

TSIMSYAN MYTHS

the Gisparhlots were taken by Rhpeelk and Nees'wamak. Among the Gitandaw, Gyæhluk was replaced by Skagwayt and Guhlrhærh. Guhlrhæh eventually went to the Gitsalas tribe and became the Eagle chief there. Soon Legyærh, who was the son of a sister of Nees'wamak and who had been taken captive by the Wudstæ tribe, returned to the Gisparhlots and brought back with him the Wudstæ name of Legyærh.¹ Because of Legyærh's success as a war leader and because of his wealth, he soon was recognized as the leading chief of all the Tsimcyan. For all the feasts Legyærh was the first chief called out. He also had the privilege of being the last chief to enter a feast house. He would often hold up a feast purposely, to show his privilege, which had been proclaimed and recognized by all the people. His foremost head-dress was the Beaver Hat, which Rhpeelk had acquired while escaping the Kanhade.

Many have challenged the strength of Legyærh's position as head-chief of the Tsimcyan. But he has overcome them all by great displays of wealth. He has strengthened his position to this day. A former Legyærh had a painting representing himself on a high cliff at the entrance to the Nass River, at Ktsiyaurhl, known as Ten Mile Point. Here, at one time, all the Tsimcyan and Gitrhahla, Gitsalas, Gitra'ata, and Niskæ were the guests of Legyærh at the feast where he showed his cliff painting.

STRONG MAN WHO HOLDS UP THE WORLD

(Recorded by William Beynon, in 1952, from Sam Bennet, Ninspins, a Gispewudwade of the Gilodzau tribe; aged 75, at Metlakatla.)

Ages ago, when all the Tsimcyan were living at Metlakatla Passage and at Gadu, on the present cemetery site at Metlakatla stood the Gitzarhlæhl village. The chief had four sons. Three of them were very active, but the fourth, the youngest, appeared to be very lazy and also indifferent to everything. Nothing seemed to interest him. His brothers were very industrious and were foremost in all activities. In wrestling they overcame everybody, and in rock-putting they also outdid all competitors. In hunting they were unsurpassed. At all times they made fun of their young dirty brother, who was lazy and dirty and always slept in the ashes beside the fire. He would never take a cleansing bath but would be content to lie by the fire in what looked like filth. Everyone in the house made fun of him and rebuked him for his laziness, but he never paid any attention to what they said.

It was now the time when the people would go and hunt the sea-lions at an island away out to sea. Only the strongest and quickest could take part. The island was a bare one. A high sea always ran, and one mistake by the hunter would mean his death. He must be able to climb and grasp the huge

¹Legyærh, meaning Great Cliff.

sea-lion or be struck by the beast. A sea-lion hunter had to be not only strong, but quick and smart. The lazy man's brothers were now training for this event. Every morning, they would go down to the water to bathe. Then they would return to the house, where the chief, their father, would whip them with shrub branches and rub them with a brew of *huhlens* roots.¹ Then they drank in large quantities a brew of devil's-club. All the brothers were treated alike, except the youngest, who was seemingly too lazy and was satisfied to lie by the fire in ashes and filth. He was never seen even to go out to urinate or excrete. Every day the other brothers were being trained. They tested their strength by pulling off the branches of the nearby trees.

Each morning, the inmates of the chief's house would rebuke the lazy brother, saying, "Why do you not bathe sometimes to keep clean?" Others would say, taunting him, "You will be the one whom we will have to depend on to feed us when we starve." To all these insults and taunts, the lazy brother paid no heed.

Now, unbeknown to the others, the lazy brother would arise and go out and bathe when all were asleep in the house, and he would also massage his body with *huhlens*, just as his brothers did. When he had finished, he would return to his ragged robes and lie on the dirt and ashes and would pay no attention to the others.

