

The summer passed away, and autumn, with its infinite suite of tints, came creeping on. Darker grew the evenings, tearfuller the moonlights, and heavier the dews. Meanwhile the comet had waxed to its largest dimensions,--so large that not only the nucleus but a portion of the tail had been visible in broad day. It was now on the wane, though every night the equatorial still afforded an opportunity of observing the singular object which would soon disappear altogether from the heavens for perhaps thousands of years.

But the astronomer of the Rings-Hill Speer was no longer a match for his celestial materials. Scientifically he had become but a dim vapour of himself; the lover had come into him like an armed man, and cast out the student, and his intellectual situation was growing a life-and-death matter.

The resolve of the pair had been so far kept: they had not seen each other in private for three months. But on one day in October he ventured to write a note to her:--

'I can do nothing! I have ceased to study, ceased to observe. The equatorial is useless to me. This affection I have for you absorbs my life, and outweighs my intentions. The power to labour in this grandest of fields has left me. I struggle against the weakness till

I think of the cause, and then I bless her. But the very desperation of my circumstances has suggested a remedy; and this I would inform you of at once.

'Can you come to me, since I must not come to you? I will wait tomorrow night at the edge of the plantation by which you would enter to the column. I will not detain you; my plan can be told in ten words.'

The night after posting this missive to her he waited at the spot mentioned.

It was a melancholy evening for coming abroad. A blustering wind had risen during the day, and still continued to increase. Yet he stood watchful in the darkness, and was ultimately rewarded by discerning a shady muffled shape that embodied itself from the field, accompanied by the scratching of silk over stubble. There was no longer any disguise as to the nature of their meeting. It was a lover's assignation, pure and simple; and boldly realizing it as such he clasped her in his arms.

'I cannot bear this any longer!' he exclaimed. 'Three months since I saw you alone! Only a glimpse of you in church, or a bow from the distance, in all that time! What a fearful struggle this keeping apart has been!'

'Yet I would have had strength to persist, since it seemed best,' she murmured when she could speak, 'had not your words on your condition so alarmed and saddened me. This inability of yours to work, or study, or

observe,--it is terrible! So terrible a sting is it to my conscience that your hint about a remedy has brought me instantly.'

'Yet I don't altogether mind it, since it is you, my dear, who have displaced the work; and yet the loss of time nearly distracts me, when I have neither the power to work nor the delight of your company.'

'But your remedy! O, I cannot help guessing it! Yes; you are going away!'

'Let us ascend the column; we can speak more at ease there. Then I will explain all. I would not ask you to climb so high but the hut is not yet furnished.'

He entered the cabin at the foot, and having lighted a small lantern, conducted her up the hollow staircase to the top, where he closed the slides of the dome to keep out the wind, and placed the observing-chair for her.

'I can stay only five minutes,' she said, without sitting down. 'You said it was important that you should see me, and I have come. I assure you it is at a great risk. If I am seen here at this time I am ruined for ever. But what would I not do for you? O Swithin, your remedy--is it to go away? There is no other; and yet I dread that like death!'

'I can tell you in a moment, but I must begin at the beginning. All this

ruinous idleness and distraction is caused by the misery of our not being able to meet with freedom. The fear that something may snatch you from me keeps me in a state of perpetual apprehension.'

'It is too true also of me! I dread that some accident may happen, and waste my days in meeting the trouble half-way.'

'So our lives go on, and our labours stand still. Now for the remedy. Dear Lady Constantine, allow me to marry you.'

She started, and the wind without shook the building, sending up a yet intenser moan from the firs.

'I mean, marry you quite privately. Let it make no difference whatever to our outward lives for years, for I know that in my present position you could not possibly acknowledge me as husband publicly. But by marrying at once we secure the certainty that we cannot be divided by accident, coaxing, or artifice; and, at ease on that point, I shall embrace my studies with the old vigour, and you yours.'

Lady Constantine was so agitated at the unexpected boldness of such a proposal from one hitherto so boyish and deferential that she sank into the observing-chair, her intention to remain for only a few minutes being quite forgotten.

She covered her face with her hands. 'No, no, I dare not!' she

whispered.

'But is there a single thing else left to do?' he pleaded, kneeling down beside her, less in supplication than in abandonment. 'What else can we do?'

'Wait till you are famous.'

'But I cannot be famous unless I strive, and this distracting condition prevents all striving!'

'Could you not strive on if I--gave you a promise, a solemn promise, to be yours when your name is fairly well known?'

St. Cleeve breathed heavily. 'It will be a long, weary time,' he said.

'And even with your promise I shall work but half-heartedly. Every hour of study will be interrupted with "Suppose this or this happens;"

"Suppose somebody persuades her to break her promise;" worse still,

"Suppose some rival maligns me, and so seduces her away." No, Lady

Constantine, dearest, best as you are, that element of distraction would

still remain, and where that is, no sustained energy is possible. Many

erroneous things have been written and said by the sages, but never did

they float a greater fallacy than that love serves as a stimulus to win

the loved one by patient toil.'

'I cannot argue with you,' she said weakly.

