

The Novels of Thomas Hardy - Volume 4

Thomas Hardy

Contents

A LAODICEAN	6
CONTENTS	6
PREFACE.	9
BOOK THE FIRST. GEORGE SOMERSET.	9
CHAPTER I.	9
CHAPTER II.	13
CHAPTER III.	20
CHAPTER IV.	24
CHAPTER V.	31
CHAPTER VI.	38
CHAPTER VII.	43
CHAPTER VIII.	48
CHAPTER IX.	53
CHAPTER X.	57
CHAPTER XI.	61
CHAPTER XII.	66
CHAPTER XIII.	71
CHAPTER XIV.	74
CHAPTER XV.	78
BOOK THE SECOND. DARE AND HAVILL.	85
CHAPTER I.	85
CHAPTER II.	90
CHAPTER III.	96
CHAPTER IV.	100
CHAPTER V.	105
CHAPTER VI.	111
CHAPTER VII.	115
BOOK THE THIRD. DE STANCY.	118
CHAPTER I.	118
CHAPTER II.	123
CHAPTER III.	129
CHAPTER IV.	134
CHAPTER V.	139
CHAPTER VI.	144
CHAPTER VII.	149

CHAPTER VIII.	152
CHAPTER IX.	155
CHAPTER X.	160
CHAPTER XI.	165
BOOK THE FOURTH. SOMERSET, DARE AND DE STANCY.	171
CHAPTER I.	171
CHAPTER II.	176
CHAPTER III.	179
CHAPTER IV.	183
CHAPTER V.	187
BOOK THE FIFTH. DE STANCY AND PAULA.	190
CHAPTER I.	190
CHAPTER II.	194
CHAPTER III.	198
CHAPTER IV.	202
CHAPTER V.	206
CHAPTER VI.	210
CHAPTER VII.	213
CHAPTER VIII.	217
CHAPTER IX.	220
CHAPTER X.	224
CHAPTER XI.	232
CHAPTER XII.	239
CHAPTER XIII.	243
CHAPTER XIV.	246
BOOK THE SIXTH. PAULA.	250
CHAPTER I.	250
CHAPTER II.	254
CHAPTER III.	260
CHAPTER IV.	266
CHAPTER V.	269

TWO ON A TOWER

	275
CONTENTS	275
PREFACE.	277
CHAPTER I	278
CHAPTER II	285
CHAPTER III	290
CHAPTER IV	293
CHAPTER V	300

* * * *	303
CHAPTER VI	306
CHAPTER VII	309
CHAPTER VIII	314
CHAPTER IX	318
CHAPTER X	323
CHAPTER XI	325
CHAPTER XII	328
CHAPTER XIII	332
CHAPTER XIV	336
CHAPTER XV	341
CHAPTER XVI	345

* * * *	350
CHAPTER XVII	351
CHAPTER XVIII	354
CHAPTER XIX	359
CHAPTER XX	365
CHAPTER XXI	367
CHAPTER XXII	370
CHAPTER XXIII	374

* * * *	377
CHAPTER XXIV	379
CHAPTER XXV	382
CHAPTER XXVI	387
CHAPTER XXVII	390

* * * *	393
CHAPTER XXVIII	396

* * * *	399
CHAPTER XXIX	404
CHAPTER XXX	407
CHAPTER XXXI	411
CHAPTER XXXII	414
CHAPTER XXXIII	418

CHAPTER XXXIV	421
CHAPTER XXXV	427
* * * *	429
CHAPTER XXXVI	433
CHAPTER XXXVII	437
CHAPTER XXXVIII	441
CHAPTER XXXIX	446
CHAPTER XL	451
* * * *	455
CHAPTER XLI	457
* * * *	460

A LAODICEAN

This novel was first published in 1881 and the plot features uncommon aspects for a Hardy novel, such as falsified telegrams and faked photographs. In the narrative, the heroine Paula Power inherits a medieval castle from her industrialist father, who has purchased it from the aristocratic De Stancy family. She employs two architects, one local and one, George Somerset, newly qualified from London. Somerset represents modernity in the novel. The novel explores themes of modernity versus the traditional. A 'Laodicean' is another word for someone that is uncertain or half-hearted, like the heroine of the novel.

Hardy, close to the time of publication of this novel

CONTENTS

- PREFACE.
- BOOK THE FIRST. GEORGE SOMERSET.
- CHAPTER I.
- CHAPTER II.
- CHAPTER III.
- CHAPTER IV.
- CHAPTER V.
- CHAPTER VI.
- CHAPTER VII.
- CHAPTER VIII.
- CHAPTER IX.
- CHAPTER X.
- CHAPTER XI.

- CHAPTER XII.
- CHAPTER XIII.
- CHAPTER XIV.
- CHAPTER XV.
- BOOK THE SECOND. DARE AND HAVILL.
- CHAPTER I.
- CHAPTER II.
- CHAPTER III.
- CHAPTER IV.
- CHAPTER V.
- CHAPTER VI.
- CHAPTER VII.
- BOOK THE THIRD. DE STANCY.
- CHAPTER I.
- CHAPTER II.
- CHAPTER III.
- CHAPTER IV.
- CHAPTER V.
- CHAPTER VI.
- CHAPTER VII.
- CHAPTER VIII.
- CHAPTER IX.
- CHAPTER X.
- CHAPTER XI.
- BOOK THE FOURTH. SOMERSET, DARE AND DE STANCY.

- CHAPTER I.
- CHAPTER II.
- CHAPTER III.
- CHAPTER IV.
- CHAPTER V.
- BOOK THE FIFTH. DE STANCY AND PAULA.
- CHAPTER I.
- CHAPTER II.
- CHAPTER III.
- CHAPTER IV.
- CHAPTER V.
- CHAPTER VI.
- CHAPTER VII.
- CHAPTER VIII.
- CHAPTER IX.
- CHAPTER X.
- CHAPTER XI.
- CHAPTER XII.
- CHAPTER XIII.
- CHAPTER XIV.
- BOOK THE SIXTH. PAULA.
- CHAPTER I.
- CHAPTER II.
- CHAPTER III.
- CHAPTER IV.
- CHAPTER V.

PREFACE.

The changing of the old order in country manors and mansions may be slow or sudden, may have many issues romantic or otherwise, its romantic issues being not necessarily restricted to a change back to the original order; though this admissible instance appears to have been the only romance formerly recognized by novelists as possible in the case. Whether the following production be a picture of other possibilities or not, its incidents may be taken to be fairly well supported by evidence every day forthcoming in most counties.

The writing of the tale was rendered memorable to two persons, at least, by a tedious illness of five months that laid hold of the author soon after the story was begun in a well-known magazine; during which period the narrative had to be strenuously continued by dictation to a predetermined cheerful ending.

As some of these novels of Wessex life address themselves more especially to readers into whose souls the iron has entered, and whose years have less pleasure in them now than heretofore, so "A Laodicean" may perhaps help to while away an idle afternoon of the comfortable ones whose lines have fallen to them in pleasant places; above all, of that large and happy section of the reading public which has not yet reached ripeness of years; those to whom marriage is the pilgrim's Eternal City, and not a milestone on the way. T.H.

January 1896.

BOOK THE FIRST. GEORGE SOMERSET.

CHAPTER I.

The sun blazed down and down, till it was within half-an-hour of its setting; but the sketcher still lingered at his occupation of measuring and copying the chevroned doorway — a bold and quaint example of a transitional style of architecture, which formed the tower entrance to an English village church. The graveyard being quite open on its western side, the tweed-clad figure of the young draughtsman, and the tall mass of antique masonry which rose above him to a battlemented parapet, were fired to a great brightness by the solar rays, that crossed the neighbouring mead like a warp of gold threads, in whose mazes groups of equally lustrous gnats danced and wailed incessantly.

He was so absorbed in his pursuit that he did not mark the brilliant chromatic effect of which he composed the central feature, till it was brought home to his intelligence by the warmth of the moulded stonework under his touch when measuring; which led him at length to turn his head and gaze on its cause.

There are few in whom the sight of a sunset does not beget as much meditative melancholy as contemplative pleasure, the human decline and death that it illustrates

being too obvious to escape the notice of the simplest observer. The sketcher, as if he had been brought to this reflection many hundreds of times before by the same spectacle, showed that he did not wish to pursue it just now, by turning away his face after a few moments, to resume his architectural studies.

He took his measurements carefully, and as if he revered the old workers whose trick he was endeavouring to acquire six hundred years after the original performance had ceased and the performers passed into the unseen. By means of a strip of lead called a leaden tape, which he pressed around and into the fillets and hollows with his finger and thumb, he transferred the exact contour of each moulding to his drawing, that lay on a sketching-stool a few feet distant; where were also a sketching-block, a small T-square, a bow-pencil, and other mathematical instruments. When he had marked down the line thus fixed, he returned to the doorway to copy another as before.

It being the month of August, when the pale face of the townsman and the stranger is to be seen among the brown skins of remotest uplanders, not only in England, but throughout the temperate zone, few of the homeward-bound labourers paused to notice him further than by a momentary turn of the head. They had beheld such gentlemen before, not exactly measuring the church so accurately as this one seemed to be doing, but painting it from a distance, or at least walking round the mouldy pile. At the same time the present visitor, even exteriorly, was not altogether commonplace. His features were good, his eyes of the dark deep sort called eloquent by the sex that ought to know, and with that ray of light in them which announces a heart susceptible to beauty of all kinds, — in woman, in art, and in inanimate nature. Though he would have been broadly characterized as a young man, his face bore contradictory testimonies to his precise age. This was conceivably owing to a too dominant speculative activity in him, which, while it had preserved the emotional side of his constitution, and with it the significant flexuousness of mouth and chin, had played upon his forehead and temples till, at weary moments, they exhibited some traces of being over-exercised. A youthfulness about the mobile features, a mature forehead — though not exactly what the world has been familiar with in past ages — is now growing common; and with the advance of juvenile introspection it probably must grow commoner still. Briefly, he had more of the beauty — if beauty it ought to be called — of the future human type than of the past; but not so much as to make him other than a nice young man.

His build was somewhat slender and tall; his complexion, though a little browned by recent exposure, was that of a man who spent much of his time indoors. Of beard he had but small show, though he was as innocent as a Nazarite of the use of the razor; but he possessed a moustache all-sufficient to hide the subtleties of his mouth, which could thus be tremulous at tender moments without provoking inconvenient criticism.

Owing to his situation on high ground, open to the west, he remained enveloped in the lingering aureate haze till a time when the eastern part of the churchyard was in obscurity, and damp with rising dew. When it was too dark to sketch further he packed up his drawing, and, beckoning to a lad who had been idling by the gate, directed him to carry the stool and implements to a roadside inn which he named, lying a mile

or two ahead. The draughtsman leisurely followed the lad out of the churchyard, and along a lane in the direction signified.

The spectacle of a summer traveller from London sketching mediaeval details in these neo-Pagan days, when a lull has come over the study of English Gothic architecture, through a re-awakening to the art-forms of times that more nearly neighbour our own, is accounted for by the fact that George Somerset, son of the Academician of that name, was a man of independent tastes and excursive instincts, who unconsciously, and perhaps unhappily, took greater pleasure in floating in lonely currents of thought than with the general tide of opinion. When quite a lad, in the days of the French Gothic mania which immediately succeeded to the great English-pointed revival under Britton, Pugin, Rickman, Scott, and other mediaevalists, he had crept away from the fashion to admire what was good in Palladian and Renaissance. As soon as Jacobean, Queen Anne, and kindred accretions of decayed styles began to be popular, he purchased such old-school works as Revett and Stuart, Chambers, and the rest, and worked diligently at the Five Orders; till quite bewildered on the question of style, he concluded that all styles were extinct, and with them all architecture as a living art. Somerset was not old enough at that time to know that, in practice, art had at all times been as full of shifts and compromises as every other mundane thing; that ideal perfection was never achieved by Greek, Goth, or Hebrew Jew, and never would be; and thus he was thrown into a mood of disgust with his profession, from which mood he was only delivered by recklessly abandoning these studies and indulging in an old enthusiasm for poetical literature. For two whole years he did nothing but write verse in every conceivable metre, and on every conceivable subject, from Wordsworthian sonnets on the singing of his tea-kettle to epic fragments on the Fall of Empires. His discovery at the age of five-and-twenty that these inspired works were not jumped at by the publishers with all the eagerness they deserved, coincided in point of time with a severe hint from his father that unless he went on with his legitimate profession he might have to look elsewhere than at home for an allowance. Mr. Somerset junior then awoke to realities, became intently practical, rushed back to his dusty drawing-boards, and worked up the styles anew, with a view of regularly starting in practice on the first day of the following January.

It is an old story, and perhaps only deserves the light tone in which the soaring of a young man into the empyrean, and his descent again, is always narrated. But as has often been said, the light and the truth may be on the side of the dreamer: a far wider view than the wise ones have may be his at that recalcitrant time, and his reduction to common measure be nothing less than a tragic event. The operation called lunging, in which a haltered colt is made to trot round and round a horsebreaker who holds the rope, till the beholder grows dizzy in looking at them, is a very unhappy one for the animal concerned. During its progress the colt springs upward, across the circle, stops, flies over the turf with the velocity of a bird, and indulges in all sorts of graceful antics; but he always ends in one way — thanks to the knotted whipcord — in a level trot round the lunger with the regularity of a horizontal wheel, and in the loss for ever

to his character of the bold contours which the fine hand of Nature gave it. Yet the process is considered to be the making of him.

Whether Somerset became permanently made under the action of the inevitable lunge, or whether he lapsed into mere dabbling with the artistic side of his profession only, it would be premature to say; but at any rate it was his contrite return to architecture as a calling that sent him on the sketching excursion under notice. Feeling that something still was wanting to round off his knowledge before he could take his professional line with confidence, he was led to remember that his own native Gothic was the one form of design that he had totally neglected from the beginning, through its having greeted him with wearisome iteration at the opening of his career. Now it had again returned to silence; indeed — such is the surprising instability of art ‘principles’ as they are facetiously called — it was just as likely as not to sink into the neglect and oblivion which had been its lot in Georgian times. This accident of being out of vogue lent English Gothic an additional charm to one of his proclivities; and away he went to make it the business of a summer circuit in the west.

The quiet time of evening, the secluded neighbourhood, the unusually gorgeous liveries of the clouds packed in a pile over that quarter of the heavens in which the sun had disappeared, were such as to make a traveller loiter on his walk. Coming to a stile, Somerset mounted himself on the top bar, to imbibe the spirit of the scene and hour. The evening was so still that every trifling sound could be heard for miles. There was the rattle of a returning waggon, mixed with the smacks of the waggoner’s whip: the team must have been at least three miles off. From far over the hill came the faint periodic yell of kennelled hounds; while from the nearest village resounded the voices of boys at play in the twilight. Then a powerful clock struck the hour; it was not from the direction of the church, but rather from the wood behind him; and he thought it must be the clock of some mansion that way.

But the mind of man cannot always be forced to take up subjects by the pressure of their material presence, and Somerset’s thoughts were often, to his great loss, apt to be even more than common truants from the tones and images that met his outer senses on walks and rides. He would sometimes go quietly through the queerest, gayest, most extraordinary town in Europe, and let it alone, provided it did not meddle with him by its beggars, beauties, innkeepers, police, coachmen, mongrels, bad smells, and such like obstructions. This feat of questionable utility he began performing now. Sitting on the three-inch ash rail that had been peeled and polished like glass by the rubbings of all the small-clothes in the parish, he forgot the time, the place, forgot that it was August — in short, everything of the present altogether. His mind flew back to his past life, and deplored the waste of time that had resulted from his not having been able to make up his mind which of the many fashions of art that were coming and going in kaleidoscopic change was the true point of departure from himself. He had suffered from the modern malady of unlimited appreciativeness as much as any living man of his own age. Dozens of his fellows in years and experience, who had never thought specially of the matter, but had blunderingly applied themselves to whatever form of

art confronted them at the moment of their making a move, were by this time acquiring renown as new lights; while he was still unknown. He wished that some accident could have hemmed in his eyes between inexorable blinkers, and sped him on in a channel ever so worn.

Thus balanced between believing and not believing in his own future, he was recalled to the scene without by hearing the notes of a familiar hymn, rising in subdued harmonies from a valley below. He listened more heedfully. It was his old friend the 'New Sabbath,' which he had never once heard since the lisping days of childhood, and whose existence, much as it had then been to him, he had till this moment quite forgotten. Where the 'New Sabbath' had kept itself all these years — why that sound and hearty melody had disappeared from all the cathedrals, parish churches, minsters and chapels-of-ease that he had been acquainted with during his apprenticeship to life, and until his ways had become irregular and uncongregational — he could not, at first, say. But then he recollected that the tune appertained to the old west-gallery period of church-music, anterior to the great choral reformation and the rule of Monk — that old time when the repetition of a word, or half-line of a verse, was not considered a disgrace to an ecclesiastical choir.

Willing to be interested in anything which would keep him out-of-doors, Somerset dismounted from the stile and descended the hill before him, to learn whence the singing proceeded.

CHAPTER II.

He found that it had its origin in a building standing alone in a field; and though the evening was not yet dark without, lights shone from the windows. In a few moments Somerset stood before the edifice. Being just then en rapport with ecclesiasticism by reason of his recent occupation, he could not help murmuring, 'Shade of Pugin, what a monstrosity!'

Perhaps this exclamation (rather out of date since the discovery that Pugin himself often nodded amazingly) would not have been indulged in by Somerset but for his new architectural resolves, which caused professional opinions to advance themselves officiously to his lips whenever occasion offered. The building was, in short, a recently-erected chapel of red brick, with pseudo-classic ornamentation, and the white regular joints of mortar could be seen streaking its surface in geometrical oppressiveness from top to bottom. The roof was of blue slate, clean as a table, and unbroken from gable to gable; the windows were glazed with sheets of plate glass, a temporary iron stovepipe passing out near one of these, and running up to the height of the ridge, where it was finished by a covering like a parachute. Walking round to the end, he perceived an oblong white stone let into the wall just above the plinth, on which was inscribed in deep letters: —

Erected 187-

AT THE SOLE EXPENSE OF
JOHN POWER, ESQ., M.P.

The 'New Sabbath' still proceeded line by line, with all the emotional swells and cadences that had of old characterized the tune: and the body of vocal harmony that it evoked implied a large congregation within, to whom it was plainly as familiar as it had been to church-goers of a past generation. With a whimsical sense of regret at the secession of his once favourite air Somerset moved away, and would have quite withdrawn from the field had he not at that moment observed two young men with pitchers of water coming up from a stream hard by, and hastening with their burdens into the chapel vestry by a side door. Almost as soon as they had entered they emerged again with empty pitchers, and proceeded to the stream to fill them as before, an operation which they repeated several times. Somerset went forward to the stream, and waited till the young men came out again.

'You are carrying in a great deal of water,' he said, as each dipped his pitcher.

One of the young men modestly replied, 'Yes: we filled the cistern this morning; but it leaks, and requires a few pitcherfuls more.'

'Why do you do it?'

'There is to be a baptism, sir.'

Somerset was not sufficiently interested to develop a further conversation, and observing them in silence till they had again vanished into the building, he went on his way. Reaching the brow of the hill he stopped and looked back. The chapel was still in view, and the shades of night having deepened, the lights shone from the windows yet more brightly than before. A few steps further would hide them and the edifice, and all that belonged to it from his sight, possibly for ever. There was something in the thought which led him to linger. The chapel had neither beauty, quaintness, nor congeniality to recommend it: the dissimilitude between the new utilitarianism of the place and the scenes of venerable Gothic art which had occupied his daylight hours could not well be exceeded. But Somerset, as has been said, was an instrument of no narrow gamut: he had a key for other touches than the purely aesthetic, even on such an excursion as this. His mind was arrested by the intense and busy energy which must needs belong to an assembly that required such a glare of light to do its religion by; in the heaving of that tune there was an earnestness which made him thoughtful, and the shine of those windows he had characterized as ugly reminded him of the shining of the good deed in a naughty world. The chapel and its shabby plot of ground, from which the herbage was all trodden away by busy feet, had a living human interest that the numerous minsters and churches knee-deep in fresh green grass, visited by him during the foregoing week, had often lacked. Moreover, there was going to be a baptism: that meant the immersion of a grown-up person; and he had been told that Baptists were serious people and that the scene was most impressive. What manner of man would it be who on an ordinary plodding and bustling evening of the nineteenth century could single himself out as one different from the rest of the inhabitants, banish all shyness, and come forward to undergo such a trying ceremony? Who was he that had pondered,

gone into solitudes, wrestled with himself, worked up his courage and said, I will do this, though few else will, for I believe it to be my duty?

Whether on account of these thoughts, or from the circumstance that he had been alone amongst the tombs all day without communion with his kind, he could not tell in after years (when he had good reason to think of the subject); but so it was that Somerset went back, and again stood under the chapel-wall.

Instead of entering he passed round to where the stove-chimney came through the bricks, and holding on to the iron stay he put his toes on the plinth and looked in at the window. The building was quite full of people belonging to that vast majority of society who are denied the art of articulating their higher emotions, and crave dumbly for a fogleman — respectably dressed working people, whose faces and forms were worn and contorted by years of dreary toil. On a platform at the end of the chapel a haggard man of more than middle age, with grey whiskers ascetically cut back from the fore part of his face so far as to be almost banished from the countenance, stood reading a chapter. Between the minister and the congregation was an open space, and in the floor of this was sunk a tank full of water, which just made its surface visible above the blackness of its depths by reflecting the lights overhead.

Somerset endeavoured to discover which one among the assemblage was to be the subject of the ceremony. But nobody appeared there who was at all out of the region of commonplace. The people were all quiet and settled; yet he could discern on their faces something more than attention, though it was less than excitement: perhaps it was expectation. And as if to bear out his surmise he heard at that moment the noise of wheels behind him.

His gaze into the lighted chapel made what had been an evening scene when he looked away from the landscape night itself on looking back; but he could see enough to discover that a brougham had driven up to the side-door used by the young water-bearers, and that a lady in white-and-black half-mourning was in the act of alighting, followed by what appeared to be a waiting-woman carrying wraps. They entered the vestry-room of the chapel, and the door was shut. The service went on as before till at a certain moment the door between vestry and chapel was opened, when a woman came out clothed in an ample robe of flowing white, which descended to her feet. Somerset was unfortunate in his position; he could not see her face, but her gait suggested at once that she was the lady who had arrived just before. She was rather tall than otherwise, and the contour of her head and shoulders denoted a girl in the heyday of youth and activity. His imagination, stimulated by this beginning, set about filling in the meagre outline with most attractive details.

She stood upon the brink of the pool, and the minister descended the steps at its edge till the soles of his shoes were moistened with the water. He turned to the young candidate, but she did not follow him: instead of doing so she remained rigid as a stone. He stretched out his hand, but she still showed reluctance, till, with some embarrassment, he went back, and spoke softly in her ear.

She approached the edge, looked into the water, and turned away shaking her head. Somerset could for the first time see her face. Though humanly imperfect, as is every face we see, it was one which made him think that the best in woman-kind no less than the best in psalm-tunes had gone over to the Dissenters. He had certainly seen nobody so interesting in his tour hitherto; she was about twenty or twenty-one — perhaps twenty-three, for years have a way of stealing marches even upon beauty's anointed. The total dissimilarity between the expression of her lineaments and that of the countenances around her was not a little surprising, and was productive of hypotheses without measure as to how she came there. She was, in fact, emphatically a modern type of maidenhood, and she looked ultra-modern by reason of her environment: a presumably sophisticated being among the simple ones — not wickedly so, but one who knew life fairly well for her age. Her hair, of good English brown, neither light nor dark, was abundant — too abundant for convenience in tying, as it seemed; and it threw off the lamp-light in a hazy lustre. And though it could not be said of her features that this or that was flawless, the nameless charm of them altogether was only another instance of how beautiful a woman can be as a whole without attaining in any one detail to the lines marked out as absolutely correct. The spirit and the life were there: and material shapes could be disregarded.

Whatever moral characteristics this might be the surface of, enough was shown to assure Somerset that she had some experience of things far removed from her present circumscribed horizon, and could live, and was even at that moment living, a clandestine, stealthy inner life which had very little to do with her outward one. The repression of nearly every external sign of that distress under which Somerset knew, by a sudden intuitive sympathy, that she was labouring, added strength to these convictions.

'And you refuse?' said the astonished minister, as she still stood immovable on the brink of the pool. He persuasively took her sleeve between his finger and thumb as if to draw her; but she resented this by a quick movement of displeasure, and he released her, seeing that he had gone too far.

'But, my dear lady,' he said, 'you promised! Consider your profession, and that you stand in the eyes of the whole church as an exemplar of your faith.'

'I cannot do it!'

'But your father's memory, miss; his last dying request!'

'I cannot help it,' she said, turning to get away.

'You came here with the intention to fulfil the Word?'

'But I was mistaken.'

'Then why did you come?'

She tacitly implied that to be a question she did not care to answer. 'Please say no more to me,' she murmured, and hastened to withdraw.

During this unexpected dialogue (which had reached Somerset's ears through the open windows) that young man's feelings had flown hither and thither between minister and lady in a most capricious manner: it had seemed at one moment a rather uncivil

thing of her, charming as she was, to give the minister and the water-bearers so much trouble for nothing; the next, it seemed like reviving the ancient cruelties of the ducking-stool to try to force a girl into that dark water if she had not a mind to it. But the minister was not without insight, and he had seen that it would be useless to say more. The crestfallen old man had to turn round upon the congregation and declare officially that the baptism was postponed.

She passed through the door into the vestry. During the exciting moments of her recusancy there had been a perceptible flutter among the sensitive members of the congregation; nervous Dissenters seeming to be at one with nervous Episcopalians in this at least, that they heartily disliked a scene during service. Calm was restored to their minds by the minister starting a rather long hymn in minims and semibreves, amid the singing of which he ascended the pulpit. His face had a severe and even denunciatory look as he gave out his text, and Somerset began to understand that this meant mischief to the young person who had caused the hitch.

‘In the third chapter of Revelation and the fifteenth and following verses, you will find these words: —

“I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth... Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.”

The sermon straightway began, and it was soon apparent that the commentary was to be no less forcible than the text. It was also apparent that the words were, virtually, not directed forward in the line in which they were uttered, but through the chink of the vestry-door, that had stood slightly ajar since the exit of the young lady. The listeners appeared to feel this no less than Somerset did, for their eyes, one and all, became fixed upon that vestry door as if they would almost push it open by the force of their gazing. The preacher’s heart was full and bitter; no book or note was wanted by him; never was spontaneity more absolute than here. It was no timid reproof of the ornamental kind, but a direct denunciation, all the more vigorous perhaps from the limitation of mind and language under which the speaker laboured. Yet, fool that he had been made by the candidate, there was nothing acrid in his attack. Genuine flashes of rhetorical fire were occasionally struck by that plain and simple man, who knew what straightforward conduct was, and who did not know the illimitable caprice of a woman’s mind.

At this moment there was not in the whole chapel a person whose imagination was not centred on what was invisibly taking place within the vestry. The thunder of the minister’s eloquence echoed, of course, through the weak sister’s cavern of retreat no less than round the public assembly. What she was doing inside there — whether listening contritely, or haughtily hastening to put on her things and get away from the chapel and all it contained — was obviously the thought of each member. What changes were tracing themselves upon that lovely face: did it rise to phases of Raffaelesque

resignation or sink so low as to flush and frown? was Somerset's inquiry; and a half-explanation occurred when, during the discourse, the door which had been ajar was gently pushed to.

Looking on as a stranger it seemed to him more than probable that this young woman's power of persistence in her unexpected repugnance to the rite was strengthened by wealth and position of some sort, and was not the unassisted gift of nature. The manner of her arrival, and her dignified bearing before the assembly, strengthened the belief. A woman who did not feel something extraneous to her mental self to fall back upon would be so far overawed by the people and the crisis as not to retain sufficient resolution for a change of mind.

The sermon ended, the minister wiped his steaming face and turned down his cuffs, and nods and sagacious glances went round. Yet many, even of those who had presumably passed the same ordeal with credit, exhibited gentler judgment than the preacher's on a tergiversation of which they had probably recognized some germ in their own bosoms when in the lady's situation.

For Somerset there was but one scene: the imagined scene of the girl herself as she sat alone in the vestry. The fervent congregation rose to sing again, and then Somerset heard a slight noise on his left hand which caused him to turn his head. The brougham, which had retired into the field to wait, was back again at the door: the subject of his rumination came out from the chapel — not in her mystic robe of white, but dressed in ordinary fashionable costume — followed as before by the attendant with other articles of clothing on her arm, including the white gown. Somerset fancied that the younger woman was drying her eyes with her handkerchief, but there was not much time to see: they quickly entered the carriage, and it moved on. Then a cat suddenly mewed, and he saw a white Persian standing forlorn where the carriage had been. The door was opened, the cat taken in, and the carriage drove away.

The stranger's girlish form stamped itself deeply on Somerset's soul. He strolled on his way quite oblivious to the fact that the moon had just risen, and that the landscape was one for him to linger over, especially if there were any Gothic architecture in the line of the lunar rays. The inference was that though this girl must be of a serious turn of mind, wilfulness was not foreign to her composition: and it was probable that her daily doings evinced without much abatement by religion the unbroken spirit and pride of life natural to her age.

The little village inn at which Somerset intended to pass the night lay a mile further on, and retracing his way up to the stile he rambled along the lane, now beginning to be streaked like a zebra with the shadows of some young trees that edged the road. But his attention was attracted to the other side of the way by a hum as of a night-bee, which arose from the play of the breezes over a single wire of telegraph running parallel with his track on tall poles that had appeared by the road, he hardly knew when, from a branch route, probably leading from some town in the neighbourhood to the village he was approaching. He did not know the population of Sleeping-Green, as the village of his search was called, but the presence of this mark of civilization seemed

to signify that its inhabitants were not quite so far in the rear of their age as might be imagined; a glance at the still ungrassed heap of earth round the foot of each post was, however, sufficient to show that it was at no very remote period that they had made their advance.

Aided by this friendly wire Somerset had no difficulty in keeping his course, till he reached a point in the ascent of a hill at which the telegraph branched off from the road, passing through an opening in the hedge, to strike across an undulating down, while the road wound round to the left. For a few moments Somerset doubted and stood still. The wire sang on overhead with dying falls and melodious rises that invited him to follow; while above the wire rode the stars in their courses, the low nocturn of the former seeming to be the voices of those stars,

‘Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubim.’

Recalling himself from these reflections Somerset decided to follow the lead of the wire. It was not the first time during his present tour that he had found his way at night by the help of these musical threads which the post-office authorities had erected all over the country for quite another purpose than to guide belated travellers. Plunging with it across the down he came to a hedgeless road that entered a park or chase, which flourished in all its original wildness. Tufts of rushes and brakes of fern rose from the hollows, and the road was in places half overgrown with green, as if it had not been tended for many years; so much so that, where shaded by trees, he found some difficulty in keeping it. Though he had noticed the remains of a deer-fence further back no deer were visible, and it was scarcely possible that there should be any in the existing state of things: but rabbits were multitudinous, every hillock being dotted with their seated figures till Somerset approached and sent them limping into their burrows. The road next wound round a clump of underwood beside which lay heaps of faggots for burning, and then there appeared against the sky the walls and towers of a castle, half ruin, half residence, standing on an eminence hard by.

Somerset stopped to examine it. The castle was not exceptionally large, but it had all the characteristics of its most important fellows. Irregular, dilapidated, and muffled in creepers as a great portion of it was, some part — a comparatively modern wing — was inhabited, for a light or two steadily gleamed from some upper windows; in others a reflection of the moon denoted that unbroken glass yet filled their casements. Over all rose the keep, a square solid tower apparently not much injured by wars or weather, and darkened with ivy on one side, wherein wings could be heard flapping uncertainly, as if they belonged to a bird unable to find a proper perch. Hissing noises supervened, and then a hoot, proclaiming that a brood of young owls were residing there in the company of older ones. In spite of the habitable and more modern wing, neglect and decay had set their mark upon the outworks of the pile, unfitting them for a more positive light than that of the present hour.

He walked up to a modern arch spanning the ditch — now dry and green — over which the drawbridge once had swung. The large door under the porter’s archway was closed and locked. While standing here the singing of the wire, which for the last

few minutes he had quite forgotten, again struck upon his ear, and retreating to a convenient place he observed its final course: from the poles amid the trees it leaped across the moat, over the girdling wall, and thence by a tremendous stretch towards the keep where, to judge by sound, it vanished through an arrow-slit into the interior. This fossil of feudalism, then, was the journey's-end of the wire, and not the village of Sleeping-Green.

There was a certain unexpectedness in the fact that the hoary memorial of a stolid antagonism to the interchange of ideas, the monument of hard distinctions in blood and race, of deadly mistrust of one's neighbour in spite of the Church's teaching, and of a sublime unconsciousness of any other force than a brute one, should be the goal of a machine which beyond everything may be said to symbolize cosmopolitan views and the intellectual and moral kinship of all mankind. In that light the little buzzing wire had a far finer significance to the student Somerset than the vast walls which neighboured it. But the modern fever and fret which consumes people before they can grow old was also signified by the wire; and this aspect of to-day did not contrast well with the fairer side of feudalism — leisure, light-hearted generosity, intense friendships, hawks, hounds, revels, healthy complexions, freedom from care, and such a living power in architectural art as the world may never again see.

Somerset withdrew till neither the singing of the wire nor the hisses of the irritable owls could be heard any more. A clock in the castle struck ten, and he recognized the strokes as those he had heard when sitting on the stile. It was indispensable that he should retrace his steps and push on to Sleeping-Green if he wished that night to reach his lodgings, which had been secured by letter at a little inn in the straggling line of roadside houses called by the above name, where his luggage had by this time probably arrived. In a quarter of an hour he was again at the point where the wire left the road, and following the highway over a hill he saw the hamlet at his feet.

CHAPTER III.

By half-past ten the next morning Somerset was once more approaching the precincts of the building which had interested him the night before. Referring to his map he had learnt that it bore the name of Stancy Castle or Castle de Stancy; and he had been at once struck with its familiarity, though he had never understood its position in the county, believing it further to the west. If report spoke truly there was some excellent vaulting in the interior, and a change of study from ecclesiastical to secular Gothic was not unwelcome for a while.

The entrance-gate was open now, and under the archway the outer ward was visible, a great part of it being laid out as a flower-garden. This was in process of clearing from weeds and rubbish by a set of gardeners, and the soil was so encumbered that in rooting out the weeds such few hardy flowers as still remained in the beds were mostly brought up with them. The groove wherein the portcullis had run was as fresh as if

only cut yesterday, the very tooling of the stone being visible. Close to this hung a bell-pull formed of a large wooden acorn attached to a vertical rod. Somerset's application brought a woman from the porter's door, who informed him that the day before having been the weekly show-day for visitors, it was doubtful if he could be admitted now.

'Who is at home?' said Somerset.

'Only Miss de Stancy,' the portress replied.

His dread of being considered an intruder was such that he thought at first there was no help for it but to wait till the next week. But he had already through his want of effrontery lost a sight of many interiors, whose exhibition would have been rather a satisfaction to the inmates than a trouble. It was inconvenient to wait; he knew nobody in the neighbourhood from whom he could get an introductory letter: he turned and passed the woman, crossed the ward where the gardeners were at work, over a second and smaller bridge, and up a flight of stone stairs, open to the sky, along whose steps sunburnt Tudor soldiers and other renowned dead men had doubtless many times walked. It led to the principal door on this side. Thence he could observe the walls of the lower court in detail, and the old mosses with which they were padded — mosses that from time immemorial had been burnt brown every summer, and every winter had grown green again. The arrow-slit and the electric wire that entered it, like a worm uneasy at being unearthed, were distinctly visible now. So also was the clock, not, as he had supposed, a chronometer coeval with the fortress itself, but new and shining, and bearing the name of a recent maker.

The door was opened by a bland, intensely shaven man out of livery, who took Somerset's name and politely worded request to be allowed to inspect the architecture of the more public portions of the castle. He pronounced the word 'architecture' in the tone of a man who knew and practised that art; 'for,' he said to himself, 'if she thinks I am a mere idle tourist, it will not be so well.'

No such uncomfortable consequences ensued. Miss De Stancy had great pleasure in giving Mr. Somerset full permission to walk through whatever parts of the building he chose.

He followed the butler into the inner buildings of the fortress, the ponderous thickness of whose walls made itself felt like a physical pressure. An internal stone staircase, ranged round four sides of a square, was next revealed, leading at the top of one flight into a spacious hall, which seemed to occupy the whole area of the keep. From this apartment a corridor floored with black oak led to the more modern wing, where light and air were treated in a less gingerly fashion.

Here passages were broader than in the oldest portion, and upholstery enlisted in the service of the fine arts hid to a great extent the coldness of the walls.

Somerset was now left to himself, and roving freely from room to room he found time to inspect the different objects of interest that abounded there. Not all the chambers, even of the habitable division, were in use as dwelling-rooms, though these were still numerous enough for the wants of an ordinary country family. In a long gallery with a coved ceiling of arabesques which had once been gilded, hung a series of paintings

representing the past personages of the De Stancy line. It was a remarkable array — even more so on account of the incredibly neglected condition of the canvases than for the artistic peculiarities they exhibited. Many of the frames were dropping apart at their angles, and some of the canvas was so dingy that the face of the person depicted was only distinguishable as the moon through mist. For the colour they had now they might have been painted during an eclipse; while, to judge by the webs tying them to the wall, the spiders that ran up and down their backs were such as to make the fair originals shudder in their graves.

He wondered how many of the lofty foreheads and smiling lips of this pictorial pedigree could be credited as true reflections of their prototypes. Some were wilfully false, no doubt; many more so by unavoidable accident and want of skill. Somerset felt that it required a profounder mind than his to disinter from the lumber of conventionality the lineaments that really sat in the painter's presence, and to discover their history behind the curtain of mere tradition.

The painters of this long collection were those who usually appear in such places; Holbein, Jansen, and Vandyck; Sir Peter, Sir Geoffrey, Sir Joshua, and Sir Thomas. Their sitters, too, had mostly been sirs; Sir William, Sir John, or Sir George De Stancy — some undoubtedly having a nobility stamped upon them beyond that conferred by their robes and orders; and others not so fortunate. Their respective ladies hung by their sides — feeble and watery, or fat and comfortable, as the case might be; also their fathers and mothers-in-law, their brothers and remoter relatives; their contemporary reigning princes, and their intimate friends. Of the De Stancys pure there ran through the collection a mark by which they might surely have been recognized as members of one family; this feature being the upper part of the nose. Every one, even if lacking other points in common, had the special indent at this point in the face — sometimes moderate in degree, sometimes excessive.

While looking at the pictures — which, though not in his regular line of study, interested Somerset more than the architecture, because of their singular dilapidation, it occurred to his mind that he had in his youth been schoolfellow for a very short time with a pleasant boy bearing a surname attached to one of the paintings — the name of Ravensbury. The boy had vanished he knew not how — he thought he had been removed from school suddenly on account of ill health. But the recollection was vague, and Somerset moved on to the rooms above and below. In addition to the architectural details of which he had as yet obtained but glimpses, there was a great collection of old movables and other domestic art-work — all more than a century old, and mostly lying as lumber. There were suites of tapestry hangings, common and fine; green and scarlet leather-work, on which the gilding was still but little injured; venerable damask curtains; quilted silk table-covers, ebony cabinets, worked satin window-cushions, carved bedsteads, and embroidered bed-furniture which had apparently screened no sleeper for these many years. Downstairs there was also an interesting collection of armour, together with several huge trunks and coffer. A great many of them had been recently taken out and cleaned, as if a long dormant interest in them were suddenly revived.

Doubtless they were those which had been used by the living originals of the phantoms that looked down from the frames.

This excellent hoard of suggestive designs for wood-work, metal-work, and work of other sorts, induced Somerset to divert his studies from the ecclesiastical direction, to acquire some new ideas from the objects here for domestic application. Yet for the present he was inclined to keep his sketch-book closed and his ivory rule folded, and devote himself to a general survey. Emerging from the ground-floor by a small doorway, he found himself on a terrace to the north-east, and on the other side than that by which he had entered. It was bounded by a parapet breast high, over which a view of the distant country met the eye, stretching from the foot of the slope to a distance of many miles. Somerset went and leaned over, and looked down upon the tops of the bushes beneath. The prospect included the village he had passed through on the previous day: and amidst the green lights and shades of the meadows he could discern the red brick chapel whose recalcitrant inmate had so engrossed him.

Before his attention had long strayed over the incident which romanticized that utilitarian structure, he became aware that he was not the only person who was looking from the terrace towards that point of the compass. At the right-hand corner, in a niche of the curtain-wall, reclined a girlish shape; and asleep on the bench over which she leaned was a white cat — the identical Persian as it seemed — that had been taken into the carriage at the chapel-door.

Somerset began to muse on the probability or otherwise of the backsliding Baptist and this young lady resulting in one and the same person; and almost without knowing it he found himself deeply hoping for such a unity. The object of his inspection was idly leaning, and this somewhat disguised her figure. It might have been tall or short, curvilinear or angular. She carried a light sunshade which she fitfully twirled until, thrusting it back over her shoulder, her head was revealed sufficiently to show that she wore no hat or bonnet. This token of her being an inmate of the castle, and not a visitor, rather damped his expectations: but he persisted in believing her look towards the chapel must have a meaning in it, till she suddenly stood erect, and revealed herself as short in stature — almost dumpy — at the same time giving him a distinct view of her profile. She was not at all like the heroine of the chapel. He saw the dented nose of the De Stancys outlined with Holbein shadowlessness against the blue-green of the distant wood. It was not the De Stancy face with all its original specialities: it was, so to speak, a defective reprint of that face: for the nose tried hard to turn up and deal utter confusion to the family shape.

As for the rest of the countenance, Somerset was obliged to own that it was not beautiful: Nature had done there many things that she ought not to have done, and left undone much that she should have executed. It would have been decidedly plain but for a precious quality which no perfection of chiselling can give when the temperament denies it, and which no facial irregularity can take away — a tender affectionateness which might almost be called yearning; such as is often seen in the women of Correggio when they are painted in profile. But the plain features of Miss De Stancy — who she

undoubtedly was — were rather severely handled by Somerset's judgment owing to his impression of the previous night. A beauty of a sort would have been lent by the flexuous contours of the mobile parts but for that unfortunate condition the poor girl was burdened with, of having to hand on a traditional feature with which she did not find herself otherwise in harmony.

She glanced at him for a moment, and showed by an imperceptible movement that he had made his presence felt. Not to embarrass her Somerset hastened to withdraw, at the same time that she passed round to the other part of the terrace, followed by the cat, in whom Somerset could imagine a certain denominational cast of countenance, notwithstanding her company. But as white cats are much alike each other at a distance, it was reasonable to suppose this creature was not the same one as that possessed by the beauty.

CHAPTER IV.

He descended the stone stairs to a lower story of the castle, in which was a crypt-like hall covered by vaulting of exceptional and massive ingenuity:

'Built ere the art was known,
By pointed aisle and shafted stalk
The arcades of an alleyed walk
To emulate in stone.'

It happened that the central pillar whereon the vaults rested, reputed to exhibit some of the most hideous grotesques in England upon its capital, was within a locked door. Somerset was tempted to ask a servant for permission to open it, till he heard that the inner room was temporarily used for plate, the key being kept by Miss De Stancy, at which he said no more. But afterwards the active housemaid redescended the stone steps; she entered the crypt with a bunch of keys in one hand, and in the other a candle, followed by the young lady whom Somerset had seen on the terrace.

'I shall be very glad to unlock anything you may want to see. So few people take any real interest in what is here that we do not leave it open.'

Somerset expressed his thanks.

Miss De Stancy, a little to his surprise, had a touch of rusticity in her manner, and that forced absence of reserve which seclusion from society lends to young women more frequently than not. She seemed glad to have something to do; the arrival of Somerset was plainly an event sufficient to set some little mark upon her day. Deception had been written on the faces of those frowning walls in their implying the insignificance of Somerset, when he found them tenanted only by this little woman whose life was narrower than his own.

'We have not been here long,' continued Miss De Stancy, 'and that's why everything is in such a dilapidated and confused condition.'

Somerset entered the dark store-closet, thinking less of the ancient pillar revealed by the light of the candle than what a singular remark the latter was to come from a member of the family which appeared to have been there five centuries. He held the candle above his head, and walked round, and presently Miss De Stancy came back.

‘There is another vault below,’ she said, with the severe face of a young woman who speaks only because it is absolutely necessary. ‘Perhaps you are not aware of it? It was the dungeon: if you wish to go down there too, the servant will show you the way. It is not at all ornamental: rough, unhewn arches and clumsy piers.’

Somerset thanked her, and would perhaps take advantage of her kind offer when he had examined the spot where he was, if it were not causing inconvenience.

‘No; I am sure Paula will be glad to know that anybody thinks it interesting to go down there — which is more than she does herself.’

Some obvious inquiries were suggested by this, but Somerset said, ‘I have seen the pictures, and have been much struck by them; partly,’ he added, with some hesitation, ‘because one or two of them reminded me of a schoolfellow — I think his name was John Ravensbury?’

‘Yes,’ she said, almost eagerly. ‘He was my cousin!’

‘So that we are not quite strangers?’

‘But he is dead now... He was unfortunate: he was mostly spoken of as “that unlucky boy.”... You know, I suppose, Mr. Somerset, why the paintings are in such a decaying state! — it is owing to the peculiar treatment of the castle during Mr. Wilkins’s time. He was blind; so one can imagine he did not appreciate such things as there are here.’

‘The castle has been shut up, you mean?’

‘O yes, for many years. But it will not be so again. We are going to have the pictures cleaned, and the frames mended, and the old pieces of furniture put in their proper places. It will be very nice then. Did you see those in the east closet?’

‘I have only seen those in the gallery.’

‘I will just show you the way to the others, if you would like to see them?’

They ascended to the room designated the east closet. The paintings here, mostly of smaller size, were in a better condition, owing to the fact that they were hung on an inner wall, and had hence been kept free from damp. Somerset inquired the names and histories of one or two.

‘I really don’t quite know,’ Miss De Stancy replied after some thought. ‘But Paula knows, I am sure. I don’t study them much — I don’t see the use of it.’ She swung her sunshade, so that it fell open, and turned it up till it fell shut. ‘I have never been able to give much attention to ancestors,’ she added, with her eyes on the parasol.

‘These ARE your ancestors?’ he asked, for her position and tone were matters which perplexed him. In spite of the family likeness and other details he could scarcely believe this frank and communicative country maiden to be the modern representative of the De Stancys.

‘O yes, they certainly are,’ she said, laughing. ‘People say I am like them: I don’t know if I am — well, yes, I know I am: I can see that, of course, any day. But they

have gone from my family, and perhaps it is just as well that they should have gone... They are useless,' she added, with serene conclusiveness.

'Ah! they have gone, have they?'

'Yes, castle and furniture went together: it was long ago — long before I was born. It doesn't seem to me as if the place ever belonged to a relative of mine.'

Somerset corrected his smiling manner to one of solicitude.

'But you live here, Miss De Stancy?'

'Yes — a great deal now; though sometimes I go home to sleep.'

'This is home to you, and not home?'

'I live here with Paula — my friend: I have not been here long, neither has she. For the first six months after her father's death she did not come here at all.'

They walked on, gazing at the walls, till the young man said: 'I fear I may be making some mistake: but I am sure you will pardon my inquisitiveness this once. WHO is Paula?'

'Ah, you don't know! Of course you don't — local changes don't get talked of far away. She is the owner of this castle and estate. My father sold it when he was quite a young man, years before I was born, and not long after his father's death. It was purchased by a man named Wilkins, a rich man who became blind soon after he had bought it, and never lived here; so it was left uncared for.'

She went out upon the terrace; and without exactly knowing why, Somerset followed.

'Your friend — '

'Has only come here quite recently. She is away from home to-day... It was very sad,' murmured the young girl thoughtfully. 'No sooner had Mr. Power bought it of the representatives of Mr. Wilkins — almost immediately indeed — than he died from a chill caught after a warm bath. On account of that she did not take possession for several months; and even now she has only had a few rooms prepared as a temporary residence till she can think what to do. Poor thing, it is sad to be left alone!'

Somerset heedfully remarked that he thought he recognized that name Power, as one he had seen lately, somewhere or other.

'Perhaps you have been hearing of her father. Do you know what he was?'

Somerset did not.

She looked across the distant country, where undulations of dark-green foliage formed a prospect extending for miles. And as she watched, and Somerset's eyes, led by hers, watched also, a white streak of steam, thin as a cotton thread, could be discerned ploughing that green expanse. 'Her father made THAT,' Miss De Stancy said, directing her finger towards the object.

'That what?'

'That railway. He was Mr. John Power, the great railway contractor. And it was through making the railway that he discovered this castle — the railway was diverted a little on its account.'

'A clash between ancient and modern.'

‘Yes, but he took an interest in the locality long before he purchased the estate. And he built the people a chapel on a bit of freehold he bought for them. He was a great Nonconformist, a staunch Baptist up to the day of his death — a much stauncher one,’ she said significantly, ‘than his daughter is.’

‘Ah, I begin to spot her!’

‘You have heard about the baptism?’

‘I know something of it.’

‘Her conduct has given mortal offence to the scattered people of the denomination that her father was at such pains to unite into a body.’

Somerset could guess the remainder, and in thinking over the circumstances did not state what he had seen. She added, as if disappointed at his want of curiosity —

‘She would not submit to the rite when it came to the point. The water looked so cold and dark and fearful, she said, that she could not do it to save her life.’

‘Surely she should have known her mind before she had gone so far?’ Somerset’s words had a condemnatory form, but perhaps his actual feeling was that if Miss Power had known her own mind, she would have not interested him half so much.

‘Paula’s own mind had nothing to do with it!’ said Miss De Stancy, warming up to staunch partizanship in a moment. ‘It was all undertaken by her from a mistaken sense of duty. It was her father’s dying wish that she should make public profession of her — what do you call it — of the denomination she belonged to, as soon as she felt herself fit to do it: so when he was dead she tried and tried, and didn’t get any more fit; and at last she screwed herself up to the pitch, and thought she must undergo the ceremony out of pure reverence for his memory. It was very short-sighted of her father to put her in such a position: because she is now very sad, as she feels she can never try again after such a sermon as was delivered against her.’

Somerset presumed that Miss Power need not have heard this Knox or Bossuet of hers if she had chosen to go away?

‘She did not hear it in the face of the congregation; but from the vestry. She told me some of it when she reached home. Would you believe it, the man who preached so bitterly is a tenant of hers? I said, “Surely you will turn him out of his house?” — But she answered, in her calm, deep, nice way, that she supposed he had a perfect right to preach against her, that she could not in justice molest him at all. I wouldn’t let him stay if the house were mine. But she has often before allowed him to scold her from the pulpit in a smaller way — once it was about an expensive dress she had worn — not mentioning her by name, you know; but all the people are quite aware that it is meant for her, because only one person of her wealth or position belongs to the Baptist body in this county.’

Somerset was looking at the homely affectionate face of the little speaker. ‘You are her good friend, I am sure,’ he remarked.

She looked into the distant air with tacit admission of the impeachment. ‘So would you be if you knew her,’ she said; and a blush slowly rose to her cheek, as if the person spoken of had been a lover rather than a friend.

‘But you are not a Baptist any more than I?’ continued Somerset.

‘O no. And I never knew one till I knew Paula. I think they are very nice; though I sometimes wish Paula was not one, but the religion of reasonable persons.’

They walked on, and came opposite to where the telegraph emerged from the trees, leapt over the parapet, and up through the loophole into the interior.

‘That looks strange in such a building,’ said her companion.

‘Miss Power had it put up to know the latest news from town. It costs six pounds a mile. She can work it herself, beautifully: and so can I, but not so well. It was a great delight to learn. Miss Power was so interested at first that she was sending messages from morning till night. And did you hear the new clock?’

‘Is it a new one? — Yes, I heard it.’

‘The old one was quite worn out; so Paula has put it in the cellar, and had this new one made, though it still strikes on the old bell. It tells the seconds, but the old one, which my very great grandfather erected in the eighteenth century, only told the hours. Paula says that time, being so much more valuable now, must of course be cut up into smaller pieces.’

‘She does not appear to be much impressed by the spirit of this ancient pile.’

Miss De Stancy shook her head too slightly to express absolute negation.

‘Do you wish to come through this door?’ she asked. ‘There is a singular chimney-piece in the kitchen, which is considered a unique example of its kind, though I myself don’t know enough about it to have an opinion on the subject.’

When they had looked at the corbelled chimney-piece they returned to the hall, where his eye was caught anew by a large map that he had conned for some time when alone, without being able to divine the locality represented. It was called ‘General Plan of the Town,’ and showed streets and open spaces corresponding with nothing he had seen in the county.

‘Is that town here?’ he asked.

‘It is not anywhere but in Paula’s brain; she has laid it out from her own design. The site is supposed to be near our railway station, just across there, where the land belongs to her. She is going to grant cheap building leases, and develop the manufacture of pottery.’

‘Pottery — how very practical she must be!’

‘O no! no!’ replied Miss De Stancy, in tones showing how supremely ignorant he must be of Miss Power’s nature if he characterized her in those terms. ‘It is GREEK pottery she means — Hellenic pottery she tells me to call it, only I forget. There is beautiful clay at the place, her father told her: he found it in making the railway tunnel. She has visited the British Museum, continental museums, and Greece, and Spain: and hopes to imitate the old fictile work in time, especially the Greek of the best period, four hundred years after Christ, or before Christ — I forget which it was Paula said... O no, she is not practical in the sense you mean, at all.’

‘A mixed young lady, rather.’

Miss De Stancy appeared unable to settle whether this new definition of her dear friend should be accepted as kindly, or disallowed as decidedly sarcastic. 'You would like her if you knew her,' she insisted, in half tones of pique; after which she walked on a few steps.

'I think very highly of her,' said Somerset.

'And I! And yet at one time I could never have believed that I should have been her friend. One is prejudiced at first against people who are reported to have such differences in feeling, associations, and habit, as she seemed to have from mine. But it has not stood in the least in the way of our liking each other. I believe the difference makes us the more united.'

'It says a great deal for the liberality of both,' answered Somerset warmly. 'Heaven send us more of the same sort of people! They are not too numerous at present.'

As this remark called for no reply from Miss De Stancy, she took advantage of an opportunity to leave him alone, first repeating her permission to him to wander where he would. He walked about for some time, sketch-book in hand, but was conscious that his interest did not lie much in the architecture. In passing along the corridor of an upper floor he observed an open door, through which was visible a room containing one of the finest Renaissance cabinets he had ever seen. It was impossible, on close examination, to do justice to it in a hasty sketch; it would be necessary to measure every line if he would bring away anything of utility to him as a designer. Deciding to reserve this gem for another opportunity he cast his eyes round the room and blushed a little. Without knowing it he had intruded into the absent Miss Paula's own particular set of chambers, including a boudoir and sleeping apartment. On the tables of the sitting-room were most of the popular papers and periodicals that he knew, not only English, but from Paris, Italy, and America. Satirical prints, though they did not unduly preponderate, were not wanting. Besides these there were books from a London circulating library, paper-covered light literature in French and choice Italian, and the latest monthly reviews; while between the two windows stood the telegraph apparatus whose wire had been the means of bringing him hither.

These things, ensconced amid so much of the old and hoary, were as if a stray hour from the nineteenth century had wandered like a butterfly into the thirteenth, and lost itself there.

The door between this ante-chamber and the sleeping-room stood open. Without venturing to cross the threshold, for he felt that he would be abusing hospitality to go so far, Somerset looked in for a moment. It was a pretty place, and seemed to have been hastily fitted up. In a corner, overhung by a blue and white canopy of silk, was a little cot, hardly large enough to impress the character of bedroom upon the old place. Upon a counterpane lay a parasol and a silk neckerchief. On the other side of the room was a tall mirror of startling newness, draped like the bedstead, in blue and white. Thrown at random upon the floor was a pair of satin slippers that would have fitted Cinderella. A dressing-gown lay across a settee; and opposite, upon a small easy-chair in the same blue and white livery, were a Bible, the Baptist Magazine, Wardlaw on

Infant Baptism, Walford's County Families, and the Court Journal. On and over the mantelpiece were nicknacks of various descriptions, and photographic portraits of the artistic, scientific, and literary celebrities of the day.

A dressing-room lay beyond; but, becoming conscious that his study of ancient architecture would hardly bear stretching further in that direction, Mr. Somerset retreated to the outside, obliviously passing by the gem of Renaissance that had led him in.

'She affects blue,' he was thinking. 'Then she is fair.'

On looking up, some time later, at the new clock that told the seconds, he found that the hours at his disposal for work had flown without his having transferred a single feature of the building or furniture to his sketch-book. Before leaving he sent in for permission to come again, and then walked across the fields to the inn at Sleeping-Green, reflecting less upon Miss De Stancy (so little force of presence had she possessed) than upon the modern flower in a mediaeval flower-pot whom Miss De Stancy's information had brought before him, and upon the incongruities that were daily shaping themselves in the world under the great modern fluctuations of classes and creeds.

Somerset was still full of the subject when he arrived at the end of his walk, and he fancied that some loungers at the bar of the inn were discussing the heroine of the chapel-scene just at the moment of his entry. On this account, when the landlord came to clear away the dinner, Somerset was led to inquire of him, by way of opening a conversation, if there were many Baptists in the neighbourhood.

The landlord (who was a serious man on the surface, though he occasionally smiled beneath) replied that there were a great many — far more than the average in country parishes. 'Even here, in my house, now,' he added, 'when volks get a drop of drink into 'em, and their feelings rise to a zong, some man will strike up a hymn by preference. But I find no fault with that; for though 'tis hardly human nature to be so calculating in yer cups, a feller may as well sing to gain something as sing to waste.'

'How do you account for there being so many?'

'Well, you zee, sir, some says one thing, and some another; I think they does it to save the expense of a Christian burial for ther children. Now there's a poor family out in Long Lane — the husband used to smite for Jimmy More the blacksmith till 'a hurt his arm — they'd have no less than eleven children if they'd not been lucky t'other way, and buried five when they were three or four months old. Now every one of them children was given to the sexton in a little box that any journeyman could nail together in a quarter of an hour, and he buried 'em at night for a shilling a head; whereas 'twould have cost a couple of pounds each if they'd been christened at church... Of course there's the new lady at the castle, she's a chapel member, and that may make a little difference; but she's not been here long enough to show whether 'twill be worth while to join 'em for the profit o't or whether 'twill not. No doubt if it turns out that she's of a sort to relieve volks in trouble, more will join her set than belongs to it already. "Any port in a storm," of course, as the saying is.'

'As for yourself, you are a Churchman at present, I presume?'

‘Yes; not but I was a Methodist once — ay, for a length of time. ‘Twas owing to my taking a house next door to a chapel; so that what with hearing the organ bizz like a bee through the wall, and what with finding it saved umbrellas on wet Zundays, I went over to that faith for two years — though I believe I dropped money by it — I wouldn’t be the man to say so if I hadn’t. Howsomever, when I moved into this house I turned back again to my old religion. Faith, I don’t zee much difference: be you one, or be you t’other, you’ve got to get your living.’

‘The De Stancys, of course, have not much influence here now, for that, or any other thing?’

‘O no, no; not any at all. They be very low upon ground, and always will be now, I suppose. It was thoughted worthy of being recorded in history — you’ve read it, sir, no doubt?’

‘Not a word.’

‘O, then, you shall. I’ve got the history zomewhere. ‘Twas gay manners that did it. The only bit of luck they have had of late years is Miss Power’s taking to little Miss De Stancy, and making her her company-keeper. I hope ‘twill continue.’

That the two daughters of these antipodean families should be such intimate friends was a situation which pleased Somerset as much as it did the landlord. It was an engaging instance of that human progress on which he had expended many charming dreams in the years when poetry, theology, and the reorganization of society had seemed matters of more importance to him than a profession which should help him to a big house and income, a fair Deiopeia, and a lovely progeny. When he was alone he poured out a glass of wine, and silently drank the healths of the two generous-minded young women who, in this lonely district, had found sweet communion a necessity of life, and by pure and instinctive good sense had broken down a barrier which men thrice their age and repute would probably have felt it imperative to maintain. But perhaps this was premature: the omnipotent Miss Power’s character — practical or ideal, politic or impulsive — he as yet knew nothing of; and giving over reasoning from insufficient data he lapsed into mere conjecture.

CHAPTER V.

The next morning Somerset was again at the castle. He passed some interval on the walls before encountering Miss De Stancy, whom at last he observed going towards a pony-carriage that waited near the door.

A smile gained strength upon her face at his approach, and she was the first to speak. ‘I am sorry Miss Power has not returned,’ she said, and accounted for that lady’s absence by her distress at the event of two evenings earlier.

‘But I have driven over to my father’s — Sir William De Stancy’s — house this morning,’ she went on. ‘And on mentioning your name to him, I found he knew it quite well. You will, will you not, forgive my ignorance in having no better knowledge of the

elder Mr. Somerset's works than a dim sense of his fame as a painter? But I was going to say that my father would much like to include you in his personal acquaintance, and wishes me to ask if you will give him the pleasure of lunching with him to-day. My cousin John, whom you once knew, was a great favourite of his, and used to speak of you sometimes. It will be so kind if you can come. My father is an old man, out of society, and he would be glad to hear the news of town.'

Somerset said he was glad to find himself among friends where he had only expected strangers; and promised to come that day, if she would tell him the way.

That she could easily do. The short way was across that glade he saw there — then over the stile into the wood, following the path till it came out upon the turnpike-road. He would then be almost close to the house. The distance was about two miles and a half. But if he thought it too far for a walk, she would drive on to the town, where she had been going when he came, and instead of returning straight to her father's would come back and pick him up.

It was not at all necessary, he thought. He was a walker, and could find the path.

At this moment a servant came to tell Miss De Stancy that the telegraph was calling her.

'Ah — it is lucky that I was not gone again!' she exclaimed. 'John seldom reads it right if I am away.'

It now seemed quite in the ordinary course that, as a friend of her father's, he should accompany her to the instrument. So up they went together, and immediately on reaching it she applied her ear to the instrument, and began to gather the message. Somerset fancied himself like a person overlooking another's letter, and moved aside.

'It is no secret,' she said, smiling. "'Paula to Charlotte," it begins.'

'That's very pretty.'

'O — and it is about — you,' murmured Miss De Stancy.

'Me?' The architect blushed a little.

She made no answer, and the machine went on with its story. There was something curious in watching this utterance about himself, under his very nose, in language unintelligible to him. He conjectured whether it were inquiry, praise, or blame, with a sense that it might reasonably be the latter, as the result of his surreptitious look into that blue bedroom, possibly observed and reported by some servant of the house.

"Direct that every facility be given to Mr. Somerset to visit any part of the castle he may wish to see. On my return I shall be glad to welcome him as the acquaintance of your relatives. I have two of his father's pictures."

'Dear me, the plot thickens,' he said, as Miss De Stancy announced the words. 'How could she know about me?'

'I sent a message to her this morning when I saw you crossing the park on your way here — telling her that Mr. Somerset, son of the Academician, was making sketches of the castle, and that my father knew something of you. That's her answer.'

'Where are the pictures by my father that she has purchased?'

'O, not here — at least, not unpacked.'

Miss de Stancy then left him to proceed on her journey to Markton (so the nearest little town was called), informing him that she would be at her father's house to receive him at two o'clock. Just about one he closed his sketch-book, and set out in the direction she had indicated. At the entrance to the wood a man was at work pulling down a rotten gate that bore on its battered lock the initials 'W. De S.' and erecting a new one whose ironmongery exhibited the letters 'P. P.'

The warmth of the summer noon did not inconveniently penetrate the dense masses of foliage which now began to overhang the path, except in spots where a ruthless timber-felling had taken place in previous years for the purpose of sale. It was that particular half-hour of the day in which the birds of the forest prefer walking to flying; and there being no wind, the hopping of the smallest songster over the dead leaves reached his ear from behind the undergrowth. The track had originally been a well-kept winding drive, but a deep carpet of moss and leaves overlaid it now, though the general outline still remained to show that its curves had been set out with as much care as those of a lawn walk, and the gradient made easy for carriages where the natural slopes were great. Felled trunks occasionally lay across it, and alongside were the hollow and fungous boles of trees sawn down in long past years.

After a walk of three-quarters of an hour he came to another gate, where the letters 'P. P.' again supplanted the historical 'W. De S.' Climbing over this, he found himself on a highway which presently dipped down towards the town of Markton, a place he had never yet seen. It appeared in the distance as a quiet little borough of a few thousand inhabitants; and, without the town boundary on the side he was approaching, stood half-a-dozen genteel and modern houses, of the detached kind usually found in such suburbs. On inquiry, Sir William De Stancy's residence was indicated as one of these.

It was almost new, of streaked brick, having a central door, and a small bay window on each side to light the two front parlours. A little lawn spread its green surface in front, divided from the road by iron railings, the low line of shrubs immediately within them being coated with pallid dust from the highway. On the neat piers of the neat entrance gate were chiselled the words 'Myrtle Villa.' Genuine roadside respectability sat smiling on every brick of the eligible dwelling.

Perhaps that which impressed Somerset more than the mushroom modernism of Sir William De Stancy's house was the air of healthful cheerfulness which pervaded it. He was shown in by a neat maidservant in black gown and white apron, a canary singing a welcome from a cage in the shadow of the window, the voices of crowing cocks coming over the chimneys from somewhere behind, and the sun and air riddling the house everywhere.

A dwelling of those well-known and popular dimensions which allow the proceedings in the kitchen to be distinctly heard in the parlours, it was so planned that a raking view might be obtained through it from the front door to the end of the back garden. The drawing-room furniture was comfortable, in the walnut-and-green-rep style of some years ago. Somerset had expected to find his friends living in an old house with

remnants of their own antique furniture, and he hardly knew whether he ought to meet them with a smile or a gaze of condolence. His doubt was terminated, however, by the cheerful and tripping entry of Miss De Stancy, who had returned from her drive to Markton; and in a few more moments Sir William came in from the garden.

He was an old man of tall and spare build, with a considerable stoop, his glasses dangling against his waistcoat-buttons, and the front corners of his coat-tails hanging lower than the hinderparts, so that they swayed right and left as he walked. He nervously apologized to his visitor for having kept him waiting.

‘I am so glad to see you,’ he said, with a mild benevolence of tone, as he retained Somerset’s hand for a moment or two; ‘partly for your father’s sake, whom I met more than once in my younger days, before he became so well-known; and also because I learn that you were a friend of my poor nephew John Ravensbury.’ He looked over his shoulder to see if his daughter were within hearing, and, with the impulse of the solitary to make a confidence, continued in a low tone: ‘She, poor girl, was to have married John: his death was a sad blow to her and to all of us. — Pray take a seat, Mr. Somerset.’

The reverses of fortune which had brought Sir William De Stancy to this comfortable cottage awakened in Somerset a warmer emotion than curiosity, and he sat down with a heart as responsive to each speech uttered as if it had seriously concerned himself, while his host gave some words of information to his daughter on the trifling events that had marked the morning just passed; such as that the cow had got out of the paddock into Miss Power’s field, that the smith who had promised to come and look at the kitchen range had not arrived, that two wasps’ nests had been discovered in the garden bank, and that Nick Jones’s baby had fallen downstairs. Sir William had large cavernous arches to his eye-sockets, reminding the beholder of the vaults in the castle he once had owned. His hands were long and almost fleshless, each knuckle showing like a bamboo-joint from beneath his coat-sleeves, which were small at the elbow and large at the wrist. All the colour had gone from his beard and locks, except in the case of a few isolated hairs of the former, which retained dashes of their original shade at sudden points in their length, revealing that all had once been raven black.

But to study a man to his face for long is a species of ill-nature which requires a colder temperament, or at least an older heart, than the architect’s was at that time. Incurious unobservance is the true attitude of cordiality, and Somerset blamed himself for having fallen into an act of inspection even briefly. He would wait for his host’s conversation, which would doubtless be of the essence of historical romance.

‘The favourable Bank-returns have made the money-market much easier to-day, as I learn?’ said Sir William.

‘O, have they?’ said Somerset. ‘Yes, I suppose they have.’

‘And something is meant by this unusual quietness in Foreign stocks since the late remarkable fluctuations,’ insisted the old man. ‘Is the current of speculation quite arrested, or is it but a temporary lull?’

Somerset said he was afraid he could not give an opinion, and entered very lamely into the subject; but Sir William seemed to find sufficient interest in his own thoughts to do away with the necessity of acquiring fresh impressions from other people's replies; for often after putting a question he looked on the floor, as if the subject were at an end. Lunch was now ready, and when they were in the dining-room Miss De Stancy, to introduce a topic of more general interest, asked Somerset if he had noticed the myrtle on the lawn?

Somerset had noticed it, and thought he had never seen such a full-blown one in the open air before. His eyes were, however, resting at the moment on the only objects at all out of the common that the dining-room contained. One was a singular glass case over the fireplace, within which were some large mediaeval door-keys, black with rust and age; and the others were two full-length oil portraits in the costume of the end of the last century — so out of all proportion to the size of the room they occupied that they almost reached to the floor.

'Those originally belonged to the castle yonder,' said Miss De Stancy, or Charlotte, as her father called her, noticing Somerset's glance at the keys. 'They used to unlock the principal entrance-doors, which were knocked to pieces in the civil wars. New doors were placed afterwards, but the old keys were never given up, and have been preserved by us ever since.'

'They are quite useless — mere lumber — particularly to me,' said Sir William.

'And those huge paintings were a present from Paula,' she continued. 'They are portraits of my great-grandfather and mother. Paula would give all the old family pictures back to me if we had room for them; but they would fill the house to the ceilings.'

Sir William was impatient of the subject. 'What is the utility of such accumulations?' he asked. 'Their originals are but clay now — mere forgotten dust, not worthy a moment's inquiry or reflection at this distance of time. Nothing can retain the spirit, and why should we preserve the shadow of the form? — London has been very full this year, sir, I have been told?'

'It has,' said Somerset, and he asked if they had been up that season. It was plain that the matter with which Sir William De Stancy least cared to occupy himself before visitors was the history of his own family, in which he was followed with more simplicity by his daughter Charlotte.

'No,' said the baronet. 'One might be led to think there is a fatality which prevents it. We make arrangements to go to town almost every year, to meet some old friend who combines the rare conditions of being in London with being mindful of me; but he has always died or gone elsewhere before the event has taken place... But with a disposition to be happy, it is neither this place nor the other that can render us the reverse. In short each man's happiness depends upon himself, and his ability for doing with little.' He turned more particularly to Somerset, and added with an impressive smile: 'I hope you cultivate the art of doing with little?'

Somerset said that he certainly did cultivate that art, partly because he was obliged to.

‘Ah — you don’t mean to the extent that I mean. The world has not yet learned the riches of frugality, says, I think, Cicero, somewhere; and nobody can testify to the truth of that remark better than I. If a man knows how to spend less than his income, however small that may be, why — he has the philosopher’s stone.’ And Sir William looked in Somerset’s face with frugality written in every pore of his own, as much as to say, ‘And here you see one who has been a living instance of those principles from his youth up.’

Somerset soon found that whatever turn the conversation took, Sir William invariably reverted to this topic of frugality. When luncheon was over he asked his visitor to walk with him into the garden, and no sooner were they alone than he continued: ‘Well, Mr. Somerset, you are down here sketching architecture for professional purposes. Nothing can be better: you are a young man, and your art is one in which there are innumerable chances.’

‘I had begun to think they were rather few,’ said Somerset.

‘No, they are numerous enough: the difficulty is to find out where they lie. It is better to know where your luck lies than where your talent lies: that’s an old man’s opinion.’

‘I’ll remember it,’ said Somerset.

‘And now give me some account of your new clubs, new hotels, and new men... What I was going to add, on the subject of finding out where your luck lies, is that nobody is so unfortunate as not to have a lucky star in some direction or other. Perhaps yours is at the antipodes; if so, go there. All I say is, discover your lucky star.’

‘I am looking for it.’

‘You may be able to do two things; one well, the other but indifferently, and yet you may have more luck in the latter. Then stick to that one, and never mind what you can do best. Your star lies there.’

‘There I am not quite at one with you, Sir William.’

‘You should be. Not that I mean to say that luck lies in any one place long, or at any one person’s door. Fortune likes new faces, and your wisdom lies in bringing your acquisitions into safety while her favour lasts. To do that you must make friends in her time of smiles — make friends with people, wherever you find them. My daughter has unconsciously followed that maxim. She has struck up a warm friendship with our neighbour, Miss Power, at the castle. We are diametrically different from her in associations, traditions, ideas, religion — she comes of a violent dissenting family among other things — but I say to Charlotte what I say to you: win affection and regard wherever you can, and accommodate yourself to the times. I put nothing in the way of their intimacy, and wisely so, for by this so many pleasant hours are added to the sum total vouchsafed to humanity.’

It was quite late in the afternoon when Somerset took his leave. Miss De Stancy did not return to the castle that night, and he walked through the wood as he had come,

feeling that he had been talking with a man of simple nature, who flattered his own understanding by devising Machiavellian theories after the event, to account for any spontaneous action of himself or his daughter, which might otherwise seem eccentric or irregular.

Before Somerset reached the inn he was overtaken by a slight shower, and on entering the house he walked into the general room, where there was a fire, and stood with one foot on the fender. The landlord was talking to some guest who sat behind a screen; and, probably because Somerset had been seen passing the window, and was known to be sketching at the castle, the conversation turned on Sir William De Stancy.

‘I have often noticed,’ observed the landlord, ‘that volks who have come to grief, and quite failed, have the rules how to succeed in life more at their vingers’ ends than volks who have succeeded. I assure you that Sir William, so full as he is of wise maxims, never acted upon a wise maxim in his life, until he had lost everything, and it didn’t matter whether he was wise or no. You know what he was in his young days, of course?’

‘No, I don’t,’ said the invisible stranger.

‘O, I thought everybody knew poor Sir William’s history. He was the star, as I may zay, of good company forty years ago. I remember him in the height of his jinks, as I used to zee him when I was a very little boy, and think how great and wonderful he was. I can seem to zee now the exact style of his clothes; white hat, white trousers, white silk handkerchief; and his jonnick face, as white as his clothes with keeping late hours. There was nothing black about him but his hair and his eyes — he wore no beard at that time — and they were black as slooes. The like of his coming on the race-course was never seen there afore nor since. He drove his ikkipage hisself; and it was always hauled by four beautiful white horses, and two outriders rode in harness bridles. There was a groom behind him, and another at the rubbing-post, all in livery as glorious as New Jerusalem. What a ‘stablishment he kept up at that time! I can mind him, sir, with thirty race-horses in training at once, seventeen coach-horses, twelve hunters at his box t’other side of London, four chargers at Budmouth, and ever so many hacks.’

‘And he lost all by his racing speculations?’ the stranger observed; and Somerset fancied that the voice had in it something more than the languid carelessness of a casual sojourner.

‘Partly by that, partly in other ways. He spent a mint o’ money in a wild project of founding a watering-place; and sunk thousands in a useless silver mine; so ‘twas no wonder that the castle named after him vell into other hands... The way it was done was curious. Mr. Wilkins, who was the first owner after it went from Sir William, actually sat down as a guest at his table, and got up as the owner. He took off, at a round sum, everything saleable, furniture, plate, pictures, even the milk and butter in the dairy. That’s how the pictures and furniture come to be in the castle still; wormeaten rubbish zome o’ it, and hardly worth moving.’

‘And off went the baronet to Myrtle Villa?’

‘O no! he went away for many years. ‘Tis quite lately, since his illness, that he came to that little place, in zight of the stone walls that were the pride of his forefathers.’

‘From what I hear, he has not the manner of a broken-hearted man?’

‘Not at all. Since that illness he has been happy, as you see him: no pride, quite calm and mild; at new moon quite childish. ‘Tis that makes him able to live there; before he was so ill he couldn’t bear a sight of the place, but since then he is happy nowhere else, and never leaves the parish further than to drive once a week to Markton. His head won’t stand society nowadays, and he lives quite lonely as you zee, only zeeing his daughter, or his son whenever he comes home, which is not often. They say that if his brain hadn’t softened a little he would ha’ died — ’twas that saved his life.’

‘What’s this I hear about his daughter? Is she really hired companion to the new owner?’

‘Now that’s a curious thing again, these two girls being so fond of one another; one of ‘em a dissenter, and all that, and t’other a De Stancy. O no, not hired exactly, but she mostly lives with Miss Power, and goes about with her, and I dare say Miss Power makes it wo’th her while. One can’t move a step without the other following; though judging by ordinary volks you’d think ‘twould be a cat-and-dog friendship rather.’

‘But ‘tis not?’

‘‘Tis not; they be more like lovers than maid and maid. Miss Power is looked up to by little De Stancy as if she were a god-a’mighty, and Miss Power lets her love her to her heart’s content. But whether Miss Power loves back again I can’t zay, for she’s as deep as the North Star.’

The landlord here left the stranger to go to some other part of the house, and Somerset drew near to the glass partition to gain a glimpse of a man whose interest in the neighbourhood seemed to have arisen so simultaneously with his own. But the inner room was empty: the man had apparently departed by another door.

CHAPTER VI.

The telegraph had almost the attributes of a human being at Stancy Castle. When its bell rang people rushed to the old tapestried chamber allotted to it, and waited its pleasure with all the deference due to such a novel inhabitant of that ancestral pile. This happened on the following afternoon about four o’clock, while Somerset was sketching in the room adjoining that occupied by the instrument. Hearing its call, he looked in to learn if anybody were attending, and found Miss De Stancy bending over it.

She welcomed him without the least embarrassment. ‘Another message,’ she said. — “Paula to Charlotte. — Have returned to Markton. Am starting for home. Will be at the gate between four and five if possible.”

Miss De Stancy blushed with pleasure when she raised her eyes from the machine. ‘Is she not thoughtful to let me know beforehand?’

Somerset said she certainly appeared to be, feeling at the same time that he was not in possession of sufficient data to make the opinion of great value.

‘Now I must get everything ready, and order what she will want, as Mrs. Goodman is away. What will she want? Dinner would be best — she has had no lunch, I know; or tea perhaps, and dinner at the usual time. Still, if she has had no lunch — Hark, what do I hear?’

She ran to an arrow-slit, and Somerset, who had also heard something, looked out of an adjoining one. They could see from their elevated position a great way along the white road, stretching like a tape amid the green expanses on each side. There had arisen a cloud of dust, accompanied by a noise of wheels.

‘It is she,’ said Charlotte. ‘O yes — it is past four — the telegram has been delayed.’
‘How would she be likely to come?’

‘She has doubtless hired a carriage at the inn: she said it would be useless to send to meet her, as she couldn’t name a time... Where is she now?’

‘Just where the boughs of those beeches overhang the road — there she is again!’

Miss De Stancy went away to give directions, and Somerset continued to watch. The vehicle, which was of no great pretension, soon crossed the bridge and stopped: there was a ring at the bell; and Miss De Stancy reappeared.

‘Did you see her as she drove up — is she not interesting?’

‘I could not see her.’

‘Ah, no — of course you could not from this window because of the trees. Mr. Somerset, will you come downstairs? You will have to meet her, you know.’

Somerset felt an indescribable backwardness. ‘I will go on with my sketching,’ he said. ‘Perhaps she will not be — ’

‘O, but it would be quite natural, would it not? Our manners are easier here, you know, than they are in town, and Miss Power has adapted herself to them.’

A compromise was effected by Somerset declaring that he would hold himself in readiness to be discovered on the landing at any convenient time.

A servant entered. ‘Miss Power?’ said Miss De Stancy, before he could speak.

The man advanced with a card: Miss De Stancy took it up, and read thereon: ‘Mr. William Dare.’

‘It is not Miss Power who has come, then?’ she asked, with a disappointed face.

‘No, ma’am.’

She looked again at the card. ‘This is some man of business, I suppose — does he want to see me?’

‘Yes, miss. Leastwise, he would be glad to see you if Miss Power is not at home.’

Miss De Stancy left the room, and soon returned, saying, ‘Mr. Somerset, can you give me your counsel in this matter? This Mr. Dare says he is a photographic amateur, and it seems that he wrote some time ago to Miss Power, who gave him permission to take views of the castle, and promised to show him the best points. But I have heard nothing of it, and scarcely know whether I ought to take his word in her absence. Mrs. Goodman, Miss Power’s relative, who usually attends to these things, is away.’

‘I dare say it is all right,’ said Somerset.

‘Would you mind seeing him? If you think it quite in order, perhaps you will instruct him where the best views are to be obtained?’

Thereupon Somerset at once went down to Mr. Dare. His coming as a sort of counterfeit of Miss Power disposed Somerset to judge him with as much severity as justice would allow, and his manner for the moment was not of a kind calculated to dissipate antagonistic instincts. Mr. Dare was standing before the fireplace with his feet wide apart, and his hands in the pockets of his coat-tails, looking at a carving over the mantelpiece. He turned quickly at the sound of Somerset’s footsteps, and revealed himself as a person quite out of the common.

His age it was impossible to say. There was not a hair on his face which could serve to hang a guess upon. In repose he appeared a boy; but his actions were so completely those of a man that the beholder’s first estimate of sixteen as his age was hastily corrected to six-and-twenty, and afterwards shifted hither and thither along intervening years as the tenor of his sentences sent him up or down. He had a broad forehead, vertical as the face of a bastion, and his hair, which was parted in the middle, hung as a fringe or valance above, in the fashion sometimes affected by the other sex. He wore a heavy ring, of which the gold seemed fair, the diamond questionable, and the taste indifferent. There were the remains of a swagger in his body and limbs as he came forward, regarding Somerset with a confident smile, as if the wonder were, not why Mr. Dare should be present, but why Somerset should be present likewise; and the first tone that came from Dare’s lips wound up his listener’s opinion that he did not like him.

A latent power in the man, or boy, was revealed by the circumstance that Somerset did not feel, as he would ordinarily have done, that it was a matter of profound indifference to him whether this gentleman-photographer were a likeable person or no.

‘I have called by appointment; or rather, I left a card stating that to-day would suit me, and no objection was made.’ Somerset recognized the voice; it was that of the invisible stranger who had talked with the landlord about the De Stancys. Mr. Dare then proceeded to explain his business.

Somerset found from his inquiries that the man had unquestionably been instructed by somebody to take the views he spoke of; and concluded that Dare’s curiosity at the inn was, after all, naturally explained by his errand to this place. Blaming himself for a too hasty condemnation of the stranger, who though visually a little too assured was civil enough verbally, Somerset proceeded with the young photographer to sundry corners of the outer ward, and thence across the moat to the field, suggesting advantageous points of view. The office, being a shadow of his own pursuits, was not uncongenial to Somerset, and he forgot other things in attending to it.

‘Now in our country we should stand further back than this, and so get a more comprehensive coup d’oeil,’ said Dare, as Somerset selected a good situation.

‘You are not an Englishman, then,’ said Somerset.

‘I have lived mostly in India, Malta, Gibraltar, the Ionian Islands, and Canada. I there invented a new photographic process, which I am bent upon making famous. Yet I am but a dilettante, and do not follow this art at the base dictation of what men call necessity.’

‘O indeed,’ Somerset replied.

As soon as this business was disposed of, and Mr. Dare had brought up his van and assistant to begin operations, Somerset returned to the castle entrance. While under the archway a man with a professional look drove up in a dog-cart and inquired if Miss Power were at home to-day.

‘She has not yet returned, Mr. Havill,’ was the reply.

Somerset, who had hoped to hear an affirmative by this time, thought that Miss Power was bent on disappointing him in the flesh, notwithstanding the interest she expressed in him by telegraph; and as it was now drawing towards the end of the afternoon, he walked off in the direction of his inn.

There were two or three ways to that spot, but the pleasantest was by passing through a rambling shrubbery, between whose bushes trickled a broad shallow brook, occasionally intercepted in its course by a transverse chain of old stones, evidently from the castle walls, which formed a miniature waterfall. The walk lay along the river-brink. Soon Somerset saw before him a circular summer-house formed of short sticks nailed to ornamental patterns. Outside the structure, and immediately in the path, stood a man with a book in his hand; and it was presently apparent that this gentleman was holding a conversation with some person inside the pavilion, but the back of the building being towards Somerset, the second individual could not be seen.

The speaker at one moment glanced into the interior, and at another at the advancing form of the architect, whom, though distinctly enough beheld, the other scarcely appeared to heed in the absorbing interest of his own discourse. Somerset became aware that it was the Baptist minister, whose rhetoric he had heard in the chapel yonder.

‘Now,’ continued the Baptist minister, ‘will you express to me any reason or objection whatever which induces you to withdraw from our communion? It was that of your father, and of his father before him. Any difficulty you may have met with I will honestly try to remove; for I need hardly say that in losing you we lose one of the most valued members of the Baptist church in this district. I speak with all the respect due to your position, when I ask you to realise how irreparable is the injury you inflict upon the cause here by this lukewarm backwardness.’

‘I don’t withdraw,’ said a woman’s low voice within.

‘What do you do?’

‘I decline to attend for the present.’

‘And you can give no reason for this?’

There was no reply.

‘Or for your refusal to proceed with the baptism?’

‘I have been christened.’

‘My dear young lady, it is well known that your christening was the work of your aunt, who did it unknown to your parents when she had you in her power, out of pure obstinacy to a church with which she was not in sympathy, taking you surreptitiously, and indefensibly, to the font of the Establishment; so that the rite meant and could mean nothing at all... But I fear that your new position has brought you into contact with the Paedobaptists, that they have disturbed your old principles, and so induced you to believe in the validity of that trumpety ceremony!’

‘It seems sufficient.’

‘I will demolish the basis of that seeming in three minutes, give me but that time as a listener.’

‘I have no objection.’

‘Very well... First, then, I will assume that those who have influenced you in the matter have not been able to make any impression upon one so well grounded as yourself in our distinctive doctrine, by the stale old argument drawn from circumcision?’

‘You may assume it.’

‘Good — that clears the ground. And we now come to the New Testament.’

The minister began to turn over the leaves of his little Bible, which it impressed Somerset to observe was bound with a flap, like a pocket book, the black surface of the leather being worn brown at the corners by long usage. He turned on till he came to the beginning of the New Testament, and then commenced his discourse. After explaining his position, the old man ran very ably through the arguments, citing well-known writers on the point in dispute when he required more finished sentences than his own.

The minister’s earnestness and interest in his own case led him unconsciously to include Somerset in his audience as the young man drew nearer; till, instead of fixing his eyes exclusively on the person within the summer-house, the preacher began to direct a good proportion of his discourse upon his new auditor, turning from one listener to the other attentively, without seeming to feel Somerset’s presence as superfluous.

‘And now,’ he said in conclusion, ‘I put it to you, sir, as to her: do you find any flaw in my argument? Is there, madam, a single text which, honestly interpreted, affords the least foothold for the Paedobaptists; in other words, for your opinion on the efficacy of the rite administered to you in your unconscious infancy? I put it to you both as honest and responsible beings.’ He turned again to the young man.

It happened that Somerset had been over this ground long ago. Born, so to speak, a High-Church infant, in his youth he had been of a thoughtful turn, till at one time an idea of his entering the Church had been entertained by his parents. He had formed acquaintance with men of almost every variety of doctrinal practice in this country; and, as the pleadings of each assailed him before he had arrived at an age of sufficient mental stability to resist new impressions, however badly substantiated, he inclined to each denomination as it presented itself, was

‘Everything by starts, and nothing long,’

till he had travelled through a great many beliefs and doctrines without feeling himself much better than when he set out.

A study of fonts and their origin had qualified him in this particular subject. Fully conscious of the inexpediency of contests on minor ritual differences, he yet felt a sudden impulse towards a mild intellectual tournament with the eager old man — purely as an exercise of his wits in the defence of a fair girl.

‘Sir, I accept your challenge to us,’ said Somerset, advancing to the minister’s side.

CHAPTER VII.

At the sound of a new voice the lady in the bower started, as he could see by her outline through the crevices of the wood-work and creepers. The minister looked surprised.

‘You will lend me your Bible, sir, to assist my memory?’ he continued.

The minister held out the Bible with some reluctance, but he allowed Somerset to take it from his hand. The latter, stepping upon a large moss-covered stone which stood near, and laying his hat on a flat beech bough that rose and fell behind him, pointed to the minister to seat himself on the grass. The minister looked at the grass, and looked up again at Somerset, but did not move.

Somerset for the moment was not observing him. His new position had turned out to be exactly opposite the open side of the bower, and now for the first time he beheld the interior. On the seat was the woman who had stood beneath his eyes in the chapel, the ‘Paula’ of Miss De Stancy’s enthusiastic eulogies. She wore a summer hat, beneath which her fair curly hair formed a thicket round her forehead. It would be impossible to describe her as she then appeared. Not sensuous enough for an Aphrodite, and too subdued for a Hebe, she would yet, with the adjunct of doves or nectar, have stood sufficiently well for either of those personages, if presented in a pink morning light, and with mythological scarcity of attire.

Half in surprise she glanced up at him; and lowering her eyes again, as if no surprise were ever let influence her actions for more than a moment, she sat on as before, looking past Somerset’s position at the view down the river, visible for a long distance before her till it was lost under the bending trees.

Somerset turned over the leaves of the minister’s Bible, and began: —

‘In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, the seventh chapter and the fourteenth verse — ’.

Here the young lady raised her eyes in spite of her reserve, but it being, apparently, too much labour to keep them raised, allowed her glance to subside upon her jet necklace, extending it with the thumb of her left hand.

‘Sir!’ said the Baptist excitedly, ‘I know that passage well — it is the last refuge of the Paedobaptists — I foresee your argument. I have met it dozens of times, and

it is not worth that snap of the fingers! It is worth no more than the argument from circumcision, or the Suffer-little-children argument.'

'Then turn to the sixteenth chapter of the Acts, and the thirty-third —'

'That, too,' cried the minister, 'is answered by what I said before! I perceive, sir, that you adopt the method of a special pleader, and not that of an honest inquirer. Is it, or is it not, an answer to my proofs from the eighth chapter of the Acts, the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh verses; the sixteenth of Mark, sixteenth verse; second of Acts, forty-first verse; the tenth and the forty-seventh verse; or the eighteenth and eighth verse?'

'Very well, then. Let me prove the point by other reasoning — by the argument from Apostolic tradition.' He threw the minister's book upon the grass, and proceeded with his contention, which comprised a fairly good exposition of the earliest practice of the Church and inferences therefrom. (When he reached this point an interest in his off-hand arguments was revealed by the mobile bosom of Miss Paula Power, though she still occupied herself by drawing out the necklace.) Testimony from Justin Martyr followed; with inferences from Irenaeus in the expression, 'Omnes enim venit per semetipsum salvare; omnes inquam, qui per eum renascuntur in Deum, INFANTES et parvulos et pueros et juvenes.' (At the sound of so much seriousness Paula turned her eyes upon the speaker with attention.) He next adduced proof of the signification of 'renascor' in the writings of the Fathers, as reasoned by Wall; arguments from Tertullian's advice to defer the rite; citations from Cyprian, Nazianzen, Chrysostom, and Jerome; and briefly summed up the whole matter.

Somerset looked round for the minister as he concluded. But the old man, after standing face to face with the speaker, had turned his back upon him, and during the latter portions of the attack had moved slowly away. He now looked back; his countenance was full of commiserating reproach as he lifted his hand, twice shook his head, and said, 'In the Epistle to the Philippians, first chapter and sixteenth verse, it is written that there are some who preach in contention and not sincerely. And in the Second Epistle to Timothy, fourth chapter and fourth verse, attention is drawn to those whose ears refuse the truth, and are turned unto fables. I wish you good afternoon, sir, and that priceless gift, SINCERITY.'

The minister vanished behind the trees; Somerset and Miss Power being left confronting each other alone.

Somerset stepped aside from the stone, hat in hand, at the same moment in which Miss Power rose from her seat. She hesitated for an instant, and said, with a pretty girlish stiffness, sweeping back the skirt of her dress to free her toes in turning: 'Although you are personally unknown to me, I cannot leave you without expressing my deep sense of your profound scholarship, and my admiration for the thoroughness of your studies in divinity.'

'Your opinion gives me great pleasure,' said Somerset, bowing, and fairly blushing. 'But, believe me, I am no scholar, and no theologian. My knowledge of the subject arises simply from the accident that some few years ago I looked into the question for

a special reason. In the study of my profession I was interested in the designing of fonts and baptisteries, and by a natural process I was led to investigate the history of baptism; and some of the arguments I then learnt up still remain with me. That's the simple explanation of my erudition.'

'If your sermons at the church only match your address to-day, I shall not wonder at hearing that the parishioners are at last willing to attend.'

It flashed upon Somerset's mind that she supposed him to be the new curate, of whose arrival he had casually heard, during his sojourn at the inn. Before he could bring himself to correct an error to which, perhaps, more than to anything else, was owing the friendliness of her manner, she went on, as if to escape the embarrassment of silence: —

'I need hardly say that I at least do not doubt the sincerity of your arguments.'

'Nevertheless, I was not altogether sincere,' he answered.

She was silent.

'Then why should you have delivered such a defence of me?' she asked with simple curiosity.

Somerset involuntarily looked in her face for his answer.

Paula again teased the necklace. 'Would you have spoken so eloquently on the other side if I — if occasion had served?' she inquired shyly.

'Perhaps I would.'

Another pause, till she said, 'I, too, was insincere.'

'You?'

'I was.'

'In what way?'

'In letting him, and you, think I had been at all influenced by authority, scriptural or patristic.'

'May I ask, why, then, did you decline the ceremony the other evening?'

'Ah, you, too, have heard of it!' she said quickly.

'No.'

'What then?'

'I saw it.'

She blushed and looked down the river. 'I cannot give my reasons,' she said.

'Of course not,' said Somerset.

'I would give a great deal to possess real logical dogmatism.'

'So would I.'

There was a moment of embarrassment: she wanted to get away, but did not precisely know how. He would have withdrawn had she not said, as if rather oppressed by her conscience, and evidently still thinking him the curate: 'I cannot but feel that Mr. Woodwell's heart has been unnecessarily wounded.'

'The minister's?'

'Yes. He is single-mindedness itself. He gives away nearly all he has to the poor. He works among the sick, carrying them necessaries with his own hands. He teaches the

ignorant men and lads of the village when he ought to be resting at home, till he is absolutely prostrate from exhaustion, and then he sits up at night writing encouraging letters to those poor people who formerly belonged to his congregation in the village, and have now gone away. He always offends ladies, because he can't help speaking the truth as he believes it; but he hasn't offended me!

Her feelings had risen towards the end, so that she finished quite warmly, and turned aside.

'I was not in the least aware that he was such a man,' murmured Somerset, looking wistfully after the minister... 'Whatever you may have done, I fear that I have grievously wounded a worthy man's heart from an idle wish to engage in a useless, unbecoming, dull, last-century argument.'

'Not dull,' she murmured, 'for it interested me.'

Somerset accepted her correction willingly. 'It was ill-considered of me, however,' he said; 'and in his distress he has forgotten his Bible.' He went and picked up the worn volume from where it lay on the grass.

'You can easily win him to forgive you, by just following, and returning the book to him,' she observed.

'I will,' said the young man impulsively. And, bowing to her, he hastened along the river brink after the minister. He at length saw his friend before him, leaning over the gate which led from the private path into a lane, his cheek resting on the palm of his hand with every outward sign of abstraction. He was not conscious of Somerset's presence till the latter touched him on the shoulder.

Never was a reconciliation effected more readily. When Somerset said that, fearing his motives might be misconstrued, he had followed to assure the minister of his goodwill and esteem, Mr. Woodwell held out his hand, and proved his friendliness in return by preparing to have the controversy on their religious differences over again from the beginning, with exhaustive detail. Somerset evaded this with alacrity, and once having won his companion to other subjects he found that the austere man had a smile as pleasant as an infant's on the rare moments when he indulged in it; moreover, that he was warmly attached to Miss Power.

'Though she gives me more trouble than all the rest of the Baptist church in this district,' he said, 'I love her as my own daughter. But I am sadly exercised to know what she is at heart. Heaven supply me with fortitude to contest her wild opinions, and intractability! But she has sweet virtues, and her conduct at times can be most endearing.'

'I believe it!' said Somerset, with more fervour than mere politeness required.

'Sometimes I think those Stancy towers and lands will be a curse to her. The spirit of old papistical times still lingers in the nooks of those silent walls, like a bad odour in a still atmosphere, dulling the iconoclastic emotions of the true Puritan. It would be a pity indeed if she were to be tainted by the very situation that her father's indomitable energy created for her.'

‘Do not be concerned about her,’ said Somerset gently. ‘She’s not a Paedobaptist at heart, although she seems so.’

Mr. Woodwell placed his finger on Somerset’s arm, saying, ‘If she’s not a Paedobaptist, or Episcopalian; if she is not vulnerable to the mediaeval influences of her mansion, lands, and new acquaintance, it is because she’s been vulnerable to what is worse: to doctrines beside which the errors of Paaedobaptists, Episcopalian, Roman Catholics, are but as air.’

‘How? You astonish me.’

‘Have you heard in your metropolitan experience of a curious body of New Lights, as they think themselves?’ The minister whispered a name to his listener, as if he were fearful of being overheard.

‘O no,’ said Somerset, shaking his head, and smiling at the minister’s horror. ‘She’s not that; at least, I think not.. .. She’s a woman; nothing more. Don’t fear for her; all will be well.’

The poor old man sighed. ‘I love her as my own. I will say no more.’

Somerset was now in haste to go back to the lady, to ease her apparent anxiety as to the result of his mission, and also because time seemed heavy in the loss of her discreet voice and soft, buoyant look. Every moment of delay began to be as two. But the minister was too earnest in his converse to see his companion’s haste, and it was not till perception was forced upon him by the actual retreat of Somerset that he remembered time to be a limited commodity. He then expressed his wish to see Somerset at his house to tea any afternoon he could spare, and receiving the other’s promise to call as soon as he could, allowed the younger man to set out for the summer-house, which he did at a smart pace. When he reached it he looked around, and found she was gone.

Somerset was immediately struck by his own lack of social dexterity. Why did he act so readily on the whimsical suggestion of another person, and follow the minister, when he might have said that he would call on Mr. Woodwell to-morrow, and, making himself known to Miss Power as the visiting architect of whom she had heard from Miss De Stancy, have had the pleasure of attending her to the castle? ‘That’s what any other man would have had wit enough to do!’ he said.

There then arose the question whether her despatching him after the minister was such an admirable act of good-nature to a good man as it had at first seemed to be. Perhaps it was simply a manoeuvre for getting rid of himself; and he remembered his doubt whether a certain light in her eyes when she inquired concerning his sincerity were innocent earnestness or the reverse. As the possibility of levity crossed his brain, his face warmed; it pained him to think that a woman so interesting could condescend to a trick of even so mild a complexion as that. He wanted to think her the soul of all that was tender, and noble, and kind. The pleasure of setting himself to win a minister’s goodwill was a little tarnished now.

CHAPTER VIII.

That evening Somerset was so preoccupied with these things that he left all his sketching implements out-of-doors in the castle grounds. The next morning he hastened thither to secure them from being stolen or spoiled. Meanwhile he was hoping to have an opportunity of rectifying Paula's mistake about his personality, which, having served a very good purpose in introducing them to a mutual conversation, might possibly be made just as agreeable as a thing to be explained away.

He fetched his drawing instruments, rods, sketching-blocks and other articles from the field where they had lain, and was passing under the walls with them in his hands, when there emerged from the outer archway an open landau, drawn by a pair of black horses of fine action and obviously strong pedigree, in which Paula was seated, under the shade of a white parasol with black and white ribbons fluttering on the summit. The morning sun sparkled on the equipage, its newness being made all the more noticeable by the ragged old arch behind.

She bowed to Somerset in a way which might have been meant to express that she had discovered her mistake; but there was no embarrassment in her manner, and the carriage bore her away without her making any sign for checking it. He had not been walking towards the castle entrance, and she could not be supposed to know that it was his intention to enter that day.

She had looked such a bud of youth and promise that his disappointment at her departure showed itself in his face as he observed her. However, he went on his way, entered a turret, ascended to the leads of the great tower, and stepped out.

From this elevated position he could still see the carriage and the white surface of Paula's parasol in the glowing sun. While he watched the landau stopped, and in a few moments the horses were turned, the wheels and the panels flashed, and the carriage came bowling along towards the castle again.

Somerset descended the stone stairs. Before he had quite got to the bottom he saw Miss De Stancy standing in the outer hall.

'When did you come, Mr. Somerset?' she gaily said, looking up surprised. 'How industrious you are to be at work so regularly every day! We didn't think you would be here to-day: Paula has gone to a vegetable show at Markton, and I am going to join her there soon.'

'O! gone to a vegetable show. But I think she has altered her —'

At this moment the noise of the carriage was heard in the ward, and after a few seconds Miss Power came in — Somerset being invisible from the door where she stood.

'O Paula, what has brought you back?' said Miss De Stancy.

'I have forgotten something.'

'Mr. Somerset is here. Will you not speak to him?'

Somerset came forward, and Miss De Stancy presented him to her friend. Mr. Somerset acknowledged the pleasure by a respectful inclination of his person, and said some words about the meeting yesterday.

‘Yes,’ said Miss Power, with a serene deliberateness quite noteworthy in a girl of her age; ‘I have seen it all since. I was mistaken about you, was I not? Mr. Somerset, I am glad to welcome you here, both as a friend of Miss De Stancy’s family, and as the son of your father — which is indeed quite a sufficient introduction anywhere.’

‘You have two pictures painted by Mr. Somerset’s father, have you not? I have already told him about them,’ said Miss De Stancy. ‘Perhaps Mr. Somerset would like to see them if they are unpacked?’

As Somerset had from his infancy suffered from a plethora of those productions, excellent as they were, he did not reply quite so eagerly as Miss De Stancy seemed to expect to her kind suggestion, and Paula remarked to him, ‘You will stay to lunch? Do order it at your own time, if our hour should not be convenient.’

Her voice was a voice of low note, in quality that of a flute at the grave end of its gamut. If she sang, she was a pure contralto unmistakably.

‘I am making use of the permission you have been good enough to grant me — of sketching what is valuable within these walls.’

‘Yes, of course, I am willing for anybody to come. People hold these places in trust for the nation, in one sense. You lift your hands, Charlotte; I see I have not convinced you on that point yet.’

Miss De Stancy laughed, and said something to no purpose.

Somehow Miss Power seemed not only more woman than Miss De Stancy, but more woman than Somerset was man; and yet in years she was inferior to both. Though becomingly girlish and modest, she appeared to possess a good deal of composure, which was well expressed by the shaded light of her eyes.

‘You have then met Mr. Somerset before?’ said Charlotte.

‘He was kind enough to deliver an address in my defence yesterday. I suppose I seemed quite unable to defend myself.’

‘O no!’ said he. When a few more words had passed she turned to Miss De Stancy and spoke of some domestic matter, upon which Somerset withdrew, Paula accompanying his exit with a remark that she hoped to see him again a little later in the day.

Somerset retired to the chambers of antique lumber, keeping an eye upon the windows to see if she re-entered the carriage and resumed her journey to Markton. But when the horses had been standing a long time the carriage was driven round to the stables. Then she was not going to the vegetable show. That was rather curious, seeing that she had only come back for something forgotten.

These queries and thoughts occupied the mind of Somerset until the bell was rung for luncheon. Owing to the very dusty condition in which he found himself after his morning’s labours among the old carvings he was rather late in getting downstairs, and seeing that the rest had gone in he went straight to the dining-hall.

The population of the castle had increased in his absence. There were assembled Paula and her friend Charlotte; a bearded man some years older than himself, with a cold grey eye, who was cursorily introduced to him in sitting down as Mr. Havill, an architect of Markton; also an elderly lady of dignified aspect, in a black satin dress,

of which she apparently had a very high opinion. This lady, who seemed to be a mere dummy in the establishment, was, as he now learnt, Mrs. Goodman by name, a widow of a recently deceased gentleman, and aunt to Paula — the identical aunt who had smuggled Paula into a church in her helpless infancy, and had her christened without her parents' knowledge. Having been left in narrow circumstances by her husband, she was at present living with Miss Power as chaperon and adviser on practical matters — in a word, as ballast to the management. Beyond her Somerset discerned his new acquaintance Mr. Woodwell, who on sight of Somerset was for hastening up to him and performing a laboured shaking of hands in earnest recognition.

Paula had just come in from the garden, and was carelessly laying down her large shady hat as he entered. Her dress, a figured material in black and white, was short, allowing her feet to appear. There was something in her look, and in the style of her corsage, which reminded him of several of the bygone beauties in the gallery. The thought for a moment crossed his mind that she might have been imitating one of them.

'Fine old screen, sir!' said Mr. Havill, in a long-drawn voice across the table when they were seated, pointing in the direction of the traceried oak division between the dining-hall and a vestibule at the end. 'As good a piece of fourteenth-century work as you shall see in this part of the country.'

'You mean fifteenth century, of course?' said Somerset.

Havill was silent. 'You are one of the profession, perhaps?' asked the latter, after a while.

'You mean that I am an architect?' said Somerset. 'Yes.'

'Ah — one of my own honoured vocation.' Havill's face had been not unpleasant until this moment, when he smiled; whereupon there instantly gleamed over him a phase of meanness, remaining until the smile died away.

Havill continued, with slow watchfulness: —

'What enormous sacrileges are committed by the builders every day, I observe! I was driving yesterday to Toneborough where I am erecting a town-hall, and passing through a village on my way I saw the workmen pulling down a chancel-wall in which they found imbedded a unique specimen of Perpendicular work — a capital from some old arcade — the mouldings wonderfully undercut. They were smashing it up as filling-in for the new wall.'

'It must have been unique,' said Somerset, in the too-readily controversial tone of the educated young man who has yet to learn diplomacy. 'I have never seen much undercutting in Perpendicular stone-work; nor anybody else, I think.'

'O yes — lots of it!' said Mr. Havill, nettled.

Paula looked from one to the other. 'Which am I to take as guide?' she asked. 'Are Perpendicular capitals undercut, as you call it, Mr. Havill, or no?'

'It depends upon circumstances,' said Mr. Havill.

But Somerset had answered at the same time: 'There is seldom or never any marked undercutting in moulded work later than the middle of the fourteenth century.'

Havill looked keenly at Somerset for a time: then he turned to Paula: 'As regards that fine Saxon vaulting you did me the honour to consult me about the other day, I should advise taking out some of the old stones and reinstating new ones exactly like them.'

'But the new ones won't be Saxon,' said Paula. 'And then in time to come, when I have passed away, and those stones have become stained like the rest, people will be deceived. I should prefer an honest patch to any such make-believe of Saxon relics.'

As she concluded she let her eyes rest on Somerset for a moment, as if to ask him to side with her. Much as he liked talking to Paula, he would have preferred not to enter into this discussion with another professional man, even though that man were a spurious article; but he was led on to enthusiasm by a sudden pang of regret at finding that the masterly workmanship in this fine castle was likely to be tinkered and spoilt by such a man as Havill.

'You will deceive nobody into believing that anything is Saxon here,' he said warmly. 'There is not a square inch of Saxon work, as it is called, in the whole castle.'

Paula, in doubt, looked to Mr. Havill.

'O yes, sir; you are quite mistaken,' said that gentleman slowly. 'Every stone of those lower vaults was reared in Saxon times.'

'I can assure you,' said Somerset deferentially, but firmly, 'that there is not an arch or wall in this castle of a date anterior to the year 1100; no one whose attention has ever been given to the study of architectural details of that age can be of a different opinion.'

'I have studied architecture, and I am of a different opinion. I have the best reason in the world for the difference, for I have history herself on my side. What will you say when I tell you that it is a recorded fact that this was used as a castle by the Romans, and that it is mentioned in Domesday as a building of long standing?'

'I shall say that has nothing to do with it,' replied the young man. 'I don't deny that there may have been a castle here in the time of the Romans: what I say is, that none of the architecture we now see was standing at that date.'

There was a silence of a minute, disturbed only by a murmured dialogue between Mrs. Goodman and the minister, during which Paula was looking thoughtfully on the table as if framing a question.

'Can it be,' she said to Somerset, 'that such certainty has been reached in the study of architectural dates? Now, would you really risk anything on your belief? Would you agree to be shut up in the vaults and fed upon bread and water for a week if I could prove you wrong?'

'Willingly,' said Somerset. 'The date of those towers and arches is matter of absolute certainty from the details. That they should have been built before the Conquest is as unlikely as, say, that the rustiest old gun with a percussion lock should be older than the date of Waterloo.'

‘How I wish I knew something precise of an art which makes one so independent of written history!’

Mr. Havill had lapsed into a mannerly silence that was only sullenness disguised. Paula turned her conversation to Miss De Stancy, who had simply looked from one to the other during the discussion, though she might have been supposed to have a prescriptive right to a few remarks on the matter. A commonplace talk ensued, till Havill, who had not joined in it, privately began at Somerset again with a mixed manner of cordiality, contempt, and misgiving.

‘You have a practice, I suppose, sir?’

‘I am not in practice just yet.’

‘Just beginning?’

‘I am about to begin.’

‘In London, or near here?’

‘In London probably.’

‘H’m... I am practising in Markton.’

‘Indeed. Have you been at it long?’

‘Not particularly. I designed the chapel built by this lady’s late father; it was my first undertaking — I owe my start, in fact, to Mr. Power. Ever build a chapel?’

‘Never. I have sketched a good many churches.’

‘Ah — there we differ. I didn’t do much sketching in my youth, nor have I time for it now. Sketching and building are two different things, to my mind. I was not brought up to the profession — got into it through sheer love of it. I began as a landscape gardener, then I became a builder, then I was a road contractor. Every architect might do worse than have some such experience. But nowadays ‘tis the men who can draw pretty pictures who get recommended, not the practical men. Young prigs win Institute medals for a pretty design or two which, if anybody tried to build them, would fall down like a house of cards; then they get travelling studentships and what not, and then they start as architects of some new school or other, and think they are the masters of us experienced ones.’

While Somerset was reflecting how far this statement was true, he heard the voice of Paula inquiring, ‘Who can he be?’

Her eyes were bent on the window. Looking out, Somerset saw in the mead beyond the dry ditch, Dare, with his photographic apparatus.

‘He is the young gentleman who called about taking views of the castle,’ said Charlotte.

‘O yes — I remember; it is quite right. He met me in the village and asked me to suggest him some views. I thought him a respectable young fellow.’

‘I think he is a Canadian,’ said Somerset.

‘No,’ said Paula, ‘he is from the East — at least he implied so to me.’

‘There is Italian blood in him,’ said Charlotte brightly. ‘For he spoke to me with an Italian accent. But I can’t think whether he is a boy or a man.’

‘It is to be earnestly hoped that the gentleman does not prevaricate,’ said the minister, for the first time attracted by the subject. ‘I accidentally met him in the lane, and he said something to me about having lived in Malta. I think it was Malta, or Gibraltar — even if he did not say that he was born there.’

‘His manners are no credit to his nationality,’ observed Mrs. Goodman, also speaking publicly for the first time. ‘He asked me this morning to send him out a pail of water for his process, and before I had turned away he began whistling. I don’t like whistlers.’

‘Then it appears,’ said Somerset, ‘that he is a being of no age, no nationality, and no behaviour.’

‘A complete negative,’ added Havill, brightening into a civil sneer. ‘That is, he would be, if he were not a maker of negatives well known in Markton.’

‘Not well known, Mr. Havill,’ answered Mrs. Goodman firmly. ‘For I lived in Markton for thirty years ending three months ago, and he was never heard of in my time.’

‘He is something like you, Charlotte,’ said Paula, smiling playfully on her companion.

All the men looked at Charlotte, on whose face a delicate nervous blush thereupon made its appearance.

‘Pon my word there is a likeness, now I think of it,’ said Havill.

Paula bent down to Charlotte and whispered: ‘Forgive my rudeness, dear. He is not a nice enough person to be like you. He is really more like one or other of the old pictures about the house. I forget which, and really it does not matter.’

‘People’s features fall naturally into groups and classes,’ remarked Somerset. ‘To an observant person they often repeat themselves; though to a careless eye they seem infinite in their differences.’

The conversation flagged, and they idly observed the figure of the cosmopolite Dare as he walked round his instrument in the mead and busied himself with an arrangement of curtains and lenses, occasionally withdrawing a few steps, and looking contemplatively at the towers and walls.

CHAPTER IX.

Somerset returned to the top of the great tower with a vague consciousness that he was going to do something up there — perhaps sketch a general plan of the structure. But he began to discern that this Stancy-Castle episode in his studies of Gothic architecture might be less useful than ornamental to him as a professional man, though it was too agreeable to be abandoned. Finding after a while that his drawing progressed but slowly, by reason of infinite joyful thoughts more allied to his nature than to his art, he relinquished rule and compass, and entered one of the two turrets opening on the roof. It was not the staircase by which he had ascended, and he proceeded to explore its lower part. Entering from the blaze of light without, and imagining the stairs to

descend as usual, he became aware after a few steps that there was suddenly nothing to tread on, and found himself precipitated downwards to a distance of several feet.

Arrived at the bottom, he was conscious of the happy fact that he had not seriously hurt himself, though his leg was twisted awkwardly. Next he perceived that the stone steps had been removed from the turret, so that he had dropped into it as into a dry well; that, owing to its being walled up below, there was no door of exit on either side of him; that he was, in short, a prisoner.

Placing himself in a more comfortable position he calmly considered the best means of getting out, or of making his condition known. For a moment he tried to drag himself up by his arm, but it was a hopeless attempt, the height to the first step being far too great.

He next looked round at a lower level. Not far from his left elbow, in the concave of the outer wall, was a slit for the admission of light, and he perceived at once that through this slit alone lay his chance of communicating with the outer world. At first it seemed as if it were to be done by shouting, but when he learnt what little effect was produced by his voice in the midst of such a mass of masonry, his heart failed him for a moment. Yet, as either Paula or Miss De Stancy would probably guess his visit to the top of the tower, there was no cause for terror, if some for alarm.

He put his handkerchief through the window-slit, so that it fluttered outside, and, fixing it in its place by a large stone drawn from the loose ones around him, awaited succour as best he could. To begin this course of procedure was easy, but to abide in patience till it should produce fruit was an irksome task. As nearly as he could guess — for his watch had been stopped by the fall — it was now about four o'clock, and it would be scarcely possible for evening to approach without some eye or other noticing the white signal. So Somerset waited, his eyes lingering on the little world of objects around him, till they all became quite familiar. Spiders'-webs in plenty were there, and one in particular just before him was in full use as a snare, stretching across the arch of the window, with radiating threads as its ribs. Somerset had plenty of time, and he counted their number — fifteen. He remained so silent that the owner of this elaborate structure soon forgot the disturbance which had resulted in the breaking of his diagonal ties, and crept out from the corner to mend them. In watching the process, Somerset noticed that on the stonework behind the web sundry names and initials had been cut by explorers in years gone by. Among these antique inscriptions he observed two bright and clean ones, consisting of the words 'De Stancy' and 'W. Dare,' crossing each other at right angles. From the state of the stone they could not have been cut more than a month before this date, and, musing on the circumstance, Somerset passed the time until the sun reached the slit in that side of the tower, where, beginning by throwing in a streak of fire as narrow as a corn-stalk, it enlarged its width till the dusty nook was flooded with cheerful light. It disclosed something lying in the corner, which on examination proved to be a dry bone. Whether it was human, or had come from the castle larder in bygone times, he could not tell. One bone was not a whole skeleton, but it made him think of Ginevra of Modena, the heroine of the Mistletoe

Bough, and other cribbed and confined wretches, who had fallen into such traps and been discovered after a cycle of years.

The sun's rays had travelled some way round the interior when Somerset's waiting ears were at last attracted by footsteps above, each tread being brought down by the hollow turret with great fidelity. He hoped that with these sounds would arise that of a soft voice he had begun to like well. Indeed, during the solitary hour or two of his waiting here he had pictured Paula straying alone on the terrace of the castle, looking up, noting his signal, and ascending to deliver him from his painful position by her own exertions. It seemed that at length his dream had been verified. The footsteps approached the opening of the turret; and, attracted by the call which Somerset now raised, began to descend towards him. In a moment, not Paula's face, but that of a dreary footman of her household, looked into the hole.

Somerset mastered his disappointment, and the man speedily fetched a ladder, by which means the prisoner of two hours ascended to the roof in safety. During the process he ventured to ask for the ladies of the house, and learnt that they had gone out for a drive together.

Before he left the castle, however, they had returned, a circumstance unexpectedly made known to him by his receiving a message from Miss Power, to the effect that she would be glad to see him at his convenience. Wondering what it could possibly mean, he followed the messenger to her room — a small modern library in the Jacobean wing of the house, adjoining that in which the telegraph stood. She was alone, sitting behind a table littered with letters and sketches, and looking fresh from her drive. Perhaps it was because he had been shut up in that dismal dungeon all the afternoon that he felt something in her presence which at the same time charmed and refreshed him.

She signified that he was to sit down; but finding that he was going to place himself on a straight-backed chair some distance off she said, 'Will you sit nearer to me?' and then, as if rather oppressed by her dignity, she left her own chair of business and seated herself at ease on an ottoman which was among the diversified furniture of the apartment.

'I want to consult you professionally,' she went on. 'I have been much impressed by your great knowledge of castellated architecture. Will you sit in that leather chair at the table, as you may have to take notes?'

The young man assented, expressed his gratification, and went to the chair she designated.

'But, Mr. Somerset,' she continued, from the ottoman — the width of the table only dividing them — 'I first should just like to know, and I trust you will excuse my inquiry, if you are an architect in practice, or only as yet studying for the profession?'

'I am just going to practise. I open my office on the first of January next,' he answered.

'You would not mind having me as a client — your first client?' She looked curiously from her sideways face across the table as she said this.

'Can you ask it!' said Somerset warmly. 'What are you going to build?'

'I am going to restore the castle.'

'What, all of it?' said Somerset, astonished at the audacity of such an undertaking.

'Not the parts that are absolutely ruinous: the walls battered by the Parliament artillery had better remain as they are, I suppose. But we have begun wrong; it is I who should ask you, not you me... I fear,' she went on, in that low note which was somewhat difficult to catch at a distance, 'I fear what the antiquarians will say if I am not very careful. They come here a great deal in summer and if I were to do the work wrong they would put my name in the papers as a dreadful person. But I must live here, as I have no other house, except the one in London, and hence I must make the place habitable. I do hope I can trust to your judgment?'

'I hope so,' he said, with diffidence, for, far from having much professional confidence, he often mistrusted himself. 'I am a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, and a Member of the Institute of British Architects — not a Fellow of that body yet, though I soon shall be.'

'Then I am sure you must be trustworthy,' she said, with enthusiasm. 'Well, what am I to do? — How do we begin?'

Somerset began to feel more professional, what with the business chair and the table, and the writing-paper, notwithstanding that these articles, and the room they were in, were hers instead of his; and an evenness of manner which he had momentarily lost returned to him. 'The very first step,' he said, 'is to decide upon the outlay — what is it to cost?'

He faltered a little, for it seemed to disturb the softness of their relationship to talk thus of hard cash. But her sympathy with his feeling was apparently not great, and she said, 'The expenditure shall be what you advise.'

'What a heavenly client!' he thought. 'But you must just give some idea,' he said gently. 'For the fact is, any sum almost may be spent on such a building: five thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand.'

'I want it done well; so suppose we say a hundred thousand? My father's solicitor — my solicitor now — says I may go to a hundred thousand without extravagance, if the expenditure is scattered over two or three years.'

Somerset looked round for a pen. With quickness of insight she knew what he wanted, and signified where one could be found. He wrote down in large figures —
100,000.00

It was more than he had expected; and for a young man just beginning practice, the opportunity of playing with another person's money to that extent would afford an exceptionally handsome opening, not so much from the commission it represented, as from the attention that would be bestowed by the art-world on such an undertaking.

Paula had sunk into a reverie. 'I was intending to intrust the work to Mr. Havill, a local architect,' she said. 'But I gathered from his conversation with you to-day that his ignorance of styles might compromise me very seriously. In short, though my father employed him in one or two little matters, it would not be right — even a morally culpable thing — to place such an historically valuable building in his hands.'

‘Has Mr. Havill ever been led to expect the commission?’ he asked.

‘He may have guessed that he would have it. I have spoken of my intention to him more than once.’

Somerset thought over his conversation with Havill. Well, he did not like Havill personally; and he had strong reasons for suspecting that in the matter of architecture Havill was a quack. But was it quite generous to step in thus, and take away what would be a golden opportunity to such a man of making both ends meet comfortably for some years to come, without giving him at least one chance? He reflected a little longer, and then spoke out his feeling.

‘I venture to propose a slightly modified arrangement,’ he said. ‘Instead of committing the whole undertaking to my hands without better proof of my ability to carry it out than you have at present, let there be a competition between Mr. Havill and myself — let our rival plans for the restoration and enlargement be submitted to a committee of the Royal Institute of British Architects — and let the choice rest with them, subject of course to your approval.’

‘It is indeed generous of you to suggest it.’ She looked thoughtfully at him; he appeared to strike her in a new light. ‘You really recommend it?’ The fairness which had prompted his words seemed to incline her still more than before to resign herself entirely to him in the matter.

‘I do,’ said Somerset deliberately.

‘I will think of it, since you wish it. And now, what general idea have you of the plan to adopt? I do not positively agree to your suggestion as yet, so I may perhaps ask the question.’

Somerset, being by this time familiar with the general plan of the castle, took out his pencil and made a rough sketch. While he was doing it she rose, and coming to the back of his chair, bent over him in silence.

‘Ah, I begin to see your conception,’ she murmured; and the breath of her words fanned his ear. He finished the sketch, and held it up to her, saying —

‘I would suggest that you walk over the building with Mr. Havill and myself, and detail your ideas to us on each portion.’

‘Is it necessary?’

‘Clients mostly do it.’

‘I will, then. But it is too late for me this evening. Please meet me to-morrow at ten.’

CHAPTER X.

At ten o’clock they met in the same room, Paula appearing in a straw hat having a bent-up brim lined with plaited silk, so that it surrounded her forehead like a nimbus; and Somerset armed with sketch-book, measuring-rod, and other apparatus of his craft.

‘And Mr. Havill?’ said the young man.

‘I have not decided to employ him: if I do he shall go round with me independently of you,’ she replied rather brusquely.

