

Chapter XVI - The Night Attack

As the girl turned to bid them good night, she thought that she saw a shadowy form moving in the darkness beyond them, and almost simultaneously she was sure that she heard the sounds of stealthy movement in the same direction.

"What is that?" she whispered. "There is something out there in the darkness."

"Yes," replied Tarzan, "it is a lion. It has been there for some time. Hadn't you noticed it before?"

"Oh!" cried the girl, breathing a sigh of relief, "is it our lion?"

"No," said Tarzan, "it is not our lion; it is another lion and he is hunting."

"He is stalking us?" asked the girl.

"He is," replied the ape-man. Smith-Oldwick fingered the grip of his pistol.

Tarzan saw the involuntary movement and shook his head.

"Leave that thing where it is, Lieutenant," he said.

The officer laughed nervously. "I couldn't help it, you know, old man," he said; "instinct of self-preservation and all that."

"It would prove an instinct of self-destruction," said Tarzan. "There are at least three hunting lions out there watching us. If we had a fire or the moon were up you would see their eyes plainly. Presently they may come after us but the chances are that they will not. If you are very anxious that they should, fire your pistol and hit one of them."

"What if they do charge?" asked the girl; "there is no means of escape."

"Why, we should have to fight them," replied Tarzan.

"What chance would we three have against them?" asked the girl.

The ape-man shrugged his shoulders. "One must die sometime," he said. "To you doubtless it may seem terrible--such a death; but Tarzan of the Apes has always expected to go out in some such way. Few of us die of old age in the jungle, nor should I care to die thus. Some day Numa will get me, or Sheeta, or a black warrior. These or some of the others. What difference does it make which it is, or whether it comes tonight or next year or in ten years? After it is over it will be all the same."

The girl shuddered. "Yes," she said in a dull, hopeless voice, "after it is over it will be all the same."

Then she went into the cavern and lay down upon the sand. Smith-Oldwick sat in the entrance and leaned against the cliff. Tarzan squatted on the opposite side.

"May I smoke?" questioned the officer of Tarzan. "I have been hoarding a few cigarettes and if it won't attract those bouncers out there I would like to have one last smoke before I cash in. Will you join me?" and he proffered the ape-man a cigarette.

"No, thanks," said Tarzan, "but it will be all right if you smoke. No wild animal is particularly fond of the fumes of tobacco so it certainly won't entice them any closer."

Smith-Oldwick lighted his cigarette and sat puffing slowly upon it. He had proffered one to the girl but she had refused, and thus they sat in silence for some time, the silence of the night ruffled occasionally by the faint crunching of padded feet upon the soft sands of the gorge's floor.

It was Smith-Oldwick who broke the silence. "Aren't they unusually quiet for lions?" he asked.

"No," replied the ape-man; "the lion that goes roaring around the jungle does not do it to attract prey. They are very quiet when they are stalking their quarry."

"I wish they would roar," said the officer. "I wish they would do anything, even charge. Just knowing that they are there and occasionally seeing something like a shadow in the darkness and the faint sounds that come to us from them are getting on my nerves. But I hope," he said, "that all three don't charge at once."

"Three?" said Tarzan. "There are seven of them out there now."

"Good Lord! exclaimed Smith-Oldwick.

"Couldn't we build a fire," asked the girl, "and frighten them away?"

"I don't know that it would do any good," said Tarzan, "as I have an idea that these lions are a little different from any that we are familiar with and possibly for the same reason which at first puzzled me a little--I refer to the apparent docility in the presence of a man of the lion who was with us today. A man is out there now with those lions."

"It is impossible!" exclaimed Smith-Oldwick. "They would tear him to pieces."

"What makes you think there is a man there?" asked the girl.

Tarzan smiled and shook his head. "I am afraid you would not understand," he replied. "It is difficult for us to understand anything that is beyond our own powers."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the officer.

"Well," said Tarzan, "if you had been born without eyes you could not understand sense impressions that the eyes of others transmit to their brains, and as you have both been born without any sense of smell I am afraid you cannot understand how I can know that there is a man there."

"You mean that you scent a man?" asked the girl.

Tarzan nodded affirmatively.

"And in the same way you know the number of lions?" asked the man.

"Yes," said Tarzan. "No two lions look alike, no two have the same scent."

The young Englishman shook his head. "No," he said, "I cannot understand."

"I doubt if the lions or the man are here necessarily for the purpose of harming us," said Tarzan, "because there has been nothing to prevent their doing so long before had they wished to. I have a theory, but it is utterly preposterous."

"What is it?" asked the girl.

"I think they are here," replied Tarzan, "to prevent us from going some place that they do not wish us to go; in other words we are under surveillance, and possibly as long as we don't go where we are not wanted we shall not be bothered."

"But how are we to know where they don't want us to go?" asked Smith-Oldwick.

"We can't know," replied Tarzan, "and the chances are that the very place we are seeking is the place they don't wish us to trespass on."

