

《Before Adam》 Chapter 4

There is one puzzling thing about these prehistoric memories of mine. It is the vagueness of the time and the order of events;--or can I tell, between some events, whether one, two, or four or five years have elapsed. I judge of time by judging the changes in the appearance and pursuits of my fellows.

Also, I can apply the logic of events to the various happenings. For instance, there is no doubt whatever that I was killed by the wild pigs and fled and fell in the days before I made the acquaintance of Lop-Ear, who became what I call my mother. And it is just as conclusive that between these two periods I must have left my mother.

I have no memory of my father than the one I have given. Never, in the years that followed, did he reappear. In the few of the times, the only explanation possible lies in that he perished shortly after the adventure with the wild pigs. His untimely end, there is no discussion. He was in full vigor, and only sudden and violent death could have taken him. The manner of his going--whether he was drowned in the river, or was swallowed by a snake, or went into the stomach of a tiger, is beyond my knowledge.

For I know that I remember only the things I saw myself, with my own eyes, in those prehistoric days. If my mother had said, and she never told me. For that matter I doubt if she had a vocabulary adequate to convey such information. Perhaps she had a vocabulary of thirty or forty sounds.

I call them SOUNDS, rather than WORDS, because sounds they were primarily. They had no fixed value and no adverbs. These latter were tools of speech not yet invented. Instead of qualifying nouns or verbs by the use of adjectives, we qualified sounds by intonation, by changes in quantity and pitch, by retarding and by accelerating. The length and intensity of a particular sound shaded its meaning.

We had no conjugation. One judged the tense by the context. We talked only concrete things because we could not talk of abstractions. Also, we depended largely on pantomime. The simplest abstraction was practically beyond our thinking; and if we could not think of it, he was hard put to communicate it to his fellows. There were no sounds for it. He was pressing beyond his power, if he invented sounds for it, his fellows did not understand the sounds. Then it was that he fell back on pantomime, however possible and at the same time repeating the new sound over and over again.

Thus language grew. By the few sounds we possessed we were enabled to think a short distance beyond the concrete. We needed for new sounds wherewith to express the new thought. Sometimes, however, we thought too long a distance, and managed to achieve abstractions (dim ones I grant), which we failed utterly to make known to other folk. A few words were so fast in that day.

Oh, believe me, we were amazingly simple. But we did know a lot that is not known to-day. We could throw stones and flatten them down at will. And we could scratch between our shoulders with ease. We could throw stones any time. And for that matter, I could keep my knees straight, bend forward from the hips, and touch, not the tips of my elbows, to the ground. And as for bird-nesting--well, I only wish the twentieth-century boy could do the same. We ate them.

I remember--but I out-run my story. First let me tell of Lop-Ear and our friendship. Very early in my life I became friendly with him. Possibly this was because, after the death of my father, she took to herself a second husband. I have few friends. He was not of the best. He was a light fellow. There was no solidity to him. He was too voluble. His infernal chatter was a hindrance. I think of it. His mind was too inconsequential to permit him to possess purpose. Monkeys in their cages always chatter. That is the best description I can give of him.

He hated me from the first. And I quickly learned to be afraid of him and his malicious pranks. Whenever I came to my mother and clung to her. But I was growing older all the time, and it was inevitable that I should from time to time stray farther and farther. And these were the opportunities that the Chatterer waited for. (I may as well explain that those days; were not known by any name. For the sake of convenience I have myself given names to the various

n contact with, and the "Chatterer" is the most fitting description I can find for that precious stepfather of myself "Big-Tooth." My eye-teeth were pronouncedly large.)

But to return to the Chatterer. He persistently terrorized me. He was always pinching me and cuffing me above biting me. Often my mother interfered, and the way she made his fur fly was a joy to see. But the result ending family quarrel, in which I was the bone of contention.

No, my home-life was not happy. I smile to myself as I write the phrase. Home-life! Home! I had no home. My home was an association, not a habitation. I lived in my mother's care, not in a house. And my mother when night came she was above the ground.

