

XIX

At the station Lady Constantine appeared, standing expectant; he saw her face from the window of the carriage long before she saw him. He no sooner saw her than he was satisfied to his heart's content with his prize. If his great-uncle had offered him from the grave a kingdom instead of her, he would not have accepted it.

Swithin jumped out, and nature never painted in a woman's face more devotion than appeared in my lady's at that moment. To both the situation seemed like a beautiful allegory, not to be examined too closely, lest its defects of correspondence with real life should be apparent.

They almost feared to shake hands in public, so much depended upon their passing that morning without molestation. A fly was called and they drove away.

'Take this,' she said, handing him a folded paper. 'It belongs to you rather than to me.'

At crossings, and other occasional pauses, pedestrians turned their faces and looked at the pair (for no reason but that, among so many, there were naturally a few of the sort who have eyes to note what incidents come in their way as they plod on); but the two in the vehicle could not but fear

that these innocent beholders had special detective designs on them.

'You look so dreadfully young!' she said with humorous fretfulness, as they drove along (Swithin's cheeks being amazingly fresh from the morning air). 'Do try to appear a little haggard, that the parson mayn't ask us awkward questions!'

Nothing further happened, and they were set down opposite a shop about fifty yards from the church door, at five minutes to eleven.

'We will dismiss the fly,' she said. 'It will only attract idlers.'

On turning the corner and reaching the church they found the door ajar; but the building contained only two persons, a man and a woman,--the clerk and his wife, as they learnt. Swithin asked when the clergyman would arrive.

The clerk looked at his watch, and said, 'At just on eleven o'clock.'

'He ought to be here,' said Swithin.

'Yes,' replied the clerk, as the hour struck. 'The fact is, sir, he is a deppity, and apt to be rather wandering in his wits as regards time and such like, which hev stood in the way of the man's getting a benefit. But no doubt he'll come.'

'The regular incumbent is away, then?'

'He's gone for his bare pa'son's fortnight,--that's all; and we was forced to put up with a weak-talented man or none. The best men goes into the brewing, or into the shipping now-a-days, you see, sir; doctrines being rather shaddery at present, and your money's worth not sure in our line. So we church officers be left poorly provided with men for odd jobs. I'll tell ye what, sir; I think I'd better run round to the gentleman's lodgings, and try to find him?'

'Pray do,' said Lady Constantine.

The clerk left the church; his wife busied herself with dusting at the further end, and Swithin and Viviette were left to themselves. The imagination travels so rapidly, and a woman's forethought is so assumptive, that the clerk's departure had no sooner doomed them to inaction than it was borne in upon Lady Constantine's mind that she would not become the wife of Swithin St. Cleeve, either to-day or on any other day. Her divinations were continually misleading her, she knew: but a hitch at the moment of marriage surely had a meaning in it.

'Ah,--the marriage is not to be!' she said to herself. 'This is a fatality.'

It was twenty minutes past, and no parson had arrived. Swithin took her hand.

'If it cannot be to-day, it can be to-morrow,' he whispered.

'I cannot say,' she answered. 'Something tells me no.'

It was almost impossible that she could know anything of the deterrent force exercised on Swithin by his dead uncle that morning. Yet her manner tallied so curiously well with such knowledge that he was struck by it, and remained silent.

'You have a black tie,' she continued, looking at him.

'Yes,' replied Swithin. 'I bought it on my way here.'

'Why could it not have been less sombre in colour?'

'My great-uncle is dead.'

'You had a great-uncle? You never told me.'

'I never saw him in my life. I have only heard about him since his death.'

He spoke in as quiet and measured a way as he could, but his heart was sinking. She would go on questioning; he could not tell her an untruth. She would discover particulars of that great-uncle's provision for him,

which he, Swithin, was throwing away for her sake, and she would refuse to be his for his own sake. His conclusion at this moment was precisely what hers had been five minutes sooner: they were never to be husband and wife.

But she did not continue her questions, for the simplest of all reasons: hasty footsteps were audible in the entrance, and the parson was seen coming up the aisle, the clerk behind him wiping the beads of perspiration from his face. The somewhat sorry clerical specimen shook hands with them, and entered the vestry; and the clerk came up and opened the book.

'The poor gentleman's memory is a bit topsy-turvy,' whispered the latter. 'He had got it in his mind that 'twere a funeral, and I found him wandering about the cemetery a-looking for us. However, all's well as ends well.' And the clerk wiped his forehead again.

'How ill-omened!' murmured Viviette.

But the parson came out robed at this moment, and the clerk put on his ecclesiastical countenance and looked in his book. Lady Constantine's momentary languor passed; her blood resumed its courses with a new spring. The grave utterances of the church then rolled out upon the palpitating pair, and no couple ever joined their whispers thereto with more fervency than they.

