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Opening extract from

Littlenose The Leader

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Littlenose the Leader

A Neanderthal man who wanted meat to feed his family had to go out and hunt for it. This was no easy job because the animals had to be tracked and stalked. The hunters knew where to lie in wait, since most animals were to be found in the same places at the same times of the year. But from time to time the system went wrong, as it did once for Littlenose's tribe.

The Old Man called a meeting one day. "As we all know," he said, "the supply of game has been very poor, and if we are to get through the winter we must find out how the game herds are moving. A reconnaissance party will leave at dawn."

Littlenose was very excited. As an apprentice hunter he would accompany the party. Dad wasn't excited. He thought that taking Littlenose was just asking for trouble! Littlenose spent the evening



packing his hunting equipment – his flint knife, fire-lighting flints and a spare pair of furs. He was about to put in one of his special treasures when Dad said: "What on earth do you want with that?"

It was a piece of flat bone carved with a picture of hunters attacking a giant fish. It had been given to Littlenose by Urk, a strange little man who had stayed with them once. "I like it and it might bring me luck!" said Littlenose.



"It's an extra weight to carry," said Dad.

In the cold darkness the reconnaissance party set off next morning. Nosey, the Chief Tracker, led the way, and by nightfall they were far from home. But they had found no game herds.

"Early days yet," said Nosey confidently.

And so they went on. They were in completely strange country, but they had great faith in Nosey, who led them in a long line, his handsome nose pointing to the ground and snuffling in a very expert way from time to time. Littlenose trudged along cheerfully enough. Urk's carved bone was safely hidden inside his furs. He was sure it was lucky.

Certainly, the reconnaissance party wasn't lucky. They found enough small game for themselves, but nothing of any

size. Nosey had stopped saying "Early days", and one mid-day they held a conference. They came to two decisions. One: it was time to return home, and two: they were lost.

For almost a month they had followed Nosey without bothering about where they were going. They asked Nosey if he had any idea where they might be, but he just shrugged and said, "Search me!"

It was several days since they had seen any trees, and the sky had a permanently grey, snowy look to it. Each day was colder than the last, and the nights were getting longer. But sitting down talking wasn't going to help, so they chose a likely-looking direction and set off for what they hoped was home. And to make matters worse, snow began to fall.

At nightfall, they wrapped themselves in their hunting robes and dreamed of warm caves and dry furs. For six nights they did this. The snow didn't stop until late on the seventh day, when it was growing dusk. They saw the last of the sun disappearing over the horizon, and bare, rocky hills ahead. Just before darkness, the hunters found a cave where they prepared to spend a cold and dry, but hungry, night. For by now all their provisions were gone, and there had been no animals to hunt during the days of snow.

Next morning Littlenose was first awake, and he ran out of the cave to see what there was to see. It wasn't much. The ground sloped steeply down, then levelled out to a flat plain which disappeared into the mist. There were patches of gravel, otherwise,

the land lay under a blanket of snow as far as the eye could see. Littlenose saw something moving in the distance, something large and dark that crawled rapidly along the ground before vanishing abruptly. He rubbed his eyes, but the creature had gone. However, at the foot of the slope, he found some wood. At least they would have a fire.

Warm at last, but still hungry, the hunters decided that their first task was to find some food. They only half believed Littlenose's story of the animal he had seen, but it was all they had to go on.

Accordingly, they set off down the slope and across the snow field. It wasn't as smooth as it looked at a distance, and there were many ridges and hollows.

As they reached the top of a ridge

Littlenose cried out in excitement: "There it is!" And they saw the most curious sight. A large, fat animal was slithering along, apparently without any legs. With a cry, the men raced towards it, but before they had taken more than a few steps it suddenly flipped its rear end in the air and vanished.

"It's gone down its burrow," cried Littlenose, and sure enough there was a large hole at the spot. But it wasn't a burrow. They reached the circular hole and found themselves looking into a pool of water. Nosey reached down with his spear. "It's bottomless," he said. He put his fingers to his lips. "It's salt," he said. "We must be close to the sea."

