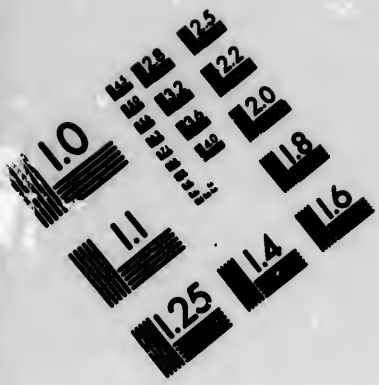

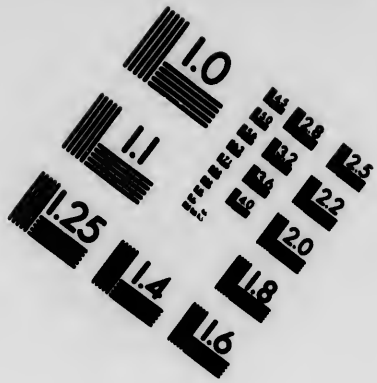

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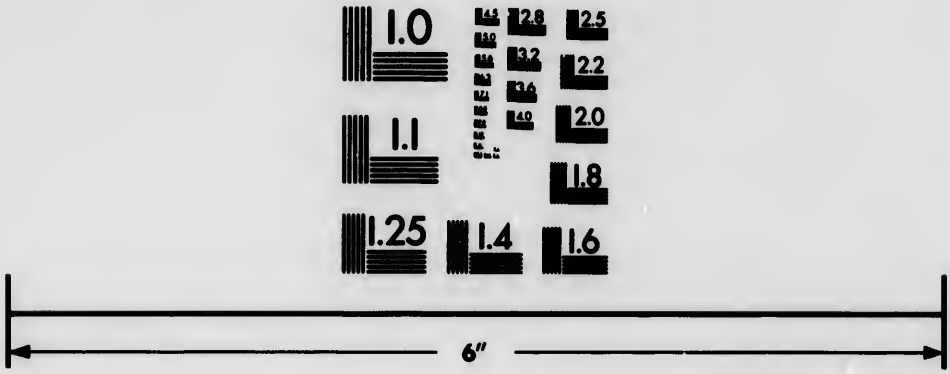

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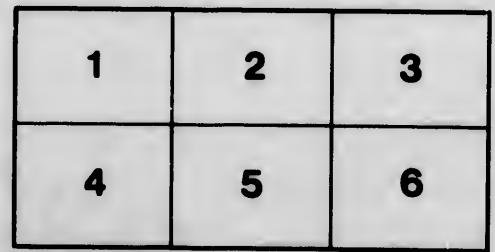

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THE SHAMAN'S GRAVE: AN ALASKAN LEGEND.

THE ordinary tourists who "do" Alaska, tarrying not in any place for longer than a day, will carry away with them, indeed, abiding memories of island-dotted waters, majestic mountains, serene and land-locked bays, crystal glaciers emerald-hued, so vast and towering that they seem to be the opaque walls of the Eternal City, and will recall in their far-distant homes, amid the sunshine and splendour of wealth and civilisation, these quaint people, who from time immemorial have lived and died along the Alaskan coast, bequeathing to their posterity the curious customs inherited from an ancestry whose origin is lost in the mists of the Northern Ocean. But these travellers over water-ways furrowed by the keels of many big ships never know how much they lose of that nameless mystery which broods perpetually among the secluded and little-visited places hidden away in the estuaries of the sea, unnoted from the "inland passage"—whose waters are unbroken except by the gliding of a canoe and the sweep of a native paddle. In silent and lonely places, save when sea-wandering birds fly in for shelter from wild western storms, or some great white-hooded eagle sweeps down from the near mountains on fish intent, one gets the true aroma of Alaskan days and comes to know

in some intangible way true stories of the native people. This holds good even of Sitka, that much-visited, much-talked-of relic of old Russian times:

> "With its ancient Castle, stained and brown,
> Like a yellow sea bird, looking down
> On the dingy roofs of the quaint old town."