Every day his brothers were gaining in strength and cleverness. Now they were able to break off the spruce-tree branches with apparent ease. And they increased their insults and taunts to their lazy indifferent brother. Finishing their ablutions, they would go off to rest in comfort. At night, again and again, the lazy brother would come out to bathe and massage himself and then would slip back into the house unobserved and would lie in the ashes and filth, to the shame and disgust of his father and all the rest of the household. Among those who ridiculed him more than anyone else was an uncle, his oldest uncle, who was very much ashamed of him. But a younger uncle and his wife used to befriend him by secretly giving him food. They would rebuke those who ridiculed him. The uncle would say, "Cease your taunts; the time for my nephew to improve his strength has not yet come. When he is ready, he will prove to you that he is worthy." This only served to bring on more taunts. The eldest brother was most sarcastic. He would say, "He likes the odour of his own urine and excrement. How can he ever be a hunter?" Instead of becoming angry, the lazy brother paid no heed. Every night he went to bathe and massage himself, and every night he would test his strength.

One night when he came to bathe in the cold water, he saw a loon swimming towards him and calling out, as if to speak to him. When it came close to where he was bathing, the young man spoke to the loon, saying, "What is it, supernatural one?" The loon (*gaul*) then spoke, "Brother, I feel

¹The roots of a very strong poisonous plant.

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13A. Bear Mother giving birth to a cub.



13B. Opposite side of No. 13A.

sorry for the way your haughty brothers taunt you. I will give you strength that will overcome them all. Take hold of my feet, and I will dive under water with you.” So the young man took hold of the loon’s feet, and it dove down with him. When they reached the bottom, a cavern opened, and the loon led the young man in, and said, “At the end of the cave, you will find a spring. Bathe in this, and then return to your village. Partake of devil’s-club to cleanse yourself, and lie by the fire as you have always done, as if nothing had happened. The young man, having finished his bathing, returned to his father’s house, and soon all in the household were up and awake. The young man’s brothers went into the water to bathe. They went out to a spruce tree and broke off the limbs. They were now much improved in strength. When they came back into the house, they heaped more taunts and abuses at their lazy brother. All in the house were bitter against him, but the youngest uncle and his wife took the lazy brother’s part, as they pitied him. They themselves did not know of his secret training; they only felt pity for him.

Every day the brothers were training, and every night when all were asleep the younger brother went down for his training. So one night the loon said to him, “Now you must go to the large spruce tree and tear its branches from it, and then bend the tree until its top touches the ground.” The young man went to the spruce tree and pulled a large branch from it. Then he took hold of the trunk and pushed it over until its top touched the ground, as he had been directed. Then he went to lie down by the fire, as he had always done, as if asleep. Here he rested all day.

The young brothers now had nearly finished their training. Soon they would be ready for the sea-lion hunt, and, as ever, they taunted their lazy brother, “Come, you who lie in your own excrements! Make yourself ready to help the slaves when we bring back canoe-loads of sea-lion! You should be able to carry the small pieces of meat from the canoes to the house when we return.” Thus they taunted the younger brother before they completed their massaging with *huhlens* and retired to rest.

It was now time for them to go for their sea-lion hunt. They were divided among the uncles. There were only three brothers who were trained, but there were four uncles, each having his own canoe. So there was no one for the youngest uncle. They were making preparations, and the young man who was always lying by the fire came to his youngest uncle’s wife, and said, “My aunt, prepare me a new shirt and some provisions. I will go with my uncle in his canoe.” When the other brothers heard this, they all laughed and told him, “What can you do? You will be in the hunters’ way. Besides, you are so filthy that even the sea-lions will go away from you, and we may not get anything. Do not let him come!” Thus they cried out, and the elder uncles said, “Why did you not train, if you wanted to go along? You will be only a hindrance and delay us.” The elder uncles refused to have him. The youngest uncle then said “Come into my canoe; you can help in many ways and then

you can always stay in the canoe.” So the unclean brother who had apparently disregarded all the training ways went along in the canoe of his young uncle.

