

# The Cave That Swims on the Water

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## CHAPTER I. FOR SACRIFICE.

INTO your hands, then shall she be delivered. Be you at the great rock by the river, two thousand paces downstream, to-morrow at sunset, and you shall see her come; by her yellow hair may you know her for the one you seek, though in truth no sign is needed, for alone will she come.”

The speaker was Ta-nu-ko, chief priest of the Ta-an, and the one to whom he spoke was Gur, chieftain of the Little Hairy Men. Fifteen years before, led by T'san-va-men, Lord of the Winged Death, the Ta-an had come to the Land of the Dying Sun and had there made their homes, stretching for miles along a fair valley. During fifteen years had they warred with the Little Hairy Men, and now for the first had one of the Ta-an spoken in peace to one of the olden-time dwellers in that land.

A strange contrast the two made as they faced each other, concealed in a deep thicket that nestled high above the river, clinging to the face of the hill, for the chief priest was tall and straight, long of limb and smooth of face, with a noble head, albeit his countenance was somewhat marked with lines of selfishness and deceit, whereas Gur was short and squatty, with stooping shoulders and long arms, so that his hands, hanging half-closed, reached nearly to his knees.

His face, with broad, low forehead, flattened nose and outward-pointing nostrils, with retreating chin and prominent cheekbones, marked him as one of a race lower than the Ta-an—a race not too far removed from the great apes, the resemblance being heightened by the thin growth of hair that covered his features.

And even in the garments and weapons of the two men was an equal difference, for Ta-nu-ko, clad in finely worked clothing of leopard's hide, bore well-chipped ax and dagger of flint beside which those of the Little Hairy Men were rude and ill-formed, and carried also a bow and quiver of arrows, Gur's chief weapon being a long and heavy club of oak, air-dried and seasoned in the sun. Also, Gur's sole garment was roughly shaped from the hide of a wild horse, worked and dressed with little skill.

Seeing the two in converse, none could have doubted that they were of different race; his only wonder would have been that the priest of the Taan should be speaking in friendship with an enemy.

“At sunset, then, shall A-ta, the Girl of the Mountain Caves, daughter to Ban-tu-v'rai of the Ta-an, come to the Great Rock. Do with her as you will, save only that she must not live.” Both spoke in the same tongue—that of the Little Hairy Men.

“May I not keep her as my slave, to do my bidding?”

“As I speak, so shall you do, else A-ta comes not!” flamed the priest, leaning forward with a hard stare, from which Gur shrank back, muttering:

“It shall be done!” “It is well!” said Ta-nu-ko. “Slay her as you will; young and strong is she, and should make good sport ere her spirit passes into the Long Dark.”

“It shall be done,” repeated Gur, licking his lips with an evil grin. “I will bind her and flay thongs for my garments from her white skin; soft and tender are the thongs made from the hide of a maiden!”

And he grinned again in anticipation, while Ta-nu-ko looked at him with a shudder of repulsion, disgusted at the thought of such deliberate cruelty.

“But tell me, tall man,” went on Gur, “why wish you death for the maiden? Why may I not keep her as a slave, binding her with thongs, watching her, or perchance hewing off her foot, that she may not flee?”

“Because,” returned the priest, “none can say that she might not escape you, finding her way back to the Ta-an. Menzono-men, Slayer of Wolves, is vowed to the priesthood of the tribe by his parents, and he loves and is loved by A-ta. Should they marry, should he take her to his cave, then is he lost to the priest clan, for by the law of the Ta-an a priest may have no woman.”

“And can you not claim him, in fulfillment of the vow?”

Ta-nu-ko shrugged his shoulders, replying:

“Were she other than A-ta, yes But T'san-vamen, Great Chieftain of the Ta-an, loves the maiden, to whom he is even as a father. In childhood did he save her from death in a swift stream, and indeed it is in my mind that she is even dearer to him than his own daughter, also that she loves him more than she loves her father. It is his joy to give her pleasure, should she desire Menzono-men she need but speak two words to the chieftain—and who may withstand the Lord of the Winged Death?”

“Straight are your words,” answered Gur. “Your will shall be done; sweet will it be to torture a maiden of the Ta-an, watching her writhings and hardening to her screams!”

Ta-nu-ko shuddered again, but controlled himself, nodded, and turned away, saying:

“At sunset, then.” And plunging into the bushes, he disappeared down the slope.

Gur stood looking after him, marking his progress by the waving of the brush, and as the priest drew farther and farther toward the river. Gur's evil smile spread wider and wider. At length he chuckled, and muttered to himself.

“Sweet indeed would it be to torture a maiden of the Ta-an, but sweeter still to keep her as a slave! Then should she labor for me, carrying water, preparing my food, dressing, with her greater skill, the hides of beasts which I slay— perchance even teaching me to bring to life the Red God, that he might warm me in cold and dry me in wet! Also, thus could I beat her each day! And who shall tell this traitor priest that Gur has not obeyed him? And could he harm me did he know? In truth, I will keep the maiden alive!”

And grunting and chuckling, shaking his head in glee at the prospect, Gur took his way down the hill in turn, swinging south, then west along the river-bank to a point opposite the great rock, where, after gorging himself on a lump of raw meat, afterward drinking deep from the river, he stretched out in the shadow of an overarching tree to sleep away the long hours between noon and sunset.

The Ta-an had made their homes along a winding stream, dwelling in the caves and grottoes of steep cliffs that overhung the water, these homes, stretching for some six or eight hundred paces along the twists and turns of the river-bed, and to one of the largest and finest of the caves the chief priest made his way, climbing to the entrance, some ten or fifteen feet above the ground, by means of a rude ladder—the stout trunk of a tree, with footholds chopped deep into the wood on each side.

Reaching his home he seated himself on the rocky floor at the cavern's mouth, squatting where he could overlook the broad river and the path which led along the bank. Here he sat for an hour or more, meditating upon the fate of A-ta, for the priest was not by nature cruel.

But he could see naught else that he might have done; jealous of the power of the priesthood, believing firmly that in the priest clan was bound up the welfare of the tribe, it behooved him to secure for that clan the finest and best of the young men.

And such a one was Menzono-men; tall and strong and handsome, well formed, young, filled with high ideals, he would be a ministrant most acceptable to O-Ma-Ken, Great Father of the Taan. And the priests of the tribe might not marry! In very truth, A-ta was a stumbling-block in the way of the priesthood!

But was there not some other way? Even yet it was not too late; it were easy to let Gur go barked of his victim! And for the hundredth time Ta-nu-ko turned over in his mind plan after plan.

To slay the maiden himself, in secret; to betray her into some pitfall; anything to bring her a more merciful death. But no; the trackers of the Ta-an were skilled and crafty; Sar-no-m'rai, The Eyes That Walk in Darkness, friend and boyhood companion of the great chieftain—keener was he than a hunting wolf; no man might hope to elude his wondrous vision, to move without leaving traces that he could see and read.

No, this was the only way; for the hundredth time Ta-nu-ko reached this decision, now final, and, rising, he made his way down the ladder and turned his steps eastward along the shore of the river.

Five hundred paces had he gone when he was aware of a movement, a rustling of the bushes ahead, and he stopped in his tracks, unslinging his powerful bow from his shoulders and fitting an arrow to the string—none might tell when some beast of prey would attack! But he lowered the bow and replaced the arrow as a girl of nineteen rounded a turn of the path and came toward him, smiling, and he smiled in response, feeling a twinge of pain in his bosom as he did so, for it was A-ta.

And once again the priest sensed a regret that so fair a one must die, for indeed A-ta was fair, fit bride for such as Menzono-men. Tall she was, so that her eyes looked level into Ta-nu-ko's; long of limb, and slim yet round, the muscles playing under the smooth, sleek skin; brown of hair and of eye, as besemed a maiden of the People of the Mountain Caves, and so beautiful of feature that in the tribal songs her name was coupled with that of the half-fabled A-ai, the Dawn, bride of Snorr, the great chieftain of olden time.

As she stood in the patches of sunlight that filtered through the trees, clad in a scanty garment of leopard's hide that left bare her arms and right shoulder and breast, and reached but to the middle of her thighs, Ta-nu-ko wondered not that Ro-su, Carver of Statues, had cut from the tusk of a mammoth a figure which he named A-ta; not fairer was its surface than the velvet roundness of the living form!

A-ta drew near, smiling, for she was friend to every man and to every woman of the Ta-an, and the Chief Priest turned sick, closed his eyes, and swayed where he stood as a vision rose before him of that lovely form, bound and writhing in agony as the savage chieftain of the Little Hairy Men stripped thongs of skin from the tortured flesh.

Instantly A-ta was at his side, her arm about his waist, supporting him, as she said, anxiously:

“Ta-nu-ko! You are sick? Has illness overtaken you?”

He recovered himself with an effort, thinking silently.

“It is for the Ta-an!” Aloud he answered: “It is but a passing weakness; not since dawn of yesterday have I tasted food.” Then, once more erect and firm:

“A-ta, we are well met; I sought a messenger, and you will serve. It is for the Ta-an!”

“Speak!” answered the girl. “In what way can I serve the Ta-an?”

“To-morrow is the Great Sacrifice of the Hunt; it is for that I fast. Go you to the great rock that overhangs the water, two thousand paces to the south from here, where the Smaller Water joins this, our stream. The place is known to you?”

The girl nodded silently, and the priest went on.

“Take with you this sacred basket of woven reeds, bathe your hands and arms even to the shoulders seven times in the water, bathing also the basket. As the sun sinks to rest in the Great Water, pluck from the rock three handfuls of the moss that grows there, returning swiftly to the Place of Sacrifice, where I will take the moss, needed for the sacrifice to-morrow. Let no sound pass your lips from now till it is in my hands, and see that the moss is touched by naught save only your fingers and the basket in which you bring it. And fail not to pray in silence to the Great Father that you may be worthy to render this service. Go in peace!”

The girl bowed, then hesitated as she turned away, raising her left hand and her eyebrows in inquiry.

“Speak!” said Ta-nu-ko.

“Think not that I seek to avoid serving,” spoke A-ta, “but did not the son of Sen-va bring the sacred moss but yesterday?”

“It has been defiled. One of the children of the tribe, meaning no harm, laid a hand upon it as it was carried from the young man's hands to the altar. Go in peace, omitting not to pray to the Great Father.”

The girl bowed, and kneeling before the chief priest, said: “Your blessing on my errand, Ta-nuko!”

Once more Ta-nu-ko shuddered, but laid his hands on the girl's head, moving his lips silently—words would not come!

Satisfied, A-ta rose and continued along the path, the priest watching her till she was hidden in the bushes, when he covered his face with his hands and bent his head.

“Great Father,” he prayed, “accept the sacrifice of my honor! In thy service has a priest of the Ta-an spoken with two tongues and sent to her death the noblest maiden of the tribe. May the sacrifice find favor in thy sight!”

Rousing himself, he passed on to the cave of T'san-va-men, great chieftain of the Ta-an, where the two sat long, planning the Great Hunt, when the tribe would move, men and women and children, ten days' journey to the north and west, to make a camp where they would hunt, storing meat, dried in the smoke of the fires, to keep them through the Long Cold.

The plans made, Ta-nu-ko returned along the river to his own cave, where he wrapped himself in skins

of wolf and leopard and lay down to sleep.

He slept ill, being troubled much by dreams, and on awaking, he caught sight of a man hurrying along the path by the water's edge.

Nearer and nearer drew the figure, and soon Ta-nu-ko recognized it for the burly form of L'vu, friend and right-hand man to the great chieftain. Coming near, L'vu looked upward, and, seeing the chief priest above, halted and raised his left hand. Ta-nu-ko nodded and beckoned, clenching his right fist and moving it back and forth across his body, knuckles upward, and L'vu climbed the ladder, bowing deeply before the priest.

