A CRITERION BOOK

FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

MEN OF THE HILLS

HENRY TREECE

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MEN OF THE HILLS

By HENRY TREECE

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1
MEN OF THE EARTH

1

WOLF HUNT

The men ran in a long, thin line down the narrow gully: twenty of them, small and dark and lithe as hunting dogs, their black shadows falling behind them as they faced into the sun.

A hawk hovered above them for a while, curious, wondering at first what manner of creatures these were. Then his diamond-sharp eye caught the quick glint of sunlight on their polished stone axes, and, with a sudden change of direction, the startled bird of prey swung away from them and then mounted higher into the sky, out of their reach, into the safety he knew best. For he had recognized them as more fearsome creatures than bear, or lynx, or wild boar—more terrible even than wolf or dog. These were the small dark men of the hill tops, who killed from a great distance with their throwing spears and their sharp little leaf-shaped arrows. Other creatures did not often kill unless they were hungry; but these little dark men from the hills always brought death with them whenever they met fur or feather, by day or night, in cold time and hot time. That was the lesson the hawk had learned from the other birds and beasts of the broad oak forests that swirled about the chalk hills. "When the little dark ones come—run away," the creatures told each other. "Run away, for they are the masters, the killers whose claws and teeth fly at the end of little sticks. Do not wait—run away!"

So the hawk obeyed this new law, but the men in the narrow gully hardly noticed him. They were after Old Hair, the wolf, and he was enough to keep a man's mind busy without thinking about a bird that is, in any case, too tough to eat.

The twenty warriors loped on, their thin, delicately featured brown faces streaked with white ochre in a tribal sign, bear-claw necklaces clacking about their necks, their shiny black hair knotted with bone pins on top of their long heads, or pushed down into white tubes of bone from which the marrow had been sucked. They were in quest of their enemy and must take no chances, so each man wore a broad belt of tough cowhide about his

middle and wide bracelets of leather up to his elbows. Old Hair the wolf must not be allowed to sink his yellow fangs into body or arm, for the wounds he made seldom healed, however carefully one covered them with cobwebs or let the good cow milk curdle into them, however many times the Old Man of the tribe, the chieftain, said his spells. Old Hair was a dangerous one to hunt, and a man must be ready for him, always.

The long file of men was led by one taller than the rest, who wore a round cap of black bearskin into which three heron's feathers had been stuck. This was Galga, brother to the chieftain of Craig Ddu. Galga was a bad-tempered man, who showed little mercy to anything living, because he felt himself wronged by fate. If, for instance, he told himself, he had been born the elder of the twins, he would be Old Man now, instead of being merely the Old Man's brother, with no place of authority in the tribe. So Galga was always angry; and he was even more irritable on this day because his nephew, Lalo, was with him and was able to see all he did and would no doubt take back tales about him to the Old Man.

But Lalo the Otter had other things to think about. He had only recently been made a man by his tribe, and the ritual scars were not yet healed across his chest. When they skinned over at last, he would have long white ridges there, to show that he was a man and not a mere boy any more. Lalo had lived for as many years as can be counted on three hands, and that was a good age for a boy to become a man among the people of the village of Craig Ddu, the settlement under the great chalk hill. But next he must kill a wolf, and then a man. After that they would call him "Warrior" when they spoke to him, and not merely "man" or "Hunter." So today he had much to think about, for he was running with the others to find a wolf and kill him.

In the smoky huts, with the clay fat lamps sending up their oily black whorls into the air, hunters had often boasted about their fights with wolves, and Lalo had listened, half afraid, because he knew that one day he must face a wolf and do as the others did. Now he was running to do that, led by his bad-tempered uncle, Galga, who had sworn before all the tribesfolk that day to be the first to sink his greenstone ax into a wolf's crafty skull.

As Lalo ran, he looked back from time to time and smiled. Behind him loped a broad-shouldered warrior, wearing the glistening feathers of a raven stuck into his hair and swinging a long-bladed ax head, set in a shaft of polished deerhorn. This man grinned and nodded in recognition whenever Lalo turned, for he was Kaa the Guardian, sworn to follow Lalo to the death and to kill all who stood against the Old Man's son.

Kaa the Guardian was a notable warrior. His family had always been the henchmen of the chiefs who ruled Craig Ddu. They had known no other life but that, and they were satisfied, for they lived in the chieftain's house, warmed themselves by his fire, and ate his sweet barley bread, whether the other, lesser men in the tribe had fire and bread or not. So Kaa smiled back at Lalo and nodded, as he always did, for Kaa loved Lalo as though the boy had been his own son.

Then, as they ran on, Lalo edged his way along the line, coming closer and closer to Galga, the leader, for he felt that this was his place as the son of the Old Man himself. And as Lalo raced forward, Kaa followed him, easily, like a dark shadow behind him, always ready to smile and, if needs be, to kill. The other tribesmen saw their chieftain's son coming, and they let him go past them in the narrow gully, out of respect; but some of them smiled wickedly, thinking that the boy would perhaps not be so anxious to be first in the race when he had met Old Hair a time or two!

As they ran, the men were singing in a high, nasal whine a song they always sang when they went after Old Hair. It went to a jaunty, three-beat tune that fitted in well with their running.

Hair the Wolf killed a man,
Killed a man, killed a man;
How he ran, that poor man,
But Hair the Wolf killed the man!

When they found the rocks so red,
Rocks so red, rocks so red,
"Hair's a fool," the warriors said,
"Hair's a fool—he'll soon be dead!"

Wolfskin lies warm on my bed,
On my bed, on my bed;
Wolfskin cap is on my head;
Once kill man, Wolf—and you're dead!

They had been through these words three times, and were about to start all over again when there was a sudden fierce scurry above them, and a little shower of earth and stones fell upon their shoulders. They glanced up, and saw a long, shaggy gray form launch itself downward onto Galga, who had no time to move from beneath that swift killer of whom they had sung so slightingly.

There was a snarling, scuffling struggle and a high shout of excitement. Galga was down on the rocky ground with the savage, half-starved wolf wrestling to get at his throat. The tribesmen, caught off balance, stood staring. They had never expected Old Hair to strike so violently. Then, with the blood suddenly pounding in his ears, Lalo found himself running forward, swinging the new greenstone ax that his father had blessed for him that very morning.

"Hi! Hi! Hair Wolf, look at me!" he heard himself shouting. "Look at me quickly, for there is little time left for you! Lalo the Otter comes to take your hide, Hair Wolf!"

As the boy shouted the last words, the wolf swung around to meet him, sensing his rapid feet scudding on the chalk; but the savage creature was too late to swing away from Lalo's wide sweep. The new ax took the creature in the ribs, knocking him away from Galga's prostrate body for an instant. Then Lalo struck again, before the wolf could spring up at his throat.

The surprised tribesmen sucked in their breath with excitement, glad that their young chieftain should be so brave. Lalo was laughing now at the ease of fighting a wolf. Why had he been so frightened before? he asked himself. This was not at all so terrible as the men had made out, when they gossiped in the smoke of the lamps, with the women listening, wide-eyed. He swung the ax again and brought it down with all his force, where the wolf's head had been. But this time the wolf did not wait to be struck. He was suddenly by Lalo's side, then reaching up, his eyes red with fury, snapped savagely at the boy's arm. With a chill, Lalo knew then that he could not turn quickly enough to meet this new attack, and his exultation turned to fear. If only he could have got around fast enough, he would not have been afraid; his sharp-edged ax would have spoken for him—but now it was different. His throat was already contracted to call out again when the wolf shuddered and fell heavily across his feet. Lalo lost his balance and fell across the wolf, feeling the warm blood on his own chest. When his sight cleared again, he saw that a broad flint knife was deeply wedged in the wolf's side.

Over them both leaned Kaa the Guardian. His painted face was still smiling, but his dark eyes were grim.

"Hit harder next time, Lalo Otter," he growled, as he stooped to raise the boy.

Then Lalo saw that Galga was frowning. His dark face was ruddy with anger, his lips twitching at the corners.

“Why did you do that, Kaa Fool?” he said. “Was not my own knife ready for this little fox-thing? Am I not always prepared to save the son of my brother, when he needs me?” His voice was very hoarse.

Kaa the Guardian bowed his head gently and smiled. Then he said, for all men to hear him, “It is my duty to watch over Lalo the Otter, Great One. I must be quick with my knife, or the Old Man might ask a question that I could not answer.”

The tribesmen began to whisper among themselves, sucking in their breath, as they did when they were quietly amused. Galga heard them and was angrier than ever. He felt that Kaa had mocked him before the young men of Craig Ddu.

“Why did you kill my wolf, fool?” he said, stooping to skin the still, gray body of the animal. “I swore to kill the first one myself. Why did you break my oath for me? Do you want to ruin me? Do you wish to spoil my word with Earth Mother, then?”

Abruptly, Kaa stepped forward and dragged the stiffening body away from Galga. His smile was still painted across his dark face, but his body posture was almost menacing. The tribesmen stood back, expecting to see another knife sunk deep before long.

“Galga the Great One,” said Kaa, “this is not your wolf, whatever you may say. This is the wolf of Lalo Otter—his first wolf. But for Lalo Otter, this wolf had torn out your throat, Great One. It was Lalo Otter’s ax that struck him away from you—not your own cleverness, my friend. So Lalo Otter shall claim this wolf. Old Hair shall make Lalo Otter a coat for the cold nights, I swear it.”

He bowed then before Galga, as was only proper when a common man spoke to the brother of a chieftain; but all the same, he kneeled suddenly over the dead wolf and rapidly began to run his keen-edged skinning knife along the belly and beside the legs. Galga glared down at him for an instant. Then, realizing that he would lose in any show of strength with this famous warrior, he turned and began to run on. “Follow me!” he shouted. “Come, men!”

But the tribesmen did not follow him. They let him go alone, for they wanted to see Lalo dressed in the bloody pelt of Old Hair for the first time. They wished to see their chieftain’s son in all his hunting glory, for he had saved Galga’s life, even as Kaa had saved his.

Lalo said, “Why is my uncle angry with me, Kaa? I only wanted to help him.”

Kaa the Guardian turned away his head and said, “Sometimes it is not wise to save a man’s life, Lalo Otter, for that may cause him to feel small. Galga your uncle does not like to be thought a small man. It would be well for us to watch him, Lalo Otter.”

Then Lalo felt the wolf’s hide drying on his flesh, drawing his skin with it. He shuffled the muscles of his shoulders, trying to find some measure of freedom. The blood they had daubed across his cheeks and forehead was now stiff in the sunshine. It felt as though he wore a mask. He screwed up his eyes and wrinkled his forehead, but the tightness was still there. He had been blooded and could call himself “Hunter” now, and that at least was worth the discomfort. He would stand above the other boys of his age, when once they reached Craig Ddu again.

He raised his hands and gestured in friendship toward his uncle, who still ran on along the gully.

“Come, warriors,” he said. “We must help my uncle Galga kill the wolf he has set his heart on.”

Laughing, they ran on once again into the sun; but now it was much later and the red light struck them full in the eyes, almost blinding them as they went. And it was because his head was drenched with this sunset that Lalo stood bewildered at last at the edge of a little oak wood, trying to rub the brilliance from his eyes so that he might see the wolf that his nostrils warned him of, the wolf that Galga was seeking, knee-deep in grasses, in the green dimness of the trees.

It was this wolf that suddenly broke from among the trees, a thin and miserable looking bitch wolf, driven crazy by hunger, ready to tear at the throat of any creature that stood in her way to safety.

Galga saw her start up from the thicket, and flung his heavy ax. The weapon took her in the flank, bowling her over among the dock leaves and willow herb. But then, with a defiant flurry of her brush, she was on her feet again and bursting through the gorse.

“Do not touch that wolf!” yelled Galga. “She is mine, I tell you, mine!”

No one made a move to touch the creature, not because of Galga’s shout, but because by then she had gone too far away from them.

So it was that Lalo Otter, pushing into the wood after the others, came almost face to face with the savage she-wolf, running with a fierce terror in her heart, away from the men who killed without mercy. And Lalo stood in the way of her escape. Moreover, he was smaller than the others, thought the wolf. This was a man-thing she might try her teeth on, as she swept past him. She began her charge.

Lalo Otter froze still for a moment, the sweat standing on his brow; then he raised his ax with all his force; but in his haste he forgot the boughs which hung low above his head. The ax struck against one of these, twisted sideways in his grip, and fell away from him, among the thick nettles. He had lost his only sure weapon; and then the wolf leaped at him.

Lalo swayed to one side at that instant, and the bounding animal missed her aim and struck him on the side, slashing at him as she came. Her teeth met in the thick pelt of the other wolf, wrapped around the boy's body. She almost tore it from him in her rushing madness. Then Lalo slipped away, leaving her chewing at the hide in her fury. He ran across the clearing, hoping to gain time, wondering if he could put his short-bladed skinning knife into her when she came at him again. He was not afraid now, only curious, working out a hunter's problem, nothing more.

From the woodside the tribesmen shouted, "Run! Run! Hair Wolf is almost upon you, Old Man's son!"

These sharp, urgent cries came to Lalo's ears as he raced, his breath almost bursting from his thin chest, his legs feeling like the limp and pliable willow wands that he had seen so often, lying soaking for basketwork outside Craig Ddu, in the little clay water basin where the brown stream was coaxed to stay by the clever village women.

Suddenly, he felt very frightened, for his legs had lost their strength. Yet his pride would not let him shout for help. He knew that a chief's son must die without a sound; that was all there was to it. He tottered on.

Behind him, he heard the sharp, violent scratching of claws on the flinty soil. In his terror he imagined he could even feel the hot breath of the wolf on his neck and shoulders. Then his legs gave way, he slipped and fell among the edged stones, immediately rolling sideways like a lynx, so as not to be there when his enemy struck. It was a trick he had always known—do not fall and lie still, but fall and roll. Every dark-haired boy of the village under the chalk hill knew that. . . . But what if Old Hair Wolf knew it as well? Lalo broke into a sweat of fear as he slithered rapidly on his back over the sharp flints, expecting the terrible tearing of teeth, the revengeful

slashing of claws. But nothing happened. He lay there with his eyes shut for a while, counting the fingers of one hand. Then, when he felt no pain, he opened his dark eyes and sat up, looking about him but pretending to be unconcerned, because he was the son of a chieftain and must show no fear.

The group of men under the oak trees saw him do this and laughed aloud, slapping their hard thighs. Lalo wondered what could amuse them so much, and looked to where their brown fingers pointed.

A long gray bundle lay stretched out five yards away in the evening sunshine, three long arrows standing out of it in the warm air, their feathers already fluttering in the first breezes. This was the terror that had been chasing him—and it was dead. Kaa the Guardian stood laughing in the shadow of the trees, his great bow still in his hand, his head thrown back, and his white teeth gleaming.

Lalo saw all this in one flash. He also saw Galga striding through the breast-high grasses behind Kaa, shaking his fist, his red face ugly with anger. He saw Galga lay his heavy hand on Kaa's shoulder, and watched Kaa shake him off, still smiling, as one might shrug away a fly.

Then Lalo rose as lightly as his scratched back would allow him, and walked over to the wolf. He bowed before the gray body, then bent, and, touching his fingers to his lips, pressed them on the dead creature's grinning mask.

"Travel well, Old Hair," he said. "May you lack no kills in the place to which you have gone. May the goat kids be tender and sweet, and may there be many of them."

Then, working swiftly, he drew his sharp skinning knife down the dead beast's body, to strip away the hide. Now the men were about him, praising him, pressing in on all sides. The air was wild with their shouting. They thumped Lalo on the back in their frenzy.

"Eat the heart, chief's son!" they yelled. "Eat the heart! Then no wolf will ever trouble you again. You will be free of that fear forever."

And, much against his will, Lalo the Otter ate the heart of a wolf, although he was almost sick immediately afterward.

When he had finished this ordeal, Kaa put his hand around the boy's shoulders and whispered, "I shall never doubt your courage again, little warrior. I saw that you were afraid, as every man is at times—but you had made your plans all the same. That is what a man does; he may be afraid, but he makes his plans. A warrior can do no more."

And Lalo took both of Kaa's hands in his own and, smiling, said, "My friend, I owe you two lives now. That is a debt I may never repay."

Gravely, Kaa looked over the boy's shoulder and said, "It is my duty, Lalo Otter, nothing more. Besides, I am rather pleased with that last long shot of mine. I would have bet five sheep against two that I should miss, but I did not—so we are both pleased, you and I."

He would have passed off the incident as lightly as that, but then a shadow fell before the two and Galga stood beside them, his hard face contorted with hurt pride, his lips wet with froth.

"Each way I turn," he shouted, "either one or the other of you gets under my feet, making me small before the tribesmen. It shall not last, I tell you! I will not stand it any longer."

Kaa turned to him slowly and said, "What wrong have I done, O Brother of the Old Man? Tell me that, Galga the Great One."

Galga's bloodshot eyes seemed to start from his head. "I will not be flattered, Kaa!" he shouted. "I will not be flattered! You should know that twice you have killed my wolf—*my wolf*—the wolf I had sworn to kill today. You know that I swore my oath before all the people, in the compound at Craig Ddu, when the sun rose this morning."

Kaa turned away from him and began to pick his teeth with a thorn. Then he shrugged his broad shoulders and said quietly, "My friend, if I had not killed those wolves, you would not have done so. I can tell you that." His voice was calm, as though he spoke of something unimportant—the color of a bird, or the shape of a leaf.

Galga took a pace toward him, and then changed his mind. "What!" he stormed, "do you doubt my skill now?"

Kaa turned suddenly and faced him, his dark eyes narrowed, his hand already clasped on the antler haft of his knife. His jaw muscles began to twitch. "How can I doubt your skill?" he asked. "I have never seen it. You have always kept it well hidden, my friend."

Now Galga's temper almost led him into conflict with this big, smiling warrior; but still he hung back hoping that one of the tribesmen might step in and challenge Kaa. No one did; they preferred to be his friend rather than his enemy. Craig Ddu had never known a greater fighter. Galga felt himself alone. He had to speak.

“There may come a time, Kaa the Guardian, when you will need to guard yourself. The Old Man will not live forever. And there could be a time when I might sit on the green slate chair in his place. Then *I* would choose who should lie on the stone of sacrifice, my friend.”

Kaa bent over the thick grasses and scooped up a grasshopper that had sat silently before him, hoping not to be seen. He opened his palm as he held out his arm. The little green creature sprang from his hand and flew full into Galga’s face, by chance. Galga brushed his hand quickly across his brow in immense fury. His eyes almost came out of his head. His mouth moved many times before a sound came forth.

“What further insult can you fling at me?” he yelled at last.

Kaa began to walk away from him, holding Lalo Otter by the arm. He did not speak to Galga, but let his answer float back over his broad shoulder, tauntingly.

“Come, my hunter friend,” he said. “Here is a great warrior who fights with grasshoppers. Wolves are too small for such a one!”

Lalo was beside himself with laughter now, for he had always been afraid of his uncle, and had never before seen him so put out. The tribesmen smiled too, but quietly. Then they passed by the furious Galga and followed their young chieftain and Kaa.

As they went toward the village, Lalo said, “From now on, I shall not be afraid of that one. I have always feared Galga—but no more!”

Yet Kaa’s face was set and serious. “When you become a real warrior, my chief,” he said, “you will learn never to despise an enemy until he is dead at your feet—and Galga is very much alive. I will tell you that he is a man to respect, not to laugh at. Galga is a true warrior, my little chief.”

Lalo Otter was puzzled. “But you made such a fool of him,” he said, “and he did nothing. A brave man would have fought you, but he suffered all your insults.”

Kaa ran on for many paces in silence. Then he sighed and said, “Nor would I have done anything, in his place. He was one, against many. Perhaps he might have killed me, yes—but then the others would have fought to save you. Galga would have died anyway. He is a brave man, I say to you—but a crafty one. We shall do well to watch him, from this time forth. Now let us see who reaches Craig Ddu the first!”

II

AMBUSH

Soon they reached the end of the wooded country and came out upon the gentle, undulating moorland, covered with coarse grass and gorse bushes, which at last led on to the great chalk hills. Their own hill towered above the others, like a stranded whale in the blue distance, with the last rays of the dying sun flaring up behind it. Now they had caught up with Galga once more, and ran with him, but they kept silent so that he should have no further reason for anger.

They were still racing on like this when before them, at the distance of a long spear cast, men began to rise out of the earth and run before them: men dressed in the skins of lynx and bear and wolf, men with painted feathers in their shaggy hair and circlets of weasels' tails hanging below the knee.

Kaa saw them first and shouted, "The Hunter Folk! Stand back, men of Craig Ddu! They have lain in the hollow to wait for us!"

The ambush had been well planned, to waylay the dark ones when they were running blind into the sun at the end of a long hunting trip, tired and unalert.

Now Galga roared like a wounded bull, hoping to prove his strength at last after the setbacks of the wolf hunt. He lurched forward to meet the oncoming Hunter Folk, calling out a war cry that lost itself in the great silence of the rolling plain.

"Come, chief's son," whispered Kaa the Guardian, urgently. "We cannot let him go to his death alone. Perhaps you may yet live to call yourself more than 'Hunter' today."

Three men, their faces painted with streaks of blue and white, their fox-fur helmets making their heads horrid in size, ran to meet Galga, their sharp-pointed lances of ashwood leveled at his stomach. Galga bellowed at them and charged, bowling the first one over as he leaned sideways to strike down with his heavy ax.

The others had drawn back to make their thrust, and it was at this moment that Kaa and Lalo burst in on them, striking savagely to left and to right, at knees and shins, at elbows and heads. Then Galga was down, shouting out his wordless cries, and the first man was at him again. Lalo sensed this through a mist of sudden red: then he flung his new greenstone ax and, as in a dream, saw it strike the Hunter, knocking off his foxskin cap. The man swung around, his gray eyes wide in surprise, and then fell face downward on the ground.

Now Galga was up again and cutting viciously at the two men who assailed Kaa. Lalo stooped and picked up his ax from beside the Hunter he had struck. The man lay very still. Lalo had no doubt about the sharpness of his ax when he looked more closely at him. For an instant he felt sick, but then he controlled himself and looked about him. Everywhere men were fighting, silently, like dogs, with no time to spare for any sound save the quick sucking in of breath, or the grunt of satisfaction when a blow went home. Though sometimes that turned into a groan of pain when another man's lance found its mark.

Lalo saw that Kaa and Galga were standing together, almost leaning on each other. Before them lay three Hunters, twisted in the attitudes of men to whom death had come by surprise. As Lalo ran up to them, he heard Galga say, "Stand with me always, Kaa my friend, and I will find you better pickings than will fall your way as dry nurse to this brat."

And he saw Kaa shut his broad mouth tightly, so that it looked nothing more than a thin line drawn across his bronzed face, and then turn his great back deliberately on the swaying Galga.

"Hail, little warrior," called Kaa to Lalo. "That ax of yours has done a better day's work than many give it credit for."

Lalo was smiling and shuddering, feeling hot and cold at the same time. Kaa took him by both wrists and looked down at him, smiling grimly.

"Go carefully, Lalo Otter with the sharp little teeth," he said, "and one day the men of the hills will speak of you with honor. But go carefully, for there are those who would drag you down."

And then, as suddenly as it had happened, the ambush seemed to fade away. The men of Craig Ddu had lost only four of their number, but the Hunters lay hunched, ten of them, about the shallow hollow where they had planned their surprise. Now, in the growing dusk, the others had made their swift-footed escape, vanishing silently, like retreating beasts of prey.

Here and there, the warriors bent over the men they had killed, their long flint knives in their hands, collecting such trophies as would hang on the king post of their huts, above the open fire; for the men of Craig Ddu still held to the old custom of taking an enemy's head. Then they knew he was safely dead and could trouble them no more.

