'April 10th, 18--, at the Palace, Melchester, the wife of the Bishop of Melchester, of a son.'

XLI

Three years passed away, and Swithin still remained at the Cape, quietly pursuing the work that had brought him there. His memoranda of observations had accumulated to a wheelbarrow load, and he was beginning to shape them into a treatise which should possess some scientific utility.

He had gauged the southern skies with greater results than even he himself had anticipated. Those unfamiliar constellations which, to the casual beholder, are at most a new arrangement of ordinary points of light, were to this professed astronomer, as to his brethren, a far greater matter.

It was below the surface that his material lay. There, in regions revealed only to the instrumental observer, were suns of hybrid kind--fire-fogs, floating nuclei, globes that flew in groups like swarms of bees, and other extraordinary sights--which, when decomposed by Swithin's equatorial, turned out to be the beginning of a new series of phenomena instead of the end of an old one.

There were gloomy deserts in those southern skies such as the north shows scarcely an example of; sites set apart for the position of suns which for some unfathomable reason were left uncreated, their places remaining ever since conspicuous by their emptiness.

The inspection of these chasms brought him a second pulsation of that old horror which he had used to describe to Viviette as produced in him by bottomlessness in the north heaven. The ghostly finger of limitless vacancy touched him now on the other side. Infinite deeps in the north stellar region had a homely familiarity about them, when compared with infinite deeps in the region of the south pole. This was an even more unknown tract of the unknown. Space here, being less the historic haunt of human thought than overhead at home, seemed to be pervaded with a more lonely loneliness.

Were there given on paper to these astronomical exercitations of St. Cleeve a space proportionable to that occupied by his year with Viviette at Welland, this narrative would treble its length; but not a single additional glimpse would be afforded of Swithin in his relations with old emotions. In these experiments with tubes and glasses, important as they were to human intellect, there was little food for the sympathetic instincts which create the changes in a life. That which is the foreground and measuring base of one perspective draught may be the vanishing-point of another perspective draught, while yet they are both

draughts of the same thing. Swithin's doings and discoveries in the southern sidereal system were, no doubt, incidents of the highest importance to him; and yet from an intersocial point of view they served but the humble purpose of killing time, while other doings, more nearly allied to his heart than to his understanding, developed themselves at home.

In the intervals between his professional occupations he took walks over the sand-flats near, or among the farms which were gradually overspreading the country in the vicinity of Cape Town. He grew familiar with the outline of Table Mountain, and the fleecy 'Devil's Table-Cloth' which used to settle on its top when the wind was south-east. On these promenades he would more particularly think of Viviette, and of that curious pathetic chapter in his life with her which seemed to have wound itself up and ended for ever. Those scenes were rapidly receding into distance, and the intensity of his sentiment regarding them had proportionately abated. He felt that there had been something wrong therein, and yet he could not exactly define the boundary of the wrong. Viviette's sad and amazing sequel to that chapter had still a fearful, catastrophic aspect in his eyes; but instead of musing over it and its bearings he shunned the subject, as we shun by night the shady scene of a disaster, and keep to the open road.

He sometimes contemplated her apart from the past--leading her life in the Cathedral Close at Melchester; and wondered how often she looked south and thought of where he was.

On one of these afternoon walks in the neighbourhood of the Royal Observatory he turned and gazed towards the signal-post on the Lion's Rump. This was a high promontory to the north-west of Table Mountain, and overlooked Table Bay. Before his eyes had left the scene the signal was suddenly hoisted on the staff. It announced that a mail steamer had appeared in view over the sea. In the course of an hour he retraced his steps, as he had often done on such occasions, and strolled leisurely across the intervening mile and a half till he arrived at the post-office door.

There was no letter from England for him; but there was a newspaper, addressed in the seventeenth century handwriting of his grandmother, who, in spite of her great age, still retained a steady hold on life. He turned away disappointed, and resumed his walk into the country, opening the paper as he went along.

A cross in black ink attracted his attention; and it was opposite a name among the 'Deaths.' His blood ran icily as he discerned the words 'The Palace, Melchester.' But it was not she. Her husband, the Bishop of Melchester, had, after a short illness, departed this life at the comparatively early age of fifty years.

