

ONE LIFE ONLY.

CHAPTER II.

No longer a swift ship, speeding under burning African skies, over seas sparkling with phosphorescent light, but a quiet English country house is the scene where Colonel Dysart and his daughter next appear. They had dropped, as Una expressed it, into a ready-made home which belonged to the "weird woman"—by which name she always designated Miss Amherst, after the night when she had startled her into so sudden an appreciation of the value of the bright young life which would never be renewed, if by error or mischance she marred its golden promise. And truly there did seem to be something weird and strange about Catherine Amherst and her unknown history. The Dysarts had first met her at the house of the Governor of Cape Town, with whom she had been spending a few days on her way home from the Mauritius. He had known some of her connections in England, but of herself he only knew that she was the sole daughter of the late Mr. Amherst, of Vale House, in Northangleshire, and that for some unexplained reason she had left her friends and her home twenty years before, and gone out to the Mauritius, where she had remained ever since. She was a striking-looking person, still handsome for her age, in spite of the pallor which made her seem almost ghastly, and the traces of intense suffering, which the impenetrable calm of her face could not completely mask, while her eyes, deep set and piercing, had an abstracted look, as if she were for ever searching back into the past, for some lost hope by which she might still hold on to life and endure it to the end.

In spite of her excessive reserve, Una Dysart was attracted by her, for she seemed to have a wonderful power of sympathy, even with one so much younger than herself, and the acquaintance ripened into something like friendship when they met on board ship, and made the voyage together to England.

Una honestly confessed to her father that she felt no small curiosity as to Miss Amherst's history, and that she did her very best to find it out (but in this she failed miserably); all she could discover was the fact that the weird woman's only brother had died unmarried a short time previously, and that she had succeeded to the family property, and been compelled, in consequence, to come to England to arrange her affairs. She told the Dysarts, however, that she did not mean to remain a day longer than she could help in her native country, and that she should endeavour to find a tenant for Vale House, without visiting it personally, at all, if possible.

Colonel Dysart wished to find a home for himself in a good neighborhood, where Una could have pleasant society, and from Miss Amherst's description of her house, it struck him that it would be precisely the sort of place to suit him. His daughter was of the same opinion; and before they all landed at Southampton it was decided that the Dysarts were to go at once to Vale House, where Mr. Amherst's servants still remained, and if they felt pleased with the whole place and establishment, they were to communicate with Miss Amherst, who remained in London, and to enter into possession at once.

They both thought it very strange that she should refuse to accompany them to her old home, even for a few days; but when Una persisted in making use of all sorts of arguments to induce her to go with them, she at last turned round upon her, almost fiercely, and said, "Una, I would rather go down into those waves, and let

them close over my head, and so make an end of all feeling, than I would go back to that house, even for one half-hour."

After such a speech there was, of course, no more to be said, and when Una Dysart took leave of Miss Amherst in London, it was with the firm conviction that they would never meet again. Little did she dream how strangely her life would be mixed up with that of the "weird woman."

Whatever Miss Amherst might think of it, there could be no question that Vale House suited the Dysarts exactly. It was a large, old-fashioned, strongly-built house, with handsomely furnished rooms, and deliciously ancient gardens and orchards, that would have horrified a modern gardener in their confused, overgrown condition, but which enchanted Una by the profusion of their sweet-scented flowers and tangled bushes, and gnarled, bending trees, that made deep shade over grassy walks and moss-grown fountains. They had only been domiciled in this pleasant spot a few days, but already they felt at home, and Una tormented her somewhat indolent father with impatient entreaties that he would fill his stables with the horses he promised to provide in due course, in order that she might go out beyond the grounds, to which as yet she had been limited, and explore the neighbourhood. She would have been well content to have commenced her researches with no better help than her own little dainty feet, on which she was now dancing round the room, as an outlet to her suppressed activity, while she told her father she could not possibly remain within the gates any longer.

Colonel Dysart's natural want of energy and supineness, increased by really bad health, were, however, proof against her efforts to drag him out on a voyage of discovery.

