

LIST OF NEW BOOKS.

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THE FAMILY HONOUR.

BY MRS. C. L. BALFOUR.

CHAPTER VI. LOST OR STOLEN?

Continued from page 245.

"The flame of passion has burnt out,
And lo! the ashes." ANON.

The letter which most touched Miss Austwick's heart, and to which we have referred in the last chapter, read as follows:—

"MY DEAR LOVE,—I am in grate greif; my een run down wif' tears, for my puir auld father is dead. He went awa thinkin' his Isa pure an' true as a wee bit wean. His blessing is a sair burden to me. Ye canna now tell him aboot it; but, oh! if ye do in vera deed love me, come an' tell my sister—she's a hard woman; I would not for anything have her find it out. Oh, come, love! or I will dee wif' greif. Ever your ain,
"ISABEL."

Then followed a sneaking sort of letter:—

"HONOURED SIR,—I am to tell you that Isabel Grant was turned out of doors by her sister, Mrs. M'Naughton, when she learned what I told her of your honour being a married man. I got the young woman Isabel a lodging, and my wimmin bodies attended her. She has twin children, a lass and a lad bairn, both strong and likely. And I make no doubt, as a gentleman, you'll provide for them. The wimmin is rearing them so far, and shall continue to do so for a proper consideration, which, doubtless, an honourable gentleman like you shall not be slow to give, the more that Isabel Grant has had to be put away, being off her head—that is, lunatic. The money already sent is well nigh done, for the expenses have been great—vera great, an' the trouble, and nothing on our part spared of charges. Your humble servant to command,
"SANDY BREE."

"P. S.—My sister Jane and her husband had gone to Canada when I got your instructions, and I told Mrs. M'Naughton I saw your lawful lady with my own eyes, as I did at St. James's Church, London."

To this letter there was appended, on a slip of paper, in Wilfred Austwick's handwriting,

"Miserable subterfuge! This man, by Isabel's request, had come to seek me in London. I saw him, and gave him money, the week before I embarked for India. He said, 'Maybe your honour married before?' I caught at his words, and answered, 'Yes.' Basil's wife accompanied me to St. James's Church, and was the innocent means of helping my deception. I was by this time ashamed of the connection I had formed in the previous autumn."

What had become of this unhappy victim of a subtle fraud? Did she live a maniac, as the letter seemed to indicate, or was she long since dead? If so, according to Miss Austwick's prejudices, the course she had to pursue would not be so difficult. Two children of fifteen might be assisted as to education, and, if presentable, patronised—the boy placed in some way not unworthy of the Austwicks. The girl was a greater difficulty. One thing was certain: her brother Wilfred had inherited the profuse tastes that had distinguished his father and elder brother. Money always seemed to melt in his hands. His personal property would not be much.

Miss Austwick, as she revolved these perplexities, bethought her of the shrewd, sarcastic tongue of her sister-in-law Gertrude, or rather Mrs. Basil Austwick, who was continually ridiculing those family prejudices which Miss Honor hugged the most closely, more from a spirit of contradiction than from any want of similar pride; therefore, she shrunk in thought, as if from the rough handling of a festering wound, from Mrs. Basil Austwick knowing this humiliating secret—at all events, precipitately. She (Miss Austwick) would make a journey and investigate for herself.

It was a relief to her, in her perplexity, to recollect that her brother Basil could not be at the funeral; he was spending the long vacation with

his wife and the boys of his family in Switzerland, and thence on to Italy. By the last letters received it would certainly be a month before their return. She must, then, order the funeral of her brother, and arrange without him.

Whether thinking over these matters, or the weariness of a sleepless night exhausted her, Miss Austwick sank into an overpowering sleep, and the room, meanwhile, became quite dark. The papers still in her hand, fell from it on to the table. There was a tap at the door, just as the clock on the mantelpiece was striking six. Had Miss Austwick been awake, she could not have heard that tap for the measured sound of the clock. It was not, therefore, to be wondered at that she did not wake. The door slowly opened, and a woman servant entered, and stood a moment looking into the room, a ray from the fire falling on the face of the sleeper. The woman crept noiselessly to the table, and, drawing off the cloth, took it and its contents into the passage; and, in a minute after, returned and spread the cover over the table, with the letters and papers all on it, *except one*. Though this operation was conducted as quietly as the first, and the woman left the room, Miss Austwick started from her brief sleep, and rising from the sofa, looked round on the darkness, shivered, and rang for lights.

Her ring was answered by the same woman, whose face owed its stolid expression to two wide-open, blank-staring, light blue eyes, so full that they had no shade from the brow—and broad, rather than high, cheek-bones. Her gaunt form seemed so awkward, as she reached up to light the gas, that her dragging the table-cover sufficiently off to scatter the papers which Miss Austwick now, for the first time, was conscious she had dropped from her hand, was a result to be expected. She was, however, civil and diligent in picking them up and replacing them; the lady crushing them together eagerly in her hands as they were laid on the table, and inwardly thankful that it was not Martin's keen eyes that were ever so casually scrutinising them. Impatiently Miss Austwick watched the awkward creature make up the fire, which a chilly evening, as much as her illness, rendered very grateful. Suddenly she started forward a moment as a blaze passed up from the bars.

"What is that?"

"Only a bit of paper, ma'am, in the fender."

As the attendant thus answered, she was obeying the dismissing wave of Miss Austwick's hand, and, without lingering, left the lady to her contemplations. These consisted in reading over again and again the few letters, and piecing out the unmeaning, yet alas! not uncommon story: a girl induced to consent to a secret marriage, which involved the sin of deceiving her own friends, and the danger of being herself deceived—the speedy reaction of feeling on the part of the man—his plot, favoured by circumstances, to appear abroad with his brother's wife—his lie—the torn lines and broken ring, sent off in feminine rage—the coarse anger of relatives—the shame and madness closing the scene—the helpless survivors.

As the hour drew nigh at which she knew Martin would be sure to come to urge her mistress to take some refreshment, Miss Austwick gathered together the papers to replace them safely under her own seal. She missed one in counting them over, the most important one—the marriage record or certificate. She sat up instantly, shook the ends of her shawl, then rose to her feet, smoothed out the folds of her dress, looked carefully under the table and the sofa, searched and opened out the doubled-up memoranda over again. It was gone! At length, in a panic, she rang the bell. The same gaunt, impressive woman answered it.

"You have upset my papers from the table; there is one lost. Look for it instantly. No, don't call my maid: you look for it!"

The woman stared a moment, then knelt down on the floor, and went creeping carefully over the room, peering under the chairs: and in every corner in vain; the paper was not there.

"What can have come of it?"

At that moment, clear as the light that had startled her a little while ago, a thought flashed on Miss Austwick's mind.