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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed March 2, 1931

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FATA MORGANA

On November 9, 1882, the Brazilian frigate "Parnahyba" was off the coast of Patagonia, in about latitude 50 south, bearing a scientific expedition from Rio de Janeiro to Punta Arenas to observe the transit of Venus. The official narrative of the expedition says:

"After midday the wind fell, the temperature rose, and the air became unusually transparent and pure. The coast, from which we were not far distant, took the most varied and strange forms. Sometimes its height was greatly exaggerated, sometimes the salient points, the hills, appeared turned upside down, or lost in the space between the lowest clouds, like the fantastic visions of a dream. One could not distinguish sea from sky, and the froth of the waves resembled flaky cirri dotted on the blue heavens. At one time the reflected images of the hills took the shape of ships arranged in regular order and engaged in gunnery practice; the reflections of the solar rays, darting in all directions, represented the flashes of the guns.

"The 'Parnahyba' seemed transported into fairyland. Sometimes she seemed to climb the side of a liquid mountain whitened with foam; at other times to glide down the steep slope of a terrible precipice. There was no horizon, and but that we were sure of our position, prudence would have advised our heaving to."

Such is the weird atmospheric phenomenon known as "fata morgana"; a complex variety of mirage, traditionally associated with the Straits of Messina, but much less common there than in some other parts of the world. Probably the most striking examples are seen in the polar regions, and the fullest scientific study of the phenomenon was made on Lake Geneva, Switzerland, by F. A. Forel.

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