

had staggered against the wall, and covered his face with his hands.

"Is this true?" she said, in her low, sweet voice, which trembled as she spoke. "Is it indeed you who have need to ask her forgiveness?"

He let his hands fall and turned towards her,—

"It is true, Ernestine. God, in whom you believe, has brought this judgment on me."

"Then come as she wishes—come quick—she is expiring."

He looked towards Annie, and saw that it was so indeed. Her head had fallen back, her shadowy blue eyes were partly hidden beneath the white lids, and over her parted lips the breath was coming each moment fainter, like the heaving tide falling ever lower and lower on the shore it is deserting. Lingard rushed to the bedside, and, sinking on his knees, exclaimed,—"*Rosie, forgive me—forgive!*"

Slowly she turned her dim eyes with a last look of life towards him, and, with great difficulty, lifting one thin white hand, she let it fall on his head as if in token of pardon and blessing. It rested there for a few more awful moments, during which her dying breath still sighed into the silence; then suddenly a light broke over her face like morning on the distant hills; and with one low sob the spirit passed away from the worn and weary frame, and Annie Brook was beyond the reach of mortal ill.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHARITY SUFFRETH LONG, AND IS KIND.

Yes; Annie Brook was beyond the reach of mortal ill, but not so Ernestine Courtenay. The scorn of the world could never more bring the flush of shame to that cold white cheek, nor its cruel hate or deadly love rend the poor heart that lay so still beneath the hand of death; but life, with its terrible capacity for suffering, was strong in the sensitive, palpitating frame of her who now beside that quiet corpse was entering on a silent agony which could only terminate with actual existence on the earth.

Thorold came hurriedly into the room, almost immediately after Annie had breathed her last, and Lingard, hearing his step, rose up at once from his kneeling posture from the bed, and walked quickly to the door; but there he paused for a moment, and, turning round, he looked on Ernestine. Their gaze met, and though not a word was spoken, both knew that it was an eternal farewell which was passing between them; yet he saw there was not one shade of reproach in the sweet eyes that were looking their last on all that made life dear,—only mournful regret and anguish, which he rightly judged was far more for his sin than her own sorrow. He could not bear the sight; a spasm of pain contracted his features, and hastily turning from the room, he rushed downstairs, and Ernestine knew she would never look upon his face again. Thorold was astonished at his abrupt departure, for he had heard from Mrs. Berry that Mr. Lingard, finding that Miss Courtenay was detained to so late an hour, had come to escort her home; but when he turned and caught a glimpse of the dumb agony on Ernestine's face as she flung herself down by the dead body, with her hands clasped above her head, he understood it all. Very gently he asked her a few questions as to Annie's last moments, and she lifted up her head and answered him in a strange, half-stilled voice; then he bade her take comfort in the thought that she had been able to carry out her mission to the last, and that she might hope the poor lost wanderer, now lying before them with so quiet a smile on her pale face, was even then at peace at her plying Saviour's feet.

A faint light stole into Ernestine's mournful eyes, as he thus said the only words which could have given her comfort at that moment, and she looked up gratefully to him, but did not speak. Then he asked her if she wished any-

one to assist her in performing the last offices for Annie. She softly answered "No." He saw that indeed it was best for her at that moment to be alone with the dead, so he quietly withdrew, giving Mrs. Berry many directions for her comfort when she should have finished the last act of charity to her whom she had so long sought, and found at last, at the cost of all her own happiness on earth.

The glad sunshine of the early summer morning was pouring into the room when Ernestine began to compose the limbs of the dead, and spread over them the fair white linen, type of the wedding garment, which she trusted even this poor erring child might win from the tender mercy of the sinless Lord; and, as she saw that a new day had begun, a strange feeling took possession of her, as if she herself had died with Annie—died forever to the sweet life of the past, with its love and hope and joy, and as if the whole earth would henceforth be for her cold and dark as the grave, whither that dead form must descend. She seemed to be acting out in a mournful drama her own future existence, as she performed her last duties to the corpse. When she closed the eyes she felt that her own also could look no more on all that had been beauty and brightness to her in this world; and as she crossed the hands, in token of meek submission, on the lifeless breast, so she felt must she, in calm resignation, accept the death of hope and gladness in her heart, and only wait with Annie for the blessed resurrection, when the sorrows of earth would vanish like fleeting vapors in the light of the eternal day.

Very quietly she went through her task; only at times the bitter pain at her heart found vent in a choking sob. With a lingering tenderness she combed out Annie's fair hair till it fell like a golden shroud over the lifeless form, then she took a lovely white camelia from her dress, which Lingard had given her the night before, when, radiant with happiness, she had hurried to meet him, and laid it upon Annie's breast. She knew she had done with the flowers of life for ever. When all was finished, she kissed the marble brow, and, kneeling down, lifted up her whole soul in one earnest supplication, that she might be able to turn the love she still must feel for Lingard, while life lasted, into one long, unwearied prayer for him, that when he too should be a silent corpse upon the bed of death, his soul might win forgiveness from his God, as she trusted this his victim had; then she bowed her head on her hands, and said in a low, calm voice, "*Now, Lord, I am Thine alone!*" and so remained motionless, as if her spirit too had passed away to the land of perfect rest.

She found Mrs. Berry waiting anxiously for her appearance, when at last she left the death chamber. Thorold had desired that Miss Courtenay should not be disturbed, and the nurse had not ventured to disobey; but now, as she came forward to meet the lady, she started back, as much appalled as if, to use her own words, she had seen a ghost. And truly Ernestine might almost have passed for one, with her white dress shining in the morning light, her face perfectly colorless, and a shadowy look in her eyes, as if they saw nothing near, but were gazing into some far-distant realm, unseen by others. When Mrs. Berry spoke to her, there was a peculiar quietude in her manner, which never again left her; it was as though nothing which could now befall her would have power to wound her any more, and she were merely passing through the world, with her hopes and heart elsewhere.

"My dear, dear lady, you do look so ill! whatever can I do for you?" said Mrs. Berry. "The carriage is waiting for you; but I am sure you are not fit to go home."

"I am quite well, dear nurse. Don't distress yourself about me. But I must go; I have nothing more to do here now."

"But you have had no rest, my dear lady, and not a morsel of food."

"It will not hurt me." What indeed could hurt her now! "I do not want anything, dear nurse. Mr. Thorold