

Chapter XIV - The Black Lion

Numa, the lion, was hungry. He had come out of the desert country to the east into a land of plenty but though he was young and strong, the wary grass-eaters had managed to elude his mighty talons each time he had thought to make a kill.

Numa, the lion, was hungry and very savage. For two days he had not eaten and now he hunted in the ugliest of humors. No more did Numa roar forth a rumbling challenge to the world but rather he moved silent and grim, stepping softly that no cracking twig might betray his presence to the keen-eared quarry he sought.

Fresh was the spoor of Bara, the deer, that Numa picked up in the well-beaten game trail he was following. No hour had passed since Bara had come this way; the time could be measured in minutes and so the great lion redoubled the cautiousness of his advance as he crept stealthily in pursuit of his quarry.

A light wind was moving through the jungle aisles, and it wafted down now to the nostrils of the eager carnivore the strong scent spoor of the deer, exciting his already avid appetite to a point where it became a gnawing pain. Yet Numa did not permit himself to be carried away by his desires into any premature charge such as had recently lost him the juicy meat of Pacco, the zebra. Increasing his gait but slightly he followed the tortuous windings of the trail until suddenly just before him, where the trail wound about the bole of a huge tree, he saw a young buck moving slowly ahead of him.

Numa judged the distance with his keen eyes, glowing now like two terrible spots of yellow fire in his wrinkled, snarling face. He could do it--this time he was sure. One terrific roar that would paralyze the poor creature ahead of him into momentary inaction, and a simultaneous charge of lightning-like rapidity and Numa, the lion, would feed. The sinuous tail, undulating slowly at its tufted extremity, whipped suddenly erect. It was the signal for the charge and the vocal organs were shaped for the thunderous roar when, as lightning out of a clear sky, Sheeta, the panther, leaped suddenly into the trail between Numa and the deer.

A blundering charge made Sheeta, for with the first crash of his spotted body through the foliage verging the trail, Bara gave a single startled backward glance and was gone.

The roar that was intended to paralyze the deer broke horribly from the deep throat of the great cat--an angry roar of rage against the meddling Sheeta who had robbed him of his kill, and the charge that was intended for Bara was

launched against the panther; but here too Numa was doomed to disappointment, for with the first notes of his fearsome roar Sheeta, considering well the better part of valor, leaped into a near-by tree.

A half-hour later it was a thoroughly furious Numa who came unexpectedly upon the scent of man. Heretofore the lord of the jungle had disdained the unpalatable flesh of the despised man-thing. Such meat was only for the old, the toothless, and the decrepit who no longer could make their kills among the fleet-footed grass-eaters. Bara, the deer, Horta, the boar, and, best and wariest, Pacco, the zebra, were for the young, the strong, and the agile, but Numa was hungry-hungrier than he ever had been in the five short years of his life.

What if he was a young, powerful, cunning, and ferocious beast? In the face of hunger, the great leveler, he was as the old, the toothless, and the decrepit. His belly cried aloud in anguish and his jowls slavered for flesh. Zebra or deer or man, what mattered it so that it was warm flesh, red with the hot juices of life? Even Dango, the hyena, eater of offal, would, at the moment, have seemed a tidbit to Numa.

The great lion knew the habits and frailties of man, though he never before had hunted man for food. He knew the despised Gomangani as the slowest, the most stupid, and the most defenseless of creatures. No woodcraft, no cunning, no stealth was necessary in the hunting of man, nor had Numa any stomach for either delay or silence.

His rage had become an almost equally consuming passion with his hunger, so that now, as his delicate nostrils apprised him of the recent passage of man, he lowered his head and rumbled forth a thunderous roar, and at a swift walk, careless of the noise he made, set forth upon the trail of his intended quarry.

Majestic and terrible, regally careless of his surroundings, the king of beasts strode down the beaten trail. The natural caution that is inherent to all creatures of the wild had deserted him. What had he, lord of the jungle, to fear and, with only man to hunt, what need of caution? And so he did not see or scent what a more wary Numa might readily have discovered until, with the cracking of twigs and a tumbling of earth, he was precipitated into a cunningly devised pit that the wily Wamabos had excavated for just this purpose in the center of the game trail.

