

Chapter 18 - The Lion Pit of Tu-lur

Though Tarzan searched the outskirts of the city until nearly dawn he discovered nowhere the spoor of his mate. The breeze coming down from the mountains brought to his nostrils a diversity of scents but there was not among them the slightest suggestion of her whom he sought. The natural deduction was therefore that she had been taken in some other direction. In his search he had many times crossed the fresh tracks of many men leading toward the lake and these he concluded had probably been made by Jane Clayton's abductors. It had only been to minimize the chance of error by the process of elimination that he had carefully reconnoitered every other avenue leading from A-lur toward the southeast where lay Mo-sar's city of Tu-lur, and now he followed the trail to the shores of Jad-ben-lul where the party had embarked upon the quiet waters in their sturdy canoes.

He found many other craft of the same description moored along the shore and one of these he commandeered for the purpose of pursuit. It was daylight when he passed through the lake which lies next below Jad-ben-lul and paddling strongly passed within sight of the very tree in which his lost mate lay sleeping.

Had the gentle wind that caressed the bosom of the lake been blowing from a southerly direction the giant ape-man and Jane Clayton would have been reunited then, but an unkind fate had willed otherwise and the opportunity passed with the passing of his canoe which presently his powerful strokes carried out of sight into the stream at the lower end of the lake.

Following the winding river which bore a considerable distance to the north before doubling back to empty into the Jad-in-lul, the ape-man missed a portage that would have saved him hours of paddling.

It was at the upper end of this portage where Mo-sar and his warriors had debarked that the chief discovered the absence of his captive. As Mo-sar had been asleep since shortly after their departure from A-lur, and as none of the warriors recalled when she had last been seen, it was impossible to conjecture with any degree of accuracy the place where she had escaped. The consensus of opinion was, however, that it had been in the narrow river connecting Jad-ben-lul with the lake next below it, which is called Jad-bal-lul, which freely translated means the lake of gold. Mo-sar had been very wroth and having himself been the only one at fault he naturally sought with great diligence to fix the blame upon another.

He would have returned in search of her had he not feared to meet a pursuing company dispatched either by Ja-don or the high priest, both of whom, he knew, had just grievances against him. He would not even spare a boatload of his warriors from his own protection to return in quest of the fugitive but hastened onward with as little delay as possible across the portage and out upon the waters of Jad-in-lul.

The morning sun was just touching the white domes of Tu-lur when Mo-sar's paddlers brought their canoes against the shore at the city's edge. Safe once more behind his own walls and protected by many warriors, the courage of the chief returned sufficiently at least to permit him to dispatch three canoes in search of Jane Clayton, and also to go as far as A-lur if possible to learn what had delayed Bu-lot, whose failure to reach the canoes with the balance of the party at the time of the flight from the northern city had in no way delayed Mo-sar's departure, his own safety being of far greater moment than that of his son.

As the three canoes reached the portage on their return journey the warriors who were dragging them from the water were suddenly startled by the appearance of two priests, carrying a light canoe in the direction of Jad-in-lul. At first they thought them the advance guard of a larger force of Lu-don's followers, although the correctness of such a theory was belied by their knowledge that priests never accepted the risks or perils of a warrior's vocation, nor even fought until driven into a corner and forced to do so. Secretly the warriors of Pal-ul-don held the emasculated priesthood in contempt and so instead of immediately taking up the offensive as they would have had the two men been warriors from A-lur instead of priests, they waited to question them.

At sight of the warriors the priests made the sign of peace and upon being asked if they were alone they answered in the affirmative.

The leader of Mo-sar's warriors permitted them to approach. "What do you here," he asked, "in the country of Mo-sar, so far from your own city?"

"We carry a message from Lu-don, the high priest, to Mo-sar," explained one.

"Is it a message of peace or of war?" asked the warrior.

"It is an offer of peace," replied the priest.

"And Lu-don is sending no warriors behind you?" queried the fighting man.

"We are alone," the priest assured him. "None in A-lur save Lu-don knows that we have come upon this errand."

"Then go your way," said the warrior.

"Who is that?" asked one of the priests suddenly, pointing toward the upper end of the lake at the point where the river from Jad-bal-lul entered it.

All eyes turned in the direction that he had indicated to see a lone warrior paddling rapidly into Jad-in-lul, the prow of his canoe pointing toward Tu-lur. The warriors and the priests drew into the concealment of the bushes on either side of the portage.

