

Chapter 21 - The Maniac

The last bar that would make the opening large enough to permit his body to pass had been removed as Tarzan heard the warriors whispering beyond the stone door of his prison. Long since had the rope of hide been braided. To secure one end to the remaining bar that he had left for this purpose was the work of but a moment, and while the warriors whispered without, the brown body of the ape-man slipped through the small aperture and disappeared below the sill.

Tarzan's escape from the cell left him still within the walled area that comprised the palace and temple grounds and buildings. He had reconnoitered as best he might from the window after he had removed enough bars to permit him to pass his head through the opening, so that he knew what lay immediately before him--a winding and usually deserted alleyway leading in the direction of the outer gate that opened from the palace grounds into the city.

The darkness would facilitate his escape. He might even pass out of the palace and the city without detection. If he could elude the guard at the palace gate the rest would be easy. He strode along confidently, exhibiting no fear of detection, for he reasoned that thus would he disarm suspicion. In the darkness he easily could pass for a Ho-don and in truth, though he passed several after leaving the deserted alley, no one accosted or detained him, and thus he came at last to the guard of a half-dozen warriors before the palace gate. These he attempted to pass in the same unconcerned fashion and he might have succeeded had it not been for one who came running rapidly from the direction of the temple shouting: "Let no one pass the gates! The prisoner has escaped from the pal-ul-ja!"

Instantly a warrior barred his way and simultaneously the fellow recognized him. "Xot tor!" he exclaimed: "Here he is now. Fall upon him! Fall upon him! Back! Back before I kill you."

The others came forward. It cannot be said that they rushed forward. If it was their wish to fall upon him there was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm other than that which directed their efforts to persuade someone else to fall upon him. His fame as a fighter had been too long a topic of conversation for the good of the morale of Mo-sar's warriors. It were safer to stand at a distance and hurl their clubs and this they did, but the ape-man had learned something of the use of this weapon since he had arrived in Pal-ul-don. And as he learned great had grown his respect for this most primitive of arms. He had come to realize that the black savages he had known had never appreciated the possibilities of their knob sticks, nor had he, and he had discovered, too, why the Pal-ul-donians had turned their ancient spears into plowshares and pinned their faith to the heavy-

ended club alone. In deadly execution it was far more effective than a spear and it answered, too, every purpose of a shield, combining the two in one and thus reducing the burden of the warrior. Thrown as they throw it, after the manner of the hammer-throwers of the Olympian games, an ordinary shield would prove more a weakness than a strength while one that would be strong enough to prove a protection would be too heavy to carry. Only another club, deftly wielded to deflect the course of an enemy missile, is in any way effective against these formidable weapons and, too, the war club of Pal-ul-don can be thrown with accuracy a far greater distance than any spear.

And now was put to the test that which Tarzan had learned from Om-at and Taden. His eyes and his muscles trained by a lifetime of necessity moved with the rapidity of light and his brain functioned with an uncanny celerity that suggested nothing less than prescience, and these things more than compensated for his lack of experience with the war club he handled so dexterously. Weapon after weapon he warded off and always he moved with a single idea in mind--to place himself within reach of one of his antagonists. But they were wary for they feared this strange creature to whom the superstitious fears of many of them attributed the miraculous powers of deity. They managed to keep between Tarzan and the gateway and all the time they bawled lustily for reinforcements. Should these come before he had made his escape the ape-man realized that the odds against him would be unsurmountable, and so he redoubled his efforts to carry out his design.

Following their usual tactics two or three of the warriors were always circling behind him collecting the thrown clubs when Tarzan's attention was directed elsewhere. He himself retrieved several of them which he hurled with such deadly effect as to dispose of two of his antagonists, but now he heard the approach of hurrying warriors, the patter of their bare feet upon the stone pavement and then the savage cries which were to bolster the courage of their fellows and fill the enemy with fear.

