Putnam's Magazine

THE TALE OF A COMET.

Spencer Edward
May, 1870 - Part 1
June, 1870 - Part 2

IN TWO PARTS: I.

"Rerum natura sacra sua non simul tradit. Initiatos nos credimus; in vestibulo ejus hæremus."
SENECA. Nat. Quæst. vii.

I.—THE PROFESSOR'S LETTER.

THE year in which the comet came I was living by myself, at the windmill. Early in May I received from my friend the Professor the following letter:

"COLLEGE OBSERVATORY, May 5.

"MY DEAR BERNARD,—I want to ask a favor, which, if you please to grant it, I honestly think will contribute sensibly to the advancement of science, without causing much disorder to your bachelor life. I want you, in fact, to take a pupil. There has come to us a very strange young man, who knows nothing but the mathematics; but knows them so thoroughly and with such remarkable and intuitive insight, that I am persuaded he is destined to become the wonder of this age. His name is Raimond Letoile; he is about twenty years old, and his nature, so far as I can determine upon slight acquaintance, is singularly amiable, pure, and unsophisticated. His recommendations are good, he has money sufficient for all his purposes, and I think you will find him a companion as well as a pupil, who, while giving you but little trouble, will reward you for your care by the contemplation of his unexampled progress. I want you to take charge of this young man, my dear Bernard, because I have confidence in the evenness of your disposition, and the steady foothold you have obtained upon the middle way of life. He is an anomaly, and therefore must be treated with prudence, and a tender reserve such as we need not exercise toward the rough-and-tumble youth of the crowd. In fact, this young man Raimond Letoile is a unique and perfect specimen of that rare order of beings, which, not being able to anatomize and classify, owing to the infrequency of their occurrence, we men of Science carelessly label under the name of *Genius*, and put away upon our shelves for future examination. Letoile is certainly a genius, and when properly instructed, I believe he will develop a faculty for the operations of pure science such as has no parallel, unless we turn to the arts and compare him with Raphael and Mozart. He is a born mathematician. And when I say this, I do not mean that he simply has an extraordinary power of calculation, like Colburn and those other prodigies who have proved but pigmies after all—I mean that he possesses an intuitive faculty for the higher analysis, and possesses it to such a wonderful degree that all of us here stand before him in genuine amaze-

ment. He knows apparently but little about our systems of formulation, though every day rapidly advancing in technical knowledge. And yet, by processes not in the books, processes apparently original with himself, and which he is not able to explain, he has worked out with ease results such as have most violently exercised the highest order of mathematical minds. In a word, this extraordinary youth may be said to think in figures and symbols—the ordinary career of his reason is along the pathway of scientific formulæ. More than all this, his mind seems to have grasped at processes and solved problems which we cannot compass with all our skill, and which, with his present deficient powers of expression, he is incapable of interpreting to us.

"In all other respects, Letoile is utterly ignorant and unsophisticated—in effect, a mere infant. Of applied science, of history, of those simple matters which are the first steps of every school-boy, he knows nothing. Of the common phenomena of nature he has surprising small knowledge; nor is he much better informed about the ordinary observances of social life. To use the language of our venerable President, he could not seem less one of our own people had he been dropped upon this earth, a full-grown stranger, accidentally snatched from some other sphere where the customary interchange of thought is through the medium of mathematical formulæ.

"It is in order to obtain for him instruction in these things of which he knows nothing that we wish you to take him. I would myself teach him, gladly, but, as you know, my duties are already too many for me to hope to do him justice; and besides, the gregarious halls of a large college are hardly fit schools of life to a person so inexperienced and unsophisticated. We are confident that, if you will accept the charge of his education for a year or so, our young man will learn to walk so securely in the right paths that there will be no danger of his going amiss hereafter. We feel a responsibility toward him that is measured by the extraordinary character of his talents, and by his helpless, confiding nature. We are sure that, in asking you to share this responsibility with us, we are doing our duty by the young man, and at the same time are giving you an opportunity to do good which you will be glad to embrace.

"Should you accept this charge, my dear Bernard, you must treasure it sacredly, and administer it with rare judgment and tender solicitude; for I need not tell you, men like this Letoile are of too fragile and delicate a constitution to endure rough usage. We can send our earthenware to the well, but we must keep our finer porcelains indoors. And if any mental or moral hurt should come to the young man, we could not fail to be deeply grieved. Our Faculty look upon him as the professors of a musical academy are said to look upon a child possessed of one of those rare voices which do not appear more than once in a century—something to be treasured more zealously than the Sibyl's books.

"It has been well observed by one of the deepest thinkers of our century, that there is nothing in the nature of mathematical science which prescribes any boundaries to its infinite progress. There is no limit to the applicability of mathematics, for there is no inquiry which may not finally be reduced to a mere question of numbers, as notative functions of quantities and their relations. The limitation that *does* exist is in ourselves, in the imperfections of our intelligence, and the absence of power in our minds to go beyond certain processes and degrees of comparison and abstraction.

"It is only by the discovery of new and simpler methods that the human intellect is able to grapple with the overpowering multitude of new relations and conditions which come up as knowledge advances. And this rank growth of strange weeds in the garden of Science will always run beyond our capacity to eradicate them; for it is part of our unhappy constitution that we are more apt at imagining than we are at reasoning. Hence, we do right to look abroad for new methods and better processes of high analysis; for, while these subtler processes will of course open up to us a vast new field of questions beyond our grasp, they will at the same time give us power to solve many problems already presented, but as yet impracticable to our imperfect algebra.

"I need not tell you that the present advanced condition of mathematical science, as compared with other sciences, has not resulted from a methodical progression, but has been reached *per saltum.* It is not coördinate with the advancement of the race, but due to the sublime flights of individual genius. Our science has not crept along with common men on the face of the earth, but has leaped from point to point up the

giddy heights, under the impulses given to it by the minds of such *un*common men as Euclid, Archimedes, Apollonius, Pappus, Diophantus, Vieta, Descartes, Kepler, Newton, Leibnitz, Napier, Laplace, and the many other illustrious names which we delight to honor.

"A new genius, therefore, in giving us new methods, may virtually enrich the world with a new mathematics. Hence the sense of responsibility which we feel toward this young man, who seems to have at his control, could we contrive to develop them, new processes in our science of as great utility to us now as were those of Diophantus to the geometers of his day.

"In the light of these facts, should you consent to receive Raimond Letoile, you will understand the nature of the guardianship we wish you to assume, and will know how to bring him under such a general discipline as will best enable him to develop his rare gifts.

"Be kind enough to reply at once, and, if you will receive the pupil, let us know when he is to come, and how we are to send him.

"Sincerely your friend,
"CANOPUS PARALLAX."

I made answer to Professor Parallax that, though I did not feel very competent to teach ordinary pupils, much less such a transcendent genius as he described, and though, sooth to say, I had very little faith in meteors of that kind, I could not refuse to oblige gentlemen to whom I owed so much of my own education, and who expressed their desires in such complimentary terms. If the young man was willing to dwell in a windmill and put up with bachelor comforts and country fare, I was quite willing to receive him, whenever he was ready to come.

II.—CHERRY.

When I say that I lived in a windmill, I mean in what had once been a windmill. But its rotary powers had got crank, its sails were no longer patchable, even in a beggarly way,* the rats had gnawed the service out of its bolting-cloth, and all its functions had quite surceased in favor of the steam mill further down the river, long before I saw it. When I did see it, it was little else than a clapboard ruin; but the independent attitude with which it lifted its burly figure, like a stout athlete squared for fight, suited my whim, and I rented it at once. The roof was all bemossed, but did not leak, and, without much expense, I fitted up a bedroom, a study (in which I took my meals), and had under the roof an ample chamber in which to adjust my telescope. Old black Nanny, who lived in a cleanly cabin close by, was my cook, my housemaid, and also my washerwoman. My books were numerous and select; the dear, delightful river was just at hand, and, when I was lonesome, or needed recreation, there was Cherry, only across the stream.

Perhaps Cherry had quite as much to do with my lease of the old windmill as Astronomy. For, though I was the same bookworm then as now, my heart was considerably younger, and my head not gray. I had just left college, and was so little used to beautiful women or indeed to women of any sort, that when I met Cherry I fell so under the charm of her frank, innocent loveliness, that it seemed I could never be done seeing her. So I rented the windmill. I could prosecute my studies there to great advantage, and then—— O Cherry!

