III

Mr. Torkingham trotted briskly onward to his house, a distance of about a mile, each cottage, as it revealed its half-buried position by its single light, appearing like a one-eyed night creature watching him from an ambush. Leaving his horse at the parsonage he performed the remainder of the journey on foot, crossing the park towards Welland House by a stile and path, till he struck into the drive near the north door of the mansion.

This drive, it may be remarked, was also the common highway to the lower village, and hence Lady Constantine's residence and park, as is occasionally the case with old-fashioned manors, possessed none of the exclusiveness found in some aristocratic settlements. The parishioners looked upon the park avenue as their natural thoroughfare, particularly for christenings, weddings, and funerals, which passed the squire's mansion with due considerations as to the scenic effect of the same from the manor windows. Hence the house of Constantine, when going out from its breakfast, had been continually crossed on the doorstep for the last two hundred years by the houses of Hodge and Giles in full cry to dinner. At present these collisions were but too infrequent, for though the villagers passed the north front door as regularly as ever, they seldom met a Constantine. Only one was there to be met, and she had no zest for outings before noon.

The long, low front of the Great House, as it was called by the parish, stretching from end to end of the terrace, was in darkness as the vicar slackened his pace before it, and only the distant fall of water disturbed the stillness of the manorial precincts.

On gaining admittance he found Lady Constantine waiting to receive him. She wore a heavy dress of velvet and lace, and being the only person in the spacious apartment she looked small and isolated. In her left hand she held a letter and a couple of at-home cards. The soft dark eyes which she raised to him as he entered--large, and melancholy by circumstance far more than by quality--were the natural indices of a warm and affectionate, perhaps slightly voluptuous temperament, languishing for want of something to do, cherish, or suffer for.

Mr. Torkingham seated himself. His boots, which had seemed elegant in the farm-house, appeared rather clumsy here, and his coat, that was a model of tailoring when he stood amid the choir, now exhibited decidedly strained relations with his limbs. Three years had passed since his induction to the living of Welland, but he had never as yet found means to establish that reciprocity with Lady Constantine which usually grows up, in the course of time, between parsonage and manor-house,--unless, indeed, either side should surprise the other by showing respectively a weakness for awkward modern ideas on landownership, or on church formulas, which had not been the case here. The present meeting, however, seemed likely to initiate such a reciprocity.

There was an appearance of confidence on Lady Constantine's face; she said she was so very glad that he had come, and looking down at the letter in her hand was on the point of pulling it from its envelope; but she did not. After a moment she went on more quickly: 'I wanted your advice, or rather your opinion, on a serious matter,--on a point of conscience.' Saying which she laid down the letter and looked at the cards.

It might have been apparent to a more penetrating eye than the vicar's that Lady Constantine, either from timidity, misgiving, or reconviction, had swerved from her intended communication, or perhaps decided to begin at the other end.

The parson, who had been expecting a question on some local business or intelligence, at the tenor of her words altered his face to the higher branch of his profession.

'I hope I may find myself of service, on that or any other question,' he said gently.

'I hope so. You may possibly be aware, Mr. Torkingham, that my husband, Sir Blount Constantine, was, not to mince matters, a mistaken--somewhat jealous man. Yet you may hardly have discerned it in the short time you knew him.'

'I had some little knowledge of Sir Blount's character in that respect.'

'Well, on this account my married life with him was not of the most comfortable kind.' (Lady Constantine's voice dropped to a more pathetic note.) 'I am sure I gave him no cause for suspicion; though had I known his disposition sooner I should hardly have dared to marry him. But his jealousy and doubt of me were not so strong as to divert him from a purpose of his,--a mania for African lion-hunting, which he dignified by calling it a scheme of geographical discovery; for he was inordinately anxious to make a name for himself in that field. It was the one passion that was stronger than his mistrust of me. Before going away he sat down with me in this room, and read me a lecture, which resulted in a very rash offer on my part. When I tell it to you, you will find that it provides a key to all that is unusual in my life here. He bade me consider what my position would be when he was gone; hoped that I should remember what was due to him,--that I would not so behave towards other men as to bring the name of Constantine into suspicion; and charged me to avoid levity of conduct in attending any ball, rout, or dinner to which I might be invited. I, in some contempt for his low opinion of me, volunteered, there and then, to live like a cloistered nun during his absence; to go into no society whatever,--scarce even to a neighbour's dinner-party; and demanded bitterly if that would satisfy him. He said yes, held me to my word, and gave me no loophole for retracting it. The inevitable fruits of precipitancy have resulted to me: my life has become a burden. I get such invitations as these' (holding up the cards), 'but I so invariably refuse them that they are getting very rare. . . . I ask you, can I honestly break that promise to my husband?'

Mr. Torkingham seemed embarrassed. 'If you promised Sir Blount Constantine to live in solitude till he comes back, you are, it seems to me, bound by that promise. I fear that the wish to be released from your engagement is to some extent a reason why it should be kept. But your own conscience would surely be the best guide, Lady Constantine?'

'My conscience is quite bewildered with its responsibilities,' she continued, with a sigh. 'Yet it certainly does sometimes say to me that--that I ought to keep my word. Very well; I must go on as I am going, I suppose.'

'If you respect a vow, I think you must respect your own,' said the parson, acquiring some further firmness. 'Had it been wrung from you by compulsion, moral or physical, it would have been open to you to break it. But as you proposed a vow when your husband only required a good intention, I think you ought to adhere to it; or what is the pride worth that led you to offer it?'

'Very well,' she said, with resignation. 'But it was quite a work of supererogation on my part.'

'That you proposed it in a supererogatory spirit does not lessen your obligation, having once put yourself under that obligation. St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Hebrews, says, "An oath for confirmation is an end of all strife." And you will readily recall the words of Ecclesiastes, "Pay

that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow than that thou shouldest vow and not pay." Why not write to Sir Blount, tell him the inconvenience of such a bond, and ask him to release you?'

'No; never will I. The expression of such a desire would, in his mind, be a sufficient reason for disallowing it. I'll keep my word.'

Mr. Torkingham rose to leave. After she had held out her hand to him, when he had crossed the room, and was within two steps of the door, she said, 'Mr. Torkingham.' He stopped. 'What I have told you is only the least part of what I sent for you to tell you.'

Mr. Torkingham walked back to her side. 'What is the rest of it, then?' he asked, with grave surprise.

'It is a true revelation, as far as it goes; but there is something more. I have received this letter, and I wanted to say--something.'

'Then say it now, my dear lady.'

'No,' she answered, with a look of utter inability. 'I cannot speak of it now! Some other time. Don't stay. Please consider this conversation as private. Good-night.'