# A VISIT TO SOUTH GEORGIA*

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(*Translated with notes by* R. S. BOUMPHREY†)

A VERY LARGE SECTOR of the South Atlantic Ocean lies between Cape Horn, the Cape of Good Hope and the Antarctic continent, normally veiled from human eyes, far from the principal sea-lanes of the world's shipping, and only seldom considered worthy of any close investigation. The large merchant ships which connect Europe with India on the one hand and California, the granary of the great American Union, on the other, only touch the outer edges of this great expanse of water which is ruled by the "Cape Horn rollers" that have become a byword amongst seafarers, by the fearful storms of the Southern Hemisphere, and by the colossal masses of ice, all of which are the outliers and forerunners of the unknown South Polar continent. Nevertheless, this inhospitable region has much of interest to offer, and when we look round at the glorious seal-skin coats worn by men and women of fashion, there is certainly a good reason for paying a short visit to this part of the world. An excellent opportunity occurred for us to sail there in the small schooner *Flying Fish* which we joined at the Cape Verde Islands, in the vicinity of which it was cruising for a reason we knew nothing about. Its small crew examined the two islands of Bravo and Fogo with special interest, and the numerous telescopes directed at the land together with the Union flag which the ship was flying at its masthead awoke our curiosity.

The ship sailed close to the small harbour of the islands' capital, but instead of entering it sailed to and fro in the vicinity of a small settlement built of stone and shaded by palm trees, and the Portuguese inhabitants likewise gave our ship their undivided attention.

At last evening came, the sun sank below the horizon, and soon the tropical darkness fell, and now the ship sprang to life. A boat was manned; it glided softly over the water, disappeared behind some rocks, at the back of which a few houses could be seen by daylight, and returned to the ship in an hour, packed with men. Both parties were satisfied. The ship had by these somewhat illegal means obtained a full crew for the voyage to the far south, and the young men of the island, who had in this way evaded their military service, were glad to have the opportunity of starting a seafaring career. However illegal this method of obtaining a crew may appear, it cannot be regarded as anything but advantageous to the population of the islands themselves, both from a cultural and from a financial point of view. Apart from a few tropical fruits, the Cape Verde Islands themselves have nothing to export or trade in and their soil produces (and that with difficulty) only what the inhabitants need for a simple, indeed frugal, existence. Every strong, healthy youngster is anxious to go to sea and begins his career on an American ship which, after a voyage lasting about 10 months, lands him on American soil; thence, after some 15 or 20 years, when the time for his military service has expired, he returns to his native land where the modest demands of its simple way of life enable him to live in comfort on his savings.

It was young men like this, lads of 15 to 20 years of age, who had come aboard to try, overnight, whether they could dedicate themselves to the service of Neptune. By daybreak some were already regretting the step they had taken, and these were taken ashore and replaced by others. The ship finally set sail only when the crew numbered some 20 to 24 men.

The Customs laws forbid the boat which fetches the young men to beach on the coast, and so they swim out to it across a short stretch of water. Personal belongings are not considered as of any great importance, and if they board the ship wearing a shirt, a pair of linen trousers and a cap, and place themselves in the shelter of the flag of freedom in something more than a state of Nature, this alone entitles them to be received with respect by their companions. In order to give the whole proceeding some validity according to American law, when the

* "Ein Besuch aus Süd-Georgien". *Dt. Rdsch. Geogr.*, III Jahrgang, Heft 11, August 1881, 522–31.

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required number of crew has come aboard and signified their intention of making the voyage, the American Consul in Bravo is brought aboard and signs the ship's muster-roll.

The voyage was now resumed, and as we sailed south in fine weather across the Equator we had plenty of time to observe the crew which had been engaged in this way and to get to know their qualities. They were lean but strongly built young men and the ship's food suited them well, for after a few weeks their appearance showed the benefit they were deriving from it after the diet of vegetables and fish to which the inhabitants of the Cape Verde Islands are restricted. In other ways too it was remarkable to observe what progress they made, for example, in their efforts to accustom themselves to the use of European footwear, which were truly comical. The natives of the Cape Verde Islands (and here I refer only to the men) all have very large feet, and so the American shoe manufacturers have to supply the ships with the largest sizes they make. Since these shoes have very thick soles, it can be extremely dangerous for anyone wearing only ordinary light shoes to encounter one of these young men, who are strangers both to the use of shoes and to the motion of a ship at sea, whilst they are working on deck. It is remarkable that they take so readily to the use of oilskins, becoming so proud of them that they wear yellow or black "sou'-westers" all day long, even in the hottest weather, and yet find it so difficult to accustom themselves to the use of shoes that they always remove them when they have to climb aloft into the shrouds and rigging. However, a period of 4 to 6 weeks suffices to turn them into reasonably well-trained seamen and they prove admirably suited to the tough and arduous work of the sealers.