As he spoke, the last of the mist rolled away and they saw a dark blue sea just a short distance from where they stood.

"We can catch fish," said Dad, and started walking towards the shore.

This time it was Dad who shouted: "Quick! Don't let it get away!" Another of the odd animals rolled over and began humping and slithering its way towards the sea. They watched it in disappointment as it slithered with barely a ripple into the water. From the water's edge the hunters watched their lost prey surface and look back at them. Then they saw something else. Moving at incredible speed through the water, was a tall, pointed black object. The object rose higher in the water and now they saw that it was a fin on the biggest fish they had ever seen! In a shower of spray, a pair of gaping jaws filled with gleaming teeth bore down on the swimming animal. Then it was gone, and a huge black and

white fish shape was slipping back into the green depths. No one spoke, until Nosey cried, "RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!"

A second black and white monster was racing in a cloud of spray, half out of the water, and straight towards the Neanderthal hunters. They turned to watch, and to their horror the fish didn't even slow down as it neared the water's edge. It reared high in the air and crashed down on the snow . . . and the ground split apart beneath! But it wasn't ground. It was ice! They were standing on the frozen sea, which was breaking up in cracks and fissures as the fish made another attempt to get at them. The ice bucked and heaved as they fled for the distant beach.

Once they had got their breath back and had stopped shaking, the hunters decided



to return to the cave and discuss their next move. They were within a few paces of the cave when without warning they found themselves surrounded by a crowd of fur-clad figures. They looked roughly Neanderthal, but their noses were flat, their eyes slanting, and their hair hung in fringes on their

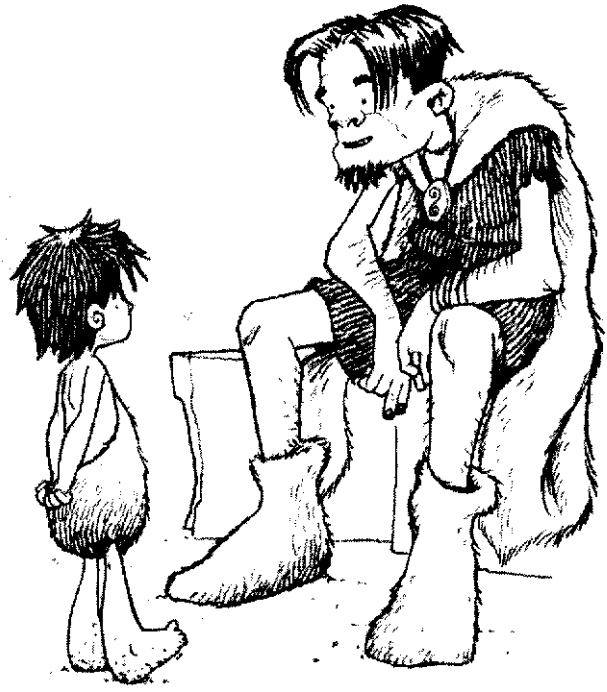
foreheads. Their leader made unmistakeable signs, and the hunters dropped their spears and raised their hands. Their captors ran their hands expertly over their furs and took away their flint knives. When they came to Littlenose, however, one man took his knife, then paused as he found the carved bone under his furs. Then he shouted a command, and his men marched the prisoners at spear point away from the cave and along the shore.

Famished as well as exhausted from their adventure, Littlenose's party felt they had been marching for ever when they came round a headland and saw a large crowd waiting. Men, women and children crowded about them, pulling and pushing and crying out in a strange language. There were caves at the foot of a cliff, and

the Neanderthal hunters were led into one of them, while a man with a spear stood guard outside.

"What's going to happen to us?" asked Littlenose. Before anyone could answer a man appeared and beckoned to Littlenose. "Who, me?" asked Littlenose in a startled voice. The man nodded and pointed. With an attempt at a brave grin, Littlenose followed him out of the cave. The man seemed quite friendly, and took Littlenose's hand over some of the rockier patches until they reached a large fire.

