

HER ONLY SIN.

BERTHA M. CLAY.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

Katherine was touched by the earnest passionate words.

"How much you think of kind words, Veronica!" she said, quietly.

"Ah! you do not know. I have been all my long, solitary life without them. For years I heard but one voice, and it never addressed me kindly. No one in all this world has ever been so utterly alone."

"It is all ended now," said Katherine; "you have us to love you."

"Yes, it is ended," returned Veronica.

"Do you know, Catherine, that I could not believe the world was fair or bright? It seemed to me impossible. I knew that the skies were blue, and that the light of the sun was all golden, but I did not understand the glory and the loveliness that seems common to you. Once, long ago, I found an old book of poems, and I read them. They were all about the beauty and passion and tenderness of life. I thought the man who wrote them—Alfieri—was mad; now I think there was some method in his madness. Do you know, Catherine—I like to give you the soft Italian name—that for long years I have never had but one thought, and that was how soon Heaven would let me die?"

Katherine caressed the dark, shining waves of hair.

"Such thoughts as those have brought all those mystic shadows into your eyes, Veronica; we must have no more of them," she said.

"Even my name," remarked the girl, "has a sad kind of music in it. And so you love me, Katherine? Tell me what to do for you, how to thank you, how to serve you. I will see with your eyes, I will hear with your ears. I shall go to sleep happy, I shall wake up happy, thinking to myself that some one deems me beautiful, and that some one loves me. You have brightened all my life for me by your goodness."

"I do not think it is goodness," said Katherine; "with me it is simply that I cannot help it."

"It might have been different," rejoined Veronica. "You might have been angry and vexed that a stranger should come into your home—the very heart of your home, as it were; you might have received me coolly, treated me unkindly, laughed at me even, because of my strange dress and strange manners; but you have been an angel of goodness to me. For that I will give you my life should you need it, my service always; my life if you will take it, my heart always."

"Do you know Katherine," she continued, "that once—oh! long ago—I was arranging an old wardrobe for my aunt, and I saw a little parcel of white paper? I opened it and inside it lay a long tress of shining golden hair so much like yours. I was almost frightened at it, for it seemed to twine round my fingers as though it were living. I took it to my aunt and showed it to her. She grew so angry. 'Whenever you see hair like that,' she said, 'always pray that England may be ruined by its own gold, by the greed of its sons and the folly of its daughters.' Her words came back to my mind now as I hold this golden hair in my hands."

"They were very horrible words, and your aunt must have been wicked to utter them. What harm had the English done her?"

"I cannot tell, but she hated them. She was angry that I wished to learn English, but I would. It was strange that when she hated it I should love it. I think England beautiful. Our Venice is perhaps one of the fairest spots on earth, but everything seems brighter and happier here."

"Papa," said Katherine, that same evening, "I fancy your ward, Veronica, has been very unhappy all her life."

"I hope not," he returned, quietly.

"I feel sure of it. I have been contrasting her lot with mine. How strange it is, papa, that in this world things are so unequal—some have so much, others so little! Veronica seems to me to have had nothing."

He made no reply, but he thought to himself that it was hard, seeing that they were children of one father. Later on he drew Katherine's golden head down and kissed her face.

"You will be kind to Veronica, my dear?" he said. "A joyless life is hard to bear."

And Katherine obeyed him, because it was impossible to know Veronica and not to love her.

CHAPTER IV.

Before two weeks had passed, Veronica was quite at home at Queen's Chace. Lady Brandon, who had at first been inclined to look upon the whole matter as a misfortune, now began to think otherwise. She thought to herself that the next season she would be more popular than ever. She would be the other of one of the fairest blondes and a champion of one of the most beautiful brunettes. She saw that the two girls would never be rivals, their style differed so greatly, and she began to take great interest in Veronica. She was so her husband and told him that she must take care to please her Veronica's wardrobe.

"It's all very well," said her ladyship, to look like a picture; but dressing like one is quite a different matter. Your ward must dress like other people, Sir Jasper. I suppose she can have what money she likes?"

"Certainly," replied Sir Jasper; "she is an heiress, I have told you. She must be treated as one;" and soon afterward he placed in her hand a check for three hundred pounds. "We can arrange later on," he added, "about her yearly allowance; at present purchase for her everything that she requires."

"Her wants are legion," said Lady Brandon; "she has literally nothing except a few picturesque old dresses that would look very nice in an old curiosity-shop."

