

## ONE LIFE ONLY.

## CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

When at last the strain ceased, to the regret of all, Una asked Hervey Crichton if he had observed that during the whole time Miss Northcote was playing, some one was keeping up with the boat on the bank of the river, running along behind the thick alder bushes, so that the movement of their branches alone was detected.

"I did not notice any one," said Hervey. "Shall we steer rather nearer the bank and find out who it is?"

They did so, and just as they came close under the bushes, which dipped almost into the water, the leafy branches were parted by two dark little hands, and the wild beautiful face of a gipsy woman gleamed out upon them suddenly, the deep flashing eyes scanning every face, and settling for a moment with a peculiar intensity on that of Una. Mrs. Burton gave a shriek of affected terror, and they saw the white teeth shine between the curved lips as they wreathed themselves into a scornful smile. Then the hands dropped down, the branches were allowed to meet again, and the face disappeared.

"Who in the world is that?" exclaimed Mr. Knight, who had been nearest to the strange apparition.

"I have not an idea," said Hervey; "a gipsy, at all events, most certainly."

"I know who it is," said Will to Una in a rather low tone; "it is Ashtaroth, the wife of the man Edwards, whose history I told you."

"I am glad I have seen her," said Una. "She is strangely handsome, though it is not exactly a pleasant face. Ashtaroth, goddess of the Sidonians! What a singular name for any one to have in these days."

"Everything is strange about the Edwardses," said Will; "but, behold!" she continued, raising herself and looking out across the country; "I perceive in the distance a black horse approaching, known as one Night-hade, which has the honour of bearing on its back the Master of Atherstone. He is coming this way;" and in the course of a few moments Humphrey, followed by his groom, came riding along the bank close to the boat. He was near enough to exchange a few words with them as to the favourable weather and the prospects of the day, and then Rupert suggested that he should entrust his horse to his servant and join them for the rest of the way.

"We have plenty of room," he said; "and, in addition to other attractions, we have a little old man here who plays the violin wonderfully well, and will entertain you with music when our conversation becomes too dull."

Humphrey smiled and began a courteous refusal; then he paused, his eyes fixed themselves on the bright face of Una Dysart, who had turned towards him, and he wavered, hesitated, and finally seeming to make a great effort, he said, "I wish indeed I could come, Northcote, but I cannot—must not—though I am none the less grateful to you for the offer;" and lifting his hat, he touched his horse on the neck with his hand, and it instantly started off at a rapid pace, bearing him speedily out of their sight.

"Now if ever a man did violence to his inclinations, it was Humphrey Atherstone," said Northcote. "It was quite evident that he longed to take his place amongst us, and was held back by some grave obstacle in his own mind, which compelled him to leave us."

"I have quite come to the conclusion," said Crichton, "that my brother the rector

is perfectly right in his serious mistrust of Mr. Atherstone."

"What grounds can you have for making such an assertion?" exclaimed Una, turning upon him with a flash of indignation in her great brown eyes.

"Simply the logical fact which has become a proverb, 'that there is no smoke without fire,' and the no less certain truth that in these days, mysteries in the lives of individuals do not generally hide anything poetic or interesting, but rather something very discreditible to those who seek to shelter themselves behind them."

"Anyhow, it is utterly unfair to condemn persons on mere assumptions," she answered, for her own generous spirit rose in revolt at the injustice which, it seemed to her, was generally dealt out to Mr. Atherstone—and she allowed a feeling not only of dangerous compassion, but of instinctive championship on his behalf, to take possession of her from that moment. She made her first concession to it by turning her back on Hervey Crichton and occupying herself exclusively in talking to Will Northcote till they reached their destination. Crichton sat silent, looking vexed and uncomfortable, for Miss Dysart had been very friendly with him up to this time, and he was becoming painfully conscious of a daily increasing desire on his own part that they should go somewhat beyond being friends, and when they all disembarked he made a great effort to regain the place by her side which he had generally held when they met in society. But Una was not to be appeased—she somewhat maliciously took refuge with Mrs. Northcote, whom she very well knew the bold warrior would not dare to encounter. Hervey lingered at a little distance from her for a time, and then seeing she was determined to remain hostile, tossed his handsome head with a look of evident pique, and went off to Miss Northcote, who received him with such merry goodwill that he could not help enjoying himself in her society most heartily, in spite of his annoyance.

