

***MARY
JOHNSTON***



THE WANDERERS

Mary Johnston

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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CHAPTER I

THE FOREST

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TREES and trees and trees—a world of trees! Little size and middle size and giant size, short and tall, slender and thick, broad-leafed, narrow-leafed, rough-barked, smooth-barked, dark green, bright green, one solid hue, or spangled or variegated with many-coloured flowers, trees that bore nuts, trees that bore fruit, and trees starkly idle and useless to a frugivorous folk! Trees and trees and trees—trees leaning their heads against one another, trees pressing side to side, trees tied together by the endless vines going looping through the world; trees and trees and trees! Overhead, through the network, showed small pieces of sky; big pieces of sky were seen only when you came to streams. Sunlight struck down in flakes or darts, never as brightness formless and unconfined. At night, looking up from the nestlike arrangements of sticks and forest débris heaped between the forks of trees, three or four stars might be seen at once. The host of stars was rarely seen. The big animals, going down to the wider streams to drink, might see the heavens, but, as a general thing, the tree-folk saw only the forest. As a general thing. Occasionally, in their lives, the horizon inexplicably widened or the zenith went up higher. The big animals stood and walked so that their eyes were not of much use when it came to things on top. The tree-folk had learned how to get about differently, and they had hands, and they stood more or less uprightly, and they used their

eyes so that they saw things on top as well as things around them, and they were beginning to think, and they had great curiosity.

She swung herself down from bough to bough until she touched the black loam and the trampled plants beneath the tree. She had a young one clinging to her neck. The tree was a bad tree. It had rocked and shaken and made a noise all night. She was so angry with it that she turned and struck it with her hands and feet. Then she settled the young one upon her shoulder and went off to a thicket where grew very good fruit.

But the day had begun wrong. A lot of other folk were there, too, and they tried to push her away, and though she got her breakfast it was a poor one, and the crowd was a quarrelsome, scolding crowd. She went off and sat down under a tree and looked at them. A thing happened that, in her individual experience, had never happened before. She experienced a distinct feeling of being outside of it all—not outside with a sense of injury, but quite calmly outside. She criticized the tree-folk.

The young one drummed against her breast with its feet. She pulled it down from her shoulder, and it lay upon her knees, and she smiled at it, and it smiled at her. She was very fond of it. All the tree-folk smiled with a kind of grimacing smile, using only the lips. But now this morning a second thing happened. She smiled with her eyes. It gave her a very singular feeling, a feeling that linked itself with the earlier one.

This tree was thin-topped. Looking up, she saw quite unusual pieces of sky. Across the largest a white cloudlet

went sailing. The folk in the fruit thicket fell into a tremendous quarrel, yelling at one another. She scrambled to her feet and made the sound that meant, "Get on my back and hold tight! We are going to travel." The young one obeyed and the two set forth.

Trees, trees, trees, trees! fighting for breathing space, shouldering away their fellows, sucking each its hardest from the earth, striving each its hardest, out with its arms, up with its head, up to the light! and all tied together, tied together with endlessly looping ropes, green and brown and grey, cupped and starred and fringed with purple and orange and white and scarlet! Over all and from all the creepers stretched and dangled. Trees and trees and trees! helplessly many, chained each to the other. Sometimes she and the young one travelled in the trees and over the stretched brown ropes, and sometimes she made her way through the cane and fern and wild and varied growths that overspread the fat black earth out of which had burst the trees. The coloured birds whistled and shrieked, and now and again, in the green gloom, she heard tree-folk calling and answering. But she avoided the tree-folk. She was still critical.

It grew dark in the universal forest. The red and green and orange birds ceased whistling, and the insect people whirring and chirping. The butterflies went to their bark homes.

"Uuugh!" she said,—which meant, "Lightning will flash and thunder will roll, trees will snap, water will come down, and the air will grow cold!"

