

ON THE FUR SEAL ISLANDS.

BY THE FIRST SPECIAL TREASURY AGENT.



SHORTLY after the cession of Russian America to the United States, the latter government began to take active measures for the protection of the few fisheries of the islands of the ceded territory, and thus it happened that I, as one who had had eighteen years' experience as a whaler in the North Pacific, became a factor in the plans for protection. My knowledge of the natural history, conditions of life, and currents of the North Pacific had brought me into communication with Professor Louis Agassiz and with Professor Benjamin Peirce, who was at the time Superintendent of the Coast Survey, and at their instance I was appointed by Hon. Hugh McCulloch, Secretary of the Treasury, first to report on the fur-seal fisheries and then to organize a system by which the interest of the islanders could be guarded and the seals protected against unnecessary destruction. The system established by me is still in active force. I reached the Fur Seal, or Pribyloff, Islands early in March, 1869, but it was not until the spring of 1871 that order was finally brought out of the confusion into which the fisheries had been thrown by the change in ownership, and we began operations under the lease granted to the Alaska Commercial Company. I had found the natives disorganized and terrified concerning their future, as the irregularities practiced by the various parties who had raided the islands for seals in the previous year had threatened extermination both to islanders and to seals; and the plan of fishing finally adopted was grafted on the general method which the Russians had observed, and in which the natives, who knew it, would therefore be likely to have confidence.

The Russians had maintained a head agent on the islands, with whom had been associated two creole subordinates who had been sufficiently educated in the counting-houses of Sitka to keep the accounts with the natives and to direct them in killing the seals and preparing the skins. A certain sum was allowed the islanders for compensation. The head agent employed three or four of the most capable men to direct parties at work, and the driving and killing of the seals had been left mainly to these. Their method had been to drive the

seals as near as possible to the salting-houses, in order that the labor of carrying the skins might be made as light as possible; and they had become sufficiently expert in their work to understand that by killing the smaller seals the work would be lighter, though no discrimination was made as to the quality of the skins in the animals killed. The number of skins taken annually had varied from forty thousand to sixty thousand.

That the Government agent in charge of the islands might have full power to enforce and supervise all operations, it seemed best to leave to some responsible company the right to take a stated number of seals under restrictions and regulations that would best subserve the interests of the United States and of the natives themselves, who were to have the exclusive right to kill the seals and salt the skins.

When the sealing began in the spring of 1871, it soon became evident that the clumsy methods in vogue were open to very great improvement. To take the necessary number of seals to fill out the annual catch, the whole working force of the islands was kept busy from the 1st of June until September, the women helping, particularly in carrying the skins to the salting-houses. These had been built too far from the landing, and as soon as possible they were moved nearer to the beach, in order to facilitate the transfer of the skins to the boats on shipping. As the skins prepared for shipment, and all the salt necessary for curing them, had to be carried on the backs of the natives across a broad beach of soft sand and through the shallow water to and from boats, a railway of light iron rails was eventually built, to be laid in movable sections, with high-wheeled flat-cars. Mules, carts, and harnesses were brought to the islands, and whenever the skins were to be carried to the salting-houses from the slaughter-grounds the boys and girls, for the sake of the ride back in the empty carts, were ready to load them. This relieved the women of the necessity of all outdoor work in sealing time, except occasional journeys for the necessary supply of seal flesh for food. Later, when we had taught them to make bread and had introduced various articles of food, seal flesh and blubber, which had been formerly almost the sole means of sustenance, were used much less frequently. Under the lease held by the Alaska Commercial Company the number

of seals to be killed annually was limited to 100,000; and at 40 cents a skin, the sum allowed the natives for each skin brought in, \$40,000 was annually divided among the islanders employed in the killing of seals. We learned when the returns for the first season's catch were made that the skins were assorted into fourteen or fifteen classes. A small number—less than ten per cent.—ranked as first-class, at \$14 a skin; about the same per cent. fell to less than \$2.50 each, while the general average was about \$5.87. This discrepancy in the value of the skins called attention at once to the question of what constituted the difference in quality between a skin worth \$14 and one worth only \$2.50. An agent of the Company was sent to London to examine the skins as they were classified for the market: the result of his examination revealed the fact that the fur of a seal was most valuable when the animal was three years old, the proportion being that at present prices a two-year-old seal would be worth \$15 or \$16, a three-year-old \$16 or \$19, a four-year-old \$16, and a five-year-old only \$2.50. As the agent had the opportunity of selecting the animals before killing, he aimed to take as many three-year-old seals as possible, making out the one hundred thousand from those two or four years old. This trebled the value of the annual catch at once. Again, it being desirable to secure the quantity with the least possible loss of life, a careful supervision of the manner of driving the seals to the slaughter-ground was instituted. Very fat seals often become overheated in driving, and die from convulsions, rendering their fur valueless for the market. In consequence of this difficulty each driver is required to carry a club and a knife, that any seal showing indications of an overheated condition may be killed immediately and skinned. These skins are collected after the herd is cared for, and are usually equal to eight or ten per cent. of the whole drive.

