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The Inheritors

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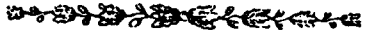
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ONE



Lok was running as fast as he could. His head was down and he carried his thorn bush horizontally for balance and smacked the drifts of vivid buds aside with his free hand. Liku rode him laughing, one hand clutched in the chestnut curls that lay on his neck and down his spine, the other holding the little Oa tucked under his chin. Lok's feet were clever. They saw. They threw him round the displayed roots of the beeches, leapt when a puddle of water lay across the trail. Liku beat his belly with her feet.

"Faster! Faster!"

His feet stabbed, he swerved and slowed. Now they could hear the river that lay parallel but hidden to their left. The beeches opened, the bush went away and they were in the little patch of flat mud where the log was.

"There, Liku."

The onyx marsh water was spread before them, widening into the river. The trail along by the river began again on the other side on ground that rose until it was lost in the trees. Lok, grinning happily, took two paces towards the water and stopped. The grin faded and his mouth opened till the lower lip hung down. Liku slid to his knee then dropped to the ground. She put the little Oa's head to her mouth and looked over her.

Lok laughed uncertainly.

"The log has gone away."

He shut his eyes and frowned at the picture of the log. It had lain in the water from this side to that, grey and rotting. When you trod the centre you could feel the water that washed beneath you, horrible water, as deep in places as a man's shoulder. The water was not awake like the river or the fall but asleep, spreading there to the river and waking up, stretching on the right into wildernesses of impassable swamp and thicket and bog. So sure was he of this log the people always used that he opened his eyes again, beginning to smile as if he were waking out of a dream; but the log was gone.

Fa came trotting along the trail. The new one was sleeping on her back. She did not fear that he would fall because she felt his hands gripping her hair at the neck and his feet holding the hair farther down her back but she trotted softly so that he should not wake. Lok heard her coming before she appeared under the beeches.

"Fa! The log has gone away!"

She came straight to the water's edge, looked, smelt, then turned accusingly to Lok. She did not need to speak. Lok began to jerk his head at her.

"No, no. I did not move the log to make the people laugh. It has gone."

He spread his arms wide to indicate the completeness of that absence, saw that she understood, and dropped them again.

Liku called him.

"Swing me."

She was reaching for a beech bough that came down out of the tree like a long neck, saw light and craned up with an armful of green and brown buds. Lok abandoned

the log that was not there and swung her into the crook. He heaved sideways, he pulled, gaining a little backwards with each step as the bough creaked.

"Ho!"

He let the branch go and dropped on to his hams. The bough shot away and Liku shrieked delightedly.

"No! No!"

But Lok hauled again and again and the armful of leaves bore Liku shrieking and laughing and protesting along the edge of the water. Fa was looking from the water to Lok and back. She was frowning again.

Ha came along the trail, hurrying but not running, more thoughtful than Lok, the man for an emergency. When Fa began to call out to him he did not answer her immediately but looked at the empty water and then away to the left where he could see the river beyond the arch of beeches. Then he searched the forest with ear and nose for intruders and only when he was sure of safety did he put down his thorn bush and kneel by the water.

"Look!"

His pointing finger showed the gashes under water where the log had moved. The edges were still sharp and pieces of broken earth lay in the gashes, not yet disintegrated by the water that covered them. He traced the curving gashes away down into the water until they disappeared in that obscurity. Fa looked across to the place where the broken trail began again. There was earth churned up there where the other end of the log had lain. She asked a question of Ha and he answered her with his mouth.

"One day. Perhaps two days. Not three."

Liku was still shrieking with laughter.

Nil came in sight along the trail. She was moaning gently as was her habit when tired and hungry. But though the skin was slack on her heavy body her breasts were stretched and full and the white milk stood in the nipples. Whoever else went hungry it would not be the new one. She glanced at him as he clung to Fa's hair, saw that he was asleep, then went to Ha and touched him on the arm.

"Why did you leave me? You have more pictures in your head than Lok."

Ha pointed to the water.

"I came quickly to see the log."

"But the log has gone away."

