

VII

A fog defaced all the trees of the park that morning, the white atmosphere adhered to the ground like a fungoid growth from it, and made the turfed undulations look slimy and raw. But Lady Constantine settled down in her chair to await the coming of the late curate's son with a serenity which the vast blanks outside could neither baffle nor destroy.

At two minutes to twelve the door-bell rang, and a look overspread the lady's face that was neither maternal, sisterly, nor amorous; but partook in an indescribable manner of all three kinds. The door was flung open and the young man was ushered in, the fog still clinging to his hair, in which she could discern a little notch where she had nipped off the curl.

A speechlessness that socially was a defect in him was to her view a piquant attribute just now. He looked somewhat alarmed.

'Lady Constantine, have I done anything, that you have sent--?' he began breathlessly, as he gazed in her face, with parted lips.

'O no, of course not! I have decided to do something,--nothing more,' she smilingly said, holding out her hand, which he rather gingerly touched. 'Don't look so concerned. Who makes equatorials?'

This remark was like the drawing of a weir-hatch and she was speedily

inundated with all she wished to know concerning astronomical opticians. When he had imparted the particulars he waited, manifestly burning to know whither these inquiries tended.

'I am not going to buy you one,' she said gently.

He looked as if he would faint.

'Certainly not. I do not wish it. I--could not have accepted it,' faltered the young man.

'But I am going to buy one for myself. I lack a hobby, and I shall choose astronomy. I shall fix my equatorial on the column.'

Swithin brightened up.

'And I shall let you have the use of it whenever you choose. In brief, Swithin St. Cleeve shall be Lady Constantine's Astronomer Royal; and she--and she--'

'Shall be his Queen.' The words came not much the worse for being uttered only in the tone of one anxious to complete a tardy sentence.

'Well, that's what I have decided to do,' resumed Lady Constantine. 'I will write to these opticians at once.'

There seemed to be no more for him to do than to thank her for the privilege, whenever it should be available, which he promptly did, and then made as if to go. But Lady Constantine detained him with, 'Have you ever seen my library?'

'No; never.'

'You don't say you would like to see it.'

'But I should.'

'It is the third door on the right. You can find your way in, and you can stay there as long as you like.'

Swithin then left the morning-room for the apartment designated, and amused himself in that 'soul of the house,' as Cicero defined it, till he heard the lunch bell sounding from the turret, when he came down from the library steps, and thought it time to go home. But at that moment a servant entered to inquire whether he would or would not prefer to have his lunch brought in to him there; upon his replying in the affirmative a large tray arrived on the stomach of a footman, and Swithin was greatly surprised to see a whole pheasant placed at his disposal.

Having breakfasted at eight that morning, and having been much in the open air afterwards, the Adonis-astronomer's appetite assumed grand proportions. How much of that pheasant he might consistently eat without

hurting his dear patroness Lady Constantine's feelings, when he could readily eat it all, was a problem in which the reasonableness of a larger and larger quantity argued itself inversely as a smaller and smaller quantity remained. When, at length, he had finally decided on a terminal point in the body of the bird, the door was gently opened.

'Oh, you have not finished?' came to him over his shoulder, in a considerate voice.

'O yes, thank you, Lady Constantine,' he said, jumping up.

'Why did you prefer to lunch in this awkward, dusty place?'

'I thought--it would be better,' said Swithin simply.

'There is fruit in the other room, if you like to come. But perhaps you would rather not?'

'O yes, I should much like to,' said Swithin, walking over his napkin, and following her as she led the way to the adjoining apartment.

Here, while she asked him what he had been reading, he modestly ventured on an apple, in whose flavour he recognized the familiar taste of old friends robbed from her husband's orchards in his childhood, long before Lady Constantine's advent on the scene. She supposed he had confined his search to his own sublime subject, astronomy?

Swithin suddenly became older to the eye, as his thoughts reverted to the topic thus reintroduced. 'Yes,' he informed her. 'I seldom read any other subject. In these days the secret of productive study is to avoid well.'

'Did you find any good treatises?'

'None. The theories in your books are almost as obsolete as the Ptolemaic System. Only fancy, that magnificent Cyclopaedia, leather-bound, and stamped, and gilt, and wide margined, and bearing the blazon of your house in magnificent colours, says that the twinkling of the stars is probably caused by heavenly bodies passing in front of them in their revolutions.'

'And is it not so? That was what I learned when I was a girl.'

The modern Eudoxus now rose above the embarrassing horizon of Lady Constantine's great house, magnificent furniture, and awe-inspiring footman. He became quite natural, all his self-consciousness fled, and his eye spoke into hers no less than his lips to her ears, as he said, 'How such a theory can have lingered on to this day beats conjecture! Francois Arago, as long as forty or fifty years ago, conclusively established the fact that scintillation is the simplest thing in the world,--merely a matter of atmosphere. But I won't speak of this to you now. The comparative absence of scintillation in warm countries was

noticed by Humboldt. Then, again, the scintillations vary. No star flaps his wings like Sirius when he lies low! He flashes out emeralds and rubies, amethystine flames and sapphirine colours, in a manner quite marvellous to behold, and this is only one star! So, too, do Arcturus, and Capella, and lesser luminaries. . . . But I tire you with this subject?'

'On the contrary, you speak so beautifully that I could listen all day.'

The astronomer threw a searching glance upon her for a moment; but there was no satire in the warm soft eyes which met his own with a luxurious contemplative interest. 'Say some more of it to me,' she continued, in a voice not far removed from coaxing.

