

Chapter XVIII - Among the Maniacs

As the lions swarmed over her protectors, Bertha Kircher shrank back in the cave in a momentary paralysis of fright super-induced, perhaps, by the long days of terrific nerve strain which she had undergone.

Mingled with the roars of the lions had been the voices of men, and presently out of the confusion and turmoil she felt the near presence of a human being, and then hands reached forth and seized her. It was dark and she could see but little, nor any sign of the English officer or the ape-man. The man who seized her kept the lions from her with what appeared to be a stout spear, the haft of which he used to beat off the beasts. The fellow dragged her from the cavern the while he shouted what appeared to be commands and warnings to the lions.

Once out upon the light sands of the bottom of the gorge objects became more distinguishable, and then she saw that there were other men in the party and that two half led and half carried the stumbling figure of a third, whom she guessed must be Smith-Oldwick.

For a time the lions made frenzied efforts to reach the two captives but always the men with them succeeded in beating them off. The fellows seemed utterly unafraid of the great beasts leaping and snarling about them, handling them much the same as one might handle a pack of obstreperous dogs. Along the bed of the old watercourse that once ran through the gorge they made their way, and as the first faint lightening of the eastern horizon presaged the coming dawn, they paused for a moment upon the edge of a declivity, which appeared to the girl in the strange light of the waning night as a vast, bottomless pit; but, as their captors resumed their way and the light of the new day became stronger, she saw that they were moving downward toward a dense forest.

Once beneath the over-arching trees all was again Cimmerian darkness, nor was the gloom relieved until the sun finally arose beyond the eastern cliffs, when she saw that they were following what appeared to be a broad and well-beaten game trail through a forest of great trees. The ground was unusually dry for an African forest and the underbrush, while heavily foliated, was not nearly so rank and impenetrable as that which she had been accustomed to find in similar woods. It was as though the trees and the bushes grew in a waterless country, nor was there the musty odor of decaying vegetation or the myriads of tiny insects such as are bred in damp places.

As they proceeded and the sun rose higher, the voices of the arboreal jungle life rose in discordant notes and loud chattering about them. Innumerable monkeys

scolded and screamed in the branches overhead, while harsh-voiced birds of brilliant plumage darted hither and thither. She noticed presently that their captors often cast apprehensive glances in the direction of the birds and on numerous occasions seemed to be addressing the winged denizens of the forest.

One incident made a marked impression on her. The man who immediately preceded her was a fellow of powerful build, yet, when a brilliantly colored parrot swooped downward toward him, he dropped upon his knees and covering his face with his arms bent forward until his head touched the ground. Some of the others looked at him and laughed nervously. Presently the man glanced upward and seeing that the bird had gone, rose to his feet and continued along the trail.

It was at this brief halt that Smith-Oldwick was brought to her side by the men who had been supporting him. He had been rather badly mauled by one of the lions; but was now able to walk alone, though he was extremely weak from shock and loss of blood.

"Pretty mess, what?" he remarked with a wry smile, indicating his bloody and disheveled state.

"It is terrible," said the girl. "I hope you are not suffering."

"Not as much as I should have expected," he replied, "but I feel as weak as a fool. What sort of creatures are these beggars, anyway?"

"I don't know," she replied, "there is something terribly uncanny about their appearance."

The man regarded one of their captors closely for a moment and then, turning to the girl asked, "Did you ever visit a madhouse?"

She looked up at him in quick understanding and with a horrified expression in her eyes. "That's it!" she cried.

"They have all the earmarks," he said. "Whites of the eyes showing all around the irises, hair growing stiffly erect from the scalp and low down upon the forehead--even their mannerisms and their carriage are those of maniacs."

The girl shuddered.

"Another thing about them," continued the Englishman, "that doesn't appear normal is that they are afraid of parrots and utterly fearless of lions."

"Yes," said the girl; "and did you notice that the birds seem utterly fearless of them--really seem to hold them in contempt? Have you any idea what language they speak?"

