

After this there only remained to be settled between them the practical details of the project.

These were that he should leave home in a couple of days, and take lodgings either in the distant city of Bath or in a convenient suburb of London, till a sufficient time should have elapsed to satisfy legal requirements; that on a fine morning at the end of this time she should hie away to the same place, and be met at the station by St. Cleeve, armed with the marriage license; whence they should at once proceed to the church fixed upon for the ceremony; returning home independently in the course of the next two or three days.

While these tactics were under discussion the two-and-thirty winds of heaven continued, as before, to beat about the tower, though their onsets appeared to be somewhat lessening in force. Himself now calmed and satisfied, Swithin, as is the wont of humanity, took serener views of Nature's crushing mechanics without, and said, 'The wind doesn't seem disposed to put the tragic period to our hopes and fears that I spoke of in my momentary despair.'

'The disposition of the wind is as vicious as ever,' she answered, looking into his face with pausing thoughts on, perhaps, other subjects than that discussed. 'It is your mood of viewing it that has changed.'

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

And, as if flatly to stultify Swithin's assumption, a circular hurricane, exceeding in violence any that had preceded it, seized hold upon Rings-Hill Speer at that moment with the determination of a conscious agent. The first sensation of a resulting catastrophe was conveyed to their intelligence by the flapping of the candle-flame against the lantern-glass; then the wind, which hitherto they had heard rather than felt, rubbed past them like a fugitive. Swithin beheld around and above him, in place of the concavity of the dome, the open heaven, with its racing clouds, remote horizon, and intermittent gleam of stars. The dome that had covered the tower had been whirled off bodily; and they heard it descend crashing upon the trees.

Finding himself untouched Swithin stretched out his arms towards Lady Constantine, whose apparel had been seized by the spinning air, nearly lifting her off her legs. She, too, was as yet unharmed. Each held the other for a moment, when, fearing that something further would happen, they took shelter in the staircase.

'Dearest, what an escape!' he said, still holding her.

'What is the accident?' she asked. 'Has the whole top really gone?'

'The dome has been blown off the roof.'

As soon as it was practicable he relit the extinguished lantern, and they emerged again upon the leads, where the extent of the disaster became at once apparent. Saving the absence of the enclosing hemisphere all remained the same. The dome, being constructed of wood, was light by comparison with the rest of the structure, and the wheels which allowed it horizontal, or, as Swithin expressed it, azimuth motion, denied it a firm hold upon the walls; so that it had been lifted off them like a cover from a pot. The equatorial stood in the midst as it had stood before.

Having executed its grotesque purpose the wind sank to comparative mildness. Swithin took advantage of this lull by covering up the instruments with cloths, after which the betrothed couple prepared to go downstairs.

But the events of the night had not yet fully disclosed themselves. At this moment there was a sound of footsteps and a knocking at the door below.

'It can't be for me!' said Lady Constantine. 'I retired to my room before leaving the house, and told them on no account to disturb me.'

She remained at the top while Swithin went down the spiral. In the gloom he beheld Hannah.

'O Master Swithin, can ye come home! The wind have blowed down the

chimley that don't smoke, and the pinning-end with it; and the old ancient house, that have been in your family so long as the memory of man, is naked to the world! It is a mercy that your grammer were not killed, sitting by the hearth, poor old soul, and soon to walk wi' God,--for 'a 's getting wambling on her pins, Mr. Swithin, as aged folks do. As I say, 'a was all but murdered by the elements, and doing no more harm than the babes in the wood, nor speaking one harmful word. And the fire and smoke were blowed all across house like a chapter in Revelation; and your poor reverent father's features scorched to flakes, looking like the vilest ruffian, and the gilt frame spoiled! Every fitch, every eye-piece, and every chine is buried under the walling; and I fed them pigs with my own hands, Master Swithin, little thinking they would come to this end. Do ye collect yourself, Mr. Swithin, and come at once!

'I will,--I will. I'll follow you in a moment. Do you hasten back again and assist.'

When Hannah had departed the young man ran up to Lady Constantine, to whom he explained the accident. After sympathizing with old Mrs. Martin Lady Constantine added, 'I thought something would occur to mar our scheme!'

'I am not quite sure of that yet.'

On a short consideration with him, she agreed to wait at the top of the tower till he could come back and inform her if the accident were really

so serious as to interfere with his plan for departure. He then left her, and there she sat in the dark, alone, looking over the parapet, and straining her eyes in the direction of the homestead.

At first all was obscurity; but when he had been gone about ten minutes lights began to move to and fro in the hollow where the house stood, and shouts occasionally mingled with the wind, which retained some violence yet, playing over the trees beneath her as on the strings of a lyre. But not a bough of them was visible, a cloak of blackness covering everything netherward; while overhead the windy sky looked down with a strange and disguised face, the three or four stars that alone were visible being so dissociated by clouds that she knew not which they were. Under any other circumstances Lady Constantine might have felt a nameless fear in thus sitting aloft on a lonely column, with a forest groaning under her feet, and palaeolithic dead men feeding its roots; but the recent passionate decision stirred her pulses to an intensity beside which the ordinary tremors of feminine existence asserted themselves in vain. The apocalyptic effect of the scene surrounding her was, indeed, not inharmonious, and afforded an appropriate background to her intentions.

After what seemed to her an interminable space of time, quick steps in the staircase became audible above the roar of the firs, and in a few instants St. Cleeve again stood beside her.

