

# WHERE IT IS A DISGRACE TO DIE A NATURAL DEATH



HOW THE KORIAKS MAKE FIRE FOR THE WHALE FEAST BY RUBBING TWO STICKS TOGETHER.

**M**R. WILLIAM OSLER of Johns Hopkins university, whose proposition to chloroform everybody over 60 years of age recently stirred the civilized world, is hundreds of years behind the times.

Osler's proposition to kill all persons when they reach the age of uselessness is now and has been for hundreds of years in practice among a people who never heard of Osler or his theory. These people are the Koriaks, subjects of the czar of Russia, who live in northeastern Siberia, near Kamchatka, and who, whether because of this practice or not, have dwindled from 25,000 to less than 12,000 since they were found by white men. They kill the old persons and the weaklings—and the custom has been in practice so long that the old people and the weaklings regard with pride and pleasure their approaching death and are honored above all others when they die.

Instead of chloroform the Koriaks use stones or spears, and the condemned man, or woman, sits happily chanting a wild song of welcome to death.

## Disgrace to Die Natural Death.

The custom of killing the old persons is general, and it is considered almost a disgrace to die what the civilized world calls a "natural" death—each Koriak looking forward to being slain by his fellows and kinsmen with great pleasure.

These people are Russified and are "Shamanists," or imperfect Christians of the Greek church. They live in great poverty and misery, subsisting on fish, whale grease, seal, and berries—neglecting utterly their immense wealth of reindeer, of which they own hundreds of thousands. A rich Koriak, owning 30,000 reindeer, will not permit one to be killed, though the whole tribe is starving, as the reindeer is regarded as sacred and cannot be eaten or sold.

Because of the cold, the misery, the hunger, the Koriaks, in the development of their economic life, decided that it was for the best interests of the majority, as well as a kindness to the individual, to kill the old and the helpless as soon as they become unable to hunt the belugas, or white whale, to fish, or to herd reindeer along the bleak tundras, or the shores of the Kamchatka or Bering sea.

Joseph N. Day, a San Franciscan who was with Waldemar Jochelson's Russian exploring party that spent four years in northeast Siberia among the natives, witnessed one of these Osler executions, and gives a graphic description of the scene.

## How the Old Are Slain.

"He had been the head man of the tribe," he said. "Owner of 12,000 reindeer and forty dogs. He had led again and again the fishing parties and had crossed the ice in search of the beluga to be his 'guest' in his strange, greasy, smelly, dirty underground house, the only entrance to which is by a pole down the chimney.

"He was a big man—looking partly like the Mongolians and yet more like our own Alaskan Indians. He was huge for his tribe, almost 6 feet, and powerful, and he was nearly 50 years old.

"Rheumatism came and he was prostrated. For days he could not move from his fur cot in the house, where fifty persons lived in the dirt and cold and evil smells. Then, one morning, he sent for them all, his children, his wives, the head men of the tribe, and he said, simply: 'It is time.'

"Had he not made the announcement the head men would have made it within a few days—but he knew, and it is not honorable among the Koriaks to live after one is useless.

"The tribe was scattered, for it was summer, and he knew it would be nearly a month before the entire tribe had gathered back to the village, so he asked that he be permitted to suffer his fearful tortures for three weeks more, so that all his friends could see him die. The head men bowed and granted the reprieve, and thereafter he was fed with the choicest fish and the best of the broiled skin of the white whale and succulent pieces of seal skin, because he had been a great man in his tribe.

## No Sorrow Over Approaching Death.

"The women nor the children showed any sorrow. He was treated with more respect, that was all, and the entire family busied itself with preparations for a great murder—the greatest murder, perhaps, that the tribe had seen in the generation.

"The second week after sentence was asked for and passed there was a great social gathering in the underground hut of Teukli, the condemned man, for that day the hunters had captured a white whale. The men had been out on the ice for hours, watching with spears at the holes where the whales come up to breathe, and finally one, the son of Teukli, harpooned the whale, and it was killed. The women saw the men straining away to drag the heavy sled and the twelve-foot whale across the ice, and then began one of the strangest ceremonies of the Koriaks—the welcoming of the whale, who is treated as an honored guest. The women, hurrying down the poles into their underground houses, arrayed themselves in holiday garb, and, running back to the beach, danced a wild dance, singing 'Ala-la-la-ho, ala-la-la-ho,' which means 'A dear guest has come.'

