

VI

The Northwest Coast of America

THE Indians who lived on the narrow strip of Pacific seacoast from Alaska to Puget Sound were a vigorous and overbearing people. They had a culture of no common order. Sharply differentiated from that of the surrounding tribes, it had a zest which it is difficult to match among other peoples. Its values were not those which are commonly recognized, and its drives not those frequently honoured.

They were a people of great possessions as primitive peoples go. Their civilization was built upon an ample supply of goods, inexhaustible, and obtained without excessive expenditure of labour. The fish, upon which they depended for food, could be taken out of the sea in great hauls. Salmon, cod, halibut, seal, and candlefish were dried for storage or tried out for oil. Stranded whales were always utilized, and the more southern tribes went whaling as well. Their life would have been impossible without the sea. The mountains abutted sharply upon their shore territory; they built upon the beaches. It was a country wonderfully suited to the demands they put upon it. The deeply indented coast was flanked with numberless islands which not only trebled the shoreline, but gave great sheltered areas of water and protected navigation from the unbroken sweep of the Pacific. The sea life that haunts this region is proverbial. It is still the great spawning ground of the world, and the tribes of the Northwest Coast knew the calendar of the fish runs as other peoples have known the habits of bears or the season for putting seed into the earth. Even in the rare cases when they depended upon some product of the earth, as when they cut the great trees that they split into boards