



The Beginning
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About Hasse:

Henry Louis Hasse (1913 - 1977) was an American science fiction author and fan. He is probably best known for being the co-author on Ray Bradbury's first published story, "Pendulum" (November 1941 in *Super Science Stories*). Hasse's novelette "He Who Shrank" is anthologized in both Isaac Asimov's memoir of 1930s science fiction *Before the Golden Age* and in the classic 1946 collection *Adventures in Time and Space*, edited by Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas.

Also available on Feedbooks for Hasse:

- *Walls of Acid* (1947)
- *We're Friends, Now* (1960)
- *One Purple Hope!* (1952)

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Transcriber's Note: This etext was first published in *Amazing Stories* May 1961. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note. The tribal names Lok, Lak and Dak, although possible typesetting errors, remain as printed.

IN the purely cerebral sense, there was no particular point-of-sequence at which Gral could have been said to Know. The very causality of his existence was a succession of brute obedience to brute awareness, for it was only thus that one survived. There was the *danger-sense* on those days when the great-toothed cats roamed the valley, and the males-who-will-bring remained huddled and sullen in the caves above the great ledge; there was the *hunger-sense* when provender was low, and Gor-wah drove them out with grunts and gibes to hunt the wild-dogs and lizards and lesser beasts; and not infrequently there was the other sense, the *not-hunger*, when the bring had been exceptional and there was somnolence after the gorging.

Gral could not remember when he had experienced the latter, for it was the dictate of Gor-wah, the Old One, that who did not bring did not eat—not until the others had gorged. Gral was small, and weakest of all the males. Not often did he bring. *Once* on a spurious moment he had scaled the valley-rim, and came out upon the huge plain where it was rumored the little three-toed horses roamed. And he had seen them, he had seen them! He pursued, armed only with blunt shaft and a few of the throw-stones such as Otah used; but he was less swift than the tiny horses, and his throw-stones fell wide, and it was rumored that here roamed the long-tusked shaggy ones that were larger than the very caves ... trembling, Gral had retraced his way, to arrive at the ledge and meekly await Gor-wah's word that he could partake of the sinews that night.

... Point of sequence. Causality in action. An atom is dissected, a belly rumbles in hunger, a star blooms into brief nova; a bird wheels in futile escape, an ice-flow impacts, an equation is expressed in awesome mushrooming shape. These are multitudinous, apocalyptic. They are timeless and equal. These are things whereby suns wheel or blossom or die, a tribe vanishes, a civilization climbs or a world decays.

Or an earlier sun, hot and soft-stroking against leaves. Or a Pleistocene man, smallest of all the males, whose supine acceptance had devolved into laziness... .

Gral would not have called it laziness; his crude synapses could not have contained the thought, much less given it relevance. Even later—as Gral-the-Bringer—his only point of relevance was to the Place where the great thing happened.

The Place was a small rocky cleft above the river, not easily accessible... . Gral found it one day because he dearly loved to climb, though all to be found here were the lizards, stringy and without substance. But

this day he found more. It was *warmth*, a warmth immeasurably more satisfying than the caves-above-the-ledge. Here for perhaps an hour the late sun stroked directly in, soft and containing, setting the narrow walls aglow with bright-brushed patterns.

To Gral it was an hour apart. He gathered leaves and placed them here, and here he paused in the lateness of each day though his bring was frugal and his belly would rumble that night. But to *that* he was accustomed, and this was pleasurable.

IT was the time of the thaw. Gral huddled in his Place and welcomed the stroking warmth. He was weary, his forage had been fruitless, his throw-stones wasted ... would he never master them as Otah and the others? He had confronted a wild-dog and pinned it snarling against rock, he had employed his shaft and got it fairly into flesh, only to have the beast slip off the smooth point and escape. Smooth points—they were useless! Briefly, his mind groped with that but could not sustain it.

So Gral burrowed into the leaves, his anger diminished as he watched with drowsy delight the sun-patterns stroking. And his eyes must have closed, half closed... .

It was no snarl that brought him back—it was a tread, soft-shod and cautious, very close. The snarl came an instant later, deep-throated with anger and meaning.

Another had found this Place, this warmth, these leaves that were fine for burrowing. Gral came erect and stared into the visage of Obe the Great Bear; just six feet away he saw the great head that swayed with deceptive gentleness, the amber eyes burning, the twinned mountainous muscle of shoulders ... and in that quick moment Gral saw something else. Obe stood directly astride the pointed shaft which Gral had left too far distant.

