

J. J. Warner

"Of the many occasional and annual feasts, whether of a religious or social character, which so frequently occur, and are most observed by the Indians, the Eagle Feast is most conspicuous. It is preeminently the feast of the year. It is known in California, in the Spanish language, as 'la Fiesta del Gabilan' -- the name of the hawk having, from the ignorance of the language by the Indians, been given to the eagle.

This feast is celebrated at a full moon, during autumn. In the spring of the year careful examination and scrutiny is made by the Indians of those localities where the eagle is wont to build its eeyrie, and he who discovers the nestling place of the bird of heaven, returns to his village filled with joy. The nest is frequently visited during the incubation of the parent bird, and when the young make their appearance, they are closely watched until they are fledged. They are then removed from the nest and carried to the village. This act is accompanied with ceremonies and rejoicing. When the young eagles have grown, so that it would be unsafe to suffer them longer to remain, the fortunate discoverer, attended by a few companions, proceeds to the locality of the nest, where after asking the blessing of the Great Spirit, the birds are removed and carefully conducted towards the village. A herald is sent forward to announce that success has attended their labors.

Upon the return of the party, they are met while yet a considerable distance from the village by a procession of the young maidens accompanied by the villagers, who receive with demonstrations of triumph the royal bird, which they convey amidst singing and dancing to the place prepared for its residence. From this time until Autumn when the young eagles have attained their growth, they are fed and tended with watchful solicitude.

When two or more eaglets are found by the inhabitants of one village, it becomes the most acceptable gift that can be bestowed upon the people to some friendly village or some particular individual of a neighboring village. One bird only is required for the feast, and this sacrificial offering occurs but once during the year, at the same village.

Upon the approach of winter, and after the gathering of the spontaneous fall crops, at the full moon, this solemn and instructive celebration takes place. The inhabitants of the friendly villages, not only near but more remote, are ceremoniously invited to participate in the festivities of the

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occasion. Suitable preparations having been made, upon the designated day, the people who have received invitations, arrive from the surrounding villages. A sufficient area for the accommodation of those who take part in the ceremonies, as well as for the spectators, having been enclosed, in the center of which a bright fire is kindled, the evening is spent in chanting and dancing. As the full orb moon gracefully ascends towards the zenith, the performance becomes more animated. A short time previous to high moon, the officiating priest, bearing the heaven-bound messenger, makes his appearance. All is hushed in silence as he enters the enclosure and approaches the burning pile, displaying the immortal bird before the anxious and admiring multitude. Low-toned and solemn chants and ejaculations, interspersed with benedictions, flow from the priest as with measured step he passes around the fire. Having in this manner introduced himself and subject to the congregated people, he informs them that if they have any thanks for blessings received, or petitions to send to the Great Spirit, to communicate the same; and then, directing his discourse to the eagle, recounts all the notable events, either of good or evil which they have enjoyed or suffered during the past year. The many anticipated wants for the coming year -- the genial showers, the fruitful forests and fields, the abundance of game, and security from the enemies, are dwelt upon.

As the moon approaches her greatest altitude, the scene becomes exciting. The measured step becomes quick, the low voice gives way to earnest entreaty and commands, until the speaker winds himself up to the highest physical and mental excitement. The imperial messenger is then charged in the most emphatic manner, to speed his way to the courts of heaven, and without fail to lay before the Great Spirit their combined thanks and petitions, while at the same time he is instructed to faithfully represent them before the giver of all good.

As the last words of this solemn and imposing charge dies away upon the still bosom of night, the spirit of this bird of Jove, takes its silent and peaceful departure from the body, to wing its way to the source of all life. The moment the head of the bird is seen to droop in death, and while its spirit still lingers to take a last look, and receive the parting ejaculations, a deep and solemn suspiration breaks forth from the attending multitude. A silence, as if instantaneous death had fallen upon every person present, reigns without interruption, while the officiating priest, passing round the open area, displays to the people the lifeless body of the eagle, which has voluntarily resigned his life here to become the messenger and advocate of man at the celestial courts.

The large feathers of the bird are then plucked and carefully preserved for future use, and the body committed to the flames, where it is closely watched by every person present until the last particle of its body disappears in ascending vapor. The remainder of the night is spent in dancing, accompanied with singing and chanting. In the morning, presents, consisting of the proceeds of the summer and fall harvests, are divided among those guests which have been invited from other villages.

It is a common occurrence that the person who makes this feast, distributes the entire produce of his fields among his guests. None but the more industrious among the Indians, are able to enjoy the luxury of giving an eagle feast, and they are necessarily left destitute of food, and are compelled to attend similar feasts at other villages, where they obtain a more bountiful share in the distribution."