There was no time to lose. Tarzan held a club in either hand and, swinging one he hurled it at a warrior before him and as the man dodged he rushed in and seized him, at the same time casting his second club at another of his opponents. The Ho-don with whom he grappled reached instantly for his knife but the ape-man grasped his wrist. There was a sudden twist, the snapping of a bone and an agonized scream, then the warrior was lifted bodily from his feet and held as a shield between his fellows and the fugitive as the latter backed through the gateway. Beside Tarzan stood the single torch that lighted the entrance to the palace grounds. The warriors were advancing to the succor of their fellow when the ape-man raised his captive high above his head and flung him full in the face

of the foremost attacker. The fellow went down and two directly behind him sprawled headlong over their companion as the ape-man seized the torch and cast it back into the palace grounds to be extinguished as it struck the bodies of those who led the charging reinforcements.

In the ensuing darkness Tarzan disappeared in the streets of Tu-lur beyond the palace gate. For a time he was aware of sounds of pursuit but the fact that they trailed away and died in the direction of Jad-in-lul informed him that they were searching in the wrong direction, for he had turned south out of Tu-lur purposely to throw them off his track. Beyond the outskirts of the city he turned directly toward the northwest, in which direction lay A-lur.

In his path he knew lay Jad-bal-lul, the shore of which he was compelled to skirt, and there would be a river to cross at the lower end of the great lake upon the shores of which lay A-lur. What other obstacles lay in his way he did not know but he believed that he could make better time on foot than by attempting to steal a canoe and force his way up stream with a single paddle. It was his intention to put as much distance as possible between himself and Tu-lur before he slept for he was sure that Mo-sar would not lightly accept his loss, but that with the coming of day, or possibly even before, he would dispatch warriors in search of him.

A mile or two from the city he entered a forest and here at last he felt such a measure of safety as he never knew in open spaces or in cities. The forest and the jungle were his birthright. No creature that went upon the ground upon four feet, or climbed among the trees, or crawled upon its belly had any advantage over the ape-man in his native heath. As myrrh and frankincense were the dank odors of rotting vegetation in the nostrils of the great Tarmangani. He squared his broad shoulders and lifting his head filled his lungs with the air that he loved best. The heavy fragrance of tropical blooms, the commingled odors of the myriad-scented life of the jungle went to his head with a pleasurable intoxication far more potent than aught contained in the oldest vintages of civilization.

He took to the trees now, not from necessity but from pure love of the wild freedom that had been denied him so long. Though it was dark and the forest strange yet he moved with a surety and ease that bespoke more a strange uncanny sense than wondrous skill. He heard ja moaning somewhere ahead and an owl hooted mournfully to the right of him--long familiar sounds that imparted to him no sense of loneliness as they might to you or to me, but on the contrary one of companionship for they betokened the presence of his fellows of the jungle, and whether friend or foe it was all the same to the ape-man.

He came at last to a little stream at a spot where the trees did not meet above it so he was forced to descend to the ground and wade through the water and upon the opposite shore he stopped as though suddenly his godlike figure had been transmuted from flesh to marble. Only his dilating nostrils bespoke his pulsing vitality. For a long moment he stood there thus and then swiftly, but with a caution and silence that were inherent in him he moved forward again, but now his whole attitude bespoke a new urge. There was a definite and masterful purpose in every movement of those steel muscles rolling softly beneath the smooth brown hide. He moved now toward a certain goal that quite evidently filled him with far greater enthusiasm than had the possible event of his return to A-lur.

And so he came at last to the foot of a great tree and there he stopped and looked up above him among the foliage where the dim outlines of a roughly rectangular bulk loomed darkly. There was a choking sensation in Tarzan's throat as he raised himself gently into the branches. It was as though his heart were swelling either to a great happiness or a great fear.

Before the rude shelter built among the branches he paused listening. From within there came to his sensitive nostrils the same delicate aroma that had arrested his eager attention at the little stream a mile away. He crouched upon the branch close to the little door.

"Jane," he called, "heart of my heart, it is I."

The only answer from within was as the sudden indrawing of a breath that was half gasp and half sigh, and the sound of a body falling to the floor. Hurriedly Tarzan sought to release the thongs which held the door but they were fastened from the inside, and at last, impatient with further delay, he seized the frail barrier in one giant hand and with a single effort tore it completely away. And then he entered to find the seemingly lifeless body of his mate stretched upon the floor.

