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June 27, 1881

AT METCHIGME BAY.

Glacier Work at Plover Bay—A Crazy Native—His Idiosyncracies and Attempted Suicide.

"Corwin"

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STEAMER CORWIN.
Near the Mouth of Metchigme Bay,
On the west side of Behring Strait.
June 27, 1881.

After leaving St. Michael's, on the evening of the 21st, we crossed Behring Sea to Plover Bay to fill our coal-bunkers from a pile belonging to his Majesty the Czar of Russia, arriving there early on the morning of the 26th, having been detained at St. Laurence Island by a gale from the north. While the ship was being coaled, I climbed the east wall of the fiord three or four miles above the mouth, where it is about 2,200 feet above the level of the sea, and as the day was clear, I obtained capital views of the mountains on both sides and around the head of the fiord among the numerous ice fountains which, during the Glacial winter, poured their tribute through this magnificent channel into Behring Sea.

[of June]

PLOVER BAY GLACIER.

When the glacier that formed what is now called Plover Bay was in its prime, it was about thirty miles long and from five to six miles in width at the widest portion of the trunk and about 2,000 feet deep. It then had at least five main tributaries, which, as the trunk melted towards the close of the ice period, became independent glaciers, and these again were melted into perhaps seventy-five or more small residual glaciers from less than a mile to several miles in length, all of which, as far as I could see, have at length vanished, though some wasting remnants may still linger in the highest and best-protected fountains above the head of the fiord. The mountains hereabouts, in the forms of the peaks, ridges, lake-basins, bits of meadow, and in sculpture and aspects in general, are like those of the high Sierra of California where the rock is least resisting. Snow still lingers in drift patches and streaks and avalanche heaps down to the sea-level, while there is but little depth of solid snow on the highest peaks and ridges, so that, there being no warm, sunny base of gentle slopes and foothills, no varying belts of climate, the mountains as a whole seem to be only the storm-beaten tops of mountains. Still there are spots here and there, where the snow is melted, that are already cheered with about ten species of plants in full bloom: anemones, buttercups, primula, several species of draba, and purple heathworts, and phlox and potentilla, making charming Alpine gardens, but too small and thinly planted to show at a distance of more than a few yards, while trees are wholly wanting.

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A NATIVE SETTLEMENT.

On our way north to-day we stopped a few minutes opposite a small native settlement, six or eight miles to the northeast of the mouth of Metchigme Bay, in search of Omniscot, the rich reindeer owner, whom we had met further up the coast two weeks ago, and who had then promised to have a lot of deer skins ready for us if we would call at his village.

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A TROUBLESOME PASSENGER—A CRAZY NATIVE.

Some of the natives came off to the steamer to trade, who informed us that Omniscot lived some distance up the bay that we had just passed, and one of them who speaks a little English, inquired why we had not brought back Omniscot's son, and told us that he was his cousin and that his mother was crying about him last night, fearing that he would never come back. We informed him that his cousin was crazy and had tried to

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kill himself, but that he was now at Plover Bay with one of his friends and would probably be home soon. This young Omniscot, whom we had taken aboard at St. Laurence Bay, thinking that he might be useful as an interpreter, is a son of the reindeer man and belongs to the Tchutchi tribe. We soon came to see that we had a troublesome passenger, for the expression of his eyes, and the nervous dread he manifested of all the natives wherever we chanced to stop, indicated some form of insanity. He would come to the door of the cabin and warn the Captain against the people of every village that we were approaching as likely to kill us, and then he would hide himself below deck or climb for greater safety into the rigging. On the 25th, when we were lying at anchor off St. Laurence Island, he offered his rifle, which he greatly prized, to one of the officers, saying that inasmuch as he would soon die he would not need it. Then he sent word to the same effect to the Captain, but came to the cabin door shortly afterward, with nothing unusual apparent in his face, or behavior, and began a discussion concerning the region back of St. Michael's as a location for a flock of reindeer. He thought they would do well there, he said, and that his father would give him some young ones to make a beginning, which he could take over in some schooner, and that they would get plenty of good moss to eat on the tundra, and multiply fast until they became a big flock like his father's, so big that nobody could count them, etc. In three or four hours after this he threw himself overboard, but was picked up and brought on deck. Some of the sailors stripped off his wet furs, and then the discovery was made that before throwing himself into the sea the poor fellow had stabbed himself in the left lung. The surgeon dressed his wound and gave as his opinion that it would prove fatal. He was doing well, however, when we left him, and is likely to recover. The Plover Bay natives, in commenting on the affair, remarked that the St. Laurence people were a bad, quarrelsome set, and always kept themselves in some sort of trouble.

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A BAD LOOKING LOT OF NATIVES.

Having procured a guide from among the natives that came aboard here, we attempted to reach Omniscot's village, but found the bay full of ice, and were compelled to go on without our winter supply of deer skins, hoping, however, to be able to get them on the east coast.

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Written June 27, 1881

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There is quite a large Tchuchi settlement near the mouth of the bay, on the north side. Seven large canoe loads of the population came aboard, making quite a stir on our little ship. They are the worst looking lot of Siberian natives that I have yet seen, though there are some fine, tall, manly fellows amongst them. Mr. Nelson, a naturalist, and zealous collector for the Smithsonian Institution, who joined us at St. Michael's, photographed a group of the most villainous of the men, and two of the women whose arms were elaborately tattooed up to the shoulders. Their faces were a curious study while they were trying to keep still under circumstances so extraordinary.

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The glaciation of the coast here is recorded in very telling characters, the movement of the ice having been in a south-southwest direction, nearly.

The weather is delightful, clear sunshine, only a few fleecy wisps of cloud in the west, and the water still as a mill pond.

JOHN MUIR.

"Corwin"

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