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The People of the Arrow

P. Schuyler Miller is the dean of contemporary Science Fiction Reviewers. This classic story of a crucial event in Man's prehistory testifies to his skill as a writer as well as a critic of Science Fiction.

By P. SCHUYLER MILLER

FOR seven days the wet earth had smoked. A shroud of gray mist lay close over the world, thick and evil, hiding the face of the Sun-father. In the night the darkness clung stiflingly about the skin huts of the Arrow-people and they lay without sleep, listening to the dark.

The night spoke with many voices of evil. The river flowed with an almost soundless rushing, chuckling over heaped-up reefs of boulders left by the Great Ice. It tore hungrily at the black flank of the mountain, naked and steaming with the new, rich life that had followed the Cold. Great moist clots of the rich earth fell away with the slithering tear of rootlets, and the soft plop of their falling and the avid gurgle of the river faded away again into the rushing silence.

The forest spoke, though no wind stirred. Its voice was the whisper of many branches, swaying and pressing in the night, of branches drawing secretly aside from the things that went four-footedly and two-footedly along the silent-needled paths beneath them. Branches murmuring of things that flitted soundlessly among them and above them through the clinging mists. Branches suddenly hushed with fear of things that were unseen.

Kor stood sniffing the night. The gash in his side was stiff and sore, caked still with dried blood and grease and the red and yellow paint of battle. The Old One had been hard to kill, twisted though he was by many scars, but the

totem of his place hung from its thong about the sinewy throat of Kor, the Wolf-Slayer. Kor was Old One of the Arrow-people! Kor was the voice of the Great Wolf, warrior brother of the Sun-father!

And Kor feared the night.

Not with a knowing fear. His terror was the atavistic terror of his race, in-born in forgotten ages. The memories told of great, green plains to the southward, where the Arrow-people had dwelt since there was time, but the fear was before that. Silver rivers twisted like flung thongs through the green uplands and bushy copses edged their rippling shallows. Food-beasts thundered on tireless hoofs across those rolling steppes, unwary, unafraid of men, and the sky above shining lakes was black with the wings of water-fowl. Great fish basked in the pebbled pools and flung themselves, mad with the lust of spawning, into the singing shallows.

That was the old Land—the good Land—the green Land of the memories. The right hand of the Sun-father had fallen in wrath upon it. The rains fled and his flaming face was never hidden. The green plains grew sere and brown under his pitiless gaze; fewer and fewer were the beasts that men might kill, fewer and warier the birds. Fire scourged the prairie and the game fled before it, far through the red night. The dust came, stripping the flame-seared uplands, choking the shallow lakes.

The wrath of the Sun-father was terrible to behold, and the Arrow-people



quailed in fear beneath it. Their children died unborn, their old men perished with the ancient memories unspoken. Their women were few and ugly and their warriors gaunt with days of famine.

But the Sun-father was just. With his flaming right hand he lashed the green prairies and made of them a desert of rock and barren sands, but with his left hand he sent the Great Wolf, his sky-brother, to give new life to the People of the Arrow.

Kor was Old One then, the memories said. Kor, father of Kor—father of many Kors through the years. Behind his footsteps the Arrow-people followed the trail of the Great Wolf, northward through the mountains, their faces turned to the star that does not move, the night-eye of the Sun-father, ever watching, ever knowing. They came to the herds of food beasts and fed as the children of the Wolf fed and moved again as the wolves moved, with the desert at their backs.

Kor, the son of Kor—son of many Kors since that first one who heard the voice of the Wolf—Kor was Old One when they came to the bitter waters. For long the Arrow-people dwelt in plenty by the shores, finding new foods, learning new lives, forgetting old memories. There were many children among the skin huts and plump and comely wives for the Old One and his bowmen. Kor died and another was Old One in his stead. Kor was of the memories, forgotten. The Arrow-people scattered and the ways of one village were no longer the ways of their sun-brothers. Their bows sang in warfare, each with the other. Their footsteps led along the shores of the great sea and beyond it where other, greater mountains stared

down at them from the sky's edge and vast black forests frowned from the steeps. They forgot the Great Wolf, arrow-brother of the Sun-father in his war on darkness. But a few remembered.

