II

Swithin St. Cleeve lingered on at his post, until the more sanguine birds of the plantation, already recovering from their midwinter anxieties, piped a short evening hymn to the vanishing sun.

The landscape was gently concave; with the exception of tower and hill there were no points on which late rays might linger; and hence the dish-shaped ninety acres of tilled land assumed a uniform hue of shade quite suddenly. The one or two stars that appeared were quickly clouded over, and it was soon obvious that there would be no sweeping the heavens that night. After tying a piece of tarpaulin, which had once seen service on his maternal grandfather's farm, over all the apparatus around him, he went down the stairs in the dark, and locked the door.

With the key in his pocket he descended through the underwood on the side of the slope opposite to that trodden by Lady Constantine, and crossed the field in a line mathematically straight, and in a manner that left no traces, by keeping in the same furrow all the way on tiptoe. In a few minutes he reached a little dell, which occurred quite unexpectedly on the other side of the field-fence, and descended to a venerable thatched house, whose enormous roof, broken up by dormers as big as haycocks, could be seen even in the twilight. Over the white walls, built of chalk in the lump, outlines of creepers formed dark patterns, as if drawn in charcoal.

Inside the house his maternal grandmother was sitting by a wood fire. Before it stood a pipkin, in which something was evidently kept warm. An eight-legged oak table in the middle of the room was laid for a meal. This woman of eighty, in a large mob cap, under which she wore a little cap to keep the other clean, retained faculties but little blunted. She was gazing into the flames, with her hands upon her knees, quietly re-enacting in her brain certain of the long chain of episodes, pathetic, tragical, and humorous, which had constituted the parish history for the last sixty years. On Swithin's entry she looked up at him in a sideway direction.

'You should not have waited for me, granny,' he said.

''Tis of no account, my child. I've had a nap while sitting here. Yes, I've had a nap, and went straight up into my old country again, as usual. The place was as natural as when I left it,--e'en just threescore years ago! All the folks and my old aunt were there, as when I was a child,--yet I suppose if I were really to set out and go there, hardly a soul would be left alive to say to me, dog how art! But tell Hannah to stir her stumps and serve supper--though I'd fain do it myself, the poor old soul is getting so unhandy!'

Hannah revealed herself to be much nimbler and several years younger than granny, though of this the latter seemed to be oblivious. When the meal was nearly over Mrs. Martin produced the contents of the mysterious

vessel by the fire, saying that she had caused it to be brought in from the back kitchen, because Hannah was hardly to be trusted with such things, she was becoming so childish.

'What is it, then?' said Swithin. 'Oh, one of your special puddings.' At sight of it, however, he added reproachfully, 'Now, granny!'

Instead of being round, it was in shape an irregular boulder that had been exposed to the weather for centuries--a little scrap pared off here, and a little piece broken away there; the general aim being, nevertheless, to avoid destroying the symmetry of the pudding while taking as much as possible of its substance.

'The fact is,' added Swithin, 'the pudding is half gone!'

'I've only sliced off the merest paring once or twice, to taste if it was well done!' pleaded granny Martin, with wounded feelings. 'I said to Hannah when she took it up, "Put it here to keep it warm, as there's a better fire than in the back kitchen."'

'Well, I am not going to eat any of it!' said Swithin decisively, as he rose from the table, pushed away his chair, and went up-stairs; the 'other station of life that was in his blood,' and which had been brought out by the grammar school, probably stimulating him.

'Ah, the world is an ungrateful place! 'Twas a pity I didn't take my

poor name off this earthly calendar and creep under ground sixty long years ago, instead of leaving my own county to come here!' mourned old Mrs. Martin. 'But I told his mother how 'twould be--marrying so many notches above her. The child was sure to chaw high, like his father!'

When Swithin had been up-stairs a minute or two however, he altered his mind, and coming down again ate all the pudding, with the aspect of a person undertaking a deed of great magnanimity. The relish with which he did so restored the unison that knew no more serious interruptions than such as this.

'Mr. Torkingham has been here this afternoon,' said his grandmother; 'and he wants me to let him meet some of the choir here to-night for practice. They who live at this end of the parish won't go to his house to try over the tunes, because 'tis so far, they say, and so 'tis, poor men. So he's going to see what coming to them will do. He asks if you would like to join.'

'I would if I had not so much to do.'

'But it is cloudy to-night.'

'Yes; but I have calculations without end, granny. Now, don't you tell him I'm in the house, will you? and then he'll not ask for me.'

'But if he should, must I then tell a lie, Lord forgive me?'

'No, you can say I'm up-stairs; he must think what he likes. Not a word about the astronomy to any of them, whatever you do. I should be called a visionary, and all sorts.'

'So thou beest, child. Why can't ye do something that's of use?'