Somerset was by no means sorry to hear this. His duty to Havill was done.

‘And now,’ she said, as they walked on together through the passages, ‘I must tell you that I am not a mediaevalist myself; and perhaps that’s a pity.’

‘What are you?’

‘I am Greek — that’s why I don’t wish to influence your design.’

Somerset, as they proceeded, pointed out where roofs had been and should be again, where gables had been pulled down, and where floors had vanished, showing her how to reconstruct their details from marks in the walls, much as a comparative anatomist reconstructs an antediluvian from fragmentary bones and teeth. She appeared to be interested, listened attentively, but said little in reply. They were ultimately in a long narrow passage, indifferently lighted, when Somerset, treading on a loose stone, felt a twinge of weakness in one knee, and knew in a moment that it was the result of the twist given by his yesterday’s fall. He paused, leaning against the wall.

‘What is it?’ said Paula, with a sudden timidity in her voice.

‘I slipped down yesterday,’ he said. ‘It will be right in a moment.’

‘I — can I help you?’ said Paula. But she did not come near him; indeed, she withdrew a little. She looked up the passage, and down the passage, and became conscious that it was long and gloomy, and that nobody was near. A curious coy uneasiness seemed to take possession of her. Whether she thought, for the first time, that she had made a mistake — that to wander about the castle alone with him was compromising, or whether it was the mere shy instinct of maidenhood, nobody knows; but she said suddenly, ‘I will get something for you, and return in a few minutes.’

‘Pray don’t — it has quite passed!’ he said, stepping out again.

But Paula had vanished. When she came back it was in the rear of Charlotte De Stancy. Miss De Stancy had a tumbler in one hand, half full of wine, which she offered him; Paula remaining in the background.

He took the glass, and, to satisfy his companions, drank a mouthful or two, though there was really nothing whatever the matter with him beyond the slight ache above mentioned. Charlotte was going to retire, but Paula said, quite anxiously, ‘You will stay with me, Charlotte, won’t you? Surely you are interested in what I am doing?’

‘What is it?’ said Miss De Stancy.

‘Planning how to mend and enlarge the castle. Tell Mr. Somerset what I want done in the quadrangle — you know quite well — and I will walk on.’

She walked on; but instead of talking on the subject as directed, Charlotte and Somerset followed chatting on indifferent matters. They came to an inner court and found Paula standing there.

She met Miss De Stancy with a smile. ‘Did you explain?’ she asked.

‘I have not explained yet.’ Paula seated herself on a stone bench, and Charlotte went on: ‘Miss Power thought of making a Greek court of this. But she will not tell you so herself, because it seems such dreadful anachronism.’

‘I said I would not tell any architect myself,’ interposed Paula correctly. ‘I did not then know that he would be Mr. Somerset.’

‘It is rather startling,’ said Somerset.

‘A Greek colonnade all round, you said, Paula,’ continued her less reticent companion. ‘A peristyle you called it — you saw it in a book, don’t you remember? — and then you were going to have a fountain in the middle, and statues like those in the British Museum.’

‘I did say so,’ remarked Paula, pulling the leaves from a young sycamore-tree that had sprung up between the joints of the paving.

From the spot where they sat they could see over the roofs the upper part of the great tower wherein Somerset had met with his misadventure. The tower stood boldly up in the sun, and from one of the slits in the corner something white waved in the breeze.

‘What can that be?’ said Charlotte. ‘Is it the fluff of owls, or a handkerchief?’

‘It is my handkerchief,’ Somerset answered. ‘I fixed it there with a stone to attract attention, and forgot to take it away.’

All three looked up at the handkerchief with interest. ‘Why did you want to attract attention?’ said Paula.

‘O, I fell into the turret; but I got out very easily.’

‘O Paula,’ said Charlotte, turning to her friend, ‘that must be the place where the man fell in, years ago, and was starved to death!’

‘Starved to death?’ said Paula.

‘They say so. O Mr. Somerset, what an escape!’ And Charlotte De Stancy walked away to a point from which she could get a better view of the treacherous turret.

‘Whom did you think to attract?’ asked Paula, after a pause.

‘I thought you might see it.’

‘Me personally?’ And, blushing faintly, her eyes rested upon him.

‘I hoped for anybody. I thought of you,’ said Somerset.

She did not continue. In a moment she arose and went across to Miss De Stancy. ‘Don’t YOU go falling down and becoming a skeleton,’ she said — Somerset overheard the words, though Paula was unaware of it — after which she clasped her fingers behind Charlotte’s neck, and smiled tenderly in her face.

It seemed to be quite unconsciously done, and Somerset thought it a very beautiful action. Presently Paula returned to him and said, ‘Mr. Somerset, I think we have had enough architecture for to-day.’

The two women then wished him good-morning and went away. Somerset, feeling that he had now every reason for prowling about the castle, remained near the spot, endeavouring to evolve some plan of procedure for the project entertained by the beautiful owner of those weather-scathed walls. But for a long time the mental perspective of his new position so excited the emotional side of his nature that he could not concentrate it on feet and inches. As Paula’s architect (supposing Havill not to be admitted

as a competitor), he must of necessity be in constant communication with her for a space of two or three years to come; and particularly during the next few months. She, doubtless, cherished far too ambitious views of her career to feel any personal interest in this enforced relationship with him; but he would be at liberty to feel what he chose: and to be the victim of an unrequited passion, while afforded such splendid opportunities of communion with the one beloved, deprived that passion of its most deplorable features. Accessibility is a great point in matters of love, and perhaps of the two there is less misery in loving without return a goddess who is to be seen and spoken to every day, than in having an affection tenderly reciprocated by one always hopelessly removed.

With this view of having to spend a considerable time in the neighbourhood Somerset shifted his quarters that afternoon from the little inn at Sleeping-Green to a larger one at Markton. He required more rooms in which to carry out Paula's instructions than the former place afforded, and a more central position. Having reached and dined at Markton he found the evening tedious, and again strolled out in the direction of the castle.

When he reached it the light was declining, and a solemn stillness overspread the pile. The great tower was in full view. That spot of white which looked like a pigeon fluttering from the loophole was his handkerchief, still hanging in the place where he had left it. His eyes yet lingered on the walls when he noticed, with surprise, that the handkerchief suddenly vanished.

Believing that the breezes, though weak below, might have been strong enough at that height to blow it into the turret, and in no hurry to get off the premises, he leisurely climbed up to find it, ascending by the second staircase, crossing the roof, and going to the top of the treacherous turret. The ladder by which he had escaped still stood within it, and beside the ladder he beheld the dim outline of a woman, in a meditative attitude, holding his handkerchief in her hand.

Somerset softly withdrew. When he had reached the ground he looked up. A girlish form was standing at the top of the tower looking over the parapet upon him — possibly not seeing him, for it was dark on the lawn. It was either Miss De Stancy or Paula; one of them had gone there alone for his handkerchief and had remained awhile, pondering on his escape. But which? 'If I were not a faint-heart I should run all risk and wave my hat or kiss my hand to her, whoever she is,' he thought. But he did not do either.

So he lingered about silently in the shades, and then thought of strolling to his rooms at Markton. Just at leaving, as he passed under the inhabited wing, whence one or two lights now blinked, he heard a piano, and a voice singing 'The Mistletoe Bough.' The song had probably been suggested to the romantic fancy of the singer by her visit to the scene of his captivity.

CHAPTER XI.

The identity of the lady whom he had seen on the tower and afterwards heard singing was established the next day.

‘I have been thinking,’ said Miss Power, on meeting him, ‘that you may require a studio on the premises. If so, the room I showed you yesterday is at your service. If I employ Mr. Havill to compete with you I will offer him a similar one.’

Somerset did not decline; and she added, ‘In the same room you will find the handkerchief that was left on the tower.’

‘Ah, I saw that it was gone. Somebody brought it down?’

‘I did,’ she shyly remarked, looking up for a second under her shady hat-brim.

‘I am much obliged to you.’

‘O no. I went up last night to see where the accident happened, and there I found it. When you came up were you in search of it, or did you want me?’

‘Then she saw me,’ he thought. ‘I went for the handkerchief only; I was not aware that you were there,’ he answered simply. And he involuntarily sighed.

It was very soft, but she might have heard him, for there was interest in her voice as she continued, ‘Did you see me before you went back?’

‘I did not know it was you; I saw that some lady was there, and I would not disturb her. I wondered all the evening if it were you.’

Paula hastened to explain: ‘We understood that you would stay to dinner, and as you did not come in we wondered where you were. That made me think of your accident, and after dinner I went up to the place where it happened.’

Somerset almost wished she had not explained so lucidly.

And now followed the piquant days to which his position as her architect, or, at worst, as one of her two architects, naturally led. His anticipations were for once surpassed by the reality. Perhaps Somerset’s inherent unfitness for a professional life under ordinary circumstances was only proved by his great zest for it now. Had he been in regular practice, with numerous other clients, instead of having merely made a start with this one, he would have totally neglected their business in his exclusive attention to Paula’s.

The idea of a competition between Somerset and Havill had been highly approved by Paula’s solicitor, but she would not assent to it as yet, seeming quite vexed that Somerset should not have taken the good the gods provided without questioning her justice to Havill. The room she had offered him was prepared as a studio. Drawing-boards and Whatman’s paper were sent for, and in a few days Somerset began serious labour. His first requirement was a clerk or two, to do the drudgery of measuring and figuring; but for the present he preferred to sketch alone. Sometimes, in measuring the outworks of the castle, he ran against Havill strolling about with no apparent object, who bestowed on him an envious nod, and passed by.

‘I hope you will not make your sketches,’ she said, looking in upon him one day, ‘and then go away to your studio in London and think of your other buildings and forget mine. I am in haste to begin, and wish you not to neglect me.’

‘I have no other building to think of,’ said Somerset, rising and placing a chair for her. ‘I had not begun practice, as you may know. I have nothing else in hand but your castle.’

‘I suppose I ought not to say I am glad of it; but it is an advantage to have an architect all to one’s self. The architect whom I at first thought of told me before I knew you that if I placed the castle in his hands he would undertake no other commission till its completion.’

‘I agree to the same,’ said Somerset.

‘I don’t wish to bind you. But I hinder you now — do pray go on without reference to me. When will there be some drawing for me to see?’

‘I will take care that it shall be soon.’

He had a metallic tape in his hand, and went out of the room to take some dimension in the corridor. The assistant for whom he had advertised had not arrived, and he attempted to fix the end of the tape by sticking his penknife through the ring into the wall. Paula looked on at a distance.

‘I will hold it,’ she said.

She went to the required corner and held the end in its place. She had taken it the wrong way, and Somerset went over and placed it properly in her fingers, carefully avoiding to touch them. She obediently raised her hand to the corner again, and stood till he had finished, when she asked, ‘Is that all?’

‘That is all,’ said Somerset. ‘Thank you.’ Without further speech she looked at his sketch-book, while he marked down the lines just acquired.

‘You said the other day,’ she observed, ‘that early Gothic work might be known by the under-cutting, or something to that effect. I have looked in Rickman and the Oxford Glossary, but I cannot quite understand what you meant.’

It was only too probable to her lover, from the way in which she turned to him, that she HAD looked in Rickman and the Glossary, and was thinking of nothing in the world but of the subject of her inquiry.

‘I can show you, by actual example, if you will come to the chapel?’ he returned hesitatingly.

‘Don’t go on purpose to show me — when you are there on your own account I will come in.’

‘I shall be there in half-an-hour.’

‘Very well,’ said Paula. She looked out of a window, and, seeing Miss De Stancy on the terrace, left him.

Somerset stood thinking of what he had said. He had no occasion whatever to go into the chapel of the castle that day. He had been tempted by her words to say he would be there, and ‘half-an-hour’ had come to his lips almost without his knowledge. This community of interest — if it were not anything more tender — was growing serious.

What had passed between them amounted to an appointment; they were going to meet in the most solitary chamber of the whole solitary pile. Could it be that Paula had well considered this in replying with her friendly 'Very well?' Probably not.

Somerset proceeded to the chapel and waited. With the progress of the seconds towards the half-hour he began to discover that a dangerous admiration for this girl had risen within him. Yet so imaginative was his passion that he hardly knew a single feature of her countenance well enough to remember it in her absence. The meditative judgment of things and men which had been his habit up to the moment of seeing her in the Baptist chapel seemed to have left him — nothing remained but a distracting wish to be always near her, and it was quite with dismay that he recognized what immense importance he was attaching to the question whether she would keep the trifling engagement or not.

The chapel of Stancy Castle was a silent place, heaped up in corners with a lumber of old panels, framework, and broken coloured glass. Here no clock could be heard beating out the hours of the day — here no voice of priest or deacon had for generations uttered the daily service denoting how the year rolls on. The stagnation of the spot was sufficient to draw Somerset's mind for a moment from the subject which absorbed it, and he thought, 'So, too, will time triumph over all this fervour within me.'

Lifting his eyes from the floor on which his foot had been tapping nervously, he saw Paula standing at the other end. It was not so pleasant when he also saw that Mrs. Goodman accompanied her. The latter lady, however, obligingly remained where she was resting, while Paula came forward, and, as usual, paused without speaking.

'It is in this little arcade that the example occurs,' said Somerset.

'O yes,' she answered, turning to look at it.

'Early piers, capitals, and mouldings, generally alternated with deep hollows, so as to form strong shadows. Now look under the abacus of this capital; you will find the stone hollowed out wonderfully; and also in this arch-mould. It is often difficult to understand how it could be done without cracking off the stone. The difference between this and late work can be felt by the hand even better than it can be seen.' He suited the action to the word and placed his hand in the hollow.

She listened attentively, then stretched up her own hand to test the cutting as he had done; she was not quite tall enough; she would step upon this piece of wood. Having done so she tried again, and succeeded in putting her finger on the spot. No; she could not understand it through her glove even now. She pulled off her glove, and, her hand resting in the stone channel, her eyes became abstracted in the effort of realisation, the ideas derived through her hand passing into her face.

'No, I am not sure now,' she said.

Somerset placed his own hand in the cavity. Now their two hands were close together again. They had been close together half-an-hour earlier, and he had sedulously avoided touching hers. He dared not let such an accident happen now. And yet — surely she saw the situation! Was the inscrutable seriousness with which she applied herself to his lesson a mockery? There was such a bottomless depth in her eyes that it was impossible

to guess truly. Let it be that destiny alone had ruled that their hands should be together a second time.

All rumination was cut short by an impulse. He seized her forefinger between his own finger and thumb, and drew it along the hollow, saying, 'That is the curve I mean.'

Somerset's hand was hot and trembling; Paula's, on the contrary, was cool and soft as an infant's.

'Now the arch-mould,' continued he. 'There — the depth of that cavity is tremendous, and it is not geometrical, as in later work.' He drew her unresisting fingers from the capital to the arch, and laid them in the little trench as before.

She allowed them to rest quietly there till he relinquished them. 'Thank you,' she then said, withdrawing her hand, brushing the dust from her finger-tips, and putting on her glove.

Her imperception of his feeling was the very sublimity of maiden innocence if it were real; if not, well, the coquetry was no great sin.

'Mr. Somerset, will you allow me to have the Greek court I mentioned?' she asked tentatively, after a long break in their discourse, as she scanned the green stones along the base of the arcade, with a conjectural countenance as to his reply.

'Will your own feeling for the genius of the place allow you?'

'I am not a mediaevalist: I am an eclectic.'

'You don't dislike your own house on that account.'

'I did at first — I don't so much now... I should love it, and adore every stone, and think feudalism the only true romance of life, if — '

'What?'

'If I were a De Stancy, and the castle the long home of my forefathers.'

Somerset was a little surprised at the avowal: the minister's words on the effects of her new environment recurred to his mind. 'Miss De Stancy doesn't think so,' he said. 'She cares nothing about those things.'

Paula now turned to him: hitherto her remarks had been sparingly spoken, her eyes being directed elsewhere: 'Yes, that is very strange, is it not?' she said. 'But it is owing to the joyous freshness of her nature which precludes her from dwelling on the past — indeed, the past is no more to her than it is to a sparrow or robin. She is scarcely an instance of the wearing out of old families, for a younger mental constitution than hers I never knew.'

'Unless that very simplicity represents the second childhood of her line, rather than her own exclusive character.'

Paula shook her head. 'In spite of the Greek court, she is more Greek than I.'

'You represent science rather than art, perhaps.'

'How?' she asked, glancing up under her hat.

'I mean,' replied Somerset, 'that you represent the march of mind — the steamship, and the railway, and the thoughts that shake mankind.'

She weighed his words, and said: 'Ah, yes: you allude to my father. My father was a great man; but I am more and more forgetting his greatness: that kind of greatness

is what a woman can never truly enter into. I am less and less his daughter every day that goes by.'

She walked away a few steps to rejoin the excellent Mrs. Goodman, who, as Somerset still perceived, was waiting for Paula at the discreetest of distances in the shadows at the farther end of the building. Surely Paula's voice had faltered, and she had turned to hide a tear?

She came back again. 'Did you know that my father made half the railways in Europe, including that one over there?' she said, waving her little gloved hand in the direction whence low rumbles were occasionally heard during the day.

'Yes.'

'How did you know?'

'Miss De Stancy told me a little; and I then found his name and doings were quite familiar to me.'

Curiously enough, with his words there came through the broken windows the murmur of a train in the distance, sounding clearer and more clear. It was nothing to listen to, yet they both listened; till the increasing noise suddenly broke off into dead silence.

'It has gone into the tunnel,' said Paula. 'Have you seen the tunnel my father made? the curves are said to be a triumph of science. There is nothing else like it in this part of England.'

'There is not: I have heard so. But I have not seen it.'

'Do you think it a thing more to be proud of that one's father should have made a great tunnel and railway like that, than that one's remote ancestor should have built a great castle like this?'

What could Somerset say? It would have required a casuist to decide whether his answer should depend upon his conviction, or upon the family ties of such a questioner. 'From a modern point of view, railways are, no doubt, things more to be proud of than castles,' he said; 'though perhaps I myself, from mere association, should decide in favour of the ancestor who built the castle.' The serious anxiety to be truthful that Somerset threw into his observation, was more than the circumstance required. 'To design great engineering works,' he added musingly, and without the least eye to the disparagement of her parent, 'requires no doubt a leading mind. But to execute them, as he did, requires, of course, only a following mind.'

His reply had not altogether pleased her; and there was a distinct reproach conveyed by her slight movement towards Mrs. Goodman. He saw it, and was grieved that he should have spoken so. 'I am going to walk over and inspect that famous tunnel of your father's,' he added gently. 'It will be a pleasant study for this afternoon.'

She went away. 'I am no man of the world,' he thought. 'I ought to have praised that father of hers straight off. I shall not win her respect; much less her love!'

CHAPTER XII.

Somerset did not forget what he had planned, and when lunch was over he walked away through the trees. The tunnel was more difficult of discovery than he had anticipated, and it was only after considerable winding among green lanes, whose deep ruts were like canyons of Colorado in miniature, that he reached the slope in the distant upland where the tunnel began. A road stretched over its crest, and thence along one side of the railway-cutting.

He there unexpectedly saw standing Miss Power's carriage; and on drawing nearer he found it to contain Paula herself, Miss De Stancy, and Mrs. Goodman.

'How singular!' exclaimed Miss De Stancy gaily.

'It is most natural,' said Paula instantly. 'In the morning two people discuss a feature in the landscape, and in the afternoon each has a desire to see it from what the other has said of it. Therefore they accidentally meet.'

Now Paula had distinctly heard Somerset declare that he was going to walk there; how then could she say this so coolly? It was with a pang at his heart that he returned to his old thought of her being possibly a finished coquette and dissembler. Whatever she might be, she was not a creature starched very stiffly by Puritanism.

Somerset looked down on the mouth of the tunnel. The popular commonplace that science, steam, and travel must always be unromantic and hideous, was not proven at this spot. On either slope of the deep cutting, green with long grass, grew drooping young trees of ash, beech, and other flexible varieties, their foliage almost concealing the actual railway which ran along the bottom, its thin steel rails gleaming like silver threads in the depths. The vertical front of the tunnel, faced with brick that had once been red, was now weather-stained, lichened, and mossed over in harmonious rusty-browns, pearly greys, and neutral greens, at the very base appearing a little blue-black spot like a mouse-hole — the tunnel's mouth.

The carriage was drawn up quite close to the wood railing, and Paula was looking down at the same time with him; but he made no remark to her.

Mrs. Goodman broke the silence by saying, 'If it were not a railway we should call it a lovely dell.'

Somerset agreed with her, adding that it was so charming that he felt inclined to go down.

'If you do, perhaps Miss Power will order you up again, as a trespasser,' said Charlotte De Stancy. 'You are one of the largest shareholders in the railway, are you not, Paula?'

Miss Power did not reply.

'I suppose as the road is partly yours you might walk all the way to London along the rails, if you wished, might you not, dear?' Charlotte continued.

Paula smiled, and said, 'No, of course not.'

Somerset, feeling himself superfluous, raised his hat to his companions as if he meant not to see them again for a while, and began to descend by some steps cut in the earth;

Miss De Stancy asked Mrs. Goodman to accompany her to a barrow over the top of the tunnel; and they left the carriage, Paula remaining alone.

Down Somerset plunged through the long grass, bushes, late summer flowers, moths, and caterpillars, vexed with himself that he had come there, since Paula was so inscrutable, and humming the notes of some song he did not know. The tunnel that had seemed so small from the surface was a vast archway when he reached its mouth, which emitted, as a contrast to the sultry heat on the slopes of the cutting, a cool breeze, that had travelled a mile underground from the other end. Far away in the darkness of this silent subterranean corridor he could see that other end as a mere speck of light.

When he had conscientiously admired the construction of the massive archivault, and the majesty of its nude ungarnished walls, he looked up the slope at the carriage; it was so small to the eye that it might have been made for a performance by canaries; Paula's face being still smaller, as she leaned back in her seat, idly looking down at him. There seemed something roguish in her attitude of criticism, and to be no longer the subject of her contemplation he entered the tunnel out of her sight.

In the middle of the speck of light before him appeared a speck of black; and then a shrill whistle, dulled by millions of tons of earth, reached his ears from thence. It was what he had been on his guard against all the time, — a passing train; and instead of taking the trouble to come out of the tunnel he stepped into a recess, till the train had rattled past and vanished onward round a curve.

Somerset still remained where he had placed himself, mentally balancing science against art, the grandeur of this fine piece of construction against that of the castle, and thinking whether Paula's father had not, after all, the best of it, when all at once he saw Paula's form confronting him at the entrance of the tunnel. He instantly went forward into the light; to his surprise she was as pale as a lily.

'O, Mr. Somerset!' she exclaimed. 'You ought not to frighten me so — indeed you ought not! The train came out almost as soon as you had gone in, and as you did not return — an accident was possible!'

Somerset at once perceived that he had been to blame in not thinking of this.

'Please do forgive my thoughtlessness in not reflecting how it would strike you!' he pleaded. 'I — I see I have alarmed you.'

Her alarm was, indeed, much greater than he had at first thought: she trembled so much that she was obliged to sit down, at which he went up to her full of solicitousness.

'You ought not to have done it!' she said. 'I naturally thought — any person would —'

Somerset, perhaps wisely, said nothing at this outburst; the cause of her vexation was, plainly enough, his perception of her discomposure. He stood looking in another direction, till in a few moments she had risen to her feet again, quite calm.

'It would have been dreadful,' she said with faint gaiety, as the colour returned to her face; 'if I had lost my architect, and been obliged to engage Mr. Havill without an alternative.'

'I was really in no danger; but of course I ought to have considered,' he said.

‘I forgive you,’ she returned good-naturedly. ‘I knew there was no GREAT danger to a person exercising ordinary discretion; but artists and thinkers like you are indiscreet for a moment sometimes. I am now going up again. What do you think of the tunnel?’

They were crossing the railway to ascend by the opposite path, Somerset keeping his eye on the interior of the tunnel for safety, when suddenly there arose a noise and shriek from the contrary direction behind the trees. Both knew in a moment what it meant, and each seized the other as they rushed off the permanent way. The ideas of both had been so centred on the tunnel as the source of danger, that the probability of a train from the opposite quarter had been forgotten. It rushed past them, causing Paula’s dress, hair, and ribbons to flutter violently, and blowing up the fallen leaves in a shower over their shoulders.

Neither spoke, and they went up several steps, holding each other by the hand, till, becoming conscious of the fact, she withdrew hers; whereupon Somerset stopped and looked earnestly at her; but her eyes were averted towards the tunnel wall.

‘What an escape!’ he said.

‘We were not so very near, I think, were we?’ she asked quickly. ‘If we were, I think you were — very good to take my hand.’

They reached the top at last, and the new level and open air seemed to give her a new mind. ‘I don’t see the carriage anywhere,’ she said, in the common tones of civilization.

He thought it had gone over the crest of the hill; he would accompany her till they reached it.

‘No — please — I would rather not — I can find it very well.’ Before he could say more she had inclined her head and smiled and was on her way alone.

The tunnel-cutting appeared a dreary gulf enough now to the young man, as he stood leaning over the rails above it, beating the herbage with his stick. For some minutes he could not criticize or weigh her conduct; the warmth of her presence still encircled him. He recalled her face as it had looked out at him from under the white silk puffing of her black hat, and the speaking power of her eyes at the moment of danger. The breadth of that clear-complexioned forehead — almost concealed by the masses of brown hair bundled up around it — signified that if her disposition were oblique and insincere enough for trifling, coquetting, or in any way making a fool of him, she had the intellect to do it cruelly well.

But it was ungenerous to ruminate so suspiciously. A girl not an actress by profession could hardly turn pale artificially as she had done, though perhaps mere fright meant nothing, and would have arisen in her just as readily had he been one of the labourers on her estate.

The reflection that such feeling as she had exhibited could have no tender meaning returned upon him with masterful force when he thought of her wealth and the social position into which she had drifted. Somerset, being of a solitary and studious nature, was not quite competent to estimate precisely the disqualifying effect, if any, of her nonconformity, her newness of blood, and other things, among the old county families

established round her; but the toughest prejudices, he thought, were not likely to be long invulnerable to such cheerful beauty and brightness of intellect as Paula's. When she emerged, as she was plainly about to do, from the seclusion in which she had been living since her father's death, she would inevitably win her way among her neighbours. She would become the local topic. Fortune-hunters would learn of her existence and draw near in shoals. What chance would there then be for him?

The points in his favour were indeed few, but they were just enough to keep a tantalising hope alive. Modestly leaving out of count his personal and intellectual qualifications, he thought of his family. It was an old stock enough, though not a rich one. His great-uncle had been the well-known Vice-admiral Sir Armstrong Somerset, who served his country well in the Baltic, the Indies, China, and the Caribbean Sea. His grandfather had been a notable metaphysician. His father, the Royal Academician, was popular. But perhaps this was not the sort of reasoning likely to occupy the mind of a young woman; the personal aspect of the situation was in such circumstances of far more import. He had come as a wandering stranger — that possibly lent some interest to him in her eyes. He was installed in an office which would necessitate free communion with her for some time to come; that was another advantage, and would be a still greater one if she showed, as Paula seemed disposed to do, such artistic sympathy with his work as to follow up with interest the details of its progress.

The carriage did not reappear, and he went on towards Markton, disinclined to return again that day to the studio which had been prepared for him at the castle. He heard feet brushing the grass behind him, and, looking round, saw the Baptist minister.

'I have just come from the village,' said Mr. Woodwell, who looked worn and weary, his boots being covered with dust; 'and I have learnt that which confirms my fears for her.'

'For Miss Power?'

'Most assuredly.'

'What danger is there?' said Somerset.

'The temptations of her position have become too much for her! She is going out of mourning next week, and will give a large dinner-party on the occasion; for though the invitations are partly in the name of her relative Mrs. Goodman, they must come from her. The guests are to include people of old cavalier families who would have treated her grandfather, sir, and even her father, with scorn for their religion and connections; also the parson and curate — yes, actually people who believe in the Apostolic Succession; and what's more, they're coming. My opinion is, that it has all arisen from her friendship with Miss De Stancy.'

'Well,' cried Somerset warmly, 'this only shows liberality of feeling on both sides! I suppose she has invited you as well?'

'She has not invited me!... Mr. Somerset, notwithstanding your erroneous opinions on important matters, I speak to you as a friend, and I tell you that she has never in her secret heart forgiven that sermon of mine, in which I likened her to the church

at Laodicea. I admit the words were harsh, but I was doing my duty, and if the case arose to-morrow I would do it again. Her displeasure is a deep grief to me; but I serve One greater than she... You, of course, are invited to this dinner?’

‘I have heard nothing of it,’ murmured the young man.

Their paths diverged; and when Somerset reached the hotel he was informed that somebody was waiting to see him.

‘Man or woman?’ he asked.

The landlady, who always liked to reply in person to Somerset’s inquiries, apparently thinking him, by virtue of his drawing implements and liberality of payment, a possible lord of Burleigh, came forward and said it was certainly not a woman, but whether man or boy she could not say. ‘His name is Mr. Dare,’ she added.

‘O — that youth,’ he said.

Somerset went upstairs, along the passage, down two steps, round the angle, and so on to the rooms reserved for him in this rambling edifice of stage-coach memories, where he found Dare waiting. Dare came forward, pulling out the cutting of an advertisement.

‘Mr. Somerset, this is yours, I believe, from the Architectural World?’

Somerset said that he had inserted it.

‘I think I should suit your purpose as assistant very well.’

‘Are you an architect’s draughtsman?’

‘Not specially. I have some knowledge of the same, and want to increase it.’

‘I thought you were a photographer.’

‘Also of photography,’ said Dare with a bow. ‘Though but an amateur in that art I can challenge comparison with Regent Street or Broadway.’

Somerset looked upon his table. Two letters only, addressed in initials, were lying there as answers to his advertisement. He asked Dare to wait, and looked them over. Neither was satisfactory. On this account he overcame his slight feeling against Mr. Dare, and put a question to test that gentleman’s capacities. ‘How would you measure the front of a building, including windows, doors, mouldings, and every other feature, for a ground plan, so as to combine the greatest accuracy with the greatest despatch?’

‘In running dimensions,’ said Dare.

As this was the particular kind of work he wanted done, Somerset thought the answer promising. Coming to terms with Dare, he requested the would-be student of architecture to wait at the castle the next day, and dismissed him.

A quarter of an hour later, when Dare was taking a walk in the country, he drew from his pocket eight other letters addressed to Somerset in initials, which, to judge by their style and stationery, were from men far superior to those two whose communications alone Somerset had seen. Dare looked them over for a few seconds as he strolled on, then tore them into minute fragments, and, burying them under the leaves in the ditch, went on his way again.

CHAPTER XIII.

Though exhibiting indifference, Somerset had felt a pang of disappointment when he heard the news of Paula's approaching dinner-party. It seemed a little unkind of her to pass him over, seeing how much they were thrown together just now. That dinner meant more than it sounded. Notwithstanding the roominess of her castle, she was at present living somewhat incommodiously, owing partly to the stagnation caused by her recent bereavement, and partly to the necessity for overhauling the De Stancy lumber piled in those vast and gloomy chambers before they could be made tolerable to nineteenth-century fastidiousness.

To give dinners on any large scale before Somerset had at least set a few of these rooms in order for her, showed, to his thinking, an overpowering desire for society.

During the week he saw less of her than usual, her time being to all appearance much taken up with driving out to make calls on her neighbours and receiving return visits. All this he observed from the windows of his studio overlooking the castle ward, in which room he now spent a great deal of his time, bending over drawing-boards and instructing Dare, who worked as well as could be expected of a youth of such varied attainments.

Nearer came the Wednesday of the party, and no hint of that event reached Somerset, but such as had been communicated by the Baptist minister. At last, on the very afternoon, an invitation was handed into his studio — not a kind note in Paula's handwriting, but a formal printed card in the joint names of Mrs. Goodman and Miss Power. It reached him just four hours before the dinner-time. He was plainly to be used as a stop-gap at the last moment because somebody could not come.

Having previously arranged to pass a quiet evening in his rooms at the Lord Quantock Arms, in reading up chronicles of the castle from the county history, with the view of gathering some ideas as to the distribution of rooms therein before the demolition of a portion of the structure, he decided off-hand that Paula's dinner was not of sufficient importance to him as a professional man and student of art to justify a waste of the evening by going. He accordingly declined Mrs. Goodman's and Miss Power's invitation; and at five o'clock left the castle and walked across the fields to the little town.

He dined early, and, clearing away heaviness with a cup of coffee, applied himself to that volume of the county history which contained the record of Stancy Castle.

Here he read that 'when this picturesque and ancient structure was founded, or by whom, is extremely uncertain. But that a castle stood on the site in very early times appears from many old books of charters. In its prime it was such a masterpiece of fortification as to be the wonder of the world, and it was thought, before the invention of gunpowder, that it never could be taken by any force less than divine.'

He read on to the times when it first passed into the hands of 'De Stancy, Chivaler,' and received the family name, and so on from De Stancy to De Stancy till he was lost in the reflection whether Paula would or would not have thought more highly of

him if he had accepted the invitation to dinner. Applying himself again to the tome, he learned that in the year 1504 Stephen the carpenter was 'paid eleven pence for necessarye repayrs,' and William the mason eight shillings 'for whyt lyming of the kitchen, and the lyme to do it with,' including 'a new rope for the fyer bell;' also the sundry charges for 'vij crockes, xij lytyll pans, a pare of pot hookes, a fyer pane, a lanterne, a chafynge dyshe, and xij candyll stycks.'

Bang went eight strokes of the clock: it was the dinner-hour.

'There, now I can't go, anyhow!' he said bitterly, jumping up, and picturing her receiving her company. How would she look; what would she wear? Profoundly indifferent to the early history of the noble fabric, he felt a violent reaction towards modernism, eclecticism, new aristocracies, everything, in short, that Paula represented. He even gave himself up to consider the Greek court that she had wished for, and passed the remainder of the evening in making a perspective view of the same.

The next morning he awoke early, and, resolving to be at work betimes, started promptly. It was a fine calm hour of day; the grass slopes were silvery with excess of dew, and the blue mists hung in the depths of each tree for want of wind to blow them out. Somerset entered the drive on foot, and when near the castle he observed in the gravel the wheel-marks of the carriages that had conveyed the guests thither the night before. There seemed to have been a large number, for the road where newly repaired was quite cut up. Before going indoors he was tempted to walk round to the wing in which Paula slept.

Rooks were cawing, sparrows were chattering there; but the blind of her window was as closely drawn as if it were midnight. Probably she was sound asleep, dreaming of the compliments which had been paid her by her guests, and of the future triumphant pleasures that would follow in their train. Reaching the outer stone stairs leading to the great hall he found them shadowed by an awning brilliantly striped with red and blue, within which rows of flowering plants in pots bordered the pathway. She could not have made more preparation had the gathering been a ball. He passed along the gallery in which his studio was situated, entered the room, and seized a drawing-board to put into correct drawing the sketch for the Greek court that he had struck out the night before, thereby abandoning his art principles to please the whim of a girl. Dare had not yet arrived, and after a time Somerset threw down his pencil and leant back.

His eye fell upon something that moved. It was white, and lay in the folding chair on the opposite side of the room. On near approach he found it to be a fragment of swan's-down fanned into motion by his own movements, and partially squeezed into the chink of the chair as though by some person sitting on it.

None but a woman would have worn or brought that swan's-down into his studio, and it made him reflect on the possible one. Nothing interrupted his conjectures till ten o'clock, when Dare came. Then one of the servants tapped at the door to know if Mr. Somerset had arrived. Somerset asked if Miss Power wished to see him, and was informed that she had only wished to know if he had come. Somerset sent a return

message that he had a design on the board which he should soon be glad to submit to her, and the messenger departed.

‘Fine doings here last night, sir,’ said Dare, as he dusted his T-square.

‘O indeed!’

‘A dinner-party, I hear; eighteen guests.’

‘Ah,’ said Somerset.

‘The young lady was magnificent — sapphires and opals — she carried as much as a thousand pounds upon her head and shoulders during that three or four hour. Of course they call her charming; *Compuesta no hay muger fea*, as they say at Madrid.’

‘I don’t doubt it for a moment,’ said Somerset, with reserve.

Dare said no more, and presently the door opened, and there stood Paula.

Somerset nodded to Dare to withdraw into an adjoining room, and offered her a chair.

‘You wish to show me the design you have prepared?’ she asked, without taking the seat.

‘Yes; I have come round to your opinion. I have made a plan for the Greek court you were anxious to build.’ And he elevated the drawing-board against the wall.

She regarded it attentively for some moments, her finger resting lightly against her chin, and said, ‘I have given up the idea of a Greek court.’

He showed his astonishment, and was almost disappointed. He had been grinding up Greek architecture entirely on her account; had wrenched his mind round to this strange arrangement, all for nothing.

‘Yes,’ she continued; ‘on reconsideration I perceive the want of harmony that would result from inserting such a piece of marble-work in a mediaeval fortress; so in future we will limit ourselves strictly to synchronism of style — that is to say, make good the Norman work by Norman, the Perpendicular by Perpendicular, and so on. I have informed Mr. Havill of the same thing.’

Somerset pulled the Greek drawing off the board, and tore it in two pieces.

She involuntarily turned to look in his face, but stopped before she had quite lifted her eyes high enough. ‘Why did you do that?’ she asked with suave curiosity.

‘It is of no further use,’ said Somerset, tearing the drawing in the other direction, and throwing the pieces into the fireplace. ‘You have been reading up orders and styles to some purpose, I perceive.’ He regarded her with a faint smile.

‘I have had a few books down from town. It is desirable to know a little about the architecture of one’s own house.’

She remained looking at the torn drawing, when Somerset, observing on the table the particle of swan’s-down he had found in the chair, gently blew it so that it skimmed across the table under her eyes.

‘It looks as if it came off a lady’s dress,’ he said idly.

‘Off a lady’s fan,’ she replied.

‘O, off a fan?’

‘Yes; off mine.’

At her reply Somerset stretched out his hand for the swan's-down, and put it carefully in his pocket-book; whereupon Paula, moulding her cherry-red lower lip beneath her upper one in arch self-consciousness at his act, turned away to the window, and after a pause said softly as she looked out, 'Why did you not accept our invitation to dinner?'

It was impossible to explain why. He impulsively drew near and confronted her, and said, 'I hope you pardon me?'

'I don't know that I can quite do that,' answered she, with ever so little reproach. 'I know why you did not come — you were mortified at not being asked sooner! But it was purely by an accident that you received your invitation so late. My aunt sent the others by post, but as yours was to be delivered by hand it was left on her table, and was overlooked.'

Surely he could not doubt her words; those nice friendly accents were the embodiment of truth itself.

'I don't mean to make a serious complaint,' she added, in injured tones, showing that she did. 'Only we had asked nearly all of them to meet you, as the son of your illustrious father, whom many of my friends know personally; and — they were disappointed.'

It was now time for Somerset to be genuinely grieved at what he had done. Paula seemed so good and honourable at that moment that he could have laid down his life for her.

'When I was dressed, I came in here to ask you to reconsider your decision,' she continued; 'or to meet us in the drawing-room if you could not possibly be ready for dinner. But you were gone.'

'And you sat down in that chair, didn't you, darling, and remained there a long time musing!' he thought. But that he did not say.

'I am very sorry,' he murmured.

'Will you make amends by coming to our garden party? I ask you the very first.'

'I will,' replied Somerset. To add that it would give him great pleasure, etc., seemed an absurdly weak way of expressing his feelings, and he said no more.

'It is on the nineteenth. Don't forget the day.'

He met her eyes in such a way that, if she were woman, she must have seen it to mean as plainly as words: 'Do I look as if I could forget anything you say?'

She must, indeed, have understood much more by this time — the whole of his open secret. But he did not understand her. History has revealed that a supernumerary lover or two is rarely considered a disadvantage by a woman, from queen to cottage-girl; and the thought made him pause.

CHAPTER XIV.

When she was gone he went on with the drawing, not calling in Dare, who remained in the room adjoining. Presently a servant came and laid a paper on his table, which

Miss Power had sent. It was one of the morning newspapers, and was folded so that his eye fell immediately on a letter headed 'Restoration or Demolition.'

The letter was professedly written by a dispassionate person solely in the interests of art. It drew attention to the circumstance that the ancient and interesting castle of the De Stancys had unhappily passed into the hands of an iconoclast by blood, who, without respect for the tradition of the county, or any feeling whatever for history in stone, was about to demolish much, if not all, that was interesting in that ancient pile, and insert in its midst a monstrous travesty of some Greek temple. In the name of all lovers of mediaeval art, conjured the simple-minded writer, let something be done to save a building which, injured and battered in the Civil Wars, was now to be made a complete ruin by the freaks of an irresponsible owner. Her sending him the paper seemed to imply that she required his opinion on the case; and in the afternoon, leaving Dare to measure up a wing according to directions, he went out in the hope of meeting her, having learnt that she had gone to the village. On reaching the church he saw her crossing the churchyard path with her aunt and Miss De Stancy. Somerset entered the enclosure, and as soon as she saw him she came across.

'What is to be done?' she asked.

'You need not be concerned about such a letter as that.'

'I am concerned.'

'I think it dreadful impertinence,' spoke up Charlotte, who had joined them. 'Can you think who wrote it, Mr. Somerset?'

Somerset could not.

'Well, what am I to do?' repeated Paula.

'Just as you would have done before.'

'That's what I say,' observed Mrs. Goodman emphatically.

'But I have already altered — I have given up the Greek court.'

'O — you had seen the paper this morning before you looked at my drawing?'

'I had,' she answered.

Somerset thought it a forcible illustration of her natural reticence that she should have abandoned the design without telling him the reason; but he was glad she had not done it from mere caprice.

She turned to him and said quietly, 'I wish YOU would answer that letter.'

'It would be ill-advised,' said Somerset. 'Still, if, after consideration, you wish it much, I will. Meanwhile let me impress upon you again the expediency of calling in Mr. Havill — to whom, as your father's architect, expecting this commission, something perhaps is owed — and getting him to furnish an alternative plan to mine, and submitting the choice of designs to some members of the Royal Institute of British Architects. This letter makes it still more advisable than before.'

'Very well,' said Paula reluctantly.

'Let him have all the particulars you have been good enough to explain to me — so that we start fair in the competition.'

She looked negligently on the grass. 'I will tell the building steward to write them out for him,' she said.

The party separated and entered the church by different doors. Somerset went to a nook of the building that he had often intended to visit. It was called the Stancy aisle; and in it stood the tombs of that family. Somerset examined them: they were unusually rich and numerous, beginning with cross-legged knights in hauberks of chain-mail, their ladies beside them in wimple and cover-chief, all more or less coated with the green mould and dirt of ages: and continuing with others of later date, in fine alabaster, gilded and coloured, some of them wearing round their necks the Yorkist collar of suns and roses, the livery of Edward the Fourth. In scrutinizing the tallest canopy over these he beheld Paula behind it, as if in contemplation of the same objects.

'You came to the church to sketch these monuments, I suppose, Mr. Somerset?' she asked, as soon as she saw him.

'No. I came to speak to you about the letter.'

She sighed. 'Yes: that letter,' she said. 'I am persecuted! If I had been one of these it would never have been written.' She tapped the alabaster effigy of a recumbent lady with her parasol.

'They are interesting, are they not?' he said. 'She is beautifully preserved. The gilding is nearly gone, but beyond that she is perfect.'

'She is like Charlotte,' said Paula. And what was much like another sigh escaped her lips.

Somerset admitted that there was a resemblance, while Paula drew her forefinger across the marble face of the effigy, and at length took out her handkerchief, and began wiping the dust from the hollows of the features. He looked on, wondering what her sigh had meant, but guessing that it had been somehow caused by the sight of these sculptures in connection with the newspaper writer's denunciation of her as an irresponsible outsider.

The secret was out when in answer to his question, idly put, if she wished she were like one of these, she said, with exceptional vehemence for one of her demeanour —

'I don't wish I was like one of them: I wish I WAS one of them.'

'What — you wish you were a De Stancy?'

'Yes. It is very dreadful to be denounced as a barbarian. I want to be romantic and historical.'

'Miss De Stancy seems not to value the privilege,' he said, looking round at another part of the church where Charlotte was innocently prattling to Mrs. Goodman, quite heedless of the tombs of her forefathers.

'If I were one,' she continued, 'I should come here when I feel alone in the world, as I do to-day; and I would defy people, and say, "You cannot spoil what has been!"'

They walked on till they reached the old black pew attached to the castle — a vast square enclosure of oak panelling occupying half the aisle, and surmounted with a little balustrade above the framework. Within, the baize lining that had once been green, now faded to the colour of a common in August, was torn, kicked and scraped to rags

by the feet and hands of the ploughboys who had appropriated the pew as their own special place of worship since it had ceased to be used by any resident at the castle, because its height afforded convenient shelter for playing at marbles and pricking with pins.

Charlotte and Mrs. Goodman had by this time left the building, and could be seen looking at the headstones outside.

‘If you were a De Stancy,’ said Somerset, who had pondered more deeply upon that new wish of hers than he had seemed to do, ‘you would be a churchwoman, and sit here.’

‘And I should have the pew done up,’ she said readily, as she rested her pretty chin on the top rail and looked at the interior, her cheeks pressed into deep dimples. Her quick reply told him that the idea was no new one with her, and he thought of poor Mr. Woodwell’s shrewd prophecy as he perceived that her days as a separatist were numbered.

‘Well, why can’t you have it done up, and sit here?’ he said warily.

Paula shook her head.

‘You are not at enmity with Anglicanism, I am sure?’

‘I want not to be. I want to be — what — ’

‘What the De Stancys were, and are,’ he said insidiously; and her silenced bearing told him that he had hit the nail.

It was a strange idea to get possession of such a nature as hers, and for a minute he felt himself on the side of the minister. So strong was Somerset’s feeling of wishing her to show the quality of fidelity to paternal dogma and party, that he could not help adding —

‘But have you forgotten that other nobility — the nobility of talent and enterprise?’

‘No. But I wish I had a well-known line of ancestors.’

‘You have. Archimedes, Newcomen, Watt, Telford, Stephenson, those are your father’s direct ancestors. Have you forgotten them? Have you forgotten your father, and the railways he made over half Europe, and his great energy and skill, and all connected with him as if he had never lived?’

She did not answer for some time. ‘No, I have not forgotten it,’ she said, still looking into the pew. ‘But, I have a predilection d’artiste for ancestors of the other sort, like the De Stancys.’

Her hand was resting on the low pew next the high one of the De Stancys. Somerset looked at the hand, or rather at the glove which covered it, then at her averted cheek, then beyond it into the pew, then at her hand again, until by an indescribable consciousness that he was not going too far he laid his own upon it.

‘No, no,’ said Paula quickly, withdrawing her hand. But there was nothing resentful or haughty in her tone — nothing, in short, which makes a man in such circumstances feel that he has done a particularly foolish action.

The flower on her bosom rose and fell somewhat more than usual as she added, 'I am going away now — I will leave you here.' Without waiting for a reply she adroitly swept back her skirts to free her feet and went out of the church blushing.

Somerset took her hint and did not follow; and when he knew that she had rejoined her friends, and heard the carriage roll away, he made towards the opposite door. Pausing to glance once more at the alabaster effigies before leaving them to their silence and neglect, he beheld Dare bending over them, to all appearance intently occupied.

He must have been in the church some time — certainly during the tender episode between Somerset and Paula, and could not have failed to perceive it. Somerset blushed: it was unpleasant that Dare should have seen the interior of his heart so plainly. He went across and said, 'I think I left you to finish the drawing of the north wing, Mr. Dare?'

'Three hours ago, sir,' said Dare. 'Having finished that, I came to look at the church — fine building — fine monuments — two interesting people looking at them.'

'What?'

'I stand corrected. *Pensa molto, parla poco*, as the Italians have it.'

'Well, now, Mr. Dare, suppose you get back to the castle?'

'Which history dubs Castle Stancy... Certainly.'

'How do you get on with the measuring?'

Dare sighed whimsically. 'Badly in the morning, when I have been tempted to indulge overnight, and worse in the afternoon, when I have been tempted in the morning!'

Somerset looked at the youth, and said, 'I fear I shall have to dispense with your services, Dare, for I think you have been tempted to-day.'

'On my honour no. My manner is a little against me, Mr. Somerset. But you need not fear for my ability to do your work. I am a young man wasted, and am thought of slight account: it is the true men who get snubbed, while traitors are allowed to thrive!'

'Hang sentiment, Dare, and off with you!' A little ruffled, Somerset had turned his back upon the interesting speaker, so that he did not observe the sly twist Dare threw into his right eye as he spoke. The latter went off in one direction and Somerset in the other, pursuing his pensive way towards Markton with thoughts not difficult to divine.

From one point in her nature he went to another, till he again recurred to her romantic interest in the De Stancy family. To wish she was one of them: how very inconsistent of her. That she really did wish it was unquestionable.

CHAPTER XV.

It was the day of the garden-party. The weather was too cloudy to be called perfect, but it was as sultry as the most thinly-clad young lady could desire. Great trouble had been taken by Paula to bring the lawn to a fit condition after the neglect of recent

years, and Somerset had suggested the design for the tents. As he approached the precincts of the castle he discerned a flag of newest fabric floating over the keep, and soon his fly fell in with the stream of carriages that were passing over the bridge into the outer ward.

Mrs. Goodman and Paula were receiving the people in the drawing-room. Somerset came forward in his turn; but as he was immediately followed by others there was not much opportunity, even had she felt the wish, for any special mark of feeling in the younger lady's greeting of him.

He went on through a canvas passage, lined on each side with flowering plants, till he reached the tents; thence, after nodding to one or two guests slightly known to him, he proceeded to the grounds, with a sense of being rather lonely. Few visitors had as yet got so far in, and as he walked up and down a shady alley his mind dwelt upon the new aspect under which Paula had greeted his eyes that afternoon. Her black-and-white costume had finally disappeared, and in its place she had adopted a picturesque dress of ivory white, with satin enrichments of the same hue; while upon her bosom she wore a blue flower. Her days of infestivity were plainly ended, and her days of gladness were to begin.

His reverie was interrupted by the sound of his name, and looking round he beheld Havill, who appeared to be as much alone as himself.

Somerset already knew that Havill had been appointed to compete with him, according to his recommendation. In measuring a dark corner a day or two before, he had stumbled upon Havill engaged in the same pursuit with a view to the rival design. Afterwards he had seen him receiving Paula's instructions precisely as he had done himself. It was as he had wished, for fairness' sake: and yet he felt a regret, for he was less Paula's own architect now.

'Well, Mr. Somerset,' said Havill, 'since we first met an unexpected rivalry has arisen between us! But I dare say we shall survive the contest, as it is not one arising out of love. Ha-ha-ha!' He spoke in a level voice of fierce pleasantry, and uncovered his regular white teeth.

Somerset supposed him to allude to the castle competition?

'Yes,' said Havill. 'Her proposed undertaking brought out some adverse criticism till it was known that she intended to have more than one architectural opinion. An excellent stroke of hers to disarm criticism. You saw the second letter in the morning papers?'

'No,' said the other.

'The writer states that he has discovered that the competent advice of two architects is to be taken, and withdraws his accusations.'

Somerset said nothing for a minute. 'Have you been supplied with the necessary data for your drawings?' he asked, showing by the question the track his thoughts had taken.

Havill said that he had. 'But possibly not so completely as you have,' he added, again smiling fiercely. Somerset did not quite like the insinuation, and the two speakers

parted, the younger going towards the musicians, who had now begun to fill the air with their strains from the embowered enclosure of a drooping ash. When he got back to the marquees they were quite crowded, and the guests began to pour out upon the grass, the toilets of the ladies presenting a brilliant spectacle — here being coloured dresses with white devices, there white dresses with coloured devices, and yonder transparent dresses with no device at all. A lavender haze hung in the air, the trees were as still as those of a submarine forest; while the sun, in colour like a brass plaque, had a hairy outline in the livid sky.

After watching awhile some young people who were so madly devoted to lawn-tennis that they set about it like day-labourers at the moment of their arrival, he turned and saw approaching a graceful figure in cream-coloured hues, whose gloves lost themselves beneath her lace ruffles, even when she lifted her hand to make firm the blue flower at her breast, and whose hair hung under her hat in great knots so well compacted that the sun gilded the convexity of each knot like a ball.

‘You seem to be alone,’ said Paula, who had at last escaped from the duty of receiving guests.

‘I don’t know many people.’

‘Yes: I thought of that while I was in the drawing-room. But I could not get out before. I am now no longer a responsible being: Mrs. Goodman is mistress for the remainder of the day. Will you be introduced to anybody? Whom would you like to know?’

‘I am not particularly unhappy in my solitude.’

‘But you must be made to know a few.’

‘Very well — I submit readily.’

She looked away from him, and while he was observing upon her cheek the moving shadow of leaves cast by the declining sun, she said, ‘O, there is my aunt,’ and beckoned with her parasol to that lady, who approached in the comparatively youthful guise of a grey silk dress that whistled at every touch.

Paula left them together, and Mrs. Goodman then made him acquainted with a few of the best people, describing what they were in a whisper before they came up, among them being the Radical member for Markton, who had succeeded to the seat rendered vacant by the death of Paula’s father. While talking to this gentleman on the proposed enlargement of the castle, Somerset raised his eyes and hand towards the walls, the better to point out his meaning; in so doing he saw a face in the square of darkness formed by one of the open windows, the effect being that of a highlight portrait by Vandyck or Rembrandt.

It was his assistant Dare, leaning on the window-sill of the studio, as he smoked his cigarette and surveyed the gay groups promenading beneath.

After holding a chattering conversation with some ladies from a neighbouring country seat who had known his father in bygone years, and handing them ices and strawberries till they were satisfied, he found an opportunity of leaving the grounds, wishing to learn what progress Dare had made in the survey of the castle.

Dare was still in the studio when he entered. Somerset informed the youth that there was no necessity for his working later that day, unless to please himself, and proceeded to inspect Dare's achievements thus far. To his vexation Dare had not plotted three dimensions during the previous two days. This was not the first time that Dare, either from incompetence or indolence, had shown his inutility as a house-surveyor and draughtsman.

'Mr. Dare,' said Somerset, 'I fear you don't suit me well enough to make it necessary that you should stay after this week.'

Dare removed the cigarette from his lips and bowed. 'If I don't suit, the sooner I go the better; why wait the week?' he said.

'Well, that's as you like.'

Somerset drew the inkstand towards him, wrote out a cheque for Dare's services, and handed it across the table.

'I'll not trouble you to-morrow,' said Dare, seeing that the payment included the week in advance.

'Very well,' replied Somerset. 'Please lock the door when you leave.' Shaking hands with Dare and wishing him well, he left the room and descended to the lawn below.

There he contrived to get near Miss Power again, and inquired of her for Miss De Stancy.

'O! did you not know?' said Paula; 'her father is unwell, and she preferred staying with him this afternoon.'

'I hoped he might have been here.'

'O no; he never comes out of his house to any party of this sort; it excites him, and he must not be excited.'

'Poor Sir William!' muttered Somerset.

'No,' said Paula, 'he is grand and historical.'

'That is hardly an orthodox notion for a Puritan,' said Somerset mischievously.

'I am not a Puritan,' insisted Paula.

The day turned to dusk, and the guests began going in relays to the dining-hall. When Somerset had taken in two or three ladies to whom he had been presented, and attended to their wants, which occupied him three-quarters of an hour, he returned again to the large tent, with a view to finding Paula and taking his leave. It was now brilliantly lighted up, and the musicians, who during daylight had been invisible behind the ash-tree, were ensconced at one end with their harps and violins. It reminded him that there was to be dancing. The tent had in the meantime half filled with a new set of young people who had come expressly for that pastime. Behind the girls gathered numbers of newly arrived young men with low shoulders and diminutive moustaches, who were evidently prepared for once to sacrifice themselves as partners.

Somerset felt something of a thrill at the sight. He was an infrequent dancer, and particularly unprepared for dancing at present; but to dance once with Paula Power he would give a year of his life. He looked round; but she was nowhere to be seen. The first set began; old and middle-aged people gathered from the different rooms to look

on at the gyrations of their children, but Paula did not appear. When another dance or two had progressed, and an increase in the average age of the dancers was making itself perceptible, especially on the masculine side, Somerset was aroused by a whisper at his elbow —

‘You dance, I think? Miss Deverell is disengaged. She has not been asked once this evening.’ The speaker was Paula.

Somerset looked at Miss Deverell — a sallow lady with black twinkling eyes, yellow costume, and gay laugh, who had been there all the afternoon — and said something about having thought of going home.

‘Is that because I asked you to dance?’ she murmured. ‘There — she is appropriated.’ A young gentleman had at that moment approached the uninviting Miss Deverell, claimed her hand and led her off.

‘That’s right,’ said Somerset. ‘I ought to leave room for younger men.’

‘You need not say so. That bald-headed gentleman is forty-five. He does not think of younger men.’

‘Have YOU a dance to spare for me?’

Her face grew stealthily redder in the candle-light. ‘O! — I have no engagement at all — I have refused. I hardly feel at liberty to dance; it would be as well to leave that to my visitors.’

‘Why?’

‘My father, though he allowed me to be taught, never liked the idea of my dancing.’

‘Did he make you promise anything on the point?’

‘He said he was not in favour of such amusements — no more.’

‘I think you are not bound by that, on an informal occasion like the present.’

She was silent.

‘You will just once?’ said he.

Another silence. ‘If you like,’ she venturesomely answered at last.

Somerset closed the hand which was hanging by his side, and somehow hers was in it. The dance was nearly formed, and he led her forward. Several persons looked at them significantly, but he did not notice it then, and plunged into the maze.

Never had Mr. Somerset passed through such an experience before. Had he not felt her actual weight and warmth, he might have fancied the whole episode a figment of the imagination. It seemed as if those musicians had thrown a double sweetness into their notes on seeing the mistress of the castle in the dance, that a perfumed southern atmosphere had begun to pervade the marquee, and that human beings were shaking themselves free of all inconvenient gravitation.

Somerset’s feelings burst from his lips. ‘This is the happiest moment I have ever known,’ he said. ‘Do you know why?’

‘I think I saw a flash of lightning through the opening of the tent,’ said Paula, with roguish abruptness.

He did not press for an answer. Within a few minutes a long growl of thunder was heard. It was as if Jove could not refrain from testifying his jealousy of Somerset for taking this covetable woman so presumptuously in his arms.

The dance was over, and he had retired with Paula to the back of the tent, when another faint flash of lightning was visible through an opening. She lifted the canvas, and looked out, Somerset looking out behind her. Another dance was begun, and being on this account left out of notice, Somerset did not hasten to leave Paula's side.

'I think they begin to feel the heat,' she said.

'A little ventilation would do no harm.' He flung back the tent door where he stood, and the light shone out upon the grass.

'I must go to the drawing-room soon,' she added. 'They will begin to leave shortly.'

'It is not late. The thunder-cloud has made it seem dark — see there; a line of pale yellow stretches along the horizon from west to north. That's evening — not gone yet. Shall we go into the fresh air for a minute?'

She seemed to signify assent, and he stepped off the tent-floor upon the ground. She stepped off also.

The air out-of-doors had not cooled, and without definitely choosing a direction they found themselves approaching a little wooden tea-house that stood on the lawn a few yards off. Arrived here, they turned, and regarded the tent they had just left, and listened to the strains that came from within it.

'I feel more at ease now,' said Paula.

'So do I,' said Somerset.

'I mean,' she added in an undeceiving tone, 'because I saw Mrs. Goodman enter the tent again just as we came out here; so I have no further responsibility.'

'I meant something quite different. Try to guess what.'

She teasingly demurred, finally breaking the silence by saying, 'The rain is come at last,' as great drops began to fall upon the ground with a smack, like pellets of clay.

In a moment the storm poured down with sudden violence, and they drew further back into the summer-house. The side of the tent from which they had emerged still remained open, the rain streaming down between their eyes and the lighted interior of the marquee like a tissue of glass threads, the brilliant forms of the dancers passing and repassing behind the watery screen, as if they were people in an enchanted submarine palace.

'How happy they are!' said Paula. 'They don't even know that it is raining. I am so glad that my aunt had the tent lined; otherwise such a downpour would have gone clean through it.'

The thunder-storm showed no symptoms of abatement, and the music and dancing went on more merrily than ever.

'We cannot go in,' said Somerset. 'And we cannot shout for umbrellas. We will stay till it is over, will we not?'

'Yes,' she said, 'if you care to. Ah!'

'What is it?'

‘Only a big drop came upon my head.’

‘Let us stand further in.’

Her hand was hanging by her side, and Somerset’s was close by. He took it, and she did not draw it away. Thus they stood a long while, the rain hissing down upon the grass-plot, and not a soul being visible outside the dancing-tent save themselves.

‘May I call you Paula?’ asked he.

There was no answer.

‘May I?’ he repeated.

‘Yes, occasionally,’ she murmured.

‘Dear Paula! — may I call you that?’

‘O no — not yet.’

‘But you know I love you?’

‘Yes,’ she whispered.

‘And shall I love you always?’

‘If you wish to.’

‘And will you love me?’

Paula did not reply.

‘Will you, Paula?’ he repeated.

‘You may love me.’

‘But don’t you love me in return?’

‘I love you to love me.’

‘Won’t you say anything more explicit?’

‘I would rather not.’

Somerset emitted half a sigh: he wished she had been more demonstrative, yet felt that this passive way of assenting was as much as he could hope for. Had there been anything cold in her passivity he might have felt repressed; but her stillness suggested the stillness of motion imperceptible from its intensity.

‘We must go in,’ said she. ‘The rain is almost over, and there is no longer any excuse for this.’

Somerset bent his lips toward hers. ‘No,’ said the fair Puritan decisively.

‘Why not?’ he asked.

‘Nobody ever has.’

‘But! — ’ expostulated Somerset.

‘To everything there is a season, and the season for this is not just now,’ she answered, walking away.

They crossed the wet and glistening lawn, stepped under the tent and parted. She vanished, he did not know whither; and, standing with his gaze fixed on the dancers, the young man waited, till, being in no mood to join them, he went slowly through the artificial passage lined with flowers, and entered the drawing room. Mrs. Goodman was there, bidding good-night to the early goers, and Paula was just behind her, apparently in her usual mood. His parting with her was quite formal, but that he did not mind,

for her colour rose decidedly higher as he approached, and the light in her eyes was like the ray of a diamond.

When he reached the door he found that his brougham from the Quantock Arms, which had been waiting more than an hour, could not be heard of. That vagrancy of spirit which love induces would not permit him to wait; and, leaving word that the man was to follow him when he returned, he went past the glare of carriage-lamps ranked in the ward, and under the outer arch. The night was now clear and beautiful, and he strolled along his way full of mysterious elation till the vehicle overtook him, and he got in.

Up to this point Somerset's progress in his suit had been, though incomplete, so uninterrupted, that he almost feared the good chance he enjoyed. How should it be in a mortal of his calibre to command success with such a sweet woman for long? He might, indeed, turn out to be one of the singular exceptions which are said to prove rules; but when fortune means to men most good, observes the bard, she looks upon them with a threatening eye. Somerset would even have been content that a little disapproval of his course should have occurred in some quarter, so as to make his wooing more like ordinary life. But Paula was not clearly won, and that was drawback sufficient. In these pleasing agonies and painful delights he passed the journey to Markton.

BOOK THE SECOND. DARE AND HAVILL.

CHAPTER I.

Young Dare sat thoughtfully at the window of the studio in which Somerset had left him, till the gay scene beneath became embrowned by the twilight, and the brilliant red stripes of the marquees, the bright sunshades, the many-tinted costumes of the ladies, were indistinguishable from the blacks and greys of the masculine contingent moving among them. He had occasionally glanced away from the outward prospect to study a small old volume that lay before him on the drawing-board. Near scrutiny revealed the book to bear the title 'Moivre's Doctrine of Chances.'

The evening had been so still that Dare had heard conversations from below with a clearness unsuspected by the speakers themselves; and among the dialogues which thus reached his ears was that between Somerset and Havill on their professional rivalry. When they parted, and Somerset had mingled with the throng, Havill went to a seat at a distance. Afterwards he rose, and walked away; but on the bench he had quitted there remained a small object resembling a book or leather case.

Dare put away the drawing-board and plotting-scales which he had kept before him during the evening as a reason for his presence at that post of espial, locked up the door, and went downstairs. Notwithstanding his dismissal by Somerset, he was so serene in countenance and easy in gait as to make it a fair conjecture that professional servitude, however profitable, was no necessity with him. The gloom now rendered it practicable

for any unbidden guest to join Paula's assemblage without criticism, and Dare walked boldly out upon the lawn. The crowd on the grass was rapidly diminishing; the tennis-players had relinquished sport; many people had gone in to dinner or supper; and many others, attracted by the cheerful radiance of the candles, were gathering in the large tent that had been lighted up for dancing.

Dare went to the garden-chair on which Havill had been seated, and found the article left behind to be a pocket-book. Whether because it was unclasped and fell open in his hand, or otherwise, he did not hesitate to examine the contents. Among a mass of architect's customary memoranda occurred a draft of the letter abusing Paula as an iconoclast or Vandal by blood, which had appeared in the newspaper: the draft was so interlined and altered as to bear evidence of being the original conception of that ungentlemanly attack.

The lad read the letter, smiled, and strolled about the grounds, only met by an occasional pair of individuals of opposite sex in deep conversation, the state of whose emotions led them to prefer the evening shade to the publicity and glare of the tents and rooms. At last he observed the white waistcoat of the man he sought.

'Mr. Havill, the architect, I believe?' said Dare. 'The author of most of the noteworthy buildings in this neighbourhood?'

Havill assented blandly.

'I have long wished for the pleasure of your acquaintance, and now an accident helps me to make it. This pocket-book, I think, is yours?'

Havill clapped his hand to his pocket, examined the book Dare held out to him, and took it with thanks. 'I see I am speaking to the artist, archaeologist, Gothic photographer — Mr. Dare.'

'Professor Dare.'

'Professor? Pardon me, I should not have guessed it — so young as you are.'

'Well, it is merely ornamental; and in truth, I drop the title in England, particularly under present circumstances.'

'Ah — they are peculiar, perhaps? Ah, I remember. I have heard that you are assisting a gentleman in preparing a design in opposition to mine — a design —'

'“That he is not competent to prepare himself,” you were perhaps going to add?'

'Not precisely that.'

'You could hardly be blamed for such words. However, you are mistaken. I did assist him to gain a little further insight into the working of architectural plans; but our views on art are antagonistic, and I assist him no more. Mr. Havill, it must be very provoking to a well-established professional man to have a rival sprung at him in a grand undertaking which he had a right to expect as his own.'

Professional sympathy is often accepted from those whose condolence on any domestic matter would be considered intrusive. Havill walked up and down beside Dare for a few moments in silence, and at last showed that the words had told, by saying: 'Every one may have his opinion. Had I been a stranger to the Power family, the case would have been different; but having been specially elected by the lady's father as a

competent adviser in such matters, and then to be degraded to the position of a mere competitor, it wounds me to the quick — ’

‘Both in purse and in person, like the ill-used hostess of the Garter.’

‘A lady to whom I have been a staunch friend,’ continued Havill, not heeding the interruption.

At that moment sounds seemed to come from Dare which bore a remarkable resemblance to the words, ‘Ho, ho, Havill!’ It was hardly credible, and yet, could he be mistaken? Havill turned. Dare’s eye was twisted comically upward.

‘What does that mean?’ said Havill coldly, and with some amazement.

‘Ho, ho, Havill! “Staunch friend” is good — especially after “an iconoclast and Vandal by blood” — ”monstrosity in the form of a Greek temple,” and so on, eh!’

‘Sir, you have the advantage of me. Perhaps you allude to that anonymous letter?’

‘O-ho, Havill!’ repeated the boy-man, turning his eyes yet further towards the zenith. ‘To an outsider such conduct would be natural; but to a friend who finds your pocket-book, and looks into it before returning it, and kindly removes a leaf bearing the draft of a letter which might injure you if discovered there, and carefully conceals it in his own pocket — why, such conduct is unkind!’ Dare held up the abstracted leaf.

Havill trembled. ‘I can explain,’ he began.

‘It is not necessary: we are friends,’ said Dare assuringly.

Havill looked as if he would like to snatch the leaf away, but altering his mind, he said grimly: ‘Well, I take you at your word: we are friends. That letter was concocted before I knew of the competition: it was during my first disgust, when I believed myself entirely supplanted.’

‘I am not in the least surprised. But if she knew YOU to be the writer!’

‘I should be ruined as far as this competition is concerned,’ said Havill carelessly. ‘Had I known I was to be invited to compete, I should not have written it, of course. To be supplanted is hard; and thereby hangs a tale.’

‘Another tale? You astonish me.’

‘Then you have not heard the scandal, though everybody is talking about it.’

‘A scandal implies indecorum.’

‘Well, ‘tis indecorous. Her infatuated partiality for him is patent to the eyes of a child; a man she has only known a few weeks, and one who obtained admission to her house in the most irregular manner! Had she a watchful friend beside her, instead of that moonstruck Mrs. Goodman, she would be cautioned against bestowing her favours on the first adventurer who appears at her door. It is a pity, a great pity!’

‘O, there is love-making in the wind?’ said Dare slowly. ‘That alters the case for me. But it is not proved?’

‘It can easily be proved.’

‘I wish it were, or disproved.’

‘You have only to come this way to clear up all doubts.’

Havill took the lad towards the tent, from which the strains of a waltz now proceeded, and on whose sides flitting shadows told of the progress of the dance. The companions

looked in. The rosy silk lining of the marquee, and the numerous coronas of wax lights, formed a canopy to a radiant scene which, for two at least of those who composed it, was an intoxicating one. Paula and Somerset were dancing together.

‘That proves nothing,’ said Dare.

‘Look at their rapt faces, and say if it does not,’ sneered Havill.

Dare objected to a judgment based on looks alone.

‘Very well — time will show,’ said the architect, dropping the tent-curtain... ‘Good God! a girl worth fifty thousand and more a year to throw herself away upon a fellow like that — she ought to be whipped.’

‘Time must NOT show!’ said Dare.

‘You speak with emphasis.’

‘I have reason. I would give something to be sure on this point, one way or the other. Let us wait till the dance is over, and observe them more carefully. Horensagen ist halb gelogen! Hearsay is half lies.’

Sheet-lightnings increased in the northern sky, followed by thunder like the indistinct noise of a battle. Havill and Dare retired to the trees. When the dance ended Somerset and his partner emerged from the tent, and slowly moved towards the tea-house. Divining their goal Dare seized Havill’s arm; and the two worthies entered the building unseen, by first passing round behind it. They seated themselves in the back part of the interior, where darkness prevailed.

As before related, Paula and Somerset came and stood within the door. When the rain increased they drew themselves further inward, their forms being distinctly outlined to the gaze of those lurking behind by the light from the tent beyond. But the hiss of the falling rain and the lowness of their tones prevented their words from being heard.

‘I wish myself out of this!’ breathed Havill to Dare, as he buttoned his coat over his white waistcoat. ‘I told you it was true, but you wouldn’t believe. I wouldn’t she should catch me here eavesdropping for the world!’

‘Courage, Man Friday,’ said his cooler comrade.

Paula and her lover backed yet further, till the hem of her skirt touched Havill’s feet. Their attitudes were sufficient to prove their relations to the most obstinate Didymus who should have witnessed them. Tender emotions seemed to pervade the summer-house like an aroma. The calm ecstasy of the condition of at least one of them was not without a coercive effect upon the two invidious spectators, so that they must need have remained passive had they come there to disturb or annoy. The serenity of Paula was even more impressive than the hushed ardour of Somerset: she did not satisfy curiosity as Somerset satisfied it; she piqued it. Poor Somerset had reached a perfectly intelligible depth — one which had a single blissful way out of it, and nine calamitous ones; but Paula remained an enigma all through the scene.

The rain ceased, and the pair moved away. The enchantment worked by their presence vanished, the details of the meeting settled down in the watchers’ minds, and

their tongues were loosened. Dare, turning to Havill, said, 'Thank you; you have done me a timely turn to-day.'

'What! had you hopes that way?' asked Havill satirically.

'I! The woman that interests my heart has yet to be born,' said Dare, with a steely coldness strange in such a juvenile, and yet almost convincing. 'But though I have not personal hopes, I have an objection to this courtship. Now I think we may as well fraternize, the situation being what it is?'

'What is the situation?'

'He is in your way as her architect; he is in my way as her lover: we don't want to hurt him, but we wish him clean out of the neighbourhood.'

'I'll go as far as that,' said Havill.

'I have come here at some trouble to myself, merely to observe: I find I ought to stay to act.'

'If you were myself, a married man with people dependent on him, who has had a professional certainty turned to a miserably remote contingency by these events, you might say you ought to act; but what conceivable difference it can make to you who it is the young lady takes to her heart and home, I fail to understand.'

'Well, I'll tell you — this much at least. I want to keep the place vacant for another man.'

'The place?'

'The place of husband to Miss Power, and proprietor of that castle and domain.'

'That's a scheme with a vengeance. Who is the man?'

'It is my secret at present.'

'Certainly.' Havill drew a deep breath, and dropped into a tone of depression. 'Well, scheme as you will, there will be small advantage to me,' he murmured. 'The castle commission is as good as gone, and a bill for two hundred pounds falls due next week.'

'Cheer up, heart! My position, if you only knew it, has ten times the difficulties of yours, since this disagreeable discovery. Let us consider if we can assist each other. The competition drawings are to be sent in — when?'

'In something over six weeks — a fortnight before she returns from the Scilly Isles, for which place she leaves here in a few days.'

'O, she goes away — that's better. Our lover will be working here at his drawings, and she not present.'

'Exactly. Perhaps she is a little ashamed of the intimacy.'

'And if your design is considered best by the committee, he will have no further reason for staying, assuming that they are not definitely engaged to marry by that time?'

'I suppose so,' murmured Havill discontentedly. 'The conditions, as sent to me, state that the designs are to be adjudicated on by three members of the Institute called in for the purpose; so that she may return, and have seemed to show no favour.'

'Then it amounts to this: your design **MUST** be best. It must combine the excellences of your invention with the excellences of his. Meanwhile a coolness should be made to

arise between her and him: and as there would be no artistic reason for his presence here after the verdict is pronounced, he would perforce hie back to town. Do you see?’

‘I see the ingenuity of the plan, but I also see two insurmountable obstacles to it. The first is, I cannot add the excellences of his design to mine without knowing what those excellences are, which he will of course keep a secret. Second, it will not be easy to promote a coolness between such hot ones as they.’

‘You make a mistake. It is only he who is so ardent. She is only lukewarm. If we had any spirit, a bargain would be struck between us: you would appropriate his design; I should cause the coolness.’

‘How could I appropriate his design?’

‘By copying it, I suppose.’

‘Copying it?’

‘By going into his studio and looking it over.’

Havill turned to Dare, and stared. ‘By George, you don’t stick at trifles, young man. You don’t suppose I would go into a man’s rooms and steal his inventions like that?’

‘I scarcely suppose you would,’ said Dare indifferently, as he rose.

‘And if I were to,’ said Havill curiously, ‘how is the coolness to be caused?’

‘By the second man.’

‘Who is to produce him?’

‘Her Majesty’s Government.’

Havill looked meditatively at his companion, and shook his head. ‘In these idle suppositions we have been assuming conduct which would be quite against my principles as an honest man.’

CHAPTER II.

A few days after the party at Stancy Castle, Dare was walking down the High Street of Markton, a cigarette between his lips and a silver-topped cane in his hand. His eye fell upon a brass plate on an opposite door, bearing the name of Mr. Havill, Architect. He crossed over, and rang the office bell.

The clerk who admitted him stated that Mr. Havill was in his private room, and would be disengaged in a short time. While Dare waited the clerk affixed to the door a piece of paper bearing the words ‘Back at 2,’ and went away to his dinner, leaving Dare in the room alone.

Dare looked at the different drawings on the boards about the room. They all represented one subject, which, though unfinished as yet, and bearing no inscription, was recognized by the visitor as the design for the enlargement and restoration of Stancy Castle. When he had glanced it over Dare sat down.

The doors between the office and private room were double; but the one towards the office being only ajar Dare could hear a conversation in progress within. It presently rose to an altercation, the tenor of which was obvious. Somebody had come for money.

‘Really I can stand it no longer, Mr. Havill — really I will not!’ said the creditor excitedly. ‘Now this bill overdue again — what can you expect? Why, I might have negotiated it; and where would you have been then? Instead of that, I have locked it up out of consideration for you; and what do I get for my considerateness? I shall let the law take its course!’

‘You’ll do me inexpressible harm, and get nothing whatever,’ said Havill. ‘If you would renew for another three months there would be no difficulty in the matter.’

‘You have said so before: I will do no such thing.’

There was a silence; whereupon Dare arose without hesitation, and walked boldly into the private office. Havill was standing at one end, as gloomy as a thundercloud, and at the other was the unfortunate creditor with his hat on. Though Dare’s entry surprised them, both parties seemed relieved.

‘I have called in passing to congratulate you, Mr. Havill,’ said Dare gaily. ‘Such a commission as has been entrusted to you will make you famous!’

‘How do you do? — I wish it would make me rich,’ said Havill drily.

‘It will be a lift in that direction, from what I know of the profession. What is she going to spend?’

‘A hundred thousand.’

‘Your commission as architect, five thousand. Not bad, for making a few sketches. Consider what other great commissions such a work will lead to.’

‘What great work is this?’ asked the creditor.

‘Stancy Castle,’ said Dare, since Havill seemed too agape to answer. ‘You have not heard of it, then? Those are the drawings, I presume, in the next room?’

Havill replied in the affirmative, beginning to perceive the manoeuvre. ‘Perhaps you would like to see them?’ he said to the creditor.

The latter offered no objection, and all three went into the drawing-office.

‘It will certainly be a magnificent structure,’ said the creditor, after regarding the elevations through his spectacles. ‘Stancy Castle: I had no idea of it! and when do you begin to build, Mr. Havill?’ he inquired in mollified tones.

‘In three months, I think?’ said Dare, looking to Havill.

Havill assented.

‘Five thousand pounds commission,’ murmured the creditor. ‘Paid down, I suppose?’ Havill nodded.

‘And the works will not linger for lack of money to carry them out, I imagine,’ said Dare. ‘Two hundred thousand will probably be spent before the work is finished.’

‘There is not much doubt of it,’ said Havill.

‘You said nothing to me about this?’ whispered the creditor to Havill, taking him aside, with a look of regret.

‘You would not listen!’

‘It alters the case greatly.’ The creditor retired with Havill to the door, and after a subdued colloquy in the passage he went away, Havill returning to the office.

‘What the devil do you mean by hoaxing him like this, when the job is no more mine than Inigo Jones’s?’

‘Don’t be too curious,’ said Dare, laughing. ‘Rather thank me for getting rid of him.’

‘But it is all a vision!’ said Havill, ruefully regarding the pencilled towers of Stancy Castle. ‘If the competition were really the commission that you have represented it to be there might be something to laugh at.’

‘It must be made a commission, somehow,’ returned Dare carelessly. ‘I am come to lend you a little assistance. I must stay in the neighbourhood, and I have nothing else to do.’

A carriage slowly passed the window, and Havill recognized the Power liveries. ‘Hullo — she’s coming here!’ he said under his breath, as the carriage stopped by the kerb. ‘What does she want, I wonder? Dare, does she know you?’

‘I would just as soon be out of the way.’

‘Then go into the garden.’

Dare went out through the back office as Paula was shown in at the front. She wore a grey travelling costume, and seemed to be in some haste.

‘I am on my way to the railway-station,’ she said to Havill. ‘I shall be absent from home for several weeks, and since you requested it, I have called to inquire how you are getting on with the design.’

‘Please look it over,’ said Havill, placing a seat for her.

‘No,’ said Paula. ‘I think it would be unfair. I have not looked at Mr. — the other architect’s plans since he has begun to design seriously, and I will not look at yours. Are you getting on quite well, and do you want to know anything more? If so, go to the castle, and get anybody to assist you. Why would you not make use of the room at your disposal in the castle, as the other architect has done?’

In asking the question her face was towards the window, and suddenly her cheeks became a rosy red. She instantly looked another way.

‘Having my own office so near, it was not necessary, thank you,’ replied Havill, as, noting her countenance, he allowed his glance to stray into the street. Somerset was walking past on the opposite side.

‘The time is — the time fixed for sending in the drawings is the first of November, I believe,’ she said confusedly; ‘and the decision will be come to by three gentlemen who are prominent members of the Institute of Architects.’

Havill then accompanied her to the carriage, and she drove away.

Havill went to the back window to tell Dare that he need not stay in the garden; but the garden was empty. The architect remained alone in his office for some time; at the end of a quarter of an hour, when the scream of a railway whistle had echoed down the still street, he beheld Somerset repassing the window in a direction from the railway, with somewhat of a sad gait. In another minute Dare entered, humming the latest air of Offenbach.

“Tis a mere piece of duplicity!’ said Havill.

‘What is?’

‘Her pretending indifference as to which of us comes out successful in the competition, when she colours carmine the moment Somerset passes by.’ He described Paula’s visit, and the incident.

‘It may not mean Cupid’s Entire XXX after all,’ said Dare judicially. ‘The mere suspicion that a certain man loves her would make a girl blush at his unexpected appearance. Well, she’s gone from him for a time; the better for you.’

‘He has been privileged to see her off at any rate.’

‘Not privileged.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I went out of your garden by the back gate, and followed her carriage to the railway. He simply went to the first bridge outside the station, and waited. When she was in the train, it moved forward; he was all expectation, and drew out his handkerchief ready to wave, while she looked out of the window towards the bridge. The train backed before it reached the bridge, to attach the box containing her horses, and the carriage-truck. Then it started for good, and when it reached the bridge she looked out again, he waving his handkerchief to her.’

‘And she waving hers back?’

‘No, she didn’t.’

‘Ah!’

‘She looked at him — nothing more. I wouldn’t give much for his chance.’ After a while Dare added musingly: ‘You are a mathematician: did you ever investigate the doctrine of expectations?’

‘Never.’

Dare drew from his pocket his ‘Book of Chances,’ a volume as well thumbed as the minister’s Bible. ‘This is a treatise on the subject,’ he said. ‘I will teach it to you some day.’

The same evening Havill asked Dare to dine with him. He was just at this time living en garcon, his wife and children being away on a visit. After dinner they sat on till their faces were rather flushed. The talk turned, as before, on the castle-competition.

‘To know his design is to win,’ said Dare. ‘And to win is to send him back to London where he came from.’

Havill inquired if Dare had seen any sketch of the design while with Somerset?

‘Not a line. I was concerned only with the old building.’

‘Not to know it is to lose, undoubtedly,’ murmured Havill.

‘Suppose we go for a walk that way, instead of consulting here?’

They went down the town, and along the highway. When they reached the entrance to the park a man driving a basket-carriage came out from the gate and passed them by in the gloom.

‘That was he,’ said Dare. ‘He sometimes drives over from the hotel, and sometimes walks. He has been working late this evening.’

Strolling on under the trees they met three masculine figures, laughing and talking loudly.

‘Those are the three first-class London draughtsmen, Bowles, Knowles, and Cockton, whom he has engaged to assist him, regardless of expense,’ continued Dare.

‘O Lord!’ groaned Havill. ‘There’s no chance for me.’

The castle now arose before them, endowed by the rayless shade with a more massive majesty than either sunlight or moonlight could impart; and Havill sighed again as he thought of what he was losing by Somerset’s rivalry. ‘Well, what was the use of coming here?’ he asked.

‘I thought it might suggest something — some way of seeing the design. The servants would let us into his room, I dare say.’

‘I don’t care to ask. Let us walk through the wards, and then homeward.’

They sauntered on smoking, Dare leading the way through the gate-house into a corridor which was not inclosed, a lamp hanging at the further end.

‘We are getting into the inhabited part, I think,’ said Havill.

Dare, however, had gone on, and knowing the tortuous passages from his few days’ experience in measuring them with Somerset, he came to the butler’s pantry. Dare knocked, and nobody answering he entered, took down a key which hung behind the door, and rejoined Havill. ‘It is all right,’ he said. ‘The cat’s away; and the mice are at play in consequence.’

Proceeding up a stone staircase he unlocked the door of a room in the dark, struck a light inside, and returning to the door called in a whisper to Havill, who had remained behind. ‘This is Mr. Somerset’s studio,’ he said.

‘How did you get permission?’ inquired Havill, not knowing that Dare had seen no one.

‘Anyhow,’ said Dare carelessly. ‘We can examine the plans at leisure; for if the placid Mrs. Goodman, who is the only one at home, sees the light, she will only think it is Somerset still at work.’

Dare uncovered the drawings, and young Somerset’s brain-work for the last six weeks lay under their eyes. To Dare, who was too cursory to trouble himself by entering into such details, it had very little meaning; but the design shone into Havill’s head like a light into a dark place. It was original; and it was fascinating. Its originality lay partly in the circumstance that Somerset had not attempted to adapt an old building to the wants of the new civilization. He had placed his new erection beside it as a slightly attached structure, harmonizing with the old; heightening and beautifying, rather than subduing it. His work formed a palace, with a ruinous castle annexed as a curiosity. To Havill the conception had more charm than it could have to the most appreciative outsider; for when a mediocre and jealous mind that has been cudgelling itself over a problem capable of many solutions, lights on the solution of a rival, all possibilities in that kind seem to merge in the one beheld.

Dare was struck by the arrested expression of the architect’s face. ‘Is it rather good?’ he asked.

‘Yes, rather,’ said Havill, subduing himself.

‘More than rather?’

‘Yes, the clever devil!’ exclaimed Havill, unable to depreciate longer.

‘How?’

‘The riddle that has worried me three weeks he has solved in a way which is simplicity itself. He has got it, and I am undone!’

‘Nonsense, don’t give way. Let’s make a tracing.’

‘The ground-plan will be sufficient,’ said Havill, his courage reviving. ‘The idea is so simple, that if once seen it is not easily forgotten.’

A rough tracing of Somerset’s design was quickly made, and blowing out the candle with a wave of his hand, the younger gentleman locked the door, and they went downstairs again.

‘I should never have thought of it,’ said Havill, as they walked homeward.

‘One man has need of another every ten years: Ogni dieci anni un uomo ha bisogno dell’ altro, as they say in Italy. You’ll help me for this turn if I have need of you?’

‘I shall never have the power.’

‘O yes, you will. A man who can contrive to get admitted to a competition by writing a letter abusing another man, has any amount of power. The stroke was a good one.’

Havill was silent till he said, ‘I think these gusts mean that we are to have a storm of rain.’

Dare looked up. The sky was overcast, the trees shivered, and a drop or two began to strike into the walkers’ coats from the east. They were not far from the inn at Sleeping-Green, where Dare had lodgings, occupying the rooms which had been used by Somerset till he gave them up for more commodious chambers at Markton; and they decided to turn in there till the rain should be over.

Having possessed himself of Somerset’s brains Havill was inclined to be jovial, and ordered the best in wines that the house afforded. Before starting from home they had drunk as much as was good for them; so that their potations here soon began to have a marked effect upon their tongues. The rain beat upon the windows with a dull dogged pertinacity which seemed to signify boundless reserves of the same and long continuance. The wind rose, the sign creaked, and the candles waved. The weather had, in truth, broken up for the season, and this was the first night of the change.

‘Well, here we are,’ said Havill, as he poured out another glass of the brandied liquor called old port at Sleeping-Green; ‘and it seems that here we are to remain for the present.’

‘I am at home anywhere!’ cried the lad, whose brow was hot and eye wild.

Havill, who had not drunk enough to affect his reasoning, held up his glass to the light and said, ‘I never can quite make out what you are, or what your age is. Are you sixteen, one-and-twenty, or twenty-seven? And are you an Englishman, Frenchman, Indian, American, or what? You seem not to have taken your degrees in these parts.’

‘That’s a secret, my friend,’ said Dare. ‘I am a citizen of the world. I owe no country patriotism, and no king or queen obedience. A man whose country has no boundary is your only true gentleman.’

‘Well, where were you born — somewhere, I suppose?’

‘It would be a fact worth the telling. The secret of my birth lies here.’ And Dare slapped his breast with his right hand.

‘Literally, just under your shirt-front; or figuratively, in your heart?’ asked Havill.

‘Literally there. It is necessary that it should be recorded, for one’s own memory is a treacherous book of reference, should verification be required at a time of delirium, disease, or death.’

Havill asked no further what he meant, and went to the door. Finding that the rain still continued he returned to Dare, who was by this time sinking down in a one-sided attitude, as if hung up by the shoulder. Informing his companion that he was but little inclined to move far in such a tempestuous night, he decided to remain in the inn till next morning. On calling in the landlord, however, they learnt that the house was full of farmers on their way home from a large sheep-fair in the neighbourhood, and that several of these, having decided to stay on account of the same tempestuous weather, had already engaged the spare beds. If Mr. Dare would give up his room, and share a double-bedded room with Mr. Havill, the thing could be done, but not otherwise.

To this the two companions agreed, and presently went upstairs with as gentlemanly a walk and vertical a candle as they could exhibit under the circumstances.

The other inmates of the inn soon retired to rest, and the storm raged on unheeded by all local humanity.

CHAPTER III.

At two o’clock the rain lessened its fury. At half-past two the obscured moon shone forth; and at three Havill awoke. The blind had not been pulled down overnight, and the moonlight streamed into the room, across the bed whereon Dare was sleeping. He lay on his back, his arms thrown out; and his well-curved youthful form looked like an unpedestaled Dionysus in the colourless lunar rays.

Sleep had cleared Havill’s mind from the drowsing effects of the last night’s sitting, and he thought of Dare’s mysterious manner in speaking of himself. This lad resembled the Etruscan youth Tages, in one respect, that of being a boy with, seemingly, the wisdom of a sage; and the effect of his presence was now heightened by all those sinister and mystic attributes which are lent by nocturnal environment. He who in broad daylight might be but a young chevalier d’industrie was now an unlimited possibility in social phenomena. Havill remembered how the lad had pointed to his breast, and said that his secret was literally kept there. The architect was too much of a provincial to have quenched the common curiosity that was part of his nature by the acquired

metropolitan indifference to other people's lives which, in essence more unworthy even than the former, causes less practical inconvenience in its exercise.

Dare was breathing profoundly. Instigated as above mentioned, Havill got out of bed and stood beside the sleeper. After a moment's pause he gently pulled back the unfastened collar of Dare's nightshirt and saw a word tattooed in distinct characters on his breast. Before there was time for Havill to decipher it Dare moved slightly, as if conscious of disturbance, and Havill hastened back to bed. Dare bestirred himself yet more, whereupon Havill breathed heavily, though keeping an intent glance on the lad through his half-closed eyes to learn if he had been aware of the investigation.

Dare was certainly conscious of something, for he sat up, rubbed his eyes, and gazed around the room; then after a few moments of reflection he drew some article from beneath his pillow. A blue gleam shone from the object as Dare held it in the moonlight, and Havill perceived that it was a small revolver.

A clammy dew broke out upon the face and body of the architect when, stepping out of bed with the weapon in his hand, Dare looked under the bed, behind the curtains, out of the window, and into a closet, as if convinced that something had occurred, but in doubt as to what it was. He then came across to where Havill was lying and still keeping up the appearance of sleep. Watching him awhile and mistrusting the reality of this semblance, Dare brought it to the test by holding the revolver within a few inches of Havill's forehead.

Havill could stand no more. Crystallized with terror, he said, without however moving more than his lips, in dread of hasty action on the part of Dare: 'O, good Lord, Dare, Dare, I have done nothing!'

The youth smiled and lowered the pistol. 'I was only finding out whether it was you or some burglar who had been playing tricks upon me. I find it was you.'

'Do put away that thing! It is too ghastly to produce in a respectable bedroom. Why do you carry it?'

'Cosmopolites always do. Now answer my questions. What were you up to?' and Dare as he spoke played with the pistol again.

Havill had recovered some coolness. 'You could not use it upon me,' he said sardonically, watching Dare. 'It would be risking your neck for too little an object.'

'I did not think you were shrewd enough to see that,' replied Dare carelessly, as he returned the revolver to its place. 'Well, whether you have outwitted me or no, you will keep the secret as long as I choose.'

'Why?' said Havill.

'Because I keep your secret of the letter abusing Miss P., and of the pilfered tracing you carry in your pocket.'

'It is quite true,' said Havill.

They went to bed again. Dare was soon asleep; but Havill did not attempt to disturb him again. The elder man slept but fitfully. He was aroused in the morning by a heavy rumbling and jingling along the highway overlooked by the window, the front wall of the house being shaken by the reverberation.

‘There is no rest for me here,’ he said, rising and going to the window, carefully avoiding the neighbourhood of Mr. Dare. When Havill had glanced out he returned to dress himself.

‘What’s that noise?’ said Dare, awakened by the same rumble.

‘It is the Artillery going away.’

‘From where?’

‘Markton barracks.’

‘Hurrah!’ said Dare, jumping up in bed. ‘I have been waiting for that these six weeks.’

Havill did not ask questions as to the meaning of this unexpected remark.

When they were downstairs Dare’s first act was to ring the bell and ask if his Army and Navy Gazette had arrived.

While the servant was gone Havill cleared his throat and said, ‘I am an architect, and I take in the Architect; you are an architect, and you take in the Army and Navy Gazette.’

‘I am not an architect any more than I am a soldier; but I have taken in the Army and Navy Gazette these many weeks.’

When they were at breakfast the paper came in. Dare hastily tore it open and glanced at the pages.

‘I am going to Markton after breakfast!’ he said suddenly, before looking up; ‘we will walk together if you like?’

They walked together as planned, and entered Markton about ten o’clock.

‘I have just to make a call here,’ said Dare, when they were opposite the barrack-entrance on the outskirts of the town, where wheel-tracks and a regular chain of hoof-marks left by the departed batteries were imprinted in the gravel between the open gates. ‘I shall not be a moment.’ Havill stood still while his companion entered and asked the commissary in charge, or somebody representing him, when the new batteries would arrive to take the place of those which had gone away. He was informed that it would be about noon.

‘Now I am at your service,’ said Dare, ‘and will help you to rearrange your design by the new intellectual light we have acquired.’

They entered Havill’s office and set to work. When contrasted with the tracing from Somerset’s plan, Havill’s design, which was not far advanced, revealed all its weaknesses to him. After seeing Somerset’s scheme the bands of Havill’s imagination were loosened: he laid his own previous efforts aside, got fresh sheets of drawing-paper and drew with vigour.

‘I may as well stay and help you,’ said Dare. ‘I have nothing to do till twelve o’clock; and not much then.’

So there he remained. At a quarter to twelve children and idlers began to gather against the railings of Havill’s house. A few minutes past twelve the noise of an arriving host was heard at the entrance to the town. Thereupon Dare and Havill went to the window.

The X and Y Batteries of the Z Brigade, Royal Horse Artillery, were entering Markton, each headed by the major with his bugler behind him. In a moment they came abreast and passed, every man in his place; that is to say:

Six shining horses, in pairs, harnessed by rope-traces white as milk, with a driver on each near horse: two gunners on the lead-coloured stout-wheeled limber, their carcasses jolted to a jelly for lack of springs: two gunners on the lead-coloured stout-wheeled gun-carriage, in the same personal condition: the nine-pounder gun, dipping its heavy head to earth, as if ashamed of its office in these enlightened times: the complement of jingling and prancing troopers, riding at the wheels and elsewhere: six shining horses with their drivers, and traces white as milk, as before: two more gallant jolted men, on another jolting limber, and more stout wheels and lead-coloured paint: two more jolted men on another drooping gun: more jingling troopers on horseback: again six shining draught-horses, traces, drivers, gun, gunners, lead paint, stout wheels and troopers as before.

So each detachment lumbered slowly by, all eyes martially forward, except when wandering in quest of female beauty.

‘He’s a fine fellow, is he not?’ said Dare, denoting by a nod a mounted officer, with a sallow, yet handsome face, and black moustache, who came up on a bay gelding with the men of his battery.

‘What is he?’ said Havill.

‘A captain who lacks advancement.’

‘Do you know him?’

‘I know him?’

‘Yes; do you?’

Dare made no reply; and they watched the captain as he rode past with his drawn sword in his hand, the sun making a little sun upon its blade, and upon his brilliantly polished long boots and bright spurs; also warming his gold cross-belt and braidings, white gloves, busby with its red bag, and tall white plume.

Havill seemed to be too indifferent to press his questioning; and when all the soldiers had passed by, Dare observed to his companion that he should leave him for a short time, but would return in the afternoon or next day.

After this he walked up the street in the rear of the artillery, following them to the barracks. On reaching the gates he found a crowd of people gathered outside, looking with admiration at the guns and gunners drawn up within the enclosure. When the soldiers were dismissed to their quarters the sightseers dispersed, and Dare went through the gates to the barrack-yard.

The guns were standing on the green; the soldiers and horses were scattered about, and the handsome captain whom Dare had pointed out to Havill was inspecting the buildings in the company of the quartermaster. Dare made a mental note of these things, and, apparently changing a previous intention, went out from the barracks and returned to the town.

CHAPTER IV.

To return for a while to George Somerset. The sun of his later existence having vanished from that young man's horizon, he confined himself closely to the studio, superintending the exertions of his draughtsmen Bowles, Knowles, and Cockton, who were now in the full swing of working out Somerset's creations from the sketches he had previously prepared.

He had so far got the start of Havill in the competition that, by the help of these three gentlemen, his design was soon finished. But he gained no unfair advantage on this account, an additional month being allowed to Havill to compensate for his later information.

Before scaling up his drawings Somerset wished to spend a short time in London, and dismissing his assistants till further notice, he locked up the rooms which had been appropriated as office and studio and prepared for the journey.

It was afternoon. Somerset walked from the castle in the direction of the wood to reach Markton by a detour. He had not proceeded far when there approached his path a man riding a bay horse with a square-cut tail. The equestrian wore a grizzled beard, and looked at Somerset with a piercing eye as he noiselessly ambled nearer over the soft sod of the park. He proved to be Mr. Cunningham Haze, chief constable of the district, who had become slightly known to Somerset during his sojourn here.

'One word, Mr. Somerset,' said the Chief, after they had exchanged nods of recognition, reining his horse as he spoke.

Somerset stopped.

'You have a studio at the castle in which you are preparing drawings?'

'I have.'

'Have you a clerk?'

'I had three till yesterday, when I paid them off.'

'Would they have any right to enter the studio late at night?'

'There would have been nothing wrong in their doing so. Either of them might have gone back at any time for something forgotten. They lived quite near the castle.'

'Ah, then all is explained. I was riding past over the grass on the night of last Thursday, and I saw two persons in your studio with a light. It must have been about half-past nine o'clock. One of them came forward and pulled down the blind so that the light fell upon his face. But I only saw it for a short time.'

'If it were Knowles or Cockton he would have had a beard.'

'He had no beard.'

'Then it must have been Bowles. A young man?'

'Quite young. His companion in the background seemed older.'

'They are all about the same age really. By the way — it couldn't have been Dare — and Havill, surely! Would you recognize them again?'

'The young one possibly. The other not at all, for he remained in the shade.'

Somerset endeavoured to discern in a description by the chief constable the features of Mr. Bowles: but it seemed to approximate more closely to Dare in spite of himself. 'I'll make a sketch of the only one who had no business there, and show it to you,' he presently said. 'I should like this cleared up.'

Mr. Cunningham Haze said he was going to Toneborough that afternoon, but would return in the evening before Somerset's departure. With this they parted. A possible motive for Dare's presence in the rooms had instantly presented itself to Somerset's mind, for he had seen Dare enter Havill's office more than once, as if he were at work there.

He accordingly sat on the next stile, and taking out his pocket-book began a pencil sketch of Dare's head, to show to Mr. Haze in the evening; for if Dare had indeed found admission with Havill, or as his agent, the design was lost.

But he could not make a drawing that was a satisfactory likeness. Then he luckily remembered that Dare, in the intense warmth of admiration he had affected for Somerset on the first day or two of their acquaintance, had begged for his photograph, and in return for it had left one of himself on the mantelpiece, taken as he said by his own process. Somerset resolved to show this production to Mr. Haze, as being more to the purpose than a sketch, and instead of finishing the latter, proceeded on his way.

He entered the old overgrown drive which wound indirectly through the wood to Markton. The road, having been laid out for idling rather than for progress, bent sharply hither and thither among the fissured trunks and layers of horny leaves which lay there all the year round, interspersed with cushions of vivid green moss that formed oases in the rust-red expanse.

Reaching a point where the road made one of its bends between two large beeches, a man and woman revealed themselves at a few yards' distance, walking slowly towards him. In the short and quaint lady he recognized Charlotte De Stancy, whom he remembered not to have seen for several days.

She slightly blushed and said, 'O, this is pleasant, Mr. Somerset! Let me present my brother to you, Captain De Stancy of the Royal Horse Artillery.'

Her brother came forward and shook hands heartily with Somerset; and they all three rambled on together, talking of the season, the place, the fishing, the shooting, and whatever else came uppermost in their minds.

Captain De Stancy was a personage who would have been called interesting by women well out of their teens. He was ripe, without having declined a digit towards fogginess. He was sufficiently old and experienced to suggest a goodly accumulation of touching amourettes in the chambers of his memory, and not too old for the possibility of increasing the store. He was apparently about eight-and-thirty, less tall than his father had been, but admirably made; and his every movement exhibited a fine combination of strength and flexibility of limb. His face was somewhat thin and thoughtful, its complexion being naturally pale, though darkened by exposure to a warmer sun than ours. His features were somewhat striking; his moustache and hair raven black; and his eyes, denied the attributes of military keenness by reason of the largeness and

darkness of their aspect, acquired thereby a softness of expression that was in part womanly. His mouth as far as it could be seen reproduced this characteristic, which might have been called weakness, or goodness, according to the mental attitude of the observer. It was large but well formed, and showed an unimpaired line of teeth within. His dress at present was a heather-coloured rural suit, cut close to his figure.

‘You knew my cousin, Jack Ravensbury?’ he said to Somerset, as they went on. ‘Poor Jack: he was a good fellow.’

‘He was a very good fellow.’

‘He would have been made a parson if he had lived — it was his great wish. I, as his senior, and a man of the world as I thought myself, used to chaff him about it when he was a boy, and tell him not to be a milksop, but to enter the army. But I think Jack was right — the parsons have the best of it, I see now.’

‘They would hardly admit that,’ said Somerset, laughing. ‘Nor can I.’

‘Nor I,’ said the captain’s sister. ‘See how lovely you all looked with your big guns and uniform when you entered Markton; and then see how stupid the parsons look by comparison, when they flock into Markton at a Visitation.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said De Stancy,

“Doubtless it is a brilliant masquerade;
But when of the first sight you’ve had your fill,
It palls — at least it does so upon me,
This paradise of pleasure and ennui.”

When one is getting on for forty;

“When we have made our love, and gamed our gaming,
Dressed, voted, shone, and maybe, something more;
With dandies dined, heard senators declaiming;
Seen beauties brought to market by the score,”

and so on, there arises a strong desire for a quiet old-fashioned country life, in which incessant movement is not a necessary part of the programme.’

‘But you are not forty, Will?’ said Charlotte.

‘My dear, I was thirty-nine last January.’

‘Well, men about here are youths at that age. It was India used you up so, when you served in the line, was it not? I wish you had never gone there!’

‘So do I,’ said De Stancy drily. ‘But I ought to grow a youth again, like the rest, now I am in my native air.’

They came to a narrow brook, not wider than a man’s stride, and Miss De Stancy halted on the edge.

‘Why, Lottie, you used to jump it easily enough,’ said her brother. ‘But we won’t make her do it now.’ He took her in his arms, and lifted her over, giving her a gratuitous ride for some additional yards, and saying, ‘You are not a pound heavier, Lott, than you were at ten years old... What do you think of the country here, Mr. Somerset? Are you going to stay long?’

‘I think very well of it,’ said Somerset. ‘But I leave to-morrow morning, which makes it necessary that I turn back in a minute or two from walking with you.’

‘That’s a disappointment. I had hoped you were going to finish out the autumn with shooting. There’s some, very fair, to be got here on reasonable terms, I’ve just heard.’

‘But you need not hire any!’ spoke up Charlotte. ‘Paula would let you shoot anything, I am sure. She has not been here long enough to preserve much game, and the poachers had it all in Mr. Wilkins’ time. But what there is you might kill with pleasure to her.’

‘No, thank you,’ said De Stancy grimly. ‘I prefer to remain a stranger to Miss Power — Miss Steam-Power, she ought to be called — and to all her possessions.’

Charlotte was subdued, and did not insist further; while Somerset, before he could feel himself able to decide on the mood in which the gallant captain’s joke at Paula’s expense should be taken, wondered whether it were a married man or a bachelor who uttered it.

He had not been able to keep the question of De Stancy’s domestic state out of his head from the first moment of seeing him. Assuming De Stancy to be a husband, he felt there might be some excuse for his remark; if unmarried, Somerset liked the satire still better; in such circumstances there was a relief in the thought that Captain De Stancy’s prejudices might be infinitely stronger than those of his sister or father.

‘Going to-morrow, did you say, Mr. Somerset?’ asked Miss De Stancy. ‘Then will you dine with us to-day? My father is anxious that you should do so before you go. I am sorry there will be only our own family present to meet you; but you can leave as early as you wish.’

Her brother seconded the invitation, and Somerset promised, though his leisure for that evening was short. He was in truth somewhat inclined to like De Stancy; for though the captain had said nothing of any value either on war, commerce, science, or art, he had seemed attractive to the younger man. Beyond the natural interest a soldier has for imaginative minds in the civil walks of life, De Stancy’s occasional manifestations of *taedium vitae* were too poetically shaped to be repellent. Gallantry combined in him with a sort of ascetic self-repression in a way that was curious. He was a dozen years older than Somerset: his life had been passed in grooves remote from those of Somerset’s own life; and the latter decided that he would like to meet the artillery officer again.

Bidding them a temporary farewell, he went away to Markton by a shorter path than that pursued by the De Stancys, and after spending the remainder of the afternoon preparing for departure, he sallied forth just before the dinner-hour towards the suburban villa.

He had become yet more curious whether a Mrs. De Stancy existed; if there were one he would probably see her to-night. He had an irrepressible hope that there might be such a lady. On entering the drawing-room only the father, son, and daughter were

assembled. Somerset fell into talk with Charlotte during the few minutes before dinner, and his thought found its way out.

‘There is no Mrs. De Stancy?’ he said in an undertone.

‘None,’ she said; ‘my brother is a bachelor.’

The dinner having been fixed at an early hour to suit Somerset, they had returned to the drawing-room at eight o’clock. About nine he was aiming to get away.

‘You are not off yet?’ said the captain.

‘There would have been no hurry,’ said Somerset, ‘had I not just remembered that I have left one thing undone which I want to attend to before my departure. I want to see the chief constable to-night.’

‘Cunningham Haze? — he is the very man I too want to see. But he went out of town this afternoon, and I hardly think you will see him to-night. His return has been delayed.’

‘Then the matter must wait.’

‘I have left word at his house asking him to call here if he gets home before half-past ten; but at any rate I shall see him to-morrow morning. Can I do anything for you, since you are leaving early?’

Somerset replied that the business was of no great importance, and briefly explained the suspected intrusion into his studio; that he had with him a photograph of the suspected young man. ‘If it is a mistake,’ added Somerset, ‘I should regret putting my draughtsman’s portrait into the hands of the police, since it might injure his character; indeed, it would be unfair to him. So I wish to keep the likeness in my own hands, and merely to show it to Mr. Haze. That’s why I prefer not to send it.’

‘My matter with Haze is that the barrack furniture does not correspond with the inventories. If you like, I’ll ask your question at the same time with pleasure.’

Thereupon Somerset gave Captain De Stancy an unfastened envelope containing the portrait, asking him to destroy it if the constable should declare it not to correspond with the face that met his eye at the window. Soon after, Somerset took his leave of the household.

He had not been absent ten minutes when other wheels were heard on the gravel without, and the servant announced Mr. Cunningham Haze, who had returned earlier than he had expected, and had called as requested.

They went into the dining-room to discuss their business. When the barrack matter had been arranged De Stancy said, ‘I have a little commission to execute for my friend Mr. Somerset. I am to ask you if this portrait of the person he suspects of unlawfully entering his room is like the man you saw there?’

The speaker was seated on one side of the dining-table and Mr. Haze on the other. As he spoke De Stancy pulled the envelope from his pocket, and half drew out the photograph, which he had not as yet looked at, to hand it over to the constable. In the act his eye fell upon the portrait, with its uncertain expression of age, assured look, and hair worn in a fringe like a girl’s.

Captain De Stancy's face became strained, and he leant back in his chair, having previously had sufficient power over himself to close the envelope and return it to his pocket.

'Good heavens, you are ill, Captain De Stancy?' said the chief constable.

'It was only momentary,' said De Stancy; 'better in a minute — a glass of water will put me right.'

Mr. Haze got him a glass of water from the sideboard.

'These spasms occasionally overtake me,' said De Stancy when he had drunk. 'I am already better. What were we saying? O, this affair of Mr. Somerset's. I find that this envelope is not the right one.' He ostensibly searched his pocket again. 'I must have mislaid it,' he continued, rising. 'I'll be with you again in a moment.'

De Stancy went into the room adjoining, opened an album of portraits that lay on the table, and selected one of a young man quite unknown to him, whose age was somewhat akin to Dare's, but who in no other attribute resembled him.

De Stancy placed this picture in the original envelope, and returned with it to the chief constable, saying he had found it at last.

'Thank you, thank you,' said Cunningham Haze, looking it over. 'Ah — I perceive it is not what I expected to see. Mr. Somerset was mistaken.'

When the chief constable had left the house, Captain De Stancy shut the door and drew out the original photograph. As he looked at the transcript of Dare's features he was moved by a painful agitation, till recalling himself to the present, he carefully put the portrait into the fire.

During the following days Captain De Stancy's manner on the roads, in the streets, and at barracks, was that of Crusoe after seeing the print of a man's foot on the sand.

CHAPTER V.

Anybody who had closely considered Dare at this time would have discovered that, shortly after the arrival of the Royal Horse Artillery at Markton Barracks, he gave up his room at the inn at Sleeping-Green and took permanent lodgings over a broker's shop in the town above-mentioned. The peculiarity of the rooms was that they commanded a view lengthwise of the barrack lane along which any soldier, in the natural course of things, would pass either to enter the town, to call at Myrtle Villa, or to go to Stancy Castle.

Dare seemed to act as if there were plenty of time for his business. Some few days had slipped by when, perceiving Captain De Stancy walk past his window and into the town, Dare took his hat and cane, and followed in the same direction. When he was about fifty yards short of Myrtle Villa on the other side of the town he saw De Stancy enter its gate.

Dare mounted a stile beside the highway and patiently waited. In about twenty minutes De Stancy came out again and turned back in the direction of the town, till

Dare was revealed to him on his left hand. When De Stancy recognized the youth he was visibly agitated, though apparently not surprised. Standing still a moment he dropped his glance upon the ground, and then came forward to Dare, who having alighted from the stile stood before the captain with a smile.

‘My dear lad!’ said De Stancy, much moved by recollections. He held Dare’s hand for a moment in both his own, and turned askance.

‘You are not astonished,’ said Dare, still retaining his smile, as if to his mind there were something comic in the situation.

‘I knew you were somewhere near. Where do you come from?’

‘From going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it, as Satan said to his Maker. — Southampton last, in common speech.’

‘Have you come here to see me?’

‘Entirely. I divined that your next quarters would be Markton, the previous batteries that were at your station having come on here. I have wanted to see you badly.’

‘You have?’

‘I am rather out of cash. I have been knocking about a good deal since you last heard from me.’

‘I will do what I can again.’

‘Thanks, captain.’

‘But, Willy, I am afraid it will not be much at present. You know I am as poor as a mouse.’

‘But such as it is, could you write a cheque for it now?’

‘I will send it to you from the barracks.’

‘I have a better plan. By getting over this stile we could go round at the back of the villas to Sleeping-Green Church. There is always a pen-and-ink in the vestry, and we can have a nice talk on the way. It would be unwise for me to appear at the barracks just now.’

‘That’s true.’

De Stancy sighed, and they were about to walk across the fields together. ‘No,’ said Dare, suddenly stopping: my plans make it imperative that we should not run the risk of being seen in each other’s company for long. Walk on, and I will follow. You can stroll into the churchyard, and move about as if you were ruminating on the epitaphs. There are some with excellent morals. I’ll enter by the other gate, and we can meet easily in the vestry-room.’

De Stancy looked gloomy, and was on the point of acquiescing when he turned back and said, ‘Why should your photograph be shown to the chief constable?’

‘By whom?’

‘Somerset the architect. He suspects your having broken into his office or something of the sort.’ De Stancy briefly related what Somerset had explained to him at the dinner-table.

‘It was merely diamond cut diamond between us, on an architectural matter,’ murmured Dare. ‘Ho! and he suspects; and that’s his remedy!’

‘I hope this is nothing serious?’ asked De Stancy gravely.

‘I peeped at his drawing — that’s all. But since he chooses to make that use of my photograph, which I gave him in friendship, I’ll make use of his in a way he little dreams of. Well now, let’s on.’

A quarter of an hour later they met in the vestry of the church at Sleeping-Green.

‘I have only just transferred my account to the bank here,’ said De Stancy, as he took out his cheque-book, ‘and it will be more convenient to me at present to draw but a small sum. I will make up the balance afterwards.’

When he had written it Dare glanced over the paper and said ruefully, ‘It is small, dad. Well, there is all the more reason why I should broach my scheme, with a view to making such documents larger in the future.’

‘I shall be glad to hear of any such scheme,’ answered De Stancy, with a languid attempt at jocularly.

‘Then here it is. The plan I have arranged for you is of the nature of a marriage.’

‘You are very kind!’ said De Stancy, agape.

‘The lady’s name is Miss Paula Power, who, as you may have heard since your arrival, is in absolute possession of her father’s property and estates, including Stancy Castle. As soon as I heard of her I saw what a marvellous match it would be for you, and your family; it would make a man of you, in short, and I have set my mind upon your putting no objection in the way of its accomplishment.’

‘But, Willy, it seems to me that, of us two, it is you who exercise paternal authority?’

‘True, it is for your good. Let me do it.’

‘Well, one must be indulgent under the circumstances, I suppose... But,’ added De Stancy simply, ‘Willy, I — don’t want to marry, you know. I have lately thought that some day we may be able to live together, you and I: go off to America or New Zealand, where we are not known, and there lead a quiet, pastoral life, defying social rules and troublesome observances.’

‘I can’t hear of it, captain,’ replied Dare reprovingly. ‘I am what events have made me, and having fixed my mind upon getting you settled in life by this marriage, I have put things in train for it at an immense trouble to myself. If you had thought over it o’ nights as much as I have, you would not say nay.’

‘But I ought to have married your mother if anybody. And as I have not married her, the least I can do in respect to her is to marry no other woman.’

‘You have some sort of duty to me, have you not, Captain De Stancy?’

‘Yes, Willy, I admit that I have,’ the elder replied reflectively. ‘And I don’t think I have failed in it thus far?’

‘This will be the crowning proof. Paternal affection, family pride, the noble instincts to reinstate yourself in the castle of your ancestors, all demand the step. And when you have seen the lady! She has the figure and motions of a sylph, the face of an angel, the eye of love itself. What a sight she is crossing the lawn on a sunny afternoon, or gliding airily along the corridors of the old place the De Stancys knew so well! Her lips

are the softest, reddest, most distracting things you ever saw. Her hair is as soft as silk, and of the rarest, tenderest brown.'

The captain moved uneasily. 'Don't take the trouble to say more, Willy,' he observed. 'You know how I am. My cursed susceptibility to these matters has already wasted years of my life, and I don't want to make myself a fool about her too.'

'You must see her.'

'No, don't let me see her,' De Stancy expostulated. 'If she is only half so good-looking as you say, she will drag me at her heels like a blind Samson. You are a mere youth as yet, but I may tell you that the misfortune of never having been my own master where a beautiful face was concerned obliges me to be cautious if I would preserve my peace of mind.'

'Well, to my mind, Captain De Stancy, your objections seem trivial. Are those all?'

'They are all I care to mention just now to you.'

'Captain! can there be secrets between us?'

De Stancy paused and looked at the lad as if his heart wished to confess what his judgment feared to tell. 'There should not be — on this point,' he murmured.

'Then tell me — why do you so much object to her?'

'I once vowed a vow.'

'A vow!' said Dare, rather disconcerted.

'A vow of infinite solemnity. I must tell you from the beginning; perhaps you are old enough to hear it now, though you have been too young before. Your mother's life ended in much sorrow, and it was occasioned entirely by me. In my regret for the wrong done her I swore to her that though she had not been my wife, no other woman should stand in that relationship to me; and this to her was a sort of comfort. When she was dead my knowledge of my own plaguy impressionableness, which seemed to be ineradicable — as it seems still — led me to think what safeguards I could set over myself with a view to keeping my promise to live a life of celibacy; and among other things I determined to forswear the society, and if possible the sight, of women young and attractive, as far as I had the power to do.'

'It is not so easy to avoid the sight of a beautiful woman if she crosses your path, I should think?'

'It is not easy; but it is possible.'

'How?'

'By directing your attention another way.'

'But do you mean to say, captain, that you can be in a room with a pretty woman who speaks to you, and not look at her?'

'I do: though mere looking has less to do with it than mental attentiveness — allowing your thoughts to flow out in her direction — to comprehend her image.'

'But it would be considered very impolite not to look at the woman or comprehend her image?'

'It would, and is. I am considered the most impolite officer in the service. I have been nicknamed the man with the averted eyes — the man with the detestable habit

— the man who greets you with his shoulder, and so on. Ninety-and-nine fair women at the present moment hate me like poison and death for having persistently refused to plumb the depths of their offered eyes.'

'How can you do it, who are by nature courteous?'

'I cannot always — I break down sometimes. But, upon the whole, recollection holds me to it: dread of a lapse. Nothing is so potent as fear well maintained.'

De Stancy narrated these details in a grave meditative tone with his eyes on the wall, as if he were scarcely conscious of a listener.

'But haven't you reckless moments, captain? — when you have taken a little more wine than usual, for instance?'

'I don't take wine.'

'O, you are a teetotaller?'

'Not a pledged one — but I don't touch alcohol unless I get wet, or anything of that sort.'

'Don't you sometimes forget this vow of yours to my mother?'

'No, I wear a reminder.'

'What is that like?'

De Stancy held up his left hand, on the third finger of which appeared an iron ring.

Dare surveyed it, saying, 'Yes, I have seen that before, though I never knew why you wore it. Well, I wear a reminder also, but of a different sort.'

He threw open his shirt-front, and revealed tattooed on his breast the letters DE STANCY; the same marks which Havill had seen in the bedroom by the light of the moon.

The captain rather winced at the sight. 'Well, well,' he said hastily, 'that's enough... Now, at any rate, you understand my objection to know Miss Power.'

'But, captain,' said the lad coaxingly, as he fastened his shirt; 'you forget me and the good you may do me by marrying? Surely that's a sufficient reason for a change of sentiment. This inexperienced sweet creature owns the castle and estate which bears your name, even to the furniture and pictures. She is the possessor of at least forty thousand a year — how much more I cannot say — while, buried here in Outer Wessex, she lives at the rate of twelve hundred in her simplicity.'

'It is very good of you to set this before me. But I prefer to go on as I am going.'

'Well, I won't bore you any more with her to-day. A monk in regimentals! — 'tis strange.' Dare arose and was about to open the door, when, looking through the window, Captain De Stancy said, 'Stop.' He had perceived his father, Sir William De Stancy, walking among the tombstones without.

'Yes, indeed,' said Dare, turning the key in the door. 'It would look strange if he were to find us here.'

As the old man seemed indisposed to leave the churchyard just yet they sat down again.

'What a capital card-table this green cloth would make,' said Dare, as they waited. 'You play, captain, I suppose?'

‘Very seldom.’

‘The same with me. But as I enjoy a hand of cards with a friend, I don’t go unprovided.’ Saying which, Dare drew a pack from the tail of his coat. ‘Shall we while away this leisure with the witching things?’

‘Really, I’d rather not.’

‘But,’ coaxed the young man, ‘I am in the humour for it; so don’t be unkind!’

‘But, Willy, why do you care for these things? Cards are harmless enough in their way; but I don’t like to see you carrying them in your pocket. It isn’t good for you.’

‘It was by the merest chance I had them. Now come, just one hand, since we are prisoners. I want to show you how nicely I can play. I won’t corrupt you!’

‘Of course not,’ said De Stancy, as if ashamed of what his objection implied. ‘You are not corrupt enough yourself to do that, I should hope.’

The cards were dealt and they began to play — Captain De Stancy abstractedly, and with his eyes mostly straying out of the window upon the large yew, whose boughs as they moved were distorted by the old green window-panes.

‘It is better than doing nothing,’ said Dare cheerfully, as the game went on. ‘I hope you don’t dislike it?’

‘Not if it pleases you,’ said De Stancy listlessly.

‘And the consecration of this place does not extend further than the aisle wall.’

‘Doesn’t it?’ said De Stancy, as he mechanically played out his cards. ‘What became of that box of books I sent you with my last cheque?’

‘Well, as I hadn’t time to read them, and as I knew you would not like them to be wasted, I sold them to a bloke who peruses them from morning till night. Ah, now you have lost a fiver altogether — how queer! We’ll double the stakes. So, as I was saying, just at the time the books came I got an inkling of this important business, and literature went to the wall.’

‘Important business — what?’

‘The capture of this lady, to be sure.’

De Stancy sighed impatiently. ‘I wish you were less calculating, and had more of the impulse natural to your years!’

‘Game — by Jove! You have lost again, captain. That makes — let me see — nine pounds fifteen to square us.’

‘I owe you that?’ said De Stancy, startled. ‘It is more than I have in cash. I must write another cheque.’

‘Never mind. Make it payable to yourself, and our connection will be quite unsuspected.’

Captain De Stancy did as requested, and rose from his seat. Sir William, though further off, was still in the churchyard.

‘How can you hesitate for a moment about this girl?’ said Dare, pointing to the bent figure of the old man. ‘Think of the satisfaction it would be to him to see his son within the family walls again. It should be a religion with you to compass such a legitimate end as this.’

‘Well, well, I’ll think of it,’ said the captain, with an impatient laugh. ‘You are quite a Mephistopheles, Will — I say it to my sorrow!’

