

CHAPTER IX - HOOJA'S CUTTHROATS APPEAR

I had built a little shelter of rocks and brush where I might crawl in and sleep out of the perpetual light and heat of the noonday sun. When I was tired or hungry I retired to my humble cot.

My masters never interposed the slightest objection. As a matter of fact, they were very good to me, nor did I see aught while I was among them to indicate that they are ever else than a simple, kindly folk when left to themselves. Their awe-inspiring size, terrific strength, mighty fighting-fangs, and hideous appearance are but the attributes necessary to the successful waging of their constant battle for survival, and well do they employ them when the need arises. The only flesh they eat is that of herbivorous animals and birds. When they hunt the mighty thag, the prehistoric bos of the outer crust, a single male, with his fiber rope, will catch and kill the greatest of the bulls.

Well, as I was about to say, I had this little shelter at the edge of my melon-patch. Here I was resting from my labors on a certain occasion when I heard a great hub-bub in the village, which lay about a quarter of a mile away.

Presently a male came racing toward the field, shouting excitedly. As he approached I came from my shelter to learn what all the commotion might be about, for the monotony of my existence in the melon-patch must have fostered that trait of my curiosity from which it had always been my secret boast I am peculiarly free.

The other workers also ran forward to meet the messenger, who quickly unburdened himself of his information, and as quickly turned and scampered back toward the village. When running these beast-men often go upon all fours. Thus they leap over obstacles that would slow up a human being, and upon the level attain a speed that would make a thoroughbred look to his laurels. The result in this instance was that before I had more than assimilated the gist of the word which had been brought to the fields, I was alone, watching my co-workers speeding villageward.

I was alone! It was the first time since my capture that no beast-man had been within sight of me. I was alone! And all my captors were in the village at the opposite edge of the mesa repelling an attack of Hooja's horde!

It seemed from the messenger's tale that two of Gr-gr-gr's great males had been set upon by a half-dozen of Hooja's cutthroats while the former were peaceably returning from the thag hunt. The two had returned to the village unscratched,

while but a single one of Hooja's half-dozen had escaped to report the outcome of the battle to their leader. Now Hooja was coming to punish Gr-gr-gr's people. With his large force, armed with the bows and arrows that Hooja had learned from me to make, with long lances and sharp knives, I feared that even the mighty strength of the beastmen could avail them but little.

At last had come the opportunity for which I waited! I was free to make for the far end of the mesa, find my way to the valley below, and while the two forces were engaged in their struggle, continue my search for Hooja's village, which I had learned from the beast-men lay farther on down the river that I had been following when taken prisoner.

As I turned to make for the mesa's rim the sounds of battle came plainly to my ears--the hoarse shouts of men mingled with the half-beastly roars and growls of the brute-folk.

Did I take advantage of my opportunity?

I did not. Instead, lured by the din of strife and by the desire to deliver a stroke, however feeble, against hated Hooja, I wheeled and ran directly toward the village.

When I reached the edge of the plateau such a scene met my astonished gaze as never before had startled it, for the unique battle-methods of the half-brutes were rather the most remarkable I had ever witnessed. Along the very edge of the cliff-top stood a thin line of mighty males--the best rope-throwers of the tribe. A few feet behind these the rest of the males, with the exception of about twenty, formed a second line. Still farther in the rear all the women and young children were clustered into a single group under the protection of the remaining twenty fighting males and all the old males.

But it was the work of the first two lines that interested me. The forces of Hooja--a great horde of savage Sagoths and primeval cave men--were working their way up the steep cliff-face, their agility but slightly less than that of my captors who had clambered so nimbly aloft--even he who was burdened by my weight.

As the attackers came on they paused occasionally wherever a projection gave them sufficient foothold and launched arrows and spears at the defenders above them. During the entire battle both sides hurled taunts and insults at one another--the human beings naturally excelling the brutes in the coarseness and vileness of their vilification and invective.

The "firing-line" of the brute-men wielded no weapon other than their long fiber nooses. When a foeman came within range of them a noose would settle unerringly about him and he would be dragged, fighting and yelling, to the cliff-

top, unless, as occasionally occurred, he was quick enough to draw his knife and cut the rope above him, in which event he usually plunged down-ward to a no less certain death than that which awaited him above.

Those who were hauled up within reach of the powerful clutches of the defenders had the nooses snatched from them and were catapulted back through the first line to the second, where they were seized and killed by the simple expedient of a single powerful closing of mighty fangs upon the backs of their necks.

But the arrows of the invaders were taking a much heavier toll than the nooses of the defenders and I foresaw that it was but a matter of time before Hooja's forces must conquer unless the brute-men changed their tactics, or the cave men tired of the battle.

Gr-gr-gr was standing in the center of the first line. All about him were boulders and large fragments of broken rock. I approached him and without a word toppled a large mass of rock over the edge of the cliff. It fell directly upon the head of an archer, crushing him to instant death and carrying his mangled corpse with it to the bottom of the declivity, and on its way brushing three more of the attackers into the hereafter.

