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On the afternoon of the next day Mr. Torkingham, who occasionally dropped in to see St. Cleeve, called again as usual; after duly remarking on the state of the weather, congratulating him on his sure though slow improvement, and answering his inquiries about the comet, he said, 'You have heard, I suppose, of what has happened to Lady Constantine?'

'No! Nothing serious?'

'Yes, it is serious.' The parson informed him of the death of Sir Blount, and of the accidents which had hindered all knowledge of the same,--accidents favoured by the estrangement of the pair and the cessation of correspondence between them for some time.

His listener received the news with the concern of a friend, Lady Constantine's aspect in his eyes depending but little on her condition matrimonially.

'There was no attempt to bring him home when he died?'

'O no. The climate necessitates instant burial. We shall have more particulars in a day or two, doubtless.'

'Poor Lady Constantine,--so good and so sensitive as she is! I suppose

she is quite prostrated by the bad news.'

'Well, she is rather serious,--not prostrated. The household is going into mourning.'

'Ah, no, she would not be quite prostrated,' murmured Swithin, recollecting himself. 'He was unkind to her in many ways. Do you think she will go away from Welland?'

That the vicar could not tell. But he feared that Sir Blount's affairs had been in a seriously involved condition, which might necessitate many and unexpected changes.

Time showed that Mr. Torkingham's surmises were correct.

During the long weeks of early summer, through which the young man still lay imprisoned, if not within his own chamber, within the limits of the house and garden, news reached him that Sir Blount's mismanagement and eccentric behaviour were resulting in serious consequences to Lady Constantine; nothing less, indeed, than her almost complete impoverishment. His personalty was swallowed up in paying his debts, and the Welland estate was so heavily charged with annuities to his distant relatives that only a mere pittance was left for her. She was reducing the establishment to the narrowest compass compatible with decent gentility. The horses were sold one by one; the carriages also; the greater part of the house was shut up, and she resided in the smallest

rooms. All that was allowed to remain of her former contingent of male servants were an odd man and a boy. Instead of using a carriage she now drove about in a donkey-chair, the said boy walking in front to clear the way and keep the animal in motion; while she wore, so his informants reported, not an ordinary widow's cap or bonnet, but something even plainer, the black material being drawn tightly round her face, giving her features a small, demure, devout cast, very pleasing to the eye.

'Now, what's the most curious thing in this, Mr. San Cleeve,' said Sammy Blore, who, in calling to inquire after Swithin's health, had imparted some of the above particulars, 'is that my lady seems not to mind being a pore woman half so much as we do at seeing her so. 'Tis a wonderful gift, Mr. San Cleeve, wonderful, to be able to guide yerself, and not let loose yer soul in blasting at such a misfortune. I should go and drink neat regular, as soon as I had swallered my breakfast, till my innerds was burnt out like a' old copper, if it had happened to me; but my lady's plan is best. Though I only guess how one feels in such losses, to be sure, for I never had nothing to lose.'

Meanwhile the observatory was not forgotten; nor that visitant of singular shape and habits which had appeared in the sky from no one knew whence, trailing its luminous streamer, and proceeding on its way in the face of a wondering world, till it should choose to vanish as suddenly as it had come.

When, about a month after the above dialogue took place, Swithin was

allowed to go about as usual, his first pilgrimage was to the Rings-Hill Speer. Here he studied at leisure what he had come to see.

On his return to the homestead, just after sunset, he found his grandmother and Hannah in a state of great concern. The former was looking out for him against the evening light, her face showing itself worn and rutted, like an old highway, by the passing of many days. Her information was that in his absence Lady Constantine had called in her driving-chair, to inquire for him. Her ladyship had wished to observe the comet through the great telescope, but had found the door locked when she applied at the tower. Would he kindly leave the door unfastened tomorrow, she had asked, that she might be able to go to the column on the following evening for the same purpose? She did not require him to attend.

During the next day he sent Hannah with the key to Welland House, not caring to leave the tower open. As evening advanced and the comet grew distinct, he doubted if Lady Constantine could handle the telescope alone with any pleasure or profit to herself. Unable, as a devotee to science, to rest under this misgiving, he crossed the field in the furrow that he had used ever since the corn was sown, and entered the plantation. His unpractised mind never once guessed that her stipulations against his coming might have existed along with a perverse hope that he would come.

On ascending he found her already there. She sat in the observing-chair: the warm light from the west, which flowed in through the opening of the

dome, brightened her face, and her face only, her robes of sable lawn rendering the remainder of her figure almost invisible.

'You have come!' she said with shy pleasure. 'I did not require you. But never mind.' She extended her hand cordially to him.

Before speaking he looked at her with a great new interest in his eye. It was the first time that he had seen her thus, and she was altered in more than dress. A soberly-sweet expression sat on her face. It was of a rare and peculiar shade--something that he had never seen before in woman.

