

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Meteors—Professor Blackie—Homer—The Descent as a Meteor of Pallas Minerva—A sparkling swift-descending Fireball Meteor ought to be called a *Minervalite*—The “*Dreag*” of the Gaels—An exploding *Dreag* in 1746—The great Meteor Shower of 1866.

FEBRUARY has come in, even as January went out, cold and calm and clear, with enough of brilliant sunshine to counterpoise all the frost and chill of the hours of twilight and darkness. Of late, indeed, we have had no such thing as darkness properly so called, for even when the last moon was but a faint and pallid fragment of an ill-defined and sickly orb in rapid wane, and while the present moon was still but a thin and sharp-horned crescent in the west, the nights were brilliantly starlit and clear, the practised eye, otherwise unaided, being able to detect and identify small magnitude stars—in Taurus, for example, and Orion and Leo as they culminated—with a readiness and ease that indicated a remarkable transparency of atmosphere, rare in this country at any time, and rarest of all, perhaps, at this particular season of the year.

One night last week, as we were observing an occultation by the moon of a star in Taurus, a fiery meteor of large size and exceeding brilliancy lit up the south-western heavens with a surging wave of pale green light of such dazzling intensity, that for a few

seconds the moon and stars were but the shivering ghosts of themselves, so tremblingly pallid and deathly was their hue in the presence of the fierce and fiery stranger. The meteor, as we saw it, seemed to issue from the left shoulder of Orion, then on the meridian, and thence to drop, or rather to dart, obliquely westwards, until, somewhere over Duart Castle in Mull, it burst into a thousand brilliant fragments, a reddish green luminous train that marked its track remaining visible for several seconds after the disruption and extinction of the meteor proper itself. Similar meteors of the fireball exploding order we have frequently seen, but never, perhaps, an example so splendid in all its belongings as this one; for it was not only of intense and almost blinding brilliancy in itself, but at the moment of explosion it was splendid in the number and exceeding brilliancy of its disrupted fragments, as well as in the broad train of light, like a strip of confused and ill-defined rainbow, that marked out its path adown the heavens from Orion to within the horizon line over the ancient stronghold of the chief of the Macleans. We wished exceedingly that, of all living men, our excellent friend Professor Blackie had been beside us at the moment, that he might see this meteor for himself even as we saw it. Why, it may be asked, of all men Professor Blackie? why in the particular circumstances should *his* presence, rather than that of any one else, be so desirable? Well, courteous reader, if you grant us your patient attention for a few minutes, you shall be made to understand the connection between the learned Professor and this same fiery meteor of ours. In the Fourth Book of the

Iliad Homer tells how Jove, at the urgent request and incessant “nagging” of ox-eyed Juno, sent Pallas Minerva to incite the Trojans to a breach of the peace—to a breach, that is, of the league, truce, armistice, or whatever it may be called, into which the contending hosts had entered shortly before, in order that the quarrel might be settled by single combat, after a fashion with which we are so familiar in the history of chivalric ages. The blue-eyed goddess, nothing loth, darts from the heights of Olympus on an errand, about the morality of which the less said the better. Literally translated, Homer’s description of the descent of Pallas is as follows:—“Thus having spoken, he (Jove) urged on Minerva already inclined; she, hastening, descended the heights of Olympus; such as the star which the son of wily Saturn sends as a sign either to mariners or to a wide host of nations, and from it many sparks are emitted. Like unto this Pallas Minerva hastened to the earth, and leaped into the midst (of the neutral space between the armies); and astonishment seized upon the horse-breaking Trojans and the well-greaved Greeks, looking on.” Now, it is clear that although Homer here employs the usual word for star (*astēr*), he cannot of course mean a star in the ordinary sense of the term in his own language any more than in ours—he cannot, that is, mean a fixed star or a planet. He must mean a celestial something, not exactly a star, but at the same time of so much of the nature of a star as to make the term upon the whole apt and proper enough, and sufficiently intelligible to those primitive peoples for whose delight and edification he sung his matchless *epos*. Com-

mentators have been a good deal puzzled as to what is really meant. Pope thinks that a *comet* is the thing, and translates accordingly :—

“ Fir'd with the charge, she headlong urg'd her flight,
 And shot like lightning from Olympus' height,
 As the red comet, from Saturnius sent
 To fright the nations with a dire portent
 (A fatal sign to armies on the plain,
 Or trembling sailors on the wintry main),
 With sweeping glories glides along in air,
 And shakes the sparkles from its shining hair ;
 Between both armies thus, in open sight,
 Shot the bright goddess in a trail of light ;
 With eyes erect the gazing hosts admire
 The power descending, and the heavens on fire ! ”

