

STILL AND DEEP.

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"ONE LIFE ONLY," ETC.

CHAPTER XX.

Bertrand Lisle had come to England at this time with the firm intention of definitely asking Mary Trevelyan to be his wife; but he went to his room on the first night of his arrival at Chiverley with all sorts of conflicting feelings combining to bewilder him. He was dazzled by Laura, doubtful of Mary, and quite perplexed as to his own position. The whole of the Lorelei's conversation had been skilfully managed by her, so as just to convey the impression she wished in an indirect manner, but of all the arrows in her shaft, there were two especially which had struck home to his heart with peculiar keenness: first the insinuation that Mary would at all times obey his father's wishes at any cost to herself; and secondly, the intimation that she had become attached to Charlie Davenant. There are few men who would accept of a sacrifice in order to win a wife, and Bertrand certainly was not one of them; if Mary Trevelyan gave herself to him it must be because she loved him, and not because his dead father had desired the alliance; and if any other had won her heart he would be the last to interfere with her choice; in fact, he did not consider that he had any right to do so; he remembered very well the words he had spoken to her by the new-made grave, when he told her that his father's wishes were his most truly also, and by those words he considered himself morally, though not legally, bound to her. But he also very well remembered that she had made no answer to them, and that in so far as it might be considered that he had conveyed to her then his wish to marry her, she had neither accepted nor rejected him. At the time he had firmly believed that her silence was eloquent of a love which rejoiced in the prospect of their union, but he had no actual ground for the supposition beyond the sentence so solemnly repeated by his father on his death-bed, as having come from Mary's own lips, and it was just possible that the old man had been mistaken; or at least, if that was impossible, as to the actual words which he had so carefully treasured in his memory, it was at least conceivable that Mary might have been influenced to some extent in uttering them, by the desire to gratify the last wish of her best friend in his dying hours.

Bertrand lay awake for a long time pondering over all these considerations, and the final result at which he arrived was that which the Lorelei most desired: he would wait and watch all concerned, and then be guided by circumstances; instead of seeking, as he had intended, the very first opportunity of asking Mary to join her fate finally to his, he would simply treat her with the affectionate kindness of their earlier years, and say not one word of marriage till he was well assured, as he had been until now, that she loved him and him alone.

"I will have no half-hearted wife," he said to himself; "she must be mine altogether or not at all." It was not without a pang that he thus contemplated the possibility of losing her; nor was it only caused by wounded pride, for Bertrand Lisle did love Mary Trevelyan—better perhaps than he knew himself—with a deep, long-standing, earnest affection; though he did not at present feel for her that overmastering, passionate love which would make it seem as if the very light of life were blotted out should he lose her; and yet, even after he had come to the for-

mal determination that he would wait and test her feelings to himself, there was all the time an underlying conviction in his heart of hearts that Mary Trevelyan was indeed his own, that all her love was surely his; for the vision of her sweet, pure face rose up before him, with the dark eyes, still and deep as fathomless waters, and he felt that whatever else might be doubtful about her, this at least was certain, that she was truth itself in all she said and did, and that if she had indeed uttered the words his father had reported, she had meant them in their fullest sense.

"She would not be false even to give peace to the dying," he murmured; and with this last reflection, Bertrand's handsome head sunk back on the pillow, and he went off into the profound slumber which usually carried him, with his good health and easy conscience, so lightly from one day to another.

In his dreams however, there came to him another image as different from that of fair quiet Mary, as is the morning star blazing in the dim skies of early dawn from the white rose in whose heart the dewdrops lie like pearls.

All night he was haunted by a bright bewitching face, with flashing eyes and radiant smile, and arch looks, that came and went with the fitful fancies of sleeping a hundred changeful aspects.

When Bertrand awoke next morning, and gradually came to understand where he was and what the day was likely to bring forth, his first thought was, that he should see again that strange and lovely Lorelei; his second, that he should once more hear the low soft voice of gentle Mary.

