

The Californian
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A Full And Reliable Account Of The Extraordinary Meteoric Shower Of Last Saturday Night

I found the following paragraph in the morning papers of the 11th inst.:

VIRGINIA, November 10. - Astronomers anticipate a recurrence this year of the November meteoric shower of 1833. The mornings from the 11th to the 15th are all likely to show an unusual number of meteors, especially from the 12th to the 14th. The best time of observation is from half-past one o'clock, A.M., onward. The radiant point is the constellation Leo. Observers in California, Nevada and the Pacific Coast generally, are requested to report their observations to Professor Silliman, Jr., San Francisco, for the American Journal of Science, where they will be published for the good of science.

B. SILLIMAN, JR.

PROF. B. SILLIMAN, JR. -Dear Sir: In accordance with the above request, which you so politely extended to all "observers," I took copious notes of the amazing meteoric phenomena of last Saturday night, and I now hasten to make my report to you for publication in the American Journal of Science "for the good of science."

I began my observations early in the evening, previously providing myself with the very best apparatus I could find wherewith to facilitate my labors. I got a telescopic glass tumbler, and two costly decanters, (containing eau de vie and Veuve Cliquot to wash out the instrument with whenever it should become clouded), and seated myself in my window, very nearly under the constellation Leo. I then poured about a gill of liquid from each decanter into the telescopic tumbler and slowly elevated it to an angle of about ninety degrees. I did not see anything. The second trial was also a failure, but I had faith in that wash, and I washed out the instrument again. And just here let me suggest to you, Professor, that you can always depend on that mixture; rightly compounded, I expect it is the most powerful aid to human eyesight ever invented; assisted by it I have known a man to see two drinks on the counter before him when in reality there was but one—and so strong was the deception that I have known that man to get drunk on thirteen of these duplicate drinks when he was naturally gauged for twenty-six.

Very well; after I had washed out my glass the third time, three or four stars, of about the nineteenth magnitude, I should judge, shot from the zenith and fell in the general direction of Oakland. During the fourth wash, and while I had one eye sighted on Venus and the other one closed in blissful repose, that planet fell upon the roof of the Russ House and bounced off into Bush street; immediately afterward, Jupiter fell and knocked a watchman's eye out—at least I think it was that star, because I saw the watchman clap his hand to his eye and say "By Jupiter!" The assertion was positive, and made without hesitation, as if he had the most perfect confidence in the accuracy of his judgment; but at the same time it is possible that he might have been mistaken, and that the damage was not done by Jupiter after all. I maintain, though, that the

chances are all in favor of his being correct, because I have noticed that policemen usually know as much about stars as anybody, and take more interest in them than most people.

Up to this time the wind had been north by northeast half west, and I noticed an uncommon dryness in the atmosphere, but it was less marked after I applied the fifth wash. My barometer never having had any experience in falling stars, got hopelessly tangled in trying to get the run of things, and after waltzing frantically between “stormy” and “falling weather” for awhile without being able to make up its mind, it finally became thoroughly demoralized and threw up its commission. My thermometer did not indicate anything; I noted this extraordinary phenomenon, of course, but at the same time I reasoned—and, I think, with considerable sagacity—that it was less owing to the singular condition of the atmosphere than to the fact that there was no quicksilver in the instrument. About this time a magnificent spectacle dazzled my vision—the whole constellation of the Great Menken came flaming out of the heavens like a vast spray of gas-jets, and shed a glory abroad over the universe as it fell! [N.B. I have used the term “Great Menken” because I regard it as a more modest expression than the Great Bear, and consequently better suited to the columns of THE CALIFORNIAN, which goes among families, you understand—but when you come to transfer my report to the Journal of Science, Professor, you are at liberty to change it if you like.]

I applied the sixth wash. A sprinkle of sparkling fragments ensued—fragments of some beautiful world that had been broken up and cast out of the blue firmament—and then a radiance of noonday flared out of the zenith, and Mercury, the winged symbol of Progress, came sweeping down like a banished sun, and catching in the folds of the flag that floats from the tall staff in the Plaza, remained blazing in the centre of its dim constellation of stars! “Lo, a miracle! the thirty-sixth star furnished from the imperial diadem of heaven! while yet no welcome comes from the old home in the Orient, behold the STATE OF NEVADA is recognized by God!” says I, and seized my telescope, filled her to the brim and washed her out again! The divinity student in the next room came in at this juncture and protested against my swearing with so much spirit, and I had some difficulty in making him understand that I had only made use of a gorgeous metaphor, and that there was really no profanity intended in it.

About this time the wind changed and quite a shower of stars fell, lasting about twenty minutes; a lull ensued, and then came several terrific discharges of thunder and lightning, and how it poured! You couldn’t see the other side of the street for the hurtling tempest of stars! I got my umbrella—which I had previously provided along with my other apparatus—and started down the street. Of course there was plenty of light, although the street lamps were not lit (you let that sagacious gas company alone, Professor, to make a good thing out of it when the almanac advertises anything of this kind. I put in these parentheses to signify a complicated wink—you understand?) I met Charles Kean, and I expect he was drunk; I drifted down the pavement, tacking from one side of it to the other, and trying to give him a wide berth, but it was no use; he would run into me, and he did—he brought up square against me and fell. “Down goes another star,” I observed and stopped a moment to make a note of it.

