

MOUNTAINS OF THE CROZET ISLANDS

BY H. W. TILMAN

THE Patagonia venture of 1956 having shown to my own satisfaction—which is perhaps what matters most—that the two apparently conflicting interests of mountaineering and sailing could be happily married, I began looking for another suitable objective. Iles Crozet—for they are French possessions—are a small group of barren, uninhabited islands some 1,800 miles south-east of Cape Town in S. lat. 47. Thus they are well down in the so-called Roaring Forties in the stormy waters of the Southern Ocean. As well as being remote and inaccessible, both desirable features, they are mountainous. According to the *Antarctic Pilot* the mountains were about 5,000 ft. high and snow covered. I might add that the best objective of all would have been Heard Island, another Southern Ocean island a thousand miles further south-east, on which is Big Ben, a 9,000-ft. volcanic peak draped in ice almost from sea to summit. But there is no safe anchorage there in which to leave a boat, so I funked it.

In this account I am concerned only with the second and successful attempt to reach the Crozet, the first made in 1957-58 having got no further than 500 miles south of Cape Town. For reaching the islands I had the same boat *Mischief*, an ex-Bristol Channel Pilot cutter of 29 tons, built and registered at Cardiff in 1906. But in collecting a crew I met the usual difficulties. The keenest mountaineers shies at the thought of spending several months at sea for the sake of a month or two among some dubious, unknown mountains. While the few yachtsmen who enjoy long ocean voyages like to choose their cruising ground, and prefer sun, warmth, and exotic faces and places, to uninhabited islands set in stormy seas under drab skies.

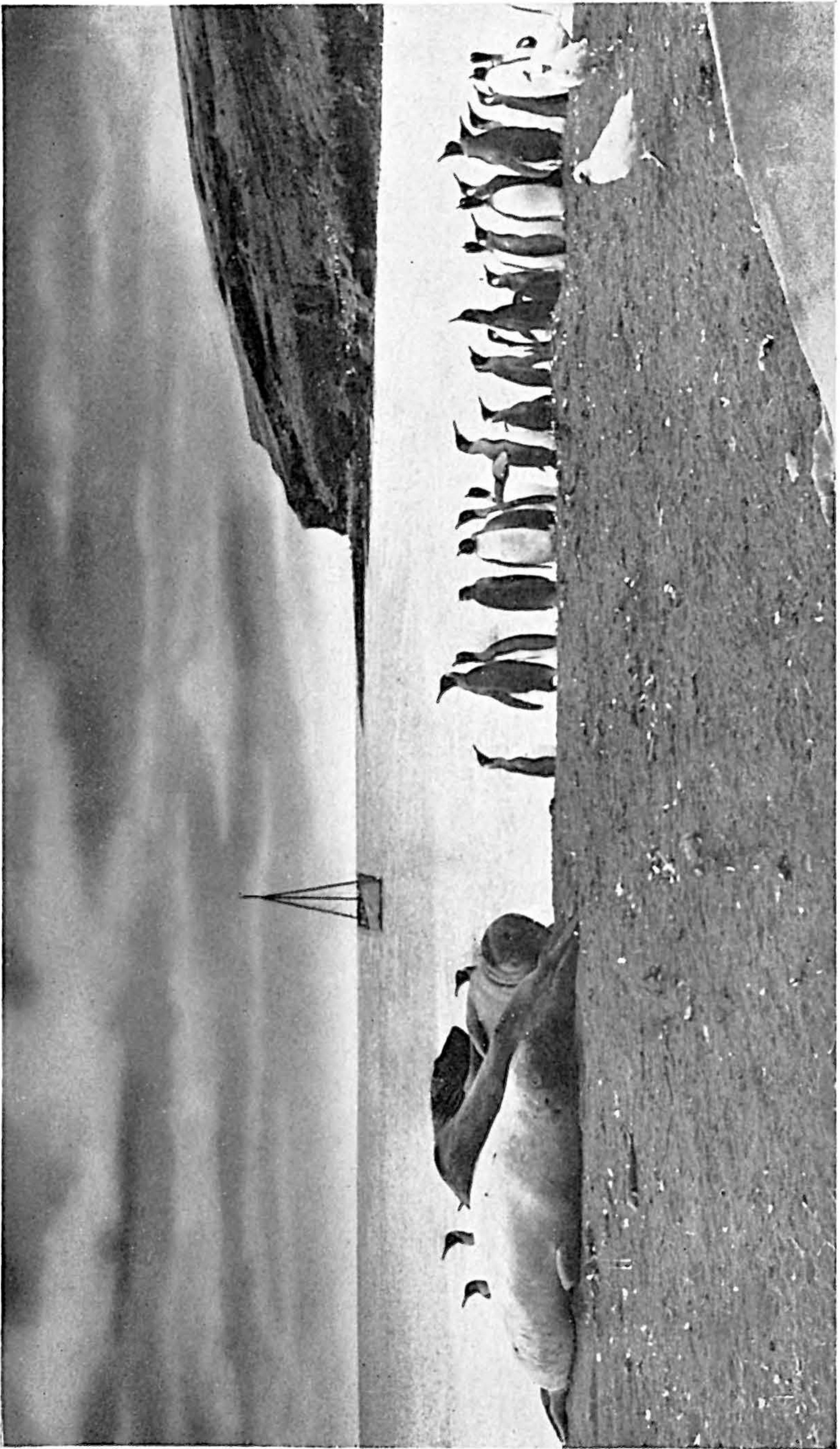
A month before sailing day I had only two certain starters: W. A. Procter who had been with me in Patagonian waters in 1956, and Roger Tufft who had just returned after three years spent on a base in the Antarctic. He was to be my companion on shore, for though he had not climbed he was accustomed to travelling over ice and snow. For the remaining three I still needed I put an advertisement in *The Times*: 'Hand wanted for long voyage in small boat. No pay, no prospects, and not much pleasure.' From the twenty who replied, some of them seriously, I got three men: Jan Garnier, a Dutchman had done seven years in the French Foreign Legion; James Osborne from out of an office; and John Lyons, an elderly retired schoolmaster

