

Chapter XX - Came Tarzan

Just before dark that evening, an almost exhausted flier entered the headquarters of Colonel Capell of the Second Rhodesians and saluted.

"Well, Thompson," asked the superior, "what luck? The others have all returned. Never saw a thing of Oldwick or his plane. I guess we shall have to give it up unless you were more successful."

"I was," replied the young officer. "I found the plane."

"No!" ejaculated Colonel Capell. "Where was it? Any sign of Oldwick?"

"It is in the rottenest hole in the ground you ever saw, quite a bit inland. Narrow gorge. Saw the plane all right but can't reach it. There was a regular devil of a lion wandering around it. I landed near the edge of the cliff and was going to climb down and take a look at the plane. But this fellow hung around for an hour or more and I finally had to give it up."

"Do you think the lions got Oldwick?" asked the colonel.

"I doubt it," replied Lieutenant Thompson, "from the fact that there was no indication that the lion had fed anywhere about the plane. I arose after I found it was impossible to get down around the plane and reconnoitered up and down the gorge. Several miles to the south I found a small, wooded valley in the center of which--please don't think me crazy, sir--is a regular city--streets, buildings, a central plaza with a lagoon, good-sized buildings with domes and minarets and all that sort of stuff."

The elder officer looked at the younger compassionately. "You're all wrought up, Thompson," he said. "Go and take a good sleep. You have been on this job now for a long while and it must have gotten on your nerves."

The young man shook his head a bit irritably. "Pardon me, sir," he said, "but I am telling you the truth. I am not mistaken. I circled over the place several times. It may be that Oldwick has found his way there--or has been captured by these people."

"Were there people in the city?" asked the colonel.

"Yes, I saw them in the streets."

"Do you think cavalry could reach the valley?" asked the colonel.

"No," replied Thompson, "the country is all cut up with these deep gorges. Even infantry would have a devil of a time of it, and there is absolutely no water that I could discover for at least a two days' march."

It was at this juncture that a big Vauxhall drew up in front of the headquarters of the Second Rhodesians and a moment later General Smuts alighted and entered. Colonel Capell arose from his chair and saluted his superior, and the young lieutenant saluted and stood at attention.

"I was passing," said the general, "and I thought I would stop for a chat. By the way, how is the search for Lieutenant Smith-Oldwick progressing? I see Thompson here and I believe he was one of those detailed to the search."

"Yes," said Capell, "he was. He is the last to come in. He found the lieutenant's ship," and then he repeated what Lieutenant Thompson had reported to him. The general sat down at the table with Colonel Capell, and together the two officers, with the assistance of the flier, marked the approximate location of the city which Thompson had reported he'd discovered.

"It's a mighty rough country," remarked Smuts, "but we can't leave a stone unturned until we have exhausted every resource to find that boy. We will send out a small force; a small one will be more likely to succeed than a large one. About one company, Colonel, or say two, with sufficient motor lorries for transport of rations and water. Put a good man in command and let him establish a base as far to the west as the motors can travel. You can leave one company there and send the other forward. I am inclined to believe you can establish your base within a day's march of the city and if such is the case the force you send ahead should have no trouble on the score of lack of water as there certainly must be water in the valley where the city lies. Detail a couple of planes for reconnaissance and messenger service so that the base can keep in touch at all times with the advance party. When can your force move out?"

"We can load the lorries tonight," replied Capell, "and march about one o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Good," said the general, "keep me advised," and returning the others' salutes he departed.

As Tarzan leaped for the vines he realized that the lion was close upon him and that his life depended upon the strength of the creepers clinging to the city walls; but to his intense relief he found the stems as large around as a man's arm, and

the tendrils which had fastened themselves to the wall so firmly fixed, that his weight upon the stem appeared to have no appreciable effect upon them.

He heard Numa's baffled roar as the lion slipped downward clawing futilely at the leafy creepers, and then with the agility of the apes who had reared him, Tarzan bounded nimbly aloft to the summit of the wall.

A few feet below him was the flat roof of the adjoining building and as he dropped to it his back was toward the niche from which an embrasure looked out upon the gardens and the forest beyond, so that he did not see the figure crouching there in the dark shadow. But if he did not see he was not long in ignorance of the fact that he was not alone, for scarcely had his feet touched the roof when a heavy body leaped upon him from behind and brawny arms encircled him about the waist.

Taken at a disadvantage and lifted from his feet, the ape-man was, for the time being, helpless. Whatever the creature was that had seized him, it apparently had a well-defined purpose in mind, for it walked directly toward the edge of the roof so that it was soon apparent to Tarzan that he was to be hurled to the pavement below--a most efficacious manner of disposing of an intruder. That he would be either maimed or killed the ape-man was confident; but he had no intention of permitting his assailant to carry out the plan.

