

## AURORA BOREALIS.

## THE GRAND PHENOMENON OF THE HEAVENS.

Witnessed Amid the Rugged Wilds of the Far Northwest—Parading on the Frontiers of Eternity—Graphic and Poetic Description of the Play of the Northern Lights—Symbolism of Faith and Religion.

[By J. K. Foran, LL. B., Lit. D., Editor of THE TRUE WITNESS.]

The following article appeared in the July number of the Catholic Reading Circle Review, and has been extensively reproduced all over the United States:—

Perhaps there is no natural phenomenon as wonderful and as beautiful as the Aurora Borealis, the fantastic and kaleidoscopic phantom of the Arctic skies. Superstition has woven a hundred legends with that shuttle of light in the great loom of the heavens; science has not arrived at any positive conclusion regarding the cause of the luminous apparition; theories have been formulated, some very reasonable, no doubt, but as yet nothing positive is known on the subject. Scott causes the "Last Minstrel" to sing:

"He knew by the streamers that shot so bright,  
That spirits were riding the Northern Light."

The Indian is naturally superstitious and the miracles of beauty or power that he beholds in the heavens always suggests to his untutored mind thoughts wild and ungovernable. The Northern Lights he considers are signals flung out by the Great Spirit to warn him of impending evils; the thunder-storm he looks upon as a manifestation of the Spirit's anger. He gazes upon the ever-shifting splendors of the Aurora Borealis with mingled feelings of astonishment and dread. The shantyman partakes, more or less, of the Indian's sentiments—especially his awe. In the woods the men believe that the appearance of the Northern Lights is a sign of war, confusion, bloodshed; they believe that when they see this phenomenon that great battles are then being fought some place in the world.

Several missionaries have taken advantage of such scenes as I am about to describe to illustrate to the Indian and the shanty man the power, the goodness, the omnipresence, the glory of God. Late in October, 1884, I had occasion to note how skillfully an earnest missionary can turn a source of superstitious fear into a means of solid instruction. I was traveling with old Simon along the Moose Creek; we had been out on a two days hunt and were returning to the depot. A small band of Indians were camped beneath the Snake Hills, a series of upheavals that line the upper part of Moose Creek. It was late in the evening when we reached the wigwams and we determined to spend the night with our Tete-de-Boule friends. Simon was always welcome on account of his flute, and I was a white-haired boy amongst these people.

Scarcely had we taken our supper when the Indians gathered around, in the expectation, no doubt, of hearing some music and songs. Before we had time to begin the evening entertainment that was to represent cash for hospitality received, we were interrupted by the arrival of a stranger. He came from the north-east, evidently from the Victoria Lake region; but in the dusk and at a distance we were not, at first, able to recognize the traveler. When he reached the camp-fire we saw that he was a priest. He had been at a Hudson Bay Company's depot or fort some miles north, and was returning by way of our depot to the head of the Black River. Like ourselves he was very glad to meet with the Indians and to have company for the night. It is a lonely thing to sleep alone in the woods. It was a beautiful evening and we enjoyed it chatting and smoking around the fire. Father Miron told us several stories of recent adventures he had experienced. Simon played several airs and sang a song, and the night grew darker, the hours flew past, the time approached when travelers love to rest, and we all prepared to roll up in our blankets.

Before retiring the priest asked us all to join him in an evening prayer; the Indians were Catholics, so that there was no one to demur, and the prayer commenced.

While we were praying a strange

transformation commenced in the heavens above us. To the Southward the sky was inky dark, to the Westward a slight, but rapidly vanishing streak of crimson told that the sun had lately gone that way, to the Eastward a pale, shimmering light announced that the moon would soon roll up from beneath the horizon, in the zenith a few stars peeped out from the blue depths and gazed calmly down upon the wilderness of trees. Along the North, and upon the very verge of the horizon and over the summits of the dark-frowning hills, a pale, soft yellowish tinge appeared—so faint that it might have been an extension of the glow that spreads out when the darkness of night gathers upon the track of the departed sun. To a species of lemon hue and then a light orange the shimmering glimmer changed. Gradually it rose higher and became much brighter, while beneath a long purple streak formed a strata of color between it and the blackish green that rested upon the extreme rim of the sky. All eyes were turned toward the advancing phenomenon. Higher still rolled the chest of golden brilliancy, lighter still grew the purple band below, and greener still became the mass of transparent blackness upon the line of the hill tops. Soon, as if a giant breath from the lips of some invisible power had swept over the face of the picture, the shades shifted, interblended, undulated to and fro, and seemed as Scott describes the shadows on the mountain:

"Neither broken nor at rest."