She dwelt in a little low-roofed cottage, so close, indeed, that if there had not been so many trees and vines and honeysuckles and roses about it, I could have looked into the windows of her dainty room. The mill stood over against a point — "Windmill Point" 'twas called—on a little round knob of land, the only thing approaching to a hill in all that region. At its base was a scrap of road, no longer used, but white with splintered oyster-shells and pebbles; beyond this, a skirt of wiry grass, intergrown with wild asparagus and tangled with sea-weed, marking the limits of the tide; then, the river's margin, sand and pebbles intermingled, white and clean; next, the river, a limpid, clear, lake-like green width of fifty yards, which I could overcome with a dozen strokes of the paddle when I had

* "Patch beside patch is neighborly,
But patch upon patch is beggarly."

unloosed my little canoe from the platform made of two planks which I called my wharf. Once across, I used to tie my boat to the trunk of one of two graceful green willows that stood there dipping their long tresses in the water like mermaids bathing; and then, it was but a step up the bank—a sloping wave of the greenest sward—across the lawn, and up to the cottage-porch. I am quite sure grass never grew so green as it grew on that little lawn; nor could honeysuckles have been sweeter, nor roses more perfect, than Cherry's always were. I used to tell her it was her smiles made these things so sweet and perfect; and when I told her, she used to smile again!

The cottage was not much to speak of—that is to say, would not have been much without Cherry. It was ill-contrived, old, leaky, and weather-stained, with small mean windows, and uneven rickety floors. There was nevertheless an appearance of quaint beauty about it such as I never saw in any other house, besides an air of that homely comfort which money cannot purchase, nor architect design. I never crossed the lawn, shady with various trees that grew how they would, nor stepped upon the low-roofed porch, hedged in and twined about with vines and flowers in all the careless grace of nature, but I was reminded how aptly all the scene fitted itself to Cherry, and chimed with her artless freedom and frank innocence of look.

One end of the porch was latticed, and on the frame a prairie-rose and a microphylla climbed in emulous rivalry which should first rest its topmost blossoms on the sill of Cherry's window, to sparkle back decoy responses to her morning salutations. All summer long, two great, high-backed, hickory armchairs stood on this porch, like sentinels, on either side of the hall-door, and in them, unless the weather prevented, the old people used to sit, Cherry's grandparents; for she was an orphan, and they were her only guardians. Two old, old people, so old you would not have had to stretch your fancy much to imagine that they came over in the first ship; and here, the livelong day, they used to sit, dozing, nodding, or cackling out to one another or the person who was by, some little trifle left them by memory out of the forgotten past, a thin, withered joke, or a scrap of homemade wisdom, as solid and as frost-bitten as a grindstone apple. The old man smoked his pipe now and then, when Cherry would fill and light it for him; and the old lady knitted white yarn stockings, careless about the stitches she dropped in her dreams, for she knew that Cherry would take them up for her. Cherry, smiling, busy Cherry, was their good providence; and they sat there securely under her protection, very certain she would never fail them. A nice, old-fashioned, quiet, cleanly couple as you ever saw, with manners brought over from the last century, and garments to suit. There never was whiter cambric than that of the old lady's inside handkerchiefs, nor ever shoes that could shine in rivalry to the old gentleman's—which, indeed, must have been fashioned upon the same last with the shoes of the Reverend Mr. Primrose, of Wakefield.

It was a very pretty sight indeed, of an evening after tea, to see Cherry sit down in the low doorway between her grandparents, like a rosy *Pomme d'Api* betwixt two shrivelled, frosted pippins. She was the beau ideal of serene and happy maidenhood. One would have thought that, leading such a quiet life in the company of two decayed old people, she must have caught their silent, old-fashioned manners. But Cherry escaped these influences by the very innocence of her nature, and the innate deep joyousness of her heart. Besides, she had much to do, and lively companionship in it. There was her housekeeping and superintendence of the blowzy, but big-hearted maid of all work. There was her poultry—her foolish geese with their spraddling goslings; her chickens; her young ducks; her simple, confiding little turkeys, that would follow her about all day, lifting their bills and crying peep! peep! and hovering under her petticoat, and clambering upon her lap whenever they had a chance. There were her

flowers, and her kitchen-garden. Cherry was a true country-girl; she knew every tree and shrub, and all the wild flowers, and could tell you something about all the various inhabitants of the river—the crabs and the king-crabs, the oysters on the bar, the terrapins, the fish, the sticklebacks and toad-fish and shrimp; and also when it was time to catch them, and where were the good fishing stakes, what was the proper bait, and what state of tide and weather was most favorable for their cajolement. From infancy she had sat beneath the willows, and rambled along the shore, until she had come to feel a sisterly interest in each object, even to the toothsome mananosays that squirted water up through the sand what time the tides were out, and the round milky-white pebbles that clustered on the shore like eggs in a basket.

Cherry did not observe exactly a city toilette, yet there was always something indescribably fresh and pure and womanly in her dress. I need not tell you she was pretty. She had not a figure to please the concocters of heroines, being rather short and plump; but her healthy, springy gait, her peach-blossom cheek, her breezy hair, her soft brown eye full of goodness and sparkling with life, and her sweet, sweet mouth, in the dimples of which laughter lingered like a rippling eddy by a brook—these were better far than any heroical traits. Her even, lustrous teeth, gleaming out so often from between the smile-parted lips, and her wide, innocent, importunate eyes, made her seem more childlike than she really was. For Cherry was quite a grown woman, and, though to appearance simply a pretty, fond, domestic maiden, there was in her a lofty ideal, something that more than made up for the absence of artificial graces. She was a woman of perfect love and of perfect faith, and the grandest martyrs were no more than this. She had precisely that "heavenly beauty of soul" which awes us in Cordelia, and moreover, under the commonplace veil of her round of daily duties kindly done, and the shy reserve of a retired country girl, she concealed an imagination warm and vivid, and that sacred fire of enthusiasm whose steady flame will only blaze upon the high altar of self-abnegation.

Does any one wonder that my canoe was often tied up at the willow trees, or that I tired of star-gazing, lorn bachelor that I was?"

III.—RAIMOND LETOILE.

In a few days my pupil came to me,—the handsomest youth that ever stepped upon this earth. A tall, statuesque figure, full of ease and grace,—an Antinous, carved first with careful chisels out of the purest marble, then, with some divine touch, warmed into shell-tints and the gleam and glow of life. And, though its tones were rich and soft, there was yet always a certain severe quality about this young man's beauty which prevented you from forgetting the marble from which he was carved. A touch had stirred him with the breath of life—it needed but another touch to crystallize him again forever, white and dumb, an image to make despairing sculptors break their tools.

I have never seen a face so free from every mark and trace of passion. There was not one feature, one line, one shade on which the sensuous instincts of man could place a smutchy finger. All was pure as virginity's self—purer, for its immaculate quality was not contingent, but a necessity. The fault of the face, indeed—if I may so express myself—lay in its very faultlessness. There was no expression you could dwell upon, no character, where each feature was but the perfectly proportioned part of a perfectly proportioned whole. Character means contrasts, discords, if you will, of various degrees, that combine to bring out harmony—this face expressed simple melody, too elemental to be analyzed.

From the very first of my intercourse with Raimond Letoile, there was a vague, confused impression made upon my mind of something lacking in him—some little link wanting to complete the chain which bound him to humanity. I do not know how to define this impression: indeed, 'twas like those shadowy dreams which melt out of our consciousness when we

waken in the morning, as the mists melt off from the meadows after the sun has risen above the trees. It was not intellect he lacked, for there he was clear and bright; nor truth, nor correct principles, nor purity of soul, nor a kindly, amiable, patient disposition; all these he had, in as ample measure as ever human being had them. But—was that human goodness which never seemed to be bearing up against any strain of temptation? Was that human kindliness, which knew no prejudices where it shed its light? Was that human sympathy which was —which was no sympathy at all, for it waked no responsive chord in the hearts of others? What was this puzzling something, for his deficiency in which I blamed and shrank away from this serene and lovely youth, who yet seemed to possess all the good qualities to which I could give a name? There he was, rich in mental power, full of all the virtues, easy, courteous, kind, the best and most tractable of pupils, the most complaisant of inmates, and yet—I could not understand my feelings toward him.

