

Spear and Fang

Robert Ervin Howard

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A-aea crouched close to the cave mouth, watching Ga-nor with wondering eyes. Ga-nor's occupation interested her, as well as Ga-nor himself. As for Ga-nor, he was too occupied with his work to notice her. A torch stuck in a niche in the cave wall dimly illuminated the roomy cavern, and by its light Ga-nor was laboriously tracing figures on the wall. With a piece of flint he scratched the outline and then with a twig dipped in ocher paint completed the figure. The result was crude, but gave evidence of real artistic genius, struggling for expression.

It was a mammoth that he sought to depict, and little A-aea's eyes widened with wonder and admiration. Wonderful! What though the beast lacked a leg and had no tail? It was tribesmen, just struggling out of utter barbarism, who were the critics, and to them Ga-nor was a past master.

However, it was not to watch the reproduction of a mammoth that A-aea hid among the scanty bushes by Ga-nor's cave. The admiration for the painting paled beside the look of positive adoration with which she favored the artist. Indeed, Ga-nor was not displeasing to the eye. Tall he was, towering well over six feet, leanly built, with mighty shoulders and narrow hips, the build of a fighting man. Both his hands and his feet were long and slim; and his features, thrown into bold profile by the flickering torch-light, were intelligent, with a high, broad forehead, topped by a mane of sandy hair.

A-aea herself was very easy to look upon. Her hair, as well as her eyes, was black and fell about her slim shoulders in a rippling wave. No ocher tattooing tinted her cheek, for she was still unmated.

Both the girl and the youth were perfect specimens of the great Cro-Magnon race which came from no man knows where and announced and enforced their supremacy over beast and beast-man.

A-aea glanced about nervously. All ideas to the contrary, customs and taboos are much more narrow and vigorously enforced among savage peoples.

The more primitive a race, the more intolerant their customs. Vice and licentiousness may be the rule, but the appearance of vice is shunned and condemned. So if A-aea had been discovered, hiding near the cave of an unattached young man, denunciation as a shameless woman would have been her lot, and doubtless a public whipping.

To be proper, A-aea should have played the modest, demure maiden, perhaps skillfully arousing the young artist's interest without seeming to do so. Then, if the youth was pleased, would have followed public wooing by means

of crude love-songs and music from reed pipes. Then barter with her parents and then — marriage. Or no wooing at all, if the lover was wealthy.

But little A-aea was herself a mark of progress. Covert glances had failed to attract the attention of the young man who seemed engrossed with his artistry, so she had taken to the unconventional way of spying upon him, in hopes of finding some way to win him.

Ga-nor turned from his completed work, stretched and glanced toward the cave mouth. Like a frightened rabbit, little A-aea ducked and darted away.

When Ga-nor emerged from the cave, he was puzzled by the sight of a small, slender footprint in the soft loam outside the cave.

A-aea walked primly toward her own cave, which was, with most of the others, at some distance from Ga-nor's cave. As she did so, she noticed a group of warriors talking excitedly in front of the chief's cave.

A mere girl might not intrude upon the councils of men, but such was A-aea's curiosity, that she dared a scolding by slipping nearer. She heard the words "footprint" and "gur-na" (man-ape).

The footprints of a gur-na had been found in the forest, not far from the caves.

"Gur-na" was a word of hatred and horror to the people of the caves, for creatures whom the tribesmen called "gur-na," or man-apes, were the hairy monsters of another age, the brutish men of the Neandertal. More feared than mammoth or tiger, they had ruled the forests until the Cro-Magnon men had come and waged savage warfare against them. Of mighty power and little mind, savage, bestial and cannibalistic, they inspired the tribesmen with loathing and horror — a horror transmitted through the ages in tales of ogres and goblins, of werewolves and beast-men.

They were fewer and more cunning, now. No longer they rushed roaring to battle, but cunning and frightful, they slunk about the forests, the terror of all beasts, brooding in their brutish minds with hatred for the men who had driven them from the best hunting grounds.

And ever the Cro-Magnon men trailed them down and slaughtered them, until sullenly they had withdrawn far into the deep forests. But the fear of them remained with the tribesmen, and no woman went into the jungle alone.

Sometimes children went, and sometimes they returned not; and searchers found but signs of a ghastly feast, with tracks that were not the tracks of beasts, nor yet the tracks of men.

And so a hunting party would go forth and hunt the monster down. Sometimes it gave battle and was slain, and sometimes it fled before them and escaped into the depths of the forest, where they dared not follow. Once a hunting party, reckless with the chase, had pursued a fleeing gur-na into the deep forest and there, in a deep ravine, where overhanging limbs shut out the sunlight, numbers of the Neandertalers had come upon them.

So no more entered the forests.

A-aea turned away, with a glance at the forest. Somewhere in its depths lurked the beast-man, piggish eyes glinting crafty hate, malevolent, frightful.

