

## STILL AND DEEP.

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"ONE LIFE ONLY," ETC.

## CHAPTER LIII.

Bertrand de L'Isle had listened with ever deepening attention and seriousness, to the simple yet earnest words with which his wife told him the sources and nature of her hopes on Laura Brant's behalf, and when she paused in her momentary agitation; he still sat silent for a few minutes before he spoke.

"Well, Mary, I hope it may be as you expect," he said at last, thoughtfully; "and after the account you have given me of poor Pemberton's ceaseless prayers, one might almost believe that a miracle of grace would indeed be worked on the woman who injured him, because of his noble devotion; but it will be in very truth a miracle I think if Lurline is ever brought to anything like real religion, for I am convinced that she is godless and false to the very heart's core."

"She has never known God, certainly," said Mary, "but I think that has in part, at least, been more her misfortune than her fault; and in other respects I believe there is greater ground for hope even in her natural character than you would be disposed to admit. I imagine the root of the evil in her case lies simply in the fact that she has never at all realised anything beyond this outward visible world and her personal existence in it; this present life, and her own happiness throughout its duration, is all she has ever thought of or aimed at or desired; she has not even recognised a moral law as applying to herself, and therefore has not scrupled to use any means, however full of falsehood and cruelty, to gain her own ends. She has been kept from graver evils mainly by her instincts as a lady, and her position in society; but I think that if once her spiritual sense could be awakened to a knowledge of the truth of God, of the love of Christ, and of the immortality that surely awaits her, there are good and hopeful qualities within her, which will help her at once to respond to such a revelation."

"You have evidently studied her character more than I have, my wise little wife, and you may be right."

"At all events, Bertrand, I have your full sanction, have I not, for trying my best to fulfil John Pemberton's charge, and for my other plans with regard to Laura?"

"Certainly you have, my darling. If he who suffered so much more by her than we have done could thus forgive and serve her to the last, we well may do what in us lies to help her now. We will go together at once, dear, to find rooms for her, and to arrange for her removal, and you may be with her in your efforts to influence her for good, as much as you please till the time comes for our return home."

Two days later Mary de L'Isle was seated by the side of Laura's couch, which had been drawn near the open window of a pleasant room, very different from the attic in which she had found her. The poor suffering Lorelei was already looking much better, though still excessively pale and wasted, the burning feverishness had evidently almost left her, and she seemed tranquil and at ease, though very weak. It had now, however, become strangely evident how completely her beauty had depended on her brilliant colouring and animation, for no one at this time would have called her even a pretty woman; her features had always been defective and irregular, and now that her eyes were sunken, and her cheeks wasted, there were not the slightest remains of the ephemeral

leveliness that had allured so many to their fatal injury. She was much more subdued and simple in her manner, and there was a touch of real feeling in the thanks she was expressing to Mary for all she had done for her.

"I never thought the day would come when I should be a dependent on your charity, and that of Bertrand Lisle," she added, while a flush tinged her wan cheeks; "I think, in a sense, you both have your revenge in that very fact, though I know you do not do it with the intention of heaping coals of fire on my head."

"No, indeed," said Mary, warmly; "we have been giving ourselves pleasure in trying to be of use to you."

"You have saved my life; but was it worth saving, Mary? I must come back to that, though I am glad not to be called upon to face God with all my sins upon my head at this time; but you don't know with what dread I look forward to the dull, monotonous existence that seems to be before me. You are going to leave me here with Mrs. Parry and this poor sickly baby, and I know that your kindness will ensure my having everything I absolutely require, but what shall I have to brighten life, or to give me happiness?"

"That which alone can give happiness to any one on earth, whatever their external existence may be—the love of God, the hope of serving through the eternal ages the Lord who suffered and died to purchase for us endless bliss."

Laura sighed. "I never was religious, you know, Mary; and although I have no doubt what you say is true, these prospects are too far off to have any reality for me; church-going used to be simply a weariness to me, as I daresay you remember."

"Yes, and I suppose even now you do not care to have such matters spoken of, though you have been very near what seems to you so far off, Laura dear."