It all happened, just in that order. She and the young one found an overhanging rock with a rock floor beneath. They crept into the opening that was like the jaws of a monster, and cowered, their faces down. Ugh! the light in sheets and the noise! There was not, this time, much water. She hated water when it came like this, cold and stinging, just as she loved it when it presented itself in pools when one was thirsty and hot with racing through trees. She had not as yet worked it out that it was lovely or hateful according to the angle from which it was approached, that the water apparently did not plan what it should do nor how it should come, and that it was you yourself who accomplished that partition into qualities. If she reasoned at all, it was to the effect that the water very actively cared, now hating and now helping. The young one whimpered and whimpered, and it irritated her, and she beat it. Yelling, it rolled away from her to the other end of the rock floor. And then the bright light and the horrible noise stopped, and the water ceased to dash against her like cold, wet leaves, and the sun came out sudden and strong, and a snake crept over the rock, coiled and darted its head above the young one that was lying sobbing to itself. She saw the snake and she screeched with terror, then she leaped and caught it with both hands just below the head that was flat and pointed like a leaf and dragged it away from the young one. It writhed and lashed about and struck at her, but she held it tighter and tighter, and trampled it with her feet, and choked it until it was dead. Then she flung it from her, over the rock, and shivered with her shoulders, and then she gathered up the young one, and the two travelled on.

They travelled nearly all day, seeing nothing but trees and the plants that hid the soil from sight, and the inhabitants of trees and the folk whose feet had always to be upon the earth. The world was anything but unpopulous. There were beings who flew and beings who climbed and beings who crept or glided, and beings who walked four-footed, and the tree-folk who both walked and climbed. When she came to the hot, still, narrow streams which she crossed by means of the festooned creepers, she saw beings who swam.

It grew late. Where was any space for the shadow of a tree to fall, it fell. Always the world was quiet in the great heat of the middle day. Evening was the time when all the world began to talk at once—all, that is, but the big animals. *They* waited for full night, and then they roared—they roared! The tree-folk were afraid of the big animals, dreadfully afraid.

The young one was hungry. She pulled it across her shoulder to her breast and gave it milk, and at the next fruit tree they came to she stopped and got her own supper. By the time this was done it was almost night. Before her there showed an opening where grass grew. It sloped to a stream and it supported two or three tall, creeper-clad trees. Through the bushes about the supper tree came a curious, dancing light. Observing this, she followed the instinct of all tree-folk and crept forward to see what might be seen.

One of the trees had been struck by lightning, and it had fallen upon the earth. It lay there all its length, and it was afire. She and the young one sat beneath the bushes and watched it with awed interest. In their history, tree-folk had

met with this phenomenon often enough to learn that you must not touch, that you must not even go very close. When you did so, it was worse than all kinds of big animals!

The flame flickered in and out among the branches and ran along the trunk. A light smoke curled up, and she could hear the tree talking. It made a crackling talk. The burning mass warmed and lit the dusk. She and the young one were so interested that they went closer and closer. It occurred to her to find out how close you *could* go. So she went cautiously, cautiously, very close indeed. Up to a certain point that was pleasant enough, but one step farther on it began to sting. She jerked back, frightened, but fascinated. Now again it was pleasant. It seemed that it was angry only when you came too close. Keep a little away and it was the best of friends! She and the young one sat on the ground and thought about it. A long, broken bough, slender and bare as a bamboo, happened to lie there, one end touching the fiery tree, the other close to her hand. Her hand chanced to close upon it, as it might have closed upon creeper or young bough in the trees. Something more happened. She lifted this stick with the fire at one end like a pennant, lifted it and moved it to and fro, the fire making lines and circles in the air.

Her brain worked. The stick gave her a long arm, an arm much longer than anybody else's, with active, bright fingers at the end of it. If you could take it with you— No one had ever thought of carrying the bright, stinging thing.... The flame blew down the stick toward her and she was horribly frightened. Dropping the bough she picked up the young one and fled.

In the shortest of times it was dark night. Day stayed only where was the red, stinging thing. She was in a region of cane and bush. That was not safe—she and the young one must get back to tree-land. And then, just as she was puckering her brows over this, she heard the big animal.

The big animal came against her through the canes. She caught the rustling sound they made when they were brushed aside, and she heard breathing and she saw eyeballs in the dark. Screeching, she turned with the young one and ran. There were no trees, no trees—no safety—only blind, exceeding terror! The big animal was coming—the big animal was coming—it was sending its voice before it. The young one, screeching too, gripped her fast. She tore through the cane, back the way she had come, and the big animal with glaring eyes rushed after her. It was coming in bounds—closer, oh, closer! She broke through the cane, into that open space where the tree still burned. The pursuer came after her and the young one. It was big and hungry. She felt its hot breath. Face over shoulder, she saw its bared teeth. She found a voice that was human; she shrieked. Along the ground lay the brand that, a while ago, she had lifted and waved. It was shorter than it had been, but yet it was fit for use. She snatched it up, turned and thrust it, flaming, against the muzzle of the big animal. She made deliberate use of fire. The beast that was after her roared and drew back, then made to come on again. With all her strength she fought it over the eyes with fire. Roaring with pain, it turned and fled. She threw down the flaming staff, and with the young one on her back, chattering wildly, never stopped until the forest was about her, until, finding a

tree with a sinewy, swinging curtain of vine, she had drawn herself and the young one up from bough to bough, up to where, on high, in the comfortable fork of two great branches, she reached what she esteemed as safety.

