

XVIII

A more beautiful October morning than that of the next day never beamed into the Welland valleys. The yearly dissolution of leafage was setting in apace. The foliage of the park trees rapidly resolved itself into the multitude of complexions which mark the subtle grades of decay, reflecting wet lights of such innumerable hues that it was a wonder to think their beauties only a repetition of scenes that had been exhibited there on scores of previous Octobers, and had been allowed to pass away without a single dirge from the imperturbable beings who walked among them. Far in the shadows semi-opaque screens of blue haze made mysteries of the commonest gravel-pit, dingle, or recess.

The wooden cabin at the foot of Rings-Hill Speer had been furnished by Swithin as a sitting and sleeping apartment, some little while before this time; for he had found it highly convenient, during night observations at the top of the column, to remain on the spot all night, not to disturb his grandmother by passing in and out of the house, and to save himself the labour of incessantly crossing the field.

He would much have liked to tell her the secret, and, had it been his own to tell, would probably have done so; but sharing it with an objector who knew not his grandmother's affection so well as he did himself, there was no alternative to holding his tongue. The more effectually to guard it he decided to sleep at the cabin during the two or three nights previous

to his departure, leaving word at the homestead that in a day or two he was going on an excursion.

It was very necessary to start early. Long before the great eye of the sun was lifted high enough to glance into the Welland valley, St. Cleeve arose from his bed in the cabin and prepared to depart, cooking his breakfast upon a little stove in the corner. The young rabbits, littered during the foregoing summer, watched his preparations through the open door from the grey dawn without, as he bustled, half dressed, in and out under the boughs, and among the blackberries and brambles that grew around.

It was a strange place for a bridegroom to perform his toilet in, but, considering the unconventional nature of the marriage, a not inappropriate one. What events had been enacted in that earthen camp since it was first thrown up, nobody could say; but the primitive simplicity of the young man's preparations accorded well with the prehistoric spot on which they were made. Embedded under his feet were possibly even now rude trinkets that had been worn at bridal ceremonies of the early inhabitants. Little signified those ceremonies to-day, or the happiness or otherwise of the contracting parties. That his own rite, nevertheless, signified much, was the inconsequent reasoning of Swithin, as it is of many another bridegroom besides; and he, like the rest, went on with his preparations in that mood which sees in his stale repetition the wondrous possibilities of an untried move.

Then through the wet cobwebs, that hung like movable diaphragms on each blade and bough, he pushed his way down to the furrow which led from the secluded fir-tree island to the wide world beyond the field.

He was not a stranger to enterprise, and still less to the contemplation of enterprise; but an enterprise such as this he had never even outlined. That his dear lady was troubled at the situation he had placed her in by not going himself on that errand, he could see from her letter; but, believing an immediate marriage with her to be the true way of restoring to both that equanimity necessary to serene philosophy, he held it of little account how the marriage was brought about, and happily began his journey towards her place of sojourn.

He passed through a little copse before leaving the parish, the smoke from newly lit fires rising like the stems of blue trees out of the few cottage chimneys. Here he heard a quick, familiar footstep in the path ahead of him, and, turning the corner of the bushes, confronted the footpost on his way to Welland. In answer to St. Cleeve's inquiry if there was anything for himself the postman handed out one letter, and proceeded on his route.

Swithin opened and read the letter as he walked, till it brought him to a standstill by the importance of its contents.

They were enough to agitate a more phlegmatic youth than he. He leant

over the wicket which came in his path, and endeavoured to comprehend the sense of the whole.

The large long envelope contained, first, a letter from a solicitor in a northern town, informing him that his paternal great-uncle, who had recently returned from the Cape (whither he had gone in an attempt to repair a broken constitution), was now dead and buried. This great-uncle's name was like a new creation to Swithin. He had held no communication with the young man's branch of the family for innumerable years,--never, in fact, since the marriage of Swithin's father with the simple daughter of Welland Farm. He had been a bachelor to the end of his life, and had amassed a fairly good professional fortune by a long and extensive medical practice in the smoky, dreary, manufacturing town in which he had lived and died. Swithin had always been taught to think of him as the embodiment of all that was unpleasant in man. He was narrow, sarcastic, and shrewd to unseemliness. That very shrewdness had enabled him, without much professional profundity, to establish his large and lucrative connexion, which lay almost entirely among a class who neither looked nor cared for drawing-room courtesies.