After three years of residence there, sent on official duty, I came to think of it as a familiar friend. I did not believe there was a legend connected with it or its people which had not been confided to me, and some of them I have carefully treasured as one guards a secret or the key to the cupboard where the family skeleton is locked up. I fondly imagined that within a radius of many miles no nook was left unexplored by me which gave promise of a story—and I was quite sure that no legend of the elder time had escaped me. One summer day, when the ambient air and the silver sea were too seductive for denial, I employed an aged native with a battered canoe to paddle me wheresoever fancy dictated. Now, my knowledge of Thlinket is very limited; and for good comradeship, and because of his proficiency in the native tongue, I asked my interpreter, Metinoff, to accompany us. He gladly assented.

Just below the present native village, and near its north-west boundary, a bold but not very commanding promontory runs out into the sea. It is thickly wooded from base to summit, and all overgrown with clambering vines, clinging mosses, graceful ferns and devil's clubs, and all those myriad growths that give the coast-line almost a tropical appearance. Something, I know not what—some intuition, maybe, in which I have abiding faith—made me greatly desire to go ashore at the foot of the promontory and explore its summit. I noticed that the native hesitated, and it was not until Metinoff had sharply reproved him that he beached his canoe. The native characteristics in some ways are similar to those of the Americans: when they hesitate about anything, be sure it is something worthy of your curiosity; when they are radiant and quick and willing, evidently there is little to learn and less to see; and so I knew that somewhere on that rocky outlet was a hidden mystery, or else some legend hallowed it in the heart of this native, whose name was Klanaut; and we pushed our way through the tangled undergrowth. It was tiresome labour; many trees had fallen, and year after year the fading foliage from the living had covered with a gentle tenderness the prone forms of the dead. At last we reached the top; and there, embowered in shade, and so overgrown with woodland greenery as to make it difficult to distinguish from nature's own handiwork, we found a native "Kaht Tah ah Kah ye tea," or, small house for the dead. It was built quite carefully of sturdy timbers, but here and there the vandal breath of the winds had blown away the roof and left the interior exposed to the elements. Beside the structure on the ground, and almost level with its surface, lay a large canoe, and inside of it a smaller one. Both were lichen and moss covered, and broken, and half filled with leaves and decayed vegetation, from which innumerable ferns and wild flowers drew rich nourishment.

To me there is much of pathos in a stranded boat, even near tide water; but a canoe on a hill top, shattered and verdure-clad, and resting beside a grave, is very like a poem in the saddest of minor keys. A native "dead house" is usually a chief or a "Shaman's" place of sepulture, and when Metinoff said "Some big *tyhee* lies here, but I do not understand the little canoe," I was not surprised. Together we approached the enclosure, and lifting a plank from its low roof we looked in. There we saw two bundles securely wrapped in *katch*, the native name for matting, and tied with the split fibres of some sinewy root.

They lay side by side, one much smaller than the other. We knew what they both contained,—at the feet of each was a native box, and many household and hunting implements were laid beside them. We made an aperture through the roof large enough to admit of our entrance; and, although it seemed a desecration, I did not object when Metinoff's nimble fingers untied the smaller bundle and began to remove the matting and layers of bark which we knew enclosed all that was mortal of some human form. When the little skeleton was uncovered we saw at once it was that of a white girl. The long yellow hair was untouched by decay, and had been nicely braided. It still retained its lustre, and a glint of rare Alaskan sunshine coming in through the broken roof touched it gently, and it seemed to respond

with a golden smile, while outside the winds held their breath and slow wavelets caressed the stony beach with a sound as of kisses and whispers.

Metinoff and I were too surprised for comment; and when we found inside the wrappings a small and well-worn English Testament bearing on its title-page the words "Bainbridge & Co., Printers, London, 1788," we were very still and quiet for a long time. Surmises and fancies were many, and we determined to know, if possible, how and whence came this little golden-haired wanderer who fell asleep beside the sea before the white man's advent.

