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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE WORD "MIRAGE"

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman
Authority on Meteorology

A remarkable fact about mirage is that no generally recognized name for it existed in any of the European languages until the beginning of the nineteenth century. When Napoleon's soldiers invaded Egypt, they were astonished at the sight of phantom lakes spread over the hot sands of the desert. The mathematician Monge, who accompanied the expedition, published a description and explanation of this spectacle in the year 1800, and he applied to it the name it now bears in French and English, and, in modified forms, in a number of other languages. The word was taken from the jargon of French sailors, who had previously applied it to somewhat different appearances observed at sea.

More philosophers than one have pointed out the important function performed by terminology in crystallizing ideas. Mirage had not, of course, been completely ignored before the time of Monge, but it had, though a very common phenomenon, failed to become widely familiar, chiefly for lack of a familiar name by which to describe it. Monge's memoir "put it on the map," and it soon became so well known that its name became a conventional metaphor for delusions in general.

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