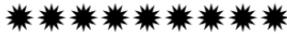


Nebulae



I

Hannover, 1764

At the bottom of the bucket is the Sun. There it lies, a drowned Star, in the water. Not that she is foolish enough to suppose it to have fallen from the sky; it is of course still up there, in its accustomed place—nor, despite appearances to the contrary, does it really disappear during the minutes that follow. That is simply the effect of the Moon's shadow, passing in front of it, her father says—a phenomenon she and her brothers are now about to witness. For they must never stare directly at the Sun, he goes on; if they did so, it would turn them stark blind. Today, April 1st—the Day of Fools, she cannot help but remember—he has called them out into the courtyard, to observe the Eclipse, having filled the big iron tub with water for the purpose.

So she keeps her gaze fixed on that. There, reflected in that improvised mirror, she sees a yellow disk, being slowly eaten up by a disk of blackness. The blackness is the Moon. Soon there is nothing left of the Sun but a fiery rim, around that circle of darkness. If they watch closely, their father says, they will see the 'diamond ring' appear...

Then the noonday world is plunged into a strange grey twilight. Even the birds have stopped singing. In the eerie hush of that moment, she feels her little brother take her hand.

'In the old times, they would bang the drums and shout and sing until the Sun came back,' says her father. 'Now we under-

stand these things better.'

Even so, she hardly dares to breathe, until the ring of fire thickens to a sliver of yellow, like a rind of cheese. On the ground at her feet, the same shape is repeated, in the spots of light—now turned to tiny crescents—which fall through the leaves of the chestnut tree. After a minute or so, the cheese-rind becomes a slice; then a quarter, then a half; then the whole round cheese itself. And there it is once more—the dear familiar Orb—without which, she knows, the Earth would be in perpetual darkness: a lifeless lump of rock, adrift in the wilderness of Space.

'For without the Sun, we would not have Light,' her father says. 'And Light is what gives us Life...'

In times past, he goes on, people had thought Eclipses of Sun or Moon to be harbingers of terrible events. Battles had been lost and won, kings crowned or overthrown, on account of such phenomena. Now, he says—thanks be to God—they are not so credulous. Now they are guided by Reason, not superstition.

Nonetheless, she half-expects him to call out 'April Fool!'—the way he used to when they were little, and had found their breakfast eggs to be nothing but empty shells, up-ended.

The day after the Eclipse, her brother Friedrich Wilhelm comes home, after eight long years in England. She has been kept busy right up to the moment of his arrival, making cakes and puddings for the feast there is to be in his honour; she has only just taken off her apron when the carriage is heard outside. There is no time for anything but to rake her fingers through her curls to smooth them, and to shake out the creases in her best blue Holland frock, before she must face him. Mingled with her joy at the prospect is the fear that, after her illness, he might not know her.

Examining her face in the looking-glass that morning, she had thought that the marks of the smallpox were not as bad as they had once been. In some lights, they were hardly visible. The wasting effect of the fever was only too apparent, however. It had spoilt her looks, and stunted her growth, so that she would never grow any taller than she had been at twelve years

old. Turning away from the displeasing sight of herself, she began, with short, fierce, strokes, to brush her hair. It had been impossible to stop her eyes filling with tears, at the thought of Wilhelm's seeing her like this...

Now, as she stands waiting for him to appear, she feels almost sick with dread. How fast her heart is beating! When she hears the sound of his voice in the hall, it takes all her reserves of courage not to run away. Although why she should feel like this, when it is Wilhelm—dearest of brothers—coming back to her, she cannot say.

As he comes into the room, she risks a glance at him. How handsome he is, in his smart new English clothes! If she had passed him in the street she would not have known him. His voice, though, is just the same, even after all these years. Years during which not a day had passed but she has thought of him, and longed for his return. And yet now she hangs back, letting her sister and brothers and Sophia's little ones go ahead of her to greet him. Her mother and father are of course the first to embrace him; Anna Ilse weeping loudly all the while. Still she herself hesitates.

She need not have been afraid, however.

For—after he has clasped their father in his arms and kissed their mother, and lifted Sophia's youngest up into the air—he looks for her, over the heads of their older brothers.

'Carolina?' he says. 'Am I not to have a kiss from you, after so long?'

She goes to him, then, and throws her arms about his neck.

'I am very glad to see you,' he whispers.

She is surprised, nonetheless, to see tears in his eyes when they move apart; although whether this is from the emotion of the moment, or some other cause, is impossible to say.

After he has been made to sit down, and has been given a glass of beer, and has been served with some of Anna Ilse's home-cured ham, and a dish of pickled cabbage, and then the cinnamon cakes she herself has made (which he says are the best he has tasted since, O, the last time he was in Hannover), Wilhelm pronounces himself content at last.

