

MT. WRANGEL LEGENDS.

TALIS INDIANS TELL OF THE MOUNTAIN OF MYSTERY.

A Dread Region Guarded by Monsters of Native Superstition and by Real Terrors of Hunger, Snow and Ice—Stories of Men who have Perished There.

Deep in the almost impenetrable centre of Alaska Mount Wrangel rears its lofty height, and unexplored peak. From the time when Baron Wrangel sighted the smoke-capped crown of the volcano and gave it his name down to the present many white men have viewed the summit from a distance and some few have tried to attain the mountain and all but perished in the attempt. None has ever set foot upon even the lowest slope of the vast acenivity which stretches up into the clouds and is not improbably the highest mountain on this continent. In the language of the Talar Indians, who live in the nearest habitable part of Alaska, there is an ancient word for the peak which is said to mean "Mountain of Mystery," and they have invested it with weird terrors, which make it a veritable Brocken of the North.

It is probable that the superstitious awe in which the mountain is held by the Indians is, like most other Alaskan superstitions, of ancient origin, but it has not decreased with the passage of the years. The latest travellers in that region R. S. Condon and George Divelbliss, who on May 3 went up the Kotsina River and ascended a mountain just across a narrow valley from the mysterious volcano and much nearer to it than any point which other white men had ever attained before, were warned by the friendly Tarals, whom they had left fifty miles away, that if they attempted to approach the Mountain of Mystery they would be devoured by fearful monsters which guarded it from intrusion by human beings.

"Many years ago," said they, "when our fathers' fathers were little children, a party of hunters of our tribe went to the mountain in search of game, for on the further slope there is a wonderful green country abounding in all sorts of game, as our tribe has known for many centuries. But the party never came back, nor was any trace of them found, and it was then known that they had been devoured by the monstrous fire-breathing beasts that inhabit the caves in the sides of the mountain. Since then a few of the bravest hunters of the tribe have made their way to the mountain, but all have perished there."

Undaunted by this relation the two Americans kept on their way and had a good view of the mountain, which they saw to be quite barren of vegetation, even the valley below it being desolate and dead, a drear stretch of solidified lava. The crater, about half a mile in diameter, was smoking, but was not throwing out any fire or lava. Dew on the slope was thirteen vent holes, which cast up steam, ing water to a height of several hundred feet in regular pulsations. These geysers, for such they seemed to be, may well be the prototypes of the monsters of Indian legend. On their return, which was hastened because of lack of food, the explorers met other Indians who received with open doubt the account of the nature of the mountain, but declined to hold much discussion of the matter, alleging that it was dangerous even to talk about that dread region. Despite this cautious spirit the Indian tongue has loosened up at intervals and the Alaskan newspapers have printed from time to time bits of Indian folklore, among which are to be found a few curious legends of the Mountain of Mystery. Presumably these exist to-day much as they were handed down from long ago, as the lore of aboriginal peoples is transmitted from generation to generation with the accuracy which in most cases would shame the printed page. One of the earliest of these legends, and the one, it would appear, to which Messrs Condon and Divelbliss's Talar friends referred, is as follows:

In a year of great scarcity of food the fathers of the tribe remembered that there was a tradition to the effect that in case of famine, when food was to be found nowhere the greatest hunters of the tribe should go to the Mountain of Mystery and hunt on the further side, where lay a fair country rich in game, but guarded by savage monsters and spirits of the waste, which must be avoided or overcome before the fertile region could be reached. Accordingly a dozen chosen hunters set forth fully armed and equipped, bearing the blessings of the tribe. It was agreed that when they reached the summit of the mountain they were to make a signal for which the tribe on the nearest peak to which it dared go, would watch. On the third day, the time set for the arrival of the bold hunters on the peak of a great cloud of black smoke was seen to rise from the summit of the volcano followed by a stupendous belch of flame, and the air was filled with a dreadful roaring and the earth trembled and

shook so that many of the tribe, terrified out of their senses, rushed down and the lookout mountain and, falling over cliffs and into crevasses, were killed. For three days the roaring and trembling of the ground continued, showing the wrath of the mountain spirit against the tribe which had impiously attempted to force a way into the secret places. What horrible fate the hunters met could only be conjectured by their friends, for there was no sign or trace of them from that day forth.