"The guest was the whale, whose body is cut up and eaten, but whose head is returned to the sea to tell his fellows how kindly he has been treated and persuade them to come and visit the tribe.

"The women danced around the whale, singing, for some time, then ran home, changed clothes, and returning, cut him up, carrying the flesh and skin to Teukli's hut. The head of the honored guest was hung above the house, with the bodies of two dead dogs, garlanded with grass, beside it to drive away the evil spirits.

## Feast in Honor of Victim.

"That night the members of the tribe gathered as the guests of the man who, in a few days, they were to kill, and he, because his son made the kill, acted as host. Men, women, and children poured down through the chimney, climbing into the interior of the hut by a greasy pole, with footholds in it, that served as a ladder, and they garlanded the head of the whale with colored grasses to show it honor.

"Everybody talked in whispers, for fear of disturbing the honored guest before the right time, and while they whispered they baked, or half baked, round 'puddings' with berries in them. A sacred fireboard was placed before the fire, and the ceremony began.

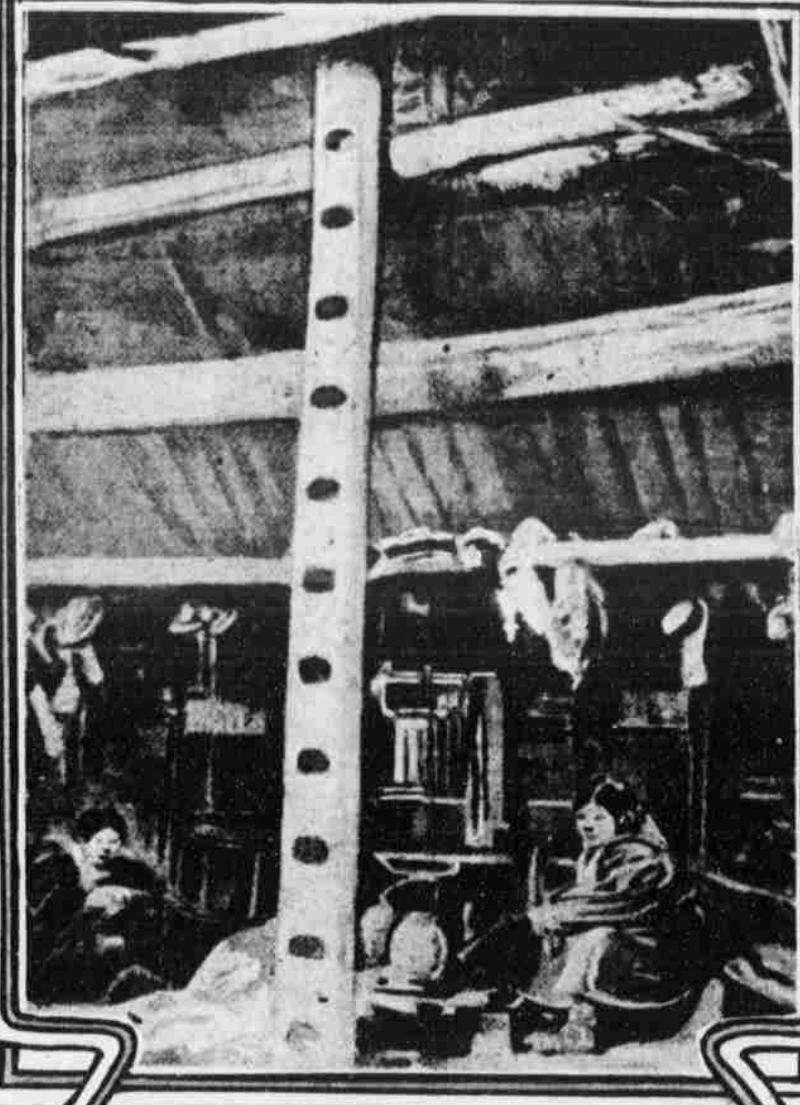
"There were twenty-one families present—each smelling worse than the other—and the twenty-one lamps of whale oil, with the fire, made a wild scene. The starting of a fresh fire by men rubbing wood together was the signal for the beginning of the ceremonial. Then one woman from each family went to each of the other twenty families and offered a piece of her pudding.