It was a pleasant scene on which the new comers looked. The field was crowded with persons of all ranks, wandering about in the sunshine and strolling in groups, or more often in couples, down the shady paths by the river-side. The match had been commenced, so soon as Atherstone and a few more of the great people of the county came on the ground, and was being played with great animation and excitement. Una had never seen a game of cricket in her life, and therefore it was to her as unintelligible as it was uninteresting, and she very soon discovered that even those who might be supposed to understand it were entirely occupied with their own concerns, and paid very little attention to it. Atherstone was the only person who seemed really to try to make the day pleasant to the cricketers and their friends, of whom there were many hard-working men and women bent on making the most of their only holiday in the year. Una's glance followed him from place to place, while Mrs. Northcote poured a dropping fire of heavy remarks into her ear, to which she found it was not necessary she should listen in order to make suitable answers, and she was struck by the gentleness and consideration he showed to the poor people for whose comfort he seemed so anxious. She could hardly have believed that his dark face could have been so full of sweetness as it was when he carried tired little children back to their mothers, or found a seat for some poor old woman where she could see her boy playing this momentous game—and he showed very evidently that it was not to mix with his acquaintances, but to do what he could

for the amusement of his tenantry that he had come on the ground.

While Una was standing very silently watching the whole scene, Mr. Northcote suddenly changed the current of her ideas, by exclaiming to his wife,—

"There is the rector talking to that fellow Edwards again. I must say I cannot understand his taking any notice of him. Whatever Atherstone may be, there is no doubt that man is a disreputable scoundrel."

Una turned eagerly in the direction to which Mr. Northcote pointed, and saw the Malay, standing half hid in the shade of a tree, talking with a cringing, furtive air to the rector, while he held upon his shoulder a tiny mite of a boy, whose gipsy face seemed sparkling with precocious intelligence.

Mrs. Northcote looked solemnly towards the group, and said, with the calm satisfaction which always accompanied her condemnation of her neighbours, "It may be, Mr. Northcote, that the rector thinks he has a better chance of inculcating morality on the low scoundrel, who makes no concealment of his guilt, than on the higher placed evil-doer, who shrouds his crimes, whatever they are, under a hard, impenitent reserve."

This evident allusion to Atherstone was a little too much for Una, and she started away from Mrs. Northcote, feeling that she could not trust herself to speak to her without indignation, and went in search of her father.

She found Colonel Dysart engaged in an examination of Atherstone's horse, which had been left under the care of the groom, in a corner of the field, and as Una came up to him he said, "I was just wishing for you, Una; I know how much you admire a fine horse, and this is really one of the most splendid beasts I ever saw." He began describing to her the various good points in the animal; and while she stood listening to him, she saw Atherstone, in the course of some arrangement he was actively making for a group of poor people, accidentally pass near the rector and Edwards. It was clear that he had not seen the Malay before, for the moment his glance fell upon him he stopped suddenly, and let a chair he was carrying drop from his hand. A few moments he stood silent and rigid, then, as Edwards slowly turned his malignant face and looked at him, Atherstone hurriedly said a few words to those around him, and then came with hasty steps to the spot where his horse was standing. There was a very strange expression on his face, a sort of mingling of sternness and misery; but it changed to a softened sadness when he saw Una. He shook hands with her and her father, and told them that he was unexpectedly obliged to leave the ground.

"What, so soon, Mr. Atherstone?" said Colonel Dysart; "I thought that your people always considered they had a right to keep you with them to the last on this day."

"So they have, and I have never failed them before; but this year all is changed. I cannot stay in this place to day." He mounted his horse at once, and saying to Una, with more earnestness than the simple words warranted, "I do trust you will enjoy yourself, Miss Dysart," he galloped off before she could answer.

Colonel Dysart looked after him, with a perplexed expression, and then turned to his daughter. "You have been desired to enjoy yourself, Una; how do you mean to accomplish that result?"

"Not by looking at the cricketers, at all events, and still less by rejoining Mrs. Northcote. I should like to find Lilith Crichton, as Will is clearly not accessible