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INTRODUCING B.C.'s HAIRY GIANTS

A collection of strange tales about British Columbia's wild men as told by those who say they have seen them

By J. W. Burns

Are the vast mountain solitudes of British Columbia, which few white men have ever penetrated, really populated by a hairy race of giants, fearful and awesome to behold, who never speak, and who vanish with uncanny swiftness, leaving only footprints to mark their passing? Reports from time to time, covering a period of many years, have come from hunters, trappers, and others who claim to have caught glimpses of these strange creatures—so many, indeed, that there is no doubt in the minds of those who have studied the matter that the “wild men” do exist. But what are they?

Some say they are a tribe of Indians who choose to live apart from their fellows, cladding themselves in skins and hiding in caves and secret fastnesses. Others hold that they are survivors of a prehistoric race of “cavemen,” who once roamed the continent and retreated to the highest mountains when more powerful tribes appeared. Still others believe that they may be entirely distinct—neither animal nor yet human, but something midway between.

The Indians of the Chehalis district, on the Fraser River, tell me that these hairy giants are called “Sasquatch,” and that they have always lived in the mountains. They rarely show themselves, and seldom molest the Indians, although stories of women and children having been carried off persist. The Indians, ordinarily reticent in such matters, speak with a note of awe when they refer to the “Sasquatch,” and watch their children carefully when they stray far from home.

Peter's Encounter with the Giant

One evening, in the month of May, while walking along a trail, [an Indian named Peter] says that he saw one of these creatures lying asleep by the side of a fallen log. Curious, Peter crept closer for a better look. The “man,” who wore no clothing other than a small piece of skin about his loins, was huge in stature, and his body covered with hair. Just then, he awoke, sprang to his feet with amazing agility, and vanished into the timber.

Another time, Peter was fishing along the Fraser when he noticed something moving on the bank. At first he thought it was a large black bear. Then, as it drew closer, he saw that it was a hairy man, stooped over and peering into the water as though looking for fish. Peter called out, and for a moment the strange being gazed at him. Then, uttering a grunt, it turned and ran off among the trees. Peter landed and examined the footprints in the mud, which he declared were of enormous size, with a stride that must have measured fully six feet.

According to Peter, one of these wild men once visited his home—and tore it to pieces in his absence. He says his wife and children, who were alone at the time, saw a huge shape peering in the window. Terrified, they ran out. Later, Peter found the walls partly torn down and the roof badly damaged, with massive footprints in the soil outside.

When questioned closely about these “wild men,” the older Indians sometimes admit having seen them. Occasionally, a white man, too, comes forward with the statement that he has encountered one. Such witnesses are reluctant to talk, fearful of ridicule. But the stories accumulate, making it difficult to dismiss them all as mere inventions.

Here, for example, is one related to me by an Indian woman named Mary:

“I was out in the berry-patch one day, on a hillside, when I saw what I at first took to be a big bear. But presently it stood up, and I saw that it was a giant man, covered from head to foot with hair. He looked at me for a few moments without making a sound, and then he walked away into the bush. When I got back to the village and told them what I had seen, the others said I must have been mistaken—that it was a bear. But I know a bear when I see one. This was no bear. It was a man—only far bigger than any Indian or white man I have ever seen.”

Charley Victor’s Story

Charley Victor, a respected Indian of the Chehalis Reserve near Harrison, also insists that he has encountered these hairy men many times in the mountains.

“They are not animals,” he says. “They are people—big men. The largest of them are about eight or nine feet tall, but they have large chests and big arms, and the hair on their bodies is like that of a bear. They do not speak, but sometimes they make a whistling sound or a noise like an animal call. They are very strong. I have seen one pick up a full-grown deer under each arm and run up a steep slope as easily as if he had no load at all.

“Usually, they mind their own business and don’t molest anyone, but you don’t want to get too close. If they feel cornered or threatened, they can tear a man to pieces. Yet they look so much like human beings that I have sometimes been afraid to shoot when I’ve seen one.”

Charley Shoots a Sasquatch Boy

“I DON’T know if I should tell you this,” Charley confided to me, “because the white people don’t believe such things. But I’ll tell you anyway. About ten years ago, I was hunting in the mountains when I spotted a small hairy man, not more than four feet high, squatting on a rock. I raised my rifle and fired. He let out a shrill cry, leaped up, and ran, screaming, into the bush. I followed and saw blood on the ground but never found him. I think he must have died of his wound. Then I was sorry I had shot, because I believe it was only a boy. I have never fired one of them since.

“My father once told me he came upon the body of one of these wild men that had been killed by a fall or a rock-slide—it was lying at the foot of a steep bluff. He examined it carefully, and he said it was neither a bear nor any kind of ape, but a hairy man. The hair was quite long and was already turning gray. That was the only time he ever saw one dead. My father warned me never to shoot one unless my life was in danger.”

Charley added that, among his own people, stories of the **“Sasquatch”** were common knowledge, though seldom discussed. “We do not like to talk about them,” he said, “because white men laugh at us and say it is all nonsense or that we are crazy. But I have seen these hairy men many times, and I know other Indians have seen them, too. They are real.”

The Wild Man at Agassiz

At Agassiz, near the site of the great hop fields on the Harrison, Indian and white pickers gather each September. On more than one occasion, the midday lull has been broken by a sudden cry, and a towering hairy figure has been glimpsed watching from some nearby log or stump. In one instance, a group around a cooking-fire looked up to see a creature standing perhaps a hundred yards away—tall, broad, and covered in hair. One man reached for his gun, but before he could aim, the figure vanished into the timber with remarkable speed. Some believed it was a bear, but those who saw it clearly said otherwise.

Another man, fishing alone on the Fraser, heard a series of piercing cries from the brush. Thinking it might be a cougar, he went to investigate and found enormous footprints along the muddy bank—clearly human in shape but far larger than any normal foot. He never saw the creature that made them, and he admitted that he felt uneasily as though he were being watched.

So, the stories go. These are only a few of the many I have collected from Indians who claim to have seen the “hairy giants.” White men may scoff, but many older frontiersmen in British Columbia keep an open mind. Whether these strange beings are truly a race of wild men lurking in the remotest mountains, or whether they are merely shadows in the imagination, is something I leave to the reader. I can only report that those who spoke with me seemed wholly sincere—and utterly convinced that what they saw was real.