The three of them stood and looked at each other. Then, as so often happened with the people, there were feelings between them. Fa and Nil shared a picture of Ha thinking. He had thought that he must make sure the log was still in position because if the water had taken the log or if the log had crawled off on business of its own then the people would have to trek a day's journey round the swamp and that meant danger or even more discomfort than usual.

Lok flung all his weight against the bough and would not let it get away. He hushed Liku and she climbed down and stood by him. The old woman was coming along the trail, they could hear her feet and her breathing. She appeared round the last of the trunks, she was grey and tiny, she was bowed and remote in the contemplation of the leaf-wrapped burden that she carried in two hands by her withered breasts. The people stood together and their silence greeted her. She said nothing but waited with a sort of humble patience for what might

come. Only the burden sagged a little in her hands and was lifted up again so that the people remembered how heavy it was.

Lok was the first to speak. He addressed them generally, laughing, hearing only words from his mouth but wanting laughter. Nil began to moan again.

Now they could hear the last of the people coming along the trail. It was Mal, coming slowly and coughing every now and then. He came round the last tree-trunk, stopped in the beginning of the open space, leaned heavily on the torn end of his thorn bush and began to cough. As he bent over they could see where the white hair had fallen away in a track that led from behind his eyebrows over his head and down into the mat of hair that lay across his shoulders. The people said nothing while he coughed but waited, still as deer at gaze, while the mud rose in square lumps that elongated and turned over between their toes. A sharply sculptured cloud moved away from the sun and the trees sifted chilly sunlight over their naked bodies.

At last Mal finished his cough. He began to straighten himself by bearing down on the thorn bush and by making his hands walk over each other up the stick. He looked at the water then at each of the people in turn, and they waited.

"I have a picture."

He freed a hand and put it flat on his head as if confining the images that flickered there.

"Mal is not old but clinging to his mother's back. There is more water not only here but along the trail where we came. A man is wise. He makes men take a tree that has fallen and——"

His eyes deep in their hollows turned to the people imploring them to share a picture with him. He coughed again, softly. The old woman carefully lifted her burden.

At last Ha spoke.

"I do not see this picture."

The old man sighed and took his hand away from his head.

"Find a tree that has fallen."

Obediently the people spread out along the water side. The old woman paced to the branch on which Liku had swung and rested her cupped hands on it. Ha was the first to call them. They hurried to him and winced at the liquid mud that rose to their ankles. Liku found some berries blackened and left over from the time of fruit. Mal came and stood, frowning at the log. It was the trunk of a birch, no thicker than a man's thigh, a trunk that was half-sunken in mud and water. The bark was peeling away here and there and Lok began to pull the coloured fungi from it. Some of the fungi were good to eat and Lok gave these to Liku. Ha and Nil and Fa plucked unhandily at the trunk. Mal sighed again

"Wait. Ha there. Fa there. Nil too. Lok!"

The log came up easily. There were branches left which caught in bushes, dragged in the mud and got in their way as they carried it heavily back to the dark neck of water. The sun hid again.

When they came to the edge of the water the old man stood frowning at the tumbled earth on the other side.

"Let the log swim."

This was delicate and difficult. However they handled the sodden wood their feet had to touch the water. At last the log lay floating and Ha was leaning out and hold-

ing the end. The other end sank a little. Ha began to bear with one hand and pull with the other. The branched head of the trunk moved out slowly and came to rest against the mud of the other side. Lok babbled happily in admiration, his head thrown back, words coming out at random. Nobody minded Lok, but the old man was frowning and pressing both hands on his head. The other end of the trunk was under water for perhaps twice the length of a man and that was the slimmest part. Ha looked his question at the old man who pressed his head again and coughed. Ha sighed and deliberately put a foot into the water. When the people saw what he was doing they groaned in sympathy. Ha inserted himself warily, he grimaced and the people grimaced with him. He gasped for breath, forcing himself in until the water washed over his knees and his hands gripped the rotten bark of the trunk till it rucked. Now he bore down with one hand and lifted with the other. The trunk rolled, the boughs stirred brown and yellow mud that swirled up with a shoal of turning leaves, the head lurched and was resting on a further bank. Ha pushed with all his strength but the splayed branches were too much for him. There was still a gap where the trunk curved under water on the farther side. He came back to the dry land, watched gravely by the people. Mal was looking at him expectantly, his two hands now holding the thorn bush again. Ha went to the place where the trail came into the open. He picked up his thorn bush and crouched. For a moment he leaned forward then as he fell his feet caught up with him and he was flashing across the open space. He took four paces on the log, falling all the time till it seemed his head must strike his knees; then the log

threshed up the water and Ha was flying through the air, feet drawn up and arms wide. He thumped on leaves and earth. He was over. He turned, seized the head of the trunk and hauled: and the trail was joined across the water.

