

Chapter 13 - The Masquerader

As Tarzan dropped to the ground beyond the temple wall there was in his mind no intention to escape from the City of A-lur until he had satisfied himself that his mate was not a prisoner there, but how, in this strange city in which every man's hand must be now against him, he was to live and prosecute his search was far from clear to him.

There was only one place of which he knew that he might find even temporary sanctuary and that was the Forbidden Garden of the king. There was thick shrubbery in which a man might hide, and water and fruits. A cunning jungle creature, if he could reach the spot unsuspected, might remain concealed there for a considerable time, but how he was to traverse the distance between the temple grounds and the garden unseen was a question the seriousness of which he fully appreciated.

"Mighty is Tarzan," he soliloquized, "in his native jungle, but in the cities of man he is little better than they."

Depending upon his keen observation and sense of location he felt safe in assuming that he could reach the palace grounds by means of the subterranean corridors and chambers of the temple through which he had been conducted the day before, nor any slightest detail of which had escaped his keen eyes. That would be better, he reasoned, than crossing the open grounds above where his pursuers would naturally immediately follow him from the temple and quickly discover him.

And so a dozen paces from the temple wall he disappeared from sight of any chance observer above, down one of the stone stairways that led to the apartments beneath. The way that he had been conducted the previous day had followed the windings and turnings of numerous corridors and apartments, but Tarzan, sure of himself in such matters, retraced the route accurately without hesitation.

He had little fear of immediate apprehension here since he believed that all the priests of the temple had assembled in the court above to witness his trial and his humiliation and his death, and with this idea firmly implanted in his mind he rounded the turn of the corridor and came face to face with an under priest, his grotesque headdress concealing whatever emotion the sight of Tarzan may have aroused.

However, Tarzan had one advantage over the masked votary of Jad-ben-Otho in that the moment he saw the priest he knew his intention concerning him, and therefore was not compelled to delay action. And so it was that before the priest could determine on any suitable line of conduct in the premises a long, keen knife had been slipped into his heart.

As the body lunged toward the floor Tarzan caught it and snatched the headdress from its shoulders, for the first sight of the creature had suggested to his ever-alert mind a bold scheme for deceiving his enemies.

The headdress saved from such possible damage as it must have sustained had it fallen to the floor with the body of its owner, Tarzan relinquished his hold upon the corpse, set the headdress carefully upon the floor and stooping down severed the tail of the Ho-don close to its root. Near by at his right was a small chamber from which the priest had evidently just emerged and into this Tarzan dragged the corpse, the headdress, and the tail.

Quickly cutting a thin strip of hide from the loin cloth of the priest, Tarzan tied it securely about the upper end of the severed member and then tucking the tail under his loin cloth behind him, secured it in place as best he could. Then he fitted the headdress over his shoulders and stepped from the apartment, to all appearances a priest of the temple of Jad-ben-Otho unless one examined too closely his thumbs and his great toes.

He had noticed that among both the Ho-don and the Waz-don it was not at all unusual that the end of the tail be carried in one hand, and so he caught his own tail up thus lest the lifeless appearance of it dragging along behind him should arouse suspicion.

Passing along the corridor and through the various chambers he emerged at last into the palace grounds beyond the temple. The pursuit had not yet reached this point though he was conscious of a commotion not far behind him. He met now both warriors and slaves but none gave him more than a passing glance, a priest being too common a sight about the palace.

And so, passing the guards unchallenged, he came at last to the inner entrance to the Forbidden Garden and there he paused and scanned quickly that portion of the beautiful spot that lay before his eyes. To his relief it seemed unoccupied and congratulating himself upon the ease with which he had so far outwitted the high powers of A-lur he moved rapidly to the opposite end of the enclosure. Here he found a patch of flowering shrubbery that might safely have concealed a dozen men.