Tarzan's arms and legs were free but he was in such a disadvantageous position that he could not use them to any good effect. His only hope lay in throwing the creature off its balance, and to this end Tarzan straightened his body and leaned as far back against his captor as he could, and then suddenly lunged forward. The result was as satisfactory as he could possibly have hoped. The great weight of the ape-man thrown suddenly out from an erect position caused the other also to lunge violently forward with the result that to save himself he involuntarily released his grasp. Catlike in his movements, the ape-man had no sooner touched the roof than he was upon his feet again, facing his adversary, a man almost as large as himself and armed with a saber which he now whipped from its scabbard. Tarzan, however, had no mind to allow the use of this formidable weapon and so he dove for the other's legs beneath the vicious cut that was directed at him from the side, and as a football player tackles an opposing runner, Tarzan tackled his antagonist, carrying him backward several yards and throwing him heavily to the roof upon his back.

No sooner had the man touched the roof than the ape-man was upon his chest, one brawny hand sought and found the sword wrist and the other the throat of the yellow-tunicked guardsman. Until then the fellow had fought in silence but just as Tarzan's fingers touched his throat he emitted a single piercing shriek

that the brown fingers cut off almost instantly. The fellow struggled to escape the clutch of the naked creature upon his breast but equally as well might he have fought to escape the talons of Numa, the lion.

Gradually his struggles lessened, his pin-point eyes popped from their sockets, rolling horribly upward, while from his foam-flecked lips his swollen tongue protruded. As his struggles ceased Tarzan arose, and placing a foot upon the carcass of his kill, was upon the point of screaming forth his victory cry when the thought that the work before him required the utmost caution sealed his lips.

Walking to the edge of the roof he looked down into the narrow, winding street below. At intervals, apparently at each street intersection, an oil flare sputtered dimly from brackets set in the walls a trifle higher than a man's head. For the most part the winding alleys were in dense shadow and even in the immediate vicinity of the flares the illumination was far from brilliant. In the restricted area of his vision he could see that there were still a few of the strange inhabitants moving about the narrow thoroughfares.

To prosecute his search for the young officer and the girl he must be able to move about the city as freely as possible, but to pass beneath one of the corner flares, naked as he was except for a loin cloth, and in every other respect markedly different from the inhabitants of the city, would be but to court almost immediate discovery. As these thoughts flashed through his mind and he cast about for some feasible plan of action, his eyes fell upon the corpse upon the roof near him, and immediately there occurred to him the possibility of disguising himself in the raiment of his conquered adversary.

It required but a few moments for the ape-man to clothe himself in the tights, sandals, and parrot emblazoned yellow tunic of the dead soldier. Around his waist he buckled the saber belt but beneath the tunic he retained the hunting knife of his dead father. His other weapons he could not lightly discard, and so, in the hope that he might eventually recover them, he carried them to the edge of the wall and dropped them among the foliage at its base. At the last moment he found it difficult to part with his rope, which, with his knife, was his most accustomed weapon, and one which he had used for the greatest length of time. He found that by removing the saber belt he could wind the rope about his waist beneath his tunic, and then replacing the belt still retain it entirely concealed from chance observation.

At last, satisfactorily disguised, and with even his shock of black hair adding to the verisimilitude of his likeness to the natives of the city, he sought for some means of reaching the street below. While he might have risked a drop from the eaves of the roof he feared to do so lest he attract the attention of passers-by, and

probable discovery. The roofs of the buildings varied in height but as the ceilings were all low he found that he could easily travel along the roof tops and this he did for some little distance, until he suddenly discovered just ahead of him several figures reclining upon the roof of a near-by building.

He had noticed openings in each roof, evidently giving ingress to the apartments below, and now, his advance cut off by those ahead of him, he decided to risk the chance of reaching the street through the interior of one of the buildings.

Approaching one of the openings he leaned over the black hole and, listened for sounds of life in the apartment below. Neither his ears nor his nose registered evidence of the presence of any living creature in the immediate vicinity, and so without further hesitation the ape-man lowered his body through the aperture and was about to drop when his foot came in contact with the rung of a ladder, which he immediately took advantage of to descend to the floor of the room below.

Here, all was almost total darkness until his eyes became accustomed to the interior, the darkness of which was slightly alleviated by the reflected light from a distant street flare which shone intermittently through the narrow windows fronting the thoroughfare. Finally, assured that the apartment was unoccupied, Tarzan sought for a stairway to the ground floor. This he found in a dark hallway upon which the room opened--a flight of narrow stone steps leading downward toward the street. Chance favored him so that he reached the shadows of the arcade without encountering any of the inmates of the house.

Once on the street he was not at a loss as to the direction in which he wished to go, for he had tracked the two Europeans practically to the gate, which he felt assured must have given them entry to the city. His keen sense of direction and location made it possible for him to judge with considerable accuracy the point within the city where he might hope to pick up the spoor of those whom he sought.

