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ATMOSPHERIC ELECTRICITY[1]

THE industrial application of electricity for light and for power began about thirty years ago. There were then no schools or laboratories in which applied electricity was taught. The science or profession of electrical engineering did not exist. Electricity was taught as a part of the physics course in schools or colleges and, incidentally thereto, brief descriptions of its application to telegraphy were included. Electroplating, the electric arc and electromagnetism were studied chiefly from books and sometimes illustrated with such instruments and apparatus as were to be found in the apparatus collection.

When, however, the great growth or expansion began, about thirty years ago, courses in electrical engineering were gradually added in some of the schools, usually in conjunction with the teaching of physics, to which the new study was most closely allied. The physics department of Princeton under Professor Brackett was among the very earliest to provide instruction in what was in fact the incipient stage of the now highly developed and important science of applied electricity. Those in the field whose memories carry them back to that early time, will easily recall the important contributions made by Professor Brackett and his department to the development of the infant science. On this present occasion Princeton is to be congratulated on the opening of its magnificent new laboratory, the generous gift of Mr. Palmer, which assures the possibil-

[1] Address at the formal opening of the Palmer Physical Laboratory at Princeton University, October 21, 1909.

ity of continued growth and usefulness, in larger measure, in those sciences to the study of which it is devoted.

As a part of the commemorative exercises at this formal opening of the Palmer laboratories, I have been requested to address you upon some topic connected with physics and electrical engineering. Out of a number of subjects which suggested themselves I have chosen "atmospheric electricity"—a subject which permits of a treatment not too technical and which more or less concerns us all. Its relation to the science of physics is evident, and as to electrical engineering, we electrical engineers are sometimes made to experience a wish that it were not so closely related, for, under certain conditions it is perhaps the one thing which menaces in a high degree the integrity of the delicate contrivances which make up an electric installation; interfering most unexpectedly with continuity of service.

I hope that in what I shall say on the subject my physicist friends will bear with me, for I realize that there is little of novelty that I can present. I can but emphasize what I believe to be correct views and treat the matters discussed very generally, if not popularly. While my attitude towards the subject itself has always been that of a learner, it has often fallen to my lot to exert myself to provide means for the protection of electrical installations from such damage by lightning storms as would involve great inconvenience and perhaps heavy monetary loss. The engineer must produce things that do the work and often the need is immediate and compelling. The student of pure science is under no such stress.

From the remotest times the thunderstorm has been one of the most impressive of natural phenomena, inspiring terror in men and other creatures alike. The realization of its interest and grandeur is probably of comparatively modern origin. It is indeed not surprising that in pagan mythology the lightning stroke was ascribed to the anger of the greatest of the gods. It is no wonder that, in one of the greatest poems of the Bible, Job is asked, "Canst thou send lightnings that they may go and say unto thee, 'Here we are'?"

With the decay of authority and miraculous interpretation of natural phenomena and the gradual growth of rationalism and scientific study the recognition of the lightning and the thunder as a result of natural processes gradually came about. In the seventeenth century began that gradual awakening to the possibilities of the conquest of nature, the outcome of which is modern science with all its great achievements. It was the period of Bacon, Galileo, Gilbert, Descartes, Newton and others. At first the explosive action of lightning, the noise of the thunder and the subsequent strong smell of ozone, which often exists, suggested a kinship with gunpowder, or, that certain nitrous and sulphurous constituents of the atmosphere supposedly had become fired. This naturalistic view even the self-constituted witchcraft exponent, Cotton Mather, willingly adopts in one of his books.

Priestley, the discoverer of oxygen gas, in his "History of Electricity," published in 1767, makes an interesting quotation from a paper of a certain Dr. Wall in the *Philosophical Transactions*. This Dr. Wall, an experimenter in electricity in the latter half of the seventeenth century, and a contemporary of Otto Guericke and later of Newton, after describing his experiments with rubbed amber and the production of light and the cracklings therefrom, says, "Now, I make no question but upon using a longer and larger piece of amber, both the cracklings and light would be much greater." Then further he says: "This light and crackling seems in some degree to represent thunder and lightening." I believe this to be the first reference to the possible relationship between electricity and lightning. The later history of Franklin's suggestion of identity, D'Alibard's experiment and that of the famous kite furnishing experimental proof, are too well known to be dwelt upon here.

