

Weird Tales

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Author of "Ashes," "The Ghost-Eater," etc.

THE Great Cliffs teemed with bustle and confusion. From every one of the subterranean chambers that honeycombed the rocky escarpment poured a steady stream of men and women. Tottering age and toddling youth with all the intermittent ages were represented in this stream of humanity that the caverns discharged. They made their way with one accord to the clearing at the foot of the cliffs, for Gra, chieftain of the tribe, had summoned them, and when Gra summoned they must heed his call.

At the far end of the clearing, on a crude throne of huge rocks, sat Gra. His massive frame was clothed in the shaggy coat of the mighty cave bear, and in his hand he bore a gnarled and knotted staff tipped with a monster lance-head of stone. On his right stood Gra, son of Gra, tall, lithe and powerful, a perfect specimen of physical manhood. On his left sat Zo-na, fairest daughter of all the tribe of Gra.

Gra looked down into the semicircle of upturned faces and raised his hand. A hush fell upon the waiting throng. Gra spoke in short, monosyllabic sounds, amplified by many

eloquent signs and gestures, for the art of speech was young and undeveloped and the primitive mind often groped long in the darkness before it found expression. It could not be accurately transcribed. The nearest one can come to it is to record the ideas, expressed by the combination of sounds, expressions and gestures.

"It has long been a custom with the people of Gra that, when a youth desires to mate with a woman of his people, his desire should be made known before the tribe in the great council.

"Long, too, have we given the woman the right to choose whether or not she would mate with the man who seeks her, for are not the best children borne by the woman who mates with the man of her choice?

"And now Gra, son of Gra, seeks a mate, that his race shall not cease to live upon the earth. And from the women of the people of Gra, now Gra, son of Gra, seeks to mate with Zo-na, daughter of Dur, who with his naked hands has slain the mighty cave bear."

Gra's ponderous voice echoed and reverberated as he reached the end of his oration. The crowd broke into excited chattering as he paused, but fell

silent again as the girl stood before them at a sign from Gra. Her voice was musical and clear as a bell, and her words were simple and free from all pomp and ceremony. She looked across to where Gra, son of Gra, stood with his eyes fastened intently upon her, before she spoke:

"Zo-na waits the voice of her people."

A lone figure detached himself from the crowd and, crossing the open space to Gra, prostrated himself before the throne of stone. Gra rose, and again his thunderous tones rang forth:

"Arise, Ra-nor, stalwart son of the people of Gra, and state your mission."

Ra-nor arose and drew himself erect.

"For many moons, O Gra, has Zo-na found favor in the eyes of Ra-nor. And has not Zo-na smiled upon him in return? So Ra-nor would seek the girl, Zo-na, to mate with him, to keep his watch-fires bright, to care for the trophies he brings from the hunt, and to be the mother of his children."

An intense hush fell upon the assembled throng. Ra-nor was entirely within his rights, according to the tribal customs of the people of Gra. But to think that he dared defy the wishes of Gra, son of Gra, was in effect a daring challenge. The girl must choose, and her choice must be confirmed by the council congregated there. If their verdict did not concur with her own, she must remain a virgin until another should find favor in her eyes, or else flee with the man of her choice and become ostracized forever from the people of Gra. So far had men progressed from the days when the male, by sheer brute force, took the female of his choice to his cave.

Again the girl took her place before the multitude. Every eye was focused upon her, every ear intent on

the words she might have to say. Gra, son of Gra, moved uneasily, but his face remained as emotionless as the pictures graven on the walls of his cave.

"Zo-na needs must find it hard to make a choice, for Gra, son of Gra, and Ra-nor both find favor in her eyes. But this is the answer of Zo-na to Ra-nor, and to Gra, son of Gra. Many times of late has the voice of Aa, the saber-tooth tiger, been heard in the mighty forest. Already have some of the brave hunters of the people of Gra fallen prey to the great beast. More dangerous is he than Brahg, the woolly mammoth, or even Gur, the shaggy cave bear. To him who will lay before her cave the head of Aa, with this one shall Zo-na mate. Zo-na has spoken."

Now the silent throng found voice and raised a mighty shout of approval at the decision the girl had made. Gra lifted his hand once more for silence.

