
Two on a Tower
Thomas Hardy

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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 1

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 exuviæ 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 connexion, 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 Raffaelle 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 realize,—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 unlearnt 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 2

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 glutchpipe, 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 pronunciation,’ 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 3

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 farm-house, 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.'