

CHAPTER IV - FRIENDSHIP AND TREACHERY

The Sari proved a most erratic craft. She might have done well enough upon a park lagoon if safely anchored, but upon the bosom of a mighty ocean she left much to be desired.

Sailing with the wind she did her best; but in quartering or when close-hauled she drifted terribly, as a nautical man might have guessed she would. We couldn't keep within miles of our course, and our progress was pitifully slow.

Instead of making for the island of Anoroc, we bore far to the right, until it became evident that we should have to pass between the two right-hand islands and attempt to return toward Anoroc from the opposite side.

As we neared the islands Perry was quite overcome by their beauty. When we were directly between two of them he fairly went into raptures; nor could I blame him.

The tropical luxuriance of the foliage that dripped almost to the water's edge and the vivid colors of the blooms that shot the green made a most gorgeous spectacle.

Perry was right in the midst of a flowery panegyric on the wonders of the peaceful beauty of the scene when a canoe shot out from the nearest island. There were a dozen warriors in it; it was quickly followed by a second and third.

Of course we couldn't know the intentions of the strangers, but we could pretty well guess them.

Perry wanted to man the sweeps and try to get away from them, but I soon convinced him that any speed of which the Sari was capable would be far too slow to outdistance the swift, though awkward, dugouts of the Mezops.

I waited until they were quite close enough to hear me, and then I hailed them. I told them that we were friends of the Mezops, and that we were upon a visit to Ja of Anoroc, to which they replied that they were at war with Ja, and that if we would wait a minute they'd board us and throw our corpses to the azdyryths.

I warned them that they would get the worst of it if they didn't leave us alone, but they only shouted in derision and paddled swiftly toward us. It was evident that they were considerably impressed by the appearance and dimensions of our craft, but as these fellows know no fear they were not at all awed.

Seeing that they were determined to give battle, I leaned over the rail of the Sari and brought the imperial battle-squadron of the Emperor of Pellucidar into action for the first time in the history of a world. In other and simpler words, I fired my revolver at the nearest canoe.

The effect was magical. A warrior rose from his knees, threw his paddle aloft, stiffened into rigidity for an instant, and then toppled overboard.

The others ceased paddling, and, with wide eyes, looked first at me and then at the battling sea-things which fought for the corpse of their comrade. To them it must have seemed a miracle that I should be able to stand at thrice the range of the most powerful javelin-thrower and with a loud noise and a smudge of smoke slay one of their number with an invisible missile.

But only for an instant were they paralyzed with wonder. Then, with savage shouts, they fell once more to their paddles and forged rapidly toward us.

Again and again I fired. At each shot a warrior sank to the bottom of the canoe or tumbled overboard.

When the prow of the first craft touched the side of the Sari it contained only dead and dying men. The other two dugouts were approaching rapidly, so I turned my attention toward them.

I think that they must have been commencing to have some doubts--those wild, naked, red warriors--for when the first man fell in the second boat, the others stopped paddling and commenced to jabber among themselves.

The third boat pulled up alongside the second and its crews joined in the conference. Taking advantage of the lull in the battle, I called out to the survivors to return to their shore.

"I have no fight with you," I cried, and then I told them who I was and added that if they would live in peace they must sooner or later join forces with me.

"Go back now to your people," I counseled them, "and tell them that you have seen David I, Emperor of the Federated Kingdoms of Pellucidar, and that single-handed he has overcome you, just as he intends overcoming the Mahars and the Sagoths and any other peoples of Pellucidar who threaten the peace and welfare of his empire."

Slowly they turned the noses of their canoes toward land. It was evident that they were impressed; yet that they were loath to give up without further contesting my claim to naval supremacy was also apparent, for some of their number seemed to be exhorting the others to a renewal of the conflict.

However, at last they drew slowly away, and the Sari, which had not decreased her snail-like speed during this, her first engagement, continued upon her slow, uneven way.

Presently Perry stuck his head up through the hatch and hailed me.

"Have the scoundrels departed?" he asked. "Have you killed them all?"

"Those whom I failed to kill have departed, Perry," I replied.