"Words of wisdom has the fair Zo-na spoken. It is well. Tonight the full moon shines upon the people of Gra. It is a good sign. Tomorrow shall Ra-nor and Gra, son of Gra, set out upon the trail of the great beast, Aa. And until one returns, Zo-na shall wait in the cave of her father, Dur. If neither should return from the great forest. . . ."

Gra's massive shoulders moved in a suggestive gesture. With a wave of his huge staff he dismissed the throng.

That night Zo-na's sleep was troubled. She dreamed that she was alone in the great forest and Aa, the saber-tooth tiger, sprang upon her from the underbrush. But instead of the head of a tiger, the monster in her dreams bore the head of Gra, son of Gra. She woke with a startled cry, the name of Ra-nor on her lips, and in her heart a fear that harm might befall this brave lad who dared defy the mighty son of Gra.

Ra-nor, too, dreamed, but his dreams were all of a glorious girl with

raven tresses and wonderful sloe-black eyes. And in those eyes gleamed the wonder-light of the great love, and he knew that this woman was his mate as surely as he knew that his only foe would be not only the terrible Aa.

But Gra, son of Gra, did not dream. His heart was filled with a great hate for the one who had dared to interfere with his plans; for Gra, son of Gra, did not wish to hunt the great beast, Aa. Much rather would he remain in the sanctuary of Gra, his father, and bask in the pleasant plaudits of the admiring crowd as he strutted proudly about, garbed in his garment made from the shaggy coat of the mighty cave bear. Far into the night he lay awake, scheming, planning, plotting, seeking some way he might win the girl, Zo-na, and yet not jeopardize his own precious hide.

With the rising of the sun, Ra-nor slipped quietly away into the great jungle that lay between the Great Cliffs and the sea. But Gra, son of Gra, was not so simply satisfied. He, too, rose with the first rays of the morning light, and made his way to the cave of Na-nor, the flint-maker. From his store he selected the best weapons he could find: a stone ax, a keen-tipped lance, and a long, needle-like dagger of stone that had caused Na-nor many an unsuccessful attempt before he had obtained his objective. Then he breakfasted before the cave of Gra, his father, on the flesh of reindeer, and listened to the many words of council that the old chieftain spoke into his ears. Then, leisurely, conscious of the many eyes that were upon him, Gra, son of Gra, entered the jungle.

And Zo-na, as she watched him take his leave, again experienced that odd sensation of impending disaster, that strange foreboding of danger for the one who had gone on before him into the mighty forest.

THE noonday sun shone down upon the lone figure of Ra-nor, as he plodded on into the trackless jungle, searching out the spoor of the great beast, Aa. His eyes scanned every inch of the ground over which he passed, reading the signs as plainly as if it were a printed page; here was where Gur, the shaggy cave bear, had passed; there, where the foliage was crushed and trampled, the woolly mammoth had crashed on its cumbersome way.

On, and still on, sometimes going on all fours, his nose close to the ground that his keen sense of smell might detect the presence of Aa, even if his sharp eyes failed to do so. At last the troglodyte came to the spot where the trail of the great cat crossed his own and he pressed on with redoubled speed. The trail led him to where the great, fernlike trees grew on the sides of the cliffs until it came to an end at the mouth of a large, dark cave. The mouth of the cave was littered with clean-picked bones of reindeer, bison, mammoth, even the bones of the cave bear.

Here, indeed, was the lair of Aa, the mighty saber-tooth tiger, who already had robbed the people of Gra of three stalwart sons. Perhaps, thought Ra-nor, their bones, too, were in that gruesome pile. He found a stone about the size of his hand and hurled it into the recesses of the cave. His only answer was the sound of the missile as it struck one of the walls. Evidently Aa was not at home. So much the better. For some time Aa must return, and he would find a warm welcome awaiting him.

Ra-nor climbed into the branches of a tree from which he could command a view of all the approaches to the cave, and waited until the shadows of the night began to fall, but Aa did not return. Boldly, Ra-nor crept into the very lair of the huge cat and made his bed on the floor of the cave.

He knew that no beast other than Aa would disturb him, for all would give a wide berth to the cave of the great beast. All through the long night he kept up his vigil, while not a hundred feet above him, in a cavern that might have been a mate to the one he occupied, slept Gra, son of Gra.

