The Mystic Spring

D.W. Higgins

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Queen. Your sister's drown'd, Laertes.
Laertes. Drown'd! 0, where?
Queen. There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream
There with fantastic garlands did she come,
Of crow−flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them:
There on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping; brook.

−−*Hamlet.*

MANY, many years ago, when Victoria was called Camoosun and the first settlers built their dwellings and warehouses behind tall palisades and mounted guns on bastions; when the aboriginal tribes were turbulent and not always amenable to the soothing influence of ship's bread and treacle; when painted savages, armed and fierce, swarmed in thousands in and about the dense forests and sweet meadowlands that surrounded the stockade; when Fort Street began in a swamp and goose pasture at Blanchard Street and ended abruptly at the fort gate, before which a big Indian−patrolled as sentry, and Yates and the other pretty streets that now add to the convenience of the people and the beauty of the town were but trails that wound through a thick forest; when you, gentle reader, had not as yet left the ethereal blue to take up your sphere of action on the earth's surface−−I say that many, many years ago there existed on the shores of Cadboro Bay a small but valiant tribe of Indians. It was at Cadboro that Sir James Douglas first landed on Vancouver Island from the brig *Cadboro,* a staunch Sunderland−built vessel of live oak, the property of the Hudson's Bay Company. He was well received by the natives, and having named the bay Cadboro (then spelt with its long termination, Cadborough) after the brig, he walked through a forest of oak, pine and spruce till he came in sight of Camoosun harbor. Here he planted the British flag, after naming the place Victoria, and reared dwellings and warehouses and palisades, and mounted guns for the protection of the infant settlement from a native foray. Victoria must have been an ideal place to live in at that time. There were no customs houses nor duties; neither taxes nor newspapers; no sidewalks and no streets; no policemen nor lawyers, nor trustees to vote away the civic revenue without check; and only one doctor; no mayor and aldermen, no politicians, no drainage, no water supply except from wells, and no typhoid; when everything that a fellow ate or drank or wore was not said to be infected with the germs of disease, and when the only obstacles to a long life were a too free use of Hudson's Bay rum, or a sly bullet from a Siwash musket.

When the party landed at Cadboro they were struck with the beauty of the beach of white sand and the oval shape of the bay, which was as faultless in its lines as if it had been laid out by surveyors. Great trees raised their heads on every side and gigantic oaks almost brushed the clouds with their vernal crowns. A thousand years old if a day, alas! they have long since been converted into firewood at two or three dollars per cord, instead of having been allowed to stand as objects of majestic grandeur and forest pride forever. Sir James was a keen admirer and student of Nature, and when from the deck of his vessel he gazed on the picturesque scene before him his senses must have been captivated and charmed. As he stepped ashore and prepared to follow the Indian trail that led to

Camoosun his attention was arrested by a huge maple tree, which, with spreading branches rich with bright green foliage, stood directly in his path. No historian has recorded the fact; but I feel sure Sir James questioned the chiefs as to this magnificent monarch of the forest, and applauded their forbearance in having preserved it from destruction, for it was very old, although it showed no signs of decay. At the foot of the tree, so near that some of the roots extended into the water, was a spring as clear as crystal. It was fed by a rill that trickled from the side of the hill which overlooks Cadboro Bay, and its waters possessed the rare characteristic of being as cold as ice in summer as well as in winter. No matter how warm the weather the waters of the spring that nestled by the great maple tree were as cool as if they had flowed from a glacier. The Indians were proud of the spring and used its water freely. They said it possessed medicinal properties. They also claimed that it was bewitched. Said one of the chiefs in Chinook jargon to the new arrivals:

"If a woman should look into the water when the moon is at its full she'll see reflected in it the face of the man who loves her. If a man looks into the water he will see the woman who loves him and will marry him should he ask her. If a woman is childless this water will give her plenty. The tree is a god. It guards the spirit of the spring, and as long as the tree stands the water will creep to its foot for protection and shade; cut down the tree and the spring will be seen no more."

Such was the Indian tradition which had clung to the maple and the spring through many ages of savage occupation. When I first visited the bay in 1860 I reached it by means of a narrow and tortuous trail that led down the side of the hill and terminated at the foot of the big maple. I had heard the legend about the Mystic Spring, and rode out to investigate. I drank of the waters, and they were sweet and cool, though the day was warm. My companions, who were young men and women from Victoria, knelt at the side of the water and tried, without success, to conjure up the faces of their future husbands or wives.

"The moon must be shining and at its full before you can see the spirit, and this is midday. You can't expect to see anything now," said one of the girls.

