

There was no doubt that either Tabitha or Viviette had been with Swithin in the cabin. He recapitulated every case that had occurred during his visit to Welland in which his sister's manner had been of a colour to justify the suspicion that it was she. There was that strange incident in the corridor, when she had screamed at what she described to be a shadowy resemblance to her late husband; how very improbable that this fancy should have been the only cause of her agitation! Then he had noticed, during Swithin's confirmation, a blush upon her cheek when he passed her on his way to the Bishop, and the fervour in her glance during the few moments of the imposition of hands. Then he suddenly recalled the night at the railway station, when the accident with the whip took place, and how, when he reached Welland House an hour later, he had found

no Viviette there. Running thus from incident to incident he increased his suspicions without being able to cull from the circumstances anything amounting to evidence; but evidence he now determined to acquire without saying a word to any one.

His plan was of a cruel kind: to set a trap into which the pair would blindly walk if any secret understanding existed between them of the nature he suspected.

XXX

Louis began his stratagem by calling at the tower one afternoon, as if on the impulse of the moment.

After a friendly chat with Swithin, whom he found there (having watched him enter), Louis invited the young man to dine the same evening at the House, that he might have an opportunity of showing him some interesting old scientific works in folio, which, according to Louis's account, he had stumbled on in the library. Louis set no great bait for St. Cleeve in this statement, for old science was not old art which, having perfected itself, has died and left its secret hidden in its remains. But Swithin was a responsive fellow, and readily agreed to come; being, moreover, always glad of a chance of meeting Viviette en famille. He hoped to tell her of a scheme that had lately suggested itself to him as likely to benefit them both: that he should go away for a while, and endeavour to raise sufficient funds to visit the great observatories of Europe, with an eye to a post in one of them. Hitherto the only bar to the plan had been the exceeding narrowness of his income, which, though sufficient for his present life, was absolutely inadequate to the requirements of a travelling astronomer.

Meanwhile Louis Glanville had returned to the House and told his sister in the most innocent manner that he had been in the company of St. Cleeve that afternoon, getting a few wrinkles on astronomy; that they had grown so friendly over the fascinating subject as to leave him no alternative but to invite St. Cleeve to dine at Welland the same evening, with a view

to certain researches in the library afterwards.

'I could quite make allowances for any youthful errors into which he may have been betrayed,' Louis continued sententiously, 'since, for a scientist, he is really admirable. No doubt the Bishop's caution will not be lost upon him; and as for his birth and connexions,--those he can't help.'

Lady Constantine showed such alacrity in adopting the idea of having Swithin to dinner, and she ignored his 'youthful errors' so completely, as almost to betray herself. In fulfilment of her promise to see him oftener she had been intending to run across to Swithin on that identical evening. Now the trouble would be saved in a very delightful way, by the exercise of a little hospitality which Viviette herself would not have dared to suggest.

Dinner-time came and with it Swithin, exhibiting rather a blushing and nervous manner that was, unfortunately, more likely to betray their cause than was Viviette's own more practised bearing. Throughout the meal Louis sat like a spider in the corner of his web, observing them narrowly, and at moments flinging out an artful thread here and there, with a view to their entanglement. But they underwent the ordeal marvellously well. Perhaps the actual tie between them, through being so much closer and of so much more practical a nature than even their critic supposed it, was in itself a protection against their exhibiting that ultra-reciprocity of manner which, if they had been merely lovers, might

have betrayed them.

After dinner the trio duly adjourned to the library as had been planned, and the volumes were brought forth by Louis with the zest of a bibliophile. Swithin had seen most of them before, and thought but little of them; but the pleasure of staying in the house made him welcome any reason for doing so, and he willingly looked at whatever was put before him, from Bertius's Ptolemy to Rees's Cyclopaedia.

The evening thus passed away, and it began to grow late. Swithin who, among other things, had planned to go to Greenwich next day to view the Royal Observatory, would every now and then start up and prepare to leave for home, when Glanville would unearth some other volume and so detain him yet another half-hour.

