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DANGER TO THE FUR SEALS

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Projecting out of the roaring, rocking Bering Sea about two hundred miles north of Dutch Harbor on 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 up 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. It looks as if the fur seals, huddled all unknowing in their wild sea bowl and lost in the fog still might not escape the dragon's eye. The dragon knows his way in these uncharted waters. Not very good to think about, at least.

This proximity brought about an international situation between several nations, Russia, Japan, England, and America, for almost encircling 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 international waters, thus giving each of these nations a hand in the immensely valuable seal pocket.

Not any too much has been known about the meanderings of the seal herd after it leaves its summer home on the Pribilofs, escorted south by a Coast Guard cutter, as it is always convoyed north in spring to its islands. This protection has been a custom for many years. It is a real adventure to be a spectator to this dramatic pilgrimage, the gaunt old cutter plodding along to the pace of its charges, the wind trailing its peaceful pipe smoke back on the horizon and billowing the bleatings of the eager seals.

Both seals and sea otter are seen along the far south Pacific Coast in winter. In recent years, southern Californians have thrilled to see the sea otter, that waning species, sporting not far off shore or lying half con-

cealed in a big bed of kelp. Pilgrimages of sight-seers to the region of Pacific Grove are not uncommon. And fur seals are seen by travelers on coastal steamers.

But just where the seal herd goes and to what shores it scatters, what it lives on, and much more information have been incomplete records. Only last year the Fish and Wildlife Service had chosen a ship and selected a group of research experts to follow the seals into laxy southern regions to learn more of their lives. Then came rumors, unrest, and at last war. There will be no research cruise, and perhaps no escort when the migrating mammals turn their noses north to the Pribilofs next spring, the Pribilofs with their tips of tumbled rocks, quaint Russian villages, and square-domed churches.

It is July 4th several years ago. Some two miles off shore from defiant looking St. Paul, a coastal cutter and a white yacht hang on the restless, rolling sea. One is American and the other Japanese, trim and official. On the deck of the cutter 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 auklets, gulls, and other sea birds cover the surface like a moving pattern, dabbling, flashing up and down like rubber birds in a bath-tub. It seems as if this is the exhaustless cornucopia pouring forth life fresh and unafraid. And borne on the wind come the ceaseless bleatings of the fur seals.

A big rowboat is seen coming out from shore, dark natives 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 ships, and the return to shore begins. The big walrus-skin bidarka is handled deftly by the singing rowers, now slipping over the crest of a wave, now sliding along a deep green trough, back and forth until forbidding rocky cliffs come all too near. No little cove or landing place is seen. A wave rolls the boat on toward jagged rocks and suddenly in a breathless suspense, the clanking of chains is heard. Big grappling hooks drop and a windlass lifts the boat smoothly to a high, green shelf as the angry wave rolls back under it. Rather

doubtful encouragement to an unfriendly landing party.

The official inspection of the seals begins, for summer rain and fog are imminent, and some near tomorrow may bring them down to stay for the rest of the season. To the seals, the mild rain is elixir to invigorate them and gloss their soft fur coats. On a curved beach of an inland bay lie thousands of brownish forms like a wiggling mass of swarming bees. Life and love are in full swing, and many a fierce suitor comes off with bloody battle scars on his chest instead of medals. From all family affairs and companionship, the three-year olds or bachelors are banished. A portion of the finest bachelors is branded for breeding purposes. The remainder is predestined to supply the season's market with fine furs. Their hour is near at hand.

Near sunset, the sands where the bachelors lie blow cool and fresh above the bay. The scattering boulders here and there are worn smooth with heavy bodies and green with guano and dead moss. Five or six thousand of them 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 furbearers. On St. George Island some forty miles away are more rookeries. All around the island 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. Only Aleuts must keep this dark tryst with the seals. The young seals, craning their necks and bellowing uneasily, gather in a mass with their heads toward the intruders. They are soon surrounded and the "drive" to the killing grounds begins. Like sheep to the slaughter, the bewildered, blundering things hobble along through the high 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 as they come into a little meadow. Some lop over on their sides. It is the signal for a rest.

The light fades into a soft, wet gloom. All things take on a vagueness

of form and the myriads of crawling bodies 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 chanting of the natives, the monotonous clattering of sticks. In the pale glow of sunrise, the tired, submissive 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 is a picture of yesterday and today. Since then the pact for seal protection between the different nations has been broken 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 may now hang like the fate of the freedom of mankind, upon the guns and planes, ^{whose} roaring drowns out all else until a better day.