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Abstract

This story was written in the foothills of the Alleghenies in the early 1980s and later incorporate into a novel, *Fantastic Travelogue: Mark Twain and CS Lewis Talk Things over in The Hereafter*. In the early 2000s this SF was begun as a project for the thesis paper in the CSUDH masters in humanities program (HUX). Mark Twain had written stories imagining travels in various parts of creation, leaving me with an impetus to re-imagine him as a character taking part in sundry aspects of same.

The Comet of 1577

by

S. Dorman

Jack Lewis, in nightclothes and tamping a pipe, climbs the starlit knoll outside a sixteenth century Germanic village. Despite this attire, he wears walking shoes to avoid slipping on the frosty pasturage. As he approaches the crown he sees a white smoke-wreathed head, then the white figure emerging in its ascent of the opposite side. He recognizes Samuel Clemens immediately. They greet one another at the top of the knoll, shaking hands and exclaiming a bit over the conjunction. The astronomical term is fitting, given the setting of their fanciful but fortuitous encounter: two bodies on the mediaeval celestial sphere gaining the same longitude.

“Now let me guess,” says Twain. “The year is 1577 and you’ve come out to observe the advent of a comet ushering us from our Aristotelian arrogance ... in order to surprise us out of the erroneous belief that all was fixed to its appropriate round beyond the planets. ...Are you researching for some book or lecture, or is it the poetry? But you’ve aged some since we last talked. Perhaps poetry is not quite the thing now?”

Lewis smiles. “Perhaps not.”

They stand on the knoll together looking up through crystalline spheres of the heavens above the river Glems, while, at some distance beneath, a woman and child climb towards them from the lane along a curve of Glems’s stream. Even from here they can see that the child wears hosen and a cape, the woman mantled to her feet and wearing a white wimple with pillbox hat. But the comet is now visible above the

mountain behind them and the men turn in silence and awe to give it their full attention. For long they watch as the quiet stream of light beams into view over the serrated silhouette of trees across the way, its self-possessed spirit of silence invoking the same in them.

At length they sense mother and child drawing near, but Twain speaks. “That cracking sound you hear up there is not just frost splitting those trees across that ridge. It is the sound of the solid spheres breaking up between the planets.”

“Yes,” murmurs Lewis, “Kepler, and Tycho Brahe with his instruments, observations and calculations, will see to that. Before long the cold and the dead, the dark and the void—empty of the music of Jove, of Venus and Saturn—will sweep in to clear the imagination of its bright celestially classical model. The high and sweet or even the pestilential influences of the planets will cease except where the zodiacal superstition persists.... But here are Kepler and his mother approaching. We shall overhear if we do not leave this place.”

“Let’s stay a minute anyway. We will only overhear in fancy, and what good is it to be tellers of tales if we neglect a found opportunity?”

The approaching pair were yet a little below the hilltop and speaking German, but each man heard enough of it in the clear cold night to understand that they were listening to familial woes. They supposed that the comet was blocked by the hill, not

yet in view to these two mediaevals who had come to witness its presence in their lives.

“Then papa is not to be hanged?” piped the child’s voice over the stillness of the slope.

“No, but we will be selling the house. He wants a tavern.”

Having heard these words, the two men stepped away and were at Uraniborg on the Scarlet Island of Venus (Hveen). Here was the towered and turreted observatory of the Danish nobleman Tycho Brahe, parts of which were yet under construction. It was late. Moony silver gleamed faintly upon quadrants of some domes. One of the windows above was aglow with the light of the astronomer working out his meticulous schedule of observations for the comet of 1577.

They stood on a corner of the below-ground-level observatory beside the domed edifice of its main watchtower, this white figure of the 19th century and this dark one of the 20th. They watched quietly as two assistants positioned an elegant geometrically fashioned 5-foot triangular sextant of Tycho’s design. Here also were domes under construction but low to the ground, for the astronomer would protect his instruments from inclement elements.

“What workmanship, elegant

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craftsmanship, they cared so much to perform,” murmured Jack Lewis. “How well they worked,” he said. “Where once beauty permeated everything they contrived to do, we’ve replaced this quality with quantity—valuing obsolescence as an economic essential. But in making well we were once able to work united with Beauty—not so attainable today, even if we can come out on a night like this to meet her merely as spectators. See how intent they are to be united not just with learning but with its beauty. They inquire into the things of created heaven with their carefully calibrated instruments. Of course, even in their sometimes exquisite theological considerations, they come near to missing it all—for the very source of what such images stand for *can* be missed, even in this sublime pursuit. Kepler, that sore sickly lad we saw, will be so yearning to have in his hands such elegant instruments, and run his gaze along such compilations of observations. Yet, somehow, one does not doubt his foundational value.”

“I take your word on it,” said Twain. “I haven’t read him enough to know ... but maybe I shall study him by and by.” The white figure beside Lewis drew upon his dark cigar.

Author’s note:

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