The practical genius of Franklin led him at once to the suggestion of protection from lightning by means of a conducting rod of metal, well connected to the moist ground at its lower end, and projecting beyond the highest parts of the building or structure to be protected. In these later years it is not unusual to meet with statements of discredit or denial of the efficacy of this simple device. There seems to be a tendency among the uninformed to regard it as an old-fashioned and useless if not a dangerous contrivance. Often the question has been asked whether it is not an exploded notion that such rods have any value for protection. It may well be that the "lightning-rod agent" of former times is largely responsible for the distrust. He was a sort of confidence man, who supplied a sham appliance, often of marvelous makeup. A structure of twisted metal tube topped with glittering gilt points in clusters, mounted on green glass insulators, the whole as extensive as the unhappy victim could be frightened into paying for, was erected, and often left without any adequate connection to the ground. It was a tree without roots; lacking, in fact, the most essential part of its structure.

Let us add with emphasis that the Franklin rod when properly installed undoubtedly secures practical immunity from lightning damage. Its installation is an engineering undertaking demanding study of varied conditions and proper care and judgment in meeting these conditions. The one consideration originally left out was that if there were any better or more direct paths for lightning existing in the building or structure or better ground connections than the rod possessed these must be included in the protective system. But it is also a fact that the construction of most modern buildings, particularly in cities, involves so much metal in roofing, ventilating and other pipes, wires and the like, that it is generally unnecessary to resort to any separate means for protection.

In cities there are many lofty structures framed in steel, piping that projects above the roof, and metal stacks, generally in good connection with the underground pipe systems; all of which together tend to minimize danger from strokes of lightning. The best vindication of Franklin will, however, be found in the fact that the firmest reliance is placed by the trained electrical engineer upon the provision of an easy path for the electricity of lightning to reach the ground. Practically all his protective appliances or arresters used in electric systems are based on that principle, with modifications and additions to suit particular conditions of use. To provide such modifications and adaptations is by no means an easy task. There is still a possibility of insufficiency such that the menace of breakdowns and damage by lightning still remains a *bête noir* to the engineer. The tremendous discharge of energy possible in a lightning stroke may be sufficient to defeat our efforts. Breaking through insulation and causing short circuits, burning of wires and rupture of circuit, and damage to apparatus are still occasional experiences in spite of our safeguards. Even at a considerable distance away a stroke of lightning, by its inductive action may set up electric waves or surgings which require to be provided against.

The extremely uncertain value of the effects, the irregularity and impossibility of calculation or prediction, render the problem of protection difficult. The effects of these secondary surges are generally incomparably less violent than direct strokes, and they are seldom dangerous to life.

So long indeed as our electric lines are extended above the ground, so long must this disturbing factor be reckoned with. Fortunately it has been possible by constant effort and study to secure more and more effective appliances so that the lightning menace grows steadily less. Research and experimentation in this direction have constituted an important part of the development of electrical engineering.

Having thus at some risk of your patience vindicated our earliest worker in the study of atmospheric electricity—Franklin—let us turn from the practical issues and consider the electricity of the air from a more general standpoint.

The study of the nature and origin of electrical storms or disturbances throughout the atmosphere is of much interest; our knowledge is yet meager; there is much more yet to be learned in this fascinating field. Exploration of the electrification of the air at varying heights by captive balloons, by kites and upon elevations of land, has generally shown an increasing electric potential upward from the earth, and usually positive in relation thereto. Sometimes this relation is reversed. It has been roughly estimated that if the differences noted can be assumed to be extended to include the total depth of the atmospheric layer, the earth's surface might be negative to the surrounding space, 150,000 volts more or less. This condition would not admit of being regarded as constant or stable, since widespread electric storms occur in both our upper and lower air levels. In the highest regions of our atmosphere they take the form of diffuse discharges as in a high vacuum and are called auroras. They either accompany or give rise to magnetic storms, which affect the direction and intensity of the earth's magnetism temporarily, and hence disturb the compass needle, sometimes through many degrees. Within a few weeks past we have experienced such a storm of a remarkable intensity; sufficient in fact to cause interruptions to telegraphic and cable transmission during several hours. Brilliant auroras were at the time seen in some places.

