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Power from the Air

DURING the War there was developed in Germany a new art—or science—that bids fair to revolutionize our present means of obtaining power.

This art, which is as new now as wireless was twenty-five years ago, will attain proportions during the next twenty years that may appear fantastic to-day. The inventor of the new science, an engineer of note, Herr Hermann Plauson, has devoted years of labor to his researches and he has now actually in use small power plants, that generate electricity direct from the air, day and night, without interruption at practically no cost, once the plant is constructed.

We had occasion, in one of our former issues, to describe the system, roughly, from cabled dispatches, but complete information is available now. The amount of electrical power that resides in our atmosphere is astounding. Herr Plauson found in his experiments that a single balloon sent aloft to a height of 300 yards gave a constant current at 400 volts of 1.8 amperes, or in 24 hours over 17¼ kilowatts! By using two balloons in connection with a special condenser battery, the power obtained was 81½ kilowatts in 24 hours! The actual current delivered was 6.8 amperes at 500 volts.

The best balloons used by the inventor are made of thin aluminum leaf. No fabric is used. A simple internal system of ribs, stays and wires, give the balloon rigidity as well as a certain amount of elasticity. The balloon, when made airtight, is filled with hydrogen or better, with helium. It will then stay aloft for weeks at a time. The outer surface is dotted with extremely sharp pins, made sharp electrolytically. Ordinary pins did not prove good current collectors, as they lacked extreme sharpness. The pins themselves were made from amalgamated zinc, containing a radium preparation, in order to ionize the air. It was also found that by dotting the outer surface of the balloon with zinc-amalgam more current could be collected. Even better results were obtained with polonium-amalgam. Plauson states that the function of these amalgams is purely photoelectric.

One hundred of such captive balloons, separated one hundred yards from each other, will give a steady yield of 200 horse power. This is the minimum, because in the winter this figure increases up to 400 horse power, due to the higher electrification of the atmosphere.

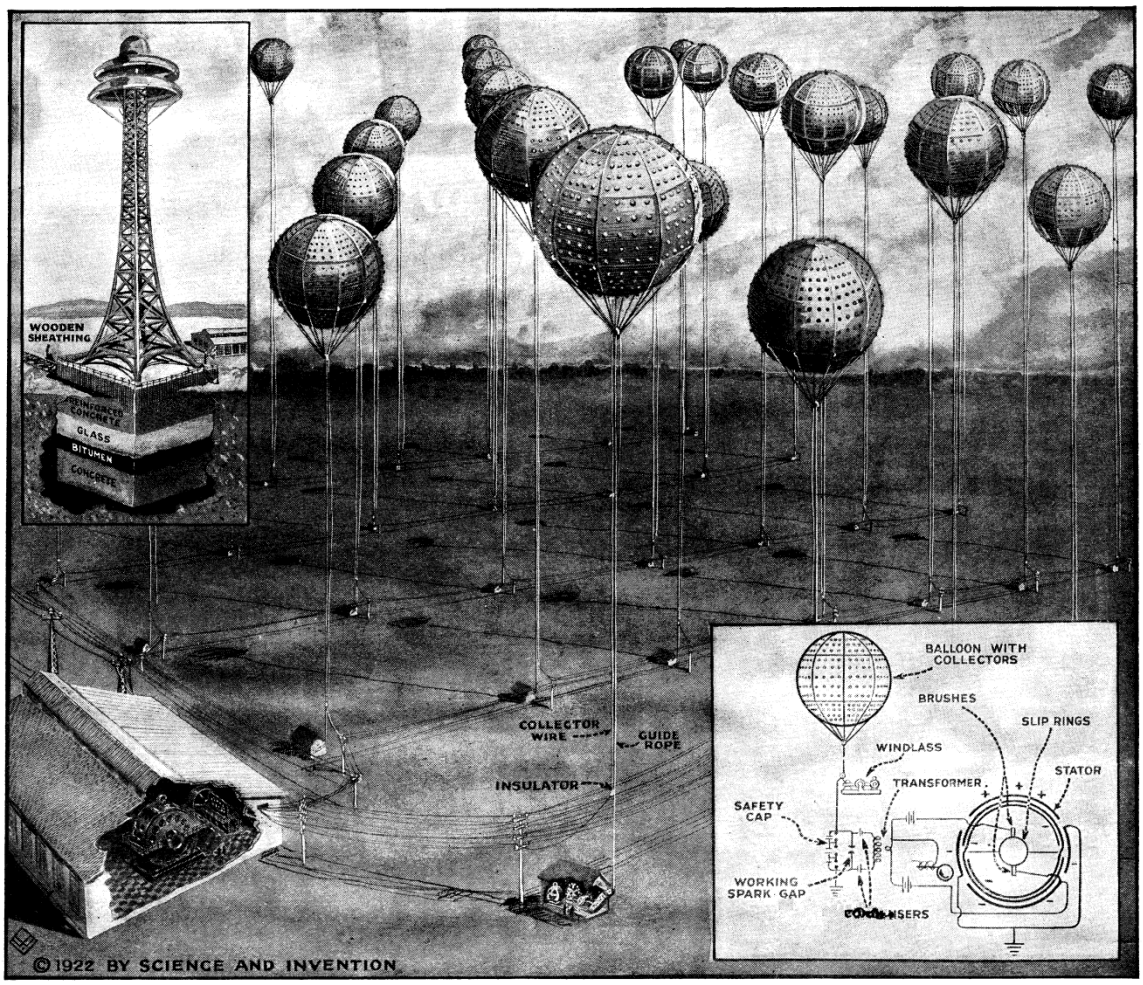
We need not go into the technic of how the current is finally made useable for industrial purposes, suffice it to say that the problem has been entirely solved by Herr Plauson. By using batteries of condensers, high tension transformers, etc., the current can be transformed to any form desired, such as for lighting lamps, running motors, charging storage batteries, etc.