Very reverently and tenderly we replaced the little Testament and all the wrappings about the fragile bones, and, repairing the roof as best we could, went back to our canoe.

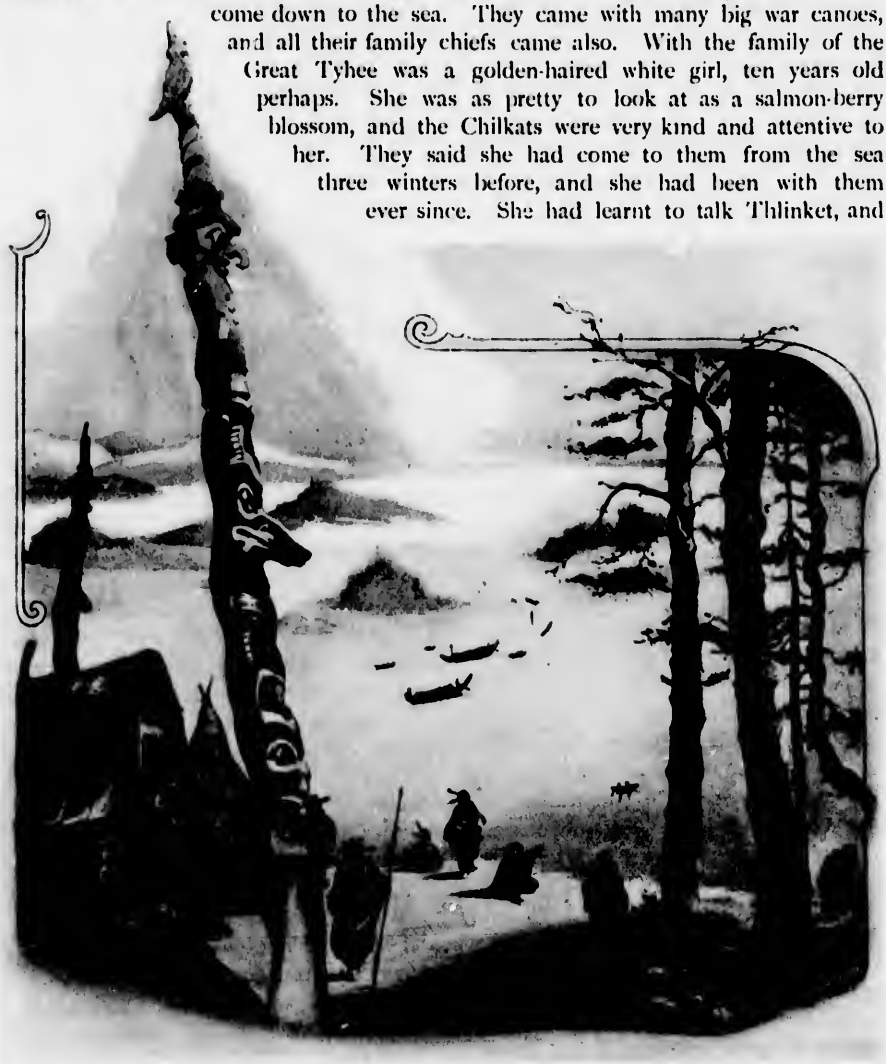
Klanaut was very still and reticent when we first came, with a set, determined look upon his stolid face; but when he saw that we were empty-handed, and had not despoiled the grave, as is the custom of curio collectors here as elsewhere, he was visibly pleased; but in response to our eager inquiries he would make no reply until after we had left the promontory out of sight and had gone ashore on one of the numerous islets that make the Bay of Sitka on a summer day like a silver shield close set with emeralds. Here he built a little fire and deliberately sat down and looked seaward for a long time. Presently he said to me, "I will tell the story as it was told to me by my people long ago"; and what follows is the tale he told, and which, after making all sorts of inquiries for corroboration, I believe to be true. I shall tell it here not, perhaps, as picturesquely and pathetically as it came to me from my interpreter—for long since I found out how entirely impossible it is to tell a native story as the natives tell them—but I shall follow as closely as I can.

