

XX

When Lady Constantine awoke the next morning Swithin was nowhere to be seen. Before she was quite ready for breakfast she heard the key turn in the door, and felt startled, till she remembered that the comer could hardly be anybody but he. He brought a basket with provisions, an extra cup-and-saucer, and so on. In a short space of time the kettle began singing on the stove, and the morning meal was ready.

The sweet resinous air from the firs blew in upon them as they sat at breakfast; the birds hopped round the door (which, somewhat riskily, they ventured to keep open); and at their elbow rose the lank column into an upper realm of sunlight, which only reached the cabin in fitful darts and flashes through the trees.

'I could be happy here for ever,' said she, clasping his hand. 'I wish I could never see my great gloomy house again, since I am not rich enough to throw it open, and live there as I ought to do. Poverty of this sort is not unpleasant at any rate. What are you thinking of?'

'I am thinking about my outing this morning. On reaching my grandmother's she was only a little surprised to see me. I was obliged

to breakfast there, or appear to do so, to divert suspicion; and this food is supposed to be wanted for my dinner and supper. There will of course be no difficulty in my obtaining an ample supply for any length of time, as I can take what I like from the buttery without observation. But as I looked in my grandmother's face this morning, and saw her looking affectionately in mine, and thought how she had never concealed anything from me, and had always had my welfare at heart, I felt--that I should like to tell her what we have done.'

'O no,--please not, Swithin!' she exclaimed piteously.

'Very well,' he answered. 'On no consideration will I do so without your consent.' And no more was said on the matter.

The morning was passed in applying wet rag and other remedies to the purple line on Viviette's cheek; and in the afternoon they set up the equatorial under the replaced dome, to have it in order for night observations.

The evening was clear, dry, and remarkably cold by comparison with the daytime weather. After a frugal supper they replenished the stove with charcoal from the homestead, which they also burnt during the day,--an idea of Viviette's, that the smoke from a wood fire might not be seen more frequently than was consistent with the occasional occupation of the cabin by Swithin, as heretofore.

At eight o'clock she insisted upon his ascending the tower for observations, in strict pursuance of the idea on which their marriage had been based, namely, that of restoring regularity to his studies.

The sky had a new and startling beauty that night. A broad, fluctuating, semicircular arch of vivid white light spanned the northern quarter of the heavens, reaching from the horizon to the star Eta in the Greater Bear. It was the Aurora Borealis, just risen up for the winter season out of the freezing seas of the north, where every autumn vapour was now undergoing rapid congelation.

'O, let us sit and look at it!' she said; and they turned their backs upon the equatorial and the southern glories of the heavens to this new beauty in a quarter which they seldom contemplated.

The lustre of the fixed stars was diminished to a sort of blueness. Little by little the arch grew higher against the dark void, like the form of the Spirit-maiden in the shades of Glenfinlas, till its crown drew near the zenith, and threw a tissue over the whole waggon and horses of the great northern constellation. Brilliant shafts radiated from the convexity of the arch, coming and going silently. The temperature fell, and Lady Constantine drew her wrap more closely around her.

'We'll go down,' said Swithin. 'The cabin is beautifully warm. Why should we try to observe to-night? Indeed, we cannot; the Aurora light overpowers everything.'

'Very well. To-morrow night there will be no interruption. I shall be gone.'

'You leave me to-morrow, Viviette?'

'Yes; to-morrow morning.'

The truth was that, with the progress of the hours and days, the conviction had been borne in upon Viviette more and more forcibly that not for kingdoms and principalities could she afford to risk the discovery of her presence here by any living soul.

'But let me see your face, dearest,' he said. 'I don't think it will be safe for you to meet your brother yet.'

As it was too dark to see her face on the summit where they sat they descended the winding staircase, and in the cabin Swithin examined the damaged cheek. The line, though so far attenuated as not to be observable by any one but a close observer, had not quite disappeared. But in consequence of her reiterated and almost tearful anxiety to go, and as there was a strong probability that her brother had left the house, Swithin decided to call at Welland next morning, and reconnoitre with a view to her return.

Locking her in he crossed the dewy stubble into the park. The house was

silent and deserted; and only one tall stalk of smoke ascended from the chimneys. Notwithstanding that the hour was nearly nine he knocked at the door.

'Is Lady Constantine at home?' asked Swithin, with a disingenuousness now habitual, yet unknown to him six months before.

'No, Mr. St. Cleeve; my lady has not returned from Bath. We expect her every day.'

'Nobody staying in the house?'

'My lady's brother has been here; but he is gone on to Budmouth. He will come again in two or three weeks, I understand.'

This was enough. Swithin said he would call again, and returned to the cabin, where, waking Viviette, who was not by nature an early riser, he waited on the column till she was ready to breakfast. When this had been shared they prepared to start.

A long walk was before them. Warborne station lay five miles distant, and the next station above that nine miles. They were bound for the latter; their plan being that she should there take the train to the junction where the whip accident had occurred, claim her luggage, and return with it to Warborne, as if from Bath.

The morning was cool and the walk not wearisome. When once they had left behind the stubble-field of their environment and the parish of Welland, they sauntered on comfortably, Lady Constantine's spirits rising as she withdrew further from danger.

They parted by a little brook, about half a mile from the station; Swithin to return to Welland by the way he had come.

Lady Constantine telegraphed from the junction to Warborne for a carriage to be in readiness to meet her on her arrival; and then, waiting for the down train, she travelled smoothly home, reaching Welland House about five minutes sooner than Swithin reached the column hard by, after footing it all the way from where they had parted.

XXI

From that day forward their life resumed its old channel in general outward aspect.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature in their exploit was its comparative effectiveness as an expedient for the end designed,—that of restoring calm assiduity to the study of astronomy. Swithin took up his old position as the lonely philosopher at the column, and Lady Constantine