

An Isolated Community

One of the loneliest spots in the world in which to live is the island of Tristan d'Acunha, a desolate rock in the South Atlantic. To the 80 white people who live there it is their world. They are almost utterly cut off from their kind. To them railroad and telegraphs, electric lights, and all the inventions of the last half century are but a name.

Once a year or so they may get news of the outer world from some sailing ship or a man-of-war of the British South African squadron. A thousand miles of the Atlantic separates them from Africa's most southerly extremity on the one hand, while 1200 miles in the other direction South America ends abruptly in stormy Cape Horn.

The islanders depend very largely upon potatoes, but these often fail, owing to hot winds that blight the crop.

The population remains practically stationary, between 75 and 80 souls. Two recent additions have been made in a couple of Italians, shipwrecked sailors, who have married island women. One of the castaways, Andrea Repetto, is the only man in Tristan who can both read and write.

Great is the excitement when a sail is sighted by the islanders. They get ready fresh provisions and vegetables, which they hope to barter for clothes and all kinds of unexpected novelties. Practically all the male population goes forth when a rare visiting ship puts in, and they do a thriving trade in mutton, butter, milk, and albatross skins.

But even when a vessel puts into the little bay which is the harbor of the island the weather is so uncertain that it must be kept ready for instant departure.

The settlement proper is built on a bold bluff on the northwest side of the rock. The rest of the island rises sheer and inaccessible in colossal cliffs from the stormy Atlantic.

Each householder keeps cattle, sheep, and pigs, but all attempts to cultivate wheat or grain of any kind have failed, owing to the swarms of rats that infest the rock. Fresh milk is the strongest beverage to be obtained in Tristan.

There is excellent sport in the vast swarms of aquatic birds that make their homes on the cliffs. Among these are magnificent albatrosses, many of them measuring nearly 13 feet from wing to wing. The land birds of Tristan are very few and rare.

Several springs have their source on the lofty mountain that forms the apex of the island, and one of these falls from the lower cliffs in a beautiful cascade. The remains of a fort can be seen, a relic of Napoleon's exile. For while he was confined on St. Helena the British Government deemed it advisable to garrison Tristan d'Acunha with troops from Cape Colony.

The Tristanites have no precise form of government, although John Swain, the oldest inhabitant, is recognised as king and legal head of the community. He is also chief justice and referee in all disputes that may arise. Marriages and baptisms are performed by the captains of visiting men-o'-war.

The island waters swarm with fish, and any kind of bait from salt pork to a bit of bread will suffice to take any quantity of fish the Tristanites call the five finger. There is also a kind of bass weighing from

10 to 60 pounds. The Tristanites do not taste bread for seven or eight months out of the 12, and have to subsist on a slight variation of meal and potato diet.

And yet these islanders are a singularly healthy people. The climate is very regular and moist, never very hot in summer or very cloudy in winter. All the English fruit trees will grow in Tristan, though the fruit lacks flavor. Periodically plants and trees are taken out to be planted there experimentally, for there is little timber on Tristan at present.

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