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## THE FAMILY HONOUR.

BY MRS. C. L. BALFOUR.

Continued from page 19, Vol. II.

## CHAPTER XXXIII. WRECKERS.

"The hearth, the hearth is desolate,  
The fire is quenched and gone,  
That into happy childhood's eyes  
Once brightly laughing shone."

MRS. HEWANS.

At that moment the home he had left, with all its considerate kindness, rose before Norman; and yet, such was the native obstinacy in his character, that to go back to them destitute, or to let them know his state, was worse than hunger or nakedness—worse, he even thought, than death itself.

The taunt about eating the bread of these people set him to work more diligently. He was amazed at the distress he constantly heard of and wrote about. Mrs. Fitzwalter told him that she employed her time, while she had means to bestow, in relieving the sick poor, and now had to state their case to others; and, though he felt that her manners were affected, yet he was content to do her bidding, and regretted that as she was so charitable, his instinctive dislike increased daily.

Meanwhile, though the furniture and arrangement of the house were as miserable and muddled as ever, the food, particularly at breakfast and supper, was abundant. Long after he had gone to rest in his garret, he heard voices down stairs carousing. The Major in particular seemed to enjoy himself; and the red nose and watery eyes were more conspicuous than ever.

It certainly did occur to Norman that they might release his clothes from pawn; but the remembrance of the rebuff he had once received kept him day after day from asking them; and he was fast becoming a mere writing-machine, and sinking into a deep melancholy. He noticed it was rare for Mrs. Fitzwalter and the Major to leave the house together. She went out during the day, as she said, on her benevolent errands, and other business; he made the evenings his time of departure. What he did during the day besides smoke, Norman could not discover. In a room under the youth's garret he lounged about, sending up the fumes of his unceasing pipe. If the parlour had become purified since Mrs. Fitzwalter's residence, Norman did not know it; for it was understood that the attic and a room on the stairs was his territory, and that in this disreputable costume he was not to be seen in other parts of the house.

It happened that at dusk one evening, Mrs. Fitzwalter not having returned, the Major sauntered out, saying, as he went, "Your mistress won't be long, Susan." And, sure enough, soon after, there came a loud knock at the door; and a voice, nearly as loud, made the house resound with the words—

"Is Widow Fitzwalter's sick son to be seen, eh?"

"Why," thought Norman, "who is Widow Fitzwalter's sick son?"

It was a coarse voice that asked for "Widow Fitzwalter's sick son;" and Norman, who could not help hearing the whole of the colloquy, thinking Susan spoke as if she felt frightened, stepped out, and looking over the banisters, he saw a servant in livery depositing a basket in the passage, and preparing in all haste, to leave, saying, as he did so—

"This young Fitzwalter's desperate bad, aint he?"

"Oh, disprate," replied Susan, catching at the word.

"And you aint much better, I should think. What a little bag o' bones! There, let me out," and the man was gone.

"Susan," cried Norman from the landing-place, "come here."

The girl bustled up-stairs, and he continued—"Who is Mrs. Fitzwalter's sick son?"

The girl stared a moment, then began opening and shutting her eyelids very fast, and nodding her head with a cunning look.

"Who is he, I say?"

"Lauk, now! don't you know?"

"She has no sick son here—where is he? Have you been telling lies?"

The girl, with a grin, said, "I tells what they tells me: I just should catch it, else."

"You couldn't be told of any sick son."

"Couldn't I though! Why, don't you twig? you're the missus's sick son. What a sucking duck you must be not to a nosed that out afore. But don't split on me. Now, pray don't, till I gets another place. I've my hie on vun—I only hope I may get it, I'll soon give 'em the go-by."

What it was that Susan's eloquence fully implied, could not be elicited at that time, for there was the sound of a latch-key in the street door, and Mrs. Fitzwalter stepped into the passage just as the girl, swinging herself from the stairs over the banister into the little back passage, seemed to have come from the kitchen.

"What's this?" said Mrs. Fitzwalter, seeing the basket.

"A gent in liv'ry left it, 'm, for your sick s—"

She was stopped from finishing her sentence by a hand being laid on her mouth. The word "Stupid" burst from Mrs. Fitzwalter's lips.

Meanwhile Norman had retreated to his attic, to ponder over what he had heard. Had Mrs. Fitzwalter come to him that evening, he would have frankly asked her what it all meant, but she did not do so. She contented herself with calling out, at the foot of the stairs—"Mr. Norman, I'm so dreadfully fatigued, and so depressed with all the accumulated misfortune I have this day witnessed, that I wish you would send me down the writing you have done. Here, Susan, quick, fetch the letters."

The girl rushed up-stairs, took the letters, putting her finger on her lip to impose silence and caution, and was down again without a word. The youth felt certain that some deception was being practised in which he was mixed up, and he resolved that he would not, if he could help it, be the passive instrument in it. His spirits instantly rallied. He would himself go down and demand an explanation. Another flying excursion of Susan's brought her, with a jug of tea and a plate of bread and butter, to his room. He asked in an undertone in which room he should find her mistress; but the girl would not speak except by a dumb show of clasped hands, imploring him not to betray her, which he so far understood, that he looked at her with so open and honest a look, that a far less acute physiognomist than Susan would know that she was safe in confiding in him.

An hour afterwards, having arranged his particoloured rags as well as he could, Norman went softly down-stairs. The house was so still that he could hear Susan's wheezy breathing in the kitchen. He listened, expecting to hear also the scratch of Mrs. Fitzwalter's pen making those rough drafts of letters which he had daily to copy, but all was still. The door of the room off the passage was not quite closed, and as he drew near it he could see the interior through the chink. Mrs. Fitzwalter was sitting in a low easy chair with her back to him. The table was loaded with good things—a cold chicken, the remains of some boiled ham, jars of preserves, and plates of tea-cakes, all in that condition which plain-speaking housewives expressively call "biggledy piggledy;" while at the lady's right hand was that big book, laid open, which Norman so well remembered carrying on the night of the fire.

"Could she be intent on reading her Bible? Had he dared to think her some impostor, and she really was a philanthropist? Was not that smaller book, near the other, her Prayer-book?"—these were the momentary misgivings of his mind, as he stepped lightly into the room, went half round the table, and presented himself to the absorbed reader. No, she was not now reading. She had fallen asleep over the open page and the plate of good things that flanked it. Her long, yellow face, wedge-shaped forehead, and thin lips, slightly awry, looked repulsive, as the slackened muscles gave their real expression of craft and subtlety.

Norman was so struck with the anomaly between the face and the occupation in which she had been engaged, that he could not forbear looking over the page. There was no other