Gral did not breathe. He did not move. Only his hand crept slowly, but already he knew his throw-stones were gone. Once more Obe snarled, and Gral saw those great shoulder muscles slide. His hand encountered the wall, groped desperately; then his fingers found something—a stick, a root, some gnarled thing that protruded... .

In one rearing flow of motion, Obe launched out in a mighty reach. Gral caught part of that sweeping blow; stunned, he managed to gain footing, and now both his hands were on the protruding object. He wrenched and the thing came free, seeming strange and heavy in his hands. Obe was upon him again, the great paws ready to crush ... pure

terror sent Gral stumbling back, but it was a different instinct that brought his arms once up and then down in a great arc... .

Once only. He felt a wondrous impact that jarred him to the shoulders—and then it was a miracle. Obe was no longer upon him. Obe lay half sprawled, roaring with rage, and from Obe's massive head came the crimson life-stuff!

Gral did not question. Avoiding the destructive paws, he leaped in and away, and then in, all the while employing the thing in his hand until Obe's life-stuff had run its course in crimson ruin.

Acceptance came slowly, as Gral sagged in weariness against the wall. He could not believe this thing! Timorously, he approached the great carcass and prodded with his foot. Then he accepted.

Now things were happening inside him—a great turmoil, a throbbing within his chest. Gral straightened; he brought his arms quickly up and around, and the thing-that-slew felt wondrous in the arc. Even better than the throw-stones! It was like—he struggled for the meaning—like an extension of one's self! One threw the stone and yet retained it!

But alas, it was not a stone at all, Gral discovered. He placed the gnarled thing in sunlight and crouched to survey it. This thing-that-slew was but a length of rotting root, frozen at the end with clay and encrusted ice. And already the ice was shattered.

The sun did the rest, as Gral watched in despair; soon there was only soft melting mud and a gnarled stick that would never slay again.

For a long time Gral crouched there, trying to understand. Dimly he perceived, but his mind would not reach. He scowled angrily and flung the useless stick away. There was a thing inside him he did not like, a strange new thing that gnawed and nagged and brought anger again.

It was anger at being robbed of a priceless thing—but the gnawing went deeper.

Wearily, he rose. He began his trek back to the great ledge, to make announcement that his bring this day would be Obe.

OTAH came, and Lak and one other, and together they brought Obe back. No one made remark on the slaying; it was enough that Obe was here! And when Gral came forward at the gorging to take the bringer's share, he merely took and retired, disdaining the great show of prowess and exaggeration which the others used to demonstrate their kill. But he saw that Gor-wah, the Old One, was pleased. Even Otah the Thrower-of-Stones looked at him with envy; it was not often they had Obe the Great

Bear; only twice before had it happened, and both times it was Otah who brought.

Gral gorged voluptuously that night. This too was new to his experience, and this he liked. But newer still was the thing he did not like, the thing that continued to gnaw and nag and would not let him sleep.

And next morning, with the valley still gray and murky before the dawn and damp with bitter cold, Gral was gone in advance of the others. He clambered down to the river and there he pursued his way—far along toward the place where it widened into shallows. No thought of bringing today! Instead he searched. He searched the rocky shallows as the sun came shafting, and he was still searching later as it climbed high.

He found the place at last, where the stones were plentiful and of proper size. There he paused; the thing was still angry and prodding within him; Gral could not have known that this "thing-that-prodded" was not anger but a churning impatience, a burning nameless need—that he was in very truth a prototype, the first in the realm of pure research!

But he applied it, knowing remotely what he must do. It was long; it was irksome; he ached all through with the effort but still he persisted. Until at last, from all the stones in the shallows, he had gathered a dozen that pleased him.

These he seized eagerly. He spread them out; he examined; he grunted and grimaced and paused in perplexity. It was difficult to choose when each might do! But he chose, weighing each in his hand before discarding, until finally *one* remained.

He grunted his pleasure, knowing purpose now. The vines! Again he selected carefully. *Tight*, said the thing-that-prodded, *it must be tight or you will have only a throw-stone*.

And so began the long task of arranging stone to shaft, as he brought the vine round and round again. It was crude; his fingers were clumsy and unaccustomed; the vine tangled and tore, and there was no way of fastening. But with each failure he found new ways, until at last it was done.