The best and most tractable of pupils he certainly was, but the most difficult of all pupils to instruct. For, how to teach a man who seemed to know everything in its essence and nothing in its appearance? who walked with the steps of a master amid the deepest arcana of Nature, yet had scarcely been taught his A B C? But, if it was hard to know how to teach him, it was not hard for him to learn. I had but to repair his ignorance of forms—the substance was already there, and ample grasp of mind to seize it. Strange scholar! taking a lesson in simple grammar and geography from me, suitable to a boy of eight, then turning to work out original solutions of the abstrusest problems in the higher geometry—problems which he solved as the young Pascal solved Euclid, before he had mastered the terms in which to express them, or the symbol by which to write them down!

In speech, Raimond was very fluent and pure. His vocabulary was rich and full, lacking only technical terms, and these he supplied periphrastically with great readiness. Yet, it was different from our speech. Not different as a foreigner's would be, for his tones and accents were highly correct—but different because entirely free from idiom, because cold and faultless as that universal language must be, when men shall agree upon one that is to supplant the home-speech of the universal human race.

This young man knew what he did know by intellection, and not by experience. His senses had taught him comparatively nothing. If he saw a flower, and you told him 'twas a rose, you had further to tell him that the rose was a flower. Of space, except when mathematically considered, of color, of sounds, of all the various phenomena of things of which the senses take perpetual cognizance, and equally of all the various relations of man to man, he knew surprisingly little. Yet, as soon as he had acquired a few elements, his knowledge flowed in swiftly, for his faculty of observation was as alert as that of a child. I had but to lead him up the steps of any temple whatsoever of art or science—he needed no further help to find his way within, aye, even to those innermost, remotest shrines, to which only the most enthusiastic devotees may penetrate, and these but rarely.

I was not alone in receiving a certain impression of this young man's singularity—singularity not such as that which strikes us in the foreigner, unacquainted with our customs but practised in those of his own people, but singularity as of one who had dwelt altogether apart, who was not experienced in any modes whatever of human life—the singularity of an infant full grown, of a man newly born into the world. Other persons who encountered him received precisely the same impression. Poor old black Nanny, while shyly fond of him, and treating him as she might have treated a forlorn orphan girl fallen to her sole charge, was yet wofully afraid of him, and shudderingly sensible of the *aerie* atmosphere in which he dwelt.

"I don't believe he'd harm a fly, ef he knowed it," she would say to me; "but dars rael sperits guards ober him, onbe-

knownst to him, an' dey'd quick enough settle wid you and me ef we was to stroke him agin de grain. I knows people when I sees 'em, an' ef dat ar young man don't see ghosts and hold comflaburations wid sperits all de time arter dark when he goes mumbling about de house, den my name ain't Ann Eliza Simmons—dat's all!"

Of course Raimond Letoile had not been my pupil long before I took him across the water with me. Cherry had expressed much curiosity to see him ever since I had showed her the professor's letter; and besides, I wanted to see Cherry, and it would not have been courteous to leave the young man at home. The old people, in their dim, drowsy way, welcomed him as my friend, and thought very well of him, as a nice young man who didn't make much noise about the house—a good trait, by the way, which they flattered me by supposing I possessed, sober old bachelor that I was!

But Cherry's reception of him was very much warmer. His rare and noble beauty, his evident purity of soul, his cold and lofty manners, his surpassing power of thought and speech, his remarkable introduction to me, and the whole deep mystery which seemed to engird him, were more than enough to entrance her, and startle her simple ways with a flood of new and thrilling experiences. Her faith more than made up for any doubts and suspicions I may have entertained. From the first hour of seeing him she *believed* in the youth, believed him to be the wonderful coming Genius for whom the good Professor was waiting—the Columbus who was to discover new worlds to Science—and, in her warm, enthusiastic fashion, congratulated me on the glorious privilege that had been accorded to me of teaching his *a b abs* to a young prince of wonders, whose shoe-latchet—I feel very confident—she thought I was not worthy to unloose. I must needs confess, this thing of being made the pedestal upon which my pupil might rear his figure with more commanding grace, did not suit me very well; but, what could one do? Cherry was a woman, and had a woman's faith—a faith which pays no respect to reason, and defies the trammels of experience. She looked up to the stranger, saw in him that which she could not explain, which excited her wonder and her awe, and straightway she began to reverence and to worship. I could not help her doing so. I might indeed have pulled down the altar, but I could not have destroyed the idol, for that was engraven upon a woman's heart, and so was indelible forever.

But, how did the object of this enthusiasm and this worship receive them? How did he conduct himself toward his little devotee who had so promptly come to bow at his shrine? Sooth to say, his reception of it was the strangest part of this worship. To her, in her creative faith, he was one whom

> "Fancy fetch'd,
> Even from the blazing chariot of the sun,
> A beardless youth, who touched a golden lute,
> And fill'd the illumined grove with ravishment."

To him, on the contrary, she was apparently a very common person indeed, a mere simple girl, whom he had not looked at closely enough or thought sufficiently about to know whether she was even ugly or pretty. He treated her as we treat the *vin ordinaire* upon our tables, something not worth talking about, or even sipping daintily. Was he blind? was he insensible? Was his conversion from the chill marble a process not quite completed? Or, was he too proud to let one see what impression her grace and loveliness *must* have made upon him? I could not tell. All I knew was that his indifference provoked my anger, and I almost told her that her admiration and worship were paid to a stock and a stone. Even had Cherry felt this to be so, however, it would have made no difference in the degree of that admiration and worship. Her religion was self-rewarding.

I have spoken of Raimond's mathematical *studies*—but indeed that is scarcely the proper word. What he did in this way seemed done not by process of reasoning, but by pure evolution of consciousness. During the day his thoughts were bestowed in other directions, but,

after the sun was down and the stars had come out, he began, as old Nanny said, to go "mumbling about the house," not, as she fancied, in conversation with hobgoblins and spooks, but in a sort of intimate communion with abstract principles—I have to use paradoxical language to express paradoxical things—in a terminology which he could only feebly and faintly translate into our common algebraic formulation. You have perhaps noticed the constant habit which musical devotees have of emphasizing as it were the harmonious fancies that perpetually float through their brains, by drumming with their fingers upon whatever thing is nigh at hand. In the same way, as soon as night was fallen, Raimond Letoile's lips seemed to be counting off fugues from and variations upon the grand harmonies of the spheres, and the mystical properties of motion and number, in their widest and most transcendent generalizations. Now and then, as he advanced in knowledge of our common symbols, he would, by way of exercise as it were, set down fragments from these essentially *rhythmical* reveries—abstruse developments of the properties of recondite curves, unguessed corollaries and scholia from the general laws of the stellar spaces, and speculations within the profoundest twilight of the Calculus—demonstrations always complete and exemplary so far as I could understand them, but often, even when most carefully written out, as much too difficult for me, as the propositions of the *Principia* or the *Mécanique Celeste* would be to an ordinary schoolboy.

The room under the pyramidal roof of the windmill which I have called my observatory, was Raimond's favorite resort. I had pierced each face of the roof with a long sliding window, like the frame of a greenhouse, so that there was a good view of the whole celestial hemisphere, and, through my little telescope, good chance to study the more conspicuous objects of astronomical science. In this room Raimond spent the most part of every night, both when I was observing, and when I slept. If the night was cloudy, he also went to bed and slept, a dull, leaden sort of sleep, as if the clouds upon the sky were casting their reflex shadows darkly over his soul. But when it was clear above, and the starry gems of night sparkled with fervor, there was no longer any cloud over his face, nor the vestige of any drowsy sigh. Then, indeed, a fine responsive fervor lightened up his brow, and he stood looking out and upward with unwearied, steady eyes, murmuring to himself like one in a trance—his murmurs growing deeper, his abstraction more profound, and his fervor wilder, as the night advanced. He must have had a very clear vision, for, on all these occasions, he would refuse the aid of the telescope, which, indeed, he never used, saying he did not need it. He seemed to have but little knowledge of our system of apportioning the stars into various constellations. He gave them names according to his fancy, and grouped them according to some recondite system of his own, which he could not explain to me in terms definite enough for me to comprehend.

I do not know that any one will be able to gather a clear idea of this youth from the few traits I have set down. My own notions about him were not clear, and, as the sequel will show, I had but scant opportunity to improve them. There were times, and especially at night, and while he was muttering to the stars, when I suspected that his intellect was diseased. But I could not look at him by daylight, nor converse with him, and find it possible to retain the suspicion. How could he be in any degree mad or distraught, whose brain was clear as glass and strong as steel, and whose soul was absolutely unmoved by any turmoil of emotion or temptation of passion?

