

CHAPTER ONE

Twice Without A Mother

My first loss in life was irretrievable—I lost my Mother.

Born December twenty-fourth in New Westminster, British Columbia, I lay in the Royal Columbian Hospital, kicking and squalling, cooing and gurgling, completely unaware that I was an orphan baby.

THE DYING WOMAN AND THE ORPHAN BABY

Among the patients at the Hospital was Mrs. Gerard. She was suffering with an illness that later caused her death. The wife of a fisherman, Mrs. Gerard had been brought down the Fraser River in a gas boat. Docking at the New Westminster wharf, they rushed the sick woman to the hospital. In the days of her recovery her heart went out to the wee baby whose only home was the hospital. Mrs. Gerard was a full-blooded Canadian Indian and had four grown boys but earnestly desired a baby daughter. In this day of adoption controls, when prospective parents have to face an inquisition on paper and meet all kinds of requirements, it is hard to imagine what circumstances conspired to join the dying woman and the orphan baby. But the adoption papers were drawn up and Mother and child bade farewell to the Hospital and travelled by boat fifty miles up the mighty Fraser River.

OUR FLOATING HOME

Like other fishermen of the Fraser, Gerards lived in a scow house, a shingled, three-room shanty, with an out-house perched on the downstream edge. A number of cedar logs, cut from British Columbia's magnificent forests, were bound together to make the raft on which sat the house. The floating home was moored to a great poplar tree on the steep but sandy bank of the river. A second raft and blue stone tanks, necessary equipment for a gill-net fisherman, lay alongside.

These floating homes had all the amenities of a house on shore plus mobility. Ours had a porch with a walk-way around one side and a railing to prevent the children from falling overboard. There were also flower boxes, beautiful beyond what one would expect, with sweet peas and nasturtiums. The iron kitchen range was kept going with firewood cut at the chopping block right on the raft or on the nearby river bank. During the winter the stove burned all day long serving as both heater and cooker.

How could I forget the old cook stove? One winter's day the boys, arriving home from a hunting trip, brought me some cat's tails. Somehow baby Bernice managed to get one of the cat's tails caught in the heavy oven door. When the door fell, it was apparent to all within hearing distance that tragedy had struck. To this day I have on my right wrist the scar left by the nasty burn received when trying to put the cat's tail where it ought not to go.

THE FRASER RIVER—QUEEN OF THE VALLEY

The Fraser River is mighty, boisterous and nearly eight hundred miles long. One hundred and thirty miles from its mouth is the Fraser Canyon, a narrow, rock-bound gorge through which the river tumbles so quickly that sometimes mud and silt are carried thirty miles into the ocean.

We drank the grey, sandy water and trusted in its purity but nobody really trusted the river itself. The swift, eddying waters continually worked their strange patterns on the sandy river banks: building up a peninsula here, carrying away an island there, changing the course of an inlet somewhere else. By the time I was old enough to be adept at handling the skiff and dugout canoe, there had been instilled in me a strong fear of the river. To be seen standing up in the canoe in midstream, meant a sound thrashing on return to shore. The thrashing served as a warning against future foolhardiness. Backing up this knowledge in my mind, was the memory of the search for the bodies of two Japanese girls who were drowned in the inlet off the main river. What they took to be a quiet bathing beach with a delightful sand bar, through the mysterious workings of the river, had become a treacherous eddy. Once caught in its downward pull they had been unable to free themselves from its power.

THE MEN OF THE RIVER

Treacherous and unfaithful, relentless and unsympathetic, with periodic bursts of anger expressed in

raging floods, the Fraser, Queen of the Valley, still held extraordinary power over the men of the river. Gerards, father and sons, were gill-net fishermen. Something about that life made gamblers out of men. Toiling on the water, their strength and skills were too often inadequate for the might and crafts of the River.

I often heard the fishermen say that after "this" season, they'd be leaving the river with its uncertainties. But on the opening day of the season when the boats gathered at the head of the drift to draw numbers to decide each man's turn, they'd be there with the rest. They dreamed of the day when Fortune would bless them and they would make a haul. When the gun went off, signalling the opening of the season, they'd sally forth to cast their nets and again hope for a successful year.

THE FISHING BUSINESS

Each man had a small boat, sometimes powered by a marine engine or sometimes by an engine from a wrecked car. The boats were built right on the river by men who had followed the trade all their lives. The engine and cabin occupied the forward part of the boat, the fish box the centre, and then piled in the stern were several hundred fathoms of fishing net,

The net is rigged with surface floats and sinkers and hangs like a curtain in the water. The salmon swim into the mesh and are caught behind the gills, hence the name gill-nets. Different nets are used at different times, as the size of the mesh determines the size of fish to be caught. Having run his boat off shore

sufficiently, the fisherman throws his net over the wooden roller at the stern until the desired amount of net is out of the boat. By controlling the speed of the engine and keeping a hand on the rudder, he skillfully lines his net across the current. On one end of the net is the buoy, the first item thrown overboard, on the other end is the fisherman in his boat. Having cast the net, careful to avoid known underwater snags and at the same time close enough to the sand bars to which the fish hold, he drifts with the current. At all times he is watching the net for strikes. When a salmon hits the net, he says, "There's a strike." If the floats continue to bob up and down in that spot, he feels quite sure that a fish is caught and that he will soon have the pleasure of drawing in his catch.

Perhaps the fisherman drifts with his net for a mile, then he cuts the engine and begins hauling the net over the roller into the boat, piling it in orderly fashion, getting ready for the next drift. As the fish come in with the net he throws them into the fish box up ahead. At regular intervals the collector from down river comes to take the fisherman's catch to the cannery.

NATURE'S GREAT ROMANCE

Of all the edible fish caught in the Fraser, the Cohoe, Steelhead, Jack Salmon, Spring Salmon, Humpbacks, Sockeye and others, the Sockeye is most valuable. This red-fleshed fish travels up-stream in great schools and when a "run" is on, it is a prosperous day for the fishermen. The story of how splendid salmon overcome many obstacles in ascending the river in

late summer to spawn at the place where they were born four years before, is one of nature's great romances. Then in the spring the young fish run down river and disappear in the Pacific. Four years later, some unknown power brings them back to their birth-place to spawn and die.

LOST—A GOOD MOTHER

Mrs. Gerard was a woman who knew the ways of the river. She could handle a boat and cast a net like a seasoned fisherman. I was scarcely two years old when she died. The neighbors used to say that she would have been a good Mother to me had she lived. Her body was taken down the river on a fishing boat and put away in the Langley Prairie cemetery.