Plauson also invented a sort of electrostatic rotary transformer which gives alternating current without the use of condensers and transformers. Indeed, its output is very great, as it actually "sucks" the current down rapidly from the collector balloons. There is no doubt that this invention will soon come into universal use all over the world. We will see the land dotted with the captive balloons, particularly in the country and wherever water power does not abound. Indeed, the time is not distant when nearly all of our power will be derived from the atmosphere. So far it seems to be the cheapest form of power known, it being much cheaper than even water power—the cheapest form of power known to-day.

Not only that, but as the inventor points out, no devastating thunder storms occur near such aerial power plants, because the balloons act not only as lightning arresters, but they quickly discharge the biggest thunder cloud, safely and noiselessly through their grounded spark gaps.

H. GERNSBACK.

Power from the Air



For Many Years Electrical Engineers Have Endeavored to Devise Some Means Whereby It Would Become Possible to Utilize the Free Electrical Energy Ever Present in the Atmosphere, But They Were Not Successful, as Every Now and Then an Extra Heavy Surge of Static Current Would Rush Down the Elevated Conductor and Endanger the Lives of the Experimenters, or Else Destroy the Apparatus Connected With It. A German Engineer Has, However, Devised the Somewhat Elaborate Scheme Here Shown in Brief, and He Has Succeeded, at Least so His Report States, in Safely Extracting Several Kilowatts of Electrical Power from the Atmosphere With Metallic Surfaced Balloons, Elevated to a Height of Only 1,000 Feet.

WE have previously treated of the extraction of electrical energy from the atmosphere. The difference of electric potential in different parts of the atmosphere, and the difference between the upper air and earth make it a tempting proposition to obtain power from atmospheric electricity. The power would take the form of high potential difference with a discharge almost of a static nature. It has long appeared rather doubtful to conservative engineers if such a source of power should really be available. Yet when we see the lightning flash, it certainly suggests very high power, even tho the total of its energy may be small, on account of the small duration of the discharge. It is not to the thunder storm that we look for getting power from the atmosphere, as the subject is now being seriously investigated. A German scientist, Hermann Plauson, has publisht a very elaborate work on this subject, and has investigated the use of kites, balloons and towers, for the utilization of the high potentials existing in the air at different altitudes, and has studied out the construction of motors to be operated by the peculiar type of discharge which will be obtained, if the projects are successfully carried out.

We will first speak of the methods used for collecting electricity from the upper air. The author cites several German patents. One of them shows the use of a kite balloon. The balloon is shown floating in the air, kite fashion, and from it hangs a great net or aerial for the collection of electricity. The conductor from the aerial leads to the ground station; quite an elaborate description is given of the net-work which the patentee proposes to have covered with needle points. A windlass takes in or pays out cable for the balloon, and the patentee claims that by sending the apparatus to a height of about one mile he will have 225,000 volts to draw upon. He then speaks of a battery of 20,000 cells in series, which will use up 40,000 to 50,000 volts in the charging. This certainly provides for a reasonably large fall of potential.

