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AN ENGINEER'S OUTLOOK¹

By Sir ALFRED EWING, K.C.B., F.R.S.

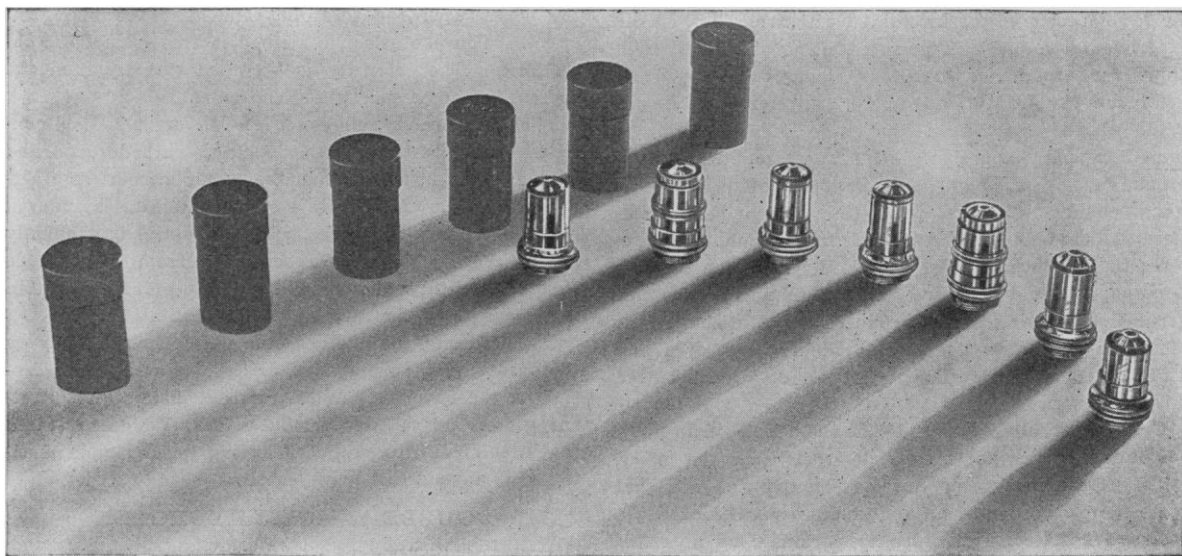
LET me make a confession which may also serve as an apology. I have the unwelcome distinction of being the oldest president the association has ever suffered. In its primitive years the average age of presidents scarcely exceeded fifty: one of them, aged only twenty-nine, afterwards founded the Cavendish Laboratory, and so did a service to science which it would be impossible to overvalue. As time went on the choice fell on older men, and now the electors have taken what one hopes may be regarded as an extreme step. But, as it happens, this is not the first time I have read the president's address. At the Edinburgh meeting of 1921 the president, Sir Edward Thorpe, was prostrated by illness and asked me to act as his mouthpiece. The small service so rendered brought an unexpected reward. Some newspaper report must have confused the platform substitute with the real president, for a well-known novelist sent me a copy

¹ From the address of the president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, York, 1932.

of one of her romances, which was no doubt meant as a tribute to Sir Edward. It was called "The Mighty Atom"—an arresting title. Perhaps that is why I did not read beyond the title-page. Without close examination it was put by a more orderly hand than mine on a shelf that already held works on like subjects by authors such as J. J. Thomson and Rutherford and Bohr. "The Mighty Atom" was said to be one of the best sellers of its day: in that respect, if in no other, it found congenial company when it was joined on the same shelf by a series of volumes from the fascinating pens of Eddington and Jeans. These, however, I need not tell you I have read and reread, to my entire pleasure and partial understanding.

If "The Mighty Atom" was an arresting phrase, it was also an apt one. For we now know the atom to be indeed mighty in senses that were little suspected by the begetters of atomic theory. It has been mighty in sweeping away ideas that were found inadequate, in demanding fresh concepts, in presenting a new

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