

NANASEMGYET, THE NATIVE ORPHEUS<sup>1</sup>

Recently, five additional illustrations have been found of the myth in which a sea-coast hunter travelled on the back of the Whale to the nether world, there to rescue the soul of his lost wife.

The first is of a Tlingit helmet of splendid design, at the Washington State Museum, Seattle. Here the head-dress is encrusted with abalone pearl on the neck of the monster, and the inset teeth are the natural teeth of an animal. The small face jutting out of the mouth is meant for the wife who was transformed into a Whale to become the wife of the chief of the underworld. And the husband in pursuit is shown, as usual, within the dorsal fin, which is adorned with pearl and hair (Photo by M.B. 10,2598, in 1947. No. 5).

Another head-dress embodies the same Nanasemgyet theme; it is one of the best illustrations of its kind. It belongs to the University of Pennsylvania Museum (Photo by M. B. 96-6, see photo in 1952. No. 6).

The third wood carving, which is a painted one, is at the British Museum. It contains one of the most interesting illustrations of the same story, showing the Dog-fish (instead of the Whale) conveying the pursuing husband on one of its spiked dorsal fins to the country under the sea, while the lost wife lies on her back next to the tail of the sea monster (23" long x 10" x 6½". 12.8.19 or 5337, in the A. W. Frank collection or sale. Photo by M.B. 64-10, 1953. No. 7).

A fourth wood carving is an unpainted ceremonial clapper showing the whale with the face of Nanasemgyet at the base of the dorsal fin and another human-like face on the tail. It was found at the Museum of the University of Cambridge, England (Hepburn Coll. N.W.C., 1875. Neg. M.B., Nat. Mus. Canada, 52, p. 46, 1953. No. 8).

Another painted wood carving also illustrates the Nanasemgyet tale. The property of Mr. Charles Valley, of Queen Charlotte City, near Skidegate, it was recently carved in the form of a pole by Luke Watson, of Skidegate, a white man adopted in childhood by a Haida at Port Simpson, B.C., and raised like a native. The owner called this a "story pole" and had heard conflicting explanations as to its meaning. The carver named the central figure *Ski-de-lore*. Old Henry Young, another Skidegate carver, called it *Kil-de-gaa*, from a story belonging to the Tsimshyan at Metlakatla. And to add still further confusion, Arthur Moody and Louis Collison, carvers of the same village, stated that these interpretations were all wrong. Yet the differences of opinion are not due so much to the decay of customs and beliefs as to the obscurity prevailing everywhere in the growth of folk

<sup>1</sup>A Kwakiutl version of this myth has been recorded and published by Dr. R. Geddis Large, in his *Soogwilis, A Collection of Kwakiutl Indian Designs and Legends* (pp. 53-65). The Ryerson Press, Toronto, 1951.

traditions among a people of varied origins and contacts. Charles Valley's Nanasemgyet pole, 31 inches tall, shows the sea-otter hunter, here called *Kild-de-goa* or *Ski-de-lore*, holding the dorsal fin of the Whale with both hands. On the upturned tail of the sea monster is the figure of a marten. The sea-otter (white in the myth, here painted black) emerges headfirst from the mouth of the Whale. The bird at the top is the Eagle holding the Frog in his mouth (Photo by Richard Harrington. *No. 9*).

Another illustration, this last in argillite, is among a group carved from a square block and belongs to Mr. Stewart S. Holland, at Victoria. It consists of two different subjects. On one side, the Killer-Whale is represented at the bottom; above, lying on his or her right side, a person grips the dorsal fin with the left hand; the feet seem to run through perforations on the rear side of the fin. The draped fold over the person represents the ocean, as the water is said to have been lifted like a blanket to let Gunarhnesemgyet proceed with the search for his wife at the bottom of the sea (*No. 10A*).

### BEAR MOTHER

The opposite side of the Nanasemgyet carving belonging to Mr. Holland, at Victoria, illustrates a different theme, the much-better known one of Bear Mother.<sup>1</sup> Here two episodes are brought out in plastic form: the marital relationship between the supernatural Bear and his human wife, at the bottom to the right; and, above, the Bear courting the young Gitksan woman whom he had kidnapped. A third subject, the Bear devouring a salmon, intrudes here only to fill up the space to the left (*No. 10B*).

A totem of argillite in the Raley collection at Vancouver shows Bear Mother holding one of her twin cubs on her lap, while the other shows his face on her head. The figures at the top (partly broken off) are of the Thunderbird and of the Whale which is crosswise in his talons (Photo by M.B. 87235. Not shown).

The Grizzly carrying the young woman away into the mountains, her feet in his mouth and her head down at his feet, is shown in a totem of the Michael Ash collection at the Cranbrook Institute, Michigan. At the top, another Bear, much smaller, walks on all fours, and the Raven carries a salmon in his long bill. This is a Skidegate carving of the Tom Price or John Cross group (Photo M.B. 210-4 and 5. Bought at the B.B.C. store in Seattle. 11" high; concave back (*No. 11*)).

A painted wooden totem in the manner of Massett shows two Grizzlies, one above the other on the stubby shaft. The one above has a long, pointed

<sup>1</sup>(Cf. *Haida Myths*. Pp. 84-147).