"It is the terrible man who called himself the Dor-ul-Otho," whispered one of the priests. "I would know that figure among a great multitude as far as I could see it."

"You are right, priest," cried one of the warriors who had seen Tarzan the day that he had first entered Ko-tan's palace. "It is indeed he who has been rightly called Tarzan-jad-guru."

"Hasten priests," cried the leader of the party. "You are two paddles in a light canoe. Easily can you reach Tu-lur ahead of him and warn Mo-sar of his coming, for he has but only entered the lake."

For a moment the priests demurred for they had no stomach for an encounter with this terrible man, but the warrior insisted and even went so far as to threaten them. Their canoe was taken from them and pushed into the lake and they were all but lifted bodily from their feet and put aboard it. Still protesting they were shoved out upon the water where they were immediately in full view of the lone paddler above them. Now there was no alternative. The city of Tu-lur offered the only safety and bending to their paddles the two priests sent their craft swiftly in the direction of the city.

The warriors withdrew again to the concealment of the foliage. If Tarzan had seen them and should come hither to investigate there were thirty of them against one and naturally they had no fear of the outcome, but they did not consider it necessary to go out upon the lake to meet him since they had been sent to look for the escaped prisoner and not to intercept the strange warrior, the stories of whose ferocity and prowess doubtless helped them to arrive at their decision to provoke no uncalled-for quarrel with him.

If he had seen them he gave no sign, but continued paddling steadily and strongly toward the city, nor did he increase his speed as the two priests shot out in full view. The moment the priests' canoe touched the shore by the city its occupants leaped out and hurried swiftly toward the palace gate, casting affrighted glances behind them. They sought immediate audience with Mo-sar, after warning the warriors on guard that Tarzan was approaching.

They were conducted at once to the chief, whose court was a smaller replica of that of the king of A-lur. "We come from Lu-don, the high priest," explained the spokesman. "He wishes the friendship of Mo-sar, who has always been his friend. Ja-don is gathering warriors to make himself king. Throughout the villages of the Ho-don are thousands who will obey the commands of Lu-don, the high priest. Only with Lu-don's assistance can Mo-sar become king, and the message from Lu-don is that if Mo-sar would retain the friendship of Lu-don he must return immediately the woman he took from the quarters of the Princess O-lo-a."

At this juncture a warrior entered. His excitement was evident. "The Dor-ul-Otho has come to Tu-lur and demands to see Mo-sar at once," he said.

"The Dor-ul-Otho!" exclaimed Mo-sar.

"That is the message he sent," replied the warrior, "and indeed he is not as are the people of Pal-ul-don. He is, we think, the same of whom the warriors that returned from A-lur today told us and whom some call Tarzan-jad-guru and some Dor-ul-Otho. But indeed only the son of god would dare come thus alone to a strange city, so it must be that he speaks the truth."

Mo-sar, his heart filled with terror and indecision, turned questioningly toward the priests.

"Receive him graciously, Mo-sar," counseled he who had spoken before, his advice prompted by the petty shrewdness of his defective brain which, under the added influence of Lu-don's tutorage leaned always toward duplicity. "Receive him graciously and when he is quite convinced of your friendship he will be off his guard, and then you may do with him as you will. But if possible, Mo-sar, and you would win the undying gratitude of Lu-don, the high-priest, save him alive for my master."

Mo-sar nodded understandingly and turning to the warrior commanded that he conduct the visitor to him.

"We must not be seen by the creature," said one of the priests. "Give us your answer to Lu-don, Mo-sar, and we will go our way."

"Tell Lu-don," replied the chief, "that the woman would have been lost to him entirely had it not been for me. I sought to bring her to Tu-lur that I might save her for him from the clutches of Ja-don, but during the night she escaped. Tell Lu-don that I have sent thirty warriors to search for her. It is strange you did not see them as you came."

"We did," replied the priests, "but they told us nothing of the purpose of their journey."

"It is as I have told you," said Mo-sar, "and if they find her, assure your master that she will be kept unharmed in Tu-lur for him. Also tell him that I will send my warriors to join with his against Ja-don whenever he sends word that he wants them. Now go, for Tarzan-jad-guru will soon be here."

He signaled to a slave. "Lead the priests to the temple," he commanded, "and ask the high priest of Tu-lur to see that they are fed and permitted to return to A-lur when they will."

