

The Red Host Comes to Die

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"Yon bloody bird! Every time he sticks his head under water he comes up with a fish in his mouth." He watches the saw-bill shoot out from our sight round the bend. "The — (too strong for this paper)! Ah, weel," McPherson has a booted leg thrown over the gunwale, "here's hoping we don't hit one of those snags."

It was like shooting the chutes down at Coney. How a fish ever got up that torrent was a puzzle to me. McPherson declared a salmon could round a rock in a current running six hundred feet to the minute. It takes a seven mile current.

Again the fatherly feeling! But to-day McPherson is rather depressed. What's the use of it all? Everything in the universe seems against him. (This last because the sportsmen have just attacked the hatchery for selling dead salmon eggs for bait to the "sports." The sportsmen declare that the canners want all the trout sent to Limbo—and that the hatcheries are helping to do it!) "It's a lie!" howls McPherson. "I hatch thousands of trout every year!" He falls to chewing his pipe: "Ay," he speaks half aloud, "man's the worst of the bolting!"

"The canners?"

"Oh, ay, but it's not them I'm thinkin'

world," said McPherson. "Every four years the fish ran so thick they had to fight to get a place on the spawning beds. Birds used to eat nothing but eyes! (Think of glutting on eyes!) Nearly all the sockeye in the world were hatched out in the watershed of that river. And it happened every four years. On the Fraser we called them the "big years." The three lean ones that followed, all lumped together, wouldn't make the half of that big one—Eh?"

In answer to my question as to why this phenomenon, he replied that scientists could never determine; but this much they knew—the big run was the result of the abundant seeding of the spawning beds four years previous (the preceding "big year," when the fish had covered every inch of the beds.); that every four years

year, say 1912 or 1914, little harm would have been done, but in the "big year" such a thing meant calamity, and it is now known as the greatest disaster in the history of fishes! 1917—which should have been another "big year"—showed an 81 per cent. decrease of catch!

The slide has been cleared, but the trouble will carry on into posterity, and Washington and the Province of British Columbia are at loggerheads as to how to correct it. Be it known that the Americans get the first whack at the run of the Fraser, as all salmon returning from the sea to spawn in its watershed must first pass through many miles of United takes 66 per cent. of the catch—and the Canadians say that the canners down there will not accept any closed season of years (which, they correctly maintain, is the only way to bring back even a part of the run). Be that as it may, one doubts, in the face of their local endeavors to maintain unrestricted fishing, just how happy the Canadian canners would be should the Americans suddenly turn pious. They seem too good to be true! At any rate, a joint commission representing British Columbia and the State of Washington has just met at Victoria—and failed to reach any agreement, though both parties stoutly maintained that they came to establish the closed seasons! The Siwash, of course, get themselves ground up in the wheels; they, at least, can be persuaded to sell out their fishing rights to the Government. Such tidbits of reform give the appearance of progress.

"But," warns the Hon. William Sloan, Commissioner of Fisheries for the Province of British Columbia, "unless some radical steps are taken at once the salmon soon will be as extinct as the Dodo."

1921—another "big year"—was just ninety-three per cent. less than that of 1913!

"We can't do anything," plead the local authorities; "it is a case for Ottawa and Washington, D. C.—an international affair!"

But to me it seems more than that: this is a personal affair—yours and mine, the man in the street—the high price of salmon. We eat it, at least when we can dig up the price. And now, in New York, our grocer will probably give us something with the name "CHUM" on the label. Whitish, queer looking stuff, not at all like the pink, rich flesh we are so accustomed to seeing against the green leaves and firm mayonnaise. Funny stuff! but salmon, nevertheless. So it is—Dog Salmon, a fish, until a few years ago rejected by canners, despised. Only fit for a Siwash! Humpbacks are now sold as "Pinks". An acquiescent market is persuaded to eat them. They aren't bad; but that's about the most that can be said for them.

I'd rather have catfish and waffles.

