**The Eclipse**

**by James Fenimore Cooper**

THE eclipse of the sun, which you have requested me to describe, occurred in the summer of 1806, on Monday, the 16th of June. Its greatest depth of shadow fell upon the American continent, somewhere about the latitude of 42 deg. I was then on a visit to my parents, at the home of my family, among the Highlands of Otsego, in that part of the country where the eclipse was most impressive. My recollections of the great event, and the incidents of the day, are as vivid as if they had occurred but yesterday.

Lake Otsego, the headwaters of the Susquehanna, lies as nearly as possible in latitude 42 deg. The village, which is the home of my family, is beautifully situated at the foot of the lake, in a valley lying between two nearly parallel ranges of heights, quite mountainous in character. The Susquehanna, a clear and rapid stream, flowing from the southeastern shore of the lake, is crossed by a high wooden bridge, which divides the main street of the little town from the lawns and meadows on the eastern bank of the river. Here were all the materials that could be desired, lake, river, mountain, wood, and the dwellings of man, to give full effect to the varied movement of light and shadow through that impressive day.

Throughout the belt of country to be darkened by the eclipse, the whole population were in a state of almost anxious expectation for weeks before the event. On the eve of the 16th of June, our family circle could think or talk of little else. I had then a father and four brothers living, and as we paced the broad hall of the house, or sat about the family board, our conversation turned almost entirely upon the movements of planets and comets, occultations and eclipses. We were all exulting in the feeling that a grand and extraordinary spectacle awaited us -- a spectacle which millions then living could never behold. There may have been a tinge of selfishness in the feeling that we were thus favored beyond others, and yet, I think, the emotion was too intellectual in its character to have been altogether unworthy.

Many were the prophecies regarding the weather, the hopes and fears expressed by different individuals, on this important point, as evening drew near. A passing cloud might veil the grand vision from our sight; rain or mist would sadly impair the sublimity of the hour. I was not myself among the desponding. The great barometer in the hall -- one of the very few then found in the State, west of Albany -- was carefully consulted. It was propitious. It gave promise of dry weather. Our last looks that night, before sleep fell on us, were turned toward the starlit heavens.

And the first movement in the morning was to the open window -- again to examine the sky. When I rose from my bed, in the early morning, I found the heavens serene, and cloudless. Day had dawned, but the shadows of night were still lingering over the valley. For a moment, my eye rested on the familiar view -- the limpid lake, with its setting of luxuriant woods and farms, its graceful bay and varied points, the hills where every cliff and cave and glen had been trodden a thousand times by my boyish feet -- all this was dear to me as the face of a friend. And it appeared as if the landscape, then lovely in summer beauty, were about to assume something of dignity hitherto unknown -- were not the shadows of a grand eclipse to fall upon every wave and branch within a few hours! There was one object in the landscape which a stranger would probably have overlooked, or might perhaps have called unsightly, but it was familiar to every eye in the village, and endowed by our people with the honors of an ancient landmark -- the tall gray trunk of a dead and branchless pine, which had been standing on the crest of the eastern hill, at the time of the foundation of the village, and which was still erect, though rocked since then by a thousand storms. To my childish fancy, it had seemed an imaginary flag-staff, or, in rustic parlance, the "liberty pole" of some former generation; but now, as I traced the familiar line of the tall trunk, in its peculiar shade of silvery gray, it became to the eye of the young sailor the mast of some phantom ship. I remember greeting it with a smile, as this was the first glance of recognition given to the old ruin of the forest since my return.

But an object of far higher interest suddenly attracted my eye. I discovered a star -- a solitary star -- twinkling dimly in a sky which had now changed its hue to a pale grayish twilight, while vivid touches of coloring were beginning to flush the eastern sky. There was absolutely no other object visible in the heavens -- cloud there was none, not even the lightest vapor. That lonely star excited a vivid interest in my mind. I continued at the window gazing, and losing myself in a sort of day-dream. That star was a heavenly body, it was known to be a planet, and my mind was filling itself with images of planets and suns. My brain was confusing itself with vague ideas of magnitude and distance, and of the time required by light to pierce the apparently illimitable void that lay between us -- of the beings who might inhabit an orb like that, with life, feeling, spirit, and aspirations like my own.

Soon the sun himself rose into view. I caught a glimpse of fiery light glowing among the branches of the forest, on the eastern mountain. I watched, as I had done a hundred times before, the flushing of the skies, the gradual illuminations of the different hills, crowned with an undulating and ragged outline of pines, nearly two hundred feet in height, the golden light gliding silently down the breast of the western mountains, and opening clearer views of grove and field, until lake, valley, and village lay smiling in one cheerful glow of warm sunshine.