When the *Flying Fish* sailed past the wide estuary of the River Plate she moved out of the zone of fine, calm weather and met the great waves of the South Atlantic Ocean and the storms which rage there in September. With reefed sails, she struggled against the perpetual, contrary south-westerly gales. When a lull occurred in the wind, it was only of the briefest duration and though the sails flapped idly the ship still rolled and pitched in the great surge of the seas which are seldom calm at this time of the year or indeed throughout the summer months. Heavy downpours of rain and snow follow each other in quick succession, and not even the lovely constellation of the Southern Cross which has so often been described can satisfy the seafarer's longing for a harbour, however desolate. The seas are utterly lonely and deserted, but even more dreary was the first sight of land which presented itself to us in the

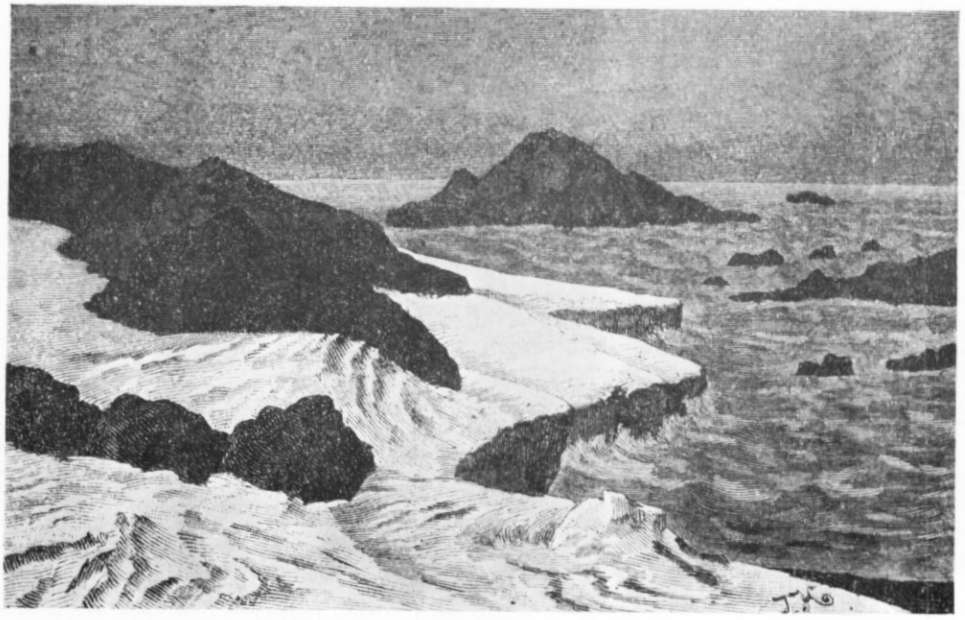

Fig. 1. The glacier front in "Ice Bay".

early morning of 22 September 1877. For some days the ship had been making its nautical observations and reckonings with the greatest care, for the existence of a large group of rocks was known, although the charts were not reliable enough to mark its exact position. Shag Rocks are a lone group which lie to the west[1] of South Georgia and were our first aim and the first object of our inspection. Parts of them rise vertically from the heavy surf to a height of 200 or 250 ft., parts lie a few feet under the troubled surface of the sea, thus causing that wonderful but dangerous phenomenon known to sailors as "overfalls" or "white water". Even in the calmest sea a wave will suddenly form and tower from 6 to 10 ft. high over these invisible rocks; it will start rolling slowly and placidly over them, but suddenly encountering a wave coming from the opposite direction or some other obstacle, it breaks furiously and covers a great expanse of sea with seething foam—a magnificent but awe-inspiring sight. Even so, Shag Rocks are only a prelude to South Georgia itself which, although still far away, could be seen as a faint line on the horizon with its jagged peaks, snow-covered mountains and magnificent glaciers. Truly a desolate piece of land even when seen from a distance. We shall have plenty of opportunity to get to know it in all its different shapes and moods and now, as the ship directs her course towards the island itself, we will take the opportunity of saying something about its geographical position and character.

