

WHEN A COMET FELL ON EARTH

WHAT MIGHT TAKE PLACE IF HALLEY'S COMET WERE SHIPWRECKED AS BIELA'S WAS

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THE astronomers announce that Halley's comet is approaching the earth at the rate of a million miles a day. As Halley's is the most splendidly attractive (otherwise the most alarming) of all our regular comets, they add that we need not fear that it will strike the earth, because it will not come closer to us than 13,000,000 miles.

This is the scientific schedule, but that does not keep any one who wishes to be inspired with proper awe on the approach of our most remarkable comet, from asking what might take place if, for any reason it leaves the scientific schedule, as Biela's comet did when it did the most remarkable thing thus far known in the history of the solar system since men have begun to watch the sky. That is, after coming back over and over on schedule time, until it was supposed to be as regular as the earth itself, it split in two, underwent final shipwreck somewhere in the heavens, and according to the last supposed to be known of it, fell on earth several hundred miles southeast of El Paso, Tex.

The probability that this was the last of that comet is conceded by such cautious astronomers as Prof. Young of Princeton. It is an authentic record, valued because it is about as near the history of Biela's comet as we will ever get. It is certainly lost, and it is thought that we have the last trace of it on earth now in a lump of nickel-iron which fell in Mexico, when supposed fragments of the lost comet (called "Biellids" after the astronomer, Biela, who discovered it) were being watched for and expected to fall in a shower somewhere on earth, if they were not burned to vapor by heat from friction as they were being whirled through the earth's atmosphere in falling. Although Halley's comet has been coming back regularly every 76 or 77 years since it is supposed to have appeared with its tail filling the

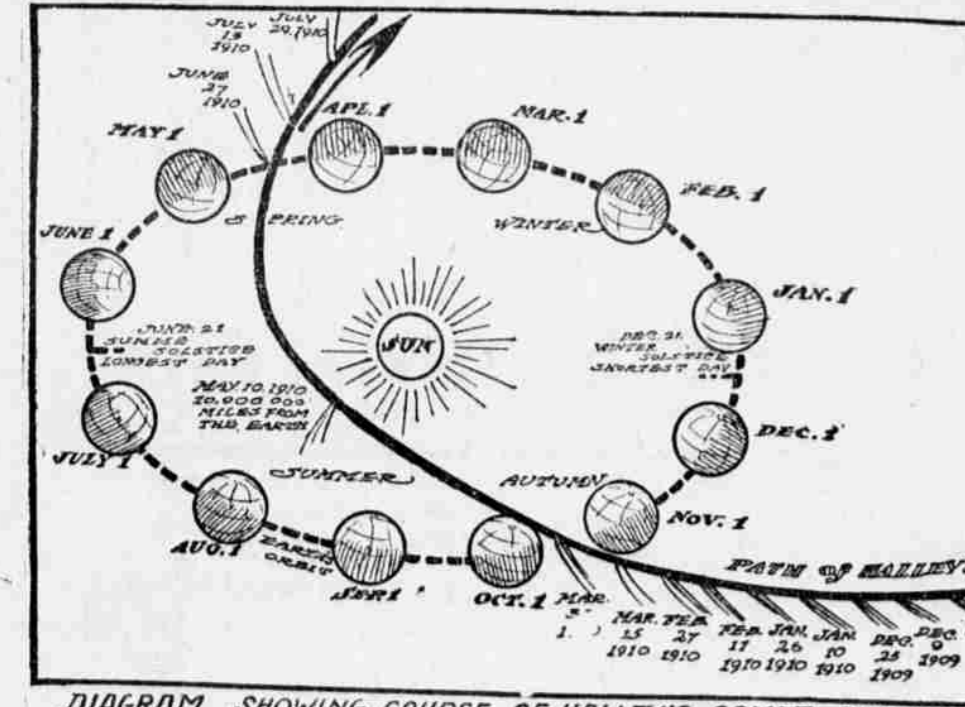


DIAGRAM SHOWING COURSE OF HALLEY'S COMET DURING 1909 AND 1910

sky before the fall of Jerusalem, it may end finally as Biela's comet did, falling in a star shower on earth, or on some other planet, or into the sun, or scattering through space around the sun in masses perhaps of nickel-iron, unseen on earth, unless the earth captures them out of space and sets them blazing through the sky as they fall.

Suppose we were to capture Halley's comet and it were really to fall, what would become of the earth or of the comet?

That is a fair question for all who wish to keep a proper scientific awe of our finest regular comet. It may offer something to take the place of the unscientific awe which used to send thousands to their knees, remembering their sins and praying for pardon as soon as Halley's comet began to spread its magnificent tail across the sky. In other words, it made them try to think, which was, no doubt, the best thing a comet could do for them.

Another important question is whether Halley's comet will bring its magnificent tail back with it, restored to its ancient and awful splendor. If it does not, the world, learned and unlearned, will be disappointed, for a comet without a tail is not awful or sublime enough to be worth growing either enthusiastic or repentant over. We cannot tell about the tail. It may come back with the comet, reduced 30 per cent, or it may finally be lost altogether or increased back to awful magnificence, streaming across the sky in such a spectacle as can be hoped for on earth only once in a lifetime.

