

Chapter 15 - "The King Is Dead!"

As they conversed Ja-don had led her down the stone stairway that leads from the upper floors of the Temple of the Gryf to the chambers and the corridors that honeycomb the rocky hills from which the temple and the palace are hewn and now they passed from one to the other through a doorway upon one side of which two priests stood guard and upon the other two warriors. The former would have halted Ja-don when they saw who it was that accompanied him for well known throughout the temple was the quarrel between king and high priest for possession of this beautiful stranger.

"Only by order of Lu-don may she pass," said one, placing himself directly in front of Jane Clayton, barring her progress. Through the hollow eyes of the hideous mask the woman could see those of the priest beneath gleaming with the fires of fanaticism. Ja-don placed an arm about her shoulders and laid his hand upon his knife.

"She passes by order of Ko-tan, the king," he said, "and by virtue of the fact that Ja-don, the chief, is her guide. Stand aside!"

The two warriors upon the palace side pressed forward. "We are here, gund of Ja-lur," said one, addressing Ja-don, "to receive and obey your commands."

The second priest now interposed. "Let them pass," he admonished his companion. "We have received no direct commands from Lu-don to the contrary and it is a law of the temple and the palace that chiefs and priests may come and go without interference."

"But I know Lu-don's wishes," insisted the other.

"He told you then that Ja-don must not pass with the stranger?"

"No--but--"

"Then let them pass, for they are three to two and will pass anyway--we have done our best."

Grumbling, the priest stepped aside. "Lu-don will exact an accounting," he cried angrily.

Ja-don turned upon him. "And get it when and where he will," he snapped.

They came at last to the quarters of the Princess O-lo-a where, in the main entrance-way, loitered a small guard of palace warriors and several stalwart black

eunuchs belonging to the princess, or her women. To one of the latter Ja-don relinquished his charge.

"Take her to the princess," he commanded, "and see that she does not escape."

Through a number of corridors and apartments lighted by stone cressets the eunuch led Lady Greystoke halting at last before a doorway concealed by hangings of jato skin, where the guide beat with his staff upon the wall beside the door.

"O-lo-a, Princess of Pal-ul-don," he called, "here is the stranger woman, the prisoner from the temple."

"Bid her enter," Jane heard a sweet voice from within command.

The eunuch drew aside the hangings and Lady Greystoke stepped within. Before her was a low-ceiled room of moderate size. In each of the four corners a kneeling figure of stone seemed to be bearing its portion of the weight of the ceiling upon its shoulders. These figures were evidently intended to represent Waz-don slaves and were not without bold artistic beauty. The ceiling itself was slightly arched to a central dome which was pierced to admit light by day, and air. Upon one side of the room were many windows, the other three walls being blank except for a doorway in each. The princess lay upon a pile of furs which were arranged over a low stone dais in one corner of the apartment and was alone except for a single Waz-don slave girl who sat upon the edge of the dais near her feet.

As Jane entered O-lo-a beckoned her to approach and when she stood beside the couch the girl half rose upon an elbow and surveyed her critically.

"How beautiful you are," she said simply.

Jane smiled, sadly; for she had found that beauty may be a curse.

"That is indeed a compliment," she replied quickly, "from one so radiant as the Princess O-lo-a."

"Ah!" exclaimed the princess delightedly; "you speak my language! I was told that you were of another race and from some far land of which we of Pal-ul-don have never heard."

"Lu-don saw to it that the priests instructed me," explained Jane; "but I am from a far country, Princess; one to which I long to return--and I am very unhappy."

"But Ko-tan, my father, would make you his queen," cried the girl; "that should make you very happy."

"But it does not," replied the prisoner; "I love another to whom I am already wed. Ah, Princess, if you had known what it was to love and to be forced into marriage with another you would sympathize with me."

The Princess O-lo-a was silent for a long moment. "I know," she said at last, "and I am very sorry for you; but if the king's daughter cannot save herself from such a fate who may save a slave woman? for such in fact you are."

