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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed September 5, 1928

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ST. ELMO'S FIRE CAUSED BY A VOLCANO

The recent renewal of volcanic activity at Krakatoa, in the Strait of Sunda, where one of the most stupendous eruptions in history occurred in 1883, recalls the fact that marvelous electric displays attended that famous outbreak. There was not only volcanic lightning on an unprecedented scale of grandeur, but the intense electrification of the dust-laden air caused the formation of corpusants, or St. Elmo's fire, on the spars of many vessels for miles around.

One captain reported that, at a distance of ten miles from the volcano, the spars of his ship were "studded with corpusants", and he noted the occurrence of "a peculiar pinky flame coming from clouds which seemed to touch the mastsheads and yard-arms."

Another vessel, the "G. C. Loudon", which was 40 or 50 miles from the scene of eruption, had the lightning-conductor on her mainmast struck by lightning several times, while "the mud rain that covered the masts, rigging and decks was phosphorescent, and on the rigging presented the appearance of St. Elmo's fire." The East Indian members of the crew hastened to put out this "fire" with their hands, insisting that it was the work of evil spirits and would scuttle the ship if it found its way below.

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