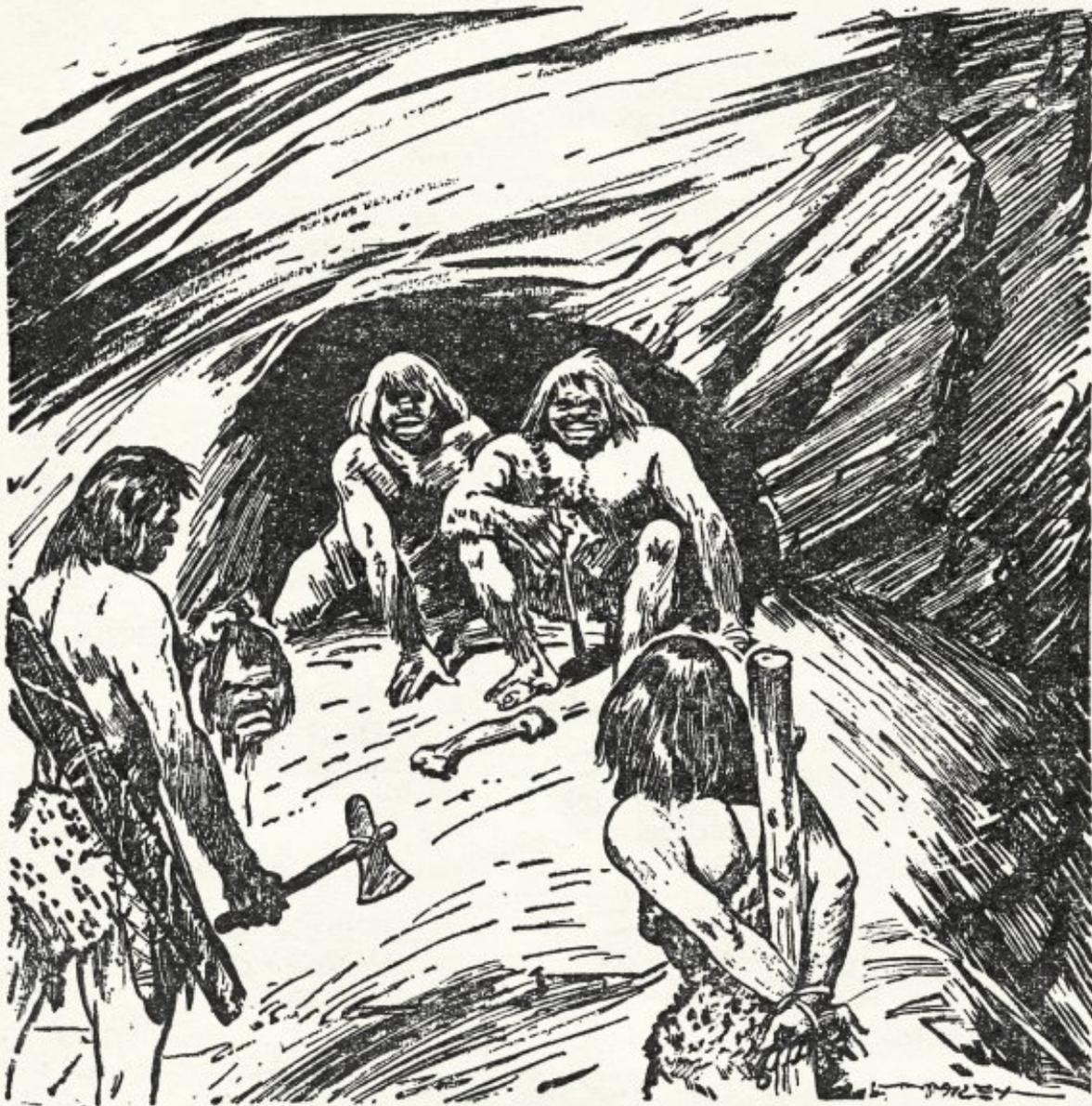


*Thrilling Adventures*, February, 1943



The forest man carried a bloodied axe and a freshly beheaded skull

# NORGON THE HUNTER

By **JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS**

*Driven from the lair of the Cave-folk by murder, Norgon returns to seek his revenge!*