The two priests were conducted from the apartment by the slave through a doorway other than that at which they had entered, and a moment later Tarzan-jad-guru strode into the presence of Mo-sar, ahead of the warrior whose duty it had been to conduct and announce him. The ape-man made no sign of greeting or of peace but strode directly toward the chief who, only by the exertion of his utmost powers of will, hid the terror that was in his heart at sight of the giant figure and the scowling face.

"I am the Dor-ul-Otho," said the ape-man in level tones that carried to the mind of Mo-sar a suggestion of cold steel; "I am Dor-ul-Otho, and I come to Tu-lur for the woman you stole from the apartments of O-lo-a, the princess."

The very boldness of Tarzan's entry into this hostile city had had the effect of giving him a great moral advantage over Mo-sar and the savage warriors who stood upon either side of the chief. Truly it seemed to them that no other than the son of Jad-ben-Otho would dare so heroic an act. Would any mortal warrior act thus boldly, and alone enter the presence of a powerful chief and, in the midst of a score of warriors, arrogantly demand an accounting? No, it was beyond reason. Mo-sar was faltering in his decision to betray the stranger by seeming friendliness. He even paled to a sudden thought--Jad-ben-Otho knew everything, even our inmost thoughts. Was it not therefore possible that this creature, if after all it should prove true that he was the Dor-ul-Otho, might even now be reading the wicked design that the priests had implanted in the brain of Mo-sar and which he had entertained so favorably? The chief squirmed and fidgeted upon the bench of hewn rock that was his throne.

"Quick," snapped the ape-man, "Where is she?"

"She is not here," cried Mo-sar.

"You lie," replied Tarzan.

"As Jad-ben-Otho is my witness, she is not in Tu-lur," insisted the chief. "You may search the palace and the temple and the entire city but you will not find her, for she is not here."

"Where is she, then?" demanded the ape-man. "You took her from the palace at A-lur. If she is not here, where is she? Tell me not that harm has befallen her," and he took a sudden threatening step toward Mo-sar, that sent the chief shrinking back in terror.

"Wait," he cried, "if you are indeed the Dor-ul-Otho you will know that I speak the truth. I took her from the palace of Ko-tan to save her for Lu-don, the high priest, lest with Ko-tan dead Ja-don seize her. But during the night she escaped from me between here and A-lur, and I have but just sent three canoes full-manned in search of her."

Something in the chief's tone and manner assured the ape-man that he spoke in part the truth, and that once again he had braved incalculable dangers and suffered loss of time futilely.

"What wanted the priests of Lu-don that preceded me here?" demanded Tarzan chancing a shrewd guess that the two he had seen paddling so frantically to avoid a meeting with him had indeed come from the high priest at A-lur.

"They came upon an errand similar to yours," replied Mo-sar; "to demand the return of the woman whom Lu-don thought I had stolen from him, thus wronging me as deeply, O Dor-ul-Otho, as have you."

"I would question the priests," said Tarzan. "Bring them hither." His peremptory and arrogant manner left Mo-sar in doubt as to whether to be more incensed, or terrified, but ever as is the way with such as he, he concluded that the first consideration was his own safety. If he could transfer the attention and the wrath of this terrible man from himself to Lu-don's priests it would more than satisfy him and if they should conspire to harm him, then Mo-sar would be safe in the eyes of Jad-ben-Otho if it finally developed that the stranger was in reality the son of god. He felt uncomfortable in Tarzan's presence and this fact rather accentuated his doubt, for thus indeed would mortal feel in the presence of a god. Now he saw a way to escape, at least temporarily.

"I will fetch them myself, Dor-ul-Otho," he said, and turning, left the apartment. His hurried steps brought him quickly to the temple, for the palace grounds of Tu-lur, which also included the temple as in all of the Ho-don cities, covered a much smaller area than those of the larger city of A-lur. He found Lu-don's messengers with the high priest of his own temple and quickly transmitted to them the commands of the ape-man.

"What do you intend to do with him?" asked one of the priests.

"I have no quarrel with him," replied Mo-sar. "He came in peace and he may depart in peace, for who knows but that he is indeed the Dor-ul-Otho?"

"We know that he is not," replied Lu-don's emissary. "We have every proof that he is only mortal, a strange creature from another country. Already has Lu-don offered his life to Jad-ben-Otho if he is wrong in his belief that this creature is not the son of god. If the high priest of A-lur, who is the highest priest of all the high priests of Pal-ul-don is thus so sure that the creature is an impostor as to stake his life upon his judgment then who are we to give credence to the claims of this stranger? No, Mo-sar, you need not fear him. He is only a warrior who may be overcome with the same weapons that subdue your own fighting men. Were it not for Lu-don's command that he be taken alive I would urge you to set your warriors upon him and slay him, but the commands of Lu-don are the commands of Jad-ben-Otho himself, and those we may not disobey."

