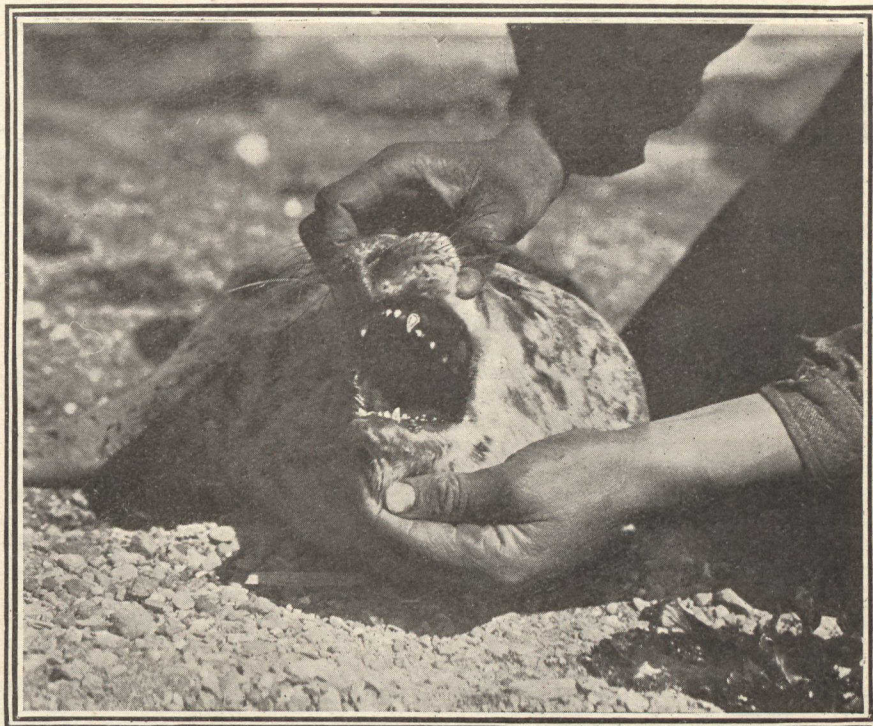


Fritz Landing a Hair Seal.



A fine Row of Submarine Teeth.

Some Strange Habits of the Hair Seal

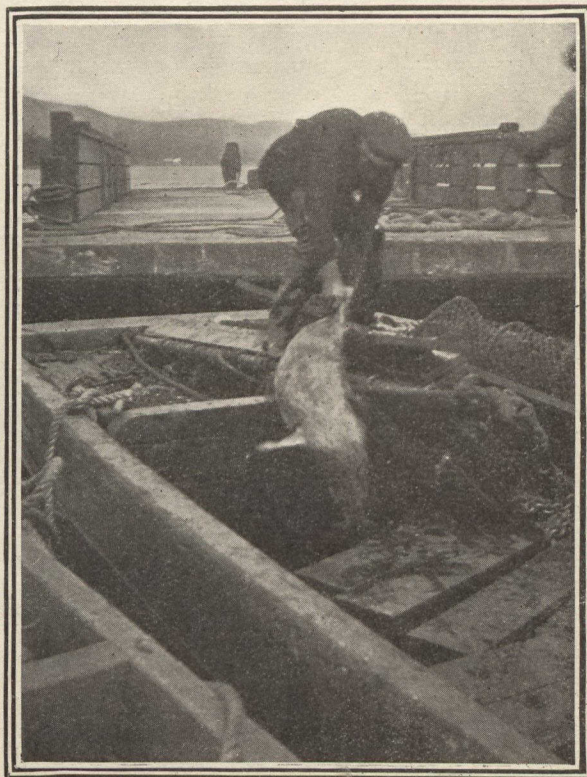
By BONNYCASTLE DALE. Photographs by the Author.

WE were standing on a little pebbly spit watching some salmon fishers arrange their tackle. Outside the spit the surf rolled tumultuously along the great Straits of Juan de Fuca, telling of some recent storm on the misnamed Pacific. Inside the spit the sheltered waters of the inlet were calm and unruffled. Suddenly there came towards us up through this calm depth a darting, splashing, dark-backed thing that cut the surface like a knife. On it slid through the shallow water right out onto the pebbles of the spit—a big, shining dog salmon, and directly in its wake, ploughing up the water into great spouting waves came a big hair seal. It was only the fact of our being on that lonely strand that saved that salmon from the seal. Alas! poor thing, it should have had its liberty after so desperate a measure as running on shore; but the fishermen took it and killed it. I do not mean to write this as a common occurrence among salmon, yet they will do anything to escape the savage pursuer. The lad Fritz, my assistant, and I have sat for hours watching one of these usually harmless animals in its swift pursuit of the salmon. It seems transformed to a savage beast when it starts to hunt, plunging on over the river flats where the water is in places less than four inches deep, with the dark-backed fish struggling ahead. Some of the rapid twists of the beach, when it actually turns a back somersault to catch a fish that had slipped by, are marvellous exhibitions of these carnivorous animals that are so perfectly adapted to a marine life.

