

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.'