But it is very certain that Homer in this passage cannot mean a comet, for it is only to the astronomer of comparatively modern times that a comet is known as a fact to move swiftly ; to the ordinary eye it moves slowly, and is besides visible, when visible at all, for weeks and months together ; whereas what Homer means is something that moves with exceeding swiftness, something that darts with extraordinary velocity, even for a heavenly body, and which, in some part or other of its course, emits sparks. Professor Blackie in his translation avoids the danger of being too particular, for he is confessedly in doubt, and translates “ a *meteor-star*,” which, although not sufficiently precise, is yet by any number of millions of miles nearer the mark than Pope's “ comet.” Blackie's lines have much of the true Homeric ring in them, and are worth quoting :—

“ Thus he ; and spurred with needless words Athenè's eager bent,
 Down from Olympus' lofty brow with rapid swoop she went :

As when the 'Thunderer' *from the sky hath shot a meteor-star*
 To sailors toiling through the seas, and soldiers camped in war,
 A flaring sign ; and thick the trailing sparks are scattered far ;
 So in a trail of light to earth down shoots the maid divine,
 And leaps between the hosts ; while strange amazement held
 the eyne

Of horse-subduing Trojans, and the stout well-greavèd Greeks."

The compound "meteor-star" of this passage is so good, so sufficiently suggestive, that we should never have dreamt that the learned Professor had the slightest doubt or difficulty in the matter, were it not for a note in which he confesses to be much puzzled by the "sparks" which his "meteor-star" is described by Homer as emitting. The Professor sees clearly enough that Pope's "comet," even if supplied with a tail the broadest and brightest you can imagine, will never do ; it is too slow, its course is not sufficiently earthwards, and it does not emit sparks. He thinks a "shooting star" is meant, though he frankly confesses that he never saw shooting stars casting out sparks in the way described. But a shooting star of the ordinary type, with which we are all so familiar, will not do any more than Pope's comet. The course of shooting stars is not necessarily earthwards ; they move in all directions, up (speaking for the moment unscientifically) as well as down, and are far too common to be a wonder or a terror either to soldiers or sailors. Let us see what is really wanted. Pallas darts from the top of Thessalian Olympus, the serene abode of the Immortals, a mountain 9000 feet high, nearly double the height of our own Ben Nevis, and her course must from such a height be a swiftly descending one, a downward "swoop," to use the Professor's own word,

for she has only to cross the Ægean in order to alight on the Trojan plains at the foot of Ida,—a few seconds, in the case of a goddess urged to do Jove's errand quickly, clearly sufficing. Such a "star," then, as will serve Homer's purpose in the connection must be a brightly luminous body, that seeks the earth swiftly, and by an almost perpendicular descent; it must be visible but for a brief moment, just long enough to impress the spectator with a due sense of the magnificence of its fiery splendour; it must emit sparks, a sign of rapid extinction and dissolution (in the case of a goddess, simply of invisibility under that particular form); and, finally, it must be of comparatively rare occurrence, so rare as to be always more or less an object of wonder and terror, and a "portent dire" to the beholders. Now, it is evident enough that neither comet nor shooting star, properly so called, will serve our purpose under all the conditions stated. But as the Fingalian proverb has it, *mur e Bran, 'se 'bhrathair*—if it be not Bran, it is Bran's brother; if it be not a shooting star proper that Homer means, he means what is only a variety of the same phenomenon. What the grand old bard, who, depend upon it, was not *always* blind, refers to is beyond all question what is known to modern science as an *Aërolite* or *Fireball*, that, as it approaches the earth at a point somewhere within the visible horizon, so frequently explodes into hundreds of brilliant fragments and disappears. Occasionally it begins to emit sparks for a second or two before it is ripe for the act of final disruption—a disruption sometimes accompanied by a noise like thunder "heard remote," or the discharge of a distant park of artillery,

the loudness of the noise, or whether it is heard at all, depending on our distance at the moment from the exploding meteor. These exploding, spark-emitting aërolites are not indeed common, but they are of frequent enough occurrence to make us wonder that the many learned commentators on Homer should have so long missed clutching at them with eager grasp as the only possible kind of "star" fit for all the requirements of the passage quoted. And in order to obviate betimes a possible enough objection in the case, it may be stated that these exploding aërolites have been frequently seen in broadest, brightest daylight, as well as at night. The reader will now understand why we so much desired the presence of Professor Blackie the other night, as the *Minervalite*—for so have we determined to call these exploding meteors in all time coming—burst upon our sight, and, after running its swift and fiery course, dissolved into a shower of bright and beautiful miniature stars.