This lower order of Pinnipedia differ from the greater sea lion in the absence of external ears. We have often seen the various rockeries where these hair seals breed. They do not frequent one place in great numbers, being scattered all along the Northern Pacific coast, a few pair in each inlet and bay. Consequently these isolated females breed on the adjacent reefs and little lonely islands. It is in the warm, early spring days that the barking of the seals ceases about these chosen spots and the big brown female flops her way up onto the shelving beach. Hardy little pups these need to be as there seems to be no choice of even a smooth spot for the youngsters' reception. Right in a crevice of the rock, near which lay rotting an ancient Indian canoe with its ghastly burden of bleached skull and whitened bones—for this present breeding ground of the hair seal had in times long past been chosen as the burial place of a neighbouring native tribe—the subject of this sketch was born. One thing that imprinted itself upon our notice was—the big female seal that glared at us from the rocky ledge where her pup lay squealing beside her had exactly the same staring expression as the time-discoloured skull beside her. Often since then when we have been watching one of these active beasts fishing have we noted the resemblance all of them bear to a human skull. Just notice the next one that pops his head above the sea and you will agree with our conclusion.

The big brown mother had been feeding the little

grey-and-black spotted chap with freshly caught fish, as the way she had flapped up was yet wet and bits of the fish lay beside the pair. Although the surf forbade us landing, we had excellent oppor-



"He seized it by its hind flippers and threw it on the deck."



Head of the Hair Seal Pup.

tunities for observation. The lad, of course, wanted the wee one, but, remembering our last experience with young seals I bade our Indians paddle away. Let me tell you of the young seal Fritz stole away from a ledge. It was one of the prettiest silky things one could imagine. It was fully reared and no doubt able to slip off the ledge and fish for itself, as they all learn to do in the first few weeks. It was of a clear grey silver coat thickly spotted with irregular black spots. On the belly it was pure white. Its delicate flippers were white and silky, its five long, strong claws on each were also pure white; there were hard-cased claws on the fore-flippers and soft-cased on the back (I have noticed that all this family, sea lions and all, soon wear out these soft hind claws).

This silvery white thing when dry was a beautiful dove grey when wet. One would think it was a thing of beauty and a joy forever. When the lad first got it we were camped. We were studying the varieties of starfish in Puget Sound. It was warm weather, so the lad partly disrobed before getting into his low bunk. Outside the tent "Merman," as we called the seal, snored and sighed and sobbed in its most peculiar seal fashion. Soon we all slept. Then the seal discovered it was hungry, and as its natural fishing ground was only ten steps from the tent, in it dived and caught, no doubt, a good bellyful. Out it flapped its way, sighing in its usual mournful habit. Ahead loomed the tent where the two big animals slept. Why should it also not sleep in the tent? In under the curtain it rolled and flapped its wet and sandy way towards Fritz's bunk. That big animal had blankets over it. Why should not a little wet seal have blankets over it also? So in it flapped into Fritz's bunk. The cry that arose on that still night air made all the roosting birds in the shorebrush twitter, and only the fact that they cannot unclasp their claws when their legs are bent prevented them from falling from off their perches. The cry brought me awake sitting up. It was repeated in a shriller key. The seal had found the warmth of the bunk and was clawing to stay in. The wet body against the warm skin of the yet only half-awakened lad was driving him hysterical, and it was only when I lighted a match and threw back his blankets that we both had time and season for laughter. We kicked the little beast out and he got even by creeping into the open mouth of the bread sack and sleeping there, causing Fritz a ten-mile paddle for more bread.

Day by day this thing tormented us. Time after time we threw it overboard only to find it at home before us. Really it was most comical to see a beast that we had flung into the water a good five miles away come flapping down the path actually barking out a welcome to the returning hosts. One day the lad came back in great glee; he said a lady had offered him five dollars for Merman and he had told her he never took money but would be happy to give the seal to her; and the last he had seen of Merman was his struggles at the end of an ignominious dog chain as he barked and sobbed