

## HIDDEN DEPTHS.

(BY PERMISSION.)

## CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

"Mr. Thorold advised you to come here, did he? Then it's all right. He is a trump, he is; not one of your stuck up parsons, talking out of a book, stiff as a poker. Would you like to know what Mr. Thorold did once?" he continued veering round on his chair so as to face Ernestine. "There was a thundering blackguard here committed for manslaughter; he had hit a publican such a knock on the head that he killed his man then and there. Well, he was just like a devil when we got him in here. He knocked down one of the turnkeys, and squared up at me; only I had the handcuffs on him before he knew where he was, and it took the lot of us to get him into the blackhole."

"The blackhole?" said Ernestine, enquiringly.

"That's where we locks them up when they're rampagious; 'taint a pleasant place, I can tell. Well, he was a howling there like a hippopotamus" (it struck Ernestine that a howling hippopotamus was a curiosity in natural history, but made no comment). "and banging the door as if he'd have it down; and Mr. Thorold, he had come in to see one of the other prisoners. 'What's that?' says he to me when he heard the row. I told him. 'Now Bolton,' says he, 'I'll tell you what: you're going to let me into the black hole to speak to that man.' 'Lord bless you, sir,' says I, 'you must not think of such a thing; why he'll tell you like an ox.' 'Not a bit of it,' says he; 'come, you take and open the door for me.' 'Just as you please,' says I, for I could not help liking his pluck; 'but if you once goes in you'll have to stay there an hour, for I've got to go out, and I can't give the key of the black hole to no one.' 'All right,' says he; 'I'll stay.' 'But I must lock you up,' says I. 'Lock me up,' says he; and so I did; and whatever he did to the fellow I can't tell you, but I went back in an hour's time and the prisoner was sitting on the floor, crying like a baby, and Mr. Thorold was leaning over him, comforting him as tender as might be."

"I am very glad you have told me that, Mr. Bolton," said Ernestine, "for I like to think there are such people in the world."

"There's not too many of them," said the goaler, nodding his head sentimentously. "Well now, your business, ma'am?"

"It is just this: I want to find a young girl who has gone astray in Greyburgh. Her name is Annie Brook. I have never seen her, but I have her picture; and Mr. Thorold said that even if she were not amongst the prisoners here, you or some of the women might recognize it."

"It's very likely; let's have a look at it."

Ernestine gave him the sketch of the pretty smiling face, with the waving hair and the wreath of flowers. The old man looked at it long and earnestly.

"I have seen this face," he said at last; "but not in here. I have seen it in the streets. She is new to the trade most probably, and has not been took up yet."

"And do you think you can help me to find her?" said Ernestine, eagerly.

"We'll find her, if she is in Greyburgh, ma'am, I'll be bound. They all find their way here sooner or later; but we'll try if the girls know her; it's pretty sure they do, if she is one of their sort."

"I fear there is little doubt she is," said Ernestine.

"Then you'll not expect to see her look like this?" he said, pointing to the sweet, innocent face in the sketch. "She'll have got a bit more brazen before now, you may depend. Here missus," he shouted, and a fat old woman came waddling into the room at his call. "This here lady wants to go and see the gals; give me your keys, and I'll take her in myself."

"Going to see the gals, are you, ma'am?" said Mrs. Bolton. "Ah! you'd not take a step to see them, if you had as much of them as I have. I am a'most out of my mind with their cantrips."

"A val-ay-able woman that, ma'am," said the goaler, drawing himself up and flourishing his hand towards his wife; "five years older than I am, and I'm no chicken, and to see how she cuts about after these vixens, it is a beautiful sight, ma'am, beautiful! The experience I have had in the female sex since I came within these walls is wonderful; you wouldn't credit it. I thought when I came here that women were all made of cheeny and glass; but, bless you! I have had reason to change my opinion. There's some of them it would be worse to meet than a roaring lion, when their blood's up. Why, I had a woman here, six feet in her stockings' des, committed for trying to ram a red-hot poker down her husband's throat, and he a corporal six feet two. She said she had warned him of her sentiments about his staying out after dark, and she made his tea every blessed night with the poker heating in the fire for him, till she caught him tripping, and then she was at him like a Philistine. But here are the keys, ma'am. This way."

He rose, keys in hand, and marched in front of her, while Ernestine followed, thinking, with no small amusement, how Hugh Lingard would laugh at the new lights she was gaining in her present adventures. They passed through a heavy door, turning on a pivot, into a dreary stone passage, and having traversed various parts of the building, all gloomier and colder than any thing Ernestine had ever imagined, they reached a small paved court yard surrounded by high walls, where the female prisoners had just been turned out to exercise. The governor told Ernestine as they went on that the women who were sent there by the university authorities were always kept apart from those committed for theft or other offences, and therefore that, all now before her were of that doomed class. For a moment Ernestine shrank from raising her eyes to any of them, but, conquering the painful feeling which appressed her, she turned towards them with a gentle, imploring look, which would have told them, could they have read it aright, how much she hoped they would not suppose she had come there to scorn and humble them, and compare the honor and purity which shielded her own life with the unspeakable degradation of theirs.

Some eighteen or twenty women were before her, of all ages, from the hard, callous-looking woman of more than thirty to the mere child of fourteen. All possessed at least some trace of the beauty which had been at once their treasure and their curse; but in not one, even the youngest, was there the least remains of the freshness, the innocence, the frankness of youth and girlhood. It seemed to Ernestine as if they belonged not only to a distinct class, but to a separate race. Gathered as they were from different parts of the country, there was in one and all of them the same restless, unsatisfied expression, the same quick impulsiveness, with a bright keenness of look like that of some wild animal whose life depends on the winning of difficult prey; nor had she been long in their presence before she saw that sudden bursts of wild gaiety diversified by intervals of sullen misery, characterized them all alike. Some there were, however, in whose eyes the lurking agony was more clearly visible than in others, while the younger girls seemed capable of keeping up, even amongst themselves, a reckless, mirthful excitement, which compelled oblivion of the darker thoughts that would one day overwhelm them altogether. Ernestine felt heart-sick as she gazed at them, for these were all human beings, whom even the world called "lost"; and were they indeed to be lost for ever? She was trying with her whole heart to save one of them, but were all these to be allowed to go their way without a hand stretched out to stay their perishing?

The appearance of a lady was evidently an unwonted sight, and the smallest event an excitement in their dreary