My mother was old-fashioned. She still clung to her trees. It is true, the more progressive members of our tribe on the river. But my mother was suspicious and unprogressive. The trees were good enough for her. Of course in the nest in which we usually roosted, though we often roosted in other trees when nightfall caught us. In a convenient nest composed of twigs and branches and creeping things. It was more like a huge bird-nest than anything else, though it differed from the weaving than any bird-nest. But it had one feature that I have never seen attached to any bird-nest, namely,

Oh, not a roof such as modern man makes! Nor a roof such as is made by the lowest aborigines of today than the clumsiest handiwork of man--of man as we know him. It was put together in a casual, helter-skelter fashion. The fork of the tree whereon we rested was a pile of dead branches and brush. Four or five adjacent forks held what served as poles. These were merely stout sticks an inch or so in diameter. On them rested the brush and branches. These were not arranged in almost aimlessly. There was no attempt at thatching. And I must confess that the roof leaked miserably in a

But the Chatterer. He made home-life a burden for both my mother and me--and by home-life I mean, not the group-life of the three of us. He was most malicious in his persecution of me. That was the one purpose of his existence longer than five minutes. Also, as time went by, my mother was less eager in her defence of me. I think, would it not have been by the Chatterer, that I must have become a nuisance to her. At any rate, the situation went from bad to worse, and, of my own volition, have left home. But the satisfaction of performing so independent an act was denied me, for, of course, I was thrown out. And I mean this literally.

The opportunity came to the Chatterer one day when I was alone in the nest. My mother and the Chatterer were in the blueberry swamp. He must have planned the whole thing, for I heard him returning alone through the swamp in a rage as he came. Like all the men of our horde, when they were angry or were trying to make themselves a nuisance, he began to hammer on his chest with his fist.

I realized the helplessness of my situation, and crouched trembling in the nest. The Chatterer came directly from the oak tree--and began to climb up. And he never ceased for a moment from his infernal row. As I have said, he was meagre, and he must have strained it by the variety of ways in which he informed me of his undying hatred and then to have it out with me.

As he climbed to the fork, I fled out the great horizontal limb. He followed me, and out I went, farther amongst the small twigs and leaves. The Chatterer was ever a coward, and greater always than any anger he ever felt. He was afraid to follow me out amongst the leaves and twigs. For that matter, his greater weight would have crushed me before he could have got to me.

But it was not necessary for him to reach me, and well he knew it, the scoundrel! With a malevolent eyes gleaming with cruel intelligence, he began teetering. Teetering!--and with me out on the very edge of the limb that broke continually with my weight. Twenty feet beneath me was the earth.

Wildly and more--wildly he teetered, grinning at me his gloating hatred. Then came the end. All four hold I fell, back-downward, looking up at him, my hands and feet still clutching the broken twigs. Luckily, there was a bush and my fall was broken by the tough and springy bushes.

Usually, my falls destroy my dreams, the nervous shock being sufficient to bridge the thousand centuries of sleep and awake into my little bed, where, perchance, I lie sweating and trembling and hear the cuckoo clock calling to me. I remember of my leaving home I have had many times, and never yet have I been awakened by it. Always do I crash, head down, and fetch up with a bump on the ground.

Scatched and bruised and whimpering, I lay where I had fallen. Peering up through the bushes, I could hear a demoniacal chant of joy and was keeping time to it with his teetering. I quickly hushed my whimpering. I was in the trees, and I knew the danger I ran of bringing upon myself the hunting animals by too audible an expression of my joy.

I remember, as my sobs died down, that I became interested in watching the strange light-effects produced by the shining my tear-wet eyelids. Then I began to investigate, and found that I was not so very badly damaged by my fall. Here and there; the sharp and jagged end of a broken branch had thrust fully an inch into my forearm; and

e the brunt of my contact with the ground, was aching intolerably. But these, after all, were only petty hurts. Those days the flesh of man had finer healing qualities than it has to-day. Yet it was a severe fall, for I limped a week afterward.

Next, as I lay in the bushes, there came upon me a feeling of desolation, a consciousness that I was home, far from my mother and the Chatterer. I would go far away through the terrible forest, and find some tree. As for food, I knew where to find it. For the last year at least I had not been beholden to my mother for food, protection and guidance.

I crawled softly out through the bushes. Once I looked back and saw the Chatterer still chanting and teetering. I knew pretty well how to be cautious, and I was exceedingly careful on this my first journey in the world.

I gave no thought as to where I was going. I had but one purpose, and that was to go away beyond the river into the trees and wandered on amongst them for hours, passing from tree to tree and never touching the ground.