

FUR SEALS OF THE PRIBILOFS

Near Neighbors to Japan

by

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Projecting out of the roaring, rocking Bering Sea about two hundred miles north of Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Chain, the two Pribilof Islands almost straddle the international line between the old and new hemispheres. A little northeast is St. Matthew Island, and still further north is St. Lawrence Island only a short distance below Big and Little Diomed Islands, planted square in the middle of the Bering Strait. Here the Seward Peninsula and Siberia almost touch noses. Due east at a greater distance from the Pribilofs, the long Kamchatka Peninsula bends southeasterly and directly into the Japanese Island chain. As the crow flies, the end of the Aleutian Chain and the little Pribilofs are closer to Tokyo than they are to San Francisco. Not very good to think about, at least.

This proximity brought about an international situation between several nations, Russia, Japan, England (British Columbia), and America, for almost encircling the shores of the Pribilofs sprawls and squirms the largest and most valuable herd of Alaska fur seals in the world. St. Paul and St. George Islands are acknowledged to be within the margin of the United States, but the seal squadrons travel all of the international waters, thus giving each of these nations a hand in the immensely valuable seal pocket.

It is July 4th several years ago. Some two miles off shore from defiant looking St. Paul, two coastal cutters hang on the restless, rolling sea. One is American and the other Japanese, trim and official. On the deck of the latter stands a dark skinned, uniformed person gazing toward the rocky, emerald island. It is a glorious, sunny morning. The water sparkles and glints with light. Myriads of little

auklets, called Choochkies, cover the surface like a moving pattern, dabbling, flashing up and down like little rubber birds in a bathtub. It seems as if this is the exhaustless cornucopia pouring forth life fresh and unafraid. And borne on the wind come the ceaseless bleatings and bellowings of the seals.

A long ~~white~~ rowboat is seen coming out from shore, dark natives also in white, standing and singing in rhythm with their bending to the oars, the Aleut welcome to infrequent visitors. Two Americans and two Japanese are taken aboard from the cutters, and the return to shore begins. The big, walrus-skin bidarka is handled deftly by the singing rowers, now slipping over the white crest of a wave, now sliding along a deep green trough, back and forth until the shore comes nearer. But no little cove or landing place is seen. A big wave rolls the boat on into the face of jagged rocks and suddenly in a breathless suspense, the clanking of chains is heard. Big grappling hooks drop from above and a windlass lifts the boat smoothly to a higher grassy shelf, as the wave rolls back from under it. Rather doubtful encouragement to an unknown landing party.

The visit to the seals begins, each rookery marked by large white numbers on rocks above. On a curved beach of an inland bay lie thousands of brownish forms like a wiggling mass of swarming bees - the seals. Rampageous bulls, fierce in protecting their harems, rear challenging above their allotted spots. They perch on the highest rocks and with half-closed eyes dramatically shake threats from their cavernous throats. They are dingy-brown and be-whiskered, while their wives are pale, silvery-gray and demure. The bulls snort and flare out frequently at competitors eager for wife-snatching, or at the young eligibles lounging at the edge of the water. Many roaring battles and many scarred and bleeding fronts result.

An old bull's mind is seldom free of suspicions of his wife's intentions to desert him. He humps his massive neck and glowers over one, grimacing and grunting his ferocity. The cow seal bawls up into his face, nipping him on the neck with quick jabs, and stands her ground for a few minutes. But he corners her from every angle of escape, and she soon gives in - if she ever had any designs of disloyalty - and waddles back to the bunch of wives with hungry looks at the sea. She falls asleep nursing her baby. There is one baby to each mother. If the old tormentor closes one eye to take a minute's rest, he keeps the other eye on the latch and one flipper waving to let his neighbors know that he is on the job. If a wife happens to make a sneak behind the others, he lunges from his pedestal, grabs her by a hind flipper and flings her back where she belongs, rolling her over and over. This excites him for some time and he lectures the household, testing the breath of each wife to see if she has a pure mind, shaking his head vigorously all the time. Since he may have as many as seventy wives, he gets little sleep.

The male seals appear early in the spring to select their old stamping grounds and await impatiently the coming of the females, each one striving to acquire a larger harem than his neighbor. These males eat nothing during the summer stay, but the females having pups to nurse, go to sea every few days with absences of two or three days to feed and refresh themselves. Their lord-and-masters, however, never allow wives to leave the land until the pups are born and mating is over, which takes place immediately after the mothers come in. Then they may go for good and all, for all the bulls care, but the females must necessarily return to attend to their children and train them in swimming for the long trip in the fall, a trip to the warm waters of the South. This takes up the season. From all family affairs and companionship, the three-year olds or bachelors are banished. A proportion of the finest bachelors is branded

for breeding purposes. The remainder is predestined to supply the season's market with fine furs.

Near sunset, the sands where the bachelors lie blow cool and fresh above the bay. The scattering boulders here and there are worn smooth by heavy bodies and are green with guano and dead moss. Five or six thousand of them may lie happily playing in one "hauling ground," and on this one small island there are fifteen or sixteen more seal rookeries, each with its pod of young fur-bearers. On St. George Island about forty miles to the South, are more rookeries. All around the islands the young seals sport in the evening light, oblivious to impending doom. Like molded statues with slim, beautiful curves, they lift their lithe bodies, sniffing with be-whiskered noses the dank smell of the sea.

At nine o'clock the last curfew rings for them. Native Aleuts appear quietly with big sticks in their hands. The young seals, craning their necks and bellowing uneasily, gather in a mass with heads toward the intruders. They are soon surrounded and the "drive" to the killing grounds a mile away begins. Like sheep to the slaughter, the bewildered, blundering things hobble along through the high, wire-grass toward the hill-top. A heavy mist is falling, the only time to "drive", for if the skins of the laboring seals become too hot, they will be spoiled. Soft swishings and thuddings break the stillness of the night as they come into the little meadow. Some lop over on their sides. It is a signal for a rest. The light fades into a soft gloom. All things take on a vagueness of form and the myriads of crawling things lumber up and down like an army of big black beetles. Mostly now they lower their heads as the minutes and hours go by, as if trying to hide from something. They have ceased even to bleat. There is only the wind blowing, only the melancholy chantings of the natives, the monotonous, dry clattering of sticks. In the pale glow of sunrise, the tired, sheep-like seals are on the death

grounds, and soon it is all over. So the Aleut and the seal are traditionally bound up in one destiny, and the fate of one is that of the other.

This was the picture before the war storm. Since then the pact between the major nations has expired and rumors are that Japan gave notice that she would not be a party to its renewal. Apparently she means to catch and kill fur seals when, where, and how she pleases, or perhaps she is even thinking that she will soon be in a position to grab islands, seals, and all. The fate of the seals now hangs like the fate of the freedom of mankind, upon the guns and planes whose roaring drowns out all else until a better day.