‘Would that I were in your place.’

‘Would that you were! Fifteen years ago I might have called the chance a magnificent one.’

‘But you are a young man still, and you look younger than you are. Nobody knows our relationship, and I am not such a fool as to divulge it. Of course, if through me you reclaim this splendid possession, I should leave it to your feelings what you would do for me.’

Sir William had by this time cleared out of the churchyard, and the pair emerged from the vestry and departed. Proceeding towards Markton by the same bypath, they presently came to an eminence covered with bushes of blackthorn, and tufts of yellowing fern. From this point a good view of the woods and glades about Stancy Castle could be obtained. Dare stood still on the top and stretched out his finger; the captain’s eye followed the direction, and he saw above the many-hued foliage in the middle distance the towering keep of Paula’s castle.

‘That’s the goal of your ambition, captain — ambition do I say? — most righteous and dutiful endeavour! How the hoary shape catches the sunlight — it is the *raison d’être* of the landscape, and its possession is coveted by a thousand hearts. Surely it is an hereditary desire of yours? You must make a point of returning to it, and appearing in the map of the future as in that of the past. I delight in this work of encouraging you, and pushing you forward towards your own. You are really very clever, you know, but — I say it with respect — how comes it that you want so much waking up?’

‘Because I know the day is not so bright as it seems, my boy. However, you make a little mistake. If I care for anything on earth, I do care for that old fortress of my forefathers. I respect so little among the living that all my reverence is for my own dead. But manoeuvring, even for my own, as you call it, is not in my line. It is distasteful — it is positively hateful to me.’

‘Well, well, let it stand thus for the present. But will you refuse me one little request — merely to see her? I’ll contrive it so that she may not see you. Don’t refuse me, it is the one thing I ask, and I shall think it hard if you deny me.’

‘O Will!’ said the captain wearily. ‘Why will you plead so? No — even though your mind is particularly set upon it, I cannot see her, or bestow a thought upon her, much as I should like to gratify you.’

CHAPTER VI.

When they had parted Dare walked along towards Markton with resolve on his mouth and an unscrupulous light in his prominent black eye. Could any person who had heard the previous conversation have seen him now, he would have found little difficulty in divining that, notwithstanding De Stancy’s obduracy, the reinstatement of Captain De

Stancy in the castle, and the possible legitimation and enrichment of himself, was still the dream of his brain. Even should any legal settlement or offspring intervene to nip the extreme development of his projects, there was abundant opportunity for his glorification. Two conditions were imperative. De Stancy must see Paula before Somerset's return. And it was necessary to have help from Havill, even if it involved letting him know all.

Whether Havill already knew all was a nice question for Mr. Dare's luminous mind. Havill had had opportunities of reading his secret, particularly on the night they occupied the same room. If so, by revealing it to Paula, Havill might utterly blast his project for the marriage. Havill, then, was at all risks to be retained as an ally.

Yet Dare would have preferred a stronger check upon his confederate than was afforded by his own knowledge of that anonymous letter and the competition trick. For were the competition lost to him, Havill would have no further interest in conciliating Miss Power; would as soon as not let her know the secret of De Stancy's relation to him.

Fortune as usual helped him in his dilemma. Entering Havill's office, Dare found him sitting there; but the drawings had all disappeared from the boards. The architect held an open letter in his hand.

'Well, what news?' said Dare.

'Miss Power has returned to the castle, Somerset is detained in London, and the competition is decided,' said Havill, with a glance of quiet dubiousness.

'And you have won it?'

'No. We are bracketed — it's a tie. The judges say there is no choice between the designs — that they are singularly equal and singularly good. That she would do well to adopt either. Signed So-and-So, Fellows of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The result is that she will employ which she personally likes best. It is as if I had spun a sovereign in the air and it had alighted on its edge. The least false movement will make it tails; the least wise movement heads.'

'Singularly equal. Well, we owe that to our nocturnal visit, which must not be known.'

'O Lord, no!' said Havill apprehensively.

Dare felt secure of him at those words. Havill had much at stake; the slightest rumour of his trick in bringing about the competition, would be fatal to Havill's reputation.

'The permanent absence of Somerset then is desirable architecturally on your account, matrimonially on mine.'

'Matrimonially? By the way — who was that captain you pointed out to me when the artillery entered the town?'

'Captain De Stancy — son of Sir William De Stancy. He's the husband. O, you needn't look incredulous: it is practicable; but we won't argue that. In the first place I want him to see her, and to see her in the most love-kindling, passion-begetting circumstances that can be thought of. And he must see her surreptitiously, for he refuses to meet her.'

‘Let him see her going to church or chapel?’

Dare shook his head.

‘Driving out?’

‘Common-place!’

‘Walking in the gardens?’

‘Ditto.’

‘At her toilet?’

‘Ah — if it were possible!’

‘Which it hardly is. Well, you had better think it over and make inquiries about her habits, and as to when she is in a favourable aspect for observation, as the almanacs say.’

Shortly afterwards Dare took his leave. In the evening he made it his business to sit smoking on the bole of a tree which commanded a view of the upper ward of the castle, and also of the old postern-gate, now enlarged and used as a tradesmen’s entrance. It was half-past six o’clock; the dressing-bell rang, and Dare saw a light-footed young woman hasten at the sound across the ward from the servants’ quarter. A light appeared in a chamber which he knew to be Paula’s dressing-room; and there it remained half-an-hour, a shadow passing and repassing on the blind in the style of head-dress worn by the girl he had previously seen. The dinner-bell sounded and the light went out.

As yet it was scarcely dark out of doors, and in a few minutes Dare had the satisfaction of seeing the same woman cross the ward and emerge upon the slope without. This time she was bonneted, and carried a little basket in her hand. A nearer view showed her to be, as he had expected, Milly Birch, Paula’s maid, who had friends living in Markton, whom she was in the habit of visiting almost every evening during the three hours of leisure which intervened between Paula’s retirement from the dressing-room and return thither at ten o’clock. When the young woman had descended the road and passed into the large drive, Dare rose and followed her.

‘O, it is you, Miss Birch,’ said Dare, on overtaking her. ‘I am glad to have the pleasure of walking by your side.’

‘Yes, sir. O it’s Mr. Dare. We don’t see you at the castle now, sir.’

‘No. And do you get a walk like this every evening when the others are at their busiest?’

‘Almost every evening; that’s the one return to the poor lady’s maid for losing her leisure when the others get it — in the absence of the family from home.’

‘Is Miss Power a hard mistress?’

‘No.’

‘Rather fanciful than hard, I presume?’

‘Just so, sir.’

‘And she likes to appear to advantage, no doubt.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Milly, laughing. ‘We all do.’

‘When does she appear to the best advantage? When riding, or driving, or reading her book?’

‘Not altogether then, if you mean the very best.’

‘Perhaps it is when she sits looking in the glass at herself, and you let down her hair.’

‘Not particularly, to my mind.’

‘When does she to your mind? When dressed for a dinner-party or ball?’

‘She’s middling, then. But there is one time when she looks nicer and cleverer than at any. It is when she is in the gymnasium.’

‘O — gymnasium?’

‘Because when she is there she wears such a pretty boy’s costume, and is so charming in her movements, that you think she is a lovely young youth and not a girl at all.’

‘When does she go to this gymnasium?’

‘Not so much as she used to. Only on wet mornings now, when she can’t get out for walks or drives. But she used to do it every day.’

‘I should like to see her there.’

‘Why, sir?’

‘I am a poor artist, and can’t afford models. To see her attitudes would be of great assistance to me in the art I love so well.’

Milly shook her head. ‘She’s very strict about the door being locked. If I were to leave it open she would dismiss me, as I should deserve.’

‘But consider, dear Miss Birch, the advantage to a poor artist the sight of her would be: if you could hold the door ajar it would be worth five pounds to me, and a good deal to you.’

‘No,’ said the incorruptible Milly, shaking her head. ‘Besides, I don’t always go there with her. O no, I couldn’t!’

Milly remained so firm at this point that Dare said no more.

When he had left her he returned to the castle grounds, and though there was not much light he had no difficulty in discovering the gymnasium, the outside of which he had observed before, without thinking to inquire its purpose. Like the erections in other parts of the shrubberies it was constructed of wood, the interstices between the framing being filled up with short billets of fir nailed diagonally. Dare, even when without a settled plan in his head, could arrange for probabilities; and wrenching out one of the billets he looked inside. It seemed to be a simple oblong apartment, fitted up with ropes, with a little dressing-closet at one end, and lighted by a skylight or lantern in the roof. Dare replaced the wood and went on his way.

Havill was smoking on his doorstep when Dare passed up the street. He held up his hand.

‘Since you have been gone,’ said the architect, ‘I’ve hit upon something that may help you in exhibiting your lady to your gentleman. In the summer I had orders to design a gymnasium for her, which I did; and they say she is very clever on the ropes and bars. Now — ’

‘I’ve discovered it. I shall contrive for him to see her there on the first wet morning, which is when she practises. What made her think of it?’

‘As you may have heard, she holds advanced views on social and other matters; and in those on the higher education of women she is very strong, talking a good deal about the physical training of the Greeks, whom she adores, or did. Every philosopher and man of science who ventilates his theories in the monthly reviews has a devout listener in her; and this subject of the physical development of her sex has had its turn with other things in her mind. So she had the place built on her very first arrival, according to the latest lights on athletics, and in imitation of those at the new colleges for women.’

‘How deuced clever of the girl! She means to live to be a hundred!’

CHAPTER VII.

The wet day arrived with all the promptness that might have been expected of it in this land of rains and mists. The alder bushes behind the gymnasium dripped monotonously leaf upon leaf, added to this being the purl of the shallow stream a little way off, producing a sense of satiety in watery sounds. Though there was drizzle in the open meads, the rain here in the thicket was comparatively slight, and two men with fishing tackle who stood beneath one of the larger bushes found its boughs a sufficient shelter.

‘We may as well walk home again as study nature here, Willy,’ said the taller and elder of the twain. ‘I feared it would continue when we started. The magnificent sport you speak of must rest for to-day.’

The other looked at his watch, but made no particular reply.

‘Come, let us move on. I don’t like intruding into other people’s grounds like this,’ De Stancy continued.

‘We are not intruding. Anybody walks outside this fence.’ He indicated an iron railing newly tarred, dividing the wilder underwood amid which they stood from the inner and well-kept parts of the shrubbery, and against which the back of the gymnasium was built.

Light footsteps upon a gravel walk could be heard on the other side of the fence, and a trio of cloaked and umbrella-screened figures were for a moment discernible. They vanished behind the gymnasium; and again nothing resounded but the river murmurs and the clock-like drippings of the leafage.

‘Hush!’ said Dare.

‘No pranks, my boy,’ said De Stancy suspiciously. ‘You should be above them.’

‘And you should trust to my good sense, captain,’ Dare remonstrated. ‘I have not indulged in a prank since the sixth year of my pilgrimage. I have found them too damaging to my interests. Well, it is not too dry here, and damp injures your health, you say. Have a pull for safety’s sake.’ He presented a flask to De Stancy.

The artillery officer looked down at his nether garments.

‘I don’t break my rule without good reason,’ he observed.

‘I am afraid that reason exists at present.’

‘I am afraid it does. What have you got?’

‘Only a little wine.’

‘What wine?’

‘Do try it. I call it “the blushful Hippocrene,” that the poet describes as

“Tasting of Flora and the country green;

Dance, and Provencal song, and sun-burnt mirth.”

De Stancy took the flask, and drank a little.

‘It warms, does it not?’ said Dare.

‘Too much,’ said De Stancy with misgiving. ‘I have been taken unawares. Why, it is three parts brandy, to my taste, you scamp!’

Dare put away the wine. ‘Now you are to see something,’ he said.

‘Something — what is it?’ Captain De Stancy regarded him with a puzzled look.

‘It is quite a curiosity, and really worth seeing. Now just look in here.’

The speaker advanced to the back of the building, and withdrew the wood billet from the wall.

‘Will, I believe you are up to some trick,’ said De Stancy, not, however, suspecting the actual truth in these unsuggestive circumstances, and with a comfortable resignation, produced by the potent liquor, which would have been comical to an outsider, but which, to one who had known the history and relationship of the two speakers, would have worn a sadder significance. ‘I am too big a fool about you to keep you down as I ought; that’s the fault of me, worse luck.’

He pressed the youth’s hand with a smile, went forward, and looked through the hole into the interior of the gymnasium. Dare withdrew to some little distance, and watched Captain De Stancy’s face, which presently began to assume an expression of interest.

What was the captain seeing? A sort of optical poem.

Paula, in a pink flannel costume, was bending, wheeling and undulating in the air like a gold-fish in its globe, sometimes ascending by her arms nearly to the lantern, then lowering herself till she swung level with the floor. Her aunt Mrs. Goodman, and Charlotte De Stancy, were sitting on camp-stools at one end, watching her gyrations, Paula occasionally addressing them with such an expression as — ‘Now, Aunt, look at me — and you, Charlotte — is not that shocking to your weak nerves,’ when some adroit feat would be repeated, which, however, seemed to give much more pleasure to Paula herself in performing it than to Mrs. Goodman in looking on, the latter sometimes saying, ‘O, it is terrific — do not run such a risk again!’

It would have demanded the poetic passion of some joyous Elizabethan lyricist like Lodge, Nash, or Constable, to fitly phrase Paula’s presentation of herself at this moment of absolute abandonment to every muscular whim that could take possession of such a supple form. The white manilla ropes clung about the performer like snakes as

she took her exercise, and the colour in her face deepened as she went on. Captain De Stancy felt that, much as he had seen in early life of beauty in woman, he had never seen beauty of such a real and living sort as this. A recollection of his vow, together with a sense that to gaze on the festival of this Bona Dea was, though so innocent and pretty a sight, hardly fair or gentlemanly, would have compelled him to withdraw his eyes, had not the sportive fascination of her appearance glued them there in spite of all. And as if to complete the picture of Grace personified and add the one thing wanting to the charm which bound him, the clouds, till that time thick in the sky, broke away from the upper heaven, and allowed the noonday sun to pour down through the lantern upon her, irradiating her with a warm light that was incarnadined by her pink doublet and hose, and reflected in upon her face. She only required a cloud to rest on instead of the green silk net which actually supported her reclining figure for the moment, to be quite Olympian; save indeed that in place of haughty effrontery there sat on her countenance only the healthful sprightliness of an English girl.

Dare had withdrawn to a point at which another path crossed the path occupied by De Stancy. Looking in a side direction, he saw Havill idling slowly up to him over the silent grass. Havill's knowledge of the appointment had brought him out to see what would come of it. When he neared Dare, but was still partially hidden by the boughs from the third of the party, the former simply pointed to De Stancy upon which Havill stood and peeped at him. 'Is she within there?' he inquired.

Dare nodded, and whispered, 'You need not have asked, if you had examined his face.'

'That's true.'

'A fermentation is beginning in him,' said Dare, half pitifully; 'a purely chemical process; and when it is complete he will probably be clear, and fiery, and sparkling, and quite another man than the good, weak, easy fellow that he was.'

To precisely describe Captain De Stancy's admiration was impossible. A sun seemed to rise in his face. By watching him they could almost see the aspect of her within the wall, so accurately were her changing phases reflected in him. He seemed to forget that he was not alone.

'And is this,' he murmured, in the manner of one only half apprehending himself, 'and is this the end of my vow?'

Paula was saying at this moment, 'Ariel sleeps in this posture, does he not, Auntie?' Suiting the action to the word she flung out her arms behind her head as she lay in the green silk hammock, idly closed her pink eyelids, and swung herself to and fro.

BOOK THE THIRD. DE STANCY.

CHAPTER I.

Captain De Stancy was a changed man. A hitherto well-repressed energy was giving him motion towards long-shunned consequences. His features were, indeed, the same as before; though, had a physiognomist chosen to study them with the closeness of an astronomer scanning the universe, he would doubtless have discerned abundant novelty.

In recent years De Stancy had been an easy, melancholy, unambitious officer, enervated and depressed by a parental affection quite beyond his control for the graceless lad Dare — the obtrusive memento of a shadowy period in De Stancy's youth, who threatened to be the curse of his old age. Throughout a long space he had persevered in his system of rigidly incarcerating within himself all instincts towards the opposite sex, with a resolution that would not have disgraced a much stronger man. By this habit, maintained with fair success, a chamber of his nature had been preserved intact during many later years, like the one solitary sealed-up cell occasionally retained by bees in a lobe of drained honey-comb. And thus, though he had irretrievably exhausted the relish of society, of ambition, of action, and of his profession, the love-force that he had kept immured alive was still a reproducible thing.

The sight of Paula in her graceful performance, which the judicious Dare had so carefully planned, led up to and heightened by subtle accessories, operated on De Stancy's surprised soul with a promptness almost magical.

On the evening of the self-same day, having dined as usual, he retired to his rooms, where he found a hamper of wine awaiting him. It had been anonymously sent, and the account was paid. He smiled grimly, but no longer with heaviness. In this he instantly recognized the handiwork of Dare, who, having at last broken down the barrier which De Stancy had erected round his heart for so many years, acted like a skilled strategist, and took swift measures to follow up the advantage so tardily gained.

Captain De Stancy knew himself conquered: he knew he should yield to Paula — had indeed yielded; but there was now, in his solitude, an hour or two of reaction. He did not drink from the bottles sent. He went early to bed, and lay tossing thereon till far into the night, thinking over the collapse. His teetotalism had, with the lapse of years, unconsciously become the outward and visible sign to himself of his secret vows; and a return to its opposite, however mildly done, signified with ceremonious distinctness the formal acceptance of delectations long forsworn.

But the exceeding freshness of his feeling for Paula, which by reason of its long arrest was that of a man far under thirty, and was a wonder to himself every instant, would not long brook weighing in balances. He wished suddenly to commit himself; to remove the question of retreat out of the region of debate. The clock struck two: and the wish became determination. He arose, and wrapping himself in his dressing-gown

went to the next room, where he took from a shelf in the pantry several large bottles, which he carried to the window, till they stood on the sill a goodly row. There had been sufficient light in the room for him to do this without a candle. Now he softly opened the sash, and the radiance of a gibbous moon riding in the opposite sky flooded the apartment. It fell on the labels of the captain's bottles, revealing their contents to be simple aerated waters for drinking.

De Stancy looked out and listened. The guns that stood drawn up within the yard glistened in the moonlight reaching them from over the barrack-wall: there was an occasional stamp of horses in the stables; also a measured tread of sentinels — one or more at the gates, one at the hospital, one between the wings, two at the magazine, and others further off. Recurring to his intention he drew the corks of the mineral waters, and inverting each bottle one by one over the window-sill, heard its contents dribble in a small stream on to the gravel below.

He then opened the hamper which Dare had sent. Uncorking one of the bottles he murmured, 'To Paula!' and drank a glass of the ruby liquor.

'A man again after eighteen years,' he said, shutting the sash and returning to his bedroom.

The first overt result of his kindled interest in Miss Power was his saying to his sister the day after the surreptitious sight of Paula: 'I am sorry, Charlotte, for a word or two I said the other day.'

'Well?'

'I was rather disrespectful to your friend Miss Power.'

'I don't think so — were you?'

'Yes. When we were walking in the wood, I made a stupid joke about her... What does she know about me — do you ever speak of me to her?'

'Only in general terms.'

'What general terms?'

'You know well enough, William; of your idiosyncrasies and so on — that you are a bit of a woman-hater, or at least a confirmed bachelor, and have but little respect for your own family.'

'I wish you had not told her that,' said De Stancy with dissatisfaction.

'But I thought you always liked women to know your principles!' said Charlotte, in injured tones; 'and would particularly like her to know them, living so near.'

'Yes, yes,' replied her brother hastily. 'Well, I ought to see her, just to show her that I am not quite a brute.'

'That would be very nice!' she answered, putting her hands together in agreeable astonishment. 'It is just what I have wished, though I did not dream of suggesting it after what I have heard you say. I am going to stay with her again to-morrow, and I will let her know about this.'

'Don't tell her anything plainly, for heaven's sake. I really want to see the interior of the castle; I have never entered its walls since my babyhood.' He raised his eyes as he spoke to where the walls in question showed their ashlar faces over the trees.

‘You might have gone over it at any time.’

‘O yes. It is only recently that I have thought much of the place: I feel now that I should like to examine the old building thoroughly, since it was for so many generations associated with our fortunes, especially as most of the old furniture is still there. My sedulous avoidance hitherto of all relating to our family vicissitudes has been, I own, stupid conduct for an intelligent being; but impossible grapes are always sour, and I have unconsciously adopted Radical notions to obliterate disappointed hereditary instincts. But these have a trick of re-establishing themselves as one gets older, and the castle and what it contains have a keen interest for me now.’

‘It contains Paula.’

De Stancy’s pulse, which had been beating languidly for many years, beat double at the sound of that name.

‘I meant furniture and pictures for the moment,’ he said; ‘but I don’t mind extending the meaning to her, if you wish it.’

‘She is the rarest thing there.’

‘So you have said before.’

‘The castle and our family history have as much romantic interest for her as they have for you,’ Charlotte went on. ‘She delights in visiting our tombs and effigies and ponders over them for hours.’

‘Indeed!’ said De Stancy, allowing his surprise to hide the satisfaction which accompanied it. ‘That should make us friendly... Does she see many people?’

‘Not many as yet. And she cannot have many staying there during the alterations.’

‘Ah! yes — the alterations. Didn’t you say that she has had a London architect stopping there on that account? What was he — old or young?’

‘He is a young man: he has been to our house. Don’t you remember you met him there?’

‘What was his name?’

‘Mr. Somerset.’

‘O, that man! Yes, yes, I remember... Hullo, Lottie!’

‘What?’

‘Your face is as red as a peony. Now I know a secret!’ Charlotte vainly endeavoured to hide her confusion. ‘Very well — not a word! I won’t say more,’ continued De Stancy good-humouredly, ‘except that he seems to be a very nice fellow.’

De Stancy had turned the dialogue on to this little well-preserved secret of his sister’s with sufficient outward lightness; but it had been done in instinctive concealment of the disquieting start with which he had recognized that Somerset, Dare’s enemy, whom he had intercepted in placing Dare’s portrait into the hands of the chief constable, was a man beloved by his sister Charlotte. This novel circumstance might lead to a curious complication. But he was to hear more.

‘He may be very nice,’ replied Charlotte, with an effort, after this silence. ‘But he is nothing to me, more than a very good friend.’

‘There’s no engagement, or thought of one between you?’

‘Certainly there’s not!’ said Charlotte, with brave emphasis. ‘It is more likely to be between Paula and him than me and him.’

De Stancy’s bare military ears and closely cropped poll flushed hot. ‘Miss Power and him?’

‘I don’t mean to say there is, because Paula denies it; but I mean that he loves Paula. That I do know.’

De Stancy was dumb. This item of news which Dare had kept from him, not knowing how far De Stancy’s sense of honour might extend, was decidedly grave. Indeed, he was so greatly impressed with the fact, that he could not help saying as much aloud: ‘This is very serious!’

‘Why!’ she murmured tremblingly, for the first leaking out of her tender and sworn secret had disabled her quite.

‘Because I love Paula too.’

‘What do you say, William, you? — a woman you have never seen?’

‘I have seen her — by accident. And now, my dear little sis, you will be my close ally, won’t you? as I will be yours, as brother and sister should be.’ He placed his arm coaxingly round Charlotte’s shoulder.

‘O, William, how can I?’ at last she stammered.

‘Why, how can’t you, I should say? We are both in the same ship. I love Paula, you love Mr. Somerset; it behoves both of us to see that this flirtation of theirs ends in nothing.’

‘I don’t like you to put it like that — that I love him — it frightens me,’ murmured the girl, visibly agitated. ‘I don’t want to divide him from Paula; I couldn’t, I wouldn’t do anything to separate them. Believe me, Will, I could not! I am sorry you love there also, though I should be glad if it happened in the natural order of events that she should come round to you. But I cannot do anything to part them and make Mr. Somerset suffer. It would be TOO wrong and blamable.’

‘Now, you silly Charlotte, that’s just how you women fly off at a tangent. I mean nothing dishonourable in the least. Have I ever prompted you to do anything dishonourable? Fair fighting allies was all I thought of.’

Miss De Stancy breathed more freely. ‘Yes, we will be that, of course; we are always that, William. But I hope I can be your ally, and be quite neutral; I would so much rather.’

‘Well, I suppose it will not be a breach of your precious neutrality if you get me invited to see the castle?’

‘O no!’ she said brightly; ‘I don’t mind doing such a thing as that. Why not come with me tomorrow? I will say I am going to bring you. There will be no trouble at all.’

De Stancy readily agreed. The effect upon him of the information now acquired was to intensify his ardour tenfold, the stimulus being due to a perception that Somerset, with a little more knowledge, would hold a card which could be played with disastrous effect against himself — his relationship to Dare. Its disclosure to a lady of such Puritan

antecedents as Paula's, would probably mean her immediate severance from himself as an unclean thing.

'Is Miss Power a severe pietist, or precisian; or is she a compromising lady?' he asked abruptly.

'She is severe and uncompromising — if you mean in her judgments on morals,' said Charlotte, not quite hearing. The remark was peculiarly apposite, and De Stancy was silent.

He spent some following hours in a close study of the castle history, which till now had unutterably bored him. More particularly did he dwell over documents and notes which referred to the pedigree of his own family. He wrote out the names of all — and they were many — who had been born within those domineering walls since their first erection; of those among them who had been brought thither by marriage with the owner, and of stranger knights and gentlemen who had entered the castle by marriage with its mistress. He refreshed his memory on the strange loves and hates that had arisen in the course of the family history; on memorable attacks, and the dates of the same, the most memorable among them being the occasion on which the party represented by Paula battered down the castle walls that she was now about to mend, and, as he hoped, return in their original intact shape to the family dispossessed, by marriage with himself, its living representative.

In Sir William's villa were small engravings after many of the portraits in the castle galleries, some of them hanging in the dining-room in plain oak and maple frames, and others preserved in portfolios. De Stancy spent much of his time over these, and in getting up the romances of their originals' lives from memoirs and other records, all which stories were as great novelties to him as they could possibly be to any stranger. Most interesting to him was the life of an Edward De Stancy, who had lived just before the Civil Wars, and to whom Captain De Stancy bore a very traceable likeness. This ancestor had a mole on his cheek, black and distinct as a fly in cream; and as in the case of the first Lord Amherst's wart, and Bennet Earl of Arlington's nose-scar, the painter had faithfully reproduced the defect on canvas. It so happened that the captain had a mole, though not exactly on the same spot of his face; and this made the resemblance still greater.

He took infinite trouble with his dress that day, showing an amount of anxiety on the matter which for him was quite abnormal. At last, when fully equipped, he set out with his sister to make the call proposed. Charlotte was rather unhappy at sight of her brother's earnest attempt to make an impression on Paula; but she could say nothing against it, and they proceeded on their way.

It was the darkest of November weather, when the days are so short that morning seems to join with evening without the intervention of noon. The sky was lined with low cloud, within whose dense substance tempests were slowly fermenting for the coming days. Even now a windy turbulence troubled the half-naked boughs, and a lonely leaf would occasionally spin downwards to rejoin on the grass the scathed multitude of its comrades which had preceded it in its fall. The river by the pavilion, in the summer

so clear and purling, now slid onwards brown and thick and silent, and enlarged to double size.

CHAPTER II.

Meanwhile Paula was alone. Of anyone else it would have been said that she must be finding the afternoon rather dreary in the quaint halls not of her forefathers: but of Miss Power it was unsafe to predicate so surely. She walked from room to room in a black velvet dress which gave decision to her outline without depriving it of softness. She occasionally clasped her hands behind her head and looked out of a window; but she more particularly bent her footsteps up and down the Long Gallery, where she had caused a large fire of logs to be kindled, in her endeavour to extend cheerfulness somewhat beyond the precincts of the sitting-rooms.

The fire glanced up on Paula, and Paula glanced down at the fire, and at the gnarled beech fuel, and at the wood-lice which ran out from beneath the bark to the extremity of the logs as the heat approached them. The low-down ruddy light spread over the dark floor like the setting sun over a moor, fluttering on the grotesque countenances of the bright andirons, and touching all the furniture on the underside.

She now and then crossed to one of the deep embrasures of the windows, to decipher some sentence from a letter she held in her hand. The daylight would have been more than sufficient for any bystander to discern that the capitals in that letter were of the peculiar semi-gothic type affected at the time by Somerset and other young architects of his school in their epistolary correspondence. She was very possibly thinking of him, even when not reading his letter, for the expression of softness with which she perused the page was more or less with her when she appeared to examine other things.

She walked about for a little time longer, then put away the letter, looked at the clock, and thence returned to the windows, straining her eyes over the landscape without, as she murmured, 'I wish Charlotte was not so long coming!'

As Charlotte continued to keep away, Paula became less reasonable in her desires, and proceeded to wish that Somerset would arrive; then that anybody would come; then, walking towards the portraits on the wall, she flippantly asked one of those cavaliers to oblige her fancy for company by stepping down from his frame. The temerity of the request led her to prudently withdraw it almost as soon as conceived: old paintings had been said to play queer tricks in extreme cases, and the shadows this afternoon were funereal enough for anything in the shape of revenge on an intruder who embodied the antagonistic modern spirit to such an extent as she. However, Paula still stood before the picture which had attracted her; and this, by a coincidence common enough in fact, though scarcely credited in chronicles, happened to be that one of the seventeenth-century portraits of which De Stancy had studied the engraved copy at Myrtle Villa the same morning.

Whilst she remained before the picture, wondering her favourite wonder, how would she feel if this and its accompanying canvases were pictures of her own ancestors, she was surprised by a light footstep upon the carpet which covered part of the room, and turning quickly she beheld the smiling little figure of Charlotte De Stancy.

‘What has made you so late?’ said Paula. ‘You are come to stay, of course?’

Charlotte said she had come to stay. ‘But I have brought somebody with me!’

‘Ah — whom?’

‘My brother happened to be at home, and I have brought him.’

Miss De Stancy’s brother had been so continuously absent from home in India, or elsewhere, so little spoken of, and, when spoken of, so truly though unconsciously represented as one whose interests lay wholly outside this antiquated neighbourhood, that to Paula he had been a mere nebulosity whom she had never distinctly outlined. To have him thus cohere into substance at a moment’s notice lent him the novelty of a new creation.

‘Is he in the drawing-room?’ said Paula in a low voice.

‘No, he is here. He would follow me. I hope you will forgive him.’

And then Paula saw emerge into the red beams of the dancing fire, from behind a half-drawn hanging which screened the door, the military gentleman whose acquaintance the reader has already made.

‘You know the house, doubtless, Captain De Stancy?’ said Paula, somewhat shyly, when he had been presented to her.

‘I have never seen the inside since I was three weeks old,’ replied the artillery officer gracefully; ‘and hence my recollections of it are not remarkably distinct. A year or two before I was born the entail was cut off by my father and grandfather; so that I saw the venerable place only to lose it; at least, I believe that’s the truth of the case. But my knowledge of the transaction is not profound, and it is a delicate point on which to question one’s father.’

Paula assented, and looked at the interesting and noble figure of the man whose parents had seemingly righted themselves at the expense of wronging him.

‘The pictures and furniture were sold about the same time, I think?’ said Charlotte.

‘Yes,’ murmured De Stancy. ‘They went in a mad bargain of my father with his visitor, as they sat over their wine. My father sat down as host on that occasion, and arose as guest.’

He seemed to speak with such a courteous absence of regret for the alienation, that Paula, who was always fearing that the recollection would rise as a painful shadow between herself and the De Stancys, felt reassured by his magnanimity.

De Stancy looked with interest round the gallery; seeing which Paula said she would have lights brought in a moment.

‘No, please not,’ said De Stancy. ‘The room and ourselves are of so much more interesting a colour by this light!’

As they moved hither and thither, the various expressions of De Stancy’s face made themselves picturesquely visible in the unsteady shine of the blaze. In a short time

he had drawn near to the painting of the ancestor whom he so greatly resembled. When her quick eye noted the speck on the face, indicative of inherited traits strongly pronounced, a new and romantic feeling that the De Stancys had stretched out a tentacle from their genealogical tree to seize her by the hand and draw her in to their mass took possession of Paula. As has been said, the De Stancys were a family on whom the hall-mark of membership was deeply stamped, and by the present light the representative under the portrait and the representative in the portrait seemed beings not far removed. Paula was continually starting from a reverie and speaking irrelevantly, as if such reflections as those seized hold of her in spite of her natural unconcern.

When candles were brought in Captain De Stancy ardently contrived to make the pictures the theme of conversation. From the nearest they went to the next, whereupon Paula as hostess took up one of the candlesticks and held it aloft to light up the painting. The candlestick being tall and heavy, De Stancy relieved her of it, and taking another candle in the other hand, he imperceptibly slid into the position of exhibitor rather than spectator. Thus he walked in advance holding the two candles on high, his shadow forming a gigantic figure on the neighbouring wall, while he recited the particulars of family history pertaining to each portrait, that he had learnt up with such eager persistence during the previous four-and-twenty-hours. 'I have often wondered what could have been the history of this lady, but nobody has ever been able to tell me,' Paula observed, pointing to a Vandyck which represented a beautiful woman wearing curls across her forehead, a square-cut bodice, and a heavy pearl necklace upon the smooth expanse of her neck.

'I don't think anybody knows,' Charlotte said.

'O yes,' replied her brother promptly, seeing with enthusiasm that it was yet another opportunity for making capital of his acquired knowledge, with which he felt himself as inconveniently crammed as a candidate for a government examination. 'That lady has been largely celebrated under a fancy name, though she is comparatively little known by her own. Her parents were the chief ornaments of the almost irreproachable court of Charles the First, and were not more distinguished by their politeness and honour than by the affections and virtues which constitute the great charm of private life.'

The stock verbiage of the family memoir was somewhat apparent in this effusion; but it much impressed his listeners; and he went on to point out that from the lady's necklace was suspended a heart-shaped portrait — that of the man who broke his heart by her persistent refusal to encourage his suit. De Stancy then led them a little further, where hung a portrait of the lover, one of his own family, who appeared in full panoply of plate mail, the pommel of his sword standing up under his elbow. The gallant captain then related how this personage of his line wooed the lady fruitlessly; how, after her marriage with another, she and her husband visited the parents of the disappointed lover, the then occupiers of the castle; how, in a fit of desperation at the sight of her, he retired to his room, where he composed some passionate verses, which he wrote with his blood, and after directing them to her ran himself through the body

with his sword. Too late the lady's heart was touched by his devotion; she was ever after a melancholy woman, and wore his portrait despite her husband's prohibition. 'This,' continued De Stancy, leading them through the doorway into the hall where the coats of mail were arranged along the wall, and stopping opposite a suit which bore some resemblance to that of the portrait, 'this is his armour, as you will perceive by comparing it with the picture, and this is the sword with which he did the rash deed.'

'What unreasonable devotion!' said Paula practically. 'It was too romantic of him. She was not worthy of such a sacrifice.'

'He also is one whom they say you resemble a little in feature, I think,' said Charlotte.

'Do they?' replied De Stancy. 'I wonder if it's true.' He set down the candles, and asking the girls to withdraw for a moment, was inside the upper part of the suit of armour in incredibly quick time. Going then and placing himself in front of a low-hanging painting near the original, so as to be enclosed by the frame while covering the figure, arranging the sword as in the one above, and setting the light that it might fall in the right direction, he recalled them; when he put the question, 'Is the resemblance strong?'

He looked so much like a man of bygone times that neither of them replied, but remained curiously gazing at him. His modern and comparatively sallow complexion, as seen through the open visor, lent an ethereal ideality to his appearance which the time-stained countenance of the original warrior totally lacked.

At last Paula spoke, so stilly that she seemed a statue enunciating: 'Are the verses known that he wrote with his blood?'

'O yes, they have been carefully preserved.' Captain De Stancy, with true wooer's instinct, had committed some of them to memory that morning from the printed copy to be found in every well-ordered library. 'I fear I don't remember them all,' he said, 'but they begin in this way: —

“From one that dyeth in his discontent,
Dear Faire, receive this greeting to thee sent;
And still as oft as it is read by thee,
Then with some deep sad sigh remember mee!
O 'twas my fortune's error to vow dutie,
To one that bears defiance in her beautie!
Sweete poyson, pretious woee, infectious jewell —
Such is a Ladie that is faire and cruell.
How well could I with ayre, camelion-like,
Live happie, and still gazeing on thy cheeke,
In which, forsaken man, methink I see
How goodlie love doth threaten cares to mee.
Why dost thou frowne thus on a kneelinge soule,

Whose faults in love thou may'st as well controule? —
In love — but O, that word; that word I feare
Is hateful still both to thy hart and eare!

.

Ladie, in breefe, my fate doth now intend
The period of my daies to have an end:
Waste not on me thy pittie, pretious Faire:
Rest you in much content; I, in despaire!"

A solemn silence followed the close of the recital, which De Stancy improved by turning the point of the sword to his breast, resting the pommel upon the floor, and saying: —

‘After writing that we may picture him turning this same sword in this same way, and falling on it thus.’ He inclined his body forward as he spoke.

‘Don’t, Captain De Stancy, please don’t!’ cried Paula involuntarily.

‘No, don’t show us any further, William!’ said his sister. ‘It is too tragic.’

De Stancy put away the sword, himself rather excited — not, however, by his own recital, but by the direct gaze of Paula at him.

This Protean quality of De Stancy’s, by means of which he could assume the shape and situation of almost any ancestor at will, had impressed her, and he perceived it with a throb of fervour. But it had done no more than impress her; for though in delivering the lines he had so fixed his look upon her as to suggest, to any maiden practised in the game of the eyes, a present significance in the words, the idea of any such *arriere-pensee* had by no means commended itself to her soul.

At this time a messenger from Markton barracks arrived at the castle and wished to speak to Captain De Stancy in the hall. Begging the two ladies to excuse him for a moment, he went out.

While De Stancy was talking in the twilight to the messenger at one end of the apartment, some other arrival was shown in by the side door, and in making his way after the conference across the hall to the room he had previously quitted, De Stancy encountered the new-comer. There was just enough light to reveal the countenance to be Dare’s; he bore a portfolio under his arm, and had begun to wear a moustache, in case the chief constable should meet him anywhere in his rambles, and be struck by his resemblance to the man in the studio.

‘What the devil are you doing here?’ said Captain De Stancy, in tones he had never used before to the young man.

Dare started back in surprise, and naturally so. De Stancy, having adopted a new system of living, and relinquished the meagre diet and enervating waters of his past years, was rapidly recovering tone. His voice was firmer, his cheeks were less pallid; and above all he was authoritative towards his present companion, whose ingenuity in vamping up a being for his ambitious experiments seemed about to be rewarded, like Frankenstein’s, by his discomfiture at the hands of his own creature.

‘What the devil are you doing here, I say?’ repeated De Stancy.

‘You can talk to me like that, after my working so hard to get you on in life, and make a rising man of you!’ expostulated Dare, as one who felt himself no longer the leader in this enterprise.

‘But,’ said the captain less harshly, ‘if you let them discover any relations between us here, you will ruin the fairest prospects man ever had!’

‘O, I like that, captain — when you owe all of it to me!’

‘That’s too cool, Will.’

‘No; what I say is true. However, let that go. So now you are here on a call; but how are you going to get here often enough to win her before the other man comes back? If you don’t see her every day — twice, three times a day — you will not capture her in the time.’

‘I must think of that,’ said De Stancy.

‘There is only one way of being constantly here: you must come to copy the pictures or furniture, something in the way he did.’

‘I’ll think of it,’ muttered De Stancy hastily, as he heard the voices of the ladies, whom he hastened to join as they were appearing at the other end of the room. His countenance was gloomy as he recrossed the hall, for Dare’s words on the shortness of his opportunities had impressed him. Almost at once he uttered a hope to Paula that he might have further chance of studying, and if possible of copying, some of the ancestral faces with which the building abounded.

Meanwhile Dare had come forward with his portfolio, which proved to be full of photographs. While Paula and Charlotte were examining them he said to De Stancy, as a stranger: ‘Excuse my interruption, sir, but if you should think of copying any of the portraits, as you were stating just now to the ladies, my patent photographic process is at your service, and is, I believe, the only one which would be effectual in the dim indoor lights.’

‘It is just what I was thinking of,’ said De Stancy, now so far cooled down from his irritation as to be quite ready to accept Dare’s adroitly suggested scheme.

On application to Paula she immediately gave De Stancy permission to photograph to any extent, and told Dare he might bring his instruments as soon as Captain De Stancy required them.

‘Don’t stare at her in such a brazen way!’ whispered the latter to the young man, when Paula had withdrawn a few steps. ‘Say, “I shall highly value the privilege of assisting Captain De Stancy in such a work.”’

Dare obeyed, and before leaving De Stancy arranged to begin performing on his venerated forefathers the next morning, the youth so accidentally engaged agreeing to be there at the same time to assist in the technical operations.

CHAPTER III.

As he had promised, De Stancy made use the next day of the coveted permission that had been brought about by the ingenious Dare. Dare's timely suggestion of tendering assistance had the practical result of relieving the other of all necessity for occupying his time with the proceeding, further than to bestow a perfunctory superintendence now and then, to give a colour to his regular presence in the fortress, the actual work of taking copies being carried on by the younger man.

The weather was frequently wet during these operations, and Paula, Miss De Stancy, and her brother, were often in the house whole mornings together. By constant urging and coaxing the latter would induce his gentle sister, much against her conscience, to leave him opportunities for speaking to Paula alone. It was mostly before some print or painting that these conversations occurred, while De Stancy was ostensibly occupied with its merits, or in giving directions to his photographer how to proceed. As soon as the dialogue began, the latter would withdraw out of earshot, leaving Paula to imagine him the most deferential young artist in the world.

'You will soon possess duplicates of the whole gallery,' she said on one of these occasions, examining some curled sheets which Dare had printed off from the negatives.

'No,' said the soldier. 'I shall not have patience to go on. I get ill-humoured and indifferent, and then leave off.'

'Why ill-humoured?'

'I scarcely know — more than that I acquire a general sense of my own family's want of merit through seeing how meritorious the people are around me. I see them happy and thriving without any necessity for me at all; and then I regard these canvas grandfathers and grandmothers, and ask, "Why was a line so antiquated and out of date prolonged till now?"'

She chid him good-naturedly for such views. 'They will do you an injury,' she declared. 'Do spare yourself, Captain De Stancy!'

De Stancy shook his head as he turned the painting before him a little further to the light.

'But, do you know,' said Paula, 'that notion of yours of being a family out of date is delightful to some people. I talk to Charlotte about it often. I am never weary of examining those canopied effigies in the church, and almost wish they were those of my relations.'

'I will try to see things in the same light for your sake,' said De Stancy fervently.

'Not for my sake; for your own was what I meant, of course,' she replied with a repressive air.

Captain De Stancy bowed.

'What are you going to do with your photographs when you have them?' she asked, as if still anxious to obliterate the previous sentimental lapse.

'I shall put them into a large album, and carry them with me in my campaigns; and may I ask, now I have an opportunity, that you would extend your permission to copy

a little further, and let me photograph one other painting that hangs in the castle, to fittingly complete my set?’

‘Which?’

‘That half-length of a lady which hangs in the morning-room. I remember seeing it in the Academy last year.’

Paula involuntarily closed herself up. The picture was her own portrait. ‘It does not belong to your series,’ she said somewhat coldly.

De Stancy’s secret thought was, I hope from my soul it will belong some day! He answered with mildness: ‘There is a sort of connection — you are my sister’s friend.’

Paula assented.

‘And hence, might not your friend’s brother photograph your picture?’

Paula demurred.

A gentle sigh rose from the bosom of De Stancy. ‘What is to become of me?’ he said, with a light distressed laugh. ‘I am always inconsiderate and inclined to ask too much. Forgive me! What was in my mind when I asked I dare not say.’

‘I quite understand your interest in your family pictures — and all of it,’ she remarked more gently, willing not to hurt the sensitive feelings of a man so full of romance.

‘And in that ONE!’ he said, looking devotedly at her. ‘If I had only been fortunate enough to include it with the rest, my album would indeed have been a treasure to pore over by the bivouac fire!’

‘O, Captain De Stancy, this is provoking perseverance!’ cried Paula, laughing half crossly. ‘I expected that after expressing my decision so plainly the first time I should not have been further urged upon the subject.’ Saying which she turned and moved decisively away.

It had not been a productive meeting, thus far. ‘One word!’ said De Stancy, following and almost clasping her hand. ‘I have given offence, I know: but do let it all fall on my own head — don’t tell my sister of my misbehaviour! She loves you deeply, and it would wound her to the heart.’

‘You deserve to be told upon,’ said Paula as she withdrew, with just enough playfulness to show that her anger was not too serious.

Charlotte looked at Paula uneasily when the latter joined her in the drawing-room. She wanted to say, ‘What is the matter?’ but guessing that her brother had something to do with it, forbore to speak at first. She could not contain her anxiety long. ‘Were you talking with my brother?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ returned Paula, with reservation. However, she soon added, ‘He not only wants to photograph his ancestors, but MY portrait too. They are a dreadfully encroaching sex, and perhaps being in the army makes them worse!’

‘I’ll give him a hint, and tell him to be careful.’

‘Don’t say I have definitely complained of him; it is not worth while to do that; the matter is too trifling for repetition. Upon the whole, Charlotte, I would rather you said nothing at all.’

De Stancy's hobby of photographing his ancestors seemed to become a perfect mania with him. Almost every morning discovered him in the larger apartments of the castle, taking down and rehangng the dilapidated pictures, with the assistance of the indispensable Dare; his fingers stained black with dust, and his face expressing a busy attention to the work in hand, though always reserving a look askance for the presence of Paula.

Though there was something of subterfuge, there was no deep and double subterfuge in all this. De Stancy took no particular interest in his ancestral portraits; but he was enamoured of Paula to weakness. Perhaps the composition of his love would hardly bear looking into, but it was recklessly frank and not quite mercenary. His photographic scheme was nothing worse than a lover's not too scrupulous contrivance. After the refusal of his request to copy her picture he fumed and fretted at the prospect of Somerset's return before any impression had been made on her heart by himself; he swore at Dare, and asked him hotly why he had dragged him into such a hopeless dilemma as this.

'Hopeless? Somerset must still be kept away, so that it is not hopeless. I will consider how to prolong his stay.'

Thereupon Dare considered.

The time was coming — had indeed come — when it was necessary for Paula to make up her mind about her architect, if she meant to begin building in the spring. The two sets of plans, Somerset's and Havill's, were hanging on the walls of the room that had been used by Somerset as his studio, and were accessible by anybody. Dare took occasion to go and study both sets, with a view to finding a flaw in Somerset's which might have been passed over unnoticed by the committee of architects, owing to their absence from the actual site. But not a blunder could he find.

He next went to Havill; and here he was met by an amazing state of affairs. Havill's creditors, at last suspecting something mythical in Havill's assurance that the grand commission was his, had lost all patience; his house was turned upside-down, and a poster gleamed on the front wall, stating that the excellent modern household furniture was to be sold by auction on Friday next. Troubles had apparently come in battalions, for Dare was informed by a bystander that Havill's wife was seriously ill also.

Without staying for a moment to enter his friend's house, back went Mr. Dare to the castle, and told Captain De Stancy of the architect's desperate circumstances, begging him to convey the news in some way to Miss Power. De Stancy promised to make representations in the proper quarter without perceiving that he was doing the best possible deed for himself thereby.

He told Paula of Havill's misfortunes in the presence of his sister, who turned pale. She discerned how this misfortune would bear upon the undecided competition.

'Poor man,' murmured Paula. 'He was my father's architect, and somehow expected, though I did not promise it, the work of rebuilding the castle.'

Then De Stancy saw Dare's aim in sending him to Miss Power with the news; and, seeing it, concurred: Somerset was his rival, and all was fair. 'And is he not to have the work of the castle after expecting it?' he asked.

Paula was lost in reflection. 'The other architect's design and Mr. Havill's are exactly equal in merit, and we cannot decide how to give it to either,' explained Charlotte.

'That is our difficulty,' Paula murmured. 'A bankrupt, and his wife ill — dear me! I wonder what's the cause.'

'He has borrowed on the expectation of having to execute the castle works, and now he is unable to meet his liabilities.'

'It is very sad,' said Paula.

'Let me suggest a remedy for this dead-lock,' said De Stancy.

'Do,' said Paula.

'Do the work of building in two halves or sections. Give Havill the first half, since he is in need; when that is finished the second half can be given to your London architect. If, as I understand, the plans are identical, except in ornamental details, there will be no difficulty about it at all.'

Paula sighed — just a little one; and yet the suggestion seemed to satisfy her by its reasonableness. She turned sad, wayward, but was impressed by De Stancy's manner and words. She appeared indeed to have a smouldering desire to please him. In the afternoon she said to Charlotte, 'I mean to do as your brother says.'

A note was despatched to Havill that very day, and in an hour the crestfallen architect presented himself at the castle. Paula instantly gave him audience, commiserated him, and commissioned him to carry out a first section of the buildings, comprising work to the extent of about twenty thousand pounds expenditure; and then, with a prematureness quite amazing among architects' clients, she handed him over a cheque for five hundred pounds on account.

When he had gone, Paula's bearing showed some sign of being disquieted at what she had done; but she covered her mood under a cloak of saucy serenity. Perhaps a tender remembrance of a certain thunderstorm in the foregoing August when she stood with Somerset in the arbour, and did not own that she loved him, was pressing on her memory and bewildering her. She had not seen quite clearly, in adopting De Stancy's suggestion, that Somerset would now have no professional reason for being at the castle for the next twelve months.

But the captain had, and when Havill entered the castle he rejoiced with great joy. Dare, too, rejoiced in his cold way, and went on with his photography, saying, 'The game progresses, captain.'

'Game? Call it Divine Comedy, rather!' said the soldier exultingly.

'He is practically banished for a year or more. What can't you do in a year, captain!'

Havill, in the meantime, having respectfully withdrawn from the presence of Paula, passed by Dare and De Stancy in the gallery as he had done in entering. He spoke a few words to Dare, who congratulated him. While they were talking somebody was heard in the hall, inquiring hastily for Mr. Havill.

‘What shall I tell him?’ demanded the porter.

‘His wife is dead,’ said the messenger.

Havill overheard the words, and hastened away.

‘An unlucky man!’ said Dare.

‘That, happily for us, will not affect his installation here,’ said De Stancy. ‘Now hold your tongue and keep at a distance. She may come this way.’

Surely enough in a few minutes she came. De Stancy, to make conversation, told her of the new misfortune which had just befallen Mr. Havill.

Paula was very sorry to hear it, and remarked that it gave her great satisfaction to have appointed him as architect of the first wing before he learnt the bad news. ‘I owe you best thanks, Captain De Stancy, for showing me such an expedient.’

‘Do I really deserve thanks?’ asked De Stancy. ‘I wish I deserved a reward; but I must bear in mind the fable of the priest and the jester.’

‘I never heard it.’

‘The jester implored the priest for alms, but the smallest sum was refused, though the holy man readily agreed to give him his blessing. Query, its value?’

‘How does it apply?’

‘You give me unlimited thanks, but deny me the tiniest substantial trifle I desire.’

‘What persistence!’ exclaimed Paula, colouring. ‘Very well, if you WILL photograph my picture you must. It is really not worthy further pleading. Take it when you like.’

When Paula was alone she seemed vexed with herself for having given way; and rising from her seat she went quietly to the door of the room containing the picture, intending to lock it up till further consideration, whatever he might think of her. But on casting her eyes round the apartment the painting was gone. The captain, wisely taking the current when it served, already had it in the gallery, where he was to be seen bending attentively over it, arranging the lights and directing Dare with the instruments. On leaving he thanked her, and said that he had obtained a splendid copy. Would she look at it?

Paula was severe and icy. ‘Thank you — I don’t wish to see it,’ she said.

De Stancy bowed and departed in a glow of triumph; satisfied, notwithstanding her frigidity, that he had compassed his immediate aim, which was that she might not be able to dismiss from her thoughts him and his persevering desire for the shadow of her face during the next four-and-twenty-hours. And his confidence was well founded: she could not.

‘I fear this Divine Comedy will be slow business for us, captain,’ said Dare, who had heard her cold words.

‘O no!’ said De Stancy, flushing a little: he had not been perceiving that the lad had the measure of his mind so entirely as to gauge his position at any moment. But he would show no shamefacedness. ‘Even if it is, my boy,’ he answered, ‘there’s plenty of time before the other can come.’

At that hour and minute of De Stancy’s remark ‘the other,’ to look at him, seemed indeed securely shelved. He was sitting lonely in his chambers far away, wondering why

she did not write, and yet hoping to hear — wondering if it had all been but a short-lived strain of tenderness. He knew as well as if it had been stated in words that her serious acceptance of him as a suitor would be her acceptance of him as an architect — that her schemes in love would be expressed in terms of art; and conversely that her refusal of him as a lover would be neatly effected by her choosing Havill's plans for the castle, and returning his own with thanks. The position was so clear: he was so well walled in by circumstances that he was absolutely helpless.

To wait for the line that would not come — the letter saying that, as she had desired, his was the design that pleased her — was still the only thing to do. The (to Somerset) surprising accident that the committee of architects should have pronounced the designs absolutely equal in point of merit, and thus have caused the final choice to revert after all to Paula, had been a joyous thing to him when he first heard of it, full of confidence in her favour. But the fact of her having again become the arbitrator, though it had made acceptance of his plans all the more probable, made refusal of them, should it happen, all the more crushing. He could have conceived himself favoured by Paula as her lover, even had the committee decided in favour of Havill as her architect. But not to be chosen as architect now was to be rejected in both kinds.

CHAPTER IV.

It was the Sunday following the funeral of Mrs. Havill, news of whose death had been so unexpectedly brought to her husband at the moment of his exit from Stancy Castle. The minister, as was his custom, improved the occasion by a couple of sermons on the uncertainty of life. One was preached in the morning in the old chapel of Markton; the second at evening service in the rural chapel near Stancy Castle, built by Paula's father, which bore to the first somewhat the relation of an episcopal chapel-of-ease to the mother church.

The unscreened lights blazed through the plate-glass windows of the smaller building and outshone the steely stars of the early night, just as they had done when Somerset was attracted by their glare four months before. The fervid minister's rhetoric equalled its force on that more romantic occasion: but Paula was not there. She was not a frequent attendant now at her father's votive building. The mysterious tank, whose dark waters had so repelled her at the last moment, was boarded over: a table stood on its centre, with an open quarto Bible upon it, behind which Havill, in a new suit of black, sat in a large chair. Havill held the office of deacon: and he had mechanically taken the deacon's seat as usual to-night, in the face of the congregation, and under the nose of Mr. Woodwell.

Mr. Woodwell was always glad of an opportunity. He was gifted with a burning natural eloquence, which, though perhaps a little too freely employed in exciting the 'Wertherism of the uncultivated,' had in it genuine power. He was a master of that oratory which no limitation of knowledge can repress, and which no training can impart.

The neighbouring rector could eclipse Woodwell's scholarship, and the freethinker at the corner shop in Markton could demolish his logic; but the Baptist could do in five minutes what neither of these had done in a lifetime; he could move some of the hardest of men to tears.

Thus it happened that, when the sermon was fairly under way, Havill began to feel himself in a trying position. It was not that he had bestowed much affection upon his deceased wife, irreproachable woman as she had been; but the suddenness of her death had shaken his nerves, and Mr. Woodwell's address on the uncertainty of life involved considerations of conduct on earth that bore with singular directness upon Havill's unprincipled manoeuvre for victory in the castle competition. He wished he had not been so inadvertent as to take his customary chair in the chapel. People who saw Havill's agitation did not know that it was most largely owing to his sense of the fraud which had been practised on the unoffending Somerset; and when, unable longer to endure the torture of Woodwell's words, he rose from his place and went into the chapel vestry, the preacher little thought that remorse for a contemptibly unfair act, rather than grief for a dead wife, was the cause of the architect's withdrawal.

When Havill got into the open air his morbid excitement calmed down, but a sickening self-aborrence for the proceeding instigated by Dare did not abate. To appropriate another man's design was no more nor less than to embezzle his money or steal his goods. The intense reaction from his conduct of the past two or three months did not leave him when he reached his own house and observed where the handbills of the countermanded sale had been torn down, as the result of the payment made in advance by Paula of money which should really have been Somerset's.

The mood went on intensifying when he was in bed. He lay awake till the clock reached those still, small, ghastly hours when the vital fires burn at their lowest in the human frame, and death seizes more of his victims than in any other of the twenty-four. Havill could bear it no longer; he got a light, went down into his office and wrote the note subjoined.

'MADAM, — The recent death of my wife necessitates a considerable change in my professional arrangements and plans with regard to the future. One of the chief results of the change is, I regret to state, that I no longer find myself in a position to carry out the enlargement of the castle which you had so generously entrusted to my hands.

'I beg leave therefore to resign all further connection with the same, and to express, if you will allow me, a hope that the commission may be placed in the hands of the other competitor. Herewith is returned a cheque for one-half of the sum so kindly advanced in anticipation of the commission I should receive; the other half, with which I had cleared off my immediate embarrassments before perceiving the necessity for this course, shall be returned to you as soon as some payments from other clients drop in. — I beg to remain, Madam, your obedient servant, JAMES HAVILL.'

Havill would not trust himself till the morning to post this letter. He sealed it up, went out with it into the street, and walked through the sleeping town to the post-office. At the mouth of the box he held the letter long. By dropping it, he was dropping at

least two thousand five hundred pounds which, however obtained, were now securely his. It was a great deal to let go; and there he stood till another wave of conscience bore in upon his soul the absolute nature of the theft, and made him shudder. The footsteps of a solitary policeman could be heard nearing him along the deserted street; hesitation ended, and he let the letter go.

When he awoke in the morning he thought over the circumstances by the cheerful light of a low eastern sun. The horrors of the situation seemed much less formidable; yet it cannot be said that he actually regretted his act. Later on he walked out, with the strange sense of being a man who, from one having a large professional undertaking in hand, had, by his own act, suddenly reduced himself to an unoccupied nondescript. From the upper end of the town he saw in the distance the grand grey towers of Stancy Castle looming over the leafless trees; he felt stupefied at what he had done, and said to himself with bitter discontent: 'Well, well, what is more contemptible than a half-hearted rogue!'

That morning the post-bag had been brought to Paula and Mrs. Goodman in the usual way, and Miss Power read the letter. His resignation was a surprise; the question whether he would or would not repay the money was passed over; the necessity of installing Somerset after all as sole architect was an agitation, or emotion, the precise nature of which it is impossible to accurately define.

However, she went about the house after breakfast with very much the manner of one who had had a weight removed either from her heart or from her conscience; moreover, her face was a little flushed when, in passing by Somerset's late studio, she saw the plans bearing his motto, and knew that his and not Havill's would be the presiding presence in the coming architectural turmoil. She went on further, and called to Charlotte, who was now regularly sleeping in the castle, to accompany her, and together they ascended to the telegraph-room in the donjon tower.

'Whom are you going to telegraph to?' said Miss De Stancy when they stood by the instrument.

'My architect.'

'O — Mr. Havill.'

'Mr. Somerset.'

Miss De Stancy had schooled her emotions on that side cruelly well, and she asked calmly, 'What, have you chosen him after all?'

'There is no choice in it — read that,' said Paula, handing Havill's letter, as if she felt that Providence had stepped in to shape ends that she was too undecided or unpractised to shape for herself.

'It is very strange,' murmured Charlotte; while Paula applied herself to the machine and despatched the words: —

'Miss Power, Stancy Castle, to G. Somerset, Esq., F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A., Queen Anne's Chambers, St. James's.

'Your design is accepted in its entirety. It will be necessary to begin soon. I shall wish to see and consult you on the matter about the 10th instant.'

When the message was fairly gone out of the window Paula seemed still further to expand. The strange spell cast over her by something or other — probably the presence of De Stancy, and the weird romanticism of his manner towards her, which was as if the historic past had touched her with a yet living hand — in a great measure became dissipated, leaving her the arch and serene maiden that she had been before.

About this time Captain De Stancy and his Achates were approaching the castle, and had arrived about fifty paces from the spot at which it was Dare's custom to drop behind his companion, in order that their appearance at the lodge should be that of master and man.

Dare was saying, as he had said before: 'I can't help fancying, captain, that your approach to this castle and its mistress is by a very tedious system. Your trenches, zigzags, counterscarps, and ravelins may be all very well, and a very sure system of attack in the long run; but upon my soul they are almost as slow in maturing as those of Uncle Toby himself. For my part I should be inclined to try an assault.'

'Don't pretend to give advice, Willy, on matters beyond your years.'

'I only meant it for your good, and your proper advancement in the world,' said Dare in wounded tones.

'Different characters, different systems,' returned the soldier. 'This lady is of a reticent, independent, complicated disposition, and any sudden proceeding would put her on her mettle. You don't dream what my impatience is, my boy. It is a thing transcending your utmost conceptions! But I proceed slowly; I know better than to do otherwise. Thank God there is plenty of time. As long as there is no risk of Somerset's return my situation is sure.'

'And professional etiquette will prevent him coming yet. Havill and he will change like the men in a sentry-box; when Havill walks out, he'll walk in, and not a moment before.'

'That will not be till eighteen months have passed. And as the Jesuit said, "Time and I against any two."... Now drop to the rear,' added Captain De Stancy authoritatively. And they passed under the walls of the castle.

The grave fronts and bastions were wrapped in silence; so much so, that, standing awhile in the inner ward, they could hear through an open window a faintly clicking sound from within.

'She's at the telegraph,' said Dare, throwing forward his voice softly to the captain. 'What can that be for so early? That wire is a nuisance, to my mind; such constant intercourse with the outer world is bad for our romance.'

The speaker entered to arrange his photographic apparatus, of which, in truth, he was getting weary; and De Stancy smoked on the terrace till Dare should be ready. While he waited his sister looked out upon him from an upper casement, having caught sight of him as she came from Paula in the telegraph-room.

'Well, Lottie, what news this morning?' he said gaily.

'Nothing of importance. We are quite well.'... She added with hesitation, 'There is one piece of news; Mr. Havill — but perhaps you have heard it in Markton?'

‘Nothing.’

‘Mr. Havill has resigned his appointment as architect to the castle.’

‘What? — who has it, then?’

‘Mr. Somerset.’

‘Appointed?’

‘Yes — by telegraph.’

‘When is he coming?’ said De Stancy in consternation.

‘About the tenth, we think.’

Charlotte was concerned to see her brother’s face, and withdrew from the window that he might not question her further. De Stancy went into the hall, and on to the gallery, where Dare was standing as still as a caryatid.

‘I have heard every word,’ said Dare.

‘Well, what does it mean? Has that fool Havill done it on purpose to annoy me? What conceivable reason can the man have for throwing up an appointment he has worked so hard for, at the moment he has got it, and in the time of his greatest need?’

Dare guessed, for he had seen a little way into Havill’s soul during the brief period of their confederacy. But he was very far from saying what he guessed. Yet he unconsciously revealed by other words the nocturnal shades in his character which had made that confederacy possible.

‘Somerset coming after all!’ he replied. ‘By God! that little six-barrelled friend of mine, and a good resolution, and he would never arrive!’

‘What!’ said Captain De Stancy, paling with horror as he gathered the other’s sinister meaning.

Dare instantly recollected himself. ‘One is tempted to say anything at such a moment,’ he replied hastily.

‘Since he is to come, let him come, for me,’ continued De Stancy, with reactionary distinctness, and still gazing gravely into the young man’s face. ‘The battle shall be fairly fought out. Fair play, even to a rival — remember that, boy... Why are you here? — unnaturally concerning yourself with the passions of a man of my age, as if you were the parent, and I the son? Would to heaven, Willy, you had done as I wished you to do, and led the life of a steady, thoughtful young man! Instead of meddling here, you should now have been in some studio, college, or professional man’s chambers, engaged in a useful pursuit which might have made one proud to own you. But you were so precocious and headstrong; and this is what you have come to: you promise to be worthless!’

‘I think I shall go to my lodgings to-day instead of staying here over these pictures,’ said Dare, after a silence during which Captain De Stancy endeavoured to calm himself. ‘I was going to tell you that my dinner to-day will unfortunately be one of herbs, for want of the needful. I have come to my last stiver. — You dine at the mess, I suppose, captain?’

De Stancy had walked away; but Dare knew that he played a pretty sure card in that speech. De Stancy’s heart could not withstand the suggested contrast between a

lonely meal of bread-and-cheese and a well-ordered dinner amid cheerful companions. 'Here,' he said, emptying his pocket and returning to the lad's side. 'Take this, and order yourself a good meal. You keep me as poor as a crow. There shall be more to-morrow.'

The peculiarly bifold nature of Captain De Stancy, as shown in his conduct at different times, was something rare in life, and perhaps happily so. That mechanical admixture of black and white qualities without coalescence, on which the theory of men's characters was based by moral analysis before the rise of modern ethical schools, fictitious as it was in general application, would have almost hit off the truth as regards Captain De Stancy. Removed to some half-known century, his deeds would have won a picturesqueness of light and shade that might have made him a fascinating subject for some gallery of illustrious historical personages. It was this tendency to moral chequer-work which accounted for his varied bearings towards Dare.

Dare withdrew to take his departure. When he had gone a few steps, despondent, he suddenly turned, and ran back with some excitement.

'Captain — he's coming on the tenth, don't they say? Well, four days before the tenth comes the sixth. Have you forgotten what's fixed for the sixth?'

'I had quite forgotten!'

'That day will be worth three months of quiet attentions: with luck, skill, and a bold heart, what mayn't you do?'

Captain De Stancy's face softened with satisfaction.

'There is something in that; the game is not up after all. The sixth — it had gone clean out of my head, by gad!'

CHAPTER V.

The cheering message from Paula to Somerset sped through the loophole of Stancy Castle keep, over the trees, along the railway, under bridges, across four counties — from extreme antiquity of environment to sheer modernism — and finally landed itself on a table in Somerset's chambers in the midst of a cloud of fog. He read it and, in the moment of reaction from the depression of his past days, clapped his hands like a child.

Then he considered the date at which she wanted to see him. Had she so worded her despatch he would have gone that very day; but there was nothing to complain of in her giving him a week's notice. Pure maiden modesty might have checked her indulgence in a too ardent recall.

Time, however, dragged somewhat heavily along in the interim, and on the second day he thought he would call on his father and tell him of his success in obtaining the appointment.

The elder Mr. Somerset lived in a detached house in the north-west part of fashionable London; and ascending the chief staircase the young man branched off from

the first landing and entered his father's painting-room. It was an hour when he was pretty sure of finding the well-known painter at work, and on lifting the tapestry he was not disappointed, Mr. Somerset being busily engaged with his back towards the door.

Art and vitiated nature were struggling like wrestlers in that apartment, and art was getting the worst of it. The overpowering gloom pervading the clammy air, rendered still more intense by the height of the window from the floor, reduced all the pictures that were standing around to the wizened feebleness of corpses on end. The shadowy parts of the room behind the different easels were veiled in a brown vapour, precluding all estimate of the extent of the studio, and only subdued in the foreground by the ruddy glare from an open stove of Dutch tiles. Somerset's footsteps had been so noiseless over the carpeting of the stairs and landing, that his father was unaware of his presence; he continued at his work as before, which he performed by the help of a complicated apparatus of lamps, candles, and reflectors, so arranged as to eke out the miserable daylight, to a power apparently sufficient for the neutral touches on which he was at that moment engaged.

The first thought of an unsophisticated stranger on entering that room could only be the amazed inquiry why a professor of the art of colour, which beyond all other arts requires pure daylight for its exercise, should fix himself on the single square league in habitable Europe to which light is denied at noonday for weeks in succession.

'O! it's you, George, is it?' said the Academician, turning from the lamps, which shone over his bald crown at such a slant as to reveal every cranial irregularity. 'How are you this morning? Still a dead silence about your grand castle competition?'

Somerset told the news. His father duly congratulated him, and added genially, 'It is well to be you, George. One large commission to attend to, and nothing to distract you from it. I am bothered by having a dozen irons in the fire at once. And people are so unreasonable. — Only this morning, among other things, when you got your order to go on with your single study, I received a letter from a woman, an old friend whom I can scarcely refuse, begging me as a great favour to design her a set of theatrical costumes, in which she and her friends can perform for some charity. It would occupy me a good week to go into the subject and do the thing properly. Such are the sort of letters I get. I wish, George, you could knock out something for her before you leave town. It is positively impossible for me to do it with all this work in hand, and these eternal fogs to contend against.'

'I fear costumes are rather out of my line,' said the son. 'However, I'll do what I can. What period and country are they to represent?'

His father didn't know. He had never looked at the play of late years. It was 'Love's Labour's Lost.' 'You had better read it for yourself,' he said, 'and do the best you can.'

During the morning Somerset junior found time to refresh his memory of the play, and afterwards went and hunted up materials for designs to suit the same, which occupied his spare hours for the next three days. As these occupations made no great demands upon his reasoning faculties he mostly found his mind wandering off to imagi-

nary scenes at Stancy Castle: particularly did he dwell at this time upon Paula's lively interest in the history, relics, tombs, architecture, — nay, the very Christian names of the De Stancy line, and her 'artistic' preference for Charlotte's ancestors instead of her own. Yet what more natural than that a clever meditative girl, encased in the feudal lumber of that family, should imbibe at least an antiquarian interest in it? Human nature at bottom is romantic rather than ascetic, and the local habitation which accident had provided for Paula was perhaps acting as a solvent of the hard, morbidly introspective views thrust upon her in early life.

Somerset wondered if his own possession of a substantial genealogy like Captain De Stancy's would have had any appreciable effect upon her regard for him. His suggestion to Paula of her belonging to a worthy strain of engineers had been based on his content with his own intellectual line of descent through Pheidias, Ictinus and Callicrates, Chersiphron, Vitruvius, Wilars of Cambray, William of Wykeham, and the rest of that long and illustrious roll; but Miss Power's marked preference for an animal pedigree led him to muse on what he could show for himself in that kind.

These thoughts so far occupied him that when he took the sketches to his father, on the morning of the fifth, he was led to ask: 'Has any one ever sifted out our family pedigree?'

'Family pedigree?'

'Yes. Have we any pedigree worthy to be compared with that of professedly old families? I never remember hearing of any ancestor further back than my great-grandfather.'

Somerset the elder reflected and said that he believed there was a genealogical tree about the house somewhere, reaching back to a very respectable distance. 'Not that I ever took much interest in it,' he continued, without looking up from his canvas; 'but your great uncle John was a man with a taste for those subjects, and he drew up such a sheet: he made several copies on parchment, and gave one to each of his brothers and sisters. The one he gave to my father is still in my possession, I think.'

Somerset said that he should like to see it; but half-an-hour's search about the house failed to discover the document; and the Academician then remembered that it was in an iron box at his banker's. He had used it as a wrapper for some title-deeds and other valuable writings which were deposited there for safety. 'Why do you want it?' he inquired.

The young man confessed his whim to know if his own antiquity would bear comparison with that of another person, whose name he did not mention; whereupon his father gave him a key that would fit the said chest, if he meant to pursue the subject further. Somerset, however, did nothing in the matter that day, but the next morning, having to call at the bank on other business, he remembered his new fancy.

It was about eleven o'clock. The fog, though not so brown as it had been on previous days, was still dense enough to necessitate lights in the shops and offices. When Somerset had finished his business in the outer office of the bank he went to the manager's room. The hour being somewhat early the only persons present in that sanctuary of balances, besides the manager who welcomed him, were two gentlemen, apparently

lawyers, who sat talking earnestly over a box of papers. The manager, on learning what Somerset wanted, unlocked a door from which a flight of stone steps led to the vaults, and sent down a clerk and a porter for the safe.

Before, however, they had descended far a gentle tap came to the door, and in response to an invitation to enter a lady appeared, wrapped up in furs to her very nose.

The manager seemed to recognize her, for he went across the room in a moment, and set her a chair at the middle table, replying to some observation of hers with the words, 'O yes, certainly,' in a deferential tone.

'I should like it brought up at once,' said the lady.

Somerset, who had seated himself at a table in a somewhat obscure corner, screened by the lawyers, started at the words. The voice was Miss Power's, and so plainly enough was the figure as soon as he examined it. Her back was towards him, and either because the room was only lighted in two places, or because she was absorbed in her own concerns, she seemed to be unconscious of any one's presence on the scene except the banker and herself. The former called back the clerk, and two other porters having been summoned they disappeared to get whatever she required.

Somerset, somewhat excited, sat wondering what could have brought Paula to London at this juncture, and was in some doubt if the occasion were a suitable one for revealing himself, her errand to her banker being possibly of a very private nature. Nothing helped him to a decision. Paula never once turned her head, and the progress of time was marked only by the murmurs of the two lawyers, and the ceaseless clash of gold and rattle of scales from the outer room, where the busy heads of cashiers could be seen through the partition moving about under the globes of the gas-lamps.

Footsteps were heard upon the cellar-steps, and the three men previously sent below staggered from the doorway, bearing a huge safe which nearly broke them down. Somerset knew that his father's box, or boxes, could boast of no such dimensions, and he was not surprised to see the chest deposited in front of Miss Power. When the immense accumulation of dust had been cleared off the lid, and the chest conveniently placed for her, Somerset was attended to, his modest box being brought up by one man unassisted, and without much expenditure of breath.

His interest in Paula was of so emotional a cast that his attention to his own errand was of the most perfunctory kind. She was close to a gas-standard, and the lawyers, whose seats had intervened, having finished their business and gone away, all her actions were visible to him. While he was opening his father's box the manager assisted Paula to unseal and unlock hers, and he now saw her lift from it a morocco case, which she placed on the table before her, and unfastened. Out of it she took a dazzling object that fell like a cascade over her fingers. It was a necklace of diamonds and pearls, apparently of large size and many strands, though he was not near enough to see distinctly. When satisfied by her examination that she had got the right article she shut it into its case.

The manager closed the chest for her; and when it was again secured Paula arose, tossed the necklace into her hand-bag, bowed to the manager, and was about to bid him good morning. Thereupon he said with some hesitation: 'Pardon one question, Miss Power. Do you intend to take those jewels far?'

'Yes,' she said simply, 'to Stancy Castle.'

'You are going straight there?'

'I have one or two places to call at first.'

'I would suggest that you carry them in some other way — by fastening them into the pocket of your dress, for instance.'

'But I am going to hold the bag in my hand and never once let it go.'

The banker slightly shook his head. 'Suppose your carriage gets overturned: you would let it go then.'

'Perhaps so.'

'Or if you saw a child under the wheels just as you were stepping in; or if you accidentally stumbled in getting out; or if there was a collision on the railway — you might let it go.'

'Yes; I see I was too careless. I thank you.'

Paula removed the necklace from the bag, turned her back to the manager, and spent several minutes in placing her treasure in her bosom, pinning it and otherwise making it absolutely secure.

'That's it,' said the grey-haired man of caution, with evident satisfaction. 'There is not much danger now: you are not travelling alone?'

Paula replied that she was not alone, and went to the door. There was one moment during which Somerset might have conveniently made his presence known; but the juxtaposition of the bank-manager, and his own disarranged box of securities, embarrassed him: the moment slipped by, and she was gone.

In the meantime he had mechanically unearthed the pedigree, and, locking up his father's chest, Somerset also took his departure at the heels of Paula. He walked along the misty street, so deeply musing as to be quite unconscious of the direction of his walk. What, he inquired of himself, could she want that necklace for so suddenly? He recollected a remark of Dare's to the effect that her appearance on a particular occasion at Stancy Castle had been magnificent by reason of the jewels she wore; which proved that she had retained a sufficient quantity of those valuables at the castle for ordinary requirements. What exceptional occasion, then, was impending on which she wished to glorify herself beyond all previous experience? He could not guess. He was interrupted in these conjectures by a carriage nearly passing over his toes at a crossing in Bond Street: looking up he saw between the two windows of the vehicle the profile of a thickly mantled bosom, on which a camellia rose and fell. All the remainder part of the lady's person was hidden; but he remembered that flower of convenient season as one which had figured in the bank parlour half-an-hour earlier to-day.

Somerset hastened after the carriage, and in a minute saw it stop opposite a jeweller's shop. Out came Paula, and then another woman, in whom he recognized

Mrs. Birch, one of the lady's maids at Stancy Castle. The young man was at Paula's side before she had crossed the pavement.

CHAPTER VI.

A quick arrested expression in her two sapphirine eyes, accompanied by a little, a very little, blush which loitered long, was all the outward disturbance that the sight of her lover caused. The habit of self-repression at any new emotional impact was instinctive with her always. Somerset could not say more than a word; he looked his intense solicitude, and Paula spoke.

She declared that this was an unexpected pleasure. Had he arranged to come on the tenth as she wished? How strange that they should meet thus! — and yet not strange — the world was so small.

Somerset said that he was coming on the very day she mentioned — that the appointment gave him infinite gratification, which was quite within the truth.

'Come into this shop with me,' said Paula, with good-humoured authoritativeness.

They entered the shop and talked on while she made a small purchase. But not a word did Paula say of her sudden errand to town.

'I am having an exciting morning,' she said. 'I am going from here to catch the one-o'clock train to Markton.'

'It is important that you get there this afternoon, I suppose?'

'Yes. You know why?'

'Not at all.'

'The Hunt Ball. It was fixed for the sixth, and this is the sixth. I thought they might have asked you.'

'No,' said Somerset, a trifle gloomily. 'No, I am not asked. But it is a great task for you — a long journey and a ball all in one day.'

'Yes: Charlotte said that. But I don't mind it.'

'You are glad you are going. Are you glad?' he said softly.

Her air confessed more than her words. 'I am not so very glad that I am going to the Hunt Ball,' she replied confidentially.

'Thanks for that,' said he.

She lifted her eyes to his for a moment. Her manner had suddenly become so nearly the counterpart of that in the tea-house that to suspect any deterioration of affection in her was no longer generous. It was only as if a thin layer of recent events had overlaid her memories of him, until his presence swept them away.

Somerset looked up, and finding the shopman to be still some way off, he added, 'When will you assure me of something in return for what I assured you that evening in the rain?'

‘Not before you have built the castle. My aunt does not know about it yet, nor anybody.’

‘I ought to tell her.’

‘No, not yet. I don’t wish it.’

‘Then everything stands as usual?’

She lightly nodded.

‘That is, I may love you: but you still will not say you love me.’

She nodded again, and directing his attention to the advancing shopman, said, ‘Please not a word more.’

Soon after this, they left the jeweller’s, and parted, Paula driving straight off to the station and Somerset going on his way uncertainly happy. His re-impression after a few minutes was that a special journey to town to fetch that magnificent necklace which she had not once mentioned to him, but which was plainly to be the medium of some proud purpose with her this evening, was hardly in harmony with her assertions of indifference to the attractions of the Hunt Ball.

He got into a cab and drove to his club, where he lunched, and mopingly spent a great part of the afternoon in making calculations for the foundations of the castle works. Later in the afternoon he returned to his chambers, wishing that he could annihilate the three days remaining before the tenth, particularly this coming evening. On his table was a letter in a strange writing, and indifferently turning it over he found from the superscription that it had been addressed to him days before at the Lord-Quantock-Arms Hotel, Markton, where it had lain ever since, the landlord probably expecting him to return. Opening the missive, he found to his surprise that it was, after all, an invitation to the Hunt Ball.

‘Too late!’ said Somerset. ‘To think I should be served this trick a second time!’

After a moment’s pause, however, he looked to see the time of day. It was five minutes past five — just about the hour when Paula would be driving from Markton Station to Stancy Castle to rest and prepare herself for her evening triumph. There was a train at six o’clock, timed to reach Markton between eleven and twelve, which by great exertion he might save even now, if it were worth while to undertake such a scramble for the pleasure of dropping in to the ball at a late hour. A moment’s vision of Paula moving to swift tunes on the arm of a person or persons unknown was enough to impart the impetus required. He jumped up, flung his dress clothes into a portmanteau, sent down to call a cab, and in a few minutes was rattling off to the railway which had borne Paula away from London just five hours earlier.

Once in the train, he began to consider where and how he could most conveniently dress for the dance. The train would certainly be half-an-hour late; half-an-hour would be spent in getting to the town-hall, and that was the utmost delay tolerable if he would secure the hand of Paula for one spin, or be more than a mere dummy behind the earlier arrivals. He looked for an empty compartment at the next stoppage, and finding the one next his own unoccupied, he entered it and changed his raiment for that in his portmanteau during the ensuing run of twenty miles.

Thus prepared he awaited the Markton platform, which was reached as the clock struck twelve. Somerset called a fly and drove at once to the town-hall.

The borough natives had ascended to their upper floors, and were putting out their candles one by one as he passed along the streets; but the lively strains that proceeded from the central edifice revealed distinctly enough what was going on among the temporary visitors from the neighbouring manors. The doors were opened for him, and entering the vestibule lined with flags, flowers, evergreens, and escutcheons, he stood looking into the furnace of gaiety beyond.

It was some time before he could gather his impressions of the scene, so perplexing were the lights, the motions, the toilets, the full-dress uniforms of officers and the harmonies of sound. Yet light, sound, and movement were not so much the essence of that giddy scene as an intense aim at obliviousness in the beings composing it. For two or three hours at least those whirling young people meant not to know that they were mortal. The room was beating like a heart, and the pulse was regulated by the trembling strings of the most popular quadrille band in Wessex. But at last his eyes grew settled enough to look critically around.

The room was crowded — too crowded. Every variety of fair one, beauties primary, secondary, and tertiary, appeared among the personages composing the throng. There were suns and moons; also pale planets of little account. Broadly speaking, these daughters of the county fell into two classes: one the pink-faced unsophisticated girls from neighbouring rectories and small country-houses, who knew not town except for an occasional fortnight, and who spent their time from Easter to Lammas Day much as they spent it during the remaining nine months of the year: the other class were the children of the wealthy landowners who migrated each season to the town-house; these were pale and collected, showed less enjoyment in their countenances, and wore in general an approximation to the languid manners of the capital.

A quadrille was in progress, and Somerset scanned each set. His mind had run so long upon the necklace, that his glance involuntarily sought out that gleaming object rather than the personality of its wearer. At the top of the room there he beheld it; but it was on the neck of Charlotte De Stancy.

The whole lucid explanation broke across his understanding in a second. His dear Paula had fetched the necklace that Charlotte should not appear to disadvantage among the county people by reason of her poverty. It was generously done — a disinterested act of sisterly kindness; theirs was the friendship of Hermia and Helena. Before he had got further than to realise this, there wheeled round amongst the dancers a lady whose tournure he recognized well. She was Paula; and to the young man's vision a superlative something distinguished her from all the rest. This was not dress or ornament, for she had hardly a gem upon her, her attire being a model of effective simplicity. Her partner was Captain De Stancy.

The discovery of this latter fact slightly obscured his appreciation of what he had discovered just before. It was with rather a lowering brow that he asked himself whether Paula's predilection *d'artiste*, as she called it, for the De Stancy line might not lead to

a predilection of a different sort for its last representative which would be not at all satisfactory.

The architect remained in the background till the dance drew to a conclusion, and then he went forward. The circumstance of having met him by accident once already that day seemed to quench any surprise in Miss Power's bosom at seeing him now. There was nothing in her parting from Captain De Stancy, when he led her to a seat, calculated to make Somerset uneasy after his long absence. Though, for that matter, this proved nothing; for, like all wise maidens, Paula never ventured on the game of the eyes with a lover in public; well knowing that every moment of such indulgence overnight might mean an hour's sneer at her expense by the indulged gentleman next day, when weighing womankind by the aid of a cold morning light and a bad headache.

While Somerset was explaining to Paula and her aunt the reason of his sudden appearance, their attention was drawn to a seat a short way off by a fluttering of ladies round the spot. In a moment it was whispered that somebody had fallen ill, and in another that the sufferer was Miss De Stancy. Paula, Mrs. Goodman, and Somerset at once joined the group of friends who were assisting her. Neither of them imagined for an instant that the unexpected advent of Somerset on the scene had anything to do with the poor girl's indisposition.

She was assisted out of the room, and her brother, who now came up, prepared to take her home, Somerset exchanging a few civil words with him, which the hurry of the moment prevented them from continuing; though on taking his leave with Charlotte, who was now better, De Stancy informed Somerset in answer to a cursory inquiry, that he hoped to be back again at the ball in half-an-hour.

When they were gone Somerset, feeling that now another dog might have his day, sounded Paula on the delightful question of a dance.

Paula replied in the negative.

'How is that?' asked Somerset with reproachful disappointment.

'I cannot dance again,' she said in a somewhat depressed tone; 'I must be released from every engagement to do so, on account of Charlotte's illness. I should have gone home with her if I had not been particularly requested to stay a little longer, since it is as yet so early, and Charlotte's illness is not very serious.'

If Charlotte's illness was not very serious, Somerset thought, Paula might have stretched a point; but not wishing to hinder her in showing respect to a friend so well liked by himself, he did not ask it. De Stancy had promised to be back again in half-an-hour, and Paula had heard the promise. But at the end of twenty minutes, still seeming indifferent to what was going on around her, she said she would stay no longer, and reminding Somerset that they were soon to meet and talk over the rebuilding, drove off with her aunt to Stancy Castle.

Somerset stood looking after the retreating carriage till it was enveloped in shades that the lamps could not disperse. The ball-room was now virtually empty for him, and feeling no great anxiety to return thither he stood on the steps for some minutes longer, looking into the calm mild night, and at the dark houses behind whose blinds

lay the burghers with their eyes sealed up in sleep. He could not but think that it was rather too bad of Paula to spoil his evening for a sentimental devotion to Charlotte which could do the latter no appreciable good; and he would have felt seriously hurt at her move if it had not been equally severe upon Captain De Stancy, who was doubtless hastening back, full of a belief that she would still be found there.

The star of gas-jets over the entrance threw its light upon the walls on the opposite side of the street, where there were notice-boards of forthcoming events. In glancing over these for the fifth time, his eye was attracted by the first words of a placard in blue letters, of a size larger than the rest, and moving onward a few steps he read: —

STANCY CASTLE.

By the kind permission of Miss Power,

A PLAY

Will shortly be performed at the above CASTLE,

IN AID OF THE FUNDS OF THE

COUNTY HOSPITAL,

By the Officers of the

ROYAL HORSE ARTILLERY,

MARKTON BARRACKS,

ASSISTED BY SEVERAL

LADIES OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD.

The cast and other particulars will be duly announced in

small bills. Places will be reserved on application to Mr.

Clangham, High Street, Markton, where a plan of the room may be seen.

N.B — The Castle is about twenty minutes' drive from Markton

Station, to which there are numerous convenient trains from all parts

of the county.

In a profound study Somerset turned and re-entered the ball-room, where he remained gloomily standing here and there for about five minutes, at the end of which he observed Captain De Stancy, who had returned punctually to his word, crossing the hall in his direction.

The gallant officer darted glances of lively search over every group of dancers and sitters; and then with rather a blank look in his face, he came on to Somerset. Replying to the latter's inquiry for his sister that she had nearly recovered, he said, 'I don't see my father's neighbours anywhere.'

'They have gone home,' replied Somerset, a trifle drily. 'They asked me to make their apologies to you for leading you to expect they would remain. Miss Power was too anxious about Miss De Stancy to care to stay longer.'

The eyes of De Stancy and the speaker met for an instant. That curious guarded understanding, or inimical confederacy, which arises at moments between two men in love with the same woman, was present here; and in their mutual glances each said as plainly as by words that her departure had ruined his evening's hope.

They were now about as much in one mood as it was possible for two such differing natures to be. Neither cared further for elaborating giddy curves on that town-hall floor. They stood talking languidly about this and that local topic, till De Stancy turned aside for a short time to speak to a dapper little lady who had beckoned to him. In a few minutes he came back to Somerset.

‘Mrs. Camperton, the wife of Major Camperton of my battery, would very much like me to introduce you to her. She is an old friend of your father’s, and has wanted to know you for a long time.’

De Stancy and Somerset crossed over to the lady, and in a few minutes, thanks to her flow of spirits, she and Somerset were chatting with remarkable freedom.

‘It is a happy coincidence,’ continued Mrs. Camperton, ‘that I should have met you here, immediately after receiving a letter from your father: indeed it reached me only this morning. He has been so kind! We are getting up some theatricals, as you know, I suppose, to help the funds of the County Hospital, which is in debt.’

‘I have just seen the announcement — nothing more.’

‘Yes, such an estimable purpose; and as we wished to do it thoroughly well, I asked Mr. Somerset to design us the costumes, and he has now sent me the sketches. It is quite a secret at present, but we are going to play Shakespeare’s romantic drama, ‘Love’s Labour’s Lost,’ and we hope to get Miss Power to take the leading part. You see, being such a handsome girl, and so wealthy, and rather an undiscovered novelty in the county as yet, she would draw a crowded room, and greatly benefit the funds.’

‘Miss Power going to play herself? — I am rather surprised,’ said Somerset. ‘Whose idea is all this?’

‘O, Captain De Stancy’s — he’s the originator entirely. You see he is so interested in the neighbourhood, his family having been connected with it for so many centuries, that naturally a charitable object of this local nature appeals to his feelings.’

‘Naturally!’ her listener laconically repeated. ‘And have you settled who is to play the junior gentleman’s part, leading lover, hero, or whatever he is called?’

‘Not absolutely; though I think Captain De Stancy will not refuse it; and he is a very good figure. At present it lies between him and Mr. Mild, one of our young lieutenants. My husband, of course, takes the heavy line; and I am to be the second lady, though I am rather too old for the part really. If we can only secure Miss Power for heroine the cast will be excellent.’

‘Excellent!’ said Somerset, with a spectral smile.

CHAPTER VII.

When he awoke the next morning at the Lord-Quantock-Arms Hotel Somerset felt quite morbid on recalling the intelligence he had received from Mrs. Camperton. But as the day for serious practical consultation about the castle works, to which Paula had playfully alluded, was now close at hand, he determined to banish sentimental

reflections on the frailties that were besieging her nature, by active preparation for his professional undertaking. To be her high-priest in art, to elaborate a structure whose cunning workmanship would be meeting her eye every day till the end of her natural life, and saying to her, 'He invented it,' with all the eloquence of an inanimate thing long regarded — this was no mean satisfaction, come what else would.

He returned to town the next day to set matters there in such trim that no inconvenience should result from his prolonged absence at the castle; for having no other commission he determined (with an eye rather to heart-interests than to increasing his professional practice) to make, as before, the castle itself his office, studio, and chief abiding-place till the works were fairly in progress.

On the tenth he reappeared at Markton. Passing through the town, on the road to Stancy Castle, his eyes were again arrested by the notice-board which had conveyed such startling information to him on the night of the ball. The small bills now appeared thereon; but when he anxiously looked them over to learn how the parts were to be allotted, he found that intelligence still withheld. Yet they told enough; the list of lady-players was given, and Miss Power's name was one.

That a young lady who, six months ago, would scarcely join for conscientious reasons in a simple dance on her own lawn, should now be willing to exhibit herself on a public stage, simulating love-passages with a stranger, argued a rate of development which under any circumstances would have surprised him, but which, with the particular addition, as leading colleague, of Captain De Stancy, inflamed him almost to anger. What clandestine arrangements had been going on in his absence to produce such a full-blown intention it were futile to guess. Paula's course was a race rather than a march, and each successive heat was startling in its eclipse of that which went before.

Somerset was, however, introspective enough to know that his morals would have taken no such virtuous alarm had he been the chief male player instead of Captain De Stancy.

He passed under the castle-arch and entered. There seemed a little turn in the tide of affairs when it was announced to him that Miss Power expected him, and was alone.

The well-known ante-chambers through which he walked, filled with twilight, draughts, and thin echoes that seemed to reverberate from two hundred years ago, did not delay his eye as they had done when he had been ignorant that his destiny lay beyond; and he followed on through all this ancientness to where the modern Paula sat to receive him.

He forgot everything in the pleasure of being alone in a room with her. She met his eye with that in her own which cheered him. It was a light expressing that something was understood between them. She said quietly in two or three words that she had expected him in the forenoon.

Somerset explained that he had come only that morning from London.

After a little more talk, in which she said that her aunt would join them in a few minutes, and Miss De Stancy was still indisposed at her father's house, she rang for tea and sat down beside a little table.

‘Shall we proceed to business at once?’ she asked him.

‘I suppose so.’

‘First then, when will the working drawings be ready, which I think you said must be made out before the work could begin?’

While Somerset informed her on this and other matters, Mrs. Goodman entered and joined in the discussion, after which they found it would be necessary to adjourn to the room where the plans were hanging. On their walk thither Paula asked if he stayed late at the ball.

‘I left soon after you.’

‘That was very early, seeing how late you arrived.’

‘Yes... I did not dance.’

‘What did you do then?’

‘I moped, and walked to the door; and saw an announcement.’

‘I know — the play that is to be performed.’

‘In which you are to be the Princess.’

‘That’s not settled, — I have not agreed yet. I shall not play the Princess of France unless Mr. Mild plays the King of Navarre.’

This sounded rather well. The Princess was the lady beloved by the King; and Mr. Mild, the young lieutenant of artillery, was a diffident, inexperienced, rather plain-looking fellow, whose sole interest in theatricals lay in the consideration of his costume and the sound of his own voice in the ears of the audience. With such an unobjectionable person to enact the part of lover, the prominent character of leading young lady or heroine, which Paula was to personate, was really the most satisfactory in the whole list for her. For although she was to be wooed hard, there was just as much love-making among the remaining personages; while, as Somerset had understood the play, there could occur no flingings of her person upon her lover’s neck, or agonized downfalls upon the stage, in her whole performance, as there were in the parts chosen by Mrs. Camperton, the major’s wife, and some of the other ladies.

‘Why do you play at all!’ he murmured.

‘What a question! How could I refuse for such an excellent purpose? They say that my taking a part will be worth a hundred pounds to the charity. My father always supported the hospital, which is quite undenominational; and he said I was to do the same.’

‘Do you think the peculiar means you have adopted for supporting it entered into his view?’ inquired Somerset, regarding her with critical dryness. ‘For my part I don’t.’

‘It is an interesting way,’ she returned persuasively, though apparently in a state of mental equipoise on the point raised by his question. ‘And I shall not play the Princess, as I said, to any other than that quiet young man. Now I assure you of this, so don’t be angry and absurd! Besides, the King doesn’t marry me at the end of the play, as in Shakespeare’s other comedies. And if Miss De Stancy continues seriously unwell I shall not play at all.’

The young man pressed her hand, but she gently slipped it away.

‘Are we not engaged, Paula!’ he asked. She evasively shook her head.

‘Come — yes we are! Shall we tell your aunt?’ he continued. Unluckily at that moment Mrs. Goodman, who had followed them to the studio at a slower pace, appeared round the doorway.

‘No, — to the last,’ replied Paula hastily. Then her aunt entered, and the conversation was no longer personal.

Somerset took his departure in a serener mood though not completely assured.

CHAPTER VIII.

His serenity continued during two or three following days, when, continuing at the castle, he got pleasant glimpses of Paula now and then. Her strong desire that his love for her should be kept secret, perplexed him; but his affection was generous, and he acquiesced in that desire.

Meanwhile news of the forthcoming dramatic performance radiated in every direction. And in the next number of the county paper it was announced, to Somerset’s comparative satisfaction, that the cast was definitely settled, Mr. Mild having agreed to be the King and Miss Power the French Princess. Captain De Stancy, with becoming modesty for one who was the leading spirit, figured quite low down, in the secondary character of Sir Nathaniel.

Somerset remembered that, by a happy chance, the costume he had designed for Sir Nathaniel was not at all picturesque; moreover Sir Nathaniel scarcely came near the Princess through the whole play.

Every day after this there was coming and going to and from the castle of railway vans laden with canvas columns, pasteboard trees, limp house-fronts, woollen lawns, and lath balustrades. There were also frequent arrivals of young ladies from neighbouring country houses, and warriors from the X and Y batteries of artillery, distinguishable by their regulation shaving.

But it was upon Captain De Stancy and Mrs. Camperton that the weight of preparation fell. Somerset, through being much occupied in the drawing-office, was seldom present during the consultations and rehearsals: until one day, tea being served in the drawing-room at the usual hour, he dropped in with the rest to receive a cup from Paula’s table. The chatter was tremendous, and Somerset was at once consulted about some necessary carpentry which was to be specially made at Markton. After that he was looked on as one of the band, which resulted in a large addition to the number of his acquaintance in this part of England.

But his own feeling was that of being an outsider still. This vagary had been originated, the play chosen, the parts allotted, all in his absence, and calling him in at the last moment might, if flirtation were possible in Paula, be but a sop to pacify him. What would he have given to impersonate her lover in the piece! But neither Paula nor any one else had asked him.

The eventful evening came. Somerset had been engaged during the day with the different people by whom the works were to be carried out and in the evening went to his rooms at the Lord-Quantock-Arms, Markton, where he dined. He did not return to the castle till the hour fixed for the performance, and having been received by Mrs. Goodman, entered the large apartment, now transfigured into a theatre, like any other spectator.

Rumours of the projected representation had spread far and wide. Six times the number of tickets issued might have been readily sold. Friends and acquaintances of the actors came from curiosity to see how they would acquit themselves; while other classes of people came because they were eager to see well-known notabilities in unwonted situations. When ladies, hitherto only beheld in frigid, impenetrable positions behind their coachmen in Markton High Street, were about to reveal their hidden traits, home attitudes, intimate smiles, nods, and perhaps kisses, to the public eye, it was a throwing open of fascinating social secrets not to be missed for money.

The performance opened with no further delay than was occasioned by the customary refusal of the curtain at these times to rise more than two feet six inches; but this hitch was remedied, and the play began. It was with no enviable emotion that Somerset, who was watching intently, saw, not Mr. Mild, but Captain De Stancy, enter as the King of Navarre.

Somerset as a friend of the family had had a seat reserved for him next to that of Mrs. Goodman, and turning to her he said with some excitement, 'I understood that Mr. Mild had agreed to take that part?'

'Yes,' she said in a whisper, 'so he had; but he broke down. Luckily Captain De Stancy was familiar with the part, through having coached the others so persistently, and he undertook it off-hand. Being about the same figure as Lieutenant Mild the same dress fits him, with a little alteration by the tailor.'

It did fit him indeed; and of the male costumes it was that on which Somerset had bestowed most pains when designing them. It shrewdly burst upon his mind that there might have been collusion between Mild and De Stancy, the former agreeing to take the captain's place and act as blind till the last moment. A greater question was, could Paula have been aware of this, and would she perform as the Princess of France now De Stancy was to be her lover?

'Does Miss Power know of this change?' he inquired.

'She did not till quite a short time ago.'

He controlled his impatience till the beginning of the second act. The Princess entered; it was Paula. But whether the slight embarrassment with which she pronounced her opening words,

'Good Lord Boyet, my beauty, though but mean,
Needs not the painted flourish of your praise,'

was due to the newness of her situation, or to her knowledge that De Stancy had usurped Mild's part of her lover, he could not guess. De Stancy appeared, and Somerset

felt grim as he listened to the gallant captain's salutation of the Princess, and her response.

De S. Fair Princess, welcome to the court of Navarre.

Paula. Fair, I give you back again: and welcome, I have not yet.

Somerset listened to this and to all that which followed of the same sort, with the reflection that, after all, the Princess never throughout the piece compromised her dignity by showing her love for the King; and that the latter never addressed her in words in which passion got the better of courtesy. Moreover, as Paula had herself observed, they did not marry at the end of the piece, as in Shakespeare's other comedies. Somewhat calm in this assurance, he waited on while the other couples respectively indulged in their love-making, and banter, including Mrs. Camperton as the sprightly Rosaline. But he was doomed to be surprised out of his humour when the end of the act came on. In abridging the play for the convenience of representation, the favours or gifts from the gentlemen to the ladies were personally presented: and now Somerset saw De Stancy advance with the necklace fetched by Paula from London, and clasp it on her neck.

This seemed to throw a less pleasant light on her hasty journey. To fetch a valuable ornament to lend it to a poorer friend was estimable; but to fetch it that the friend's brother should have something magnificent to use as a lover's offering to herself in public, that wore a different complexion. And if the article were recognized by the spectators as the same that Charlotte had worn at the ball, the presentation by De Stancy of what must seem to be an heirloom of his house would be read as symbolizing a union of the families.

De Stancy's mode of presenting the necklace, though unauthorized by Shakespeare, had the full approval of the company, and set them in good humour to receive Major Camperton as Armado the braggart. Nothing calculated to stimulate jealousy occurred again till the fifth act; and then there arose full cause for it.

The scene was the outside of the Princess's pavilion. De Stancy, as the King of Navarre, stood with his group of attendants awaiting the Princess, who presently entered from her door. The two began to converse as the play appointed, De Stancy turning to her with this reply —

'Rebuke me not for that which you provoke;
The virtue of your eye must break my oath.'

So far all was well; and Paula opened her lips for the set rejoinder. But before she had spoken De Stancy continued —

'If I profane with my unworthy hand
(Taking her hand)
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this —
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.'

Somerset stared. Surely in this comedy the King never addressed the Princess in such warm words; and yet they were Shakespeare's, for they were quite familiar to him. A dim suspicion crossed his mind. Mrs. Goodman had brought a copy of Shakespeare with her, which she kept in her lap and never looked at: borrowing it, Somerset turned to 'Romeo and Juliet,' and there he saw the words which De Stancy had introduced as gag, to intensify the mild love-making of the other play. Meanwhile De Stancy continued —

'O then, dear Saint, let lips do what hands do;
They pray, grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.
Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.
Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purg'd!'

Could it be that De Stancy was going to do what came next in the stage direction — kiss her? Before there was time for conjecture on that point the sound of a very sweet and long-drawn osculation spread through the room, followed by loud applause from the people in the cheap seats. De Stancy withdrew from bending over Paula, and she was very red in the face. Nothing seemed clearer than that he had actually done the deed. The applause continuing, Somerset turned his head. Five hundred faces had regarded the act, without a consciousness that it was an interpolation; and four hundred and fifty mouths in those faces were smiling. About one half of them were tender smiles; these came from the women. The other half were at best humorous, and mainly satirical; these came from the men. It was a profanation without parallel, and his face blazed like a coal.

The play was now nearly at an end, and Somerset sat on, feeling what he could not express. More than ever was he assured that there had been collusion between the two artillery officers to bring about this end. That he should have been the unhappy man to design those picturesque dresses in which his rival so audaciously played the lover to his, Somerset's, mistress, was an added point to the satire. He could hardly go so far as to assume that Paula was a consenting party to this startling interlude; but her otherwise unaccountable wish that his own love should be clandestinely shown lent immense force to a doubt of her sincerity. The ghastly thought that she had merely been keeping him on, like a pet spaniel, to amuse her leisure moments till she should have found appropriate opportunity for an open engagement with some one else, trusting to his sense of chivalry to keep secret their little episode, filled him with a grim heat.

CHAPTER IX.

At the back of the room the applause had been loud at the moment of the kiss, real or counterfeit. The cause was partly owing to an exceptional circumstance which had occurred in that quarter early in the play.

The people had all seated themselves, and the first act had begun, when the tapestry that screened the door was lifted gently and a figure appeared in the opening. The general attention was at this moment absorbed by the newly disclosed stage, and scarcely a soul noticed the stranger. Had any one of the audience turned his head, there would have been sufficient in the countenance to detain his gaze, notwithstanding the counter-attraction forward.

He was obviously a man who had come from afar. There was not a square inch about him that had anything to do with modern English life. His visage, which was of the colour of light porphyry, had little of its original surface left; it was a face which had been the plaything of strange fires or pestilences, that had moulded to whatever shape they chose his originally supple skin, and left it pitted, puckered, and seamed like a dried water-course. But though dire catastrophes or the treacherous airs of remote climates had done their worst upon his exterior, they seemed to have affected him but little within, to judge from a certain robustness which showed itself in his manner of standing.

The face-marks had a meaning, for any one who could read them, beyond the mere suggestion of their origin: they signified that this man had either been the victim of some terrible necessity as regarded the occupation to which he had devoted himself, or that he was a man of dogged obstinacy, from sheer sang froid holding his ground amid malign forces when others would have fled affrighted away.

As nobody noticed him, he dropped the door hangings after a while, walked silently along the matted alley, and sat down in one of the back chairs. His manner of entry was enough to show that the strength of character which he seemed to possess had phlegm for its base and not ardour. One might have said that perhaps the shocks he had passed through had taken all his original warmth out of him. His beaver hat, which he had retained on his head till this moment, he now placed under the seat, where he sat absolutely motionless till the end of the first act, as if he were indulging in a monologue which did not quite reach his lips.

When Paula entered at the beginning of the second act he showed as much excitement as was expressed by a slight movement of the eyes. When she spoke he turned to his next neighbour, and asked him in cold level words which had once been English, but which seemed to have lost the accent of nationality: 'Is that the young woman who is the possessor of this castle — Power by name?'

His neighbour happened to be the landlord at Sleeping-Green, and he informed the stranger that she was what he supposed.

'And who is that gentleman whose line of business seems to be to make love to Power?'

'He's Captain De Stancy, Sir William De Stancy's son, who used to own this property.'

'Baronet or knight?'

'Baronet — a very old-established family about here.'

The stranger nodded, and the play went on, no further word being spoken till the fourth act was reached, when the stranger again said, without taking his narrow black eyes from the stage: 'There's something in that love-making between Stancy and Power that's not all sham!'

'Well,' said the landlord, 'I have heard different stories about that, and wouldn't be the man to zay what I couldn't swear to. The story is that Captain De Stancy, who is as poor as a gallicrow, is in full cry a'ter her, and that his on'y chance lies in his being heir to a title and the wold name. But she has not shown a genuine hanker for anybody yet.'

'If she finds the money, and this Stancy finds the name and blood, 'twould be a very neat match between 'em, — hey?'

'That's the argument.'

Nothing more was said again for a long time, but the stranger's eyes showed more interest in the passes between Paula and De Stancy than they had shown before. At length the crisis came, as described in the last chapter, De Stancy saluting her with that semblance of a kiss which gave such umbrage to Somerset. The stranger's thin lips lengthened a couple of inches with satisfaction; he put his hand into his pocket, drew out two half-crowns which he handed to the landlord, saying, 'Just applaud that, will you, and get your comrades to do the same.'

The landlord, though a little surprised, took the money, and began to clap his hands as desired. The example was contagious, and spread all over the room; for the audience, gentle and simple, though they might not have followed the blank verse in all its bearings, could at least appreciate a kiss. It was the unusual acclamation raised by this means which had led Somerset to turn his head.

When the play had ended the stranger was the first to rise, and going downstairs at the head of the crowd he passed out of doors, and was lost to view. Some questions were asked by the landlord as to the stranger's individuality; but few had seen him; fewer had noticed him, singular as he was; and none knew his name.

While these things had been going on in the quarter allotted to the commonalty, Somerset in front had waited the fall of the curtain with those sick and sorry feelings which should be combated by the aid of philosophy and a good conscience, but which really are only subdued by time and the abrading rush of affairs. He was, however, stoical enough, when it was all over, to accept Mrs. Goodman's invitation to accompany her to the drawing-room, fully expecting to find there a large company, including Captain De Stancy.

But none of the acting ladies and gentlemen had emerged from their dressing-rooms as yet. Feeling that he did not care to meet any of them that night, he bade farewell to Mrs. Goodman after a few minutes of conversation, and left her. While he was passing along the corridor, at the side of the gallery which had been used as the theatre, Paula crossed it from the latter apartment towards an opposite door. She was still in the dress of the Princess, and the diamond and pearl necklace still hung over her bosom as placed there by Captain De Stancy.

Her eye caught Somerset's, and she stopped. Probably there was something in his face which told his mind, for she invited him by a smile into the room she was entering.

'I congratulate you on your performance,' he said mechanically, when she pushed to the door.

'Do you really think it was well done?' She drew near him with a sociable air.

'It was startlingly done — the part from "Romeo and Juliet" pre-eminently so.'

'Do you think I knew he was going to introduce it, or do you think I didn't know?' she said, with that gentle sauciness which shows itself in the loved one's manner when she has had a triumphant evening without the lover's assistance.

'I think you may have known.'

'No,' she averred, decisively shaking her head. 'It took me as much by surprise as it probably did you. But why should I have told!'

Without answering that question Somerset went on. 'Then what he did at the end of his gag was of course a surprise also.'

'He didn't really do what he seemed to do,' she serenely answered.

'Well, I have no right to make observations — your actions are not subject to my surveillance; you float above my plane,' said the young man with some bitterness. 'But to speak plainly, surely he — kissed you?'

'No,' she said. 'He only kissed the air in front of me — ever so far off.'

'Was it six inches off?'

'No, not six inches.'

'Nor three.'

'It was quite one,' she said with an ingenuous air.

'I don't call that very far.'

'A miss is as good as a mile, says the time-honoured proverb; and it is not for us modern mortals to question its truth.'

'How can you be so off-hand?' broke out Somerset. 'I love you wildly and desperately, Paula, and you know it well!'

'I have never denied knowing it,' she said softly.

'Then why do you, with such knowledge, adopt an air of levity at such a moment as this! You keep me at arm's-length, and won't say whether you care for me one bit, or no. I have owned all to you; yet never once have you owned anything to me!'

'I have owned much. And you do me wrong if you consider that I show levity. But even if I had not owned everything, and you all, it is not altogether such a grievous thing.'

'You mean to say that it is not grievous, even if a man does love a woman, and suffers all the pain of feeling he loves in vain? Well, I say it is quite the reverse, and I have grounds for knowing.'

'Now, don't fume so, George Somerset, but hear me. My not owning all may not have the dreadful meaning you think, and therefore it may not be really such a grievous thing. There are genuine reasons for women's conduct in these matters as well as for men's, though it is sometimes supposed to be regulated entirely by caprice. And if I

do not give way to every feeling — I mean demonstration — it is because I don't want to. There now, you know what that implies; and be content.'

'Very well,' said Somerset, with repressed sadness, 'I will not expect you to say more. But you do like me a little, Paula?'

'Now!' she said, shaking her head with symptoms of tenderness and looking into his eyes. 'What have you just promised? Perhaps I like you a little more than a little, which is much too much! Yes, — Shakespeare says so, and he is always right. Do you still doubt me? Ah, I see you do!'

'Because somebody has stood nearer to you to-night than I.'

'A foggy like him! — half as old again as either of us! How can you mind him? What shall I do to show you that I do not for a moment let him come between me and you?'

'It is not for me to suggest what you should do. Though what you should permit ME to do is obvious enough.'

She dropped her voice: 'You mean, permit you to do really and in earnest what he only seemed to do in the play.'

Somerset signified by a look that such had been his thought.

Paula was silent. 'No,' she murmured at last. 'That cannot be. He did not, nor must you.'

It was said none the less decidedly for being spoken low.

'You quite resent such a suggestion: you have a right to. I beg your pardon, not for speaking of it, but for thinking it.'

'I don't resent it at all, and I am not offended one bit. But I am not the less of opinion that it is possible to be premature in some things; and to do this just now would be premature. I know what you would say — that you would not have asked it, but for that unfortunate improvisation of it in the play. But that I was not responsible for, and therefore owe no reparation to you now... Listen!'

'Paula — Paula! Where in the world are you?' was heard resounding along the corridor in the voice of her aunt. 'Our friends are all ready to leave, and you will surely bid them good-night!'

'I must be gone — I won't ring for you to be shown out — come this way.'

'But how will you get on in repeating the play tomorrow evening if that interpolation is against your wish?' he asked, looking her hard in the face.

'I'll think it over during the night. Come to-morrow morning to help me settle. But,' she added, with coy yet genial independence, 'listen to me. Not a word more about a — what you asked for, mind! I don't want to go so far, and I will not — not just yet anyhow — I mean perhaps never. You must promise that, or I cannot see you again alone.'

'It shall be as you request.'

'Very well. And not a word of this to a soul. My aunt suspects: but she is a good aunt and will say nothing. Now that is clearly understood, I should be glad to consult with you tomorrow early. I will come to you in the studio or Pleasance as soon as I am disengaged.'

She took him to a little chamfered doorway in the corner, which opened into a descending turret; and Somerset went down. When he had unfastened the door at the bottom, and stepped into the lower corridor, she asked, 'Are you down?' And on receiving an affirmative reply she closed the top door.

CHAPTER X.

Somerset was in the studio the next morning about ten o'clock superintending the labours of Knowles, Bowles, and Cockton, whom he had again engaged to assist him with the drawings on his appointment to carry out the works. When he had set them going he ascended the staircase of the great tower for some purpose that bore upon the forthcoming repairs of this part. Passing the door of the telegraph-room he heard little sounds from the instrument, which somebody was working. Only two people in the castle, to the best of his knowledge, knew the trick of this; Miss Power, and a page in her service called John. Miss De Stancy could also despatch messages, but she was at Myrtle Villa.

The door was closed, and much as he would have liked to enter, the possibility that Paula was not the performer led him to withhold his steps. He went on to where the uppermost masonry had resisted the mighty hostility of the elements for five hundred years without receiving worse dilapidation than half-a-century produces upon the face of man. But he still wondered who was telegraphing, and whether the message bore on housekeeping, architecture, theatricals, or love.

Could Somerset have seen through the panels of the door in passing, he would have beheld the room occupied by Paula alone.

It was she who sat at the instrument, and the message she was despatching ran as under: —

'Can you send down a competent actress, who will undertake the part of Princess of France in "Love's Labour's Lost" this evening in a temporary theatre here? Dresses already provided suitable to a lady about the middle height. State price.'

The telegram was addressed to a well-known theatrical agent in London.

Off went the message, and Paula retired into the next room, leaving the door open between that and the one she had just quitted. Here she busied herself with writing some letters, till in less than an hour the telegraph instrument showed signs of life, and she hastened back to its side. The reply received from the agent was as follows: —

'Miss Barbara Bell of the Regent's Theatre could come. Quite competent. Her terms would be about twenty-five guineas.'

Without a moment's pause Paula returned for answer: —

'The terms are quite satisfactory.'

Presently she heard the instrument again, and emerging from the next room in which she had passed the intervening time as before, she read: —

‘Miss Barbara Bell’s terms were accidentally understated. They would be forty guineas, in consequence of the distance. Am waiting at the office for a reply.’

Paula set to work as before and replied: —

‘Quite satisfactory; only let her come at once.’

She did not leave the room this time, but went to an arrow-slit hard by and gazed out at the trees till the instrument began to speak again. Returning to it with a leisurely manner, implying a full persuasion that the matter was settled, she was somewhat surprised to learn that,

‘Miss Bell, in stating her terms, understands that she will not be required to leave London till the middle of the afternoon. If it is necessary for her to leave at once, ten guineas extra would be indispensable, on account of the great inconvenience of such a short notice.’

Paula seemed a little vexed, but not much concerned she sent back with a readiness scarcely politic in the circumstances: —

‘She must start at once. Price agreed to.’

Her impatience for the answer was mixed with curiosity as to whether it was due to the agent or to Miss Barbara Bell that the prices had grown like Jack’s Bean-stalk in the negotiation. Another telegram duly came: —

‘Travelling expenses are expected to be paid.’

With decided impatience she dashed off: —

‘Of course; but nothing more will be agreed to.’

Then, and only then, came the desired reply: —

‘Miss Bell starts by the twelve o’clock train.’

This business being finished, Paula left the chamber and descended into the inclosure called the Pleasance, a spot grassed down like a lawn. Here stood Somerset, who, having come down from the tower, was looking on while a man searched for old foundations under the sod with a crowbar. He was glad to see her at last, and noticed that she looked serene and relieved; but could not for the moment divine the cause. Paula came nearer, returned his salutation, and regarded the man’s operations in silence awhile till his work led him to a distance from them.

‘Do you still wish to consult me?’ asked Somerset.

‘About the building perhaps,’ said she. ‘Not about the play.’

‘But you said so?’

‘Yes; but it will be unnecessary.’

Somerset thought this meant skittishness, and merely bowed.

‘You mistake me as usual,’ she said, in a low tone. ‘I am not going to consult you on that matter, because I have done all you could have asked for without consulting you. I take no part in the play to-night.’

‘Forgive my momentary doubt!’

‘Somebody else will play for me — an actress from London. But on no account must the substitution be known beforehand or the performance to-night will never come off: and that I should much regret.’

‘Captain De Stancy will not play his part if he knows you will not play yours — that’s what you mean?’

‘You may suppose it is,’ she said, smiling. ‘And to guard against this you must help me to keep the secret by being my confederate.’

To be Paula’s confederate; to-day, indeed, time had brought him something worth waiting for. ‘In anything!’ cried Somerset.

‘Only in this!’ said she, with soft severity. ‘And you know what you have promised, George! And you remember there is to be no — what we talked about! Now will you go in the one-horse brougham to Markton Station this afternoon, and meet the four o’clock train? Inquire for a lady for Stancy Castle — a Miss Bell; see her safely into the carriage, and send her straight on here. I am particularly anxious that she should not enter the town, for I think she once came to Markton in a starring company, and she might be recognized, and my plan be defeated.’

Thus she instructed her lover and devoted friend; and when he could stay no longer he left her in the garden to return to his studio. As Somerset went in by the garden door he met a strange-looking personage coming out by the same passage — a stranger, with the manner of a Dutchman, the face of a smelter, and the clothes of an inhabitant of Guiana. The stranger, whom we have already seen sitting at the back of the theatre the night before, looked hard from Somerset to Paula, and from Paula again to Somerset, as he stepped out. Somerset had an unpleasant conviction that this queer gentleman had been standing for some time in the doorway unnoticed, quizzing him and his mistress as they talked together. If so he might have learnt a secret.

When he arrived upstairs, Somerset went to a window commanding a view of the garden. Paula still stood in her place, and the stranger was earnestly conversing with her. Soon they passed round the corner and disappeared.

It was now time for him to see about starting for Markton, an intelligible zest for circumventing the ardent and coercive captain of artillery saving him from any unnecessary delay in the journey. He was at the station ten minutes before the train was due; and when it drew up to the platform the first person to jump out was Captain De Stancy in sportsman’s attire and with a gun in his hand. Somerset nodded, and De Stancy spoke, informing the architect that he had been ten miles up the line shooting waterfowl. ‘That’s Miss Power’s carriage, I think,’ he added.

‘Yes,’ said Somerset carelessly. ‘She expects a friend, I believe. We shall see you at the castle again to-night?’

De Stancy assured him that they would, and the two men parted, Captain De Stancy, when he had glanced to see that the carriage was empty, going on to where a porter stood with a couple of spaniels.

Somerset now looked again to the train. While his back had been turned to converse with the captain, a lady of five-and-thirty had alighted from the identical compartment occupied by De Stancy. She made an inquiry about getting to Stancy Castle, upon which Somerset, who had not till now observed her, went forward, and introducing himself assisted her to the carriage and saw her safely off.

De Stancy had by this time disappeared, and Somerset walked on to his rooms at the Lord-Quantock-Arms, where he remained till he had dined, picturing the discomfiture of his alert rival when there should enter to him as Princess, not Paula Power, but Miss Bell of the Regent's Theatre, London. Thus the hour passed, till he found that if he meant to see the issue of the plot it was time to be off.

On arriving at the castle, Somerset entered by the public door from the hall as before, a natural delicacy leading him to feel that though he might be welcomed as an ally at the stage-door — in other words, the door from the corridor — it was advisable not to take too ready an advantage of a privilege which, in the existing secrecy of his understanding with Paula, might lead to an overthrow of her plans on that point.

Not intending to sit out the whole performance, Somerset contented himself with standing in a window recess near the proscenium, whence he could observe both the stage and the front rows of spectators. He was quite uncertain whether Paula would appear among the audience to-night, and resolved to wait events. Just before the rise of the curtain the young lady in question entered and sat down. When the scenery was disclosed and the King of Navarre appeared, what was Somerset's surprise to find that, though the part was the part taken by De Stancy on the previous night, the voice was that of Mr. Mild; to him, at the appointed season, entered the Princess, namely, Miss Barbara Bell.

Before Somerset had recovered from his crestfallen sensation at De Stancy's elusiveness, that officer himself emerged in evening dress from behind a curtain forming a wing to the proscenium, and Somerset remarked that the minor part originally allotted to him was filled by the subaltern who had enacted it the night before. De Stancy glanced across, whether by accident or otherwise Somerset could not determine, and his glance seemed to say he quite recognized there had been a trial of wits between them, and that, thanks to his chance meeting with Miss Bell in the train, his had proved the stronger.

The house being less crowded to-night there were one or two vacant chairs in the best part. De Stancy, advancing from where he had stood for a few moments, seated himself comfortably beside Miss Power.

On the other side of her he now perceived the same queer elderly foreigner (as he appeared) who had come to her in the garden that morning. Somerset was surprised to perceive also that Paula with very little hesitation introduced him and De Stancy to each other. A conversation ensued between the three, none the less animated for being carried on in a whisper, in which Paula seemed on strangely intimate terms with the stranger, and the stranger to show feelings of great friendship for De Stancy, considering that they must be new acquaintances.

The play proceeded, and Somerset still lingered in his corner. He could not help fancying that De Stancy's ingenious relinquishment of his part, and its obvious reason, was winning Paula's admiration. His conduct was homage carried to unscrupulous and inconvenient lengths, a sort of thing which a woman may chide, but which she can never resent. Who could do otherwise than talk kindly to a man, incline a little to him,

and condone his fault, when the sole motive of so audacious an exercise of his wits was to escape acting with any other heroine than herself.

His conjectures were brought to a pause by the ending of the comedy, and the opportunity afforded him of joining the group in front. The mass of people were soon gone, and the knot of friends assembled around Paula were discussing the merits and faults of the two days' performance.

'My uncle, Mr. Abner Power,' said Paula suddenly to Somerset, as he came near, presenting the stranger to the astonished young man. 'I could not see you before the performance, as I should have liked to do. The return of my uncle is so extraordinary that it ought to be told in a less hurried way than this. He has been supposed dead by all of us for nearly ten years — ever since the time we last heard from him.'

'For which I am to blame,' said Mr. Power, nodding to Paula's architect. 'Yet not I, but accident and a sluggish temperament. There are times, Mr Somerset, when the human creature feels no interest in his kind, and assumes that his kind feels no interest in him. The feeling is not active enough to make him fly from their presence; but sufficient to keep him silent if he happens to be away. I may not have described it precisely; but this I know, that after my long illness, and the fancied neglect of my letters —'

'For which my father was not to blame, since he did not receive them,' said Paula.