All the enactments of the bygone days at Welland now started up like an awakened army from the ground. But a few months were wanting to the time

when he would be of an age to marry without sacrificing the annuity which formed his means of subsistence. It was a point in his life that had had no meaning or interest for him since his separation from Viviette, for women were now no more to him than the inhabitants of Jupiter. But the whirligig of time having again set Viviette free, the aspect of home altered, and conjecture as to her future found room to work anew.

But beyond the simple fact that she was a widow he for some time gained not an atom of intelligence concerning her. There was no one of whom he could inquire but his grandmother, and she could tell him nothing about a lady who dwelt far away at Melchester.

Several months slipped by thus; and no feeling within him rose to sufficient strength to force him out of a passive attitude. Then by the merest chance his granny stated in one of her rambling epistles that Lady Constantine was coming to live again at Welland in the old house, with her child, now a little boy between three and four years of age.

Swithin, however, lived on as before.

But by the following autumn a change became necessary for the young man himself. His work at the Cape was done. His uncle's wishes that he should study there had been more than observed. The materials for his great treatise were collected, and it now only remained for him to arrange, digest, and publish them, for which purpose a return to England was indispensable.

So the equatorial was unscrewed, and the stand taken down; the astronomer's barrow-load of precious memoranda, and rolls upon rolls of diagrams, representing three years of continuous labour, were safely packed; and Swithin departed for good and all from the shores of Cape Town.

He had long before informed his grandmother of the date at which she might expect him; and in a reply from her, which reached him just previous to sailing, she casually mentioned that she frequently saw Lady Constantine; that on the last occasion her ladyship had shown great interest in the information that Swithin was coming home, and had inquired the time of his return.

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On a late summer day Swithin stepped from the train at Warborne, and, directing his baggage to be sent on after him, set out on foot for old Welland once again.

It seemed but the day after his departure, so little had the scene changed. True, there was that change which is always the first to arrest attention in places that are conventionally called unchanging--a higher and broader vegetation at every familiar corner than at the former time.

He had not gone a mile when he saw walking before him a clergyman whose

form, after consideration, he recognized, in spite of a novel whiteness in that part of his hair that showed below the brim of his hat. Swithin walked much faster than this gentleman, and soon was at his side.

'Mr. Torkingham! I knew it was,' said Swithin.

Mr. Torkingham was slower in recognizing the astronomer, but in a moment had greeted him with a warm shake of the hand.

'I have been to the station on purpose to meet you!' cried Mr. Torkingham, 'and was returning with the idea that you had not come. I am your grandmother's emissary. She could not come herself, and as she was anxious, and nobody else could be spared, I came for her.'

Then they walked on together. The parson told Swithin all about his grandmother, the parish, and his endeavours to enlighten it; and in due course said, 'You are no doubt aware that Lady Constantine is living again at Welland?'

Swithin said he had heard as much, and added, what was far within the truth, that the news of the Bishop's death had been a great surprise to him.

'Yes,' said Mr. Torkingham, with nine thoughts to one word. 'One might have prophesied, to look at him, that Melchester would not lack a bishop for the next forty years. Yes; pale death knocks at the cottages of the

poor and the palaces of kings with an impartial foot!'

'Was he a particularly good man?' asked Swithin.

'He was not a Ken or a Heber. To speak candidly, he had his faults, of which arrogance was not the least. But who is perfect?'

Swithin, somehow, felt relieved to hear that the Bishop was not a perfect man.

'His poor wife, I fear, had not a great deal more happiness with him than with her first husband. But one might almost have foreseen it; the marriage was hasty--the result of a red-hot caprice, hardly becoming in a man of his position; and it betokened a want of temperate discretion which soon showed itself in other ways. That's all there was to be said against him, and now it's all over, and things have settled again into their old course. But the Bishop's widow is not the Lady Constantine of former days. No; put it as you will, she is not the same. There seems to be a nameless something on her mind--a trouble--a rooted melancholy, which no man's ministry can reach. Formerly she was a woman whose confidence it was easy to gain; but neither religion nor philosophy avails with her now. Beyond that, her life is strangely like what it was when you were with us.'

Conversing thus they pursued the turnpike road till their conversation was interrupted by a crying voice on their left. They looked, and

perceived that a child, in getting over an adjoining stile, had fallen on his face.