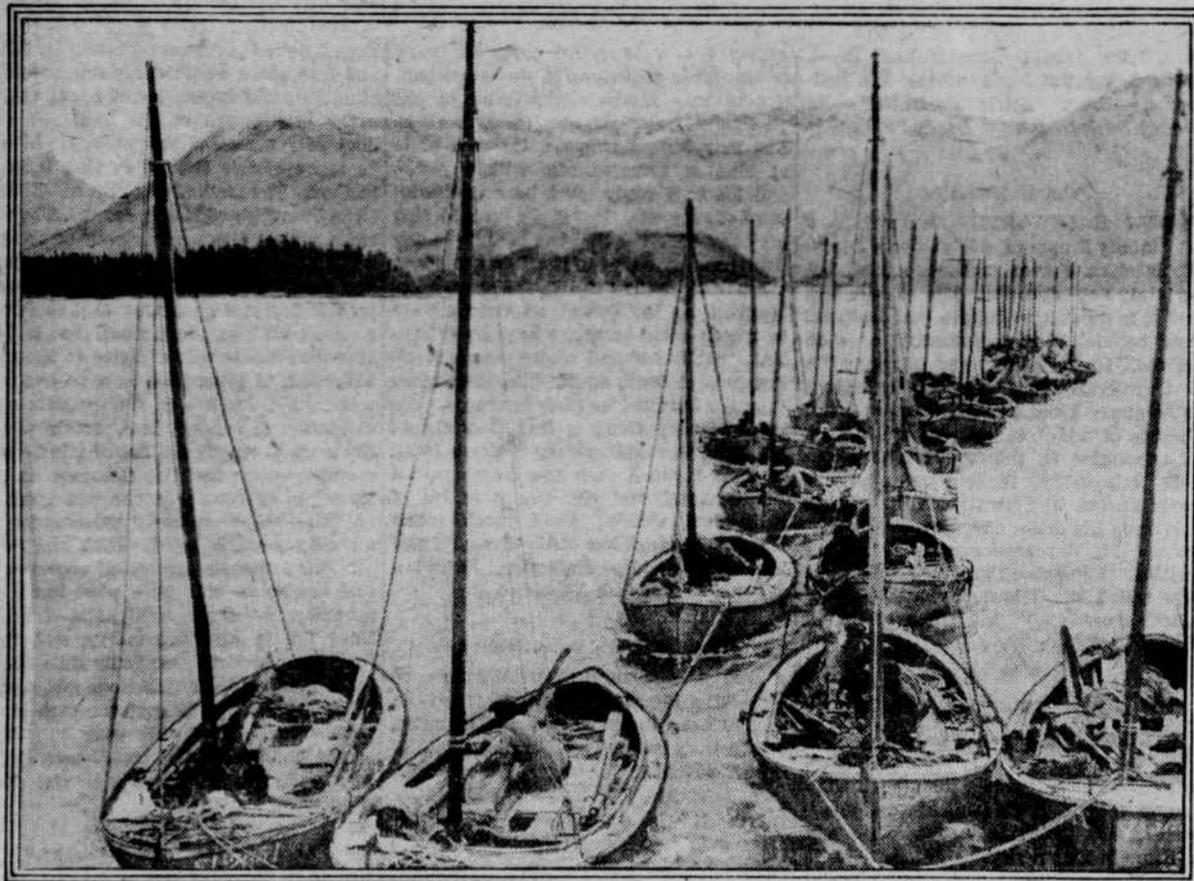


Photo by Gilliams Service

A fleet of salmon fishers on the Columbia.

running steadily, to bar their continual progress.

"They use their heads," vouchsafed McPherson; "strategy. They make use of every obstruction, sneak up in the backwaters and eddies and then charge the swift water. That! . . ." McPherson's fist shot past my nose to show the speed of their dash.

It stunned one; the thought of this homeric struggle, with death as its final reward. Made one wonder if, after all, there wasn't some mistake in the order of things, some absurd cosmic blunder. Fish, like the Tyee, the Spring, a hundred pound salmon—blotted out in their prime! Like killing a man when he's forty!

We were now on the gray sea-going launch and headed down lake, and for the first time that day McPherson emitted the sound, which the writer chaps term "breathing easy." We had "stripped" thirteen fish: three bucks and ten females. At 2,000 eggs to the coho that meant we had collected 26,000 potential salmon. Twenty fish would by estimated average be all that nature would have allowed to mature. Twenty fish! But these eggs were in the hands of McPherson.

They would be placed in long, wire, water swept troughs at the hatchery. In about ninety days queer little things will emerge, fish about the size of a pin and with an odd little sac fastened to each (his meals for four weeks). When the sac has disappeared the fish will be placed in retaining ponds and fed with grated ox liver. They live high on this and wax fat and strong. In about four months they will be the size of one's finger—fingerlings! Then—

But this year McPherson has other plans: "I'm going to keep them as long as I can, say six months or so. Every day, I contend, increases their chances. Then when I put them into the stream I can say 'God be with you!' and not feel it's a joke."

about. It's an engineer who forgot some of his figures."

