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opening extract from

# Littlenose the Hunter

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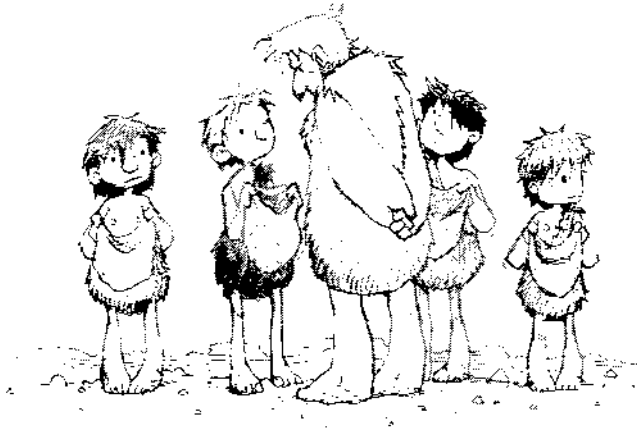
# Littlenose the Hunter

Littlenose was a Neanderthal boy who lived long ago, when people lived in caves and hunted animals for their food. When he grew up he was going to be a hunter like his father.

So, early one morning, Littlenose and Dad hurried off to an open space in front of the caves. All the hunters of the tribe and several other boys were there. A small

stout man with white hair was in charge of the boys. He had been a very great hunter once, and now he was their teacher.

First the apprentice hunters were made to stand in a line while the teacher inspected their equipment.



Littlenose was carrying a satchel made of animal skin, and the evening before he had packed it very carefully with the things he needed. There was a clean pair of furs, a bundle of dried twigs, two flints, and a flint

knife. And a brightly-coloured stone. He didn't really need the stone, but it was nice to look at.

Littlenose held his satchel out, trembling. The teacher raised one bushy eyebrow at the coloured stone, but nodded approval. Littlenose glowed with pride.

At last the party set off in single file. They followed the river to begin with, then crossed a ridge, and later a winding trail led them down into a thickly-wooded valley. At long last they halted in a wide clearing.

Dad and the other men didn't stop. They marched on across the clearing, and in a few minutes had disappeared. Then, one by one, the teacher called the boys to him. One was sent to catch fish. Another had to find fruit. A third was to look for bracken to make soft sleeping places for the night.

Littlenose was last to be called.

"Now, Littlenose," said the teacher, "I have a very important task for you. You will prepare our fire. Listen carefully. This clearing will be our camping place for the night. At sunset we shall require a good fire to cook supper. You must light a fire which is big enough to burn all afternoon. We don't want a great blaze, but a bed of hot ashes." Here he paused and wagged a finger at Littlenose. "If the fire isn't right, then that will mean a late supper, and hungry hunters are very impatient people. Now, it won't take you all day to build a fire. Everyone is going to gather on the other side of the hill, there." And he pointed. "At midday we eat, and then start lessons."

"Yes, sir," said Littlenose.

"I'll see you at midday, then, on the other

side of the hill. Just follow the path." And he strode off, leaving Littlenose all alone in the clearing.

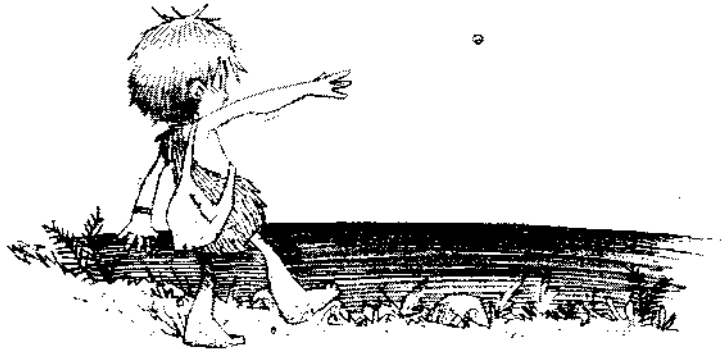
Littlenose looked about him. He'd better get started. He made his preparations with great care. First, he gathered a pile of dry sticks, then took out the knife and the twigs and flints from his bag. He whittled the twigs into bundles of shavings, then struck the flints together, until sparks fell on them. Most of the sparks went out right away, but at last one stayed alight long enough for Littlenose to blow it gently. The spark grew brighter until it was a pale, flickering flame. Quickly he built more twigs into a pyramid over the flame, and blew again. Soon the twigs were crackling and spitting. He took out the coloured stone and admired it for a moment before

putting all his things back in the bag. But the fire was supposed to be big enough to last until nightfall. Littlenose began throwing branches onto the flames. Soon he had to fetch more branches from the woods. The fire grew bigger and became higher and hotter. Littlenose wiped the sweat from his eyes. Surely *that* would be enough to last?