Lady Constantine (as she continued to be called by the outside world, though she liked to think herself the Mrs. St. Cleeve that she legally was) had told Green that she might be expected at Welland in a day, or two, or three, as circumstances should dictate. Though the time of return was thus left open it was deemed advisable, by both Swithin and herself, that her journey back should not be deferred after the next day, in case any suspicions might be aroused. As for St. Cleeve, his comings and goings were of no consequence. It was seldom known whether he was at home or abroad, by reason of his frequent seclusion at the column.

Late in the afternoon of the next day he accompanied her to the Bath station, intending himself to remain in that city till the following morning. But when a man or youth has such a tender article on his hands as a thirty-hour bride it is hardly in the power of his strongest reason to set her down at a railway, and send her off like a superfluous portmanteau. Hence the experiment of parting so soon after their union proved excruciatingly severe to these. The evening was dull; the breeze of autumn crept fitfully through every slit and aperture in the town; not a soul in the world seemed to notice or care about anything they did. Lady Constantine sighed; and there was no resisting it,--he could not leave her thus. He decided to get into the train with her, and keep her company for at least a few stations on her way.

It drew on to be a dark night, and, seeing that there was no serious risk after all, he prolonged his journey with her so far as to the junction at

which the branch line to Warborne forked off. Here it was necessary to wait a few minutes, before either he could go back or she could go on. They wandered outside the station doorway into the gloom of the road, and there agreed to part.

While she yet stood holding his arm a phaeton sped towards the station-entrance, where, in ascending the slope to the door, the horse suddenly jibbed. The gentleman who was driving, being either impatient, or possessed with a theory that all jibbers may be started by severe whipping, applied the lash; as a result of it, the horse thrust round the carriage to where they stood, and the end of the driver's sweeping whip cut across Lady Constantine's face with such severity as to cause her an involuntary cry. Swithin turned her round to the lamplight, and discerned a streak of blood on her cheek.

By this time the gentleman who had done the mischief, with many words of regret, had given the reins to his man and dismounted.

'I will go to the waiting-room for a moment,' whispered Viviette hurriedly; and, loosing her hand from his arm, she pulled down her veil and vanished inside the building.

The stranger came forward and raised his hat. He was a slightly built and apparently town-bred man of twenty-eight or thirty; his manner of address was at once careless and conciliatory.

'I am greatly concerned at what I have done,' he said. 'I sincerely trust that your wife'--but observing the youthfulness of Swithin, he withdrew the word suggested by the manner of Swithin towards Lady Constantine--'I trust the young lady was not seriously cut?'

'I trust not,' said Swithin, with some vexation.

'Where did the lash touch her?'

'Straight down her cheek.'

'Do let me go to her, and learn how she is, and humbly apologize.'

'I'll inquire.'

He went to the ladies' room, in which Viviette had taken refuge. She met him at the door, her handkerchief to her cheek, and Swithin explained that the driver of the phaeton had sent to make inquiries.

'I cannot see him!' she whispered. 'He is my brother Louis! He is, no doubt, going on by the train to my house. Don't let him recognize me! We must wait till he is gone.'

Swithin thereupon went out again, and told the young man that the cut on her face was not serious, but that she could not see him; after which they parted. St. Cleeve then heard him ask for a ticket for Warborne,

which confirmed Lady Constantine's view that he was going on to her house. When the branch train had moved off Swithin returned to his bride, who waited in a trembling state within.

On being informed that he had departed she showed herself much relieved.

'Where does your brother come from?' said Swithin.

'From London, immediately. Rio before that. He has a friend or two in this neighbourhood, and visits here occasionally. I have seldom or never spoken to you of him, because of his long absence.'

'Is he going to settle near you?'

'No, nor anywhere, I fear. He is, or rather was, in the diplomatic service. He was first a clerk in the Foreign Office, and was afterwards appointed attache at Rio Janeiro. But he has resigned the appointment. I wish he had not.'

Swithin asked why he resigned.

'He complained of the banishment, and the climate, and everything that people complain of who are determined to be dissatisfied,--though, poor fellow, there is some ground for his complaints. Perhaps some people would say that he is idle. But he is scarcely that; he is rather restless than idle, so that he never persists in anything. Yet if a

subject takes his fancy he will follow it up with exemplary patience till something diverts him.'

'He is not kind to you, is he, dearest?'

'Why do you think that?'

'Your manner seems to say so.'

'Well, he may not always be kind. But look at my face; does the mark show?'