VI.—ON THE PORCH.

Spring tripped away gladly, like a maiden to the dance, and summer came, with all its fruits and flushes. The heats streamed down, but Zephyr had always a breath to lend to the beautiful river, to ripple its green lustre withal, and teach it to remember May. Raimond and I quietly studied in the silent

old tower, and often, when evening came down with its opaline lustre upon the river, we would cross it to visit Cherry. And always we found her, dear Lady Apple betwixt the withered Pippins, sitting with the old folks upon the porch, dressed in some cool, airy lawn or muslin, and ready to greet us with bright, eager eyes.

One evening, after a very hot day, as we were lingering by her, while the old people nodded, and we rather mused in company with her cheerful prattle than replied to it or followed it, I suddenly bethought me to ask her for a song. And then, remembering she had not sung to me for a long time, I pressed her all the more. Cherry was not a "performer;" she possessed neither piano nor guitar; but she had a sweet, tender voice, with a thrill in it as clear and gushing as a wren's, and she sang with expression and feeling. So, after a glance toward Raimond as he sat indifferent in the moonlight, she took up the strain of a sort of half hymn, half ballad — a pure little melody such as mothers use to win their weary babes to slumber, by night, in the darkened nursery, when their reverent thoughts turn naturally to prayer and praise. Cherry sang sweeter than I had ever heard her sing before, I thought, and, as she sang, Raimond, listening, seemed just like one wakened out of a long, deep trance, who hears a celestial voice bidding him rise, and trembles lest he should lose some one of its strange, sweet vibrations. I gazed upon him with surprise as he sat there, motionless, attent, while his countenance was transfigured with a sort of divine rapture, and his eyes dilated in ecstacy; and, as I watched him, I said to myself: "Now at last he looks like a man!"

When the song ended he was silent a long while, gazing out upon the stars, which shone pale and dim in the light of the half-moon. At last he turned to Cherry, and said:

"That song has awakened strange memories in me! It is a voice from my home; a voice I have not heard before since I came here! You have been there, Cherry; surely you have been at my home!"

"I am afraid not," answered Cherry, timidly; "I am but a little home-body, and have not travelled much."

"Your home!" said I—"where is it, Raimond?" for I had never heard him refer to the subject before.

He stretched out his hand toward the clustering stars, and turned again to Cherry.

"There!" he cried, "there is my home, in the cycles of yonder bright wilderness of spheres which you call Arcturus! There is my home; and since I was sent from thence I have had no word from home, until Cherry's voice uttered it just now, with such a familiar accent. Surely you are one of our denizens, Cherry, wandering, like me, a little while from home."

"Cherry's whole life is a poem, Raimond," I answered for her; "and a very sweet one. But it is only set to earthly music, after all, and I do not imagine she understands the language of the spheres."

"Yet she speaks to me in that language," responded Raimond, musingly.

"I do not know," was all that Cherry said; "I do not know, Bernard; but Raimond does know, far better than we."

"Raimond ought to know better than to let his fancy go astray, to bewilder poor little girls' brains with mystic metaphors."

"Metaphors?" answered he again, as if in doubt. "Is it all a mere metaphor, then, and am I merely one of you, and simply *as* you are? It cannot be! To-night a long veil has been rent asunder betwixt me and the past, and I can trace myself far backward along dim distant paths, where I have never heard any mortal say he travelled. How should I read the language of the spheres, unless I pertained to them? Cherry has spoken our tongue also, she must needs be of our kindred. What I have always read in the numbers, I now seem to see plainly before me, like a vivid dream out of which I have just waked. The touch of her voice roused me to con-

sciousness again, as it was meant to do, for I have slept long. It was meant to rouse me, that thrilling, tender song! See there!" he cried, suddenly pointing; "did I not tell you 'twas time for me to be awake? See, there comes a messenger! It has sprung into view, like my vision, at the very sound of her voice! See it!"

"A messenger! What do you mean?"

"O Bernard!" cried Cherry, tremulously—"look! look! it is a comet—a new comet, that has just come into view!"

It was so.

Remote and dim, a mere faint, feeble, nebulous star, low down in the region of the Great Bear, with a long, streaming, shadowy dim veil, the new comet showed itself.

"Raimond," I asked, "have you ever seen this before?"

"Never," he answered; "it has but just appeared. It was wandering at will among the spaces, until her song reached it, and bade it come hither, for that we were here! It is a messenger from the cycles of Arcturus!"

Cherry had risen from her seat, and now stood close beside me, resting her hand timidly upon my arm. I saw that she was frightened, and full of awe.

"Why do you tremble, Cherry?" said I, "it is but a simple comet, as natural an appearance, as harmless, and quite as beneficent, did we know its uses, as yonder familiar moon."

"A comet!" said the old man, waking up out of his doze—"a new comet!" He shook his head with ominous gravity. "I do not like comets. I have always noticed that they bring war with them, and all sorts of calamity. The last comet we had my wheat was ruined by the rust. Where is it?"

He came to the steps of the porch where we were and gazed out toward the north, but his poor old eyes were too feeble to grasp so dim an object.

"I cannot see it," said he, returning at last to his chair; "wife, I cannot see the comet."

"It must be a poor sort of a comet, then," retorted she, disdainfully, "if you cannot see it, for you always was famous for being far-sighted! Don't you remember the ducks you saw flying so far, when everybody else said they were quite gone out of sight?"

"I feel a sort of vague terror," said Cherry, with a shiver; "I do not like to think of these strange sights in the Heavens. Suppose one should fall upon our earth?"

"Not probable, Cherry," answered I. "They have their orbits just as other bodies in our system; they are as much part and parcel of that system as the round earth itself—nebulous bodies with wandering habits and uncertain hours, like men of genius I could name, but with good principles, nevertheless."

"Nebulæ!" rejoined Raimond Letoile, in a tone of strong protest—"messengers, I tell you, intelligent existences with souls of flame and lightning wings, set on to do the bidding of the superior spheres!"

"Pray tell me something about these wandering mysteries, Raimond," said Cherry, eagerly; "I am sure that if any body knows about them, you do."

"But, do you not know as well as I?" asked Raimond, lifting his beautiful head with swan-like grace, and turning his eyes toward her inquiringly. "You sang their song."

"It was only a simple ballad I learned from my grandmamma. I scarcely know about the little flowers of earth, much less the bright and beautiful beings of space. How should I know about them?"

"How should *I* know about them?" he said; "unless they are my kindred—free thoughts of the sublime spaces, as I am an imprisoned thought!" He went on, seemingly talking more to himself than to us: "I was yesterday reading in one of Bernard's books an Arabian tale of the Genie that was kept pent up within a narrow vase by the spell of a magic seal, until a fisherman came that way to drag his nets, and broke the seal, and let the spirit float aloof in a great cloud of vapor. Such a cloud, wandering free, and lighted up by a spark of the illumining universal thought, might

be one of those existences we call comets. What is thought? What is space?" he continued, with a certain rapture. "Only names which you bestow upon forces stirring within the Universal All—names for designation, but not for definition! Existence, substance, are but comparative degrees, after all, and that which is volatile and immaterial here in this dense, cross atmosphere, may well glow forth like a blazing, radiant world rolled grandly upon the more attenuated floors of yonder mighty Space."

"But I do not understand all that," said Cherry, naïvely.

"It is rank Spinozism, Cherry;" said I; "and if you could understand it, would only bewilder you the more. Do not quit your flowers for philosophy like that."

"I do not know what Spinozism is," Raimond replied; "what I have told you is simple truth, and Cherry will understand it, too, when she shall have gone thither to her home."

"Her home?"

"In the cycles of the radiant Arcturus!" said he, "whence sprung the thought whom you call Cherry."