'My only possible other chance would lie in going away,' he resumed after a moment's reflection, with his eyes on the lantern flame, which waved and smoked in the currents of air that leaked into the dome from the fierce wind-stream without. 'If I might take away the equatorial, supposing it possible that I could find some suitable place for observing in the southern hemisphere,--say, at the Cape,--I might be able to apply myself to serious work again, after the lapse of a little time. The southern constellations offer a less exhausted field for investigation. I wonder if I might!'

'You mean,' she answered uneasily, 'that you might apply yourself to work when your recollection of me began to fade, and my life to become a matter of indifference to you? . . . Yes, go! No,--I cannot bear it! The remedy is worse than the disease. I cannot let you go away!'

'Then how can you refuse the only condition on which I can stay, without ruin to my purpose and scandal to your name? Dearest, agree to my proposal, as you love both me and yourself!'

He waited, while the fir-trees rubbed and prodded the base of the tower, and the wind roared around and shook it; but she could not find words to reply.

'Would to God,' he burst out, 'that I might perish here, like Winstanley in his lighthouse! Then the difficulty would be solved for you.'

'You are so wrong, so very wrong, in saying so!' she exclaimed passionately. 'You may doubt my wisdom, pity my short-sightedness; but there is one thing you do know,--that I love you dearly!'

'You do,--I know it!' he said, softened in a moment. 'But it seems such a simple remedy for the difficulty that I cannot see how you can mind adopting it, if you care so much for me as I do for you.'

'Should we live . . . just as we are, exactly, . . . supposing I agreed?' she faintly inquired.

'Yes, that is my idea.'

'Quite privately, you say. How could--the marriage be quite private?'

'I would go away to London and get a license. Then you could come to me, and return again immediately after the ceremony. I could return at leisure and not a soul in the world would know what had taken place. Think, dearest, with what a free conscience you could then assist me in my efforts to plumb these deeps above us! Any feeling that you may now have against clandestine meetings as such would then be removed, and our hearts would be at rest.'

There was a certain scientific practicability even in his love-making, and it here came out excellently. But she sat on with suspended breath,

her heart wildly beating, while he waited in open-mouthed expectation. Each was swayed by the emotion within them, much as the candle-flame was swayed by the tempest without. It was the most critical evening of their lives.

The pale rays of the little lantern fell upon her beautiful face, snugly and neatly bound in by her black bonnet; but not a beam of the lantern leaked out into the night to suggest to any watchful eye that human life at its highest excitement was beating within the dark and isolated tower; for the dome had no windows, and every shutter that afforded an opening for the telescope was hermetically closed. Predilections and misgivings so equally strove within her still youthful breast that she could not utter a word; her intention wheeled this way and that like the balance of a watch. His unexpected proposition had brought about the smartest encounter of inclination with prudence, of impulse with reserve, that she had ever known.

Of all the reasons that she had expected him to give for his urgent request to see her this evening, an offer of marriage was probably the last. Whether or not she had ever amused herself with hypothetical fancies on such a subject,--and it was only natural that she should vaguely have done so,--the courage in her protege coolly to advance it, without a hint from herself that such a proposal would be tolerated, showed her that there was more in his character than she had reckoned on: and the discovery almost frightened her. The humour, attitude, and tenor



of her attachment had been of quite an unpremeditated quality, unsuggestive of any such audacious solution to their distresses as this.

'I repeat my question, dearest,' he said, after her long pause. 'Shall it be done? Or shall I exile myself, and study as best I can, in some distant country, out of sight and sound?'

'Are those the only alternatives? Yes, yes; I suppose they are!' She waited yet another moment, bent over his kneeling figure, and kissed his forehead. 'Yes; it shall be done,' she whispered. 'I will marry you.'

'My angel, I am content!'

He drew her yielding form to his heart, and her head sank upon his shoulder, as he pressed his two lips continuously upon hers. To such had the study of celestial physics brought them in the space of eight months, one week, and a few odd days.

'I am weaker than you,--far the weaker,' she went on, her tears falling. 'Rather than lose you out of my sight I will marry without stipulation or condition. But--I put it to your kindness--grant me one little request.'

He instantly assented.

'It is that, in consideration of my peculiar position in this county,--O, you can't understand it!--you will not put an end to the absolute secrecy

of our relationship without my full assent. Also, that you will never come to Welland House without first discussing with me the advisability of the visit, accepting my opinion on the point. There, see how a timid woman tries to fence herself in!

'My dear lady-love, neither of those two high-handed courses should I have taken, even had you not stipulated against them. The very essence of our marriage plan is that those two conditions are kept. I see as well as you do, even more than you do, how important it is that for the present,--ay, for a long time hence--I should still be but the curate's lonely son, unattached to anybody or anything, with no object of interest but his science; and you the recluse lady of the manor, to whom he is only an acquaintance.'

'See what deceits love sows in honest minds!'

'It would be a humiliation to you at present that I could not bear if a marriage between us were made public; an inconvenience without any compensating advantage.'

'I am so glad you assume it without my setting it before you! Now I know you are not only good and true, but politic and trustworthy.'

'Well, then, here is our covenant. My lady swears to marry me; I, in return for such great courtesy, swear never to compromise her by intruding at Welland House, and to keep the marriage concealed till I

have won a position worthy of her.'

'Or till I request it to be made known,' she added, possibly foreseeing a contingency which had not occurred to him.

'Or till you request it,' he repeated.

'It is agreed,' murmured Lady Constantine,