KOR remembered. Kor, son of Kor—Kor, the Wolf-Slayer. Naked he went where the snows lay deep on the high peaks and slew the great white Wolf-King of the north and drank his hot blood where it spilled out on the snow. The wolf's fat healed his wounds and the skin of the wolf hung about his loins. Son of the Great Wolf he became, by right of the blood of that Wolf-son he had slain, and when he came again to the huddle of skin huts beside the great north-reaching river, the Arrow-people welcomed him and sang again the memories and danced the Wolf-dance before the cave of Mog.

He came into the firelight—Mog, the Old One, the Sun-Drinker—and the thrust of his great spear brushed the skin of the white wolf where it lay against Kor's side. Kor's knife came in his hand and his eyes were keen in the firelight. His voice gave the cry of the Wolf-King and beyond the darkness the Great Wolf answered, wailing through the night.

Mog heard it—Mog, the Sun-Drinker—Mog, dancing the blind and wavering Sun-dance, drunk with the red, stinging blood of the Sun that was his alone, save on the day of feasting when all the people of the Arrow drank and leaped and shouted in honor of their father in the sky.

Mog heard it, and there was fear in his eyes. The blood of the Sun ran in his veins like his own blood, and the Sun was sleeping. Sleep was heavy in his eyes and in his limbs and clouded his brain. Sleep made the night waver and blur about him, and out of it came the

eager clamor of the Wolf and a keen knife thrusting under the clumsy lunge of his spear.

Kor was Old One of the Arrow-people!

He led them slowly northward along the great, rushing river, following the Wolf as of yore. Some cried against him among the people, but his spear was strong and quick. The hills closed in behind them, black with spruce and pine and drooping hemlock. At night the skin huts of the Arrow-people huddled close by the river's edge in a clearing torn from the long grass. With the Sun-coming the bowmen lay in wait for the beasts that came to drink at the river, and there was no hunger among the people. But there was fear.

Kor stood staring at the night. Fear clogged the bodies and dulled the senses of his people, as the Sun-blood had numbed the mind and body of Mog. Fear of the dark and the voices of the dark, and of the unknown that lay in the dark northland. Fear made more terrible by the gray, clinging fog of evil, that hid the bright face of the Sun-father.

He knew that fear. It lay in his own heart like a dull gnawing, but with it there was a yearning that made the ache seem small. The gap in the black hills beckoned him and the river lay lazy, like a silver pathway leading into the unseen. His blood throbbed in his temples and a queer nostalgia gripped him. He longed for open uplands dark with grazing herds and for the ripple of wind over the tall grasses and the river a shining ribbon across the world. He longed for the hungry wail of the wolf-pack running the clear night where the bright eye of the Sun-father gazed unhidden upon his children. And in his blood, driving him on and on, was the faith and knowledge that those things lay be-

fore him, somewhere beyond these mountains of cold and night.

He fingered the carved pendant that hung at his throat. Age had yellowed it and countless caressing fingers had worn it to a glistening smoothness, but its cunningly fashioned curves still prisoned the crouching body of a wolf, the great white Wolf-father who was brother of the Sun. Men still shaped wood and bone with their flint knives, but none so cunningly as this, nor had any of the Arrow-people seen bone so hard and fine and smooth.

For some time now the voices of the darkness had been stilled. A wan white light was filtering through the mist. Behind him the noises of the waking camp broke the early morning stillness—the crying of a child, the low murmur of women, the pat of the hunters' naked feet. As the sun climbed higher, Kor sensed a restless stirring of the fog-curtains. The surface of the river no longer steamed and the dark edge of the forest loomed closer. Streamers of vapor lay low over the meadow, twisting and coiling, like vast, grey serpents. And then on the moist skin of his naked body he felt the touch of cool fingers, and the grasses stirred and whispered eagerly in the freshening breeze.

