

STILL AND DEEP.

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"ONE LIFE ONLY," ETC.

CHAPTER XXXV.

When Bertrand Lisle, having removed all traces of his long dusty journey, walked down through the great room towards his uncle, with his handsome head erect, and his eyes bright with excitement, he looked in truth a worthy representative of the old de L'Isles, whose portraits gazed down upon him from the walls, many of them bearing that strange resemblance to his own pleasant face which is often to be traced in members of an ancient family, even with an interval of centuries between them. His appearance was in striking contrast to that of the actual possessor, who still sat in his great chair with a black velvet robe folded loosely round his wasted shrivelled form, and a rich crimson silk coverlet flung over his helpless limbs; he watched the young man admiringly as the servant drew forward an old-fashioned green velvet chair with a carved wooden back, in which he seated himself close to his uncle's side.

The old Comte stretched out one of his thin white hands, and laid it on Bertrand's, not less delicate and shapely, though tanned with exposure to the sun, and said, tenderly, "You are very like your father, Bertrand; no wonder that I forgot the lapse of years, and took you for him."

"Ah!" continued he, "life must have been greatly embittered for Louis before he could thus seek to bring you up as an alien from our country, and doubtless I had my heavy share in poisoning it; but Providence has overruled us both—him in his nobleness and me in my unworthiness—and at the end of it all you stand in your rightful place, beneath the roof-tree of your ancestral home. You did well, Bertrand de L'Isle, to leave the stranger country that you might fight for France; and France opens her heart to you, and bids you rest on her soil for ever."

"I scarce understand you," said Bertrand, looking anxiously at the old man, who spoke with feverish excitement.

"No," he said, "how should you till you know my history. But I will accomplish now the bitter task, and tell it you from first to last." He joined his hands for a moment as if in prayer, and then went on. "Your father was my nephew, the son of my eldest brother, but we were so nearly the same age that we were brought up together as children in this old home, where I, in my orphanhood, was sheltered by your grandfather, who was in possession of the estates. Louis, his only son, was of course, by the law of primogeniture, which was always observed in our family, the direct heir of the property and all its territorial rights and titles. He was generous to me after he became the head of our house, but we were never friends, we were too unlike; he was like one of the old cavaliers of the times of chivalry—loyal to his God and to his king, pure-minded and disinterested, holding principle more precious than gold, and truth dearer than life. As for me, I cared neither for religion nor for the throne, nor for my country; I desired only wealth and worldly honours and luxurious ease, and I was bitterly jealous of Louis because he held the position of lord of this castle and estate, which I coveted for myself. I rejoiced to see his enthusiastic devotion to the cause of the Bourbons, because I knew that their tenure of the throne was precarious, and I allied myself to those who were secretly labouring to undermine it,

on purpose that if they fell I might stand well with the government inimical to them, and wrest the estates from Louis should he follow them in their fallen fortunes. I well knew that in doing so I should be false to the principles of our family as well as a treacherous usurper of that to which I had no real claim, but cared nothing even for honour and justice so that I could gain my own ends. I had married by that time a woman of low birth, for whom I never pretended to have the slightest affection, but whose wealth had become necessary to me on account of my debts, and she was full of vulgar ambition to be made lady of the castle, and urged me on in all my unworthy plans. They succeeded but too well: Charles X. was driven from France, and Louis clung to him in his misfortunes. I seized on the estates at once, and succeeded in getting my possession of them, unjust as it was, recognised by the new dynasty, to whom I gave in my adhesion, till the Revolution of 1848 made me veer round to call myself first a Republican, and to court the imperial favour. During all these years I did my best to lose sight of Louis. I knew well that even if he chose to remain in exile, my plain duty would have been to ask him to let me care for the estates as his representative, and to have honestly transmitted to him every farthing of the revenue, but so far from that, I succeeded in getting a sentence of exile and deprivation passed upon him, through false representations which I made concerning him, to the reigning powers, and I established myself here as in my right. I forbade the mention of his name by any of our dependents, and after that one intimation of his marriage, and subsequently of your birth, which he sent through the family notary, I never heard of him from that day to this. But Bertrand, God is just, and not for one single hour did I find happiness in my usurped position. Nothing prospered with me. My wife was a woman of violent temper, coarse in language and in mind; she made enemies of all around her. Our neighbours, equal to the de L'Isles in birth, and long the friends of the family, refused to associate with her, and her violence and insolence to our tenants and household were such that I dared not leave her alone in the chateau. We lived, therefore, a lonely life when we were here, shut up together, without a spark of affection between us to render our position tolerable, and when we went to Paris she tortured me by her plebeian manners and reckless extravagance. We had children, but they died one after another. The greatest desire I had in the world was that a son of mine should become lord of de L'Isle and head of our house, and again and again the hope was awakened only to perish. I had four sons, who passed from their cradles to their coffins. My wife and I were left alone face to face in our misery. Age crept on apace. Rather more than five years ago she died. It was too late then for me to marry again.