The fireball or aërolite is known to the people of the Highlands as a *Drèag* (Scot. Dreg) or *Driug*, a compound term from *Draoidh*, a Druid, and *eug*, death, because in the old Druidical times it was believed that such a meteor was the soul or spirit of one of these philosopher-priests just released from its tenement of clay, and fast urging its flight to the shores of a dim and distant ghost-land, the geography of which was uncertain. Our own researches, however, into the folk-lore of this particular question rather lead us to the conclusion that the *drèag* or meteor was not believed to be itself the visible soul or spirit of the deceased Druid, but only the psychopompal vehicle, the

“fiery chariot,” in which the spirit was conveyed in fiery splendour into the happiness and “higher life” of a new form of existence. It is to be observed that by the *drèag* proper was always meant the *non-exploding* meteor that rushes athwart the heavens for a few seconds, an intensely luminous globe of fire, and seems to vanish simply by being swallowed up in darkness. The exploding *drèag*, or Minervalite, as we have called it, is known in the Highlands as *drèag-shradagach*, or the *spark-emitting drèag*, and has always been held as a portent not of such a comparatively small matter as the death of any single individual, however exalted, but of some widespread calamity, such as we should call now-a-days a national disaster, always indeed connected with death, but with death on a large scale, and of a violent or sudden nature. Thus, shortly after sunset on the evening of the 15th April 1746, and while it was still daylight, a large fiery meteor passed over Upper Strathspey and Badenoch, its course being from south-east to north-west. It finished its course by exploding into a thousand brilliant sparks, and with loud and terrible detonations, “more awful,” said the old man who related to us the tradition as it had been handed down to him—“more awful than any thunder.” This meteor was of course intimately associated in the popular superstition with the sad disaster of the following day on the bleak, black moor of Culloden. The same portentous meteor is mentioned in an old poem of the period taken down many years ago from the recitation of a Badenoch man by the late distinguished Gaelic scholar James Munro of Blarour, in Brae-Lochaber, who kindly handed to us

the original copy for publication in a work which we meditated at the time, and which may yet see the light. Similarly, some three-and-twenty years ago, as we were informed at the time by some cattle-drovers who had just returned from the island, a brilliant meteor that finished its course by exploding into a shower of fiery stars passed over the island of Barra, one of the Outer Hebrides, and this meteor was by the inhabitants believed to have been portentous of, and specially connected with, the wreck shortly afterwards of a large emigrant ship on Barra Head, with the loss of almost all the passengers and crew. So that it would seem that in the popular superstitions of modern times these brilliant, spark-emitting meteors are held to be still as portentous of disaster to soldiers and sailors as they were in the days of Homer on the shores of the *Ægean* Sea three thousand years ago. The commoner non-exploding *aërolite*, too, is still associated, where possible, with the death of some distinguished personage in the district over which it urges its fiery flight. Not many years ago, while the proprietor of a large estate in a neighbouring county, that has been in the possession of the family for at least five centuries, was lying sick unto death, a large and brilliant meteor, the passage of which we ourselves happened to observe, was, by the common consent of more than a thousand people, associated with the death of the "Laird," a most excellent man, although the two events were separated from each other by an interval of several days. When one of these meteors is associated with the death of any particular individual, it is usually in a good sense; the meteor, that is, in most cases, is accepted in its old

Druidical aspect, a true drèag, in short, with which in some mysterious manner the spirit of the departed is associated in its passage to a brighter and better world. If the meteor, however, were to appear synchronously with the death of a man at once "big" and *bad*, of exalted station, but of evil repute, we are not quite so sure but that the meteor would be held as heralding *his* passage to a very different, though still fitting, abode; while in the case of a laird who was a *novus homo*, a man with neither ancestral name nor holding in the Highlands, and who had but recently entered upon this property by purchase, the meaning of a meteor as regards *him*, if indeed he was allowed to be honoured with the attention of a meteor at all, would probably be very much the same as in the case of the man of evil repute aforesaid.

But the reader must not run away with the idea that these superstitions are confined to the Highlands. We have abundance of evidence beside us to prove that they are quite as widespread, and are held quite as firmly, in the southern and midland counties as in the north; only that in the northern counties, perhaps, their existence is acknowledged with less reserve than among the longer-visaged and more puritanical peoples of the old whigamore counties of the south and southwest.

Finally, let us state that the most magnificent display of meteors we ever beheld was that of the 13-14th November 1866, when, from eight or nine o'clock at night until the dawning day, the whole firmament seemed literally on fire with every conceivable kind of luminous meteor-shooting stars, aërolites, and fireballs,

exploding and non-exploding, with frequent lightning flashes to intensify the awful magnificence of the scene, the whole, too, projected on a background of weird auroral light, like the glare you have seen and been affrighted at in a madman's eye. As we sat on, hour after hour, watching the really terrible though magnificent spectacle, the like of which we have but little hopes of ever seeing again, more than once we caught ourselves repeating the fine verse of the Apocalypse—
“And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs when she is shaken of a mighty wind.”