

*D. W. Gillingham*

## THE DARK RIVER

THE LONG INLET between its steep backdrop of timbered mountains acquired an atmosphere of sombre unreality at night, when all the lights of the fishing nets strung across it had less the impression of a floating city than of a solemn occasion. The lighting, shall I say, of sacrificial lamps, attended by a silent priesthood, as votives to placate the spirits of the place for the salmon they took out of those deep waters. To raise your voice would have been a kind of outrage. Now and then came the low monotone of someone talking, or the conspiratorial wash of oars, and always the dull stunning of the wooden floats on the stern rollers as the nets were hauled in or shaken out. A flash of silver in the dim light of a hurricane lamp as a salmon was tossed into the hold added to the effect. Yes, a primitive ritual somehow connected with the grotesque totem poles, now weatherworn and neglected, that leaned indolently this way and that outside the cabins of the poor Indians at the river-mouth at the head of the inlet. Or is it just memory that makes me imagine it all like that, because of what happened?

In memory it is always night, and calm, with voices, in that inlet up the British Columbia coast. From below the ridges sharp against the stars sometimes rose the thin wail of a timber wolf, loneliness crying out to loneliness, and perhaps being distantly answered. The wolf howl (and the wolf was one of the tribal totemic figures of these Indians, along with the killer whale) seems to have evolved from the very stuff of wild solitude, more articulate than all our words, and to commune with the mysteries. Or there echoed between the slopes the most extraordinary gasping and clashing sounds, at once terrifying, which, coming nearer, caused near panic to run through this watch on the waters. There were shouts and splashes as the men jumped to it to get their nets in—before they were carried away by the raiding school of blackfish, those small whales whose shadowy dorsal fins all too soon could be made out sabreing the velvet calm as the holes in their heads sucked in the

night and spewed it vaporously out again with that shocking explosive hiss as if the very inlet were breathing from subterranean chambers. A net might be carried away, and you would see its end light streaking like a frightened eye through the darkness, suddenly to be extinguished.

It was not always necessary to pull the whole net in hand over hand. You could quietly feel your way along the net to where several floats had sunk and pull in just that portion, telling by the live weight how many salmon were down there. Now and then the catch turned out to be a luckless seal, badly entangled, or a submerged log, or—though rarely, because one could break through with ease—a monster blackfish. But one night Hanson, the Swede, who usually paid out his net just above us, seeing so many floats going under in a strong tide, hauled the net in, finding it unaccountably heavy. He got a nasty shock. Because he had not heard. But I doubt he was so badly shaken as he made out. You were conditioned to those dark waters giving up their grimmer lodgers, too.

We had heard, and so had most of the fishermen. But Hanson always was a quiet and stand-offish sort of man; anyway, he had to attend closely to spoken English to understand it. We had heard the whole story on our way back from a trip up the lake. On week-ends fishing was forbidden in the inlet to allow the salmon to get up the river into the lake and the spawning reeds of the tributaries, and we had taken advantage of the holiday. John and I, I should explain, had a boat between us for the season. We worked, on a royalty per salmon basis, for this outfit at the head of the inlet, half a mile below the Indian settlement at the river mouth. I think they built the cannery just there, on piles, lacking any other lodgement on the steep slope, because of the cheap Indian labour. I write of the days when squaws with papooses strapped to their backs (kept quiet and content with strips of raw red salmon to chew) topped, tailed, and gutted the sockeye and springs on long slimy benches; today a machine does all that, a little more clinically.

We were the youngest among the fishermen, mere striplings, and so possessed by a romantic urge to experience and explore everything, daringly—even the hinterland of this inlet, back in as far as the mystery mountain which the Indians reported and one or two whites had glimpsed on a clear day rising like a frozen pinnacle above all the other peaks, out of which area flowed a vast glacier whose melt fed the lake above us. George, a white who was either a game warden or a forest warden—I have forgotten—whom we met at the cannery once or twice, warned us that it was still forbidden country as far as the Indians were concerned; a few years earlier two prospectors who had gone in had not returned. It was of course quite impossible in the time at our disposal to penetrate so far inland, but George said, with a tolerant

smile, that he would lend us a boat if we wanted to go up to the lake-head. He had a cabin at the foot of the lake.