'For which nobody was to blame — after that, I say, I wrote no more.'

'You have much pleasure in returning at last, no doubt,' said Somerset.

'Sir, as I remained away without particular pain, so I return without particular joy. I speak the truth, and no compliments. I may add that there is one exception to this absence of feeling from my heart, namely, that I do derive great satisfaction from seeing how mightily this young woman has grown and prevailed.'

This address, though delivered nominally to Somerset, was listened to by Paula, Mrs. Goodman, and De Stancy also. After uttering it, the speaker turned away, and continued his previous conversation with Captain De Stancy. From this time till the group parted he never again spoke directly to Somerset, paying him barely so much attention as he might have expected as Paula's architect, and certainly less than he might have supposed his due as her accepted lover.

The result of the appearance, as from the tomb, of this wintry man was that the evening ended in a frigid and formal way which gave little satisfaction to the sensitive Somerset, who was abstracted and constrained by reason of thoughts on how this resuscitation of the uncle would affect his relation with Paula. It was possibly also the thought of two at least of the others. There had, in truth, scarcely yet been time enough to adumbrate the possibilities opened up by this gentleman's return.

The only private word exchanged by Somerset with any one that night was with Mrs. Goodman, in whom he always recognized a friend to his cause, though the fluidity of her character rendered her but a feeble one at the best of times. She informed him that Mr. Power had no sort of legal control over Paula, or direction in her estates; but

Somerset could not doubt that a near and only blood relation, even had he possessed but half the static force of character that made itself apparent in Mr. Power, might exercise considerable moral influence over the girl if he chose. And in view of Mr. Power's marked preference for De Stancy, Somerset had many misgivings as to its operating in a direction favourable to himself.

CHAPTER XI.

Somerset was deeply engaged with his draughtsmen and builders during the three following days, and scarcely entered the occupied wing of the castle.

At his suggestion Paula had agreed to have the works executed as such operations were carried out in old times, before the advent of contractors. Each trade required in the building was to be represented by a master-tradesman of that denomination, who should stand responsible for his own section of labour, and for no other, Somerset himself as chief technician working out his designs on the spot. By this means the thoroughness of the workmanship would be greatly increased in comparison with the modern arrangement, whereby a nominal builder, seldom present, who can certainly know no more than one trade intimately and well, and who often does not know that, undertakes the whole.

But notwithstanding its manifest advantages to the proprietor, the plan added largely to the responsibilities of the architect, who, with his master-mason, master-carpenter, master-plumber, and what not, had scarcely a moment to call his own. Still, the method being upon the face of it the true one, Somerset supervised with a will.

But there seemed to float across the court to him from the inhabited wing an intimation that things were not as they had been before; that an influence adverse to himself was at work behind the ashlar face of inner wall which confronted him. Perhaps this was because he never saw Paula at the windows, or heard her footfall in that half of the building given over to himself and his myrmidons. There was really no reason other than a sentimental one why he should see her. The uninhabited part of the castle was almost an independent structure, and it was quite natural to exist for weeks in this wing without coming in contact with residents in the other.

A more pronounced cause than vague surmise was destined to perturb him, and this in an unexpected manner. It happened one morning that he glanced through a local paper while waiting at the Lord-Quantock-Arms for the pony-carriage to be brought round in which he often drove to the castle. The paper was two days old, but to his unutterable amazement he read therein a paragraph which ran as follows: —

'We are informed that a marriage is likely to be arranged between Captain De Stancy, of the Royal Horse Artillery, only surviving son of Sir William De Stancy, Baronet, and Paula, only daughter of the late John Power, Esq., M.P., of Stancy Castle.'

Somerset dropped the paper, and stared out of the window. Fortunately for his emotions, the horse and carriage were at this moment brought to the door, so that nothing hindered Somerset in driving off to the spot at which he would be soonest likely to learn what truth or otherwise there was in the newspaper report. From the first he doubted it: and yet how should it have got there? Such strange rumours, like paradoxical maxims, generally include a portion of truth. Five days had elapsed since he last spoke to Paula.

Reaching the castle he entered his own quarters as usual, and after setting the draughtsmen to work walked up and down pondering how he might best see her without making the paragraph the ground of his request for an interview; for if it were a fabrication, such a reason would wound her pride in her own honour towards him, and if it were partly true, he would certainly do better in leaving her alone than in reproaching her. It would simply amount to a proof that Paula was an arrant coquette.

In his meditation he stood still, closely scanning one of the jamb-stones of a doorless entrance, as if to discover where the old hinge-hook had entered the stonework. He heard a footstep behind him, and looking round saw Paula standing by. She held a newspaper in her hand. The spot was one quite hemmed in from observation, a fact of which she seemed to be quite aware.

‘I have something to tell you,’ she said; ‘something important. But you are so occupied with that old stone that I am obliged to wait.’

‘It is not true surely!’ he said, looking at the paper.

‘No, look here,’ she said, holding up the sheet. It was not what he had supposed, but a new one — the local rival to that which had contained the announcement, and was still damp from the press. She pointed, and he read —

‘We are authorized to state that there is no foundation whatever for the assertion of our contemporary that a marriage is likely to be arranged between Captain De Stancy and Miss Power of Stancy Castle.’

Somerset pressed her hand. ‘It disturbed me,’ he said, ‘though I did not believe it.’

‘It astonished me, as much as it disturbed you; and I sent this contradiction at once.’

‘How could it have got there?’

She shook her head.

‘You have not the least knowledge?’

‘Not the least. I wish I had.’

‘It was not from any friends of De Stancy’s? or himself?’

‘It was not. His sister has ascertained beyond doubt that he knew nothing of it. Well, now, don’t say any more to me about the matter.’

‘I’ll find out how it got into the paper.’

‘Not now — any future time will do. I have something else to tell you.’

‘I hope the news is as good as the last,’ he said, looking into her face with anxiety; for though that face was blooming, it seemed full of a doubt as to how her next information would be taken.

‘O yes; it is good, because everybody says so. We are going to take a delightful journey. My new-created uncle, as he seems, and I, and my aunt, and perhaps Charlotte, if she is well enough, are going to Nice, and other places about there.’

‘To Nice!’ said Somerset, rather blankly. ‘And I must stay here?’

‘Why, of course you must, considering what you have undertaken!’ she said, looking with saucy composure into his eyes. ‘My uncle’s reason for proposing the journey just now is, that he thinks the alterations will make residence here dusty and disagreeable during the spring. The opportunity of going with him is too good a one for us to lose, as I have never been there.’

‘I wish I was going to be one of the party!... What do YOU wish about it?’

She shook her head impenetrably. ‘A woman may wish some things she does not care to tell!’

‘Are you really glad you are going, dearest? — as I MUST call you just once,’ said the young man, gazing earnestly into her face, which struck him as looking far too rosy and radiant to be consistent with ever so little regret at leaving him behind.

‘I take great interest in foreign trips, especially to the shores of the Mediterranean: and everybody makes a point of getting away when the house is turned out of the window.’

‘But you do feel a little sadness, such as I should feel if our positions were reversed?’

‘I think you ought not to have asked that so incredulously,’ she murmured. ‘We can be near each other in spirit, when our bodies are far apart, can we not?’ Her tone grew softer and she drew a little closer to his side with a slightly nestling motion, as she went on, ‘May I be sure that you will not think unkindly of me when I am absent from your sight, and not begrudge me any little pleasure because you are not there to share it with me?’

‘May you! Can you ask it?... As for me, I shall have no pleasure to be begrudged or otherwise. The only pleasure I have is, as you well know, in you. When you are with me, I am happy: when you are away, I take no pleasure in anything.’

‘I don’t deserve it. I have no right to disturb you so,’ she said, very gently. ‘But I have given you some pleasure, have I not? A little more pleasure than pain, perhaps?’

‘You have, and yet... But I don’t accuse you, dearest. Yes, you have given me pleasure. One truly pleasant time was when we stood together in the summer-house on the evening of the garden-party, and you said you liked me to love you.’

‘Yes, it was a pleasant time,’ she returned thoughtfully. ‘How the rain came down, and formed a gauze between us and the dancers, did it not; and how afraid we were — at least I was — lest anybody should discover us there, and how quickly I ran in after the rain was over!’

‘Yes’, said Somerset, ‘I remember it. But no harm came of it to you... And perhaps no good will come of it to me.’

‘Do not be premature in your conclusions, sir,’ she said archly. ‘If you really do feel for me only half what you say, we shall — you will make good come of it — in some way or other.’

‘Dear Paula — now I believe you, and can bear anything.’

‘Then we will say no more; because, as you recollect, we agreed not to go too far. No expostulations, for we are going to be practical young people; besides, I won’t listen if you utter them. I simply echo your words, and say I, too, believe you. Now I must go. Have faith in me, and don’t magnify trifles light as air.’

‘I THINK I understand you. And if I do, it will make a great difference in my conduct. You will have no cause to complain.’

‘Then you must not understand me so much as to make much difference; for your conduct as my architect is perfect. But I must not linger longer, though I wished you to know this news from my very own lips.’

‘Bless you for it! When do you leave?’

‘The day after to-morrow.’

‘So early? Does your uncle guess anything? Do you wish him to be told just yet?’

‘Yes, to the first; no, to the second.’

‘I may write to you?’

‘On business, yes. It will be necessary.’

‘How can you speak so at a time of parting?’

‘Now, George — you see I say George, and not Mr. Somerset, and you may draw your own inference — don’t be so morbid in your reproaches! I have informed you that you may write, or still better, telegraph, since the wire is so handy — on business. Well, of course, it is for you to judge whether you will add postscripts of another sort. There, you make me say more than a woman ought, because you are so obtuse and literal. Good afternoon — good-bye! This will be my address.’

She handed him a slip of paper, and flitted away.

Though he saw her again after this, it was during the bustle of preparation, when there was always a third person present, usually in the shape of that breathing refrigerator, her uncle. Hence the few words that passed between them were of the most formal description, and chiefly concerned the restoration of the castle, and a church at Nice designed by him, which he wanted her to inspect.

They were to leave by an early afternoon train, and Somerset was invited to lunch on that day. The morning was occupied by a long business consultation in the studio with Mr. Power and Mrs. Goodman on what rooms were to be left locked up, what left in charge of the servants, and what thrown open to the builders and workmen under the surveillance of Somerset. At present the work consisted mostly of repairs to existing rooms, so as to render those habitable which had long been used only as stores for lumber. Paula did not appear during this discussion; but when they were all seated in the dining-hall she came in dressed for the journey, and, to outward appearance, with blithe anticipation at its prospect blooming from every feature. Next to her came Charlotte De Stancy, still with some of the pallor of an invalid, but wonderfully brightened up, as Somerset thought, by the prospect of a visit to a delightful shore. It might have been this; and it might have been that Somerset’s presence had a share in the change.

It was in the hall, when they were in the bustle of leave-taking, that there occurred the only opportunity for the two or three private words with Paula to which his star treated him on that last day. His took the hasty form of, 'You will write soon?'

'Telegraphing will be quicker,' she answered in the same low tone; and whispering 'Be true to me!' turned away.

How unreasonable he was! In addition to those words, warm as they were, he would have preferred a little paleness of cheek, or trembling of lip, instead of the bloom and the beauty which sat upon her undisturbed maidenhood, to tell him that in some slight way she suffered at his loss.

Immediately after this they went to the carriages waiting at the door. Somerset, who had in a measure taken charge of the castle, accompanied them and saw them off, much as if they were his visitors. She stepped in, a general adieu was spoken, and she was gone.

While the carriages rolled away, he ascended to the top of the tower, where he saw them lessen to spots on the road, and turn the corner out of sight. The chances of a rival seemed to grow in proportion as Paula receded from his side; but he could not have answered why. He had bidden her and her relatives adieu on her own doorstep, like a privileged friend of the family, while De Stancy had scarcely seen her since the play-night. That the silence into which the captain appeared to have sunk was the placidity of conscious power, was scarcely probable; yet that adventitious aids existed for De Stancy he could not deny. The link formed by Charlotte between De Stancy and Paula, much as he liked the ingenuous girl, was one that he could have wished away. It constituted a bridge of access to Paula's inner life and feelings which nothing could rival; except that one fact which, as he firmly believed, did actually rival it, giving him faith and hope; his own primary occupation of Paula's heart. Moreover, Mrs. Goodman would be an influence favourable to himself and his cause during the journey; though, to be sure, to set against her there was the phlegmatic and obstinate Abner Power, in whom, apprised by those subtle media of intelligence which lovers possess, he fancied he saw no friend.

Somerset remained but a short time at the castle that day. The light of its chambers had fled, the gross grandeur of the dictatorial towers oppressed him, and the studio was hateful. He remembered a promise made long ago to Mr. Woodwell of calling upon him some afternoon; and a visit which had not much attractiveness in it at other times recommended itself now, through being the one possible way open to him of hearing Paula named and her doings talked of. Hence in walking back to Markton, instead of going up the High Street, he turned aside into the unfrequented footway that led to the minister's cottage.

Mr. Woodwell was not indoors at the moment of his call, and Somerset lingered at the doorway, and cast his eyes around. It was a house which typified the drearier tenets of its occupier with great exactness. It stood upon its spot of earth without any natural union with it: no mosses disguised the stiff straight line where wall met earth; not a creeper softened the aspect of the bare front. The garden walk was strewn with

loose clinkers from the neighbouring foundry, which rolled under the pedestrian's foot and jolted his soul out of him before he reached the porchless door. But all was clean, and clear, and dry.

Whether Mr. Woodwell was personally responsible for this condition of things there was not time to closely consider, for Somerset perceived the minister coming up the walk towards him. Mr. Woodwell welcomed him heartily; and yet with the mien of a man whose mind has scarcely dismissed some scene which has preceded the one that confronts him. What that scene was soon transpired.

'I have had a busy afternoon,' said the minister, as they walked indoors; 'or rather an exciting afternoon. Your client at Stancy Castle, whose uncle, as I imagine you know, has so unexpectedly returned, has left with him to-day for the south of France; and I wished to ask her before her departure some questions as to how a charity organized by her father was to be administered in her absence. But I have been very unfortunate. She could not find time to see me at her own house, and I awaited her at the station, all to no purpose, owing to the presence of her friends. Well, well, I must see if a letter will find her.'

Somerset asked if anybody of the neighbourhood was there to see them off.

'Yes, that was the trouble of it. Captain De Stancy was there, and quite monopolized her. I don't know what 'tis coming to, and perhaps I have no business to inquire, since she is scarcely a member of our church now. Who could have anticipated the daughter of my old friend John Power developing into the ordinary gay woman of the world as she has done? Who could have expected her to associate with people who show contempt for their Maker's intentions by flippantly assuming other characters than those in which He created them?'

'You mistake her,' murmured Somerset, in a voice which he vainly endeavoured to attune to philosophy. 'Miss Power has some very rare and beautiful qualities in her nature, though I confess I tremble — fear lest the De Stancy influence should be too strong.'

'Sir, it is already! Do you remember my telling you that I thought the force of her surroundings would obscure the pure daylight of her spirit, as a monkish window of coloured images attenuates the rays of God's sun? I do not wish to indulge in rash surmises, but her oscillation from her family creed of Calvinistic truth towards the traditions of the De Stancys has been so decided, though so gradual, that — well, I may be wrong.'

'That what?' said the young man sharply.

'I sometimes think she will take to her as husband the present representative of that impoverished line — Captain De Stancy — which she may easily do, if she chooses, as his behaviour to-day showed.'

'He was probably there on account of his sister,' said Somerset, trying to escape the mental picture of farewell gallantries bestowed on Paula.

'It was hinted at in the papers the other day.'

'And it was flatly contradicted.'

‘Yes. Well, we shall see in the Lord’s good time; I can do no more for her. And now, Mr. Somerset, pray take a cup of tea.’

The revelations of the minister depressed Somerset a little, and he did not stay long. As he went to the door Woodwell said, ‘There is a worthy man — the deacon of our chapel, Mr. Havill — who would like to be friendly with you. Poor man, since the death of his wife he seems to have something on his mind — some trouble which my words will not reach. If ever you are passing his door, please give him a look in. He fears that calling on you might be an intrusion.’

Somerset did not clearly promise, and went his way. The minister’s allusion to the announcement of the marriage reminded Somerset that she had expressed a wish to know how the paragraph came to be inserted. The wish had been carelessly spoken; but he went to the newspaper office to make inquiries on the point.

The reply was unexpected. The reporter informed his questioner that in returning from the theatricals, at which he was present, he shared a fly with a gentleman who assured him that such an alliance was certain, so obviously did it recommend itself to all concerned, as a means of strengthening both families. The gentleman’s knowledge of the Powers was so precise that the reporter did not hesitate to accept his assertion. He was a man who had seen a great deal of the world, and his face was noticeable for the seams and scars on it.

Somerset recognized Paula’s uncle in the portrait.

Hostilities, then, were beginning. The paragraph had been meant as the first slap. Taking her abroad was the second.

BOOK THE FOURTH. SOMERSET, DARE AND DE STANCY.

CHAPTER I.

There was no part of Paula’s journey in which Somerset did not think of her. He imagined her in the hotel at Havre, in her brief rest at Paris; her drive past the Place de la Bastille to the Boulevard Mazas to take the train for Lyons; her tedious progress through the dark of a winter night till she crossed the isothermal line which told of the beginning of a southern atmosphere, and onwards to the ancient blue sea.

Thus, between the hours devoted to architecture, he passed the next three days. One morning he set himself, by the help of John, to practise on the telegraph instrument, expecting a message. But though he watched the machine at every opportunity, or kept some other person on the alert in its neighbourhood, no message arrived to gratify him till after the lapse of nearly a fortnight. Then she spoke from her new habitation nine hundred miles away, in these meagre words: —

‘Are settled at the address given. Can now attend to any inquiry about the building.’

The pointed implication that she could attend to inquiries about nothing else, breathed of the veritable Paula so distinctly that he could forgive its sauciness. His reply was soon despatched: —

‘Will write particulars of our progress. Always the same.’

The last three words formed the sentimental appendage which she had assured him she could tolerate, and which he hoped she might desire.

He spent the remainder of the day in making a little sketch to show what had been done in the castle since her departure. This he despatched with a letter of explanation ending in a paragraph of a different tenor: —

‘I have demonstrated our progress as well as I could; but another subject has been in my mind, even whilst writing the former. Ask yourself if you use me well in keeping me a fortnight before you so much as say that you have arrived? The one thing that reconciled me to your departure was the thought that I should hear early from you: my idea of being able to submit to your absence was based entirely upon that.

‘But I have resolved not to be out of humour, and to believe that your scheme of reserve is not unreasonable; neither do I quarrel with your injunction to keep silence to all relatives. I do not know anything I can say to show you more plainly my acquiescence in your wish “not to go too far” (in short, to keep yourself dear — by dear I mean not cheap — you have been dear in the other sense a long time, as you know), than by not urging you to go a single degree further in warmth than you please.’

When this was posted he again turned his attention to her walls and towers, which indeed were a dumb consolation in many ways for the lack of herself. There was no nook in the castle to which he had not access or could not easily obtain access by applying for the keys, and this propinquity of things belonging to her served to keep her image before him even more constantly than his memories would have done.

Three days and a half after the despatch of his subdued effusion the telegraph called to tell him the good news that

‘Your letter and drawing are just received. Thanks for the latter. Will reply to the former by post this afternoon.’

It was with cheerful patience that he attended to his three draughtsmen in the studio, or walked about the environs of the fortress during the fifty hours spent by her presumably tender missive on the road. A light fleece of snow fell during the second night of waiting, inverting the position of long-established lights and shades, and lowering to a dingy grey the approximately white walls of other weathers; he could trace the postman’s footmarks as he entered over the bridge, knowing them by the dot of his walking-stick: on entering the expected letter was waiting upon his table. He looked at its direction with glad curiosity; it was the first letter he had ever received from her.

‘HOTEL — -, NICE,

Feb. 14.

‘MY DEAR MR. SOMERSET’ (the ‘George,’ then, to which she had so kindly treated him in her last conversation, was not to be continued in black and white), —

‘Your letter explaining the progress of the work, aided by the sketch enclosed, gave me as clear an idea of the advance made since my departure as I could have gained by being present. I feel every confidence in you, and am quite sure the restoration is in good hands. In this opinion both my aunt and my uncle coincide. Please act entirely on your own judgment in everything, and as soon as you give a certificate to the builders for the first instalment of their money it will be promptly sent by my solicitors.

‘You bid me ask myself if I have used you well in not sending intelligence of myself till a fortnight after I had left you. Now, George, don’t be unreasonable! Let me remind you that, as a certain apostle said, there are a thousand things lawful which are not expedient. I say this, not from pride in my own conduct, but to offer you a very fair explanation of it. Your resolve not to be out of humour with me suggests that you have been sorely tempted that way, else why should such a resolve have been necessary?

‘If you only knew what passes in my mind sometimes you would perhaps not be so ready to blame. Shall I tell you? No. For, if it is a great emotion, it may afford you a cruel satisfaction at finding I suffer through separation; and if it be a growing indifference to you, it will be inflicting gratuitous unhappiness upon you to say so, if you care for me; as I SOMETIMES think you may do A LITTLE.’

(‘O, Paula!’ said Somerset.)

‘Please which way would you have it? But it is better that you should guess at what I feel than that you should distinctly know it. Notwithstanding this assertion you will, I know, adhere to your first prepossession in favour of prompt confessions. In spite of that, I fear that upon trial such promptness would not produce that happiness which your fancy leads you to expect. Your heart would weary in time, and when once that happens, good-bye to the emotion you have told me of. Imagine such a case clearly, and you will perceive the probability of what I say. At the same time I admit that a woman who is ONLY a creature of evasions and disguises is very disagreeable.

‘Do not write VERY frequently, and never write at all unless you have some real information about the castle works to communicate. I will explain to you on another occasion why I make this request. You will possibly set it down as additional evidence of my cold-heartedness. If so you must. Would you also mind writing the business letter on an independent sheet, with a proper beginning and ending? Whether you inclose another sheet is of course optional. — Sincerely yours, PAULA POWER.’

Somerset had a suspicion that her order to him not to neglect the business letter was to escape any invidious remarks from her uncle. He wished she would be more explicit, so that he might know exactly how matters stood with them, and whether Abner Power had ever ventured to express disapproval of him as her lover.

But not knowing, he waited anxiously for a new architectural event on which he might legitimately send her another line. This occurred about a week later, when the men engaged in digging foundations discovered remains of old ones which warranted a modification of the original plan. He accordingly sent off his professional advice on the point, requesting her assent or otherwise to the amendment, winding up the inquiry with ‘Yours faithfully.’ On another sheet he wrote: — ‘Do you suffer from any

unpleasantness in the manner of others on account of me? If so, inform me, Paula. I cannot otherwise interpret your request for the separate sheets. While on this point I will tell you what I have learnt relative to the authorship of that false paragraph about your engagement. It was communicated to the paper by your uncle. Was the wish father to the thought, or could he have been misled, as many were, by appearances at the theatricals?

‘If I am not to write to you without a professional reason, surely you can write to me without such an excuse? When you write tell me of yourself. There is nothing I so much wish to hear of. Write a great deal about your daily doings, for my mind’s eye keeps those sweet operations more distinctly before me than my bodily sight does my own.

‘You say nothing of having been to look at the chapel-of-ease I told you of, the plans of which I made when an architect’s pupil, working in metres instead of feet and inches, to my immense perplexity, that the drawings might be understood by the foreign workmen. Go there and tell me what you think of its design. I can assure you that every curve thereof is my own.

‘How I wish you would invite me to run over and see you, if only for a day or two, for my heart runs after you in a most distracted manner. Dearest, you entirely fill my life! But I forget; we have resolved not to go VERY FAR. But the fact is I am half afraid lest, with such reticence, you should not remember how very much I am yours, and with what a dogged constancy I shall always remember you. Paula, sometimes I have horrible misgivings that something will divide us, especially if we do not make a more distinct show of our true relationship. True do I say? I mean the relationship which I think exists between us, but which you do not affirm too clearly. — Yours always.’

Away southward like the swallow went the tender lines. He wondered if she would notice his hint of being ready to pay her a flying visit, if permitted to do so. His fancy dwelt on that further side of France, the very contours of whose shore were now lines of beauty for him. He prowled in the library, and found interest in the mustiest facts relating to that place, learning with aesthetic pleasure that the number of its population was fifty thousand, that the mean temperature of its atmosphere was 60 degrees Fahrenheit, and that the peculiarities of a mistral were far from agreeable.

He waited overlong for her reply; but it ultimately came. After the usual business preliminary, she said: —

‘As requested, I have visited the little church you designed. It gave me great pleasure to stand before a building whose outline and details had come from the brain of such a valued friend and adviser.’

(‘Valued friend and adviser,’ repeated Somerset critically.)

‘I like the style much, especially that of the windows — Early English are they not? I am going to attend service there next Sunday, BECAUSE YOU WERE THE ARCHITECT, AND FOR NO GODLY REASON AT ALL. Does that content you? Fie for your despondency! Remember M. Aurelius: “This is the chief thing: Be not

perturbed; for all things are of the nature of the Universal.” Indeed I am a little surprised at your having forebodings, after my assurance to you before I left. I have none. My opinion is that, to be happy, it is best to think that, as we are the product of events, events will continue to produce that which is in harmony with us... You are too faint-hearted, and that’s the truth of it. I advise you not to abandon yourself to idolatry too readily; you know what I mean. It fills me with remorse when I think how very far below such a position my actual worth removes me.

‘I should like to receive another letter from you as soon as you have got over the misgiving you speak of, but don’t write too soon. I wish I could write anything to raise your spirits, but you may be so perverse that if, in order to do this, I tell you of the races, routs, scenery, gaieties, and gambling going on in this place and neighbourhood (into which of course I cannot help being a little drawn), you may declare that my words make you worse than ever. Don’t pass the line I have set down in the way you were tempted to do in your last; and not too many Dearests — at least as yet. This is not a time for effusion. You have my very warm affection, and that’s enough for the present.’

As a love-letter this missive was tantalising enough, but since its form was simply a continuation of what she had practised before she left, it produced no undue misgiving in him. Far more was he impressed by her omitting to answer the two important questions he had put to her. First, concerning her uncle’s attitude towards them, and his conduct in giving such strange information to the reporter. Second, on his, Somerset’s, paying her a flying visit some time during the spring. Since she had requested it, he made no haste in his reply. When penned, it ran in the words subjoined, which, in common with every line of their correspondence, acquired from the strangeness of subsequent circumstances an interest and a force that perhaps they did not intrinsically possess.

‘People cannot’ (he wrote) ‘be for ever in good spirits on this gloomy side of the Channel, even though you seem to be so on yours. However, that I can abstain from letting you know whether my spirits are good or otherwise, I will prove in our future correspondence. I admire you more and more, both for the warm feeling towards me which I firmly believe you have, and for your ability to maintain side by side with it so much dignity and resolution with regard to foolish sentiment. Sometimes I think I could have put up with a little more weakness if it had brought with it a little more tenderness, but I dismiss all that when I mentally survey your other qualities. I have thought of fifty things to say to you of the TOO FAR sort, not one of any other; so that your prohibition is very unfortunate, for by it I am doomed to say things that do not rise spontaneously to my lips. You say that our shut-up feelings are not to be mentioned yet. How long is the yet to last?’

‘But, to speak more solemnly, matters grow very serious with us, Paula — at least with me: and there are times when this restraint is really unbearable. It is possible to put up with reserve when the reserved being is by one’s side, for the eyes may reveal what the lips do not. But when she is absent, what was piquancy becomes harshness,

tender railleries become cruel sarcasm, and tacit understandings misunderstandings. However that may be, you shall never be able to reproach me for touchiness. I still esteem you as a friend; I admire you and love you as a woman. This I shall always do, however unconfiding you prove.'

CHAPTER II.

Without knowing it, Somerset was drawing near to a crisis in this soft correspondence which would speedily put his assertions to the test; but the knowledge came upon him soon enough for his peace.

Her next letter, dated March 9th, was the shortest of all he had received, and beyond the portion devoted to the building-works it contained only the following sentences: —

'I am almost angry with you, George, for being vexed because I am not more effusive. Why should the verbal I LOVE YOU be ever uttered between two beings of opposite sex who have eyes to see signs? During the seven or eight months that we have known each other, you have discovered my regard for you, and what more can you desire? Would a reiterated assertion of passion really do any good? Remember it is a natural instinct with us women to retain the power of obliging a man to hope, fear, pray, and beseech as long as we think fit, before we confess to a reciprocal affection.

'I am now going to own to a weakness about which I had intended to keep silent. It will not perhaps add to your respect for me. My uncle, whom in many ways I like, is displeased with me for keeping up this correspondence so regularly. I am quite perverse enough to venture to disregard his feelings; but considering the relationship, and his kindness in other respects, I should prefer not to do so at present. Honestly speaking, I want the courage to resist him in some things. He said to me the other day that he was very much surprised that I did not depend upon his judgment for my future happiness. Whether that meant much or little, I have resolved to communicate with you only by telegrams for the remainder of the time we are here. Please reply by the same means only. There, now, don't flush and call me names! It is for the best, and we want no nonsense, you and I. Dear George, I feel more than I say, and if I do not speak more plainly, you will understand what is behind after all I have hinted. I can promise you that you will not like me less upon knowing me better. Hope ever. I would give up a good deal for you. Good-bye!'

This brought Somerset some cheerfulness and a good deal of gloom. He silently reproached her, who was apparently so independent, for lacking independence in such a vital matter. Perhaps it was mere sex, perhaps it was peculiar to a few, that her independence and courage, like Cleopatra's, failed her occasionally at the last moment.

One curious impression which had often haunted him now returned with redoubled force. He could not see himself as the husband of Paula Power in any likely future. He could not imagine her his wife. People were apt to run into mistakes in their presentiments; but though he could picture her as queening it over him, as avowing

her love for him unreservedly, even as compromising herself for him, he could not see her in a state of domesticity with him.

Telegrams being commanded, to the telegraph he repaired, when, after two days, an immediate wish to communicate with her led him to dismiss vague conjecture on the future situation. His first telegram took the following form: —

‘I give up the letter writing. I will part with anything to please you but yourself. Your comfort with your relative is the first thing to be considered: not for the world do I wish you to make divisions within doors. Yours.’

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday passed, and on Saturday a telegram came in reply:

—
‘I can fear, grieve at, and complain of nothing, having your nice promise to consider my comfort always.’

This was very pretty; but it admitted little. Such short messages were in themselves poor substitutes for letters, but their speed and easy frequency were good qualities which the letters did not possess. Three days later he replied: —

‘You do not once say to me “Come.” Would such a strange accident as my arrival disturb you much?’

She replied rather quickly: —

‘I am indisposed to answer you too clearly. Keep your heart strong: ‘tis a censorious world.’

The vagueness there shown made Somerset peremptory, and he could not help replying somewhat more impetuously than usual: — ‘Why do you give me so much cause for anxiety! Why treat me to so much mystification! Say once, distinctly, that what I have asked is given.’

He awaited for the answer, one day, two days, a week; but none came. It was now the end of March, and when Somerset walked of an afternoon by the river and pool in the lower part of the grounds, his ear newly greeted by the small voices of frogs and toads and other creatures who had been torpid through the winter, he became doubtful and uneasy that she alone should be silent in the awakening year.

He waited through a second week, and there was still no reply. It was possible that the urgency of his request had tempted her to punish him, and he continued his walks, to, fro, and around, with as close an ear to the undertones of nature, and as attentive an eye to the charms of his own art, as the grand passion would allow. Now came the days of battle between winter and spring. On these excursions, though spring was to the forward during the daylight, winter would reassert itself at night, and not unfrequently at other moments. Tepid airs and nipping breezes met on the confines of sunshine and shade; trembling raindrops that were still akin to frost crystals dashed themselves from the bushes as he pursued his way from town to castle; the birds were like an orchestra waiting for the signal to strike up, and colour began to enter into the country round.

But he gave only a modicum of thought to these proceedings. He rather thought such things as, ‘She can afford to be saucy, and to find a source of blitheness in my

love, considering the power that wealth gives her to pick and choose almost where she will.' He was bound to own, however, that one of the charms of her conversation was the complete absence of the note of the heiress from its accents. That, other things equal, her interest would naturally incline to a person bearing the name of De Stancy, was evident from her avowed predilections. His original assumption, that she was a personification of the modern spirit, who had been dropped, like a seed from the bill of a bird, into a chink of mediaevalism, required some qualification. Romanticism, which will exist in every human breast as long as human nature itself exists, had asserted itself in her. Veneration for things old, not because of any merit in them, but because of their long continuance, had developed in her; and her modern spirit was taking to itself wings and flying away. Whether his image was flying with the other was a question which moved him all the more deeply now that her silence gave him dread of an affirmative answer.

For another seven days he stoically left in suspension all forecasts of his possibly grim fate in being the employed and not the beloved. The week passed: he telegraphed: there was no reply: he had sudden fears for her personal safety and resolved to break her command by writing.

'STANCY CASTLE, April

13

'DEAR PAULA, — Are you ill or in trouble? It is impossible in the very unquiet state you have put me into by your silence that I should abstain from writing. Without affectation, you sorely distress me, and I think you would hardly have done it could you know what a degree of anxiety you cause. Why, Paula, do you not write or send to me? What have I done that you should treat me like this? Do write, if it is only to reproach me. I am compelled to pass the greater part of the day in this castle, which reminds me constantly of you, and yet eternally lacks your presence. I am unfortunate indeed that you have not been able to find half-an-hour during the last month to tell me at least that you are alive.

'You have always been ambiguous, it is true; but I thought I saw encouragement in your eyes; encouragement certainly was in your eyes, and who would not have been deluded by them and have believed them sincere? Yet what tenderness can there be in a heart that can cause me pain so wilfully!

'There may, of course, be some deliberate scheming on the part of your relations to intercept our letters; but I cannot think it. I know that the housekeeper has received a letter from your aunt this very week, in which she incidentally mentions that all are well, and in the same place as before. How then can I excuse you?

'Then write, Paula, or at least telegraph, as you proposed. Otherwise I am resolved to take your silence as a signal to treat your fair words as wind, and to write to you no more.'

CHAPTER III.

He despatched the letter, and half-an-hour afterwards felt sure that it would mortally offend her. But he had now reached a state of temporary indifference, and could contemplate the loss of such a tantalising property with reasonable calm.

In the interim of waiting for a reply he was one day walking to Markton, when, passing Myrtle Villa, he saw Sir William De Stancy ambling about his garden-path and examining the crocuses that palisaded its edge. Sir William saw him and asked him to come in. Somerset was in the mood for any diversion from his own affairs, and they seated themselves by the drawing-room fire.

‘I am much alone now,’ said Sir William, ‘and if the weather were not very mild, so that I can get out into the garden every day, I should feel it a great deal.’

‘You allude to your daughter’s absence?’

‘And my son’s. Strange to say, I do not miss her so much as I miss him. She offers to return at any moment; but I do not wish to deprive her of the advantages of a little foreign travel with her friend. Always, Mr. Somerset, give your spare time to foreign countries, especially those which contrast with your own in topography, language, and art. That’s my advice to all young people of your age. Don’t waste your money on expensive amusements at home. Practise the strictest economy at home, to have a margin for going abroad.’

Economy, which Sir William had never practised, but to which, after exhausting all other practices, he now raised an altar, as the Athenians did to the unknown God, was a topic likely to prolong itself on the baronet’s lips, and Somerset contrived to interrupt him by asking —

‘Captain De Stancy, too, has gone? Has the artillery, then, left the barracks?’

‘No,’ said Sir William. ‘But my son has made use of his leave in running over to see his sister at Nice.’

The current of quiet meditation in Somerset changed to a busy whirl at this reply. That Paula should become indifferent to his existence from a sense of superiority, physical, spiritual, or social, was a sufficiently ironical thing; but that she should have relinquished him because of the presence of a rival lent commonplace dreariness to her cruelty.

Sir William, noting nothing, continued in the tone of clever childishness which characterized him: ‘It is very singular how the present situation has been led up to by me. Policy, and policy alone, has been the rule of my conduct for many years past; and when I say that I have saved my family by it, I believe time will show that I am within the truth. I hope you don’t let your passions outrun your policy, as so many young men are apt to do. Better be poor and politic, than rich and headstrong: that’s the opinion of an old man. However, I was going to say that it was purely from policy that I allowed a friendship to develop between my daughter and Miss Power, and now events are proving the wisdom of my course. Straws show how the wind blows, and there are little signs that my son Captain De Stancy will return to Stancy Castle by

the fortunate step of marrying its owner. I say nothing to either of them, and they say nothing to me; but my wisdom lies in doing nothing to hinder such a consummation, despite inherited prejudices.'

Somerset had quite time enough to rein himself in during the old gentleman's locution, and the voice in which he answered was so cold and reckless that it did not seem his own: 'But how will they live happily together when she is a Dissenter, and a Radical, and a New-light, and a Neo-Greek, and a person of red blood; while Captain De Stancy is the reverse of them all!'

'I anticipate no difficulty on that score,' said the baronet. 'My son's star lies in that direction, and, like the Magi, he is following it without trifling with his opportunity. You have skill in architecture, therefore you follow it. My son has skill in gallantry, and now he is about to exercise it profitably.'

'May nobody wish him more harm in that exercise than I do!' said Somerset fervently.

A stagnant moodiness of several hours which followed his visit to Myrtle Villa resulted in a resolve to journey over to Paula the very next day. He now felt perfectly convinced that the inviting of Captain De Stancy to visit them at Nice was a second stage in the scheme of Paula's uncle, the premature announcement of her marriage having been the first. The roundness and neatness of the whole plan could not fail to recommend it to the mind which delighted in putting involved things straight, and such a mind Abner Power's seemed to be. In fact, the felicity, in a politic sense, of pairing the captain with the heiress furnished no little excuse for manoeuvring to bring it about, so long as that manoeuvring fell short of unfairness, which Mr. Power's could scarcely be said to do.

The next day was spent in furnishing the builders with such instructions as they might require for a coming week or ten days, and in dropping a short note to Paula; ending as follows: —

'I am coming to see you. Possibly you will refuse me an interview. Never mind, I am coming — Yours, G. SOMERSET.'

The morning after that he was up and away. Between him and Paula stretched nine hundred miles by the line of journey that he found it necessary to adopt, namely, the way of London, in order to inform his father of his movements and to make one or two business calls. The afternoon was passed in attending to these matters, the night in speeding onward, and by the time that nine o'clock sounded next morning through the sunless and leaden air of the English Channel coasts, he had reduced the number of miles on his list by two hundred, and cut off the sea from the impediments between him and Paula.

On awakening from a fitful sleep in the grey dawn of the morning following he looked out upon Lyons, quiet enough now, the citizens unaroused to the daily round of bread-winning, and enveloped in a haze of fog.

Six hundred and fifty miles of his journey had been got over; there still intervened two hundred and fifty between him and the end of suspense. When he thought of that

he was disinclined to pause; and pressed on by the same train, which set him down at Marseilles at mid-day.

Here he considered. By going on to Nice that afternoon he would arrive at too late an hour to call upon her the same evening: it would therefore be advisable to sleep in Marseilles and proceed the next morning to his journey's end, so as to meet her in a brighter condition than he could boast of to-day. This he accordingly did, and leaving Marseilles the next morning about eight, found himself at Nice early in the afternoon.

Now that he was actually at the centre of his gravitation he seemed even further away from a feasible meeting with her than in England. While afar off, his presence at Nice had appeared to be the one thing needful for the solution of his trouble, but the very house fronts seemed now to ask him what right he had there. Unluckily, in writing from England, he had not allowed her time to reply before his departure, so that he did not know what difficulties might lie in the way of her seeing him privately. Before deciding what to do, he walked down the Avenue de la Gare to the promenade between the shore and the Jardin Public, and sat down to think.

The hotel which she had given him as her address looked right out upon him and the sea beyond, and he rested there with the pleasing hope that her eyes might glance from a window and discover his form. Everything in the scene was sunny and gay. Behind him in the gardens a band was playing; before him was the sea, the Great sea, the historical and original Mediterranean; the sea of innumerable characters in history and legend that arranged themselves before him in a long frieze of memories so diverse as to include both AENEAS and St. Paul.

Northern eyes are not prepared on a sudden for the impact of such images of warmth and colour as meet them southward, or for the vigorous light that falls from the sky of this favoured shore. In any other circumstances the transparency and serenity of the air, the perfume of the sea, the radiant houses, the palms and flowers, would have acted upon Somerset as an enchantment, and wrapped him in a reverie; but at present he only saw and felt these things as through a thick glass which kept out half their atmosphere.

At last he made up his mind. He would take up his quarters at her hotel, and catch echoes of her and her people, to learn somehow if their attitude towards him as a lover were actually hostile, before formally encountering them. Under this crystalline light, full of gaieties, sentiment, languor, seductiveness, and ready-made romance, the memory of a solitary unimportant man in the lugubrious North might have faded from her mind. He was only her hired designer. He was an artist; but he had been engaged by her, and was not a volunteer; and she did not as yet know that he meant to accept no return for his labours but the pleasure of presenting them to her as a love-offering.

So off he went at once towards the imposing building whither his letters had preceded him. Owing to a press of visitors there was a moment's delay before he could be attended to at the bureau, and he turned to the large staircase that confronted him, momentarily hoping that her figure might descend. Her skirts must indeed have

brushed the carpeting of those steps scores of times. He engaged his room, ordered his luggage to be sent for, and finally inquired for the party he sought.

‘They left Nice yesterday, monsieur,’ replied madame.

Was she quite sure, Somerset asked her?

Yes, she was quite sure. Two of the hotel carriages had driven them to the station. Did she know where they had gone to?

This and other inquiries resulted in the information that they had gone to the hotel at Monte Carlo; that how long they were going to stay there, and whether they were coming back again, was not known. His final question whether Miss Power had received a letter from England which must have arrived the day previous was answered in the affirmative.

Somerset’s first and sudden resolve was to follow on after them to the hotel named; but he finally decided to make his immediate visit to Monte Carlo only a cautious reconnoitre, returning to Nice to sleep.

Accordingly, after an early dinner, he again set forth through the broad Avenue de la Gare, and an hour on the coast railway brought him to the beautiful and sinister little spot to which the Power and De Stancy party had strayed in common with the rest of the frivolous throng.

He assumed that their visit thither would be chiefly one of curiosity, and therefore not prolonged. This proved to be the case in even greater measure than he had anticipated. On inquiry at the hotel he learnt that they had stayed only one night, leaving a short time before his arrival, though it was believed that some of the party were still in the town.

In a state of indecision Somerset strolled into the gardens of the Casino, and looked out upon the sea. There it still lay, calm yet lively; of an unmixed blue, yet variegated; hushed, but articulate even to melodiousness. Everything about and around this coast appeared indeed jaunty, tuneful, and at ease, reciprocating with heartiness the rays of the splendid sun; everything, except himself. The palms and flowers on the terraces before him were undisturbed by a single cold breath. The marble work of parapets and steps was unsplintered by frosts. The whole was like a conservatory with the sky for its dome.

For want of other occupation he went round towards the public entrance to the Casino, and ascended the great staircase into the pillared hall. It was possible, after all, that upon leaving the hotel and sending on their luggage they had taken another turn through the rooms, to follow by a later train. With more than curiosity he scanned first the reading-rooms, only however to see not a face that he knew. He then crossed the vestibule to the gaming-tables.

CHAPTER IV.

Here he was confronted by a heated phantasmagoria of splendour and a high pressure of suspense that seemed to make the air quiver. A low whisper of conversation prevailed, which might probably have been not wrongly defined as the lowest note of social harmony.

The people gathered at this negative pole of industry had come from all civilized countries; their tongues were familiar with many forms of utterance, that of each racial group or type being unintelligible in its subtler variations, if not entirely, to the rest. But the language of meum and tuum they collectively comprehended without translation. In a half-charmed spell-bound state they had congregated in knots, standing, or sitting in hollow circles round the notorious oval tables marked with figures and lines. The eyes of all these sets of people were watching the Roulette. Somerset went from table to table, looking among the loungers rather than among the regular players, for faces, or at least for one face, which did not meet his gaze.

The suggestive charm which the centuries-old impersonality Gaming, rather than games and gamesters, had for Somerset, led him to loiter on even when his hope of meeting any of the Power and De Stancy party had vanished. As a non-participant in its profits and losses, fevers and frenzies, it had that stage effect upon his imagination which is usually exercised over those who behold Chance presented to them with spectacular piquancy without advancing far enough in its acquaintance to suffer from its ghastly reprisals and impish tricks. He beheld a hundred diametrically opposed wishes issuing from the murky intelligences around a table, and spreading down across each other upon the figured diagram in their midst, each to its own number. It was a network of hopes; which at the announcement, 'Sept, Rouge, Impair, et Manque,' disappeared like magic gossamer, to be replaced in a moment by new. That all the people there, including himself, could be interested in what to the eye of perfect reason was a somewhat monotonous thing — the property of numbers to recur at certain longer or shorter intervals in a machine containing them — in other words, the blind groping after fractions of a result the whole of which was well known — was one testimony among many of the powerlessness of logic when confronted with imagination.

At this juncture our loungeer discerned at one of the tables about the last person in the world he could have wished to encounter there. It was Dare, whom he had supposed to be a thousand miles off, hanging about the purlieu of Markton.

Dare was seated beside a table in an attitude of application which seemed to imply that he had come early and engaged in this pursuit in a systematic manner. Somerset had never witnessed Dare and De Stancy together, neither had he heard of any engagement of Dare by the travelling party as artist, courier, or otherwise; and yet it crossed his mind that Dare might have had something to do with them, or at least have seen them. This possibility was enough to overmaster Somerset's reluctance to speak to the young man, and he did so as soon as an opportunity occurred.

Dare's face was as rigid and dry as if it had been encrusted with plaster, and he was like one turned into a computing machine which no longer had the power of feeling. He recognized Somerset as indifferently as if he had met him in the ward of Stancy Castle, and replying to his remarks by a word or two, concentrated on the game anew.

'Are you here alone?' said Somerset presently.

'Quite alone.' There was a silence, till Dare added, 'But I have seen some friends of yours.' He again became absorbed in the events of the table. Somerset retreated a few steps, and pondered the question whether Dare could know where they had gone. He disliked to be beholden to Dare for information, but he would give a great deal to know. While pausing he watched Dare's play. He staked only five-franc pieces, but it was done with an assiduity worthy of larger coin. At every half-minute or so he placed his money on a certain spot, and as regularly had the mortification of seeing it swept away by the croupier's rake. After a while he varied his procedure. He risked his money, which from the look of his face seemed rather to have dwindled than increased, less recklessly against long odds than before. Leaving off backing numbers en plein, he laid his venture a cheval; then tried it upon the dozens; then upon two numbers; then upon a square; and, apparently getting nearer and nearer defeat, at last upon the simple chances of even or odd, over or under, red or black. Yet with a few fluctuations in his favour fortune bore steadily against him, till he could breast her blows no longer. He rose from the table and came towards Somerset, and they both moved on together into the entrance-hall.

Dare was at that moment the victim of an overpowering mania for more money. His presence in the South of Europe had its origin, as may be guessed, in Captain De Stancy's journey in the same direction, whom he had followed, and troubled with persistent request for more funds, carefully keeping out of sight of Paula and the rest. His dream of involving Paula in the De Stancy pedigree knew no abatement. But Somerset had lighted upon him at an instant when that idea, though not displaced, was overwhelmed by a rage for play. In hope of being able to continue it by Somerset's aid he was prepared to do almost anything to please the architect.

'You asked me,' said Dare, stroking his impassive brow, 'if I had seen anything of the Powers. I have seen them; and if I can be of any use to you in giving information about them I shall only be too glad.'

'What information can you give?'

'I can tell you where they are gone to.'

'Where?'

'To the Grand Hotel, Genoa. They went on there this afternoon.'

'Whom do you refer to by they?'

'Mrs. Goodman, Mr. Power, Miss Power, Miss De Stancy, and the worthy captain. He leaves them tomorrow: he comes back here for a day on his way to England.'

Somerset was silent. Dare continued: 'Now I have done you a favour, will you do me one in return?'

Somerset looked towards the gaming-rooms, and said dubiously, 'Well?'

‘Lend me two hundred francs.’

‘Yes,’ said Somerset; ‘but on one condition: that I don’t give them to you till you are inside the hotel you are staying at.’

‘That can’t be; it’s at Nice.’

‘Well I am going back to Nice, and I’ll lend you the money the instant we get there.’

‘But I want it here, now, instantly!’ cried Dare; and for the first time there was a wiry unreasonableness in his voice that fortified his companion more firmly than ever in his determination to lend the young man no money whilst he remained inside that building.

‘You want it to throw it away. I don’t approve of it; so come with me.’

‘But,’ said Dare, ‘I arrived here with a hundred napoleons and more, expressly to work out my theory of chances and recurrences, which is sound; I have studied it hundreds of times by the help of this.’ He partially drew from his pocket the little volume that we have before seen in his hands. ‘If I only persevere in my system, the certainty that I must win is almost mathematical. I have staked and lost two hundred and thirty-three times. Allowing out of that one chance in every thirty-six, which is the average of zero being marked, and two hundred and four times for the backers of the other numbers, I have the mathematical expectation of six times at least, which would nearly recoup me. And shall I, then, sacrifice that vast foundation of waste chances that I have laid down, and paid for, merely for want of a little ready money?’

‘You might persevere for a twelvemonth, and still not get the better of your reverses. Time tells in favour of the bank. Just imagine for the sake of argument that all the people who have ever placed a stake upon a certain number to be one person playing continuously. Has that imaginary person won? The existence of the bank is a sufficient answer.’

‘But a particular player has the option of leaving off at any point favourable to himself, which the bank has not; and there’s my opportunity.’

‘Which from your mood you will be sure not to take advantage of.’

‘I shall go on playing,’ said Dare doggedly.

‘Not with my money.’

‘Very well; we won’t part as enemies,’ replied Dare, with the flawless politeness of a man whose speech has no longer any kinship with his feelings. ‘Shall we share a bottle of wine? You will not? Well, I hope your luck with your lady will be more magnificent than mine has been here; but — mind Captain De Stancy! he’s a fearful wildfowl for you.’

‘He’s a harmless inoffensive soldier, as far as I know. If he is not — let him be what he may for me.’

‘And do his worst to cut you out, I suppose?’

‘Ay — if you will.’ Somerset, much against his judgment, was being stimulated by these pricks into words of irritation. ‘Captain De Stancy might, I think, be better employed than in dangling at the heels of a lady who can well dispense with his company. And you might be better employed than in wasting your wages here.’

‘Wages — a fit word for my money. May I ask you at what stage in the appearance of a man whose way of existence is unknown, his money ceases to be called wages and begins to be called means?’

Somerset turned and left him without replying, Dare following his receding figure with a look of ripe resentment, not less likely to vent itself in mischief from the want of moral ballast in him who emitted it. He then fixed a nettled and unsatisfied gaze upon the gaming-rooms, and in another minute or two left the Casino also.

Dare and Somerset met no more that day. The latter returned to Nice by the evening train and went straight to the hotel. He now thanked his fortune that he had not precipitately given up his room there, for a telegram from Paula awaited him. His hand almost trembled as he opened it, to read the following few short words, dated from the Grand Hotel, Genoa: —

‘Letter received. Am glad to hear of your journey. We are not returning to Nice, but stay here a week. I direct this at a venture.’

This tantalising message — the first breaking of her recent silence — was saucy, almost cruel, in its dry frigidity. It led him to give up his idea of following at once to Genoa. That was what she obviously expected him to do, and it was possible that his non-arrival might draw a letter or message from her of a sweeter composition than this. That would at least be the effect of his tardiness if she cared in the least for him; if she did not he could bear the worst. The argument was good enough as far as it went, but, like many more, failed from the narrowness of its premises, the contingent intervention of Dare being entirely undreamt of. It was altogether a fatal miscalculation, which cost him dear.

Passing by the telegraph-office in the Rue Pont-Neuf at an early hour the next morning he saw Dare coming out from the door. It was Somerset’s momentary impulse to thank Dare for the information given as to Paula’s whereabouts, information which had now proved true. But Dare did not seem to appreciate his friendliness, and after a few words of studied civility the young man moved on.

And well he might. Five minutes before that time he had thrown open a gulf of treachery between himself and the architect which nothing in life could ever close. Before leaving the telegraph-office Dare had despatched the following message to Paula direct, as a set-off against what he called Somerset’s ingratitude for valuable information, though it was really the fruit of many passions, motives, and desires: —

‘G. Somerset, Nice, to Miss Power, Grand Hotel, Genoa.

‘Have lost all at Monte Carlo. Have learnt that Captain D. S. returns here to-morrow. Please send me one hundred pounds by him, and save me from disgrace. Will await him at eleven o’clock and four, on the Pont-Neuf.’

CHAPTER V.

Five hours after the despatch of that telegram Captain De Stancy was rattling along the coast railway of the Riviera from Genoa to Nice. He was returning to England by way of Marseilles; but before turning northwards he had engaged to perform on Miss Power's account a peculiar and somewhat disagreeable duty. This was to place in Somerset's hands a hundred and twenty-five napoleons which had been demanded from her by a message in Somerset's name. The money was in his pocket — all in gold, in a canvas bag, tied up by Paula's own hands, which he had observed to tremble as she tied it.

As he leaned in the corner of the carriage he was thinking over the events of the morning which had culminated in that liberal response. At ten o'clock, before he had gone out from the hotel where he had taken up his quarters, which was not the same as the one patronized by Paula and her friends, he had been summoned to her presence in a manner so unexpected as to imply that something serious was in question. On entering her room he had been struck by the absence of that saucy independence usually apparent in her bearing towards him, notwithstanding the persistency with which he had hovered near her for the previous month, and gradually, by the position of his sister, and the favour of Paula's uncle in intercepting one of Somerset's letters and several of his telegrams, established himself as an intimate member of the travelling party. His entry, however, this time as always, had had the effect of a tonic, and it was quite with her customary self-possession that she had told him of the object of her message.

'You think of returning to Nice this afternoon?' she inquired.

De Stancy informed her that such was his intention, and asked if he could do anything for her there.

Then, he remembered, she had hesitated. 'I have received a telegram,' she said at length; and so she allowed to escape her bit by bit the information that her architect, whose name she seemed reluctant to utter, had travelled from England to Nice that week, partly to consult her, partly for a holiday trip; that he had gone on to Monte Carlo, had there lost his money and got into difficulties, and had appealed to her to help him out of them by the immediate advance of some ready cash. It was a sad case, an unexpected case, she murmured, with her eyes fixed on the window. Indeed she could not comprehend it.

To De Stancy there appeared nothing so very extraordinary in Somerset's apparent fiasco, except in so far as that he should have applied to Paula for relief from his distresses instead of elsewhere. It was a self-humiliation which a lover would have avoided at all costs, he thought. Yet after a momentary reflection on his theory of Somerset's character, it seemed sufficiently natural that he should lean persistently on Paula, if only with a view of keeping himself linked to her memory, without thinking too profoundly of his own dignity. That the esteem in which she had held Somerset up to that hour suffered a tremendous blow by his apparent scrape was clearly visible

in her, reticent as she was; and De Stancy, while pitying Somerset, thanked him in his mind for having gratuitously given a rival an advantage which that rival's attentions had never been able to gain of themselves.

After a little further conversation she had said: 'Since you are to be my messenger, I must tell you that I have decided to send the hundred pounds asked for, and you will please to deliver them into no hands but his own.' A curious little blush crept over her sobered face — perhaps it was a blush of shame at the conduct of the young man in whom she had of late been suspiciously interested — as she added, 'He will be on the Pont-Neuf at four this afternoon and again at eleven tomorrow. Can you meet him there?'

'Certainly,' De Stancy replied.

She then asked him, rather anxiously, how he could account for Mr. Somerset knowing that he, Captain De Stancy, was about to return to Nice?

De Stancy informed her that he left word at the hotel of his intention to return, which was quite true; moreover, there did not lurk in his mind at the moment of speaking the faintest suspicion that Somerset had seen Dare.

She then tied the bag and handed it to him, leaving him with a serene and impenetrable bearing, which he hoped for his own sake meant an acquired indifference to Somerset and his fortunes. Her sending the architect a sum of money which she could easily spare might be set down to natural generosity towards a man with whom she was artistically co-operating for the improvement of her home.

She came back to him again for a moment. 'Could you possibly get there before four this afternoon?' she asked, and he informed her that he could just do so by leaving almost at once, which he was very willing to do, though by so forestalling his time he would lose the projected morning with her and the rest at the Palazzo Doria.

'I may tell you that I shall not go to the Palazzo Doria either, if it is any consolation to you to know it,' was her reply. 'I shall sit indoors and think of you on your journey.'

The answer admitted of two translations, and conjectures thereon filled the gallant soldier's mind during the greater part of the journey. He arrived at the hotel they had all stayed at in succession about six hours after Somerset had left it for a little excursion to San Remo and its neighbourhood, as a means of passing a few days till Paula should write again to inquire why he had not come on. De Stancy saw no one he knew, and in obedience to Paula's commands he promptly set off on foot for the Pont-Neuf.

Though opposed to the architect as a lover, De Stancy felt for him as a poor devil in need of money, having had experiences of that sort himself, and he was really anxious that the needful supply entrusted to him should reach Somerset's hands. He was on the bridge five minutes before the hour, and when the clock struck a hand was laid on his shoulder: turning he beheld Dare.

Knowing that the youth was loitering somewhere along the coast, for they had frequently met together on De Stancy's previous visit, the latter merely said, 'Don't

bother me for the present, Willy, I have an engagement. You can see me at the hotel this evening.'

'When you have given me the hundred pounds I will fly like a rocket, captain,' said the young gentleman. 'I keep the appointment instead of the other man.'

De Stancy looked hard at him. 'How — do you know about this?' he asked breathlessly.

'I have seen him.'

De Stancy took the young man by the two shoulders and gazed into his eyes. The scrutiny seemed not altogether to remove the suspicion which had suddenly started up in his mind. 'My soul,' he said, dropping his arms, 'can this be true?'

'What?'

'You know.'

Dare shrugged his shoulders; 'Are you going to hand over the money or no?' he said.

'I am going to make inquiries,' said De Stancy, walking away with a vehement tread.

'Captain, you are without natural affection,' said Dare, walking by his side, in a tone which showed his fear that he had over-estimated that emotion. 'See what I have done for you. You have been my constant care and anxiety for I can't tell how long. I have stayed awake at night thinking how I might best give you a good start in the world by arranging this judicious marriage, when you have been sleeping as sound as a top with no cares upon your mind at all, and now I have got into a scrape — as the most thoughtful of us may sometimes — you go to make inquiries.'

'I have promised the lady to whom this money belongs — whose generosity has been shamefully abused in some way — that I will deliver it into no hands but those of one man, and he has not yet appeared. I therefore go to find him.'

Dare laid his hand upon De Stancy's arm. 'Captain, we are both warm, and punctilious on points of honour; this will come to a split between us if we don't mind. So, not to bring matters to a crisis, lend me ten pounds here to enable me to get home, and I'll disappear.'

In a state bordering on distraction, eager to get the young man out of his sight before worse revelations should rise up between them, De Stancy without pausing in his walk gave him the sum demanded. He soon reached the post-office, where he inquired if a Mr. Somerset had left any directions for forwarding letters.

It was just what Somerset had done. De Stancy was told that Mr. Somerset had commanded that any letters should be sent on to him at the Hotel Victoria, San Remo.

It was now evident that the scheme of getting money from Paula was either of Dare's invention, or that Somerset, ashamed of his first impulse, had abandoned it as speedily as it had been formed. De Stancy turned and went out. Dare, in keeping with his promise, had vanished. Captain De Stancy resolved to do nothing in the case till further events should enlighten him, beyond sending a line to Miss Power to inform her that Somerset had not appeared, and that he therefore retained the money for further instructions.

BOOK THE FIFTH. DE STANCY AND PAULA.

CHAPTER I.

Miss Power was reclining on a red velvet couch in the bedroom of an old-fashioned red hotel at Strassburg, and her friend Miss De Stancy was sitting by a window of the same apartment. They were both rather wearied by a long journey of the previous day. The hotel overlooked the large open Kleber Platz, erect in the midst of which the bronze statue of General Kleber received the rays of a warm sun that was powerless to brighten him. The whole square, with its people and vehicles going to and fro as if they had plenty of time, was visible to Charlotte in her chair; but Paula from her horizontal position could see nothing below the level of the many dormered house-tops on the opposite side of the Platz. After watching this upper storey of the city for some time in silence, she asked Charlotte to hand her a binocular lying on the table, through which instrument she quietly regarded the distant roofs.

‘What strange and philosophical creatures storks are,’ she said. ‘They give a taciturn, ghostly character to the whole town.’

The birds were crossing and recrossing the field of the glass in their flight hither and thither between the Strassburg chimneys, their sad grey forms sharply outlined against the sky, and their skinny legs showing beneath like the limbs of dead martyrs in Crivelli’s emaciated imaginings. The indifference of these birds to all that was going on beneath them impressed her: to harmonize with their solemn and silent movements the houses beneath should have been deserted, and grass growing in the streets.

Behind the long roofs thus visible to Paula over the window-sill, with their tiers of dormer-windows, rose the cathedral spire in airy openwork, forming the highest object in the scene; it suggested something which for a long time she appeared unwilling to utter; but natural instinct had its way.

‘A place like this,’ she said, ‘where he can study Gothic architecture, would, I should have thought, be a spot more congenial to him than Monaco.’

The person referred to was the misrepresented Somerset, whom the two had been gingerly discussing from time to time, allowing any casual subject, such as that of the storks, to interrupt the personal one at every two or three sentences.

‘It would be more like him to be here,’ replied Miss De Stancy, trusting her tongue with only the barest generalities on this matter.

Somerset was again dismissed for the stork topic, but Paula could not let him alone; and she presently resumed, as if an irresistible fascination compelled what judgment had forbidden: ‘The strongest-minded persons are sometimes caught unawares at that place, if they once think they will retrieve their first losses; and I am not aware that he is particularly strong-minded.’

For a moment Charlotte looked at her with a mixed expression, in which there was deprecation that a woman with any feeling should criticize Somerset so frigidly,

and relief that it was Paula who did so. For, notwithstanding her assumption that Somerset could never be anything more to her than he was already, Charlotte's heart would occasionally step down and trouble her views so expressed.

Whether looking through a glass at distant objects enabled Paula to bottle up her affection for the absent one, or whether her friend Charlotte had so little personality in Paula's regard that she could commune with her as with a lay figure, it was certain that she evinced remarkable ease in speaking of Somerset, resuming her words about him in the tone of one to whom he was at most an ordinary professional adviser. 'It would be very awkward for the works at the castle if he has got into a scrape. I suppose the builders were well posted with instructions before he left: but he ought certainly to return soon. Why did he leave England at all just now?'

'Perhaps it was to see you.'

'He should have waited; it would not have been so dreadfully long to May or June. Charlotte, how can a man who does such a hare-brained thing as this be deemed trustworthy in an important work like that of rebuilding Stancy Castle?'

There was such stress in the inquiry that, whatever factitiousness had gone before, Charlotte perceived Paula to be at last speaking her mind; and it seemed as if Somerset must have considerably lost ground in her opinion, or she would not have criticized him thus.

'My brother will tell us full particulars when he comes: perhaps it is not at all as we suppose,' said Charlotte. She strained her eyes across the Platz and added, 'He ought to have been here before this time.'

While they waited and talked, Paula still observing the storks, the hotel omnibus came round the corner from the station. 'I believe he has arrived,' resumed Miss De Stancy; 'I see something that looks like his portmanteau on the top of the omnibus... Yes; it is his baggage. I'll run down to him.'

De Stancy had obtained six weeks' additional leave on account of his health, which had somewhat suffered in India. The first use he made of his extra time was in hastening back to meet the travelling ladies here at Strassburg. Mr. Power and Mrs. Goodman were also at the hotel, and when Charlotte got downstairs, the former was welcoming De Stancy at the door.

Paula had not seen him since he set out from Genoa for Nice, commissioned by her to deliver the hundred pounds to Somerset. His note, stating that he had failed to meet Somerset, contained no details, and she guessed that he would soon appear before her now to answer any question about that peculiar errand.

Her anticipations were justified by the event; she had no sooner gone into the next sitting-room than Charlotte De Stancy appeared and asked if her brother might come up. The closest observer would have been in doubt whether Paula's ready reply in the affirmative was prompted by personal consideration for De Stancy, or by a hope to hear more of his mission to Nice. As soon as she had welcomed him she reverted at once to the subject.

‘Yes, as I told you, he was not at the place of meeting,’ De Stancy replied. And taking from his pocket the bag of ready money he placed it intact upon the table.

De Stancy did this with a hand that shook somewhat more than a long railway journey was adequate to account for; and in truth it was the vision of Dare’s position which agitated the unhappy captain: for had that young man, as De Stancy feared, been tampering with Somerset’s name, his fate now trembled in the balance; Paula would unquestionably and naturally invoke the aid of the law against him if she discovered such an imposition.

‘Were you punctual to the time mentioned?’ she asked curiously.

De Stancy replied in the affirmative.

‘Did you wait long?’ she continued.

‘Not very long,’ he answered, his instinct to screen the possibly guilty one confining him to guarded statements, while still adhering to the literal truth.

‘Why was that?’

‘Somebody came and told me that he would not appear.’

‘Who?’

‘A young man who has been acting as his clerk. His name is Dare. He informed me that Mr. Somerset could not keep the appointment.’

‘Why?’

‘He had gone on to San Remo.’

‘Has he been travelling with Mr. Somerset?’

‘He had been with him. They know each other very well. But as you commissioned me to deliver the money into no hands but Mr. Somerset’s, I adhered strictly to your instructions.’

‘But perhaps my instructions were not wise. Should it in your opinion have been sent by this young man? Was he commissioned to ask you for it?’

De Stancy murmured that Dare was not commissioned to ask for it; that upon the whole he deemed her instructions wise; and was still of opinion that the best thing had been done.

Although De Stancy was distracted between his desire to preserve Dare from the consequences of folly, and a gentlemanly wish to keep as close to the truth as was compatible with that condition, his answers had not appeared to Paula to be particularly evasive, the conjuncture being one in which a handsome heiress’s shrewdness was prone to overleap itself by setting down embarrassment on the part of the man she questioned to a mere lover’s difficulty in steering between honour and rivalry.

She put but one other question. ‘Did it appear as if he, Mr. Somerset, after telegraphing, had — had — regretted doing so, and evaded the result by not keeping the appointment?’

‘That’s just how it appears.’ The words, which saved Dare from ignominy, cost De Stancy a good deal. He was sorry for Somerset, sorry for himself, and very sorry for Paula. But Dare was to De Stancy what Somerset could never be: and ‘for his kin that is near unto him shall a man be defiled.’

After that interview Charlotte saw with warring impulses that Somerset slowly diminished in Paula's estimate; slowly as the moon wanes, but as certainly. Charlotte's own love was of a clinging, uncritical sort, and though the shadowy intelligence of Somerset's doings weighed down her soul with regret, it seemed to make not the least difference in her affection for him.

In the afternoon the whole party, including De Stancy, drove about the streets. Here they looked at the house in which Goethe had lived, and afterwards entered the cathedral. Observing in the south transept a crowd of people waiting patiently, they were reminded that they unwittingly stood in the presence of the popular clock-work of Schwilgue.

Mr. Power and Mrs. Goodman decided that they would wait with the rest of the idlers and see the puppets perform at the striking. Charlotte also waited with them; but as it wanted eight minutes to the hour, and as Paula had seen the show before, she moved on into the nave.

Presently she found that De Stancy had followed. He did not come close till she, seeing him stand silent, said, 'If it were not for this cathedral, I should not like the city at all; and I have even seen cathedrals I like better. Luckily we are going on to Baden to-morrow.'

'Your uncle has just told me. He has asked me to keep you company.'

'Are you intending to?' said Paula, probing the base-moulding of a pier with her parasol.

'I have nothing better to do, nor indeed half so good,' said De Stancy. 'I am abroad for my health, you know, and what's like the Rhine and its neighbourhood in early summer, before the crowd comes? It is delightful to wander about there, or anywhere, like a child, influenced by no fixed motive more than that of keeping near some friend, or friends, including the one we most admire in the world.'

'That sounds perilously like love-making.'

'Tis love indeed.'

'Well, love is natural to men, I suppose,' rejoined the young lady. 'But you must love within bounds; or you will be enervated, and cease to be useful as a heavy arm of the service.'

'My dear Miss Power, your didactic and respectable rules won't do for me. If you expect straws to stop currents, you are sadly mistaken! But no — let matters be: I am a happy contented mortal at present, say what you will... You don't ask why? Perhaps you know. It is because all I care for in the world is near me, and that I shall never be more than a hundred yards from her as long as the present arrangement continues.'

'We are in a cathedral, remember, Captain De Stancy, and should not keep up a secular conversation.'

'If I had never said worse in a cathedral than what I have said here, I should be content to meet my eternal judge without absolution. Your uncle asked me this morning how I liked you.'

'Well, there was no harm in that.'

‘How I like you! Harm, no; but you should have seen how silly I looked. Fancy the inadequacy of the expression when my whole sense is absorbed by you.’

‘Men allow themselves to be made ridiculous by their own feelings in an inconceivable way.’

‘True, I am a fool; but forgive me,’ he rejoined, observing her gaze, which wandered critically from roof to clerestory, and then to the pillars, without once lighting on him. ‘Don’t mind saying Yes. — You look at this thing and that thing, but you never look at me, though I stand here and see nothing but you.’

‘There, the clock is striking — and the cock crows. Please go across to the transept and tell them to come out this way.’

De Stancy went. When he had gone a few steps he turned his head. She had at last ceased to study the architecture, and was looking at him. Perhaps his words had struck her, for it seemed at that moment as if he read in her bright eyes a genuine interest in him and his fortunes.

CHAPTER II.

Next day they went on to Baden. De Stancy was beginning to cultivate the passion of love even more as an escape from the gloomy relations of his life than as matrimonial strategy. Paula’s juxtaposition had the attribute of making him forget everything in his own history. She was a magic alterative; and the most foolish boyish shape into which he could throw his feelings for her was in this respect to be aimed at as the act of highest wisdom.

He supplemented the natural warmth of feeling that she had wrought in him by every artificial means in his power, to make the distraction the more complete. He had not known anything like this self-obscuration for a dozen years, and when he conjectured that she might really learn to love him he felt exalted in his own eyes and purified from the dross of his former life. Such uneasiness of conscience as arose when he suddenly remembered Dare, and the possibility that Somerset was getting ousted unfairly, had its weight in depressing him; but he was inclined to accept his fortune without much question.

The journey to Baden, though short, was not without incidents on which he could work out this curious hobby of cultivating to superlative power an already positive passion. Handing her in and out of the carriage, accidentally getting brushed by her clothes, of all such as this he made available fuel. Paula, though she might have guessed the general nature of what was going on, seemed unconscious of the refinements he was trying to throw into it, and sometimes, when in stepping into or from a railway carriage she unavoidably put her hand upon his arm, the obvious insignificance she attached to the action struck him with misgiving.

One of the first things they did at Baden was to stroll into the Trink-halle, where Paula sipped the water. She was about to put down the glass, when De Stancy quickly took it from her hands as though to make use of it himself.

‘O, if that is what you mean,’ she said mischievously, ‘you should have noticed the exact spot. It was there.’ She put her finger on a particular portion of its edge.

‘You ought not to act like that, unless you mean something, Miss Power,’ he replied gravely.

‘Tell me more plainly.’

‘I mean, you should not do things which excite in me the hope that you care something for me, unless you really do.’

‘I put my finger on the edge and said it was there.’

‘Meaning, “It was there my lips touched; let yours do the same.”’

‘The latter part I wholly deny,’ she answered, with disregard, after which she went away, and kept between Charlotte and her aunt for the rest of the afternoon.

Since the receipt of the telegram Paula had been frequently silent; she frequently stayed in alone, and sometimes she became quite gloomy — an altogether unprecedented phase for her. This was the case on the morning after the incident in the Trink-halle. Not to intrude on her, Charlotte walked about the landings of the sunny white hotel in which they had taken up their quarters, went down into the court, and petted the tortoises that were creeping about there among the flowers and plants; till at last, on going to her friend, she caught her reading some old letters of Somerset’s.

Paula made no secret of them, and Miss De Stancy could see that more than half were written on blue paper, with diagrams amid the writing: they were, in fact, simply those sheets of his letters which related to the rebuilding. Nevertheless, Charlotte fancied she had caught Paula in a sentimental mood; and doubtless could Somerset have walked in at this moment instead of Charlotte it might have fared well with him, so insidiously do tender memories reassert themselves in the face of outward mishaps.

They took a drive down the Lichtenthal road and then into the forest, De Stancy and Abner Power riding on horseback alongside. The sun streamed yellow behind their backs as they wound up the long inclines, lighting the red trunks, and even the blue-black foliage itself. The summer had already made impression upon that mass of uniform colour by tipping every twig with a tiny sprout of virescent yellow; while the minute sounds which issued from the forest revealed that the apparently still place was becoming a perfect reservoir of insect life.

Abner Power was quite sentimental that day. ‘In such places as these,’ he said, as he rode alongside Mrs. Goodman, ‘nature’s powers in the multiplication of one type strike me as much as the grandeur of the mass.’

Mrs. Goodman agreed with him, and Paula said, ‘The foliage forms the roof of an interminable green crypt, the pillars being the trunks, and the vault the interlacing boughs.’

‘It is a fine place in a thunderstorm,’ said De Stancy. ‘I am not an enthusiast, but to see the lightning spring hither and thither, like lazy-tongs, bristling, and striking, and vanishing, is rather impressive.’

‘It must be indeed,’ said Paula.

‘And in the winter winds these pines sigh like ten thousand spirits in trouble.’

‘Indeed they must,’ said Paula.

‘At the same time I know a little fir-plantation about a mile square not far from Markton,’ said De Stancy, ‘which is precisely like this in miniature, — stems, colours, slopes, winds, and all. If we were to go there any time with a highly magnifying pair of spectacles it would look as fine as this — and save a deal of travelling.’

‘I know the place, and I agree with you,’ said Paula.

‘You agree with me on all subjects but one,’ he presently observed, in a voice not intended to reach the others.

Paula looked at him, but was silent.

Onward and upward they went, the same pattern and colour of tree repeating themselves endlessly, till in a couple of hours they reached the castle hill which was to be the end of their journey, and beheld stretched beneath them the valley of the Murg. They alighted and entered the fortress.

‘What did you mean by that look of kindness you bestowed upon me just now, when I said you agreed with me on all subjects but one?’ asked De Stancy half humorously, as he held open a little door for her, the others having gone ahead.

‘I meant, I suppose, that I was much obliged to you for not requiring agreement on that one subject,’ she said, passing on.

‘Not more than that?’ said De Stancy, as he followed her. ‘But whenever I involuntarily express towards you sentiments that there can be no mistaking, you seem truly compassionate.’

‘If I seem so, I feel so.’

‘If you mean no more than mere compassion, I wish you would show nothing at all, for your mistaken kindness is only preparing more misery for me than I should have if let alone to suffer without mercy.’

‘I implore you to be quiet, Captain De Stancy! Leave me, and look out of the window at the view here, or at the pictures, or at the armour, or whatever it is we are come to see.’

‘Very well. But pray don’t extract amusement from my harmless remarks. Such as they are I mean them.’

She stopped him by changing the subject, for they had entered an octagonal chamber on the first floor, presumably full of pictures and curiosities; but the shutters were closed, and only stray beams of light gleamed in to suggest what was there.

‘Can’t somebody open the windows?’ said Paula.

‘The attendant is about to do it,’ said her uncle; and as he spoke the shutters to the east were flung back, and one of the loveliest views in the forest disclosed itself outside.

Some of them stepped out upon the balcony. The river lay along the bottom of the valley, irradiated with a silver shine. Little rafts of pinewood floated on its surface like tiny splinters, the men who steered them not appearing larger than ants.

Paula stood on the balcony, looking for a few minutes upon the sight, and then came into the shadowy room, where De Stancy had remained. While the rest were still outside she resumed: 'You must not suppose that I shrink from the subject you so persistently bring before me. I respect deep affection — you know I do; but for me to say that I have any such for you, of the particular sort you only will be satisfied with, would be absurd. I don't feel it, and therefore there can be nothing between us. One would think it would be better to feel kindly towards you than to feel nothing at all. But if you object to that I'll try to feel nothing.'

'I don't really object to your sympathy,' said De Stancy, rather struck by her seriousness. 'But it is very saddening to think you can feel nothing more.'

'It must be so, since I CAN feel no more,' she decisively replied, adding, as she stopped her seriousness: 'You must pray for strength to get over it.'

'One thing I shall never pray for; to see you give yourself to another man. But I suppose I shall witness that some day.'

'You may,' she gravely returned.

'You have no doubt chosen him already,' cried the captain bitterly.

'No, Captain De Stancy,' she said shortly, a faint involuntary blush coming into her face as she guessed his allusion.

This, and a few glances round at the pictures and curiosities, completed their survey of the castle. De Stancy knew better than to trouble her further that day with special remarks. During the return journey he rode ahead with Mr. Power and she saw no more of him.

She would have been astonished had she heard the conversation of the two gentlemen as they wound gently downwards through the trees.

'As far as I am concerned,' Captain De Stancy's companion was saying, 'nothing would give me more unfeigned delight than that you should persevere and win her. But you must understand that I have no authority over her — nothing more than the natural influence that arises from my being her father's brother.'

'And for exercising that much, whatever it may be, in my favour I thank you heartily,' said De Stancy. 'But I am coming to the conclusion that it is useless to press her further. She is right! I am not the man for her. I am too old, and too poor; and I must put up as well as I can with her loss — drown her image in old Falernian till I embark in Charon's boat for good! — Really, if I had the industry I could write some good Horatian verses on my inauspicious situation!... Ah, well; — in this way I affect levity over my troubles; but in plain truth my life will not be the brightest without her.'

'Don't be down-hearted! you are too — too gentlemanly, De Stancy, in this matter — you are too soon put off — you should have a touch of the canvasser about you in approaching her; and not stick at things. You have my hearty invitation to travel with

us all the way till we cross to England, and there will be heaps of opportunities as we wander on. I'll keep a slow pace to give you time.'

'You are very good, my friend! Well, I will try again. I am full of doubt and indecision, mind, but at present I feel that I will try again. There is, I suppose, a slight possibility of something or other turning up in my favour, if it is true that the unexpected always happens — for I foresee no chance whatever... Which way do we go when we leave here to-morrow?'

'To Carlsruhe, she says, if the rest of us have no objection.'

'Carlsruhe, then, let it be, with all my heart; or anywhere.'

To Carlsruhe they went next day, after a night of soft rain which brought up a warm steam from the Schwarzwald valleys, and caused the young tufts and grasses to swell visibly in a few hours. After the Baden slopes the flat thoroughfares of 'Charles's Rest' seemed somewhat uninteresting, though a busy fair which was proceeding in the streets created a quaint and unexpected liveliness. On reaching the old-fashioned inn in the Lange-Strasse that they had fixed on, the women of the party betook themselves to their rooms and showed little inclination to see more of the world that day than could be gleaned from the hotel windows.

CHAPTER III.

While the malignant tongues had been playing havoc with Somerset's fame in the ears of Paula and her companion, the young man himself was proceeding partly by rail, partly on foot, below and amid the olive-clad hills, vineyards, carob groves, and lemon gardens of the Mediterranean shores. Arrived at San Remo he wrote to Nice to inquire for letters, and such as had come were duly forwarded; but not one of them was from Paula. This broke down his resolution to hold off, and he hastened directly to Genoa, regretting that he had not taken this step when he first heard that she was there.

Something in the very aspect of the marble halls of that city, which at any other time he would have liked to linger over, whispered to him that the bird had flown; and inquiry confirmed the fancy. Nevertheless, the architectural beauties of the palace-bordered street, looking as if mountains of marble must have been levelled to supply the materials for constructing it, detained him there two days: or rather a feat of resolution, by which he set himself to withstand the drag-chain of Paula's influence, was operative for that space of time.

At the end of it he moved onward. There was no difficulty in discovering their track northwards; and feeling that he might as well return to England by the Rhine route as by any other, he followed in the course they had chosen, getting scent of them in Strassburg, missing them at Baden by a day, and finally overtaking them at Carlsruhe, which town he reached on the morning after the Power and De Stancy party had taken up their quarters at the ancient inn above mentioned. When Somerset was about to

get out of the train at this place, little dreaming what a meaning the word Carlsruhe would have for him in subsequent years, he was disagreeably surprised to see no other than Dare stepping out of the adjoining carriage. A new brown leather valise in one of his hands, a new umbrella in the other, and a new suit of fashionable clothes on his back, seemed to denote considerable improvement in the young man's fortunes. Somerset was so struck by the circumstance of his being on this spot that he almost missed his opportunity for alighting.

Dare meanwhile had moved on without seeing his former employer, and Somerset resolved to take the chance that offered, and let him go. There was something so mysterious in their common presence simultaneously at one place, five hundred miles from where they had last met, that he exhausted conjecture on whether Dare's errand this way could have anything to do with his own, or whether their juxtaposition a second time was the result of pure accident. Greatly as he would have liked to get this answered by a direct question to Dare himself, he did not counteract his first instinct, and remained unseen.

They went out in different directions, when Somerset for the first time remembered that, in learning at Baden that the party had flitted towards Carlsruhe, he had taken no care to ascertain the name of the hotel they were bound for. Carlsruhe was not a large place and the point was immaterial, but the omission would necessitate a little inquiry. To follow Dare on the chance of his having fixed upon the same quarters was a course which did not commend itself. He resolved to get some lunch before proceeding with his business — or fatuity — of discovering the elusive lady, and drove off to a neighbouring tavern, which did not happen to be, as he hoped it might, the one chosen by those who had preceded him.

Meanwhile Dare, previously master of their plans, went straight to the house which sheltered them, and on entering under the archway from the Lange-Strasse was saved the trouble of inquiring for Captain De Stancy by seeing him drinking bitters at a little table in the court. Had Somerset chosen this inn for his quarters instead of the one in the Market-Place which he actually did choose, the three must inevitably have met here at this moment, with some possibly striking dramatic results; though what they would have been remains for ever hidden in the darkness of the unfulfilled.

De Stancy jumped up from his chair, and went forward to the new-comer. 'You are not long behind us, then,' he said, with laconic disquietude. 'I thought you were going straight home?'

'I was,' said Dare, 'but I have been blessed with what I may call a small competency since I saw you last. Of the two hundred francs you gave me I risked fifty at the tables, and I have multiplied them, how many times do you think? More than four hundred times.'

De Stancy immediately looked grave. 'I wish you had lost them,' he said, with as much feeling as could be shown in a place where strangers were hovering near.

'Nonsense, captain! I have proceeded purely on a calculation of chances; and my calculations proved as true as I expected, notwithstanding a little in-and-out luck at

first. Witness this as the result.' He smacked his bag with his umbrella, and the chink of money resounded from within. 'Just feel the weight of it!'

'It is not necessary. I take your word.'

'Shall I lend you five pounds?'

'God forbid! As if that would repay me for what you have cost me! But come, let's get out of this place to where we can talk more freely.' He put his hand through the young man's arm, and led him round the corner of the hotel towards the Schloss-Platz.

'These runs of luck will be your ruin, as I have told you before,' continued Captain De Stancy. 'You will be for repeating and repeating your experiments, and will end by blowing your brains out, as wiser heads than yours have done. I am glad you have come away, at any rate. Why did you travel this way?'

'Simply because I could afford it, of course. — But come, captain, something has ruffled you to-day. I thought you did not look in the best temper the moment I saw you. Every sip you took of your pick-up as you sat there showed me something was wrong. Tell your worry!'

'Pooh — I can tell you in two words,' said the captain satirically. 'Your arrangement for my wealth and happiness — for I suppose you still claim it to be yours — has fallen through. The lady has announced to-day that she means to send for Somerset instantly. She is coming to a personal explanation with him. So woe to me — and in another sense, woe to you, as I have reason to fear.'

'Send for him!' said Dare, with the stillness of complete abstraction. 'Then he'll come.'

'Well,' said De Stancy, looking him in the face. 'And does it make you feel you had better be off? How about that telegram? Did he ask you to send it, or did he not?'

'One minute, or I shall be up such a tree as nobody ever saw the like of.'

'Then what did you come here for?' burst out De Stancy. "'Tis my belief you are no more than a — But I won't call you names; I'll tell you quite plainly that if there is anything wrong in that message to her — which I believe there is — no, I can't believe, though I fear it — you have the chance of appearing in drab clothes at the expense of the Government before the year is out, and I of being eternally disgraced!'

'No, captain, you won't be disgraced. I am bad to beat, I can tell you. And come the worst luck, I don't say a word.'

'But those letters pricked in your skin would say a good deal, it strikes me.'

'What! would they strip me? — but it is not coming to that. Look here, now, I'll tell you the truth for once; though you don't believe me capable of it. I DID concoct that telegram — and sent it; just as a practical joke; and many a worse one has been only laughed at by honest men and officers. I could show you a bigger joke still — a joke of jokes — on the same individual.'

Dare as he spoke put his hand into his breast-pocket, as if the said joke lay there; but after a moment he withdrew his hand empty, as he continued:

‘Having invented it I have done enough; I was going to explain it to you, that you might carry it out. But you are so serious, that I will leave it alone. My second joke shall die with me.’

‘So much the better,’ said De Stancy. ‘I don’t like your jokes, even though they are not directed against myself. They express a kind of humour which does not suit me.’

‘You may have reason to alter your mind,’ said Dare carelessly. ‘Your success with your lady may depend on it. The truth is, captain, we aristocrats must not take too high a tone. Our days as an independent division of society, which holds aloof from other sections, are past. This has been my argument (in spite of my strong Norman feelings) ever since I broached the subject of your marrying this girl, who represents both intellect and wealth — all, in fact, except the historical prestige that you represent. And we mustn’t flinch at things. The case is even more pressing than ordinary cases — owing to the odd fact that the representative of the new blood who has come in our way actually lives in your own old house, and owns your own old lands. The ordinary reason for such alliances is quintupled in our case. Do then just think and be reasonable, before you talk tall about not liking my jokes, and all that. Beggars mustn’t be choosers.’

‘There’s really much reason in your argument,’ said De Stancy, with a bitter laugh: ‘and my own heart argues much the same way. But, leaving me to take care of my aristocratic self, I advise your aristocratic self to slip off at once to England like any hang-gallows dog; and if Somerset is here, and you have been doing wrong in his name, and it all comes out, I’ll try to save you, as far as an honest man can. If you have done no wrong, of course there is no fear; though I should be obliged by your going homeward as quickly as possible, as being better both for you and for me... Hullo — Damnation!’

They had reached one side of the Schloss-Platz, nobody apparently being near them save a sentinel who was on duty before the Palace; but turning as he spoke, De Stancy beheld a group consisting of his sister, Paula, and Mr. Power, strolling across the square towards them.

It was impossible to escape their observation, and putting a bold front upon it, De Stancy advanced with Dare at his side, till in a few moments the two parties met, Paula and Charlotte recognizing Dare at once as the young man who assisted at the castle.

‘I have met my young photographer,’ said De Stancy cheerily. ‘What a small world it is, as everybody truly observes! I am wishing he could take some views for us as we go on; but you have no apparatus with you, I suppose, Mr. Dare?’

‘I have not, sir, I am sorry to say,’ replied Dare respectfully.

‘You could get some, I suppose?’ asked Paula of the interesting young photographer.

Dare declared that it would be not impossible: whereupon De Stancy said that it was only a passing thought of his; and in a few minutes the two parties again separated, going their several ways.

‘That was awkward,’ said De Stancy, trembling with excitement. ‘I would advise you to keep further off in future.’

Dare said thoughtfully that he would be careful, adding, ‘She is a prize for any man, indeed, leaving alone the substantial possessions behind her! Now was I too enthusiastic? Was I a fool for urging you on?’

‘Wait till success justifies the undertaking. In case of failure it will have been anything but wise. It is no light matter to have a carefully preserved repose broken in upon for nothing — a repose that could never be restored!’

They walked down the Carl-Friedrichs-Strasse to the Margrave’s Pyramid, and back to the hotel, where Dare also decided to take up his stay. De Stancy left him with the book-keeper at the desk, and went upstairs to see if the ladies had returned.

CHAPTER IV.

He found them in their sitting-room with their bonnets on, as if they had just come in. Mr. Power was also present, reading a newspaper, but Mrs. Goodman had gone out to a neighbouring shop, in the windows of which she had seen something which attracted her fancy.

When De Stancy entered, Paula’s thoughts seemed to revert to Dare, for almost at once she asked him in what direction the youth was travelling. With some hesitation De Stancy replied that he believed Mr. Dare was returning to England after a spring trip for the improvement of his mind.

‘A very praiseworthy thing to do,’ said Paula. ‘What places has he visited?’

‘Those which afford opportunities for the study of the old masters, I believe,’ said De Stancy blandly. ‘He has also been to Turin, Genoa, Marseilles, and so on.’ The captain spoke the more readily to her questioning in that he divined her words to be dictated, not by any suspicions of his relations with Dare, but by her knowledge of Dare as the draughtsman employed by Somerset.

‘Has he been to Nice?’ she next demanded. ‘Did he go there in company with my architect?’

‘I think not.’

‘Has he seen anything of him? My architect Somerset once employed him. They know each other.’

‘I think he saw Somerset for a short time.’

Paula was silent. ‘Do you know where this young man Dare is at the present moment?’ she asked quickly.

De Stancy said that Dare was staying at the same hotel with themselves, and that he believed he was downstairs.

‘I think I can do no better than send for him,’ said she. ‘He may be able to throw some light upon the matter of that telegram.’

She rang and despatched the waiter for the young man in question, De Stancy almost visibly trembling for the result. But he opened the town directory which was lying on a table, and affected to be engrossed in the names.

Before Dare was shown in she said to her uncle, 'Perhaps you will speak to him for me?'

Mr. Power, looking up from the paper he was reading, assented to her proposition. Dare appeared in the doorway, and the waiter retired. Dare seemed a trifle startled out of his usual coolness, the message having evidently been unexpected, and he came forward somewhat uneasily.

'Mr. Dare, we are anxious to know something of Miss Power's architect; and Captain De Stancy tells us you have seen him lately,' said Mr. Power sonorously over the edge of his newspaper.

Not knowing whether danger menaced or no, or, if it menaced, from what quarter it was to be expected, Dare felt that honesty was as good as anything else for him, and replied boldly that he had seen Mr. Somerset, De Stancy continuing to cream and mantle almost visibly, in anxiety at the situation of the speaker.

'And where did you see him?' continued Mr. Power.

'In the Casino at Monte Carlo.'

'How long did you see him?'

'Only for half an hour. I left him there.'

Paula's interest got the better of her reserve, and she cut in upon her uncle: 'Did he seem in any unusual state, or in trouble?'

'He was rather excited,' said Dare.

'And can you remember when that was?'

Dare considered, looked at his pocket-book, and said that it was on the evening of April the twenty-second.

The answer had a significance for Paula, De Stancy, and Charlotte, to which Abner Power was a stranger. The telegraphic request for money, which had been kept a secret from him by his niece, because of his already unfriendly tone towards Somerset, arrived on the morning of the twenty-third — a date which neighboured with painfully suggestive nicety upon that now given by Dare.

She seemed to be silenced, and asked no more questions. Dare having furbished himself up to a gentlemanly appearance with some of his recent winnings, was invited to stay on awhile by Paula's uncle, who, as became a travelled man, was not fastidious as to company. Being a youth of the world, Dare made himself agreeable to that gentleman, and afterwards tried to do the same with Miss De Stancy. At this the captain, to whom the situation for some time had been amazingly uncomfortable, pleaded some excuse for going out, and left the room.

Dare continued his endeavours to say a few polite nothings to Charlotte De Stancy, in the course of which he drew from his pocket his new silk handkerchief. By some chance a card came out with the handkerchief, and fluttered downwards. His momen-

tary instinct was to make a grasp at the card and conceal it: but it had already tumbled to the floor, where it lay face upward beside Charlotte De Stancy's chair.

It was neither a visiting nor a playing card, but one bearing a photographic portrait of a peculiar nature. It was what Dare had characterized as his best joke in speaking on the subject to Captain De Stancy: he had in the morning put it ready in his pocket to give to the captain, and had in fact held it in waiting between his finger and thumb while talking to him in the Platz, meaning that he should make use of it against his rival whenever convenient. But his sharp conversation with that soldier had dulled his zest for this final joke at Somerset's expense, had at least shown him that De Stancy would not adopt the joke by accepting the photograph and using it himself, and determined him to lay it aside till a more convenient time. So fully had he made up his mind on this course, that when the photograph slipped out he did not at first perceive the appositeness of the circumstance, in putting into his own hands the role he had intended for De Stancy; though it was asserted afterwards that the whole scene was deliberately planned. However, once having seen the accident, he resolved to take the current as it served.

The card having fallen beside her, Miss De Stancy glanced over it, which indeed she could not help doing. The smile that had previously hung upon her lips was arrested as if by frost and she involuntarily uttered a little distressed cry of 'O!' like one in bodily pain.

Paula, who had been talking to her uncle during this interlude, started round, and wondering what had happened, inquiringly crossed the room to poor Charlotte's side, asking her what was the matter. Charlotte had regained self-possession, though not enough to enable her to reply, and Paula asked her a second time what had made her exclaim like that. Miss De Stancy still seemed confused, whereupon Paula noticed that her eyes were continually drawn as if by fascination towards the photograph on the floor, which, contrary to his first impulse, Dare, as has been said, now seemed in no hurry to regain. Surmising at last that the card, whatever it was, had something to do with the exclamation, Paula picked it up.

It was a portrait of Somerset; but by a device known in photography the operator, though contriving to produce what seemed to be a perfect likeness, had given it the distorted features and wild attitude of a man advanced in intoxication. No woman, unless specially cognizant of such possibilities, could have looked upon it and doubted that the photograph was a genuine illustration of a customary phase in the young man's private life.

Paula observed it, thoroughly took it in; but the effect upon her was by no means clear. Charlotte's eyes at once forsook the portrait to dwell on Paula's face. It paled a little, and this was followed by a hot blush — perceptibly a blush of shame. That was all. She flung the picture down on the table, and moved away.

It was now Mr. Power's turn. Anticipating Dare, who was advancing with a deprecatory look to seize the photograph, he also grasped it. When he saw whom it represented

he seemed both amused and startled, and after scanning it a while handed it to the young man with a queer smile.

‘I am very sorry,’ began Dare in a low voice to Mr. Power. ‘I fear I was to blame for thoughtlessness in not destroying it. But I thought it was rather funny that a man should permit such a thing to be done, and that the humour would redeem the offence.’

‘In you, for purchasing it,’ said Paula with haughty quickness from the other side of the room. ‘Though probably his friends, if he has any, would say not in him.’

There was silence in the room after this, and Dare, finding himself rather in the way, took his leave as unostentatiously as a cat that has upset the family china, though he continued to say among his apologies that he was not aware Mr. Somerset was a personal friend of the ladies.

Of all the thoughts which filled the minds of Paula and Charlotte De Stancy, the thought that the photograph might have been a fabrication was probably the last. To them that picture of Somerset had all the cogency of direct vision. Paula’s experience, much less Charlotte’s, had never lain in the fields of heliographic science, and they would as soon have thought that the sun could again stand still upon Gibeon, as that it could be made to falsify men’s characters in delineating their features. What Abner Power thought he himself best knew. He might have seen such pictures before; or he might never have heard of them.

While pretending to resume his reading he closely observed Paula, as did also Charlotte De Stancy; but thanks to the self-management which was Miss Power’s as much by nature as by art, she dissembled whatever emotion was in her.

‘It is a pity a professional man should make himself so ludicrous,’ she said with such careless intonation that it was almost impossible, even for Charlotte, who knew her so well, to believe her indifference feigned.

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Power, since Charlotte did not speak: ‘it is what I scarcely should have expected.’

‘O, I am not surprised!’ said Paula quickly. ‘You don’t know all.’ The inference was, indeed, inevitable that if her uncle were made aware of the telegram he would see nothing unlikely in the picture. ‘Well, you are very silent!’ continued Paula petulantly, when she found that nobody went on talking. ‘What made you cry out “O,” Charlotte, when Mr. Dare dropped that horrid photograph?’

‘I don’t know; I suppose it frightened me,’ stammered the girl.

‘It was a stupid fuss to make before such a person. One would think you were in love with Mr. Somerset.’

‘What did you say, Paula?’ inquired her uncle, looking up from the newspaper which he had again resumed.

‘Nothing, Uncle Abner.’ She walked to the window, and, as if to tide over what was plainly passing in their minds about her, she began to make remarks on objects in the street. ‘What a quaint being — look, Charlotte!’ It was an old woman sitting by a stall on the opposite side of the way, which seemed suddenly to hit Paula’s sense of

the humorous, though beyond the fact that the dame was old and poor, and wore a white handkerchief over her head, there was really nothing noteworthy about her.

Paula seemed to be more hurt by what the silence of her companions implied — a suspicion that the discovery of Somerset's depravity was wounding her heart — than by the wound itself. The ostensible ease with which she drew them into a bye conversation had perhaps the defect of proving too much: though her tacit contention that no love was in question was not incredible on the supposition that affronted pride alone caused her embarrassment. The chief symptom of her heart being really tender towards Somerset consisted in her apparent blindness to Charlotte's secret, so obviously suggested by her momentary agitation.

CHAPTER V.

And where was the subject of their condemnatory opinions all this while? Having secured a room at his inn, he came forth to complete the discovery of his dear mistress's halting-place without delay. After one or two inquiries he ascertained where such a party of English were staying; and arriving at the hotel, knew at once that he had tracked them to earth by seeing the heavier portion of the Power luggage confronting him in the hall. He sent up intelligence of his presence, and awaited her reply with a beating heart.

In the meanwhile Dare, descending from his pernicious interview with Paula and the rest, had descried Captain De Stancy in the public drawing-room, and entered to him forthwith. It was while they were here together that Somerset passed the door and sent up his name to Paula.

The incident at the railway station was now reversed, Somerset being the observed of Dare, as Dare had then been the observed of Somerset. Immediately on sight of him Dare showed real alarm. He had imagined that Somerset would eventually impinge on Paula's route, but he had scarcely expected it yet; and the architect's sudden appearance led Dare to ask himself the ominous question whether Somerset had discovered his telegraphic trick, and was in the mood for prompt measures.

'There is no more for me to do here,' said the boy hastily to De Stancy. 'Miss Power does not wish to ask me any more questions. I may as well proceed on my way, as you advised.'

De Stancy, who had also gazed with dismay at Somerset's passing figure, though with dismay of another sort, was recalled from his vexation by Dare's remarks, and turning upon him he said sharply, 'Well may you be in such a hurry all of a sudden!'

'True, I am superfluous now.'

'You have been doing a foolish thing, and you must suffer its inconveniences. — Will, I am sorry for one thing; I am sorry I ever owned you; for you are not a lad to my heart. You have disappointed me — disappointed me almost beyond endurance.'

‘I have acted according to my illumination. What can you expect of a man born to dishonour?’

‘That’s mere speciousness. Before you knew anything of me, and while you thought you were the child of poverty on both sides, you were well enough; but ever since you thought you were more than that, you have led a life which is intolerable. What has become of your plan of alliance between the De Stancys and the Powers now? The man is gone upstairs who can overthrow it all.’

‘If the man had not gone upstairs, you wouldn’t have complained of my nature or my plans,’ said Dare drily. ‘If I mistake not, he will come down again with the flea in his ear. However, I have done; my play is played out. All the rest remains with you. But, captain, grant me this! If when I am gone this difficulty should vanish, and things should go well with you, and your suit should prosper, will you think of him, bad as he is, who first put you on the track of such happiness, and let him know it was not done in vain?’

‘I will,’ said De Stancy. ‘Promise me that you will be a better boy?’

‘Very well — as soon as ever I can afford it. Now I am up and away, when I have explained to them that I shall not require my room.’

Dare fetched his bag, touched his hat with his umbrella to the captain and went out of the hotel archway. De Stancy sat down in the stuffy drawing-room, and wondered what other ironies time had in store for him.

A waiter in the interim had announced Somerset to the group upstairs. Paula started as much as Charlotte at hearing the name, and Abner Power stared at them both.

‘If Mr. Somerset wishes to see me ON BUSINESS, show him in,’ said Paula.

In a few seconds the door was thrown open for Somerset. On receipt of the pointed message he guessed that a change had come. Time, absence, ambition, her uncle’s influence, and a new wooer, seemed to account sufficiently well for that change, and he accepted his fate. But a stoical instinct to show her that he could regard vicissitudes with the equanimity that became a man; a desire to ease her mind of any fear she might entertain that his connection with her past would render him troublesome in future, induced him to accept her permission, and see the act to the end.

‘How do you do, Mr. Somerset?’ said Abner Power, with sardonic geniality: he had been far enough about the world not to be greatly concerned at Somerset’s apparent failing, particularly when it helped to reduce him from the rank of lover to his niece to that of professional adviser.

Miss De Stancy faltered a welcome as weak as that of the Maid of Neidpath, and Paula said coldly, ‘We are rather surprised to see you. Perhaps there is something urgent at the castle which makes it necessary for you to call?’

‘There is something a little urgent,’ said Somerset slowly, as he approached her; ‘and you have judged rightly that it is the cause of my call.’ He sat down near her chair as he spoke, put down his hat, and drew a note-book from his pocket with a despairing sang froid that was far more perfect than had been Paula’s demeanour just before.

‘Perhaps you would like to talk over the business with Mr. Somerset alone?’ murmured Charlotte to Miss Power, hardly knowing what she said.

‘O no,’ said Paula, ‘I think not. Is it necessary?’ she said, turning to him.

‘Not in the least,’ replied he, bestowing a penetrating glance upon his questioner’s face, which seemed however to produce no effect; and turning towards Charlotte, he added, ‘You will have the goodness, I am sure, Miss De Stancy, to excuse the jargon of professional details.’

He spread some tracings on the table, and pointed out certain modified features to Paula, commenting as he went on, and exchanging occasionally a few words on the subject with Mr. Abner Power by the distant window.

In this architectural dialogue over his sketches, Somerset’s head and Paula’s became unavoidably very close. The temptation was too much for the young man. Under cover of the rustle of the tracings, he murmured, ‘Paula, I could not get here before!’ in a low voice inaudible to the other two.

She did not reply, only busying herself the more with the notes and sketches; and he said again, ‘I stayed a couple of days at Genoa, and some days at San Remo, and Mentone.’

‘But it is not the least concern of mine where you stayed, is it?’ she said, with a cold yet disquieted look.

‘Do you speak seriously?’ Somerset brokenly whispered.

Paula concluded her examination of the drawings and turned from him with sorrowful disregard. He tried no further, but, when she had signified her pleasure on the points submitted, packed up his papers, and rose with the bearing of a man altogether superior to such a class of misfortune as this. Before going he turned to speak a few words of a general kind to Mr. Power and Charlotte.

‘You will stay and dine with us?’ said the former, rather with the air of being unhappily able to do no less than ask the question. ‘My charges here won’t go down to the table-d’hote, I fear, but De Stancy and myself will be there.’

Somerset excused himself, and in a few minutes withdrew. At the door he looked round for an instant, and his eyes met Paula’s. There was the same miles-off expression in hers that they had worn when he entered; but there was also a look of distressful inquiry, as if she were earnestly expecting him to say something more. This of course Somerset did not comprehend. Possibly she was clinging to a hope of some excuse for the message he was supposed to have sent, or for the other and more degrading matter. Anyhow, Somerset only bowed and went away.

A moment after he had gone, Paula, impelled by something or other, crossed the room to the window. In a short time she saw his form in the broad street below, which he traversed obliquely to an opposite corner, his head somewhat bent, and his eyes on the ground. Before vanishing into the Ritterstrasse he turned his head and glanced at the hotel windows, as if he knew that she was watching him. Then he disappeared; and the only real sign of emotion betrayed by Paula during the whole episode escaped her at this moment. It was a slight trembling of the lip and a sigh so slowly breathed that

scarce anybody could hear — scarcely even Charlotte, who was reclining on a couch her face on her hand and her eyes downcast.

Not more than two minutes had elapsed when Mrs. Goodman came in with a manner of haste.

‘You have returned,’ said Mr. Power. ‘Have you made your purchases?’

Without answering, she asked, ‘Whom, of all people on earth, do you think I have met? Mr. Somerset! Has he been here? — he passed me almost without speaking!’

‘Yes, he has been here,’ said Paula. ‘He is on the way from Genoa home, and called on business.’

‘You will have him here to dinner, of course?’

‘I asked him,’ said Mr. Power, ‘but he declined.’

‘O, that’s unfortunate! Surely we could get him to come. You would like to have him here, would you not, Paula?’

‘No, indeed. I don’t want him here,’ said she.

‘You don’t?’

‘No!’ she said sharply.

‘You used to like him well enough, anyhow,’ bluntly rejoined Mrs. Goodman.

Paula sedately: ‘It is a mistake to suppose that I ever particularly liked the gentleman mentioned.’

‘Then you are wrong, Mrs. Goodman, it seems,’ said Mr. Power.

Mrs. Goodman, who had been growing quietly indignant, notwithstanding a vigorous use of her fan, at this said. ‘Fie, fie, Paula! you did like him. You said to me only a week or two ago that you should not at all object to marry him.’

‘It is a mistake,’ repeated Paula calmly. ‘I meant the other one of the two we were talking about.’

‘What, Captain De Stancy?’

‘Yes.’

Knowing this to be a fiction, Mrs. Goodman made no remark, and hearing a slight noise behind, turned her head. Seeing her aunt’s action, Paula also looked round. The door had been left ajar, and De Stancy was standing in the room. The last words of Mrs. Goodman, and Paula’s reply, must have been quite audible to him.

They looked at each other much as if they had unexpectedly met at the altar; but after a momentary start Paula did not flinch from the position into which hurt pride had betrayed her. De Stancy bowed gracefully, and she merely walked to the furthest window, whither he followed her.

‘I am eternally grateful to you for avowing that I have won favour in your sight at last,’ he whispered.

She acknowledged the remark with a somewhat reserved bearing. ‘Really I don’t deserve your gratitude,’ she said. ‘I did not know you were there.’

‘I know you did not — that’s why the avowal is so sweet to me. Can I take you at your word?’

‘Yes, I suppose.’

‘Then your preference is the greatest honour that has ever fallen to my lot. It is enough: you accept me?’

‘As a lover on probation — no more.’

The conversation being carried on in low tones, Paula’s uncle and aunt took it as a hint that their presence could be spared, and severally left the room — the former gladly, the latter with some vexation. Charlotte De Stancy followed.

‘And to what am I indebted for this happy change?’ inquired De Stancy, as soon as they were alone.

‘You shouldn’t look a gift-horse in the mouth,’ she replied brusquely, and with tears in her eyes for one gone.

‘You mistake my motive. I am like a reprieved criminal, and can scarcely believe the news.’

‘You shouldn’t say that to me, or I shall begin to think I have been too kind,’ she answered, some of the archness of her manner returning. ‘Now, I know what you mean to say in answer; but I don’t want to hear more at present; and whatever you do, don’t fall into the mistake of supposing I have accepted you in any other sense than the way I say. If you don’t like such a limitation you can go away. I dare say I shall get over it.’

‘Go away! Could I go away? — But you are beginning to tease, and will soon punish me severely; so I will make my escape while all is well. It would be presumptuous to expect more in one day.’

‘It would indeed,’ said Paula, with her eyes on a bunch of flowers.

CHAPTER VI.

On leaving the hotel, Somerset’s first impulse was to get out of sight of its windows, and his glance upward had perhaps not the tender significance that Paula imagined, the last look impelled by any such whiff of emotion having been the lingering one he bestowed upon her in passing out of the room. Unluckily for the prospects of this attachment, Paula’s conduct towards him now, as a result of misrepresentation, had enough in common with her previous silence at Nice to make it not unreasonable as a further development of that silence. Moreover, her social position as a woman of wealth, always felt by Somerset as a perceptible bar to that full and free eagerness with which he would fain have approached her, rendered it impossible for him to return to the charge, ascertain the reason of her coldness, and dispel it by an explanation, without being suspected of mercenary objects. Continually does it happen that a genial willingness to bottle up affronts is set down to interested motives by those who do not know what generous conduct means. Had she occupied the financial position of Miss De Stancy he would readily have persisted further and, not improbably, have cleared up the cloud.

Having no further interest in Carlsruhe, Somerset decided to leave by an evening train. The intervening hour he spent in wandering into the thick of the fair, where steam

roundabouts, the proprietors of wax-work shows, and fancy-stall keepers maintained a deafening din. The animated environment was better than silence, for it fostered in him an artificial indifference to the events that had just happened — an indifference which, though he too well knew it was only destined to be temporary, afforded a passive period wherein to store up strength that should enable him to withstand the wear and tear of regrets which would surely set in soon. It was the case with Somerset as with others of his temperament, that he did not feel a blow of this sort immediately; and what often seemed like stoicism after misfortune was only the neutral numbness of transition from palpitating hope to assured wretchedness.

He walked round and round the fair till all the exhibitors knew him by sight, and when the sun got low he turned into the Erbprinzen-Strasse, now raked from end to end by ensaffroned rays of level light. Seeking his hotel he dined there, and left by the evening train for Heidelberg.

Heidelberg with its romantic surroundings was not precisely the place calculated to heal Somerset's wounded heart. He had known the town of yore, and his recollections of that period, when, unfettered in fancy, he had transferred to his sketch-book the fine Renaissance details of the Otto-Heinrichs-Bau came back with unpleasant force. He knew of some carved cask-heads and other curious wood-work in the castle cellars, copies of which, being unobtainable by photographs, he had intended to make if all went well between Paula and himself. The zest for this was now well-nigh over. But on awaking in the morning and looking up the valley towards the castle, and at the dark green height of the Königsstuhl alongside, he felt that to become vanquished by a passion, driven to suffer, fast, and pray in the dull pains and vapours of despised love, was a contingency not to be welcomed too readily. Thereupon he set himself to learn the sad science of renunciation, which everybody has to learn in his degree — either rebelling throughout the lesson, or, like Somerset, taking to it kindly by force of judgment. A more obstinate pupil might have altogether escaped the lesson in the present case by discovering its illegality.

Resolving to persevere in the heretofore satisfactory paths of art while life and faculties were left, though every instinct must proclaim that there would be no longer any collateral attraction in that pursuit, he went along under the trees of the Anlage and reached the castle vaults, in whose cool shades he spent the afternoon, working out his intentions with fair result. When he had strolled back to his hotel in the evening the time was approaching for the table-d'hôte. Having seated himself rather early, he spent the few minutes of waiting in looking over his pocket-book, and putting a few finishing touches to the afternoon performance whilst the objects were fresh in his memory. Thus occupied he was but dimly conscious of the customary rustle of dresses and pulling up of chairs by the crowd of other diners as they gathered around him. Serving began, and he put away his book and prepared for the meal. He had hardly done this when he became conscious that the person on his left hand was not the typical cosmopolite with boundless hotel knowledge and irrelevant experiences that he was accustomed to find next him, but a face he recognized as that of a young man whom he had met

and talked to at Stancy Castle garden-party, whose name he had now forgotten. This young fellow was conversing with somebody on his left hand — no other personage than Paula herself. Next to Paula he beheld De Stancy, and De Stancy's sister beyond him. It was one of those gratuitous encounters which only happen to discarded lovers who have shown commendable stoicism under disappointment, as if on purpose to reopen and aggravate their wounds.

It seemed as if the intervening traveller had met the other party by accident there and then. In a minute he turned and recognized Somerset, and by degrees the young men's cursory remarks to each other developed into a pretty regular conversation, interrupted only when he turned to speak to Paula on his left hand.

'Your architectural adviser travels in your party: how very convenient,' said the young tourist to her. 'Far pleasanter than having a medical attendant in one's train!'

Somerset, who had no distractions on the other side of him, could hear every word of this. He glanced at Paula. She had not known of his presence in the room till now. Their eyes met for a second, and she bowed sedately. Somerset returned her bow, and her eyes were quickly withdrawn with scarcely visible confusion.

'Mr. Somerset is not travelling with us,' she said. 'We have met by accident. Mr. Somerset came to me on business a little while ago.'

'I must congratulate you on having put the castle into good hands,' continued the enthusiastic young man.

'I believe Mr. Somerset is quite competent,' said Paula stiffly.

To include Somerset in the conversation the young man turned to him and added: 'You carry on your work at the castle con amore, no doubt?'

'There is work I should like better,' said Somerset.

'Indeed?'

The frigidity of his manner seemed to set her at ease by dispersing all fear of a scene; and alternate dialogues of this sort with the gentleman in their midst were more or less continued by both Paula and Somerset till they rose from table.

In the bustle of moving out the two latter for one moment stood side by side.

'Miss Power,' said Somerset, in a low voice that was obscured by the rustle, 'you have nothing more to say to me?'

'I think there is nothing more?' said Paula, lifting her eyes with longing reticence.

'Then I take leave of you; and tender my best wishes that you may have a pleasant time before you!... I set out for England to-night.'

'With a special photographer, no doubt?'

It was the first time that she had addressed Somerset with a meaning distinctly bitter; and her remark, which had reference to the forged photograph, fell of course without its intended effect.

'No, Miss Power,' said Somerset gravely. 'But with a deeper sense of woman's thoughtless trifling than time will ever eradicate.'

'Is not that a mistake?' she asked in a voice that distinctly trembled.

'A mistake? How?'

‘I mean, do you not forget many things?’ (throwing on him a troubled glance). ‘A woman may feel herself justified in her conduct, although it admits of no explanation.’

‘I don’t contest the point for a moment... Goodbye.’

‘Good-bye.’

They parted amid the flowering shrubs and caged birds in the hall, and he saw her no more. De Stancy came up, and spoke a few commonplace words, his sister having gone out, either without perceiving Somerset, or with intention to avoid him.

That night, as he had said, he was on his way to England.

CHAPTER VII.

The De Stancys and Powers remained in Heidelberg for some days. All remarked that after Somerset’s departure Paula was frequently irritable, though at other times as serene as ever. Yet even when in a blithe and saucy mood there was at bottom a tinge of melancholy. Something did not lie easy in her undemonstrative heart, and all her friends excused the inequalities of a humour whose source, though not positively known, could be fairly well guessed.

De Stancy had long since discovered that his chance lay chiefly in her recently acquired and fanciful predilection d’artiste for hoary mediaeval families with ancestors in alabaster and primogenitive renown. Seeing this he dwelt on those topics which brought out that aspect of himself more clearly, talking feudalism and chivalry with a zest that he had never hitherto shown. Yet it was not altogether factitious. For, discovering how much this quondam Puritan was interested in the attributes of long-chronicled houses, a reflected interest in himself arose in his own soul, and he began to wonder why he had not prized these things before. Till now disgusted by the failure of his family to hold its own in the turmoil between ancient and modern, he had grown to undervalue its past prestige; and it was with corrective ardour that he adopted while he ministered to her views.

Henceforward the wooing of De Stancy took the form of an intermittent address, the incidents of their travel furnishing pegs whereon to hang his subject; sometimes hindering it, but seldom failing to produce in her a greater tolerance of his presence. His next opportunity was the day after Somerset’s departure from Heidelberg. They stood on the great terrace of the Schloss-Garten, looking across the intervening ravine to the north-east front of the castle which rose before them in all its customary warm tints and battered magnificence.

‘This is a spot, if any, which should bring matters to a crisis between you and me,’ he asserted good-humouredly. ‘But you have been so silent to-day that I lose the spirit to take advantage of my privilege.’

She inquired what privilege he spoke of, as if quite another subject had been in her mind than De Stancy.

‘The privilege of winning your heart if I can, which you gave me at Carlsruhe.’

‘O,’ she said. ‘Well, I’ve been thinking of that. But I do not feel myself absolutely bound by the statement I made in that room; and I shall expect, if I withdraw it, not to be called to account by you.’

De Stancy looked rather blank.

‘If you recede from your promise you will doubtless have good reason. But I must solemnly beg you, after raising my hopes, to keep as near as you can to your word, so as not to throw me into utter despair.’

Paula dropped her glance into the Thier-Garten below them, where gay promenaders were clambering up between the bushes and flowers. At length she said, with evident embarrassment, but with much distinctness: ‘I deserve much more blame for what I have done than you can express to me. I will confess to you the whole truth. All that I told you in the hotel at Carlsruhe was said in a moment of pique at what had happened just before you came in. It was supposed I was much involved with another man, and circumstances made the supposition particularly objectionable. To escape it I jumped at the alternative of yourself.’

‘That’s bad for me!’ he murmured.

‘If after this avowal you bind me to my words I shall say no more: I do not wish to recede from them without your full permission.’

‘What a caprice! But I release you unconditionally,’ he said. ‘And I beg your pardon if I seemed to show too much assurance. Please put it down to my gratified excitement. I entirely acquiesce in your wish. I will go away to whatever place you please, and not come near you but by your own permission, and till you are quite satisfied that my presence and what it may lead to is not undesirable. I entirely give way before you, and will endeavour to make my future devotedness, if ever we meet again, a new ground for expecting your favour.’

Paula seemed struck by the generous and cheerful fairness of his remarks, and said gently, ‘Perhaps your departure is not absolutely necessary for my happiness; and I do not wish from what you call caprice — ’

‘I retract that word.’

‘Well, whatever it is, I don’t wish you to do anything which should cause you real pain, or trouble, or humiliation.’

‘That’s very good of you.’

‘But I reserve to myself the right to accept or refuse your addresses — just as if those rash words of mine had never been spoken.’

‘I must bear it all as best I can, I suppose,’ said De Stancy, with melancholy humorousness.

‘And I shall treat you as your behaviour shall seem to deserve,’ she said playfully.

‘Then I may stay?’

‘Yes; I am willing to give you that pleasure, if it is one, in return for the attentions you have shown, and the trouble you have taken to make my journey pleasant.’

She walked on and discovered Mrs. Goodman near, and presently the whole party met together. De Stancy did not find himself again at her side till later in the afternoon,

when they had left the immediate precincts of the castle and decided on a drive to the Konigsstuhl.

The carriage, containing only Mrs. Goodman, was driven a short way up the winding incline, Paula, her uncle, and Miss De Stancy walking behind under the shadow of the trees. Then Mrs. Goodman called to them and asked when they were going to join her.

‘We are going to walk up,’ said Mr. Power.

Paula seemed seized with a spirit of boisterousness quite unlike her usual behaviour. ‘My aunt may drive up, and you may walk up; but I shall run up,’ she said. ‘See, here’s a way.’ She tripped towards a path through the bushes which, instead of winding like the regular track, made straight for the summit.

Paula had not the remotest conception of the actual distance to the top, imagining it to be but a couple of hundred yards at the outside, whereas it was really nearer a mile, the ascent being uniformly steep all the way. When her uncle and De Stancy had seen her vanish they stood still, the former evidently reluctant to forsake the easy ascent for a difficult one, though he said, ‘We can’t let her go alone that way, I suppose.’

‘No, of course not,’ said De Stancy.

They then followed in the direction taken by Paula, Charlotte entering the carriage. When Power and De Stancy had ascended about fifty yards the former looked back, and dropped off from the pursuit, to return to the easy route, giving his companion a parting hint concerning Paula. Whereupon De Stancy went on alone. He soon saw Paula above him in the path, which ascended skyward straight as Jacob’s Ladder, but was so overhung by the brushwood as to be quite shut out from the sun. When he reached her side she was moving easily upward, apparently enjoying the seclusion which the place afforded.

‘Is not my uncle with you?’ she said, on turning and seeing him.

‘He went back,’ said De Stancy.

She replied that it was of no consequence; that she should meet him at the top, she supposed.

Paula looked up amid the green light which filtered through the leafage as far as her eyes could stretch. But the top did not appear, and she allowed De Stancy to get in front. ‘It did not seem such a long way as this, to look at,’ she presently said.

He explained that the trees had deceived her as to the real height, by reason of her seeing the slope foreshortened when she looked up from the castle. ‘Allow me to help you,’ he added.

‘No, thank you,’ said Paula lightly; ‘we must be near the top.’

They went on again; but no Konigsstuhl. When next De Stancy turned he found that she was sitting down; immediately going back he offered his arm. She took it in silence, declaring that it was no wonder her uncle did not come that wearisome way, if he had ever been there before.

De Stancy did not explain that Mr. Power had said to him at parting, ‘There’s a chance for you, if you want one,’ but at once went on with the subject begun on the terrace. ‘If my behaviour is good, you will reaffirm the statement made at Carlsruhe?’

‘It is not fair to begin that now!’ expostulated Paula; ‘I can only think of getting to the top.’

Her colour deepening by the exertion, he suggested that she should sit down again on one of the mossy boulders by the wayside. Nothing loth she did, De Stancy standing by, and with his cane scratching the moss from the stone.

‘This is rather awkward,’ said Paula, in her usual circumspect way. ‘My relatives and your sister will be sure to suspect me of having arranged this scramble with you.’

‘But I know better,’ sighed De Stancy. ‘I wish to Heaven you had arranged it!’

She was not at the top, but she took advantage of the halt to answer his previous question. ‘There are many points on which I must be satisfied before I can reaffirm anything. Do you not see that you are mistaken in clinging to this idea? — that you are laying up mortification and disappointment for yourself?’

‘A negative reply from you would be disappointment, early or late.’

‘And you prefer having it late to accepting it now? If I were a man, I should like to abandon a false scent as soon as possible.’

‘I suppose all that has but one meaning: that I am to go.’

‘O no,’ she magnanimously assured him, bounding up from her seat; ‘I adhere to my statement that you may stay; though it is true something may possibly happen to make me alter my mind.’

He again offered his arm, and from sheer necessity she leant upon it as before.

‘Grant me but a moment’s patience,’ he began.

‘Captain De Stancy! Is this fair? I am physically obliged to hold your arm, so that I MUST listen to what you say!’

‘No, it is not fair; ‘pon my soul it is not!’ said De Stancy. ‘I won’t say another word.’

He did not; and they clambered on through the boughs, nothing disturbing the solitude but the rustle of their own footsteps and the singing of birds overhead. They occasionally got a peep at the sky; and whenever a twig hung out in a position to strike Paula’s face the gallant captain bent it aside with his stick. But she did not thank him. Perhaps he was just as well satisfied as if she had done so.

