

## THE DISCOVERY OF ALASKA.

SPAIN had taken possession of Florida, Mexico, Central America, Peru and Chile, had colonized Lower California and established an enormous trans-Pacific commerce with the Indies; France had colonized Canada; the English, Dutch and Swedes had planted flourishing colonies on the Atlantic Coast, and the great Hudson's Bay Company had become firmly settled in its possession of the country surrounding the great inland sea from which it derives its name, before the first vessel's prow cleaved the waters of the North Pacific. In 1578 Sir Francis Drake had sailed as far north on the coast of "New Albion" as the forty-third parallel, possibly the forty-eighth, and in 1603 Martin de Aguilar had reached and attempted to enter the Rogue, or Umpqua, River on the Oregon coast; but north of that all was blank. For more than a hundred years thereafter not the least effort was made by these rival nations to establish themselves on the Pacific Coast north of the Spanish possessions in California. Not a vessel cast its shadow upon the waters of the North Pacific, nor a Caucasian eye gaze upon the mountain peaks that stand like ancient sentinels along our coast. Suddenly interest in this region was revived, and the initial steps were taken by a Power previously supposed to have no interest whatever in the American question.

The sudden rise of Russia from oblivion to a high rank among the Powers of the world, a revolution wrought by the genius of the enlightened monarch, Peter the Great, is one of the marvels of history. Gradually he extended his power eastward across the snowy wastes of Siberia until his dominions were washed by the waters of the Pacific beating upon the peninsula of Kamtchatka. The fur trade of this vast solitude became a valuable one, and added to the great revenue of the Czar. Having reached the Pacific he became eager to extend his power still further eastward until it touched the western confines of the dependencies of England, France and Spain in America. How far that was, or what was the nature of the region coveted, neither he nor any one else had the faintest glimmering of knowledge. It might be a great ocean of valueless water, a sea filled with islands, a continent of ice, or a land of plenty, "flowing with milk and honey." No one knew, but this powerful autocrat proposed to find out. His first step was to discover a waterway into the Pacific from the Arctic Ocean which washed his dominions on the north, just such a passage as the English mariners had searched for in vain, though he expected to reach it by going east instead of to the west. He ordered vessels to be constructed at Archangel, on the White Sea, for the purpose of coasting in the Arctic eastward along the shores of Siberia until an opening was discovered into the Pacific. Other vessels were to be constructed on the coast of Kamtchatka, which were to take an opposite course and endeavor to pass northward into the Arctic. Peter died before his plans were executed, and the project was held in abeyance for several years.

The Empress Catherine was a worthy successor of her

noble husband, and when firmly settled upon the throne she turned her attention to completing the work he had begun. In 1728, in accordance with her instructions, vessels were built on the coast of Kamtchatka, which were dispatched in search of the desired passage between the Arctic Ocean and the Pacific. In command of the expedition was Vitus Behring, a Danish navigator of skill and experience, in whose charge the former exploration was to have been placed by Peter. Russia was not a maritime nation and her seamen were in no manner scientific navigators, hence the selection of this skillful Dane for the command of so important an expedition. Behring sailed on the 14th of July, and followed the coast northerly in his little vessel until he found it trending steadily to the westward. From this fact he became convinced that he had already entered the Arctic and was sailing along the northern coast of Asia; and being unprepared for a long voyage, or the possibility of being compelled to spend the winter in the ice, he returned at once to the port of embarkation. The highest point reached was 67 degrees 18 minutes, but the longitude is not given. Neither going nor returning through the straits did he espy the coast line of America, foggy and cloudy weather obscuring it from view, and consequently he reported upon his return that a great open sea lay to the eastward of Asia, joining the Pacific Ocean with the Arctic. The next year he endeavored to cross this ocean and reach the shore of America by sailing directly eastward. In this attempt he was baffled by head winds and was driven by a gale into the Gulf of Okotsk. He abandoned the effort and returned to St. Petersburg to report his discoveries. During the few succeeding years a number of smaller expeditions were made by Russian subjects, one of these being driven upon the Alaskan coast in 1732, and it was discovered that not an open sea, but a strait, connected the two great oceans. Upon this was bestowed the name of the Danish explorer, the pioneer navigator of the North Pacific.

Catherine died, and after the consequent delay her successor, the Empress Anne, fitted out an expedition for the purpose of exploring on a more extended scale than had previously been done. This consisted of two vessels, Behring being in command of one, and Alexei Tchirikof, a Russian who had been his lieutenant on the first voyage, of the other. Anne died before the expedition was ready to sail, but Elizabeth, who succeeded to the throne, did not interfere with the plans which had been laid, and the two consorts sailed from the Bay of Avatsche on the 4th of June, 1741. They were soon separated in a gale, and were not again united. Tchirikof's vessel, the *St. Paul*, returned on the 8th of October in a sad plight. She had reached a group of islands in latitude 56 degrees, where sixteen of the crew, who landed to make a reconnoissance, were slaughtered by the Indians. Besides these, twenty-one more succumbed to the ravages of the scurvy before the vessel found her way back to port.

Sad as were the misfortunes that befel the crew of the *St. Paul*, they were slight compared with the disasters which crowded upon their comrades on board the *St.*