

Sunday morning came, and complicated her previous emotions by bringing a new and unexpected shock to mingle with them. The postman had delivered among other things an illustrated newspaper, sent by a hand she did not recognize; and on opening the cover the sheet that met her eyes filled her with a horror which she could not express. The print was one which drew largely on its imagination for its engravings, and it already contained an illustration of the death of Sir Blount Constantine. In this work of art he was represented as standing with his pistol to his mouth, his brains being in process of flying up to the roof of his chamber, and his native princess rushing terror-stricken away to a remote position in the thicket of palms which neighboured the dwelling.

The crude realism of the picture, possibly harmless enough in its effect upon others, overpowered and sickened her. By a curious fascination she would look at it again and again, till every line of the engraver's performance seemed really a transcript from what had happened before his eyes. With such details fresh in her thoughts she was going out of the door to make arrangements for confirming, by repetition, her marriage with another. No interval was available for serious reflection on the tragedy, or for allowing the softening effects of time to operate in her mind. It was as though her first husband had died that moment, and she was keeping an appointment with another in the presence of his corpse.

So revived was the actuality of Sir Blount's recent life and death by this incident, that the distress of her personal relations with Swithin was the single force in the world which could have coerced her into abandoning to him the interval she would fain have set apart for getting over these new and painful impressions. Self-pity for ill-usage afforded her good reasons for ceasing to love Sir Blount; but he was yet too closely intertwined with her past life to be destructible on the instant as a memory.

But there was no choice of occasions for her now, and she steadily waited for the church bells to cease chiming. At last all was silent; the surrounding cottagers had gathered themselves within the walls of the adjacent building. Tabitha Lark's first voluntary then droned from the tower window, and Lady Constantine left the garden in which she had been loitering, and went towards Rings-Hill Speer.

The sense of her situation obscured the morning prospect. The country was unusually silent under the intensifying sun, the songless season of birds having just set in. Choosing her path amid the efts that were basking upon the outer slopes of the plantation she wound her way up the tree-shrouded camp to the wooden cabin in the centre.

The door was ajar, but on entering she found the place empty. The tower door was also partly open; and listening at the foot of the stairs she heard Swithin above, shifting the telescope and wheeling round the

rumbling dome, apparently in preparation for the next nocturnal reconnoitre. There was no doubt that he would descend in a minute or two to look for her, and not wishing to interrupt him till he was ready she re-entered the cabin, where she patiently seated herself among the books and papers that lay scattered about.

She did as she had often done before when waiting there for him; that is, she occupied her moments in turning over the papers and examining the progress of his labours. The notes were mostly astronomical, of course, and she had managed to keep sufficiently abreast of him to catch the meaning of a good many of these. The litter on the table, however, was somewhat more marked this morning than usual, as if it had been hurriedly overhauled. Among the rest of the sheets lay an open note, and, in the entire confidence that existed between them, she glanced over and read it as a matter of course.

It was a most business-like communication, and beyond the address and date contained only the following words:--

'DEAR SIR,--We beg leave to draw your attention to a letter we addressed to you on the 26th ult., to which we have not yet been favoured with a reply. As the time for payment of the first moiety of the six hundred pounds per annum settled on you by your late uncle is now at hand, we should be obliged by your giving directions as to where and in what manner the money is to be handed over to you, and shall also be glad to receive any other definite instructions from you

with regard to the future.--We are, dear Sir, yours faithfully,

HANNER AND RAWLES.'

'SWITHIN ST. CLEEVE, Esq.'

An income of six hundred a year for Swithin, whom she had hitherto understood to be possessed of an annuity of eighty pounds at the outside, with no prospect of increasing the sum but by hard work! What could this communication mean? He whose custom and delight it was to tell her all his heart, had breathed not a syllable of this matter to her, though it met the very difficulty towards which their discussions invariably tended--how to secure for him a competency that should enable him to establish his pursuits on a wider basis, and throw himself into more direct communion with the scientific world. Quite bewildered by the lack of any explanation she rose from her seat, and with the note in her hand ascended the winding tower-steps.