So on the Saturday morning we shouldered our packs and set off up the trail to the lake. This trail, a portage, skirted the rapids of the river, which was little more than a mile and a half long. The long narrow lake and the inlet, I surmised, had been one in past ages, but a moraine had been formed at this point when the glacier began melting back to its present remote position, and with its great boulders and rubbish had sealed off the lake from the sea. Some two-thirds of the way up we came to a well-beaten landing place, with stakes driven in, and an Indian dugout secured to one—the incoming wash from the furiously tumbling water farther out was gently slapping its sides. The river was rising and had overflowed the bank. Here the Indians began their portage around the unnavigable white water. They cheated the rapids by creeping close in to the bank, along a backwater, this far, and could pole back without much trouble into the lake. No Indian will walk any farther than he must. It was a wild spectacle, not twenty feet away, like the revolutions of some giant mill wheels hidden beneath an overwhelming flood. We had to shout to talk.

We walked on, and soon the lake opened out magnificently before us. The quiet there was surprising. We downed our packs and yelled, as we had been instructed to do, across to George's house on the far side, under the dark mountain slope. I suppose he had settled on that more isolated side because the Indians had a summer fishing-camp on this side—we could see it, and smell it, just above us, with its split salmon drying on racks. A few of their curs began to bark at us. Then we saw across the lake the door of the unpainted house open, and the light fall quite unexpectedly and theatrically upon a figure in white, a woman. Perhaps the effect was due to the deep shadows behind. John said he had heard that George had a wife, but it was news to me. She closed the door, and without haste walked down to where a skiff was drawn up. We watched her slowly push it into the water, get in, and put out the oars, her every movement echoing over to us. With strong sweeps, pointing the bow a little up-lake to counteract the gathering flow, she rowed over, the thump of the rowlocks and splash of the blades loud as if the muffled thunder of the rapids came from miles away, a trick of acoustics, or just a trick of the air-flow. Out in the lake, the sun illumined her as splendidly as a swan.

When she eased alongside the bank she called: "You boys the ones who want to go up the lake? My husband's up there now. He'll be back soon. I'll take you over."

She was a striking woman, big-bosomed, with greying hair still tinted gold

wound around her head in plaits thicker than the rope of the skiff. Her eyes were grey-blue, in shadows so dark that it was as if the pockets of skin had gathered the sombreness of the hills, its heavy rains, until they had soaked into her. She looked a big woman, but later when she stepped out of the boat she proved to be almost stocky beside John, who was a tall young man. Never once did she smile as she rowed us across—her biceps working like a man's (it would have been an impertinence to have suggested taking over the oars) under the short sleeves of her fresh white frock, white from the fading of the original flower design. She was reluctant to talk. She just answered my polite questions briefly, in a fine voice with a faint Scottish accent to it. My attempts at jocularly drew no response. Disconcerted, I fell silent. She wore, I noticed, Indian beaded moccasins, and an Indian shawl around her shoulders. I wished with all my heart that George had not gone up the lake.

When we got out on to the sandy gravel beach—we could hear, oddly enough, the low thunder of the rapids more clearly here than from over the other side and closer up—I found her scowling a glance at me, hands on her hips. She demanded, "You boys got plenty of food with you?" She could see what we were, from the city, spending the summer commercial fishing. But in that remark I detected, with profound relief, an underlying motherliness, which her next words confirmed. "You come on up and I'll give you a good meal before you start."

She did. We found the table already laid, in the dim front room, for four. And we had told George only vaguely that we would be over this week-end or next. Asked if we wanted a wash, we nervously declined, to spare her any more trouble. We stood around while she quietly busied herself in the kitchen.

