“The Fair Philosopher to Rowley Flies …”

Some nymphs prefer astronomy to love:
Elope from mortal man, and range above.
The fair philosopher to Rowley flies,
Where, in a box, the whole creation lies: …

I was diffident at first. I mean on the first occasion I truly saw her, though I count it her second visit. I felt certain I had seen her before – accompanying some gentle-lady perhaps, or at the window, as she was on this day. Many pass by and many pause. But she was as if transfixed. I began to feel embarrassed, that she gazed so long. I made my mind up to go to her. But then I hesitated.

Window-shopping (as they call it) has its own rhythm. It is not still, though it may accommodate much pause. Even of window shoppers I often think, what makes them afraid? Why do they not venture in? I would rather answer their curiosity than stay a mystery to them; I would rather wait upon them as entertainer, or tutor, than have them go away thinking I sit here miserly, polite only to those whose errand is purchase, or the settlement of an account. I see it thus: they will return, one day a year or five hence, when they have come into their estate, or buried an uncle, and they will place a valuable commission upon me, because I was previously at their service and explained it to them kindly, without thought of reward. Or they will tell their wealthy neighbour, a reverend schoolmaster perchance; or their grandfather, a baron of Cheshire.

Oh such a kindly and a cultivated fellow. He gave us so lucid an explication of his machine, we understood it perfectly until at least half-way home. You know, he did not rush us one bit, he did not so much as turn his head – the way they do in bookshops – as if business of more consequence were beckoning from a corner. He showed us everything we pleased, and told us all about each, though I am sure he knew we were just window-shopping (as they call it).

Yet come to think of it, Master Cumberbatch, would it not be just the thing for your schoolroom?

Why I seem to have heard of this fellow and these machines – their reverend scholarly neighbour will soon be saying – I forget what he calls ’em but by heaven you’re right, when I’m in town I’ll call on him and get him to explicate ’em to me too. And then by jove I’ll have one.

Of course they remind him of the name I call the machines, and giggle as they elucidate it, as they did when I illumined it to them.

Or if it should chance to be their dear old grandpapa they are telling, the Viscount of Whateveritmaybe, in the Irish peerage, they will undoubtedly say: He has modestly smaller ones that I am almost of a mind to aspire to, if I were to save assiduously, for I should so like to know about the heavens. I'm resolved to put aside threppence a month, as soon as my allowance is raised. Oh I should so like to have one Granpy.

And the doting old Duke will almost certainly reply: You shall have the largish one, my wide-eyed child, and hang the cost. How many pretty *and* intelligent granddaughters does a man have in one short lifetime, by jove?

The answer I think is two: I feel sure I have been picturing two, sisters perhaps, or else a young lady of station and her companion.

Look to boxing day to commence your journeys through the heavens, he continues. And they kiss him of course, and go away in a soft streamlet of laughter, knowing in their fibres that God who made the heavens never made a better salesman than a pretty girl. Unless it were two pretty girls.

I have drifted, as I do. You will notice my drifting, and pardon it. I always come back, or I always have thus far, I have yet to drift so far out of my orbit that I never come back. Though perhaps it will happen one day.

I was telling you of my particularly devoted window gazer, on a particular day. She, I think my point was to have been, was *not* a window-shopper, she was not one of this gentleman's granddaughters. She was quite outside the customary rhythm of pausing. She stood transfixed without my portal such a time that I speculated she may be in difficulty. Her feet unaccountably fastened to the paving, her ankle held in a trap set by my mischievous boy to catch me some custom. Or had her mind deserted her fair frame, and flown away? The mere flesh and bones of her left standing insensible, wearing her clothes like a manikin, but on the wrong side of the window.

On reflection I think it was so. I think her thoughts were eloped with a small ball of ivory, and ranging in my machine through the spheres of the sky. I think that, still though they seemed – to me, a mortal man – she and machine both were moving by the sheer force of her mind in sweeping circles through the far reaches of our firmament. I think she was not chained to the pavement at all – I think she was flying.

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I wondered if I might be of service to you, Miss ... tress.

I am not the sort of person who calls after people in the street. Even were I, to call after a lady I would rate very low. Pick-pockets and fish-mongers do it. She had – as I feared she would – released herself from the bewitchment of my window upon seeing me approach. In the brief time it took me she had fallen back to earth, reoccupied her flesh and clothing, and reminded her limbs of something pressingly urgent somewhere further along the street.

