

## ONE LIFE ONLY.

## CHAPTER V.—Continued.

"He must have repented of his anger then, at the last, and wished Edwards to be convicted," said Una.

"So Dr. Burton thought, and every one else; but if it was so, Humphrey Atherstone did not act upon it. That is just one of his proceedings which people think so strange. The first thing he did, before his uncle had been dead a day, was to put an end to the whole affair, so far as Edwards was concerned; he paid the money himself to the bank on which the forged cheque had been drawn; declared at the trial that the matter had been explained by Mr. Atherstone before his death, and had Edwards liberated as speedily as possible. It is believed that he made it a condition with the Malay that he should leave the country at once, which the man did; but he very composedly left his wife and children behind him."

"Was Edwards married then?"

"Yes, I forgot to tell you; when he was quite young, not more than twenty, he married a handsome gipsy girl, whom he encountered in some of his vagabond expeditions. I believe old Mr. Atherstone was very much annoyed when he suddenly brought her home with him; but in spite of that he had the marriage ceremony repeated at the parish church here, in order to make sure that she was really his wife, and then he gave them a cottage on the estate, and was very kind to them. Humphrey Atherstone supported the family entirely during Edwards's absence; but I hear that the man has returned to this neighbourhood."

"What a very strange story it is altogether; but it seems to me, though the circumstances of old Mr. Atherstone's death were certainly very painful, that they contain no clue to the secret of the change which you say has taken place in his nephew since then."

"No, you are quite right, they do not, and that is just one of the reasons why people think there must be something wrong."

"Something mysterious there clearly is," said Una; "and I confess all you have told me makes me feel the greatest possible curiosity to see Mr. Atherstone."

At that moment a step sounded on the path which led along the river-bank, past the spot where Miss Northcote and Una were sitting, and as they looked up they saw a gentleman advancing rather slowly towards them.

He was a tall man, broad-shouldered and strongly built, but with an air of distinction and refinement, which prevented his somewhat massive proportions from giving him the least appearance of coarseness. He had a strikingly intellectual face, with an unmistakable look of power, and with strong indications of a passionate temperament in the dark, closely-meeting brows and the finely-cut nostril; his haughty, determined expression would have been almost repelling but for the wonderful softness of his large hazel eyes, and a certain sweetness in the curve of the lips—which, however, were scarcely to be seen under his thick black beard.

Lifting his hat to Miss Northcote as he came up to her, he showed a broad, well-developed forehead, bronzed with the sun, the effect of which was somewhat neutralised by the masses of dark hair that waved over it. Altogether, he was a remarkable-looking man, and one who would not have escaped notice even in a crowd.

Una observed with some interest the peculiar quietude of his manner and the vibrating tones of his deep voice, as he paused for an instant beside Miss North-

cote, and asked if he should find her father at home. She answered that he certainly would, as she had left him with Colonel Dysart, who was still, as she knew, at the Manor, whereupon, bowing silently, the gentleman passed on, and was very soon completely lost to sight among the trees of the park.

Will Northcote waited till his footfall had entirely died away, and then, lying back on the bank, she went into fits of laughter, from which she could not recover herself for some minutes.

Una sat watching her, much amused at her merriment, without having the least idea what was the cause of it, till at last Will composed herself sufficiently to speak.

"Never was a more opportune encounter," she said; "we need no longer have the slightest doubt to what class of beings the gentleman belongs, whose history I have been telling you. You know who it is that appears whenever people are speaking about him; even at the Cape of Good Hope you must have heard the proverb."

"Miss Northcote! you do not mean to say—" Una stopped, she could hardly have told why.

"I mean to say that you have just seen Humphrey Atherstone."

## CHAPTER VI.

It is not often that any of the inhabitants of this world are able to say that they consider it an entirely pleasant place to live in; but such was, undoubtedly, the conviction at which Una Dysart had arrived, after she had spent a little time longer at her new home in Valehead. She and her father speedily became, not only intimate, but thoroughly friendly with the Northcotes and Crichtons, and they were on terms of pleasant acquaintanceship with various other families; but it was with those, their first friends, that they chiefly associated.