It was done! A thing of extended strength and weight, at once so wondrous that Gral could only place it before him and stare. He felt a pulsing at his throat, his thoughts went leaping. Obe the Great Bear! Now he could bring Obe many times! Even Otah the Thrower-of-Stones would be in awe!

Gral lifted the thing of his creation ... and just a little way distant, his glance caught the bole of a tree. *Now this will be Obe the Great Bear ...* then Gral leapt forward, arm outflung in the arc he remembered.

Truly and without effort the weight went to the mark. It made impact that jarred him from arm to shoulder, but this he did not mind because his weapon's edge brought a great gaping wound to the weathered bole.

... the first sound of isolate words across a wire. The initial shock of mushroom-shape above an atoll. The fierce clutch of a weighted shaft newly fashioned ... man stands always for a moment in awe of what man has wrought.

For a moment only. And so Gral stood stark in his moment of awe, truly frightened as he visioned what such a blow might have done to Obe. But Gral was truly man, truly prototype; for the time of one deep breath he felt it, then awe and fright were gone as he exulted.

Once more he brought the shaft *up* in smooth swing and *down* in the arc... .

Alas for Gral—alas for research. Alas for all the effort and application and the prodding-thing within. It was Gral's destiny yet to know that a mere day's effort was only the beginning.

For his second mighty swing did not reach the bole-bark. It reached nothing but air. He felt a sudden lightness as the stone fled from shaft, and he was left holding a stick trailing vines at the end.

Undaunted, he tried again, and again it happened—the stone went plummeting. A third time he tried, and a fourth. He chose the more pliant vines and strove to make them stay, sought a new way to fasten. The stone would not stay.

Gral mourned, and from the mourning came anger and then a bitterness that rose to blind him. For the rest of that day he tried—he could not have counted the times. A factor was missing—dimly he knew that. The sun was dull red along the valley when he desisted; his hands were raw and bleeding, and seeing that, a sound rose in his throat like grating gravel.

Grimly, he buried his stone there beneath the bole and made his way back to the great ledge. His share of Obe would last yet a day or two. The thought of food was only fleeting, because the anger was still inside him, larger now, demanding now ... that thing-that-prodded.

OBE was gone at last, both Gral's share and all the rest. Three days were gone and Gral did not try to bring again. But each day he went from the ledge in advance of the others, he went in a hunger he did not heed—to the place of the buried stone.

On the third day he thought that Otah followed, keeping discreetly behind; but he could not be sure. This was not Otah's usual direction. And

later, on the far shore across the shallows he saw one of Kurho's tribe from Far End. It was not often that Kurho's people foraged this far, and Gral could not say how long the man must have stood there bold and brazen. When next he looked up, the fellow was gone.

Ordinarily he would have reported this to Gor-wah, but the incident was soon forgotten. He continued doggedly with shaft and stone. It was something wild and febrile that drove him now, and he could not have wondered at his own incredible quixotism—he was a million years removed from that! But inevitably his synapses took hold, the neuronc links grooved, and to Gral one thought emerged:*the vines would never do.*

And so he came to know where the missing factor lay. He knew it dully and was helpless.

More than helpless, he was hungry. It came with a great gnawing need. On the fifth day it was *Otah* who noticed, and more out of contempt than pity tossed him the remnants of a wild-dog he had brought: the portion was little more than stripped bones and sinew, but Gral accepted without question, crawled to his place on the ledge and partially assuaged his hunger... .

The ways of discovery are most wondrous—yet who will dare to say they take precedence over the wondrous ways of the stomach? And the ways are ironic; is it not conceivable that the two should align in devious fruition? For Gral found answer, not in his groping hands, but tangled about his clumsy feet!

The sun came high and hot. Gral emerged from his sleep-place on the ledge, faint and hungry but knowing he must try yet again. He took a step, his feet tangled, and growling deep he reached down and tore at a tough twining substance.

Sinews. Sinews stripped bare by his own hunger, all that *Otah* and others had tossed him these past days; they were taut and clinging now, unresilient, like the vines of the young trees and yet strangely unlike.

Unlike! Gral stared, as his throat went pulsing. He reached out and touched; one had twined about a rock, was now so fast that his fingers could not cause it to move. For a long time he crouched, perplexed, growling deep as his fingers explored. He glanced up at the sun, and then back, and with that glance two things came together with searing shock... .

For the very first time, man—a Pleistocene man—had made a clear cerebral distinction of cause and effect.