"The riding-horses will be here next week, and the pony-carriage, too; but till then you must go alone, Una, if you go at all; and I do not know in the least how far the conventional proprieties would be violated by such a proceeding on the part of a young person of your years. I must find some highly-decorous old lady to give me instructions on the manners and customs of respectable young women in this country."

"Oh dear! may such an old lady never be found. Anyhow, I do hope nothing will prevent me roaming about alone—at least in the morning, when I know the place and the people a little better; it would take away half the pleasure of life if I could not do that."

As she spoke, the old butler, from whom she had already obtained a good deal of information about the neighbourhood, appeared at the door, and announced "Mr. and Miss Crichton, and Mr. Hervey Crichton." Thanks to the revelations of the antiquated functionary, who had been major-domo at Vale House for thirty years, the Dysarts knew that their visitors were the rector of Valehead—the parish in which they were now living—and his half-brother and sister.

Una cast a furtive glance of dismay towards her father as the clergyman walked slowly forward, for a man of more forbidding aspect it would not have been easy to see. He was tall and gaunt, his black clothes hanging loosely on his spare figure, and his countenance, not without a grandeur in the massive, strongly-marked features, was singularly unprepossessing, from the excessive coldness and severity of his expression. His brother and sister, the children of a different mother, were as unlike him as possible, and many years younger. Hervey Crichton, by his manner and bearing, unmistakably a soldier, was a fine-looking man of five-and-twenty, and

the young girl, who with no small timidity kept close to his side, was at least five years younger.

As Una's eyes fell upon Lilith Crichton, she was so much struck by her appearance that for a moment she almost forgot to welcome her. She was extremely delicate and fragile-looking, her complexion dazzlingly fair, her eyes blue as the morning sky, and the soft masses of her long hair hanging, like a sunny mist, round her sweet pure face. She reminded Una irresistibly of a snowdrop, as she hung down her pretty head with a shy grace; and it was so impossible to stand on ceremony with one so gentle and shrinking, that she involuntarily took her hand and drew her down to a seat by her side, telling her she was so very glad to make her acquaintance.

Meanwhile the rector, in a cold, formal manner, and in very measured tones, welcomed Colonel Dysart and his daughter to the neighborhood, expressed a satisfaction, which Una felt sure nothing could really have made him feel, in their having become residents in his parish, and requested to know if he could be of any use to them.

Colonel Dysart thanked him, and said, with a slightly sarcastic glance at Una, that his daughter would certainly be very grateful for any information she could obtain as to the neighbourhood and the families with whom she was likely to become acquainted.

"There are so many residents in this part of the country, that it would take more time than I can spare to enumerate them all," said the rector, stiffly.

"Without giving you quite so much trouble as that would involve," said Una, "we should be very well satisfied if you would enlighten us on the history of the lady to whom this house belongs, without going any further—"

"That being a subject on which my daughter happens to be particularly curious," said Colonel Dysart with a smile.

"I am quite ready to admit that I am," said Una; "and I think it would be very odd if I were not. We have been in constant intercourse with her all the way from the Cape, and we know absolutely nothing about her beyond her name and the fact that she has been a long time at the Mauritius."

"Very little more is known of her by any one," said the rector. "Her desertion of her parents and her home is considered quite unaccountable, especially as her only brother, who after the death of his father and mother lived here alone, was a poor crippled invalid."

"Was no reason ever assigned for her going away?" asked Colonel Dysart.

"Some persons surmised that an attachment which was supposed to exist between her and a gentleman named Atherstone, who had a large property in this neighborhood, might have had some share in her extraordinary proceedings, as he had gone out to the Mauritius some years before she did; but he returned from there unmarried when his father died, and she remained—no one knows why."

"Is he still alive?" said Una eagerly.

"No; he died about three years ago, and was succeeded by his nephew."

"He never married any one else, then?"

"No, he did not; but we need not assume from that circumstance that he ever intended to marry Miss Amherst. He was much attached to his nephew, who had been brought up as the heir of the large Atherstone estates, from the time that he was quite a child," said the rector.

"Is it a good property?" asked Colonel Dysart.

"The finest in the whole county," said Hervey.

"Yes," said the rector, "it has belonged