

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

lapsed back to immured existence at the house, with apparently not a friend in the parish. The enforced narrowness of life which her limited resources necessitated was now an additional safeguard against the discovery of her relations with St. Cleeve. Her neighbours seldom troubled her; as much, it must be owned, from a tacit understanding that she was not in a position to return invitations as from any selfish coldness engendered by her want of wealth.

At the first meeting of the secretly united pair after their short honeymoon they were compelled to behave as strangers to each other. It occurred in the only part of Welland which deserved the name of a village street, and all the labourers were returning to their midday meal, with those of their wives who assisted at outdoor work. Before the eyes of this innocent though quite untrustworthy group, Swithin and his Viviette could only shake hands in passing, though she contrived to say to him in an undertone, 'My brother does not return yet for some time. He has gone to Paris. I will be on the lawn this evening, if you can come.' It was a fluttered smile that she bestowed on him, and there was no doubt that every fibre of her heart vibrated afresh at meeting, with such reserve, one who stood in his close relation to her.

The shades of night fell early now, and Swithin was at the spot of appointment about the time that he knew her dinner would be over. It was just where they had met at the beginning of the year, but many changes had resulted since then. The flower-beds that had used to be so neatly edged were now jagged and leafy; black stars appeared on the pale surface

of the gravel walks, denoting tufts of grass that grew unmolested there. Lady Constantine's external affairs wore just that aspect which suggests that new blood may be advantageously introduced into the line; and new blood had been introduced, in good sooth,--with what social result remained to be seen.

She silently entered on the scene from the same window which had given her passage in months gone by. They met with a concerted embrace, and St. Cleeve spoke his greeting in whispers.

'We are quite safe, dearest,' said she.

'But the servants?'

'My meagre staff consists of only two women and the boy; and they are away in the other wing. I thought you would like to see the inside of my house, after showing me the inside of yours. So we will walk through it instead of staying out here.'

She let him in through the casement, and they strolled forward softly, Swithin with some curiosity, never before having gone beyond the library and adjoining room. The whole western side of the house was at this time shut up, her life being confined to two or three small rooms in the south-east corner. The great apartments through which they now whisperingly walked wore already that funereal aspect that comes from disuse and inattention. Triangular cobwebs already formed little hammocks for the

dust in corners of the wainscot, and a close smell of wood and leather, seasoned with mouse-droppings, pervaded the atmosphere. So seldom was the solitude of these chambers intruded on by human feet that more than once a mouse stood and looked the twain in the face from the arm of a sofa, or the top of a cabinet, without any great fear.

Swithin had no residential ambition whatever, but he was interested in the place. 'Will the house ever be thrown open to gaiety, as it was in old times?' said he.

'Not unless you make a fortune,' she replied laughingly. 'It is mine for my life, as you know; but the estate is so terribly saddled with annuities to Sir Blount's distant relatives, one of whom will succeed me here, that I have practically no more than my own little private income to exist on.'

'And are you bound to occupy the house?'

'Not bound to. But I must not let it on lease.'

'And was there any stipulation in the event of your re-marriage?'

'It was not mentioned.'

'It is satisfactory to find that you lose nothing by marrying me, at all events, dear Viviette.'

'I hope you lose nothing either--at least, of consequence.'

'What have I to lose?'

'I meant your liberty. Suppose you become a popular physicist (popularity seems cooling towards art and coquetting with science now-a-days), and a better chance offers, and one who would make you a newer and brighter wife than I am comes in your way. Will you never regret this? Will you never despise me?'

Swithin answered by a kiss, and they again went on; proceeding like a couple of burglars, lest they should draw the attention of the cook or Green.

In one of the upper rooms his eyes were attracted by an old chamber organ, which had once been lent for use in the church. He mentioned his recollection of the same, which led her to say, 'That reminds me of something. There is to be a confirmation in our parish in the spring, and you once told me that you had never been confirmed. What shocking neglect! Why was it?'

'I hardly know. The confusion resulting from my father's death caused it to be forgotten, I suppose.'

'Now, dear Swithin, you will do this to please me,--be confirmed on the

present occasion?'

'Since I have done without the virtue of it so long, might I not do without it altogether?'

'No, no!' she said earnestly. 'I do wish it, indeed. I am made unhappy when I think you don't care about such serious matters. Without the Church to cling to, what have we?'

'Each other. But seriously, I should be inverting the established order of spiritual things; people ought to be confirmed before they are married.'

'That's really of minor consequence. Now, don't think slightingly of what so many good men have laid down as necessary to be done. And, dear Swithin, I somehow feel that a certain levity which has perhaps shown itself in our treatment of the sacrament of marriage--by making a clandestine adventure of what is, after all, a solemn rite--would be well atoned for by a due seriousness in other points of religious observance. This opportunity should therefore not be passed over. I thought of it all last night; and you are a parson's son, remember, and he would have insisted on it if he had been alive. In short, Swithin, do be a good boy, and observe the Church's ordinances.'

Lady Constantine, by virtue of her temperament, was necessarily either lover or devotee, and she vibrated so gracefully between these two

conditions that nobody who had known the circumstances could have condemned her inconsistencies. To be led into difficulties by those mastering emotions of hers, to aim at escape by turning round and seizing the apparatus of religion--which could only rightly be worked by the very emotions already bestowed elsewhere--it was, after all, but Nature's well-meaning attempt to preserve the honour of her daughter's conscience in the trying quandary to which the conditions of sex had given rise. As Viviette could not be confirmed herself, and as Communion Sunday was a long way off, she urged Swithin thus.

'And the new bishop is such a good man,' she continued. 'I used to have a slight acquaintance with him when he was a parish priest.'

'Very well, dearest. To please you I'll be confirmed. My grandmother, too, will be delighted, no doubt.'

They continued their ramble: Lady Constantine first advancing into rooms with the candle, to assure herself that all was empty, and then calling him forward in a whisper. The stillness was broken only by these whispers, or by the occasional crack of a floor-board beneath their tread. At last they sat down, and, shading the candle with a screen, she showed him the faded contents of this and that drawer or cabinet, or the wardrobe of some member of the family who had died young early in the century, when muslin reigned supreme, when waists were close to arm-pits, and muffs as large as smugglers' tubs. These researches among habilimental hulls and husks, whose human kernels had long ago perished,

went on for about half an hour; when the companions were startled by a loud ringing at the front-door bell.