

THE KORYAKS OF SIBERIA AND THEIR GREAT WHALE FESTIVAL.

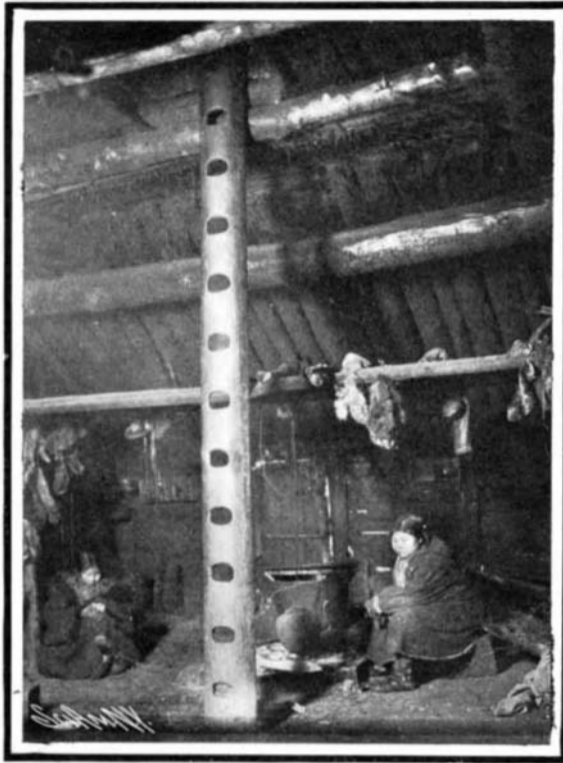
BY WALTER L. BEASLEY.

The American Museum of Natural History, through the investigations of Mr. Waldemar Jochelson, the Russian scientist and traveler, who, for two years past, has carried on explorations at the head of the Jesup Siberian Expedition, will shortly announce some interesting and noteworthy results from these extensive and systematic surveys of the peoples of northeastern Asia. Mr. Jochelson has nearly completed his first memoir, and sails shortly for Europe, where he will continue preparing other volumes of the series. This explorer, together with his co-worker, Mr. Bogoras, brought back over ten thousand specimens, consisting of fur costumes, household utensils, and ceremonial objects, the largest number ever brought back from this region. The descriptive accounts of the whole expedition will portray the everyday life, religion, and customs of some of the most obscure and isolated dwellers on the earth to-day, adding a new and fascinating chapter to existing primitive life in Asia. The aim of the expedition was to settle the unsolved problem as to the early history of the native races of our continent and their relation to those of Asia. The final results of these investigations, though not entirely worked out at present, are enough to show conclusively that the isolated tribes of northeastern Siberia and those on the northwest coast of our own shores in remote times were one race, similar in type and possessing a common culture. Mr. Jochelson, in a recent interview, has favored the writer with some of the odd and characteristic modes of life and strange ceremonial customs of one of the native tribes visited by him, which will appear in his forthcoming volume.

Mr. Jochelson was the first white man to witness and gather a full interpretation of these mysterious rites and performances. Among the interesting races studied were the maritime Koryaks, living in scattered villages along the shores south of the Bering and Okhotsk seas, and also on the bays of Gishiga and Penshina. These resemble mostly in mythology and other ethnological points the Haida Tlinyit and Tsimshian of the northwest coast of America. They number about 10,000, and are separated into two divisions, the maritime and reindeer people. Both women and men wear boots and garments made of reindeer skin, which are obtained in exchange from inland deer breeders for oil, blubber, seal, and walrus thongs. The maritime Koryaks use dogs exclusively for traveling, which is done mostly in the winter months, when the whole country is covered with snow and ice.

A striking and characteristic phase of Koryak life is their peculiar hour-glass-like houses. These are remarkable subterranean habitations, having a squalid atmosphere almost unbearable to the white traveler. From a distance one of the houses has the appearance of some huge inverted funnel arising out of a snowbank. The crater-like top, besides forming a roof, is used as a general storing place for food and all sorts of articles. It slopes downward to an aperture in the center, which serves as a smoke-hole, ventilator, and passageway below. A number of logs arranged in a circle support the framework of the roof, the lower end of which rests on a secondary pile of timbers, forming the slanting walls of the interior. For nearly nine months the whole house is banked and covered up almost to the protecting roof with tons of snow, chinked in with frozen earth and debris. This brings the inmates at all times about ten feet below the surface. Undoubtedly the most astonishing and spectacular feature of the Koryak house is the means of entrance. This is accomplished by scaling a narrow split log, extending down from the roof, having holes cut in it for the feet and hands. The interior is reached by descending another perpendicular hewn stairway covered with a slippery coating of grease and soot, which none but a native can successfully accomplish. The inclosure has a ground floor, and is barren of anything in the shape of furniture. Large copper vessels for cooking seal and blubber and a kettle used for melting snow are the chief household utensils. The diet is limited almost exclusively to fish, half-cooked seal and whale flesh, with Russian brick tea as an occasional luxury. Some thirty to forty of both sexes, usually relations, inhabit one dwelling. Small skin sleeping booths, some six feet high by five in width, heated by a lamp in the cen-

ter, are arranged around the walls. These are assigned to married couples and the young girls, several of the latter occupying one booth. Invariably thick fumes of smoke and soot fill the room. Dogs play an important part in Koryak religion, which is full of Sham-



Interior of Koryak Underground House.

anism and magic. They are often offered as sacrifices and are thought to be one of the most potent agencies for keeping away evil spirits and maladies. For this reason the form of a dog is always hung from a roof top.