He gathered her in his arms; her heart beat; she still breathed, and presently he realized that she had but swooned.

When Jane Clayton regained consciousness it was to find herself held tightly in two strong arms, her head pillowed upon the broad shoulder where so often before her fears had been soothed and her sorrows comforted. At first she was not sure but that it was all a dream. Timidly her hand stole to his cheek.

"John," she murmured, "tell me, is it really you?"

In reply he drew her more closely to him. "It is I," he replied. "But there is something in my throat," he said haltingly, "that makes it hard for me to speak."

She smiled and snuggled closer to him. "God has been good to us, Tarzan of the Apes," she said.

For some time neither spoke. It was enough that they were reunited and that each knew that the other was alive and safe. But at last they found their voices and when the sun rose they were still talking, so much had each to tell the other; so many questions there were to be asked and answered.

"And Jack," she asked, "where is he?"

"I do not know," replied Tarzan. "The last I heard of him he was on the Argonne Front."

"Ah, then our happiness is not quite complete," she said, a little note of sadness creeping into her voice.

"No," he replied, "but the same is true in countless other English homes today, and pride is learning to take the place of happiness in these."

She shook her head, "I want my boy," she said.

"And I too," replied Tarzan, "and we may have him yet. He was safe and unwounded the last word I had. And now," he said, "we must plan upon our return. Would you like to rebuild the bungalow and gather together the remnants of our Waziri or would you rather return to London?"

"Only to find Jack," she said. "I dream always of the bungalow and never of the city, but John, we can only dream, for Obergatz told me that he had circled this whole country and found no place where he might cross the morass."

"I am not Obergatz," Tarzan reminded her, smiling. "We will rest today and tomorrow we will set out toward the north. It is a savage country, but we have crossed it once and we can cross it again."

And so, upon the following morning, the Tarmangani and his mate went forth upon their journey across the Valley of Jad-ben-Otho, and ahead of them were fierce men and savage beasts, and the lofty mountains of Pal-ul-don; and beyond the mountains the reptiles and the morass, and beyond that the arid, thorn-covered steppe, and other savage beasts and men and weary, hostile miles of untracked wilderness between them and the charred ruins of their home.

Lieutenant Erich Obergatz crawled through the grass upon all fours, leaving a trail of blood behind him after Jane's spear had sent him crashing to the ground

beneath her tree. He made no sound after the one piercing scream that had acknowledged the severity of his wound. He was quiet because of a great fear that had crept into his warped brain that the devil woman would pursue and slay him. And so he crawled away like some filthy beast of prey, seeking a thicket where he might lie down and hide.

He thought that he was going to die, but he did not, and with the coming of the new day he discovered that his wound was superficial. The rough obsidian-shod spear had entered the muscles of his side beneath his right arm inflicting a painful, but not a fatal wound. With the realization of this fact came a renewed desire to put as much distance as possible between himself and Jane Clayton. And so he moved on, still going upon all fours because of a persistent hallucination that in this way he might escape observation. Yet though he fled his mind still revolved muddily about a central desire--while he fled from her he still planned to pursue her, and to his lust of possession was added a desire for revenge. She should pay for the suffering she had inflicted upon him. She should pay for rebuffing him, but for some reason which he did not try to explain to himself he would crawl away and hide. He would come back though. He would come back and when he had finished with her, he would take that smooth throat in his two hands and crush the life from her.

He kept repeating this over and over to himself and then he fell to laughing out loud, the cackling, hideous laughter that had terrified Jane. Presently he realized his knees were bleeding and that they hurt him. He looked cautiously behind. No one was in sight. He listened. He could hear no indications of pursuit and so he rose to his feet and continued upon his way a sorry sight--covered with filth and blood, his beard and hair tangled and matted and filled with burrs and dried mud and unspeakable filth. He kept no track of time. He ate fruits and berries and tubers that he dug from the earth with his fingers. He followed the shore of the lake and the river that he might be near water, and when ja roared or moaned he climbed a tree and hid there, shivering.

