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Our Continent

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Our Continent, v. 2, 1882, July 12.

An Alaska Legend.

By Henry W. Elliott.

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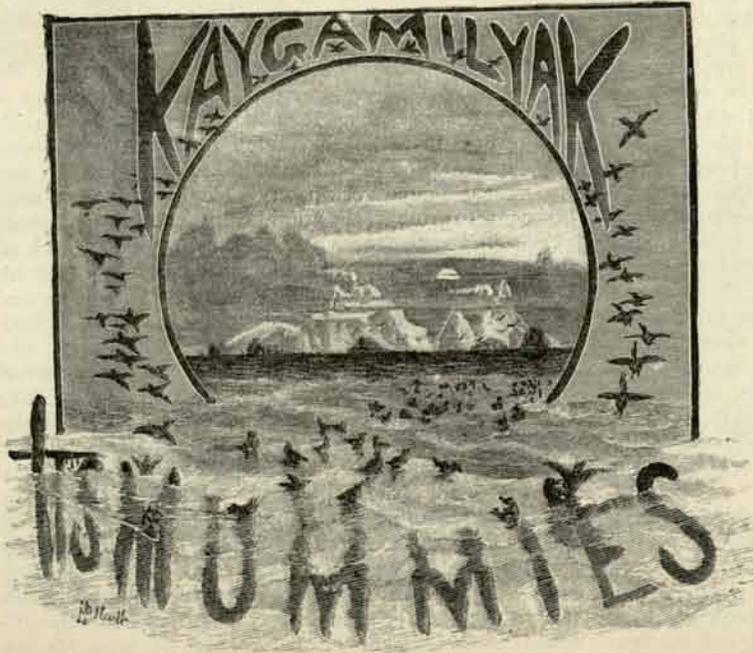
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AN ALASKA LEGEND.

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THE WRITER'S NARRATIVE.

[During the season of 1874 the author was cruising in Alaskan waters, and while in Oonalashka, he met a fur-trader who had a very wide personal knowledge of the Aleutian Islands. This hardy mariner, in return for a petty favor, offered to secure and give to the writer for the Smithsonian Institution, a lot of mummies of which he knew the hiding place. Certain parties had been hunting for these relics of Aleutian types unsuccessfully for many years, and he had enjoyed their discomfiture. The writer gladly encouraged the undertaking, and Captain Hennig, in the service of the Alaska Commercial Company of San Francisco, secured in a "fire-cave" on Kaygamil Island thirteen mummies, which have been used for scientific examination and comparison and placed on exhibition by the Smithsonian Institution. They are the first Aleutian mummies ever found in Alaska, and with the exception of a single one from Prince William Sound, also given to this Institution by the company above named, they are the only examples of their curious burial which have been given to us. These mummies are not embalmed as are those of Egypt, but are really desiccated, like the Peruvian specimens of the same class; the hot walls of the volcanic cave in which they were found accomplished this effective preservation.

The legend which accompanied the mummies and forms the basis of this sketch, declares that these bodies of Kaygamil are about one hundred and fifty years old, since they were placed in the cave on the northeast side of the island during 1724 or 1725. Kaygamilyak is the largest of the group—the "Cheetery Sopochnie," or the "Four Mountains,"

a small, but abruptly rising cluster of volcanic islets in the Aleutian chain; a number of grumbling, smoking peaks and hills still complain and labor here as they did when the mummy prince was long ago laid in their hot flanks.]

THE LEGEND.

A RUGGED archipelago, known to us as the Aleutian Islands, reaches away out into Behring Sea, almost to Asia, from its initial point on that volcanic Alaskan peninsula, where it baffles and breaks the mighty billows of the great Pacific. Upon this forbidding isolation geographers and hydrographers always love to rest their eyes; and also, in their closets with maps unrolled, to indulge in endless speculation over its influence with and relation to the New World as compared with the Old. Few, indeed, of their number know ever so little of the wild weird scenery of this rocky upheaval, or of the simple inhabitants thereof. Both landscape and people are as sealed books to most of us and will doubtless remain so far into the future.

Before the fur-hunting Russians discovered these islands and overpowered the natives in their passionate, indomitable search for fine peltries, the Aleutes were a brave and numerous people. They possessed nothing in common with the nomadic Esquimaux to the northward, nor with the treacherous, indolent Koloshians to the eastward and south. They steadily refused to treat with these savage neighbors, and repelled with blows and bloodshed any attempt on their part to visit the Aleutian land. Each group of islets or island in the Archipelago was ruled



-The Prince of Kaygamil-

absolutely by its chosen Töyone or chief, who was invariably a man selected by acclamation on account of his personal prowess and skill.