She was receding at a brisk pace by the time I sought to exercise some hold upon her. My voice had not enough gravity; or the city's sounds vied with it, absorbing me. I could not bring myself to hail her again, or louder, it felt impolite to have done so at all. Anyway, the street might have thought I was calling stop thief.

It was nearly a week before her next visit. I had no reason to expect her return, she resembled neither a bailiff nor a comet. Yet I did expect it. Just as I knew I had seen her before, so I knew I would see her again. Perhaps it was born of my thinking of her so oft in the meantime: picturing her anyway, wrapt in that attentive gaze that seemed to own my machine more truly than many who have paid money for one. We are never so close to the things we merely purchase as to those our imagination takes purchase upon.

Seeing her there again thus seemed natural, when it occurred. I looked up and almost thought nothing of it, and looked back down, as if she were always there. But my heart fluttered like suddenly shaken watchwork, and raced a little while. How easily the fair affect our inner motions. Some Hooke should invent a barometer of it. Or a clock may measure it, if my heart can. A piece of wheelwork that answers for a hygrometer of the feminine influence: gains as they approach, races when they are near, forgets all friction and runs free when they lean to touch. And then takes grip again as they turn, slows as they move away, ticks melancholy when they are gone. A heavy pendulum. Shivers when they die, and stops.

I do not doubt but they will someday make a being of wheels, the homunculus, a clockwork man. And he will inhabit a clockwork, a mechanical world: all work done by machines, by perpetual motion, by mills that need nor river nor mule. But woman must always be made of flesh. And the heart of man must always work harder under her gaze.

A clock is the pulse-glass of your house. I am put in mind of it. I almost think our clock would not go without the lady of my house. It works at her behest, it ticks to please her – or because she pleases it, as a cat purrs. She winds our clock, she is very fond of it. I had it made to my design by Mr Graham, when we were newly wed. It has counted the hours and moons of our years together. I must remember to say to her, sometime, I must listen for the moment. How her presence in my house is like a ticking clock. How time might as well halt if she were not there.

I have drifted from my intent. As indeed I drifted that day, when I saw the young lady once more at my window. My thoughts ranged back before my wife, before I served my time even, back to Staffordshire I think, as surely as my window guest's thoughts were transported to Saturn. Or the emptyness beyond. Though some ask if worlds do not continue out, another after Saturn as Saturn comes after Jupiter, and then another and another, little spheres advancing into the great sphere of darkness, planet after planet. It may be only that we cannot see so deeply into the dark, into the void. I wonder if that is the true edge of it.

That is what she said. The door opening caught me in my reverie – about Staffordshire or Saturn or wherever I was – and confounded my politeness, for I had not time to stand before she was inside, facing me, speaking. And that is what she said. Smiling, a little shyly. You don't mind me asking? she said. And of course I was rapidly risen and attending upon her. I did not mind, not at all.

She turned to the machine, and spread her hand towards it. I wonder if that is the true edge of it?

A small bare hand, thin fingers, very pretty, neatly manicured, soft. She was the daughter of a gentle household at the least. Though her speech was plain. I mean, her accent, or her lack of an accent, did not bespeak nobility. Yet of the types of young lady – I was sure now she could not have reached her majority, though perhaps not quite as young as she seemed through the window glass – of the two types of young lady who might window-shop without chaperone, or glove, she cannot have been the lower. She had to be a daughter of rank to come so confidently into the street, to speak so confidently on entering a shop, to have so pretty and delicate a hand.

Her hand, though, her small hand – I have drifted from her hand – her pretty hand made a gesture of waves or undulations some inches over the edges of my machine. I wonder if that is the true edge of it.

Does your ladyship mean, of the universe itself? I did not mean to disparage her question at all, I regret still if there were tone to my response that suggested such a thing. But she looked sneaped, as we used to say in Staffordshire. She looked me in the eye, as if I had hurt her feelings. It *will* seem silly, I know, to a philosopher such as yourself, but I'd be obliged to you for a moment's patient instruction upon it. I promise to leave you in peace after just two or three girlish questions.

I am but a mechanic, I said, and am entirely at the service of any lady who does me the kindness of calling upon me and taking an interest in my productions. Saturn here is the furthermost of our seven planets, so that is as far as the solar system, as we call it, the Sun's family of

companions, reaches. Thereafter I think is a very great distance of emptyness, a void you might say, within which at various distances are the stars of the starry canopy or sphere. They are barely represented in my humble machine, which shows the movements of most interest to mortals, those of our own home sphere and its Moon, about the Sun. Beyond that, your ladyship, I think even philosophers cannot imagine how far it may stretch, nor what it is forms the edge – if not the other heaven, the one we pray to.