Mr. Jochelson was fortunately able to be present at one of the most curious and weird of all the Koryak

fall, after the animal has been caught. The essential part of the celebration is based upon the idea that the captured whale has come to visit the settlement, during which time he must be treated with great respect and hospitably entertained, for he is destined to return to the sea, where he will tell his companions of the good time which was given him, and induce his relatives to pay the Koryaks a visit, as he will probably do also. For, according to their mythology, all are one tribe of related individuals, and live in a settlement somewhere in the under-sea world. All the inhabitants of the village take part in the feast. The white whale is now very scarce in the bays of Okhotsk Sea. They are harpooned and caught in seal nets out on the ice floes in the open fissures, which they are compelled to frequent for breathing purposes. When the hunters are seen approaching with a sled, drawing the body of the animal, the women at once light a fire on the beach and don their dancing coats and boots and execute a sort of welcome dance, accompanied by singing the words: "Ala-la-la-ho! Ala-la-la-ho!" which means: "Ah! a dear guest has come." As soon as the sledge with the whale reaches the shore, the dancers return to their houses and remove their dancing costumes, and return with a large plaited grass mat to lay the body of the distinguished guest upon, and pails and utensils to gather the blood. The men carve up the whale; the meat, blubber, and skin are divided into parts and distributed to the hunters. The head, destined to play a prominent part in the celebration, is wrapped in a grass hood and put upon the roof of the storehouse. On the evening of the day the whale is captured, the first part of the celebration in honor of the mighty guest is given, in the house of the hunter who killed him. It was held in the largest of the underground houses of the settlement. The women and men from near and distant dwellings arrived at intervals, and ascended the steep log stairway to the roof, and descended again to the inside by a similar way. Many of the women were burdened with cooking vessels on the back and dangling offspring, yet they climbed the slippery and soot-covered logs with the greatest ease.

The interior of the subterranean edifice had a mysterious and gloomy appearance. Eight stone lamps, corresponding to the number of families participating in the festival, were burning around the room, and gave off a very unpleasant smell of seal oil. The walls, black with soot, completely absorbed the light of the lamps, and it was very difficult to discern the inmates, who were almost entirely shrouded in the vastness of the underground house. They seemed like apparitions moving to and fro. All spoke in whispers, for fear of awaking the guest before the right time. The women were busy cooking and mixing berries, edible grasses, and roots into puddings. The men were sitting silently in half-circles near the house-posts, while the youths and children were standing or sitting on the ground near the hearth. Near the left of the entrance was set up a sort of shrine or altar, on which were placed charms adorned with plaited grass. One of the most prominent of these charms was the sacred fire-board. This is one of the most essential and highly prized of the ceremonial objects of the Koryaks, and is employed in the first part of the whale festival. Besides acting as a fire-making apparatus, it is also considered a potent charm, and is

supposed to take care of the welfare and to keep all evil spirits from the owner's household. The sacred fire-board is particularly the master of the underground house, and the helper in the hunt of sea mammals.

It is usually a board of aspen wood crudely carved in the shape of a human figure, having eyes, nose, and mouth, with holes in it. In these a round wooden shaft is turned by means of a bow. The drill is held in position by a person pressing the chin or hand down on a bone socket arranged on the upper part of the drill, while the lower part is quickly revolved in the holes. Two or three are sometimes required to work this implement, though the aspen wood ignites readily. There is a rigid taboo against using the fire furnished by others or cooking on a strange hearth. The vessels of one family must not be brought into contact with the fire or hearth of another; if so, it would be a desecration to the family hearth, and is likely to prove infectious. When, owing to frequent use, the entire bed of the fireboard is filled with holes, a new one is made; the old one, however, is preserved as a cherished heirloom and kept in the place set aside for



Koryak House in Northeastern Siberia, Showing Curious Ladder-Stairway to the Roof-Entrance.

ceremonials, namely, the whale festival, among the most important and spectacular events of the year. The main features are here related for the first time, and as a primitive ceremony full of magic and superstition, it is unquestionably unique, both in its conception and execution. The whale feast is held in the



Hauling the White Whale Ashore.

the sacred objects. Often fire-boards are found that have outlasted three or more generations.

