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September 27, 1928

A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed September 20, 1928

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WHAT IS A HURRICANE?

The storm that recently wrought ruin in the West Indies and Florida was a hurricane and it was also a cyclone. But not all hurricanes are cyclones, nor are all cyclones hurricanes.

A cyclone is a large traveling whirlwind -- scores or hundreds of miles in diameter. If it originates within the tropics it is a tropical cyclone; if elsewhere, an extra-tropical cyclone. Tropical cyclones frequently pass from the tropics to higher latitudes, but extra-tropical cyclones never invade the tropics. Tropical cyclones are, on the average, much smaller than extra-tropical cyclones and have some other distinguishing features. Both kinds of cyclone occur in varying degrees of intensity. Some are attended by light, shifting winds that do not reach the force of a gale. At the opposite extreme are those in which the winds reach velocities well over 100 miles an hour.

Extremely violent cyclones are almost entirely confined to the tropics, but occasionally occur in middle latitudes. On the other hand, the small traveling whirlwinds known as tornadoes, which vary in diameter from a few yards to a mile or so, and which are by far the most violent of all storms, are peculiar to the temperate zones.

The term "hurricane" is a Carib. Indian word, originally applied to the more severe tropical cyclones of the West Indies. Nowadays it is applied to severe trop-