

STILL AND DEEP.

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"ONE LIFE ONLY," ETC.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It was the night following that day when Laura had made her final and most successful attempt to enthrall Bertrand Lisle absolutely and for ever, and the inhabitants of Chiverley Rectory were supposed to be all tranquilly slumbering away the hours of darkness, but there was neither rest nor sleep in Mary Trevelyan's little room: she was kneeling by the side of her bed, with her arms stretched out across it, and her head laid low between them, in an attitude which betokened a complete abandonment of herself to thoughts too sad with their weight of grief almost to be borne.

There had been a time when Mary Trevelyan thought she had almost attained the summit of earthly happiness; when, standing on the little bridge beneath the shade of the summer trees, with her hand in Bertrand's she felt that he was about to utter the words which would have linked her life to his for evermore, and then, just at that crisis of her fate, had come the mournful melodious sound—the wail of anguish in the voice she knew so well, the voice of the syren, who, by every art, had been trying to lure him from her—and instantly it had been to him as though she existed not, and he had fled away from her to follow the beguiling sound, and she knew, she felt, that he would return to her as her true lover never more! for she had easily recognised that the cry, half-musical, half-sad, was no true shriek of terror drawn forth by some sudden danger, but rather the studied expression of some bitter sorrow, some dark foreboding, more like the poetical idea of the death-song of the swan than any real outcome of trouble or distress, and she well understood what it all meant for her. Somehow the subtle Lorelei had discovered how near in that instant she was to losing Bertrand altogether, and forthwith she had sent out the sweet appealing wail which drew him so quickly to her side.

And long they had lingered in the lonely wood, those two—hours and hours—while Mary kept her watch upon that deserted bridge, unwilling to leave the spot where he had stood with her, though no hope lingered in her heart, prophetic of its future, that he would ever seek her there again; and morning had ripened to noon, and noon faded to the sun's declining hours, and twilight came, but still she was alone; then slowly, wearily, she had returned to the home which sheltered them all alike, and there she had seen Bertrand with eyes that never quitted Laura's radiant face, and looks averted from herself, and manner constrained and cold. And now night had come, and she was alone with the dark, terrible shadow that enfolded her, precursor of the deadliest evil her life could know, even now very close at hand; for weeks she had dreaded its coming, and had seen the danger, but hope had never quite left her, and it was hard to lose it altogether, even in this the saddest hour her life had known; but she was trying to steel herself for whatever might be coming upon her, she was trying to give herself up to her merciful God, that he might work His will upon her in any way He pleased. Mary Trevelyan was herself too single-hearted and pure-minded to be able to imagine that Laura had been influenced by motives of worldly ambition only, and although she could not but be aware of the absolute determination with which the Lorelei had set herself to win Bertrand,

she yet believed that she did love him truly; and Mary was schooling herself to feel, as she lay there, that if indeed her Bertrand had given to Laura all his heart's love in return, she ought for his sake to be glad and thankful that they had learnt to know and prize each other; for surely Bertrand's happiness was that which she desired most in all the world; and if he was to find it best with Laura, and not with her—alas, not with her!—then ought she to rejoice that Laura was his own, that with her he would walk through sunny paths in life, while the poor Mary, who having loved him could never love another, went on to her distant grave ever and ever, joyless and alone! It was a hard lesson to learn, and Mary's chest heaved with sobs, and her face was wet with bitter tears under the veil of her long dark hair, while her lamp burnt low, and cast a dim light on her prostrate figure, when suddenly the door of her room was opened by a quick impatient hand, and shut again as rapidly, leaving the intruder by her side, while a voice clear and musical, but with a ring of sharpness in its tone, said authoritatively, "Rise up, Mary Trevelyan, and prepare to listen to me, for I have much to say to you, which is of great importance to us both."

Then slowly Mary raised her wan face, and looked round, to see Laura Wyndham standing before her, holding a lamp in her white hand, which sent a strong glow over her beautiful face, more brilliant than ever from the light of triumph which glittered in her eyes, and proud happiness which curved her lips in a meaning smile.

