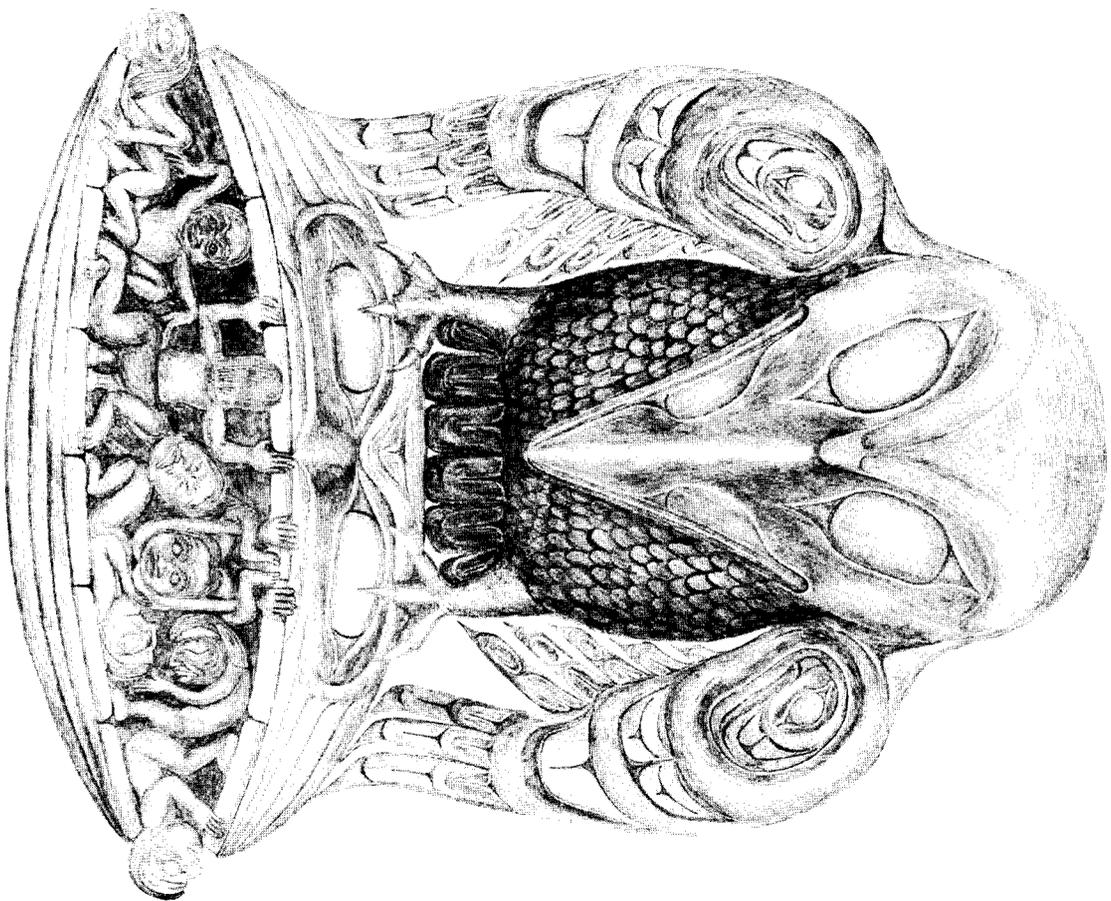


The Raven and the First Men



THE GREAT FLOOD which had covered the earth for so long had at last receded, and even the thin strip of sand now called Rose Spit, stretching north from Naikun village, lay dry. The Raven had flown there to gorge himself on the delicacies left by the receding water, so for once he wasn't hungry. But his other appetites – lust, curiosity and the unquenchable itch to meddle and provoke things, to play tricks on the world and its creatures – these remained unsatisfied.

He had recently stolen the light from the old man who kept it hidden in a box in his house in the middle of the darkness, and had scattered it throughout the sky. The new light spattered the night with stars and waxed and waned in the shape of the moon. And it dazzled the day with a single bright shining which lit up the long beach that curved from the spit beneath the Raven's feet westward as far as Tao Hill. Pretty as it was, it looked lifeless and so to the Raven quite boring. He gave a great sigh, crossed his wings behind his back and walked along the sand, his shiny head cocked, his sharp eyes and ears alert for any unusual sight or sound. Then taking to the air, he called petulantly out to the empty sky. To his delight, he heard an answering cry – or to describe it more closely, a muffled squeak.

The Raven Steals the Light

At first he saw nothing, but as he scanned the beach again, a white flash caught his eye, and when he landed he found at his feet, half buried in the sand, a gigantic clamshell. When he looked more closely still, he saw that the shell was full of little creatures covering in terror of his enormous shadow.