The drinking in the great banquet hall of the palace of Ko-tan, king of Pal-ul-don had commenced earlier this night than was usual, for the king was celebrating the morrow's betrothal of his only daughter to Bu-lot, son of Mo-sar, the chief, whose great-grandfather had been king of Pal-ul-don and who thought that he should be king, and Mo-sar was drunk and so was Bu-lot, his son. For that matter nearly all of the warriors, including the king himself, were drunk. In the heart of Ko-tan was no love either for Mo-sar, or Bu-lot, nor did either of these love the king. Ko-tan was giving his daughter to Bu-lot in the hope that the alliance would prevent Mo-sar from insisting upon his claims to the throne, for, next to Ja-don, Mo-sar was the most powerful of the chiefs and while Ko-tan looked with fear upon Ja-don, too, he had no fear that the old Lion-man would attempt to seize the throne, though which way he would throw his influence and his warriors in the event that Mo-sar declare war upon Ko-tan, the king could not guess.

Primitive people who are also warlike are seldom inclined toward either tact or diplomacy even when sober; but drunk they know not the words, if aroused. It was really Bu-lot who started it.

"This," he said, "I drink to O-lo-a," and he emptied his tankard at a single gulp. "And this," seizing a full one from a neighbor, "to her son and mine who will bring back the throne of Pal-ul-don to its rightful owners!"

"The king is not yet dead!" cried Ko-tan, rising to his feet; "nor is Bu-lot yet married to his daughter--and there is yet time to save Pal-ul-don from the spawn of the rabbit breed."

The king's angry tone and his insulting reference to Bu-lot's well-known cowardice brought a sudden, sobering silence upon the roistering company. Every eye turned upon Bu-lot and Mo-sar, who sat together directly opposite the king. The first was very drunk though suddenly he seemed quite sober. He was so drunk that for an instant he forgot to be a coward, since his reasoning powers were so effectually paralyzed by the fumes of liquor that he could not intelligently weigh the consequences of his acts. It is reasonably conceivable that a drunk and angry rabbit might commit a rash deed. Upon no other hypothesis is the thing

that Bu-lot now did explicable. He rose suddenly from the seat to which he had sunk after delivering his toast and seizing the knife from the sheath of the warrior upon his right hurled it with terrific force at Ko-tan. Skilled in the art of throwing both their knives and their clubs are the warriors of Pal-ul-don and at this short distance and coming as it did without warning there was no defense and but one possible result--Ko-tan, the king, lunged forward across the table, the blade buried in his heart.

A brief silence followed the assassin's cowardly act. White with terror, now, Bu-lot fell slowly back toward the doorway at his rear, when suddenly angry warriors leaped with drawn knives to prevent his escape and to avenge their king. But Mo-sar now took his stand beside his son.

"Ko-tan is dead!" he cried. "Mo-sar is king! Let the loyal warriors of Pal-ul-don protect their ruler!"

Mo-sar commanded a goodly following and these quickly surrounded him and Bu-lot, but there were many knives against them and now Ja-don pressed forward through those who confronted the pretender.

"Take them both!" he shouted. "The warriors of Pal-ul-don will choose their own king after the assassin of Ko-tan has paid the penalty of his treachery."

Directed now by a leader whom they both respected and admired those who had been loyal to Ko-tan rushed forward upon the faction that had surrounded Mo-sar. Fierce and terrible was the fighting, devoid, apparently, of all else than the ferocious lust to kill and while it was at its height Mo-sar and Bu-lot slipped unnoticed from the banquet hall.

To that part of the palace assigned to them during their visit to A-lur they hastened. Here were their servants and the lesser warriors of their party who had not been bidden to the feast of Ko-tan. These were directed quickly to gather together their belongings for immediate departure. When all was ready, and it did not take long, since the warriors of Pal-ul-don require but little impedimenta on the march, they moved toward the palace gate.

Suddenly Mo-sar approached his son. "The princess," he whispered. "We must not leave the city without her--she is half the battle for the throne."

Bu-lot, now entirely sober, demurred. He had had enough of fighting and of risk. "Let us get out of A-lur quickly," he urged, "or we shall have the whole city upon us. She would not come without a struggle and that would delay us too long."

"There is plenty of time," insisted Mo-sar. "They are still fighting in the pal-e-don-so. It will be long before they miss us and, with Ko-tan dead, long before any will think to look to the safety of the princess. Our time is now--it was made for us by Jad-ben-Otho. Come!"

Reluctantly Bu-lot followed his father, who first instructed the warriors to await them just inside the gateway of the palace. Rapidly the two approached the quarters of the princess. Within the entrance-way only a handful of warriors were on guard. The eunuchs had retired.

"There is fighting in the pal-e-don-so," Mo-sar announced in feigned excitement as they entered the presence of the guards. "The king desires you to come at once and has sent us to guard the apartments of the princess. Make haste!" he commanded as the men hesitated.

