

CHAPTER XII - KIDNAPED!

I searched about the spot carefully. At last I was rewarded by the discovery of her javelin, a few yards from the bush that had concealed us from the charging thag--her javelin and the indications of a struggle revealed by the trampled vegetation and the overlapping footprints of a woman and a man. Filled with consternation and dismay, I followed these latter to where they suddenly disappeared a hundred yards from where the struggle had occurred. There I saw the huge imprints of a lidi's feet.

The story of the tragedy was all too plain. A Thurian had either been following us, or had accidentally espied Dian and taken a fancy to her. While Juag and I had been engaged with the thag, he had abducted her. I ran swiftly back to where Juag was working over the kill. As I approached him I saw that something was wrong in this quarter as well, for the islander was standing upon the carcass of the thag, his javelin poised for a throw.

When I had come nearer I saw the cause of his belligerent attitude. Just beyond him stood two large jaloks, or wolf-dogs, regarding him intently--a male and a female. Their behavior was rather peculiar, for they did not seem preparing to charge him. Rather, they were contemplating him in an attitude of questioning.

Juag heard me coming and turned toward me with a grin. These fellows love excitement. I could see by his expression that he was enjoying in anticipation the battle that seemed imminent. But he never hurled his javelin. A shout of warning from me stopped him, for I had seen the remnants of a rope dangling from the neck of the male jalok.

Juag again turned toward me, but this time in surprise. I was abreast him in a moment and, passing him, walked straight toward the two beasts. As I did so the female crouched with bared fangs. The male, however, leaped forward to meet me, not in deadly charge, but with every expression of delight and joy which the poor animal could exhibit.

It was Raja--the jalok whose life I had saved, and whom I then had tamed! There was no doubt that he was glad to see me. I now think that his seeming desertion of me had been but due to a desire to search out his ferocious mate and bring her, too, to live with me.

When Juag saw me fondling the great beast he was filled with consternation, but I did not have much time to spare to Raja while my mind was filled with the grief of my new loss. I was glad to see the brute, and I lost no time in taking him to

Juag and making him understand that Juag, too, was to be Raja's friend. With the female the matter was more difficult, but Raja helped us out by growling savagely at her whenever she bared her fangs against us.

I told Juag of the disappearance of Dian, and of my suspicions as to the explanation of the catastrophe. He wanted to start right out after her, but I suggested that with Raja to help me it might be as well were he to remain and skin the thag, remove its bladder, and then return to where we had hidden the canoe on the beach. And so it was arranged that he was to do this and await me there for a reasonable time. I pointed to a great lake upon the surface of the pendent world above us, telling him that if after this lake had appeared four times I had not returned to go either by water or land to Sari and fetch Ghak with an army. Then, calling Raja after me, I set out after Dian and her abductor. First I took the wolf dog to the spot where the man had fought with Dian. A few paces behind us followed Raja's fierce mate. I pointed to the ground where the evidences of the struggle were plainest and where the scent must have been strong to Raja's nostrils.

Then I grasped the remnant of leash that hung about his neck and urged him forward upon the trail. He seemed to understand. With nose to ground he set out upon his task. Dragging me after him, he trotted straight out upon the Lidi Plains, turning his steps in the direction of the Thurian village. I could have guessed as much!

Behind us trailed the female. After a while she closed upon us, until she ran quite close to me and at Raja's side. It was not long before she seemed as easy in my company as did her lord and master.

We must have covered considerable distance at a very rapid pace, for we had reentered the great shadow, when we saw a huge lidi ahead of us, moving leisurely across the level plain. Upon its back were two human figures. If I could have known that the jaloks would not harm Dian I might have turned them loose upon the lidi and its master; but I could not know, and so dared take no chances.

However, the matter was taken out of my hands presently when Raja raised his head and caught sight of his quarry. With a lunge that hurled me flat and jerked the leash from my hand, he was gone with the speed of the wind after the giant lidi and its riders. At his side raced his shaggy mate, only a trifle smaller than he and no whit less savage.

