SOME QUEER LABORERS—WHERE PEACEFUL LIVING IS PREFERRED TO MONEY MAKING: BY CHARLES FREDERICK HOLDER

IN TRAVELING over the great western country of the United States, owing to the cosmopolitan character of the population, one has excellent opportunity to observe human nature and its many varieties, and possibly no one feature of life is more interesting than the strange fields of labor. In New Mexico is found one of the most contented of all laborers—the native garnet-collector; seen lying prone upon the ground, resting on his elbows, languidly gazing at an ant-hole, out of which comes at intervals huge black ants bearing tiny stones. These ant-holes or nests can be found all over the surface in certain localities—circular mounds a foot or more in diameter, darker than the surrounding ground. The ants bring small stones up from the interior in the pursuance of their labor, and a certain percentage of these are garnets, to obtain which the Indian merely lies down, brushes over the quart or more of fine debris, or watches the large ants and relieves them as they come to the surface with the gems.

Among many tribes, work—that is, drudgery—is done by the women. Among the Navajos a woman is frequently seen herding cattle or horses, driving them in, a richly designed blanket thrown over her shoulders to keep out the chill of the evening. These people are skilful makers of jewelry, pounding and hammering bands and bracelets of silver out of silver dollars, and displaying no little taste in their designs. It is not the jewelry, however, which attracts one's attention, but rather the strong face of the worker—a type long to be remembered. The Navajos are among the finest specimens of all the American Indians of to-day. They are famous manufacturers and "good Indians." The Navajo blankets have a world-wide fame, and those of native wool and dyes made by the Indians are often of beautiful design and very expensive. Bales are sent in from the country, piled on the backs of burros, stored in the warehouses of way-stations and finally sent to Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, Chicago and other large centers for goods of this character.

At the old city of Santa Fé, New Mexico, one finds various interesting fields of labor, from the boys who drive the trains of burros to
WOOD-CHOPPERS IN THE RED WOODS, CALIFORNIA
the jewelry-manufacturers, of whom there are many, producing beautiful silver filagree-work, also gold, massive gold and silver bracelets and bangles set with huge pieces of turquoise. Not far from here we may find Indians who hunt for turquoise, often bringing it in from secret places. In New Mexico a very ancient turquoise-mine has been discovered which is worked to-day. It is supposed to have been worked several thousand years ago, and the turquoise of Old Mexico, it is supposed, come from here in part. Indians, strange to say, are not, as a rule, interested in mining for gold and silver. The writer has seen an illustration of this. Not ten miles from a placer mine was an Indian settlement, the natives in actual poverty, but making no attempt to hunt for the gold which was being accumulated all about them by a band of Chinese placer-miners, all of whom were probably making from two to ten dollars per day. The Indian hunter is a picturesque figure. This is the field of his choice; labor in the sense of extreme hard work is abhorrent to him; yet in some of the hottest places in the desert, as at Needles, the Yuma Indians make excellent workers, it being impossible to secure white men to work, as they can not endure the protracted heat. At Zuñi may be seen the bead- or wampum-maker, a fine type of one of the most progressive of the American Indians of the West. He sits in front of his door, and with his boring-tool, made by himself from the ancient type, bores a small but perfect hole in each bead, and in this way all the countless beads found in the bead-graves of the West were made. These Indians are farmers, horticulturists, architects, and their little gardens and fields, their picturesque homes are among the attractions of the West along the great lines of travel.

IN NEW MEXICO and Arizona the basket-makers are picturesque figures, and the work they produce finds a market over the entire country; Indian baskets have become a fashion and large prices are paid for them. As an illustration, a basket which was bought from an Indian in Tulare County, California, for five or six dollars, sold to a collector for one hundred and fifty. Numbers of collections of Indian baskets are to be seen in the United States which represent large sums, as high as several thousand dollars. Many of the baskets are extremely fine, often holding water, and the designs very artistic and beautiful.
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In New Mexican homes strange articles are found, and the Indian
girl is often seen grinding corn, making flour upon a metate—a flat
rock—after the primitive fashion. In all the old camps of California
and the Pacific Slope, seeds and grain were ground in this manner,
and the flat stones and their pestles or grinders are found in all the
Indian graves, it having been the custom to bury the possessions of the
Indian with him. The old grinders are still in use in certain localities,
and women and girls may be seen grinding acorns, cones or piñons
on the flat stones. The discovery and collection of these curiosities
has given rise to another peculiar laborer—the curiosity-collector.
These men live on the islands, particularly Santa Catalina, famous as
an archeological treasure-house. They outfit at Avalon, where there
is a large curiosity business, and are taken to the various islands, often
being left several weeks, spending their time in opening the graves
of the ancient people of the Santa Catalina Channel. The island of
that name has many old town-sites, and tons of stone implements have
been carried away from there and distributed over the world. At San
Nicolas Island there are shell-mounds a mile in length and eight or
more feet in height, which the collectors open carefully, taking the
material—skeletons and implements—which later are sold to the
dealers or to some museum. San Nicolas is the most desolate spot to
be imagined, buffeted by wind, and the sand blowing like rain or
snow. But here a single man lives—a herder of a few sheep—with two
dogs as companions. When the writer went ashore, after great
difficulty and danger in the heavy surf, the one inhabitant was seen
walking away, and did not display any sociability until held up. He
was a Basque, utterly ignorant of the news of the world for the past
year and apparently had but one desire unfilled—beans, which he was
given. He had abundance of provisions, red wine and tobacco, and
in his daily ten- or fifteen-mile walk up the island he shot sea birds to
supply his larder. Robinson Crusoe could not have been more alone
than this man, who said his only fear was that some day he might be
blown into the sea, though he confessed that he also feared that the
spirits of the ancient islanders, so often disturbed, might haunt him.
As we left he stood on the beach, a gun over his shoulder, a cane in
his hand, his big dog at his feet, plainly relieved at our departure.