"Ta-nu-ko, Chief Priest," he said, "T'san-vamen, Lord of the Winged Death, Great Chieftain of the Ta-an, sends me to pray you come to him swiftly."

Ta-nu-ko leaped to his feet. "Trouble is come upon the Ta-an?" he asked.

"Nay," answered L'vu, "upon the great chieftain. A-ta, whom he loves as a daughter, returned not to her home, and he fears misfortune may have come upon her. Savage beasts are abroad."

"I come!" And quickly the two climbed down the ladder, making their way in haste to the cave of T'san-va-men. Arrived there, the priest bowed before the chieftain, who motioned him to sit, L'vu, Sar-no-m'rai, and others standing respectfully.

"Ta-nu-ko," spoke the chieftain, "A-ta returned not to the cave of her father yesternight. She was seen to speak with you by the river, and by none has she been seen since. Can you perchance tell us aught of what has overtaken her?"

"Nay, naught is known to me, save only that by me was she sent to bring the sacred moss for the Great Sacrifice of the Hunt, going to the Great Rock to gather it."

"Did not the son of Sen-va bring moss?"

"By chance was it defiled."

T'san-va-men turned to Sar-no-m'rai.

"Sar-no-m'rai," he said, "most skilful of all the trackers of the Ta-an are you. Go swiftly to the Great Rock and bring news of what you read there."

The famous hunter bowed in silence, examined his weapons—ax and dagger of flint, bow and arrows—and, turning, left the cave, proceeding on a jog-trot down the river. In silence he went, and in silence he returned.

Straight to the chieftain's cave he came, bowing before T'san-va-men and starting to draw in the dust the three circles of ceremony without which none dared address the great chieftain of the Ta-an. But T'san-va-men waved his hand impatiently, saying:

"That another time! Speak quickly!" "Oh, great chieftain," said Sar-no-m'rai, "to the Great Rock went A-ta. There knelt she by the stream, bathing hands and arms; her knees had pressed deeply into the grass by the river's edge. Rising, she went to the Great Rock and took from it some moss. While doing so, she was seized from behind by one of the Little Hairy Men, who crept close and sprang upon her, the tracks were clear. Bitterly she fought, but was overpowered and carried away. Also, I found where the Little Hairy Man had lain and slept. Also, I bring the basket of woven reeds given A-ta by Ta-nu-ko, thus proving his words."

And he laid down the basket at the chieftain's feet, drawing back and bowing as he took once more his place in the circle.

The chieftain's face grew red with anger and his brows drew together as he leaped to his feet, clenching his fists. But his eye fell on Ta-nu-ko, who sat with his face buried in his hands, muttering:

“And I sent her to death! It is I who am to blame!”

The great chieftain eyed the priest askance for a moment, for he had no strong love for the priesthood, but Ta-nu-ko's grief and self-reproach were evident, and his face softened. Stepping near, he laid his hand on the shoulder of the chief priest, saying gently:

“Nay, Ta-nu-ko, blame not yourself. One or another must bring the moss, and who so fit as A-ta, purest of the pure? And it is not known that she is dead; it may be that the Little Hairy Men but hold her captive. Blame not yourself, Ta-nu-ko! If she lives, rescue will find her—and if not, the Little Hairy Men shall journey into the Long Dark!” He turned to L'vu.

“L'vu,” he said, “take Kan-to, Sar-no-m'rai, and Sen-va, also others, as you may see fit. Go swiftly up the river and down, also up the Smaller Water; summon the warriors of the Ta-an, bidding them come armed and with food, prepared for war, for by the Great Father above I swear to rescue A-ta whole and unharmed from the hands of the Little Hairy Men, or to carry swift death and destruction to all their tribe, from the Snow-Crowned Mountains on the east to the Great Water on the west; from the Great Blue Water on the south to the farthest north that the foot of man has trod. Go swiftly; summon the tribesmen to war! Go!”

## CHAPTER II. AT THE ROCK OF COUNCIL.

THE following morning as the chieftain, with Nan-ai, his wife, arose, and the two stepped to the mouth of the cave, they stopped, smiling, for their son, a lad of fourteen, squatted in the sunlight polishing and testing his boyish weapons.

“Oh, great chieftain, my father,” greeted the youth instantly, “take me, I pray, with you into battle! Beasts have I fought and slain, but never armed foes. Strong am I, and skilled in the use of weapons, even as you yourself have said; let me then go with you, I beg, that I may learn to meet the shock of battle, as beseems a chieftain's son of the Ta-an!”

T'san-va-men looked with pride at the youth, then turned to his wife, saying:

“Your son is he also, shall his prayer be heard?”

Nan-ai clung to her husband's arm, mingled pride and fear showing on her face as she answered, doubtfully:

“Our only son is he, and I fear for him! Yet—yet—Tsu ven must learn! Only—I beg—watch over him in battle, my husband!”

The chieftain's eyes glowed proudly, but he controlled himself, saying only:

“L'vu and Sar-no-m'rai shall keep near him. Better teachers could he not have; craft and skill, skill and strength—he will return to you, bearing the weapons of his foes!” Then turning to his son he nodded, saying? “Your wish is granted; you shall go.”

The youth's face glowed, and his eyes shone, but he said, quietly and soberly:

"I thank you, my father; and you also, my mother." Then rising, he took his weapons and left the cave, turning into the forest, while the chieftain turned to his wife, speaking gently, laughing a little:

"Nay, put fear from your heart, Nan-ai; even such a one was I in my youth—yet I still live!"

"L'vu comes," said Nan-ai, and T'san-vamen turned to greet his messenger, who drew near, hurrying along the river-bank. Reaching the cave, L'vu knelt before the chieftain, drew in the dust with his finger, and said:

"Great chieftain, the men of the eastern caves are at the Place of Council."

"It is well," replied T'san-va-men. "And Sarno-m'rai approaches from the north!"

Even as he spoke Sar-no-m'rai came, reporting as had L'vu, and swift on his heels Kanto from the west and Sen-va from the south.

"To the Rock of Council," said T'san-vamen, and stepped within the cave, to gather his weapons when, striding along the path by the river, hurrying, appeared a young man of some twenty years of age, tall and handsome, slim of build, but wiry and muscular.

Approaching the cave, he knelt before the chieftain, drawing in the dust the interlocking circles of ceremony. By his unmutated hands, which bore all the fingers intact, the youth might have been an artist, but he carried only the lance and dagger of boyhood, and by the absence of ax and bow it might be recognized that he had not yet been inducted into any of the clans, either priestly, artist, or warrior.

"Speak, Menzono-men!" said the chieftain, and the young man began, doubtfully and hesitatingly:

"Oh, T'san-va-men, great chieftain of the Taan," he said, "it is known to you that from childhood my parents have destined me to the priestly clan?" He looked up questioningly, and the chieftain nodded, whereat the youth continued:

"I crave a boon—I—I—" and he stopped, seeking words.

"Speak! I can but refuse," said T'san-va-men. "I—I—O great chieftain, let me be one of the warriors rather than the priests!" said the Slayer of Wolves. "I—I love A-ta; to give her up—I could not endure to see her another's! And—and—to slay a bound and helpless victim on the altar—I cannot do it! My heart sickens, my hand weakens at the thought! To slay in battle, in defense of my life and of the tribe, yes, but at the altar I cannot! Let me be of the warrior clan and go with you to seek A-ta!"

T'san-va-men turned on his companions a look which they understood, for though it was not seemly that the chieftain should oppose the priests, yet to his boyhood companions, men who had stood by him in outlawry and had been with him received again into the tribe, it was well known that the great chieftain had no love for the priest clan.

His enmity was perhaps natural; Ja-ko, then chief priest, had endeavored to have him slain, but though Ja-ko had long since gone into the Long Dark, yet still it pleased the chieftain could he draw the best of the young men to the warrior clan.

But he turned a stern face to the kneeling youth.

"Menzono-men," said the chieftain, "this is a great thing you ask. It does not become a chieftain of the Ta-an to oppose the priests, taking from them one vowed to them from childhood! Nor has your training been that of a warrior; how, then, shall you handle weapons and endure the hardships of war?"

“Oh, great chieftain,” spoke the Slayer of Wolves eagerly, “long have I trained myself in the use of weapons, and to endure the long march and the cold camp! Ever in my mind has been the thought that perchance I might be a warrior. And for the rest—if a priest I must be—my lance will set me free!”

“Speak not thus!” said the chieftain sternly. “It is to serve the Great Father that you are vowed to the priest clan! He will not receive with favor one who shuns his service! Your body to the beast and your soul to the Place of Evil should you thus avoid your duty! Only by favor of the priest clan, only with their consent, can you be a warrior. But go we now to the Rock of Council; do you follow, and this matter shall be laid before the tribe.”

So saying, the chieftain and his men bent their steps to the north, fording the river and taking the shortest way across a neck of land, formed by a loop in the stream, Menzono-men following submissively, head bent.

This short-cut saved perhaps some three thousand paces in distance, but made necessary the fording of the river a second time, and this at a dangerous place, where the water, narrowing below a little island, and made swift by the shallow bottom which alone made possible the ford, foamed and boiled waist deep over a rough, rocky, and uneven bed.

More than one man, daring this passage, had been swept from his uncertain footing and whirled and tumbled down-stream until, battered and bruised by the sharp and jagged stones which thrust up from the rapids below, his lifeless body was spewed ashore from some eddy far down the river.

But the chieftain and his men, confident of their strength and skill—and not unwilling to test Menzono-men—strode along the narrow path toward the river.

Reaching the river-bank, the chieftain plunged unhesitating into the water, and after him L'vu.

Then followed Sen-va, and after him came Sar-no-m'rai, and last Kan-to, Menzono-men—who had never dared the ford—watching, awestruck, at the careless manner in which these men flung themselves to what seemed certain death.

At length the young man's turn was come, T'san-va-men, who had reached the farther bank, swinging about to see the manner of the young man's coming. But at that instant the chieftain's eye was caught by Kan-to, who slipped on the wet rock, staggered, caught at his balance, poised wavering, flung up his arms, fell, and was carried away by the rushing water, his form now appearing, now lost to view as he was swept down the flood.

Among the Ta-an it was, if not a disgrace, at least unusual, for man or woman to be unable to swim. By force of long tradition, the mothers took their children, while yet infants, to a shallow pool in some near-by stream, there letting them sport and play in the smooth water, so that often indeed a child could swim before he was able to walk.

But it had so chanced that Kan-to when young, had had his right leg broken by a falling rock, and although he had, by long and arduous training, overcome this handicap, and was known as a warrior of especial strength and skill, he had not learned to swim as well as most of his tribe.

But even as the chieftain turned to run, a white form rose from the farther bank, curved downward, plunged, and Menzono-men, like a swooping bird, cleft the water in one magnificent dive, disappearing with scarce a splash, and rising to the surface at once, his arms and legs flashing in the long, sweeping overhand stroke that carries a swimmer with utmost speed.

T'san-va-men, running, eyed the water anxiously; five hundred paces below the rocks broke the surface



in those rapids where no man might live. Could Menzono-men bring Kan-to to shore ere the flood carried them there?

Faster and faster the swimmer closed on the drowning man, flashing through the boiling, surging water even as the salmon darts. No spray flew from those gleaming arms; in smooth, even strokes they broke the water, and gently if swiftly they clove it again—only the arms showed above the surface; body and head buried, save only that at times the head was raised for breath or for a quick glance ahead.