The cost of maintaining these fisheries is about \$10,000 a year; the revenue obtained during the twenty years that the present lease has been running amounts to \$365,000 a year. A careful count is made of the number of skins taken, each party through whose hands they pass keeping its own account. First they are counted by the chiefs, that the natives may be paid a proper sum; the Treasury officer in charge of the islands counts them when they are taken from the salting-houses for shipment; when received at the side of the vessel they are counted by the executive officer for his bills of lading; at San Francisco a revenue officer takes charge of them and has them counted; they are counted again at the warehouse in San Francisco, where they are packed

in one-hundred-gallon tierces and shipped to New York, and thence to London, where they are counted twice again before they are ready for sale. An important element in the economy of the business is that, by reason of the many improved methods used in capturing and handling the seals, the time required for this work has been materially shortened. Formerly the work was continued from the 1st of June until September, but now the whole time required for taking the one hundred thousand skins and shipping them has been shortened to forty-five days. This gain in time also increases the value of the skins, as the fur is far brighter when the seals first land.

The present lease to the Alaska Commercial Company expires July 1, 1890. When the lease was granted, in 1870, the bids were governed by the average price of sealskins in London, which had never exceeded \$6. Under the terms of the lease the Company paid the Government an average price of \$3.65 per skin. If the business was profitable at that rate, the Government should now obtain a much larger share, in consideration of the trebled value of the skins in the London market at the present time. As there should be a large increase in the number of seals now available, owing to the improved methods of killing which reserve all the females, a far larger number might now be killed annually—perhaps twice as many. The seals occupy as breeding-grounds about eight miles of coast-line, and at the beginning of my stay on the islands I estimated the number of breeding females to be fully 1,130,000. When I left, eight years later, a similar method of computation gave 1,800,000 breeding females on the ground.

The males come to the islands the 1st of May and remain until about the 20th of July, when they scatter slowly, although a large number of them remain as late as November. The males appear on the ground first, and soon after their arrival they begin to locate about a rod apart, forming a line the entire length of the shore. The younger and weaker males, beaten back by the stronger, coast along, entering the bays, and haul up on the hillsides and in the valleys. The greatest number at any one time upon St. Paul, the largest of the islands, is on the 20th of July, when we have estimated the number to be five millions. The seals really walk on four legs, raising their bodies from the ground as they move. Under favorable conditions they travel about a mile and a half an hour, and the longest drive we ever made was eight miles. As England alone has the necessary skilled labor for preparing the skins for final sale, she receives an amount of profit from the fur-seal fisheries equal to the whole profit of the United

States in the islands, and she therefore is equally interested in the question of wanton destruction of the seals. Under such circumstances an international agreement for the protection and regulation of the trade ought not to be difficult to obtain.

The Fur Seal Islands lie nearly in the middle of Behring's Sea, the nearest mainland being three hundred miles away to the north. When discovered in 1789 they were uninhabited, although traces of firebrands gave proof of earlier visitors. The islands are four in number—St. Paul, St. George, Otter, and Walrus, the former being the largest, though but fifteen miles long. It is triangular in shape, and furnishes ninety per cent. of the whole number of seals. The average mean temperature for the year is about the same as that of New England, though it is cooler in summer and warmer in winter. The islands are of volcanic origin, but around the shores accumulations of marine sand have been washed up by the sea, which high winds have driven over the rocky surface, forming a light soil. The moist climate has clothed this with a thick vegetation, and in the valleys and lower plains a wild grass resembling rye abounds, which furnishes excellent feed for horses and sheep. On the hillsides great masses of purple lupine grow, and a thick moss-like plant is found, which bears a delicious berry, and is much used for making wine as well as for cooking purposes.

On the whole group of Aleutian Islands there were 8000 people, and on the Fur Seal Islands about 400. A few of the men from the latter had been to Sitka on Russian vessels, and two or three had been taught enough of the Russian language to allow them to act as clerks in keeping accounts with the natives, but the great body of the people had never been from home. They had no money, and trade was chiefly a barter. The houses were merely turf huts, half underground, and the only fuel was seal blubber, and seal flesh and blubber almost the only food. For lighting their huts they also used seal oil, in small dishes with floating wicks, and of course the ceilings were always sooty. The necessity for improved habitations was evident, and later when the sealing company holding the lease offered to build houses and permit the natives to live in them free of rent, no time was lost in accepting the generous proposal. Before I left St. Paul there had been built small cottages of three rooms sufficient to house every family on the island. The people were so convinced of the necessity of keeping their habitations underground for warmth that at first we could not convince them that houses could be made comfortable in any other way. We passed through various stages of unsatisfactory yieldings to this preju-

