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by C. M. Eddy Jr.

Author of "The Ghost-Eater," "With Weapons of Stone," etc.

WHEN Arhl-a opened her eyes, darkness had settled over the universe. The tough cords of reindeer sinews which bound her hands and feet cut deep into her flesh, and her wrists and ankles were raw and bleeding from her futile struggles to free herself from the bonds. The flickering light of the fire at the entrance of the cavern caused the shadows to dance on the limestone walls in a ghostly, ever-changing glow. Silhouetted against the background of the fire loomed the huge body of Zurd, his eyes fastened intently upon her.

Ugh! how she hated him! She spat between her clenched teeth, and her tortured wrists strained anew at their fastenings as her gaze rested upon him. Never would she become his mate of her own free will! Better far that she should bury the keen blade of the stag-handled stone dagger, that lay hidden away beneath her garment of doeskin, clean to the hilt in her bosom than to suffer such insult at the hands of the human monster who had stolen her from her chosen one.

Zurd, the Coward! How well he was named! How different he was from Wagh, the Mighty, the man whom she loved. She could picture

him now as she lay there, his tall, lithe, sinewy frame scarred from head to foot by the claws and teeth of the mighty beasts he fought and overpowered. He even wore a necklace made from the very teeth and claws that had inflicted those wounds, trophies she had strung together for him with her own hands and hung about his neck when it was finished. His broad head with its shock of jet-black hair, his powerful hands that could tear apart the jaws of the mighty cavelion! He was a man, indeed!

She looked again at the squat figure still watching her from the mouth of the cave. His low, receding forehead with its heavy overhanging brow, his massive jaw, his short grotesque arms and legs, reminded her of the ape people that still roamed the forests and warred against her kind.

Zurd, the Coward! He was even afraid of her, a woman! He had sprung upon her from behind, and even now that he had spirited her many miles away from her own people he dared not loose her bonds. She thought of the day to come, when Wagh should trail Zurd to his hiding place. Then he would take him in his two hands and break him like a stick of wood across his knee.

Zurd rose and crossed the floor of the cavern to the helpless girl, with loping, swinging strides. He did not stand erect, his knees being slightly bent, and his similarity to a huge monkey was more marked than before.

He gave the girl a vicious prod with his foot and spoke to her. His tone was harsh and guttural, not at all like her own—low, liquid and musical. Indeed, he spoke more with his eyes and his gestures than with his lips, for language was then in its infancy and speech a power to conjure with.

"And how likes Arhl-a the fare that Zurd provides for her? A long journey and a longer sleep she has had since last she feasted upon the flesh of the reindeer."

Arl-a's sloe-black eyes flashed fire.

"And does it aid Arhl-a to digest her food to be slung upon Zurd's back like the carcass of the shaggy cave-bear and be carried thus for miles through forest and field?" she asked. "Does it improve her appetite to lie here bound by thongs of the same creature he would have her eat?"

"Then Arhl-a must needs remain hungry and Zurd will feast alone. For bound she must remain until the fire dies out of her heart and she is tamed—until she will give herself to mate with Zurd."

"Much would Arhl-a prefer to suffer the great hunger and pass into the land of the long sleep," retorted the girl.

Zurd, angered by her taunts, caught up a piece of driftwood from the floor of the cave and raised it high above her head. The girl steeled herself for the blow, but his mood passed, and with an imprecation he flung the stick against the wall of the rock chamber. Satisfying himself with another kick at the defenseless girl, Zurd lumbered out of the cavern and into the night.

Arhl-a knew that he would soon return. When he had gorged himself on reindeer meat he would come back

to her, and her night would be filled with nameless terror. Far rather would she spend a night in the forest and take her chances with the monsters there. She could hear some of them now as she lay with eyes half closed; the trumpeting of the elephants as they crashed their way down to the river, the howling cry of the terrible hyena, the bellow of the stag, the roar of the lion, and the growl of the cave-bear.

Her eyes scanned the length of the cavern within her range of vision in search of some way of releasing herself. The dancing light of the fire on the wall was poor illumination, but fate must have guided her eyes, for they lighted on a ragged point of rock that jutted out a few inches above the floor of the cave.