'For is not a man's home the seat of all contentment—and

am I not home at long last, after wanderings almost as lengthy as those of Aeneas?’

He then proceeds to unpack the presents he has brought: tobacco for their father and Jacob, a box of China tea for their mother, a pocket-knife for Alexander, and a strange English cake full of plums for Dietrich. For Sophia he has brought a bolt of yellow silk, to make a new dress. When it comes to Carolina’s turn, he smiles.

‘I am afraid you will not think much of this, Lina—for it is not good to eat, nor useful—nor is it pretty, like Sophia’s gift. And yet it is the most precious thing I could think of to give you...’

She replies that she does not mind what it is. What she means is, she will be happy with whatever he chooses to give her.

‘Here you are.’ Into her hands, he places a sheaf of music. ‘It is all the latest pieces from the Italian opera. They listen to nothing else in London. There are some of Signor Galuppi’s songs, and one by Signor Piccinni, which I think you will like...’

She thanks him with all the emotion she feels at being thus singled out, in a family of musicians, as the one most deserving of a gift of music. And yet her heart is heavy, knowing—as he does not—the unlikelihood of her ever being able to benefit from his generosity.

It is her mother who saves her the trouble of explaining.

‘O, Carolina will have precious little time for singing,’ says Anna Ilse. ‘Now she has left school, she will be busy improving her skills as a seamstress. For she is to go to Fräulein Kuster’s next month, with that end in view.’

At this, Wilhelm is unable to conceal his dismay.

‘Is this true, Carolina? You have left school?’

She hangs her head, and admits it is so.

‘I am very sorry to hear it,’ he says gravely. ‘Very sorry indeed. I had thought to assist your education—not to hear of its coming to an end.’

If the family had not all been present, she would have cried out that it had not been her choice to have her studies thus curtailed. As it is, she says nothing.

‘Carolina often sits in on her youngest brother’s violin lessons,’ says their father, with his usual mild and conciliatory air. ‘That is, when her mother can spare her from her domestic duties. She has quite a good ear, I believe, our Carolina. Yes, yes. I am sure she has a good ear...’

All that day, and the next, and every other day of that all-too-brief fortnight’s visit, she follows Wilhelm around, delighting in his presence, and listening to his talk. And how brilliantly he could talk, on such a range of subjects, from Newton’s theories on the refraction of light, and Euler’s calculations concerning the orbiting of comets, to the merits or otherwise of the opera buffa he had seen the previous month at Covent Garden. It is not to her he talks, of course, but to their father and brothers. She manages to find some excuse to be there, however—bringing her sewing to her favourite seat on the parlour windowsill, and making herself as inconspicuous as possible, so as not to cause comment from any other quarter. Even so, she is soon tagged with the name of ‘Shadow’—their brother Jacob being quick both to observe and to condemn.

‘One would think she had never laid eyes on our brother Wilhelm before, the way she keeps staring,’ he says, well aware that she is listening. ‘Has the little wretch nothing better to do than eavesdrop on our conversation?’

‘Leave her alone,’ is Wilhelm’s reply. ‘I am sure we have nothing to say that Carolina may not hear...’

At this, Jacob can only subside into muttering about the miserable state of his linen under Carolina’s care:

‘For look,’ he exclaims disgustedly, snatching up the shirt she is presently working on, ‘she has left spots of blood all over the sleeve from pricking her fingers...’

‘Then we must take care to say nothing that will distract her too much from her sewing,’ says Wilhelm, with a wink at Carolina.

With Wilhelm there to defend her, she feels equal to anything. Neither their elder brother’s unkind comments, nor their mother’s complaining that all this talk of things she does not understand will turn Carolina’s head, can hurt her. How she will manage when Wilhelm is gone, is another matter.

As she lies in bed later that night—her little brother Dietrich Johann on the truckle-bed beside her, and Sophia's youngest (who is teething) snuffling in the cot at her feet—she thinks of all that Wilhelm has told her about England. The countryside in Yorkshire, where he has been living, is very wild, he says. He is often obliged to ride fifty miles, across dark and deserted moor-land, in order to fulfil his various obligations. The houses in Yorkshire are very fine, however; when he was tutoring Lady Milbanke on the harpsichord, he had spend several months at Halnaby Hall—Sir Ralph's country seat, and one of the grandest houses to be found in that region. Why, it was not unusual for there to be thirty sitting down to dinner. He was often obliged to play to the company, when the ladies were too tired.

Was there dancing? Carolina wants to know. O, a great deal of dancing, says Wilhelm. Lady Milbanke liked nothing better than to have four or five couples stand up together of an evening, when their elders were engaged at cards.