Reaching the upper aperture she perceived him under the dome, moving musingly about as if he had never been absent an hour, his light hair frilling out from under the edge of his velvet skull-cap as it was always wont to do. No question of marriage seemed to be disturbing the mind of this juvenile husband of hers. The primum mobile of his gravitation was apparently the equatorial telescope which she had given him, and which he was carefully adjusting by means of screws and clamps. Hearing her movements he turned his head.

'O here you are, my dear Viviette! I was just beginning to expect you,' he exclaimed, coming forward. 'I ought to have been looking out for you, but I have found a little defect here in the instrument, and I wanted to set it right before evening comes on. As a rule it is not a good thing to tinker your glasses; but I have found that the diffraction-rings are not perfect circles. I learnt at Greenwich how to correct them--so kind they have been to me there!--and so I have been loosening the screws and gently shifting the glass, till I think that I have at last made the illumination equal all round. I have so much to tell you about my visit; one thing is, that the astronomical world is getting quite excited about the coming Transit of Venus. There is to be a regular expedition fitted out. How I should like to join it!'

He spoke enthusiastically, and with eyes sparkling at the mental image of the said expedition; and as it was rather gloomy in the dome he rolled it round on its axis, till the shuttered slit for the telescope directly faced the morning sun, which thereupon flooded the concave interior, touching the bright metal-work of the equatorial, and lighting up her pale, troubled face.

'But Swithin!' she faltered; 'my letter to you--our marriage!'

'O yes, this marriage question,' he added. 'I had not forgotten it, dear Viviette--or at least only for a few minutes.'

'Can you forget it, Swithin, for a moment? O how can you!' she said reproachfully. 'It is such a distressing thing. It drives away all my rest!'

'Forgotten is not the word I should have used,' he apologized.

'Temporarily dismissed it from my mind, is all I meant. The simple fact is, that the vastness of the field of astronomy reduces every terrestrial thing to atomic dimensions. Do not trouble, dearest. The remedy is quite easy, as I stated in my letter. We can now be married in a prosy public way. Yes, early or late--next week, next month, six months hence--just as you choose. Say the word when, and I will obey.'

The absence of all anxiety or consternation from his face contrasted strangely with hers, which at last he saw, and, looking at the writing she held, inquired--

'But what paper have you in your hand?'

'A letter which to me is actually inexplicable,' said she, her curiosity returning to the letter, and overriding for the instant her immediate concerns. 'What does this income of six hundred a year mean? Why have you never told me about it, dear Swithin? or does it not refer to you?'

He looked at the note, flushed slightly, and was absolutely unable to begin his reply at once.

'I did not mean you to see that, Viviette,' he murmured.

'Why not?'

'I thought you had better not, as it does not concern me further now. The solicitors are labouring under a mistake in supposing that it does. I have to write at once and inform them that the annuity is not mine to receive.'

'What a strange mystery in your life!' she said, forcing a perplexed smile. 'Something to balance the tragedy in mine. I am absolutely in the dark as to your past history, it seems. And yet I had thought you told me everything.'

'I could not tell you that, Viviette, because it would have endangered our relations--though not in the way you may suppose. You would have reproved me. You, who are so generous and noble, would have forbidden me to do what I did; and I was determined not to be forbidden.'

'To do what?'

'To marry you.'

'Why should I have forbidden?'

'Must I tell--what I would not?' he said, placing his hands upon her arms, and looking somewhat sadly at her. 'Well, perhaps as it has come to this you ought to know all, since it can make no possible difference to my intentions now. We are one for ever--legal blunders notwithstanding; for happily they are quickly reparable--and this question of a devise from my uncle Jocelyn only concerned me when I was a single man.'

Thereupon, with obviously no consideration of the possibilities that were reopened of the nullity of their marriage contract, he related in detail, and not without misgiving for having concealed them so long, the events that had occurred on the morning of their wedding-day; how he had met the postman on his way to Warborne after dressing in the cabin, and how he had received from him the letter his dead uncle had confided to his family lawyers, informing him of the annuity, and of the important request attached--that he should remain unmarried until his five-and-twentieth year; how in comparison with the possession of her dear self he had reckoned the income as nought, abandoned all idea of it there and then, and had come on to the wedding as if nothing had happened to interrupt for a moment the working out of their plan; how he had scarcely thought with any closeness of the circumstances of the case since, until reminded of them by this note she had seen, and a previous one of a like sort received from the same solicitors.