The frequency of auroral phenomena, and perhaps also to some extent the frequency of thunder-storms, seems to keep pace with the sunspot period, at least in our latitudes. At times of sunspot activity, the surface layers of the sun, upon the energy radiated from which so much of earthly activity depends, are stirred by great storms, or immense cyclones of hot gas or metallic vapors; storms seen as dusky spots on the sun's disc. They can attain enormous size—20,000, 30,000 or even 50,000 miles in diameter, though these dimensions are exceptional. They are visible, as is well known, not because they are non-luminous, but because they are less luminous than the surrounding solar surface. In like manner bright spots or faculæ may also be seen, because they are on the whole brighter than the sun's surface adjoining them.

There is much reason to believe that, in accordance with suggestions made many years ago, these solar storms are accompanied by exceptionally vigorous projection outward from the sun to immense distances, of streams of electrified matter. Should the earth happen to be in a position to be swept by such a stream, an aurora may be produced. During a total solar eclipse the so-called coronal streamers are seen to extend from the sun's surface to distances of upwards of two millions of miles or possibly farther than that, but doubtless they keep on outwardly, and invisibly, to relatively enormous distances. It is not unreasonable as a hypothesis to imagine that they may extend at times as far as the orbit of the earth and may, if the direction is the proper one, reach our outer air.

Further, if they consist of electric ions or particles conveying electric charges, an aurora may result. Dr. Hale, of Mt. Wilson Observatory, has indeed recently shown by the spectroscope that great solar storms are in fact attended by the motion of electric ions at enormous velocities. The phenomena of auroras present peculiar difficulties in their study, since, as in the case of the rainbow, no two observers at a distance from each other see the same or identical appearances. Hence attempts to determine the height by triangulation at which auroras exist give most contradictory results, for it is impossible to fix upon any condensation or streamer which may not be displaced or absent to another observer some distance away. This is understood when we bear in mind that the luminous appearances are not located in one plane, but are distributed in space; condensations of light being the result of superposition in the line of observation.

I have come to the opinion that the auroral streamers often extend in a general direction outwardly from the earth, sometimes to very great distances relatively to the known extent of our atmosphere. The effects observed appear unaccountable upon any other supposition, while they are consistent with the idea of outwardly directed streams of great extent. In April, 1883, there occurred an aurora which was at its maximum a little after midnight. It was the most magnificent display of the kind, which, in spite of a continual vigilance on my part, it has been my fortune to witness. It was upon such a scale that, so to speak, the mechanism of the streamers stood revealed. At that time I could not avoid the conclusion that the auroral streamers must have extended outwardly several thousand miles. There is no space here to present the argument involved. Perhaps the most significant fact is that precisely the same general appearances were noted in Chicago as in the east, and that they occurred simultaneously. The interesting question arises, does the earth temporarily acquire streamers similar in nature to the solar coronal streamers? The answer is as yet unknown. At the time of the great display mentioned there was a sunspot near the center of the sun's disc of about 50,000 miles in diameter. During that disturbance long telegraphic lines could not be operated, owing to arcing at the keys which prevented interruption of the circuits. Apparently in subtle sympathy with its master orb, the sun, the earth's electric and magnetic equilibrium was for a time profoundly disturbed.

While it is by no means certain that auroras and magnetic storms are always dependent on solar outbursts, it is now generally recognized that the observed coincidences are too frequent to be the result of chance. It is perhaps safe to assume that although solar storms and sunspots can occur without provoking auroras or magnetic storms here, it may be doubted if these latter occur on any great scale unless solar activity is coincident therewith. And it seemingly is true that only when the projected electrified matter actually reaches the earth or comes near enough to inductively affect its electrical equilibrium are the terrestrial phenomena produced thereby.

It has even been suspected that a greater frequency and severity of thunder-storms in our lower air accompanies the active period of the sun or sunspot maximum. This is a hypothesis which would require a careful collection and comparison of data over a long period to give it status as a scientific fact or wholly to disprove it. Be that as it may, experience with lightning damage in electric installations seemingly supports the idea, and led me in a paper given some seven or eight years ago during the minimum period, to predict a severe ordeal a few years in advance. As a matter of fact the prediction was to a large extent verified with the result of extraordinary activity in devising safeguards from which the electrical engineering art now benefits. In general the harm done by thunderstorms is due directly or indirectly to the heavy spark discharges called lightning flashes or strokes of lightning.

