

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.

The incident of the previous night left her in great doubt as to what her bearing towards him ought to be. She had made no show of resenting his conduct at the time, from a momentary supposition that he must know all her secret; and afterwards, finding that he did not know it, it seemed too late to affect indignation at his suspicions. So she preserved a quiet neutrality. Even had she resolved on an artificial part she might have forgotten to play it at this instant, the letter being of a kind to banish previous considerations.

'It is a letter from Bishop Helmsdale,' she faltered.

'Well done! I hope for your sake it is an offer.'

'That's just what it is.'

'No,--surely?' said Louis, beginning a laugh of surprise.

'Yes,' she returned indifferently. 'You can read it, if you like.'

'I don't wish to pry into a communication of that sort.'

'Oh, you may read it,' she said, tossing the letter across to him.

Louis thereupon read as under:--

'THE PALACE, MELCHESTER,

June 28, 18--.

'MY DEAR LADY CONSTANTINE,--During the two or three weeks that have elapsed since I experienced the great pleasure of renewing my acquaintance with you, the varied agitation of my feelings has clearly proved that my only course is to address you by letter, and at once. Whether the subject of my communication be acceptable to you or not, I can at least assure you that to suppress it would be far less natural, and upon the whole less advisable, than to speak out frankly, even if afterwards I hold my peace for ever.

'The great change in my experience during the past year or two--the change, that is, which has resulted from my advancement to a bishopric--has frequently suggested to me, of late, that a discontinuance in my domestic life of the solitude of past years was a question which ought to be seriously contemplated. But whether I should ever have contemplated it without the great good fortune of my meeting with you is doubtful. However, the thing has been considered at last, and without more ado I candidly ask if you would be willing to give up your life at Welland, and relieve my household loneliness here by becoming my wife.

'I am far from desiring to force a hurried decision on your part, and will wait your good pleasure patiently, should you feel any uncertainty at the moment as to the step. I am quite disqualified, by habits and experience, for the delightful procedure of urging my suit

in the ardent terms which would be so appropriate towards such a lady, and so expressive of my inmost feeling. In truth, a prosy cleric of five-and-forty wants encouragement to make him eloquent. Of this, however, I can assure you: that if admiration, esteem, and devotion can compensate in any way for the lack of those qualities which might be found to burn with more outward brightness in a younger man, those it is in my power to bestow for the term of my earthly life. Your steady adherence to church principles and your interest in ecclesiastical polity (as was shown by your bright questioning on those subjects during our morning walk round your grounds) have indicated strongly to me the grace and appropriateness with which you would fill the position of a bishop's wife, and how greatly you would add to his reputation, should you be disposed to honour him with your hand. Formerly there have been times when I was of opinion--and you will rightly appreciate my candour in owning it--that a wife was an impediment to a bishop's due activities; but constant observation has convinced me that, far from this being the truth, a meet consort infuses life into episcopal influence and teaching.

'Should you reply in the affirmative I will at once come to see you, and with your permission will, among other things, show you a few plain, practical rules which I have interested myself in drawing up for our future guidance. Should you refuse to change your condition on my account, your decision will, as I need hardly say, be a great blow to me. In any event, I could not do less than I have done, after giving the subject my full consideration. Even if there be a slight

deficiency of warmth on your part, my earnest hope is that a mind comprehensive as yours will perceive the immense power for good that you might exercise in the position in which a union with me would place you, and allow that perception to weigh in determining your answer.

'I remain, my dear Lady Constantine, with the highest respect and affection,--Yours always,

'C. MELCHESTER.'

'Well, you will not have the foolhardiness to decline, now that the question has actually been popped, I should hope,' said Louis, when he had done reading.

'Certainly I shall,' she replied.

'You will really be such a flat, Viviette?'

'You speak without much compliment. I have not the least idea of accepting him.'

'Surely you will not let your infatuation for that young fellow carry you so far, after my acquainting you with the shady side of his character? You call yourself a religious woman, say your prayers out loud, follow up the revived methods in church practice, and what not; and yet you can

think with partiality of a person who, far from having any religion in him, breaks the most elementary commandments in the decalogue.'

'I cannot agree with you,' she said, turning her face askance, for she knew not how much of her brother's language was sincere, and how much assumed, the extent of his discoveries with regard to her secret ties being a mystery. At moments she was disposed to declare the whole truth, and have done with it. But she hesitated, and left the words unsaid; and Louis continued his breakfast in silence.

When he had finished, and she had eaten little or nothing, he asked once more, 'How do you intend to answer that letter? Here you are, the poorest woman in the county, abandoned by people who used to be glad to know you, and leading a life as dismal and dreary as a nun's, when an opportunity is offered you of leaping at once into a leading position in this part of England. Bishops are given to hospitality; you would be welcomed everywhere. In short, your answer must be yes.'

'And yet it will be no,' she said, in a low voice. She had at length learnt, from the tone of her brother's latter remarks, that at any rate he had no knowledge of her actual marriage, whatever indirect ties he might suspect her guilty of.

Louis could restrain himself no longer at her answer. 'Then conduct your affairs your own way. I know you to be leading a life that won't bear investigation, and I'm hanged if I'll stay here any longer!'

Saying which, Glanville jerked back his chair, and strode out of the room. In less than a quarter of an hour, and before she had moved a step from the table, she heard him leaving the house.

XXXII

What to do she could not tell. The step which Swithin had entreated her to take, objectionable and premature as it had seemed in a county aspect, would at all events have saved her from this dilemma. Had she allowed him to tell the Bishop his simple story in its fulness, who could say but that that divine might have generously bridled his own impulses, entered into the case with sympathy, and forwarded with zest their designs for the future, owing to his interest of old in Swithin's father, and in the naturally attractive features of the young man's career.

A puff of wind from the open window, wafting the Bishop's letter to the floor, aroused her from her reverie. With a sigh she stooped and picked it up, glanced at it again; then arose, and with the deliberateness of inevitable action wrote her reply:--

'WELLAND HOUSE, June 29, 18--.