

THE CALIFORNIAN.

VOL. II.

OCTOBER, 1892.

No. 5.



AMONG THE BASKET MAKERS.

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IN studying the evolution and characteristics of a race, a convenient starting point is found in the earliest evidence of its ability to adapt the materials furnished by wild nature to permanent uses.

On both the eastern and western shores of the Pacific Ocean we find that the art of basketry has played a most important part not only in services essential to the maintenance of life, but possibly a still greater one through the development of intelligence and skill in the process of construction and of taste in decoration. Mr. Christopher Dresser, in his admirable work on "Art and the Art Manufacturers of Japan," says: "The Japanese are the best basket makers in the world. They make baskets which are not only useful, but which may be classed as art objects. The

patterns are beautiful, and their curves almost invariably form a pleasing contrast with the lines of other parts of their work." It is a singular coincidence that this is equally true of the baskets made by the Indian women of the Pacific Coast from a period long prior to their intercourse with civilized nations. And however varied have been the requirements of use, the articles are equally remarkable for their perfection of form; and when decorated, for the taste displayed in their coloring and designs.

Conceding the perfection of the Japanese workmanship, and the incomparable superiority of the bamboo as a material of basketry, the Indian baskets afford us a more attractive study through their relation to the higher development of the aboriginal races of our own country. As ideo-

graphs they are full of interest to the ethnologist, who finds in the progressive steps of their manufacture a preparatory training for pottery, weaving and other primitive arts. And in tracing back the conventionalized patterns to their natural sources, the artist finds them in the cones of pine trees, in acorns and the seed vessels of many humbler plants; in heads of

dried the grasshoppers for winter use. In times of scarcity they searched every hiding place of fat grub or toothsome bulh; or with a tough stick drove the angleworms from their holes, and with the addition of a few wild onions and acorn flour converted the mess into an appetizing soup. They made petticoats of tule and other wild grasses for summer use, and winter



The Collection of Miss Kate Mabley of Detroit, made in Los Angeles County.

artichokes and burrs of teazels; in feathers and fish scales, and even upon the variegated skins of lizards and snakes.

Among primitive arts, basketry also furnishes the most striking illustration of the inventive genius, fertility of resource and almost incredible patience of the Indian women. They collected the fuel, gathered the stores of acorns, mesquite and other wild seeds; they

garments of rabbit and squirrel skins. And while all these accomplishments added to the market value of the women, it was invariably the most expert in basketry who brought the highest price, viz: two strings of shell money, or one hundred dollars.

Divorced from the basket of his squaw, the brave had no social status whatever. He could only revenge himself by calling his wife by her own

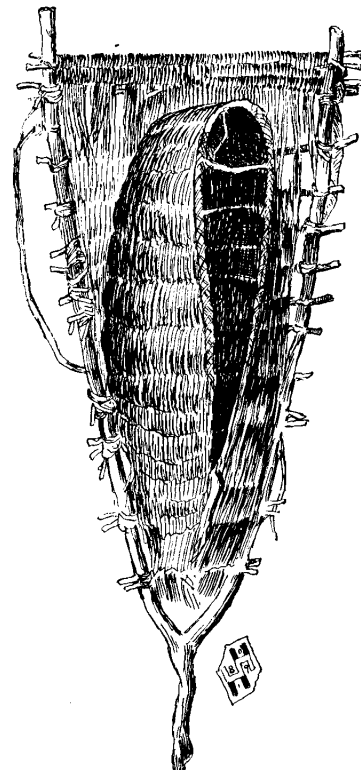
name—the greatest possible insult to a married woman of the California tribes. The entire alphabet of natural uses was as familiar to them as the changes of the seasons or the tokens of the wind and sky. And though the functions of war and worship, and the pursuits of the chase belonged exclusively to the men, there were female shamans in all the northern tribes, who invoked and cast out spirits and were famous for their skill in the treatment of disease.

Alone in the forest, or beside some rippling stream, the Indian mother received into her bosom the little brown creature who made her slavery endurable. Its basket nest, cunningly wrought after the fashion of a butterfly's cradle, was fastened to a strong frame of wicker-work. Taught by the oriole, she lined the nest with down of milkweed and soft fibres; but prouder or less wary than the bird, she decorated it outwardly with bright feathers and strings of tiny shells. When she traveled, the precious basket was strapped to her back, and she never parted with it until the baby died, the empty basket being then hung above its grave. When at home, the baby basket was usually fastened to the nearest tree, where, with never a cry, the little bead eyes followed the moving clouds and fluttering leaves into the land of dreams, while the mother molded her acorn bread in a basket tray, or cooked her dinner in a deep, round basket into which heated stones were thrown to serve the purposes of fuel.