"You mean the water?" asked the girl.

"Yes," replied Tarzan.

For some time they sat in silence which was broken only by an occasional sound of movement from the outer darkness. It must have been an hour later that the ape-man rose quietly and drew his long blade from its sheath. Smith-Oldwick was dozing against the rocky wall of the cavern entrance, while the girl, exhausted by the excitement and fatigue of the day, had fallen into deep slumber. An instant

after Tarzan arose, Smith-Oldwick and the girl were aroused by a volley of thunderous roars and the noise of many padded feet rushing toward them.

Tarzan of the Apes stood directly before the entrance to the cavern, his knife in his hand, awaiting the charge. The ape-man had not expected any such concerted action as he now realized had been taken by those watching them. He had known for some time that other men had joined those who were with the lions earlier in the evening, and when he arose to his feet it was because he knew that the lions and the men were moving cautiously closer to him and his party. He might easily have eluded them, for he had seen that the face of the cliff rising above the mouth of the cavern might be scaled by as good a climber as himself. It might have been wiser had he tried to escape, for he knew that in the face of such odds even he was helpless, but he stood his ground though I doubt if he could have told why.

He owed nothing either of duty or friendship to the girl sleeping in the cavern, nor could he longer be of any protection to her or her companion. Yet something held him there in futile self-sacrifice.

The great Tarmangani had not even the satisfaction of striking a blow in self-defense. A veritable avalanche of savage beasts rolled over him and threw him heavily to the ground. In falling his head struck the rocky surface of the cliff, stunning him.

It was daylight when he regained consciousness. The first dim impression borne to his awakening mind was a confusion of savage sounds which gradually resolved themselves into the growling of lions, and then, little by little, there came back to him the recollections of what had preceded the blow that had felled him.

Strong in his nostrils was the scent of Numa, the lion, and against one naked leg he could feel the coat of some animal. Slowly Tarzan opened his eyes. He was lying on his side and as he looked down his body, he saw that a great lion stood straddling him--a great lion who growled hideously at something which Tarzan could not see.

With the full return of his senses Tarzan's nose told him that the beast above him was Numa of the Wamabo pit.

Thus reassured, the ape-man spoke to the lion and at the same time made a motion as though he would arise. Immediately Numa stepped from above him. As Tarzan raised his head, he saw that he still lay where he had fallen before the opening of the cliff where the girl had been sleeping and that Numa, backed against the cliffside, was apparently defending him from two other lions who paced to and fro a short distance from their intended victim.

And then Tarzan turned his eyes into the cave and saw that the girl and Smith-Oldwick were gone.

His efforts had been for naught. With an angry toss of his head, the ape-man turned upon the two lions who had continued to pace back and forth a few yards from him. Numa of the lion pit turned a friendly glance in Tarzan's direction, rubbed his head against the ape-man's side, and then directed his snarling countenance toward the two hunters.

"I think," said Tarzan to Numa, "that you and I together can make these beasts very unhappy." He spoke in English, which, of course, Numa did not understand at all, but there must have been something reassuring in the tone, for Numa whined pleadingly and moved impatiently to and fro parallel with their antagonists.

"Come," said Tarzan suddenly and grasping the lion's mane with his left hand he moved toward the other lions, his companion pacing at his side. As the two advanced the others drew slowly back and, finally separating, moved off to either side. Tarzan and Numa passed between them but neither the great black-maned lion nor the man failed to keep an eye upon the beast nearer him so that they were not caught unawares when, as though at some preconcerted signal, the two cats charged simultaneously from opposite directions.

The ape-man met the charge of his antagonist after the same fashion of fighting that he had been accustomed to employing in previous encounters with Numa and Sheeta. To have attempted to meet the full shock of a lion's charge would have been suicidal even for the giant Tarmangani. Instead he resorted to methods of agility and cunning, for quick as are the great cats, even quicker is Tarzan of the Apes.

With outspread, raking talons and bared fangs Numa sprang for the naked chest of the ape-man. Throwing up his left arm as a boxer might ward off a blow, Tarzan struck upward beneath the left forearm of the lion, at the same time rushing in with his shoulder beneath the animal's body and simultaneously drove his blade into the tawny hide behind the shoulder. With a roar of pain Numa wheeled again, the personification of bestial rage. Now indeed would he exterminate this presumptuous man-thing who dared even to think that he could thwart the king of beasts in his desires. But as he wheeled, his intended quarry wheeled with him, brown fingers locked in the heavy mane on the powerful neck and again the blade struck deep into the lion's side.

Then it was that Numa went mad with hate and pain and at the same instant the ape-man leaped full upon his back. Easily before had Tarzan locked his legs

beneath the belly of a lion while he clung to its long mane and stabbed it until his point reached its heart. So easy it had seemed before that he experienced a sharp feeling of resentment that he was unable to do so now, for the quick movements of the lion prevented him, and presently, to his dismay, as the lion leaped and threw him about, the ape-man realized that he was swinging inevitably beneath those frightful talons.