The room was full of surprises. It contained four mahogany chairs with faded red plush seats, *and a piano*—in black wood of some kind. How on earth had they got that heavy thing over to this place? Having been denied a piano for many weeks, and though it had a look of long disuse, I could not resist lifting the lid and tentatively pressing a yellow key or two. The response was dreadful, a tinny twang, which brought her in, hurriedly, a little wide-eyed. I apologized for the liberty. Did I play? Yes. Only last summer I had played with the orchestra on the *Prince Rupert* during her cruises to Alaska. Quite a change, fishing! She had not used the piano for years, she said—since some of the hammers and keys had come unglued from all the damp, and other things. She hesitated, on the verge of saying more, then strode back to the kitchen.

I thumbed through some of the music stuffed into a home-made case; it was nearly all opera. And I decided that two of the framed pictures on the walls, which might have come out of magazines, were of operatic scenes. Interesting! There

was a shelf of old books—one, a history of philosophy. On top of the piano, among some small items of Indian workmanship and a perfectly ground stone axe-head, was a quite hideous wooden ritual mask, but reminiscent of the masks we see done in plaster, with garlands, in theatres. Under the window was a settee covered in a Haida Indian rug. On the floor were two rag rugs brilliantly dyed—probably she had used local vegetable dyes. The place was spotless, yet with an air of tired thread-bareness, of resignation, of which the piano was the symbol.

She gave us some cold venison (out of season) with new potatoes, home-grown, and currant jelly, and then blueberry pie—delicious, but just a little tart, and she said unapologetically that she had run out of sugar, among other things. She had not been over to the cannery store for two or three weeks.

She would not sit down. Probably she was waiting for George. She attended us silently, and an awkward silence lay upon the room, with only the tinkle of cutlery and sound of chewing. My friend John was too shy to venture even a word. On the window screen flies were trying to get in.

In my embarrassed need for some sort of conversation, I mentioned that I could see she liked opera. This ruse worked a magic upon her. Her eyes lit up, for the first—no, the second time. Did I belong to the theatrical world? I answered evasively, not to discourage her, and asked if she sang. No one, I suppose, had ever asked her such questions for ages. I could hear her beginning to breathe heavily. She admitted that she did sing. She began wiping her hands on an invisible apron. Certain obstructions, like river ice, one by one gave way in her throat of memory. She talked. She had come out from Scotland twenty years ago. As a young woman, indeed when she was still really a girl, she had sung in amateur opera, then had taken it up professionally, at first in the chorus and then in solo parts. She even had understudied for the part of Brunnehilde. I exclaimed. At once everything fell into place. I saw her against a background of valkyrian stage scenery, of magic and spells and storms, of props and grease paint and costumes. But she was thankful, she went on to confess, that she had been spared the actual ordeal. Her voice just never was good enough to match her ambition, and her strivings, and contrivings, had resulted in her losing her voice altogether, for a time. She had come to her senses when convalescing.

What was she doing over here, then? Well, she had come to Canada, suddenly. She gave singing lessons for a while. But all things seemed to fail her. In Vancouver, she became a waitress in a fashionable restaurant. Late one evening a drunk had rolled in for some coffee—coffee only. He looked like a lumberjack in dishevelled Sunday-best. The customers at first were patiently amused, then openly

shocked. He wouldn't leave, but one or two others did, fearing trouble. Then the manager and the assistant tried force. The drunk had not struggled, but simply had "broken down", to use her own words—and I pictured him there, sprawled over the linen and cutlery, the coffee-spoon gripped defiantly and ludicrously in one hand, weeping in his arms; for this was the last straw, this violence to his self-respect, or to the sordid remnants of his self respect. What had shocked her, seemingly more than this weak surrender, was when, becoming reasonable on cups of coffee, he had apologized in the accents of a cultured Englishman. He had been spending his last dime, presumably—not in a Chinese joint down on the waterfront, but in a place of some refinement and dignity, of a way of life which his conduct unintentionally transgressed, and to his perpetual embarrassment thereafter. "I married him", she said.