Gr-gr-gr turned toward me in surprise. For an instant he appeared to doubt the sincerity of my motives. I felt that perhaps my time had come when he reached for me with one of his giant paws; but I dodged him, and running a few paces to the right hurled down another missile. It, too, did its allotted work of destruction. Then I picked up smaller fragments and with all the control and accuracy for which I had earned justly deserved fame in my collegiate days I rained down a hail of death upon those beneath me.

Gr-gr-gr was coming toward me again. I pointed to the litter of rubble upon the cliff-top.

"Hurl these down upon the enemy!" I cried to him. "Tell your warriors to throw rocks down upon them!"

At my words the others of the first line, who had been interested spectators of my tactics, seized upon great boulders or bits of rock, whichever came first to their hands, and, without waiting for a command from Gr-gr-gr, deluged the terrified cave men with a perfect avalanche of stone. In less than no time the cliff-face was stripped of enemies and the village of Gr-gr-gr was saved.

Gr-gr-gr was standing beside me when the last of the cave men disappeared in rapid flight down the valley. He was looking at me intently.

"Those were your people," he said. "Why did you kill them?"

"They were not my people," I returned. "I have told you that before, but you would not believe me. Will you believe me now when I tell you that I hate Hooja and his tribe as much as you do? Will you believe me when I tell you that I wish to be the friend of Gr-gr-gr?"

For some time he stood there beside me, scratching his head. Evidently it was no less difficult for him to readjust his preconceived conclusions than it is for most human beings; but finally the idea percolated--which it might never have done had he been a man, or I might qualify that statement by saying had he been some men. Finally he spoke.

"Gilak," he said, "you have made Gr-gr-gr ashamed. He would have killed you. How can he reward you?"

"Set me free," I replied quickly.

"You are free," he said. "You may go down when you wish, or you may stay with us. If you go you may always return. We are your friends."

Naturally, I elected to go. I explained all over again to Gr-gr-gr the nature of my mission. He listened attentively; after I had done he offered to send some of his people with me to guide me to Hooja's village. I was not slow in accepting his offer.

First, however, we must eat. The hunters upon whom Hooja's men had fallen had brought back the meat of a great thag. There would be a feast to commemorate the victory--a feast and dancing.

I had never witnessed a tribal function of the brute-folk, though I had often heard strange sounds coming from the village, where I had not been allowed since my capture. Now I took part in one of their orgies.

It will live forever in my memory. The combination of bestiality and humanity was oftentimes pathetic, and again grotesque or horrible. Beneath the glaring noonday sun, in the sweltering heat of the mesa-top, the huge, hairy creatures leaped in a great circle. They coiled and threw their fiber-ropes; they hurled taunts and insults at an imaginary foe; they fell upon the carcass of the thag and literally tore it to pieces; and they ceased only when, gorged, they could no longer move.

I had to wait until the processes of digestion had released my escort from its torpor. Some had eaten until their abdomens were so distended that I thought they must burst, for beside the thag there had been fully a hundred antelopes of

various sizes and varied degrees of decomposition, which they had unearthed from burial beneath the floors of their lairs to grace the banquet-board.

But at last we were started--six great males and myself. Gr-gr-gr had returned my weapons to me, and at last I was once more upon my oft-interrupted way toward my goal. Whether I should find Dian at the end of my journey or no I could not even surmise; but I was none the less impatient to be off, for if only the worst lay in store for me I wished to know even the worst at once.

I could scarce believe that my proud mate would still be alive in the power of Hooja; but time upon Pellucidar is so strange a thing that I realized that to her or to him only a few minutes might have elapsed since his subtle trickery had enabled him to steal her away from Phutra. Or she might have found the means either to repel his advances or escape him.

As we descended the cliff we disturbed a great pack of large hyena-like beasts--hyaena spelaeus, Perry calls them--who were busy among the corpses of the cave men fallen in battle. The ugly creatures were far from the cowardly things that our own hyenas are reputed to be; they stood their ground with bared fangs as we approached them. But, as I was later to learn, so formidable are the brute-folk that there are few even of the larger carnivora that will not make way for them when they go abroad. So the hyenas moved a little from our line of march, closing in again upon their feasts when we had passed.

We made our way steadily down the rim of the beautiful river which flows the length of the island, coming at last to a wood rather denser than any that I had before encountered in this country. Well within this forest my escort halted.

"There!" they said, and pointed ahead. "We are to go no farther."

Thus having guided me to my destination they left me. Ahead of me, through the trees, I could see what appeared to be the foot of a steep hill. Toward this I made my way. The forest ran to the very base of a cliff, in the face of which were the mouths of many caves. They appeared untenanted; but I decided to watch for a while before venturing farther. A large tree, densely foliated, offered a splendid vantage-point from which to spy upon the cliff, so I clambered among its branches where, securely hidden, I could watch what transpired about the caves.

It seemed that I had scarcely settled myself in a comfortable position before a party of cave men emerged from one of the smaller apertures in the cliff-face, about fifty feet from the base. They descended into the forest and disappeared. Soon after came several others from the same cave, and after them, at a short interval, a score of women and children, who came into the wood to gather fruit. There were several warriors with them--a guard, I presume.

