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Chapter 10

After we had had out our laugh, Lop-Ear and I curved back in our flight and got breakfast in the blueberry swamp. It was the same swamp to which I had made my first journeys in the world, years before, accompanied by my mother. I had seen little of her in the intervening time. Usually, when she visited the horde at the caves, I was away in the forest. I had once or twice caught glimpses of the Chatterer in the open space, and had had the pleasure of making faces at him and angering him from the mouth of my cave. Beyond such amenities I had left my family severely alone. I was not much interested in it, and anyway I was doing very well by myself.

After eating our fill of berries, with two nestfuls of partly hatched quail-eggs for dessert, Lop-Ear and I wandered circumspectly into the woods toward the river. Here was where stood my old home-tree, out of which I had been thrown by the Chatterer. It was still occupied. There had been increase in the family. Clinging tight to my mother was a little baby. Also, there was a girl, partly grown, who cautiously regarded us from one of the lower branches. She was evidently my sister, or half-sister, rather.

My mother recognized me, but she warned me away when I started to climb into the tree. Lop-Ear, who was more cautious by far than I, beat a retreat, nor could I persuade him to return. Later in the day, however, my sister came down to the ground, and there and in neighboring trees we romped and played all afternoon. And then came trouble. She was my sister, but that did not prevent her from treating me abominably, for she had inherited all the viciousness of the Chatterer. She turned upon me suddenly, in a petty rage, and scratched me, tore my hair, and sank her sharp little teeth deep into my forearm. I lost my temper. I did not injure her, but it was undoubtedly the soundest spanking she had received up to that time.

How she yelled and squalled. The Chatterer, who had been away all day and who was only then returning, heard the noise and rushed for the spot. My mother also rushed, but he got there first. Lop-Ear and I did not wait his coming. We were off and away, and the Chatterer gave us the chase of our lives through the trees.

After the chase was over, and Lop-Ear and I had had out our laugh, we discovered that twilight was falling. Here was night with all its terrors upon us, and to return to the caves was out of the question. Red-Eye made that impossible. We took refuge in a tree that stood apart from other trees, and high up in a fork we passed the night. It was a miserable night. For the first few hours it rained heavily, then it turned cold and a chill wind blew upon us. Soaked through, with shivering bodies and chattering teeth, we huddled in each other's arms. We missed the snug, dry cave that so quickly warmed with the heat of our bodies.

Morning found us wretched and resolved. We would not spend another such night. Remembering the tree-shelters of our elders, we set to work to make one for ourselves. We built the framework of a rough nest, and on higher forks overhead even got in several ridge-poles for the roof. Then the sun came out, and under its benign influence we forgot the hardships of the night and went off in search of breakfast. After that, to show the inconsequentiality of life in those days, we fell to playing. It must have taken us all of a month, working intermittently, to make our tree-house; and then, when it was completed, we never used it again.

But I run ahead of my story. When we fell to playing, after breakfast, on the second day away from the caves, Lop-Ear led me a chase through the trees and down to the river. We came out upon it where a large slough entered from the blueberry swamp. The mouth of this slough was wide, while the slough itself was practically without a current. In the dead water, just inside its mouth, lay a tangled mass of tree trunks. Some of these, what of the wear and tear of freshets and of being stranded long summers on sand-bars, were seasoned and dry and without branches. They floated high in the water, and bobbed up and down or rolled over when we put our weight upon them.

Here and there between the trunks were water-cracks, and through them we could see schools of small fish, like minnows, darting back and forth. Lop-Ear and I became fishermen at once. Lying flat on the logs, keeping perfectly quiet, waiting till the minnows came close, we would make swift passes with our hands. Our prizes we ate on the spot, wriggling and moist. We did not notice the lack of salt.

The mouth of the slough became our favorite playground. Here we spent many hours each day, catching fish and playing on the logs, and here, one day, we learned our first lessons in navigation. The log on which Lop-Ear was lying got adrift. He was curled up on his side, asleep. A light fan of air slowly drifted the log away from the shore, and when I noticed his predicament the distance was already too great for him to leap.

At first the episode seemed merely funny to me. But when one of the vagrant impulses of fear, common in that age of perpetual insecurity, moved within me, I was struck with my own loneliness. I was made suddenly aware of Lop-Ear's remoteness out there on that alien element a few feet away. I called loudly to him a warning cry. He awoke frightened, and shifted his weight rashly on the log. It turned over, sousing him under. Three times again it soused him under as he tried to climb out upon it. Then he succeeded, crouching upon it and chattering with fear.