Lady Brandon set to work at once. She knew too well the effect of dress to offer to transform Veronica into a fashionable English lady. Everything she purchased was made after some picturesque Venetian fashion, and Sir Jasper was pleased when he saw it.

"You have preserved the unities," he said to his wife, with one of those rare smiles that so altered the expression of his face.

As for Veronica herself, she could not understand such attention.

"All this for me!" she cried when she saw the lace, the silks, the velvets, the thousand little elegancies that made up a lady's toilet, fans and slippers, gloves and sunshades.

Then Sir Jasper brought her some superb jewels, a set of rubies that suited her dark complexion, a set of corals, and a set of diamonds. The girl raised a wondering face to his when he showed them to her.

"Why do you do all this for me?" she asked.

He looked down at her. She was looking at him with dead Giulia's love-lit eyes. "Why?" he repeated. "Because I am your guardian. You will know more some day."

She took his hand and kissed it in her strange, impulsive way.

"You are very good to me, and I am very grateful," she said.

But it seemed to him that Giulia's lips had touched him. He shrank back pale and trembling.

"Never do that again, child," he said—"never again."

She glanced at him quickly, not understanding. How should she?

"Have I vexed you?" she asked. "I am sorry, for you are so kind."

"You have not vexed me, Veronica," he said. "Why should you have done so? English people are unused to showing emotion—yours startled me. I am pleased that you like the jewels. I shall be glad to see you wear them when your black dresses are laid aside."

By the middle of December Veronica was quite at home. How she loved Katherine! There was something almost pathetic in the way in which she followed her about and waited upon her. She would have served her almost on her knees. She watched her every look, waited for every word. Lady Brandon was amused by it; Sir Jasper was pained.

She had been introduced to most of their friends and neighbors; the beautiful Venetian girl, whose face was a study, whose voice was like music, was admired by all who saw her. She went with Katherine to all the balls, the soirées, the parties, in the neighborhood, where they reigned as queens. There was no jealousy, no rivalry, between them. How could there be when Veronica worshiped her brilliant young sister?

So Christmas came, and it was, as usual kept up in right good English style at Queen's Chace. Every man, woman and child on the estate was the happier for its coming, and richer. Sir Jasper was most liberal. The friends he had invited came, and among them was Alton, Lord Wynleigh, who had decided not to leave Queen's Chace until he had won the hand of the heiress. He conquered after a few days' hard siege; the lovely, wilful girl had plighted her troth to him, and he knew that she would keep it sacred until death.

"Give me something else, Kate," he said. "A kiss from you is indeed a favor, but I want something more."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want your love, your promise to be my wife, your troth to-night. I want you, my darling, to be my own for ever and ever. What do you say?"

The sweet flushed face dropped before him; the blue eyes could not meet his own; the sweet lips opened, but he did not hear the faint whisper that came from them.

"Kate," he said, "what do you say?"

"You know, my darling, if I thought you did not love me, I would go away now from out of the light of your sweet presence, and I would—well, I should be worth nothing all the rest of my life. You see, Kate, you are a great heiress; that makes all the difference."

"What difference does it make?" she asked.

"Just this; that if you were not a great heiress, I would make you love me. I would clasp you in my arms and kiss you until you said 'yes'; but—"

"But what, Alton?"

"If I urged you too much, and begged and prayed of you as it is in my heart to pray, you might think I cared about your fortune; but I do not."

"I am sure you do not," she answered. "My darling," he said, drawing her nearer to him, "you must see that you shall

see that your trust is not in vain. Will you be my wife, Kate?"

The answer this time must have satisfied him, for he kissed the lips on which it trembled, murmuring words that were sweetest music to Katherine.

"I shall work for you, Kate," he said, "my Kate, the bonniest Kate in Christendom. I will not ask you to marry me until I have made a position worthy of your father's daughter. I have led a useless life, but it shall be useless no more. I will work for you. Men shall never say I married an heiress for her money."

Kate, your sweet love has made a man of me. To-morrow will be Christmas day, and in the morning I shall go to your father and tell him. Will he give you to me, Kate?"

"I hope so," she replied. "He would do anything to make me happy."

That was why Sir Jasper sat on Christmas morning as the gay bells were ringing, with saddened eyes and darkened face, while the great heart of the world beat high with joy. Lord Wynleigh had waited upon him to make his formal request for his daughter's hand. Sir Jasper listened kindly—he had a great liking for the gallant, handsome young lover.

"What am I to say to you, Wynleigh? My daughter has many suitors. I should like her to marry the one she loves best."

"That is myself, Sir Jasper," he replied proudly.