If only she could reach it before Zurd returned. Should he come back and discover her. . . .

Slowly she began her torturing journey toward the jagged rock that must serve as her liberator. At every move the cords cut deeper and deeper into her tender flesh. On, and still on, she rolled; it seemed miles instead of feet, hours instead of seconds. One more twist and she would be within reach of the broken stone. Could she make it? Every muscle, every nerve cried out in protest against the attempt. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists so tightly that the nails sank deep into her palms. With a supreme effort she made the last turn and paused for the moment, exhausted.

The thought of Zurd roused her from her lethargy. If he discovered her. . . .

She bent every energy to the tedious task of sawing through the tough sinews that bound her, until at last they gave way and her wrists were free. The stone dagger in her bosom made short work of her other bonds and Arhl-a gave an articulate sigh of relief when the last cord dropped away.

THE sun yet glowed, a flaming ball of red in the western sky, when Wagh, the Mighty, pushed his way out of the great forest and came in sight of the huge cliffs which had been the dwelling ground of his people. The season was growing cold again, and the larger part of the dwellers had already started on their migratory march to where the warmer breezes would blow upon them. But Wagh, together with a few of the hardier ones, had chosen to linger in the old haunts for a while. Later, by forced marches, they could easily overtake the slower moving older ones and join them in their new camping ground.

The other hunters had not returned from the jungle, and the place was well-nigh deserted. He picked his way over the rocks to his cave and entered, letting his burden of pelts slip from his broad back to the floor. Wagh had a strange premonition that something was wrong; that was why he had left the chase and come home earlier than usual. His keen eyes swept the surroundings in search of that which might either confirm or allay his suspicions. He wondered where Arhl-a could be. Most likely she was with We-na, mate of Ze-ka, the Flint-cutter. He did not see what these two women could find to talk about. They were always together. Still, he reflected, he was early. Arhl-a would return in due time.

The patter of sandaled feet fell upon his ear. Ah! But it was not Arhl-a who burst with the speed of the wind into his cave. It was We-na, breathless from the haste with which she had traveled.

"Where is Arhl-a?"

"I have not seen her since early morn. I had thought to find her with you in the cave of Ze-ka. See!"

The girl thrust her hand into her bosom and displayed a broad fillet of tiger hide.

Wagh's eyes dilated as they recognized the object the girl held. He had fashioned this fillet himself for Arhl-a to wear. His strong hand closed about the wrist of the girl in a viselike grip and tightened until she winced beneath the pressure.

"Speak, girl! Where found We-na the head-dress made for the raven locks of Arhl-a?"

"At the edge of the great jungle, where Wagh spends his day hunting the woolly mammoth and the saber-tooth tiger who preys upon his people and robs the land of the food that they desire. I thought it might be that Arhl-a had joined Wagh in the chase today, but when I saw him return alone I hastened to show him that which I had found."

"We-na did well to come at once to Wagh with her discovery. Come, take him to the place where she found the fillet of tiger-hide that he might seek for trace of what has become of Arhl-a, woman of Wagh."

"Wait. First shall I take the news to Ze-ka, that he may ask the hunters about her as they return. Then shall I show you where I found the ornament."

At last they set out for the edge of the great jungle, and the girl led Wagh to a spot not far from where he had entered the great forest earlier in the day and indicated the spot where she had found the fillet of Arhl-a. There in the earth Wagh read the story of the struggle that had occurred. It was all as plain to him as the pictures that decorated the walls of his cave. He saw that it was no jungle creature to whom she had fallen a victim; it was a two-footed beast that had spirited her away. But who had dared to make off with Arhl-a, woman of Wagh, the Mighty? He would track him to his hiding place and beat out his brains against the side of his own habitation!

It was too late, now, to follow the trail, for already the shades of night

were falling. He would return to his people and there he would count noses. Soon he would know who had stolen his mate away. Then, on the morrow, he would set out upon the trail, and by the antlers of the great reindeer, one of the two would not return alive!

The hunters were nearly all returned, and already the circle fires had been lighted when Wagh reached the camping grounds. The others straggled in by ones and twos until only one remained unaccounted for—Zurd, the Coward.

