

Chapter 14 - The Temple of the Gryf

When night had fallen Tarzan donned the mask and the dead tail of the priest he had slain in the vaults beneath the temple. He judged that it would not do to attempt again to pass the guard, especially so late at night as it would be likely to arouse comment and suspicion, and so he swung into the tree that overhung the garden wall and from its branches dropped to the ground beyond.

Avoiding too grave risk of apprehension the ape-man passed through the grounds to the court of the palace, approaching the temple from the side opposite to that at which he had left it at the time of his escape. He came thus it is true through a portion of the grounds with which he was unfamiliar but he preferred this to the danger of following the beaten track between the palace apartments and those of the temple. Having a definite goal in mind and endowed as he was with an almost miraculous sense of location he moved with great assurance through the shadows of the temple yard.

Taking advantage of the denser shadows close to the walls and of what shrubs and trees there were he came without mishap at last to the ornate building concerning the purpose of which he had asked Lu-don only to be put off with the assertion that it was forgotten--nothing strange in itself but given possible importance by the apparent hesitancy of the priest to discuss its use and the impression the ape-man had gained at the time that Lu-don lied.

And now he stood at last alone before the structure which was three stories in height and detached from all the other temple buildings. It had a single barred entrance which was carved from the living rock in representation of the head of a gryf, whose wide-open mouth constituted the doorway. The head, hood, and front paws of the creature were depicted as though it lay crouching with its lower jaw on the ground between its outspread paws. Small oval windows, which were likewise barred, flanked the doorway.

Seeing that the coast was clear, Tarzan stepped into the darkened entrance where he tried the bars only to discover that they were ingeniously locked in place by some device with which he was unfamiliar and that they also were probably too strong to be broken even if he could have risked the noise which would have resulted. Nothing was visible within the darkened interior and so, momentarily baffled, he sought the windows. Here also the bars refused to yield up their secret, but again Tarzan was not dismayed since he had counted upon nothing different.

If the bars would not yield to his cunning they would yield to his giant strength if there proved no other means of ingress, but first he would assure himself that this latter was the case. Moving entirely around the building he examined it carefully. There were other windows but they were similarly barred. He stopped often to look and listen but he saw no one and the sounds that he heard were too far away to cause him any apprehension.

He glanced above him at the wall of the building. Like so many of the other walls of the city, palace, and temple, it was ornately carved and there were too the peculiar ledges that ran sometimes in a horizontal plane and again were tilted at an angle, giving oftentimes an impression of irregularity and even crookedness to the buildings. It was not a difficult wall to climb, at least not difficult for the ape-man.

But he found the bulky and awkward headdress a considerable handicap and so he laid it aside upon the ground at the foot of the wall. Nimble he ascended to find the windows of the second floor not only barred but curtained within. He did not delay long at the second floor since he had in mind an idea that he would find the easiest entrance through the roof which he had noticed was roughly dome shaped like the throneroom of Ko-tan. Here there were apertures. He had seen them from the ground, and if the construction of the interior resembled even slightly that of the throneroom, bars would not be necessary upon these apertures, since no one could reach them from the floor of the room.

There was but a single question: would they be large enough to admit the broad shoulders of the ape-man.

He paused again at the third floor, and here, in spite of the hangings, he saw that the interior was lighted and simultaneously there came to his nostrils from within a scent that stripped from him temporarily any remnant of civilization that might have remained and left him a fierce and terrible bull of the jungles of Kerchak. So sudden and complete was the metamorphosis that there almost broke from the savage lips the hideous challenge of his kind, but the cunning brute-mind saved him this blunder.

And now he heard voices within--the voice of Lu-don he could have sworn, demanding. And haughty and disdainful came the answering words though utter hopelessness spoke in the tones of this other voice which brought Tarzan to the pinnacle of frenzy.

The dome with its possible apertures was forgotten. Every consideration of stealth and quiet was cast aside as the ape-man drew back his mighty fist and struck a single terrific blow upon the bars of the small window before him, a blow that

sent the bars and the casing that held them clattering to the floor of the apartment within.

Instantly Tarzan dove headforemost through the aperture carrying the hangings of antelope hide with him to the floor below. Leaping to his feet he tore the entangling pelt from about his head only to find himself in utter darkness and in silence. He called aloud a name that had not passed his lips for many weary months. "Jane, Jane," he cried, "where are you?" But there was only silence in reply.

Again and again he called, groping with outstretched hands through the Stygian blackness of the room, his nostrils assailed and his brain tantalized by the delicate effluvia that had first assured him that his mate had been within this very room. And he had heard her dear voice combatting the base demands of the vile priest. Ah, if he had but acted with greater caution! If he had but continued to move with quiet and stealth he might even at this moment be holding her in his arms while the body of Lu-don, beneath his foot, spoke eloquently of vengeance achieved. But there was no time now for idle self-reproaches.