All the tales of Mount Wrangel are of this general type, but some go more into detail and of these the following is a good specimen. It was told to a traveller through an interpreter by a Talar Indian who had come down to the coast several years ago:

"In the days when my father was a boy and just learning to cast a spear there was a great witch doctor in the tribe named Tas-kah-yeh, who was more powerful and feared than the chief himself. For this reason the chief was jealous of him, and when a sickness fell upon many of the tribe he laid the blame of it upon the witch doctor and banished him to the smoking mountain to bring back from the devils and spirits that guard it a cure for the sickness. So Tas-kah-yeh went forth declaring that by his mysterious powers he would come back unharmed and with stores of wisdom, and would learn the fate of those of the tribe who, many years before, had gone to the mountain for game and never returned. With him went his pupil, Sha-koo, who desired knowledge greatly that he might in time succeed to the honors of his master. It was arranged that he should stand on the summit of a mountain near the Mountain of Mystery and there watch his master make the ascent.

"If the evil spirits prevail over me," said Tas-kah-yeh to him "do you return to the tribe and tell them the things which you have seen for a warning to others who may in the future attempt to enter this region for it I, with all my wisdom, cannot preserve myself from these agencies, then no man can come hither and live."

"Accordingly the young man stationed himself at a point where he could see all that passed, and presently beheld his master emerge into the valley of lava below. More swiftly than any mere man could run he traversed the broken surface, and soon was speeding up the gradual slope of the mountain. Stride after stride, each covering ten spears' lengths, he took, and nothing rose up to oppose him; but Sha-koo heard with terror a deep, hollow roar come from the bowels of the volcano. Then, directly in the path of the climber, there leaped from out the side of the acclivity a hissing serpent that towered a mile in the air, giving forth a thick vapor from all its length. To the right and to the left sprang up other serpents, and the sound of their hissing was so terrific that the watcher on the further mountain buried his head in his arms. When he looked up he saw Tas-kah-yeh, grown to gigantic proportions by his magic, strike down serpent after serpent with great rocks which he tore from the side of the mountain and heard him shout with a mighty voice.

"Do not fear. I have conquered the spirits of the mountain and destroyed them."

"Then up he went and was met by a monstrous beast like a bear, but taller than the highest tree and with three heads, who rose from out a vast crevice in the volcano. With this beast the magician grappled and strangled him, casting his body clear across the valley to the side of the next mountain, where the imprint may be seen yet. Again he shouted to his pupil in

exultation. But as he leaped the abyss from which the animal had arisen and strode toward the fire-hole of the mountain, there was a roar like that of a thousand cataracts, and the spirit of the mountain, a creature of living flame, leaped forth from the opening, flung itself upon the intruder and utterly consumed him. In his death agony the magician uttered a shriek so terrible that it swept all the trees from the nearby mountains, and none has ever grown here since. That is the tale which the pupil, Sha-koo, who afterward became witch-doctor of the tribe, brought back with him."