He turned. High above the river he stood, a magnificent bronzed figure, his broad chest streaked with ziz-zag bands of graphite and ochre, the pelt of the white wolf twisted about his muscular waist. At his voice the bustle of the little encampment ceased and all eyes turned up to where he stood.

"Ho!" he shouted. "Ho, my people. The Sun-father smiles again. Today we follow the Wolf!"

It seemed, in the weeks that followed, that fog and darkness and fear had gone forever. The Sun-father smiled benignly from cloudless heavens and the game

came readily to their arrows and spears. Steadily the Arrow-folk moved north along the banks of the still-youthful Rhone, brimming with blue snow-water from the melting ice of a long, post-glacial winter. Their stomachs were full, and though now and again dark eyes turned fearfully toward the black barrier of the forest, no one grumbled audibly and in some the flame of Kor's own atavistic unrest was smouldering.

THEN, finally, Kor realized that a subtle change had come over the game. The little forest deer were more timid; they came watchfully to drink and it was no longer possible to slip within spearthrow. The great broad-horned stag of the forests they had not seen for many days, nor, though the mountains were pressing ever closer to the narrowing river, did hunters often find the spoor of the great cave bear or find the strewn bounty of his gartantuan fishing orgies.

They came to a pleasant bowl among the hills where the river widened and flowed more sluggishly, and the hills withdrew a little on the east. The grassy meadow should have thundered with the drumming hoofs of startled auroch herds, frightened by their coming. Only a raven sailed heavily above the forest, croaking dismally.

Here they camped. Kor was worried; why he could not say. Something in the atmosphere of the place disturbed him, and for the first time he forgot the urge that drove him northward. That night he sat alone before his hut, listening. Night after night he had sat thus, listening for the far-off crying of the wolf-packs, as it gave tongue along the northward trail. But now it did not come.

No game came to the meadow with dawn. That day they went hungry, and the next, and then with the third sun

Kor led his hunters out in search of meat. Mile after mile they followed the winding river without success. Then, where a tributary stream came tumbling down from the western hills and the forest wall loomed almost at their shoulder as they filed along, they found what they sought.

A well-trodden game trail wound down out of the forest past a cliff of whitish clay. Hoofs had beaten that way to the water and those same hoofs had pawed and cut at the savory soil of the salt-lick. The spoor was fresh—deer had been here within the day.

Superstition was submerged in the need to kill. Nor was the forest so terrible by day. Intent on the evidence of the trail he strode fearlessly into the shadow of the great pines. Two or three of his hunters followed; the others spread to examine the salt-lick and the nearby stream for suitable points of ambush.

In the half-dark of the forest it was difficult to read the spoor. The trail was a mass of tracks—aurochs, deer, moose, and with them the prints of carnivores great and small. They grew aware of the oppressive gloom and Kor found himself peering furtively down the shadowed aisles under the great, low-hanging hemlocks. He was about to turn back when his keen eyes caught an odd irregularity in the trail. He strode quickly forward. With a crackle of dry branches he plunged feet-first into a deep pit!

For a moment he lay stunned; then he sprang to his feet. He had missed by a hand's breadth a row of sharpened stakes driven point upward in the bottom of the pit. A stag or bison would have been impaled.

The pit had been dug by men!

Before he clambered out, Kor shouted for a twist of grass and a coal from the fire-ball that one man always carried.

The tinder-dry grass blazed furiously for a moment, revealing every corner of the pit. Imprinted in the wet clay were the marks of human feet, naked and huge. Nor were they the high-arched, narrow prints of Kor's own race. Flat, splayed, misshapen, these were the feet of apes rather than of men!

EVERY minute on that long back-trail seemed an age. The camp had been deserted, save for three young hunters left to supervise the fishing. Their women were alone with children and half a score of men too ancient for anything but flint-napping and memories. Kor dreaded what they would find in that unprotected camp.

