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John Muir

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SAN FRANCISCO, CA.

WANDERINGS IN ALASKA.


Visit to a Deserted Indian Village.

Habitations of the Natives—Carved Images and Other Relics—Indian Rites—A Doomed Race.

FORT WRANDEL, October 12, 1879.

Steaming solemnly along the Great Glacier—the cycler-heads still hanging well on their shoulders—the far islands and mountains again passed in review. We had climbed to the very mountains, and the clouds that so often hide the mountain tops even in good weather were now floating high above them, and scarce cast a perceptible shadow on the white fountains of the lce. So abundant and novel are the sights that it is a matter of interest hereabout to pursue the clouds that so often lie between a point ten or fifteen thousand feet at the least. Also the glaciers now seemed larger than usual beyond the Stickene river. I counted sizes between a point ten or fifteen miles in circumference, and the month of the strawberry bushes, and the crooked stems of the prickly panax, I made my way back to Cassiar, and then lingered in the twilight doing business.

It is here only a step from the marine vegetation of the Cassiar, to the terrestrial vegetation of almost tropical luxuriance. The thickets of the mountain ash, the alders and huckleberry bushes, and the crooked stems of the prickly panax, I made my way back to Cassiar, and then lingered in the twilight doing business.

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These are the by seventy years ago, and some of them lost of for-fight diJ.1,1 •

night water, and dancing spangies. Divinity abounded nevertheless. The day at still llobd tliat da:f. The stefte

green lage llow that so ponder.ous a mission most warlike and most alive of tribes should end that da:f. They were deserted

of the baptism of the dead. The families that occupied the houses in front of

which they stand. Others figures, one above the deeply charred bones are contained in a cavity in the pillar made to receive them. Others support the figure of a man or woman, life-size or larger, usually in a sitting posture, and the heads in some cases were grotesquely doubled and folded. In some instances the heads of various animals, and are said to have a mythological significance. Others, too, have been found, and in some curious way suggest the form of an animal, and the

carved figures of animals, and are said to have

rogenousness and audacity displayed in the designs, compression. On the contrary, every feature shows grave power and decision; while the childish innocence and audacity of the原始

form, finish and proportions that well. Few, indeed, could do bUlging. The simplest of these consists of a smooth post,

drilling round cells. In diameter, with the life-size, or an eagle or raven, three or four times as large as a man or woman, life-size or

the pillar made to receive them. Others, too, have been found, and in some curious way suggest the form of an animal, and the

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life-size, or an eagle or raven, three or four times as large as a man or woman, life-size or

bell,

the woodpecker in brushing round, and the beaver, wolf or bear. Each plank had evidently been hewn out of a whole log, and must have required infinite deliberation as well as skill. Their geometrical truthfulness is most admirable; their lines are all in strict geometric proportion, and the carving is done in the most precise way possible. It is difficult to imagine a more perfect example of Indian workmanship than these.
The colored lichens and mosses give them a venerable air, while the larger vegetation often found in such as are most decayed, produces a marked picturesque effect. Here, for example, is a bear five or six feet long, reposing on top of his lichen-frescoed pillar, with paws comfortably folded, a tuft of grass in each ear, and rubus-bushes along his back. And there is an old chief poised on a taller pillar, apparently gazing out over the beautiful landscape in contemplative mood, a tuft of bushes leaning back with jaunty air from the top of his weather-beaten hut, and downy mosses about his massive lips, the whole figure outlined against the pale sky. But no rudeness or grotesqueness that may appear, however combined with the decorations that nature has added, may possibly provoke mirth. The whole work is too serious in aspect, and brave and true in execution.

Similar monuments are made by the Sitka and Fort Simpson Indians, and also by the Haidah tribe on the Queen Charlotte and adjacent islands. Those of the Haidahs are said to surpass all others in size and excellence of workmanship.

INDIAN RITES.

The erection of one of these carvings is made a grand affair, and is talked of for a year or two beforehand. A feast, to which hundreds are invited, is held, and the joyous occasion is spent in eating, dancing and the bestowing of presents. Some of the larger specimens cost a thousand dollars or more. From one to two hundred blankets, worth $3 apiece, are paid to the genius who makes the carving, while the presents and feast material usually cost twice as much, so that only the wealthy families can afford them. I was talking with an old Indian genius the other day, who pointed out one of the carvings he had made, and for which he told me he had received forty blankets, a gun, canoe, and other articles, altogether worth about $170.

Mr. Swan, who has contributed much information concerning the Indian tribes of our Northwest coast, mentions one specimen that cost $2,500. They are always planted firmly in the ground. Most of these old ones, even, still stand fast, showing the erectness of the backbones of their builders.

DESECRATION.

While I was busy with my pencil I heard chopping going on at the north end of the...
village, then a heavy thud, as if a dead tree had fallen. It appeared, that after digging about the old hearth in the first dwelling visited by us without finding anything of consequence, the archaeological doctor called away the Indians to one of the most interesting of the monuments and cut it down, sawed off the figure, a woman measuring three feet three inches across the shoulders, and conveyed it aboard the steamer, with a view to taking it on East to enrich some museum or other. This sacrilege came near causing trouble with the Indians, and would have cost dearly had it not chanced to belong to the Kootachan family, the representative of which is a member of the newly organized Wrangel Presbyterian Church. He looked very seriously into the face of the reverend doctor, and pushed home the pertinent question: “How would you like to have an Indian go to a graveyard and break down and carry away a monument belonging to your family?” However, a few trifling presents deeply imbedded in deprecation served to hush and mend the matter, in consideration of the religious relations of the parties concerned.

PASSING AWAY.

These noble ruins seem to foreshadow too surely the fate of the Stickene tribe. Contact with the whites has already reduced it more than one-half. It now numbers less than 300 persons, and the deaths at present greatly exceed the births. Will they perish utterly from the face of the earth? A few years will tell. Under present conditions there only hope seems to lie in good missionaries and teachers, who will stand between them and the degrading vices of civilization and bestow what good they can. Thus a remnant may possibly be saved to gather fresh strength to grow up into the high place that they seem so fully capable of attaining to.

THE RETURN.

Sometime in the afternoon the steam-whistle called us together. The sail to Wrangel was delightful. The water was smooth and gilded by a glorious sunset. The shadows of our sombre meditations among the ruins melted away. There was no trace of decay in the painted sky. Landing at dusk we pushed back through the midst of Indians gathered on the wharf, and across the low, crooked streets up to our clean home in the Fort, and thus ended the defunct expedition to Chilcat. JOHN MUIR.