



CHAPTER XIII. — Continued.



MISS AUSTWICKE, 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 honorable 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. Johnston, and her husband."

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

"Yes, who knows but it was helping to hide this piece of business first taught him? Anyway, 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 temporize 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 Austwicke 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 honor—she would draw on her own slender resources. Perhaps to Burke the most interesting and pertinent question Miss Austwicke 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 Austwicke winced at the words. It was in the power of this low man, with his grating voice and wizened face, to sear 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 Johnston sent most of his London letters to."

"A friend of yours? Of course you do not mention my—that is, Captain Austwicke's name. Unless I am sure of this of course I can have nothing—"

"Give yourself no concern on that head. I've a deep sense of honor myself, as a Burke, madam. It's the grief of my life that I was led into this, and my family corrupted by it; and I'd die rather than let it be known, make you sure of that."

He clenched his hands as if holding something tight from all the world, and pressed them on his chest as he spoke.

Miss Austwicke drew out her purse; there was a ten-pound note, two sovereigns, and some silver in it. She took the note from the rest and said—

"I must think over what you have told me, and consider what must be done in this matter. I give you this on account. I'm not prepared to promise that I will, or can, make good your losses; but find the children. You say they are in England—London, I think you said. Well, I will see them for myself. I am willing to help them, and to—to reward fidelity—that is to say, diligence."

Her proud heart swelled and nearly choked her utterance as she spoke thus confidentially and gave the retaining fee to this ally of her brother's—and now of hers.

As with cringing bows he went out she was ready to dash her head against the carved oak of the high old chimney-piece, she so resented the humiliation. Ah, if she had but thought of her duty to God as highly as of her station in society, she would have cleared her eyes unclouded of the film of pride, and seen clearly the meanness of all crooked ways, and the danger of the edge tools, low and base, with which she was unwittingly playing—too's she was sharpening for her own destruction.

CHAPTER XIV.—CONSCIENCE VS. HONOR.

"What stronger breastplate than a heart untainted?
Thrice is he armed that hath his quarrel just;
And he but naked, though locked up in steel,
Whose conscience with injustice is corrupted."

SHAKESPEARE.

Great as the contrasts in human condition are every day, they present themselves most prominently on that day which good George Herbert calls

"The couch of time—care's balm and bay;
The week were dark but for thy light."

How differently rises the sun of that day to the thoughtful, pious sons and daughters of toil, and to the rich worldling!—to the spirits who are glad to go as loving children to a Father's house, and those who are weary of the services, or never enter the portals consecrated to praise and prayer! How different, too, the measure of enjoyment both in the assemblies of worshippers, and from the calm face of Nature, on that sweet returning

day! to some there is all fulness, to others mere vacuity.

As Miss Austwicke and her niece sat side by side in the carved and curtained old pew under the painted window, which had in its arabesque border a blazonry of the Austwicke crest—great as the outward contrast was between the tall, rigid form, and face becoming daily more severe in outline and expression, and the little soft, dimpled creature, whose silky ringlets fell caressingly round her white throat, and shaded her delicate cheek, and who, kneeling in the colored light that streamed through the window, might be taken for a pictured angel draped in prismatic radiance—great as this contrast was, yet, if we use our clairvoyant privilege, and look into the hearts of each, still greater was the difference. Gertrude was all gentle peace and humble gratitude. To her the sacred service was full of comfort and instruction. She did not think, poor child! of criticizing the sermon. To her it was a message of truth, to be received reverently. Her young heart was open to the sweet influences of holy light, and the refreshing dews of the heavenly blessing. Little did she know of the uneasy throbbing, the absent, bewildered spirit near her, anxious and troubled about many things, commanding an outward rigidity that passed for calm, yet entering upon that fatal task of endeavoring to reconcile what is opposite—to make right bend to expediency; still with a lofty scorn of what, in a worldly phrase, she called "dishonorable," a proud abstract estimate of truth—not so much from religious obligation as from a belief that it was like ancestry and blood, a something that belonged to the race. Why did Mr. Nugent invariably select such texts as were displeasing to Miss Austwicke? What did he mean by annoying her with what she called his prosing on "All things are naked and open with Him with whom we have to do"? How tranquilly little True's dark eyes were raised to the preacher, while Miss Austwicke felt glad that her veil fell down over her face, for she was half conscious of knitting her brow and setting her lips as if to numb some inward pang. How long and tedious! Would he never have done? Why did he not apply the lesson to the common people—to her servants, who were present, sitting respectably in a row at the back? They, of course, should be warned of falsehood and gossiping and dishonesty. Such faults low people were all prone to. But all this talk of secret sins, of self-deception, of pride that wraps itself in a mantle of isolation before man, only to appear in filthy rags before God—what could Mr. Nugent mean?

She was so perturbed that on returning home she took refuge in her room on the plea, by no means pretended, of indisposition; and so it fell out that Gertrude had an afternoon to herself in the library, and sought out among some treasures of old divinity for further elucidations of Mr. Nugent's subject, and came to an exactly different conclusion from her aunt as to his merits as a preacher. What the elder lady called Puritanical and pragmatic, Gertrude considered faithful and earnest.

Some consciousness that there was this difference of estimate kept each lady, when they met, from naming the curate, and had, indeed, prevented Gertrude having the pleasure she coveted of something more than a mere bowing acquaintance with Miss Nugent, the