We do not intend to trace out in detail all the arts by which Laura Wyndham laboured to separate Bertrand Lisle from his first love, and win him to herself. It is sad enough to know that there are in the world persons who will leave no stone unturned to compass their own ends, and who care not over what broken hearts or untimely graves they have to step in the attainment of their object; sad enough to know that the character we are describing is no fiction, but a living reality, and while we trust that the history of this erring soul, with her perverted gifts, may act in some measure as a warning to those who may be tempted to enter upon tortuous paths, yet it will ever be a salutary process to unfold the windings of the serpent evil, and show by what means the rarest qualities, that might have been used to noble purposes in the service of the God who gave them, may be degraded to the basest uses, and made the ministers of falsehood and cruelty.

Be it remembered that the heart of Laura Wyndham was untouched by that divine fire of the love of God, which can make the desert blossom as a rose, and turn even pain and suffering into sweetest joy if borne for the dear Redeemer's sake. This mortal life was all in all to her, and she never really looked beyond it, though she believed herself to have a faith in that which was to come; and now at the point of her career at which she stood—verging on thirty, sickened of the dreamy sameness of her existence, without a prospect of escape from it—it was hardly strange that she, such as she was, should seize, with almost desperate determination, the possibility which presented itself in Bertrand Lisle, not only of release from a detested duration in her father's miserable home, but of the possession of all that her fancy pictured as the perfection of happiness. Marriage with him had, in fact, every attraction life could offer her. He was himself a thoroughly lovable individual—handsome, agreeable, honourable, and good; he had

an excellent position; the *entree* into the best society; and his home was in the gayest and sunniest of Continental towns, where music and laughter were in the very air.

What wonder that she set herself to win him by fair means or by foul, and thought no more of Mary Trevelyan, whose happiness she might be crushing in the process, than she would of a tender flower trampled under her feet as she sped on some hasty errand.

And this much more may be said for Laura, though it would not have stayed her course had it been otherwise, that she did not in the least understand the depth of Mary Trevelyan's nature. She honestly believed her cold, and incapable of strong feeling, and, although she knew perfectly well by her instincts as a woman that Mary did love Bertrand truly, and him alone, yet she believed her heart to be so still and passionless, that even his loss, she thought, would but pass over it as a light cloud soon dispersed; and now, though Mary had to die for it, though John Pemberton's life should be forever marred and broken, she, Laura Wyndham, meant to be Bertrand's wife, to live with him in his sunny *palazzo*, to shine like a star at his diplomatic receptions, to spend her joyous evenings at operas and balls, and taste at last all the pleasures of a life spent amid the allurements of the world.

So, from that first morning when Bertrand, coming out of his room, saw her dancing in through the open door into the hall, with her hands full of dewy flowers, fairer even than in his dreams, more radiant than the morning itself—to the day, a month later, when he resumed the record of events, the Lorelei ceased not for a single moment to use every charm she possessed, every art she could devise, to allure him to herself, and she succeeded. She dazzled his senses, she captivated his fancy, and she woke a sudden passion in his heart which had neither the depth nor the durability of the sentiment he had felt and still in a measure retained for Mary Trevelyan.

As it happened, there was nothing whatever to stay Lurline in her triumphant course. Charlie Davenant had left Chiverley two or three days after Bertrand's arrival; he just remained long enough to let the new-comer see clearly that he had neither eyes nor thoughts for any one but Mary, and the excessive annoyance and distress he manifested at having to leave the rectory at this juncture could only be attributed by Bertrand to that which Lurline told him was indeed the cause, the fear that he himself might prove a rival to him in Miss Trevelyan's affections. In actual fact Charlie's great unwillingness to leave Chiverley at that time arose from his perfect comprehension of the Lorelei's plans for the capture of him on whom he well knew Mary's whole happiness depended; he could not bear the idea of her abandoning her to her fate, although he hardly knew what he could have done to avert it had he remained. There was no help for it, however, he had to go; and Lurline well knew how to make capital with Bertrand out of his miserable looks as he bade farewell to Mary.

Laura was thoroughly mistress of the situation as soon as he was gone; for Mary never by word or look made the smallest attempt to stand between her and Bertrand, or to keep that place in his affections she had once believed to be her own. She, like Bertrand himself, had never forgotten the avowal she had made to Mr. Lisle on his death-bed, or the possibility that he might have repeated her words to his son; and to her delicate