**N**ORGON had been quietly watching the lair of the Cave-folk for three days. During the daylight hours he never stirred from his perch in the branches of a convenient tree that stood near the upper runway, for Norgon was a very patient man when it suited him to control his violent temper. His gray eyes watched everything that took place along the broad stretch of gravel between the river and the caves.

The brambles of the inner forest had scarred Norgon's hairy and muscular legs with a multitude of tiny scratches. His stone axe hung from his fur girdle ready to his hand. A skin-covered case was slung across the back of his heavy shoulders. That case was long and flat. It was a bother when swinging through the branches, but it was something that the forest-man never laid aside.

After dark, when blackness cleared the murmuring face of the river and the fires of the Cave-folk flickered redly in the mouths of their cliffside dwellings, Norgon would come down from his perch. At the start his muscles would be stiff from his long vigil in the branches, but before long he would be drifting ghost-like through the night shadows of the forest in search of food.

SOMETIMES a bird or animal would be caught in one of the snares of twisted grass he had set the night before, sometimes he made a meal of edible roots he dug up with a pointed stick, but always he ate. Norgon the Hunter was used to providing for himself without the benefit of any tribal assistance.

After he had eaten, Norgon usually crept close to the lair of the Cave-folks. Lying just outside one of the semi-circles of firelight that spewed outward from the cave mouths, he would listen to the talk of the fireguard. He noted the way they formed their words and how they grouped them, listening to all they had to say. Most folk spoke the same crude and primitive language in that long ago day of

earth-youth, but dialects were beginning to vary a little between isolated tribes. At last, when things grew quiet, Norgon would slip back into the forest and sleep out the night.

After the fourth day of watching the lair of the Cave-folk, Norgon felt ready to go down to the river. He was thinking about it as he dropped through the branches at daylight the next morning. When he reached the ground he carefully tested the taut rawhide lashings of his axe-head before slinging the heavy stone weapon at his girdle once more.

Norgon's gray eyes were cold. He had a particular errand in mind, something he had been planning for a long time, and his face was hard with the bitterness of a grim and ancient anger.

When the sun was well up that morning, Flatnose the Chief moved out from the depths of his cave to a broad shelf of rock that ran along the face of the cliff outside. Broad and squat and hairy he was, with heavy bone ridges above his reddened eyes, and with long arms that hung nearly to his knees.

One of his wives came hurrying to spread a bearskin for him to sit on, and Flatnose kicked her in the rump for being slow. Then, settling himself with a grunt, he pushed the shaggy hair back from his eyes and began to gnaw the half-cooked meat from a haunch of deer.

Flatnose was ready to begin another day. As usual these past few weeks, his mind turned to the problem of how to kill Canga the Strong without danger to his own thick skull.

In front of where Flatnose sat was a shelf of well-worn rock and then a graveled slope that led down to the river bank. To his right and left stretched the sheer face of the cliff, the gray rock now touched with amber by the pale northern sun. An irregular row of dark openings led to the other caves of the tribe.

At night those cave mouths would be blocked by blazing fires to keep out prowling

animals, but in these daylight hours the fires were shifted further down the slope. The women of the tribe were gathered about them now, cooking meat or scraping hides, or busy at other tasks. It was still the youth of Mankind, in that year 100,000 B.C., but community organization had begun.

Flatnose's broken, yellow teeth showed in a sardonic grin as he looked down on the tribe he ruled. Shaggy, fur-clad men and women moved to and fro between the caverns and the water. The damp river valley, this stretch of cliffs and gravel beside a nameless stream, was the home of the People of the Caves. How long they had been there, they did not know. There was only a dim tradition that once, long ago, the home of their people had been in a forest up close to the edge of the Great Ice.

