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A GILDED SIN.

BY BERTHA M. CLAY.
CHAPTER I.
The pleasant years of your youth make lashes which scourge us in old age! No words were ever more true, more full of wisdom, more full of warning, than these.

As he sat thinking it all over, it seemed to him that that one lady was to him the dearest part of his life. Even now, when years had closed over it, when time should have almost obliterated it—even now it was the brightest recollection he had; it stood out a golden memory from the background of a dark life—a love so sharp, so sudden, so beautiful, so keen, so passionate, that the dead ashes of it stirred the life within him. This was the story of his life and his love.

He, Sir Jasper Brandon, was the only son of his parents. His father, Sir Francis, married late in life; his mother, Lady Maria, was young; he was their only child and he was worshipped after a fashion that could have brought but evil results. The anxiety with which his mother watched his little bed, her agony of fear if even his finger ached, his father's equally speechless pride and joy in him, were almost pitiful to behold; they would have been regretted, if they had not been necessary to his life. He had not written home about her. His whole life had been absorbed in his love. He had forgotten his country, his parents, his friends; the swift, keen, and sudden passion had taken possession of him; he had no life outside it, and he came to a race that never existed in love nor faltered in it. When Assunta drove him from the threshold with bitter words, he made up his mind what to do. Looking into the face of the girl he loved, he said:

"I cannot live without you. Send me away if you will—I will not live. Come with me, and I will make this world heaven for us both."
She assented. He married her unknown to everyone, and took her away from his home and his friends. They lived on love one month, happy and content. Then, when Jasper roused himself, to wonder, what his parents would say when he took his young bride home. He had no time to ask for their consent to his marriage, and when he was married he had many misgivings. He knew that they had great hopes as to his marriage; that they wished him to wed Lady Marie Valadoraine; so he felt that, perhaps, it would be better if he said nothing about it until he took his young wife home.

"You will remember, Jasper," he said, "that you had your life in your hands. I should never survive any wrong-doing of yours."
"If you live until I give you, father," he answered, "you will never die," and those were his farewell words. He travelled through Norway and Sweden, through Germany and Holland, through fair France and sunny Spain, but he lingered longest in fair and fruitful Italy, where it seemed to him that his soul first woke to its full and perfect life. Venice had the great charm for him; imperial Rome, gay Florence, ancient Verona, time-honored Milan, were all beautiful, but Venice charmed him; he loved it as a lover loves his mistress. All the poetry and passion of his nature woke to life there. The dark old palaces, the silent canals, the tranquil waters, the swiftly-gliding gondolas, were all so many poems to him. He stood one day musing as he looked at the sculptured walls of the Ducal palace, musing on the grand old Venetian tragedy of "Romeo and Juliet," thinking of the balcony scene, and the love that must have shone in the girl's face there, when suddenly from the lattice of a window near a girl's face peeped out—a girl's face—and he saw only for one minute, yet in that minute the whole current of his life was changed. Be sure that he had thought that at some distant time he should marry, and that fair children would grow up around him, but he had given no thought to love. Now a swift deep

love took possession of him; he felt that that girl's face was the star of his life. It was only a girl's face, with hair of light gold, and eyes of darkest blue—a face with a beautiful mouth—a face that, once seen, could never be forgotten. The girl looked slowly up and down the broad waters; then her eyes fell on the face upraised to hers, and she disappeared.

By dint of persevering inquiry he found out who she was, and learned her history; he resolved that he would marry her. Her name was Giulia di Cynthia, and she lived in a dull, gloomy, half-ruined old palace with her elder sister Assunta. They were the last descendants of a noble but ruined race. In the life of the elder sister Assunta there had been a tragedy. She had been beautiful in her youth, with the dark picturesque beauty of the Venetian woman; and her lover, who held an appointment under the Venetian Government as it existed then, had gone to England on political business, and there had been foully and treacherously murdered. For this Assunta hated the English and England with a deadly hatred. She prayed morning and night for vengeance upon the perfidious and accursed country; she would have seen an Englishman die of hunger at her feet rather than live; she would have seen a crust of bread, if it were the last, given to a starving Englishman. She was twenty years older than Giulia, and every year grew bitterer. Their parents had died when she was twenty-six and the little golden-haired Giulia only six. They had but little money; the gloomy old palace, with its faded hangings, its worn-out furniture, its air of decay, was theirs, but the income left to them was scanty. Assunta brought up her little sister to hate England.

"Pray, child," she would say, "that Heaven may bless every land except England. Pray that the sun may shine and the dew fall on every land except that. It is accursed, for innocent blood was shed there."
But Giulia could not learn to hate; when she had finished her prayers, she would look at a low level of the sea, that the dead ashes of it stirred the life within him. This was the story of his life and his love.