Conspicuous among the Aleutian chiefs was Katháya Koochák, of Kaygamilyak, whose indomitable will coupled with matchless skill in the chase and home industry, made him feared and respected throughout the nation. The Töyone was a man very small in physical stature, spare in flesh, but yet possessed of great nervous strength and endurance. He was, moreover, so superior in understanding and address above all others of his countrymen that they gladly hailed him chief and rendered ready, prompt obedience, both in peace and in war. He had an only son, called Egadahgeek, or the Sleeping Seal, whom he fondly loved and whose youthful form was the constant thought and object of his mind. When the boy had passed his thirteenth year it became necessary that he should learn those arts of hunting and fishing which were so important to the worldly advantage and even existence of every Aleute. He must begin to make journeys out to sea alone, to plunge into rolling surf with his bidarka, to find his watery path through fogs both thick and thin, to throw his seal and bird spears with unerring aim and telling force, and to outwit the extraordinary cunning and wariness of the sea otter.

Fully realizing the imperative need of this experience and discipline for his young son, Katháya-Koochák made for the boy with his own skillful hands a bidarka, the skin cover of which was so beautifully stretched and sewed over its slender wooden and whalebone keel and frame as to call out the astonished praise of the best boat-makers in the village. The devoted parent then ornamented the little vessel with fantastic and superstitious paintings, executed with red ochre and green clays; and, into its tightly-sewed seams above, he deftly wove the tiny blue and white feathers of certain gayly-plumaged sea parrots. No less care was taken with the seal and bird spears and the rest of the young prince's outfit.

When all had been made ready, the unwilling father pushed the youthful hunter's boat out from land and consigned him, unaided and alone for the first time, to the perils of the sea and the ardor of the chase. Unable to watch his son as he paddled out from the

land, the old Chief withdrew to his banabora and was seen no more that day.

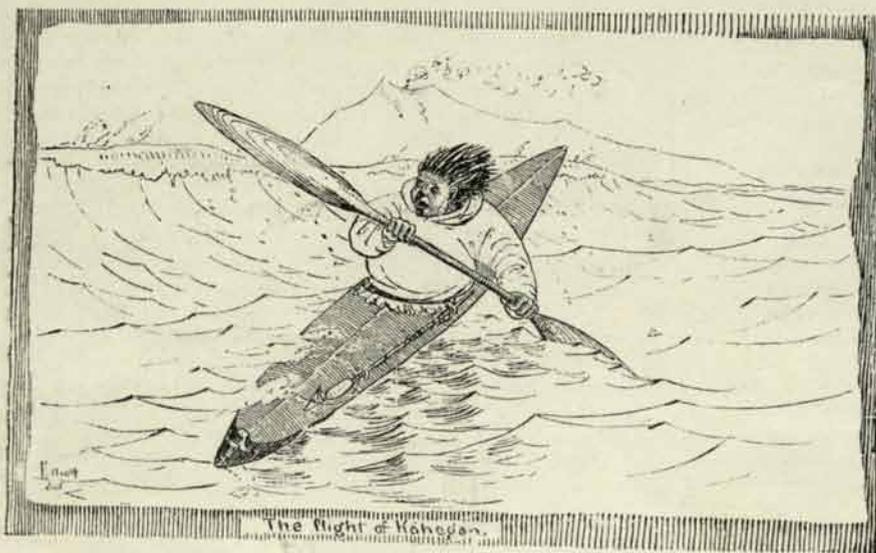
Egadahgeek, flushed with honest pride, and spurred by roseate hopes and ambition, swiftly propelled his tiny craft toward the famous kelp beds of Kugamil, where the hunters often found the otter as it slept upon the floating gardens of sea-weed. Thick fogs soon closed down, as usual, over the landmarks, and he had nothing to guide him on his course except the wind ripples on the water and the regular heaving of the southerly swell as it rolled from the great Pacific and dashed in futile fury upon the black iron-bound reefs and cliffs of the "Four Mountains." Swiftly and noiselessly Egadahgeek paddled his light bidarka, until he began to grow weary and his suspicions were aroused at not finding the rocks awash that he was in search of.

