

## ONE LIFE ONLY.

## CHAPTER I.

A great ship homeward bound from the Cape, was speeding gaily over tranquil waters, that scarce were ruffled by the light breezes of a glad spring day—there was sunshine in the blue sky overhead—sunshine on the bluer sea below—but the brightness of life's own morning was on the cloudless face of Colonel Dysart's daughter, as she leant over the side of the vessel and looked out upon the shoreless ocean with a fixed, abstracted gaze. He was watching her, with an expression half amused, half wandering on his thin, refined face, as he lay on the deck propped up by a heap of cushions, and at last raising himself on his elbow he called to her, with a slightly mocking tone in his voice, "Una! I have come to the conclusion that you must be composing an epic poem at the very least; one half-hour by my watch you have been gazing immovably over the sea, without so much as stirring an eye-lash, and I never in my life before saw you quiet so long. I tremble for the result. How many cantos shall I be condemned to hear?"

She turned round with a laughing light in her great brown eyes as she answered merrily, "Not one—for the present: I thought you knew by this time that I can only compose poems by rushing about frantically, knocking over the furniture and tearing my hair when the rhymes will not come right."

"What were you doing, then?"

"Thinking."

"Only thinking! it must have been on some very important subject surely to make you look so wonderfully serious."

"So it was," she said, a sudden gravity replacing the mirthful sunshine on her mobile face. "That very strange woman, Miss Amherst, made an attack on me last night which startled me extremely, and what she said was so very suggestive that I was trying to work it out in my own mind as it affected myself. Let me tell you all about it, father mine; I should like to have your opinion," and bounding away from her place she flung herself down on the deck beside her father.

Colonel Dysart looked at her with an expression of intense tenderness, which contrasted strangely with his habitual air of languor and indifference. She was all he had in the world—all that remained to him of the one love of his life. He was coming home invalided from the Cape, where he had been in command of an inland military station for many years, and where, greatly to the surprise of the London world, the clever and talented Lady Mary Molyneux, went with him as his wife. No one would have supposed her to be a person likely to make a romantic love match, for she was very accomplished and intellectual, and somewhat strong minded; however, she turned her back on a host of adorers to follow the fortunes of handsome Harry Dysart in his distant exile, and there she remained, buried alive as her friends said, till her brave devoted life came to an end, when her only child Una was about seventeen. Colonel Dysart's post was in a very remote and lonely part of the country, where there were no European residents, but although Una grew up like a wild rose in some woodland solitude, with all the influences of Nature free and unobstructed round her, she had the advantage of the very high culture which Lady Mary's rare mental gifts enabled her to bestow on her daughter. Una's rich, lavishly-endowed nature had responded readily to the really noble training she received, and she was now, at nineteen, a pure, high-minded girl, with generous sympathies and refined, artistic tastes—*spirituelle*, to

use the untranslatable French term, rather than brilliant, cherishing an almost fierce scorn of all that was vile or mean, and a no less vehement appreciation of goodness in any shape. She had lived in such complete seclusion that she knew nothing whatever of the world, on which she was now for the first time entering, and where it was very certain her ardent, passionate temperament and eager impulsiveness would expose her to many difficulties and dangers which minds of a lower type might escape altogether. Una Dysart had a charming face, with an expression of mingled brightness and sweetness which gave her a beauty peculiarly her own, and her voice, both in singing and speaking, was singularly attractive, very soft and melodious, with a pathetic undertone, which seemed to tell of depths in her nature as yet unknown even to herself.

It was on her account that Colonel Dysart decided to give up his appointment and return to England, for he felt that his health was failing, and he had little doubt that if his daughter mixed for a time in the society from which he had so long been exiled she would soon make a home for herself, where he might leave her sheltered and beloved when he himself could watch over her no more. Una knew nothing of these gloomy forebodings, however; light of heart as a lark in the sunshiny morning, she had not a care or fear in the world, but looked out with eager eyes to the unknown years, impatient to see them yield up the glorious possibilities with which they were fraught in the dreams of her confident youth.

"Well, child," said Colonel Dysart, as she nestled close at his side, "what did Miss Amherst say to plunge you in such profound meditations? I fancy a revelation from the days of her youth might be rather exciting; I have a strong conviction that some strange history lies hid behind the determined calm of that woman's face."

