

The Carrington Event

There are perils that we are never aware of and often never have to be. Rarely does it cross anyone's mind that they are a speck on a grain in a dust cloud, and that the objects outside our little water drop can preserve us or harm us. An odd mix of protection and threat happened in September 1859.

Without the sun we would not be here. A cloud of gas and dust began a dance billions of years ago, and out of that dance was born all that we knew for most of our existence, and ultimately ourselves, strange riddles that we are. The sun however is massive beyond our picturing, hotter than anything we could feel, and as lacking in solidity as any random wit. It is usually quiet, but then like some betrayed woman of myth, it rages and threatens war against its rocky and gassy children.

A massive plasma plume, which probably looked like a cloak of fire, was flung at us. Deadly turning, for our original mother! We did not need to make godlike machines to protect us, however. Though we give it even less thought of than the air we breathe, a cage of magnetic lines from the earth contains and shelters us, and it deflected this storm, though imperfectly.

Humanity was busy being humanity when things Started To Go Wrong. Telegrams were interrupted, and like a whipcrack sparks hurt the hands of the operators. This of course made it difficult to obtain news and placed itself as a stumbling block in the way of Business and frightened many a family.

Then there was the sky. To New England from the North Pole, and flying well over Australia from the South Pole, shards of green and red and purple changed the sky. Awestruck, we looked

up, some aware and some not, but that did not change the gorgeous and terrifying realization that we were small, and ashes from the caves might as well still stain our hands.

Father was agitated all that week, running back and forth to the observatory, notes and maps perpetually storming around him. He was muttering about the sun every other breath, and it was like the dang thing had put him in a trance. It was over tea, sometime near the end of August, that he suddenly broke the family tradition and decided she was worth giving important information.

“Something is going to happen soon. There’s been more sunspots than usual – who knows. We should prepare for the next few days, just in case. Gather food, go into town, send our letters.”

“I understand.”

“And stay inside. I want you to be safe.”

What could be possibly that terrible, that powerful? What could have shaken him into showing an emotion? I too loved the skies, and often studied in secret, but he cataloged the firmament and won prizes and was one of those people who are well-known without being famous, so all others were unworthy.

Sunspots. They seemed so odd to me; how could a great source of light develop blemishes? The source of light could have little in common with me and those little marks on my face, the ones that apparently would make me disliked by everyone. I could hear the heckling from the other schoolchildren even now, and the principal remarking, when he thought I couldn’t hear that I was “an ugly little thing, but bright – too bright”. Too bright for a girl, whatever too bright and girl meant. I knew this wasn’t supposed to be a good thing, these sunspots, but I felt akin to

them. They weren't supposed to be there, they were too powerful, and yet they were, in all the glory of defiance.

The next night brought my upheaval.

I heard, as I went from morning chores to the little schoolhouse and so on, about people not getting their news. Tommy, an exhausting menace who had been made to be useful, was regaling his comrades with his story of getting shocked cleaning the telegraph, claiming it felt like being stabbed by a thousand needles while on fire. He did gradually add to the colorful metaphors during the course of the day, which made me at least quite suspicious.

I often had the distinct feeling that humanity was not my native stock. I had never managed to really bond with anyone, and the thoughts of others always seemed strange and empty to my own, while they thought I was no more worth listening to than the leaves in the wind. True, I was aloof and somewhat lacking in expected social graces (for one, I was too blunt, as small talk and similar waffling seemed a waste of time), and, indeed, I was homely, but I was a hard worker, excellent at school, my handwork was known to be excellent, and were anyone in trouble I would help them. As to the second, I made sure to be neat and pressed, and to follow cades where necessary – otherwise it was my business.