The people cried out in relief and joy. The sun chose this moment to reappear so that the whole world seemed to share their pleasure. They applauded Ha, beating the flat of their hands against their thighs and Lok was sharing their triumph with Liku.

"Do you see, Liku? The trunk is across the water. Ha has many pictures!"

When they were quiet again Mal pointed his thorn bush at Fa.

"Fa and the new one."

Fa felt with her hand for the new one. The bunched hair by her neck covered him and they could see little but his hands and feet firmly gripped to individual curls. She went to the water's edge, stretched out her arms sideways and ran neatly across the trunk, jumped the last part and stood with Ha. The new one woke, peered out over her shoulder, shifted the grip of one foot and went to sleep again.

"Now Nil."

Nil frowned, drawing the skin together over her brows. She smoothed the curls back from them, she grimaced painfully and ran at the log. She held her hands high above her head and by the time she reached the middle she was crying out.

"Ai! Ai! Ai!"

The log began to bend and sink. Nil came to the thinnest part, leaped high, her full breasts bouncing and

landed in water up to her knees. She screamed and lugged her feet out of the mud, seized Ha's outstretched hand and then was gasping and shuddering on the solid earth.

Mal walked to the old woman and spoke gently.

"Will she carry it across now?"

The old woman withdrew only in part from her inward contemplation. She paced down to the water's edge, still holding the two handfuls at breast height. There was little to her body but bone and skin and scanty white hair. When she walked swiftly across the trunk scarcely stirred in the water.

Mal bent down to Liku.

"Will you cross?"

Liku took the little Oa from her mouth and rubbed her mop of red curls against Lok's thigh.

"I will go with Lok."

This lit a kind of sunshine in Lok's head. He opened his mouth wide and laughed and talked at the people, though there was little connection between the quick pictures and the words that came out. He saw Fa laughing back at him and Ha smiling gravely.

Nil called out to them.

"Be careful, Liku. Hold tight."

Lok pulled a curl of Liku's hair.

"Up."

Liku took his hand, seized his knee with one foot and clambered to the curls of his back. The little Oa lay in her warm hand under his chin. She shouted at him.

"Now!"

Lok went right back to the trail under the beeches. He scowled at the water, rushed at it, then skidded to a stop. Across the water the people began to laugh. Lok rushed

backwards and forwards, baulking each time at the near end of the log. He shouted.

"Look at Lok, the mighty jumper!"

Proudly he pranced forward, his pride diminished, he crouched and scuttled back. Liku was bouncing and shrieking.

"Jump! Jump!"

Her head was rolling helplessly against his. He came down to the water's edge as Nil, his hands high in the air.

"Ai! Ai!"

Even Mal was grinning at that. Liku's laughter had reached the silent, breathless stage and the water was falling from her eyes. Lok hid behind a beech tree and Nil held her breasts for laughter. Then suddenly Lok reappeared. He shot forward, head down. He flashed across the log with a tremendous shout. He leapt and landed on dry ground, bounced round and went on bouncing and jeering at the defeated water, till Liku began to hiccup by his neck and the people were holding on to each other.

At last they were silent and Mal came forward. He coughed a little and grimaced wryly at them.

"Now, Mal."

He held his thorn bush crossways for balance. He ran at the trunk, his old feet gripping and loosing. He began to cross, swaying the thorn bush about. He did not get up enough speed to cross in safety. They saw the anguish growing in his face, saw his bared teeth. Then his back foot pushed a piece of bark off the trunk and left a bare patch and he was not quick enough. The other foot slid and he fell forward. He bounced sideways and disap-

peared in a dirty flurry of water. Lok rushed up and down shouting as loud as he could.

