

and am not afraid of your lifting the curtain—at least without my permission—that has hitherto shrouded one portion of my life.”

CHAPTER II.

THE YOUNG ASTRONOMER.

Having agreed that I would reveal nothing whatever my strange acquaintance might see fit to tell me, at least without first obtaining his consent, my fellow-traveller commenced his strange narrative as follows:—

“I promise you that it is a strange story that you are about to hear;” and he moved into the seat opposite mine, dropping at the same time his voice to a key that could barely be heard above the rattle and whirr of the train; “a very strange story. My name is Seybold Melvin.” He here handed me a card on which was engraved, “Seybold Melvin, Grange House, Wilts.” I replied by handing him a pasteboard from my own card case, when he continued: “I was born near Amesbury, a village on those Wiltshire downs where the intrepid Alfred conquered the fiery Danes. My birthplace stands within an easy walk of that marvel of antiquity, Stonehenge. My parents, fortunately or unfortunately, according to the light in which you choose to view the question, were sufficiently wealthy to preclude the necessity of my looking forward to a life of toil in order to gain a livelihood. It is possible, that, had I been ordinarily robust, they would have deployed me into the ranks of one of the learned professions in order to keep me from too rapid a pursuit of my hobbies, but this was not found practicable. The grand and sublime, both in nature and art, when continually encountered in one’s youth, to leave ineradicable traces upon the mind through life. Whatever nineteenth century reasoners may have said to the contrary thus far, I maintain that the Bard of the Lakes spoke the truth when he declared that

‘The child is father of the man.’

It was therefore small wonder if I—an only child—delighted more in lonely rambles than in the companionship of other children of the same age; my mind continuously feasting on the lonely grandeur of the great plain around me, until before I had reached the age of twelve years I had become noted for my fondness for solitude, and an affection for the poetical ideas wherewith what is termed ‘Popular Astronomy’ abounds. It also grew to be a delight with me to wander amongst those fallen or leaning masses of stone,—over which a world marvels—and there to indulge in the most poetical reveries, until for me

‘Time would run back and fetch the age of Gold,’ and I could almost imagine myself a denizen of that past, concerning which we know so little, and consequently are prone to imagine so much.

“If my waking moments were colored with the reveries and fantastic ideas of a romantic student and recluse, what shall I say concerning my sleeping ones? In early boyhood even, amidst visions of exploration and discovery I often sank to rest, so that it was little to be wondered that my dreams were full of imagined adventures. Adventures, too, of the most marvellous nature, amidst surroundings and people of which no geography I owned made mention. But, as I grew to manhood, my visions shaped themselves toward a centre, and at length a face, shrouded in masses of golden hair, reproduced itself continually. In time I grew enamoured of my vision, it became my ideal, and asleep or awake, I at last finally resolved to attach myself to none other than the beauteous counterpart. With such a resolve, day by day I grew more and more misanthropical and pre-occupied.

“When fairly in my teens, it was my father’s wish to send me to Cambridge University, but about the same time I was afflicted with a severe nervous affection,—of which I still bear traces—and all manner of study was forbidden by my physicians. I felt keenly being debarred from the privilege of reading my beloved books,—chiefly poems of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and astronomical works—this to me was worse than the malady. As for the proposed terms at Cambridge I cared little or nothing for the loss of them, shrinking as I did from any contact with the world. Time, which cures all things, restored me at last to health, but with a frame sufficiently impaired to preclude all idea of my ever entering college.

“With a fair prospect of wealth and a dislike for the companionship of persons of my own sex, it was considered peculiar that I was not attracted by some young beauty of the opposite, but not one I saw pleased my fancy, much less approached my dream ideal, and I remained heart whole. I admit that I often felt strange, unaccountable longings for the presence of that ideal, whom I imagined I should find some day, somewhere or somehow; and these longings I persisted in cherishing, notwithstanding their apparent fallacy. I think that most youths and maidens of a thoughtful or ‘intense’ frame of mind are cognizant of similar longings, which sometimes take a considerable while to combat; nor is this to be wondered at if we consider such images in the light of ideal creations formed out of the best thoughts of our better or ‘innermost’ selves; shadowing forth all that we consider great and good in mankind. Some think—I cannot say that I lean to the opinion—that these imagined shadows of purity are spirits, or at least persons of a higher order of being, whose desires are akin to our own; still the sequel might lead a wiser man than I to some such conclusion. But to return.

“My sickness, if it debarred me from reading, allowed more time for observation, and I made use of my hours of convalescence to continue my study of the heavens. Every constellation was mapped by my busy brain, every visible star noted, and I delighted to watch these, evening after evening, searching out the various groups, fancying figures—as did the ancients—amongst the stars. But, had the whole host of fixed stars been blotted from the firmament, I had scarcely murmured, since beyond and above them in my estimation were those

‘Five other wand’ring fires that move
In mystic dance.’

Planetary observation grew in fact to be with me a consuming study. I could barely wait for the shades of evening to prevail, and would be at my look-out as the rooks winged their way homeward toward sunset. I often arose at midnight and walked forth under the stars, or just ere the Sun ascended went out to study those brilliants that hide themselves near the rays of the god of day. I needed no instructor to point me out those five steady glowing spheres amidst the thousands of twinkling stars. Even the wanderer Mercury,—so hard to locate with the unaided eye in this latitude,—was no unfamiliar orb to me, and at every elongation, east or west, evening or morning, my keen vision picked him up, for all the twilight and horizon clouds.

“When my strength returned, I sought and obtained permission from my father to build an observatory near those gigantic stones that had themselves often assisted the Druids, doing crude duty for a similar purpose in the days of old. I cannot attempt to express the satisfaction that I felt when my observatory was at length finished, and the large lens—obtained from London at considerable cost—finally adjusted, had been placed in position, tested by terrestrial comparisons, declared perfect as could be, and I was left alone, master of that great eye, capable of searching the abysses of space. That first night of actual telescopic observation is one of the remembrances of my life, only overshadowed in importance by one of which I shall speak later. I recollect that the magnificent orb of Jupiter was fortunately nearing opposition at the time, and a grander sight than the giant planet with his rosy bands and roving satellites it was impossible to conceive.

“I need not describe in detail my work as an observational astronomer, suffice it to say that I made a few discoveries. After I had become thoroughly used to the ‘seeing’ of my telescope, the time approached for a very favorable opposition of Mars. I made every preparation for this event, amongst other things resilvering my reflector, and procuring more powerful and perfect eyepieces.

(To be continued.)