
THE SIWASH ROCK
Bishop & Christie, Photo.

*[Page 11]*

***The Siwash Rock***

[](http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/johnson/vancouver/U-300.gif)NIQUE, and so distinct from its surroundings as to suggest rather the handicraft of man than a whim of Nature, it looms up at the entrance to the Narrows, a symmetrical column of solid grey stone. There are no similar formations within the range of vision, or indeed within many a day's paddle up and down the coast. Amongst all the wonders, the natural beauties that encircle Vancouver, the marvels of mountains, shaped into crouching lions and brooding beavers, the yawning canyons, the stupendous forest firs and cedars, Siwash Rock stands as distinct, as individual, as if dropped from another sphere.

I saw it first in the slanting light of a redly setting August sun; the little tuft of green shrubbery that crests its summit was black against the crimson of sea and *[Page 12]*  sky, and its colossal base of grey stone gleamed like flaming polished granite.

My old tillicum lifted his paddle-blade to point towards it. "You know the story?" he asked. I shook my head (experience has taught me his love of silent replies, his moods of legend-telling). For a time we paddled slowly; the rack detached itself from its background of forest and shore, and it stood forth like a sentinel–erect, enduring, eternal.

"Do you think it stands straight–like a man?" he asked.

"Yes, like some noble-spirited, upright warrior," I replied.

"It is a man," he said, "and a warrior man, too; a man who fought for everything that was noble and upright."

"What do you regard as everything that is noble and upright, chief?" I asked, curious as to his ideas. I shall not forget the reply; it was but two words–astounding, amazing words. He said simply:

"Clean fatherhood."

Through my mind raced tumultuous recollections of numberless articles in *[Page 13]*  yet numberless magazines, all dealing with the recent "fad" of motherhood, but I had to hear from the lip of a Squamish Indian chief the only treatise on the nobility of "clean fatherhood" that I have yet unearthed. And this treatise has been an Indian legend for centuries; and, lest they forget how all-important those two little words must ever be, Siwash Rock stands to remind them, set there by the Deity as a monument to one who kept his own life clean, that cleanliness might be the heritage of the generations to come.

It was "thousands of years ago" (all Indian legends begin in extremely remote times) that a handsome boy chief journeyed in his canoe to the upper coast for the shy little northern girl whom he brought home as his wife. Boy though he was, the young chief had proved himself to be an excellent warrior, a fearless hunter, and an upright, courageous man among men. His tribe loved him, his enemies respected him, and the base and mean and cowardly feared him.

The customs and traditions of his *[Page 14]*  ancestors were a positive religion to him, the sayings and the advices of the old people were his creed. He was conservative in every rite and ritual of his race. He fought his tribal enemies like the savage that he was. He sang his war-songs, danced his war-dances, slew his foes, but the little girl-wife from the north he treated with the deference that he gave his own mother, for was she not to be the mother of his warrior son?

The year rolled round, weeks merged into months, winter into spring, and one glorious summer at daybreak he wakened to her voice calling him. She stood beside him, smiling.

"It will be to-day," she said proudly.

He sprang from his couch of wolf-skins and looked out upon the coming day: the promise of what it would bring him seemed breathing through all his forest world. He took her very gently by the hand and led her through the tangle of wilderness down to the water's edge, where the beauty spot we moderns call Stanley Park bends about Prospect Point. "I must swim," he told her. *[Page 15]*

"I must swim, too," she smiled, with the perfect understanding of two beings who are mated. For, to them, the old Indian custom was law–the custom that the parents of a coming child must swim until their flesh is so clear and clean that a wild animal cannot scent their proximity. If the wild creatures of the forests have no fear of them, then, and only then, are they fit to become parents, and to scent a human is in itself a fearsome thing to all wild creatures.

