

## A SKETCH OF SITKA.

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As Sitka is the capital (by act of courtesy) of Alaska, where the Collector of Customs for the District has his office, and where the would-be manipulators of all this Territory, ye military, rule all but supreme, it may be interesting to the reader to be invited to come and stay with us for a while. The obliging visitor must come about Spring, and we will dismiss him the following Winter, in order that he may have a smack of all our seasons. As a mail steamer runs, or is at least supposed to run regularly once a month, between Portland and here, you will not need to build a vessel of your own for the trip.

The passage from Portland to Sitka, 900 miles by the inner (the usual) passage, occupies, when no delays are encountered, about six days, and will absorb just seventy dollars in coin.

After leaving Astoria, in a few hours you will enter the labyrinth of islands between which we must feel our way for nearly 800 miles to Sitka. At Victoria will be taken on board the pilot, whom you might blindfold and who still would lead the vessel safely to its destination. Having touched at Nanaimo, say farewell to civilization for a while. It is said that 1100 islands stud the archipelago from Cape Disappointment to Cross Sound, a hundred miles north of Sitka. You will scarcely count them yourself, but will nevertheless believe it. The islands vary in size. From the several hundred miles long Vancouver Island to the solitary rock just peeping above water, they are all covered from water's edge to summit, with spruce, pine, cedar, and hemlock. You will miss the wavy line of beauty so pleasing to the eye at the sight of leafy forests. The straight, uncompromising trunks and branches of the closely crowded forests, the unvarying sameness of the scenery about you, will after the first day appear monotonous; after that, almost annoying. On either side, islands; before you, islands; look back—lands. You stand on deck and wonder if you are not on some unroofed inland lake, and momentarily expect some hidden castle to meet the searching view. It seems hardly possible that there should be an egress. But the pilot stands unmoved, and, when you least suspect it, he calmly orders, "Port your helm;" the vessel makes a sharp turn, where a notice "No throughfare" would seem in order, and a few minutes later you are again in the same predicament, wondering which way next? Often the passage becomes so narrow that a stone can from the deck be thrown ashore on either side. The darkness of night does not seem to impede the way, for, though you can not distinguish the shores, the pilot sees the mountaintops loom up darker against a black sky, and with unerring certainty he wends his way through the channel. Once we pass through rapids; it is midnight, and the boiling waters foam noisily about us. Here the pilot has, if not his hands, at least his jaws full, for the different commands to the helmsman crowd thick and fast from his lips, as he anxiously and nervously watches the unquiet turns of the trembling vessel. Finally, we come in sight of Wrangell, on a small island opposite the mouth of the Sitka river. This is the point of departure for the Cassiar miners. A customhouse, a military garrison, a few stores, less dwelling houses, an old steamer beached and by a Chinaman converted into a boarding and lodging house, together with an Indian rancherie; these are the principal features of the place. Not less than a thousand persons pass through here on their

way to and from the mines every day.

Hence we reach Sitka within a day, though in the winter-time, when heavy snowstorms prevail, the steamer sometimes is as much as four days on the way between the two places. Just before entering the harbor, you pass by Mt. Edgecombe, an extinct volcano, with a huge crater crowning the mountain. From the base to halfway up, it is covered by magnificent timber, the rest being bare. It is less than 3,000 feet in height, and snow does not linger on it longer than June. Last Summer a party from Sitka ascended it, and on the summit found a bottle, wherein was a paper on which in lead pencil was written an account of a Russian scientific expedition which had made the ascent in 1853 and seemed to have been more interested in investigating the contents of numerous bottles than in solving scientific problems, if we are to judge from the number of "dead marines" left on the field of action.

As yet you see nothing of the town. You are told that it is at the foot of a peculiarly shaped mountain, which, however, proves to be "not himself at all," there being in fact two of them. The mountain in front is studded with heavy timber to its summit, a flat and long ridge. The one behind is bare and terminates in a bold peak. Curiosity has prompted the latter to crowd closely upon the former, so he might peep far below into the doings of the white intruders, right over the head of his forward brother. No doubt if the whites were to encroach on the native sons of the isle, the bold peaked mountain, Verstovia by name, would come right down and see them. But the impression on the newcomer is and remains for some time, that the heavily wooded mountain and the abrupt, rocky bare peak form but one mountain and a very peculiarly shaped one at that.

The harbor of Sitka is protected by numerous small islands. The town itself is on Baranoff Island, which is 80 miles long by 20 to 30 wide. Rounding one of the small islands, you suddenly are within sight of the town, only a few cables length distant. First, you pass by the Indian village, consisting now of nearly 100 houses. The main features of this quarter are filth and squalidness. The Indians, squaws and papooses line the beach and cheer you on your way. All but the papooses see in you a possible customer; the men will sell you the liquor they make from molasses and brown sugar; the women their smiles.

A stockade divides this Indian village from the town. A gate gives communication between the two. Here a guard of a corporal and three privates is stationed day and night. You wonder why you see no Indians on the streets; but it is after 3 p. m., at which hour the guard drives them out at the point of the bayonet; the gate then is locked, not to be opened again until next morning at 9 o'clock.

From the village of the natives your glance turns to the town itself. As we are nearing the wharf, you are at once impressed with the conviction that you are now in the holy precincts of an incorruptible military government. Brightly gleams on the wharf the tremendous trowel-bayonet of the polished sentry, who with his shovel-like weapon will take pleasure in scooping out your "inards" on short notice. The officers of the garrison are there, and with eagle glances inspect the newcomers. Besides these, the Postmaster and the merchants receiving freight are allowed to be on the wharf. No others need apply. Long ago the commander decreed that the "loafers" (all except the above citizens) should be excluded from the wharf, and the stern sentry

with gruff voice obeys his orders well.

