

STILL AND DEEP.

BY F. M. F. SKENE, AUTHOR OF "TRIED,"
"ONE LIFE ONLY," ETC.

CHAPTER L.

There was a pause in the conversation for a few minutes after Mary's unusually impulsive outburst, and then Bertrand asked Signor Vilalta a few more questions about the unhappy woman who had so nearly marred for ever both his own life and his wife's, and on whom such dire retribution seemed to have fallen. "He wished to know," he said "whether, should she recover, the creditors would proceed against her for secreting the valuables which she had no doubt intended to carry away." Signor Vilalta thought not; the jewels and other treasures she had feloniously concealed had been taken from her, and nothing would now be gained by sending her to prison. They would turn her out of the house so soon as they could do so without risk to her life, and give themselves no further concern about her.

"But is she left quite without means?" asked Bertrand.

"Absolutely penniless, I believe," replied the Italian. "One of the creditors, who is an Englishman, gave the old woman a small sum to procure the mere necessities of life for Mrs. Brant, and to pay for her attendance on her, such as it was; but he said quite openly, that he did so very grudgingly, as he did not consider that either Mr. or Mrs. Brant deserved the smallest consideration."

"But she must have at least the means of living," said Bertrand. "What will become of her if she recovers?"

"It was thought that she would write for help to her friends in England," answered Vilalta.

"I do not think there are any there who could help her," said Mary. "Her father was so very ill when I left England that I do not believe it possible he can be alive now."

"Then I do not know what she is to do," said the Italian, shrugging his shoulders; "go to the house of the poor, I suppose."

"Does no one go to see her or help her now?" asked Bertrand.

"No one but the old woman who is paid to do it, I believe. You must know, my dear friend, that the fair Mrs. Brant did not make herself very much beloved in our city; she was so selfish, so heartless, so intriguing; she attracted only the silly young men."

Bertrand glanced round with a comical smile to Mary, whispering to her in English, "I suppose I may consider myself described in that speech, and it is quite true. I was a perfect ass to let myself be attracted by such a being as Lorelei." "I should have thought that some one would have gone to her for the sake of mere charity," he said aloud in Italian.

Vilalta made an expressive grimace as he answered, "I only know I do not feel at all disposed to befriend her myself, although she used to flash her brilliant eyes at me as much as at other men; she might have helped Brant and been of real service to him, if she had chosen; but she wilfully hastened his ruin to please herself, spite of his remonstrances. Bah! she has no heart!" and he snapped his fingers in the air, as if this finished the subject.

After a few more words on other subjects, he embraced Bertrand, foreign fashion, on both cheeks; bowed most elaborately to Mary, and took his leave, promising to see them again before they left Italy.

He had no sooner closed the door than Mary turned quickly to her husband.

"Dearest Bertrand, you will let me do

what I can for her, will you not? Only think of poor Lurline alone there, ill and unhappy."

"Lurline, who injured you so much!" he said, laying his hand caressingly on her soft hair.

"That is one reason why I wish so much to help her," answered Mary, gently.

"You are right, my darling, she has injured us both, and therefore we must not leave her to perish unaided; but I wish much it had not happened thus. I had no desire that there should be any renewal of acquaintance. I myself will not see her, on that I am fully determined."

"Then had I not better go at once dear? I think we shall both be happier when I have done it; and I shall try to be back with you by the time you have finished writing your letters."

"I suppose you must go," he said, reluctantly, "but you must take your maid with you, Mary. I will not have you go there alone."

"Then you were right in thinking I should find some use for such an appendage," she said, smiling, "though I thought it so needless to bring any servant for me only, from the chateau."

"Every one there would have considered it very odd if the Comtesse de L'Isle had travelled without an attendant. You must live according to your rank, my little Mary, and you will find the maid a great convenience. But now as to Lurline; when you have ascertained what condition she really is in, remember you must make no promise which would involve her coming to our house or being seen by me. Only whatever she requires in the way of money let her have at once; the person I once thought to make my wife must never know want," and he threw back his handsome head with a somewhat lordly air; then he rang, and ordered a carriage to be got ready for the Comtesse.