Thus Menzono-men bore down on the older man—half-way to the rapids he overtook him—dove—came up behind—passed his right arm through the crook of Kan-to's elbows, drawing Kan-to's arms behind him—turned on his left side, bringing Kan-to's face above the water— and, swimming with legs and left arm alone, made his way slowly toward the shore, where the others waited his coming.

Still the river swept them down, and doubt was in the minds of T'san-va-men and his followers—could he make it? Nearer and nearer drew the rapids—but now Menzono-men was close at hand—into the water plunged T'san-va-men, grasping the hand of Sar-no-m'rai, he holding to Sen-va, the burly L'vu, as anchor, gripping tight an overhanging limb of a tree.

Out into the stream stretched the living chain, and as Menzono-men bore down on them the outthrust hand of the chieftain caught the wrist of the young man, and the two were hauled ashore, where they lay gasping, exhausted by the struggle. Kan-to recovered first—he had but rested while Menzono-men, swam with him—and staggering to his feet he spoke:

“Ours must he be; not for such a one the bound and helpless victim on the altar!”

“In very truth!” answered the chieftain, and L'vu and Sen'va echoed his words: “In very truth!” while Sar-no-m'rai, ever silent unless speech were needed, nodded his head in agreement.

Presently Menzono-men, too, rose, and the six—though now more slowly—resumed their march to the Rock of Council, some four hundred paces from the ford, where were gathered the warriors and priests from the neighboring caves both up and down the river, and from the caves and shelters along both sides of the Smaller Water.

The Rock of Council, flat-topped like a table, and some ten paces in diameter, rose two-thirds the height of a man above the level of the plain, and grouped in a semicircle about it—for the river flowed under one side—were four or five hundred armed men, strong, active, and eager of face, each dressed in a single scanty garment of hide, each bearing ax and dagger and lance, bow and quiver of arrows.

On the rock sat, or rather squatted, five men, Ta-nu-ko, and four lesser priests, for among the Ta-an the priest clan had equal voice with the warrior clan in all deliberations concerning the welfare of the tribe.

Toward this rock the great chieftain strode, followed by his four trusted lieutenants, and Menzono-men, and the crowd opened before them, closing in again behind, each warrior raising his lance erect, full length, above his head, while a mighty shout rose to the sky:

“Comes T'san-va-men! Hail, Lord of the Winged Death, great chieftain of the Ta-an!”

Reaching the Rock of Council, T'san-va-men took two quick steps and, burdened as he was with weapons, leaped full and free to its surface, landing erect. Followed L'vu, Sar-no-m'rai, and Sen-va; last Kan-to, though for him, weakened from the river, the effort was great.

Menzono-men halted at the foot of the rock, kneeling as became one who had a gift to crave, but T'san-va-men, turning, beckoned him, using the clenched fist moved back and forth across the body,

breast-high, and the Slayer of Wolves, rising, leaped also upon the rock, while a murmur of astonishment ran through the crowd—an unfledged youth, not yet admitted to either warrior or priest clan, standing on the Rock of Council! But swinging about on the edge of the rock, his men beside him and the priests behind, rising to their feet, the chieftain spoke:

“Warriors of the Ta-an, too bold grow the Little Hairy Men! To all of you is known A-ta— but yesternight was she, going to the Great Rock for the sacred moss, attacked and carried to death or captivity by one of their tribe. Shall this be? Shall one of the noblest of the Ta-an be slave to a savage people, a people who command not the Red God, but, losing him, go cold till they can beg a spark? Or shall she be victim to a people who torture captives, slaying them through long days, and even, it is told, devouring the bodies of those slain in battle or upon their vile altars? Shall not the warriors of the Ta-an move to the rescue, punishing this base people, driving them far from our homes, and—it may be—sending them into the Long Dark? How say you, men of the Ta-an? Speak!”

Then from the crowding warriors rose a great shout:

“Lead us, O chieftain! Lead us against the Little Hairy Men, that we may destroy them! Lead us! Lead us!”

The chieftain turned to the priests. “And you, Ta-nu-ko—how say you? For your word also must we have ere we go to battle!”

Now, Ta-nu-ko would gladly have opposed, hoping for the death of A-ta, and fearing the capture of Gur, willingly would he have negated the proposal to war—yet dared not! No reason could he give that would not betray him, and he bowed, saying:

“Lead, T'san-va-men! The Great father will send victory!”

Then rose a greater shout than before, and weapons were tossed on high, but the chieftain raised his hand.

“Yet one thing, men of the Ta-an! Here Stands before you Menzono-men, Slayer of Wolves, a youth vowed to the priesthood, who yet craves admittance to the warrior clan, that he may go with us to seek A-ta, beloved by him. Also, he craves not the service of the altar, slaying the bound victim, but rather the shock of battle. How say you, warriors and priests; shall his prayer be heard?”

This was a serious matter, diverting from a clan one vowed thereto, and the warriors stood thoughtful, a murmur rippling through the ranks. Aghast stood Ta-nu-ko; should this be granted, his crime had gone for naught! Useless his betrayal of A-ta, useless his lies, useless his sacrifice of honor! He leaped forward, throwing out his hands.

“Warriors and priests of the Ta-an!” he cried, “this may not be! From birth is Menzono-men vowed to the priesthood, not for us now to turn aside that vow! The wrath of the Great Father would lie heavy on us did we thus! This may not be! Further, untrained is the youth to war; no skill has he in the use of weapons, no warrior, he, but a priest, to serve at the altar!”

\* Even at the present day there are savage tribes who are familiar with the use of fire, but cannot generate it, depending on keeping alive a spark, or, if this be lost, on fortuitous origins, such as lightning— AUTHOR'S NOTE

Again the chieftain spoke: “Not an hour since did this youth save the life of Kan-to, who stands beside me now, plunging of his own free will into the Ford of Death to bring to shore Kan-to, swept down the flood! Is it for such a one to serve at the altar or to fight shoulder to shoulder with other warriors in

battle?"

Once more a murmur spread through the ranks, this time of astonishment, and all looked with respect on the youth who had dared, swimming, the Ford of Death. Then forward stepped Sar-no-m'rai, raising his hand, and the crowd was still, listening with attention, for Sarno-na'rai was known as one who, usually silent, spoke, when he spoke at all, with the tongue of wisdom.

"Men of the Ta-an!" he said, "this youth has courage. Also, strength has he, his deed proving well my words. Yet the chief priest says he knows not the use of weapons as a warrior should, nor can he endure hardships as beseems a warrior. Let us then put this to the proof.

"Let-Menzono-men lie, fasting, for seven days and seven nights on the Rock of Council, unsheltered from the sun and from the storm. Let him then bring to the Rock of Council—still fasting—the skin of Menzono the wolf, the born of the Beast that Wears a Horn on His Nose, and the Poisoned Slayer—this last living, and borne in the naked hand. So shall he prove his skill with weapons, his craft, his courage, and his endurance. Is the word good?"

"The word is good! The word is good!" shouted the warriors, and Sar-no-m'rai turned to the chief priest, asking directly:

"Is the word good?"

Ta-nu-ko, confident that the youth could not meet the test, and sure also that A-ta, for all her strength and spirit, would be dead long ere the test was ended and the warriors should move—in his heart pleased with the proposal, yet feigning reluctance, answered:

"The word is good!"

"Do you accept the test?" asked the chieftain of Menzono-men, and the youth bowed, replying:

"Gladly, great chieftain!"

"It is said!" spoke T'san-va-men, turning to the group. "Go you now to your homes, prepare for war, taking food, making ready your weapons, each man carrying five tens of arrows, for perchance is this a long war. On the twelfth day be here once more, to greet Menzono-men, and thereafter we march. Go, prepare! It is said!"

He waved his hand and leaped from the rock, and the crowd melted swiftly away, the warriors going to hunt beasts for food, that the flesh might be smoked over the fires, going to make new stores of arrows, to look over their weapons, and to make ready in all things.

There remained the chieftain and his followers, the priests under Ta-nu-ko, and Menzono-men. To the last the chieftain turned, saying: "You have heard! Water will be brought you daily. The Great Father aid you!"

And the ten strode off into the forest, T'sanva-men taking one path, Ta-nu-ko another, and the young man was left alone to his vigil on the Rock of Council.

### **CHAPTER III. THE CAVE THAT SWIMS ON THE WATER.**

AND now for a time we turn to A-ta, the Girl of the Mountain Caves. Trusting the words of Ta-nu-ko, fearing naught, and rejoicing to be entrusted with so holy a mission, she followed her instructions with care, going duly to the Great Rock, bathing herself and the basket, and repairing to the rock to gather the sacred moss for the sacrifice.

While kneeling before the rock, A-ta caught a slight sound, the rustling of a dry stick, perhaps, and turned swiftly, fearing some beast of prey, but even as she turned, as she had a glimpse of a squat, hairy form, there descended on her head a club, a million lights flashed and whirled before her eyes, and she sank back, dazed.

But deep within her breast a voice seemed to say: "Fight! Fight!" and with all her powers she struggled to rise. Her limbs seemed weighted down, and but slowly and with infinite effort could she stir, yet she stood upright and as Gur advanced, grinning, she closed, grappling him, biting, scratching, striking with fist and knee, so that the chieftain of the Little Hairy Men gave back, amazed.

Closely A-ta followed, for it was the tradition and training of the Ta-an—and A-ta was a warrior's child—ever to carry the fight forward, not standing on defense, but ever attacking, and closing with Gur once more she sank her teeth deep in his upper arm, so that the blood gushed forth and the man howled with pain. But he wrenched free, leaped back, and as A-ta came forward again his club fell—once more the lights whirled and danced before her eyes—and all was black

When she regained consciousness she was being carried over Gur's shoulder, belly down, her legs in front tight clasped in his muscular left arm, her face, behind, bumping against the small of his back as he proceeded at a shambling trot through the darkening forest. Her feet were tied together with a thong, her hands were tied behind her back, but as soon as A-ta was fully conscious she began once more to struggle.

Gur stopped, leaned his club against his body, reached around with his right hand, and caught the girl's long hair, which was flowing loose. He twisted it about his forearm, pulling it taut and drawing her head over to one side, picked up his club, and resumed his swinging trot, and A-ta, now helpless and tortured, again lost consciousness.

All during that long night Gur proceeded thus, never once stopping to rest, but keeping on, on, ever on. At times A-ta came out of her swoon and realized what was happening, at times all was black and she knew but vaguely the pain of the regular jerk, jerk, jerk on her imprisoned hair.

Once the slap of cold water on her face roused her to full consciousness as Gur forded a river, and A-ta wondered dully at the marvelous strength and endurance in the ungainly, almost grotesque body of the chieftain who could carry a grown woman thus tirelessly through the midnight dark of the forest, but as the water grew deeper she swooned once more, half strangled by the flood that swept over her face.

A-ta never knew how long Gur carried her (it was, in fact, for several days, with intervals for rest), nor had she any slightest notion of the route he followed. When next her senses came to her it was late afternoon—the sun was just setting—and she lay, still bound, on the floor of a rude cave, the home of her captor.

At first A-ta did not move; indeed, she could not, for every bone and muscle ached fiercely from the terrible ride, and her head throbbed agonizingly—she had been carried head downward for long hours. So she lay still, looking about, examining what came within range of her eyes, for the cave fronted the west, and the last rays of the sun struck brilliantly into it.

The roof of the cave was not ornamented with drawings and paintings of bison and mammoth, as were the caves of the Ta-an, nor had any slightest effort been made to shape the grotto into a better home; the floor was not swept, nor was the daily litter removed; gnawed bones, scraps of fur, weapons, tools, and other objects mingling in heaps about the place, so that A-ta felt a wave of disgust as she saw the filthy way her captor lived.

