

HER ONLY SIN.

BERTHA M. CLAY.

CHAPTER II.—Continued

Lady Brandon had studied her husband long enough to know that, when he spoke in the tone that he now did, it was quite useless to persevere in making inquiries. "Some friends whom he met in Italy," she said to herself. "Most probably, as he is so reticent, it was a political friend; indeed, now I come to think of it, that solves the mystery. There is a political secret hidden under the mystery."

Once feeling sure of that, Lady Brandon resigned herself to circumstances. A political secret, she knew quite well, could never be forced from her husband's keeping.

"But what will you do with a ward in Italy, papa?" asked Katherine.

Sir Jasper turned his careworn face to her, and it cleared a little as he met the gaze of the bright, sweet eyes.

"That is the difficulty, Katherine," he replied; "her property will be in England, and she must come to live with us."

Again Lady Brandon looked up. This time there was some little contempt on her face.

"That is impossible, Sir Jasper," she said; "I could not think of receiving a stranger into the very heart of my home."

He paused a few minutes before answering her, and then he said gently:

"You have been so kind to me, Marie, so attentive to my interests, that I am sure you will never refuse anything that will be of service to me."

"Would it be of service?" she asked, quickly.

"Most assuredly, it would," he answered. "You would help me out of a real difficulty."

"Then," said Lady Brandon, "if it will serve your interests, I will do it. I withdraw my opposition."

Sir Jasper bent down and kissed the white, jeweled hands.

"You have always studied my interests," he said, "and I am always grateful."

"It will be just as though I had a sister," said Katherine; and the words struck Sir Jasper like a blow. "I wonder what she is like, papa? Dark, I suppose, as she is an Italian. We shall contrast well. I need not be jealous if she is a brunette. I will be very kind to her. Is it her father or her mother who has just died, papa?"

Again he shuddered as the careless words fell on his ear. He made a pretence of not having heard what she said; and Katherine, with her quick instinct, seeing that the question was not agreeable to him, did not press it.

Both ladies settled the matter in their own minds and according to their lights. Lady Brandon concluded that the dead friend had probably been one who shared her husband's political secrets; and Katherine thought to herself that it was probably some one whom her father had known in his youth. They were both content, and talked quite amiably about it. Sir Jasper bore it as long as he could; then he quitted the room and went to his study.

"You see, Katherine," said Lady Brandon, "if the girl is really noble and wealthy, it will be an acquisition rather than otherwise."

"I am pleased about it, mamma," cried the girl. "I have always felt the want of a sister; now I shall have one."

"I would not say anything about that, my dear, until you have seen what she is like," said prudent Lady Brandon; "it is always better not to commit one's self in any way."

They discussed the matter in all its bearings; there was complete confidence between this mother and child. Katherine laughed at her mother's very caudid worldliness; she teased her about her worship of Mammon. But she was very fond of her; while Lady Brandon worshipped her beautiful child; she thought there was no one like her in the wide world; all the love of which she was capable, the love of her heart and soul, was centred on and in her darling.

Meanwhile Sir Jasper was in a fever of dismay. What should he do? It was as though the dead ghost of his youth had suddenly risen up before him; he was utterly unnerved. Then it became clear that he must send some one to fetch her. Whom could he send? He could not go himself; he was not strong enough to travel; nor did he care to see again the place where he had suffered so much. He decided that the best person to send would be his agent, John Segrave, a sensible, experienced man of the world. He wrote at once to summon Mr. Segrave; and, when he had reached Queen's Chace, he told him exactly the same story that he had told his wife.

"I want you to go to Italy," he said, "to bring back with you a young lady, my ward, who is for the future to make her home with Lady Brandon."

The agent set out, amply provided with funds; and then Sir Jasper spent a day and night in a terrible state of suspense. What would she be like—this daughter of his lost Giulia?

December came with its frost and cold, its biting wind and snow-bound earth, before that question was answered. It was on the 2nd of December that he received a letter from Mr. Segrave, saying

that he hoped to reach the Chace with his charge on the following day. Sir Jasper was greatly agitated, although he beat down his emotion with an iron hand.