Here's a queer shift in the wind. Engineer! What connection has such a man with the salmon?

McPherson is still speaking in riddles: "A few figures on the wrong side of the decimal point, and . . . bang! goes a cliff. Ay, and, bang! goes the world's best run o' salmon!"

He looked me over to be sure that I was well prepared for the question: "What'd ye say, lad, if I told you that one push of a man's hand cost B. C. and the State of Washington \$27,000,000?"

I told him.

But a queer change had come over his face, making my remarks about the strength of his whiskey sound rather foolish. He kicked the switch off the magneto and sat down on the locker, letting the launch drift on in the rain. He stuffed some vile smelling shag into his pipe and then using the thing as a pointer talked figures.

Interesting? Rather! At first I refused to believe them. Fancy the State of Washington, alone, being forced to lose \$10,000,000 a year because of the act of one man! Impossible? So it would seem; but McPherson was dealing with facts, and as he held them up to my view I began to see numerous things which before I had found hard to explain. A tin of salmon, for instance, I had bought years before—out in Egypt—now I understood why it had cost me so much! All the world must forever pay through the nose because that one engineer was weak on his strength of materials!

"Man, I can tell you a tale of death and destruction that will fairly break your heart." And there, in the reek of oil and burnt gases, 'neath a hammer of rain on the cabin, I heard the saga of the Sockeye, the "Big Run" in the Fraser, and its tragic conclusion.

"It was the most wonderful run in the

it occurred, and that the intervening three years were just as sure to be "lean." These "lean years," perhaps, had been caused by some landslide, lost in the mists of antiquity, blocking the fish for three years, and thus causing the barren returns from those spawnings.

"And that's just the point," McPherson continued, "the four year life cycle of the sockeye. Keep that fact in your mind, for it holds the gist of what I'm to tell you. It's where the murder comes in.

"Nineteen thirteen was a big year. The biggest 'big year' ever was! The sockeyes came in in millions and millions; 31,000,000 sockeye did the canners pack that year! But that was all right; millions more were headed up for the beds. They entered the Fraser like sardines in a tin! And had these fish been allowed to get to their spawning bed," here McPherson jabbed at me with his pipe, "the Fraser would still be the most valuable fishery known. But here comes that engineer . . . with his figures! Because of him 1913 was the last "big year" of the sockeye . . . there will never be another. Because, the last blast on the Canadian Northern Railway tunnel at Yale knocked the face off the cliff and tumbled the lot into the Fraser. Hell Gate? Yes, and the Big Run was stymied!"

McPherson had now finished with figures and was dealing with tragedy: "It was a sight to make a man scream! I watched thousands and thousands of salmon have a try at that jump. Men worked like devils to help 'em get past; fish ladders were built on the sides, flumes, rocks were hauled out by sheer sweat alone. But all was too late. Millions and millions of fish died at the foot of those falls. Nine feet; the fish made the height, but a stream like a fire hose, shooting over the top, flung them back. With their eggs still inside them, they died . . . and the 'big year' died with them."

And this is the satanic irony of it all: had the rock slide occurred in any lean

A Two-Foot Shelf for Young

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Twenty-five books comprise the collection. They are "Little Women," by Louisa M. Alcott; "Alice in Wonderland," by Lewis Carroll; "Robinson Crusoe," by De Foe; "Tom Sawyer," by Mark Twain; "Treasure Island," by R. L. Stevenson; Nicolay's "Boy's Life of Abraham Lincoln," Kipling's "Jungle Book," Andersen's "Fairy Tales," Aesop's "Fables," Stevenson's "Child's Garden of Verses," Pyle's "Merry Adventures of Robin Hood," Malory's "Boy's King Arthur," Lamb's "Tales from Shakespeare," Van Loon's "Story of Mankind," Mrs. Wiggan's "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm," Burton E. Stevenson's "Home Book of Verse for Young Folks," Dickens's "Christmas Carol," "Mother Goose," Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," Mrs. Dodge's "Hans Brinker," Hagedorn's "Boy's Life of Theodore Roosevelt," Hawthorne's "Wonder Book," Seton's "Wild Animals I Have Known" and the "Arabian Nights."