Kaa said to Lalo Otter, "You must do as the men are doing, warrior; then all the folk will know. Then your father, the Old Man, will be proud of his only son."

But Lalo Otter looked down on the man he had so easily killed and shook his head. "How could I say that I slew him in fair fight?" he said. "I flung my ax and then he fell—that was all. I do not call that fighting. No, Kaa the Guardian, I cannot do it."

Kaa bowed his head gravely. "If that is your word, who am I to quarrel with it? Be it as you say, Lalo the Otter."

Galga heard this and sneered openly at Lalo. "When I was your age, chief's son," he said, "I had taken three heads. I did not weep over them. I took them and thought no more about it. But in those days, real men walked the land."

Kaa smiled and patted Lalo on the shoulder. "He has forgotten the truth of the matter," he said, to console the boy. "Galga Greatmouth took three weasels' heads, and they have grown to man size in his dreams, that is all."

But Galga was listening and heard those words. He swung round on Kaa the Guardian, and even laid his red hand on the other's shoulder in his anger.

"Kaa Nursemaid," he said, "in my lifetime there have been many men who trusted too much to my good nature—but my anger clenched on them like the shadow of the night on the land. Now they lie silent. Their tongues will wag no more. I tell you, beware, my friend!"

Kaa gazed steadily into Galga's angry eyes and then, without speaking, reached up and took his wrist in the grip of one hand. He held it only for the space during which a man might count five, but Lalo saw the sudden beads of sweat burst out on Galga's forehead, and a look of amazement come quickly into his eyes. At first he thought that his uncle was going to scream with pain. Then the incident had finished. The two men parted without a word. But, as Galga rubbed his crushed wrist in silence, Lalo knew that Kaa had made a deadly enemy.

Suddenly, Galga turned and began to lope in the direction of the village on the great hill. The others turned and followed him. Kaa and Lalo ran this

time at the tail of the column.

At last Lalo said fearfully, “My friend Kaa, you would have been wiser if you had run your knife into Galga. It was not well to bring scorn on him in that way.”

Kaa ran on many paces before he answered. Then he said, “Galga’s mouth opens and shuts like the flap of a tent—according to the way the wind blows, nothing more. Yet if he should make up his mind to strike at me, then I am contented. I shall not run away when he comes seeking me. He knows where I am to be found.”

As the hunting party ran, the sun sank below the hills and twilight fell like a gray mist about them. Some of the men ran with their fingers crossed, to keep away the ghosts of their dead enemies; but others, who wished to appear brave, scoffed aloud and sang:

Wait not for us, Men of the Dead,
Our knives are keen, our axes red.
We have killed you once, let it be said:
Now sleep the long sleep in your long-house bed.

Nevertheless, when the hunting band came to the slope of their own hill, on the far side of which lay Craig Ddu, every man, scoffer or not, kneeled before the stone, a solitary upright plinth that stood higher than two men and heeled over drunkenly in the dusk.

They chanted in unison:

Old Man stone, let there be good years;
Let there be barley to eat and water to drink;
Let there be fire at night.
Let our children grow upward like trees;
Let our old folk die smiling.
Old Man stone, let there be good years.

It was the law of the village that no man of Craig Ddu must pass this ancient stone without speaking those words. Galga led the chanting, acting on behalf of his brother, the Old Man of the tribe. And when they had touched the ground with their foreheads, they rose and began to climb the chalk hill.

But when they were only halfway to the summit, Kaa stopped and sniffed the air like a dog. He wiped his nostrils, as though to be rid of some

scent that was distasteful. Lalo gazed at him, afraid.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

Kaa shook his head but did not answer straightway. At last he whispered, "All is not well, over there in the village. Hark, the cattle in the hilltop corral are crying out that death has walked into our place."

When they were nearer the top of the hill, Lalo looked across the little valley to the next hill, where the kine of Craig Ddu were driven for safety each night behind ramparted walls. Now the sad and frightened lowing of the cattle came across the gray mists of evening to the ears of the men on the hill.

Lalo the Otter shuddered suddenly, without knowing why. A curlew started up from beneath his feet and swung into the dusk above the boy's head, crying in a sad, discordant voice.

"Watch out! Watch out! Death walks!"

Lalo stared down the hill, but he could not see the village yet. The mist was too thick. But he could see the long House of Silence, the great humpbacked tomb of his family, below the hill, rising out of the swirling grayness like an immense fish coming up from the water. That was the last resting place: the place where all his people had gone, stripped of their finery and daubed with the red ochre got from the clay, to signify that they were reborn within the earth—within Earth Mother, the Old One, the Knowing One, the Only One; from whom came everything, men and creatures, barley and whinberries, ash for spearshaft and flint for axhead. Everything, even the grasshopper.

The curlew circled about the men, curiously, wondering why they stood so still and sniffed the thick night air like dogs. Then the bird grew tired of man's foolishness, and swept away with a crazy beating of wings, down the hill the men had just climbed.

Galga said softly, "Come, we must hurry. Something is wrong down there."

No man questioned him now. Each one ran swiftly, with fear in his heart. Near the foot of the hill, Galga halted again, holding up his hand and listening.

"Something is amiss at the flint shaft," he said. Then he went forward warily, like a hunting cat.

Four bowshots from the village lay the flint shaft, dark and massive, three men's lengths across its mouth and eight men's lengths to the bottom. A great oak trunk stood in the shaft, notched here and there so that men could go down it to the galleries that spread out on every side, twisting and curling like the bindweed's tendrils. Men climbed back up this notched trunk, carrying chalk in little wicker baskets strapped to their heads, so that it would not be in the way of the miners, who worked away daily with their shovels made from the shoulder blades of the red deer, or hacked at the deep black flint with their sharp antler picks.

Here grew the great hard flints that were turned into sharp, polished axheads, or vicious skinning knives, or little, swift leaf-shaped arrows. Something was wrong here, the hunting band knew.

They dared to approach the mouth of the flint shaft. Smoke hung heavy in the dark shaft, and there was the low sound of men groaning. Galga called down, "What is wrong, my brothers? What ails the men of the flint now?"

A solitary weak voice came out of the deep hole, up to the ears of the men who shuddered on the dark brink.

"Go away, whoever you are. Death has walked in Craig Ddu this day. Go away and save yourselves. It is too late to save us!"

Kaa called out, "Which death came, my friend?"

After a while, the dying voice came again to them. "The Hunter Folk came from the forest. They have no creatures to hunt, and must hunt us. They killed all in the village and smoked us out of the galleries to use us for their arrow practice. Go away; peace be with you."

Kaa called again and again, but there was no answer. Only silence from the dusk-filled flint shaft.

At last the hunting party started off again, but now each man carried his ax ready as he stepped, wondering what might come out of the mist toward him. Kaa and Lalo ran in the middle of the line, the Guardian slightly behind the boy, so that he might act for him, from whichever direction the attack should come.

III

CRAIG DDU

Now they were at the high thorn stockade, but no guard leaped forward to challenge them. At first Lalo thought that everyone in the village must be dead, but then his sharp eyes cut through the mingling mist and smoke, and he discerned the dark shapes of men moving here and there among the glowing huts. Whoever had been there had run into the middle of the settlement, firing the thatch left and right, before the bloodthirsty skirmishing had begun. As Lalo and Kaa raced across the hard earth compound, they passed huddled heaps of men, some of them warriors whom they recognized, others dressed in the furs and painted feathers of the Hunters—the ancient folk of the distant oak forests.

Lalo's father, the Old Man of the tribe, left a group of villagers who were beating out the flames and turned toward his son. The chief's eyes were red and streaming, his broad face black with smoke. Below the long amber necklace that he wore, Lalo saw a wound across his chest that must have come from the sweeping blow of a sharp war ax. The Old Man's coarse linen tunic was almost torn from him, and hung in tatters about his knees. Lalo saw that he had smothered his dark head with the white ashes from the burning houses, as a sign of mourning. He had never seen his father look like this before, so beaten, so weak.

He ran forward and bent to touch the chief's feet with his forehead, but the Old Man raised him.

"Welcome, my son," he said slowly. "Yet you come at a bad time. A great sin must have been committed, that Earth Mother should have let the wild men of the forests break upon us like this. Yet perhaps she was merciful to let you come back to your village without meeting them."

Kaa the Guardian bowed his head and said, "We did meet them, Old Man, and took revenge for you on them. Lalo your son has made himself a warrior today because of that meeting."

The chief's eyes brightened savagely for a moment, and he placed his arms about the boy's shoulders.

"Then we have something to be thankful about," he began—but he did not finish what he was about to say, for suddenly Galga ran forward, his face contorted with anger, his thick arms waving furiously about his head. In horror, the tribesmen thought he would strike the Old Man, whose body and blood were sacred.

"What means this?" he demanded. "My house burned, my wife and children gone! Is this the way you look after your people, Old Man who should not be Old Man?" All his envy of his brother flared out in that angry speech.

The chief turned wearily toward him and said gently, "Brother, your house is burned—that is true. But you are not the only sufferer. My house is burned, and so is the house of almost every man of Craig Ddu. As for your wife and children, they are safe, as far as I may know. All the women and the small ones left through the tunnels beneath the stockade, and went to the caves beyond the hill when the fighting started. Have patience; they will return, brother. But there are some good warriors who lie tumbled here and there in this village who will never return."

He turned his back on Galga then in weariness and went toward the fires. But Galga would not be pacified. He followed the chief, and would even have struck at him if he dared, such was his overwhelming madness.

"Why should you be our Old Man?" he yelled, beside himself. "Why should we obey you in all your commands if you are not able to protect us? You say that you speak the words of Earth Mother to us; if this is so, why did she not send you a warning?"

Men began to murmur at this, some angry with Galga, others nodding their heads in secret agreement with him. At first the chief would not reply to his wild outburst, but Galga came so close to him, gesturing so violently, that the Old Man turned again and said quietly, "My brother, if we had had the twenty warriors you took with you to kill a wolf today, we should have stopped the Hunter Folk from getting into our village. As it was, we fought with the men we had, and I do not think we left many of the enemy to run away over the hill. Be assured, we did all that men could do. As for Earth Mother, her ways are not to be guessed at by us. She will do as she wishes, whatever our hearts may desire. So let your tongue wag no more, and help us to put out the fires."

Now Galga did the unforgivable thing. In his great anger he laid hand on his brother's shoulder and swung him around. The body of the Old Man was sacred, all men knew that; he was not like other men, for he was the Chosen One of Earth Mother. A great gasp went up from the folk. Men stopped beating at the flames. Women and children, coming back into the village now, stopped to stare wide-eyed at this terrible thing. This had never happened before in Craig Ddu.

"Aiee!" they whispered. "But it had been better for Galga to fling himself into the flint shaft. Now he is a man with a curse on him."

The chief glowered at his brother wordlessly for an instant. Galga shrank back a pace, his mouth twitching, the hand that had touched the Old Man clenching and unclenching. He had realized what he had done, and he was suddenly afraid.

Then the chief smiled a little sadly and said, "Go your ways in peace, my brother. But keep your anger in check the next time you speak to me." It was as though he spoke to a small naughty boy.

Yet it seemed that Galga had determined to destroy himself. He stared at his brother once again and said in a loud voice: "So, you are too weak to punish one like me, are you, Old Man? Too weak to do what a chief should do? Are you indeed sacred, or are you not, my brother? Or have you blinded us with your trickery, all these years?"

In the terrified hush that fell upon the folk of Craig Ddu then, Kaa moved grimly forward, his ax held ready, his eyes gazing expectantly into those of the Old Man, his master. But the chief shook his head slowly and Kaa fell back into the shadows, bowing his head in obedience.

Then the Old Man stepped toward Galga. His squat and powerful figure seemed immense in the glow of the smoking fires. Gone was his weariness, his age, his defeat. Now he was the man they all knew and feared, the man who made the sacrifices and blessed the crops. His face was terrible to see. Even Lalo the Otter fell back a pace and hardly dared to look at his father; he seemed so different, so unearthly. In the silence, the chief pointed his finger at Galga and said in a deep voice, "Had any other man spoken to me as you have done, my friend, he would lie on the great stone at the next time of sacrifice. But you are my brother, of my own blood, and I will try to forget what you have said, and forbear to spill the blood of our mother. Go in peace now, from this village, taking your wife and children. And when you have come to your senses, then return and live with us as an honest man should. But do not think to tempt my patience again."

Then Galga gave a curious little high laugh, like the cry of a bird, as though he had lost all control of himself, and men saw him plunge forward, his flint hunting knife gripped tightly in his right hand, toward his brother. It happened so swiftly that Kaa was powerless to help his master. Then, to the amazement of them all, the Old Man bent a little to one side as Galga struck, so that the blow sheared along his outer arm instead of into his breast; and before a man could count three, the chief had grasped his brother about the body like a bundle of rags and had raised him high above his head, bulky though he was.

"Go in peace, you fool!" he shouted loud and furiously, and flung Galga away from him, almost beyond the glow of the fires. Men watched the heavy body fly through the air, arms and legs outspread. Then they heard it strike the hard earth compound with an awful thud. Galga gave a muffled groan and lay for a while as though dead. No man went forward to help him. Instead, they gazed at him as upon one stricken in his wickedness by Earth Mother herself.

But even while they watched him, Galga rose unsteadily to his feet and hobbled toward the gate in the stockade. His wife and children ran after him now, but he waved them back savagely, as though he disowned them. A whisper of contempt rose from the men and women in the compound. At the gate, he shook himself like a dog coming from a stream, and stood gazing back at the chief. Then, pointing his finger at his brother, steadily, he called in a hoarse voice:

"Brother, it had been better for you to have run your knife into my heart —for now you have made an enemy who will one day drag you down. I have spoken; let no man say that I did not warn you. I swear that I will bring about your death."

He turned then and staggered heavily away into the darkness. Three young warriors stepped forward to the chief and said, "Shall we go after him, Old Man? Shall we bring back his head?"

But the chief smiled grimly and said, "No, let him keep it on his shoulders. It would be of no more use to us than it is to him, I think."

Kaa said quietly, "But he has threatened your life, master."

And the chief answered: "Galga's threats are like the night breeze blowing into an empty pot. It makes much noise, but hurts no one. Come, we have other things to think of; tomorrow there will be building to do, and flint to get from the galleries, for those who were our miners are no more."

Kaa shook his head, as though the chief were wrong to let Galga go free. But when the chief spoke, all good men obeyed him without question, and now they turned back to the smoldering fires, to put them out finally, lest the growing night wind that swept down the high chalk hill should fan them once more into flame and so complete the destruction of Craig Ddu.

Lalo the Otter worked as hard as any man there. And when at length they had conquered the fires, he was too exhausted to tell his father of the two wolves and the ax throw that had made him a man.

He slept, in the open, for what remained of the night, snuggled against Kaa the Guardian, and there he dreamed that Galga had come back with a great band of Hunter Folk to kill all the men of the hill and to make himself Old Man in the place of his brother. He tried to tell Kaa of his dream, but the warrior only nodded his tired head without hearing what was said to him.

“Maybe, maybe, little chief,” he muttered. “Now go to sleep. Kaa is by your side. No harm shall come to you. Go to sleep.”

Away on the hill top, a solitary wolf howled, high and menacing, as if he, too, were threatening the men of Craig Ddu with vengeance for what they had done to his kind in their hunting that day. Lalo shivered, and then, hiding his face in a cloak of black bearskin, he went off to sleep again, too exhausted even for fear to keep him awake any longer.

IV

THE HOUSE OF SILENCE

The House of Silence stood below the hill, and well away from Craig Ddu. A great hollow mound, forty paces in length, it stood humped like a quiet brooding whale in the early spring sunshine. At the end nearest the village, the House of Silence had a low doorway, the lintels of which were of stone. This doorway was filled with flakes of flint, and then covered with fresh earth, after every burial—for this was the last home of all the great ones, the men and women of the chief's family, in whom pulsed the sacred blood. Stripped of their finery, painted with red ochre to signify rebirth, they were laid on stone slabs along the sides of the inner chamber, to wait until Earth Mother should give them life once more.

Within the tomb, with the water dripping slowly from the clay roof and the heavy scent of mortality hanging in the air, Lalo shuddered. It was not a place where one could feel at all lighthearted.

There were many men in that low, narrow passageway, all of them anxious not to tread on the stiff, clay-covered occupants of that hall of long silences—the distant ancestors of the chief's family, the Old Ones, who had lain there for more years than any man could count.

Lalo had accompanied his father into the long house that morning, together with all his relatives, so that three young warriors, his cousins, might be laid at rest after the fighting in the village. Now they lay, the three young men, looking strangely alike in their red paint, their hands folded upon their breasts. Lalo turned away from them. He had known them well, had laughed and played with them only two days ago, before he had gone on his hunting trip with Kaa and Galga. One of them had teased him, running with him as far as the Old Man stone on the other side of the hill, calling out to him every few paces, "Hail, Hunter that shall be! Bring us home the skin of a weasel, that we may always remember your courage!"

And now that young warrior lay stiff and still, his dead face a mask of red clay, his flint ax clutched to his chest with unknowing fingers. Lalo wanted to weep, but he knew that this would be thought cowardly by the

older men. Besides, his father was saying the Last Words, and there must not be any interruption when these were spoken:

Son of Earth Mother,
That mother calls you,
That mother wants you;
Go to her, her love for you is great.
Tell her that we send our hearts to her,
And beg her to let the barley spring from the ground.
Take our love to her,
And tell her that we wait impatiently
For her to call us also,
And take us into herself again,
We, her children, who came from her
And must return when she calls,
Be it by day or by night.

Lalo had heard these words many times, whenever the door of the House of Silence had been opened. Even when he was a little boy, curious to know what happened inside that grim and secret place, he had stood outside with the slaves who shoveled away the soil and pulled down the dry-stone walling before the great door. And since he had grown big, his father had insisted that he should accompany him whenever a relative had to be laid down in the last long sleep.

To many of the villagers, this mound *was* Earth Mother herself; and they would tell each other that the chief and his family had been *into the heart* of Earth Mother that day. Only the slaves knew that this was not Earth Mother, but a great tomb—and no one listened to what slaves said. They were, after all, only animals; and no one paid heed to the words of a dog.

This day, Lalo could bear it no longer. He pushed his way gently through the throng, for his head was whirling with the stifling, thick air. At the far end of the chamber, set high in the wall, was a small, round hole through which he could see the blue sky outside. This was the Spirit Hole, through which the ghost of the dead man found its way at last, to let his tired body lie in peace, until Earth Mother called him again to be reborn.

Lalo leaned against the damp wall and sucked in the fresh air that came through the hole. His father's deep voice droned on, and every now and then one of his relatives would groan in sympathy, or strike his chest or palms in time to the Old Man's chanting. Through the Spirit Hole, Lalo Otter suddenly saw a great white bird skimming across the blue sky, its broad

wings tipped with gold from the new sun. He wondered what sort of bird this was, and where it was going. He wished that he might be free, like the bird, to sail across the blue sky, and not be forced to stand with the old folk in this musty place. He suddenly wanted to live where there was no pain, no sacrifice, no death.

He was still thinking these wild thoughts when he heard the horn wailing outside the long house, and then the bone bull-roarers starting up in their vibrant and monotonous undertone. Soon the drums would begin. The burial was finished. Now they must go out into the light again and let the weary slaves build up the walls and pile the soil against the great door, working with their flat, shoulder-blade shovels, urged on by the hide whip of their overseer, who was anxious that the ghosts of the dead should not come out before the mound was in its place again.

Once outside, Lalo ran forward to assume a solemn pace, a little behind his father. Kaa the Guardian walked beside Lalo, frowning that the boy had been so long in leaving the long house, for the chief had had to wait for him and was impatient that morning. It was as though he had some great trouble eating into his heart.

On the way back to Craig Ddu, the long line of mourners had to pass through a narrow little cleft in the chalk slopes, a dark place, formed when the hillside had once slid down, many, many years before, but then had stopped of its own accord. Now it was overgrown with many green things, willow herb and old man's beard and coltsfoot; it was a neglected place of wild things. At the entrance to the cleft, the Old Man stepped forward, as there was only room for one to pass between the sloping walls of chalk. For a moment, Lalo lost sight of his father, and then he heard him cry out in a strange voice, as though surprised, almost as though he were afraid.

Immediately, Kaa pushed past Lalo and ran into the cleft, his knife already in his hand. Lalo followed close behind him and saw what had startled the chief.

An old woman stood before him, grimacing and pointing up into his surprised face with her thin, withered hand. Her straggling hair was quite white and bound at the forehead by a coronet of weeds. Holding the tattered rags to her body was a belt of hide, from which dangled the white skulls of many creatures: the shrew, the vole, and even the badger cub. At first Lalo could not understand what she was saying; her voice was so much like the sound of the night wind blowing among the thorn bushes, or the waters of the stream rushing between the sharp gray stones, talking in the world's

most ancient, most secret language. But at last his ears grew accustomed to her strange tones and he heard her say, “It will not be long now, Old Man, before you join those you have left in the House of Silence. No, not long now, for pride must have its downfall! Yet before you go, your powers will leave you and the barley will not spring. Then what will you do, Old Man? What will you do when the sweet Barley Women will not show their green faces to the sunshine? What will you tell your people then, my old friend? What will you tell them when they ask why they are hungry?”

She began to laugh, and Kaa edged forward, his knife held before him, a savage expression on his dark face. But the chief waved him back, almost as though he were in a trance and mortally afraid.

“What will happen, old woman?” he said. “I beg you, tell me what will happen.” Lalo had never heard him sound like this before.

The old woman began to cackle, moving her head from side to side, as though she were dancing to silent, ghastly music.

At last she said, “Ha, who shall tell you that, Old Man? That is something that you must find out for yourself. Yet I will tell you, that before your end comes, you will think it good to eat the long pig again . . . ha! the long pig . . . the long pig. . . .”

The Old Man gave a gasp of horror and covered his eyes. Lalo looked down in his fear—and then the woman had gone and Kaa had his arms about the chief’s shoulders, supporting him.

Swiftly Lalo ran to the end of the little cleft, but the old woman was nowhere in sight, and though he looked behind every rock that might have hidden her, he could not find her anywhere. After a while, Kaa appeared, the chief leaning heavily on his arm and gulping in his breathing as though his heart beat but faintly. Kaa waved Lalo aside and led the Old Man back to his ruined hut. When Lalo went to see his father, the women sent him away, angrily, saying that the chief was sleeping and must not be disturbed.

Later, near the thorn stockade, Lalo asked Kaa, “What did she mean by ‘the long pig,’ Guardian?” His voice was anxious as he spoke, for the old woman had wakened a strange fear in his mind.

Kaa stared above Lalo’s head. “I do not know what you mean,” he said. “I did not hear her say such words. You were dreaming, boy.”

But Lalo said, “No, I was not dreaming, Kaa. I heard her say it three times. What is it, Kaa? I am a warrior now; you should not treat me as a child.”

Kaa looked away from him for a moment, and then, turning suddenly, drew his forefinger across his throat. “She meant that,” he said, with a grim smile, looking deeply into the boy’s wide-open eyes.

But Lalo said, “What is so secret about that? It is done very often and no one makes any secret of it. Men die in battle, after all. It is no great disaster, if they die bravely.”

Kaa saw that Lalo would not be satisfied. For a moment his dark, lined face took on a strange expression; then he shrugged his shoulders and said, “It is something very old, so old that men have almost forgotten it was ever done. It is not a good thing to think about, Lalo the Otter. If I were to tell you, your dreams might be fearful ones.”

Lalo said, “Do not be a fool, Kaa the Guardian. I have killed a wolf, or almost done so; and I have killed a man. What dreams could frighten me? I am willing to sleep all night in the House of Silence to prove it.”

Then Kaa said, “This dream might frighten you, my friend. But if you must know, then who am I to deny you knowledge, being your father’s man?”