'By George!' he said, looking at the clock when Swithin was at last really about to depart. 'I didn't know it was so late. Why not stay here to-night, St. Cleeve? It is very dark, and the way to your place is an awkward cross-cut over the fields.'

'It would not inconvenience us at all, Mr. St. Cleeve, if you would care to stay,' said Lady Constantine.

'I am afraid--the fact is, I wanted to take an observation at twenty minutes past two,' began Swithin.

'Oh, now, never mind your observation,' said Louis. 'That's only an excuse. Do that to-morrow night. Now you will stay. It is settled. Viviette, say he must stay, and we'll have another hour of these charming intellectual researches.'

Viviette obeyed with delightful ease. 'Do stay, Mr St. Cleeve!' she said sweetly.

'Well, in truth I can do without the observation,' replied the young man, as he gave way. 'It is not of the greatest consequence.'

Thus it was arranged; but the researches among the tomes were not prolonged to the extent that Louis had suggested. In three-quarters of an hour from that time they had all retired to their respective rooms; Lady Constantine's being on one side of the west corridor, Swithin's opposite, and Louis's at the further end.

Had a person followed Louis when he withdrew, that watcher would have discovered, on peeping through the key-hole of his door, that he was engaged in one of the oddest of occupations for such a man,--sweeping down from the ceiling, by means of a walking-cane, a long cobweb which lingered on high in the corner. Keeping it stretched upon the cane he gently opened the door, and set the candle in such a position on the mat that the light shone down the corridor. Thus guided by its rays he passed out slipperless, till he reached the door of St. Cleeve's room, where he applied the dangling spider's thread in such a manner that it

stretched across like a tight-rope from jamb to jamb, barring, in its fragile way, entrance and egress. The operation completed he retired again, and, extinguishing his light, went through his bedroom window out upon the flat roof of the portico to which it gave access.

Here Louis made himself comfortable in his chair and smoking-cap, enjoying the fragrance of a cigar for something like half-an-hour. His position commanded a view of the two windows of Lady Constantine's room, and from these a dim light shone continuously. Having the window partly open at his back, and the door of his room also scarcely closed, his ear retained a fair command of any noises that might be made.

In due time faint movements became audible; whereupon, returning to his room, he re-entered the corridor and listened intently. All was silent again, and darkness reigned from end to end. Glanville, however, groped his way along the passage till he again reached Swithin's door, where he examined, by the light of a wax-match he had brought, the condition of the spider's thread. It was gone; somebody had carried it off bodily, as Samson carried off the pin and the web. In other words, a person had passed through the door.

Still holding the faint wax-light in his hand Louis turned to the door of Lady Constantine's chamber, where he observed first that, though it was pushed together so as to appear fastened to cursory view, the door was not really closed by about a quarter of an inch. He dropped his light and extinguished it with his foot. Listening, he heard a voice

within,--Viviette's voice, in a subdued murmur, though speaking earnestly.

Without any hesitation Louis then returned to Swithin's door, opened it, and walked in. The starlight from without was sufficient, now that his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, to reveal that the room was unoccupied, and that nothing therein had been disturbed.

With a heavy tread Louis came forth, walked loudly across the corridor, knocked at Lady Constantine's door, and called 'Viviette!'

She heard him instantly, replying 'Yes' in startled tones. Immediately afterwards she opened her door, and confronted him in her dressing-gown, with a light in her hand. 'What is the matter, Louis?' she said.

'I am greatly alarmed. Our visitor is missing.'

'Missing? What, Mr. St. Cleeve?'

'Yes. I was sitting up to finish a cigar, when I thought I heard a noise in this direction. On coming to his room I find he is not there.'

'Good Heaven! I wonder what has happened!' she exclaimed, in apparently intense alarm.

'I wonder,' said Glanville grimly.

