

fault of Bertrand's father; therefore he adopted you and cared for you all his life, and therefore, when death took his protection from you, he imposed on his son the duty of giving you a home as his wife."

"And this was Bertrand's reason—this only?" asked Mary, faintly.

"Yes—good son that he was!—he tried to obey his father; but, Mary, he had never loved you or any other woman enough to make him wish for a union till he came to Chiverley, and then he met his fate in Laura Wyndham. He has told it to me this day with bitter anguish, because he feared you would hold him bound to accomplish his father's reparation. He told me that he loved me, and me only; that a life spent with me would be perfect bliss, and without me, utter torture, and I love him—with all my heart I love him!" Laura spoke now with genuine vehemence. "Oh, Mary! will you hold him to his bond? will you ruin his life for ever, and mine along with it? will you force him to marry you?"

"Laura, stop!" said Mary, rising, with quiet dignity, "you have no right to use such words to me; Bertrand Lisle is perfectly free from me. Since his happiness consists in a marriage with you, I will do all I can to promote it."

"But, Mary you must tell him so yourself," said Laura, eagerly, "or he will not believe it. I told him you intended to be one of those noble heroines of charity—a lady-nurse, or something of that sort; but he was so convinced you wished to marry him, that he will only be at ease if he hears it from your own lips. He means to ask you to-morrow, what are your plans for your future life, and all our happiness in this world depends on the answer you give."

"Then you may be quite at rest, Laura," said the low, calm voice; "you and he shall be made perfectly happy if words of mine can ensure it; and I thank you for telling me the truth. And now may I ask you to leave me? I must be alone."

Something there was in Mary's manner which subdued even Laura Wyndham. She stooped silently, and kissed her on the forehead, and then, without another word, turned and left the room. Her work was accomplished, her victory complete!

CHAPTER XXV.

Bertrand Lisle had not, of course, the smallest suspicion that any conversation had taken place between Laura Wyndham and Mary respecting himself; nor could he ever have conceived it possible that revelations of so terrible a description could have been made to the adopted daughter of his father, especially in such cruelly-distorted shapes. He could not therefore in the least account for the peculiar impression made upon him by Mary Trevelyan's appearance, when he saw her for the first time on the following morning. It was in the breakfast room, where all the rest of the family were assembled, that they met, and there was nothing in Mary's manner, or in the few words with which she answered those who spoke to her, that was at all different from her usual gentle stillness; and yet it was with a strange shivering sense of pain that Bertrand gazed at her, for it seemed to him precisely as though he were looking on the face of the newly dead. Dead, surely, in some sense she was to him. The heart, the soul, where, once at least, he felt that he had reigned supreme, were now, he was conscious, wholly locked away from him, as if the grave itself had consummated their separation. What it was, so like to death, that had passed over her, he could not tell;

but, as his glance rested on the set immovable expression of her face, and noted how the dark eyes, that ever had turned to him with such soft tenderness, were now fixed and solemn under the shadow of some heavy thought which held her wholly in possession, he felt, with a conviction none the less sure that it was indefinite, that for him at least Mary Trevelyan lived no longer. He had scarce time, however, to dwell upon the impression thus unaccountably made upon him, before the Lorelei flashed into the room, all brightness and joy; and, as his eyes turned with delight to her radiant face, the quiet figure of Mary Trevelyan seemed to fade away from his thoughts as completely as he felt she had even now passed out of his life.

It was a lovely summer morning, and as they all passed into the hall when breakfast was over, they saw through the open door the sunlight streaming on the green lawn and waving trees, seeming to invite them into the sweet fresh air; but it was with no small astonishment in the case of all save Lurline, that Mary Trevelyan was seen to pass, with her noiseless step, through the little group, till she found herself face to face with Bertrand; and then she said, in tones which were perfectly distinct, though soft and low,

"Bertrand, will you come and walk with me in the garden for a little time? I wish to have your advice on some arrangements I propose to make."

Such a request from the silent retiring Mary seemed very strange, for she had never sought Bertrand in any way since he had been at Chiverley; but he could only agree at once, with ready courtesy, to her request; while the others went their ways in different direction. Laura so far from manoeuvring, as she generally did, to prevent Mary and Bertrand from being alone together, now did her best to facilitate their interview. Only, with the subtle instinct of that artfulness which was her fatal gift, she turned to John Pemberton, and whispered, "Dear old John, it is a long time since you have had any music; shall I sing to you this morning, while those two are out?"

