

Letters to the Editor

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Possible Existence of a Neutron

It has been shown by Bothe and others that beryllium when bombarded by α -particles of polonium emits a radiation of great penetrating power, which has an absorption coefficient in lead of about 0.3 (cm.)^{-1} . Recently Mme. Curie-Joliot and M. Joliot found, when measuring the ionisation produced by this beryllium radiation in a vessel with a thin window, that the ionisation increased when matter containing hydrogen was placed in front of the window. The effect appeared to be due to the ejection of protons with velocities up to a maximum of nearly $3 \times 10^9 \text{ cm. per sec.}$ They suggested that the transference of energy to the proton was by a process similar to the Compton effect, and estimated that the beryllium radiation had a quantum energy of $50 \times 10^6 \text{ electron volts.}$

I have made some experiments using the valve counter to examine the properties of this radiation excited in beryllium. The valve counter consists of a small ionisation chamber connected to an amplifier, and the sudden production of ions by the entry of a particle, such as a proton or α -particle, is recorded by the deflexion of an oscillograph. These experiments have shown that the radiation ejects particles from hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium, carbon, air, and argon. The particles ejected from hydrogen behave, as regards range and ionising power, like protons with speeds up to about $3.2 \times 10^9 \text{ cm. per sec.}$ The particles from the other elements have a large ionising power, and appear to be in each case recoil atoms of the elements.

If we ascribe the ejection of the proton to a Compton recoil from a quantum of $52 \times 10^6 \text{ electron volts,}$ then the nitrogen recoil atom arising by a similar process should have an energy not greater than about 400,000 volts, should produce not more than about 10,000 ions, and have a range in air at N.T.P. of about 1.3 mm. Actually, some of the recoil atoms in nitrogen produce at least 30,000 ions. In collaboration with Dr. Feather, I have observed the recoil atoms in an expansion chamber, and their range, estimated visually, was sometimes as much as 3 mm. at N.T.P.

These results, and others I have obtained in the course of the work, are very difficult to explain on the assumption that the radiation from beryllium is a quantum radiation, if energy and momentum are to be conserved in the collisions. The difficulties disappear, however, if it be assumed that the radiation consists of particles of mass 1 and charge 0, or neutrons. The capture of the α -particle by the Be^9 nucleus may be supposed to result in the formation of a C^{12} nucleus and the emission of the neutron. From the energy relations of this process the velocity of the neutron emitted in the forward direction may well be about $3 \times 10^9 \text{ cm. per sec.}$ The collisions of this neutron with the atoms through which it passes give rise to the recoil atoms, and the observed energies of the recoil atoms are in fair agreement with this view. Moreover, I have observed that the protons ejected from hydrogen by the radiation emitted in the opposite direction to that of the exciting α -particle appear to have a much smaller range than those ejected by the forward radiation.

This again receives a simple explanation on the neutron hypothesis.

If it be supposed that the radiation consists of quanta, then the capture of the α -particle by the Be^9 nucleus will form a C^{13} nucleus. The mass defect of C^{13} is known with sufficient accuracy to show that the energy of the quantum emitted in this process cannot be greater than about $14 \times 10^6 \text{ volts.}$ It is difficult to make such a quantum responsible for the effects observed.

It is to be expected that many of the effects of a neutron in passing through matter should resemble those of a quantum of high energy, and it is not easy to reach the final decision between the two hypotheses. Up to the present, all the evidence is in favour of the neutron, while the quantum hypothesis can only be upheld if the conservation of energy and momentum be relinquished at some point.

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Cambridge, Feb. 17.