In New Mexico the stations are often given a picturesqueness by
the women and girls who come in from the outlying Indian towns to
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sell ollas or clay vessels of various sizes and colors. These jars are very attractive, and ornamented in a barbaric fashion. Some of them are of large size, yet are easily balanced upon the head of the owners, who use a grammet or base of basketry to protect the heads. The vessels they sell are made originally to carry water from the springs to their camps.

The track-walker, common in the West, represents an uninteresting yet important field of labor. His business is to walk over a certain number of miles of track every day and see that it is in perfect order. The traveler may see the “walker” of the Royal Gorge sitting on a rock overhanging the mysterious river, eating his dinner preparatory to taking up the silent tramp through one of the most remarkable canons in the Rocky Mountains, where in some places the walls almost appear to meet.

COMING to the cities of the Pacific coast, strange fields of labor are found. Here may be seen the Chinese school-teacher teaching the young disciple of Confucius, with a hearty contempt for everything American except the language, which he is anxious to acquire as a mere business proposition. The most remarkable laborer among the Chinese is he who is the “legs of the dragon.” The latter is an extraordinary object resembling a dragon, often two or three hundred feet in length, of most gorgeous make-up, and a head sufficiently fantastic to make the beholder thankful that it is but a picture of the fancy. Each large city has a dragon. There is one in San Francisco and one in Los Angeles. Each is estimated to be worth $20,000 or $30,000, being made of the most expensive silks and satins, with gold, silver, ivory and glass trimmings. When times are hard the dragon is brought out to appease the evil spirits, and it is always exhibited at the first-of-the-year processions and with the Tournament of Roses of Los Angeles. To say that this dragon is fearfully and wonderfully made will suffice. When it appears, it invariably creates a sensation, winding down the streets like a huge caterpillar, snapping its jaws from side to side, its evil eyes glistening, its antennæ quivering. The legs of the dragon are Chinamen selected for the purpose. They are concealed beneath it, their heads being under the back; and being well trained they give the dragon the natural undulatory motion that real dragons are supposed to have. The legs are some two hundred in
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number, depending upon the size of the creature; and the men are very proud of their work, especially the big man who bears the head and makes the jaws open and shut. Another important position is the one filled by a Chinaman who precedes the dragon, who dances along taunting it, just escaping from the vicious snaps the hideous fangs make at him. The “legs” of the dragon are trained for the positions and strive to hold it year after year.

In Southern California the orange-picking is a labor by itself, requiring some skill. The pickers are mostly Mexicans who go around with long ladders and with bags strung about their necks clipping the fruit from the trees with peculiar knives made for the purpose. A good picker and culler can fill a large number of boxes a day.

One would hardly expect to find laborers on the California desert, where the heat is often 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, and where no grateful oasis can be found; yet here, in a singular sink or depression nearly three hundred feet below the level of the sea, is found an interesting business—that of plowing salt. So hot is this region that few white men can stand it, and the majority of laborers are Indians, who thrive in this desolate, ancient sea-bed. The salt is plowed up, the plow being hauled by a cable attached to an engine; the salt then being heaped up into small piles, later placed upon flat cars and transported to storehouses. No field of labor offers more terrors to the worker. Intense heat, suffocating sand-storms, glaring, white salt, deadly to the vision of white men, it would seem, yet the Indians of the desert live and work here year after year. Several years ago the Colorado River overflowed its banks, and the weird depression began to fill up and a vast sea formed. The Indians became demoralized and fled to the mountains, believing that the ancient sea of the California desert had returned.

America has some of the finest and largest trees in the world, and a war of extermination has been waged against them, on one hand, while, on the other, the government has been endeavoring to place them all in government reservation. The men who cut these giants of other centuries live a most isolated life deep in the heart of these Titans, some coming out but once a year, remaining year after year, winter and summer, their lives almost comparable to that of the sea-elephant hunters, who live on Kergulen land two years at a time amid endless rain and sleet.
Klicatat squaw weaving a mat

Navajoe woman herding horses on the plains