After this came other parties, and two or three groups who passed out of the forest and up the cliff-face to enter the same cave. I could not understand it. All who came out had emerged from the same cave. All who returned reentered it. No other cave gave evidence of habitation, and no cave but one of extraordinary size could have accommodated all the people whom I had seen pass in and out of its mouth.

For a long time I sat and watched the coming and going of great numbers of the cave-folk. Not once did one leave the cliff by any other opening save that from which I had seen the first party come, nor did any reenter the cliff through another aperture.

What a cave it must be, I thought, that houses an entire tribe! But dissatisfied of the truth of my surmise, I climbed higher among the branches of the tree that I might get a better view of other portions of the cliff. High above the ground I reached a point whence I could see the summit of the hill. Evidently it was a flat-topped butte similar to that on which dwelt the tribe of Gr-gr-gr.

As I sat gazing at it a figure appeared at the very edge. It was that of a young girl in whose hair was a gorgeous bloom plucked from some flowering tree of the forest. I had seen her pass beneath me but a short while before and enter the small cave that had swallowed all of the returning tribesmen.

The mystery was solved. The cave was but the mouth of a passage that led upward through the cliff to the summit of the hill. It served merely as an avenue from their lofty citadel to the valley below.

No sooner had the truth flashed upon me than the realization came that I must seek some other means of reaching the village, for to pass unobserved through this well-traveled thoroughfare would be impossible. At the moment there was no one in sight below me, so I slid quickly from my arboreal watch-tower to the ground and moved rapidly away to the right with the intention of circling the hill if necessary until I had found an unwatched spot where I might have some slight chance of scaling the heights and reaching the top unseen.

I kept close to the edge of the forest, in the very midst of which the hill seemed to rise. Though I carefully scanned the cliff as I traversed its base, I saw no sign of any other entrance than that to which my guides had led me.

After some little time the roar of the sea broke upon my ears. Shortly after I came upon the broad ocean which breaks at this point at the very foot of the great hill where Hooja had found safe refuge for himself and his villains.

I was just about to clamber along the jagged rocks which lie at the base of the cliff next to the sea, in search of some foothold to the top, when I chanced to see a canoe rounding the end of the island. I threw myself down behind a large boulder where I could watch the dugout and its occupants without myself being seen.

They paddled toward me for a while and then, about a hundred yards from me, they turned straight in toward the foot of the frowning cliffs. From where I was it seemed that they were bent upon self-destruction, since the roar of the breakers beating upon the perpendicular rock-face appeared to offer only death to any one who might venture within their relentless clutch.

A mass of rock would soon hide them from my view; but so keen was the excitement of the instant that I could not refrain from crawling forward to a point whence I could watch the dashing of the small craft to pieces on the jagged rocks that loomed before her, although I risked discovery from above to accomplish my design.

When I had reached a point where I could again see the dugout, I was just in time to see it glide unharmed between two needle-pointed sentinels of granite and float quietly upon the unruffled bosom of a tiny cove.

Again I crouched behind a boulder to observe what would next transpire; nor did I have long to wait. The dugout, which contained but two men, was drawn close to the rocky wall. A fiber rope, one end of which was tied to the boat, was made fast about a projection of the cliff face.

Then the two men commenced the ascent of the almost perpendicular wall toward the summit several hundred feet above. I looked on in amazement, for, splendid climbers though the cave men of Pellucidar are, I never before had seen so remarkable a feat performed. Upwardly they moved without a pause, to disappear at last over the summit.

When I felt reasonably sure that they had gone for a while at least I crawled from my hiding-place and at the risk of a broken neck leaped and scrambled to the spot where their canoe was moored.

If they had scaled that cliff I could, and if I couldn't I should die in the attempt.

But when I turned to the accomplishment of the task I found it easier than I had imagined it would be, since I immediately discovered that shallow hand and footholds had been scooped in the cliff's rocky face, forming a crude ladder from the base to the summit.

At last I reached the top, and very glad I was, too. Cautiously I raised my head until my eyes were above the cliff-crest. Before me spread a rough mesa, liberally sprinkled with large boulders. There was no village in sight nor any living creature.

I drew myself to level ground and stood erect. A few trees grew among the boulders. Very carefully I advanced from tree to tree and boulder to boulder toward the inland end of the mesa. I stopped often to listen and look cautiously about me in every direction.

How I wished that I had my revolvers and rifle! I would not have to worm my way like a scared cat toward Hooja's village, nor did I relish doing so now; but Dian's life might hinge upon the success of my venture, and so I could not afford to take chances. To have met suddenly with discovery and had a score or more of armed warriors upon me might have been very grand and heroic; but it would have immediately put an end to all my earthly activities, nor have accomplished aught in the service of Dian.

Well, I must have traveled nearly a mile across that mesa without seeing a sign of anyone, when all of a sudden, as I crept around the edge of a boulder, I ran plump into a man, down on all fours like myself, crawling toward me.