Flatnose grunted, spat out a bit of gristle, and went back to thinking about Canga. This matter of killing him was a problem. A few summers ago, Flatnose would simply have picked a fight and killed him without the slightest hesitancy as he had eliminated so many others in the past. But Flatnose was aging. His strength and his swiftness were not what they had been, and though he had kept that fact from the knowledge of the tribe, he was unpleasantly aware of it himself.

Kar, the lame one, came slowly up the slope toward the cave, lurching along with the slewing gait that spilled his lank gray hair down over his face. Kar had been gored by an aurochs many years ago and for a long time now he had slept in a corner of Flatnose's cave and lived on the scraps flung him by the chief.

Flatnose kept the old man alive because of the shrewdness that dwelt inside his pointed skull, and because he was the best weapon maker in the whole tribe. Ordinarily, the Cave-folk did not live to be old. When they began to slow up they died, in those grim

days when survival was only for the strong.

KAR squatted down a few feet from his master and unwrapped the piece of tanned hide he had been carrying. He had a newly-completed axe head—a masterpiece. It was heavy and strong, shaped by chipping off hundreds of tiny flakes of flint till its edge was straight and keen and true.

The old man fondled it in his gnarled hands, cushioned it in the leather while he struck off one last chip of flint with his hammer stone, then laid it down to pick up a newly-split branch scraped smooth to make a handle.

"The new axe is almost ready," he said.

Flatnose nodded grimly.

"Maybe I will use it to split Canga's skull," he said.

Kar did not answer for a moment. He pried the split end of the branch apart and set the axe head firmly in the cleft. Not until he had begun to lash it in place with many wrappings of wet rawhide did he speak.

"Canga," he said. "Yes, I have been expecting that. I have noticed how often you have watched his daughter Heo when she has walked past. But be careful. Canga is strong."

"Careful!" Flatnose snorted, boasting to hide the gnawing fear that he really felt. "I have killed stronger men in the past!"

"I know," Kar said.

He was finishing the lashings of the axe, drawing the strips of wet raw-hide very tight. When they dried they would hold the stone head securely in the shaft.

"I know. But not in these last few years. Of course—there is always Igu."

"Igu," Flatnose said doubtfully. "I do not know."

He finished the last of the deer meat, tossed the bone aside and wiped his hands on the hair of his chest. Then he raised his voice in a deep shout.

“Igu! Come!”

Something stirred in the darkness of the cave behind. A man’s face appeared slowly. A round and hairy face with two yellow fangs jutting down over the lower lip like a wolf’s fangs. Then came a pair of shoulders as broad and muscular as those of a musk-ox.

Down to the hips, Igu the witless was a mighty thewed giant, but his shriveled legs were those of a child. When he settled back against the rock wall on Flatnose’s left, his face became blank and expressionless.

“Though there is gray in Canga’s hair nowadays, he would still be too swift and clever for Igu,” Flatnose said.

“It was the Witless One who slew Marak the night you became chief of the tribe in his stead,” Kar reminded him.

Flatnose shrugged.

“Only after my axe had struck Marak down and brought him within reach of Igu’s arms.” Flatnose grinned reminiscently. “Ho—that was a night. The gravel ran with blood as we slew them, slew Marak and his brothers and all his family.”

“Except for his wife and one child who escaped into the forest.”

“The woman and the brat could not have lived two moons alone in the forest,” Flatnose shrugged.

Down along the river bank there was a minor stir of excitement as a stranger came from the forest. Men lifted their weapons, but the stranger’s axe hung at his belt and he flung up one arm in the gesture of friendship as he called a greeting. Tall and broad-shouldered he was, with his girdle cut in the manner of the Forest-folk and a strange thin case of hide slung on his back. The Cave-folk gathered about him.

“I don’t like strangers,” Flatnose said slowly. “And I don’t like that stranger. Already he talks to Heo!”