He paused for a moment, searching for words, and then he came toward Lalo and touched him lightly on the arm, and then on the leg, and then on the shoulder.

“All of this,” he said, “all of this is the long pig. Now are you satisfied, Lalo Big Ears?”

He drew back, smiling ironically. Lalo shrank away at the thought and whispered, “She said we would eat the long pig, didn’t she?”

Kaa looked down at his feet and said, “She was an old mad woman, Lalo the Otter. We must not think of her stupid words.”

But Lalo answered, “Tell me, with truth in your heart, Kaa the Guardian, have my people ever eaten—the long pig?”

Kaa said slowly, and as though ashamed, “Yes, my friend. So have all the men of the hills, but many years ago. And then only when the barley crops failed or there were no sheep on the hill and no wild boars in the forests. No one has eaten it for many hands of men’s years. Now are you satisfied? Rest easy, no man now living in Craig Ddu has ever eaten it.”

But already Lalo was walking away, his mind troubled by the thought. It was like some dark or unclean dream that had been dragged up to the surface and shown in the sunlight for all to see. He strode away from Craig

Ddu and sat on the hillside, the sun hot on his bare back, his chin in his thin hands, worrying about the old woman's words. Below him he heard the sound of men hacking down the charred kingposts of the huts to set up new ones, or of women singing at their tasks of plaiting basketwork or scraping hides to make the new roofs of the houses that were to be built again. Then these sounds faded, and he sank into a tired sleep after the exertions of the last two days. As he slept, the sun gradually went behind the hill.

He was awakened by a gentle touch on his arm, and looked up to see Kaa the Guardian gazing down at him with laughter in his eyes.

"Look," Kaa was saying, "a dog, master, a dog!"

He held out a young dog, light gray in color, with deep brown eyes and a long tail. The animal bit at Kaa's brown hand, worrying with its sharp white teeth to make the warrior set it down on the hillside, but Kaa hung on, laughing even when he was bitten.

"This is a young warrior, too," he said, holding out the dog toward Lalo. "Here, take him, he is yours. Now you have your own hunting dog, chief's son!"

Lalo did not ask where Kaa had found the dog. He guessed that the man had raced many miles across the chalk countryside, perhaps to another village, to get him while Lalo was sleeping, to reward him, perhaps, for his action the day before in his first battle. Or was it to drive from his mind the dark fear of the long pig? Lalo did not know. Nor did he care, for now he had a dog of his own, and that was the first stage toward having a tribe of his own. Already he was almost a chief; at least he had one subject—if only he could tame him!

So Lalo went back to the village, hugging the struggling dog to his chest, feeling the warmth of its lithe, strong body, trying to think of names for him, already dreaming of the day when he and this dog should drag down their first buck. Suddenly, Lalo was strangely happy; happier, indeed than he had ever been before. *For this was his first dog.* He decided to call him Yan, for that means *the first* among the sheep-rearing hill folk.

"Yan, tan, tethera, pethera, pip! Sethera, lethera, hovera, bovera, dik!" he chanted, in a world of his own, as he danced toward what was left of his home.

V

DISASTER THREATENS

For many days Lalo thought of nothing but Yan, until at last Kaa took the boy aside and said, “Otter, my friend, do not set too great store by your dog. It is not good to love a creature too much. It is not wise. Perhaps I was wrong to give him to you, after all.”

Lalo the Otter said, “What do you mean, warrior? Why should you tell me not to love Yan? What right have you to say such a thing?”

Kaa the Guardian began to draw in the dust with the shaft of his long spear, looking away from the boy into the far distance.

“Why, I ask you?” Lalo almost shouted, kneeling down beside the dog and drawing Yan to him. “Answer me, my father’s man.”

Then Kaa shrugged his broad shoulders and said, “Lalo Otter, you know as well as I do that at the end of the year we must make our offerings, our sacrifices, to those who watch over us without being seen themselves. You know that we must offer our animals, one of each kind, so that *She* will be fed through the winter: *She* who will give us barley in the summer. Your father must take Yan, if there is no other dog to give, when the firetime comes around again.”

For a moment, the tears began to gather in Lalo’s eyes; but he shook them away savagely, and then his face became grim.

“Rather than let my father put Yan into the fire with the others,” he said, “I would run away from the village. I would leave the folk on the hill, Kaa! I would leave my own people!”

The warrior stared at him in horror. “What?” he said, “A chief’s son leave his people? It has never been done before!”

Lalo the Otter stood up and stared Kaa in the eyes until the warrior looked away again, for it was a bad thing to outstare the son of the Old Man, who might be Old Man himself one day, and might remember such a thing, such an act of defiance.

Then Lalo said slowly, “Have no doubt, axman, this chief’s son would run away if his dog were taken from him.”

He raced away swiftly, beyond the stockade, whistling to Yan to follow him. The lithe gray dog yelped joyously and streaked after the boy, snapping at his heels as they went, a pair of young hunters, into the sunshine.

Kaa sighed and then loped off behind them, for it was his duty never to let the boy out of his sight. Kaa the Guardian valued his eyes and his right hand too much to disobey such a tradition.

But from that moment, a cloud seemed to cover the boy’s mind. Even when he and Yan were at their happiest, chasing a badger cub, or splashing about in the stream where the women congregated to beat their flax stems, or to make their willow wands pliable, or following the scent of a wild cat in the green glades of the forest, among the cow parsley and dock—even there, Lalo felt the cloud settling darkly over him. Luckily, Yan did not know of this. He gloried in his master’s friendship, and did everything that Lalo taught him. He even learned to come obediently at Lalo’s whistle, which was hard for him, for he was young and rebellious, and anxious to see as much of the big, strange world as he could.

The Old Man saw the friendship between Lalo and Yan, and he smiled and said to his gray-haired counselors, “I had such a dog when I was a lad, like Lalo the Otter. It was a merry friend, until my father took it away from me at the firetime, to feed to the flames, *Her* flames.”

He walked on in silence for a while, his face solemn. Those who walked nearest their chief saw that his eyes were glistening. He wiped them with the back of his woad-marked hand and said, “It is always the same, my friends. A man must not grow to love anything too much, for The Others grow jealous, and then that thing has to be given up. Bear that in mind, my counselors.”

They nodded, sagely, and walked on out of the village to the fields, which straggled halfway up the hillside, marked out with white stones to show their boundaries. There the Old Man walked alone, saying the Barley Blessing, known only to himself, and passed on from father to son. And when he had blessed the fields, he went back to the village and told the folk, who came out in hordes, what he had done. With pointed sticks they began to break up the ground so that the good barley seed might be scattered without delay.

They did not even try to make furrows. It was sufficient for them to hide the seed from the birds or the frosts. However, there were two brothers, quite old men, who had thought long about this during the dull nights of winter, when there was little for a man to do with his time; and these brothers had made a big digging stick out of a strong oak bough, its long point hardened in the fire. On to this bough they had fastened two footrests and a thick hide harness with two shoulder straps. When the time came for ploughing, one of the brothers balanced himself on the stick, pressing down into the earth, while the other wrapped the harness about himself and pulled. They made the villagers laugh, but they also made deeper holes than the other men, and in the end they were looked on with respect. Soon many of the farmers of Craig Ddu had copied that great digging stick.

And when the digging was over, the Old Man walked out once again; but this time he was worried. The Old Law said that blood must be spilled on the fields if the barley were to spring strongly as the year wore on. Often this was easy to fulfill, for there would be prisoners of another tribe, kept for such an occasion, or even a wandering stranger who had strayed into the village by mistake. But this year there was no prisoner, no stranger, to use on the fields. The Old Law said that if this should happen, then the Old Man must break the law that forbade the spilling of his own blood, and choose a member of his family instead, to bring the harvest to fruition.

So the old Man walked in grief, heavy laden with his problem. He could choose Galga's family, or his own dead wife's cousin, or even Lalo—but that was unthinkable. Lalo must follow him as chief. It would be wrong to choose him. Yet it would be hard to kill poor Galga's family, who were left behind in the village through no fault of their own. And as for the cousin of Lalo's mother, well, she was a pleasant old woman, who baked good barley bread, and had never done anyone any harm. In truth, he did not wish to carry out the Law.

It seemed to be an answer from the gods that a fox should run across his path at that moment, and that the Old Man should fling his heavy hunting knife at the creature, and hit it. It seemed to be the obvious course of action to sprinkle this animal's blood here and there across the fields, and then to drop its carcass into a deep crevice in the chalk rocks, where no one would find it. When the Old Man told his tribe that he had made the blood offering, they accepted it without question. But when they asked him whose blood had gone to help the barley, he was tongue-tied for the first time in his life. He could only glare back at them fiercely and make signs in the air with his knife, to frighten them into silence.

The tribesmen did not dare to press him for an answer. But when he had left the village compound, some of them clustered together and shook their heads. “No good will come of this,” they whispered. “He has always shown us the body before. Something is wrong this time. No good can come of this.”

Yet they accepted the chief’s word, and flung their barley corns broadcast into the fields on the days set aside for the sowing. That should have been the time of a great feast. But this year the folk of Craig Ddu had not enough meat and drink for a true festival. The winter had been cold and bitter and the animals had died both in the great corral on the hill and in the low oak forests, far down in the valley. That had been the reason for the Hunters’ attack. So this time, with all the barley grain reserved for sowing, and none for barley cakes, or barley beer, there was no feast in Craig Ddu.

And once again the wise old folk of the tribe put their heads together and said, “This is not what usually happens. This year is a bad year. We are not so happy as we have been in other years.”

Then some of the younger ones, hearing these words, said, “That is because our chief has lost his power. There can be no other answer. Do you not remember what the old witch told him, on the way back from the Long House? She told him that before long we should all be eating the long pig.”

At these words, the old men became angry, for this was a terrible thing to say. They struck the young men and drove them away; but all the same, they were heavy in their minds. And one of them, an old man, older than the chief, and almost toothless, hobbled across the compound to the chief’s new house and, beating three times with his staff against the hide curtain that covered the doorway, he went down the three steps into the well of the house, where the fire burned in the center of the clay floor and the fat lamps sent out their deep amber glow.

“Old Man,” he said gravely, “the folk are not happy. They have never lacked a sowing feast before. They have always seen the body that gave the blood until now. This year they are unhappy.”

The chief was lying back on a bed of sheepskins, stitching himself a hood of deerskin with a thread of fish gut and a needle of fine fishbone. He did not look up for quite a long time, and the villager became afraid, not knowing what might be working in the Old Man’s mind. But at last the chief completed his row of stitching, and then he said, “What are you afraid of, Gumai the Ferret?”

Gumai saw that the Old Man was smiling gently and with a quiet confidence—as though he were in command of the seasons and the rain and the calving of cows and the budding of the oak trees: as though he held everything in the palm of his great hand, as a chief should do. And when he saw this, the old tribesman dared to tell his fears to the chief.

"I am afraid that we shall become hungry, Old Man," he said. "We shall be as once we were in my father's childhood, when the folk were forced to lose their children to keep life in their bodies. That is a bad thing, Old Man. One's children should grow up strong and untouched, like trees in the sunlight. *That* would be the worst thing to happen."

Then the chief rose from his couch of sheepskins and went over to where the old villager kneeled. He put his gnarled hand on the man's shoulder and said quietly, "I too am aware of that, friend. I have a son, and I would not wish him to suffer so that I might live. It is the same with all of us, whether we are chieftains or warriors. Have no fear, old friend, I know what we must do—and it is not *that*. The witch woman lied when she spoke among the stones that day. Have no fear, she was no true prophetess. I tell you this in all truth, for *She*, Earth Mother, the Greatest One, has been speaking to me while I sewed my hood. Did you not see the smile come to my face?"

Then he made the old tribesman put on the hood and see how it fitted him. And when the man said that it felt very warm, the chief said, "Go, old fellow, and take the hood with you. It is a gift from your chief. Wear that, and the wind can do you no harm, for I have stitched a blessing into it."

So the old tribesman went back to his grumbling fellows and told them, with a toothless smile, that all would be well, that the chief was full of confidence, and that the men of Craig Ddu need not fear. And they went away and slept soundly, in the belief that they were safe once more.

But when the night came, and no one walked in the compound, the chief called for Kaa the Guardian and said, "Kaa, my friend, the folk are afraid. We must show them that their bellies will not go empty before the barley comes up on the hill fields."

And Kaa kneeled before his chief and bowed his dark head until it touched the hard earth floor of the hut.

"Command me, master," he said. "I am your dog, to hunt and to kill for you while there is breath in my body and strength in my arm."

The chief went up the steps of his hut first, to make sure that no one was listening. Then he said, "You must go to the Fisher Folk, this very night.

Take five trusted young men with you, warriors for at least three years, and take my son Lalo, for this must be as though I came to them myself."

Kaa looked up at him, his eyes bright in the lamp light.

"Is this a war party, master?" he asked anxiously.

The Old Man shook his head. "You go in peace," he answered. "Take a wicker basket of arrowheads, of the best black flint, to them. Barter these for five baskets of shell fish. Come back with food for my people, something to satisfy the bitter young ones and the frightened old ones. Do you understand?"

Kaa bowed his head again and nodded. "I understand, Master," he said. "If I do not bring back what you say, then eat me."

The Old Man regarded him strangely for a moment, and then said with a smile, "We might do that, too, my friend! Who knows?"

Then Kaa shuddered as he went from the chief's hut; he told himself it was because of the bitter wind that blew from the high chalk hill across the compound. Straightway he went to waken Lalo the Otter, to tell him what they had to do. But before Lalo would listen, he went to his fireside and began to stroke Yan, who slept in the warmest part of the hut.

"We must waken him," said Lalo. "He must not be left out of any secrets, my friend. He must know all."

Kaa shrugged his shoulders and waited until the young dog was awake and scampering about the hut. Then he told Lalo the Otter what they had to do.

When he had finished, Lalo turned to Yan and said, "What is your opinion, hunter?"

The dog ran to Lalo and jumped at his chest in play, bowling him over.

Lalo the Otter sat up and said quite seriously, "My counselor Yan approves of your idea, Kaa the Guardian. Let us hurry; we are anxious to go on this journey, Yan and I."

Kaa went to waken the five warriors, shaking his head, and wondering whether the world had ever been so mad before.

VI

STRANGE MEETING

The Fisher Folk lived along a bleak estuary that fed into the savage gray sea. They did not grow barley nor did they attempt to move inland to trap the deer or the wild pig. They took their harvest from the sea that roared beyond the mouth of their estuary, sailing out in rough, dug-out boats, or on rafts to which they had fastened square sails of hide or woven reeds, and fishing with harpoons of fish bone or with little hooks made from the ribs of mackerel. They were a wild people, and their goddess was a basking shark, hung up to rot on a fire-blackened pole at the outer edge of their wattle-and-mud village.

This village, sheltered under the sides of the chalk cliffs, was hidden so well that the careless traveler all but fell into it. Few travelers went there of their own accord; those who found themselves in it seldom returned to the place from which they had come.

The Fisher Folk were not to be scoffed at, for though they did not fight in the field like the men of the chalk hills, they were also warriors in their own fashion. When a strong war party attacked them, they would put out to sea in their craft and wait until the enemy had gone away again. Or, if they felt fairly confident, they would fling fish harpoons, or swing their vicious fishhooks at the end of weighted lines, and so wound their opponents. Because of this, they were not a tribe to be attacked without careful preparation. They were merciless and brutal and, as far as the hill dwellers were concerned, unfriendly. It was to these men that Kaa and Lalo led their party, with nothing more fearful than a few axes and a basket of flint arrows to persuade their cooperation.

The seven men of Craig Ddu scrambled down the rubble of the steep cliff side, Yan slithering just behind them among the loose pebbles. At each step they expected to hear the deadly whirring of an arrow, or at least the warning call, blown on the great shell which this folk used instead of the bull's horn trumpet. But nothing happened, and at length the party made their way among the wretched hovels that formed the homes of the Fisher

Folk, walking proudly, with no expression on their faces, as was appropriate to a warrior folk.

Nevertheless, Lalo the Otter was almost overcome by the stench of the fish offal that lay strewn everywhere along the green-slimed shore of the estuary, and came near to screwing up his face with disgust. This was much worse than the midden ditch of Craig Ddu. Kaa the Guardian seemed to sense his distaste, and touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Our lives are in your hands, chief's son," he said, briefly. "If you let them see that a little thing like a smell offends you, they will shoot at us from the darkness of their huts, and we will never see the arrow that kills us. Moreover, let me warn you that although you are a person of some worth in Craig Ddu, here you are nothing. Here, Tula, their Headman, is everything, and no one else may even open his mouth until Tula has spoken first."

Lalo nodded solemnly, forcing his face into the rigid, masklike expression of an imperturbable warrior.

"When can one speak, then?" he whispered.

Kaa answered, "Only when one holds the conch shell, which is their sign that one has been given the right to talk."

Then, from the farthest and most tumbledown hovel, a place overgrown with olive-green weeds and sea parasites, an old man came, stooping low to get under the doorway, and coughing all the time, as though the bitter east wind that blew along the estuary had given him an everlasting cold on the chest.

"Tula," grunted Kaa. "Take care now, and remember what I have said, my friend!"

Lalo nodded and leaned down to hold Yan by the collar, so that he might not offend this dread ruler of the shores.

Tula came slowly toward them, holding the great conch shell with one hand and the edge of his sealskin robe with the other. As he came nearer, Lalo saw that his hands were red and chapped, and his fingers crooked and swollen. This was not the sort of man he would have called a Great One, he thought. Kaa seemed to sense what was in his mind, for he whispered, "Set no store by appearances, Otter Man. This is a very great chief in these parts. He has power over more men than has your father, even."

Then he became silent and the party from Craig Ddu waited, with that strange, itchy sensation in the middle of their backs that a man always

experiences when he walks into a strange village, where people stare from doorways.

Tula, followed by a small company of old men, each in his robe of skins, halted when he was three paces from them. Lalo saw that his eyes were red around the rims, and watering, as though the wind troubled them as well as his chest. His voice was high and nasal. “Welcome,” he said, looking at each one of them in turn. “Welcome, at least for a short stay, at our hungry village by the hungrier sea.”

Lalo, who had been brought up to answer all greetings, was about to give thanks to Tula, when he saw Kaa’s face muscles move slightly, and he knew that this was the signal for him to be quiet.

Tula waited, his thin lips smiling, as though he hoped that one of them would break his law. But, finding that no one was going to speak, he went on, a little sadly, “Alas, when the great warriors of Craig Ddu must come to my poor village with a little basket of arrow chips! Alas, for they must be feeling the cruel pinch of hunger in their brave bellies.”

Once again he waited, but no one spoke, although this time Lalo was so angry that he almost reviled Tula, in spite of Kaa’s glance. But just then Yan had begun to take an interest in what was happening. He was growling at Tula, setting his legs out so that he could not be dragged away, and showing his small white fangs at the chief of the Fisher Folk. Lalo’s anxious attention was taken up with this awkward situation.

Tula said, “Alas, the men of Craig Ddu! What has happened to their senses that they have not eaten this dog before now? He would have made a little dish to feed three men—small men, of course—not the biggest of the warriors!”

He turned around to his counselors, the old men, who sniggered at their headman’s joke; but Lalo did not laugh. His face was set and grim, and it cost the boy all his self-control not to fly at the headman’s throat there and then.

Then Tula said with a sigh, “Alas, alas, when good hunters cannot bring themselves to put a little bird arrow into a dog’s ribs, eh, Kaa the Guardian?”

Kaa bowed humbly before the man he could have broken with one hand. To keep his temper, he thought of the five baskets of shell fish. Now he had the right of speech, having been addressed, and having been offered the conch shell.

“Tula, Headman,” he said, “your eyes are the keen eyes of the eagle; your nose is the sharp nose of the wolf. Other men may guess at the truth, but you know the truth. There are no secrets kept from Tula.”

At first, Lalo despised Kaa for these words, but then he saw the craft of them, for Tula began to smile: not the sickly, cruel smile that had marked his face before, but the smile of a wild cat when it is washing itself after a good meal of trout. A contented smile, a smile that boasts of its prowess as a hunter.

“Say on, O Kaa the Wise,” said Tula. “And let me tell Kaa that if ever he grows weary of service in Craig Ddu, there will always be a place for him at my side. I can say no more.”

Kaa bowed in thanks, but Lalo noticed the quick little smile he gave when his head was bent and his face hidden.

“O Tula, the Headman,” Kaa said then, “we come, as you know, for food —just five baskets of shell fish, to keep our folk—”

Tula made a sudden gesture of irritation and cut him short.

“What!” he shouted, “Five baskets of my lovely, sweet shell fish—each basket of which costs a life—for a few miserable pieces of flint! Is that a fair exchange, think you?”

He turned to his counselors, who shook their heads in distress at such a suggestion.

“Who put you up to such dog’s tricks?” he bellowed at Kaa.

Kaa stood his ground and said quietly, “I speak the words of my master, the Old Man of Craig Ddu. They are not my own words. I am the bull’s horn that his breath blows through, no more.”

For a moment, it looked as though Tula would have a seizure. His lips became flecked with froth and his thin eyebrows rose so high on his forehead that they disappeared inside the hood of his sealskin garment.

“Then the Old Man of Craig Ddu is a fool!” he shouted, his hands shaking so that he almost dropped the Talking Shell.

At these words, the pulses in Lalo’s temple beat like a fast drum. He loosed Yan and stood upright, his hand upon his flint dagger. He was about to plunge at Tula, the mocking headman, when Kaa’s hand restrained him. But Kaa was too late to prevent him from stepping forward and standing in front of Tula of the Fisher Folk.

“Dotard,” said Lalo the Otter, “if you dared call my father that before his face, he would take your withered head with one sweep of his great ax. If you dare to step with me outside this stinking village, I will try to do the same. Though perhaps it will take me two sweeps, for I am not yet so strong as my father.”

As the boy spoke, a great silence fell on the fishing village. Even the red-faced women in the hovels ceased their chattering, the babies stopped squawking, and the very dogs howled no more. Now all that could be heard was the sighing of the water, the whispering of the east wind, and the clacking of the dried basking shark against the village totem pole.

Tula came toward Lalo, his red eyes wide-open and staring. He stretched out his callused hands towards the boy, trying to frighten him. Then he smiled, wickedly and cruelly. And Lalo saw that this old fellow had only two yellowing teeth in his mouth. It was a strange thing to give a boy courage, but it did; and Lalo did not edge away, as he wanted to, but stayed his ground and deliberately grinned back at the approaching chief of the Fisher Folk, showing his own full set of even white teeth. Yan, the little gray dog, stood by his young master’s side and revealed his teeth too, almost as though he had been trained to do such a thing in time with his master.

“Aiee! Aiee!” cried the old men behind Tula. “It is a sign. Two dogs, Headman, two dogs! Do not go near them!”

Tula stopped, as though he had been struck on the neck with an ax. His body stiffened. He said at last, “Go to the Guest Place. The baskets of fish shall be brought straightway.”

He turned then and walked as briskly as he could back to his hovel. One of his old men had more foresight, however, and took the basket of arrowheads from the warrior who carried them. Then he too shuffled as fast as he could to the house of his master.

Kaa and Lalo smiled at each other, and looked puzzled. What they did not know was that, many years ago, Tula had been a daring young hunter of seals. One bitter winter’s day, when the very spray flung itself up in splinters of glittering ice, he had set his rough coracle after a lovely gray seal, far toward the Northern Lights. Tula had followed this seal, yearning always to get her within range of the bone harpoon, but never quite reaching her, until, as evening came on, he found himself enclosed by great walls of ice, with no space in which to turn his boat. And there, on a ledge before him, sat the seal he had been chasing, and she seemed to be smiling at him, as he flurried hither and thither with his paddle, trying to turn the clumsy boat. Then,

when he was sweating, despite the cold and the icy spray, the seal seemed to say in his ears, “Tula, Tula, little man, do not be afraid. I was once such another one as you, or, at least, as your wife, for I am a seal-woman. I change my gray pelt for the white skin of a princess at the full-moon time, my friend.”