Tarzan of the Apes stood in the center of the clearing watching the plane shrinking to diminutive toy-like proportions in the eastern sky. He had breathed a sigh of relief as he saw it rise safely with the British flier and Fraulein Bertha Kircher. For weeks he had felt the hampering responsibility of their welfare in this savage wilderness where their utter helplessness would have rendered them

easy prey for the savage carnivores or the cruel Wamabos. Tarzan of the Apes loved unfettered freedom, and now that these two were safely off his hands, he felt that he could continue upon his journey toward the west coast and the long-untended cabin of his dead father.

And yet, as he stood there watching the tiny speck in the east, another sigh heaved his broad chest, nor was it a sigh of relief, but rather a sensation which Tarzan had never expected to feel again and which he now disliked to admit even to himself. It could not be possible that he, the jungle bred, who had renounced forever the society of man to return to his beloved beasts of the wilds, could be feeling anything akin to regret at the departure of these two, or any slightest loneliness now that they were gone. Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick Tarzan had liked, but the woman whom he had known as a German spy he had hated, though he never had found it in his heart to slay her as he had sworn to slay all Huns. He had attributed this weakness to the fact that she was a woman, although he had been rather troubled by the apparent inconsistency of his hatred for her and his repeated protection of her when danger threatened.

With an irritable toss of his head he wheeled suddenly toward the west as though by turning his back upon the fast disappearing plane he might expunge thoughts of its passengers from his memory. At the edge of the clearing he paused; a giant tree loomed directly ahead of him and, as though actuated by sudden and irresistible impulse, he leaped into the branches and swung himself with apeline agility to the topmost limbs that would sustain his weight. There, balancing lightly upon a swaying bough, he sought in the direction of the eastern horizon for the tiny speck that would be the British plane bearing away from him the last of his own race and kind that he expected ever again to see.

At last his keen eyes picked up the ship flying at a considerable altitude far in the east. For a few seconds he watched it speeding evenly eastward, when, to his horror, he saw the speck dive suddenly downward. The fall seemed interminable to the watcher and he realized how great must have been the altitude of the plane before the drop commenced. Just before it disappeared from sight its downward momentum appeared to abate suddenly, but it was still moving rapidly at a steep angle when it finally disappeared from view behind the far hills.

For half a minute the ape-man stood noting distant landmarks that he judged might be in the vicinity of the fallen plane, for no sooner had he realized that these people were again in trouble than his inherent sense of duty to his own kind impelled him once more to forego his plans and seek to aid them.

The ape-man feared from what he judged of the location of the machine that it had fallen among the almost impassable gorges of the arid country just beyond

the fertile basin that was bounded by the hills to the east of him. He had crossed that parched and desolate country of the dead himself and he knew from his own experience and the narrow escape he had had from succumbing to its relentless cruelty no lesser man could hope to win his way to safety from any considerable distance within its borders. Vividly he recalled the bleached bones of the long-dead warrior in the bottom of the precipitous gorge that had all but proved a trap for him as well. He saw the helmet of hammered brass and the corroded breastplate of steel and the long straight sword in its scabbard and the ancient harquebus--mute testimonials to the mighty physique and the warlike spirit of him who had somehow won, thus illy caparisoned and pitifully armed, to the center of savage, ancient Africa; and he saw the slender English youth and the slight figure of the girl cast into the same fateful trap from which this giant of old had been unable to escape--cast there wounded and broken perhaps, if not killed.

His judgment told him that the latter possibility was probably the fact, and yet there was a chance that they might have landed without fatal injuries, and so upon this slim chance he started out upon what he knew would be an arduous journey, fraught with many hardships and unspeakable peril, that he might attempt to save them if they still lived.