They met constantly—riding out together, and spending the evening at each other's houses, and both Will Northcote and Lilith Crichton became very dear to Una. Will was, however, the one whose society she most enjoyed; she was so racy and original, so unfashionably honest and sincere, and so very much better in all essential good qualities than she chose to appear. With Lilith, though it was impossible for any one to know her without loving her, Una often felt a sense of awe and constraint, from the very extent of her child-like innocence and goodness, which seemed to make her unable even to understand the possibility of any compromise with evil. Happily her brother Hervey was quite pleasantly human, and he managed somewhat persistently to make his way to Miss Dysart's side, whenever and wherever he could succeed in catching a glimpse of her.

It chanced one especially bright warm day, however, that Colonel Dysart and his daughter were going to ride out alone together, and as they passed through the gates of Vale House, Una asked her father if there was any particular direction in which he wished to go.

"None whatever, my dear; I am quite at your service, and I conclude from your asking the question with such extreme politeness, that you have entirely made up your mind what we are to do."

"Yes, I have," she answered, laughing, "you are quite right; I want to go to Atherstone Abbey."

"What! to pay a visit uninvited to Mr. Atherstone? Would not that be rather an eccentric proceeding for Miss Dysart?"

"Possibly; but I do not mean to go near him. I only want to see the place; and Will Northcote told me that any one who leaves their card at the lodge can have leave to drive through the grounds, which are splendid, I believe, and also, if they

like, they may see the fine old house, where there is a good gallery of pictures amongst other attractions."

"That is very public spirited on the part of Mr. Atherstone; most English proprietors seem to grudge letting their beautiful parks be seen by any one but the rabbits and hares, and even those they shoot for their temerity. We will by all means profit by his benevolence, only we must not go to the house, Una; for I made his acquaintance the first day we went to Northcote Manor, and he said he should call upon me, but he has not appeared."

"What did you think of him? You have never told me, and people do spread such extraordinary stories about him."

"There is, undoubtedly, a strong prejudice against him in the county; but I saw nothing to justify it in the few minutes during which I conversed with him. There is, certainly, a rather peculiar reserve in his manner, and he looks proud enough to be descended from Lucifer himself; but he is a perfect gentleman, and he was very courteous and agreeable to me. You did not meet him, I think."

"Not at the house—he was gone before we came in; but I just saw him when I was out with Will."

"Northcote told me his history, and a strange enough one it is?"

"I heard it all from Will. Do you think he really has done anything wrong as people imagine?"

"It is hard to say. Northcote said Atherstone himself had told him that he considered himself in a sense guilty of his uncle's death, as he had driven the old man into the fit of rage which killed him; but I am sure I should have acted precisely in the same way with regard to the forger, with only this difference, that I should not have let him off as he did afterwards. I cannot conceive anything more intolerable than to be obliged, as Atherstone was, to associate continually with such an unmitigated scoundrel as that fellow Edwards seems to have been."

"Yes, and to see his uncle so miserably deceived by him, that must have been the worst of all; but let us go on a little quicker, father. I want to reach the place while the sun is still high, so as to get all the effects of light and shade on the grand old house."

They cantered on, and soon reached the nearest gate of Atherstone Abbey, which was not more than four miles from their own home. Here they found a very urbane lodge-keeper, who was quite willing to let them enter, and just as the heavy iron gates rolled back and they rode in, a horseman came at a hard gallop down the avenue towards them, whom they perceived to be none other than Mr. Atherstone himself. He was riding the powerful black horse, of which Una had heard already, and when he saw his visitors he checked him so suddenly as almost to throw him back on his haunches, which movement had the effect of making Miss Dysart's fiery little steed execute a sort of fancy dance, that might have proved very inconvenient to a lady with a less firm seat than her own. Atherstone started forward as if to come to her assistance; but Colonel Dysart, who was watching his daughter, made him a sign to leave her to herself, and he soon saw that she was perfectly mistress of her position, and knew how to manage her horse and quiet his excitement, both with grace and skill. Her hat fell off in the process, however, and her bright beautiful face, with her long hair waving round it in the wind, seemed to Humphrey Atherstone the most charming picture he had ever seen. She completed the conquest of her impatient horse by giving him a run on the turf at the side of