The warriors knew him and that on the morrow the princess was to be betrothed to Bu-lot, his son. If there was trouble what more natural than that Mo-sar and Bu-lot should be intrusted with the safety of the princess. And then, too, was not Mo-sar a powerful chief to whose orders disobedience might prove a dangerous thing? They were but common fighting men disciplined in the rough school of tribal warfare, but they had learned to obey a superior and so they departed for the banquet hall--the place-where-men-eat.

Barely waiting until they had disappeared Mo-sar crossed to the hangings at the opposite end of the entrance-hall and followed by Bu-lot made his way toward the sleeping apartment of O-lo-a and a moment later, without warning, the two men burst in upon the three occupants of the room. At sight of them O-lo-a sprang to her feet.

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded angrily.

Mo-sar advanced and halted before her. Into his cunning mind had entered a plan to trick her. If it succeeded it would prove easier than taking her by force, and then his eyes fell upon Jane Clayton and he almost gasped in astonishment and admiration, but he caught himself and returned to the business of the moment.

"O-lo-a," he cried, "when you know the urgency of our mission you will forgive us. We have sad news for you. There has been an uprising in the palace and Ko-tan, the king, has been slain. The rebels are drunk with liquor and now on their way here. We must get you out of A-lur at once--there is not a moment to lose. Come, and quickly!"

"My father dead?" cried O-lo-a, and suddenly her eyes went wide. "Then my place is here with my people," she cried. "If Ko-tan is dead I am queen until the warriors choose a new ruler--that is the law of Pal-ul-don. And if I am queen none can make me wed whom I do not wish to wed--and Jad-ben-Otho knows I never wished to wed thy cowardly son. Go!" She pointed a slim forefinger imperiously toward the doorway.

Mo-sar saw that neither trickery nor persuasion would avail now and every precious minute counted. He looked again at the beautiful woman who stood beside O-lo-a. He had never before seen her but he well knew from palace gossip that she could be no other than the godlike stranger whom Ko-tan had planned to make his queen.

"Bu-lot," he cried to his son, "take you your own woman and I will take--mine!" and with that he sprang suddenly forward and seizing Jane about the waist lifted her in his arms, so that before O-lo-a or Pan-at-lee might even guess his purpose he had disappeared through the hangings near the foot of the dais and was gone with the stranger woman struggling and fighting in his grasp.

And then Bu-lot sought to seize O-lo-a, but O-lo-a had her Pan-at-lee--fierce little tiger-girl of the savage Kor-ul-ja--Pan-at-lee whose name belied her--and Bu-lot found that with the two of them his hands were full. When he would have lifted O-lo-a and borne her away Pan-at-lee seized him around the legs and strove to drag him down. Viciously he kicked her, but she would not desist, and finally, realizing that he might not only lose his princess but be so delayed as to invite capture if he did not rid himself of this clawing, scratching she-jato, he hurled O-lo-a to the floor and seizing Pan-at-lee by the hair drew his knife and--

The curtains behind him suddenly parted. In two swift bounds a lithe figure crossed the room and before ever the knife of Bu-lot reached its goal his wrist was seized from behind and a terrific blow crashing to the base of his brain dropped him, lifeless, to the floor. Bu-lot, coward, traitor, and assassin, died without knowing who struck him down.

As Tarzan of the Apes leaped into the pool in the gryf pit of the temple at A-lur one might have accounted for his act on the hypothesis that it was the last blind urge of self-preservation to delay, even for a moment, the inevitable tragedy in which each some day must play the leading role upon his little stage; but no--those cool, gray eyes had caught the sole possibility for escape that the surroundings and the circumstances offered--a tiny, moonlit patch of water glimmering through a small aperture in the cliff at the surface of the pool upon its farther side. With swift, bold strokes he swam for speed alone knowing that the water would in no way deter his pursuer. Nor did it. Tarzan heard the great

splash as the huge creature plunged into the pool behind him; he heard the churning waters as it forged rapidly onward in his wake. He was nearing the opening--would it be large enough to permit the passage of his body? That portion of it which showed above the surface of the water most certainly would not. His life, then, depended upon how much of the aperture was submerged. And now it was directly before him and the gryf directly behind. There was no alternative--there was no other hope. The ape-man threw all the resources of his great strength into the last few strokes, extended his hands before him as a cutwater, submerged to the water's level and shot forward toward the hole.