3

WA GH awoke in the morning as the first rays of the sun were streaking the eastern sky. He selected from the pile of crude weapons in the corner of the cave his favorite lance, the head carved with a likeness of the cave-bear that it might be more effective against him; a stone hatchet which had put the finishing touches to more than one four-footed antagonist; and a long, sharp dagger of stone, with an edge as keen as the finest tempered steel.

Thus armed, the man set out upon his quest. With these simple weapons he would face all the dangers that beset him and make his way to where he knew his Arhl-a must be waiting, an unwilling captive at the mercy of Zurd. With unerring accuracy he read the trail of the fleeing man. Every broken twig or crushed blade of grass bore a message for this man who had learned to interpret their significance. On, and still on, he followed the path so plainly marked for his eyes. At times, when the spoor would not be so clear, he would go along on all fours, his nose close to the ground, sniffing, more like one of the animals of the jungle than man.

He wondered how far the two had gone. He knew that their progress would be slow, for Zurd would be hampered with the burden of the girl

—and he knew that Arhl-a would never have gone with him of her own volition.

Well on toward midday he stopped short in his tracks and listened, for the wind had brought to his quivering nostrils the scent of the reindeer, and Wagh realized that he was hungry. Cautiously, silently, he made his way in the direction where he knew the herd must be grazing. He pushed on through the underbrush without making a sound, for man could, if he chose, move more silently than any of the animals that roamed at the edge of a clearing.

The herd were making their way directly toward his hiding place. It could not have been better if he had planned it out for himself. He swung into the overhanging branches of a big tree and waited, until the last of the reindeer passed beneath the tree. Then, swinging lightly from the branches, he dropped to the back of the hindmost animal and plunged his lance clean to the shaft into its shoulder.

The startled animal plunged into the underbrush with its human freight, and Wagh clung to its spreading antlers for support, lest he be brushed off by the branch of some tree and crushed by the flying feet of his wounded steed. The now frantic animal crashed heedlessly on, trying in vain to shake off its unaccustomed burden. Of a sudden, one foot stepped into a deep hole, and the reindeer stumbled and tottered to its knees. With the agility of a monkey, Wagh sprang clean over its antlers, and before the frightened animal could regain its feet he sank his stone dagger deep into its heart. A last convulsive effort to rise, and the reindeer collapsed and rolled over upon its side, dead!

Regaining his weapons, Wagh proceeded to strip the animal of its pelt. Next he gathered a head of dry leaves and twigs. With a sharp bit of hard

wood and a hollowed-out piece of soft wood he proceeded to build a fire, twirling the hardwood stick upon the other until a spark caught the dry leaves. He nursed the tiny blaze with care, until he had a fire of the size he desired. Then, cutting a large, juicy steak from the animal he had killed, he proceeded to cook his dinner. Retracing his steps, Wagh finally picked up the trail he had left and once more set out upon his way.

All this had taken time, and it was not until late afternoon when Wagh at last came in sight of the cold, barren, deserted cliffs whither Zurd had borne the helpless girl. Every nerve tense, every sense alert, he drew nearer and nearer to the cave where the single trail led. No sound broke the stillness, save the lapping of the sea-waves upon the beach at the foot of the cliffs. Boldly he entered the cavern, before which the fire had smoldered and died. And there, his body already grown cold, he found Zurd, with Arhl-a's stag-handled stone dagger shaft-deep between his shoulder-blades.

But where was Arhl-a?

Once more he took up the trail, harder to follow now, with darkness coming on. Back into the forest Wagh followed the spoor of the woman he loved. Already the moon had risen and flooded the scene with silvery rays. Wagh was desperate. He must find Arhl-a before the animals of the night came out to roam the jungle, else all that he might find would be her bones, picked clean!

Suddenly, upon the somber stillness of the night, rang out a piercing cry—the cry of a human voice, a cry fraught with horror and distress. And in that cry Wagh recognized the voice of Arhl-a!

4

ARHL-A, crouching in the shadows, heard the heavy step of Zurd as he approached the cave. Zurd, his

belly filled with the savory meat of the reindeer, had turned his thoughts to the helpless girl he had left bound in the far corner of the cavern. Suiting action to impulse, he made his way to where he had left her. The food had warmed his body and the blood flowed hot through his veins; he yearned for the solace that only the soft warm body of the girl could give him. His eyes agleam with lust, he entered the cave.

