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WINGED CANOES AT NOOTKA

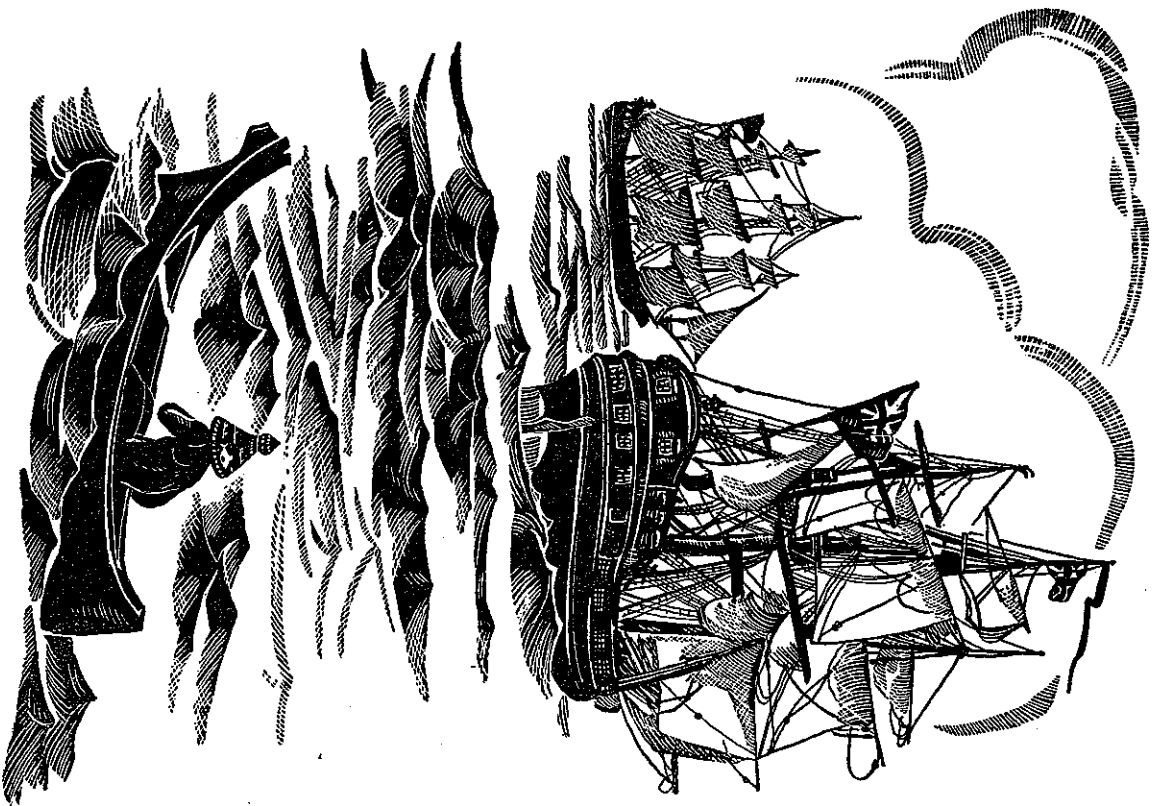
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OTHER STORIES OF THE EVERGREEN
COAST

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Winged Canoes at Nootka

Captain Cook Arrives at Vancouver Island

Rain drummed mournfully against cedar roofs in the Indian village at Nootka on the west coast of Vancouver Island; yet this gloomy March day in 1778 was to live in the memory of every Nootkan Indian.

It started out with an event as depressing as the weather: the hunters returned empty-handed after a vain search for whales. The women, children and old men who crowded to the beach to welcome them all realized that this disappointment might mean hungry days ahead. The women tried to encourage their men as they followed them up the shale beach to the chief's huge lodge. The Nootkans were proud of their reputation as the only tribe on the coast who killed whales, and they depended on them for food and for trade with other tribes.

Inside the chief's lodge, the men squatted on the earthen floor around the blazing fire. The chief stepped down from his living quarters and joined them. He listened gravely as the harpooners told of searching the waters without sighting a single whale. While they talked the women hurried to

prepare a meal, sending the children to play on the platforms which circled the great room. Smoke spiralled from the open fire and rose to escape in wisps through the shutter in the roof. A silence fell until suddenly a quavering voice called out,

"There is no need to be sad. Our people will have plenty to eat, and soon great honour comes to Nootka."