Long ago, in the far, far time, before any big ships or white men had come to our coast, when the missionary men and women were all asleep, and there was not one Christian *siwash* in Alaska, there lived at Sitka—not this Sitka, but old Sitka, down there seven miles—a *shaman*, a big medicine man, who was very great and powerful, and who was feared by every chief and tribe. He had done many strange and wonderful things, and because of those things, and also because he was very cruel and afraid of no man, his fame had gone out all along the sea-coast, and even up the rivers among the tribes of the interior, so that his words were law and no one dared disobey them. He was a very large, strong man, and could tell a witch by just looking at one. He killed all the witches he could find; and he found many, because there were numbers of men, women and children whom he did not like, and there was more room for him in this world if he sent them to the other, and so he used to have a great time torturing witches until they died. He was a very ugly-looking *shaman*. When he was a youth he had fought and killed a large bear single-handed in the mountains; but the bear had knocked one of his eyes out and torn out part of his nose and one side of his face, so that when it healed up he looked like a worse devil than any he could tell about. Sometimes he would go to a *pot latch*—which, as you know, is a feast where the chief or head of a family who entertains gives away many presents—and if he were not satisfied with his gifts he would at once denounce some of the chief's family, or the chief himself, as a witch, and would compel the assembled guests to lead them out to death or torture.

These tortures were fearful things—so bad, sometimes, that the natives would go away and leave him alone with his victims, coming back after a long time to find him mutilating their dead bodies.

This evil spirit grew upon him year by year, and all the tribes dreaded his presence—for his coming surely meant death to some of their people. But they believed in him at the same time, or they would have killed him. One woman, whose husband and three children had been tortured to death at different times, followed him to his house for that purpose. She waited until he slept, and then crept close to him, raising a "sealing club" to knock out his brains; but a big black raven flew in at the door and pulled him by the long hair, so that he awoke quickly and seized the woman and tied her, and fed her piecemeal to his dogs. That was the story he told, and it was believed, for the *K'lootchman* never came back to deny it

