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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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A CLEAR-SKY THUNDERSTORM

In the meteorological log of the British S.S. "Moravian," Capt. A. Simpson described a thunderstorm experienced on December 30, 1902, just on getting within range of Cape Verde lighthouse. At 1:30 a.m., a warm puff of dust-laden wind came off the African shore. Lightning, at first distant on the northeast horizon, became almost continuous, with loud thunder. All the stars were visible; only upper clouds, no cumulus, in the sky. Capt. Simpson had never before experienced a severe thunderstorm without cloud. For fully an hour the sky was one blaze of lightning, and wire ropes, mastheads, yardarms, derrick ends, etc., were lighted up. All the stays seemed to have glow-lamps 3 to 4 feet apart, and the mastheads and yardarms a bright light at their extremities. The officers and passengers were roused to witness the weird spectacle.

The most remarkable part of the phenomenon was the extraordinary sound emitted throughout. It was, says the log, exactly like the noise of the sparks from the carbons of an arc lamp; or as if several thousands of cicadas had taken up their quarters in the rigging; or the crackling of burning graas or twigs. This noise was not local near the bridge, but the officers reported it all over the ship, even in the neighborhood of the noisy steering-gear.

Striking electrical displays in the form of brush discharges (St. Elmo's fire), accompanied by a crackling noise, are a not infrequent attendant of dust storms. Whether the lightning and thunder reported in this case could have been caused by dust is doubtful, though both these phenomena have often been observed in the cloud of dust discharged by an active volcano.

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