He was not prepared for the horror that was there. Men and women lay in a welter of blood among the ruins of the skin huts. Their skulls were beaten in, their bodies gashed and torn and great masses of flesh ripped from them as by ravenous beasts. The air reeked with the stench of burnt flesh. Kor's lips tightened at the evidence of the terrible feast that had occurred.

Everywhere were the prints of those brutish feet. There had been scores of the things. The old men had gone down like felled deer and even the three young men, stalwart fighters though they were, had been literally torn to pieces by overwhelming odds. Four women and a child were dead. The rest were gone.

The things had had weapons. They found two huge knives, beaten out of coarse-grained flint with the crust still clinging to one side. The great gashes in the skulls and bodies of the dead had been made by something still huger and more terrible, and some bore the marks of wooden spears. These monsters killed by brute force. What were they, that mocked the shape of men?

Once, twice, he shouted the weird cry of his totem, and the voices of his men

rang with him in a demented howl of hate. Far above them on the wooded mountain side the wailing Wolf-song answered them. Fiercely he shook his chieftains' spear aloft and gave it tongue again, and again the answer came eerily from the cliffs, fainter, hungrier, eager for the kill. Every ear heard it; every eye blazed with a new fire. It was the voice of the Great Wolf! It was a sign!

The beast men were cunning in the dark. Their splayed feet bore them tracelessly over the forest floor, by ways they knew of old. But the women of the Arrow-people had the blood of generations of fighters in their veins. They fought savagely, like wild things, until their captors beat them into submission. The trail they left was plain to the dull-est of Kor's men. And when it vanished, as the unconscious women were flung over brutish shoulders, Kor knew that he would not lose it again.

The scent of the things reeked in his nostrils. Hanging in the still air of the forest, the acrid fear-scent of the stolen women came plainly to them and reddened their flaming rage, but so overpowering, as almost to hide it, was the foul, musky odor of the beast-things, like the den-stench of the great flesh-eating beasts. It sickened them and poured red fury into their brains. Their eyes were keen in the darkness. And ever and again Kor gave whispering tongue to the clan-cry of the Wolf, and it seemed that the Wolf would answer from afar.

Night laid a deeper gloom over the blackfastness of the forest, but the reek of the burdened things was hotter and fresher in their nostrils and they ran bent low over the trail like great wolves questing. Deeper and deeper they plunged into the pillared darkness, and higher and higher they climbed, until they ran close under the cliff of riddled limestone that rimmed the valley on the west.

Caution was flung aside. They ran blindly, like men gone mad. And they *were* mad!

It was near daybreak. The sky, that they glimpsed through gaps in the forest, was graying and the shadowed aisles were taking on form again. Suddenly Kor saw the red glow of a fire.

They crept closer through the trees. The forest ended where the cliffs came down close to the river's edge, and in the open, built on a great flat rock, the embers of a huge campfire burned fitfully.

KOR'S eyes went to the cliffs. Two huge holes gaped at their base, black and ominous even in the growing light. And that light revealed the debris of an orgy that made the blood pound madly in his skull. He sprang to his feet. Blood-mad, his men were leaping past him into the open. Wolf-song, Sun-song, all were forgotten as he belated the insane challenge of a man berserk.

The caves spewed out misshapen life, like bees pouring from a hive. The place stank of the things; their filth and refuse strewn the rocks—and now from their dens in the earth the beasts themselves came shambling.

They were smaller than a man. Their massive legs were bent and crooked, their backs warped until their great blunt paws hung far below their knees. Little red eyes peered under protruding brows; thick, sucking lips slavered and spewed out clucking speech. Man stood facing hairy, grizzled beasts, across a hundred feet of rock, as at Kor's wild scream a score of bowstrings sang.