The first need, however, was to discover a street paralleling the northern wall along which he could make his way in the direction of the gate he had seen from the forest. Realizing that his greatest hope of success lay in the boldness of his operations he moved off in the direction of the nearest street flare without making any other attempt at concealment than keeping in the shadows of the arcade, which he judged would draw no particular attention to him in that he saw other pedestrians doing likewise. The few he passed gave him no heed, and he had almost reached the nearest intersection when he saw several men wearing yellow tunics identical to that which he had taken from his prisoner.

They were coming directly toward him and the ape-man saw that should he continue on he would meet them directly at the intersection of the two streets in

the full light of the flare. His first inclination was to go steadily on, for personally he had no objection to chancing a scrimmage with them; but a sudden recollection of the girl, possibly a helpless prisoner in the hands of these people, caused him to seek some other and less hazardous plan of action.

He had almost emerged from the shadow of the arcade into the full light of the flare and the approaching men were but a few yards from him, when he suddenly kneeled and pretended to adjust the wrappings of his sandals--wrappings, which, by the way, he was not at all sure that he had adjusted as their makers had intended them to be adjusted. He was still kneeling when the soldiers came abreast of him. Like the others he had passed they paid no attention to him and the moment they were behind him he continued upon his way, turning to the right at the intersection of the two streets.

The street he now took was, at this point, so extremely winding that, for the most part, it received no benefit from the flares at either corner, so that he was forced practically to grope his way in the dense shadows of the arcade. The street became a little straighter just before he reached the next flare, and as he came within sight of it he saw silhouetted against a patch of light the figure of a lion. The beast was coming slowly down the street in Tarzan's direction.

A woman crossed the way directly in front of it and the lion paid no attention to her, nor she to the lion. An instant later a little child ran after the woman and so close did he run before the lion that the beast was forced to turn out of its way a step to avoid colliding with the little one. The ape-man grinned and crossed quickly to the opposite side of the street, for his delicate senses indicated that at this point the breeze stirring through the city streets and deflected by the opposite wall would now blow from the lion toward him as the beast passed, whereas if he remained upon the side of the street upon which he had been walking when he discovered the carnivore, his scent would have been borne to the nostrils of the animal, and Tarzan was sufficiently jungle-wise to realize that while he might deceive the eyes of man and beast he could not so easily disguise from the nostrils of one of the great cats that he was a creature of a different species from the inhabitants of the city, the only human beings, possibly, that Numa was familiar with. In him the cat would recognize a stranger, and, therefore, an enemy, and Tarzan had no desire to be delayed by an encounter with a savage lion. His ruse worked successfully, the lion passing him with not more than a side glance in his direction.

He had proceeded for some little distance and had about reached a point where he judged he would find the street which led up from the city gate when, at an intersection of two streets, his nostrils caught the scent spoor of the girl. Out of a maze of other scent spoors the ape-man picked the familiar odor of the girl and, a

second later, that of Smith-Oldwick. He had been forced to accomplish it, however, by bending very low at each street intersection in repeated attention to his sandal wrappings, bringing his nostrils as close to the pavement as possible.

As he advanced along the street through which the two had been conducted earlier in the day he noted, as had they, the change in the type of buildings as he passed from a residence district into that portion occupied by shops and bazaars. Here the number of flares was increased so that they appeared not only at street intersections but midway between as well, and there were many more people abroad. The shops were open and lighted, for with the setting of the sun the intense heat of the day had given place to a pleasant coolness. Here also the number of lions, roaming loose through the thoroughfares, increased, and also for the first time Tarzan noted the idiosyncrasies of the people.

Once he was nearly upset by a naked man running rapidly through the street screaming at the top of his voice. And again he nearly stumbled over a woman who was making her way in the shadows of one of the arcades upon all fours. At first the ape-man thought she was hunting for something she had dropped, but as he drew to one side to watch her, he saw that she was doing nothing of the kind--that she had merely elected to walk upon her hands and knees rather than erect upon her feet. In another block he saw two creatures struggling upon the roof of an adjacent building until finally one of them, wrenching himself free from the grasp of the other, gave his adversary a mighty push which hurled him to the pavement below, where he lay motionless upon the dusty road. For an instant a wild shriek re-echoed through the city from the lungs of the victor and then, without an instant's hesitation, the fellow leaped headfirst to the street beside the body of his victim. A lion moved out from the dense shadows of a doorway and approached the two bloody and lifeless things before him. Tarzan wondered what effect the odor of blood would have upon the beast and was surprised to see that the animal only sniffed at the corpses and the hot red blood and then lay down beside the two dead men.

He had passed the lion but a short distance when his attention was called to the figure of a man lowering himself laboriously from the roof of a building upon the east side of the thoroughfare. Tarzan's curiosity was aroused.