And as Tula gazed at the seal in fascination, he saw that her eyes were those of a woman, not those of an animal, and he began to sweat all the more. The magic creature watched him dithering with his paddle all this time, and then, with a flick of her tail, she disappeared into the little, low tunnel of ice where she lived. But before she vanished, she said: “You need not be afraid of me, Tula Little Heart. I will never hurt you, little man. Your fate is decided by something bigger than I am.”

Then Tula dropped his paddle in his relief, but he dared to say, “Tell me, seal-woman, who will hurt me.”

And along the tunnel of ice came the voice of the seal, “You will be killed by two dogs. Nothing else can kill you, my gallant friend. Two dogs, remember that!”

And though Tula shouted again and again into the iceberg, no sound came back to answer him—not even an echo.

So it was that in the village of the Fisher Folk on that day, Lalo the Otter went free and unharmed because he showed his teeth like a dog, and because he had Yan, the small gray hunter, with him. But Lalo did not know all this, and he and Kaa scratched their heads in bewilderment as they went to the place set aside for guests in this village by the shore.

It was a cave, set away from the sea; yet all the same it was damp, and its gray walls were covered with the green fungus that comes with dampness. And when they were lying on their pallets of weed and samphire, Lalo said, “Well, at least we have driven our bargain: one basket of arrowheads for five baskets of shell fish.”

Kaa the Guardian fondled his long ax. He did not comment on this; but in his heart he felt that the bargaining was not over yet.

“You go to sleep like the others, Lalo my friend,” he said. “I think you need rest after the long journey.”

Lalo stared at him and said, “But why don’t you sleep as well?”

Kaa answered, “When a man gets to be old, like me, he does not need much rest.”

Lalo turned his head and glanced around at the five warriors. They were all older than Kaa, he knew. But he did not question this saying, and immediately fell asleep, his arm about Yan the dog. When he saw this, Kaa took out his two knives, and laid them beside his long-bladed greenstone ax. Then he unslung his short hornbeam bow and carefully fitted into it a thick stag arrow. An arrow with barbs, not the smooth, leaf-shaped kind.

Then, with a funny little smile, he blew out the fat lamp, and placing himself so that the mouth of the cave was immediately before him, he waited in silence. Or, at least, in silence save for the snores and grunts of the six people with him in that cavern—the people he guarded with his life.

VII

AN OLD ENEMY

Once Kaa started and shrank back a little into the darkness when he heard what he thought were footsteps coming along the shore outside the cave. But then the footsteps turned into the lapping of the rising tide, and he smiled to think how his heart was beating so suddenly. He put down his bow and began to rub his hands, for the night had turned very cold, and Tula, in his spite, had not sent them any coverings for their rough beds.

Then the wind began to get up, blowing past the mouth of the cave and muffling the other small noises of the night. Kaa found that he had to listen very hard now, even to pick out the sound of the lapping ripples of the sea. And while he sat, bent slightly forward like an animal of the forests, something touched his elbow and Kaa turned, almost ready to drive his knife into the thing that had surprised him. But immediately he realized that it was Yan, who had left his master and was rubbing against him, as though he too felt lonely in that dark cavern with all the men save one asleep.

Then Kaa the Guardian also realized something else; this keen-scented little hunting dog was shivering, but not with cold. Yan's muscles were a-quiver with excitement, the tension that comes when one smells danger from afar, yet must wait for it to materialize, to take shape. Now Kaa could hear the dog sniffing hard and rhythmically, and from time to time making little sobbing noises in his throat.

"Thank you for the warning, Yan the Hunter," whispered Kaa. "I must try to profit by it, my gray friend."

And Kaa took up his ax this time, for the night had come down so thickly that he could not have seen to shoot off his arrows accurately. And this time, the warrior rose quietly and crept over to the mouth of the cave. There he leaned against the inside of the entrance, so that he could see who might wish to come in, but remain unseen—at least, until it was too late for the intruder to protect himself.

“Stay there, Yan,” he breathed to the little dog. He felt Yan’s tail strike against his leg as he bent to pat the dog’s head. Then there was silence again.

The cave wall was cold against Kaa’s shoulder, and he hoped that he would not have to stand in that position for very long. His wish was answered even more immediately than he might have wanted, for all at once the little dog’s whining turned into an excited yelp, and as he stared into the dark gray of the night, Kaa’s eyes sensed something a deeper color than gray, almost black, and moving swiftly. There was a flurry of footsteps within the entrance of the cave, and Kaa felt the movement of air that comes from the motion of a running body. Someone was passing into the cavern, racing in so that he might take the sleepers by surprise.

Kaa the Guardian was an experienced warrior, trained to strike almost without thought. His ax came down with the speed of an angry snake, and he felt the jar of his blow run along the antler shaft so hard that he feared he had splintered the weapon. Before him, a man groaned aloud in the darkness, and then fell against him and lay at his feet.

Kaa jumped to one side, lest the man should still strike out with a knife and cut through his leg tendons. But this one did not move again.

Suddenly, footsteps sounded outside in the darkness, many footsteps, running away, as though whoever was there had realized that the surprise attack had failed. They did not want to risk the darkness of that cavern after what they had just heard. Then Kaa heard Lalo’s voice, whispering to him in the blackness.

“Who was that, Kaa the Guardian?” asked the boy. “I heard him come in, and I heard the sound of your blow. Who was it?”

Kaa bent down and touched the man’s face. And at last he rose and whispered to the boy, “I can feel that this man wears the tribal scars across his cheekbones in two straight lines. The lobe of his left ear is missing. He lacks a tooth at the front of his lower jaw.”

Lalo said, breathlessly, “Then it is Galga, my uncle.”

Kaa nodded in the darkness. “Even so,” he said. “It is Galga.”

Lalo said, “I have often wondered where he had hidden himself, and now we know. He has been living with the Fisher Folk. No wonder Tula hated us. Galga has poisoned his mind toward us.”

Kaa was bending over the man. “He carried a knife in his hand,” he said. “He came here tonight to kill you, Lalo the Otter.”

Lalo said, “Is he dead, my friend?”

Kaa answered him in a low whisper. “No, his heart still beats, though faintly. My blow did not find his head, but caught him low down, in the small of the back, for he ran bending forward.”

Then Lalo said: “It is forbidden for me to spill the blood of my family, and Galga is my father’s brother. We must not take his life, Kaa my friend. If he dies now, it is the will of Earth Mother. But we must do no more to him.”

After a while Kaa said: “It is death for us to stay any longer in this place, Otter friend. We should go now, before the others return and shoot us full of arrows in the darkness. Have no fear, they will come back, when they have regained their courage.”

“That was in my own mind, Kaa,” the boy replied. “Let us take up our five baskets of fish and set our feet toward Craig Ddu.”

So Kaa went from one man to another and woke them quietly by pressing with the side of his hand on their necks. Each man woke quickly and gently from his sleep, wide awake upon the instant. Kaa told each one to gather his weapons and a fish basket, and to go from that cavern of treachery.

They went as silently as ghosts, with Kaa at the head of the column and Lalo at the tail. Yan followed Kaa this time, sniffing all the way, and ready to bark out the warning if anyone should try to ambush them as they made their slow way up the crumbling cliff side.

2
MEN OF THE SUN

1

THE ENCAMPMENT BY THE SALT MARSH

Across the little sea that separated the land of the chalk hills and the plains of the other folk, there was great excitement. Along the reed-fringed margins of the shore, many men worked, shouting and laughing, singing and fighting each other—not out of enmity, but from sheer high spirits—for the spring winds had blown into their beings, and they were wild with desire to sail across the narrow sea to the island they had heard of for so long.

Morag, the Sun King, he of the great copper sword, stood on a little hillock, looking down on his swarming hosts of men as they hacked with their adzes into the thick oak trunks to make themselves dug-out boats, or pulled in unison on the stout hide ropes to lash together the many boughs that would make up a raft capable of transporting cattle on the waters.

Morag was an immense man, whose red-gold hair hung to his broad shoulders, bound about the forehead by a thin circlet of gold. His face was streaked across with caste marks of blue woad, and his nose jutted forth above his drooping mustaches like the beak of a hunting eagle. From his heavy bronze shoulder brooches, a colored woolen cloak hung down almost to his heels, red and green and yellow. For those were the colors of his tribe. Many bracelets of bronze and copper jangled on his thick wrists as he moved. About his neck he wore a half-moon of gold, thinly beaten and embossed with the sun sign: a glorious symbol of writhing rays.

Yet these were not the things that first struck a man when he saw Morag, the Sun King. Those who came upon this strange and brutal man remembered first his eyes. For they were of different colors, one gray and the other brown. Then they saw his broad copper sword, which hung down before his body in a scabbard of white oxhide, from a belt studded with yellow amber and decorated with a fringe of human hair.

It was this sword that had gained him his kingship over the wandering folk of the great plains, the horsemen and cattle drovers, who called themselves “The Lordly Ones” because they disdained to live in houses or to

plough the fields and sow the barley seeds, like the little dark ones of the chalk hills.

Morag had once been nothing more than a cattle lord, though comfortably rich in his many herds of cows and black bulls. But one day, foraging with his henchmen in a strange part of the plains, he had come upon a little smoky settlement where the headman was a smith, whose forge was hung with many objects of copper and even of bronze. And there Morag had chosen for himself the great copper sword; but when the headman asked a hundred head of cattle for this princely weapon, Morag had struck off the man's head with that very sword, laughing at his craftiness in outwitting the bargainer.

With this sword, Morag had impressed all whom he met, for it was so much sharper and more deadly than the crude axes of polished stone that were then the weapons of the plains. After that, it had been but a few short steps to kingship of the nomadic cattlemen. For no man cared to stand against a lord with so incomparable a sword. And now the smith who had made it was no longer alive to make another one for any possible rival.

So Morag stood on a little hillock, watching his followers build their boats and rafts, preparing to sail across the dangerous channel that divided the great plains from the island of the hillmen who planted the barley and prayed to Earth Mother.

For this Morag was an ambitious man, who longed to rule over a kingdom that no other man should share with him. In his dreams, he saw plain after plain, stretching toward the immensely distant horizon, black with cattle, and all his; the cows grazing, with their calves beside them; the bulls standing guard, here and there, secure in their domains. Morag dreamed of cattle as another man might dream of gold or of villages; and to breed cattle, a king needed vast grazing plains.

In these dreams, he and his chosen few, mounted on great stallions, rode among the cattle, sizing them up as they went, all through an eternal summer. For Morag's lords rode on the backs of horses, and that also was a noble thing to do; a thing that the little dark men of the chalk hills did not know about, as yet, though they had seen horses, the little, thin ponies of the far moors.

On the little hillock overlooking the reed-fringed salt marshes, Morag chuckled in his dream of conquest: a bright sword, a horse, and many, many cattle! That was enough to strike fear into the heart of any man of the hills. One day soon, he thought, he would be a very great king. And when he was

great, he would raise a tall temple to the Sun, a round place, like the Sun Himself, built of massive stones, some standing upright, others lying across them. And in the midst of the stones, he would have a blood slab, an altar where the sacrifice should take place on midsummer morning, when the first rays of the new sun struck down the aisle of the temple.

And that too would increase his fame.

Then, when at last he was called to his fathers, he would have a little stone room built about his body, and over that an enormous mound of earth, reaching up almost to the sun, shaped to a point at the top. Morag did not know where he had found this idea, but it ran at the back of his mind that this had been done somewhere before, somewhere far to the south, in the sun lands. But he could not remember, and he was not the sort of man to press his brain hard.

In any case, his dreams came to an abrupt end, for behind him he was suddenly aware of the beating of hoofs. He turned around as a sleek white stallion burst up the sandy hillside and swung around him, scattering earth and stones behind it, filling his eyes and mouth with dust.

On the horse sat a young boy whose golden hair swept out behind him in the wind. Like Morag, this lad wore a thin circlet of gold about his brow, and a cloak of red, yellow, and green.

“Hail, Uncle Morag!” called out the rider, as he drew his foaming mount to a standstill, almost at the feet of the Sun King. He looked down, laughing, his blue eyes twinkling, his cheeks red from his gallop along the shore.

“Are we ready to sail yet, my Uncle?” he asked, pulling on the reins.

Morag frowned and said, “Unless you ride more gently, my boy, you may never have the chance of coming with us. That horse of yours will break your neck one of these days.”

But if his words were harsh, the King’s thin mouth was smiling with the fierce affection of a warrior for his son; for though the boy, Cradoc, was his nephew, Morag loved him as if he had been his true son—for he had none of his own.

The young prince bowed mockingly toward his uncle and said, “Would you feel happier if I rode a wooden horse, dear Uncle?”

The King pretended to strike at the boy with the back of his hand; then Cradoc showed his mastery of the stallion he rode, for pulling back on the

hide reins, he swung the panting creature up and around, away from the blow.

"There, Uncle," he said, "you see—you could never catch me!"

And Morag the King laughed aloud, in reply to words that would have brought death to any other man who spoke them. Then, running alongside the boy, his heavy cloak swinging out behind him, the great Sun King caught his nephew by the belt and called out: "Hold tight to your mount, Cradoc Stallion, and let us amuse ourselves. The boats will be many days yet before they are ready—and even then we must await a wind to take us to our kingdom."

So, running alongside the horse, his strong hands clasped about the saddle-girth, the King raced down the hill like a fierce storm wind, leaping with every other step, and shouting to the stallion to show what he could do and to put all the other horses to shame.

In the encampment of hide windbreaks, down below the hill and away from the shore, the great cattle lords lounged here and there, plaiting their long whips of bull's hide, or burnishing their swords, or even wagering their cattle against each other on a throw of the white knucklebones. They heard the thrumming of hoofs and the wild shouts of their king, and they looked up, smiling savagely.

"Look, look," they shouted, pointing, so that the bracelets on their wrists clinked with the sudden movement. "Here they come, the mad ones, the rulers of the earth!"

And these warriors laughed aloud to watch their King and their Prince, sweeping over the hill like the wind of winter. Some of them, the youngest ones, ran to their own hobbled horses and, swinging into their sheepskin saddles, swirled about the racing pair in a wild scurry of hoofs. The air was heavy with the beat of feet, shrill with the neighing of stallions, thick with upflung earth. All was wildness suddenly, as though a great torrential madness had swept into the camp and taken men's minds in its grip, sending them out recklessly over the plains beside the narrow sea.

And at last, when their fierce, jesting fury had worn itself out, the riders came back to the hide windbreaks, laughing and slapping each other on the back or the shoulder, wagering their stallions, one against the other, making impossible claims for their animals, calling on the sun himself to witness that no horse could run as fast or leap as far as their own savage beast. For the men of the Sun King were wild and boastful, swift and savage in their

actions, lovers of bright colors and fierce music, drinkers of the honey mead, eaters of meat. They were such as could not stay under a roof for more than a day, or eat barley bread if there was beef. Their hearts were filled with glory, and with a great yearning to travel far, to ride over the horizon—into the sun, if needs be. And Morag was the right king for them, for whatever hunger assailed them, he felt it fivefold; and Cradoc might have been Morag's true son, for he shared his uncle's thoughts and feelings as closely as though he had been a finger on his uncle's sword hand.

At length, when they all sat in the shelter of their King's windbreak, sweating with their exertions, the men began to call for drink, to celebrate this day. Then the slave women ran hither and thither, carrying horn cups to the warriors, spilling the sticky, sweet amber fluid in their haste and getting teased for their clumsiness by the men, whose exercise had made them good-natured for the moment. And when they had drunk to their King and their Prince, one of them called out, "Where is the bard? Call the bard, Morag! This day should have a song to celebrate it!"

Then all took up the cry, and at last the slave women led the bard before the King, guiding his steps gently, for the man was blind.

Old Cromac had once been a warrior like the others, but that was many years ago. His eyeballs were all milky white now, but they had once seen the axes rise and fall in the thick of battle; they had seen the ground sweeping past beneath a wild horse's hoofs; they had adored gay colors and bright, clinking ornaments. Cromac was not such a bard that, like the linnet, he must be blinded before he sang sweetly. He was the best of bards: one who had himself acted the stories he sang, and felt the feelings he described. The warriors knew this, and believed in his words. They did not scoff at him, or fling beef bones at him after the feasting, as happened to many lesser bards, among other peoples.

Now Cromac stood before the King, his pale, thin face and long white hair contrasting strongly with the black of his robes. About his neck hung a little silver half-moon, the sign of the Dedicated Ones, those affected by that strange lunacy over which the moon has control: the lunacy of the poet, the singer, the man possessed by a vision. And in Cromac's hand was a harp, a crude thing, little more than a small bent bow, strung with three cords of gut. A man would have no success in trying to coax a melody from such strings. Their only use was to stress the rhythms of the song with discordant twanging.

“Hail, Cromac the Singer!” called out Morag from his chair beneath the hide awning.

“Hail, Cromac the Singer!” chorused the warriors, reclining against their sheepskin saddles, spread on the ground.

The bard’s face wrinkled into a thin smile and he bowed his white head in the direction of the King’s voice.

“You send for a song, my King,” he said. “You send for a song to celebrate this day. You shall have it, my master, for a song came to me this very morning, and you shall be the first to hear it.”

Cromac struck his hand three times across the strings of the harp, and as their wild chords swept into the air, all men fell silent, their horn cups forgotten. Now they were the simple wild men of the early world, suddenly struck dumb by the power of the poet. And then Cromac’s high voice soared like a white bird above the tents, and even the discontented slave women stood still and ceased their chattering behind the windbreaks, to listen to the old man’s words:

> “*I, Cromac, who was once an eagle*
> *And am now a sparrow;*
> *Whose eyes were once swords*
> *And are now dull pebbles:*
> *I, Cromac, bard of the Sun King,*
> *Send you this song.*
> *Give heed, my friends,*
> *For who knows but the gods*
> *May take my voice, as they have taken my eyes,*
> *After these words;*
> *Then I shall sing no more.*”

Now the warriors bowed their heads in sadness, for Cromac had such power that he could make men feel sad or happy, just as he desired. And when he sensed that all shared the mood he decreed, the bard struck swiftly on the strings of his harp and began again:

> “*Song-drunk and drifting,*
> *Over the lift and the drop of green waters,*
> *Into the sun, the Red One, we come. . . .*”

And so Cromac told his story, his voice rising on the rising wind. And the warriors heard how they would struggle against the great waves, losing

many cattle and horses when the rafts overturned; but how, at last, they would beach their craft in a friendly estuary, and there find a man who crawled on all fours like a beast, but who had the blood of a king in his veins. And this man would help them, the bard foretold, if in return they would help him. But they must beware of him, in spite of his offered friendship, and they must put an end to him when the right time came—if they were ever to gain the kingdom they all desired. Yet they must be sure to kill him *at the right time*, or there could only be disaster.

Then blind Cromac's voice faltered and he was silent. When they pressed him to tell them more, he shook his white head, and his hand fell away from his harp strings.

"I cannot speak more of this," he said, "for at this point my dream is clouded with a great darkness. It is as though a thick black smoke had blown across the eyes of my vision."

Nor, though King Morag offered Cromac a hundred head of cattle, would the bard continue his story. Then the King rose in great annoyance and swept out from his windbreak tent, muttering angrily that a bard's duty was to sing when his master willed him to. He even made certain threatening remarks concerning Cromac, but the tribesmen smiled and nudged each other, for they knew that their King's anger would wear itself out in time, if no one crossed him further. His was a temper that rose quickly, but subsided just as quickly. The important thing was not to be within reach of the King's sword when his great angers came upon him, for often he would strike blindly, and then, although he might later regret what he had done, a man's life would be at an end, and all the sorrowing in the world would not bring it back.

So the King strode down to the salt marsh, his nephew Cradoc at his heels, to watch the men working at the boats and rafts. One of these men, a great-thewed rogue from the northern forest, grinned up at the King and said: "Morag, my friend, this oak is unseasoned stuff. It will not stand the adze-edge as the wood of my own country does. See, here we ran too close to the outer side and our log has split so wide that we have had to bore holes on either side of the crack and put ropes into them to draw the lips of the hole together again."

Morag was no seaman; his life had been spent on the back of a horse, rounding up his vast herds of cattle. He gazed at the hole in the wood and then at the angry gray waves. "Will such a little rope as that bind the crack so that those hungry wolves of breakers will not enter the boat?" he asked.

The man shrugged his hunched shoulders as he pulled at the rope and replied, “Who knows, master? We can only do our best, in this world. I shall fill up the seam with wood strips and then pour hot tar into the hole. After that, we must hope. And if we should find the water about our knees, well, a man has to die some time, master!”

King Morag looked down so amazedly at the man at that remark, that the man had to laugh, right in the King’s face. For an instant, Cradoc expected his fierce uncle to smite the man’s head from his shoulders for such insolence; but that did not happen. The King’s anger had worn itself out, and this red-faced man’s rough jest shook him into a good humor once more. He leaned over the man and struck him hard on the shoulder, almost knocking him into his boat.

“My friend,” said the King, “when we gain our kingdom, come to me and remind me of the talk we have had this day. I will give you whatever my hand is resting on—be it a cup of gold, or the very chair I sit in.”

The man rubbed his shoulder and nodded. “Have no fear, Morag,” he said. “I will do that.”

As King Morag strode back inland with his nephew, the man climbed up the hill behind them and shouted, “I have a long memory, Morag of the Black Bulls! I shall not forget!”

Morag was secretly pleased to be called by his old nickname, for he had gained it when he was a young prince, and was glad that men still remembered his feat of driving a wagon yoked with four of the most savage black bulls his people had ever bred. It needed the strength of a giant and the craft of a wizard to control them—but Morag had done it; and now he heard himself once more called by his old name, and his heart was cheered.

“Come, Cradoc, my prince,” he called, “let us pass a weary hour until sunset at the edge of the forest with the dogs.”

They raced back to the encampment and there, yelping behind their own hide shelter, were the King’s two great deerhounds, Bran and Troynt: immensely powerful dogs, deep gray and shaggy, their long necks encircled by bronze collars. When they saw Cradoc, they set up such a howling that all the tribesmen stopped in their work or their play and said, “There, the King’s great hounds are greeting their young master. They can smell that he will be a king himself, one day, when we have gained our kingdom.”

For every man loved Cradoc, and would have followed him, boy though he was, to death, just as the dogs would have done. Yet, like the men, these

dogs were savages, born only to kill.

Morag and Cradoc unleashed the dogs and set off with them toward the woods. They were about to turn back, in the first glow of sunset, when they came upon a great stag, who set the dogs defiantly and challenged them in silence, staring down at them from a little hill that overlooked the wood. Bran and Troynt began a great baying and started in fury after the antlered beast. But the stag was glad to draw them away so easily, for he had a deer with her fawn at the woodside, hidden in the bracken, and it suited him well to have these red-eyed hounds at his swift heels.

When they had run for the best part of a mile, the stag plunged down a slope and took to the shallow waters beyond the salt marsh. Bran and Troynt, having been bred inland, were afraid of the sea and would not follow him, but prowled up and down the reedy shores, snarling and whimpering with angry disappointment. Cradoc watched the stag's great antlers until his eyes were blinded by the setting sun. It was at this point, however, that his attention was caught by something else, which interested him just as much. A shallow dug-out boat came clumsily and slowly bobbing on the tide, out of the west.

There was the dark shape of a man inside it, his arms dangling over the side of his craft.

"Look, Uncle, look!" he cried, already wading out into the cold salt sea toward the incoming boat.

Morag the King shook his head. "Do not risk your life, my prince," he said. "That man can wait. He is already dead, if I am not much mistaken."

But King Morag was mistaken; the man was not dead, though he was very close to death. Cradoc looked down at him, when they had dragged the boat the last yard or so inshore, and sniffed with disgust, for the man was filthily dressed in greasy otter-skins and carried the smell of fish about him.