'You would like it there, Lina, I am sure,' he goes on. 'For there is a library full of books where you could read to your heart's content, and no end of pretty walks about the grounds.'

The picture he conjures up is so agreeable that she returns to it many times in imagination, thinking what it must be like, not only to have a library at one's disposal, but also the leisure to enjoy it. Were she to have a house of her own she would fill it with books, she decides. There would be a harpsichord, too; and she would do nothing all day but play and sing. In the evenings, there would be dancing. She would never have to sew another shirt, or scrub another kitchen floor. She and Wilhelm would live together, perfectly content for the rest of their lives.

She thinks of the day, eight years before, when Wilhelm went away. She was six; she remembers it well.

He had just turned eighteen, and—at their father's instigation—was to play the hautbois in the military band, which was going to England with the Hannoverian Guard. She remembers how proud he was of his new uniform. She had stared at him, suddenly shy at the sight of him, tall and handsome in his blue-and-gold; although, only that morning, he had given her a pig-

gyback around the stable-yard, and had pointed out a swallow's nest under the eaves.

Now the drums are beating so loud it seems to make the air shake; the flags are flying all along the street; and her mother is weeping as if her heart will break.

'What shall I do? What shall I do?' cries Anna Ilse, half-distracted with grief, so that nothing can be done to quiet her. All Carolina can do is to fetch the handkerchief she has been hemming from the stool, and put a corner of it into her mother's hand, whilst with another, she wipes away her own tears.

'*Ach*, poor wretch, what will you do, now your father is gone to war?' is Anna Ilse's response to this, in a kinder tone than she is accustomed to use to her small daughter. Then she falls to weeping once more—which rouses the baby, Dietrich, from his sleep, so that his wails drown out even the sound of the drums. It is left to Carolina to soothe him, by pinching his cheeks and making faces at him, for her mother takes no more interest in him than in any of her children, save Jacob.

He—having found fault with everything that has been done for him, from the way his coat has been brushed to the polish on his boots—is also going to England with the regiment, though to hear him talk, you'd have thought he was at least a sergeant, instead of just a musician in the regimental band.

'O my poor boy, my poor boy!' weeps their mother, when he comes to take his leave, all dressed up in his finery and impatient to be gone. 'When shall I ever see you again?'

As ill-luck would have it, Jacob is the first of them back; although he is obliged to return to England double-quick, to avoid being pressed for a soldier. Would that he had stayed abroad for good—for on his return two years later, he has grown into even more of a tyrant than when he left. From that time on, Carolina has nothing but kicks and curses from him. His beefsteak is too tough; his tea is stewed; or the knives and forks have not been cleaned to his liking. How he likes to box her ears! It is a wonder she is not half-deaf, as well as half-blind from the smallpox.

Almost as bad as the slaps and pinches are the unkind names—*Dummkopf*. *Hässliches Weibchen*—and the constant

jibing.

She will never get a husband, with a face like that. It makes him sick just to look at her. As for her cooking—it is not fit for the dogs to eat.

Sometimes it gets so bad that their father is moved to remonstrate with his eldest son.

‘That is no way to speak to your sister.’

His voice trembles a little, for it is an effort for him to speak harshly to any of his children, even one who so richly deserves it.

Jacob replies with a scowl, muttering that it is not his fault if Carolina persists in scorching his shirt-cuffs.

‘A sister is worth more than a shirt-cuff, my son,’ Isaac says, with a quelling look. Of course it does no good; but she is glad that one person in that house at least cares enough for her to take her part.

It was her father who first showed her the stars.

She cannot have been more than seven or eight years of age; he had taken her by the hand and led her out into the street, to look at the Comet, which was then visible. She remembers the way the cobblestones rang under their feet, hard as iron in the bitter cold, and how their breath smoked in front of them, as he pointed out the constellations to her, one by one. There was Andromeda. Al Sufi mentioned a nebula in that constellation, on the boundary near Pisces—could she make it out? There was Perseus, and, overhead, Cassiopeia. It made a shape like a ‘W’—for Wilhelm. There was his own favourite, on the other side of the Milky Way—the Lyre. It was the instrument played by Orpheus—did she know the story? Orpheus was a musician, like himself—although of course a far greater one. He could charm the birds of the air with his music, and even the wild beasts...

She remembers the gentle sound of his voice, and the light touch of his hand upon her head.

Schauen Sie, Carolina! Das ist Coma Berenices...

This last was named, he told her, for a princess’s beautiful hair, cut off and flung into the sky in a shining mass, to remain there for all eternity. Her hair was beautiful, too—like her

mother's—he told her kindly. Although later he was to speak more frankly about her looks, or lack of them.