She converted a round, gray boulder from the nearest brook into a mortar wherein seeds and nuts were pounded into meal; but even this primitive mill was not complete until a wide rim of basketry was securely cemented around its opening to prevent waste. Basket sifters, also, of various degrees of fineness were needed to separate the chaff. An increasing family required more and more baskets, strong and heavy ones for the storage of acorns and grain; others light, yet

substantial, in which clothing and the rabbit skin coverlets used in winter could be protected from rain and the ravages of tree rats and squirrels. The aboriginal bureau or wardrobe was simply made by turning a large basket over a smaller one suspended by ropes of hair or strong fibre in some convenient place, out of reach of these enemies.

The thrifty squaw was known not only by the size of her roof granary,



Indian Baby Basket. Chrysalis Pattern.

Contributions to American Ethnology.

but by the huge bundles of raw materials, flexile willow wands and long stemmed, wiry grasses, stored away beneath the supporting poles of her hut or wickiup. Thus provided, as described by the earliest American pioneers, the rainy season found her "everlastingly puddering, yet doing nothing." Nevertheless, in textile

art she had no peer. Simply out of the grasses of the field she created forms of beauty and grace, which, "uncontaminated by the complex conditions of civilized art, offer the best possible facilities for the study of esthetic development."*

And while the functional demands of her art were never lost sight of, or in the least degree subordinated, the

environment, that its utter extinction is near at hand, unless it is preserved under the fostering hand of the government and perpetuated through the industrial education of Indian children, upon the reservations where the materials of basketry are still abundant.

The Pacific Coast baskets were originally made for carrying and



Baskets collected in the San Gabriel Valley.

shapes were equally perfect, and we may easily trace, in the evolution of both forms and patterns, the growth of an entirely new class of art products indigenous to the Pacific Coast. But so rapid has been the deterioration of the art of basketry under the more and more complex conditions of its

storing water, as well as for the uses already indicated; and hence the lightest, cleanest and most durable materials were selected. These are found in various species of willow, the "chippa" of the Southern Indians, while the fibers of the red bud (*Cercis occidentalis*) served the same purpose in the North, and are equal to those of the palm and bamboo in flexibility

*W. H. Holmes, in Report of Bureau of Ethnology, 1884-5.

and strength. Among grasses used in the woof, the smooth, wiry culms of vilfa and sporobolus were preferred. Some very old, undecorated baskets are among the most perfect in form and texture, and we, therefore, conclude that having attained perfection in these respects, the native genius reached out toward surface embellishment for its more adequate expression. What they found to be the only mode of ornamentation which would not interfere with the smoothness and flatness of surfaces, and hence with

might be made in basketry we never shall know,* but this is certain—the result has proved the capacity of our patient Indian drudge for development along the lines which have made the Japanese so wonderful a people.

The finest as well as the largest California baskets are of the coiled variety. The simplicity of their construction is well shown in the illustration, which presents the bottom of a very old Indian basket from the Pauma reservation in San Diego County. Gregoria Majal, who made



The Home of a Basket Maker.

the durability of their work, was color. It is precisely at this point that the fine art of basketry has its beginning.

As the woof or willow coils always covered the more perishable warps of grass stems, the artist was necessarily limited to changes in the woof, and to purely geometric patterns. Every kindergartner knows how infinitely varied these may be, and how every new combination stimulates invention. How far back in the ages the discovery was made that, simply by breaking off the plain fillet and introducing a colored piece in its place, pictures

it, wove such a granary for each of her three daughters, who are venerable women; yet Gregoria's strength and skill are even now fully competent for work of this quality. This storehouse is nine feet and nine inches in circumference, three feet deep, and has only four coils or stitches to the inch of weaving. Fifteen stitches is considered a fine weave; the finest ever seen by the writer had twenty-eight to the inch, and was truly a perfect work of art. It was beautifully mod-

*See page 605—Human figures in Dr. Sherk's illustration.



Large Basket in the Collection of Mrs. Jewett, Lamanda Park.

eled on an acorn pattern, the point of the acorn being cut off, and a flat bottom substituted just where it was required to give the basket secure standing. A perfectly imitated acorn cup formed the cover, in the center of which an exquisitely modeled basketry acorn served as a lift or handle. The body color was broken by the regular introduction of three different shades of brown, giving the whole a rich, beaded appearance, like that of the central basket in the frontispiece. This precious basket was an heirloom in one of the old Spanish families of Los Angeles.

