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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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ROCKET LIGHTNING

The phenomenon of "rocket lightning" was recently observed from the British steamship "Inkum", while off one of the Bahama Islands. Early one evening, when the ship had just run out of a heavy shower, the horizon to the southwest was ablaze with sheet lightning. "Out of the center of this silent confusion of light," writes Third Officer Jackson, "one thin streak of lightning was seen to emerge, shooting up the sky in a perfectly straight line until apparently right overhead, and then scattering at the extremity like a rocket. Unlike the usual fork lightning, it was not blinding, and it gave the impression of being decidedly sluggish in its upward movement."

Prof. W. H. Everett saw similar lightning near Calcutta, India, in July, 1903. He writes: "At intervals of three minutes or so, immediately after a flash -- which, as is common here, was mostly multiple, lasting a second or so altogether -- a luminous trail shot straight up about as fast as, or rather faster than, a rocket and of very similar appearance, but with minute waves, like ribbon lightning. It terminated in apparently clear sky. No thunder was audible."

The total number of such observations thus far reported is not large. Several of them date from the eighteenth century.

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