I was prepared for that. And the confidence I did not find in the least reprehensible or embarrassing. She gave it in such a matter-of-fact, unashamed way, as if such conduct were of ourselves rather than of others, and to be blamed on the treacheries of fate. Drink was just another river in her life, to be suffered. But I very much doubt that she had ever divulged this to anyone else—it was just that the moment had come for it, to tell a complete stranger, one who could play the piano and liked opera. Afterwards, it occurred to me that she had only Indians for neighbours. No Joneses. The Indians were frank, fatalistic, and completely uninhibited in the conventional sense. Only dark powers inhibited them. No, things were such that there must be plain speaking or silence.

She had married him, and he had brought her to this remote inlet when he was offered the job of caretaker at the new cannery. Later, he had built this place at the foot of the lake, under the frowning hills, within hearing of the eternal thunder of the rapids which was like the orchestration to her own destiny, the background music to all her dark days—crisper in fine weather, more sullen and sodden in the long relentless rains.

Were these new potatoes her own? They were. She had forced back the wet and mossy jungle of salal and salmonberry and devil's clubs, until lettuces and marrows swelled at the side of the house, and nasturtiums and asters rioted at the front. All from a little seed she had brought with her, and gathered anew each year. But at that she lapsed into silence again, and it seemed that we had heard all we were likely to hear. When I suggested, hastily, that the mountains and solitude would be like home to a Scot, she shrugged her shoulders and went out with the plates.

The answer of course was in her face. No totemic figure had a more solemn countenance. Not wooden, but set. The face, indeed, of a Salish Indian. Probably

it had been in her young days innocently beautiful, before the wilderness took it in its hands and shaped it after its sterner self. Then, as if reading my thoughts, whilst I was speculating on this she came in and without a word put down in front of me a portrait in a silver frame, with a snapshot tucked into one corner. The portrait was of the professional type, and of herself—herself perhaps at the height of her hopes as a singer. It was a handsome, sensitive face, with a superb crown of golden hair, and, what was a little startling, done in the same plaited style she wore now. Fine grey eyes, a true Brunnehilde. The snapshot was of herself about this period, radiantly smiling; it was half of a snapshot, the other half having been snipped off, but I could see that someone's arm, a man's arm, had been around her, tight; there was a suggestion of a gay seaside pier in the background. Just then we heard George unshipping his oars, and she came in and hastily retrieved the silver frame, returning it, presumably, to the bedroom.

I understood more now than if she had been talking for hours. A love affair, broken up; broken up, perhaps, by her own ambition for a career. Only an idiot would have deliberately jilted such a prize. Then emigration, more frustration; then George—to cling to like a raft, and to rebuild from his own wreckage. No doubt at the time she had been glad to get away from it all, and found the prospect of that strange life attractive. A chance to be completely natural. Bedrock. She still had something to fight for, **George**.

But the place had proved more than she had bargained for. George, too, I think, had disappointed her in some indefinable way. Perhaps he always had. Perhaps he was not responsive enough. They had no children. Perhaps he didn't need her, so much. I heard long afterwards that George thrived on that backwoods life, and never wanted to leave it, refusing even a holiday "outside" in a city. He had never exchanged more than a few words with her in any day, preferring silence. The habit had caught. For her, the life had become more and more unendurable. Or would have, had she not, contrarily, taken it on, made use of it. That was her triumph. She found a new enemy to fight—the intangible, the brooding things, of which the Indians themselves had special knowledge, and propitiated these spirits in solemn rites, in certain initiation ceremonies in their lodges farther up the lake, in which there had been, originally, human sacrifices; they made do now with tokens. From a remark which she dropped, and which I was a long time interpreting, I am inclined to think that she herself was convinced that there were dark powers in the land.