The Indian women were very skillful in the preparation of dyes and mordants, and of the colors used, black red, and various shades of brown, were permanent. The basket hats in common use were of plain colors, and left to steep in the dyes for months, a quantity of pigeon's dung being used as a fixative. The tribes of Southern California, even those dwelling in the forest regions of Kern and San Bernardino, made little use of spruce or pine roots in their basketry. Nor did they ever use the inner head band, or employ any totemic decorations, like the Haidas of the northern coast. Feathers and shells, though sometimes seen in very old baskets, were more sparingly used in the South where insect life is far more destructive.

With her bundles of well-soaked grasses and willow "splits," the basket maker seats herself in a shady spot with a shallow vessel of water beside her. Taking as many of the grass stems as the nature of her work requires, she wraps the willow firmly and evenly around them for the first, or initial coil. In the second coil the willow is passed through each turn of the initial coil as the winding proceeds, thus creating a system of steps, or stitches, and providing for variations in size and shape on the same principle as that which is applied in knitting and crochet work. Bone needles are used to hold the willow strands firmly in place whenever the

operator leaves her work; the strong wing bones of the hawk being preferred for this purpose.* We have now reached a point where we see that our artist has no freedom, but is wholly dominated by technique.† She must have clearly in mind, not only the form, size and special function of the work to be created, but the number of colored stitches required in every row, for each of the figures, and of uncolored ones in the interspaces, must be exactly calculated for every separate line.

The more we study the evolution of the basket, the more astonishing seem the results, until we are willing to concede, not six, but sixty thousand years for the evolution of the basket maker. Perfection of shape is more easily accounted for in the perfection of Nature's models; but even that is becoming contaminated and debased by "untoward exotic influences," resulting in a loss of equilibrium, and the balance of motives and desires.‡ The introduction of extraneous substances, such as beads and feathers, belongs to a comparatively late period in the history of the art. In the feather work of the interior tribes we find proof of the delicacy of the native taste; no inharmonious colors are used; and while the splendor of the color seems to have answered every demand, this was often enhanced by contrast. The earliest explorers and discoverers of the Pacific Coast reported the beauty and perfection of this work of the Indian women; and the Russians of Fort Ross were among the first to send it to Europe.

Mr. Stephen Powers describes a fancy work basket "covered entirely with the down of woodpeckers' scalps among which were a great number of hanging loops of strung beads; and around the rim an upright row of little black quails' plumes gaily nodding." There were eighty plumes,

*These needles passed as heirlooms from mother to daughter, and were carefully treasured along with gambling dice and strings of shell money.

†W. H. Holmes.

‡W. H. Holmes.

which required the sacrifice of as many quails; and at least a hundred and fifty woodpeckers had been robbed to furnish that royal scarlet nap for the outside. The squaw was engaged for three years in making it, and valued it at twenty-five dollars. The Gualala women are even now superior artists, as is shown in the illustration, (see page 609). In the North bottom-

rivalled that of Montezuma in splendor, was secretly served in the vanqueech or temple from the choicest baskets; after these were emptied by him, they were cherished greatly by the women who had made the offering. The following legend is preserved by Mr. Stephen Powers:

"There were once two rival chiefs on the upper Sacramento who were



Showing the Degradation of Basketry.

less baskets were often seen; these were placed upon flat stones where acorns were pounded; and not cemented around mortar, as in the south.

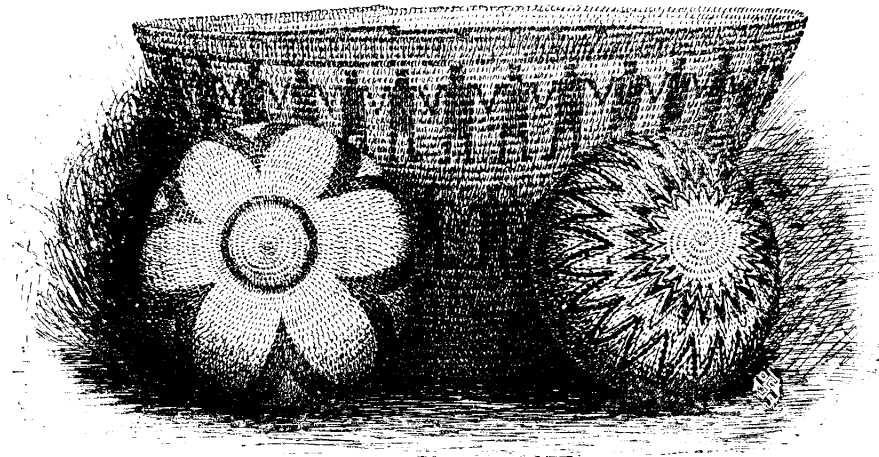
It is very interesting to notice the important part which the basket plays in the legendary lore of the native Californians. No story, sacred or profane, can be told without its help. In the south the god, Chinigchinich, whose superb tobet or robe of feathers

