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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed January 12, 1935

CHAIN LIGHTNING

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The popular comparison "as fast as chain lightning" is pretty old. It appears to have been current long before the year 1876, when the first scientific account was published, in France, of what is now known to science as "beaded lightning." Moreover, beaded lightning, which is somewhat chain-like in appearance, is not common, and probably few people who use the expression above quoted have ever heard of it. What, then, is chain lightning? The latest "Webster" says it is "lightning which appears to move very rapidly in a long angular, zigzag or forked course," while the Oxford Dictionary says that it "appears to form a long zigzag or broken line." Of course, photographs show that lightning is not really angular or zigzag, but it may look that way to the less sensitive human eye.

The following account of lightning that really looked chain-like, besides being remarkable in other respects, was published long ago in the English journal Nature:

"On September 9, 1895, I was cycling near Pitlochry, N.B. The day had been extremely hot -- 80 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade -- and as dusk came on it grew somewhat foggy, and flashes of distant lightning became frequent. At ten o'clock there suddenly came on a terrific thunderstorm. Crash succeeded crash, and the lightning, of all colors, blazed almost continuously. Objects fifteen miles off could be seen as plainly as in bright daylight, if not more so. \*\*\* But the chief peculiarity was the occurrence of eight strange flashes of a chain formation, with large elliptical links, and of a golden-yellow colour. These flashes were not rapid in their passage, as ordinary lightning is wont to be; but one of them took slightly over a minute to pour from the clouds to the edge of the valley opposite me. Two of these chains of living, burning gold passed between adjacent clouds, while the remaining six came to earth, one in the field just beside me."

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