

INDIAN LIFE AT SITKA.

BY F. C. PRAY.

Dogbreak at Sitka is greeted by the fast swelling notes of four brass bugles, followed by the blowing of four trumpets. The soldiers are living scattered through town, and those whose quarters are not distant from the garrison still have business that keeps them employed there through the weary hours of night. So as to give them timely warning that their presence at reveille is required, the buglers must promenade the sidewalks of the town, with sounding brass, waking the civilian as well as the military. Then you may see fun—soldiers rushing along the streets at a fearful rate, whisking past you from highways and byways, darting from out of sundry habitations not claimed by Uncle Sam, and tumbling over the sixteen-foot high stockade on their exit from the Indian Ranch; for if they are not on time, their absence is punished by fine and imprisonment.

Slowly now Sitka endures; at daybreak all the Indians, men, women, children, newborn infants and all have hurried, naked and shivering, out of their houses, and run out into the waters of the bay, where they dip down several times, and then out and back. This is a religious observance of theirs, and must not be omitted, no matter what the season. Often of a winter's morning, when the thermometer thought it a favor to show 80 above zero only, have I heard one united yell, and a thousand human forms rushed simultaneously into the clear frothy waters of the ocean. An outsider can then see queer antics, for the icy deep makes the bathers frolic about like lambs on green pastures, and a continual howl and wail rends the air and proves that the sensation of the devotees is not pleasant. The conscientious observance of this custom during the winter has this effect on the very young children, that more than fifty per cent. become bow-legged.

Not a single Indian as yet in town. But more music is upon the air, and we will go down and see the grand *wauwau*. They do not mount anything higher than their shoes, and as they stand drawn up in strictly parallel lines, glistening in brass, iron and steel, clothed in the colors of constancy, the features of many illuminated by "spirited" fervor, while the adjutant and officers of the day wave their crimson plumes upon the morning air and muster their warriors with keen eyes and ready tongues, the looker-on is glad he is not "even as one of them." This new guard now takes the place of the wearied watchers of last night, the prisoners have all been counted by the new officer of the day, the Commander has given his orders, and now everything is in readiness to let in our dark-browed neighbors. It is about nine o'clock, and the stores have just been opened to admit the unwary purchaser. Let us go over to the gate which the corporal is just about to open, and take a look at the entering multitude.

Over the gate is a platform and a sentry box with bell attachment. There let us take post. See how hundreds of the Indians are squatting on their haunches, with and without goods, patiently awaiting the opening act. The key rattles in the lock; the waiters arise; the comidor is removed; the coming ones poised themselves on one leg; open swings the gate, and—get out of the way! Like a tornado they sweep through the portal and in five minutes they are all over town. The sentry and the corporal watch the impouring Reds, to make sure that they have neither arms nor liquor in their possession, neither of which they are allowed to bring in. Once in a while a discovery of the contraband articles rewards the zealous sentry, and then Mr. or Mrs. Z is marched over to the guard-house, where they are accommodated to bolts and chains, and extruded at various public works, principally chopping and sawing wood.

A throng of from five to seven hundred

passes into town within half an hour, of all ages and sexes, all looking very much pressed for time as though thousands of dollars depend on their arrival. These Indians have coarse hair, very black, but (with the exception of their medicine men) the males do not wear long hair. Their eyes are large and dreamy, "childlike and bland"; their disposition indolent and their appearance noways prepossessing. A fancy of theirs makes them cover their whole face with lampblack and seal-oil, which is allowed to gradually wear off before the coat is renewed. As for washing the face, it is out of the question, though their bodies are frequently immersed; yet as they keep themselves greased with seal oil, the cleansing element (nearly always salt water) can not be expected to take much effect on the accumulating grime. With all this it seems rather strange that their clothes, consisting for men of drawers, shirt, and blankets, often also, shoes and hats, and for women of petticoats, chemise, dress and blankets are kept neat and clean—men and women, every Sunday, bring in their dirty linen to town and in the creek at the saw-mill washing them—with plenty of soap, too. Their motto is: "Every one for himself and the devil take the hindmost," for the wives do not attend to the wash of the family—not they! If the husband wants a clean shirt he may wash it. A common sight is to see an Indian gravely step into the creek, within ten steps of the main street, pull off shirt and unmentionables, scrub them, spread them on the bank, and then contentedly curl himself or herself alongside, throw a blanket over the form, divide and have a snooze, to find, on awakening, the linen clean and dry. They mostly select the Sabbath as washday; for on that day no stores are allowed to be open, and the church that was built for them long ago, was, about twenty years since, converted by them into a fort whence they amused themselves, one day, by bombarding the town with their flintlocks, wounding and killing a number of the Russians, since which time religious stock has come down to zero. In that vicinity, until, last year, Brothers Howard and Hammond tried to bull the market among them with very indifferent success, indeed.