Everyone turned to look at the speaker, an old man who stood shaking with excitement. His frail body seemed to have regained strength as he hurried across the room to stand before his chief.

"I have had word from the Great Ones," he said. "My helpers have told me where the whales have gone. They also told me that strange things will happen here. My helpers, the Great Ones, have given me back my medicine and I will be once more a great shaman among you." His old eyes looked around the room until they found the face of Komeka, the young shaman, who stared at him in contempt.

"Old Nekus dreams again," he said. "He sits by the fire and dozes, then tries to make us believe his dreams. His medicine is as weak as he is . . . if the Great Ones had a message for us, they would have revealed it to me, your shaman."

One of the hunters laughed. The others joined in until the room was filled with their mirth. Old Nekus looked about him bewildered as he realized that they had not believed him. He turned and walked away from that cruel laughter. The rain had stopped as he stumbled towards the beach where his small dug-out lay, drawn up high above the other canoes. He seldom used it now. He went to it and sat on the bow, thinking of the scene he had left. Suddenly his despair gave way to a wave of strange thoughts that flooded his mind as though a great voice had reached his ears.

"Nekus," it said, "go and find the whales where you were told they are waiting. When you return, lead the hunters to them. Then they will know it was not a dream you had. They will know your helpers are still with you and your medicine is strong. They said you were too old when they chose Komeka to fill your place as shaman. Now show them that they were wrong."

Old Nekus rose to his feet and nodded his head. Yes, this he must do. His breath came in gasps as he dragged the dug-out into the water and picking up the paddle, started towards the mouth of the Sound. A strange feeling of power came over him and soon the dip of his paddle beat rhythmically through the grey water. He was too deep in his thoughts at first to notice the thickening fog drifting towards him. When he did notice it he stopped paddling and looked about him. His sense of power left him and the bleak loneliness pressed down upon him. Must he turn back . . . admit defeat and have Komeka, the young shaman, laugh at him and say again that he was an old man who had dreamed of great medicine. No, it was true what he had told them in the chief's lodge. His helpers *had* returned to him. They had promised him great things. He would not stop until he found the whales. He would show Komeka that his medicine was indeed strong. Picking up the paddle he drove the canoe forward.

Suddenly the fog lifted and the old man stared ahead. What he saw made him drop his paddle and cry out in terror. A huge monster with great white wings was coming straight towards him. Nekus shut his eyes tight and called to his helpers. This was not a whale . . . he had not been led to the place where the whales were hiding from the hunters. This monster must come from the Evil One.

Nekus snatched up the paddle but his hands were trembling so that he could barely hold it. Curiosity finally over-

came his fear and he looked at the huge object which was now directly above him. As he stared at it he realized that it was not a monster . . . nor was it the Evil One. It was a huge winged canoe! Strange creatures stood on it and as he sat, too amazed to move, a figure at the rail waved to him. It was a human being like himself. But its face was pale like the underside of a fish. It was a *man* old Nekus decided, one of a very strange tribe. He waved timidly and the stranger motioned to him, inviting him to come closer. Nekus shook his head and, hurriedly swinging his dug-out about, paddled furiously for home.

As he neared the shore his fears left him and a feeling of excitement took their place. He could hardly wait to spread the news of the strangers who had come to Nootka in their winged canoe. Presently he saw a second great winged monster, but he did not stop this time. He had seen enough to know that the spirits guarding him had spoken truly to him as he sat by the fire in the chief's lodge. Great events indeed were coming to Nootka and he, Nekus, had been chosen as the first to know about them. He must hurry to his village and tell his tribesmen what he had seen.

Meantime, Captain James Cook stood at the rail of his vessel, the *Resolution*, and turning to one of his men remarked, "That old native in the canoe seemed terrified when he saw us."

"He has probably never seen a sailing ship before, Sir."
 "No, I suppose not. I hope his people are friendly. We need wood and supplies sorely; it has been a long, hard journey since we left the Sandwich Islands. These waters are not easy to navigate and the winds and fogs are treacherous."