'Have you nothing to say?' she continued. 'Your footsteps were audible to me from the very bottom, and I knew they were yours. You look almost restored.'

'I am almost restored,' he replied, respectfully pressing her hand. 'A reason for living arose, and I lived.'

'What reason?' she inquired, with a rapid blush.

He pointed to the rocket-like object in the western sky.

'Oh, you mean the comet. Well, you will never make a courtier! You know, of course, what has happened to me; that I have no longer a husband--have had none for a year and a half. Have you also heard that I

am now quite a poor woman? Tell me what you think of it.'

'I have thought very little of it since I heard that you seemed to mind poverty but little. There is even this good in it, that I may now be able to show you some little kindness for all those you have done me, my dear lady.'

'Unless for economy's sake, I go and live abroad, at Dinan, Versailles, or Boulogne.'

Swithin, who had never thought of such a contingency, was earnest in his regrets; without, however, showing more than a sincere friend's disappointment.

'I did not say it was absolutely necessary,' she continued. 'I have, in fact, grown so homely and home-loving, I am so interested in the place and the people here, that, in spite of advice, I have almost determined not to let the house; but to continue the less business-like but pleasanter alternative of living humbly in a part of it, and shutting up the rest.'

'Your love of astronomy is getting as strong as mine!' he said ardently.

'You could not tear yourself away from the observatory!'

'You might have supposed me capable of a little human feeling as well as scientific, in connection with the observatory.'

'Dear Lady Constantine, by admitting that your astronomer has also a part of your interest--'

'Ah, you did not find it out without my telling!' she said, with a playfulness which was scarcely playful, a new accession of pinkness being visible in her face. 'I diminish myself in your esteem by reminding you.'

'You might do anything in this world without diminishing yourself in my esteem, after the goodness you have shown. And more than that, no misrepresentation, no rumour, no damning appearance whatever would ever shake my loyalty to you.'

'But you put a very matter-of-fact construction on my motives sometimes. You see me in such a hard light that I have to drop hints in quite a manoeuvring manner to let you know I am as sympathetic as other people. I sometimes think you would rather have me die than have your equatorial stolen. Confess that your admiration for me was based on my house and position in the county! Now I am shorn of all that glory, such as it was, and am a widow, and am poorer than my tenants, and can no longer buy telescopes, and am unable, from the narrowness of my circumstances, to mix in circles that people formerly said I adorned, I fear I have lost the little hold I once had over you.'

'You are as unjust now as you have been generous hitherto,' said St. Cleeve, with tears in his eyes at the gentle banter of the lady, which he, poor innocent, read as her real opinions. Seizing her hand he continued, in tones between reproach and anger, 'I swear to you that I have but two devotions, two thoughts, two hopes, and two blessings in this world, and that one of them is yourself!'

'And the other?'

'The pursuit of astronomy.'

'And astronomy stands first.'

'I have never ordained two such dissimilar ideas. And why should you deplore your altered circumstances, my dear lady? Your widowhood, if I may take the liberty to speak on such a subject, is, though I suppose a sadness, not perhaps an unmixed evil. For though your pecuniary troubles have been discovered to the world and yourself by it, your happiness in marriage was, as you have confided to me, not great; and you are now left free as a bird to follow your own hobbies.'

'I wonder you recognize that.'

'But perhaps,' he added, with a sigh of regret, 'you will again fall a prey to some man, some uninteresting country squire or other, and be lost to the scientific world after all.'

'If I fall a prey to any man, it will not be to a country squire. But don't go on with this, for heaven's sake! You may think what you like in silence.'

'We are forgetting the comet,' said St. Cleeve. He turned, and set the instrument in order for observation, and wheeled round the dome.

While she was looking at the nucleus of the fiery plume, that now filled so large a space of the sky as completely to dominate it, Swithin dropped his gaze upon the field, and beheld in the dying light a number of labourers crossing directly towards the column.

'What do you see?' Lady Constantine asked, without ceasing to observe the comet.

'Some of the work-folk are coming this way. I know what they are coming for,--I promised to let them look at the comet through the glass.'

'They must not come up here,' she said decisively.

'They shall await your time.'

'I have a special reason for wishing them not to see me here. If you ask why, I can tell you. They mistakenly suspect my interest to be less in astronomy than in the astronomer, and they must have no showing for such

a wild notion. What can you do to keep them out?'

'I'll lock the door,' said Swithin. 'They will then think I am away.' He ran down the staircase, and she could hear him hastily turning the key. Lady Constantine sighed.

'What weakness, what weakness!' she said to herself. 'That envied power of self-control, where is it? That power of concealment which a woman should have--where? To run such risks, to come here alone,--oh, if it were known! But I was always so,--always!'

She jumped up, and followed him downstairs.