

STILL AND DEEP.

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"ONE LIFE ONLY," ETC.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Sally, the red-cheeked housemaid of Chiverley Rectory, had one great virtue to which possibly her healthy complexion might be attributed; she was an early riser; and on the following morning, even the summer dawn—so swiftly overtaking night—had scarce filled the sky with crimson light, when she was already to be seen on her hands and knees, busily engaged in cleaning the steps at the front door. In the course of this operation she was suddenly startled by hearing a step coming along the hall at that untimely hour, when, generally speaking, all the inmates of the house were buried in slumber. She looked up, to see Mr. Pemberton, with a face almost livid in its paleness, and with dark lines under the eyes that evidently had been sleepless all night; he had a travelling bag in his hand; and Sally rose to her feet feeling terrified, she scarce knew why; he had always been civil and kind to her, and she had a great respect for him, and felt pained to see how dismally ill he was looking.

"I hoped to find you here, Sally," he said; "I want you to do me a service. Will you tell Mr. Wyndham from me that I have been obliged to go away very suddenly, and that I will write to him fully on the subject in a day or two? My luggage is all ready packed in my room, and I should be much obliged if you would have it sent to the station by the carrier. Good-bye, Sally. I wish you well!" and he gave her a piece of gold, which she almost dropped in her dismay.

"Dear heart, Mr. Pemberton!" she exclaimed; "surely you are not going away for good, you as has been one of the family, so to speak, for such a time; the house would seem quite strange without you."

"Yes, Sally, for good or for evil, I am going right away; no one will ever see me here any more!" and shaking her rough hand, he went past her down the steps, through the shrubbery to the gate, and then took the road that led direct to the station. It was a lovely morning, with exquisite freshness in the air, and dewdrops glittering on every blade of grass; but John Pemberton walked with his head bent, feeling unworthy so much as to raise his eyes to the pure cloudless sky, for he counted himself nothing less than a renegade from the true fealty and devotion he had once vowed in such sincerity to his crucified Lord. "I will arise and go to my Father!" he had said to himself that night, when all the piteous record of his faithlessness seemed to have been rolled out before him; but he did not feel that he could dare approach even to that most merciful God, until, by some hard service, some sharp discipline, he had proved himself now to be sincere, with a deathless truth, which no human hand could touch or mar. The first step as surely was to put away from himself for ever the sight of that face whose bewitching beauty had beguiled him to such fatal loss; and though he knew it would be like tearing asunder the very heartstrings to leave the roof which sheltered Laura, he resolved that the morning sun should not find him still within the walls of her home. Like Lot fleeing from the city on which the vengeance of God had been denounced, John Pemberton went his way for the last time from Chiverley; but the thought that bowed his head with shame, and held back his soul when it would have risen

in swift progress to God, was the bitter knowledge that he only left Laura now when she was already lost to him, that it was too late for him to make the sacrifice of her love for the dear Lord's sake; he had been put to the test, and failed, and never more perhaps would the opportunity be given him of making a worthy sacrifice to the cause of his Divine Master. Thankful he might be, and was, that the strong hand of his God had plucked him out of the snare in which his feet were set, and flung him down, wounded and bleeding, where he was free to turn once more to holiness and truth; but the power to give the first fruits of his young heart freely to his Master was gone beyond recall, for they had all been lavished on one who was false to her God as she had been to him. And so it was that on this fair summer morning John Pemberton walked away from that fatal house, heart-stricken and ashamed, with all the beauty and glory of his life left from him for ever by the selfish cruelty of a heartless and designing woman. Well for him that He who bade us forgive until seventy times seven is ever watching for the wandering son's return, and, a thousandfold more merciful than man, is ready to crown his faintest aspirations with a love that cannot deceive or fail.

Sally delivered her message to Mr. Wyndham when the family were seated round the breakfast-table, which he received in blank astonishment. He was too apathetic and depressed ever to take note of what was going on in his household, and he did not in the slightest degree connect John Pemberton's unexpected flight with Laura's intended marriage. His wife, woman-like, was quicker-witted, and she said, with unusual energy, "I do hope John Pemberton has not left us altogether; we cannot afford to lose a pupil."

