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## A GILDED SIN.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "DORA THORNE,"  
"WEDDED AND PARTED," "A BRIDE  
FROM THE SEA," "FROM GLOOM  
TO SUNLIGHT," &c.

### CHAPTER XI.

Great had been the consternation at Queen's  
Chace when Lady Brandon, in a few curt  
words, said that Miss di Cyntha'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 afterwards  
those interested had been told to cease all  
preparations for the wedding.

No one was more astonished than Kather-  
ine 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 me.'

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

'Whose fault is it?' inquired Katherine.

'Not Veronica's? I am quite sure that Ver-  
onica loved Sir Marc more dearly than I can  
tell. It always seemed to me that her love  
was her life. It cannot be Sir Marc's, for  
he loved the very ground she stood on. I  
cannot understand it, mamma. What does  
Veronica say?'

'Nothing. She only looks unutterably  
sad and miserable, and begs of me not to  
talk about it.'

'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 favourite 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, or a year,  
but for ever.'

'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.

'You must tell me,' declared Katherine.  
'I want to help you. I could not live and  
know that you were unhappy, Veronica. I  
must follow Sir Marc and bring him back.'

'I cannot tell you anything about it Ka-  
therine,' said Veronica. 'And yet I may  
tell you this. He asked me to do something  
for him, and I refused; he placed the alter-  
native of parting before me, and I took it.  
You will ask me nothing more?'

'No,' she replied, musingly—'that is, un-  
less you like to trust me more fully.'

'I cannot,' said Veronica, with a shudder;  
'he has gone, and we shall not meet again  
in this world, yet I was worthy of his love.  
To me it seems that I have stood by him  
dead and kissed him for the last time.'

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

'Kate, give me one promise,' she said—  
'just one. Tell me that you will never re-  
new this subject. To renew it will be sim-  
ply 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 request-  
ed; 'let us talk of you—not of me—of you  
and 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 all 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 lone-  
ly desolate soul and the aching heart that  
there would be some little support, some lit-  
tle comfort, in hearing that her great sacri-  
fice 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 hap-  
piness while you are so sad, Veronica.'

'It will comfort me,' she plead—'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 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 Ver-  
onica.

'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 has that  
comforted you?'

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

It had not been all 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 Bran-  
don. 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 Bran-  
don 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 that 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 un-  
shed 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 home to Venice to die.'

Then she wept as she had never wept in  
her life before, as one who had no hope—  
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 in-  
fluenced her so strongly she waited, but it  
seemed to her and to every one else that  
those days brought her nearer death.

'Do people ever die of a broken heart?'  
she thought. 'A year ago I was strong and  
well. I had colour in my face and light in  
my eyes; I had strength in my limbs and  
joy in my heart. Now my strength has left  
me; people look grave when their eyes rest  
on me; life is a heavy burden that I would  
fain lay down—and why? What has hap-  
pened? I have lost my love! The man  
who took my heart from me has left me, and  
—I may hide it as I may—I am pining for  
one look at his face before I die. Oh, Marc,  
my sweetheart, could you not have trusted  
me even ever so little? I shall send for him  
when I am dying, and ask him to hold me in  
his strong arms. Oh, Marc, you might have  
trusted me, for you were all I had in the  
world!'

So she wore her heart and her life away,  
longing only for death, that, dying, she  
might see him again.

### CHAPTER XII.

#### AND LAST.

'Peace on earth,' rang the Christmas-bells  
—'Peace on earth, good-will toward men!'  
The music came pealing over the snow, stir-  
ring men's hearts with the warmth of love.  
It was such a Christmas as had not been  
seen for years, so bright, so clear, so frosty.  
The country-people said strange things must  
happen, for the holly was so full of berries.

Queen's Chace was unusually gay. Out-  
side 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. The world was so fair  
and so bright; great icicles hung like huge  
diamonds from the trees and the hedges.

Lord Alton had arrived, and was so en-  
grossed with his fair young love that Lady  
Brandon had ceased to expect anything from  
him. He had been, like every one else,  
alarmed when he saw Veronica. Her pale,  
shadowy loveliness had startled him, and  
many of the whispered words between Ka-  
therine and himself were about her. On  
that Christmas night she looked more fragile  
and more beautiful than ever. By Lady  
Brandon's desire she wore a dress of costly  
black velvet, with a suite of superb rubies;  
but the white rounded arms had grown thin,  
and there was a shadow over her beauty.

She was sitting watching Katherine's bright  
face, flushed into greater brightness by her  
lover's words, when one of the footmen com-  
ing to her said, in a mysterious undertone—  
'You are wanted, Miss di Cyntha.'

'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 those come back to  
thank her, no doubt. It was not a nice time  
to choose; and she wondered just a little  
why the servants should show such a one  
into the library.

She rose and quitted the room; as she  
passed through the broad corridor she stop-  
ped for a moment and looked through the  
windows at the lovely Christmas night—at  
the moon shining on the white snow, and the  
shadows of the great swaying boughs. In  
the faint far distance she heard the bells of  
Hurstwood church. 'Peace on earth,' they  
were chiming—'good-will toward men!'

Then she remembered the poor pensioner  
waiting, and went on to the library.

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 shadows. She  
entered and stood for some minutes in silent  
expectation; there was no sound, no move-  
ment, 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 root-  
ed to the ground, a low cry on her lips and  
a pain as bitter as death in her heart—sure-  
ly a figure she knew was coming to her from  
out of the soft dark shadows! She held up  
her hands as though to ward off an evil pre-  
sence, 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 firelight 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 see you again,'  
she said faintly. 'Are you sorry that you  
were quite so hard? Have you come to tell  
me so?'

Her words seemed to recall him to him-  
self.

'I have come to tell you that I was a mad-  
man—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.'

She clasped her hands with a murmured  
word he did not hear.

'I know why it was, and I blame myself  
for my great folly,' he continued. 'I ought  
to have understood—I ought to have known  
that you were incapable of anything wicked.  
I deserve to lose you for not having under-  
stood you better.'

She raised her face to his.

'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 surpris-  
ed? Veronica, see what this has told me.'

He came nearer to her, and, taking a pa-  
per 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 some curiosity,  
the words that 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 Bran-  
don, hitherto known as Veronica di Cyn-  
tha"'

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

(Concluded on Eighth Page.)