XXXVIII

Viviette's determination to hamper Swithin no longer had led her, as has been shown, to balk any weak impulse to entreat his return, by forbidding him to furnish her with his foreign address. His ready disposition, his fear that there might be other reasons behind, made him obey her only too literally. Thus, to her terror and dismay, she had placed a gratuitous difficulty in the way of her present endeavour.

She was ready before Green, and urged on that factotum so wildly as to leave him no time to change his corduroys and 'skitty-boots' in which he had been gardening; he therefore turned himself into a coachman as far down as his waist merely--clapping on his proper coat, hat, and waistcoat, and wrapping a rug over his horticultural half below. In this compromise he appeared at the door, mounted, and reins in hand.

Seeing how sad and determined Viviette was, Louis pitied her so far as to put nothing in the way of her starting, though he forbore to help her. He thought her conduct sentimental foolery, the outcome of mistaken pity and 'such a kind of gain-giving as would trouble a woman;' and he decided that it would be better to let this mood burn itself out than to keep it smouldering by obstruction.

'Do you remember the date of his sailing?' she said finally, as the pony-carriage turned to drive off.

'He sails on the 25th, that is, to-day. But it may not be till late in the evening.'

With this she started, and reached Warborne in time for the up-train. How much longer than it really is a long journey can seem to be, was fully learnt by the unhappy Viviette that day. The changeful procession of country seats past which she was dragged, the names and memories of their owners, had no points of interest for her now. She reached Southampton about midday, and drove straight to the docks.

On approaching the gates she was met by a crowd of people and vehicles coming out--men, women, children, porters, police, cabs, and carts. The Occidental had just sailed.

The adverse intelligence came upon her with such odds after her morning's tension that she could scarcely crawl back to the cab which had brought her. But this was not a time to succumb. As she had no luggage she dismissed the man, and, without any real consciousness of what she was doing, crept away and sat down on a pile of merchandise.

After long thinking her case assumed a more hopeful complexion. Much might probably be done towards communicating with him in the time at her command. The obvious step to this end, which she should have thought of sooner, would be to go to his grandmother in Welland Bottom, and there obtain his itinerary in detail--no doubt well known to Mrs. Martin. There

was no leisure for her to consider longer if she would be home again that night; and returning to the railway she waited on a seat without eating or drinking till a train was ready to take her back.

By the time she again stood in Warborne the sun rested his chin upon the meadows, and enveloped the distant outline of the Rings-Hill column in his humid rays. Hiring an empty fly that chanced to be at the station she was driven through the little town onward to Welland, which she approached about eight o'clock. At her request the man set her down at the entrance to the park, and when he was out of sight, instead of pursuing her way to the House, she went along the high road in the direction of Mrs. Martin's.

Dusk was drawing on, and the bats were wheeling over the green basin called Welland Bottom by the time she arrived; and had any other errand instigated her call she would have postponed it till the morrow. Nobody responded to her knock, but she could hear footsteps going hither and thither upstairs, and dull noises as of articles moved from their places. She knocked again and again, and ultimately the door was opened by Hannah
as usual.

'I could make nobody hear,' said Lady Constantine, who was so weary she could scarcely stand.

'I am very sorry, my lady,' said Hannah, slightly awed on beholding her

visitor. 'But we was a putting poor Mr. Swithin's room to rights, now that he is, as a woman may say, dead and buried to us; so we didn't hear your ladyship. I'll call Mrs. Martin at once. She is up in the room that used to be his work-room.'

Here Hannah's voice implied moist eyes, and Lady Constantine's instantly overflowed.

'No, I'll go up to her,' said Viviette; and almost in advance of Hannah she passed up the shrunken ash stairs.

The ebbing light was not enough to reveal to Mrs. Martin's aged gaze the personality of her visitor, till Hannah explained.

'I'll get a light, my lady,' said she.

'No, I would rather not. What are you doing, Mrs. Martin?'

'Well, the poor misguided boy is gone--and he's gone for good to me! I am a woman of over four-score years, my Lady Constantine; my junketting days are over, and whether 'tis feasting or whether 'tis sorrowing in the land will soon be nothing to me. But his life may be long and active, and for the sake of him I care for what I shall never see, and wish to make pleasant what I shall never enjoy. I am setting his room in order, as the place will be his own freehold when I am gone, so that when he comes back he may find all his poor jim-cracks and trangleys as he left

'em, and not feel that I have betrayed his trust.'