And so after a time he came up the southern shore of Jad-ben-lul until a wide river stopped his progress. Across the blue water a white city glimmered in the sun. He looked at it for a long time, blinking his eyes like an owl. Slowly a recollection forced itself through his tangled brain. This was A-lur, the City of Light. The association of ideas recalled Bu-lur and the Waz-ho-don. They had called him Jad-ben-Otho. He commenced to laugh aloud and stood up very straight and strode back and forth along the shore. "I am Jad-ben-Otho," he cried, "I am the Great God. In A-lur is my temple and my high priests. What is Jad-ben-Otho doing here alone in the jungle?"

He stepped out into the water and raising his voice shrieked loudly across toward A-lur. "I am Jad-ben-Otho!" he screamed. "Come hither slaves and take your god to his temple." But the distance was great and they did not hear him and no one came, and the feeble mind was distracted by other things--a bird flying in the air, a school of minnows swimming around his feet. He lunged at them trying to catch them, and falling upon his hands and knees he crawled through the water grasping futilely at the elusive fish.

Presently it occurred to him that he was a sea lion and he forgot the fish and lay down and tried to swim by wriggling his feet in the water as though they were a tail. The hardships, the privations, the terrors, and for the past few weeks the lack of proper nourishment had reduced Erich Oberatz to little more than a gibbering idiot.

A water snake swam out upon the surface of the lake and the man pursued it, crawling upon his hands and knees. The snake swam toward the shore just within the mouth of the river where tall reeds grew thickly and Oberatz followed, making grunting noises like a pig. He lost the snake within the reeds but he came upon something else--a canoe hidden there close to the bank. He examined it with cackling laughter. There were two paddles within it which he took and threw out into the current of the river. He watched them for a while and then he sat down beside the canoe and commenced to splash his hands up and down upon the water. He liked to hear the noise and see the little splashes of spray. He rubbed his left forearm with his right palm and the dirt came off and left a white spot that drew his attention. He rubbed again upon the now thoroughly soaked blood and grime that covered his body. He was not attempting to wash himself; he was merely amused by the strange results. "I am turning white," he cried. His glance wandered from his body now that the grime and blood were all removed and caught again the white city shimmering beneath the hot sun.

"A-lur--City of Light!" he shrieked and that reminded him again of Tu-lur and by the same process of associated ideas that had before suggested it, he recalled that the Waz-ho-don had thought him Jad-ben-Otho.

"I am Jad-ben-Otho!" he screamed and then his eyes fell again upon the canoe. A new idea came and persisted. He looked down at himself, examining his body, and seeing the filthy loin cloth, now water soaked and more bedraggled than before, he tore it from him and flung it into the lake. "Gods do not wear dirty rags," he said aloud. "They do not wear anything but wreaths and garlands of flowers and I am a god--I am Jad-ben-Otho--and I go in state to my sacred city of A-lur."

He ran his fingers through his matted hair and beard. The water had softened the burrs but had not removed them. The man shook his head. His hair and beard failed to harmonize with his other godly attributes. He was commencing to think more clearly now, for the great idea had taken hold of his scattered wits and concentrated them upon a single purpose, but he was still a maniac. The only difference being that he was now a maniac with a fixed intent. He went out on the shore and gathered flowers and ferns and wove them in his beard and hair--blazing blooms of different colors--green ferns that trailed about his ears or rose bravely upward like the plumes in a lady's hat.

When he was satisfied that his appearance would impress the most casual observer with his evident deity he returned to the canoe, pushed it from shore and jumped in. The impetus carried it into the river's current and the current bore it out upon the lake. The naked man stood erect in the center of the little craft, his arms folded upon his chest. He screamed aloud his message to the city: "I am Jad-ben-Otho! Let the high priest and the under priests attend upon me!"

As the current of the river was dissipated by the waters of the lake the wind caught him and his craft and carried them bravely forward. Sometimes he drifted with his back toward A-lur and sometimes with his face toward it, and at intervals he shrieked his message and his commands. He was still in the middle of the lake when someone discovered him from the palace wall, and as he drew nearer, a crowd of warriors and women and children were congregated there watching him and along the temple walls were many priests and among them Lu-don, the high priest. When the boat had drifted close enough for them to distinguish the bizarre figure standing in it and for them to catch the meaning of his words Lu-don's cunning eyes narrowed. The high priest had learned of the escape of Tarzan and he feared that should he join Ja-don's forces, as seemed likely, he would attract many recruits who might still believe in him, and the Dor-ul-Otho, even if a false one, upon the side of the enemy might easily work havoc with Lu-don's plans.