But still the remnant of a doubt stirred within the cowardly breast of Mo-sar, urging him to let another take the initiative against the stranger.

"He is yours then," he replied, "to do with as you will. I have no quarrel with him. What you may command shall be the command of Lu-don, the high priest, and further than that I shall have nothing to do in the matter."

The priests turned to him who guided the destinies of the temple at Tu-lur. "Have you no plan?" they asked. "High indeed will he stand in the counsels of Lu-don and in the eyes of Jad-ben-Otho who finds the means to capture this impostor alive."

"There is the lion pit," whispered the high priest. "It is now vacant and what will hold ja and jato will hold this stranger if he is not the Dor-ul-Otho."

"It will hold him," said Mo-sar; "doubtless too it would hold a gryf, but first you would have to get the gryf into it."

The priests pondered this bit of wisdom thoughtfully and then one of those from A-lur spoke. "It should not be difficult," he said, "if we use the wits that Jad-ben-Otho gave us instead of the worldly muscles which were handed down to us from our fathers and our mothers and which have not even the power possessed by those of the beasts that run about on four feet."

"Lu-don matched his wits with the stranger and lost," suggested Mo-sar. "But this is your own affair. Carry it out as you see best."

"At A-lur, Ko-tan made much of this Dor-ul-Otho and the priests conducted him through the temple. It would arouse in his mind no suspicion were you to do the same, and let the high priest of Tu-lur invite him to the temple and gathering all the priests make a great show of belief in his kinship to Jad-ben-Otho. And what more natural than that the high priest should wish to show him through the temple as did Lu-don at A-lur when Ko-tan commanded it, and if by chance he should be led through the lion pit it would be a simple matter for those who bear the torches to extinguish them suddenly and before the stranger was aware of what had happened, the stone gates could be dropped, thus safely securing him."

"But there are windows in the pit that let in light," interposed the high priest, "and even though the torches were extinguished he could still see and might escape before the stone door could be lowered."

"Send one who will cover the windows tightly with hides," said the priest from A-lur.

"The plan is a good one," said Mo-sar, seeing an opportunity for entirely eliminating himself from any suspicion of complicity, "for it will require the presence of no warriors, and thus with only priests about him his mind will entertain no suspicion of harm."

They were interrupted at this point by a messenger from the palace who brought word that the Dor-ul-Otho was becoming impatient and if the priests from A-lur were not brought to him at once he would come himself to the temple and get them. Mo-sar shook his head. He could not conceive of such brazen courage in mortal breast and glad he was that the plan evolved for Tarzan's undoing did not necessitate his active participation.

And so, while Mo-sar left for a secret corner of the palace by a roundabout way, three priests were dispatched to Tarzan and with whining words that did not entirely deceive him, they acknowledged his kinship to Jad-ben-Otho and begged him in the name of the high priest to honor the temple with a visit, when the priests from A-lur would be brought to him and would answer any questions that he put to them.

Confident that a continuation of his bravado would best serve his purpose, and also that if suspicion against him should crystallize into conviction on the part of Mo-sar and his followers that he would be no worse off in the temple than in the palace, the ape-man haughtily accepted the invitation of the high priest.

And so he came into the temple and was received in a manner befitting his high claims. He questioned the two priests of A-lur from whom he obtained only a

repetition of the story that Mo-sar had told him, and then the high priest invited him to inspect the temple.

They took him first to the altar court, of which there was only one in Tu-lur. It was almost identical in every respect with those at A-lur. There was a bloody altar at the east end and the drowning basin at the west, and the grizzly fringes upon the headdresses of the priests attested the fact that the eastern altar was an active force in the rites of the temple. Through the chambers and corridors beneath they led him, and finally, with torch bearers to light their steps, into a damp and gloomy labyrinth at a low level and here in a large chamber, the air of which was still heavy with the odor of lions, the crafty priests of Tu-lur encompassed their shrewd design.

The torches were suddenly extinguished. There was a hurried confusion of bare feet moving rapidly across the stone floor. There was a loud crash as of a heavy weight of stone falling upon stone, and then surrounding the ape-man naught but the darkness and the silence of the tomb.