned the will!"

"You cannot know why I destroyed it," she said. "Even the wicked woman who saw me burn it did not know the reason."

"She did not, but I do. Are you surprised? Veronica, see what this has told me."

He came nearer to her, and, taking a paper from his pocket, unfolded it; and then she saw the charred fragments of the will.

"Look on this side first," he said. "Here are the words, 'Last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon.' The woman read those."

She looked at them with curiosity, the words had cost her so dear. Then Sir Marc opened the parchment.

"Now look," he said, "at what is written here."

She bent over him and read:

"My beloved daughter, Veronica Brandon, hitherto known as Veronica di Cynthia!"

She cried out as she read the words. It seemed as though Heaven itself had cleared her.

"Those are the words that the woman did not read," he said. "They are clear to me. The moment my eyes fell upon them I understood it all. I know, just as well as if you told me, that Sir Jasper married your mother long years ago—in Venice, I should imagine—and that she died quite young, leaving you. Why he gave you up I cannot imagine, perhaps you will tell me; but it seems to me that he kept the fact of his marriage a profound secret—why, I cannot say. Then," he continued, "I believe that on his death-bed he gave you this will, leaving, as was right, his estates to you, his eldest daughter, and that you, in your generosity, your great self-sacrifice, rather than disinherit your sister, burned the will and never mentioned it. Is it so?"

"I cannot answer you," she said. "I will tell you why. I took an oath of silence, with my hand upon my dead father's heart." Then she stopped with a cry of dismay. She had betrayed herself!

"He was your father, then," said Sir Marc. "I knew it." He took her hand in his "sweetheart," he said, "my life has been a curse to me since I lost you. Forgive me—forgive my absurd folly, my miserable suspicions, my unjust thoughts. Give me the great treasure of your love again and I will promise on my part the most inviolable secrecy—I will never betray the secret of your birth or the secret of the will. I do not deserve such pardon but—"

The answer was certainly not given in words. There was silence in the room after that—silence full of happiness. How long had it lasted? Veronica started in alarm. Lady Brandon was standing near her with a most alarmed expression on her face.

"My dear Veronica," she was saying, "where are you? Who is that with you?"

She looked still more alarmed when Veronica raised her happy, tear-stained face, saying:

"Lady Brandon, this is Sir Marc. He has come back, and we are friends again."

"We are more than friends, Lady Brandon," broke in Sir Marc; "we are lovers, and I hope shall soon be husband and wife."

Then Lady Brandon went to seek for Katherine; and while she was gone, Veronica turned to her lover, saying:

"Marc, swear to me that you will never utter a single word to Lady Brandon about the will—that you will never betray to her your knowledge of my birth."

He promised; and that was the only secret Veronica kept from him—he did not know that Lady Brandon ever heard either of the marriage or the will.

"I knew it must be so," said the young heiress, as she stood holding a hand of each. "Mamma, their wedding must be on the same day as ours, and we will take Veronica to France until she grows quite strong again."

And it was all carried out as she proposed.

THE END

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