Around the fire were sitting some very important-looking men, one of whom seemed to be the leader. He waved Littlenose towards him and said something in a kindly voice. Littlenose said, "Yes sir," and smiled. And all the people round about cheered



and clapped. The leader now squatted down by the fire, while everyone gathered around. Then with a stick he began to draw in the sand, all the time talking in his strange language. Slowly, Littlenose began to understand. He recognised some of the words he had learned from Urk, the stranger

who had made his carved bone ornament. The leader told about his tribe and their life by the shores of the frozen sea. He described the animals they hunted. The slithering creature on the ice he called a seal. Seals made very good eating and provided furs for clothing. The biggest creature, however, was the whale. Here he laid Littlenose's bone carving on the ground and proceeded to draw a bigger version of it. It was like an enormous fish, bigger than ten mammoths, and was only caught in very exceptional circumstances like being stranded in shallow water at low tide. He looked enquiringly at Littlenose. Had they seen any whales, he asked?

Littlenose thought, then with his finger he drew in the sand as well as he could the hunters' narrow escape.

The people looked at each other in amazement, while the chief shook his head and said, "Phew!" It appeared that they had escaped from the deadly killer whale, which attacked everything and was afraid of nothing.

The leader signalled Littlenose to stand beside him. Then he said something to the crowd and hung the carved bone around Littlenose's neck once more. He gave him back his spear and flint knife while everyone cheered. By signs, the leader told Littlenose that he was to go back to the cave and fetch the others.

At the cave the hunters crowded round. "How did you escape? How did you get away?" they asked.

"Listen very carefully," said Littlenose. "You must do exactly as I tell you."

"What?" spluttered Dad.

"The Snow People (that's what they call themselves) think that I am your leader," said Littlenose. "And that is my badge of office." He fingered the carved bone.



"Well I'll– " began Dad, but Littlenose, beginning to enjoy himself, said sternly, "You'll do as you're told. Or be left behind. They're preparing a feast. In MY honour."

That changed everything. Everyone became cheerful, except Dad, who gave Littlenose a very wait-till-I-get-you-home look. Littlenose was enjoying himself even more as he bustled about shouting "Come on now! Smarten yourselves up! Straighten



those furs there!" Then he led the hunters out to meet the Snow People. The feast seemed a long time in coming, but when it did, it was beyond their wildest dreams. Afterwards they sat back and watched a display of dancing and music which first excited them, then began to lull them to

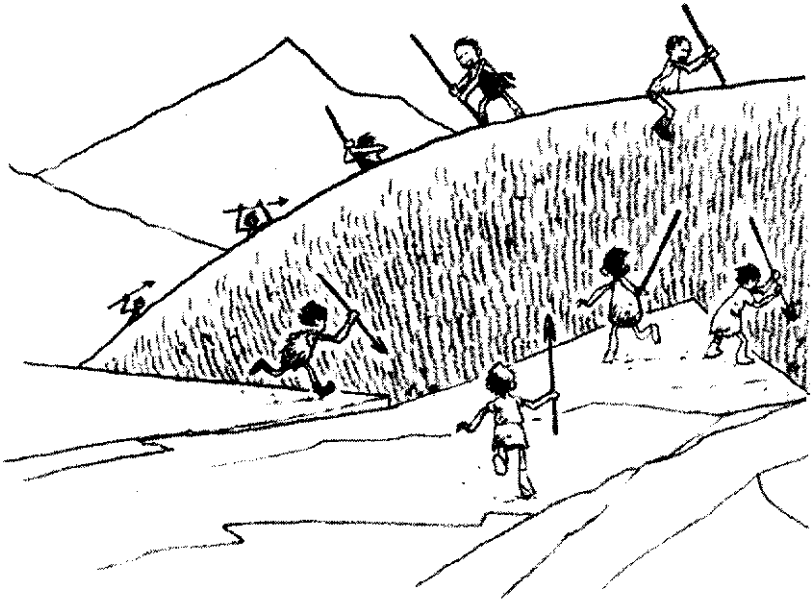
sleep. It was all they could do to make their way back to the cave.