Paula, panting, broke the silence: ‘Will you go on, and discover if the top is near?’

He went on. This time the top was near. When he returned she was sitting where he had left her among the leaves. ‘It is quite near now,’ he told her tenderly, and she took his arm again without a word. Soon the path changed its nature from a steep and rugged watercourse to a level green promenade.

‘Thank you, Captain De Stancy,’ she said, letting go his arm as if relieved.

Before them rose the tower, and at the base they beheld two of their friends, Mr. Power being seen above, looking over the parapet through his glass.

‘You will go to the top now?’ said De Stancy.

‘No, I take no interest in it. My interest has turned to fatigue. I only want to go home.’

He took her on to where the carriage stood at the foot of the tower, and leaving her with his sister ascended the turret to the top. The landscape had quite changed from

its afternoon appearance, and had become rather marvellous than beautiful. The air was charged with a lurid exhalation that blurred the extensive view. He could see the distant Rhine at its junction with the Neckar, shining like a thread of blood through the mist which was gradually wrapping up the declining sun. The scene had in it something that was more than melancholy, and not much less than tragic; but for De Stancy such evening effects possessed little meaning. He was engaged in an enterprise that taxed all his resources, and had no sentiments to spare for air, earth, or skies.

‘Remarkable scene,’ said Power, mildly, at his elbow.

‘Yes; I dare say it is,’ said De Stancy. ‘Time has been when I should have held forth upon such a prospect, and wondered if its livid colours shadowed out my own life, et caetera, et caetera. But, begad, I have almost forgotten there’s such a thing as Nature, and I care for nothing but a comfortable life, and a certain woman who does not care for me!... Now shall we go down?’

CHAPTER VIII.

It was quite true that De Stancy at the present period of his existence wished only to escape from the hurly-burly of active life, and to win the affection of Paula Power. There were, however, occasions when a recollection of his old renunciatory vows would obtrude itself upon him, and tinge his present with wayward bitterness. So much was this the case that a day or two after they had arrived at Mainz he could not refrain from making remarks almost prejudicial to his cause, saying to her, ‘I am unfortunate in my situation. There are, unhappily, worldly reasons why I should pretend to love you, even if I do not: they are so strong that, though really loving you, perhaps they enter into my thoughts of you.’

‘I don’t want to know what such reasons are,’ said Paula, with promptness, for it required but little astuteness to discover that he alluded to the alienated Wessex home and estates. ‘You lack tone,’ she gently added: ‘that’s why the situation of affairs seems distasteful to you.’

‘Yes, I suppose I am ill. And yet I am well enough.’

These remarks passed under a tree in the public gardens during an odd minute of waiting for Charlotte and Mrs. Goodman; and he said no more to her in private that day. Few as her words had been he liked them better than any he had lately received. The conversation was not resumed till they were gliding ‘between the banks that bear the vine,’ on board one of the Rhine steamboats, which, like the hotels in this early summer time, were comparatively free from other English travellers; so that everywhere Paula and her party were received with open arms and cheerful countenances, as among the first swallows of the season.

The saloon of the steamboat was quite empty, the few passengers being outside; and this paucity of voyagers afforded De Stancy a roomy opportunity.

Paula saw him approach her, and there appearing in his face signs that he would begin again on the eternal subject, she seemed to be struck with a sense of the ludicrous. De Stancy reddened. 'Something seems to amuse you,' he said.

'It is over,' she replied, becoming serious.

'Was it about me, and this unhappy fever in me?'

'If I speak the truth I must say it was.'

'You thought, "Here's that absurd man again, going to begin his daily supplication."'

'Not "absurd," she said, with emphasis; 'because I don't think it is absurd.'

She continued looking through the windows at the Lurlei Heights under which they were now passing, and he remained with his eyes on her.

'May I stay here with you?' he said at last. 'I have not had a word with you alone for four-and-twenty hours.'

'You must be cheerful, then.'

'You have said such as that before. I wish you would say "loving" instead of "cheerful."'

'Yes, I know, I know,' she responded, with impatient perplexity. 'But why must you think of me — me only? Is there no other woman in the world who has the power to make you happy? I am sure there must be.'

'Perhaps there is; but I have never seen her.'

'Then look for her; and believe me when I say that you will certainly find her.'

He shook his head.

'Captain De Stancy, I have long felt for you,' she continued, with a frank glance into his face. 'You have deprived yourself too long of other women's company. Why not go away for a little time? and when you have found somebody else likely to make you happy, you can meet me again. I will see you at your father's house, and we will enjoy all the pleasure of easy friendship.'

'Very correct; and very cold, O best of women!'

'You are too full of exclamations and transports, I think!'

They stood in silence, Paula apparently much interested in the manoeuvring of a raft which was passing by. 'Dear Miss Power,' he resumed, 'before I go and join your uncle above, let me just ask, Do I stand any chance at all yet? Is it possible you can never be more pliant than you have been?'

'You put me out of all patience!'

'But why did you raise my hopes? You should at least pity me after doing that.'

'Yes; it's that again! I unfortunately raised your hopes because I was a fool — was not myself that moment. Now question me no more. As it is I think you presume too much upon my becoming yours as the consequence of my having dismissed another.'

'Not on becoming mine, but on listening to me.'

'Your argument would be reasonable enough had I led you to believe I would listen to you — and ultimately accept you; but that I have not done. I see now that a woman who gives a man an answer one shade less peremptory than a harsh negative may be carried beyond her intentions, and out of her own power before she knows it.'

‘Chide me if you will; I don’t care!’

She looked steadfastly at him with a little mischief in her eyes. ‘You DO care,’ she said.

‘Then why don’t you listen to me? I would not persevere for a moment longer if it were against the wishes of your family. Your uncle says it would give him pleasure to see you accept me.’

‘Does he say why?’ she asked thoughtfully.

‘Yes; he takes, of course, a practical view of the matter; he thinks it commends itself so to reason and common sense that the owner of Stancy Castle should become a member of the De Stancy family.’

‘Yes, that’s the horrid plague of it,’ she said, with a nonchalance which seemed to contradict her words. ‘It is so dreadfully reasonable that we should marry. I wish it wasn’t!’

‘Well, you are younger than I, and perhaps that’s a natural wish. But to me it seems a felicitous combination not often met with. I confess that your interest in our family before you knew me lent a stability to my hopes that otherwise they would not have had.’

‘My interest in the De Stancys has not been a personal interest except in the case of your sister,’ she returned. ‘It has been an historical interest only; and is not at all increased by your existence.’

‘And perhaps it is not diminished?’

‘No, I am not aware that it is diminished,’ she murmured, as she observed the gliding shore.

‘Well, you will allow me to say this, since I say it without reference to your personality or to mine — that the Power and De Stancy families are the complements to each other; and that, abstractedly, they call earnestly to one another: “How neat and fit a thing for us to join hands!”’

Paula, who was not prudish when a direct appeal was made to her common sense, answered with ready candour: ‘Yes, from the point of view of domestic politics, that undoubtedly is the case. But I hope I am not so calculating as to risk happiness in order to round off a social idea.’

‘I hope not; or that I am either. Still the social idea exists, and my increased years make its excellence more obvious to me than to you.’

The ice once broken on this aspect of the question, the subject seemed further to engross her, and she spoke on as if daringly inclined to venture where she had never anticipated going, deriving pleasure from the very strangeness of her temerity: ‘You mean that in the fitness of things I ought to become a De Stancy to strengthen my social position?’

‘And that I ought to strengthen mine by alliance with the heiress of a name so dear to engineering science as Power.’

‘Well, we are talking with unexpected frankness.’

‘But you are not seriously displeased with me for saying what, after all, one can’t help feeling and thinking?’

‘No. Only be so good as to leave off going further for the present. Indeed, of the two, I would rather have the other sort of address. I mean,’ she hastily added, ‘that what you urge as the result of a real affection, however unsuitable, I have some remote satisfaction in listening to — not the least from any reciprocal love on my side, but from a woman’s gratification at being the object of anybody’s devotion; for that feeling towards her is always regarded as a merit in a woman’s eye, and taken as a kindness by her, even when it is at the expense of her convenience.’

She had said, voluntarily or involuntarily, better things than he expected, and perhaps too much in her own opinion, for she hardly gave him an opportunity of replying.

They passed St. Goar and Boppard, and when steering round the sharp bend of the river just beyond the latter place De Stancy met her again, exclaiming, ‘You left me very suddenly.’

‘You must make allowances, please,’ she said; ‘I have always stood in need of them.’

‘Then you shall always have them.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ she said quickly; but Paula was not to be caught again, and kept close to the side of her aunt while they glided past Brauback and Oberlahnstein. Approaching Coblenz her aunt said, ‘Paula, let me suggest that you be not so much alone with Captain De Stancy.’

‘And why?’ said Paula quietly.

‘You’ll have plenty of offers if you want them, without taking trouble,’ said the direct Mrs. Goodman. ‘Your existence is hardly known to the world yet, and Captain De Stancy is too near middle-age for a girl like you.’ Paula did not reply to either of these remarks, being seemingly so interested in Ehrenbreitstein’s heights as not to hear them.

CHAPTER IX.

It was midnight at Coblenz, and the travellers had retired to rest in their respective apartments, overlooking the river. Finding that there was a moon shining, Paula leant out of her window. The tall rock of Ehrenbreitstein on the opposite shore was flooded with light, and a belated steamer was drawing up to the landing-stage, where it presently deposited its passengers.

‘We should have come by the last boat, so as to have been touched into romance by the rays of this moon, like those happy people,’ said a voice.

She looked towards the spot whence the voice proceeded, which was a window quite near at hand. De Stancy was smoking outside it, and she became aware that the words were addressed to her.

‘You left me very abruptly,’ he continued.

Paula’s instinct of caution impelled her to speak.

‘The windows are all open,’ she murmured. ‘Please be careful.’

‘There are no English in this hotel except ourselves. I thank you for what you said to-day.’

‘Please be careful,’ she repeated.

‘My dear Miss P — — ’

‘Don’t mention names, and don’t continue the subject!’

‘Life and death perhaps depend upon my renewing it soon!’

She shut the window decisively, possibly wondering if De Stancy had drunk a glass or two of Steinberg more than was good for him, and saw no more of moonlit Ehrenbreitstein that night, and heard no more of De Stancy. But it was some time before he closed his window, and previous to doing so saw a dark form at an adjoining one on the other side.

It was Mr. Power, also taking the air. ‘Well, what luck to-day?’ said Power.

‘A decided advance,’ said De Stancy.

None of the speakers knew that a little person in the room above heard all this out-of-window talk. Charlotte, though not looking out, had left her casement open; and what reached her ears set her wondering as to the result.

It is not necessary to detail in full De Stancy’s imperceptible advances with Paula during that northward journey — so slowly performed that it seemed as if she must perceive there was a special reason for delaying her return to England. At Cologne one day he conveniently overtook her when she was ascending the hotel staircase. Seeing him, she went to the window of the entresol landing, which commanded a view of the Rhine, meaning that he should pass by to his room.

‘I have been very uneasy,’ began the captain, drawing up to her side; ‘and I am obliged to trouble you sooner than I meant to do.’

Paula turned her eyes upon him with some curiosity as to what was coming of this respectful demeanour. ‘Indeed!’ she said.

He then informed her that he had been overhauling himself since they last talked, and had some reason to blame himself for bluntness and general want of euphemism; which, although he had meant nothing by it, must have been very disagreeable to her. But he had always aimed at sincerity, particularly as he had to deal with a lady who despised hypocrisy and was above flattery. However, he feared he might have carried his disregard for conventionality too far. But from that time he would promise that she should find an alteration by which he hoped he might return the friendship at least of a young lady he honoured more than any other in the world.

This retrograde movement was evidently unexpected by the honoured young lady herself. After being so long accustomed to rebuke him for his persistence there was novelty in finding him do the work for her. The guess might even have been hazarded that there was also disappointment.

Still looking across the river at the bridge of boats which stretched to the opposite suburb of Deutz: ‘You need not blame yourself,’ she said, with the mildest conceiv-

able manner, 'I can make allowances. All I wish is that you should remain under no misapprehension.'

'I comprehend,' he said thoughtfully. 'But since, by a perverse fate, I have been thrown into your company, you could hardly expect me to feel and act otherwise.'

'Perhaps not.'

'Since I have so much reason to be dissatisfied with myself,' he added, 'I cannot refrain from criticizing elsewhere to a slight extent, and thinking I have to do with an ungenerous person.'

'Why ungenerous?'

'In this way; that since you cannot love me, you see no reason at all for trying to do so in the fact that I so deeply love you; hence I say that you are rather to be distinguished by your wisdom than by your humanity.'

'It comes to this, that if your words are all seriously meant it is much to be regretted we ever met,' she murmured. 'Now will you go on to where you were going, and leave me here?'

Without a remonstrance he went on, saying with dejected whimsicality as he smiled back upon her, 'You show a wisdom which for so young a lady is perfectly surprising.'

It was resolved to prolong the journey by a circuit through Holland and Belgium; but nothing changed in the attitudes of Paula and Captain De Stancy till one afternoon during their stay at the Hague, when they had gone for a drive down to Scheveningen by the long straight avenue of chestnuts and limes, under whose boughs tufts of wild parsley waved their flowers, except where the *buitenplaatsen* of retired merchants blazed forth with new paint of every hue. On mounting the dune which kept out the sea behind the village a brisk breeze greeted their faces, and a fine sand blew up into their eyes. De Stancy screened Paula with his umbrella as they stood with their backs to the wind, looking down on the red roofs of the village within the sea wall, and pulling at the long grass which by some means found nourishment in the powdery soil of the dune.

When they had discussed the scene he continued, 'It always seems to me that this place reflects the average mood of human life. I mean, if we strike the balance between our best moods and our worst we shall find our average condition to stand at about the same pitch in emotional colour as these sandy dunes and this grey scene do in landscape.'

Paula contended that he ought not to measure everybody by himself.

'I have no other standard,' said De Stancy; 'and if my own is wrong, it is you who have made it so. Have you thought any more of what I said at Cologne?'

'I don't quite remember what you did say at Cologne?'

'My dearest life!' Paula's eyes rounding somewhat, he corrected the exclamation. 'My dear Miss Power, I will, without reserve, tell it to you all over again.'

‘Pray spare yourself the effort,’ she said drily. ‘What has that one fatal step betrayed me into!... Do you seriously mean to say that I am the cause of your life being coloured like this scene of grass and sand? If so, I have committed a very great fault!’

‘It can be nullified by a word.’

‘Such a word!’

‘It is a very short one.’

‘There’s a still shorter one more to the purpose. Frankly, I believe you suspect me to have some latent and unowned inclination for you — that you think speaking is the only point upon which I am backward... There now, it is raining; what shall we do? I thought this wind meant rain.’

‘Do? Stand on here, as we are standing now.’

‘Your sister and my aunt are gone under the wall. I think we will walk towards them.’

‘You had made me hope,’ he continued (his thoughts apparently far away from the rain and the wind and the possibility of shelter), ‘that you might change your mind, and give to your original promise a liberal meaning in renewing it. In brief I mean this, that you would allow it to merge into an engagement. Don’t think it presumptuous,’ he went on, as he held the umbrella over her; ‘I am sure any man would speak as I do. A distinct permission to be with you on probation — that was what you gave me at Carlsruhe: and flinging casuistry on one side, what does that mean?’

‘That I am artistically interested in your family history.’ And she went out from the umbrella to the shelter of the hotel where she found her aunt and friend.

De Stancy could not but feel that his persistence had made some impression. It was hardly possible that a woman of independent nature would have tolerated his dangling at her side so long, if his presence were wholly distasteful to her. That evening when driving back to the Hague by a devious route through the dense avenues of the Bosch he conversed with her again; also the next day when standing by the Vijver looking at the swans; and in each case she seemed to have at least got over her objection to being seen talking to him, apart from the remainder of the travelling party.

Scenes very similar to those at Scheveningen and on the Rhine were enacted at later stages of their desultory journey. Mr. Power had proposed to cross from Rotterdam; but a stiff north-westerly breeze prevailing Paula herself became reluctant to hasten back to Stancy Castle. Turning abruptly they made for Brussels.

It was here, while walking homeward from the Park one morning, that her uncle for the first time alluded to the situation of affairs between herself and her admirer. The captain had gone up the Rue Royale with his sister and Mrs. Goodman, either to show them the house in which the ball took place on the eve of Quatre Bras or some other site of interest, and the two Powers were thus left to themselves. To reach their hotel they passed into a little street sloping steeply down from the Rue Royale to the Place Ste. Gudule, where, at the moment of nearing the cathedral, a wedding party emerged from the porch and crossed in front of uncle and niece.

‘I hope,’ said the former, in his passionless way, ‘we shall see a performance of this sort between you and Captain De Stancy, not so very long after our return to England.’

‘Why?’ asked Paula, following the bride with her eyes.

‘It is diplomatically, as I may say, such a highly correct thing — such an expedient thing — such an obvious thing to all eyes.’

‘Not altogether to mine, uncle,’ she returned.

‘‘Twould be a thousand pities to let slip such a neat offer of adjusting difficulties as accident makes you in this. You could marry more tin, that’s true; but you don’t want it, Paula. You want a name, and historic what-do-they-call-it. Now by coming to terms with the captain you’ll be Lady De Stancy in a few years: and a title which is useless to him, and a fortune and castle which are in some degree useless to you, will make a splendid whole useful to you both.’

‘I’ve thought it over — quite,’ she answered. ‘And I quite see what the advantages are. But how if I don’t care one atom for artistic completeness and a splendid whole; and do care very much to do what my fancy inclines me to do?’

‘Then I should say that, taking a comprehensive view of human nature of all colours, your fancy is about the silliest fancy existing on this earthly ball.’

Paula laughed indifferently, and her uncle felt that, persistent as was his nature, he was the wrong man to influence her by argument. Paula’s blindness to the advantages of the match, if she were blind, was that of a woman who wouldn’t see, and the best argument was silence.

This was in some measure proved the next morning. When Paula made her appearance Mrs. Goodman said, holding up an envelope: ‘Here’s a letter from Mr. Somerset.’

‘Dear me,’ said she blandly, though a quick little flush ascended her cheek. ‘I had nearly forgotten him!’

The letter on being read contained a request as brief as it was unexpected. Having prepared all the drawings necessary for the rebuilding, Somerset begged leave to resign the superintendence of the work into other hands.

‘His letter caps your remarks very aptly,’ said Mrs. Goodman, with secret triumph. ‘You are nearly forgetting him, and he is quite forgetting you.’

‘Yes,’ said Paula, affecting carelessness. ‘Well, I must get somebody else, I suppose.’

CHAPTER X.

They next deviated to Amiens, intending to stay there only one night; but their schemes were deranged by the sudden illness of Charlotte. She had been looking unwell for a fortnight past, though, with her usual self-abnegation, she had made light of her ailment. Even now she declared she could go on; but this was said over-night, and in the morning it was abundantly evident that to move her was highly inadvisable. Still she was not in serious danger, and having called in a physician, who pronounced rest indispensable, they prepared to remain in the old Picard capital two or three

additional days. Mr. Power thought he would take advantage of the halt to run up to Paris, leaving De Stancy in charge of the ladies.

In more ways than in the illness of Charlotte this day was the harbinger of a crisis.

It was a summer evening without a cloud. Charlotte had fallen asleep in her bed, and Paula, who had been sitting by her, looked out into the Place St. Denis, which the hotel commanded. The lawn of the square was all ablaze with red and yellow clumps of flowers, the acacia trees were brightly green, the sun was soft and low. Tempted by the prospect Paula went and put on her hat; and arousing her aunt, who was nodding in the next room, to request her to keep an ear on Charlotte's bedroom, Paula descended into the Rue de Noyon alone, and entered the green enclosure.

While she walked round, two or three little children in charge of a nurse trundled a large variegated ball along the grass, and it rolled to Paula's feet. She smiled at them, and endeavoured to return it by a slight kick. The ball rose in the air, and passing over the back of a seat which stood under one of the trees, alighted in the lap of a gentleman hitherto screened by its boughs. The back and shoulders proved to be those of De Stancy. He turned his head, jumped up, and was at her side in an instant, a nettled flush having meanwhile crossed Paula's face.

'I thought you had gone to the Hotoie Promenade,' she said hastily. 'I am going to the cathedral;' (obviously uttered lest it should seem that she had seen him from the hotel windows, and entered the square for his company).

'Of course: there is nothing else to go to here — even for Roundheads.'

'If you mean ME by that, you are very much mistaken,' said she testily.

'The Roundheads were your ancestors, and they knocked down my ancestors' castle, and broke the stained glass and statuary of the cathedral,' said De Stancy slyly; 'and now you go not only to a cathedral, but to a service of the unreformed Church in it.'

'In a foreign country it is different from home,' said Paula in extenuation; 'and you of all men should not reproach me for tergiversation — when it has been brought about by — by my sympathies with —'

'With the troubles of the De Stancys.'

'Well, you know what I mean,' she answered, with considerable anxiety not to be misunderstood; 'my liking for the old castle, and what it contains, and what it suggests. I declare I will not explain to you further — why should I? I am not answerable to you!'

Paula's show of petulance was perhaps not wholly because she had appeared to seek him, but also from being reminded by his criticism that Mr. Woodwell's prophecy on her weakly succumbing to surroundings was slowly working out its fulfilment.

She moved forward towards the gate at the further end of the square, beyond which the cathedral lay at a very short distance. Paula did not turn her head, and De Stancy strolled slowly after her down the Rue du College. The day happened to be one of the church festivals, and people were a second time flocking into the lofty monument of Catholicism at its meridian. Paula vanished into the porch with the rest; and, almost catching the wicket as it flew back from her hand, he too entered the high-shouldered

edifice — an edifice doomed to labour under the melancholy misfortune of seeming only half as vast as it really is, and as truly as whimsically described by Heine as a monument built with the strength of Titans, and decorated with the patience of dwarfs.

De Stancy walked up the nave, so close beside her as to touch her dress; but she would not recognize his presence; the darkness that evening had thrown over the interior, which was scarcely broken by the few candles dotted about, being a sufficient excuse if she required one.

‘Miss Power,’ De Stancy said at last, ‘I am coming to the service with you.’

She received the intelligence without surprise, and he knew she had been conscious of him all the way.

Paula went no further than the middle of the nave, where there was hardly a soul, and took a chair beside a solitary rushlight which looked amid the vague gloom of the inaccessible architecture like a lighthouse at the foot of tall cliffs.

He put his hand on the next chair, saying, ‘Do you object?’

‘Not at all,’ she replied; and he sat down.

‘Suppose we go into the choir,’ said De Stancy presently. ‘Nobody sits out here in the shadows.’

‘This is sufficiently near, and we have a candle,’ Paula murmured.

Before another minute had passed the candle flame began to drown in its own grease, slowly dwindled, and went out.

‘I suppose that means I am to go into the choir in spite of myself. Heaven is on your side,’ said Paula. And rising they left their now totally dark corner, and joined the noiseless shadowy figures who in twos and threes kept passing up the nave.

Within the choir there was a blaze of light, partly from the altar, and more particularly from the image of the saint whom they had assembled to honour, which stood, surrounded by candles and a thicket of flowering plants, some way in advance of the foot-pace. A secondary radiance from the same source was reflected upward into their faces by the polished marble pavement, except when interrupted by the shady forms of the officiating priests.

When it was over and the people were moving off, De Stancy and his companion went towards the saint, now besieged by numbers of women anxious to claim the respective flower-pots they had lent for the decoration. As each struggled for her own, seized and marched off with it, Paula remarked — ‘This rather spoils the solemn effect of what has gone before.’

‘I perceive you are a harsh Puritan.’

‘No, Captain De Stancy! Why will you speak so? I am far too much otherwise. I have grown to be so much of your way of thinking, that I accuse myself, and am accused by others, of being worldly, and half-and-half, and other dreadful things — though it isn’t that at all.’

They were now walking down the nave, preceded by the sombre figures with the pot flowers, who were just visible in the rays that reached them through the distant

choir screen at their back; while above the grey night sky and stars looked in upon them through the high clerestory windows.

‘Do be a little MORE of my way of thinking!’ rejoined De Stancy passionately.

‘Don’t, don’t speak,’ she said rapidly. ‘There are Milly and Champreau!’

Milly was one of the maids, and Champreau the courier and valet who had been engaged by Abner Power. They had been sitting behind the other pair throughout the service, and indeed knew rather more of the relations between Paula and De Stancy than Paula knew herself.

Hastening on the two latter went out, and walked together silently up the short street. The Place St. Denis was now lit up, lights shone from the hotel windows, and the world without the cathedral had so far advanced in nocturnal change that it seemed as if they had been gone from it for hours. Within the hotel they found the change even greater than without. Mrs. Goodman met them half-way on the stairs.

‘Poor Charlotte is worse,’ she said. ‘Quite feverish, and almost delirious.’

Paula reproached herself with ‘Why did I go away!’

The common interest of De Stancy and Paula in the sufferer at once reproduced an ease between them as nothing else could have done. The physician was again called in, who prescribed certain draughts, and recommended that some one should sit up with her that night. If Paula allowed demonstrations of love to escape her towards anybody it was towards Charlotte, and her instinct was at once to watch by the invalid’s couch herself, at least for some hours, it being deemed unnecessary to call in a regular nurse unless she should sicken further.

‘But I will sit with her,’ said De Stancy. ‘Surely you had better go to bed?’ Paula would not be persuaded; and thereupon De Stancy, saying he was going into the town for a short time before retiring, left the room.

The last omnibus returned from the last train, and the inmates of the hotel retired to rest. Meanwhile a telegram had arrived for Captain De Stancy; but as he had not yet returned it was put in his bedroom, with directions to the night-porter to remind him of its arrival.

Paula sat on with the sleeping Charlotte. Presently she retired into the adjacent sitting-room with a book, and flung herself on a couch, leaving the door open between her and her charge, in case the latter should awake. While she sat a new breathing seemed to mingle with the regular sound of Charlotte’s that reached her through the doorway: she turned quickly, and saw her uncle standing behind her.

‘O — I thought you were in Paris!’ said Paula.

‘I have just come from there — I could not stay. Something has occurred to my mind about this affair.’ His strangely marked visage, now more noticeable from being worn with fatigue, had a spectral effect by the night-light.

‘What affair?’

‘This marriage... Paula, De Stancy is a good fellow enough, but you must not accept him just yet.’

Paula did not answer.

‘Do you hear? You must not accept him,’ repeated her uncle, ‘till I have been to England and examined into matters. I start in an hour’s time — by the ten-minutes-past-two train.’

‘This is something very new!’

‘Yes — ’tis new,’ he murmured, relapsing into his Dutch manner. ‘You must not accept him till something is made clear to me — something about a queer relationship. I have come from Paris to say so.’

‘Uncle, I don’t understand this. I am my own mistress in all matters, and though I don’t mind telling you I have by no means resolved to accept him, the question of her marriage is especially a woman’s own affair.’

Her uncle stood irresolute for a moment, as if his convictions were more than his proofs. ‘I say no more at present,’ he murmured. ‘Can I do anything for you about a new architect?’

‘Appoint Havill.’

‘Very well. Good night.’ And then he left her. In a short time she heard him go down and out of the house to cross to England by the morning steamboat.

With a little shrug, as if she resented his interference in so delicate a point, she settled herself down anew to her book.

One, two, three hours passed, when Charlotte awoke, but soon slumbered sweetly again. Milly had stayed up for some time lest her mistress should require anything; but the girl being sleepy Paula sent her to bed.

It was a lovely night of early summer, and drawing aside the window curtains she looked out upon the flowers and trees of the Place, now quite visible, for it was nearly three o’clock, and the morning light was growing strong. She turned her face upwards. Except in the case of one bedroom all the windows on that side of the hotel were in darkness. The room being rather close she left the casement ajar, and opening the door walked out upon the staircase landing. A number of caged canaries were kept here, and she observed in the dim light of the landing lamp how snugly their heads were all tucked in. On returning to the sitting-room again she could hear that Charlotte was still slumbering, and this encouraging circumstance disposed her to go to bed herself. Before, however, she had made a move a gentle tap came to the door.

Paula opened it. There, in the faint light by the sleeping canaries, stood Charlotte’s brother.

‘How is she now?’ he whispered.

‘Sleeping soundly,’ said Paula.

‘That’s a blessing. I have not been to bed. I came in late, and have now come down to know if I had not better take your place?’

‘Nobody is required, I think. But you can judge for yourself.’

Up to this point they had conversed in the doorway of the sitting-room, which De Stancy now entered, crossing it to Charlotte’s apartment. He came out from the latter at a pensive pace.

‘She is doing well,’ he said gently. ‘You have been very good to her. Was the chair I saw by her bed the one you have been sitting in all night?’

‘I sometimes sat there; sometimes here.’

‘I wish I could have sat beside you, and held your hand — I speak frankly.’

‘To excess.’

‘And why not? I do not wish to hide from you any corner of my breast, futile as candour may be. Just Heaven! for what reason is it ordered that courtship, in which soldiers are usually so successful, should be a failure with me?’

‘Your lack of foresight chiefly in indulging feelings that were not encouraged. That, and my uncle’s indiscreet permission to you to travel with us, have precipitated our relations in a way that I could neither foresee nor avoid, though of late I have had apprehensions that it might come to this. You vex and disturb me by such words of regret.’

‘Not more than you vex and disturb me. But you cannot hate the man who loves you so devotedly?’

‘I have said before I don’t hate you. I repeat that I am interested in your family and its associations because of its complete contrast with my own.’ She might have added, ‘And I am additionally interested just now because my uncle has forbidden me to be.’

‘But you don’t care enough for me personally to save my happiness.’

Paula hesitated; from the moment De Stancy confronted her she had felt that this nocturnal conversation was to be a grave business. The cathedral clock struck three. ‘I have thought once or twice,’ she said with a naivete unusual in her, ‘that if I could be sure of giving peace and joy to your mind by becoming your wife, I ought to endeavour to do so and make the best of it — merely as a charity. But I believe that feeling is a mistake: your discontent is constitutional, and would go on just the same whether I accepted you or no. My refusal of you is purely an imaginary grievance.’

‘Not if I think otherwise.’

‘O no,’ she murmured, with a sense that the place was very lonely and silent. ‘If you think it otherwise, I suppose it is otherwise.’

‘My darling; my Paula!’ he said, seizing her hand. ‘Do promise me something. You must indeed!’

‘Captain De Stancy!’ she said, trembling and turning away. ‘Captain De Stancy!’ She tried to withdraw her fingers, then faced him, exclaiming in a firm voice a third time, ‘Captain De Stancy! let go my hand; for I tell you I will not marry you!’

‘Good God!’ he cried, dropping her hand. ‘What have I driven you to say in your anger! Retract it — O, retract it!’

‘Don’t urge me further, as you value my good opinion!’

‘To lose you now, is to lose you for ever. Come, please answer!’

‘I won’t be compelled!’ she interrupted with vehemence. ‘I am resolved not to be yours — not to give you an answer to-night! Never, never will I be reasoned out of my intention; and I say I won’t answer you to-night! I should never have let you be so much with me but for pity of you; and now it is come to this!’

She had sunk into a chair, and now leaned upon her hand, and buried her face in her handkerchief. He had never caused her any such agitation as this before.

‘You stab me with your words,’ continued De Stancy. ‘The experience I have had with you is without parallel, Paula. It seems like a distracting dream.’

‘I won’t be hurried by anybody!’

‘That may mean anything,’ he said, with a perplexed, passionate air. ‘Well, mine is a fallen family, and we must abide caprices. Would to Heaven it were extinguished!’

‘What was extinguished?’ she murmured.

‘The De Stancys. Here am I, a homeless wanderer, living on my pay; in the next room lies she, my sister, a poor little fragile feverish invalid with no social position — and hardly a friend. We two represent the De Stancy line; and I wish we were behind the iron door of our old vault at Sleeping-Green. It can be seen by looking at us and our circumstances that we cry for the earth and oblivion!’

‘Captain De Stancy, it is not like that, I assure you,’ sympathized Paula with damp eyelashes. ‘I love Charlotte too dearly for you to talk like that, indeed. I don’t want to marry you exactly: and yet I cannot bring myself to say I permanently reject you, because I remember you are Charlotte’s brother, and do not wish to be the cause of any morbid feelings in you which would ruin your future prospects.’

‘My dear life, what is it you doubt in me? Your earnestness not to do me harm makes it all the harder for me to think of never being more than a friend.’

‘Well, I have not positively refused!’ she exclaimed, in mixed tones of pity and distress. ‘Let me think it over a little while. It is not generous to urge so strongly before I can collect my thoughts, and at this midnight time!’

‘Darling, forgive it! — There, I’ll say no more.’

He then offered to sit up in her place for the remainder of the night; but Paula declined, assuring him that she meant to stay only another half-hour, after which nobody would be necessary.

He had already crossed the landing to ascend to his room, when she stepped after him, and asked if he had received his telegram.

‘No,’ said De Stancy. ‘Nor have I heard of one.’

Paula explained that it was put in his room, that he might see it the moment he came in.

‘It matters very little,’ he replied, ‘since I shall see it now. Good-night, dearest: good-night!’ he added tenderly.

She gravely shook her head. ‘It is not for you to express yourself like that,’ she answered. ‘Good-night, Captain De Stancy.’

He went up the stairs to the second floor, and Paula returned to the sitting-room. Having left a light burning De Stancy proceeded to look for the telegram, and found it on the carpet, where it had been swept from the table. When he had opened the sheet a sudden solemnity overspread his face. He sat down, rested his elbow on the table, and his forehead on his hands.

Captain De Stancy did not remain thus long. Rising he went softly downstairs. The grey morning had by this time crept into the hotel, rendering a light no longer necessary. The old clock on the landing was within a few minutes of four, and the birds were hopping up and down their cages, and whetting their bills. He tapped at the sitting-room, and she came instantly.

‘But I told you it was not necessary — ’ she began.

‘Yes, but the telegram,’ he said hurriedly. ‘I wanted to let you know first that — it is very serious. Paula — my father is dead! He died suddenly yesterday, and I must go at once... . About Charlotte — and how to let her know — ’

‘She must not be told yet,’ said Paula... ‘Sir William dead!’

‘You think we had better not tell her just yet?’ said De Stancy anxiously. ‘That’s what I want to consult you about, if you — don’t mind my intruding.’

‘Certainly I don’t,’ she said.

They continued the discussion for some time; and it was decided that Charlotte should not be informed of what had happened till the doctor had been consulted, Paula promising to account for her brother’s departure.

De Stancy then prepared to leave for England by the first morning train, and roused the night-porter, which functionary, having packed off Abner Power, was discovered asleep on the sofa of the landlord’s parlour. At half-past five Paula, who in the interim had been pensively sitting with her hand to her chin, quite forgetting that she had meant to go to bed, heard wheels without, and looked from the window. A fly had been brought round, and one of the hotel servants was in the act of putting up a portmanteau with De Stancy’s initials upon it. A minute afterwards the captain came to her door.

‘I thought you had not gone to bed, after all.’

‘I was anxious to see you off,’ said she, ‘since neither of the others is awake; and you wished me not to rouse them.’

‘Quite right, you are very good;’ and lowering his voice: ‘Paula, it is a sad and solemn time with me. Will you grant me one word — not on our last sad subject, but on the previous one — before I part with you to go and bury my father?’

‘Certainly,’ she said, in gentle accents.

‘Then have you thought over my position? Will you at last have pity upon my loneliness by becoming my wife?’

Paula sighed deeply; and said, ‘Yes.’

‘Your hand upon it.’

She gave him her hand: he held it a few moments, then raised it to his lips, and was gone.

When Mrs. Goodman rose she was informed of Sir William’s death, and of his son’s departure.

‘Then the captain is now Sir William De Stancy!’ she exclaimed. ‘Really, Paula, since you would be Lady De Stancy by marrying him, I almost think — ’

‘Hush, aunt!’

‘Well; what are you writing there?’

‘Only entering in my diary that I accepted him this morning for pity’s sake, in spite of Uncle Abner. They’ll say it was for the title, but knowing it was not I don’t care.’

CHAPTER XI.

On the evening of the fourth day after the parting between Paula and De Stancy at Amiens, when it was quite dark in the Markton highway, except in so far as the shades were broken by the faint lights from the adjacent town, a young man knocked softly at the door of Myrtle Villa, and asked if Captain De Stancy had arrived from abroad. He was answered in the affirmative, and in a few moments the captain himself came from an adjoining room.

Seeing that his visitor was Dare, from whom, as will be remembered, he had parted at Carlsruhe in no very satisfied mood, De Stancy did not ask him into the house, but putting on his hat went out with the youth into the public road. Here they conversed as they walked up and down, Dare beginning by alluding to the death of Sir William, the suddenness of which he feared would delay Captain De Stancy’s overtures for the hand of Miss Power.

‘No,’ said De Stancy moodily. ‘On the contrary, it has precipitated matters.’

‘She has accepted you, captain?’

‘We are engaged to be married.’

‘Well done. I congratulate you.’ The speaker was about to proceed to further triumphant notes on the intelligence, when casting his eye upon the upper windows of the neighbouring villa, he appeared to reflect on what was within them, and checking himself, ‘When is the funeral to be?’

‘To-morrow,’ De Stancy replied. ‘It would be advisable for you not to come near me during the day.’

‘I will not. I will be a mere spectator. The old vault of our ancestors will be opened, I presume, captain?’

‘It is opened.’

‘I must see it — and ruminare on what we once were: it is a thing I like doing. The ghosts of our dead — Ah, what was that?’

‘I heard nothing.’

‘I thought I heard a footstep behind us.’

They stood still; but the road appeared to be quite deserted, and likely to continue so for the remainder of that evening. They walked on again, speaking in somewhat lower tones than before.

‘Will the late Sir William’s death delay the wedding much?’ asked the younger man curiously.

De Stancy languidly answered that he did not see why it should do so. Some little time would of course intervene, but, since there were several reasons for despatch, he

should urge Miss Power and her relatives to consent to a virtually private wedding which might take place at a very early date; and he thought there would be a general consent on that point.

‘There are indeed reasons for despatch. Your title, Sir William, is a new safeguard over her heart, certainly; but there is many a slip, and you must not lose her now.’

‘I don’t mean to lose her!’ said De Stancy. ‘She is too good to be lost. And yet — since she gave her promise I have felt more than once that I would not engage in such a struggle again. It was not a thing of my beginning, though I was easily enough inflamed to follow. But I will not lose her now. — For God’s sake, keep that secret you have so foolishly pricked on your breast. It fills me with remorse to think what she with her scrupulous notions will feel, should she ever know of you and your history, and your relation to me!’

Dare made no reply till after a silence, when he said, ‘Of course mum’s the word till the wedding is over.’

‘And afterwards — promise that for her sake?’

‘And probably afterwards.’

Sir William De Stancy drew a dejected breath at the tone of the answer. They conversed but a little while longer, the captain hinting to Dare that it was time for them to part; not, however, before he had uttered a hope that the young man would turn over a new leaf and engage in some regular pursuit. Promising to call upon him at his lodgings De Stancy went indoors, and Dare briskly retraced his steps to Markton.

When his footfall had died away, and the door of the house opposite had been closed, another man appeared upon the scene. He came gently out of the hedge opposite Myrtle Villa, which he paused to regard for a moment. But instead of going townward, he turned his back upon the distant sprinkle of lights, and did not check his walk till he reached the lodge of Stancy Castle.

Here he pulled the wooden acorn beside the arch, and when the porter appeared his light revealed the pedestrian’s countenance to be scathed, as by lightning.

‘I beg your pardon, Mr. Power,’ said the porter with sudden deference as he opened the wicket. ‘But we wasn’t expecting anybody to-night, as there is nobody at home, and the servants on board wages; and that’s why I was so long a-coming.’

‘No matter, no matter,’ said Abner Power. ‘I have returned on sudden business, and have not come to stay longer than to-night. Your mistress is not with me. I meant to sleep in Markton, but have changed my mind.’

Mr. Power had brought no luggage with him beyond a small hand-bag, and as soon as a room could be got ready he retired to bed.

The next morning he passed in idly walking about the grounds and observing the progress which had been made in the works — now temporarily suspended. But that inspection was less his object in remaining there than meditation, was abundantly evident. When the bell began to toll from the neighbouring church to announce the burial of Sir William De Stancy, he passed through the castle, and went on foot in the direction indicated by the sound. Reaching the margin of the churchyard he looked over

the wall, his presence being masked by bushes and a group of idlers from Markton who stood in front. Soon a funeral procession of simple — almost meagre and threadbare — character arrived, but Power did not join the people who followed the deceased into the church. De Stancy was the chief mourner and only relation present, the other followers of the broken-down old man being an ancient lawyer, a couple of faithful servants, and a bowed villager who had been page to the late Sir William's father — the single living person left in the parish who remembered the De Stancys as people of wealth and influence, and who firmly believed that family would come into its rights ere long, and oust the uncircumcized Philistines who had taken possession of the old lands.

The funeral was over, and the rusty carriages had gone, together with many of the spectators; but Power lingered in the churchyard as if he were looking for some one. At length he entered the church, passing by the cavernous pitfall with descending steps which stood open outside the wall of the De Stancy aisle. Arrived within he scanned the few idlers of antiquarian tastes who had remained after the service to inspect the monuments; and beside a recumbent effigy — the effigy in alabaster whose features Paula had wiped with her handkerchief when there with Somerset — he beheld the man it had been his business to find. Abner Power went up and touched this person, who was Dare, on the shoulder.

'Mr. Power — so it is!' said the youth. 'I have not seen you since we met in Carl-sruhe.'

'You shall see all the more of me now to make up for it. Shall we walk round the church?'

'With all my heart,' said Dare.

They walked round; and Abner Power began in a sardonic recitative: 'I am a traveller, and it takes a good deal to astonish me. So I neither swooned nor screamed when I learnt a few hours ago what I had suspected for a week, that you are of the house and lineage of Jacob.' He flung a nod towards the canopied tombs as he spoke. — 'In other words, that you are of the same breed as the De Stancys.'

Dare cursorily glanced round. Nobody was near enough to hear their words, the nearest persons being two workmen just outside, who were bringing their tools up from the vault preparatively to closing it.

Having observed this Dare replied, 'I, too, am a traveller; and neither do I swoon nor scream at what you say. But I assure you that if you busy yourself about me, you may truly be said to busy yourself about nothing.'

'Well, that's a matter of opinion. Now, there's no scarlet left in my face to blush for men's follies; but as an alliance is afoot between my niece and the present Sir William, this must be looked into.'

Dare reflectively said 'O,' as he observed through the window one of the workmen bring up a candle from the vault and extinguish it with his fingers.

'The marriage is desirable, and your relationship in itself is of no consequence,' continued the elder, 'but just look at this. You have forced on the marriage by un-

scrupulous means, your object being only too clearly to live out of the proceeds of that marriage.'

'Mr. Power, you mock me, because I labour under the misfortune of having an illegitimate father to provide for. I really deserve commiseration.'

'You might deserve it if that were all. But it looks bad for my niece's happiness as Lady De Stancy, that she and her husband are to be perpetually haunted by a young chevalier d'industrie, who can forge a telegram on occasion, and libel an innocent man by an ingenious device in photography. It looks so bad, in short, that, advantageous as a title and old family name would be to her and her children, I won't let my brother's daughter run the risk of having them at the expense of being in the grip of a man like you. There are other suitors in the world, and other titles: and she is a beautiful woman, who can well afford to be fastidious. I shall let her know at once of these things, and break off the business — unless you do ONE THING.'

A workman brought up another candle from the vault, and prepared to let down the slab. 'Well, Mr. Power, and what is that one thing?'

'Go to Peru as my agent in a business I have just undertaken there.'

'And settle there?'

'Of course. I am soon going over myself, and will bring you anything you require.'

'How long will you give me to consider?' said Dare.

Power looked at his watch. 'One, two, three, four hours,' he said. 'I leave Markton by the seven o'clock train this evening.'

'And if I meet your proposal with a negative?'

'I shall go at once to my niece and tell her the whole circumstances — tell her that, by marrying Sir William, she allies herself with an unhappy gentleman in the power of a criminal son who makes his life a burden to him by perpetual demands upon his purse; who will increase those demands with his accession to wealth, threaten to degrade her by exposing her husband's antecedents if she opposes his extortions, and who will make her miserable by letting her know that her old lover was shamefully victimized by a youth she is bound to screen out of respect to her husband's feelings. Now a man does not care to let his own flesh and blood incur the danger of such anguish as that, and I shall do what I say to prevent it. Knowing what a lukewarm sentiment hers is for Sir William at best, I shall not have much difficulty.'

'Well, I don't feel inclined to go to Peru.'

'Neither do I want to break off the match, though I am ready to do it. But you care about your personal freedom, and you might be made to wear the broad arrow for your tricks on Somerset.'

'Mr. Power, I see you are a hard man.'

'I am a hard man. You will find me one. Well, will you go to Peru? Or I don't mind Australia or California as alternatives. As long as you choose to remain in either of those wealth-producing places, so long will Cunningham Haze go uninformed.'

'Mr. Power, I am overcome. Will you allow me to sit down? Suppose we go into the vestry. It is more comfortable.'

They entered the vestry, and seated themselves in two chairs, one at each end of the table.

‘In the meantime,’ continued Dare, ‘to lend a little romance to stern realities, I’ll tell you a singular dream I had just before you returned to England.’ Power looked contemptuous, but Dare went on: ‘I dreamt that once upon a time there were two brothers, born of a Nonconformist family, one of whom became a railway-contractor, and the other a mechanical engineer.’

‘A mechanical engineer — good,’ said Power, beginning to attend.

‘When the first went abroad in his profession, and became engaged on continental railways, the second, a younger man, looking round for a start, also betook himself to the continent. But though ingenious and scientific, he had not the business capacity of the elder, whose rebukes led to a sharp quarrel between them; and they parted in bitter estrangement — never to meet again as it turned out, owing to the dogged obstinacy and self-will of the younger man. He, after this, seemed to lose his moral ballast altogether, and after some eccentric doings he was reduced to a state of poverty, and took lodgings in a court in a back street of a town we will call Geneva, considerably in doubt as to what steps he should take to keep body and soul together.’

Abner Power was shooting a narrow ray of eyesight at Dare from the corner of his nearly closed lids. ‘Your dream is so interesting,’ he said, with a hard smile, ‘that I could listen to it all day.’

‘Excellent!’ said Dare, and went on: ‘Now it so happened that the house opposite to the one taken by the mechanician was peculiar. It was a tall narrow building, wholly unornamented, the walls covered with a layer of white plaster cracked and soiled by time. I seem to see that house now! Six stone steps led up to the door, with a rusty iron railing on each side, and under these steps were others which went down to a cellar — in my dream of course.’

‘Of course — in your dream,’ said Power, nodding comprehensively.

‘Sitting lonely and apathetic without a light, at his own chamber-window at night time, our mechanician frequently observed dark figures descending these steps and ultimately discovered that the house was the meeting-place of a fraternity of political philosophers, whose object was the extermination of tyrants and despots, and the overthrow of established religions. The discovery was startling enough, but our hero was not easily startled. He kept their secret and lived on as before. At last the mechanician and his affairs became known to the society, as the affairs of the society had become known to the mechanician, and, instead of shooting him as one who knew too much for their safety, they were struck with his faculty for silence, and thought they might be able to make use of him.’

‘To be sure,’ said Abner Power.

‘Next, like friend Bunyan, I saw in my dream that denunciation was the breath of life to this society. At an earlier date in its history, objectionable persons in power had been from time to time murdered, and curiously enough numbered; that is, upon the body of each was set a mark or seal, announcing that he was one of a series. But

at this time the question before the society related to the substitution for the dagger, which was vetoed as obsolete, of some explosive machine that would be both more effectual and less difficult to manage; and in short, a large reward was offered to our needy Englishman if he would put their ideas of such a machine into shape.'

Abner Power nodded again, his complexion being peculiar — which might partly have been accounted for by the reflection of window-light from the green-baize table-cloth.

'He agreed, though no politician whatever himself, to exercise his wits on their account, and brought his machine to such a pitch of perfection, that it was the identical one used in the memorable attempt — ' (Dare whispered the remainder of the sentence in tones so low that not a mouse in the corner could have heard.) 'Well, the inventor of that explosive has naturally been wanted ever since by all the heads of police in Europe. But the most curious — or perhaps the most natural part of my story is, that our hero, after the catastrophe, grew disgusted with himself and his comrades, acquired, in a fit of revulsion, quite a conservative taste in politics, which was strengthened greatly by the news he indirectly received of the great wealth and respectability of his brother, who had had no communion with him for years, and supposed him dead. He abjured his employers and resolved to abandon them; but before coming to England he decided to destroy all trace of his combustible inventions by dropping them into the neighbouring lake at night from a boat. You feel the room close, Mr. Power?'

'No, I suffer from attacks of perspiration whenever I sit in a consecrated edifice — that's all. Pray go on.'

'In carrying out this project, an explosion occurred, just as he was throwing the stock overboard — it blew up into his face, wounding him severely, and nearly depriving him of sight. The boat was upset, but he swam ashore in the darkness, and remained hidden till he recovered, though the scars produced by the burns had been set on him for ever. This accident, which was such a misfortune to him as a man, was an advantage to him as a conspirators' engineer retiring from practice, and afforded him a disguise both from his own brotherhood and from the police, which he has considered impenetrable, but which is getting seen through by one or two keen eyes as time goes on. Instead of coming to England just then, he went to Peru, connected himself with the guano trade, I believe, and after his brother's death revisited England, his old life obliterated as far as practicable by his new principles. He is known only as a great traveller to his surviving relatives, though he seldom says where he has travelled. Unluckily for himself, he is WANTED by certain European governments as badly as ever.'

Dare raised his eyes as he concluded his narration. As has been remarked, he was sitting at one end of the vestry-table, Power at the other, the green cloth stretching between them. On the edge of the table adjoining Mr. Power a shining nozzle of metal was quietly resting, like a dog's nose. It was directed point-blank at the young man.

Dare started. 'Ah — a revolver?' he said.

Mr. Power nodded placidly, his hand still grasping the pistol behind the edge of the table. 'As a traveller I always carry one of 'em,' he returned; 'and for the last

five minutes I have been closely considering whether your numerous brains are worth blowing out or no. The vault yonder has suggested itself as convenient and snug for one of the same family; but the mental problem that stays my hand is, how am I to despatch and bury you there without the workmen seeing?’

“Tis a strange problem, certainly,’ replied Dare, ‘and one on which I fear I could not give disinterested advice. Moreover, while you, as a traveller, always carry a weapon of defence, as a traveller so do I. And for the last three-quarters of an hour I have been thinking concerning you, an intensified form of what you have been thinking of me, but without any concern as to your interment. See here for a proof of it.’ And a second steel nose rested on the edge of the table opposite to the first, steadied by Dare’s right hand.

They remained for some time motionless, the tick of the tower clock distinctly audible.

Mr. Power spoke first.

‘Well, ‘twould be a pity to make a mess here under such dubious circumstances. Mr. Dare, I perceive that a mean vagabond can be as sharp as a political regenerator. I cry quits, if you care to do the same?’

Dare assented, and the pistols were put away.

‘Then we do nothing at all, either side; but let the course of true love run on to marriage — that’s the understanding, I think?’ said Dare as he rose.

‘It is,’ said Power; and turning on his heel, he left the vestry.

Dare retired to the church and thence to the outside, where he idled away a few minutes in looking at the workmen, who were now lowering into its place a large stone slab, bearing the words ‘DE STANCY,’ which covered the entrance to the vault. When the footway of the churchyard was restored to its normal condition Dare pursued his way to Markton.

Abner Power walked back to the castle at a slow and equal pace, as though he carried an over-brimming vessel on his head. He silently let himself in, entered the long gallery, and sat down. The length of time that he sat there was so remarkable as to raise that interval of inaction to the rank of a feat.

Power’s eyes glanced through one of the window-casements: from a hole without he saw the head of a tomtit protruding. He listlessly watched the bird during the successive epochs of his thought, till night came, without any perceptible change occurring in him. Such fixity would have meant nothing else than sudden death in any other man, but in Mr. Power it merely signified that he was engaged in ruminations which necessitated a more extensive survey than usual. At last, at half-past eight, after having sat for five hours with his eyes on the residence of the tomtits, to whom night had brought cessation of thought, if not to him who had observed them, he rose amid the shades of the furniture, and rang the bell. There were only a servant or two in the castle, one of whom presently came with a light in her hand and a startled look upon her face, which was not reduced when she recognized him; for in the opinion of that household there was something ghoulish in Mr. Power, which made him no desirable guest.

He ate a late meal, and retired to bed, where he seemed to sleep not unsoundly. The next morning he received a letter which afforded him infinite satisfaction and gave his stagnant impulses a new momentum. He entered the library, and amid objects swathed in brown holland sat down and wrote a note to his niece at Amiens. Therein he stated that, finding that the Anglo-South-American house with which he had recently connected himself required his presence in Peru, it obliged him to leave without waiting for her return. He felt the less uneasy at going, since he had learnt that Captain De Stancy would return at once to Amiens to his sick sister, and see them safely home when she improved. He afterwards left the castle, disappearing towards a railway station some miles above Markton, the road to which lay across an unfrequented down.

CHAPTER XII.

It was a fine afternoon of late summer, nearly three months subsequent to the death of Sir William De Stancy and Paula's engagement to marry his successor in the title. George Somerset had started on a professional journey that took him through the charming district which lay around Stancy Castle. Having resigned his appointment as architect to that important structure — a resignation which had been accepted by Paula through her solicitor — he had bidden farewell to the locality after putting matters in such order that his successor, whoever he might be, should have no difficulty in obtaining the particulars necessary to the completion of the work in hand. Hardly to his surprise this successor was Havill.

Somerset's resignation had been tendered in no hasty mood. On returning to England, and in due course to the castle, everything bore in upon his mind the exceeding sorrowfulness — he would not say humiliation — of continuing to act in his former capacity for a woman who, from seeming more than a dear friend, had become less than an acquaintance.

So he resigned; but now, as the train drew on into that once beloved tract of country, the images which met his eye threw him back in point of emotion to very near where he had been before making himself a stranger here. The train entered the cutting on whose brink he had walked when the carriage containing Paula and her friends surprised him the previous summer. He looked out of the window: they were passing the well-known curve that led up to the tunnel constructed by her father, into which he had gone when the train came by and Paula had been alarmed for his life. There was the path they had both climbed afterwards, involuntarily seizing each other's hand; the bushes, the grass, the flowers, everything just the same:

‘ — — -Here was the pleasant place,
And nothing wanting was, save She, alas!’

When they came out of the tunnel at the other end he caught a glimpse of the distant castle-keep, and the well-remembered walls beneath it. The experience so far transcended the intensity of what is called mournful pleasure as to make him wonder

how he could have miscalculated himself to the extent of supposing that he might pass the spot with controllable emotion.

On entering Markton station he withdrew into a remote corner of the carriage, and closed his eyes with a resolve not to open them till the embittering scenes should be passed by. He had not long to wait for this event. When again in motion his eye fell upon the skirt of a lady's dress opposite, the owner of which had entered and seated herself so softly as not to attract his attention.

'Ah indeed!' he exclaimed as he looked up to her face. 'I had not a notion that it was you!' He went over and shook hands with Charlotte De Stancy.

'I am not going far,' she said; 'only to the next station. We often run down in summer time. Are you going far?'

'I am going to a building further on; thence to Normandy by way of Cherbourg, to finish out my holiday.'

Miss De Stancy thought that would be very nice.

'Well, I hope so. But I fear it won't.'

After saying that Somerset asked himself why he should mince matters with so genuine and sympathetic a girl as Charlotte De Stancy? She could tell him particulars which he burned to know. He might never again have an opportunity of knowing them, since she and he would probably not meet for years to come, if at all.

'Have the castle works progressed pretty rapidly under the new architect?' he accordingly asked.

'Yes,' said Charlotte in her haste — then adding that she was not quite sure if they had progressed so rapidly as before; blushing and correcting herself at this point and that, in the tinkering manner of a nervous organization aiming at nicety where it was not required.

'Well, I should have liked to carry out the undertaking to its end,' said Somerset. 'But I felt I could not consistently do so. Miss Power — ' (here a lump came into Somerset's throat — so responsive was he yet to her image) — 'seemed to have lost confidence in me, and — it was best that the connection should be severed.'

There was a long pause. 'She was very sorry about it,' said Charlotte gently.

'What made her alter so? — I never can think!'

Charlotte waited again as if to accumulate the necessary force for honest speaking at the expense of pleasantness. 'It was the telegram that began it of course,' she answered. 'Telegram?'

She looked up at him in quite a frightened way — little as there was to be frightened at in a quiet fellow like him in this sad time of his life — and said, 'Yes: some telegram — I think — when you were in trouble? Forgive my alluding to it; but you asked me the question.'

Somerset began reflecting on what messages he had sent Paula, troublous or otherwise. All he had sent had been sent from the castle, and were as gentle and mellifluous as sentences well could be which had neither articles nor pronouns. 'I don't under-

stand,' he said. 'Will you explain a little more — as plainly as you like — without minding my feelings?'

'A telegram from Nice, I think?'

'I never sent one.'

'O! The one I meant was about money.'

Somerset shook his head. 'No,' he murmured, with the composure of a man who, knowing he had done nothing of the sort himself, was blinded by his own honesty to the possibility that another might have done it for him. 'That must be some other affair with which I had nothing to do. O no, it was nothing like that; the reason for her change of manner was quite different!'

So timid was Charlotte in Somerset's presence, that her timidity at this juncture amounted to blameworthiness. The distressing scene which must have followed a clearing up there and then of any possible misunderstanding, terrified her imagination; and quite confounded by contradictions that she could not reconcile, she held her tongue, and nervously looked out of the window.

'I have heard that Miss Power is soon to be married,' continued Somerset.

'Yes,' Charlotte murmured. 'It is sooner than it ought to be by rights, considering how recently my dear father died; but there are reasons in connection with my brother's position against putting it off: and it is to be absolutely simple and private.'

There was another interval. 'May I ask when it is to be?' he said.

'Almost at once — this week.'

Somerset started back as if some stone had hit his face.

Still there was nothing wonderful in such promptitude: engagements broken in upon by the death of a near relative of one of the parties had been often carried out in a subdued form with no longer delay.

Charlotte's station was now at hand. She bade him farewell; and he rattled on to the building he had come to inspect, and next to Budmouth, whence he intended to cross the Channel by steamboat that night.

He hardly knew how the evening passed away. He had taken up his quarters at an inn near the quay, and as the night drew on he stood gazing from the coffee-room window at the steamer outside, which nearly thrust its spars through the bedroom casements, and at the goods that were being tumbled on board as only shippers can tumble them. All the goods were laden, a lamp was put on each side the gangway, the engines broke into a crackling roar, and people began to enter. They were only waiting for the last train: then they would be off. Still Somerset did not move; he was thinking of that curious half-told story of Charlotte's, about a telegram to Paula for money from Nice. Not once till within the last half-hour had it recurred to his mind that he had met Dare both at Nice and at Monte Carlo; that at the latter place he had been absolutely out of money and wished to borrow, showing considerable sinister feeling when Somerset declined to lend: that on one or two previous occasions he had reasons for doubting Dare's probity; and that in spite of the young man's impoverishment at Monte Carlo he had, a few days later, beheld him in shining raiment at Carlsruhe.

Somerset, though misty in his conjectures, was seized with a growing conviction that there was something in Miss De Stancy's allusion to the telegram which ought to be explained.

He felt an insurmountable objection to cross the water that night, or till he had been able to see Charlotte again, and learn more of her meaning. He countermanded the order to put his luggage on board, watched the steamer out of the harbour, and went to bed. He might as well have gone to battle, for any rest that he got. On rising the next morning he felt rather blank, though none the less convinced that a matter required investigation. He left Budmouth by a morning train, and about eleven o'clock found himself in Markton.

The momentum of a practical inquiry took him through that ancient borough without leaving him much leisure for those reveries which had yesterday lent an unutterable sadness to every object there. It was just before noon that he started for the castle, intending to arrive at a time of the morning when, as he knew from experience, he could speak to Charlotte without difficulty. The rising ground soon revealed the old towers to him, and, jutting out behind them, the scaffoldings for the new wing.

While halting here on the knoll in some doubt about his movements he beheld a man coming along the road, and was soon confronted by his former competitor, Havill. The first instinct of each was to pass with a nod, but a second instinct for intercourse was sufficient to bring them to a halt. After a few superficial words had been spoken Somerset said, 'You have succeeded me.'

'I have,' said Havill; 'but little to my advantage. I have just heard that my commission is to extend no further than roofing in the wing that you began, and had I known that before, I would have seen the castle fall flat as Jericho before I would have accepted the superintendence. But I know who I have to thank for that — De Stancy.'

Somerset still looked towards the distant battlements. On the scaffolding, among the white-jacketed workmen, he could discern one figure in a dark suit.

'You have a clerk of the works, I see,' he observed.

'Nominally I have, but practically I haven't.'

'Then why do you keep him?'

'I can't help myself. He is Mr. Dare; and having been recommended by a higher power than I, there he must stay in spite of me.'

'Who recommended him?'

'The same — De Stancy.'

'It is very odd,' murmured Somerset, 'but that young man is the object of my visit.'

'You had better leave him alone,' said Havill drily.

Somerset asked why.

'Since I call no man master over that way I will inform you.' Havill then related in splenetic tones, to which Somerset did not care to listen till the story began to advance itself, how he had passed the night with Dare at the inn, and the incidents of that night, relating how he had seen some letters on the young man's breast which long had puzzled him. 'They were an E, a T, an N, and a C. I thought over them long,

till it eventually occurred to me that the word when filled out was "De Stancy," and that kinship explains the offensive and defensive alliance between them.'

'But, good heavens, man!' said Somerset, more and more disturbed. 'Does she know of it?'

'You may depend she does not yet; but she will soon enough. Hark — there it is!' The notes of the castle clock were heard striking noon. 'Then it is all over.'

'What? — not their marriage!'

'Yes. Didn't you know it was the wedding day? They were to be at the church at half-past eleven. I should have waited to see her go, but it was no sight to hinder business for, as she was only going to drive over in her brougham with Miss De Stancy.'

'My errand has failed!' said Somerset, turning on his heel. 'I'll walk back to the town with you.'

However he did not walk far with Havill; society was too much at that moment. As soon as opportunity offered he branched from the road by a path, and avoiding the town went by railway to Budmouth, whence he resumed, by the night steamer, his journey to Normandy.

CHAPTER XIII.

To return to Charlotte De Stancy. When the train had borne Somerset from her side, and she had regained her self-possession, she became conscious of the true proportions of the fact he had asserted. And, further, if the telegram had not been his, why should the photographic distortion be trusted as a phase of his existence? But after a while it seemed so improbable to her that God's sun should bear false witness, that instead of doubting both evidences she was inclined to readmit the first. Still, upon the whole, she could not question for long the honesty of Somerset's denial and if that message had indeed been sent by him, it must have been done while he was in another such an unhappy state as that exemplified by the portrait. The supposition reconciled all differences; and yet she could not but fight against it with all the strength of a generous affection.

All the afternoon her poor little head was busy on this perturbing question, till she inquired of herself whether after all it might not be possible for photographs to represent people as they had never been. Before rejecting the hypothesis she determined to have the word of a professor on the point, which would be better than all her surmises. Returning to Markton early, she told the coachman whom Paula had sent, to drive her to the shop of Mr. Ray, an obscure photographic artist in that town, instead of straight home.

Ray's establishment consisted of two divisions, the respectable and the shabby. If, on entering the door, the visitor turned to the left, he found himself in a magazine of old clothes, old furniture, china, umbrellas, guns, fishing-rods, dirty fiddles, and split flutes. Entering the right-hand room, which had originally been that of an indepen-

dent house, he was in an ordinary photographer's and print-collector's depository, to which a certain artistic solidity was imparted by a few oil paintings in the background. Charlotte made for the latter department, and when she was inside Mr. Ray appeared in person from the lumber-shop adjoining, which, despite its manginess, contributed by far the greater share to his income.

Charlotte put her question simply enough. The man did not answer her directly, but soon found that she meant no harm to him. He told her that such misrepresentations were quite possible, and that they embodied a form of humour which was getting more and more into vogue among certain facetious persons of society.

Charlotte was coming away when she asked, as on second thoughts, if he had any specimens of such work to show her.

'None of my own preparation,' said Mr. Ray, with unimpeachable probity of tone. 'I consider them libellous myself. Still, I have one or two samples by me, which I keep merely as curiosities. — There's one,' he said, throwing out a portrait card from a drawer. 'That represents the German Emperor in a violent passion: this one shows the Prime Minister out of his mind; this the Pope of Rome the worse for liquor.'

She inquired if he had any local specimens.

'Yes,' he said, 'but I prefer not to exhibit them unless you really ask for a particular one that you mean to buy.'

'I don't want any.'

'O, I beg pardon, miss. Well, I shouldn't myself own such things were produced, if there had not been a young man here at one time who was very ingenious in these matters — a Mr. Dare. He was quite a gent, and only did it as an amusement, and not for the sake of getting a living.'

Charlotte had no wish to hear more. On her way home she burst into tears: the entanglement was altogether too much for her to tear asunder, even had not her own instincts been urging her two ways, as they were.

To immediately right Somerset's wrong was her impetuous desire as an honest woman who loved him; but such rectification would be the jeopardizing of all else that gratified her — the marriage of her brother with her dearest friend — now on the very point of accomplishment. It was a marriage which seemed to promise happiness, or at least comfort, if the old flutter that had transiently disturbed Paula's bosom could be kept from reviving, to which end it became imperative to hide from her the discovery of injustice to Somerset. It involved the advantage of leaving Somerset free; and though her own tender interest in him had been too well schooled by habitual self-denial to run ahead on vain personal hopes, there was nothing more than human in her feeling pleasure in prolonging Somerset's singleness. Paula might even be allowed to discover his wrongs when her marriage had put him out of her power. But to let her discover his ill-treatment now might upset the impending union of the families, and wring her own heart with the sight of Somerset married in her brother's place.

Why Dare, or any other person, should have set himself to advance her brother's cause by such unscrupulous blackening of Somerset's character was more than her

sagacity could fathom. Her brother was, as far as she could see, the only man who could directly profit by the machination, and was therefore the natural one to suspect of having set it going. But she would not be so disloyal as to entertain the thought long; and who or what had instigated Dare, who was undoubtedly the proximate cause of the mischief, remained to her an inscrutable mystery.

The contention of interests and desires with honour in her heart shook Charlotte all that night; but good principle prevailed. The wedding was to be solemnized the very next morning, though for before-mentioned reasons this was hardly known outside the two houses interested; and there were no visible preparations either at villa or castle. De Stancy and his groomsman — a brother officer — slept at the former residence.

De Stancy was a sorry specimen of a bridegroom when he met his sister in the morning. Thick-coming fancies, for which there was more than good reason, had disturbed him only too successfully, and he was as full of apprehension as one who has a league with Mephistopheles. Charlotte told him nothing of what made her likewise so wan and anxious, but drove off to the castle, as had been planned, about nine o'clock, leaving her brother and his friend at the breakfast-table.

That clearing Somerset's reputation from the stain which had been thrown on it would cause a sufficient reaction in Paula's mind to dislocate present arrangements she did not so seriously anticipate, now that morning had a little calmed her. Since the rupture with her former architect Paula had sedulously kept her own counsel, but Charlotte assumed from the ease with which she seemed to do it that her feelings towards him had never been inconveniently warm; and she hoped that Paula would learn of Somerset's purity with merely the generous pleasure of a friend, coupled with a friend's indignation against his traducer.

Still, the possibility existed of stronger emotions, and it was only too evident to poor Charlotte that, knowing this, she had still less excuse for delaying the intelligence till the strongest emotion would be purposeless.

On approaching the castle the first object that caught her eye was Dare, standing beside Havill on the scaffolding of the new wing. He was looking down upon the drive and court, as if in anticipation of the event. His contiguity flurried her, and instead of going straight to Paula she sought out Mrs. Goodman.

'You are come early; that's right!' said the latter. 'You might as well have slept here last night. We have only Mr. Wardlaw, the London lawyer you have heard of, in the house. Your brother's solicitor was here yesterday; but he returned to Markton for the night. We miss Mr. Power so much — it is so unfortunate that he should have been obliged to go abroad, and leave us unprotected women with so much responsibility.'

'Yes, I know,' said Charlotte quickly, having a shy distaste for the details of what troubled her so much in the gross.

'Paula has inquired for you.'

'What is she doing?'

'She is in her room: she has not begun to dress yet. Will you go to her?'

Charlotte assented. 'I have to tell her something,' she said, 'which will make no difference, but which I should like her to know this morning — at once. I have discovered that we have been entirely mistaken about Mr. Somerset.' She nerved herself to relate succinctly what had come to her knowledge the day before.

Mrs. Goodman was much impressed. She had never clearly heard before what circumstances had attended the resignation of Paula's architect. 'We had better not tell her till the wedding is over,' she presently said; 'it would only disturb her, and do no good.'

'But will it be right?' asked Miss De Stancy.

'Yes, it will be right if we tell her afterwards. O yes — it must be right,' she repeated in a tone which showed that her opinion was unstable enough to require a little fortification by the voice. 'She loves your brother; she must, since she is going to marry him; and it can make little difference whether we rehabilitate the character of a friend now, or some few hours hence. The author of those wicked tricks on Mr. Somerset ought not to go a moment unpunished.'

'That's what I think; and what right have we to hold our tongues even for a few hours?'

Charlotte found that by telling Mrs. Goodman she had simply made two irresolute people out of one, and as Paula was now inquiring for her, she went upstairs without having come to any decision.

CHAPTER XIV.

Paula was in her boudoir, writing down some notes previous to beginning her wedding toilet, which was designed to harmonize with the simplicity that characterized the other arrangements. She owned that it was depriving the neighbourhood of a pageant which it had a right to expect of her; but the circumstance was inexorable.

Mrs. Goodman entered Paula's room immediately behind Charlotte. Perhaps the only difference between the Paula of to-day and the Paula of last year was an accession of thoughtfulness, natural to the circumstances in any case, and more particularly when, as now, the bride's isolation made self-dependence a necessity. She was sitting in a light dressing-gown, and her face, which was rather pale, flushed at the entrance of Charlotte and her aunt.

'I knew you were come,' she said, when Charlotte stooped and kissed her. 'I heard you. I have done nothing this morning, and feel dreadfully unsettled. Is all well?'

The question was put without thought, but its aptness seemed almost to imply an intuitive knowledge of their previous conversation. 'Yes,' said Charlotte tardily.

'Well, now, Clementine shall dress you, and I can do with Milly,' continued Paula. 'Come along. Well, aunt — what's the matter? — and you, Charlotte? You look harassed.'

'I have not slept well,' said Charlotte.

‘And have not you slept well either, aunt? You said nothing about it at breakfast.’

‘O, it is nothing,’ said Mrs. Goodman quickly. ‘I have been disturbed by learning of somebody’s villainy. I am going to tell you all some time to-day, but it is not important enough to disturb you with now.’

‘No mystery!’ argued Paula. ‘Come! it is not fair.’

‘I don’t think it is quite fair,’ said Miss De Stancy, looking from one to the other in some distress. ‘Mrs. Goodman — I must tell her! Paula, Mr. Som — ’

‘He’s dead!’ cried Paula, sinking into a chair and turning as pale as marble. ‘Is he dead? — tell me!’ she whispered.

‘No, no — he’s not dead — he is very well, and gone to Normandy for a holiday!’

‘O — I am glad to hear it,’ answered Paula, with a sudden cool mannerliness.

‘He has been misrepresented,’ said Mrs. Goodman. ‘That’s all.’

‘Well?’ said Paula, with her eyes bent on the floor.

‘I have been feeling that I ought to tell you clearly, dear Paula,’ declared her friend. ‘It is absolutely false about his telegraphing to you for money — it is absolutely false that his character is such as that dreadful picture represented it. There — that’s the substance of it, and I can tell you particulars at any time.’

But Paula would not be told at any time. A dreadful sorrow sat in her face; she insisted upon learning everything about the matter there and then, and there was no withstanding her.

When it was all explained she said in a low tone: ‘It is that pernicious, evil man Dare — yet why is it he? — what can he have meant by it! Justice before generosity, even on one’s wedding-day. Before I become any man’s wife this morning I’ll see that wretch in jail! The affair must be sifted... O, it was a wicked thing to serve anybody so! — I’ll send for Cunningham Haze this moment — the culprit is even now on the premises, I believe — acting as clerk of the works!’ The usually well-balanced Paula was excited, and scarcely knowing what she did went to the bell-pull.

‘Don’t act hastily, Paula,’ said her aunt. ‘Had you not better consult Sir William? He will act for you in this.’

‘Yes — He is coming round in a few minutes,’ said Charlotte, jumping at this happy thought of Mrs. Goodman’s. ‘He’s going to run across to see how you are getting on. He will be here by ten.’

‘Yes — he promised last night.’

She had scarcely done speaking when the prancing of a horse was heard in the ward below, and in a few minutes a servant announced Sir William De Stancy.

De Stancy entered saying, ‘I have ridden across for ten minutes, as I said I would do, to know if everything is easy and straightforward for you. There will be time enough for me to get back and prepare if I start shortly. Well?’

‘I am ruffled,’ said Paula, allowing him to take her hand.

‘What is it?’ said her betrothed.

As Paula did not immediately answer Mrs. Goodman beckoned to Charlotte, and they left the room together.

‘A man has to be given in charge, or a boy, or a demon,’ she replied. ‘I was going to do it, but you can do it better than I. He will run away if we don’t mind.’

‘But, my dear Paula, who is it? — what has he done?’

‘It is Dare — that young man you see out there against the sky.’ She looked from the window sideways towards the new wing, on the roof of which Dare was walking prominently about, after having assisted two of the workmen in putting a red streamer on the tallest scaffold-pole. ‘You must send instantly for Mr. Cunningham Haze!’

‘My dearest Paula,’ repeated De Stancy faintly, his complexion changing to that of a man who had died.

‘Please send for Mr. Haze at once,’ returned Paula, with graceful firmness. ‘I said I would be just to a wronged man before I was generous to you — and I will. That lad Dare — to take a practical view of it — has attempted to defraud me of one hundred pounds sterling, and he shall suffer. I won’t tell you what he has done besides, for though it is worse, it is less tangible. When he is handcuffed and sent off to jail I’ll proceed with my dressing. Will you ring the bell?’

‘Had you not better consider?’ began De Stancy.

‘Consider!’ said Paula, with indignation. ‘I have considered. Will you kindly ring, Sir William, and get Thomas to ride at once to Mr. Haze? Or must I rise from this chair and do it myself?’

‘You are very hasty and abrupt this morning, I think,’ he faltered.

Paula rose determinedly from the chair. ‘Since you won’t do it, I must,’ she said.

‘No, dearest! — Let me beg you not to!’

‘Sir William De Stancy!’

She moved towards the bell-pull; but he stepped before and intercepted her.

‘You must not ring the bell for that purpose,’ he said with husky deliberateness, looking into the depths of her face.

‘It wants two hours to the time when you might have a right to express such a command as that,’ she said haughtily.

‘I certainly have not the honour to be your husband yet,’ he sadly replied, ‘but surely you can listen? There exist reasons against giving this boy in charge which I could easily get you to admit by explanation; but I would rather, without explanation, have you take my word, when I say that by doing so you are striking a blow against both yourself and me.’

Paula, however, had rung the bell.

‘You are jealous of somebody or something perhaps!’ she said, in tones which showed how fatally all this was telling against the intention of that day. ‘I will not be a party to baseness, if it is to save all my fortune!’

The bell was answered quickly. But De Stancy, though plainly in great misery, did not give up his point. Meeting the servant at the door before he could enter the room he said. ‘It is nothing; you can go again.’

Paula looked at the unhappy baronet in amazement; then turning to the servant, who stood with the door in his hand, said, 'Tell Thomas to saddle the chestnut, and —'

'It's all a mistake,' insisted De Stancy. 'Leave the room, James!'

James looked at his mistress.

'Yes, James, leave the room,' she calmly said, sitting down. 'Now what have you to say?' she asked, when they were again alone. 'Why must I not issue orders in my own house? Who is this young criminal, that you value his interests higher than my honour? I have delayed for one moment sending my messenger to the chief constable to hear your explanation — only for that.'

'You will still persevere?'

'Certainly. Who is he?'

'Paula... he is my son.'

She remained still as death while one might count ten; then turned her back upon him. 'I think you had better go away,' she whispered. 'You need not come again.'

He did not move. 'Paula — do you indeed mean this?' he asked.

'I do.'

De Stancy walked a few paces, then said in a low voice: 'Miss Power, I knew — I guessed just now, as soon as it began — that we were going to split on this rock. Well — let it be — it cannot be helped; destiny is supreme. The boy was to be my ruin; he is my ruin, and rightly. But before I go grant me one request. Do not prosecute him. Believe me, I will do everything I can to get him out of your way. He shall annoy you no more... Do you promise?'

'I do,' she said. 'Now please leave me.'

'Once more — am I to understand that no marriage is to take place to-day between you and me?'

'You are.'

Sir William De Stancy left the room. It was noticeable throughout the interview that his manner had not been the manner of a man altogether taken by surprise. During the few preceding days his mood had been that of the gambler seasoned in ill-luck, who adopts pessimist surmises as a safe background to his most sanguine hopes.

She remained alone for some time. Then she rang, and requested that Mr. Wardlaw, her father's solicitor and friend, would come up to her. A messenger was despatched, not to Mr. Cunningham Haze, but to the parson of the parish, who in his turn sent to the clerk and clerk's wife, then busy in the church. On receipt of the intelligence the two latter functionaries proceeded to roll up the carpet which had been laid from the door to the gate, put away the kneeling-cushions, locked the doors, and went off to inquire the reason of so strange a countermand. It was soon proclaimed in Markton that the marriage had been postponed for a fortnight in consequence of the bride's sudden indisposition: and less public emotion was felt than the case might have drawn forth, from the ignorance of the majority of the populace that a wedding had been going to take place at all.

Meanwhile Miss De Stancy had been closeted with Paula for more than an hour. It was a difficult meeting, and a severe test to any friendship but that of the most sterling sort. In the turmoil of her distraction Charlotte had the consolation of knowing that if her act of justice to Somerset at such a moment were the act of a simpleton, it was the only course open to honesty. But Paula's cheerful serenity in some measure laid her own troubles to rest, till they were reawakened by a rumour — which got wind some weeks later, and quite drowned all other surprises — of the true relation between the vanished clerk of works, Mr. Dare, and the fallen family of De Stancy.

BOOK THE SIXTH. PAULA.

CHAPTER I.

'I have decided that I cannot see Sir William again: I shall go away,' said Paula on the evening of the next day, as she lay on her bed in a flushed and highly-strung condition, though a person who had heard her words without seeing her face would have assumed perfect equanimity to be the mood which expressed itself with such quietness. This was the case with her aunt, who was looking out of the window at some idlers from Markton walking round the castle with their eyes bent upon its windows, and she made no haste to reply.

'Those people have come to see me, as they have a right to do when a person acts so strangely,' Paula continued. 'And hence I am better away.'

'Where do you think to go to?'

Paula replied in the tone of one who was actuated entirely by practical considerations: 'Out of England certainly. And as Normandy lies nearest, I think I shall go there. It is a very nice country to ramble in.'

'Yes, it is a very nice country to ramble in,' echoed her aunt, in moderate tones. 'When do you intend to start?'

'I should like to cross to-night. You must go with me, aunt; will you not?'

Mrs. Goodman expostulated against such suddenness. 'It will redouble the rumours that are afloat, if, after being supposed ill, you are seen going off by railway perfectly well.'

'That's a contingency which I am quite willing to run the risk of. Well, it would be rather sudden, as you say, to go to-night. But we'll go to-morrow night at latest.' Under the influence of the decision she bounded up like an elastic ball and went to the glass, which showed a light in her eye that had not been there before this resolution to travel in Normandy had been taken.

The evening and the next morning were passed in writing a final and kindly note of dismissal to Sir William De Stancy, in making arrangements for the journey, and in commissioning Havill to take advantage of their absence by emptying certain rooms of their furniture, and repairing their dilapidations — a work which, with that in hand,

would complete the section for which he had been engaged. Mr. Wardlaw had left the castle; so also had Charlotte, by her own wish, her residence there having been found too oppressive to herself to be continued for the present. Accompanied by Mrs. Goodman, Milly, and Clementine, the elderly French maid, who still remained with them, Paula drove into Markton in the twilight and took the train to Budmouth.

When they got there they found that an unpleasant breeze was blowing out at sea, though inland it had been calm enough. Mrs. Goodman proposed to stay at Budmouth till the next day, in hope that there might be smooth water; but an English seaport inn being a thing that Paula disliked more than a rough passage, she would not listen to this counsel. Other impatient reasons, too, might have weighed with her. When night came their looming miseries began. Paula found that in addition to her own troubles she had those of three other people to support; but she did not audibly complain.

‘Paula, Paula,’ said Mrs. Goodman from beneath her load of wretchedness, ‘why did we think of undergoing this?’

A slight gleam of humour crossed Paula’s not particularly blooming face, as she answered, ‘Ah, why indeed?’

‘What is the real reason, my dear? For God’s sake tell me!’

‘It begins with S.’

‘Well, I would do anything for that young man short of personal martyrdom; but really when it comes to that — ’

‘Don’t criticize me, auntie, and I won’t criticize you.’

‘Well, I am open to criticism just now, I am sure,’ said her aunt, with a green smile; and speech was again discontinued.

The morning was bright and beautiful, and it could again be seen in Paula’s looks that she was glad she had come, though, in taking their rest at Cherbourg, fate consigned them to an hotel breathing an atmosphere that seemed specially compounded for depressing the spirits of a young woman; indeed nothing had particularly encouraged her thus far in her somewhat peculiar scheme of searching out and expressing sorrow to a gentleman for having believed those who traduced him; and this coup d’audace to which she had committed herself began to look somewhat formidable. When in England the plan of following him to Normandy had suggested itself as the quickest, sweetest, and most honest way of making amends; but having arrived there she seemed further off from his sphere of existence than when she had been at Stancy Castle. Virtually she was, for if he thought of her at all, he probably thought of her there; if he sought her he would seek her there. However, as he would probably never do the latter, it was necessary to go on. It had been her sudden dream before starting, to light accidentally upon him in some romantic old town of this romantic old province, but she had become aware that the recorded fortune of lovers in that respect was not to be trusted too implicitly.

Somerset’s search for her in the south was now inversely imitated. By diligent inquiry in Cherbourg during the gloom of evening, in the disguise of a hooded cloak, she learnt out the place of his stay while there, and that he had gone thence to Lisieux. What

she knew of the architectural character of Lisieux half guaranteed the truth of the information. Without telling her aunt of this discovery she announced to that lady that it was her great wish to go on and see the beauties of Lisieux.

But though her aunt was simple, there were bounds to her simplicity. 'Paula,' she said, with an undeceivable air, 'I don't think you should run after a young man like this. Suppose he shouldn't care for you by this time.'

It was no occasion for further affectation. 'I am SURE he will,' answered her niece flatly. 'I have not the least fear about it — nor would you, if you knew how he is. He will forgive me anything.'

'Well, pray don't show yourself forward. Some people are apt to fly into extremes.'

Paula blushed a trifle, and reflected, and made no answer. However, her purpose seemed not to be permanently affected, for the next morning she was up betimes and preparing to depart; and they proceeded almost without stopping to the architectural curiosity-town which had so quickly interested her. Nevertheless her ardent manner of yesterday underwent a considerable change, as if she had a fear that, as her aunt suggested, in her endeavour to make amends for cruel injustice, she was allowing herself to be carried too far.

On nearing the place she said, 'Aunt, I think you had better call upon him; and you need not tell him we have come on purpose. Let him think, if he will, that we heard he was here, and would not leave without seeing him. You can also tell him that I am anxious to clear up a misunderstanding, and ask him to call at our hotel.'

But as she looked over the dreary suburban erections which lined the road from the railway to the old quarter of the town, it occurred to her that Somerset would at that time of day be engaged in one or other of the mediaeval buildings thereabout, and that it would be a much neater thing to meet him as if by chance in one of these edifices than to call upon him anywhere. Instead of putting up at any hotel, they left the maids and baggage at the station; and hiring a carriage, Paula told the coachman to drive them to such likely places as she could think of.

'He'll never forgive you,' said her aunt, as they rumbled into the town.

'Won't he?' said Paula, with soft faith. 'I'll see about that.'

'What are you going to do when you find him? Tell him point-blank that you are in love with him?'

'Act in such a manner that he may tell me he is in love with me.'

They first visited a large church at the upper end of a square that sloped its gravelled surface to the western shine, and was pricked out with little avenues of young pollard limes. The church within was one to make any Gothic architect take lodgings in its vicinity for a fortnight, though it was just now crowded with a forest of scaffolding for repairs in progress. Mrs. Goodman sat down outside, and Paula, entering, took a walk in the form of a horse-shoe; that is, up the south aisle, round the apse, and down the north side; but no figure of a melancholy young man sketching met her eye anywhere. The sun that blazed in at the west doorway smote her face as she emerged from beneath it and revealed real sadness there.

‘This is not all the old architecture of the town by far,’ she said to her aunt with an air of confidence. ‘Coachman, drive to St. Jacques.’

He was not at St. Jacques’. Looking from the west end of that building the girl observed the end of a steep narrow street of antique character, which seemed a likely haunt. Beckoning to her aunt to follow in the fly Paula walked down the street.

She was transported to the Middle Ages. It contained the shops of tinkers, braziers, bellows-menders, hollow-turners, and other quaintest trades, their fronts open to the street beneath stories of timber overhanging so far on each side that a slit of sky was left at the top for the light to descend, and no more. A blue misty obscurity pervaded the atmosphere, into which the sun thrust oblique staves of light. It was a street for a mediaevalist to revel in, toss up his hat and shout hurrah in, send for his luggage, come and live in, die and be buried in. She had never supposed such a street to exist outside the imaginations of antiquarians. Smells direct from the sixteenth century hung in the air in all their original integrity and without a modern taint. The faces of the people in the doorways seemed those of individuals who habitually gazed on the great Francis, and spoke of Henry the Eighth as the king across the sea.

She inquired of a coppersmith if an English artist had been seen here lately. With a suddenness that almost discomfited her he announced that such a man had been seen, sketching a house just below — the ‘Vieux Manoir de Francois premier.’ Just turning to see that her aunt was following in the fly, Paula advanced to the house. The wood framework of the lower story was black and varnished; the upper story was brown and not varnished; carved figures of dragons, griffins, satyrs, and mermaids swarmed over the front; an ape stealing apples was the subject of this cantilever, a man undressing of that. These figures were cloaked with little cobwebs which waved in the breeze, so that each figure seemed alive.

She examined the woodwork closely; here and there she discerned pencil-marks which had no doubt been jotted thereon by Somerset as points of admeasurement, in the way she had seen him mark them at the castle. Some fragments of paper lay below: there were pencilled lines on them, and they bore a strong resemblance to a spoilt leaf of Somerset’s sketch-book. Paula glanced up, and from a window above protruded an old woman’s head, which, with the exception of the white handkerchief tied round it, was so nearly of the colour of the carvings that she might easily have passed as of a piece with them. The aged woman continued motionless, the remains of her eyes being bent upon Paula, who asked her in Englishwoman’s French where the sketcher had gone. Without replying, the crone produced a hand and extended finger from her side, and pointed towards the lower end of the street.

Paula went on, the carriage following with difficulty, on account of the obstructions in the thoroughfare. At bottom, the street abutted on a wide one with customary modern life flowing through it; and as she looked, Somerset crossed her front along this street, hurrying as if for a wager.

By the time that Paula had reached the bottom Somerset was a long way to the left, and she recognized to her dismay that the busy transverse street was one which led to

the railway. She quickened her pace to a run; he did not see her; he even walked faster. She looked behind for the carriage. The driver in emerging from the sixteenth-century street to the nineteenth had apparently turned to the right, instead of to the left as she had done, so that her aunt had lost sight of her. However, she dare not mind it, if Somerset would but look back! He partly turned, but not far enough, and it was only to hail a passing omnibus upon which she discerned his luggage. Somerset jumped in, the omnibus drove on, and diminished up the long road. Paula stood hopelessly still, and in a few minutes puffs of steam showed her that the train had gone.

She turned and waited, the two or three children who had gathered round her looking up sympathizingly in her face. Her aunt, having now discovered the direction of her flight, drove up and beckoned to her.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Mrs. Goodman in alarm.

‘Why?’

‘That you should run like that, and look so woebegone.’

‘Nothing; only I have decided not to stay in this town.’

‘What! he is gone, I suppose?’

‘Yes!’ exclaimed Paula, with tears of vexation in her eyes. ‘It isn’t every man who gets a woman of my position to run after him on foot, and alone, and he ought to have looked round! Drive to the station; I want to make an inquiry.’

On reaching the station she asked the booking-clerk some questions, and returned to her aunt with a cheerful countenance. ‘Mr. Somerset has only gone to Caen,’ she said. ‘He is the only Englishman who went by this train, so there is no mistake. There is no other train for two hours. We will go on then — shall we?’

‘I am indifferent,’ said Mrs. Goodman. ‘But, Paula, do you think this quite right? Perhaps he is not so anxious for your forgiveness as you think. Perhaps he saw you, and wouldn’t stay.’

A momentary dismay crossed her face, but it passed, and she answered, ‘Aunt, that’s nonsense. I know him well enough, and can assure you that if he had only known I was running after him, he would have looked round sharply enough, and would have given his little finger rather than have missed me! I don’t make myself so silly as to run after a gentleman without good grounds, for I know well that it is an undignified thing to do. Indeed, I could never have thought of doing it, if I had not been so miserably in the wrong!’

CHAPTER II.

That evening when the sun was dropping out of sight they started for the city of Somerset’s pilgrimage. Paula seated herself with her face toward the western sky, watching from her window the broad red horizon, across which moved thin poplars lopped to human shapes, like the walking forms in Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace. It was dark when the travellers drove into Caen.

She still persisted in her wish to casually encounter Somerset in some aisle, lady-chapel, or crypt to which he might have betaken himself to copy and learn the secret of the great artists who had erected those nooks. Mrs. Goodman was for discovering his inn, and calling upon him in a straightforward way; but Paula seemed afraid of it, and they went out in the morning on foot. First they searched the church of St. Sauveur; he was not there; next the church of St. Jean; then the church of St. Pierre; but he did not reveal himself, nor had any verger seen or heard of such a man. Outside the latter church was a public flower-garden, and she sat down to consider beside a round pool in which water-lilies grew and gold-fish swam, near beds of fiery geraniums, dahlias, and verbenas just past their bloom. Her enterprise had not been justified by its results so far; but meditation still urged her to listen to the little voice within and push on. She accordingly rejoined her aunt, and they drove up the hill to the Abbaye aux Dames, the day by this time having grown hot and oppressive.

The church seemed absolutely empty, the void being emphasized by its grateful coolness. But on going towards the east end they perceived a bald gentleman close to the screen, looking to the right and to the left as if much perplexed. Paula merely glanced over him, his back being toward her, and turning to her aunt said softly, 'I wonder how we get into the choir?'

'That's just what I am wondering,' said the old gentleman, abruptly facing round, and Paula discovered that the countenance was not unfamiliar to her eye. Since knowing Somerset she had added to her gallery of celebrities a photograph of his father, the Academician, and he it was now who confronted her.

For the moment embarrassment, due to complicated feelings, brought a slight blush to her cheek, but being well aware that he did not know her, she answered, coolly enough, 'I suppose we must ask some one.'

'And we certainly would if there were any one to ask,' he said, still looking eastward, and not much at her. 'I have been here a long time, but nobody comes. Not that I want to get in on my own account; for though it is thirty years since I last set foot in this place, I remember it as if it were but yesterday.'

'Indeed. I have never been here before,' said Paula.

'Naturally. But I am looking for a young man who is making sketches in some of these buildings, and it is as likely as not that he is in the crypt under this choir, for it is just such out-of-the-way nooks that he prefers. It is very provoking that he should not have told me more distinctly in his letter where to find him.'

Mrs. Goodman, who had gone to make inquiries, now came back, and informed them that she had learnt that it was necessary to pass through the Hotel-Dieu to the choir, to do which they must go outside. Thereupon they walked on together, and Mr. Somerset, quite ignoring his troubles, made remarks upon the beauty of the architecture; and in absence of mind, by reason either of the subject, or of his listener, retained his hat in his hand after emerging from the church, while they walked all the way across the Place and into the Hospital gardens.

'A very civil man,' said Mrs. Goodman to Paula privately.

‘Yes,’ said Paula, who had not told her aunt that she recognized him.

One of the Sisters now preceded them towards the choir and crypt, Mr. Somerset asking her if a young Englishman was or had been sketching there. On receiving a reply in the negative, Paula nearly betrayed herself by turning, as if her business there, too, ended with the information. However, she went on again, and made a pretence of looking round, Mr. Somerset also staying in a spirit of friendly attention to his countrywomen. They did not part from him till they had come out from the crypt, and again reached the west front, on their way to which he additionally explained that it was his son he was looking for, who had arranged to meet him here, but had mentioned no inn at which he might be expected.

When he had left them, Paula informed her aunt whose company they had been sharing. Her aunt began expostulating with Paula for not telling Mr. Somerset what they had seen of his son’s movements. ‘It would have eased his mind at least,’ she said.

‘I was not bound to ease his mind at the expense of showing what I would rather conceal. I am continually hampered in such generosity as that by the circumstance of being a woman!’

‘Well, it is getting too late to search further tonight.’

It was indeed almost evening twilight in the streets, though the graceful freestone spires to a depth of about twenty feet from their summits were still dyed with the orange tints of a vanishing sun. The two relatives dined privately as usual, after which Paula looked out of the window of her room, and reflected upon the events of the day. A tower rising into the sky quite near at hand showed her that some church or other stood within a few steps of the hotel archway, and saying nothing to Mrs. Goodman, she quietly cloaked herself, and went out towards it, apparently with the view of disposing of a portion of a dull dispiriting evening. The church was open, and on entering she found that it was only lighted by seven candles burning before the altar of a chapel on the south side, the mass of the building being in deep shade. Motionless outlines, which resolved themselves into the forms of kneeling women, were darkly visible among the chairs, and in the triforium above the arcades there was one hitherto unnoticed radiance, dim as that of a glow-worm in the grass. It was seemingly the effect of a solitary tallow-candle behind the masonry.

A priest came in, unlocked the door of a confessional with a click which sounded in the silence, and entered it; a woman followed, disappeared within the curtain of the same, emerging again in about five minutes, followed by the priest, who locked up his door with another loud click, like a tradesman full of business, and came down the aisle to go out. In the lobby he spoke to another woman, who replied, ‘Ah, oui, Monsieur l’Abbe!’

Two women having spoken to him, there could be no harm in a third doing likewise. ‘Monsieur l’Abbe,’ said Paula in French, ‘could you indicate to me the stairs of the triforium?’ and she signified her reason for wishing to know by pointing to the glimmering light above.

‘Ah, he is a friend of yours, the Englishman?’ pleasantly said the priest, recognizing her nationality; and taking her to a little door he conducted her up a stone staircase, at the top of which he showed her the long blind story over the aisle arches which led round to where the light was. Cautioning her not to stumble over the uneven floor, he left her and descended. His words had signified that Somerset was here.

It was a gloomy place enough that she found herself in, but the seven candles below on the opposite altar, and a faint sky light from the clerestory, lent enough rays to guide her. Paula walked on to the bend of the apse: here were a few chairs, and the origin of the light.

This was a candle stuck at the end of a sharpened stick, the latter entering a joint in the stones. A young man was sketching by the glimmer. But there was no need for the blush which had prepared itself beforehand; the young man was Mr. Cockton, Somerset’s youngest draughtsman.

Paula could have cried aloud with disappointment. Cockton recognized Miss Power, and appearing much surprised, rose from his seat with a bow, and said hastily, ‘Mr. Somerset left to-day.’

‘I did not ask for him,’ said Paula.

‘No, Miss Power: but I thought — ’

‘Yes, yes — you know, of course, that he has been my architect. Well, it happens that I should like to see him, if he can call on me. Which way did he go?’

‘He’s gone to Etretat.’

‘What for? There are no abbeys to sketch at Etretat.’

Cockton looked at the point of his pencil, and with a hesitating motion of his lip answered, ‘Mr. Somerset said he was tired.’

‘Of what?’

‘He said he was sick and tired of holy places, and would go to some wicked spot or other, to get that consolation which holiness could not give. But he only said it casually to Knowles, and perhaps he did not mean it.’

‘Knowles is here too?’

‘Yes, Miss Power, and Bowles. Mr. Somerset has been kind enough to give us a chance of enlarging our knowledge of French Early-pointed, and pays half the expenses.’

Paula said a few other things to the young man, walked slowly round the triforium as if she had come to examine it, and returned down the staircase. On getting back to the hotel she told her aunt, who had just been having a nap, that next day they would go to Etretat for a change.

‘Why? There are no old churches at Etretat.’

‘No. But I am sick and tired of holy places, and want to go to some wicked spot or other to find that consolation which holiness cannot give.’

‘For shame, Paula! Now I know what it is; you have heard that he’s gone there! You needn’t try to blind me.’

‘I don’t care where he’s gone!’ cried Paula petulantly. In a moment, however, she smiled at herself, and added, ‘You must take that for what it is worth. I have made

up my mind to let him know from my own lips how the misunderstanding arose. That done, I shall leave him, and probably never see him again. My conscience will be clear.'

The next day they took the steamboat down the Orne, intending to reach Etretat by way of Havre. Just as they were moving off an elderly gentleman under a large white sunshade, and carrying his hat in his hand, was seen leisurely walking down the wharf at some distance, but obviously making for the boat.

'A gentleman!' said the mate.

'Who is he?' said the captain.

'An English,' said Clementine.

Nobody knew more, but as leisure was the order of the day the engines were stopped, on the chance of his being a passenger, and all eyes were bent upon him in conjecture. He disappeared and reappeared from behind a pile of merchandise and approached the boat at an easy pace, whereupon the gangway was replaced, and he came on board, removing his hat to Paula, quietly thanking the captain for stopping, and saying to Mrs. Goodman, 'I am nicely in time.'

It was Mr. Somerset the elder, who by degrees informed our travellers, as sitting on their camp-stools they advanced between the green banks bordered by elms, that he was going to Etretat; that the young man he had spoken of yesterday had gone to that romantic watering-place instead of studying art at Caen, and that he was going to join him there.

Paula preserved an entire silence as to her own intentions, partly from natural reticence, and partly, as it appeared, from the difficulty of explaining a complication which was not very clear to herself. At Havre they parted from Mr. Somerset, and did not see him again till they were driving over the hills towards Etretat in a carriage and four, when the white umbrella became visible far ahead among the outside passengers of the coach to the same place. In a short time they had passed and cut in before this vehicle, but soon became aware that their carriage, like the coach, was one of a straggling procession of conveyances, some mile and a half in length, all bound for the village between the cliffs.

In descending the long hill shaded by lime-trees which sheltered their place of destination, this procession closed up, and they perceived that all the visitors and native population had turned out to welcome them, the daily arrival of new sojourners at this hour being the chief excitement of Etretat. The coach which had preceded them all the way, at more or less remoteness, was now quite close, and in passing along the village street they saw Mr. Somerset wave his hand to somebody in the crowd below. A felt hat was waved in the air in response, the coach swept into the inn-yard, followed by the idlers, and all disappeared. Paula's face was crimson as their own carriage swept round in the opposite direction to the rival inn.

Once in her room she breathed like a person who had finished a long chase. They did not go down before dinner, but when it was almost dark Paula begged her aunt to wrap herself up and come with her to the shore hard by. The beach was deserted, everybody being at the Casino; the gate stood invitingly open, and they went in.

Here the brilliantly lit terrace was crowded with promenaders, and outside the yellow palings, surmounted by its row of lamps, rose the voice of the invisible sea. Groups of people were sitting under the verandah, the women mostly in wraps, for the air was growing chilly. Through the windows at their back an animated scene disclosed itself in the shape of a room-full of waltzers, the strains of the band striving in the ear for mastery over the sounds of the sea. The dancers came round a couple at a time, and were individually visible to those people without who chose to look that way, which was what Paula did.

‘Come away, come away!’ she suddenly said. ‘It is not right for us to be here.’

Her exclamation had its origin in what she had at that moment seen within, the spectacle of Mr. George Somerset whirling round the room with a young lady of uncertain nationality but pleasing figure. Paula was not accustomed to show the white feather too clearly, but she soon had passed out through those yellow gates and retreated, till the mixed music of sea and band had resolved into that of the sea alone.

‘Well!’ said her aunt, half in soliloquy, ‘do you know who I saw dancing there, Paula? Our Mr. Somerset, if I don’t make a great mistake!’

‘It was likely enough that you did,’ sedately replied her niece. ‘He left Caen with the intention of seeking distractions of a lighter kind than those furnished by art, and he has merely succeeded in finding them. But he has made my duty rather a difficult one. Still, it was my duty, for I very greatly wronged him. Perhaps, however, I have done enough for honour’s sake. I would have humiliated myself by an apology if I had found him in any other situation; but, of course, one can’t be expected to take MUCH trouble when he is seen going on like that!’

The coolness with which she began her remarks had developed into something like warmth as she concluded.

‘He is only dancing with a lady he probably knows very well.’

‘He doesn’t know her! The idea of his dancing with a woman of that description! We will go away tomorrow. This place has been greatly over-praised.’

‘The place is well enough, as far as I can see.’

‘He is carrying out his programme to the letter. He plunges into excitement in the most reckless manner, and I tremble for the consequences! I can do no more: I have humiliated myself into following him, believing that in giving too ready credence to appearances I had been narrow and inhuman, and had caused him much misery. But he does not mind, and he has no misery; he seems just as well as ever. How much this finding him has cost me! After all, I did not deceive him. He must have acquired a natural aversion for me. I have allowed myself to be interested in a man of very common qualities, and am now bitterly alive to the shame of having sought him out. I heartily detest him! I will go back — aunt, you are right — I had no business to come... His light conduct has rendered him uninteresting to me!’

CHAPTER III.

When she rose the next morning the bell was clanging for the second breakfast, and people were pouring in from the beach in every variety of attire. Paula, whom a restless night had left with a headache, which, however, she said nothing about, was reluctant to emerge from the seclusion of her chamber, till her aunt, discovering what was the matter with her, suggested that a few minutes in the open air would refresh her; and they went downstairs into the hotel gardens.

The clatter of the big breakfast within was audible from this spot, and the noise seemed suddenly to inspirit Paula, who proposed to enter. Her aunt assented. In the verandah under which they passed was a rustic hat-stand in the form of a tree, upon which hats and other body-gear hung like bunches of fruit. Paula's eye fell upon a felt hat to which a small block-book was attached by a string. She knew that hat and block-book well, and turning to Mrs. Goodman said, 'After all, I don't want the breakfast they are having: let us order one of our own as usual. And we'll have it here.'

She led on to where some little tables were placed under the tall shrubs, followed by her aunt, who was in turn followed by the proprietress of the hotel, that lady having discovered from the French maid that there was good reason for paying these ladies ample personal attention.

'Is the gentleman to whom that sketch-book belongs staying here?' Paula carelessly inquired, as she indicated the object on the hat-stand.

'Ah, no!' deplored the proprietress. 'The Hotel was full when Mr. Somerset came. He stays at a cottage beyond the Rue Anicet Bourgeois: he only has his meals here.'

Paula had taken her seat under the fuchsia-trees in such a manner that she could observe all the exits from the salle a manger; but for the present none of the breakfasters emerged, the only moving objects on the scene being the waitresses who ran hither and thither across the court, the cook's assistants with baskets of long bread, and the laundresses with baskets of sun-bleached linen. Further back towards the inn-yard, stablemen were putting in the horses for starting the flies and coaches to Les Ifs, the nearest railway-station.

'Suppose the Somersets should be going off by one of these conveyances,' said Mrs. Goodman as she sipped her tea.

'Well, aunt, then they must,' replied the younger lady with composure.

Nevertheless she looked with some misgiving at the nearest stableman as he led out four white horses, harnessed them, and leisurely brought a brush with which he began blacking their yellow hoofs. All the vehicles were ready at the door by the time breakfast was over, and the inmates soon turned out, some to mount the omnibuses and carriages, some to ramble on the adjacent beach, some to climb the verdant slopes, and some to make for the cliffs that shut in the vale. The fuchsia-trees which sheltered Paula's breakfast-table from the blaze of the sun, also screened it from the eyes of the outpouring company, and she sat on with her aunt in perfect comfort, till among the last of the stream came Somerset and his father. Paula reddened at being so near the

former at last. It was with sensible relief that she observed them turn towards the cliffs and not to the carriages, and thus signify that they were not going off that day.

Neither of the two saw the ladies, and when the latter had finished their tea and coffee they followed to the shore, where they sat for nearly an hour, reading and watching the bathers. At length footsteps crunched among the pebbles in their vicinity, and looking out from her sunshade Paula saw the two Somersets close at hand.

The elder recognized her, and the younger, observing his father's action of courtesy, turned his head. It was a revelation to Paula, for she was shocked to see that he appeared worn and ill. The expression of his face changed at sight of her, increasing its shade of paleness; but he immediately withdrew his eyes and passed by.

Somerset was as much surprised at encountering her thus as she had been distressed to see him. As soon as they were out of hearing, he asked his father quietly, 'What strange thing is this, that Lady De Stancy should be here and her husband not with her? Did she bow to me, or to you?'

'Lady De Stancy — that young lady?' asked the puzzled painter. He proceeded to explain all he knew; that she was a young lady he had met on his journey at two or three different times; moreover, that if she were his son's client — the woman who was to have become Lady De Stancy — she was Miss Power still; for he had seen in some newspaper two days before leaving England that the wedding had been postponed on account of her illness.

Somerset was so greatly moved that he could hardly speak connectedly to his father as they paced on together. 'But she is not ill, as far as I can see,' he said. 'The wedding postponed? — You are sure the word was postponed? — Was it broken off?'

'No, it was postponed. I meant to have told you before, knowing you would be interested as the castle architect; but it slipped my memory in the bustle of arriving.'

'I am not the castle architect.'

'The devil you are not — what are you then?'

'Well, I am not that.'

Somerset the elder, though not of penetrating nature, began to see that here lay an emotional complication of some sort, and reserved further inquiry till a more convenient occasion. They had reached the end of the level beach where the cliff began to rise, and as this impediment naturally stopped their walk they retraced their steps. On again nearing the spot where Paula and her aunt were sitting, the painter would have deviated to the hotel; but as his son persisted in going straight on, in due course they were opposite the ladies again. By this time Miss Power, who had appeared anxious during their absence, regained her self-control. Going towards her old lover she said, with a smile, 'I have been looking for you!'

'Why have you been doing that?' said Somerset, in a voice which he failed to keep as steady as he could wish.

'Because — I want some architect to continue the restoration. Do you withdraw your resignation?'

Somerset appeared unable to decide for a few instants. 'Yes,' he then answered.

For the moment they had ignored the presence of the painter and Mrs. Goodman, but Somerset now made them known to one another, and there was friendly intercourse all round.

‘When will you be able to resume operations at the castle?’ she asked, as soon as she could again speak directly to Somerset.

‘As soon as I can get back. Of course I only resume it at your special request.’

‘Of course.’ To one who had known all the circumstances it would have seemed a thousand pities that, after again getting face to face with him, she did not explain, without delay, the whole mischief that had separated them. But she did not do it — perhaps from the inherent awkwardness of such a topic at this idle time. She confined herself simply to the above-mentioned business-like request, and when the party had walked a few steps together they separated, with mutual promises to meet again.

‘I hope you have explained your mistake to him, and how it arose, and everything?’ said her aunt when they were alone.

‘No, I did not.’

‘What, not explain after all?’ said her amazed relative.

‘I decided to put it off.’

‘Then I think you decided very wrongly. Poor young man, he looked so ill!’

‘Did you, too, think he looked ill? But he danced last night. Why did he dance?’ She turned and gazed regretfully at the corner round which the Somersets had disappeared.

‘I don’t know why he danced; but if I had known you were going to be so silent, I would have explained the mistake myself.’

‘I wish you had. But no; I have said I would; and I must.’

Paula’s avoidance of tables d’hote did not extend to the present one. It was quite with alacrity that she went down; and with her entry the antecedent hotel beauty who had reigned for the last five days at that meal, was unceremoniously deposed by the guests. Mr. Somerset the elder came in, but nobody with him. His seat was on Paula’s left hand, Mrs. Goodman being on Paula’s right, so that all the conversation was between the Academician and the younger lady. When the latter had again retired upstairs with her aunt, Mrs. Goodman expressed regret that young Mr. Somerset was absent from the table. ‘Why has he kept away?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know — I didn’t ask,’ said Paula sadly. ‘Perhaps he doesn’t care to meet us again.’

‘That’s because you didn’t explain.’

‘Well — why didn’t the old man give me an opportunity?’ exclaimed the niece with suppressed excitement. ‘He would scarcely say anything but yes and no, and gave me no chance at all of introducing the subject. I wanted to explain — I came all the way on purpose — I would have begged George’s pardon on my two knees if there had been any way of beginning; but there was not, and I could not do it!’

Though she slept badly that night, Paula promptly appeared in the public room to breakfast, and that not from motives of vanity; for, while not unconscious of her

accession to the unstable throne of queen-beauty in the establishment, she seemed too preoccupied to care for the honour just then, and would readily have changed places with her unhappy predecessor, who lingered on in the background like a candle after sunrise.

Mrs. Goodman was determined to trust no longer to Paula for putting an end to what made her so restless and self-reproachful. Seeing old Mr. Somerset enter to a little side-table behind for lack of room at the crowded centre tables, again without his son, she turned her head and asked point-blank where the young man was.

Mr. Somerset's face became a shade graver than before. 'My son is unwell,' he replied; 'so unwell that he has been advised to stay indoors and take perfect rest.'

'I do hope it is nothing serious.'

'I hope so too. The fact is, he has overdone himself a little. He was not well when he came here; and to make himself worse he must needs go dancing at the Casino with this lady and that — among others with a young American lady who is here with her family, and whom he met in London last year. I advised him against it, but he seemed desperately determined to shake off lethargy by any rash means, and wouldn't listen to me. Luckily he is not in the hotel, but in a quiet cottage a hundred yards up the hill.'

Paula, who had heard all, did not show or say what she felt at the news: but after breakfast, on meeting the landlady in a passage alone, she asked with some anxiety if there were a really skilful medical man in Etretat; and on being told that there was, and his name, she went back to look for Mr. Somerset; but he had gone.

They heard nothing more of young Somerset all that morning, but towards evening, while Paula sat at her window, looking over the heads of fuchsias upon the promenade beyond, she saw the painter walk by. She immediately went to her aunt and begged her to go out and ask Mr. Somerset if his son had improved.

'I will send Milly or Clementine,' said Mrs. Goodman.

'I wish you would see him yourself.'

'He has gone on. I shall never find him.'

'He has only gone round to the front,' persisted Paula. 'Do walk that way, auntie, and ask him.'

Thus pressed, Mrs. Goodman acquiesced, and brought back intelligence to Miss Power, who had watched them through the window, that his son did not positively improve, but that his American friends were very kind to him.

Having made use of her aunt, Paula seemed particularly anxious to get rid of her again, and when that lady sat down to write letters, Paula went to her own room, hastily dressed herself without assistance, asked privately the way to the cottage, and went off thitherward unobserved.

At the upper end of the lane she saw a little house answering to the description, whose front garden, window-sills, palings, and doorstep were literally ablaze with nasturtiums in bloom.

She entered this inhabited nosegay, quietly asked for the invalid, and if he were well enough to see Miss Power. The woman of the house soon returned, and she was conducted up a crooked staircase to Somerset's modest apartments. It appeared that some rooms in this dwelling had been furnished by the landlady of the inn, who hired them of the tenant during the summer season to use as an annexe to the hotel.

Admitted to the outer room she beheld her architect looking as unarchitectural as possible; lying on a small couch which was drawn up to the open casement, whence he had a back view of the window flowers, and enjoyed a green transparency through the undersides of the same nasturtium leaves that presented their faces to the passers without.

When the latch had again clicked into the catch of the closed door Paula went up to the invalid, upon whose pale and interesting face a flush had arisen simultaneously with the announcement of her name. He would have sprung up to receive her, but she pressed him down, and throwing all reserve on one side for the first time in their intercourse, she crouched beside the sofa, whispering with roguish solicitude, her face not too far from his own: 'How foolish you are, George, to get ill just now when I have been wanting so much to see you again! — I am so sorry to see you like this — what I said to you when we met on the shore was not what I had come to say!'

Somerset took her by the hand. 'Then what did you come to say, Paula?' he asked.

'I wanted to tell you that the mere wanton wandering of a capricious mind was not the cause of my estrangement from you. There has been a great deception practised — the exact nature of it I cannot tell you plainly just at present; it is too painful — but it is all over, and I can assure you of my sorrow at having behaved as I did, and of my sincere friendship now as ever.'

'There is nothing I shall value so much as that. It will make my work at the castle very pleasant to feel that I can consult you about it without fear of intruding on you against your wishes.'

'Yes, perhaps it will. But — you do not comprehend me.'

'You have been an enigma always.'

'And you have been provoking; but never so provoking as now. I wouldn't for the world tell you the whole of my fancies as I came hither this evening; but I should think your natural intuition would suggest what they were.'

'It does, Paula. But there are motives of delicacy which prevent my acting on what is suggested to me.'

'Delicacy is a gift, and you should thank God for it; but in some cases it is not so precious as we would persuade ourselves.'

'Not when the woman is rich, and the man is poor?'

'O, George Somerset — be cold, or angry, or anything, but don't be like this! It is never worth a woman's while to show regret for her injustice; for all she gets by it is an accusation of want of delicacy.'

'Indeed I don't accuse you of that — I warmly, tenderly thank you for your kindness in coming here to see me.'

‘Well, perhaps you do. But I am now in I cannot tell what mood — I will not tell what mood, for it would be confessing more than I ought. This finding you out is a piece of weakness that I shall not repeat; and I have only one thing more to say. I have served you badly, George, I know that; but it is never too late to mend; and I have come back to you. However, I shall never run after you again, trust me for that, for it is not the woman’s part. Still, before I go, that there may be no mistake as to my meaning, and misery entailed on us for want of a word, I’ll add this: that if you want to marry me, as you once did, you must say so; for I am here to be asked.’

It would be superfluous to transcribe Somerset’s reply, and the remainder of the scene between the pair. Let it suffice that half-an-hour afterwards, when the sun had almost gone down, Paula walked briskly into the hotel, troubled herself nothing about dinner, but went upstairs to their sitting-room, where her aunt presently found her upon the couch looking up at the ceiling through her fingers. They talked on different subjects for some time till the old lady said ‘Mr. Somerset’s cottage is the one covered with flowers up the lane, I hear.’

‘Yes,’ said Paula.

‘How do you know?’

‘I’ve been there... We are going to be married, aunt.’

‘Indeed!’ replied Mrs. Goodman. ‘Well, I thought this might be the end of it: you were determined on the point; and I am not much surprised at your news. Your father was very wise after all in entailing everything so strictly upon your offspring; for if he had not I should have been driven wild with the responsibility!’

‘And now that the murder is out,’ continued Paula, passing over that view of the case, ‘I don’t mind telling you that somehow or other I have got to like George Somerset as desperately as a woman can care for any man. I thought I should have died when I saw him dancing, and feared I had lost him! He seemed ten times nicer than ever then! So silly we women are, that I wouldn’t marry a duke in preference to him. There, that’s my honest feeling, and you must make what you can of it; my conscience is clear, thank Heaven!’

‘Have you fixed the day?’

‘No,’ continued the young lady, still watching the sleeping flies on the ceiling. ‘It is left unsettled between us, while I come and ask you if there would be any harm — if it could conveniently be before we return to England?’

‘Paula, this is too precipitate!’

‘On the contrary, aunt. In matrimony, as in some other things, you should be slow to decide, but quick to execute. Nothing on earth would make me marry another man; I know every fibre of his character; and he knows a good many fibres of mine; so as there is nothing more to be learnt, why shouldn’t we marry at once? On one point I am firm: I will never return to that castle as Miss Power. A nameless dread comes over me when I think of it — a fear that some uncanny influence of the dead De Stancys would drive me again from him. O, if it were to do that,’ she murmured, burying her face in her hands, ‘I really think it would be more than I could bear!’

‘Very well,’ said Mrs. Goodman; ‘we will see what can be done. I will write to Mr. Wardlaw.’

CHAPTER IV.

On a windy afternoon in November, when more than two months had closed over the incidents previously recorded, a number of farmers were sitting in a room of the Lord-Quantock-Arms Inn, Markton, that was used for the weekly ordinary. It was a long, low apartment, formed by the union of two or three smaller rooms, with a bow-window looking upon the street, and at the present moment was pervaded by a blue fog from tobacco-pipes, and a temperature like that of a kiln. The body of farmers who still sat on there was greater than usual, owing to the cold air without, the tables having been cleared of dinner for some time and their surface stamped with liquid circles by the feet of the numerous glasses.

Besides the farmers there were present several professional men of the town, who found it desirable to dine here on market-days for the opportunity it afforded them of increasing their practice among the agriculturists, many of whom were men of large balances, even luxurious livers, who drove to market in elegant phaetons drawn by horses of supreme blood, bone, and action, in a style never anticipated by their fathers when jogging thither in light carts, or afoot with a butter basket on each arm.

The buzz of groggy conversation was suddenly impinged on by the notes of a peal of bells from the tower hard by. Almost at the same instant the door of the room opened, and there entered the landlord of the little inn at Sleeping-Green. Drawing his supply of cordials from this superior house, to which he was subject, he came here at stated times like a prebendary to the cathedral of his diocesan, afterwards retailing to his own humbler audience the sentiments which he had learnt of this. But curiosity being awakened by the church bells the usual position was for the moment reversed, and one of the farmers, saluting him by name, asked him the reason of their striking up at that time of day.

‘My mis’ess out yonder,’ replied the rural landlord, nodding sideways, ‘is coming home with her fancy-man. They have been a-gaying together this turk of a while in foreign parts — Here, maid! — what with the wind, and standing about, my blood’s as low as water — bring us a thimbleful of that that isn’t gin and not far from it.’

‘It is true, then, that she’s become Mrs. Somerset?’ indifferently asked a farmer in broadcloth, tenant of an estate in quite another direction than hers, as he contemplated the grain of the table immediately surrounding the foot of his glass.

‘True — of course it is,’ said Havill, who was also present, in the tone of one who, though sitting in this rubicund company, was not of it. ‘I could have told you the truth of it any day these last five weeks.’

Among those who had lent an ear was Dairyman Jinks, an old gnarled character who wore a white fustian coat and yellow leggings; the only man in the room who

never dressed up in dark clothes for marketing. He now asked, 'Married abroad, was they? And how long will a wedding abroad stand good for in this country?'

'As long as a wedding at home.'

'Will it? Faith; I didn't know: how should I? I thought it might be some new plan o' folks for leasing women now they be so plentiful, so as to get rid o' 'em when the men be tired o' 'em, and hev spent all their money.'

'He won't be able to spend her money,' said the landlord of Sleeping-Green. "'Tis her very own person's — settled upon the hairs of her head for ever.'

'O nation! Then if I were the man I shouldn't care for such a one-eyed benefit as that,' said Dairyman Jinks, turning away to listen to the talk on his other hand.

'Is that true?' asked the gentleman-farmer in broadcloth.

'It is sufficiently near the truth,' said Havill. 'There is nothing at all unusual in the arrangement; it was only settled so to prevent any schemer making a beggar of her. If Somerset and she have any children, which probably they will, it will be theirs; and what can a man want more? Besides, there is a large portion of property left to her personal use — quite as much as they can want. Oddly enough, the curiosities and pictures of the castle which belonged to the De Stancys are not restricted from sale; they are hers to do what she likes with. Old Power didn't care for articles that reminded him so much of his predecessors.'

'Hey?' said Dairyman Jinks, turning back again, having decided that the conversation on his right hand was, after all, the more interesting. 'Well — why can't 'em hire a travelling chap to touch up the picters into her own gaffers and gammers? Then they'd be worth sommat to her.'

'Ah, here they are? I thought so,' said Havill, who had been standing up at the window for the last few moments. 'The ringers were told to begin as soon as the train signalled.'

As he spoke a carriage drew up to the hotel-door, followed by another with the maid and luggage. The inmates crowded to the bow-window, except Dairyman Jinks, who had become absorbed in his own reflections.

'What be they stopping here for?' asked one of the previous speakers.

'They are going to stay here to-night,' said Havill. 'They have come quite unexpectedly, and the castle is in such a state of turmoil that there is not a single carpet down, or room for them to use. We shall get two or three in order by next week.'

'Two little people like them will be lost in the chammers of that wandering place!' satirized Dairyman Jinks. 'They will be bound to have a randy every fortnight to keep the moth out of the furniture!'

By this time Somerset was handing out the wife of his bosom, and Dairyman Jinks went on: 'That's no more Miss Power that was, than my niece's daughter Kezia is Miss Power — in short it is a different woman altogether!'

'There is no mistake about the woman,' said the landlord; 'it is her fur clothes that make her look so like a caterpillar on end. Well, she is not a bad bargain! As for Captain De Stancy, he'll fret his gizzard green.'

‘He’s the man she ought to ha’ married,’ declared the farmer in broadcloth. ‘As the world goes she ought to have been Lady De Stancy. She gave up her chapel-going, and you might have thought she would have given up her first young man: but she stuck to him, though by all accounts he would soon have been interested in another party.’

‘‘Tis woman’s nature to be false except to a man, and man’s nature to be true except to a woman,’ said the landlord of Sleeping-Green. ‘However, all’s well that ends well, and I have something else to think of than new-married couples;’ saying which the speaker moved off, and the others returned to their seats, the young pair who had been their theme vanishing through the hotel into some private paradise to rest and dine.

By this time their arrival had become known, and a crowd soon gathered outside, acquiring audacity with continuance there. Raising a hurrah, the group would not leave till Somerset had showed himself on the balcony above; and then declined to go away till Paula also had appeared; when, remarking that her husband seemed a quiet young man enough, and would make a very good borough member when their present one misbehaved himself, the assemblage good-humouredly dispersed.

