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Next morning Viviette received a visit from Mr. Cecil himself. He informed her that the box spoken of by the servant had arrived quite unexpectedly just after the departure of his clerk on the previous evening. There had not been sufficient time for him to thoroughly examine it as yet, but he had seen enough to enable him to state that it contained letters, dated memoranda in Sir Blount's handwriting, notes referring to events which had happened later than his supposed death, and other irrefragable proofs that the account in the newspapers was correct as to the main fact--the comparatively recent date of Sir Blount's decease.

She looked up, and spoke with the irresponsible helplessness of a child.

'On reviewing the circumstances, I cannot think how I could have allowed myself to believe the first tidings!' she said.

'Everybody else believed them, and why should you not have done so?' said the lawyer.

'How came the will to be permitted to be proved, as there could, after all, have been no complete evidence?' she asked. 'If I had been the executrix I would not have attempted it! As I was not, I know very little about how the business was pushed through. In a very unseemly

way, I think.'

'Well, no,' said Mr. Cecil, feeling himself morally called upon to defend legal procedure from such imputations. 'It was done in the usual way in all cases where the proof of death is only presumptive. The evidence, such as it was, was laid before the court by the applicants, your husband's cousins; and the servants who had been with him deposed to his death with a particularity that was deemed sufficient. Their error was, not that somebody died--for somebody did die at the time affirmed--but that they mistook one person for another; the person who died being not Sir Blount Constantine. The court was of opinion that the evidence led up to a reasonable inference that the deceased was actually Sir Blount, and probate was granted on the strength of it. As there was a doubt about the exact day of the month, the applicants were allowed to swear that he died on or after the date last given of his existence--which, in spite of their error then, has really come true, now, of course.'

'They little think what they have done to me by being so ready to swear!' she murmured.

Mr. Cecil, supposing her to allude only to the pecuniary straits in which she had been prematurely placed by the will taking effect a year before its due time, said, 'True. It has been to your ladyship's loss, and to their gain. But they will make ample restitution, no doubt: and all will be wound up satisfactorily.'

Lady Constantine was far from explaining that this was not her meaning; and, after some further conversation of a purely technical nature, Mr. Cecil left her presence.

When she was again unencumbered with the necessity of exhibiting a proper bearing, the sense that she had greatly suffered in pocket by the undue haste of the executors weighed upon her mind with a pressure quite inappreciable beside the greater gravity of her personal position. What was her position as legatee to her situation as a woman? Her face crimsoned with a flush which she was almost ashamed to show to the daylight, as she hastily penned the following note to Swithin at Greenwich--certainly one of the most informal documents she had ever written.

'WELLAND, Thursday.

'O Swithin, my dear Swithin, what I have to tell you is so sad and so humiliating that I can hardly write it--and yet I must. Though we are dearer to each other than all the world besides, and as firmly united as if we were one, I am not legally your wife! Sir Blount did not die till some time after we in England supposed. The service must be repeated instantly. I have not been able to sleep all night. I feel so frightened and ashamed that I can scarcely arrange my thoughts. The newspapers sent with this will explain, if you have not seen particulars. Do come to me as soon as you can, that we may consult on what to do. Burn this at once.

'Your VIVIETTE.'

When the note was despatched she remembered that there was another hardly less important question to be answered--the proposal of the Bishop for her hand. His communication had sunk into nothingness beside the momentous news that had so greatly distressed her. The two replies lay before her--the one she had first written, simply declining to become Dr. Helmsdale's wife, without giving reasons; the second, which she had elaborated with so much care on the previous day, relating in confidential detail the history of her love for Swithin, their secret marriage, and their hopes for the future; asking his advice on what their procedure should be to escape the strictures of a censorious world. It was the letter she had barely finished writing when Mr. Cecil's clerk announced news tantamount to a declaration that she was no wife at all.