"They must have beautiful thoughts there, then," I said, glancing at the girl who listened to him so eager and intent. But he did not notice how she was absorbed in him. He only said:

"They do indeed have beautiful thoughts there—thoughts too dazzling, bright, and warm for this poor, pallid air! I call to mind such a thought, even now—a thought flung forth from those mighty, mystic cycles, ages on ages ago. It was a little naked thought, like a new-born babe, scarce able to struggle with the immensity of space into which it was flung, and the immensity of being that ran thrilling before it like the long echoing vibrations of a harp. But even the little naked thoughts, unequal forces though they be, cannot perish, and this thought found the elements not unkindly. It wandered forth, a wee, tiny spark, and as it went it grew, until, like a long star-ray—like one of those long rays now streaming down from Vega, overhead—it left its track along the wondrous spaces, far and bright and free. And the vital power within it spirited it on and on, with rushing speed, yet softly as the evening wind will waft you fragrance from the flowers. And ever as it came it waxed brighter and brighter still, and spread its radiance higher, a self-lighted, rosy mist, sailing among the spaces on seraphic wings. Ah! what a happy play-time had that infant thought, at its little sports among the spaces and the ages! Anon, however, a strange sadness seized it, a strange darkness overcame it, and the mysterious elder forces, gray and cheerless powers over which it had no control, caught it as it wandered, and dragged it downward to the face of earth, and imprisoned it there for ages. But, for all its sadness, the little thought was too pure and bright to have a darkling prison, so it was melted into the substance of a crystal spar, where it might shine and glisten at its will. And presently, when its time was ripe, a kindred ray from those far-off cycles glanced through it with a message, and gave it new powers, so that it rent its prison-house again, and, after strange transformations, walked the earth a full-grown man. Yet this man knew not who he was, nor why, until, this very evening, a kindred voice, singing, touched on the chord of memory, so that it thrilled with a million responsive echoes, and then the blinding veil passed upward, and all was very clear. Cherry! the new-born wandering thought was a thought from the cycles of Arcturus, and the ray that rent its prison-house in the crystal spar came from thence, also, and the voice that sweetly undoes the casket of memory has a like origin! Cherry, yonder is your home, and we will go back thither, you and I."

"A pretty myth! You have a poetic fancy, my pupil," said I. Then, seeing how Cherry stood before him, leaning toward him like one magnetized and entranced—seeing all her faith in him and enthusiasm for him—seeing how absolutely she accepted his mystic utterances for truth—seeing how, in her un-

conscious frankness, she was without concealment putting me away from her forever, like a thing of no account—me who loved her better than I loved my own soul—and suffering this unknown stranger to absorb her very being, as a flower's cup absorbs the dew—seeing all this, I cried out in the bitterness of my soul:

"Truly a pretty myth, little Cherry, but you must not let it create within you longings for Arcturus! For, spite of all he says, Cherry, you and I are mere beings of this world, and we must not venture, even in thought, into regions where these 'superior intelligences' may look down upon us from their lofty heights, and treat us with contumely and neglect!"

But she did not heed me. She did not hear me. She only gazed still earnestly into his eyes, and cried, clasping her hands with rapture:

"Oh! what a beautiful life, Raymond! what a beautiful life is yours!"

THE TALE OF A COMET.

CONCLUSION.

V. THE VIENNA PROBLEM.

Day and night the summer deepened, clear and warm. And the comet came on closer, closer every night, a mystic shaft of splendor, set above a star. And Raimond and Cherry, gazing at it nightly, grew more confidential and intimate; while I, with bitter, bitter feelings, watched them, nursing my woe in darkness.

One day there came a letter to me from my good friend Professor Parallax, to whom I had sent several reports of my pupil's progress. After thanking me for my zealous guardianship, and congratulating me upon having such a brilliant charge to keep—I gnawed my lips with fury every time I thought of my having accepted it!—he wrote as follows:

"The astronomical world is all on the *qui vive* in regard to a strange thing that has lately happened at Vienna, and which I find reported in Herr Doctor Cometenbahnen's *Astronomische Schwärmereien*, a leading scientific periodical published in that city. It seems that Doctor Cometenbahnen, who is one of the most promising of our young astronomers, has been making some very important and careful observations upon the brilliant new comet, and has succeeded in obtaining several exceedingly accurate pictures of it by means of the camera. One night, while he was adjusting the focus, which re-

quires to be very carefully done, an unusual brightness seemed to illuminate his instrument, so that he fancied a meteor must have crossed the field of vision. He instantly closed his glass, took out the plate, and proceeded to develop the image. But, to his great surprise, instead of having a photographic image of the comet, his plate contained the representation of a series of strange characters or symbols, arranged in order, in a circumscribed lozenge, very much like the ideographic writing of the ancient Egyptians. How it came there he could not imagine, nor what it meant. The characters are not those of any known language, nor have the works of Champollion or Young or Rawlinson afforded any key to them—if, indeed, they be characters at all, which I am inclined to doubt. But Doctor Cometenbahnen not only claims that they are demonstrably characters, but also that they are mathematical symbols, and that they contain a problem of importance to the world, if a solution can only be found. And, as he truly says, the human ingenuity that has deciphered the strange monuments of Egypt and the cuneiform inscriptions of Assyria, need not be staggered before the text of any language, even though it embody the songs of the very stars.

"I send you a copy of the *Astronomische Schwärmereien*, containing Herr C.'s account of the occurrence in full, together with what he says is an accurate lithograph of the strange inscription. You may puzzle over it if you please, but I suspect you will not make more of it than I did. If Herr C. be right, however, it will be of use to show it to Raimond Letoile. He will certainly be able to solve it if it contains a mathematical problem. Pray show it to him, and write me what he says about it."

—I was much too busy with my own dark-brooding fancies to undertake the solution of a mathematical rebus. I placed the plate and magazine where Raimond would be likely to see them—for he was gone out—and then, to smoothe the wrinkles out of my soul, saddled my horse and went for a long ride.

That night, as I was writing in my study, Raimond came suddenly down to me, with the book and the diagram in his hands. He seemed very much startled, and was pale and haggard.

"What is this?" he cried, holding the problem out to me; "whence did it come? What does it mean?"

"Can you interpret it?" I asked. "The Professor sent it to me to-day, trusting that you would be able to make it out."

"Can it be! Sent to me! Explain me this mystery!"

I read the Professor's letter to him; then, taking the magazine, I translated Doctor Cometenbahnen's history of the strange occurrence.

"From the comet!" he cried, still more pale; "it must be authentic, then—it must be true!"

He scanned the mysterious paper with a long, anxious, eager, burning gaze, as one would read over his own indictment for treason, seeking if he might detect some flaw.

"Can you solve the thing, Raimond? Have you a key to the puzzle?"

He did not answer—did not hear me. He raised his face, very pale, like marble in moonlight, and put the paper reverently to his forehead.

"I will obey!" he said, and went out into the open air.

I followed him, for his manner was strangely disturbed, and I had never before seen him so agitated. He walked rapidly down to the brink of the river, and stood there gazing earnestly upwards, while the white silvery image of the comet streamed across the water to his feet, almost as brightly as it shone above—almost as bright as the sheeny reflection of a full moon.

He stood there, and, murmuring, shuddered. Then, still gazing upwards, he lifted his hands and apostrophized the stars and the vaulted sky in wild, passionate words, the import of which I could not gather.

"O golden clusters of the parent

world! O stars, ye wombs of thought, strange parents of your lost yet still remembered child, forgive me! Forgive me that I rebelled one moment, bewildered by a fairy-dream of earth! Sweet-smiling, swift-rushing bride of my soul, thou shalt not smile nor come in vain! I yearn for thee with rapture unspeakable, O thou inscrutable one, serenely smiling! I yearn for thee and the old-remembered joys of roaming ever by thy side, a kindred sphere! I obey, O messenger—gladly I obey!"

But, even then, a bitter, burning regret seemed to make him writhe in anguish. He tore the sheet of paper with the problem on it into a hundred fragments, and scattered them abroad over the ripples.

"O Cherry!" he cried, "O Cherry! Cherry!" and flung himself, face downwards, upon the pebbly sand. At sound of that name I made a step towards him. He turned and saw me, and motioned with his hand.

"Away!" he said, passionately, "away; I will not talk to-night! I wish to be alone! Away!"

So I left him, still crying, "Cherry! Cherry!" and beating his clenched fists on the pebbled shore.

—"Were you mad, last night?" I asked him when he came to breakfast next morning; "have the vapors of the comet got into your brain, or was there really something in Cometenbahnen's problem to give you concern?"

He looked at me pleasantly, yet perplexed.

"I read the problem," he said, "and what it told me was so strange, I could not help but show my excitement."