A streak, straight as a meridian, was visible down her cheek. The blood had been brought almost to the surface, but was not quite through, that which had originally appeared thereon having possibly come from the horse. It signified that to-morrow the red line would be a black one.

Swithin informed her that her brother had taken a ticket for Warborne, and she at once perceived that he was going on to visit her at Welland, though from his letter she had not expected him so soon by a few days. 'Meanwhile,' continued Swithin, 'you can now get home only by the late train, having missed that one.'

'But, Swithin, don't you see my new trouble? If I go to Welland House to-night, and find my brother just arrived there, and he sees this cut on my face, which I suppose you described to him--'

'I did.'

'He will know I was the lady with you!'

'Whom he called my wife. I wonder why we look husband and wife already!'

'Then what am I to do? For the ensuing three or four days I bear in my face a clue to his discovery of our secret.'

'Then you must not be seen. We must stay at an inn here.'

'O no!' she said timidly. 'It is too near home to be quite safe. We might not be known; but if we were!'

'We can't go back to Bath now. I'll tell you, dear Viviette, what we must do. We'll go on to Warborne in separate carriages; we'll meet outside the station; thence we'll walk to the column in the dark, and I'll keep you a captive in the cabin till the scar has disappeared.'

As there was nothing which better recommended itself this course was decided on; and after taking from her trunk the articles that might be required for an incarceration of two or three days they left the said trunk at the cloak-room, and went on by the last train, which reached Warborne about ten o'clock.

It was only necessary for Lady Constantine to cover her face with the thick veil that she had provided for this escapade, to walk out of the station without fear of recognition. St. Cleeve came forth from another compartment, and they did not rejoin each other till they had reached a shadowy bend in the old turnpike road, beyond the irradiation of the Warborne lamplight.

The walk to Welland was long. It was the walk which Swithin had taken in the rain when he had learnt the fatal forestalment of his stellar discovery; but now he was moved by a less desperate mood, and blamed neither God nor man. They were not pressed for time, and passed along the silent, lonely way with that sense rather of predestination than of choice in their proceedings which the presence of night sometimes imparts. Reaching the park gate, they found it open, and from this they inferred that her brother Louis had arrived.

Leaving the house and park on their right they traced the highway yet a little further, and, plunging through the stubble of the opposite field, drew near the isolated earthwork bearing the plantation and tower, which together rose like a flattened dome and lantern from the lighter-hued plain of stubble. It was far too dark to distinguish firs from other trees by the eye alone, but the peculiar dialect of sylvan language which the piny multitude used would have been enough to proclaim their class at any time. In the lovers' stealthy progress up the slopes a dry stick here and there snapped beneath their feet, seeming like a shot of alarm.

On being unlocked the hut was found precisely as Swithin had left it two days before. Lady Constantine was thoroughly wearied, and sat down, while he gathered a handful of twigs and spikelets from the masses strewn without and lit a small fire, first taking the precaution to blind the little window and relock the door.

Lady Constantine looked curiously around by the light of the blaze. The hut was small as the prophet's chamber provided by the Shunammite: in one corner stood the stove, with a little table and chair, a small cupboard hard by, a pitcher of water, a rack overhead, with various articles, including a kettle and a gridiron; while the remaining three or four feet at the other end of the room was fitted out as a dormitory, for Swithin's use during late observations in the tower overhead.

'It is not much of a palace to offer you,' he remarked, smiling. 'But at any rate, it is a refuge.'

The cheerful firelight dispersed in some measure Lady Constantine's anxieties. 'If we only had something to eat!' she said.

'Dear me,' cried St. Cleeve, blankly. 'That's a thing I never thought of.'

'Nor I, till now,' she replied.

He reflected with misgiving.

'Beyond a small loaf of bread in the cupboard I have nothing. However, just outside the door there are lots of those little rabbits, about the size of rats, that the keepers call runners. And they are as tame as possible. But I fear I could not catch one now. Yet, dear Viviette, wait a minute; I'll try. You must not be starved.'

He softly let himself out, and was gone some time. When he reappeared, he produced, not a rabbit, but four sparrows and a thrush.

'I could do nothing in the way of a rabbit without setting a wire,' he said. 'But I have managed to get these by knowing where they roost.'

He showed her how to prepare the birds, and, having set her to roast them by the fire, departed with the pitcher, to replenish it at the brook which flowed near the homestead in the neighbouring Bottom.

'They are all asleep at my grandmother's,' he informed her when he re-entered, panting, with the dripping pitcher. 'They imagine me to be a hundred miles off.'

The birds were now ready, and the table was spread. With this fare, eked out by dry toast from the loaf, and moistened with cups of water from the pitcher, to which Swithin added a little wine from the flask he had carried on his journey, they were forced to be content for their supper.