

Chapter 24 - The Messenger of Death

The sun rose to see the forces of Ja-don still held at the palace gate. The old warrior had seized the tall structure that stood just beyond the palace and at the summit of this he kept a warrior stationed to look toward the northern wall of the palace where Ta-den was to make his attack; but as the minutes wore into hours no sign of the other force appeared, and now in the full light of the new sun upon the roof of one of the palace buildings appeared Lu-don, the high priest, Mo-sar, the pretender, and the strange, naked figure of a man, into whose long hair and beard were woven fresh ferns and flowers. Behind them were banked a score of lesser priests who chanted in unison: "This is Jad-ben-Otho. Lay down your arms and surrender." This they repeated again and again, alternating it with the cry: "The false Dor-ul-Otho is a prisoner."

In one of those lulls which are common in battles between forces armed with weapons that require great physical effort in their use, a voice suddenly arose from among the followers of Ja-don: "Show us the Dor-ul-Otho. We do not believe you!"

"Wait," cried Lu-don. "If I do not produce him before the sun has moved his own width, the gates of the palace shall be opened to you and my warriors will lay down their arms."

He turned to one of his priests and issued brief instructions.

The ape-man paced the confines of his narrow cell. Bitterly he reproached himself for the stupidity which had led him into this trap, and yet was it stupidity? What else might he have done other than rush to the succor of his mate? He wondered how they had stolen her from Ja-lur, and then suddenly there flashed to his mind the features of the warrior whom he had just seen with her. They were strangely familiar. He racked his brain to recall where he had seen the man before and then it came to him. He was the strange warrior who had joined Ja-don's forces outside of Ja-lur the day that Tarzan had ridden upon the great gryf from the uninhabited gorge next to the Kor-ul-ja down to the capital city of the chieftain of the north. But who could the man be? Tarzan knew that never before that other day had he seen him.

Presently he heard the clanging of a gong from the corridor without and very faintly the rush of feet, and shouts. He guessed that his warriors had been discovered and a fight was in progress. He fretted and chafed at the chance that had denied him participation in it.

Again and again he tried the doors of his prison and the trap in the center of the floor, but none would give to his utmost endeavors. He strained his eyes toward the aperture above but he could see nothing, and then he continued his futile pacing to and fro like a caged lion behind its bars.

The minutes dragged slowly into hours. Faintly sounds came to him as of shouting men at a great distance. The battle was in progress. He wondered if Jardon would be victorious and should he be, would his friends ever discover him in this hidden chamber in the bowels of the hill? He doubted it.

And now as he looked again toward the aperture in the roof there appeared to be something depending through its center. He came closer and strained his eyes to see. Yes, there was something there. It appeared to be a rope. Tarzan wondered if it had been there all the time. It must have, he reasoned, since he had heard no sound from above and it was so dark within the chamber that he might easily have overlooked it.

He raised his hand toward it. The end of it was just within his reach. He bore his weight upon it to see if it would hold him. Then he released it and backed away, still watching it, as you have seen an animal do after investigating some unfamiliar object, one of the little traits that differentiated Tarzan from other men, accentuating his similarity to the savage beasts of his native jungle. Again and again he touched and tested the braided leather rope, and always he listened for any warning sound from above.

He was very careful not to step upon the trap at any time and when finally he bore all his weight upon the rope and took his feet from the floor he spread them wide apart so that if he fell he would fall astride the trap. The rope held him. There was no sound from above, nor any from the trap below.

Slowly and cautiously he drew himself upward, hand over hand. Nearer and nearer the roof he came. In a moment his eyes would be above the level of the floor above. Already his extended arms projected into the upper chamber and then something closed suddenly upon both his forearms, pinioning them tightly and leaving him hanging in mid-air unable to advance or retreat.

Immediately a light appeared in the room above him and presently he saw the hideous mask of a priest peering down upon him. In the priest's hands were leathern thongs and these he tied about Tarzan's wrists and forearms until they were completely bound together from his elbows almost to his fingers. Behind this priest Tarzan presently saw others and soon several lay hold of him and pulled him up through the hole.

Almost instantly his eyes were above the level of the floor he understood how they had trapped him. Two nooses had lain encircling the aperture into the cell below. A priest had waited at the end of each of these ropes and at opposite sides of the chamber. When he had climbed to a sufficient height upon the rope that had dangled into his prison below and his arms were well within the encircling snares the two priests had pulled quickly upon their ropes and he had been made an easy captive without any opportunity of defending himself or inflicting injury upon his captors.

And now they bound his legs from his ankles to his knees and picking him up carried him from the chamber. No word did they speak to him as they bore him upward to the temple yard.

The din of battle had risen again as Ja-don had urged his forces to renewed efforts. Ta-den had not arrived and the forces of the old chieftain were revealing in their lessened efforts their increasing demoralization, and then it was that the priests carried Tarzan-jad-guru to the roof of the palace and exhibited him in the sight of the warriors of both factions.

"Here is the false Dor-ul-Otho," screamed Lu-don.

Obergatz, his shattered mentality having never grasped fully the meaning of much that was going on about him, cast a casual glance at the bound and helpless prisoner, and as his eyes fell upon the noble features of the ape-man, they went wide in astonishment and fright, and his pasty countenance turned a sickly blue. Once before had he seen Tarzan of the Apes, but many times had he dreamed that he had seen him and always was the giant ape-man avenging the wrongs that had been committed upon him and his by the ruthless hands of the three German officers who had led their native troops in the ravishing of Tarzan's peaceful home. Hauptmann Fritz Schneider had paid the penalty of his needless cruelties; Unter-lieutenant von Goss, too, had paid; and now Obergatz, the last of the three, stood face to face with the Nemesis that had trailed him through his dreams for long, weary months. That he was bound and helpless lessened not the German's terror--he seemed not to realize that the man could not harm him. He but stood cringing and jibbering and Lu-don saw and was filled with apprehension that others might see and seeing realize that this bewhiskered idiot was no god--that of the two Tarzan-jad-guru was the more godly figure. Already the high priest noted that some of the palace warriors standing near were whispering together and pointing. He stepped closer to Obergatz. "You are Jad-ben-Otho," he whispered, "denounce him!"

