

dream how you are stabbing me to the very heart! It is not your relations with John Pemberton which stand in our way—though I did not indeed understand before in what they consisted—it is my position with regard to Mary."

"Mary Trevelyan! Your sister Mary!" exclaimed Laura, turning round upon him with a look of almost horrified surprise.

"She is not my sister, Lurline. Oh that she were!"

"She has no other feeling for you but such as a sister might have. If she loves any one it is Charlie Davenant."

"She does not love him, Laura, I am sure of it."

"Perhaps not: because she is incapable of feeling affection at all; but in any case, she does not love you. What fatal mistake are you making, Bertrand?" continued Laura, vehemently. "You have told me plainly that you do not care for her, and that I am dear to you, and are you going to sacrifice yourself and me to the wild delusion that any love for you exists in that block of marble—that cold, passionless, rigid statue! She feels no more for you than does that stone," and Lurline pushed one angrily away with her foot.

"How can you be so sure she does not love me, Lurline?" said Bertrand, reluctantly.

"Because I have lived with her nearly a year, and I know her through and through. Have I not seen her coldness when she spoke of you, her indifference when your letters came, her careless unwillingness that your arrival should interfere with her own arrangements? A thousand things have proved it. Could she have made me her intimate friend all these months, and never a spark of her affection for you have shone through her life to me, if indeed she possessed any? Bertrand, it is madness to suppose she can love you!"

"Yet I have had good reason to think it," he said, slowly.

"What reason?" exclaimed Laura, flashing her bright eyes impatiently on him.

For a moment he did not answer: his delicacy shrank from betraying Mary's secret to any one. At last he said, gently, "I think you must not ask me that, dear Lorelei."

She started to her feet, and flung up her hands as with a movement of despair, crying out, "Because you have none—because it is a mere excuse. You are deceiving me! You have been only playing with me! You wring from me a confession of my fatal love for you, and then fling it back in my face, and tell me you are to give yourself to that block of stone. Why, why did you not leave me to die! But I can bear no more! I will never see you again! I have been betrayed, but I will never be scorned!"

And all her frame quivering with passion, she wrenched her hands out of Bertrand's grasp, and ran with the speed of a deer along the bank towards the point of danger.

But he was swifter even than she was, and he had caught her before she had gone many steps.

"Laura, Laura, forgive me!" he exclaimed, "you mistake me quite. Stay with me, only stay with me, and I will tell you all—everything you may ask me!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

As Bertrand spoke these words, impetuously, holding her fast all the time, Laura slowly turned round, and looked up at him with the sweetest expression possible softening all her winning face.

"Come and sit down," he said, "and I

will give you the fullest details of my position; it will be a great relief to myself to do so, I have been so completely alone in my perplexity."

And then he told her how, as Mary grew up in her fair stillness in his home, he had always loved her with a true and deep affection, and how, when his dying father had adjured him, both by word and letter, in the most urgent manner to make her his wife, he had been very willing and pleased to do so—"because, not then, sweet Lorelei," he added, "had my heart ever been roused to any warmer feeling, as it has been unhappily since."

"But your father could never have wished you to marry a woman you did not love," broke in Lurline, impatiently.

"No, he expressly said that he did not, but I did love Mary in a calm and reasonable manner then, and he had a most solemn reason for wishing that I should marry her almost as an act of justice."

"What was it? Tell it me, dear Bertrand," said the soft caressing voice.

And he did tell her all the history of Robert Trevelyan's fatal accident, and its consequences in Mary's utter orphanhood, and Mr. Lisle's life-long anguish of remorse; for it did not seem to him that in so doing he was failing in care and reverence for his father's memory, as he did not consider that he was in reality at all to be blamed for the terrible catastrophe, or that one of less sensitive conscience would have considered himself in any real sense the cause of it."

Laura caught eagerly at the expressions he used as to his father's morbid scrupulosity and exaggerated sensibility.

"Yes; and can you suppose, Bertrand, that in the clearer light where he sees all things now, he could wish you and Mary alike to sacrifice yourselves to a marriage in which there would be no love on either side, simply in the attempt to repair a fault which he never really committed?"

