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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed September 19, 1931

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THE BAROMETER AS A WEATHER GLASS

A good barometer is an accurate means of measuring atmospheric pressure, but its value as a means of indicating future weather has been greatly overestimated by the public almost ever since the instrument was invented. The custom of placing at various points on the barometer scale such inscriptions as "Rain," "Stormy," "Change," "Set Fair," etc., dates from the latter part of the 17th century. These inscriptions, which have disappeared from most modern barometers intended for strictly scientific use, are quite misleading. As Sir Napier Shaw remarks: "Strictly interpreted, they would imply that the weather is the same at all points along an isobar, and the examination of any synoptic chart shows that to be a very imperfect statement!" Changes in the height of the mercury are of much more significance as weather prognostics than its actual height at any particular time, but even these changes need to be interpreted in connection with weather indications of other kinds.

The exaggerated confidence once placed in the barometer as a "weather glass" is well illustrated in Joseph Addison's Latin poem "Barometri Descriptio," of which there is an English translation by George Sewall. The poet apparently supposed the instrument might even be used as a basis of long-range weather forecasting, for he says:

"In its bright face you certainly behold  
The distant winter and the future cold," etc.

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