



## SEALS AND SEALSKINS.

By WILLOUGHBY MAYCOCK.



QUITE recently a divine in the west of England sought to appeal to the feelings of the female members of his flock by apprising them that the "trim sealskin jacket of which its fair owner is so proud, which looks so handsome, and which keeps out the cold, represents some half dozen dams who have more or less been skinned alive, while their little ones have been left to die in all the slow agonies of starvation. Such, ladies, is the price of a sealskin jacket!" This diatribe was followed as a matter of course by an animated newspaper correspondence, in which the fallacies into which the worthy canon had fallen were fully exposed. The latter, in defence, sought shelter behind an article by Lady Blake, which appeared in a contemporary last spring. Had the reverend gentleman restricted his remarks to the *modus operandi* of seal killing in Newfoundland his humane purpose would have been equally well served, and the "nakedness of the land" left unexposed. But the wearing apparel of the "flock" offered a target of exceptional attraction, and the rest we know. This incident, coupled with the fact that the lease of the Pribylov Islands<sup>1</sup> granted by The United States Congress for twenty years to the Alaska Commercial Company will expire on the 30th of the present month, induces me to think that some account of the life, habits and death of the fur seals on these islands may not be altogether uninteresting at the present juncture.

The classical denomination of the fur seal, to whom fashion is indebted for its glossy jackets and vests, is the *Callorhinus ursinus*, one of the numerous family of *Otaridæ*. It has no affinity whatever with the hair and other seals with which it is so frequently confounded, and which belong to the species *Phocidæ*. The skins of these latter are worth but little more than sixpence apiece in their undressed state, and are used for mats, and other minor purposes in the tanning industry. Their commercial value lies in their blubber, which, when "tried out," yields an oil of great service in dressing jute. They have no external ears, their flippers are placed close to the head, and walking on land is with them an extremely difficult matter. The fur seals, on the other hand, have short external ears, and, their flippers being in the middle of the body, they manage to waddle along on shore with comparative ease, provided the distance be not in excess of their staying powers.

According to Mr. Guillemard, and other recognized authorities, the fur seal is now almost extinct save in certain islands of the Behring Sea, though in past years considerable numbers were met with off Patagonia and the Falkland Islands, as well as on the Chilian and Bolivian coasts, and various islands in the Western Pacific. But as no proper means were organized for their protection in these localities, the greed with which they were pursued for the sake of their highly-prized skins has practically resulted in their extermination; the consequence being that the supply of the world<sup>2</sup> is now confined to Behring and Copper Islands of the Commander Group, and St. George and St. Paul of the Pribylov Islands.

<sup>1</sup> The Pribylov Islands are situated in the Behring Sea between 56° and 57° north latitude, and 168° and 170° west longitude.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Howard Clark in his *Review of the Fur Seal Fisheries of the World* estimates the annual average yield from 1880 to 1887 inclusive from all sources at 192,457 skins, of which quite 160,000 are drawn from the Behring Sea and its adjacent waters.

In 1867 the United States purchased from Russia for \$7,200,000 gold the vast expanse of territory known as Russian America, which included the Pribylov Islands, of whose extent and value but little was then known. The following year a Mr. Hutchinson, of New Hampshire, and Captain Ebenezer Morgan, of Connecticut, repaired to Alaska, captured a large number of seals, and by their personal efforts succeeded in interesting and arousing Congress to declare the seal islands a Governmental reservation. In 1869 seals were only taken on those islands for subsistence of the natives, and in 1870 Congress passed a law limiting their annual slaughter on St. Paul's to 75,000 per annum, and on St. George's to 25,000. The act also empowered the Treasury department to lease the seal islands for twenty years at \$50,000 a year, plus a revenue tax of two dollars on each skin taken; and after an animated and bitter struggle in competition, the Alaska Commercial Company secured the valued award. Mr. Hutchinson was the prime organizer of this Company, whose headquarters are at San Francisco. I must not omit to mention that in March, 1874, an amended Act of Congress empowered the Treasury to determine the number of seals that might be annually destroyed in each island, so that the fixed ratio of three to one above referred to only lasted for four years. Agents of the Treasury department reside on the spot in order to see that all regulations are complied with to the letter.

