

Some Adventures While Photographing the Salmon

By Bonnycastle Dale

WE were sitting on the pebbles beside a little mountain fed river in British Columbia. The annual "run" of the salmon had begun, and we were hopeful of obtaining a fairly complete set of pictures of the life of this so-called salmon. The shades of evening were drawing down, and all the fish along the banks showed black against the mighty red rocks that formed the mountain side. We were interested in the actions of a wee native lad. He had been spearing the speedy running salmon with all the ardor of a savage. We watched him through the glasses crouched over his spear, then, springing erect he would dart it into a big fish, turn, and struggle shorewards, the flopping, splashing thing at the end of the pole almost dragging him backwards or upsetting him. Once the big salmon was landed on the pebbles, he performed an unholy war dance, and fell upon it and beat it savagely with his killing stick, shouting and yelling all the while like one possessed—suddenly, in the midst of one of these paroxysms, when the full sweep of his ancient barbaric race had control, we saw him become rigid, lay the killing stick on the pebbles and begin to walk slowly backwards towards the high level bank. No sooner did the tall ferns partly conceal him than off he darted along the trail at full speed, up the cliff path he sped and entered the little native house that crowned the eminence. We had hardly ceased to wonder what caused the ten-year-old lad to flee so swiftly when we saw his dark figure passing again along the hill top and down the trail, through the ferns, across the pebbles. Here he fell on his knees, and, raising what we now saw was a rifle fired. "Bang," "bang," "bang," sang the weapon. We instantly "coo-ee-d" in case a vagrant bullet might come our way. The youngster waved his hand, and we splashed on down to him. With his big Oriental eyes, flashing—for his people originally came across from Asia—he told us that he had hit a bear he saw salmon feeding, and his brother and he would get the body in the morning. Sure enough they did, as, when we returned to our work the next day it had been carried across the river, and the skin and head removed.

When we arrived on the little meadow beside the river next morning, where we cooked our frugal breakfast the time was running out. All the myriad gulls of yesterday still dozed beside far-off barrier ridges—lulled by the surf. Just the faintest sign of dawn was in the air. The time of the November night glistened like diamonds on the ferns and firs. Nature is very silent at this solemn moment of the new day's birth. Suddenly, as if the herald had called, a golden eagle whistled shrilly, the kingfishers darted out of their roosting places, the cock pheasants crowded racily, squadrons of funeral black crows wheeled into view, the myriad salmon in the rivers started leaping, the first of the great gull flight arrived, and lo! the day was fully born.

There were yet some hours before the light of the sun would shine directly into this mere niche in the eternal hills, so we took time exposures of the bearskin and head, and also of the wee hunter. Now the tide paused in its "run out," and soon started to "flood." The fish crowded pools felt the influence and, as if at a given signal, all the spawning hosts started to swim upwards. The riffles were so shallow that many of the salmon actually squirmed across the dry points of the bars on their stomachs, wearing off the fins and scales; many of the fish were sadly mutilated already. We saw some that had not a single atom of skin or flesh or muscle left on the fins—these stuck out like the ribs of a fan, some were totally blind, yet they urged their way upwards towards the further spawning pools. Some of the fish had worn large holes through scales and skin and flesh.

others were quite freshly run from the sea, sprightly, swiftly swimming fish these. Some, among the countless thousands that were forcing their way up to this four-mile-long-and-one-hundred-yards stream to fulfil the decree

spawning and death—a decree enacted on some half billion salmon yearly on the Pacific Coast, had already succumbed to the weakness engendered by starvation, for none of these fish feed after they leave the sea, even though they urge their way two thousand miles upstream from the ocean. These weakened fish, half spawned, were drifting, tail first, towards the sea, ever fighting to keep their poor blinded eyes and deformed mouths pointed towards that land of promise they would never see—the upper spawning grounds.



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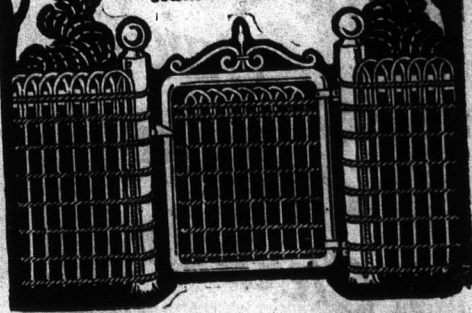
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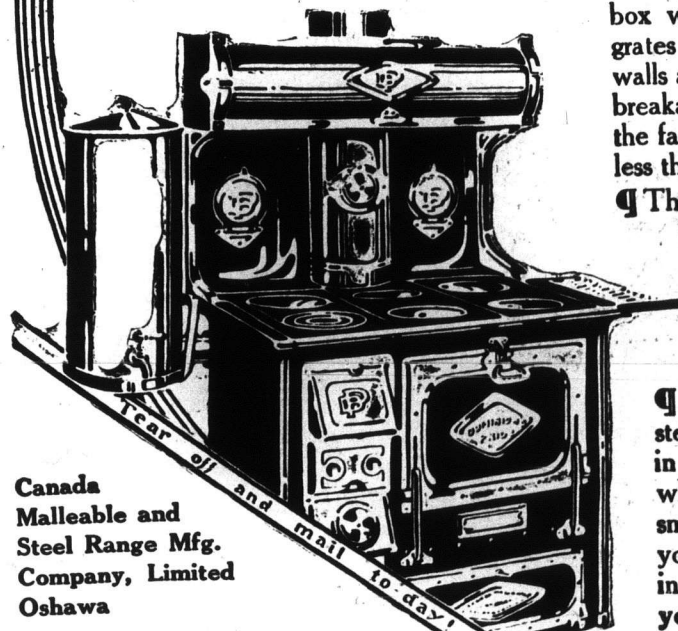
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