"I do not dislike your talking of religion, Mary, because you never were either canting or self-righteous. But although it is true, no doubt, that if I had died as I expected I should have been brought into the midst of all that the Bible teaches of the unseen world, I only felt terrified at the thought of God's just anger, and my probable punishment; and I must say all that is happiness in this life seems to me very far removed from anything that religion can offer."

"I think that is just where your mistake has been, Laura. You have imagined that the gifts which this present visible world can bestow are capable of conveying happiness to the immortal beings whom God has created to find bliss only in Himself, and I think even your own experience might show you now what a fallacy it is to suppose the soul can ever be satisfied with earthly pleasures. You used to think that riches and society and amusements were all that was most desirable, did you not?"

"Yes, and I fought hard to win them."

"And you succeeded; for some months after your marriage, you had all these supposed advantages, had you not? You had wealth untold, and you lived in a round of gaieties, and won a great deal of admiration and homage?"

"That is true enough," said Laura.

"Then, tell me, were you happy in the midst of it all?" and Mary fixed her dark earnest eyes on the faded face.

"Never for a single moment," answered Laura, energetically; "but there were a thousand causes to prevent it. I had rivals in society who were more courted than I was, and it worried me beyond endurance not to be able to emulate their success. Then I used to spend heaps of money in giving splendid fetes to numbers of people, not one of whom I ever cared to

see again, and I reaped nothing from them myself but disappointment and weariness. I got tired to death of the theatre when I went to it every night, and soon my state of health incapacitated me from much fatigue, and at home Mr. Brant and I were always quarrelling. Oh, I have been very wretched, but that was the result of my special circumstances, not because a life of pleasure cannot give happiness!"

"You would find that there are always circumstances to mar the enjoyments which belong to this world only; the very satiety they produce would do it, if nothing else did."

"But look at your own case, Mary; you are very happy, as well you may be—Comtesse de L'Isle, with wealth, position, and everything you can desire!"

"I am happy because I have my Bertrand," she answered, simply; "but the very love I bear him would turn to utter anguish if I had no hope beyond this life; for, think how precarious all such happiness is—at any moment death may take him from me or me from him. I do not know how I could bear the thought of all earth's changes and chances, if it were not for the prospects of the steadfast peace into which I trust we both may enter when this incomplete existence is broken off or ending in decay. As to these other so-called advantages of which you speak, they are absolutely nothing in themselves, and altogether valueless, excepting for the power they sometimes convey of being useful to our fellow creatures."

"Then, do you mean that earth has no joys at all for any one, Mary?" asked Laura.

"No, far from it! There are many sources of happiness, pure and sweet, many tranquil pleasures which our Father in heaven gives us to cheer us in our difficult journey to our home; but they are only like the flowers growing by the wayside, which may enliven our path a little way, if we can but be sure that we ever see before us that Bright and Morning Star, the true light of the world, which alone can really fill our hearts with joy, the perfect joy of His eternal love."

Mary seemed almost to have forgotten to whom she was speaking as she uttered these words, while her eloquent eyes were lifted up to the pure blue vault, seen through the open window, with a look which told how intense was in that moment her realisation of the great truth she was expressing.

The worldly woman at her side lay still and silent, gazing at her with mingled wonder and envy, and not daring for a time to disturb the thoughts she could so little understand.

## CHAPTER LIV.

It might have made a striking and suggestive picture if Mary de L'Isle and Laura Brant could have been depicted in that moment of silence, as representatives, the one of the children of light, the other of the children of this world. Mary had turned to the window, and the full glory of an Italian sunset was streaming on her pure spiritual face and large dark eyes all luminous with the light of faith and hope, her snowy garments shining in the vivid radiance with the dazzling whiteness of an angel's robes, while Lurline lay back amid the shadows with her gray faded face and lustreless eyes, and the weary careworn expression of one whose spirit knows no peace. She broke the stillness, and recalled Mary to herself at last by saying, with a heavy sigh, "I wish, oh how I wish, I could feel as you do! but for me it is hopelessly impossible."

In an instant Mary had turned.