

STILL AND DEEP.

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

CHAPTER LI.

Mary de L'Isle was too experienced a nurse not to see at once that the first thing to be done for the unhappy Laura Brant, was to lessen her physical discomfort, before she made any attempt to quiet her mind. She therefore persuaded her to drink a little wine, and then bathed her face and hands with cold water, smoothing back the long hair that hung over her burning forehead, and gathering it into a net, so as to be out of the way; then she shook up the pillows, and raised Laura sufficiently to enable her to sit up in the bed, and, finally, she lifted the sleeping child very tenderly in her arms, and placed it where it could lie more comfortably, and give Laura greater freedom of movement. She managed, too, to open the high window, so as to relieve the oppressive atmosphere of the room, and when all these arrangements were completed, she came and sat down beside the poor changed Lorelei, and took her hand lovingly in her own.

"Oh, Mary!" sighed the invalid, who had watched all her gentle movements with tearful eyes; "it is like a breath of sweet air from heaven to have you moving round me; you look so fresh and pure, and snow-white as an angel, in the midst of all the wickedness and misery this wretched room contains. I cannot understand how you have come here; why did they bring me your name as Comtesse de L'Isle? Are you married? and to whom?"

"To Bertrand Lisle!" said Mary, very softly, and averting her eyes from Laura's face, over which her words brought an angry flush for a moment; but it soon faded, and Lurline gave a weary sigh.

"I might have guessed it," she said; "but how does that make you a countess?"

"Bertrand has succeeded to the title and estates of his family, by the death of his uncle."

"I never knew that he had any prospects of that kind," said Laura.

"He did not know it himself," replied Mary; "he was not aware of the existence of the chateau or the property till he visited his uncle last autumn, and soon after he came into possession."

"Then he is wealthy now, I suppose, and a peer of France?"

"Yes," said Mary, simply; "but, dear Laura, do not let us speak of such matters now, when you are so ill."

"Oh, the irony of fate!" exclaimed Laura, flinging up her arms with a gesture of despair; "and this was really the position I abandoned when I discarded Bertrand Lisle because he had become a poor soldier! I gave up the rich Comte de L'Isle to end my days as a beggar in a garret!" She flung herself round, buried her face in the pillow, and groaned aloud.

"Dear Laura!" said Mary, earnestly, "if you are indeed so ill that you think your life is drawing to a close, you have no need surely to trouble yourself about earthly riches and honours; they are at all times utterly valueless compared with that peace in immortality, which alone can avail any one of us at the last."

"Yes, you are right," she answered, turning slowly round; "if that awful hateful mystery of death is coming upon me—from which I would fly to the ends of the earth if I could—nothing matters much in my past life, except my wickedness. But where am I to find peace, or hope, or pity in that other world which they say is

the presence of God? Mary, I see many frightful visions in my feverish nights—serpents crawling about me, and demons mocking me, but the most hideous sight of all is the spectacle of my own soul. I do not suppose you have the remotest idea how bad I have been!"

"We all need to repent, Laura."

"Repent! I do not know if I do, rightly; I repent of everything which has brought me to such a pass as this, but I cannot tell if it is repentance which will avail in the sight of God. How can I suppose the all-pure God will ever look on me with pardon or compassion, when I do not believe that you would sit there beside me, Mary, if you knew what my sins have been, even only against yourself!"

"It could not make the smallest difference to me, Laura; it is all past and forgotten; do not let us speak of it."

"But do you know that I parted you and Bertrand by a systematic course of falsehood, in order to win him to myself?" said Laura, with a bitterness against herself which caused her to use her natural frankness of speech for the purpose of self-accusation.

"God brought us back to each other," said Mary, gently; "so you need think of it no more."

"I doubt if Bertrand would be as forgiving as you are, Mary. He must hate and despise me, and so must poor John Pemberton."

For a moment Mary started, to hear the dead spoken of thus, and then remembered that Lurline could not possibly know of the catastrophe which had put an end to that noble life during the siege of Paris; she determined to say nothing on the subject at that time, when Laura was so much excited, in the hope that when she did tell her all the history of Jehn's blessed passage to his rest, it might help to draw this wayward spirit nearer to the Saviour whom he had loved so well. Mary could remember his very look and accent, when he had begged her so earnestly to try and bring poor Lurline to the light and truth, if ever she had the opportunity. Perhaps his prayers had obtained this meeting for her, Mary thought, and when a fitting moment came, she would do her best to carry out his generous wishes for the woman who had destroyed all his earthly happiness.

