

## ONE LIFE ONLY.

## CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

To certain generous, deep-toned natures, the sentiment of compassion can become an influence more powerful than love, or ambition, or even the intense human desire for personal happiness. To women, especially, the suffering of one towards whom their sympathies have been strongly drawn out is intolerable, and when their tendency to hero worship is roused, along with a restless rebellion against the pain they cannot reach, it is well-nigh inevitable that a power is thereby established over their heart and soul and life itself, from which they never more are free while thought and feeling last.

So at least it was with Una Dysart; a very tyranny of pity held her in its grasp as she stood an hour later on the threshold of her home, and let her hand rest for a moment in that of Humphrey Atherstone while he took his leave of her. But mingled with her aching regret for the darkening of his life, by the baleful shadows she dimly perceived, but in nowise understood, was a sense of strong admiration for the sacrifice of himself to some high theory of honour or rectitude, which she believed, from what he said, to have been the cause of all that was strange and unusual in his mode of existence. Little enough did the young girl know of the complicated difficulties that beset even the most white-robed souls, when they seek to walk with their garments spotless through the tortuous paths of this bewildering world; but her own pure instincts taught her that there is nothing upon earth more noble than the man who flings away life and its hopes like dross, that he may keep unalloyed the fine gold of truth and justice; and she believed she had discerned that this was the case with Humphrey Atherstone, although she was aware that she had as yet obtained but a glimpse of the singularly intricate web of trials and perplexities which seemed to surround him on every side.

They had come down together from the "Eagles' Nest" after that strange meeting, when during a moment Una had thought she saw the vision of a soul in pain, for whom the days of expiation were too surely gone, and found instead that it was a living, breathing man who stood before her, on whom the burden of the flesh still lay, with all its marvellous contradictions of miserable weakness and glorious strength. It was scarcely a matter of choice that he should go with her when she started to return home, for the descent by the steep and rocky path was much more dangerous than even the ascent had been, difficult as she had found it; and often her two little white hands were clasped in his, while she bounded from some impracticable rock to the lower level where he stood; or his strong arm held her flimsy figure in his grasp when the shelving path threatened a precipitous fall. And when at last they had passed from the cliff to the heath-clad mountain-side, they walked on together through the dewy morning air, talking almost with the freedom of old acquaintances, and on the strength of a tacit compact that henceforth they were to be special

little Una, in her naive inexperience, thought that nothing could be much more charming than to have a confidential friendship with a man who never intended to marry, especially if he happened to possess such great qualities as those with which she invested Humphrey Atherstone, and had the additional merit of being unhappy, for it was so very pleasant to comfort people who were unfortunate; and under these felicitous circumstances, she

could be as kind to him as she pleased, without the least risk of his mistaking her; and she could give him her confidence, and benefit by the hard-headed wisdom and freedom from pettiness of all kinds, by which she honestly believed men were distinguished from the weaker vessels among whom she herself was numbered. So she turned to him with a trust and sympathy which gave exquisite pleasure to the world-worn man, and roused in him a response of a somewhat stronger nature than she at all suspected.

Of course they exchanged confidences as to the past. It was as easy as it was delightful for Humphrey Atherstone to look through and through the transparent, sunny life of nineteen years, which was all that pure-hearted Una had yet tasted of human experience; but it was a very different matter when she turned her eyes, clear and unclouded as they were, on the veiled existence, whose hidden struggles had made him what he now was. He could speak to her of his youthful days, when the world and its joys were as free to him as to any one on earth; of his exploits at school and college, and of the period after his return home, when he made the old Abbey one of the gayest centres of the county society, and he was himself foremost in all the field sports for which Northangleshire was famed; but when he came to the point where the grave of Maurice Atherstone seemed to lie across his path in life, and cut off that which was past from all that was to come, his lips became locked in an impenetrable silence, from which she learned indeed, better than words could have told her, that out of that grave had arisen the dark, inexplicable mists through which he was now stumbling on, like a man who has lost his way, and knows not whether the course he has taken will lead him to safety or destruction. But she could read no further than this one fact in the riddle of his history. Very bitterly he spoke to her, however, of the suspicions which had fallen upon him, even while he offered no explanation of the change in himself which had caused them, and it was for this especially that Una longed to comfort him as they stood on the doorstep of her home, scarcely conscious how unwilling they were to separate.