Very soon Mary and her French maid Justine, who was the daughter of one of Bertrand's tenants, were driving rapidly through the streets of the beautiful city, and they speedily arrived at the door of a house which might well be called a palace for the size and beauty of the building, but it looked deserted and uncared-for. A number of Italian beggars were lounging on the marble steps in front of the door, which stood open, revealing a splendid hall destitute of furniture, where a man, who seemed to be a lawyer's clerk, kept guard over a number of cases, apparently awaiting removal. He rose, as Mary came forward with her maid, and asked what she might be pleased to want. She said she wished to visit Mrs. Brant, who was ill, she believed, in the house.

"There is a sick woman somewhere in the attics," he said, "but I know nothing about her, excepting that my master means to send her to the hospital to-morrow, whatever state she is in, he will not have her here any longer."

"Will you show me the way to her room," said Mary, giving him her card and putting some money into his hand at the same time.

"I will call the old woman down to you, Signora Comtesse," he said with much more alacrity than he had yet displayed, and he was gone before she could attempt to follow him; he soon returned with a disagreeable old Italian, whose brown skin and shrivelled face would have made her seem like a mummy, but for the cunning black eyes which twinkled brightly under the yellow handkerchief she wore over her head.

She made a cringing salutation to Mary, and said, "The Comtesse must pardon me, but that ill-conditioned sick woman refuses to see her."

"Oh, I hope not!" exclaimed Mary, "why does she object?"

"She says she will not have any proud fine lady coming to make her an object of charity; and what else is she I should like to know?"

"Ah, no doubt she does not know me by my new name," said Mary to her maid, and, taking another card, she wrote under the printed words "Comtesse de L'Isle" "Your friend Mary Trevelyan." "Go with the old woman and give her this," she continued to Justine, and the French girl at once told the Italian to show the way, and hurried off. In a few minutes she returned, running swiftly down the marble staircase, which was all covered with dust and straw, saying, "Ah, madame, the moment she saw your English name, she called out to you to come to her, quick, quick!"

And Mary went to look once more upon Laura Wyndham.

Could this be Lurline, that faded haggard woman, with fevered lips and tear-swollen eyes, tossing from side to side on a miserable little bed which constituted almost the sole furniture of the small ill-ventilated attic? Mary stood at the door for a few minutes before the sick woman perceived her, trying to realise that this was indeed the brilliant Lorelei of Ohiverville, who had stolen Bertrand's heart away from her, and destroyed all earthly happiness for poor John Pemberton. Her appearance, apart from the look of illness, was so squalid and neglected, that it was hard indeed to believe she could be the same. Her long fair hair was matted about her head, her once pretty hands and arms were so thin that the bones could be traced beneath the skin, and the expression of her face was wholly changed; its brightness, its saucy archness, all were gone, and she wore a look of restless gloom and misery. On a broken chair at her side was a jar of water and a little wine, and at the foot of the bed, wrapped in an old shawl, lay a puny infant, sleeping, happily unconscious of the wretchedness around him. Mary's heart swelled with pity for the rival who had been so cruel to her, and, whispering to Justine to take the old Italian woman away and leave her alone with Mrs. Brant, she advanced into the room, closing the door behind her. Suddenly Lurline saw her; then a look of wild eagerness flashed into her dimmed eyes; she started almost convulsively from her hard pillow, and stretched out her wasted arms to the graceful white-robed figure, so fair and sweet, that looked like a ray of silver moonlight passing into the dark room, where a small window, high up in the wall, admitted not a gleam of sunshine.

"Oh, Mary, Mary, come to me!" almost shrieked out Laura. "Oh, the comfort of seeing a good kind face again! Come to me, come!" and as Mary went forward and knelt down by her side, she flung her arms around her neck, and laying her head on her friend's shoulder, burst into a torrent of tears. Mary sobbed and caressed her for a few minutes as if she had been a frightened child; but when she would have risen to bring her a little wine and water from the other side of the bed, Laura clung to her with a frantic grasp, and seemed almost beside herself with terror and misery. "Don't leave me, Mary! take care of me! help me! I am going to die! I know I am! and I am so frightened! I have been so wicked. I don't dare go before God! What shall I do! oh, what shall I do!"

"Dear Laura, I am not going to leave you! do not be afraid! I am only going to get you a little wine, which will quiet you and give you strength. Let me try to

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