"I have not seen such a man before, Uncle," he said.

King Morag scratched his cheek and answered, "I had heard that there were such folk, though I did not expect to see one of them—yet."

They gazed at his strangely cut black hair, held up with crude bone pins on the top of his long head, and at the curious bracelet of solid amber that he wore on his thin wrist. It was merely an irregular piece of that precious substance, with a hole bored roughly through its center. Cradoc compared it with the bright whorl of copper that decorated his own strong brown arm, and smiled down at this poor fellow.

“He comes from the west,” he said, “from the place we go to visit, no doubt. It would not look as though there is much wealth for us there, Uncle.”

King Morag smiled dryly and said, “Do not judge by a man’s bracelets, my prince. I have known great cattle lords who dressed like scarecrows. This one could be a king among his own folk.”

Later, when the man had drunk some warming mead, he opened his black eyes and gazed at Bran and Troynt in fear, shrinking from them, and jabbering in the rough tongue of the Fisher Folk. By now, many of the tribesmen had gathered about this spot on the shore, having been attracted by the baying of the great hounds, and one of them listened to what the man said, and then said to the King, “I have heard this speech before, Morag. My father had a slave of the shore folk when I was a little lad, and he taught me much of their language. This one says that your dogs are the Hounds of Death who killed his own father, Tula, in the woods above his village.”

Morag began to laugh, but the half-drowned Fisher man waved his arms in anguish and began to chatter again. The tribesman listened to him and then told the King, “He says that these dogs tore his father to death, according to an old prophecy, and that a stranger called Galga took his place as headman of the Fisher Folk. He says that this Galga is a cruel man, who put him to sea in this boat, hoping that he would die in a storm.”

Morag thought for a while and said, “This Galga seems to be a strong man, does he not, to turn the son of the headman adrift like this? Tell him that if he will lead us to his village, we will get back his throne for him and destroy Galga. This little man might be useful to us, for a start. And if he is not—well, we can always finish the work that Galga began, and dispose of him, one way or another.”

The tribesman told the man as much of this speech as he thought concerned him; then they carried him back to the encampment and gave him food and drink, and warm sheepskins to lie on. He seemed very grateful for the kind treatment he received, but cried out in fear whenever one of the dogs came near him.

That evening Cradoc found Cromac the bard and asked him what he thought of the affair. Cromac bowed his head and said, “This is my dream coming true. Have no doubt, this Galga is the four-footed beast I told you of. No doubt, he killed Tula, the headman of the Fisher Folk, and put the blame on the Hounds of Death that this man gabbles about.”

Cradoc gazed at the blind man, puzzled. “But how could that be?” he asked. “A man kills differently from a dog, surely.”

The bard said with a soft smile, “This Tula may have been a simple man, being a Fisher chief, unused to inland ways. He may have let himself be lured into the woods where wolves might have slain him. Especially if Galga knocked him on the head first, and left him there, to the mercy of the gray folk. That is what happened—I see it clearly.”

Cradoc said no more about the matter, but went back to his father’s tent and sat in the shadows, watching this strange man who had come from the sea, who now slept fitfully, twitching like a wild creature, afraid of an attack at any moment.

Then Cradoc went to his uncle by the seashore and said, “The men of the island we go to visit seem to live and die in fear, my uncle.”

Morag nodded, with a grim smile. “Yes, my prince,” he answered. “And when we arrive on their shores, they will have yet another thing to be afraid of!”

He said no more, but gazed out in the moonlight, over the rolling gray waters, his eyes watering in the bitter wind that blew from the west, the wind that must change before he might gain the kingdom on which he had set his savage heart.

II

THE SAILING

But the west wind blew into their faces for many days, and when they were all so anxious to be on the sea that they had no kind word for anyone, another disaster struck them. One night, plague walked into the encampment on the salt marsh, and in the morning half the men lay groaning in agony upon the ground, clutching their stomachs, a strange white froth at their mouths.

"We are poisoned!" they cried. "Someone has poisoned our food!"

King Morag was almost beside himself with fury and disappointment, for it seemed that now he might never set sail to gain his kingdom, the delays had been so many. Then, to make matters even worse, a scout came riding into the encampment from the plains far beyond the coastal forests with the news that other tribes were approaching.

"They are on our heels, master," he gasped, exhausted with his long ride. "There are more than a man could count if he had many hundreds of hands. The plains are black with them, and with their cattle. It seems that all the folk of the plains are moving westward. I did not think there could be so many men *in all the world*!"

He fell before the King's feet. Morag turned away from him without a word of thanks. His face worked like that of a maniac. Then he drew Cradoc aside and whispered to the boy. "My prince, this is a great disaster to fall on us after all this time. It is not for myself that I care so greatly, for I have had a good life; it is for you. You are a boy who was born to sit in power over a people of your own, and now that may never be. You are my dear brother's son, and I promised him that one day you should rule a great land, full of fat cows and fierce bulls. But it seems that I have left some prayer unsaid, some sacrifice undone—and now He, the Sun God, is going to punish me for it. I am truly sorry, my brother's son."

The King knelt quietly before the boy and, taking out his keen hunting knife, offered it hilt foremost to Cradoc. Then, with a quick little movement,

he tore open his tunic and drew his finger across his throat.

"I am prepared to offer myself to the Sun," he said. "Then He may forget my faults and let you travel to your rightful kingdom."

But Cradoc dropped the knife and knelt with his uncle, his eyes filled with tears. "My hand would not obey me, Uncle," he said, "if I tried to do such a thing. You have always been good to me. How could I hurt you, then? No, I am willing to forget my kingdom and to ride with you as a cattle lord, nothing more."

They were still on their knees when blind Cromac, the bard, came into the tent and said gently, "The men who were sick are now well, King Morag. I have given them a potion. They had drunk the marsh water, nothing more. It is bad water, especially in such a wind as we have had. They are well again now, and can sail whenever you wish."

Morag got slowly to his feet and said, "No, not when I wish, but when the wind wishes; for it is the wind that keeps us from setting out upon the waters, not I."

Then Cromac said again, "They can sail whenever you wish, King Morag. Go you up to the hill, and you will believe my words. I have also said a prayer that is not without some strength."

Morag and Cradoc pushed past the old man and almost ran on to the hill. And suddenly Cradoc stopped and said: "The wind! The wind! The wind! It has changed. At last we are going on our way. The way to our kingdom!"

Then the King turned to the tribesmen who waited at the edge of the camp, and raised his arms high above his head. They understood his signal, and the horns began to blow and the drums to beat. Soon, from the grazing grounds beside the woods, the great herds of cattle began to move slowly toward the shore, lowing and snorting, stumbling in the harsh scree of the hill, then slipping into the ooze on the other side, the side that led down to the misty salt marsh.

Now the air was full of the sound of men's voices, yelling and laughing and singing, shouting orders to the sweating slaves, calling out bets to friends, each man wagering that his raft or his boat would be the first to sight land. And along with the shouts of the men came the yapping and howling of the many dogs that had gathered about the encampment.

Over all these sounds rumbled the deep and never-ending bass harmony of the sea, to which they were about to trust themselves in their crude and flimsy craft.

The great sailing had started, and a new people were moving toward their destiny.

III

THE LANDING

It was four days before the foremost rafts and boats sighted the long, low cliffs of the island to which the cattle men had set their faces—and they were four days of hardship and suffering. Though they had started bravely, misfortune had soon overtaken them, when, in a heavy swell, the hide lashings on one of the broad rafts had broken, flinging the load of bound cattle and fodder to one side, so that the craft swung up on its end, flinging men and beasts into the water. The warriors who sailed in the shallow dug-out boats could do nothing to help their shouting fellows, for the wind they had prayed for so long filled their hide sails and swept the little craft forward, ever forward, with an immense force that no paddle could restrain. And though most of the dug-out boats were fitted with clumsy outboard gear to steady them on the high seas, it was not long before these spars of ashwood and birch crumbled under the weight of the waters, to leave the canoes rocking, out of control and waterlogged.

As though this misfortune were not enough, on the second day out the wind swung around once more, blowing into their faces, holding them back from the white cliff line, which the keenest sighted of the tribesmen could now discern.

Men used their paddles like demons, afraid that they would be swept back to the salt marsh from which they had but lately come. They knew that they might expect short shrift there, for by now the vast tribes that had followed them so closely would have assembled on the shore.

But the Sun God was with his people, it seemed, for just when the invaders had exhausted their fresh water and salt beef, the fickle wind danced round again, and sent them scurrying faster than ever toward the kingdom that now seemed to be a fatal lure to so many of the tribesmen.

King Morag sat in the foremost dug-out, a great clumsy vessel of oak that wallowed with every breaker. Cradoc sat at his right hand and Tula's son at his left.

The King spoke at last. “Are we sailing in the right direction, friend?” he asked.

Tula’s son pointed with a trembling hand and said, “Aye, King. If this wind holds, we should run into the estuary before dawn tomorrow.”

In the weeks that he had stayed with Morag’s folk, he had learned some of their words, and though he spoke them with a strange accent, his meaning was clear to all who took the trouble to listen to his outlandish voice.

King Morag said softly, so that Tula’s son should not hear, “What we shall do with this man when we do land rests in the hand of the god, Cradoc. It would be a pity to let him spoil our chances of getting the kingdom we want, would it not?”

Cradoc looked at the wretch, who shivered constantly in the biting wind, wrapped as he was in the thinnest of robes.

“It would be a good thing to take pity on him, my Uncle,” said the boy. “Set him up in his own kingdom, and then go on to gain our own place farther inland. In that way, we should always have a friend to keep watch for us upon the shore. He would send us word if others came to threaten our kingdom.”

King Morag slapped Cradoc on the shoulder and smiled. “Why,” he said, “you are more than half a king already, my boy. Yes, that shall be done. We will get his kingdom back for him, and then see what happens.”

He paused a while and gazed at the shuddering creature, the son of Tula, whose eyes fell before the strange glare of the Sun King, as one who owned his master when he met him.

“Yet I think this one has scarcely the courage to rule a kingdom of mice, Cradoc. I do not think we do wisely to put our trust in him. The moment our backs are turned, he will give up his inheritance to any man who stares him in the eye and holds out his hand.”

Cradoc nodded and said, “I have also thought of that. It would not do for this meek little man to give back his kingdom to that fierce Galga, who stole the throne from him in the first place. Therefore, we must take care of Galga. We must either kill him, or promise him another kingdom to lord it over, if he will help us.”

Morag nodded thoughtfully. Suddenly the boy tugged at his uncle’s cloak and said, “Why, that is it! The bard has said that this Galga is the four-footed creature of his song.”

Excitedly, he turned to the cowering son of Tula, and speaking slowly, said, “Galga—your enemy. Has he four feet?” He had to repeat the question many times before the man understood him.

Then the son of Tula shook his head and said, “He has two hands and two feet, like other men.”

Cradoc turned back in disappointment, under the mocking eye of his uncle, when suddenly the son of Tula began to nod and grin, spluttering out his words.

“But he does not use his two hands and two feet like other men. When he moves, he must be carried, or walk on hands and knees, like a dog or a wolf.”

Now King Morag began to be interested in this talk and asked, “Why is that, my friend?”

And the son of Tula replied, “He was struck with a war ax one night, when he went to kill his brother’s son in a cavern. It hurt his back, so that now Galga cannot walk upright like other men.”

Cradoc turned in the boat to call out to the bard that his prophecy was coming true, but a great breaker swung over them and half choked the boy. He fell back gasping, and by the time he had regained his breath he had no wish to say anything to anyone.

So, as the gray dawn broke behind them, the first of the boats pulled into the weed-covered shore of the estuary. To the savage invaders, this looked to be a place of utter squalor; to the son of Tula, however, it was home—a home he had never hoped to see again. Yet it was not a welcoming home, for as soon as the King’s boat beached, a shower of stick arrows fell among the men, killing one of them, and wounding several. As by some magic, neither of the leaders, Morag nor Cradoc, was hurt, but a glancing shaft caught the son of Tula in the calf of his leg, and laid him flat on his back in the slime of the estuary.

Then Morag set the great bull’s horn to his lips and blew loudly, again and again, to summon all the boats’ crews to him as quickly as possible. Men ran toward him along the slippery shore, shouting out their war cry: “Morag and the Sun Folk! Morag and the Sun Folk!”

And soon, with their swords and throwing spears in their hands, they stood ready, glaring fiercely toward the rocks and the hovels from which the flight of arrows had come. But nothing happened.

The Fisher Folk had seen row upon row of rafts and boats appearing on the waters, like seeds on the surface of a forest pool at leaf-fall time. They had not thought there could be so many people. Now they dared not shoot again, for fear began to grasp their hearts. And as King Morag stood, baying like a great hound, his gleaming sword held high above his head, his picked warriors about him, their hunger and thirst forgotten at that moment, a party of Fisher Folk emerged from the biggest of the hovels by the shore, the house of the headman, and came down the beach toward their outraged visitors.

Then the son of Tula, who had risen to his feet and now stood behind Morag, began to quake with fright. “Look!” he said, pointing with a shivering hand. “Look, it is Galga himself! He is the headman now, as I told you. He killed my father.”

Both Morag and Cradoc followed his gesture and smiled to each other. A great, hunched man sat cross-legged on a rough litter of driftwood, carried by four old ones, dressed in tattered robes. In his hands he clutched the talking shell—the conch—his symbol of rule and power.

The four old men set Galga down ten paces from King Morag, and he stared up from the ground with spite in his red-rimmed eyes, and held the conch shell before him, so that all should see it. To the surprise of the cattle men, he spoke in a language so like their own that they could understand his words, as one may understand the words of a man who speaks with a pebble in his mouth.

“Who are you that dare to walk on my shore?” said Galga. “Who gives you leave to land your craft in my kingdom? Know you not that I am the master here? Know you not that the sea hawk asks my permission before he fishes here, that the gannet begs my leave before he dares to fly above my house?”

Great King Morag stood smiling down on him with contempt, but silently. The tribesmen about him, taking their tone from their king, also smiled, looking over the man’s head, as though the crumbling cliffs amused them in some quiet and curious manner.

Once again Galga spoke, shaking the great conch shell before him in fury, as though to impress the silent, smiling warriors. “I command you to bow before me,” he roared. “By this shell, I command you! Kneel now and tell me from whence you come, and what you wish to do in my kingdom!”

This time King Morag's own temper began to rise, for he was as hasty a man as Galga, in his way. Without warning, he strode forward, his sword in his hand, and all men saw that golden blade sweep out, catching on its edge the first rays of the sun. For a moment, the tribesmen thought that their king had struck off the head of this strange headman who sat on the shore in front of them. But when Morag moved to one side, they saw that it was the shell that their king had shattered with the blow. It now lay before Galga in many shards, broken open and ruined. The four old men who stood beside the litter ran forward with a high cry of horror, but Morag waved them back. They obeyed him, stopping in their tracks.

"What have you to say now, Galga, the killer of Tula?" he said softly, so that few heard him.

Galga stared up at the Sun King, as though the powers of speech had been suddenly taken from him by the gods. His great mouth hung open; his dark eyes were wide with amazement. Then at last he found his tongue and stammered, "Tula was killed according to an old prophecy. I did not kill him. If the truth be known, it was his son who killed him, for he fled from this place when the thing was done. No man knows where he fled, for he went by night with his sin upon him!"

Then, from behind the warriors, a voice rose, high-pitched and accusing. "You lie, Galga the killer! It was you who murdered my father, and would have murdered me, too!"

Then Galga's great face relaxed and he even smiled. "Why, you have brought the little weasel with you. No doubt he will have told a lie or two to persuade you to help him. But beware, my loud-voiced friends, he will bite you if you do not watch him. Bring him to me, and I will strangle him for you now. I will do you a good turn for your bad one. I am a generous man!"

Then something happened that no one there had foreseen. The son of Tula had stood, cowering in fear, beside King Morag's huntsman, who held the two great hounds, Bran and Troynt, on a twin leash of plaited leather. The dogs strained forward, their fangs bared. At Galga's last, bitter taunt, the son of Tula found some of the courage he had lost earlier, and with a high shout of excited anger he snatched the copper knife from the huntsman's belt and slashed through the plaited leash that held the hounds in check. Then, as these savage creatures plunged forward, the son of Tula flung back his shaggy head and yelled, "The curse of the Hounds of Death fall upon you, Galga, who killed my father! Let his fate fall upon you!"

There was nothing anyone might do to stop that mad onrush of the ravenous hounds. Cradoc was pushed sideways by their movement, and though King Morag struck again and again at the dogs with his bull's hide whip, they did not seem to feel the strokes he gave them, any more than they might have felt the beat of rain upon their skins.

Galga saw them coming at him, and floundered for a moment in terror, as he tried to rise to his feet. But it was no use. He sank before the onslaught, then rolled over and lay still. A low cry of horror swept through the village on the estuary. The huntsman came forward at last to slip the noose once more about the necks of the hounds; and King Morag turned away with a shrug of his heavy shoulders.

"Son of Tula," he said, "the death of Galga be upon your own head. I had no part in it, let all men notice."

He said no more, but walked back to the shore, to help with the unloading of the hobbled horses. The four old men in their ragged black robes knelt before the son of Tula and pressed his hand to their foreheads, one by one, thereby accepting him as their headman now. There was no other course open to them. Then men and women came running from their hovels, smiling at their new chief, as though they were delighted to have him back.

"Hail, son of Tula!" they cried. "Hail, our headman!"

Cradoc watched the new headman point with contempt to the remains of Galga. He saw a party of young men take up the tyrant's body and, staggering with it to the water's edge, fling it as far as they could. He watched the body swing round a time or two in the vicious current, then disappear. After that, he turned away and went to help his uncle the King.

King Morag was rubbing down the legs of his own horse and hissing to the half-wild creature as he did so. He glanced at Cradoc and smiled.

"You have seen what happens when a man seeks revenge, my prince. See that you never give a man cause for revenge when you are a king."

The boy gazed at his uncle, puzzled. "But, Uncle," he said, "how can a king avoid giving men cause for revenge?"

King Morag stood upright, a strangely bitter little smile playing on his thin lips, his unforgettable eyes twinkling wickedly.

"Either give them what they want, always," he said, "or simply kill them. One or the other."

Cradoc stared at him for a moment and then went to find his own stallion, wondering whether he would like to be a king after all.

But later that day, at the feast that the headman was giving in honor of his new friends, Cromac the bard sang a wild song in which he described a great king riding across the hills and the plains, with his henchmen beside him, to seek more cattle. And as Cradoc listened, in the smoke of the many torches set here and there along the cliff side, he forgot where he was, and felt the wind rushing through his hair, heard the thud of his stallion's hoofs on the springy turf, smelled the sweet scent of cattle—and before he fell away into a tired sleep, he was smiling again, anxious one day to become what his uncle wished: the king of the Cattle Folk, the Sun King.

When the boy was fast asleep and covered with sheepskins, King Morag gathered several of his most trusted henchmen about him and said to them in a low voice, "Our plans go well. Tomorrow, every man capable of using a sword will ride with me to gain our kingdom. The slaves, the women, and the youngest children will stay behind to guard the cattle."

"How shall we know where our kingdom is, Morag?" asked one old warrior, whose nose had been broken by a sword cut fifty years before—an event that had left him with a constantly ferocious expression, even when he was smiling and meant no harm to any man.

"We shall know when we get there, because the son of Tula will be our guide, my friend," answered the King. "He has an old grudge to pay off against the place we are going to, for it was from this place that Galga came."

"What is the name of this place, Morag?" asked the old warrior, already feeling the edge of his short copper sword.

King Morag scratched his chin for a moment, as though trying to remember the name. Then he said slowly, "Craig Ddu, my friend. Yes, that is the place—Craig Ddu! That will be our new kingdom! Tula has said he is willing to guide us there, and we will hold him to his promise, whether he likes it or not. So, with his help, Craig Ddu shall be ours!"

3
CONFLICT OF GODS

1

RIDERS IN THE BARLEY

There was a strange, subdued rustling in the air above the new settlement of Craig Ddu, as though a thousand small voices whispering and laughing at some secret joke. And overheard the birds flew, strongly, even those birds that only so short a time ago had been nestlings. Now the air was warm again and green growth was everywhere, for the year had grown older, and with it the barley had flourished, despite what the old witch had said in the weed-grown cleft on the way back from the long house.

It was the dry sound of the Barley Women talking to each other that filled the air with rustling, the sound of the ripening crops as the wind blew through them down the great chalk hill and across the thatched roofs of the village. And the Old Man sat up with a sudden movement, his thin nostrils twitching like those of a dog. His face was haggard, but he smiled, glancing about at the others who sat with him round the fire. They too were thin, very thin—but they were still alive; that was the important thing. No one had died in Craig Ddu, in spite of the terrible prophecy of the old woman.

Then the Old Man spoke: "My brothers, we have few sheep now in our hill corral, few cattle on the grazing lands—but we are alive, and we will build up our flocks and herds again, if Earth Mother will deal kindly with us this harvest. If only She will fill the barley ears full and let us bring in a heavy crop, we shall still be smiling when the year dies. And no one here will eat the long pig."

He listened to the rustling for a while and then said: "Lalo the Otter, can you hear the Barley Women talking to us—to you and me, my son? They are saying, 'Come out to us, Old Man and warrior! Come out and let us see you, then we will grow fat for you. Come, come, Old Man and Otter!' "

Lalo listened for a while and nodded. "Let us go, father. I would like to say a prayer for the Barley Women on this fine day."

So the two rose and walked through the compound; and, as they passed, the tribesmen and even the children bowed their heads in respect for the

great ones. Kaa the Guardian and Yan the dog followed like two shadows, keeping their proper distance from the shadow of the Old Man, for no creature must ever tread on that in the Barley Time. Yan was now a much older dog; he had learned to walk gravely, as befitted the hound of a princeling. At length the Old Man and Lalo stood at the foot of the hill and looked upward, up through the waving barley stalks to the blue sky.

The Old Man was thinking that if this fine weather held, the barley would soon be ripe enough to cut—and what a crop it would be this year, if She willed it to be so! There would be plenty for everyone, and some left over for next year, to be stored away in the warmest places of the huts, to await the Sowing Time. He began to picture the women pounding the barley grains on their flat stones, to make their flour . . . what wonderful fresh barley bread this crop would make! And perhaps a haunch of venison . . . and a clay cup of mead or barley beer, to finish off the feast. Oh, that would be fine indeed!

But then another thought cast its shadow across this picture; something else must happen before the feast. The man to cut the last sheaf on the reaping day must be sacrificed. It was he who brought home the Corn Hag, as they called it in the village. And he must be wedded in death to that Hag, bound round, as it would be, to assume the rough shape of a woman—a sheaf of barley like a woman. And suddenly the Old Man wished that this did not have to happen every year. He wished that he dared ignore the old custom, just to see if She, Earth Mother, really wished it. After all, he had not sprinkled a *man's* blood in the furrows, and yet this fine crop stood whispering on the hill now; so that was one thing he need not do in the future. Perhaps they would not need to kill the man who cut the last sheaf either.

While his father was thinking of such serious things, Lalo the Otter's mind was elsewhere. He thought of the grand dance his father must perform before the reaping started, the dance of the Corn King, as they called it in Craig Ddu. Every year it was the same. The Old Man would rise early and pray to Earth Mother that she should let the women make good bread and good beer; then he would paint his face and body with white clay, red ochre, and lamp-black, so that men no longer recognized him. After that, the women would bind up his long black hair with bone pins, and then set a tall headdress of white sheepskin on his head. Around his waist and beneath each knee, they would tie circles of dangling white oxtails. So, with the bone flutes wailing and the bulls' horns blowing, the Corn King would run up the hill slope and when the drums began to roll—the drums made of deerhide

stretched tightly over the mouths of great, echoing jars—the Corn King would begin his dance, prancing along the hill top like a strange god, bringing prosperity on the settlement.

