

The Family Honor

By...
Mrs. C. L.
Balfour

CHAPTER XV THE ACCOMPLICE.

"Still to guilt occasion lends
Slaves, tools, accomplices—no friends."
Byron.



WHEN the church bell had done summoning the people to evening worship, Old Leathery went out, and took his way along the somewhat lonely road toward Southampton.

Crossing the railway, he came upon the shingly ridge at the muddy head of the Southampton water, and, looking towards the glowing lights of the town in the distance and those on the pier to his right, he seemed to be expecting some one. Heavy clouds swept over the sky in masses that were only fitfully pierced by watery moonbeams. He had not walked long when he saw a tall woman advancing, who strode along at a quick pace, her shawl and skirts blown about by the wind, and her long arms swinging in unison with her steps, so that she looked like an advancing windmill. Her quick breathing from the haste of her movements could be heard even amid the frequent blasts of a squally wind.

As soon as she came near, Old Leathery said in his hard, dry voice that cut the air like a razor, "Save your breath, Janet: don't be spending it at that rate. Save it, not to cool your parritch, woman, but to talk to me."

"Save!" panted the woman, coming up to him. "I must save time, if I'm to stay yonder. I must na be running aff this rate."

"Ou, it's church-time, Janet; don't fash yourself or me. But say, noo, are ye sure ye were right when you repeated to me that he deceived the lassie, Isabel, and that it was na true about his being married afore?"

"I'm as sure as I live he said it."

"And he not wandering?"

"Wandering! He gave the papers all right. I touched the curtains to get a peep, but they were all done up close in the envelope; and I was as near being found out—for the sister got up quickly, for all as stiff and stately as she is, and was coming round to the side where I stood—but I had left the door in the papered wall ajee, and in I popped, as I have telled ye once—you know, when I gave you the only paper I could get. But I say, Sandy, hear me. I'm tired of this. I don't know what you're meaning to do, or whar you're guiding me. These crooked ways are wearifu."

"Wearifu! Nonsense, woman! What but crooked ways could have saved you or yours, I'd like to know!"

"So you tell me; but I'd like to get away. You promised me money for the voyage long since. I'm sure I earned it: first and last I've worked well for you."

"Worked for me, Janet? Ye worked for yourself. If the way is crooked, ye know how it was that it ceased to be straight. Ye're surely forgettin'. My wife was never so mighty good to me, that I should put my-

self out of the way to save you, her sister, from the consequence of both sin and folly."

"Sin! you, Sandy, to talk o' sin," said the woman, lifting a white face and angry eyes to heaven.

"No one has mair right," he answered, huskily. "You forget, seemingly, that it was you betrayed the trust, and by your carelessness, going after your sweetheart caused the baby's death."

"Hush! there's some one coming," said the woman, in a panic of terror.

"He looked round quickly, and assured himself that it was only her terror that suggested an eavesdropper."

"I'll not hush, I say that, if they charged you wi' murder, they'd ha' proved it. Nae one wad have believed it was an accident—I even don't surely know. It was my weakness for you, as belonging to my wife's people, made me trust your story; but I'm maybe wrong."

"Sandy, you never said that to me before—never. You do know better."

"Well, we helped you in the only way we could. It was painful, but we could do no other, unless, indeed, we had let the law come in, and then—" He spread out his hands, and threw them up, as if all would have been lost, adding in a low voice, "And now I own I'm terrified when I think if it should ever be known: the last sin would be thought as bad as the first—the sub-sti-tu-tion!" He churned out the word slowly between his teeth.

"There, don't—don't speak of it!" she said: adding a moment after, desperately, "But I could *but* be ruined, body and soul, if all was known."

"It might be worse for Archie. Serve me, and I serve you. I have done so, most carefully; but any meagrim and stuff, and I cease to serve you. I saw a deserter branded at Winchester only three weeks ago. I'd business wi' the doctor in the prison; he's known me for years. I saw the branding-iron, Janet, go fizzing into the man's flesh."