Among those whose ears had been reached by the hurrahs of these idlers was a man in silence and solitude, far out of the town. He was leaning over a gate that divided two meads in a watery level between Stancy Castle and Markton. He turned his head for a few seconds, then continued his contemplative gaze towards the towers of the castle, visible over the trees as far as was possible in the leaden gloom of the November eve. The military form of the solitary loungee was recognizable as that of Sir William De Stancy, notwithstanding the failing light and his attitude of so resting his elbows on the gate that his hands enclosed the greater part of his face.

The scene was inexpressibly cheerless. No other human creature was apparent, and the only sounds audible above the wind were those of the trickling streams which distributed the water over the meadow. A heron had been standing in one of these rivulets about twenty yards from the officer, and they vied with each other in stillness till the bird suddenly rose and flew off to the plantation in which it was his custom to pass the night with others of his tribe. De Stancy saw the heron rise, and seemed to imagine the creature’s departure without a supper to be owing to the increasing darkness; but in another minute he became conscious that the heron had been disturbed by sounds too distant to reach his own ears at the time. They were nearer now, and there came along under the hedge a young man known to De Stancy exceedingly well.

‘Ah,’ he said listlessly, ‘you have ventured back.’

‘Yes, captain. Why do you walk out here?’

‘The bells began ringing because she and he were expected, and my thoughts naturally dragged me this way. Thank Heaven the battery leaves Markton in a few days, and then the precious place will know me no more!’

‘I have heard of it.’ Turning to where the dim lines of the castle rose he continued: ‘Well, there it stands.’

‘And I am not in it.’

‘They are not in it yet either.’

‘They soon will be.’

‘Well — what tune is that you were humming, captain?’

‘ALL IS LOST NOW,’ replied the captain grimly.

‘O no; you have got me, and I am a treasure to any man. I have another match in my eye for you, and shall get you well settled yet, if you keep yourself respectable. So thank God, and take courage!’

‘Ah, Will — you are a flippant young fool — wise in your own conceit; I say it to my sorrow! ‘Twas your dishonesty spoilt all. That lady would have been my wife by fair dealing — time was all I required. But base attacks on a man’s character never deserve to win, and if I had once been certain that you had made them, my course would have been very different, both towards you and others. But why should I talk to you about this? If I cared an atom what becomes of you I would take you in hand severely enough; not caring, I leave you alone, to go to the devil your own way.’

‘Thank you kindly, captain. Well, since you have spoken plainly, I will do the same. We De Stancys are a worn-out old party — that’s the long and the short of it. We represent conditions of life that have had their day — especially me. Our one remaining chance was an alliance with new aristocrats; and we have failed. We are past and done for. Our line has had five hundred years of glory, and we ought to be content. Enfin les renards se trouvent chez le pelletier.’

‘Speak for yourself, young Consequence, and leave the destinies of old families to respectable philosophers. This fiasco is the direct result of evil conduct, and of nothing else at all. I have managed badly; I countenanced you too far. When I saw your impish tendencies I should have forsworn the alliance.’

‘Don’t sting me, captain. What I have told you is true. As for my conduct, cat will after kind, you know. You should have held your tongue on the wedding morning, and have let me take my chance.’

‘Is that all I get for saving you from jail? Gad — I alone am the sufferer, and feel I am alone the fool!... Come, off with you — I never want to see you any more.’

‘Part we will, then — till we meet again. It will be a light night hereabouts, I think, this evening.’

‘A very dark one for me.’

‘Nevertheless, I think it will be a light night. Au revoir!’

Dare went his way, and after a while De Stancy went his. Both were soon lost in the shades.

CHAPTER V.

The castle to-night was as gloomy as the meads. As Havill had explained, the habitable rooms were just now undergoing a scour, and the main block of buildings was empty even of the few servants who had been retained, they having for comfort’s

sake taken up their quarters in the detached rooms adjoining the entrance archway. Hence not a single light shone from the lonely windows, at which ivy leaves tapped like woodpeckers, moved by gusts that were numerous and contrary rather than violent. Within the walls all was silence, chaos, and obscurity, till towards eleven o'clock, when the thick immovable cloud that had dulled the daytime broke into a scudding fleece, through which the moon forded her way as a nebulous spot of watery white, sending light enough, though of a rayless kind, into the castle chambers to show the confusion that reigned there.

At this time an eye might have noticed a figure flitting in and about those draughty apartments, and making no more noise in so doing than a puff of wind. Its motion hither and thither was rapid, but methodical, its bearing absorbed, yet cautious. Though it ran more or less through all the principal rooms, the chief scene of its operations was the Long Gallery overlooking the Pleasance, which was covered by an ornamental wood-and-plaster roof, and contained a whole throng of family portraits, besides heavy old cabinets and the like. The portraits which were of value as works of art were smaller than these, and hung in adjoining rooms.

The manifest occupation of the figure was that of removing these small and valuable pictures from other chambers to the gallery in which the rest were hung, and piling them in a heap in the midst. Included in the group were nine by Sir Peter Lely, five by Vandyck, four by Cornelius Jansen, one by Salvator Rosa (remarkable as being among the few English portraits ever painted by that master), many by Kneller, and two by Romney. Apparently by accident, the light being insufficient to distinguish them from portraits, the figure also brought a Raffaele Virgin-and-Child, a magnificent Tintoretto, a Titian, and a Giorgione.

On these was laid a large collection of enamelled miniature portraits of the same illustrious line; afterwards tapestries and cushions embroidered with the initials 'De S.'; and next the cradle presented by Charles the First to the contemporary De Stancy mother, till at length there arose in the middle of the floor a huge heap containing most of what had been personal and peculiar to members of the De Stancy family as distinct from general furniture.

Then the figure went from door to door, and threw open each that was unfastened. It next proceeded to a room on the ground floor, at present fitted up as a carpenter's shop, and knee-deep in shavings. An armful of these was added to the pile of objects in the gallery; a window at each end of the gallery was opened, causing a brisk draught along the walls; and then the activity of the figure ceased, and it was seen no more.

Five minutes afterwards a light shone upon the lawn from the windows of the Long Gallery, which glowed with more brilliancy than it had known in the meridian of its Caroline splendours. Thereupon the framed gentleman in the lace collar seemed to open his eyes more widely; he with the flowing locks and turn-up mustachios to part his lips; he in the armour, who was so much like Captain De Stancy, to shake the plates of his mail with suppressed laughter; the lady with the three-stringed pearl necklace,

and vast expanse of neck, to nod with satisfaction and triumphantly signify to her adjoining husband that this was a meet and glorious end.

The flame increased, and blown upon by the wind roared round the pictures, the tapestries, and the cradle, up to the plaster ceiling and through it into the forest of oak timbers above.

The best sitting-room at the Lord-Quantock-Arms in Markton was as cosy this evening as a room can be that lacks the minuter furniture on which cosiness so largely depends. By the fire sat Paula and Somerset, the former with a shawl round her shoulders to keep off the draught which, despite the curtains, forced its way in on this gusty night through the windows opening upon the balcony. Paula held a letter in her hand, the contents of which formed the subject of their conversation. Happy as she was in her general situation, there was for the nonce a tear in her eye.

‘MY EVER DEAR PAULA (ran the letter), — Your last letter has just reached me, and I have followed your account of your travels and intentions with more interest than I can tell. You, who know me, need no assurance of this. At the present moment, however, I am in the whirl of a change that has resulted from a resolution taken some time ago, but concealed from almost everybody till now. Why? Well, I will own — from cowardice — fear lest I should be reasoned out of my plan. I am going to steal from the world, Paula, from the social world, for whose gaieties and ambitions I never had much liking, and whose circles I have not the ability to grace. My home, and resting-place till the great rest comes, is with the Protestant Sisterhood at — — . Whatever shortcomings may be found in such a community, I believe that I shall be happier there than in any other place.

‘Whatever you may think of my judgment in taking this step, I can assure you that I have not done it without consideration. My reasons are good, and my determination is unalterable. But, my own very best friend, and more than sister, don’t think that I mean to leave my love and friendship for you behind me. No, Paula, you will ALWAYS be with me, and I believe that if an increase in what I already feel for you be possible, it will be furthered by the retirement and meditation I shall enjoy in my secluded home. My heart is very full, dear — too full to write more. God bless you, and your husband. You must come and see me there; I have not so many friends that I can afford to lose you who have been so kind. I write this with the fellow-pen to yours, that you gave me when we went to Budmouth together. Good-bye! — Ever your own sister, CHARLOTTE.’

Paula had first read this through silently, and now in reading it a second time aloud to Somerset her voice faltered, and she wept outright. ‘I had been expecting her to live with us always,’ she said through her tears, ‘and to think she should have decided to do this!’

‘It is a pity certainly,’ said Somerset gently. ‘She was genuine, if anybody ever was; and simple as she was true.’

‘I am the more sorry,’ Paula presently resumed, ‘because of a little plan I had been thinking of with regard to her. You know that the pictures and curiosities of the castle

are not included in the things I cannot touch, or impeach, or whatever it is. They are our own to do what we like with. My father felt in devising the estate that, however interesting to the De Stancys those objects might be, they did not concern us — were indeed rather in the way, having been come by so strangely, through Mr. Wilkins, though too valuable to be treated lightly. Now I was going to suggest that we would not sell them — indeed I could not bear to do such a thing with what had belonged to Charlotte's forefathers — but to hand them over to her as a gift, either to keep for herself, or to pass on to her brother, as she should choose. Now I fear there is no hope of it: and yet I shall never like to see them in the house.'

'It can be done still, I should think. She can accept them for her brother when he settles, without absolutely taking them into her own possession.'

'It would be a kind of generosity which hardly amounts to more than justice (although they were purchased) from a recusant usurper to a dear friend — not that I am a usurper exactly; well, from a representative of the new aristocracy of internationality to a representative of the old aristocracy of exclusiveness.'

'What do you call yourself, Paula, since you are not of your father's creed?'

'I suppose I am what poor Mr. Woodwell said — by the way, we must call and see him — something or other that's in Revelation, neither cold nor hot. But of course that's a sub-species — I may be a lukewarm anything. What I really am, as far as I know, is one of that body to whom lukewarmth is not an accident but a provisional necessity, till they see a little more clearly.' She had crossed over to his side, and pulling his head towards her whispered a name in his ear.

'Why, Mr. Woodwell said you were that too! You carry your beliefs very comfortably. I shall be glad when enthusiasm is come again.'

'I am going to revise and correct my beliefs one of these days when I have thought a little further.' She suddenly breathed a sigh and added, 'How transitory our best emotions are! In talking of myself I am heartlessly forgetting Charlotte, and becoming happy again. I won't be happy to-night for her sake!'

A few minutes after this their attention was attracted by a noise of footsteps running along the street; then a heavy tramp of horses, and lumbering of wheels. Other feet were heard scampering at intervals, and soon somebody ascended the staircase and approached their door. The head waiter appeared.

'Ma'am, Stancy Castle is all afire!' said the waiter breathlessly.

Somerset jumped up, drew aside the curtains, and stepped into the bow-window. Right before him rose a blaze. The window looked upon the street and along the turnpike road to the very hill on which the castle stood, the keep being visible in the daytime above the trees. Here rose the light, which appeared little further off than a stone's throw instead of nearly three miles. Every curl of the smoke and every wave of the flame was distinct, and Somerset fancied he could hear the crackling.

Paula had risen from her seat and joined him in the window, where she heard some people in the street saying that the servants were all safe; after which she gave her mind more fully to the material aspects of the catastrophe.

The whole town was now rushing off to the scene of the conflagration, which, shining straight along the street, showed the burgesses' running figures distinctly upon the illumined road. Paula was quite ready to act upon Somerset's suggestion that they too should hasten to the spot, and a fly was got ready in a few minutes. With lapse of time Paula evinced more anxiety as to the fate of her castle, and when they had driven as near as it was prudent to do, they dismounted, and went on foot into the throng of people which was rapidly gathering from the town and surrounding villages. Among the faces they recognized Mr. Woodwell, Havill the architect, the rector of the parish, the curate, and many others known to them by sight. These, as soon as they saw the young couple, came forward with words of condolence, imagining them to have been burnt out of bed, and vied with each other in offering them a lodging. Somerset explained where they were staying and that they required no accommodation, Paula interrupting with 'O my poor horses, what has become of them?'

'The fire is not near the stables,' said Mr. Woodwell. 'It broke out in the body of the building. The horses, however, are driven into the field.'

'I can assure you, you need not be alarmed, madam,' said Havill. 'The chief constable is here, and the two town engines, and I am doing all I can. The castle engine unfortunately is out of repair.'

Somerset and Paula then went on to another point of view near the gymnasium, where they could not be seen by the crowd. Three-quarters of a mile off, on their left hand, the powerful irradiation fell upon the brick chapel in which Somerset had first seen the woman who now stood beside him as his wife. It was the only object visible in that direction, the dull hills and trees behind failing to catch the light. She significantly pointed it out to Somerset, who knew her meaning, and they turned again to the more serious matter.

It had long been apparent that in the face of such a wind all the pigmy appliances that the populace could bring to act upon such a mass of combustion would be unavailing. As much as could burn that night was burnt, while some of that which would not burn crumbled and fell as a formless heap, whence new flames towered up, and inclined to the north-east so far as to singe the trees of the park. The thicker walls of Norman date remained unmoved, partly because of their thickness, and partly because in them stone vaults took the place of wood floors.

The tower clock kept manfully going till it had struck one, its face smiling out from the smoke as if nothing were the matter, after which hour something fell down inside, and it went no more.

Cunningham Haze, with his body of men, was devoted in his attention, and came up to say a word to our two spectators from time to time. Towards four o'clock the flames diminished, and feeling thoroughly weary, Somerset and Paula remained no longer, returning to Markton as they had come.

On their journey they pondered and discussed what course it would be best to pursue in the circumstances, gradually deciding not to attempt rebuilding the castle unless they were absolutely compelled. True, the main walls were still standing as firmly

as ever; but there was a feeling common to both of them that it would be well to make an opportunity of a misfortune, and leaving the edifice in ruins start their married life in a mansion of independent construction hard by the old one, unencumbered with the ghosts of an unfortunate line.

‘We will build a new house from the ground, eclectic in style. We will remove the ashes, charred wood, and so on from the ruin, and plant more ivy. The winter rains will soon wash the unsightly smoke from the walls, and Stancy Castle will be beautiful in its decay. You, Paula, will be yourself again, and recover, if you have not already, from the warp given to your mind (according to Woodwell) by the mediaevalism of that place.’

‘And be a perfect representative of “the modern spirit”?’ she inquired; ‘representing neither the senses and understanding, nor the heart and imagination; but what a finished writer calls “the imaginative reason”?’

‘Yes; for since it is rather in your line you may as well keep straight on.’

‘Very well, I’ll keep straight on; and we’ll build a new house beside the ruin, and show the modern spirit for evermore... But, George, I wish — ’ And Paula repressed a sigh.

‘Well?’

‘I wish my castle wasn’t burnt; and I wish you were a De Stancy!’

TWO ON A TOWER

Two on a Tower (1882) was classified by Hardy as a romance and fantasy. The novel features the uncharacteristic theme of astronomy and tells the story of unhappily married Lady Constantine, who breaks the rules of social decorum when she falls in love with Swithin St. Cleeve, an astronomer who is ten years her junior. Notable for its constant plot twists and surprising ending, the novel is now classed as one of Hardy's minor works.

Hardy, close to the time of this novel's publication

CONTENTS

- PREFACE.
- CHAPTER I
- CHAPTER II
- CHAPTER III
- CHAPTER IV
- CHAPTER V
- CHAPTER VI
- CHAPTER VII
- CHAPTER VIII
- CHAPTER IX
- CHAPTER X
- CHAPTER XI
- CHAPTER XII
- CHAPTER XIII

- CHAPTER XIV
- CHAPTER XV
- CHAPTER XVI
- CHAPTER XVII
- CHAPTER XVIII
- CHAPTER XIX
- CHAPTER XX
- CHAPTER XXI
- CHAPTER XXII
- CHAPTER XXIII
- CHAPTER XXIV
- CHAPTER XXV
- CHAPTER XXVI
- CHAPTER XXVII
- CHAPTER XXVIII
- CHAPTER XXIX
- CHAPTER XXX
- CHAPTER XXXI
- CHAPTER XXXII
- CHAPTER XXXIII
- CHAPTER XXXIV
- CHAPTER XXXV
- CHAPTER XXXVI
- CHAPTER XXXVII
- CHAPTER XXXVIII

- CHAPTER XXXIX
- CHAPTER XL
- CHAPTER XLI

[image not archived]

‘Ah, my heart! her eyes and she
 Have taught thee new astrology.
 Howe’er Love’s native hours were set,
 Whatever starry synod met,
 ‘Tis in the mercy of her eye,
 If poor Love shall live or die.’
 Crashaw: Love’s Horoscope.

PREFACE.

This slightly-built romance was the outcome of a wish to set the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe, and to impart to readers the sentiment that of these contrasting magnitudes the smaller might be the greater to them as men.

But, on the publication of the book people seemed to be less struck with these high aims of the author than with their own opinion, first, that the novel was an ‘improper’ one in its morals, and, secondly, that it was intended to be a satire on the Established Church of this country. I was made to suffer in consequence from several eminent pens.

That, however, was thirteen years ago, and, in respect of the first opinion, I venture to think that those who care to read the story now will be quite astonished at the scrupulous propriety observed therein on the relations of the sexes; for though there may be frivolous, and even grotesque touches on occasion, there is hardly a single caress in the book outside legal matrimony, or what was intended so to be.

As for the second opinion, it is sufficient to draw attention, as I did at the time, to the fact that the Bishop is every inch a gentleman, and that the parish priest who figures in the narrative is one of its most estimable characters.

However, the pages must speak for themselves. Some few readers, I trust — to take a serious view — will be reminded by this imperfect story, in a manner not unprofitable to the growth of the social sympathies, of the pathos, misery, long-suffering, and divine tenderness which in real life frequently accompany the passion of such a woman as Viviette for a lover several years her junior.

The scene of the action was suggested by two real spots in the part of the country specified, each of which has a column standing upon it. Certain surrounding peculiarities have been imported into the narrative from both sites.

T. H.
 July 1895.

CHAPTER I

On an early winter afternoon, clear but not cold, when the vegetable world was a weird multitude of skeletons through whose ribs the sun shone freely, a gleaming landau came to a pause on the crest of a hill in Wessex. The spot was where the old Melchester Road, which the carriage had hitherto followed, was joined by a drive that led round into a park at no great distance off.

The footman alighted, and went to the occupant of the carriage, a lady about eight - or nine-and-twenty. She was looking through the opening afforded by a field-gate at the undulating stretch of country beyond. In pursuance of some remark from her the servant looked in the same direction.

The central feature of the middle distance, as they beheld it, was a circular isolated hill, of no great elevation, which placed itself in strong chromatic contrast with a wide acreage of surrounding arable by being covered with fir-trees. The trees were all of one size and age, so that their tips assumed the precise curve of the hill they grew upon. This pine-clad protuberance was yet further marked out from the general landscape by having on its summit a tower in the form of a classical column, which, though partly immersed in the plantation, rose above the tree-tops to a considerable height. Upon this object the eyes of lady and servant were bent.

‘Then there is no road leading near it?’ she asked.

‘Nothing nearer than where we are now, my lady.’

‘Then drive home,’ she said after a moment. And the carriage rolled on its way.

A few days later, the same lady, in the same carriage, passed that spot again. Her eyes, as before, turned to the distant tower.

‘Nobbs,’ she said to the coachman, ‘could you find your way home through that field, so as to get near the outskirts of the plantation where the column is?’

The coachman regarded the field. ‘Well, my lady,’ he observed, ‘in dry weather we might drive in there by inching and pinching, and so get across by Five-and-Twenty Acres, all being well. But the ground is so heavy after these rains that perhaps it would hardly be safe to try it now.’

‘Perhaps not,’ she assented indifferently. ‘Remember it, will you, at a drier time?’

And again the carriage sped along the road, the lady’s eyes resting on the segmental hill, the blue trees that muffled it, and the column that formed its apex, till they were out of sight.

A long time elapsed before that lady drove over the hill again. It was February; the soil was now unquestionably dry, the weather and scene being in other respects much as they had been before. The familiar shape of the column seemed to remind her that at last an opportunity for a close inspection had arrived. Giving her directions she saw the gate opened, and after a little manoeuvring the carriage swayed slowly into the uneven field.

Although the pillar stood upon the hereditary estate of her husband the lady had never visited it, owing to its insulation by this well-nigh impracticable ground. The

drive to the base of the hill was tedious and jerky, and on reaching it she alighted, directing that the carriage should be driven back empty over the clods, to wait for her on the nearest edge of the field. She then ascended beneath the trees on foot.

The column now showed itself as a much more important erection than it had appeared from the road, or the park, or the windows of Welland House, her residence hard by, whence she had surveyed it hundreds of times without ever feeling a sufficient interest in its details to investigate them. The column had been erected in the last century, as a substantial memorial of her husband's great-grandfather, a respectable officer who had fallen in the American war, and the reason of her lack of interest was partly owing to her relations with this husband, of which more anon. It was little beyond the sheer desire for something to do — the chronic desire of her curiously lonely life — that had brought her here now. She was in a mood to welcome anything that would in some measure disperse an almost killing ennui. She would have welcomed even a misfortune. She had heard that from the summit of the pillar four counties could be seen. Whatever pleasurable effect was to be derived from looking into four counties she resolved to enjoy to-day.

The fir-shrouded hill-top was (according to some antiquaries) an old Roman camp, — if it were not (as others insisted) an old British castle, or (as the rest swore) an old Saxon field of Witenagemote, — with remains of an outer and an inner vallum, a winding path leading up between their overlapping ends by an easy ascent. The spikelets from the trees formed a soft carpet over the route, and occasionally a brake of brambles barred the interspaces of the trunks. Soon she stood immediately at the foot of the column.

It had been built in the Tuscan order of classic architecture, and was really a tower, being hollow with steps inside. The gloom and solitude which prevailed round the base were remarkable. The sob of the environing trees was here expressively manifest; and moved by the light breeze their thin straight stems rocked in seconds, like inverted pendulums; while some boughs and twigs rubbed the pillar's sides, or occasionally clicked in catching each other. Below the level of their summits the masonry was lichen-stained and mildewed, for the sun never pierced that moaning cloud of blue-black vegetation. Pads of moss grew in the joints of the stone-work, and here and there shade-loving insects had engraved on the mortar patterns of no human style or meaning; but curious and suggestive. Above the trees the case was different: the pillar rose into the sky a bright and cheerful thing, unimpeded, clean, and flushed with the sunlight.

The spot was seldom visited by a pedestrian, except perhaps in the shooting season. The rarity of human intrusion was evidenced by the mazes of rabbit-runs, the feathers of shy birds, the exuviae of reptiles; as also by the well-worn paths of squirrels down the sides of trunks, and thence horizontally away. The fact of the plantation being an island in the midst of an arable plain sufficiently accounted for this lack of visitors. Few unaccustomed to such places can be aware of the insulating effect of ploughed ground, when no necessity compels people to traverse it. This rotund hill of trees and

brambles, standing in the centre of a ploughed field of some ninety or a hundred acres, was probably visited less frequently than a rock would have been visited in a lake of equal extent.

She walked round the column to the other side, where she found the door through which the interior was reached. The paint, if it had ever had any, was all washed from the wood, and down the decaying surface of the boards liquid rust from the nails and hinges had run in red stains. Over the door was a stone tablet, bearing, apparently, letters or words; but the inscription, whatever it was, had been smoothed over with a plaster of lichen.

Here stood this aspiring piece of masonry, erected as the most conspicuous and ineffaceable reminder of a man that could be thought of; and yet the whole aspect of the memorial betokened forgetfulness. Probably not a dozen people within the district knew the name of the person commemorated, while perhaps not a soul remembered whether the column were hollow or solid, whether with or without a tablet explaining its date and purpose. She herself had lived within a mile of it for the last five years, and had never come near it till now.

She hesitated to ascend alone, but finding that the door was not fastened she pushed it open with her foot, and entered. A scrap of writing-paper lay within, and arrested her attention by its freshness. Some human being, then, knew the spot, despite her surmises. But as the paper had nothing on it no clue was afforded; yet feeling herself the proprietor of the column and of all around it her self-assertiveness was sufficient to lead her on. The staircase was lighted by slits in the wall, and there was no difficulty in reaching the top, the steps being quite unworn. The trap-door leading on to the roof was open, and on looking through it an interesting spectacle met her eye.

A youth was sitting on a stool in the centre of the lead flat which formed the summit of the column, his eye being applied to the end of a large telescope that stood before him on a tripod. This sort of presence was unexpected, and the lady started back into the shade of the opening. The only effect produced upon him by her footfall was an impatient wave of the hand, which he did without removing his eye from the instrument, as if to forbid her to interrupt him.

Pausing where she stood the lady examined the aspect of the individual who thus made himself so completely at home on a building which she deemed her unquestioned property. He was a youth who might properly have been characterized by a word the judicious chronicler would not readily use in such a connection, preferring to reserve it for raising images of the opposite sex. Whether because no deep felicity is likely to arise from the condition, or from any other reason, to say in these days that a youth is beautiful is not to award him that amount of credit which the expression would have carried with it if he had lived in the times of the Classical Dictionary. So much, indeed, is the reverse the case that the assertion creates an awkwardness in saying anything more about him. The beautiful youth usually verges so perilously on the incipient coxcomb, who is about to become the Lothario or Juan among the neighbouring maidens, that, for the due understanding of our present young man, his

sublime innocence of any thought concerning his own material aspect, or that of others, is most fervently asserted, and must be as fervently believed.

Such as he was, there the lad sat. The sun shone full in his face, and on his head he wore a black velvet skull-cap, leaving to view below it a curly margin of very light shining hair, which accorded well with the flush upon his cheek.

He had such a complexion as that with which Raffaella enriches the countenance of the youthful son of Zacharias, — a complexion which, though clear, is far enough removed from virgin delicacy, and suggests plenty of sun and wind as its accompaniment. His features were sufficiently straight in the contours to correct the beholder's first impression that the head was the head of a girl. Beside him stood a little oak table, and in front was the telescope.

His visitor had ample time to make these observations; and she may have done so all the more keenly through being herself of a totally opposite type. Her hair was black as midnight, her eyes had no less deep a shade, and her complexion showed the richness demanded as a support to these decided features. As she continued to look at the pretty fellow before her, apparently so far abstracted into some speculative world as scarcely to know a real one, a warmer wave of her warm temperament glowed visibly through her, and a qualified observer might from this have hazarded a guess that there was Romance blood in her veins.

But even the interest attaching to the youth could not arrest her attention for ever, and as he made no further signs of moving his eye from the instrument she broke the silence with —

‘What do you see? — something happening somewhere?’

‘Yes, quite a catastrophe!’ he automatically murmured, without moving round.

‘What?’

‘A cyclone in the sun.’

The lady paused, as if to consider the weight of that event in the scale of terrene life.

‘Will it make any difference to us here?’ she asked.

The young man by this time seemed to be awakened to the consciousness that somebody unusual was talking to him; he turned, and started.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. ‘I thought it was my relative come to look after me! She often comes about this time.’

He continued to look at her and forget the sun, just such a reciprocity of influence as might have been expected between a dark lady and a flaxen-haired youth making itself apparent in the faces of each.

‘Don't let me interrupt your observations,’ said she.

‘Ah, no,’ said he, again applying his eye; whereupon his face lost the animation which her presence had lent it, and became immutable as that of a bust, though superadding to the serenity of repose the sensitiveness of life. The expression that settled on him was one of awe. Not unaptly might it have been said that he was worshipping the sun. Among the various intensities of that worship which have prevailed since the first

intelligent being saw the luminary decline westward, as the young man now beheld it doing, his was not the weakest. He was engaged in what may be called a very chastened or schooled form of that first and most natural of adorations.

‘But would you like to see it?’ he recommenced. ‘It is an event that is witnessed only about once in two or three years, though it may occur often enough.’

She assented, and looked through the shaded eyepiece, and saw a whirling mass, in the centre of which the blazing globe seemed to be laid bare to its core. It was a peep into a maelstrom of fire, taking place where nobody had ever been or ever would be.

‘It is the strangest thing I ever beheld,’ she said. Then he looked again; till wondering who her companion could be she asked, ‘Are you often here?’

‘Every night when it is not cloudy, and often in the day.’

‘Ah, night, of course. The heavens must be beautiful from this point.’

‘They are rather more than that.’

‘Indeed! Have you entirely taken possession of this column?’

‘Entirely.’

‘But it is my column,’ she said, with smiling asperity.

‘Then are you Lady Constantine, wife of the absent Sir Blount Constantine?’

‘I am Lady Constantine.’

‘Ah, then I agree that it is your ladyship’s. But will you allow me to rent it of you for a time, Lady Constantine?’

‘You have taken it, whether I allow it or not. However, in the interests of science it is advisable that you continue your tenancy. Nobody knows you are here, I suppose?’

‘Hardly anybody.’

He then took her down a few steps into the interior, and showed her some ingenious contrivances for stowing articles away.

‘Nobody ever comes near the column, — or, as it’s called here, Rings-Hill Speer,’ he continued; ‘and when I first came up it nobody had been here for thirty or forty years. The staircase was choked with daws’ nests and feathers, but I cleared them out.’

‘I understood the column was always kept locked?’

‘Yes, it has been so. When it was built, in 1782, the key was given to my great-grandfather, to keep by him in case visitors should happen to want it. He lived just down there where I live now.’

He denoted by a nod a little dell lying immediately beyond the ploughed land which environed them.

‘He kept it in his bureau, and as the bureau descended to my grandfather, my mother, and myself, the key descended with it. After the first thirty or forty years, nobody ever asked for it. One day I saw it, lying rusty in its niche, and, finding that it belonged to this column, I took it and came up. I stayed here till it was dark, and the stars came out, and that night I resolved to be an astronomer. I came back here from school several months ago, and I mean to be an astronomer still.’

He lowered his voice, and added:

‘I aim at nothing less than the dignity and office of Astronomer Royal, if I live. Perhaps I shall not live.’

‘I don’t see why you should suppose that,’ said she. ‘How long are you going to make this your observatory?’

‘About a year longer — till I have obtained a practical familiarity with the heavens. Ah, if I only had a good equatorial!’

‘What is that?’

‘A proper instrument for my pursuit. But time is short, and science is infinite, — how infinite only those who study astronomy fully realise, — and perhaps I shall be worn out before I make my mark.’

She seemed to be greatly struck by the odd mixture in him of scientific earnestness and melancholy mistrust of all things human. Perhaps it was owing to the nature of his studies.

‘You are often on this tower alone at night?’ she said.

‘Yes; at this time of the year particularly, and while there is no moon. I observe from seven or eight till about two in the morning, with a view to my great work on variable stars. But with such a telescope as this — well, I must put up with it!’

‘Can you see Saturn’s ring and Jupiter’s moons?’

He said drily that he could manage to do that, not without some contempt for the state of her knowledge.

‘I have never seen any planet or star through a telescope.’

‘If you will come the first clear night, Lady Constantine, I will show you any number. I mean, at your express wish; not otherwise.’

‘I should like to come, and possibly may at some time. These stars that vary so much — sometimes evening stars, sometimes morning stars, sometimes in the east, and sometimes in the west — have always interested me.’

‘Ah — now there is a reason for your not coming. Your ignorance of the realities of astronomy is so satisfactory that I will not disturb it except at your serious request.’

‘But I wish to be enlightened.’

‘Let me caution you against it.’

‘Is enlightenment on the subject, then, so terrible?’

‘Yes, indeed.’

She laughingly declared that nothing could have so piqued her curiosity as his statement, and turned to descend. He helped her down the stairs and through the briers. He would have gone further and crossed the open corn-land with her, but she preferred to go alone. He then retraced his way to the top of the column, but, instead of looking longer at the sun, watched her diminishing towards the distant fence, behind which waited the carriage. When in the midst of the field, a dark spot on an area of brown, there crossed her path a moving figure, whom it was as difficult to distinguish from the earth he trod as the caterpillar from its leaf, by reason of the excellent match between his clothes and the clods. He was one of a dying-out generation who retained the principle, nearly unlearned now, that a man’s habiliments should be in harmony

with his environment. Lady Constantine and this figure halted beside each other for some minutes; then they went on their several ways.

The brown person was a labouring man known to the world of Welland as Haymoss (the encrusted form of the word Amos, to adopt the phrase of philologists). The reason of the halt had been some inquiries addressed to him by Lady Constantine.

‘Who is that — Amos Fry, I think?’ she had asked.

‘Yes my lady,’ said Haymoss; ‘a homely barley driller, born under the eaves of your ladyship’s outbuildings, in a manner of speaking, — though your ladyship was neither born nor ‘tempted at that time.’

‘Who lives in the old house behind the plantation?’

‘Old Gammer Martin, my lady, and her grandson.’

‘He has neither father nor mother, then?’

‘Not a single one, my lady.’

‘Where was he educated?’

‘At Warborne, — a place where they draw up young gam’sters’ brains like rhubarb under a ninepenny pan, my lady, excusing my common way. They hit so much larning into en that ‘a could talk like the day of Pentecost; which is a wonderful thing for a simple boy, and his mother only the plainest ciphering woman in the world. Warborne Grammar School — that’s where ‘twas ‘a went to. His father, the reverent Pa’son St. Cleeve, made a terrible bruckle hit in ‘s marrying, in the sight of the high. He were the curate here, my lady, for a length o’ time.’

‘Oh, curate,’ said Lady Constantine. ‘It was before I knew the village.’

‘Ay, long and merry ago! And he married Farmer Martin’s daughter — Giles Martin, a limberish man, who used to go rather bad upon his lags, if you can mind. I knowed the man well enough; who should know en better! The maid was a poor windling thing, and, though a playward piece o’ flesh when he married her, ‘a socked and sighed, and went out like a snoff! Yes, my lady. Well, when Pa’son St. Cleeve married this homespun woman the toppermost folk wouldn’t speak to his wife. Then he dropped a cuss or two, and said he’d no longer get his living by curing their twopenny souls o’ such d — - nonsense as that (excusing my common way), and he took to farming straightway, and then ‘a dropped down dead in a nor’-west thunderstorm; it being said — hee-hee! — that Master God was in tantrums wi’en for leaving his service, — hee-hee! I give the story as I heard it, my lady, but be dazed if I believe in such trumpery about folks in the sky, nor anything else that’s said on ‘em, good or bad. Well, Swithin, the boy, was sent to the grammar school, as I say for; but what with having two stations of life in his blood he’s good for nothing, my lady. He mopes about — sometimes here, and sometimes there; nobody troubles about en.’

Lady Constantine thanked her informant, and proceeded onward. To her, as a woman, the most curious feature in the afternoon’s incident was that this lad, of striking beauty, scientific attainments, and cultivated bearing, should be linked, on the maternal side, with a local agricultural family through his father’s matrimonial eccentricity. A more attractive feature in the case was that the same youth, so capable

of being ruined by flattery, blandishment, pleasure, even gross prosperity, should be at present living on in a primitive Eden of unconsciousness, with aims towards whose accomplishment a Caliban shape would have been as effective as his own.

CHAPTER II

Swithin St. Cleeve lingered on at his post, until the more sanguine birds of the plantation, already recovering from their midwinter anxieties, piped a short evening hymn to the vanishing sun.

The landscape was gently concave; with the exception of tower and hill there were no points on which late rays might linger; and hence the dish-shaped ninety acres of tilled land assumed a uniform hue of shade quite suddenly. The one or two stars that appeared were quickly clouded over, and it was soon obvious that there would be no sweeping the heavens that night. After tying a piece of tarpaulin, which had once seen service on his maternal grandfather's farm, over all the apparatus around him, he went down the stairs in the dark, and locked the door.

With the key in his pocket he descended through the underwood on the side of the slope opposite to that trodden by Lady Constantine, and crossed the field in a line mathematically straight, and in a manner that left no traces, by keeping in the same furrow all the way on tiptoe. In a few minutes he reached a little dell, which occurred quite unexpectedly on the other side of the field-fence, and descended to a venerable thatched house, whose enormous roof, broken up by dormers as big as haycocks, could be seen even in the twilight. Over the white walls, built of chalk in the lump, outlines of creepers formed dark patterns, as if drawn in charcoal.

Inside the house his maternal grandmother was sitting by a wood fire. Before it stood a pipkin, in which something was evidently kept warm. An eight-legged oak table in the middle of the room was laid for a meal. This woman of eighty, in a large mob cap, under which she wore a little cap to keep the other clean, retained faculties but little blunted. She was gazing into the flames, with her hands upon her knees, quietly re-enacting in her brain certain of the long chain of episodes, pathetic, tragical, and humorous, which had constituted the parish history for the last sixty years. On Swithin's entry she looked up at him in a sideway direction.

'You should not have waited for me, granny,' he said.

'Tis of no account, my child. I've had a nap while sitting here. Yes, I've had a nap, and went straight up into my old country again, as usual. The place was as natural as when I left it, — e'en just threescore years ago! All the folks and my old aunt were there, as when I was a child, — yet I suppose if I were really to set out and go there, hardly a soul would be left alive to say to me, dog how art! But tell Hannah to stir her stumps and serve supper — though I'd fain do it myself, the poor old soul is getting so unhandy!'

Hannah revealed herself to be much nimbler and several years younger than granny, though of this the latter seemed to be oblivious. When the meal was nearly over Mrs. Martin produced the contents of the mysterious vessel by the fire, saying that she had caused it to be brought in from the back kitchen, because Hannah was hardly to be trusted with such things, she was becoming so childish.

‘What is it, then?’ said Swithin. ‘Oh, one of your special puddings.’ At sight of it, however, he added reproachfully, ‘Now, granny!’

Instead of being round, it was in shape an irregular boulder that had been exposed to the weather for centuries — a little scrap pared off here, and a little piece broken away there; the general aim being, nevertheless, to avoid destroying the symmetry of the pudding while taking as much as possible of its substance.

‘The fact is,’ added Swithin, ‘the pudding is half gone!’

‘I’ve only sliced off the merest paring once or twice, to taste if it was well done!’ pleaded granny Martin, with wounded feelings. ‘I said to Hannah when she took it up, “Put it here to keep it warm, as there’s a better fire than in the back kitchen.”’

‘Well, I am not going to eat any of it!’ said Swithin decisively, as he rose from the table, pushed away his chair, and went up-stairs; the ‘other station of life that was in his blood,’ and which had been brought out by the grammar school, probably stimulating him.

‘Ah, the world is an ungrateful place! ‘Twas a pity I didn’t take my poor name off this earthly calendar and creep under ground sixty long years ago, instead of leaving my own county to come here!’ mourned old Mrs. Martin. ‘But I told his mother how ‘twould be — marrying so many notches above her. The child was sure to chaw high, like his father!’

When Swithin had been up-stairs a minute or two however, he altered his mind, and coming down again ate all the pudding, with the aspect of a person undertaking a deed of great magnanimity. The relish with which he did so restored the unison that knew no more serious interruptions than such as this.

‘Mr. Torkingham has been here this afternoon,’ said his grandmother; ‘and he wants me to let him meet some of the choir here to-night for practice. They who live at this end of the parish won’t go to his house to try over the tunes, because ‘tis so far, they say, and so ‘tis, poor men. So he’s going to see what coming to them will do. He asks if you would like to join.’

‘I would if I had not so much to do.’

‘But it is cloudy to-night.’

‘Yes; but I have calculations without end, granny. Now, don’t you tell him I’m in the house, will you? and then he’ll not ask for me.’

‘But if he should, must I then tell a lie, Lord forgive me?’

‘No, you can say I’m up-stairs; he must think what he likes. Not a word about the astronomy to any of them, whatever you do. I should be called a visionary, and all sorts.’

‘So thou beest, child. Why can’t ye do something that’s of use?’

At the sound of footsteps Swithin beat a hasty retreat up-stairs, where he struck a light, and revealed a table covered with books and papers, while round the walls hung star-maps, and other diagrams illustrative of celestial phenomena. In a corner stood a huge pasteboard tube, which a close inspection would have shown to be intended for a telescope. Swithin hung a thick cloth over the window, in addition to the curtains, and sat down to his papers. On the ceiling was a black stain of smoke, and under this he placed his lamp, evidencing that the midnight oil was consumed on that precise spot very often.

Meanwhile there had entered to the room below a personage who, to judge from her voice and the quick pit-pat of her feet, was a maiden young and blithe. Mrs. Martin welcomed her by the title of Miss Tabitha Lark, and inquired what wind had brought her that way; to which the visitor replied that she had come for the singing.

‘Sit ye down, then,’ said granny. ‘And do you still go to the House to read to my lady?’

‘Yes, I go and read, Mrs. Martin; but as to getting my lady to hearken, that’s more than a team of six horses could force her to do.’

The girl had a remarkably smart and fluent utterance, which was probably a cause, or a consequence, of her vocation.

“‘Tis the same story, then?” said grandmother Martin.

‘Yes. Eaten out with listlessness. She’s neither sick nor sorry, but how dull and dreary she is, only herself can tell. When I get there in the morning, there she is sitting up in bed, for my lady don’t care to get up; and then she makes me bring this book and that book, till the bed is heaped up with immense volumes that half bury her, making her look, as she leans upon her elbow, like the stoning of Stephen. She yawns; then she looks towards the tall glass; then she looks out at the weather, mooning her great black eyes, and fixing them on the sky as if they stuck there, while my tongue goes flick-flack along, a hundred and fifty words a minute; then she looks at the clock; then she asks me what I’ve been reading.’

‘Ah, poor soul!’ said granny. ‘No doubt she says in the morning, “Would God it were evening,” and in the evening, “Would God it were morning,” like the disobedient woman in Deuteronomy.’

Swithin, in the room overhead, had suspended his calculations, for the duologue interested him. There now crunched heavier steps outside the door, and his grandmother could be heard greeting sundry local representatives of the bass and tenor voice, who lent a cheerful and well-known personality to the names Sammy Blore, Nat Chapman, Hezekiah Biles, and Haymoss Fry (the latter being one with whom the reader has already a distant acquaintance); besides these came small producers of treble, who had not yet developed into such distinctive units of society as to require particularizing.

‘Is the good man come?’ asked Nat Chapman. ‘No, — I see we be here afore him. And how is it with aged women to-night, Mrs. Martin?’

‘Tedious traipsing enough with this one, Nat. Sit ye down. Well, little Freddy, you don’t wish in the morning that ‘twere evening, and at evening that ‘twere morning again, do you, Freddy, trust ye for it?’

‘Now, who might wish such a thing as that, Mrs Martin? — nobody in this parish?’ asked Sammy Blore curiously.

‘My lady is always wishing it,’ spoke up Miss Tabitha Lark.

‘Oh, she! Nobody can be answerable for the wishes of that onnatural tribe of mankind. Not but that the woman’s heart-strings is tried in many aggravating ways.’

‘Ah, poor woman!’ said granny. ‘The state she finds herself in — neither maid, wife, nor widow, as you may say — is not the primest form of life for keeping in good spirits. How long is it since she has heard from Sir Blount, Tabitha?’

‘Two years and more,’ said the young woman. ‘He went into one side of Africa, as it might be, three St. Martin’s days back. I can mind it, because ‘twas my birthday. And he meant to come out the other side. But he didn’t. He has never come out at all.’

‘For all the world like losing a rat in a barley-mow,’ said Hezekiah. ‘He’s lost, though you know where he is.’

His comrades nodded.

‘Ay, my lady is a walking weariness. I seed her yawn just at the very moment when the fox was halloaed away by Lornton Copse, and the hounds runned en all but past her carriage wheels. If I were she I’d see a little life; though there’s no fair, club-walking, nor feast to speak of, till Easter week, — that’s true.’

‘She dares not. She’s under solemn oath to do no such thing.’

‘Be cust if I would keep any such oath! But here’s the pa’son, if my ears don’t deceive me.’

There was a noise of horse’s hoofs without, a stumbling against the door-scraper, a tethering to the window-shutter, a creaking of the door on its hinges, and a voice which Swithin recognized as Mr. Torkingham’s. He greeted each of the previous arrivals by name, and stated that he was glad to see them all so punctually assembled.

‘Ay, sir,’ said Haymoss Fry. ‘‘Tis only my jints that have kept me from assembling myself long ago. I’d assemble upon the top of Welland Steeple, if ‘tweren’t for my jints. I assure ye, Pa’son Tarkenham, that in the clitch o’ my knees, where the rain used to come through when I was cutting clots for the new lawn, in old my lady’s time, ‘tis as if rats wez gnawing, every now and then. When a feller’s young he’s too small in the brain to see how soon a constitution can be squandered, worse luck!’

‘True,’ said Biles, to fill the time while the parson was engaged in finding the Psalms. ‘A man’s a fool till he’s forty. Often have I thought, when hay-pitching, and the small of my back seeming no stouter than a harnet’s, “The devil send that I had but the making of labouring men for a twelvemonth!” I’d gie every man jack two good backbones, even if the alteration was as wrong as forgery.’

‘Four, — four backbones,’ said Haymoss, decisively.

‘Yes, four,’ threw in Sammy Blore, with additional weight of experience. ‘For you want one in front for breast-ploughing and such like, one at the right side for ground-dressing, and one at the left side for turning mixens.’

‘Well; then next I’d move every man’s wyndpipe a good span away from his clutch-pipe, so that at harvest time he could fetch breath in ‘s drinking, without being choked and strangled as he is now. Thinks I, when I feel the victuals going — ’

‘Now, we’ll begin,’ interrupted Mr. Torkingham, his mind returning to this world again on concluding his search for a hymn.

Thereupon the racket of chair-legs on the floor signified that they were settling into their seats, — a disturbance which Swithin took advantage of by going on tiptoe across the floor above, and putting sheets of paper over knot-holes in the boarding at points where carpet was lacking, that his lamp-light might not shine down. The absence of a ceiling beneath rendered his position virtually that of one suspended in the same apartment.

The parson announced the tune, and his voice burst forth with ‘Onward, Christian soldiers!’ in notes of rigid cheerfulness.

In this start, however, he was joined only by the girls and boys, the men furnishing but an accompaniment of ahas and hems. Mr. Torkingham stopped, and Sammy Blore spoke, —

‘Beg your pardon, sir, — if you’ll deal mild with us a moment. What with the wind and walking, my throat’s as rough as a grater; and not knowing you were going to hit up that minute, I hadn’t hawked, and I don’t think Hezzy and Nat had, either, — had ye, souls?’

‘I hadn’t got thorough ready, that’s true,’ said Hezekiah.

‘Quite right of you, then, to speak,’ said Mr. Torkingham. ‘Don’t mind explaining; we are here for practice. Now clear your throats, then, and at it again.’

There was a noise as of atmospheric hoes and scrapers, and the bass contingent at last got under way with a time of its own:

‘Honwerd, Christen sojers!’

‘Ah, that’s where we are so defective — the pronounciation,’ interrupted the parson. ‘Now repeat after me: “On-ward, Christ-ian, sol-diers.”’

The choir repeated like an exaggerative echo: ‘On-wed, Chris-ting, sol-jaws!’

‘Better!’ said the parson, in the strenuously sanguine tones of a man who got his living by discovering a bright side in things where it was not very perceptible to other people. ‘But it should not be given with quite so extreme an accent; or we may be called affected by other parishes. And, Nathaniel Chapman, there’s a jauntiness in your manner of singing which is not quite becoming. Why don’t you sing more earnestly?’

‘My conscience won’t let me, sir. They say every man for himself: but, thank God, I’m not so mean as to lessen old fokes’ chances by being earnest at my time o’ life, and they so much nearer the need o’t.’

‘It’s bad reasoning, Nat, I fear. Now, perhaps we had better sol-fa the tune. Eyes on your books, please. Sol-sol! fa-fa! mi — ’

‘I can’t sing like that, not I!’ said Sammy Blore, with condemnatory astonishment. ‘I can sing genuine music, like F and G; but not anything so much out of the order of nater as that.’

‘Perhaps you’ve brought the wrong book, sir?’ chimed in Haymoss, kindly. ‘I’ve knowed music early in life and late, — in short, ever since Luke Sneap broke his new fiddle-bow in the wedding psalm, when Pa’son Wilton brought home his bride (you can mind the time, Sammy? — when we sung “His wife, like a fair fertile vine, her lovely fruit shall bring,” when the young woman turned as red as a rose, not knowing ‘twas coming). I’ve knowed music ever since then, I say, sir, and never heard the like o’ that. Every martel note had his name of A, B, C, at that time.’

‘Yes, yes, men; but this is a more recent system!’

‘Still, you can’t alter a old-established note that’s A or B by nater,’ rejoined Haymoss, with yet deeper conviction that Mr. Torkingham was getting off his head. ‘Now sound A, neighbour Sammy, and let’s have a slap at Christen sojers again, and show the Pa’son the true way!’

Sammy produced a private tuning-fork, black and grimy, which, being about seventy years of age, and wrought before pianoforte builders had sent up the pitch to make their instruments brilliant, was nearly a note flatter than the parson’s. While an argument as to the true pitch was in progress, there came a knocking without.

‘Somebody’s at the door!’ said a little treble girl.

‘Thought I heard a knock before!’ said the relieved choir.

The latch was lifted, and a man asked from the darkness, ‘Is Mr. Torkingham here?’

‘Yes, Mills. What do you want?’

It was the parson’s man.

‘Oh, if you please,’ said Mills, showing an advanced margin of himself round the door, ‘Lady Constantine wants to see you very particular, sir, and could you call on her after dinner, if you ben’t engaged with poor fokes? She’s just had a letter, — so they say, — and it’s about that, I believe.’

Finding, on looking at his watch, that it was necessary to start at once if he meant to see her that night, the parson cut short the practising, and, naming another night for meeting, he withdrew. All the singers assisted him on to his cob, and watched him till he disappeared over the edge of the Bottom.

CHAPTER III

Mr. Torkingham trotted briskly onward to his house, a distance of about a mile, each cottage, as it revealed its half-buried position by its single light, appearing like a one-eyed night creature watching him from an ambush. Leaving his horse at the parsonage he performed the remainder of the journey on foot, crossing the park towards Welland House by a stile and path, till he struck into the drive near the north door of the mansion.

This drive, it may be remarked, was also the common highway to the lower village, and hence Lady Constantine's residence and park, as is occasionally the case with old-fashioned manors, possessed none of the exclusiveness found in some aristocratic settlements. The parishioners looked upon the park avenue as their natural thoroughfare, particularly for christenings, weddings, and funerals, which passed the squire's mansion with due considerations as to the scenic effect of the same from the manor windows. Hence the house of Constantine, when going out from its breakfast, had been continually crossed on the doorstep for the last two hundred years by the houses of Hodge and Giles in full cry to dinner. At present these collisions were but too infrequent, for though the villagers passed the north front door as regularly as ever, they seldom met a Constantine. Only one was there to be met, and she had no zest for outings before noon.

The long, low front of the Great House, as it was called by the parish, stretching from end to end of the terrace, was in darkness as the vicar slackened his pace before it, and only the distant fall of water disturbed the stillness of the manorial precincts.

On gaining admittance he found Lady Constantine waiting to receive him. She wore a heavy dress of velvet and lace, and being the only person in the spacious apartment she looked small and isolated. In her left hand she held a letter and a couple of at-home cards. The soft dark eyes which she raised to him as he entered — large, and melancholy by circumstance far more than by quality — were the natural indices of a warm and affectionate, perhaps slightly voluptuous temperament, languishing for want of something to do, cherish, or suffer for.

Mr. Torkingham seated himself. His boots, which had seemed elegant in the farmhouse, appeared rather clumsy here, and his coat, that was a model of tailoring when he stood amid the choir, now exhibited decidedly strained relations with his limbs. Three years had passed since his induction to the living of Welland, but he had never as yet found means to establish that reciprocity with Lady Constantine which usually grows up, in the course of time, between parsonage and manor-house, — unless, indeed, either side should surprise the other by showing respectively a weakness for awkward modern ideas on landownership, or on church formulas, which had not been the case here. The present meeting, however, seemed likely to initiate such a reciprocity.

There was an appearance of confidence on Lady Constantine's face; she said she was so very glad that he had come, and looking down at the letter in her hand was on the point of pulling it from its envelope; but she did not. After a moment she went on more quickly: 'I wanted your advice, or rather your opinion, on a serious matter, — on a point of conscience.' Saying which she laid down the letter and looked at the cards.

It might have been apparent to a more penetrating eye than the vicar's that Lady Constantine, either from timidity, misgiving, or reconviction, had swerved from her intended communication, or perhaps decided to begin at the other end.

The parson, who had been expecting a question on some local business or intelligence, at the tenor of her words altered his face to the higher branch of his profession.

'I hope I may find myself of service, on that or any other question,' he said gently.

‘I hope so. You may possibly be aware, Mr. Torkingham, that my husband, Sir Blount Constantine, was, not to mince matters, a mistaken — somewhat jealous man. Yet you may hardly have discerned it in the short time you knew him.’

‘I had some little knowledge of Sir Blount’s character in that respect.’

‘Well, on this account my married life with him was not of the most comfortable kind.’ (Lady Constantine’s voice dropped to a more pathetic note.) ‘I am sure I gave him no cause for suspicion; though had I known his disposition sooner I should hardly have dared to marry him. But his jealousy and doubt of me were not so strong as to divert him from a purpose of his, — a mania for African lion-hunting, which he dignified by calling it a scheme of geographical discovery; for he was inordinately anxious to make a name for himself in that field. It was the one passion that was stronger than his mistrust of me. Before going away he sat down with me in this room, and read me a lecture, which resulted in a very rash offer on my part. When I tell it to you, you will find that it provides a key to all that is unusual in my life here. He bade me consider what my position would be when he was gone; hoped that I should remember what was due to him, — that I would not so behave towards other men as to bring the name of Constantine into suspicion; and charged me to avoid levity of conduct in attending any ball, rout, or dinner to which I might be invited. I, in some contempt for his low opinion of me, volunteered, there and then, to live like a cloistered nun during his absence; to go into no society whatever, — scarce even to a neighbour’s dinner-party; and demanded bitterly if that would satisfy him. He said yes, held me to my word, and gave me no loophole for retracting it. The inevitable fruits of precipitancy have resulted to me: my life has become a burden. I get such invitations as these’ (holding up the cards), ‘but I so invariably refuse them that they are getting very rare. . . . I ask you, can I honestly break that promise to my husband?’

Mr. Torkingham seemed embarrassed. ‘If you promised Sir Blount Constantine to live in solitude till he comes back, you are, it seems to me, bound by that promise. I fear that the wish to be released from your engagement is to some extent a reason why it should be kept. But your own conscience would surely be the best guide, Lady Constantine?’

‘My conscience is quite bewildered with its responsibilities,’ she continued, with a sigh. ‘Yet it certainly does sometimes say to me that — that I ought to keep my word. Very well; I must go on as I am going, I suppose.’

‘If you respect a vow, I think you must respect your own,’ said the parson, acquiring some further firmness. ‘Had it been wrung from you by compulsion, moral or physical, it would have been open to you to break it. But as you proposed a vow when your husband only required a good intention, I think you ought to adhere to it; or what is the pride worth that led you to offer it?’

‘Very well,’ she said, with resignation. ‘But it was quite a work of supererogation on my part.’

‘That you proposed it in a supererogatory spirit does not lessen your obligation, having once put yourself under that obligation. St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Hebrews,

says, "An oath for confirmation is an end of all strife." And you will readily recall the words of Ecclesiastes, "Pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow than that thou shouldest vow and not pay." Why not write to Sir Blount, tell him the inconvenience of such a bond, and ask him to release you?"

'No; never will I. The expression of such a desire would, in his mind, be a sufficient reason for disallowing it. I'll keep my word.'

Mr. Torkingham rose to leave. After she had held out her hand to him, when he had crossed the room, and was within two steps of the door, she said, 'Mr. Torkingham.' He stopped. 'What I have told you is only the least part of what I sent for you to tell you.'

Mr. Torkingham walked back to her side. 'What is the rest of it, then?' he asked, with grave surprise.

'It is a true revelation, as far as it goes; but there is something more. I have received this letter, and I wanted to say — something.'

'Then say it now, my dear lady.'

'No,' she answered, with a look of utter inability. 'I cannot speak of it now! Some other time. Don't stay. Please consider this conversation as private. Good-night.'

CHAPTER IV

It was a bright starlight night, a week or ten days later. There had been several such nights since the occasion of Lady Constantine's promise to Swithin St. Cleeve to come and study astronomical phenomena on the Rings-Hill column; but she had not gone there. This evening she sat at a window, the blind of which had not been drawn down. Her elbow rested on a little table, and her cheek on her hand. Her eyes were attracted by the brightness of the planet Jupiter, as he rode in the ecliptic opposite, beaming down upon her as if desirous of notice.

Beneath the planet could be still discerned the dark edges of the park landscape against the sky. As one of its features, though nearly screened by the trees which had been planted to shut out the fallow tracts of the estate, rose the upper part of the column. It was hardly visible now, even if visible at all; yet Lady Constantine knew from daytime experience its exact bearing from the window at which she leaned. The knowledge that there it still was, despite its rapid envelopment by the shades, led her lonely mind to her late meeting on its summit with the young astronomer, and to her promise to honour him with a visit for learning some secrets about the scintillating bodies overhead. The curious juxtaposition of youthful ardour and old despair that she had found in the lad would have made him interesting to a woman of perception, apart from his fair hair and early-Christian face. But such is the heightening touch of memory that his beauty was probably richer in her imagination than in the real. It was a moot point to consider whether the temptations that would be brought to bear upon him in his course would exceed the staying power of his nature. Had he been

a wealthy youth he would have seemed one to tremble for. In spite of his attractive ambitions and gentlemanly bearing, she thought it would possibly be better for him if he never became known outside his lonely tower, — forgetting that he had received such intellectual enlargement as would probably make his continuance in Welland seem, in his own eye, a slight upon his father's branch of his family, whose social standing had been, only a few years earlier, but little removed from her own.

Suddenly she flung a cloak about her and went out on the terrace. She passed down the steps to the lower lawn, through the door to the open park, and there stood still. The tower was now discernible. As the words in which a thought is expressed develop a further thought, so did the fact of her having got so far influence her to go further. A person who had casually observed her gait would have thought it irregular; and the lessening and increasing of speed with which she proceeded in the direction of the pillar could be accounted for only by a motive much more disturbing than an intention to look through a telescope. Thus she went on, till, leaving the park, she crossed the turnpike-road, and entered the large field, in the middle of which the fir-clad hill stood like Mont St. Michel in its bay.

The stars were so bright as distinctly to show her the place, and now she could see a faint light at the top of the column, which rose like a shadowy finger pointing to the upper constellations. There was no wind, in a human sense; but a steady stertorous breathing from the fir-trees showed that, now as always, there was movement in apparent stagnation. Nothing but an absolute vacuum could paralyze their utterance.

The door of the tower was shut. It was something more than the freakishness which is engendered by a sickening monotony that had led Lady Constantine thus far, and hence she made no ado about admitting herself. Three years ago, when her every action was a thing of propriety, she had known of no possible purpose which could have led her abroad in a manner such as this.

She ascended the tower noiselessly. On raising her head above the hatchway she beheld Swithin bending over a scroll of paper which lay on the little table beside him. The small lantern that illuminated it showed also that he was warmly wrapped up in a coat and thick cap, behind him standing the telescope on its frame.

What was he doing? She looked over his shoulder upon the paper, and saw figures and signs. When he had jotted down something he went to the telescope again.

‘What are you doing to-night?’ she said in a low voice.

Swithin started, and turned. The faint lamp-light was sufficient to reveal her face to him.

‘Tedious work, Lady Constantine,’ he answered, without betraying much surprise. ‘Doing my best to watch phenomenal stars, as I may call them.’

‘You said you would show me the heavens if I could come on a starlight night. I have come.’

Swithin, as a preliminary, swept round the telescope to Jupiter, and exhibited to her the glory of that orb. Then he directed the instrument to the less bright shape of Saturn.

'Here,' he said, warming up to the subject, 'we see a world which is to my mind by far the most wonderful in the solar system. Think of streams of satellites or meteors racing round and round the planet like a fly-wheel, so close together as to seem solid matter!' He entered further and further into the subject, his ideas gathering momentum as he went on, like his pet heavenly bodies.

When he paused for breath she said, in tones very different from his own, 'I ought now to tell you that, though I am interested in the stars, they were not what I came to see you about. . . . I first thought of disclosing the matter to Mr. Torkingham; but I altered my mind, and decided on you.'

She spoke in so low a voice that he might not have heard her. At all events, abstracted by his grand theme, he did not heed her. He continued, —

'Well, we will get outside the solar system altogether, — leave the whole group of sun, primary and secondary planets quite behind us in our flight, as a bird might leave its bush and sweep into the whole forest. Now what do you see, Lady Constantine?' He levelled the achromatic at Sirius.

She said that she saw a bright star, though it only seemed a point of light now as before.

'That's because it is so distant that no magnifying will bring its size up to zero. Though called a fixed star, it is, like all fixed stars, moving with inconceivable velocity; but no magnifying will show that velocity as anything but rest.'

And thus they talked on about Sirius, and then about other stars

. . . in the scrawl

Of all those beasts, and fish, and fowl,

With which, like Indian plantations,

The learned stock the constellations,

till he asked her how many stars she thought were visible to them at that moment.

She looked around over the magnificent stretch of sky that their high position unfolded. 'Oh, thousands, hundreds of thousands,' she said absently.

'No. There are only about three thousand. Now, how many do you think are brought within sight by the help of a powerful telescope?'

'I won't guess.'

'Twenty millions. So that, whatever the stars were made for, they were not made to please our eyes. It is just the same in everything; nothing is made for man.'

'Is it that notion which makes you so sad for your age?' she asked, with almost maternal solicitude. 'I think astronomy is a bad study for you. It makes you feel human insignificance too plainly.'

'Perhaps it does. However,' he added more cheerfully, 'though I feel the study to be one almost tragic in its quality, I hope to be the new Copernicus. What he was to the solar system I aim to be to the systems beyond.'

Then, by means of the instrument at hand, they travelled together from the earth to Uranus and the mysterious outskirts of the solar system; from the solar system to a star in the Swan, the nearest fixed star in the northern sky; from the star in the Swan

to remoter stars; thence to the remotest visible; till the ghastly chasm which they had bridged by a fragile line of sight was realised by Lady Constantine.

‘We are now traversing distances beside which the immense line stretching from the earth to the sun is but an invisible point,’ said the youth. ‘When, just now, we had reached a planet whose remoteness is a hundred times the remoteness of the sun from the earth, we were only a two thousandth part of the journey to the spot at which we have optically arrived now.’

‘Oh, pray don’t; it overpowers me!’ she replied, not without seriousness. ‘It makes me feel that it is not worth while to live; it quite annihilates me.’

‘If it annihilates your ladyship to roam over these yawning spaces just once, think how it must annihilate me to be, as it were, in constant suspension amid them night after night.’

‘Yes. . . . It was not really this subject that I came to see you upon, Mr. St. Cleeve,’ she began a second time. ‘It was a personal matter.’

‘I am listening, Lady Constantine.’

‘I will tell it you. Yet no, — not this moment. Let us finish this grand subject first; it dwarfs mine.’

It would have been difficult to judge from her accents whether she were afraid to broach her own matter, or really interested in his. Or a certain youthful pride that he evidenced at being the elucidator of such a large theme, and at having drawn her there to hear and observe it, may have inclined her to indulge him for kindness’ sake.

Thereupon he took exception to her use of the word ‘grand’ as descriptive of the actual universe:

‘The imaginary picture of the sky as the concavity of a dome whose base extends from horizon to horizon of our earth is grand, simply grand, and I wish I had never got beyond looking at it in that way. But the actual sky is a horror.’

‘A new view of our old friends, the stars,’ she said, smiling up at them.

‘But such an obviously true one!’ said the young man. ‘You would hardly think, at first, that horrid monsters lie up there waiting to be discovered by any moderately penetrating mind — monsters to which those of the oceans bear no sort of comparison.’

‘What monsters may they be?’

‘Impersonal monsters, namely, Immensities. Until a person has thought out the stars and their inter-spaces, he has hardly learnt that there are things much more terrible than monsters of shape, namely, monsters of magnitude without known shape. Such monsters are the voids and waste places of the sky. Look, for instance, at those pieces of darkness in the Milky Way,’ he went on, pointing with his finger to where the galaxy stretched across over their heads with the luminousness of a frosted web. ‘You see that dark opening in it near the Swan? There is a still more remarkable one south of the equator, called the Coal Sack, as a sort of nickname that has a farcical force from its very inadequacy. In these our sight plunges quite beyond any twinkler we have yet visited. Those are deep wells for the human mind to let itself down into, leave alone

the human body! and think of the side caverns and secondary abysses to right and left as you pass on!

Lady Constantine was heedful and silent.

He tried to give her yet another idea of the size of the universe; never was there a more ardent endeavour to bring down the immeasurable to human comprehension! By figures of speech and apt comparisons he took her mind into leading-strings, compelling her to follow him into wildernesses of which she had never in her life even realised the existence.

‘There is a size at which dignity begins,’ he exclaimed; ‘further on there is a size at which grandeur begins; further on there is a size at which solemnity begins; further on, a size at which awfulness begins; further on, a size at which ghastliness begins. That size faintly approaches the size of the stellar universe. So am I not right in saying that those minds who exert their imaginative powers to bury themselves in the depths of that universe merely strain their faculties to gain a new horror?’

Standing, as she stood, in the presence of the stellar universe, under the very eyes of the constellations, Lady Constantine apprehended something of the earnest youth’s argument.

‘And to add a new weirdness to what the sky possesses in its size and formlessness, there is involved the quality of decay. For all the wonder of these everlasting stars, eternal spheres, and what not, they are not everlasting, they are not eternal; they burn out like candles. You see that dying one in the body of the Greater Bear? Two centuries ago it was as bright as the others. The senses may become terrified by plunging among them as they are, but there is a pitifulness even in their glory. Imagine them all extinguished, and your mind feeling its way through a heaven of total darkness, occasionally striking against the black, invisible cinders of those stars. . . . If you are cheerful, and wish to remain so, leave the study of astronomy alone. Of all the sciences, it alone deserves the character of the terrible.’

‘I am not altogether cheerful.’

‘Then if, on the other hand, you are restless and anxious about the future, study astronomy at once. Your troubles will be reduced amazingly. But your study will reduce them in a singular way, by reducing the importance of everything. So that the science is still terrible, even as a panacea. It is quite impossible to think at all adequately of the sky — of what the sky substantially is, without feeling it as a juxtaposed nightmare. It is better — far better — for men to forget the universe than to bear it clearly in mind! . . . But you say the universe was not really what you came to see me about. What was it, may I ask, Lady Constantine?’

She mused, and sighed, and turned to him with something pathetic in her.

‘The immensity of the subject you have engaged me on has completely crushed my subject out of me! Yours is celestial; mine lamentably human! And the less must give way to the greater.’

‘But is it, in a human sense, and apart from macrocosmic magnitudes, important?’ he inquired, at last attracted by her manner; for he began to perceive, in spite of his prepossession, that she had really something on her mind.

‘It is as important as personal troubles usually are.’

Notwithstanding her preconceived notion of coming to Swithin as employer to dependant, as châtelaine to page, she was falling into confidential intercourse with him. His vast and romantic endeavours lent him a personal force and charm which she could not but apprehend. In the presence of the immensities that his young mind had, as it were, brought down from above to hers, they became unconsciously equal. There was, moreover, an inborn liking in Lady Constantine to dwell less on her permanent position as a county lady than on her passing emotions as a woman.

‘I will postpone the matter I came to charge you with,’ she resumed, smiling. ‘I must reconsider it. Now I will return.’

‘Allow me to show you out through the trees and across the fields?’

She said neither a distinct yes nor no; and, descending the tower, they threaded the firs and crossed the ploughed field. By an odd coincidence he remarked, when they drew near the Great House —

‘You may possibly be interested in knowing, Lady Constantine, that that medium-sized star you see over there, low down in the south, is precisely over Sir Blount Constantine’s head in the middle of Africa.’

‘How very strange that you should have said so!’ she answered. ‘You have broached for me the very subject I had come to speak of.’

‘On a domestic matter?’ he said, with surprise.

‘Yes. What a small matter it seems now, after our astronomical stupendousness! and yet on my way to you it so far transcended the ordinary matters of my life as the subject you have led me up to transcends this. But,’ with a little laugh, ‘I will endeavour to sink down to such ephemeral trivialities as human tragedy, and explain, since I have come. The point is, I want a helper: no woman ever wanted one more. For days I have wanted a trusty friend who could go on a secret errand for me. It is necessary that my messenger should be educated, should be intelligent, should be silent as the grave. Do you give me your solemn promise as to the last point, if I confide in you?’

‘Most emphatically, Lady Constantine.’

‘Your right hand upon the compact.’

He gave his hand, and raised hers to his lips. In addition to his respect for her as the lady of the manor, there was the admiration of twenty years for twenty-eight or nine in such relations.

‘I trust you,’ she said. ‘Now, beyond the above conditions, it was specially necessary that my agent should have known Sir Blount Constantine well by sight when he was at home. For the errand is concerning my husband; I am much disturbed at what I have heard about him.’

‘I am indeed sorry to know it.’

‘There are only two people in the parish who fulfil all the conditions, — Mr. Torkingham, and yourself. I sent for Mr. Torkingham, and he came. I could not tell him. I felt at the last moment that he wouldn’t do. I have come to you because I think you will do. This is it: my husband has led me and all the world to believe that he is in Africa, hunting lions. I have had a mysterious letter informing me that he has been seen in London, in very peculiar circumstances. The truth of this I want ascertained. Will you go on the journey?’

‘Personally, I would go to the end of the world for you, Lady Constantine; but — ’
‘No buts!’

‘How can I leave?’

‘Why not?’

‘I am preparing a work on variable stars. There is one of these which I have exceptionally observed for several months, and on this my great theory is mainly based. It has been hitherto called irregular; but I have detected a periodicity in its so-called irregularities which, if proved, would add some very valuable facts to those known on this subject, one of the most interesting, perplexing, and suggestive in the whole field of astronomy. Now, to clinch my theory, there should be a sudden variation this week, — or at latest next week, — and I have to watch every night not to let it pass. You see my reason for declining, Lady Constantine.’

‘Young men are always so selfish!’ she said.

‘It might ruin the whole of my year’s labour if I leave now!’ returned the youth, greatly hurt. ‘Could you not wait a fortnight longer?’

‘No, — no. Don’t think that I have asked you, pray. I have no wish to inconvenience you.’

‘Lady Constantine, don’t be angry with me! Will you do this, — watch the star for me while I am gone? If you are prepared to do it effectually, I will go.’

‘Will it be much trouble?’

‘It will be some trouble. You would have to come here every clear evening about nine. If the sky were not clear, then you would have to come at four in the morning, should the clouds have dispersed.’

‘Could not the telescope be brought to my house?’

Swithin shook his head.

‘Perhaps you did not observe its real size, — that it was fixed to a frame-work? I could not afford to buy an equatorial, and I have been obliged to rig up an apparatus of my own devising, so as to make it in some measure answer the purpose of an equatorial. It could be moved, but I would rather not touch it.’

‘Well, I’ll go to the telescope,’ she went on, with an emphasis that was not wholly playful. ‘You are the most ungallant youth I ever met with; but I suppose I must set that down to science. Yes, I’ll go to the tower at nine every night.’

‘And alone? I should prefer to keep my pursuits there unknown.’

‘And alone,’ she answered, quite overborne by his inflexibility.

‘You will not miss the morning observation, if it should be necessary?’

‘I have given my word.’

‘And I give mine. I suppose I ought not to have been so exacting!’ He spoke with that sudden emotional sense of his own insignificance which made these alternations of mood possible. ‘I will go anywhere — do anything for you — this moment — to-morrow or at any time. But you must return with me to the tower, and let me show you the observing process.’

They retraced their steps, the tender hoar-frost taking the imprint of their feet, while two stars in the Twins looked down upon their two persons through the trees, as if those two persons could bear some sort of comparison with them. On the tower the instructions were given. When all was over, and he was again conducting her to the Great House she said —

‘When can you start?’

‘Now,’ said Swithin.

‘So much the better. You shall go up by the night mail.’

CHAPTER V

On the third morning after the young man’s departure Lady Constantine opened the post-bag anxiously. Though she had risen before four o’clock, and crossed to the tower through the gray half-light when every blade and twig were furred with rime, she felt no languor. Expectation could banish at cock-crow the eye-heaviness which apathy had been unable to disperse all the day long.

There was, as she had hoped, a letter from Swithin St. Cleeve.

‘Dear Lady Constantine, — I have quite succeeded in my mission, and shall return to-morrow at 10 p.m. I hope you have not failed in the observations. Watching the star through an opera-glass Sunday night, I fancied some change had taken place, but I could not make myself sure. Your memoranda for that night I await with impatience. Please don’t neglect to write down at the moment, all remarkable appearances both as to colour and intensity; and be very exact as to time, which correct in the way I showed you. — I am, dear Lady Constantine, yours most faithfully,

Swithin St. Cleeve.’

Not another word in the letter about his errand; his mind ran on nothing but this astronomical subject. He had succeeded in his mission, and yet he did not even say yes or no to the great question, — whether or not her husband was masquerading in London at the address she had given.

‘Was ever anything so provoking!’ she cried.

However, the time was not long to wait. His way homeward would lie within a stone’s-throw of the manor-house, and though for certain reasons she had forbidden him to call at the late hour of his arrival, she could easily intercept him in the avenue. At twenty minutes past ten she went out into the drive, and stood in the dark. Seven minutes later she heard his footstep, and saw his outline in the slit of light between

the avenue-trees. He had a valise in one hand, a great-coat on his arm, and under his arm a parcel which seemed to be very precious, from the manner in which he held it.

‘Lady Constantine?’ he asked softly.

‘Yes,’ she said, in her excitement holding out both her hands, though he had plainly not expected her to offer one.

‘Did you watch the star?’

‘I’ll tell you everything in detail; but, pray, your errand first!’

‘Yes, it’s all right. Did you watch every night, not missing one?’

‘I forgot to go — twice,’ she murmured contritely.

‘Oh, Lady Constantine!’ he cried in dismay. ‘How could you serve me so! what shall I do?’

‘Please forgive me! Indeed, I could not help it. I had watched and watched, and nothing happened; and somehow my vigilance relaxed when I found nothing was likely to take place in the star.’

‘But the very circumstance of it not having happened, made it all the more likely every day.’

‘Have you — seen — ’ she began imploringly.

Swithin sighed, lowered his thoughts to sublunary things, and told briefly the story of his journey. Sir Blount Constantine was not in London at the address which had been anonymously sent her. It was a mistake of identity. The person who had been seen there Swithin had sought out. He resembled Sir Blount strongly; but he was a stranger.

‘How can I reward you!’ she exclaimed, when he had done.

‘In no way but by giving me your good wishes in what I am going to tell you on my own account.’ He spoke in tones of mysterious exultation. ‘This parcel is going to make my fame!’

‘What is it?’

‘A huge object-glass for the great telescope I am so busy about! Such a magnificent aid to science has never entered this county before, you may depend.’

He produced from under his arm the carefully cuddled-up package, which was in shape a round flat disk, like a dinner-plate, tied in paper.

Proceeding to explain his plans to her more fully, he walked with her towards the door by which she had emerged. It was a little side wicket through a wall dividing the open park from the garden terraces. Here for a moment he placed his valise and parcel on the coping of the stone balustrade, till he had bidden her farewell. Then he turned, and in laying hold of his bag by the dim light pushed the parcel over the parapet. It fell smash upon the paved walk ten or a dozen feet beneath.

‘Oh, good heavens!’ he cried in anguish.

‘What?’

‘My object-glass broken!’

‘Is it of much value?’

‘It cost all I possess!’

He ran round by the steps to the lower lawn, Lady Constantine following, as he continued, 'It is a magnificent eight-inch first quality object lens! I took advantage of my journey to London to get it! I have been six weeks making the tube of milled board; and as I had not enough money by twelve pounds for the lens, I borrowed it of my grandmother out of her last annuity payment. What can be, can be done!'

'Perhaps it is not broken.'

He felt on the ground, found the parcel, and shook it. A clicking noise issued from inside. Swithin smote his forehead with his hand, and walked up and down like a mad fellow.

'My telescope! I have waited nine months for this lens. Now the possibility of setting up a really powerful instrument is over! It is too cruel — how could it happen! . . . Lady Constantine, I am ashamed of myself, — before you. Oh, but, Lady Constantine, if you only knew what it is to a person engaged in science to have the means of clinching a theory snatched away at the last moment! It is I against the world; and when the world has accidents on its side in addition to its natural strength, what chance for me!'

The young astronomer leant against the wall, and was silent. His misery was of an intensity and kind with that of Palissy, in these struggles with an adverse fate.

'Don't mind it, — pray don't!' said Lady Constantine. 'It is dreadfully unfortunate! You have my whole sympathy. Can it be mended?'

'Mended, — no, no!'

'Cannot you do with your present one a little longer?'

'It is altogether inferior, cheap, and bad!'

'I'll get you another, — yes, indeed, I will! Allow me to get you another as soon as possible. I'll do anything to assist you out of your trouble; for I am most anxious to see you famous. I know you will be a great astronomer, in spite of this mishap! Come, say I may get a new one.'

Swithin took her hand. He could not trust himself to speak.

* * * *

Some days later a little box of peculiar kind came to the Great House. It was addressed to Lady Constantine, 'with great care.' She had it partly opened and taken to her own little writing-room; and after lunch, when she had dressed for walking, she took from the box a paper parcel like the one which had met with the accident. This she hid under her mantle, as if she had stolen it; and, going out slowly across the lawn, passed through the little door before spoken of, and was soon hastening in the direction of the Rings-Hill column.

There was a bright sun overhead on that afternoon of early spring, and its rays shed an unusual warmth on south-west aspects, though shady places still retained the look and feel of winter. Rooks were already beginning to build new nests or to mend up old ones, and clamorously called in neighbours to give opinions on difficulties in their architecture. Lady Constantine swerved once from her path, as if she had decided to go to the homestead where Swithin lived; but on second thoughts she bent her steps to the column.

Drawing near it she looked up; but by reason of the height of the parapet nobody could be seen thereon who did not stand on tiptoe. She thought, however, that her young friend might possibly see her, if he were there, and come down; and that he was there she soon ascertained by finding the door unlocked, and the key inside. No movement, however, reached her ears from above, and she began to ascend.

Meanwhile affairs at the top of the column had progressed as follows. The afternoon being exceptionally fine, Swithin had ascended about two o'clock, and, seating himself at the little table which he had constructed on the spot, he began reading over his notes and examining some astronomical journals that had reached him in the morning. The sun blazed into the hollow roof-space as into a tub, and the sides kept out every breeze. Though the month was February below it was May in the abacus of the column. This state of the atmosphere, and the fact that on the previous night he had pursued his observations till past two o'clock, produced in him at the end of half an hour an overpowering inclination to sleep. Spreading on the lead-work a thick rug which he kept up there, he flung himself down against the parapet, and was soon in a state of unconsciousness.

It was about ten minutes afterwards that a soft rustle of silken clothes came up the spiral staircase, and, hesitating onwards, reached the orifice, where appeared the form of Lady Constantine. She did not at first perceive that he was present, and stood still to reconnoitre. Her eye glanced over his telescope, now wrapped up, his table and papers, his observing-chair, and his contrivances for making the best of a deficiency of instruments. All was warm, sunny, and silent, except that a solitary bee, which had somehow got within the hollow of the abacus, was singing round inquiringly, unable to discern that ascent was the only mode of escape. In another moment she beheld the astronomer, lying in the sun like a sailor in the main-top.

Lady Constantine coughed slightly; he did not awake. She then entered, and, drawing the parcel from beneath her cloak, placed it on the table. After this she waited, looking for a long time at his sleeping face, which had a very interesting appearance.

She seemed reluctant to leave, yet wanted resolution to wake him; and, pencilling his name on the parcel, she withdrew to the staircase, where the brushing of her dress decreased to silence as she receded round and round on her way to the base.

Swithin still slept on, and presently the rustle began again in the far-down interior of the column. The door could be heard closing, and the rustle came nearer, showing that she had shut herself in, — no doubt to lessen the risk of an accidental surprise by any roaming villager. When Lady Constantine reappeared at the top, and saw the parcel still untouched and Swithin asleep as before, she exhibited some disappointment; but she did not retreat.

Looking again at him, her eyes became so sentimentally fixed on his face that it seemed as if she could not withdraw them. There lay, in the shape of an Antinous, no amoroso, no gallant, but a guileless philosopher. His parted lips were lips which spoke, not of love, but of millions of miles; those were eyes which habitually gazed, not into the depths of other eyes, but into other worlds. Within his temples dwelt thoughts, not of woman's looks, but of stellar aspects and the configuration of constellations.

Thus, to his physical attractiveness was added the attractiveness of mental inaccessibility. The ennobling influence of scientific pursuits was demonstrated by the speculative purity which expressed itself in his eyes whenever he looked at her in speaking, and in the childlike faults of manner which arose from his obtuseness to their difference of sex. He had never, since becoming a man, looked even so low as to the level of a Lady Constantine. His heaven at present was truly in the skies, and not in that only other place where they say it can be found, in the eyes of some daughter of Eve. Would any Circe or Calypso — and if so, what one? — ever check this pale-haired scientist's nocturnal sailings into the interminable spaces overhead, and hurl all his mighty calculations on cosmic force and stellar fire into Limbo? Oh, the pity of it, if such should be the case!

She became much absorbed in these very womanly reflections; and at last Lady Constantine sighed, perhaps she herself did not exactly know why. Then a very soft expression lighted on her lips and eyes, and she looked at one jump ten years more youthful than before — quite a girl in aspect, younger than he. On the table lay his implements; among them a pair of scissors, which, to judge from the shreds around, had been used in cutting curves in thick paper for some calculating process.

What whim, agitation, or attraction prompted the impulse, nobody knows; but she took the scissors, and, bending over the sleeping youth, cut off one of the curls, or rather crooks, — for they hardly reached a curl, — into which each lock of his hair chose to twist itself in the last inch of its length. The hair fell upon the rug. She picked it up quickly, returned the scissors to the table, and, as if her dignity had suddenly become ashamed of her fantasies, hastened through the door, and descended the staircase.

CHAPTER VI

When his nap had naturally exhausted itself Swithin awoke. He awoke without any surprise, for he not unfrequently gave to sleep in the day-time what he had stolen from it in the night watches. The first object that met his eyes was the parcel on the table, and, seeing his name inscribed thereon, he made no scruple to open it.

The sun flashed upon a lens of surprising magnitude, polished to such a smoothness that the eye could scarcely meet its reflections. Here was a crystal in whose depths were to be seen more wonders than had been revealed by the crystals of all the Cagliostros.

Swithin, hot with joyousness, took this treasure to his telescope manufactory at the homestead; then he started off for the Great House.

On gaining its precincts he felt shy of calling, never having received any hint or permission to do so; while Lady Constantine's mysterious manner of leaving the parcel seemed to demand a like mysteriousness in his approaches to her. All the afternoon he lingered about uncertainly, in the hope of intercepting her on her return from a drive, occasionally walking with an indifferent lounge across glades commanded by the windows, that if she were in-doors she might know he was near. But she did not show herself during the daylight. Still impressed by her playful secrecy he carried on the same idea after dark, by returning to the house and passing through the garden door on to the lawn front, where he sat on the parapet that breasted the terrace.

Now she frequently came out here for a melancholy saunter after dinner, and to-night was such an occasion. Swithin went forward, and met her at nearly the spot where he had dropped the lens some nights earlier.

'I have come to see you, Lady Constantine. How did the glass get on my table?'

She laughed as lightly as a girl; that he had come to her in this way was plainly no offence thus far.

'Perhaps it was dropped from the clouds by a bird,' she said.

'Why should you be so good to me?' he cried.

'One good turn deserves another,' answered she.

'Dear Lady Constantine! Whatever discoveries result from this shall be ascribed to you as much as to me. Where should I have been without your gift?'

'You would possibly have accomplished your purpose just the same, and have been so much the nobler for your struggle against ill-luck. I hope that now you will be able to proceed with your large telescope as if nothing had happened.'

'O yes, I will, certainly. I am afraid I showed too much feeling, the reverse of stoical, when the accident occurred. That was not very noble of me.'

'There is nothing unnatural in such feeling at your age. When you are older you will smile at such moods, and at the mishaps that gave rise to them.'

'Ah, I perceive you think me weak in the extreme,' he said, with just a shade of pique. 'But you will never realise that an incident which filled but a degree in the circle of your thoughts covered the whole circumference of mine. No person can see exactly what and where another's horizon is.'

They soon parted, and she re-entered the house, where she sat reflecting for some time, till she seemed to fear that she had wounded his feelings. She awoke in the night, and thought and thought on the same thing, till she had worked herself into a feverish fret about it. When it was morning she looked across at the tower, and sitting down, impulsively wrote the following note: —

‘Dear Mr. St. Cleeve, — I cannot allow you to remain under the impression that I despised your scientific endeavours in speaking as I did last night. I think you were too sensitive to my remark. But perhaps you were agitated with the labours of the day, and I fear that watching so late at night must make you very weary. If I can help you again, please let me know. I never realised the grandeur of astronomy till you showed me how to do so. Also let me know about the new telescope. Come and see me at any time. After your great kindness in being my messenger I can never do enough for you. I wish you had a mother or sister, and pity your loneliness! I am lonely too. — Yours truly,

Viviette Constantine.’

She was so anxious that he should get this letter the same day that she ran across to the column with it during the morning, preferring to be her own emissary in so curious a case. The door, as she had expected, was locked; and, slipping the letter under it, she went home again. During lunch her ardour in the cause of Swithin’s hurt feelings cooled down, till she exclaimed to herself, as she sat at her lonely table, ‘What could have possessed me to write in that way!’

After lunch she went faster to the tower than she had gone in the early morning, and peeped eagerly into the chink under the door. She could discern no letter, and, on trying the latch, found that the door would open. The letter was gone, Swithin having obviously arrived in the interval.

She blushed a blush which seemed to say, ‘I am getting foolishly interested in this young man.’ She had, in short, in her own opinion, somewhat overstepped the bounds of dignity. Her instincts did not square well with the formalities of her existence, and she walked home despondently.

Had a concert, bazaar, lecture, or Dorcas meeting required the patronage and support of Lady Constantine at this juncture, the circumstance would probably have been sufficient to divert her mind from Swithin St. Cleeve and astronomy for some little time. But as none of these incidents were within the range of expectation — Welland House and parish lying far from large towns and watering-places — the void in her outer life continued, and with it the void in her life within.

The youth had not answered her letter; neither had he called upon her in response to the invitation she had regretted, with the rest of the epistle, as being somewhat too warmly informal for black and white. To speak tenderly to him was one thing, to write another — that was her feeling immediately after the event; but his counter-move of silence and avoidance, though probably the result of pure unconsciousness on his part, completely dispersed such self-considerations now. Her eyes never fell upon the Rings-Hill column without a solicitous wonder arising as to what he was doing. A true

woman, she would assume the remotest possibility to be the most likely contingency, if the possibility had the recommendation of being tragical; and she now feared that something was wrong with Swithin St. Cleeve. Yet there was not the least doubt that he had become so immersed in the business of the new telescope as to forget everything else.

On Sunday, between the services, she walked to Little Welland, chiefly for the sake of giving a run to a house-dog, a large St. Bernard, of whom she was fond. The distance was but short; and she returned along a narrow lane, divided from the river by a hedge, through whose leafless twigs the ripples flashed silver lights into her eyes. Here she discovered Swithin, leaning over a gate, his eyes bent upon the stream.

The dog first attracted his attention; then he heard her, and turned round. She had never seen him looking so despondent.

‘You have never called, though I invited you,’ said Lady Constantine.

‘My great telescope won’t work!’ he replied lugubriously.

‘I am sorry for that. So it has made you quite forget me?’

‘Ah, yes; you wrote me a very kind letter, which I ought to have answered. Well, I did forget, Lady Constantine. My new telescope won’t work, and I don’t know what to do about it at all!’

‘Can I assist you any further?’

‘No, I fear not. Besides, you have assisted me already.’

‘What would really help you out of all your difficulties? Something would, surely?’

He shook his head.

‘There must be some solution to them?’

‘O yes,’ he replied, with a hypothetical gaze into the stream; ‘some solution of course — an equatorial, for instance.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Briefly, an impossibility. It is a splendid instrument, with an object lens of, say, eight or nine inches aperture, mounted with its axis parallel to the earth’s axis, and fitted up with graduated circles for denoting right ascensions and declinations; besides having special eye-pieces, a finder, and all sorts of appliances — clock-work to make the telescope follow the motion in right ascension — I cannot tell you half the conveniences. Ah, an equatorial is a thing indeed!’

‘An equatorial is the one instrument required to make you quite happy?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘But, Lady Constantine,’ cried the amazed astronomer, ‘an equatorial such as I describe costs as much as two grand pianos!’

She was rather staggered at this news; but she rallied gallantly, and said, ‘Never mind. I’ll make inquiries.’

‘But it could not be put on the tower without people seeing it! It would have to be fixed to the masonry. And there must be a dome of some kind to keep off the rain. A tarpaulin might do.’

Lady Constantine reflected. 'It would be a great business, I see,' she said. 'Though as far as the fixing and roofing go, I would of course consent to your doing what you liked with the old column. My workmen could fix it, could they not?'

'O yes. But what would Sir Blount say, if he came home and saw the goings on?'

Lady Constantine turned aside to hide a sudden displacement of blood from her cheek. 'Ah — my husband!' she whispered. . . . 'I am just now going to church,' she added in a repressed and hurried tone. 'I will think of this matter.'

In church it was with Lady Constantine as with the Lord Angelo of Vienna in a similar situation — Heaven had her empty words only, and her invention heard not her tongue. She soon recovered from the momentary consternation into which she had fallen at Swithin's abrupt query. The possibility of that young astronomer becoming a renowned scientist by her aid was a thought which gave her secret pleasure. The course of rendering him instant material help began to have a great fascination for her; it was a new and unexpected channel for her cribbed and confined emotions. With experiences so much wider than his, Lady Constantine saw that the chances were perhaps a million to one against Swithin St. Cleeve ever being Astronomer Royal, or Astronomer Extraordinary of any sort; yet the remaining chance in his favour was one of those possibilities which, to a woman of bounding intellect and venturesome fancy, are pleasanter to dwell on than likely issues that have no savour of high speculation in them. The equatorial question was a great one; and she had caught such a large spark from his enthusiasm that she could think of nothing so piquant as how to obtain the important instrument.

When Tabitha Lark arrived at the Great House next day, instead of finding Lady Constantine in bed, as formerly, she discovered her in the library, poring over what astronomical works she had been able to unearth from the worm-eaten shelves. As these publications were, for a science of such rapid development, somewhat venerable, there was not much help of a practical kind to be gained from them. Nevertheless, the equatorial retained a hold upon her fancy, till she became as eager to see one on the Rings-Hill column as Swithin himself.

The upshot of it was that Lady Constantine sent a messenger that evening to Welland Bottom, where the homestead of Swithin's grandmother was situated, requesting the young man's presence at the house at twelve o'clock next day.

He hurriedly returned an obedient reply, and the promise was enough to lend great freshness to her manner next morning, instead of the leaden air which was too frequent with her before the sun reached the meridian, and sometimes after. Swithin had, in fact, arisen as an attractive little intervention between herself and despair.

CHAPTER VII

A fog defaced all the trees of the park that morning, the white atmosphere adhered to the ground like a fungoid growth from it, and made the turfed undulations look

slimy and raw. But Lady Constantine settled down in her chair to await the coming of the late curate's son with a serenity which the vast blanks outside could neither baffle nor destroy.

At two minutes to twelve the door-bell rang, and a look overspread the lady's face that was neither maternal, sisterly, nor amorous; but partook in an indescribable manner of all three kinds. The door was flung open and the young man was ushered in, the fog still clinging to his hair, in which she could discern a little notch where she had nipped off the curl.

A speechlessness that socially was a defect in him was to her view a piquant attribute just now. He looked somewhat alarmed.

'Lady Constantine, have I done anything, that you have sent — ?' he began breathlessly, as he gazed in her face, with parted lips.

'O no, of course not! I have decided to do something, — nothing more,' she smilingly said, holding out her hand, which he rather gingerly touched. 'Don't look so concerned. Who makes equatorials?'

This remark was like the drawing of a weir-hatch and she was speedily inundated with all she wished to know concerning astronomical opticians. When he had imparted the particulars he waited, manifestly burning to know whither these inquiries tended.

'I am not going to buy you one,' she said gently.

He looked as if he would faint.

'Certainly not. I do not wish it. I — could not have accepted it,' faltered the young man.

'But I am going to buy one for myself. I lack a hobby, and I shall choose astronomy. I shall fix my equatorial on the column.'

Swithin brightened up.

'And I shall let you have the use of it whenever you choose. In brief, Swithin St. Cleeve shall be Lady Constantine's Astronomer Royal; and she — and she —'

'Shall be his Queen.' The words came not much the worse for being uttered only in the tone of one anxious to complete a tardy sentence.

'Well, that's what I have decided to do,' resumed Lady Constantine. 'I will write to these opticians at once.'

There seemed to be no more for him to do than to thank her for the privilege, whenever it should be available, which he promptly did, and then made as if to go. But Lady Constantine detained him with, 'Have you ever seen my library?'

'No; never.'

'You don't say you would like to see it.'

'But I should.'

'It is the third door on the right. You can find your way in, and you can stay there as long as you like.'

Swithin then left the morning-room for the apartment designated, and amused himself in that 'soul of the house,' as Cicero defined it, till he heard the lunch bell sounding from the turret, when he came down from the library steps, and thought it

time to go home. But at that moment a servant entered to inquire whether he would or would not prefer to have his lunch brought in to him there; upon his replying in the affirmative a large tray arrived on the stomach of a footman, and Swithin was greatly surprised to see a whole pheasant placed at his disposal.

Having breakfasted at eight that morning, and having been much in the open air afterwards, the Adonis-astronomer's appetite assumed grand proportions. How much of that pheasant he might consistently eat without hurting his dear patroness Lady Constantine's feelings, when he could readily eat it all, was a problem in which the reasonableness of a larger and larger quantity argued itself inversely as a smaller and smaller quantity remained. When, at length, he had finally decided on a terminal point in the body of the bird, the door was gently opened.

'Oh, you have not finished?' came to him over his shoulder, in a considerate voice.

'O yes, thank you, Lady Constantine,' he said, jumping up.

'Why did you prefer to lunch in this awkward, dusty place?'

'I thought — it would be better,' said Swithin simply.

'There is fruit in the other room, if you like to come. But perhaps you would rather not?'

'O yes, I should much like to,' said Swithin, walking over his napkin, and following her as she led the way to the adjoining apartment.

Here, while she asked him what he had been reading, he modestly ventured on an apple, in whose flavour he recognized the familiar taste of old friends robbed from her husband's orchards in his childhood, long before Lady Constantine's advent on the scene. She supposed he had confined his search to his own sublime subject, astronomy?

Swithin suddenly became older to the eye, as his thoughts reverted to the topic thus reintroduced. 'Yes,' he informed her. 'I seldom read any other subject. In these days the secret of productive study is to avoid well.'

'Did you find any good treatises?'

'None. The theories in your books are almost as obsolete as the Ptolemaic System. Only fancy, that magnificent Cyclopædia, leather-bound, and stamped, and gilt, and wide margined, and bearing the blazon of your house in magnificent colours, says that the twinkling of the stars is probably caused by heavenly bodies passing in front of them in their revolutions.'

'And is it not so? That was what I learned when I was a girl.'

The modern Eudoxus now rose above the embarrassing horizon of Lady Constantine's great house, magnificent furniture, and awe-inspiring footman. He became quite natural, all his self-consciousness fled, and his eye spoke into hers no less than his lips to her ears, as he said, 'How such a theory can have lingered on to this day beats conjecture! Francois Arago, as long as forty or fifty years ago, conclusively established the fact that scintillation is the simplest thing in the world, — merely a matter of atmosphere. But I won't speak of this to you now. The comparative absence of scintillation in warm countries was noticed by Humboldt. Then, again, the scintillations vary. No star flaps his wings like Sirius when he lies low! He flashes out emeralds and rubies,

amethystine flames and sapphirine colours, in a manner quite marvellous to behold, and this is only one star! So, too, do Arcturus, and Capella, and lesser luminaries. . . . But I tire you with this subject?’

‘On the contrary, you speak so beautifully that I could listen all day.’

The astronomer threw a searching glance upon her for a moment; but there was no satire in the warm soft eyes which met his own with a luxurious contemplative interest. ‘Say some more of it to me,’ she continued, in a voice not far removed from coaxing.

After some hesitation the subject returned again to his lips, and he said some more — indeed, much more; Lady Constantine often throwing in an appreciative remark or question, often meditatively regarding him, in pursuance of ideas not exactly based on his words, and letting him go on as he would.

Before he left the house the new astronomical project was set in train. The top of the column was to be roofed in, to form a proper observatory; and on the ground that he knew better than any one else how this was to be carried out, she requested him to give precise directions on the point, and to superintend the whole. A wooden cabin was to be erected at the foot of the tower, to provide better accommodation for casual visitors to the observatory than the spiral staircase and lead-flat afforded. As this cabin would be completely buried in the dense fir foliage which enveloped the lower part of the column and its pedestal, it would be no disfigurement to the general appearance. Finally, a path was to be made across the surrounding fallow, by which she might easily approach the scene of her new study.

When he was gone she wrote to the firm of opticians concerning the equatorial for whose reception all this was designed.

The undertaking was soon in full progress; and by degrees it became the talk of the hamlets round that Lady Constantine had given up melancholy for astronomy, to the great advantage of all who came in contact with her. One morning, when Tabitha Lark had come as usual to read, Lady Constantine chanced to be in a quarter of the house to which she seldom wandered; and while here she heard her maid talking confidentially to Tabitha in the adjoining room on the curious and sudden interest which Lady Constantine had acquired in the moon and stars.

‘They do say all sorts of trumpery,’ observed the handmaid. ‘They say — though ‘tis little better than mischief, to be sure — that it isn’t the moon, and it isn’t the stars, and it isn’t the plannards, that my lady cares for, but for the pretty lad who draws ‘em down from the sky to please her; and being a married example, and what with sin and shame knocking at every poor maid’s door afore you can say, “Hands off, my dear,” to the civilest young man, she ought to set a better pattern.’

Lady Constantine’s face flamed up vividly.

‘If Sir Blount were to come back all of a sudden — oh, my!’

Lady Constantine grew cold as ice.

‘There’s nothing in it,’ said Tabitha scornfully. ‘I could prove it any day.’

‘Well, I wish I had half her chance!’ sighed the lady’s maid. And no more was said on the subject then.

Tabitha's remark showed that the suspicion was quite in embryo as yet. Nevertheless, saying nothing to reveal what she had overheard, immediately after the reading Lady Constantine flew like a bird to where she knew that Swithin might be found.

He was in the plantation, setting up little sticks to mark where the wooden cabin was to stand. She called him to a remote place under the funereal trees.

'I have altered my mind,' she said. 'I can have nothing to do with this matter.'

'Indeed?' said Swithin, surprised.

'Astronomy is not my hobby any longer. And you are not my Astronomer Royal.'

'O Lady Constantine!' cried the youth, aghast. 'Why, the work is begun! I thought the equatorial was ordered.'

She dropped her voice, though a Jericho shout would not have been overheard: 'Of course astronomy is my hobby privately, and you are to be my Astronomer Royal, and I still furnish the observatory; but not to the outer world. There is a reason against my indulgence in such scientific fancies openly; and the project must be arranged in this wise. The whole enterprise is yours: you rent the tower of me: you build the cabin: you get the equatorial. I simply give permission, since you desire it. The path that was to be made from the hill to the park is not to be thought of. There is to be no communication between the house and the column. The equatorial will arrive addressed to you, and its cost I will pay through you. My name must not appear, and I vanish entirely from the undertaking. . . . This blind is necessary,' she added, sighing. 'Good-bye!'

'But you do take as much interest as before, and it will be yours just the same?' he said, walking after her. He scarcely comprehended the subterfuge, and was absolutely blind as to its reason.

'Can you doubt it? But I dare not do it openly.'

With this she went away; and in due time there circulated through the parish an assertion that it was a mistake to suppose Lady Constantine had anything to do with Swithin St. Cleeve or his star-gazing schemes. She had merely allowed him to rent the tower of her for use as his observatory, and to put some temporary fixtures on it for that purpose.

After this Lady Constantine lapsed into her former life of loneliness; and by these prompt measures the ghost of a rumour which had barely started into existence was speedily laid to rest. It had probably originated in her own dwelling, and had gone but little further. Yet, despite her self-control, a certain north window of the Great House, that commanded an uninterrupted view of the upper ten feet of the column, revealed her to be somewhat frequently gazing from it at a rotundity which had begun to appear on the summit. To those with whom she came in contact she sometimes addressed such remarks as, 'Is young Mr. St. Cleeve getting on with his observatory? I hope he will fix his instruments without damaging the column, which is so interesting to us as being in memory of my dear husband's great-grandfather — a truly brave man.'

On one occasion her building-steward ventured to suggest to her that, Sir Blount having deputed to her the power to grant short leases in his absence, she should have a

distinctive agreement with Swithin, as between landlord and tenant, with a stringent clause against his driving nails into the stonework of such an historical memorial. She replied that she did not wish to be severe on the last representative of such old and respected parishioners as St. Cleeve's mother's family had been, and of such a well-descended family as his father's; so that it would only be necessary for the steward to keep an eye on Mr. St. Cleeve's doings.

Further, when a letter arrived at the Great House from Hilton and Pimm's, the opticians, with information that the equatorial was ready and packed, and that a man would be sent with it to fix it, she replied to that firm to the effect that their letter should have been addressed to Mr. St. Cleeve, the local astronomer, on whose behalf she had made the inquiries; that she had nothing more to do with the matter; that he would receive the instrument and pay the bill, — her guarantee being given for the latter performance.

CHAPTER VIII

Lady Constantine then had the pleasure of beholding a waggon, laden with packing-cases, moving across the field towards the pillar; and not many days later Swithin, who had never come to the Great House since the luncheon, met her in a path which he knew to be one of her promenades.

'The equatorial is fixed, and the man gone,' he said, half in doubt as to his speech, for her commands to him not to recognize her agency or patronage still puzzled him. 'I respectfully wish — you could come and see it, Lady Constantine.'

'I would rather not; I cannot.'

'Saturn is lovely; Jupiter is simply sublime; I can see double stars in the Lion and in the Virgin, where I had seen only a single one before. It is all I required to set me going!'

'I'll come. But — you need say nothing about my visit. I cannot come to-night, but I will some time this week. Yet only this once, to try the instrument. Afterwards you must be content to pursue your studies alone.'

Swithin seemed but little affected at this announcement. 'Hilton and Pimm's man handed me the bill,' he continued.

'How much is it?'

He told her. 'And the man who has built the hut and dome, and done the other fixing, has sent in his.' He named this amount also.

'Very well. They shall be settled with. My debts must be paid with my money, which you shall have at once, — in cash, since a cheque would hardly do. Come to the house for it this evening. But no, no — you must not come openly; such is the world. Come to the window — the window that is exactly in a line with the long snowdrop bed, in the south front — at eight to-night, and I will give you what is necessary.'

'Certainly, Lady Constantine,' said the young man.

At eight that evening accordingly, Swithin entered like a spectre upon the terrace to seek out the spot she had designated. The equatorial had so entirely absorbed his thoughts that he did not trouble himself seriously to conjecture the why and wherefore of her secrecy. If he casually thought of it, he set it down in a general way to an intensely generous wish on her part not to lessen his influence among the poorer inhabitants by making him appear the object of patronage.

While he stood by the long snowdrop bed, which looked up at him like a nether Milky Way, the French casement of the window opposite softly opened, and a hand bordered by a glimmer of lace was stretched forth, from which he received a crisp little parcel, — bank-notes, apparently. He knew the hand, and held it long enough to press it to his lips, the only form which had ever occurred to him of expressing his gratitude to her without the incumbrance of clumsy words, a vehicle at the best of times but rudely suited to such delicate merchandise. The hand was hastily withdrawn, as if the treatment had been unexpected. Then seemingly moved by second thoughts she bent forward and said, ‘Is the night good for observations?’

‘Perfect.’

She paused. ‘Then I’ll come to-night,’ she at last said. ‘It makes no difference to me, after all. Wait just one moment.’

He waited, and she presently emerged, muffled up like a nun; whereupon they left the terrace and struck across the park together.

Very little was said by either till they were crossing the fallow, when he asked if his arm would help her. She did not take the offered support just then; but when they were ascending the prehistoric earthwork, under the heavy gloom of the fir-trees, she seized it, as if rather influenced by the oppressive solitude than by fatigue.

Thus they reached the foot of the column, ten thousand spirits in prison seeming to gasp their griefs from the funereal boughs overhead, and a few twigs scratching the pillar with the drag of impish claws as tenacious as those figuring in St. Anthony’s temptation.

‘How intensely dark it is just here!’ she whispered. ‘I wonder you can keep in the path. Many ancient Britons lie buried there doubtless.’

He led her round to the other side, where, feeling his way with his hands, he suddenly left her, appearing a moment after with a light.

‘What place is this?’ she exclaimed.

‘This is the new wood cabin,’ said he.

She could just discern the outline of a little house, not unlike a bathing-machine without wheels.

‘I have kept lights ready here,’ he went on, ‘as I thought you might come any evening, and possibly bring company.’

‘Don’t criticize me for coming alone,’ she exclaimed with sensitive promptness. ‘There are social reasons for what I do of which you know nothing.’

‘Perhaps it is much to my discredit that I don’t know.’

‘Not at all. You are all the better for it. Heaven forbid that I should enlighten you. Well, I see this is the hut. But I am more curious to go to the top of the tower, and make discoveries.’

He brought a little lantern from the cabin, and lighted her up the winding staircase to the temple of that sublime mystery on whose threshold he stood as priest.

The top of the column was quite changed. The tub-shaped space within the parapet, formerly open to the air and sun, was now arched over by a light dome of lath-work covered with felt. But this dome was not fixed. At the line where its base descended to the parapet there were half a dozen iron balls, precisely like cannon-shot, standing loosely in a groove, and on these the dome rested its whole weight. In the side of the dome was a slit, through which the wind blew and the North Star beamed, and towards it the end of the great telescope was directed. This latter magnificent object, with its circles, axes, and handles complete, was securely fixed in the middle of the floor.

‘But you can only see one part of the sky through that slit,’ said she.

The astronomer stretched out his arm, and the whole dome turned horizontally round, running on the balls with a rumble like thunder. Instead of the star Polaris, which had first been peeping in through the slit, there now appeared the countenances of Castor and Pollux. Swithin then manipulated the equatorial, and put it through its capabilities in like manner.

She was enchanted; being rather excitable she even clapped her hands just once. She turned to him: ‘Now are you happy?’

‘But it is all yours, Lady Constantine.’

‘At this moment. But that’s a defect which can soon be remedied. When is your birthday?’

‘Next month, — the seventh.’

‘Then it shall all be yours, — a birthday present.’

The young man protested; it was too much.

‘No, you must accept it all, — equatorial, dome stand, hut, and everything that has been put here for this astronomical purpose. The possession of these apparatus would only compromise me. Already they are reputed to be yours, and they must be made yours. There is no help for it. If ever’ (here her voice lost some firmness), — ‘if ever you go away from me, — from this place, I mean, — and marry, and settle in a new home elsewhere for good, and forget me, you must take these things, equatorial and all, and never tell your wife or anybody how they came to be yours.’

‘I wish I could do something more for you!’ exclaimed the much-moved astronomer. ‘If you could but share my fame, — supposing I get any, which I may die before doing, — it would be a little compensation. As to my going away and marrying, I certainly shall not. I may go away, but I shall never marry.’

‘Why not?’

‘A beloved science is enough wife for me, — combined, perhaps, with a little warm friendship with one of kindred pursuits.’

‘Who is the friend of kindred pursuits?’

‘Yourself I should like it to be.’

‘You would have to become a woman before I could be that, publicly; or I a man,’ she replied, with dry melancholy.

‘Why I a woman, or you a man, dear Lady Constantine?’

‘I cannot explain. No; you must keep your fame and your science all to yourself, and I must keep my — troubles.’

Swithin, to divert her from melancholy — not knowing that in the expression of her melancholy thus and now she found much pleasure, — changed the subject by asking if they should take some observations.

‘Yes; the scenery is well hung to-night,’ she said looking out upon the heavens.

Then they proceeded to scan the sky, roving from planet to star, from single stars to double stars, from double to coloured stars, in the cursory manner of the merely curious. They plunged down to that at other times invisible multitude in the back rows of the celestial theatre: remote layers of constellations whose shapes were new and singular; pretty twinklers which for infinite ages had spent their beams without calling forth from a single earthly poet a single line, or being able to bestow a ray of comfort on a single benighted traveller.

‘And to think,’ said Lady Constantine, ‘that the whole race of shepherds, since the beginning of the world, — even those immortal shepherds who watched near Bethlehem, — should have gone into their graves without knowing that for one star that lighted them in their labours, there were a hundred as good behind trying to do so! . . . I have a feeling for this instrument not unlike the awe I should feel in the presence of a great magician in whom I really believed. Its powers are so enormous, and weird, and fantastical, that I should have a personal fear in being with it alone. Music drew an angel down, said the poet: but what is that to drawing down worlds!’

‘I often experience a kind of fear of the sky after sitting in the observing-chair a long time,’ he answered. ‘And when I walk home afterwards I also fear it, for what I know is there, but cannot see, as one naturally fears the presence of a vast formless something that only reveals a very little of itself. That’s partly what I meant by saying that magnitude, which up to a certain point has grandeur, has beyond it ghastliness.’

Thus the interest of their sidereal observations led them on, till the knowledge that scarce any other human vision was travelling within a hundred million miles of their own gave them such a sense of the isolation of that faculty as almost to be a sense of isolation in respect of their whole personality, causing a shudder at its absoluteness. At night, when human discords and harmonies are hushed, in a general sense, for the greater part of twelve hours, there is nothing to moderate the blow with which the infinitely great, the stellar universe, strikes down upon the infinitely little, the mind of the beholder; and this was the case now. Having got closer to immensity than their fellow-creatures, they saw at once its beauty and its frightfulness. They more and more felt the contrast between their own tiny magnitudes and those among which they had recklessly plunged, till they were oppressed with the presence of a vastness they could not cope with even as an idea, and which hung about them like a nightmare.

He stood by her while she observed; she by him when they changed places. Once that Swithin's emancipation from a trammelling body had been effected by the telescope, and he was well away in space, she felt her influence over him diminishing to nothing. He was quite unconscious of his terrestrial neighbourings, and of herself as one of them. It still further reduced her towards unvarnished simplicity in her manner to him.

The silence was broken only by the ticking of the clock-work which gave diurnal motion to the instrument. The stars moved on, the end of the telescope followed, but their tongues stood still. To expect that he was ever voluntarily going to end the pause by speech was apparently futile. She laid her hand upon his arm.

He started, withdrew his eye from the telescope, and brought himself back to the earth by a visible — almost painful — effort.

'Do come out of it,' she coaxed, with a softness in her voice which any man but unpractised Swithin would have felt to be exquisite. 'I feel that I have been so foolish as to put in your hands an instrument to effect my own annihilation. Not a word have you spoken for the last ten minutes.'

'I have been mentally getting on with my great theory. I hope soon to be able to publish it to the world. What, are you going? I will walk with you, Lady Constantine. When will you come again?'

'When your great theory is published to the world.'

CHAPTER IX

Lady Constantine, if narrowly observed at this time, would have seemed to be deeply troubled in conscience, and particularly after the interview above described. Ash Wednesday occurred in the calendar a few days later, and she went to morning service with a look of genuine contrition on her emotional and yearning countenance.

Besides herself the congregation consisted only of the parson, clerk, school-children, and three old people living on alms, who sat under the reading-desk; and thus, when Mr. Torkingham blazed forth the denunciatory sentences of the Communion, nearly the whole force of them seemed to descend upon her own shoulders. Looking across the empty pews she saw through the one or two clear panes of the window opposite a youthful figure in the churchyard, and the very feeling against which she had tried to pray returned again irresistibly.

When she came out and had crossed into the private walk, Swithin came forward to speak to her. This was a most unusual circumstance, and argued a matter of importance.

'I have made an amazing discovery in connection with the variable stars,' he exclaimed. 'It will excite the whole astronomical world, and the world outside but little less. I had long suspected the true secret of their variability; but it was by the merest chance on earth that I hit upon a proof of my guess. Your equatorial has done it, my good, kind Lady Constantine, and our fame is established for ever!'

He sprang into the air, and waved his hat in his triumph.

‘Oh, I am so glad — so rejoiced!’ she cried. ‘What is it? But don’t stop to tell me. Publish it at once in some paper; nail your name to it, or somebody will seize the idea and appropriate it, — forestall you in some way. It will be Adams and Leverrier over again.’

‘If I may walk with you I will explain the nature of the discovery. It accounts for the occasional green tint of Castor, and every difficulty. I said I would be the Copernicus of the stellar system, and I have begun to be. Yet who knows?’

‘Now don’t be so up and down! I shall not understand your explanation, and I would rather not know it. I shall reveal it if it is very grand. Women, you know, are not safe depositaries of such valuable secrets. You may walk with me a little way, with great pleasure. Then go and write your account, so as to insure your ownership of the discovery. . . . But how you have watched!’ she cried, in a sudden accession of anxiety, as she turned to look more closely at him. ‘The orbits of your eyes are leaden, and your eyelids are red and heavy. Don’t do it — pray don’t. You will be ill, and break down.’

‘I have, it is true, been up a little late this last week,’ he said cheerfully. ‘In fact, I couldn’t tear myself away from the equatorial; it is such a wonderful possession that it keeps me there till daylight. But what does that matter, now I have made the discovery?’

‘Ah, it does matter! Now, promise me — I insist — that you will not commit such imprudences again; for what should I do if my Astronomer Royal were to die?’

She laughed, but far too apprehensively to be effective as a display of levity.

They parted, and he went home to write out his paper. He promised to call as soon as his discovery was in print. Then they waited for the result.

It is impossible to describe the tremulous state of Lady Constantine during the interval. The warm interest she took in Swithin St. Cleeve — many would have said dangerously warm interest — made his hopes her hopes; and though she sometimes admitted to herself that great allowance was requisite for the overweening confidence of youth in the future, she permitted herself to be blinded to probabilities for the pleasure of sharing his dreams. It seemed not unreasonable to suppose the present hour to be the beginning of realisation to her darling wish that this young man should become famous. He had worked hard, and why should he not be famous early? His very simplicity in mundane affairs afforded a strong presumption that in things celestial he might be wise. To obtain support for this hypothesis she had only to think over the lives of many eminent astronomers.

She waited feverishly for the flourish of trumpets from afar, by which she expected the announcement of his discovery to be greeted. Knowing that immediate intelligence of the outburst would be brought to her by himself, she watched from the windows of the Great House each morning for a sight of his figure hastening down the glade.

But he did not come.

A long array of wet days passed their dreary shapes before her, and made the waiting still more tedious. On one of these occasions she ran across to the tower, at the risk of a severe cold. The door was locked.

Two days after she went again. The door was locked still. But this was only to be expected in such weather. Yet she would have gone on to his house, had there not been one reason too many against such precipitancy. As astronomer and astronomer there was no harm in their meetings; but as woman and man she feared them.

Ten days passed without a sight of him; ten blurred and dreary days, during which the whole landscape dripped like a mop; the park trees swabbed the gravel from the drive, while the sky was a zinc-coloured archi-vault of immovable cloud. It seemed as if the whole science of astronomy had never been real, and that the heavenly bodies, with their motions, were as theoretical as the lines and circles of a bygone mathematical problem.

She could content herself no longer with fruitless visits to the column, and when the rain had a little abated she walked to the nearest hamlet, and in a conversation with the first old woman she met contrived to lead up to the subject of Swithin St. Cleeve by talking about his grandmother.

‘Ah, poor old heart; ‘tis a bad time for her, my lady!’ exclaimed the dame.

‘What?’

‘Her grandson is dying; and such a gentleman through and through!’

‘What! . . . Oh, it has something to do with that dreadful discovery!’

‘Discovery, my lady?’

She left the old woman with an evasive answer, and with a breaking heart crept along the road. Tears brimmed into her eyes as she walked, and by the time that she was out of sight sobs burst forth tumultuously.

‘I am too fond of him!’ she moaned; ‘but I can’t help it; and I don’t care if it’s wrong, — I don’t care!’

Without further considerations as to who beheld her doings she instinctively went straight towards Mrs. Martin’s. Seeing a man coming she calmed herself sufficiently to ask him through her dropped veil how poor Mr. St. Cleeve was that day. But she only got the same reply: ‘They say he is dying, my lady.’

When Swithin had parted from Lady Constantine, on the previous Ash-Wednesday, he had gone straight to the homestead and prepared his account of ‘A New Astronomical Discovery.’ It was written perhaps in too glowing a rhetoric for the true scientific tone of mind; but there was no doubt that his assertion met with a most startling aptness all the difficulties which had accompanied the received theories on the phenomena attending those changeable suns of marvellous systems so far away. It accounted for the nebulous mist that surrounds some of them at their weakest time; in short, took up a position of probability which has never yet been successfully assailed.

The papers were written in triplicate, and carefully sealed up with blue wax. One copy was directed to Greenwich, another to the Royal Society, another to a prominent

astronomer. A brief statement of the essence of the discovery was also prepared for the leading daily paper.

He considered these documents, embodying as they did two years of his constant thought, reading, and observation, too important to be entrusted for posting to the hands of a messenger; too important to be sent to the sub-post-office at hand. Though the day was wet, dripping wet, he went on foot with them to a chief office, five miles off, and registered them. Quite exhausted by the walk, after his long night-work, wet through, yet sustained by the sense of a great achievement, he called at a bookseller's for the astronomical periodicals to which he subscribed; then, resting for a short time at an inn, he plodded his way homewards, reading his papers as he went, and planning how to enjoy a repose on his laurels of a week or more.

On he strolled through the rain, holding the umbrella vertically over the exposed page to keep it dry while he read. Suddenly his eye was struck by an article. It was the review of a pamphlet by an American astronomer, in which the author announced a conclusive discovery with regard to variable stars.

The discovery was precisely the discovery of Swithin St. Cleeve. Another man had forestalled his fame by a period of about six weeks.

Then the youth found that the goddess Philosophy, to whom he had vowed to dedicate his whole life, would not in return support him through a single hour of despair. In truth, the impishness of circumstance was newer to him than it would have been to a philosopher of threescore-and-ten. In a wild wish for annihilation he flung himself down on a patch of heather that lay a little removed from the road, and in this humid bed remained motionless, while time passed by unheeded.

At last, from sheer misery and weariness, he fell asleep.

The March rain pelted him mercilessly, the beaded moisture from the heavily charged locks of heath penetrated him through back and sides, and clotted his hair to unsightly tags and tufts. When he awoke it was dark. He thought of his grandmother, and of her possible alarm at missing him. On attempting to rise, he found that he could hardly bend his joints, and that his clothes were as heavy as lead from saturation. His teeth chattering and his knees trembling he pursued his way home, where his appearance excited great concern. He was obliged at once to retire to bed, and the next day he was delirious from the chill.

It was about ten days after this unhappy occurrence that Lady Constantine learnt the news, as above described, and hastened along to the homestead in that state of anguish in which the heart is no longer under the control of the judgment, and self-abandonment even to error, verges on heroism.

On reaching the house in Welland Bottom the door was opened to her by old Hannah, who wore an assiduously sorrowful look; and Lady Constantine was shown into the large room, — so wide that the beams bent in the middle, — where she took her seat in one of a methodic range of chairs, beneath a portrait of the Reverend Mr. St. Cleeve, her astronomer's erratic father.

The eight unwatered dying plants, in the row of eight flower-pots, denoted that there was something wrong in the house. Mrs. Martin came downstairs fretting, her wonder at beholding Lady Constantine not altogether displacing the previous mood of grief.

‘Here’s a pretty kettle of fish, my lady!’ she exclaimed.

Lady Constantine said, ‘Hush!’ and pointed inquiringly upward.

‘He is not overhead, my lady,’ replied Swithin’s grandmother. ‘His bedroom is at the back of the house.’

‘How is he now?’

‘He is better, just at this moment; and we are more hopeful. But he changes so.’

‘May I go up? I know he would like to see me.’

Her presence having been made known to the sufferer, she was conducted upstairs to Swithin’s room. The way thither was through the large chamber he had used as a study and for the manufacture of optical instruments. There lay the large pasteboard telescope, that had been just such a failure as Crusoe’s large boat; there were his diagrams, maps, globes, and celestial apparatus of various sorts. The absence of the worker, through illness or death is sufficient to touch the prosiest workshop and tools with the hues of pathos, and it was with a swelling bosom that Lady Constantine passed through this arena of his youthful activities to the little chamber where he lay.

Old Mrs. Martin sat down by the window, and Lady Constantine bent over Swithin.

‘Don’t speak to me!’ she whispered. ‘It will weaken you; it will excite you. If you do speak, it must be very softly.’

She took his hand, and one irrepressible tear fell upon it.

‘Nothing will excite me now, Lady Constantine,’ he said; ‘not even your goodness in coming. My last excitement was when I lost the battle. . . . Do you know that my discovery has been forestalled? It is that that’s killing me.’

‘But you are going to recover; you are better, they say. Is it so?’

‘I think I am, to-day. But who can be sure?’

‘The poor boy was so upset at finding that his labour had been thrown away,’ said his grandmother, ‘that he lay down in the rain, and chilled his life out.’

‘How could you do it?’ Lady Constantine whispered. ‘O, how could you think so much of renown, and so little of me? Why, for every discovery made there are ten behind that await making. To commit suicide like this, as if there were nobody in the world to care for you!’

‘It was done in my haste, and I am very, very sorry for it! I beg both you and all my few friends never, never to forgive me! It would kill me with self-reproach if you were to pardon my rashness!’