He stumbled blindly forward, groping for he knew not what till suddenly the floor beneath him tilted and he shot downward into a darkness even more utter than that above. He felt his body strike a smooth surface and he realized that he was hurtling downward as through a polished chute while from above there came the mocking tones of a taunting laugh and the voice of Lu-don screamed after him: "Return to thy father, O Dor-ul-Otho!"

The ape-man came to a sudden and painful stop upon a rocky floor. Directly before him was an oval window crossed by many bars, and beyond he saw the moonlight playing on the waters of the blue lake below. Simultaneously he was conscious of a familiar odor in the air of the chamber, which a quick glance revealed in the semidarkness as of considerable proportion.

It was the faint, but unmistakable odor of the gryf, and now Tarzan stood silently listening. At first he detected no sounds other than those of the city that came to him through the window overlooking the lake; but presently, faintly, as though from a distance he heard the shuffling of padded feet along a stone pavement, and as he listened he was aware that the sound approached.

Nearer and nearer it came, and now even the breathing of the beast was audible. Evidently attracted by the noise of his descent into its cavernous retreat it was approaching to investigate. He could not see it but he knew that it was not far distant, and then, deafeningly there reverberated through those gloomy corridors the mad bellow of the gryf.

Aware of the poor eyesight of the beast, and his own eyes now grown accustomed to the darkness of the cavern, the ape-man sought to elude the infuriated charge which he well knew no living creature could withstand. Neither did he dare risk the chance of experimenting upon this strange gryf with the tactics of the Torodon that he had found so efficacious upon that other occasion when his life and liberty had been the stakes for which he cast. In many respects the conditions were dissimilar. Before, in broad daylight, he had been able to approach the gryf under normal conditions in its natural state, and the gryf itself was one that he had seen subjected to the authority of man, or at least of a manlike creature; but here he was confronted by an imprisoned beast in the full swing of a furious charge and he had every reason to suspect that this gryf might never have felt the restraining influence of authority, confined as it was in this gloomy pit to serve likely but the single purpose that Tarzan had already seen so graphically portrayed in his own experience of the past few moments.

To elude the creature, then, upon the possibility of discovering some loophole of escape from his predicament seemed to the ape-man the wisest course to pursue. Too much was at stake to risk an encounter that might be avoided--an encounter the outcome of which there was every reason to apprehend would seal the fate of the mate that he had just found, only to lose again so harrowingly. Yet high as his disappointment and chagrin ran, hopeless as his present estate now appeared, there tingled in the veins of the savage lord a warm glow of thanksgiving and elation. She lived! After all these weary months of hopelessness and fear he had found her. She lived!

To the opposite side of the chamber, silently as the wraith of a disembodied soul, the swift jungle creature moved from the path of the charging Titan that, guided solely in the semi-darkness by its keen ears, bore down upon the spot toward which Tarzan's noisy entrance into its lair had attracted it. Along the further wall the ape-man hurried. Before him now appeared the black opening of the corridor from which the beast had emerged into the larger chamber. Without hesitation Tarzan plunged into it. Even here his eyes, long accustomed to darkness that would have seemed total to you or to me, saw dimly the floor and the walls within a radius of a few feet--enough at least to prevent him plunging into any unguessed abyss, or dashing himself upon solid rock at a sudden turning.

The corridor was both wide and lofty, which indeed it must be to accommodate the colossal proportions of the creature whose habitat it was, and so Tarzan encountered no difficulty in moving with reasonable speed along its winding trail. He was aware as he proceeded that the trend of the passage was downward, though not steeply, but it seemed interminable and he wondered to what distant subterranean lair it might lead. There was a feeling that perhaps after all he

might better have remained in the larger chamber and risked all on the chance of subduing the gryf where there was at least sufficient room and light to lend to the experiment some slight chance of success. To be overtaken here in the narrow confines of the black corridor where he was assured the gryf could not see him at all would spell almost certain death and now he heard the thing approaching from behind. Its thunderous bellows fairly shook the cliff from which the cavernous chambers were excavated. To halt and meet this monstrous incarnation of fury with a futile whee-oo! seemed to Tarzan the height of insanity and so he continued along the corridor, increasing his pace as he realized that the gryf was overhauling him.

Presently the darkness lessened and at the final turning of the passage he saw before him an area of moonlight. With renewed hope he sprang rapidly forward and emerged from the mouth of the corridor to find himself in a large circular enclosure the towering white walls of which rose high upon every side--smooth perpendicular walls upon the sheer face of which was no slightest foothold. To his left lay a pool of water, one side of which lapped the foot of the wall at this point. It was, doubtless, the wallow and the drinking pool of the gryf.