After that visit Cadboro Bay became a favorite resort. We put a rude table and a bench at the foot of the maple, which we christened "Father Time" because of a few sprays of "old man's beard" that hung from a branch. We called the spring Undine, after Lafontaine's famous water sprite, and nearly every fine Saturday afternoon we formed a small party and rode on Indian ponies to the spot. After luncheon we donned bathing suits and disported in the waters of the bay until the chill breeze and setting sun admonished us that the hour had arrived when we must seek our homes.

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The fame of "Father Time" and sweet Undine spread far and wide, and many were the trips made by the lovesick of both sexes to the spring. When the moon was at its full the visitors sought to conjure up their future partners. If they met with success I never heard of it. One lovely evening in August, 1862, I rode out to the spring. I wanted to test the truth of the pretty legend and did not expect to meet any other person there. As I descended the hill I heard voices, and to my surprise soon saw that two ladies and two gentlemen had reached the spot before me. They rallied me as to the object of my visit at that untimely hour, and I frankly confessed that I was in search of the woman who was to be my wife. They were frank, too, and we found that all had come on the same errand. At eight o'clock the harvest moon rose in all its splendor, and before nine it shone full upon the enchanted spot. Its rays seemed to force themselves through the foliage of the grand old maple, and lighted up the placid waters of Undine, which glistened like molten silver.

"Come on, girls," cried one of the young fellows, "let's take a peep."

The girls advanced timidly and then fell back. They were afraid to look lest they should see something that would not be pleasant−−the whole affair was so uncanny.

"Well," continued the young man, "if you won't, I will," and he gazed long and earnestly into the water and then rising, said:

"I saw only the reflection of my own ugly face−−I saw that plainly."

I tried my luck next with a like result. The waters gave back only my own features. I squinted and the shadow squinted. I made a grimace and it grimaced. I raised my hand and the figure raised its hand.

"Pshaw!" I cried, "that Indian legend is a humbug−−there's no spirit here. Hurry up−−try it and let's go home."

One of the young ladies who had gathered courage by this time advanced and knelt at the side of the pool. She

was very nervous, but gazed long and earnestly into the depths. I had turned away to untie my horse, intending to mount him for home, in deep regret at the time lost on an errand so foolish.

"Thus," said I, "is another colossal Indian legend bubble pricked."

"I never did believe in the story," said the young man who had not yet tried his luck, "and I never knew an Indian legend that was not false all the way through."

I was about to make a remark in reply when my attention was arrested by a cry from the remaining young man.

"Look!−−look at Annie!" he cried.

I looked. The girl had fallen forward and her face lay submerged in the ice−cold water. To leap forward and lift her from her position required but an instant. She was motionless. We laid her on the grass beneath "Father Time," and chafed her hands and temples. We at first feared that she was dead. The other girl had a small flask of sal volatile and used it, and in a few minutes the patient came to her senses and rose to her feet with assistance.

"Take−−oh! take me home!" she murmured, and then she went into a fit of hysterics. Her screams were fearful, and her peals of laughter were unearthly. It was a new experience for me. I had never before seen a woman in a state of hysteria, and all were at their wits' ends to know what to do to restore the girl. At last she ceased to shriek and laugh, and cried softly.

"Annie," asked the other girl, "what's the matter with you? Why do you cry? What did you see? You silly little thing to frighten us all so."

"Oh!" she moaned, "that face−−that dreadful face−−the face I saw in the spring."

"What was it?−−tell us," we all cried.

"Oh!" the girl replied with a shudder and with symptoms of a relapse, "it was fearful−−the most awful I ever saw. A low−browed, cunning face, deeply lined with wicked thoughts and evil designs, and such awful eyes. He raised his hand to clutch me and I fainted. And he's to be my future husband! No, I'd sooner die than marry him."

We rode as far as the farmhouse of Hon. John Tod, the nonogenarian, by which time the young lady had become so weak that she could not maintain her seat on the horse. Mr. Tod placed his horse and buggy at our service, and we reached town without further incident late in the evening. By common consent it was agreed that nothing should be said of the affair, but it leaked out−−such things always do−−and the fame of Undine spread far and near. For a long time the locality was a favorite resort for bathing and picnic parties and love−sick youths of both sexes. My visits after that night were not frequent, and the two young ladies who were present that evening could not be induced to go there at all. I never learned with any degree of certainty that that presence or any other presence ever again appeared at the spring; but the pretty Indian legend clung to it, and the girls and boys continued to direct their footsteps to the shrine for several years.

