

A GREAT SIGHT.

Things that Have Happened when
the Sun Was Darkened.

(M. L. Rayne in Chicago Times-Herald.)

A total eclipse of the sun is announced as the most important celestial phenomenon of 1900, and although the frequency with which solar totality occurs, and the scientific knowledge which has robbed it of the mystery and even the terror which formerly accompanied it, great value in astronomical circles is given to its recurrence. Unfortunately there is a doubt as to the totality being visible in America, the leading astronomers locating it in Spain, and naming 1925 as the date of a total solar eclipse in the United States. Be this as it may, elaborate preparations are to be made for the occurrence on May 28, when the Southern Railway will run an eclipse train from New Orleans to Norfolk, and another epoch will be accentuated by progression in science. Among the elegant modern distinctions of railway travel smoked glass will be a leading feature, and the only drawback anticipated will be a cloudy sky or a total absence of the expected eclipse.

The earliest records of solar eclipses are ascribed to Confucius, and of these three were total, and they are not mentioned as scientific facts, but as bad omens. He recorded that the total eclipse was greeted as such phenomena is received at the present time by the Chinese people, with the beating of gongs, wild cries and a savage uproar, all of which is supposed to drive off the evil monster who is "eating up the friendly sun."

One of the eclipses of antiquity was famous for two events. One was that it was foretold by an astrologer of the philosophical school of the time, 585 B. C., and its alarming appearance stopped a battle between the Lydians and the Medes. The sudden darkness convinced the combatants that the gods were wroth and they at once ceased fighting. The prophets took advantage of their own ignorance and the terrors of the people to predict direful things, which in many cases—being the result of unfortunate conditions—took place, adding to their terror of the sun and inspiring a new reverence for the powers of the prophet.

Two famous eclipses occurred in Europe during the ninth century. A total eclipse in A. D. 840 frightened Emperor Louis of Bavaria to death and destroyed his kingdom. Other eclipses had the same effect on rulers, which was so disastrous that some wise men among those in power gave out the death of the king as an event of such moment that the heavens, shocked at the suddenness of the fatality, went into mourning.

In 1716, in May, an eclipse of the sun was predicted in London by a pamphlet, "The Black Day, or the Prospect of Doomsday." Great preparation was made for the unwelcome shadow, and it was related afterward that in spite of the "awesome dark," no one of prominence died, nor did any public disaster overtake the country.

An eclipse of especial interest to America was that of October 27, 1780, when the first American eclipse expedition was fitted out, destined to be followed by many and greatly improved solar institutions, securing results of wonderful scientific accuracy and developing much valuable astronomical material. Several eclipses of minor scientific material. Several eclipses of minor scientific importance were recorded between 1833 and 1859, but in the later year two appeared. The first ushered in the new year and was visible from California to Manitoba. The weather was favorable at all points along the line and many photographs were made. The second eclipse of the year occurred in December and was visible in South America.

On more than one occasion in history there is a record of the special darkness which accompanies an eclipse, disclosing the presence of a comet, but the eclipse of 1552 was the first time that a comet was photographed by the astronomers. This eclipse was observed by astronomers representing England, France and Italy.

The total eclipse of May, 1883, had some special dramatic features about it. To begin with, the duration was unusually long, nearly five and a half minutes. The greatest duration of totality was six and a half minutes, recorded in Great Britain, August 29, 1850. Another peculiar feature was that this eclipse was only visible in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Fortunately for the cause of science, a group of coral islands lay in its neighborhood. America, England, France, Italy and Australia were all represented.

During the total eclipse of the sun, August 7, 1869, which was visible in Alaska, the Indians of the Chilkat River were greatly alarmed. Professor

Benjamin Price of the United States coast survey had gone with a party to Alaska to observe and report the eclipse and had warned the Indians, but they had refused to believe him until the sun was half obscured. Then they all disappeared and not a sound was heard throughout their village. They had made up their aboriginal minds that the scientists were taking care of matters—that the sun was "very sick" and they had "put it to sleep."

Educated and intelligent people do not hesitate to express a dread of that solemn darkness which is unlike any other atmosphere, and in which all nature appears overshadowed with approaching doom. One who has witnessed a total eclipse gives this graphic description:—

"As much as five minutes before the total obscurity it may be possible to detect strange wavering lines of light and shade drawing across the landscape. Then, with frightful velocity, the shadow of the moon is seen approaching, a tangible darkness advancing like a wall, swift as imagination, silent as doom. The immensity of nature never comes so near as then, and strong must be the nerves not to quiver as the blue-black shadow rushes upon the spectator with incredible speed. A vast palpating presence seems overwhelming the world. Bats emerge stealthily. Sensitive flowers close. An assembled crowd is awed into absolute silence. It becomes curiously cold, and the chill is mental as well as physical."

Already the colored minister and exhorter of the South is pointing a moral with the coming eclipse, and this recalls the story of a colored servant of Governor James of Alabama, who on the occasion of an eclipse fell prostrate at his master's feet, breathless with his news: "Massa James, de sun am a-clippin'—de sun am a-clippin'!"