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Lady Constantine crossed the field and the park beyond, and found on passing the church that the congregation was still within. There was no hurry for getting indoors, the open windows enabling her to hear that Mr. Torkingham had only just given out his text. So instead of entering the house she went through the garden-door to the old bowling-green, and sat down in the arbour that Louis had occupied when he overheard the interview between Swithin and the Bishop. Not until then did she find courage to draw out the letter and papers relating to the bequest, which Swithin in a critical moment had handed to her.

Had he been ever so little older he would not have placed that unconsidered confidence in Viviette which had led him to give way to her curiosity. But the influence over him which eight or nine outnumbering years lent her was immensely increased by her higher position and wider experiences, and he had yielded the point, as he yielded all social points; while the same conditions exempted him from any deep consciousness that it was his duty to protect her even from herself.

The preamble of Dr. St. Cleeve's letter, in which he referred to his pleasure at hearing of the young man's promise as an astronomer,

disturbed her not at all--indeed, somewhat prepossessed her in favour of the old gentleman who had written it. The first item of what he called 'unfavourable news,' namely, the allusion to the inadequacy of Swithin's income to the wants of a scientific man, whose lines of work were not calculated to produce pecuniary emolument for many years, deepened the cast of her face to concern. She reached the second item of the so-called unfavourable news; and her face flushed as she read how the doctor had learnt 'that there was something in your path worse than narrow means, and that something is a woman.'

'To save you, if possible, from ruin on these heads,' she read on, 'I take the preventive measures entailed below.'

And then followed the announcement of the 600 pounds a year settled on the youth for life, on the single condition that he remained unmarried till the age of twenty-five--just as Swithin had explained to her. She next learnt that the bequest was for a definite object--that he might have resources sufficient to enable him to travel in an inexpensive way, and begin a study of the southern constellations, which, according to the shrewd old man's judgment, were a mine not so thoroughly worked as the northern, and therefore to be recommended. This was followed by some sentences which hit her in the face like a switch:--

'The only other preventive step in my power is that of exhortation. . . . Swithin St. Cleeve, don't make a fool of yourself, as your father did. If your studies are to be worth anything, believe me they must be carried on

without the help of a woman. Avoid her, and every one of the sex, if you mean to achieve any worthy thing. Eschew all of that sort for many a year yet. Moreover, I say, the lady of your acquaintance avoid in particular. . . . She has, in addition to her original disqualification as a companion for you (that is, that of sex), these two special drawbacks: she is much older than yourself--'

Lady Constantine's indignant flush forsook her, and pale despair succeeded in its stead. Alas, it was true. Handsome, and in her prime, she might be; but she was too old for Swithin!

'And she is so impoverished. . . . Beyond this, frankly, I don't think well of her. I don't think well of any woman who dotes upon a man younger than herself. . . . To care to be the first fancy of a young fellow like you shows no great common sense in her. If she were worth her salt she would have too much pride to be intimate with a youth in your unassured position, to say no more.' (Viviette's face by this time tingled hot again.) 'She is old enough to know that a liaison with her may, and almost certainly would, be your ruin; and, on the other hand, that a marriage would be preposterous--unless she is a complete fool; and in that case there is even more reason for avoiding her than if she were in her few senses.

'A woman of honourable feeling, nephew, would be careful to do nothing to hinder you in your career, as this putting of herself in your way most certainly will. Yet I hear that she professes a great anxiety on this

same future of yours as a physicist. The best way in which she can show the reality of her anxiety is by leaving you to yourself.'

Leaving him to himself! She paled again, as if chilled by a conviction that in this the old man was right.

'She'll blab your most secret plans and theories to every one of her acquaintance, and make you appear ridiculous by announcing them before they are matured. If you attempt to study with a woman, you'll be ruled by her to entertain fancies instead of theories, air-castles instead of intentions, qualms instead of opinions, sickly prepossessions instead of reasoned conclusions. . . .

'An experienced woman waking a young man's passions just at a moment when

he is endeavouring to shine intellectually, is doing little less than committing a crime.'

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Thus much the letter; and it was enough for her, indeed. The flushes of indignation which had passed over her, as she gathered this man's opinion of herself, combined with flushes of grief and shame when she considered that Swithin--her dear Swithin--was perfectly acquainted with this cynical view of her nature; that, reject it as he might, and as he unquestionably did, such thoughts of her had been implanted in him, and

lay in him. Stifled as they were, they lay in him like seeds too deep for germination, which accident might some day bring near the surface and aerate into life.

