

## XXIII

Swithin could not sleep that night for thinking of his Viviette. Nothing told so significantly of the conduct of her first husband towards the poor lady as the abiding dread of him which was revealed in her by any sudden revival of his image or memory. But for that consideration her almost childlike terror at Swithin's inadvertent disguise would have been ludicrous.

He waited anxiously through several following days for an opportunity of seeing her, but none was afforded. Her brother's presence in the house sufficiently accounted for this. At length he ventured to write a note, requesting her to signal to him in a way she had done once or twice before,--by pulling down a blind in a particular window of the house, one of the few visible from the top of the Rings-Hill column; this to be done on any evening when she could see him after dinner on the terrace.

When he had levelled the glass at that window for five successive nights he beheld the blind in the position suggested. Three hours later, quite in the dusk, he repaired to the place of appointment.

'My brother is away this evening,' she explained, 'and that's why I can come out. He is only gone for a few hours, nor is he likely to go for longer just yet. He keeps himself a good deal in my company, which has made it unsafe for me to venture near you.'

'Has he any suspicion?'

'None, apparently. But he rather depresses me.'

'How, Viviette?' Swithin feared, from her manner, that this was something serious.

'I would rather not tell.'

'But--Well, never mind.'

'Yes, Swithin, I will tell you. There should be no secrets between us. He urges upon me the necessity of marrying, day after day.'

'For money and position, of course.'

'Yes. But I take no notice. I let him go on.'

'Really, this is sad!' said the young man. 'I must work harder than ever, or you will never be able to own me.'

'O yes, in good time!' she cheerfully replied.

'I shall be very glad to have you always near me. I felt the gloom of our position keenly when I was obliged to disappear that night, without

assuring you it was only I who stood there. Why were you so frightened at those old clothes I borrowed?'

'Don't ask,--don't ask!' she said, burying her face on his shoulder. 'I don't want to speak of that. There was something so ghastly and so uncanny in your putting on such garments that I wish you had been more thoughtful, and had left them alone.'

He assured her that he did not stop to consider whose they were. 'By the way, they must be sent back,' he said.

'No; I never wish to see them again! I cannot help feeling that your putting them on was ominous.'

'Nothing is ominous in serene philosophy,' he said, kissing her. 'Things are either causes, or they are not causes. When can you see me again?'

In such wise the hour passed away. The evening was typical of others which followed it at irregular intervals through the winter. And during the intenser months of the season frequent falls of snow lengthened, even more than other difficulties had done, the periods of isolation between the pair. Swithin adhered with all the more strictness to the letter of his promise not to intrude into the house, from his sense of her powerlessness to compel him to keep out should he choose to rebel. A student of the greatest forces in nature, he had, like many others of his sort, no personal force to speak of in a social point of view, mainly

because he took no interest in human ranks and formulas; and hence he was

as docile as a child in her hands wherever matters of that kind were concerned.

Her brother wintered at Welland; but whether because his experience of tropic climes had unfitted him for the brumal rigours of Britain, or for some other reason, he seldom showed himself out of doors, and Swithin caught but passing glimpses of him. Now and then Viviette's impulsive affection would overcome her sense of risk, and she would press Swithin to call on her at all costs. This he would by no means do. It was obvious to his more logical mind that the secrecy to which they had bound themselves must be kept in its fulness, or might as well be abandoned altogether.

He was now sadly exercised on the subject of his uncle's will. There had as yet been no pressing reasons for a full and candid reply to the solicitor who had communicated with him, owing to the fact that the payments were not to begin till Swithin was one-and-twenty; but time was going on, and something definite would have to be done soon. To own to his marriage and consequent disqualification for the bequest was easy in itself; but it involved telling at least one man what both Viviette and himself had great reluctance in telling anybody. Moreover he wished Viviette to know nothing of his loss in making her his wife. All he could think of doing for the present was to write a postponing letter to his uncle's lawyer, and wait events.

The one comfort of this dreary winter-time was his perception of a returning ability to work with the regularity and much of the spirit of earlier days.

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One bright night in April there was an eclipse of the moon, and Mr. Torkingham, by arrangement, brought to the observatory several labouring men and boys, to whom he had promised a sight of the phenomenon through the telescope. The coming confirmation, fixed for May, was again talked of; and St. Cleeve learnt from the parson that the Bishop had arranged to stay the night at the vicarage, and was to be invited to a grand luncheon at Welland House immediately after the ordinance.

This seemed like a going back into life again as regarded the mistress of that house; and St. Cleeve was a little surprised that, in his communications with Viviette, she had mentioned no such probability. The next day he walked round the mansion, wondering how in its present state any entertainment could be given therein.

