

throw my words away on you"—the waiting-woman went into the servants' hall, and beckoned the packman, saying, with a toss of her head, "There's some people always a-putting other people out of the way, or a-showing their tempers for nothing as I knows on, but contrariness. There, that's the door, the baize one—there's another inside."

Following her directions, the man entered, and stood before Miss Austwicko.

CHAPTER XII. THE INTERVIEW.

"Take your beak from out my heart,
Take your shadow from my door,
Quoth the raven, 'Never more.'"

EDGAR A. POE.

For about a minute the two very different persons were silent who confronted each other in the room, but dimly lighted by a single lamp. Miss Austwicko's erect head, and haughty yet anxious glance, were in great contrast to the awkward curve meant for a low bow, and the pinched-up face, whose sidelong glances, out of two gimlet-holes of eyes, seemed to the lady to belong to a withered, purblind visage, almost a blank.

"What is your business with me?" she said, mastering an instinctive feeling of disgust rather than fear.

"I have made bold to come, my lady, on the business ye wot of."

"My name is Miss Austwicko, and you must speak more plainly—what business?"

The man thoroughly misunderstood Miss Austwicko's pride if he thought a title prostituted her. The fiercest republican in all America did not look down on titles more contemptuously than she did.

"That concerning"—he peered round cautiously, came nearer, and, in a husky whisper, added—"concerning what Captain Austwicko telled ye."

The lady started back some paces, reached, as if involuntarily, a chair, and planting it before her, like a barrier against intrusion, rested her hands on the back.

"Captain Austwicko told me?" she repeated, instantly recalling the fact that no one was present at the interview, the purport of what he said could not be known. "I do not understand you, sir."

"I humbly ask your pardon, madam, if I startled ye. I should have premised that I knew of the Captain's intention."

"Did he write you, then? Did my brother tell you that he meant to acquaint me with his—"

"His entanglement, and the results."

Mortification for a moment kept Miss Austwicko silent. The hot blood mounted to her temples in a painful flush, and then receded, leaving her pale as ashes, and as cold.

"Well, go on—what then?" she forced herself to say.

"His death—the Captain's lamented death—"

The lady waved her hand, as if deprecating any intrusion on her grief.

"Has most unfortunately thrown everything into confusion—everything. I wanted him to help me to bring to justice a man—a most unprincipled cheat of a man—who has been for years receiving seventy pounds annually for the education of—madam, I crave pardon for naming them—the twins—the lad and lass whom the captain was interested in—and only, as I recently discovered, this fellow has been only paying twenty-five; and now I fear me—I greatly fear me—I'll not be able to execute the law on him; it would invite an exposure."

"By no means. We can—I can have no law matters forced on me."

"And besides, madam, this man is in Canada."

"Canada! Are the children—is their mother in Canada?"

"Until lately, madam, I thought so. I was in a manner betrayed into the belief that the children were there."

"Canada! I had thought Scotland was the place where—"

"I myself, to keep all safe, on Captain Austwicko's account, who had a dislike—a gentlemanly dislike—to his family knowing the sort of connection he had formed—"

"Never mind all that about him, pray—that's all over. The—"

"The consequences, you would say, madam, very truly; ah! they fall hard, very hard. But I was telling you, I took these children, on Captain Austwicko's account, when they were but a year old, to Canada, to a man that was a relation of mine, and whom I then trusted."

"Was a relation? I do not understand you."

"He married my sister, madam; and, as she is dead, I reckon naught of him—naught. He's cheated and deceived Captain Austwicko and me; nay, he's made me the instrument of deceiving my late friend, the good Captain."

Miss Austwicko beat with her foot impatiently on the ground, and wrung her hands together, chafing at the word "friend," and longing to ring the bell and order the intruder to be shown out.

"For he not only has, as it were, farmed the children out at twenty-five pounds a year, but he let the people that he farmed them to, bring them back eight or nine years ago, as I only lately learned, to England."

"To England? these unfortunate children and their mother?"

"Craving your pardon, madam, I said nothing of their mother."

"Indeed! I understood you to say—"

"Oh, it's not to the likes of you, madam, that I'd speak of that poor creature!"

He squeezed up his face into the look of something as dry and cleft as a fir cone, when the rasping words came from his bloodless lips; and Miss Austwicko—whose fault it was, where her prejudice was concerned, to believe the very worst—shuddered obviously, and compelled herself to say—

"Then she is not with the children?"

"Never has been, madam."

"Oh, that is well!" said the man, with a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I saw to that from the first. I stood by the Captain—my friend—and helped him out of the scrape he got into."

"It's a pity you did not help him before he got into it," the lady interposed.

"May be I tried, madam; but they say in Scotland, 'A wilfu' man mun ha' his way.' Though I see ye know to whom ye're granting the favour o' this interview, ye have na asked me, seeing that doubtless ye divined I owned the name on the card."

