

On the third morning after the young man's departure Lady Constantine opened the post-bag anxiously. Though she had risen before four o'clock, and crossed to the tower through the gray half-light when every blade and twig were furred with rime, she felt no languor. Expectation could banish at cock-crow the eye-heaviness which apathy had been unable to disperse all the day long.

There was, as she had hoped, a letter from Swithin St. Cleeve.

'DEAR LADY CONSTANTINE,--I have quite succeeded in my mission, and shall return to-morrow at 10 p.m. I hope you have not failed in the observations. Watching the star through an opera-glass Sunday night, I fancied some change had taken place, but I could not make myself sure. Your memoranda for that night I await with impatience. Please don't neglect to write down at the moment, all remarkable appearances both as to colour and intensity; and be very exact as to time, which correct in the way I showed you.--I am, dear Lady Constantine, yours most faithfully,

SWITHIN ST. CLEEVE.'

Not another word in the letter about his errand; his mind ran on nothing but this astronomical subject. He had succeeded in his mission, and yet

he did not even say yes or no to the great question,--whether or not her husband was masquerading in London at the address she had given.

'Was ever anything so provoking!' she cried.

However, the time was not long to wait. His way homeward would lie within a stone's-throw of the manor-house, and though for certain reasons she had forbidden him to call at the late hour of his arrival, she could easily intercept him in the avenue. At twenty minutes past ten she went out into the drive, and stood in the dark. Seven minutes later she heard his footstep, and saw his outline in the slit of light between the avenue-trees. He had a valise in one hand, a great-coat on his arm, and under his arm a parcel which seemed to be very precious, from the manner in which he held it.

'Lady Constantine?' he asked softly.

'Yes,' she said, in her excitement holding out both her hands, though he had plainly not expected her to offer one.

'Did you watch the star?'

'I'll tell you everything in detail; but, pray, your errand first!'

'Yes, it's all right. Did you watch every night, not missing one?'

'I forgot to go--twice,' she murmured contritely.

'Oh, Lady Constantine!' he cried in dismay. 'How could you serve me so!
what shall I do?'

'Please forgive me! Indeed, I could not help it. I had watched and
watched, and nothing happened; and somehow my vigilance relaxed when I
found nothing was likely to take place in the star.'

'But the very circumstance of it not having happened, made it all the
more likely every day.'

'Have you--seen--' she began imploringly.

Swithin sighed, lowered his thoughts to sublunary things, and told
briefly the story of his journey. Sir Blount Constantine was not in
London at the address which had been anonymously sent her. It was a
mistake of identity. The person who had been seen there Swithin had
sought out. He resembled Sir Blount strongly; but he was a stranger.

'How can I reward you!' she exclaimed, when he had done.

'In no way but by giving me your good wishes in what I am going to tell
you on my own account.' He spoke in tones of mysterious exultation.

'This parcel is going to make my fame!'

'What is it?'

'A huge object-glass for the great telescope I am so busy about! Such a magnificent aid to science has never entered this county before, you may depend.'

He produced from under his arm the carefully cuddled-up package, which was in shape a round flat disk, like a dinner-plate, tied in paper.

Proceeding to explain his plans to her more fully, he walked with her towards the door by which she had emerged. It was a little side wicket through a wall dividing the open park from the garden terraces. Here for a moment he placed his valise and parcel on the coping of the stone balustrade, till he had bidden her farewell. Then he turned, and in laying hold of his bag by the dim light pushed the parcel over the parapet. It fell smash upon the paved walk ten or a dozen feet beneath.

'Oh, good heavens!' he cried in anguish.

'What?'

'My object-glass broken!'

'Is it of much value?'

'It cost all I possess!'

He ran round by the steps to the lower lawn, Lady Constantine following, as he continued, 'It is a magnificent eight-inch first quality object lens! I took advantage of my journey to London to get it! I have been six weeks making the tube of milled board; and as I had not enough money by twelve pounds for the lens, I borrowed it of my grandmother out of her last annuity payment. What can be, can be done!'

'Perhaps it is not broken.'

He felt on the ground, found the parcel, and shook it. A clicking noise issued from inside. Swithin smote his forehead with his hand, and walked up and down like a mad fellow.

'My telescope! I have waited nine months for this lens. Now the possibility of setting up a really powerful instrument is over! It is too cruel--how could it happen! . . . Lady Constantine, I am ashamed of myself,--before you. Oh, but, Lady Constantine, if you only knew what it is to a person engaged in science to have the means of clinching a theory snatched away at the last moment! It is I against the world; and when the world has accidents on its side in addition to its natural strength, what chance for me!'

The young astronomer leant against the wall, and was silent. His misery was of an intensity and kind with that of Palissy, in these struggles with an adverse fate.

'Don't mind it,--pray don't!' said Lady Constantine. 'It is dreadfully unfortunate! You have my whole sympathy. Can it be mended?'

'Mended,--no, no!'

'Cannot you do with your present one a little longer?'

'It is altogether inferior, cheap, and bad!'

'I'll get you another,--yes, indeed, I will! Allow me to get you another as soon as possible. I'll do anything to assist you out of your trouble; for I am most anxious to see you famous. I know you will be a great astronomer, in spite of this mishap! Come, say I may get a new one.'