After an interval all the families went out, and returned with bundles of fagots, and these were heaped up in a large fire on the hearth, which lighted up and made the interior less gloomy than before. Amid the silence that was still reigning the women placed kettles near the fire and melted in them the blubber of the white whale, and continued to whisper to one another. They finished the preparation of the puddings which the white whale was to take along on its journey to his former home. When they were ready, the women representing the different families passed from one corner to the other, and tendered presents in the shape of small pieces of the puddings. After this two men ascended the roof and brought down the head of the white whale, and suspended it on a cross-beam at one side of the house. The appearance of the honored head of the chief guest, symbolizing his entrance and presence among them, now broke the long silence which had reigned before. Instantly from all sides of the house were heard joyful exclamations of the women, saying: "Ah! here the dear guest has come! Visit us often! When you go back to sea, tell your friends to call on us also. We will prepare just as nice food for them as for you. We have plenty of berries," etc.—and they pointed with their fingers at the puddings that were placed on boards. Everybody in the house was now carried away with excitement. The men and children conversed loudly and crowded around the hearth; then the host, with a grass collar around his neck, took a piece of the fat of the white whale and threw it in the flame, saying, "We are burning it in the fire for thee!" After this he went to the shrine, and placed pieces of fat before the guardian fire-board and smeared its mouth with fat. This was a signal for general feasting to begin, and all those persons in the house began to partake of food. Here is the

menu of the banqueters at this queer celebration of the Arctic world. They ate dried fish dipped in whale oil, boiled whale meat, broiled skin of the whale, and pudding. The ceremony had now reached its height. The heat had increased so that the men were compelled to take off their fur coats, while their bronzed forms, the excited countenances of the women, children's faces smeared with oil, ghost-like atmosphere from the smoke and soot from the lamps, produced a strange and unforgettable sight, bordering more upon the unnatural than the real.

On the following morning the company assembled to bid adieu to the honored hero of the deep. The hearth was converted into something like an altar; on it were placed the traveling bags

filled with puddings that had been frozen outside, also the head of the whale, which was wound around with sacrificial grass. Two sisters of the owner of the house put on long grass masks and officiated as priestesses. They knelt before the hearth, bent their heads over the

the head was carried to the beach by the assemblage and launched into the sea. At the same time the following farewell incantation was pronounced: "Good-bye, dear friend! When the next high tide comes in, induce all your relatives to come with you!" It is thought that this incantation has the effect of bringing sea animals in with the following tide.

The accompanying illustrations are reproduced by the courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History.

A New Use for Glass.

L'illustration (Paris) publishes the following: Like reinforced concrete, reinforced glass is now more and more employed in buildings. Reinforced glass, the principle of which has been patented by an American, is made by rolling two sheets of glass between which is placed a metallic grating. The product shows remarkable cohesion and tenacity; and, in case of breaking, the pieces of glass, instead of separating, remain adherent, held by the metallic grating. That is the principal advantage of reinforced glass. By interesting experiments, recently made, MM. Schlernitzauer and Croquet have proved that a plate of reinforced glass, slightly less than a quarter of an inch thick, and a trifle over four feet long by about a foot and a half wide, could support a weight of about 1,047 pounds. Under 1,322 pounds it did not break, but was only bent and cracked.

Reinforced glass has another important property: a small building, the walls of which are made of reinforced glass, resists a very lively fire lit on the inside; whereas an ordinary window breaks at the first touches of the flame.

Such properties clearly fit reinforced glass for roofing, shop-windows, and glass partitions; but its application to the construction of staircases is particularly successful, for glass staircases allow the easy lighting of the descents into basements. Their steps are not slippery, and, in case of fire, their superiority over wooden staircases is incontestable.

The Academy of Sciences of Vienna lately awarded the following prizes for scientific work in various fields. M. Oscar von Wunsheim received a prize of 1,000 crowns for his researches upon the questions relating to the theory of immunity of animals, vaccination, etc.

M. Jellinsch, of Vienna, was awarded a prize of 500 crowns for his work in the field of electro-pathology. M. E. Finger, of the same city, received a prize of 2,000 crowns which will enable him to continue his important researches in the question of contagion of syphilis in the case of monkeys. A prize of 2,000 crowns was adjudged to E. Emisch, of Prague, for his researches upon the density of gases.



Covering Up the Whale-Guest on the Beach.



Plaiting the Grass Mat, Which is to be the Whale's Bed.



Grass-Masked Women, Pronouncing Incantation Over the Whale Head.

sending of the animal's head to its former habitat. Two men ascended the roof and let down into the house long thongs, to which the traveling bags and the head were tied. Puddings were also placed in these, and berries and sacrificial grass into the mouth for food. Thus festooned and provisioned, and having been furnished with five days' entertainment and feasting,



Koryak Woman and Child, Ready for the Festival.



Koryak Fire-Making Apparatus.



Ceremonial Grass Mask Worn During the Festival.