

A Short Story

THE PAINTER

AGE 7 TO 10



STUART R. DENIKE

The Painter

Once our world was very different. There were no towns, no cities, no cars. There was no school or Saturday cartoons. In fact, no houses like the ones you and I live in had yet been built, and no one even knew what a Saturday was. People (there were very few in those days) worked very, very hard every day. Mothers, fathers, boys and girls all had to work just so that they could eat and stay warm. You see, this was a long, long time ago. People then didn't look the way you and I do. No. They wore animal skins for clothes, and they lived in caves. Life was hard and difficult! There really wasn't much fun way back then.

In that time there lived a family who made their home in a large, dry cave (lots of caves aren't dry you know). Not far below the cave was a clear, clean stream, and from the cave entrance it was only a short walk to a meadow of flowers and green woods. From this bubbling stream the family fetched water for drinking and washing. In it they also caught fish and crawdads to eat. Animals in the meadow and woods were

trapped for food and clothing. There they also gathered seeds, nuts, grains and roots to eat, straw to sleep upon and wood to burn.

The color of the fall season was on the leaves. Winter would not be far behind, so they all worked day and night. All except Oog. Now Oog is not a funny name for a person in those days, so don't laugh.

"Oog, why don't you work?" the rest of the family asked.

"I do work," said Oog. And upon a warm rock by the cave entrance he sat in the sun. He sat and stared out at the stream, the meadow and the woods.

"Are you catching animals so that we can have meat to cook and warm fur to wear?" Father said.

"And are you gathering seeds, nuts, grains and roots to store so we shall not be hungry this cold winter?" said Mother.

"Do you help bring in the straw so the cave floor will be soft, dry and warm, and so that we will not have to sit and sleep on cold stone?" asked Sister.

"And do you help carry and stack the wood so that there is always fuel for the fire, and so we can cook and keep our cave warm?" asked Brother.

"No, no -- no and no," said Oog. "I'll do my share. You'll see," he said with a small smile as he seemed to dream the day away.

So the days went by with everyone working very hard. All except Oog. At times Oog would simply be sitting and staring. At other times he would be down at the stream banks or wandering through the woods or across the meadow.

Every night as they all sat around the fire, each member of the family would tell what he or she had accomplished that day. All except Oog.

"Have you done anything today Oog?" they would each ask reproachfully.

"No, no -- no and no," Oog would say. "I'll do my share. You'll see."

Big heads and little heads would shake, half in anger and half in sorrow as all but Oog would leave the fire and climb into the warm straw to sleep. Late into the night Oog would still be sitting, staring into the glowing red embers of the dying fire.

The winter days finally came, and when the first big snow fell (there was much more snow in those long ago days), the family had to stay in their warm dry cave. In the beginning there was still lots to do: cleaning, stacking, storing and the like. But then little by little as the cold and the snow kept them inside, they each began to get bored and restless. All except Oog.

"Why is it Oog," they asked, "that you are not unhappy about being inside all the time as the rest of us are?"

"Well," said Oog, "it is simply because while all of you gathered food and fuel, I gathered the sights of Spring, Summer and Fall."

Yes , it was Oog's turn to do his share.

To brighten winter's gray, he had gathered colors found in the mud banks of the stream. Reds, purples and blues he had made from the many fruits and flowers growing in the meadow and woods. Now Oog brought out his colors and the brushes he had fashioned from animal hair.

In the fire's flickering light Oog became the world's first painter. All those times when he had just sat while the others worked, Oog had been looking at the world very, very hard. He had wanted to be able to remember what the flowers, woods, stream, meadow and all the animals that lived there looked like. So this night Oog, the painter,

began to draw on the cave wall. His mother, father, brother and sister watched with wonder.

As Oog painted, he talked: " -- and this yellow patch, bright and warm, is the summer sun."

It was a picture, the first of many, that made them all very happy. As if by magic, Oog's sun made them warm inside, chasing winter's bleakness away -- scattering the snowflakes and melting the ice.

While Oog finished painting a meadow full of wild flowers under the summer sun, his family all clapped. "Oog," they cried, "Why this is wonderful. You are an artist!"

Oog shyly smiled and turned back to the wall to paint lovely blue periwinkles. He was making their cave, their home and their world more beautiful.

"Yes," he said, "an artist!"