However, what Dr. St. Cleeve had been as a practitioner matters little. He was now dead, and the bulk of his property had been left to persons with whom this story has nothing to do. But Swithin was informed that out of it there was a bequest of 600 pounds a year to himself,--payment of which was to begin with his twenty-first year, and continue for his

life, unless he should marry before reaching the age of twenty-five. In the latter precocious and objectionable event his annuity would be forfeited. The accompanying letter, said the solicitor, would explain all.

This, the second letter, was from his uncle to himself, written about a month before the former's death, and deposited with his will, to be forwarded to his nephew when that event should have taken place. Swithin read, with the solemnity that such posthumous epistles inspire, the following words from one who, during life, had never once addressed him:--

'DEAR NEPHEW,--You will doubtless experience some astonishment at receiving a communication from one whom you have never personally known, and who, when this comes into your hands, will be beyond the reach of your knowledge. Perhaps I am the loser by this life-long mutual ignorance. Perhaps I am much to blame for it; perhaps not. But such reflections are profitless at this date: I have written with quite other views than to work up a sentimental regret on such an amazingly remote hypothesis as that the fact of a particular pair of people not meeting, among the millions of other pairs of people who have never met, is a great calamity either to the world in general or to themselves.

'The occasion of my addressing you is briefly this: Nine months ago a report casually reached me that your scientific studies were pursued by you with great ability, and that you were a young man of some

promise as an astronomer. My own scientific proclivities rendered the report more interesting than it might otherwise have been to me; and it came upon me quite as a surprise that any issue of your father's marriage should have so much in him, or you might have seen more of me in former years than you are ever likely to do now. My health had then begun to fail, and I was starting for the Cape, or I should have come myself to inquire into your condition and prospects. I did not return till six months later, and as my health had not improved I sent a trusty friend to examine into your life, pursuits, and circumstances, without your own knowledge, and to report his observations to me. This he did. Through him I learnt, of favourable news:--

'(1) That you worked assiduously at the science of astronomy.

'(2) That everything was auspicious in the career you had chosen.

'Of unfavourable news:--

'(1) That the small income at your command, even when eked out by the sum to which you would be entitled on your grandmother's death and the freehold of the homestead, would be inadequate to support you becomingly as a scientific man, whose lines of work were of a nature not calculated to produce emoluments for many years, if ever.

'(2) That there was something in your path worse than narrow means,

and that that something was a woman.

'To save you, if possible, from ruin on these heads, I take the preventive measures detailed below.

'The chief step is, as my solicitor will have informed you, that, at the age of twenty-five, the sum of 600 pounds a year be settled on you for life, provided you have not married before reaching that age;--a yearly gift of an equal sum to be also provisionally made to you in the interim--and, vice versa, that if you do marry before reaching the age of twenty-five you will receive nothing from the date of the marriage.

'One object of my bequest is that you may have resources sufficient to enable you to travel and study the Southern constellations. When at the Cape, after hearing of your pursuits, I was much struck with the importance of those constellations to an astronomer just pushing into notice. There is more to be made of the Southern hemisphere than ever has been made of it yet; the mine is not so thoroughly worked as the Northern, and thither your studies should tend.

'The only other preventive step in my power is that of exhortation, at which I am not an adept. Nevertheless, I say to you, Swithin St. Cleeve, don't make a fool of yourself, as your father did. If your studies are to be worth anything, believe me, they must be carried on without the help of a woman. Avoid her, and every one of the sex, if

you mean to achieve any worthy thing. Eschew all of that sort for many a year yet. Moreover, I say, the lady of your acquaintance avoid in particular. I have heard nothing against her moral character hitherto; I have no doubt it has been excellent. She may have many good qualities, both of heart and of mind. But she has, in addition to her original disqualification as a companion for you (that is, that of sex), these two serious drawbacks: she is much older than yourself--'

'Much older!' said Swithin resentfully.