But a mechanic is a bold fellow, I said smiling, and noticing too how she smiled, her countenance smiled, smiled upon my machine, so gently and naturally, as if my merely talking of such things gave her joy. And also how her hand, her small, soft, pretty hand, continued stretched above the model, swaying a little, as if caressing its atmosphere. If she had been sneaped by me it was momentary and quickly gone – I console but do not forgive myself on that ground, I would not have disparaged her curiosity for the world. Edge I think took me a-back, the word edge. It is not the usual question I am asked. For there are the usual, the predictable questions. At least, it is not how the question is commonly phrased.

It put me in mind of the cabinet-maker. My grand model is edged with little brass pillars and cased with panels of japanning all around, twelve-sided, each zodiacal beast inlaid nicely into the ebony with some precious material – pearwood, brass wire, mother of pearl ... But I am drifting out of my orbit yet again.

A mechanic is a bold fellow, I said, and must compass the universe in a box, a small piece of furniture, edged with panels of japanning all around, or in a globe that sits in a stand. The whole creation must fit into a lordly library or drawing room – not to say in the wagon that will take it thither. Whatever philosophers descry, the mechanic must make it in brass or ivory or wood, or silver, and make it portable to boot. Indeed I have many smaller models and spheres that your ladyship may please to view presently. I swept my hand about the shelves, as is my custom, and bowed my body.

I would reward your defrocking yourself from philosopher to mechanic by lowering my own disguise, and confess I'd like you to call me Miss better than ladyship, or I'll feel I'm defrauding your kindly attention when I leave without purchase. I am lured into your college by a fascination richly sincere but which is unendowed. I will give you a little something if it does not offend you but I haven't the means to possess even the smallest of your beautiful, oh they are so beautiful – she had followed my hand and was casting her eyes about the shelves, full of my smaller globes and armillary spheres – your beautiful beautiful treasures.

I remain entirely at your service under whatever title you permit me to address you, Miss, I said.

And as I said so I began turning the handle of my machine, and – if it can be thought possible – her wondrous distraction at my beautiful beautiful creations visibly redoubled – quintupled, in fact, I do not think I flatter myself. I cannot say I have ever seen in the face of the fair, nor in any face, such transport, such rapture, such delight, as my unendowed Miss evinced nay exuded when my model began its circling before her, when my quiet clockwork came alive.

That was *her* word – quiet – when, after an astonished pause, and a raising of her pretty hand to her mouth in a gesture of wonder, she said – or rather she whispered, in reverence: It is so quiet. It is not so quiet as the Master's handywork, I said, but it is my aim I grant you to approximate as near to it as I may, as mortal man and metal may. The true Creator of what I merely model does not need to use wheels. I own, it is an artifice I take pride in, if I may be excused saying so.

Oh you are right to, and famed for it too. When my uncle spoke of your skill he did not exaggerate. It is one of the things I came to London to see. The menagerie, the milling crowds, and Master Rowley's orrery.

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The menagerie smelled, my enchantress continued, unaware how my heart's own quiet watchwork wheeled and danced. And it held captive various sad looking creatures who seemed unwell, and strode to and fro as if longing for release. The streets smell too, and the milling crowds I greatly dislike, and was once jostled for my purse. But *you* have not disappointed me Master Rowley, you have made my season here worth all the jostling and odours, and the long uncomfortable journey.

I bowed to my fair flatterer, and proceeded to perform for her the fullest explication that I am used to doing, tailored to the auditory of country persons, youth, and ladies, in demonstration of my machine and of the Creator's heavenly clockwork that it presumes to mimic. Extemporising, here and there, upon features I concluded my pupil, in common with myself, to be particularly taken withal. The quietness not just of cogs but of space itself – she did not know that you cannot hear a bell ring in the void; the symmetry and correspondences between the universe and the microcosm, the great reality and the model; the place of the Sun and her family of worlds in this larger sphere, and the great circles of the cosmos – she *did* know of celestial geometry and motions, she had read a book or two upon it. And the mystery of her very question – the ultimate question, I began to think, the more I thought the more I admired her for commencing with it – the question of what are the edges of it, and where will we meet them, and what will be beyond, all the which the frame and case and hoops of my model confound, and cannot answer.