Mr. Torkingham and Swithin both hastened up to help the sufferer, who was a lovely little fellow with flaxen hair, which spread out in a frill of curls from beneath a quaint, close-fitting velvet cap that he wore. Swithin picked him up, while Mr. Torkingham wiped the sand from his lips and nose, and administered a few words of consolation, together with a few sweet-meats, which, somewhat to Swithin's surprise, the parson produced as if by magic from his pocket. One half the comfort rendered would have sufficed to soothe such a disposition as the child's. He ceased crying and ran away in delight to his unconscious nurse, who was reaching up for blackberries at a hedge some way off.

'You know who he is, of course?' said Mr. Torkingham, as they resumed their journey.

'No,' said Swithin.

'Oh, I thought you did. Yet how should you? It is Lady Constantine's boy--her only child. His fond mother little thinks he is so far away from home.'

'Dear me!--Lady Constantine's--ah, how interesting!' Swithin paused abstractedly for a moment, then stepped back again to the stile, while he stood watching the little boy out of sight.

'I can never venture out of doors now without sweets in my pocket,' continued the good-natured vicar: 'and the result is that I meet that young man more frequently on my rounds than any other of my parishioners.'

St. Cleeve was silent, and they turned into Welland Lane, where their paths presently diverged, and Swithin was left to pursue his way alone. He might have accompanied the vicar yet further, and gone straight to Welland House; but it would have been difficult to do so then without provoking inquiry. It was easy to go there now: by a cross path he could be at the mansion almost as soon as by the direct road. And yet Swithin did not turn; he felt an indescribable reluctance to see Viviette. He could not exactly say why. True, before he knew how the land lay it might be awkward to attempt to call: and this was a sufficient excuse for postponement.

In this mood he went on, following the direct way to his grandmother's homestead. He reached the garden-gate, and, looking into the bosky basin where the old house stood, saw a graceful female form moving before the porch, bidding adieu to some one within the door.

He wondered what creature of that mould his grandmother could know, and went forward with some hesitation. At his approach the apparition turned, and he beheld, developed into blushing womanhood, one who had once been known to him as the village maiden Tabitha Lark. Seeing

Swithin, and apparently from an instinct that her presence would not be desirable just then, she moved quickly round into the garden.

The returned traveller entered the house, where he found awaiting him poor old Mrs. Martin, to whose earthly course death stood rather as the asymptote than as the end. She was perceptibly smaller in form than when he had left her, and she could see less distinctly.

A rather affecting greeting followed, in which his grandmother murmured the words of Israel: '"Now let me die, since I have seen thy face,
because thou art yet alive."'

The form of Hannah had disappeared from the kitchen, that ancient servant having been gathered to her fathers about six months before, her place being filled by a young girl who knew not Joseph. They presently chatted with much cheerfulness, and his grandmother said, 'Have you heard what a wonderful young woman Miss Lark has become?--a mere fleet-footed, slittering maid when you were last home.'

St. Cleeve had not heard, but he had partly seen, and he was informed that Tabitha had left Welland shortly after his own departure, and had studied music with great success in London, where she had resided ever since till quite recently; that she played at concerts, oratorios--had,
in short, joined the phalanx of Wonderful Women who had resolved to eclipse masculine genius altogether, and humiliate the brutal sex to the dust.

'She is only in the garden,' added his grandmother. 'Why don't ye go out and speak to her?'

Swithin was nothing loth, and strolled out under the apple-trees, where he arrived just in time to prevent Miss Lark from going off by the back gate. There was not much difficulty in breaking the ice between them, and they began to chat with vivacity.

Now all these proceedings occupied time, for somehow it was very charming to talk to Miss Lark; and by degrees St. Cleeve informed Tabitha of his great undertaking, and of the voluminous notes he had amassed, which would require so much rearrangement and recopying by an amanuensis as to
absolutely appal him. He greatly feared he should not get one careful enough for such scientific matter; whereupon Tabitha said she would be delighted to do it for him. Then blushing, and declaring suddenly that it had grown quite late, she left him and the garden for her relation's house hard by.

Swithin, no less than Tabitha, had been surprised by the disappearance of the sun behind the hill; and the question now arose whether it would be advisable to call upon Viviette that night. There was little doubt that she knew of his coming; but more than that he could not predicate; and being entirely ignorant of whom she had around her, entirely in the dark as to her present feelings towards him, he thought it would be better to

defer his visit until the next day.

Walking round to the front of the house he beheld the well-known agriculturists Hezzy Biles, Haymoss Fry, and some others of the same old school, passing the gate homeward from their work with bundles of wood at their backs. Swithin saluted them over the top rail.