"Even the beasts thrust offal from their dens!" she thought, and her disgust grew as she watched Gur,

squatting before a fire, cook and eat his evening meal, for he tore the meat like a tiger, grunting and growling and snarling over it, nor, to A-ta's amazement, did he allow it to cook through; instead, he roasted the outside over the flames, gnawed off that layer, cooked it a little more, gnawed off the next layer in turn, and so on, cooking and eating alternately.

A-ta gave an exclamation of disgust, and Gur rose, coming to stand by her side, grinning down at her and saying something which was unintelligible to the girl, for he spoke in the tongue of the Little Hairy Men.

Turning, he apparently called some one, and four women of the tribe entered, to stand watching the captive, jabbering excitedly, whereupon the girl, exhausted, overwrought, tortured, and in an agony of fear, swooned again.

Then for many days A-ta, a prisoner, labored for Gur, carrying wood and water, curing hides, preparing food, doing the work of the chieftain's household, beaten if she failed to do it, beaten if she did it, but ever borne up by the hope of escape. So A-ta labored for Gur, seeking ever her chance, watchful always, thinking ever of some way to get back to the Ta-an.

Gradually, day by day, she made her plans for escape, deciding finally that by water, if at all, could she win back to the home caves of the Taan. Could she make the journey, beset as it was by nameless terrors?

So thinking, that very night A-ta made up her mind to the attempt, but it was an attempt foredoomed to failure. Gur following hard on her trail, and recapturing her, despite her desperate resistance. Then followed fresh indignities, until she resolved to plan more fully, to see if it were not possible to devise some means which would enable her to evade pursuit, and the thought came that she might follow the stream *in* rather than *beside* the water, for then she would leave no trail, no scent would lie, and the sweep of the river itself would carry her on her way.

But she could not hope to swim any such distance—would it be possible to float on a log? No, a log would roll under her; she could not sleep on it, nor could she carry food, for any least little wavelet would sweep it away.

Day after day she pondered over the matter, turning it over and over in her mind as she worked for Gur, and at last the solution came. She would travel on a log, beaching it at night—taking the risk of discovery—and would hollow out a place for her food—instantly there flashed across her mind the thought: “Why not hollow out a place for myself, too? Lying down, I could draw leaves and branches over myself, and the Little Hairy Men, passing, would think it but a stranded tree!”

The more she thought it over, the more this idea pleased her, and she set about to accomplish her purpose.

The first thing that occurred to her was that she must work at night, for during the day she was too cleverly watched, so night after night she slipped from the cave to work in the forest, it being, fortunately, full moon, so that there was light enough to see.

Each night, as Gur placed the bonds on her ankles and wrists, A-ta craftily set her muscles—a trick she had learned from Sar-no-m'rai—so that when she relaxed the thongs might fall slack and her hands and feet, slim and flexible, be drawn through, nor did Gur, dull of brain and slow of wit, but, trusting the bonds, and sleeping soundly, once notice the deception. But for all her care it was no simple matter to escape nightly from the cave, nor was it easy to force her tired limbs, worn and exhausted by the labor of the day, to struggle with the task she had set herself.

But night after night she persevered, first burning with a slow fire—the coals stolen from Gur's

hearth—the wood from the surface of the great tree she had chosen.

It was a long task for a young girl, but at length it was finished; and then the thought occurred to her; how was she to propel her log?

Down-stream the current would carry it, but she must travel against the current after reaching the junction of the rivers.

Long she pondered this matter, and finally cut a pole, trusting that she might be able to push her craft along, striking the pole against the bed of the stream; then, ready to start, she placed in the hollowed-out space her provisions, stolen, little by little, from her captor; dried flesh of deer and wild horse, roots and berries, and a bundle of salt, wrapped in a fragment of skin. As she was doing this her eye fell on her adze, and she thought:

“A dull tool cuts not well; will not a sharpened log cut the water better than a dull?” And down she sat to debate this new question.

All that day this question was in her mind, and when night came she had decided to sharpen one end of the log to a cutting edge—speed might be needed on the journey! This held her back three days—the longest three since she had begun her toil!—but at length the task was finally done and all was ready for the start.

Provisions stowed, adze beside them, pole ready, she prepared to slide the craft to the water—and could not move it!

A-ta was no heroine of romance, she was a poor, tired girl, worn out by her frantic labors, tortured and tried by the cruelty of Gur and his wives, borne up by the hope of escape, the dream of seeing her home and friends once more—she dropped full length on the ground and wept as though her heart would break.

Long she lay there, sobbing, thinking of the bitter contrast between her present fate and her happiness of a few short weeks before, when, of a sudden there flashed into her mind the humorous quirk of the chieftain's mouth and the gleam of his eyes as once he said, in time of famine:

“If the prey comes not to the hunter, then must the hunter go to the prey!”

Raising her head, A-ta stared intently into the forest, thinking hard; she rose, stepped to the waters' edge, looked long at the river, then:

“Perchance can I bring the river to the log!” She looked up at the stars and saw that scarce three hours remained till dawn, then seized her adze and frantically began to scoop a canal, barely big enough to pass the log, from the river to the craft. Long and desperately she labored, until, when she was beginning to despair, she broke down the last barrier, in rushed the water—A-ta held her breath, watching—the log was afloat! About to step into the hollowed log, A-ta heard behind her a rustle, a gasp of astonishment, and whirled quickly, to see Boh, oldest and ugliest and most cruel of the wives of Gur.

Boh's mouth was open to yell, to call for help, but in that instant, before the sound came, A-ta's pole, driven by her strong young arms, the hatred engendered by weeks of torture urging, plunged, butt-first, into the woman's stomach.

Eyes goggling, mouth lolling, Boh doubled up and fell slowly forward; as she fell the pole swept up and down, striking full on the back of her neck, and the chief of Gur's wives pitched forward, dead. A-ta watched a moment, pole ready, but Boh did not stir, and the girl, stepping into her craft, sat down and

pushed off from the bank, turning the bow down-stream.

Then followed days of comparative ease for A-ta. Once in her slow progress a band of the Little Hairy Men appeared on the southern bank, shouting and gesticulating, but after that no human being did she see, but many animals, Snorr-m'rai-no, the fear that walks the night; Dom'rai, the hill that walks; Ven-su, the beaver; Vam'rai, the swift runner, trooping daintily down to the water's edge, his does and fawns following; Kzen, the rat who lives in the water, and once, chancing to look up, she saw, depending from a spreading branch, the green and glistening form and evil, beady, black eyes of the Poisoned Slayer.

At length the mouth of the great river, as large almost as that on which she was, came in sight, and A-ta, poling her craft ashore, beached it at dusk to sleep one full night and in the morning take up the long struggle against the current that must be hers before she could win once more to the homes of the Ta-an.

#### CHAPTER IV. A WARRIOR'S METTLE.

MEANWHILE, Menzono-men fasted on the great Rock of Council, finding the task, indeed, more severe by far than he had expected it to prove. A fast of seven days and seven nights was naught to the young man, glorying in the strength of youth, nor—after the first day—did the wolf in his belly gnaw, but from the fierce sun Menzono-men sheltered himself as much as might be, following the shade while it lasted, and covering his bowed head with his hands, but for all he could do it seemed at times as though the blood seethed and bubbled within him, and more than once he felt, during the hottest hours, as though worms and maggots and grubs crawled and writhed within his skull.

And at night the coolness brought a chill from which he shivered.

Twice daily, at dawn and at sunset, water was brought by Ta-nu-ko and Kan-to, for neither priest nor warrior clan would trust the other to deal fairly, and the two made each trip in company.

So the weary days wore on, and on the fifth came the worst torment of all Menzono-men endured.

On the fifth day the wind had blown all morning, hot and searing, his scanty allowance of water was exhausted long since, and he huddled, bent over, clasping his head in his hands and moaning slightly from time to time.

Once more Menzono-men groaned, and, stripping his scanty garment of hide from his loins, he wrapped it tightly about his head. Hot and suffering before, he was now half suffocated, yet he knew it was his only salvation, so he endured. Presently, little puffs of yet hotter wind came, bringing with them faint, sifting dust, which touched his skin almost caressingly, then faster and faster they came, till the dust, wind-borne, struck against him continuously, like rain, but no longer caressing; it burned and cut and stung, it dried yet further his already parched skin, it sifted through the covering about his head, it clogged his eyes, it filled his ears, it drove into his nostrils, it scorched his lips, till Menzono-men, tortured, could scarce restrain himself from leaping from the rock and running to the river, that, plunging in, he might find relief from his agony. One thought only held him back, and over and over he repeated to himself.

“A-ta! A-ta!” grinding his teeth and clenching his fists till the nails, cutting into the flesh, brought a new pain which in some measure diverted his mind from the old.

So for three long hours he held on, till the storm had blown itself out, and with the coming of the shade came Kan-to and Ta-nu-ko, bearing the precious water.

Menzono-men, knowing his haggard looks from the shocked expression of the warrior's face, yet contrived a twisted smile of greeting, winning thus a nod and smile of approval from Kan-to, who loved brave men.

“Endure yet two days,” said Kan-to. “And it is permitted to say to you that the Ta-an march not till your test is done, the great chieftain, Lord of the Winged Death, having sworn that should you succeed it shall be yours to seek out and slay the one who has taken A-ta captive.”

Menzono-men, glancing from Kan-to to Tanu-ko, surprised a curious look on the latter's face, but thought little of it, taking it merely for disappointment at the favor shown. Rinsing his mouth, he took a long swallow of the life-bringing water, and after a vain effort spoke in a harsh, rasping croak:

“Bear my thanks to the great chieftain, I pray, and tell him I will endure, the suffering is great, but so likewise, and greater, is the reward!”

Kan-to nodded approvingly, and said: “Good! Your words shall go to him.” Then, turning, the two left Menzono-men to the last stretch of his fasting.

The worst was now past; there came no more dust-storms, and cooler weather made more endurable the days, the chill of night being less hard to bear than the heat of the day. Still, Menzono-men suffered, and was rejoiced when, at sunrise of the eighth day, there came to the Rock of Council T'san-va-men and Ta-nu-ko, none others being with them.

“Descend, Slayer of Wolves!” said the great chieftain, and the priest nodded, whereat the youth, gathering his strength, leaped from the rock and knelt before them.

“Menzono-men,” said the chieftain gravely and solemnly, “the first part of the test have you passed. It remains now to pass the second. From this day forth water is yours where you shall find it, but not food. Swear now, by your honor as one of the Ta-an, by your worship as a child of O-Ma- Ken, the Great Father, and by your hope that after this life you may be with the spirits of your fathers in the Place of Good, that no food shall pass your lips till you come once more to the Rock of Council, bearing the horn of the great beast, the hide of the wolf, and the Poisoned Slayer; for none goes with you into the forest.”

“As you have said, so do I swear,” answered Menzono-men, solemnly and reverently.

“It is well!” said T'san-va-men. “Take now these weapons, a gift from me to you. Bear them into the forest and use them well, that your prayer may be granted! Go!”

And T'san-va-men dropped over the youth's shoulders the thong of a quiver of arrows and the string of a bow, placed in his girdle a beautiful dagger of flint, with handle of oak, and in his hands ax and lance. He touched the young man lightly on the shoulder, repeated: “Go!” and, turning, disappeared into the forest, followed by Ta-nu-ko.

Menzono-men remained kneeling while he uttered a prayer for aid, then, taking his way to the river, luxuriated in a quiet pool, whence, when he had bathed, he set out in search of a trail along which he might place a trap for the Beast that Wears a Horn on His Nose.