It may be of interest to refer briefly to the conditions existing in a cloud which is the source of such destructive energy. As is well known, clouds consist of fine water particles suspended in the air. When frozen these particles are crystalline like minute snow crystals. All clouds above the snow line are likely to be of that character. At a temperature above freezing the particles of water are microscopic spheroids which may by gradual coalescence form drops of rain. This process of coalescence necessarily diminishes the total surface of the water existing as such in the cloud. Should, however, the original particles possess even a slight electric charge, the union of the drops, by lessening the total surface, or diminishing the electric capacity, results in a great rise of potential or electric pressure on the surface of the drops. The process of coalescence continues and the water falls out of the cloud as rain. If the cloud particles are frozen the diminution of surface and consequent increase of electric pressure can not take place. This would seem sufficient to account for the general absence of thunder-storms in winter, though perhaps other causes contribute.

A thunder-cloud has been compared to an insulated charged conductor, such as a body of metal hung upon a silk cord, but in reality the two are not at all comparable. It is a mistake to assume any close analogy to exist. The cloud being only an air body containing suspended water particles, is not a conductor, nor can it, as in the case of metal, permit the accumulation of its electric charge on its outer surface. In fact it possesses no true definite outer surface but blends with the clear air around it. The electric charge it possesses remains disseminated, so to speak, throughout, and must reside chiefly upon the surface of its constituent water drops. Accumulation in any part would require the insulating air between the drops to be overcome.

A lightning stroke from such a mass may indeed represent a discharge of hundreds of amperes at millions of volts. We must, however, be cautious not to exaggerate either the current or the potential present in a lightning flash. The current in a flash can at times be only a few amperes or may in the heavier discharge reach perhaps hundreds, or possibly in extreme cases some few thousands of amperes. It is doubtful if the potential much exceeds at any time more than a few millions of volts as it is probable that small local breakdowns start the disruptive process which then extends through miles of length. The individual water particles even when collected into drops can not be charged to such enormous potentials as millions of volts. In reality it is the combined effect of the numerous particles acting inductively that accounts for such pressures. A combined stress is set up towards the earth or towards another cloud mass of opposite charge. The lightning stroke results from a breakdown of the insulating air layer between them, and also all through the cloud itself, and for a time a partial neutralization or electric equilibrium is effected. This continues until a further redistribution of charges is required and until again the breakdown potential is reached. The continued coalescence of charged water particles which were not discharged at the first breakdown, repeats the original condition, and so on. Unlike the case of a suspended charged metal body, a single discharge does not usually equalize the electric potential of cloud and earth. Instead, many successive discharges occur. It is probably fortunate for us that the process is as gradual as it is, for the ordinary partial discharges of the cloud are each terrific enough and tax our resources sufficiently when we seek to protect ourselves and our effects from them.

Various hypotheses have been proposed to account for the presence of electric charges in cloud masses, but there is no time to discuss them here, and there is in fact little that is really known as to the origin of the electricity of clouds. We shall briefly refer to the phenomena which characterize or accompany the electric discharges. The usual form which the discharge takes is that known as disruptive spark or fork lightning, a long flash or electric spark, joining earth and cloud, or cloud and cloud, and branching within the cloud mass like a tree. Oftentimes between cloud and earth there is seen the single streak zigzag in its course, but within the cloud it ramifies or branches extensively in several directions. In this way only can any considerable part of the cloud contribute its portion to the main discharge path, for, as stated before, the cloud can not act as a conducting body.

Some authorities treat lightning as a discharge of very high frequency like the ordinary discharge of a condenser or Leyden jar. In fact it has not been unusual to assume that such apparatus can be substituted and inferences drawn as to the nature and character of the lightning discharge from experimentation and tests with these laboratory appliances. There is, however, abundant reason to doubt that lightning discharges are really oscillatory. If they oscillate the conditions are such as to forbid such oscillation being of a high frequency order. The cloud discharge represents what is known as a discharge of a large capacity, and the length of the path or spark may reach thousands of feet or even many miles; a long inductive path, while the heat and light given out in every part of the path indicate a high resistance to the passage of the discharge. All of these conditions are together known to be inconsistent with the idea of high frequency oscillation. But the breakdown or discharge is extremely sudden and involves an almost instant rise of the current to a large value, so that the inductive effects upon surrounding structures, such as electric lines or circuits, are very energetic and sharp like a quick blow struck; and these lines or structures become the seat of rapid vibration or high frequency oscillations. The sudden blow of the hammer on a bell in like manner brings out all the rates of the vibration, fundamental and overtones, of which the bell is capable and in which the hammer itself takes no part.