Mrs. Martin's voice revealed that she had burst into such few tears as were left her, and then Hannah began crying likewise; whereupon Lady Constantine, whose heart had been bursting all day (and who, indeed, considering her coming trouble, had reason enough for tears), broke into bitterer sobs than either--sobs of absolute pain, that could no longer be concealed.

Hannah was the first to discover that Lady Constantine was weeping with them; and her feelings being probably the least intense among the three she instantly controlled herself.

'Refrain yourself, my dear woman, refrain!' she said hastily to Mrs. Martin; 'don't ye see how it do raft my lady?' And turning to Viviette she whispered, 'Her years be so great, your ladyship, that perhaps ye'll excuse her for busting out afore ye? We know when the mind is dim, my lady, there's not the manners there should be; but decayed people can't help it, poor old soul!'

'Hannah, that will do now. Perhaps Lady Constantine would like to speak to me alone,' said Mrs. Martin. And when Hannah had retreated Mrs. Martin continued: 'Such a charge as she is, my lady, on account of her great age! You'll pardon her biding here as if she were one of the family. I put up with such things because of her long service, and we know that years lead to childishness.'

'What are you doing? Can I help you?' Viviette asked, as Mrs. Martin, after speaking, turned to lift some large article.

'Oh, 'tis only the skeleton of a telescope that's got no works in his inside,' said Swithin's grandmother, seizing the huge pasteboard tube that Swithin had made, and abandoned because he could get no lenses to suit it. 'I am going to hang it up to these hooks, and there it will bide till he comes again.'

Lady Constantine took one end, and the tube was hung up against the whitewashed wall by strings that the old woman had tied round it.

'Here's all his equinoctial lines, and his topics of Capricorn, and I don't know what besides,' Mrs. Martin continued, pointing to some charcoal scratches on the wall. 'I shall never rub 'em out; no, though 'tis such untidiness as I was never brought up to, I shall never rub 'em out.'

'Where has Swithin gone to first?' asked Viviette anxiously. 'Where does he say you are to write to him?'

'Nowhere yet, my lady. He's gone traipsing all over Europe and America, and then to the South Pacific Ocean about this Transit of Venus that's going to be done there. He is to write to us first--God knows when!--for he said that if we didn't hear from him for six months we were not to be

gallied at all.'

At this intelligence, so much worse than she had expected, Lady Constantine stood mute, sank down, and would have fallen to the floor if there had not been a chair behind her. Controlling herself by a strenuous effort, she disguised her despair and asked vacantly: 'From America to the South Pacific--Transit of Venus?' (Swithin's arrangement to accompany the expedition had been made at the last moment, and therefore she had not as yet been informed.)

'Yes, to a lone island, I believe.'

'Yes, a lone islant, my lady!' echoed Hannah, who had crept in and made herself one of the family again, in spite of Mrs. Martin.

'He is going to meet the English and American astronomers there at the end of the year. After that he will most likely go on to the Cape.'

'But before the end of the year--what places did he tell you of visiting?'

'Let me collect myself; he is going to the observatory of Cambridge, United States, to meet some gentlemen there, and spy through the great refractor. Then there's the observatory of Chicago; and I think he has a letter to make him beknown to a gentleman in the observatory at Marseilles--and he wants to go to Vienna--and Poulkowa, too, he means to

take in his way--there being great instruments and a lot of astronomers at each place.'

'Does he take Europe or America first?' she asked faintly, for the account seemed hopeless.

Mrs. Martin could not tell till she had heard from Swithin. It depended upon what he had decided to do on the day of his leaving England.

Lady Constantine bade the old people good-bye, and dragged her weary limbs homeward. The fatuousness of forethought had seldom been evinced more ironically. Had she done nothing to hinder him, he would have kept up an unreserved communication with her, and all might have been well.

For that night she could undertake nothing further, and she waited for the next day. Then at once she wrote two letters to Swithin, directing one to Marseilles observatory, one to the observatory of Cambridge, U.S., as being the only two spots on the face of the globe at which they were likely to intercept him. Each letter stated to him the urgent reasons which existed for his return, and contained a passionately regretful intimation that the annuity on which his hopes depended must of necessity be sacrificed by the completion of their original contract without delay.

