



Drawn by George Varian

THE FIRST POET

BY JACK LONDON

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SCENE: *A summer plain, the eastern side of which is bounded by grassy hills of limestone, the other sides by a forest. The hill nearest to the plain terminates in a cliff, in the face of which, nearly at the level of the ground, are four caves, with low, narrow entrances. Before the caves, and distant from them less than one hundred feet, is a broad, flat rock, on which are laid several sharp slivers of flint, which, like the rock, are blood-stained. Between the rock and the cave-entrances, on a low pile of stones, is squatted a man, stout and hairy. Across his knees is a thick club, and behind him crouches a woman. At his right and left are two men somewhat resembling him, and like him, bearing wooden clubs. These four face the west, and between them and the bloody rock squat some threescore of cave-folk, talking loudly among themselves. It is late afternoon. The name of him on the pile of stones is Uk, the name*

of his mate, Ala; and of those at his right and left, Ok and Un.

Uk:

Be still!

(Turning to the woman behind him)

Thou seest that they become still. None save me can make his kind be still, except perhaps the chief of the apes, when in the night he deems he hears a serpent. . . . At whom dost thou stare so long? At Oan? Oan, come to me!

Oan:

I am thy cub.

Uk:

Oan, thou art a fool!

Ok and Un:

Ho! ho! Oan is a fool!

All the Tribe:

Ho! ho! Oan is a fool!

Oan:

Why am I a fool?

Uk:

Dost thou not chant strange words?
Last night I heard thee chant strange
words at the mouth of thy cave.

Oan:

Aye! they are marvelous words; they
were born within me in the dark.

Uk:

Art thou a woman, that thou shouldst
bring forth? Why dost thou not sleep
when it is dark?

Oan:

I did half sleep; perhaps I dreamed.

Uk:

And why shouldst thou dream, not hav-
ing had more than thy portion of flesh?
Hast thou slain a deer in the forest and
brought it not to the Stone?

All the Tribe:

Wa! Wa! He hath slain in the for-
est, and brought not the meat to the
Stone!

Uk:

Be still, ye!

(*To Ala*)

Thou seest that they become still. . . .
Oan, hast thou slain and kept to thyself?

Oan:

Nay, thou knowest that I am not apt
at the chase. Also it irks me to squat on
a branch all day above a path, bearing a
rock upon my thighs. Those words did
but awaken within me when I was peace-
less in the night.

Uk:

And why wast thou peaceful in the
night?

Oan:

Thy mate wept, for that thou didst
beat her.

Uk:

Aye! she lamented loudly. But thou
shalt make thy half-sleep henceforth at the
mouth of the cave, so that when Gurr the
tiger cometh, thou shalt hear him sniff be-
tween the boulders, and shalt strike the

flints, whose stare he hateth. Gurr cometh
nightly to the caves.

One of the Tribe:

Aye! Gurr smelleth the Stone!

Uk:

Be still!

(*To Ala*)

Had he not become still, Ok and Un
would have beaten him with their clubs.
. . . But, Oan, tell us those words that
were born to thee when Ala did weep.

Oan (arising):

They are wonderful words. They are
such:

The bright day is gone—

Uk:

Now I see thou art liar as well as fool:
behold, the day is not gone!

Oan:

But the day was gone in that hour
when my song was born to me.

Uk:

Then shouldst thou have sung it only
at that time, and not when it is yet day.
But beware lest thou awaken me in the
night. Make thou many stars, that they
fly in the whiskers of Gurr.

Oan:

My song is even of stars.

Uk:

It was Ul, thy father's wont, ere I slew
him with four great stones, to climb to
the tops of the tallest trees and reach forth
his hand, to see if he might not pluck a
star. But I said: "Perhaps they be as
chestnut-burs." And all the tribe did
laugh. Ul was also a fool. But what
dost thou sing of stars?

Oan:

I will begin again:

The bright day is gone.