She was coming, Giulia's little child, who had nestled for one brief moment in her mother's dying arms—Giulia's little daughter—the babe from whom he had turned with something like bitter hate in his heart. What would she be like? He asked about her rooms, and Katherine took him to see them—a pretty suite of rooms in the western wing; they looked very bright in the winter sunlight, with their cheerful fires and choice flowers.

"She will like these rooms, papa," said Katherine. "See what I have put here!—all the Italian views and photographs that I can find. See!—here is the Arno, here is the Rialto in Venice."

She stopped suddenly. Why did he pause and turn from her with a sharp cry? There was the very spot on which he had stood when Giulia's fair face first shone down upon him!

"It is nothing, child," he said, in answer to her anxious inquiries—"less than nothing—a sharp, sudden pain that hurts but will never kill me."

"How do you know that it will never kill you, papa?" she asked.

"Because, my darling, if it could have shortened my life it would have done so long ago," he replied. Now show me all the arrangements you have made for my ward?"

"Papa," cried generous, beautiful Katherine, "she will be very dull, she will be very lonely. Do you suppose that she is alone in the world, that she has no other friends but us? If she had but one it would be of something."

"I cannot tell you, Katherine," he replied. "You must ask her when she comes."

He was pleased to see the arrangements his wife and daughter had made for her, yet, as the time for her arrival drew near, he trembled and shuddered like one seized with a sudden cold. He had to meet the child he had literally given away—Giulia's daughter.

CHAPTER III.

Veronica stood before her father, a tall, beautiful woman, with a noble Venetian face. She was quite unlike anything he had pictured. He had fancied a girl with Giulia's sweet face, with her golden hair and sensitive lips. The girl before him looked like a Roman empress, but that she had Giulia's eyes—her dark, tender, passionate eyes—the eyes that had made for him the only light he had ever known with hair as black as night, and worn after the old Grecian fashion. She was more beautiful than her young mother had ever been, but was of a different type of loveliness.

As he gazed upon her, Sir Jasper Brandon owned to himself that it was the most beautiful and the saddest face that he had ever seen. The dark eyes had a story in their depths, the proud lips trembled even as she smiled.

"Where have I seen a face something like it?" he asked himself. Then he remembered that it was in one of his favorite pictures hanging in the Louvre.

He had gone to the station himself to meet her. Lady Brandon was very sure of it, but Katherine was shrewder still. He felt that he might betray himself. So he decided on meeting Veronica, that the first shock might pass unperceived. And a shock it was when she looked at him with Giulia's eyes. He stood still for a few moments, beating back the anguish that almost mastered him; then he held out his hands in greeting to her.

"Veronica," he said, gently, "welcome to England!" He did not kiss the beautiful face—he dared not trust himself. "Welcome," he repeated, adding, "do you speak English?"

To his surprise she answered him in English; she spoke the language exceedingly well, but with a slight foreign accent that was very musical and charming.

"Yes, I speak English; it was my own wish. I learned by my own desire; my aunt was very unwilling."

"Why did you wish to learn?" he said.

"It is harsh after your beautiful liquid Italian."

"I cannot tell; but something seemed always to stir in my heart at the very mention of England. I hardly know whether it was pain or pleasure, for it was unlike either. Now I know what it was."

"What?" he inquired, wondering if any idea had occurred to her.

"It was a foreboding," she replied; "it was because I had to come to England." Then she glanced at him again. "Are you my guardian?" she asked, timidly.

"Yes," he replied. "I came to meet you; I thought you would feel dull at first in a strange country."

"I have been dull all my life," she said, with a smile—the saddest smile he had ever seen.

"We must try to make you happier," he said.

"Why are you my guardian?" she asked. "I cannot understand it. My aunt never spoke to me of you until she was dying, and then she told me that far away in England there lived a rich gentleman who would be my guardian when she was dead; that I was to live in England and be docile to him. It will not be very difficult to be docile to you."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I like you," she answered,

simply. "I can always tell at first sight whether I shall like any one or not, and I do like you."