At this moment the doctor was announced, and Mrs. Martin went downstairs to receive him. Lady Constantine thought she would remain to hear his report, and for this purpose withdrew, and sat down in a nook of the adjoining work-room of Swithin, the doctor meeting her as he passed through it into the sick chamber.

He was there a torturingly long time; but at length he came out to the room she waited in, and crossed it on his way downstairs. She rose and followed him to the stairhead.

‘How is he?’ she anxiously asked. ‘Will he get over it?’

The doctor, not knowing the depth of her interest in the patient, spoke with the blunt candour natural towards a comparatively indifferent inquirer.

‘No, Lady Constantine,’ he replied; ‘there’s a change for the worse.’

And he retired down the stairs.

Scarcely knowing what she did Lady Constantine ran back to Swithin’s side, flung herself upon the bed and in a paroxysm of sorrow kissed him.

CHAPTER X

The placid inhabitants of the parish of Welland, including warbling waggoners, lone shepherds, ploughmen, the blacksmith, the carpenter, the gardener at the Great House, the steward and agent, the parson, clerk, and so on, were hourly expecting the announcement of St. Cleeve’s death. The sexton had been going to see his brother-in-law, nine miles distant, but promptly postponed the visit for a few days, that there might be the regular professional hand present to toll the bell in a note of due fulness and solemnity; an attempt by a deputy, on a previous occasion of his absence, having degenerated into a miserable stammering clang that was a disgrace to the parish.

But Swithin St. Cleeve did not decease, a fact of which, indeed, the habituated reader will have been well aware ever since the rain came down upon the young man in the ninth chapter, and led to his alarming illness. Though, for that matter, so many maimed histories are hourly enacting themselves in this dun-coloured world as to lend almost a priority of interest to narratives concerning those

‘Who lay great bases for eternity

Which prove more short than waste or ruining.’

How it arose that he did not die was in this wise; and his example affords another instance of that reflex rule of the vassal soul over the sovereign body, which, operating so wonderfully in elastic natures, and more or less in all, originally gave rise to the legend that supremacy lay on the other side.

The evening of the day after the tender, despairing, farewell kiss of Lady Constantine, when he was a little less weak than during her visit, he lay with his face to the window. He lay alone, quiet and resigned. He had been thinking, sometimes of her and other friends, but chiefly of his lost discovery. Although nearly unconscious at the time, he had yet been aware of that kiss, as the delicate flush which followed it upon his cheek would have told; but he had attached little importance to it as between woman and man. Had he been dying of love instead of wet weather, perhaps the impulsive act of that handsome lady would have been seized on as a proof that his love was returned.

As it was her kiss seemed but the evidence of a naturally demonstrative kindness, felt towards him chiefly because he was believed to be leaving her for ever.

The reds of sunset passed, and dusk drew on. Old Hannah came upstairs to pull down the blinds and as she advanced to the window he said to her, in a faint voice, 'Well, Hannah, what news to-day?'

'Oh, nothing, sir,' Hannah replied, looking out of the window with sad apathy, 'only that there's a comet, they say.'

'A what?' said the dying astronomer, starting up on his elbow.

'A comet — that's all, Master Swithin,' repeated Hannah, in a lower voice, fearing she had done harm in some way.

'Well, tell me, tell me!' cried Swithin. 'Is it Gambart's? Is it Charles the Fifth's, or Halley's, or Faye's, or whose?'

'Hush!' said she, thinking St. Cleeve slightly delirious again. "'Tis God A'mighty's, of course. I haven't seed en myself, but they say he's getting bigger every night, and that he'll be the biggest one known for fifty years when he's full growed. There, you must not talk any more now, or I'll go away.'

Here was an amazing event, little noise as it had made in the happening. Of all phenomena that he had longed to witness during his short astronomical career, those appertaining to comets had excited him most. That the magnificent comet of 1811 would not return again for thirty centuries had been quite a permanent regret with him. And now, when the bottomless abyss of death seemed yawning beneath his feet, one of these much-desired apparitions, as large, apparently, as any of its tribe, had chosen to show itself.

'O, if I could but live to see that comet through my equatorial!' he cried.

Compared with comets, variable stars, which he had hitherto made his study, were, from their remoteness, uninteresting. They were to the former as the celebrities of Ujiji or Unyamwesi to the celebrities of his own country. Members of the solar system, these dazzling and perplexing rangers, the fascination of all astronomers, rendered themselves still more fascinating by the sinister suspicion attaching to them of being possibly the ultimate destroyers of the human race. In his physical prostration St. Cleeve wept bitterly at not being hale and strong enough to welcome with proper honour the present specimen of these desirable visitors.

The strenuous wish to live and behold the new phenomenon, supplanting the utter weariness of existence that he had heretofore experienced, gave him a new vitality. The crisis passed; there was a turn for the better; and after that he rapidly mended. The comet had in all probability saved his life. The limitless and complex wonders of the sky resumed their old power over his imagination; the possibilities of that unfathomable blue ocean were endless. Finer feats than ever he would perform were to be achieved in its investigation. What Lady Constantine had said, that for one discovery made ten awaited making, was strikingly verified by the sudden appearance of this splendid marvel.

The windows of St. Cleeve's bedroom faced the west, and nothing would satisfy him but that his bed should be so pulled round as to give him a view of the low sky, in which the as yet minute tadpole of fire was recognizable. The mere sight of it seemed to lend him sufficient resolution to complete his own cure forthwith. His only fear now was lest, from some unexpected cause or other, the comet would vanish before he could get to the observatory on Rings-Hill Speer.

In his fervour to begin observing he directed that an old telescope, which he had used in his first celestial attempts, should be tied at one end to the bed-post, and at the other fixed near his eye as he reclined. Equipped only with this rough improvisation he began to take notes. Lady Constantine was forgotten, till one day, suddenly, wondering if she knew of the important phenomenon, he revolved in his mind whether as a fellow-student and sincere friend of his she ought not to be sent for, and instructed in the use of the equatorial.

But though the image of Lady Constantine, in spite of her kindness and unmistakably warm heart, had been obscured in his mind by the heavenly body, she had not so readily forgotten him. Too shy to repeat her visit after so nearly betraying her secret, she yet, every day, by the most ingenious and subtle means that could be devised by a woman who feared for herself, but could not refrain from tampering with danger, ascertained the state of her young friend's health. On hearing of the turn in his condition she rejoiced on his account, and became yet more despondent on her own. If he had died she might have mused on him as her dear departed saint without much sin: but his return to life was a delight that bewildered and dismayed.

One evening a little later on he was sitting at his bedroom window as usual, waiting for a sufficient decline of light to reveal the comet's form, when he beheld, crossing the field contiguous to the house, a figure which he knew to be hers. He thought she must be coming to see him on the great comet question, to discuss which with so delightful and kind a comrade was an expectation full of pleasure. Hence he keenly observed her approach, till something happened that surprised him.

When, at the descent of the hill, she had reached the stile that admitted to Mrs. Martin's garden, Lady Constantine stood quite still for a minute or more, her gaze bent on the ground. Instead of coming on to the house she went heavily and slowly back, almost as if in pain; and then at length, quickening her pace, she was soon out of sight. She appeared in the path no more that day.

CHAPTER XI

Why had Lady Constantine stopped and turned?

A misgiving had taken sudden possession of her. Her true sentiment towards St. Cleeve was too recognizable by herself to be tolerated.

That she had a legitimate interest in him as a young astronomer was true; that her sympathy on account of his severe illness had been natural and commendable was also true. But the superfluous feeling was what filled her with trepidation.

Superfluities have been defined as things you cannot do without, and this particular emotion, that came not within her rightful measure, was in danger of becoming just such a superfluity with her. In short, she felt there and then that to see St. Cleeve again would be an impropriety; and by a violent effort she retreated from his precincts, as he had observed.

She resolved to ennoble her conduct from that moment of her life onwards. She would exercise kind patronage towards Swithin without once indulging herself with his company. Inexpressibly dear to her deserted heart he was becoming, but for the future he should at least be hidden from her eyes. To speak plainly, it was growing a serious question whether, if he were not hidden from her eyes, she would not soon be plunging across the ragged boundary which divides the permissible from the forbidden.

By the time that she had drawn near home the sun was going down. The heavy, many-chevroned church, now subdued by violet shadow except where its upper courses caught the western stroke of flame-colour, stood close to her grounds, as in many other parishes, though the village of which it formerly was the nucleus had become quite depopulated: its cottages had been demolished to enlarge the park, leaving the old building to stand there alone, like a standard without an army.

It was Friday night, and she heard the organist practising voluntaries within. The hour, the notes, the even-song of the birds, and her own previous emotions, combined to influence her devotionally. She entered, turning to the right and passing under the chancel arch, where she sat down and viewed the whole empty length, east and west. The semi-Norman arches of the nave, with their multitudinous notchings, were still visible by the light from the tower window, but the lower portion of the building was in obscurity, except where the feeble glimmer from the candle of the organist spread a glow-worm radiance around. The player, who was Miss Tabitha Lark, continued without intermission to produce her wandering sounds, unconscious of any one's presence except that of the youthful blower at her side.

The rays from the organist's candle illuminated but one small fragment of the chancel outside the precincts of the instrument, and that was the portion of the eastern wall whereon the ten commandments were inscribed. The gilt letters shone sternly into Lady Constantine's eyes; and she, being as impressionable as a turtle-dove, watched a certain one of those commandments on the second table, till its thunder broke her spirit with blank contrition.

She knelt down, and did her utmost to eradicate those impulses towards St. Cleeve which were inconsistent with her position as the wife of an absent man, though not unnatural in her as his victim.

She knelt till she seemed scarcely to belong to the time she lived in, which lost the magnitude that the nearness of its perspective lent it on ordinary occasions, and took its actual rank in the long line of other centuries. Having once got out of herself,

seen herself from afar off, she was calmer, and went on to register a magnanimous vow. She would look about for some maiden fit and likely to make St. Cleeve happy; and this girl she would endow with what money she could afford, that the natural result of their apposition should do him no worldly harm. The interest of her, Lady Constantine's, life should be in watching the development of love between Swithin and the ideal maiden. The very painfulness of the scheme to her susceptible heart made it pleasing to her conscience; and she wondered that she had not before this time thought of a stratagem which united the possibility of benefiting the astronomer with the advantage of guarding against peril to both Swithin and herself. By providing for him a suitable helpmate she would preclude the dangerous awakening in him of sentiments reciprocating her own.

Arrived at a point of exquisite misery through this heroic intention, Lady Constantine's tears moistened the books upon which her forehead was bowed. And as she heard her feverish heart throb against the desk, she firmly believed the wearing impulses of that heart would put an end to her sad life, and momentarily recalled the banished image of St. Cleeve to apostrophise him in thoughts that paraphrased the quaint lines of Heine's *Lieb' Liebchen*: —

'Dear my love, press thy hand to my breast, and tell
If thou tracest the knocks in that narrow cell;
A carpenter dwells there; cunning is he,
And slyly he's shaping a coffin for me!'

Lady Constantine was disturbed by a break in the organist's meandering practice, and raising her head she saw a person standing by the player. It was Mr. Torkingham, and what he said was distinctly audible. He was inquiring for herself.

'I thought I saw Lady Constantine walk this way,' he rejoined to Tabitha's negative. 'I am very anxious indeed to meet with her.'

She went forward. 'I am here,' she said. 'Don't stop playing, Miss Lark. What is it, Mr. Torkingham?'

Tabitha thereupon resumed her playing, and Mr. Torkingham joined Lady Constantine.

'I have some very serious intelligence to break to your ladyship,' he said. 'But — I will not interrupt you here.' (He had seen her rise from her knees to come to him.) 'I will call at the House the first moment you can receive me after reaching home.'

'No, tell me here,' she said, seating herself.

He came close, and placed his hand on the poppy-head of the seat.

'I have received a communication,' he resumed haltingly, 'in which I am requested to prepare you for the contents of a letter that you will receive to-morrow morning.'

'I am quite ready.'

'The subject is briefly this, Lady Constantine: that you have been a widow for more than eighteen months.'

'Dead!'

‘Yes. Sir Blount was attacked by dysentery and malarious fever, on the banks of the Zouga in South Africa, so long ago as last October twelvemonths, and it carried him off. Of the three men who were with him, two succumbed to the same illness, a hundred miles further on; while the third, retracing his steps into a healthier district, remained there with a native tribe, and took no pains to make the circumstances known. It seems to be only by the mere accident of his having told some third party that we know of the matter now. This is all I can tell you at present.’

She was greatly agitated for a few moments; and the Table of the Law opposite, which now seemed to appertain to another dispensation, glistened indistinctly upon a vision still obscured by the old tears.

‘Shall I conduct you home?’ asked the parson.

‘No thank you,’ said Lady Constantine. ‘I would rather go alone.’

CHAPTER XII

On the afternoon of the next day Mr. Torkingham, who occasionally dropped in to see St. Cleeve, called again as usual; after duly remarking on the state of the weather, congratulating him on his sure though slow improvement, and answering his inquiries about the comet, he said, ‘You have heard, I suppose, of what has happened to Lady Constantine?’

‘No! Nothing serious?’

‘Yes, it is serious.’ The parson informed him of the death of Sir Blount, and of the accidents which had hindered all knowledge of the same, — accidents favoured by the estrangement of the pair and the cessation of correspondence between them for some time.

His listener received the news with the concern of a friend, Lady Constantine’s aspect in his eyes depending but little on her condition matrimonially.

‘There was no attempt to bring him home when he died?’

‘O no. The climate necessitates instant burial. We shall have more particulars in a day or two, doubtless.’

‘Poor Lady Constantine, — so good and so sensitive as she is! I suppose she is quite prostrated by the bad news.’

‘Well, she is rather serious, — not prostrated. The household is going into mourning.’

‘Ah, no, she would not be quite prostrated,’ murmured Swithin, recollecting himself. ‘He was unkind to her in many ways. Do you think she will go away from Welland?’

That the vicar could not tell. But he feared that Sir Blount’s affairs had been in a seriously involved condition, which might necessitate many and unexpected changes.

Time showed that Mr. Torkingham’s surmises were correct.

During the long weeks of early summer, through which the young man still lay imprisoned, if not within his own chamber, within the limits of the house and garden, news reached him that Sir Blount’s mismanagement and eccentric behaviour were

resulting in serious consequences to Lady Constantine; nothing less, indeed, than her almost complete impoverishment. His personalty was swallowed up in paying his debts, and the Welland estate was so heavily charged with annuities to his distant relatives that only a mere pittance was left for her. She was reducing the establishment to the narrowest compass compatible with decent gentility. The horses were sold one by one; the carriages also; the greater part of the house was shut up, and she resided in the smallest rooms. All that was allowed to remain of her former contingent of male servants were an odd man and a boy. Instead of using a carriage she now drove about in a donkey-chair, the said boy walking in front to clear the way and keep the animal in motion; while she wore, so his informants reported, not an ordinary widow's cap or bonnet, but something even plainer, the black material being drawn tightly round her face, giving her features a small, demure, devout cast, very pleasing to the eye.

'Now, what's the most curious thing in this, Mr. San Cleeve,' said Sammy Blore, who, in calling to inquire after Swithin's health, had imparted some of the above particulars, 'is that my lady seems not to mind being a pore woman half so much as we do at seeing her so. 'Tis a wonderful gift, Mr. San Cleeve, wonderful, to be able to guide yerself, and not let loose yer soul in blasting at such a misfortune. I should go and drink neat regular, as soon as I had swallered my breakfast, till my innerds was burnt out like a' old copper, if it had happened to me; but my lady's plan is best. Though I only guess how one feels in such losses, to be sure, for I never had nothing to lose.'

Meanwhile the observatory was not forgotten; nor that visitant of singular shape and habits which had appeared in the sky from no one knew whence, trailing its luminous streamer, and proceeding on its way in the face of a wondering world, till it should choose to vanish as suddenly as it had come.

When, about a month after the above dialogue took place, Swithin was allowed to go about as usual, his first pilgrimage was to the Rings-Hill Speer. Here he studied at leisure what he had come to see.

On his return to the homestead, just after sunset, he found his grandmother and Hannah in a state of great concern. The former was looking out for him against the evening light, her face showing itself worn and rutted, like an old highway, by the passing of many days. Her information was that in his absence Lady Constantine had called in her driving-chair, to inquire for him. Her ladyship had wished to observe the comet through the great telescope, but had found the door locked when she applied at the tower. Would he kindly leave the door unfastened to-morrow, she had asked, that she might be able to go to the column on the following evening for the same purpose? She did not require him to attend.

During the next day he sent Hannah with the key to Welland House, not caring to leave the tower open. As evening advanced and the comet grew distinct, he doubted if Lady Constantine could handle the telescope alone with any pleasure or profit to herself. Unable, as a devotee to science, to rest under this misgiving, he crossed the field in the furrow that he had used ever since the corn was sown, and entered the

plantation. His unpractised mind never once guessed that her stipulations against his coming might have existed along with a perverse hope that he would come.

On ascending he found her already there. She sat in the observing-chair: the warm light from the west, which flowed in through the opening of the dome, brightened her face, and her face only, her robes of sable lawn rendering the remainder of her figure almost invisible.

‘You have come!’ she said with shy pleasure. ‘I did not require you. But never mind.’ She extended her hand cordially to him.

Before speaking he looked at her with a great new interest in his eye. It was the first time that he had seen her thus, and she was altered in more than dress. A soberly-sweet expression sat on her face. It was of a rare and peculiar shade — something that he had never seen before in woman.

‘Have you nothing to say?’ she continued. ‘Your footsteps were audible to me from the very bottom, and I knew they were yours. You look almost restored.’

‘I am almost restored,’ he replied, respectfully pressing her hand. ‘A reason for living arose, and I lived.’

‘What reason?’ she inquired, with a rapid blush.

He pointed to the rocket-like object in the western sky.

‘Oh, you mean the comet. Well, you will never make a courtier! You know, of course, what has happened to me; that I have no longer a husband — have had none for a year and a half. Have you also heard that I am now quite a poor woman? Tell me what you think of it.’

‘I have thought very little of it since I heard that you seemed to mind poverty but little. There is even this good in it, that I may now be able to show you some little kindness for all those you have done me, my dear lady.’

‘Unless for economy’s sake, I go and live abroad, at Dinan, Versailles, or Boulogne.’

Swithin, who had never thought of such a contingency, was earnest in his regrets; without, however, showing more than a sincere friend’s disappointment.

‘I did not say it was absolutely necessary,’ she continued. ‘I have, in fact, grown so homely and home-loving, I am so interested in the place and the people here, that, in spite of advice, I have almost determined not to let the house; but to continue the less business-like but pleasanter alternative of living humbly in a part of it, and shutting up the rest.’

‘Your love of astronomy is getting as strong as mine!’ he said ardently. ‘You could not tear yourself away from the observatory!’

‘You might have supposed me capable of a little human feeling as well as scientific, in connection with the observatory.’

‘Dear Lady Constantine, by admitting that your astronomer has also a part of your interest — ’

‘Ah, you did not find it out without my telling!’ she said, with a playfulness which was scarcely playful, a new accession of pinkness being visible in her face. ‘I diminish myself in your esteem by reminding you.’

‘You might do anything in this world without diminishing yourself in my esteem, after the goodness you have shown. And more than that, no misrepresentation, no rumour, no damning appearance whatever would ever shake my loyalty to you.’

‘But you put a very matter-of-fact construction on my motives sometimes. You see me in such a hard light that I have to drop hints in quite a manoeuvring manner to let you know I am as sympathetic as other people. I sometimes think you would rather have me die than have your equatorial stolen. Confess that your admiration for me was based on my house and position in the county! Now I am shorn of all that glory, such as it was, and am a widow, and am poorer than my tenants, and can no longer buy telescopes, and am unable, from the narrowness of my circumstances, to mix in circles that people formerly said I adorned, I fear I have lost the little hold I once had over you.’

‘You are as unjust now as you have been generous hitherto,’ said St. Cleeve, with tears in his eyes at the gentle banter of the lady, which he, poor innocent, read as her real opinions. Seizing her hand he continued, in tones between reproach and anger, ‘I swear to you that I have but two devotions, two thoughts, two hopes, and two blessings in this world, and that one of them is yourself!’

‘And the other?’

‘The pursuit of astronomy.’

‘And astronomy stands first.’

‘I have never ordained two such dissimilar ideas. And why should you deplore your altered circumstances, my dear lady? Your widowhood, if I may take the liberty to speak on such a subject, is, though I suppose a sadness, not perhaps an unmixed evil. For though your pecuniary troubles have been discovered to the world and yourself by it, your happiness in marriage was, as you have confided to me, not great; and you are now left free as a bird to follow your own hobbies.’

‘I wonder you recognize that.’

‘But perhaps,’ he added, with a sigh of regret, ‘you will again fall a prey to some man, some uninteresting country squire or other, and be lost to the scientific world after all.’

‘If I fall a prey to any man, it will not be to a country squire. But don’t go on with this, for heaven’s sake! You may think what you like in silence.’

‘We are forgetting the comet,’ said St. Cleeve. He turned, and set the instrument in order for observation, and wheeled round the dome.

While she was looking at the nucleus of the fiery plume, that now filled so large a space of the sky as completely to dominate it, Swithin dropped his gaze upon the field, and beheld in the dying light a number of labourers crossing directly towards the column.

‘What do you see?’ Lady Constantine asked, without ceasing to observe the comet.

‘Some of the work-folk are coming this way. I know what they are coming for, — I promised to let them look at the comet through the glass.’

‘They must not come up here,’ she said decisively.

‘They shall await your time.’

‘I have a special reason for wishing them not to see me here. If you ask why, I can tell you. They mistakenly suspect my interest to be less in astronomy than in the astronomer, and they must have no showing for such a wild notion. What can you do to keep them out?’

‘I’ll lock the door,’ said Swithin. ‘They will then think I am away.’ He ran down the staircase, and she could hear him hastily turning the key. Lady Constantine sighed.

‘What weakness, what weakness!’ she said to herself. ‘That envied power of self-control, where is it? That power of concealment which a woman should have — where? To run such risks, to come here alone, — oh, if it were known! But I was always so, — always!’

She jumped up, and followed him downstairs.

CHAPTER XIII

He was standing immediately inside the door at the bottom, though it was so dark she could hardly see him. The villagers were audibly talking just without.

‘He’s sure to come, rathe or late,’ resounded up the spiral in the vocal note of Hezzy Biles. ‘He wouldn’t let such a fine show as the comet makes to-night go by without peeping at it, — not Master Cleeve! Did ye bring along the flagon, Haymoss? Then we’ll sit down inside his little board-house here, and wait. He’ll come afore bed-time. Why, his spy-glass will stretch out that there comet as long as Welland Lane!’

‘I’d as soon miss the great peep-show that comes every year to Greenhill Fair as a sight of such a immortal spectacle as this!’ said Amos Fry.

“‘Immortal spectacle,’ — where did ye get that choice mossel, Haymoss?” inquired Sammy Blore. ‘Well, well, the Lord save good scholars — and take just a bit o’ care of them that bain’t! As ‘tis so dark in the hut, suppose we draw out the bench into the front here, souls?’

The bench was accordingly brought forth, and in order to have a back to lean against, they placed it exactly across the door into the spiral staircase.

‘Now, have ye got any backy? If ye haven’t, I have,’ continued Sammy Blore. A striking of matches followed, and the speaker concluded comfortably, ‘Now we shall do very well.’

‘And what do this comet mean?’ asked Haymoss. ‘That some great tumult is going to happen, or that we shall die of a famine?’

‘Famine — no!’ said Nat Chapman. ‘That only touches such as we, and the Lord only consarns himself with born gentlemen. It isn’t to be supposed that a strange fiery lantern like that would be lighted up for folks with ten or a dozen shillings a week and their gristing, and a load o’ thorn faggots when we can get ‘em. If ‘tis a token that he’s getting hot about the ways of anybody in this parish, ‘tis about my Lady Constantine’s, since she is the only one of a figure worth such a hint.’

‘As for her income, — that she’s now lost.’

‘Ah, well; I don’t take in all I hear.’

Lady Constantine drew close to St. Cleeve’s side, and whispered, trembling, ‘Do you think they will wait long? Or can we get out?’

Swithin felt the awkwardness of the situation. The men had placed the bench close to the door, which, owing to the stairs within, opened outwards; so that at the first push by the pair inside to release themselves the bench must have gone over, and sent the smokers sprawling on their faces. He whispered to her to ascend the column and wait till he came.

‘And have the dead man left her nothing? Hey? And have he carried his inheritance into’s grave? And will his skeleton lie warm on account o’t? Hee-hee!’ said Haymoss.

‘‘Tis all swallered up,’ observed Hezzy Biles. ‘His goings-on made her miserable till ‘a died, and if I were the woman I’d have my randys now. He ought to have bequeathed to her our young gent, Mr. St. Cleeve, as some sort of amends. I’d up and marry en, if I were she; since her downfall has brought ‘em quite near together, and made him as good as she in rank, as he was afore in bone and breeding.’

‘D’ye think she will?’ asked Sammy Blore. ‘Or is she meaning to enter upon a virgin life for the rest of her days?’

‘I don’t want to be unreverent to her ladyship; but I really don’t think she is meaning any such waste of a Christian carcase. I say she’s rather meaning to commit flat matrimony wi’ somebody or other, and one young gentleman in particular.’

‘But the young man himself?’

‘Planned, cut out, and finished for the delight of ‘ooman!’

‘Yet he must be willing.’

‘That would soon come. If they get up this tower ruling plannards together much longer, their plannards will soon rule them together, in my way o’ thinking. If she’ve a disposition towards the knot, she can soon teach him.’

‘True, true, and lawfully. What before mid ha’ been a wrong desire is now a holy wish!’

The scales fell from Swithin St. Cleeve’s eyes as he heard the words of his neighbours. How suddenly the truth dawned upon him; how it bewildered him, till he scarcely knew where he was; how he recalled the full force of what he had only half apprehended at earlier times, particularly of that sweet kiss she had impressed on his lips when she supposed him dying, — these vivid realisations are difficult to tell in slow verbiage. He could remain there no longer, and with an electrified heart he retreated up the spiral.

He found Lady Constantine half way to the top, standing by a loop-hole; and when she spoke he discovered that she was almost in tears. ‘Are they gone?’ she asked.

‘I fear they will not go yet,’ he replied, with a nervous fluctuation of manner that had never before appeared in his bearing towards her.

‘What shall I do?’ she asked. ‘I ought not to be here; nobody knows that I am out of the house. Oh, this is a mistake! I must go home somehow.’

‘Did you hear what they were saying?’

‘No,’ said she. ‘What is the matter? Surely you are disturbed? What did they say?’

‘It would be the exaggeration of frankness in me to tell you.’

‘Is it what a woman ought not to be made acquainted with?’

‘It is, in this case. It is so new and so indescribable an idea to me — that’ — he leant against the concave wall, quite tremulous with strange incipient sentiments.

‘What sort of an idea?’ she asked gently.

‘It is — an awakening. In thinking of the heaven above, I did not perceive — the — ,’

‘Earth beneath?’

‘The better heaven beneath. Pray, dear Lady Constantine, give me your hand for a moment.’

She seemed startled, and the hand was not given.

‘I am so anxious to get home,’ she repeated. ‘I did not mean to stay here more than five minutes!’

‘I fear I am much to blame for this accident,’ he said. ‘I ought not to have intruded here. But don’t grieve! I will arrange for your escape, somehow. Be good enough to follow me down.’

They redescended, and, whispering to Lady Constantine to remain a few stairs behind, he began to rattle and unlock the door.

The men precipitately removed their bench, and Swithin stepped out, the light of the summer night being still enough to enable them to distinguish him.

‘Well, Hezekiah, and Samuel, and Nat, how are you?’ he said boldly.

‘Well, sir, ‘tis much as before wi’ me,’ replied Nat. ‘One hour a week wi’ God A’mighty and the rest with the devil, as a chap may say. And really, now yer poor father’s gone, I’d as lief that that Sunday hour should pass like the rest; for Pa’son Tarkenham do tease a feller’s conscience that much, that church is no hollerday at all to the limbs, as it was in yer reverent father’s time! But we’ve been waiting here, Mr. San Cleeve, supposing ye had not come.’

‘I have been staying at the top, and fastened the door not to be disturbed. Now I am sorry to disappoint you, but I have another engagement this evening, so that it would be inconvenient to admit you. To-morrow evening, or any evening but this, I will show you the comet and any stars you like.’

They readily agreed to come the next night, and prepared to depart. But what with the flagon, and the pipes, and the final observations, getting away was a matter of time. Meanwhile a cloud, which nobody had noticed, arose from the north overhead, and large drops of rain began to fall so rapidly that the conclave entered the hut till it should be over. St. Cleeve strolled off under the firs.

The next moment there was a rustling through the trees at another point, and a man and woman appeared. The woman took shelter under a tree, and the man, bearing wraps and umbrellas, came forward.

‘My lady’s man and maid,’ said Sammy.

‘Is her ladyship here?’ asked the man.

‘No. I reckon her ladyship keeps more kissable company,’ replied Nat Chapman.

‘Pack o’ stuff!’ said Blore.

‘Not here? Well, to be sure! We can’t find her anywhere in the wide house! I’ve been sent to look for her with these overclothes and umbrella. I’ve suffered horse-flesh traipsing up and down, and can’t find her nowhere. Lord, Lord, where can she be, and two months’ wages owing to me!’

‘Why so anxious, Anthony Green, as I think yer name is shaped? You be not a married man?’ said Hezzy.

‘‘Tis what they call me, neighbours, whether or no.’

‘But surely you was a bachelor chap by late, afore her ladyship got rid of the regular servants and took ye?’

‘I were; but that’s past!’

‘And how came ye to bow yer head to ‘t, Anthony? ‘Tis what you never was inclined to. You was by no means a doting man in my time.’

‘Well, had I been left to my own free choice, ‘tis as like as not I should ha’ shunned forming such kindred, being at that time a poor day man, or weekly, at my highest luck in hiring. But ‘tis wearing work to hold out against the custom of the country, and the woman wanting ye to stand by her and save her from unborn shame; so, since common usage would have it, I let myself be carried away by opinion, and took her. Though she’s never once thanked me for covering her confusion, that’s true! But, ‘tis the way of the lost when safe, and I don’t complain. Here she is, just behind, under the tree, if you’d like to see her? — a very nice homespun woman to look at, too, for all her few weather-stains. . . . Well, well, where can my lady be? And I the trusty jeneral man — ’tis more than my place is worth to lose her! Come forward, Christiana, and talk nicely to the work-folk.’

While the woman was talking the rain increased so much that they all retreated further into the hut. St. Cleeve, who had impatiently stood a little way off, now saw his opportunity, and, putting in his head, said, ‘The rain beats in; you had better shut the door. I must ascend and close up the dome.’

Slamming the door upon them without ceremony he quickly went to Lady Constantine in the column, and telling her they could now pass the villagers unseen he gave her his arm. Thus he conducted her across the front of the hut into the shadows of the firs.

‘I will run to the house and harness your little carriage myself,’ he said tenderly. ‘I will then take you home in it.’

‘No; please don’t leave me alone under these dismal trees!’ Neither would she hear of his getting her any wraps; and, opening her little sunshade to keep the rain out of her face, she walked with him across the insulating field, after which the trees of the park afforded her a sufficient shelter to reach home without much damage.

Swithin was too greatly affected by what he had overheard to speak much to her on the way, and protected her as if she had been a shorn lamb. After a farewell which had more meaning than sound in it, he hastened back to Rings-Hill Speer. The work-folk

were still in the hut, and, by dint of friendly converse and a sip at the flagon, had so cheered Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Green that they neither thought nor cared what had become of Lady Constantine.

St. Cleeve's sudden sense of new relations with that sweet patroness had taken away in one half-hour his natural ingenuousness. Henceforth he could act a part.

'I have made all secure at the top,' he said, putting his head into the hut. 'I am now going home. When the rain stops, lock this door and bring the key to my house.'

CHAPTER XIV

The laboured resistance which Lady Constantine's judgment had offered to her rebellious affection ere she learnt that she was a widow, now passed into a bashfulness that rendered her almost as unstable of mood as before. But she was one of that mettle — fervid, cordial, and spontaneous — who had not the heart to spoil a passion; and her affairs having gone to rack and ruin by no fault of her own she was left to a painfully narrowed existence which lent even something of rationality to her attachment. Thus it was that her tender and unambitious soul found comfort in her reverses.

As for St. Cleeve, the tardiness of his awakening was the natural result of inexperience combined with devotion to a hobby. But, like a spring bud hard in bursting, the delay was compensated by after speed. At once breathlessly recognizing in this fellow-watcher of the skies a woman who loved him, in addition to the patroness and friend, he truly translated the nearly forgotten kiss she had given him in her moment of despair.

Lady Constantine, in being eight or nine years his senior, was an object even better calculated to nourish a youth's first passion than a girl of his own age, superiority of experience and ripeness of emotion exercising the same peculiar fascination over him as over other young men in their first ventures in this kind.

The alchemy which thus transmuted an abstracted astronomer into an eager lover — and, must it be said, spoiled a promising young physicist to produce a common-place innamorato — may be almost described as working its change in one short night. Next morning he was so fascinated with the novel sensation that he wanted to rush off at once to Lady Constantine, and say, 'I love you true!' in the intensest tones of his mental condition, to register his assertion in her heart before any of those accidents which 'creep in 'twixt vows, and change decrees of kings,' should occur to hinder him. But his embarrassment at standing in a new position towards her would not allow him to present himself at her door in any such hurry. He waited on, as helplessly as a girl, for a chance of encountering her.

But though she had tacitly agreed to see him on any reasonable occasion, Lady Constantine did not put herself in his way. She even kept herself out of his way. Now that for the first time he had learnt to feel a strong impatience for their meeting, her shyness for the first time led her to delay it. But given two people living in one parish,

who long from the depths of their hearts to be in each other's company, what resolves of modesty, policy, pride, or apprehension will keep them for any length of time apart?

One afternoon he was watching the sun from his tower, half echoing the Greek astronomer's wish that he might be set close to that luminary for the wonder of beholding it in all its glory, under the slight penalty of being consumed the next instant. He glanced over the high-road between the field and the park (which sublunary features now too often distracted his attention from his telescope), and saw her passing along that way.

She was seated in the donkey-carriage that had now taken the place of her landau, the white animal looking no larger than a cat at that distance. The buttoned boy, who represented both coachman and footman, walked alongside the animal's head at a solemn pace; the dog stalked at the distance of a yard behind the vehicle, without indulging in a single gambol; and the whole turn-out resembled in dignity a dwarfed state procession.

Here was an opportunity but for two obstructions: the boy, who might be curious; and the dog, who might bark and attract the attention of any labourers or servants near. Yet the risk was to be run, and, knowing that she would soon turn up a certain shady lane at right angles to the road she had followed, he ran hastily down the staircase, crossed the barley (which now covered the field) by the path not more than a foot wide that he had trodden for himself, and got into the lane at the other end. By slowly walking along in the direction of the turnpike-road he soon had the satisfaction of seeing her coming. To his surprise he also had the satisfaction of perceiving that neither boy nor dog was in her company.

They both blushed as they approached, she from sex, he from inexperience. One thing she seemed to see in a moment, that in the interval of her absence St. Cleeve had become a man; and as he greeted her with this new and maturer light in his eyes she could not hide her embarrassment, or meet their fire.

'I have just sent my page across to the column with your book on Cometary Nuclei,' she said softly; 'that you might not have to come to the house for it. I did not know I should meet you here.'

'Didn't you wish me to come to the house for it?'

'I did not, frankly. You know why, do you not?'

'Yes, I know. Well, my longing is at rest. I have met you again. But are you unwell, that you drive out in this chair?'

'No; I walked out this morning, and am a little tired.'

'I have been looking for you night and day. Why do you turn your face aside? You used not to be so.' Her hand rested on the side of the chair, and he took it. 'Do you know that since we last met, I have been thinking of you — daring to think of you — as I never thought of you before?'

'Yes, I know it.'

'How did you know?'

'I saw it in your face when you came up.'

‘Well, I suppose I ought not to think of you so. And yet, had I not learned to, I should never fully have felt how gentle and sweet you are. Only think of my loss if I had lived and died without seeing more in you than in astronomy! But I shall never leave off doing so now. When you talk I shall love your understanding; when you are silent I shall love your face. But how shall I know that you care to be so much to me?’

Her manner was disturbed as she recognized the impending self-surrender, which she knew not how to resist, and was not altogether at ease in welcoming.

‘O, Lady Constantine,’ he continued, bending over her, ‘give me some proof more than mere seeming and inference, which are all I have at present, that you don’t think this I tell you of presumption in me! I have been unable to do anything since I last saw you for pondering uncertainly on this. Some proof, or little sign, that we are one in heart!’

A blush settled again on her face; and half in effort, half in spontaneity, she put her finger on her cheek. He almost devotionally kissed the spot.

‘Does that suffice?’ she asked, scarcely giving her words voice.

‘Yes; I am convinced.’

‘Then that must be the end. Let me drive on; the boy will be back again soon.’ She spoke hastily, and looked askance to hide the heat of her cheek.

‘No; the tower door is open, and he will go to the top, and waste his time in looking through the telescope.’

‘Then you should rush back, for he will do some damage.’

‘No; he may do what he likes, tinker and spoil the instrument, destroy my papers, — anything, so that he will stay there and leave us alone.’

She glanced up with a species of pained pleasure.

‘You never used to feel like that!’ she said, and there was keen self-reproach in her voice. ‘You were once so devoted to your science that the thought of an intruder into your temple would have driven you wild. Now you don’t care; and who is to blame? Ah, not you, not you!’

The animal ambled on with her, and he, leaning on the side of the little vehicle, kept her company.

‘Well, don’t let us think of that,’ he said. ‘I offer myself and all my energies, frankly and entirely, to you, my dear, dear lady, whose I shall be always! But my words in telling you this will only injure my meaning instead of emphasize it. In expressing, even to myself, my thoughts of you, I find that I fall into phrases which, as a critic, I should hitherto have heartily despised for their commonness. What’s the use of saying, for instance, as I have just said, that I give myself entirely to you, and shall be yours always, — that you have my devotion, my highest homage? Those words have been used so frequently in a flippant manner that honest use of them is not distinguishable from the unreal.’ He turned to her, and added, smiling, ‘Your eyes are to be my stars for the future.’

‘Yes, I know it, — I know it, and all you would say! I dreaded even while I hoped for this, my dear young friend,’ she replied, her eyes being full of tears. ‘I am injuring

you; who knows that I am not ruining your future, — I who ought to know better? Nothing can come of this, nothing must, — and I am only wasting your time. Why have I drawn you off from a grand celestial study to study poor lonely me? Say you will never despise me, when you get older, for this episode in our lives. But you will, — I know you will! All men do, when they have been attracted in their unsuspecting youth, as I have attracted you. I ought to have kept my resolve.'

'What was that?'

'To bear anything rather than draw you from your high purpose; to be like the noble citizen of old Greece, who, attending a sacrifice, let himself be burnt to the bone by a coal that jumped into his sleeve rather than disturb the sacred ceremony.'

'But can I not study and love both?'

'I hope so, — I earnestly hope so. But you'll be the first if you do, and I am the responsible one if you do not.'

'You speak as if I were quite a child, and you immensely older. Why, how old do you think I am? I am twenty.'

'You seem younger. Well, that's so much the better. Twenty sounds strong and firm. How old do you think I am?'

'I have never thought of considering.' He innocently turned to scrutinize her face. She winced a little. But the instinct was premature. Time had taken no liberties with her features as yet; nor had trouble very roughly handled her.

'I will tell you,' she replied, speaking almost with physical pain, yet as if determination should carry her through. 'I am eight-and-twenty — nearly — I mean a little more, a few months more. Am I not a fearful deal older than you?'

'At first it seems a great deal,' he answered, musing. 'But it doesn't seem much when one gets used to it.'

'Nonsense!' she exclaimed. 'It is a good deal.'

'Very well, then, sweetest Lady Constantine, let it be,' he said gently.

'You should not let it be! A polite man would have flatly contradicted me. . . . O I am ashamed of this!' she added a moment after, with a subdued, sad look upon the ground. 'I am speaking by the card of the outer world, which I have left behind utterly; no such lip service is known in your sphere. I care nothing for those things, really; but that which is called the Eve in us will out sometimes. Well, we will forget that now, as we must, at no very distant date, forget all the rest of this.'

He walked beside her thoughtfully awhile, with his eyes also bent on the road. 'Why must we forget it all?' he inquired.

'It is only an interlude.'

'An interlude! It is no interlude to me. O how can you talk so lightly of this, Lady Constantine? And yet, if I were to go away from here, I might, perhaps, soon reduce it to an interlude! Yes,' he resumed impulsively, 'I will go away. Love dies, and it is just as well to strangle it in its birth; it can only die once! I'll go.'

‘No, no!’ she said, looking up apprehensively. ‘I misled you. It is no interlude to me, — it is tragical. I only meant that from a worldly point of view it is an interlude, which we should try to forget. But the world is not all. You will not go away?’

But he continued drearily, ‘Yes, yes, I see it all; you have enlightened me. It will be hurting your prospects even more than mine, if I stay. Now Sir Blount is dead, you are free again, — may marry where you will, but for this fancy of ours. I’ll leave Welland before harm comes of my staying.’

‘Don’t decide to do a thing so rash!’ she begged, seizing his hand, and looking miserable at the effect of her words. ‘I shall have nobody left in the world to care for! And now I have given you the great telescope, and lent you the column, it would be ungrateful to go away! I was wrong; believe me that I did not mean that it was a mere interlude to me. O if you only knew how very, very far it is from that! It is my doubt of the result to you that makes me speak so slightly.’

They were now approaching cross-roads, and casually looking up they beheld, thirty or forty yards beyond the crossing, Mr. Torkingham, who was leaning over a gate, his back being towards them. As yet he had not recognized their approach.

The master-passion had already supplanted St. Cleeve’s natural ingenuousness by subtlety.

‘Would it be well for us to meet Mr. Torkingham just now?’ he began.

‘Certainly not,’ she said hastily, and pulling the rein she instantly drove down the right-hand road. ‘I cannot meet anybody!’ she murmured. ‘Would it not be better that you leave me now? — not for my pleasure, but that there may arise no distressing tales about us before we know — how to act in this — this’ — (she smiled faintly at him) ‘heartaching extremity!’

They were passing under a huge oak-tree, whose limbs, irregular with shoulders, knuckles, and elbows, stretched horizontally over the lane in a manner recalling Absalom’s death. A slight rustling was perceptible amid the leafage as they drew out from beneath it, and turning up his eyes Swithin saw that very buttoned page whose advent they had dreaded, looking down with interest at them from a perch not much higher than a yard above their heads. He had a bunch of oak-apples in one hand, plainly the object of his climb, and was furtively watching Lady Constantine with the hope that she might not see him. But that she had already done, though she did not reveal it, and, fearing that the latter words of their conversation had been overheard, they spoke not till they had passed the next turning.

She stretched out her hand to his. ‘This must not go on,’ she said imploringly. ‘My anxiety as to what may be said of such methods of meeting makes me too unhappy. See what has happened!’ She could not help smiling. ‘Out of the frying-pan into the fire! After meanly turning to avoid the parson we have rushed into a worse publicity. It is too humiliating to have to avoid people, and lowers both you and me. The only remedy is not to meet.’

‘Very well,’ said Swithin, with a sigh. ‘So it shall be.’

And with smiles that might more truly have been tears they parted there and then.

CHAPTER XV

The summer passed away, and autumn, with its infinite suite of tints, came creeping on. Darker grew the evenings, tearfuller the moonlights, and heavier the dews. Meanwhile the comet had waxed to its largest dimensions, — so large that not only the nucleus but a portion of the tail had been visible in broad day. It was now on the wane, though every night the equatorial still afforded an opportunity of observing the singular object which would soon disappear altogether from the heavens for perhaps thousands of years.

But the astronomer of the Rings-Hill Speer was no longer a match for his celestial materials. Scientifically he had become but a dim vapour of himself; the lover had come into him like an armed man, and cast out the student, and his intellectual situation was growing a life-and-death matter.

The resolve of the pair had been so far kept: they had not seen each other in private for three months. But on one day in October he ventured to write a note to her: —

‘I can do nothing! I have ceased to study, ceased to observe. The equatorial is useless to me. This affection I have for you absorbs my life, and outweighs my intentions. The power to labour in this grandest of fields has left me. I struggle against the weakness till I think of the cause, and then I bless her. But the very desperation of my circumstances has suggested a remedy; and this I would inform you of at once.

‘Can you come to me, since I must not come to you? I will wait to-morrow night at the edge of the plantation by which you would enter to the column. I will not detain you; my plan can be told in ten words.’

The night after posting this missive to her he waited at the spot mentioned.

It was a melancholy evening for coming abroad. A blustering wind had risen during the day, and still continued to increase. Yet he stood watchful in the darkness, and was ultimately rewarded by discerning a shady muffled shape that embodied itself from the field, accompanied by the scratching of silk over stubble. There was no longer any disguise as to the nature of their meeting. It was a lover’s assignation, pure and simple; and boldly realising it as such he clasped her in his arms.

‘I cannot bear this any longer!’ he exclaimed. ‘Three months since I saw you alone! Only a glimpse of you in church, or a bow from the distance, in all that time! What a fearful struggle this keeping apart has been!’

‘Yet I would have had strength to persist, since it seemed best,’ she murmured when she could speak, ‘had not your words on your condition so alarmed and saddened me. This inability of yours to work, or study, or observe, — it is terrible! So terrible a sting is it to my conscience that your hint about a remedy has brought me instantly.’

‘Yet I don’t altogether mind it, since it is you, my dear, who have displaced the work; and yet the loss of time nearly distracts me, when I have neither the power to work nor the delight of your company.’

‘But your remedy! O, I cannot help guessing it! Yes; you are going away!’

‘Let us ascend the column; we can speak more at ease there. Then I will explain all. I would not ask you to climb so high but the hut is not yet furnished.’

He entered the cabin at the foot, and having lighted a small lantern, conducted her up the hollow staircase to the top, where he closed the slides of the dome to keep out the wind, and placed the observing-chair for her.

‘I can stay only five minutes,’ she said, without sitting down. ‘You said it was important that you should see me, and I have come. I assure you it is at a great risk. If I am seen here at this time I am ruined for ever. But what would I not do for you? O Swithin, your remedy — is it to go away? There is no other; and yet I dread that like death!’

‘I can tell you in a moment, but I must begin at the beginning. All this ruinous idleness and distraction is caused by the misery of our not being able to meet with freedom. The fear that something may snatch you from me keeps me in a state of perpetual apprehension.’

‘It is too true also of me! I dread that some accident may happen, and waste my days in meeting the trouble half-way.’

‘So our lives go on, and our labours stand still. Now for the remedy. Dear Lady Constantine, allow me to marry you.’

She started, and the wind without shook the building, sending up a yet intenser moan from the firs.

‘I mean, marry you quite privately. Let it make no difference whatever to our outward lives for years, for I know that in my present position you could not possibly acknowledge me as husband publicly. But by marrying at once we secure the certainty that we cannot be divided by accident, coaxing, or artifice; and, at ease on that point, I shall embrace my studies with the old vigour, and you yours.’

Lady Constantine was so agitated at the unexpected boldness of such a proposal from one hitherto so boyish and deferential that she sank into the observing-chair, her intention to remain for only a few minutes being quite forgotten.

She covered her face with her hands. ‘No, no, I dare not!’ she whispered.

‘But is there a single thing else left to do?’ he pleaded, kneeling down beside her, less in supplication than in abandonment. ‘What else can we do?’

‘Wait till you are famous.’

‘But I cannot be famous unless I strive, and this distracting condition prevents all striving!’

‘Could you not strive on if I — gave you a promise, a solemn promise, to be yours when your name is fairly well known?’

St. Cleeve breathed heavily. ‘It will be a long, weary time,’ he said. ‘And even with your promise I shall work but half-heartedly. Every hour of study will be interrupted with “Suppose this or this happens;” “Suppose somebody persuades her to break her promise;” worse still, “Suppose some rival maligns me, and so seduces her away.” No, Lady Constantine, dearest, best as you are, that element of distraction would still remain, and where that is, no sustained energy is possible. Many erroneous things

have been written and said by the sages, but never did they float a greater fallacy than that love serves as a stimulus to win the loved one by patient toil.'

'I cannot argue with you,' she said weakly.

'My only possible other chance would lie in going away,' he resumed after a moment's reflection, with his eyes on the lantern flame, which waved and smoked in the currents of air that leaked into the dome from the fierce wind-stream without. 'If I might take away the equatorial, supposing it possible that I could find some suitable place for observing in the southern hemisphere, — say, at the Cape, — I might be able to apply myself to serious work again, after the lapse of a little time. The southern constellations offer a less exhausted field for investigation. I wonder if I might!'

'You mean,' she answered uneasily, 'that you might apply yourself to work when your recollection of me began to fade, and my life to become a matter of indifference to you? . . . Yes, go! No, — I cannot bear it! The remedy is worse than the disease. I cannot let you go away!'

'Then how can you refuse the only condition on which I can stay, without ruin to my purpose and scandal to your name? Dearest, agree to my proposal, as you love both me and yourself!'

He waited, while the fir-trees rubbed and prodded the base of the tower, and the wind roared around and shook it; but she could not find words to reply.

'Would to God,' he burst out, 'that I might perish here, like Winstanley in his lighthouse! Then the difficulty would be solved for you.'

'You are so wrong, so very wrong, in saying so!' she exclaimed passionately. 'You may doubt my wisdom, pity my short-sightedness; but there is one thing you do know, — that I love you dearly!'

'You do, — I know it!' he said, softened in a moment. 'But it seems such a simple remedy for the difficulty that I cannot see how you can mind adopting it, if you care so much for me as I do for you.'

'Should we live . . . just as we are, exactly, . . . supposing I agreed?' she faintly inquired.

'Yes, that is my idea.'

'Quite privately, you say. How could — the marriage be quite private?'

'I would go away to London and get a license. Then you could come to me, and return again immediately after the ceremony. I could return at leisure and not a soul in the world would know what had taken place. Think, dearest, with what a free conscience you could then assist me in my efforts to plumb these deeps above us! Any feeling that you may now have against clandestine meetings as such would then be removed, and our hearts would be at rest.'

There was a certain scientific practicability even in his love-making, and it here came out excellently. But she sat on with suspended breath, her heart wildly beating, while he waited in open-mouthed expectation. Each was swayed by the emotion within them, much as the candle-flame was swayed by the tempest without. It was the most critical evening of their lives.

The pale rays of the little lantern fell upon her beautiful face, snugly and neatly bound in by her black bonnet; but not a beam of the lantern leaked out into the night to suggest to any watchful eye that human life at its highest excitement was beating within the dark and isolated tower; for the dome had no windows, and every shutter that afforded an opening for the telescope was hermetically closed. Predilections and misgivings so equally strove within her still youthful breast that she could not utter a word; her intention wheeled this way and that like the balance of a watch. His unexpected proposition had brought about the smartest encounter of inclination with prudence, of impulse with reserve, that she had ever known.

Of all the reasons that she had expected him to give for his urgent request to see her this evening, an offer of marriage was probably the last. Whether or not she had ever amused herself with hypothetical fancies on such a subject, — and it was only natural that she should vaguely have done so, — the courage in her protege coolly to advance it, without a hint from herself that such a proposal would be tolerated, showed her that there was more in his character than she had reckoned on: and the discovery almost frightened her. The humour, attitude, and tenor of her attachment had been of quite an unpremeditated quality, unsuggestive of any such audacious solution to their distresses as this.

‘I repeat my question, dearest,’ he said, after her long pause. ‘Shall it be done? Or shall I exile myself, and study as best I can, in some distant country, out of sight and sound?’

‘Are those the only alternatives? Yes, yes; I suppose they are!’ She waited yet another moment, bent over his kneeling figure, and kissed his forehead. ‘Yes; it shall be done,’ she whispered. ‘I will marry you.’

‘My angel, I am content!’

He drew her yielding form to his heart, and her head sank upon his shoulder, as he pressed his two lips continuously upon hers. To such had the study of celestial physics brought them in the space of eight months, one week, and a few odd days.

‘I am weaker than you, — far the weaker,’ she went on, her tears falling. ‘Rather than lose you out of my sight I will marry without stipulation or condition. But — I put it to your kindness — grant me one little request.’

He instantly assented.

‘It is that, in consideration of my peculiar position in this county, — O, you can’t understand it! — you will not put an end to the absolute secrecy of our relationship without my full assent. Also, that you will never come to Welland House without first discussing with me the advisability of the visit, accepting my opinion on the point. There, see how a timid woman tries to fence herself in!’

‘My dear lady-love, neither of those two high-handed courses should I have taken, even had you not stipulated against them. The very essence of our marriage plan is that those two conditions are kept. I see as well as you do, even more than you do, how important it is that for the present, — ay, for a long time hence — I should still be but the curate’s lonely son, unattached to anybody or anything, with no object of

interest but his science; and you the recluse lady of the manor, to whom he is only an acquaintance.'

'See what deceits love sows in honest minds!'

'It would be a humiliation to you at present that I could not bear if a marriage between us were made public; an inconvenience without any compensating advantage.'

'I am so glad you assume it without my setting it before you! Now I know you are not only good and true, but politic and trustworthy.'

'Well, then, here is our covenant. My lady swears to marry me; I, in return for such great courtesy, swear never to compromise her by intruding at Welland House, and to keep the marriage concealed till I have won a position worthy of her.'

'Or till I request it to be made known,' she added, possibly foreseeing a contingency which had not occurred to him.

'Or till you request it,' he repeated.

'It is agreed,' murmured Lady Constantine,

CHAPTER XVI

After this there only remained to be settled between them the practical details of the project.

These were that he should leave home in a couple of days, and take lodgings either in the distant city of Bath or in a convenient suburb of London, till a sufficient time should have elapsed to satisfy legal requirements; that on a fine morning at the end of this time she should hie away to the same place, and be met at the station by St. Cleeve, armed with the marriage license; whence they should at once proceed to the church fixed upon for the ceremony; returning home independently in the course of the next two or three days.

While these tactics were under discussion the two-and-thirty winds of heaven continued, as before, to beat about the tower, though their onsets appeared to be somewhat lessening in force. Himself now calmed and satisfied, Swithin, as is the wont of humanity, took serener views of Nature's crushing mechanics without, and said, 'The wind doesn't seem disposed to put the tragic period to our hopes and fears that I spoke of in my momentary despair.'

'The disposition of the wind is as vicious as ever,' she answered, looking into his face with pausing thoughts on, perhaps, other subjects than that discussed. 'It is your mood of viewing it that has changed. "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."'

And, as if flatly to stultify Swithin's assumption, a circular hurricane, exceeding in violence any that had preceded it, seized hold upon Rings-Hill Speer at that moment with the determination of a conscious agent. The first sensation of a resulting catastrophe was conveyed to their intelligence by the flapping of the candle-flame against the lantern-glass; then the wind, which hitherto they had heard rather than

felt, rubbed past them like a fugitive. Swithin beheld around and above him, in place of the concavity of the dome, the open heaven, with its racing clouds, remote horizon, and intermittent gleam of stars. The dome that had covered the tower had been whirled off bodily; and they heard it descend crashing upon the trees.

Finding himself untouched Swithin stretched out his arms towards Lady Constantine, whose apparel had been seized by the spinning air, nearly lifting her off her legs. She, too, was as yet unharmed. Each held the other for a moment, when, fearing that something further would happen, they took shelter in the staircase.

‘Dearest, what an escape!’ he said, still holding her.

‘What is the accident?’ she asked. ‘Has the whole top really gone?’

‘The dome has been blown off the roof.’

As soon as it was practicable he relit the extinguished lantern, and they emerged again upon the leads, where the extent of the disaster became at once apparent. Saving the absence of the enclosing hemisphere all remained the same. The dome, being constructed of wood, was light by comparison with the rest of the structure, and the wheels which allowed it horizontal, or, as Swithin expressed it, azimuth motion, denied it a firm hold upon the walls; so that it had been lifted off them like a cover from a pot. The equatorial stood in the midst as it had stood before.

Having executed its grotesque purpose the wind sank to comparative mildness. Swithin took advantage of this lull by covering up the instruments with cloths, after which the betrothed couple prepared to go downstairs.

But the events of the night had not yet fully disclosed themselves. At this moment there was a sound of footsteps and a knocking at the door below.

‘It can’t be for me!’ said Lady Constantine. ‘I retired to my room before leaving the house, and told them on no account to disturb me.’

She remained at the top while Swithin went down the spiral. In the gloom he beheld Hannah.

‘O Master Swithin, can ye come home! The wind have blowed down the chimley that don’t smoke, and the pinning-end with it; and the old ancient house, that have been in your family so long as the memory of man, is naked to the world! It is a mercy that your grammer were not killed, sitting by the hearth, poor old soul, and soon to walk wi’ God, — for ‘a ‘s getting wambling on her pins, Mr. Swithin, as aged folks do. As I say, ‘a was all but murdered by the elements, and doing no more harm than the babes in the wood, nor speaking one harmful word. And the fire and smoke were blowed all across house like a chapter in Revelation; and your poor reverent father’s features scorched to flakes, looking like the vilest ruffian, and the gilt frame spoiled! Every fitch, every eye-piece, and every chine is buried under the walling; and I fed them pigs with my own hands, Master Swithin, little thinking they would come to this end. Do ye collect yourself, Mr. Swithin, and come at once!’

‘I will, — I will. I’ll follow you in a moment. Do you hasten back again and assist.’

When Hannah had departed the young man ran up to Lady Constantine, to whom he explained the accident. After sympathizing with old Mrs. Martin Lady Constantine added, 'I thought something would occur to mar our scheme!'

'I am not quite sure of that yet.'

On a short consideration with him, she agreed to wait at the top of the tower till he could come back and inform her if the accident were really so serious as to interfere with his plan for departure. He then left her, and there she sat in the dark, alone, looking over the parapet, and straining her eyes in the direction of the homestead.

At first all was obscurity; but when he had been gone about ten minutes lights began to move to and fro in the hollow where the house stood, and shouts occasionally mingled with the wind, which retained some violence yet, playing over the trees beneath her as on the strings of a lyre. But not a bough of them was visible, a cloak of blackness covering everything netherward; while overhead the windy sky looked down with a strange and disguised face, the three or four stars that alone were visible being so dissociated by clouds that she knew not which they were. Under any other circumstances Lady Constantine might have felt a nameless fear in thus sitting aloft on a lonely column, with a forest groaning under her feet, and palæolithic dead men feeding its roots; but the recent passionate decision stirred her pulses to an intensity beside which the ordinary tremors of feminine existence asserted themselves in vain. The apocalyptic effect of the scene surrounding her was, indeed, not inharmonious, and afforded an appropriate background to her intentions.

After what seemed to her an interminable space of time, quick steps in the staircase became audible above the roar of the firs, and in a few instants St. Cleeve again stood beside her.

The case of the homestead was serious. Hannah's account had not been exaggerated in substance: the gable end of the house was open to the garden; the joists, left without support, had dropped, and with them the upper floor. By the help of some labourers, who lived near, and Lady Constantine's man Anthony, who was passing at the time, the homestead had been propped up, and protected for the night by some rickcloths; but Swithin felt that it would be selfish in the highest degree to leave two lonely old women to themselves at this juncture. 'In short,' he concluded despondently, 'I cannot go to stay in Bath or London just now; perhaps not for another fortnight!'

'Never mind,' she said. 'A fortnight hence will do as well.'

'And I have these for you,' he continued. 'Your man Green was passing my grandmother's on his way back from Warborne, where he had been, he says, for any letters that had come for you by the evening post. As he stayed to assist the other men I told him I would go on to your house with the letters he had brought. Of course I did not tell him I should see you here.'

'Thank you. Of course not. Now I'll return at once.'

In descending the column her eye fell upon the superscription of one of the letters, and she opened and glanced over it by the lantern light. She seemed startled, and, musing, said, 'The postponement of our — intention must be, I fear, for a long time.'

I find that after the end of this month I cannot leave home safely, even for a day.' Perceiving that he was about to ask why, she added, 'I will not trouble you with the reason now; it would only harass you. It is only a family business, and cannot be helped.'

'Then we cannot be married till — God knows when!' said Swithin blankly. 'I cannot leave home till after the next week or two; you cannot leave home unless within that time. So what are we to do?'

'I do not know.'

'My dear, dear one, don't let us be beaten like this! Don't let a well-considered plan be overthrown by a mere accident! Here's a remedy. Do you go and stay the requisite time in the parish we are to be married in, instead of me. When my grandmother is again well housed I can come to you, instead of you to me, as we first said. Then it can be done within the time.'

Reluctantly, shyly, and yet with a certain gladness of heart, she gave way to his proposal that they should change places in the programme. There was much that she did not like in it, she said. It seemed to her as if she were taking the initiative by going and attending to the preliminaries. It was the man's part to do that, in her opinion, and was usually undertaken by him.

'But,' argued Swithin, 'there are cases in which the woman does give the notices, and so on; that is to say, when the man is absolutely hindered from doing so; and ours is such a case. The seeming is nothing; I know the truth, and what does it matter? You do not refuse — retract your word to be my wife, because, to avoid a sickening delay, the formalities require you to attend to them in place of me?'

She did not refuse, she said. In short she agreed to his entreaty. They had, in truth, gone so far in their dream of union that there was no drawing back now. Whichever of them was forced by circumstances to be the protagonist in the enterprise, the thing must be done. Their intention to become husband and wife, at first halting and timorous, had accumulated momentum with the lapse of hours, till it now bore down every obstacle in its course.

'Since you beg me to, — since there is no alternative between my going and a long postponement,' she said, as they stood in the dark porch of Welland House before parting, — 'since I am to go first, and seem to be the pioneer in this adventure, promise me, Swithin, promise your Viviette, that in years to come, when perhaps you may not love me so warmly as you do now — '

'That will never be.'

'Well, hoping it will not, but supposing it should, promise me that you will never reproach me as the one who took the initiative when it should have been yourself, forgetting that it was at your request; promise that you will never say I showed immodest readiness to do so, or anything which may imply your obliviousness of the fact that I act in obedience to necessity and your earnest prayer.'

Need it be said that he promised never to reproach her with that or any other thing as long as they should live? The few details of the reversed arrangement were soon

settled, Bath being the place finally decided on. Then, with a warm audacity which events had encouraged, he pressed her to his breast, and she silently entered the house. He returned to the homestead, there to attend to the unexpected duties of repairing the havoc wrought by the gale.

* * * *

That night, in the solitude of her chamber, Lady Constantine reopened and read the subjoined letter — one of those handed to her by St. Cleeve: —

“ — - Street, Piccadilly,
October 15, 18 — .

‘Dear Viviette, — You will be surprised to learn that I am in England, and that I am again out of harness — unless you should have seen the latter in the papers. Rio Janeiro may do for monkeys, but it won’t do for me. Having resigned the appointment I have returned here, as a preliminary step to finding another vent for my energies; in other words, another milch cow for my sustenance. I knew nothing whatever of your husband’s death till two days ago; so that any letter from you on the subject, at the time it became known, must have miscarried. Hypocrisy at such a moment is worse than useless, and I therefore do not condole with you, particularly as the event, though new to a banished man like me, occurred so long since. You are better without him, Viviette, and are now just the limb for doing something for yourself, notwithstanding the threadbare state in which you seem to have been cast upon the world. You are still young, and, as I imagine (unless you have vastly altered since I beheld you), good-looking: therefore make up your mind to retrieve your position by a match with one of the local celebrities; and you would do well to begin drawing neighbouring covers at once. A genial squire, with more weight than wit, more realty than weight, and more personalty than realty (considering the circumstances), would be best for you. You might make a position for us both by some such alliance; for, to tell the truth, I have had but in-and-out luck so far. I shall be with you in little more than a fortnight, when we will talk over the matter seriously, if you don’t object. — Your affectionate brother,

Louis.’

It was this allusion to her brother’s coming visit which had caught her eye in the tower staircase, and led to a modification in the wedding arrangement.

Having read the letter through once Lady Constantine flung it aside with an impatient little stamp that shook the decaying old floor and casement. Its contents produced perturbation, misgiving, but not retreat. The deep glow of enchantment shed by the idea of a private union with her beautiful young lover killed the pale light of cold reasoning from an indifferently good relative.

‘Oh, no,’ she murmured, as she sat, covering her face with her hand. ‘Not for wealth untold could I give him up now!’

No argument, short of Apollo in person from the clouds, would have influenced her. She made her preparations for departure as if nothing had intervened.

CHAPTER XVII

In her days of prosperity Lady Constantine had often gone to the city of Bath, either frivolously, for shopping purposes, or musico-religiously, to attend choir festivals

in the abbey; so there was nothing surprising in her reverting to an old practice. That the journey might appear to be of a somewhat similar nature she took with her the servant who had been accustomed to accompany her on former occasions, though the woman, having now left her service, and settled in the village as the wife of Anthony Green, with a young child on her hands, could with some difficulty leave home. Lady Constantine overcame the anxious mother's scruples by providing that young Green should be well cared for; and knowing that she could count upon this woman's fidelity, if upon anybody's, in case of an accident (for it was chiefly Lady Constantine's exertions that had made an honest wife of Mrs. Green), she departed for a fortnight's absence.

The next day found mistress and maid settled in lodgings in an old plum-coloured brick street, which a hundred years ago could boast of rank and fashion among its residents, though now the broad fan-light over each broad door admitted the sun to the halls of a lodging-house keeper only. The lamp-posts were still those that had done duty with oil lights; and rheumatic old coachmen and postilions, that once had driven and ridden gloriously from London to Land's End, ornamented with their bent persons and bow legs the pavement in front of the chief inn, in the sorry hope of earning sixpence to keep body and soul together.

'We are kept well informed on the time o' day, my lady,' said Mrs. Green, as she pulled down the blinds in Lady Constantine's room on the evening of their arrival. 'There's a church exactly at the back of us, and I hear every hour strike.'

Lady Constantine said she had noticed that there was a church quite near.

'Well, it is better to have that at the back than other folks' winders. And if your ladyship wants to go there it won't be far to walk.'

'That's what occurred to me,' said Lady Constantine, 'if I should want to go.'

During the ensuing days she felt to the utmost the tediousness of waiting merely that time might pass. Not a soul knew her there, and she knew not a soul, a circumstance which, while it added to her sense of secrecy, intensified her solitude. Occasionally she went to a shop, with Green as her companion. Though there were purchases to be made, they were by no means of a pressing nature, and but poorly filled up the vacancies of those strange, speculative days, — days surrounded by a shade of fear, yet poetized by sweet expectation.

On the thirteenth day she told Green that she was going to take a walk, and leaving the house she passed by the obscurest streets to the Abbey. After wandering about beneath the aisles till her courage was screwed to its highest, she went out at the other side, and, looking timidly round to see if anybody followed, walked on till she came to a certain door, which she reached just at the moment when her heart began to sink to its very lowest, rendering all the screwing up in vain.

Whether it was because the month was October, or from any other reason, the deserted aspect of the quarter in general sat especially on this building. Moreover the pavement was up, and heaps of stone and gravel obstructed the footway. Nobody was coming, nobody was going, in that thoroughfare; she appeared to be the single one of the human race bent upon marriage business, which seemed to have been unanimously

abandoned by all the rest of the world as proven folly. But she thought of Swithin, his blonde hair, ardent eyes, and eloquent lips, and was carried onward by the very reflection.

Entering the surrogate's room Lady Constantine managed, at the last juncture, to state her errand in tones so collected as to startle even herself to which her listener replied also as if the whole thing were the most natural in the world. When it came to the affirmation that she had lived fifteen days in the parish, she said with dismay —

‘O no! I thought the fifteen days meant the interval of residence before the marriage takes place. I have lived here only thirteen days and a half. Now I must come again!’

‘Ah — well — I think you need not be so particular,’ said the surrogate. ‘As a matter of fact, though the letter of the law requires fifteen days’ residence, many people make five sufficient. The provision is inserted, as you doubtless are aware, to hinder runaway marriages as much as possible, and secret unions, and other such objectionable practices. You need not come again.’

That evening Lady Constantine wrote to Swithin St. Cleeve the last letter of the fortnight: —

‘My Dearest, — Do come to me as soon as you can. By a sort of favouring blunder I have been able to shorten the time of waiting by a day. Come at once, for I am almost broken down with apprehension. It seems rather rash at moments, all this, and I wish you were here to reassure me. I did not know I should feel so alarmed. I am frightened at every footstep, and dread lest anybody who knows me should accost me, and find out why I am here. I sometimes wonder how I could have agreed to come and enact your part, but I did not realise how trying it would be. You ought not to have asked me, Swithin; upon my word, it was too cruel of you, and I will punish you for it when you come! But I won't upbraid. I hope the homestead is repaired that has cost me all this sacrifice of modesty. If it were anybody in the world but you in question I would rush home, without waiting here for the end of it, — I really think I would! But, dearest, no. I must show my strength now, or let it be for ever hid. The barriers of ceremony are broken down between us, and it is for the best that I am here.’

And yet, at no point of this trying prelude need Lady Constantine have feared for her strength. Deeds in this connection demand the particular kind of courage that such perfervid women are endowed with, the courage of their emotions, in which young men are often lamentably deficient. Her fear was, in truth, the fear of being discovered in an unwonted position; not of the act itself. And though her letter was in its way a true exposition of her feeling, had it been necessary to go through the whole legal process over again she would have been found equal to the emergency.

It had been for some days a point of anxiety with her what to do with Green during the morning of the wedding. Chance unexpectedly helped her in this difficulty. The day before the purchase of the license Green came to Lady Constantine with a letter in her hand from her husband Anthony, her face as long as a fiddle.

‘I hope there's nothing the matter?’ said Lady Constantine.

‘The child’s took bad, my lady!’ said Mrs. Green, with suspended floods of water in her eyes. ‘I love the child better than I shall love all them that’s coming put together; for he’s been a good boy to his mother ever since twelve weeks afore he was born! ‘Twas he, a tender deary, that made Anthony marry me, and thereby turned hisself from a little calamity to a little blessing! For, as you know, the man were a backward man in the church part o’ matrimony, my lady; though he’ll do anything when he’s forced a bit by his manly feelings. And now to lose the child — hoo-hoo-hoo! What shall I doo!’

‘Well, you want to go home at once, I suppose?’

Mrs. Green explained, between her sobs, that such was her desire; and though this was a day or two sooner than her mistress had wished to be left alone she consented to Green’s departure. So during the afternoon her woman went off, with directions to prepare for Lady Constantine’s return in two or three days. But as the exact day of her return was uncertain no carriage was to be sent to the station to meet her, her intention being to hire one from the hotel.

Lady Constantine was now left in utter solitude to await her lover’s arrival.

CHAPTER XVIII

A more beautiful October morning than that of the next day never beamed into the Welland valleys. The yearly dissolution of leafage was setting in apace. The foliage of the park trees rapidly resolved itself into the multitude of complexions which mark the subtle grades of decay, reflecting wet lights of such innumerable hues that it was a wonder to think their beauties only a repetition of scenes that had been exhibited there on scores of previous Octobers, and had been allowed to pass away without a single dirge from the imperturbable beings who walked among them. Far in the shadows semi-opaque screens of blue haze made mysteries of the commonest gravel-pit, dingle, or recess.

The wooden cabin at the foot of Rings-Hill Speer had been furnished by Swithin as a sitting and sleeping apartment, some little while before this time; for he had found it highly convenient, during night observations at the top of the column, to remain on the spot all night, not to disturb his grandmother by passing in and out of the house, and to save himself the labour of incessantly crossing the field.

He would much have liked to tell her the secret, and, had it been his own to tell, would probably have done so; but sharing it with an objector who knew not his grandmother’s affection so well as he did himself, there was no alternative to holding his tongue. The more effectually to guard it he decided to sleep at the cabin during the two or three nights previous to his departure, leaving word at the homestead that in a day or two he was going on an excursion.

It was very necessary to start early. Long before the great eye of the sun was lifted high enough to glance into the Welland valley, St. Cleeve arose from his bed in the

cabin and prepared to depart, cooking his breakfast upon a little stove in the corner. The young rabbits, littered during the foregoing summer, watched his preparations through the open door from the grey dawn without, as he bustled, half dressed, in and out under the boughs, and among the blackberries and brambles that grew around.

It was a strange place for a bridegroom to perform his toilet in, but, considering the unconventional nature of the marriage, a not inappropriate one. What events had been enacted in that earthen camp since it was first thrown up, nobody could say; but the primitive simplicity of the young man's preparations accorded well with the prehistoric spot on which they were made. Embedded under his feet were possibly even now rude trinkets that had been worn at bridal ceremonies of the early inhabitants. Little signified those ceremonies to-day, or the happiness or otherwise of the contracting parties. That his own rite, nevertheless, signified much, was the inconsequent reasoning of Swithin, as it is of many another bridegroom besides; and he, like the rest, went on with his preparations in that mood which sees in his stale repetition the wondrous possibilities of an untried move.

Then through the wet cobwebs, that hung like movable diaphragms on each blade and bough, he pushed his way down to the furrow which led from the secluded fir-tree island to the wide world beyond the field.

He was not a stranger to enterprise, and still less to the contemplation of enterprise; but an enterprise such as this he had never even outlined. That his dear lady was troubled at the situation he had placed her in by not going himself on that errand, he could see from her letter; but, believing an immediate marriage with her to be the true way of restoring to both that equanimity necessary to serene philosophy, he held it of little account how the marriage was brought about, and happily began his journey towards her place of sojourn.

He passed through a little copse before leaving the parish, the smoke from newly lit fires rising like the stems of blue trees out of the few cottage chimneys. Here he heard a quick, familiar footstep in the path ahead of him, and, turning the corner of the bushes, confronted the foot-post on his way to Welland. In answer to St. Cleeve's inquiry if there was anything for himself the postman handed out one letter, and proceeded on his route.

Swithin opened and read the letter as he walked, till it brought him to a standstill by the importance of its contents.

They were enough to agitate a more phlegmatic youth than he. He leant over the wicket which came in his path, and endeavoured to comprehend the sense of the whole.

The large long envelope contained, first, a letter from a solicitor in a northern town, informing him that his paternal great-uncle, who had recently returned from the Cape (whither he had gone in an attempt to repair a broken constitution), was now dead and buried. This great-uncle's name was like a new creation to Swithin. He had held no communication with the young man's branch of the family for innumerable years, — never, in fact, since the marriage of Swithin's father with the simple daughter of Welland Farm. He had been a bachelor to the end of his life, and had amassed a

fairly good professional fortune by a long and extensive medical practice in the smoky, dreary, manufacturing town in which he had lived and died. Swithin had always been taught to think of him as the embodiment of all that was unpleasant in man. He was narrow, sarcastic, and shrewd to unseemliness. That very shrewdness had enabled him, without much professional profundity, to establish his large and lucrative connection, which lay almost entirely among a class who neither looked nor cared for drawing-room courtesies.

However, what Dr. St. Cleeve had been as a practitioner matters little. He was now dead, and the bulk of his property had been left to persons with whom this story has nothing to do. But Swithin was informed that out of it there was a bequest of 600 pounds a year to himself, — payment of which was to begin with his twenty-first year, and continue for his life, unless he should marry before reaching the age of twenty-five. In the latter precocious and objectionable event his annuity would be forfeited. The accompanying letter, said the solicitor, would explain all.

This, the second letter, was from his uncle to himself, written about a month before the former's death, and deposited with his will, to be forwarded to his nephew when that event should have taken place. Swithin read, with the solemnity that such posthumous epistles inspire, the following words from one who, during life, had never once addressed him: —

‘Dear Nephew, — You will doubtless experience some astonishment at receiving a communication from one whom you have never personally known, and who, when this comes into your hands, will be beyond the reach of your knowledge. Perhaps I am the loser by this life-long mutual ignorance. Perhaps I am much to blame for it; perhaps not. But such reflections are profitless at this date: I have written with quite other views than to work up a sentimental regret on such an amazingly remote hypothesis as that the fact of a particular pair of people not meeting, among the millions of other pairs of people who have never met, is a great calamity either to the world in general or to themselves.

‘The occasion of my addressing you is briefly this: Nine months ago a report casually reached me that your scientific studies were pursued by you with great ability, and that you were a young man of some promise as an astronomer. My own scientific proclivities rendered the report more interesting than it might otherwise have been to me; and it came upon me quite as a surprise that any issue of your father's marriage should have so much in him, or you might have seen more of me in former years than you are ever likely to do now. My health had then begun to fail, and I was starting for the Cape, or I should have come myself to inquire into your condition and prospects. I did not return till six months later, and as my health had not improved I sent a trusty friend to examine into your life, pursuits, and circumstances, without your own knowledge, and to report his observations to me. This he did. Through him I learnt, of favourable news: —

‘(1) That you worked assiduously at the science of astronomy.

‘(2) That everything was auspicious in the career you had chosen.

‘Of unfavourable news: —

‘(1) That the small income at your command, even when eked out by the sum to which you would be entitled on your grandmother’s death and the freehold of the homestead, would be inadequate to support you becomingly as a scientific man, whose lines of work were of a nature not calculated to produce emoluments for many years, if ever.

‘(2) That there was something in your path worse than narrow means, and that that something was a woman.

‘To save you, if possible, from ruin on these heads, I take the preventive measures detailed below.

‘The chief step is, as my solicitor will have informed you, that, at the age of twenty-five, the sum of 600 pounds a year be settled on you for life, provided you have not married before reaching that age; — a yearly gift of an equal sum to be also provisionally made to you in the interim — and, vice versa, that if you do marry before reaching the age of twenty-five you will receive nothing from the date of the marriage.

‘One object of my bequest is that you may have resources sufficient to enable you to travel and study the Southern constellations. When at the Cape, after hearing of your pursuits, I was much struck with the importance of those constellations to an astronomer just pushing into notice. There is more to be made of the Southern hemisphere than ever has been made of it yet; the mine is not so thoroughly worked as the Northern, and thither your studies should tend.

‘The only other preventive step in my power is that of exhortation, at which I am not an adept. Nevertheless, I say to you, 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. I have heard nothing against her moral character hitherto; I have no doubt it has been excellent. She may have many good qualities, both of heart and of mind. But she has, in addition to her original disqualification as a companion for you (that is, that of sex), these two serious drawbacks: she is much older than yourself — ’

‘Much older!’ said Swithin resentfully.

‘ — and she is so impoverished that the title she derives from her late husband is a positive objection. 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 worse. 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 goose, 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. Perhaps she persuades herself that she is doing you no harm. Well, let her have the benefit of the possible belief; but depend upon it that in truth she gives the lie to her conscience by maintaining such a transparent fallacy. Women’s brains are not formed for assisting at any profound science: they lack the power to see things except in the concrete. She’ll blab your most secret plans and theories to every one of her acquaintance — ’

‘She’s got none!’ said Swithin, beginning to get warm.

‘ — and make them 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. Your wide heaven of study, young man, will soon reduce itself to the miserable narrow expanse of her face, and your myriad of stars to her two trumpery eyes.

‘A 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.

‘Like a certain philosopher I would, upon my soul, have all young men from eighteen to twenty-five kept under barrels; seeing how often, in the lack of some such sequestering process, the woman sits down before each as his destiny, and too frequently enervates his purpose, till he abandons the most promising course ever conceived!

‘But no more. I now leave your fate in your own hands. Your well-wishing relative,
‘Jocelyn St. Cleeve,
Doctor in Medicine.’

As coming from a bachelor and hardened misogynist of seventy-two, the opinions herein contained were nothing remarkable: but their practical result in restricting the sudden endowment of Swithin’s researches by conditions which turned the favour into a harassment was, at this unique moment, discomfiting and distracting in the highest degree.

Sensational, however, as the letter was, the passionate intention of the day was not hazarded for more than a few minutes thereby. The truth was, the caution and bribe came too late, too unexpectedly, to be of influence. They were the sort of thing which required fermentation to render them effective. Had St. Cleeve received the exhortation a month earlier; had he been able to run over in his mind, at every wakeful hour of thirty consecutive nights, a private catechism on the possibilities opened up by this annuity, there is no telling what might have been the stress of such a web of perplexity upon him, a young man whose love for celestial physics was second to none. But to have held before him, at the last moment, the picture of a future advantage that he had never once thought of, or discounted for present staying power, it affected him

about as much as the view of horizons shown by sheet-lightning. He saw an immense prospect; it went, and the world was as before.

He caught the train at Warborne, and moved rapidly towards Bath; not precisely in the same key as when he had dressed in the hut at dawn, but, as regarded the mechanical part of the journey, as unhesitatingly as before.

And with the change of scene even his gloom left him; his bosom's lord sat lightly in his throne. St. Cleeve was not sufficiently in mind of poetical literature to remember that wise poets are accustomed to read that lightness of bosom inversely. Swithin thought it an omen of good fortune; and as thinking is causing in not a few such cases, he was perhaps, in spite of poets, right.

CHAPTER XIX

At the station Lady Constantine appeared, standing expectant; he saw her face from the window of the carriage long before she saw him. He no sooner saw her than he was satisfied to his heart's content with his prize. If his great-uncle had offered him from the grave a kingdom instead of her, he would not have accepted it.

Swithin jumped out, and nature never painted in a woman's face more devotion than appeared in my lady's at that moment. To both the situation seemed like a beautiful allegory, not to be examined too closely, lest its defects of correspondence with real life should be apparent.

They almost feared to shake hands in public, so much depended upon their passing that morning without molestation. A fly was called and they drove away.

'Take this,' she said, handing him a folded paper. 'It belongs to you rather than to me.'

At crossings, and other occasional pauses, pedestrians turned their faces and looked at the pair (for no reason but that, among so many, there were naturally a few of the sort who have eyes to note what incidents come in their way as they plod on); but the two in the vehicle could not but fear that these innocent beholders had special detective designs on them.

'You look so dreadfully young!' she said with humorous fretfulness, as they drove along (Swithin's cheeks being amazingly fresh from the morning air). 'Do try to appear a little haggard, that the parson mayn't ask us awkward questions!'

Nothing further happened, and they were set down opposite a shop about fifty yards from the church door, at five minutes to eleven.

'We will dismiss the fly,' she said. 'It will only attract idlers.'

On turning the corner and reaching the church they found the door ajar; but the building contained only two persons, a man and a woman, — the clerk and his wife, as they learnt. Swithin asked when the clergyman would arrive.

The clerk looked at his watch, and said, 'At just on eleven o'clock.'

'He ought to be here,' said Swithin.

‘Yes,’ replied the clerk, as the hour struck. ‘The fact is, sir, he is a deppity, and apt to be rather wandering in his wits as regards time and such like, which hev stood in the way of the man’s getting a benefit. But no doubt he’ll come.’

‘The regular incumbent is away, then?’

‘He’s gone for his bare pa’son’s fortnight, — that’s all; and we was forced to put up with a weak-talented man or none. The best men goes into the brewing, or into the shipping now-a-days, you see, sir; doctrines being rather shaddery at present, and your money’s worth not sure in our line. So we church officers be left poorly provided with men for odd jobs. I’ll tell ye what, sir; I think I’d better run round to the gentleman’s lodgings, and try to find him?’

‘Pray do,’ said Lady Constantine.

The clerk left the church; his wife busied herself with dusting at the further end, and Swithin and Viviette were left to themselves. The imagination travels so rapidly, and a woman’s forethought is so assumptive, that the clerk’s departure had no sooner doomed them to inaction than it was borne in upon Lady Constantine’s mind that she would not become the wife of Swithin St. Cleeve, either to-day or on any other day. Her divinations were continually misleading her, she knew: but a hitch at the moment of marriage surely had a meaning in it.

‘Ah, — the marriage is not to be!’ she said to herself. ‘This is a fatality.’

It was twenty minutes past, and no parson had arrived. Swithin took her hand.

‘If it cannot be to-day, it can be to-morrow,’ he whispered.

‘I cannot say,’ she answered. ‘Something tells me no.’

It was almost impossible that she could know anything of the deterrent force exercised on Swithin by his dead uncle that morning. Yet her manner tallied so curiously well with such knowledge that he was struck by it, and remained silent.

‘You have a black tie,’ she continued, looking at him.

‘Yes,’ replied Swithin. ‘I bought it on my way here.’

‘Why could it not have been less sombre in colour?’

‘My great-uncle is dead.’

‘You had a great-uncle? You never told me.’

‘I never saw him in my life. I have only heard about him since his death.’

He spoke in as quiet and measured a way as he could, but his heart was sinking. She would go on questioning; he could not tell her an untruth. She would discover particulars of that great-uncle’s provision for him, which he, Swithin, was throwing away for her sake, and she would refuse to be his for his own sake. His conclusion at this moment was precisely what hers had been five minutes sooner: they were never to be husband and wife.

But she did not continue her questions, for the simplest of all reasons: hasty footsteps were audible in the entrance, and the parson was seen coming up the aisle, the clerk behind him wiping the beads of perspiration from his face. The somewhat sorry clerical specimen shook hands with them, and entered the vestry; and the clerk came up and opened the book.

‘The poor gentleman’s memory is a bit topsy-turvy,’ whispered the latter. ‘He had got it in his mind that ‘twere a funeral, and I found him wandering about the cemetery a-looking for us. However, all’s well as ends well.’ And the clerk wiped his forehead again.

‘How ill-omened!’ murmured Viviette.

But the parson came out robed at this moment, and the clerk put on his ecclesiastical countenance and looked in his book. Lady Constantine’s momentary languor passed; her blood resumed its courses with a new spring. The grave utterances of the church then rolled out upon the palpitating pair, and no couple ever joined their whispers thereto with more fervency than they.

Lady Constantine (as she continued to be called by the outside world, though she liked to think herself the Mrs. St. Cleeve that she legally was) had told Green that she might be expected at Welland in a day, or two, or three, as circumstances should dictate. Though the time of return was thus left open it was deemed advisable, by both Swithin and herself, that her journey back should not be deferred after the next day, in case any suspicions might be aroused. As for St. Cleeve, his comings and goings were of no consequence. It was seldom known whether he was at home or abroad, by reason of his frequent seclusion at the column.

Late in the afternoon of the next day he accompanied her to the Bath station, intending himself to remain in that city till the following morning. But when a man or youth has such a tender article on his hands as a thirty-hour bride it is hardly in the power of his strongest reason to set her down at a railway, and send her off like a superfluous portmanteau. Hence the experiment of parting so soon after their union proved excruciatingly severe to these. The evening was dull; the breeze of autumn crept fitfully through every slit and aperture in the town; not a soul in the world seemed to notice or care about anything they did. Lady Constantine sighed; and there was no resisting it, — he could not leave her thus. He decided to get into the train with her, and keep her company for at least a few stations on her way.

It drew on to be a dark night, and, seeing that there was no serious risk after all, he prolonged his journey with her so far as to the junction at which the branch line to Warborne forked off. Here it was necessary to wait a few minutes, before either he could go back or she could go on. They wandered outside the station doorway into the gloom of the road, and there agreed to part.

While she yet stood holding his arm a phaeton sped towards the station-entrance, where, in ascending the slope to the door, the horse suddenly jibbed. The gentleman who was driving, being either impatient, or possessed with a theory that all jibbers may be started by severe whipping, applied the lash; as a result of it, the horse thrust round the carriage to where they stood, and the end of the driver’s sweeping whip cut across Lady Constantine’s face with such severity as to cause her an involuntary cry. Swithin turned her round to the lamplight, and discerned a streak of blood on her cheek.

By this time the gentleman who had done the mischief, with many words of regret, had given the reins to his man and dismounted.

‘I will go to the waiting-room for a moment,’ whispered Viviette hurriedly; and, loosing her hand from his arm, she pulled down her veil and vanished inside the building.

The stranger came forward and raised his hat. He was a slightly built and apparently town-bred man of twenty-eight or thirty; his manner of address was at once careless and conciliatory.

‘I am greatly concerned at what I have done,’ he said. ‘I sincerely trust that your wife’ — but observing the youthfulness of Swithin, he withdrew the word suggested by the manner of Swithin towards Lady Constantine — ‘I trust the young lady was not seriously cut?’

‘I trust not,’ said Swithin, with some vexation.

‘Where did the lash touch her?’

‘Straight down her cheek.’

‘Do let me go to her, and learn how she is, and humbly apologize.’

‘I’ll inquire.’

He went to the ladies’ room, in which Viviette had taken refuge. She met him at the door, her handkerchief to her cheek, and Swithin explained that the driver of the phaeton had sent to make inquiries.

‘I cannot see him!’ she whispered. ‘He is my brother Louis! He is, no doubt, going on by the train to my house. Don’t let him recognize me! We must wait till he is gone.’

Swithin thereupon went out again, and told the young man that the cut on her face was not serious, but that she could not see him; after which they parted. St. Cleeve then heard him ask for a ticket for Warborne, which confirmed Lady Constantine’s view that he was going on to her house. When the branch train had moved off Swithin returned to his bride, who waited in a trembling state within.

On being informed that he had departed she showed herself much relieved.

‘Where does your brother come from?’ said Swithin.

‘From London, immediately. Rio before that. He has a friend or two in this neighbourhood, and visits here occasionally. I have seldom or never spoken to you of him, because of his long absence.’

‘Is he going to settle near you?’

‘No, nor anywhere, I fear. He is, or rather was, in the diplomatic service. He was first a clerk in the Foreign Office, and was afterwards appointed attache at Rio Janeiro. But he has resigned the appointment. I wish he had not.’

Swithin asked why he resigned.

‘He complained of the banishment, and the climate, and everything that people complain of who are determined to be dissatisfied, — though, poor fellow, there is some ground for his complaints. Perhaps some people would say that he is idle. But he is scarcely that; he is rather restless than idle, so that he never persists in anything. Yet

if a subject takes his fancy he will follow it up with exemplary patience till something diverts him.'

'He is not kind to you, is he, dearest?'

'Why do you think that?'

'Your manner seems to say so.'

'Well, he may not always be kind. But look at my face; does the mark show?'

A streak, straight as a meridian, was visible down her cheek. The blood had been brought almost to the surface, but was not quite through, that which had originally appeared thereon having possibly come from the horse. It signified that to-morrow the red line would be a black one.

Swithin informed her that her brother had taken a ticket for Warborne, and she at once perceived that he was going on to visit her at Welland, though from his letter she had not expected him so soon by a few days. 'Meanwhile,' continued Swithin, 'you can now get home only by the late train, having missed that one.'

'But, Swithin, don't you see my new trouble? If I go to Welland House to-night, and find my brother just arrived there, and he sees this cut on my face, which I suppose you described to him — '

'I did.'

'He will know I was the lady with you!'

'Whom he called my wife. I wonder why we look husband and wife already!'

'Then what am I to do? For the ensuing three or four days I bear in my face a clue to his discovery of our secret.'

'Then you must not be seen. We must stay at an inn here.'

'O no!' she said timidly. 'It is too near home to be quite safe. We might not be known; but if we were!'

'We can't go back to Bath now. I'll tell you, dear Viviette, what we must do. We'll go on to Warborne in separate carriages; we'll meet outside the station; thence we'll walk to the column in the dark, and I'll keep you a captive in the cabin till the scar has disappeared.'

As there was nothing which better recommended itself this course was decided on; and after taking from her trunk the articles that might be required for an incarceration of two or three days they left the said trunk at the cloak-room, and went on by the last train, which reached Warborne about ten o'clock.

It was only necessary for Lady Constantine to cover her face with the thick veil that she had provided for this escapade, to walk out of the station without fear of recognition. St. Cleeve came forth from another compartment, and they did not rejoin each other till they had reached a shadowy bend in the old turnpike road, beyond the irradiation of the Warborne lamplight.

The walk to Welland was long. It was the walk which Swithin had taken in the rain when he had learnt the fatal forestalment of his stellar discovery; but now he was moved by a less desperate mood, and blamed neither God nor man. They were not pressed for time, and passed along the silent, lonely way with that sense rather of predestination

than of choice in their proceedings which the presence of night sometimes imparts. Reaching the park gate, they found it open, and from this they inferred that her brother Louis had arrived.

Leaving the house and park on their right they traced the highway yet a little further, and, plunging through the stubble of the opposite field, drew near the isolated earthwork bearing the plantation and tower, which together rose like a flattened dome and lantern from the lighter-hued plain of stubble. It was far too dark to distinguish firs from other trees by the eye alone, but the peculiar dialect of sylvan language which the piny multitude used would have been enough to proclaim their class at any time. In the lovers' stealthy progress up the slopes a dry stick here and there snapped beneath their feet, seeming like a shot of alarm.

On being unlocked the hut was found precisely as Swithin had left it two days before. Lady Constantine was thoroughly wearied, and sat down, while he gathered a handful of twigs and spikelets from the masses strewn without and lit a small fire, first taking the precaution to blind the little window and relock the door.

Lady Constantine looked curiously around by the light of the blaze. The hut was small as the prophet's chamber provided by the Shunammite: in one corner stood the stove, with a little table and chair, a small cupboard hard by, a pitcher of water, a rack overhead, with various articles, including a kettle and a gridiron; while the remaining three or four feet at the other end of the room was fitted out as a dormitory, for Swithin's use during late observations in the tower overhead.

'It is not much of a palace to offer you,' he remarked, smiling. 'But at any rate, it is a refuge.'

The cheerful firelight dispersed in some measure Lady Constantine's anxieties. 'If we only had something to eat!' she said.

'Dear me,' cried St. Cleve, blankly. 'That's a thing I never thought of.'

'Nor I, till now,' she replied.

He reflected with misgiving.

'Beyond a small loaf of bread in the cupboard I have nothing. However, just outside the door there are lots of those little rabbits, about the size of rats, that the keepers call runners. And they are as tame as possible. But I fear I could not catch one now. Yet, dear Viviette, wait a minute; I'll try. You must not be starved.'

He softly let himself out, and was gone some time. When he reappeared, he produced, not a rabbit, but four sparrows and a thrush.

'I could do nothing in the way of a rabbit without setting a wire,' he said. 'But I have managed to get these by knowing where they roost.'

He showed her how to prepare the birds, and, having set her to roast them by the fire, departed with the pitcher, to replenish it at the brook which flowed near the homestead in the neighbouring Bottom.

'They are all asleep at my grandmother's,' he informed her when he re-entered, panting, with the dripping pitcher. 'They imagine me to be a hundred miles off.'

The birds were now ready, and the table was spread. With this fare, eked out by dry toast from the loaf, and moistened with cups of water from the pitcher, to which Swithin added a little wine from the flask he had carried on his journey, they were forced to be content for their supper.

CHAPTER XX

When Lady Constantine awoke the next morning Swithin was nowhere to be seen. Before she was quite ready for breakfast she heard the key turn in the door, and felt startled, till she remembered that the comer could hardly be anybody but he. He brought a basket with provisions, an extra cup-and-saucer, and so on. In a short space of time the kettle began singing on the stove, and the morning meal was ready.

The sweet resinous air from the firs blew in upon them as they sat at breakfast; the birds hopped round the door (which, somewhat riskily, they ventured to keep open); and at their elbow rose the lank column into an upper realm of sunlight, which only reached the cabin in fitful darts and flashes through the trees.

‘I could be happy here for ever,’ said she, clasping his hand. ‘I wish I could never see my great gloomy house again, since I am not rich enough to throw it open, and live there as I ought to do. Poverty of this sort is not unpleasant at any rate. What are you thinking of?’

‘I am thinking about my outing this morning. On reaching my grandmother’s she was only a little surprised to see me. I was obliged to breakfast there, or appear to do so, to divert suspicion; and this food is supposed to be wanted for my dinner and supper. There will of course be no difficulty in my obtaining an ample supply for any length of time, as I can take what I like from the buttery without observation. But as I looked in my grandmother’s face this morning, and saw her looking affectionately in mine, and thought how she had never concealed anything from me, and had always had my welfare at heart, I felt — that I should like to tell her what we have done.’

‘O no, — please not, Swithin!’ she exclaimed piteously.

‘Very well,’ he answered. ‘On no consideration will I do so without your consent.’ And no more was said on the matter.

The morning was passed in applying wet rag and other remedies to the purple line on Viviette’s cheek; and in the afternoon they set up the equatorial under the replaced dome, to have it in order for night observations.

The evening was clear, dry, and remarkably cold by comparison with the daytime weather. After a frugal supper they replenished the stove with charcoal from the home-stead, which they also burnt during the day, — an idea of Viviette’s, that the smoke from a wood fire might not be seen more frequently than was consistent with the occasional occupation of the cabin by Swithin, as heretofore.

At eight o'clock she insisted upon his ascending the tower for observations, in strict pursuance of the idea on which their marriage had been based, namely, that of restoring regularity to his studies.

The sky had a new and startling beauty that night. A broad, fluctuating, semicircular arch of vivid white light spanned the northern quarter of the heavens, reaching from the horizon to the star Eta in the Greater Bear. It was the Aurora Borealis, just risen up for the winter season out of the freezing seas of the north, where every autumn vapour was now undergoing rapid congelation.

'O, let us sit and look at it!' she said; and they turned their backs upon the equatorial and the southern glories of the heavens to this new beauty in a quarter which they seldom contemplated.

The lustre of the fixed stars was diminished to a sort of blueness. Little by little the arch grew higher against the dark void, like the form of the Spirit-maiden in the shades of Glenfinlas, till its crown drew near the zenith, and threw a tissue over the whole waggon and horses of the great northern constellation. Brilliant shafts radiated from the convexity of the arch, coming and going silently. The temperature fell, and Lady Constantine drew her wrap more closely around her.

'We'll go down,' said Swithin. 'The cabin is beautifully warm. Why should we try to observe to-night? Indeed, we cannot; the Aurora light overpowers everything.'

'Very well. To-morrow night there will be no interruption. I shall be gone.'

'You leave me to-morrow, Viviette?'

'Yes; to-morrow morning.'

The truth was that, with the progress of the hours and days, the conviction had been borne in upon Viviette more and more forcibly that not for kingdoms and principalities could she afford to risk the discovery of her presence here by any living soul.

'But let me see your face, dearest,' he said. 'I don't think it will be safe for you to meet your brother yet.'

As it was too dark to see her face on the summit where they sat they descended the winding staircase, and in the cabin Swithin examined the damaged cheek. The line, though so far attenuated as not to be observable by any one but a close observer, had not quite disappeared. But in consequence of her reiterated and almost tearful anxiety to go, and as there was a strong probability that her brother had left the house, Swithin decided to call at Welland next morning, and reconnoitre with a view to her return.

Locking her in he crossed the dewy stubble into the park. The house was silent and deserted; and only one tall stalk of smoke ascended from the chimneys. Notwithstanding that the hour was nearly nine he knocked at the door.

'Is Lady Constantine at home?' asked Swithin, with a disingenuousness now habitual, yet unknown to him six months before.

'No, Mr. St. Cleeve; my lady has not returned from Bath. We expect her every day.'

'Nobody staying in the house?'

'My lady's brother has been here; but he is gone on to Budmouth. He will come again in two or three weeks, I understand.'

This was enough. Swithin said he would call again, and returned to the cabin, where, waking Viviette, who was not by nature an early riser, he waited on the column till she was ready to breakfast. When this had been shared they prepared to start.

A long walk was before them. Warborne station lay five miles distant, and the next station above that nine miles. They were bound for the latter; their plan being that she should there take the train to the junction where the whip accident had occurred, claim her luggage, and return with it to Warborne, as if from Bath.

The morning was cool and the walk not wearisome. When once they had left behind the stubble-field of their environment and the parish of Welland, they sauntered on comfortably, Lady Constantine's spirits rising as she withdrew further from danger.

They parted by a little brook, about half a mile from the station; Swithin to return to Welland by the way he had come.

Lady Constantine telegraphed from the junction to Warborne for a carriage to be in readiness to meet her on her arrival; and then, waiting for the down train, she travelled smoothly home, reaching Welland House about five minutes sooner than Swithin reached the column hard by, after footing it all the way from where they had parted.

CHAPTER XXI

From that day forward their life resumed its old channel in general outward aspect.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature in their exploit was its comparative effectiveness as an expedient for the end designed, — that of restoring calm assiduity to the study of astronomy. Swithin took up his old position as the lonely philosopher at the column, and Lady Constantine lapsed back to immured existence at the house, with apparently not a friend in the parish. The enforced narrowness of life which her limited resources necessitated was now an additional safeguard against the discovery of her relations with St. Cleeve. Her neighbours seldom troubled her; as much, it must be owned, from a tacit understanding that she was not in a position to return invitations as from any selfish coldness engendered by her want of wealth.

At the first meeting of the secretly united pair after their short honeymoon they were compelled to behave as strangers to each other. It occurred in the only part of Welland which deserved the name of a village street, and all the labourers were returning to their midday meal, with those of their wives who assisted at outdoor work. Before the eyes of this innocent though quite untrustworthy group, Swithin and his Viviette could only shake hands in passing, though she contrived to say to him in an undertone, 'My brother does not return yet for some time. He has gone to Paris. I will be on the lawn this evening, if you can come.' It was a fluttered smile that she bestowed on him, and there was no doubt that every fibre of her heart vibrated afresh at meeting, with such reserve, one who stood in his close relation to her.

The shades of night fell early now, and Swithin was at the spot of appointment about the time that he knew her dinner would be over. It was just where they had met at the beginning of the year, but many changes had resulted since then. The flower-beds that had used to be so neatly edged were now jagged and leafy; black stars appeared on the pale surface of the gravel walks, denoting tufts of grass that grew unmolested there. Lady Constantine's external affairs wore just that aspect which suggests that new blood may be advantageously introduced into the line; and new blood had been introduced, in good sooth, — with what social result remained to be seen.

She silently entered on the scene from the same window which had given her passage in months gone by. They met with a concerted embrace, and St. Cleve spoke his greeting in whispers.

'We are quite safe, dearest,' said she.

'But the servants?'

'My meagre staff consists of only two women and the boy; and they are away in the other wing. I thought you would like to see the inside of my house, after showing me the inside of yours. So we will walk through it instead of staying out here.'

She let him in through the casement, and they strolled forward softly, Swithin with some curiosity, never before having gone beyond the library and adjoining room. The whole western side of the house was at this time shut up, her life being confined to two or three small rooms in the south-east corner. The great apartments through which they now whisperingly walked wore already that funereal aspect that comes from disuse and inattention. Triangular cobwebs already formed little hammocks for the dust in corners of the wainscot, and a close smell of wood and leather, seasoned with mouse-droppings, pervaded the atmosphere. So seldom was the solitude of these chambers intruded on by human feet that more than once a mouse stood and looked the twain in the face from the arm of a sofa, or the top of a cabinet, without any great fear.

Swithin had no residential ambition whatever, but he was interested in the place. 'Will the house ever be thrown open to gaiety, as it was in old times?' said he.

'Not unless you make a fortune,' she replied laughingly. 'It is mine for my life, as you know; but the estate is so terribly saddled with annuities to Sir Blount's distant relatives, one of whom will succeed me here, that I have practically no more than my own little private income to exist on.'

'And are you bound to occupy the house?'

'Not bound to. But I must not let it on lease.'

'And was there any stipulation in the event of your re-marriage?'

'It was not mentioned.'

'It is satisfactory to find that you lose nothing by marrying me, at all events, dear Viviette.'

'I hope you lose nothing either — at least, of consequence.'

'What have I to lose?'

‘I meant your liberty. Suppose you become a popular physicist (popularity seems cooling towards art and coquetting with science now-a-days), and a better chance offers, and one who would make you a newer and brighter wife than I am comes in your way. Will you never regret this? Will you never despise me?’

Swithin answered by a kiss, and they again went on; proceeding like a couple of burglars, lest they should draw the attention of the cook or Green.

In one of the upper rooms his eyes were attracted by an old chamber organ, which had once been lent for use in the church. He mentioned his recollection of the same, which led her to say, ‘That reminds me of something. There is to be a confirmation in our parish in the spring, and you once told me that you had never been confirmed. What shocking neglect! Why was it?’

‘I hardly know. The confusion resulting from my father’s death caused it to be forgotten, I suppose.’

‘Now, dear Swithin, you will do this to please me, — be confirmed on the present occasion?’

‘Since I have done without the virtue of it so long, might I not do without it altogether?’

‘No, no!’ she said earnestly. ‘I do wish it, indeed. I am made unhappy when I think you don’t care about such serious matters. Without the Church to cling to, what have we?’

‘Each other. But seriously, I should be inverting the established order of spiritual things; people ought to be confirmed before they are married.’

‘That’s really of minor consequence. Now, don’t think slightingly of what so many good men have laid down as necessary to be done. And, dear Swithin, I somehow feel that a certain levity which has perhaps shown itself in our treatment of the sacrament of marriage — by making a clandestine adventure of what is, after all, a solemn rite — would be well atoned for by a due seriousness in other points of religious observance. This opportunity should therefore not be passed over. I thought of it all last night; and you are a parson’s son, remember, and he would have insisted on it if he had been alive. In short, Swithin, do be a good boy, and observe the Church’s ordinances.’

Lady Constantine, by virtue of her temperament, was necessarily either lover or devotee, and she vibrated so gracefully between these two conditions that nobody who had known the circumstances could have condemned her inconsistencies. To be led into difficulties by those mastering emotions of hers, to aim at escape by turning round and seizing the apparatus of religion — which could only rightly be worked by the very emotions already bestowed elsewhere — it was, after all, but Nature’s well-meaning attempt to preserve the honour of her daughter’s conscience in the trying quandary to which the conditions of sex had given rise. As Viviette could not be confirmed herself, and as Communion Sunday was a long way off, she urged Swithin thus.

‘And the new bishop is such a good man,’ she continued. ‘I used to have a slight acquaintance with him when he was a parish priest.’

‘Very well, dearest. To please you I’ll be confirmed. My grandmother, too, will be delighted, no doubt.’

They continued their ramble: Lady Constantine first advancing into rooms with the candle, to assure herself that all was empty, and then calling him forward in a whisper. The stillness was broken only by these whispers, or by the occasional crack of a floor-board beneath their tread. At last they sat down, and, shading the candle with a screen, she showed him the faded contents of this and that drawer or cabinet, or the wardrobe of some member of the family who had died young early in the century, when muslin reigned supreme, when waists were close to arm-pits, and muffs as large as smugglers’ tubs. These researches among habilimental hulls and husks, whose human kernels had long ago perished, went on for about half an hour; when the companions were startled by a loud ringing at the front-door bell.

CHAPTER XXII

Lady Constantine flung down the old-fashioned lacework, whose beauties she had been pointing out to Swithin, and exclaimed, ‘Who can it be? Not Louis, surely?’

They listened. An arrival was such a phenomenon at this unfrequented mansion, and particularly a late arrival, that no servant was on the alert to respond to the call; and the visitor rang again, more loudly than before. Sounds of the tardy opening and shutting of a passage-door from the kitchen quarter then reached their ears, and Viviette went into the corridor to hearken more attentively. In a few minutes she returned to the wardrobe-room in which she had left Swithin.

‘Yes; it is my brother!’ she said with difficult composure. ‘I just caught his voice. He has no doubt come back from Paris to stay. This is a rather vexatious, indolent way he has, never to write to prepare me!’

‘I can easily go away,’ said Swithin.

By this time, however, her brother had been shown into the house, and the footsteps of the page were audible, coming in search of Lady Constantine.

‘If you will wait there a moment,’ she said, directing St. Cleeve into a bedchamber which adjoined; ‘you will be quite safe from interruption, and I will quickly come back.’ Taking the light she left him.

Swithin waited in darkness. Not more than ten minutes had passed when a whisper in her voice came through the keyhole. He opened the door.

‘Yes; he is come to stay!’ she said. ‘He is at supper now.’

‘Very well; don’t be flurried, dearest. Shall I stay too, as we planned?’

‘O, Swithin, I fear not!’ she replied anxiously. ‘You see how it is. To-night we have broken the arrangement that you should never come here; and this is the result. Will it offend you if — I ask you to leave?’

‘Not in the least. Upon the whole, I prefer the comfort of my little cabin and homestead to the gauntness and alarms of this place.’

‘There, now, I fear you are offended!’ she said, a tear collecting in her eye. ‘I wish I was going back with you to the cabin! How happy we were, those three days of our stay there! But it is better, perhaps, just now, that you should leave me. Yes, these rooms are oppressive. They require a large household to make them cheerful. . . . Yet, Swithin,’ she added, after reflection, ‘I will not request you to go. Do as you think best. I will light a night-light, and leave you here to consider. For myself, I must go downstairs to my brother at once, or he’ll wonder what I am doing.’

She kindled the little light, and again retreated, closing the door upon him.

Swithin stood and waited some time; till he considered that upon the whole it would be preferable to leave. With this intention he emerged and went softly along the dark passage towards the extreme end, where there was a little crooked staircase that would conduct him down to a disused side door. Descending this stair he duly arrived at the other side of the house, facing the quarter whence the wind blew, and here he was surprised to catch the noise of rain beating against the windows. It was a state of weather which fully accounted for the visitor’s impatient ringing.

St. Cleeve was in a minor kind of dilemma. The rain reminded him that his hat and great-coat had been left downstairs, in the front part of the house; and though he might have gone home without either in ordinary weather it was not a pleasant feat in the pelting winter rain. Retracing his steps to Viviette’s room he took the light, and opened a closet-door that he had seen ajar on his way down. Within the closet hung various articles of apparel, upholstery lumber of all kinds filling the back part. Swithin thought he might find here a cloak of hers to throw round him, but finally took down from a peg a more suitable garment, the only one of the sort that was there. It was an old moth-eaten great-coat, heavily trimmed with fur; and in removing it a companion cap of sealskin was disclosed.

‘Whose can they be?’ he thought, and a gloomy answer suggested itself. ‘Pooh,’ he then said (summoning the scientific side of his nature), ‘matter is matter, and mental association only a delusion.’ Putting on the garments he returned the light to Lady Constantine’s bedroom, and again prepared to depart as before.

Scarcely, however, had he regained the corridor a second time, when he heard a light footstep — seemingly Viviette’s — again on the front landing. Wondering what she wanted with him further he waited, taking the precaution to step into the closet till sure it was she.

The figure came onward, bent to the keyhole of the bedroom door, and whispered (supposing him still inside), ‘Swithin, on second thoughts I think you may stay with safety.’

Having no further doubt of her personality he came out with thoughtless abruptness from the closet behind her, and looking round suddenly she beheld his shadowy fur-clad outline. At once she raised her hands in horror, as if to protect herself from him; she uttered a shriek, and turned shudderingly to the wall, covering her face.

Swithin would have picked her up in a moment, but by this time he could hear footsteps rushing upstairs, in response to her cry. In consternation, and with a view of

not compromising her, he effected his retreat as fast as possible, reaching the bend of the corridor just as her brother Louis appeared with a light at the other extremity.

‘What’s the matter, for heaven’s sake, Viviette?’ said Louis.

‘My husband!’ she involuntarily exclaimed.

‘What nonsense!’

‘O yes, it is nonsense,’ she added, with an effort. ‘It was nothing.’

‘But what was the cause of your cry?’

She had by this time recovered her reason and judgment. ‘O, it was a trick of the imagination,’ she said, with a faint laugh. ‘I live so much alone that I get superstitious — and — I thought for the moment I saw an apparition.’

‘Of your late husband?’

‘Yes. But it was nothing; it was the outline of the — tall clock and the chair behind. Would you mind going down, and leaving me to go into my room for a moment?’

She entered the bedroom, and her brother went downstairs. Swithin thought it best to leave well alone, and going noiselessly out of the house plodded through the rain homeward. It was plain that agitations of one sort and another had so weakened Viviette’s nerves as to lay her open to every impression. That the clothes he had borrowed were some cast-off garments of the late Sir Blount had occurred to St. Cleve in taking them; but in the moment of returning to her side he had forgotten this, and the shape they gave to his figure had obviously been a reminder of too sudden a sort for her. Musing thus he walked along as if he were still, as before, the lonely student, dissociated from all mankind, and with no shadow of right or interest in Welland House or its mistress.

The great-coat and cap were unpleasant companions; but Swithin having been reared, or having reared himself, in the scientific school of thought, would not give way to his sense of their weirdness. To do so would have been treason to his own beliefs and aims.

When nearly home, at a point where his track converged on another path, there approached him from the latter a group of indistinct forms. The tones of their speech revealed them to be Hezzy Biles, Nat Chapman, Fry, and other labourers. Swithin was about to say a word to them, till recollecting his disguise he deemed it advisable to hold his tongue, lest his attire should tell a too dangerous tale as to where he had come from. By degrees they drew closer, their walk being in the same direction.

‘Good-night, stranger,’ said Nat.

The stranger did not reply.

All of them paced on abreast of him, and he could perceive in the gloom that their faces were turned inquiringly upon his form. Then a whisper passed from one to another of them; then Chapman, who was the boldest, dropped immediately behind his heels, and followed there for some distance, taking close observations of his outline, after which the men grouped again and whispered. Thinking it best to let them pass on Swithin slackened his pace, and they went ahead of him, apparently without much reluctance.

There was no doubt that they had been impressed by the clothes he wore; and having no wish to provoke similar comments from his grandmother and Hannah, Swithin took the precaution, on arriving at Welland Bottom, to enter the homestead by the outhouse. Here he deposited the cap and coat in secure hiding, afterwards going round to the front and opening the door in the usual way.

In the entry he met Hannah, who said —

‘Only to hear what have been seed to-night, Mr. Swithin! The work-folk have dropped in to tell us!’

In the kitchen were the men who had outstripped him on the road. Their countenances, instead of wearing the usual knotty irregularities, had a smoothed-out expression of blank concern. Swithin’s entrance was unobtrusive and quiet, as if he had merely come down from his study upstairs, and they only noticed him by enlarging their gaze, so as to include him in the audience.

‘We was in a deep talk at the moment,’ continued Blore, ‘and Natty had just brought up that story about old Jeremiah Paddock’s crossing the park one night at one o’clock in the morning, and seeing Sir Blount a-shutting my lady out-o’-doors; and we was saying that it seemed a true return that he should perish in a foreign land; when we happened to look up, and there was Sir Blount a-walking along.’

‘Did it overtake you, or did you overtake it?’ whispered Hannah sepulchrally.

‘I don’t say ‘twas it,’ returned Sammy. ‘God forbid that I should drag in a resurrection word about what perhaps was still solid manhood, and has to die! But he, or it, closed in upon us, as ‘twere.’

‘Yes, closed in upon us!’ said Haymoss.

‘And I said “Good-night, stranger,”’ added Chapman.

‘Yes, “Good-night, stranger,” — that wez yer words, Natty. I support ye in it.’

‘And then he closed in upon us still more.’

‘We closed in upon he, rather,’ said Chapman.

‘Well, well; ‘tis the same thing in such matters! And the form was Sir Blount’s. My nostrils told me, for — there, ‘a smelled. Yes, I could smell’n, being to leeward.’

‘Lord, lord, what unwholesome scandal’s this about the ghost of a respectable gentleman?’ said Mrs. Martin, who had entered from the sitting-room.

‘Now, wait, ma’am. I don’t say ‘twere a low smell, mind ye. ‘Twere a high smell, a sort of gamey flavour, calling to mind venison and hare, just as you’d expect of a great squire, — not like a poor man’s ‘natomy, at all; and that was what strengthened my faith that ‘twas Sir Blount.’

(‘The skins that old coat was made of,’ ruminated Swithin.)

‘Well, well; I’ve not held out against the figure o’ starvation these five-and-twenty year, on nine shillings a week, to be afeard of a walking vapour, sweet or savoury,’ said Hezzy. ‘So here’s home-along.’

‘Bide a bit longer, and I’m going too,’ continued Fry. ‘Well, when I found ‘twas Sir Blount my spet dried up within my mouth; for neither hedge nor bush were there for refuge against any foul spring ‘a might have made at us.’

“’Twas very curious; but we had likewise a-mentioned his name just afore, in talking of the confirmation that’s shortly coming on,’ said Hezzy.

‘Is there soon to be a confirmation?’

‘Yes. In this parish — the first time in Welland church for twenty years. As I say, I had told ‘em that he was confirmed the same year that I went up to have it done, as I have very good cause to mind. When we went to be examined, the pa’son said to me, “Rehearse the articles of thy belief.” Mr. Blount (as he was then) was nighest me, and he whispered, “Women and wine.” “Women and wine,” says I to the pa’son: and for that I was sent back till next confirmation, Sir Blount never owning that he was the rascal.’

‘Confirmation was a sight different at that time,’ mused Biles. ‘The Bishops didn’t lay it on so strong then as they do now. Now-a-days, yer Bishop gies both hands to every Jack-rag and Tom-straw that drops the knee afore him; but ‘twas six chaps to one blessing when we was boys. The Bishop o’ that time would stretch out his palms and run his fingers over our row of crowns as off-hand as a bank gentleman telling money. The great lords of the Church in them days wasn’t particular to a soul or two more or less; and, for my part, I think living was easier for ‘t.’

‘The new Bishop, I hear, is a bachelor-man; or a widow gentleman is it?’ asked Mrs. Martin.

‘Bachelor, I believe, ma’am. Mr. San Cleeve, making so bold, you’ve never faced him yet, I think?’

Mrs. Martin shook her head.

‘No; it was a piece of neglect. I hardly know how it happened,’ she said.

‘I am going to, this time,’ said Swithin, and turned the chat to other matters.

CHAPTER XXIII

Swithin could not sleep that night for thinking of his Viviette. Nothing told so significantly of the conduct of her first husband towards the poor lady as the abiding dread of him which was revealed in her by any sudden revival of his image or memory. But for that consideration her almost childlike terror at Swithin’s inadvertent disguise would have been ludicrous.

He waited anxiously through several following days for an opportunity of seeing her, but none was afforded. Her brother’s presence in the house sufficiently accounted for this. At length he ventured to write a note, requesting her to signal to him in a way she had done once or twice before, — by pulling down a blind in a particular window of the house, one of the few visible from the top of the Rings-Hill column; this to be done on any evening when she could see him after dinner on the terrace.

When he had levelled the glass at that window for five successive nights he beheld the blind in the position suggested. Three hours later, quite in the dusk, he repaired to the place of appointment.

‘My brother is away this evening,’ she explained, ‘and that’s why I can come out. He is only gone for a few hours, nor is he likely to go for longer just yet. He keeps himself a good deal in my company, which has made it unsafe for me to venture near you.’

‘Has he any suspicion?’

‘None, apparently. But he rather depresses me.’

‘How, Viviette?’ Swithin feared, from her manner, that this was something serious.

‘I would rather not tell.’

‘But — Well, never mind.’

‘Yes, Swithin, I will tell you. There should be no secrets between us. He urges upon me the necessity of marrying, day after day.’

‘For money and position, of course.’

‘Yes. But I take no notice. I let him go on.’

‘Really, this is sad!’ said the young man. ‘I must work harder than ever, or you will never be able to own me.’

‘O yes, in good time!’ she cheerfully replied.

‘I shall be very glad to have you always near me. I felt the gloom of our position keenly when I was obliged to disappear that night, without assuring you it was only I who stood there. Why were you so frightened at those old clothes I borrowed?’

‘Don’t ask, — don’t ask!’ she said, burying her face on his shoulder. ‘I don’t want to speak of that. There was something so ghastly and so uncanny in your putting on such garments that I wish you had been more thoughtful, and had left them alone.’

He assured her that he did not stop to consider whose they were. ‘By the way, they must be sent back,’ he said.

‘No; I never wish to see them again! I cannot help feeling that your putting them on was ominous.’

‘Nothing is ominous in serene philosophy,’ he said, kissing her. ‘Things are either causes, or they are not causes. When can you see me again?’

In such wise the hour passed away. The evening was typical of others which followed it at irregular intervals through the winter. And during the intenser months of the season frequent falls of snow lengthened, even more than other difficulties had done, the periods of isolation between the pair. Swithin adhered with all the more strictness to the letter of his promise not to intrude into the house, from his sense of her powerlessness to compel him to keep out should he choose to rebel. A student of the greatest forces in nature, he had, like many others of his sort, no personal force to speak of in a social point of view, mainly because he took no interest in human ranks and formulas; and hence he was as docile as a child in her hands wherever matters of that kind were concerned.

Her brother wintered at Welland; but whether because his experience of tropic climes had unfitted him for the brumal rigours of Britain, or for some other reason, he seldom showed himself out of doors, and Swithin caught but passing glimpses of him. Now and then Viviette’s impulsive affection would overcome her sense of risk, and she

would press Swithin to call on her at all costs. This he would by no means do. It was obvious to his more logical mind that the secrecy to which they had bound themselves must be kept in its fulness, or might as well be abandoned altogether.

He was now sadly exercised on the subject of his uncle's will. There had as yet been no pressing reasons for a full and candid reply to the solicitor who had communicated with him, owing to the fact that the payments were not to begin till Swithin was one-and-twenty; but time was going on, and something definite would have to be done soon. To own to his marriage and consequent disqualification for the bequest was easy in itself; but it involved telling at least one man what both Viviette and himself had great reluctance in telling anybody. Moreover he wished Viviette to know nothing of his loss in making her his wife. All he could think of doing for the present was to write a postponing letter to his uncle's lawyer, and wait events.

The one comfort of this dreary winter-time was his perception of a returning ability to work with the regularity and much of the spirit of earlier days.

* * * *

One bright night in April there was an eclipse of the moon, and Mr. Torkingham, by arrangement, brought to the observatory several labouring men and boys, to whom he had promised a sight of the phenomenon through the telescope. The coming confirmation, fixed for May, was again talked of; and St. Cleeve learnt from the parson that the Bishop had arranged to stay the night at the vicarage, and was to be invited to a grand luncheon at Welland House immediately after the ordinance.

This seemed like a going back into life again as regarded the mistress of that house; and St. Cleeve was a little surprised that, in his communications with Viviette, she had mentioned no such probability. The next day he walked round the mansion, wondering how in its present state any entertainment could be given therein.

He found that the shutters had been opened, which had restored an unexpected liveliness to the aspect of the windows. Two men were putting a chimney-pot on one of the chimney-stacks, and two more were scraping green mould from the front wall. He made no inquiries on that occasion. Three days later he strolled thitherward again. Now a great cleaning of window-panes was going on, Hezzy Biles and Sammy Blore being the operators, for which purpose their services must have been borrowed from the neighbouring farmer. Hezzy dashed water at the glass with a force that threatened to break it in, the broad face of Sammy being discernible inside, smiling at the onset. In addition to these, Anthony Green and another were weeding the gravel walks, and putting fresh plants into the flower-beds. Neither of these reasonable operations was a great undertaking, singly looked at; but the life Viviette had latterly led and the mood in which she had hitherto regarded the premises, rendered it somewhat significant. Swithin, however, was rather curious than concerned at the proceedings, and returned to his tower with feelings of interest not entirely confined to the worlds overhead.

