

ONE LIFE ONLY.

CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

"Don't speak to me of that iron man," she said, "I cannot command my feelings when he is mentioned; but Hervey is an uncommonly good fellow, I like him very much."

"I think Miss Orichton quite charming," said Una.

"She is the dearest little thing in the world," said Miss Northcote, "but awfully slow."

"Very slow indeed," said Rupert, composedly, "she does not talk slang."

"Since you object to my style of conversation, Ru, I will leave you to enjoy that of our respected elders. Miss Dysart, do come out and let me show you our fernery." She did not wait for her visitor's consent, but quietly turning round, she said, "Miss Dysart wishes to go out, mother, we shall not come back for some little time," and then lightly dancing down the steps which led from the window, she held out her hand to Una who joined her with great goodwill; Rupert was following, but Will stopped, and facing him in a very decided manner, ordered him to remain where he was.

"At least, you do not come with us," she said; "I mean to find out what sort of a person Miss Dysart is quite by myself." Rupert laughed, and went back as if he knew it was no use to dispute her authority, and she drew Una rapidly on by a shady walk which led to the river.

"That was rather a terrific announcement of yours," said Una, as they almost ran along together; "perhaps you will be very much dissatisfied with the discoveries you may make in my character."

"I do not expect I shall, I think you will suit me; anyhow, I simply want a jolly talk by ourselves. Of course we are not going to the fernery, I hate ferns."

"Where are we going then?"

"To a little nook by the river-side, which is a favourite hiding-place of mine, and where they will not be able to find us, if they send for you before I am ready to let you go. There now," she said as they reached their destination, "is not this perfect?"

It was a pleasant spot, certainly, a mossy bank carpeted at this season with primroses and violets, and drooping willow-trees all around them, whose branches, just tinged with tender green, touched the sparkling waters of the swiftly-rushing river that rolled past them, making music in the still soft air. Miss Northcote flung herself down at once on a bed of flowers, and Una very willingly took a place beside her.

CHAPTER V.

It was not difficult for the two new acquaintances to find topics for conversation. Miss Northcote seemed to be inquisitive on every subject under the sun, and begged Una to understand at once, that she had an inquiring mind, which it was absolutely necessary she should satisfy by every means in her power, and notably by the present opportunity for enlightenment, which Miss Dysart's visit afforded her. For instance, she had a weakness for Hottentots. Would Una be kind enough to tell her whether she had found them agreeable companions at the Cape? and especially had she been able to discover whether it was pleasant to have a Hottentot mother? and how about the sailors on board ship; had she fraternized with them much? and had she ever succeeded with their assistance in being mast-headed? which was the object of her own highest ambition, as she should then at least feel free for one

half-hour from all the terrible rules and restrictions of this monotonous civilised life. Oh! that she were a man; or could even look like one; then would she not go straight off to sea, and never come back again to be proper and polite. And so wild Will rambled on, talking the most ineffable nonsense, but letting gleams of shrewd common sense occasionally appear through it all, which showed that she had some sterling qualities under her quaint absurdity, and that her vehement independence of mind covered a good deal of feminine softness and kindness. At last, after she had insisted that Miss Dysart should give her some idea of the opinion she had formed of the British nation, from the specimens she had seen in that neighbourhood, she suddenly said—

"Now tell me, have you become acquainted with the county mystery?"

"The county mystery! I do not understand."

"The county hero then, he is as much one as the other."

"I cannot at all tell who you mean."

"I mean Humphrey Atherstone, of Atherstone; hero and mystery, certainly, and either almost a saint—or almost a demon—no mortal in this part of the world at least can say which."

"No, indeed, I do not know him; though I heard of him as possessing a splendid old place, which took my fancy immensely when I saw it from the hillside. But I had no idea he was anything half so remarkable as you seem to imply. What a wonderful contradiction of terms you have used in describing him!"