All that morning he tramped, till the sun was high overhead, when he rested for a time, and again took up the search, walking along the bank of the river and examining carefully and with attention the grass and brush which grew close down to the stream. Many game trails he passed, but none which bore the mark of the huge foot he sought, till about the middle of the afternoon he found the desired track. Casting a glance at the sun, the young man decided it was too late to set his trap; so, climbing a tree, he made a rude platform of branches wattled across two great limbs, and lay down to watch the trail.

At length, grunting and rolling his little piggish eyes, the prey he sought, the Beast that Wears a Horn on His Nose, came to the river to drink and then went away. This done, Menzonoren climbed cautiously



down from the tree and with all possible speed—for it was at best a long task—selected a heavy tree, from which with infinite labor, he made a deadfall. Presently came the first of the beasts, a troop of wild sheep, but they passed in safety, unalarmed—Menzono-men had cleared away, as well as might be, all signs of his labor, and had strewed the ground with strong-scented leaves plucked near the river. Next came a dozen wild cattle, and at last the chosen prey of the hunter.

Slowly he walked down the trail, grunting and snorting, his huge, ungainly bulk looming large in the dusk of the forest. On and on he came, and Menzono-men's heart beat fast—never had he hunted such mighty game! On and on, and Menzono-men, lips parted, watching closely, gathered tight the end of the vine—nearer and nearer came the beast—Menzono-men's eyes glowed—his muscles drew slowly taut—one step more—a strong jerk—the upright pole snapped—the great log, gathering speed, swept crashing down, striking the prey just behind the shoulders—and Menzono-men, after watching a moment, climbed down his tree and, taking his ax, began to cut away the horn; the deadfall had broken the beast's spine and it had died instantly.

The following day saw Menzono-men returning toward the homes of the Ta-an, for while searching for the Beast that Wears a Horn on His Nose he had marked down a wolf's den, a cave in a pile of tumbled rocks, and here he planned to take the hide of Menzono the Slayer.

Here the young man lay in wait, and late in the afternoon his vigil was rewarded, for there suddenly appeared, without warning, like a magic trick, the head of a great gray wolf, framed in the black mouth of the den.

For some moments the wolf looked about, seeking danger, seeking to know whether or not he could safely leave his home, and the young man silently rose to one knee, lifting his bow, an arrow fitted to the string.

Slowly, silently rose the Slayer of Wolves, drew back the arrow to his ear, and sped the shaft—the wolf dodged back, catching sound of the twang of string, and Menzono-men dashed the bow furiously to the ground, cursing—the arrow had flown wild! Again he cursed, and stood a moment in thought, then looked at the sun, now low down toward the horizon, reflected a moment more, and with a reckless air dropped his weapons on the ground, all but his dagger, fell on all fours, and crawled head first into the wolf's den!

The dagger Menzono-men carried was a large one, the flint blade alone being half the length of the young man's forearm, from elbow to finger-tip.

Menzono-men had no fear, could he but reach the wolf with this, and on he crawled, down a little slope, the smell of the dank earth, mixed with the strong animal reek, in his nostrils as he went.

The entrance to the den pitched slightly downward, and the passage was at first barely wide enough for him to travel, but presently it widened slightly, giving more elbow-room, and became higher, so that he could walk, crouching. His feet struck against a few bones as he progressed, but for the most part the hard-packed earth underfoot was bare and clean.

And now there came to his nostrils another scent, that of blood, whereby he knew that some partly devoured prey of the wolf still lay in the den; lifting his head to sniff, his eyes caught the gleam of two greenish eyes ahead—the eyes of Menzono—his hand tightened on the dagger—in that instant there sounded a ferocious snarl—the eyes moved—the wolf sprang—and Menzonomen struck!

Twice he struck, even as the sharp teeth gashed his left arm, outthrown, from elbow to wrist—again—again!—and all was still, save for his own hard breathing. Cautiously Menzono-men reached out and felt before him a warm, furry body; he was conscious of the hot blood gushing down his

wounded arm; seizing the carcass, he backed from the den, dragging it after him, and, reaching the open air once more, flung himself down on the grass, panting, the great beast a huddled heap beside him.

Presently he rose, sought healing leaves, and bound them tightly about his arm, first bruising them between his hands that the soothing juices, entering the wounds, might allay the pain and prevent stiffening, then set to work to strip the hide from the wolf.

This was no slight task, weakened as he was by fasting, wearied by his labors at the deadfall, and further weakened by loss of blood; but he persisted, though the work was not finished till after nightfall, and Menzono-men saw scores of eyes gleaming about him, and heard rustlings in the brush. At length, the hide taken, the young man thought of rest, and as he cast about for a safe place his eye lit with a sudden glint of humor; he would sleep in the wolf's den! No fear of the wolf's mate returning; this was the season of young, and there were none in the den, so this was a lone beast, unmated, and Menzono-men, pushing the rolled-up skin before him, crept into the den, curled up, faced the opening, and slept.

In the morning he woke, crawled from the den, finding the bones of the wolf picked bare of flesh by hyenas who had feasted during the night, and took up the third and most perilous part of his task, the search for the Poisoned Slayer. For this he struck inland, away from the river, for only seldom and by chance did the reptile come down to the water; he preferred the higher ground, where piled rocks offered many dens and lurking-places, and where, stretched out on their hot surface, he could sun himself through the long, unshaded days.

So Menzono-men turned his face away from the stream, climbing the slope of the gently rising ground to a place he knew, where were many tumbled rock masses, the chosen home of his third prey. All that morning he tramped, the forest gradually thinning out, till toward noon he came to the crest of a low hill and saw before him a little open space, rock-floored, where lay in twisted, intertwined piles the green and shining bodies of thousands of snakes.

Snakes big and little, snakes young and old, lay in the hot sun, their unwinking eyes staring like black jewels in their evil, flattened heads. Menzono-men, drawing near, was conscious of a strong, sickening odor that rose from the deadly reptile, and he hesitated—the snakes, at sight of a man, lifting their heads and weaving them back and forth, darting their forked tongues in and out, while from the mass rose a low, prolonged hissing sound.

Menzono-men was no coward—none save a man of proved courage could crawl into a wolf's den to slay the beast!—but he was smitten with sick horror at the dreadful sight before him, instinctive fear, racial, from his ancestors, came upon him, and he retreated a few steps, shuddering; he leaned against a tree, shaking from head to foot, his empty stomach retching agonizingly as he strove vainly to vomit.

For some time he stood thus, then, calling up all his forces, he cut from a tree a straight branch some six feet in length, and with this in his hand approached once more the heap of snakes. Thrice he drew near and thrice recoiled, as there rose before him the memory of one he had seen die from the bite of the Poisoned Slayer—as there rang again in his ears the screams of the dying man, and his cries: "I burn! I burn! In pity, slay me!"

Menzono-men feared not death, but torture he feared! At last, with bitten lip and blood therefrom trickling down his chin, he stepped forward and extended the stick toward the nearest snake, which instantly flung itself into a coil and struck, recoiling swift as a flash of light. Still Menzono-men held out the stick, and again and again the snake struck till, exhausted or sullen, it refused to strike again.

Immediately the young man pressed the stick down firmly on the back of the snake's neck, and, despite its writhings, held it down while he gripped it tight with his right hand, clasping three fingers about its neck

and pressing hard with thumb and forefinger against the sides of its jaw. He rose erect, the reptile twisting itself about his arm and wrenching in its efforts to reach him with its fangs, but Menzono-men held fast and turned once more toward the river.

Suddenly a thought struck him—how was he to carry the snake?

For a time the young man was puzzled, and was minded to slay this snake and capture another, but there came to him a recollection of what an old man of the Ta-an had told him; that should he press firmly on a certain spot on the snake's neck the reptile would sleep for a time. He tried, using his left hand, and to his amazement the snake ceased its struggles, became utterly rigid, stiff as the haft of an ax, and so remained.

He laid it down, took a thong of rawhide, made in it a slip-knot, fastened the other end to a long stick, slipped the loop over the snake's neck, drawing it snug, lifted his prey, and made his way to where he had left the hide of the wolf and the horn of the Beast that Wears a Horn on His Nose. These he lifted, and with them, and his weapons set his face again toward the homes of the Ta-an and the Great Rock of Council.

#### CHAPTER V. TO THE DEATH.

DOWN the bank of the river marched T'sanva-men, Great Chieftain of the Ta-an, followed by more than four hundred armed warriors of the tribe, each bearing ax and dagger, lance and bow, and a quiver of arrows.

A magnificent body of men were they, each man stepping proudly in the company to which he belonged.

Menzono-men, a full-fledged warrior, had knelt at the altar while Ta-nu-ko, the chief priest, with the adze and hammer of ceremony, struck off the little finger of his left hand, thus proving his induction into the clan, and he now strode forth proudly in the Company of the Wolf, following directly behind L'vu, Sar-m'rai-no, Kan-to, and Sen-va, these in turn stepping in the footprints of their chieftain, while beside Menzono-men walked Tsu-ven, son of the chief, claiming fulfillment of his father's promise.

The chieftain had sent out scouts, seeking a passage directly overland to the homes of the Little Hairy Men, but these had returned, confirming his belief that the Farther River was impassable, and he had resolved to march down the river on which he was to the junction of that with the one on which lived the Little Hairy Men, to cross the broad water by swimming, and make his way up the confluent branch along the southern shore.

Now, for seven days had the warriors marched, pressing on through forest and brush, fording or swimming small streams, and sleeping where night overtook them. Five days of rest and feeding had Menzono-men received, then three of fasting and prayer before the ceremony of induction, so it was now the twenty-eighth day since the disappearance of A-ta, and Menzonomen feared greatly, though L'vu oft reassured him, saying:

“Did she not die forthwith, she still lives, a slave.” On the evening of the twenty-eighth day, as the warriors were preparing to camp, came one to T'san-va-men, greatly excited, begging speech with the chieftain. This granted, he knelt and drew on the grass the three circles of ceremony, saying:

“Oh, T'san-va-men, Lord of the Winged Death, Great Chieftain of the Ta-an, an omen!”

“Speak!” answered T'san-va-men, and the warrior replied:

“There comes a log toward us, moving against the stream!”

At these words there was a stir among those near the chief, and Tsu-ven broke out:

“Oh, father—great chieftain, rather—is the omen of good?”

T'san-va-men smiled at the boy's eagerness, answering gently:

“Go we forthwith to learn.” And, rising from where he sat on a fallen tree, he led the way the few steps to the bank, where the crowd of warriors, eagerly peering, made way respectfully.

In very truth, far down the stream, there appeared a log, and in very truth was it making its way against the current. T'san-va-men looked for a time, then turned to him who stood at his left, saying.

“Sar-no-m'rai, keenest of all is your sight; look now and tell us if the omen be of good or of evil!”

Long Sar-no-m'rai looked, shading his eyes with his hand against the glare from the sky, then, smiling, he turned to the chieftain, replying:

“Good, in very truth! It is A-ta who comes!” At these astounding words a buzz of wonder ran through the crowd, and T'san-va-men looked keenly at the most skilful tracker among the Taan.

“A-ta!” he cried. “Sar-no-m'rai, is this indeed sooth?”

“I speak not with two tongues,” replied Sarno-m'rai, and the chieftain answered:

“Indeed, that is known to me. It is A-ta!” Forthwith a great shout broke from the warriors, and crying: “A-ta! A-ta!” they rushed along the bank till opposite the strange craft, which swung inshore to meet them. Amid much buzz of talk it was dragged up on dry land, and A-ta, half led, half carried, was taken to where the chieftain had resumed his seat on the log, over which had been thrown a lion's hide.

As she drew near he rose, and when she knelt he lifted her, pressing her in his arms and seating her near him on a smaller log which was quickly brought. Menzono-men was sent for, and food and drink were brought, and when the girl had rested and eaten she told her tale, showing the scars of the beatings she had received from Gur and his wives, and showing also her limbs, gaunt from starvation.