Our family party assembled early. We were soon joined by friends and connections, all eager and excited, and each provided with a colored glass for the occasion. By nine o'clock the cool air, which is peculiar to the summer nights in the Highlands, had left us, and the heat of midsummer filled the valley. The heavens were still absolutely cloudless, and a more brilliant day never shone in our own bright climate. There was not a breath of air, and we could see the rays of heat quivering here and there on the smooth surface of the lake. There was every appearance of a hot and sultry noontide.

We left the house, and passed beyond the grounds into the broad and grassy street which lay between the gates and the lake. Here there were no overhanging branches to obstruct the view; the heavens, the wooded mountains, and the limpid sheet of water before us, were all distinctly seen. As the hour for the eclipse drew near, our eagerness and excitement increased to an almost boyish impatience. The elders of the party were discussing the details of some previous eclipse: leaving them to revive their recollections, I strolled away, glass in hand, through the principal streets of the village. Scarce a dwelling, or a face, in the little town, that was not familiar to me, and it gave additional zest to the pleasure of a holiday at home, to meet one's townsfolk under the excitement of an approaching eclipse. As yet there was no great agitation, although things wore a rather unusual aspect for the busy hours of a summer's day. Many were busy with their usual tasks, women and children were coming and going with pails of water, the broom and the needle were not yet laid aside, the blacksmith's hammer and the carpenter's plane were heard in passing their shops. Loaded teams, and travellers in waggons, were moving through the streets; the usual quiet traffic at the village counters had not yet ceased. A farm-waggon, heavily laden with hay, was just crossing the bridge, coming in from the fields, the driver looking drowsy with sleep, wholly unconscious of the movement in the heavens. The good people in general, however, were on the alert; at every house some one seemed to be watching, and many groups were passed, whose eager up-turned faces and excited conversation spoke the liveliest interest. It was said, that there were not wanting one or two philosophers of the skeptical school, among our people, who did not choose to commit themselves to the belief in a total eclipse of the sun -- simply because they had never seen one. Seeing is believing, we are told, though the axiom admits of dispute. But what these worthy neighbors of ours had not seen, no powers of reasoning, or fulness of evidence, could induce them to credit. Here was the dignity of human reason! Here was private judgment taking a high stand! Anxious to witness the conversion of one of these worthies, with boyish love of fun I went in quest of him. He had left the village, however, on business. But, true to his principles, before mounting his horse that morning, he had declared to his wife that "he was not running away from that eclipse;" nay, more, with noble candor, he averred that if the eclipse did overtake him, in the course of his day's journey, "he would not be above acknowledging it!" This was highly encouraging.

I had scarcely returned to the family party, left on the watch, when one of my brothers, more vigilant, or with clearer sight than his companions, exclaimed that he clearly saw a dark line, drawn on the western margin of the sun's disc! All faces were instantly turned upwards, and through the glasses we could indeed now see a dusky, but distinct object, darkening the sun's light. An exclamation of delight, almost triumphant, burst involuntarily from the lips of all. We were not to be disappointed, no cloud was there to veil the grand spectacle; the vision, almost unearthly in its sublime dignity, was about to be revealed to us. In an incredibly short time, the oval formation of the moon was discerned. Another joyous burst of delight followed, as one after another declared that he beheld with distinctness the dark oval outline, drawn against the flood of golden light. Gradually, and at first quite imperceptibly to our sight, that dark and mysterious sphere gained upon the light, while a feeling of watchful stillness, verging upon reverence, fell upon our excited spirits.

As yet there was no change perceptible in the sunlight falling upon lake and mountain; the familiar scene wore its usual smiling aspect, bright and glowing as on other days of June. The people, however, were now crowding into the streets -- their usual labors were abandoned -- forgotten for the moment -- and all faces were turned upward. So little, however, was the change in the power of the light, that to a careless observer it seemed more the gaze of faith, than positive perception, which turned the faces of all upward. Gradually a fifth, and even a fourth, of the sun's disc became obscured, and still the unguarded eye could not endure the flood of light -- it was only with the colored glass that we could note the progress of the phenomenon. The noon-day heat, however, began to lessen, and something of the coolness of early morning returned to the valley.

I was looking upward, intently watching for the first moment where the dark outline of the moon should be visible to the naked eye, when an acquaintance passed. "Come with me!" he said quietly, at the same moment drawing his arm within my own, and leading me away. He was a man of few words, and there was an expression in his face which induced me to accompany him without hesitation. He led me to the Court House, and from thence into an adjoining building, and into a room then occupied by two persons. At a window, looking upward at the heavens, stood a figure which instantly riveted my attention. It was a man with haggard face, and fettered arms, a prisoner under sentence of death. By his side was the jailor.