After some hesitation the subject returned again to his lips, and he said some more--indeed, much more; Lady Constantine often throwing in an appreciative remark or question, often meditatively regarding him, in pursuance of ideas not exactly based on his words, and letting him go on as he would.

Before he left the house the new astronomical project was set in train. The top of the column was to be roofed in, to form a proper observatory; and on the ground that he knew better than any one else how this was to be carried out, she requested him to give precise directions on the point, and to superintend the whole. A wooden cabin was to be erected at the foot of the tower, to provide better accommodation for casual

visitors to the observatory than the spiral staircase and lead-flat afforded. As this cabin would be completely buried in the dense fir foliage which enveloped the lower part of the column and its pedestal, it would be no disfigurement to the general appearance. Finally, a path was to be made across the surrounding fallow, by which she might easily approach the scene of her new study.

When he was gone she wrote to the firm of opticians concerning the equatorial for whose reception all this was designed.

The undertaking was soon in full progress; and by degrees it became the talk of the hamlets round that Lady Constantine had given up melancholy for astronomy, to the great advantage of all who came in contact with her. One morning, when Tabitha Lark had come as usual to read, Lady Constantine chanced to be in a quarter of the house to which she seldom wandered; and while here she heard her maid talking confidentially to Tabitha in the adjoining room on the curious and sudden interest which Lady Constantine had acquired in the moon and stars.

'They do say all sorts of trumpery,' observed the handmaid. 'They say--though 'tis little better than mischief, to be sure--that it isn't the moon, and it isn't the stars, and it isn't the plannards, that my lady cares for, but for the pretty lad who draws 'em down from the sky to please her; and being a married example, and what with sin and shame knocking at every poor maid's door afore you can say, "Hands off, my dear," to the civilest young man, she ought to set a better pattern.'

Lady Constantine's face flamed up vividly.

'If Sir Blount were to come back all of a sudden--oh, my!'

Lady Constantine grew cold as ice.

'There's nothing in it,' said Tabitha scornfully. 'I could prove it any day.'

'Well, I wish I had half her chance!' sighed the lady's maid. And no more was said on the subject then.

Tabitha's remark showed that the suspicion was quite in embryo as yet. Nevertheless, saying nothing to reveal what she had overheard, immediately after the reading Lady Constantine flew like a bird to where she knew that Swithin might be found.

He was in the plantation, setting up little sticks to mark where the wooden cabin was to stand. She called him to a remote place under the funereal trees.

'I have altered my mind,' she said. 'I can have nothing to do with this matter.'

'Indeed?' said Swithin, surprised.

'Astronomy is not my hobby any longer. And you are not my Astronomer Royal.'

'O Lady Constantine!' cried the youth, aghast. 'Why, the work is begun! I thought the equatorial was ordered.'

She dropped her voice, though a Jericho shout would not have been overheard: 'Of course astronomy is my hobby privately, and you are to be my Astronomer Royal, and I still furnish the observatory; but not to the outer world. There is a reason against my indulgence in such scientific fancies openly; and the project must be arranged in this wise. The whole enterprise is yours: you rent the tower of me: you build the cabin: you get the equatorial. I simply give permission, since you desire it. The path that was to be made from the hill to the park is not to be thought of. There is to be no communication between the house and the column. The equatorial will arrive addressed to you, and its cost I will pay through you. My name must not appear, and I vanish entirely from the undertaking. . . . This blind is necessary,' she added, sighing. 'Good-bye!'

'But you do take as much interest as before, and it will be yours just the same?' he said, walking after her. He scarcely comprehended the subterfuge, and was absolutely blind as to its reason.

'Can you doubt it? But I dare not do it openly.'

With this she went away; and in due time there circulated through the parish an assertion that it was a mistake to suppose Lady Constantine had anything to do with Swithin St. Cleeve or his star-gazing schemes. She had merely allowed him to rent the tower of her for use as his observatory, and to put some temporary fixtures on it for that purpose.

After this Lady Constantine lapsed into her former life of loneliness; and by these prompt measures the ghost of a rumour which had barely started into existence was speedily laid to rest. It had probably originated in her own dwelling, and had gone but little further. Yet, despite her self-control, a certain north window of the Great House, that commanded an uninterrupted view of the upper ten feet of the column, revealed her to be somewhat frequently gazing from it at a rotundity which had begun to appear on the summit. To those with whom she came in contact she sometimes addressed such remarks as, 'Is young Mr. St. Cleeve getting on with his observatory? I hope he will fix his instruments without damaging the column, which is so interesting to us as being in memory of my dear husband's great-grandfather--a truly brave man.'

On one occasion her building-steward ventured to suggest to her that, Sir Blount having deputed to her the power to grant short leases in his absence, she should have a distinctive agreement with Swithin, as between landlord and tenant, with a stringent clause against his driving nails into the stonework of such an historical memorial. She replied that she

did not wish to be severe on the last representative of such old and respected parishioners as St. Cleeve's mother's family had been, and of such a well-descended family as his father's; so that it would only be necessary for the steward to keep an eye on Mr. St. Cleeve's doings.

Further, when a letter arrived at the Great House from Hilton and Pimm's, the opticians, with information that the equatorial was ready and packed, and that a man would be sent with it to fix it, she replied to that firm to the effect that their letter should have been addressed to Mr. St. Cleeve, the local astronomer, on whose behalf she had made the inquiries; that she had nothing more to do with the matter; that he would receive the instrument and pay the bill,--her guarantee being given for the latter performance.