The case of the homestead was serious. Hannah's account had not been exaggerated in substance: the gable end of the house was open to the

garden; the joists, left without support, had dropped, and with them the upper floor. By the help of some labourers, who lived near, and Lady Constantine's man Anthony, who was passing at the time, the homestead had

been propped up, and protected for the night by some rickcloths; but Swithin felt that it would be selfish in the highest degree to leave two lonely old women to themselves at this juncture. 'In short,' he concluded despondently, 'I cannot go to stay in Bath or London just now; perhaps not for another fortnight!'

'Never mind,' she said. 'A fortnight hence will do as well.'

'And I have these for you,' he continued. 'Your man Green was passing my grandmother's on his way back from Warborne, where he had been, he says, for any letters that had come for you by the evening post. As he stayed to assist the other men I told him I would go on to your house with the letters he had brought. Of course I did not tell him I should see you here.'

'Thank you. Of course not. Now I'll return at once.'

In descending the column her eye fell upon the superscription of one of the letters, and she opened and glanced over it by the lantern light. She seemed startled, and, musing, said, 'The postponement of our--intention must be, I fear, for a long time. I find that after the end of this month I cannot leave home safely, even for a day.' Perceiving that he

was about to ask why, she added, 'I will not trouble you with the reason now; it would only harass you. It is only a family business, and cannot be helped.'

'Then we cannot be married till--God knows when!' said Swithin blankly. 'I cannot leave home till after the next week or two; you cannot leave home unless within that time. So what are we to do?'

'I do not know.'

'My dear, dear one, don't let us be beaten like this! Don't let a well-considered plan be overthrown by a mere accident! Here's a remedy. Do you go and stay the requisite time in the parish we are to be married in, instead of me. When my grandmother is again well housed I can come to you, instead of you to me, as we first said. Then it can be done within the time.'

Reluctantly, shyly, and yet with a certain gladness of heart, she gave way to his proposal that they should change places in the programme. There was much that she did not like in it, she said. It seemed to her as if she were taking the initiative by going and attending to the preliminaries. It was the man's part to do that, in her opinion, and was usually undertaken by him.

'But,' argued Swithin, 'there are cases in which the woman does give the notices, and so on; that is to say, when the man is absolutely hindered

from doing so; and ours is such a case. The seeming is nothing; I know the truth, and what does it matter? You do not refuse--retract your word to be my wife, because, to avoid a sickening delay, the formalities require you to attend to them in place of me?'

She did not refuse, she said. In short she agreed to his entreaty. They had, in truth, gone so far in their dream of union that there was no drawing back now. Whichever of them was forced by circumstances to be the protagonist in the enterprise, the thing must be done. Their intention to become husband and wife, at first halting and timorous, had accumulated momentum with the lapse of hours, till it now bore down every obstacle in its course.

'Since you beg me to,--since there is no alternative between my going and a long postponement,' she said, as they stood in the dark porch of Welland House before parting,--'since I am to go first, and seem to be the pioneer in this adventure, promise me, Swithin, promise your Viviette, that in years to come, when perhaps you may not love me so warmly as you do now--'

'That will never be.'

'Well, hoping it will not, but supposing it should, promise me that you will never reproach me as the one who took the initiative when it should have been yourself, forgetting that it was at your request; promise that you will never say I showed immodest readiness to do so, or anything

which may imply your obliviousness of the fact that I act in obedience to necessity and your earnest prayer.'

Need it be said that he promised never to reproach her with that or any other thing as long as they should live? The few details of the reversed arrangement were soon settled, Bath being the place finally decided on. Then, with a warm audacity which events had encouraged, he pressed her to his breast, and she silently entered the house. He returned to the homestead, there to attend to the unexpected duties of repairing the havoc wrought by the gale.

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That night, in the solitude of her chamber, Lady Constantine reopened and read the subjoined letter--one of those handed to her by St. Cleve:--

"--- STREET, PICCADILLY,
October 15, 18--.

'DEAR VIVIETTE,--You will be surprised to learn that I am in England, and that I am again out of harness--unless you should have seen the latter in the papers. Rio Janeiro may do for monkeys, but it won't do for me. Having resigned the appointment I have returned here, as a preliminary step to finding another vent for my energies; in other words, another milch cow for my sustenance. I knew nothing whatever

of your husband's death till two days ago; so that any letter from you on the subject, at the time it became known, must have miscarried. Hypocrisy at such a moment is worse than useless, and I therefore do not condole with you, particularly as the event, though new to a banished man like me, occurred so long since. You are better without him, Viviette, and are now just the limb for doing something for yourself, notwithstanding the threadbare state in which you seem to have been cast upon the world. You are still young, and, as I imagine (unless you have vastly altered since I beheld you), good-looking: therefore make up your mind to retrieve your position by a match with one of the local celebrities; and you would do well to begin drawing neighbouring covers at once. A genial squire, with more weight than wit, more realty than weight, and more personalty than realty (considering the circumstances), would be best for you. You might make a position for us both by some such alliance; for, to tell the truth, I have had but in-and-out luck so far. I shall be with you in little more than a fortnight, when we will talk over the matter seriously, if you don't object.--Your affectionate brother,

LOUIS.'

It was this allusion to her brother's coming visit which had caught her eye in the tower staircase, and led to a modification in the wedding arrangement.

Having read the letter through once Lady Constantine flung it aside with

an impatient little stamp that shook the decaying old floor and casement. Its contents produced perturbation, misgiving, but not retreat. The deep glow of enchantment shed by the idea of a private union with her beautiful young lover killed the pale light of cold reasoning from an indifferently good relative.

'Oh, no,' she murmured, as she sat, covering her face with her hand. 'Not for wealth untold could I give him up now!'

No argument, short of Apollo in person from the clouds, would have influenced her. She made her preparations for departure as if nothing had intervened.