

Chapter VI - Vengeance and Mercy

It was an hour later that Sheeta, the panther, hunting, chanced to glance upward into the blue sky where his attention was attracted by Ska, the vulture, circling slowly above the bush a mile away and downwind. For a long minute the yellow eyes stared intently at the gruesome bird. They saw Ska dive and rise again to continue his ominous circling and in these movements their woodcraft read that which, while obvious to Sheeta, would doubtless have meant nothing to you or me.

The hunting cat guessed that on the ground beneath Ska was some living thing of flesh--either a beast feeding upon its kill or a dying animal that Ska did not yet dare attack. In either event it might prove meat for Sheeta, and so the wary feline stalked by a circuitous route, upon soft, padded feet that gave forth no sound, until the circling aasvogel and his intended prey were upwind. Then, sniffing each vagrant zephyr, Sheeta, the panther, crept cautiously forward, nor had he advanced any considerable distance before his keen nostrils were rewarded with the scent of man--a Tarmangani.

Sheeta paused. He was not a hunter of men. He was young and in his prime; but always before he had avoided this hated presence. Of late he had become more accustomed to it with the passing of many soldiers through his ancient hunting ground, and as the soldiers had frightened away a great part of the game Sheeta had been wont to feed upon, the days had been lean, and Sheeta was hungry.

The circling Ska suggested that this Tarmangani might be helpless and upon the point of dying, else Ska would not have been interested in him, and so easy prey for Sheeta. With this thought in mind the cat resumed his stalking. Presently he pushed through the thick bush and his yellow-green eyes rested gloatingly upon the body of an almost naked Tarmangani lying face down in a narrow game trail.

Numa, sated, rose from the carcass of Bertha Kircher's horse and seized the partially devoured body by the neck and dragged it into the bush; then he started east toward the lair where he had left his mate. Being uncomfortably full he was inclined to be sleepy and far from belligerent. He moved slowly and majestically with no effort at silence or concealment. The king walked abroad, unafraid.

With an occasional regal glance to right or left he moved along a narrow game trail until at a turn he came to a sudden stop at what lay revealed before him--Sheeta, the panther, creeping stealthily upon the almost naked body of a Tarmangani lying face down in the deep dust of the pathway. Numa glared intently at the quiet body in the dust. Recognition came. It was his Tarmangani. A

low growl of warning rumbled from his throat and Sheeta halted with one paw upon Tarzan's back and turned suddenly to eye the intruder.

What passed within those savage brains? Who may say? The panther seemed debating the wisdom of defending his find, for he growled horribly as though warning Numa away from the prey. And Numa? Was the idea of property rights dominating his thoughts? The Tarmangani was his, or he was the Tarmangani's. Had not the Great White Ape mastered and subdued him and, too, had he not fed him? Numa recalled the fear that he had felt of this man-thing and his cruel spear; but in savage brains fear is more likely to engender respect than hatred and so Numa found that he respected the creature who had subdued and mastered him. He saw Sheeta, upon whom he looked with contempt, daring to molest the master of the lion. Jealousy and greed alone might have been sufficient to prompt Numa to drive Sheeta away, even though the lion was not sufficiently hungry to devour the flesh that he thus wrested from the lesser cat; but then, too, there was in the little brain within the massive head a sense of loyalty, and perhaps this it was that sent Numa quickly forward, growling, toward the spitting Sheeta.

For a moment the latter stood his ground with arched back and snarling face, for all the world like a great, spotted tabby.

Numa had not felt like fighting; but the sight of Sheeta daring to dispute his rights kindled his ferocious brain to sudden fire. His rounded eyes glared with rage, his undulating tail snapped to stiff erectness as, with a frightful roar, he charged this presuming vassal.

It came so suddenly and from so short a distance that Sheeta had no chance to turn and flee the rush, and so he met it with raking talons and snapping jaws; but the odds were all against him. To the larger fangs and the more powerful jaws of his adversary were added huge talons and the preponderance of the lion's great weight. At the first clash Sheeta was crushed and, though he deliberately fell upon his back and drew up his powerful hind legs beneath Numa with the intention of disemboweling him, the lion forestalled him and at the same time closed his awful jaws upon Sheeta's throat.

It was soon over. Numa rose, shaking himself, and stood above the torn and mutilated body of his foe. His own sleek coat was cut and the red blood trickled down his flank; though it was but a minor injury, it angered him. He glared down at the dead panther and then, in a fit of rage, he seized and mauled the body only to drop it in a moment, lower his head, voice a single terrific roar, and turn toward the ape-man.