Night passed, dawn came. It came still and red, with a mist over a water where long-legged, long-billed, scarlet-and-white bird people waded about. They fished or stood on one leg pondering the universe, or not pondering it, as you choose. She and the young one looked down a clear forty feet and saw great roots of trees and between them black, yielding earth. The light strengthened, and they leaped and slid and swung out of this tree into another, and then another, and so they went by trees and trees and trees until they came to firm ground and saw below them bushes with fruit. The young one locked its hands about her neck and she sprang and swung, now upon this bough, now with this liana between her hands. So they came to the ground and the fruit bushes that were all covered with bloomy, purple orbs. It was a good and quiet breakfast. There were creeping folk and flying folk in this part of the world, but she saw and heard no tree-folk.

She and the young one sat down upon the ground. The young one fell to pulling at some tufts of grass, patting them and making its own range of sounds, but she sat with her chin on her knees and her eyes down. Yet another thing was happening. All tree-folk, of course, remembered; even the big animals did that; everybody did it. But they did not know that they remembered; they never gave the matter a thought. To their apprehension, each day was taken up *de novo*. But now not only did she remember, but she was

aware that she remembered. Not clearly, of course, only vaguely, but still aware. She was going over, she was returning to a time that was not this present time. The big animal, his eyes and claws and teeth—the bright thing jumping up and down and climbing over the tree on the ground—the feel of it, pleasant when you were a little way off, but the most dreadful bite of all if you touched it!... Back of the bright thing was the storm, and the snake that had tried to bite the young one, and back of that was the poor breakfast, and the quarrelsome crowd of tree-folk, and how strange and unfamiliar they had all of a sudden looked to her. And back of that—but she could not go any farther back. It was as though there were a deep stream, and the creeper that had stretched across was broken....

It was the bright thing to which she returned most fully—the bright thing and the stick. Beneath the fruit trees lay enough of broken and dead wood. Her hand went out to the nearest piece, which she lifted and with some delight brandished. She spoke. As yet her language was almost as limited as that of the big animals, but what she meant was, "I have a long arm!—a longer arm than anybody else's!" Three or four feet away a lizard lay on a stone. She touched it with the stick. Then, as it raised its head, she struck with force and killed it. This result caused her to chatter with surprise. She had not been angry with the lizard—she had not laid hand or foot upon it. The long arm had killed it—but she had moved the long arm. She knew certain aspects of death well enough. That lizard, no more than the snake of yesterday, would run about again!

She sat and thought. Then she took the stick and, rising, struck with it at a cluster of purple fruit which had been beyond reach. The fruit came tumbling down upon the grass. The long arm was good, then, for that, too.

Out of the wood came one of the tree-folk—one of the other kind, the kind that did not carry young ones around with them, the kind into which half of the young ones grew. He was at some distance, and did not at once see her. She stood and watched him coming.

The two were about of a height, but the other kind—because it did not have young ones, and did not have to spend much of its time gambolling with young ones and watching young ones, because it roamed more, because it had, perhaps, a certain surplus of explosive energy which set it to contending with its fellows or sent it, day and night, howling and racing through the trees, because of this and because of that—the other kind was ahead in muscular development. Muscular development meant a heightened muscular sense. The other kind had, undoubtedly, a somewhat greater delight in movement and action, from which, in the fulness of time, might spring a certain initiative in enterprise, and a vast and various network of results. The kind that had young ones, nursed them and carried them about, had its superiorities, too, due again to a range of matters beyond its present comprehension. But neither of them knew about his or her own or the other's superiorities. They were a very simple folk—tree-folk.

The other kind now saw her, and after an instant of gazing, came on. Although she had been so critical, yesterday, of the tree-folk, she found—measuring by her

standards—she found this one rather a strong and comely individual. She had travelled, relatively speaking, a long way without any other company than the young one. She certainly experienced a sensation of friendliness.

