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Kalli, the Esquimaux Christian A Memoir

Thomas Boyles Murray

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KALLIHIRUA THE ESQUIMAUX.

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Kallihirua, notwithstanding the disadvantages of person (for he was plain, and short of stature, and *looked* what he was,—an Esquimaux), excited a feeling of interest and regard in those who were acquainted with his history, and who knew his docile mind, and the sweetness of his disposition.

Compliance with the precept in the Old Testament, "Love ye the stranger[1], " becomes a delight as well as a duty in such an instance as that about to be recorded, especially when we consider the affecting injunction conveyed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares[2]."

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Her Majesty's Ship "Assistance"

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Erasmus Augustine York, whose native name was Kallihirua, was brought to England on board Her Majesty's ship "Assistance," Captain Erasmus Ommanney, in 1851. Captain Ommanney was second in command of the expedition under the orders of Captain Horatio Austin, C.B., which was dispatched in May, 1850, in search of the missing vessels of Sir John Franklin, the "Erebus" and "Terror". Franklin had quitted England on his perilous and fatal enterprise in May, 1845.

Much interest was attached to the young Esquimaux, who was considered to be about sixteen years of age in August, 1850. He was one of a tribe inhabiting the country in the vicinity of Wolstenholme Sound, at the head of Baffin's Bay, in 76° 3' north latitude, the nearest residents to the North Pole of any human beings known to exist on the globe. He was the only person ever brought to this country from so high a northern latitude. His tribe was met with by the late Sir John Ross, during his voyage in 1818, and was by him called the Arctic Highlanders.

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Cape York

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It appears that, when the expedition under Captain Austin's command was passing Cape York, in August, 1850, after its release from the ice in Melville Bay, natives were seen from the "Assistance". Captain Ommanney went with the "Intrepid" (one of the vessels comprising the expedition) to communicate with them, when it was ascertained that H.M.S., "North Star," had passed the winter in the neighbourhood. The fate of this vessel was then a matter of anxiety, as by her instructions she had been cautioned to avoid passing the winter in those regions. The tribe thus discovered consisted of only three families, residing in their summer huts at Cape York. As no steamer had ever before found its way to these seas, it was interesting to watch the impression upon the singular beings now visited, when they descended into the engine-room. The large furnaces and machinery astonished them. The latter, on being put in motion, made them take to their heels with fright, and they ran out of the engine-room on deck as fast as they could.

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Kallihirua on board the "Assistance"

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It was after this first interview that the report was raised of the massacre of two ships' crews in 1846. Captain Ommanney, accompanied by Captain Penny, with his interpreter, immediately returned to Cape York, and had a long interview with the natives. They most emphatically denied the whole statement, adding, that no ship had ever been on their coasts except the "North Star," and passing whalers. Then it was, that Kallihirua consented to show Captain Ommanney where the "North Star" had wintered, and to join the ship, for the purpose of being useful as an interpreter, in the event of their meeting with any natives during the search for the missing expedition under Sir John Franklin. Parting (for awhile, as he supposed) with his immediate relatives, and with the only people whom he knew on earth, he threw himself into the hands of strangers in perfect confidence. Having arrived on board the "Assistance," he put off his rough native costume, submitted to the process of a good washing, and, being soon clad in ordinary European clothing, which was cheerfully contributed by the officers, the young Esquimaux with much intelligence performed the duty of pilot to the place where the "North Star" had wintered.

The Esquimaux Graves

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On entering Wolstenholme Sound[3], Kallihirua, or, as he was familiarly called, Kalli, directed Captain Ommanney and the officers to the late winter-station of his tribe, the spot having been abandoned in consequence of some epidemic, probably influenza, which had carried off several persons. On entering the huts, a most distressing sight presented itself. A heap of dead bodies, about seven, in a state of decomposition, lay, one over the other, clad in their skin-clothing, as if suddenly cut off by the hand of death. The survivors, from fear of infection, had left the remains of their relatives unburied. It was an affecting scene in such a remote and desolate region, separated from all communication with the human race. Near the huts was the burial-ground, with several well-formed graves of heaps of stones. On one lay a spear, which one of the officers of the "Assistance" took up, to bring away. Some of the crew were examining the graves to see whether they contained any of our missing countrymen. Seeing this, Kalli ran up to the officer, and, with tears and entreaties, as well as he could make himself understood, begged him and the men to desist from the work of desecration.

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Kallihirua's Family

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Poor Kalli's lamentations were quite heartrending. His feelings were, of course, respected, the graves were at once built up again, and the spear replaced. Captain Ommanney learnt afterwards from Kalli, that it was his father's grave, over which the spear had been placed by friends of the deceased. They have a tradition that in a future state the means of hunting are still required, and, because in this world the search of food is the chief object of life, the hunting-lance is deposited on the grave.

The young stranger subsequently lived on board the "Assistance". He was placed under the care of the serjeant of Marines, who instructed Kalli in the rudiments of reading and writing, and to whom he became much attached. By his amiable disposition he made himself welcome and agreeable to all the expedition, and, as, in consequence of the state of the ice, no opportunity was offered of landing him on his native shores, on the return of the vessel past York Inlet, he was brought to England. The leaders of the expedition conferred the surname of York upon him, from the locality in which he was found. To this the name of Erasmus was prefixed, after that of the gallant Captain Ommanney.

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