The night maketh me sad, sad, sad—

Uk:

Nay, the night maketh thee sad; not
sad, sad, sad. For when I say to Ala,
"Gather thou dried leaves," I say not,

"Gather thou dried leaves, leaves, leaves."
Thou art a fool!

Ok and Un:

Thou art a fool!

All the Tribe:

Thou art a fool!

Uk:

Yea, he is a fool. But say on, Oan, and tell us of thy chestnut-burs.

Oan:

I will begin again:

The bright day is gone—

Uk:

Thou dost not say, "gone, gone, gone!"

Oan:

I am thy cub. Suffer that I speak: so shall the tribe admire greatly.

Uk:

Speak on!

Oan:

I will begin once more:

The bright day is gone.

The night maketh me sad, sad—

Uk:

Said I not that "sad" should be spoken but once? Shall I set Ok and Un upon thee with their branches?

Oan:

But it was so born within me—even "sad, sad—"

Uk:

If again thou twice or thrice say "sad," thou shalt be dragged to the Stone.

Oan:

Ow! Ow! I am thy cub! Yet listen:

The bright day is gone.

The night maketh me sad—

Ow! Ow! thou makest me more sad than the night doth! The song—

Uk:

Ok! Un! Be prepared!

Oan (hastily):

Nay! have mercy! I will begin afresh:

The bright day is gone.
The night maketh me sad.
The—the—the—

Uk:

Thou hast forgotten, and art a fool!
See, Ala, he is a fool!

Ok and Un:

He is a fool!

All the Tribe:

He is a fool!

Oan:

I am not a fool! This is a new thing. In the past, when ye did chant, O men, ye did leap about the Stone, beating your breasts and crying, "Hai, hai, hai!" Or, if the moon was great, "Hai, hai! hai, hai, hai!" But this song is made even with such words as ye do speak, and is a great wonder. One may sit at the cave's mouth, and moan it many times as the light goeth out of the sky.

One of the Tribe:

Aye! even thus doth he sit at the mouth of our cave, making us marvel, and more especially the women.

Uk:

Be still! . . . When I would make women marvel, I do show them a wolf's brains upon my club, or the great stone that I cast, or perhaps do whirl my arms mightily, or bring home much meat. How should a man do otherwise? I will have no songs in this place.

Oan:

Yet suffer that I sing my song unto the tribe. Such things have not been before. It may be that they shall praise thee, seeing that I who do make this song am thy cub.

Uk:

Well, let us have the song.

Oan (facing the tribe):

The bright day is gone.
The night maketh me sa—sad.
But the stars are very white.
They whisper that the day shall return.
O stars! little pieces of the day!

Uk:

This is indeed madness. Hast thou heard a star whisper? Did Ul, thy father, tell thee that he heard the stars whisper when he was in the tree-top? And, of what moment is it that a star be a piece of the day, seeing that its light is of no value? Thou art a fool!

Ok and Un:

Thou art a fool!

All the Tribe:

Thou art a fool!

Oan:

But it was so born unto me. And at that birth it was as though I would weep, yet had not been stricken; I was moreover glad, yet none had given me a gift of meat.

Uk:

It is a madness. How shall the stars profit us? Will they lead us to a bear's den, or where the deer foregather, or break for us great bones that we come at their marrow? Will they tell us anything at all? Wait thou until the night, and we shall peer forth from between the boulders, and all men shall take note that the stars cannot whisper. . . . Yet it may be that they are pieces of the day. This is a deep matter.

Oan:

Aye! they are pieces of the moon!

Uk:

What further madness is this? How shall they be pieces of two things that are not the same? Also it was not thus in the song.

Oan:

I will make me a new song. We do change the shape of wood and stone, but a song is made out of nothing. Ho! ho! I can fashion things from nothing! Also I say that the stars come down at morning and become the dew.

Uk:

Let us have no more of these stars. It may be that a song is a good thing, if it be of what a man knoweth. Thus, if thou singest of my club, or of the bear that I slew, of the stain on the Stone, or

the cave and the warm leaves in the cave, it might be well.

Oan:

I will make thee a song of Ala!