This legend suggests plainly the geysers and an eruption of the volcano, though it is not known that it has been in eruption for many years. Similar is a tale told by a tribe of Indians near the coast of three of their number who wandered into the interior. Of these three only one returned. He was broken in body and spirit, and what was left of his hair had turned almost white, though he was a young man. Some wandering Indians found him in the vicinity of the Copper River, and by their help he succeeded in making his way to the coast, where he died soon afterward. According to his story he and his two companions were in search of game near the headwaters of a river (probably the Kotsina), and leaving the river struck across a range of small mountains, one of the men declaring that there was a fine hunting country on the other side. When they reached the top of this range they found themselves looking across a narrow valley at the highest mountain any of them had ever seen, from the top of which rolled great volumes of dense black smoke. Immediately they became possessed of an irresistible desire to ascend the mountain and warm themselves at the smoking mouth. They descended into a desolate valley and began the ascent the mountain, upon which no living thing grew. It was not a difficult ascent, as the slope was gradual and the footing fairly good, but after they had climbed several hours they were overtaken by a snowstorm in which they lost their way. The rest of the tale found a shelter between two lava formations, where he remained while his companions went forward and disappeared in the curtain of snow. Suddenly the snowfall ceased, and the Indian looking above, saw his two companions surrounded by a score of monstrous beings which whirled aloft in the air further than the eye could reach, giving forth a terrific hissing and roarings with vapors. He could see the two terrified men rushing hither and thither in their efforts to avoid the monsters but, they were presently snatched up, shot aloft and torn to pieces. At this dreadful sight the watcher was possessed of an insane impulse to rush forward to the fate which his companion had just met. Striving as he might against it, it proved to be too strong to be overcome, and he leaped from his shelter and rushed up the slope with such vehemence that he fell into a lava crevice and lost his senses. When he recovered, the madness was gone, and there remained in his place only an overpowering terror, which never left him to the time of his death. He fled down the mountain, and wandered there for days before being picked up by the tribe of local Indians.

The legend of the irresistible attraction of the volcano is paralleled in other bits of Alaskan folklore which ascribes to other volcanic peaks spirits of the mountain who lure human beings to their destruction. In the Aleutian Islands, many of which are volcanic, there are a number of cases,

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apparently well authenticated, in which Indian have rushed to the craters of volcanoes and thrown themselves in without known motive for suicide. This would seem to indicate some powerful influence of a volcano over the savage mind. The same thing has been related, by the way, of the natives of the Hawaiian Islands. No other mountain in Alaska is regarded with such awe as Mount Wrangel, a strange fact in view of its extreme inaccessibility and the activity of various other volcanic peaks. The most widespread legend about it is that which tells of the guardianship of gigantic animals, who devour all intruders. The greatest of these creatures is said to be a huge white bear who inhabits the crater and lives on flames and issues forth with terrible roarings only when the privacy of his retreat is threatened. He is the presiding genius of the mountain and the geyser spirits are his minions. So thoroughly imbued with terror of the mountain are the natives now that it is unlikely that they will again attempt to find the fabulous hunting grounds on the further side. If the mysterious mount is ever explored it will be by white men.

Whoever undertakes the exploration will do so at the peril of his life from the very real guardian monsters of cold and starvation. In 1885 Lieut. Allen, U. S. A., went up the Copper River and got within forty miles of the peak, but could go no further. In 1890 a party led by E. H. Wells of Cincinnati came down from the Yukon River to the north and got within about forty miles of Mount Wrangel, but were forced to turn back for want of food, and almost died of want before they were picked up by a band of Indians. The description given by Messrs Condon and Divelbliss—who, by the way, was not looking for the mountain, but were prospecting and found many traces of gold and copper, the latter extremely rich—does not hold out alluring prospects. They say that there was not a trace of vegetation on the mountain or even in the valley around it, not so much as a bush, though it was summer when they were there. The mountain itself was a mass of ice, snow and hardened lava. The geysers and the exuding masses of smoke were the only signs of activity. They found no traces of game and only a few signs of mountain sheep, though the Indians told them that the place was infested with bears of great ferocity and size. Their testimony, together with that of the explorers who have approached the mountain from the other side, is sufficient to show that it lies in a dead region and that the Talar tradition of a fertile slope is pure legend.

SUICIDES OF RATTLESNAKES

Love one of the Causes if you Believe Simon Kent.

"Some people do say that a rattlesnake won't commit suicide," said Simon Kent of Clifton county. "I say they are wrong. I've seen rattlers put an end to themselves dozens of times, but never when they were in captivity. Why that is I am unable to say. If you have a rattlesnake caged up you may put all sorts of indignities upon him, and while he will work himself into a rage, somehow he won't let his feelings overcome him so far that he will turn to bite and kill himself. It is entirely different when he is met with on his native barren and cornered. He won't as a general thing, put an end to himself until he has exhausted all means at hand in trying to get out of the trouble he is in. Then sometimes his rage seems to get beyond control, and he twists his head around and sets his fangs in his body, right over his heart, and in less time than you could kill him with a club he stretches out still."