"No," said the man, "I have been trying to figure that out. It's not like any of the few native dialects of which I have any knowledge."

"It doesn't sound at all like the native language," said the girl, "but there is something familiar about it. You know, every now and then I feel that I am just on the verge of understanding what they are saying, or at least that somewhere I have heard their tongue before, but final recognition always eludes me."

"I doubt if you ever heard their language spoken," said the man. "These people must have lived in this out-of-the-way valley for ages and even if they had retained the original language of their ancestors without change, which is doubtful, it must be some tongue that is no longer spoken in the outer world."

At one point where a stream of water crossed the trail the party halted while the lions and the men drank. They motioned to their captors to drink too, and as Bertha Kircher and Smith-Oldwick, lying prone upon the ground drank from the clear, cool water of the rivulet, they were suddenly startled by the thunderous roar of a lion a short distance ahead of them. Instantly the lions with them set up a hideous response, moving restlessly to and fro with their eyes always either turned in the direction from which the roar had come or toward their masters, against whom the tawny beasts slunk. The men loosened the sabers in their scabbards, the weapons that had aroused Smith-Oldwick's curiosity as they had Tarzan's, and grasped their spears more firmly.

Evidently there were lions and lions, and while they evinced no fear of the beasts which accompanied them, it was quite evident that the voice of the newcomer had an entirely different effect upon them, although the men seemed less terrified than the lions. Neither, however, showed any indication of an inclination to flee; on the contrary the entire party advanced along the trail in the direction of the menacing roars, and presently there appeared in the center of the path a black lion of gigantic proportions. To Smith-Oldwick and the girl he appeared to be the same lion that they had encountered at the plane and from which Tarzan had rescued them. But it was not Numa of the pit, although he resembled him closely.

The black beast stood directly in the center of the trail lashing his tail and growling menacingly at the advancing party. The men urged on their own beasts, who growled and whined but hesitated to charge. Evidently becoming impatient, and in full consciousness of his might the intruder raised his tail stiffly erect and shot forward. Several of the defending lions made a half-hearted attempt to obstruct his passage, but they might as well have placed themselves in the path of an express train, as hurling them aside the great beast leaped straight for one of the men. A dozen spears were launched at him and a dozen sabers leaped from

their scabbards; gleaming, razor-edged weapons they were, but for the instant rendered futile by the terrific speed of the charging beast.

Two of the spears entering his body but served to further enrage him as, with demoniacal roars, he sprang upon the hapless man he had singled out for his prey. Scarcely pausing in his charge he seized the fellow by the shoulder and, turning quickly at right angles, leaped into the concealing foliage that flanked the trail, and was gone, bearing his victim with him.

So quickly had the whole occurrence transpired that the formation of the little party was scarcely altered. There had been no opportunity for flight, even if it had been contemplated; and now that the lion was gone with his prey the men made no move to pursue him. They paused only long enough to recall the two or three of their lions that had scattered and then resumed the march along the trail.

"Might be an everyday occurrence from all the effect it has on them," remarked Smith-Oldwick to the girl.

"Yes," she said. "They seem to be neither surprised nor disconcerted, and evidently they are quite sure that the lion, having got what he came for, will not molest them further."

"I had thought," said the Englishman, "that the lions of the Wamabo country were about the most ferocious in existence, but they are regular tabby cats by comparison with these big black fellows. Did you ever see anything more utterly fearless or more terribly irresistible than that charge?"

For a while, as they walked side by side, their thoughts and conversation centered upon this latest experience, until the trail emerging from the forest opened to their view a walled city and an area of cultivated land. Neither could suppress an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, that wall is a regular engineering job," exclaimed Smith-Oldwick

"And look at the domes and minarets of the city beyond," cried the girl. "There must be a civilized people beyond that wall. Possibly we are fortunate to have fallen into their hands."