It was, perhaps, fortunate that an interruption came. The old butler suddenly appeared, ushering out Mr. Northcote, somewhat to Una's surprise, as it seemed an early hour for a visitor. He shook hands with her, merely saying he had called to see her father on business; and then, as he went down the steps, Atherstone gave a quick pressure to her hand, and followed him at once, with a bitter expression of self-scorn on his silent lips as he felt the pain it caused him to leave her.

## CHAPTER X.

"Rather an unexpected meeting, Mr. Atherstone," said the outspoken Squire Northcote with his genial laugh, as they walked down the avenue together. "I dare say you did not look to find me at Vale House so early, and I certainly did not anticipate seeing you as a young lady's escort at this time in the morning."

"An accidental encounter," said Atherstone, so grimly that Mr. Northcote hurriedly changed the subject, and plunged into explanations as to his own proceedings, which had he paused for reflection he would probably have withheld.

"Colonel Dysart asked me to come and advise him about his will, which he wishes to draw up in the course of the next few days, while Mr. Cunliffe is with him."

"Who is Mr. Cunliffe?"

"An Australian judge, who came over in the same ship with him from the Cape. It

seems Dysart has some property in Australia, which he has never seen, and he thinks this man can advise him as to the proper testamentary disposal of it, so he has asked him to come and visit him for a few days, and he wishes me to be one of his exhorters."

"Is Colonel Dysart feeling ill, that he is making these preparations?"

"Not worse than usual, I imagine; but he tells me he has some malady which is likely to carry him off suddenly, though he may live for years yet. Of course, his only anxiety is about his daughter, to whom he wishes to secure this property."

"What would become of her if he died?"

"She has some relations on the mother's side to whom she could go, I believe, though she has never made acquaintance with them. But Dysart naturally expects she will marry and have a home of her own; and I should think there could be no doubt that she will, for she is an uncommonly pretty, attractive girl," added the squire, glancing at his friend. But when Mr. Atherstone spoke again it was to ask, with much apparent solicitude for Mr. Northcote's comfort, how he came to be on foot at such a distance from his home.

"My horse cast a shoe, and the groom took him to the blacksmith's; but here he is bringing him to meet me. I say, Atherstone," he continued, after he was mounted and ready to start, "the Dysarts are coming to dine with us the day after to-morrow, and they bring their guest with them; will you join us? I fancy this Cunliffe is a shrewd old fellow, well worth knowing."

For a moment Atherstone stood irresolute, with a frown on his face, as if he were in a sort of angry perplexity; then, with an impatient stamp of his foot on the ground, he turned impulsively to Mr. Northcote and said, "I will come with the greatest pleasure, Mr. Northcote. What is your hour?—seven? Thank you; I shall not fail to appear;" and therewith the men shook hands and parted.

"Bless me!" exclaimed Mr. Northcote to himself as he trotted away, "what on earth will Mrs. Northcote say? she has such a horror of Atherstone nowadays; and I never dreamt he would come. What possessed me to ask him?—old habit, I suppose. Well, the deed is done, and cannot be undone. I must do the best I can with her;" and thus philosophically making up his mind to endurance, the oppressed squire trotted on to his doom.

Never in all her life had Una Dysart felt so restless as she did during the remainder of this day. It might have been supposed that after her fatiguing walk in the morning she would have been glad to have rested in peace; but instead of that, if she attempted to sit still for five minutes, her impatient little feet seemed to carry her off in spite of herself. From room to room she flitted like an unquiet spirit, tormenting her father by her efforts to make him leave the papers with which he was occupied; then making wild proposals to go and meet Mr. Cunliffe at the station, to which plan Colonel Dysart strongly objected; and finally, in spite of the heavy rain which had quenched the brightness of the morning, and made it seem to her more like a sunny, far-off dream than a reality, she determined to go and visit Lilith Orlinton, whom she had not seen since the cricket match a few days previously.

Una had often thought with great wonder and distress of the strange state of suffering in which she had found the rector's sister, by the river-side, on that occasion; but after the few words already recorded which Lilith had spoken when first taken by surprise, she had said nothing which could explain the seemingly unnecessary pain she was inflicting both on herself and