addicted to gambling, one of whom was a sorcerer, and had a hollow body. His arms also were hollow tubes, so that he could slip his pieces from one hand to another without being seen. Thus he won everything possessed by his adversary; lands, wife and children. The entire tribe was removed to a distant region, leaving the unfortunate victim only a daughter and one old Indian woman. In this

extremity the daughter went forth with a basket to gather clover, for they had nothing else to eat; not so much as a bow and arrow had been left behind. There fell at her feet an arrow, trimmed with yellowhammers' feathers. Turning to take up her basket there stood beside it a man, who reassured her by saying that he was only the Red Cloud which she daily gazed upon in the evening sky, and bade her not to be afraid. She modestly proffered him her basket of grass seed pinole, which was all she had to give; whereupon the radiant stranger touched the basket, when the

reached the lodge she was afraid her father would not believe her miraculous tale; and therefore hid her boy in the Assembly House behind the great basket of acorns. The old chief soon after entered the Assembly House, where he sat brooding over his folly and misfortunes, when he was amazed to hear a sound 'like the ticking of a bug in the wall.' He called his daughter to explain this, but she was afraid to tell him that it was the beating of her child's heart, and kept silence.

"But very soon after there was a sacred dance in the Assembly House,



From a Los Angeles County Collection.

pinole vanished, and the girl fell upon the ground in a swoon.

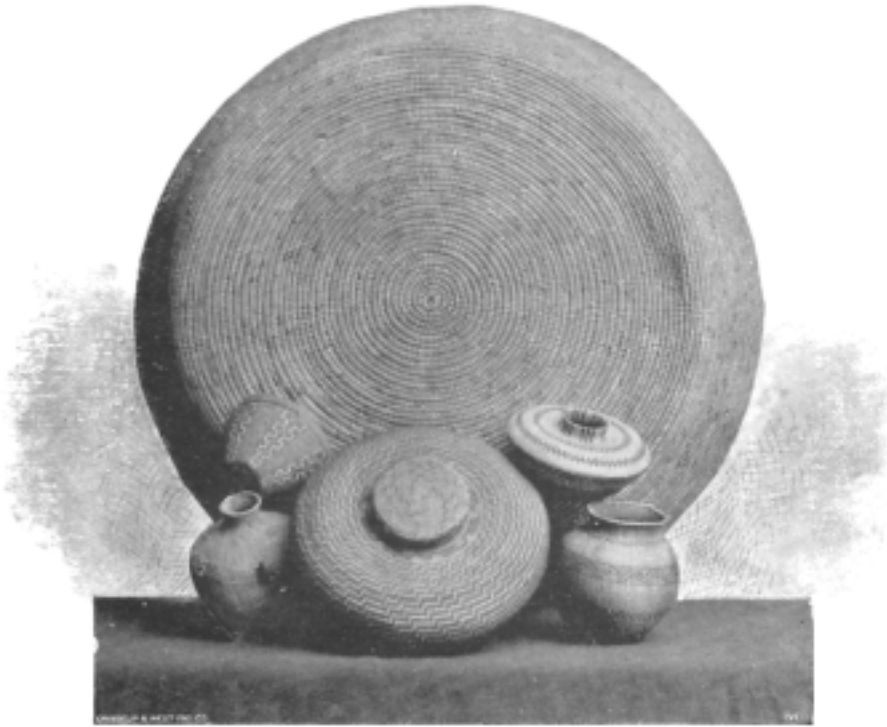
"When she came to herself Red Cloud stood beside her, and she had given birth to a son. She was full of joy and wonder at sight of the babe; but the Red Cloud assured her that he was not of this world. He then placed the babe in a basket, and laid beside him all kinds of Indian weapons, bows, arrows, etc., then vanished from her sight. Then the young mother took up the basket with her babe, and turned towards her father's lodge; looking back over her shoulder, the Red Cloud had disappeared, and she saw him no more. When she

which, as usual, was held at night, and lighted by a fire of willow wood. A coal snapped out and fell upon the dry basket in which the young child lay asleep. He sprang forth, full grown, and called his grandfather by name. But the old chief said, 'My daughter has no husband.' When the mother was called, and related the strange story of the child's birth, they did not believe her until the young chief told them about many of their relations whom he had met in the land of spirits. He then at once assumed the size of a man and the position of a chief. He followed the sorcerer who had won his grandfather's tribe in a

gambling game, and soon won them back. In the joyous reunion that followed, the son of the Red Cloud counseled his mother's people never again to sacrifice their parents, brothers and sisters so foolishly, and thus incur tribal annihilation."

