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## THE FAMILY HONOUR.

BY MRS. G. L. BALFOUR.

CHAPTER I. THE MESSAGE.

"For duty is but deeds of loveliness,  
And truth a power to make the spirit free;  
And they whose self-forged bonds their souls oppress,  
No effort shall arouse from slavery."  
FROM THE GERMAN.

THE last Sunday in September, some dozen years ago, was one of the very loveliest of autumn days, when the parting smile of summer lingered tenderly on the peaceful fields, and flushed the woodlands with a golden gleam, that promised to kindle rapidly into yet richer splendour; while there was a pure, fresh breath of coolness in the quiet air, most grateful after the heat of the harvest days. For Austwicke Chase was in the south of England, about sixty miles from London, towards the Hampshire coast, and the harvest for that year was over, well over, in that district. The afternoon sunbeams fell softly on the stubble fields, and along the slope of some rich meadows that skirted a narrow winding river, on whose opposite bank there was an extensive flat common, or chase as it was called, that was bounded in the distance by a stretch of noble woodland. The whole scene, in its quiet rural and sylvan beauty, being improved by a little village green and groups of nestling cottages at one end of the chase, and in the foreground of the other extremity were some scattered farmhouses and homesteads.

The church—Wicke Church, as by the abbreviations of time, it was called—was close to the village green, and also close to the old house of the time-honoured lords of the manor—the Austwicks, an untitled, but very ancient English family, whose boast, indeed, it was, that, once in olden times, and once again in more modern days, the honour of knighthood and of baronetage had been offered to, and declined by, their family.

It is just possible that pride, rather than humility, in both cases dictated that refusal of title and distinction; for, without going into records of the past history of the owners of Austwicke Chase, it is certain that Honoria Austwicke, a maiden lady of mature age, who now, for the time being, was the only occupant of the old mansion, had no lack of what she called "true dignity," and what others might consider overweening family pride, for personal and relative estimate is often very opposite in such matters. Certain it was that, among the congregation of the village church now streaming forth from its shadowy aisles and ivy-mantled porch into the sweet calm sunshine that bathed the fields in Sabbath quiet, none were more troubled by the sermon that had been preached to them that afternoon than the before-named lady.

The preacher was a young man, a curate only recently appointed; and the incumbent of the living being an invalid, whose infirmities, of late years, had necessitated his residing at Harrogate. Mr. Nugent, the curate, was a mild, reserved young man, rather liked by the farmers and people of Austwicke Chase, and by no means disliked by Miss Honor, as the lady of the Austwicke family was generally called, for she had ascertained from inquiries that Mr. Nugent, though poor, was "well connected," and she had concluded his principles were all that could be desired in a gentleman of good family and refined feelings. But the sermon of this afternoon was on humility, and instead of being soothing and suitable to her notions of the claims of station and the authority of rank, was against pride—especially family pride.

She marched through the private wicket gate out of the churchyard into the grounds of Chase Hall with a step so firm, and a mien so erect, that it might be called defiant. Turning for a moment to look back towards the church, she saw Mr. Nugent coming towards her, and answered his bow by a curtsey at once so stately and so distant that it forbade any further approach; indeed, she at the same time locked the wicket gate with her own pass-key, and went on by a path through the shrubbery, feeling, it must be owned, no pleasure in the tranquillity of Nature, no soothing in its beauty.

Just then the soft blue sky, the slanting beams of the westering sun, that sent broad shafts of gold through the interlacing boughs of the shrubbery, was all unnoticed by her. A sense of offended dignity shut out all other sensations but that of haughty anger. As she came to the wide lawn that spread before the old hall, she stood still an instant and looked at it intently. It was a heterogeneous mass of building, with no pretensions to architectural merit: a long, irregular-gabled front, with incongruous but convenient modern windows to the lower rooms; an ivy-covered turret at the far or west end, under which was the principal entrance, long unused, and now completely overgrown by a luxuriant Virginia creeper that, in its autumnal garb of brilliant crimson, hung flaunting over the dark green ivy like trailing blood-red banners. At the end of the building next to Miss Honor was the east porch, an old oaken doorway that led into the east wing, the only part of the house at present occupied. A belt of thick plantation shrubs completely encircled the wide lawn—or, as Miss Honor called it, "the croft;" but through some spaces skillfully left in the woodland there were peeps of the Chase beyond, the shining little river that girdled it, and the upland fields and farms stretching away in the distance.

"It is a place to love, ay, and to be proud of," said the lady, as she scanned the house rather than the surroundings; adding, after a moment's pause, as she heaved a troubled sigh, "and yet they do not value it—not as they should, not as I, in their place, would. Why did not my brother Edmund stay here, and improve the property and keep up the family influence? He might have been alive now, and have prevented—ay, prevented—as became his name, the growth of such opinions as I have heard this afternoon. 'Blessed are the meek!' Of course, that is Holy Scripture, and true; but it surely means teach the poor to be humble; but as to talking about pride so pointedly, as if to me, it's sheer nonsense, or worse."

She untied the strings of her bonnet as she talked to herself, and in an absent way took it off and hung it on her arm, pacing to and fro on the thick mossy turf before the house. In her way she was quite as remarkable looking as the old hall itself. Her features were well cut and fine, but must have been always rather too strongly marked for female beauty. Now that she was something past her fortieth year, her high nose, lofty but narrow forehead, arched brows that nearly met, tremulous, irresolute mouth, and perfectly pale complexion, gave her a distinguished and anxious, yet somewhat forbidding, or perhaps unapproachable look. And yet there was kindness enough in her clear, dark-grey, restless eyes to compensate for the frigid hauteur of the face. But she had a languid way of drooping her eyelids that prevented most observers from noticing their usual benevolent expression. If, indeed, such an observer had chanced to see her angry, then the flash and gleam that made her eyes glow like two wells of quivering light, would not soon be forgotten. For the rest, her person was spare and of middle height, though the erect way in which she carried her head made her appear much taller than she really was. Her dress of steel-grey silk, trimmed with black lace, suited her face and form, and in particular harmonised with her partially faded hair, which, yet thick and abundant, was pinned up on each side of her head in the stiff curls that had been in fashion in her early womanhood.

She was still musing, when the Sabbath silence of the day was broken by the sound of a horse's hoofs galloping along the hard chalk road at the rear of the hall. There was such unmistakable speed in the sound, that Miss Honor Austwicke, with a startled pause, turned her head to listen if the horseman were merely passing or coming to the hall. The loud clangour of the bell at the stable entrance announced some messenger, whose tidings were of sufficient import to warrant his making the whole household hear. With her steps a little quickened, the lady walked at once towards the house, and without waiting to go into the east porch, turned the fastening of a side window that led into a little drawingroom overlooking a small flower garden. It was her own