Well, here was something to break the monotony of his day. But nothing was going to happen as long as the tiny things stayed in the shell, and they certainly weren't coming out in their present terrified state. So the Raven leaned his great head close to the shell, and with the smooth trickster's tongue that had got him into and out of so many misadventures during his troubled and troublesome existence, he coaxed and cajoled and coerced the little creatures to come out and play in his wonderful, shiny new world. As you know, the Raven speaks in two voices, one harsh and strident, and the other, which he used now, a seductive bell-like croon which seems to come from the depth of the sea, or out of the cave where the winds are born. It is an irresistible sound, one of the loveliest sounds in the world. So it wasn't long before one and then another of the little shell-dwellers timidly emerged. Some of them immediately scurried back when they saw the immensity of the sea and the sky, and the overwhelming blackness of the Raven. But eventually curiosity overcame caution and all of them had crept or scrambled out. Very strange creatures they were: two-legged like the Raven, but there the resemblance ended. They had no glossy feathers, no thrusting beak. Their skin was pale, and they were naked except for the long black hair on their round, flat-featured heads. Instead of strong wings, they had thin stick-like appendages that waved and fluttered constantly. They were the original Haidas, the first humans.

For a long time the Raven amused himself with his new playthings, watching them as they explored their much-expanded world. Sometimes they helped one another in their

new discoveries. Just as often, they squabbled over some novelty they found on the beach. And the Raven taught them some clever tricks, at which they proved remarkably adept. But the Raven's attention span was brief, and he grew tired of his small companions. For one thing, they were all males. He had looked all up and down the beach for female creatures, hoping to make the game more interesting, but females were nowhere to be found. He was about to shove the now tired, demanding and quite annoying little creatures back into their shell and forget about them when suddenly – as happens so often with the Raven – he had an idea.

He picked up the men, and in spite of their struggles and cries of fright he put them on his broad back, where they hid themselves among his feathers. Then the Raven spread his wings and flew to North Island. The tide was low, and the rocks, as he had expected, were covered with those large but soft-jipped molluscs known as red chitons. The Raven shook himself gently, and the men slid down his back to the sand. Then he flew to the rock and with his strong beak pried a chiton from its surface.

Now, if any of you have ever examined the underside of a chiton, you may begin to understand what the Raven had in his libidinous, devious mind. He threw back his head and flung the chiton at the nearest of the men. His aim was as unerring as only a great magician's can be, and the chiton found its mark in the delicate groin of the startled, shellborn creature. There the chiton attached itself firmly. Then as sudden as spray hitting the rocks from a breaking wave, a shower of chitons broke over the wide-eyed humans, as each of the open-mouthed shellfish flew inexorably to its target.

Nothing quite like this had ever happened to the men. They had never dreamed of such a thing during their long stay in the clamshell. They were astounded, embarrassed, con-

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fused by a rush of new emotions and sensations. They shuffled and squirmed, uncertain whether it was pleasure or pain they were experiencing. They threw themselves down on the beach, where a great storm seemed to break over them, followed just as suddenly by a profound calm. One by one the chitons dropped off. The men staggered to their feet and headed slowly down the beach, followed by the raucous laughter of the Raven, echoing all the way to the great island to the north which we now call Prince of Wales.

That first troop of male humans soon disappeared behind the nearest headland, passing out of the games of the Raven and the story of humankind. Whether they found their way back to their shell or lived out their lives elsewhere, or perished in the strange environment in which they found themselves, nobody remembers, and perhaps nobody cares. They had played their roles and gone their way.

Meanwhile the chitons had made their way back to the rock, where they attached themselves as before. But they too had been changed. As high tide followed low and the great storms of winter gave way to the softer rains and warm sun of spring, the chitons grew and grew, many times larger than their kind had ever been before. Their jointed shells seemed about to fly apart from the enormous pressure within them. And one day a huge wave swept over the rock, tore them from their footholds and carried them back to the beach. As the water receded and the warm sun dried the sand, a great stirring began among the chitons. From each emerged a brown-skinned, black-haired human. This time there were both males and females among them, and the Raven could begin his greatest game: one that still goes on.

They were no timid shell-dwellers these, but children of the wild coast, born between the sea and land, challenging the strength of the stormy North Pacific and wrestling from it a

rich livelihood. Their descendants built on its beaches the strong, beautiful homes of the Haidas and embellished them with the powerful heraldic carvings that told of the legendary beginnings of great families, all the heroes and heroines and the gallant beasts and monsters who shaped their world and their destinies. For many generations they grew and flourished, built and created, fought and destroyed, living according to the changing seasons and the unchanging rituals of their rich and complex lives.

It's nearly over now. Most of the villages are abandoned, and those which have not entirely vanished lie in ruins. The people who remain are changed. The sea has lost much of its richness, and great areas of the land itself lie in waste. Perhaps it's time the Raven started looking for another clamshell.

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