Someone stepped across her path. It was Ka-nanu, the son of a councilor of the chief.

She drew away with a shrug of her shoulders. She did not like Ka-nanu and she was afraid of him. He wooed her with a mocking air, as if he did it merely for amusement and would take her whenever he wished, anyway. He seized her by the wrist.

"Turn not away, fair maiden," said he. "It is your slave, Ka-nanu."

"Let me go," she answered. "I must go to the spring for water."

"Then I will go with you, moon of delight, so that no beast may harm you."

And accompany her he did, in spite of her protests.

"There is a gur-na abroad," he told her sternly. "It is lawful for a man to accompany even an unmated maiden, for protection. And I am Ka-nanu," he added, in a different tone; "do not resist me too far, or I will teach you obedience."

A-aea knew somewhat of the man's ruthless nature. Many of the tribal girls looked with favor on Ka-nanu, for he was bigger and taller even than Ga-nor, and more handsome in a reckless, cruel way. But A-aea loved Ga-nor and she was afraid of Ka-nanu. Her very fear of him kept her from resisting his approaches too much. Ga-nor was known to be gentle with women, if careless of them, while Ka-nanu, thereby showing himself to be another mark of progress, was proud of his success with women and used his power over them in no gentle fashion.

A-aea found Ka-nanu was to be feared more than a beast, for at the spring just out of sight of the caves, he seized her in his arms.

“A-aea,” he whispered, “my little antelope, I have you at last. You shall not escape me.”

In vain she struggled and pleaded with him. Lifting her in his mighty arms he strode away into the forest.

Frantically she strove to escape, to dissuade him.

“I am not powerful enough to resist you,” she said, “but I will accuse you before the tribe.”

“You will never accuse me, little antelope,” he said, and she read another, even more sinister intention in his cruel countenance.

On and on into the forest he carried her, and in the midst of a glade he paused, his hunter’s instinct alert.

From the trees in front of them dropped a hideous monster, a hairy, misshapen, frightful thing.

A-aea’s scream re-echoed through the forest, as the thing approached. Ka-nanu, white-lipped and horrified, dropped A-aea to the ground and told her to run. Then, drawing knife and ax, he advanced.

The Neandertal man plunged forward on short, gnarled legs. He was covered with hair and his features were more hideous than an ape’s because of the grotesque quality of the man in them. Flat, flaring nostrils, retreating chin, fangs, no forehead whatever, great, immensely long arms dangling from sloping, incredible shoulders, the monster seemed like the devil himself to the terrified girl. His apelike head came scarcely to Ka-nanu’s shoulders, yet he must have outweighed the warrior by nearly a hundred pounds.

On he came like a charging buffalo, and Ka-nanu met him squarely and boldly. With flint ax and obsidian dagger he thrust and smote, but the ax was brushed aside like a toy and the arm that held the knife snapped like a stick in the misshapen hand of the Neandertaler. The girl saw the councilor’s son wrenched from the ground and swung into the air, saw him hurled clear across the glade, saw the monster leap after him and rend him limb from limb.

Then the Neandertaler turned his attention to her. A new expression came into his hideous eyes as he lumbered toward her, his great hairy hands horribly smeared with blood, reaching toward her.

Unable to flee, she lay dizzy with horror and fear. And the monster dragged her to him, leering into her eyes. He swung her over his shoulder and waddled away through the trees; and the girl, half-fainting, knew that he was taking her to his lair, where no man would dare come to rescue her.

Ga-nor came down to the spring to drink. Idly he noticed the faint footprints of a couple who had come before him. Idly he noticed that they had not returned.

Each footprint had its individual characteristic. That of the man he knew to be Ka-nanu. The other track was the same as that in front of his cave. He wondered, idly as Ga-nor was wont to do all things except the painting of pictures.

Then, at the spring, he noticed that the footprints of the girl ceased, but that the man's turned toward the jungle and were more deeply imprinted than before. Therefore Ka-nanu was carrying the girl.

Ga-nor was no fool. He knew that a man carries a girl into the forest for no good purpose. If she had been willing to go, she would not have been carried.

Now Ga-nor (another mark of progress) was inclined to meddle in things not pertaining to him. Perhaps another man would have shrugged his shoulders and gone his way, reflecting that it would not be well to interfere with a son of a councilor. But Ga-nor had few interests, and once his interest was roused he was inclined to see a thing through. Moreover, though not renowned as a fighter, he feared no man.

Therefore, he loosened ax and dagger in his belt, shifted his grip on his spear, and took up the trail.

On and on, deeper and deeper into the forest, the Neandertaler carried little A-aea.

The forest was silent and evil, no birds, no insects broke the stillness. Through the overhanging trees no sunlight filtered. On padded feet that made no noise the Neandertaler hurried on.