Littlenose took one last look at the fire, which was now making shimmering heat waves in the air, and followed the path into the forest. He could see the top of the hill behind which he was to meet the others, and the path led straight towards it. But soon it began to turn away to one side.

"This is no good," thought Littlenose. "I'll be quicker if I leave the path and make straight for the hill." And at first he was. There was very little undergrowth and

walking was easy. He was quite close to the foot of the hill when he came to a sudden stop. There was water in front of him – it stretched black and smooth and deep-looking right to the bottom of the hill. This, of course, was why the path had not taken the straight route. Littlenose picked up a large stone and threw it. The stone fell with the hollow splash that stones make falling into deep water. He couldn't possibly get across here, and to go back to the path would take too long. He walked along the bank throwing stones.



He was beginning to think that the water sounded quite bottomless, when he paused. That last stone had sounded different. He tried another at the same place. It made the definite rattle of a stone falling into shallow water – shallow enough for him to wade to the other side. He splashed across, and in a few moments was safely on the other bank at the foot of the hill.

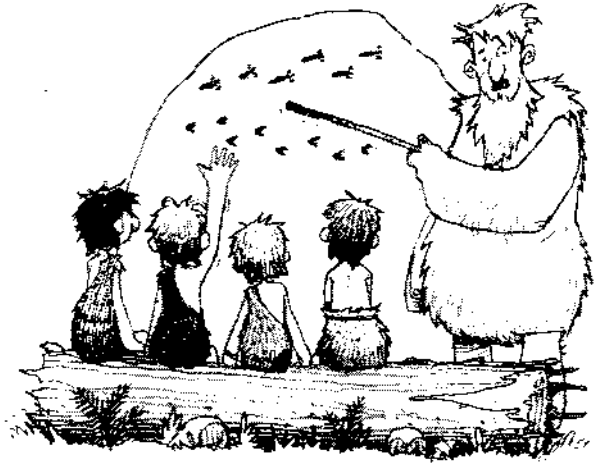
By the time Littlenose scrambled up the hillside and over the top to find the others, he was hot and tired. He was glad to sit down with the other boys and eat a lunch of cold grilled fish and berries. It was when he took out his knife to cut his fish that he made an awful discovery. His coloured stone was gone! But he hadn't time to look for it. Already the teacher was getting ready for the first lesson.

The boys were made to sit on a log and the teacher drew with a charred stick on the smooth surface of a large rock. He started off with a lecture on animal tracks. He sketched here, pointed there, and from time to time tapped on the rock with his pointer. He talked very rapidly in a high-pitched voice, and Littlenose began to feel more and more drowsy. He began to daydream of being such a fine hunter that he could go out before anyone was awake and be back with a rabbit, a red deer, a rhinoceros and an elk by breakfast time.

Littlenose sat up with a jerk. The teacher was speaking.

"Come along, now," he exclaimed angrily. "Surely *someone* can tell me what those tracks are. You, there!" And he nodded towards Littlenose.

Still half-dreaming, Littlenose blurted out, "Rabbit, red deer, rhinoceros and elk."



"Well done. Well done," exclaimed the teacher. "You seem to be the only one who has paid attention. YOU will be tracker on our hunt this afternoon. Who knows? You may even find us a rabbit, a red deer, a rhinoceros and an elk."

The men rejoined the party for the hunt, and Dad glowed with pride when he learned of Littlenose's success. Once more

they formed a long line, but this time Littlenose was in the lead. "Come on, Littlenose," said the teacher. Littlenose held up his hand and waved the party forward. He led them under low bushes and branches until their backs ached, and made them squeeze through narrow spaces that bruised their ribs. The men soon realised that there were disadvantages in having a small boy as a tracker.