This epistle she now destroyed--and with the less reluctance in knowing that Swithin had been somewhat averse to the confession as soon as he found that Bishop Helmsdale was also a victim to tender sentiment concerning her. The first, in which, at the time of writing, the suppressio veri was too strong for her conscience, had now become an honest letter, and sadly folding it she sent the missive on its way.

The sense of her undefinable position kept her from much repose on the second night also; but the following morning brought an unexpected letter

from Swithin, written about the same hour as hers to him, and it comforted her much.

He had seen the account in the papers almost as soon as it had come to her knowledge, and sent this line to reassure her in the perturbation she must naturally feel. She was not to be alarmed at all. They two were husband and wife in moral intent and antecedent belief, and the legal flaw which accident had so curiously uncovered could be mended in half-an-hour. He would return on Saturday night at latest, but as the hour would probably be far advanced, he would ask her to meet him by slipping out of the house to the tower any time during service on Sunday morning, when there would be few persons about likely to observe them. Meanwhile he might provisionally state that their best course in the emergency would be, instead of confessing to anybody that there had already been a solemnization of marriage between them, to arrange their re-marriage in as open a manner as possible--as if it were the just-reached climax of a sudden affection, instead of a harking back to an old departure--prefacing it by a public announcement in the usual way.

This plan of approaching their second union with all the show and circumstance of a new thing, recommended itself to her strongly, but for one objection--that by such a course the wedding could not, without appearing like an act of unseemly haste, take place so quickly as she desired for her own moral satisfaction. It might take place somewhat early, say in the course of a month or two, without bringing down upon her the charge of levity; for Sir Blount, a notoriously unkind husband,

had been out of her sight four years, and in his grave nearly one. But what she naturally desired was that there should be no more delay than was positively necessary for obtaining a new license--two or three days at longest; and in view of this celerity it was next to impossible to make due preparation for a wedding of ordinary publicity, performed in her own church, from her own house, with a feast and amusements for the villagers, a tea for the school children, a bonfire, and other of those proclamatory accessories which, by meeting wonder half-way, deprive it of much of its intensity. It must be admitted, too, that she even now shrank from the shock of surprise that would inevitably be caused by her openly taking for husband such a mere youth of no position as Swithin still appeared, notwithstanding that in years he was by this time within a trifle of one-and-twenty.

The straightforward course had, nevertheless, so much to recommend it, so well avoided the disadvantage of future revelation which a private repetition of the ceremony would entail, that assuming she could depend upon Swithin, as she knew she could do, good sense counselled its serious consideration.

She became more composed at her queer situation: hour after hour passed, and the first spasmodic impulse of womanly decorum--not to let the sun go down upon her present improper state--was quite controllable. She could regard the strange contingency that had arisen with something like philosophy. The day slipped by: she thought of the awkwardness of the accident rather than of its humiliation; and, loving Swithin now in a far

calmer spirit than at that past date when they had rushed into each other's arms and vowed to be one for the first time, she ever and anon caught herself reflecting, 'Were it not that for my honour's sake I must re-marry him, I should perhaps be a nobler woman in not allowing him to encumber his bright future by a union with me at all.'

This thought, at first artificially raised, as little more than a mental exercise, became by stages a genuine conviction; and while her heart enforced, her reason regretted the necessity of abstaining from self-sacrifice--the being obliged, despite his curious escape from the first attempt, to lime Swithin's young wings again solely for her credit's sake.

However, the deed had to be done; Swithin was to be made legally hers. Selfishness in a conjuncture of this sort was excusable, and even obligatory. Taking brighter views, she hoped that upon the whole this yoking of the young fellow with her, a portionless woman and his senior, would not greatly endanger his career. In such a mood night overtook her, and she went to bed conjecturing that Swithin had by this time arrived in the parish, was perhaps even at that moment passing homeward beneath her walls, and that in less than twelve hours she would have met him, have ventilated the secret which oppressed her, and have satisfactorily arranged with him the details of their reunion.