Beasts slunk out of his path. Once a great python came slithering through the jungle and the Neandertaler took to the trees with surprising speed for one of his gigantic bulk. He was not at home in the trees, however, not even as much as A-aea would have been.

Once or twice the girl glimpsed another such monster as her captor. Evidently they had gone far beyond the vaguely defined boundaries of her race. The other Neandertal men avoided them. It was evident that they lived as do beasts, uniting only against some common enemy and not often then. Therein had lain the reason for the success of the Cro-Magnons' warfare against them.

Into a ravine he carried the girl, and into a cave, small and vaguely illuminated by the light from without. He threw her roughly to the floor of the cave, where she lay, too terrified to rise.

The monster watched her, like some demon of the forest. He did not even jabber at her, as an ape would have done. The Neanderthals had no form of speech whatever.

He offered her meat of some kind — uncooked, of course. Her mind reeling with horror, she saw that it was the arm of a Cro-Magnon child. When he saw she would not eat, he devoured it himself, tearing the flesh with great fangs.

He took her between his great hands, bruising her soft flesh. He ran rough fingers through her hair, and when he saw that he hurt her he seemed filled with a fiendish glee. He tore out handfuls of her hair, seeming to enjoy devilishly the torturing of his fair captive. A-aea set her teeth and would not scream as she had done at first, and presently he desisted.

The leopard-skin garment she wore seemed to enrage him. The leopard was his hereditary foe. He plucked it from her and tore it to pieces.

And meanwhile Ga-nor was hurrying through the forest. He was racing now, and his face was a devil's mask, for he had come upon the bloody glade and found the monster's tracks, leading away from it.

And in the cave in the ravine the Neanderthal reached for A-aea.

She sprang back and he plunged toward her. He had her in a corner but she slipped under his arm and sprang away. He was still between her and the outside of the cave.

Unless she could get past him, he would corner her and seize her. So she pretended to spring to one side. The Neanderthal lumbered in that direction, and quick as a cat she sprang the other way and darted past him, out into the ravine.

With a bellow he charged after her. A stone rolled beneath her foot, flinging her headlong; before she could rise, his hand seized her shoulder. As he dragged her into the cave, she screamed, wildly, frenziedly, with no hope of rescue, just the scream of a woman in the grasp of a beast.

Ga-nor heard that scream as he bounded down into the ravine. He approached the cave swiftly but cautiously. As he looked in, he saw red rage. In the vague light of the cave, the great Neanderthal stood, his piggish eyes on his foe, hideous, hairy, blood-smeared, while at his feet, her soft white

body contrasting with the shaggy monster, her long hair gripped in his blood-stained hand, lay A-aea.

The Neandertaler bellowed, dropped his captive and charged. And Ga-nor met him, not matching brute strength with his lesser might, but leaping back and out of the cave. His spear leaped and the monster bellowed as it tore through his arm. Leaping back again, the warrior jerked his spear and crouched. Again the Neandertaler rushed, and again the warrior leaped away and thrust, this time for the great hairy chest. And so they battled, speed and intelligence against brute strength and savagery.

Once the great, lashing arm of the monster caught Ga-nor upon the shoulder and hurled him a dozen feet away, rendering that arm nearly useless for a time. The Neandertaler bounded after him, but Ga-nor flung himself to one side and leaped to his feet. Again and again his spear drew blood, but apparently it seemed only to enrage the monster.

Then before the warrior knew it, the wall of the ravine was at his back and he heard A-aea shriek as the monster rushed in. The spear was torn from his hand and he was in the grasp of his foe. The great arms encircled his neck and shoulders, the great fangs sought his throat. He thrust his elbow under the retreating chin of his antagonist, and with his free hand struck the hideous face again and again; blows that would have felled an ordinary man but which the Neandertal beast did not even notice.

Ga-nor felt consciousness going from him. The terrific arms were crushing him, threatening to break his neck. Over the shoulder of his foe he saw the girl approaching with a great stone, and he tried to motion her back.

With a great effort he reached down over the monster's arm and found his ax. But so close were they clinched together that he could not draw it. The Neandertal man set himself to break his foe to pieces as one breaks a stick. But Ga-nor's elbow was thrust under his chin, and the more the Neandertal man tugged, the deeper drove the elbow into his hairy throat. Presently he realized that fact and flung Ga-nor away from him. As he did so, the warrior drew his ax, and striking with the fury of desperation, clove the monster's head.

For a minute Ga-nor stood reeling above his foe, then he felt a soft form within his arms and saw a pretty face, close to his.

"Ga-nor!" A-aea whispered, and Ga-nor gathered the girl in his arms.

"What I have fought for I will keep," said he.

And so it was that the girl who went forth into the forest in the arms of an abductor came back in the arms of a lover and a mate.

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