She had been drawn to the Indians. She would go sometimes to watch them dance, when the hills throbbed to their drums, and the stars seemed to tremble from

their beat; or to watch them gamble as they squatted in rows in their long communal house. They accepted her, but sullenly. Of course, if she had led a gay theatrical life in the city, God knows she needed some entertainment up here!

These Indians, it came to me afterwards in the endless gossip that flared up at the cannery, regarded her with some awe. They would hear her singing a Wagnerian *aria* across the lake (at first, to piano accompaniment), and also when she rowed over to the portage on her way to get supplies. The hills echoed and amplified her voice—probably made up gratifyingly for its shortcomings. Not a bit like the *aye-yah-yah* howling of their own voices to the tom-toms, was this astonishing performance coming across the quiet waters. It often set the fish camp's dogs howling.

But there was rumour that the Indians held her singing responsible for the poor salmon runs, especially the scarcity this season. It kept the salmon out of the lake, and drove them into the nets of the white fishermen below in the inlet. Salmon, it was even said, had been seen turning and going back down the rapids. Their medicine man was certain that she was there to cast this spell. She was in league with darkness. The river god was angry at such rivalry, a comforting thought to the Indians who wanted the god to be on their side. (Perhaps, today, their admiration having overcome this fear, they have carved her into their totem poles—braided crown of hair and all—and she has become a legend among them.)

We were smoking our pipes, on her "orders", the chairs pushed back, when we heard George's feet at last on the scraper. The door opened and he came in, taking off his felt hat and nodding to us in the same motion, "How-do, boys." He allowed himself a quiet shy smile, saying nothing—a smile that was furtively appealing—and hung his hat on the antler by the door. He was tallish, and thin, and his face was lean, with perhaps weak lips. There was a shadow of distinction in its framework, and in the nostrils. I liked George, always had. (I never did catch his surname, until we had reason to know it a few days later—Fothergill—and, what is more, that he had the right, which he wisely suppressed, to put "Hon." before it.) His wife brought in his dinner, and he went into the kitchen and had a wash, briskly drying with a towel, and blowing, then came in and sat down.

"The boat's out there ready, when you are, boys", he said. "You ought to get a good sailing breeze in half an hour or so, right off the inlet. And if you make the top end of the lake tonight, there's Albert Andrew's trapping cabin there. He's away at the moment. But he'd be glad if you made yourself at home. It's hard to see from the lake—just up a kind of overhung backwater, a snug place. I'll make a sketch for you." There was the ghost of a cultured accent to his words, now almost



deliberately roughened to match the life; and a tendency to stutter. "You won't have time to take the trail up to the glacier. Anyway, the Indians back in don't like strangers. You'd have been all right with Albert. They know him. He can talk their lingo. He's a quarter breed."

There is no point in describing our trip up the lake. We slept in the cabin he had marked, and during the night were awakened by a cry like a woman wailing on the near hillside, a cougar on the prowl. It too expressed the mood of the place, as the laughter of loons do on other lakes, and we, being young, gloated in it. Of course we could venture only a little distance up the trail—it had a powerful pull, and I was sick at heart to have to turn back from its mysteries. On the return voyage we narrowly escaped disaster when, as we were anchoring in a steep cove for lunch, the little primus practically blew up; we smothered the flames before they caught the boat. The primus had never given us trouble before. But on the hillside a hermit thrush had sung.

The shadows were falling weightedly upon the lake when George's house came into view again. Most of the way we had used the sail, tacking, but as the wind had fallen we had to row the last three or four miles. A dugout canoe with three Indians in it we saw putting out from the camp on the opposite shore, and apparently heading for George's too. It split the dark calm with silver. I think they deliberately hung back, whereas we applied the blades more resolutely, and got there ahead of them.

Two white men awaited us, hands in their pockets. George was not one of them. We instantly felt that all was not right. We recognized the foreman from the cannery, wearing the same old suspenders repaired with green fishing twine, and as he stooped to draw our bow on to the little beach, he inquired: "Have a good trip, boys?" Then, straightening, after a pause he continued in a lowered voice: "Got some bad news. George's missus. Drowned, this morning. In the rapids. They found her boat overturned."