Frequent and loud were the curses as the tale was told, for A-ta was loved of all the tribe, and many were the demands to be led at once, without delay, against the Little Hairy Men, but T'san-vamen, thoughtful, asked:

“Was it chance, think you, A-ta, that Gur waited at the Great Rock? Or was it appointed?”

“Nay, great chieftain,” replied A-ta, “he boasted that the chief priest of the Ta-an had sent me to him!”

“Gur speaks the tongue of the Ta-an?” “Nay, he did but point to me and to himself, saying: 'Ta-nu-ko! Ta-nu-ko!' and laughing.”

For a long time the chieftain sat silent, thinking, remembering various trifles which at the time had made no impression, then, rising, he said:

“L'vu, Kan-to, Sen-va, take you the trail to the homes of the Ta-an. Reaching there, tell Tanu-ko I require his presence here. Tell him no other word, and in especial speak to none of the return of A-ta. Should he refuse—though it is not in my mind that he will—bring him by force, but unharmed. Go!”

The three bowed and took their departure, and T'san-va-men spoke to Sar-no-m'rai.

“A-ta being once more among us, the Little Hairy Men may wait our pleasure. Here we camp till these return with Ta-nu-ko; see to it!”

So camp was made, and for ten days the warriors of the Ta-an busied themselves with hunting and with drying over fires the flesh of the animals slain, adding thus to their store of food, to the supplies they carried with them to the war. On the eleventh day, at about the middle hour of the morning, appeared the messengers, and with them the chief priest, coming of his own will, though wondering.

Straight to T'san-va-men they went, bowing before him where he sat on his skin-covered log at the edge of a little glade in the forest, L'vu— having drawn the ceremonial sign—saying:

“Oh, great chieftain, the errand is accomplished; before you stands Ta-nu-ko, chief priest of the Ta-an!”

“It is well done,” answered T'san-va-men. “Call now the warriors.” Presently, full-panoplied, the warriors of the Ta-an came hurrying, and grouped themselves in a semicircle about where sat the chieftain, none speaking; Ta-nu-ko standing alone three paces from him, and facing him. When all were placed T'san-va-men, closely watching Ta-nu-ko, said:

“L'vu, go you and bring A-ta,” and he saw that Ta-nu-ko, for all his self-control, started and looked about quickly as though seeking escape. Quickly came A-ta, led by the burly lieutenant of the chieftain, and the circle parted ^to let her pass,

“A-ta,” said T'san-va-men, “you have said that this priest betrayed you into the hands of Gur; tell now once more, that all may hear, what happened, that all may judge of the guilt of Ta-nuko, sending to death or slavery one of the Ta-an!”

But as A-ta was about to speak, Ta-na-ko, who had recovered his self-possession, broke in:

“It needs not; the maiden speaks truly. I it was who sent her to the Great Rock, knowing that Gur awaited her coming. And this I did that Menzono-men, losing her whom he loved, might keep the vows made for him, following the path of the priestly clan, to the glory and honor of the Great Father of the Ta-an, The sin is mine, if sin there be; for the welfare of the tribe did I thus, sacrificing my honor to the glory of the Great Father, and mine is the punishment, if punishment there be!”

And he looked about him proudly and bravely—defiantly, even—at the throng of threatening faces, for from the warriors there rose a fierce growl, and a murmur of :

“Death to the traitor! Slay! Slay!”

But the chieftain raised his hand for silence, and in the hush that followed whispered briefly with L'vu and Sar-no-m'rai, both of these nodding. Then, addressing Ta-nu-ko, he spoke:

“Ta-nu-ko, chief priest of the People of the Mountain Caves, it is in my mind that you have done ill; betraying a maiden of the tribe into the hands of savages, to death or worse, false have you been to the Ta-an, nor does it seem that the Great Father approves your act, since before you stand A-ta, escaped from slavery, and Menzonomen, no priest, but a warrior, your plot a failure.

“Yet, since to your twisted mind it seemed a worthy act, since you hoped thus to add to the glory of the Great Father, if is not in my mind to slay you forthwith, even though by the law of the tribe treachery is so punished.

“Therefore make now your choice; either to die on the Great Altar, at the hands of the priests, in sacrifice, that the Great Father, seeing your death, may accept this in expiation; or taking bow and arrows, to seek Menzono-men in the forest, righting with him. Should you slay him against whom you have plotted, then may the Ta-an take it as a sign that O-Ma-Ken approves your act, and you shall go free, returning once more to the priestly office. Choose!”

Now it chanced that Ta-nu-ko, unlike the most of the priests, was skilled in the use of the bow; with him it was a diversion, an amusement, and often had he practised it in hours of leisure from his duties at the altar. Therefore, when T'san-va-men offered the alternative, the priest's eyes lit up, and not doubting that he could conquer, he answered:

"I accept the trial; let bows be given, and set us to seek each other deep in the forest!"

"So be it," said the chieftain. "L'vu and Senva, let the bows be brought; give each man three arrows; conduct the priest a thousand paces into the forest thither"—and he pointed northwest— "and Menzono-men a thousand paces there"—and he pointed northeast. "Then let them seek each other. It is said; go!"

L'vu and Sen-va, each with a bow and three arrows, stepped forward to lead the duelists to their places, Menzono-men casting a last look at A-ta as he followed the steps of Sen-va. Then the warriors of the Ta-an settled themselves to wait the outcome, squatting about the little glade and speaking in hushed voices.

A-ta, knowing the chief priest's skill with the bow, crouched, shivering with fear for her lover, behind the log where sat the chieftain, impassive as a rock. Presently was heard the long-drawn, quavering call of L'vu, announcing that his man was placed, and that of Sen-va replying, and the warriors knew the hunt was on; that one or both of the duelists would fall—the die was cast. At length Sen-va returned, to take his place in the group about the chieftain, and soon L'vu also stepped from the forest.

All that long afternoon the great chieftain and his men sat in the little glade, and behind him crouched A-ta, clenching and unclenching her hands; and so the slow day dragged on.

And now the chieftain began to cast anxious glances at the sun, which was drawing low down in the western sky; no sign of either of the two had appeared, and sunset was near. But as the sun touched the tops of the western trees and the long shadows crept across the grass a sudden sound broke the hush of afternoon; one long, shuddering scream, the scream of a man in agony, rang through the forest—and once more all was still.

The Winged Death had found one—but which? A-ta's heart swelled till it seemed as though it would burst, then the blood swept away from it, leaving her cold. Which would return, which would step from the forest? It seemed long hours ere a step sounded, a rustling in the brush as a man passed through, drawing nearer and nearer the little glade—which?

A long-drawn sigh from the eagerly watching warriors, a joyful cry from A-ta—and Menzonomen, blood trickling from a wound on his shoulder, staggered forth to kneel at the feet of T'san-va-men! The great chieftain rose, grim and stern.

"Menzono-men," he said, "you have returned; what of Ta-nu-ko? Is he in very truth wrapped in death? Has his soul gone into the Long Dark? Or does he lie wounded in the forest? Speak!"

The young man strove to answer, but, exhausted from the hunt, pitched forward at the chieftain's feet. T'san-va-men motioned to the warriors to lift him up, but at that moment Sar-nom'rai touched his leader on the shoulder, pointing upward. Far above the tree-tops showed a speck in the sky, growing swiftly larger and larger, till presently, clearly seen of all, a vulture, wide and black of wing, dropped from the blue, falling, falling, like a plummet, straight to the forest. Another followed—another—another—

Next morning T'san-va-men called his warriors together, and when all were assembled he spoke to them, saying:

“Men of the Ta-an, A-ta, escaped from the Little Hairy Men, has given counsel. At one spot only can we ford the Farther River, on the southern bank of which the Little Hairy Men make their homes. This ford they guard well, it being further guarded by the high bank of the stream. Therefore, says A-ta—and the counsel seems good—let us pass this river on which we have made our camp, betake ourselves through the forest to the Farther River, and there make for ourselves many of the Cave That Swims On the Water, such as that in which A-ta returned.

“Thus shall we pass the river that guards the Little Hairy Men on the north, avoiding also the morass which—A-ta tells—guards their homes on the south and west. Thus may we cross, falling upon the Little Hairy Men from the east, the upstream side of their camp, the side unprotected save by themselves. Is the counsel good?”

“It is good! It is good!” cried the warriors. “Let us go! Lead on, great chieftain!”

“One other thing,” spoke T'san-va-men. “It is against the law of the Ta-an that a woman go with us to war, yet would I have A-ta, that she may show us the manner of making the Cave That Swims On the Water. What say you, tribesmen?”

A silence followed, each man eyeing his neighbor doubtfully; the word of the chieftain was strong, yet strong also was the law and the respect due the law. At length spoke Sar-no-m'rai, he who spoke but seldom:

“Men of the Ta-an,” he said, “who makes the law? Is it not ourselves? Can we not then unmake the law, even as an artizan can destroy the bow that he has made, or an artist the carving? If then it is our desire that A-ta go with us, shall she not do so? Who is there to gainsay us? It is *our* law!”

A murmur sounded among the warriors, growing in strength and at last breaking into words:

“It is our law! A-ta shall go! It is we who make the law; let the girl go with us to war!”

And the acclamation swelled till the great chieftain held up his hand, saying:

“It is enough; A-ta goes with us! Cross we now the river that lies before us and take we our way through the forest, to fall upon the Little Hairy Men!”

And taking their weapons and falling into formation in their various companies, the warriors of the Ta-an marched some two thousand paces back up-stream to where the river, broad and shallow, offered easy passage, and, fording the stream, plunged into the depths of the thick forest, T'san-va-men, accompanied by L'vu, Sar-nom'rai, Kan-to, and Sen-va, leading, and with them A-ta, first of the women of the Ta-an to march with the men to war.

## CHAPTER VI. THE SWAMP OF FEAR.

FIFTEEN days later the Great Chieftain sent for Menzono-men, and the latter accompanied Kan-to, the messenger, to their leader. During those fifteen days the Ta-an had pressed through the forest, crossing the broad “V” of land, five days' journey in width, that here separated the river of the Ta-an from the Farther River, and had established their camp several thousand paces upstream from the homes of the Little Hairy Men and half a day's travel inland.

They had sent out scouts—sentries, rather—to guard against wandering individuals from Gur's tribe who might chance to discover them, and under this protection the artists and craftsmen of the tribe, aided by the warriors, had set to work to fell trees and make canoes, instructed by A-ta, inventor of the Cave That Swims On The Water.

It was, indeed, somewhat unusual for the artists and artisans of the Ta-an to accompany the fighting-men to war, but in such a case as this, when the call went out for the full man-power of the tribe, they did so, and in this instance it was well that they were there, for the warriors, trained to battle and in the hunt, could not handle tools so well as men trained from infancy in their use.

At suggestion of L'vu the canoes were made of the largest logs, capable, when hollowed out, of holding twenty men, and Sar-no-m'rai also had come forward with advice. To this genius of the trail may be credited the invention of the paddle, fashioned from a tree limb, as a result of which each man of the tribe was furnished with this implement of progress, in more senses than one.

By now three canoes had been completed, and the tribesmen were looking forward eagerly to the day, not far off, when they should make the projected descent upon the Little Hairy Men, the tribe that acknowledged Gur's leadership.

Menzono-men, summoned, followed Kan-to, wondering at the chieftain's sending for him, and questioning Kan-to, who, however, knew naught of the purpose. Coming to where the leader sat, calm and dignified, on his skin-covered log, the young man bowed, tracing with his finger on the grass. T'san-va-men's face relaxed and he smiled at the youth, then said:

"Menzono-men, you being now a warrior, and A-ta being once more among us, doubtless you desire to wed her as soon as may be?"

