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August 15, 1931

A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed August 8, 1931

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LUMINOUS RAIN

According to a report received by the British Meteorological Office from its observer at Tavistock, England, luminous rain was observed at that place during a thunder-shower late in the evening of June 5, 1917. "It seemed," he stated, "as if the drops were something like streaks of whitish phosphorescent lines of fire about three inches long."

A somewhat similar phenomenon was reported in an English newspaper in 1892 on the authority of an electrical engineer, who claimed to have witnessed it at Cordova, Spain. "The weather," we are told, "had been warm and undisturbed by wind, and soon after dark the sky became overcast by clouds. About 8 o'clock there came a flash of lightning, followed by great drops of electrical rain, each one of which, on touching the ground, walls or trees, gave a faint crack and emitted a spark of light. The phenomenon continued for several seconds."

A century ago the French physicist Arago collected about a dozen reports of luminous rain, hail and snow, dating mostly from the eighteenth century, and he devotes a chapter to the subject in his classic work, "Le Tonnerre."

Can electrified raindrops and ice particles emit sparks? And, if they can, why is the phenomenon so rarely observed?

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