Miss Austwicko inclined her head stiffly, and a little unpuckering his eyes, her strange visitor continued—

"I've travelled by land and sea on this business. I went to London and saw Captain Austwicko wi' his lawful lady—and I went back and tauld the misguided lassie so, who had set herself up. I put her in charge of my wife, then living; and when she went into such a distraction with her pride and tempers that we'd to put her away—ah, we had awhile—and then she got well and just took herself off out o' the country, which was well rid of her, and went her ain gate down the road to ruin. Then my wife and I took the children out to Montreal, and meant to settle; but, my wife dying, what could I do but place the bairns with Johnstou—the cheat that he's proved—and get back to my own affairs, which had suffered greatly? but I make no mention o' that. I had to take to a humbler line of life than I ever thought to have given myself to. But there, an honest penny is better than a cheating pound; and I mak' no doubt that a lady like you will do by me, for my losses in serving him, according to what the Captain promised."

"I can fulfil no promise to you, Mr. Burke. Captain Austwicko has left no property—I think, none whatever. He had no claims on the estate, which is, as you may have heard, his nephew's, Mr. De Lacy Austwicko; so that these poor children are likely to have, as *their right*, even less than the dishonourable man you mention spared out of the sum my brother paid for their maintenance."

"Dishonourable indeed, madam! Ah! it's wretched the dishonourable things some misguided people will stoop to. And, may I make bold to ask, your brother's widow?"

"My brother's widow! he had no wi—that is

—What do you mean? Pardon me, I'm confused with your narrative. What did you say?"

"The lady I saw with him—his wife, madam—is now, of course, his wid w."

"Oh, dear, I didn't comprehend! No, you are wrong. He—that is—he survived her. I mean, he left no widow."

"Oh! what a coil was winding round her?"

"Yes, I understand you, madam." There was a thin flash darted, like a gleam of steel, out of the hungry, peering eyes, and for an instant lighted up the depths.

"Then my—I don't want to press it, but I've had great losses already—my claim, and the poor children's? For Captain Austwicko always said, 'My sister alone shall be told. She'll guard the family honour.'"

Miss Austwicko, turning the chair round, against which she had been standing, sunk into it, as if she feared that otherwise she should fall, and all but groaned aloud. For clear and distinct there rose the dying words to her memory, and smote her, "Beware of the pride that props itself with falsehood."

"It's an honourable name," pursued the man, relentlessly; "and I'm sure I've proved for years that I'd do anything in reason that a man who's had great losses could to save it from a stain—a public stain; and certainly, I'm bound to say the lassie was deceived in the first place; she was led to think herself married. I was one of the witnesses who signed my name; and it was bitter to me to find I'd been led to put 'Burke' to any such transaction, and my sister, Mrs. Johnstou, and her husband."

"You have yourself called him a cheat," interposed Miss Austwicko, with a desire to inculcate some one.

"Yes; who knows but it was helping to hido this piece of business first taught him? Any way, unless all comes out, something must be done."

"I'm willing to help the—the innocent." Her white lips quivered as she spoke the last words, for now was not she guilty? Yet how could she own the truth, the horrible truth, that her brother was really married to such a woman as this man described? Surely her brother could not have known, when he told her to do justice, what had become of the mother of these children. She strained her memory for any recollection of what he had told her about this miserable wife. But he had so little time, death was so near, that she was left merely with a promise on her conscience which she wanted to temporise in keeping so as to make pride and principle combine. Truth is an unyielding metal: we cannot safely bend it to serve our purposes. We may break it, and so wound ourselves and others; and that was what Miss Austwicko was doing.

Yes, indeed; rather than all should come out—rather than her brother Basil and his caustic wife should know, in any way, of this tarnish on the family honour—she would draw on her own slender resources. Perhaps to Burke the most interesting and pertinent question Miss Austwicko had put in all the interview she uttered now:

"Pray, of what amount are the claims you have on my late brother; and where, do you say, are these children?"

"Oh, madam, as to my whole claims, that I have vouchers for. I'll not press them entire. A hundred pounds will be a composition for my losses in that Canada voyage and residence, which; beyond all question, ruined me and killed my poor wife, and—"

"But how came my brother not to settle that at once?"

"Why, he left it till his return."

"But he had no estate to look forward to."

"Oh, he had his income. He always said he'd do justice."

Miss Austwicko winced at the words. It was in the power of this low man, with his grating voice and wizened face, to scathe her like a keen east wind. It was a relief to interrupt him by repeating the inquiry—

"And these children?"

"I'm not just sure of the address. I doubt they'll take a deal of seeking, though a friend of mine thinks he knows where Johnstou sent most of his London letters to."