For it is all too true that she has nothing to recommend her—neither beauty nor accomplishments. All her brothers, even nine year-old Dietrich, can play at least one instrument, and—thanks to their father—are well-versed in the rudiments of Natural Philosophy. Her sister, being beautiful, has no need to know such things; nor does she care to know them. That her name means 'Wisdom' is neither here nor there.

But for Carolina, to be denied the chances that are offered to the others is to be denied all that makes life worth living—like a plant starved of the Sun's life-giving light... So that when Wilhelm, on one particular afternoon towards the end of his visit, asks her—is she happy, now that she has left school?—it takes all her reserves of self-control not to break down.

'I am happy enough.'

They are walking by the river; the water-meadows are scattered with daisies and cornflowers, and the sky above their heads is a pure, clear blue. They stop to listen to a skylark singing, so high up in that cloudless vault that it can scarcely be made out—the shrill, sweet, bubbling notes seeming to come out of nowhere. For at that moment, it is true: she is happy. On such a day, and with her dear Wilhelm beside her, how could she have been anything else?

She breaks off a spray of wild roses from an overhanging bough, and fastens it in his buttonhole.

'But Lina,' he persists. 'Would you not care to have singing lessons, or to learn to play an instrument, like the rest of us?'

'Sophia does not play an instrument.'

He gives an impatient shrug. 'Sophia is married, with little ones to care for. I do not see that Sophia has anything to do with it...'

She is silent a moment.

From across the river, comes the silvery chimes of the Marktkirche clock.

'Well?' He gives her an encouraging smile. For a moment she is seized with an impulse to tell him everything. How miserable her life has become, now that there is not even the consolation of her daily lesson with the Pastor's wife. How much she would

have loved to sing, and play—and how unlikely it is that she will ever be given leave to do so.

‘I have not thought much about it.’

A look of disappointment crosses his face. She cannot bear to have him look at her like that.

‘Then perhaps you *ought* to think,’ he says, with a reproving shake of the head. ‘To be able to sew and cook is all very well, but you should not neglect your studies.’

At this, she feels the tears start to come, so that she has to turn her head away quickly, to prevent him from seeing. For it was not *her* idea that she should leave school; nor is it her fault that she has not developed her musical skills.

‘Why,’ her brother says, warming to his theme, ‘in my opinion there is no reason why women should not be as well taught as men—in music, art, and science, too. I have met several young ladies during my stay in England whose command of Latin and Greek is as good as—if not better—than my own. Indeed, there is one I could mention—the sister of a pupil of mine in Pontefract, you know—who is not only as learned as any man, but can play very sweetly upon the guitar...’

Here he colours slightly, and clears his throat, as if a fly had got stuck there.

‘So you see, Lina,’ he goes on, ‘there is no reason in the world why you should not be educated. A woman should have at least the rudiments of languages—French and English will do to begin with. And mathematics, too. I will write to you on the subject, as soon as I am back in England...’

At this—the thought of his imminent departure—she is so cast down that she says not another word. And if she had, what could she have said, that would have conveyed the utter dreariness of her life?

For this is the pattern of her days: after rising at five, from the bed she shares with Hildegard, the servant (a country girl, who snores, and kicks, and is not overly particular about washing), she lays the fires—it is Hildegard’s job to sweep out the ashes—and makes the porridge for the younger ones’ breakfasts. Mornings are spent at the market—searching out the cheaper cuts of meat, or begging for fish heads for a soup from the

fishmonger. Afternoons are consumed in darning and mending, or cutting out ruffles for shirts. Evenings she likes the best, because it is then—the housework being done—that she helps her father copying music, a task for which her neat hand (Isaac says) makes her particularly suited.

Monotonous as it is, all this would not have been so bad, if it had not been for her brother Jacob.

How she comes to hate him, during those years of her servitude, for his vanity and his spendthrift ways (nothing is ever too good for him—no matter that the rest of them are living on stews and slops); above all, for his cruelty to her. Not that her mother is any less sparing with the rod; but she, at least, has the excuse of having been treated with similar harshness by her own parents. Jacob—her mother's darling—has never suffered so; and yet he does not forbear to punish his sister whenever he sees fit.

Later, she comes to see that he was just a spoiled young man, whose chief fault was that he lacked imagination. To him, a sister was of no more interest—indeed, of considerably less interest—than his horse or his dog. Unlike Wilhelm, that Paragon amongst brothers, Jacob never said two words to her that did not concern his dinner or the state of his shirts. That she might have a mind—a Soul—above such matters would never have occurred to him.