

STILL AND DEEP.

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

CHAPTER XLIII.

"I do wish so much Mary had not gone back to the hospital; I miss her every moment!"

The speaker was Valerie Brunot, who was seated on a stool by the side of Bertrand Lisle, as he reclined in an easy chair in her mother's house. It was the second day after his joyful meeting with Mary Trevelyan at the Salpetriere.

When his first agitation and delight at her unexpected appearance had subsided, and she had briefly explained to him that she, whom he had believed to be safe in England, had passed the whole time of the siege in Paris, she at once proposed that he should leave the refuge, which was associated in his mind with so much suffering, and take up his abode at Madame Brunot's, where Mrs. Parry would, she hoped, soon be able to nurse him into health. The doctor entirely approved of this plan. He had felt for some time past that his patient was not likely to get well unless he were roused out of the state of morbid melancholy into which he had fallen; and Bertrand caught at the idea most joyfully, and showed such feverish impatience to carry it out at once, that it was at last arranged he should accompany Mary home that same day.

To him it was like a return to life and home and happiness to find himself once more under the same roof with Mary Trevelyan; and as he lay that first night on the sofa, resting from the fatigue of the transit, and watched her gentle movements while she ministered to his comfort, the whole circumstance of his severance from her seemed like a bad dream, from which he had awakened to find himself once more in the clear light of day. The discovery of Laura Wyndham's falsehood and treachery had produced in him a revulsion of feeling towards her which did not fall short of absolute loathing and contempt. He was a just and honourable man, and the selfish intrigues and systematic deceit with which she had won her ends in his own case, completely revolted him. Her letter had suddenly revealed her character to him in its true light, as clearly as if he had been able to read into her soul; for although his fancy had been caught by her peculiar charm of manner and appearance, he would neither have felt nor imagined that he felt, anything like real love for her, had she not so thoroughly persuaded him of her own attachment and uncontrolled devotion to himself. The idea that she had abandoned to him her whole heart, with such an unreserved surrender that she could not even try to hide it, drew out all the tenderness of his nature, and made him, half unwillingly, return her an answering affection. And now he saw the truth. Not only had she never loved him, and been basely false in all her dealings with him, solely for her own selfish interests, but she was so incapable of a high and pure affection that she had not shrunk from entering into the most holy of bonds with a man of whose character and antecedents she knew nothing, simply because a marriage with him would gratify her worldly ambition.

When Bertrand Lisle after thinking over Laura Brant's letter again during his convalescence at the Salpetriere, thoroughly realised that she who had solemnly engaged herself to him, was already, even then, the wife of another man, he was conscious, first of an intense thankfulness that he had been saved the misery of an

alliance with such a woman, and next, of the clear conviction that, however completely Laura had deceived him into the conviction that she loved him, he had no less effectually deceived himself on the score of his supposed attachment to her; for the plain fact was that after the first indignant sense of wrong and betrayal which the knowledge of her faithlessness had produced—and which was sufficient in his weak state to overthrow the balance of his mind—had passed away, the truth dawned upon him that, so far from being distressed at her loss, he was immensely relieved to find himself suddenly freed from all entanglement with her. The spell of her false fascination had been broken; and he knew that his enthralment had never been love, even when he believed her worthy of it. He shook himself free of all thought of her now with a hearty good will, a strong sense of compassion for Mr. Brant, and a great deal of vexation with himself for having been so easily taken in.

Gradually as the weeks of his tedious recovery passed on in loneliness and weakness, an inexpressible longing rose within him to see once more the sweet face that had awakened within him the first pure affection of his youth, to hear again the soft, low voice that had never spoken to him save in words of truth and tenderness; and the love never wholly destroyed, even in the days of his greatest delusion, which he had always felt for Mary Trevelyan, revived with a force and intensity such as it had never known before; perhaps it took possession of him all the more powerfully now because it had so little hope left to sustain it.

There was one respect in which the poisonous influence of Laura's falsehoods still worked with baneful effect on Bertrand's mind; not only had she to some extent persuaded him that the peculiar quietness of Mary's manner was caused by her cold apathetic nature, but she had deeply impressed him with the fear that if ever Mary consented to marry him, it would be from no affection to himself, but solely from the desire to carry out his father's wishes.

