

money to another lodge-keeper. There's many a one would be glad to step into my shoes—ay, and many a one watches to see me make a false move, that they may get into them."

"But Lord and Lady Carleton would never object to your receiving your daughter, if she were really penitent, and came to your house only to seek a shelter from sin and temptation."

"Would they not? Did they not send and tell me when Lois went, and again when Annie left, that if ever one or the other of them was seen within the park gates I should be turned out without a day's notice? Did not Mrs. Brace, the housekeeper, in her silks and satins, bring me the message herself, and sit there as proud as a peacock, toying her head and speaking of my girls as if she would not touch them with a pair of tongs, let alone my lady? And I'd like you to tell me, ma'am," continued Brook, turning round and putting his elbows on the table, while he looked full at Ernestine with a strangely sinister expression,—“I'd like you just to tell me how it is, that among you gentlefolks what is thought a shameful sin in a poor girl is neither a sin nor yet a shame in a fine gentleman? At the very time Mrs. Brace brought me my lord's and my lady's message, Colonel Courtenay, the grand, swaggering colonel that ruined my pretty Lois, was staying at the Hall courting my lady's niece, Miss Julia Trevor; and who so civil to him as my lord, and who so pleased to see him as my lady? And they knew just as well as I did that my child's ruin lay at his door, and that his sin was the same as hers, to say the least of it,—for I take it his was something the blackest of the two,—anyhow, the one was as bad as the other; but she was not to dare to show her face within her father's door, at the risk of bringing us all to the work'us, while he was to ride with my lady in her carriage, and sit with my lord at his table, and have the whole house at his beck and call like master and more." Brook paused a moment, still looking fixedly at Ernestine, and then said, "Ma'am, our parson tells us that God Almighty knows all things: I should just like to know whether He knows these things, and if He does, what He thinks of them?"

Ernestine bent down her head, unable for the moment to make him any answer, so keenly did the truth of his words strike home to her sense of right. She had felt her brother's guilt heavily enough, as her present conduct testified, and the general injustice of the world in the matter had struck her, as she stood by Lois's dead body; but the whole dreadful subject was of course entirely new to her, and it was the first time that her eyes had been opened to the practical working of the conventional law which visits sins of this description without mercy on the woman, the weaker sinner, while it leaves honoured and unscathed the man who has destroyed her. Ernestine shuddered as she thought how these things would appear when weighed in the balance of immaculate justice, but she had too much conscientious courage to gloss over the truth now, even to the hard man before her. She looked up at him with her candid eyes, and said: "It is a most cruel injustice; but you may be certain it is one which is hateful in the sight of the righteous God, and for which He will surely require us to give account in our final trial. I still think, however, that Lady Carleton would not refuse to let you give your daughter Annie a shelter, if she were really penitent; now especially, when poor Lois can claim no more pity from either her or you. At all events I will see her to-morrow and try to gain her consent, provided you will promise me that if she does agree, you will not persist in your refusal to give the poor child a home."

"It is of no use to ask her, ma'am; you may save yourself the trouble."

"Still I may succeed; only say that if I do, and if I can bring Annie back to you, you will receive her."

"Well, if you would take her by the hand, so that folk should not think she was altogether lost, I won't say but

what I might," said Brook; "but there—it is no use thinking of it. I know well enough what your answer will be at the Hall."

"Still I have your promise," said Ernestine, rising, "and I thank you sincerely for it, as indeed for your patience in listening to all I had to say. One question more I must ask: can you give me any idea where Annie is now?"

"None at all; I know nothing of her," said Brook, relapsing into his sullen manner.

"Then she has never written to any of you?" asked Ernestine.

"She knew better than to do that," said Brook. "She'd have her letter back just as she sent it. No, the last I can tell you of her is this: she stood there the night afore she left us, as pretty and innocent a little maid as ever you'd wish to see. She stood there looking at me, and I could see tears in her eyes, and I thought she were fretting because I had spoken a bit sharp to her for loitering about the gate; but I little thought she was giving just these few tears to the father and the home she would never see again."

"Oh, don't say never!" exclaimed Ernestine. "I must hope she may yet return to be a comfort to you, and all the more dutiful, because she has once fallen so far. If I succeed with Lady Carleton, I will come and tell you; if you do not see me, you will know I have failed."

"I shall not see you," said Brook determinedly.

"In that case I must do the best I can for Annie without your help; but I hope better things from Lady Carleton."

Ernestine then took her leave, bending so tenderly over the children as she bade them farewell, that both Brook and his wife seemed touched. He took off his hat as he opened the gate for her, with a degree of genuine respect, which was very different from the conventional civility he usually showed to visitors at the Hall. Ernestine had gone some way down the road, when she heard a rapid step behind her, and turning she saw Brook's wife hastening after her. She came up breathless.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but I think this may help you to find our Annie," she said, holding out a water-colour portrait of a young girl. "A lady who was staying at the Hall once thought her so pretty that she made this likeness of her, and her father can't a-bear to see it, so I hid it away, and never thought of it till you was gone."

"Oh! thank you," said Ernestine, taking it; "it will help me very much indeed. Is it really like her?"

"It is just her very self," said Mrs. Brook, "only it was the lady dressed her up with flowers that way; her father would never have let her wear them so." And taking leave once more, the woman went back to her cottage.

Ernestine stood looking at the drawing in the fast failing light; it was skilfully executed, and represented a girl not more than sixteen, with a sweet childish face, lovely in its look of happiness. Large eyes, of that limpid blue we see only in the early morning sky, sunny hair falling in bright waves from under a wreath of lilies of the valley, and lips parted in a smile of playful archness, combined to represent the very type of light-hearted innocence, and of girlish beauty undimmed by blight or shadow. As Ernestine gazed sadly on it, she felt her very soul rise up in indignation against the man who, in his selfish wickedness, had for ever marred this fair creation of the God of goodness, and darkened all that guileless loveliness with the ineffaceable stains of guilt and shame. That face, so bright with the sunshine of a soul unawakened yet to sorrow or to evil, was indeed blotted out from the very universe; since the best she could now hope for was to see one day those clear blue eyes looking sorrowfully out through penitential tears, and those smiling lips quivering with anguish, as they confessed the sin, repented bitterly, but never to be undone. It seemed to her a very marvel, that even the world's code of justice should impose on society so cruel a wrong as that which Brook's words had