As we gazed in mute contemplation, in silent wonderment, the scene changed with the rapidity of a panorama. From out the scene of the moving and variegated color a beam of light shot with electric rapidity up into the heavens; it was followed by a second and a third until fully twenty score of glittering lances pierced the dark blue of the vault above. As if some detachment from the Angelic Army of the Church Triumphant were parading on the frontier of eternity, the shimmering spears arose, fell moved, from side to side, came together in groups, separated into detachments, and finally united in one immeasurable sheaf of glory. Meanwhile a crimson flush crept up from behind the hills, and a deep, vermillion tinge spread over the brow of night. Higher and higher rolled, flashed, spurted, undulated, the ever changing, ever interlacing, ever fantastic glories; wider and wider, to East and to West, the yellowish green of the huge foundation of light expanded until half the circle of the horizon was taken in. Zenithward softly, silently, mysteriously moved the scintillating points of the giant spears and the silver shafts that upheld them. At last, in the very centre of the empyrean, riveted to the ceiling of the skies by a diamond-headed bolt, the gathered folds of the wondrous prismatic canopy remained fixed. A golden bar, reaching from the extremes of the sky, rested horizontally in space; at either end it was supported by a star and from its quivering edge hung a curtain of endless shades and colors; the immense fringes of that restless veil touched the tops of the Laurentians and seemed to become tangled in the branches of the lofty pine trees. It would almost make one think that this must be the curtain that hides from our human eyes the glories of the Beatific Vision. Never before did I gaze upon aught so wonderful; never again do I expect to behold such a spectacle of glory. It is only in the North, in the land of the long winters and the short days, away towards the sources of our mighty rivers, that the Aurora Borealis is to be seen in all its perfection. Perchance that very night people in Ottawa were gazing upon the upper rim of that pavilion of prismatic splendor beneath which we said our prayers; if so they could glean but a faint idea of all the shifting beauties that were hidden beneath their horizon.

But even as we watched every change in the form and combination of the vision before us, the immense curtain seemed to quiver, as if stirred by a breeze; to glimmer, as if it were miles of shot silk; to roll up, as if some mighty crank were turned by an irresistible power. Up, up it rolled, until half the dark stage in that wonderful theatre of nature was visible; suddenly, the strength that worked the wheel gave out, for the drop-curtain came down with a flash and rushing noise. Meanwhile the canopy overhead had changed, and a million arrows of silver and gold were pointed downward, at us, from the centre of the heavens. These



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soon vanished; a velvety cloud of a rose-a-hue replaced them; wheels of varied proportions whirled through space; waves of greenish lustre leaped over in rapid succession. It would seem as if the hand of the Almighty were turning the kaleidoscope of the universe for the amusement of the dusky children of the forest.

All these transformations took less time than it does to write, or in fact to read, of them. An immense cloud of black, devoid of all color, all reflection even of the hues around it, came tearing along from the East; it seemed like some fearful monster escaped from the infernal regions and bent on running amuck through the realms of the sky. It came on like a tempest of the desert, like a hurricane of the South, like the demon phantom of the Orient; it crushed its way through the spears of light, snapping and shivering them into atoms; it plunged into the curtain of glories and tore it into ribbons, leaving them streeling in its track like fragments of a ripped and riven rainbow. In the wake of the monster there was a seething mass of phosphorescent foam—something like that peculiar glimmer that is seen at night upon the Atlantic when the mackerel are in motion. "The Phantom of the Threshold" vanished behind the hills and below the horizon, and into the cavern of Erebus it dragged the remaining shreds of the tattered canopy of light.