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Late in the afternoon of the 21st April, 1868, Benjamin Evans, for many years Usher of the Supreme Court, and who owned a small property facing on Cadboro Bay, was at work in his garden. The day was beautiful. The sun shone warmly, and the new grass and the young foliage of the trees gave promise of an early and bountiful season. As Evans delved with his spade he saw descending the road that led down the hill to the bay a handsome young lady. She was stylishly dressed in a brightly−colored gown with voluminous skirts, and wore a turban or toque, about which was loosely coiled a bright green veil. The young woman inquired if he was on the right road to the bay. Evans replied, "Yes."

"And," said she, after a moment's hesitation, "where is the wonderful magic spring?"

Evans laughed good−naturedly as he said, "Ho! ho! Do you think you'll find him?"

"Find who?" asked the girl, archly.

"Why, your future husband," replied Evans. "Take care he doesn't jump out of the spring and hug you to death!"

It was the girl's turn to laugh, but she said nothing, and Evans directed her to the locality of the spring, and she continued on her way.

Some two hours later, and shortly before dark, an Indian lad who was walking along the trail saw a well−dressed young woman sitting on the rustic bench at the spring−side. Her face was buried in her hands, and her elbows rested on the table. The turban had fallen from her head and lay on the grass. The boy watched the woman for some time. She seemed in great distress and moaned and wept, sometimes rocking her body to and fro

in her anguish. Nightfall was coming on and even to the mind of that untutored savage the impropriety of this young lady remaining in that lonely spot all night, exposed to the chill air or an attack from wild animals, with which the locality was infested at the time, was manifest, so he went and told his father and mother, who were encamped nearby. The old people watched the young stranger for some time, peeping through the underbrush. The lady seemed oblivious to her surroundings. Was she waiting for the moon to rise? If so, she had made an error, for there was no moon that night. Had she a tryst? There was no evidence of one, for no one had met her. She just seemed a young person to whom disappointment, sudden and keen, had come, and who had sought that lonesome spot to pour out her sorrows to the stars which sparkled brightly overhead. At last her head reclined on her arms, and she appeared to fall fast asleep. The watchers left her there.

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In the middle of the night the boy awoke with a start and leaped to his feet. He listened, and a wail like that of a woman in deep distress fell on his ear. He called to his father, "That King George klootchman (Englishwoman) is crying for help. Listen!"

The old man bent his ear and listened for a few moments. All was still. Save for the waving of the mighty pines in the night wind and the lapping of the waves on the beach, no sound disturbed the stillness. "Go to sleep," he at last said, "you pilton (fool). It's only a panther calling to its mate." And the boy went back to his bed.

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In the morning, bright and early, the Indian lad was astir. He walked to where he could gain a view of the spring and its surroundings. The "klootchman" had disappeared. He drew nearer. There, lying on the ground where it had fallen, was the turban with the green veil tied about it. His practiced eye detected the marks of small footsteps on the sward. He traced them through a clump of bushes to the edge of the bank overlooking the bay. Lying on the bank he found a crinoline or hoop−skirt which had been unbuckled at the waist. He pressed forward to a spot where he commanded a better view of the water, and then he saw something that froze his young blood, accustomed though he was to gruesome sights. He hastened back to the camp, aroused his father and mother, and the three returned to the spot and drew from the water the body of the strange girl, which was floating face downward. She had divested herself of a part of her raiment and fallen or flung herself from the bluff. Death came from drowning, and there were no marks of violence. The body was brought to town and identified as that of a most respectable young lady, named Julia Booth, who lived with her parents near Victoria. Beneath "Father Time" and near the Mystic Spring were found torn bits of paper upon which there had been words written; but the bits were too minute to be pieced.

On the bench was a sheet of notepaper upon which were written the following words from a then popular song:

"Farewell, farewell, 'tis a solemn sound
And often brings a sigh,
But give to me that good old word
That comes from the heart−−good−bye."

Miss Booth was a light−hearted and sensible girl and as pure as the virgin snow. Had she, with only the stars to light up the pool, seen the presence that so affrighted the girl six years before, had the spirit tried to seize her, and had she fled to the water to escape a supposed impending fate? or was her case one of disappointed love and suicide?

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Nearly twenty years later the vandal hand of man seized upon "Father Time." The hand held an axe within its grasp and before its sharp strokes the monarch was laid low. It fell with a great crash that shook the earth. An old Indian witnessed the desecration. His forefathers had worshipped that tree and he wanted it saved. Could he have expressed himself in verse he probably would have wailed:

"Woodman, spare that tree,
Touch not a single bough,
In youth it sheltered me
And I'll protect it now."

With the tragic end of the old tree the Mystic Spring disappeared and was seen no more.

I almost forgot to say that the young lady who saw the spirit married a few months later, and that she got for a husband one of the best fellows on earth. She is still a resident of Victoria, and so are her children and her grandchildren.

(End.)