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### VERONICA

Lister paused breathlessly on the pillared porch, as the girl emerged from the shadow of the church door, and the sunlight fell upon her face and form.

It was the vision that had been hovering in the artist's fancy for months; the stately, graceful figure, the creamy magnolia bloom of the cheek, the dark sadness of the eye, the pitying tenderness of the lips. It was the Veronica of his unfinished picture; the picture he hoped to make his masterpiece. He had begun with light heart and careless touch, but slowly the divine tragedy of the scene had grown upon him, and his artist hand and spirit had become changed, chastened, reverent as he worked on.

There was only Veronica to finish; Veronica, whom he had left to the last. The marble porch of her palace was outlined, the maids startled at their mistress' boldness, the form divine staggering under the cross, blinded with blood and sweat at her door.

But Veronica, as she had grown in his artist thoughts and dreams, eluded him. More than once she had started out faintly from his canvas, only to be brushed away impatiently as unworthy of his ideal, the woman sublime in her pity and tenderness, whose deed has come down the ages in Christian prayer and Christian story, "Veronica Wiping the Face of Christ."

He had come to this old Church hoping that in the dim, religious light the thought might grow upon him—and now he faced it at the door: Veronica herself, fair, stately, fearless, his dream, glowing with beautiful life. He must have her as a model at any cost. He watched her as she passed through the crowd, hoping she would recognize some mutual acquaintance, but she hurried on, unnoted and unnoticed, while he followed at a distance, eager and resolute.

The "conventions" stood between them, but he must dare them in the name of art. She led him far, into the shabby, narrow streets he seldom trod, and at last, as if weary, she paused in a bit of dusty park where the wintry trees gathered around a choked fountain, and sat down to rest.

And then Lister dared.

"I beg pardon," he said, drawing near her, while she started up, flushed and indignant. "This is an unwarrantable liberty I know—" and the grave courtesy of his voice and manner somewhat reassured her—"I am Hugh Lister, the artist of whom Father C—, whose church you have just left, will speak kindly, I know. I have been at work on an altar piece for the new church of St. Veronica, but so far have failed to complete it to my own satisfaction. You, if you will forgive an artist's boldness, have the ideal face and form for my titular figure. The picture I hope to make a notable one in religious art; my studio is well known, my dear mother is its guardian and its chaperon. A few sittings from you would be a favor which—"

"You mean that you wish to paint me?" she interrupted, while the color came and went on her cheek.

"As Veronica—the strong, pitying, beautiful Veronica of the Gospel," he said, and then as she hesitated and he saw her surroundings, he added hurriedly, "it will be a favor which I can never repay, but if—if—money is in any way an object with you—"

"It is," she answered eagerly; "it is. Oh, yes, I—I need money very much." "My terms will be ten dollars an hour to you," he said.

"Ten dollars an hour! An hour!" she exclaimed. "But surely that is too much."

"Not for all the help you will give me. At double the price the obligation would still be mine. Here is my card; make if inquiries as you think best, and then,

you can, come at ten o'clock tomorrow." "At ten o'clock tomorrow?" she repeated. "Yes; I will come—if—if—again she hesitated, and the soft flush dyed the creamy bloom of her cheek—"if I may be simply 'Veronica to you—and nothing more—"

"Simply Veronica," he answered, gravely. "It is all I ask."

And he held to his word. She gave no other name and he did not ask for one. She was simply "Veronica" to him in the days that followed—days that brought her every morning to his studio to don the rich robe and veil of the Hebrew woman and pose at his will. He said little to her, but as she stood before him every line and curve of the pitying, tender face responding to his word, a spell grew upon him that he could not resist.

He worked slowly, that the beautiful time might linger; slowly, laboriously, with infinite care and wonderful success. Veronica stood out at last upon the canvas, his ideal of all that was beautiful and tender and gracious in womanhood, the vision of his dreams. Then one morning the mail brought a brief note that chilled and darkened all things to him.

"I can come to you no more," it ran. "Thank you for the kindness, which I shall never forget, and sometimes give a friendly thought to 'Veronica.'"

He crushed the bit of paper in his hand, as if it felt a sting and started to his feet in the fierce, rebellious indignation of one suddenly robbed—defrauded. She would come no more! Ah, she should, she must! He could not spare her yet; the picture was unfinished; the soft curve of the cheek, the shadow of the eyes, the delicate sweep of the hair, were all incomplete—she must come back. He needed her—for hours, for days, for weeks, perhaps.

And he searched, eagerly, lingering around the old church where he had first met her, inquiring of the pastor, to whom in truth he could give little clew, hunting the dusky park where he had spoken to her; even advertising cautiously in the daily papers. All in vain, Veronica had vanished utterly out of his life. And he turned the unfinished picture to the wall, and driven to the restlessness of disappointment went abroad—to steady, if possible, heart and hand.

"And you won't come, Lister?"