Doubt and distrust of himself finally arrested his hands, and he laid his paddle across the bidarka and peered eagerly into the gray darkness around him. Suddenly a whirring sound struck his ears, and simultaneously a heavy-headed bird arrow splashed into the water by his side. This was the greeting of an enemy, not a friend, and the young hunter seized his paddle and desperately urged his bidarka over the waves and away; another arrow followed the first and struck upon the wake of the flying boy with an angry thud that nerved him to fresher, wilder desperation, so that as he forced his paddle through the brine, it snapped short off and precipitated the youthful argonaut, who had put his whole weight upon it, into the dark cold waters beneath—the frail bidarka turned over on him, and he drew his last breath on earth as he sank.

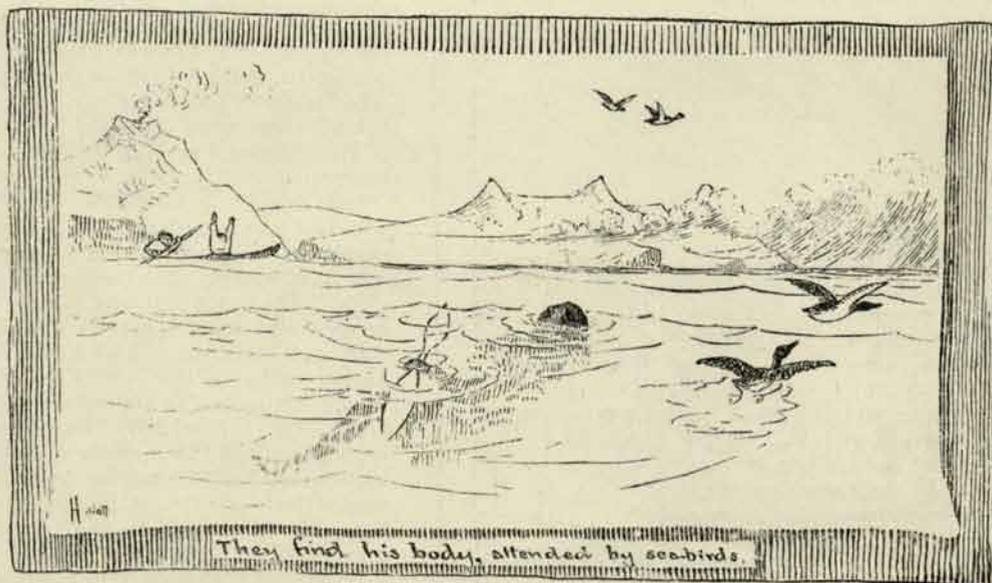
A few moments after this misfortune the form of the pursuer emerged from the dark gloom of the gray fog. With a cry of anguish he seized upon the overturned bidarka of Egadahgeek, and as he righted it he drew out of the water the lifeless form of the unfortunate boy. Wild, piercing notes of sorrow were uttered by the wretched Aleute, who had caused the untimely death of the young Töyone, and who was none other than the unhappy boy's brother-in-law. Káhegan, who loved the Prince as a brother, had secretly followed Egadahgeek with the sole object of shadowing the boy's progress and of protecting and assisting him were he to

get into trouble. His idea of startling Egadahgeek and stirring him to flight was merely in the nature of a good-humored jest, and the dreadful sequel was not for a moment in his mind.

Káhegan held the lifeless body clasped in his arms while he implored forgiveness, and bedewed the cold face with scalding tears. Night was coming on, and the angry combing of the surf gave unerring warning of approaching storm. What should Káhegan do? He did not dare to face the grief and wrath of the Töyone, and he could not endure the thought of leaving the body of Egadahgeek to be food for marine monsters



The Flight of Káhegan.



and hobgoblins. His resolve was quickly formed, and with the corpse laid across the bidarka, he rapidly retraced his course until near to Kaygamil village. Here Káhegan tenderly deposited the body on a large mass of floating sea-weed, and arranged it with great care, so that it should remain there securely afloat. It could be easily discovered and give no clue to the cause of Egadahgeek's death. Then he turned the prow of his bidarka seaward and disappeared in the darkness, breathing as he went into exile a prayer of love and remembrance for his wife and unborn child.

Meanwhile Töyone Katháya Koocháak, as night drew near, came out from his "casine" and anxiously looked for the return of his son; the whole village joined him; they scaled the highest rocky points over the settlement and lighted many lamps of seal oil and moss wicking to serve as guiding stars for the absent Egadahgeek.