The humiliation of such a possibility was almost too much to endure; the mortification--she had known nothing like it till now. But this was not all. There succeeded a feeling in comparison with which resentment and mortification were happy moods--a miserable conviction that this old man who spoke from the grave was not altogether wrong in his speaking; that he was only half wrong; that he was, perhaps, virtually right. Only those persons who are by nature affected with that ready esteem for others' positions which induces an undervaluing of their own, fully experience the deep smart of such convictions against self--the wish for annihilation that is engendered in the moment of despair, at feeling that at length we, our best and firmest friend, cease to believe in our cause.

Viviette could hear the people coming out of church on the other side of the garden wall. Their footsteps and their cheerful voices died away; the bell rang for lunch; and she went in. But her life during that morning and afternoon was wholly introspective. Knowing the full circumstances of his situation as she knew them now--as she had never before known them--ought she to make herself the legal wife of Swithin St. Cleve, and so secure her own honour at any price to him? such was the formidable question which Lady Constantine propounded to her startled understanding. As a subjectively honest woman alone, beginning her charity at home, there was no doubt that she ought. Save Thyself was

sound Old Testament doctrine, and not altogether discountenanced in the New. But was there a line of conduct which transcended mere self-preservation? and would it not be an excellent thing to put it in practice now?

That she had wronged St. Cleeve by marrying him--that she would wrong him

infinitely more by completing the marriage--there was, in her opinion, no doubt. She in her experience had sought out him in his inexperience, and had led him like a child. She remembered--as if it had been her fault, though it was in fact only her misfortune--that she had been the one to go for the license and take up residence in the parish in which they were wedded. He was now just one-and-twenty. Without her, he had all the world before him, six hundred a year, and leave to cut as straight a road to fame as he should choose: with her, this story was negatived.

No money from his uncle; no power of advancement; but a bondage with a woman whose disparity of years, though immaterial just now, would operate in the future as a wet blanket upon his social ambitions; and that content with life as it was which she had noticed more than once in him latterly, a content imperilling his scientific spirit by abstracting his zeal for progress.

It was impossible, in short, to blind herself to the inference that marriage with her had not benefited him. Matters might improve in the future; but to take upon herself the whole liability of Swithin's life,

as she would do by depriving him of the help his uncle had offered, was a fearful responsibility. How could she, an unendowed woman, replace such assistance? His recent visit to Greenwich, which had momentarily revived that zest for his pursuit that was now less constant than heretofore, should by rights be supplemented by other such expeditions. It would be true benevolence not to deprive him of means to continue them, so as to keep his ardour alive, regardless of the cost to herself.

It could be done. By the extraordinary favour of a unique accident she had now an opportunity of redeeming Swithin's seriously compromised future, and restoring him to a state no worse than his first. His annuity could be enjoyed by him, his travels undertaken, his studies pursued, his high vocation initiated, by one little sacrifice--that of herself. She only had to refuse to legalize their marriage, to part from him for ever, and all would be well with him thenceforward. The pain to him would after all be but slight, whatever it might be to his wretched Viviette.

The ineptness of retaining him at her side lay not only in the fact itself of injury to him, but in the likelihood of his living to see it as such, and reproaching her for selfishness in not letting him go in this unprecedented opportunity for correcting a move proved to be false. He wished to examine the southern heavens--perhaps his uncle's letter was the father of the wish--and there was no telling what good might not result to mankind at large from his exploits there. Why should she, to save her narrow honour, waste the wide promise of his ability?

That in immolating herself by refusing him, and leaving him free to work wonders for the good of his fellow-creatures, she would in all probability add to the sum of human felicity, consoled her by its breadth as an idea even while it tortured her by making herself the scapegoat or single unit on whom the evil would fall. Ought a possibly large number, Swithin included, to remain unbenefited because the one individual to whom his release would be an injury chanced to be herself? Love between man and woman, which in Homer, Moses, and other early exhibitors of life, is mere desire, had for centuries past so far broadened as to include sympathy and friendship; surely it should in this advanced stage of the world include benevolence also. If so, it was her duty to set her young man free.