Approaching the still form he sniffed it over from head to foot. Then he placed a huge paw upon it and turned it over with its face up. Again he smelled about the body and at last with his rough tongue licked Tarzan's face. It was then that Tarzan opened his eyes.

Above him towered the huge lion, its hot breath upon his face, its rough tongue upon his cheek. The ape-man had often been close to death; but never before so close as this, he thought, for he was convinced that death was but a matter of seconds. His brain was still numb from the effects of the blow that had felled him, and so he did not, for a moment, recognize the lion that stood over him as the one he had so recently encountered.

Presently, however, recognition dawned upon him and with it a realization of the astounding fact that Numa did not seem bent on devouring him--at least not immediately. His position was a delicate one. The lion stood astraddle Tarzan with his front paws. The ape-man could not rise, therefore, without pushing the lion away and whether Numa would tolerate being pushed was an open question. Too, the beast might consider him already dead and any movement that indicated the contrary was true would, in all likelihood, arouse the killing instinct of the man-eater.

But Tarzan was tiring of the situation. He was in no mood to lie there forever, especially when he contemplated the fact that the girl spy who had tried to brain him was undoubtedly escaping as rapidly as possible.

Numa was looking right into his eyes now evidently aware that he was alive. Presently the lion cocked his head on one side and whined. Tarzan knew the note, and he knew that it spelled neither rage nor hunger, and then he risked all on a single throw, encouraged by that low whine.

"Move, Numa!" he commanded and placing a palm against the tawny shoulder he pushed the lion aside. Then he rose and with a hand on his hunting knife awaited that which might follow. It was then that his eyes fell for the first time on the torn body of Sheeta. He looked from the dead cat to the live one and saw the marks of conflict upon the latter, too, and in an instant realized something of what had happened--Numa had saved him from the panther!

It seemed incredible and yet the evidence pointed clearly to the fact. He turned toward the lion and without fear approached and examined his wounds which he found superficial, and as Tarzan knelt beside him Numa rubbed an itching ear against the naked, brown shoulder. Then the ape-man stroked the great head, picked up his spear, and looked about for the trail of the girl. This he soon found

leading toward the east, and as he set out upon it something prompted him to feel for the locket he had hung about his neck. It was gone!

No trace of anger was apparent upon the ape-man's face unless it was a slight tightening of the jaws; but he put his hand ruefully to the back of his head where a bump marked the place where the girl had struck him and a moment later a half-smile played across his lips. He could not help but admit that she had tricked him neatly, and that it must have taken nerve to do the thing she did and to set out armed only with a pistol through the trackless waste that lay between them and the railway and beyond into the hills where Wilhelmstal lies.

Tarzan admired courage. He was big enough to admit it and admire it even in a German spy, but he saw that in this case it only added to her resourcefulness and made her all the more dangerous and the necessity for putting her out of the way paramount. He hoped to overtake her before she reached Wilhelmstal and so he set out at the swinging trot that he could hold for hours at a stretch without apparent fatigue.

That the girl could hope to reach the town on foot in less than two days seemed improbable, for it was a good thirty miles and part of it hilly. Even as the thought crossed his mind he heard the whistle of a locomotive to the east and knew that the railway was in operation again after a shutdown of several days. If the train was going south the girl would signal it if she had reached the right of way. His keen ears caught the whining of brake shoes on wheels and a few minutes later the signal blast for brakes off. The train had stopped and started again and, as it gained headway and greater distance, Tarzan could tell from the direction of the sound that it was moving south.

The ape-man followed the trail to the railway where it ended abruptly on the west side of the track, showing that the girl had boarded the train, just as he thought. There was nothing now but to follow on to Wilhelmstal, where he hoped to find Captain Fritz Schneider, as well as the girl, and to recover his diamond-studded locket.

It was dark when Tarzan reached the little hill town of Wilhelmstal. He loitered on the outskirts, getting his bearings and trying to determine how an almost naked white man might explore the village without arousing suspicion. There were many soldiers about and the town was under guard, for he could see a lone sentinel walking his post scarce a hundred yards from him. To elude this one would not be difficult; but to enter the village and search it would be practically impossible, garbed, or un-garbed, as he was.

