

HIDDEN DEPTHS.

(BY PERMISSION.)

CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

"And are there many imprisoned?"

"In term time there are often from twenty to thirty. I only wish," he added, clenching his hand, "that the university police would administer a somewhat more even justice, and imprison the men, who are a hundredfold more guilty than these wretched women."

"I am very glad to hear you say so," said Ernestine, "for I cannot understand the received code of opinion on that subject at all. You think, then, that I may find Annie Brook in the prison?"

"It is possible,—in any case, you are likely to get some clue to her. You say you have a portrait of her; I advise you to take it with you, and show it to the governor of the gaol. It is very possible he may recognize it; if not ask him to show it to the women imprisoned there, and if he is careful not to say for what purpose he does so, they will be sure at least to betray the name by which she goes at present; these girls scarcely ever retain their own name."

"But would they not be glad to tell all they knew of her to those who wished to help her?"

"Not if they thought there was any intention of persuading her to reform."

"How very strange! I should have thought that, however lost and wretched they might be, they would retain enough of humanity to be glad that a companion should be saved out of misery like their own."

"I fear it is a principle of human nature to feel it a relief to have companions in guilt, and to dread repentance in others, lest it awaken personal uneasiness of conscience. But there is a stronger motive in the case of these poor girls: the good people who have established 'refuges' and 'homes' for those who repent, have succeeded in making them so repellant and intollerable to them, that I believe they consider themselves to be performing an act of common humanity when they try to prevent any from being persuaded to enter them."

At this moment a considerable degree of noise was heard from the next room, and Mr. Thorold went hurriedly to the door.

"My populace is becoming clamorous," he said; "I must go."

"But pray tell me," said Ernestine, "how am I to gain admission to the goal?"

"You must have an order from a magistrate. I will get one for you, if you will tell me your name."

"You do not know my name," said Ernestine, looking up with a smile of amusement.

"How should I?"

"True; I was only thinking how surprised my aunt, who regulates most of my proceedings, would be if she knew I had been talking to you as I have done, without your so much as knowing my name."

He shrugged his shoulders. "These abstruse etiquettes of society are quite beyond me—I cannot away with them. Life is too short and too solemn to be clogged with such trammels as these. If you want to save a soul, and I am willing to help you, what can it signify to me whether you are a duchess or a dairymaid, or to you who I am, if you have reason to believe I am neither a ruffian nor an impostor?"

"I quite agree with you," said Ernestine, laughing; "and my aunt is not here to argue the point with you. My name is Ernestine Courtenay; and I am so much obliged to you for your kindness." He smiled as he looked keenly and searchingly at her for a moment, and

then, having arranged that he was to bring the order to her brother's rooms next day, he opened the door for her, and she passed out into the dark streets with her guide.

CHAPTER XIII.

REGINALD.

Reginald still lay in his deathlike sleep. Ernestine had decided to watch by him herself, at least for this night, that she might judge of his state more fully; and Mrs. Berry, after hearing, with great satisfaction, that Mr. Thorold had proved quite as helpful as she had prophesied, took her leave, promising to return early in the morning. Ernestine sat down by her brother's side, feeling that she could with her free heart give him her undivided attention, now that a hopeful step had been taken on behalf of Annie Brook. But while he slept her thoughts flew away to the one who was dearer to her than even the dying brother, or than all the world beside—the one to whom she had given the love that can be felt but once in a lifetime, and which is a terrible thing to feel on this earth at all; for the exceeding preciousness with which it invests one perishable human being, to whom each day brings the chance of sickness and death, sorrow and danger, makes such a love an agony rather than a blessing. They who so love must ever drink deeply of the cup of trembling; but at times there will arise in their hearts a nameless terror, a sickening anxiety for the future, whose brightness all depends on this one cherished treasure, which often proves a foreboding of some real anguish looming in the distant hours. It was so on this night with Ernestine Courtenay. She did not wonder that, in the darkness of the quiet sick-room, her heart seemed to go out to Hugh Lingard with a tenderness almost mournful in its depth; it was often so when she was parted from him, but on this occasion she was oppressed by a vague yet most painful feeling that she had somehow separated herself from him to a certain degree,—that she had begun to raise a barrier between them which would ultimately shut him out from her for ever. She argued with herself on the unreasonableness of such shadowy fears. It was with his full consent that she had come to Greyburgh. She was going to write to him the next day, as she had promised, with a detail of all she had done as yet in her mission. The very last words they had said to each other had been to arrange that their marriage should take place in the course of a few months. Yet, do what she would, her spirits sank under the weight of an undefined conviction, that she had entered upon a path, which, by some means, would lead her far away from the one being to whom she clung with all a woman's passionate devotion.

She was roused from her dark thoughts by Reginald, who suddenly started out of his heavy sleep with a cry of indescribable terror. He flung out his arms, beating the air with his helpless hands, while his large black eyes opened to their fullest extent, and gazed into the darkness with a vacant stare.

"Not yet—not yet," he shrieked out. "No! I cannot go—I cannot. Help, oh, help me!"

In a moment Ernestine was kneeling at his side with her arms clasped round him. "Reginald, darling, what is it? There is no one here but me, Ernestine, your sister. Look at me, dearest; don't be afraid."

His hands fell on her shoulders, the wildness passed from his eyes, and he looked down at her with returning consciousness; but she could feel his whole frame trembling from head to foot. "Ernie," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "is the dreadful hour come? Must I go? Is this death?" and he literally shuddered.

"No, my darling," she said soothingly; "you are only faint. Let me give you some wine; you will be better presently."