The island of South Georgia is about 90 miles long and lies roughly north-west and south-east between latitudes 44° and 45°S.[2] and longitudes 36° and 38°W. of Greenwich. Curved gently rather like a bow in shape, it is elongated in form, narrow at the western end and

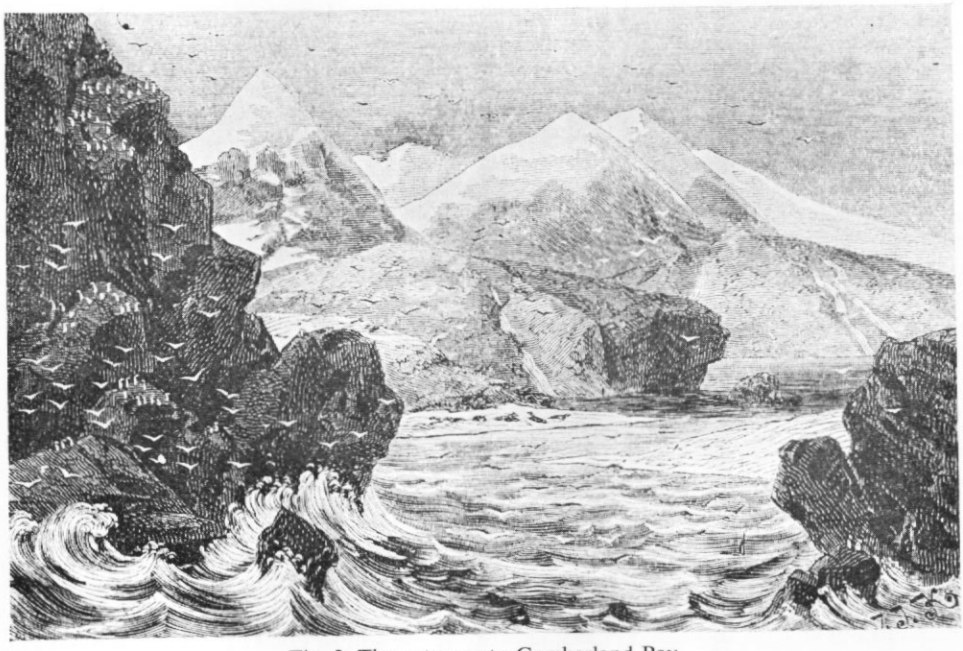

Fig. 2. The entrance to Cumberland Bay.

broadening towards the east, and along its entire length the coast is broken up by bays which reach far inland, in places much resembling fjords. The island has been known to geography only since 1797;[3] Captain Cook discovered it during his voyage round the world, and since

[1] The German here is "östlich", but it is clear from the words on p. 526 of the original, "sowie in der westlichen Verlängerung die Schenk's=Felsen . . .", that the "Schenk's=Felsen" are Shag Rocks which, of course, lie to the west of South Georgia.

[2] In fact, it lies between lat. 54° and 55° S.

[3] South Georgia was, of course, discovered to geography by Cook in 1775, *not* 1797.

then only fleeting calls have been made by several explorers. The coastal fringes have been explored by Frenchmen, British and Americans, though by the latter only in recent times. The interior, however, is still unknown and with the exception of a very narrow stretch at the western end between "French Harbour"[4] and "Adventure Bay", has never been explored despite its narrow breadth of only some 20 to 25 miles. The island's formation is that of a mountain range some 4,000 to 5,000 ft. in height, a range of once mighty but now extinct volcanoes which only reveal their former activity in their sharp, cone-shaped peaks and great beds of lava.[5] As regards its relation to other continents, South Georgia is part of a submarine range of high mountains connecting the uplands of South America with the Antarctic continent. The highest peaks of this range between Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope are represented by the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, the South Orkneys, the South Sandwich Islands, and furthermore by Circumcision Island.[6] With the exception of the Falkland Islands, which are inhabited and even boast a small port, Port Stanley, they are all of the same volcanic nature, but are so little known as to be scarcely more than names on maps. According to the latest reports, some of these volcanoes, for example the so-called "Southern Terror" in the South Sandwich group, are still active.[7]

To revert to South Georgia itself, the accompanying map will render a more detailed description unnecessary. We see the main island surrounded by a number of other islands, small and large, which are little more than bare rocks, and besides those shown on the map there are also countless submerged reefs which have not been included on it, many of them stretching out into the open sea. Just as Shag Rocks are a continuation of South Georgia to the west, so Clerke Rocks are another continuation of the island to the south-east, though they are not so imposing in formation or so dangerous. Clerke Rocks lie nearer to the main island and are visible from it, and, not being an isolated group, are neither so dangerous nor so unpleasant as Shag Rocks. During the warmer months of the year sea hens, gulls and albatrosses nest there.