And when the Corn King had finished his dance along the backbone of the hill and had disappeared from their view, the villagers would run forward, anxious to begin, anxious not to be the one who cut the final sheaf. They worked in a long line, reaping great swathes with their toothed flint sickles set in shafts of antler horn. The children would follow just behind the reapers, holding wicker baskets into which father or uncle or brother would throw the cut barley, almost in one movement, before making the next sweep of the sickle. Lalo almost envied his father that wonderful Corn Dance—for then all men's eyes were set on the Old Man. He was the most important man in the world at that moment. If he stumbled, then disaster would surely come to Craig Ddu; but if he carried on along the hill top, proud and prancing, like a spring buck at the edge of the forest, then all would be well.

Lalo was gazing past his father up the hill slopes when suddenly he saw more than waving barley. And just as suddenly, Yan the dog, a pace or two behind him, raised his gray head and howled a ghastly warning.

The Old Man looked up and so did Kaa the Guardian. A flock of birds started from the hill top, crying discordantly, into the blue air. That was very strange. They had never done that before.

And as the three watched, they saw the hill top take on a new shape, the shape of a great host of men. In the afternoon sunlight they saw many points of light glittering along the whale-backed chalk hill, and could not understand what they might be. Then they saw the men getting bigger and realized that they were not walking, not running. They sat astride horses, and they were a great multitude.

"Aiee!" gasped Kaa the Guardian. "Men on horses! I have never seen such a thing before. Are they devils, Old Man? And what are those things they carry, that flash in the light like fires? Are they devils, Old Man?"

The chief's face was suddenly white. He turned and swept his arm about Lalo the Otter. "Run to the village, my friends! There is no time to spare. We must push the thorn gates into place before these men—if they be men—are upon us!"

Racing like men in the grip of a nightmare, the three stumbled into the village, Yan running at their heels, whimpering with terror at this thing that

he had never known before in his short life. Then, as the frightened tribesmen pushed the thick thorn gates together and the women scurried into the shelter of the huts, carrying their babies under their arms, the warriors stood and gazed up the hillside.

"Aiee! Aiee! Look!" they shouted, pointing with trembling fingers. "This is the end of our harvest. This is what the old witch meant, this is the plague she foretold, and we thought that we had escaped it! Oh, we may yet live to eat the long pig!"

The Old Man, shading his eyes with his shaking hand, said solemnly: "So, there can be no harvest this year. This is the end of the Barley Women. This is what they were whispering, my son! They were telling us that we should not reap them this year—or perhaps any year after this."

And the men of Craig Ddu gazed in horror to see the fierce horsemen of the Sun King riding knee-high among the barley, their neighing stallions slithering down the slopes of the hill, the warriors yelling like fiends and waving their shining swords and spears, the sun catching their colored cloaks, the brooches at throat and breast, the scores of bronze and copper bracelets that glimmered like the eyes of the lynx on a moonlit night.

Lalo the Otter stood near Kaa the Guardian and whispered, "These are like no other men we have ever seen—but they are men, nevertheless, and not devils. Even I can see that. I watched one of them fall from his horse and lie still when his fellow trampled on him. A devil would laugh and then get up again, but that one lay still and will never get up, for it was a heavy stallion that fell on his body."

Kaa the Guardian smiled then for the first time. "Very well, prince," he said, "if they are men, then they can be killed. There is no more to it, is there?"

Calmly he set a long arrow to his powerful hornbeam bow. "Try to follow this one," he said grimly to the boy.

Lalo nodded. "Shoot, Kaa!" he said, like a chief giving his orders. Then he watched the shaft whir up in a great arc, over the high thorn stockade, toward the hill. For a while he lost it, but his sharp eyes found it again as it began to fall toward the moving host of horsemen.

There was a great warrior whose white stallion had pulled ahead of the others. He was riding down toward the stockade like a madman, his red hair streaming out behind him, his cloak spread like the wings of a great eagle. In his right hand he carried a javelin of bronze, and around the shaft a thick

circlet of yellow hair flared like a flame from the sun. This warrior was called Maddolch, and he was famed as a merciless man. The hair about his javelin shaft had once adorned the heads of three brothers, on whom Maddolch had sworn vengeance because they had cheated him over a black bull. So Maddolch had crept into their hide tent one night and had come away satisfied and smiling, wiping his copper knife on the fringe of his cloak. After that, no man tried to cheat him in the cattle markets.

And it was this warrior who, by the hand of fate, was beneath Kaa's arrow as it fell. Both Kaa and Lalo saw him suddenly fling away his javelin, with a surprised look on his face. Then he gave a shout and leaped high from his white sheepskin saddle and lay still among the green, crushed barley. His white stallion crashed on for a few yards, then splayed out his legs and stopped, looking around puzzled, as though he did not understand why the load on his back should have gone.

Yet both Kaa and Lalo felt tears come into their eyes when they saw the white stallion go back among the barley, his nose close to the ground, like a dog searching for something. And when the stallion found what he was searching for, he stood beside it, even though the other riders swept past him on their way down the steep hillside.

"I would hope that Yan stayed with me like that," whispered Lalo, fondling the little dog's head.

Kaa said: "You must not think of such things. I have merely shot an arrow in the air, nothing more. Come now, tell me when to shoot, and watch where the shaft lands. I have not so many arrows that I can afford to waste them. They are good stag arrows, I might tell you, and cost me a cupful of barley apiece."

Once more his sheep-gut bowstring twanged, and once more Lalo watched a great horseman slide from his saddle. Nor was Kaa the only successful archer that day. From the shadow of the huts, the sound of bowstrings could be heard on all sides. And here and there on the slopes outside the stockade, men fell in all the postures of sudden death, some among the corn, some in the bare place before the thorn gates.

Disdaining to hide behind rock or hutment, the Old Man strode here and there, his black bearskin cap on his head now and the white paint on his face. In his hand he carried a heavier greenstone ax than any other man had ever wielded in that village, save Galga, who was gone from them now. In his thick belt of bull's hide he wore a flint dagger, toothed like a corn sickle to make the wound worse, set into a thick antler haft on which there were

forty notches cut. Each notch had its own meaning and there were few men, even in Craig Ddu, who could look upon that dagger without flinching.

Suddenly the charge was over and all that could be seen was a vast cloud of chalk dust, slowly settling over the wide fields of ruined barley. The Old Man shouted for his folk to hear, “My people, these men have torn up our fields, but before they go from Craig Ddu, they shall leave something behind to pay for their ride today!”

The dark-haired hillfolk cheered at this and once more the archers began their flights of arrows, directed now toward the thickest of the dust cloud. From time to time they heard the high screams of death or the groans of the wounded, and then their hands went once again to the deerskin quiver to find another arrow, precious though it was.

II

AT THE STOCKADE

At last the twilight began to fall and the dusk seemed to settle like a gray cloak over the chalk hill. The archers no longer kept up their fire from the shelter of their huts, for now the Old Man had warned them to keep as many arrows as they could, in case the attackers tried to ride the stockade down in a great rush.

While Kaa was talking with the warriors, going his rounds of the huts and the various trenches that they had dug for themselves in the compound, Lalo the Otter crept forward toward the thorn gate, anxious to see what the enemy were doing, wondering why they were so silent for such a long time. Yan followed close behind him, trembling with excitement, as he always did when there was fighting to do.

There was a spot, between two rocks, where the thorn fence was very thin—so thin, indeed, that a strong horse could have forced its way through, if only its rider had the sense to hang a hide about its chest so that the thorns might be turned. The Old Man had often said that he would have this part of the stockade strengthened when the men had a little time on their hands. But that never seemed to happen: there was always flint to get, hides to scrape, willows to cut, milking to be done, clay to be dug for the women's pottery, and so the thin place in the stockade was never strengthened. It was to this spot that Lalo crawled, moving inch by inch, in case the enemy had set a watchman on the slope to shout out if he saw anything suspicious happening within the village. When he reached the place, he lay as still as a stone, hardly daring to breathe, waiting for his eyes to accustom themselves to the dusk before he looked out toward the attackers.

When he did so at last, his heart gave an immense thump, so that he gasped with mingled excitement and fear. Someone was at the other side of the stockade, looking back at him!

His sight cleared, and he saw that it was a boy of his own age, but more richly dressed. His hair was the color of ripe corn, and his eyes were light, not dark, as though there were holes in his skull through which one could

see the sky. As he moved there were many little jingles, as though he wore bells about his neck and wrists.

Even in the twilight, Lalo saw that this boy did not wear the skins of wild creatures, but a long tunic, too thick for flax linen, and a long cloak, with a strange pattern of squares on it, though Lalo could not tell whether these squares were colored or not. He felt that he would like to ask the boy whether the squares were colored, and if so how he had made them colored. For Lalo loved colors, though there were so few among his own somber folk.

Then, with a fascinated horror, he saw this young boy draw out a broad-bladed dagger and begin to hack away at the thorn hedge, as though he were trying to cut through the thickest of the boughs that kept his people out.

Lalo crept forward hurriedly and drew his own flint knife. It was a poor, blunt thing beside the one the other boy used. Lalo saw this and suddenly felt ashamed. For a moment or two, silently, the two boys faced each other —the one smiling, the other grim with fear. Curiously, Lalo watched the knife of the other boy slice through a thorn bough as easily as a heavy flint ax would go through the flat cheeses that the women made when there was milk to spare.

Then, in a spurt of terror lest this boy should force a way singlehanded into Craig Ddu, and knowing that he could not prevent such an entry with his own blunt weapon, Lalo hissed to his dog—"Here, Yan! Here, Yan boy! Go on, boy, bite his hand! Good dog! Good dog!"

Yan, the little dog, pricked up his ears and ran forward, sniffing and whimpering at the same time. For a brief instant he watched the boy who hacked at the thorn boughs, then, worming his way on his belly, the dog went forward toward Cradoc, the Prince of the Sun Folk.

III

NIGHT ATTACK

Lalo watched little Yan squeeze himself beneath the wicked spines of the stockade and heard him yelping with excitement. Then, as though he had found a nest of stoats and was anxious to put an end to them, Yan made for the boy with the copper dagger. He whined and scratched furiously, his teeth bared at Cradoc's hand.

"Take care, Yan—take care, he has a knife!" called Lalo, in fear for his dog.

But at first Cradoc could do nothing to help himself. He had one hand, the hand with the dagger, within the thorn fence, and it was this hand that Yan was worrying, growling angrily as he nipped at the boy's fingers. Then, to Lalo's horror, the other boy withdrew his hand, and after putting it to his lips for a moment, clasped his dagger once again, holding it this time above the dog's head, so that when he came in to worry, the blow should fall on his neck. Lalo suddenly wished that he had his bow. Then he could kill this boy who wanted to stab Yan, his little hunter. He heard himself saying, "Take care, Yan, he will kill you! Dodge to the left boy, then in at his throat! Go on, I will help you!"

Then, at the very moment that he realized there was a thorn hedge between them and that he could not help his dog, he heard the other boy say in the dusk, "if I had a dog like this, I would not send him to his death. You are a fool, boy, whoever you are."

Lalo was astounded that he could understand what the boy had said; though he did speak strangely, as though he had a pebble in his mouth. But when he had conquered his surprise, he answered, "I am not a fool. And if you want to know who I am—I am the son of the Old Man! Does that not strike terror into your bones, you little thing?"

The other boy was silent for a while. He seemed to be thinking. He was not afraid, Lalo decided. Then he said, "No, it does not. I am the nephew of a king, little one. I have a white stallion and a copper sword. What have you,

besides this little dog, and a flint knife that would not cut an apple from a twig?"

Lalo was furious at first, but when his anger left him, he knew that this other boy had something that he had not—except Yan.

"Do not kill my dog," he heard himself saying suddenly. "I sent him to drive you away. Do not kill him. It is my fault. I would not kill your stallion, you understand?"

The boy at the other side of the thorn hedge smiled strangely and said, "I did not mean to kill him. I do not believe in killing dogs, for they only do what their masters tell them to do, and if all who did that were killed—why, who would then remain living?"

"Thank you," said Lalo. "I would not kill your stallion, either."

The other boy sneered at him then and said, "My little friend, my stallion would kill you, have no doubts! He had already trampled on three warriors —not boys, mark you—before I got him. Why, he would tread down this fence and smash all your little huts in one bound!"

Suddenly Lalo wished he had a bow again, although in the last few moments he had come to like this strange, sky-eyed boy.

"Give me my dog," he shouted. "If you do not give me back my dog, I will get my father to put you on the stone and offer you to Earth Mother for a good berry season."

The boy at the other side of the fence snorted and then laughed scornfully. "Berry season, berry season!" he said. "Why, then, you are a berry eater, like the badger. We eat meat in the winter, not berries. And as for lying on the stone, do not worry your silly head. We found your stone, behind the hill, and we overturned it. We tied three of our stallions to it with bull's hide ropes, and then pulled. That moved it, I can tell you! No one will lie on that stone again."

Lalo heard this aghast. The stone, the Old Man stone, had always been there, ever since he first remembered anything. He stood up, his anger forcing him to do so.

"Give me back my dog," he said. "You are holding him down there in the darkness. I do not want him to be held by anyone who would tear down the great stone."

Now the dusk had turned to darkness. From the other side of the stockade, Lalo heard a sly giggle. Then the boy said, "I like this little dog. I

shall keep him. I should have given him back, but he is too good to live with a berry eater. So I shall keep him, and later, when we come inside your village, I shall kill you, so that the little dog will not pine. Good-by, berry eater, good-by!"

At first Lalo felt that he wanted to run through the thorn fence. But he realized that he would kill himself if he did, and that would be no good to Yan or to anyone. Then he felt he wanted to weep. But that would be no good, either. And then he knew that the most important thing was to tell his father that the thin place in the fence was discovered. That was more than a dog, more than a boy—it was a whole village.

Lalo turned and ran toward the middle of the compound. In the dim light of a fire from one of the huts, he saw his father, gigantic in his bearskin hat.

"Old Man, Old Man!" he screamed. "They know where the weak place is! They know where the thin thorns lie in the stockade, my father!"

His father's voice was as gentle as though they had been playing a game before Lalo went off to sleep. "Do they, my son?" he said.

He put his great hand on his son's shoulder. Lalo felt the hard cushions of the fingers on his flesh, and thought how strong his father was, how invincible. He smiled to think how these new people would fall before his father's ax. There was only Yan—and that made Lalo sad.

"Father, they have captured Yan," he said.

"We will get him back, if She wills it, my son," replied the Old Man.

"But I want him back now!" Lalo shouted.

His father turned him around, so that he could see toward the gateway of Craig Ddu.

"Look," said the Old Man, as gently as ever. "Look, they will soon be coming in. Then we can get Yan back for you. Now go into the house and wait for me to come to you with Yan."

And as the boy looked, he saw three fire arrows suddenly lodge in the thorn brushwood and flare up. Then another three, and another three—and soon the gateway was down.

"Father, father!" he yelled, "I cannot leave you! I want to stay here in the compound. I do not care whether Yan—"

But then the tribesmen were about him, fitting arrows to their little bows in the darkness. And around him was the thunder of hoofs and loud cries in

that strange way of speaking, as though a man had a pebble in his mouth.

IV

DEFEAT

After a while, torches flared up here and there, for men must see where their blows are to fall, or there is no fighting. Lalo had never seen the village look as it did then: a place full of dancing, writhing shadows, of horse shapes, of falling swords, and of wild cries. Once he caught sight of his great, squat father striding forward purposefully, and then he saw, in the sudden flash of a torch, that the Old Man was passing his flint knife into the body of a man dressed in ragged otter-skins. He even heard a tribesman beside him hiss, "The son of Tula! He led them here. The Old Man has paid him his wages!"

Then Lalo was busy on his own affairs, seeking that boy who had taken Yan from him. He found him at last, riding alongside a great man with a colored cloak and a shining circle round his head. He even ran toward these two, but someone pulled him back.

"Get into the hut, Lalo. It is death to go near those two!"

He looked up and saw that it was Kaa the Guardian who had spoken. He turned and grinned at Kaa and then ran on, his knife at the ready. But almost under the hoofs of the white stallion ridden by the strange boy, Lalo felt himself being dragged back. Then he was under Kaa's arm and moving into the darkness at the battle's edge again. He kicked furiously, but Kaa would not put him down until they were safe.

"Look, Otter Prince," said Kaa, "your father must be at the front tonight. Perhaps he will kill them all. Perhaps—" he stopped lamely. Then he went on in a new burst, "But we need you, for I have heard that Galga is dead, and there is no one else. If you let them kill you tonight, we are finished, the People of the Hill. Stay here in the shadow of the huts, my friend. They will never see you here."

Then Kaa ran back into the battle, to be beside his chief when he was needed.

Now Lalo forgot Yan and ran after Kaa, no longer afraid—only anxious to drive out these men on horses; these men with the shining swords.

Suddenly the huts began to blaze, their dry thatch catching in the light breeze that blew down over the chalk hill. Craig Ddu was afire. And in that sudden glow, Lalo saw his father, moving before all the other warriors of the village, slashing like a giant with his heavy ax. And each time he struck, a man fell or a horse reared and screamed, toppling its rider backward, to be dealt with by the others who came on relentlessly, stabbing with their flint knives.

Even as Lalo ran forward toward his father, he saw a great black stallion rise over the chief, and watched his father bend under it, thrusting upward. Then he saw the horse spring sideways, casting a warrior from its back in agony. Another roof flared, and Lalo watched that fallen warrior rise and run at the Old Man, who waited for him, smiling. So King Morag met the Old Man of Craig Ddu: two great men together.

With every pace onward, Lalo saw some of that fight between the two kings. He saw his father's ax strike Morag on the shoulder, and then he realized that the blow had been turned by a piece of gleaming metal that held the Sun King's cloak to his body. And once he saw his father sweep at Morag's knees, making him leap into the air to miss the blow. At this, the men of Craig Ddu who saw it stopped in their fighting to laugh. But then, even as Lalo got to within five paces of his father, he saw the other king step to one side for a moment and then come in, his glittering sword pointed at the Old Man's chest.

And then Lalo could not see his father. He could see only King Morag, standing back, his teeth grinning white in the firelight, his red sword held high. Lalo gave a great sob and pushed at the men of Craig Ddu, anxious to get to his father. But his own folk were running away, carrying him with them. He was powerless to stem that frantic tide.

"They have killed the Old Man! They have killed the Old Man! We are lost, we are lost!" the voices cried.

Lalo fell to the ground, and the many feet trampled over him as they passed from the village. Yet his eyes were open for a long time. He saw Kaa the Guardian still standing over the body of the Old Man, still swinging the ax that kept the attackers away from the chief.

In the sudden silence that descended on Craig Ddu, Lalo even heard a man's voice say, "Put an arrow into him and let him go with his master. The battle will not be over until this warrior is dead!"

Then Lalo heard the man who had killed his father say, “No; I will kill the man who hurts this one. He is a brave man and must have his life.”

This king of the enemy even walked toward Kaa, as though to stand between him and any archer. But Kaa said grimly, still swinging his great ax, “If you come any nearer, my enemy, I will strike your head from your shoulders. It is my wish to die this night. Get away!”

Lalo began to feel very weak, as though he wanted to sleep. He did not realize that a sword cut had laid open his forehead, he had been so anxious to die with his father. Yet, even as he fell down into the darkness of wounded exhaustion, he seemed to hear Yan’s voice about his ears; his fading sight even showed him the little dog running to him, his tongue wagging with excitement at seeing his master again.

Lalo lost consciousness even as he reached out to stroke Yan. It was as well that it happened like that, otherwise he would have seen that Cradoc the Prince had Yan on a lead attached to a bronze collar that bore the sun sign. And that would have been another blow for Lalo, at a time when he had enough troubles to carry with him into the underworld of dreams.

V

WHITE STALLION

When Lalo came to his senses again, the sun was beating down on his head and shoulders. He found that he was sitting propped against the wall of a hut, and that there was a rough bandage tied about his head. His first desire was to move his hands up to this bandage, which was slipping down over one eye and troubling him, but to his surprise he found that he could not move his hands very far. He looked down. A broad strip of hide circled his wrists. A thong led off from this strip somewhere to his left. He followed the thong with his eyes, dazedly, and saw Kaa the Guardian leaning beside him, bound in the same way, his legs thrust out before him on the hard ground.

Kaa's face was very white. He smiled bitterly. "So, you have awakened at last, Lalo the Otter. I have been watching over you since dawn, when they put us here. I thought you were never going to wake again."

Lalo remembered his dead father and his lost dog. The tears stood in his dark eyes, blinding him utterly.

"I wish I did not have to wake, Kaa—ever," he said quietly. "For our people are destroyed or fled and we have nothing left."

Kaa gazed across the compound, lighted now by the morning sun, and saw many bodies lying here and there, men of both sides, but mostly of Craig Ddu—men he had known all his life. He searched with his eyes for the body of the Old Man, but could not find it. The Old Man lay deep beneath a heap of tribesmen who had plunged to their deaths to die with him, and now he lay in peace at last, his henchmen over him, covering him with their bodies.

Kaa shuddered and said, "I wish I had gone with the Old Man in the fighting last night, Lalo the Otter. That was my wish then, but She did not want to take me, it seems. I tried, but She would not take me."

Lalo looked at his friend and saw that Kaa's body was a mass of wounds. He had taken many blows on his arms, too, and they were bruised

and caked with blood to the elbows. Then he looked down at his own arms and saw that they were almost the same.

"What is there to do now, Kaa, my old friend?" said the boy. "We are their prisoners and will become their slaves."

Kaa's head fell forward on to his broad breast. He looked utterly miserable. "Rather than be a slave I will ask them to kill me," he said. "Then I can go with your father, the Old Man. As for you, they know you are a chief's son, and will want to keep you a prisoner. You might be useful to them—as a means of bargaining with other tribes, perhaps."

Lalo bit his lips in silence for a while, and then he said: "If our hands were not tied, it would not be difficult to run from Craig Ddu. There are few men in the compound and the thorn hedges are all burned. If we were free, we could run down the slope toward the oak forest, and then they would never find us."

Kaa raised his head a little and smiled grimly. "No, but the Hunter Folk would, my friend, and they will not forget in a hurry what we did to them that day when we hunted Old Hair the wolf."

Lalo's mind turned away from escape then, and his sadness came back to him. He recalled the good days he had passed with his father, and with his dog, and then, unashamedly, he began to cry, the tears running unchecked down his chest as he lay slumped against the stone wall of the hut, Kaa heard him crying and tried to take his mind away from sad thoughts. He sat up and stared toward the high chalk hill, the hill that had once been theirs and now belonged to this stranger race. At last he said, "Look, up there. They are all standing on the top of our hill, holding up their arms to the sun. They are calling to the sun. He must be their god. How foolish of them! All sensible men know that Earth Mother is the god to hear a man's prayers."

Lalo raised his eyes and saw the sunlight glinting on the weapons and throat rings of the conquerors.

"Perhaps we are wrong, Kaa," he said bitterly. "Perhaps the Sun is the god we should pray to. He seems to bring his people victory."

Kaa nodded his bruised head slowly. "Perhaps, perhaps. Who knows about such things?" he answered, as though deep in thought.

Then, as they sat in gloomy silence, a shadow fell across their feet. A man had approached from behind the huts, and they had not heard his soft shoes on the hard earth. They looked up. He was a tall old man, with long white hair, and he wore black robes that swept in the dust at his feet. About

his neck hung a great silver half-moon, and he moved like one who was not sure of his way.

"He is blind," whispered Kaa, gazing up at the man in amazement.

Before Lalo could reply, the old man had spoken too, almost echoing Kaa's words, but with the ghost of a smile hovering over the fixed expression of his face.