"Mal is in the water!"

"Ai! Ai!"

Ha was wading in, grinning painfully at the strangeness of the cold touch. He got hold of the thorn bush, and Mal was on the other end. Now he had Mal by the wrist and they were falling about, seeming to wrestle with each other. Mal disengaged himself and began to crawl on all fours up the firmer ground. He got a beech tree between himself and the water and lay curled up and shuddering. The people gathered round in a tight little group. They crouched and rubbed their bodies against him, they wound their arms into a lattice of protection and comfort. The water streamed off him and left his hair in points. Liku wormed her way into the group and pressed her belly against his calves. Only the old woman still waited without moving. The group of people crouched round Mal and shared his shivers.

Liku spoke.

"I am hungry."

The people broke the knot round Mal and he stood up. He was still shivering. This shivering was not a surface movement of skin and hair but deep so that the very thorn bush shook with him.

"Come!"

He led the way along the trail. Here there was more space between the trees and many bushes in the spaces. They came presently to a clearing that a great tree had made before it died, a clearing close by the river and still dominated by the standing corpse of the tree. Ivy had

taken over, its embedded stems making a varicose entanglement on the old trunk and ending where the trunk had branched in a huge nest of dark green leaves. Fungi had battened too, plates that stuck out and were full of rain-water, smaller jelly-like blobs of red and yellow so that the old tree was dissolving into dust and white pulp. Nil took food for Liku and Lok pried with his fingers for the white grubs. Mal waited for them. His body no longer shook all the time but jerked every now and then. After these jerks he would lean on his thorn bush as though he were sliding down it.

There was a new element present to the senses, a noise so steady and pervasive that the people did not need to remind each other what it was. Beyond the clearing the ground began to rise steeply, earthen, but dotted with smaller trees; and here the bones of the land showed, lumps of smooth grey rock. Beyond this slope was the gap through the mountains, and from the lip of this gap the river fell in a great waterfall twice the height of the tallest tree. Now they were silent the people attended to the distant drone of the water. They looked at each other and began to laugh and chatter. Lok explained to Liku.

"You will sleep to-night by the falling water. It has not gone away. Do you remember?"

"I have a picture of the water and the cave."

Lok patted the dead tree affectionately and Mal led them upward. Now in their joy they also began to pay attention to his weakness, though they were not yet aware how deep it was. Mal lifted his legs like a man pulling them out of mud and his feet were no longer clever. They chose places of their own unskilfully, but

as though something were pulling them sideways so that he reeled on his stick. The people behind him followed each of his actions easily out of the fullness of their health. Focused on his struggle they became an affectionate and unconscious parody. As he leaned and reached for his breath they gaped too, they reeled, their feet were deliberately unclever. They wound up through a litter of grey boulders and knees of stone until the trees fell away and they were out in the open.

Here Mal stopped and coughed and they understood that now they must wait for him. Lok took Liku by the hand.

"See!"

The slope led up to the gap and the mountain rose before them. On the left the slope broke off and fell down a cliff to the river. There was an island in the river which extended up as though one part had been stood on end and leaned against the fall. The river fell over on both sides of the island, thinly on this side but most widely and tremendously on that; and where it fell no man could see for the spray and the drifting smoke. There were trees and thick bushes on the island but the end towards the fall was obscured as by a thick fog and the river on either side of it had only a qualified glitter.

Mal started off again. There were two ways up to the lip of the fall; one zigzagged away to their right and climbed among the rocks. Although that way would have been easier for Mal he ignored it as though he were anxious above all things to reach comfort quickly. He chose then the path to the left. Here were little bushes which held them up on the edge of the cliff, and while they were threading these Liku spoke to Lok again. The

noise of the fall took the life out of her words and left nothing of them but a faint sketch.

"I am hungry."

Lok smacked himself on the chest. He shouted so that all the people heard.

"I have a picture of Lok finding a tree with ears that grow thickly——"

"Eat, Liku."