They had barely closed their eyes, it seemed, before they were wakened by loud shouts. They rushed outside. It was growing light, and Snow People were dashing about shouting: "WHALE! WHALE!"

"Come on," cried Littlenose, and the Neanderthal hunters joined the crowd streaming along the shore. They went round the rocky headland and saw a broad bay. Ice clung to the shores, and great floating fragments cut it off from the open sea. The crowd spread round the shores of the bay, and Littlenose could see no whale. Then the water erupted in a giant cloud of spray, and Littlenose almost turned and ran as something black, shining, and bigger than TWENTY mammoths rose out of the

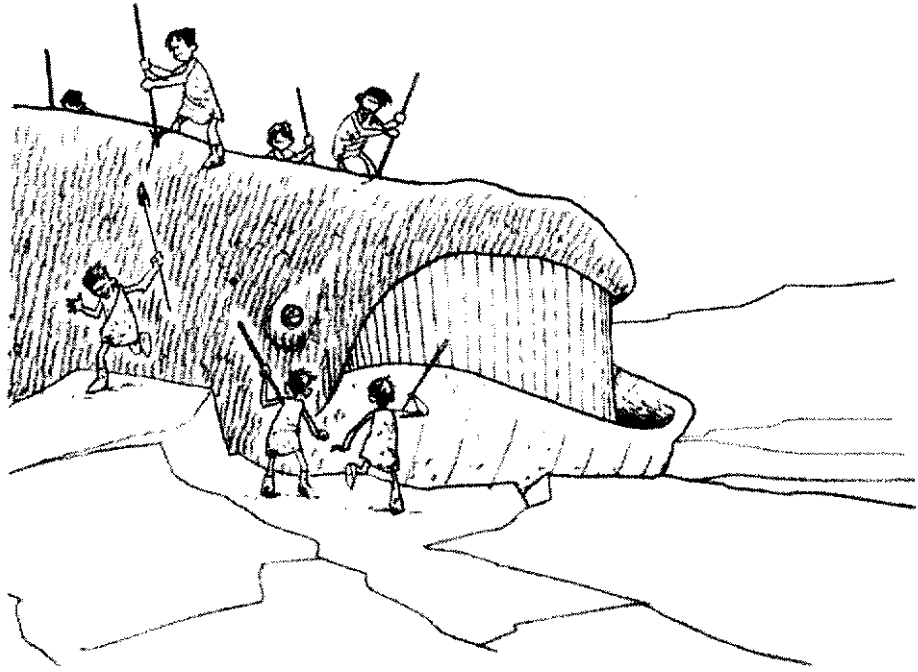
water, blowing clouds of steaming breath into the icy air and beating the water with a giant tail.

The Snow People shouted and began running across the shore and onto the floating pieces of ice. Long spears were thrown, and the whale dived again. But when it surfaced it was closer to the shore. Each time it came up the Snow People



drove it further in until with a great lashing of its tail it stopped. It had grounded in the shallows. In a moment the hunters were all over it, and in no time at all, it seemed, the dead whale was being cut up and carried back to the caves.

There was another celebration party that night, and Littlenose was guest of honour. The Snow People were quite sure that it



was he who had brought them luck.

They left for home the next day, with directions and plenty of provisions from their hosts. They were each given a commemorative carved bone. Littlenose was given one slightly larger than the others, as became a leader.

Littlenose's leadership lasted until they were out of sight of the Snow People's caves. Then Dad said, "Enough's enough. Now, tuck that thing back inside your furs again and keep your eyes peeled for firewood."

When they reached home, many weeks later, Littlenose had almost forgotten that for a short time he had been a leader. And he didn't really care. It was nice to look back on, but much more fun just being a Neanderthal boy.