'Well! do my eyes and ears--' began Hezzy; and then, balancing his faggot on end against the hedge, he came forward, the others following.

'Says I to myself as soon as I heerd his voice,' Hezzy continued (addressing Swithin as if he were a disinterested spectator and not himself), 'please God I'll pitch my nitch, and go across and speak to en.'

'I knowed in a winking 'twas some great navigator that I see a standing there,' said Haymoss. 'But whe'r 'twere a sort of nabob, or a diment-digger, or a lion-hunter, I couldn't so much as guess till I heerd en speak.'

'And what changes have come over Welland since I was last at home?' asked Swithin.

'Well, Mr. San Cleeve,' Hezzy replied, 'when you've said that a few stripling boys and maidens have busted into blooth, and a few married women have plimmed and chimped (my lady among 'em), why, you've said

anighst all, Mr. San Cleeve.'

The conversation thus began was continued on divers matters till they were all enveloped in total darkness, when his old acquaintances shouldered their faggots again and proceeded on their way.

Now that he was actually within her coasts again Swithin felt a little more strongly the influence of the past and Viviette than he had been accustomed to do for the last two or three years. During the night he felt half sorry that he had not marched off to the Great House to see her, regardless of the time of day. If she really nourished for him any particle of her old affection it had been the cruellest thing not to call. A few questions that he put concerning her to his grandmother elicited that Lady Constantine had no friends about her--not even her brother--and that her health had not been so good since her return from Melchester as formerly. Still, this proved nothing as to the state of her heart, and as she had kept a dead silence since the Bishop's death it was quite possible that she would meet him with that cold repressive tone and manner which experienced women know so well how to put on when they
wish to intimate to the long-lost lover that old episodes are to be taken as forgotten.

The next morning he prepared to call, if only on the ground of old acquaintance, for Swithin was too straightforward to ascertain anything indirectly. It was rather too early for this purpose when he went out

from his grandmother's garden-gate, after breakfast, and he waited in the garden. While he lingered his eye fell on Rings-Hill Speer.

It appeared dark, for a moment, against the blue sky behind it; then the fleeting cloud which shadowed it passed on, and the face of the column brightened into such luminousness that the sky behind sank to the complexion of a dark foil.

'Surely somebody is on the column,' he said to himself, after gazing at it awhile.

Instead of going straight to the Great House he deviated through the insulating field, now sown with turnips, which surrounded the plantation on Rings-Hill. By the time that he plunged under the trees he was still more certain that somebody was on the tower. He crept up to the base with proprietary curiosity, for the spot seemed again like his own.

The path still remained much as formerly, but the nook in which the cabin had stood was covered with undergrowth. Swithin entered the door of the tower, ascended the staircase about half-way on tip-toe, and listened, for he did not wish to intrude on the top if any stranger were there. The hollow spiral, as he knew from old experience, would bring down to his ears the slightest sound from above; and it now revealed to him the words of a duologue in progress at the summit of the tower.

'Mother, what shall I do?' a child's voice said. 'Shall I sing?'

The mother seemed to assent, for the child began--

'The robin has fled from the wood
To the snug habitation of man.'

This performance apparently attracted but little attention from the child's companion, for the young voice suggested, as a new form of entertainment, 'Shall I say my prayers?'

'Yes,' replied one whom Swithin had begun to recognize.

'Who shall I pray for?'

No answer.

'Who shall I pray for?'

'Pray for father.'

'But he is gone to heaven?'

A sigh from Viviette was distinctly audible.

'You made a mistake, didn't you, mother?' continued the little one.

'I must have. The strangest mistake a woman ever made!'

Nothing more was said, and Swithin ascended, words from above indicating to him that his footsteps were heard. In another half-minute he rose through the hatchway. A lady in black was sitting in the sun, and the boy with the flaxen hair whom he had seen yesterday was at her feet.

'Viviette!' he said.

'Swithin!--at last!' she cried.

The words died upon her lips, and from very faintness she bent her head. For instead of rushing forward to her he had stood still; and there appeared upon his face a look which there was no mistaking.

Yes; he was shocked at her worn and faded aspect. The image he had mentally carried out with him to the Cape he had brought home again as that of the woman he was now to rejoin. But another woman sat before him, and not the original Viviette. Her cheeks had lost for ever that firm contour which had been drawn by the vigorous hand of youth, and the masses of hair that were once darkness visible had become touched here and there by a faint grey haze, like the Via Lactea in a midnight sky.

