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RADIOACTIVITY

By the late Sir Joseph (John) Thomson, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge

I now pass to a very brief consideration of one of the most important and interesting advances ever made in physics, and in which Canada, as the place of the labors of Professors Rutherford and Soddy, has taken a conspicuous part. I mean the discovery and investigation of radioactivity. Radioactivity was brought to light by the Röntgen rays. One of the many remarkable properties of these rays is to excite phosphorescence in certain substances, including the salts of uranium, when they fall upon them. Since Röntgen rays produce phosphorescence, it occurred to Beequerel to try whether phosphorescence would produce Röntgen rays. He took some uranium salts which had been made to phosphoresce by exposure, not to Röntgen rays but to sunlight, tested them, and found that they gave out rays possessing properties similar to Röntgen rays. Further investigation showed, however, that to get these rays it was not necessary to make the uranium phosphoresce, that the salts were just as active if they had been kept in the dark. It thus appeared that the property was due to the metal and not to the phosphorescence, and that uranium and its compounds possessed the power of giving out rays which, like Röntgen rays, affect a photographic plate, make certain minerals phosphoresce, and make gases through which they pass conductors of electricity.

Niepee de Saint-Victor had observed some years before this discovery that paper soaked in a solution of uranium nitrate affected a photographic plate, but the observation excited but little interest. The ground had
Editor's Summary

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