Bertrand, meanwhile, was looking at Lurline with no very pleasant expression of face. He had never been able to divest himself thoroughly of an uneasy suspicion that she had not dealt fairly with the young man, whom she chose to call her brother; and as he glanced from her to Mary's sweet, pure face, he could not help reflecting how impossible it would have been for him ever to have had such a suspicion of her. So soon as breakfast was over he drew Lurline out into the garden alone with him.

"Tell me the truth, Lurline," he said, with much greater sternness of tone than had ever been used to her before; "can you assure me that your past conduct with John Pemberton has had no share in his sudden departure?"

"Oh, you darling Bertrand!" she exclaimed, flinging herself upon his arm in the most caressing manner, and clasping both her hands round his, "can you not understand that the poor fellow loved me too tenderly, whether as a brother or not, to be able to see me with complacency wholly monopolised by you. I dare say he was afraid he would not always be as cordial to you as he would wish to be to my future husband, so he thought it best to go away for a time, till he got accustomed to the change. I think he was quite right, and I am very glad we shall have no one to disturb us."

"But would he have felt thus if you had not at some time given him hope? I must know, Laura."

"You know that I told him he should be my adopted brother, you do not call that giving him hope, I suppose? I think it is very hard, Bertrand," added Laura, with a movement of her bright eyes, as if she were winking tears off their long lashes, where, however, no moisture was

to be seen; "I have told you that I never loved any one in this world till I saw you, and I think that ought to be enough for you, it is not my fault if other people loved me more than I wished; why do you blame me for it?"

Her aggrieved tone touched Bertrand's chivalrous nature at once, and he was too completely enthralled by her to retain even the lightest suspicion against her after her denial, so in a very few minutes John Pemberton was as entirely forgotten by them both as if he had never existed, and it was not long before his name ceased to be ever heard at Chiverley Rectory. Two days after his departure there arrived a letter from him to Mr. Wyndham, enclosing a year's payment in advance of the sum for which he was received as pupil, and merely saying that circumstances had obliged him to alter his plans for the future, so he should be unable to return to the Rectory. He then thanked Mr. and Mrs. Wyndham for their kindness, and begged to be remembered by Miss Trevelyan. He was too honest to speak of Laura as a mere ordinary acquaintance, so he did not mention her at all; and as his letter was read out by Mr. Wyndham before Bertrand Lisle, she bore him no grudge for the omission. Perhaps the only person who thought of poor John Pemberton with regret, or with anything like appreciation of the misery that had fallen upon him, was Mary Trevelyan, for she remembered what Charlie Davenant had prophesied of the fatal result of his love for the Lorelei. It was becoming almost impossible for her to believe now in Laura's goodness and truth as she had done so long; the reality of her selfishness and intriguing disposition was beginning to force itself even upon her pure mind as an unmistakable certainty, and one of the sharpest pangs she had to endure in the dreary days that preceded Bertrand's departure was in the growing conviction that he—to win whose happiness she would willingly have died—was about to join his fate to one who was in no sense worthy of him, and therefore but too likely to cause him disappointment and distress. Terrible days these were indeed for poor Mary; she had steel-ed herself to endure them without taking flight, as John Pemberton had done, lest she should betray her real feelings, but she found them very hard to bear. Laura was absolutely determined that Bertrand Lisle should not leave Chiverley till every arrangement for their speedy marriage had been made, and all day long Mary was doomed to her discussions on this subject, and to listen to Lurline's exulting plans for spending their honeymoon in Paris, as being the place where she could have the most unceasing amusement. There was some little difficulty in fixing the time of the wedding, as Bertrand was uncertain when he could get leave, but after some correspondence with the Foreign Office he found he could be allowed two or three weeks in September for this special purpose, provided he returned at once to his post. He determined therefore to leave Chiverley the morning after the receipt of this letter, which had settled all their plans so definitely that there was no longer any occasion for his remaining. And so it was on just as fair a morning as that which had witnessed his arrival, Mary Trevelyan rose from her sleepless bed to the full consciousness that the visit from which she had anticipated such unutterable joy was over; that the last day was come, and that the result to her had been simply the crushing out of all earthly happiness from her loyal and faithful heart.

Bertrand was to start immediately after