Crawling well within he removed the uncomfortable headdress and sat down to await whatever eventualities fate might have in store for him the while he formulated plans for the future. The one night that he had spent in A-lur had kept him up to a late hour, apprising him of the fact that while there were few abroad in the temple grounds at night, there were yet enough to make it possible for him to fare forth under cover of his disguise without attracting the unpleasant attention of the guards, and, too, he had noticed that the priesthood constituted a privileged class that seemed to come and go at will and unchallenged throughout the palace as well as the temple. Altogether then, he decided, night furnished the most propitious hours for his investigation--by day he could lie up in the shrubbery of the Forbidden Garden, reasonably free from detection. From beyond the garden he heard the voices of men calling to one another both far and near, and he guessed that diligent was the search that was being prosecuted for him.

The idle moments afforded him an opportunity to evolve a more satisfactory scheme for attaching his stolen caudal appendage. He arranged it in such a way that it might be quickly assumed or discarded, and this done he fell to examining the weird mask that had so effectively hidden his features.

The thing had been very cunningly wrought from a single block of wood, very probably a section of a tree, upon which the features had been carved and afterward the interior hollowed out until only a comparatively thin shell remained. Two-semicircular notches had been rounded out from opposite sides of the lower edge. These fitted snugly over his shoulders, aprons of wood extending downward a few inches upon his chest and back. From these aprons hung long tassels or switches of hair tapering from the outer edges toward the center which reached below the bottom of his torso. It required but the most cursory examination to indicate to the ape-man that these ornaments consisted of human scalps, taken, doubtless, from the heads of the sacrifices upon the eastern altars. The headdress itself had been carved to depict in formal design a hideous face that suggested both man and gryf. There were the three white horns, the yellow face with the blue bands encircling the eyes and the red hood which took the form of the posterior and anterior aprons.

As Tarzan sat within the concealing foliage of the shrubbery meditating upon the hideous priest-mask which he held in his hands he became aware that he was not alone in the garden. He sensed another presence and presently his trained ears detected the slow approach of naked feet across the sward. At first he suspected that it might be one stealthily searching the Forbidden Garden for him but a little later the figure came within the limited area of his vision which was circumscribed by stems and foliage and flowers. He saw then that it was the

princess O-lo-a and that she was alone and walking with bowed head as though in meditation--sorrowful meditation for there were traces of tears upon her lids.

Shortly after his ears warned him that others had entered the garden--men they were and their footsteps proclaimed that they walked neither slowly nor meditatively. They came directly toward the princess and when Tarzan could see them he discovered that both were priests.

"O-lo-a, Princess of Pal-ul-don," said one, addressing her, "the stranger who told us that he was the son of Jad-ben-Otho has but just fled from the wrath of Ludon, the high priest, who exposed him and all his wicked blasphemy. The temple, and the palace, and the city are being searched and we have been sent to search the Forbidden Garden, since Ko-tan, the king, said that only this morning he found him here, though how he passed the guards he could not guess."

"He is not here," said O-lo-a. "I have been in the garden for some time and have seen nor heard no other than myself. However, search it if you will."

"No," said the priest who had before spoken, "it is not necessary since he could not have entered without your knowledge and the connivance of the guards, and even had he, the priest who preceded us must have seen him."

"What priest?" asked O-lo-a.

"One passed the guards shortly before us," explained the man.

"I did not see him," said O-lo-a.

"Doubtless he left by another exit," remarked the second priest.

"Yes, doubtless," acquiesced O-lo-a, "but it is strange that I did not see him." The two priests made their obeisance and turned to depart.

"Stupid as Buto, the rhinoceros," soliloquized Tarzan, who considered Buto a very stupid creature indeed. "It should be easy to outwit such as these."

The priests had scarce departed when there came the sound of feet running rapidly across the garden in the direction of the princess to an accompaniment of rapid breathing as of one almost spent, either from fatigue or excitement.

"Pan-at-lee," exclaimed O-lo-a, "what has happened? You look as terrified as the doe for which you were named!"

"O Princess of Pal-ul-don," cried Pan-at-lee, "they would have killed him in the temple. They would have killed the wondrous stranger who claimed to be the Dor-ul-Otho."

"But he escaped," said O-lo-a. "You were there. Tell me about it."

"The head priest would have had him seized and slain, but when they rushed upon him he hurled one in the face of Lu-don with the same ease that you might cast your breastplates at me, and then he leaped upon the altar and from there to the top of the temple wall and disappeared below. They are searching for him, but, O Princess, I pray that they do not find him."

