

THE TOTAL ECLIPSE

Magnificent Spectacle of Corona and Prominences.

What I saw in the Central Line.

(By PERCY JOHNSON.)

No description I have ever read, no picture I have ever seen, no mental impression I have ever formed, can for a moment compare with the actual experience of the reality of a total solar eclipse which was my great fortune on Wednesday last. My greatest expectations of the "dread darkness" of totality and of the glory of the corona were completely surpassed. In a few brief seconds the light of the world went out and the beautiful but truly "unearthly" vision of the corona met my startled gaze.

This rare and stupendous experience was shared by thousands of people who congregated on the sandhills at Hillside, just outside Southport, and held them spellbound while it lasted.

At 4-30 a.m., together with a party of friends, I took up a position on a sandhill adjacent to the curious "round" house, which is such a striking object in this district. The sky was grey, and held but little hope of successful observations. Even at that early hour, hundreds of motor cars were parked along the road sides, and many of the sandy knolls were crowded with enthusiastic observers. The number of cars steadily increased until they stretched as far as the eye could reach, each arrived adding its quota to the patient watches. Many ladies hot from the midnight ballrooms of Southport took their places in scanty attire, wholly unsuitable for the chill morning air. A stream of motor 'busses continually discharged into the ever-growing crowds; electric trains in the distance followed each other in rapid succession, piling their human freights into the central zone. Above circled droning aeroplanes, climbing higher and higher into the grey sky. The scene was set for the great event.

At 4-45 the sudden brightening of the landscape, faint rosy tints in the N.E. sky and a pale but misty blue high overhead announced that the sun had risen, but that luminary itself lay quite obscured behind an impenetrable bank of low-lying clouds. By 5-15 great crowds occupied every vantage point on the innumerable sandhills, and the greatest excitement prevailed when at this time a dull red glow low down in the sky heralded the sun's coming ascendancy above the cloudy barrier; a few minutes later its shining disc became visible, and the highest hopes were raised in every breast of the expectant multitude. It was evident that before the time of totality the sun would reach an altitude where the sky was comparatively clear.

Shortly after 5-50 the moon's dark body was clearly seen eclipsing a small segment in the top right hand quadrant of the sun. From then onwards the moon's slow progress across the sun's disc was observed through a rather watery atmosphere, which itself at times afforded a sufficient eye screen and rendered the rather dense eclipse "spectacle," with which the crowd was almost universally provided, practically useless. The sun's light was at no time strong enough to permit observation by pin hole image, nor could the double shadows which are the curious effect of a crescent shaped sun be observed.

At 6-15, when the crescent was becoming attenuated, and the sky was threatening to become hopeless, I resolutely turned my back upon the sun to await the coming shadow. I looked in vain for shadowbands on the walls of the "round" house. The landscape had assumed the gloomy appearance, which, I reflected, would be the maximum effect noticeable in the Island.

Then, just at the incoming of totality, came the shadow. I am quite sure that no one who beheld it will ever forget it. In breathless silence the vast concourse of people saw the light of the world going out, out. The darkness came in swift pulsations, it came down upon us from above, there was a sense of impending disaster as it overwhelmed us in a few tense soul-stirring moments. Suddenly an inky blackness came upon the south-west sky, it was the darkness of night. I have one vivid recollection of a vague line of motor cars, of someone nervously switching on a light and putting it out again, of vague sandhills, of people, of dead silence and of great darkness.

Then I turned quickly—it was almost too late. "Look! Look!" I cried, "the corona!" There was the black ball of the moon set in a jewelled circle of ruby and green. A huge red prominence dominated the first quadrant. The blowing of motor car horns by unthinking revellers jarred on the nerves of those who gazed enthralled at the awful heavenly sight. A point of light appeared, and in the twinkling of an eye broke into a string of beaded light running like mercury round part of the moon's rim; a piercing shaft of sunlight, a moving, twisting, crescent sun; darkness was banished; it was over.

My feeble attempt to describe the total solar eclipse of June 29th, 1927, can never convey to those who were not fortunate enough to witness it more than the faintest idea of the impressive grandeur of a phenomenon which is surely unparalleled in Nature.

As Seen in Liverpool Bay.

(By Our Own Representative.)

The Isle of Man Steam Packet Co.'s steamer "Mona" left Douglas on Tuesday night at 11 o'clock with a party on board to view the eclipse of the sun from the belt of totality in Liverpool Bay. There were not many passengers on board, about 150 in all, many who intended going being deterred by the miserable weather. Those who did not take the trip were rather more lucky than those who were on board, because as a spectacle eclipses will never be a paying proposition; they are most unsatisfactory—at least this one was, as viewed from Liverpool Bay.

Though the night was dull and there was some rain, the sea was calm; and by three o'clock the "Mona" had arrived at her anchorage—about two miles the sea-side of the Bar Lightship.

The captain laid his ship with her bow south by east with her stern towards the Isle of Man, so that the sun came up over the port side. About a mile inshore of us lay the "Manxman," which had come out of Liverpool with a party of sightseers, and further inshore could be seen a number of other steamers.