With a final effort he threw himself from Numa's back and sought, by his quickness, to elude the frenzied beast for the fraction of an instant that would permit him to regain his feet and meet the animal again upon a more even footing. But this time Numa was too quick for him and he was but partially up when a great paw struck him on the side of the head and bowled him over.

As he fell he saw a black streak shoot above him and another lion close upon his antagonist. Rolling from beneath the two battling lions Tarzan regained his feet, though he was half dazed and staggering from the impact of the terrible blow he had received. Behind him he saw a lifeless lion lying torn and bleeding upon the sand, and before him Numa of the pit was savagely mauling the second lion.

He of the black coat tremendously outclassed his adversary in point of size and strength as well as in ferocity. The battling beasts made a few feints and passes at each other before the larger succeeded in fastening his fangs in the other's throat, and then, as a cat shakes a mouse, the larger lion shook the lesser, and when his dying foe sought to roll beneath and rake his conqueror with his hind claws, the other met him halfway at his own game, and as the great talons buried themselves in the lower part of the other's chest and then were raked downward with all the terrific strength of the mighty hind legs, the battle was ended.

As Numa rose from his second victim and shook himself, Tarzan could not but again note the wondrous proportions and symmetry of the beast. The lions they had bested were splendid specimens themselves and in their coats Tarzan noted a suggestion of the black which was such a strongly marked characteristic of Numa of the pit. Their manes were just a trifle darker than an ordinary black-maned lion but the tawny shade on the balance of their coats predominated. However, the ape-man realized that they were a distinct species from any he had seen as though they had sprung originally from a cross between the forest lion of his acquaintance and a breed of which Numa of the pit might be typical.

The immediate obstruction in his way having been removed, Tarzan was for setting out in search of the spoor of the girl and Smith-Oldwick, that he might discover their fate. He suddenly found himself tremendously hungry and as he circled about over the sandy bottom searching among the tangled network of innumerable tracks for those of his proteges, there broke from his lips

involuntarily the whine of a hungry beast. Immediately Numa of the pit pricked up his ears and, regarding the ape-man steadily for a moment, he answered the call of hunger and started briskly off toward the south, stopping occasionally to see if Tarzan was following.

The ape-man realized that the beast was leading him to food, and so he followed and as he followed his keen eyes and sensitive nostrils sought for some indication of the direction taken by the man and the girl. Presently out of the mass of lion tracks, Tarzan picked up those of many sandaled feet and the scent spoor of the members of the strange race such as had been with the lions the night before, and then faintly he caught the scent spoor of the girl and a little later that of Smith-Oldwick. Presently the tracks thinned and here those of the girl and the Englishman became well marked.

They had been walking side by side and there had been men and lions to the right and left of them, and men and lions in front and behind. The ape-man was puzzled by the possibilities suggested by the tracks, but in the light of any previous experience he could not explain satisfactorily to himself what his perceptions indicated.

There was little change in the formation of the gorge; it still wound its erratic course between precipitous cliffs. In places it widened out and again it became very narrow and always deeper the further south they traveled. Presently the bottom of the gorge began to slope more rapidly. Here and there were indications of ancient rapids and waterfalls. The trail became more difficult but was well marked and showed indications of great antiquity, and, in places, the handiwork of man. They had proceeded for a half or three-quarters of a mile when, at a turning of the gorge, Tarzan saw before him a narrow valley cut deep into the living rock of the earth's crust, with lofty mountain ranges bounding it upon the south. How far it extended east and west he could not see, but apparently it was no more than three or four miles across from north to south.

That it was a well-watered valley was indicated by the wealth of vegetation that carpeted its floor from the rocky cliffs upon the north to the mountains on the south.

Over the edge of the cliffs from which the ape-man viewed the valley a trail had been hewn that led downward to the base. Preceded by the lion Tarzan descended into the valley, which, at this point, was forested with large trees. Before him the trail wound onward toward the center of the valley. Raucous-voiced birds of brilliant plumage screamed among the branches while innumerable monkeys chattered and scolded above him.

The forest teemed with life, and yet there was borne in upon the ape-man a sense of unutterable loneliness, a sensation that he never before had felt in his beloved jungles. There was unreality in everything about him--in the valley itself, lying hidden and forgotten in what was supposed to be an arid waste. The birds and the monkeys, while similar in type to many with which he was familiar, were identical with none, nor was the vegetation without its idiosyncrasies. It was as though he had been suddenly transported to another world and he felt a strange restlessness that might easily have been a premonition of danger.

Fruits were growing among the trees and some of these he saw that Manu, the monkey, ate. Being hungry he swung to the lower branches and, amidst a great chattering of the monkeys, proceeded to eat such of the fruit as he saw the monkeys ate in safety. When he had partially satisfied his hunger, for meat alone could fully do so, he looked about him for Numa of the pit to discover that the lion had gone.