

SHELLING OF AN INDIAN VILLAGE IN ALASKA.

LETTER

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF THE TREASURY,

IN RELATION TO

The shelling of an Indian village in Alaska by the revenue steamer Corwin.

DECEMBER 21, 1882.—Referred to the Committee on the Territories and ordered to be printed.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT, *December 20, 1882.*

SIR: Respectfully referring to the letter of this department of the 5th instant, in answer to House resolution of the 4th instant, calling for information regarding the reported shelling of an Indian village in Alaska by the revenue steamer Corwin, I have the honor to transmit herewith a report of Mr. W. E. Morris, collector of customs at Sitka, Alaska, dated the 9th of November last, in which he gives more circumstantial information than that hitherto received by the department regarding this affair.

Very respectfully,

CHAS. J. FOLGER,
Secretary.

Hon. J. W. KEIFER,
Speaker, House of Representatives.

CUSTOM-HOUSE, SITKA, ALASKA,
COLLECTOR'S OFFICE, *November 9, 1882.*

SIR: On the 23th of last month I had the honor to transmit to the department the following telegram:

"SITKA, Oct. 28, 1882.

"SECRETARY TREASURY,
"Washington, D. C.:

"26th inst. Hoochenoo Indians becoming troublesome, capturing property from whites, Commander Merriman repaired thither in Corwin. Became necessary to shell and destroy village, canoes, and make prisoners. Severe lesson taught. Particulars by mail."

It is presumed that all essential information has already been rendered the department by the report of the commander of the Corwin himself, and that as the expedition was a joint one upon behalf of the Navy and Treasury Departments, that the report of the naval commander will also reach the head of this department, hence it will be unnecessary for me to enter into general details, but merely give a synopsis of what I saw myself as an eye witness, and my opinion of the necessity which existed for adopting such stringent measures.

It has been a custom for many years in this territory, when an Indian has been killed or injured by another, or by a white man, for his surviving relatives to demand at the hands of the parties who injured him a certain payment or tribute, consisting generally of blankets. When this levy is made it means potlatch (pay) or die. It has been attempted by the Navy to break up this practice, but without effect.

Shortly previous to the case at bar, whilst an Indian was cutting down a tree for the Northwest Trading Company at Killisnoo, he was warned of the danger, and continued in a position of peril. The tree fell and killed him. Immediately a certain number of blankets were levied as a fine upon the company by his relatives, and payment demanded. The company refused, of course. Matters remained *in statu quo* until the Adams, Commander Merriman, arrived in these waters. He touched at Killisnoo on his way to this port, and complaint was made to him of the exaction, by the superintendent of the company. He informed the Indians that in future no such payments should either be demanded or enforced as far as white men were concerned; that if they persisted in such course he would punish them severely, and that in this instance the company would and should not pay. They submitted with bad grace.

On the night of October 22, whilst this company were whaling in the Kootzenoo Lagoon, a bomb, shot from the whale-boat at a whale, accidentally exploded and killed an Indian *shaman*, who composed one of the crew; whereupon the latter immediately arose, and aided by about one hundred Indians, overpowered the two white men in the boat and took them prisoners; captured the boat, nets, whaling gear, and steam launch of the company, valued at several thousand dollars, and demanded payment of two hundred blankets for the dead man. The white men were kept close prisoners. A plan was formed to murder the engineer of the launch, who fortunately did not take the trail expected.

Capt. J. M. Vanderbilt, the superintendent, at once got up steam on the company's tug-boat Favorite, and started with his family post haste to Sitka for aid from the naval commander. The Indians endeavored to cut off the Favorite, but failed.

As soon as Vanderbilt reported the facts to Commander Merriman, the latter put a howitzer and Gatling gun on the Favorite, sought the co-operation of the revenue-marine steamer Corwin, then in port, and as early as practicable, with a force of about one hundred marines and sailors, started himself for the scene of action, picking up his large steam launch on the way. I accompanied the expedition.

Upon arriving at the lagoon, matters were found exactly as represented by Vanderbilt; the men still prisoners; the Indians increasing in force and very much excited. Commander Merriman lost no time in arresting the ringleaders, and got the two principal chiefs of the tribe on board the Corwin, and informed them that, instead of the Northwest Trading Company paying anything to them, he should inflict upon them a fine of four hundred blankets, payable the next morning, under the penalty of having their canoes destroyed and principal village shelled and burnt.

So temporizing has been the policy pursued within the past two years by the Navy towards the Siwashes that they evidently thought this a game of bluff. They were surly and impertinent, and affected not to think Commander Merriman would put his threat into execution. They, however, took the precaution to make use of the intervening night in taking to a place of security their large canoes and valuables.

On the following day, the Indians having failed to come to time, Commander Merriman made good his threat, destroyed their canoes, shelled and burnt their village.

My object in addressing the department upon this subject is for the purpose of placing my opinion on record as to the propriety of this measure and the absolute necessity which existed for such harsh measures being adopted.

The Hoochenoos are a rich and warlike tribe, very insolent and saucy towards the whites. Not long since they proceeded to Wrangell and attacked the Church Indians there, killing several, amongst them Toyatt, a missionary Indian, a very useful and intelligent man.

As long as the native tribes throughout the archipelago do not feel the force of the government and are not punished for flagrant outrages, so much the more dangerous do they become, and are to be feared by isolated prospecting parties of miners. Once let it be understood by the Siwashes that the life of a white man is sacred, and that they will be severely handled if they harm him, there will be no danger or difficulty in small parties traversing the country in search of mineral and other wealth.

The punishment has been most severe, but eminently salutary, and in my judgment the very thing that was needed, and unhesitatingly, in my opinion, is the prompt and energetic action of Commander Merriman to be applauded, and this occasion is sought to express great confidence in the result of his action and general management of the Indians since he has been on this station.

Owing to the heavy draught of water needed for the Adams, the presence and co-operation of the Corwin were most opportune.

The conduct of Lieutenant Healy, in command of said vessel, is especially to be commended, as that of an officer and a gentleman, and a credit to the service. His officers and men conducted themselves well throughout the whole affair, and deserve therefor special mention.

I am, respectfully, your obedient servant,

WM. GOUVERNEUR MORRIS,

Collector

Hon. CHAS. J. FOLGER,

Secretary of the Treasury, Washington, D. C.