"And why do you pray that?" asked O-lo-a. "Has not one who has so blasphemed earned death?"

"Ah, but you do not know him," replied Pan-at-lee.

"And you do, then?" retorted O-lo-a quickly. "This morning you betrayed yourself and then attempted to deceive me. The slaves of O-lo-a do not such things with impunity. He is then the same Tarzan-jad-guru of whom you told me? Speak woman and speak only the truth."

Pan-at-lee drew herself up very erect, her little chin held high, for was not she too among her own people already as good as a princess? "Pan-at-lee, the Kor-ul-ja does not lie," she said, "to protect herself."

"Then tell me what you know of this Tarzan-jad-guru," insisted O-lo-a.

"I know that he is a wondrous man and very brave," said Pan-at-lee, "and that he saved me from the Tor-o-don and the gryf as I told you, and that he is indeed the same who came into the garden this morning; and even now I do not know that he is not the son of Jad-ben-Otho for his courage and his strength are more than those of mortal man, as are also his kindness and his honor: for when he might have harmed me he protected me, and when he might have saved himself he thought only of me. And all this he did because of his friendship for Om-at, who is gund of Kor-ul-ja and with whom I should have mated had the Ho-don not captured me."

"He was indeed a wonderful man to look upon," mused O-lo-a, "and he was not as are other men, not alone in the conformation of his hands and feet or the fact that he was tailless, but there was that about him which made him seem different in ways more important than these."

"And," supplemented Pan-at-lee, her savage little heart loyal to the man who had befriended her and hoping to win for him the consideration of the princess even though it might not avail him; "and," she said, "did he not know all about Ta-den and even his whereabouts. Tell me, O Princess, could mortal know such things as these?"

"Perhaps he saw Ta-den," suggested O-lo-a.

"But how would he know that you loved Ta-den," parried Pan-at-lee. "I tell you, my Princess, that if he is not a god he is at least more than Ho-don or Waz-don. He followed me from the cave of Es-sat in Kor-ul-ja across Kor-ul-lul and two wide ridges to the very cave in Kor-ul-gryf where I hid, though many hours had passed since I had come that way and my bare feet left no impress upon the ground. What mortal man could do such things as these? And where in all Pal-ul-don would virgin maid find friend and protector in a strange male other than he?"

"Perhaps Lu-don may be mistaken--perhaps he is a god," said O-lo-a, influenced by her slave's enthusiastic championing of the stranger.

"But whether god or man he is too wonderful to die," cried Pan-at-lee. "Would that I might save him. If he lived he might even find a way to give you your Ta-den, Princess."

"Ah, if he only could," sighed O-lo-a, "but alas it is too late for tomorrow I am to be given to Bu-lot."

"He who came to your quarters yesterday with your father?" asked Pan-at-lee.

"Yes; the one with the awful round face and the big belly," exclaimed the Princess disgustedly. "He is so lazy he will neither hunt nor fight. To eat and to drink is all that Bu-lot is fit for, and he thinks of naught else except these things and his slave women. But come, Pan-at-lee, gather for me some of these beautiful blossoms. I would have them spread around my couch tonight that I may carry away with me in the morning the memory of the fragrance that I love best and which I know that I shall not find in the village of Mo-sar, the father of Bu-lot. I will help you, Pan-at-lee, and we will gather armfuls of them, for I love to gather them as I love nothing else--they were Ta-den's favorite flowers."

The two approached the flowering shrubbery where Tarzan hid, but as the blooms grew plentifully upon every bush the ape-man guessed there would be no necessity for them to enter the patch far enough to discover him. With little exclamations of pleasure as they found particularly large or perfect blooms the two moved from place to place upon the outskirts of Tarzan's retreat.

"Oh, look, Pan-at-lee," cried O-lo-a presently; "there is the king of them all. Never did I see so wonderful a flower--No! I will get it myself--it is so large and wonderful no other hand shall touch it," and the princess wound in among the bushes toward the point where the great flower bloomed upon a bush above the ape-man's head.