Smith-Oldwick shrugged his shoulders. "I hope so," he said, "though I am not at all sure about people who travel about with lions and are afraid of parrots. There must be something wrong with them."

The party followed the trail across the field to an arched gateway which opened at the summons of one of their captors, who beat upon the heavy wooden panels with his spear. Beyond, the gate opened into a narrow street which seemed but a

continuation of the jungle trail leading from the forest. Buildings on either hand adjoined the wall and fronted the narrow, winding street, which was only visible for a short distance ahead. The houses were practically all two-storied structures, the upper stories flush with the street while the walls of the first story were set back some ten feet, a series of simple columns and arches supporting the front of the second story and forming an arcade on either side of the narrow thoroughfare.

The pathway in the center of the street was unpaved, but the floors of the arcades were cut stone of various shapes and sizes but all carefully fitted and laid without mortar. These floors gave evidence of great antiquity, there being a distinct depression down the center as though the stone had been worn away by the passage of countless sandaled feet during the ages that it had lain there.

There were few people astir at this early hour, and these were of the same type as their captors. At first those whom they saw were only men, but as they went deeper into the city they came upon a few naked children playing in the soft dust of the roadway. Many they passed showed the greatest surprise and curiosity in the prisoners, and often made inquiries of the guards, which the two assumed must have been in relation to themselves, while others appeared not to notice them at all.

"I wish we could understand their bally language," exclaimed Smith-Oldwick.

"Yes," said the girl, "I would like to ask them what they are going to do with us."

"That would be interesting," said the man. "I have been doing considerable wondering along that line myself."

"I don't like the way their canine teeth are filed," said the girl. "It's too suggestive of some of the cannibals I have seen."

"You don't really believe they are cannibals, do you?" asked the man. "You don't think white people are ever cannibals, do you?"

"Are these people white?" asked the girl.

"They're not Negroes, that's certain," rejoined the man. "Their skin is yellow, but yet it doesn't resemble the Chinese exactly, nor are any of their features Chinese."

It was at this juncture that they caught their first glimpse of a native woman. She was similar in most respects to the men though her stature was smaller and her figure more symmetrical. Her face was more repulsive than that of the men, possibly because of the fact that she was a woman, which rather accentuated the idiosyncrasies of eyes, pendulous lip, pointed tusks and stiff, low-growing hair.

The latter was longer than that of the men and much heavier. It hung about her shoulders and was confined by a colored bit of some lacy fabric. Her single garment appeared to be nothing more than a filmy scarf which was wound tightly around her body from below her naked breasts, being caught up some way at the bottom near her ankles. Bits of shiny metal resembling gold, ornamented both the headdress and the skirt. Otherwise the woman was entirely without jewelry. Her bare arms were slender and shapely and her hands and feet well proportioned and symmetrical.

She came close to the party as they passed her, jabbering to the guards who paid no attention to her. The prisoners had an opportunity to observe her closely as she followed at their side for a short distance.

"The figure of a *hour*," remarked Smith-Oldwick, "with the face of an imbecile."

The street they followed was intersected at irregular intervals by crossroads which, as they glanced down them, proved to be equally as tortuous as that through which they were being conducted. The houses varied but little in design. Occasionally there were bits of color, or some attempt at other architectural ornamentation. Through open windows and doors they could see that the walls of the houses were very thick and that all apertures were quite small, as though the people had built against extreme heat, which they realized must have been necessary in this valley buried deep in an African desert.

Ahead they occasionally caught glimpses of larger structures, and as they approached them, came upon what was evidently a part of the business section of the city. There were numerous small shops and bazaars interspersed among the residences, and over the doors of these were signs painted in characters strongly suggesting Greek origin and yet it was not Greek as both the Englishman and the girl knew.

Smith-Oldwick was by this time beginning to feel more acutely the pain of his wounds and the consequent weakness that was greatly aggravated by loss of blood. He staggered now occasionally and the girl, seeing his plight, offered him her arm.