Let us step ashore. We are not apt to kneel down and kiss the ground, for the rain has been pouring down for some days, making it rather soft under foot, though to-day it is fair and fine.

Having been sharply mustered by the grizzly Commandant, who seems just on the point of asking what business you have to come there at all, let us walk up street.

As the visitor enters the town, he is at once impressed with the signs of its general decay. The houses mostly built of logs, are slowly settling down on their foundations, the lower parts rotten from being constantly water-soaked. Scarcely more than half of them are now inhabited. As nearly every town is noted for some peculiarity, I should say that this is one, considering its size, is remarkable for the number of its huge iron church bells and the size of its padlocks. Some of these bells are now doing service for the military. Three sentries are pacing their beats night and day; one in front of the barracks, jail and offices, one at the gate to the Indian village, and another on a commanding hill where the powder magazine is. Each of the sentries has one of the above-mentioned bells close at hand, to sound an alarm if necessary. When the commandant of the guard tells the first sentry the full hour, he slowly strikes its number on the resounding metal; the same is repeated by the second guardian, and its echo calls forth the sound of the third bell. In addition to this, after nightfall, the guards call out the hour before striking it, and the half hour, and each time they loudly inform the wakeful public that "all is well." The keen eye of the sentry on the hill, at the magazine, roves over the town, and sees that no disturbance takes place. Several times each day a patrol goes through the streets to insure good order. Periodically, raids are made into houses, to search for illicit distilleries; then the curious soldier has the privilege of peeping everywhere. It is a delightful task to him; collar-boxes and all kind of impossible places are searched for the fiery liquid, and every once in a while the hunters have been rewarded by a capture of the "crooked."

On arrival of the monthly mail steamer, all the inhabitants flock to the main street, watching for the newcomers and waiting for the news. There at once you see the combined population, of whom by far the majority are the Creoles, descendants of Indians and Russians. Some of them are tall and well formed, even a few young women very good-looking; but they are nearly all small in stature, and of dusky complexion. Of native Russians only about five families, remain, and they are wishing for means and opportunity to leave and go to some more thriving and congenial place. All these Russians and Creoles, now some 300 in number, were formerly employees of the Fur Company, besides some 500 more who have already been taken away from Sitka, at their own request, by Russian government vessels. After the transfer of the country and the disbanding of that Company, their means of livelihood in Alaska ceased, and their removal became a matter of necessity.

Proceeding along the street, the visitor will pass by a diminutive post office, where four weeks' mail is dealt out to the eager crowd. Next comes the stores of several traders; but a glance into them will convince you that they are doing but small business. Six traders try here to turn an honest penny, and from personal knowledge I am enabled to say that hardly one of them makes more than common wages. This is on account of the rabid rivalry among

them, owing to which the Indians ask and obtain nearly the full market value for their peltry.

Further on a disused Lutheran church is fast going to ruin. The roof is partially in very bad condition, and the water has now no difficulty in finding its way into the interior, which is well furnished. A fine organ graces the church, but before long all this will go to wreck; a number of the windows are broken, and a gust of wind drives the pouring rain within. The door is secured by one of those peculiar Russian padlocks of which quite a number are yet extant in Sitka. This one, by no means the largest in town, measures 8 inches long, 5 wide, 3 deep. The Centennial ought to have one of them.

By far the finest building is the Greek Church, with a pleasant exterior, and well furnished inside, where massive silver ornaments, costly and good paintings, and heavily gold covered Bibles, are in profusion. The personnel of this church consists of two priests, a reader, an assistant reader, and a choir. Instrumental music is not allowed in Greek churches, neither are seats, and I have seen men women and children standing erect as long as four hours at a time to perform their devotions. The sexes take separate sides; men to the right, women to the left, children neutral. It is a breach of behavior and morals to look askance; all eyes must be directed to the sanctuary, and sparring or criticising of dresses becomes absolutely impossible. No collections taken, which is a rather agreeable feature of their worship, the Russian Government maintaining its churches. Leaning room against the walls and pillars is at a premium and a prey to the early arrivals, while the tardy believers must stand firm as Lot's pillar without any support whatever. The worshippers are ever crossing themselves and bowing and kneeling down, with their foreheads all but touching the floor. This they do, not all together, but each for himself when he deems it the proper occasion, and consequently there is a continual movement in the congregation. Of all the officials, the reader is the busiest, as he is almost constantly reading or singing at the top of his voice, and often have I heard him starting in with a clear vigorous larynx, and before the end of the service he was hoarse as a fog-whistle. So far as one can make out, the priest has but little to say for himself or any one else, as he performs the symbolic part of the worship. Saturday evening at six, or Sunday evening at nine, are their regular hours of worship. Their Sabbath used to be Saturday, and is still so throughout Russia, but in the American churches the difference has been split.

Right beyond this edifice is the Town House. Once the itinerant carpet-bagger made his headquarters here, and instituted a civil government, to support which the residents were taxed pretty severely. When after the transfer of territory, several hundred American subjects rushed hither to become millionaires, the taxes came in well enough, but when these several hundred subjects left, revenues decreased to almost nothing; the patriots in power could not see the point of holding office for the honor only, and so the municipality expired and the military governor became step-father to Sitka. As is generally the case, the stern step-father rules with an iron rod.

In this Town House is also kept the school. So long as Sitka had civil rule, the citizens employed a teacher, but now a competent soldier is by the Commandant appointed to fill the office. The Post Fund and occasional subscriptions by the citizens defray the expenses.