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THE FAMILY HONOUR.

BY MRS. C. L. BALFOUR.

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CHAPTER XIX. COMMITTED.

"To how foul a blot, on the fair page of a long life will a little drop of dirty ink spread itself!"

RICHARDSON.

If in her dreams, three months back, Miss Austwicke had pictured herself walking slowly down an avenue of Kensington Gardens to keep an appointment with a man of Burke's rank in life or any man of any rank, she would have certainly concluded so humiliating a fantasy was the result of a severe attack of indigestion. Yet now she was actually walking slowly in the yellow mist of a gloomy morning, and fretting at the weather, which she feared prevented her being seen. No eyes are keener than those that avarice sharpens; and it was a real luxury to "Old Leathery" to dodge behind the trees and shrubs to watch her as she walked. He could not bring himself to shorten his enjoyment by crossing her path and presenting himself until the very last moment. Indeed, once he resolved to let her return home disappointed of her errand. To make her come the next morning would have been so good a test of his power over this proud and proper lady, that he was tempted to try it. But the fear that something might arise to release her from the coils he was slowly, but, with her own assistance, surely, winding round her wanted him not to trifle. She proved herself, by coming, sufficiently in earnest to conceal an important family secret, even by conniving at injustice; but women, he argued, were weak: her mind might change, and she had not as yet fully committed herself; so when the hour's desolate walk had come to a close, and Miss Austwicke, angry with herself and all the world, was about leaving by a side path that wound round a bank of shrubs, a man came bending his grizzled head, and puckering up his eyes and mouth, mopping and mowing like a gibbering fiend—

"I ask yer pardon madam; I've been long waiting, but the fog's thickening, I fear."

Now that he was perceptibly near, Miss Austwicke felt glad the fog was thickening. Not another creature was in the walk as the yellow mist blackened; the only sound in the torpid air was the rustle of some last lingering leaf as it fell, or the monotonous drip, like slowly gathered tears, that pattered among the evergreens.

"Never mind apologies," said Miss Austwicke haughtily. "What have you to tell me?"

"At no small trouble and expense I've found Captain Austwicke's—"

"Found the children," interposed Miss Austwicke; "you have found them at the house of a Mr. Hope, in Kensington." She paused a moment for his answer; then, convinced she was right as to the identity, she continued—"I found them without any trouble."

"I'm aware that you have visited them, but you have not discovered yourself to them. Am I to go to Mr. Hope and tell him?"

Miss Austwicke did not answer, and he continued—

"It will be a sore scandal if all comes out. I know there's been some trickery—sharp practice rather about the money that has been paid for their maintenance. Seventy good pounds a year has that Johnstone, of Canada, had."

"Mr. Hope, I feel sure, had never had half that sum. There has been trickery and speculation," said Miss Austwicke, indignantly.

"Oo, madam, I feel sure that not half has been paid. I've been so deceived that, as an honest man, I feel inclined to wash my hands of the affair; but respect for my friend, the captain's memory, makes me willing—"

"To help me in providing for the children!" interposed Miss Austwicke, impatiently.

"Yes, madam—yes. Consideration for my friend and the poor orphans—defrauded, poor things!"

"I think they have been very well brought up hitherto. I don't see that children of—such a mother—what I wish to say is—I am willing to

continue the sum that has hitherto been paid for them, but I should like them removed."

"Certainly they are too near, madam. You would not choose to come in contact with them? Money for their support, much or little, has hitherto been sent from Canada; of course, I could make it a matter of business, and should say nothing of my friendship for them—"

"You would, of course, restrict yourself to a business arrangement, conducted by letter, I should think, with Mr. Hope?"

"I would do my best, madam, as humbly in duty bound, to protect you from any annoyance."

His low bow and leering eyes were at this juncture so offensive that Miss Austwicke said hastily—

"Of course, sir, I should remunerate you for all trouble. It is a business transaction, sir"—

"purely," she would have added, but the word died on her lips. She had sufficient preception of character to believe that this man was to be bound to fidelity by his interests, but she did not know how rapacious he might be, or by any means fully realise what was involved in this co-partnership of concealment. One question lingered in her mind, and after a few moments' silence she uttered it—

"Do you know what became of Isabel Grant?"

"Died years ago, madam."

"You are sure of that?" said Miss Austwicke, with a sigh of relief.

"She never held up her head after she heard the captain was a married man—never. She was demented and, well—"

"Yes, yes; that's all I wanted to know. When can I hear the result of your arrangement with Mr. Hope?"

"I'll lose no time, madam; but money will be wanted to pay arrears, and there's my own claims, though I say nothing of them. I only regret that I am poor—poor. It's not the honest men, madam, that—"

"I have not brought money with me, but I will send you; tell me what is needful."

"Twenty or thirty pounds—arrears, madam, arrears."

"It shall be sent in half-notes. Send a newspaper, to let me know the first halves have come to hand, and the others shall follow. I would rather you wrote as seldom as possible."

"Assuredly, madam; and permit me to say that I feel for you. It was very unlike my friend, the captain, to go through a ceremony of marriage, which I witnessed, madam, with that lassie Isabel."

"I have no doubt my brother fell into bad hands. Good morning," said Miss Austwicke, walking hastily away. Meanwhile, her companion was not so easily distanced; making long, stealthy strides, he kept up with her, saying—

"There's the marriage lines to prove it, ma'am."

"I've have nothing to do with that," haughtily replied Miss Austwicke.

"Yes, but you're aware that when the youth comes of age, he might require to see the certificate of his father's former marriage—that marriage which invalidated Isabel's claim."

Miss Austwicke turned round in alarm.

"He must never know. Our name, my name, is that of a stranger to him. It must continue so, or I do nothing—absolutely nothing—for these children. Captain Austwicke left no property. If they were legally his children they would be beggars. They have nothing to gain, but much to lose, in attempting to make any claim. My brother, Mr. Basil Austwicke, is a lawyer: they would have no chance."

"Only what truth and right would give them, madam; that is, I'm supposing, of course, that they were—what you say you consider them."

"I'm supposing nothing but this: under the name they bear, and the station they have been reared in, they have hitherto done very well, as they may in the future. Under that name I privately help them, and pay you for your assistance not otherwise."

"I understand, madam. Rely on me. I'm true as steel." And as sharp as a two-edged weapon, he might have added.

Miss Austwicke, having reached the gate, made a stiff inclination of her head in dismissal; and he