I think I was as transported as she, on that afternoon. I am certain to have drifted, as you will know that I do, far beyond my trajectory. But my fair audient did not complain. She drifted with me. I think we both left our bones, our flesh and our clothing behind us and journeyed in spirit through the vastness. Even as I spoke of the orbits of planets, we were as if orbiting with them. Even as I drifted into a digression upon quietness and air-pumps, she drifted beside me. Even as I expounded upon the great circles, there she was, in the farthest reach of the universe, a celestial nymph, swimming among the very framework of space and time.

It was time caught us up. My boy came in at five, to help close the shutters. We spoke, my Miss and I, simultaneously, and looked each other in the eye. But I have kept you so long, I meant to say. But I have taken your afternoon, I think she said. I have given it to you with the utmost pleasure Miss, said I, though I feel sure I have exceeded my brief and drifted from my course. Oh no sir, she said, and she held her hand out – her small pretty hand, the very hand I had studied and have described – no sir, you have taken me upon a grand tour of the firmament, and made it even more wondrous than my feeble imagination had conjured, or than the dull, difficult books I have read upon it. You have taught me to fly.

Warm and soft it was, the pretty hand, the delicate hand, and yet gripped solidly, unlike a lady's usual handshake. It was like my daughter taking my hand, trusting and with no inhibition. I think she retained her grip – and her gaze – some seconds when I would have withdrawn. She lifted her purse from her frock and I immediately waved my hand in the negative. I am honoured to have accompanied you thither Miss. Your kind recommendation of me to kin and acquaintances, to schoolmasters or philosophical personages of your neighbourhood, and your favourable report to your uncle, will be my gratuity. She was readily dissuaded.

But if you will permit me I will send the boy for a carriage to take you to your lodgings. No no, I can't afford a carriage. Then let my boy accompany you thither, I said. Evening is falling and you are a young lady unchaperoned; you did speak of your dislike of the streets. She relented at this. We put up the shutters and the boy swaggered at her side, pleased of the errand I think, and well he might be. I wished it had not been unseemly to offer myself. In youth or in middle life, there is nothing makes you walk more proudly in a metropolitan fare than walking it beside a fair maid. He is of good character, I had said to her latterly, and will not need tipping either, he is fully provided for here. I hope I shall see you again Miss. I hope so too, she said, and smiled to shame the Moon. I watched her disappear, Venus melting into morning.

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I tried to be the tradesman. I tried to be true to my calling, to put business first. I tried to lead my afterthoughts into sifting the salient pieces of her revelation. She had come a long, uncomfortable journey. It was her first sojourn in town, a season she called it, though she did not mean the season that is called so in society. Crowded streets and captive animals were not familiar to her. Perhaps she was from Staffordshire, my fellow countryman. I had not placed her accent, such as it was. She was quiet of speech, yet upon speaking eloquent and firm. It is to do with education of course: a good ladies' academy anywhere in the land will finish her thus, and rob her of too transparent a provinciality.

Twenty is now my guess. It is not easy to judge, though I have a daughter myself. It is human nature to speculate: a polished, partly educated young lady without chaperone, without funds even for a carriage. Perhaps she is twenty-one, and that is the occasion for her liberation, her long journey with her uncle's blessing but without company. I have drifted back.

I was trying to be the artisan, and make myself think rather of the business advantages of having received her and instructed her. Her uncle – perchance he is a peer. But if too miserly to give her a scholarship, to underwrite her holiday, I can have no cause to await his patronage. Say he is a small gent, limited of means but dotes upon his neice – and who would not? who would not prize such a one as she, as neice or ... Or he may be a man of the professions, or of industry, capable of being tempted into linking his standing in the world to the possession of a grand orrery, or at least a medium-sized sphere. The more as his means are limited, or his rank hard-won, so his ostentations must be well-chosen, and speak for his taste.

Imagine her returning, the starry firmament a-glisten in her eyes, all her talk of London being of circles and spheres and globes, revolutions and rotations, of celestial motions and symmetries – the quiet purring of the worlds, the springs and wheels of mechanism, the beauty of the universe entire, in a shop window in Fleet Street, under the sign of the Globe.