We shall obtain a better idea of the climate of the island when we describe our voyage round it, but it can be stated immediately that there is a marked difference between the south-west and the north-east coasts. The main mountain range of South Georgia, which resembles a wall of rock, rises near the coast in the south-western half of the island and acts as a breakwater against which the waves stirred up by the south-westerly storms hurl themselves. The ocean currents, the air streams, the pack ice, all come out of the south-west and beat with full force against this side of the island with the result that the lower northern coast of the island enjoys a milder, more kindly climate. At the same time the mountain range prevents the warmer air from the Equator having any effect on the south-western half of the island, and as a result there is a tremendous difference in climate between places separated by only a trifling distance. A glance at the map will suffice to show that the distribution of the glaciers bears out this statement. The south-eastern part of the island, especially on its southern side towards the sea, is an almost uninterrupted wall of ice.

After this digression we shall now return to the *Flying Fish* as she approached the island. The outline of the land which we had earlier seen from a distance grew longer, the land masses higher, the rocks darker, and the snow fields lighter in colour, and only the gleaming, ever-changing blue of the ice showed a constant interplay of colour and shade. The glaciers, green, blue and sapphire in colour, no longer appeared as compact masses, their higher reaches branched out and these branches split again and disappeared between high ridges of rock which stood out sharply as jagged peaks against the dark horizon. The lower-lying land masses also changed in appearance. As we came closer to the island, surf and breakers became visible on the level stretches of the sea, the rock formations grew more rugged and stood out from the

[4] "French Harbour" lies just west of Cape Buller (Matthews, L. H. 1931. *South Georgia: the British Empire's sub-Antarctic outpost*. Bristol, John Wright and Sons Ltd.; London, Simpkin Marshall Ltd., p. 115).

[5] This is incorrect; there are no extinct volcanoes; lava beds interbedded with sediments have a restricted occurrence on the south coast of South Georgia.

[6] Circumcision Island is Bouvetøya, but neither it nor the Falkland Islands form part of the Scotia arc to which the rest belong.

[7] Of the islands mentioned, only the South Sandwich Islands group is volcanic, and some of these islands are still active.

coastline in low projecting spurs, and various larger islands detached themselves from the mainland. We could see "Great Pickersgill Island"[8] clearly and to its left another large island whose two peaks showed it to be "Franklin Island"[9] and served us as a landmark for our entry into the harbour.[10] In fact it was this very schooner, which on an earlier voyage first sought shelter here from a frightful storm, that gave the harbour its name. There is a great variety of scenery in "Flying Fish Bay"[10] and as the ship lay at anchor, it was interesting to survey the landscape around us.

The western side of the bay consists of a hill covered with heaps of jagged rocks, and behind it an almost vertical cliff rises to dizzy heights. The eastern side consists of a glacier some