He glanced at the axe that Kar was just

finishing, but the old man was peering down the slope with narrowed eyes.

“If a stranger can be persuaded to the killing of Canga,” Kar said, then the revenge of Canga’s friends will not turn against us.”

EVERYTHING was just as Norgon had been told it would be. Even though he had been watching this place for four days from the tree tops, he had a strange sensation of homecoming as he actually stood on the gravel above the river.

The wide stream murmuring along behind him, the gray cliff with the dark cave mouths in front, the straggling bits of vegetation that grew in clefts in the rock, the grove of stunted and twisted trees at the far end, all was just as it had been described to him.

For a moment he seemed to be back in one of innumerable moonlight nights of the past, swaying in a tree-borne aerie as he listened to his mother telling of this place that had been their home. The wide and windswept caves!

Then, abruptly, he came back to the present and answered a question about hunting conditions this season in the woods beyond the further scarp.

“You Forest-folk range far,” said a big thewed, smiling hunter whom the others called Canga. “I have often thought it is a good life.”

“It is now my thought to join a tribe,” Norgon said.

“You’ll have to speak to Flatnose, the Chief,” warned Canga. “And keep your hand near your axe, in case he decides that he doesn’t like you.”

“There are very few people I like myself,” Norgon said grimly.

Heo, Canga’s slender daughter, looked at him provocatively.

“You have been living too long alone, oh man from the Forest!” she said.

Gradually the others moved away, so

that Norgon stood by himself. Last to go was Heo, the daughter of Canga. For a long moment Norgon stood looking after her, watching the sunlight strike the shining hair which hung nearly to her waist.

She walked erect, not as though bent always under a burden as did most of the women of the Cave-folk. Then Norgon squared his shoulders and turned up toward the caves.

Clouds were moving across the sky now, cutting off the pale northern sun. A chill wind came up the valley to ripple the face of the river. Norgon shivered a little as he walked, but it was not entirely the bite of the wind. The chattering crowd behind him had fallen silent as they watched him go, and there was no sound but the whistle of the wind and the steady crunch of his bare feet on the gravel of the slope. The head of his stone axe tapped against his thigh with each step. The air was heavy with the scent of wood smoke from the cooking fires.

Before Norgon, three silent figures sat on the rocky shelf outside the cave-mouth. Three men who watched him with unblinking and heavy-lidded eyes.

Everything was just as Norgon had known he would find it, just as his mother had told him it would be when the day came for him to return to the lair along the river.

Shaggy Flatnose sat in the center of the trio with his axe across his knees. Lame Kar was on the right, his lank gray hair falling over his face like a mask. Misshapen Igu huddled on the left with his dull eyes blank and staring. The tiger and his jackals!

The time had come for Norgon to face the weird triumvirate who ruled the Cave-folk. He gave the gesture of friendship and moved forward cautiously, his weight on the balls of his feet and his leg muscles tense. Flat-nose gave him a yellow-fanged grin.

"Welcome to the Caves, stranger," he said.

IN NORGON'S brain, a sudden alarm was sounding. He was tense and wary, like an animal sniffing the bait in a trap. He had been prepared for distrust and suspicion when he arrived at the Caves, or for instant and open hostility, but he had not looked for this sort of friendly welcome. There was something wrong—and the lines deepened at the corners of Norgon's square jaw. But his voice was steady when he spoke.

"I come from afar," he said.

Flatnose pointed one broad and calloused thumb toward a granite boulder a few feet away.

"Sit, stranger. You Forest-folk do not come often to the Caves. What is that flat case on your back?"

"My talisman against the devils of the forest," Norgon said.

Flatnose nodded. He could understand that. He knew there were many unseen devils lurking along the river bank, devils who had to be propitiated, and he did not doubt that there were many more in the forest.