But I found myself struggling to think of anything else but the lush undiscovered planets of her eyes, the beauty of the universe in two green orbs. Or the spiral ringlets of her hair, honey-brown, the springs of the moving macrocosm. And then the purring, the music of the spheres, a homely chime as she relates these things amidst a rhythm of soft breathing, her bosom swelling and falling, with perhaps a sigh. Her small bare hand, making a wave as it swims near the edge. Her soul, her mind rising to range among stars. To drift at my side.

For a time I was unimpressed by anything but an inner vision of green – they were green as the new leaves in spring are, as fresh and as

innocent, full of wonderment and focused so far from anything mundane or material. Except when she cast them upon me, a rough fabric I fear – she looked directly into my eyes two times, I am almost certain of it. I was unmoved by anything but a recollection of brown – a gold autumnal brown it was, curling about her cheeks and neck. Anything but a faint impression of celestial music – a female voice, addressing me unafraid. I wonder if that is the true edge of it.

Nor might I forget the pretty hand, the soft little hand that clasped mine – she held firmly to my hand just the once – and set my heart to go fast. I struggled to think of anything mundane at all, for a while, against the deluge of her in which businesslike thoughts were drowned.

Are you scheming or daydreaming these days, my dear? It was my wife's voice. I looked at her without ready reply. You're not troubled or I'd know it, she said, or our clock would go slow. Yet you're distracted all the same. What can it be?

My wife is a thoughtful woman. I always tell her my business, and listen with benefit to her encouragement if I have a scheme, her sympathy if I have troubles. Her support is the constant sun about which my days orbit.

I take your distraction to evidence some new scheme you are scheming, she continued. Yet – how grander can an orrery be?

We laughed. Laughter is a light oil, necessary and benign in the intermeshing of two gears, however perfectly milled for each other. So I told her what I had been waiting for an opportune time to tell her, even though it had slipped my mind once again. And then, when she had wept and rested her cheek on my shoulder, as wives do, I told her of the fair philosopher who had licensed my shop as a college, and made it disappear a whole noontide as we journeyed to the edge of the universe and back, my machine turned by a wave of her hand into a carriage that transports the imagination, and flies.

I told her how I had never known anyone so transported, so carried away, so wrapt in it all, so enraptured. Adding, after catching an amused turn of her lip, that I was consequently curious whose neice she may be, for perhaps the future may bring me his patronage. My wife did not believe me. She sounds like a neice of Urania fallen to earth in a state of mild amnesia, she said, come to your shop to be reminded of her nature. Or to remind you, to take your hand and conduct you back to the passion that her realm used to fire in you. I think you have met your Muse Jack.

When I asked the boy what he had learned it was little enough. Her lodgings were beyond St Paul's, not unsavoury but a poor place in an alley. She had conversed, but inconsequentially, without adding to what we knew of her. And she had asked him about himself, which

much flattered him I think. He had told her that he would like to be apprenticed and learn the craft, if he were better placed, but his parents could not afford; he thought he had no prospects of being ought but a shop boy. I own he is a good honest boy, but I had not considered it before, how I might make or unmake his prospects. My Muse has brought it to my notice. He is worst at his main task – opening the door to nobility, holding their horses – but he will sometimes watch me at work with wide eyes, when he has no better occupation.

My wife was being kinder than I thought, or teasing me. Only afterwards did I remember, after what she said, in the procession of unexpected thoughts that pass through your head while you are working at a dull task. *She* was my Muse, my dear wife was, years before. She is younger than myself, I suppose no older than my visitor when we met, when I first loved her. I told her then that she was my Muse, I recall it now. It was in the back of her mind, when she spoke, though for years it has lain unmentioned.

I made amends. Love becomes a way of life, marriage betokens it, our daughter proclaims it, the model our union has created, the best in us both. But mortal man is forgetful. He schemes and he toils. He dreams of *magnalia naturae*, the perfect machine, the perpetual motion. He labours to harness the world. His courting days fall into triviality. How quietly we move into a new season of life. We forget even that we have forgotten.

You were my Muse Kate, I said, I think I forgot. Forgive me. You are and ever will be, I will not have you resign it. She shook her head modestly. A Muse must be fresh and wide-eyed, she replied, and have a pretty hand. I am your anchor now, your pendulum. Your Muse must make you free.

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I did not see her again. After some weeks I sent the boy, now my apprentice – I offered it to his father for a peppercorn – to the place where she lodged to enquire after her. The landlady was not at home; the other lodger had not seen the girl, as she called her, for a week or so. She knew little of her, except that her name was Honora. Honora. Is it about a debt?