"The men are over-joyed by the sight of land, sir," said the senior officer, joining them. "Those mountains with their

covering of green trees make it seem to be a land of rich growth. There will be wood aplenty for repairing our two ships, fresh water too, I hope. By the way, the *Discovery* is not lagging behind, as you can see. She is clearing the fog bank just a short distance behind us."

"Yes, I have seen her. We will land tomorrow and a good thing too. But I have work to do on my charts as soon as we clear the entrance and find anchorage."

"What name will you give this Sound, sir?"

"I shall name it 'King George's Sound,' and yonder cove shall be 'Friendly Cove,' because I doubt not that the natives will be friendly. That old man seemed so indeed, although somewhat frightened." The others joined in his laughter.

The next few hours passed quickly as Jim Cook sat working at his charts. He finished and stared unseeing at the papers in front of him. His thoughts turned to the purpose of this voyage, his second to this new continent of North America. He knew the eyes of the whole world were upon him, waiting the results of this expedition.

The purpose of the voyage was the century old, world wide search for a North West passage which would open a short route to the Orient. Explorers from all countries had searched in vain for that passage. Now he was determined to find it for his country. Two ships, the *Discovery* and *Resolution*, had been outfitted with the greatest care by his government, no expense had been spared, and he had been honoured with the command of this expedition.

The honour had come to him because of his outstanding record as a navigator. Years of struggle and hard work had brought him this reward. He thought now of the young boy, Jim Cook, born in a two-room cottage in the small village in Yorkshire, England. His father had been too poor to give him much in the way of an education. The struggle

to clothe and feed a large family had been almost more than his parents could manage until Mr. Cook finally got a job as manager of a farm. Jim, his youngest son, had shown promise as a student and the man his father worked for had financed the boy's education.

Even at that Jim had to leave school when he was thirteen years old. He smiled now as he remembered all this and the desperate struggle that he had gone through to keep up his studies. He could not have done it had it not been for the kind interest of Miss Mary Walker. What a good friend she had been . . . she had tutored him, and encouraged him when he first showed an interest in navigation. When work on the farm became too heavy for his father and brother, and he had to give up his studies to help them, Miss Mary's interest and encouragement had not ceased. Jim had been determined to learn all he could in whatever spare time he had and she helped him to do this. At last the day came when he could leave the farm and go to sea. He continued his studies with even greater enthusiasm and his determination to use his knowledge in exploring and charting new waters grew with the years.

When war broke out between France and England and the destiny of Canada was at stake, young Cook joined the British Navy. It was his charts of the St. Lawrence River which made possible the capture of Quebec and so insured his country's victory. Yes, thought Cook, as memories of the past flooded over him, he had been well rewarded for his struggles. He had succeeded so far on this voyage, though the goal was still before him. On this journey he had discovered the Sandwich Islands and claimed them in the name of his king. He had named them after the Earl of Sandwich.

His thoughts turned now to his wife and children at

home in England. It was nearly a year since he had seen them. How much longer would it be before he was once more at home with them? He smiled wryly as he thought of that young Jim Cook who had dreamed of one day setting out on a voyage such as this one. He had come a long way from the poverty of his youth. It was true also that loneliness and stern self-discipline had marked the road to the fulfilment of his boyhood dreams.

A knock at the door and a voice calling to him brought him back to the present. "The natives are circling us in their canoes; what are your orders, sir? Are we to let them board us?"

"Yes, Jones. But make sure that the chief and the men in his canoe come aboard first. I will be there to meet them. Of course we will take the usual precautions against possible hostility. However, I will attend to those orders."

A short time later Captain Cook stood at the rail of his ship and looked shorewards. The green-timbered hills reached down to the sprawling village above the shoreline. Canoes, filled with natives were pushing off from the beach. He looked down and saw a huge canoe which had just circled his ship. It was carved and painted with weird images of fish and birds and he surmised it belonged to the chief.

There was a man sitting aft holding the steering paddle in his hands and staring up at the white man. Cook recognized him as the old native who had appeared out of the fog when they arrived in the Sound. Then his attention was diverted to a tall native who stood up in the canoe and, gazing up at the captain, threw handfuls of white down feathers and of red clay onto the water. Jim Cook knew from his experience with native tribes that this was a symbol of friendship and welcome. Just then the man,

Obviously the chief, started to sing and at the same time shake the rattles, he now held in each hand, in time to the rhythm of his song. The natives in the other canoes which had now reached the ship began to chant, first low, then louder and louder until their voices filled the air with the deep notes of a ceremonial song of welcome.