But our author discards this idea and first suggests something more permanent. He proposes the erection of towers to be in the neighborhood of 1,000 feet high, or about the height of the Eiffel Tower. At the summit he has his collecting aerial. The appliance consists of a number of copper tubes; within each one he proposes to burn gas lamps, whose products of combustion will reach the aerial, a collecting net-work covering the tops of the tubes. One of his apprehensions is that if rain should wet his connections trouble might ensue, so he proposes a protection at the top in the shape of a great bell-like shield, resembling in his terms "a Siamese pagoda." He also compares the form of the protection to that of a great petticoat insulator. Another of his difficulties is that he must have his tower insulated from the earth. He, therefore describes a complicated foundation for his structure.

He proposes first to pour in at the bottom of the excavation a foundation of simple concrete. On this he places a layer of asphalt, and then a layer of cast glass, three to ten feet thick, and then comes a reinforced concrete foundation, to which the metallic foot of the tower is to be anchored. This foundation must rise at least seven feet above the ground level, and is to be boarded in on all sides to protect it from moisture. The author's idea is to erect a number of these towers connected by a horizontal cable, to which the aerials for collection of potentials are secured.

The author strongly advocates balloons as collectors of the electric power of the air. These he depicts covered with spots. These spots indicate areas to be variously coated and prepared to collect potential from the atmosphere.

In the first place he describes the balloon as made of thin metallic leaf supported by internal ribs. Steel wires silver-plated, copper-plated, or aluminum-coated, run from the balloon to the pendant or junction ring. To this ring the tether-cable is attached and runs to an insulated windlass on the surface of the earth. The balloon is to rise to an altitude varying from 300 feet to three miles.

The coating of the spots is to be of the thinnest amalgam, of mercury and gold, or zinc, or even polonium, perhaps only 1/2500 inch thick. All over the upper face of the balloon are numberless metal points. To prepare the needle-like wires, they are collected into bundles and are treated electrolytically in a bath, so as to be dissolved in part. This gives a sharp point and roughened surface, all adapted for collecting the electric energy. The points may be of copper, steel, or some hard metallic alloy. After this corrosion, as it may be termed, the wires are plated with gold or other of the so-called "noble metals." It is advised that polonium or radium salts be added to the plating bath.

Dr. Plauson devotes many pages of his book to describing his motor. This is a rotary motor including a stator and rotor and its peculiarity is that it contains no coils, develops no electro-magnetic field properly speaking, but works by static excitation. One typical arrangement is shown in our illustration. The stator plates and rotor plates are concentric with each other, representing segments of cylinders. The alternation of negative and positive charged plates produces the rotation. In the connections there is included a safety spark gap to take care of dangerous potentials. Inductances and capacities are also used and indicated. It was found that the plates heated, owing to the Foucault currents, and to overcome this, several methods of subdividing the stator and rotor plates, are described by the author.

The whole subject is quite captivating, and it really seems as if the utilization of the electricity of the air may be almost in sight. It would seem possible to carry out experiments in this direction by means of the Eiffel Tower, but, of course, the trouble here is that the tower is grounded, and perfect insulation of the collecting surface is absolutely essential.

And now our author gives us some practical details. He says that on the Finland plains he carried out experiments with a balloon made of aluminum leaf with collecting needles of amalgamated zinc with a radium preparation as an ionizer. The surface of the balloon was sprinkled over with zinc amalgam. It was sent up to a height of 300 meters, nearly 1,000 feet, and was held by a copper-plated steel wire. A constant current of 1.8 amperes at an average of 400 volts potential difference was obtained. This gave nearly three-quarters of a kilowatt, or close to one horse-power. The collector of the balloon insulated from the earth showed a tension of 42,000 volts. By sending up a second balloon with an antenna to the same height at a distance of 100 meters from the first balloon, a current of over 3 amperes was obtained. Then by putting into the circuit a large condenser, whose capacity was equal to the surface capacity of both balloons, and of the antenna connections, the current rose to 6.8 amperes with about 500 volts mean tension. By the use of these two balloons, he eventually ran up the power to 3.4 kilowatts.