Creeping forward, taking advantage of every cover, lying flat and motionless when the sentry's face was toward him, the ape-man at last reached the sheltering shadows of an outhouse just inside the lines. From there he moved stealthily from building to building until at last he was discovered by a large dog in the rear of one of the bungalows. The brute came slowly toward him, growling. Tarzan stood motionless beside a tree. He could see a light in the bungalow and uniformed men moving about and he hoped that the dog would not bark. He did not; but he growled more savagely and, just at the moment that the rear door of the bungalow opened and a man stepped out, the animal charged.

He was a large dog, as large as Dango, the hyena, and he charged with all the vicious impetuosity of Numa, the lion. As he came Tarzan knelt and the dog shot through the air for his throat; but he was dealing with no man now and he found his quickness more than matched by the quickness of the Tarmangani. His teeth never reached the soft flesh--strong fingers, fingers of steel, seized his neck. He voiced a single startled yelp and clawed at the naked breast before him with his talons; but he was powerless. The mighty fingers closed upon his throat; the man rose, snapped the clawing body once, and cast it aside. At the same time a voice from the open bungalow door called: "Simba!"

There was no response. Repeating the call the man descended the steps and advanced toward the tree. In the light from the doorway Tarzan could see that he was a tall, broad-shouldered man in the uniform of a German officer. The ape-man withdrew into the shadow of the tree's stem. The man came closer, still calling the dog--he did not see the savage beast, crouching now in the shadow, awaiting him. When he had approached within ten feet of the Tarmangani, Tarzan leaped upon him--as Sabor springs to the kill, so sprang the ape-man. The momentum and weight of his body hurled the German to the ground, powerful fingers prevented an outcry and, though the officer struggled, he had no chance and a moment later lay dead beside the body of the dog.

As Tarzan stood for a moment looking down upon his kill and regretting that he could not risk voicing his beloved victory cry, the sight of the uniform suggested a means whereby he might pass to and fro through Wilhelmstal with the minimum chance of detection. Ten minutes later a tall, broad-shouldered officer stepped from the yard of the bungalow leaving behind him the corpses of a dog and a naked man.

He walked boldly along the little street and those who passed him could not guess that beneath Imperial Germany's uniform beat a savage heart that pulsed with implacable hatred for the Hun. Tarzan's first concern was to locate the hotel, for here he guessed he would find the girl, and where the girl was doubtless would be

Hauptmann Fritz Schneider, who was either her confederate, her sweetheart, or both, and there, too, would be Tarzan's precious locket.

He found the hotel at last, a low, two-storied building with a veranda. There were lights on both floors and people, mostly officers, could be seen within. The ape-man considered entering and inquiring for those he sought; but his better judgment finally prompted him to reconnoiter first. Passing around the building he looked into all the lighted rooms on the first floor and, seeing neither of those for whom he had come, he swung lightly to the roof of the veranda and continued his investigations through windows of the second story.

At one corner of the hotel in a rear room the blinds were drawn; but he heard voices within and once he saw a figure silhouetted momentarily against the blind. It appeared to be the figure of a woman; but it was gone so quickly that he could not be sure. Tarzan crept close to the window and listened. Yes, there was a woman there and a man--he heard distinctly the tones of their voices although he could overhear no words, as they seemed to be whispering.

The adjoining room was dark. Tarzan tried the window and found it unlatched. All was quiet within. He raised the sash and listened again--still silence. Placing a leg over the sill he slipped within and hurriedly glanced about. The room was vacant. Crossing to the door he opened it and looked out into the hall. There was no one there, either, and he stepped out and approached the door of the adjoining room where the man and woman were.

Pressing close to the door he listened. Now he distinguished words, for the two had raised their voices as though in argument. The woman was speaking.

"I have brought the locket," she said, "as was agreed upon between you and General Kraut, as my identification. I carry no other credentials. This was to be enough. You have nothing to do but give me the papers and let me go."

The man replied in so low a tone that Tarzan could not catch the words and then the woman spoke again--a note of scorn and perhaps a little of fear in her voice.

"You would not dare, Hauptmann Schneider," she said, and then: "Do not touch me! Take your hands from me!"

It was then that Tarzan of the Apes opened the door and stepped into the room. What he saw was a huge, bull-necked German officer with one arm about the waist of Fraulein Bertha Kircher and a hand upon her forehead pushing her head back as he tried to kiss her on the mouth. The girl was struggling against the great brute; but her efforts were futile. Slowly the man's lips were coming closer to hers and slowly, step by step, she was being carried backward.

Schneider heard the noise of the opening and closing door behind him and turned. At sight of this strange officer he dropped the girl and straightened up.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion, Lieutenant?" he demanded, noting the other's epaulettes. "Leave the room at once."

