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## THE "TABLECLOTH" OF TABLE MOUNTAIN.

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We are indebted to Mr. W. T. Crespinel, of Prizma (Inc.), New York, City for permission to publish the accompanying photograph (Fig. 1) of the celebrated "Tablecloth," capping the summit of Table Mountain, South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

A rather hasty search on the part of the writer has brought to light only three pictures of the Tablecloth, in addition to Mr. Crespinel's photograph and apart from mere diagrams illustrating the process of the cloud's formation. Two of these pictures are reproduced herewith. A third, published in the report of the "Valdivia" Expedition of 1898-99, is reproduced in F. Ratzel's "Die Erde," vol. 2, p. 477.

The literature of the Tablecloth dates back at least as far as the seventeenth century. One of the pictures here shown (fig. 2) is taken from the curious treatise by Erasmus Francisci entitled "Der Wunder-reiche Überzug unserer Nider-Welt, oder Erd-umgebende Luft-Kreys," etc., published at Nürnberg in 1680. A quaint description of the phenomenon, found in the same work, may be freely translated as follows:

"Not far from the shore stands a large mountain, which does not taper to the summit, but is flat on top like a table; whence the Netherlanders call it Table Mountain. From this summit the flying storm often breaks forth with fury, after having announced itself by a certain sign. For, when the sky is clearest and the sea most tranquil, there may be seen over the mountain a delicate little cloud, which at first seems hardly so big as a barley-corn, and then the size of a walnut; wherefore the Portuguese and Hollanders call this cloud, which is barely visible at a distance, the 'bull's-eye.' At once it grows and spreads over the whole top of the mountain, and then the Hollanders say, 'The table is spread,' because, as they declare, the appearance is as if a table were spread and set with all kinds of food. Immediately afterward the cloud-storm comes sweeping down from the summit with such violence that unless ships are heedful in good time to shorten sail they are all dashed to the bottom."

The best known scientific description of the Tablecloth is that given in Sir John F. W. Herschel's "Meteorology" (Edinburgh, 1861):

"That the mere self-expansion of the ascending air is sufficient to cause precipitation of some of its vapour, when abundant, is rendered matter of ocular demonstration in that very striking phenomenon so common at the Cape of Good Hope, where the south or south-easterly wind which sweeps over the Southern Ocean, impinging on the long range of rocks which terminate in the Table Mountain, is thrown up by them, makes a clear sweep over the flat table-land which forms the summit of that mountain (about 3,850 feet high), and thence plunges down with the violence of a cataract, clinging close to the mural precipices that form a kind of background to Cape Town, which it fills with dust and uproar. A perfectly cloudless sky meanwhile prevails over the town, the sea, and the level country, but the mountain is covered with a dense white cloud reaching to no great height

above its summit, and quite level, which, though evidently swept along by the wind, and hurried furiously over the edge of the precipice, dissolves and completely disappears on a definite level, suggesting the idea (whence it derives its name) of a 'Tablecloth.' Occasionally when the wind is very violent, a ripple is formed in the aerial current, which, by a sort of rebound in the hollow of the amphitheatre in which Cape Town stands, is again thrown up, just over the edge of the sea, vertically over the Jetty, where we have stood for hours watching a small white patch of cloud in the zenith, a few acres in extent, in violent internal agitation (from the hurricane of wind blowing through it), yet immovable, as if fixed by some spell, the material ever changing, the form and aspect unvarying. The Tablecloth is formed also at the commencement of a 'north-wester,' but its fringes then descend on the opposite side of the mountain, which is no less precipitous."

An example of this alternative variety of the cloud, due to a "northwester," is illustrated in Herschel's book, and we have reproduced his picture (fig. 3), which shows a flat sheet of cloud corresponding much more closely to the idea suggested by the name "Tablecloth" than do the clouds seen in the other two pictures herewith.

From the "Guide to South Africa," by A. S. and G. G. Brown, numerous editions of which have been published by the Union-Castle Mail Steamship Co., it appears that the Tablecloth, on account of the suddenness of its formation, is a source of danger to persons who climb the mountain. We quote from the sixteenth edition (London, 1909):

"The ascent of Table Mountain, although fatiguing, offers no mountainering difficulties. The only danger to be apprehended is from the dense clouds which collect at times round the summit of the mountain and produce the well-known phenomenon of the Tablecloth. As this peculiar appearance is generally occasioned by southeast winds, it occurs more frequently in summer than in winter, but the extreme suddenness with which the clouds arrive makes it impossible at any time to predict that the mountain will be clear for the next 24 hours. Fatal accidents have occurred from visitors wandering about in the mist and falling over precipices, whilst others, preferring the safer plan of waiting for the mist to rise, have remained in one spot for many hours."