Sir Jasper smiled.

"You think so? Well there is one remark I must make. So far as regards 'worldly goods,' you are not the most eligible lover."

"Never mind that, Sir Jasper," said Lord Wynleigh. "I know it, and am going to remedy it. Do not imagine that I am saying to you: Give me your daughter now at once—my hands are empty, but she will fill them. It is not that. I say give me the hope of one day calling Katherine my wife, and I will set to work at once. I will make such a name that I shall not be ashamed to ask her to share it. Will you say 'Yes,' Sir Jasper?"

"You speak bravely. You are sure my daughter loves you?"

"Kate says so," the young man replied, "and she never speaks falsely."

"Then I give my consent," said Sir Jasper. "But Katherine is too young to marry yet. She must wait a year or two. The child is but just seventeen. Come back in two years' time to claim her if in the mean time you have made a position for yourself. I do not care that you should make money, but I do care for the other."

"I will do it, Sir Jasper," he replied, "and you will help me. I shall study under you—help with your influence. There is a borough vacant now. Help me to place my foot on the first round of the ladder, and I will never cease until I reach the top."

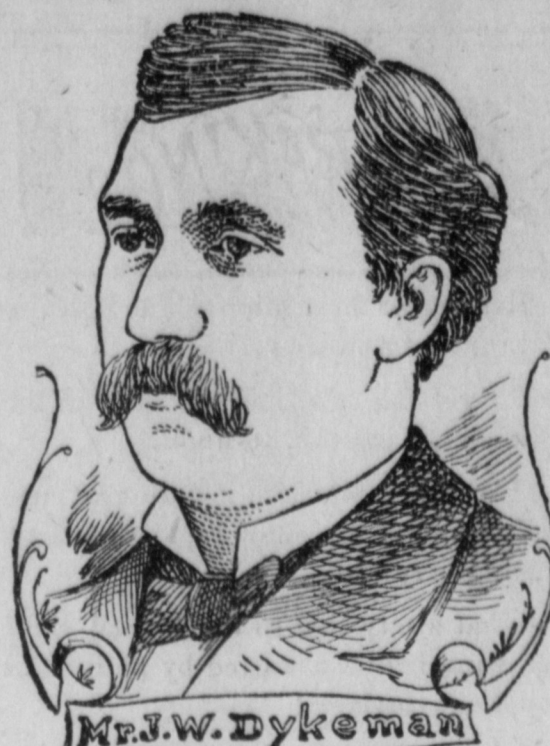
Long after Lord Wynleigh had left him, Sir Jasper sat silent and motionless, listening to the sound of the joy-bells, listening to the music and laughter which filled the old Chace. What was he to do? When the sanguine lover left him, dark and bitter thoughts came to him. He was an Englishman, with a hatred of all fraud and deceit. What could he do? He could never allow Lord Wynleigh to marry Kate under the impression that she was heiress to the grand domain of Queen's Chace and Hurstwood. She was not so in reality. All his broad lands belonged by right to his elder child, the beautiful, dark-eyed Veronica. Before Lord Wynleigh married Katherine, he must know the truth. Sir Jasper rose from his seat.

"I am a brave and strong man," he said; "but I would rather face death than tell my story now."

It seemed so far away to the middle-aged statesman, the story of his youth, the mad love that had altered his whole life. It would be profanation to him to hear Giulia's name mentioned now. He could imagine the sneers, the comments, that would follow. The Opposition Journals would be sure to get hold of it, and hold up to public ridicule the one treasured poem of his heart. He could not bear it. Come what might, he must keep his secret yet a little longer; and in the mean time he would have his will prepared—a will in which the truth should be told, and Queen's Chace, with all the broad lands round Hurstwood, given to his daughter Veronica. At the same time he would put all the papers that went to prove her identity into one packet, and give them to her. Why, because her mother was dead, should he rob her of her birthright? What could he do to atone to her for her long, cheerless youth? Her cold, joyless life? He could not defraud Giulia's child. If he could have divided the inheritance, all would have been well; but that was impossible. In the Brandon family, when there was no male heir, the eldest daughter succeeded to the barony to the title and estates; and there had been several baronesses. Therefore, the inheritance must go to his eldest daughter. That was Veronica.

What would those proud Valdoraines—the proudest people in England—say to him when they heard that Katherine was not his heiress after all? Katherine Brandon's name was known all over England. Sir Jasper was at a loss. His sense of justice and his love of right, his love and his pride, his honesty and his sensitive reserve were all at war. There

(Continued on Page 5.)



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