Yet to those who had eyes to understand as well as to see, the chastened pensiveness of her once handsome features revealed more promising material beneath than ever her youth had done. But Swithin was

hopelessly her junior. Unhappily for her he had now just arrived at an age whose canon of faith it is that the silly period of woman's life is her only period of beauty. Viviette saw it all, and knew that Time had at last brought about his revenges. She had tremblingly watched and waited without sleep, ever since Swithin had re-entered Welland, and it was for this.

Swithin came forward, and took her by the hand, which she passively allowed him to do.

'Swithin, you don't love me,' she said simply.

'O Viviette!'

'You don't love me,' she repeated.

'Don't say it!'

'Yes, but I will! you have a right not to love me. You did once. But now I am an old woman, and you are still a young man; so how can you love me? I do not expect it. It is kind and charitable of you to come and see me here.'

'I have come all the way from the Cape,' he faltered, for her insistence took all power out of him to deny in mere politeness what she said.

'Yes; you have come from the Cape; but not for me,' she answered. 'It would be absurd if you had come for me. You have come because your work there is finished. . . . I like to sit here with my little boy--it is a pleasant spot. It was once something to us, was it not? but that was long ago. You scarcely knew me for the same woman, did you?'

'Knew you--yes, of course I knew you!'

'You looked as if you did not. But you must not be surprised at me. I belong to an earlier generation than you, remember.'

Thus, in sheer bitterness of spirit did she inflict wounds on herself by exaggerating the difference in their years. But she had nevertheless spoken truly. Sympathize with her as he might, and as he unquestionably did, he loved her no longer. But why had she expected otherwise? 'O woman,' might a prophet have said to her, 'great is thy faith if thou believest a junior lover's love will last five years!'

'I shall be glad to know through your grandmother how you are getting on,' she said meekly. 'But now I would much rather that we part. Yes; do not question me. I would rather that we part. Good-bye.'

Hardly knowing what he did he touched her hand, and obeyed. He was a scientist, and took words literally. There is something in the inexorably simple logic of such men which partakes of the cruelty of the natural laws that are their study. He entered the tower-steps, and

mechanically descended; and it was not till he got half-way down that he thought she could not mean what she had said.

Before leaving Cape Town he had made up his mind on this one point; that if she were willing to marry him, marry her he would without let or hindrance. That much he morally owed her, and was not the man to demur. And though the Swithin who had returned was not quite the Swithin who had gone away, though he could not now love her with the sort of love he had once bestowed; he believed that all her conduct had been dictated by the purest benevolence to him, by that charity which 'seeketh not her own.' Hence he did not flinch from a wish to deal with loving-kindness towards her--a sentiment perhaps in the long-run more to be prized than lover's love.

Her manner had caught him unawares; but now recovering himself he turned back determinedly. Bursting out upon the roof he clasped her in his arms, and kissed her several times.

'Viviette, Viviette,' he said, 'I have come to marry you!'

She uttered a shriek--a shriek of amazed joy--such as never was heard on that tower before or since--and fell in his arms, clasping his neck.

There she lay heavily. Not to disturb her he sat down in her seat, still holding her fast. Their little son, who had stood with round conjectural

eyes throughout the meeting, now came close; and presently looking up to Swithin said--

'Mother has gone to sleep.'

Swithin looked down, and started. Her tight clasp had loosened. A wave of whiteness, like that of marble which had never seen the sun, crept up from her neck, and travelled upwards and onwards over her cheek, lips, eyelids, forehead, temples, its margin banishing back the live pink till the latter had entirely disappeared.

Seeing that something was wrong, yet not understanding what, the little boy began to cry; but in his concentration Swithin hardly heard it. 'Viviette--Viviette!' he said.

The child cried with still deeper grief, and, after a momentary hesitation, pushed his hand into Swithin's for protection.

'Hush, hush! my child,' said Swithin distractedly. 'I'll take care of you! O Viviette!' he exclaimed again, pressing her face to his.

But she did not reply.

'What can this be?' he asked himself. He would not then answer according to his fear.

He looked up for help. Nobody appeared in sight but Tabitha Lark, who was skirting the field with a bounding tread--the single bright spot of colour and animation within the wide horizon. When he looked down again his fear deepened to certainty. It was no longer a mere surmise that help was vain. Sudden joy after despair had touched an over-strained heart too smartly. Viviette was dead. The Bishop was avenged.