

XXXIX

Louis got up the next morning with an idea in his head. He had dressed for a journey, and breakfasted hastily.

Before he had started Viviette came downstairs. Louis, who was now greatly disturbed about her, went up to his sister and took her hand.

'Aux grands maux les grands remedes,' he said, gravely. 'I have a plan.'

'I have a dozen!' said she.

'You have?'

'Yes. But what are they worth? And yet there must--there must be a way!'

'Viviette,' said Louis, 'promise that you will wait till I come home to-night, before you do anything.'

Her distracted eyes showed slight comprehension of his request as she said 'Yes.'

An hour after that time Louis entered the train at Warborne, and was speedily crossing a country of ragged woodland, which, though intruded on

by the plough at places, remained largely intact from prehistoric times, and still abounded with yews of gigantic growth and oaks tufted with mistletoe. It was the route to Melchester.

On setting foot in that city he took the cathedral spire as his guide, the place being strange to him; and went on till he reached the archway dividing Melchester sacred from Melchester secular. Thence he threaded his course into the precincts of the damp and venerable Close, level as a bowling-green, and beloved of rooks, who from their elm perches on high threatened any unwary gazer with the mishap of Tobit. At the corner of this reposeful spot stood the episcopal palace.

Louis entered the gates, rang the bell, and looked around. Here the trees and rooks seemed older, if possible, than those in the Close behind him. Everything was dignified, and he felt himself like Punchinello in the king's chambers. Verily in the present case Glanville was not a man to stick at trifles any more than his illustrious prototype; and on the servant bringing a message that his lordship would see him at once, Louis marched boldly in.

Through an old dark corridor, roofed with old dark beams, the servant led the way to the heavily-moulded door of the Bishop's room. Dr. Helmsdale was there, and welcomed Louis with considerable stateliness. But his condescension was tempered with a curious anxiety, and even with nervousness.

He asked in pointed tones after the health of Lady Constantine; if Louis had brought an answer to the letter he had addressed to her a day or two earlier; and if the contents of the letter, or of the previous one, were known to him.

'I have brought no answer from her,' said Louis. 'But the contents of your letter have been made known to me.'

Since entering the building Louis had more than once felt some hesitation, and it might now, with a favouring manner from his entertainer, have operated to deter him from going further with his intention. But the Bishop had personal weaknesses that were fatal to sympathy for more than a moment.

'Then I may speak in confidence to you as her nearest relative,' said the prelate, 'and explain that I am now in a position with regard to Lady Constantine which, in view of the important office I hold, I should not have cared to place myself in unless I had felt quite sure of not being refused by her. And hence it is a great grief, and some mortification to me, that I was refused--owing, of course, to the fact that I unwittingly risked making my proposal at the very moment when she was under the influence of those strange tidings, and therefore not herself, and scarcely able to judge what was best for her.'

The Bishop's words disclosed a mind whose sensitive fear of danger to its own dignity hindered it from criticism elsewhere. Things might have been

worse for Louis's Puck-like idea of mis-mating his Hermia with this Demetrius.

Throwing a strong colour of earnestness into his mien he replied:

'Bishop, Viviette is my only sister; I am her only brother and friend. I am alarmed for her health and state of mind. Hence I have come to consult you on this very matter that you have broached. I come absolutely without her knowledge, and I hope unconventionality may be excused in me on the score of my anxiety for her.'

'Certainly. I trust that the prospect opened up by my proposal, combined with this other news, has not proved too much for her?'

'My sister is distracted and distressed, Bishop Helmsdale. She wants comfort.'

'Not distressed by my letter?' said the Bishop, turning red. 'Has it lowered me in her estimation?'

'On the contrary; while your disinterested offer was uppermost in her mind she was a different woman. It is this other matter that oppresses her. The result upon her of the recent discovery with regard to the late Sir Blount Constantine is peculiar. To say that he ill-used her in his lifetime is to understate a truth. He has been dead now a considerable period; but this revival of his memory operates as a sort of terror upon her. Images of the manner of Sir Blount's death are with her night and

day, intensified by a hideous picture of the supposed scene, which was cruelly sent her. She dreads being alone. Nothing will restore my poor Viviette to her former cheerfulness but a distraction--a hope--a new prospect.'