"If I could be sure that Mary has indeed no love for me!" said Bertrand, flushing as he spoke. "My father on his death-bed wrung from her an avowal that she did love me—and me alone."

"Ah!" said Laura, composedly, "we know how much that is worth. People will, even in a general way, do anything to soothe a dying man's last hours, and I believe there is nothing Mary would not have said to please your father at that sad time."

"But Laura, Mary is true. She could not speak falsely, even for his sake."

"No, perhaps not; and I dare say she could say with truth that she liked you better than any one else because she literally knew no other; but she has no love for you now, Bertrand. I can tell that, alas! by the feelings of my own heart. At the same time she glories in the martyr spirit, and if you were to press her to marry you because your father wished it she would very likely sacrifice herself and do it. But is my noble beautiful Bertrand to have a wife on such terms as that! oh, it drives me wild to think of it!" and Laura sprang to her feet, and paced to and fro, as if unable to control herself.

"Stay Lurline!" said Bertrand; "you need be in no fear that I will consent to take a wife on any such terms as these; let me but have the proof that Mary does not love me for myself, and would only marry me out of reverence to the dead, and I shall consider myself free as the winds, so far as she is concerned. I can secure her material comfort otherwise than by a marriage with me, and then I shall no longer hesitate to seek my own happiness where alone it can be found; but this proof, Lurline, how am I to obtain it?"

"From her own lips if you choose. Will that satisfy you?"

"Surely it would, if quiet, silent Mary could ever speak to me on such a theme!"

"Her silence and quietness might be your proof if you chose to accept it, Bertrand, for true love cannot hide itself or be silent, as to my cost I know," and the Lorelei drooped her head, apparently shame-faced, but speedily raised it, to say, with flashing eyes, "however, I will undertake that she shall remove your needless scruples herself to-morrow; for this I can tell you; ever since you have been here, Mary has been making all sorts of schemes for her own future, wholly independent of you."

"Schemes? of what nature? Not marriage with Charles Davenant, Lurline. I cannot believe that!"

"Not now perhaps; though I believe it will come later. But for the moment the sober Mary seems to be aspiring to a saintship, and to an emulation of Florence Nightingale. She has some plan of philanthropic self-devotion in her head, I believe."

"That is more like Mary, certainly!" said Bertrand.

"Ask her yourself to-morrow what her purpose for the future is, and she will tell you. But Bertrand," continued Laura, bending her eyes keenly on his face, "tell me if Mary knows that you are aware of what she said respecting her love for you in order to quiet your father on his death-bed?"

"That I cannot tell, but I should think not; for so far as I know she never spoke to him again after he told me. He died next day."

"But she knows that you heard from him what his wishes were?"

"Yes, that she certainly does, for I told her myself, and there it is, Lurline, that I consider my chief difficulty to lie. If I were to know certainly that she loved me, I should hold myself morally bound to her, because I told her in so many words that I knew his wishes, and that they were mine also, and I hoped they would be hers."

"When did you say that to her?" said Laura, frowning.

"On the night before we left our old home, standing by my father's new-made grave."

"And what was her answer?"

"She made none."

"What! do you mean to say she remained silent?" exclaimed Laura.

"Perfectly silent," he answered.

"Oh, Bertrand! and can you for a single moment imagine that she has any love for you if she could receive such a speech as that in silence. Ah, if it had been me!" and the Lorelei hid her face in her hands.

"My Lurline," he said tenderly, "you and Mary are as different as fire and water."

He remembered as he spoke how his father used to quote the proverb, "Still waters run deep," with reference to Mary's character, and a misgiving crossed him whether he was not mistaken in the impression he had gradually been acquiring under the Lorelei's subtle influence; that Mary's disposition instead of having any depth, rather represented the shallow waters which most speedily take a coating of ice, and he said, somewhat anxiously—"At least, Laura, you see now how it is that I cannot, with any peace of mind, follow the bent of my own inclination, until I am well assured that I am not acting a dishonourable part towards her whom my father left in my care; but if she were indeed to tell me, of her own accord, that her hopes and wishes have all been