

## HIDDEN DEPTHS.

(BY PERMISSION.)

## CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued).

"Is there no chance of Mr. Thorold's coming?" she said, turning anxiously to Mrs. Berry, who was standing near, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"He's sure to come, my dear lady, the moment he goes home and gets the message; but he's out among the sick and poor somewhere, and no one can tell where to find him or when he will be back."

"Well, you must not stay here, dear nurse, at all events," said Ernestine, who saw that the good woman was feeling faint and ill. "I shall not leave Annie, and you must go and lie down. I will call you if I want you."

"I'll go to poor Ellen, then, for she is wonderful timid at the thought of death in the house. She says she's been such a sinner, it scares her; and she can't bring herself to come near the room, for all she's so fond of Annie."

"Yes, go and make her take care of you." But as she went to the door to close it after Mrs. Berry, Annie thought she was going away, and shrieked out,—

"Miss Courtenay are you going to leave me to die alone, and go our before God with all my sins upon my head? Oh, why won't you help me? Don't you see I am dying; and every wicked thing I've ever done is written on the wall there in letters all of fire; and I'm obliged to see it; I'm obliged to read it. I tell you it's dreadful. And then, there's the Lord Christ dying on His cross, and me flaunting pass Him, laughing and mocking. What did I care? I took my pleasure, and let Him suffer in vain for me. O Miss Courtenay, you have done your best for me; but I'm lost. I'm lost!" Only exhaustion made her pause for a moment, but the restless glancing of her eyes never ceased for an instant, or the convulsive clenching of her hands. She was beginning to cry out again with her despairing words, but Ernestine forcibly took the trembling hands in hers, and compelled her to turn her glance on her.

"Annie, listen to me," she said; "I have one word to say, which you must hear. Listen to me quietly now for a moment." Annie's eyes rested on hers, and she saw that, for the time at least, she was giving her full attention, and slowly and solemnly Ernestine said: "The Lord Jesus Christ declared, 'I am come into the world to seek and to save that which was lost.' Do you hear me, Annie? He came to save that which was lost."

"Lost!" repeated Annie slowly. "Lost! and who so lost as I am?" She remained silent a moment; then over the bright, flashing eyes there gathered a mist of tears.

"Oh, is it possible, that me, even me! so lost, He would seek and save?" She drew her hands out of Ernestine's grasp, and folded them together as she had been taught to do when a little child, she repeated her evening prayers, and in a trembling voice she said,—

"Lord Jesus, I am lost indeed; oh, seek and save me, even me Lord Jesus!" Then she remained perfectly still, her eyes closed, and tears slowly coursing down her cheeks, now grown deadly pale. Ernestine remained kneeling at her side in perfect silence. At last Annie whispered softly,—

"Do you think the Lord Jesus would like to save me?"

"I am sure He would, my child."

"But so bad as I have been?"

"His love is greater even than your sin, Annie."

Then there was silence again for a long time. The terrible restlessness was gone. The feverish flush had died away. The calm which often precedes death had set in; and, but for her laboured breathing, it would have seemed

as if the struggle were already over, so like a marble statue did she seem, with her closed eyes and her unearthly whiteness. Once only she spoke during this interval,—

"Do you think Mr. Thorold will come and give me the sacrament now?"

"I hope so, dear Annie; we have sent for him; he was out, but he will come the moment he gets the message."

"Too late!" she said, with a quiet movement of the head. "He will be too late. But it is only just I should not have it now; I refused it so often."

Then she relapsed into silence. So passed some hours. Sometimes Ernestine thought she slept; at other times her lips moved as if in prayer; but her breathing was growing perceptibly fainter, and it was plain that death was very near. Ernestine knelt, with her back to the door, looking sorrowfully on the white, sad face, and feeling as if she ought to be speaking some words of comfort to her; while at the same time she dared not break in upon a silence in which the departing soul might be listening to the very voice of God. Suddenly she saw Annie start as if she had received an electric shock. Her eyes opened wide, clear and bright as in her fairest days, and fixed themselves intently on the door, which had opened a moment previously, though Ernestine had been too much absorbed to hear it. The powers of the girl's failing life seemed to rush over her sinking frame once more. She gazed towards that spot with a smile of ecstasy, and stretching out her arms, exclaimed,—

"*You are come!* Oh, God be praised, who has heard my prayer! You are come, that I may tell you I forgive you with all my heart, with all my soul, as I pray the dear Lord may forgive me too. Come to me; come to me quick. I have but a moment, and I want to take back the bitter words I have said against you; let us part in peace, though you wronged me so cruelly, who loved you so well."

Ernestine was utterly astonished at the sudden outburst, and at the strange words Annie uttered, and for a moment she almost thought her delirious; but it was evident from her look she was indeed addressing some one actually present, and turning quickly round to see who it was, she gave a suppressed shriek, while her heart seemed to stop beating, and she felt as if turned to stone. It was Hugh Lingard who was standing there in the doorway, with a look of horror and dismay on his face such as no words can paint, while his eyes were fixed on the dying girl with unmistakable recognition; his arms fell slowly to his sides, and the one word, "Rosie!" escaped involuntarily from his lips. In a moment Ernestine saw it all. The truth flashed upon her soul in all its details, with that irresistible conviction which seems almost like an inspiration from heaven. She knew in that moment, with a terrible knowledge which could never pass away from her, that the destroyer of this child, whom God had sent her to seek throughout the world, was that very man who was dearer to her than life itself, and in whom her whole earthly happiness was bound up only too fatally. It was like the shock of an earthquake to her thus to learn that the truth and goodness, in which she had believed so fondly as being his special characteristic, had in fact never existed. Kneeling as she was, she had to catch hold of the bed to keep herself from falling, for there was a mist before her eyes, and a roaring as of thunder in her ears; but through it all she caught the tones of Annie's voice, fainter than before,—

"Oh, why will you not come to me? I am going fast. Why do you look at me so? I could not live any more in this world. But come quick. I want to ask God to forgive you. My breath is failing. Come."

Her faltering words died away. Her breathing came in long gasps, and Ernestine, forcing herself to look up, saw that an awful change was passing over her features. There was no time to be lost. No earthly thoughts or human feelings must stay the work of charity in that supreme moment. She rose up and went towards Lingard, who