

Released on receipt  
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July 14, 1928.

A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed July 7, 1928.

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MANUFACTURING A THUNDERSHOWER

Once in a while a mere mortal manufactures a thundershower by accident. This happens on a day when the air is calm and well charged with water vapor -- i.e., water in an invisible gaseous form. A lighted cigarette is dropped upon a heap of dry forest litter. Soon the forest is ablaze.

What follows illustrates several interesting operations described in books on meteorology. First there is the ascent of large masses of hot air. The supply of moisture originally present in the atmosphere is augmented by the processes of evaporation and combustion. The rising air cools by expansion and moisture condenses. Drops form. They are shattered by the uprushing gusts and acquire electric charges. Strong potential gradients are set up. Presently the heavens are balancing their volt accounts. Meantime rain descends in a deluge.

Finally the downpour puts the fire out and the storm ceases.

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