'Suppose he is a somnambulist! If so, he may have gone out and broken his neck. I have never heard that he is one, but they say that sleeping in strange places disturbs the minds of people who are given to that sort of thing, and provokes them to it.'

'Unfortunately for your theory his bed has not been touched.'

'Oh, what then can it be?'

Her brother looked her full in the face. 'Viviette!' he said sternly.

She seemed puzzled. 'Well?' she replied, in simple tones.

'I heard voices in your room,' he continued.

'Voices?'

'A voice,--yours.'

'Yes, you may have done so. It was mine.'

'A listener is required for a speaker.'

'True, Louis.'



'Well, to whom were you speaking?'

'God.'

'Viviette! I am ashamed of you.'

'I was saying my prayers.'

'Prayers--to God! To St. Swithin, rather!'

'What do you mean, Louis?' she asked, flushing up warm, and drawing back from him. 'It was a form of prayer I use, particularly when I am in trouble. It was recommended to me by the Bishop, and Mr. Torkingham commends it very highly.'

'On your honour, if you have any,' he said bitterly, 'whom have you there in your room?'

'No human being.'

'Flatly, I don't believe you.'

She gave a dignified little bow, and, waving her hand into the apartment, said, 'Very well; then search and see.'

Louis entered, and glanced round the room, behind the curtains, under the

bed, out of the window--a view from which showed that escape thence would have been impossible,--everywhere, in short, capable or incapable of affording a retreat to humanity; but discovered nobody. All he observed was that a light stood on the low table by her bedside; that on the bed lay an open Prayer-Book, the counterpane being unpressed, except into a little pit beside the Prayer Book, apparently where her head had rested in kneeling.

'But where is St. Cleeve?' he said, turning in bewilderment from these evidences of innocent devotion.

'Where can he be?' she chimed in, with real distress. 'I should so much like to know. Look about for him. I am quite uneasy!'

'I will, on one condition: that you own that you love him.'

'Why should you force me to that?' she murmured. 'It would be no such wonder if I did.'

'Come, you do.'

'Well, I do.'

'Now I'll look for him.'

Louis took a light, and turned away, astonished that she had not

indignantly resented his intrusion and the nature of his questioning.

At this moment a slight noise was heard on the staircase, and they could see a figure rising step by step, and coming forward against the long lights of the staircase window. It was Swithin, in his ordinary dress, and carrying his boots in his hand. When he beheld them standing there so motionless, he looked rather disconcerted, but came on towards his room.

Lady Constantine was too agitated to speak, but Louis said, 'I am glad to see you again. Hearing a noise, a few minutes ago, I came out to learn what it could be. I found you absent, and we have been very much alarmed.'

'I am very sorry,' said Swithin, with contrition. 'I owe you a hundred apologies: but the truth is that on entering my bedroom I found the sky remarkably clear, and though I told you that the observation I was to make was of no great consequence, on thinking it over alone I felt it ought not to be allowed to pass; so I was tempted to run across to the observatory, and make it, as I had hoped, without disturbing anybody. If I had known that I should alarm you I would not have done it for the world.'

Swithin spoke very earnestly to Louis, and did not observe the tender reproach in Viviette's eyes when he showed by his tale his decided notion that the prime use of dark nights lay in their furtherance of practical

astronomy.

Everything being now satisfactorily explained the three retired to their several chambers, and Louis heard no more noises that night, or rather morning; his attempts to solve the mystery of Viviette's life here and her relations with St. Cleeve having thus far resulted chiefly in perplexity. True, an admission had been wrung from her; and even without such an admission it was clear that she had a tender feeling for Swithin. How to extinguish that romantic folly it now became his object to consider.

XXXI

Swithin's midnight excursion to the tower in the cause of science led him to oversleep himself, and when the brother and sister met at breakfast in the morning he did not appear.

'Don't disturb him,--don't disturb him,' said Louis laconically. 'Hullo, Viviette, what are you reading there that makes you flame up so?'

She was glancing over a letter that she had just opened, and at his words looked up with misgiving.