"In very truth, Great Chieftain!" replied Menzono-men.

"Your endurance have you proven in the test laid upon you; likewise your courage in face of peril. But A-ta, foster-daughter to T'san-va-men, Lord of the Winged Death, is one to mate with the highest. Therefore still further proof must you give, of craft and skill and courage in face of an enemy, even greater proof than in the fight with the Chief Priest. Take, therefore, twenty men, full-armed; take also a Cave That Swims On The Water; cross the Farther River, march secretly upon the Little Hairy Men, spying out their camp on all sides and bringing word to me of where and when and how we may best attack. It is said; go!"

Menzono-men bowed respectfully and asked:

"Great Chieftain, may I take with me Sar-nom'rai as one of the twenty?"

The corners of T'san-va-men's mouth twitched slightly at this crafty request, but he suppressed a smile and answered:

"No; nor L'vu nor Kan-to nor Sen-va. Leader are you of the party, and upon yourself must you depend."

The young warrior bowed once more and withdrew, going among the party and choosing his men, instructing each to take weapons and food and join him. Soon they set out, plunging in single file into the trees, and all the rest of the day Menzono-men led his party through the forest, reaching the river about sunset and making camp—a cold camp, lest the fires be seen by any of the Little Hairy Men—a few yards from the shore, where he allowed his men to rest and eat while he waited for dark. Shortly before the woods were utterly dark he sent his followers to bring the canoe and paddles, he himself remaining on guard. Behind him the woods were hushed save for the cries and chirping of nesting birds, and before him the broad river flowed smooth and black in the dusk, its surface broken at times as a fish leaped with silvery flash.

Beyond the stream the forest stretched black and impenetrable to the eye as Menzono-men peered



across, seeking any slightest movement which might betray the presence of an enemy on the farther shore. But nothing appeared, and the solitude was unbroken till his men returned bearing the great canoe, when he bade them set it down by the water's edge that he might speak a few words. They did so, gathering in a compact group about him, and he addressed them:

“Men of the Ta-an, great honor has our chieftain done us, in thus sending us to spy out the land of the Little Hairy Men, for on us may hinge the outcome of the war; whether failure or success meets the arms of the People of the Mountain Caves, whether we return victorious or leave our bones to whiten by the Farther River. Be ye then swift and silent, following one who, younger in warfare than yourselves, has yet been named by the Great Chieftain for this work. Cross we now the river, treading softly down the farther bank till we reach the homes of the Little Hairy Men, seeking to leave no trail, seeking to learn of their camp, slaying but at need, and slaying, if slay we must, in silence. It is said!”

Crossing the river, dawn found Menzonomen and his scouts strung out in a long line, belly-down on the grass, peering through screening brush at the open space which lay before the caves of those whom they sought.

This open space, three hundred paces in width and a thousand in length, had on its northern side the broad surface of the Farther River, which here flowed almost due west; on the eastern end—where lay Menzono-men—the ground rose somewhat steeply to a terrace ten times the height of a tall man, and this terrace, curving round to the southern side of the flat below, showed the rude caves and shelters of the tribe of the Little Hairy Men over whom Gur held the chieftainship.

Farther south the hill sloped gradually down into a broad morass, which, turning the western end of the hill, protected Gur's camp on the downstream end.

Thus the camp, guarded on the north by the river, on the west by the morass, and on the south by morass and hill, lay open to attack only from the east. Part of this the leader of the scouts knew from A-ta's words, part he could see from where he lay, and part was yet hidden from him, to become known at a later time.

As Menzono-men lay watching, there appeared at the mouths of the various caves numerous women, who stirred and made up the fires, then set about preparing the morning meal, and Menzono-men was astonished to see no warriors come forth; the food cooked, it was eaten by the women, companied only by certain youths and old men, and even while Menzono-men wondered over this there rose in the forest behind him a sound as of men approaching.

He whispered quickly to the man nearest, and as the word was passed, the warriors of the Ta-an, grasping their weapons, faced about and waited what might come.

Nearer and nearer came the rustling, and presently, with a shout, there burst forth a great crowd of the Little Hairy Men, who, returning from a hunt, had chanced on the trail of the scouts of the Ta-an and had followed swiftly to attack.

Taken by surprise, Menzono-men and his followers fought desperately, but, out-numbered, were swept back by the very weight of the swarming savages and were rushed down the slope which lay at their backs. Cornered, it seemed as though annihilation waited them, and they fought like men resolved to sell their lives as dearly as might be, but Menzono-men, struck by a sudden thought, shouted above the noise of battle:

“To the caves, men of the Ta-an! To the caves!” and led the way. No room was there to draw bow or use lance; swarming, surging, the men of Gur pressed close; knee to knee and breast to breast the tribesmen fought, using dagger or swinging the deadly ax.

Onward through the circling masses the Taan cut their way, moving forward step by step, feeling in their faces the hot breath of the savages, against their bodies the rough and sweaty skin of the Little Hairy Men; treading on still bodies or on men who groaned and writhed, panting, with contorted faces and snarling lips, shoulder to shoulder, cutting, striking, stabbing, they held their way till at length the caves were reached and a last desperate push cleared the path—into the largest cave—half held the opening while the others swung their bows—a storm of arrows swept the Little Hairy Men back—great stones were piled in the opening—and for the time the warriors of the Ta-an were safe.

Safe! As a wolf is safe in a trap! The heart of the leader sank as he realized, given space for thought, that there was no escape. But one way out, and that through the swarming foes! For a time he could hold them at bay, but in the end hunger must have its way with him and his men—the Little Hairy People need but sit and wait!

No aid could he hope for from T'san-va-men; the Great Chieftain would not move till his scouts returned—or till it was too late! And how long could he hold out? Two or three days at most; but sixteen remained of his twenty men—three had fallen in the fight, and one, snatched from the ranks, had been torn in pieces before his comrades' eyes. Yet, tortured, he had died as became a warrior; no sound had issued from his lips while the savages wrenched his limbs apart.

And another thing, worse than hunger, worst than wounds—thirst! No water had the men of the Ta-an, and all but two bore wounds; and all began to feel the thirst that comes from battle, of effort, and of loss of blood.

Quickly Menzono-men took count of these things, quickly he formed his decision, and called his men to him.

“Men of the Ta-an,” he said, “not long can we hold out here; the Little Hairy Men have hunger and thirst to aid. Word must be carried to the Great Chieftain. Through the morass to the west can one slip out, swimming the river, and mine is it to take this task, since it offers the greatest peril. Ku-ten, yours it is to command in my absence; this night I go, seeking to pass the guards. If I return not, the leadership is yours.”

“Nay, Slayer of Wolves,” spoke Ku-ten, “rather it be mine to go; yours is it to lead. Further, A-ta awaits you, and none waits me; let me then go, for it is in my mind that he who goes is like to take the last journey—that into the Long Dark!”

Others spoke, each seeking the more perilous task, till at length Menzono-men lost patience and exclaimed, his eyes flashing:

“Am I not leader? Yours is it to obey! Tonight I go!” and opposition ceased.

Three times that day the Little Hairy Men, forming in a compact though irregular body, swept up the slope and tried to storm the defenses, and each time, met by a deadly arrow-sleet, they were driven back, broken, fleeing before that storm of wood and stone. At last came night, drawing its kindly mantle over the death and torment that changed that pleasant place to a hell of agony and hate, and with the sinking of the sun Menzono-men prepared.

Drawing a little apart, he prayed to the Great Father for aid, then, rising, cast aside all weapons save only his dagger and flint, long and keen. In a sack hung from his quiver he carried a little stock of grease to keep his bow-string from wetting, and with this he rubbed himself from crown to toe, afterward rubbing the earth, that his white skin might not betray him. He pressed the hands of his comrades, one by one, and then, it being fully dark, the watch-fires not yet lit, slid like a snake over the rocks which formed a breastwork at the entrance, and, turning, crawled, belly to the earth, up the slope of the hill which lay

behind the cave.

It was his plan to cross the hill and skirt along its base to the western end, there plunging into the swamp, for he knew that the Little Hairy Men would have a cordon of guards drawn about the cave, nor, indeed, had he reached the crest of the hill when, looking up, he saw, outlined against the sky, a savage form, not twenty paces before him the brush here growing thin and low.

Menzono-men lay silently as a sentinel passed along the crest, pacing slowly back and forth, meeting at each end of his travel another who also paced his round. Menzono-men's first thought was to creep near and, leaping on the man, slay him, but an instant's reflection told him that this would not do, and he crept toward the right, to the meeting-place of the two.

Silent, scarce breathing, he hugged the ground till they met, exchanged a few words, and parted, when Menzono-men, waiting till they were some paces off, wriggled swiftly past and down the southern slope of the hill. Reaching the bottom, he lay still and rested a few moments, then rose to a crouching posture and turned west. From bush to bush he flitted, keeping ever hidden; at times, where no cover offered, crawling once more, till at length he reached the swamp.

Here he halted for a time, considering. He dared not strike in close to the base of the hill, lest he be seen, nor, on the other hand, could he travel far to the west for fear that, mired, he should be lost, even as he had once seen the mighty bulk of a mammoth sink, wallowing and struggling beneath the mud and slime.

And now the great morass grew lighter, and he could see faint details as the moon peered over the tree-tops, pouring a cold light down upon the swamp—the home of reptiles, of miasma, of lurking death.

Menzono-men cursed to himself, drew a long breath, and crept into the morass. Deeper and deeper he went, the water rising to his waist as his feet sank into the ooze from which bubbles gurgled upward as from the lungs of a drowning man. The reeds blocked his way, and the sharp-edged swordgrass stabbed and cut at his naked body; swarming millions of mosquitoes, disturbed by his passage, rose in clouds about his head, singing their high-pitched song, biting, stinging, till the blood streamed down his face and chest and back, and, frantic from the torment, he plunged beneath the water. But the relief was momentary; when he emerged they settled once more about him, and through all that dreadful night his myriad torturers followed close.

The moon now gleamed on the swamp, lighting it up with steady glow, as on and on he pressed.

And now he began to grow weak from loss of blood; it seemed to him that mocking faces rose before him, among them the face of Ta-nu-ko, twisted, agonized, as the arrow pierced his vitals; the face of Gur, exulting; unknown, inhuman faces, half man, half beast; and Menzono-men, cursing, struck at them with his dagger, when they fled away, and only the never-ending swamp lay before him, glittering under the now waning moon.

On and on he struggled, the chill of night striking his limbs, numbing and paralyzing, and presently the moon had sunk, and a faint glow in the sky proclaimed the coming of the dawn.

Eagerly he pressed on, catching at times fugitive glimpses of the water, oily in its smoothness—of a sudden he stopped, arrested in mid-stride, for a momentary thinning of the mist, which closed again at once, had shown him the form of a man, one of his enemies, resting on his knees, his head thrown forward as if listening.

Was he to be halted now? Pulling himself together, calling up his failing strength, slowly, silently, more cautiously than ever, Menzono-men crept forward, dagger in hand—he drew near the spot where the closing mist had hid the foe—nearer—nearer—he could make out the form—nearer—he drew back

his arm to strike—one step—he held the blow, staring in amazement—the man was dead!

A deep wound in the chest showed whence the life had fled; stricken to death in the fight of the day before, the Little Hairy Man had rolled into the river; carried down, he had struggled ashore, had made his way to this spot of firmer ground, and here had died, resting against the bush that now upheld his lifeless form.

Menzono-men drew a deep breath, skirted around the body of the foe, and slipped into the river, pushing his way through the sedge till deeper water was reached, then, secure from chance vision, hidden under the fog wreaths of early morning, the cool water bringing new life to his wearied limbs, he struck out for the farther shore.