"They do despise me! they do hate me! I see you cannot deny it, Mary!" said Laura, excitedly, mistaking altogether the reason of her friend's silence, "and they are right. I behaved shamefully to them both. I deceived them, for I cared nothing for either of them; I never loved but one truly, years ago, and he would have nothing to say to me. I was utterly false to John and Bertrand, when I pretended they had won my affection, and I betrayed them without a pang—first one, and then the other, when it suited my purpose. I see all the hatefulness of my conduct now as well as they can, but you can tell them that they have their revenge, Mary. Here I am, in this wretched hole, dying—dying! going before the awful judgment-seat of God; and I am terrified, I am appalled! What hope have I? I am lost! Yes, I am hopelessly lost!" and her voice rose to a shriek, as she tossed her arms about, and gazed wildly upward.

Mary took hold of her hands, drawing them firmly down into the soft steady grasp of her own, and, looking at the feverish violently-agitated woman with a calm and decision which had an instantaneous effect, she said distinctly, "Laura, you must compose yourself, that we may talk quietly over your position and prospects. Will you listen to me calmly?"

"I will do whatever you like," said

Laura, wearily. "I can lie as long as you are beside me; the sight of your peaceful face makes me feel safe."

"Then let me tell you, first, that I think you are mistaken in supposing yourself to be dying. I have had a great deal of experience of illness and death lately, and I feel convinced you have, at present at least, no fatal symptoms."

"I am sure I feel ill enough to be dying, Mary," said Lurline, pushing back the hair from her forehead; "I am so weak, and I am always light-headed at night, and every day I hear that dreadful old woman who waits on me say to the men who want to turn me out, 'Wait a little longer, and she is sure to die!'"

"Poor dear!" said Mary, compassionately, "it has been miserable for you to be left to such a nurse, but no doubt she said it because she wanted to continue in charge of you, so as to get the payment. We shall take you out of her hands now, you may be sure; and I still think, though you have a great deal of fever, and are very much exhausted, that you are in no especial danger. With care and good nursing, I believe you will soon recover."

"I don't think I wish it, Mary," said Laura, with tears rolling down her cheeks. "I am afraid to die—horribly afraid—because of my wickedness, but I am almost as much afraid of coming back to a hopeless poverty-stricken miserable life. What have I to live for now?"

"Your child, Laura! Surely you have not forgotten it!" said Mary.

"Poor little helpless mite! I think it would be happier for it to die too, than to live to have me for its mother!"

"Not if you fit yourself, as you may, to bring it up worthily; and there is your husband, Lurline," she added, in a low voice.

Laura turned her head away. "I do not love him; I never did!"

"Still, it is your duty to be with him; and if you try to please him, affection may grow up between you."

"I do not believe he would have me with him now; he wanted me to come too, when he escaped that night, and I was so enraged because he had reduced me to poverty that I refused. Then he said his failure was chiefly my fault, and we parted in anger. I do not know where he is now."

"Did he not give you any address to which you could write?"

"Yes, he did, a place in New York; but it is no use, Mary, I am not good like you; I cannot bear the thought of a life of privation and wretchedness. I think death would be happiest for me, if only I am not punished hereafter. I am so tired of suffering!" And she flung herself back in the bed, and closed her eyes.

Mary rose, and knelt down by her side, stroking her cheek with her soft hand.

"Laura, dear, you are completely worn-out now, and you must not talk any more; you need some strengthening food more than anything else at this moment, and I will see that you have that immediately, but I want you just to grant me one request. Will you let me take care of you now, and manage everything for you, as I think best, at least while you are so weak? I feel sure I can make you willing to live again, when you are better, and away from this place. May I do what I like with you, Lurline?"

"Oh yes, dear sweet little Mary," she said, bending forward to kiss her; "you are the only friend, the only hope I have in the world; how can I thank you enough, if you will indeed be burdened with the care of such a one as I am?"

"That is well!" said Mary, brightly; "then, dear, I shall go at once to make

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