

FOLKTALES OF THE SLAVE INDIANS

collected by

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These tales were recounted in English by an educated young Slave Indian now residing in Fort Simpson, N.W.T., who had heard them told by the "old people" of the region. Unfortunately, they were recorded during the course of a canoe trip, a circumstance that made interrogation and full recording difficult. So I must offer my apologies to the informant and to the reader for presenting the tales in less detailed and complete form than they were told. There is, however, such a paucity of published material on Slavey folklore that the presentation of these admittedly fragmentary accounts seems justified.

In speaking English, Slave Indians refer to other aborigines by tribal names, i.e., "Cree," "Chipewyan," etc., but call themselves simply "Indians" (their translation of the Slave term dene, "the people," "the men."). I have followed this usage in the text - where "Indians" are spoken of, the reference is to the Slave Indians.

THE CROW AND THE LOON

The birds used to paint one another. They painted each other all nice colours. The last two were the crow (i.e., the large northern raven) and the loon. They got mad at each other. The crow told the loon that he would paint him real nice. When the loon came out of the water, the crow threw black paint at him. Since then, the loon has had a black head.

The birds got mad at the crow. They threw him in the ashes. The crow almost choked and he flew away choking on the ashes, crying "Caa, Caa" because he was choking. That is how the crow got his cry.

FRAGMENTS OF THE SAGA OF EHTSONTSIE

The informant explained that the word "Ehtsontsie" means "like intestines." The radical tson within the word means "faeces."

Ehtsontsie was called by this name because he was like a man of rock. He did not have to go into the bush (i.e., for purposes of elimination) but once a month. When he was a child, the Indians were afraid that if the Cree heard of such a man of rock, they would come and kill him, so he was hidden until he was grown.

In the early days, the Cree came into this country taking scalps from the Indians. The Cree had muzzle loaders but the Indians had only bows and arrows. The Whites once asked the Cree what kind of fur these scalps were. The Cree told the White men that they got this fur from animals swimming in the ocean. One time, many Indians were camped in the Horn Mountains. There were so many people camped that a crow flew by and dropped dead, choked to death by the smoke of the many camp fires. The Cree came upon the Indians and started shooting them. The Indians had no rifles. The Indians got into a bunch to try to stop the bullets. They got into a line of ten trying to stop the bullets, but that way one bullet went through ten Indians and killed all ten. The Cree used up all their bullets, then they scalped the Indians and sold the scalps to the Whites.

Ehtsontsie was a tough guy and he defended the Indians here against the Crees. One time, when Ehtsontsie was a little boy, he went out to set rabbit snares. He wore a little club to kill rabbits, such as people carried in the old days. His brother-in-law followed him in the bush and whistled to scare Ehtsontsie, that is, he whistled to make the little boy think that a nakan (a nakan is a mysterious bush prowler that steals women and children) was whistling at him. The boy grabbed his rabbit club and hit his brother-in-law. He killed him. The boy did not know it was his brother-in-law when he struck. He was very sorry and would not eat for a long time. The hero was very mad at himself because he had killed his brother-in-law. It was autumn and the waves of the river were making ice. The boy took his blanket, covered his head with it and threw himself in the water. Soon he was covered with ice and he remained covered with ice most of the winter. His father was very sorry and he stayed by the hero. In the middle of the winter, people heard the ice cracking and the hero, Ehtsontsie, broke through the ice. He shook the ice from his head and went back to his father's place. Only then did he eat.

Not long after Ehtsontsie had killed his brother-in-law, a war party was made up against the Cree.

It was in the winter. The boy's father wouldn't let him go with the war party against the Cree because he was too young. Forty warriors were going against the Cree. The boy cried because he wanted to go too, so he followed the party. As the party was nearing the Cree camp the Indians saw a fire. They crept up to it, but the fire had been made by the boy. His father was angry to find that the boy had followed them. Then the boy saw some fires in the distance and asked who made them. His father scolded him. "Warriors don't ask questions." The men made a reconnaissance. The boy asked if he could watch from behind the tree. Pretty soon the firing started. Ehtsontsie said; "Why are you throwing spruce cones at me?" The things he thought were spruce cones were really bullets. Then Ehtsontsie rushed out and bashed in the heads of all the Cree. Afterwards he shook out his shirt and flattened bullets fell out from it.

