

XIII

He was standing immediately inside the door at the bottom, though it was so dark she could hardly see him. The villagers were audibly talking just without.

'He's sure to come, rathe or late,' resounded up the spiral in the vocal note of Hezzy Biles. 'He wouldn't let such a fine show as the comet makes to-night go by without peeping at it,--not Master Cleeve! Did ye bring along the flagon, Haymoss? Then we'll sit down inside his little board-house here, and wait. He'll come afore bed-time. Why, his spy-glass will stretch out that there comet as long as Welland Lane!'

'I'd as soon miss the great peep-show that comes every year to Greenhill Fair as a sight of such a immortal spectacle as this!' said Amos Fry.

"'Immortal spectacle,'--where did ye get that choice mossel, Haymoss?' inquired Sammy Blore. 'Well, well, the Lord save good scholars--and take just a bit o' care of them that bain't! As 'tis so dark in the hut, suppose we draw out the bench into the front here, souls?'

The bench was accordingly brought forth, and in order to have a back to lean against, they placed it exactly across the door into the spiral staircase.

'Now, have ye got any backy? If ye haven't, I have,' continued Sammy Blore. A striking of matches followed, and the speaker concluded comfortably, 'Now we shall do very well.'

'And what do this comet mean?' asked Haymoss. 'That some great tumult is going to happen, or that we shall die of a famine?'

'Famine--no!' said Nat Chapman. 'That only touches such as we, and the Lord only consarns himself with born gentlemen. It isn't to be supposed that a strange fiery lantern like that would be lighted up for folks with ten or a dozen shillings a week and their gristing, and a load o' thorn faggots when we can get 'em. If 'tis a token that he's getting hot about the ways of anybody in this parish, 'tis about my Lady Constantine's, since she is the only one of a figure worth such a hint.'

'As for her income,--that she's now lost.'

'Ah, well; I don't take in all I hear.'

Lady Constantine drew close to St. Cleeve's side, and whispered, trembling, 'Do you think they will wait long? Or can we get out?'

Swithin felt the awkwardness of the situation. The men had placed the bench close to the door, which, owing to the stairs within, opened outwards; so that at the first push by the pair inside to release themselves the bench must have gone over, and sent the smokers sprawling

on their faces. He whispered to her to ascend the column and wait till he came.

'And have the dead man left her nothing? Hey? And have he carried his inheritance into's grave? And will his skeleton lie warm on account o't? Hee-hee!' said Haymoss.

'Tis all swallowed up,' observed Hezzy Biles. 'His goings-on made her miserable till 'a died, and if I were the woman I'd have my randys now. He ought to have bequeathed to her our young gent, Mr. St. Cleeve, as some sort of amends. I'd up and marry en, if I were she; since her downfall has brought 'em quite near together, and made him as good as she in rank, as he was afore in bone and breeding.'

'D'ye think she will?' asked Sammy Blore. 'Or is she meaning to enter upon a virgin life for the rest of her days?'

'I don't want to be unreverent to her ladyship; but I really don't think she is meaning any such waste of a Christian carcass. I say she's rather meaning to commit flat matrimony wi' somebody or other, and one young gentleman in particular.'

'But the young man himself?'

'Planned, cut out, and finished for the delight of 'ooman!'

'Yet he must be willing.'

'That would soon come. If they get up this tower ruling plannards together much longer, their plannards will soon rule them together, in my way o' thinking. If she've a disposition towards the knot, she can soon teach him.'

'True, true, and lawfully. What before mid ha' been a wrong desire is now a holy wish!'

The scales fell from Swithin St. Cleeve's eyes as he heard the words of his neighbours. How suddenly the truth dawned upon him; how it bewildered him, till he scarcely knew where he was; how he recalled the full force of what he had only half apprehended at earlier times, particularly of that sweet kiss she had impressed on his lips when she supposed him dying,--these vivid realizations are difficult to tell in slow verbiage. He could remain there no longer, and with an electrified heart he retreated up the spiral.

He found Lady Constantine half way to the top, standing by a loop-hole; and when she spoke he discovered that she was almost in tears. 'Are they gone?' she asked.

'I fear they will not go yet,' he replied, with a nervous fluctuation of manner that had never before appeared in his bearing towards her.

'What shall I do?' she asked. 'I ought not to be here; nobody knows that I am out of the house. Oh, this is a mistake! I must go home somehow.'

'Did you hear what they were saying?'

'No,' said she. 'What is the matter? Surely you are disturbed? What did they say?'

'It would be the exaggeration of frankness in me to tell you.'

'Is it what a woman ought not to be made acquainted with?'

'It is, in this case. It is so new and so indescribable an idea to me--that'--he leant against the concave wall, quite tremulous with strange incipient sentiments.

'What sort of an idea?' she asked gently.

'It is--an awakening. In thinking of the heaven above, I did not perceive--the--'

'Earth beneath?'

