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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed Feb. 19, 1935

AN OVERRATED WEATHER SIGN

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The man in Longfellow's poem who, having seen St. Elmo's "glittering lanterns all at play," concluded, on the basis of this observation, that the weather would be foul the following day was a rash prophet. The brush discharge^s of electricity known as St. Elmo's fire, or corposants, are mostly seen, at least on the ocean, when a storm is already in progress at the place of observation. Sometimes the storm responsible for them is in the immediate vicinity and will come very soon, if at all; in other cases the storm has recently left the point of observation. The appearance of the lights on a calm night followed by a storm the next day is probably a rather uncommon sequence of events.

The belief that St. Elmo's fire is an indication of coming storms is really, like a great many other beliefs about weather signs, a survival of the ancient idea that all sorts of coming events are foreshadowed by divinely provided "omens" of one sort or another. Ages ago Greek and Roman sailors believed that it was a good omen to see two corposants at one time but a sign of misfortune to see only one. A much later nautical superstition is that if a corposant rises in the rigging the weather will improve, but if one descends the weather will grow more stormy.

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