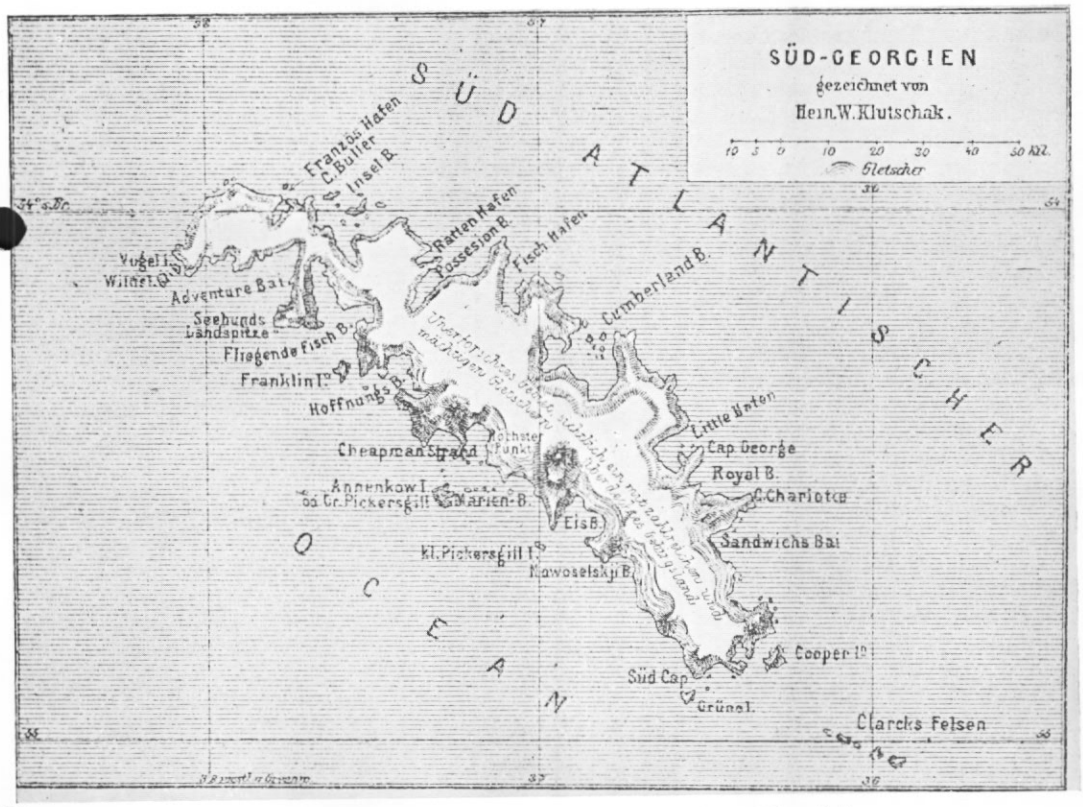


Fig. 3. Map of South Georgia drawn by Heinrich W. Klutschak.

2 miles long, its vertical walls which fall sheer into the sea standing out in awesome contrast to the wide and glorious stretch of sand which encloses the head of the bay to the north. Sheltered from wind and storm and weather, a gentle surf washes up and down the beach and keeps this stretch of sand and pebbles entirely free of snow. However, the influence of the sea, which remains unfrozen because the motion of the tides prevents the formation of a covering of ice even in winter, ends at high-water mark, and above that everything—the hills, the rocks, and the mountains—presents a dreary, wintry scene. The second day of our stay was certainly a real spring day so far as the weather was concerned, but this was only a fleeting interlude. By the next morning a violent blizzard had covered everything with snow again, the wind

[8] Now known only as Annenkov Island, the name given to it by Bellingshausen in 1819, though it had been named "Pickersgills Island" by Cook in 1775.
[9] Saddle Island.
[10] Wilson Harbour (Matthews, 1931).

howled mercilessly down on us from the ravines above, and we lay behind two taut anchor chains uncertain as to whether or when one of the tremendous gusts which resembled whirlwinds in their ferocity would part us from our anchors and dash the ship to pieces on the rocks on one side of the bay or against the wall of ice on the other side. In the months that followed it became clear to us that for every reasonably fine day which we enjoyed on that side of the island, we would have to pay with a week of inclement weather, and we soon began to look forward to a moderate south-westerly storm, as being normal weather in these parts. It proved impossible for us to venture far out to sea from this point and our excursions were restricted to occasional short journeys along the coast from bay to bay and from harbour to harbour. One of these journeys took us one evening to a bay called "Cheapman Strand"[11] which lies to the east of "Flying Fish Bay". It consists of a flat spur of land lying between two long and beautiful stretches of beach each a nautical mile long which themselves terminate in groups of rocks hemmed in by glaciers. We dropped anchor near the mouth of the bay, one side of which consists of the beach, and watched the numerous black objects scattered about on the stretch of sand which at times lay still, and at others moved about and seemed to turn into monsters, fighting each other with clumsy and yet snake-like movements. These were the sea elephants, the walruses of the Southern Ocean. They leave their natural element, the sea, and come ashore to give birth to their young, climbing laboriously up the steep beaches, and staying there in their hundreds until the young have grown sufficiently to take to the water.

