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Chapter 18

Of our wanderings in the great swamp I have no clear knowledge. When I strive to remember, I have a riot of unrelated impressions and a loss of time-value. I have no idea of how long we were in that vast everglade, but it must have been for weeks. My memories of what occurred invariably take the form of nightmare. For untold ages, oppressed by protean fear, I am aware of wandering, endlessly wandering, through a dank and soggy wilderness, where poisonous snakes struck at us, and animals roared around us, and the mud quaked under us and sucked at our heels.

I know that we were turned from our course countless times by streams and lakes and slimy seas. Then there were storms and risings of the water over great areas of the low-lying lands; and there were periods of hunger and misery when we were kept prisoners in the trees for days and days by these transient floods.

Very strong upon me is one picture. Large trees are about us, and from their branches hang gray filaments of moss, while great creepers, like monstrous serpents, curl around the trunks and writhe in tangles through the air. And all about is the mud, soft mud, that bubbles forth gases, and that heaves and sighs with internal agitations. And in the midst of all this are a dozen of us. We are lean and wretched, and our bones show through our tight-stretched skins. We do not sing and chatter and laugh. We play no pranks. For once our volatile and exuberant spirits are hopelessly subdued. We make plaintive, querulous noises, look at one another, and cluster close together. It is like the meeting of the handful of survivors after the day of the end of the world.

This event is without connection with the other events in the swamp. How we ever managed to cross it, I do not know, but at last we came out where a low range of hills ran down to the bank of the river. It was our river emerging like ourselves from the great swamp. On the south bank, where the river had broken its way through the hills, we found many sand-stone caves. Beyond, toward the west, the ocean boomed on the bar that lay across the river's mouth. And here, in the caves, we settled down in our abiding-place by the sea.

There were not many of us. From time to time, as the days went by, more of the Folk appeared. They dragged themselves from the swamp singly, and in twos and threes, more dead than alive, mere perambulating skeletons, until at last there were thirty of us. Then no more came from the swamp, and Red-Eye was not among us. It was noticeable that no children had survived the frightful journey.

I shall not tell in detail of the years we lived by the sea. It was not a happy abiding-place. The air was raw and chill, and we suffered continually from coughing and colds. We could not survive in such an environment. True, we had children; but they had little hold on life and died early, while we died faster than new ones were born. Our number steadily diminished.

Then the radical change in our diet was not good for us. We got few vegetables and fruits, and became fish-eaters. There were mussels and abalones and clams and rock-oysters, and great ocean-crabs that were thrown upon the beaches in stormy weather. Also, we found several kinds of seaweed that were good to eat. But the change in diet caused us stomach troubles, and none of us ever waxed fat. We were all lean and dyspeptic-looking. It was in getting the big abalones that Lop-Ear was lost. One of them closed upon his fingers at low-tide, and then the flood-tide came in and drowned him. We found his body the next day, and it was a lesson to us. Not another one of us was ever caught in the closing shell of an abalone.

The Swift One and I managed to bring up one child, a boy--at least we managed to bring him along for several years. But I am quite confident he could never have survived that terrible climate. And then, one day, the Fire People appeared again. They had come down the river, not on a catamaran, but in a rude dug-out. There were three of them that paddled in it, and one of them was the little wizened old hunter. They landed on our beach, and he limped across the sand and examined our caves.

They went away in a few minutes, but the Swift One was badly scared. We were all frightened, but none of us to the extent that she was. She whimpered and cried and was restless all that night. In the morning she took the child in her arms, and by sharp cries, gestures, and example, started me on our second long flight. There were eight of the Folk (all that was left of the horde) that remained behind in the caves. There was no hope for them. Without doubt, even if the Fire People did not return, they must soon have perished. It was a bad climate down there by the sea. The Folk were not constituted for the coast-dwelling life.

We travelled south, for days skirting the great swamp but never venturing into it. Once we broke back to the westward, crossing a range of mountains and coming down to the coast. But it was no place for us. There were no trees--only bleak headlands, a thundering surf, and strong winds that seemed never to cease from blowing. We turned back across the mountains, travelling east and south, until we came in touch with the great swamp again.

Soon we gained the southern extremity of the swamp, and we continued our course south and east. It was a pleasant land. The air was warm, and we were again in the forest. Later on we crossed a low-lying range of hills and found ourselves in an even better forest country. The farther we penetrated from the coast the warmer we found it, and we went on and on until we came to a large river that seemed familiar to the Swift One. It was where she must have come during the four years' absence from the harde. This river we crossed on logs, landing on side at the large bluff. High up on the bluff we found our new home most difficult of access and quite hidden from any eyes beneath.

There is little more of my tale to tell. Here the Swift One and I lived and reared our family. And here my memories end. We never made another migration. I never dreamt beyond our high, inaccessible cave. And here must have been born the child that inherited the stuff of my dreams, that had moulded into its being all the impressions of my life--or of the life of Big-Tooth, rather, who is my other-self, and not my real self, but who is so real to me that often I am unable to tell what age I am living in.

I often wonder about this line of descent. I, the modern, am incontestably a man; yet I, Big-Tooth, the primitive, am not a man. Somewhere, and by straight line of descent, these two parties to my dual personality were connected. Were the Folk, before their destruction, in the process of becoming men? And did I and mine carry through this process? On the other hand, may not some descendant of mine have gone in to the Fire People and become one of them? I do not know. There is no way of learning. One thing only is certain, and that is that Big-Tooth did stamp into the cerebral constitution of one of his progeny all the impressions of his life, and stamped them in so indelibly that the hosts of intervening generations have failed to obliterate them.

There is one other thing of which I must speak before I close. It is a dream that I dream often, and in point of time the real event must have occurred during the period of my living in the high, inaccessible cave. I remember that I wandered far in the forest toward the east. There I came upon a tribe of Tree People. I crouched in a thicket and watched them at play. They were holding a laughing council, jumping up and down and screeching rude choruses.

Suddenly they hushed their noise and ceased their capering. They shrank down in fear, and quested anxiously about with their eyes for a way of retreat. Then Red-Eye walked in among them. They cowered away from him. All were frightened. But he made no attempt to hurt them. He was one of them. At his heels, on stringy bended legs, supporting herself with knuckles to the ground on either side, walked an old female of the Tree People, his latest wife. He sat down in the midst of the circle. I can see him now, as I write this, scowling, his eyes inflamed, as he peers about him at the circle of the Tree People. And as he peers he crooks one monstrous leg and with his gnarly toes scratches himself on the stomach. He is Red-Eye, the atavism.

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