"You read it? You have the key, then? What——"

"Stop there, my kind master," said he, interrupting. "I am not at liberty to explain that message—for message it certainly was—because it concerns my own private matters. Besides, neither you nor any like you would either understand it or believe me, since the whole thing is not only outside of, but contrary to, your ordinary experiences. So I will keep it to myself, for I do not wish you to treat me either as an impostor or a lunatic."

"Very well, Mr. Letoile," I answered gravely, "I am glad you do not propose to carry your poetic fancies into practice while you reside with me. Be sure always to *act* so that you cannot be charged with imposition or with madness, and you will not fail of proper credit at my hands."

He thanked me in kind tones, but I could not feel kindly towards him. Always I thought of him prostrate on the river-shore, crying, "Cherry! Cherry!" Always I dreaded something, and hated him for being the cause of that dread.

—Two or three days later than this, when I was at the cottage, Cherry came close to me, and, dropping her eyes a little, said:

"Raimond has had a message sent him, Bernie." (Sometimes she gave me that dear diminutive title.)

"Ah!" I answered; "so he said to me."

"But you do not believe it, Bernie. I do! I know it all by heart, but am not at liberty to tell. Oh, it is a very beautiful message, Bernard—very, very beautiful! And he will be very happy! Bernard," she cried, suddenly clasping my two hands in hers, and gazing entreatingly into my face, "you do not like Raimond! You do not believe in him! Do so, for my sake—for your own sake! He is not to be with us long, Bernard; and oh, you will never know until after he is gone what a privilege it is to us to have this free intercourse with a being so pure and bright and far above us! Trust him, Bernard, and love him, as I do!"

"He is going away, you say?"

"Yes, he is going away—away, ever so far, and very, very soon! Yes, he is going away, Bernard—he is going away!"

And as her voice lingered iteratively upon those plaintive words, they sounded like the refrain of a nocturne, while a dreary desolation came into her face, filling it with inexpressible sadness.

Yet she smiled.

VI. WEEPING WILLOWS.

Raimond Letoile now had a little canoe of his own, so that he was no longer dependent upon me to take him across to the cottage. He did not time his visits by mine, indeed, but went and came just as it suited him. And, as was natural in such a case, the oftener he went the less frequent my visits became.

One evening, when he was across the river as usual, my books excited a great loathing in me, and, tossing them aside, I went to the river-shore, stepped into my boat, and, slowly paddling, pushed myself gently down the stream, until I had gone a mile. I ceased from paddling then, and, slowly borne homeward by the flooding, gurgling tide, sat and mused, drinking in the moist night-air. It was a very calm night, serene and gentle as a sleeping infant. The sickle-moon had not yet risen, and the stars shone around with deep brilliancy, while the comet, now evidently not far from its perigee, streamed aloft like an airy veil of silver lace, such as young brides wear at the very altar. It sheered through the clustering constellations like a spectral sword of silvery flame, beautiful yet terrible—the angel's sword that kept the gate from Adam, and would not let him enter any more. I gazed long and earnestly upon the strange, lustrous phantom, and thought of Raimond and of Cherry, until my heart ached shrewdly, and the grating beneath my feet warned me my boat had drifted to the shore.

Pushing off again, a few vigorous strokes of the paddle drove the light boat up the river, and close by the shore in front of the cottage. I was about to moor as usual, and refresh my weary spirit with a sight at least of Cherry, when, from under the willows, I heard the sound of voices, and saw that it was Raimond and Cherry, seated in his canoe at the trees. I kept my boat quiet in the shadows of the bank, and watched them.

I had begun to notice a great change in Cherry. It was not merely that a new depth had come into her eyes, not merely that a more womanly sweetness tempered the vivid glow of her earlier bloom, for these were developments which had been going on in her a good while. The change I mean was one I had remarked from the day when she told me Raimond was going away. It was a change similar to that of the evening from the first pink flushes of sunset into the less lustrous violet-gray of twilight—a change from one kind of loveliness into another kind equally pure, yet not so bright and joyous. A deep earnestness had settled in her eyes, which now met yours as if some spirit behind them was looking forth with serious importunity to question you to your very soul. There was a certain quaver in her voice, as if its chord had suffered over-strain from pressure of emotion. The roses upon her cheeks had grown pale and dim, and threatened to depart altogether; and there was a languor in her step, and a dreamy, listless, sad sort of halo all about her, which betokened dreary thoughts and unwholesome consciousness, and a throng of beckoning shapes and strange phantoms that haunted her couch by night and vexed her from her rest.

Suffering was a new experience in the life of this once happy little country maiden, yet she bore the burden patiently, nay, did not know she suffered, but, smiling, fancied this was some new kind of joy, too rapturous for the contentment of her simple soul. And, as the new being passed into her frame, even while she shivered and stood hesitating, drooping, lost in pensive reverie, a new beauty dawned within her also, and all the secret, inscrutable depths of her pure, radiant womanliness grew more wondrous in their loveliness.

Yet the change did not please me, for my blossom grew paler while it waxed more lovely. Her languor was none the less the languor of illness that it was beautiful to see. I hated Raimond Letoile for being the cause of this illness, and I hated him none the less for being the cause why she turned away from me and the simple, fervid love I lavished at her feet, to stray, like

a lost and forlorn maiden, among the dim shapes that his enchantment had power to summon up around her. And hatred bred suspicion. What had he done to her to change her bright cheerfulness into such "sad dreariment?" Could he love her, he that was lithe and cold as steel? Assuredly not with a love to compensate her for the self-consuming devotion she was pouring out for him. What was this man, who had come to share my home and steal away my love? Was he merely some clever madman, some half-crazed enthusiast, whose ravings culminated with the moon; or was he a shrewd, deep-scheming, subtle impostor, stolen into Cherry's confidence like a wolf into a sheep-fold? I had heard of such—those dazzling, dark, incomprehensible libertines—men who devote half the energies of a rare and multiplex life to compassing the ruin of some poor trusting woman, her innocence and purity the spur that goads them on—men whose faces nevertheless remain as smooth and clear and lovely as if their thoughts abided always with the angels. Was Raimond Letoile one of these tempters, with their arts of hell? I had no fears for Cherry—for what could smutch the simple, flawless crystal?—yet, I clutched my paddle as I watched them, and thought, were such a suspicion true, I could brain him then and there.

Screened by the deep, dark shadows of the shore, I watched them as they sat in the little boat and talked. The great weeping willows, solemn and black in the night, hung far above them, their long branches drooping down into the water like a bower around the boat, and scarcely a breath of zephyr made the long branches and leaves rustle. The comet was not visible from where they sat, but its image on the water was, fleeing across the river like a flitting ghost. It was a still and witching scene, and their voices, as they spoke, were in accord with it, murmuring out low and seldom but long-drawn tones as they sat motionless in the motionless boat—an enchanted couple in a fairy craft upon some magic lake hid deep in the pathless woods, inaccessible to mortals unless the wand of Vivian or Urgana pointed out the way. They sat motionless, gazing out upon the waters, and I saw that she held his hand in hers, with a clasp light as the touch of floating thistle-down. Yet, light as that touch was, I would have given ten years of my life to feel my hand resting in hers that way!

A dim, pallid mist came up from the water and floated softly through the air, until the stars hung vaguely as when one gazes upon them through tears, and the comet shone with a red, lurid, smoky glare, quite unlike its former pearly radiance. Then suddenly Raimond unmoored his little shallop, and with a stroke sent it out into the stream, while Cherry bent a long, loving look upon his face. The boat hung there where he had propelled it into the mist like a motionless, painted thing, while he turned his eyes towards the lurid meteor, and made salutations to it, like some pagan at his vesper worship.

"She is angry, Cherry," he murmured; "her pure brow wears a frown, her veil is dulled and angry with the spray of tears! My bride is angry, Cherry; I have given her offence!"

She answered nothing, but, with a growing wanness and a deepening pallor in her face, which even the gloomy night could not hide, sought silently to take his hand again, which he silently drew away, renewing those wild gestures and wild words. He rose, and, standing upright, like a statue against the sky, made mystic invocations to the mysterious stars; while she, rising also, bent forward upon her knees, and with clasped hands and sad white face, yet full of rapt wonder and wild, bursting love, watched at his feet, like a Virgin with an aureole at the Transfiguration—the parent of a God, yet the mother, the weary mother of a man! Here was a picture for some silent, musing sculptor, to steal into the marble, fixing immortal Beauty, radiant, evanescent, with one cunning touch that should make his hand immortal and his name a thing of wonder!