Out of the darkness, Arhl-a sprang.

Zurd reeled and lurched forward unsteadily under the impact of the unexpected attack. He tried to shake off the body that clung to him with a grip of steel. He swore a mighty oath, invoking the anger of the gods upon this girl who dared defy him. He felt a sudden biting, stinging sensation as the blade of the girl's dagger was buried deep into his back. His body burned with a feverish fire. Again the stone knife bit his flesh. He could feel the life-blood gushing from the open wound. He staggered drunkenly and pitched face down upon the floor of the cave. The cavern echoed hideously with his mighty groans. At length they grew weaker, until finally they ceased altogether. . . .

Arhl-a breathed a great sigh of relief as the silence of death fell over the cave. Death, sudden and sure, held no terrors for this girl of the cave and the wilderness. It was the living whom she fought and feared. Exhausted with the strenuous experiences of the day and stopping only long enough to replenish the fire, that she might be protected from the chance prowler from the jungle nearby, she curled up into a snug warm ball and slept—a long, deep, refreshing, dreamless sleep.

When Arhl-a awoke the sun was high in the heavens. With only a passing glance at her lifeless companion she made her way down the side of the cliff to where the sea-waves gently lapped the sun-kissed shore.

Then, letting her single garment of doeskin slip from her white shoulders, she stepped out into the water and bathed, the little waves playing over her lithe form. At last, tired of her sport, she stretched at full length on the sandy beach and basked in the glorious warmth of the sun.

• Donning her doeskin wrap once more, she sought out the remains of the reindeer flesh upon which Zurd had feasted the night before and roasted some of it for her breakfast in the hot embers of the dying fire. Her bodily needs satisfied, Arhl-a became possessed of a desire to be on her way back to her people, and Wagh. But first she must have weapons. She re-entered the cave and stripped the dead body of the weapons it wore, leaving her stag-handled dagger in the body that Wagh, should he be trailing them, might know that she was safe. Thus armed, she scaled the barren walls of the cliff and plunged into the heart of the great forest.

All through the long day she plunged on, ever on. But Arhl-a possessed not the ability of Wagh to follow unerringly the vaguely defined trail through the jungle. It was not until twilight closed about her that the girl realized that she was lost. Had she but known, she had traveled in a gigantic circle and was but a short distance from the cave where she had spent the night before, with the silent form of Zurd her sole companion.

The fast gathering darkness brought with it a disquieting silence—the silence that always preceded the voices of the creatures of the night. Above the tree-tops the white moon shone bright in a clear sky and Arhl-a caught an occasional glimpse of a tiny, twinkling star.

Intent upon finding refuge for the long night ahead, the girl did not see the small, beadlike eyes that peered

at her from the underbrush, nor did she hear the catlike tread of the creature that trailed her as she pushed on. She did not know that long, hairy arms reached out to encircle her, until she felt a gigantic paw close upon her shoulder and she wheeled to meet her new-found foe. But when she saw the wicked eyes that burned into her own, the low, slavering jaw and the hairy, misshapen body of the great ape that held her in its grasp, then horror overwhelmed her and she screamed—a shrill, piercing, blood-curdling scream.

In answer, a mighty form came crashing through the forest and stood before them, and Arhl-a's heart leapt with joy as she beheld the one who had come to her aid—Wagh, her mate and her protector.

With a harsh, guttural cry the ape flung the girl from him and turned to give battle to his more formidable antagonist. Another moment and the two were locked in a mighty, death-like embrace, with only the wide-eyed girl to witness the battle supreme for which she was to be the prize.

SIILENTLY they fought, the stillness broken only by the snapping of dry twigs beneath their feet or the dull thud as the huge bodies crashed against the trunks of the massive trees.

At last Wagh gained the opening he sought and brought his stone ax down with terrific force upon the head of the beast, cleaving it from skull to chin between the eyes. The hairy bulk tottered for a brief instant and toppled in an inert mass at the feet of the victorious man.

And there in the heart of the jungle, with only the moon looking on, the girl found her place in the outstretched arms of the man and the evening breeze softly kissed the re-united pair.