The Pribylov Islands were originally colonized by Aleuts from the neighbouring islands. Into their origin it is unnecessary to inquire further than to say that their breeding has become so mixed up with the Russian, Japanese, and other strains that they present characteristics of all the various races of men from the Negro to the Caucasian. Their average height is five feet four, with small, wide-set eyes, broad and high cheek-bones, coarse, straight, black hair, and a brownish yellowy complexion. They are courteous in their manner, both to the officials of the Company and to one another. The women possess a fair share of vanity, and watch with anxiety the arrival of new costumes for the Treasury agents' wives or daughters, and, being by nature expert needlewomen, lose no time in copying them to the best of their power. The principal food of the inhabitants is seal meat, from 5,000 to 6,000 "pups" being killed each fall for preserving. For butter and sugar they evince especial partiality, and consume large quantities of both. As parents they are most affectionate. During the breeding season of the seals they are all actively employed, as will be gathered anon. In the winter they subside into a state of vegetation, drinking tea and sleeping, and they are regular in their attendance at the Greek Catholic Church. Leaving out of consideration officers of the Company and Treasury officials, the natives on St. Paul Island number about 300, and those on St. George perhaps a third of that number. The female population is in excess of the male portion—a circumstance which is due in great measure to the stringent regulations of the Greek Church, which forbids a marriage contract where the most distant relationship exists. This rule even extends to relatives of the godfathers and godmothers of the contracting parties. The field of eligible parties being thus restricted, the men have to make periodical pilgrimages to Ounalashka in quest of their better halves. Having now given a brief sketch of the Pribylov Islands, their inhabitants, and the concession under which they are managed, I will proceed to give some account of the manners and customs of the fur seals themselves.

The local names given to the various seals and their haunts in the Pribylov Islands seem to have been chosen in such a manner as to dispel any suggestion of partiality. While on the one hand the old males are known as "bulls" and their consorts "cows," the offspring is designated a "pup," and the breeding-grounds "rookeries." The first week in May heralds the arrival of an advance guard of full-grown males, seven years old and upwards. Let us avail ourselves of the opportunity, while he has taken his station and is eagerly awaiting the advent of the female, to examine him in some detail. He measures most likely from the tip of his nose to the end of his abbreviated tail from six to seven feet. This class of seal is known to the natives as the "seecatch." His bodily weight when he first emerges from the sea is at least 400 pounds, and older and more corpulent specimens are not unfrequently met with weighing 600 pounds. His head is absurdly small when compared with his immensely thick neck and shoulders. His eyes are large, of a bluish hazel hue, alternately burning with revengeful passionate light, and changing to tones of tenderness and good nature. His muzzle and jaws are not dissimilar to those of a Newfoundland dog,

with the exception that his lips are tightly compressed, the upper one supporting a fair moustache composed of long stiff bristles, most of which will be torn out in the course of the combats in which he will shortly be destined to embark. The fore feet, or flippers, are a pair of dark, bluish black hands, about eight or ten inches broad next the body, and gradually widening to about eighteen inches from this union. The shape of the hind flipper is very like that of the human foot reversed; the instep is flattened down and drawn out to a length of over twenty inches, while from the toes exude three strong, cylindrical, greyish horn-coloured nails, each half an inch long or thereabouts. The body is covered, so to speak, with two coats, one being a short, crisp, glistening over hair; and the other a close, soft elastic pelage, or fur, which gives the distinctive value to the pelt. In short, the hair and fur of a seal bear pretty much the same analogy to one another as the down and feathers on the breast of a duck. The prevailing colour of the "bulls" in spring is a dark, dull brown, with a sprinkling of black. Hoary and grizzly grey coats are the peculiar characteristics of very old males. The outer hair on the shoulders is either a grey or reddish ochre, or "pepper and salt." The breast is always lighter, and the muzzle a dark bluish black. The pups are entirely black.

The movements of the seal on land are peculiar. Its mode of progress under ordinary circumstances consists in two steps to the front with its fore flippers, it then arches its spine, and in so doing drags and lifts up the hind flippers to a position under the body, thus gaining fresh leverage for a further movement to the front. But, if hustled, the method of progress becomes much more rapid, and it can at a pinch gallop for a short distance as fast as a man can run. From the first week in May to the 10th or 12th of June the "seecatchie" arrive from day to day. The older hands are generally the last comers however, and it is in the latter part of this period more especially that they swarm from the depths in hundreds and thousands. One continuous fight is all the while sustained among these bulls for the most advantageous position on the beach for the reception of the females. These quarrels, which not unfrequently end fatally, result in the survival of the fittest, who range themselves close to the sea-shore, while the weaker vessels have to be content with a back seat. Some of the bulls exhibit great strength and fortitude. It is recorded of one veteran years ago, that he took up a position early in May beside the water line. He fought at least fifty desperate battles, in all of which he came off victor, and when the fighting season was over—or in other words all the females had landed and been appropriated—there sat this old warrior covered with scars and frightfully gashed, raw, festering and blood-stained, with one eye gouged out, but lording it bravely over his harem of twenty females, who were all huddled together on the same spot of his first location and around him! Seals fight principally with their mouths. They seize one another with their teeth, and then clenching their jaws hold on with the tenacity of a bull-dog, the grip being only relaxed by the strength of the one endeavouring to escape. Thus deep scars are frequently caused in the skin, and the flippers torn into shreds.