He had covered a mile perhaps when his quick ears caught the sound of rapid movement along the game trail ahead of him. The sound, increasing in volume, proclaimed the fact that whatever caused it was moving in his direction and moving rapidly. Nor was it long before his trained senses convinced him that the footfalls were those of Bara, the deer, in rapid flight. Inextricably confused in Tarzan's character were the attributes of man and of beasts. Long experience had taught him that he fights best or travels fastest who is best nourished, and so, with few exceptions, Tarzan could delay his most urgent business to take advantage of an opportunity to kill and feed. This perhaps was the predominant beast trait in him. The transformation from an English gentleman, impelled by the most humanitarian motives, to that of a wild beast crouching in the concealment of a dense bush ready to spring upon its approaching prey, was instantaneous.

And so, when Bara came, escaping the clutches of Numa and Sheeta, his terror and his haste precluded the possibility of his sensing that other equally formidable foe lying in ambush for him. Abreast of the ape-man came the deer; a light-brown body shot from the concealing verdure of the bush, strong arms encircled the sleek neck of the young buck and powerful teeth fastened themselves in the soft flesh. Together the two rolled over in the trail and a moment later the ape-man rose, and, with one foot upon the carcass of his kill, raised his voice in the victory cry of the bull ape.

Like an answering challenge came suddenly to the ears of the ape-man the thunderous roar of a lion, a hideous angry roar in which Tarzan thought that he discerned a note of surprise and terror. In the breast of the wild things of the jungle, as in the breasts of their more enlightened brothers and sisters of the human race, the characteristic of curiosity is well developed. Nor was Tarzan far from innocent of it. The peculiar note in the roar of his hereditary enemy aroused a desire to investigate, and so, throwing the carcass of Bara, the deer, across his shoulder, the ape-man took to the lower terraces of the forest and moved quickly in the direction from which the sound had come, which was in line with the trail he had set out upon.

As the distance lessened, the sounds increased in volume, which indicated that he was approaching a very angry lion and presently, where a jungle giant overspread the broad game trail that countless thousands of hooved and padded feet had worn and trampled into a deep furrow during perhaps countless ages, he saw beneath him the lion pit of the Wamabos and in it, leaping futilely for freedom such a lion as even Tarzan of the Apes never before had beheld. A mighty beast it was that glared up at the ape-man--large, powerful and young, with a huge black mane and a coat so much darker than any Tarzan ever had seen that in the depths of the pit it looked almost black--a black lion!

Tarzan who had been upon the point of taunting and reviling his captive foe was suddenly turned to open admiration for the beauty of the splendid beast. What a creature! How by comparison the ordinary forest lion was dwarfed into insignificance! Here indeed was one worthy to be called king of beasts. With his first sight of the great cat the ape-man knew that he had heard no note of terror in that initial roar; surprise doubtless, but the vocal chords of that mighty throat never had reacted to fear.

With growing admiration came a feeling of quick pity for the hapless situation of the great brute rendered futile and helpless by the wiles of the Gomangani. Enemy though the beast was, he was less an enemy to the ape-man than those blacks who had trapped him, for though Tarzan of the Apes claimed many fast and loyal friends among certain tribes of African natives, there were others of degraded character and bestial habits that he looked upon with utter loathing, and of such were the human flesh-eaters of Numabo the chief. For a moment Numa, the lion, glared ferociously at the naked man-thing upon the tree limb above him. Steadily those yellow-green eyes bored into the clear eyes of the ape-man, and then the sensitive nostrils caught the scent of the fresh blood of Bara and the eyes moved to the carcass lying across the brown shoulder, and there came from the cavernous depths of the savage throat a low whine.

Tarzan of the Apes smiled. As unmistakably as though a human voice had spoken, the lion had said to him "I am hungry, even more than hungry. I am starving," and the ape-man looked down upon the lion beneath him and smiled, a slow quizzical smile, and then he shifted the carcass from his shoulder to the branch before him and, drawing the long blade that had been his father's, deftly cut off a hind quarter and, wiping the bloody blade upon Bara's smooth coat, he returned it to its scabbard. Numa, with watering jaws, looked up at the tempting meat and whined again and the ape-man smiled down upon him his slow smile and, raising the hind quarter in his strong brown hands buried his teeth in the tender, juicy flesh.