The two stood jabbering at the edge of the wood. She had dropped the stick, but now she stooped and picking it up flourished it about and with the end struck off a cluster of fruit. Parade and showing off—however they got into the world, here they were! The other kind gave a deep screech of surprise, then stood, spellbound, watching this so marvellous performance, then by degrees, became wildly excited. He put out both hands, seized the stick, and tried to take it from her. There was much wood upon the ground, but he could not conceive that any other piece would serve. She had the only stick.

She resisted, and they quarrelled, both clutching the stick, jabbering each at the other. Both put forth force to keep the thing that knocked down fruit. But there was actually more strength in his long arms and large hands than in hers. He wrested the stick from her and grinned with delight in its possession.

It is probable that, of late, changes had been occurring among the particles of his own brain. Probably he, too, had been making discoveries. Neither the one nor the other might corner discovery. At any rate, he now began to experiment with the stick. He knocked from the tree all the purple fruit in reach, and then he sat down upon the ground and with the end of the staff scraped at the earth and beat the grass flat. His interest in what he was doing grew and grew. She had gone away, sulking, to the young one. But it

was impossible long to resist the fascination of this new extension of power. She came and sat down in the grass and watched. She was friendly again, and he, too, having the stick, was gracious. He was a young, strong, well-looking member of the tree-folk. Lying about were some small stones, miniature boulders. He struck the end of the stick beneath one of these, put his weight upon the other end, and lifted the stone out of its bed. The lever was here. Both of them jabbered with excitement. There were other stones. She wanted to disturb one, too, and she came across and put her hand upon the stick. "Let me!" meant the sound which she uttered. But he jabbered back, and shook her off, and went on turning over stones. Very angry, she returned to the charge, and, watching her chance, suddenly jerked the stick from him. He sprang to his feet and seized it again. She screamed at him and held it stubbornly—a good, thick piece of wood it was! The other kind, now in a violent passion, tugged and wrenched until he got it from her. Then, with suddenness, he found yet another use for a piece of wood. He knocked her down with it, and when, with a cry of fury, she rose to her feet, he repeated the action.

CHAPTER II

THE CAVE

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THE rocks rose in tiers to a stark height above the dark and tangled wood. From their feet sloped away to the floor of mould a runway of stones great and small. Long ago, long, long ago, water had honeycombed the cliff.

A great stone, shaped like a fir-cone, masked half the cave mouth. A gnarled, rock-clinging tree helped with the other half. When the cave woman had found food and would bring it home, she looked first for the tree and then for the stone.

Sometimes, for a long while, food was easy to get—that is to say, comparatively easy. Then, for a long time, food might be hard to get. There were times when food-getting took strength and cunning and patience in excess. Such was this time, and it had lasted long. So long had it lasted that everything in the world seemed to be hungry.

The cone-shaped stone and the ragged tree kept full sunshine from the cave, but a fair amount entered in shafts and splashes. Four children played in the light and shadow. Naked, with sticks and stones and a snare made from the red fibre of a vine, they played at being hunters. They jumped and dodged and screamed; they hid behind outcropping folds of rock; now one was the quarry and now another. When they tired of that, they sat down and tossed and caught round, shining pebbles, brought to them by the mother from a stream she had crossed. After a time they

grew hungry and easily angered. One struck another and they fought. That over, a common void and weakness drew them again together. The sun was getting low, the orange light going away from the littered cavern floor. They felt cold. Back in the cave was heaped dry wood from the floor of the forest, and to one side, guarded by a circle of flat stones, a little fire was burning. Never were the children to burn too great a fire, and never were they to let what was there go out! Now they sat around it whimpering. The oldest crawled into the dimness of the cavern and, bringing back an armful of small sticks, put two crosswise in the flame. Warmth was good, and the flickering light did for sunbeams. Three sat hunched around the fire, while the littlest one lay and sucked its thumb for lack of other food, and went at last to sleep. The next to the littlest nodded, nodded, and then it, too, slept, close to the littlest for warmth. The eldest was a girl and the next a boy. Shag-haired, naked, lean, they watched and fed the fire, and with growing hunger watched the entrance. Daylight grew colder and thinner. They got up and went to the cave mouth. The tree and the cone-shaped rock blocked vision. The lawgiver had forbidden the four to show themselves on the farther side of the tree and the rock. If they did, all the ill of the world would fall upon them. At least, they knew that the lawgiver's hand would fall upon them.