"It was about six months after my wife's death, when I had come down here to entertain some of my political friends who had agreed to meet at my house. They had spent a week with me, and had departed, leaving me alone; it was a beautiful summer evening, and I could not bear the solitude of these old halls; I went out, and roamed beyond the grounds, into a wood which lies at no very great distance from our domain. I did not feel well, but the fresh air seemed to revive me, and I had gone far into the recesses of the forest when suddenly a weakness seemed to take possession of me, a dimness passed over my eyes, then all became blank, and I remained unconscious. I know not how

long; when I came to myself I was lying on the ground at the foot of the tree; darkness had fallen on the earth, save that one portion of the horizon was illuminated every now and then by sheet lightning, the thunder was growling in the distance, but in the wood itself all was absolute calm. I lay there for a few minutes, trying to understand what had happened to me, and I concluded I had fainted, but when I tried to raise myself to move my limbs I understood the fatal truth, I had had a paralytic stroke, and I had lost all power of movement excepting in my hands; I tried to cry out, but my dumb lips refused to make any sound; I have since regained my speech, though not the use of my limbs, but for the time even the power to ask help was taken from me, my head fell back upon the earth, and I said to myself in despair, 'I shall die here unaided and alone. No one knew where I was, no one ever ventured into the forest after dark, where the peasants believed that the spirit of a man who was murdered years ago within its shade still walked by night; there was not a chance that any one would seek me till the morning, for my servants believed I had retired to rest. In my faintness and helplessness I felt as if I could not possibly survive through the night, stretched on the damp earth, without succour; death then, death speedy and terrible was surely before me, and as I closed my eyes in helpless despair I seemed to hear a solemn voice within me saying, 'and after death the judgment!'

"The dreadful night wore on, while my awakened conscience held me in its grasp like an accusing spectre. But still I lived; and with the dawning light a wood-cutter, passing near, through the mercy of my God, perceived me, and I was rescued. My servants were summoned. They carried me home. For days and months I lay dumb and helpless. Gradually the power of speech returned; but my limbs remain like those of a dead man."

"I believe that this much life was given me only that I might make restitution of all my unlawful gains. I sought Louis by every means in my power, but nowhere could I hear of him. I had a deep conviction that if only I were permitted to restore these estates to the rightful heir, I might take it as a token that the pardon and mercy of God would be extended even unto me, repentant, when in actual fact I am summoned before the judgment-seat. And now Bertrand de L'Isle," continued the old man, turning to him with a smile of ineffable contentment, "has not the good God been gracious to me indeed? He has tried the truth of my repentance by five years of anguish and almost hopeless waiting, and then he has brought you to me—you, the son and representative of Louis de L'Isle, legitimate heir, the true and rightful lord of all this fair estate. Already have I sent for the family notary, and to-morrow, in the presence of competent witnesses, I make over to you this chateau, and all that belongs to the inheritance of your father. As for me, the good cure of the village will give me a lodging with him for the brief remnant of my days."

"No, dear uncle, not so," said Bertrand, earnestly; "I will never consent to you leaving this place. After all that you have told me, I dare not gainsay your will that it should belong to my father's son hereafter, if I should survive the war, which is very doubtful; but while you live it is yours, and I will never deprive you of it."

"So Louis would have spoken," said his uncle, smiling. "But, Bertrand, we need scarce discuss the matter; it is but a question of a few months—the doctors have