For the third time Numa, the lion, uttered that low pleading whine and then, with a rueful and disgusted shake of his head, Tarzan of the Apes raised the balance of the carcass of Bara, the deer, and hurled it to the famished beast below.

"Old woman," muttered the ape-man. "Tarzan has become a weak old woman. Presently he would shed tears because he has killed Bara, the deer. He cannot see Numa, his enemy, go hungry, because Tarzan's heart is turning to water by contact with the soft, weak creatures of civilization." But yet he smiled, nor was he sorry that he had given way to the dictates of a kindly impulse.

As Tarzan tore the flesh from that portion of the kill he had retained for himself his eyes were taking in each detail of the scene below. He saw the avidity with which Numa devoured the carcass; he noted with growing admiration the finer points of the beast, and also the cunning construction of the trap. The ordinary lion pit with which Tarzan was familiar had stakes imbedded in the bottom, upon whose sharpened points the hapless lion would be impaled, but this pit was not so made. Here the short stakes were set at intervals of about a foot around the walls near the top, their sharpened points inclining downward so that the lion had fallen unhurt into the trap but could not leap out because each time he essayed it his head came in contact with the sharp end of a stake above him.

Evidently, then, the purpose of the Wamabos was to capture a lion alive. As this tribe had no contact whatsoever with white men in so far as Tarzan knew, their motive was doubtless due to a desire to torture the beast to death that they might enjoy to the utmost his dying agonies.

Having fed the lion, it presently occurred to Tarzan that his act would be futile were he to leave the beast to the mercies of the blacks, and then too it occurred to him that he could derive more pleasure through causing the blacks discomfiture than by leaving Numa to his fate. But how was he to release him? By removing two stakes there would be left plenty of room for the lion to leap from the pit, which was not of any great depth. However, what assurance had Tarzan that

Numa would not leap out instantly the way to freedom was open, and before the ape-man could gain the safety of the trees? Regardless of the fact that Tarzan felt no such fear of the lion as you and I might experience under like circumstances, he yet was imbued with the sense of caution that is necessary to all creatures of the wild if they are to survive. Should necessity require, Tarzan could face Numa in battle, although he was not so egotistical as to think that he could best a full-grown lion in mortal combat other than through accident or the utilization of the cunning of his superior man-mind. To lay himself liable to death futilely, he would have considered as reprehensible as to have shunned danger in time of necessity; but when Tarzan elected to do a thing he usually found the means to accomplish it.

He had now fully determined to liberate Numa, and having so determined, he would accomplish it even though it entailed considerable personal risk. He knew that the lion would be occupied with his feeding for some time, but he also knew that while feeding he would be doubly resentful of any fancied interference. Therefore Tarzan must work with caution.

Coming to the ground at the side of the pit, he examined the stakes and as he did so was rather surprised to note that Numa gave no evidence of anger at his approach. Once he turned a searching gaze upon the ape-man for a moment and then returned to the flesh of Bara. Tarzan felt of the stakes and tested them with his weight. He pulled upon them with the muscles of his strong arms, presently discovering that by working them back and forth he could loosen them: and then a new plan was suggested to him so that he fell to work excavating with his knife at a point above where one of the stakes was imbedded. The loam was soft and easily removed, and it was not long until Tarzan had exposed that part of one of the stakes which was imbedded in the wall of the pit to almost its entire length, leaving only enough imbedded to prevent the stake from falling into the excavation. Then he turned his attention to an adjoining stake and soon had it similarly exposed, after which he threw the noose of his grass rope over the two and swung quickly to the branch of the tree above. Here he gathered in the slack of the rope and, bracing himself against the bole of the tree, pulled steadily upward. Slowly the stakes rose from the trench in which they were imbedded and with them rose Numa's suspicion and growling.