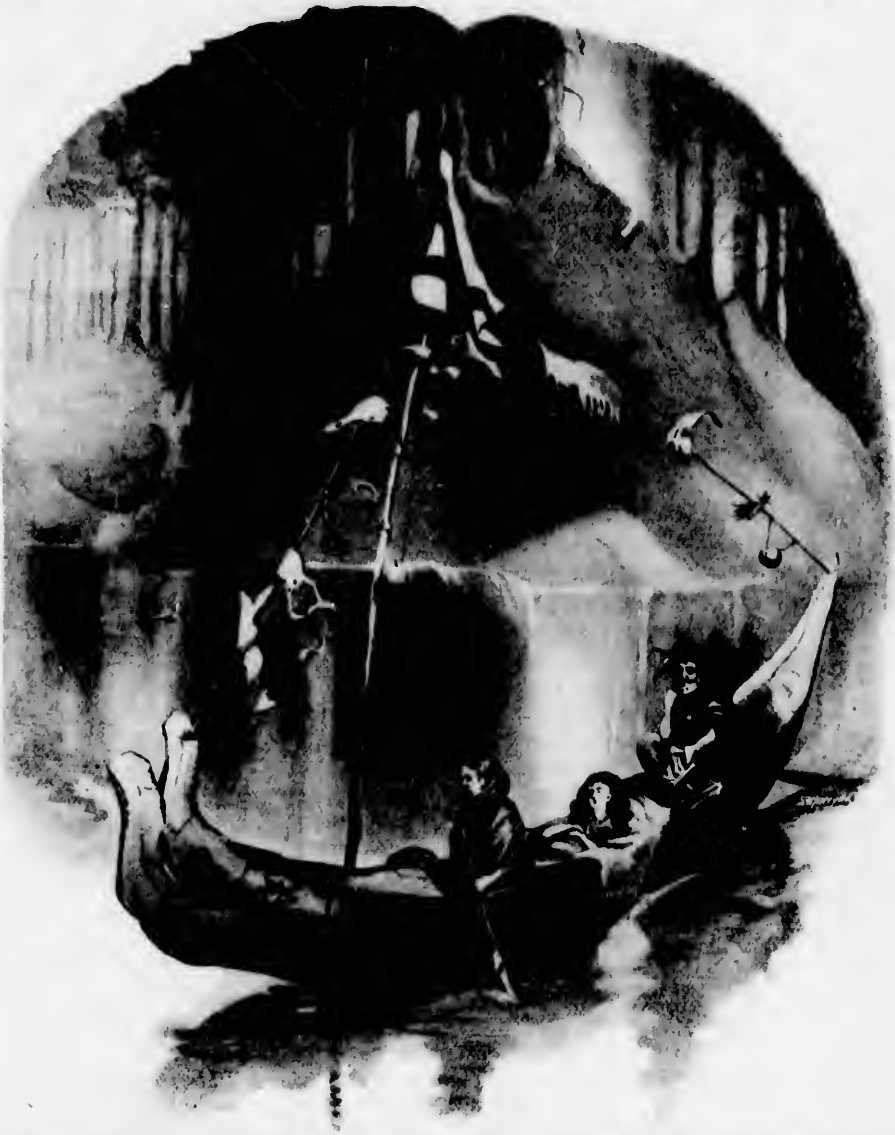
One time a great feast was held at Sitka, and Thlinkets came to it from long distances, and there were great numbers of them. The Chilkats came in great state They were very fierce and warlike, and since unremembered time had made the Thlinkets, who lived in the interior, pay tribute before they would permit them to come down to the sea. They came with many big war canoes, and all their family chiefs came also. With the family of the Great Tyhee was a golden-haired white girl, ten years old perhaps. She was as pretty to look at as a salmon-berry blossom, and the Chilkats were very kind and attentive to her. They said she had come to them from the sea three winters before, and she had been with them ever since. She had learnt to talk Thlinket, and



her little fingers were very deft at making baskets and in weaving the long hair of the mountain goat into blankets. She had an *ictus*, which she looked at closely, and told them stories which she said the *ictus* told to her. These stories were different from any they had ever heard before, and they believed them to be all lies and nonsense. I now understand that the *ictus* was a book the missionaries talk through when they teach us to be good. Well, the girl was given an honoured place at the feast, and the big *Shaman* of the Sitkans sat opposite to her, and looked at her fiercely out of his one eye. But she was not afraid of him, nor of any one, and she sang some sad songs in a language that none of the Thlinkets understood. Now, after two or three days of feasting and *pot-latching*, the Chilkats made ready to go away, and it was the last night of the feast, when suddenly the *Shaman* denounced the little white girl as a witch, and demanded that she be tied up and given to him. To this the Chilkats objected, but the *Shaman* had on his death-mask, and was so awful in his anger that they were frightened—brave men as they were; and they went away, leaving the little white girl crying bitterly and beseeching them to take her home. Immediately after they had gone she took her little book, which all my people then called an *ictus*, and began to look at it very carefully; and she did that until they bound her hand and foot and delivered her over to the *Shaman*; and he carried her to the shore, and placed her, tied as she was, in his canoe, and paddled away.