Ha stood by them with berries in his hand. He poured them out for Liku and she ate, burying her mouth in the food; and the little Oa lay uncomfortably under her arm. The food reminded Lok of his own hunger. Now they had left the dank winter cave by the sea and the bitter, unnatural tasting food of beach and salt marsh he had a sudden picture of good things, of honey and young shoots, of bulbs and grubs, of sweet and wicked meat. He picked up a stone and beat it on the barren rock by his head as presently he would beat on a likely tree.

Nil pulled a withered berry off the bush and put it in her mouth.

"See Lok beating a rock!"

When they laughed at him he clowned, pretending to listen to the rock and shouting.

"Wake up, grubs! Are you awake?"

But Mal was leading them onward.

The top of the cliff leaned back a little so that instead of climbing over the jagged top they could skirt the sheer part over the river where it ran out of the confusion at the foot of the falls. The trail gained height at each step, a dizzy way of slant and overhang, of gap and buttress where roughness to the foot was the only safety and the

rock dived back under, leaving a void of air between them and the smoke and the island. Here the ravens floated below them like black scraps from a fire, the weed-tails wavered with only a faint glister over them to show where the water was: and the island, reared against the fall, interrupting the sill of dropping water, was separate as the moon. The cliff leaned out as if looking for its own feet in the water. The weed-tails were very long, longer than many men, and they moved backwards and forwards beneath the climbing people as regularly as the beat of a heart or the breaking of the sea.

Lok remembered how the ravens sounded. He flapped at them with his arms.

"Kwak!"

The new one stirred on Fa's back, shifting the grip of his hands and feet. Ha was going very slowly for his weight made him cautious. He crept along, hands and feet flexing and contracting on the slanting rock. Mal spoke again.

"Wait."

They read his lips as he turned to them and gathered in a group at his side. Here the trail expanded to a platform with room for them all. The old woman rested her hands on the slanting rock so that the weight was eased for her. Mal bent down and coughed till his shoulders were wrenched. Nil squatted by him, put one hand on his belly and the other on his shoulder.

Lok looked away over the river to forget his hunger. He flared his nostrils and immediately was rewarded with a whole mixture of smells, for the mist from the fall magnified any smell incredibly, as rain will deepen and distinguish the colours of a field of flowers. There were

the smells of the people too, individual but each engaged to the smell of the muddy path where they had been.

This was so concretely the evidence of their summer quarters that he laughed for joy and turned to Fa, feeling that he would like to lie with her for all his hunger. The rain-water from the forest had dried off her and the curls that clustered round her neck and over the new one's head were glossy red. He reached out his hand to her breast so that she laughed too and patted her hair back from her ears.

"We shall find food," he said with all of his wide mouth, "and we shall make love."

Mentioning food made his hunger as real as the smells. He turned again outwards to where he smelt the old woman's burden. Then there was nothing but emptiness and the smoke of the fall coming towards him from the island. He was down, spread-eagled on the rock, toes and hands gripping the roughness like limpets. He could see the weed-tails, not moving but frozen in an instant of extreme perception, beneath his armpit. Liku was squawking on the platform and Fa was flat by the edge, holding him by the wrist, while the new one struggled and whimpered in her hair. The other people were coming back. Ha was visible from the loins up, careful but swift and now leaning down to his other wrist. He felt the sweat of terror in their palms. A foot or a hand at a time he moved up until he was squatting on the platform. He scrambled round and gibbered at the weed-tails that were moving again. Liku was howling. Nil bent down and took her head between her breasts and stroked the curls down her back soothingly. Fa pulled Lok so that he faced her.

"Why?"

Lok knelt for a moment, scratching in the hair under his mouth. Then he pointed into the damp spray that was drifting at them across the island.

"The old woman. She was out there. And it."

The ravens were rising under his hand as the air poured up the cliff. Fa took her hand away from him when his man's voice touched the matter of the old woman. But Lok's eyes stayed on her face.

"She was out there——"

Complete incomprehension silenced them both. Fa was frowning again. She was not a woman to lie with. Something of the old woman was invisibly present in the air round her head. Lok implored her.

"I turned to her and fell."

Fa closed her eyes and spoke austerely.

"I do not see this picture."