The two children went back into the cave. In a corner lay a pile of skins—both short hair and thick fur. They took two of these and wrapped themselves in them. The light grew colder and thinner. They were so hungry that tears came out of their eyes. The littlest one waked and cried.

The two eldest wandered again to the cave mouth. They wanted so badly to see if the provider were coming. From the other side of the big stone they could look down the runway of stones, they could see some way into the wood. They stood and stared at the concealing face of the big stone and the concealing, twisted trunk of the tree, and the tears ran down their cheeks. The feet of the eldest one moved uncertainly, then with more assurance. She moved out of the cave mouth and around the great stone, beckoning to the next eldest to follow. He ran after her. Shag-haired, with skins from the heap gathered around them, they came in front of the masking stone and tree. Here the light was stronger, was as yet quite strong.

They looked down the stony slope, and they peered under the thick trees at its base, but nowhere could they see the provider. She had been gone a long time. The world looked cold and harsh and terrifying to the children.... Yet it was hard to go back into the cave, when, if they stayed out here, they might the sooner see the provider. They stayed, two small shapes huddled at the top of the runway of stones.

Something moved in the wood below. Bushes and little trees bent this way or that. Something that was strong was moving. The children's mouths opened, they raised themselves to their knees. The bushes shook again and nearer to the stony slope; there was heard the snapping of a branch. The children scrambled to their feet. The provider must not see them out here—if she did, there would be blows. The thought arrived, maybe it was not the provider! Terror took them—they turned in haste. One struck foot

against a root of a tree, was thrown down, delaying both. Open-mouthed, they looked over shoulder, and saw that it was not the provider.

A man with a great fell of hair, with a club and with a skin filled with stones for throwing, came from the deep wood into the straggling growth at the base of the tiers of rock. Hunter on his own account, and fierce from lack of luck, he had pushed from his own lair farther in this direction than he had ever done before. Such was the adversity of the times that all hunters, human or brute, must widen their hunting-grounds. This hunter had widened his. He was, moreover, a strong hunter and quick of eye. And yet so bad were the times that he often went hungry—as now.

Clear of the great wood, he came before the line of cliffs that he had not seen before. Hereabouts was strange to him. He stood still, and his gaze swept the rocks. Presently it fell upon the two human children at the top of the runway. He stared, resting on his club. Then, from the wood ahead, some sound that he knew how to interpret caught his ear. He bent his head aside. The sound came again. His eye saw the light disturbance of the undergrowth. Doe and fawn, he caught their movement, doe and fawn passing that way. Instantly, he was hunter of flesh, hunter upon their trail. As he had come, so he vanished. The children saw only the stony way and the wood again. A panic took them; they turned, and, crying out, rushed past the stone and the twisted tree, back into the cave.

The light lowered still. Out of the wood to the base of the cliffs and then to the stony runway came another hunter. This one, too, had had scant luck—roving all day, and now

with naught to show but nuts and roots and of these none too many. She carried them slung in a skin. She had a club and a snare of green withes. She wore upon her body, for warmth and for protection against the thorns and briars of the world, the pelt of some forest beast. She was largely made and strong, and down her back fell a mass of darkly red and tangled hair. She climbed the runway. The children, cowering beside the fire, saw her at the cave mouth, and set up a yelping welcome.

Seated upon the cavern floor, she took up and suckled the littlest one. Such scarcity was there that she herself was hungry, and there was not much milk. The littlest one fretted yet when she pushed it away. She broke the nuts she had brought between two stones. The roots she pounded and shredded. She and her young had supper. No one had food enough to satisfy. They ate greedily what there was, to the last kernel and shred. Language was a scanty thing. Uncombined guttural or high-pitched sounds answered well enough for three fourths of communication. But they had a certain number of words of action, relation, and naming. Mother and children talked together after a fashion. The children talked of food, more food. She answered sharply, then gave the youngest her breast again, then sat with her chin upon her knees, staring into the flame. The younger children slept at last, lying upon and under the skins in the corner of the cave. The eldest stayed for a time by the fire and the brooding form of the mother. The eldest looked at the flame and the shadows that chased one another around the cave, and at the black cave mouth. She was not going to tell the lawgiver about the other hunter, for that would be to

say that she had gone out of the cave, beyond the hiding rock and tree. *Avoid your penalties—outwit your karma—* was a policy attempted as early and earlier than that. The lawgiver herself often attempted it, as had done the mother and lawgiver before her.

