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THE FAMILY HONOUR.

BY MRS. C. L. BALFOUR.

CHAPTER III. CAPTAIN AUSTWICKE'S REVELATION.

Continued from page 229.

"Love is not to be reasoned down, or lost
In high ambition." ADDISON.

"It's a long story. I've no breath to tell it, Honor," said Captain Austwicke; "but I want you to know that—that long years ago—I—I married."

Miss Austwicke rose to her feet in surprise, and echoed the word—

"Married?"

"Yes, Honor. Don't—don't make a scene, it's no use—any words."

"When, Wilfred, when?"

"In Scotland, sixteen years ago, when I spent the autumn in Dumbartonshire with Gertrude's brother."

"Married! when you stayed at Lord Dunoon's. Whom?" repeated Miss Austwicke, still bewildered, and half suspecting her brother was delirious.

"Isabel—but you'll learn her name, there," pointing to the sealed envelope.

"Brother, brother! of what family is the lady?" "Something like the wandering ghost of an impatient smile flitted over the sight of the dying eyes as he answered—

"Of the oldest family—the workers: a gardener's daughter—the gardener at Glower O'er."

"A gardener's daughter?" gasped Miss Austwicke—"and you married her? And you tell me this?"

"Would to God I had told it long before—told it like a man to all the world! I should not lie here with pangs of the spirit, that rack me more than the pangs of the flesh. I should not lie here telling my miserable, shameful, cowardly sin to one who, I fear, has no heart to understand my woe—no conscience to help me to set right the wrong I did."

"Brother, what do you, what can you mean?"

"I mean what I say." He rose on his elbow with a strange access of strength, stretched out his hand towards the glass on the table, and, as Miss Austwicke involuntarily handed it, drank again eagerly, and resumed—

"Yes, it's my misery—my curse that you will not see my sin as I now see it. Pride like yours made me shrink from avowing my marriage—made me cowardly and base."

"Wilfred Austwicke, even on that bed you have no right to say such words to me. When, pray, was I cowardly or base?"

"Fear of the world and love of the world both work to sin. Bear with a dying man—a dying brother, Honor. After a brief delirium of passion—a young man's madness, that you cannot comprehend—in which I had made poor Isabel my wife, I stooped to the real degradation of deceiving her. I cannot tell you all the plan, but I led her to believe that I had been married before, and had a wife living, and that therefore she was not legally my wife."

"You, Wilfred—you an Austwicke, did this?"

"Yes, pride made me stoop to this deadly meanness—extremes meet, Honor. I shrank from owning my marriage, in the face of the aristocratic and wealthy marriages my brothers had made. My humble bride would have shamed me with them and with you. Deference to man often means defiance to God. Yes, Honor, it does. I sent money by a sure hand, for Isabel wrote to me no more. I sent money for her and her children—"

"Children?"

"Yes, my children! Oh, that I could see them! Oh, that my strength would hold out to crawl to them on my hands and knees. Surely, if they prayed for their father, the poor innocents—if they prayed, I might have some sense of forgiveness—something to cool the burning of heart and brain that maddens me."

Miss Austwicke looked at her brother steadily, as his eyes rolled and his head moved restlessly from side to side. A conviction that greatly relieved her appeared to have entered her mind. "He is delirious," she whispered. "Poor fellow! it's all mere delirium."

With the intense acuteness to which all his faculties were strung, he heard the purport of her whisper, and said, in a voice of piercing anguish, "I am not delirious, Honor; it's all true."

"Hush, dear Wilfred. Don't excite yourself over a bad dream. How can it be true? Children?"

"Twin children—a son and daughter, I tell you. I never saw them, except in dreams. How I hunger for them—mine—mine! Oh, for life, a little longer life, to do something for them! Oh, for a friend, who would help me in this bitter hour—bitter—bitter—bitter! forsaken of God and man!"

He sunk back and groaned deeply.

Miss Austwicke visibly shuddered. "No, no, not forsaken," she said, sinking on her knees. "I do not, I confess, clearly comprehend what you tell me; but if it will comfort you, I promise, if—if anything happens to you, to fulfil your wishes and intentions towards your children, certainly towards them, and—and your wife."

The big drops started on his brow; he looked at her gratefully. "Sister, I can give no blessing—from my lips it might be but a curse; but I thank you—with all the power left me I thank you—for that promise. And don't be angry, Nora dear, if I also warn you."

His voice had softened and sunk low to a tender whisper, as he called her by the name familiar in childish years, and his mouth worked convulsively.

His sister was deeply moved, and for the first time her eyes were wet. "Yes, Wilfred, speak on; let me hear your warning."

"Beware of the pride that props itself with falsehood! When a poor wretch lies stranded on the brink of the cold river, and traces the road he has passed, how false and mean looks many a deed that has been called expedient! There's a light, Honor—the light of truth—that reveals to us all that we have hidden in the depths of our hearts. It's dreadful—intolerable!" He paused for breath, then gaspingly resumed—"Isn't there—a hymn, Honor—that we used to sing—in childhood—What does it say? something about—"

'Cover my defenceless head
With the shadow of thy wing.'

Oh, sister—sister, for that covering now!"

Just then there was a creeping sound or a rustling behind the bed-curtains, on the other side of the room. Miss Austwicke, alarmed, rose from her knees. The dying gaze of her brother followed her as she, fearing she knew not what, went round to the side of the room that had been so completely screened off by the drapery of the great old-fashioned four-post bed. A faint noise, like the flapping of paper, yet sounded in her ears, but she saw nothing. There was a chest of drawers, flanked by chairs, two on each side, that rested against the papered wall. All was undisturbed by the arrangements on the other side of the sick bed. Miss Austwicke very naturally accused her nerves. She was not by any means the only watcher in a sick room that is tormented by evil sounds. She returned, and brought the candle, holding it high above her head, so as to see into the whole space. Her foot became entangled in something; she stooped, and picked up from the ground nothing more mysterious than a rough garment, a house-maid's apron, that had been carelessly dropped by the side of the drawers—perhaps, as Miss Austwicke, with the quick disgust at untidy habits which was part of her nature, divined, had been used as a duster and so left. This matter-of-fact, lowly incident breaking in on the intensity of her feelings, restored her to a measure of composure, and enabled her, as there came a faint, panting whisper of "Sister Nora," to go to the bed, and bathe the temples of the fast sinking invalid with refreshing perfume. He did not speak—only held her hand for a moment, then feeling along the bed-clothes with his other hand, found the letter, and laid it in her palm; and so folding her fingers over it, held her closed hand tightly in both his, tried in vain to speak, and sighed wearily. Miss Austwicke was thankful for the tranquil dreamy look, that seemed to