

A FELON'S WIFE.

BY HANNAH R. MACKENZIE.

You may think a tax-collector can't possibly have any tales to tell; but you are mistaken there. The general opinion of a tax-collector is that he is a mere machine, conveying that most unpleasant of all messages to most people. "Pay, pay," said that is not the case. There are collectors who look on life as a strange study from which many lessons are to be learned, and things quite as queer as any "detective experiences" come within their range occasionally. Well, I'm a tax-collector, and I am not ashamed of the fact. Though people look on all our class with mixed feelings of dread and hatred—though it is trying to see the look that comes into a good-wife's face when, in answer to the ring at the bell, she comes to answer it—though it is not pleasant to have the door opened to one by a child of a thing, who says, demurely, "Misther says I'm tae tell ye aboot the tax-man," yet the life of a tax-collector is not without its compensations. And one of these is that, to a man of a reflecting turn of mind, a great deal that is strange and interesting in the lives of the people he goes among is laid bare.

at the time, and they had almost passed out of my mind—when you can imagine how many faces a tax-collector is continually seeing to put things out of his mind—until I went my rounds, a year after, through the same buildings. My old friend, Mrs Macqueen, was still in the same house, and attacked me as usual. "Dae ye mind the folk on the top flat?" she commenced, after she had got me settled in the parlor, pulling up the Venetian blinds, and dusting them with great vigor. "Yes; the Alderinis. They're still there." "Still there? I wish tae guidness they were at the Lavin's Ec, or in the David Sea! I hope they may do some-thing outrageous, an' then we can mak' the landlord turn them out. I've spoke tae the factor, but a' he says is, as lang as f-llk pay their rent decent, an' mak' nase disturbance in the laun, nasebody can turn them out."

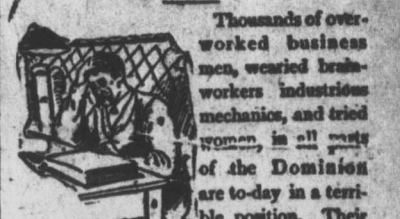
"Of course not," said I. "There's something no guid about these folks, Mr Aitken, an' it's no pleasant tae be leavin' below sorcerers, or murderers, or a body doens ken what. You man's an emissary o' Satan, as the meesister wad say, as true's ye're here, Mr Aitken; an' that pair woman is either his slave or his victim. As for lookin' o' her, she's a fine sight, ye mind I said tae ye aifter they first cam' I didna care for her stook-up ways, an' thoct her a proud huzzie; but noo I've discovered it's no' her fault, pair thing! Aince or twice that I met her she looked at me sae pitiful, I couldna help stoppin' tae haec wee bit o' chile; but aince, as I look o' her changin' wrinkles on the stair heid, Alderini passed, an' fixin' his eyes on his wife, said somethin' in a furrin tongue. Her face turned whiter even than it is o' nary, an' she began to shake like a body in a fit, an' without anither wurd tae me she went up the stair wi' him. It's no' me class that's observed that, bi' there in the laun wha he's spoken like her." "Perhaps he's a mesmerist!" I suggested. "Indeed I wadna won'er, for the look o' his een is nase pleasant thing tae meet; but he man has some strange poo'er ower her, that's certain. Ae night Macqueen wakened me, an' telt me tae hasten tae the strange noise in the bed-room above us. It was like a low sab, sabbin', an' a' through it a voice goin' on, speakin' without since pausin', kind o' even-like, neither risin' nor fallin'; an' then quite suddenly we heard an loud cry, soundin' like 'Mercy! Mercy!' Macqueen jumped at rousin' out o' bed, an' 'twixt him an' some o' his class went up stairs, leavin' me chitterin' wi' fricht. He wians lang in comin' back, hoover, an' then he telt me Alderini cam' himsel' tae the door when he knocked, an' asked him very politely if he wis disturbed wi' the noise. Macqueen said he hoped there was naught in it, but Alderini, in some o' his slight attack o' illness, Alderini said, in his furrin gibberish, an' asked Macqueen tae gang in an' see her himsel'. Macqueen gae in readily, an' in the parlor Mrs Alderini was lyin' on the couch. "She had on a wrapper," Macqueen says, "an' looked liker a corp than a leavin' wrung in my mind, she pit oot her haun, an' said: 'I hope I hanna disturbed you, Mr Macqueen; I've had a slight attack o' illness.' Jist her husband's vera words. There's nase doot there's a somethin' materially wrong there, an' if the man's no' tryin' tae kill her, he's daein' worse."

"It is a very curious case," said I, "but I don't see that you can do anything, Mrs Macqueen. Unless tenants make themselves unbearable to their neighbors, I don't think one can complain, for a landlord will not interfere." "Weel," said Mrs Macqueen, shaking her head, "I canna pit up wi' it much langer, that's a thing certain; an' if the landlord's nase interferer, we can do it in the laun. Are ye gaun upstairs?" I had to go, and getting away from Mrs Macqueen at last, went straight up to the door of the Alderinis' house. This time, as before, a slipshod slaver answered my ring; but it was not the same slaver. "The mistress is no' in," she said, when I had sufficiently indicated what I was; "bi' the meesister in. He's in the parlor thonder," pointing to the room I had been in before; "ye'd better gang in."

I followed in the steps of the untidy handmaid, who, throwing open the door, announced, with a staid air, the fact of the mistress's absence, and the fact that the mistress was not in. Her eyes looked straight at you, with a kind of mesmerism in them that made it impossible for you to turn yours away from them. I told her my business. "My husband shall call at your office tomorrow," she said, with a good English accent. "I am sorry to have given you the trouble of calling, but I am so ignorant about all these matters that I did not know when you would be likely to do so." It is not often my regret is expressed at my trouble, and I did not so. "We always make it a rule—my husband and I—to trouble those with whom we have anything to do as little as possible," said Mrs Alderini, coldly. "So that you do not require to call again, sir."

Of course I took this as my dismissal, and departed. But it was destined that I should see more of the Alderinis than I at all anticipated at the time. I happened to be in the office when Edward Alderini called to pay his tax, and so could satisfy my curiosity as to the appearance of that striking young woman's husband. I did not wonder at Mrs Macqueen's account of him then. He was a tall, dark man, seemingly a good deal older than his wife, with the smooth, dark complexion, and long almond-shaped eyes of an Italian; but there was something very evil in his face. I don't know where it lay, but I think it must have been in his mouth, which was small and cruel-looking, and armed with two rows of short, strong, hungry teeth, which glittered like some bloodthirsty beast's. You may think that this was all imagination on my part, and that I only remembered it after I knew what I did of him, but that was not the case. The first time I saw Alderini he reminded me of some stealthy, cunning beast of prey, who could take a spring in the dark better than in the light. Well, that was all I saw of the people

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