

Literature.org:
[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[Before Adam](#)

[Jack London](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 8

Well do I remember that first winter after I left home. I have long dreams of sitting shivering in the cold. Lop-Ear and I sit close together, with our arms and legs about each other, blue-faced and with chattering teeth. It got particularly crisp along toward morning. In those chill early hours we slept little, huddling together in numb misery and waiting for the sunrise in order to get warm.

When we went outside there was a crackle of frost under foot. One morning we discovered ice on the surface of the quiet water in the eddy where was the drinking-place, and there was a great How-do-you-do about it. Old Marrow-Bone was the oldest member of the horde, and he had never seen anything like it before. I remember the worried, plaintive look that came into his eyes as he examined the ice. (This plaintive look always came into our eyes when we did not understand a thing, or when we felt the prod of some vague and inexpressible desire.) Red-Eye, too, when he investigated the ice, looked bleak and plaintive, and stared across the river into the northeast, as though in some way he connected the Fire People with this latest happening.

But we found ice only on that one morning, and that was the coldest winter we experienced. I have no memory of other winters when it was so cold. I have often thought that that cold winter was a fore-runner of the countless cold winters to come, as the ice-sheet from farther north crept down over the face of the land. But we never saw that ice-sheet. Many generations must have passed away before the descendants of the horde migrated south, or remained and adapted themselves to the changed conditions.

Life was hit or miss and happy-go-lucky with us. Little was ever planned, and less was executed. We ate when we were hungry, drank when we were thirsty, avoided our carnivorous enemies, took shelter in the caves at night, and for the rest just sort of played along through life.

We were very curious, easily amused, and full of tricks and pranks. There was no seriousness about us, except when we were in danger or were angry, in which cases the one was quickly forgotten and the other as quickly got over.

We were inconsecutive, illogical, and inconsequential. We had no steadfastness of purpose, and it was here that the Fire People were ahead of us. They possessed all these things of which we possessed so little. Occasionally, however, especially in the realm of the emotions, we were capable of long-cherished purpose. The faithfulness of the monogamic couples I have referred to may be explained as a matter of habit; but my long desire for the Swift One cannot be so explained, any more than can be explained the undying enmity between me and Red-Eye.

But it was our inconsequentiality and stupidity that especially distresses me when I look back upon that life in the long ago. Once I found a broken gourd which happened to lie right side up and which had been filled with the rain. The water was sweet, and I drank it. I even took the gourd down to the stream and filled it with more water, some of which I drank and some of which I poured over Lop-Ear. And then I threw the gourd away. It never entered my head to fill the gourd with water and carry it into my cave. Yet often I was thirsty at night, especially after eating wild onions and watercress, and no one ever dared leave the caves at night for a drink.

Another time I found a dry, gourd, inside of which the seeds rattled. I had fun with it for a while. But it was a play thing, nothing more. And yet, it was not long after this that the using of gourds for storing water became the general practice of the horde. But I was not the inventor. The honor was due to old Marrow-Bone, and it is fair to assume that it was the necessity of his great age that brought about the innovation.

At any rate, the first member of the horde to use gourds was Marrow-Bone. He kept a supply of drinking-water in his cave, which cave belonged to his son, the Hairless One, who permitted him to occupy a corner of it. We used to see Marrow-Bone filling his gourd at the drinking-place and carrying it carefully up to his cave. Imitation was strong in the Folk, and first one, and then another and another, procured a gourd and used it in similar fashion, until it was a general practice with all of us so to store water.

Sometimes old Marrow-Bone had sick spells and was unable to leave the cave. Then it was that the Hairless One filled the gourd for him. A little later, the Hairless One deputed the task to Long-Lip, his son. And after that, even when Marrow-Bone was well again, Long-Lip continued carrying water for him. By and by, except on unusual occasions, the men never carried any water at all, leaving the task to the women and larger children. Lop-Ear and I were independent. We carried water only for ourselves, and we often mocked the young water-carriers when they were called away from play to fill the gourds.