Tarzan made no articulate reply; but the two there with him heard a low growl break from those firm lips--a growl that sent a shudder through the frame of the girl and brought a pallor to the red face of the Hun and his hand to his pistol but even as he drew his weapon it was wrested from him and hurled through the blind and window to the yard beyond. Then Tarzan backed against the door and slowly removed the uniform coat.

"You are Hauptmann Schneider," he said to the German.

"What of it?" growled the latter.

"I am Tarzan of the Apes," replied the ape-man. "Now you know why I intrude."

The two before him saw that he was naked beneath the coat which he threw upon the floor and then he slipped quickly from the trousers and stood there clothed only in his loin cloth. The girl had recognized him by this time, too.

"Take your hand off that pistol," Tarzan admonished her. Her hand dropped at her side. "Now come here!"

She approached and Tarzan removed the weapon and hurled it after the other. At the mention of his name Tarzan had noted the sickly pallor that overspread the features of the Hun. At last he had found the right man. At last his mate would be partially avenged--never could she be entirely avenged. Life was too short and there were too many Germans.

"What do you want of me?" demanded Schneider.

"You are going to pay the price for the thing you did at the little bungalow in the Waziri country," replied the ape-man.

Schneider commenced to bluster and threaten. Tarzan turned the key in the lock of the door and hurled the former through the window after the pistols. Then he turned to the girl. "Keep out of the way," he said in a low voice. "Tarzan of the Apes is going to kill."

The Hun ceased blustering and began to plead. "I have a wife and children at home," he cried. "I have done nothing, I--"

"You are going to die as befits your kind," said Tarzan, "with blood on your hands and a lie on your lips." He started across the room toward the burly Hauptmann. Schneider was a large and powerful man--about the height of the ape-man but much heavier. He saw that neither threats nor pleas would avail him and so he prepared to fight as a cornered rat fights for its life with all the maniacal rage, cunning, and ferocity that the first law of nature imparts to many beasts.

Lowering his bull head he charged for the ape-man and in the center of the floor the two clinched. There they stood locked and swaying for a moment until Tarzan succeeded in forcing his antagonist backward over a table which crashed to the floor, splintered by the weight of the two heavy bodies.

The girl stood watching the battle with wide eyes. She saw the two men rolling hither and thither across the floor and she heard with horror the low growls that came from the lips of the naked giant. Schneider was trying to reach his foe's throat with his fingers while, horror of horrors, Bertha Kircher could see that the other was searching for the German's jugular with his teeth!

Schneider seemed to realize this too, for he redoubled his efforts to escape and finally succeeded in rolling over on top of the ape-man and breaking away. Leaping to his feet he ran for the window; but the ape-man was too quick for him and before he could leap through the sash a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder and he was jerked back and hurled across the room to the opposite wall. There Tarzan followed him, and once again they locked, dealing each other terrific blows, until Schneider in a piercing voice screamed, "Kamerad! Kamerad!"

Tarzan grasped the man by the throat and drew his hunting knife. Schneider's back was against the wall so that though his knees

wobbled he was held erect by the ape-man. Tarzan brought the sharp point to the lower part of the German's abdomen.

"Thus you slew my mate," he hissed in a terrible voice. "Thus shall you die!"

The girl staggered forward. "Oh, God, no!" she cried. "Not that. You are too brave--you cannot be such a beast as that!"

Tarzan turned at her. "No," he said, "you are right, I cannot do it--I am no German," and he raised the point of his blade and sunk it deep into the putrid heart of Hauptmann Fritz Schneider, putting a bloody period to the Hun's last gasping cry: "I did not do it! She is not--"

Then Tarzan turned toward the girl and held out his hand. "Give me my locket," he said.

She pointed toward the dead officer. "He has it." Tarzan searched him and found the trinket. "Now you may give me the papers," he said to the girl, and without a word she handed him a folded document.

For a long time he stood looking at her before he spoke again.

"I came for you, too," he said. "It would be difficult to take you back from here and so I was going to kill you, as I have sworn to kill all your kind; but you were right when you said that I was not such a beast as that slayer of women. I could not slay him as he slew mine, nor can I slay you, who are a woman."

He crossed to the window, raised the sash and an instant later he had stepped out and disappeared into the night. And then Fraulein Bertha Kircher stepped quickly to the corpse upon the floor, slipped her hand inside the blouse and drew forth a little sheaf of papers which she tucked into her waist before she went to the window and called for help.