Sleep did not close the eyes of the chief that night; he stood for hours fixed like a statue on the rocky shingle where the booming roar of the surf drowned his cries and words of encouragement; gesticulating and hoarse with continued shouting, the unhappy father summoned at the first dawn of light his best hunters and started out upon the sea in search for the missing son. The body was quickly found on its floating bier. The Töyone was nearly speechless and dumb with his grief and misery; he preceded the sad procession to his öolagamuh and ordered the funeral ceremonies to take place.

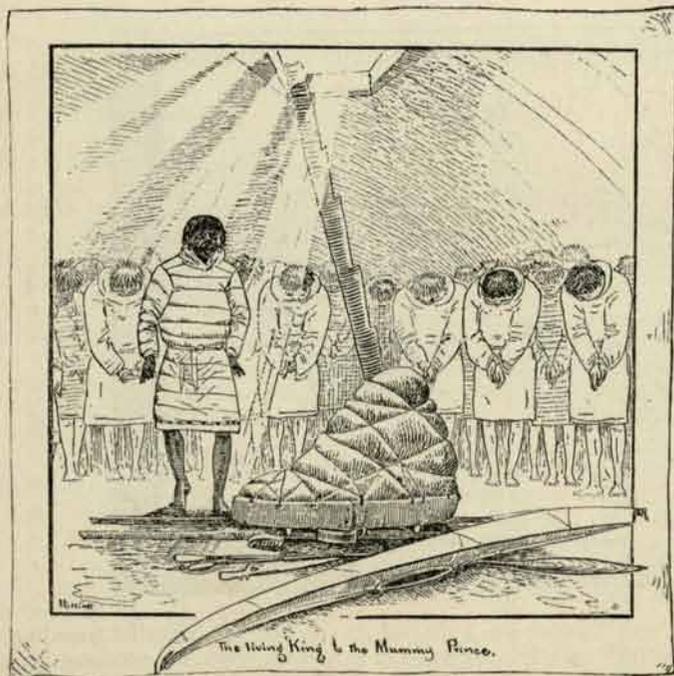
Under the constant supervision of the old chieftain the body of his son was eviscerated and tenderly filled with scented grass; it was placed in a sitting posture, with the arms folded around the knees; a priceless charm or amulet was taken by the King from his own neck and strung round that of the dead; then a baldric of beautifully-woven grass cloth that the skill and patience of many months had fashioned was placed over the features and head of the deceased; then the whole body was wrapped tightly up and over in another mat of coarser make, yet of intricate pattern, with tasteful feather ornamentation; then a fine bird-skin "parka," or coat, was put on, the neck and lower portion being tied up with the arms, so that the contents were inclosed in a complete envelope; then another exquisitely fine woven mat of grass fibres was laid upon the breast,

which was a marvelous specimen of beautiful weaving; then around these in turn were sewed the precious skins of richest sea otter and finest fur seal, and a funereal cradle was neatly made of whale baleen and driftwood timber deftly cut and bound together.

It had always been the habit of these simple people when death took the living from their ranks to bury the bodies in the earth and heap rude, rocky cairns upon the newly-made graves; but Katháya Koocháak surprised his servants when he declared that the great fire cave of Kaygamil was to be the sepulchre of Egadahgeek. Word was swiftly carried to all the natives of the Four Mountains that the Töyone's son had perished, and that he was to be buried with honor and grief by the whole people; so, as the light of day dawned, they quickly gathered in from their little villages surrounding Kaygamil. When the shamans of the villages had completed their weird incantation and death dance, and when the grief-smitten parent gave signal, the mummy-bier was gently raised upon the shoulders of four stout Aleutes and carried slowly down to the beach, followed by the King, who stooped as he walked from utter prostration. His people, with uncovered heads and tearful eyes, filed after in a long procession, and filled the air with a solemn, sad chant, which set forth the virtues and the youth and the courage of the dead.

The big "bidarrah," or boat made of sea-lion skins, received the body and the strong arms of the boatmen soon urged the vessel to its landing, where, under the beetling brow of a mighty bluff and flush with its mural face, was the entrance fissure to that cavern of sepulchre which was hot from volcanic heat and subterranean fires. With great difficulty the peril of meeting smoothly the heavy surf swells was safely overcome—such waves as fall on the rocks with the weight and fury of an avalanche and sound as booming cannon. The remains of Egadahgeek were deposited in this strange sarcophagus with a large selection of the choicest furs and the best implements of the chase, bedewed with the tears and accompanied by the chanted lamentations of his people.