Norgon sat on the boulder, his elbows resting on his knees and his big hands loose but ready. From the corner of his eye he saw lame Kar shift a little to his left, and noticed that the old man's hand was under his fur kilt as though grasping a flint knife. Igu was rocking forward on his haunches as though ready for a spring.

Then Flatnose spoke, and Norgon knew why he had been met by a yellow-fanged grin of welcome instead of a volley of stones.

"We have a custom for strangers here at the Caves. Each newcomer must perform one task set him by the Chief before he can be accepted into the tribe."

"And my task?" Norgon asked.

Flatnose gestured down the slope.

"Kill Canga. Slay me that tawny-eyed hunter. Kill him in any way you wish—and

then you will be assigned a regular place in one of the caves.”

Norgon hesitated. He was tempted to snatch the axe at his belt, to do now the thing for which he had come to the Caves, but they had him at a disadvantage with the edge of the rocky shelf just behind him and a steep drop to a heap of broken stones below.

“Let me do it in my own way and I’ll bring you the head of Canga by the second hour after sunset,” he said slowly.

The tension lessened. Igu settled back, Kar withdrew his hand from under his kilt, and Flatnose grinned broadly. He bent forward and reached out one hairy paw to pat Norgon on the shoulder.

“I knew at first sight that you were a man after my own heart. Wait, I’ll have one of my women bring us food.”

THAT night a fire blazed redly, deep in the heart of Flatnose’s cave. Unlike most of the other caverns of the lair, this one had a cleft in the roof through which the smoke drifted upward, so that Flatnose could have a fire inside in addition to the normal blaze at the cave mouth. As lame Kar came in with his slewing gait, shadows leaped along the walls, shadows that gave life to the crude paintings smeared on the rock by past generations.

“Well?” Flatnose said impatiently, “The sun has been down for over an hour.”

“I found no trace of either Canga or the stranger,” Kar said. When I last saw Igu, he was keeping close to the stranger in the dusk, watching him. But I have had men fetch the daughter of Canga for you.”

Again the murky shadows danced along the cave walls, as two of Flatnose’s henchmen came in with the daughter of Canga between them. Heo’s arms were bound behind her with strips of rawhide, and her mouth was distended by a leather gag, but her eyes blazed defiance as they dragged her forward. Flatnose ran his tongue over his thick lips.

“Tie her to that post,” he commanded.

Several tree trunks had been wedged upright in a rocky cleft at one side of the cavern, posts used for securing captives when Flatnose wished to delay their death for a while. The two men lashed Heo to one of the posts and then returned to the forward part of the cave, leaving the leaders alone with their prisoner.

“I wish that misbegotten son of an ape would come!” Flatnose muttered fretfully.

Kar looked up at him through his straggly hair.

“And if he has really killed Canga? Then what?”

“Then I’ll split his skull, and fling his body to the tribe as proof that Canga has been avenged.”

Footsteps sounded in the corridor that led to the outer cave, the footsteps of a single man, and Flatnose looked up sharply as Norgon strode into the circle of firelight.

In one hand the forest-man carried a bloodied axe, and in the other a freshly-severed human head. His face was grim as he flung the grisly thing face down in the filth of the cave floor.

“There is the head of Canga for you!” he snapped.

Flatnose grinned broadly, and chuckled deep in his throat. He pulled Norgon down beside him on the stone that served as his bench and patted the younger man on the shoulder.

“You have done well, Norgon. Tell us how you did it.”

“An axe stroke in the throat,” Norgon shrugged. “He tried to fight, but he was taken by surprise.”

“A good stroke!” Flatnose chuckled. “Yours must be a fine axe. Let me see it.”

For a moment Norgon hesitated, then handed his axe to the chief. Flatnose weighed it, nodded approvingly, and casually laid it on the ground to his left. Norgon did not seem to

notice that his weapon was now out of his reach.

Heo was twisting helplessly in her bonds across the cave and choked sounds came from behind her gag while her eyes tried to give mute warning. But Norgon never looked in the girl's direction.