The very sudden startling character of a lightning discharge leads to an exaggeration in the popular estimate of its more evident effects. The amount of light given out is not so great as is often assumed. It does not give effects at all comparable with full sunshine. While doubtless the intrinsic brilliancy is very high the duration of the flash is small, generally only a minute fraction of a second. In photographs of lightning the landscape is generally seen only in outline or poorly lighted by the discharge. In the daytime, when the clouds are not dense enough to greatly darken the sky, the flash loses most of the blinding character it has when seen in the blackness of night. Similarly, the sound of thunder, though of terrifying quality, is not extraordinarily loud. It is a common experience when traveling in a train to note that the sound of even near-by flashes is smothered by the roar of the train so that no thunder is heard. The noise of thunder can not be due in any part, as is sometimes erroneously assumed, to collapse of the air upon itself and into a partial vacuum left by the spark. I have seen this error even recently repeated and even extended to include all the noise of thunder as due to such collapse. When, however, we consider that in a minute fraction of a second the air in the path of the discharge is so highly heated that, if it were confined, its pressure due to heat expansion alone would rise to more than ten atmospheres we can readily understand the explosive shock given to the surrounding air and the propagation therethrough of an intense air wave. In fact such waves from electric spark discharges and from dynamite explosions have been clearly recorded by photography. Moreover, that the collapse of the air after expansion can have little or no effect in the sound production, follows from the fact that the heated gas streak left in the path of the discharge takes an appreciable time to cool on account of its low radiating power. This is shown by the observation that a lightning discharge in dusty air is often succeeded by a luminosity of the streak which persists for a perceptible time and slowly fades away like the luminous trail of a meteor.

Another common misconception is that the prolonged rolling character of thunder is due to reverberations or echoes. In mountain regions with steep rock walls such reverberations possibly contribute to the effect, but it is now clearly recognized that a sufficient single explanation suffices for most cases. Owing to the great length of the lightning spark or path, we receive the sound from the nearer parts of the discharge far in advance of that from the more remote portions, and between these sounds are those from parts of the path at intermediate distances from the observer. It follows from this that no two observers at a distance from each other hear the same succession of sounds in the thunder of a discharge. Whenever portions of the discharge path are situated or extended in an approximate direction at right angles to the line from the observer, the sound from that part of the path is louder or of high amplitude owing to the sound from that part of the path reaching the observer's ear at the same instant. Whenever the path leads directly away from the observer the amplitude is less, the sound is less explosive and takes the character of an extended roll or rumble.

It will be seen from this that every twist and turn and every change of direction of the spark path with respect to the observer's position gives a varying loudness and sequence of sounds. Every branch of the main discharge in like manner records its position and direction, its twistings and bendings in these sound vibrations and sequences. It would seem possible even to record on a phonograph noises from sparks invisible to the eye and map the positions of the sparks in space from records so produced. If this were done as it were stereoscopically or stereographically from two or more separated observing or recording places, the records would contain the necessary data for the reconstruction of the spark and its branches in space.

From the above considerations an attempt to determine the distance of a lightning stroke to earth by counting seconds elapsing between the flash and the first thunder and allowing five seconds to a mile approximately is seen to be futile. Should one of the cloud ramifications or branches of the great tree-like discharge extend in the cloud overhead with relation to the observer, and that part of the discharge be nearer to him than any other he will first hear a receding rumble above him, followed it may be by a heavy explosion from the main or approximately vertical spark between cloud and earth and from the parts of which his distance is nearly the same. This louder explosion will then be followed generally by a prolonged rumble of diminishing loudness which is the sound coming from the ramifications which lead farther to the distant parts of the cloud. Manifestly the counting of time should be between the flash and the heavy explosive sound due to the vertical part of the flash.