'The better heaven beneath. Pray, dear Lady Constantine, give me your hand for a moment.'

She seemed startled, and the hand was not given.

'I am so anxious to get home,' she repeated. 'I did not mean to stay here more than five minutes!'

'I fear I am much to blame for this accident,' he said. 'I ought not to have intruded here. But don't grieve! I will arrange for your escape, somehow. Be good enough to follow me down.'

They redescended, and, whispering to Lady Constantine to remain a few stairs behind, he began to rattle and unlock the door.

The men precipitately removed their bench, and Swithin stepped out, the light of the summer night being still enough to enable them to distinguish him.

'Well, Hezekiah, and Samuel, and Nat, how are you?' he said boldly.

'Well, sir, 'tis much as before wi' me,' replied Nat. 'One hour a week wi' God A'mighty and the rest with the devil, as a chap may say. And really, now yer poor father's gone, I'd as lief that that Sunday hour should pass like the rest; for Pa'son Tarkenham do tease a feller's conscience that much, that church is no hollerday at all to the limbs, as it was in yer reverent father's time! But we've been waiting here, Mr. San Cleeve, supposing ye had not come.'

'I have been staying at the top, and fastened the door not to be disturbed. Now I am sorry to disappoint you, but I have another engagement this evening, so that it would be inconvenient to admit you. To-morrow evening, or any evening but this, I will show you the comet and any stars you like.'

They readily agreed to come the next night, and prepared to depart. But what with the flagon, and the pipes, and the final observations, getting away was a matter of time. Meanwhile a cloud, which nobody had noticed, arose from the north overhead, and large drops of rain began to fall so rapidly that the conclave entered the hut till it should be over. St. Cleeve strolled off under the firs.

The next moment there was a rustling through the trees at another point, and a man and woman appeared. The woman took shelter under a tree, and the man, bearing wraps and umbrellas, came forward.

'My lady's man and maid,' said Sammy.

'Is her ladyship here?' asked the man.

'No. I reckon her ladyship keeps more kissable company,' replied Nat Chapman.

'Pack o' stuff!' said Blore.

'Not here? Well, to be sure! We can't find her anywhere in the wide house! I've been sent to look for her with these overclothes and umbrella. I've suffered horse-flesh traipsing up and down, and can't find her nowhere. Lord, Lord, where can she be, and two months' wages owing to me!'

'Why so anxious, Anthony Green, as I think yer name is shaped? You be not a married man?' said Hezzy.

'Tis what they call me, neighbours, whether or no.'

'But surely you was a bachelor chap by late, afore her ladyship got rid of the regular servants and took ye?'

'I were; but that's past!'

'And how came ye to bow yer head to 't, Anthony? 'Tis what you never was inclined to. You was by no means a doting man in my time.'

'Well, had I been left to my own free choice, 'tis as like as not I should ha' shunned forming such kindred, being at that time a poor day man, or weekly, at my highest luck in hiring. But 'tis wearing work to hold out against the custom of the country, and the woman wanting ye to stand by her and save her from unborn shame; so, since common usage would

have it, I let myself be carried away by opinion, and took her. Though she's never once thanked me for covering her confusion, that's true! But, 'tis the way of the lost when safe, and I don't complain. Here she is, just behind, under the tree, if you'd like to see her?--a very nice homespun woman to look at, too, for all her few weather-stains. . . . Well, well, where can my lady be? And I the trusty jeneral man--'tis more than my place is worth to lose her! Come forward, Christiana, and talk nicely to the work-folk.'

While the woman was talking the rain increased so much that they all retreated further into the hut. St. Cleeve, who had impatiently stood a little way off, now saw his opportunity, and, putting in his head, said, 'The rain beats in; you had better shut the door. I must ascend and close up the dome.'

Slamming the door upon them without ceremony he quickly went to Lady Constantine in the column, and telling her they could now pass the villagers unseen he gave her his arm. Thus he conducted her across the front of the hut into the shadows of the firs.

'I will run to the house and harness your little carriage myself,' he said tenderly. 'I will then take you home in it.'

'No; please don't leave me alone under these dismal trees!' Neither would she hear of his getting her any wraps; and, opening her little sunshade to keep the rain out of her face, she walked with him across the

insulating field, after which the trees of the park afforded her a sufficient shelter to reach home without much damage.

Swithin was too greatly affected by what he had overheard to speak much to her on the way, and protected her as if she had been a shorn lamb. After a farewell which had more meaning than sound in it, he hastened back to Rings-Hill Speer. The work-folk were still in the hut, and, by dint of friendly converse and a sip at the flagon, had so cheered Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Green that they neither thought nor cared what had become of Lady Constantine.

St. Cleeve's sudden sense of new relations with that sweet patroness had taken away in one half-hour his natural ingenuousness. Henceforth he could act a part.

'I have made all secure at the top,' he said, putting his head into the hut. 'I am now going home. When the rain stops, lock this door and bring the key to my house.'