He, too, had traversed the big forest, but little care had he given to the trail of Aa. Instead, he had followed the trail that Ra-nor had blazed. Let Ra-nor track the great beast to his lair; he would follow on at his leisure. Let Ra-nor spend his strength battling with the tawny animal; it was far easier to wrest spoils from a man already spent with a mighty struggle than to risk life and limb in an effort to take for himself the head of Aa. It was far simpler to overpower a fellow man than a monster with the strength of ten men.

He had overtaken Ra-nor as the latter came in sight of the cave of Aa. When Ra-nor had taken up his post in the branches of the big tree, Gra, son of Gra, did a little scouting of his own and found the cave above, where he planned to spend the night. He dared not risk a fire, for the smell of smoke might warn the other of his presence.

Morning found Ra-nor again in his perch among the branches of the tall tree. Beneath the overhanging boughs the life of the jungle passed in an incessant stream. Chattering monkeys swung from limb to limb; huge, hideous, hairy apes, with misshapen bodies and slaving jaws, pushed their way through the underbrush. From the distance came the howling, devilish cry of the hyenas and the answering bellow of the stag. Ra-nor could picture the persecuted animal fighting against overwhelming odds, and the pack of hungry brutes snapping and biting at him from all sides.

Ra-nor became conscious that he was hungry. For two days and a night he had been without food. He

heard the challenging growl of Gur, the shaggy cave bear, as he lumbered into sight through the trees. Here was food enough for more than one satisfying meal. Another moment and the animal would be directly beneath his tree. The hungry man steeled himself for the attack.

Then, through the great forest, came an answer to the challenge of Gur—the blood-curdling cry of the great beast, Aa. Never would Gur let the voice of his life-long foe remain unanswered. The bear turned in the direction of the sound, and rumbled defiance to the mighty Aa. Again the voice of Aa echoed through the trees.

Ra-nor drew into the sheltering foliage of the tree until only his eyes were visible. His keen ears could detect not a sound. Over the great forest fell a silence fraught with expectancy and dread. The cave bear sniffed the air and shook his huge bulk savagely, rearing upon his hind quarters and focusing keen, penetrating eyes upon the surrounding jungle.

A sudden swish, a crashing through the trees, and the mighty body of Aa came hurtling through the air, landing full upon the broad shoulders of Gur. Then the silence was broken with a terrible commixture of sounds as the two beasts battled for supremacy, a snarling, growling, tangled mass of flying flesh and fur. At last the curved fangs of the great cat, fully eighteen inches long, sank deep into the throat of Gur, and Ra-nor knew that it was the beginning of the end. Finally the shaggy body of Gur lay still, and through the jungle rang the triumphant cry of Aa. Again a long and intense silence as the victorious animal settled itself to its feasting.

But Aa did not long feast uninterrupted. Noiselessly, moving even more silently than the mighty beast below him, Ra-nor lowered himself to the ground within a few rods of where the tail of Aa switched through the air, and hurled his lance powerfully into

the body of the monster, full between the shoulder-blades. With an angry snarl the great beast turned, but quicker yet was the bold hunter as, with the agility of a monkey, he gained the sanctuary of the big tree.

Aa crouched, ready to spring upon his new foe, his tail cutting great arcs through the air. His long fangs dripped blood and his body was cut and bleeding from the struggle with his late antagonist. Aa's huge body swayed from side to side, and with a cry he leaped straight for the branches of the tree where Ra-nor waited. There the great cat met the stone ax of the troglodyte cleaving into its skull, between the eyes.

Again, and yet again, the mighty beast sprang. Each time the man in the tree met his attack with crushing counter-blows. Once the claws of Aa struck the shoulder of the daredevil, ripping his flesh open clean to the bone and nearly dislodging him from his lofty perch.

Now blood streamed from the mouth and nose of the great beast, and Ra-nor knew that his shafts had found a vital spot. Throwing caution to the winds, the man dropped lightly to the ground and closed in upon the spent and wounded Aa. A last terrific effort and the lifeless body of Aa slumped in an inert mass beside the shaggy form of its victim, Gur.

Forgetful of his own wounds, intent only upon making sure of the prize that was to win for him the hand of Zo-na, Ra-nor set about his task of severing the head of Aa from its body.

