

CHAPTER XIII - RACING FOR LIFE

At last the sea subsided, and we were able to get a better view of the armada of small boats in our wake. There must have been two hundred of them. Juag said that he had never seen so many boats before in all his life. Where had they come from? Juag was first to hazard a guess.

"Hooja," he said, "was building many boats to carry his warriors to the great river and up it toward Sari. He was building them with almost all his warriors and many slaves upon the Island of Trees. No one else in all the history of Pellucidar has ever built so many boats as they told me Hooja was building. These must be Hooja's boats."

"And they were blown out to sea by the great storm just as we were," suggested Dian.

"There can be no better explanation of them," I agreed.

"What shall we do?" asked Juag.

"Suppose we make sure that they are really Hooja's people," suggested Dian. "It may be that they are not, and that if we run away from them before we learn definitely who they are, we shall be running away from a chance to live and find the mainland. They may be a people of whom we have never even heard, and if so we can ask them to help us--if they know the way to the mainland."

"Which they will not," interposed Juag.

"Well," I said, "it can't make our predicament any more trying to wait until we find out who they are. They are heading for us now. Evidently they have spied our sail, and guess that we do not belong to their fleet."

"They probably want to ask the way to the mainland themselves," said Juag, who was nothing if not a pessimist.

"If they want to catch us, they can do it if they can paddle faster than we can sail," I said. "If we let them come close enough to discover their identity, and can then sail faster than they can paddle, we can get away from them anyway, so we might as well wait."

And wait we did.

The sea calmed rapidly, so that by the time the foremost canoe had come within five hundred yards of us we could see them all plainly. Every one was headed for

us. The dugouts, which were of unusual length, were manned by twenty paddlers, ten to a side. Besides the paddlers there were twenty-five or more warriors in each boat.

When the leader was a hundred yards from us Dian called our attention to the fact that several of her crew were Sagoths. That convinced us that the flotilla was indeed Hooja's. I told Juag to hail them and get what information he could, while I remained in the bottom of our canoe as much out of sight as possible. Dian lay down at full length in the bottom; I did not want them to see and recognize her if they were in truth Hooja's people.

"Who are you?" shouted Juag, standing up in the boat and making a megaphone of his palms.

A figure arose in the bow of the leading canoe--a figure that I was sure I recognized even before he spoke.

"I am Hooja!" cried the man, in answer to Juag.

For some reason he did not recognize his former prisoner and slave--possibly because he had so many of them.

"I come from the Island of Trees," he continued. "A hundred of my boats were lost in the great storm and all their crews drowned. Where is the land? What are you, and what strange thing is that which flutters from the little tree in the front of your canoe?"

He referred to our sail, flapping idly in the wind.

"We, too, are lost," replied Juag. "We know not where the land is. We are going back to look for it now."

So saying he commenced to scull the canoe's nose before the wind, while I made fast the primitive sheets that held our crude sail. We thought it time to be going.

There wasn't much wind at the time, and the heavy, lumbering dugout was slow in getting under way. I thought it never would gain any momentum. And all the while Hooja's canoe was drawing rapidly nearer, propelled by the strong arms of his twenty paddlers. Of course, their dugout was much larger than ours, and, consequently, infinitely heavier and more cumbersome; nevertheless, it was coming along at quite a clip, and ours was yet but barely moving. Dian and I remained out of sight as much as possible, for the two craft were now well within bow-shot of one another, and I knew that Hooja had archers.

Hooja called to Juag to stop when he saw that our craft was moving. He was much interested in the sail, and not a little awed, as I could tell by his shouted remarks and questions. Raising my head, I saw him plainly. He would have made an excellent target for one of my guns, and I had never been sorrier that I had lost them.

We were now picking up speed a trifle, and he was not gaining upon us so fast as at first. In consequence, his requests that we stop suddenly changed to commands as he became aware that we were trying to escape him.

"Come back!" he shouted. "Come back, or I'll fire!"

I use the word fire because it more nearly translates into English the Pellucidarian word *trag*, which covers the launching of any deadly missile.

But Juag only seized his paddle more tightly--the paddle that answered the purpose of rudder, and commenced to assist the wind by vigorous strokes. Then Hooja gave the command to some of his archers to fire upon us. I couldn't lie hidden in the bottom of the boat, leaving Juag alone exposed to the deadly shafts, so I arose and, seizing another paddle, set to work to help him. Dian joined me, though I did my best to persuade her to remain sheltered; but being a woman, she must have her own way.

The instant that Hooja saw us he recognized us. The whoop of triumph he raised indicated how certain he was that we were about to fall into his hands. A shower of arrows fell about us. Then Hooja caused his men to cease firing--he wanted us alive. None of the missiles struck us, for Hooja's archers were not nearly the marksmen that are my Sarians and Amozites.

We had now gained sufficient headway to hold our own on about even terms with Hooja's paddlers. We did not seem to be gaining, though; and neither did they. How long this nerve-racking experience lasted I cannot guess, though we had pretty nearly finished our meager supply of provisions when the wind picked up a bit and we commenced to draw away.

Not once yet had we sighted land, nor could I understand it, since so many of the seas I had seen before were thickly dotted with islands. Our plight was anything but pleasant, yet I think that Hooja and his forces were even worse off than we, for they had no food nor water at all.