Uk (furiously):

Thou shalt make me no such song! Thou shalt make me a song of the deer-liver that thou hast eaten! Did I not give to thee of the liver of the she-deer, because thou didst bring me crawfish?

Oan:

Truly I did eat of the liver of the she-deer; but to sing thereof is another matter.

Uk:

It was no labor for thee to sing of the stars. See now our clubs and casting-stones, with which we slay flesh to eat; also the caves in which we dwell, and the Stone whereon we make sacrifice; wilt thou sing no song of those?

Oan:

It may be that I shall sing thee songs of them. But now, as I strive here to sing of the doe's liver, no words are born unto me: I can but sing, "O liver! O red liver!"

Uk:

That is a good song: thou seest that the liver is red. It is red as blood.

Oan:

But I love not the liver, save to eat of it.

Uk:

Yet the song of it is good. When the moon is full we shall sing it about the Stone. We shall beat upon our breasts and sing, "O liver! O red liver!" And all the women in the caves shall be affrightened.

Oan:

I will not have that song of the liver! It shall be Ok's song; the tribe must say, "Ok hath made the song!"

Ok:

Aye! I shall be a great singer; I shall sing of a wolf's heart, and say, "Behold, it is red!"

Uk:

Thou art a fool, and shalt sing only, "Hai, hai!" as thy father before thee. But Oan shall make me a song of my club, for the women listen to his songs.

Oan:

I will make thee no songs, neither of thy club, nor thy cave, nor thy doe's-liver. Yea! though thou give me no more flesh, yet will I live alone in the forest, and eat the seed of grasses, and likewise rabbits, that are easily snared. And I will sleep in a tree-top, and I will sing nightly:

The bright day is gone.

The night maketh me sad, sad, sad,
sad, sad, sad—

Uk:

Ok, and Un, arise and slay!

(*Ok and Un rush upon Oan, who stoops and picks up two casting-stones, with one of which he strikes Ok between the eyes, and with the other mashes the hand of Un, so that he drops his club. Uk arises.*)

Uk:

Behold! Gurr cometh! he cometh swiftly from the wood!

(*The Tribe, including Oan and Ala, rush for the cave-mouths. As Oan passes Uk, the latter runs behind him and crushes his skull with a blow of his club.*)

Uk:

O men! O men with the heart of hyenas! Behold, Gurr cometh not! I did but strive to deceive you, that I might the more easily slay this singer, who is very swift of foot. . . . Gather ye before me, for I would speak wisdom. . . . It is not well that there be any song among us other than what our fathers sang in the past, or, if there be songs, let them be of such mat-

ters as are of common understanding. If a man sing of a deer, so shall he be drawn, it may be, to go forth and slay a deer, or even a moose. And if he sing of his casting-stones, it may be that he become more apt in the use thereof. And if he sing of his cave, it may be that he shall defend it more stoutly when Gurr teareth at the boulders. But it is a vain thing to make songs of the stars, that seem scornful even of me; or of the moon, which is never two nights the same; or of the day, which goeth about its business and will not linger though one pierce a she-babe with a flint. But as for me, I would have none of these songs. For if I sing of such in the council, how shall I keep my wits? And if I think thereof, when at the chase, it may be that I babble it forth, and the meat hear and escape. And ere it be time to eat, I do give my mind solely to the care of my hunting-gear. And if one sing when eating, he may fall short of his just portion. And when one hath eaten, doth not he go straightway to sleep? So where shall men find a space for singing? But do ye as ye will: as for me, I will have none of these songs and stars.

Be it also known to all the women that if, remembering these wild words of Oan, they do sing them to themselves, or teach them to the young ones, they shall be beaten with brambles. Cause swiftly that the wife of Ok cease from her wailing, and bring hither the horses that were slain yesterday, that I may apportion them. Had Oan wisdom, he might have eaten thereof; and had a mammoth fallen into our pit, he might have feasted many days. But Oan was a fool!

Un:

Oan was a fool!

All the Tribe:

Oan was a fool!

THE END