If it recovers its tail in its full historic splendor, Halley's will be too magnificent a comet to be lost, according to our ways of looking at comets. It is not a thriftrate as

running towards me from the neighboring houses and they helped me to quiet the horses, which had become much excited. We were afraid of being burned. We all asked what could be the matter. In a few moments, when we had recovered from our fear, we saw the light disappear. Bringing lanterns, we found a hole in the ground and in it a ball of light. We retired to a little distance, fearing it would explode and harm us. Looking up to the sky, we saw exhalations or stars which went out without noise. We returned after a little and found in the hole a hot stone we could barely handle. This, on the next day, we saw looked like a piece of iron. All night it rained stars. We saw none fall to the ground, as they all seemed to be extinguished while yet high up."

If this stone, the only one known to have reached the earth out of the "rain of stars," is all that is left of Biela's comet, there is 10 1/2 pounds left of it in the shape of a mass of iron ore, showing such "pits" from contraction after great



HALLEY'S COMET AS IT APPEARED IN 1835
The "BIELID" of 1885 SUPPOSED FRAGMENT OF BIELA'S COMET

heat as the telescope shows in a much larger way on the face of the moon.

As this was considered the most distinguished visitor that had ever reached the earth from infinite space, it was presented as a mark of his distinguished consideration by Prof. Bonilla to William Earl Hidden, as one of the most distinguished American mineralogists, who was also an authority on meteors and meteoric minerals. Analysis showed that it was 91.26 per cent. iron, 7.84 per cent. nickel, 65-100 per cent. cobalt, 20-100 per cent. phosphorus, with traces of sulphur, carbon and chlorine. Mr. Hidden wrote its history in the American Journal of Science. In the century Magazine of August, 1885, he answered the question, "Is it a piece of a comet?" by summing up the evidence in connection with the known history of Biela's lost comet, since it split in 1846 and returned as two comets in 1852, to disappear finally in what were supposed to be a swarm of "biellids."

"At the time of the fall of this meteorite" (in Mexico), Hidden writes, "it was 10 hours after the maximum number of meteors was observed. The earth was meeting with only the stragglers of the train. It cannot be doubted that the comical dust proceeding from the disintegration of Biela's comet wholly enveloped the earth and was seen as meteors from every part of it. Such was the magnificence of the celestial phenomena in some parts of the eastern continent that some people believed there would be no more stars left in the sky."

Biela's comet had returned regularly in a period of a little less than seven years until it underwent complete shipwreck in the heavens. No one ever expects to see it again. The end, as far as known, is this star shower in the night the Bonilla biellid was picked up in Mazapil, to give us the best knowledge we have of what may be expected when a comet falls.

Biela's lost comet does not compare with Halley's, which must have billions of stones or small and large masses of matter, probably nickel-iron, in its magnificent head. If it were shipwrecked by Jupiter, by the earth or by any other planet, these, if they were drawn close enough by the planet to break the hold the sun has on them, may do a number of interesting things.

They might revolve around the earth at a distance, collecting in such a ring as that of Saturn, which is supposed to be composed of an infinite number of such stones, or they might whirl closer and closer in revolving around it until finally the largest of them, which do not burn up in the atmosphere by friction, must fall as this biellid fell in Mexico. The hope of getting a beautiful earth ring, such as that of Saturn's, by capturing comets, is very small, if only because comets have not matter enough in them to make it.

within range of the earth and be captured and pulled down to the surface? If so, would it jar the earth in its orbit or set the planet on fire?

All we will ever have in the way of a final answer to these questions as they belong to the complete and final loss of Biela's comet is given officially now in the records of Mexico in the statement recorded by Senor Jose A. y Bonilla, director of the astronomical observatory in the state of Zacatecas. In November, 1885, it was supposed that between the twenty-fourth and twenty-ninth of the month the earth would pass in space through or near the fragments left by Biela's comet. As they were then called "Biellids," it had been concluded that they were a swarm of hundreds of thousands or perhaps of millions of small masses of meteoric matter, perhaps weighing from an ounce up to a ton or more. It was feared that if the earth passed through them and drew them to the surface in daylight they would not be seen at all, but would either burn up in gas or else fall in a few scattering stones on distant parts of the earth. This may have occurred in other places, but on a ranch near Mazapil, in the state of Zacatecas, one of them (or a mass of nickel-iron belonging to some group of the same kind) was seen to fall and recovered at once by the owner of the ranch, who made the deposition taken down in Spanish by Senor Bonilla and translated by William Earl Hidden, to close the last chapter in the story of Biela's lost comet.

"It was about 7 o'clock on the night of November 27 (1885)," said the ranchman in his deposition, "when I went out to the corral to feed the horses. Suddenly I heard a loud, sizzling noise, exactly as though something red hot was being plunged into cold water and almost instantly there followed a somewhat loud thud. At once the corral was covered with a phosphorescent light, while suspended in the air were small, luminous sparks, as though from a rocket. I had not recovered from my surprise before I saw this luminous air disappear and there remained on the ground only such a light as is made when a match is rubbed. A number of people came

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