And yet, people acted as if I had the scarlet A upon me, and while you could argue whether Hester's punishment was just, there was at least an obvious reason. I was judged by other's feelings, standards made for people who didn't have my capacities or flaws, my father's reputation as a slightly mad man who was always chased by creditors – and because of this, my natural urge to be good and of use had been blunted over a mere few years. I had come to view the people around me as ill-disposed and foolish, and so made less and less effort – and the sight

of Tommy being, if not taken seriously, at least listened to, did not raise the townsfolk in my esteem.

Since my father was consistently out of money, and so I did work, though he would make irritated remarks about how it was beneath me. However, my handwork was responsible for one of my few pleasures – a pile of books that lived in the corner of the room which I always insisted on dusting myself.

My favorite of these stirring and comforting books was a collection of Wordsworth. I read the Prelude again and again, swept away by the devotion that man seemed to feel in the face of the nature he was graced with, which was nothing like the drab forest that surrounded me. I longed for beauty and purpose, it didn't matter from where. I resented the way my father treated the heavens, a great source of both and yet he didn't care at all, simply looking for signs of doom.

That night it happened. I could no longer bear the cramped atmosphere and so I slipped away for a walk. I headed for the sea, the scent of salt calling me down the dusty paths. I reached the rocks, expecting to see what I always saw; grey rocks adorned with seaweed, waves going back and forth monotonously, a peaceful emptiness.

Instead, the sky was on fire. An emerald-green fire, rippling and waving like a dancer's skirt.

There were occasional traces of red and purple too, banishing the darkness. Sometimes it seemed more like a curtain and sometimes more like a sword.

I sat down, feeling overwhelmed. Aurora Borealis, far away from where you are supposed to see them. I wasn't sure what to feel. It was beautiful and wild, reminding me of Wordsworth's star, but the sky is not supposed to take on alien colors. Historically, this is usually taken as a sign of doom. Or revelation.

But I was sitting on a rock, and nothing happened: no grand revelations, no signs of impending death. My heart pounded, but I stayed still, hypnotized by the dance of disembodied color. This was what I wasn't supposed to see. "Not exactly bluebeard," I muttered to no one, continuing to stare.

I stared for a very long time because it seemed the only appropriate thing to do. It seemed rude almost to ignore such an awful spectacle, which at this hour seemed just for me. It soon came to my attention that I was not, in fact, alone. Who did I see awkwardly clambering down the salt and pepper rocks but Tommy himself? Of all people, this empty-headed libertine was who I got to share this service of the stars. He looked scared, but determined, as if he could somehow take on this phenomenon. He stopped and stared too, and I almost pitied him. I felt, somewhere in my heart, that it was he and not I who should have slept, and that this was the effects of a gaze from a medusa.

I shuddered. Perhaps it was shock or my sense of the beauty, but my father's words came back. This was related to the sunspots, those seemingly harmless little freckles the size of the planet I stood on. My father, for all his coldness to care and beauty, might be right. It was possible I shouldn't be here. I had come looking for poetry and some tamed shadow of danger, and had found it, but with it too where horrifying implications, like that haunting cliff I loved to read about in secret again and again. The world seemed more to be a duality, not all was so cut and dried, and part of what made my beloved sublime so transcendent was the reminder or suggestion of our death – they were memento mori too large and real to reside in a paperweight. I scrambled onto the beach, rushing toward him. He collapsed to the ground just as I reached him, vibrating like a stuck gong.

"The color! The color!" he cried, reaching a shaking hand to the sky, his eye wide in horror.

Driven by an unknown impulse, I grasped his hand.

“No, we will survive. It’s just a solar storm.”

“Repent...” He was deathly pale, a light dew of sweat on his brow despite the night’s chill.

Tommy needed help, I knew that. How? To cure what? I wasn’t sure, but it was the right thing to do.

I thought of my father again. Was he suffering too? Did this inference from the sun drive people mad? He had been so agitated for days, and here I was, on sparkling granite, helping one who represented all I loathed. But he would have wanted this – it was he who taught me to do the right thing. *Never leave your neighbor in distress – even if they might, it will always haunt you.*

No time. “Can you stand?” I asked Tommy. His eyes turned in my direction, taking an alarming moment to focus his eyes on me. Finally, he grunted in the affirmative, and with my support, I guided him to the closest potential source of help – the church.