Was this some new encroachment upon his rights and his liberties? He was puzzled and, like all lions, being short of temper, he was irritated. He had not minded it when the Tarmangani squatted upon the verge of the pit and looked down upon him, for had not this Tarmangani fed him? But now something else was afoot and the suspicion of the wild beast was aroused. As he watched, however, Numa saw the stakes rise slowly to an erect position, tumble against

each other and then fall backwards out of his sight upon the surface of the ground above. Instantly the lion grasped the possibilities of the situation, and, too, perhaps he sensed the fact that the man-thing had deliberately opened a way for his escape. Seizing the remains of Bara in his great jaws, Numa, the lion, leaped agilely from the pit of the Wamabos and Tarzan of the Apes melted into the jungles to the east.

On the surface of the ground or through the swaying branches of the trees the spoor of man or beast was an open book to the ape-man, but even his acute senses were baffled by the spoorless trail of the airship. Of what good were eyes, or ears, or the sense of smell in following a thing whose path had lain through the shifting air thousands of feet above the tree tops? Only upon his sense of direction could Tarzan depend in his search for the fallen plane. He could not even judge accurately as to the distance it might lie from him, and he knew that from the moment that it disappeared beyond the hills it might have traveled a considerable distance at right angles to its original course before it crashed to earth. If its occupants were killed or badly injured the ape-man might search futilely in their immediate vicinity for some time before finding them.

There was but one thing to do and that was to travel to a point as close as possible to where he judged the plane had landed, and then to follow in ever-widening circles until he picked up their scent spoor. And this he did.

Before he left the valley of plenty he made several kills and carried the choicest cuts of meat with him, leaving all the dead weight of bones behind. The dense vegetation of the jungle terminated at the foot of the western slope, growing less and less abundant as he neared the summit beyond which was a sparse growth of sickly scrub and sunburned grasses, with here and there a gnarled and hardy tree that had withstood the vicissitudes of an almost waterless existence.

From the summit of the hills Tarzan's keen eyes searched the arid landscape before him. In the distance he discerned the ragged tortuous lines that marked the winding course of the hideous gorges which scored the broad plain at intervals--the terrible gorges that had so nearly claimed his life in punishment for his temerity in attempting to invade the sanctity of their ancient solitude.

For two days Tarzan sought futilely for some clue to the whereabouts of the machine or its occupants. He cached portions of his kills at different points, building cairns of rock to mark their locations. He crossed the first deep gorge and circled far beyond it. Occasionally he stopped and called aloud, listening for some response but only silence rewarded him--a sinister silence that his cries only accentuated.

Late in the evening of the second day he came to the well-remembered gorge in which lay the clean-picked bones of the ancient adventurer, and here, for the first time, Ska, the vulture, picked up his trail. "Not this time, Ska," cried the ape-man in a taunting voice, "for now indeed is Tarzan Tarzan. Before, you stalked the grim skeleton of a Tarmangani and even then you lost. Waste not your time upon Tarzan of the Apes in the full of his strength." But still Ska, the vulture, circled and soared above him, and the ape-man, notwithstanding his boasts, felt a shudder of apprehension. Through his brain ran a persistent and doleful chant to which he involuntarily set two words, repeated over and over again in horrible monotony: "Ska knows! Ska knows!" until, shaking himself in anger, he picked up a rock and hurled it at the grim scavenger.

Lowering himself over the precipitous side of the gorge Tarzan half clambered and half slid to the sandy floor beneath. He had come upon the rift at almost the exact spot at which he had clambered from it weeks before, and there he saw, just as he had left it, just, doubtless, as it had lain for centuries, the mighty skeleton and its mighty armor.

As he stood looking down upon this grim reminder that another man of might had succumbed to the cruel powers of the desert, he was brought to startled attention by the report of a firearm, the sound of which came from the depths of the gorge to the south of him, and reverberated along the steep walls of the narrow rift.