The sealers avail themselves of this period to kill the sea elephants on the beaches. The beasts lie there, motionless and asleep, and unconscious of approaching danger, rousing themselves only when the first shot has been fired and has wounded them. For a bullet to prove mortal, it must either reach the heart or penetrate through the eye or the palate to the brain, and the recumbent position of the beasts when asleep at the time of the first shot gives no opportunity for a bullet to do this. Their blubber is the only part of them which can be used and this is the sole reason why such a cruel and unnecessary mass extermination of these great animals has taken place only a few years after the discovery of the island. As in other places where animals have been slaughtered in mass, this method of killing them has its consequences. Thus, not only do the beasts avoid a place where the skeletons of their kind are still visible from the previous year's slaughter, but the complete extinction of the species is to be feared. The females are killed, and the young, which cannot provide for themselves, are left behind and not yet having a covering of blubber, they perish miserably. This occurs annually with hundreds and thousands of such creatures and the danger of their dying out completely is thus not merely probable but certain.

As we ventured farther along the south-eastern coast, the severe storms involved us in a series of unpleasant experiences. Thus one day, owing to an approaching storm, we were compelled to run for shelter into what was called "Ice Bay"[12] on the chart, hoping to find a good anchorage there. A projecting spit of land certainly sheltered us from the heavy sea that was running and from the ferocity of the wind, but the bottom was too deep, in other words the land fell away too steeply into the sea, for us to drop anchor, so we were only able to cast a glance at the high glacier walls and then leave what we had hoped would provide us with a snug anchorage. We found better shelter in a small inlet at the south-eastern end of the island between it and Cooper Island,[13] and here we were compelled to remain for three full weeks. On a short stretch of beach on Cooper Island we found a species of seal known as the sea leopard. In general it resembles the Greenland seal, but it is much longer and is very slender in proportion to its length. Its spotted coat and the striking roar it utters are probably the reason for its name. Its meagre covering of blubber and the uselessness of its skin render it of little interest to the sealers.

Immediately we rounded Cape Charlotte, the difference in climate between the two sides of the island, which has already been mentioned, became noticeable. It was December when we entered "Little Harbour"[14] and instead of the familiar rocks and glacier walls we found green stretches of grass growing on the lower hills and even spreading up to some of the higher land.

[11] Probably Cheapman Bay.
[12] Probably Holmestrand (Matthews, 1931).
[13] Probably Larsen Harbour in Drygalski Fjord (Matthews, 1931).
[14] Doris Bay (Matthews, 1931).

Innumerable streams flow through the grass and carry off the snow from the higher mountains, falling over the rocks into the sea as cataracts. But it is not only the scenery which strikes one after the monotony of the other side of the island. One also encounters, nesting on every ridge of rock, numerous flocks of birds of a great variety of known species ranging from the tiny cape pigeon to the huge albatross. When one realizes that apart from a few rats (probably left behind by some ship) at "Rat Harbour",[15] which is named after them, the whole island is absolutely devoid of four-footed animals, and the southern coast supports no animal life at all apart from the seals, one appreciates how welcome this sudden activity is to a visitor to this otherwise silent waste. The mighty albatross itself, which hatches its three eggs unmolested on some green patch of land and makes no attempt to leave its nest even when human beings approach, fails to attract the attention of an observer so compellingly as the penguins which one meets here in flocks of hundreds. These birds watch the approach of a man with some curiosity, and when he comes close to them, one or two step forward and waddle towards him. The naïvety and fearlessness of these birds is so striking that only scientific curiosity or extreme need would induce me to kill one. Yet human greed has persecuted even these animals on a tremendous scale. I was told (though I would not presume to maintain the truth of this story against a better-informed person) that formerly the fat or oil of the penguin was used in making leather, and great ships were engaged in catching these creatures in their thousands, killing them, and boiling them down for their oil. Fortunately it appears that the oil, which must have been very expensive to obtain, was replaced by the development of a chemical which proved to be cheaper and more efficient, and so the slaughter of the penguins came to an end. But the proof that this did happen in former times can be seen all along the north and north-eastern coast. Countless numbers of little iron vessels which were used can be found everywhere, standing together in pairs; and in "French Harbour"[16] there still lies the wreck of a French ship which perished on the rocks of this so-called harbour.

