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 lessenings and increasings 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 scrowl
> 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 realized 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 realized 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 chatelaine 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.'