

HUNTING THE GREATEST LIVING CARNIVOR

In a Land Over-Shadowed by War

by

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The Aleutian Chain of islands is a thousand mile festoon that dips down southeastward from the end of the Alaska Peninsula, the beads on the string growing smaller till they end with the tiny island of Attu. It pokes so far across the Bering Sea under the Asiatic nose that it seems to be asking for trouble. Attu Island is more than double the distance from Dutch Harbor, so far the nearest fortified seaport to guard the Chain, that she is to Kamchatka, that long barrier that trails directly down to the Japanese Islands. More trouble in the air, in times when trouble comes without the asking, for this region is rich in fisheries, whale oil supplies, blue foxes, and fur seals, not to mention wild game birds and animals - all this a juicy plum for any belligerent nation.

We were camped on Unimak, the first large island joining with the tip of the Alaska Peninsula. Hunting the great brown bear or Kodiak was our aim, and since this island is a game reserve, harboring also caribou, foxes, squirrels, and myriads of sea birds, our hunting was to be done with the harmless camera.

The brown monarch of the tundra seemed shy about presenting himself, although we came upon many of his deep beds hollowed out in the rank grass along the salmon streams where he gorges on fish, and then sleeps it off. It gives one the creeps to stand looking into an empty bed, no sound but the spawning salmon struggling over a sand-bar of a rushing stream, the slap of tails, the ghoulish wind moaning over the wide wastes. Emptiness is a fearsome thing with the feel of watching, hostile eyes and danger. One backs off and treads softly, watching every step until he has left the region behind, and he dares breathe again.

One day our field-glasses picked up a small herd of caribou as

the sun flashed on their tawny-yellow coats. There was no way to get near them except to flatten on our stomachs and caterpillar along over the dwarfed mat of willows padded with deep moss. We finally looked down into the dip of a big, open hollow that sloped evenly off to the shore of a little lake. The herd was feeding peacefully. The wind was in our favor, as it was blowing toward us instead of the other direction. Soon we noticed that a watchful old cow had pricked up her ears and levelled her eyes off toward the slope of Shishaldin, that pointed, symmetrical cone that lifted into the sky with a lighted candle at its tip at night. The caribou was watching a Kodiak bear.

The old bruin was shuffling liesurely down the ridge, stopping here and there to dig out a squirrel hole. With one huge paw, he scooped the dirt out, sending a shower behind him. But he had no luck and looked surly as he ambled on down the hill. The camera man was ahead, running low and crouching down to head Bruin off at the head of the slope. I followed, hitching along as best I could with a knap-sack on my back. I saw the big form reach the bottom of the hill and disappear below the washed-out bank of the lake. The camera man stood up and made a run for it. He reached the bank soon after the bear, and I saw him duck down as he went over the top. I labored on, getting less enthusiastic for an adventure with a Kodiak, especially this one. Everybody was out of sight, and the landscape was empty. The bunch of caribou, frightened by imminent disaster from two directions, were in full flight around the far end of the lake. The wind followed the racing herd.

I crawled gingerly along to the edge of the bank and looked over. The bear had his back to us and was leaning over the rim of the lake, drinking and splashing in the water/ about sixty yards away. Just then immediately below me, a head and lifted camera raised up, the movie motor humming. Both of us were in plain sight. At the noise, the bear turned, startled. The camera man was cornered, and too close.

That enormous, shaggy hulk rose on its hind feet. His head went down and his neck bowed up like a bull's, his long, heavy

down ~~down~~ and his neck bowed up like a bull's, his long, heavy arms and paws dangling at his sides. The camera buzzed on. I was petrified. I couldn't make a sound. All at once, that lumbering beast bolted straight up the path where he had gone down, his great, ugly face with broken teeth and burning eyes coming closer every minute. I stood as if in a devastating dream. He swished past. The camera still hummed. As I looked up the hill, the old bear was looking back to see if the demons were still pursuing him.

That night at eleven o'clock, I stepped to the door of the tent to take a last look at the white mountain. The little river rippled at my side. Above the top of the bank hung the moon. The dim reaches of the tundra melted into the white night, and there like a pale amethyst in the sky was Shishaldin with its lighted candle. Somewhere at its feet the caribou lay asleep. Somewhere the big brown bear munched about in the moonlight.