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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology

ST. ELMO'S FIRE

Apropos of the recent displays of St. Elmo's fire on Pike's Peak, it is an interesting fact that, while this phenomenon is much commoner and assumes a much more spectacular character on high mountains than anywhere else, its popular history and legendry are associated almost entirely with the sea. Sailors have been familiar with the phenomenon since remote antiquity and it has been the subject of many nautical superstitions, not yet, perhaps, wholly extinct.

St. Elmo's fire has borne dozens of names, of which "corposant" is one of the commonest. Captain William Dampier, writing in the seventeenth century, calls it "Corpus Sant", and describes a display he witnessed during a storm off the China coast. He says:

"After four o'clock the thunder and rain abated, and then we saw a Corpus Sant at our main-topmast head... This sight rejoiced our men exceedingly; for the height of the storm is commonly over when the Corpus Sant is seen aloft; but when they are seen lying on the deck it is generally accounted a bad sign... A Corpus Sant is a certain small glittering light; when it appears as this did, on the very top of the mainmast or at a yard-arm, it is like a star; but when it appears on the deck it resembles a great glow-worm."

He adds that he had never seen the "Corpus Sant" except when there had been hard rain as well as wind, and that he believes it to be "some jelly".

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