Thus she laboured, with a generosity more worthy even than its object, to sink her love for her own decorum in devotion to the world in general, and to Swithin in particular. To counsel her activities by her understanding, rather than by her emotions as usual, was hard work for a tender woman; but she strove hard, and made advance. The self-centred attitude natural to one in her situation was becoming displaced by the sympathetic attitude, which, though it had to be artificially fostered at first, gave her, by degrees, a certain sweet sense that she was rising above self-love. That maternal element which had from time to time evinced itself in her affection for the youth, and was imparted by her superior ripeness in experience and years, appeared now again, as she drew nearer the resolve not to secure propriety in her own social

condition at the expense of this youth's earthly utility.

Unexpectedly grand fruits are sometimes forced forth by harsh pruning. The illiberal letter of Swithin's uncle was suggesting to Lady Constantine an altruism whose thoroughness would probably have amazed that queer old gentleman into a withdrawal of the conditions that had induced it. To love St. Cleeve so far better than herself as this was to surpass the love of women as conventionally understood, and as mostly existing.

Before, however, clinching her decision by any definite step she worried her little brain by devising every kind of ingenious scheme, in the hope of lighting on one that might show her how that decision could be avoided with the same good result. But to secure for him the advantages offered, and to retain him likewise; reflection only showed it to be impossible.

Yet to let him go for ever was more than she could endure, and at length she jumped at an idea which promised some sort of improvement on that design. She would propose that reunion should not be entirely abandoned, but simply postponed--namely, till after his twenty-fifth birthday--when he might be her husband without, at any rate, the loss to him of the income. By this time he would approximate to a man's full judgment, and that painful aspect of her as one who had deluded his raw immaturity would have passed for ever.

The plan somewhat appeased her disquieted honour. To let a marriage sink

into abeyance for four or five years was not to nullify it; and though she would leave it to him to move its substantiation at the end of that time, without present stipulations, she had not much doubt upon the issue.

The clock struck five. This silent mental debate had occupied her whole afternoon. Perhaps it would not have ended now but for an unexpected incident--the entry of her brother Louis. He came into the room where she was sitting, or rather writhing, and after a few words to explain how he had got there and about the mistake in the date of Sir Blount's death, he walked up close to her. His next remarks were apologetic in form, but in essence they were bitterness itself.

'Viviette,' he said, 'I am sorry for my hasty words to you when I last left this house. I readily withdraw them. My suspicions took a wrong direction. I think now that I know the truth. You have been even madder than I supposed!'

'In what way?' she asked distantly.

'I lately thought that unhappy young man was only your too-favoured lover.'

'You thought wrong: he is not.'

'He is not--I believe you--for he is more. I now am persuaded that he is

your lawful husband. Can you deny it!

'I can.'

'On your sacred word!'

'On my sacred word he is not that either.'

'Thank heaven for that assurance!' said Louis, exhaling a breath of relief. 'I was not so positive as I pretended to be--but I wanted to know the truth of this mystery. Since you are not fettered to him in that way I care nothing.'

Louis turned away; and that afforded her an opportunity for leaving the room. Those few words were the last grains that had turned the balance, and settled her doom.

She would let Swithin go. All the voices in her world seemed to clamour for that consummation. The morning's mortification, the afternoon's benevolence, and the evening's instincts of evasion had joined to carry the point.

Accordingly she sat down, and wrote to Swithin a summary of the thoughts above detailed.

'We shall separate,' she concluded. 'You to obey your uncle's orders and

explore the southern skies; I to wait as one who can implicitly trust you. Do not see me again till the years have expired. You will find me still the same. I am your wife through all time; the letter of the law is not needed to reassert it at present; while the absence of the letter secures your fortune.'

Nothing can express what it cost Lady Constantine to marshal her arguments; but she did it, and vanquished self-comfort by a sense of the general expediency. It may unhesitatingly be affirmed that the only ignoble reason which might have dictated such a step was non-existent; that is to say, a serious decline in her affection. Tenderly she had loved the youth at first, and tenderly she loved him now, as time and her after-conduct proved.

Women the most delicate get used to strange moral situations. Eve probably regained her normal sweet composure about a week after the Fall. On first learning of her anomalous position Lady Constantine had blushed hot, and her pure instincts had prompted her to legalize her marriage without a moment's delay. Heaven and earth were to be moved at once to effect it. Day after day had passed; her union had remained unsecured, and the idea of its nullity had gradually ceased to be strange to her; till it became of little account beside her bold resolve for the young man's sake.