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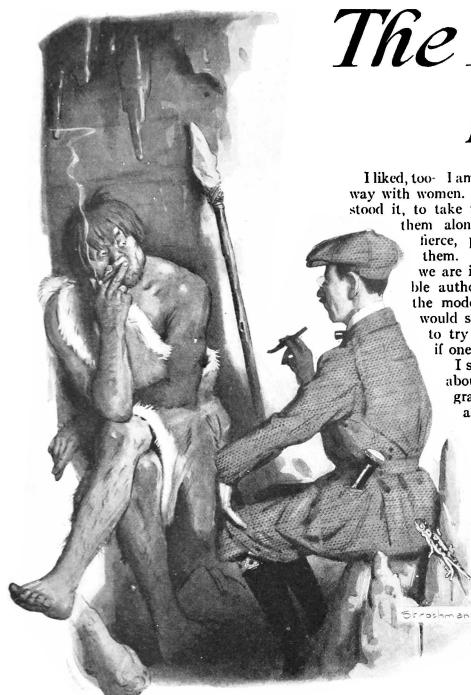
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The Real Cave-Man

By Stephen Leacock
Illustrated by F. Strothmann



"Have you never been outside?" I asked. "No fear!" said the Cave-man. "Not for mine—not safe!"

ITHINK it likely that few people besides myself have ever actually seen and spoken with a "cave-man."

Yet everybody nowadays knows all about the cave-man. The fifteen-cent magazines and the new fiction have made him a familiar figure. A few years ago, it is true, nobody had ever heard of him. But lately, for some reason or other, there has been a run on the cave-man. No up-to-date story is complete without one or two references to him. The hero, when the heroine slighted him, is said to "feel for a moment the wild, primordial desire of the cave-man, the longing to seize her, to drag her with him, to carry her away, to make her his." When he takes her in his arms it is recorded that "all the elemental passion of the cave-man surges through him." When he fights, on her behalf, against a dray-man or a gun-man or an ice-man or any other compound that makes up a modern villain, he is said to "feel all the fierce fighting joy of the cave-man." If they kick him in the ribs, he likes it. If they beat him over the head he never feels it; because he is, for the moment, a cave-man. And the cave-man is, and is known to be, quite above sensation.

The heroine, too, shares the same point of view. "Take me," she murmurs as she falls into the hero's embrace, "be my cave-man." As she says it there is, so the writer assures us, something of the fierce light of the cave-woman in her eyes, the primordial woman to be wooed and won only by force.

So like everybody else, I had, till I saw him, a great idea of the cave-man. I had a clear mental picture of him: huge, brawny, muscular, a wolfskin thrown about him and a great war-lub in his hand. I knew him as without fear, with nerves untouched by our effete civilization, fighting, as the beasts fight, to the death, killing without pity and suffering without a moan.

It was a picture that I could not but admire.

I liked, too— I am free to confess it— his peculiar way with women. His system was, as I understood it, to take them by the neck and bring them along with him. That was his fierce, primordial way of "wooming" them. And they liked it. So at least we are informed by a thousand credible authorities. They liked it. And the modern women, so we are told, would still like it if only one dared to try it on. There's the trouble; if one only dared!

I see lots of them—I'll be frank about it—that I should like to grab, to sling over my shoulder and carry away with me; or, what is the same thing, allowing for modern conditions, have an expressman carry them. I noticed them at Atlantic City, I see them on Fifth Avenue—yes, everywhere.

But would they come? That's the *deuce* of it. Would they come right along, like the cave-woman, merely biting off my ear as they came, or are they degenerate enough to bring an action-at-law against me, indicting the express company as a party of the second part?

Doubts such as these prevent me from taking active measures. But they leave me, as they leave many another man, preoccupied and fascinated with the cave-man.

One may imagine, then, my extraordinary interest in him when I actually met him in the flesh. Yet the thing came about quite simply, indeed more by accident than by design, an adventure open to all.