Electricity has always been mysterious, and the most frightening mystery to most is the spark or lightening and the heat it can produce. The poles that carried those early wires started catching fire as the wires themselves could no longer bear the charge from space. What terror! Sudden unexplained fire through the town, smoke and flame obscuring the seductive glow of the auroras. With so much wood, tragedy could easily strike – and surely many died because of the storm, and unlike a nor’easter this New England town wasn’t prepared. Yet, this was but a gentle touch compared to what it would have been without our magnetic shield. We would have never been.

After much effort and straining, Tommy and I reached the old meeting house. As Quakers demanded, it was plain and grey, but to me on this night it seemed a palace. Tommy was still murmuring distractedly, and I knew I would be unable to help him alone. The sky still glowed above, and at one moment these shining beacons would anger or dazzle me. We went past towards a little cottage where I knew the clerk resided. I was surprised to see that we were no longer alone. Several villagers, shaking and stunned, stood near the house, and it was only then that I noticed that there was a color in the sky that was not the auroras or the moon, but was orange. Glaring.

Fire. The spell broke for a moment, and I recalled the story that the young man I was helping and who now seemed deaf and blind to all had shared that morning – the sparks from the telegraph.

Our houses and poles were of wood, and except for the sea we were surrounded by forest.

Was father all right? A cold stab of guilt went through me, as we at last reached the door.

Perhaps he was in danger. Like Icarus, I had to fly too close, and while for now I was alive and well, all I had gained was a madman and some foolish dreams.

As if to atone for my strange crime, I rapped at the door with uncharacteristic boldness. A woman, tall and imposing opened the door.

“I am so sorry to disturb you at this hour. Tommy here needs a place to rest and wait for the doctor, and...” I hesitated and looked over at what I now saw was a poor family, “I think they need shelter too. Is it possible to use the meeting house?”

If an angel, with all the eyes and pomp and circumstance, had appeared before me, I would not have been as glad as I was to hear that “of course!” and the stirring of the other inhabitants. Soon enough, we were all inside.

One of the members of the family, a little child I could not identify with a penetrating stare, kept glancing at me as if frightened, and again that guilt appeared. I was well dressed, not hungry, and I spoke well, showing my education. While I had often complained of the little that we owned, I could have passed them by many times and not seen them, or worse, have put them out of my head from discomfort.

“You are the odd one, right?” The child said. The mother, who I now recognized as Mrs. Graves, one of the local laundresses, stepped up to grab the wee one.

“I’m so sorry, Miss, he’ll be quiet,” she said with a look of fear.

“No, I understand, and I would say he’s rather astute.” I said with my kindest smile, attempting to set things to rights, and to learn more about these people I should have seen before.

“Are you a poet?” the little boy, whose name was Nathaniel, asked, and that started it. Over tea, me and the Graves got acquainted, while the sky still sang with colors and Tommy was attended to.

Connection, learning, and love are the great human powers that have always kept us alive through the upheavals. Many have made dangerous claims about the strong and weak and such or misunderstood Darwin’s words about the fittest. The fittest is whoever can best face the circumstances before them, which always change. For a naked and chaotic ape, there’s little chance, but for three it’s better and more so for ten and so on. We learn skills and crafts and knowledge and stories, experiment, philosophize, and preach our way up the food chain, physical weakness be damned. It is probably from this that our wild variation springs, as the reservoir called creativity must always be fed and to maintain society and quickly adapt, we must

have a near endless set of possible people. Because we are so weak, we are easily hurt or fall ill or our minds (usually our greatest ally) turn on us, and then we need care and safety.

We all too often forget this truth in ways large and small.

