

THE PLAGUE O' LIGHTS

A Story of the Year 1906

By OWEN OLIVER

THE official Blue Books just published, as the result of the Royal Commission on the Plague of Lights, contains the evidence of some two hundred scientists, and an exhaustive report by the two peers, three M. P.'s and four Fellows of the Royal Society who formed the Commission, upon the terrible calamity which recently devastated the earth. It may seem presumptuous for me to add to the testimony of such authorities; but I notice that all the learned men who gave evidence either obtained their facts at second-hand (having themselves escaped the plague by flight or going into hiding), or confessed that during the actual attack their faculties were obscured. As I am one of the few sufferers who escaped with memory unimpaired, I think it well to set down the events which came under my observation.

It was on the evening of June 12, 1906, that the lights first appeared among a chattering and laughing crowd that was pouring out of the Strand Theater into Surrey-st. Phyllis Brand was leaning upon my arm. We were newly engaged, and I was looking only at her, till I heard cries from the people around us. Then I saw that the air was full of pale yellow lights. Most of them were some distance above, standing out clearly against the dark houses and cloudy sky, but a few were fluttering down among the crowd—round lights of about the bigness of a shilling, and much the same thickness. When they came near, it was seen that they went in threes, each at the corner of an equal-sided triangle, some eight or nine inches apart.

Some one called "fire," and the crowd began to sway dangerously. I put my arms around Phyllis, and forced our way through, with some damage to our clothing and a few bruises, and watched the crowd from a dark doorway a little distance from the street. I was powerless to help, even if I could have left Phyllis. The excitement increased, and several of the crowd were thrown down and trampled underfoot. Seventeen people were killed, we learned the next morning. Afterward they were accounted among the lucky ones.

The treble lights dropped steadily among the fighting mass at the doors, and darted swiftly at some who escaped from the outskirts, always fastening upon their breasts. A white-bearded man beside me declared that it was only a meteoric shower and there was no real harm in the lights. They were luminous, like electric light, he explained, but did not burn. A man with a hoarse voice suggestive of drink remarked that they had sent for a fire-engine, and when it came the crowd would be worse, and anyhow it wasn't his business, and he was going home. He had taken a few unsteady steps, when a triangle of lights dropped noiselessly upon him. He howled like an injured animal and ran. A woman in evening dress rushed by with the lights hovering over her opera-cloak. She threw the cloak aside, but the lights had penetrated it, and adhered to her dress. She tore away the flimsy muslin; but when she plucked this away, they were still left, three pale yellow spots, upon her flesh. She tore at them with her fingers,

till her nails made long, red wales, but the fiendish spots remained. A man, hatless and coatless, with the three spots upon his shirt-front around a glittering diamond stud, seized her arm and hurried her away. It was nothing, he assured her, nothing. His voice sounded like a sob of rage.

Phyllis' hold upon me relaxed, and I found that she had fainted. I walked stealthily along the pavement, keeping in the shadow as much as I could, carrying her in my arms, and reached the Temple Station safely.

The booking clerk and ticket collectors had fled, and I carried her down to the platform below. It was a warm night, and the perspiration was pouring down me in hot streams.

The people who had the yellow spots upon them were gathered at one end of the platform, screaming and trying to tear them from themselves and from one another. Those who had escaped attack were huddled together at the other end of the platform. A man with the spots upon him tried to join us, and refused to go away. Another man, who stood before his children brandishing a big walking-stick, felled him. A baby was crying lustily, and a girl was in hysterics. Several women had fainted. A train hustled in, and we crowded wildly into the already crowded carriages, elbowing each other fiercely out of the way. I thrust Phyllis in first, and forced my way in somehow. A somber-looking man in a corner woke up, and grumbled about the crowding, and asked what was the matter. Somebody told

him that fire had dropped upon earth. He snorted and offered us some pamphlets upon "The Curse of Alcohol." It was evident that the rest of the passengers also thought that we were all drunk.

I got out at Blackfriars, and carried Phyllis, who was still in the faint, into St. Paul's Station. I tried to get some brandy from the buffet; but it was full of wailing people branded with the lights. They did not hurt, they said, but they frightened them, because they would not come off. The lights penetrated the clothing and stuck to the skin; but when the clothing was removed they left no mark or rent upon it. In other words, it was the flesh on which they settled, but they showed through the clothing.

I obtained half a pailful of water to bathe Phyllis' hands and face, and she revived. She was brave, and wished to try to help the sufferers; but I persuaded her that she could do no good. I should have run the risk of contact with them myself, but of course I could not let her.

The officials assigned one end of the train to those who were attacked and their friends, and the other to those who were not, and we got back to Dulwich about twenty minutes after time. All the doctors of the locality were at the station, waiting for sufferers who had telegraphed for them. I did not stay to hear what they said, as Phyllis was weak, and I thought it best to get her home. Also, I confess, I was a little frightened of the lights. I could not get rid of a suspicion that I had been dreaming or drinking. Phyllis' father pooh-poohed the thing as an optical delusion, and advised me to go home and

get to bed, and I went. The morning's paper however, treated the matter seriously, and gave two whole pages to it. The lights had appeared in most parts of the city and West End at about eleven o'clock, it stated, and had fastened upon people in the way that I have described. There had been some hundreds of fatalities through panics in the crowds, and several persons had died of fright. Professor Morden, F.R.S., the great authority upon physical astronomy, considered that a disembodied asteroid, in the form of luminous vapor, had fallen upon the earth, and that, owing to chemical affinity for living tissues, its particles had adhered to the people with whom it came in contact. He could not explain why it attacked only adult human beings, and not children, dogs or horses; but he was sure that it was too unsubstantial to do any real harm, and that the lights would fade away gradually. Dr. Maurice Ray, the specialist for skin diseases, held similar opinions, and pointed out that the perpetual dying out and regeneration of the tissues would in a short time rid those who had been attacked from the objectionable spots. He gave a prescription for a lotion which would expedite this result.

After calling to inquire about Phyllis, I went up to town by the train which should have started at nine-nineteen. It was late, owing to a special having been run to convey those who had been attacked by the lights to the London hospitals. At the "Elephant and Castle" we came into a swarm of the yellow spots, faintly visible in the light of day. A porter and three



A Woman in Evening Dress Rushed by With the Lights Hovering Over Her Cloak