They did not give tongue until the lidi itself discovered them and broke into a lumbering, awkward, but none the less rapid gallop. Then the two hound-beasts commenced to bay, starting with a low, plaintive note that rose, weird and

hideous, to terminate in a series of short, sharp yelps. I feared that it might be the hunting-call of the pack; and if this were true, there would be slight chance for either Dian or her abductor--or myself, either, as far as that was concerned. So I redoubled my efforts to keep pace with the hunt; but I might as well have attempted to distance the bird upon the wing; as I have often reminded you, I am no runner. In that instance it was just as well that I am not, for my very slowness of foot played into my hands; while had I been fleeter, I might have lost Dian that time forever.

The lidi, with the hounds running close on either side, had almost disappeared in the darkness that enveloped the surrounding landscape, when I noted that it was bearing toward the right. This was accounted for by the fact that Raja ran upon his left side, and unlike his mate, kept leaping for the great beast's shoulder. The man on the lidi's back was prodding at the hyaenodon with his long spear, but still Raja kept springing up and snapping.

The effect of this was to turn the lidi toward the right, and the longer I watched the procedure the more convinced I became that Raja and his mate were working together with some end in view, for the she-dog merely galloped steadily at the lidi's right about opposite his rump.

I had seen jaloks hunting in packs, and I recalled now what for the time I had not thought of--the several that ran ahead and turned the quarry back toward the main body. This was precisely what Raja and his mate were doing--they were turning the lidi back toward me, or at least Raja was. Just why the female was keeping out of it I did not understand, unless it was that she was not entirely clear in her own mind as to precisely what her mate was attempting.

At any rate, I was sufficiently convinced to stop where I was and await developments, for I could readily realize two things. One was that I could never overhaul them before the damage was done if they should pull the lidi down now. The other thing was that if they did not pull it down for a few minutes it would have completed its circle and returned close to where I stood.

And this is just what happened. The lot of them were almost swallowed up in the twilight for a moment. Then they reappeared again, but this time far to the right and circling back in my general direction. I waited until I could get some clear idea of the right spot to gain that I might intercept the lidi; but even as I waited I saw the beast attempt to turn still more to the right--a move that would have carried him far to my left in a much more circumscribed circle than the hyaenodons had mapped out for him. Then I saw the female leap forward and head him; and when he would have gone too far to the left, Raja sprang, snapping at his shoulder and held him straight.

Straight for me the two savage beasts were driving their quarry! It was wonderful.

It was something else, too, as I realized while the monstrous beast neared me. It was like standing in the middle of the tracks in front of an approaching express-train. But I didn't dare waver; too much depended upon my meeting that hurtling mass of terrified flesh with a well-placed javelin. So I stood there, waiting to be run down and crushed by those gigantic feet, but determined to drive home my weapon in the broad breast before I fell.

The lidi was only about a hundred yards from me when Raja gave a few barks in a tone that differed materially from his hunting-cry. Instantly both he and his mate leaped for the long neck of the ruminant.

Neither missed. Swinging in mid-air, they hung tenaciously, their weight dragging down the creature's head and so retarding its speed that before it had reached me it was almost stopped and devoting all its energies to attempting to scrape off its attackers with its forefeet.

Dian had seen and recognized me, and was trying to extricate herself from the grasp of her captor, who, handicapped by his strong and agile prisoner, was unable to wield his lance effectively upon the two jaloks. At the same time I was running swiftly toward them.

When the man discovered me he released his hold upon Dian and sprang to the ground, ready with his lance to meet me. My javelin was no match for his longer weapon, which was used more for stabbing than as a missile. Should I miss him at my first cast, as was quite probable, since he was prepared for me, I would have to face his formidable lance with nothing more than a stone knife. The outlook was scarcely entrancing. Evidently I was soon to be absolutely at his mercy.

Seeing my predicament, he ran toward me to get rid of one antagonist before he had to deal with the other two. He could not guess, of course, that the two jaloks were hunting with me; but he doubtless thought that after they had finished the lidi they would make after the human prey--the beasts are notorious killers, often slaying wantonly.

But as the Thurian came Raja loosened his hold upon the lidi and dashed for him, with the female close after. When the man saw them he yelled to me to help him, protesting that we should both be killed if we did not fight together. But I only laughed at him and ran toward Dian.

