

HER ONLY SIN.

BERTHA M. CLAY.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

Yet Veronica saw that she had to summon all her courage, to make a most desperate effort. She looked up at her.

"You remember Sir Jasper's death, Miss Di Cynthia? You remember the day after it? Though it was a warm June day, you would have a fire in your room." Veronica started; her face grew white, a low cry came from her lips.

"Go on," she said to the girl, who had paused abruptly when she saw the change in her mistress's face.

"That very day, miss, I thought there was something wrong," she said. "Why should you want a fire when the June sun was shining so warmly? I said to myself that you had something to burn."

Another low cry came from Veronica. Morton continued:

"I—you will be very angry with me, Miss Di Cynthia—I watched you; I knelt down and looked through the key-hole. I saw distinctly a roll of parchment in your hands, and I saw you put it on the fire. I saw it begin to burn, and I was wild to know what it was. All at once I had an idea that you were destroying something that belonged to Sir Jasper, and was determined to know."

She paused, while the beautiful face gazing into hers grew deadly white.

"I invented an excuse to get you from the room, Miss Di Cynthia," she continued. "I told you that Lady Brandon had not answered a knock at her door. Then I took from the fire the charred remains of the parchment. I saw quite distinctly the words, 'Last will and testament of Sir Jasper Brandon, Miss Di Cynthia. It was but a charred fragment. I took it away with me; and now, Miss Di Cynthia, I accuse you of having burned Sir Jasper's will. You cannot deny it; I have the proofs.'"

Veronica stood like one turned to stone. She had lost all power of speech. The girl continued:

"I can form no idea why you did it—that does not concern me; perhaps it was for your own interest. They said in the servants' hall that Sir Jasper had left you money; perhaps the will you destroyed took it from you."

There was a flash as of fire from the dark eyes.

"I do not wish to do you any harm, miss. I have not mentioned what I saw to any one, and I never will; but you must give me five hundred pounds for keeping your secret. Give me that and I will promise, I will swear that no allusion to what I have seen shall ever pass my lips. Give me that and I will bring the charred fragment to you. I do not wish to harm you, but Providence has given me this chance and I must make the most of it. From that one moment I said to myself that I would keep your secret until I could use it. Give me five hundred pounds and I will be as faithful as death to you."

Then the power of speech came to Veronica.

"Even if I would condescend to bribe you," she said, "I could not; I have not five hundred pounds of my own money in the world."

"You have a rich lover," returned the girl, with a significant smile. "Sir Marc would give you anything in the world—his heart's blood if you needed it."

"Hush!" said Veronica, sternly. "I will not allow you to say such words."

"You may do what you like, miss, I shall keep to my work. 'If you give me five hundred pounds I will never reveal your secret, if not, I will betray it.'"

"What if I refuse?" said Veronica.

"Tell me the worst," in her heart she knew the worst must come; it was impossible for her to find five hundred pounds as it would have been to find five thousand.

"The worst that is, if I fail to get the money from you, I must try to find out who is the next most interested in the matter. There is one thing you cannot deny, Miss Di Cynthia—you burned the will." She paused with a sudden cry.

Unperceived by either, Sir Marc had entered through the open window, and stood with a horror-stricken face, listening to the last few terrible words.

With an air of terrible bewilderment he looked from one to the other. Veronica was white as death; the servant-girl insolent in the full triumph of her accusation, in the knowledge of her victory. Veronica looked round when she saw the sudden dawn of fear in the girl's eyes. She uttered no cry when she saw her lover, but a cold, terrible shudder seized her. He came to her and took her hand.

"What is the matter, Veronica? What does this insolent woman say? Why do you allow her to insult you?"

"Truth is no insult, Sir Marc," put in Morton.

"Say the word, and I will send for a policeman and will give her into custody. I heard a little of what has passed, and I see she is trying to extort money from you. Why not order her from the house?"

"Ah! why not?" cried Morton, insolently. "As you say, Sir Marc, why not?"

