

STILL AND DEEP.

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"ONE LIFE ONLY," ETC.

CHAPTER XXII.

Bertrand Lisle leaped from the bridge to the rocky bank of the stream below, forgetting everything but the sound, so wildly plaintively sweet, which had drawn him from Mary's side, and which seemed to recede before him as he hastened along at his utmost speed. It was Lurline's voice, he well knew, for none other could fill the air with melody of such exquisite softness and pathos, or thrill through his own heart with such dismay and pain, as he recognized in its mournful cadences the expression of some deep distress, and the thought that she was in peril or grief drove him from all recollection of any one in the world but herself.

Judging by the sounds, that grew fainter and fainter, she seemed to be flying away from him, and he hurried on, half frantic with dread as to what evil might have befallen her, especially when the sweet sad voice died away altogether, and he heard it no more. He increased his pace, dashing through the reeds and water-lilies that edged the stream, till at length the course of the current, sweeping round a projecting rock, brought him to an isolated spot, shut in by overhanging trees, and a very long way from the bridge where he had left Mary Trevelyan.

The water at this point was extremely deep, and the bank rose from it abruptly, with only here and there a rough moss-covered stone, affording a stepping-place for any one adventurous enough to approach the stream.

As Bertrand reached the top of the bank, and looked down upon the little inlet, he beheld a sight which struck him for a moment motionless with breathless terror: Laura Wyndham was standing on a stone which jutted out far into the deep pool formed by the stream at this point, and she was bending forward in an attitude which must infallibly have precipitated her into it, but for the frail support which she received from the slender branch of a tree, round which one of her hands was clasped; her other arm was stretched out over the pool, as if she was about to fling herself into it, or at least was making no effort to save herself from sinking into its dangerous waters when the branch, which was rapidly giving way under the pressure of her hold, should finally break asunder.

This Bertrand saw, to his horror, it was in the very act of doing, even while he looked on it, and the result could only be Laura's instantaneous fall into the water, from whence, if she did not sink at once, she would drift into the rapid current that would speedily bear her beyond his reach. The danger was too imminent for him even to attempt to rouse her to a sense of her position before he rescued her from it, and with one bound he had cleared the space which separated him from her, and at some peril to himself of falling into the stream, he succeeded in flinging his arm round her slender waist, and dragging her back from her dangerous post up the bank to a place of safety.

Then for a moment he stood breathless, holding her close to his heart, which was beating wildly with the sense of the danger she had escaped, and the excitement of her rescue, while she, with her head drooping on his breast, and her long bright hair trailing over his arm, made no effort to detach herself from his grasp; but he recollected himself almost instantly, and gently laid her out of his arms on to the grass at

the foot of a tree under whose shade they were standing.

It was with a bitter pang, however, that he loosed his hold, and let her lean for support against the rugged trunk of an old elm instead of his own passionate heart, where he longed to give her a place evermore, for the agony he had suffered in the moment of her peril had been to him a sudden revelation of the extent to which she was indeed intensely dear to him, and he knew now what he had failed altogether to understand before: that if he gave her up from a sense of honour to Mary Trevelyan he gave up with her the fairest promise of happiness his life could ever have known.

"Lurline," he said, in a voice hoarse with emotion, and the words burst from him so impetuously that he scarcely knew in what terms he framed them; "darling Lurline, thank Heaven you are safe!"

Then suddenly she shook the shining hair back from her face, which was wan and mournful as he had never before seen it, and lifted up to him her lovely eyes, wide open and dilated in a wild half-frenzied look, while she exclaimed, clasping her hands convulsively, "Why did you save me, Bertrand Lisle? why did you save me? But for your merciless help I had now been lying perhaps cold and senseless under those deep waters, safe from suffering any more, safe from feeling even the loss of all I prize! Oh, why did you not let me die?"

"Lurline," he exclaimed, flinging himself down on the grass at her feet, "what are you saying? what can you mean? Is it possible that you, the brightest and loveliest of beings, can have had the dreadful thought of flinging your dear life away?"

"I did not mean to kill myself; I do not wish to do wrong," she said, piteously. "but if the branch had broken and I had fallen in, it would not have been my fault, and yet I should have been at rest, and safe from the misery I see before me."