He came out on deck and, peering over the side, descried the lone canoe floating a short distance astern with its grim and grisly freight. Farther his eyes wandered to the retreating boats.

"David," said he at last, "this is a notable occasion. It is a great day in the annals of Pellucidar. We have won a glorious victory.

"Your majesty's navy has routed a fleet of the enemy thrice its own size, manned by ten times as many men. Let us give thanks."

I could scarce restrain a smile at Perry's use of the pronoun "we," yet I was glad to share the rejoicing with him as I shall always be glad to share everything with the dear old fellow.

Perry is the only male coward I have ever known whom I could respect and love. He was not created for fighting; but I think that if the occasion should ever arise where it became necessary he would give his life cheerfully for me--yes, I KNOW it.

It took us a long time to work around the islands and draw in close to Anoroc. In the leisure afforded we took turns working on our map, and by means of the compass and a little guesswork we set down the shoreline we had left and the three islands with fair accuracy.

Crossed sabers marked the spot where the first great naval engagement of a world had taken place. In a note-book we jotted down, as had been our custom, details that would be of historical value later.

Opposite Anoroc we came to anchor quite close to shore. I knew from my previous experience with the tortuous trails of the island that I could never find my way inland to the hidden tree-village of the Mezop chieftain, Ja; so we remained aboard the Sari, firing our express rifles at intervals to attract the attention of the natives.

After some ten shots had been fired at considerable intervals a body of copper-colored warriors appeared upon the shore. They watched us for a moment and then I hailed them, asking the whereabouts of my old friend Ja.

They did not reply at once, but stood with their heads together in serious and animated discussion. Continually they turned their eyes toward our strange craft. It was evident that they were greatly puzzled by our appearance as well as unable to explain the source of the loud noises that had attracted their attention to us. At last one of the warriors addressed us.

"Who are you who seek Ja?" he asked. "What would you of our chief?"

"We are friends," I replied. "I am David. Tell Ja that David, whose life he once saved from a sithic, has come again to visit him.

"If you will send out a canoe we will come ashore. We cannot bring our great warship closer in."

Again they talked for a considerable time. Then two of them entered a canoe that several dragged from its hiding-place in the jungle and paddled swiftly toward us.

They were magnificent specimens of manhood. Perry had never seen a member of this red race close to before. In fact, the dead men in the canoe we had left astern after the battle and the survivors who were paddling rapidly toward their shore were the first he ever had seen. He had been greatly impressed by their physical beauty and the promise of superior intelligence which their well-shaped skulls gave.

The two who now paddled out received us into their canoe with dignified courtesy. To my inquiries relative to Ja they explained that he had not been in the village when our signals were heard, but that runners had been sent out after him and that doubtless he was already upon his way to the coast.

One of the men remembered me from the occasion of my former visit to the island; he was extremely agree-able the moment that he came close enough to recognize me. He said that Ja would be delighted to welcome me, and that all the tribe of Anoroc knew of me by repute, and had received explicit instructions from their chieftain that if any of them should ever come upon me to show me every kindness and attention.

Upon shore we were received with equal honor. While we stood conversing with our bronze friends a tall warrior leaped suddenly from the jungle.

It was Ja. As his eyes fell upon me his face lighted with pleasure. He came quickly forward to greet me after the manner of his tribe.

Toward Perry he was equally hospitable. The old man fell in love with the savage giant as completely as had I. Ja conducted us along the maze-like trail to his strange village, where he gave over one of the tree-houses for our exclusive use.

Perry was much interested in the unique habitation, which resembled nothing so much as a huge wasp's nest built around the bole of a tree well above the ground.

After we had eaten and rested Ja came to see us with a number of his head men. They listened attentively to my story, which included a narrative of the events leading to the formation of the federated kingdoms, the battle with the Mahars, my journey to the outer world, and my return to Pellucidar and search for Sari and my mate.

Ja told me that the Mezops had heard something of the federation and had been much interested in it. He had even gone so far as to send a party of warriors toward Sari to investigate the reports, and to arrange for the entrance of Anoroc into the empire in case it appeared that there was any truth in the rumors that one of the aims of the federation was the overthrow of the Mahars.

