

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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LOST IN A CLOUD

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Authority on Meteorology

George Oettle, a former publicity representative of the Union of South Africa in the United States, was once lost in the Tablecloth, the famous sheet of cloud that frequently overspreads Table Mountain, near Cape Town. He and a companion scaled the mountain one afternoon. Suddenly they found themselves enveloped in the cloud. For a long time they did not dare to move, but they finally groped their way to a familiar ledge, halfway up the mountain, from which they hoped to make a safe descent. Here, to add to their terrors, they came upon a human skeleton; one of the many victims of the treacherous cloud. Not until late that night were they able to scramble down to Cape Town.

A standard guidebook to South Africa contains the following warning:

"The ascent of Table Mountain, although fatiguing, offers no mountaineering difficulties. The only danger to be apprehended is from the dense clouds that collect at times around the summit 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."

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