Late that afternoon the Great Chieftain, directing, deep in the forest, the making of the canoes, was startled at the appearance of a horrible figure that struggled through the brush into the clearing where the trees had been felled. Plastered and caked with mud and gore, blood still trickling from the newly opened wound in his shoulder, green slime from the swamp clinging in his hair, his head and arms and body blotched and swollen and distorted from the venom of the mosquitoes, Menzono-men, exhausted, reeled into the clearing.

Dropping their tools, the warriors crowded about him till L'vu and Sar-no-m'rai, pushing through the throng, caught him under the arms and led him before the chieftain. Summoning his failing strength, Menzono-men straightened up, speaking through swollen lips, his voice thick and blurred, mumbling:

“Surrounded—ambush—in the caves— fighting—Ku-ten commands—four slain— through the swamp—mosquitoes—devils—the river—” His voice trailed off into an unintelligible mutter, his head dropped forward, his knees sagged, his body slumped against the arms of the two who held him, and gently they eased him to the ground at the feet of the Great Chieftain.

For the space of ten breaths the chieftain stood in thought, while all watched, none moving, and then he spoke, his orders rattling like hail, his voice harsh with the note of authority:

“Take weapons, form ranks; leave these logs—those at the river will serve. L'vu, Kan-to, Sar-no-m'rai, with me; Sen-va and A-ta here; you, and you, and you”—with pointing finger he chose five from among the warriors—“here as a guard. Care for this man; bathe and feed him; give him to drink and let him rest; he has done well. To the rescue, men of the Ta-an! Forward!”

By midnight the warriors of the Ta-an had reached the river, bringing down to the shore the two canoes left by Menzono-men and three others since completed and hidden, in readiness for the attack. But now there rose in the mind of the chieftain a question, a doubt. Would it be better to cross far up-stream, making several trips to ferry across the four or five hundred warriors, then march down upon the Little Hairy Men, forcing their defenses, or to take a hundred men in the canoes and thrust straight across the river, trusting to surprise to terrify, the enemy by their first sight of the Cave That Swims On The Water? He called his counselors to him and laid the matter before them, and, as usual, it was Sar-no-m'rai, the silent, who found the answer:

“Let the men cross straight,” he said, “and to each log let as many as may find place cling fast, their bodies in the stream. Thus the logs will not be overweighted, yet may the warriors cross nor tire themselves with swimming. Coming within bow-shot or nearer, let them loose their hold of the logs and swim ashore, those in the Caves That Swim On The Water covering them meanwhile with flight after flight of arrows. Landing, they will make good their footing till the others reach the bank.”

“Well is it spoken,” said the chieftain. “Thus shall we bring all to the attack, on the least guarded side.”

And so was it ordered and so was it done. A hundred warriors, each with his strung bow and a quiver of arrows beside him, manned the canoes, and the rest, armed with ax and dagger for hand- to-hand combat, trailed in the water, hands on the gunwales of the craft, and thus, propelled by the silent paddles, the men of the Ta-an swept down on their foes.

It was a cloudy night; behind great masses of dark wind-driven clouds the moon shone, but little light did it cast on the river and the shore. From time to time fitful greams broke through as the skyey rack was torn apart by hurtling gusts, which bent and swayed the trees and roughened the surface of the mighty river, making the passage to the unaccustomed paddlers of the Ta-an, doubly, trebly hard.

Yet was the wind an aid; the noise of its rush and sweep among the trees drowned all sounds of the passage, and the rough water was far less likely to show strange sights than had it been as glass. Further, the cloudy darkness helped, since the Little Hairy Men, blinded by their own watch- fires, could not well see the stream. Also, they trusted the river; none could cross it—to their minds—save by swimming, and warriors who swam that broad water would not come to shore with strength to fight. So it was that the men of the Ta-an were within fifty paces of the shore ere Gur, chancing to cast an eye toward the stream at the very moment that the moon peered from behind a cloud, caught sight of armed men coming in strange fashion on the bosom of the water. The Great Chieftain heard Gur's warning shout, and answered it with an order to his own men.

“Now, swimmers! Bowmen, make ready! To the shore!”

The swimmers loosed their grip and with the long, sweeping overhand stroke rushed for the bank, but the canoes, driven by strong arms, bade fair to overtake them, and on the instant T'san-vamen changed his plan. Loud above the roar of the wind and the cries of the gathering enemy sounded his voice:

“Bowmen, ashore! Make good the landing! Forward!” and the canoes crept on, passing the swimming warriors, rushing to the bank, driving high on the sloping ground, and from them sprang the warriors. In open order they knelt, speeding their arrows, holding back the rush of the enemy, till the axmen, landing, ranged themselves in line.

Then followed a dreadful fight, fought by the ruddy light of the leaping fires and the cold gleams that from time to time broke through the clouds. No quarter was asked on either side, nor was any given; falling, a man died where he fell, from blow of ax or club or from dagger-thrust. Thrice the swarming hordes of the Little Hairy Men fell back, but the fourth time, rallying to Gur's call, they pressed on and closed with the men of the Ta-an.

Ax and dagger and club rose and fell, the camp resounded with the shrieks and groans of wounded men, with the battle-cries of the Little Hairy Men, with the screams of the women, who watched from the slope of the hill. Backward and forward swayed the battle, the Ta-an at times hurled back toward the river-bank by press of numbers, then, rallying, driving their foes before them toward the caves.

In the heat of the fight met Gur and T'san-vamen, and the battle paused about them as they closed. Snarling like a beast, Gur rushed on his foe, his great war-club raised high for the downward sweep, but like the panther of the forest the Great Chieftain waited—the club swept down—the leader of the Ta-an sprang back—the club crashed on the earth, and ere Gur, overbalanced, could catch himself, T'san-va-men leaped.

“This for A-ta!” he cried, and his long, keen dagger flashed in the moonlight; Gur fell, and the Little Hairy Men, disheartened, gave back. At that instant the scouts of Menzono-men, rushing down the hill, fell on the foe in the rear, and the battle swiftly became a rout; some few of the Little Hairy Men escaped, passing over the hill to the east and losing themselves in the forest ere overtaken by the men of the Ta-an;

some few, fleeing to the west, won through the morass, but most who chose that route were bogged and mired in the swamp and drowned.

And when the pale light of morning struggled through the clouds even T'san-va-men, stern chieftain that he was, shuddered as he looked about him on the havoc the night had brought. Above, on the hill, the wailing women; nearer, before the caves, three row of dead, where the Little Hairy Men had broken before the arrows of the Ta-an; still nearer, on the shore, a ghastly tangled mass of dead and dying, friend and foe mingled in strange, unnatural postures, the sands beneath them red. T'san-va-men sighed deeply and turned to the shore, shaking his head. Across the chieftain's shoulders L'vu, his giant friend, laid an arm.

“Nay. Lord of the Winged Death,” he spoke, “it had to be; no other was lay open before us. Not safe were the lives of the Ta-an while the Little Hairy Men held sway in the forest.”

“You speak the words of truth, friend of mine,” answered the Great Chieftain. “Yet is my soul sick within me. Let us go.”

The warriors crossed once more the river, ferried by twenties, and again back in the forest, a litter was made for Menzono-men, two poles being laid side by side and branches wattled across, leaves laid on these making soft the bed. Eight scout warriors lifted it, the young man resting thereon, for the return to the homes of the Ta-an, A-ta walking beside and holding the hand of her lover.

Gradually, as the days passed, Menzono-men recovered his strength, helped thereto in no small measure by the pressure of that soft hand in his and the looks bent on him by those bright eyes, ever turned in love toward his face, toward his contented smile, and the day before the homes of the Ta-an were reached he begged to be set down, that he might return, marching on his own feet, not carried on the shoulders of others.

His request was granted, and so the entry into the camp was made, when the young man saw admiring crowds pressing around him, to touch his hand—the chieftain had sent messengers ahead, to tell of the victory and of the part A-ta and Menzono-men had played. None ventured to touch the hand of A-ta; Menzono-men was a hero, but she was something more; he had crossed the Swamp of Death, but she had made the Cave That Swims On The Water, and the women and children and old men of the Ta-an gazed on her with awe, pressing close, bowing, but not daring to lay hand on hers. Even her own father bent respectfully before her, whereat A-ta was mightily amused and wished to laugh, but did not.

Reaching the camp, the Great Chieftain sent out a call for all the tribe to assemble next midday at the Rock of Council, sending messengers in all directions, that none might be absent, and when the sun stead overhead on the following day came the throngs, with much buzz of thought, crowding about the Rock.

Presently came T'san-va-men, his own personal followers with him, also Menzono-men and A-ta, and the crowd parted to let them pass. Mounting the Rock, the Great Chieftain waited till silence spread over the multitude, then he spoke, his strong voice carrying to all parts of the clearing:

“People of the Ta-an,” he said, “by now is it known to you, from the lips of others, how we fought and won; you have heard of the death of the traitorous Chief Priest at the hands of Menzono-men, in fair fight; you have heard of how Menzono-men, winning through the deadly swamp, brought news of the ambush; and you have heard of how the victory came, in no small measure, through A-ta, first maker of the Cave That Swims On The Water. Well indeed has Menzono-men proven himself, and great shall be his reward, for A-ta shall he have to wife.

“Remains then the reward of A-ta. People of the Mountain Caves, by old tradition, by the law of the tribe, handed down from ere the time of Snorr, Great Chieftain of the, Ta-an, each chieftain is one who

has aided the tribe. My service, the Winged Death, is known to you, likewise that of him who went before, Na-t'san, Son of the Red God, who first brought the gift of fire to the tribesmen.

“But to you here gathered do I say that the service of this maiden is as great as his or mine; in years to come the Cave That Swims On The Water is destined to bring aid and comfort, food and safety and help to the People of the Mountain Caves. Therefore should she be chieftain in my place when it is mine to make the journey into the Long Dark.

“But since no woman, by the law of the tribe, may rule over us, may hold the baton of the chieftain, this may not be. Yet reward must she have, and a great one, and therefore, calling to witness the Great Father who rules us all, in his name do I swear, and call upon you to see that the oath is kept, that the first-born son of A-ta shall take my place, ruling over the Ta-an in my stead when I am gone. I have sworn.”

Waving his hand, the Great Chieftain stepped down from the Rock of Council, and a mighty shout rose swelling from the crowd:

“Hail, A-ta, Girl of the Mountain Caves! Hail to her who gives us the Cave That Swims On The Water! Hail and long life to her and to her husband, who passed through the Swamp of Death to bring word to the Great Chieftain! Long life and honor and joy be theirs!”

Great feasting was there at the wedding of Menzono-men and A-ta, great feasting and many songs. Wild cattle and horses were roasted whole, in great pits, together with sweet roots and fruit and berries from the forest. Dances also were there, and beating of drums, for had not the Great Chieftain himself ordered that all honor should be paid these two? And when at last the feasting was done, the songs sung, and the dancers wearied, when the Great Chieftain, as became his dignity, had withdrawn to his own cave, torches were seized, and the People of the Mountain Caves, a compact body, escorted the young couple to the cave that was to be their home.

There in the mouth of the cave halted Menzono-men and A-ta, their eyes shining with happiness, she pressing close to him, his arm about her shoulders, while the crowd, a little down the slope, shouted and waved the flaring torches. Thrice Menzono-men strove to speak, but his heart was too full, and at last he merely flung out his arm in sign of greeting and thanks.

And so may we also take leave of them, of Menzono-men, Slayer of Wolves, the man who passed the Swamp of Death, and A-ta, the Girl of the Mountain Caves, who gave to her people the Cave That Swims On The Water.

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