

## CORRESPONDENCE

## The Explanation of "Fire balls"

by

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I wish to make an enquiry, purely as a matter of academic interest, regarding "fire balls". I notice recent press reports of two housewives having seen the phenomenon when lightning struck close to their home yesterday.

I have never heard any logical explanation of "fire balls" and their behaviour as usually described is so contrary to the known laws of nature as to suggest they are merely figments of the imagination.

I have a theory which I submit for comment. An extremely bright light temporarily inactivates the retinal cells on which it falls, so that for a short period after seeing such a bright light, and 'after-image' persists, of the same shape as the source of light but indefinite in outline and colour.

My theory is that the observers of "fire balls" see the flash of lightning at close proximity, perhaps out of the corner of their eye, and on turning to look at the origin (as they would instinctively do) the "after image" of the flash is observed to "float" in the same direction as they turn, causing them to turn further, and so on. It then disappears gradually though they in remembering the occurrence afterwards, usually decide the disappearance has been sudden and accompanied 'with a bang'. It is suggested that the nervous shock due to the intensity of the flash and the thunder, is probably sufficient to produce mental confusion as to the sequence of events, particularly the "bang" and the time at which damage, if any, was caused by the flash.

Descriptions of "fire balls" usually seem to fit in very well with this theory.

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11 December 1958

(Dr. Stevenson has presented an interesting theory on a subject which has been well described in literature but has no basis of substantiated theory to account for its development or behaviour. His letter is published with a view to provoking comment from meteorologists. Ed. A.M.M.)