And now the creature emerged from the corridor and Tarzan retreated to the edge of the pool to make his last stand. There was no staff with which to enforce the authority of his voice, but yet he made his stand for there seemed naught else to do. Just beyond the entrance to the corridor the gryf paused, turning its weak eyes in all directions as though searching for its prey. This then seemed the psychological moment for his attempt and raising his voice in peremptory command the ape-man voiced the weird whee-oo! of the Tor-o-don. Its effect upon the gryf was instantaneous and complete--with a terrific bellow it lowered its three horns and dashed madly in the direction of the sound.

To right nor to left was any avenue of escape, for behind him lay the placid waters of the pool, while down upon him from before thundered annihilation. The mighty body seemed already to tower above him as the ape-man turned and dove into the dark waters.

Dead in her breast lay hope. Battling for life during harrowing months of imprisonment and danger and hardship it had fitfully flickered and flamed only to sink after each renewal to smaller proportions than before and now it had died out entirely leaving only cold, charred embers that Jane Clayton knew would never again be rekindled. Hope was dead as she faced Lu-don, the high priest, in her prison quarters in the Temple of the Gryf at A-lur. Both time and hardship had failed to leave their impress upon her physical beauty--the contours of her perfect form, the glory of her radiant loveliness had defied them, yet to these very attributes she owed the danger which now confronted her, for Lu-don desired her.

From the lesser priests she had been safe, but from Lu-don, she was not safe, for Lu-don was not as they, since the high priesthood of Pal-ul-don may descend from father to son.

Ko-tan, the king, had wanted her and all that had so far saved her from either was the fear of each for the other, but at last Lu-don had cast aside discretion and had come in the silent watches of the night to claim her. Haughtily had she repulsed him, seeking ever to gain time, though what time might bring her of relief or renewed hope she could not even remotely conjecture. A leer of lust and greed shone hungrily upon his cruel countenance as he advanced across the room to seize her. She did not shrink nor cower, but stood there very erect, her chin up, her level gaze freighted with the loathing and contempt she felt for him. He read her expression and while it angered him, it but increased his desire for possession. Here indeed was a queen, perhaps a goddess; fit mate for the high priest.

"You shall not!" she said as he would have touched her. "One of us shall die before ever your purpose is accomplished."

He was close beside her now. His laugh grated upon her ears. "Love does not kill," he replied mockingly.

He reached for her arm and at the same instant something clashed against the bars of one of the windows, crashing them inward to the floor, to be followed almost simultaneously by a human figure which dove headforemost into the room, its head enveloped in the skin window hangings which it carried with it in its impetuous entry.

Jane Clayton saw surprise and something of terror too leap to the countenance of the high priest and then she saw him spring forward and jerk upon a leather thong that depended from the ceiling of the apartment. Instantly there dropped from above a cunningly contrived partition that fell between them and the intruder, effectively barring him from them and at the same time leaving him to grope upon its opposite side in darkness, since the only cresset the room contained was upon their side of the partition.

Faintly from beyond the wall Jane heard a voice calling, but whose it was and what the words she could not distinguish. Then she saw Lu-don jerk upon another thong and wait in evident expectancy of some consequent happening. He did not have long to wait. She saw the thong move suddenly as though jerked from above and then Lu-don smiled and with another signal put in motion whatever machinery it was that raised the partition again to its place in the ceiling.

Advancing into that portion of the room that the partition had shut off from them, the high priest knelt upon the floor, and down tilting a section of it, revealed the dark mouth of a shaft leading below. Laughing loudly he shouted into the hole: "Return to thy father, O Dor-ul-Otho!"

Making fast the catch that prevented the trapdoor from opening beneath the feet of the unwary until such time as Lu-don chose the high priest rose again to his feet.

"Now, Beautiful One!" he cried, and then, "Ja-don! what do you here?"

Jane Clayton turned to follow the direction of Lu-don's eyes and there she saw framed in the entrance-way to the apartment the mighty figure of a warrior, upon whose massive features sat an expression of stern and uncompromising authority.

"I come from Ko-tan, the king," replied Ja-don, "to remove the beautiful stranger to the Forbidden Garden."

"The king defies me, the high priest of Jad-ben-Otho?" cried Lu-don.

"It is the king's command--I have spoken," snapped Ja-don, in whose manner was no sign of either fear or respect for the priest.

Lu-don well knew why the king had chosen this messenger whose heresy was notorious, but whose power had as yet protected him from the machinations of the priest. Lu-don cast a surreptitious glance at the thongs hanging from the ceiling. Why not? If he could but maneuver to entice Ja-don to the opposite side of the chamber!