"Yes, blind," he said gently. "But he sees farther than most men who have the use of their eyes."

Something fell to the ground beside Kaa, and then the shadow of the old bard had passed on. Bewildered, the two prisoners looked down at the thing that the old man had dropped between them. It was a copper knife, sharp and gleaming, set into the tine of a red-deer antler and hardly longer than a man's hand.

"This is an answer from the gods," said Kaa quickly, leaning over and grasping the knife. "But which god, I do not know—Earth Mother or Sun Father."

Lalo said, "A warrior does not ask questions, Kaa. He takes what chance is offered him, wherever it comes from."

For the moment he had forgotten his great sorrow and now his tired brain raced with the wish to be free, whatever might happen to him afterward. Never in his life had Lalo been bound before, and, like any young animal, freedom to move as he wanted was the most important thing in his world. Like other savage creatures, Lalo did not wish to live at all unless he could move about as he chose.

Kaa was working away with the knife, sometimes cutting his own wrists because of the numbness of his hands; but at last he gave a little grunt of satisfaction.

"I am free, Lalo," he said. "Now hold out your hands toward me and I will cut your bonds too. But do not move until I give the word, in case someone is watching us. We must seem to be tied until the moment comes for us to run."

Lalo felt his hide bonds fall from his wrists. "What shall we do now, Kaa, old friend?" he whispered.

Kaa said urgently, "We will run down the slope, as you have said, and as for the Hunter Folk—well, we must risk meeting them. And if we do meet

them, perhaps they will befriend us, now that these strangers have come to take their land too."

Lalo nodded and was about to spring forward as Kaa gave the word, when from behind the huts came the sound of a horse's hoofs thundering on the ground.

Cradoc appeared, his cloak flying in the morning wind, his cheeks red with excitement as he galloped. He looked what he was, the victorious prince of a warrior people. Even Lalo had to admit that, albeit bitterly.

Kaa whispered quickly, "Do not move until he has gone by, or we shall be discovered. Keep still and pretend to sleep, Lalo."

But then something happened that flung Lalo upright, trembling in every limb. The great white stallion seemed to tread on a smoldering piece of wood, slipped sideways with a sickening lurch, and then, screaming with pain, flung his forefeet high into the air, almost falling backward. Cradoc gave a little shout and then toppled over, away from the thick sheepskin saddle, his arms and legs splayed out wildly. Lalo expected him to strike the ground, but to his horror he saw that Cradoc's foot was caught in the rough cowhide loop that served him as a stirrup, and now, as the stallion still reared and whinnied, the boy hung head downward, his golden hair trailing in the dust, his body in constant danger of being crushed by the flailing hoofs of the maddened stallion. With the boy dangling like a helpless puppet, the animal swung around, righted itself, and began a mad rush toward the stockade.

"By Earth Mother, but he will kill the lad," gasped Kaa. "He will beat out his brains on the stones and never know that he has killed his master!"

Lalo had the little knife in his hand and was suddenly racing across the compound to meet the wild horse.

"Come back, you fool!" called Kaa, his weary eyes wide with fear for the boy he had guarded so long.

But Lalo had forgotten everything except that the stallion would kill this prince. And now he was alongside the beast, shouting at it, even though his own heart beat with a terrible fear, for he had never been so near a horse before, and it was such a big, fierce one at that. Then Kaa saw Lalo run under those very hoofs, like a lithe, dark shadow, the knife glistening in his hand. He saw the boy slash out—once, twice, three times . . . and then the horseman fell to the ground and rolled over a time or two wrapped in his

colored cloak. And the stallion, freed of his weight, neighed again and raced like a white cloud away from the village.

For a moment, Lalo stood undecided, the knife still in his hand, looking down at Cradoc, who was slowly rising to his feet and smiling ruefully. Lalo did not know what to do then, but Cradoc was smiling and holding out his hand.

"Thank you, savage!" he said thickly. "I shall see that my uncle knows of this. I will have you set free, my black-faced friend!"

"Give me back my dog," was all that Lalo could think to say. "I want my dog."

Then, from the huts and from the hillside, the men of the Sun King began to appear, shouting wildly, their hair flying. "Look! Look! The black one is going to kill our prince! Shoot an arrow into him! Quickly, before the knife falls!"

Lalo stared about him, bewildered now. He seemed to see men running at him from every direction. Then he heard Kaa's great voice, bellowing almost in his ear.

"Run with me, run, run! They will kill you! They see you have the knife!"

And Lalo felt himself swung around, and then he was running alongside Kaa, toward the burned stockade, then past the charred branches, then down the green slope, with the stones coming hard against his feet and little, vicious whirring noises all about him as the arrows pursued them, biting into the ground. From behind, higher up the slope that led at last to the great chalk hill, came the many sounds of excited men: shouts and war cries, the howling of a bull's horn, and the sudden beating of drums.

"Run, run as you have never run before!" gasped Kaa. "They will ride down this slope on their horses soon, and then we will be shot before we can reach the forest."

Stumbling and groaning, they ran on in the sunlight, their breath coming hard for their very bones ached with weariness after the battle of the night before. And Lalo's quick ear caught the thrumming sound of hoofs behind them now, coming nearer all the time. He thought to feel the hard thump of an arrow in his back at any moment. His sight turned thick and he found that he could not even see Kaa. Then he was splashing through water up to his waist. He halted for a moment and plunged his head downward, letting the

cold stream lap over him. That freshened him and he shook himself like a hound that has swum into a stream after his namesake the otter.

Kaa was lying behind a stone some yards away. He had taken off his long hide belt and was making a sling of it. Beside him he had scooped up a number of flints.

"Go on to the forest!" he yelled wildly at Lalo. "Go on! I will knock a few of them from their saddles before I join you. Go on, you little fool—do you want to let them kill both of us?"

Lalo looked back up the slope. Three horsemen were ahead of the rest, galloping savagely toward the stream. Then he saw Kaa stand up suddenly, swing the hide sling about his head, and then let the stone go. The foremost horseman stood high in his stirrups, clutching at his head. Then he fell and rolled into the grass.

Lalo turned and ran for the forest as hard as he could go. His ears rang with the wild beating of hoofs and with Kaa's great shout of triumph. Lalo smiled as he ran, to think how great a warrior his guardian was.

4
MEN OF THE FORESTS

1

FOREST

In the dim greenness of the forest, Lalo shivered with foreboding. He had never been so far among the trees before, and now the sun was sinking and soon it would be night. He snuggled down farther into the clump of bushes where he was hiding and listened for Kaa's warning cry, the cry that would say he had escaped from their enemies and was seeking Lalo again. It would be the sound that the raven makes, for that was Kaa's sign. It was from the cry of the raven that he had got his name, and that was why Kaa wore the feathers of the raven in his hair when he went hunting or ran into battle.

But around Lalo there was a great silence, as though the world had died that day and he was the last man left alive. The boy found himself shuddering at that thought. Then he looked down again at the little copper knife he still carried, and wondered whether, after all, it might not be best to do what the warriors sometimes did when they were defeated and knew that, if they were caught, they would be offered up as sacrifices to the gods of their enemies. He felt the point of the knife. It was very sharp. He put it to his chest and pressed on it a little. It was very painful, he thought.

Then he lowered the knife—not because he was afraid to die, but because he suddenly thought how silly it would be to kill himself like that, and then for Kaa to come seeking him in the forest. He put back the weapon into his belt and began to wait again, trying to think of all the songs and stories he had ever heard, to pass away the time—but listening always in case the cry of the raven should sound at the outer edges of the wood.

Once a little green snake slithered past him and disappeared again into a clump of nettles. Lalo started with fright, but the creature did not seem interested in him. And then, as the dusk began to fall, he heard a movement behind him, among the dry ferns, coming nearer and nearer. And when he heard the sound of a creature snuffling, he broke out in a sweat, even though the night was already quite cold. Turning quickly, he clasped the knife firmly, determined to fight to the last, if this beast should come at him. But

nothing happened. Lalo saw a dim gray shape move away into the depths of the forest again, and there was silence for a time.

Then Lalo found that he was trembling violently; had Kaa appeared at that moment, he would not have been able to talk to him, his teeth were chattering so loudly. At last darkness came down on the forest, and the green world about him became black. There were a hundred different noises, some so small as hardly to be heard, others so near and so frightening that Lalo imagined himself surrounded by wild beasts of all descriptions. Once a white owl swooped low above the bush in which he was hiding. Lalo felt the movement of air that the bird's broad wings made over his head. The owl gave a sudden squawk of fear and fluttered away among the thick oak trunks. Lalo began to shudder once more.

Now he was very hungry and very thirsty, for he had had nothing to eat all day and nothing to drink since he had dipped his head into the stream at the edge of the forest. He began to think of water continually. He pulled some of the leaves from the bush in which he lay, and chewed them to slake his thirst. But they were very bitter and he had to spit them out. That made him thirstier than ever. Then he thought he had a pain in his stomach, and wondered whether the leaves had been poisonous, and whether he was about to die very soon. But after a time the pains left him and he knew then that they were hunger pangs, nothing worse. He smiled at himself for being such a coward. He even thought of making his way back to the outskirts of the forest to see if he could find Kaa; but then he knew that he would not dare move from his safe bush. It was a long way to the edge of the forest, and who knew what might be waiting for him before he reached the open again? Besides, the Sun Men might be camping there, waiting for him to come out again, knowing that he would be afraid to stay in the thick of the forest for long.

Lalo said to himself, "I will show them! I will show them I dare stay all night in this bush, if needs be."

Then, from tiredness and hunger, he fell asleep in his hiding place, and for a short time at least forgot the many things that had bothered his heart.

He was still fast asleep when running footsteps sounded right in his ear and a dark figure stumbled into the place where he was hiding. He awoke with a wildly beating heart and a cry on his dry lips. The figure bent over him, and seemed to strike down at him. Lalo slipped sideways and dragged the little knife from his belt.

II

FRIENDSHIP THROUGH SADNESS

Suddenly the newcomer spoke. “Do not strike, black one. I come to give you back your dog.”

Then Lalo heard a muffled whimpering in the darkness. He came forward cautiously, holding out his hand. He felt it being licked by a small wet tongue and his heart was strangely glad. The knife was lowered and then thrust into his belt. He reached out and took Yan in his arms, hugging him to his breast, weeping over him, and calling him by his name again and again. At last he spoke to the shadowy figure beside him.

“You are that prince whose stallion ran away today, are you not?”

The other answered, “That is true, but it was yesterday, not today, black one. I have searched for you a long while.”

Lalo said, “Thank you for bringing back my dog to me. Now, before we part, I tell you that I, Lalo the Otter, son of the Old Man of Craig Ddu, will never strike at you, even if we meet in battle at some future time, even though your king killed my father. I swear that, by Earth Mother. Now go in peace, for I am happy that you have brought my dog to me.”

There was silence for a while in the forest. Then the other spoke, “I am Cradoc, nephew of the Sun King who killed your father, and who now lies dead himself. I too am alone now. Even my white horse is dead. He died after you had cut me free yesterday, for he galloped into a ravine in his madness.”

In the darkness, the two boys stood silent, neither knowing what should be said then. Yan the dog became so worried by this silence that he moved from one to the other, rubbing himself against their legs; and at last Lalo said, “Cradoc, what can we do? If we are not enemies, we must be friends. You have given me back my dog and Earth Mother has let me save you from death.”

He held out his hands, and in the darkness Cradoc took them in silence, as warriors should.

Then the boys sat down together in the shelter of the bush. And at length Cradoc said with difficulty, “A great misfortune has come upon my people, the Men of the Sun, since they gained their victory so short a time ago.”

Lalo bowed his head, not wishing to break in on the other’s words, even though in his heart he was glad that his father had been avenged.

Then Cradoc went on slowly, “The men tried to set the Sun King’s great hounds on to Yan—to make sport, they said.”

Lalo started with anger. “They did that!” he said. “And you let them do it?”

Cradoc groaned and then whispered, “No, my friend. I did not love the great hounds as I love this little dog. I struck them with my bull’s hide whip, and one of them turned on me, to tear me for spoiling his sport.”

Lalo began to breathe heavily. “And so you slew the great hound, did you?” he asked, his voice full of subdued excitement. “You slew him for Yan’s sake?”

Cradoc shook his head. “No,” he answered. “My uncle, the Sun King, did that. Much as he loved his hounds, he loved me more. He rode them down, both of them, to save my life. And then a strange thing happened. There was a man, a boatmaker, who had jested with my uncle on the shore, before we sailed the narrow sea. Now he was drunk with victory and mead, and he called out to my uncle: ‘Morag, have you forgotten your promise, to give me whatever your hand rested on? So, we have won a victory; now give me your horse!’

“He ran forward then, and, taking my uncle unawares, dragged him down by his foot. My uncle loved his horse dearly and in his great fury he used his whip on the man. Then that man forgot his blood oath and put his sword into my uncle. I fled from the place, for I knew that they would not let either me or the little dog live, after that.

“So we gained a kingdom, but held it for less than a day, the King and I. And now the others who are left will squabble over it like savage dogs after a bone, until they kill each other.”

He laughed mirthlessly and terribly, as though laughter took the place of tears. Lalo could not understand him fully, and placed his hand on the other’s shoulder.

But Cradoc said, “Do not fear for me. I am not mad, my friend. I am only thinking of the long ride we had to the salt marshes, and the dreadful voyage over the little sea—all for nothing, for death!”

And Lalo replied, “It is the same with me, my friend. Yet we have not lost everything. We still have the little dog to share. He is our kingdom now; all we possess.”

Then the boys lay close to each other, to share what warmth there was in the bushes; and, with Yan lying between them, they fell into a troubled sleep. Cradoc dreamed of the blind bard Cromac, who had run out of the huts when the fighting started, to bring peace to the shouting men, until one of them had called him the King’s dog, and had struck him down with an ax. Lalo dreamed of Kaa, his oldest friend, who had stood up to face the charge of the Sun Men, his sling swinging about his head: Kaa, laughing in the sunshine, and now dead.

III

THE FIRE

When dawn came, the boys woke with the sound of the birds' chorus in their ears. They smiled sadly at each other and then gathered berries to eat and drank the dew from the oak leaves.

Lalo's wound was already healing, but all the same it felt stiff, and hurt when he wrinkled his forehead. Cradoc tore a strip of woollen cloth from his tunic and bound it about Lalo's head, to keep the cut clean. Then they pushed through the wood until they came to a clear little stream, and there they sat down to make their plans, dangling their hands in the cool water and dragging up the edible weeds that floated there.

At last Lalo said, "This would be a good place to make our home for the time being. Perhaps the Hunter Folk do not come here often, since it is not so far to the edge of the wood. Perhaps the wild beasts do not come here, either. There do not seem to be any tracks."

Cradoc said, "I have lived all my life in the plains, my brother Lalo. I would not recognize a track if one stared me in the face. I am useless when it comes to forest lore."

Lalo smiled wryly. "It is the same with me," he said. "I have always lived on the hill. I know about digging for flint, or growing the barley seed. But I have never been so far into the forest in my life. Yet we have your long sword and my little knife. We ought to be able to find some food for ourselves."

"I have always eaten meat, brother," Cradoc said. "I should die if I had to eat berries and grass for long."

"At least we can try," said Lalo the Otter. "It may only be for a short while, who knows? But it is certain that if we go back to the hill, we shall be killed. Better to risk living here than dying there!"

That morning the two boys cut down branches and built a rough shelter. It was draughty and damp, but at least it was a place where they could lie

down, away from the forest beasts. By afternoon, Lalo had found dry sticks and crackling leaves, and had a fire going, using a bent stick and a length of sheep sinew to make a fire bow. And while he worked at that, Cradoc went deeper still into the forest, with Yan, who now followed him as though he had known him all his life. When he returned, he carried two partridges slung on a stick over his shoulder, and when Lalo congratulated him on his prowess as a hunter, he shook his head and pointed to Yan.

"He dragged them down," said Cradoc. "He caught them before they could rise into the air. He is quick, our Yan!"

"Then he must have the pickings of these fowl," said Lalo, who in any case did not care for such meat, having been brought up to eat barley bread and only the smallest share of mutton.

The boys tore away the feathers and the skin from the birds and then tried to cook them on a stick over Lalo's fire. They were not very good at this, and when they did eat their meal it was not with very good appetites, in spite of their great hunger. Yan came best out of it. He was ready to eat anything, and even looked hungrily at a fat frog that plopped into the stream while he waited for his masters to throw him what they could not stomach.

That evening Lalo went back toward the edge of the wood, leaving Cradoc to guard the little hut. All the way, he called out like a raven, but there was no reply from any direction. At the edge of the forest he halted and looked up toward the hill again.

It stood in the evening mist like a great hunchbacked monster. Lalo saw points of fire dotted about, here and there, on the long slopes, the encampments of the cattle men. It would not be safe to go that way, he knew now, for they had spread themselves all around the village, wherever they could find grazing for their cows and sheep. He looked toward the little stream where he had left Kaa, but no one was there. It was a place of emptiness, of despair. Lalo shut his eyes and backed into the forest. This was his home now; terrible though it was, it was not so terrible as the gray slope that led up to the ruined settlement of Craig Ddu, the village that was no more.

When he got back to the hut, Cradoc was asleep, his arm curled about Yan, who flapped his long tail wildly when he saw Lalo again and woke Cradoc.

"Do you not know that the fire must never go out, Cradoc?" asked Lalo sternly. "That is the rule among my people. To let the fire go out brings

disaster."

Cradoc grinned sleepily. "Among my people," he replied, "we have slaves who look after the camp fires. I was never trained to be a slave, Lalo."

Such was Lalo's tiredness that he almost quarreled with his new friend that very night because of the fire. But then a little night breeze blew through the glade, and Lalo saw that there were still some sparks left from which he could build another blaze.

Then they lay down on a rough bed of bracken and watched the flames licking up into the green darkness, casting their shadows inside the little hut. And at last, watching the fire and listening to the gurgling voice of the stream, they fell asleep, too tired even to dream this night.

And it seemed that they had slept for a hundred years when suddenly they awoke with a start, Yan's warning cries in their ears. The fire that had brought them comfort had also brought disaster.

Above the glowing boughs, staring into the hut, were three grinning faces, their flattened noses and high cheekbones picked out vividly by the flickering of the fire.

Lalo looked at the fur headdresses that framed these masklike features, and at the heron's feathers that splayed out from the fur, and then he knew who had stolen on them that night, drawn by the smell of the fire.

"The Hunter Folk, Cradoc!" he whispered. "We must sell our lives dearly, for they are a savage people!"

Yet even as the boys groped in the gloom for their weapons, one of the Hunter Folk gave a little, low bark, like the cry of a dog, and then the hut was full of men, the fire was trampled out, and the boys were flung face downward, their arms twisted up behind their backs.

They were captured.

IV

CAPTURED

Lalo and Cradoc lay in a cave, bound hand and foot, gazing about them in wonder. Painted on wall and roof, in wonderful colors of red and black and amber, were all the creatures of the forest: bear, wild boar, lynx, and cat. Neither the flintmen nor the cattlemen were artists in this way. They could do many things, but they never thought to make pictures.

"Look," said Cradoc in amazement, "there is a black bull, so like the one my uncle loved when we lived on the plains beyond the sea!"

"There is a stag, too," said Lalo the Otter, "so like a real one that I think it could almost come down off the wall if we set Yan to bark at it. Oh, look at its great antlers!"

Yan the dog, who lay bound like his masters, heard his name, and whimpered. He did not appreciate the drawings on the wall of the cave. He only knew that he was tied up, and hungry.

Cradoc said, "I believe I have heard of such things, but I never thought to see them. Who are these folk?"

Lalo shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?" he answered. "Some say that they are the first folk ever to live in this land. My people did not care to mingle with them, and I have never met anyone who has learned their language. It is more like the barking of dogs and foxes than the speech of men. It is difficult to know how they can understand each other—yet they do."

Cradoc said, "Men who can make pictures like this must be kindhearted, think you not? Pictures could only be made by a gentle folk."

Lalo grinned scornfully. "This is all they do, my simple friend—paint pictures and kill. There is no cattle raising with them, no planting of the barley seed—only painting and killing. Have no doubts, Cradoc, they are not a soft folk."

The boys remembered their nightmare journey to this cave, bound hand and foot and slung on two poles like bear or dead stag going home for the pot. It had been an agonizing journey, during which they fell asleep out of sheer pain and jolting torment. Now they had been in the cave for half a day, with no one to bring them food, no one to show any interest in them at all.

At last Cradoc said, “What will they do with us, do you think?”

Lalo replied, “They will probably turn us loose in the forest and then shoot their arrows into us. They use small chips of flint set into alder stems —nothing like our leaf-shaped arrows, or your devilish ones, with their long barbs.”

Cradoc, the prince of the Cattle Folk, clenched his teeth. “That is no way to treat a prisoner,” he said. “Among my own people, even a prisoner is treated with the respect due him.”

Lalo smiled grimly, recalling how he and Kaa had been tied and flung beside a hut like bundles of old hide, by Cradoc’s folk.

“Indeed?” he said gently.

Cradoc sensed the irony in his friend’s voice, and flushed with irritation. “Very well,” he said, “but were your own people any kinder to their captured enemies? Were they not anxious to kill them, too?”

Lalo was silent for a while, and then he said, “I do not think that we were anxious to kill them—unless it was a sacrifice time, and we needed someone to bring prosperity on our village, or growth to our crops, or calves to our cows.”

Cradoc laughed scornfully. “So, after fighting with them and capturing them, you let them all go, did you?”

Lalo would not let himself be drawn by his friend’s taunt. “No,” he said, “we did not do that, exactly. But we did give them a chance to get free and return to their own villages. We stood in two lines across the compound, with sticks in our hands. Our prisoners had to run between the lines and out through the open gate of the stockade to their freedom—if they could. We never gave chase once they had passed through the gate.”

Cradoc said slowly, “The sticks would be heavy ones, I think. Few would go out of your gate to freedom.”

Lalo turned away his head, but did not answer. Perhaps Cradoc was right. Perhaps his own people were cruel, after all. Anyway, that was all past now. There was nothing that Lalo could do, but wait himself for death. And

while they sat silent, there was a sudden scurry of feet outside the cave entrance and the light was shut out as a band of men appeared, and stood looking down at the boys. Against the bright shafts of sunlight that streaked through the forest glade, these men looked shaggy and horrible, their bodies hunched, their short legs bound around with furs until they looked unnaturally thick and bestial.

The Hunters stood silent for a moment, their heads wagging and their noses sniffling like those of questing hounds. Then one of them gave a short, sharp bark and came forward into the cavern toward the boys. He stopped when he was a pace away from them and, putting his hands on his hips, grinned down at them. To their excited eyes, his white teeth seemed as sharp as those of a fox—or even of a wolf. His body was wrapped around with the bristling pelt of a black bear, bound to him with broad strips of hide; his thick legs were encased in the skins of the red fox; about his bull-like neck and his hairy arms, many circlets of teeth gleamed and clacked as he moved: the teeth of the bear, the wolf, the fox, the lynx. They were his jewels. His face was flat and heavily scarred from many battles; his shaggy hair and beard were a dark gray, and stood out stiffly from his head, almost like the skin of the bear he wore, but lighter in color.

His gray-brown eyes flicked from one to the other of the boys, taking in everything about them. They were the eyes of a forest creature, accustomed to seeing everything. Cradoc shuddered as their amber light flashed over him. It was like looking up at a wolf.

Then, after he had made a series of sharp, barking sounds, this strange creature began to shake with laughter and point down at the boys. His mouth tried to shape sounds that seemed to baffle him, but at length the boys heard him say, distinctly, “Me Badger. Badger lead Hunter pack.”

Then he started to laugh again. In the doorway of the cavern the clustered Hunters began to laugh too, shaking their great heads.