dice, but our last houses were the best, and were built on high ground, uncompromisingly above the earth. A skillful mechanic was brought out by the sealing company, and under his guidance the natives soon became sufficiently expert to assist very materially in building. After a row of foundations, the length of the street, had been made ready, the people were divided into three gangs, who were soon able to put up one of these houses and finish it in a day. One gang laid the sills and floors, another set up the frame and boarded the house laid the day before, and the third shingled the roof and clapboarded the walls of the one framed two days before. We introduced furniture as quickly as possible; and it was not long before the islanders were as comfortably situated as are the average employees in any manufacturing community.

It was interesting to note the difference in character crop out as the community gradually took upon itself civilization. Some were naturally prudent, and easily saved a surplus; others would be in debt at the end of the year. In 1877 a small proportion of their number, perhaps ten per cent., had invested about ten or twelve hundred dollars with the Fur Company; another ten per cent. were always in want; the remainder spent what they received. The best paid class, the ablest workers, received over four hundred dollars each for their season's work, and as they could obtain a large part of their food from the resources of the island without cost, and received their houses furnished, rent free, their needs were few. To foreign ways in clothes and fashion they inclined very naturally. The year before my coming sealing-parties had brought to the island considerable quantities of ready-made clothing as an article of trade, and the men were consequently fairly well dressed; but only a small quantity of cloth suitable for dresses had been taken, and the women had not begun to make their clothing in any regular form. But in time, with some assistance, their ready adaptability made them a very well-dressed people. Before I came away the wives of those who had been saving sent their measures to Sitka with orders for silk dresses for church wear, and the young men arrayed themselves in broadcloth, wore gloves and well-blacked boots, and carried perfumed handkerchiefs.

As my time was not fully taken up with my duties, and good fortune brought to me an abiding place of unusual size for St. Paul, I seized the happy chance of making my house a meeting-place for the people, and especially for the children. Later we fitted up a school-room, which we also made a place for social entertainment, and kept the school open eight months in the year. We were greatly assisted

in our school duties by illustrated books and papers sent to us; for so unvaried and barren was the scenery of the island, which was all of the world these children had ever seen, that it was well-nigh impossible for them to comprehend physical objects of the simplest nature. What a mountain might be was beyond their understanding, and the difficulty of explaining the appearance of a great forest to children who knew no vegetable growth larger than the purple lupine on their gentle slopes was greater than one can tell. It was necessary, however, to exercise the strictest censorship in our illustrated lessons, as it was difficult for all to comprehend caricature even in its simplest forms; even the most impossible pictures they believed represented facts.

I found the people living in separate families, and, as far as I could see, there was no more immorality among them than would be

found in any decent civilized community. The women were modest in deportment, the children obedient and respectful to their parents, and the men always manifested a disposition to assist me in all my efforts.

In character they were mild and gentle, with the expression of settled melancholy habitual to those races which have no amusements. In this respect, however, they changed greatly as opportunity developed the merriment latent in their nature. The children when first taught to speak did so in a serious way, and the utter absence of anything like hearty laughter in a group of them always affected me strangely. It seemed as if their avenues of expression were closed to pleasure, and later, when they had learned the simple games I taught them, it was a great satisfaction to me to hear my rooms ring with their merry voices.

Charles Bryant.

“AND HIS WILL IS OUR PEACE.”

E la sua volontade è nostra pace.—DANTE.

O RESTLESS soul of man, unsatisfied
 With the world's empty noise and feverish glare,
 Sick with its hopes of happiness denied,
 The dust and ashes of its promise fair;

Baffled and buffeted, thy days perplexed,
 Thy cherished treasures profitless and vain,
 What comfort hast thou, captive, thwarted, vexed,
 Mocked by mirage of joys that merge in pain?

Though love be sweet, yet death is strong, and still
 Inexorable change will follow thee;
 Yea, though thou vanquish every mortal ill,
 Thou shalt not conquer mutability!

The human tide goes rushing down to death;
 Turn thou a moment from its current broad,
 And listen: what is this the silence saith,
 O soul? “Be still, and know that I am God!”

The mighty God! Here shalt thou find thy rest,
 O weary one! There is naught else to know,
 Naught else to seek—here thou mayst cease thy quest,
 Give thyself up. He leads where thou shalt go.

The changeless God! Into thy troubled life
 Steals strange, sweet peace; the pride that drove thee on,
 The hot ambition and the selfish strife
 That made thy misery, like mist are gone;

And in their place a bliss beyond all speech;
 The patient resignation of the will
 That lifts thee out of bondage, out of reach
 Of death, of change, of every earthly ill.

Celia Thaxter.