In an hour from the time that the first flush of the Aurora Borealis appeared upon the sky the whole picture of glory had vanished. During all that hour not a single word was spoken in our camp. The priest told his beads and repeated some of his other prayers; never did he pray in a grander basilica, and never had temple such a canopy of splendor. It recalled to my mind, especially when the moon rolled zenithward, those four inimitable lines from Denis Florence McCarthy's "Voyage of St. Brendan":

"What earthly temple such a roof can boast?  
What flickering lamp with the rich star-light vies,  
When the round moon rests, like a sacred Host,  
Upon the azure altar of the skies?"

I was too much absorbed in the unspeakable glories about me to break the silence during that hour of transport; I almost imagine that it is somewhat thus a soul would feel thrilled with wonder, admiration, love, adoration, perfected bliss and immeasurable contentment when the first gleam of heaven's glories would break upon its vision and the majesty of God's splendor would encompass its existence. In presence of such phenomena the heart is too full, the soul too wrapt, the mind too occupied to permit of speech; one can only kneel, contemplate and adore.

When all was over, and we decided that it was time to retire for the night, the good missionary asked us to listen to his explanation of the wonders we had just beheld. It is unnecessary that I should repeat the able manner in which Father Miron explained to the Indians the meaning of our Faith, the ideas of God, of creation, of redemption, of the devil, of the veil that hides the beauties of heaven from our sight, but through which, by the light of the Church's teaching, we can catch a glimpse of the effects of sin, of how the monster cloud of evil tears and destroys the most perfectly harmonized virtues in the soul. It is sufficient to say that the priest taught these poor forest children a lesson that they never forgot. Five years later Simon told me that every Indian in that band could describe the glories of heaven, the evils of sin, the beauty of faith, the majesty of God and the perfections of the Church better than any ordinarily educated person that he had ever met. Since that night I have never seen Father Miron,

nor do I know whether he is living or dead; but should he be alive and ever read these pages I am sure they will serve to awaken pleasant memories.

## THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY.

IS IT WRONG?

There are two kinds of slavery, willing and unwilling. There is no question about the second being wrong; it is against Nature for a man to hold and use another like an animal. Such a dominion ignores the essential right of man to liberty. It is worse than tyranny, and essentially wrong. Willing slavery is when a man consents to be a slave. This question is more difficult to resolve. Man can give up those essential rights which cannot be taken from him, as priests give up the right to marry. We read of St. Dominic offering himself to be sold into slavery as a ransom. This may seem to belong to the heroic and exceptional class of actions which cannot establish a rule. Neither, however, can they contradict an essential rule of Nature. It would seem, perhaps, probable that a man may surrender his entire liberty and be a slave of his own will, always putting aside the case of sin. This, however, is different from the case of hereditary slavery which is willing, perhaps, but only from custom or fear of a freedom not experienced and therefore dangerous. Men born in slavery are willingly slaves, but in a negative sense, and they never claim rights because they have not known them. This kind of slavery is not lawful, and on the part of the master at least is sinful.

The Church in the ancient world had to confront not an abstract principle, but a state of society in the institution of slavery. There was not one will but two bound in the institution. There was the will of the master and the will of the slave. It was not easy, therefore, to say how far this complex state of things was wrong, when the will of the slave consented to and upheld it. Multitudes of slaves wished for no other lot, and were fitted for no other. They were happy, fed, cared for, taught. If set at liberty, as then understood, they would starve, fall into neglect and ignorance. Next, granting a state of things to be wrong, it requires great prudence, care and thought to know how and when to condemn it. To condemn at all sometimes entails a greater evil. To condemn false principles is one thing, to condemn a state of society is another. The Church was bound from the first to condemn the principles of slavery. She did so, as we see from the New Testament, and in the best way by proclaiming the opposite truth. St. Paul says, "One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism." These words and many others were a knell in the ears of the slaveholder. Rarely does the Church condemn positive states of society. This belongs more to the individual conscience. Give conscience its true light, provide it with sound general principles, and by degrees, slowly and surely the walls of iniquity fall down.

So it was with slavery. Instead of a wholesale ban against slavery equally unwelcome both to master and slave, because neither would have understood it, the Church poured her calm, clear light on man, and in due time the abominable thing which had enslaved both master and slave in different degrees of dishonorable servitude, crept from the new illumination and vanished.—*Liverpool Catholic Times*.

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