The Tablecloth is of further interest to meteorologists as affording a well-known example of the phenomenon of fog-drip. During the almost rainless summers of this region, the upper parts of Table Mountain, as well as of other mountains of the Cape, are clad in a luxuriant vegetation, supported by a copious deposit of moisture from the drifting clouds. Measurements of the fog-drip on Table Mountain have been made by Dr. R. Marloth, who has published his results in the *Transactions of the South African Philosophical Society*, v. 14, 1903, p. 403-408, and v. 16, 1905, p. 97-105. See also a discussion of these investigations in *Meteorologische Zeitschrift*, v. 23, 1906, p. 547-553.

<sup>1</sup> Published on a large scale in *New York Evening Post*, Oct. 2, 1920, pt. 5, p. 1.



FIG. 1.—The "Tablecloth," capping the summit of Table Mountain, South Africa.  
(Photograph by W. T. Crespinel (copyrighted).)

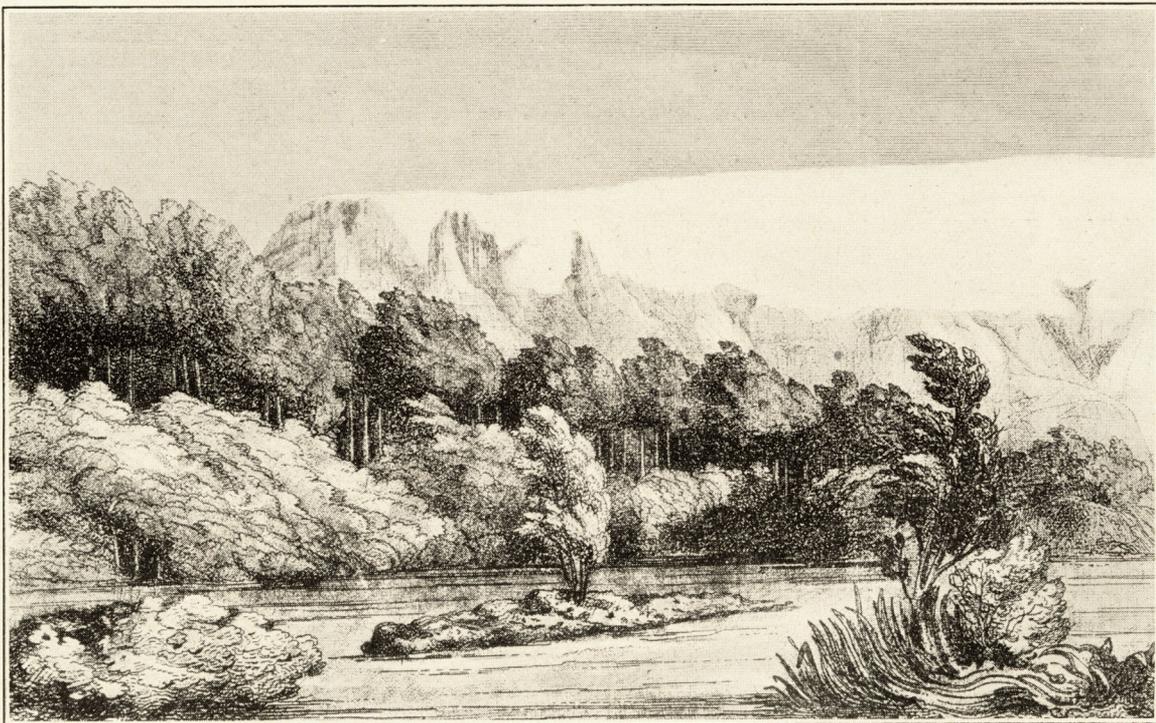


FIG. 3.—The "Tablecloth" formed by a "northwester." (From Herschel's "Meteorology," 1861.)



FIG. 2.—The "Tablecloth." (From a picture published by E. Francisci, 1680.)



FIG. 4.—A cloud draping Mount Shasta, California. (Reproduced by permission of Earl N. Findley, editor, *U. S. Air Service* (October, 1920, p. 14).)