All this time the *tenas Klootchman* (little girl) had been very quiet, but her big blue eyes had a far-away, longing look in them, as if she saw a fairer land somewhere, or was watching for the coming of some one she loved. Very many of the Sitkan [illegible] badly for her sake; but their intense fear of the *Shaman*, and their superst[illegible]us belief in his power over the unseen mysteries, prevented them making any objection or trying to interfere between the child and the awful fate that awaited her. After the canoe and its occupants had faded out of sight, one strong-minded but tender-hearted middle-aged woman lifted her arms with an imploring gesture toward the sky and then ran away and hid in her hut. Four nights and days passed, and just at evening time the *Shaman* came back alone. He was very stern and ugly, and if any one ventured to mention the child he scowled so fiercely that they were all glad to keep silence about her. But he acted very queerly. He took from his own dwelling all his beautiful dancing robes and his fine blankets, and he bought from an ancestor of mine a blanket made of snow-white ermine, and he collected all the dainty things he could find and carried them away to his boat and placed them carefully in it; and it was noticed then that he was not so rude and cruel as was his usual way, for when little children were in his pathway he did not run against and knock them about, but put them gently to one side. Then he stood in the water near his loaded canoe and said, "Good-bye, my people," a thing he had never done before; and all our people were amazed, and watched him wonderingly so long as they could see. And at that time he had a long talk alone with the woman who had expressed her sorrow at the going away of the child, and the woman went away with him. He had greatly changed in every way; his clothing was clean, and his manners were very tender for a Sitkan *Shaman*; and our people were greatly puzzled, and would have followed him, but this he would not permit, and for many moons the *Shaman* and the woman were absent. Then one warm sunshiny day, when the men, the women and the children were sitting lazily watching the sea, they saw coming from out of the shadows of a distant island a wonderful canoe. It carried a tall mast, with cordage running from its top to the stem and stern of the canoe, and all the cordage was hung with flags of strange devices; and from the very top, over all the rest, there floated a

snow-white flag, with a broad red cross worked on its centre; and as they came nearer they saw the *Shaman* and the native woman. He was at the stern and the woman forward, and as they paddled there could be heard the wail for the Sitkan dead. As they came near the shore, my people saw, resting on a soft bed of deer-skins, with her little hands folded across her breast and her lithe body wrapped in the



spotless folds of the ermine robe, the white child whom the *Shaman* had taken away to slay as a witch. She looked very beautiful, and her long hair had the lustre of a sea-trout freshly caught, and it shone in the sunlight like threads of gold. Willing hands drew the canoe high on the beach above the water-line, but the *Shaman* sat as one in a dream gazing into the face of the dead child, as silent as she.

And my people spake never one word, but waited with a kind of awe.

Presently he stepped carefully out upon the land, turned his scarred face towards the heavens, then swept the sea-line as one who waits, and thus he spake: "My people, my kindred, I know this day that you are all my brothers and my sisters. I was born among you; my babyhood, my youth, my manhood have been lived here with you by the great waters. I have lived thus far the life of a Sitkan *Shaman* of the olden time. I have been very harsh and very cruel; I have lived the life of a murderer, a liar and a thief. Although you have deemed me brave, I know that I have been a wicked coward, and I have brought back to you to-day the *tenas Klootchman* who has made me know these bitter things.

"She is dead, but before she went away I promised her to tell the story to you; so it is not only I who talk, but it is her lips, her heart which speaks through mine. When she first came to us from the Chilkats I coveted her possession, and when I carried her away to my hut in the mountains my intentions were very cruel and wicked. I know this now; I did not know it then. It is a day's journey to my mountain home, and soon after leaving here I untied her, and she came trustingly and sat at my feet in the bottom of the canoe, and laid her head on my knee, and looked up into my face out of eyes like a young fawn's. I turned the disfigured side of my face away from her, so that she might not see; but she noticed it, and put up her little hands, and turned it back again, and caressed it. She did not scorn it, nor put it away from her; and I felt like a hunting dog caressed by his master. No living man or woman had ever been gentle to me before in all my recollection.

"Then she made me tell her about it, and when I had finished she called me 'brave' and stroked the scarred places, saying, 'Poor face, poor face!'

