

CHAPTER XII

I have no idea how long Lop-Ear and I wandered in the land north of the river. We were like mariners wrecked on a desert isle, so far as concerned the likelihood of our getting home again. We turned our backs upon the river, and for weeks and months adventured in that wilderness where there were no Folk. It is very difficult for me to reconstruct our journeying, and impossible to do it from day to day. Most of it is hazy and indistinct, though here and there I have vivid recollections of things that happened.

Especially do I remember the hunger we endured on the mountains between Long Lake and Far Lake, and the calf we caught sleeping in the thicket. Also, there are the Tree People who dwelt in the forest between Long Lake and the mountains. It was they who chased us into the mountains and compelled us to travel on to Far Lake.

First, after we left the river, we worked toward the west till we came to a small stream that flowed through marshlands. Here we turned away toward the north, skirting the marshes and after several days arriving at what I have called Long Lake. We spent some time around its upper end, where we found food in plenty; and then, one day, in the forest, we ran foul of the Tree People. These creatures were ferocious apes, nothing more. And yet they were not so different from us. They were more hairy, it is true; their legs were a trifle more twisted and gnarly,

their eyes a bit smaller, their necks a bit thicker and shorter, and their nostrils slightly more like orifices in a sunken surface; but they had no hair on their faces and on the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet, and they made sounds similar to ours with somewhat similar meanings. After all, the Tree People and the Folk were not so unlike.

I found him first, a little withered, dried-up old fellow, wrinkled-faced and bleary-eyed and tottery. He was legitimate prey. In our world there was no sympathy between the kinds, and he was not our kind. He was a Tree-Man, and he was very old. He was sitting at the foot of a tree--evidently his tree, for we could see the tattered nest in the branches, in which he slept at night.

I pointed him out to Lop-Ear, and we made a rush for him. He started to climb, but was too slow. I caught him by the leg and dragged him back. Then we had fun. We pinched him, pulled his hair, tweaked his ears, and poked twigs into him, and all the while we laughed with streaming eyes. His futile anger was most absurd. He was a comical sight, striving to fan into flame the cold ashes of his youth, to resurrect his strength dead and gone through the oozing of the years--making woeful faces in place of the ferocious ones he intended, grinding his worn teeth together, beating his meagre chest with feeble fists.

Also, he had a cough, and he gasped and hacked and spluttered prodigiously. Every time he tried to climb the tree we pulled him back,

until at last he surrendered to his weakness and did no more than sit and weep. And Lop-Ear and I sat with him, our arms around each other, and laughed at his wretchedness.

From weeping he went to whining, and from whining to wailing, until at last he achieved a scream. This alarmed us, but the more we tried to make him cease, the louder he screamed. And then, from not far away in the forest, came a "Goek! Goek!" to our ears. To this there were answering cries, several of them, and from very far off we could hear a big, bass "Goek! Goek! Goek!" Also, the "Whoo-who!" call was rising in the forest all around us.

Then came the chase. It seemed it never would end. They raced us through the trees, the whole tribe of them, and nearly caught us. We were forced to take to the ground, and here we had the advantage, for they were truly the Tree People, and while they out-climbed us we out-footed them on the ground. We broke away toward the north, the tribe howling on our track. Across the open spaces we gained, and in the brush they caught up with us, and more than once it was nip and tuck. And as the chase continued, we realized that we were not their kind, either, and that the bonds between us were anything but sympathetic.

They ran us for hours. The forest seemed interminable. We kept to the glades as much as possible, but they always ended in more thick forest. Sometimes we thought we had escaped, and sat down to rest; but always, before we could recover our breath, we would hear the hateful

"Whoo-who!" cries and the terrible "Goek! Goek! Goek!" This latter sometimes terminated in a savage "Ha ha ha ha haaaaa!!!"

And in this fashion were we hunted through the forest by the exasperated Tree People. At last, by mid-afternoon, the slopes began rising higher and higher and the trees were becoming smaller. Then we came out on the grassy flanks of the mountains. Here was where we could make time, and here the Tree People gave up and returned to their forest.

The mountains were bleak and inhospitable, and three times that afternoon we tried to regain the woods. But the Tree People were lying in wait, and they drove us back. Lop-Ear and I slept that night in a dwarf tree, no larger than a bush. Here was no security, and we would have been easy prey for any hunting animal that chanced along.

