

# "So Hago"

By Maria Bolanz

"SO HAGO... SO HAGO... SO HAGO..."

"Return... Return... Return..."

*(Continued from last week, the poignant story of a Tlingit woman, Chin Kley, separated from her infant son at his birth and dying from tuberculosis in a hospital far from the spruce forests and snow-capped mountains of her homeland. Her loneliness and homesickness impels her to write letters to her little son, telling him of the rich heritage of the Tlingit people.)*

March 23

I have not been able to write to you for a few days. At least that was what the doctor said. I had to rest, and I felt like resting. I do not like feeling bad again, because I am afraid I will be ill as I was those first two months. I am afraid of going back . . . and I was feeling so well . . . it makes me feel all lost again. That is why I could scarcely wait until I was able to write to you again, for just to be saying something to you gives me hope . . . and I need it so.

You see, several days ago I was sitting up and weaving. Suddenly I began to cough and cough . . . I could not summon them . . . it seemed to shake my body all over . . . and I fell across the pillow on which my weaving rested. I lay there . . . not being able to move myself or lift my arms. I lay there coughing and coughing and

coughing into the pillow. They found me that way. . . and then I developed a fever and was tired all day, and they gave me pills to sleep. I ached all over, and there was a great pain in my chest. My doctor says this will go away. I hope he is right . . . I could not bear to be ill again like those two months. I shall be better and better and better all the time; even now I am. He says these things just happen when one is getting well. And so I shall not think of it, but think instead of other things. . . .

It was also at this time that we would go at sunrise to Tongass Harbour to gather the hemlock branches on which we had collected herring eggs. I have told you that the name of this month in Tlingit is the Moon of the Herring Eggs. The herring spawn near the beaches, and because we are very fond of eating herring eggs, we collect them for ourselves by placing the branches of the hemlock down into the water so that the eggs will attach to them as they

do to the sea grass.

It was a day of low tide and the water was out until the sea grass was visible, and each small leaf was covered with herring eggs. Have you ever seen the morning sunlight on sea grass, and the glistening of the water at dawn. . . when all the forest is awakening?

Across the harbor stood Tongass Mountain, and its summit was all covered with snow. On the cliff side the snow seemed very heavy, but the round lower slopes that fell away from it were green. I remember on the heavily wooded slopes we could hear the grouse calling. Occasionally the wild haunting cry of a loon would pierce the morning air, and a heron would fly overhead. The day was cloudless and warm as the sun rose fully over Tongass Mountain and into our faces as we knelt in the moist sand to gather our hemlock branches.

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With the advance of the sun, the life in the forest increased. The shadows that it cast on the spruce and cedar trees diminished until only the lower slopes lay in the cool dark shadows. The upper slopes became lighter green in the sunlight and only in their soft curves that folded in and deepened into small valleys was there the blue blackness of the spruce that had not yet been touched by sunlight. Only the lower shore was still in darkness that fell off into the water.

How calm it was that morning! There was not a ripple in the middle of the bay, and on our side there was only a faint lapping of the water that rocked the sea grass and loosened the hemlock branches that we had not yet carried off. And there was about us the sandy beach made larger now because of the low tide; and behind it fell away the forest of the flatland where lay the trail on which we had come.

As we worked gathering our

branches our feet would sink into the fairly living sand, alive with all the animals of the sea at low tide. Clams were squirting, and crabs had dug themselves into small mounds of sand, and other shell fish and mussels were lying exposed at our feet. But we were here to gather herring eggs this morning, and not the other things. We laid our branches aside and securely attached them so that they would not be lost with their treasures. Then we carried them back to our village.

How very hungry I am for herring eggs! Oh, it is so wonderful when they are in abundance; we eat them solidly for a week, for they are so wonderful fresh. After that to preserve them for eating we must dry them. Sometimes, too, in April and as late as May we gather them on the seaweed and on the kelp and store them away. To cook the eggs we dip the branches in and out of boiling water and then serve them with grease. I can

eat a whole bowl of these, just as people do rice; and how much fun it is to chew them, for they snap and crackle! They are smaller than salmon eggs, and white, but when they still cling in the sea to sea grass or hemlock boughs they are opaque, and they glisten.