Swithin took her hand. He could not trust himself to speak.

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Some days later a little box of peculiar kind came to the Great House. It was addressed to Lady Constantine, 'with great care.' She had it partly opened and taken to her own little writing-room; and after lunch, when she had dressed for walking, she took from the box a paper parcel like the one which had met with the accident. This she hid under her mantle, as if she had stolen it; and, going out slowly across the lawn, passed through the little door before spoken of, and was soon hastening in the

direction of the Rings-Hill column.

There was a bright sun overhead on that afternoon of early spring, and its rays shed an unusual warmth on south-west aspects, though shady places still retained the look and feel of winter. Rooks were already beginning to build new nests or to mend up old ones, and clamorously called in neighbours to give opinions on difficulties in their architecture. Lady Constantine swerved once from her path, as if she had decided to go to the homestead where Swithin lived; but on second thoughts she bent her steps to the column.

Drawing near it she looked up; but by reason of the height of the parapet nobody could be seen thereon who did not stand on tiptoe. She thought, however, that her young friend might possibly see her, if he were there, and come down; and that he was there she soon ascertained by finding the door unlocked, and the key inside. No movement, however, reached her ears from above, and she began to ascend.

Meanwhile affairs at the top of the column had progressed as follows. The afternoon being exceptionally fine, Swithin had ascended about two o'clock, and, seating himself at the little table which he had constructed on the spot, he began reading over his notes and examining some astronomical journals that had reached him in the morning. The sun blazed into the hollow roof-space as into a tub, and the sides kept out every breeze. Though the month was February below it was May in the abacus of the column. This state of the atmosphere, and the fact that on

the previous night he had pursued his observations till past two o'clock, produced in him at the end of half an hour an overpowering inclination to sleep. Spreading on the lead-work a thick rug which he kept up there, he flung himself down against the parapet, and was soon in a state of unconsciousness.

It was about ten minutes afterwards that a soft rustle of silken clothes came up the spiral staircase, and, hesitating onwards, reached the orifice, where appeared the form of Lady Constantine. She did not at first perceive that he was present, and stood still to reconnoitre. Her eye glanced over his telescope, now wrapped up, his table and papers, his observing-chair, and his contrivances for making the best of a deficiency of instruments. All was warm, sunny, and silent, except that a solitary bee, which had somehow got within the hollow of the abacus, was singing round inquiringly, unable to discern that ascent was the only mode of escape. In another moment she beheld the astronomer, lying in the sun like a sailor in the main-top.

Lady Constantine coughed slightly; he did not awake. She then entered, and, drawing the parcel from beneath her cloak, placed it on the table. After this she waited, looking for a long time at his sleeping face, which had a very interesting appearance. She seemed reluctant to leave, yet wanted resolution to wake him; and, pencilling his name on the parcel, she withdrew to the staircase, where the brushing of her dress decreased to silence as she receded round and round on her way to the base.

Swithin still slept on, and presently the rustle began again in the far-down interior of the column. The door could be heard closing, and the rustle came nearer, showing that she had shut herself in,--no doubt to lessen the risk of an accidental surprise by any roaming villager. When Lady Constantine reappeared at the top, and saw the parcel still untouched and Swithin asleep as before, she exhibited some disappointment; but she did not retreat.

Looking again at him, her eyes became so sentimentally fixed on his face that it seemed as if she could not withdraw them. There lay, in the shape of an Antinous, no amoroso, no gallant, but a guileless philosopher. His parted lips were lips which spoke, not of love, but of millions of miles; those were eyes which habitually gazed, not into the depths of other eyes, but into other worlds. Within his temples dwelt thoughts, not of woman's looks, but of stellar aspects and the configuration of constellations.

Thus, to his physical attractiveness was added the attractiveness of mental inaccessibility. The ennobling influence of scientific pursuits was demonstrated by the speculative purity which expressed itself in his eyes whenever he looked at her in speaking, and in the childlike faults of manner which arose from his obtuseness to their difference of sex. He had never, since becoming a man, looked even so low as to the level of a Lady Constantine. His heaven at present was truly in the skies, and not in that only other place where they say it can be found, in the eyes of

some daughter of Eve. Would any Circe or Calypso--and if so, what one?--ever check this pale-haired scientist's nocturnal sailings into the interminable spaces overhead, and hurl all his mighty calculations on cosmic force and stellar fire into Limbo? Oh, the pity of it, if such should be the case!

She became much absorbed in these very womanly reflections; and at last Lady Constantine sighed, perhaps she herself did not exactly know why. Then a very soft expression lighted on her lips and eyes, and she looked at one jump ten years more youthful than before--quite a girl in aspect, younger than he. On the table lay his implements; among them a pair of scissors, which, to judge from the shreds around, had been used in cutting curves in thick paper for some calculating process.

What whim, agitation, or attraction prompted the impulse, nobody knows; but she took the scissors, and, bending over the sleeping youth, cut off one of the curls, or rather crooks,--for they hardly reached a curl,--into which each lock of his hair chose to twist itself in the last inch of its length. The hair fell upon the rug. She picked it up quickly, returned the scissors to the table, and, as if her dignity had suddenly become ashamed of her fantasies, hastened through the door, and descended the staircase.