The meteoric storm abated gradually, and finally ceased, but by that time the stars had cut my umbrella nearly all to pieces, and there were a dozen or more sticking in it when I lowered it. It was the most furious deluge I ever saw, while it lasted. Pretty soon I heard a great huzzaing in the distance, and immediately afterward I noticed a brilliant meteor streaming athwart the heavens with a train of fire of incredible length appended to it. It swept the sky in a graceful curve, and after I had watched its splendid career a few seconds and was in the act of making the proper entry in my note-book, it descended and struck me such a stunning thump in the pit of the

stomach that I was groveling in the dust before I rightly knew what the matter was. When I recovered consciousness, I remarked "Down went a couple of us then," and made a note of it. I saved the remains of this most remarkable meteor, and I transmit them to you with this report, to be preserved in the National Astronomical Museum. They consist of a fragment of a torn and jagged cylinder the size of your wrist, composed of a substance strongly resembling the pasteboard of this world; to this is attached a slender stick some six feet long, which has something of the appearance of the pine wood so well known to the commerce of this earth, but of such a supernatural fineness of texture, of course, as to enable one to detect its celestial origin at once. There is food here for philosophic contemplation, and a series of interesting volumes might be written upon a question which I conceive to be of the utmost importance to Science, viz.: Do they cultivate pines in Paradise? And if it be satisfactorily demonstrated that they do cultivate pines in Paradise, may we not reasonably surmise that they cultivate cabbages there also? O, sublime thought! O, beautiful dream! The scientific world may well stand speechless and awe-stricken in the presence of these tremendous questions! But may we not hope that the learned German who has devoted half his valuable life to determining what materials a butterfly's wing is made of, and to writing unstinted books upon the subject, will devote the balance of it to profound investigation of the celestial cabbage question? And is it too much to hope that that other benefactor of our race who has proven in his thirteen inspired volumes that it is exceedingly mixed as to whether the extraordinary bird called the Phoenix ever really existed or not, will lend his assistance to the important work and turn out a few tomes upon the subject, wherewith to enrich our scientific literature? My dear sir, this matter is worthy of the noblest effort; for we know by the past experience of learned men, that whosoever shall either definitely settle this cabbage question, or indefinitely unsettle it with arguments and reasonings and deductions freighted with that odor of stately and incomprehensible wisdom which is so overpowering to the aspiring student and so dazzling and bewildering to the world at large, will be clothed with titles of dignity by our colleges, and receive medals of gold from the Kings and Presidents of the earth.

As I was meandering down the street, pondering over the matters treated of in the preceding paragraph, I ran against another man, and he squared off for a fight. I squared off, also, and dashed out with my left, but he dodged and "cross-counter." [I have since learned that he was educated at the Olympic Club.] That is to say, he ducked his head to one side and avoided my blow, and at the same time he let go with his right and caved the side of my head in. At this moment I beheld the most magnificent discharge of stars that had occurred during the whole evening. I estimated the number to be in the neighborhood of fifteen hundred thousand. I beg that you will state it at that figure in the Journal of Science, Professor, and throw in a compliment about my wasting no opportunity that seemed to promise anything for the good of the cause. It might help me along with your kind of men if I should conclude to tackle science for a regular business, you know. You see they have elected a new governor over there in Nevada, and consequently I am not as much Governor of the Third House there as I was. It was a very comfortable berth; I had a salary of \$60,000 a year when I could collect it.

While my stranger and myself were staggering under the two terrific blows which we had exchanged—and especially myself, on account of the peculiar nature of the "cross-counter" as above described—a singular star dropped in our midst which I would have liked well to possess, because of its quaint appearance, and because I had never seen anything like it mentioned in Mr. Dick's astronomy. It emitted a mild silvery luster, and bore upon its face some characters which, in the fervor of my astronomical enthusiasm, I imagined spelt "Police - 18," but of course this

was an absurd delusion. I only mention it to show to what lengths scientific zeal will sometimes carry a novice. This marvelous meteor was already in the possession of another enthusiast, and he would not part with it.

On my way home, I met young John William Skae—the inimitable punster of Virginia City, and formerly of Pennsylvania, perhaps you know him?—and I knew from his distraught and pensive air that he was building a joke. I was anxious not to intrude any excitement upon him, which might have the effect of bringing the half-finished edifice down about my ears, but my very caution precipitated the catastrophe I was trying to avert. Said I, “Are you out looking for meteors, too?” His eye instantly lighted with a devilish satisfaction, and says he: “Well, sorter; I’m looking for my Susan—going to meteor by moonlight alone; O Heavens! why this sudden pang, this bursting brain! save me, save me or I perish!”

But I didn’t save him—I let him drop; and I deserted him and left him moaning there in the gutter. A man cannot serve me that way twice and expect me to stand by him and chafe his temples and blow his nose and sandpaper his legs and fetch him round again. I would let him perish like an outcast first, and deny him Christian burial afterwards. That Skae has always been following me around trying to make me low-spirited with his dismal jokes, but since that time he caught me out in the lonely moor on the Cliff House road, and intimidated me into listening to that execrable pun on the Kingfisher, I have avoided him as I would a pestilence.

I will now close my report, Professor. If you had not just happened to print that assurance in your little notice that these things should be published in the American Journal of Science, “for the good of Science,” I expect it never would have occurred to me to make any meteorological observations at all; but you see that remark corralled me. It has been the dearest wish of my life to do something for the good of Science and see it in print in such a paper as the one you mention, and when I saw this excellent opportunity presented, I thought it was now or never with me. It is a pity that the astonishing drawings which accompany this report cannot be published in the CALIFORNIAN; it could not be helped, though: the artist who was to have engraved them was not healthy, and he only took one look at them and then went out in the back yard and destroyed himself. But you can print them in the Journal of Science, anyhow, just the same; get an artist whose sensibilities have been toned down by chiseling melancholy devices on tombstones all his life, and let him do them up for you. He would probably survive the job.

(Source: Twainquotes.com, <http://www.twainquotes.com/Calif/18641119.html>)