Strange to say, the Yokut basket makers maintained the fullest equality

when hardened, this furnished the field for inlaying. In the south, the larger and stronger shells of the California walnut were used. As described by Mr. Powers, the evil spirit of gambling was incarnated in an old squaw, with scarcely a tooth in her head, one eye gone, and her face all withered, but with a jaw of iron. and features



From the Tulare Indians.

Upper, bottom of Grain Basket, shown on page 602.
Center of group, Fancy Basket, used to hold wampum
and trinkets.

On right, Fancy Basket.
Below, Water Jar.

Lower left, water tight Carrying Basket.

Upper left, Hat, very richly shaded and decorated.

with the men in respect to gambling, and invented dice and dice tables which were temptations in themselves. They wove a large, flat basket tray, with curved and decorated edges, using eight acorn shell dice inlaid with abalone shells. With these, four squaws played the game, while a fifth kept tally with fifteen sticks. The acorn shells were first filled with pitch;

denoting an extraordinary strength of will. A reckless old gambler grabbed the dice, throwing them with savage energy, as if unaware of the presence of anyone around her.

The Southern Indians were of a different type, and yielded more readily to the forces of civilization, yet with all their savagery there were no better basket makers than those fierce



Cahuilla Indians Collecting Basket Material among the Palms of Palm Cañon.

old hags of the Klamath and upper Sacramento rivers. Jacinta, one of the last surviving neophytes of Father Junipero Serra's flock, was brought to Pasadena in 1888, with all the materials and implements of basketry, to assist in illustrating it during an Art Loan Exhibition. Passing up the nave of the Library Building where Navajo blankets and the fine Crittenden collection of Indian curiosities from the Gulf of California to Alaska, attracted attention, the dim old eyes of Jacinta fell upon the display of basketry. It was touching to see her interest aroused as she gradually recognized her own work, which she took from the shelves, fondling it with her small brown hands, as a mother would linger over the playthings of a dead child. Whenever the crowd diminished, Jacinta was seen examining her treasures, which were woven early in the century. It is scarcely to be expected that such a collection will ever again be gathered, as since that time the State has been ransacked for baskets in the interest of Eastern and foreign collections, and of speculators in their artistic value. There yet remain some valuable private collections in the possession of owners notably interested in the perpetuation of this beautiful art. There is an indescribable magnetism attaching to them, altogether different from any other feminine property. Collectors and dealers find it harder to part with them than with articles of far greater value, and reserve certain favorites for the elect among customers, who are likely to cherish them.

The degradation of the art of basketry has rapidly followed the change from life in wild nature to a semi-civilization opposed to the instincts and too often to the interests of the basket makers. The question whether the native races can be made a part of our

social and political structure was partially answered by a model agent of the government with the Mission Indians.*



Indian Home with Roof Granaries, San Diego County.

He said: "Under the Missions the wild Indians became masons, carpenters, plasterers, tanners, shoemakers, blacksmiths, cart-makers, weavers and spinners, saddlers and shepherds, vintners and vaqueros; in a word, they filled all the occupations known to civilized society. Nearly every Mission church could show quantities of exquisite lace and Mexican drawn work made by the skillful fingers of Indian women. Too small in numbers to be longer feared, the question is worth considering whether there is not in the aborigines of California special adaptation to lines of usefulness otherwise unfilled. Many thoughtful citizens believe the native races are as well worth preserving as the Sequoia groves and other great forests which were once their wild pastures, and that the way to do it is

*Hon. B. D. Wilson.

by the education of Indian children, wherever possible in their natural surroundings, and along the lines of natural tendency."