So those two plunged into the waters of the Narrows as the grey dawn slipped up the eastern skies and all the forest awoke to the life of a new, glad day. Presently he took her ashore, and smilingly she crept away under the giant trees. "I must be alone," she said, "but come to me at sunrise: you will not find me alone then." He smiled also, and plunged back into the sea. He must swim, swim, swim through this hour when his fatherhood was coming upon him. It was the law that he must be clean, spotlessly clean, so that when his child looked out upon the world it would *[Page 16]*  have the chance to live its own life clean. If he did not swim hour upon hour his child would come to an unclean father. He must give his child a chance in life; he must not hamper it by his own uncleanliness at its birth. It was the tribal law–the law of vicarious purity.

As he swam joyously to and fro, a canoe bearing four men headed up the Narrows. These men were giants in stature, and the stroke of their paddles made huge eddies that boiled like the seething tides.

"Out from our course!" they cried as his lithe, copper-coloured body arose and fell with his splendid stroke. He laughed at them, giants though they were, and answered that he could not cease his swimming at their demand.

"But you shall cease!" they commanded. "We are the men [agents] of the Sagalie Tyee [God], and we command you ashore out of our way!" (I find in all these Coast Indian legends that the Deity is represented by four men, usually paddling an immense canoe.)

He ceased swimming, and, lifting his *[Page 17]*  head, defied them. "I shall not stop, nor yet go ashore," he declared, striking out once more to the middle of the channel.

"Do you dare disobey us," they cried–"we, the men of the Sagalie Tyee? We can turn you into a fish, or a tree, or a stone for this; do you dare disobey the Great Tyee?"

"I dare anything for the cleanliness and purity of my coming child. I dare even the Sagalie Tyee Himself, but my child must be born to a spotless life."

The four men were astounded. They consulted together, lighted their pipes, and sat in council. Never had they, the men of the Sagalie Tyee, been defied before. Now, for the sake of a little unborn child, they were ignored, disobeyed, almost despised. The lithe young copper-coloured body still disported itself in the cool waters; superstition held that should their canoe, or even their paddle-blades, touch a human being, their marvellous power would be lost. The handsome young chief swam directly in their course. They dared not run him down; if so, they would become as other men. While *[Page 18]*  they yet counselled what to do, there floated from out the forest a faint, strange, compelling sound. They listened, and the young chief ceased his stroke as he listened also. The faint sound drifted out across the waters once more. It was the cry of a little, little child. Then one of the four men, he that steered the canoe, the strongest and tallest of them all, arose, and, standing erect, stretched out his arms towards the rising sun and chanted, not a curse on the young chief's disobedience, but a promise of everlasting days and freedom from death.

"Because you have defied all things that come in your path we promise this to you," he chanted: "you have defied what interferes with your child's chance for a clean life, you have lived as you wish your son to live, you have defied us when we would have stopped your swimming and hampered your child's future. You have placed that child's future before all things, and for this the Sagalie Tyee commands us to make you for ever a pattern for your tribe. You shall never die, but you shall stand through all the *[Page 19]*  thousands of years to come, where all eyes can see you. You shall live, live, live as an indestructible monument to Clean Fatherhood."

The four men lifted their paddles and the handsome young chief swam inshore; as his feet touched the line where sea and land met he was transformed into stone.

Then the four men said, "His wife and child must ever be near him; they shall not die, but live also." And they, too, were turned into stone. If you penetrate the hollows in the woods near Siwash Rock you will find a large rock and a smaller one beside it. They are the shy little bride-wife from the north, with her hour-old baby beside her. And from the uttermost parts of the world vessels come daily throbbing and sailing up the Narrows. From far trans-Pacific ports, from the frozen North, from the lands of the Southern Cross, they pass and repass the living rock that was there before their hulls were shaped, that will be there when their very names are forgotten, when their crews and their captains have taken their long last voyage, *[Page 20]*  when their merchandise has rotted, and their owners are known no more. But the tall, grey column of stone will still be there–a monument to one man's fidelity to a generation yet unborn–and will endure from everlasting to everlasting.