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CHASING WHALES ALONG THE ALEUTIAN CHAIN

by

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Photographs by William L. Finley

One evening a group of us were playing Russian bank at a big whaling station on Akutan Island in the Aleutian Chain. Our boat had just come out of the wild and roaring Bering Sea, crawling into this inland bay cut deep into the big island with rising hills all around. There were seven of us in the bare little room, sitting around the table bent on the game, Captain Howell of the Coast Guard Cutter Algonquin, the superintendent of the station and his wife, and four of us from our boat. We had come to visit the whalers and meet the whales themselves.

I couldn't keep my mind on the game for the pressure of the silence that almost throbbed in my ears after the rolling, tumbling trip along the coast of this chain of islands, marked by sentinels of smoking craters, yet clad in their covers of ermine with candles lighted dimly at their tips. It is one of the longest lines of active volcanoes in the world and belongs to the Asiatic group and not to our Pacific Coast formation.

It was so still that I felt like a pirate in a hide-away. Only one sound broke the silence, the mournful howling of huskies that were patrolling the narrow, steep beaches hunting for food of any kind from birds nesting on the tundra to whale offal washed up by the bloody, foul smelling water of the bay.

These wild dogs are the hard working sled pullers of the winter snows, hungry at all times, turned out in summer to forage for themselves in a barren land. The bigness of the world and the far-awayness were accentuated by the lonely voices of the dogs. I looked out of the dingy window to discern only dim pilot lights of our little boat and behind it those of the long, slim cutter casting faint streaks across the black water.

These islands comprise a long, narrow ridge lifting out of the water

more than five thousand feet deep. Not far south of this ridge the ocean floor is sunk to a depth of between four and five miles. On the north side of this Chain it is not so deep, although in some places it drops to twelve thousand feet. Still further north the Bering Sea is comparatively shallow.

The natural resources of the North Pacific even up into the Arctic regions are varied and valuable, especially the marine life,- the great salmon runs, halibut, porpoises and allied forms that furnish quantities of oil, fur seals, otter, mink, foxes, game birds in myriads. All this has been a coveted revenue to the Japs' lean larder and a source of easy sniping, which hasn't added anything to cooperation between the two nations. Now that there is open warfare and a show-down, the birds and the beasts are taking it on the chin.

The salt waters of the world are inhabited by a great array of fish-like mammals, of which the whales are the largest members. They are warm-blooded mammals which breathe air instead of water, drown if submerged too long, bring forth their young alive and nourish them with milk from their own bodies. The largest and swiftest of all whales is the great sulphur-bottom of the Pacific Ocean, in fact the largest mammal in existence today. This big cetacean, *Balaenoptera sulfureus*, belongs to the baleen group or toothless whales, of which there are some fifteen others. For the protection of their flesh and vital organs from the cold Arctic waters, they are completely enveloped in a thick layer of fat, called "blubber", which lies under the skin, and is impervious to cold. This "blubber" is the source of quantities of oil. A sulphur-bottom may be some seventy feet long and may weigh that many tons.

The baleen or toothless whales live upon minute, shrimp-like crustaceans and swimming mollusks which float in great masses on the surface of the sea. In feeding, the whale swims through a wide scum of floating crustaceans, with its mouth open. In its mouth are two great masses of fringed whalebone or baleen which serves the purpose of a strainer, allowing the water to drain out, leaving the soft food to be swallowed. Another baleen whale, the bow-head, has even larger plates of baleen than the sulphur-bottom. These are sometimes ten or twelve feet in length.

In earlier days baleen had a number of commercial uses. Later the big amounts of whalebone obtained were more valuable than whale oil, used for corset stays, and when scraped fine and mixed with silk fiber was used to make cloth rustle, and also give stiffness.

The sperm or toothed whales are found from the north Atlantic to the north Pacific, and yields sperm oil, spermaceta, and teeth which are valuable for ivory. A substance called ambergris, of value to druggists and perfumers, is obtained from the intestinal canal.

Our boat was equipped with a miniature whale gun similar to that used on the big, old rusty whalers, only smaller. In the hope of getting a shot at a whale the gun was set up on the bow. Since the harpoon could not be fired more than twenty-five yards, it was a long chance to get near enough for a shot. We hit a whale with a first charge, but he broke the line and got away. For the next one we saw, the heavy hawser attached to the harpoon was coiled very carefully to avoid a second miss. On the end of the harpoon was a bomb that carried about half a pound of powder. To this was attached a time fuse that exploded the bomb about three seconds after the harpoon left the gun. This is the method of killing a whale if the gunner scores a bull's-eye.

The nostril or blow-hole of the whale is on the top of his head, and after swimming under water for a while, the whale rises, blows the air out of its lungs, which is hot and rises like steam. A whale comes up and "blows" several times and then "sounds", that is, the tail or flukes go up, then down the animal goes into deep water to hunt for food. It remains down perhaps for twelve or fifteen minutes before coming up again for more air.

After several trials, a whale came up crossing our bow within twenty yards. At the shot, the harpoon bounced square over his back and slithered clear beyond him. While the whale was not injured, he was scared clear out of the country, and we never saw him again. Cruising quietly along on the auxiliary motor, we saw some distance ahead of us two whales apparently sporting with each other and jumping completely out of the water. Everyone was excited and we went

full speed ahead to shoot them with the cameras. By climbing to the top of the mast, we had a better lookout for shots. One came up part way, then went down deeper. The other one turned partly over on its side with a tremendous splash, and was gone.

The next day we followed a bigger fellow, keeping at a safe distance so as to get a harpoon shot at him. For the most part, he rolled along lazily, just his back showing above the surface like a sneaking submarine. Once in a while his flukes came up, the under sides pure white and waving in the air like a big fan. Then he would send up his spout of steam, give one big roll and head for deep water.

Finally the gunner got a shot within twenty yards. The parpoon struck just behind the dorsal fin. Pictures were taken from the pilot house and also from the masthead. There was a tremendous splash, and then came the question of whether he could be stopped. A thousand feet of cable slithered out, the winch rattling noisily. For half an hour it seemed impossible to stop our big game. He thrashed and rolled about, sending sprays of spume high in the air. Then he sent up his flukes, opened his big nostrils and spat a jet into the air, and lunged downward. Did we have cable enough and speed enough to keep from being dragged to the bottom with him?

A little later, however, he became pretty well worn out, the air pump having inflated his big carcass, which now rolled along close to the surface. He was hauled alongside and anchored to the bow of the boat. Pretty good for a little eighty-foot boat and a toy whale gun. The whale was turned over to a fox farmer on one of the islands and provided fine meals for the rare blue foxes.