"Sandy, don't!" cried Janet, crouching down and covering her face, her gaunt form seemed to writhe: while the dry voice, unheeding the interruption, went rasping on:

"And I thought, 'If that was Archie now: and he'd be sure to get ten years beside.' Isn't he better off, though only a stable-keeper—eh?"

"Weel, Weel, what is't you want? I took this place, as you bade me, to be near the family: and I listened, when you hadn't told me, to what the dying man said, and found out, I fancy, something worth knowing."

"Ou, a trifle—a mere trifle. There's no fortune hanging to the name for the bairns. It's a name, and nothing more, if all's true that they have a right to it. It's of far more consequence to you to hide the past, whatever comes in the future."

"I have some money saved, Sandy. Be my friend: lend me enough for Archie—he's a'most broke down and done for—and let us go over the sea and die, out o' the way in peace."

"That cannot be a while. No: you must stay a wee bit longer, till I see if I can get the money together."

"And I've told you all I heard, and got the marriage lines, and now you put me off again," she murmured, beginning to cry.

"What can I do? It's your deed that makes it so difficult to get things straight. How can

I restore the children? Answer me that. No, no, Janet. You must be patient, for your own sake. Listen. I want you to give notice, and leave your place at the hotel, and look for a chance of hiring yourself at Austwicke Chace. You'd not be so hard worked there, woman."

"Worked! it's all work. I must go," said she, roused by his last words to a sense of the swift-passing time.

"Yes, yes; but now listen. I'm trying to get something out of this Miss Austwicke—something to cover my losses, Janet. She'll never own these bairns—not she. She'll pay money—money"—he sunk his voice into a hissing whisper, and involuntarily clutched his hands—"to have the secret kept. I know it, and you know it. For reasons of your own you cannot ever tell, that I know; but if I can keep her well in hand, madam must pay for her pride. Let her get so far that she cannot go back, and your Australian trip and a bit of land at the end is safe for you and Archie."

"It's long in coming. Year after year I've waited, till I'm well-nigh getting grey, Sandy."

"So much the better. Ye're so changed, ye'll never be known as the same, even if Mrs. Basil should by chance come—not you. Ye're bleached, face and all, Janet; so that if my wife, Maggie, rose from her grave she would not know ye. It would do ye good, and keep off the wrinkles awhile, to live in a quiet place like the old Hall. I know there's a wedding coming off there. Old Gubbins told me so in a chat I had wi' him lately. They like staid women folk, and not young girls. Your forty year and odd will be no hindrance there—not any more than it was at the 'Royal Surgeon.' It makes ye respectable like. You prepare to leave, so as to get a good name, and be ready, and I'll maybe find a way to give you a lift. There's many a way, more than masters and mistresses know of, to get into places; only, mind you this—all depends on my knowing what goes on with Miss Austwicke. Keep your eyes open." He looked at Janet's staring orbs, and added, "I mean, see with them, and tell me all that goes on. The little one is there now."

"What little one?"

"The lassie."

The woman's wide face and glassy eyes became more stony than ever, as she dropped her under jaw and stood repeating, in a guttural tone from her throat the words—

"The lassie!"

"There, go home: Archie shall be safe, and your dreadful secret be buried with me. As soon as I recover my losses, and see my way straight, you shall go. I want you to go, poor Janet!"

The contemptuous pity with which he spoke seemed to add bitterness to the woman's feelings, for she suddenly turned round and said—

"Don't you pretend to pity me, or I shall hate you outright. I serve you because I fear you; and you use me because you cannot do without me."

"Well, I've no fear of you, that's one good thing, Janet. I fear nobody—not I. But I'll make some I know pay up, or wince before I've done with them."

As he spoke he screwed up his face into such a knot of ugliness that Janet's wall eyes seemed to open wider with terror. She visibly shuddered, and with a farewell sound something between a groan and a sob, tramped off towards Southampton.

The man stood and watched her by the fit-