"Come," he said in a conciliatory tone, "let us discuss the matter," and moved toward the spot where he would have Ja-don follow him.

"There is nothing to discuss," replied Ja-don, yet he followed the priest, fearing treachery.

Jane watched them. In the face and figure of the warrior she found reflected those admirable traits of courage and honor that the profession of arms best develops. In the hypocritical priest there was no redeeming quality. Of the two then she might best choose the warrior. With him there was a chance--with Lu-don, none. Even the very process of exchange from one prison to another might offer some possibility of escape. She weighed all these things and decided, for Lu-don's quick glance at the thongs had not gone unnoticed nor uninterpreted by her.

"Warrior," she said, addressing Ja-don, "if you would live enter not that portion of the room."

Lu-don cast an angry glance upon her. "Silence, slave!" he cried.

"And where lies the danger?" Ja-don asked of Jane, ignoring Lu-don.

The woman pointed to the thongs. "Look," she said, and before the high priest could prevent she had seized that which controlled the partition which shot downward separating Lu-don from the warrior and herself.

Ja-don looked inquiringly at her. "He would have tricked me neatly but for you," he said; "kept me imprisoned there while he secreted you elsewhere in the mazes of his temple."

"He would have done more than that," replied Jane, as she pulled upon the other thong. "This releases the fastenings of a trapdoor in the floor beyond the partition. When you stepped on that you would have been precipitated into a pit beneath the temple. Lu-don has threatened me with this fate often. I do not know that he speaks the truth, but he says that a demon of the temple is imprisoned there--a huge gryf."

"There is a gryf within the temple," said Ja-don. "What with it and the sacrifices, the priests keep us busy supplying them with prisoners, though the victims are sometimes those for whom Lu-don has conceived hatred among our own people. He has had his eyes upon me for a long time. This would have been his chance but for you. Tell me, woman, why you warned me. Are we not all equally your jailers and your enemies?"

"None could be more horrible than Lu-don," she replied; "and you have the appearance of a brave and honorable warrior. I could not hope, for hope has died and yet there is the possibility that among so many fighting men, even though they be of another race than mine, there is one who would accord honorable treatment to a stranger within his gates--even though she be a woman."

Ja-don looked at her for a long minute. "Ko-tan would make you his queen," he said. "That he told me himself and surely that were honorable treatment from one who might make you a slave."

"Why, then, would he make me queen?" she asked.

Ja-don came closer as though in fear his words might be overheard. "He believes, although he did not tell me so in fact, that you are of the race of gods. And why not? Jad-ben-Otho is tailless, therefore it is not strange that Ko-tan should suspect that only the gods are thus. His queen is dead leaving only a single

daughter. He craves a son and what more desirable than that he should found a line of rulers for Pal-ul-don descended from the gods?"

"But I am already wed," cried Jane. "I cannot wed another. I do not want him or his throne."

"Ko-tan is king," replied Ja-don simply as though that explained and simplified everything.

"You will not save me then?" she asked.

"If you were in Ja-lur," he replied, "I might protect you, even against the king."

"What and where is Ja-lur?" she asked, grasping at any straw.

"It is the city where I rule," he answered. "I am chief there and of all the valley beyond."

"Where is it?" she insisted, and "is it far?"

"No," he replied, smiling, "it is not far, but do not think of that--you could never reach it. There are too many to pursue and capture you. If you wish to know, however, it lies up the river that empties into Jad-ben-lul whose waters kiss the walls of A-lur--up the western fork it lies with water upon three sides.

Impregnable city of Pal-ul-don--alone of all the cities it has never been entered by a foeman since it was built there while Jad-ben-Otho was a boy."

"And there I would be safe?" she asked.

"Perhaps," hereplied.

Ah, dead Hope; upon what slender provocation would you seek to glow again! She sighed and shook her head, realizing the inutility of Hope--yet the tempting bait dangled before her mind's eye--Ja-lur!

"You are wise," commented Ja-don interpreting her sigh. "Come now, we will go to the quarters of the princess beside the Forbidden Garden. There you will remain with O-lo-a, the king's daughter. It will be better than this prison you have occupied."

"And Ko-tan?" she asked, a shudder passing through her slender frame.

"There are ceremonies," explained Ja-don, "that may occupy several days before you become queen, and one of them may be difficult of arrangement." He laughed, then.

"What?" she asked.

"Only the high priest may perform the marriage ceremony for a king," he explained.

"Delay!" she murmured; "blessed delay!" Tenacious indeed of life is Hope even though it be reduced to cold and lifeless char--a veritable phoenix.