Progress was slow with us. We played through life, even the adults, much in the same way that children play, and we played as none of the other animals played. What little we learned, was usually in the course of play, and was due to our curiosity and keenness of appreciation. For that matter, the one big invention of the horde, during the time I lived with it, was the use of gourds. At first we stored only water in the gourds--in imitation of old Marrow-Bone.

But one day some one of the women--I do not know which one--filled a gourd with black-berries and carried it to her cave. In no time all the women were carrying berries and nuts and roots in the gourds. The idea, once started, had to go on. Another evolution of the carrying-receptacle was due to the women. Without doubt, some woman's gourd was too small, or else she had forgotten her gourd; but be that as it may, she bent two great leaves together, pinning the seams with twigs, and carried home a bigger quantity of berries than could have been contained in the largest gourd.

So far we got, and no farther, in the transportation of supplies during the years I lived with the Folk. It never entered anybody's head to weave a basket out of willow-withes. Sometimes the men and women tied tough vines about the bundles of ferns and branches that they carried to the caves to sleep upon. Possibly in ten or twenty generations we might have worked up to the weaving of baskets. And of this, one thing is sure: if once we wove withes into baskets, the next and inevitable step would have been the weaving of cloth. Clothes would have followed, and with covering our nakedness would have come modesty.

Thus was momentum gained in the Younger World. But we were without this momentum. We were just getting started, and we could not go far in a single generation. We were without weapons, without fire, and in the raw beginnings of speech. The device of writing lay so far in the future that I am appalled when I think of it.

Even I was once on the verge of a great discovery. To show you how fortuitous was development in those days let me state that had it not been for the gluttony of Lop-Ear I might have brought about the domestication of the dog. And this was something that the Fire People who lived to the northeast had not yet achieved. They were without dogs; this I knew from observation. But let me tell you how Lop-Ear's gluttony possibly set back our social development many generations.

Well to the west of our caves was a great swamp, but to the south lay a stretch of low, rocky hills. These were little frequented for two reasons. First of all, there was no food there of the kind we ate; and next, those rocky hills were filled with the lairs of carnivorous beasts.

But Lop-Ear and I strayed over to the hills one day. We would not have strayed had we not been teasing a tiger. Please do not laugh. It was old Saber-Tooth himself. We were perfectly safe. We chanced upon him in the forest, early in the morning, and from the safety of the branches overhead we chattered down at him our dislike and hatred. And from branch to branch, and from tree to tree, we followed overhead, making an infernal row and warning all the forest-dwellers that old Saber-Tooth was coming.

We spoiled his hunting for him, anyway. And we made him good and angry. He snarled at us and lashed his tail, and sometimes he paused and stared up at us quietly for a long time, as if debating in his mind some way by which he could get hold of us. But we only laughed and pelted him with twigs and the ends of branches.

This tiger-baiting was common sport among the folk. Sometimes half the horde would follow from overhead a tiger or lion that had ventured out in the daytime. It was our revenge; for more than one member of the horde, caught unexpectedly, had gone the way of the tiger's belly or the lion's. Also, by such ordeals of helplessness and shame, we taught the hunting animals to some extent to keep out of our territory. And then it was funny. It was a great game.

And so Lop-Ear and I had chased Saber-Tooth across three miles of forest. Toward the last he put his tail between his legs and fled from our gibing like a beaten cur. We did our best to keep up with him; but when we reached the edge of the forest he was no more than a streak in the distance.

I don't know what prompted us, unless it was curiosity; but after playing around awhile, Lop-Ear and I ventured across the open ground to the edge of the rocky hills. We did not go far. Possibly at no time were we more than a hundred yards from the trees. Coming around a sharp corner of rock (we went very carefully, because we did not know what we might encounter), we came upon three puppies playing in the sun.

They did not see us, and we watched them for some time. They were wild dogs. In the rock-wall was a horizontal fissure--evidently the lair where their mother had left them, and where they should have remained had they been obedient. But the growing life, that in Lop-Ear and me had impelled us to venture away from the forest, had driven the puppies out of the cave to frolic. I know how their mother would have punished them had she caught them.