A painful tragedy had been recently enacted in our little town. The schoolmaster of a small hamlet in the county had beaten a child under his charge very severely -- and for a very trifling error. The sufferer was a little girl, his own niece, and it was said that natural infirmity had prevented the child from clearly pronouncing certain words which her teacher required her to utter distinctly. To conquer what he considered the obstinacy of the child, this man continued to beat her so severely that she never recovered from the effects of the blows, and died some days after. The wretched man was arrested, tried for murder, condemned, and sentenced to the gallows. This was the first capital offence in Otsego County. It produced a very deep impression. The general character of the schoolmaster had been, until that evil hour, very good, in every way. He was deeply, and beyond all doubt unfeignedly, penitent for the crime into which he had been led, more, apparently, from false ideas of duty, than from natural severity of temper. He had been entirely unaware of the great physical injury he was doing the child. So great was his contrition, that public sympathy had been awakened in his behalf, and powerful petitions had been sent to the Governor of the State, in order to obtain a respite, if not a pardon. But the day named by the judge arrived without a return of the courier. The Governor was at his country-house, at least eighty miles beyond Albany. The petition had been kept to the last moment, for additional signatures, and the eighty miles to be travelled by the courier, after reaching Albany, had not been included in the calculation. No despatch was received, and there was every appearance that there would be no reprieve. The day arrived -- throngs of people from Chenango, and Unadilla, and from the valley of the Mohawk, poured into the village, to witness the painful, and as yet unknown, spectacle of a public execution. In looking down, from an elevated position, upon the principal street of the village that day, it had seemed to me paved with human faces. The hour struck, the prisoner was taken from the jail, and, seated, as is usual, on his coffin, was carried to the place of execution, placed between two ministers of the gospel. His look of utter misery was beyond description. I have seen other offenders expiate for their crimes with life, but never have I beheld such agony, such a clinging to life, such mental horror at the nearness of death, as was betrayed by this miserable man. When he approached the gallows, he rose from his seat, and wringing his fettered hands, turned his back upon the fearful object, as if the view were too frightful for endurance. The ministers of the gospel succeeded at length in restoring him to a decent degree of composure. The last prayer was offered, and his own fervent "Amen!" was still sounding, hoarse, beseeching, and almost despairing, in the ears of the crowd, when the respite made its tardy appearance. A short reprieve was granted, and the prisoner was carried back to the miserable cell from which he had been drawn in the morning.

Such was the wretched man who had been brought from his dungeon that morning, to behold the grand phenomenon of the eclipse. During the twelve-month previous, he had seen the sun but once. The prisons of those days were literally dungeons, cut off from the light of day. That striking figure, the very picture of utter misery, his emotion, his wretchedness, I can never forget. I can see him now, standing at the window, pallid and emaciated by a year's confinement, stricken with grief, his cheeks furrowed with constant weeping, his whole frame attesting the deep and ravaging influences of conscious guilt and remorse. Here was a man drawn from the depths of human misery, to be immediately confronted with the grandest natural exhibition in which the Creator deigns to reveal his Omnipotence to our race. The wretched criminal, a murderer in fact, though not in intention, seemed to gaze upward at the awful spectacle, with an intentness and a distinctness of mental vision far beyond our own, and purchased by an agony scarcely less bitter than death. It seemed as if, for him, the curtain which veils the world beyond the grave, had been lifted. He stood immovable as a statue, with uplifted and manacled arms and clasped hands, the very image of impotent misery and wretchedness. Perhaps human invention could not have conceived of a more powerful moral accessory, to heighten the effect of the sublime movement of the heavenly bodies, than this spectacle of penitent human guilt afforded. It was an incident to stamp on the memory for life. It was a lesson not lost on me.

When I left the Court House, a sombre, yellowish, unnatural coloring was shed over the country. A great change had taken place. The trees on the distant heights had lost their verdure and their airy character; they were taking the outline of dark pictures graven upon an unfamiliar sky. The lake wore a lurid aspect, very unusual. All living creatures seemed thrown into a state of agitation. The birds were fluttering to and fro, in great excitement; they seemed to mistrust that this was not the gradual approach of evening, and were undecided in their movements. Even the dogs -- honest creatures -- became uneasy, and drew closer to their masters. The eager, joyous look of interest and curiosity, which earlier in the morning had appeared in almost every countenance, was now changed to an expression of wonder or anxiety or thoughtfulness, according to the individual character.