who very stout-heartedly volunteered to cook. None had any experience of sailing, except that Osborne had sailed a canoe and John Lyons had crossed the Atlantic fifty-one times in the *Queen Mary* playing the double bass in the ship's orchestra.

The first two or three days at sea with an inexperienced crew are usually harassing, but on a long cruise there is time to learn. By the time we reached the Canaries where we put in for water, most of them knew which rope to pull without holding a debate. From Las Palmas to Cape Town by the sailing ship route is over 6,000 miles and it took seventy-one days, an average of eighty-five miles a day. The only land sighted was South Trinidad, an uninhabited island of fantastic rock scenery 500 miles off the Brazil coast. On it there is an 800-ft.-high circular rock pillar called 'Il Monumento', which someone ought to climb. There are also multitudes of ravenous land crabs.

We reached Cape Town on November 1, 1959, almost exactly three months out from home. We left there on December 2 to begin the serious part of the voyage. South of Cape Town, even in the southern summer, gales are frequent, and as it is far from any steamer track one's boat must be well found and able. I think that this time the weather favoured us. The wind seldom fell below Force 6, which is what *Mischief* likes, and when it did rise to gale force it was neither violent enough nor lasted long enough to raise dangerously high seas with big breaking crests. It was one such sea which on the previous attempt had swept our dinghy overboard, damaged us superficially on deck, and obliged us to put back to Durban. As we drew south the weather became colder, wetter and windier. Oilskins were worn always on deck, and until we had permanently battened down the skylight cover they might well have been worn below. In this cold, grey, watery waste there is far more bird life than in tropic seas. Majestic albatrosses soar and glide incessantly over the waves, black and white speckled Cape pigeons gather in flocks, and the sturdy little storm petrels dance and flutter on the surface.

On Marion Island, which we sighted, there is a South African weather station. Though the island is 4,200 ft. high there is nothing there of any mountaineering interest. The Crozet are about on the same latitude, 600 miles further east, and on the night of December 26, when I judged we were getting near, we hove to until daylight. Of several things that might happen on the voyage, the one that scared me most was that of missing the islands or worse still hitting one in the night. They are small and scattered, visibility is often poor, so that we needed luck in the matter of getting sun or star sights when in the vicinity if we were not to be blown past them without knowing it. We got our sights and at dawn of December 27 Penguin Island, a small rock, was about three miles away to starboard.



ON THE BEACH AT BAIE DU NAVIRE, POSSESSION ISLAND.



SEA ELEPHANTS AND AN OLD SEALER'S TRY-POT ON POSSESSION ISLAND.

