

7. THE DEVIL'S CLUB

It was early in the year and the ice was beginning to flow down the Nass River. The people of Metlakahtla set out for the oolichan fishing. With them went a poor widow and her daughter, Tgahaast. The wind blew strong and cold down the valley. Even the young men found it hard to paddle into the wind. Tgahaast and her mother paddled as hard as they could, but they were left further and further behind. When night fell they were alone.

They stopped by a rocky cliff. Here they made a rough shelter against the rock. They slept, one at each side of the smoking fire. The wind grew stronger. It shook their shelter. Thunder rolled across the mountains.

In the middle of the night Tgahaast woke. She looked up to see a young man standing beside her.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I have come to ask you to marry me."

Tgahaast said, "Yes." She knew that it was not easy for the daughter of a poor widow to find a good husband.

When her new husband came close to her, Tgahaast had a strange, itchy feeling. It was as though she had brushed against a devil's club plant. Before

morning came, the young man left. Tgahaast had not been able to see his face clearly.

Each day the weather became worse. Each night the young man came back to visit his wife. Every time he came close to her, Tgahaast felt that same prickly feeling on her skin. In the mornings, when she went out to fetch water, she found a grouse laid by the door. Always there was enough firewood for the whole day.

One night the young man came in as usual. "This will be the last time I shall see you for a long time," he said. "You are going to have a son. He will grow up to be a great hunter. Nobody will be as good a hunter as he, because I will always be with him."

Next morning the weather was good. They set out on the smooth water. They arrived at the fishing camp on the very day the oolichan came. When the fishing was over they went back home until it was time for the salmon run on the Ksan.

In winter, Tgahaast had a beautiful baby boy. One day in the summer, she went into the forest to gather fire wood. Suddenly she saw a young man standing among the trees. Only when he spoke did Tgahaast know it was her husband.

"I have come to see you and my son," he said. How has he been?"

"Very well," said Tgahaast, holding up the baby.

The man touched his son gently. "Yes, he is fine and strong," he said. "When he grows up, do not give him too much to eat. Let him chew the inner bark of the devil's club. When he has chewed it, let him spit on his hands. Then he can rub himself with the juice. Do not go past the place where we met. He will be a very good hunter, because I will be with him. I will teach him to hunt and trap. Do not let him marry while he is young."

The boy, Wudsint, grew up quickly. Soon he was as good a hunter as any of the older men. One day he went to the mouth of the Nass River with four of his friends. They made their camp at the foot of that rock where his mother had camped so many years ago. While his friends were lighting a fire, Wudsint wandered into the forest. By a pool he saw a tall man.

"My son," said the man. "Yes, I am your father. I have come here to talk to you."

"I am listening, father."

"First I will teach you to catch valuable animals easily."

He showed Wudsint how to make a deadfall trap. He showed him how the bait should be set. He showed him how to make snares from cords and thongs.

"A good hunter does not only know about trapping," said the man. "He also knows how long to fast and how to wash himself so that he will please the spirits of

the forest. You must eat the inner bark of the devil's club. At night, after the fourth day, you must wash yourself by a stream. Then you must dive in. After that, you may not wash for a whole year. At the end of that year you must dive into the stream twelve times. Then you shall have everything you could want. But do not get married while you are young. I will see you once more."

Next morning the young men went hunting in the forest. Wudsint killed a great number of animals. He did exactly what his father had said. He was very lucky from the first day. He set traps and they were never empty.

When the twelve months were over, he went to look at his traps. Nothing was in them. He spent days mending and setting them. Still he could catch nothing.

He went into the forest to look for devil's club. He looked all day, but he could find none. He went home and washed himself in the stream. He went back up the hill. It was becoming dark now. At the top of the little hill he saw a big tree which he had not seen before. He walked towards it slowly. As he came close a man came out to meet him. Wudsint saw that the man, the being, glowed in the dusk.

"Come here again tomorrow, my son," said the being. Wudsint knew for the first time that he was the son of a spirit. "Tomorrow you will fell this tree. It will



last you through all your life."

Early next morning, Wudsint went back up the hill. The big tree was there. It was a huge devil's club. He felled the tree with his stone axe. When it lay on the ground, he peeled off the spiny outer bark. He scraped away the softer inner bark. It took him many journeys to carry the inner bark down to the village. He stored it behind his house.

At once he began to wash himself with the bark's juice. He ate some. He did this for forty days. At the end of this time he set out for his trapline again. It took him four days to mend and reset his many traps.

When he came back to the traps, each one had caught an animal. From that day Wudsint was the most successful of hunters.