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November 13, 1930

A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

Mailed November 6, 1930

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LENTICULAR CLOUDS

The more or less lens-shaped clouds, frequently showing iridescence at their edges, that hang almost stationary over or near mountains while the wind flows through them are scientifically classified as "lenticular" clouds, while the layman may describe some of the less elongated varieties, in Shakespearean language, as "very like a whale." The members of Captain Scott's antarctic expedition called clouds of this type seen over Mount Erebus "whalebacks."

In the Azores a lenticular cloud that often forms in the lee of Pico is known to the islanders as "la Baleia" (the whale). This is but one of many cases in which clouds, lenticular or otherwise, associated with particular mountains bear individual names. In the lee of Mount Etna, in Sicily, generally resting over the Val del Bove, there is frequently formed a lenticular cloud that resembles a gigantic white turban, with its crown merging into the clouds above. This is known locally -- for what reason I do not know -- as "La contessa di vento" (the wind countess). A long strip of cloud that hangs at times around the southern base of the same huge mountain and is said to portend rain is called "la serpe" (the snake). This cloud is not a lenticular.

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21st and B Sts.,  
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