It was very early in the morning and still dark, just before daybreak, when they set out to go to the place where sea-lions gathered in herds. While the hunters were still a long way off, they could hear the roaring of these large beasts. There were so many of them. The island, which stood alone, away out to sea, was shaped like a huge sea-lion. The hunters now had arrived at this sea-lion island, where it was always stormy and difficult to approach, and where there were always high seas running. It was necessary to jump from the canoe on the crest of a wave, and if the hunter missed his jump he would perish in the water or be jumped upon by the sea-lions. So there must be no mistake.

The first canoe to reach there was that of the oldest uncle with several of his kinsmen who had trained faithfully. The uncle stood at the bow of his canoe, ready to jump to where the sea-lions were. As the canoe rose on top of the wave, he jumped, and as he did, another wave crashed the canoe against the rock and broke it. All in the canoe perished. As soon as the oldest uncle landed on the island, he was attacked by a huge sea-lion and thrown into the air; his back was broken. Then the next uncle came and stood ready. When the canoe rode on the crest of the wave, he jumped, but failed to land. His canoe was smashed, and all perished. It was then that the youngest brother said to his uncle, “I will jump onto the rock, and you will guide the canoe, and we will overcome the sea-lions.” The others in the canoe would not heed what the younger brother wanted. They said, “Why should you overcome the sea-lions, while those who have observed all training ways have failed. This will only belittle us the more. It is well we should now go back rather than perish like the rest.” But the young man was insistent, saying, “Are you old women or little children that you cannot do what men can do?” They were all embarrassed, and the young uncle headed the canoe toward the rock. The young brother, whom all others had been making fun of as being lazy and useless, stood up in the canoe and, as the canoe rose on the crest of the wave and was at its highest, he jumped safely onto the island. As he landed, a huge sea-lion, the chief of the sea-lions, approached him. Without any effort the young man seized the monster, threw it over, and broke its back. He did the same with many more sea-lions. Seeing that they were being overcome, the other beasts jumped into the water.

As the rock was now bare (all sea-lions and many carcasses remained on the island), the young man called his youngest uncle. Each time the canoe rose on the crest of the waves, the young man placed in it the carcass of a sea-lion, until the canoe was full. Then he himself jumped into the canoe, and they returned to their village. Those that had survived were very much ashamed, because they had made taunting and belittling remarks about the youngest brother.

Landing below the house of the youngest uncle, the young man went up. Instead of going to his usual sleeping place, he made himself a place to sleep alongside the fire. There he slept while the slaves brought up the sea-lion carcasses.



14. Bear Mother and twins.

The next day he arose and called upon his uncle, saying, "Come, we must go for more sea-lions." So they went out every day, and at nightfall they would return with a canoe-load of sea-lions. This they did for a long while. Now the youngest uncle's house was full of sea-lion meat, and he was the only one that had a plenteous supply. He began trading with all the other tribes. Soon he became very wealthy, to the embarrassment of the elder uncles who now had to come to the young man for food.

It was now time for the competitions of the various tribes from all over to find out who were the strongest contestants in their midst. Many young men began to train and fast; they went through long periods of training. Again the

young man seemingly paid no heed and would sleep in the dirt. Whenever he did rise, the people saw a pool of water where he had slept. So they said, "Why does he not go out to urinate?" To all this he, as formerly, paid no heed, but when all were asleep he would go quietly to the beach and bathe and train himself. As soon as he had finished, he would go into the forest at the rear of the village and tear off the limbs and the large branches of trees. Finally he began uprooting first whole small trees and then large ones. He would carry them out and throw them into the sea. Every night he did this secretly, unbeknown to the people in the house. And while he was training the large loon would always swim about him, advising him what to do.

Again the people began to make fun of his lazy ways. Some said, "Why does he not train as the others do, so that at least he may be strong?" Others said, "How can one train and be unclean? We are ashamed of him." And as before, only the wife of his younger uncle had compassion for him and shielded him. When the others would have thrown him out, she said, "Do not forget that he once put you all to shame."