Actually, Littlenose had no idea where

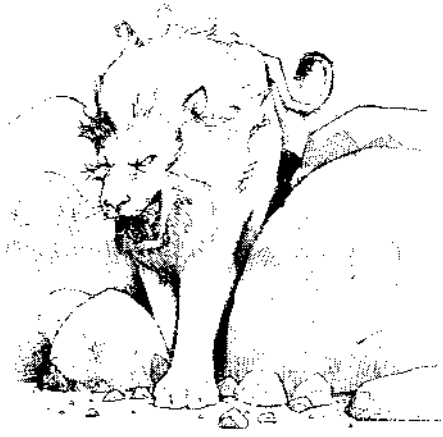


he was going – he just reckoned that they were bound to see some sort of animal sooner or later, and then he could say that that was the one he was tracking. He led the party out into a clearing. He was hot and tired, so he held up his hand, and they all stopped. He put his finger to his lips, and the hunters held their breath and waited expectantly.

Across the clearing was a jumble of rocks. They looked shady and cool; Littlenose made his way towards them. The hunters tiptoed after him. They waited as Littlenose crept inside.

The next moment the hunting party scattered like leaves in the wind. Head over heels they tumbled towards the trees as, with an earth-shattering roar, there stepped out from among the rocks an enormous

lion. It had been sleeping peacefully in the shade when Littlenose blundered in and fell over it. By the time the lion's eyes became accustomed to the bright light, there was not a hunter to be seen.



They ran and ran, straight down the hill. But they could still hear the lion roaring.

"Look," said Littlenose, pointing. "It's getting foggy. If we can hide in the fog, the lion won't see us."

Sure enough, a haze was drifting through the trees, and was beginning to form dense streamers between the trunks. In a few moments the hunters were only dim

shapes in the mist. The next time they heard the lion roar it was a long way off. It had lost them. Again they stopped, and at almost the same moment everyone said, "This isn't fog!"

They had been so busy running that they hadn't noticed what their noses and smarting eyes now told them. It was smoke! It was getting thicker every moment.

"A forest fire," cried one man. "Run!" And he set off up the hill, away from the smoke. Then he remembered the lion, and ran back. "What shall we do? What shall we do?" he cried.

"Leave it to me," said Littlenose, and he began to climb a tall, straight fir tree. The smoke grew thicker the higher he went, but suddenly he came out of it, and saw blue sky above him. He also saw the fire. The

whole forest seemed to be ablaze, particularly the site where he'd built the camp fire. The camp fire! He'd done it again! Well, they'd wanted a big fire! Anyway, it was too late to worry about that now. But there wasn't much time. They had to get away from the trees before they caught fire *and* avoid the lion. Littlenose hurried to the ground.

"Quick, follow me," he shouted. "Hurry!"

Again the hunting party scrambled along behind Littlenose. Only a few more paces, he thought; then he stopped dead. In front was a wide, dark and deep-looking stretch of water. They had circled round, and had reached Littlenose's earlier short-cut.

"We'll never get across. We're trapped!" the hunters cried.

"No, there is a way," shouted Littlenose. And he dashed along the bank, trying to recognise a tree or a bush or something which would give him a clue. Suddenly, everyone nearly fell over Littlenose as he bent down and picked up something from the ground.

"This is the place," he cried, and dashing into the shallow water he splashed his way to the far bank.

Littlenose looked at what he held in his hand. Wasn't it lucky that he had lost his coloured stone as he crossed the water the first time? If he hadn't spotted it lying in the grass, they would never have found the crossing place in time. In a few moments, the whole party was safe on the bare hilltop, while the fire raged in the woods. All night, the hunting party crouched in darkness,

watching the flames below. In the early hours of the morning it began to rain, and at last the sun rose on a soggy, sooty and sizzling stretch of blackened woodland.



Black, wet, weary, and smelling of wood smoke, Littlenose arrived home with Dad late in the evening.

"It was all Littlenose's fault," said Dad to Mum that night. "I know he saved us, but it was only because of him that we *needed* saving. Look at him, sound asleep there

without a care in the world."

Littlenose lay in a corner of the cave curled up under his fur covers. And in his hand he clutched a brightly-coloured stone.