

THE HEADDRESS OF THE MOUNTAIN GOAT

Informant: Joshua Tsyebesa, Kitkatla, Gispewudwada chief
Recorded by: William Beynon, 1916

In the neighbourhood of Temlaxam on the Skeena River, were a lot of mountain goats, which the hunters used to abuse and kill. They did so not for food but for the fun of crippling and maiming them, and afterwards releasing them. One day, a young prince of Temlaxam was out hunting. He came upon a number of young men abusing a little kid. When he saw this, he became very angry and said, "Stop that! These animals will some day return and kill us all on account of the way we are treating them." He took the kid under his arm, went up the hill, and said to it, "Go, my brother! Go home where you belong, and do not forget me."

Nonetheless the young people kept on killing and maiming the mountain goats, although their elders wanted them to stop. One day, a young man came into the village, entered the house of the chiefs, and said, "You and all your men are invited to a feast given by a great chief up in the hills." The chief answered, "We will go." The young stranger added, "Somebody, when the moment arrives, will come down for you, to guide you all to his house." Now this man was a mountain goat who had taken human shape in order to be revenged upon this tribe. Everybody got ready for the big feast and some composed new dirge songs to be sung at this feast. They never inquired as to their hosts or where the chief inviting them was, as the mountain goats had used their supernatural power on the people, so as to blind them. When the day arrived, a few young men came to the village and said, "Tomorrow, we will go up into the hills and enter the house of the chief and go to the feast."

So in the morning early, the people all followed these young men who led them up into the mountains. The paths were all clear and they reached a large mountain and rested outside. They were fed and they waited. Among the guests was the young prince who had saved the life of the kid. He was sitting there among his folk, when a young man came to him and said, "Brother, when you go into the house, do not sit at the side of the house among your people, but at the end. You will come to where I am sitting. I have not forgotten you." The young prince did not know what the young man meant, or who he was. After all the guests had rested and had eaten something, they wandered about as the feast and dances would soon commence. They saw that all the houses were made of rock built into the mountains. The strangers who lived here seemed to move about very quickly and lightly. When they had finished eating, a dried meat was served to them; it tasted like mountain goat's meat, but it really was the dung of mountain goat fixed up like meat. When they had finished eating, dancing began. The dancers now entered and all of them wore mountain goats' heads for headdresses, and this looked very real to the guests. The feet of the dancers were similar to the hooves of the mountain goats. Their movements were also the same as those of mountain goats. The guests said, "They are like real mountain goats."

The dancers now sang a song. In this song, the singers described how some of their tribe had been crippled and maimed and killed. They would get even upon the people that injured them. The guests now knew that their hosts were mountain goats and that they would be destroyed by them. They looked towards the door which they had entered and saw that it had disappeared. It was now a solid wall in the mountain, so they could not get out. They had to stay where they were. The leader, a big man who had a larger headdress and larger feet than the other dancers flew past the guests and ran and jumped over the fire. After he had done this a few times he shouted, "The moment has come when we shall show you, people, what we intend to do." Another song was sung, and the dancers kept jumping and dancing from one end of the house to the other. The young prince was taken care of by the young man who had called him brother; and who said to him, "When the big dancer says, 'I will kick the mountain,' you hold on to me very tight and I will save you. Your people are all to be destroyed. Nothing can save them." The big dancer jumped and ran and said, "I will kick the mountain." So he did, and the whole side of the mountain fell away, dragging with it the guests who were sitting on that side, all with the exception of the young prince who had done as he was told by his friend.

When the young prince looked, he saw that he was holding on to a mountain goat kid, and all the people who were in this house were now changed to mountain goats. The kid turned and said to the young prince, "You follow me and do whatever I tell you, and you shall be saved." This the young prince did and he saw that the roads upon which they had come in had disappeared. They now stood on the edge of a great precipice, over which the people and mountain had fallen. The kid then said to the prince, "The mountain goats have killed your people because they had abused them and made them suffer. Because you saved my life once I will save yours." Then he led on the way for the prince to follow. When they came to places where the prince could not follow, the kid would take him on its back and they travelled for a few days. Then they came to a very swift stream on the Skeena, across which they wanted to go to get to the village. The prince did not know how to get across, so the kid said, "I will take off my skin and give it to you, and you will be able to jump across, and my hooves will stop you from slipping on the rocks. After you get over, you will throw it back to me." This he did. He took the kid's skin and changed into a mountain goat and jumped across this river with ease. When he got over, he threw back the skin to the kid, who again wore it and leaped across the river to where the prince was standing. Then he led him on over and around hills and said to the prince, "When I get to that hill, I will leave you, as you will then be near your village, which is close by." When they came to the hill, the kid said to the prince, "You know now the power of the mountain goats. You must not kill any more than you want for food, and you will make a crest of the mountain goat headdress. You and your family will wear it." The kid turned away and went up into the hills. The young prince went on until he found his village, which was all in ruins. Only women were left, all of them mourning. He thought he had been away only a few days, but actually he found out that he had been away ten years. He told the women what had happened, and they sang dirge songs. The women married men from neighbouring villages.