Nil was leading Liku after the others. Fa followed them as if Lok did not exist. He clambered after her sheepishly aware of his mistake; but as he went he murmured:

"I turned to her——"

The others had gathered in a group farther along the path. Fa shouted to them.

"We are coming!"

Ha shouted back:

"There is an ice woman."

Beyond and above Mal there was a gully in the cliff loaded with old snow that the sun had not reached. Weight and cold and then the pelting rain of late winter had compacted the snow into ice that hung perilously and water ran out between the melting edge and the

warmer rock. Though they had never seen an ice woman still left in this gully when they came back from their winter cave by the sea, the thought did not occur to them that Mal had taken them into the mountains too early. Lok forgot his escape and the strange indefinable newness of the spray-smell and ran forward. He stood by Ha and shouted:

"Oa! Oa! Oa!"

Ha and the others shouted with him.

"Oa! Oa! Oa!"

Over the insistent drumming of the fall their voices were puny and without resonance, yet the ravens heard and faltered, then glided smoothly once more. Liku was shouting and waving the little Oa, though she did not know why. The new one woke again, passed a pink tongue over his lips like a kitten and peered out from the curls by Fa's ear. The ice woman hung above and beyond them. Though the deadly water still trickled from her belly, she would not move. Then the people were silent and passed swiftly till she was hidden by the rock. They came without speech to the rocks by the fall where the huge cliff looked down for its feet in the turbulence and smother of white water. Almost on a level with their eyes was the clear curve where the water turned down over the sill, water so clear that they could see into it. There were weeds, not moving with slow rhythm but shivering madly as though anxious to be gone. Near the fall the rocks were wet with spray and ferns hung out over space. The people hardly glanced at the fall but pressed on quickly.

Above the fall the river came through a gap in the range of mountains.

Now that the day was almost done the sun lay in the gap and dazzled from the water. Across the water the current slid by sheer mountain that was black and hidden from the sun; but this side of the gap was less uncompromising. There was a slanting shelf, a terrace that gradually became a cliff. Lok ignored the unvisited island and the mountain beyond it on the other side of the gap. He began to hurry after the people as he remembered how safe the terrace was. Nothing could come at them out of the water because the current would snatch it over the fall; and the cliff above the terrace was for foxes, goats, the people, hyenas and birds. Even the way down from the terrace to the forest was defended by an entry so narrow that one man with a thorn bush could hold it. As for this trail on the sheer cliff above the spray pillars and the confusion of waters, it was worn by nothing but the feet of the people.

When Lok edged round the corner at the end of the trail the forest was already dark behind him, and shadows were racing through the gap towards the terrace. The people relaxed noisily on the terrace but then Ha swung his thorn bush so that the prickly head lay on the ground before him. He bent his knees and sniffed the air. At once the people were silent, spreading in a semicircle before the overhang. Mal and Ha stole forward, thorn bushes at the ready, moved up a little slope of earth until they could look down into the overhang.

But the hyenas had gone. Though the scent clung to the scattered stones that had dropped from the roof and the scanty grass that grew in the soil of generations, it was a day old. The people saw Ha lift his thorn bush until it was no longer a weapon and relaxed their muscles.

They moved a few paces up the slope and stood before the overhang .while the sunlight threw their shadows sideways. Mal quelled the cough that rose from his chest, turned to the old woman and waited. She knelt in the overhang and laid the ball of clay in the centre of it. She opened the clay, smoothing and patting it over the old patch that lay there already. She put her face to the clay and breathed on it. In the very depth of the overhang there were recesses on either side of a pillar of rock and these were filled with sticks and twigs and thicker branches. She went quickly to the piles and came again with twigs and leaves and a log that was fallen almost to powder. She arranged this over the opened clay and breathed till a trickle of smoke appeared and a single spark shot into the air. The branch cracked and a flame of amethyst and red coiled up and straightened so that the side of her face away from the sun was glowing and her eyes gleamed. She came again from the recesses and put on more wood so that the fire gave them a brilliant display of flame and sparks. She began to work the wet clay with her fingers, tidying the edges so that now the fire sat in the middle of a shallow dish. Then she stood up and spoke to them.

"The fire is awake again."