The provider lifted her head from her knees, banked the ashes over the red embers, and gave utterance to a row of half-articulate sounds that meant, “Dead tired.—Hunting all day without luck.—Hard world.—Go to sleep!” So saying, she got to her feet and, moving to the cave mouth, looked out into the darkness. Hard-to-get-food meant all kinds of added insecurities. She went in front of the tree and stone and looked down the runway and to either hand along the base of the cliff. Not one of her senses took alarm. It was a quiet night, without sight or sound or scent or forward-reaching touch of any hurtful approach. Returning to the cave, she moved past the red eye of the fire to the heap of skins. The girl was already there. Mother and children lay wreathed together under the pelts. At hand rested the club and a pile of stones, and lightwood waited by the covered embers.

The still night went by. Howsoever heavy the provider’s sleep, the first light wakened her, when, cool and grey, it came creeping into the cavern. The elder children she shook awake. The littlest one waked of its own accord and began a wailing crying. She suckled it, and it stilled itself for a time. The girl and boy scraped away the ashes and put fresh sticks upon the fire. But there was no breakfast for them nor for the provider. The latter took her long, heavy, and knotted club, took the skin shaped to hold matters or food

or missiles, and the flint flake chipped to the semblance of a knife blade. She threatened the children with beatings if they left the cave, and then left it herself and passed down the runway of stones into the forest where even the trees looked hungry.

All day long the children waited, now so pinched with hunger that it was a pity to see their faces. They did not play much to-day; they quarrelled and wept, and lay by the smouldering fire, their elfish faces hidden upon their thin arms. Once the boy and girl went out of the cave mouth and peered cautiously around the edge of the great stone. They saw nothing, neither the provider coming back, nor the hunter of yesterday, nor any moving thing but the tree-tops shaken by the wind, and some round white clouds adrift in the sky, and an eagle soaring above the cliff-tops, looking, too, for food.

Came a splendour of sunset, beating against the tiers of rock, making them red and purple. The provider emerged from the wood, and over her shoulder hung spoil and food—hung a game bird of the largest kind, a wattled, bronze-feathered colossus among birds! The dark red mass of her hair mingled with its plumage. Triumph breathed around her; she set her foot lightly on lichen and stone.

She had tied leaves and moss so that blood might not fall from the borne victim. When she came to the runway, when she was about to mount the stony slope, she noticed red drops. Leaves and moss had slipped. Furrows came into her brow. She drew her prey before her and adjusted that covering. The light was withdrawing. Though she turned and looked at her backward-stretching path, she could not tell in

the dimness of the world if there were other drops of blood, if there were downy feathers. Dusk was growing—she was savage from famine—home was up there and her hungry brood. She hoped for the best, hoped that there were about no prowlers of dangerous size, and set her foot upon the incline that led to her door. The children, looking out, saw her coming....

They built the fire up until it crackled and flung light into all but the deepest crannies of the cave. How warm it was, how genial! They plucked the bird, and air streaming in at the entrance blew the bronze feathers about. The uses of fire were many and good,—meat was better brought near to fire, left there for a time. They put the meat upon a flat stone and shoved it into a ring of ardent heat, and presently it was improved to their taste. The provider, with her sharpened flake of stone, divided the bird part from part. The hungry family ate, tearing tissue and sinew with sharp teeth, sucking the juices. Even the littlest one was given a bone to do what it might with. At last they had dined, and there was little of the bird that was left. They gnawed the great bones clean. Only the feathers blew about in the night air as the flame blew, and the smoke flattened itself against cavern roof and wall.

For all the gaping, black cave mouth, the intruding night air, the smoke and litter of the cavern, here was cheer within, light, warmth, intimacy, coziness, home! The littlest one lay and laughed and crowed. The next to the littlest got up and leaped about with the leaping shadows. The two biggest gathered together the beautiful feathers that had clothed the dinner. They did not know what they should do

with them, but they were treasures none the less. The provider, the cave-user, the home-maker, stretched herself by the fire. Rest was earned, good rest, and presently sleep! She lay relaxed, and in her attitude, her crossed legs and outflung arms, was something of the grace of a great cat of the forest. The firelight reddened all the cave save that oblong, ragged, black aperture where was passage in and out. Here the black night showed and here swirled the wind. "Ow! Ow!" laughed and mowed and clamoured to itself the child who danced with the shadows.

The provider raised herself upon her elbow, then sat upright. A far, thin noise had caught her ear. With a gesture of her clenched hand she brought to an end the sound that the child was making. Now was only the crackle of the fire and the strong whisper of the wind.... It was the wind that brought again the other sound. The provider heard it, thin and far yet, but growing articulate. At a bound she was upon her feet.