'O Swithin! Swithin!' she cried, bursting into tears as she realized it all, and sinking on the observing-chair; 'I have ruined you! yes, I have



ruined you!

The young man was dismayed by her unexpected grief, and endeavoured to soothe her; but she seemed touched by a poignant remorse which would not be comforted.

'And now,' she continued, as soon as she could speak, 'when you are once more free, and in a position--actually in a position to claim the annuity that would be the making of you, I am compelled to come to you, and beseech you to undo yourself again, merely to save me!'

'Not to save you, Viviette, but to bless me. You do not ask me to re-marry; it is not a question of alternatives at all; it is my straight course. I do not dream of doing otherwise. I should be wretched if you thought for one moment I could entertain the idea of doing otherwise.'

But the more he said the worse he made the matter. It was a state of affairs that would not bear discussion at all, and the unsophisticated view he took of his course seemed to increase her responsibility.

'Why did your uncle attach such a cruel condition to his bounty?' she cried bitterly. 'O, he little thinks how hard he hits me from the grave--me, who have never done him wrong; and you, too! Swithin, are you sure that he makes that condition indispensable? Perhaps he meant that you should not marry beneath you; perhaps he did not mean to object in such a case as your marrying (forgive me for saying it) a little above

you.'

'There is no doubt that he did not contemplate a case which has led to such happiness as this has done,' the youth murmured with hesitation; for though he scarcely remembered a word of his uncle's letter of advice, he had a dim apprehension that it was couched in terms alluding specifically to Lady Constantine.

'Are you sure you cannot retain the money, and be my lawful husband too?' she asked piteously. 'O, what a wrong I am doing you! I did not dream that it could be as bad as this. I knew I was wasting your time by letting you love me, and hampering your projects; but I thought there were compensating advantages. This wrecking of your future at my hands I did not contemplate. You are sure there is no escape? Have you his letter with the conditions, or the will? Let me see the letter in which he expresses his wishes.'

'I assure you it is all as I say,' he pensively returned. 'Even if I were not legally bound by the conditions I should be morally.'

'But how does he put it? How does he justify himself in making such a harsh restriction? Do let me see the letter, Swithin. I shall think it a want of confidence if you do not. I may discover some way out of the difficulty if you let me look at the papers. Eccentric wills can be evaded in all sorts of ways.'

Still he hesitated. 'I would rather you did not see the papers,' he said.

But she persisted as only a fond woman can. Her conviction was that she who, as a woman many years his senior, should have shown her love for him

by guiding him straight into the paths he aimed at, had blocked his attempted career for her own happiness. This made her more intent than ever to find out a device by which, while she still retained him, he might also retain the life-interest under his uncle's will.

Her entreaties were at length too potent for his resistance. Accompanying her downstairs to the cabin, he opened the desk from which the other papers had been taken, and against his better judgment handed her the ominous communication of Jocelyn St. Cleeve which lay in the envelope just as it had been received three-quarters of a year earlier.

'Don't read it now,' he said. 'Don't spoil our meeting by entering into a subject which is virtually past and done with. Take it with you, and look it over at your leisure--merely as an old curiosity, remember, and not as a still operative document. I have almost forgotten what the contents are, beyond the general advice and stipulation that I was to remain a bachelor.'

'At any rate,' she rejoined, 'do not reply to the note I have seen from the solicitors till I have read this also.'

He promised. 'But now about our public wedding,' he said. 'Like certain royal personages, we shall have had the religious rite and the civil contract performed on independent occasions. Will you fix the day? When is it to be? and shall it take place at a registrar's office, since there is no necessity for having the sacred part over again?'

'I'll think,' replied she. 'I'll think it over.'

'And let me know as soon as you can how you decide to proceed.'

'I will write to-morrow, or come. I do not know what to say now. I cannot forget how I am wronging you. This is almost more than I can bear!'

To divert her mind he began talking about Greenwich Observatory, and the great instruments therein, and how he had been received by the astronomers, and the details of the expedition to observe the Transit of Venus, together with many other subjects of the sort, to which she had not power to lend her attention.

'I must reach home before the people are out of church,' she at length said wearily. 'I wish nobody to know I have been out this morning.' And forbidding Swithin to cross into the open in her company she left him on the edge of the isolated plantation, which had latterly known her tread so well.