Possession Island, the biggest and our objective, lay sixty miles further east and at midday we sighted it through driving rain squalls. Under reduced canvas we sped along the west coast before big following seas. Upon rounding the southern corner we smoothed our water, but even in the lee of the land the wind swept violently over the low cliffs whipping water from the surface like the willy-waws of the Patagonia channels. Baie du Navire, one of the two possible anchorages, looked less snug from the sea than it does on the chart. With the wind blowing straight out of the cove we had to use our engine to get in and that evening we dropped anchor a cable's length from a beach of black sand white with penguins. And no sooner had Procter returned in the dinghy from laying out a second anchor than a school of killer whales circled the ship, their long black fins sticking three feet out of the water in menacing fashion.

Mischief lay there safely for fifteen days while Tufft and I, with a tent and a fortnight's food, were away finding and climbing the mountains. This was less simple than it sounds. Cloud usually covered them, and it was a week later, after we had just climbed what we took to be the highest, that we saw two others which were obviously higher. The highest proved to be only 3,150 ft. by aneroid; the snow cover which came down to about 2,500 ft. was not permanent snow, and there was no climbing in the technical sense. Thus the mountains we had come 10,000 miles to climb were a great disappointment. One was tempted to say with the Red Queen: 'I have seen hills,' said the Red Queen, 'compared with which these are valleys.' But no mountains are to be despised, least of all by an ageing mountaineer, and we had the satisfaction of treading where no one else has trod and of correcting someone else's mistake. Naturally for the purpose of the chart only the coastlines and the off-lying dangers have been surveyed, the height of the mountains being either guessed at, or, if measured from the sea with a sextant, measured very badly.

The wild life made amends for the mountains. The smelly, clamorous rookery of several thousand king-penguins at Baie du Navire was alone worth the voyage. Then there were hundreds of sea-elephants, slug-like creatures weighing up to two tons, dozing on the beaches and in the grass a mile inland. Wandering albatrosses and giant petrels, nested on the slopes, perky white sheathbills scavenged among the penguins, and skua gulls followed us about. Tufft ringed some 200 albatrosses which he was expert enough to do single-handed, lifting the great bird off its nest and holding it with its neck under his arm behind him. The sea-elephants dozed blissfully until one walked right up to them, when they either shuffled backwards or reared up on their foreflippers, opened their mouths, and snarled ferociously. The young ones, about the size of a prize sow, liked being stroked.



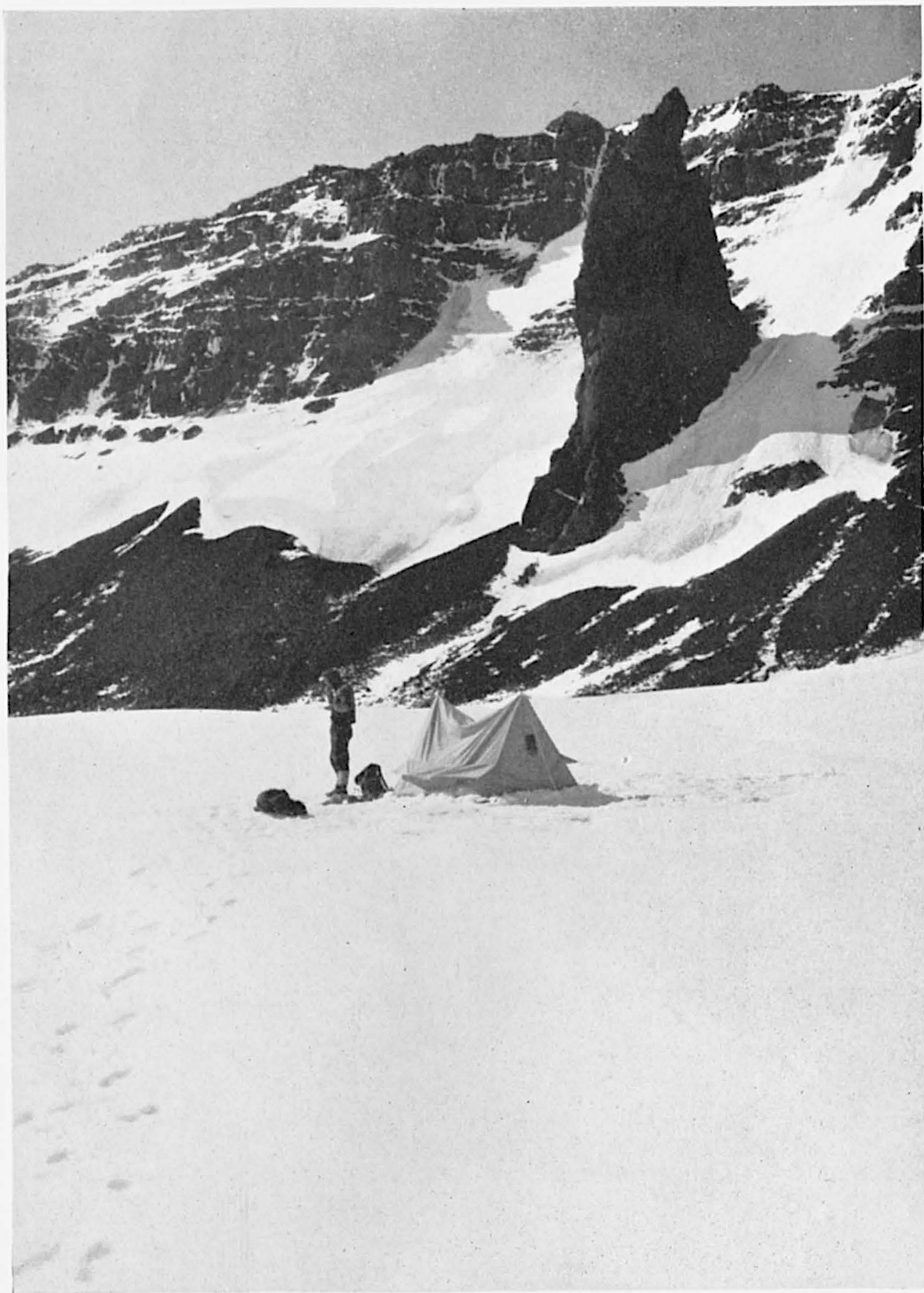
ON THE HIGHEST OF THE POSSESSION ISLAND PEAKS, CIRCA 3,100 FT.