Winters, when said creek is frozen over, and from the millrace overhead icicles twenty feet long hang down along its whole length, forming fanciful arches and grotesques; when the flaxy snow covers all, these natives still bring their washing here; a hole is cut in the ice, and barefooted they stand on the brink and lave and scrub as unconcerned as were a sirocco blowing.

It often struck me, why strong-minded females do not go up to Sitka and join the tribe. Never have I seen a finer distribution of family duties than right here. Thus you may see a noble warrior trudging along the sidewalk, proudly and tenderly carrying in his arms an infant, while his spouse brings up the rear with a dear little poppy in her embrace. Thus, domestic labor is finely divided among them. Apropos of infants, I think it must be on account of the climate's gradually changing, as knowing ones tell us, that we see here so many of the children, carried about by the Indians, pale in color, with features unmistakably Caucasian in mould. Perhaps, on first beholding the light, they were badly scared at seeing the starry emblem waving high above them—that emblem of mild, paternal supervision, of aboriginal affairs, renowned the world over for its effectiveness. It is not quite clear to me, but ethnologists and local residents of long standing may doubtless be able to rise and explain this little race change.

And now, if you want to have your ideal of the heroic Red, a la Fenimore Cooper, knocked "higher than a kite," just come along and let us enter a trader's store. He enters the same and prices all the goods, even if he does not mean to buy a cent's worth. That often happens, and it is a frequent generator of curses, loud and long

from the impatient storekeeper. But this party here came to buy, and sell, indeed, and the fun begins. The buck carries the furs, the squaw the money. This is generally slung around the neck, in a little leather pouch; but when they decide to make a small purchase, before going in, the woman takes out of the bag so much as she concludes to spend, and this she carefully deposits in her mouth, where it remains until paid over to the trader. After much discussion the bargain is concluded, the wife in all cases of doubtful value deciding, and the articles are done up in brown paper and delivered. The woman then bends over the counter, down drops the lower jaw, out rolls the money, and before it is done jingling, all juicy as it is, it reposes in the till, till some future day it will be sent far away to swell out the trader's bank account. Lo, having bought, he will sell in his turn; a bundle of furs he unfurls, and volubly he praises their quality. The trader goes one eye on the speaker and one on the furs, closely examining them, and asks what's the price? The Indian then goes up high in the figures, and would take more than they bring in the market; the trader says bah! and divides the amount asked by about two, willing to give the quotient. Indignant Indians roll up all in a huff and rush out with many a sonorous "Klakh!" which means "No, you don't," and which puts you in mind of Poe's raven. Then they make the rounds, not leaving one store unvisited, repeating the scene in each, after which they return to the trader who offered the most, and he gets the pelt. But should they not be satisfied by any of the prices offered, they will march back to their village with their furs, taking them afterwards to some Hudson Bay Post, where, if they do not procure a higher price, they at least obtain goods cheaper than from the American traders.

These Indians are very confidential; they always occupy the porch in front of your house, where they take up all available space, pleasantly chatting and criticising friend and foe without favor to either. Then they get tired and drop down on their knees and elbows, with a blanket thrown over the whole, their bustles looming up high in air, like bold promontories in foggy weather. In this position they remains for hours, unless some loud noise within the house disturbs their dreamy slumber, when half a dozen of them will start up and with reproachful eyes flatten their noses against the window panes, as though to say, "How could you be so rude!" Those whose animal spirits will not admit them to be inactive, produce cards, and soon become highly interested and vociferous in their games.

Quite a number of them daily bring in deer, fish and clams, peddling them from house to house. It is an appetizing sight to see a squaw stalking the sidewalk, a quarter of a deer in her hand, the end of it trailing along the ground; she meets a water, down drops the quarter on the sidewalk, and they interchange news. Meanwhile a big dog is investigating the quality of the meat, sniffing it all over; where the thread of the narrative breaks off, the venison is taken up, and you are expected to buy it, yes, and eat it, too.

In the Summer-time the squaws go out in squads to pick berries, Alaska has a great variety of these, and the cranberry is hence exported to Portland, they make nice pie, especially when you know how they are collected. A squaw, arriving on the ground, spreads her blanket; then she has on nothing but her chemise; which is tied about the body by a rope above the loins; the gathered berries are then dropped down the neck of the chemise; when from the rope upward she is "chuck" full of the luscious fruit, she walks to the blanket, takes post upon it, unites her loins—and oh, what a falling off is there! Cranberries in heaps cover her cunning little, but very dirty feet; and these the unconscious Portlanders snuck their lips over and say, "How delicious!" Thank you! no more for me.

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