

A Science Service Feature

Released on receipt
but intended for use
May 16, 1927

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed May 9, 1927

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MIRAGE AT SEA

Mirage is a familiar sight to sailors, and its observation probably explains the legend of the Flying Dutchman and many of the other strange legends of the sea. Some descriptions of it read like fairy tales. Thus William Scoresby, Jr., the Arctic navigator, tells of seeing his father's ship inverted in the sky. With his spyglass he could make out the details of masts and hull, though the vessel was 34 miles away and nearly 15 miles beyond the horizon. The story is told of a ship that was expected to arrive at New York from England in Colonial days. One Sunday afternoon, after a violent storm, she was seen floating in the air, every spar so clearly visible that there was no doubt about the identity of the image thus depicted in the sky. That was the last that was ever seen of her. Probably she had sprung a leak in the storm and foundered before she could get to port.

In two celebrated cases observations of mirage have led to mistakes in cartography. Commander Wilkes, of the United States Exploring Expedition, was deceived in this manner with regard to the location of the Antarctic coast, and his map started a controversy that raged among geographers for generations. The second case was that of the mythical "Crocker Land," which Peary thought he had discovered in 1906. After it had figured on charts of the Arctic regions for some years it was proved to be non-existent, but the "Crocker Land Expedition," which went north to explore it, observed the same mirage by which Peary had been misled.

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