

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed April 3, 1928

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ST. ELMO'S FIRE

St. Elmo's fire is not always a "fire", for while it assumes a luminous and visible form only by night the discharge itself is equally common by day. A recent French work on atmospheric electricity by E. Mathias says of this phenomenon:

"During the day the discharge is expressed by an electric wind, which crackles; the hair of travelers and the coats of their steeds stand on end when they are brushed. At night luminous aureoles stand out around the head and form at the finger-tips when the hand is raised above the head. In times of thunderstorm the phenomena are exaggerated; luminous pencils are formed at the points of lightning conductors, on the weathercocks of houses and on the yards and mastheads of ships."

M. Mathias mentions the frequency with which these discharges are seen on the summits of the Pic du Midi and the Puy de Dome, in southern France, and records the following episode:

"On June 25, 1888, the Prince of Wales (afterward Edward VII), accompanied by his secretary, was able to observe the phenomenon of St. Elmo's fire on the gallery of the platform attached to the tower at the summit of the Puy de Dome. When he took off his hat his hair stood on end. Lifting his arms above his head a discharge of electricity took place from the finger-tips. When the prince pointed his walking-stick to the sky the crackling manifested itself at its extremity."

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