Lady Constantine may or may not have seen him from the house; but the same evening, which was fine and dry, while he was occupying himself in the observatory with cleaning the eye-pieces of the equatorial, skull-cap on head, observing-jacket on, and in other ways primed for sweeping, the customary stealthy step on the winding staircase brought her form in due course into the rays of the bull's-eye lantern. The meeting was all the more pleasant to him from being unexpected, and he at once lit up a larger lamp in honour of the occasion.

'It is but a hasty visit,' she said when, after putting up her mouth to be kissed, she had seated herself in the low chair used for observations, panting a little with the labour of ascent. 'But I hope to be able to come more freely soon. My brother is still living on with me. Yes, he is going to stay until the confirmation is over. After the confirmation he will certainly leave. So good it is of you, dear, to please me by agreeing to the ceremony. The Bishop, you know, is going to lunch with us. It is a wonder he has promised to come, for he is a man averse to society, and mostly keeps entirely with the clergy on these confirmation tours, or circuits, or whatever they call them. But Mr. Torkingham's house is so very small, and mine is so close at hand, that this arrangement to relieve him of the fuss of one meal, at least, naturally suggested itself;

and the Bishop has fallen in with it very readily. How are you getting on with your observations? Have you not wanted me dreadfully, to write down notes?’

‘Well, I have been obliged to do without you, whether or no. See here, — how much I have done.’ And he showed her a book ruled in columns, headed ‘Object,’ ‘Right Ascension,’ ‘Declination,’ ‘Features,’ ‘Remarks,’ and so on.

She looked over this and other things, but her mind speedily winged its way back to the confirmation. ‘It is so new to me,’ she said, ‘to have persons coming to the house, that I feel rather anxious. I hope the luncheon will be a success.’

‘You know the Bishop?’ said Swithin.

‘I have not seen him for many years. I knew him when I was quite a girl, and he held the little living of Puddle-sub-Mixen, near us; but after that time, and ever since I have lived here, I have seen nothing of him. There has been no confirmation in this village, they say, for twenty years. The other bishop used to make the young men and women go to Warborne; he wouldn’t take the trouble to come to such an out-of-the-way parish as ours.’

‘This cleaning and preparation that I observe going on must be rather a tax upon you?’

‘My brother Louis sees to it, and, what is more, bears the expense.’

‘Your brother?’ said Swithin, with surprise.

‘Well, he insisted on doing so,’ she replied, in a hesitating, despondent tone. ‘He has been active in the whole matter, and was the first to suggest the invitation. I should not have thought of it.’

‘Well, I will hold aloof till it is all over.’

‘Thanks, dearest, for your considerateness. I wish it was not still advisable! But I shall see you on the day, and watch my own philosopher all through the service from the corner of my pew! . . . I hope you are well prepared for the rite, Swithin?’ she added, turning tenderly to him. ‘It would perhaps be advisable for you to give up this astronomy till the confirmation is over, in order to devote your attention exclusively to that more serious matter.’

‘More serious! Well, I will do the best I can. I am sorry to see that you are less interested in astronomy than you used to be, Viviette.’

‘No; it is only that these preparations for the Bishop unsettle my mind from study. Now put on your other coat and hat, and come with me a little way.’

CHAPTER XXIV

The morning of the confirmation was come. It was mid-May time, bringing with it weather not, perhaps, quite so blooming as that assumed to be natural to the month by the joyous poets of three hundred years ago; but a very tolerable, well-wearing May, that the average rustic would willingly have compounded for in lieu of Mays occasionally fairer, but usually more foul.

Among the larger shrubs and flowers which composed the outworks of the Welland gardens, the lilac, the laburnum, and the guelder-rose hung out their respective colours of purple, yellow, and white; whilst within these, belted round from every disturbing gale, rose the columbine, the peony, the larkspur, and the Solomon's seal. The animate things that moved amid this scene of colour were plodding bees, gadding butterflies, and numerous sauntering young feminine candidates for the impending confirmation, who, having gaily bedecked themselves for the ceremony, were enjoying their own appearance by walking about in twos and threes till it was time to start.

Swithin St. Cleeve, whose preparations were somewhat simpler than those of the village belles, waited till his grandmother and Hannah had set out, and then, locking the door, followed towards the distant church. On reaching the churchyard gate he met Mr. Torkingham, who shook hands with him in the manner of a man with several irons in the fire, and telling Swithin where to sit, disappeared to hunt up some candidates who had not yet made themselves visible.

Casting his eyes round for Viviette, and seeing nothing of her, Swithin went on to the church porch, and looked in. From the north side of the nave smiled a host of girls, gaily uniform in dress, age, and a temporary repression of their natural tendency to 'skip like a hare over the meshes of good counsel.' Their white muslin dresses, their round white caps, from beneath whose borders hair-knots and curls of various shades of brown escaped upon their low shoulders, as if against their will, lighted up the dark pews and grey stone-work to an unwonted warmth and life. On the south side were the young men and boys, — heavy, angular, and massive, as indeed was rather necessary, considering what they would have to bear at the hands of wind and weather before they returned to that mouldy nave for the last time.

Over the heads of all these he could see into the chancel to the square pew on the north side, which was attached to Welland House. There he discerned Lady Constantine already arrived, her brother Louis sitting by her side.

Swithin entered and seated himself at the end of a bench, and she, who had been on the watch, at once showed by subtle signs her consciousness of the presence of the young man who had reversed the ordained sequence of the Church services on her account. She appeared in black attire, though not strictly in mourning, a touch of red in her bonnet setting off the richness of her complexion without making her gay. Handsomest woman in the church she decidedly was; and yet a disinterested spectator who had known all the circumstances would probably have felt that, the future considered, Swithin's more natural mate would have been one of the muslin-clad maidens who were to be presented to the Bishop with him that day.

When the Bishop had arrived and gone into the chancel, and blown his nose, the congregation were sufficiently impressed by his presence to leave off looking at one another.

The Right Reverend Cuthbert Helmsdale, D.D., ninety-fourth occupant of the episcopal throne of the diocese, revealed himself to be a personage of dark complexion, whose darkness was thrown still further into prominence by the lawn protuberances

that now rose upon his two shoulders like the Eastern and Western hemispheres. In stature he seemed to be tall and imposing, but something of this aspect may have been derived from his robes.

The service was, as usual, of a length which severely tried the tarrying powers of the young people assembled; and it was not till the youth of all the other parishes had gone up that the turn came for the Welland bevy. Swithin and some older ones were nearly the last. When, at the heels of Mr. Torkingham, he passed Lady Constantine's pew, he lifted his eyes from the red lining of that gentleman's hood sufficiently high to catch hers. She was abstracted, tearful, regarding him with all the rapt mingling of religion, love, fervour, and hope which such women can feel at such times, and which men know nothing of. How fervidly she watched the Bishop place his hand on her beloved youth's head; how she saw the great episcopal ring glistening in the sun among Swithin's brown curls; how she waited to hear if Dr. Helmsdale uttered the form 'this thy child' which he used for the younger ones, or 'this thy servant' which he used for those older; and how, when he said, 'this thy child,' she felt a prick of conscience, like a person who had entrapped an innocent youth into marriage for her own gratification, till she remembered that she had raised his social position thereby, — all this could only have been told in its entirety by herself.

As for Swithin, he felt ashamed of his own utter lack of the high enthusiasm which beamed so eloquently from her eyes. When he passed her again, on the return journey from the Bishop to his seat, her face was warm with a blush which her brother might have observed had he regarded her.

Whether he had observed it or not, as soon as St. Cleeve had sat himself down again Louis Glanville turned and looked hard at the young astronomer. This was the first time that St. Cleeve and Viviette's brother had been face to face in a distinct light, their first meeting having occurred in the dusk of a railway-station. Swithin was not in the habit of noticing people's features; he scarcely ever observed any detail of physiognomy in his friends, a generalization from their whole aspect forming his idea of them; and he now only noted a young man of perhaps thirty, who lolled a good deal, and in whose small dark eyes seemed to be concentrated the activity that the rest of his frame decidedly lacked. This gentleman's eyes were henceforward, to the end of the service, continually fixed upon Swithin; but as this was their natural direction, from the position of his seat, there was no great strangeness in the circumstance.

Swithin wanted to say to Viviette, 'Now I hope you are pleased; I have conformed to your ideas of my duty, leaving my fitness out of consideration;' but as he could only see her bonnet and forehead it was not possible even to look the intelligence. He turned to his left hand, where the organ stood, with Miss Tabitha Lark seated behind it.

It being now sermon-time the youthful blower had fallen asleep over the handle of his bellows, and Tabitha pulled out her handkerchief intending to flap him awake with it. With the handkerchief tumbled out a whole family of unexpected articles: a silver thimble; a photograph; a little purse; a scent-bottle; some loose halfpence; nine green gooseberries; a key. They rolled to Swithin's feet, and, passively obeying his first

instinct, he picked up as many of the articles as he could find, and handed them to her amid the smiles of the neighbours.

Tabitha was half-dead with humiliation at such an event, happening under the very eyes of the Bishop on this glorious occasion; she turned pale as a sheet, and could hardly keep her seat. Fearing she might faint, Swithin, who had genuinely sympathized, bent over and whispered encouragingly, 'Don't mind it, Tabitha. Shall I take you out into the air?' She declined his offer, and presently the sermon came to an end.

Swithin lingered behind the rest of the congregation sufficiently long to see Lady Constantine, accompanied by her brother, the Bishop, the Bishop's chaplain, Mr. Torkingham, and several other clergy and ladies, enter to the grand luncheon by the door which admitted from the churchyard to the lawn of Welland House; the whole group talking with a vivacity all the more intense, as it seemed, from the recent two hours' enforced repression of their social qualities within the adjoining building.

The young man stood till he was left quite alone in the churchyard, and then went slowly homeward over the hill, perhaps a trifle depressed at the impossibility of being near Viviette in this her one day of gaiety, and joining in the conversation of those who surrounded her.

Not that he felt much jealousy of her situation, as his wife, in comparison with his own. He had so clearly understood from the beginning that, in the event of marriage, their outward lives were to run on as before, that to rebel now would have been unmanly in himself and cruel to her, by adding to embarrassments that were great enough already. His momentary doubt was of his own strength to achieve sufficiently high things to render him, in relation to her, other than a patronized young favourite, whom she had married at an immense sacrifice of position. Now, at twenty, he was doomed to isolation even from a wife; could it be that at, say thirty, he would be welcomed everywhere?

But with motion through the sun and air his mood assumed a lighter complexion, and on reaching home he remembered with interest that Venus was in a favourable aspect for observation that afternoon.

CHAPTER XXV

Meanwhile the interior of Welland House was rattling with the progress of the ecclesiastical luncheon.

The Bishop, who sat at Lady Constantine's side, seemed enchanted with her company, and from the beginning she engrossed his attention almost entirely. The truth was that the circumstance of her not having her whole soul centred on the success of the repast and the pleasure of Bishop Helmsdale, imparted to her, in a great measure, the mood to ensure both. Her brother Louis it was who had laid out the plan of entertaining the Bishop, to which she had assented but indifferently. She was secretly bound to another, on whose career she had staked all her happiness. Having thus other

interests she evinced to-day the ease of one who hazards nothing, and there was no sign of that preoccupation with housewifely contingencies which so often makes the hostess hardly recognizable as the charming woman who graced a friend's home the day before. In marrying Swithin Lady Constantine had played her card, — recklessly, impulsively, ruinously, perhaps; but she had played it; it could not be withdrawn; and she took this morning's luncheon as an episode that could result in nothing to her beyond the day's entertainment.

Hence, by that power of indirectness to accomplish in an hour what strenuous aiming will not effect in a life-time, she fascinated the Bishop to an unprecedented degree. A bachelor, he rejoiced in the commanding period of life that stretches between the time of waning impulse and the time of incipient dotage, when a woman can reach the male heart neither by awakening a young man's passion nor an old man's infatuation. He must be made to admire, or he can be made to do nothing. Unintentionally that is how Viviette operated on her guest.

Lady Constantine, to external view, was in a position to desire many things, and of a sort to desire them. She was obviously, by nature, impulsive to indiscretion. But instead of exhibiting activities to correspond, recently gratified affection lent to her manner just now a sweet serenity, a truly Christian contentment, which it puzzled the learned Bishop exceedingly to find in a warm young widow, and increased his interest in her every moment. Thus matters stood when the conversation veered round to the morning's confirmation.

'That was a singularly engaging young man who came up among Mr. Torkingham's candidates,' said the Bishop to her somewhat abruptly.

But abruptness does not catch a woman without her wit. 'Which one?' she said innocently.

'That youth with the "corn-coloured" hair, as a poet of the new school would call it, who sat just at the side of the organ. Do you know who he is?'

In answering Viviette showed a little nervousness, for the first time that day.

'O yes. He is the son of an unfortunate gentleman who was formerly curate here, — a Mr. St. Cleeve.'

'I never saw a handsomer young man in my life,' said the Bishop. Lady Constantine blushed. 'There was a lack of self-consciousness, too, in his manner of presenting himself, which very much won me. A Mr. St. Cleeve, do you say? A curate's son? His father must have been St. Cleeve of All Angels, whom I knew. How comes he to be staying on here? What is he doing?'

Mr. Torkingham, who kept one ear on the Bishop all the lunch-time, finding that Lady Constantine was not ready with an answer, hastened to reply: 'Your lordship is right. His father was an All Angels' man. The youth is rather to be pitied.'

'He was a man of talent,' affirmed the Bishop. 'But I quite lost sight of him.'

'He was curate to the late vicar,' resumed the parson, 'and was much liked by the parish: but, being erratic in his tastes and tendencies, he rashly contracted a marriage with the daughter of a farmer, and then quarrelled with the local gentry for not taking

up his wife. This lad was an only child. There was enough money to educate him, and he is sufficiently well provided for to be independent of the world so long as he is content to live here with great economy. But of course this gives him few opportunities of bettering himself.'

'Yes, naturally,' replied the Bishop of Melchester. 'Better have been left entirely dependent on himself. These half-incomes do men little good, unless they happen to be either weaklings or geniuses.'

Lady Constantine would have given the world to say, 'He is a genius, and the hope of my life;' but it would have been decidedly risky, and in another moment was unnecessary, for Mr. Torkingham said, 'There is a certain genius in this young man, I sometimes think.'

'Well, he really looks quite out of the common,' said the Bishop.

'Youthful genius is sometimes disappointing,' observed Viviette, not believing it in the least.

'Yes,' said the Bishop. 'Though it depends, Lady Constantine, on what you understand by disappointing. It may produce nothing visible to the world's eye, and yet may complete its development within to a very perfect degree. Objective achievements, though the only ones which are counted, are not the only ones that exist and have value; and I for one should be sorry to assert that, because a man of genius dies as unknown to the world as when he was born, he therefore was an instance of wasted material.'

Objective achievements were, however, those that Lady Constantine had a weakness for in the present case, and she asked her more experienced guest if he thought early development of a special talent a good sign in youth.

The Bishop thought it well that a particular bent should not show itself too early, lest disgust should result.

'Still,' argued Lady Constantine rather firmly (for she felt this opinion of the Bishop's to be one throwing doubt on Swithin), 'sustained fruition is compatible with early bias. Tycho Brahe showed quite a passion for the solar system when he was but a youth, and so did Kepler; and James Ferguson had a surprising knowledge of the stars by the time he was eleven or twelve.'

'Yes; sustained fruition,' conceded the Bishop (rather liking the words), 'is certainly compatible with early bias. Fenelon preached at fourteen.'

'He — Mr. St. Cleeve — is not in the church,' said Lady Constantine.

'He is a scientific young man, my lord,' explained Mr. Torkingham.

'An astronomer,' she added, with suppressed pride.

'An astronomer! Really, that makes him still more interesting than being handsome and the son of a man I knew. How and where does he study astronomy?'

'He has a beautiful observatory. He has made use of an old column that was erected on this manor to the memory of one of the Constantines. It has been very ingeniously adapted for his purpose, and he does very good work there. I believe he occasionally

sends up a paper to the Royal Society, or Greenwich, or somewhere, and to astronomical periodicals.'

'I should have had no idea, from his boyish look, that he had advanced so far,' the Bishop answered. 'And yet I saw on his face that within there was a book worth studying. His is a career I should very much like to watch.'

A thrill of pleasure chased through Lady Constantine's heart at this praise of her chosen one. It was an unwitting compliment to her taste and discernment in singling him out for her own, despite its temporary inexpediency.

Her brother Louis now spoke. 'I fancy he is as interested in one of his fellow-creatures as in the science of astronomy,' observed the cynic dryly.

'In whom?' said Lady Constantine quickly.

'In the fair maiden who sat at the organ, — a pretty girl, rather. I noticed a sort of by-play going on between them occasionally, during the sermon, which meant mating, if I am not mistaken.'

'She!' said Lady Constantine. 'She is only a village girl, a dairyman's daughter, — Tabitha Lark, who used to come to read to me.'

'She may be a savage, for all that I know: but there is something between those two young people, nevertheless.'

The Bishop looked as if he had allowed his interest in a stranger to carry him too far, and Mr. Torkingham was horrified at the irreverent and easy familiarity of Louis Glanville's talk in the presence of a consecrated bishop. As for Viviette, her tongue lost all its volubility. She felt quite faint at heart, and hardly knew how to control herself.

'I have never noticed anything of the sort,' said Mr. Torkingham.

'It would be a matter for regret,' said the Bishop, 'if he should follow his father in forming an attachment that would be a hindrance to him in any honourable career; though perhaps an early marriage, intrinsically considered, would not be bad for him. A youth who looks as if he had come straight from old Greece may be exposed to many temptations, should he go out into the world without a friend or counsellor to guide him.'

Despite her sudden jealousy Viviette's eyes grew moist at the picture of her innocent Swithin going into the world without a friend or counsellor. But she was sick in soul and disquieted still by Louis's dreadful remarks, who, unbeliever as he was in human virtue, could have no reason whatever for representing Swithin as engaged in a private love affair if such were not his honest impression.

She was so absorbed during the remainder of the luncheon that she did not even observe the kindly light that her presence was shedding on the right reverend ecclesiastic by her side. He reflected it back in tones duly mellowed by his position; the minor clergy caught up the rays thereof, and so the gentle influence played down the table.

The company soon departed when luncheon was over, and the remainder of the day passed in quietness, the Bishop being occupied in his room at the vicarage with writing letters or a sermon. Having a long journey before him the next day he had expressed a wish to be housed for the night without ceremony, and would have dined

alone with Mr. Torkingham but that, by a happy thought, Lady Constantine and her brother were asked to join them.

However, when Louis crossed the churchyard and entered the vicarage drawing-room at seven o'clock, his sister was not in his company. She was, he said, suffering from a slight headache, and much regretted that she was on that account unable to come. At this intelligence the social sparkle disappeared from the Bishop's eye, and he sat down to table, endeavouring to mould into the form of episcopal serenity an expression which was really one of common human disappointment.

In his simple statement Louis Glanville had by no means expressed all the circumstances which accompanied his sister's refusal, at the last moment, to dine at her neighbour's house. Louis had strongly urged her to bear up against her slight indisposition — if it were that, and not disinclination — and come along with him on just this one occasion, perhaps a more important episode in her life than she was aware of. Viviette thereupon knew quite well that he alluded to the favourable impression she was producing on the Bishop, notwithstanding that neither of them mentioned the Bishop's name. But she did not give way, though the argument waxed strong between them; and Louis left her in no very amiable mood, saying, 'I don't believe you have any more headache than I have, Viviette. It is some provoking whim of yours — nothing more.'

In this there was a substratum of truth. When her brother had left her, and she had seen him from the window entering the vicarage gate, Viviette seemed to be much relieved, and sat down in her bedroom till the evening grew dark, and only the lights shining through the trees from the parsonage dining-room revealed to the eye where that dwelling stood. Then she arose, and putting on the cloak she had used so many times before for the same purpose, she locked her bedroom door (to be supposed within, in case of the accidental approach of a servant), and let herself privately out of the house.

Lady Constantine paused for a moment under the vicarage windows, till she could sufficiently well hear the voices of the diners to be sure that they were actually within, and then went on her way, which was towards the Rings-Hill column. She appeared a mere spot, hardly distinguishable from the grass, as she crossed the open ground, and soon became absorbed in the black mass of the fir plantation.

Meanwhile the conversation at Mr. Torkingham's dinner-table was not of a highly exhilarating quality. The parson, in long self-communing during the afternoon, had decided that the Diocesan Synod, whose annual session at Melchester had occurred in the month previous, would afford a solid and unimpeachable subject to launch during the meal, whenever conversation flagged; and that it would be one likely to win the respect of his spiritual chieftain for himself as the introducer. Accordingly, in the further belief that you could not have too much of a good thing, Mr. Torkingham not only acted upon his idea, but at every pause rallied to the synod point with unbroken firmness. Everything which had been discussed at that last session — such as the introduction of the lay element into the councils of the church, the reconstitution of

the ecclesiastical courts, church patronage, the tithe question — was revived by Mr. Torkingham, and the excellent remarks which the Bishop had made in his addresses on those subjects were quoted back to him.

As for Bishop Helmsdale himself, his instincts seemed to be to allude in a debonair spirit to the incidents of the past day — to the flowers in Lady Constantine's beds, the date of her house — perhaps with a view of hearing a little more about their owner from Louis, who would very readily have followed the Bishop's lead had the parson allowed him room. But this Mr. Torkingham seldom did, and about half-past nine they prepared to separate.

Louis Glanville had risen from the table, and was standing by the window, looking out upon the sky, and privately yawning, the topics discussed having been hardly in his line.

'A fine night,' he said at last.

'I suppose our young astronomer is hard at work now,' said the Bishop, following the direction of Louis's glance towards the clear sky.

'Yes,' said the parson; 'he is very assiduous whenever the nights are good for observation. I have occasionally joined him in his tower, and looked through his telescope with great benefit to my ideas of celestial phenomena. I have not seen what he has been doing lately.'

'Suppose we stroll that way?' said Louis. 'Would you be interested in seeing the observatory, Bishop?'

'I am quite willing to go,' said the Bishop, 'if the distance is not too great. I should not be at all averse to making the acquaintance of so exceptional a young man as this Mr. St. Cleeve seems to be; and I have never seen the inside of an observatory in my life.'

The intention was no sooner formed than it was carried out, Mr. Torkingham leading the way.

CHAPTER XXVI

Half an hour before this time Swithin St. Cleeve had been sitting in his cabin at the base of the column, working out some figures from observations taken on preceding nights, with a view to a theory that he had in his head on the motions of certain so-called fixed stars.

The evening being a little chilly a small fire was burning in the stove, and this and the shaded lamp before him lent a remarkably cosy air to the chamber. He was awakened from his reveries by a scratching at the window-pane like that of the point of an ivy leaf, which he knew to be really caused by the tip of his sweetheart-wife's forefinger. He rose and opened the door to admit her, not without astonishment as to how she had been able to get away from her friends.

‘Dearest Viv, why, what’s the matter?’ he said, perceiving that her face, as the lamplight fell on it, was sad, and even stormy.

‘I thought I would run across to see you. I have heard something so — so — to your discredit, and I know it can’t be true! I know you are constancy itself; but your constancy produces strange effects in people’s eyes!’

‘Good heavens! Nobody has found us out — ’

‘No, no — it is not that. You know, Swithin, that I am always sincere, and willing to own if I am to blame in anything. Now will you prove to me that you are the same by owning some fault to me?’

‘Yes, dear, indeed; directly I can think of one worth owning.’

‘I wonder one does not rush upon your tongue in a moment!’

‘I confess that I am sufficiently a Pharisee not to experience that spontaneity.’

‘Swithin, don’t speak so affectedly, when you know so well what I mean! Is it nothing to you that, after all our vows for life, you have thought it right to — flirt with a village girl?’

‘O Viviette!’ interrupted Swithin, taking her hand, which was hot and trembling. ‘You who are full of noble and generous feelings, and regard me with devoted tenderness that has never been surpassed by woman, — how can you be so greatly at fault? I flirt, Viviette? By thinking that you injure yourself in my eyes. Why, I am so far from doing so that I continually pull myself up for watching you too jealously, as to-day, when I have been dreading the effect upon you of other company in my absence, and thinking that you rather shut the gates against me when you have big-wigs to entertain.’

‘Do you, Swithin?’ she cried. It was evident that the honest tone of his words was having a great effect in clearing away the clouds. She added with an uncertain smile, ‘But how can I believe that, after what was seen to-day? My brother, not knowing in the least that I had an iota of interest in you, told me that he witnessed the signs of an attachment between you and Tabitha Lark in church, this morning.’

‘Ah!’ cried Swithin, with a burst of laughter. ‘Now I know what you mean, and what has caused this misunderstanding! How good of you, Viviette, to come at once and have it out with me, instead of brooding over it with dark imaginings, and thinking bitter things of me, as many women would have done!’ He succinctly told the whole story of his little adventure with Tabitha that morning; and the sky was clear on both sides. ‘When shall I be able to claim you,’ he added, ‘and put an end to all such painful accidents as these?’

She partially sighed. Her perception of what the outside world was made of, latterly somewhat obscured by solitude and her lover’s company, had been revived to-day by her entertainment of the Bishop, clergymen, and, more particularly, clergymen’s wives; and it did not diminish her sense of the difficulties in Swithin’s path to see anew how little was thought of the greatest gifts, mental and spiritual, if they were not backed up by substantial temporalities. However, the pair made the best of their future that circumstances permitted, and the interview was at length drawing to a close when there came, without the slightest forewarning, a smart rat-tat-tat upon the little door.

‘O I am lost!’ said Viviette, seizing his arm. ‘Why was I so incautious?’

‘It is nobody of consequence,’ whispered Swithin assuringly. ‘Somebody from my grandmother, probably, to know when I am coming home.’

They were unperceived so far, for the only window which gave light to the hut was screened by a curtain. At that moment they heard the sound of their visitors’ voices, and, with a consternation as great as her own, Swithin discerned the tones of Mr. Torkingham and the Bishop of Melchester.

‘Where shall I get? What shall I do?’ said the poor lady, clasping her hands.

Swithin looked around the cabin, and a very little look was required to take in all its resources. At one end, as previously explained, were a table, stove, chair, cupboard, and so on; while the other was completely occupied by a diminutive Arabian bedstead, hung with curtains of pink-and-white chintz. On the inside of the bed there was a narrow channel, about a foot wide, between it and the wall of the hut. Into this cramped retreat Viviette slid herself, and stood trembling behind the curtains.

By this time the knock had been repeated more loudly, the light through the window-blind unhappily revealing the presence of some inmate. Swithin threw open the door, and Mr. Torkingham introduced his visitors.

The Bishop shook hands with the young man, told him he had known his father, and at Swithin’s invitation, weak as it was, entered the cabin, the vicar and Louis Glanville remaining on the threshold, not to inconveniently crowd the limited space within.

Bishop Helmsdale looked benignantly around the apartment, and said, ‘Quite a settlement in the backwoods — quite: far enough from the world to afford the votary of science the seclusion he needs, and not so far as to limit his resources. A hermit might apparently live here in as much solitude as in a primeval forest.’

‘His lordship has been good enough to express an interest in your studies,’ said Mr. Torkingham to St. Cleeve. ‘And we have come to ask you to let us see the observatory.’

‘With great pleasure,’ stammered Swithin.

‘Where is the observatory?’ inquired the Bishop, peering round again.

‘The staircase is just outside this door,’ Swithin answered. ‘I am at your lordship’s service, and will show you up at once.’

‘And this is your little bed, for use when you work late,’ said the Bishop.

‘Yes; I am afraid it is rather untidy,’ Swithin apologized.

‘And here are your books,’ the Bishop continued, turning to the table and the shaded lamp. ‘You take an observation at the top, I presume, and come down here to record your observations.’

The young man explained his precise processes as well as his state of mind would let him, and while he was doing so Mr. Torkingham and Louis waited patiently without, looking sometimes into the night, and sometimes through the door at the interlocutors, and listening to their scientific converse. When all had been exhibited here below, Swithin lit his lantern, and, inviting his visitors to follow, led the way up the column, experiencing no small sense of relief as soon as he heard the footsteps of all three

tramping on the stairs behind him. He knew very well that, once they were inside the spiral, Viviette was out of danger, her knowledge of the locality enabling her to find her way with perfect safety through the plantation, and into the park home.

At the top he uncovered his equatorial, and, for the first time at ease, explained to them its beauties, and revealed by its help the glories of those stars that were eligible for inspection. The Bishop spoke as intelligently as could be expected on a topic not peculiarly his own; but, somehow, he seemed rather more abstracted in manner now than when he had arrived. Swithin thought that perhaps the long clamber up the stairs, coming after a hard day's work, had taken his spontaneity out of him, and Mr. Torkingham was afraid that his lordship was getting bored. But this did not appear to be the case; for though he said little he stayed on some time longer, examining the construction of the dome after relinquishing the telescope; while occasionally Swithin caught the eyes of the Bishop fixed hard on him.

'Perhaps he sees some likeness of my father in me,' the young man thought; and the party making ready to leave at this time he conducted them to the bottom of the tower.

Swithin was not prepared for what followed their descent. All were standing at the foot of the staircase. The astronomer, lantern in hand, offered to show them the way out of the plantation, to which Mr. Torkingham replied that he knew the way very well, and would not trouble his young friend. He strode forward with the words, and Louis followed him, after waiting a moment and finding that the Bishop would not take the precedence. The latter and Swithin were thus left together for one moment, whereupon the Bishop turned.

'Mr. St. Cleeve,' he said in a strange voice, 'I should like to speak to you privately, before I leave, to-morrow morning. Can you meet me — let me see — in the churchyard, at half-past ten o'clock?'

'O yes, my lord, certainly,' said Swithin. And before he had recovered from his surprise the Bishop had joined the others in the shades of the plantation.

Swithin immediately opened the door of the hut, and scanned the nook behind the bed. As he had expected his bird had flown.

CHAPTER XXVII

All night the astronomer's mind was on the stretch with curiosity as to what the Bishop could wish to say to him. A dozen conjectures entered his brain, to be abandoned in turn as unlikely. That which finally seemed the most plausible was that the Bishop, having become interested in his pursuits, and entertaining friendly recollections of his father, was going to ask if he could do anything to help him on in the profession he had chosen. Should this be the case, thought the suddenly sanguine youth, it would seem like an encouragement to that spirit of firmness which had led him to reject his late uncle's offer because it involved the renunciation of Lady Constantine.

At last he fell asleep; and when he awoke it was so late that the hour was ready to solve what conjecture could not. After a hurried breakfast he paced across the fields, entering the churchyard by the south gate precisely at the appointed minute.

The inclosure was well adapted for a private interview, being bounded by bushes of laurel and alder nearly on all sides. He looked round; the Bishop was not there, nor any living creature save himself. Swithin sat down upon a tombstone to await Bishop Helmsdale's arrival.

While he sat he fancied he could hear voices in conversation not far off, and further attention convinced him that they came from Lady Constantine's lawn, which was divided from the churchyard by a high wall and shrubbery only. As the Bishop still delayed his coming, though the time was nearly eleven, and as the lady whose sweet voice mingled with those heard from the lawn was his personal property, Swithin became exceedingly curious to learn what was going on within that screened promenade. A way of doing so occurred to him. The key was in the church door; he opened it, entered, and ascended to the ringers' loft in the west tower. At the back of this was a window commanding a full view of Viviette's garden front.

The flowers were all in gayest bloom, and the creepers on the walls of the house were bursting into tufts of young green. A broad gravel-walk ran from end to end of the facade, terminating in a large conservatory. In the walk were three people pacing up and down. Lady Constantine's was the central figure, her brother being on one side of her, and on the other a stately form in a corded shovel-hat of glossy beaver and black breeches. This was the Bishop. Viviette carried over her shoulder a sunshade lined with red, which she twirled idly. They were laughing and chatting gaily, and when the group approached the churchyard many of their remarks entered the silence of the church tower through the ventilator of the window.

The conversation was general, yet interesting enough to Swithin. At length Louis stepped upon the grass and picked up something that had lain there, which turned out to be a bowl: throwing it forward he took a second, and bowled it towards the first, or jack. The Bishop, who seemed to be in a sprightly mood, followed suit, and bowled one in a curve towards the jack, turning and speaking to Lady Constantine as he concluded the feat. As she had not left the gravelled terrace he raised his voice, so that the words reached Swithin distinctly.

'Do you follow us?' he asked gaily.

'I am not skilful,' she said. 'I always bowl narrow.'

The Bishop meditatively paused.

'This moment reminds one of the scene in Richard the Second,' he said. 'I mean the Duke of York's garden, where the queen and her two ladies play, and the queen says

"What sport shall we devise here in this garden,
To drive away the heavy thought of care?"
To which her lady answers, "Madam, we'll play at bowls."

‘That’s an unfortunate quotation for you,’ said Lady Constantine; ‘for if I don’t forget, the queen declines, saying, “Twill make me think the world is full of rubs, and that my fortune runs against the bias.”’

‘Then I cite mal à propos. But it is an interesting old game, and might have been played at that very date on this very green.’

The Bishop lazily bowled another, and while he was doing it Viviette’s glance rose by accident to the church tower window, where she recognized Swithin’s face. Her surprise was only momentary; and waiting till both her companions’ backs were turned she smiled and blew him a kiss. In another minute she had another opportunity, and blew him another; afterwards blowing him one a third time.

Her blowings were put a stop to by the Bishop and Louis throwing down the bowls and rejoining her in the path, the house clock at the moment striking half-past eleven.

‘This is a fine way of keeping an engagement,’ said Swithin to himself. ‘I have waited an hour while you indulge in those trifles!’

He fumed, turned, and behold somebody was at his elbow: Tabitha Lark. Swithin started, and said, ‘How did you come here, Tabitha?’

‘In the course of my calling, Mr. St. Cleeve,’ said the smiling girl. ‘I come to practise on the organ. When I entered I saw you up here through the tower arch, and I crept up to see what you were looking at. The Bishop is a striking man, is he not?’

‘Yes, rather,’ said Swithin.

‘I think he is much devoted to Lady Constantine, and I am glad of it. Aren’t you?’

‘O yes — very,’ said Swithin, wondering if Tabitha had seen the tender little salutes between Lady Constantine and himself.

‘I don’t think she cares much for him,’ added Tabitha judicially. ‘Or, even if she does, she could be got away from him in no time by a younger man.’

‘Pooh, that’s nothing,’ said Swithin impatiently.

Tabitha then remarked that her blower had not come to time, and that she must go to look for him; upon which she descended the stairs, and left Swithin again alone.

A few minutes later the Bishop suddenly looked at his watch, Lady Constantine having withdrawn towards the house. Apparently apologizing to Louis the Bishop came down the terrace, and through the door into the churchyard. Swithin hastened downstairs and joined him in the path under the sunny wall of the aisle.

Their glances met, and it was with some consternation that Swithin beheld the change that a few short minutes had wrought in that episcopal countenance. On the lawn with Lady Constantine the rays of an almost perpetual smile had brightened his dark aspect like flowers in a shady place: now the smile was gone as completely as yesterday; the lines of his face were firm; his dark eyes and whiskers were overspread with gravity; and, as he gazed upon Swithin from the repose of his stable figure it was like an evangelized King of Spades come to have it out with the Knave of Hearts.

* * * *

To return for a moment to Louis Glanville. He had been somewhat struck with the abruptness of the Bishop's departure, and more particularly by the circumstance that he had gone away by the private door into the churchyard instead of by the regular exit on the other side. True, great men were known to suffer from absence of mind, and Bishop Helmsdale, having a dim sense that he had entered by that door yesterday, might have unconsciously turned thitherward now. Louis, upon the whole, thought little of the matter, and being now left quite alone on the lawn, he seated himself in an arbour and began smoking.

The arbour was situated against the churchyard wall. The atmosphere was as still as the air of a hot-house; only fourteen inches of brickwork divided Louis from the scene of the Bishop's interview with St. Cleeve, and as voices on the lawn had been audible to Swithin in the churchyard, voices in the churchyard could be heard without difficulty from that close corner of the lawn. No sooner had Louis lit a cigar than the dialogue began.

'Ah, you are here, St. Cleeve,' said the Bishop, hardly replying to Swithin's good morning. 'I fear I am a little late. Well, my request to you to meet me may have seemed somewhat unusual, seeing that we were strangers till a few hours ago.'

'I don't mind that, if your lordship wishes to see me.'

'I thought it best to see you regarding your confirmation yesterday; and my reason for taking a more active step with you than I should otherwise have done is that I have some interest in you through having known your father when we were undergraduates. His rooms were on the same staircase with mine at All Angels, and we were friendly till time and affairs separated us even more completely than usually happens. However, about your presenting yourself for confirmation.' (The Bishop's voice grew stern.) 'If I had known yesterday morning what I knew twelve hours later, I wouldn't have confirmed you at all.'

'Indeed, my lord!'

'Yes, I say it, and I mean it. I visited your observatory last night.'

'You did, my lord.'

'In inspecting it I noticed something which I may truly describe as extraordinary. I have had young men present themselves to me who turned out to be notoriously unfit, either from giddiness, from being profane or intemperate, or from some bad quality or other. But I never remember a case which equalled the cool culpability of this. While infringing the first principles of social decorum you might at least have respected the ordinance sufficiently to have stayed away from it altogether. Now I have sent for you here to see if a last entreaty and a direct appeal to your sense of manly uprightness will have any effect in inducing you to change your course of life.'

The voice of Swithin in his next remark showed how tremendously this attack of the Bishop had told upon his feelings. Louis, of course, did not know the reason why the words should have affected him precisely as they did; to any one in the secret the double embarrassment arising from misapprehended ethics and inability to set matters

right, because his word of secrecy to another was inviolable, would have accounted for the young man's emotion sufficiently well.

'I am very sorry your lordship should have seen anything objectionable,' said Swithin. 'May I ask what it was?'

'You know what it was. Something in your chamber, which forced me to the above conclusions. I disguised my feelings of sorrow at the time for obvious reasons, but I never in my whole life was so shocked!'

'At what, my lord?'

'At what I saw.'

'Pardon me, Bishop Helmsdale, but you said just now that we are strangers; so what you saw in my cabin concerns me only.'

'There I contradict you. Twenty-four hours ago that remark would have been plausible enough; but by presenting yourself for confirmation at my hands you have invited my investigation into your principles.'

Swithin sighed. 'I admit it,' he said.

'And what do I find them?'

'You say reprehensible. But you might at least let me hear the proof!'

'I can do more, sir. I can let you see it!'

There was a pause. Louis Glanville was so highly interested that he stood upon the seat of the arbour, and looked through the leafage over the wall. The Bishop had produced an article from his pocket.

'What is it?' said Swithin, labouriously scrutinizing the thing.

'Why, don't you see?' said the Bishop, holding it out between his finger and thumb in Swithin's face. 'A bracelet, — a coral bracelet. I found the wanton object on the bed in your cabin! And of the sex of the owner there can be no doubt. More than that, she was concealed behind the curtains, for I saw them move.' In the decision of his opinion the Bishop threw the coral bracelet down on a tombstone.

'Nobody was in my room, my lord, who had not a perfect right to be there,' said the younger man.

'Well, well, that's a matter of assertion. Now don't get into a passion, and say to me in your haste what you'll repent of saying afterwards.'

'I am not in a passion, I assure your lordship. I am too sad for passion.'

'Very well; that's a hopeful sign. Now I would ask you, as one man of another, do you think that to come to me, the Bishop of this large and important diocese, as you came yesterday, and pretend to be something that you are not, is quite upright conduct, leave alone religious? Think it over. We may never meet again. But bear in mind what your Bishop and spiritual head says to you, and see if you cannot mend before it is too late.'

Swithin was meek as Moses, but he tried to appear sturdy. 'My lord, I am in a difficult position,' he said mournfully; 'how difficult, nobody but myself can tell. I cannot explain; there are insuperable reasons against it. But will you take my word of

assurance that I am not so bad as I seem? Some day I will prove it. Till then I only ask you to suspend your judgment on me.'

The Bishop shook his head incredulously and went towards the vicarage, as if he had lost his hearing. Swithin followed him with his eyes, and Louis followed the direction of Swithin's. Before the Bishop had reached the vicarage entrance Lady Constantine crossed in front of him. She had a basket on her arm, and was, in fact, going to visit some of the poorer cottages. Who could believe the Bishop now to be the same man that he had been a moment before? The darkness left his face as if he had come out of a cave; his look was all sweetness, and shine, and gaiety, as he again greeted Viviette.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The conversation which arose between the Bishop and Lady Constantine was of that lively and reproductive kind which cannot be ended during any reasonable halt of two people going in opposite directions. He turned, and walked with her along the laurel-screened lane that bordered the churchyard, till their voices died away in the distance. Swithin then aroused himself from his thoughtful regard of them, and went out of the churchyard by another gate.

Seeing himself now to be left alone on the scene, Louis Glanville descended from his post of observation in the arbour. He came through the private doorway, and on to that spot among the graves where the Bishop and St. Cleeve had conversed. On the tombstone still lay the coral bracelet which Dr. Helmsdale had flung down there in his indignation; for the agitated, introspective mood into which Swithin had been thrown had banished from his mind all thought of securing the trinket and putting it in his pocket.

Louis picked up the little red scandal-breeding thing, and while walking on with it in his hand he observed Tabitha Lark approaching the church, in company with the young blower whom she had gone in search of to inspire her organ-practising within. Louis immediately put together, with that rare diplomatic keenness of which he was proud, the little scene he had witnessed between Tabitha and Swithin during the confirmation, and the Bishop's stern statement as to where he had found the bracelet. He had no longer any doubt that it belonged to her.

'Poor girl!' he said to himself, and sang in an undertone —

'Tra deri, dera,

L'histoire n'est pas nouvelle!

When she drew nearer Louis called her by name. She sent the boy into the church, and came forward, blushing at having been called by so fine a gentleman. Louis held out the bracelet.

'Here is something I have found, or somebody else has found,' he said to her. 'I won't state where. Put it away, and say no more about it. I will not mention it either.'

Now go on into the church where you are going, and may Heaven have mercy on your soul, my dear.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Tabitha, with some perplexity, yet inclined to be pleased, and only recognizing in the situation the fact that Lady Constantine's humorous brother was making her a present.

'You are much obliged to me?'

'O yes!'

'Well, Miss Lark, I've discovered a secret, you see.'

'What may that be, Mr. Glanville?'

'That you are in love.'

'I don't admit it, sir. Who told you so?'

'Nobody. Only I put two and two together. Now take my advice. Beware of lovers! They are a bad lot, and bring young women to tears.'

'Some do, I dare say. But some don't.'

'And you think that in your particular case the latter alternative will hold good? We generally think we shall be lucky ourselves, though all the world before us, in the same situation, have been otherwise.'

'O yes, or we should die outright of despair.'

'Well, I don't think you will be lucky in your case.'

'Please how do you know so much, since my case has not yet arrived?' asked Tabitha, tossing her head a little disdainfully, but less than she might have done if he had not obtained a charter for his discourse by giving her the bracelet.

'Fie, Tabitha!'

'I tell you it has not arrived!' she said, with some anger. 'I have not got a lover, and everybody knows I haven't, and it's an insinuating thing for you to say so!'

Louis laughed, thinking how natural it was that a girl should so emphatically deny circumstances that would not bear curious inquiry.

'Why, of course I meant myself,' he said soothingly. 'So, then, you will not accept me?'

'I didn't know you meant yourself,' she replied. 'But I won't accept you. And I think you ought not to jest on such subjects.'

'Well, perhaps not. However, don't let the Bishop see your bracelet, and all will be well. But mind, lovers are deceivers.'

Tabitha laughed, and they parted, the girl entering the church. She had been feeling almost certain that, having accidentally found the bracelet somewhere, he had presented it in a whim to her as the first girl he met. Yet now she began to have momentary doubts whether he had not been labouring under a mistake, and had imagined her to be the owner. The bracelet was not valuable; it was, in fact, a mere toy, — the pair of which this was one being a little present made to Lady Constantine by Swithin on the day of their marriage; and she had not worn them with sufficient frequency out of doors for Tabitha to recognize either as positively her ladyship's. But when, out of sight of the blower, the girl momentarily tried it on, in a corner by the organ, it seemed

to her that the ornament was possibly Lady Constantine's. Now that the pink beads shone before her eyes on her own arm she remembered having seen a bracelet with just such an effect gracing the wrist of Lady Constantine upon one occasion. A temporary self-surrender to the sophism that if Mr. Louis Glanville chose to give away anything belonging to his sister, she, Tabitha, had a right to take it without question, was soon checked by a resolve to carry the tempting strings of coral to her ladyship that evening, and inquire the truth about them. This decided on she slipped the bracelet into her pocket, and played her voluntaries with a light heart.

* * * *

Bishop Helmsdale did not tear himself away from Welland till about two o'clock that afternoon, which was three hours later than he had intended to leave. It was with a feeling of relief that Swithin, looking from the top of the tower, saw the carriage drive out from the vicarage into the turnpike road, and whirl the right reverend gentleman again towards Warborne. The coast being now clear of him Swithin meditated how to see Viviette, and explain what had happened. With this in view he waited where he was till evening came on.

Meanwhile Lady Constantine and her brother dined by themselves at Welland House. They had not met since the morning, and as soon as they were left alone Louis said, 'You have done very well so far; but you might have been a little warmer.'

'Done well?' she asked, with surprise.

'Yes, with the Bishop. The difficult question is how to follow up our advantage. How are you to keep yourself in sight of him?'

'Heavens, Louis! You don't seriously mean that the Bishop of Melchester has any feelings for me other than friendly?'

'Viviette, this is affectation. You know he has as well as I do.'

She sighed. 'Yes,' she said. 'I own I had a suspicion of the same thing. What a misfortune!'

'A misfortune? Surely the world is turned upside down! You will drive me to despair about our future if you see things so awry. Exert yourself to do something, so as to make of this accident a stepping-stone to higher things. The gentleman will give us the slip if we don't pursue the friendship at once.'

'I cannot have you talk like this,' she cried impatiently. 'I have no more thought of the Bishop than I have of the Pope. I would much rather not have had him here to lunch at all. You said it would be necessary to do it, and an opportunity, and I thought it my duty to show some hospitality when he was coming so near, Mr. Torkingham's house being so small. But of course I understood that the opportunity would be one for you in getting to know him, your prospects being so indefinite at present; not one for me.'

'If you don't follow up this chance of being spiritual queen of Melchester, you will never have another of being anything. Mind this, Viviette: you are not so young as you were. You are getting on to be a middle-aged woman, and your black hair is precisely of the sort which time quickly turns grey. You must make up your mind to grizzled bachelors or widowers. Young marriageable men won't look at you; or if they do just now, in a year or two more they'll despise you as an antiquated party.'

Lady Constantine perceptibly paled. 'Young men what?' she asked. 'Say that again.'

'I said it was no use to think of young men; they won't look at you much longer; or if they do, it will be to look away again very quickly.'

'You imply that if I were to marry a man younger than myself he would speedily acquire a contempt for me? How much younger must a man be than his wife — to get that feeling for her?' She was resting her elbow on the chair as she faintly spoke the words, and covered her eyes with her hand.

‘An exceedingly small number of years,’ said Louis drily. ‘Now the Bishop is at least fifteen years older than you, and on that account, no less than on others, is an excellent match. You would be head of the church in this diocese: what more can you require after these years of miserable obscurity? In addition, you would escape that minor thorn in the flesh of bishops’ wives, of being only “Mrs.” while their husbands are peers.’

She was not listening; his previous observation still detained her thoughts.

‘Louis,’ she said, ‘in the case of a woman marrying a man much younger than herself, does he get to dislike her, even if there has been a social advantage to him in the union?’

‘Yes, — not a whit less. Ask any person of experience. But what of that? Let’s talk of our own affairs. You say you have no thought of the Bishop. And yet if he had stayed here another day or two he would have proposed to you straight off.’

‘Seriously, Louis, I could not accept him.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t love him.’

‘Oh, oh, I like those words!’ cried Louis, throwing himself back in his chair and looking at the ceiling in satirical enjoyment. ‘A woman who at two-and-twenty married for convenience, at thirty talks of not marrying without love; the rule of inverse, that is, in which more requires less, and less requires more. As your only brother, older than yourself, and more experienced, I insist that you encourage the Bishop.’

‘Don’t quarrel with me, Louis!’ she said piteously. ‘We don’t know that he thinks anything of me, — we only guess.’

‘I know it, — and you shall hear how I know. I am of a curious and conjectural nature, as you are aware. Last night, when everybody had gone to bed, I stepped out for a five minutes’ smoke on the lawn, and walked down to where you get near the vicarage windows. While I was there in the dark one of them opened, and Bishop Helmsdale leant out. The illuminated oblong of your window shone him full in the face between the trees, and presently your shadow crossed it. He waved his hand, and murmured some tender words, though what they were exactly I could not hear.’

‘What a vague, imaginary story, — as if he could know my shadow! Besides, a man of the Bishop’s dignity wouldn’t have done such a thing. When I knew him as a younger man he was not at all romantic, and he’s not likely to have grown so now.’

‘That’s just what he is likely to have done. No lover is so extreme a specimen of the species as an old lover. Come, Viviette, no more of this fencing. I have entered into the project heart and soul — so much that I have postponed my departure till the matter is well under way.’

‘Louis — my dear Louis — you will bring me into some disagreeable position!’ said she, clasping her hands. ‘I do entreat you not to interfere or do anything rash about me. The step is impossible. I have something to tell you some day. I must live on, and endure — ’

‘Everything except this penury,’ replied Louis, unmoved. ‘Come, I have begun the campaign by inviting Bishop Helmsdale, and I’ll take the responsibility of carrying it on. All I ask of you is not to make a ninny of yourself. Come, give me your promise!’

‘No, I cannot, — I don’t know how to! I only know one thing, — that I am in no hurry — ’

‘“No hurry” be hanged! Agree, like a good sister, to charm the Bishop.’

‘I must consider!’ she replied, with perturbed evasiveness.

It being a fine evening Louis went out of the house to enjoy his cigar in the shrubbery. On reaching his favourite seat he found he had left his cigar-case behind him; he immediately returned for it. When he approached the window by which he had emerged he saw Swithin St. Cleeve standing there in the dusk, talking to Viviette inside.

St. Cleeve’s back was towards Louis, but, whether at a signal from her or by accident, he quickly turned and recognized Glanville; whereupon raising his hat to Lady Constantine the young man passed along the terrace-walk and out by the churchyard door.

Louis rejoined his sister. ‘I didn’t know you allowed your lawn to be a public thoroughfare for the parish,’ he said.

‘I am not exclusive, especially since I have been so poor,’ replied she.

‘Then do you let everybody pass this way, or only that illustrious youth because he is so good-looking?’

‘I have no strict rule in the case. Mr. St. Cleeve is an acquaintance of mine, and he can certainly come here if he chooses.’ Her colour rose somewhat, and she spoke warmly.

Louis was too cautious a bird to reveal to her what had suddenly dawned upon his mind — that his sister, in common with the (to his thinking) unhappy Tabitha Lark, had been foolish enough to get interested in this phenomenon of the parish, this scientific Adonis. But he resolved to cure at once her tender feeling, if it existed, by letting out a secret which would inflame her dignity against the weakness.

‘A good-looking young man,’ he said, with his eyes where Swithin had vanished. ‘But not so good as he looks. In fact a regular young sinner.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh, only a little feature I discovered in St. Cleeve’s history. But I suppose he has a right to sow his wild oats as well as other young men.’

‘Tell me what you allude to, — do, Louis.’

‘It is hardly fit that I should. However, the case is amusing enough. I was sitting in the arbour to-day, and was an unwilling listener to the oddest interview I ever heard of. Our friend the Bishop discovered, when we visited the observatory last night, that our astronomer was not alone in his seclusion. A lady shared his romantic cabin with him; and finding this, the Bishop naturally enough felt that the ordinance of confirmation had been profaned. So his lordship sent for Master Swithin this morning, and meeting him in the churchyard read him such an excommunicating lecture as I warrant he won’t forget in his lifetime. Ha-ha-ha! ‘Twas very good, — very.’

He watched her face narrowly while he spoke with such seeming carelessness. Instead of the agitation of jealousy that he had expected to be aroused by this hint of another woman in the case, there was a curious expression, more like embarrassment than anything else which might have been fairly attributed to the subject. 'Can it be that I am mistaken?' he asked himself.

The possibility that he might be mistaken restored Louis to good-humour, and lights having been brought he sat with his sister for some time, talking with purpose of Swithin's low rank on one side, and the sordid struggles that might be in store for him. St. Cleeve being in the unhappy case of deriving his existence through two channels of society, it resulted that he seemed to belong to either this or that according to the altitude of the beholder. Louis threw the light entirely on Swithin's agricultural side, bringing out old Mrs. Martin and her connections and her ways of life with luminous distinctness, till Lady Constantine became greatly depressed. She, in her hopefulness, had almost forgotten, latterly, that the bucolic element, so incisively represented by Messrs. Hezzy Biles, Haymoss Fry, Sammy Blore, and the rest entered into his condition at all; to her he had been the son of his academic father alone.

But she would not reveal the depression to which she had been subjected by this resuscitation of the homely half of poor Swithin, presently putting an end to the subject by walking hither and thither about the room.

'What have you lost?' said Louis, observing her movements.

'Nothing of consequence, — a bracelet.'

'Coral?' he inquired calmly.

'Yes. How did you know it was coral? You have never seen it, have you?'

He was about to make answer; but the amazed enlightenment which her announcement had produced in him through knowing where the Bishop had found such an article, led him to reconsider himself. Then, like an astute man, by no means sure of the dimensions of the intrigue he might be uncovering, he said carelessly, 'I found such a one in the churchyard to-day. But I thought it appeared to be of no great rarity, and I gave it to one of the village girls who was passing by.'

'Did she take it? Who was she?' said the unsuspecting Viviette.

'Really, I don't remember. I suppose it is of no consequence?'

'O no; its value is nothing, comparatively. It was only one of a pair such as young girls wear.' Lady Constantine could not add that, in spite of this, she herself valued it as being Swithin's present, and the best he could afford.

Panic-struck by his ruminations, although revealing nothing by his manner, Louis soon after went up to his room, professedly to write letters. He gave vent to a low whistle when he was out of hearing. He of course remembered perfectly well to whom he had given the corals, and resolved to seek out Tabitha the next morning to ascertain whether she could possibly have owned such a trinket as well as his sister, — which at present he very greatly doubted, though fervently hoping that she might.

CHAPTER XXIX

The effect upon Swithin of the interview with the Bishop had been a very marked one. He felt that he had good ground for resenting that dignitary's tone in haughtily assuming that all must be sinful which at the first blush appeared to be so, and in narrowly refusing a young man the benefit of a single doubt. Swithin's assurance that he would be able to explain all some day had been taken in contemptuous incredulity.

'He may be as virtuous as his prototype Timothy; but he's an opinionated old fogey all the same,' said St. Cleeve petulantly.

Yet, on the other hand, Swithin's nature was so fresh and ingenuous, notwithstanding that recent affairs had somewhat denaturalised him, that for a man in the Bishop's position to think him immoral was almost as overwhelming as if he had actually been so, and at moments he could scarcely bear existence under so gross a suspicion. What was his union with Lady Constantine worth to him when, by reason of it, he was thought a reprobate by almost the only man who had professed to take an interest in him?

Certainly, by contrast with his air-built image of himself as a worthy astronomer, received by all the world, and the envied husband of Viviette, the present imputation was humiliating. The glorious light of this tender and refined passion seemed to have become debased to burlesque hues by pure accident, and his æsthetic no less than his ethic taste was offended by such an anti-climax. He who had soared amid the remotest grandeurs of nature had been taken to task on a rudimentary question of morals, which had never been a question with him at all. This was what the exigencies of an awkward attachment had brought him to; but he blamed the circumstances, and not for one moment Lady Constantine.

Having now set his heart against a longer concealment he was disposed to think that an excellent way of beginning a revelation of their marriage would be by writing a confidential letter to the Bishop, detailing the whole case. But it was impossible to do this on his own responsibility. He still recognized the understanding entered into with Viviette, before the marriage, to be as binding as ever, — that the initiative in disclosing their union should come from her. Yet he hardly doubted that she would take that initiative when he told her of his extraordinary reprimand in the churchyard.

This was what he had come to do when Louis saw him standing at the window. But before he had said half-a-dozen words to Viviette she motioned him to go on, which he mechanically did, ere he could sufficiently collect his thoughts on its advisability or otherwise. He did not, however, go far. While Louis and his sister were discussing him in the drawing-room he lingered musing in the churchyard, hoping that she might be able to escape and join him in the consultation he so earnestly desired.

She at last found opportunity to do this. As soon as Louis had left the room and shut himself in upstairs she ran out by the window in the direction Swithin had taken. When her footsteps began crunching on the gravel he came forward from the churchyard door.

They embraced each other in haste, and then, in a few short panting words, she explained to him that her brother had heard and witnessed the interview on that spot between himself and the Bishop, and had told her the substance of the Bishop's accusation, not knowing she was the woman in the cabin.

'And what I cannot understand is this,' she added; 'how did the Bishop discover that the person behind the bed-curtains was a woman and not a man?'

Swithin explained that the Bishop had found the bracelet on the bed, and had brought it to him in the churchyard.

'O Swithin, what do you say? Found the coral bracelet? What did you do with it?'

Swithin clapped his hand to his pocket.

'Dear me! I recollect — I left it where it lay on Reuben Heath's tombstone.'

'Oh, my dear, dear Swithin!' she cried miserably. 'You have compromised me by your forgetfulness. I have claimed the article as mine. My brother did not tell me that the Bishop brought it from the cabin. What can I, can I do, that neither the Bishop nor my brother may conclude I was the woman there?'

'But if we announce our marriage —'

'Even as your wife, the position was too undignified — too I don't know what — for me ever to admit that I was there! Right or wrong, I must declare the bracelet was not mine. Such an escapade — why, it would make me ridiculous in the county; and anything rather than that!'

'I was in hope that you would agree to let our marriage be known,' said Swithin, with some disappointment. 'I thought that these circumstances would make the reason for doing so doubly strong.'

'Yes. But there are, alas, reasons against it still stronger! Let me have my way.'

'Certainly, dearest. I promised that before you agreed to be mine. My reputation — what is it! Perhaps I shall be dead and forgotten before the next transit of Venus!'

She soothed him tenderly, but could not tell him why she felt the reasons against any announcement as yet to be stronger than those in favour of it. How could she, when her feeling had been cautiously fed and developed by her brother Louis's unvarnished exhibition of Swithin's material position in the eyes of the world? — that of a young man, the scion of a family of farmers recently her tenants, living at the homestead with his grandmother, Mrs. Martin.

To soften her refusal she said in declaring it, 'One concession, Swithin, I certainly will make. I will see you oftener. I will come to the cabin and tower frequently; and will contrive, too, that you come to the house occasionally. During the last winter we passed whole weeks without meeting; don't let us allow that to happen again.'

'Very well, dearest,' said Swithin good-humouredly. 'I don't care so terribly much for the old man's opinion of me, after all. For the present, then, let things be as they are.'

Nevertheless, the youth felt her refusal more than he owned; but the unequal temperament of Swithin's age, so soon depressed on his own account, was also soon to

recover on hers, and it was with almost a child's forgetfulness of the past that he took her view of the case.

When he was gone she hastily re-entered the house. Her brother had not reappeared from upstairs; but she was informed that Tabitha Lark was waiting to see her, if her ladyship would pardon the said Tabitha for coming so late. Lady Constantine made no objection, and saw the young girl at once.

When Lady Constantine entered the waiting-room behold, in Tabitha's outstretched hand lay the coral ornament which had been causing Viviette so much anxiety.

'I guessed, on second thoughts, that it was yours, my lady,' said Tabitha, with rather a frightened face; 'and so I have brought it back.'

'But how did you come by it, Tabitha?'

'Mr. Glanville gave it to me; he must have thought it was mine. I took it, fancying at the moment that he handed it to me because I happened to come by first after he had found it.'

Lady Constantine saw how the situation might be improved so as to effect her deliverance from this troublesome little web of evidence.

'Oh, you can keep it,' she said brightly. 'It was very good of you to bring it back. But keep it for your very own. Take Mr. Glanville at his word, and don't explain. And, Tabitha, divide the strands into two bracelets; there are enough of them to make a pair.'

The next morning, in pursuance of his resolution, Louis wandered round the grounds till he saw the girl for whom he was waiting enter the church. He accosted her over the wall. But, puzzling to view, a coral bracelet blushed on each of her young arms, for she had promptly carried out the suggestion of Lady Constantine.

'You are wearing it, I see, Tabitha, with the other,' he murmured. 'Then you mean to keep it?'

'Yes, I mean to keep it.'

'You are sure it is not Lady Constantine's? I find she has one like it.'

'Quite sure. But you had better take it to her, sir, and ask her,' said the saucy girl.

'Oh, no; that's not necessary,' replied Louis, considerably shaken in his convictions.

When Louis met his sister, a short time after, he did not catch her, as he had intended to do, by saying suddenly, 'I have found your bracelet. I know who has got it.'

'You cannot have found it,' she replied quietly, 'for I have discovered that it was never lost,' and stretching out both her hands she revealed one on each, Viviette having performed the same operation with her remaining bracelet that she had advised Tabitha to do with the other.

Louis was mystified, but by no means convinced. In spite of this attempt to hoodwink him his mind returned to the subject every hour of the day. There was no doubt that either Tabitha or Viviette had been with Swithin in the cabin. He recapitulated every case that had occurred during his visit to Welland in which his sister's manner had been of a colour to justify the suspicion that it was she. There was that strange

incident in the corridor, when she had screamed at what she described to be a shadowy resemblance to her late husband; how very improbable that this fancy should have been the only cause of her agitation! Then he had noticed, during Swithin's confirmation, a blush upon her cheek when he passed her on his way to the Bishop, and the fervour in her glance during the few moments of the imposition of hands. Then he suddenly recalled the night at the railway station, when the accident with the whip took place, and how, when he reached Welland House an hour later, he had found no Viviette there. Running thus from incident to incident he increased his suspicions without being able to cull from the circumstances anything amounting to evidence; but evidence he now determined to acquire without saying a word to any one.

His plan was of a cruel kind: to set a trap into which the pair would blindly walk if any secret understanding existed between them of the nature he suspected.

CHAPTER XXX

Louis began his stratagem by calling at the tower one afternoon, as if on the impulse of the moment.

After a friendly chat with Swithin, whom he found there (having watched him enter), Louis invited the young man to dine the same evening at the House, that he might have an opportunity of showing him some interesting old scientific works in folio, which, according to Louis's account, he had stumbled on in the library. Louis set no great bait for St. Cleeve in this statement, for old science was not old art which, having perfected itself, has died and left its secret hidden in its remains. But Swithin was a responsive fellow, and readily agreed to come; being, moreover, always glad of a chance of meeting Viviette en famille. He hoped to tell her of a scheme that had lately suggested itself to him as likely to benefit them both: that he should go away for a while, and endeavour to raise sufficient funds to visit the great observatories of Europe, with an eye to a post in one of them. Hitherto the only bar to the plan had been the exceeding narrowness of his income, which, though sufficient for his present life, was absolutely inadequate to the requirements of a travelling astronomer.

Meanwhile Louis Glanville had returned to the House and told his sister in the most innocent manner that he had been in the company of St. Cleeve that afternoon, getting a few wrinkles on astronomy; that they had grown so friendly over the fascinating subject as to leave him no alternative but to invite St. Cleeve to dine at Welland the same evening, with a view to certain researches in the library afterwards.

'I could quite make allowances for any youthful errors into which he may have been betrayed,' Louis continued sententiously, 'since, for a scientist, he is really admirable. No doubt the Bishop's caution will not be lost upon him; and as for his birth and connections, — those he can't help.'

Lady Constantine showed such alacrity in adopting the idea of having Swithin to dinner, and she ignored his 'youthful errors' so completely, as almost to betray herself.

In fulfilment of her promise to see him oftener she had been intending to run across to Swithin on that identical evening. Now the trouble would be saved in a very delightful way, by the exercise of a little hospitality which Viviette herself would not have dared to suggest.

Dinner-time came and with it Swithin, exhibiting rather a blushing and nervous manner that was, unfortunately, more likely to betray their cause than was Viviette's own more practised bearing. Throughout the meal Louis sat like a spider in the corner of his web, observing them narrowly, and at moments flinging out an artful thread here and there, with a view to their entanglement. But they underwent the ordeal marvellously well. Perhaps the actual tie between them, through being so much closer and of so much more practical a nature than even their critic supposed it, was in itself a protection against their exhibiting that ultra-reciprocity of manner which, if they had been merely lovers, might have betrayed them.

After dinner the trio duly adjourned to the library as had been planned, and the volumes were brought forth by Louis with the zest of a bibliophile. Swithin had seen most of them before, and thought but little of them; but the pleasure of staying in the house made him welcome any reason for doing so, and he willingly looked at whatever was put before him, from Bertius's Ptolemy to Rees's Cyclopædia.

The evening thus passed away, and it began to grow late. Swithin who, among other things, had planned to go to Greenwich next day to view the Royal Observatory, would every now and then start up and prepare to leave for home, when Glanville would unearth some other volume and so detain him yet another half-hour.

'By George!' he said, looking at the clock when Swithin was at last really about to depart. 'I didn't know it was so late. Why not stay here to-night, St. Cleeve? It is very dark, and the way to your place is an awkward cross-cut over the fields.'

'It would not inconvenience us at all, Mr. St. Cleeve, if you would care to stay,' said Lady Constantine.

'I am afraid — the fact is, I wanted to take an observation at twenty minutes past two,' began Swithin.

'Oh, now, never mind your observation,' said Louis. 'That's only an excuse. Do that to-morrow night. Now you will stay. It is settled. Viviette, say he must stay, and we'll have another hour of these charming intellectual researches.'

Viviette obeyed with delightful ease. 'Do stay, Mr St. Cleeve!' she said sweetly.

'Well, in truth I can do without the observation,' replied the young man, as he gave way. 'It is not of the greatest consequence.'

Thus it was arranged; but the researches among the tomes were not prolonged to the extent that Louis had suggested. In three-quarters of an hour from that time they had all retired to their respective rooms; Lady Constantine's being on one side of the west corridor, Swithin's opposite, and Louis's at the further end.

Had a person followed Louis when he withdrew, that watcher would have discovered, on peeping through the key-hole of his door, that he was engaged in one of the oddest of occupations for such a man, — sweeping down from the ceiling, by means of a

walking-cane, a long cobweb which lingered on high in the corner. Keeping it stretched upon the cane he gently opened the door, and set the candle in such a position on the mat that the light shone down the corridor. Thus guided by its rays he passed out slipperless, till he reached the door of St. Cleeve's room, where he applied the dangling spider's thread in such a manner that it stretched across like a tight-rope from jamb to jamb, barring, in its fragile way, entrance and egress. The operation completed he retired again, and, extinguishing his light, went through his bedroom window out upon the flat roof of the portico to which it gave access.

Here Louis made himself comfortable in his chair and smoking-cap, enjoying the fragrance of a cigar for something like half-an-hour. His position commanded a view of the two windows of Lady Constantine's room, and from these a dim light shone continuously. Having the window partly open at his back, and the door of his room also scarcely closed, his ear retained a fair command of any noises that might be made.

In due time faint movements became audible; whereupon, returning to his room, he re-entered the corridor and listened intently. All was silent again, and darkness reigned from end to end. Glanville, however, groped his way along the passage till he again reached Swithin's door, where he examined, by the light of a wax-match he had brought, the condition of the spider's thread. It was gone; somebody had carried it off bodily, as Samson carried off the pin and the web. In other words, a person had passed through the door.

Still holding the faint wax-light in his hand Louis turned to the door of Lady Constantine's chamber, where he observed first that, though it was pushed together so as to appear fastened to cursory view, the door was not really closed by about a quarter of an inch. He dropped his light and extinguished it with his foot. Listening, he heard a voice within, — Viviette's voice, in a subdued murmur, though speaking earnestly.

Without any hesitation Louis then returned to Swithin's door, opened it, and walked in. The starlight from without was sufficient, now that his eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, to reveal that the room was unoccupied, and that nothing therein had been disturbed.

With a heavy tread Louis came forth, walked loudly across the corridor, knocked at Lady Constantine's door, and called 'Viviette!'

She heard him instantly, replying 'Yes' in startled tones. Immediately afterwards she opened her door, and confronted him in her dressing-gown, with a light in her hand. 'What is the matter, Louis?' she said.

'I am greatly alarmed. Our visitor is missing.'

'Missing? What, Mr. St. Cleeve?'

'Yes. I was sitting up to finish a cigar, when I thought I heard a noise in this direction. On coming to his room I find he is not there.'

'Good Heaven! I wonder what has happened!' she exclaimed, in apparently intense alarm.

'I wonder,' said Glanville grimly.

‘Suppose he is a somnambulist! If so, he may have gone out and broken his neck. I have never heard that he is one, but they say that sleeping in strange places disturbs the minds of people who are given to that sort of thing, and provokes them to it.’

‘Unfortunately for your theory his bed has not been touched.’

‘Oh, what then can it be?’

Her brother looked her full in the face. ‘Viviette!’ he said sternly.

She seemed puzzled. ‘Well?’ she replied, in simple tones.

‘I heard voices in your room,’ he continued.

‘Voices?’

‘A voice, — yours.’

‘Yes, you may have done so. It was mine.’

‘A listener is required for a speaker.’

‘True, Louis.’

‘Well, to whom were you speaking?’

‘God.’

‘Viviette! I am ashamed of you.’

‘I was saying my prayers.’

‘Prayers — to God! To St. Swithin, rather!’

‘What do you mean, Louis?’ she asked, flushing up warm, and drawing back from him. ‘It was a form of prayer I use, particularly when I am in trouble. It was recommended to me by the Bishop, and Mr. Torkingham commends it very highly.’

‘On your honour, if you have any,’ he said bitterly, ‘whom have you there in your room?’

‘No human being.’

‘Flatly, I don’t believe you.’

She gave a dignified little bow, and, waving her hand into the apartment, said, ‘Very well; then search and see.’

Louis entered, and glanced round the room, behind the curtains, under the bed, out of the window — a view from which showed that escape thence would have been impossible, — everywhere, in short, capable or incapable of affording a retreat to humanity; but discovered nobody. All he observed was that a light stood on the low table by her bedside; that on the bed lay an open Prayer-Book, the counterpane being unpressed, except into a little pit beside the Prayer Book, apparently where her head had rested in kneeling.

‘But where is St. Cleeve?’ he said, turning in bewilderment from these evidences of innocent devotion.

‘Where can he be?’ she chimed in, with real distress. ‘I should so much like to know. Look about for him. I am quite uneasy!’

‘I will, on one condition: that you own that you love him.’

‘Why should you force me to that?’ she murmured. ‘It would be no such wonder if I did.’

‘Come, you do.’

‘Well, I do.’

‘Now I’ll look for him.’

Louis took a light, and turned away, astonished that she had not indignantly resented his intrusion and the nature of his questioning.

At this moment a slight noise was heard on the staircase, and they could see a figure rising step by step, and coming forward against the long lights of the staircase window. It was Swithin, in his ordinary dress, and carrying his boots in his hand. When he beheld them standing there so motionless, he looked rather disconcerted, but came on towards his room.

Lady Constantine was too agitated to speak, but Louis said, ‘I am glad to see you again. Hearing a noise, a few minutes ago, I came out to learn what it could be. I found you absent, and we have been very much alarmed.’

‘I am very sorry,’ said Swithin, with contrition. ‘I owe you a hundred apologies: but the truth is that on entering my bedroom I found the sky remarkably clear, and though I told you that the observation I was to make was of no great consequence, on thinking it over alone I felt it ought not to be allowed to pass; so I was tempted to run across to the observatory, and make it, as I had hoped, without disturbing anybody. If I had known that I should alarm you I would not have done it for the world.’

Swithin spoke very earnestly to Louis, and did not observe the tender reproach in Viviette’s eyes when he showed by his tale his decided notion that the prime use of dark nights lay in their furtherance of practical astronomy.

Everything being now satisfactorily explained the three retired to their several chambers, and Louis heard no more noises that night, or rather morning; his attempts to solve the mystery of Viviette’s life here and her relations with St. Cleeve having thus far resulted chiefly in perplexity. True, an admission had been wrung from her; and even without such an admission it was clear that she had a tender feeling for Swithin. How to extinguish that romantic folly it now became his object to consider.

CHAPTER XXXI

Swithin’s midnight excursion to the tower in the cause of science led him to oversleep himself, and when the brother and sister met at breakfast in the morning he did not appear.

‘Don’t disturb him, — don’t disturb him,’ said Louis laconically. ‘Hullo, Viviette, what are you reading there that makes you flame up so?’

She was glancing over a letter that she had just opened, and at his words looked up with misgiving.

The incident of the previous night left her in great doubt as to what her bearing towards him ought to be. She had made no show of resenting his conduct at the time, from a momentary supposition that he must know all her secret; and afterwards, finding that he did not know it, it seemed too late to affect indignation at his suspicions. So

she preserved a quiet neutrality. Even had she resolved on an artificial part she might have forgotten to play it at this instant, the letter being of a kind to banish previous considerations.

‘It is a letter from Bishop Helmsdale,’ she faltered.

‘Well done! I hope for your sake it is an offer.’

‘That’s just what it is.’

‘No, — surely?’ said Louis, beginning a laugh of surprise.

‘Yes,’ she returned indifferently. ‘You can read it, if you like.’

‘I don’t wish to pry into a communication of that sort.’

‘Oh, you may read it,’ she said, tossing the letter across to him.

Louis thereupon read as under: —

‘The Palace, Melchester,

June 28, 18 — .

‘My dear Lady Constantine, — During the two or three weeks that have elapsed since I experienced the great pleasure of renewing my acquaintance with you, the varied agitation of my feelings has clearly proved that my only course is to address you by letter, and at once. Whether the subject of my communication be acceptable to you or not, I can at least assure you that to suppress it would be far less natural, and upon the whole less advisable, than to speak out frankly, even if afterwards I hold my peace for ever.

‘The great change in my experience during the past year or two — the change, that is, which has resulted from my advancement to a bishopric — has frequently suggested to me, of late, that a discontinuance in my domestic life of the solitude of past years was a question which ought to be seriously contemplated. But whether I should ever have contemplated it without the great good fortune of my meeting with you is doubtful. However, the thing has been considered at last, and without more ado I candidly ask if you would be willing to give up your life at Welland, and relieve my household loneliness here by becoming my wife.

‘I am far from desiring to force a hurried decision on your part, and will wait your good pleasure patiently, should you feel any uncertainty at the moment as to the step. I am quite disqualified, by habits and experience, for the delightful procedure of urging my suit in the ardent terms which would be so appropriate towards such a lady, and so expressive of my inmost feeling. In truth, a prosy cleric of five-and-forty wants encouragement to make him eloquent. Of this, however, I can assure you: that if admiration, esteem, and devotion can compensate in any way for the lack of those qualities which might be found to burn with more outward brightness in a younger man, those it is in my power to bestow for the term of my earthly life. Your steady adherence to church principles and your interest in ecclesiastical polity (as was shown by your bright questioning on those subjects during our morning walk round your grounds) have indicated strongly to me the grace and appropriateness with which you would fill the position of a bishop’s wife, and how greatly you would add to his reputation, should you be disposed to honour him with your hand. Formerly there have been times

when I was of opinion — and you will rightly appreciate my candour in owning it — that a wife was an impediment to a bishop's due activities; but constant observation has convinced me that, far from this being the truth, a meet consort infuses life into episcopal influence and teaching.

'Should you reply in the affirmative I will at once come to see you, and with your permission will, among other things, show you a few plain, practical rules which I have interested myself in drawing up for our future guidance. Should you refuse to change your condition on my account, your decision will, as I need hardly say, be a great blow to me. In any event, I could not do less than I have done, after giving the subject my full consideration. Even if there be a slight deficiency of warmth on your part, my earnest hope is that a mind comprehensive as yours will perceive the immense power for good that you might exercise in the position in which a union with me would place you, and allow that perception to weigh in determining your answer.

'I remain, my dear Lady Constantine, with the highest respect and affection, —
Yours always,

'C. Melchester.'

'Well, you will not have the foolhardiness to decline, now that the question has actually been popped, I should hope,' said Louis, when he had done reading.

'Certainly I shall,' she replied.

'You will really be such a flat, Viviette?'

'You speak without much compliment. I have not the least idea of accepting him.'

'Surely you will not let your infatuation for that young fellow carry you so far, after my acquainting you with the shady side of his character? You call yourself a religious woman, say your prayers out loud, follow up the revived methods in church practice, and what not; and yet you can think with partiality of a person who, far from having any religion in him, breaks the most elementary commandments in the decalogue.'

'I cannot agree with you,' she said, turning her face askance, for she knew not how much of her brother's language was sincere, and how much assumed, the extent of his discoveries with regard to her secret ties being a mystery. At moments she was disposed to declare the whole truth, and have done with it. But she hesitated, and left the words unsaid; and Louis continued his breakfast in silence.

When he had finished, and she had eaten little or nothing, he asked once more, 'How do you intend to answer that letter? Here you are, the poorest woman in the county, abandoned by people who used to be glad to know you, and leading a life as dismal and dreary as a nun's, when an opportunity is offered you of leaping at once into a leading position in this part of England. Bishops are given to hospitality; you would be welcomed everywhere. In short, your answer must be yes.'

'And yet it will be no,' she said, in a low voice. She had at length learnt, from the tone of her brother's latter remarks, that at any rate he had no knowledge of her actual marriage, whatever indirect ties he might suspect her guilty of.

Louis could restrain himself no longer at her answer. 'Then conduct your affairs your own way. I know you to be leading a life that won't bear investigation, and I'm hanged if I'll stay here any longer!'

Saying which, Glanville jerked back his chair, and strode out of the room. In less than a quarter of an hour, and before she had moved a step from the table, she heard him leaving the house.

CHAPTER XXXII

What to do she could not tell. The step which Swithin had entreated her to take, objectionable and premature as it had seemed in a county aspect, would at all events have saved her from this dilemma. Had she allowed him to tell the Bishop his simple story in its fulness, who could say but that that divine might have generously bridled his own impulses, entered into the case with sympathy, and forwarded with zest their designs for the future, owing to his interest of old in Swithin's father, and in the naturally attractive features of the young man's career.

A puff of wind from the open window, wafting the Bishop's letter to the floor, aroused her from her reverie. With a sigh she stooped and picked it up, glanced at it again; then arose, and with the deliberateness of inevitable action wrote her reply: —

'Welland House, June 29, 18 — .

'My dear Bishop of Melchester, — I confess to you that your letter, so gracious and flattering as it is, has taken your friend somewhat unawares. The least I can do in return for its contents is to reply as quickly as possible.

'There is no one in the world who esteems your high qualities more than myself, or who has greater faith in your ability to adorn the episcopal seat that you have been called on to fill. But to your question I can give only one reply, and that is an unqualified negative. To state this unavoidable decision distresses me, without affectation; and I trust you will believe that, though I decline the distinction of becoming your wife, I shall never cease to interest myself in all that pertains to you and your office; and shall feel the keenest regret if this refusal should operate to prevent a lifelong friendship between us. — I am, my dear Bishop of Melchester, ever sincerely yours,

'Viviette Constantine.'

A sudden revulsion from the subterfuge of writing as if she were still a widow, wrought in her mind a feeling of dissatisfaction with the whole scheme of concealment; and pushing aside the letter she allowed it to remain unfolded and unaddressed. In a few minutes she heard Swithin approaching, when she put the letter out of the way and turned to receive him.

Swithin entered quietly, and looked round the room. Seeing with unexpected pleasure that she was there alone, he came over and kissed her. Her discomposure at some foregone event was soon obvious.

‘Has my staying caused you any trouble?’ he asked in a whisper. ‘Where is your brother this morning?’

She smiled through her perplexity as she took his hand. ‘The oddest things happen to me, dear Swithin,’ she said. ‘Do you wish particularly to know what has happened now?’

‘Yes, if you don’t mind telling me.’

‘I do mind telling you. But I must. Among other things I am resolving to give way to your representations, — in part, at least. It will be best to tell the Bishop everything, and my brother, if not other people.’

‘I am truly glad to hear it, Viviette,’ said he cheerfully. ‘I have felt for a long time that honesty is the best policy.’

‘I at any rate feel it now. But it is a policy that requires a great deal of courage!’

‘It certainly requires some courage, — I should not say a great deal; and indeed, as far as I am concerned, it demands less courage to speak out than to hold my tongue.’

‘But, you silly boy, you don’t know what has happened. The Bishop has made me an offer of marriage.’

‘Good gracious, what an impertinent old man! What have you done about it, dearest?’

‘Well, I have hardly accepted him,’ she replied, laughing. ‘It is this event which has suggested to me that I should make my refusal a reason for confiding our situation to him.’

‘What would you have done if you had not been already appropriated?’

‘That’s an inscrutable mystery. He is a worthy man; but he has very pronounced views about his own position, and some other undesirable qualities. Still, who knows? You must bless your stars that you have secured me. Now let us consider how to draw up our confession to him. I wish I had listened to you at first, and allowed you to take him into our confidence before his declaration arrived. He may possibly resent the concealment now. However, this cannot be helped.’

‘I tell you what, Viviette,’ said Swithin, after a thoughtful pause, ‘if the Bishop is such an earthly sort of man as this, a man who goes falling in love, and wanting to marry you, and so on, I am not disposed to confess anything to him at all. I fancied him altogether different from that.’

‘But he’s none the worse for it, dear.’

‘I think he is — to lecture me and love you, all in one breath!’

‘Still, that’s only a passing phase; and you first proposed making a confidant of him.’

‘I did. . . . Very well. Then we are to tell nobody but the Bishop?’

‘And my brother Louis. I must tell him; it is unavoidable. He suspects me in a way I could never have credited of him!’

Swithin, as was before stated, had arranged to start for Greenwich that morning, permission having been accorded him by the Astronomer-Royal to view the Observatory; and their final decision was that, as he could not afford time to sit down with

her, and write to the Bishop in collaboration, each should, during the day, compose a well-considered letter, disclosing their position from his and her own point of view; Lady Constantine leading up to her confession by her refusal of the Bishop's hand. It was necessary that she should know what Swithin contemplated saying, that her statements might precisely harmonize. He ultimately agreed to send her his letter by the next morning's post, when, having read it, she would in due course despatch it with her own.

As soon as he had breakfasted Swithin went his way, promising to return from Greenwich by the end of the week.

Viviette passed the remainder of that long summer day, during which her young husband was receding towards the capital, in an almost motionless state. At some instants she felt exultant at the idea of announcing her marriage and defying general opinion. At another her heart misgave her, and she was tormented by a fear lest Swithin should some day accuse her of having hampered his deliberately-shaped plan of life by her intrusive romanticism. That was often the trick of men who had sealed by marriage, in their inexperienced youth, a love for those whom their maturer judgment would have rejected as too obviously disproportionate in years.

However, it was now too late for these lugubrious thoughts; and, bracing herself, she began to frame the new reply to Bishop Helmsdale — the plain, unvarnished tale that was to supplant the undivulging answer first written. She was engaged on this difficult problem till daylight faded in the west, and the broad-faced moon edged upwards, like a plate of old gold, over the elms towards the village. By that time Swithin had reached Greenwich; her brother had gone she knew not whither; and she and loneliness dwelt solely, as before, within the walls of Welland House.

At this hour of sunset and moonrise the new parlourmaid entered, to inform her that Mr. Cecil's head clerk, from Warborne, particularly wished to see her.

Mr. Cecil was her solicitor, and she knew of nothing whatever that required his intervention just at present. But he would not have sent at this time of day without excellent reasons, and she directed that the young man might be shown in where she was. On his entry the first thing she noticed was that in his hand he carried a newspaper.

'In case you should not have seen this evening's paper, Lady Constantine, Mr. Cecil has directed me to bring it to you at once, on account of what appears there in relation to your ladyship. He has only just seen it himself.'

'What is it? How does it concern me?'

'I will point it out.'

'Read it yourself to me. Though I am afraid there's not enough light.'

'I can see very well here,' said the lawyer's clerk stepping to the window. Folding back the paper he read: —

“NEWS FROM SOUTH AFRICA.

“Cape Town, May 17 (viâ Plymouth). — A correspondent of the Cape Chronicle states that he has interviewed an Englishman just arrived from the interior, and learns

from him that a considerable misapprehension exists in England concerning the death of the traveller and hunter, Sir Blount Constantine — ”

‘O, he’s living! My husband is alive,’ she cried, sinking down in nearly a fainting condition.

‘No, my lady. Sir Blount is dead enough, I am sorry to say.’

‘Dead, did you say?’

‘Certainly, Lady Constantine; there is no doubt of it.’

She sat up, and her intense relief almost made itself perceptible like a fresh atmosphere in the room. ‘Yes. Then what did you come for?’ she asked calmly.

‘That Sir Blount has died is unquestionable,’ replied the lawyer’s clerk gently. ‘But there has been some mistake about the date of his death.’

‘He died of malarious fever on the banks of the Zouga, October 24, 18 — .’

‘No; he only lay ill there a long time it seems. It was a companion who died at that date. But I’ll read the account to your ladyship, with your permission: —

“The decease of this somewhat eccentric wanderer did not occur at the time hitherto supposed, but only in last December. The following is the account of the Englishman alluded to, given as nearly as possible in his own words: During the illness of Sir Blount and his friend by the Zouga, three of the servants went away, taking with them a portion of his clothing and effects; and it must be they who spread the report of his death at this time. After his companion’s death he mended, and when he was strong enough he and I travelled on to a healthier district. I urged him not to delay his return to England; but he was much against going back there again, and became so rough in his manner towards me that we parted company at the first opportunity I could find. I joined a party of white traders returning to the West Coast. I stayed here among the Portuguese for many months. I then found that an English travelling party were going to explore a district adjoining that which I had formerly traversed with Sir Blount. They said they would be glad of my services, and I joined them. When we had crossed the territory to the South of Ulunda, and drew near to Marzambo, I heard tidings of a man living there whom I suspected to be Sir Blount, although he was not known by that name. Being so near I was induced to seek him out, and found that he was indeed the same. He had dropped his old name altogether, and had married a native princess — ”

‘Married a native princess!’ said Lady Constantine.

‘That’s what it says, my lady, — ”married a native princess according to the rites of the tribe, and was living very happily with her. He told me he should never return to England again. He also told me that having seen this princess just after I had left him, he had been attracted by her, and had thereupon decided to reside with her in that country, as being a land which afforded him greater happiness than he could hope to attain elsewhere. He asked me to stay with him, instead of going on with my party, and not reveal his real title to any of them. After some hesitation I did stay, and was not uncomfortable at first. But I soon found that Sir Blount drank much harder now than when I had known him, and that he was at times very greatly depressed in mind

at his position. One morning in the middle of December last I heard a shot from his dwelling. His wife rushed frantically past me as I hastened to the spot, and when I entered I found that he had put an end to himself with his revolver. His princess was broken-hearted all that day. When we had buried him I discovered in his house a little box directed to his solicitors at Warborne, in England, and a note for myself, saying that I had better get the first chance of returning that offered, and requesting me to take the box with me. It is supposed to contain papers and articles for friends in England who have deemed him dead for some time.”

The clerk stopped his reading, and there was a silence. ‘The middle of last December,’ she at length said, in a whisper. ‘Has the box arrived yet?’

‘Not yet, my lady. We have no further proof of anything. As soon as the package comes to hand you shall know of it immediately.’

Such was the clerk’s mission; and, leaving the paper with her, he withdrew. The intelligence amounted to thus much: that, Sir Blount having been alive till at least six weeks after her marriage with Swithin St. Cleeve, Swithin St. Cleeve was not her husband in the eye of the law; that she would have to consider how her marriage with the latter might be instantly repeated, to establish herself legally as that young man’s wife.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Next morning Viviette received a visit from Mr. Cecil himself. He informed her that the box spoken of by the servant had arrived quite unexpectedly just after the departure of his clerk on the previous evening. There had not been sufficient time for him to thoroughly examine it as yet, but he had seen enough to enable him to state that it contained letters, dated memoranda in Sir Blount’s handwriting, notes referring to events which had happened later than his supposed death, and other irrefragable proofs that the account in the newspapers was correct as to the main fact — the comparatively recent date of Sir Blount’s decease.

She looked up, and spoke with the irresponsible helplessness of a child.

‘On reviewing the circumstances, I cannot think how I could have allowed myself to believe the first tidings!’ she said.

‘Everybody else believed them, and why should you not have done so?’ said the lawyer.

‘How came the will to be permitted to be proved, as there could, after all, have been no complete evidence?’ she asked. ‘If I had been the executrix I would not have attempted it! As I was not, I know very little about how the business was pushed through. In a very unseemly way, I think.’

‘Well, no,’ said Mr. Cecil, feeling himself morally called upon to defend legal procedure from such imputations. ‘It was done in the usual way in all cases where the proof of death is only presumptive. The evidence, such as it was, was laid before the court

by the applicants, your husband's cousins; and the servants who had been with him deposed to his death with a particularity that was deemed sufficient. Their error was, not that somebody died — for somebody did die at the time affirmed — but that they mistook one person for another; the person who died being not Sir Blount Constantine. The court was of opinion that the evidence led up to a reasonable inference that the deceased was actually Sir Blount, and probate was granted on the strength of it. As there was a doubt about the exact day of the month, the applicants were allowed to swear that he died on or after the date last given of his existence — which, in spite of their error then, has really come true, now, of course.'

'They little think what they have done to me by being so ready to swear!' she murmured.

Mr. Cecil, supposing her to allude only to the pecuniary straits in which she had been prematurely placed by the will taking effect a year before its due time, said, 'True. It has been to your ladyship's loss, and to their gain. But they will make ample restitution, no doubt: and all will be wound up satisfactorily.'

Lady Constantine was far from explaining that this was not her meaning; and, after some further conversation of a purely technical nature, Mr. Cecil left her presence.

When she was again unencumbered with the necessity of exhibiting a proper bearing, the sense that she had greatly suffered in pocket by the undue haste of the executors weighed upon her mind with a pressure quite inappreciable beside the greater gravity of her personal position. What was her position as legatee to her situation as a woman? Her face crimsoned with a flush which she was almost ashamed to show to the daylight, as she hastily penned the following note to Swithin at Greenwich — certainly one of the most informal documents she had ever written.

'Welland, Thursday.

'O Swithin, my dear Swithin, what I have to tell you is so sad and so humiliating that I can hardly write it — and yet I must. Though we are dearer to each other than all the world besides, and as firmly united as if we were one, I am not legally your wife! Sir Blount did not die till some time after we in England supposed. The service must be repeated instantly. I have not been able to sleep all night. I feel so frightened and ashamed that I can scarcely arrange my thoughts. The newspapers sent with this will explain, if you have not seen particulars. Do come to me as soon as you can, that we may consult on what to do. Burn this at once.

'Your Viviette.'

When the note was despatched she remembered that there was another hardly less important question to be answered — the proposal of the Bishop for her hand. His communication had sunk into nothingness beside the momentous news that had so greatly distressed her. The two replies lay before her — the one she had first written, simply declining to become Dr. Helmsdale's wife, without giving reasons; the second, which she had elaborated with so much care on the previous day, relating in confidential detail the history of her love for Swithin, their secret marriage, and their hopes for the future; asking his advice on what their procedure should be to escape the strictures of

a censorious world. It was the letter she had barely finished writing when Mr. Cecil's clerk announced news tantamount to a declaration that she was no wife at all.

This epistle she now destroyed — and with the less reluctance in knowing that Swithin had been somewhat averse to the confession as soon as he found that Bishop Helmsdale was also a victim to tender sentiment concerning her. The first, in which, at the time of writing, the *suppressio veri* was too strong for her conscience, had now become an honest letter, and sadly folding it she sent the missive on its way.

The sense of her undefinable position kept her from much repose on the second night also; but the following morning brought an unexpected letter from Swithin, written about the same hour as hers to him, and it comforted her much.

He had seen the account in the papers almost as soon as it had come to her knowledge, and sent this line to reassure her in the perturbation she must naturally feel. She was not to be alarmed at all. They two were husband and wife in moral intent and antecedent belief, and the legal flaw which accident had so curiously uncovered could be mended in half-an-hour. He would return on Saturday night at latest, but as the hour would probably be far advanced, he would ask her to meet him by slipping out of the house to the tower any time during service on Sunday morning, when there would be few persons about likely to observe them. Meanwhile he might provisionally state that their best course in the emergency would be, instead of confessing to anybody that there had already been a solemnization of marriage between them, to arrange their re-marriage in as open a manner as possible — as if it were the just-reached climax of a sudden affection, instead of a harking back to an old departure — prefacing it by a public announcement in the usual way.

This plan of approaching their second union with all the show and circumstance of a new thing, recommended itself to her strongly, but for one objection — that by such a course the wedding could not, without appearing like an act of unseemly haste, take place so quickly as she desired for her own moral satisfaction. It might take place somewhat early, say in the course of a month or two, without bringing down upon her the charge of levity; for Sir Blount, a notoriously unkind husband, had been out of her sight four years, and in his grave nearly one. But what she naturally desired was that there should be no more delay than was positively necessary for obtaining a new license — two or three days at longest; and in view of this celerity it was next to impossible to make due preparation for a wedding of ordinary publicity, performed in her own church, from her own house, with a feast and amusements for the villagers, a tea for the school children, a bonfire, and other of those proclamatory accessories which, by meeting wonder half-way, deprive it of much of its intensity. It must be admitted, too, that she even now shrank from the shock of surprise that would inevitably be caused by her openly taking for husband such a mere youth of no position as Swithin still appeared, notwithstanding that in years he was by this time within a trifle of one-and-twenty.

The straightforward course had, nevertheless, so much to recommend it, so well avoided the disadvantage of future revelation which a private repetition of the ceremony

would entail, that assuming she could depend upon Swithin, as she knew she could do, good sense counselled its serious consideration.

She became more composed at her queer situation: hour after hour passed, and the first spasmodic impulse of womanly decorum — not to let the sun go down upon her present improper state — was quite controllable. She could regard the strange contingency that had arisen with something like philosophy. The day slipped by: she thought of the awkwardness of the accident rather than of its humiliation; and, loving Swithin now in a far calmer spirit than at that past date when they had rushed into each other's arms and vowed to be one for the first time, she ever and anon caught herself reflecting, 'Were it not that for my honour's sake I must re-marry him, I should perhaps be a nobler woman in not allowing him to encumber his bright future by a union with me at all.'

This thought, at first artificially raised, as little more than a mental exercise, became by stages a genuine conviction; and while her heart enforced, her reason regretted the necessity of abstaining from self-sacrifice — the being obliged, despite his curious escape from the first attempt, to lime Swithin's young wings again solely for her credit's sake.

However, the deed had to be done; Swithin was to be made legally hers. Selfishness in a conjuncture of this sort was excusable, and even obligatory. Taking brighter views, she hoped that upon the whole this yoking of the young fellow with her, a portionless woman and his senior, would not greatly endanger his career. In such a mood night overtook her, and she went to bed conjecturing that Swithin had by this time arrived in the parish, was perhaps even at that moment passing homeward beneath her walls, and that in less than twelve hours she would have met him, have ventilated the secret which oppressed her, and have satisfactorily arranged with him the details of their reunion.

CHAPTER XXXIV

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 realised 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.

CHAPTER XXXV

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.’

* * * *

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 aërate 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. Cleeve, 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 legalise 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 legalise 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.

CHAPTER XXXVI

The immediate effect upon St. Cleeve of the receipt of her well-reasoned argument for retrocession was, naturally, a bitter attack upon himself for having been guilty of such cruel carelessness as to leave in her way the lawyer’s letter that had first made her aware of his uncle’s provision for him. Immature as he was, he could realise Viviette’s position sufficiently well to perceive what the poor lady must suffer at having suddenly thrust upon her the responsibility of repairing her own situation as a wife by ruining his as a legatee. True, it was by the purest inadvertence that his pending sacrifice of means had been discovered; but he should have taken special pains to render such a mishap impossible. If on the first occasion, when a revelation might have been made with impunity, he would not put it in the power of her good nature to relieve his

position by refusing him, he should have shown double care not to do so now, when she could not exercise that benevolence without the loss of honour.

With a young man's inattention to issues he had not considered how sharp her feelings as a woman must be in this contingency. It had seemed the easiest thing in the world to remedy the defect in their marriage, and therefore nothing to be anxious about. And in his innocence of any thought of appropriating the bequest by taking advantage of the loophole in his matrimonial bond, he undervalued the importance of concealing the existence of that bequest.

The looming fear of unhappiness between them revived in Swithin the warm emotions of their earlier acquaintance. Almost before the sun had set he hastened to Welland House in search of her. The air was disturbed by stiff summer blasts, productive of windfalls and premature descents of leafage. It was an hour when unripe apples shower down in orchards, and unbrowned chestnuts descend in their husks upon the park glades. There was no help for it this afternoon but to call upon her in a direct manner, regardless of suspicions. He was thunderstruck when, while waiting in the full expectation of being admitted to her presence, the answer brought back to him was that she was unable to see him.

This had never happened before in the whole course of their acquaintance. But he knew what it meant, and turned away with a vague disquietude. He did not know that Lady Constantine was just above his head, listening to his movements with the liveliest emotions, and, while praying for him to go, longing for him to insist on seeing her and spoil all. But the faintest symptom being always sufficient to convince him of having blundered, he unwittingly took her at her word, and went rapidly away.

However, he called again the next day, and she, having gained strength by one victory over herself, was enabled to repeat her refusal with greater ease. Knowing this to be the only course by which her point could be maintained, she clung to it with strenuous and religious pertinacity.

Thus immured and self-controlling she passed a week. Her brother, though he did not live in the house (preferring the nearest watering-place at this time of the year), was continually coming there; and one day he happened to be present when she denied herself to Swithin for the third time. Louis, who did not observe the tears in her eyes, was astonished and delighted: she was coming to her senses at last. Believing now that there had been nothing more between them than a too-plainly shown partiality on her part, he expressed his commendation of her conduct to her face. At this, instead of owing to its advantage also, her tears burst forth outright.

Not knowing what to make of this, Louis said —

‘Well, I am simply upholding you in your course.’

‘Yes, yes; I know it!’ she cried. ‘And it is my deliberately chosen course. I wish he — Swithin St. Cleeve — would go on his travels at once, and leave the place! Six hundred a year has been left him for travel and study of the southern constellations; and I wish he would use it. You might represent the advantage to him of the course if you cared to.’

Louis thought he could do no better than let Swithin know this as soon as possible. Accordingly when St. Cleeve was writing in the hut the next day he heard the crackle of footsteps over the fir-needles outside, and jumped up, supposing them to be hers; but, to his disappointment, it was her brother who appeared at the door.

‘Excuse my invading the hermitage, St. Cleeve,’ he said in his careless way, ‘but I have heard from my sister of your good fortune.’

‘My good fortune?’

‘Yes, in having an opportunity for roving; and with a traveller’s conceit I couldn’t help coming to give you the benefit of my experience. When do you start?’

‘I have not formed any plan as yet. Indeed, I had not quite been thinking of going.’

Louis stared.

‘Not going? Then I may have been misinformed. What I have heard is that a good uncle has kindly bequeathed you a sufficient income to make a second Isaac Newton of you, if you only use it as he directs.’

Swithin breathed quickly, but said nothing.

‘If you have not decided so to make use of it, let me implore you, as your friend, and one nearly old enough to be your father, to decide at once. Such a chance does not happen to a scientific youth once in a century.’

‘Thank you for your good advice — for it is good in itself, I know,’ said Swithin, in a low voice. ‘But has Lady Constantine spoken of it at all?’

‘She thinks as I do.’

‘She has spoken to you on the subject?’

‘Certainly. More than that; it is at her request — though I did not intend to say so — that I come to speak to you about it now.’

‘Frankly and plainly,’ said Swithin, his voice trembling with a compound of scientific and amatory emotion that defies definition, ‘does she say seriously that she wishes me to go?’

‘She does.’

‘Then go I will,’ replied Swithin firmly. ‘I have been fortunate enough to interest some leading astronomers, including the Astronomer Royal; and in a letter received this morning I learn that the use of the Cape Observatory has been offered me for any southern observations I may wish to make. This offer I will accept. Will you kindly let Lady Constantine know this, since she is interested in my welfare?’

Louis promised, and when he was gone Swithin looked blankly at his own situation, as if he could scarcely believe in its reality. Her letter to him, then, had been deliberately written; she meant him to go.

But he was determined that none of those misunderstandings which ruin the happiness of lovers should be allowed to operate in the present case. He would see her, if he slept under her walls all night to do it, and would hear the order to depart from her own lips. This unexpected stand she was making for his interests was winning his admiration to such a degree as to be in danger of defeating the very cause it was meant

to subserve. A woman like this was not to be forsaken in a hurry. He wrote two lines, and left the note at the house with his own hand.

‘The Cabin, Rings-Hill,
July 7th.

‘Dearest Viviette, — If you insist, I will go. But letter-writing will not do. I must have the command from your own two lips, otherwise I shall not stir. I am here every evening at seven. Can you come? — S.’

This note, as fate would have it, reached her hands in the single hour of that week when she was in a mood to comply with his request, just when moved by a reactionary emotion after dismissing Swithin. She went upstairs to the window that had so long served purposes of this kind, and signalled ‘Yes.’

St. Cleeve soon saw the answer she had given and watched her approach from the tower as the sunset drew on. The vivid circumstances of his life at this date led him ever to remember the external scenes in which they were set. It was an evening of exceptional irradiations, and the west heaven gleamed like a foundry of all metals common and rare. The clouds were broken into a thousand fragments, and the margin of every fragment shone. Foreseeing the disadvantage and pain to her of maintaining a resolve under the pressure of a meeting, he vowed not to urge her by word or sign; to put the question plainly and calmly, and to discuss it on a reasonable basis only, like the philosophers they assumed themselves to be.

But this intention was scarcely adhered to in all its integrity. She duly appeared on the edge of the field, flooded with the metallic radiance that marked the close of this day; whereupon he quickly descended the steps, and met her at the cabin door. They entered it together.

As the evening grew darker and darker he listened to her reasoning, which was precisely a repetition of that already sent him by letter, and by degrees accepted her decision, since she would not revoke it. Time came for them to say good-bye, and then

‘He turn’d and saw the terror in her eyes,
That yearn’d upon him, shining in such wise
As a star midway in the midnight fix’d.’

It was the misery of her own condition that showed forth, hitherto obscured by her ardour for ameliorating his. They closed together, and kissed each other as though the emotion of their whole year-and-half’s acquaintance had settled down upon that moment.

‘I won’t go away from you!’ said Swithin huskily. ‘Why did you propose it for an instant?’

Thus the nearly ended interview was again prolonged, and Viviette yielded to all the passion of her first union with him. Time, however, was merciless, and the hour approached midnight, and she was compelled to depart. Swithin walked with her towards the house, as he had walked many times before, believing that all was now

smooth again between them, and caring, it must be owned, very little for his fame as an expositor of the southern constellations just then.

When they reached the silent house he said what he had not ventured to say before, 'Fix the day — you have decided that it is to be soon, and that I am not to go?'

But youthful Swithin was far, very far, from being up to the fond subtlety of Viviette this evening. 'I cannot decide here,' she said gently, releasing herself from his arm; 'I will speak to you from the window. Wait for me.'

She vanished; and he waited. It was a long time before the window opened, and he was not aware that, with her customary complication of feeling, she had knelt for some time inside the room before looking out.

'Well?' said he.

'It cannot be,' she answered. 'I cannot ruin you. But the day after you are five-and-twenty our marriage shall be confirmed, if you choose.'

'O, my Viviette, how is this!' he cried.

'Swithin, I have not altered. But I feared for my powers, and could not tell you whilst I stood by your side. I ought not to have given way as I did to-night. Take the bequest, and go. You are too young — to be fettered — I should have thought of it! Do not communicate with me for at least a year: it is imperative. Do not tell me your plans. If we part, we do part. I have vowed a vow not to further obstruct the course you had decided on before you knew me and my puling ways; and by Heaven's help I'll keep that vow. . . . Now go. These are the parting words of your own Viviette!'

Swithin, who was stable as a giant in all that appertained to nature and life outside humanity, was a mere pupil in domestic matters. He was quite awed by her firmness, and looked vacantly at her for a time, till she closed the window. Then he mechanically turned, and went, as she had commanded.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A week had passed away. It had been a time of cloudy mental weather to Swithin and Viviette, but the only noteworthy fact about it was that what had been planned to happen therein had actually taken place. Swithin had gone from Welland, and would shortly go from England.

She became aware of it by a note that he posted to her on his way through Warborne. There was much evidence of haste in the note, and something of reserve. The latter she could not understand, but it might have been obvious enough if she had considered.

On the morning of his departure he had sat on the edge of his bed, the sunlight streaming through the early mist, the house-martens scratching the back of the ceiling over his head as they scrambled out from the roof for their day's gnat-chasing, the thrushes cracking snails on the garden stones outside with the noisiness of little smiths at work on little anvils. The sun, in sending its rods of yellow fire into his room, sent, as he suddenly thought, mental illumination with it. For the first time, as he sat there,

it had crossed his mind that Viviette might have reasons for this separation which he knew not of. There might be family reasons — mysterious blood necessities which are said to rule members of old musty-mansioned families, and are unknown to other classes of society — and they may have been just now brought before her by her brother Louis on the condition that they were religiously concealed.

The idea that some family skeleton, like those he had read of in memoirs, had been unearthed by Louis, and held before her terrified understanding as a matter which rendered Swithin's departure, and the neutralization of the marriage, no less indispensable to them than it was an advantage to himself, seemed a very plausible one to Swithin just now. Viviette might have taken Louis into her confidence at last, for the sake of his brotherly advice. Swithin knew that of her own heart she would never wish to get rid of him; but coerced by Louis, might she not have grown to entertain views of its expediency? Events made such a supposition on St. Cleeve's part as natural as it was inaccurate, and, conjoined with his own excitement at the thought of seeing a new heaven overhead, influenced him to write but the briefest and most hurried final note to her, in which he fully obeyed her sensitive request that he would omit all reference to his plans. These at the last moment had been modified to fall in with the winter expedition formerly mentioned, to observe the Transit of Venus at a remote southern station.

The business being done, and himself fairly plunged into the preliminaries of an important scientific pilgrimage, Swithin acquired that lightness of heart which most young men feel in forsaking old love for new adventure, no matter how charming may be the girl they leave behind them. Moreover, in the present case, the man was endowed with that schoolboy temperament which does not see, or at least consider with much curiosity, the effect of a given scheme upon others than himself. The bearing upon Lady Constantine of what was an undoubted predicament for any woman, was forgotten in his feeling that she had done a very handsome and noble thing for him, and that he was therefore bound in honour to make the most of it.

His going had resulted in anything but lightness of heart for her. Her sad fancy could, indeed, indulge in dreams of her yellow-haired laddie without that formerly besetting fear that those dreams would prompt her to actions likely to distract and weight him. She was wretched on her own account, relieved on his. She no longer stood in the way of his advancement, and that was enough. For herself she could live in retirement, visit the wood, the old camp, the column, and, like CEnone, think of the life they had led there —

‘Mournful CEnone, wandering forlorn
Of Paris, once her playmate on the hills,’

leaving it entirely to his goodness whether he would come and claim her in the future, or desert her for ever.

She was diverted for a time from these sad performances by a letter which reached her from Bishop Helmsdale. To see his handwriting again on an envelope, after thinking

so anxiously of making a father-confessor of him, started her out of her equanimity. She speedily regained it, however, when she read his note.

‘The Palace, Melchester,
July 30, 18 — .

‘My dear Lady Constantine, — I am shocked and grieved that, in the strange dispensation of things here below, my offer of marriage should have reached you almost simultaneously with the intelligence that your widowhood had been of several months less duration than you and I, and the world, had supposed. I can quite understand that, viewed from any side, the news must have shaken and disturbed you; and your unequivocal refusal to entertain any thought of a new alliance at such a moment was, of course, intelligible, natural, and praiseworthy. At present I will say no more beyond expressing a hope that you will accept my assurances that I was quite ignorant of the news at the hour of writing, and a sincere desire that in due time, and as soon as you have recovered your equanimity, I may be allowed to renew my proposal. — I am, my dear Lady Constantine, yours ever sincerely,

C. Melchester.’

She laid the letter aside, and thought no more about it, beyond a momentary meditation on the errors into which people fall in reasoning from actions to motives. Louis, who was now again with her, became in due course acquainted with the contents of the letter, and was satisfied with the promising position in which matters seemingly stood all round.

Lady Constantine went her mournful ways as she had planned to do, her chief resort being the familiar column, where she experienced the unutterable melancholy of seeing two carpenters dismantle the dome of its felt covering, detach its ribs, and clear away the enclosure at the top till everything stood as it had stood before Swithin had been known to the place. The equatorial had already been packed in a box, to be in readiness if he should send for it from abroad. The cabin, too, was in course of demolition, such having been his directions, acquiesced in by her, before he started. Yet she could not bear the idea that these structures, so germane to the events of their romance, should be removed as if removed for ever. Going to the men she bade them store up the materials intact, that they might be re-erected if desired. She had the junctions of the timbers marked with figures, the boards numbered, and the different sets of screws tied up in independent papers for identification. She did not hear the remarks of the workmen when she had gone, to the effect that the young man would as soon think of buying a halter for himself as come back and spy at the moon from Rings-Hill Speer, after seeing the glories of other nations and the gold and jewels that were found there, or she might have been more unhappy than she was.

On returning from one of these walks to the column a curious circumstance occurred. It was evening, and she was coming as usual down through the sighing plantation, choosing her way between the ramparts of the camp towards the outlet giving upon the field, when suddenly in a dusky vista among the fir-trunks she saw, or thought she saw, a golden-haired, toddling child. The child moved a step or two, and vanished

behind a tree. Lady Constantine, fearing it had lost its way, went quickly to the spot, searched, and called aloud. But no child could she perceive or hear anywhere around. She returned to where she had stood when first beholding it, and looked in the same direction, but nothing reappeared. The only object at all resembling a little boy or girl was the upper tuft of a bunch of fern, which had prematurely yellowed to about the colour of a fair child's hair, and waved occasionally in the breeze. This, however, did not sufficiently explain the phenomenon, and she returned to make inquiries of the man whom she had left at work, removing the last traces of Swithin's cabin. But he had gone with her departure and the approach of night. Feeling an indescribable dread she retraced her steps, and hastened homeward doubting, yet half believing, what she had seemed to see, and wondering if her imagination had played her some trick.

The tranquil mournfulness of her night of solitude terminated in a most unexpected manner.

The morning after the above-mentioned incident Lady Constantine, after meditating a while, arose with a strange personal conviction that bore curiously on the aforesaid hallucination. She realised a condition of things that she had never anticipated, and for a moment the discovery of her state so overwhelmed her that she thought she must die outright. In her terror she said she had sown the wind to reap the whirlwind. Then the instinct of self-preservation flamed up in her like a fire. Her altruism in subjecting her self-love to benevolence, and letting Swithin go away from her, was demolished by the new necessity, as if it had been a gossamer web.

There was no resisting or evading the spontaneous plan of action which matured in her mind in five minutes. Where was Swithin? how could he be got at instantly? — that was her ruling thought. She searched about the room for his last short note, hoping, yet doubting, that its contents were more explicit on his intended movements than the few meagre syllables which alone she could call to mind. She could not find the letter in her room, and came downstairs to Louis as pale as a ghost.

He looked up at her, and with some concern said, 'What's the matter?'

'I am searching everywhere for a letter — a note from Mr. St. Cleeve — just a few words telling me when the Occidental sails, that I think he goes in.'

'Why do you want that unimportant document?'

'It is of the utmost importance that I should know whether he has actually sailed or not!' said she in agonized tones. 'Where can that letter be?'

Louis knew where that letter was, for having seen it on her desk he had, without reading it, torn it up and thrown it into the waste-paper basket, thinking the less that remained to remind her of the young philosopher the better.

'I destroyed it,' he said.

'O Louis! why did you?' she cried. 'I am going to follow him; I think it best to do so; and I want to know if he is gone — and now the date is lost!'

'Going to run after St. Cleeve? Absurd!'

'Yes, I am!' she said with vehement firmness. 'I must see him; I want to speak to him as soon as possible.'

‘Good Lord, Viviette! Are you mad?’

‘O what was the date of that ship! But it cannot be helped. I start at once for Southampton. I have made up my mind to do it. He was going to his uncle’s solicitors in the North first; then he was coming back to Southampton. He cannot have sailed yet.’

‘I believe he has sailed,’ muttered Louis sullenly.

She did not wait to argue with him, but returned upstairs, where she rang to tell Green to be ready with the pony to drive her to Warborne station in a quarter of an hour.

CHAPTER 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 galled 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.

CHAPTER 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.’

CHAPTER XL

The silence of Swithin was to be accounted for by the circumstance that neither to the Mediterranean nor to America had he in the first place directed his steps. Feeling himself absolutely free he had, on arriving at Southampton, decided to make straight for the Cape, and hence had not gone aboard the Occidental at all. His object was to leave his heavier luggage there, examine the capabilities of the spot for his purpose, find out the necessity or otherwise of shipping over his own equatorial, and then cross to America as soon as there was a good opportunity. Here he might inquire the movements of the Transit expedition to the South Pacific, and join it at such a point as might be convenient.

Thus, though wrong in her premisses, Viviette had intuitively decided with sad precision. There was, as a matter of fact, a great possibility of her not being able to

communicate with him for several months, notwithstanding that he might possibly communicate with her.

This excursive time was an awakening for Swithin. To altered circumstances inevitably followed altered views. That such changes should have a marked effect upon a young man who had made neither grand tour nor petty one — who had, in short, scarcely been away from home in his life — was nothing more than natural. New ideas struggled to disclose themselves and with the addition of strange twinklers to his southern horizon came an absorbed attention that way, and a corresponding forgetfulness of what lay to the north behind his back, whether human or celestial. Whoever may deplore it few will wonder that Viviette, who till then had stood high in his heaven, if she had not dominated it, sank, like the North Star, lower and lower with his retreat southward. Master of a large advance of his first year's income in circular notes, he perhaps too readily forgot that the mere act of honour, but for her self-suppression, would have rendered him penniless.

Meanwhile, to come back and claim her at the specified time, four years thence, if she should not object to be claimed, was as much a part of his programme as were the exploits abroad and elsewhere that were to prelude it. The very thoroughness of his intention for that advanced date inclined him all the more readily to shelve the subject now. Her unhappy caution to him not to write too soon was a comfortable license in his present state of tension about sublime scientific things, which knew not woman, nor her sacrifices, nor her fears. In truth he was not only too young in years, but too literal, direct, and uncompromising in nature to understand such a woman as Lady Constantine; and she suffered for that limitation in him as it had been antecedently probable that she would do.

He stayed but a little time at Cape Town on this his first reconnoitring journey; and on that account wrote to no one from the place. On leaving he found there remained some weeks on his hands before he wished to cross to America; and feeling an irrepressible desire for further studies in navigation on shipboard, and under clear skies, he took the steamer for Melbourne; returning thence in due time, and pursuing his journey to America, where he landed at Boston.

Having at last had enough of great circles and other nautical reckonings, and taking no interest in men or cities, this indefatigable scrutineer of the universe went immediately on to Cambridge; and there, by the help of an introduction he had brought from England, he revelled for a time in the glories of the gigantic refractor (which he was permitted to use on occasion), and in the pleasures of intercourse with the scientific group around. This brought him on to the time of starting with the Transit expedition, when he and his kind became lost to the eye of civilization behind the horizon of the Pacific Ocean.

To speak of their doings on this pilgrimage, of ingress and egress, of tangent and parallax, of external and internal contact, would avail nothing. Is it not all written in the chronicles of the Astronomical Society? More to the point will it be to mention that Viviette's letter to Cambridge had been returned long before he reached that place,

while her missive to Marseilles was, of course, misdirected altogether. On arriving in America, uncertain of an address in that country at which he would stay long, Swithin wrote his first letter to his grandmother; and in this he ordered that all communications should be sent to await him at Cape Town, as the only safe spot for finding him, sooner or later. The equatorial he also directed to be forwarded to the same place. At this time, too, he ventured to break Viviette's commands, and address a letter to her, not knowing of the strange results that had followed his absence from home.

It was February. The Transit was over, the scientific company had broken up, and Swithin had steamed towards the Cape to take up his permanent abode there, with a view to his great task of surveying, charting and theorizing on those exceptional features in the southern skies which had been but partially treated by the younger Herschel. Having entered Table Bay and landed on the quay, he called at once at the post-office.

Two letters were handed him, and he found from the date that they had been waiting there for some time. One of these epistles, which had a weather-worn look as regarded the ink, and was in old-fashioned penmanship, he knew to be from his grandmother. He opened it before he had as much as glanced at the superscription of the second.

Besides immaterial portions, it contained the following: —

'J reckon you know by now of our main news this fall, but lest you should not have heard of it J send the exact thing snipped out of the newspaper. Nobody expected her to do it quite so soon; but it is said hereabout that my lord bishop and my lady had been drawing nigh to an understanding before the glum tidings of Sir Blount's taking of his own life reached her; and the account of this wicked deed was so sore afflicting to her mind, and made her poor heart so timid and low, that in charity to my lady her few friends agreed on urging her to let the bishop go on paying his court as before, notwithstanding she had not been a widow-woman near so long as was thought. This, as it turned out, she was willing to do; and when my lord asked her she told him she would marry him at once or never. That's as J was told, and J had it from those that know.'

The cutting from the newspaper was an ordinary announcement of marriage between the Bishop of Melchester and Lady Constantine.

Swithin was so astounded at the intelligence of what for the nonce seemed Viviette's wanton fickleness that he quite omitted to look at the second letter; and remembered nothing about it till an hour afterwards, when sitting in his own room at the hotel.

It was in her handwriting, but so altered that its superscription had not arrested his eye. It had no beginning, or date; but its contents soon acquainted him with her motive for the precipitate act. The few concluding sentences are all that it will be necessary to quote here: —

'There was no way out of it, even if I could have found you, without infringing one of the conditions I had previously laid down. The long desire of my heart has been not to impoverish you or mar your career. The new desire was to save myself and, still more, another yet unborn. . . . I have done a desperate thing. Yet for myself I could do no

better, and for you no less. I would have sacrificed my single self to honesty, but I was not alone concerned. What woman has a right to blight a coming life to preserve her personal integrity? . . . The one bright spot is that it saves you and your endowment from further catastrophes, and preserves you to the pleasant paths of scientific fame. I no longer lie like a log across your path, which is now as open as on the day before you saw me, and ere I encouraged you to win me. Alas, Swithin, I ought to have known better. The folly was great, and the suffering be upon my head! I ought not to have consented to that last interview: all was well till then! . . . Well, I have borne much, and am not unprepared. As for you, Swithin, by simply pressing straight on your triumph is assured. Do not communicate with me in any way — not even in answer to this. Do not think of me. Do not see me ever any more. — Your unhappy

‘Viviette.’

Swithin’s heart swelled within him in sudden pity for her, first; then he blanched with a horrified sense of what she had done, and at his own relation to the deed. He felt like an awakened somnambulist who should find that he had been accessory to a tragedy during his unconsciousness. She had loosened the knot of her difficulties by cutting it unscrupulously through and through.

The big tidings rather dazed than crushed him, his predominant feeling being soon again one of keenest sorrow and sympathy. Yet one thing was obvious; he could do nothing — absolutely nothing. The event which he now heard of for the first time had taken place five long months ago. He reflected, and regretted — and mechanically went on with his preparations for settling down to work under the shadow of Table Mountain. He was as one who suddenly finds the world a stranger place than he thought; but is excluded by age, temperament, and situation from being much more than an astonished spectator of its strangeness.

* * * *

The Royal Observatory was about a mile out of the town, and hither he repaired as soon as he had established himself in lodgings. He had decided, on his first visit to the Cape, that it would be highly advantageous to him if he could supplement the occasional use of the large instruments here by the use at his own house of his own equatorial, and had accordingly given directions that it might be sent over from England. The precious possession now arrived; and although the sight of it — of the brasses on which her hand had often rested, of the eyepiece through which her dark eyes had beamed — engendered some decidedly bitter regrets in him for a time, he could not long afford to give to the past the days that were meant for the future.

Unable to get a room convenient for a private observatory he resolved at last to fix the instrument on a solid pillar in the garden; and several days were spent in accommodating it to its new position. In this latitude there was no necessity for economizing clear nights as he had been obliged to do on the old tower at Welland. There it had happened more than once, that after waiting idle through days and nights of cloudy weather, Viviette would fix her time for meeting him at an hour when at last he had an opportunity of seeing the sky; so that in giving to her the golden moments of cloudlessness he was losing his chance with the orbs above.

Those features which usually attract the eye of the visitor to a new latitude are the novel forms of human and vegetable life, and other such sublunary things. But the young man glanced slightly at these; the changes overhead had all his attention. The old subject was imprinted there, but in a new type. Here was a heaven, fixed and ancient as the northern; yet it had never appeared above the Welland hills since they were heaved up from beneath. Here was an unalterable circumpolar region; but the polar patterns stereotyped in history and legend — without which it had almost seemed that a polar sky could not exist — had never been seen therein.

St. Cleeve, as was natural, began by cursory surveys, which were not likely to be of much utility to the world or to himself. He wasted several weeks — indeed above two months — in a comparatively idle survey of southern novelties; in the mere luxury of looking at stellar objects whose wonders were known, recounted, and classified, long before his own personality had been heard of. With a child's simple delight he allowed his instrument to rove, evening after evening, from the gorgeous glitter of Canopus to the hazy clouds of Magellan. Before he had well finished this optical prelude there floated over to him from the other side of the Equator the postscript to the epistle of his lost Viviette. It came in the vehicle of a common newspaper, under the head of 'Births:' —

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

CHAPTER 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 exertions 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.

* * * *

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, slithering 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 heard 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.

The Ted K Archive

Thomas Hardy
The Novels of Thomas Hardy - Volume 4

www.thetedkarchive.com