

In our own story, KING'S EVIL (F&SF, Oct. 1956), mention was made of of the first "Philadelphia experiment"—of which every school-child knows—kites, keys, thunder and lightning. Up till now, however, that this experiment had not been the last, efcap'd the publick Knowledge. We will say no more, but allow the reader to read on . . . perhaps rueful and regretful that the subject of the knowledge was ever discovered at all.

The Second Philadelphia Experiment

Robert F. Young

(NOTE: WITH THE EXCEPTION of the opening paragraph, which is included to indicate the probable chronological point in the Autobiography at which the pages dealing with the second Philadelphia experiment originally occurred, the following document has never before been published. Why, after removing the pages from the rest of, his manuscript, Dr. Franklin did not burn them in keeping with his intention, is anybody's guess, and how they could have gone undiscovered for so many years is a mystery which will probably never be resolved. In any event, the account of the second Philadelphia experiment has finally come to light, happily providing us with an instance of the Greco-Overby Audio-Temporal Throwback Principle in action—an instance that predates the discovery of the principle by over three hundred years.)

What gave my book * (* A pamphlet on the sameness of lightning and electricity, published in England circa 1752.) the more sudden and general celebrity was the success of one of its proposed experiments, made by Messrs. Dalibard and De Lor at Marly, for drawing lightning from the clouds. This engag'd the public attention every where. M. de Lor, who had an apparatus for experimental philosophy, and lectur'd in that branch of science, undertook to repeat what he called the Philadelphia Experiments; and, after they were performed before the king and court, all the curious of Paris flocked to see them. I will not swell this narrative with an account of that capital experiment, nor of the infinite pleasure I receiv'd in the success of a similar one I made soon after with a kite at Philadelphia, as both are to be found in the histories of electricity.

I would like, however, to make some mention of a second experiment which I conduct'd not long after that time in the privacy of my home and which result'd in a most singular phenomenon. In anticipation of the noble uses to which electricity will some day be put, I had for some time been seeking to improve upon the Leyden jar in the hope of applying my discovery toward some practical purpose, and to this end I had devis'd a sort of super-jar from a large and thick-walled demijohn, which I had previously stripp'd of its wicker casing. The intervening years have dimm'd my memory insofar as the exact arrangement of the apparatus which I then assembl'd is concern'd, but I do recall that in addition to the Leyden jar it consist'd among other things of a glass lamp chimney, a quartz paperweight, a brass doorkey, a kite, a tuning fork, an iron wille, and two pewter plates. I had sent the kite and key aloft earlier in the evening, having first ascertain'd that there was a good likelihood of a thunderstorm, and I purpos'd to convert the electrical fluid which would drench the immediate area once the key procur'd lightning from the clouds, into light.

The apparatus assembl'd to my satisfaction, I sat down before my work table to wait. Distant rumblings of thunder sound'd, and occasionally the darkness beyond the windows leap'd into brief and blinding brightness. Not wishing to jeopardize the safety of any of the members of my family, I had arrang'd matters so that none of them would be present during the experiment, and hence I had the entire house to myself.

The rumbling grew in volume, and the brightnesses increas'd both in frequency and in intensity. I had to proceed on the assumption that the kite was still aloft, since were I to leave the apparatus the moment for which I eagerly wait'd might come and go during my absence, leaving me no more enlighten'd than I had been before. The thought that I might be playing with forces the true nature of which I could not even

guess at cross'd my mind, but I did not let it dissuade me from my purpose, having come to the conclusion during the course of previous experiments that all worthwhile undertakings are accompani'd by an element of risk.

The lightning bolt which the key attract'd took me unawares when it came, and the thunder that follow'd shook the house. The glass lamp-chimney shatter'd, whether from the vibration occasion'd by the thunder or from the actual functioning of the apparatus, I have never been able to determine, but in either case my attempt to convert electrical fluid into light did not bear fruit. However, while the experiment fail'd to gain its desired end, it was not altogether without results, for the tuning fork was quivering erratically, and when the sound of thunder fad'd away, a voice could be heard—a loud presumptuous voice that brought me to my feet.

At first I thought that someone had slipp'd into the room and was addressing me, but a glance around inform'd me that such was not the case, and I could only conclude that my apparatus was in some way responsible for the sounds I was hearing. The invisible speaker spoke only a few slurred words, and then another speaker—or possibly a singer—took over and began caterwauling at the top of his hobble-dehoyish voice to the accompaniment of a medley of sounds that I can only describe as a series of throbs, thrums, and twangs. I subsequently transcrib'd the spoken sounds from memory:

First Voice: —to the Dick the Disk Show, brought to you by W-D-U.

Second voice:

BABYBABY-BAI3YBABYBABYBABYBABY-BABYBABYBABYBABYBABY-BABYBABYBA
BY HUH-WONCHU WONCH

UWONCHU-WONCHUWONCHUWON-CHUWONCHUWONCH UWONCHUWONCHU

CUMMA-ONAONAONAONAONA-ONAONAONAONA

HUM! BABYBABYBABYBABY-BABYBABYBABY

It was at this point that a fit of trembling seiz'd me, causing me to lurch against the table. The impact dislodg'd my apparatus, and grille, Leyden jar, pewter plates, &c went crashing to the floor. Immediately, the caterwauling ceas'd, and a blessed silence filled the room.

I was unnerv'd all the rest of the evening, and I resolv'd never to try the experiment again. Recently I came across a possible explanation for its bizarre results in a paper written by a little-known French metaphysicist named M. de Vrains. According to M. de Vrains, the aether acts as a storage place for sounds and contains all of the sounds that have ever been creat'd on Earth. Occasionally, "downdrafts" occur, and bear some of these sounds back to earth, where they are heard by "preternatural people." I consider M. de Vrains' theory to be medieval nonsense for the most part, but I do think that he has hit upon a half-truth (that is to say that his basic idea is correct, but that other forces are at work of which he is totally ignorant), and I have come to the conclusion that my apparatus some how occasion'd one of these "downdrafts" and briefly expos'd my eardrums to the tortured wails of a victim of a long-ago puberty rite. M. de Vrains makes the further suggestion that the aether may not be subject to time and that the sounds stor'd in it may comprise not only all of the sounds that have ever been creat'd on earth but all of the sounds that ever will be created on earth. This, of course, is arrant nonsense. Certain of the words I heard do not lend themselves to a primitive past, but neither do they lend themselves to a civilized future. It may very well be that M. de Vrains might think they do, however, and use them to substantiate his theory: Which is why I have just decid'd to remove this account of the second Philadelphia experiment from my papers and burn it.