"No," he expostulated, "you have passed through too much yourself to have any extra burden imposed upon you." But though he made a valiant effort to keep up with their captors he occasionally lagged, and upon one such occasion the guards for the first time showed any disposition toward brutality.

It was a big fellow who walked at Smith-Oldwick's left. Several times he took hold of the Englishman's arm and pushed him forward not ungently, but when the captive lagged again and again the fellow suddenly, and certainly with no just

provocation, flew into a perfect frenzy of rage. He leaped upon the wounded man, striking him viciously with his fists and, bearing him to the ground, grasped his throat in his left hand while with his right he drew his long sharp saber. Screaming terribly he waved the blade above his head.

The others stopped and turned to look upon the encounter with no particular show of interest. It was as though one of the party had paused to readjust a sandal and the others merely waited until he was ready to march on again.

But if their captors were indifferent, Bertha Kircher was not. The close-set blazing eyes, the snarling fanged face, and the frightful screams filled her with horror, while the brutal and wanton attack upon the wounded man aroused within her the spirit of protection for the weak that is inherent in all women. Forgetful of everything other than that a weak and defenseless man was being brutally murdered before her eyes, the girl cast aside discretion and, rushing to Smith-Oldwick's assistance, seized the uplifted sword arm of the shrieking creature upon the prostrate Englishman.

Clinging desperately to the fellow she surged backward with all her weight and strength with the result that she overbalanced him and sent him sprawling to the pavement upon his back. In his efforts to save himself he relaxed his grasp upon the grip of his saber which had no sooner fallen to the ground than it was seized upon by the girl. Standing erect beside the prostrate form of the English officer Bertha Kircher, the razor-edged weapon grasped firmly in her hand, faced their captors.

She was a brave figure; even her soiled and torn riding togs and disheveled hair detracted nothing from her appearance. The creature she had felled scrambled quickly to his feet and in the instant his whole demeanor changed. From demoniacal rage he became suddenly convulsed with hysterical laughter although it was a question in the girl's mind as to which was the more terrifying. His companions stood looking on with vacuous grins upon their countenances, while he from whom the girl had wrested the weapon leaped up and down shrieking with laughter. If Bertha Kircher had needed further evidence to assure her that they were in the hands of a mentally deranged people the man's present actions would have been sufficient to convince her. The sudden uncontrolled rage and now the equally uncontrolled and mirthless laughter but emphasized the facial attributes of idiocy.

Suddenly realizing how helpless she was in the event any one of the men should seek to overpower her, and moved by a sudden revulsion of feeling that brought on almost a nausea of disgust, the girl hurled the weapon upon the ground at the feet of the laughing maniac and, turning, knelt beside the Englishman.

"It was wonderful of you," he said, "but you shouldn't have done it. Don't antagonize them: I believe that they are all mad and you know they say that one should always humor a madman."

She shook her head. "I couldn't see him kill you," she said.

A sudden light sprang to the man's eyes as he reached out a hand and grasped the girl's fingers. "Do you care a little now?" he asked. "Can't you tell me that you do--just a bit?"

She did not withdraw her hand from his but she shook her head sadly. "Please don't," she said. "I am sorry that I can only like you very much."

The light died from his eyes and his fingers relaxed their grasp on hers. "Please forgive me," he murmured. "I intended waiting until we got out of this mess and you were safe among your own people. It must have been the shock or something like that, and seeing you defending me as you did. Anyway, I couldn't help it and really it doesn't make much difference what I say now, does it?"

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

He shrugged and smiled ruefully. "I will never leave this city alive," he said. "I wouldn't mention it except that I realize that you must know it as well as I. I was pretty badly torn up by the lion and this fellow here has about finished me. There might be some hope if we were among civilized people, but here with these frightful creatures what care could we get even if they were friendly?"