'--and she is so impoverished that the title she derives from her late husband is a positive objection. Beyond this, frankly, I don't think well of her. I don't think well of any woman who dotes upon a man younger than herself. To care to be the first fancy of a young fellow like you shows no great common sense in her. If she were worth her salt she would have too much pride to be intimate with a youth in your unassured position, to say no worse. She is old enough to know that a liaison with her may, and almost certainly would, be your ruin; and, on the other hand, that a marriage would be preposterous,--unless she is a complete goose, and in that case there is even more reason for avoiding her than if she were in her few senses.

'A woman of honourable feeling, nephew, would be careful to do nothing to hinder you in your career, as this putting of herself in your way most certainly will. Yet I hear that she professes a great anxiety on

this same future of yours as a physicist. The best way in which she can show the reality of her anxiety is by leaving you to yourself. Perhaps she persuades herself that she is doing you no harm. Well, let her have the benefit of the possible belief; but depend upon it that in truth she gives the lie to her conscience by maintaining such a transparent fallacy. Women's brains are not formed for assisting at any profound science: they lack the power to see things except in the concrete. She'll blab your most secret plans and theories to every one of her acquaintance--'

'She's got none!' said Swithin, beginning to get warm.

'--and make them appear ridiculous by announcing them before they are matured. If you attempt to study with a woman, you'll be ruled by her to entertain fancies instead of theories, air-castles instead of intentions, qualms instead of opinions, sickly prepossessions instead of reasoned conclusions. Your wide heaven of study, young man, will soon reduce itself to the miserable narrow expanse of her face, and your myriad of stars to her two trumpery eyes.

'A woman waking a young man's passions just at a moment when he is endeavouring to shine intellectually, is doing little less than committing a crime.

'Like a certain philosopher I would, upon my soul, have all young men from eighteen to twenty-five kept under barrels; seeing how often, in

the lack of some such sequestering process, the woman sits down before each as his destiny, and too frequently enervates his purpose, till he abandons the most promising course ever conceived!

'But no more. I now leave your fate in your own hands. Your well-wishing relative,

'JOCELYN ST. CLEEVE,
Doctor in Medicine.'

As coming from a bachelor and hardened misogynist of seventy-two, the opinions herein contained were nothing remarkable: but their practical result in restricting the sudden endowment of Swithin's researches by conditions which turned the favour into a harassment was, at this unique moment, discomfiting and distracting in the highest degree.

Sensational, however, as the letter was, the passionate intention of the day was not hazarded for more than a few minutes thereby. The truth was, the caution and bribe came too late, too unexpectedly, to be of influence. They were the sort of thing which required fermentation to render them effective. Had St. Cleeve received the exhortation a month earlier; had he been able to run over in his mind, at every wakeful hour of thirty consecutive nights, a private catechism on the possibilities opened up by this annuity, there is no telling what might have been the stress of such a web of perplexity upon him, a young man whose love for celestial physics was second to none. But to have held before him, at

the last moment, the picture of a future advantage that he had never once thought of, or discounted for present staying power, it affected him about as much as the view of horizons shown by sheet-lightning. He saw an immense prospect; it went, and the world was as before.

He caught the train at Warborne, and moved rapidly towards Bath; not precisely in the same key as when he had dressed in the hut at dawn, but, as regarded the mechanical part of the journey, as unhesitatingly as before.

And with the change of scene even his gloom left him; his bosom's lord sat lightly in his throne. St. Cleeve was not sufficiently in mind of poetical literature to remember that wise poets are accustomed to read that lightness of bosom inversely. Swithin thought it an omen of good fortune; and as thinking is causing in not a few such cases, he was perhaps, in spite of poets, right.