Gral arose. There was a wild new urgency. Quickly he searched and he found, across all the great ledge, sinews from the gorging which the sun had not yet touched. Some among the tribe stared with immobile contempt, thinking Gral the scavenger was yet hungry. But Gral gathered quickly, and departed, and was soon at the far place by the great bole, where he retrieved his stone and set feverishly to work.

Indeed it was not like the vines! It was easy now, but he was doubly thorough; he made his fingers be strong as he followed the pattern he knew so well. The sinews held, they held! His part done at last, he went out from the trees and placed his shaft where the sun's hot stroke could reach.

And this was perhaps hardest of all—the waiting. Most of that day he crouched and waited and watched, as the sun's work was done; that great bright orb, his ally; he had known times when it was beneficent and times when it was cruel, but now in his need Gral's thoughts were kindly.

Soon it became as if his own kind thoughts and the sun's hot strength were one. The thing-that-prodded now was different, now it outpoured, gracious to meet his need. He could not have known that this was prayer! And so, by degree and small degree Gral saw the sinews grasp and tighten.

Not until the sun was low, at valley's Far End, did he dare reach out and take his shaft and put it to test. But already he knew! The stone held, and it held, and would continue to hold after many tries. He had fashioned a thing and it was wondrous—his own sole possession—a weapon beyond anything the valley-people had dreamed of—and it was his alone.

A stirring of vague alarm made him pause. He growled deep. The thing-that-prodded churned in a new way, a cunning way, and once again Gral was prototype. This thing must be kept secret! Not yet would he share—not until he became known as Gral-the-Bringer!

... he could not have known. Could not have known that this thing he wrought spelled at once Beginning and End: that no such shocking departure remains long sole-possessed, either shaft or fire or mushroom-shape: that with each great thing of man's devising comes question and doubt and challenge and often disaster... .

Or knowing, would not have cared.

SO now he was known as Gral-the-Bringer! He went alone each day, taking throw-stones which he discarded in favor of his new weapon from its place of hiding. He brought the wild-dogs for a time, but soon he disdained them. Three times more he brought Obe the Great Bear, but would not demonstrate his method of kill. Sometimes he scaled the valley-rim to the great plain, where he slew the three-toed horses whose flesh was sweet and different.

And each time at the gorging Otah watched him—watched sometimes sullen and brooding, sometimes with secret knowing.

And then came a day when *Otah* brought Obe the Bear. Three times in as many days he brought Obe, and on the third time he brought back also the shaft-with-stone, bearing it boldly to make sure that Gral and all the others saw.

With half snarl and half wail, Gral leaped to seize it. Otah might have crushed him with a blow, but Otah waited, looking at him fully. Gral's snarl died in his throat. This was not the weapon he had hidden, but another! Otah had found and copied.

"See this!" Otah grunted. "I slew Obe with this!" And he demonstrated to all the tribe. He was still angry, facing Gral, but he gave credit. "*Gral* used it first. Gral is greatest among us! But if Gral can use, Otah can use—we will all use!"

He turned to Gor-wah the Old One, and said in the language of monosyllable and gesture: "We must have Council!"

There was Council, and the truth was out. Gral held back nothing in his telling. Gor-wah listened and nodded and grunted, his brow furrowed and he growled deep in his throat.

"A weapon of great magic," Gor-wah pronounced, and he prodded with his fingers at it, almost afraid to touch.

"Arh-h-h!" echoed the males. "A weapon of great magic!"

"Let us have many such," Otah repeated with growl and gesture. "The tribe of Gor-wah will be greatest in all the valley!"

Again Gor-wah grunted, shook his head slowly. "The tribe of Gor-wah seeks only food and peace. This we have. We do well without such a weapon."

"Arh-h," echoed the males. "We do well without."

Gral felt helpless, listening. All attention was now upon Otah and the Old One. "But we will use only for food and peace," Otah pursued sullenly. "Such was my meaning!"

Gor-wah rose, trembling. "Meaning? I will give you meaning. Kurho's tribe at Far End! Already they have taken the lesser tribes. Each year they

come in bold insolence, and only the river separates; in time they mean to take the whole valley. Kurho has declared it!" He spread his hands. "Never again will we know peace, if Kurho learns the way of such a weapon!"

There was pause, a restless unease. And again it was Otah who growled boldly, touching the weapon: "Such is the reason for many of these. Let us make them, and none will dare to come!"