Bertha Kircher knew that he spoke the truth, and yet she could not bring herself to an admission that Smith-Oldwick would die. She was very fond of him, in fact her great regret was that she did not love him, but she knew that she did not.

It seemed to her that it could be such an easy thing for any girl to love Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick--an English officer and a gentleman, the scion of an old family and himself a man of ample means, young, good-looking and affable. What more could a girl ask for than to have such a man love her and that she possessed Smith-Oldwick's love there was no doubt in Bertha Kircher's mind.

She sighed, and then, laying her hand impulsively on his forehead, she whispered, "Do not give up hope, though. Try to live for my sake and for your sake I will try to love you."

It was as though new life had suddenly been injected into the man's veins. His face lightened instantly and with strength that he himself did not know he possessed he rose slowly to his feet, albeit somewhat unsteadily. The girl helped him and supported him after he had arisen.

For the moment they had been entirely unconscious of their surroundings and now as she looked at their captors she saw that they had fallen again into their almost habitual manner of stolid indifference, and at a gesture from one of them the march was resumed as though no untoward incident had occurred.

Bertha Kircher experienced a sudden reaction from the momentary exaltation of her recent promise to the Englishman. She knew that she had spoken more for him than for herself but now that it was over she realized, as she had realized the moment before she had spoken, that it was unlikely she would ever care for him the way he wished. But what had she promised? Only that she would try to love him. "And now?" she asked herself.

She realized that there might be little hope of their ever returning to civilization. Even if these people should prove friendly and willing to let them depart in peace, how were they to find their way back to the coast? With Tarzan dead, as she fully believed him after having seen his body lying lifeless at the mouth of the cave when she had been dragged forth by her captor, there seemed no power at their command which could guide them safely.

The two had scarcely mentioned the ape-man since their capture, for each realized fully what his loss meant to them. They had compared notes relative to those few exciting moments of the final attack and capture and had found that they agreed perfectly upon all that had occurred. Smith-Oldwick had even seen the lion leap upon Tarzan at the instant that the former was awakened by the roars of the charging beasts, and though the night had been dark, he had been able to see that the body of the savage ape-man had never moved from the instant that it had come down beneath the beast.

And so, if at other times within the past few weeks Bertha Kircher had felt that her situation was particularly hopeless, she was now ready to admit that hope was absolutely extinct.

The streets were beginning to fill with the strange men and women of this strange city. Sometimes individuals would notice them and seem to take a great interest in them, and again others would pass with vacant stares, seemingly unconscious of their immediate surroundings and paying no attention whatsoever to the prisoners. Once they heard hideous screams up a side street, and looking they saw a man in the throes of a demoniacal outburst of rage, similar to that which they had witnessed in the recent attack upon Smith-Oldwick. This creature was venting his insane rage upon a child which he repeatedly struck and bit, pausing only long enough to shriek at frequent intervals. Finally, just before they passed out of sight the creature raised the limp body of the child high above his head and cast it down with all his strength upon the pavement, and then, wheeling

and screaming madly at the top of his lungs, he dashed headlong up the winding street.

Two women and several men had stood looking on at the cruel attack. They were at too great a distance for the Europeans to know whether their facial expressions portrayed pity or rage, but be that as it may, none offered to interfere.

A few yards farther on a hideous hag leaned from a second story window where she laughed and jibbered and made horrid grimaces at all who passed her. Others went their ways apparently attending to whatever duties called them, as soberly as the inhabitants of any civilized community.

"God," muttered Smith-Oldwick, "what an awful place!"

The girl turned suddenly toward him. "You still have your pistol?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied. "I tucked it inside my shirt. They did not search me and it was too dark for them to see whether I carried any weapons or not. So I hid it in the hope that I might get through with it."

She moved closer to him and took hold of his hand. "Save one cartridge for me, please?" she begged.

Smith-Oldwick looked down at her and blinked his eyes very rapidly. An unfamiliar and disconcerting moisture had come into them. He had realized, of course, how bad a plight was theirs but somehow it had seemed to affect him only: it did not seem possible that anyone could harm this sweet and beautiful girl.