Both the fierce beasts were upon the Thurian simultaneously--he must have died almost before his body tumbled to the ground. Then the female wheeled toward Dian. I was standing by her side as the thing charged her, my javelin ready to receive her.

But again Raja was too quick for me. I imagined he thought she was making for me, for he couldn't have known anything of my relations toward Dian. At any rate he leaped full upon her back and dragged her down. There ensued forthwith as terrible a battle as one would wish to see if battles were gaged by volume of noise and riotousness of action. I thought that both the beasts would be torn to shreds.

When finally the female ceased to struggle and rolled over on her back, her forepaws limply folded, I was sure that she was dead. Raja stood over her, growling, his jaws close to her throat. Then I saw that neither of them bore a scratch. The male had simply administered a severe drubbing to his mate. It was his way of teaching her that I was sacred.

After a moment he moved away and let her rise, when she set about smoothing down her rumpled coat, while he came stalking toward Dian and me. I had an arm about Dian now. As Raja came close I caught him by the neck and pulled him up to me. There I stroked him and talked to him, bidding Dian do the same, until I think he pretty well understood that if I was his friend, so was Dian.

For a long time he was inclined to be shy of her, often baring his teeth at her approach, and it was a much longer time before the female made friends with us. But by careful kindness, by never eating without sharing our meat with them, and by feeding them from our hands, we finally won the confidence of both animals. However, that was a long time after.

With the two beasts trotting after us, we returned to where we had left Juag. Here I had the dickens' own time keeping the female from Juag's throat. Of all the venomous, wicked, cruel-hearted beasts on two worlds, I think a female hyaenodon takes the palm.

But eventually she tolerated Juag as she had Dian and me, and the five of us set out toward the coast, for Juag had just completed his labors on the thag when we arrived. We ate some of the meat before starting, and gave the hounds some. All that we could we carried upon our backs.

On the way to the canoe we met with no mishaps. Dian told me that the fellow who had stolen her had come upon her from behind while the roaring of the thag had drowned all other noises, and that the first she had known he had disarmed her and thrown her to the back of his lidi, which had been lying down close by

waiting for him. By the time the thag had ceased bellowing the fellow had got well away upon his swift mount. By holding one palm over her mouth he had prevented her calling for help.

"I thought," she concluded, "that I should have to use the viper's tooth, after all."

We reached the beach at last and unearthed the canoe. Then we busied ourselves stepping a mast and rigging a small sail--Juag and I, that is--while Dian cut the thag meat into long strips for drying when we should be out in the sunlight once more.

At last all was done. We were ready to embark. I had no difficulty in getting Raja aboard the dugout; but Ranee--as we christened her after I had explained to Dian the meaning of Raja and its feminine equivalent--positively refused for a time to follow her mate aboard. In fact, we had to shove off without her. After a moment, however, she plunged into the water and swam after us.

I let her come alongside, and then Juag and I pulled her in, she snapping and snarling at us as we did so; but, strange to relate, she didn't offer to attack us after we had ensconced her safely in the bottom alongside Raja.

The canoe behaved much better under sail than I had hoped--infinitely better than the battle-ship Sari had--and we made good progress almost due west across the gulf, upon the opposite side of which I hoped to find the mouth of the river of which Juag had told me.

The islander was much interested and impressed by the sail and its results. He had not been able to understand exactly what I hoped to accomplish with it while we were fitting up the boat; but when he saw the clumsy dugout move steadily through the water without paddles, he was as delighted as a child. We made splendid headway on the trip, coming into sight of land at last.

Juag had been terror-stricken when he had learned that I intended crossing the ocean, and when we passed out of sight of land he was in a blue funk. He said that he had never heard of such a thing before in his life, and that always he had understood that those who ventured far from land never returned; for how could they find their way when they could see no land to steer for?

I tried to explain the compass to him; and though he never really grasped the scientific explanation of it, yet he did learn to steer by it quite as well as I. We passed several islands on the journey--islands which Juag told me were entirely unknown to his own island folk. Indeed, our eyes may have been the first ever to rest upon them. I should have liked to stop off and explore them, but the business of empire would brook no unnecessary delays.

