

XVII

In her days of prosperity Lady Constantine had often gone to the city of Bath, either frivolously, for shopping purposes, or musico-religiously, to attend choir festivals in the abbey; so there was nothing surprising in her reverting to an old practice. That the journey might appear to be of a somewhat similar nature she took with her the servant who had been accustomed to accompany her on former occasions, though the woman, having now left her service, and settled in the village as the wife of Anthony Green, with a young child on her hands, could with some difficulty leave home. Lady Constantine overcame the anxious mother's scruples by providing that young Green should be well cared for; and knowing that she could count upon this woman's fidelity, if upon anybody's, in case of an accident (for it was chiefly Lady Constantine's exertions that had made an honest wife of Mrs. Green), she departed for a fortnight's absence.

The next day found mistress and maid settled in lodgings in an old plum-coloured brick street, which a hundred years ago could boast of rank and fashion among its residents, though now the broad fan-light over each broad door admitted the sun to the halls of a lodging-house keeper only. The lamp-posts were still those that had done duty with oil lights; and rheumatic old coachmen and postilions, that once had driven and ridden gloriously from London to Land's End, ornamented with their bent persons and bow legs the pavement in front of the chief inn, in the sorry hope of

earning sixpence to keep body and soul together.

'We are kept well informed on the time o' day, my lady,' said Mrs. Green, as she pulled down the blinds in Lady Constantine's room on the evening of their arrival. 'There's a church exactly at the back of us, and I hear every hour strike.'

Lady Constantine said she had noticed that there was a church quite near.

'Well, it is better to have that at the back than other folks' winders. And if your ladyship wants to go there it won't be far to walk.'

'That's what occurred to me,' said Lady Constantine, 'if I should want to go.'

During the ensuing days she felt to the utmost the tediousness of waiting merely that time might pass. Not a soul knew her there, and she knew not a soul, a circumstance which, while it added to her sense of secrecy, intensified her solitude. Occasionally she went to a shop, with Green as her companion. Though there were purchases to be made, they were by no means of a pressing nature, and but poorly filled up the vacancies of those strange, speculative days,--days surrounded by a shade of fear, yet poetized by sweet expectation.

On the thirteenth day she told Green that she was going to take a walk, and leaving the house she passed by the obscurest streets to the Abbey.

After wandering about beneath the aisles till her courage was screwed to its highest, she went out at the other side, and, looking timidly round to see if anybody followed, walked on till she came to a certain door, which she reached just at the moment when her heart began to sink to its very lowest, rendering all the screwing up in vain.

Whether it was because the month was October, or from any other reason, the deserted aspect of the quarter in general sat especially on this building. Moreover the pavement was up, and heaps of stone and gravel obstructed the footway. Nobody was coming, nobody was going, in that thoroughfare; she appeared to be the single one of the human race bent upon marriage business, which seemed to have been unanimously abandoned by all the rest of the world as proven folly. But she thought of Swithin, his blonde hair, ardent eyes, and eloquent lips, and was carried onward by the very reflection.

Entering the surrogate's room Lady Constantine managed, at the last juncture, to state her errand in tones so collected as to startle even herself to which her listener replied also as if the whole thing were the most natural in the world. When it came to the affirmation that she had lived fifteen days in the parish, she said with dismay--

'O no! I thought the fifteen days meant the interval of residence before the marriage takes place. I have lived here only thirteen days and a half. Now I must come again!'

'Ah--well--I think you need not be so particular,' said the surrogate.

'As a matter of fact, though the letter of the law requires fifteen days' residence, many people make five sufficient. The provision is inserted, as you doubtless are aware, to hinder runaway marriages as much as possible, and secret unions, and other such objectionable practices. You need not come again.'

That evening Lady Constantine wrote to Swithin St. Cleeve the last letter of the fortnight:--

'MY DEAREST,--Do come to me as soon as you can. By a sort of favouring blunder I have been able to shorten the time of waiting by a day. Come at once, for I am almost broken down with apprehension. It seems rather rash at moments, all this, and I wish you were here to reassure me. I did not know I should feel so alarmed. I am frightened at every footstep, and dread lest anybody who knows me should accost me, and find out why I am here. I sometimes wonder how I could have agreed to come and enact your part, but I did not realize how trying it would be. You ought not to have asked me, Swithin; upon my word, it was too cruel of you, and I will punish you for it when you come! But I won't upbraid. I hope the homestead is repaired that has cost me all this sacrifice of modesty. If it were anybody in the world but you in question I would rush home, without waiting here for the end of it,--I really think I would! But, dearest, no. I must show my strength now, or let it be for ever hid. The barriers of

ceremony are broken down between us, and it is for the best that I am here.'

And yet, at no point of this trying prelude need Lady Constantine have feared for her strength. Deeds in this connexion demand the particular kind of courage that such perfervid women are endowed with, the courage of their emotions, in which young men are often lamentably deficient. Her fear was, in truth, the fear of being discovered in an unwonted position; not of the act itself. And though her letter was in its way a true exposition of her feeling, had it been necessary to go through the whole legal process over again she would have been found equal to the emergency.

It had been for some days a point of anxiety with her what to do with Green during the morning of the wedding. Chance unexpectedly helped her in this difficulty. The day before the purchase of the license Green came to Lady Constantine with a letter in her hand from her husband Anthony, her face as long as a fiddle.

'I hope there's nothing the matter?' said Lady Constantine.

'The child's took bad, my lady!' said Mrs. Green, with suspended floods of water in her eyes. 'I love the child better than I shall love all them that's coming put together; for he's been a good boy to his mother ever since twelve weeks afore he was born! 'Twas he, a tender deary, that made Anthony marry me, and thereby turned hisself from a little

calamity to a little blessing! For, as you know, the man were a backward man in the church part o' matrimony, my lady; though he'll do anything when he's forced a bit by his manly feelings. And now to lose the child--hoo-hoo-hoo! What shall I doo!

'Well, you want to go home at once, I suppose?'

Mrs. Green explained, between her sobs, that such was her desire; and though this was a day or two sooner than her mistress had wished to be left alone she consented to Green's departure. So during the afternoon her woman went off, with directions to prepare for Lady Constantine's return in two or three days. But as the exact day of her return was uncertain no carriage was to be sent to the station to meet her, her intention being to hire one from the hotel.

Lady Constantine was now left in utter solitude to await her lover's arrival.