The boys looked up aghast, to see this strange man, Badger, fumble inside his bearskin wrapping and slowly pull out a crude flint skinning knife. He grinned and held it out for them to examine. Then he shambled toward them. Even Yan began to yelp in sudden terror.

V

BADGER

Badger, the Hunter Chief, was the oldest man in the southern oak forests. No man among the Wood Folk could remember how old he was. He said he had been there before the dark ones came to live on the hills, even before the sea came, he said—though no one really believed that. This made him angry for a little while, but Badger's anger soon left him, and then he would tell wonderful tales about how, when he was a young man, he and his father—who was also called Badger, because of the strange little clumsy movements he made, backward, when he was fighting, as though to draw his opponent on—would walk over what was now the sea, through the great oak forests far away, to kill the elk and even the buffalo, who lived beyond, and beyond, and beyond *everything*.

True, Badger had been born far away, in the north, and had moved to the south as the game took to the forests and became scarcer. He had been carried by his patient mother in a bearskin strapped close to her body, so as to leave her hands free to throw stones at the creatures her tribe hunted. Badger had never known any other scent than that of hides and pelts, or any other food than berries and flesh.

Many tales were told of him, and he was famous among all the Forest Folk. They said that Badger had once been lost when he was a baby and had been suckled by a vixen whose cubs had died. It was believed that he could speak the language of the stoat and the pine marten, which was considered by all to be a very difficult tongue, even harder than the secret women's language of the vixen, the tongue the vixens used when they did not want the old dog fox to understand them. So much did Badger know about all creatures that he could recognize any of them by their scent, even on a windy day, at fifty paces, hide as they might. There was even the story that he had once lived with a wolf family for three days before they discovered that he was not one of their own folk.

And Badger, being a rough, humorous man, liked the folk to spread these tales, for it made his fame the greater. He played many tricks on his

Hunters; he would come behind them quietly and, without warning, make the sound of the wild boar or the charging wolf. It gave him a great pleasure to see the frightened men climb trees that normally they could not have tackled, or dive into streams, even though they had hated the water from birth.

It was even said that the animals themselves had their own stories about Badger, which they passed on to each other in the common tongue of the forest creatures, the language they could all understand. One old Hunter used to tell how he had once passed two weasels quarreling beside a brook, and had overheard one of them say to the other, "Why I would as soon trust you as I would old Badger!" And the other had replied, "What! Don't you dare mention that crafty old creature to me! I cannot even think of him without fear."

Because Badger was so crafty, he had learned about the creatures who lived outside the forests too—the dark-haired men of the chalk hills. He had lain close to them when they were sitting about their fires, plaiting willow wands or shaping pottery, and he had taught himself some of their words; but not many, for it is hard to learn a language in that way; a man needs a patient teacher, not a quick enemy. From what he had seen of them, Badger had formed the opinion that they would not be a hard folk to conquer, and he had a strange longing to live in a hut for a time and to warm himself at a fire. If only he had someone who knew everything there was to know about these villages and their defenses, he felt certain that he could make himself a Hill King—if only for a little while. And Badger had a great, stupid yearning to be a Hill King for a few days, before he returned to his forests. It would be something to tell the others, far away in the north, when he went back, following the bears in the summer heat.

And so it was that he drew his skinning knife and went toward the boys in the cave, grinning down at their wide-eyed terror. A dark-haired one of the Hill Folk had at last fallen into his hands, and he should help him to achieve his desire.

He bent over them and said, "Badger has new knife. Badger kill boys, eh! Ha! Badger kill *this* one—keep *that* one!" He touched Cradoc with the knife and patted Lalo on the head.

Lalo shouted, "You cannot kill him and leave me! Either kill us both or set us free together!"

Cradoc whispered, "Do not bargain with this thing. My uncle would have used him for lance practice."

Badger did not understand all this, perhaps luckily for Cradoc. Instead, he smiled again and bent over Yan, who turned back his eyes and whimpered with fear at this strange-smelling creature.

"Badger eat little dog for supper," he said pleasantly, nodding all the while.

Once again Lalo burst out, "Kill me and let Yan go free, you savage!"

At this the Hunters in the doorway shouted out in a great gust of laughter. Although they did not understand Lalo's words, they guessed at his meaning, and they could not believe that man could be so foolish as to love a little animal like that. A big bear, yes, or a full-grown stag; but a little dog! They gasped with laughter, holding their sides.

Suddenly Badger straightened up, his face fixed in a mask of gravity. He held up his hand for silence, and the Hunters at the cave entrance stopped their laughing.

"Boy of hills?" he said, pointing at Lalo. "You, boy of hills?"

Lalo nodded, puzzled at the change in this strange man.

Badger said slowly, groping for the right words, "Badger no kill boy of hills."

"What do you want?" Lalo asked slowly.

Badger said, "Boy of hills take Badger and Hunter pack into village. Badger sit in house. Badger be king. Boy of hills do this, and no killing then, eh?"

Lalo stared at Badger in amazement as his meaning became clear. At first he would have refused, and then, sadly, he recalled that the village on the hill was no longer his father's, that it no longer contained his own folk. His heart began to beat with excitement, for now he might gain his revenge on the Sun Men, who had stolen Craig Ddu so savagely. He turned doubtfully toward Cradoc, expecting him to protest since, in any attack, his folk must suffer.

But Cradoc's face was hard. Quietly he said, "Why should we not help the Hunters to attack Craig Ddu?" he said. "My own folk, like savages, have turned me away. They have killed my uncle the King. Why should my heart be gentle toward them? Tell this creature that you will lead the Hunters. So you will get revenge for us both, my friend."

Slowly, Lalo told Badger that he would do as he had asked. “But,” he said, “Badger must set Cradoc and Yan free, if the bargain is to be carried out.”

No sooner had he said this than Badger bent over them, flicking his keen knife across their bonds. They stood untied in the sunlight then, and the folk at the cavern mouth broke into laughter once more, clustering around the boys and slapping them on the back with merriment. They even picked up Yan and pretended to bite his ears; but the little dog had no respect for their strength, and they soon put him down, to be out of the danger of his snapping jaws.

VI

FLINT SHAFT

Three days after the boys had been set free in the cave, they were leading the Hunter Folk to attack Craig Ddu, creeping half-bent, in the dusk, among the grasses on the long hill slope that led up to the ruined village. Here and there on the grazing grounds small fires blazed, picking out the shadows of the gently moving herds.

Cradoc felt a lump rise in his throat as he saw this and smelled the sweet scent of cattle once again. If only his uncle were still alive, he thought, he would not be leading the enemy against his own folk like this. . . .

Lalo carried no such thoughts in his head. He wished only for vengeance now, come how it might. Yan trotted at his heels, silent as a lithe gray spirit and tense with excitement. It seemed as though he understood what they were about. Beside Lalo moved Badger, now so noiseless that the boy had to turn from time to time to see if the Hunter chief was still with him. And behind them in a long broken line loped the Hunters, moving so quietly that they looked more like dark gray shadows, or a thick plume of smoke, than a hundred men.

As he ran, Lalo thought back on the three days of preparation for this foray: the strange war dances held in the forest glades, with the men making guttural noises in the voices of all the animals they knew; then the sharpening of weapons, the rough flints and the sticks; then the putting up of food, which they carried, each man looking after himself, in dried hide pouches—strips of venison, berries, even sappy tree bark, which could keep a man alive when he ran out of real food, and, most important of all, water brought from the fresh forest streams in deerskin bags sewn with the fine sinews of the wild cat and the badger kitten.

This was to be the biggest attack the Hunter Folk had ever made on Craig Ddu; and many were there that night who had long wished for vengeance on the hill people, who had always, somehow or other, defeated them in the past. Now their savage dream was coming true, and they were happy.

Yet it was not an uneventful journey. Once a herdsman wakened from his sleep and sat up to stare Badger straight in the eye. But that crafty old man had suddenly shrieked out like an owl, and while the cattle man shook his head, trying to clear his senses and decide where the noise came from, another Hunter crept behind him and drew his knife across the puzzled man's throat. He sank down without a murmur. Then they passed on, stepping over him without touching him. Once Cradoc's heart had leaped into his mouth when a horseman came cantering toward them, driving a small herd of calves before him. Badger saw this and barked sharply like a fox. The Hunters fell to their faces on the grass, and the rider thudded between them, never knowing they were there. Some of the calves blew down their nostrils, however, as though they had picked up an unfamiliar and frightening scent. But old Badger lowed to them like a kindly mother and they went on reassured.

At last the Hunters came up above the village and looked down into the compound. Lalo gave a little cry of surprise, for he had never seen it so brightly lighted before. Torches of resinous wood burned everywhere, and in all the pits where once the huts had stood great fires blazed. Men lolled about them, cooking meat at the end of sticks or drinking honey mead from cows' horns. In the middle of the earthen compound, beside a crackling fire, a man stood singing and telling impossible stories, setting his listeners rocking with laughter.

Badger leaned over to Cradoc and said, "Your people a happy people. Soon not happy, eh?"

Cradoc looked him in the eye and said grimly, "They are just as happy when they are fighting, Badger."

But Badger was not put off by these words. "Good! Good!" he grunted. "Happy warrior dies contented."

Then he began to laugh aloud, but, recollecting himself, turned the laughter into the sound of a dog barking. The men in the compound did not look toward that sound on the hillside, for it seemed quite natural to them. But the dogs within the ruined place of Craig Ddu had other thoughts about it. They suddenly began to yelp, as though the Great Dog Devil himself was on their heels and snapping at their tails.

At last Cradoc said, "Badger, if you want to defeat these people, do not attack now. They are drunk with glory and would fight on, even when they carried as many spines as a hedgehog in their bodies. You must never attack a cattleman when he is in the midst of a victory feast."

Badger nodded. “Badger see that, friend,” he said. “But when, eh?”

Cradoc lowered his head as he spoke, as though in shame. “Come upon them at dawn,” he answered. “Then they will be sleeping off the effects of this feast. Then you will have victory over them.”

When he had spoken, he put his face into his hands and wept. Lalo knew why he was crying, but Badger did not. He slapped Cradoc on the back and said, “Good boy,” and laughed—but the two boys looked away from him.

Then Lalo said, “If we stay here until dawn, we shall be discovered, that is certain. We can only defeat them if we take them by surprise, for their number is great.”

Badger stared into his eyes. “Badger asks, where hide? Where good hide place, eh? Hide till sun comes and bird sings first song.”

Lalo rose quietly and said, “Come, follow me. I know where we can all hide, and where no one will dare to come to find us. The flint galleries will be safe until the morning, my friends.”

He began to creep away from the village and up toward the gaping hole with the thick oak trunk set in its center, notched so that men’s feet could find a grip as they lowered themselves toward the many galleries that ran out into the hill—the winding, low galleries dug by countless generations of flint miners.

Badger paused at the mouth of the shaft. “Is this a trap?” he asked fiercely.

Lalo shook his head, trying to smile.

Then Badger said, “Then go first, boy! Go down into gallery and show us not trap. Later we follow.”

Lalo had been down into the mine shaft many times, and his feet knew every notch on the oak pole; but this night his legs trembled so violently with excitement that more than once he slipped and had to hang still, groping with his free hand to find a new hold, so that he should not fall into the deep darkness and be killed on the jagged flints below. At last, breathing heavily, he lowered himself opposite the biggest of the entrance mouths to the galleries, and there he hung for a while, recovering his breath.

Badger stood above him, already merging into the darkness of the night. “Go on, boy,” he called down. “Go on, and then Badger knows there is no trap.”

Lalo called back hoarsely, “If I had wished to trap you, Badger, I would have shouted my head off when we waited above the village. From what I saw of those warriors, they would have found it an easy task to run up the hill and take your heads, every one of you!”

Then he swung sideways into the gallery mouth, scrambling on to the ledge, his breath coming in gasps after sudden, strenuous effort. And as he began to struggle to his feet, there was a quick movement behind him, a sudden shuffle of feet among the flint chips, and then a strong hand was clenched over his mouth and a hard knee was thrust into his back, knocking him over into the darkness. He could not shout, nor could he fight against the strength of this man of the darkness.

So, he thought, this is my end. Imagine that it should happen as easily as this. I always thought a warrior had time to weigh it all up, to think about his death, his glory. But see how simply it comes, with no time for anything!

The pressure began to tighten about his throat and now Lalo’s senses swam. He resigned himself to death, for he knew that neither Cradoc nor Badger would dare to come down into such a strange place. They would wait a while, and then they would go away, thinking that he had betrayed them and had escaped into the earth. The last thing he heard was Yan’s sudden barking, up there at the mouth of the shaft; Yan, shouting his heart out that his master was in danger—and with no one to understand him.

VII

AN OLD FRIEND

Cradoc was at the point of overcoming his fear of the dark shaft and of following Lalo down that treacherous oak trunk; and Badger was already bending over the frantic Yan, listening to his excited barking and trying to make out the words he was saying, when suddenly the grip on Lalo's throat was relaxed and a voice above him said, "What have I done! That is Yan's voice above us, in the dark. You must be Lalo—Lalo the Otter, my friend, the son of my chief!"

Lalo came back from the threshold of unconsciousness to hear this voice. "Kaa the Guardian, my dear one," he gasped, his senses swimming dizzily somewhere just outside his grasp.

"Yes, Kaa!" said the voice. "Who almost killed the one he loves most in the world."

Lalo sat up, shaking his head to clear it. "I have had a narrow escape then, Kaa," he said, trying to laugh. "For yours are the strongest hands in Craig Ddu."

But Kaa the Guardian did not laugh. Instead, he said gravely, "They deserve to be taken from me now, little friend."

Lalo said quickly, "The men above us are our friends, Kaa. They want to punish the Sun Men and drag them down into disaster. Is it your wish also?"

Out of the darkness Kaa answered, "It is my wish, Lalo, my chieftain. And if it were not my wish, I should still want to do what you commanded, my lord."

When he heard these words, Lalo felt greatness stealing over him, for he knew that Kaa was giving him his rightful title: chieftain. Yes, he was that, now that his dear father had gone. But chieftain of what? He had no tribe, not even a village now. Only a friend, and a dog. A dog that had saved his life by his barking.

So Lalo came down to earth again. “Kaa,” he said gently, so as not to hurt the faithful warrior, “now there is no chieftain, no ruler of Craig Ddu. That is all over. We are friends now, nothing else. Is that not enough?”

Kaa said softly, “Yes, chieftain, that is enough. That is all my heart desires, Lalo the Otter.”

Then Lalo went back to the mouth of the gallery and called up to the others, telling them to follow him down, telling them that he had found his oldest friend down there, the greatest warrior that Craig Ddu had ever known.

“Do not be afraid, Badger,” he called, teasing. “This man will not hurt you, if I tell him not to.”

Badger grunted in anger at first, and then in great good humor. “I come,” he said. “Badger come to see this great one. Badger bring his sharp teeth with him.”

Lalo heard the man laughing deep in his chest as he slithered down the oak trunk, looking as clumsy as a bear, but moving as lightly as a lynx kitten. And when Kaa put out his hands to help Badger into the gallery, the Hunter chief gave a great shout of laughter and said, “Ho! How right the boy is! I smell you, Kaa the Guardian! I smell the man who once grazed me with an arrow. Hail, friend! Ha—come down, my Forest Folk, and meet great warrior, greatest warrior of them all!”

In the darkness, Kaa and Badger hugged each other, old enemies who were now friends because of the talk they shared. Lalo and Cradoc stood together, hand in hand, with Yan between them. The Hunter Folk sat down, leaning against the sharp walls of the gallery, singing softly a song of the woods. Sometimes their low voices took on the tone of the morning breezes through the great oak boughs, and sometimes the roar of the winter wind through the pines of the far north. Then again, it was the crying of wolves at searching time, then the soft moaning of the lynx mother at kitten-feeding time. Never before had such a song been heard in the ancient flint galleries. Lalo’s skin prickled as he listened.

“Ah, Cradoc,” he whispered, “think of all the old flint men who dug here —think how their ghosts must be standing in the darkness now, hearing this song, wishing that they could join us and come with this strange folk of the forest to victory!”

But Cradoc had turned away in the darkness and was weeping, for the song reminded him of a kingdom his uncle had once told him about, where

the great plains were black with cattle, with proud bulls, and the horsemen rode from herd to herd, their noses held high in pride, the Lords of Creation, the Men of the Sun.

And now it was this, only this: a shaggy band of savages, singing in a dark flint mine. Nothing more.

VIII

LAST DAWN

Lalo got little sleep that night, for the chill flint seemed to eat into his bones, and even Yan was restless, constantly moving about, trying to find a more comfortable place to curl up. From time to time, Lalo looked across the floor to the spot where Cradoc lay, trying to see him, to catch his eye. But it was too dark. The Hunter Folk slept lightly, like animals. They would leap up, fully awake, Lalo knew, when the time came. Kaa the Guardian lay stretched out at Lalo's feet, sleeping like a man who had not rested for many moons. Sometimes he muttered in his sleep, and Lalo heard the words, "Lalo, my chief! My little chief!"

"Dear Kaa," he said to himself, "it will never be so, now."

Then the dawn came: not like a harsh shaft of sunlight, but like a creeping mist that moves away from the world's face and lets one sense her features gradually, surely, everything growing clearer with each moment, the vision coming closer, truer. . . .

And Lalo saw Cradoc rise then and move without warning along the gallery, to its steadily brightening mouth. He watched his friend swing out, on to the oak trunk, and then he saw Cradoc's heels disappearing upward.

Lalo gave him a few moments and then he followed. But when he reached the top, Cradoc was two bowshots away, running like a deer toward the village, wildly, like a man in a dream of despair, his golden hair flying behind him in the dawn breeze. Lalo followed him swiftly now, already understanding the battle that was going on in Cradoc's heart, knowing what his friend meant to do.

He was almost upon Cradoc when they reached the little slope above the village. He saw the boy cup his hands about his mouth to give the warning to his people, and then Lalo leaped forward, shouting, "Take care, Cradoc! You play a dangerous game!"

The two boys rolled together a little way down the slope toward the village, struggling violently.

“You will bring death to your friends!” gasped Lalo.

Cradoc suddenly twisted from under him, as viciously as an angry snake when a man’s foot treads on it unawares.

“That is perhaps better than bringing death upon my own folk!” he shouted, rolling clear and putting his hands to his mouth once more.

Lalo lay powerless to stop him now. Then Kaa the Guardian passed in a great rush of air. Cradoc had not time to avoid him, and was swung high as the warrior swept him off his feet. Lalo looked around then and saw Badger close behind them. The two men had followed the boys swiftly from the flint shaft, suspecting that something was afoot. And now Cradoc lay in Kaa’s arms, defeated and ashamed.

Lalo went to him and said, “All is well, Cradoc. We understand your feelings, but how can we let you do it? Have no fear, we are still good friends, all of us.”

Then Cradoc signed to Kaa, telling him to release him. He walked to Lalo and took his hands, tears streaming down his unhappy face.

Kaa stood beside Badger, who said gruffly, “Good boy. Make good Hunter one day, eh? Son for Badger, eh?”

Then as he spoke, the dawn air was suddenly filled with the sounds of men—a multitude of men, going into battle. Horses screamed, trumpets howled, hoofs thundered, and warriors yelled. It was as though this great commotion floated above their heads, in the upper air. In amazement, the four below the hill looked up to the crest of the high chalk summit, and there they saw a sight that set their hearts thumping against their ribs and froze the sound in their throats.

Coming like the morning wind over the ridge was an immense army of men, spear points bristling, the dawn sun glinting on their swords and throat rings. They surged down the hillside like an unbreakable ocean, wave after wave, their voices harsh and frightening on the gentle morning air.

“Hear what they say,” whispered Lalo. “ ‘Death to King Morag!’ ”

Cradoc said sadly, “These are the great tribes who gathered behind us in the plains, before we crossed to this island. Yet they come too late to harm my uncle. Too late!”

Lalo said, “Among them I see some of the Fisher Folk. No doubt they have led these warriors here, to gain their own revenge for Tula’s son. They also come too late. My folk have gone!”

Then Kaa spoke, urgently, his anxiety gleaming through his dark eyes. “Hurry, my friends,” he said. “Soon they will be down here and then they will kill every man they see, whoever he may be.”

Only Badger seemed bewildered now. “What shall we do, my folk and I?” he asked. “We came to capture Craig Ddu. What shall we do?”

Kaa replied, “Kaa tells Badger to go back where he came from, into the forest. There are stronger warriors than Badger anxious to capture Craig Ddu this day. Go, warn your folk, and take them back swiftly, if you wish to live!”

Badger grunted and then smiled. He did not go yet. “Come with Badger,” he said. “Live in forest with Hunter pack.”

Kaa shook his head and smiled sadly. “No, Badger,” he said. “We go another way. But one day we may meet again, old friend.”

Badger came to him and took his hand, pressing it to his hairy forehead. Then he did the same to Lalo and Cradoc. After that, he bent over Yan and whispered in his ear. The little dog began to leap in the air excitedly.

“What did you tell him, Badger?” asked Lalo the Otter.

But Badger only said, “It is a secret between dog and Badger. But take care, boy. Yan knows where come now, if you ever cruel. Take care, Badger say!”

Then he grinned and shambled off toward the mine, to collect his staring folk and lead them away.

Kaa and the boys ran swiftly along the hill, away from the village. As they passed the long house, Lalo looked aside, lest there should be any Old Ones who watched him desert his birthplace.

And now, when they looked back, they saw the horsemen crashing about among the ruined huts, striking here and there at anyone who moved. The trumpets of Morag’s folk were screaming like wounded creatures, and warriors were rising from their mead-drugged beds to answer them, rubbing the sleep from their eyes even as death overtook them in a sudden thrust of lance, a surprise stroke of the war ax.

The boys turned away and followed Kaa.

“This is the best place,” he said, pointing upward. “We shall skirt them here and be over into the high plain while they are still slaughtering below.”

So they climbed up through the morning sunshine, out of sight now of the carnage that took place in the village. At the top of the hill, Kaa stopped for a rest and said, “We shall go into the sunset, my friends. There are many places where such warriors as ourselves can find a home, and even a kingdom—eh, Cradoc?”

But Cradoc smiled sadly and said, “That is finished now, Kaa. Let us earn a living honestly. That is enough for me. I only want enough to eat and drink, and my friends beside me.”

Kaa said: “That is enough for any man and, with such a sword as yours, we should find that much at least.”

Lalo slapped Kaa on the back, pretending to be angry. “What is all this talk of swords?” he asked. “Why do you not mention dogs, too? See, Yan is quite offended!”

As they started over the hill, Kaa swept Yan into his arms and said, “Forgive me if I hurt you, little hunter. You are worth all the swords in the world—even swords like the one that Cradoc flaunts!”

Then, putting down the dog, he whispered wryly to Cradoc. “I had to tell him that, friend, or he would have remembered what Badger offered him, and run off into the forests.”

The boys began to laugh, and as the sun grew in its power, striking on their bare backs, they passed westward over the great chalk hill.

They did not stop in their striding to see what happened below them in the shattered place of Craig Ddu, for now that was like a terrible dream to them all—a dream that must be forgotten as soon as possible.

Now their world lay before them: not where the sun was now, but where it would be, as the day wore on. The future was theirs.

Some other books that tell about the same period and what led up to it:

The Dawn of European Civilization by V. G. Childe (Knopf)

Everyday Life in the New Stone, Bronze and Early Iron Ages by Marjorie and C. H. B. Quennell (Putnam)

The First Men in the World by A. T. White (Random House)

The Outline of History (Book II) by H. G. Wells (Garden City)

Prehistoric Britain by Jacquetta and C. F. C. Hawkes (Harvard)

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Christine Price was the illustrator for both the 1957 and 1958 editions of this book. As her work is not yet out of copyright in Canada all illustrations have been omitted from the book and cover.
Book name and author have been added to the original book cover. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Men of the Hills* by Henry Treece]