The delegation had met with a party of Sagoths. As there had been a truce between the Mahars and the Mezops for many generations, they camped with these warriors of the reptiles, from whom they learned that the federation had gone to pieces. So the party returned to Anoroc.

When I showed Ja our map and explained its purpose to him, he was much interested. The location of Anoroc, the Mountains of the Clouds, the river, and the strip of seacoast were all familiar to him.

He quickly indicated the position of the inland sea and close beside it, the city of Phutra, where one of the powerful Mahar nations had its seat. He likewise showed us where Sari should be and carried his own coast-line as far north and south as it was known to him.

His additions to the map convinced us that Greenwich lay upon the verge of this same sea, and that it might be reached by water more easily than by the arduous crossing of the mountains or the dangerous approach through Phutra, which lay almost directly in line between Anoroc and Greenwich to the northwest.

If Sari lay upon the same water then the shore-line must bend far back toward the southwest of Greenwich--an assumption which, by the way, we found later to be true. Also, Sari was upon a lofty plateau at the southern end of a mighty gulf of the Great Ocean.

The location which Ja gave to distant Amoz puzzled us, for it placed it due north of Greenwich, apparently in mid-ocean. As Ja had never been so far and knew only of Amoz through hearsay, we thought that he must be mistaken; but he was not. Amoz lies directly north of Greenwich across the mouth of the same gulf as that upon which Sari is.

The sense of direction and location of these primitive Pellucidarians is little short of uncanny, as I have had occasion to remark in the past. You may take one of them to the uttermost ends of his world, to places of which he has never even heard, yet without sun or moon or stars to guide him, without map or compass, he will travel straight for home in the shortest direction.

Mountains, rivers, and seas may have to be gone around, but never once does his sense of direction fail him--the homing instinct is supreme.

In the same remarkable way they never forget the location of any place to which they have ever been, and know that of many of which they have only heard from others who have visited them.

In short, each Pellucidarian is a walking geography of his own district and of much of the country contiguous thereto. It always proved of the greatest aid to Perry and me; nevertheless we were anxious to enlarge our map, for we at least were not endowed with the homing instinct.

After several long councils it was decided that, in order to expedite matters, Perry should return to the prospector with a strong party of Mezops and fetch the freight I had brought from the outer world. Ja and his warriors were much impressed by our firearms, and were also anxious to build boats with sails.

As we had arms at the prospector and also books on boat-building we thought that it might prove an excellent idea to start these naturally maritime people upon the construction of a well built navy of staunch sailing-vessels. I was sure that with definite plans to go by Perry could oversee the construction of an adequate flotilla.

I warned him, however, not to be too ambitious, and to forget about dreadnoughts and armored cruisers for a while and build instead a few small sailing-boats that could be manned by four or five men.

I was to proceed to Sari, and while prosecuting my search for Dian attempt at the same time the rehabilitation of the federation. Perry was going as far as possible by water, with the chances that the entire trip might be made in that manner, which proved to be the fact.

With a couple of Mezops as companions I started for Sari. In order to avoid crossing the principal range of the Mountains of the Clouds we took a route that passed a little way south of Phutra. We had eaten four times and slept once, and were, as my companions told me, not far from the great Mahar city, when we were suddenly confronted by a considerable band of Sagoths.

They did not attack us, owing to the peace which exists between the Mahars and the Mezops, but I could see that they looked upon me with considerable suspicion. My friends told them that I was a stranger from a remote country, and as we had previously planned against such a contingency I pretended ignorance of the language which the human beings of Pellucidar employ in conversing with the gorilla-like soldiery of the Mahars.

I noticed, and not without misgivings, that the leader of the Sagoths eyed me with an expression that betokened partial recognition. I was sure that he had seen me before during the period of my incarceration in Phutra and that he was trying to recall my identity.

It worried me not a little. I was extremely thankful when we bade them adieu and continued upon our journey.

Several times during the next few marches I became acutely conscious of the sensation of being watched by unseen eyes, but I did not speak of my suspicions to my companions. Later I had reason to regret my reticence, for--

Well, this is how it happened:

We had killed an antelope and after eating our fill I had lain down to sleep. The Pellucidarians, who seem seldom if ever to require sleep, joined me in this instance, for we had had a very trying march along the northern foothills of the Mountains of the Clouds, and now with their bellies filled with meat they seemed ready for slumber.