At the sound of footsteps Swithin beat a hasty retreat up-stairs, where he struck a light, and revealed a table covered with books and papers, while round the walls hung star-maps, and other diagrams illustrative of celestial phenomena. In a corner stood a huge pasteboard tube, which a close inspection would have shown to be intended for a telescope. Swithin hung a thick cloth over the window, in addition to the curtains, and sat down to his papers. On the ceiling was a black stain of smoke, and under this he placed his lamp, evidencing that the midnight oil was consumed on that precise spot very often.

Meanwhile there had entered to the room below a personage who, to judge from her voice and the quick pit-pat of her feet, was a maiden young and blithe. Mrs. Martin welcomed her by the title of Miss Tabitha Lark, and inquired what wind had brought her that way; to which the visitor replied that she had come for the singing.

'Sit ye down, then,' said granny. 'And do you still go to the House to read to my lady?'

'Yes, I go and read, Mrs. Martin; but as to getting my lady to hearken, that's more than a team of six horses could force her to do.'

The girl had a remarkably smart and fluent utterance, which was probably a cause, or a consequence, of her vocation.

''Tis the same story, then?' said grandmother Martin.

'Yes. Eaten out with listlessness. She's neither sick nor sorry, but how dull and dreary she is, only herself can tell. When I get there in the morning, there she is sitting up in bed, for my lady don't care to get up; and then she makes me bring this book and that book, till the bed is heaped up with immense volumes that half bury her, making her look, as she leans upon her elbow, like the stoning of Stephen. She yawns; then she looks towards the tall glass; then she looks out at the weather, mooning her great black eyes, and fixing them on the sky as if they stuck there, while my tongue goes flick-flack along, a hundred and fifty words a minute; then she looks at the clock; then she asks me what I've been reading.'

'Ah, poor soul!' said granny. 'No doubt she says in the morning, "Would God it were evening," and in the evening, "Would God it were morning," like the disobedient woman in Deuteronomy.'

Swithin, in the room overhead, had suspended his calculations, for the duologue interested him. There now crunched heavier steps outside the

door, and his grandmother could be heard greeting sundry local representatives of the bass and tenor voice, who lent a cheerful and well-known personality to the names Sammy Blore, Nat Chapman, Hezekiah Biles,
and Haymoss Fry (the latter being one with whom the reader has already a distant acquaintance); besides these came small producers of treble, who had not yet developed into such distinctive units of society as to require particularizing.

'Is the good man come?' asked Nat Chapman. 'No,--I see we be here afore him. And how is it with aged women to-night, Mrs. Martin?'

'Tedious traipsing enough with this one, Nat. Sit ye down. Well, little Freddy, you don't wish in the morning that 'twere evening, and at evening that 'twere morning again, do you, Freddy, trust ye for it?'

'Now, who might wish such a thing as that, Mrs Martin?--nobody in this parish?' asked Sammy Blore curiously.

'My lady is always wishing it,' spoke up Miss Tabitha Lark.

'Oh, she! Nobody can be answerable for the wishes of that onnatural tribe of mankind. Not but that the woman's heart-strings is tried in many aggravating ways.'

'Ah, poor woman!' said granny. 'The state she finds herself in--neither

maid, wife, nor widow, as you may say--is not the primest form of life for keeping in good spirits. How long is it since she has heard from Sir Blount, Tabitha?'

'Two years and more,' said the young woman. 'He went into one side of Africa, as it might be, three St. Martin's days back. I can mind it, because 'twas my birthday. And he meant to come out the other side. But he didn't. He has never come out at all.'

'For all the world like losing a rat in a barley-mow,' said Hezekiah. 'He's lost, though you know where he is.'

His comrades nodded.

'Ay, my lady is a walking weariness. I seed her yawn just at the very moment when the fox was halloaed away by Lornton Copse, and the hounds runned en all but past her carriage wheels. If I were she I'd see a little life; though there's no fair, club-walking, nor feast to speak of, till Easter week,--that's true.'

'She dares not. She's under solemn oath to do no such thing.'

'Be cust if I would keep any such oath! But here's the pa'son, if my ears don't deceive me.'

There was a noise of horse's hoofs without, a stumbling against the door-

scraper, a tethering to the window-shutter, a creaking of the door on its hinges, and a voice which Swithin recognized as Mr. Torkingham's. He greeted each of the previous arrivals by name, and stated that he was glad to see them all so punctually assembled.

'Ay, sir,' said Haymoss Fry. ''Tis only my jints that have kept me from assembling myself long ago. I'd assemble upon the top of Welland Steeple, if 'tweren't for my jints. I assure ye, Pa'son Tarkenham, that in the clitch o' my knees, where the rain used to come through when I was cutting clots for the new lawn, in old my lady's time, 'tis as if rats wez gnawing, every now and then. When a feller's young he's too small in the brain to see how soon a constitution can be squandered, worse luck!'

'True,' said Biles, to fill the time while the parson was engaged in finding the Psalms. 'A man's a fool till he's forty. Often have I thought, when hay-pitching, and the small of my back seeming no stouter than a harnet's, "The devil send that I had but the making of labouring men for a twelvemonth!" I'd gie every man jack two good backbones, even if the alteration was as wrong as forgery.'