Every house now gave up its tenants. As the light failed more and more with every passing second, the children came flocking about their mothers in terror. The women themselves were looking about uneasily for their husbands. The American wife is more apt than any other to turn with affectionate confidence to the stronger arm for support. The men were very generally silent and grave. Many a laborer left his employment to be near his wife and children, as the dimness and darkness increased.

I once more took my position beside my father and my brothers, before the gates of our own grounds. The sun lay a little obliquely to the south and east, in the most favorable position possible for observation. I remember to have examined, in vain, the whole dusky canopy in search of a single cloud. It was one of those entirely unclouded days, less rare in America than in Europe. The steadily waning light, the gradual approach of darkness, became the more impressive as we observed this absolutely transparent state of the heavens. The birds, which a quarter of an hour earlier had been fluttering about in great agitation, seemed now convinced that night was at hand. Swallows were dimly seen dropping into the chimneys, the martins returned to their little boxes, the pigeons flew home to their dove-cots, and through the open door of a small barn we saw the fowls going to roost.

The usual flood of sunlight had now become so much weakened, that we could look upward long, and steadily, without the least pain. The sun appeared like a young moon of three or four days old, though of course with a larger and more brilliant crescent. Looking westward a moment, a spark appeared to glitter before my eye. For a second I believed it to be an optical illusion, but in another instant I saw it plainly to be a star. One after another they came into view, more rapidly than in the evening twilight, until perhaps fifty stars appeared to us, in a broad, dark zone of the heavens, crowning the pines on the western mountain. This wonderful vision of the stars, during the noontide hours of day, filled the spirit with singular sensations.

Suddenly one of my brothers shouted aloud, "The moon!" Quicker than thought, my eye turned eastward again, and there floated the moon, distinctly apparent, to a degree that was almost fearful. The spherical form, the character, the dignity, the substance of the planet, were clearly revealed as I have never beheld them before, or since. It looked grand, dark, majestic, and mighty, as it thus proved its power to rob us entirely of the sun's rays. We are all but larger children. In daily life we judge of objects by their outward aspect. We are accustomed to think of the sun, and also of the moon, as sources of light, as etherial, almost spiritual, in their essence. But the positive material nature of the moon was now revealed to our senses, with a force of conviction, a clearness of perception, that changed all our usual ideas in connection with the planet. This was no interposition of vapor, no deceptive play of shadow; but a vast mass of obvious matter had interposed between the sun above us and the earth on which we stood. The passage of two ships at sea, sailing on opposite courses, is scarcely more obvious than this movement of one world before another. Darkness like that of early night now fell upon the village.

My thoughts turned to the sea. A sailor at heart, already familiar with the face of the ocean, I seemed, in mental vision, to behold the grandeur of that vast pall of supernatural shadow falling suddenly upon the sea, during the brightest hour of the day. The play of light and shade upon the billows, always full of interest, must at that hour have been indeed sublime. And my fancy was busy with pictures of white-sailed schooners, and brigs, and ships, gliding like winged spirits over the darkened waves.

I was recalled by a familiar and insignificant incident, the dull tramp of hoofs on the village bridge. A few cows, believing that night had overtaken them, were coming homeward from the wild open pastures about the village. And no wonder the kindly creatures were deceived, the darkness was now much deeper than the twilight which usually turns their faces homeward; the dew was falling perceptibly, as much so as at any hour of the previous night, and the coolness was so great that the thermometer must have fallen many degrees from the great heat of the morning. The lake, the hills, and the buildings of the little town were swallowed up in the darkness. The absence of the usual lights in the dwellings rendered the obscurity still more impressive. All labor had ceased, and the hushed voices of the people only broke the absolute stillness by subdued whispering tones.

"Hist! The whippoorwill!" whispered a friend near me; and at the same moment, as we listened in profound silence, we distinctly heard from the eastern bank of the river the wild, plaintive note of that solitary bird of night, slowly repeated at intervals. The song of the summer birds, so full in June, had entirely ceased for the last half hour. A bat came flitting about our heads. Many stars were now visible, though not in sufficient number to lessen the darkness. At one point only in the far distant northern horizon, something of the brightness of dawn appeared to linger.