When it ended, Captain Cook raised his arm and motioned to the chief to come aboard with his men. The first thing the Nootkan chief did after formal greetings had taken place was to unfasten the handsome sea otter cloak he wore draped around his body. He presented it to the Captain. Cook understood the value of those rich, soft furs and immediately gave an order to one of his men. The man returned a few minutes later carrying one of the Captain's coats, bright brass buttons flashing against the dark cloth. With a low bow Captain Cook offered it to the chief whose face broke into a dazzling smile as he accepted it. He wore it with great pride during the rest of the white man's visit to Nootka.

Old Nekus, meantime, was shivering with delight as he looked timidly about the deck where he had followed his chief. He had been allowed to accompany the latter on this visit to the strange canoe. He was no longer frightened by it nor by the strange human beings walking around on it. They were men all right but very different in speech, manner and dress from his own people. He watched his tribesmen crowding around some of the pale-faced men who were holding up objects and pointing to the fur cloak his chief had given to the white chief. Old Nekus understood as did the other natives, that these men wanted to trade the glittering objects for furs. He saw one man holding a bright, shining thing which held him spell-bound for a moment. But he turned dejectedly away from its temptation . . . he had no furs to offer. He was too old to hunt.

With sagging shoulders he walked to the rail and looked over the water towards the village. He saw the chief's lodge with the huge, carved totem pole standing in front of it. He had no lodge now or totem pole, the family crest and symbol of tribal honour. He lived on the bounty of his chief. Yet his helpers had told him of these great events which had happened.

He heard his name called and turned to see his chief beckoning to him. He hurried over and stood waiting while the white man spoke to the chief. He stared in awe as the latter turned and held something out to him. It was the shining object he had seen and coveted a moment before. Now this stranger was offering it to him. But he shook his head and murmured, "I have no furs." The chief laughed, then told him to take it. The white man was giving it to him, said his chief, because he had been the first to welcome him on his arrival at Nootka.

Old Nekus smiled shyly as he reached out and took the gift. He looked up at the tall man who offered it and stared for a moment into the penetrating eyes smiling kindly at him. He did not notice the brown hair tied with a ribbon, but the pale face held his attention. He realized suddenly, that in every way except colour, this man's features resembled his own. This was indeed a man like himself, not a being from the other world. A kindly man too, the eyes told him, harsh sometimes, but fair. Nekus laughed happily as he held the treasure close and, gesturing excitedly, thanked the stranger.

That night the old Indian stood in front of his chief's lodge before entering. It was again raining as it had been that morning, but what a difference! The dreary sound of the downpour on the roof was drowned out by the laughter and songs of the tribesmen inside. They were celebrating

this great occasion and all thoughts of the failure of the whale hunt were forgotten. Old Nekus stared up at the towering totem pole, carved with the crests of his chief's clan. He went over to it and walking up the few steps, opened a trap door which was the entrance to the lodge as well as the mouth of the carved figure which formed its base. Before he stepped down into the room he thought proudly, "I have no totem or lodge it is true, but I have great medicine now. This shiny one, given me by the pale chief will bring me many good things and my power will be great. I will tell the hunters tomorrow where they can find the whales and they will believe me. The pale one in the winged canoe has given me back my place among my people." He straightened his frail shoulders as he walked to the crowd seated around the blazing fire.

Anger flamed in the eyes of Komeka as Nekus approached; the young shaman turned away as the chief motioned the old man to the place of honour by his side. Nekus obeyed proudly and the others respectfully made room for him. The singing started again and, holding his treasure close, his quavering voice joined in the chorus.

Meantime, Jim Cook was staring at the dark ceiling of his cabin as he waited for sleep to come. It had been an eventful day and marked another success in his career. He smiled as thought of the old Indian who had been overcome with joy when he gave him the brass candlestick.

"That old man saw a sailing ship for the first time today but he also saw the beginning of a new era," he thought. "Many ships will follow us here: as the years pass this will mean many changes for these Indians."

The quiet of night fell over Nootka and brought to a close that historic day when the white man arrived on the Coast of British Columbia.

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