A century and more ago frightful scenes of slaughter were enacted on the beaches of these islands. From 1805 onwards they were visited by British and American sealers until about 1870 when the seals had been pretty well wiped out. The fur seals have never recovered but the sea-elephants—killed for their oil—are in a fair way to restoration and are not molested. The sealing ships used to land their parties and pick them up six months or a year later, the men living in rough wooden huts, killing the seals and trying out the blubber. We saw remains of the huts and several big iron try-pots. Even penguins were massacred for their oil. One schooner claimed to have killed 70,000 annually, each bird producing about a pint of oil.

While Tufft and I were away Procter made a collection of plants and lichens for the museum. Vegetation is scant, neither trees nor shrubs exist and there are only about twenty species of plants. Osborne, who is a keen amateur geologist, collected rocks, and Garnier amused himself with a .22 rifle in pursuit of non-existent rabbits. These, which were formerly plentiful, have disappeared. We killed a few penguins for the table and also ate their eggs as well as albatross eggs. The island is about ten miles long and four miles wide, and we estimated that on the few suitable beaches there must be about 16,000 penguins.

Having cleared up the mountain problems in an unexpectedly short time we decided to go on to Kerguelen, 700 miles further east in S. lat. 49. We might instead have explored East Island which is only ten miles from Possession, but the mountains there looked no higher and held no more snow. Kerguelen is a rugged, mountainous island seventy-five miles long with an immense length of coast comprising large peninsulas, wide bays, and long fjords running far inland. No part of it is more than twelve miles from the sea. There are some 300 islands or islets so that it is properly an archipelago with the name *Iles des Kerguelen*. It was first sighted by Kerguelen Trémarac in 1772, who thought he had discovered the great southern continent upon which the geographers of those days were so intent. He called his discovery South France and hurried home with the great news. But in the following year when he was sent back to follow up the discovery he soon had to acknowledge his mistake.

Seven days of strong westerly winds brought us to Kerguelen where we made our landfall not far from Christmas Harbour where Captain Cook had landed in 1776. He called it Desolation Island, a name which is rightly applicable on most days; but when the sun is out and cloud shadows drift across the warm brown slopes, and the sea and the glaciers sparkle, it is a lovely island. Running parallel to the west coast is a sheet of ice about twenty-five miles long and ten miles wide which sends down numerous glaciers on both sides almost to sea level. On the chart it is named Glacier Cook. As no height was given to it I



CAMP ON THE GLACIER, CIRCA 2,100 FT. BELOW THE KERGUELEN ICE-CAP.

imagined nobody had been on it, so we decided to devote the short time available to exploring this ice-cap. An alternative would have been to attempt the unclimbed Mt. Ross, 6,430 ft., the highest point on the island. Having no idea what sort of a peak it was, and since our party, made up of age and inexperience, was decidedly weak, I thought we had more chance of achieving something on the ice-cap. Having since seen Mt. Ross from a long way off and also a picture of it, I think we were right. It looks a real Alpine peak, steep and icy, and might well be difficult.

