

MWP
970.3
W274
C.2

THE CENTURY MAGAZINE.

VOL. XXIV.

JULY, 1882.

No. 3.

AMONG THE THLINKITS IN ALASKA.

WE set forth in April, 1877, from Portland, Oregon, in the steamer *California*, and steamed northward till we entered the Straits of Fuca. Our purpose was to climb Mount St. Elias, the highest peak in the world above the snow-line, to explore the Mount St. Elias alps, and to acquire information about the unknown districts lying nearest the coast, with a view to future explorations. For less is known to-day of Central Alaska than of Central Africa. From Cape Flattery to Fort Wrangell—nearly a thousand miles—the passage is entirely inland, excepting short runs across the Gulf of Georgia and Queen Charlotte's Sound. The shores are forest-covered mountains, between which the steamer passed as between the lofty banks of a river. One of these channels, Grenville Strait, is forty-five miles long, perfectly straight, and, in some places, only four hundred yards wide. Cliffs and snow-capped mountains wall it in. Avalanches have mowed bare swaths through the fir-trees from the summits to the water's edge, and the mountain lakes, lying a thousand or fifteen hundred feet above the spectator, pour their waters in foaming cataracts into the sea. Twelve hundred miles from the Columbia River bar we touched at Fort Wrangell, a filthy little town at the mouth of the Stickeen, where the miners from the gold-diggings up the Stickeen River spend the winter in squalor and drunkenness. A native village lies, between high tide and the forest, to the east of the town, along a sweep of the rocky beach. Behind the huts may be seen the graves of some Shamáns, or "medicine-men." Their functions, however, are more spiritual than medicinal, for these savages attribute death and disease to the workings of evil spirits. It is the part of the Shamán to exorcise the evil spirits or to call up the good. His remedies are

almost exclusively incantations and frenzied pantomime, accompanied with the wild hubbub of his rattles and drum. The Shamáns alone have tombs. All the other dead are burned on funeral pyres. At Wrangell we first saw the tall ancestral columns, which are carved from the trunks of huge trees, and sometimes are eighty and one hundred feet high. Their colossal symbolic carvings represent the totemic genealogy of the cabin-dweller before whose door they stand. They serve the double purpose of frightening away evil spirits and satisfying family pride. A few sick or bankrupt miners were hanging about the American town. One ragamuffin, almost picturesque in tatters and dirt, was seated on the shoe-box steps of the "Miners' Palace Home and Rest-ent," playing an asthmatic accordion to an audience of half-naked Indians, wearing yellow headkerchiefs and cotton drawers.

After a few hours' stay at Wrangell, we sailed for Sitka by the outside passage around Cape Ommaney and Baranoff Island, as the inside passage is much longer.

As we entered the harbor of Sitka from the sea the general appearance of the place was tropical.* The snowy cone of Edgumbe first appeared, then the sharp peak of Vostovia—a triangular patch of white against the sky. Everywhere below the snow-line the mountains were green with luxuriant growth. The harbor was protected against the sea by a curved line of reefs, on which grew firs and pines and cedars, with bare trunks and tufts of branches, making them look not unlike palms. The warm, moist atmosphere curtailed all the middle distance with a film of

* Observations at Sitka during fourteen years give as mean summer temperature, 54.2 Fahr. Mean winter temperature, 31.9; average temperature, 42.80.