"None will dare!" echoed the Council. But there were both those who said it strong, and those who said in doubt.

Now it was plain that even Gor-wah was in doubt. He was old and he had known this time would come, the time when another took the tribe, and that one would be Otah. But now he stood straight and made pronouncement. "I say no! The risk is too great. You, Otah—and you, Gral—you will destroy this weapon. It must not be used again!"

OF course it was never done. Otah also knew that he must take the tribe, and they looked to him now. Soon Lok had the weapon, then Mai-ak and most of the others, as day by day Gral instructed them in the making. But they used with caution! Otah reminded them always of the Old One's words, though none of the Far End tribe had been seen near the river for many days now.

Until Mai-ak returned from a journey, to announce he had encountered one of Kurho's tribe. "We exchanged insults. I invited him to come close," Mai-ak explained with amusing gesture, "but the fellow would not. He saw my weapon! I think he would have given all his throw-stones to possess it!"

Otah was not pleased. He would have admonished, except that Mai-ak told a story well; besides, Mai-ak was a great hunter.

But there came another such day, and then others. First Lok reported and then Mai-ak again. The reports became frequent. Kurho's men were forever near, watching in silence this new weapon in the hands of the Gor-wah tribe across the river.

And then Mai-ak brought a message ... there had been another encounter, no insults this time but rather a sullen understanding. Kurho was aware of the new weapon; it made his own people uneasy and restless; such a thing at loose in the valley could only spell threat to all peoples! But, if it was to be, then what the tribe of Gor-wah devised Kurho's tribe would also devise. They would devise more and better!

Otah listened, growled in anger. "Kurho says this? Kurho, who has boasted that he will take the whole valley?" Then he paused and

considered sensibly. "Mai-ak, take answer. You will say that we go in peace. Say that never do we intend to cross the river. And say also"—Otah paused, groping—"say also that we shall be ready for any who do choose to cross!"

The Old One nodded approval, but no one saw; and no one saw the dark furrow of doubt like a shadow of doom across his face.

"Kurho speaks big," sneered a young one, new in Council. "We have heard it before, always it is Kurho's tribe who is greatest in every deed... ." He spat in contempt.

Days were gone, endless days without incident. But the reports came in—a mere trickle at first, and then in great tide. Kurho's tribe had indeed devised. Their weapon had been observed! Dak returned one day in high excitement, stumbling across the ledge from a long day's journey.

"Kurho has devised better! We bring Obe the Bear, but they have now slain the great-toothed one. I saw it, I swear! They slew him easily!" He gasped for breath, then gained his feet and gave them eloquent gesture of what he had seen.

There could be no doubt. Kurho now had a weapon much more facile, more deadly.

Otah accepted grimly. Now it was he who must prove! He went to work at once, he and Gral, devising a weapon to meet the threat—more sharp-edged and deadly, of greater length and balance. It took days. And days more to seek out the place of the great-toothed ones. Not one but *three* were slain, and it was made certain the word reached Kurho.

But now Otah knew. He knew and was helpless. A frightful thing had been launched and there could be no turning; nothing now but the constant fear, the trap without end, the perilous thing above all their heads ... and the waiting.

Kurho also waited. True, one thing remained to temper the distrust: sporadic communication had been established, a thing new and yet heavy with pretense, which again like a serpent at its tail spelled mutual distrust. But it was there, begrudging, and all the smaller tribes knew of it too—those scattered ones who were little more than clans. All the peoples of the valley watched and waited, aware of this thing between the two great tribes of Kurho and Otah.

"It is better that we should talk, even endlessly, than to use such weapons tribe against tribe!" Such was Otah's word to those who grumbled and those who feared, and there was much to indicate that such was Kurho's feeling too.

Indeed it appeared to be so! For the first time, Kurho relaxed his borders at Far End. Occasionally the Otah tribesmen were permitted to enter, welcomed without suspicion—a thing unprecedented! Similarly, select members from the Kurho tribe were accepted beyond the river; they displayed certain prowesses new to the Otah tribe, for in many ways these were a strange and fantastic people.

It seemed to be a beginning. Word went out in secret and still other word returned, in which Mai-ak played a great part. And so, after scores of days it was done: there would be a time of understanding; Kurho, himself, would cross the river to go in person among Otah's people! When this was done, Otah would also cross the river to observe the things at Far End!