Another time, Ehtsontsie went across a lake to take revenge on the Cree. He brought back six Cree women, hauling three sleighs all loaded. Two women pulled each sleigh. The man Ehtsontsie walked ahead. When they reached the camp of the Indians, he unloaded all the knives, guns, silk and beads that he had taken from the Cree. He passed these things around to the Indians so the Indians could now defend themselves against the Cree. Then that night he killed all six Cree women with a club.

People say that Ehtsontsie was so tough that his voice sounded like thunder. They say that Ehtsontsie died about one hundred years ago. His grandson, the third Ehtsontsie, died not very long ago.

FRAGMENTS OF THE SAGA OF THE TWO BROTHERS¹

There were two brothers. Their mother went out to gather berries. The brothers stayed with their grandfather. Their grandfather told them to look for lice in his hair. The brothers did not like that. So when their grandfather went to sleep, the brothers cut off the top of his head and put hot rocks in the hole. When their father and mother came back from berrying and saw what the brothers had done, they got mad. The brothers took a carving knife and left home. They went to a mountain and climbed to the top of it. With the carving knife, they cut pointed sticks. People came after them to the mountain. The brothers threw the pointed sticks down the mountain at the people and killed all of them.

The brothers did not know which way to go. One brother, the youngest, wanted to go to hot country. The other one, wanted to go to cold country. Before they parted, they split up a red fox and made belts out of it.

In his travels, one brother met little, short people about three feet high. He went into their camp and saw a little boy going out to visit the nets. He asked the little boy: "Where are you going?" Then he and the little boy started fighting. The little boy threw the man down on the ice. The big one got up very surprised and went into the camp. He thought the little boy was going out to visit the nets. The man broke the biggest tree he could find with his hands. Then the little boy came back. The little boy looked at the tree and said: "I don't make fire with such a little piece of hay." Then the little boy went out and brought back much bigger wood with which to make fire.

During his travels, one of the brothers killed lots of big animals of all kinds. One time when he was travelling on the Mackenzie River, he came near the Cameron Hills. It was getting late. He thought he was getting close to a mountain. Suddenly, quills started flying all around him. It was getting late so he camped for the night to keep from being killed by the quills. When day came, he saw that what he had thought was the mountain was a big porcupine. That was where the quills had come from. He killed that porcupine. Where he thought there had been a little hill, he now saw that was a little porcupine. He killed it. People say that these hills in the Cameron Hills look like two porcupines.

THE TINY PEOPLE

While the informant was telling the story of the brother who met the little people three feet high, he was reminded of other stories about very tiny people. Thus he stopped the story of the two brothers and proceeded to tell about the tiny people. This is part of the story. Not all of the details were recorded.

When the earth was young, there were really small people. These little birds we have here in the North, that stay in the North all winter, are those little people. These little birds are called tzitzakien. These tiny people used to live under leaves. They were so tiny that they used the leaves just like a tent. A big guy

like one of us came to their camps. The big guy wanted to know what the tiny people ate. The tiny people were going out to hunt. He followed them. They were so tiny they travelled under the leaves and he could hardly see to follow them. They had snares set for rabbits but they didn't get anything. They told the big guy to wait. They told him they were going to hunt a moose and they would drive the moose towards him. They made a turn around a big tree and found an owl and chased it out. They thought the owl was a moose. The owl came past the big guy who stood waiting for the moose. Then the little people appeared and they asked the big guy: "Did you see our game? Did you see our moose?" "No," he said. "I just saw an owl." The tiny people got mad.

The big guy camped with an old man of the tiny people. The tiny people left a little girl by his camp to be his wife. The big guy went out hunting and he killed a moose. He gave the fat to the old man. He gave the moose meat to the tiny people. The tiny people could not believe their eyes. They had never seen anything as big as that moose. The little girl wanted to show her mother part of the moose, so she carried two moose hairs to show her mother. She was so tiny that she could hardly pack the hairs. The little people went with the big guy to skin the moose. The big guy found that the little people were running through the moose's eyes, his nose, through everywhere - they were that tiny. One little guy fell in the moose track and the big fellow had to pull him out.

THE GIANT-KILLER

an adaptation of European motifs

The informant explained that this final story "must be a white man's story because it has a king in it. It is, indeed, obviously of recent European derivation, having the introductory motif of that tale known as "The Brave Little Tailor" or "Seven at One Blow."² Its main interest in the present instance is in the adaptation of the events to the environment of the northern forest, and, especially, in the 'twist' ending wherein the 'success story' conclusion, so typical of European tales, is rejected.