Artful as Laura Wyndham was, there was a genuine anguish in her tone, for she did feel at that moment that all her future was trembling in the balance, and that the scales were leaning heavily to that final separation from Bertrand, which would indeed be utter grief to her, although the causes which would make it so were more or less ignoble.

He caught her hand in his.

"But why do you see misery before you, beautiful bright Lurline? You are fitted to bring sunshine and joy to every heart that knows you, and it cannot be but that your own path must be blest with light and love wherever you go."

"My path has been through gloom and dreariness all my life long," she answered, passionately. "I have been like one stranded on an arctic shore, with only gloom, and ice, and solitude around me, and when suddenly there came a six-weeks' summer to my life, all full of warmth, and hope, and brightness, and I thought there was in it a light of affection that could never altogether fade away from it, do you wonder that it is misery to me to hear all in a moment from careless lips that it is about to be quenched in sudden darkness; that the drear winter of hopeless loneliness is coming back to me again, made all the gloomier for the recollection of the vanished sunshine?"

It was with an effort Bertrand kept back the words trembling on his lips, which would have asked if indeed it was his presence that had made radiance in her life, his threatened absence which was to bring back the gloom, but the recollection of Mary and of his dead father's wishes held him back, loyal and true-hearted as he was,

and he gazed mutely into her exquisite face with a look which she read as if it had been written in a book. She knew how to meet it; with one of the wild impulsive gestures which enabled her so often to say with impunity what would have seemed unmaidenly in any other, but in her appeared only to be guileless freedom, she exclaimed, "I do not know what the friendship between us has been to you, Bertrand—a passing amusement, perhaps. I believe it is so sometimes with men, who care not what lifelong agony they cause if they can while away a few weeks pleasantly—but I do know that to me it has been light, and joy, and blessedness, which has changed the whole world for me, and made it like the garden of Eden where you are, and a desolate wilderness where you are not; and then you wonder that I hate my life and shrink from the future when you coolly announce that you are about to take yourself out of my sight for ever and for ever!" and bursting into a passion of tears, she clasped her hands upon her knees, and laid her head down upon them, weeping bitterly.

"Oh, Lurline!" said Bertrand, almost beside himself; "if only I dared tell you what our friendship has indeed been to me these last few weeks! more, far more than ever it can have been to you, and now it would seem to me the very sweetest dream of bliss to have your companionship all my days, but I dare not, dare not speak of it, since it is so decreed that we can never be more to each other than we are now."

"Never more to each other than we are now!" she repeated, slowly; then she lifted her head, and fixed her large eyes, shining through their tears, on Bertrand's face. "Do I understand you rightly," she said, very softly, "that if there was no impediment in your way you would wish that our lives should be passed together?"

"Can you doubt it?" he exclaimed. "I am wrong, perhaps, to say it, but this once only I will make the avowal, and then lock my lips over all I feel for ever more. Darling Lorelei! to have you for the blessing of my life would be the deepest wish of my heart, and I hardly know at this moment how to bear the fiat which tells me it may never be."

A smile radiant as the morning sunshine flashed over Laura's face, and lit it up with a dazzling beauty on which Bertrand gazed entranced, while she exclaimed, in a tone of a rapturous joy, "Oh, Bertrand, I think we may be happy yet! I think the terrible black cloud is rolling away from my life. I understand it all; I see where your mistake is: you think that I am bound to John Pemberton, and that you must not in honour come between us, but you are quite mistaken; I am free as the air—free to give myself to you. Poor John is nothing to me but a brother, whom I adopted as such out of very charity, as an innocent consolation to him for my refusal to make him happy, for he does love me, alas! but too well. No, Bertrand, there is none in all the world can come between me and you. I never gave my heart before, but I have given it now; it is all yours for ever!" and she gave him both her little hands with a gesture of tender grace, as if she concluded all doubt was at an end; but in the words she had spoken, which seemed the genuine outburst of a guileless heart, she had been false with the basest of falseness, for she well knew that John Pemberton was not the obstacle between them.

Bertrand's fine face had taken an expression of the deepest distress and perplexity.

"Oh, Lurline, do not tempt me—do not madden me!" he said; "you cannot