There is not an Indian reservation in Southern California where the materials required in basketry may not be grown as well as any other crop. Hundreds of acres of tule lands could be reclaimed and devoted to the culture of the Japanese bamboo. Combined with the various manufactures founded upon willow culture, ornamental basketry might include a great variety of useful and artistic

to spread a table in such a wilderness of rock and chaparral ; but if we follow one of our basket makers to her eyrie, suddenly we startle a quail, a jack rabbit bounds from his covert, and the longing cry of the wood pigeon is heard. Suddenly again we emerge from the shadowy cañon and a typical Indian home is in sight. A brush fence keeps a few cattle from straying; the hut is warped from its original form, yet is strong enough to sustain the basket granaries piled upon the roof. A dozen or more of their scattered Indian huts make a village, of



High Art In Basketry—Bead and Feather Work.

creations. The gambling trays of the Yokut women would serve well as fancy table tops ; and what an ideal nest would a cradle of fine basketry be with a delicate open-work border around the hood !

As the Indians of Southern California have retreated into the mountains, the sheep have followed them, destroying the grasses and tender shoots of willow as they go. One must now penetrate the remoter cañons of the northern and southern Sierras to experience their mysterious charm in its fullness. One marvels that human ingenuity can find wherewith

which there are several in San Diego county. The largest of these are now furnished with schools and teachers.

On the southeastern edge of this county and within ten miles of Seven Palms Station, on the S. P. R. R., there is an uplifted valley which seems to have been dropped here from another continent or zone. Approached from the hot plain below, it is a mere "wady" on the rim of the desert, along which the Cahuillas gathered their most precious stores ; pine nuts from the superb forests of San Jacinto, their patron mountain, and richer crops from the palm trees whose seeds

have been distributed throughout the world. This romantic spot is better known as Agua Caliente, from the warm springs which were favorite resorts of the natives long before Cabrillo's ship had touched the islands of the coast. Old Francisco, capitan of the warm springs village, was one of the workmen employed in building the San Gabriel mission. He was the first to substitute the worship of the virgin and the Holy Babe in the vanqueech, or temple built of willow twigs, where his ancestors had been instructed by Quaguor, the god of the mountain from the earliest times.

The weird charm of this uplifted valley is indescribable, when late in the afternoon one wanders through the cañon where the Whitewater comes leaping down from the summit snows in a series of lovely cascades, or mounted upon a pony, rides up the valley to meet the old squaws trudging homeward under their burdens of thatch, or materials of basketry. There are a few large fig trees and ancient vine stumps near the spring, which were planted by the padres who were in charge of the San Bernardino mission. At the time of our visit, a long descended heir of old Francisco lay basking in the warm sand, near the brush house where we bought the basket handiwork of his mother, grandmother, and great grandmother; and also an olla or water jar, fresh from the kiln. The young Indian offered to guide us into the summits of Mts. San Bernardino and Jacinto to the southern Fusiyama, where wild sheep and deer still linger, but upon us also was laid the spell of "drowsy indolence," as we watched the crimson afterglow fade over the silver sands of the desert.

No mere purchaser of Indian baskets can enjoy his possession like one who finds them, or whom they find in unexpected places and ways. Thus the writer's first basket was bought in the To Senute Valley in 1869, of a

squaw whose wickiup stood under the shadow of the great rock, named from its resemblance to the hood of an Indian baby basket. Seeing our admiration of her finely woven baskets in common use, the good-natured squaw obeyed a hint from Mr. Hutchling's young daughter to show us her best, a decorated one, which, by the subtle law of association, has never failed to reproduce that perfect hour and scene. At a lately abandoned rancheria near the San Luis Rey mission, lived the oldest of the California basket makers, among five generations of her descendants. I have never seen so interesting a human being. A talking tree would not be more remarkable. An organic sense of kinship, deeper than any sentimental feeling, took possession of me as I watched her under that Southern sky, as if I had found Mother Eve in the primitive garden. The wonder is not that people live so long in this climate but that diseases and sins should exist here at all; for her they had never existed. She had served Father Boscana while he gathered up the history and mythology of her race, and Father Lalvidea also, as simply as a tree grows and gives shade to the woodcutter. The "coras" useful and ornamental, made by this ancient neophyte, would furnish a museum. She saw the land in its pristine loveliness, witnessed the growth of this royal mission, with its encircling cloisters, its gardens and fountains. A hundred of her kindred and descendants here received their baptism and burial.

Where the grasses for her basketry grew thickly in the moist glades, there are now overstocked pastures and cultivated fields. And so the last of the neophytes baptized by Father Peyri has gone far back into the mountains to wait for death beyond the sound of the mission bells. Happily for such as these, neglect of the aged is not among the failings of the South California Indians.