

"You must not only try, you must do it," said the lady very decidedly, and then Ernestine took leave of Annie, with a warm pressure of the hand and a few words of kind encouragement, to which the poor girl's sobs prevented her from making any answer. Ernestine caught the last look of her blue eyes wistfully turned towards her as the door closed, and she could not resist a final entreaty to the lady, to treat her with as much indulgence as she could one of so impressive and affectionate a disposition. "I forgot too to tell you that the doctor that wrote her certificate considers her in a very feeble state. He does not think she can live long."

"That is very likely," said the lady. "It has been proved by the statistics that the average length of these girls' career is from four to five years; but the good food and quiet of this house may do much for her."

Ernestine then quitted the refuge, knowing that she left Annie in safety for the present, and it was with a feeling of intense thankfulness that she looked back over all the difficulties she had surmounted, and felt that she had been thus far able to keep the pledge she had given to the dead.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CLOUDS BEGIN TO GATHER.

The month which followed this day of anxiety was one of such deep happiness to Ernestine Courtenay that the memory of it haunted her to the very of her death. She tasted then to the full the sweetness which the human heart can sometimes know even in this perishing world. Long after, when all the sunshine had faded out of her life, and existence lay around her like a dim landscape at eventide, where the shadows fall heavily on earth, and the only brightness is in the sunset gleam which seems to open a vista to the purer land, the thought of that little time of exquisite joy would come back to her, as in the gloom of a northern winter the recollections returns of the perfumes and beauty of a southern clime. She had no misgivings while the bright weeks were passing that it was happiness too great to last, nor did she seem to hear, as some have done, the footsteps of the coming sorrow, echoing down the long, dim aisles of the future. She gave herself up to the trusting love which filled her heart, and let it flood her whole being with its ineffable joys. There was not a shadow on the radiance with which it surrounded her; not a doubt, not a fear. The undercurrent sadness which the thought of both her brothers would ever leave for her beneath all the enjoyments of this world had not power to mar the intense personal happiness which she found in Hugh Lingard's love. He had from the first been passionately attached to her, but there was an inexplicable change in his bearing towards her, which was calculated to have the deepest charm for one so gentle and warm-hearted as Ernestine Courtenay. There was a tender reverence in his manner now, a loving devotion which was unwearied in seeking how to please her. He seemed to hang on every word she spoke, as if he longed to learn from her on all points, and to bring his very thoughts into accordance with hers, if that were possible. He did not now, any more than formerly, make professions of religious faith, and Ernestine's own convictions on that subject had greatly deepened since she had of late been brought so near to some of the great mysteries of the soul, in life and in death; but she had ever believed Hugh Lingard to be good, and pure, and chivalrous, as the kingdom of old, and she hoped now more than ever that he did hold a true religion in the hidden depths of his spirit, though he mistrusted himself too much to show it openly, and that it yet would find its full development in the life they hoped to lead together. In this she was deceived. Whatever change there was in Hugh Lingard had not sprung from clearer perception of the truth of God than that to which he had attained when she first became engaged to him.

Very little was said between on the subject of Annie Brook. Ernestine had fulfilled her promise of keeping Lingard *au courant* of her proceedings at Greyburgh, but of course the subject was one on which it was painful to her to speak; and after having told him that her mind was now at rest in the knowledge that the poor child was safe in the refuge, she said no more, and Hugh Lingard himself never alluded to the subject. Her account of Reginald's state of mind before his death confirmed him in his original belief, that it was as a victim of this young brother Ernestine had felt bound to grieve the girl over. Ernestine had purposely avoided giving Mr. Brown's name in any of her letters, as she thought it not unlikely, since he had been her brother George's friend, that Hugh might also have some slight acquaintance with him; and she was too honorable to reveal the dark secrets of a man's hidden life, acquired in such a manner. There was a vein of sadness in all Hugh Lingard said which touched very much and which she had never known in him before; but she, only labored the more earnestly to show how entirely she could care for his happiness when it became her first worthy duty. The preparations for their marriage were now going on rapidly, and had been fixed to take place in three months from the time of Ernestine's return to London. And so the golden hours floated on for Ernestine, brightened with sweetest hope, and precious already by the human sympathy which has so marvellous a charm for every living heart. Then suddenly came the first mutterings of the gathering storm, though she failed to perceive their import.

One day, when she was sitting alone in the drawing-room, her aunt having gone out, the mid-day post brought her a letter from the refuge. It contained the news that Annie Brook had the evening before made her escape from the home. She had, the writer stated, been gradually growing more and more restless, and had shown symptoms of rebellion against some of the rules, especially the "silence times." These, the writer explained, were periods during the day when entire silence was enforced on the penitents, as a form of discipline, and when they were required to perform their various duties in each other's society without the utterance of a single word. To this Annie had objected, on what the lady termed the "unreasonable ground" that "she could not bear her own thoughts." The half hour between 1 and 1.30 was divided between "mid-day prayers and recreation"—the only recreation allowed during the day—and on having been summoned from this brief respite to enter upon the afternoon "silence time," Annie had refused to obey. For this act of disobedience she was locked up in the "punishment room," and sentenced to remain there, on a diet of bread and water, till she was properly humbled. When visited in the evening it was found that she had made her escape through the window, at the risk of breaking her neck. Nothing had been heard of her since, and the letter concluded with the announcement that even if she were found, she could not again be received at the home, as Miss Courtenay would easily understand.

Ernestine's first impulse was to fling the letter from her, and clasp her hands in dismay, while something like a groan escaped her. Had it then been all in vain? Had all her efforts, her longings, her endurance, been useless after all? Was the unhappy child lost whom she had struggled to save from destruction? A pang of keen remorse shot through her heart: was it perhaps her own fault after all? She knew that Annie loved her, and she remembered how Thorold warned her, that human affection was almost the only influence which could be brought to bear on a heart still dead to the love of God: had she not too long neglected to use her power over that wayward soul? She had promised to go and see her; Annie had depended upon it; and she had let a month slip by in the golden light of her own deep happiness, which had seemed to hide from her charmed eyes all the darkness and sorrow