

## XXII

Lady Constantine flung down the old-fashioned lacework, whose beauties she had been pointing out to Swithin, and exclaimed, 'Who can it be? Not Louis, surely?'

They listened. An arrival was such a phenomenon at this unfrequented mansion, and particularly a late arrival, that no servant was on the alert to respond to the call; and the visitor rang again, more loudly than before. Sounds of the tardy opening and shutting of a passage-door from the kitchen quarter then reached their ears, and Viviette went into the corridor to hearken more attentively. In a few minutes she returned to the wardrobe-room in which she had left Swithin.

'Yes; it is my brother!' she said with difficult composure. 'I just caught his voice. He has no doubt come back from Paris to stay. This is a rather vexatious, indolent way he has, never to write to prepare me!'

'I can easily go away,' said Swithin.

By this time, however, her brother had been shown into the house, and the footsteps of the page were audible, coming in search of Lady Constantine.

'If you will wait there a moment,' she said, directing St. Cleeve into a bedchamber which adjoined; 'you will be quite safe from interruption, and

I will quickly come back.' Taking the light she left him.

Swithin waited in darkness. Not more than ten minutes had passed when a whisper in her voice came through the keyhole. He opened the door.

'Yes; he is come to stay!' she said. 'He is at supper now.'

'Very well; don't be flurried, dearest. Shall I stay too, as we planned?'

'O, Swithin, I fear not!' she replied anxiously. 'You see how it is. To-night we have broken the arrangement that you should never come here; and

this is the result. Will it offend you if--I ask you to leave?'

'Not in the least. Upon the whole, I prefer the comfort of my little cabin and homestead to the gauntness and alarms of this place.'

'There, now, I fear you are offended!' she said, a tear collecting in her eye. 'I wish I was going back with you to the cabin! How happy we were, those three days of our stay there! But it is better, perhaps, just now, that you should leave me. Yes, these rooms are oppressive. They require a large household to make them cheerful. . . . Yet, Swithin,' she added, after reflection, 'I will not request you to go. Do as you think best. I will light a night-light, and leave you here to consider. For myself, I must go downstairs to my brother at once, or he'll wonder what I am

doing.'

She kindled the little light, and again retreated, closing the door upon him.

Swithin stood and waited some time; till he considered that upon the whole it would be preferable to leave. With this intention he emerged and went softly along the dark passage towards the extreme end, where there was a little crooked staircase that would conduct him down to a disused side door. Descending this stair he duly arrived at the other side of the house, facing the quarter whence the wind blew, and here he was surprised to catch the noise of rain beating against the windows. It was a state of weather which fully accounted for the visitor's impatient ringing.

St. Cleeve was in a minor kind of dilemma. The rain reminded him that his hat and great-coat had been left downstairs, in the front part of the house; and though he might have gone home without either in ordinary weather it was not a pleasant feat in the pelting winter rain. Retracing his steps to Viviette's room he took the light, and opened a closet-door that he had seen ajar on his way down. Within the closet hung various articles of apparel, upholstery lumber of all kinds filling the back part. Swithin thought he might find here a cloak of hers to throw round him, but finally took down from a peg a more suitable garment, the only one of the sort that was there. It was an old moth-eaten great-coat, heavily trimmed with fur; and in removing it a companion cap of sealskin

was disclosed.

'Whose can they be?' he thought, and a gloomy answer suggested itself. 'Pooh,' he then said (summoning the scientific side of his nature), 'matter is matter, and mental association only a delusion.' Putting on the garments he returned the light to Lady Constantine's bedroom, and again prepared to depart as before.

Scarcely, however, had he regained the corridor a second time, when he heard a light footstep--seemingly Viviette's--again on the front landing. Wondering what she wanted with him further he waited, taking the precaution to step into the closet till sure it was she.

The figure came onward, bent to the keyhole of the bedroom door, and whispered (supposing him still inside), 'Swithin, on second thoughts I think you may stay with safety.'

Having no further doubt of her personality he came out with thoughtless abruptness from the closet behind her, and looking round suddenly she beheld his shadowy fur-clad outline. At once she raised her hands in horror, as if to protect herself from him; she uttered a shriek, and turned shudderingly to the wall, covering her face.

Swithin would have picked her up in a moment, but by this time he could hear footsteps rushing upstairs, in response to her cry. In consternation, and with a view of not compromising her, he effected his

retreat as fast as possible, reaching the bend of the corridor just as her brother Louis appeared with a light at the other extremity.

'What's the matter, for heaven's sake, Viviette?' said Louis.

'My husband!' she involuntarily exclaimed.

'What nonsense!'

'O yes, it is nonsense,' she added, with an effort. 'It was nothing.'

'But what was the cause of your cry?'

She had by this time recovered her reason and judgment. 'O, it was a trick of the imagination,' she said, with a faint laugh. 'I live so much alone that I get superstitious--and--I thought for the moment I saw an apparition.'

'Of your late husband?'

'Yes. But it was nothing; it was the outline of the--tall clock and the chair behind. Would you mind going down, and leaving me to go into my room for a moment?'

She entered the bedroom, and her brother went downstairs. Swithin thought it best to leave well alone, and going noiselessly out of the

house plodded through the rain homeward. It was plain that agitations of one sort and another had so weakened Viviette's nerves as to lay her open to every impression. That the clothes he had borrowed were some cast-off garments of the late Sir Blount had occurred to St. Cleeve in taking them; but in the moment of returning to her side he had forgotten this, and the shape they gave to his figure had obviously been a reminder of too sudden a sort for her. Musing thus he walked along as if he were still, as before, the lonely student, dissociated from all mankind, and with no shadow of right or interest in Welland House or its mistress.