He helped her into the carriage and sat down by her side; the servants were busy with her luggage. Mr. Segrave drove home with Sir Jasper and his ward, and all the way the baronet was saying to himself:

"This is Giulia's daughter; that beautiful head lay on Giulia's breast; this is Giulia's child!" He longed to clasp her in his arms and say, "You have your mother's eyes, child; you have the same sweet voice and the same loving heart."

All his fancied dislike melted as he gazed on her. He wondered how he could have hated her, how he could have forgotten her. He reproached himself for it with bitter reproaches. How could he have been unkind to Giulia's child?

"I have been dull all my life," she had said, and the words smote him with pain. He longed to say to her, "I am your father, Veronica, but my love for your mother is shut up in my heart. It is my most cherished secret; it is so sacred to me that I cannot talk of it; I cannot tell others of it; it is the very core of my heart." He was sorely tempted; but

"Not yet," he said to himself—"not yet." He turned to her suddenly.

"Tell me about your life, Veronica," he said. "What made it so dull? How have you spent it?"

"I have lived always with my aunt Assunta," she replied, "and my aunt was a woman whose heart must have been broken when she was young, I think. She never laughed, she never even smiled, but she hated the English. 'They are perfidious,' she said, 'as Judas. The sun never shines on England; it is always dark with Heaven's frown.' She would not let me have any friends. We used to sit for days and months and years in that dark old palace, watching the water, watching the sky, seldom speaking a word. She gave me histories to read, and after many prayers she allowed me to have masters for painting—nothing else; and for many years I have passed my life in reading dull histories and painting."

"Poor child," he said; "it was not a very bright life, was it?"

"No. I have often asked her to tell me where my mother and father lie buried; but my aunt would never inform me. I have never seen my mother's grave."

Sir Jasper's face grew white with emotion. He said to himself, "It is Giulia's child who has led this sad life—who has never known one bright hour." He dared not look at her lest she should wonder at the pain on his face.

"How old are you, Veronica?" he asked.

"I am twenty, as men count years," she said. "It seems to me that I have lived a century in that dark old palace. It was full of spirits who wailed all night through the long passages. When my aunt was angry with me, she said that I was a child, an ignorant child. I think myself that I am very old—more like a woman whose years were run than a child."

"You will not feel so when you have lived a little longer," he said, gently.

"Veronica, look around you. This is an English winter. Do you see how white the ground is—how great icicles hang like huge diamonds from the trees and hedges? When the sun shines on the snow and sparkles on the ice, I do not think there is a grander sight in the world."

"I wonder," said Veronica, musingly, "why my aunt disliked England so much, do you know?"

He tried to answer her indifferently. "It would require a very learned philosopher to understand a lady's likes and dislikes," he said. "Veronica, you say that you have had a very sad life; let me advise you to try to forget it—forget the gloomy aunt who seems to have been so mistaken. Just as a flower opens its heart to the sun, open yours to the sunshine of happiness. Will you try?"

"I will try," she answered. "I will do anything you tell me."

Then he pointed out to her the beauties of the park through which they were driving, and then, in the distance, the towers of Queen's Chace.

"How beautiful!" she cried. "And see, the sun shines on it; it looks as though Heaven were blessing it."

He wondered what she would say if she knew that this superb house ought one day by right to be hers.

"Tell me," she cried, "what do you call this beautiful place? Teach me to say it; teach me to say your name. What shall I call you?"

And he taught Giulia's child to call him Sir Jasper, while longing with all his heart to hear the word "father" from her lips.

"Some day," he said to himself, "I will tell her all about it, and she will know. Then I will ask her to call me 'father,' and I shall hear all earth's music in the word."

Sir Jasper said one thing to Veronica on entering the house. He turned to her with an expression of pain on his face.

"Veronica," he said, "I want to ask you one favor; that is, I wish to give one piece of advice, afterward you will know the reason why. I advise you to say nothing of the home you have left. People are sure to ask questions. Do not answer them; evade them."

(Continued on Page 5.)

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