—Then, after a while, the boat was turned towards the shore again and moored among the willow branches, while she stepped upon the terrace without a word. Then Raimond, with swift strokes of his paddle, returned across the river to the tower; while Cherry, with heavy feet, walked through the dewy grass towards her home. I lingered still, watching the light that twinkled in her little windows, until it ceased to shine. And, long after midnight, I stole slowly homewards, sad as Cherry.

VII. A CUL-DE-SAC.

The comet was very near its perigee, when I received a hurried and agitated note from the Professor, asking me to come to see him at once.

"I wish to consult you in regard to your pupil, Raimond Letoile, about whom I have made a very strange and perplexing discovery," he wrote. "You must come to me at once, and help me to find a way out of the greatest difficulty I have ever encountered in my life."

The note was despatched from a hotel in a neighboring city; so, the next morning, I took the steamboat, and joined my friend that afternoon. He immediately began upon the object for which he had summoned me.

"You recollect, my dear Bernard," said he, "that you wrote to me that you were not altogether satisfied with your pupil's demeanor, and that he was a burden to you of which you would fain be rid. You hinted, at the same time, of very strange behavior—conduct, in fact, which, although you did not say it, I could not in my own mind divest from the suspicion of something like mental aberration. I wished to ascertain whether this was a new thing with him, or whether any such singularities had been before observed in his conduct, and, for that purpose, I sought to communicate with the persons who had represented themselves to be his guardians. Now here began the mystery, to solve which I have summoned your aid.

"Strange as it may appear to you," said the Professor, in a very agitated way, "I cannot find those guardians! I cannot discover that Raimond Letoile has any connections, acquaintances, or any antecedents whatsoever!"

"You mean," said I, bitterly, "what I have often suspected, that he came to you under false pretences, and is merely a cunning impostor, who has planned to deceive us for some purpose of his own. God grant that purpose be not the one I fear!" added I, thinking of Cherry, while a flood of wild apprehensions made my heart beat violently.

"I mean, that there is an incomprehensible mystery about the whole matter—a mystery that fills me with affright, old man as I am and good Christian as I hope I am!" replied Mr. Parallax, catching his breath and looking at me with a face full of perplexity. "In these days, when the devil seems to be unloosed, and goes abroad like a roaring lion—in these days of strange prodigies, of animal magnetism, and clairvoyance, and spiritualism, my old-fashioned reason feels as if it had dragged its anchors and gone adrift like a rudderless ship upon a stormy midnight sea! What if all we have conquered from the past should turn out to be no knowledge, after all!"

"We must examine the resources of roguery first," said I, "before we pin our faith to the supernatural. Tell me about this young man Letoile."

"Yes, yes," he said, eagerly, "we must deal with the obvious—we must exclude shadows! About the young man, then. You may remember that I wrote to you his recommendations were good, and that he seemed amply furnished with funds. Here are all the papers which concern him, including the letters we received;" and he placed them on the table before me.

"In cases of imposture," said I, gathering them up in my hand, "the crucial test is generally the financial one. Rogues are most counterfeit when there is question of actual coin."

"That test fails here, Bernard," replied the Professor. "The College has

in hand several hundred dollars of the money sent to be applied to this young man's uses. See, here is the memorandum of a draft of ——, bankers, of this city, drawn to order of the College Treasurer. That draft was duly credited and duly cashed. I have consulted with the utterers of the draft, but their books simply notice an ordinary business transaction, the sale of the draft that day to 'cash.' Examine the other papers, and see if you can discover any clue. They all refer to this city."

These were extracts from the business and memorandum books of the College, and, besides these, several letters. One, which the Professor told me to read first, was from a legal firm, giving a certain address in the city, and enclosing two other letters, one from a reverend gentleman, who claimed to have been Raimond Letoile's pastor, the other from a professional gentleman, his former physician. This first letter was the one which Raimond had brought with him when he came to the college. The legal firm addressed the college authorities as the constituted guardians of Raimond Letoile, a young man wanting a few months of his majority. They stated it to be the wish of his parents, who dwelt in a distant land, to have his education completed at —— College. At the same time, they wrote, they feared the young man would not prove far enough advanced to enter at once upon the regular curriculum, "a severe and protracted fever (see medical certificate accompanying) having so seriously impaired his memory as to deprive him of all the fruits of previous studies." Still, as he was said to be a youth of great talent and exemplary conduct, and as the writers were totally inexperienced in such matters, they hoped they would not be requiring too much of the college authorities in asking them either to undertake his schooling themselves, or provide him with a reputable and adequate tutor. Ample funds should be forthcoming, of which the enclosed draft was an earnest. All accounts and reports should be sent to them, and, when further supplies were needed, they were prepared to honor a draft for any reasonable amount. Their address was, Box ——, Post-office, —— city.

The pastor's letter spoke of the young man as having been under his spiritual charge from boyhood, and testified to a high appreciation of his many virtues.

The physician's letter corroborated what the lawyers had said in regard to the young man's illness, and his loss of memory. His health was entirely restored, and all he had lost would very speedily be regained, it said.

There was also a second letter from the legal firm, acknowledging receipt of news of Raimond's arrival at —— College, and expressing entire satisfaction with the arrangements made to place him under my tuition.

"This seems all very plain and simple," I said; "there can be no difficulty here."

"But there *is* insuperable difficulty," retorted the Professor. "Doctor —— and Reverend Doctor —— both positively deny that they ever wrote any such letters, or ever knew any such person, whose name, they say, they now hear for the first time. Both are greatly surprised that their handwritings should have been so closely imitated. Doctor —— said, very naïvely, that he would have sworn to the signature of the letter pretending to be his. These gentleman have such position in society that we cannot think of challenging their denials. As for the legal firm, the pseudo-guardians of Raimond Letoile, neither they, nor their place of business, have any existence, nor have they ever had any existence whatsoever!"

"Aha!" said I, "this puts quite another face upon it, Mr. Parallax. This becomes now a matter of police. We must employ a detective."

"A detective! There is nothing for the police to seize upon. We can give them no data. We are in a *cul-de-sac*."

"There is the young man," said I, gloomily, "and we must let the police sift him and his antecedents. They may be able to tell us more than you suspect. Let us go and see Markleigh."

Markleigh was the most ingenious detective I have ever encountered, and was, besides, an honorable, kindly man. To him we went and told him all we knew.

He shook his head.

"A doubtful case!" he said. "The doctor and the divine are above suspicion; the bogus lawyers are likely beyond our reach. Have you questioned the lad himself? How do you know he is an impostor?"

I mentioned my suspicion of Raimond's designs against Cherry. Markleigh asked the Professor if they were in the habit of sending pupils to me, and if my name had been mentioned in connection with such a thing, in such a way that Raimond or some one about him might have chanced to hear it. The Professor answered no.

"Then that suspicion must fall to the ground," said Markleigh; "for how could Letoile hope to forward his designs against the lady by going to the College, unless he had reason to believe the College would send him to you? Now, I'll tell you what, gentlemen, I suspect this young man is more sinned against than sinning. He is probably a little touched in the upper story, or has been, and some of his rights of property or person are being plotted against by parties determined to keep both him and themselves out of sight. Nine times out of ten such cases turn out just that way. We must find out who the real parties are who have used the name of the bogus firm."

"How can we, when there is no clue?"

"How do you know the young man won't tell you, when you question him seriously?"

I mentioned Raimond's romantic version of his past history.

"Ah, I see!" said Markleigh; "plainly cracked! But how do you know his own papers will not reveal what he refuses to tell you?"

"I do not think he has any papers. He has never received any letters, and he never locks his trunk—he has only one."

"Papers there, for all that," said Markleigh. "Besides, there is the post-office box; let us go and see about that."

"The post-office box!" We had not thought of that.

"Yes," said Markleigh. "Uncle Sam helps us to unearth many a John Doe who thinks his mole-tracks too intricate for him ever to be caught. Your letter from the College was received, and answered. By whom? Who took that letter from the office? Who rented Box ——, last May?"

We went to the office full of hope, but met with an unexpected rebuff. There was, indeed, a box of the number given, but only of recent construction. At the date of the correspondence no such box existed! The numbers then did not run so high by two hundred. There could be no mistake about this, we were assured by the highest authority. The box with the number given had not been in use two months.

"The letter was directed to a box bearing that number," said Markleigh, stubbornly; "it must have been received as sent, for here is the answer, which came in due course of mail."