It was not seemly to pursue her further. I had no business with her. The debt was mine, to her. I made no further enquiry. I let go her pretty hand and let her drift away. Into the dark void. Beyond the edge of it.

Honora.

It was half a year later, almost. My apprentice came to me at my bench and said there was a blunt old fellow looking about the shop and asking for me by name. I frowned at his characterisation, but it was

apt. He was a Yorkshireman, blunt and portly of appearance as well as blunt in manner. A small, heavily-bonneted wife accompanied him.

I have come to town to settle the affairs of my ward, who ... who ran away from home and ... She has left unpaid debts scattered the length of Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street. I regret any inconvenience to yourself, you may hold it all, the inconvenience included, to my account. I will not have London say of Halifax that we hide away behind miles of bumpy road while our debts fester.

The small woman rebuked him silently for his colourful prose.

Higginbottom is the name sir.

I am honoured to meet you my lord, I said, as I do – I start at the top and work down, as you will have noticed. But I fear you may be in the wrong shop, or under a misapprehension.

Mister Higginbottom. I am in trade like yourself – I manufacture worsted. But I am not a pauper sir, my means are ample to settle what I owe. I know my ward came here, and I know that you sent a boy to collect from her, after she ... Without doubt she had something of you, or some service. She herself hinted it most strongly in her letters. It would be ... the autumn of last year. Do you not recollect such a person? A girl of nineteen—

The lady interrupted him by saying eighteen.

She will have had a birthday about the time. Bright and confident for her years, but ... I think you'd call her pretty.

He looked towards his wife, who was not pretty at all. The haberdasher called her so, she said.

I confess it meant nothing to me thus far. I had forgotten that I had forgotten. I raised my eyebrows and shook my head slightly, in token of it.

A dainty enough figure. So high. He held his hand in a posture that seemed somehow familiar. Green eyes and chestnut hair. I know she came and saw you sir. You see, her passion was astronomy—

My heart fluttered and I knew. I knew instantly, in whom passion and astronomy meet. And green spheres and chestnut spirals. I had not forgotten at all, honestly I had not, I had not relinquished the memory of my new Muse. But the habit of thinking of her constantly, or daily, had fallen away. And a blunt fellow from Yorkshire had by no means put me in mind of her. I let him finish his speech.

... and so she was keen to see your machine. I had spoken to her of viewing it myself – you have no cause to recollect me, I was with a party of merchants – for I encouraged her interest as it first blossomed. She showed the makings of a philosopher, if womenfolk may be so. I even had her tutored somewhat by the minister. But, I fear it only aggravated her restlessness.

And thus you were among the unwitting abductors of her, so to say, for as I may have mentioned, she ran away from home to come here. She did write us though. She wrote that she had seen the orrery, and you had expounded it to her, and it had exceeded her expectations, as had the kindliness of its inventor.

I smiled, acknowledging the compliment with a slight bow, and said: The menagerie, the milling crowds, and Master Rowley's orrery.

His countenance changed, from blunt and bothered to benign, even avuncular. Those were her very words sir, he said, and his wife blew her nose.

I assured him she did not owe me a farthing. But he was stubborn in the matter, contending that even if I had done nought but talk to her instructively, such service should command a fee. Where I come from, time is money, he said. I suspect it is Halifax logic, but it has not been my practise. Least of all with – I found myself saying it to them – least of all with one who could almost have been my Muse, so charmingly and genuinely did she inspire my holding forth, so enraptured a fellow voyager was she in the celestial journey we went upon by the agency of my machine.

Agreement as to the debt – that it was void – precipitated a further relaxation of our interview, as the boy brought up chairs, and we passed a half-hour exchanging exclamations and memoirs anent his ward, as he had called her, whom now that he was seated he named Honora. Honora. I said I felt sure she had referred to an 'uncle'. Aye, that is what she has generally called me, he owned, with a little pride if I am not too mistaken. She came to me thus.

She's step-daughter to my late nephew. I regret to say she was born out of wedlock. But my nephew admired her mother very much; I didn't approve, but he defied me and wed her. And then she died, in childbed, taking his own child with her. He doted upon his borrowed daughter thereafter, and in truth I couldn't blame him. She were a delightful and precocious child. When my nephew died she were twelve. I had healed my rift with him by then, for he was heir to my mill; and so I inherited the girl. Missus Higginbottom and I have not had children, and were uncertain about taking her on; but she had no one else. Thus she called me uncle, though we are her guardians, more properly speaking.