It so happened that I spent my vacation in Kentucky—the region, as everybody knows, of the great caves. They extend, it is a matter of common knowledge, for hundreds of miles; in some places dark and sunless tunnels, the black silence broken only by the dripping of the water from the roof; in other places great vaults like subterranean temples, with vast stone arches sweeping to the dome, and with deep, still water of unfathomed depth as the floor; and here and there again they are lighted from above through rifts in the surface of the earth, and are dry and sand strewn—fit for human habitation.

In such caves as these, so has the obstinate legend run for centuries, there still dwell cave-men, the dwindled remnant of their race. And here it was that I came across him.

I had penetrated into the caves far beyond my guides. I carried a revolver and had with me an electric lantern, but the increasing sunlight in the cave as I went on had rendered the latter needless.

There he sat, a huge figure, clad in a great wolfskin. Beside him lay a great club. Across his knee was a spear round which he was binding sinews that tightened under his muscular hand. His head was bent over his task. His matted hair had fallen over his eyes. He did not see me till I was close beside him on the sanded floor of the cave.

I gave a slight cough. "Excuse me!" I said. The Cave-man gave a startled jump. "My goodness," he said, "you startled me!"

I could see that he was quite trembling. "You came along so suddenly," he said, "it

gave me the jumps." Then he muttered, more to himself than to me, "too much of this darned cave-water! I must quit drinking it."

I sat down near to the Cave-man on a stone, taking care to place my revolver carefully behind it. I don't mind admitting that a loaded revolver, especially as I get older, makes me nervous. I was afraid that he might start fooling with it. One can't be too careful!

As a way of opening conversation I picked up the Cave-man's club. "Say," I said, "that's a great club you have, eh? By gee! it's heavy!"

"Look out!" said the Cave-man with a certain agitation in his voice as he reached out and took the club from me; "don't fool with that club! It's loaded! You know you could easily drop that club on your toes, or on mine. A man can't be too careful with a loaded club."

He rose as he said this and carried the club to the other side of the cave where he leant it against the wall. Now that he stood up I could examine him no longer looked so big. In fact he was not big at all. The effect of size must have come, I think, from the great wolf-skin that he wore. I have noticed the same thing in Grand Opera. I noticed, too, for the first time that the cave we were in seemed fitted up, in a rude sort of way, like a dwelling-room. "This is a nice place you've got," I said.

"Dandy, isn't it?" he said, as he cast his eyes around. "She fixed it up. She's got great taste. See that mud sideboard? That's the real thing, A-one mud! None of your cheap rock about that. We fetched that mud for two miles to make that. And look at that wicker bucket. Isn't it great? Hardly leaks at all except through the sides, and perhaps a little through the bottom." She wove that. She's a humdinger at weaving."

He was moving about as he spoke, showing me all his little belongings. He reminded me for all the world of a man in a Harlem flat, showing a visitor how convenient it all is. Somehow, too, the Cave-man had lost all appearance of size. He looked, in fact, quite little, and when he had pushed his long hair back from his forehead he seemed to wear that same, worried, apologetic look that we all have. To a higher being, if there is such, our little faces one and all appear, no doubt, pathetic.

I knew that he must be speaking about his wife.

"Where is she?" I asked. "My wife?" he said. "Oh, she's gone out somewhere through the caves with the kid. You didn't meet our kid as you came along, did you? No? Well, he's the greatest boy you ever saw. He was only two this nineteenth of August. And you should hear him say "Pop" and "Mom" just as if he was grown up. He is really, I think, about the brightest boy I've ever known—I mean quite apart from being his father, and speaking of him as if he were anyone else's boy. You didn't meet them?"

"No," I said, "I didn't."