Far out behind us in a long line that curved upward in the distance, to be lost in the haze, strung Hooja's two hundred boats. But one would have been enough to have taken us could it have come alongside. We had drawn some fifty yards ahead of Hooja--there had been times when we were scarce ten yards in advance-

and were feeling considerably safer from capture. Hooja's men, working in relays, were commencing to show the effects of the strain under which they had been forced to work without food or water, and I think their weakening aided us almost as much as the slight freshening of the wind.

Hooja must have commenced to realize that he was going to lose us, for he again gave orders that we be fired upon. Volley after volley of arrows struck about us. The distance was so great by this time that most of the arrows fell short, while those that reached us were sufficiently spent to allow us to ward them off with our paddles. However, it was a most exciting ordeal.

Hooja stood in the bow of his boat, alternately urging his men to greater speed and shouting epithets at me. But we continued to draw away from him. At last the wind rose to a fair gale, and we simply raced away from our pursuers as if they were standing still. Juag was so tickled that he forgot all about his hunger and thirst. I think that he had never been entirely reconciled to the heathenish invention which I called a sail, and that down in the bottom of his heart he believed that the paddlers would eventually overhaul us; but now he couldn't praise it enough.

We had a strong gale for a considerable time, and eventually dropped Hooja's fleet so far astern that we could no longer discern them. And then--ah, I shall never forget that moment--Dian sprang to her feet with a cry of "Land!"

Sure enough, dead ahead, a long, low coast stretched across our bow. It was still a long way off, and we couldn't make out whether it was island or mainland; but at least it was land. If ever shipwrecked mariners were grateful, we were then. Raja and Ranee were commencing to suffer for lack of food, and I could swear that the latter often cast hungry glances upon us, though I am equally sure that no such hideous thoughts ever entered the head of her mate. We watched them both most closely, however. Once while stroking Ranee I managed to get a rope around her neck and make her fast to the side of the boat. Then I felt a bit safer for Dian. It was pretty close quarters in that little dugout for three human beings and two practically wild, man-eating dogs; but we had to make the best of it, since I would not listen to Juag's suggestion that we kill and eat Raja and Ranee.

We made good time to within a few miles of the shore. Then the wind died suddenly out. We were all of us keyed up to such a pitch of anticipation that the blow was doubly hard to bear. And it was a blow, too, since we could not tell in what quarter the wind might rise again; but Juag and I set to work to paddle the remaining distance.

Almost immediately the wind rose again from precisely the opposite direction from which it had formerly blown, so that it was mighty hard work making progress against it. Next it veered again so that we had to turn and run with it parallel to the coast to keep from being swamped in the trough of the seas.

And while we were suffering all these disappointments Hooja's fleet appeared in the distance!

They evidently had gone far to the left of our course, for they were now almost behind us as we ran parallel to the coast; but we were not much afraid of being overtaken in the wind that was blowing. The gale kept on increasing, but it was fitful, swooping down upon us in great gusts and then going almost calm for an instant. It was after one of these momentary calms that the catastrophe occurred. Our sail hung limp and our momentum decreased when of a sudden a particularly vicious squall caught us. Before I could cut the sheets the mast had snapped at the thwart in which it was stepped.

The worst had happened; Juag and I seized paddles and kept the canoe with the wind; but that squall was the parting shot of the gale, which died out immediately after, leaving us free to make for the shore, which we lost no time in attempting. But Hooja had drawn closer in toward shore than we, so it looked as if he might head us off before we could land. However, we did our best to distance him, Dian taking a paddle with us.

We were in a fair way to succeed when there appeared, pouring from among the trees beyond the beach, a horde of yelling, painted savages, brandishing all sorts of devilish-looking primitive weapons. So menacing was their attitude that we realized at once the folly of attempting to land among them.

Hooja was drawing closer to us. There was no wind. We could not hope to outpaddle him. And with our sail gone, no wind would help us, though, as if in derision at our plight, a steady breeze was now blowing. But we had no intention of sitting idle while our fate overtook us, so we bent to our paddles and, keeping parallel with the coast, did our best to pull away from our pursuers.

It was a grueling experience. We were weakened by lack of food. We were suffering the pangs of thirst. Capture and death were close at hand. Yet I think that we gave a good account of ourselves in our final effort to escape. Our boat was so much smaller and lighter than any of Hooja's that the three of us forced it ahead almost as rapidly as his larger craft could go under their twenty paddles.

As we raced along the coast for one of those seemingly interminable periods that may draw hours into eternities where the labor is soul-searing and there is no way to measure time, I saw what I took for the opening to a bay or the mouth of a

great river a short distance ahead of us. I wished that we might make for it; but with the menace of Hooja close behind and the screaming natives who raced along the shore parallel to us, I dared not attempt it.

We were not far from shore in that mad flight from death. Even as I paddled I found opportunity to glance occasionally toward the natives. They were white, but hideously painted. From their gestures and weapons I took them to be a most ferocious race. I was rather glad that we had not succeeded in landing among them.

Hooja's fleet had been in much more compact formation when we sighted them this time than on the occasion following the tempest. Now they were moving rapidly in pursuit of us, all well within the radius of a mile. Five of them were leading, all abreast, and were scarce two hundred yards from us. When I glanced over my shoulder I could see that the archers had already fitted arrows to their bows in readiness to fire upon us the moment that they should draw within range.

Hope was low in my breast. I could not see the slightest chance of escaping them, for they were overhauling us rapidly now, since they were able to work their paddles in relays, while we three were rapidly wearying beneath the constant strain that had been put upon us.

It was then that Juag called my attention to the rift in the shore-line which I had thought either a bay or the mouth of a great river. There I saw moving slowly out into the sea that which filled my soul with wonder.