Without a word, Mary raised herself from her knees, gathered the white garments round her, which contrasted strangely with the scarlet robe over which Laura's fair hair waved in free luxuriance, and having placed a chair for her unwelcome guest, she sat down herself, and said, "I am ready Laura; say whatever you will."

"I shall do that, even without your permission, Mary, for I have come to do for you an act of friendly kindness, which none have ever done for you before: I have come to tell you the truth."

"Has no one ever told me the truth before?" said Mary, raising her sad eyes calmly to Laura's bright face.

"No one," answered Lurline, "at least, in respect to that which most concerns you. Old Mr. Lisle deceived you, unconsciously perhaps, and Bertrand, scarce knowing what he did, has done so too; but the time has come when your delusions must no longer be suffered to exist, lest they wreck for ever a life that is too precious, even to yourself, to be so ruined."

"Of whom do you speak?" asked Mary, with lips calm as ever, but from which all colour had fled.

"Of Bertrand Lisle," answered Laura, and then she added, in a soft, clear voice, "who loves me, and whom I love."

Mary did not utter a syllable; it might have seemed that she did not hear the words which came to her laden with the weight of her own life-long misery, but for the convulsive movement with which she gathered her loose dress closer to her breast, as if to shield herself from the arrows which were about to pierce her heart. The Lorelei's keen eye noted it all. She had seated herself immediately opposite to Mary, so that she might read each changing expression on her face, and she now went on, with a composure resembling the judicial calmness of a judge when summing up the case against

one who is about to be condemned to death.

"I have said that I am come to tell you the truth, Mary Trevelyan, and, to show you that I have indeed a perfect knowledge of it, I will first go over the matter on which I wish to undeceive you, as I know it appears to you, and then I will reveal to you the real state of the case. You had lived for twenty-one years in Bertrand Lisle's home, without there ever having been the faintest hint of any idea of a marriage between you. On his death-bed Mr. Lisle told you that such a marriage was his dearest wish, that he believed or hoped you were beloved by his son, and in reply to his questions you distinctly said that you at least loved Bertrand."

At these words Mary Trevelyan started as if she had received a stab, and buried her face in her hands, while she said, in a tone, of unspeakable pain, "Laura who told you this?"

And the Lorelei answered, "Bertrand Lisle, who heard it from his father's lips."

And she knew that in uttering the cruel sentence she had laid the corner stone of that edifice of her own happiness which she hoped to build up on Mary Trevelyan's ruined life.

Her victim remained silent, with her face hidden, praying in her heart that she might have grace not to blame one lying in the helplessness of death for his breach of confidence.

Lurline continued. "You were aware that Bertrand had a long conversation with his father the night before the old man died, and you could not doubt, after his statement to yourself, that he had told his son his desire for a union between you. When Bertrand therefore uttered some cautious words to you respecting his father's wishes, in the passing excitement of grief, at the new-made grave, you interpreted them as a sort of proposal of marriage."

"Laura, no!" exclaimed Mary, letting her hands fall from her burning face. "I did not! I could not! I never for an instant considered that Bertrand had bound himself to me."

"I only know," said Lurline, "that you managed to impress him with the idea that you wished and expected him to marry you, and he came here to see whether he could make up his mind to do it, as a duty his father had laid upon him."

"How could even his father's wishes make such an act seem a duty, Laura? Are you not mistaken?" said Mary, with trembling eagerness.

"Not in the least," said Laura. "I will now give you the true history of this affair which has been cruelly hard on Bertrand. Mr. Lisle imposed this duty upon him as an act of reparation to you."

"Of reparation to me? How? Why?"

"Because he had killed your father," was Laura's answer.

She could be absolutely heartless where her own interests were concerned, but she was not prepared for the piercing cry which burst from the pale lips usually so calm, as Mary, starting to her feet, shrunk back to the wall, and stood there trembling with horror-stricken eyes, as if she had seen a spectre.

Lurline rose, and drew her back to her seat, saying, "Don't mistake me, Mary; Mr. Lisle caused his death, but not wilfully. There was a quarrel and a struggle on board the ship coming home from Madeira, in which your father, trying to escape Mr. Lisle's violence, fell overboard, and was drowned. Your mother died that same night of her grief, leaving you a destitute infant, orphaned through the