"Oh, well," the Cave-man went on: "there are lots of ways and passages through. I guess they went in another direction. The wife generally likes to take a stroll round in the morning and see some of the neighbors. But, say," he interrupted, "I guess I'm forgetting manners. Let me get you a drink of cave-water. Here, take it in this stone mug! There you are, say when! Where do we get it? Oh, we find it in parts of the cave where it filters through the soil above. Alcoholic? Oh yes, about fifteen per cent., I think. Some say it soaks all through the soil of this State. Sit down and be comfortable, and, say, if you hear the woman coming just slip your mug behind that stone out of sight. Do you mind? Now, try one of these elm-

root cigars. Oh, pick a good one—there are lots of them!"

We seated ourselves in some comfort on the soft sand, our backs against the boulders, sipping cave-water and smoking elm-root cigars. It seemed altogether as if one were back in civilization, talking to a genial host.

"Yes," said the Cave-man, and he spoke as it were in a large and patronizing way. "I generally let my wife trot about as she likes in the daytime. She and the other women nowadays are getting up all these different movements, and the way I look at it is that if it amuses her to run round and talk and attend meetings, why let her do it. Of course," he continued, assuming a look of great firmness, "if I liked to put my foot down——"

"Exactly, exactly," I said; "it's the same way with us!"

"Is it now?" he questioned with interest. "I had imagined that it was all different Outside. You're from the Outside, aren't you? I guessed you must be from the skins you wear."

"Have you never been Outside?" I asked.

"No fear!" said the Cave-man. "Not for mine! Down in here in the caves, clean underground and mostly in the dark, it's all right. It's nice and safe." He gave a sort of shudder. "Geel! You fellows out there must have your nerve to go walking around like that on the outside rim of everything, where the stars might fall on you or a thousand things happen to you. But then you Outside Men have got a natural elemental fearlessness about you that we Cave-men have lost. I tell you, I was pretty scared when I looked up and saw you standing there."

"Had you never seen any Outside Men?" I asked.

"Why, yes," he answered, "but never close. The most I've done is to go out to the edges of the cave sometimes and look out and see them, Outside Men and Women, in the distance. But of course, in one way and another, we Cave-men know all about them. And the thing we envy most in you Outside Men is the way you treat your women! By geel! You take no nonsense from them—you fellows are the real primordial, primitive men. We've lost it somehow."

"Why, my dear fellow——" I began.

But the Cave-man, who had sat suddenly upright, interrupted.

"Quick! quick!" he said. "Hide that infernal mug! She's coming. Don't you hear?"

As he spoke I caught the sound of a woman's

voice somewhere in the outer passages of the cave.

"Now, Willie," she was saying, speaking evidently to the Cave-child, "you come right along back with me, and if I ever catch you getting in such a mess as that again I'll never take you anywhere, so there!"

Her voice had grown louder. She entered the cave as she spoke—a big-boned woman in a suit of skins leading by the hand a pathetic little mite in a rabbit-skin, with blue eyes and a slobbered face.

But as I was sitting the Cave-woman evidently couldn't see me; for she turned at once to speak to her husband, unconscious of my presence.

"Well, of all the idle creatures!" she exclaimed, "loafing here in the sand!" she gave a sniff, "and smoking——!"

"My dear," began the Cave-man.

"Don't you my-dear me!" she answered. "Look at this place! Nothing tidied up yet and the day half through! Did you put the alligator on to boil?"

"I was just going to say——" began the Cave-man.

"Going to say! Yes, I don't doubt you were going to say. You'd go on saying all day if I'd let you. What I'm asking you is, Is the alligator on to boil for dinner or is it not—— My gracious!" She broke off all of a sudden, as she caught sight of me. "Why didn't you say there was company? Land sakes! And you sit there and never say there was a gentleman here!"

She had hustled across the cave and was busily arranging her hair with a pool of water as a mirror.