'That is precisely what acceptance of my offer would afford.'

'Precisely,' said Louis, with great respect. 'But how to get her to avail herself of it, after once refusing you, is the difficulty, and my earnest problem.'

'Then we are quite at one.'

'We are. And it is to promote our wishes that I am come; since she will do nothing of herself.'

'Then you can give me no hope of a reply to my second communication?'

'None whatever--by letter,' said Louis. 'Her impression plainly is that she cannot encourage your lordship. Yet, in the face of all this reticence, the secret is that she loves you warmly.'

'Can you indeed assure me of that? Indeed, indeed!' said the good Bishop musingly. 'Then I must try to see her. I begin to feel--to feel strongly--that a course which would seem premature and unbecoming in other cases would be true and proper conduct in this. Her unhappy

dilemmas--her unwonted position--yes, yes--I see it all! I can afford to have some little misconstruction put upon my motives. I will go and see her immediately. Her past has been a cruel one; she wants sympathy; and with Heaven's help I'll give it.'

'I think the remedy lies that way,' said Louis gently. 'Some words came from her one night which seemed to show it. I was standing on the terrace: I heard somebody sigh in the dark, and found that it was she. I asked her what was the matter, and gently pressed her on this subject of boldly and promptly contracting a new marriage as a means of dispersing the horrors of the old. Her answer implied that she would have no objection to do it, and to do it at once, provided she could remain externally passive in the matter, that she would tacitly yield, in fact, to pressure, but would not meet solicitation half-way. Now, Bishop Helmsdale, you see what has prompted me. On the one hand is a dignitary of high position and integrity, to say no more, who is anxious to save her from the gloom of her situation; on the other is this sister, who will not make known to you her willingness to be saved--partly from apathy, partly from a fear that she may be thought forward in responding favourably at so early a moment, partly also, perhaps, from a modest sense that there would be some sacrifice on your part in allying yourself with a woman of her secluded and sad experience.'

'O, there is no sacrifice! Quite otherwise. I care greatly for this alliance, Mr. Glanville. Your sister is very dear to me. Moreover, the advantages her mind would derive from the enlarged field of activity that

the position of a bishop's wife would afford, are palpable. I am induced to think that an early settlement of the question--an immediate coming to the point--which might be called too early in the majority of cases, would be a right and considerate tenderness here. My only dread is that she should think an immediate following up of the subject premature. And the risk of a rebuff a second time is one which, as you must perceive, it would be highly unbecoming in me to run.'

'I think the risk would be small, if your lordship would approach her frankly. Write she will not, I am assured; and knowing that, and having her interest at heart, I was induced to come to you and make this candid statement in reply to your communication. Her late husband having been virtually dead these four or five years, believed dead two years, and actually dead nearly one, no reproach could attach to her if she were to contract another union to-morrow.'

'I agree with you, Mr. Glanville,' said the Bishop warmly. 'I will think this over. Her motive in not replying I can quite understand: your motive in coming I can also understand and appreciate in a brother. If I feel convinced that it would be a seemly and expedient thing I will come to Welland to-morrow.'

The point to which Louis had brought the Bishop being so satisfactory, he feared to endanger it by another word. He went away almost hurriedly, and at once left the precincts of the cathedral, lest another encounter with Dr. Helmsdale should lead the latter to take a new and slower view

of his duties as Viviette's suitor.

He reached Welland by dinner-time, and came upon Viviette in the same pensive mood in which he had left her. It seemed she had hardly moved since.

'Have you discovered Swithin St. Cleeve's address?' she said, without looking up at him.

'No,' said Louis.

Then she broke out with indescribable anguish: 'But you asked me to wait till this evening; and I have waited through the long day, in the belief that your words meant something, and that you would bring good tidings! And now I find your words meant nothing, and you have not brought good tidings!'

Louis could not decide for a moment what to say to this. Should he venture to give her thoughts a new course by a revelation of his design? No: it would be better to prolong her despair yet another night, and spring relief upon her suddenly, that she might jump at it and commit herself without an interval for reflection on certain aspects of the proceeding.