Bearing in mind that over the extent of cloud the charged water particles may be said to be waiting for a chance to discharge to earth, it is not surprising that any path which has been opened or broken down by disruption of the insulating layer of air should serve for the discharge of an extended body of cloud. The heated vapor or gas in the path of the discharge is a relatively good conductor of electricity serving to connect the cloud mass to the earth below. The significance of this is understood when it is known that many lightning discharges are multiple. Instead of a single discharge they consist of a number rapidly following one another through the path or spark streak opened to them by the first discharge. This first discharge opens the way or overcomes the insulating barrier to the discharge of portions of the cloud mass, which, on account of remoteness or lower potential, could not themselves have caused the breakdown. These repeated or multiple flashes are exceedingly dangerous, both to life and property. The first discharge may reduce wood to splinters and the subsequent ones set it on fire. The time interval between the successive discharges in such a multiple flash is quite variable and may be long enough to be easily perceptible by the eye. The multiple character is easily disclosed by the image in a revolving mirror. If a strong wind be blowing at the time of such a multiple flash, the hot gas conducting the discharges may be displaced laterally in the direction of the wind with the result of spreading out the discharges into a ribbon more or less broad. Photographs of these ribbon flashes show their true character plainly; each separate discharge appearing as a streak of light parallel to the others and at varying distances apart. In fact parallel discharges of exactly the same contour are sometimes observed many feet apart. Here the hot gas of the first discharge has evidently been shifted by the wind over a considerable space before the second and subsequent discharges took place. Heavy rain seems to weaken the air and help to precipitate a discharge. From the fact that strokes of lightning are often followed by increased fall of rain within a few seconds it is a prevalent idea that the increased downpour is caused by the discharge. In reality the reverse is the case, for just when a gush of rain has reached from the cloud down to within a hundred feet or more from the ground, by far the major part of the air layer has been so weakened electrically by the presence of the water drops, that the discharge itself anticipates the completion of the distance of fall of the rain, and is therefore a short time in advance of the time when the descending gush of rain actually reaches the ground. As the gusts or gushes of rain are more or less local and sweep along with the storm cloud, they are apt to mark out the places of the most frequent lightning strokes. Shelter sought at such times under tall trees is particularly dangerous.

The amount of energy which may be concerned in a lightning discharge is neither definite nor capable of estimation. It would seem that the widest variations in energy may occur and this would account largely for the observed differences in the severity of the effects. It must be remembered also that by far the larger part is expended in the long spark in the air and cloud. Even when much damage is done to objects struck it is only a small fraction of the total energy which is expended on them. Most of the damage to property comes indirectly from the electric discharge by its energy being instantaneously converted into heat. This heat evolves steam and expanded gases in the interior of such materials as wood and causes explosion, shown in the splintering or rupture.

A curious effect, often noted when a tree is struck and shattered, is that when the splinters, sometimes of large size, are thrown bodily out to distances of many feet from the shattered tree, the splinters in their movement remain in parallel to the tree and in a vertical position. They are frequently found standing upright after a stroke and at distances ranging up to sixty or eighty feet away. This fact indicates that the projecting force is quite instantaneous and is exerted equally and at the same moment throughout the length of the splinter in a direction transverse to its length. Such splinters are sometimes ten or twelve feet in length and several inches thick. As will be seen, a person near a large tree which is so disrupted is in danger of being struck in a different way, even if he escapes being included in the path of the stroke itself. Aside from this mechanical danger it is known that to take refuge under a tall tree during a heavy thunderstorm is particularly hazardous. This is so because the human body is a better conductor than the tree trunk, particularly as the trunk itself is the last part to become thoroughly wetted by the rain. The leaves and upper parts are wet and more or less conducting while the tree trunk itself may be yet dry. In such a case the body of a person forms a good path or shunt to the dry trunk and is therefore particularly apt to be traversed by any stroke which reaches the tree.