The beasts went down like logs. Their mighty bodies stiffened with the shock, then beat and writhed in horrible contortions though bone-tipped hunting arrows stood out a foot behind their backs. Twice the bows of the Arrow-people

buzzed with death; twice the beast-things went down among the rocks in thrashing heaps. Then their dull brains woke and with a shambling lurch they charged.

They had outnumbered Kor's small force by nearly two to one. But the Arrows had changed those odds. Now in the forefront of his men the Wolf-Slayer flung his bow aside and raced with lifted spear to meet that charge.

Wall smashed into wall of flesh. Kor's spear hissed low under an upflung arm into the hairy body of the leading thing. Its strong shaft broke in Kor's hand as the thing went down; tearing it free he sprang across the sprawling body and drove the splintered wood with all his strength into the breast of the beast beyond.

It bellowed pain and blood. Its little red eyes blazed into his, as one huge fist came up clenched on a mighty pointed blade of flint. As that fist smashed down at his unprotected skull Kor tried to swerve, but the press of rushing bodies drove him on. His left hand reached for that bestial face and pushed it back; his right hand drove a knife again and again into that barrel-chest.

Twice the massive hand-axe came smashing down, tearing great gashes in the muscles of his back. He felt his left arm crumple, felt the other's brutal fingers at his neck, crushing the very vertebrae. His arm came up; with one last savage effort he drove his knife home in the hairy throat just under the thing's receding chin and let the sinews rip as he tore it out. Then suddenly that terrible grip on his spine was gone and all about him his men were stabbing in insane frenzy at the bloody carcasses of the monsters they had slain.

In the caves their women were fighting fiercely with females of the same demonic breed. Spawn of the things scratched and bit like bear cubs, before

they broke their misshapen backs. Sick with the horror of that which had occurred, Kor and his hunters killed until nothing lived to die. Their own meagre numbers were shrunken, for the things had fought with the strength and fury of the beasts they seemed. Yet, staring at them where they lay for the ravens to find, Kor knew that they were men.

HE stood on the cliff-top, high above the caves. Forests, black and menacing, reached away as far as he could see to the north, yet beyond that illimitable waste of darkness there was no bounding line of snow-capped mountains thrusting at the skies. The river flowed down out of that unknown north, and in the night, curtains of ghostly fire swayed and billowed among the stars beneath the glittering eye of the Sun-father.

What was there in the north, beyond the forests and the mountains, beyond the river's end and the end of rivers beyond that? It was the home of the gray man-things, but now the people of the Arrow would be ready and waiting when they came, and there would be war to the death between them until one race or both had vanished. They were few now, his people—all too few, now that their children were gone and many of their women—but they could rest here at the border of that unknown land, until they had grown again in strength and numbers and the time had come for Kor, or the son of Kor, to lead them on into the north where the Great Wolf waited for his children.

Kor—or the son of Kor? Which would it be? And as his fingers closed about the ivory emblem of the Wolf its mystery rose tantalizingly before him. For in the cave of the things they had found a giant, broken tusk, longer than a man, and Kor knew that its smooth white bone-stuff was the material from which the pendant had been carved, in ages gone and in another land.

Kor—or the son of Kor. Down out of forgotten times it had come, bearing the power and honor of the Wolf. Into the ages it would go, leading them on and on, passing from hand to hand—into the darksome forest-country of the beast-things, where cannibal fires burned evilly before ancient caves—into that visioned land beyond, land of vast sweeping meadows and mighty, fearless herds, of plenty and of peace. Always seeking the Great Wolf, always following the eerie keening of his earthly children, as they ran the hunger race through the long dark night.

He looked at it as it lay there in his cupped palms. A bit of carven bone, cunningly wrought, with magic woven in its lines and curves. Out of the memories it had come, into the hand of Kor, the son of Kor. For a while he would hold it, until that hand should weaken and let it fall. Until Kor was only a memory, and Kor's son, and all the people of the Arrow and the beast-things that they fought here in these strange new lands.

Then one day it would rest.

He wondered when.