Nothing, accordingly, did he say; and conjecturing that she would be hardly likely to take any desperate step that night, he left her to



herself.

His anxiety at this crisis continued to be great. Everything depended on the result of the Bishop's self-communion. Would he or would he not come the next day? Perhaps instead of his important presence there would appear a letter postponing the visit indefinitely. If so, all would be lost.

Louis's suspense kept him awake, and he was not alone in his sleeplessness. Through the night he heard his sister walking up and down, in a state which betokened that for every pang of grief she had disclosed, twice as many had remained unspoken. He almost feared that she might seek to end her existence by violence, so unreasonably sudden were her moods; and he lay and longed for the day.

It was morning. She came down the same as usual, and asked if there had arrived any telegram or letter; but there was neither. Louis avoided her, knowing that nothing he could say just then would do her any good.

No communication had reached him from the Bishop, and that looked well. By one ruse and another, as the day went on, he led her away from contemplating the remote possibility of hearing from Swithin, and induced her to look at the worst contingency as her probable fate. It seemed as if she really made up her mind to this, for by the afternoon she was apathetic, like a woman who neither hoped nor feared.

And then a fly drove up to the door.

Louis, who had been standing in the hall the greater part of that day, glanced out through a private window, and went to Viviette. 'The Bishop has called,' he said. 'Be ready to see him.'

'The Bishop of Melchester?' said Viviette, bewildered.

'Yes. I asked him to come. He comes for an answer to his letters.'

'An answer--to--his--letters?' she murmured.

'An immediate reply of yes or no.'

Her face showed the workings of her mind. How entirely an answer of assent, at once acted on for better or for worse, would clear the spectre from her path, there needed no tongue to tell. It would, moreover, accomplish that end without involving the impoverishment of Swithin--the inevitable result if she had adopted the legitimate road out of her trouble. Hitherto there had seemed to her dismayed mind, unenlightened as to any course save one of honesty, no possible achievement of both her desires--the saving of Swithin and the saving of herself. But behold, here was a way! A tempter had shown it to her. It involved a great wrong, which to her had quite obscured its feasibility. But she perceived now that it was indeed a way. Nature was forcing her hand at this game; and to what will not nature compel her weaker victims, in

extremes?

Louis left her to think it out. When he reached the drawing-room Dr. Helmsdale was standing there with the air of a man too good for his destiny--which, to be just to him, was not far from the truth this time.

'Have you broken my message to her?' asked the Bishop sonorously.

'Not your message; your visit,' said Louis. 'I leave the rest in your Lordship's hands. I have done all I can for her.'

She was in her own small room to-day; and, feeling that it must be a bold stroke or none, he led the Bishop across the hall till he reached her apartment and opened the door; but instead of following he shut it behind his visitor.

Then Glanville passed an anxious time. He walked from the foot of the staircase to the star of old swords and pikes on the wall; from these to the stags' horns; thence down the corridor as far as the door, where he could hear murmuring inside, but not its import. The longer they remained closeted the more excited did he become. That she had not peremptorily negatived the proposal at the outset was a strong sign of its success. It showed that she had admitted argument; and the worthy Bishop had a pleader on his side whom he knew little of. The very weather seemed to favour Dr. Helmsdale in his suit. A blustering wind had blown up from the west, howling in the smokeless chimneys, and

suggesting to the feminine mind storms at sea, a tossing ocean, and the hopeless inaccessibility of all astronomers and men on the other side of the same.

The Bishop had entered Viviette's room at ten minutes past three. The long hand of the hall clock lay level at forty-five minutes past when the knob of the door moved, and he came out. Louis met him where the passage joined the hall.

Dr. Helmsdale was decidedly in an emotional state, his face being slightly flushed. Louis looked his anxious inquiry without speaking it.

'She accepts me,' said the Bishop in a low voice. 'And the wedding is to be soon. Her long solitude and sufferings justify haste. What you said was true. Sheer weariness and distraction have driven her to me. She was quite passive at last, and agreed to anything I proposed--such is the persuasive force of trained logical reasoning! A good and wise woman, she perceived what a true shelter from sadness was offered in me, and was not the one to despise Heaven's gift.'

XL