So sudden and unexpected her approach that there was no opportunity to escape and Tarzan sat silently trusting that fate might be kind to him and lead Ko-tan's daughter away before her eyes dropped from the high-growing bloom to him. But as the girl cut the long stem with her knife she looked down straight into the smiling face of Tarzan-jad-guru.

With a stifled scream she drew back and the ape-man rose and faced her.

"Have no fear, Princess," he assured her. "It is the friend of Ta-den who salutes you," raising her fingers to his lips.

Pan-at-lee came now excitedly forward. "O Jad-ben-Otho, it is he!"

"And now that you have found me," queried Tarzan, "will you give me up to Lu-don, the high priest?"

Pan-at-lee threw herself upon her knees at O-lo-a's feet. "Princess! Princess!" she beseeched, "do not discover him to his enemies."

"But Ko-tan, my father," whispered O-lo-a fearfully, "if he knew of my perfidy his rage would be beyond naming. Even though I am a princess Lu-don might demand that I be sacrificed to appease the wrath of Jad-ben-Otho, and between the two of them I should be lost."

"But they need never know," cried Pan-at-lee, "that you have seen him unless you tell them yourself for as Jad-ben-Otho is my witness I will never betray you."

"Oh, tell me, stranger," implored O-lo-a, "are you indeed a god?"

"Jad-ben-Otho is not more so," replied Tarzan truthfully.

"But why do you seek to escape then from the hands of mortals if you are a god?" she asked.

"When gods mingle with mortals," replied Tarzan, "they are no less vulnerable than mortals. Even Jad-ben-Otho, should he appear before you in the flesh, might be slain."

"You have seen Ta-den and spoken with him?" she asked with apparent irrelevancy.

"Yes, I have seen him and spoken with him," replied the ape-man. "For the duration of a moon I was with him constantly."

"And--" she hesitated--"he--" she cast her eyes toward the ground and a flush mantled her cheek--"he still loves me?" and Tarzan knew that she had been won over.

"Yes," he said, "Ta-den speaks only of O-lo-a and he waits and hopes for the day when he can claim her."

"But tomorrow they give me to Bu-lot," she said sadly.

"May it be always tomorrow," replied Tarzan, "for tomorrow never comes."

"Ah, but this unhappiness will come, and for all the tomorrows of my life I must pine in misery for the Ta-den who will never be mine."

"But for Lu-don I might have helped you," said the ape-man. "And who knows that I may not help you yet?"

"Ah, if you only could, Dor-ul-Otho," cried the girl, "and I know that you would if it were possible for Pan-at-lee has told me how brave you are, and at the same time how kind."

"Only Jad-ben-Otho knows what the future may bring," said Tarzan. "And now you two go your way lest someone should discover you and become suspicious."

"We will go," said O-lo-a, "but Pan-at-lee will return with food. I hope that you escape and that Jad-ben-Otho is pleased with what I have done." She turned and walked away and Pan-at-lee followed while the ape-man again resumed his hiding.

At dusk Pan-at-lee came with food and having her alone Tarzan put the question that he had been anxious to put since his conversation earlier in the day with O-lo-a.

"Tell me," he said, "what you know of the rumors of which O-lo-a spoke of the mysterious stranger which is supposed to be hidden in A-lur. Have you too heard of this during the short time that you have been here?"

"Yes," said Pan-at-lee, "I have heard it spoken of among the other slaves. It is something of which all whisper among themselves but of which none dares to speak aloud. They say that there is a strange she hidden in the temple and that Lu-don wants her for a priestess and that Ko-tan wants her for a wife and that neither as yet dares take her for fear of the other."

"Do you know where she is hidden in the temple?" asked Tarzan.

"No," said Pan-at-lee. "How should I know? I do not even know that it is more than a story and I but tell you that which I have heard others say."

"There was only one," asked Tarzan, "whom they spoke of?"

"No, they speak of another who came with her but none seems to know what became of this one."

Tarzan nodded. "Thank you Pan-at-lee," he said. "You may have helped me more than either of us guess."

"I hope that I have helped you," said the girl as she turned back toward the palace.

"And I hope so too," exclaimed Tarzan emphatically.