In the morning, what of our new-gained respect for the Tree People, we faced into the mountains. That we had no definite plan, or even idea, I am confident. We were merely driven on by the danger we had escaped. Of our wanderings through the mountains I have only misty memories. We were in that bleak region many days, and we suffered much, especially from fear, it was all so new and strange. Also, we suffered from the cold, and later from hunger.

It--was a desolate land of rocks and foaming streams and clattering cataracts. We climbed and descended mighty canyons and gorges; and ever, from every view point, there spread out before us, in all directions,

range upon range, the unceasing mountains. We slept at night in holes and crevices, and on one cold night we perched on top a slender pinnacle of rock that was almost like a tree.

And then, at last, one hot midday, dizzy with hunger, we gained the divide. From this high backbone of earth, to the north, across the diminishing, down-falling ranges, we caught a glimpse of a far lake. The sun shone upon it, and about it were open, level grass-lands, while to the eastward we saw the dark line of a wide-stretching forest.

We were two days in gaining the lake, and we were weak with hunger; but on its shore, sleeping snugly in a thicket, we found a part-grown calf. It gave us much trouble, for we knew no other way to kill than with our hands. When we had gorged our fill, we carried the remainder of the meat to the eastward forest and hid it in a tree. We never returned to that tree, for the shore of the stream that drained Far Lake was packed thick with salmon that had come up from the sea to spawn.

Westward from the lake stretched the grass-lands, and here were multitudes of bison and wild cattle. Also were there many packs of wild dogs, and as there were no trees it was not a safe place for us. We followed north along the stream for days. Then, and for what reason I do not know, we abruptly left the stream and swung to the east, and then to the southeast, through a great forest. I shall not bore you with our journey. I but indicate it to show how we finally arrived at the Fire People's country.

We came out upon the river, but we did not know it for our river. We had been lost so long that we had come to accept the condition of being lost as habitual. As I look back I see clearly how our lives and destinies are shaped by the merest chance. We did not know it was our river--there was no way of telling; and if we had never crossed it we would most probably have never returned to the horde; and I, the modern, the thousand centuries yet to be born, would never have been born.

And yet Lop-Ear and I wanted greatly to return. We had experienced homesickness on our journey, the yearning for our own kind and land; and often had I had recollections of the Swift One, the young female who made soft sounds, whom it was good to be with, and who lived by herself nobody knew where. My recollections of her were accompanied by sensations of hunger, and these I felt when I was not hungry and when I had just eaten.

But to come back to the river. Food was plentiful, principally berries and succulent roots, and on the river bank we played and lingered for days. And then the idea came to Lop-Ear. It was a visible process, the coming of the idea. I saw it. The expression in his eyes became plaintive and querulous, and he was greatly perturbed. Then his eyes went muddy, as if he had lost his grip on the inchoate thought. This was followed by the plaintive, querulous expression as the idea persisted and he clutched it anew. He looked at me, and at the river and the far shore. He tried to speak, but had no sounds with which to express the

idea. The result was a gibberish that made me laugh. This angered him, and he grabbed me suddenly and threw me on my back. Of course we fought, and in the end I chased him up a tree, where he secured a long branch and poked me every time I tried to get at him.

And the idea had gone glimmering. I did not know, and he had forgotten. But the next morning it awoke in him again. Perhaps it was the homing instinct in him asserting itself that made the idea persist. At any rate it was there, and clearer than before. He led me down to the water, where a log had grounded in an eddy. I thought he was minded to play, as we had played in the mouth of the slough. Nor did I change my mind as I watched him tow up a second log from farther down the shore.

It was not until we were on the logs, side by side and holding them together, and had paddled out into the current, that I learned his intention. He paused to point at the far shore, and resumed his paddling, at the same time uttering loud and encouraging cries. I understood, and we paddled energetically. The swift current caught us, flung us toward the south shore, but before we could make a landing flung us back toward the north shore.

Here arose dissension. Seeing the north shore so near, I began to paddle for it. Lop-Ear tried to paddle for the south shore. The logs swung around in circles, and we got nowhere, and all the time the forest was flashing past as we drifted down the stream. We could not fight. We knew better than to let go the grips of hands and feet that held the logs

together. But we chattered and abused each other with our tongues until the current flung us toward the south bank again. That was now the nearest goal, and together and amicably we paddled for it. We landed in an eddy, and climbed directly into the trees to reconnoitre.