And that she should have to be destroyed--destroyed by him! It was too hideous: it was unbelievable, unthinkable! If he had been filled with apprehension before, he was doubly perturbed now.

"I don't believe I could do it, Bertha," he said.

"Not even to save me from something worse?" she asked.

He shook his head dismally. "I could never do it," he replied.

The street that they were following suddenly opened upon a wide avenue, and before them spread a broad and beautiful lagoon, the quiet surface of which mirrored the clear cerulean of the sky. Here the aspect of all their surroundings changed. The buildings were higher and much more pretentious in design and ornamentation. The street itself was paved in mosaics of barbaric but stunningly beautiful design. In the ornamentation of the buildings there was considerable color and a great deal of what appeared to be gold leaf. In all the decorations

there was utilized in various ways the conventional figure of the parrot, and, to a lesser extent, that of the lion and the monkey.

Their captors led them along the pavement beside the lagoon for a short distance and then through an arched doorway into one of the buildings facing the avenue. Here, directly within the entrance was a large room furnished with massive benches and tables, many of which were elaborately hand carved with the figures of the inevitable parrot, the lion, or the monkey, the parrot always predominating.

Behind one of the tables sat a man who differed in no way that the captives could discover from those who accompanied them. Before this person the party halted, and one of the men who had brought them made what seemed to be an oral report. Whether they were before a judge, a military officer, or a civil dignitary they could not know, but evidently he was a man of authority, for, after listening to whatever recital was being made to him the while he closely scrutinized the two captives, he made a single futile attempt to converse with them and then issued some curt orders to him who had made the report.

Almost immediately two of the men approached Bertha Kircher and signaled her to accompany them. Smith-Oldwick started to follow her but was intercepted by one of their guards. The girl stopped then and turned back, at the same time looking at the man at the table and making signs with her hands, indicating, as best she could, that she wished Smith-Oldwick to remain with her, but the fellow only shook his head negatively and motioned to the guards to remove her. The Englishman again attempted to follow but was restrained. He was too weak and helpless even to make an attempt to enforce his wishes. He thought of the pistol inside his shirt and then of the futility of attempting to overcome an entire city with the few rounds of ammunition left to him.

So far, with the single exception of the attack made upon him, they had no reason to believe that they might not receive fair treatment from their captors, and so he reasoned that it might be wiser to avoid antagonizing them until such a time as he became thoroughly convinced that their intentions were entirely hostile. He saw the girl led from the building and just before she disappeared from his view she turned and waved her hand to him:

"Good luck!" she cried, and was gone.

The lions that had entered the building with the party had, during their examination by the man at the table, been driven from the apartment through a doorway behind him. Toward this same doorway two of the men now led Smith-Oldwick. He found himself in a long corridor from the sides of which other doorways opened, presumably into other apartments of the building. At the far

end of the corridor he saw a heavy grating beyond which appeared an open courtyard. Into this courtyard the prisoner was conducted, and as he entered it with the two guards he found himself in an opening which was bounded by the inner walls of the building. It was in the nature of a garden in which a number of trees and flowering shrubs grew. Beneath several of the trees were benches and there was a bench along the south wall, but what aroused his most immediate attention was the fact that the lions who had assisted in their capture and who had accompanied them upon the return to the city, lay sprawled about upon the ground or wandered restlessly to and fro.

Just inside the gate his guard halted. The two men exchanged a few words and then turned and reentered the corridor. The Englishman was horror-stricken as the full realization of his terrible plight forced itself upon his tired brain. He turned and seized the grating in an attempt to open it and gain the safety of the corridor, but he found it securely locked against his every effort, and then he called aloud to the retreating figure of the men within. The only reply he received was a high-pitched, mirthless laugh, and then the two passed through the doorway at the far end of the corridor and he was alone with the lions.