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## THE FAMILY HONOUR.

BY MRS. C. L. BALFOUR.

Continued from page 325.

## CHAPTER XVI. FAMILY MEETINGS.

"But oh! mankind are unco weak,  
And little to be trusted;  
If self the wavering balance shake,  
It's rarely right adjusted." BURNS.

Any event that saved Miss Austwick the trouble of decision in the perplexity into which she had fallen was welcome; and therefore, when there came a letter announcing the speedy return of Mr. Basil Austwick and family to London for the winter, and containing a cordial invitation to her to accompany her niece home, she felt as if released for a time from the performance of her promise to her dead brother, and, shielded by intercourse with the younger branch of her family, from the possible annoyance of many more interviews just now with Burke. Annoyance not danger, was what she dreaded. As to the consequences of swerving from the beaten track, she had no fear, because, habituated to think that what she did was right, she could not clearly realise that she had diverged. It is only the humble and vigilant, who watch themselves with jealous care, who can plainly detect where the path gently curves, and leads them out of the straight road.

For some days all was bustle at the Chace, arranging for the departure of Miss Austwick and her niece; the former now added considerably to the wardrobe, which had been packed in a single portmanteau, and never since disturbed, in the hastily planned and abandoned journey for Scotland. At length—when the weather had completely broken, and the woods at Austwick, after three days' battling with stormy winds, were laying down their leafy banners in wet and faded heaps before the breath of the approaching conqueror, Winter—the old travelling-carriage was again on the road, and the ladies, with Martin inside, and the roof and rumble heavy with luggage, set off for town, leaving Mr. Gubbins in the undivided dignity of major-domo at the Hall, a position that sometimes brought him into such wrangling collision with Martin, that he did not greatly lament her departure—indeed, was so far propitiated, that when, as her parting injunction to her fellow-servant, the waiting-woman said, as she walked by his side through the passages to the hall, "Don't you let Mrs. Comfit interfere, she's quite superannuated—w' sending any more of her hangers-on, or her nieces, or their cousins into the family. Gracious me! they're as thick, them Comfits, as limpets on a rock. When Betsy's married—and, goodness knows, she's talked long enough about it—you take and get somebody as is expatriated; no more of your marrying minxes, a-hupsettin' everybody; mind that, Gubbins."

"Ay, ay; trust me. I'll have a staid 'un; I've heard of one."

"Not out of the village, Gubbins, surely?"

"Village, indeed! no, from Southampton; a north-country 'oman."

"Well, well, I'm sorry I didn't see her, so as to have spoke to missus—about it. But you can do all right."

"I should think I could by this time o' day. You mind as you does likewise."

That same evening saw the party arrive, not a little tired, from a journey that they might have performed in a third of the time, if Miss Austwick had not yielded to her prejudices. However, she had the dignity, as a compensation for a headache, of driving up to her brother's house in Wilton Place with all the stateliness of smoking posters, soaking wet postillion, and mud bespattered carriage.

The family had arrived a day previously; and as it was within half an hour of dinner-time, and Mrs. Basil Austwick had expected her sister-in-law and daughter by train earlier in the day, she had given them up, and was comfortably making her toilet, which even when they dined *en famille* was elaborate, when the commotion in the house announced the arrival. Her vexed comment as she ascertained the fact—

"Posted to London, Absurd. In that lumbering Noah's Ark, with the Austwick arms duly blazoned—idiotic!"

After which pithy verdict she resigned herself quietly to her maid, who was braiding her hair and now and then measuring her mistress's features in the glass so as to keep herself *au courant* with her mood, as a skilful waiting-woman should.

Miss Austwick, on being shown to her chamber, did not omit to make her comment on the degeneracy of modern manners.

"No one to receive us!" said she, as she walked up-stairs.

"We have come, aunt, no doubt, at a different hour from that at which we were expected," apologised Gertrude, taking her aunt's hand as she entered her room, and lifting up her face to give her a welcoming kiss. "I am mamma's representative, you know."

"It was different, Gertrude, in my time," replied Miss Austwick, gravely; and yet returning the welcome of her niece, and dismissing her to her own room.

Martin dressed her mistress in what she afterwards described as "hasty pudding fashion—all boil and stir."

It must be owned, if that was the effect on the maid, a very different result seemed to be attained by the mistress. She was more cold and rigid than ever when she entered the drawing-room, clad in the stiffest of mourning silks, and manacled with the largest of jet chains, crape lappets, like bat's wings, falling from her head.

A tall lady attired in a silver-grey slip, with a black net dress over it, and a pearl comb in her hair, came forward to meet her. There was a twinkle of derisive laughter latent in the eyes. These eyes and very fine teeth gave a distinguishing charm to a face not otherwise beautiful. But no one noticed whether the mouth was too wide or the cheek-bones too high, when the undoubted brilliancy of the face flashed forth; and even if the defects of decidedly coarse features were noted, a commanding figure compensated for all minor faults. Mrs. Basil Austwick was always spoken of as a "very fine woman." It must be owned Miss Austwick did not by any means thaw as her sister-in-law said—

"You must be dreadfully tired; I quite feel for you, so long upon the road. We landed yesterday, and came from Dover in three hours—full twice the distance that it is from the Chace. I'm quite sorry for your fatigue—and poor little True, I have not yet seen her—has she been obliged to go to bed?"

"I am here, mamma, not a wink of sleep in my eyes, I assure you," said Gertrude, who had followed her aunt into the room, and been for a minute obscured from notice by that sable cloud.

"Ah, I did not see you, *petite*—that's no wonder; one must search, rather than merely look for you."

Gertrude made no other answer than taking her mother's hand—a white, jewelled hand—fondly in hers, and stooping over to kiss it; for the lady stood so elaborately upright, that any other embrace was not easy. However, she looked down pityingly, rather than proudly on the little creature whose fair curls, as she bent her head, were falling over the hand she was caressing. Mrs. Basil Austwick, raising her other hand, laid it a moment on the curls and then turning up the face, and holding it by the chin as one does a child's, perused it for a moment, and, bending lower than was needful, touched her forehead lightly with her lips, saying—

"You keep your likeness, True, to the little old dame, Grace Austwick: you do not grow out of it."

"Grow! no, True does not out of anything," said rather a plethoric voice. A stout comely gentleman stepped up to Miss Austwick as he spoke, and greeted her very cordially, his eyes glancing over her very deep mourning, and as he looked, after a moment, saying rather to her dress than to herself—

"Couldn't get home to the funeral. Should have liked to show the last respect to him poor fellow. Fortunate he saw you."

"True is waiting for papa's welcome," said