Then Kar reached out a foot to turn the severed head face upward—and an instant later bounded to his feet.

"That is not Canga!" he shrieked. "*It is the head of Igu!*"

FROM Flatnose's distorted mouth came a sudden bellow of rage. He snatched up the axe and leaped to his feet, ready to strike.

Lame Kar was swift as a striking serpent. His hand darted under his ragged fur kilt and came out with a long flint knife.

Swift as were Norgon's own movements, he would have had no chance if he had stayed to fight. Instead the forest-man leaped from between his two assailants and bounded across the cavern to run to the top of a heap of talus piled in a far corner.

There was a momentary pause. Flatnose and Kar, surprised by the forest-man's unexpected flight to the top of the heap of broken rock, stared at him across the circle of firelight. Then Flatnose's thick lips twisted in a snarl.

"Jackal! Son of a mangy ape! You killed Igu!" he growled.

"Aye," mocked Norgon, and there was no fear in his voice even though he stood cornered and weaponless.

"I killed him as he tried to follow me through the darkness, killed him to avenge the death of my father that he slew at your bidding! Do you not know me, Flatnose? Nor you, lame Kar? I am Norgon, son of Marak! Son of the chief of the Cave-folk that you murdered one night many years ago!"

"I told you no good would come of Marak's woman and his brat escaping into the

forest!" Kar muttered.

Flatnose shrugged.

"It does not matter. We have him cornered and weaponless now. Do you hurl some rocks while I close in and finish him with the axe."

Flatnose moved forward confidently. The other man was younger and stronger but weaponless, he would have no chance against the terrible swing of the flint-headed axe.

Kar moved to the left and hastily gathered up some handy-sized stones for throwing.

Norgon was smiling a thin, tight smile. This was the moment for which he had long planned. He jerked the thin leather case from his back and drew out several small sticks.

Working with practiced speed, he bent the heaviest stick into an arc while he slipped the rawhide string over the notch on the upper end. He took several of the shorter, slenderer sticks that were tipped with sharp slivers of flint. As he worked he talked, in low-voiced mockery.

"Come to your deaths, Flatnose the killer and Kar the evil!" he jibed. "Death at the hands of a forest-man. Death that strikes from afar. The flying death against which the axe or the knife is helpless. *Aie!*"

As he spoke the last word, Norgon lifted his strung bow and drew one of the arrows back to his ear. His left foot was thrown forward, his left arm stiff and straight. Kar had raised his arm to hurl a stone when the flint-tipped arrow hummed through the air and took him squarely in the throat so that the bloodied point stood out a handbreath behind.

"*Aie!* The flying death!" mocked Norgon the hunter.

Flatnose came forward with a deep-voiced shout. There was something here that he did not understand, and he knew no way of meeting a peril except to charge in with his axe-head swinging.

He was halfway up the slope of talus

when Norgon's next arrow took him in the chest. Swiftly the forest-man bent down and snatched another shaft from the pile at his feet, winging it home into the body of the fallen chief by the time Flatnose had stopped rolling.

"Three men did it, three men have died!" mocked Norgon, making the words a sort of chant. Canga and the friends he had rallied after Norgon warned him came charging into the cavern. Torches blazed in their hands and the blood of Flatnose's cronies gleamed on their axe-heads.

"Marak is avenged!" Norgon shouted.

The Cave-folk hailed Norgon the hunter their new chief as he bent and ripped from Flatnose's wrist the crude bracelet of raw

gold that had belonged to Norgon's father—and to a long chain of ancestors before him. He let them wait until he had cut Heo free from her bonds, then he held up his hand for silence.

"I have brought you the Flying Death," he said, "By its magic we will extend our rule over all the tribes this side of the Great Water!"

Shadows danced anew along the painted walls as the Cave-folk hailed their new leader. The first bow and arrow had been used, and for the first time in man's history a weapon of skill and quickness had triumphed over mere strength and power of muscle.