"Then men, women, and all sang: 'Our dear guest has come. Visit us often. We prepare nice food for you.'

"The host, who was to die in a few days, arose painfully, and, walking to the fire, threw a lump of whale fat in, which flared up, and the host said, 'We are burning it in the fire for thee.' The host failed to respond to the toast, and the host smeared the sacred fireboard with the fat.

"Then all fell to and ate fish dipped in staling whale fat and broiled bits of whale skin. The men and women removed their fur coats and sang and shouted.

HOW THE KORIAK APPEARS WHEN HE CLIMBS OUT OF HIS UNDERGROUND HOUSE TO TAKE A LOOK AT THE LANDSCAPE



KORIAK UNDERGROUND HOUSE WITH STAIRWAY RUNNING THROUGH THE ROOF AND EXTENDING HIGH ABOVE IT

"The next morning the frozen head, decorated with grasses, was surrounded by the natives. The old man who was to die led the ceremony, and his two daughters, with furs pulled over their faces so that they might not see the 'sacred guest,' pronounced an incantation and the whale's head was thrown into the sea to invite his fellows to come and visit the village.

"Teukli, who was to die, led the procession, scarcely able to walk, because of rheumatism, but proud in his position, and he pushed the honored guest from the sledge into the sea.

"The old man fell three times coming back and his women helped him down into his hut, where he writhed in agony. "The following Thursday he came from his hut to die. Most of the hunters and herdsmen had returned to the village and all preparations for the execution were complete. By his house stood a funeral pyre of wood, which he, his sons, and the women had gathered from the beach, hunting for miles, and from the tundra inland, dry, and some of it soaked in whale oil. Piles of grasses were inside it and around it.

"At 10 o'clock in the morning Teukli came forth from his house, trying to walk without showing his agony when the rheumatism clutched him. His last efforts to make his funeral pyre greater than any other had added to his misery until his legs and arms were double their natural size and his face was purple from agony. Yet he came singing a death chant.

## Heaven Where White Whales Come.

"His sons, his daughters, his women, his friends were all weeping and he was proud. He had lived long and honorably, according to his standards, and he was a 'great Christian,' also, according to his standards. So all was well. He had smeared his body with whale oil, he had killed four of his favorite dogs, so that they might guard him from evil spirits, and he had no fears of the hereafter. He was certain that he was going to a heaven, which was a strange mixture of the heaven about which the orthodox missionary told his father and a heaven in which white whales came voluntarily to be slain in time of famine.

"Likewise his rheumatism was about to be cured—and he was happy.

"All Koriaks die standing, if they can stand, with their faces toward their friends, the executioners; so Teukli stood between two poles, from which were suspended the frozen bodies of his dogs, and he chanted.

"His son stepped forward and threw a stone, which struck Teukli a glancing blow—and he sang louder—for this was the crowning triumph, not to be knocked down by the first stone. A shower of stones fell on and around him. He swayed from the shock, but sang on a wild chant.

## Speared After Stoning to Death.

"He was having a grand death and was extremely proud. The whole tribe threw at him—sons, wives, daughters, neighbors—and they shared his triumph. It was a killing to talk about for generations, and his sons threw harder and harder for the honor of the family. He fell, singing still, and then spears were used—and Teukli's rheumatism was permanently cured, let us hope.

"The body was lifted with great ceremony upon the funeral pyre, the sons made fire with sticks, and threw whale fat upon the pyre, for added honor. And, after it was all over, the ashes were scattered to the winds by his proud daughters, who went home boasting.

"They have no poorhouses in northeast Siberia and scarcely food enough to supply the healthy—and Teukli would have suffered more had he been permitted to live. Besides, he was there to see that his friends did due honor at the obsequies."



KORIAKS DRAWING THE WHALE TO THE FEASTING PLACE



HOW THE KORIAK WOMAN CARRIES HER CHILD



MASKED KORIAK WOMEN PRONOUNCING INCANTATION OVER THE WHALE FLESH



KORIAK WOMEN DANCING TO WELCOME THE WHALE