"Gracious!" she said, "I'm a perfect fright! You must excuse me," she added, looking round toward me, "for being in this state. I'd just slipped on this old fur blouse and run round to a neighbor's and I'd no idea that he was going to bring in company. Just like him! I'm afraid we've nothing but a plain alligator stew for you, but I'm sure if you'll stay to dinner——"

She was hustling about already, good primitive

housewife that she was, making the stone-plates rattle on the mud table.

"Why, really——" I began. But I was interrupted by a sudden exclamation from both the Cave-man and the Cave-woman together, "Willie! where's Willie!"

"Gracious!" cried the woman. "He's wandered out alone—oh, hurry, look for him! Something might get him! He may have fallen in the water! Oh, hurry!"

They were off in a moment, shouting into the dark passages of the outer cave: "Willie! Willie!" There was agonized anxiety in their voices.

And then in a moment as it seemed they were back again, with Willie in their arms, blubbering, his rabbit-skin all wet.

"Goodness gracious!" said the Cave-woman. "He'd fallen right in, the poor little man. Hurry, dear, and get something dry to wrap him in! Goodness, what a fright! Quick, darling, give me something to rub him with."

Anxiously the Cave-parents moved about beside the child, all quarrel vanished.

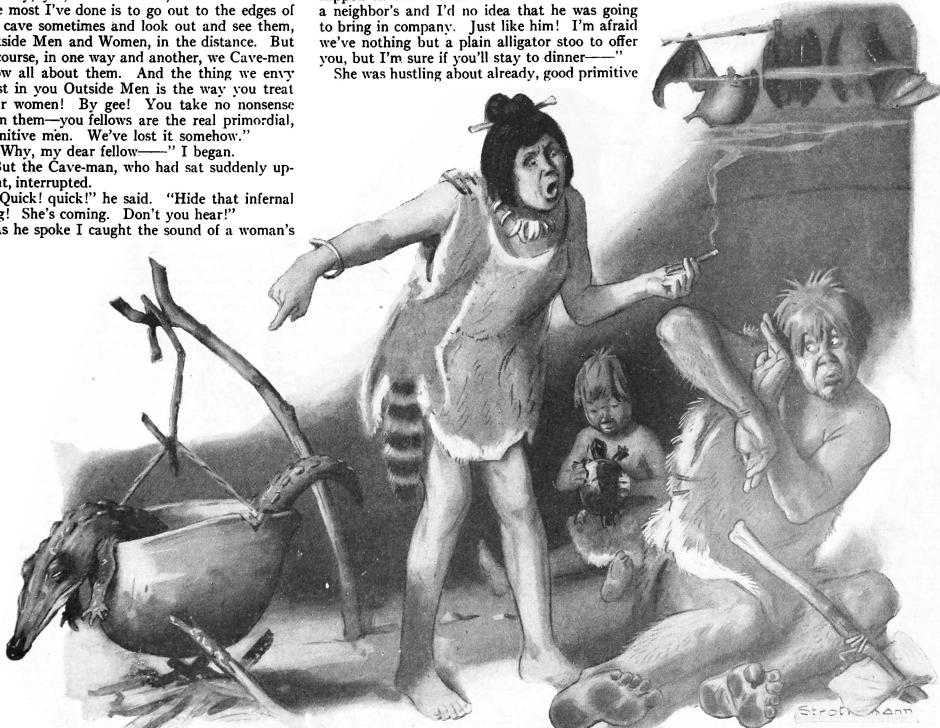
"But surely," I said, as they calmed down a little, "just there, where Willie fell in, beside the passage that I came through, there is only three inches of water."

"So there is," they said, both together, "but just suppose it had been three feet!"

Later on, when Willie was restored, they both renewed their invitation to me to stay to dinner.

"Didn't you say——" said the Cave-man, "that you wanted to make some notes on the difference between Cave-people and the people of your world of to-day?"

"I thank you," I answered, "I have already all the notes I want!"



"Well, of all the idle creatures," exclaimed the Cave-woman, "loafing here in the sand! Did you put the alligator on to boil for dinner? Why didn't you start the fire?"