For a while the people kept quiet while the other young people trained for the athletic combats, which were wrestling and weight-throwing. They would wrestle among themselves and throw heavy boulders. After this, they would cleanse themselves by bathing and drinking *wawms* (devil's-club juice). Then they would retire by themselves to their sleeping places and would have no contact with anything impure. No women were allowed even to look at them, except their aged paternal aunts, who were allowed to prepare their food or to assist them in any way. Sexual indulgence was prohibited, and above all absolute cleanliness was the rule. The trainee was made to swim great distances, and this even in freezing weather. As they came from the water, the chief would whip their bare backs. Then they would go to the chief's house to be fed and advised. This training period was a hard one for all. But the young brother seemed to pay no attention to the taunts directed at him. Nobody knew that he was secretly training and as a result was in very good condition. He was able to uproot big trees with ease and to throw large boulders a long distance.

The day on which tribal contests were to take place was near, and distant tribes began to gather. All the strong men from these were picked for the stone-throwing contest. Large stones were gathered together. Each contestant took his turn at throwing, and the one who could throw the farthest was a winner. All the tribes were the spectators. As each contestant heaved the heavy-weighted boulder, should it fall short of other contestants' he would be jeered by such remarks as, "Dzæ'i" (What a mess!). Among the contestants was a great man and a warrior from Gitrhahla. He was the contestant who so far had out-thrown all the others. The Gitrhahla were very happy and began challenging others, "Come, bring down your strong men; do not send women as if they were men!" These taunts aggravated the other Tsimtsyan

tribes. While they were thus excited, the young brother who they thought had not trained came down from his uncle's house and proceeded to where the other contestants stood. As soon as his own people saw him, they cried out, "Call him back, we have had enough shame now! He will further belittle us. He has never trained, and those who have trained were overcome. What does he expect to accomplish, he who has such filthy habits!" The people tried to get him to return, but he would not listen to anybody. He went to the boulder which the contestants were using, and said, "Why use so small a stone? This is only fit for children to use." He went to where a huge boulder was and, without any effort, picked it up and raised it on the palm of his hand. He gave a mighty throw, and the boulder travelled much farther than those of the other contestants who were using smaller ones. A great murmur of approval went up among the Tsimsyan, and the Gitrhahla who had been so boastful were now much embarrassed. The young man, after he had accomplished this, went back to his uncle's house, to the spot where he had always slept. He was unconcerned at what he had done and did not take any part in the happy dancing that followed, when the Tsimsyan had overcome all competitors by his stone-throwing. The stone-throwing had taken many days, as the competitors were many and came from all the different tribes, not only Tsimsyan, but also the Git'amat, the Gitlawp, the Wudstæ, the Niskæ, the Gitrhahla, and all the nearby nations.

When the wrestling began, it took a long while. The winner of the first match would be challenged by another, until he would be defeated. This kept on until finally there was an outstanding contestant. He was a large man, a Git'amat, a giant. As fast as competitors came forward, he would grasp them and throw them down with such violence that their backs would break. He was now openly challenging everybody to come and meet him. "Where are the brave and strong men of the Tsimsyan? Come, I want you to try me and overcome me." This he called out, and the Tsimsyan tribes were now crestfallen. There was none among them who could answer the challenge. But behold, the young man whom they had always ridiculed as the "Filthy One" came down the beach toward the giant monster, to meet him. They were astounded. Some said, "Do not let him shame us further! Stop him!" But the young man went on down the beach. Taking off his robe, he began to make preparations to meet his opponent. There were a great many spectators, all making fun of the Tsimsyan because of the "Filthy One." The giant ran at the young man who, at once, turned about and grasped his attacker. The huge man went up into the air and fell back to the ground, his bones broken. The Git'amat, who had been very happy, were now very much embarrassed. Such a simple-looking fellow had defeated their champion so thoroughly that every bone in his body was smashed. Again the Tsimsyan were jubilant. But the young man, quite unconcerned, went up the beach, as no further competitors came forward. He returned to his uncle's house

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and went to his sleeping place alongside the fire. The people no longer made fun of him; they now recognized that he was no ordinary being. All now had respect for him.