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the "seecatch" is the manner in which he subsists from May till the first week in August entirely without food. This is the more remarkable when one comes to think of the continued physical exertion necessitated by the defence of his station and the supervening cares of married life. Cases of total abstinence both from food and water have been known to last for as long as four months. This absence of any outward nourishment is compensated for by the self-absorption of that blubber with which the bull seals are so liberally supplied on their first arrival, and which alone enables them, speaking metaphorically, to live for so long on love. When they go back to the sea in the early days of August they are the merest shadows of their former selves, worn and emaciated to the last extent. Next season, however, they will return as sleek, fat, and ambitious as ever to their happy hunting grounds at St. Paul or St. George's!

If the reader will now picture to himself a sea-coast swarming for miles with thousands of able-bodied bull seals, whose propinquity to the water has been stoutly contested and only determined after long and severe fighting, he will be in some position to form an idea of the wild excitement engendered by the advent of the first cow, an event which almost invariably occurs between the 12th and 14th of June. At length the long-sustained patience of the countless myriads is rewarded, and they signalize it by a period of universal, spasmodic, and desperate fighting among them-

selves. Though they have quarrelled all the time from the moment they first landed, yet the fighting which now takes place is the most sanguinary and vindictive known to peltric warfare.

The females by their dove-like amiability afford a striking contrast to the ferocity of their lords. They average from four to four and a half feet in length, and are more shapely in proportion than the males. There is no wrapping around their necks and shoulders of unsightly masses of blubber. Their coats are of a rich steel grey tint, and their breasts snow white. Their sole object in landing is to be delivered of their young. This happy event—the result of the previous year's mating—generally takes place immediately after arrival, and is invariably restricted to one black "pup." Having thus contributed a small addition to the hordes of peltries already located on the island, the mother will return to sea to feed and be absent perhaps for a day or more, leaving her chick in charge of the male of whose temporary protection she has availed herself.

The head and eye of the female are exceedingly beautiful; the expression is at once gentle, attractive and intelligent, the large, lustrous, blue-black eyes are humid and soft with the tenderest expression, while the small, well-formed head is poised as gracefully on her neck as can well be imagined. She is the very picture of benignity and satisfaction when she is perched up on some convenient rock, and has an opportunity to quietly fan herself with a hind flipper, the eyes half closed and the head thrown back on her gently swelling shoulders.

On their arrival they are noticed and received by the males at the water's edge with great attention. They are alternately coaxed and urged up on to the rocks by chuckling, whistling, and roaring, and from that date they are under the most jealous supervision. At first they have a very rough-and-tumble time of it, but by degrees as the supply increases, things settle down, and by the time the last female arrives, which is generally about the 10th of July, the greater portion of the "seecatchie" who first established themselves in the front rank have a comfortable little harem of from fifteen to twenty inmates on their station, while those in the more remote localities have to satiate their polygamous appetites with a dozen or less. Veritable Henry the Eighth's of the seal tribe have been known to have as many as fifty females in their sole charge.

The pup, or "kotickie," as I have already stated, is black at its birth and for three months after. When a week old it weighs from six to seven pounds, and its skin one and a quarter pounds. Six years will alter these weights respectively to two hundred and eighty and twenty-five pounds. The pups get together in groups called by the natives "pods," and their bleating resembles that of lambs. The mother by almost supernatural instinct knows at once the voice of her own "kotickie," and can pick it out from any number of others. The same intelligence is not however evinced by the pups, who are ever ready to avail themselves of nourishment wherever it is forthcoming.

By no means the least interesting feature in seal life is the pup's first attempt to swim. If thrown into the water before attaining the age of a month or six weeks they would assuredly sink. Once they have acquired the art they fairly revel in it, indulging in every kind of gambol, and ultimately curling themselves up and taking a nap after their exertions. By the end of September the "rookeries" are broken up, and all the pups have mastered the art of swimming. A month later all seals have left the island with the exception of a few "kotickies," who linger behind for a space and take their departure later on.