An Indian came to a village. He went to a big house where a king stayed. This Indian was a smart fellow. He would trick people by telling lies. The

Indian sat down near the palace where they threw out the trash. There were lots of flies around the garbage. The Indian smashed flies with his belt. Pretty soon a king's man came out and he said to the Indian: "Why are you here? There is a giant around here. You should not be outside the fence." The Indian said: "I can't die. Nobody can kill me." The king's man said: "Prove that." The Indian showed the man the flies on his belt and said: "I have killed as many giants as there are flies here." Then the king's man took him to the king. When the king heard this story, he offered his daughter and half of his money if the Indian would kill the giant. The Indian said: "O.K., but you will have to give me a little piece of bear skin." So the king gave the Indian a piece of bear skin. Then the Indian went into the bush.

He found the giant's trail and began to follow it. Pretty soon it grew late. The Indian made a fire. He could hear the giant coming, carrying a big club. The Indian cut a piece of spruce wood. He threw it near the fireplace and covered it with a blanket so it looked like someone sleeping under a blanket. He put the bear skin at one end and fixed it to look like the hair of the sleeper. Then the Indian hid in the bush holding his bow and arrow. The giant came up to the camp fire. He hit the sleeper with his club. "Don't move," the giant said to the dead man, "I'll pick you up when I come back." Then the giant went on. He killed a moose. Meanwhile, the Indian came out of the bush and threw the spruce log and the piece of bear skin into the fire. Then he went to a big spruce tree and made a hole in the spruce tree, big enough for his fist to go through. Pretty soon he could hear the giant coming back. The Indian lay down by the fire in place of the spruce log and covered himself with his blanket. When the giant came near, the Indian pretended that he had just awakened. The giant said: "I thought I killed you." The Indian said: "That's the kind of a guy I am. Kill me, I come alive again. Nobody can kill me." The giant got scared. The Indian called the giant "Grandfather," (elhtsie, a term commonly used to an older person.) The Indian said: "Grandfather, let's test our strength. I'm so tough, I can't die. I can do anything. Come on over to this tree. Let's see who can hit it the hardest." The giant was scared. He banged his hand as hard as he could against the tree. He hurt his hand and said: "I can't do any more." Then the Indian said: "I'll try," and he hit a tree. It was the tree he had made a hole in and his hand went right through the hole. Then the

Indian turned to the giant saying: "That's how tough I am. I can't die. Nothing can kill me." The giant was scared.

The giant had people in his sleigh, tied up. He was going to eat them later. The giant said to the Indian: "My wife is sleeping there in the sleigh. Let's eat some moose." But the Indian could see feet in the sleigh so he knew the giant had someone tied up there. The giant took the moose he had killed, over to the fire and skinned it. He cooked the whole moose. The giant said: "I'm so hungry, I can eat a whole moose." The Indian said: "I'm not very hungry, I can't eat much." Both started eating. The Indian said: "I can't eat much when people watch me eat or when I watch another person eat. Let's turn our backs on each other so we can't see each other eat." So they turned their backs to one another. When the giant's back was turned, the Indian took the moose guts and put them into a little bag that he had hung around his neck. The giant ate so much, he could hardly move. He took the moose hide and filled it with water and drank all the water. The Indian said: "Grandfather, I ate so much I can hardly move. I think I am going to die. Have you got a knife? When I eat too much, I cut open my stomach. That makes me feel better. Watch me." He took the giant's knife and slashed at himself, cutting open the bag full of moose guts that he had hung around his neck. When he cut the bag, all the guts that he had put into it came falling out. He rubbed blood on his skin as if he had cut himself open. Then he said: "See Grandfather, I am all mended all ready. I mended myself by rubbing the cut with my thumb. Since you ate too much, you do the same thing. You cut yourself open and I will mend you with my thumb." So the giant took the knife and cut himself open and he died. Then the Indian cut his head off.

In the morning, the Indian took the giant's head and went back to the king. When the king saw the giant's head, he said: "Good, now I will give you my daughter and money for your reward." But the Indian said "No," and ran away.

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NOTES

1. Other adventures of the Two Brothers have been previously published. See J.H. MacNeish, "Contemporary Folk Beliefs of a Slave Indian Band" in Journal of American Folklore, vol. 67, no. 264, 1954, pp. 195-196.
2. For the use of this motif and others in the Tale by Other American Indians, see Stith Thompson on "The Lucky Boaster," pp. 430-433 in European Tales Among the North American Indians, Colorado College Publication, Language Series, vol. II, no. 34, 1919.