

# **THE STAR**

By H. G. Wells



Above were the lava, hot gases and ash, and below the seething floods and the whole earth swayed and rumbled with the earthquake.

Here is an impressive story based on the inter-action of planetary bodies and of the sun upon them. A great star is seen approaching the earth. At first it is only an object of interest to the general public, but there is an astronomer on the earth, who is watching each phase and making mathematical calculations, for he knows the intimate relation of gravitation between bodies and the effect on rotating bodies of the same force from an outside source. He fears all sorts of wreckage on our earth. He warns the people, but they, as usual, discount all he says and label him mad. But he was not mad. H. G. Wells, in his own way, gives us a picturesque description of the approach of the new body through long days and nights—he tells how the earth and natural phenomena of the earth will react. Though this star never touches our sphere, the devastation and destruction wrought by it are complete and horrible. The story is correct in its astronomical aspects.

## THE STAR

It was on the first day of the new year that the announcement was made, almost simultaneously from three observatories, that the motion of the planet Neptune, the outermost of all the planets that wheeled about the sun, had become erratic. Ogilvy had already called attention to a suspected retardation in its velocity in December. Such a piece of news was scarcely calculated to interest the world the greater portion of whose inhabitants were unaware of the existence of the planet Neptune, nor outside the astronomical profession did the subsequent discovery of a faint remote speck of light in the region of the perturbed planet cause any great excitement.

Scientific people, however, found the intelligence remarkable enough, even before it became known that the new body was rapidly growing larger and brighter, that its motion was quite different from the orderly progress of the planets, and that the deflection of Neptune and its satellite was becoming now of an unprecedented kind.

Few people without training in science can realize the huge isolation of the solar system. The sun with its specks of planets, its dust of planetoids, and its impalpable comets swims in vacant immensity that almost defeats the imagination. Beyond the orbit of Neptune there is space, vacant so far as human observation has penetrated, without warmth or light or sound, blank emptiness, for twenty billion times a million miles. That is the smallest estimate of the distance to be traversed before the nearest of the stars is attained. And, saving a few comets, more unsubstantial than the

thinnest flame, no matter had ever to human knowledge crossed the gulf of space, until early in the twentieth century this wanderer appeared.

A vast mass of matter it was, bulky, heavy, rushing without warning out of the black mystery of the sky into the radiance of the sun. By the second day it was clearly visible to any decent instrument, as a speck with a barely sensible diameter, in the constellation Leo near Regulus. In a little while an opera glass could attain it.

On the third day of the new year the newspaper readers of two hemispheres were made aware for the first time of the real importance of this unusual apparition in the heavens. "A Planetary Collision," one London paper headed the news, and proclaimed Duchine's opinion that this strange new planet would probably collide with Neptune. The leader writers enlarged upon the topic. So that in most of the capitals of the world, on Jan. 3, there was an expectation, however vague, of some eminent phenomenon in the sky; and as the night followed the sunset round the globe thousands of men turned their eyes skyward to see—the old familiar stars just as they had always been.

Until it was dawn in London and Pollux setting, and the stars overhead grown pale. The winter's dawn it was, a sickly filtering accumulation of daylight, and the light of gas and candles shone yellow in the windows to show where people were astir. But the yawning policeman saw the thing, the busy crowds in the market stopped agape, workmen going to their work betimes, milkmen, the drivers of news carts, dissipation going home jaded and pale, homeless wanderers, sentinels on their beats, and in the country, laborers trudging afield, poachers slinking home, all over the

dusky quickening country it would be seen—and out at sea by seamen watching for the day—a great white star, come suddenly into the westward sky!

Brighter it was than any star in our skies; brighter than the evening star at its brightest. It still glowed out white and large, no mere twinkling spot of light but a small round clear shining disk, an hour after the day had come. And where science has not reached, men stared and feared, telling one another of the wars and pestilences that are foreshadowed by these fiery signs in the heavens. Sturdy Boers, dusky Hottentots, Gold Coast negroes, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Portuguese, stood in the glow of the sunrise watching the setting of this strange new star.

And in a hundred observatories there had been suppressed excitement, rising almost to shouting pitch, as the two remote bodies had rushed together. There had been a hurrying to and fro to gather photographic apparatus and spectroscope; to gather this appliance and that, to record the novel astonishing sight, the destruction of a world,—for it was a world, a sister planet of our earth, far greater than our earth indeed, that had so suddenly flashed into flaming death. Neptune it was, which had been struck, fairly, and squarely, by the planet from outer space and the heat of concussion had incontinently turned two solid globes into one vast mass of incandescence.

Round the world that day, two hours before the dawn, went the pallid great white star, fading only as it sank westward and the sun mounted above it. Everywhere man marveled at it, but of all those who saw it none could have marveled more than those sailors, habitual watchers of the stars, who far away at sea had heard nothing of its advent and saw it now rise like a pigmy moon and

climb zenithward and hang overhead and sink westward with the passing of the night.

And when next it rose over Europe everywhere were crowds of watchers on hilly slopes, on house roofs, in open spaces, staring eastward, waiting for the rising of the new star. It rose with a white glow in front, like the glare of a white fire, and those who had seen it come into existence the night before cried out at the sight of it. "It is larger," they cried. "It is brighter!" And, indeed, the moon a quarter full and sinking in the west was in its apparent size beyond comparison, but scarcely in all its breadth had it as much brightness now as the little circle of the strange new star.

"It is brighter!" cried the people clustering in the streets. But in the dim observatories the watchers held their breath and peered at one another. "It is nearer," they said. "Nearer!"

And voice after voice repeated. "It is nearer," and the clicking telegraph took that up, and it trembled along telephone wires, and in a thousand cities grimy compositors fingered the type. "It is nearer." Men writing in offices, struck with strange realization, flung down their pens, men talking in a thousand places suddenly came upon a grotesque possibility in those words, "It is nearer." It hurried along awakening streets, it was shouted down the frost-stilled ways of quiet villages, men who had read these things, from the throbbing tape stood in yellow-lit doorways shouting the news to the passers-by. "It is nearer." Pretty women flushed and glittering, heard the news told jestingly between dances, and feigned an intelligent interest they did not feel. "Nearer! Indeed. How curious! How clever people must be to find out things like that!"

Lonely tramps faring through the wintry night murmured those words to comfort themselves—looking skyward. “It has need to be nearer, for the night’s as cold as charity. Don’t seem much warmth from it if it is nearer, all the same.”

“What is a new star to me?” cried the weeping woman kneeling beside her dead.

The schoolboy, rising early for his examination work, puzzled it out for himself—with the great white star shining broad and bright through the frost-flowers of his window. “Centrifugal, centripetal,” he said, with his chin on his fist. “Stop a planet in its flight, rob it of its centrifugal force, what then? Centripetal has it, and down it falls into the sun! And this——!”

“Do we come in the way? I wonder——”

The light of that day went the way of its brethren, and with the later watches of the frosty darkness rose the strange star again, And it was now so bright that the waxing moon seemed but a pale yellow ghost of itself, rising huge in the sunset hour. In a South African city a great man had married, and the streets were alight to welcome his return with his bride. “Even the skies have illuminated,” said the flatterer. Under Capricorn, two negro lovers, daring the wild beasts and evil spirits, for love of one another, crouched together in a cane brake where the fireflies hovered. “That is our star,” they whispered, and felt strangely comforted by the sweet brilliancy of its light.

The master mathematician sat in his private room and pushed the papers from him. His calculations were already finished. In a small white phial there still remained a little of the drug that had kept him awake and active for four long nights. Each day, serene,



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