"I take the duty upon myself," he said, "I order you not only to quit the room but to quit the house. Lady Brandon will approve of what I have done when she hears of your conduct."

"I shall not leave the room, Sir Marc," she replied quietly, "until I have Miss Di Cynthia's answer. She knows what I want; let her say if she will give it to me."

"You know that I cannot," she answered.

Sir Marc looked at her in bewilderment.

"Surely you are not willing to compromise with this woman, Veronica? She must be punished; any attempt to extort money is a crime that the law punishes very severely. Do not speak to her, leave her to me."

Then he paused in bewildered wonder; there was something he did not understand—a shrinking fear in Veronica's face and an insolent triumph in the maid's.

Where was the indignation, the just anger, that she should feel? What could it mean? With a restless, uneasy gaze he looked from one to the other. The dark eyes of the woman he loved had never met his own.

"I heard what passed," he said. "I was bringing you these Gloire de Dijon roses, Veronica, and I heard this insolent woman say that you had burned a will, that you could not deny it. I know the meaning of that. She brings this false accusation against you, meaning to extort money from you, and you very properly refuse to give it to her. She ought to be sent to prison."

"Stop, Sir Marc," said the woman, angrily; "you speak too fast. Ask my mistress whether my charge against her is false or not."

"I will not insult Miss Di Cynthia by any such question," he replied.

"Then you are unjust," she said. "You accuse me of bringing a false charge; ask Miss Di Cynthia whether the charge is true or false—she will not deny it if you ask her."

Still there came no word from the white lips that were closed so strangely.

"I refuse to do any such thing," he returned.

"Again, Sir Marc, I say that you are unjust. I accuse Miss Di Cynthia of having in her own room, unknown to every one, and, as she thought, unseen by every one, wilfully burned Sir Jasper Brandon's last will and testament. More than that, I can prove that she did so. Now, Sir Marc, look from her to me—which of us looks guilty?"

He looked at Veronica as though half expecting an indignant denial. None came.

"Miss Di Cynthia," she continued, "tell Sir Marc, who accuses me of bringing a false charge, whether you destroyed that will or not."

Still there was no answer.

"I swear to heaven that I saw her do it, and that I have the proofs," cried the maid. "I should not speak so plainly before you, Sir Marc, but that hush-money will do from you as well as from her."

Then Veronica spoke; she went up to him, and, without looking at him, she said:

"Will you send that woman away, Marc? I shall die if she remains here. I will speak to you when she is gone."

It struck him with a pang more bitter than death that she had never once denied the charge.

"Go," he said to Morton, "leave Miss Di Cynthia's presence, and never dare to seek it again. Leave this house at once. If in an hour from now you are within these walls, nothing will save you from prison."

"And nothing will save Miss Di Cynthia from penal servitude," she rejoined.

The woman's persistence in her story astonished him, while Veronica's silence bewildered him. It could not be true—of course it was false; but it was evident from her silence that there was a mystery.

"Hush!" The white lips had opened again, and a voice that was unlike any he had ever heard came to him in the sunlit silence. "Do not drive her to extremes. Send her away."

Then Sir Marc, pointing to the door, said:

"Go! Leave the house; but wait for me at the railway station at Hurstwood, I will see you there."

The woman left the house, and he took Veronica in his arms.

"Sweetheart," he said, "what is this mystery? Why did you not deny that woman's outrageous charges? My Veronica burn a will! You cannot think how it has distressed me." He kissed the white, cold face, which looked as though neither warmth nor color could brighten it again; his heart was full of keen, intolerable pain. "There is some mystery, Veronica," he went on; "I can see that. Tell me what it is."

"I cannot," she said.

And the two simple words were more terrible to him than any others.

"At least, my darling," he pleaded, "tell me that it is not true. I cannot endure that you should remain silent under such a charge; unwomanly, almost—deny it. I ask no explanation of the mystery; my sweetheart shall be as free and unfettered as the wind that blows. But I do ask this; deny those horrible words."

Then she looked at him with the pallor of death on her face. She tried to speak lightly, but her lips trembled. She tried to smile, but the smile died away.