Frothing with rage was the baffled Lu-don as he realized how neatly the stranger she had turned his own tables upon him. He could of course escape the Temple of the Gryf in which her quick wit had temporarily imprisoned him; but during the delay, however brief, Ja-don would find time to steal her from the temple and deliver her to Ko-tan. But he would have her yet--that the high priest swore in the names of Jad-ben-Otho and all the demons of his faith. He hated Ko-tan. Secretly he had espoused the cause of Mo-sar, in whom he would have a willing tool. Perhaps, then, this would give him the opportunity he had long awaited--a pretext for inciting the revolt that would dethrone Ko-tan and place Mo-sar in power--with Lu-don the real ruler of Pal-ul-don. He licked his thin lips as he sought the window through which Tarzan had entered and now Lu-don's only avenue of escape. Cautiously he made his way across the floor, feeling before him with his hands, and when they discovered that the trap was set for him an ugly snarl broke from the priest's lips. "The she-devil!" he muttered; "but she shall pay, she shall pay--ah, Jad-ben-Otho; how she shall pay for the trick she has played upon Lu-don!"

He crawled through the window and climbed easily downward to the ground. Should he pursue Ja-don and the woman, chancing an encounter with the fierce chief, or bide his time until treachery and intrigue should accomplish his design? He chose the latter solution, as might have been expected of such as he.

Going to his quarters he summoned several of his priests--those who were most in his confidence and who shared his ambitions for absolute power of the temple over the palace--all men who hated Ko-tan.

"The time has come," he told them, "when the authority of the temple must be placed definitely above that of the palace. Ko-tan must make way for Mo-sar, for Ko-tan has defied your high priest. Go then, Pan-sat, and summon Mo-sar secretly to the temple, and you others go to the city and prepare the faithful warriors that they may be in readiness when the time comes."

For another hour they discussed the details of the coup d'etat that was to overthrow the government of Pal-ul-don. One knew a slave who, as the signal sounded from the temple gong, would thrust a knife into the heart of Ko-tan, for the price of liberty. Another held personal knowledge of an officer of the palace that he could use to compel the latter to admit a number of Lu-don's warriors to various parts of the palace. With Mo-sar as the cat's paw, the plan seemed scarce possible of failure and so they separated, going upon their immediate errands to palace and to city.

As Pan-sat entered the palace grounds he was aware of a sudden commotion in the direction of the pal-e-don-so and a few minutes later Lu-don was surprised to see him return to the apartments of the high priest, breathless and excited.

"What now, Pan-sat?" cried Lu-don. "Are you pursued by demons?"

"O master, our time has come and gone while we sat here planning. Ko-tan is already dead and Mo-sar fled. His friends are fighting with the warriors of the palace but they have no head, while Ja-don leads the others. I could learn but little from frightened slaves who had fled at the outburst of the quarrel. One told me that Bu-lot had slain the king and that he had seen Mo-sar and the assassin hurrying from the palace."

"Ja-don," muttered the high priest. "The fools will make him king if we do not act and act quickly. Get into the city, Pan-sat--let your feet fly and raise the cry that Ja-don has killed the king and is seeking to wrest the throne from O-lo-a. Spread the word as you know best how to spread it that Ja-don has threatened to destroy the priests and hurl the altars of the temple into Jad-ben-lul. Rouse the warriors of the city and urge them to attack at once. Lead them into the temple by the secret way that only the priests know and from here we may spew them out upon the palace before they learn the truth. Go, Pan-sat, immediately--delay not an instant."

"But stay," he called as the under priest turned to leave the apartment; "saw or heard you anything of the strange white woman that Ja-don stole from the Temple of the Gryf where we have had her imprisoned?"

"Only that Ja-don took her into the palace where he threatened the priests with violence if they did not permit him to pass," replied Pan-sat. "This they told me, but where within the palace she is hidden I know not."

"Ko-tan ordered her to the Forbidden Garden," said Lu-don, "doubtless we shall find her there. And now, Pan-sat, be upon your errand."

In a corridor by Lu-don's chamber a hideously masked priest leaned close to the curtained aperture that led within. Were he listening he must have heard all that passed between Pan-sat and the high priest, and that he had listened was evidenced by his hasty withdrawal to the shadows of a nearby passage as the lesser priest moved across the chamber toward the doorway. Pan-sat went his way in ignorance of the near presence that he almost brushed against as he hurried toward the secret passage that leads from the temple of Jad-ben-Otho, far beneath the palace, to the city beyond, nor did he sense the silent creature following in his footsteps.