I told him of my first vision of her – I did not say I thought I had seen her before, for I have never placed the memory – gazing in at my window, transfixed, all that time. He laughed with recognition, and his wife wiped her eyes and blew her nose and nodded. It were a definite gift she had, he agreed, to gaze and gaze, at something that entranced her with its intricacy or some such allure. Nor was it without understanding that she gazed. Years ago she attended for ages to the works of the clock in our church, and when later she spoke with the smith who tends it he said she fair flummoxed him with her comprehension, her grasp of its operations. Not flawless you understand, but her very questions in themselves showed her cleverness.

It was just thus with my orrery! I exclaimed, and we glowed with recognition and the shared admiration of his clever Honora. Her first question fairly floored me, I said, for it was not in the usual run of enquiries; and its consideration took us together on a flight of the imagination to the farthest reaches of the firmament ... I drifted on in this wise – you can well imagine me doing it – my delight in her company transparent, if careful not quite to open to them how my heart clicked louder than my machine when she was near me, how my mind would not be released from the image of her for months, how my soul yearned for her to fly with me again. But not afraid to share with them, since it pleased them, my conviction of her worth as a scholar (and a Muse), my honest sense of flattery at her opinion of my machine and its maker.

She had written them about it, he reiterated. Exceeded her expectations, the highlight of her education, how she would love to possess even the smallest of my models. Mister Rowley was kindness itself, and conducted me on a grand tour of the universe, she wrote. A grand tour of the universe. He said it again, her blunt guardian, he had the phrases from her letters by rote.

He's read them over and over, his wife said, in her squeaky, emotional way. Over and over.

She did not come to London with his blessing though – she had ran away. We thought she'd eloped, he explained. You see, there's this young youth smitten with her. I might have approved of him: it were *she* wouldn't have him. She preferred astronomy to love, her studies and her daydreams. And she spoke oft of her wish to come to London, to see the menagerie and the orrery, and some other sights. One day, she were gone, and some money.

The worst of it was, she stole the money, the lady said.

It were little enough woman, he said sharply. If she'd asked me I'd have given it her.

His wife contradicted him.

I was angry at the time, you understand, Mister Rowley. But it were little enough. It weren't meanness that made me not want her to come to London; it was our inability to provide a companion. So we thought *that* consideration had converted her to her suitor, and they'd eloped. That's why we weren't all that bothered at first. We couldn't approve of such behaviour, but we thought: at least she has a protector.

Her letters did not disabuse us. The very fact that she wrote – and apologised – assuaged our worry in some measure, as well our anger. But then, a sennight on, the young fellow came round enquiring of her. He'd been away visiting relatives. He knew nothing of their supposed elopement. Suddenly we were faced with it: Honora ... Honora was alone in the metropolis.

But her letters were full of sensibleness and interesting report, reassuring us she was all right. So many things she'd learnt, and sights she'd seen. The menagerie and the milling crowds disappointed, as you rightly said. But Mister Rowley's orrery did not let her down. And the new cathedral church what's building she liked champion, and visited daily. And the great river ...

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She wrote finally sounding homesick, reading between the lines. And long run out of funds by then, we feel sure. I wish you'd have let me send her some, he said, unguardedly. The little lady sniffled, she was a very timid and emotional thing, or seemed so, though perhaps she was a tyrant at home. I mean, I wish now I had, he said. You'll understand, Mister Rowley, if you're a family man, the dilemma I faced, Missus Higginbottom and me. We thought she should come home. Sending her money would just subscribe to her foolhardiness, prolonging her abscondment.

She wrote how the great river fascinated her, how she stood and gazed into it from a particular spot. For the stars you cannot see, she wrote – to see the heavens you must go to the Globe in Fleet Street – I don't know how Mister Rowley abides his exile from Staffordshire, to a place where the smoke and the lights conspire to veil the lovely celestial canopy from our eyes, she wrote. Veil the celestial canopy from our eyes. And so on, and so.

It were a melancholy letter, the last. But I took some comfort from it, he said, didn't we? We reasoned she'd soon be home, now the lure of the city had tarnished. She'd return the wiser in worldliness, and wiser in matters of the heavenly world, without doubt. As we looked to her homecoming I contemplated how I might welcome her with an undertaking to write you, Mister Rowley, and get her some machine or other that would delight her for ever. And make her know ... I was not

harsh nor miserly towards her, in my heart, but really ... really quite fond.