As before indicated, damage to buildings and other such structures can in all cases be prevented by the provision of an effective shunting path to earth. A most essential feature of such a structure as the Franklin conductor is its good connection with the ground, or better its connection with what we know as a good ground. In early times it was considered that it was quite important that the tip or upper end of the conducting rod should be sharply pointed, or should bristle with sharp points, so to speak. The tips were gilded and the points made of gold or platinum to prevent rusting. The points were supposed to draw off the lightning silently from the cloud and so prevent strokes of lightning. But for millions of volts at cloud distances almost all irregular objects on the surface of the earth are practically pointed. Perhaps on this erroneous assumption of the action of points as applied here little stress was laid on the direct path to earth being chosen and on the necessity of including with it or connecting to it other good paths such as gas pipes, bell wires and the like. There is no need of any special provision of points. A blunt end will do as well, for after all there is practically no silent drawing off of the charge from the cloud, for it is not an insulated conductor. The provision of a lightning conductor on a building undoubtedly increases its chances of being struck by lightning, but if properly arranged it also ensures that the structure shall suffer no harm therefrom. Viewed from our present standpoint it is a curious historical fact that in 1777, just after the war of the American revolution broke out, a miniature verbal war between the advocates of *blunts* and *points*, respectively, as applied to lightning conductors raged. In England party politics led many to condemn *points* as revolutionary and stick to *blunts*. The Royal Society by majority vote decided for points, but those who so voted were considered friends of the rebels in America. George III. took the side of *blunts*. Franklin, who from the first had prescribed points, wrote from France: "The King's changing his pointed conductors for blunt ones is a matter of small importance to me. For it is only since he thought himself safe from the thunders of Heaven that he dared to use his own thunder in destroying his own subjects." The king is reputed to have tried to get Sir John Pringle, then president of the Royal Society to work for blunts, but received the reply: "Sire, I can not reverse the laws and operations of nature." As stated above, it matters not at all which we may use. I have, indeed, seen a number of cases in which the sharp points of lightning conductors had been melted into rounded ends by lightning.

In the foregoing we have been considering the effects of such ordinary discharges of electricity as the disruptive spark, or zigzag flash. Apparently if the testimony is reliable there are other and more rare forms of discharge. I allude to sheet lightning, so-called globular lightning and to bead lightning. But it may be asked, why call sheet lightning a rare form? It is, indeed, true that when a storm is so far distant that the spark discharges can not be seen, as when it is below the horizon, or when the spark is blanketed by a mass of mist or cloud there is to be noted a diffused light or extended illumination, which, on account of distance, may not appear to be attended by thunder. This and similar effects are often called sheet lightning. From observations during a few heavy storms, however, I am led to infer the existence at rare intervals of a noiseless discharge between cloud and earth—a silent effect attended by a diffused light, and which may be the true sheet lightning. In my experience it has accompanied an unusually heavy downpour of rain, the whole atmosphere where the rain fell most heavily being apparently momentarily lighted up by a purple glow, seemingly close at hand in the space between the rain drops. The appearance has been seen in the daytime as an intense bluish or purplish momentary glow without any accompanying sound. It could scarcely have been illusory. It is hoped that other observers will carefully note any such like effect if it occurs. It is certainly a rare phenomenon.

It is quite common that any very bright flash, the details of which from its suddenness and intensity are unobservable, be alluded to as a ball of fire. Doubtless many of the reported cases of so-called ball or globular lightning may be explained as instances of this condition of things. Nevertheless, there are so many recorded instances, apparently in substantial agreement, that it is difficult to escape the conclusion that there in reality exists this rare form of electric effect, globular lightning.

We can not properly discredit observations of phenomena which are so rare that our own chance for confirmation of them may never come. We must, in such cases, carefully scrutinize the testimony, examine the credibility of witnesses and their chances of being mistaken. It is certainly impossible at present to frame any adequate hypothesis to account for this curious and obscure electric appearance. The witnesses agree that it is an accompaniment of thunder-storms and that it resembles a ball of fire floating in the air or moving along a surface, such as the ground. It is not described as very bright or dazzling, and the size of the ball itself may be from an inch or two to a foot or more in diameter. Observers agree that it can persist for some time and that its slow movement allows it to be readily kept under observation while it lasts. When it disappears there is usually an explosion and a single explosive report like that of gun fire. Sometimes it is said to disappear silently. Usually the damage done by its explosion is only slight. This summary of characteristics is common to all accounts. Some accounts are even more detailed, mentioning that the fiery ball seemed to be agitated or with its surface in active motion. I have found two instances occurring many years apart and in widely different localities in which it is described as having a reddish nucleus, in diameter some considerable fraction of the whole. The outer fiery mass has been described as yellowish in color. In some instances it has been seen to fall out of a cloud. It is described as entering buildings and moving about therein. Personally I was for a long period in doubt as to the reality of this strange appearance, deeming it the result of some illusion, or a fanciful myth. But on hearing descriptions by eye witnesses known to me as persons not given to romancing, and finding their accounts to correspond closely with the best detailed descriptions in publications, my doubts have disappeared.