But letter conveyance was too slow a process to satisfy her. To send an epitome of her epistles by telegraph was, after all, indispensable. Such an imploring sentence as she desired to address to him it would be

hazardous to despatch from Warborne, and she took a dreary journey to a strange town on purpose to send it from an office at which she was unknown.

There she handed in her message, addressing it to the port of arrival of the Occidental, and again returned home.

She waited; and there being no return telegram, the inference was that he had somehow missed hers. For an answer to either of her letters she would have to wait long enough to allow him time to reach one of the observatories--a tedious while.

Then she considered the weakness, the stultifying nature of her attempt at recall.

Events mocked her on all sides. By the favour of an accident, and by her own immense exertions against her instincts, Swithin had been restored to the rightful heritage that he had nearly forfeited on her account. He had just started off to utilize it; when she, without a moment's warning, was asking him again to cast it away. She had set a certain machinery in motion--to stop it before it had revolved once.

A horrid apprehension possessed her. It had been easy for Swithin to give up what he had never known the advantages of keeping; but having once begun to enjoy his possession would he give it up now? Could he be depended on for such self-sacrifice? Before leaving, he would have done

anything at her request; but the mollia tempora fandi had now passed. Suppose there arrived no reply from him for the next three months; and that when his answer came he were to inform her that, having now fully acquiesced in her original decision, he found the life he was leading so profitable as to be unable to abandon it, even to please her; that he was very sorry, but having embarked on this course by her advice he meant to adhere to it by his own.

There was, indeed, every probability that, moving about as he was doing, and cautioned as he had been by her very self against listening to her too readily, she would receive no reply of any sort from him for three or perhaps four months. This would be on the eve of the Transit; and what likelihood was there that a young man, full of ardour for that spectacle, would forego it at the last moment to return to a humdrum domesticity with a woman who was no longer a novelty?

If she could only leave him to his career, and save her own situation also! But at that moment the proposition seemed as impossible as to construct a triangle of two straight lines.

In her walk home, pervaded by these hopeless views, she passed near the dark and deserted tower. Night in that solitary place, which would have caused her some uneasiness in her years of blitheness, had no terrors for her now. She went up the winding path, and, the door being unlocked, felt her way to the top. The open sky greeted her as in times previous to the dome-and-equatorial period; but there was not a star to suggest to

her in which direction Swithin had gone. The absence of the dome suggested a way out of her difficulties. A leap in the dark, and all would be over. But she had not reached that stage of action as yet, and the thought was dismissed as quickly as it had come.

The new consideration which at present occupied her mind was whether she could have the courage to leave Swithin to himself, as in the original plan, and singly meet her impending trial, despising the shame, till he should return at five-and-twenty and claim her? Yet was this assumption of his return so very safe? How altered things would be at that time! At twenty-five he would still be young and handsome; she would be three-and-thirty, fading to middle-age and homeliness, from a junior's point of view. A fear sharp as a frost settled down upon her, that in any such scheme as this she would be building upon the sand.

She hardly knew how she reached home that night. Entering by the lawn door she saw a red coal in the direction of the arbour. Louis was smoking there, and he came forward.

He had not seen her since the morning and was naturally anxious about her. She blessed the chance which enveloped her in night and lessened the weight of the encounter one half by depriving him of vision.

'Did you accomplish your object?' he asked.

'No,' said she.

'How was that?'

'He has sailed.'

'A very good thing for both, I say. I believe you would have married him, if you could have overtaken him.'

'That would I!' she said.

'Good God!'

'I would marry a tinker for that matter; I have reasons for being any man's wife,' she said recklessly, 'only I should prefer to drown myself.'

Louis held his breath, and stood rigid at the meaning her words conveyed.

'But Louis, you don't know all!' cried Viviette. 'I am not so bad as you think; mine has been folly--not vice. I thought I had married him--and then I found I had not; the marriage was invalid--Sir Blount was alive! And now Swithin has gone away, and will not come back for my calling! How can he? His fortune is left him on condition that he forms no legal tie. O will he--will he, come again?'

'Never, if that's the position of affairs,' said Louis firmly, after a

pause.

'What then shall I do?' said Viviette.

Louis escaped the formidable difficulty of replying by pretending to continue his Havannah; and she, bowed down to dust by what she had revealed, crept from him into the house. Louis's cigar went out in his hand as he stood looking intently at the ground.