Assunta watched the little Giulia grow until she became one of the loveliest maidens in Venice; but when Jasper Brandon came from the land which she held accursed and asked for her treasure, she would not give her to him. She drove him away with stern, cruel words; she told him she would rather that her beautiful Giulia lay drowned and dead in the waters of the canal than that she become his wife. He had met her only five or six times when he asked her every breath of heaven which blew on him. No child was ever so surrounded with love and care. He grew up the very idol of his heart; and what seemed wonderful was that the boy retained this love by one equally passionate and devoted.

The Bransons came of a Norman race that never faltered in love nor faltered in it. When Assunta drove him from the threshold with bitter words, he made up his mind what to do. Looking into the face of the girl he loved, he said:

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slightly powdered and lustrous, proud with a quick, bright pride that was but a "virgin run to seed"—a most charming, lovable character, not perhaps of the most exalted type. She would never have made a profession of a tragedy upon there was no sad, tragical story in her lovely young face; but she was essentially womanly, quick, generous, kindly, sensitive, nobly generous. All her short sweet life she had been called "Heiress of Queen's Chase." She was woman enough to be more than pleased with her lot in life—she was proud of it. She loved the bright beautiful world, and above all she loved her own share in it. She would rather have been heiress of Queen's Chase, she declared, than Queen of England. She loved the place, she enjoyed the honors and advantages connected with it. She had inherited just sufficient of her mother's character to make her appreciate the advantages of her position. The great difference between them was that Lady Brandon loved the world, the pomp, the honors of the world, while Katherine loved its brightness and its pleasures.

Sir Jasper was very much attached to his daughter; his own joy never reminded him of his lost love, but his daughter did. In her bright, glad youth, in her sunny laughter, in her bright eyes, reminding him of the beautiful Venetian girl whom he had loved so madly. In these latter years all the love of his life had centered in his daughter; all the little happiness that he enjoyed came from her—with her he forgot his life-long pain, and was at peace.

She was heiress of Queen's Chase. He had taken the greatest pride and care in her education. She was accomplished in the full sense of the word. She spoke French, Italian, and German. She sang with a clear, sweet voice. She danced gracefully, and was no mean artist. Her father had taken care that no pains should be spared in her education, no expense, no labor. The result was she developed into a brilliantly-accomplished girl. He was delighted with her.

Katherine Brandon had met her *debut*; royal eyes had glanced kindly at the fair, bright young face. She had more lovers than she could count; a beauty, a great heiress, clever, accomplished, with a laugh like clear music and spirits that never failed, no wonder that some of the most eligible men in England were at her feet. She only laughed at them at present. It was the time for smiles; tears would come afterward. If there was one she liked a little better than the rest, it was Lord Wynchell, the son of the Earl of Woodley, the poorest earl in England.

Lord Wynchell was handsome and clever. He had had a hard fight with the world, for he found it difficult to keep up appearances on a small income; but he forgot his troubles, and everything else when he fell in love with charming, tantalizing, imperious Katherine Brandon. Would she ever care for him? At present the difference in her behavior toward him and her other lovers was that she laughed more at him, and never looked at him, and she flushed crimson at the mention of his name.

That same year Sir Jasper was much overworked with work, he was so ill as to be compelled to consult a physician, who told him that he could not stay in his high pressure, and that if he wished to save himself he must give up work and rest for a time. In order to do this, the illustrious statesman decided on going to Queen's Chase, the home where she had lived with such deadly hate, and the words she used were more gracious than any she had ever used before. She told him that she should rejoice her sister—the young wife he had so dearly loved—and that she could not die until her child was safe and well provided for.

"If I had money of my own," she would say, "I should not trouble you, but I have none—my income dies with me, and the old palace that has been my own passes into other hands. I have nothing to leave my beautiful Veronica, and you must take her. She is beautiful and gifted, but she is unlike other girls, because she has led a lonely life. She is devoted to her father's death. She knows nothing of her parents or of her birth. I have taught her—Heaven forbid me if I have done wrong—to hate the English. My lessons may bear evil fruit or good—I know not. I understand the child as no one else ever can, and I say to you now, decide if ever you wish to win her love or her heart, do not show her at first by telling her that you are her father; remember she had been taught to hate the English, and to believe that her father is dead. Let her learn to know you and to love you first, then tell her when you will. I impress this on you, for I know her well. I will forward by her all papers that are necessary to prove her birth. Send for Veronica at once. I know that I have not many hours to live."

He was sitting in the drawing room at Queen's Chase when that letter was brought to him. His daughter Katherine was at the piano, singing some of the old English ballads that he loved.

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