But it was Lop-Ear and I who caught them. He looked at me, and then we made a dash for it. The puppies knew no place to run except into the lair, and we headed them off. One rushed between my legs. I squatted and grabbed him. He sank his sharp little teeth into my arm, and I dropped him in the suddenness of the hurt and surprise. The next moment he had scurried inside.

Lop-Ear, struggling with the second puppy, scowled at me and intimated by a variety of sounds the different kinds of a fool and a bungler that I was. This made me ashamed and spurred me to valor. I grabbed the remaining puppy by the tail. He got his teeth into me once, and then I got him by the nape of the neck. Lop-Ear and I sat down, and held the puppies up, and looked at them, and laughed.

They were snarling and yelping and crying. Lop-Ear started suddenly. He thought he had heard something. We looked at each other in fear, realizing the danger of our position. The one thing that made animals raging demons was tampering with their young. And these puppies that made such a racket belonged to the wild dogs. Well we knew them, running in packs, the terror of the grass-eating animals. We had watched them following the herds of cattle and bison and dragging down the calves, the aged, and the sick. We had been chased by them ourselves, more than once. I had seen one of the Folk, a woman, run down by them and caught just as she reached the shelter of the woods. Had she not been tired out by the run, she might have made it into a tree. She tried, and slipped, and fell back. They made short work of her.

We did not stare at each other longer than a moment. Keeping tight hold of our prizes, we ran for the woods. Once in the security of a tall tree, we held up the puppies and laughed again. You see, we had to have our laugh out, no matter what happened.

And then began one of the hardest tasks I ever attempted. We started to carry the puppies to our cave. Instead of using our hands for climbing, most of the time they were occupied with holding our squirming captives. Once we tried to walk on the ground, but were treed by a miserable hyena, who followed along underneath. He was a wise hyena.

Lop-Ear got an idea. He remembered how we tied up bundles of leaves to carry home for beds. Breaking off some tough vines, he tied his puppy's legs together, and then, with another piece of vine passed around his neck, slung the puppy on his back. This left him with hands and feet free to climb. He was jubilant, and did not wait for me to finish tying my puppy's legs, but started on. There was one difficulty, however. The puppy wouldn't stay slung on Lop-Ear's back. It swung around to the side and then on in front. Its teeth were not tied, and the next thing it did was to sink its teeth into Lop-Ear's soft and unprotected stomach. He let out a scream, nearly fell, and clutched a branch violently with both hands to save himself. The vine around his neck broke, and the puppy, its four legs still tied, dropped to the ground. The hyena proceeded to dine.

Lop-Ear was disgusted and angry. He abused the hyena, and then went off alone through the trees. I had no reason that I knew for wanting to carry the puppy to the cave, except that I WANTED to; and I stayed by my task. I made the work a great deal easier by elaborating on Lop-Ear's idea. Not only did I tie the puppy's legs, but I thrust a stick through his jaws and tied them together securely.

At last I got the puppy home. I imagine I had more pertinacity than the average Folk, or else I should not have succeeded. They laughed at me when they saw me lugging the puppy up to my high little cave, but I did not mind. Success crowned my efforts, and there was the puppy. He was a plaything such as none of the Folk possessed. He learned rapidly. When I played with him and he bit me, I boxed his ears, and then he did not try again to bite for a long time.

I was quite taken up with him. He was something new, and it was a characteristic of the Folk to like new things. When I saw that he refused fruits and vegetables, I caught birds for him and squirrels and young rabbits. (We Folk were meat-eaters, as well as vegetarians, and we were adept at catching small game.) The puppy ate the meat and thrived. As well as I can estimate, I must have had him over a week. And then, coming back to the cave one day with a nestful of young-hatched pheasants, I found Lop-Ear had killed the puppy and was just beginning to eat him. I sprang for Lop-Ear,--the cave was small,--and we went at it tooth and nail.

And thus, in a fight, ended one of the earliest attempts to domesticate the dog. We pulled hair out in handfuls, and scratched and bit and gouged. Then we sulked and made up. After that we ate the puppy. Raw? Yes. We had not yet discovered fire. Our evolution into cooking animals lay in the tight-rolled scroll of the future.