With trembling delighted eagerness he implored her to do so, for she had greatly neglected him of late; but, deceived and betrayed as he was, Pemberton never dreamt that her object was simply, by this expedient, to maintain her influence over Mr. Lisle throughout his interview with Mary. And so it was, that during all the time that Bertrand spent with Mary Trevelyan, in the very crisis of her fate, the Lorelei's voice of haunting sweetness rose and fell upon the summer air, wafted to him through the open window of the music-room, and beguiling him even with the memory of her loveliness and genius, even while the noble heart of the gentle girl who walked by his side, was almost breaking in the anguish of uttering words that were to part them for ever.

As Bertrand and his companion walked down the steps from the hall-door, to go out into the garden, Mary Trevelyan raised her eyes to the heavens with one long earnest appealing gaze, while she asked, with her whole heart, for strength to accomplish the dread task that lay before her. She had laboured all night long, after Laura's visit, to steel herself for its performance with a composure which should prevent Bertrand from feeling one shadow of remorse or pain, in seeing himself freed from her wholly and for ever. And she knew that not only must she have courage to go bravely and calmly through their final interview, but she must brace herself for days, and perhaps even weeks, of endurance, while she would have to

stand by and see his happiness with Lurline; for, much as she longed to escape even then from Chiverley, she knew that her flight at such a moment could not fail to reveal to him and to all that very truth, as to her own feelings, which she most wished to conceal.

But who has ever cast as much as one feeble glance to the Father's throne in vain? The eyes which Mary Trevelyan raised to heaven grew bright and calm, and the strength and peace of pure self-sacrifice filled all her heart, when she found herself at last alone with Bertrand Lisle in a retired part of the garden, while the sweet voice of the Lorelei floated round them in soft entrancing strains.

"Bertrand," said Mary, "I have asked to speak to you because, as you are soon going to leave us, I wish to have your approval of the plans I have made myself when I shall leave Chiverley. I know," she continued, quickly, as she saw that he was about to speak, "that your dear father, in his care for me, made you in some sense responsible for my welfare; but, whatever schemes he may himself have formed for my future, his one wish certainly was that I should do that which most commended itself to my own inclinations and feelings—is it not so?" And she lifted her eyes calmly to Bertrand's.

"Doubtless it is," he answered, hesitatingly; "but Mary, he very much wished you to have a safe and happy home."

"I know he did," said Mary, "and that is just what I have provided for myself, in the way that suits me best. I have a great desire to try and be of some use in relieving however small a proportion of the suffering which is so rife in this sad world, and I have found a post where, I think, I could carry out this wish effectually; it is in a hospital for sick pauper children, where the managers are in want of help, and they would no doubt be willing to accept mine."

"But, Mary, is this really the life you would prefer to any other?" said Bertrand, uneasily; "it would be arduous work, and you would be alone, away from all your friends."

"I have not many friends, as you know, Bertrand," she answered, with a sad smile.

"You have me," he said, in a low tone, and for a moment, the ring of tenderness in his voice almost overthrew her composure; but at that instant Lurline's soft singing came more distinctly to his ears in the silence, and Mary saw his eyes light up, and his lips part in a fond smile, as he turned his head to listen.

When Mary's answer came, it was perfectly calm. "Yes, dear Bertrand, I have you as a friend, and as such I am sure I shall have you always; and I hope, when I am at the hospital, that I shall hear from you, sometimes, that you are very happy; for you know well that your happiness is very dear to me; and therefore you will forgive me if I speak of that which concerns your future, as well as my own."

She paused for a moment, breathing hard, and gathering up all her courage; then she turned, put her hand into his, and, looking up to him with a faint sweet smile, she said, softly, "Bertrand, my first and dearest friend, I hope and pray that you may have with Laura Wyndham every joy this mortal life can give you!"

"Oh, Mary!" he exclaimed, grasping her hand forcibly; "who has told you this? what is it you know?"

"I know that you love the beautiful Lurline, and that she returns your affection to the fullest extent," she said still smiling. "As there is nothing to prevent your marriage, I trust it will soon take place, and that you will find in it all the happiness even I could wish you."