The old chief, after he had returned to the village stood up on his öolagamuh, and solemnly directed his subjects to do to him when he should die exactly as he had done to his son, and to treat every member of his



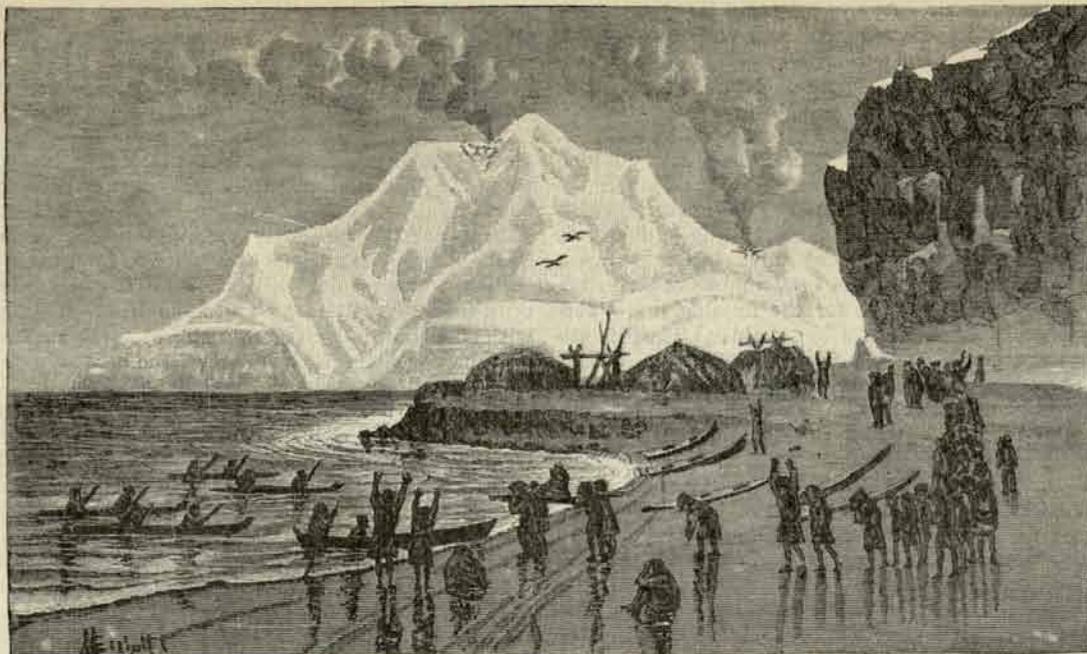
household in the same way; so that when death had ended his kith and kin they should all be grimly gathered together in the dark recesses of the Kaygamil cavern. The Töyone did not long survive his loss and grief; his orders were faithfully carried out by his obedient Aleutes, and in the lapse of a few decades the

last of the blood of Katháya Koochák was laid away in this manner; all of their wealth, their sea otter and fur-seal skins, their household goods, wooden dishes, arrows, spears and other weapons—all their earthly goods left behind them were deposited as were those of the Mummy Prince in the same cave with their remains.

Soon after, in 1758-60, the first white men who had ever appeared before the eyes of the people of Kaygamil landed from a Russian schooner, seeking and trading for sea-otter skins. They took shameful advantage of the unsuspecting natives, oppressed them, robbed them and sowed the seeds of disease and death among them, so that the Four Mountains rapidly diminished in population and eventually became uninhabited. But the mummies of Kaygamil and their costly wrappings were undisturbed until September, 1874. Now the wasted body of Prince Egadageek and the king, his father, rest in their singular cements beside Peruvian Incas and those of Egyptian birth within the museum of the Smithsonian Institution at Washington.

What a strange blending of the Old World with the New, were the mummified remains of the children of Cheops to suddenly renew their life and step out and forward to clasp hands with a simultaneous resurrection of the Chief and Prince of Kaygamil! They might and doubtless would appear to us as much alike in life as they do in death, despite that vast geographical abyss which yawns between them.

HENRY W. ELLIOTT.



THE MUMMY'S MARCH TO ITS VOLCANIC SARCOPHAGUS.