I could do nothing. Nor could he. Swimming was something of which we knew nothing. We were already too far removed from the lower life-forms to have the instinct for swimming, and we had not yet become sufficiently man-like to undertake it as the working out of a problem. I roamed disconsolately up and down the bank, keeping as close to him in his involuntary travels as I could, while he wailed and cried till it was a wonder that he did not bring down upon us every hunting animal within a mile.

The hours passed. The sun climbed overhead and began its descent to the west. The light wind died down and left Lop-Ear on his log floating around a hundred feet away. And then, somehow, I know not how, Lop-Ear made the great discovery. He began paddling with his hands. At first his progress was slow and erratic. Then he straightened out and began laboriously to paddle nearer and nearer. I could not understand. I sat down and watched and waited until he gained the shore.

But he had learned something, which was more than I had done. Later in the afternoon, he deliberately launched out from shore on the log. Still later he persuaded me to join him, and I, too, learned the trick of paddling. For the next several days we could not tear ourselves away from the slough. So absorbed were we in our new game that we almost neglected to eat. We even roosted in a nearby tree at night. And we forgot that Red-Eye existed.

We were always trying new logs, and we learned that the smaller the log the faster we could make it go. Also, we learned that the smaller the log the more liable it was to roll over and give us a ducking. Still another thing about small logs we learned. One day we paddled our individual logs alongside each other. And then, quite by accident, in the course of play, we discovered that when each, with one hand and foot, held on to the other's log, the logs were steadied and did not turn over. Lying side by side in this position, our outside hands and feet were left free for paddling. Our final discovery was that this arrangement enabled us to use still smaller logs and thereby gain greater speed. And there our discoveries ended. We had invented the most primitive catamaran, and we did not have sense enough to know it. It never entered our heads to lash the logs together with tough vines or stringy roots. We were content to hold the logs together with our hands and feet.

It was not until we got over our first enthusiasm for navigation and had begun to return to our tree-shelter to sleep at night, that we found the Swift One. I saw her first, gathering young acorns from the branches of a large oak near our tree. She was very timid. At first, she kept very still; but when she saw that she was discovered she dropped to the ground and dashed wildly away. We caught occasional glimpses of her from day to day, and came to look for her when we travelled back and forth between our tree and the mouth of the slough.

And then, one day, she did not run away. She waited our coming, and made soft peace-sounds. We could not get very near, however. When we seemed to approach too close, she darted suddenly away and from a safe distance uttered the soft sounds again. This continued for some days. It took a long while to get acquainted with her, but finally it was accomplished and she joined us sometimes in our play.

I liked her from the first. She was of most pleasing appearance. She was very mild. Her eyes were the mildest I had ever seen. In this she was quite unlike the rest of the girls and women of the Folk, who were born viragos. She never made harsh, angry cries, and it seemed to be her nature to flee away from trouble rather than to remain and fight.

The mildness I have mentioned seemed to emanate from her whole being. Her bodily as well as facial appearance was the cause of this. Her eyes were larger than most of her kind, and they were not so deep-set, while the lashes were longer and more regular. Nor was her nose so thick and squat. It had quite a bridge, and the nostrils opened downward. Her incisors were not large, nor was her upper lip long and down-hanging, nor her lower lip protruding. She was not very hairy, except on the outsides of arms and legs and across the shoulders; and while she was thin-hipped, her calves were not twisted and gnarly.

I have often wondered, looking back upon her from the twentieth century through the medium of my dreams, and it has always occurred to me that possibly she may have been related to the Fire People. Her father, or mother, might well have come from that higher stock. While such things were not common, still they did occur, and I have seen the proof of them with my own eyes, even to the extent of members of the horde turning renegade and going to live with the Tree People.

All of which is neither here nor there. The Swift One was radically different from any of the females of the horde, and I had a liking for her from the first. Her mildness and gentleness attracted me. She was never rough, and she never fought. She always ran away, and right here may be noted the significance of the naming of her. She was a better climber than Lop-Ear or I. When we played tag we could never catch her except by accident, while she could catch us at will. She was remarkably swift in all her movements, and she had a genius for judging distances that was equalled only by her daring. Excessively timid in all other matters, she was without fear when it came to climbing or running through the trees, and Lop-Ear and I were awkward and lumbering and cowardly in comparison.

She was an orphan. We never saw her with any one, and there was no telling how long she had lived alone in the world. She must have learned early in her helpless childhood that safety lay only in flight. She was very wise and very discreet. It became a sort of game with Lop-Ear and me to try to find where she lived. It was certain that she had a tree-shelter somewhere, and not very far away; but trail her as we would, we could never find it. She was willing enough to join with us at play in the day-time, but the secret of her abiding-place she guarded jealously.