The wrestling competitions once over, it was now a competition of complete strength, in which the competitor was called to go up into the woods and to uproot a tree and drag it down to the beach. The one who could bring down the largest tree would be the winner. This was the final test of the athletes, and it was in this that the young man had been training.



15. Bear Mother and twins
and the Eagle above.

A tree nearby had been selected, and one competitor went to it. After a long struggle, he gave it up. Then the next, and so on until finally one was able to uproot this tree and drag it down. This man was a Wudstæ. This tribe was now outstanding, and as each following competitor went to another tree to try and uproot it but failed, he was jeered by the Wudstæ, who all felt that their man would not be defeated. When it seemed that no one would come forward to challenge him, the Wudstæ were even more outspoken in their jeers. They called out, "Where is he that sleeps in his own urine?" meaning the young man who had won the first and second contests. The people were startled to see the young man walking from his uncle's house and going to where the competition was taking place. Arriving there, he looked at the tree that they were endeavouring to uproot, and said, "Why

do you strong men play with a sapling? Why not a large spruce tree, that one?" pointing to a large tree standing on a hill. As soon as he had finished speaking, he walked up to this tree and began shaking it. Then he pulled out the lower branches without breaking them. Next he grasped the tree trunk, and began shaking it. He gradually lifted it out of the ground, roots and all. Then he packed it down to the water's edge. A great murmur of approval arose from all the people, excepting the Wudstæ, who were now crestfallen. The young man not only had overcome their strong man but had brought down a much larger tree.

The young man's fame spread to all the other countries. Various animals began to hear of it. They, in their separate turns, came to attack him, first the Howhow (mountain lion), the Medeek (grizzly), the Gibæo (wolves). But all these he overcame. The forests themselves began to crowd down upon the village where the champion lived, but he uprooted the trees as fast as they came. The mountains began to crowd down, and he pushed them back, one by one, to where they now stand. So now this young man had overcome everything in the world.

At this time, there was a man who was holding up the world on the end of a stout hemlock pole. Ever so often, the blue bill duck used to go to where he was and grease his joints. Every time he moved, he caused an earth tremor. When he changed hands, he caused an earthquake. This man was now very old, and he wanted to rest.

The young champion who had acquired his strength and power from the loon was sleeping by the fireside, and as usual he bothered nobody and spent most of the time asleep. He was now again beginning to be made fun of by his people, even though he had saved them from shame and embarrassment. But the people were forgetful.

One night at a time when all were asleep, a large canoe came to the beach below the house in which he was staying. When landing, those in the canoe kept saying to each other—there were many in the canoe—"This is the place; this is where he lives." Then the steersman jumped ashore, saying, "I will go up and see him. You await us here!" The strange man walked up directly to the house in which the young man was staying with his uncle and went straight to the young man who was sleeping. He shook him, saying, "Well, dear man, we have come for you. Your grandfather is now very weak, and he wants you to take his place." The champion woke up, and, without saying anything to any one in the house, he followed the stranger down into the canoe. There he seated himself in the stern, and the steersman said, "Let us be on our way!" Without any paddling the canoe moved away as if it were alive, and it travelled fast. This canoe was alive. It was a black fish, and the canoemen sat on its back. When they were away out to sea, out of sight of land, they came to a rock-like island. Here they landed, and the crew, which was human-like, changed into loons. Only the steersman