He found that the shutters had been opened, which had restored an unexpected liveliness to the aspect of the windows. Two men were putting a chimney-pot on one of the chimney-stacks, and two more were scraping green mould from the front wall. He made no inquiries on that occasion.

Three days later he strolled thitherward again. Now a great cleaning of window-panes was going on, Hezzy Biles and Sammy Blore being the operators, for which purpose their services must have been borrowed from the neighbouring farmer. Hezzy dashed water at the glass with a force that threatened to break it in, the broad face of Sammy being discernible inside, smiling at the onset. In addition to these, Anthony Green and another were weeding the gravel walks, and putting fresh plants into the flower-beds. Neither of these reasonable operations was a great undertaking, singly looked at; but the life Viviette had latterly led and the mood in which she had hitherto regarded the premises, rendered it somewhat significant. Swithin, however, was rather curious than concerned at the proceedings, and returned to his tower with feelings of interest not entirely confined to the worlds overhead.

Lady Constantine may or may not have seen him from the house; but the same evening, which was fine and dry, while he was occupying himself in the observatory with cleaning the eye-pieces of the equatorial, skull-cap on head, observing-jacket on, and in other ways primed for sweeping, the customary stealthy step on the winding staircase brought her form in due course into the rays of the bull's-eye lantern. The meeting was all the more pleasant to him from being unexpected, and he at once lit up a larger lamp in honour of the occasion.

'It is but a hasty visit,' she said when, after putting up her mouth to be kissed, she had seated herself in the low chair used for observations, panting a little with the labour of ascent. 'But I hope to be able to

come more freely soon. My brother is still living on with me. Yes, he is going to stay until the confirmation is over. After the confirmation he will certainly leave. So good it is of you, dear, to please me by agreeing to the ceremony. The Bishop, you know, is going to lunch with us. It is a wonder he has promised to come, for he is a man averse to society, and mostly keeps entirely with the clergy on these confirmation tours, or circuits, or whatever they call them. But Mr. Torkingham's house is so very small, and mine is so close at hand, that this arrangement to relieve him of the fuss of one meal, at least, naturally suggested itself; and the Bishop has fallen in with it very readily. How are you getting on with your observations? Have you not wanted me dreadfully, to write down notes?'

'Well, I have been obliged to do without you, whether or no. See here,--how much I have done.' And he showed her a book ruled in columns, headed 'Object,' 'Right Ascension,' 'Declination,' 'Features,' 'Remarks,' and so on.

She looked over this and other things, but her mind speedily winged its way back to the confirmation. 'It is so new to me,' she said, 'to have persons coming to the house, that I feel rather anxious. I hope the luncheon will be a success.'

'You know the Bishop?' said Swithin.

'I have not seen him for many years. I knew him when I was quite a girl,

and he held the little living of Puddle-sub-Mixen, near us; but after that time, and ever since I have lived here, I have seen nothing of him. There has been no confirmation in this village, they say, for twenty years. The other bishop used to make the young men and women go to Warborne; he wouldn't take the trouble to come to such an out-of-the-way parish as ours.'

'This cleaning and preparation that I observe going on must be rather a tax upon you?'

'My brother Louis sees to it, and, what is more, bears the expense.'

'Your brother?' said Swithin, with surprise.

'Well, he insisted on doing so,' she replied, in a hesitating, despondent tone. 'He has been active in the whole matter, and was the first to suggest the invitation. I should not have thought of it.'

'Well, I will hold aloof till it is all over.'

'Thanks, dearest, for your considerateness. I wish it was not still advisable! But I shall see you on the day, and watch my own philosopher all through the service from the corner of my pew! . . . I hope you are well prepared for the rite, Swithin?' she added, turning tenderly to him. 'It would perhaps be advisable for you to give up this astronomy till the confirmation is over, in order to devote your attention exclusively to



that more serious matter.'

'More serious! Well, I will do the best I can. I am sorry to see that you are less interested in astronomy than you used to be, Viviette.'

'No; it is only that these preparations for the Bishop unsettle my mind from study. Now put on your other coat and hat, and come with me a little way.'

#### XXIV

The morning of the confirmation was come. It was mid-May time, bringing with it weather not, perhaps, quite so blooming as that assumed to be natural to the month by the joyous poets of three hundred years ago; but a very tolerable, well-wearing May, that the average rustic would willingly have compounded for in lieu of Mays occasionally fairer, but usually more foul.

Among the larger shrubs and flowers which composed the outworks of the Welland gardens, the lilac, the laburnum, and the guelder-rose hung out their respective colours of purple, yellow, and white; whilst within these, belted round from every disturbing gale, rose the columbine, the peony, the larkspur, and the Solomon's seal. The animate things that