But now growlings arose which even Otah could not contain. Kurho should not be welcomed! Kurho must not be trusted! Was not this the man who already had suppressed the minor tribes? Had he not flaunted his aim of one day taking the whole valley?

Nevertheless, Kurho came. He came in all his boast and arrogance. The time was not festive—he was made to feel that—but what Kurho felt he did not show. Extravagant point was made that he should see all that he wished! Across all the great series of ledges he was taken, both high and low and length and breadth, to observe the abundance and well-being and extent of the Otah tribe. Through all the near valley he was shown, even to the places of great hunting, that he might see how the tribe of Otah prospered in the Bringing.

Through it all, Kurho made a token show of interest; he twice lost his temper in boast against boast, but he was more often a blunt enigma. He saw much and said little. Those times when he did speak, so extravagant were his grunt and gesture that much was lost.

When Kurho departed at last for Far End, he had implanted a feeling of frustration and one thing more—the disturbing thought that not all of his own boasts were idle!

And now came the time for Otah to cross. It was done so quietly that not many knew he was gone, but soon the reports came: Otah had been received with great clamor and curiosity by the Kurho people, and accorded much honor! Aside from that, the result was much the same, as Otah saw much and said little and did not once lose his temper. Kurho persisted in his boast and claim, and it was rumored that the two leaders had gone so far as to discuss the weapons!

Rumor was true. Otah returned from Far End and immediately called Council, even as Kurho was calling Council. Little had been gained, little proven; the perilous thing was still there, that monstrous means of death that might come in a moment of temper or reprisal to either tribe. Alas, such weapons were not easily relinquished—and who would be first?

Plainly, the way would now be slow and heavy with suspicion, but a method to abate such a threat must soon be formulated.

On *that* Otah and Kurho were agreed!

SO the two great leaders agreed, and were patient, and twice more there were meetings. So engrossed they became and even enamored, that they were only dimly aware—

Others in the valley, those so scattered and isolate as to be considered only clans, had long watched and waited—and yearned. Neither the long-shaft weapon nor the way of making were longer secret—so why should they not also have?

Inevitably the reports trickled in. A lone clansman had been observed near the river, employing one of the weapons crudely devised but efficient. Some days later, one from the high-plateau was seen skulking the valley with such a weapon. Those lone ones, who barely subsisted in the barren places beyond river and cave, nor foraged afield—discreet and fleeting at first but with increased daring as the days went on.

And so fixed were Otah and Kurho that such reports were tolerated. There could be no threat here! True, the way of the making was no longer secret. True, such clan-people had long been despised and neglected and left to their own grubbing hunger—but was it not recognized, especially now, that the tribes of Otah and Kurho would determine the fate of all?

They erred—both Otah and Kurho. Neither would determine, nor would preponderance of weapons determine. It was not yet perceived that such clan-people were not Tribe-People, and thus could not know the meaning of Council, nor weigh consequence, nor realize in their new-found cleverness that a single arrogant act would trigger the first and final avalanche... .

It came. It came on a day when a lone and hungry clansman found himself a full day's journey beyond the river; he was not of Otah's Tribe nor any tribe, nor did he know that the two he faced were of Kurho's Tribe. In the dispute over the bring, so emboldened was he by his weapon newly-fashioned that he used it quick and surely.

He did not again look at the two bodies! Taking up his bring, the lone one departed quite leisurely, without even the good sense to flee in horror of the consequence.

Consequence came. It came soon, before the sun was scarcely down. It came swiftly without question or council, as word reached Far End that two had been slain. Throughout the night it came in divergent attack, as Kurho deployed a token force near the river and sent his real strength high to the north, across the valley-rim and down upon Otah's people. It was at once attack and reprisal and reason!

And for Otah it was reason! For many weeks past, in test and maneuver of the long-shafts he had looked to the north. Now couriers brought the alarm swiftly, and within minutes his forces were launched—fearless ones who knew each foot of terrain by day or night. Otah led one contingent and Mai-ak the other, strategy being to stem Kurho's strength high upon the valley-rim, deplete the enemy and then join force to hunt down any who sifted through.

It was good strategy, the only strategy—and for a time it went well. Within the hour Kurho's forces were scattered, as attack and counter-attack surged and slashed in wild eruption of the long-shafts. Just as eruptive were the neuro-emotives, as each in his primal way must have known that *this* was the long awaitment, *this* was the grim finality in Kurho's boast and Otah's boast of weapons.