When I awoke it was with a start to find a couple of huge Sagoths astride me. They pinioned my arms and legs, and later chained my wrists behind my back. Then they let me up.

I saw my companions; the brave fellows lay dead where they had slept, javelined to death without a chance at self-defense.

I was furious. I threatened the Sagoth leader with all sorts of dire reprisals; but when he heard me speak the hybrid language that is the medium of communication between his kind and the human race of the inner world he only grinned, as much as to say, "I thought so!"

They had not taken my revolvers or ammunition away from me because they did not know what they were; but my heavy rifle I had lost. They simply left it where it had lain beside me.

So low in the scale of intelligence are they, that they had not sufficient interest in this strange object even to fetch it along with them.

I knew from the direction of our march that they were taking me to Phutra. Once there I did not need much of an imagination to picture what my fate would be. It was the arena and a wild thag or fierce tarag for me--unless the Mahars elected to take me to the pits.

In that case my end would be no more certain, though infinitely more horrible and painful, for in the pits I should be subjected to cruel vivisection. From what I had once seen of their methods in the pits of Phutra I knew them to be the opposite of merciful, whereas in the arena I should be quickly despatched by some savage beast.

Arrived at the underground city, I was taken immediately before a slimy Mahar. When the creature had received the report of the Sagoth its cold eyes glistened with malice and hatred as they were turned balefully upon me.

I knew then that my identity had been guessed. With a show of excitement that I had never before seen evinced by a member of the dominant race of Pellucidar, the Mahar hustled me away, heavily guarded, through the main avenue of the city to one of the principal buildings.

Here we were ushered into a great hall where presently many Mahars gathered.

In utter silence they conversed, for they have no oral speech since they are without auditory nerves. Their method of communication Perry has likened to the projection of a sixth sense into a fourth dimension, where it becomes cognizable to the sixth sense of their audience.

Be that as it may, however, it was evident that I was the subject of discussion, and from the hateful looks bestowed upon me not a particularly pleasant subject.

How long I waited for their decision I do not know, but it must have been a very long time. Finally one of the Sagoths addressed me. He was acting as interpreter for his masters.

"The Mahars will spare your life," he said, "and release you on one condition."

"And what is that condition?" I asked, though I could guess its terms.

"That you return to them that which you stole from the pits of Phutra when you killed the four Mahars and escaped," he replied.

I had thought that that would be it. The great secret upon which depended the continuance of the Mahar race was safely hid where only Dian and I knew.

I ventured to imagine that they would have given me much more than my liberty to have it safely in their keeping again; but after that--what?

Would they keep their promises?

I doubted it. With the secret of artificial propagation once more in their hands their numbers would soon be made so to overrun the world of Pellucidar that there could be no hope for the eventual supremacy of the human race, the cause for which I so devoutly hoped, for which I had consecrated my life, and for which I was not willing to give my life.

Yes! In that moment as I stood before the heartless tribunal I felt that my life would be a very little thing to give could it save to the human race of Pellucidar the chance to come into its own by insuring the eventual extinction of the hated, powerful Mahars.

"Come!" exclaimed the Sagoths. "The mighty Mahars await your reply."

"You may say to them," I answered, "that I shall not tell them where the great secret is hid."

When this had been translated to them there was a great beating of reptilian wings, gaping of sharp-fanged jaws, and hideous hissing. I thought that they were about to fall upon me on the spot, and so I laid my hands upon my revolvers; but at length they became more quiet and presently transmitted some command to my Sagoth guard, the chief of which laid a heavy hand upon my arm and pushed me roughly before him from the audience-chamber.

They took me to the pits, where I lay carefully guarded. I was sure that I was to be taken to the vivisection laboratory, and it required all my courage to fortify myself against the terrors of so fearful a death. In Pellucidar, where there is no time, death-agonies may endure for eternities.

Accordingly, I had to steel myself against an endless doom, which now stared me in the face!