He verged upon sharing the moist sentimentality that characterised his good lady, for some seconds. While I verged upon expecting that I would now be asked to show him the particular model she had named, or else to make her a specially tailored one. I should like to do that, I *have* thought of it. I have thought of embarking at my own expense upon an especially beautiful machine, in which each and every tooth and wheel and part, every hour of filing or dividing, is dedicated to *her*, with whom I have flown, my second Muse ...

But instead my guests now rallied in haste, realising they had made themselves unduly at home in my chairs, in neglect of such business as they had meant to be about. For we are returning the day after tomorrow, he said, I cannot leave off my trade any longer. We have made our pilgrimage, and I think we have paid all our debts bar one. Our debt to you sir, if you will not render me account, is in our hearts, and can never be expunged. For you were kind to our ... our Honora, and we can only thank you for it and bid you farewell.

I wished them farewell too, and a safe if bumpy journey, and thanked them for coming, and assured them of my services should they ever require them. I thought it best to phrase it elliptically. He had his own way of doing business, I could tell, and it was a while yet till Christmas.

And pray when you return to Halifax, of course I added, carry with you and convey my warmest remembrances to your dear ward Honora, pardon me, Miss Honora, and my humble services to her. I should not mind to correspond with her, if it will assist her studies. But I hope she may come to town again – with your blessing of course – and take another grand tour with me.

Mister Higginbottom's countenance returned to the bothered bluntness that had characterised his arrival. He frowned at me.

I fear you have not understood me sir. Or happen in my opening sentances I was unclear as to the origin of my errand ...

I understood that while in town you were settling some accounts you believed she may have run up.

No sir. I came to London expressly to settle those debts, and some other affairs, and, though you may think me blunt, to make a penance in my way, for I am a Presbyterian Elder. I came in order to pause at the places she wrote us about, in quiet remembrance, including that spot where she gazed into the river ... I believe it was there she cast herself in ... And then, with my good lady here, to say Our Father, and

place flowers, at the burial ground where they have laid her unmarked among the paupers.

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Notes

The title and indeed nearly the whole thing derive from some lines written in 1725 by the poet Edward Young:

> Some nymphs prefer astronomy to love:
> Elope from mortal man, and range above.
> The fair philosopher to Rowley flies,
> Where, in a box, the whole creation lies: ...

The long satirical poem *Love of Fame* (originally titled *The Universal Passion*) was published in parts between 1725 and 1728, part V containing these lines being issued in January 1726; Edward Young (1683-1765) was one of the leading English poets of the period, but his fame has worn less well than that of contemporaries such as Pope.

John Rowley (1668-1728) was the most skilled maker of mathematical instruments and astronomical models of his time; he was born in Lichfield, Staffordshire; he and his wife Catherine were married in 1697, their only child Elizabeth was born in 1698; his workshop and retail shop were at the sign of the Globe, Fleet Street, London; he was appointed Master of Mechanics to the King in 1715, and his ordinary shop business was taken over by his former apprentice Thomas Wright in 1718; his later activities included larger-scale projects in hydraulic engineering, but his fame derived largely from the orrery.

George Graham (1674-1751) was a friend and neighbour of John Rowley; he worked for the clockmaker Thomas Tompion from 1696; Tompion and Graham made the first prototype orreries, which Rowley copied and developed (and named); the notion that Graham made a clock for Rowley is a fiction, but is not intrinsically improbable.

Honora owes her Christian name, albeit anachronistically, to the Lichfield poet Anna Seward's friend Honora Sneyd (1751-1780), one of the most beautiful and intelligent women of the 18th century.

Fair was used at the time (as adjective and noun) to mean female (a usage surviving in the phrase 'the fair sex'); while *philosopher* was used where we would now say scientist; a 'fair philosopher' was thus, in modern parlance, a female scientist.

Orrery was the name given by Rowley to the mechanical or clockwork planetary model he made in 1712 for the Earl of Orrery (intending perhaps a pun on the word 'horary'); the word entered the language, and the instrument became a staple of 18th-century science, the larger version he developed being called a 'grand orrery'.

Magnalia naturae was a term used in the 17th century for ingenious and pseudo-magical mechanical contraptions; Rowley was particularly interested in (the possibility of) perpetual motion machines.

The new cathedral church is St Paul's Cathedral, which was being built at this date.

The story is set about the year 1715.

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