

CHAPTER I



ITEM: ONE BOY AGED eighteen, name Roderick Norquay; one girl aged fifteen, named Mary Thorn; one gaudy cedar dugout canoe got up in the Siwash style of high-curving bow and stern, both ends grotesquely carved and brilliantly coloured in flaming red, blinding yellow, piercing blue; one stretch of tiderace running swiftly between an island shore and a forbidding rock-strewn point.

The tides of Fundy and the maelstroms of the Scandinavian coast have been variously hymned since Jules Verne vulgarized holy science and proved himself an unwitting prophet with Captain Nemo's submersible. But there are tides and maelstroms on the Pacific seaboard as worthy as these others, which have as yet no place in literature save through the dull medium of admiralty charts and blue-bound North Pacific pilot books. These sheets and tomes are thumbed and conned by men nowise concerned with that colour, form, and substance which imparts magic to the written word. They seek therein only knowledge

of reef and shoal, of anchorages, currents, depths, for the safe passage of their sea-borne keels.

Rod Norquay, sitting on the shore of Little Dent, waiting for the flood tide to wax strong and the race of it through the choked pass to grow swifter, found himself wondering why no poet had sung the song of this swirling water; why no novelist had lovingly portrayed this land as a backdrop for his comic and tragic puppets? Why was there no *Iliad* of the pioneers, no Human Comedy of men and manners peculiar to the North Coast? If McAndrews sighed for a Burns to sing the song of steam, so young Norquay found himself wishing that someone with the gift of living words could catch and transfix the beauty and majesty, the invisible yet pulsing spirit of his native land. That it deserved a Homer and a Burns he did not doubt. Rod had been reading Homer with his tutor that morning. Perhaps the thought in his mind now was only the reflex of a question put then.

"Why should a fellow have to learn all about these frowsy old Greeks?" he had demanded, as much in mild mischief, to scandalize his tutor, as for any reason. Yet he was suddenly earnest when he followed up this by saying, "It would be much more interesting to read poetry about our own people. How they sailed this coast in small ships, how they fought Indians and settled the country and founded families, and all that sort of thing."

He could not quite comprehend when Mr. Spence shook his grey head and gravely stated in a precise, tutorial voice:

"There is, my dear Rod, no epic literature dealing with the pioneer. That is merely in the nature of things. It takes leisure and culture to embody a tradition in language that will live. American civilization has been too occupied with grasping material power, with cutting trees and digging mines, making machinery and so on. This country has tradition, but little culture. It is too young and lusty, too new and crude — raw, one might say."

Rod Norquay had muttered "rats!" under his breath. He did not accept as gospel *all* that his elderly tutor vouchsafed. Young? Four generations of men had been born in the house where they sat. Its stone walls had been fabricated by English masons who rounded the Horn

before the day of steam. Rod believed the Anglo-Saxon took his culture with him insofar as he possessed culture — wherever he went. It was not something indigenous to the soil in which he planted his roots.

At any rate that was a passing thought and Rod put it by as youth so easily puts abstractions aside. His eyes rested critically on the flooding tide, the line of current that poured with accelerating speed through its narrow gate. Northward, up Cardero Channel, the level was beginning to rise. Southward, where the four-mile boomerang curve of the Euclataw Passage opened into the Gulf the tide was falling fast. Vancouver Island, spreading its sinuous length like a barrier against the Pacific, crowded the sea into the shape of an enormous hourglass. Queen Charlotte Sound formed one bulb, the Gulf of Georgia the other. An hourglass three hundred miles from north to south. The Euclataw Passage was the neck, and the rapids between Little Dent and Valdez was a constriction of this neck to a span six hundred feet across, through which at the full strength of the tidal flow the sea ran with hurrying feet and a loud, complaining voice, as a mountain river hastens roaring over its stony bed.

Rod turned to the girl.

"It's running pretty good," he remarked. "Let's go, Mary."

She smiled assent. They got off the mossy rock. The green-bodied dugout with its futuristic bow and stern rubbed against a shelf convenient for embarking. The girl sat amidships, Rod in the stern, squatting on their knees, paddles in hand. Forty feet out from shore the water dropped with a murmur over a sunken ledge. It stood like a low, green wall, curling over with a white-edged crest. In two hours that murmur would rise to a thunderous roar, the low green wall would be a man's height with hissing whirlpools below. Already the suction was strong. The indraught took the canoe backward the instant they let go the shore hold. They bent to the paddles, plying short, swift strokes, won clear to the slack water well above the rapids and pointed for the Valdez side.

Here the current, thirty fathoms deep, free of all obstruction, shot through the Euclataws in a clear, straight line, pitching down in a slant perceptible to the eye, a strip of smooth jade-green bordered to right

and left by eddies, whirlpools, white-tipped waves where conflicting currents met and slashed up foam. The song of running water crooned gently between wooded banks — that song which would presently fill the air with deep-toned antiphony to the whisper of the winds.

“Now,” Rod commanded. “Stow your paddle till I shout.”

