

LITTLE MEN OF THE SEA.

(By Hugh Ross.)

THERE was a storm raging outside, but by the time the huge green rollers crashed on the rocky shore of the little bay their might had been reduced to nothing worse than an angry swirl.

In the open sea a penguin appeared on the crest of a wave in order, one might have thought, to take stock of his surroundings. He was reputedly short-sighted, yet he either saw the formidable towering cliffs against whose buttresses the waves pounded furiously, or else—and this is more likely—he had been there before, because he turned off and headed directly for the bay.

Kelp swirled along the shore-line of the bay, which was very low, sloping gently upward to merge with the virgin bush. Here and there were little creeks up which wavelets frothed to hiss angrily round and round over gravel and sea-shells.

In one of these creeks the penguin suddenly appeared. Gently swimming he allowed a wave to propel him on to the shingle; then, fearful of being drawn back by the strong under-tow he hastily scrambled up the rocks and made awkward way along the bed of a wide boggy creek.

Following a trail well defined by the feet of fellow-travellers, the penguin waddled steadily onward. He cut a quaint figure, this dignified little "bird-man," what with his absurd walk and almost human demeanour. His whole attention was taken up in avoiding misstep on greasy twig and slippery slope—a mistake which might very well send him tobogganing beachward with loss of dignity.

Presently he left the gully and by vigorous use of feet, flippers and bill clambered up a surprisingly steep slope to a piece of flat ground, where he took up residence under a large, very dense lawyer-bush. Fellow-birds gave him welcome in loud, shrill cries, but used vicious beaks to keep him from approaching too close.

He was a very handsome fellow as he stood on the dark-brown peat. He stood nearly two feet high, was white from throat down, with bluish back and white-edged flippers. The back of his head, from eye to eye, was yellow merging into brownish red at the back of his neck. His heavy, formidable beak was red on

top and white underneath. The eyes were three distinct colours, pale red around the edges, pale cream and black in the centre. From eyes to beak and throat the pattern was greenish yellow with black stripes. His feet were flesh-coloured.

He mated with a female bird as handsome and large as himself. The pair were very sleek and in perfect condition as they settled down to the business of rearing a family. Under the lawyer bush in the soft fibrous peat they scratched a very shallow hole into which they bundled a few leaves and small twigs. Two eggs slightly larger than average domestic hen eggs, white with perhaps the faintest hint of green, were laid in the makeshift nest. In brooding the hen appeared to crouch over the eggs rather than sit on them. The other bird remained at sea all day, but always returned at night.

On hands and knees I crawled under the evil-smelling bush. Penguin, quite unafraid, crouched over the eggs and watched my advance calmly. I paused at a safe distance; I knew that a penguin was far from speedy on land, but should it decide to attack I might be too slow in retreating out from the clinging affection of that lawyer bush.

Unfortunately, penguin's nest was fully fifteen miles from my home. To visit the nest took me a full day. Part of the journey I was able to make by motor-cycle, but there were hours of foot-slogging along a muddy cattle track through the wet bush. The date was the later part of August, which left the days none too long, and to find one's way back by torch-light was impossible. As a result there were two husky chicks, clad in wool resembling down, occupying the nest when next I returned. They appeared very helpless and had an old bird forming a highly effective guard over them.

I returned several times in the months that followed. As the young birds grew stronger both parents apparently sought food for them. I several times found the young alone, and although I waited till four o'clock I saw no signs of the old ones. By March the youngsters were fully fledged, complete even to the elaborate colour scheme. Indeed they struck me as being even more gaudy than the mature birds.