The great-coat and cap were unpleasant companions; but Swithin having been reared, or having reared himself, in the scientific school of thought, would not give way to his sense of their weirdness. To do so would have been treason to his own beliefs and aims.

When nearly home, at a point where his track converged on another path, there approached him from the latter a group of indistinct forms. The tones of their speech revealed them to be Hezzy Biles, Nat Chapman, Fry, and other labourers. Swithin was about to say a word to them, till recollecting his disguise he deemed it advisable to hold his tongue, lest his attire should tell a too dangerous tale as to where he had come from. By degrees they drew closer, their walk being in the same direction.

'Good-night, stranger,' said Nat.

The stranger did not reply.

All of them paced on abreast of him, and he could perceive in the gloom that their faces were turned inquiringly upon his form. Then a whisper passed from one to another of them; then Chapman, who was the boldest, dropped immediately behind his heels, and followed there for some distance, taking close observations of his outline, after which the men grouped again and whispered. Thinking it best to let them pass on Swithin slackened his pace, and they went ahead of him, apparently without much reluctance.

There was no doubt that they had been impressed by the clothes he wore; and having no wish to provoke similar comments from his grandmother and Hannah, Swithin took the precaution, on arriving at Welland Bottom, to enter the homestead by the outhouse. Here he deposited the cap and coat in secure hiding, afterwards going round to the front and opening the door in the usual way.

In the entry he met Hannah, who said--

'Only to hear what have been seed to-night, Mr. Swithin! The work-folk have dropped in to tell us!'

In the kitchen were the men who had outstripped him on the road. Their countenances, instead of wearing the usual knotty irregularities, had a smoothed-out expression of blank concern. Swithin's entrance was unobtrusive and quiet, as if he had merely come down from his study

upstairs, and they only noticed him by enlarging their gaze, so as to include him in the audience.

'We was in a deep talk at the moment,' continued Blore, 'and Natty had just brought up that story about old Jeremiah Paddock's crossing the park one night at one o'clock in the morning, and seeing Sir Blount a-shutting my lady out-o'-doors; and we was saying that it seemed a true return that he should perish in a foreign land; when we happened to look up, and there was Sir Blount a-walking along.'

'Did it overtake you, or did you overtake it?' whispered Hannah sepulchrally.

'I don't say 'twas it,' returned Sammy. 'God forbid that I should drag in a resurrection word about what perhaps was still solid manhood, and has to die! But he, or it, closed in upon us, as 'twere.'

'Yes, closed in upon us!' said Haymoss.

'And I said "Good-night, stranger,"' added Chapman.

'Yes, "Good-night, stranger,"--that wez yer words, Natty. I support ye in it.'

'And then he closed in upon us still more.'



'We closed in upon he, rather,' said Chapman.

'Well, well; 'tis the same thing in such matters! And the form was Sir Blount's. My nostrils told me, for--there, 'a smelled. Yes, I could smell'n, being to leeward.'

'Lord, lord, what unwholesome scandal's this about the ghost of a respectable gentleman?' said Mrs. Martin, who had entered from the sitting-room.

'Now, wait, ma'am. I don't say 'twere a low smell, mind ye. 'Twere a high smell, a sort of gamey flavour, calling to mind venison and hare, just as you'd expect of a great squire,--not like a poor man's 'natomy, at all; and that was what strengthened my faith that 'twas Sir Blount.'

('The skins that old coat was made of,' ruminated Swithin.)

'Well, well; I've not held out against the figure o' starvation these five-and-twenty year, on nine shillings a week, to be afeard of a walking vapour, sweet or savoury,' said Hezzy. 'So here's home-along.'

'Bide a bit longer, and I'm going too,' continued Fry. 'Well, when I found 'twas Sir Blount my spet dried up within my mouth; for neither hedge nor bush were there for refuge against any foul spring 'a might have made at us.'

"'Twas very curious; but we had likewise a-mentioned his name just afore, in talking of the confirmation that's shortly coming on,' said Hezzy.

'Is there soon to be a confirmation?'

'Yes. In this parish--the first time in Welland church for twenty years. As I say, I had told 'em that he was confirmed the same year that I went up to have it done, as I have very good cause to mind. When we went to be examined, the pa'son said to me, "Rehearse the articles of thy belief." Mr. Blount (as he was then) was nighest me, and he whispered, "Women and wine." "Women and wine," says I to the pa'son: and for that I was sent back till next confirmation, Sir Blount never owning that he was the rascal.'

'Confirmation was a sight different at that time,' mused Biles. 'The Bishops didn't lay it on so strong then as they do now. Now-a-days, yer Bishop gies both hands to every Jack-rag and Tom-straw that drops the knee afore him; but 'twas six chaps to one blessing when we was boys. The Bishop o' that time would stretch out his palms and run his fingers over our row of crowns as off-hand as a bank gentleman telling money. The great lords of the Church in them days wasn't particular to a soul or two more or less; and, for my part, I think living was easier for 't.'

'The new Bishop, I hear, is a bachelor-man; or a widow gentleman is it?' asked Mrs. Martin.

'Bachelor, I believe, ma'am. Mr. San Cleeve, making so bold, you've never faced him yet, I think?'

Mrs. Martin shook her head.

'No; it was a piece of neglect. I hardly know how it happened,' she said.

'I am going to, this time,' said Swithin, and turned the chat to other matters.