"What if I could not deny it, Marc?" His face flushed bodily.

"Great Heavens! Veronica," he cried, "do not just over such a subject as this—do not just about a crime! I could not have thought you capable of such light words."

"I am not jesting," she answered, faintly; "I never thought of doing so."

She saw his face grow stern and his eyes take a cold, hard expression.

"Veronica," he said, "answer me one question—it is your own fault that I have to ask it: Is that woman's charge true? She says that she holds proofs—is it true? Tell me—did you burn a will, or did you not? Answer me."

She knew that it would be useless to resist her fate even if she could lie—Morton would produce the charred fragments as evidence. She—Veronica—would not attempt to screen herself. He must think what he would.

"Did you destroy a will, Veronica?" he repeated. "Answer me—I shall go mad with suspense."

She raised her white face to his and spoke slowly:

"It is quite true," she said; "I did burn Sir Jasper Brandon's last will and testament; yet, listen, I would deny it if I could, but if that woman holds those fatal proofs, it is useless."

He drew back from her as though she had stabbed him.

"You do not mean it, I am sure," he said; "you cannot mean it; it would be too horrible. You are saying it to try my love—only for that—to try my faith, my darling; you could not have done it."

"Was it so great a crime?" she asked, simply.

"A crime!" he repeated. "The person who could even ask such a question must be dead to all sense of honor and shame. A crime! I should place it next to murder."

"I did not know it," she said softly.

"I never thought of that."

He looked at her in horror.

"Then you did it—you really and truly did it, Veronica?" he said.

"Yes, I did it, Marc," she replied, sadly.

"What was the reason? Why did you do it? What was your motive? Tell me, that I may understand."

"I cannot do that," she replied, sadly. "I can tell you no more than this: that I, of my own accord, burned that will."

"Great Heaven!" he cried, "it is incredible. Did any one else know?"

"I cannot tell you," she replied.

"Was any one else present?"

"No," she answered.

"Was the will you destroyed one against your own interests? Did it take money from you, or what?"

She raised her dark eyes in solemn wonder at the question.

"You must think what you will of my motives," she replied; "I cannot explain them to you."

"It is incredible!" he cried. "I could believe you and myself both mad before I could believe this. It is some foul trick, some horrible farce!"

"No," she replied; "it is the simple, terrible truth. I destroyed the will, but I did not know it was such a crime as you say."

"And if you had known—" he cried.

"I should have destroyed it just the same," she said.

"You swear it is true?" he said.

"I swear it," she replied.

They stood looking at each other, while the sunbeams fell between them and the birds sang on the roses outside the window.

Veronica was the first to break the terrible silence.

"Marc," she said, "you will not betray me?"

"No," he replied, slowly, "I will not betray you, lest the iron hand of law should grasp you. Great Heaven! how could you have done such a deed?"

She looked at him, with a shudder.

"Could I really be put in prison for it?" she said.

"Yes, if those whom you have defrauded chose to prosecute you." And then he wondered for a soft sweet light came over the white stillness of her face.

"I see," she said, slowly—"I understand."

"Veronica," he cried, "how callous you are! You seem to have no shame for the deed you have done."

She was asking herself what she should do—how she should make him understand; and then, with a great, sharp, bitter pang, the thought came to her that she could never make him understand—that she could never break her oath, the oath taken with her hands on her dead father's heart. He was looking at her with wistful eyes.

"You, Veronica," he said, "whom I thought of all women the most perfect, will you tell me why you did this? Will you give me some explanation of the mystery—any key by which I may solve it? Will you say one word that will lessen my misery?"

"I cannot," she replied. "I am bound in chains of iron—I cannot. I tell you this bare fact—I burned the will. You must trust me all in all or not at all."

"Trust you! Great Heaven! trust a woman who could burn the will of a dead man! Stay—tell me one thing: Did he wish you to destroy it? Did he ask you to do so?"

"No," she replied, "he did not."

"Then do not ask me to trust you,"

(Continued on Page 5.)

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