It was like a path between precipices, that strip of smooth, swift-flowing water, after the first dizzy swoop at the overfall. A boat length on either hand spun whirlpools. A sudden sheer of their craft meant almost sure destruction. The guiding thrust of Rod’s paddle held the dugout true. Their breath came quickly. Their eyes glowed. Their lips parted in a set smile, as if an alteration of feature might destroy their equilibrium.

“Right,” young Norquay said curtly.

The girl’s paddle dipped with a sure, vigorous thrust. In the stern Rod held his blade at an angle, like a rudder, and the dugout shaved a whirling hollow in the vortex of which a drift log stood upended, spinning like a top, going slowly down end-on in the suction.

“Steady.”

She held her paddle poised again. The canoe came back to midway of the green path. The Valdez shore flew by, stubs of trees, tall cedars with lancelike crests and drooping boughs. A gull swooped over them, crying. The swiftness made a cool breeze in their faces, flung the girl’s hair in a loose brown cloud about her head.

The high, carved bow dipped into broken water, among cross-surges. They rode over “boils” — deflecting currents that shot up from the depths and broke into strange watery mounds with a sinister muttering. They shipped a little spray, rolled uncertainly in this agitation. Then they were through, floating in a great eddy that swept them back toward Little Dent. They had shot the rapids.

Mary looked over her shoulder. They smiled at each other in perfect understanding, and young Norquay thought:

“I’d like to take old Spence through. *He* wouldn’t grin. Poor old duffer, he gets all his fun second-hand — out of books.”

Aloud he said, “We’d better get under the Dent shore before the eddy carries us back among the swirls.”

"Among the Devil's Dishpans, you mean," she laughed, keeping stroke with him. "That's what daddy calls them."

"Good name," he grunted. "They're devil's something when they get to spinning good. Paddle, Brownie. We're losing ground."

They got in under the weedy shore of Little Dent and worked up to the overfall. They got ashore. Rod took a light line from the bow and hauled. Mary held the canoe off with a slender pole. Thus they worked their craft up over the jump-off and reached the northern side of the small island where the flood tide parted and where its sweep was slow. Then they re-embarked and stood clear, paddling in a wide detour until they drove into the straight current again and were swept down like a gaudy arrow.

Close on their heels as they made the second voyage came a white power cruiser, all agleam in the afternoon sun, her housework varnished oak, bright flashes reflected off polished brass and copper. She plowed down the green spillway, her bow wave spreading like an ostrich plume. When Rod and Mary skilfully picked smooths in the broken water and swung aside into the comparative calm of the great eddy the white cruiser followed and hauled up close to them.

Out her pilot-house window a capped, red face grinned genially. On her low afterdeck half a dozen people sat in wicker chairs, the women in cool summer stuff, the men in flannels and coloured sweaters. A girl about Mary Thorn's age, a fair-haired, blue-eyed creature like a bisque doll, stood with one arm around the slender signal mast. A little below her a tall young man with the reddish-brown hair and fine clear skin and greyish-blue eyes of the boy in the canoe leaned over the pipe rail.

"Hello, everybody," Rod greeted casually.

His brother disregarded this.

"Better climb aboard and tow that thing," he suggested. "How did you manage to get caught in the rapids?"

"We didn't get caught," Rod answered mildly.

"Then what the deuce are you doing in them?" Phil demanded.

"Oh, just running 'em for fun," Rod drawled.

"For fun!" One of the matrons on the afterdeck contrived a horrified inflection.

Phil Norquay's brow wrinkled a trifle. He looked inquiringly down at his brother. That youth gazed up at him with bland innocence.

"You'll be getting in among those big swirls if you don't watch out," Rod said to him. "Never mind about us."

Phil glanced up and ahead, called an order to the man leaning out the pilot house.

"You'd better —"

But his sentence to Rod was cut off, for that imperturbable youth drove the dugout well clear of the power boat with a thrust of his paddle, and Mary Thorn's blade dipped in unison. They pointed straight for shore.

The launch swung in a short circle, gathered way, passed up the channel. Rod steered the canoe over to Little Dent, caught a drooping bough and held it against the streaming tide.

Mary looked after the white cruiser, turning now into Mermaid Bay.

"What a pretty girl that was by the mast. Who is she?"

"Oh, Isabel Wall. Sister to a girl Phil's got half a crush on," Rod answered carelessly. "I don't think she's so pretty. Too dolly-dolly. Shall we run 'em once more?"

"She looked pretty to me. She was so beautifully dressed," Mary said thoughtfully.

"Oh, clothes," Rod answered disdainfully. "That's all the bunch around our place does these days; doll up and look pretty. Come on, let's shoot the shoots again."

"No. It's running too fast now. The boils are beginning to break in the straight current," Mary said. "I want to go home."

"All right."

Rod let go the branch. They paddled against the eddy, crossed the small stretch of broken water where a lesser flood poured in from behind Little Dent, and slid down on the tide along the Valdez shore to a point a mile inside the rapids. Facing north, looking across the channel into Mermaid Bay, a planked float gave them landing. Back from the beach an unpainted house of split cedar lifted in a square of cleared land in the edge of virgin forest.

Mary sprang lightly to the float.