Body slanted forward, hands behind her ears, she stood in the cave mouth, hearkening. She left the cave, passed between the covering rock and twisted tree, and stood at the top of the runway up which at sunset she had toiled, the great bird upon her back. The night was black and starry. The wind brought again the noise. Now it was fully articulate. At this point in her history she had not formally named, perhaps, those enemies that she heard. But for all that, she knew well enough who they were. They were wolves.

Back in the cave the lawgiver obtained silence from her brood. She regarded the heap of firewood, then, working

with dispatch, dragged dead boughs and rotting bark toward the cave mouth. The two more able of her young helped. All heard the sound now, and there was grey fear in the cave. From wall to wall they laid a line of fuel. Behind it, the cavern was spacious enough; there were loose stones of a size for casting, and these were brought together in a heap. There was the club, and there was the sharpened flake of stone that made a fair knife. And there were the provider's own strength and instinct. FIGHT FOR YOUR YOUNG! Lives for number like the leaves of the wood had woven firmly that pattern and dyed it to stay.

She stood between the unkindled wood and the black night and listened to the sound, whether it swelled or sank. The children cowered together by the cave hearth. Perhaps the pack would go by—perhaps it did not savour the blood dropped from the bird.

That proved to be a vain hope. Length by length the baying came loud and near. She heard the assembly at the foot of the runway, and the stealthy, crowding push upon the stones.... The provider became the defender.

A brand from the hearth fired the guardian line. The flame ran like a serpent from point to point. The leader of the pack, appearing between the cone-shaped stone and the twisted tree, was met by what he hated and did not understand, by what was ever too strong for wolves. He snapped and sprang, but the fire cast him back.

The wolves crowded the top of the runway, they jostled one another before the cave mouth. In the out-shot, quivering, murky light their movement was one to dizzy the eye. They padded to right and left, investigating the base of

the cliff; they leaped at its face, found footing in root or fissure, wreathed the orifice whence poured the red light behind which was prey. The light upon their yellow-grey bodies, moving, twining, leaping, gave them, too, a semblance as of fire. They made a violent noise, violent and dogged. The wolf-world was hungry. Fire—they hated fire, screening their prey! But fire might die—wolves had that wisdom. Wait, and watch chances! They waited, leaping like dun waves, like solid, forky flames, and always their yelling made a whirlpool in the else silent night.

Fire might die—the defender, too, knew that! She looked down upon the dwindling heap of firewood, and upon the children who clutched her by the knees. Then she thrust them away, selected a fagot and mended a place that was thin. It seemed to her that she had done all this before, and that living had in it much of agony.

Fire leaped and played and sang. Rose and yellow and blue, its forky shapes held the cave, a zone of magic between wolf and savage, brute and human. Fire blossomed and bloomed from all that was given it, bough and branch and log. It played merrily, it sang clearly; with a thousand well-shaped weapons it said No! to the famished pack. But when less was given it, and less and less, its blossoms withered and its weapons were lowered. The defender nursed her resources, but it grew that the line of fire was narrower. A wolf, huge and lean, made a bound and well-nigh cleared it. Well-nigh, but not quite! Singed and howling, he made back to his fellows. The defender hurled stones after. Her arm was not a weakling's arm. The stones fell with bruising weight, and with the weight, to the wolves, of

supernatural powers. Moreover, she fed to the fire a prized and until now withheld great knot of pine, dragged to the cave from a lightning-riven tree. Up roared the fire, with strong, new weapons. The pack, howling, momentarily daunted, dragged back from the cave mouth. She heard the stones of the runway give beneath the outward-pushing feet, go rolling down the slope. For one suffocating instant of hope doom was seen as a figure in retreat ... then doom stood its ground, then doom waited still, before the cave mouth.

The points of flame sank, the fat pine burned away. The defender took her club; the lawgiver commanded the children into the bottom, low and dark, of the cavern; the provider could provide no further. The mother did not reason about it, but there would be fight in the cave until all was done. She took the stone knife between her teeth. Her teeth were strong and white; her eyes held a red gleam, her dark red hair seemed to bristle upon her head.... A wolf leaped again, coming over the dying fire-weapons. She swung the great club—the skull cracked beneath it—the wolf fell down and moved no more. Again a respite, then two came. The club rose, descended—rose, descended. She drove the stone knife in through the eyes of the one who came closest, teeth seizing the skin with which she was girt. Her victims lay before her, but she was one and the pack were fifty. Fearful noise, wavering light, blind, swift, unreckoning action, and some knowledge that presently would come, blood-red and terrific, the end of the world....