To observe the penguins and their regular, almost orderly way of life is a most rewarding occupation which always brings something new to light, but there is no room to consider it in detail here and we must restrict ourselves to mentioning a few incidents. The following episode shows how cunning they can be, despite their apparent simplicity. During the hatching season the birds usually choose a hill some hundreds of feet above sea-level, the top of which is sparsely covered with grass, where they lay their eggs. Our Portuguese hands, tired of ship's provisions, made their way one evening to one of these hills, climbed it, drove away the birds, and collected the eggs they found there. They were able to repeat this a second time, but on the third occasion when they wanted to collect eggs, they found the place bare of eggs and of penguins. Several days passed before the birds were seen again. One morning, however, our attention was attracted by a line of white dots moving down a steep slope to the sea from the top of a high hill. They were our penguins which were descending from the summit to swim in the sea, and a few hours later we saw them making the return journey. The penguins had removed themselves and their eggs to safety, for the Cape Verde Islanders, eager as they were to collect the eggs, were too lazy to climb such a steep slope.

There are three species of penguins in South Georgia,[17] the king penguin being the largest and most beautiful of them. It stands some 3 to 3½ ft. high, lives in groups of two to four,[18] and is nothing like so comical and entertaining as the ordinary penguin.

However, apart from the great variety of birds, this side of the island is almost bare of animal life; the wide beaches are empty, only occasionally does one see a sea elephant, and then not on the beaches but in the high grass behind.

A few years ago the island was rich in seals, but they have been driven away by their reckless slaughter.

We now reached the western end of South Georgia in our cruise round the island and encountered the fur seal on its barren islets and rocks.

[15] Prince Olav Harbour (Matthews, 1931).

[16] See [4].

[17] Only three species of penguin breed in numbers in South Georgia (Matthews, 1931, p. 33), the gentoo (*Pygoscelis papua*), the macaroni (*Eudyptes chrysolophus*) and the king (*Aptenodytes patagonica*), but the chin-strap penguin (*Pygoscelis antarctica*) and the Adélie (*Pygoscelis adeliae*) also occur.

[18] In fact, it breeds in rookeries of several hundred birds.

The Bay of Isles, Bird Island and the Willis Islands are the fur seals' chief breeding grounds in this part, and like the sea elephants, they leave the sea and come ashore to give birth to and suckle their young. They tend to congregate not on the beaches but on low rocks washed by the surf, and the sealers find it very difficult to get close enough to kill them, which they do either by shooting or by clubbing them. The former high price of the skins (when they were at the height of their fashion, they fetched 16 to 17 dollars even undressed, and are worth 6 to 7 dollars even now) made the hunters search for them with greater zeal, driving them inland and killing them there. The skins were removed and salted down after the blubber had been cut off, and then stored in the ships' holds.

January and the first days of February are the best time for obtaining the skins, for the animals moult later and then the skins become worthless. During this period the *Flying Fish* collected a cargo of several hundred skins, but the hunting season which alone makes a stay in these regions bearable ends with the month of February. The time for seal hunting is over and it is important to make as fast as possible a return journey to keep the skins in a good enough condition to retain their value.

We weighed anchor in South Georgia on 28 February, rounded Bird Island on its western side, and altered course for the north.

Before losing sight of the land we encountered in all the glory and majesty of its great length one of those icebergs which are peculiar to the Southern Hemisphere. They are not the gigantic, picturesque, often strangely shaped formations which are found in the north, but huge expanses of ice, sometimes many miles in length, with sharply defined cliffs some 200 ft. high falling vertically into the sea. The sight of these silent giants, in comparison with which even the great Cape Horn rollers seem petty, powerless things, filled us with wonder, and we asked ourselves: "What must the home and birthplace of these monsters look like?" This is certainly a question which will be answered only in the distant future and only after the discovery of the North Pole which has been sought for so long and not yet attained. In the Arctic there live reindeer, wolves, bears and even human beings, but no trace of them exists in the Antarctic regions.

A fresh south-westerly breeze carried us swiftly north and in the first days of April the sight of the lighthouse at Pernambuco in Brazil drove away all thoughts of the far south.

Here the ship salted the seal skins and resumed its journey to the north; we, however, disembarked in order to enjoy the balmy sea breezes under the glorious tropical trees of the piazza for a short time and to mount the trams drawn by mules which took us into the centre of the city to make further observations of the remarkable progress which this newly civilized place had made.

Since Weddell was at South Georgia on 12 March 1823, the desolate, ice-covered island has been visited only by sealers and whalers; it is hoped that the projected Italian South Polar Expedition will make a thorough scientific examination of it.

*MS. received 24 May 1966*