

One evening a little later on he was sitting at his bedroom window as usual, waiting for a sufficient decline of light to reveal the comet's form, when he beheld, crossing the field contiguous to the house, a figure which he knew to be hers. He thought she must be coming to see him on the great comet question, to discuss which with so delightful and kind a comrade was an expectation full of pleasure. Hence he keenly observed her approach, till something happened that surprised him.

When, at the descent of the hill, she had reached the stile that admitted to Mrs. Martin's garden, Lady Constantine stood quite still for a minute or more, her gaze bent on the ground. Instead of coming on to the house she went heavily and slowly back, almost as if in pain; and then at length, quickening her pace, she was soon out of sight. She appeared in the path no more that day.

## XI

Why had Lady Constantine stopped and turned?

A misgiving had taken sudden possession of her. Her true sentiment towards St. Cleve was too recognizable by herself to be tolerated.

That she had a legitimate interest in him as a young astronomer was true;

that her sympathy on account of his severe illness had been natural and commendable was also true. But the superfluous feeling was what filled her with trepidation.

Superfluities have been defined as things you cannot do without, and this particular emotion, that came not within her rightful measure, was in danger of becoming just such a superfluity with her. In short, she felt there and then that to see St. Cleeve again would be an impropriety; and by a violent effort she retreated from his precincts, as he had observed.

She resolved to ennoble her conduct from that moment of her life onwards. She would exercise kind patronage towards Swithin without once indulging herself with his company. Inexpressibly dear to her deserted heart he was becoming, but for the future he should at least be hidden from her eyes. To speak plainly, it was growing a serious question whether, if he were not hidden from her eyes, she would not soon be plunging across the ragged boundary which divides the permissible from the forbidden.

By the time that she had drawn near home the sun was going down. The heavy, many-chevroned church, now subdued by violet shadow except where

its upper courses caught the western stroke of flame-colour, stood close to her grounds, as in many other parishes, though the village of which it formerly was the nucleus had become quite depopulated: its cottages had been demolished to enlarge the park, leaving the old building to stand there alone, like a standard without an army.

It was Friday night, and she heard the organist practising voluntaries within. The hour, the notes, the even-song of the birds, and her own previous emotions, combined to influence her devotionally. She entered, turning to the right and passing under the chancel arch, where she sat down and viewed the whole empty length, east and west. The semi-Norman arches of the nave, with their multitudinous notchings, were still visible by the light from the tower window, but the lower portion of the building was in obscurity, except where the feeble glimmer from the candle of the organist spread a glow-worm radiance around. The player, who was Miss Tabitha Lark, continued without intermission to produce her wandering sounds, unconscious of any one's presence except that of the youthful blower at her side.

The rays from the organist's candle illuminated but one small fragment of the chancel outside the precincts of the instrument, and that was the portion of the eastern wall whereon the ten commandments were inscribed. The gilt letters shone sternly into Lady Constantine's eyes; and she, being as impressionable as a turtle-dove, watched a certain one of those commandments on the second table, till its thunder broke her spirit with blank contrition.

She knelt down, and did her utmost to eradicate those impulses towards St. Cleeve which were inconsistent with her position as the wife of an absent man, though not unnatural in her as his victim.

She knelt till she seemed scarcely to belong to the time she lived in, which lost the magnitude that the nearness of its perspective lent it on ordinary occasions, and took its actual rank in the long line of other centuries. Having once got out of herself, seen herself from afar off, she was calmer, and went on to register a magnanimous vow. She would look about for some maiden fit and likely to make St. Cleeve happy; and this girl she would endow with what money she could afford, that the natural result of their apposition should do him no worldly harm. The interest of her, Lady Constantine's, life should be in watching the development of love between Swithin and the ideal maiden. The very painfulness of the scheme to her susceptible heart made it pleasing to her conscience; and she wondered that she had not before this time thought of a stratagem which united the possibility of benefiting the astronomer with the advantage of guarding against peril to both Swithin and herself. By providing for him a suitable helpmate she would preclude the dangerous awakening in him of sentiments reciprocating her own.

Arrived at a point of exquisite misery through this heroic intention, Lady Constantine's tears moistened the books upon which her forehead was bowed. And as she heard her feverish heart throb against the desk, she firmly believed the wearing impulses of that heart would put an end to her sad life, and momentarily recalled the banished image of St. Cleeve to apostrophise him in thoughts that paraphrased the quaint lines of Heine's *Lieb' Liebchen*:--

'Dear my love, press thy hand to my breast, and tell

If thou tracest the knocks in that narrow cell;  
A carpenter dwells there; cunning is he,  
And slyly he's shaping a coffin for me!

Lady Constantine was disturbed by a break in the organist's meandering practice, and raising her head she saw a person standing by the player. It was Mr. Torkingham, and what he said was distinctly audible. He was inquiring for herself.

'I thought I saw Lady Constantine walk this way,' he rejoined to Tabitha's negative. 'I am very anxious indeed to meet with her.'

She went forward. 'I am here,' she said. 'Don't stop playing, Miss Lark. What is it, Mr. Torkingham?'

Tabitha thereupon resumed her playing, and Mr. Torkingham joined Lady Constantine.

'I have some very serious intelligence to break to your ladyship,' he said. 'But--I will not interrupt you here.' (He had seen her rise from her knees to come to him.) 'I will call at the House the first moment you can receive me after reaching home.'

'No, tell me here,' she said, seating herself.

He came close, and placed his hand on the poppy-head of the seat.

'I have received a communication,' he resumed haltingly, 'in which I am requested to prepare you for the contents of a letter that you will receive to-morrow morning.'

'I am quite ready.'

'The subject is briefly this, Lady Constantine: that you have been a widow for more than eighteen months.'

'Dead!'

'Yes. Sir Blount was attacked by dysentery and malarious fever, on the banks of the Zouga in South Africa, so long ago as last October twelvemonths, and it carried him off. Of the three men who were with him, two succumbed to the same illness, a hundred miles further on; while the third, retracing his steps into a healthier district, remained there with a native tribe, and took no pains to make the circumstances known. It seems to be only by the mere accident of his having told some third party that we know of the matter now. This is all I can tell you at present.'

She was greatly agitated for a few moments; and the Table of the Law opposite, which now seemed to appertain to another dispensation, glistened indistinctly upon a vision still obscured by the old tears.

'Shall I conduct you home?' asked the parson.

'No thank you,' said Lady Constantine. 'I would rather go alone.'