After anchoring, those of us who could went to sleep again for about an hour, when people began to gather on deck. Despite the gloomy prospects of the night before the morning was fine, with a fairly clear sky to the north-east, and hope rose high that we were to have a really fine view. A light haze overcast the sky however, reminding one most forcibly of those mornings in Douglas Bay which the late Mr Nicholson has made famous in his water colour and oil paintings.

The first really clear view of the sun was obtained at 5-15, and out, came coloured glasses, old photograph plates, and all sorts of gadgets for protecting the eyes. As the sun rose higher and the time for the first shadow of the moon to appear, the haze grew thicker. About 5-30, or perhaps a little later, there was one short glimpse of a partial shadow on the right hand side, and as the orb of the sun became clearer or more obscured in cloud we all anxiously recorded what we could see. At six o'clock, however, the clouds grew thicker and the sun disappeared altogether. From quarter to 20 past six, as the time for the total eclipse drew near, it cleared just a little, and you could see the

light of the sun through a fog, but no clear outline of the sphere could be defined, and our smoked and coloured glasses became useless, as, without discomfort, one could look with the naked eye.

It was about this time that the most impressive part of the spectacle occurred, which was seen most clearly by those in the forward part of the steamer who were not sheltering under the lea of the cabins. Away on the opposite side to the sun began to bank up black clouds, or a pall of blackness. With frightful velocity this shadow of tangible darkness came rushing like a wall of doom across the sea. It was rather terrifying, and made the nerves quiver as the blue-black shadow rushed down with incredible speed as if it would blot out our little boat. It became curiously cold, the chill appearing mental as well as physical. The darkness was unnatural and gruesome like some dead thing, but as one turned back to the sun, which then was only a spot as black as doom, out flashed on either side radiant streams of light of orange and red, stretching away into space as far as the eye could see. These streamers of different coloured light appeared something like a mix up between the northern lights we occasionally see in the sky from the Island, and a stormy sunset; and then, instantaneous, as a lightning flash, the shadow had passed, the blackness had gone, and life seemed to come back to the sea and the people. One drew one's breath with relief. The thought struck me that no wonder uncivilised nations were afraid when an eclipse occurred and attributed it to a fight between the forces of good and evil, because the awful rush of darkness came on with incredible suddenness, which was awe-inspiring.

It was curious how soon it became light. One had been led to expect that the shadow would creep from the sun's disc as slowly as it appeared; but this was not so, or did not appear to be so, because at one moment it was black as the mouth of hell, then there were the radiant flashes of flaming lights, and within a few seconds we were in the sunlight—dull, it is true, but growing brighter and brighter each moment.

There was considerable disappointment that we had not seen the disc of the sun clearly at the moment of totality; but, seeing how others fared, we can, I think, count ourselves lucky we saw so much.

Another ten minutes of so we hung round the deck, but there was nothing much to be seen but a dull watery looking dawn; and so we went down to breakfast, where the catering of Mr Maylor put new life into one and made one feel that again all was well with the world.

While we were at breakfast the anchor was raised and about 8-30 we drew alongside the Stage, having to await our turn to get alongside till the "Manxman" had moved out.

So ended our trip to see the eclipse, and as there will not be another until 1999, I don't think I will trouble about it.

The Eclipse in the Island.

The much-boasted eclipse of the sun took place in the early hours of Wednesday; at all events, it can safely be said, as far as the Isle of Man is concerned, that we believe it took place according to the pre-arranged programme. As a spectacle it was a decided failure, and Southport's "Darker June" effort is now relegated to the past like a damp squib which misfired.

Many arose from their bed in the early hours of the morning, looked out of the window, discovered it was dark, dreary, cloudy and wet, an promptly went back to bed again. Others looked out of the window, and all they saw was continuous darkness, continuous clouds and continuous rain. About 6-30 the darkness became very heavy; it was a darkness which one could compare to a horrible London fog. It became cold and dreary and altogether unpleasant; so much so that many of those who had got up to watch the effect crawled back into bed to get warm. Nothing whatever was seen of the sun, nothing whatever was seen of the moon; in fact, the whole thing was a dismal failure.

A number of people—probably about a hundred—walked up to Douglas Head in all the rain. At half-past five a knot of people gathered about the wooden buildings on the Head, deriving what shelter they could from the merciless rain. From 5-30 until about 6 o'clock more people arrived, but others, we through, were leaving. Anxious eyes were cast eastwards, but not a sight of either moon or sun was obtained. Both spheres were absolutely blotted out by the clouds and the rain. As the time of totality drew near, a partial darkness came on, and that was all the difference there was between this morning in particular and any other drenching, soaking morning. The rain grew worse, if anything, after the time of totality. Those who had ridden to the Head in their cars were the most fortunate, for they had shelter, whilst others—including visitors in flannels and white shoes—were wet to the skin.

By half-past six the last of the sightseers were leaving Douglas Head, having seen nothing—not even the usual eclipse.

In anticipation of witnessing the eclipse of the sun—or a partial eclipse to the extent of 99 per cent—many Ramsey people left their beds at an unearthly hour on Wednesday morning, but they were doomed to disappointment. It turned out a cloudy, and later, thoroughly wet morning, and beyond the darkening effect noticed close upon 6-30 a.m., nothing of the great astronomical event was revealed to the eclipse hunters who retired sadder and decidedly very little the wiser for turning out some hours before their breakfast.