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THE FAMILY HONOUR.

BY MRS. C. L. BALFOUR.

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CHAPTER LIV. NIGHT WATCHES.

"The owl hoots near the crumbings walls,
The dank dew from the yew-tree falls,
The quiet graves lie heaped around;
Oh, that I lay beneath the ground!"

Perplexed, if not convinced, Ruth heaved a weary sigh, and, resting against an old tombstone, let her companion talk on. Burke grew more and more plausible as he continued to dwell alternately on threats, and on expediency. The faint glimmer of the light of truth that had shone for a moment into Ruth's darkened soul, was obscured by his words. She felt the weight of her guilty burden, yet ceased to think resolutely of laying it down. She must bear it till the end. With an envious eye she looked on the quiet mounds around her, and longed for her lowly bed; yet, somehow, she wanted to repent; she shrank appalled from the scaffold and the gaol; she had the memory of a far-off childhood that had been consecrated by a dying mother's prayers. Some vague bewildered hope had dwelt like a dim ray in the gloomy solitudes of her soul, that she might meet that mother again. "How?" was a dreary question she had never carefully paused to answer, though the words heard to-day, "Make a clean breast," seemed the right response. Then there was the dread of injuring the lovely and innocent Gertrude, whose sweetness of disposition had penetrated even that hard heart, and won it to tenderness. Altogether, when she at length left Burke, she was as much his bond-slave as ever, carrying a weight of misery in her spirit that was fast becoming too heavy to bear. Unable to eat any food, or to rest, she walked about, scarcely knowing where, until, late in the afternoon, weary, tearless, chilled, she returned by the train, and caught a van for market people that went from the station to the Chace.

Considering how she had been agitated during the day, it was not wonderful that the shock of the evening brought on the severe attack, which, as we have seen, rendered her insensible, and hurled her to the brink of the grave.

Nor must it be supposed that Burke was easy in his mind. He dreaded the mood to which the death of the man in the infirmary, who was indeed her husband, had reduced Ruth. He had schemed to prevent her seeing him at all, fearing that he might entreat her to confess all. Indeed Burke had destroyed the few almost-illegible scrawls given him for her by the dying man. While Burke congratulated himself that no actual communication had taken place, he felt as if Ruth's remorse was as a spark that would fire the mine under his feet. He complimented himself that he had behaved magnanimously to Miss Austwicke, in that he had by no means obtained from her the amount of money that some ruffians would have exacted. He knew enough of crooked ways and evil-doers to know that participation in a guilty secret was often a source of large gain to rapacious scoundrels. He was not, after all, he argued, so bad as others—nay, rather a respectable, considerate sort of man, for he had been moderate in his demands. The fact being, that he knew tolerably well how much he could obtain, without driving Miss Austwicke to desperate means.

He had haunted the docks in London, and the ports of different parts of the kingdom, while he was able to carry his pack, in search of the lost youth. And though he had not told Miss Austwicke the lad was wholly out of his reach, he had said he was gone abroad, and drawn sums of money on his account, which served to swell his private hoard. He now turned over in his mind whether it would not be better to make one great effort at obtaining a final sum of good amount, and take himself off to Australia. The boy seemed got rid of altogether. The secret in his possession was surely worth a costly sum. If, indeed, Burke could have found the lad, after he had exhausted Miss Austwicke's resources, he might have traded in reinstating him in his

rights as heir of Austwicke; but that seemed now hopeless. Fate worked against him. A youth of fifteen or sixteen when lost, would so alter in a few years as not to be recognised, especially by one who had but a casual knowledge of his features and manner.

These cogitations occupied him as he lingered at Winchester to superintend the funeral, which was to take place on Monday. Early on that morning there came to him a letter from Miss Austwicke, enclosing a cheque, and saying that, "as the young person's (Miss Grant's) term of articles was now up, and Miss Austwicke had understood she was for the future to be employed in teaching, Miss A. supposed all had been done that was required, and, therefore, would Mr. Burke state what final expenses there were?"

The word *final* was underlined, and he leered as he repeated it, adding—

"Not yet—not quite final, my good, honourable madam. You've not done with Sandy Burke quite. I must let you know what I know, and you know. The marriage! Miss Austwicke—you'll buy the marriage-lines of me, doubtless, for a nice little sum." He rubbed his hard hands and chuckled as he spoke, adding, "True, the hair—fiery fool of a boy that he was—is lost; and Miss Mysie has been reared bravely, considering she's but a soldier's bairn. It's an ill wind blows nobody good. It was quite as well that my wife took the bit lassie on board ship from her dying mother, and so met Johnston with two bairns. They matched for twins capitally, better than the real pair, and enabled me to get the money for two, aye and pay for two. He was squeamish, John Johnston was, he'd never had the skill to work the matter as I have. Well, anyhow, the lassies both ha'e profited right veel. Nay, but for Mysie, the lad's kicking over the traces would a thrown the whole concern out o' gear." He paused and re-read the letter. Then said, "Well, that idiot got home all-right. She looked to me deadly ill; but nae doubt that's over now. I suppose I must e'en go over there, and watch a bit for her, or the ledly. I hate going there, for I'm obliged to skulk; not but old Gubbins is infirm, and Mrs. Martin seldom leaves the Hall. She'll be waitin' in the kirk-yard."

Accordingly on that night, the funeral of the man, whom Burke called Thomas Smith, being over at four o'clock, Old Leathery went his way to the Chace, taking the rail part of the way, and walking the seven miles in the dusk of the gathering night. He avoided the village, and about ten o'clock entered the churchyard to wait for Ruth's coming—as Miss Austwicke had before so employed her, believing that Ruth could neither read nor write, and felt safe in her stolid stupidity. We need not say that he waited in vain. He crouched down under the shelter of a vault until he was chilled to the bone. Then he walked about until the clock struck twelve. Every light that he could see was out in the Hall, save one that faintly glimmered through the chinks of the blind in Miss Austwicke's drawing-room. Burke tried the private gate between the churchyard and the shrubbery. It was locked. Evidently no one was coming to him that night. The air grew chilly, and a drizzling rain began to fall. He tried to clamber over the gate, and succeeded. Suddenly, the hoarse barking of a watch-dog, followed by a chorus of other barks, woke the slumbering echoes. He saw a window opened quietly. Afraid almost to move, lest the dogs might be unchained, he kept in the shadow. A tall form wrapped in a long cloak emerged from the window, crossed the lawn with gliding step, and came into the shrubbery towards the gate. He knew it was Miss Austwicke, and creeping along he drew near enough to touch her mantle. She looked down with a start and shudder, as at some noisome animal. His dry voice croaked out, in a whisper—"Don't fear, madam."

"Go," she said; "Go at once. My servant is ill—I fear dying. Write; don't come—on any account."

A horse's hoofs sounded on the gravel near, and the lady shrank behind the bole of a large tree. It was the doctor come, before he retired for the night, to see what change had been