The man was drifting close in. His canoe would soon be caught in the current that ran close to shore here and carried toward the river that emptied the waters of Jad-ben-lul into Jad-bal-lul. The under priests were looking toward Lu-don for instructions.

"Fetch him hither!" he commanded. "If he is Jad-ben-Otho I shall know him."

The priests hurried to the palace grounds and summoned warriors. "Go, bring the stranger to Lu-don. If he is Jad-ben-Otho we shall know him."

And so Lieutenant Erich Obergatz was brought before the high priest at A-lur. Lu-don looked closely at the naked man with the fantastic headdress.

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"I am Jad-ben-Otho," cried the German. "I came from heaven. Where is my high priest?"

"I am the high priest," replied Lu-don.

Obergatz clapped his hands. "Have my feet bathed and food brought to me," he commanded.

Lu-don's eyes narrowed to mere slits of crafty cunning. He bowed low until his forehead touched the feet of the stranger. Before the eyes of many priests, and warriors from the palace he did it.

"Ho, slaves," he cried, rising; "fetch water and food for the Great God," and thus the high priest acknowledged before his people the godhood of Lieutenant Erich Obergatz, nor was it long before the story ran like wildfire through the palace and out into the city and beyond that to the lesser villages all the way from A-lur to Tu-lur.

The real god had come--Jad-ben-Otho himself, and he had espoused the cause of Lu-don, the high priest. Mo-sar lost no time in placing himself at the disposal of Lu-don, nor did he mention aught about his claims to the throne. It was Mo-sar's opinion that he might consider himself fortunate were he allowed to remain in peaceful occupation of his chieftainship at Tu-lur, nor was Mo-sar wrong in his deductions.

But Lu-don could still use him and so he let him live and sent word to him to come to A-lur with all his warriors, for it was rumored that Ja-don was raising a great army in the north and might soon march upon the City of Light.

Obergatz thoroughly enjoyed being a god. Plenty of food and peace of mind and rest partially brought back to him the reason that had been so rapidly slipping from him; but in one respect he was madder than ever, since now no power on earth would ever be able to convince him that he was not a god. Slaves were put at his disposal and these he ordered about in godly fashion. The same portion of his naturally cruel mind met upon common ground the mind of Lu-don, so that the two seemed always in accord. The high priest saw in the stranger a mighty force wherewith to hold forever his power over all Pal-ul-don and thus the future of Obergatz was assured so long as he cared to play god to Lu-don's high priest.

A throne was erected in the main temple court before the eastern altar where Jad-ben-Otho might sit in person and behold the sacrifices that were offered up to him there each day at sunset. So much did the cruel, half-crazed mind enjoy these spectacles that at times he even insisted upon wielding the sacrificial knife himself and upon such occasions the priests and the people fell upon their faces in awe of the dread deity.

If Obergatz taught them not to love their god more he taught them to fear him as they never had before, so that the name of Jad-ben-Otho was whispered in the city and little children were frightened into obedience by the mere mention of it. Lu-don, through his priests and slaves, circulated the information that Jad-ben-Otho had commanded all his faithful followers to flock to the standard of the high priest at A-lur and that all others were cursed, especially Ja-don and the base impostor who had posed as the Dor-ul-Otho. The curse was to take the form of early death following terrible suffering, and Lu-don caused it to be published abroad that the name of any warrior who complained of a pain should be brought to him, for such might be deemed to be under suspicion, since the first effects of the curse would result in slight pains attacking the unholy. He counseled those who felt pains to look carefully to their loyalty. The result was remarkable and immediate--half a nation without a pain, and recruits pouring into A-lur to offer their services to Lu-don while secretly hoping that the little pains they had felt in arm or leg or belly would not recur in aggravated form.