"We cannot help that," was all the answer we received; "the box was certainly not in existence at that date." And official records were shown to us making the statement incontestable.

Markleigh came away with us, in silence. At last he said: "I must confess this thing puzzles me, gentlemen. The plot hides deeper than I thought. The motive for concealment must be strong, and the art displayed is considerable. I will study the matter over a little. There is only one thing for you to do, and that is, make what you can out of the young man. Go home at once and question him closely. Whatever you do, be sure to get possession of his trunk and papers before he supposes he is suspected. If you need me, let me know. I think I will drop down to see you, in a day or two. You have made me curious about the lad. I want to look at him, to see if his countenance

reminds me of any of my old acquaintances. So, good day, gentlemen."

The next morning I went aboard the steamboat for my home, accompanied by the Professor. He was morbidly anxious about the condition of affairs, and deeply regretted having induced me to take the young man under my charge. I was devoured with apprehensions. I could not tell what fears possessed me, what doubts, suspicions, and dark dreads tortured me with their violent urgency. The steamboat was all too slow for my swift-running cares, and all day long I paced the deck, and watched out forward to see what progress we were making. There was considerable delay, for there was much freight to be landed, and many passengers, and I chafed and fumed in vain.

The steamboat landing was about two miles from my windmill, and we did not reach the wharf until after seven o'clock in the evening. I had no conveyance, so the Professor was obliged to follow me on foot, along a sandy road. Driven by I knew not what of anxiety and terror, I walked on furiously, forgetful of my companion's years and infirmities, until, panting and breathless, he told me he could go no further unless I went more slowly. I adapted my step to his, while my heart beat fearfully, and the veins in my temples throbbed as if they would burst. The night had quite fallen before we reached the windmill, and twilight was faded all away.

"How brilliantly the comet shines to-night," said the Professor, as at last we stood before the door after mounting the long steps. "This is her perigee, certainly. I am glad it is so clear. We must take an observation before we sleep this night, Bernard."

And we entered my study as he spoke.

VIII. TO ARCTURUS!

Old Nanny met us, weeping loudly, and mopping her fat, bacon-colored face with the ends of a not over-clean check apron.

"I'm glad you come, Marse Bernie! I'm glad you come!"

"What is the matter, Nanny?"

"Oh, he's gone away, sir! He's gone away!"

"Raimond gone away! Where to?"

"I dunno! I dunno! He kim to me and says as how I was werry good to him" (*sobbing*), "and he was goin' away a long v'yage dis werry night, and never comin' back no more, so here's somethin' to remember me by! An' he give me dis, poor dear innocent!" said she, opening her hand and showing several large gold coins.

"Did he take his trunk?"

"No—he hain't gone yit. He's across de creek, now—I reckon sayin' good-by to Miss Cherry."

I turned to the Professor. "An elopement!" said I. "We are still in time! Nanny, go up-stairs and bring down Raimond's trunk—at once! We will forestall the gentleman's intentions," said I to the Professor, who had taken a seat in the nearest chair.

Presently, old Nanny came down again, dragging behind her Raimond's moderate-sized trunk.

"'Tain't locked," she said—"'tain't packed. Mebbe he ain't goin' to-night, arter all."

"Put the trunk in the closet," said I, "and give me the key."

"I hope he hain't been doin' nothin' bad," said she, peering anxiously into my face after she had locked the closet door.

"That remains to be seen! Now, Mr. Parallax," said I, briskly, turning to the Professor, "let us go across the river at once."

He followed me out of the house to the little wharf where my canoe was tied up. When we got there, I found that the paddle was not in the boat.

"Nanny!" I called, "bring me my paddle—quick!"

While we waited for her to come, I looked across the river, and out upon the night. All around the vaulted sky the brilliant constellations hung

"Like captain-jewels in a carcanet;"

while the comet, its nucleus large upon the very verge of the horizon, and its

tail sweeping upwards at a great angle, blazed with a clearer, brighter gleam than ever before. The black shadows of the great willows across the stream rose gloomily against the sky, and in those shadows I could not see if Raimond's boat was there or not.

"What you goin' 'cross de creek for, 'fore you gits your supper?" asked Nanny, as she trotted up, panting, and gave me the paddle.

"We will soon be back," I answered; "keep a cup of tea hot for us. Step in, Mr. Parallax—gently—the boat is very light, a touch will capsize her—sit there—sit low;" and I proceeded to untie the painter.

"What a strange smoke that is!" cried the Professor, suddenly, pointing behind me.

"O Lord!" screamed old Nanny; "come back, Marse Bernie! come back! de house's a-fire! de smoke's all a-bustin' out under de eaves!"

I turned. There was a huge volume of smoke bursting out from every cranny of the roof of my poor old windmill—such smoke as told plainly enough the blaze was not far behind!

I sprang from the boat. But, at that instant, from the region of sky where the pearl-bright comet reigned, with a rushing sound, and a broad, unholy blaze of light that turned all things into a sulphurous day, and a long, scintillating track of flame, there came a mighty meteor, swift and furious as a thunderbolt. With a whirling curve it swept along, and in its ghastly light we saw our faces, white, and dumb, and terror-stricken. With a whirling curve it came, and dipped towards the river till it seemed the very fishes underneath the waves must go blind in all that glare. It dipped towards the river, then, poising one moment in increasing splendor over the willows, the drooping weeping willows, it soared aloft again with its mighty train of fire, upwards, upwards, until it was out of sight!

"God!" shrieked old Nanny, dropping to her knees, "de world's come to its end! de night o' judgment's here! Glory! oh, glory!" and she clapped her hands and shouted in a sort of delirious awe.

"'He is terrible exceedingly in all His works!'" said the Professor's solemn voice. "A fearful meteor, Bernard!"

But I—I grasped my paddle with frantic fingers, and, crying "Cherry! Cherry!" sprang from the wharf again, and tore the knotted rope loose, and in hot haste dashed the rocking boat along!

"Your house is burning! The smoke increases, Bernard!" said the Professor, wondering at my madness.

But "Cherry! Cherry!" I screamed out, and forced the boat along. For, in that moment when the poising meteor had shaken its white defiance in the face of night, and all its lurid horrors burst forth like a gleam from hell, I had seen Cherry—seen her upon the opposite shore—betwixt the trailing, drooping, weeping willows, upon the long dewy slope of grass! I had seen her there, rapt, transfigured, dying! By her side I saw Raimond Letoile standing, the meteor's blue flame dressing his white brow with an aureola. I saw him standing there, his eyes turned upwards, a smile of conscious supernatural power lighting all his face, while his figure was magnified and seemed exalting itself like an angel's on tiptoe for a flight. And, like a saint, adoring, face pale, upturned, glorified, hands clasped, knees humbly bent, I saw Cherry, a votive offering at his feet! One moment I saw them thus, and then, it was dreary dark. One moment—but forever!

"Cherry!" I cried, and urged the boat on till the water foamed, while the Professor per force sat still, and old Nanny's wailing shouts and clappings followed us as we went.

The boat's keel grated, and I sprang ashore, bidding the Professor tie the boat and follow.

Five steps up the slope, and through the long dewy grass, and I was beside the white, kneeling figure—the figure in pure white muslin limp with dew who knelt there, hands clasped and face upturned, seraphic—the figure of Cherry, kneeling there, alone! kneeling

there, alone, and gazing upward towards the comet with a white face full of joy, with the rapt face of her who sees a God! with fading eyes, indeed, but full of love and peace! Oh, Cherry! oh, my Cherry!

By her side I knelt me down, there in the comet's chilly light, and she knew me with that smile of fading sweetness, and turned her face to mine, whispering,

"Kiss me, Bernie!"

So I kissed her cold, white lips, and she heaved a little sigh, still smiling towards the comet. Then, as I put my arm about her waist, to keep her from falling, her world-weary head sunk drooping to my shoulder, and a little shiver ran through all her frame.

"He will know me in Arcturus!" she said, and so, was still.

—"Your house is all in flames," said the Professor, coming near me. "You will save nothing, Bernard."

"Hush!" I cried. "Let there be peace! She sleeps!"

He seized Cherry's limp hand quickly, then gently let it fall again.

"She sleeps, indeed, my poor Bernard! She is dead—quite dead!"

—There was ardent quest for Raimond Letoile, but he had disappeared, nor was there any trace of him discovered ever after.