At twelve minutes past eleven, the moon stood revealed in its greatest distinctness -- a vast black orb, so nearly obscuring the sun that the face of the great luminary was entirely and absolutely darkened, though a corona of rays of light appeared beyond. The gloom of night was upon us. A breathless intensity of interest was felt by all. There would appear to be something instinctive in the feeling with which man gazes at all phenomena in the heavens. The peaceful rainbow, the heavy clouds of a great storm, the vivid flash of electricity, the falling meteor, the beautiful lights of the aurora borealis, fickle as the play of fancy, -- these never fail to fix the attention with something of a peculiar feeling, different in character from that with which we observe any spectacle on the earth. Connected with all grand movements in the skies there seems an instinctive sense of inquiry, of anxious expectation; akin to awe, which may possibly be traced to the echoes of grand Christian prophecies, whispering to our spirits, and endowing the physical sight with some mysterious mental prescience. In looking back to that impressive hour, such now seem to me the feelings of the youth making one of that family group, all apparently impressed with a sensation of the deepest awe -- I speak with certainty -- a clearer view than I had ever yet had of the majesty of the Almighty, accompanied with a humiliating, and, I trust, a profitable sense of my own utter insignificance. That movement of the moon, that sublime voyage of the worlds, often recurs to my imagination, and even at this distant day, as distinctly, as majestically, and nearly as fearfully, as it was then beheld.

A group of silent, dusky forms stood near me; one emotion appeared to govern all. My father stood immovable, some fifteen feet from me, but I could not discern his features. Three minutes of darkness, all but absolute, elapsed. They appeared strangely lengthened by the intensity of feeling and the flood of overpowering thought which filled the mind.

Thus far the sensation created by this majestic spectacle had been one of humiliation and awe. It seemed as if the great Father of the Universe had visibly, and almost palpably, veiled his face in wrath. But, appalling as the withdrawal of light had been, most glorious, most sublime, was its restoration! The corona of light above the moon became suddenly brighter, the heavens beyond were illuminated, the stars retired, and light began to play along the ridges of the distant mountains. And then a flood of grateful, cheering, consoling brightness fell into the valley, with a sweetness and a power inconceivable to the mind, unless the eye has actually beheld it. I can liken this sudden, joyous return of light, after the eclipse, to nothing of the kind that is familiarly known. It was certainly nearest to the change produced by the swift passage of the shadow of a very dark cloud, but it was the effect of this instantaneous transition, multiplied more than a thousand fold. It seemed to speak directly to our spirits, with full assurance of protection, of gracious mercy, and of that Divine love which has produced all the glorious combinations of matter for our enjoyment. It was not in the least like the gradual dawning of day, or the actual rising of the sun. There was no gradation in the change. It was sudden, amazing, like what the imagination would teach us to expect of the advent of a heavenly vision. I know that philosophically I am wrong; but, to me, it seemed that the rays might actually be seen flowing through the darkness in torrents, till they had again illuminated the forest, the mountains, the valley, and the lake with their glowing, genial touch.

There was another grand movement, as the crescent of the sun reappeared, and the moon was actually seen steering her course through the void. Venus was still shining brilliantly.

This second passage of the moon lasted but a moment, to the naked eye. As it ceased, my eye fell again on the scene around me. The street, now as distinctly seen as ever, was filled with the population of the village. Along the line of road stretching for a mile from the valley, against the side of the mountain, were twenty waggons bearing travellers, or teams from among the hills. All had stopped on their course, impelled, apparently, by unconscious reverence, as much as by curiosity, while every face was turned toward heaven, and every eye drank in the majesty of the sight. Women stood in the open street, near me, with streaming eyes and clasped hands, and sobs were audible in different directions. Even the educated and reflecting men at my side continued silent in thought. Several minutes passed, before the profound impressions of the spectacle allowed of speech. At such a moment the spirit of man bows in humility before his Maker.

The changes of the unwonted light, through whose gradations the full brilliancy of the day was restored, must have been very similar to those by which it had been lost, but they were little noted. I remember, however, marking the instant when I could first distinguish the blades of grass at my feet -- and later again watching the shadows of the leaves on the gravel walk. The white lilies in my mother's flower-garden were observed by others among the first objects of the vegetation which could be distinguished from the windows of the house. Every living creature was soon rejoicing again in the blessed restoration of light after that frightful moment of a night at noon-day.

Men who witness any extraordinary spectacle together, are apt, in after-times, to find a pleasure in conversing on its impressions. But I do not remember to have ever heard a single being freely communicative on the subject of his individual feelings at the most solemn moment of the eclipse. It would seem as if sensations were aroused too closely connected with the constitution of the spirit to be irreverently and familiarly discussed. I shall only say that I have passed a varied and eventful life, that it has been my fortune to see earth, heavens, ocean, and man in most of their aspects; but never have I beheld any spectacle which so plainly manifested the majesty of the Creator, or so forcibly taught the lesson of humility to man as a total eclipse of the sun.

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