From the first moment when he saw her again at the Salpetriere he laboured anxiously to discover what her real feelings were towards himself; but as yet her extreme reserve had quite baffled him. He spoke to her of Lurline's treachery and of his own thankfulness at having been awakened from his delusions respecting her in no measured terms on the first night of her arrival at Madame Brunot's, but Mary had listened in silence, and when his vehement expressions of disgust at Laura's selfishness and deceit almost compelled her to speak, she simply said, gently, "Laura's conduct is quite incomprehensible to me."

He had little opportunity of speaking to her after that first evening, for so soon as it was settled that he was to take up his abode in Madame Brunot's house, Mary Trevelyan determined that she would not herself remain in it. She had the greatest dread of his imagining, now that he was once more free, that she herself laid any claim to his affection, either in consequence of his father's wish, or from the fact of that unhappy avowal of her love to him, which it was possible she might have known through Mr. Lisle; and it seemed to her best, both for herself and him, that she should quietly withdraw from his society, and leave him to the very efficient care of Nurse Parry.

She had told Bertrand of John Pemberton's long search for him, which had been terminated by so glorious a death; but she gave him no hint that it had been undertaken at her request; and when on the

following day she went back to the hospital as volunteer nurse she said not a word of her long absence from it, for which he was in fact responsible. Bertrand concluded, therefore, that she was only resuming her ordinary course of life which his arrival had interrupted for a single day; and so it was that Valerie's remark considerably surprised him.

"You cannot have learnt to miss her very much, when she has only been with you one day," he said to the child in answer.

"One day!" said Valerie, looking up surprised; "I don't understand you Monsieur Lisle; Mary has been with us eight weeks—ever since that terrible night when she went out to look for you in the snow."

"Went out to look for me in the snow!" exclaimed Bertrand, starting from his pillows. "Child, what do you mean? what are you talking about?"

"Don't you remember the night you were in the ambulance at the Church of the Trinity?"

"I remember being there a great many nights, and a miserable time it was."

"Yes; but do you recollect that night when you ran away?" persisted the child.

"When I ran away!" repeated Bertrand, in utter surprise but unable to help laughing; "that is a strange accusation to bring against a soldier of France, Valerie. Whom do you suppose I ran away from?"

"Why from Mary, to be sure."
Bertrand fell back on his cushions completely mystified. "You must be pleased to explain yourself, Miss Valerie, for I don't understand a single word you are saying."

"I think you are very stupid," said Valerie; "or perhaps being ill has put it out of your head. Well I will try and teach you. You know that my dear Mr. Pemberton found you in the church; do you not?"

"Yes, that I do remember; and he told me there was a letter from England for me; I got it somehow—I cannot tell in what way—and when I had read it, it made me bitterly angry, so that I believe I went into a violent rage—which no doubt you think was very wrong, little Valerie—and after that I remember nothing more till I found myself in the Salpetriere. It seemed to be for a long time in the midst of all sorts of horrible dreams, and then I woke up, and there I was among all the poor mad people. That is all I can remember; now tell me what you know."

"I understand it all quite well," said Valerie, composedly. "Mr. Pemberton told Mary you were there, and she went to nurse you; then she left you to read your letter, and went to say her prayers for you in a corner, and when she came back to take care of you she found you gone away quite; then Pierron—"

"Who is Pierron?" interrupted Bertrand.

"Pierron is an extremely naughty boy, whom I love very much, because he loved my dear Mr. Pemberton. He had been eating your cake and chocolate so he knew what had happened; and he told Mary that when you had read your letter, you got very wild, and did not know what you were saying, and then you ran right away from her out of the church."

"And then what did Mary do?" said Bertrand eagerly.

"She did what nearly killed her," said Valerie gravely; "she went away out into the snow, to try to find you; and all night long she wandered about in the terrible cold and never found you, for the police people had taken you to the Salpetriere, though she did not know it. So then in the morning she came back to the church to see if you had returned, and she met