From his vantage point at the mouth of the upper cave, Gra, son of Gra, had watched the struggle. Now was his opportunity. One well-directed blow and the prize would be his. The story he would tell was plausible enough to pass the dwarfed, childish minds of the people of Gra: how he had come upon Ra-nor struggling with the great beast Aa; how Aa had killed the other man before he, Gra,

son of Gra, could lend his aid; and how he had meted out vengeance for the death of his tribal brother by slaying, single-handed, the great jungle terror.

Stealthily he wormed his way through the tangled underbrush until he came near enough to reach out and touch Ra-nor with his hand. From his gee-string he selected the long, sharp, needlelike stone dagger that had been the pride of Na-nor the flint-maker. Slowly, deliberately, he gaged the distance between himself and his unsuspecting victim and lifted the dagger of stone high above his head. One blow and Gra, son of Gra, would be mighty among the people of Gra; one blow and the fair Zo-na would be his mate; one blow and the upstart Ra-nor would be forever removed from his path.

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ZO-NA, in the cave of her father, Dur, waited impatiently for the return of the victor with the head of Aa. Deep in her heart lurked a longing that Ra-nor would be the one to lay the trophy at her feet, but should it be the other. . . Zo-na had given her word.

All day long she paced to and fro about the confines of the dwellings, like some hunted beast at bay. She could not shake off her evergrowing sense of peril. She almost regretted her attitude toward her suitors the day before. Why should she have concealed her greater love for Ra-nor, even if the other claimant was Gra, son of Gra? Why had she sent the man she loved to face the perils of the vast forest that her vain wish might be gratified? It had all been so unnecessary.

Again she felt that tightening around her heart—a stifling, suffocating fear that threatened to drive her wild. Night came on, and with the darkness her anxiety for the man she loved increased a thousandfold.

All night she tossed and turned in a futile endeavor to sleep. She wished to set forth into the jungle, that she might in some way protect the daring man who had so fearlessly gone forth to do her bidding. To Gra, son of Gra, she gave but a passing thought. Might the powerful mammoth crush the life from his body, and the lean hyena pick his bones!

In the gray dawn of early morning, Zo-na stole silently from the cave of Dur, her father. Hidden in the folds of her doe-skin garment she bore a keen-edged knife of stone. Though the trail was a day old, the girl picked it up with ease. Alone, undaunted, she sped on, her one thought being to find Ra-nor and beg him to flee with her. What matter if they became outcasts from the people of Gra? Would they not have one another?

She came to the point where the spoor of the great beast, Aa, crossed that of her lover. Once more, that strange premonition of danger. Her heart beat wildly as she bent close over the trail and doubled her speed. Then upon the stillness of the forest came the challenge of Gur and the answering cry of Aa.

Unheard, unseen, the girl came to a point where she could watch the terrific struggle between the enraged beasts. She watched until the body of the shaggy cave bear lay silent at the feet of the giant cat. Then, her terror-widened eyes following every move, she watched her lover as he battled with the great beast. Aa. She

barely repressed a cry as the claws of the tiger ripped open his shoulder. She saw the last great conflict, saw the tiger roll lifeless at the feet of her lover, and watched while he set about severing his trophy from the body of Aa. She would watch him, she told herself, until he had finished his task and then she would make her way back as she had come—alone. For soon he would return and lay at her cave the prize she had seen him wrest from the jaws of death itself.

But suddenly her sharp ears caught the sound of a snapping twig. Her keen eyes saw the form of a man through the tangled underbrush, saw his arm raise high above his head, and saw the stone dagger as it poised in mid-air.

As quick as thought, her hand flew to her bosom, where lay her own keen blade. Straight and true as an arrow from a bow she flung it from her with all the strength she could command. The man's form crumpled and fell, and the body of Gra, son of Gra, rolled into the clearing straight to the feet of Ra-nor, his heart pierced with the girl's weapon of stone.

Zo-na turned and, with the speed of a deer, flew over the trail that led back to the cave of Dur, her father, to watch and wait the few short hours until her lover returned, to lay at her feet the head of the great beast, Aa.

NOTE: "Arhi-a of the Caves," another story of prehistoric men by C. M. Eddy, Jr., will appear in the next issue of WEIRD TALES.

