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THE FAMILY HONOUR.

BY MRS. C. L. DALFOUR.

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CHAPTER XLIX. A LULL IN THE GALE.

"It is strange, yet true,
That doubtful knowledge travels with a speed
Miraculous, which certain cannot match.
I know not why, when this or that hath chanced,
The smoke should come before the flash; yet 'tis so."
VAN ARTEVALDE.

Early the next morning Gertrude rose and left her chamber to make inquiries after Ruth. No trouble of her own could make her unmindful of others. She found that one of the under servants had relieved Martin, who had sat up until four o'clock. The girl seemed rather reluctant to admit Gertrude to Ruth's chamber, and when the young lady expressed her intention of seeing the sufferer, tried to prepare her with the words—
"She looks so awful, miss!"

And, in truth, the poor creature had been terribly changed by the rigour of her convulsions. Her face, always large and pallid, was now distorted and livid. The head and some of the features were drawn on one side. There were cloths wet with lotion on her head, and her hands, blue and contracted, laid, as if dislocated, helplessly outside the coverlet. The eyes were partly closed, but under their swollen and purple lids they rolled incessantly. Still she had partially recovered her senses some hours before, and, as Gertrude on tip-toe, drew near the bed, and, gazing at her with compassion, softly breathed the words, "Poor thing!" Ruth quivered, and under her heavy eyelids looked towards her, and, painfully trying to speak, could get out only one word that Gertrude could understand: it was "Duty!"

"You wish to say you have done your duty, my poor Ruth?" said Gertrude, trying, with ready apprehension, to interpret her meaning.

"To—you," gasped the sufferer with laboured speech.

"Oh, yes, Ruth, I know you have to me; but"—she hesitated from timidity a moment, then continued, in a soft, low, appealing tone, "there's One, Ruth, to whom none, not the very best, have done their duty. We are all sinners in His sight, dear Ruth, you and I, both."

Ruth writhed and shook all the bed, and even the room vibrated with her tremor.

"But I won't say anything more just now. You shall see our clergyman, Ruth," continued Gertrude, softly, adding—"I'll pray for you; and you, too, my poor Ruth, must pray."

With pitying tears running down her cheeks she left the sick chamber, and returning to her own room, pondered the scene, and lifted up her heart in supplication.

The breakfast that morning was neither cheered nor troubled by Mrs. Austwicke's presence. That lady remained in her own room, "too fatigued," she said, "to appear, until later in the day—perhaps not till dinner-time."

It was the Sabbath-day, and Gertrude, as she sat in the pew at church between her father and brother, had a strange sense that something in her life was altered since the previous Sabbath. She was subdued to a gentle pensiveness that did not belong to her naturally mirthful temperament.

The parsonage pew was so full—Marian Hope sitting there, with her father, Mysie Grant, and Harriet—that Mr. Griesbach joined his friend Allan in the squire's pew not certainly unwillingly. It is to be hoped that the young man did not forget the abstractions of the sacred place; but he surely felt also some human emotions when, glancing at Gertrude—

"He saw her kneel with sweet and simple air,
And whisper the response to every prayer;
And when the humble roof with praises rung,
He caught the hallelujah from her tongue."

On leaving church Miss Nugent came up and performed a rather elaborate curtsy to the squire; and, as he, in his genial way, inquired of her health, and expressed his pleasure at the discourse her brother had given them, she took courage to say—

"They had hoped—indeed, arranged—that Miss Gertrude Austwicke should have taken tea

with them, as it was the last day that their young friend, Mysie Grant, who was visiting them, would stay. But she feared she might be asking too great a favour, as Mrs. Austwicke might not spare Gertrude."

To which Mr. Austwicke answered—
"Gertrude keep your engagement. We are too much indebted to your young friend for making your residence here pleasant, during your mamma's absence, to allow of any disappointment to her or her friends."

He spoke this as much to Harriet as to his daughter; but added to the latter in a lower voice—

"Your mamma will not want you."
"No, mamma will not want me," said Gertrude, sadly, with difficulty checking a sigh, and glad that Marian, speaking to Mr. Austwicke, turned the conversation at that moment into other channels.

"Mamma will not want me," embodied for the poor girl a painful and haunting thought; yet it did not prevent her going to Mrs. Austwicke's dressing-room on her return home to make dutiful inquiries.

She found that lady sitting at her writing-table, and was hastily dismissed from her presence with a few cold words, and the remark, alas! too frequent, from Gertrude's childhood, on her mother's lips—

"You see I am busy."
From her mother, Gertrude went to Miss Austwicke, not exactly in any uneasiness at not seeing her at church, for she seldom attended, but yearning in her isolation to her aunt.

"Surely, people making their own troubles is no reason we should not sympathise with them," said the pitying Gertrude.

But on this morning she was startled at her aunt's appearance. Miss Austwicke sat with her back to the light in her pretty drawing-room filled with nicknacks, and garnished with all sorts of embroidered cushions, tabourets, and chairs; flowers—worsted flowers—of every hue in bright yet stiff profusion; in the midst of these, the contrast of Miss Austwicke's grey dress, and greyer face, now thin, rigid, and bloodless, was very striking. As Gertrude looked at her, she thought she seemed to be withering away before her eyes. Over the mantel-piece there hung a portrait, taken only five years before, of a stately, handsome woman, a little hard, perhaps, but in her prime of bloom. Gertrude could remember her aunt looking far better even than the well-executed likeness represented. She had had no serious illness, no obvious trouble; yet how strangely she had shrunk and faded, until her skin appeared lead-coloured and her face wizened.

"Dear Aunt Honor, I fear you must be ill," said Gertrude, as she drew near, and affectionately kissed her.

"Ill! what should make me ill, pray?" was the sharp answer; to which was added, "Don't be so full of fears and fancies; it's foolish, Gertrude. I am never fanciful. Some people, I know, are always dying."

She checked herself with a jerk. Her remark applied to Mrs. Austwicke; but it was not to Gertrude she should say it, so she abruptly changed the conversation with—

"How's Ruth?"
"Very ill still; I inquired directly I returned from church; very ill."

"It's her own fault, going off for a holiday, indeed! What does a woman at her time of life want with holidays?"

"Nay, aunt; but—"
"I say it's folly; and when I wanted her! I have no doubt she walked about in Winchester till she was fit to drop, and then was shaken to pieces on the railroad. It's her own fault!"

"Can I do anything for you, Aunt?"
Gertrude felt that there was a deep substratum of selfishness in Miss Austwicke's strictures.

"You! no child—no; I want nothing that you could do."

It was not wonderful that, as all her offers were rejected, Gertrude did not stay long with her aunt. On leaving her, she met the doctor, just as he was getting on his horse, and inquired of him after his patient.

"Not in immediate danger now, but shaken—"