"I don't know what it was, but I had a pain in my heart, and something came up in my throat and made me gasp. Then she said she would tell me a story, and she told me of One who was the Son of God, the Great Tyhee, who made the world and the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars; and how, because of wicked men like me, this Son of God gave His own life and died a cruel death, so that I might not suffer for my own sins if I would believe in Him. She told me He was gentle and harmless as a child, although He possessed mighty power and could accomplish all things. After this she went to sleep, and I sat very still for fear of waking her, and watched her face, and thought about this wonderful thing she had told me. I was not in a hurry to take her to my home, and I ceased paddling and let the canoe swing lazily to the motion of the sea. Far out beyond the islands, where the sky bends to the waters, it seemed to me as if the day was breaking, for instead of growing darker it grew brighter and brighter, and I could see the glimmer of the white gulls as if the sun shone on them; but here, where we now stand, and all along the mountain side, it was so black that I could not distinguish anything. Now I thought this was a sign and a mystery, and I wondered if the child's God was coming over the western waters to visit her, for she had told me 'He was a bright and shining One,' and so I waited and watched while the child slept. Suddenly the light faded out, and a cold wind came off from the sea, and I heard the familiar witch voices talking, and my heart was hardened, and I awoke the child rudely and pushed her from me, and commenced paddling furiously; but I had drifted whither I knew not, and before the light had faded out I had forgotten to notice where we were. I was frightened, for I had never lost my way before, and I had never seen so black a night; and because I was cruel and ugly, I told the child that we were going to die, that a sea witch was pulling us to her home, where we would be killed and eaten. Then the child came and knelt down at my

feet, and, putting up her little hands, said many words in a strange tongue. At last she said in Thinklet, '"Be not afraid, for I am with you always": this is the promise of our God, yours and mine, and He will save us.' And very soon after that the wings of the darkness lifted, and it flew away, and I knew where we were—not far from my landing-place; and I beached the canoe and carried the child up the steep trail to my mountain hut, and I could not be cruel or harsh to her. She told me such wonderful stories of her God: that I was one of His children; and about a beautiful country where He waited for our coming; and that by living kindly and wronging no man, and believing in Him, and doing good, we would, after our death here, be welcomed there, and never have any more sorrow or pain.

"And I never had been so happy in all my life. I carried her all the things that I prized most, and she made the hut in the mountains a beautiful place, and I loved her as a mother loves her baby, and I would have suffered all things for her sake.

"One day she told me that God was calling her, and she must obey, and leave me for a time. Then I wished to see Him face to face, and fight to keep her with me; but she told me that God was with me every day and hour, and that He could only be conquered by love and resignation; and much more she told me, until my stormy heart rested in peace. And then I saw her fading away like a flower each day, and near the end she could not walk nor even feed herself, and I came here after Ne-that-la, whom you all know for a kindly woman. She went with me, and tended and nourished the white blossom as best she could until the time came when God touched her heart and it was still.

"Just before she left us for His beautiful country she made us both promise to try and come to her, and to lead as many of our people as we could to follow us. She said she 'would wait for us on the shore'; and because of that promise, and because I who loved her wished to live with her for ever, I have brought her dead body here to rest among my own people, and when I die I wish to be laid by her side on the hill which I have chosen as my last resting-place. And oh, my people, if you will listen and obey the counsels of a Sitkan *Shaman* who has learned to love and be tender, you will believe in one God only—the God of this little child."

Then he ceased, and the women of the tribe prepared the poor little body for its long rest in the house of the dead; and they placed her book *ictus* in her bosom, and the ermine robe they folded around her, and all the presents from the *Shaman* in a box and laid it at her feet; and day after day the *Shaman* waited alone on the hill beside her body, and night after night, through storms and starlight, he watched to see that no harm came to it; and one morning, after a great gale, he did not come to the village, and when a long time had passed some of the people went in search of him, and found him dead, sitting beside the house, holding to it strongly as if he would not be torn away. And my people laid him beside the girl, and placed his war canoe near by, with a smaller one for the child.

That is all I know.

Here Klanaut ceased talking. I believe there was a tremulous flutter in Metinoff's eyelids and my own, and a suspicious moisture, which perhaps was blown from off the sea. But I have visited the place many times since, and I think of the fair child, and picture her as graceful as the ferns which sway about her last resting-place; and I wonder if the *Shaman* found her—waiting on the "other shore."

ARTHUR VILLIERS.