kept his human shape. He said to the young man, "Your grandfather feels very ill. That is why he sent for you, as it is now time that you should replace him. He has trained you these many days, and now you have overcome everything and everybody. You must take up the work which he has prepared you for. Follow me!" So without anything more being said, they went down a path which led inside this rock-like island. The trail all along was guarded by ducks and loons. Finally they came to the end of the trail. Then the loon, who was still in human form, stooped down and pulled the lid off an opening in the ground. A long ladder was seen by the young man. They climbed down this ladder. Finally they came to a small platform, all four sides of which were steep. No bottom was visible. In the middle of this platform sat a very aged man who was holding between his legs a huge hemlock pole. This he held against what appeared to be a flat floor. Then the loon man spoke, "Your grandfather has been holding up the world since it was made; now he has become weakened with age. You will take his place, after he has told you what you shall do. The aged one, seeing the young man, said, "I have been waiting a long while for you, but I wanted to be certain that you would be strong enough to carry on this work. That is why I wanted you to train and win all competitions in strength. This you have done, and now I will further instruct you. The ducks and loons will be your messengers, and they will supply you with food. They also will constantly oil your joints, in order that they may not grow stiff. They will know where to find me after I leave here. Now remember, you must always stay very still, as every time you move or change your position, no matter how slightly, it will be the cause of earthquakes. Should you collapse, this would cause the destruction of the world. All would perish." When he had finished, he very slowly arose, still holding the huge hemlock pole, and the young man sat down in his stead. The aged one placed the pole in his hand, and said, "Now I am going to sleep and rest. I am confident you can carry my burden."

The young man, it must be said, had been under the influence of the old man right from the start. He had made it so that he did not crave for the company of others, but was always satisfied to be by himself. Thus he would be accustomed to the loneliness of his new duties. He had shunned all companions and had never shown any desire to meet any woman. Yet, after he had accomplished his great feats of strength, they made many attempts to tempt him, but he always held himself aloof. Thus when he took his new duties he was contented.

When, next morning, the people of his uncle's house arose and saw that his sleeping place was vacant, they felt that a secret raid had come upon them and he had been taken away. But the uncle and his wife said, "I am certain no harm can happen to him, for he is a supernatural being. He is not like us. That is why he was always able to accomplish those wonders

which we witnessed. Now we may see him again, but whatever he is doing, you may be sure that it is something worthwhile." The people searched for him, but he had left no trace anywhere.

STRONG MAN AEMAELK WHO HOLDS UP THE WORLD

(A Tsimsyan myth recorded by William Beynon in 1954, from Heber Clifton and Mrs. Clifton, of Hartley Bay.)

The old people use to train their young men in many ways for them to become strong and to endure hardships and cold weather. During the winter the chief would make the young men of his tribe go out and swim in the cold water for a given distance, usually early in the morning. As soon as the swimmers came out of the water, they were whipped on their bare backs by the chief with switches made of bundles of berry bushes. Then they were fed by the chief's wives. This was kept up for an indefinite period. Those that could endure it the longest were considered the hardest and bravest. This was the custom. A Tsimsyan chief said to his nephews, "I want you four brothers to train yourselves so that you shall be the strongest and foremost athletes. Then we shall challenge the other Tsimsyan tribes and the foreign tribes too. So every morning the eldest nephew and his two brothers got up, swam, and trained themselves under the direction of their uncle. But the youngest brother paid no heed to his elders. He made a sleeping place for himself by the fire, and there he would sleep all day. There was always water where he slept; his folk thought that he urinated where he slept. Soon scabs seemed to be forming on his body. The people all made fun of him and called him *Æmælk*—Scabs. Every morning the brothers would say, "Why don't you try once to bathe and see how it is when you are clean. How can you bear your own filth?" But he paid no attention. At night when all in the house were asleep, he would walk down to the beach, and then go for a very long swim, much farther than any of his older brothers. Then he would climb into the woods, and there he would bathe in a brew made of devil's-club. While all were still asleep in the house, he would return, and his body still soaking he would fall asleep in the hollow in the ground which he used as a sleeping place. No one knew of his secret training. Every day the others made fun of him and referred to him as one that was always inhaling his own stench, while his brothers were training. They went out, and the chief told them, "Go to the small spruce tree and try to tear the branches from it. When you can do it, you will know that you are very strong." The young brothers tried day after day to do this but failed utterly. They were able only to twist the branches but could not tear them out without breaking them. Day after day they tried it again, but could not do any better.