A few sifted through, but were quickly brought down as Otah's drifting rear-guard deployed to their assignments. It became evident early that Otah's tribe was more proficient in the long-shafts!

Alas, mere proficiency would not prevail against force of numbers. Well within the hour Otah knew it, knew with a raging despair that time was not with him, he had deployed too late with too little. Now he knew with consuming clarity, that despite the lulling pretense Kurho's boasts of strength had not been idle boasts!

This was Otah's last bitter thought, and then he was too occupied for cerebral indulgence. For the next minutes he wielded truer than any! Men came and fell, and others leaped and fell, skulls shattered, the life-stuff spurting, before Otah's shaft went spinning away in shattered ruin; he leaped to seize another, employed it in great sweeping swaths against those who still came. Two went down, but two came to fill the gap. In perfect unison, one parried as the other wielded truly to the mark... .

It cannot be said, with surety, that Otah in that ultimate moment felt pain. It is fairly certain that both finitely and cosmically the initial numbing shock did register; and it may be assumed that he jolted rather

horribly at the splintering bite of bone into brain. *But who can say he did not reach a point-of-prescience, that his neuro-thalamics did not leap to span the eons, and gape in horror, in that precise and endless time just before his brains spewed in a gush of gray and gore, to cerebrate no more?*

A MATTER of minutes, now. Both Kurho and Mai-ak knew it. The latter had glimpsed Otah's destruction, and with wild abandon sought to rally his men into the area.

There was no longer an area. There was clash and groan and rush and retreat, there was dark endless rock and a darker sky, from which the very stars seemed to recoil in darkest wonderment at man's senseless assault. The valley-rim yawned, and there Mai-ak made his stand and made it well.

He was unaware that Kurho was no more—that the man of boast was at this very moment a quivering, protoplasmic lump splattered across a dark crevice. A random weapon in a frantic hand had proved to be no respecter of person. Nor did it matter! Decimated as they were, enough of the enemy got through. Once propelled in the insane purpose there could be no stopping, as they descended upon Otah's people who huddled in the caves... .

For weeks, they had been told that when it came it would be from above, sudden and savage without defense or recourse. Few had believed, or bothered to plot the route to safety. Would not these issues be resolved? Had not their caves been always safe and secure?

Now there was no time for belief or wonder. Within minutes none of Otah's tribe were alive, neither women nor children. Gor-wah the Old One remained, having failed in his exhortations; now he stood quite still, erect and waiting, with arms outflung as the weapons came swarming, and when that final blow fell the expression upon his mouth might have been a grimace or might have been a smile... .

Nor did the others escape, those at Far End who also huddled and waited and would not believe. Their caves at the valley-floor were even less secure. Whether it was blinding hate or the bitter dregs of expediency, for Mai-ak and his remnants there was only one recourse now. It had been deeply ingrained!

Grimly they pursued the way, automaton-like, unresponsive now to horror or any emotive. And once again, within the hour the weapons fell.

It was swift and it was thorough.

Methodical. Merciless. Complete.

IT will not be said here when emotive-response returned. Does one return from a horror all-encompassing, or seek to requite the unrequited? Does one yearn for a Way that is no more when deadening shock has wiped it out?

The season of thaw came, and again the great cold and once more the thaw. Both Obe the Bear and the great saber-cats were at large across the valley, and for those few who remained the bring was not easy now. There was more dangerous prey!

Lone clansman encountered clansman across his path, and there was furtive slinking. Each went silently alone and returned alone to his place of hiding. Bellies growled, but none dared use his weapon except in secret.

Perhaps a few, some isolate few remembered that time of chaos a season ago—but it was fleeting recall at best, as somatic responses rose to blot it out.

It was not to be forever! One thing remained, unmasked and unbeknownst, grooved with synaptic permanence in their burgeoning brains. *This was neither beginning nor end: for though Otah's Tribe was gone, bellies still growled. Kurho's Tribe was no more, but the weapons yet remained.*

There could be no beginning or end—for would not new things come, means and methods and ways of devising so long as man remained? Was not this The Way?

Such were Mai-ak's thoughts at the time of the next thaw; when he felt the thing-that-prodded that would not let him be, and his anger became stubborn resolve; when day after day he bent the young saplings, and found a way at last to fasten the sinew.

When he pulled, finally, pulled with all his strength, and with great gloating saw his shaft go outward to a distance never yet conceived... .

THE END

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