

# AURORA TRIPS OVER DANCING STARLIGHT

Even Army Doctor and Preacher Stumble  
on Violent Shuffling in Northern Skies

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While the pale shafts of the aurora borealis were playing across the northern heavens late one evening last July, a curious phenomenon, seemingly in connection with these northern lights, was observed and later reported to me by a physician.

Around midnight he noticed a bright light very low in the north. At first he thought it was stationary. It apparently was dancing up and down, right and left, with real energy.

In addition, it was flashing violently, sometimes in red and a fraction of a second later in yellow or green or blue. It was an auroral behavior never heard of before.

## Eastward Movement

Finally he was sure that this erratic flasher had moved eastward during the considerable time he had been watching its wild performance through the auroral streamers.

The doctor set up a stationary sighting device which could be pointed directly at the light and left it in that position. In a very short time it was easily noticed that the curious luminary had moved eastward and higher in the sky.

I have not the least doubt that this was the same object concerning which I receive excited inquiries every year. Usually they come in September when this light is low over the north-northeastern horizon early in the evening in about the same place it appeared around midnight in July.

## Wartime Excitement

The first occasion, as far as I recall, on which I had to "explain away" the mysteries of this queer light was in September, 1918, when an old Army doctor came rushing into our meteorological station a few miles south of Paris with the startling announcement that a German airplane had been heading our way for fully half an hour "with all lights ablaze."

He was greatly excited and it took some time and explanation to quiet his fears that bombs

would soon be falling on our hapless heads.

The object is so far away that its light, traveling through the vast interstellar spaces at 186,300 miles a second, requires about 45 years to reach us. This flashing light is none other than the bright star Capella in the constellation Auriga.

## Violent Flashes

Like all stars when below the North Star — more exactly, a point about 1 deg. from it—this star's apparent motion, due to the earth's rotation, is eastward and upward. And when near the horizon all bright stars usually seem to flash violently with rapid changes of color.

This is due to the disturbance the light encounters when passing through dense layers of atmosphere near the earth.

Through a telescope of moderate size this flashing, varicolored starlight is gorgeous. All apparent motions and changes are immensely exaggerated. A few years ago, I was showing this at the observatory to a church group. All seemed delighted with the beauty of the celestial spectacle.

## Minister's Reaction

But when the minister peered into the telescope, he immediately threw up his hands in eloquent gestures and shouted with fervent glee, "My, my! That's exactly my idea of hell fire!"

Two days later I received a letter from another of the group apologizing for the minister's defamation of my beloved and beautiful star. She concluded, "I knew you didn't like it." I had not realized I had shown my displeasure.