By this time I can fancy I hear the reader remarking, "Well, you've told us all about the landing, the rookeries, and the departure of the seals, but how about the slaughter and the "skins"? My rejoinder is that I have kept for the last the only element of the narrative that savours at all of sadness.

In round numbers we may take it that about a million pups are born in each year in the Pribylov Islands, and the sexes are probably about equally divided. From one year up to the age of five this category are known as "holluschickie" or "bachelor" seals, and must not be confounded with the more mature "seecatchie" and "cows" of whom mention has already been made. The great herds of "holluschickie" who yearly visit the Pribylov Islands are never allowed by the "seecatchie," under the pain of frightful mutilation or death, to put their flippers on or near the "rookeries." It is from this latter category alone that selections are made for slaughter by the natives. The

majority of them come on shore at intermittent intervals in the summer months in rear of the "rookeries" and on free beaches. They are sportive and independent, and their gambols both on the islands and adjacent waters afford a most interesting study. The slaughtering of the "holluschickie" commences about June. A batch of natives, availing themselves of a time when the seals are dozing, creep down quietly between them and the surf. This move once accomplished, and escape thereby cut off, the "holluschickie" are driven in shoals up to the killing grounds in the village, at the rate of a mile or a mile and a quarter per hour. If the weather is unusually hot they are permitted numerous halts, as if they become unduly heated their skins are spoiled. The age at which their skins are in the best condition is four years. Arrived at the flat slaughtering grounds they are allowed to cool and rest, and then the able-bodied male population turn out to annihilate them. Each man's outfit consists of a stout oaken or hickory bludgeon, about five feet in length, a stabbing knife, a skinning knife and a whetstone. The chiefs select those who are in all respects eligible subjects for slaughter, and at a given signal down comes the club, and the poor animal is stunned and motionless; their skulls being very thin are readily fractured. This operation over, the men seize the prostrate seals by the hind flippers, and range them in rows. Then each sealer takes his knife, and drives it into the heart at a point between the fore flippers of each stunned form, the blood gushes forth, and the quivering of the animal soon ceases. Then follows the skinning. The first cut takes a horizontal direction from the throat straight down the breast to the tail. With the smaller knife the native then effects a circular cut round the neck and tail and at the root of the flippers. The rest is a mere question of hauling, and the whole operation is performed as a rule in one minute. No time is allowed to be lost, especially in warm weather, as if the skin becomes heated the fur comes away from it, and, as an article of commerce, it is rendered valueless. Under the skin is a loin of blubber, which, unlike that appertaining to the hair seals, is most offensive to the smell.

The skins are then taken from the field to the salt house, where they are laid out one upon another, hair to fat, like so many sheets of paper, with salt profusely spread upon the fleshy side, as they are piled up in the kenches or bins. After lying two or three weeks in this style they become pickled. They are then rolled into bundles of two skins to the package, tightly corded, and ready for shipment from the islands. For each skin the native receives from the agent of the Company forty cents (*1s. 8d.*) for his labour.

There is yet, however, a great deal to be done before the skin assumes a wearable form. In the condition in which it is tied up and exported from Alaska the fur is not visible at all, being entirely concealed by a coat of stiff overhair, dull, grey and grizzled, and it takes three to make a decent-sized jacket.

To make the narrative complete some account of the dressing process may not be out of place. First of all the salt is washed off, and the skins are placed on a beam and the fat scraped away with a knife, care being taken to avoid cuts or uneven places. They are next washed in water and dried by a moderate heat. After being dried they are again soaked in water and thoroughly cleansed with soap, after this they pass to the picker who dries the fur by stove heat, the pelt being kept moist. The skin is then replaced on a beam, and with a dull shoe knife the long hair is plucked out. Finer hairs are then extracted with another knife. The skins are next shaved to a fine even surface; they are then stretched, worked, and dried, and afterwards put in a tub and trodden on to make them pliable. Various dyes are then applied till the requisite hue is obtained, from eight to twelve coats, laid on with a brush, being necessary to make a good colour. They are again shaved, and made up into those delightful articles of apparel which gladden the hearts of our female folk.

In bringing this brief sketch to a conclusion it is only right that I should acknowledge my indebtedness for much that it contains to the admirable monograph on the subject by Mr. H. W. Elliott, of the Smithsonian Institute at Washington, whose two years experiences in the Pribylov Islands are so graphically recorded in the Reports of the Fishery Commission of the United States.