"Only such as would accurately convey the county sentiments on the subject; there is an extraordinary conflict of opinion; some people believe him to be everything that is most terribly wicked—capable of all manner of crimes, and having committed not a few; whilst others think there never was any one half so good, so noble, so generous, so public spirited." For instance, to show you I am not speaking at random, my mother and the rector are convinced that he is nothing less than an iniquitous monster; while my father and Rupert are disposed to be mildly charitable, and Dr. Burton, and Mr. Knight, doctor and lawyer, consider that he is endowed with every imaginable virtue; my own astute judgment is still at fault respecting him, but I incline to the worst."

"All this is very bewildering, but of course you have excited my curiosity to an unendurable extent, and you must really do your best to satisfy it now by all the explanations you can give. Please to begin systematically. You said he was a hero, a mystery, and a saint or a demon. Now, first of all, why a hero?"

"Because a man who, in the prime of life, with wealth sufficient to gratify the most luxurious and extravagant tastes, with undoubted talent, a stately presence, and a strong self-controlled character which would make him a power among his equals, chooses to shut himself out from the public stage of the world, from every channel of pleasure and ambition, and devote his fortune, his intellect, his whole existence, to the improvement of his estates, and the care of his tenantry, and the numerous poor people connected with him, is surely a hero in the strictest sense of the word."

"I should think so certainly, if he does it really with a view to benefit his people, and not simply from some eccentric fancy."

"There can be no doubt on that point, because before he came into possession of the property few men enjoyed life more than he did. But it is impossible that he can find any personal pleasure in the hard, austere, laborious existence he leads now. His whole energies are devoted to improv-

ing the condition of his labourers, and turning his land to good account; he has built model cottages, converted public-houses into temperance clubs, restored the parish church which stands on his ground, built a mission chapel for the outlying hamlets, and founded all manner of industrial and charitable institutions. He is at work early and late on these matters, and says he has no time to go into society. The only relaxation he seems to allow himself is an occasional gallop on a huge black horse, for which he has an especial affection."

"Well, you have certainly made out his claim to be a hero—at least in the nineteenth century; it is not exactly the description of a mediæval knight; but how is he a mystery?"

"Do you not think that a man living in a county absolutely replete with charming young ladies, and who yet announces publicly, that he never means to marry, is a decided mystery?"

"I am not quite sure of that; many men remain unmarried."

"But not under such circumstances. Humphrey Atherstone is the last of his race; if he were to die unmarried, there would be no heir to a property which has passed from father to son for ages upon ages. And it is the more extraordinary, because he has the most deeply-rooted attachment to the old home of his ancestors, and has always been noted for his intense family pride. It seems almost incredible that he should be willing to let the ancient Abbey pass to strangers in name and blood."

"Perhaps he may change his mind, as men often do, when the right woman comes in their way."

"I do not think he will. Mr. Knight, who is his lawyer, told my father that Mr. Atherstone had asked him to make it as public as he could, that it was his inviolable determination to remain single, and he said also that he had made a will in accordance with this resolution, which was of a very extraordinary nature. Of course he revealed nothing of its contents, and I suppose it was rather a breach of honour in a lawyer to say as much as he did; but it was perfectly plain, from the way he spoke, that he thought there was some strange secret lying at the root of this predilection for a single life, which was as much hid from him, in spite his having drawn up the will, as from every one else."

"Well, I admit you have proved Mr. Atherstone to be a mystery, and your description of his good deeds shows why he might be considered a saint by some people; but why should any one think him a demon?"

"Partly from a species of instinct which affects many people with regard to him, myself included; partly because the extraordinary change which came over him at the time of his uncle's death gave rise to rather uncomfortable suspicions respecting him?"

"Not that he murdered him, surely?"

"Oh no, people are never expected to go so far as that in these moderate days; besides, Humphrey Atherstone was passionately attached to his uncle; but there is no doubt that the old man's death took place from the bursting of a blood-vessel, caused by the agitation of a violent quarrel between himself and his nephew. He was quite well before it took place, and dead an hour after. Of course, this alone was startling, but it was the change which was observed in Mr. Atherstone from that very day which made people take a prejudice against him. He had not been even a hero before that, though he had always taken an interest in the tenantry, and he was not in the least a mystery. He went into society