I asked Juag how Hooja expected to reach the mouth of the river which we were in search of if he didn't cross the gulf, and the islander explained that Hooja would undoubtedly follow the coast around. For some time we sailed up the coast searching for the river, and at last we found it. So great was it that I thought it must be a mighty gulf until the mass of driftwood that came out upon the first ebb tide convinced me that it was the mouth of a river. There were the trunks of trees uprooted by the undermining of the river banks, giant creepers, flowers, grasses, and now and then the body of some land animal or bird.

I was all excitement to commence our upward journey when there occurred that which I had never before seen within Pellucidar--a really terrific wind-storm. It blew down the river upon us with a ferocity and suddenness that took our breaths away, and before we could get a chance to make the shore it became too late. The best that we could do was to hold the scud-ding craft before the wind and race along in a smother of white spume. Juag was terrified. If Dian was, she hid it; for was she not the daughter of a once great chief, the sister of a king, and the mate of an emperor?

Raja and Ranee were frightened. The former crawled close to my side and buried his nose against me. Finally even fierce Ranee was moved to seek sympathy from a human being. She slunk to Dian, pressing close against her and whimpering, while Dian stroked her shaggy neck and talked to her as I talked to Raja.

There was nothing for us to do but try to keep the canoe right side up and straight before the wind. For what seemed an eternity the tempest neither increased nor abated. I judged that we must have blown a hundred miles before the wind and straight out into an unknown sea!

As suddenly as the wind rose it died again, and when it died it veered to blow at right angles to its former course in a gentle breeze. I asked Juag then what our course was, for he had had the compass last. It had been on a leather thong about his neck. When he felt for it, the expression that came into his eyes told me as plainly as words what had happened--the compass was lost! The compass was lost!

And we were out of sight of land without a single celestial body to guide us! Even the pendent world was not visible from our position!

Our plight seemed hopeless to me, but I dared not let Dian and Juag guess how utterly dismayed I was; though, as I soon discovered, there was nothing to be gained by trying to keep the worst from Juag--he knew it quite as well as I. He had always known, from the legends of his people, the dangers of the open sea beyond the sight of land. The compass, since he had learned its uses from me,

had been all that he had to buoy his hope of eventual salvation from the watery deep. He had seen how it had guided me across the water to the very coast that I desired to reach, and so he had implicit confidence in it. Now that it was gone, his confidence had departed, also.

There seemed but one thing to do; that was to keep on sailing straight before the wind--since we could travel most rapidly along that course--until we sighted land of some description. If it chanced to be the mainland, well and good; if an island--well, we might live upon an island. We certainly could not live long in this little boat, with only a few strips of dried thag and a few quarts of water left.

Quite suddenly a thought occurred to me. I was surprised that it had not come before as a solution to our problem. I turned toward Juag.

"You Pellucidarians are endowed with a wonderful instinct," I reminded him, "an instinct that points the way straight to your homes, no matter in what strange land you may find yourself. Now all we have to do is let Dian guide us toward Amoz, and we shall come in a short time to the same coast whence we just were blown."

As I spoke I looked at them with a smile of renewed hope; but there was no answering smile in their eyes. It was Dian who enlightened me.

"We could do all this upon land," she said. "But upon the water that power is denied us. I do not know why; but I have always heard that this is true--that only upon the water may a Pellucidarian be lost. This is, I think, why we all fear the great ocean so--even those who go upon its surface in canoes. Juag has told us that they never go beyond the sight of land."

We had lowered the sail after the blow while we were discussing the best course to pursue. Our little craft had been drifting idly, rising and falling with the great waves that were now diminishing. Sometimes we were upon the crest--again in the hollow. As Dian ceased speaking she let her eyes range across the limitless expanse of billowing waters. We rose to a great height upon the crest of a mighty wave. As we topped it Dian gave an exclamation and pointed astern.

"Boats!" she cried. "Boats! Many, many boats!"

Juag and I leaped to our feet; but our little craft had now dropped to the trough, and we could see nothing but walls of water close upon either hand. We waited for the next wave to lift us, and when it did we strained our eyes in the direction that Dian had indicated. Sure enough, scarce half a mile away were several boats, and scattered far and wide behind us as far as we could see were many others! We could not make them out in the distance or in the brief glimpse that

we caught of them before we were plunged again into the next wave canon; but they were boats.

And in them must be human beings like ourselves.