Glaciers on the east side of the ice-cap descend to fjords which in turn lead into a big bay, Baie des Baleiniers, while those on the west descend to the open coast, or small inlets. Since above all we required a tranquil anchorage we entered Baie des Baleiniers and found an anchorage at the head of one of the fjords. After a day's reconnaissance we discovered a glacier leading up to the ice-cap. The snout of the glacier was about 100 ft. above sea level and about five miles from the sea at the far end of a wide, perfectly flat valley opening on to the next fjord to the south. Taking a tent and a fortnight's food, Tufft and I spent ten days going up this glacier and crossing the ice-cap to the west. The ice-fall, though not steep, defeated us almost at once, but we found an easy way by the rocks on the true right bank. From a camp on the rocks we got on to the névé and placed another camp at about 2,100 ft. some three miles up the glacier.

From this camp, after rising quickly for about 800 ft., we emerged on the ice-cap proper, a huge expanse of flat uncrevassed snow sloping up very gradually to a level, distant horizon. During the long trudge of three or four miles to the summit we slowly brought into view two snow peaks to the north of about 4,000 ft. and finally the twin peaks of Mt. Ross twenty-five miles to the south-east. The summit of the ice-cap is only 3,300 ft. None of these higher mountains feed it, so that the existence of such an extensive ice-field of so low a height in so low a latitude is all the more remarkable.

The day was fine and cloudless, the heat and glare off the snow were fierce. We plodded on westwards in softening snow for another two miles or so losing about 600 ft. of height. Away to the west over sea and coast lay a dense bank of fog reaching up to about 1,500 ft. Some hilltops near the coast floated above it like islands on the sea. By going on down we should see less rather than more and I'm afraid the thought of the long journey back in ever-worsening snow had some effect upon me. Glacier lethargy had me in its grip. I felt like some of the early conquerors on Mt. Blanc—'In need only of an umbrella and scent bottle'. And like them, only with none of the bottles carried by their guides to relieve it, I suffered from 'a lassitude which could not be overcome without the aid of liquor'. The journey back was all that I

had pictured it and before we reached the tent I was almost brought to a halt with an attack of mountaineer's foot—the inability to put one in front of the other.

We had now to pay our respects to the French who since the war have established a weather station and scientific base in Baie de Morbihan at the south-east end of the island. No doubt they were not a little astonished to see a small yacht beating up the bay. M. Heurgon, the base leader whom I had met and corresponded with some years before, came off and took us ashore to the little jetty where all hands had assembled to welcome us. It was a Sunday, happily the lunch hour, so piling into a jeep we were driven to the mess where all—sixty-seven of them and six of us—sat down at one long table, and amidst a most convivial clatter and uproar began a meal such as only Frenchmen could conjure up on a barren island. The chef, looking in his professional white cap every inch a chef, sat with us at the high table and kept a watchful eye on his understrappers.

They live uncommonly well and almost entirely on fresh food. By means of glass frames and intensive cultivation a clever Malagasy gardener produces tomatoes, lettuce, spinach and potatoes. They have cows and a piggery, flocks of ducks and hens, and on an islet near by they run several hundred sheep which produce the finest mutton one could wish. They are breeding reindeer and M. Heurgon, a keen fisherman, has started a trout hatchery. Near the base a small private company runs a factory for processing oil from sea-elephants which are killed on neighbouring beaches to the limited extent of one thousand a year. The carcasses are hauled overland by Weasels, chopped up and fed into a hopper, and thence into a series of huge pressure cookers. As well as the oil there is a residue of oily meal which is fed to the livestock. But the base is solely for weather observation and scientific research into magnetism, cosmic rays, the ionosphere, and suchlike abstruse matters. A few years ago they thought of making an airfield near the base, for Kerguelen is midway between the Cape and Australia by the shortest flying route, but this is at present in abeyance.

After two enjoyable days with the French we left on February 2 for Cape Town. Our kindly hosts filled *Mischief* with good things, among them a huge carboy of red wine and a gallon jar of rum. One of the tragedies of the voyage was the breaking of this jar before it was half finished. Having worked north to S. lat. 34 to get clear of the prevailing westerlies we headed west for Cape Town which we reached on March 15. Leaving there early in April and calling only at St. Helena we sailed up Lympington river on June 30 after an eleven months' voyage of some 21,000 miles.