"I have known a rattler to kill himself from disappointment, and, strangest thing of all from disappointment in love. I witnessed an unmistakable case of it one warm day in early spring. It was just at mating time, and I went to a ledge of rocks where I always had great luck in gathering a big crop of rattlers. Just before I reached the ledge I came into an open space in the woods, and there, on a big flat rock, lay three rattlesnakes. One was nicely coiled at one edge of the rock, and the other two were stretched out at full length. The coiled snake I saw at once was a female and she was a beauty and no mistake. She was yellow as gold and her scales glistened like scoured copper. The two snakes lying flat on the rock were males, and both of them fine ones—one a shining black fellow and the other yellow. While I stood there looking at the snakes the yellow chap crept over toward the coiled snake by short, choppy, kittenish squirms. He stopped within two feet of her, coiled himself and set his rattles going in a droning hum."

Then he shot his head out toward the female, the strike being in play. Instantly the golden beauty bristled on. She sounded her rattles loud and strong, darted her head viciously toward the bold disturber of her repose and hissed. The fellow's feathers seemed to drop a good many points at this reception, and after a few more hums of his rattles and a twist or two of his thin neck he uncoiled and retired to the spot on the rock that he had occupied before and stretched out again, with his head toward the female and his blazing eyes fixed upon her.

"A few seconds passed, and then the black rattler wiggled over toward the coiled snake and went through exactly the same manoeuvres that the yellow chap had. But the conduct of the female was entirely different. She sounded her rattles with the same low, droning hum that the black rattler brought from his, and, instead of striking out at him with vigorous and vicious displeasure, as she had at the yellow snake, she darted her head and neck forward in the playful way and almost met the lips of the black rattler as he darted his head toward her.

"Well," thought I, "those two fellows are courting that yellow charmer, sure as guns! And if she isn't dead gone on the black fellow then appearances are away off."

"And that was, the case exactly. After the female and the black rattler had flirted perhaps two or three minutes they left the rock and went away to begin housekeeping for the season. The yellow male, seeing that he was thrown clear overboard and no mistake about it, wiggled around on the rock in an aimless and plainly disconsolate way awhile, and then suddenly threw his head back and buried his fangs in his heart. By the time I got to the rock he was dead than a last year's cabbage stump."—N. Y. Sun.

HAM-SMELLER AS A BUSINESS.

It is not Very Pleasant but it is Quite Remunerative.

To the long list of curious and unusual occupations by which men live, the Kansas City Star adds that of the "ham-smeller" in a packing-house. His duty is to inspect meat products and judge of their soundness.

The ham-smeller's only tools are a long steel trier and his nose. He stands in a barrel to keep his clothes from being soiled by the dripping brine, and the hams are brought to him by workmen. A ham is laid before him, and he plunges his sharp-pointed trier into it, withdraws it and passes it swiftly beneath his nose. The trier always goes down to the knuckle joint.

In testing meat in that manner the man with the trier judges by the slightest shade of difference between the smell of one piece of meat and another. The smell of the meat is almost universally sweet, and that is what he smells; the slightest taint or deviation from the sweet smell is therefore appreciable. It is not the degree of taint that he expects to find, but the slightest odor that is not sweet.

When he detects an odor he throws the meat aside, and if it is not unwholesome it is sold as "rejected" meat, but if it is tainted it goes to the rendering tank. The ham-tester smells meat from seven o'clock in the morning until five o'clock at night, and his sense must never become jaded or inexact, or usefulness would be at end.

Ham-testing is not a pursuit dangerous to the health, as tea-tasting is supposed to be, but the ham-smeller with a cold in his head is like a pianist who loses his arm in a railroad wreck.

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