A Science Service Feature

Released on receipt
but intended for use
May 7,1927.

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed April 30,1927.

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THE VAGARIES OF BALL LIGHTNING

Although the origin of ball lightning is still a mystery, a large fund of information has been gathered concerning the characteristics of this curious phenomenon. Reports of numerous observations were collected by Arago, Flammarion and other authorities of the last centuries, and much larger collections have appeared in recent years. The latest work on this subject, published by Dr. Walther Brand, in Germany, contains a critical analysis of 215 cases of ball lightning, selected from a much larger number of reports to which the author had access.

Ball lightning occurs during thunderstorms, being more frequent toward the end of the storm, and relatively more frequent in winter thunderstorms than in summer thunderstorms. It generally takes the form of a red luminous ball or hollow sphere, from four to eight inches in diameter. A hissing, humming or fluttering sound often accompanies it. The time the ball remains visible varies from a small fraction of a second to several minutes, but in a majority of cases is only a few seconds. The ball may first be seen emerging from the base of a cloud, or it may form in midair, or, again, it may suddenly appear resting on some object. Frequently, but not always, its appearance follows immediately after a flash of ordinary lightning.

The movement of the ball through the air appears to be independent of the wind. It may disappear silently, or with a slight crack, or, in some cases, with a deafening explosion.

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Washington, D.C.