Who knew what hour it was, as the color shone through the darkness outside. The fire in town was out and no one was seriously hurt. I helped with people in the meeting house, carrying blankets and food, being a cheerful presence, and keeping an eye on the candles. I had met and talked to more people in this cold little place than I had for years. Tommy, however, had been seen and poked at and prayed over, and he still stared off, uttering nonsense wildly. I learned he had no family, and this put the rumors about his behavior in a different light. He was usually hated, but his malady had many concerned for him. In his distress, his good qualities were what was remembered about him – his moments of compassion, his musical talent, how he had cared for his now dead mother.

That was not all. The mad situation we were all in seemed to have struck many people with Scrooge's lesson, and they gave funds and aid to people they would not have usually talked to. I wondered why this was not going on before. People should not need shocks to behave. Much latter, I found out that there had been violence in the city of --- as the people panicked and picked the most convenient scapegoats. Why this did not happen in my sleepy town is still a mystery to me.

The armor I had crafted for so long have dropped a little. Had this little town been harsh and small minded? Yes, but not all of them were that way, and even the worst had at least some vulnerability. Secondly, it had taken me so long to realize this because I had become cold and harsh to everyone, retreating into my shell as deep as I could go. I could have shown more

kindness with my self-sufficiency (which had not been true self-sufficiency, but rather a defense against attacks not yet made) and shown my gifts. It could be true simultaneously that my father was irresponsible and a wet fish, and that I didn't exactly make a good show of my lovability at every meal, or that I was viewed unfairly and contributed constantly to this view of me, that Tommy could be a menace and so because he had no help.

It was not until almost dawn until my father arrived. Pale and exhausted, tear streaks across his face like river deltas, he seemed the farthest thing from the unfeeling accountant and calculator of the planets who I had always known. One moment he was still, the next I was swept into a hug.

"You're alive. Thank god." I wasn't sure which of us said it or if we said it together, but those four words said everything. For a moment all the strife of the past was erased, the horrible seduction of the skies, the glow of the fires, by love and peace.

Eventually the town was rebuilt, in a few days the skies turned back to their blue and eternal selves, the mail and telegrams resumed, time marched on, and my father still acted like the person I always knew, with some exceptions. He encouraged my love of the stars and words, and I pray I may make something of it! Meanwhile, I worked hard and with a will, and of my own accord always let him know if I was going anywhere at night, though that little spark of fear never went away entirely. Better to be loved imperfectly than not at all.

Tommy at first appeared to recover, but soon he fell into a depression, staring at the sky every night. He did his job well but listlessly, he no longer bothered the girls, and no joke left his lips. Like a fire being extinguished, he became ill and slowly slipped away. Oddly as this happened, he was remembered more and more fondly, and he got more assistance. He seemed to value

these offerings, and worked like it never had before, like the colors that struck him dead had shown him a different side of things.

The Graves, who were already almost ruined, had lost their house, but the Quakers, who had been looked at with suspicion by the town, volunteered their skills, and the town gave their money, to build a new house. While this happened, they stayed at Laurel House, the summer home of the Petersons, who were wealthy. From the little I know, all of them were against it until my father, who they respected, visited them. Who knows what he said or why, but they had a place to be. Nathaniel became a regular fixture and through this it was found that he had marvelous mathematical talent, and I hope he will have a bright future.

There was still strife and business and great divides, but we had all been touched somehow, as if the Carrington event had been a strange baptism, and there was a gravity to day-to-day life that was not there before, and it was as if we were all haunted by the dark cliff that was that night.

All things end, and the plume that had run against the magnetic lines of the earth dissipated as if it had never been. The sun shown as usual, giving light and food to the plants. Such is the strange duality of life that has always driven us to search for answers and meaning – that however much we try to classify and reason, a medicine is poison in too high a dose, that mortality is both a curse and blessing, and that we are, as far as we know, the great witnesses of the universes and the same time a bit of dust vulnerable to all.