"No; emphatically no," was the reply, as the speaker stretched himself lazily on the grassy terrace of the old Italian garden.

"It is the third invitation I have brought you. What am I to tell Miss?" "Anything you please: that I am too sick, too surly, too savage, for social functions. I won't be, to paraphrase the immortal lines, 'badgered to make a Roman holiday' for a woman who has half the 'Eternal City' at her feet. The American heiress abroad has always been my special aversion. She is so glowingly out of tone."

"Have you ever seen Vera Carmichael?" asked the other, with the air of one possessing his soul in patience.

"Never," replied Hugh Lister. "And I never wish to see her. I understand she has the auriferous halo of millions that must make her one of the worst of her kind."

"Pon my word, you ought to be burned at the stake for heresy against such grace and loveliness," burst forth his friend, impetuously.

"Forgive me, Milton; old fellow. You are struck hard I see. I suppose it is a little tough on you to explain away my churlishness. So for your sake, I'll go. I'll show up at Miss Carmichael's fiesta to night and do proper homage to this Queen of Hearts."

And Miss Carmichael's fiesta was a scene of delight even an artists' eye when, at nine o'clock that night, Hugh Lister kept his reluctant word.

Colored lights gleamed like jewels in the rich foliage of grove and garden; strains of soft music filled the fragrant air! the old palazzo rose, as if carved of ivory, against the deep blue of the Italian sky. There was no formal reception. Miss Carmichael's guests were free to wander as they pleased, until the midnight banquet drew them to meet their beautiful hostess in her regal hall.

One view from a marble terrace was so noble and far-reaching that it held Lister spell-bound, and he was lingering there delightedly when a voice beside him spoke his name in tones that made his heart leap. He turned mute, breathless. Surely it was a vision born of the magical beauty of the night that faced him—robed in white, lustrous garments arched by the starry glory of the Italian skies.

"Veronica!" he found voice at last to say. "Is it Veronica?"

"At last," she said, holding out both hands in joyous welcome, "at last you have come. Oh, you must have thought hard, strange, cruel things of me. I am sure—"

"Hard, strange, cruel," he echoed as he held the white hands—warm, living, real in his own. "Oh, no, no, no, Am I waking? Is—is it a dream—to find you again here—here?"

"Then you don't know?" she murmured. "Ah, I thought you did, I thought you were avoiding me. I thought many bitter things, and wanted to see you and explain all—all the trouble that I was in when I met you. I had become a Catholic, and Uncle Duncan was furious with me. He had all an old Covenanters' prejudice. He said things that I could not bear. I left him, left my home. I went to N—to my cousin, the cousin who was like a sister to me. I found she had just closed her apartments and sailed for Europe, and I was alone—a stranger among strangers, without money or friends. Eleanor's old Irish nurse took me to her little home, but Uncle Duncan was swearing he would starve me out of my Popery, and I had nothing. It was then I met you. I had been praying for help and guidance, and you came. And you were so good, so kind, so considerate. Ah, those days in your studio I can never forget!"

"Nor I. I have been starving heart and soul since you left me. Veronica—"

"I had to go," she answered, "Uncle Duncan was stricken down suddenly and sent for me. He died in my arms, poor old man, and then I came abroad. Our picture—is finished?"

"No. You left it as you did my life—incomplete. Is there hope for either?" "For both," she said softly. "If you need Veronica again—"

"Need her? God knows I do! Not for hours or days or weeks—but for all time—all eternity," was the impassioned answer.

"For all time, all eternity," the echo came almost too low for his ear, but the radiant smile on the beautiful face was the revelation.

"Vera, Vera, Miss Carmichael!" called merry voices from the terrace stairs. "Where is she? Vera?"

"Vera! Vera Carmichael!" exclaimed Lister, a sudden light flashing upon his bewildered mind.

"My prosaic name to other mortals," she answered, laughing up in his astonished face, "but to you—to you always and ever—"

"Veronica," he said, as the merry crowd came pressing up the terrace in search of the queen of the festa. "Veronica always until I can give you the sweeter, holier one—of wife."—Mary T. Waggaman, in Benziger's.

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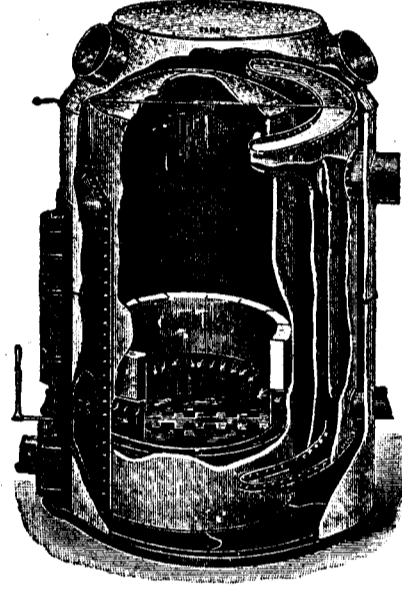
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