In one instance, while observing the lightning during a heavy thunderstorm, a companion, whose eyes were turned in a direction nearly opposite to my own, suddenly called to me that a ball had just dropped out of the cloud some distance away. The view of the ground was obstructed by buildings and I unfortunately just missed it. The noise of its explosion was, however, heard in the direction indicated by my fellow observer, as a single report like the firing of a gun. At the time I closely questioned him as to details of the appearance. Our ignorance of its possible nature is complete. No rational hypothesis exists to explain it. Science has in the past unraveled many obscure phenomena. The difficulty here is that it is too accidental and rare for consistent study, and we have not as yet any laboratory phenomena which resemble it closely.

Sometimes photographs taken during thunder-storms have been found to carry curiously contorted streaks in some degree resembling lightning flashes. Generally they have been found on plates upon which undoubted lightning discharges have been recorded. In some instances which have come to my notice the streaks have had the appearance of a string of dots or beads and have been taken to represent a very rare form of lightning known as bead lightning. A number of such photographs have been submitted to me for opinion as to the nature of the curious streaks. In all cases they are explained as due to the camera having been moved without capping the lens, permitting images of lights, such as arc lights, or spots of reflected light from wet or polished surfaces to traverse the plate in an irregular course. They are then only records of the inadvertence of the lightning photographer. In one instance the effect was so curious that it was several years before the true explanation was found. In that case there were two wavy contorted streaks of perfectly parallel and of similar outline, but unequal in intensity, rising each from a rail of a single track railway, and apparently terminating in the air fifteen or twenty feet above the tracks. They were finally traced to a moving camera, and a reflection from the wet and polished rail surfaces of the light of an arc lamp located outside the field of view. It required a visit to the place itself to enable this conclusion to be reached. The particular beaded streaks or lines of dots were traced to the fact that the arc lamps causing them were operated by alternating currents which naturally give light interrupted at the zero of current; one hundred and twenty times per second being the usual rate. All this emphasizes the need of care and wholesome scrutiny or even skepticism before reaching a conclusion in such cases.

Is bead lightning, which has at times been described as observed visually, a reality? If it is it appears to be even rarer than the globular variety. Perhaps it is a string of globules; a variety of globular lightning. But we can not make assumptions. As in the case of globular lightning there is some testimony, which can not be wholly disregarded, tending to show that a form of discharge resembling a string of beads can actually exist. An account of an instance was given me within one hour after the occurrence itself. The witness was known to me as perfectly reliable. The appearance was described as a festoon of finely colored oval beads hung as it were from one part of cloud to another, and as persisting for some seconds while gradually fading away. The opposite ends of each bead were said to be different in color. It was seen during an afternoon thunderstorm and spoken of as very beautiful, and altogether different from the usual zigzag flash.

If I have dwelt upon these exceptional appearances at some length it is because they seem to show that in electricity there is much yet to learn and abundant opportunity for future investigation. It is certainly literally true that, in the language of Shakespeare, "There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Such work belongs to the science of physics, now recognized as fundamental in all study of nature's processes. In electrical engineering, which is in reality an art based upon applied physics, the subject of lightning protection has always been one of considerable if not vital importance. Just as a lightning discharge from a cloud clears up a path for other discharges to follow, so in electric undertakings it opens up paths for the escape of the electricity we are sending out to do the work intended, such as for lighting, power or other use. In the past, disablement of machinery in electric stations has not been rare. The recent growth of long-distance transmission involving hundreds of miles of wire carried on poles across country, over hills and through valleys, has set new problems of protection, and called for renewed activity in providing means for rendering the lines and apparatus immune to the baneful effects of electric storms. Judging the future by the past, we may conclude that, whatever difficulties of the kind arise, in the great future extensions of such engineering work, science and invention will provide resources ample for the needs, and the rapid advance will be continued unchecked.

ELIHU THOMSON