"You would not have thought her calm if you had seen her last night. It happened after you had gone to your cabin; I was looking out over the sea, which was all crimson and opal with the last glow of the sunset, and singing to myself so low that I thought no one could hear me. Miss Amherst was sitting near, quite still and silent. Greatly to my surprise up came Mr. Cunliffe, that stiff old Australian judge, and revealed to me that he had actually a soul for music, whereas I had doubted if he had a soul at all. He solemnly asked me to do him the favour of singing that oldest of hackneyed old songs 'Oft in the stilly night,' supposing I knew it. Happily I remembered how our sentimental band-master used to groan it out, over and over again, so I sang it at once to the best of my ability, and pleased him so much that he further asked if I knew any other song of a similar description. I thought of 'Tears, idle tears,' which expresses the same idea so much more beautifully, and which I set to music myself, and I sang it forthwith."

"The saddest little poem that ever was written," said Colonel Dysart.

"So poor Miss Amherst seemed to think," said Una. "I noticed that while I was singing both songs she sat quite motionless with her head bent down on her hands, but when I came to that last line, 'Oh, death in life, the days that are no more,' she suddenly started from her seat, with her face absolutely convulsed by some strange inward agony, and darted away to the other side of the ship, where I saw her grasp hold of the railing and lean down over it, seeming actually torn with sobs."

"Poor woman, I should have thought she was past the age for such keen feeling; she must be fifty at least."

"She has not lost the power of suffering, anyhow. Of course I was dismayed to find I had produced such an effect, and Mr. Cunliffe was evidently appalled at the prospect of a scene, for he departed as fast as his dignity would allow him, and left me alone with Miss Amherst. I went to her at once, and told her it would grieve me very much if I had been so unfortunate as to cause her any pain by the songs I had chosen. For a moment she could not speak, and then with a perfect passion of grief she exclaimed, 'Pain! it is agony! that cruellest agony, a vain remorse, which comes to me from the thought of the days that are no more?' Then she suddenly turned towards me and caught hold of both my hands, while she fixed her eyes, that looked like two deep wells of infinite sadness, full upon mine, and said in a low hoarse voice, 'Una Dysart, let my bitter experience bear fruit at least for you—let it teach you now, in the spring-time of your youth, while it may still avail you, the lesson which most human beings learn at the gate of the grave alone. Remember that you have one life only—only one life to make or mar; it is given you as a prey; you may crown it with joy, or poison it with anguish to yourself and to others; you may so deal with it, while the power of choice is still yours, that it may lead you in honor and happiness safe to the portals of Paradise, or you may so wreck it by error and fatal mistakes, that you will doubt if even from its last sad hours you can wring Heaven's pardon or pity,—but however you act by it, Una, remember, you have one life only. If you ruin it, blight it, waste it away like precious waters poured out on the sands of the desert, you can never have another wherewith to try and redeem its unutterable loss—one chance, one trial, one life alone you can have, and it is all in your own hand still; you can make it what you please. I charge you to be wise in time, look to it, while yet it lies untouched, untainted before you; determine even now what aim and meaning you will give to it, that whatever may be the outward circumstances you cannot control, at least in essence and spirit, it may be bright and blest. Take care, Una, take care that you do not make of your one life an utter and a hopeless wreck as I have made of Mine!' and when she had said all this she flung my hands away from her, and rushed down to her cabin, where she shut herself in for the night. Do you know she left me feeling positively awed by her words, for though they sound rather melodramatic as I repeat them, she was most thoroughly in earnest, and said, I am sure, nothing more than she felt."

"I quite believe it; no doubt she wrong her experience out of the depths of some miserable past, but it was certainly a startling address to make to a young girl like you. It is strange, although, of course, it is the simplest truism, that we have one life only, yet it never struck me exactly in that light before. She is quite right, however; if in early youth we were to realize the fact that we have but one existence given us for weal or woe, we should be somewhat more careful not to ruin it by errors and weakness as most of us do. Well, Una love, it is not too late for you, though it is for me as well as for Miss Amherst: you must profit by her warning."

"I mean to do so," said Una, turning round and lifting her clear sunny eyes full on her father's face. "It is a glorious thought to me, that life is still all in my hands; to a great extent I can make of it what I will. I was thinking out the question with all my might when you spoke."

"No wonder you were abstracted then. Did you come to any conclusion?" he