'Four,--four backbones,' said Haymoss, decisively.

'Yes, four,' threw in Sammy Blore, with additional weight of experience. 'For you want one in front for breast-ploughing and such like, one at the right side for ground-dressing, and one at the left side for turning mixens.'

'Well; then next I'd move every man's wyndpipe a good span away from his glutchpipe, so that at harvest time he could fetch breath in 's drinking, without being choked and strangled as he is now. Thinks I, when I feel the victuals going--'

'Now, we'll begin,' interrupted Mr. Torkingham, his mind returning to this world again on concluding his search for a hymn.

Thereupon the racket of chair-legs on the floor signified that they were settling into their seats,--a disturbance which Swithin took advantage of by going on tiptoe across the floor above, and putting sheets of paper over knot-holes in the boarding at points where carpet was lacking, that his lamp-light might not shine down. The absence of a ceiling beneath rendered his position virtually that of one suspended in the same apartment.

The parson announced the tune, and his voice burst forth with 'Onward, Christian soldiers!' in notes of rigid cheerfulness.

In this start, however, he was joined only by the girls and boys, the men furnishing but an accompaniment of ahas and hems. Mr. Torkingham stopped, and Sammy Blore spoke,--

'Beg your pardon, sir,--if you'll deal mild with us a moment. What with the wind and walking, my throat's as rough as a grater; and not knowing

you were going to hit up that minute, I hadn't hawked, and I don't think Hezzy and Nat had, either,--had ye, souls?'

'I hadn't got thorough ready, that's true,' said Hezekiah.

'Quite right of you, then, to speak,' said Mr. Torkingham. 'Don't mind explaining; we are here for practice. Now clear your throats, then, and at it again.'

There was a noise as of atmospheric hoes and scrapers, and the bass contingent at last got under way with a time of its own:

'Honwerd, Christen sojers!'

'Ah, that's where we are so defective--the pronunciation,' interrupted the parson. 'Now repeat after me: "On-ward, Christ-ian, sol-diers."'

The choir repeated like an exaggerative echo: 'On-wed, Chris-ting, sol-jaws!'

'Better!' said the parson, in the strenuously sanguine tones of a man who got his living by discovering a bright side in things where it was not very perceptible to other people. 'But it should not be given with quite so extreme an accent; or we may be called affected by other parishes. And, Nathaniel Chapman, there's a jauntiness in your manner of singing which is not quite becoming. Why don't you sing more earnestly?'

'My conscience won't let me, sir. They say every man for himself: but, thank God, I'm not so mean as to lessen old fokes' chances by being earnest at my time o' life, and they so much nearer the need o't.'

'It's bad reasoning, Nat, I fear. Now, perhaps we had better sol-fa the tune. Eyes on your books, please. Sol-sol! fa-fa! mi--'

'I can't sing like that, not I!' said Sammy Blore, with condemnatory astonishment. 'I can sing genuine music, like F and G; but not anything so much out of the order of nater as that.'

'Perhaps you've brought the wrong book, sir?' chimed in Haymoss, kindly. 'I've knowed music early in life and late,--in short, ever since Luke Sneap broke his new fiddle-bow in the wedding psalm, when Pa'son Wilton brought home his bride (you can mind the time, Sammy?--when we sung "His wife, like a fair fertile vine, her lovely fruit shall bring," when the young woman turned as red as a rose, not knowing 'twas coming). I've knowed music ever since then, I say, sir, and never heard the like o' that. Every martel note had his name of A, B, C, at that time.'

'Yes, yes, men; but this is a more recent system!'

'Still, you can't alter a old-established note that's A or B by nater,' rejoined Haymoss, with yet deeper conviction that Mr. Torkingham was

getting off his head. 'Now sound A, neighbour Sammy, and let's have a slap at Christen sojers again, and show the Pa'son the true way!'

Sammy produced a private tuning-fork, black and grimy, which, being about seventy years of age, and wrought before pianoforte builders had sent up the pitch to make their instruments brilliant, was nearly a note flatter than the parson's. While an argument as to the true pitch was in progress, there came a knocking without.

'Somebody's at the door!' said a little treble girl.

'Thought I heard a knock before!' said the relieved choir.

The latch was lifted, and a man asked from the darkness, 'Is Mr. Torkingham here?'

'Yes, Mills. What do you want?'

It was the parson's man.

'Oh, if you please,' said Mills, showing an advanced margin of himself round the door, 'Lady Constantine wants to see you very particular, sir, and could you call on her after dinner, if you ben't engaged with poor fokes? She's just had a letter,--so they say,--and it's about that, I believe.'

Finding, on looking at his watch, that it was necessary to start at once if he meant to see her that night, the parson cut short the practising, and, naming another night for meeting, he withdrew. All the singers assisted him on to his cob, and watched him till he disappeared over the edge of the Bottom.