

brought home so forcibly to her mind. If there were to be any distinction in the sin, the punishment, and the degradation of Annie Brook and her betrayer, surely the heaviest burden should fall on the mature man of the world, and not on the frail, ignorant child, who knew neither trial nor temptation till he lured her from the shelter of her father's roof.

CHAPTER X.

LADY CARLETON'S DECISION.

It was with ineffable satisfaction that Mrs. Craven heard next morning of Ernestine's intention to visit Lady Carleton, although assured that she did not intend to spend more than an hour at the Hall. This was sufficient to enable the anxious chaperon to mention the fact before the innkeeper, in such terms as should convince that functionary that Miss Courtenay's proper abode had been in the aristocratic mansion, and not in his own ignominious dwelling.

"So distressing to reflect on what he must have thought of us!" she said to Ernestine.

"Who?—the innkeeper?" Ernestine answered, laughing. "I cannot say I have reflected about him at all; but now I shall go at once to Lady Carleton, as I am anxious we should start for Greyburgh in time to reach it to-night. I have not heard from Reginald this morning as I expected, and I begin to fear he is seriously ill."

Ernestine found Lady Carleton at home, and to her great relief there was no one with her but her sister, Miss Verney, a lady *d'un certain age*, who was reported, according to the phraseology of her set, to have become "serious," since the fatal lapse of years had caused her matrimonial ambition to descend from the marquises and earls of her earlier hopes to the rectors and widowers, who were now, so far as she was concerned, the only game in season.

Lady Carleton received Ernestine with the utmost cordiality. Their previous acquaintance had been slight, but Colonel Courtenay had been very intimate at the Hall, where he at first met his wife; and it would have been music to Mrs. Craven's ears to have heard Lady Carleton's pressing invitation to Ernestine to stay and spend a few days with them.

"Thank you very much," said Ernestine, "but I have only an hour to spare. I must hasten on to Greyburgh to see my brother Reginald, who is ill. My object in coming here to-day was to ask you a great favour," she added, looking up into the calm, expressionless face that was turned towards her.

"I trust I may be able to do anything you wish," said Lady Carleton.

"I am afraid the subject is one which may be disagreeable to you," said Ernestine, colouring painfully, "but my request may really involve the whole future welfare of a very unhappy person."

"Going to ask for a subscription," thought Miss Verney; "she need not come to me, while the dear Vicar of Dulton's new aisle is unfinished."

"I have heard," Ernestine went on, "through some very painful circumstances, of a young girl named Annie Brook, the daughter of one of your lodge-keepers, and it is on her behalf I have come to speak to you."

Lady Carleton's face grew rigid. "My dear Miss Courtenay, you cannot be in the least aware what sort of a person this individual is, or you would certainly not wish to mention her to me or to any one."

"I know too well what she is," replied Ernestine; "and it is because the strongest efforts are about to be made to rescue her out of her dreadful life, that I come with a request to you. If these efforts should succeed," she went on hurriedly, "if she should become truly repentant, and only anxious to hide from those who have known her

otherwise, will you allow her father to give her a shelter in his house again? He is quite willing to take her, if you do not object."

"If Brook leaves my service, he will naturally do as he pleases. I shall have no control over him. Of course, you do not propose a person of bad character venturing within a lodge on our property?" said Lady Carleton, with the utmost stiffness.

"Only if she were altogether penitent and changed, wishing nothing but to live a humble, unnoticed life. Brook cannot give up his situation without bringing his other children to want and misery, so that if he received her at all, it must be here; and it would seem too cruel to refuse her the shelter of her father's roof, if she were seeking to fly from a life and a future so dreadful as hers is now."

"Are you aware, Miss Courtenay, that Brook's lodge is actually within our own gates, inside the park, and that my sister and I and our guests sometimes take shelter there from a shower of rain?"

"But you need hold no intercourse with this poor child," said Ernestine eagerly; "and, after all, how many there are whom we meet in society, at least among me, whom we have far more reason to shun than a miserable girl who has been the victim of such as they are!"

It was with something more than coldness that Lady Carleton answered now, "Miss Courtenay, I am really totally unaccustomed to discussions on subjects of this nature."

"Had I not better leave the room?" interrupted Miss Verney, rising with an air of injured innocence.

"Pray do nothing of the kind, Laura," said Lady Carleton hastily; "Miss Courtenay will not, I am sure, continue so very unpleasant a conversation. I do not know from what theories you may draw your ideas," she added, addressing Ernestine, "but mine are those which have been always received in society, and I can in no way depart from them; allow me to decline pursuing the subject further."

There was nothing more to be said, and after a few constrained speeches on indifferent subjects, Ernestine rose to go.

The cold politeness with which the ladies who had received her so cordially now took leave of her was the first indication of the truth, which was to meet her at every turn, that she could not unscathed run counter to the opinion of the world how ever false and godless that might be. Ernestine was not indifferent to the painful knowledge thus acquired. No one, especially no woman, can brave the censure of the class to which she belongs, without being made to feel it keenly; nor does the righteousness of the cause which has made her depart from received opinion prevent her from growing daily more sensitive to the blame she has provoked. She may be, as Ernestine was, too unselfish to forsake the truth and the right, because her defence of it brings the world's contumely on her head; but the harsh judgment that will assail her, the unworthy motives that will be attributed to her, the misconceptions and exaggerations which her every action will call forth, must gradually make her shrink more and more into herself, till she finds herself happiest in the isolation to which she has involuntarily exiled herself. As yet Ernestine anticipated nothing of this, nor of far deeper pangs which her present course was one day to cost her; and she tried to shake off the feeling of humiliation and wounded pride which her interview with Lady Carleton had left on her mind. The sight of Brook's lodge was efficacious at once in chasing away all thoughts of self. As she drew near it she could see that he was standing, hidden, as he thought, by the muslin curtain of the lattice window, watching her eagerly as she came down the avenue. She felt he was waiting to see if her errand had been successful, and if he might take home the lost child towards whom his indifference had been so much more