She had taken the skiff on a trip to the cannery store, which was open Sunday mornings, and presumably moored it at the landing place where the Indians began their portage. At any rate, she was seen at the cannery. It was not easy to understand what had happened afterwards, as she was a wise and skilled river woman.

The Indian visitors had beached their canoe not twenty yards away from us and had got out, but they did not approach. The foreman's companion, who had

been standing silently beside him, and who had the look of a breed, though fair-skinned, walked over to them. He spoke to an old Indian wearing a moustache and a black stetson, who sat on the bow of the canoe, smoking a big pipe. We watched them, the three of us silent, not knowing what to say.

Just then George came out of the house. Not the same George. He was drawn and haggard, and his legs seemed unable to guide him properly. We smelt the whiskey as he passed us, nodding a polite recognition, on his way to join the group of Indians.

"I brought him over a bottle of Scotch. He needed something," the foreman volunteered. "Maybe I did wrong."

We followed behind George, the Indians watching us with a sort of gloomy distrust which one gets used to. The breed, said the foreman, whispering, and to our surprise, was Albert Andrews, just back, and on his way up the lake.

Albert was talking to the Indians in their own language. The old grizzled Indian seemed to be persuading a younger one to talk. It became a three-way spasmodic exchange. Albert turned to the limp, dazed figure of George: "Little Bird here saw it happen. But he's been scared to tell. The chief made him come over. He says he was returning on foot to the fish camp on the portage skirting the rapids and was near the landing place when above the roar he heard someone singing. He was frightened. He hid. It was she, up to her waist in the swift water, towing the skiff. He says she must have been swept down the rapids, but had managed to get back to the bank."

We heard the rest in bits. Instead of leaving it at that, mercifully spared a worse disaster, she had towed the skiff, magnificently defiant, back up to the little landing place, her starting point—the labour of a Samson. He had watched her progress. With her dress plastered about her, the rope over her shoulder, sometimes stumbling, even once going under, she had struggled on. And he had seen her at the landing place, where the backwater begins, get in and try again. But he thought she only had one oar then. She poled with it.

The old Indian interposed a guttural remark. Albert interpreted. "He says 'She sing. All time sing.'" Her hair was down, ropes of it.

"Why didn't Little Bird help?" I demanded, foolishly.

Albert patiently turned his head to me: "He was scared of her. They all are."

But he spoke to the old man, then to me again. "He says 'No good.'"

The young Indian had just watched. A snarling curler that breaks over some big boulders at all times there, but is monstrous in high water, as it was now, seemed to reach out and pull the bow once again into the white water. He saw the

skiff turn broadside, go tossing faster and faster, she still standing up and brandishing the oar like a weapon, then he lost sight of it behind some trees. He ran back down the trail just in time to see the bottom of the skiff as it turned over and over; then suddenly the skiff upreared from a smother of spray, as if flung out by a hand, the whole length of it, and coming down was instantly swallowed. He stood watching and waiting for a few minutes, then hurried up to the camp—he had not come by canoe, because of the flood water. After a while he told the chief.

He thinks she is bad medicine", Albert said. "The river god took her. But Little Bird says she brave, and fight."

Yes, she had dared the river to do its worst, and it had done its worst, and she had battled against it, as against all the threatening darkness of her world, in her last act. She had what all men at odds with life need, something tangible to fight, to come to grips with.

George, who had been keeping a strong hold of himself, drunk perhaps for the first time since his marriage, on taking an unsteady step back, seemed to trip over a small stone. He crumpled and, lying there on the beach which had taken this unfair advantage of him, broke into sobs.

It was two nights later, when a strong tide was flowing and the festive inlet was strung once more with the lights of a myriad nets, that Hanson, the Swede, our neighbour, drew in enquiringly, out of the black water, and to a sound like an intaking sigh at the end of a strenuous aria that even we could hear, the huge Brunnehilde burden of the net.