Without the cavern, the face of the cliff in which it was hollowed ran brokenly up to a wild and broken hill-brow.

Here this crest retreated, and here it overhung. Ice had passed over it, and there had been left huge boulders. Now one of these, balanced to a hair, resting on the cliff edge, was pushed from its place and started upon a journey. With a grinding and a shouting noise, with a belting cloud of earth and rock particles, with huge weight and momentum it came down among, it came down upon, the wolves. It slew and maimed, catching and pinning wolves beneath it; it almost spanned the top of the runway; it made a terror as of thunderbolts; it thrust down the slope; it scattered and spilled the hunting pack! With long-drawn yelling the units fled. Elsewhere might be release from hunger. Here was blank enmity and power, and staying further was no good. Pattering and pushing, they passed down the stony slope, into the thick forest. Their long-drawn crying died away. Another part of the world for them, and other prey!

The hunter who had prized the boulder over the cliff was pleased with the thundering commotion he had made, and with the success of the raid. Now he climbed down the face of the cliff to the long shelter line formed by the jutting rock. Here was the boulder he had toppled over! He patted it with his hand and he kicked with his foot the body of a wolf that projected from beneath. The night had but a late-risen waning moon, but so clear was the air, and so good was the eyesight of hunters accustomed by day and by night to the roof of the sky, that the man saw as though he had been cat or owl. He gazed down the runway and recognized the outstretched finger of wood where, two suns ago, he had paused and looked this way, and then had followed the doe and fawn. He had slain both and eaten his fill. He carried

now, wrapped in fawn skin, strips of meat. He also had a knife of flaked stone. After that chase and after a gorging feast and sleep in a hole that he had found in this same long-continuing fastness line of rock and hill, he had remembered the children he had seen before the doe went by.... These were fresh hunting-fields to him. He knew better the lower ground, near the quarter where the sun rose, where pushed a turbid, great river. But to eat in these days, one must wander afar! For a long while he had seen few beings of his own kind. This cave region was new to him. He knew little of caves, and though he made a lair where it was convenient to do so, and though, through considerable periods of time, he might return to it at night, he had not acquired the habit of a fixed abode. The male of his kind was restless and a wanderer.

The boulder which he had thrown down almost hid the cave mouth. But now from one side stole forth a diffused red light. Smoke, too, was in his nostrils. Grasping his club more closely, he rounded the corner of the stone and having done so was fairly in the cave. He discovered there what he may be said to have expected to discover—a woman and her children. It was the female of his kind that found or made substantial lairs.

The defender had put upon the fire the last scrapings of her heap of wood. Rose and gold and violet, the flames lit the cavern. They showed her, still with her club and knife, and her young ones by the wall, and the heap of skins, and the stone hearth. It was cold without, it was warm within; dark without, light within. He had never seen so noble a lair! He spoke—chiefly by gestures, but also with words. She

answered with gestures and words. "I threw the boulder down," he said. "Wolves dead!"

He gazed around the place that was warm and dry and pleasant. He gazed at the woman. She stood upon the younger side of prime, as did he. He dropped his club; he came across, and with a smoothing motion ran his hand along her arm. She made no objection to that; she looked at him with eyes out of which had died the red rage....

Dawn broke and lit the world in front of the tiers of rock. Those within the cavern stirred from sleep. The man and the woman went forth together, found dead wood and brought it in under the rock. Embers were left beneath the ashes. They made up the fire and they broiled the strips of meat that the man had wrapped in the fawn skin. Woman and children and man had breakfast.

That over, the two went out and looked at the boulder, and by dint of the strength of both dragged and pried from under it the slain wolves. Scavenger birds were circling overhead, or watching from tree-tops.... That morning they worked hard, stripping with flake knives the skins from the wolves. They cut meat in thin pieces and hung these in sun and wind over a horizontal pole set between two vertical ones. The elder children watched, frightening the birds with cries and flung stones. Finally, the man and woman bore the carcasses some distance from the cave and dropped them over a precipitous place into the wood below. Now let the birds strip the bones!

The man and the woman waited to see them come sailing, then they turned back to the cavern. As they went they talked amicably together. The man pointed out, over