The German shook himself. His mind cleared of all but his great terror and the words of the high priest gave him the clue to safety.

"I am Jad-ben-Otho!" he screamed.

Tarzan looked him straight in the eye. "You are Lieutenant Obergatz of the German Army," he said in excellent German. "You are the last of the three I have sought so long and in your putrid heart you know that God has not brought us together at last for nothing."

The mind of Lieutenant Obergatz was functioning clearly and rapidly at last. He too saw the questioning looks upon the faces of some of those around them. He saw the opposing warriors of both cities standing by the gate inactive, every eye turned upon him, and the trussed figure of the ape-man. He realized that indecision now meant ruin, and ruin, death. He raised his voice in the sharp barking tones of a Prussian officer, so unlike his former maniacal screaming as to quickly arouse the attention of every ear and to cause an expression of puzzlement to cross the crafty face of Lu-don.

"I am Jad-ben-Otho," snapped Obergatz. "This creature is no son of mine. As a lesson to all blasphemers he shall die upon the altar at the hand of the god he has profaned. Take him from my sight, and when the sun stands at zenith let the faithful congregate in the temple court and witness the wrath of this divine hand," and he held aloft his right palm.

Those who had brought Tarzan took him away then as Obergatz had directed, and the German turned once more to the warriors by the gate. "Throw down your arms, warriors of Ja-don," he cried, "lest I call down my lightnings to blast you where you stand. Those who do as I bid shall be forgiven. Come! Throw down your arms."

The warriors of Ja-don moved uneasily, casting looks of appeal at their leader and of apprehension toward the figures upon the palace roof. Ja-don sprang forward among his men. "Let the cowards and knaves throw down their arms and enter the palace," he cried, "but never will Ja-don and the warriors of Ja-lur touch their foreheads to the feet of Lu-don and his false god. Make your decision now," he cried to his followers.

A few threw down their arms and with sheepish looks passed through the gateway into the palace, and with the example of these to bolster their courage others joined in the desertion from the old chieftain of the north, but staunch and true around him stood the majority of his warriors and when the last weakling had left their ranks Ja-don voiced the savage cry with which he led his followers to the attack, and once again the battle raged about the palace gate.

At times Ja-don's forces pushed the defenders far into the palace ground and then the wave of combat would recede and pass out into the city again. And still

Ta-den and the reinforcements did not come. It was drawing close to noon. Lu-don had mustered every available man that was not actually needed for the defense of the gate within the temple, and these he sent, under the leadership of Pan-sat, out into the city through the secret passageway and there they fell upon Ja-don's forces from the rear while those at the gate hammered them in front.

Attacked on two sides by a vastly superior force the result was inevitable and finally the last remnant of Ja-don's little army capitulated and the old chief was taken a prisoner before Lu-don. "Take him to the temple court," cried the high priest. "He shall witness the death of his accomplice and perhaps Jad-ben-Otho shall pass a similar sentence upon him as well."

The inner temple court was packed with humanity. At either end of the western altar stood Tarzan and his mate, bound and helpless. The sounds of battle had ceased and presently the ape-man saw Ja-don being led into the inner court, his wrists bound tightly together before him. Tarzan turned his eyes toward Jane and nodded in the direction of Ja-don. "This looks like the end," he said quietly. "He was our last and only hope."

"We have at least found each other, John," she replied, "and our last days have been spent together. My only prayer now is that if they take you they do not leave me."

Tarzan made no reply for in his heart was the same bitter thought that her own contained--not the fear that they would kill him but the fear that they would not kill her. The ape-man strained at his bonds but they were too many and too strong. A priest near him saw and with a jeering laugh struck the defenseless ape-man in the face.

"The brute!" cried Jane Clayton.

Tarzan smiled. "I have been struck thus before, Jane," he said, "and always has the striker died."

"You still have hope?" she asked.

"I am still alive," he said as though that were sufficient answer. She was a woman and she did not have the courage of this man who knew no fear. In her heart of hearts she knew that he would die upon the altar at high noon for he had told her, after he had been brought to the inner court, of the sentence of death that Obergatz had pronounced upon him, and she knew too that Tarzan knew that he would die, but that he was too courageous to admit it even to himself.

As she looked upon him standing there so straight and wonderful and brave among his savage captors her heart cried out against the cruelty of the fate that had overtaken him. It seemed a gross and hideous wrong that that wonderful creature, now so quick with exuberant life and strength and purpose should be presently naught but a bleeding lump of clay--and all so uselessly and wantonly. Gladly would she have offered her life for his but she knew that it was a waste of words since their captors would work upon them whatever it was their will to do--for him, death; for her--she shuddered at the thought.

And now came Lu-don and the naked Obergatz, and the high priest led the German to his place behind the altar, himself standing upon the other's left. Lu-don whispered a word to Obergatz, at the same time nodding in the direction of Ja-don. The Hun cast a scowling look upon the old warrior.

"And after the false god," he cried, "the false prophet," and he pointed an accusing finger at Ja-don. Then his eyes wandered to the form of Jane Clayton.

"And the woman, too?" asked Lu-don.

"The case of the woman I will attend to later," replied Obergatz. "I will talk with her tonight after she has had a chance to meditate upon the consequences of arousing the wrath of Jad-ben-Otho."

He cast his eyes upward at the sun. "The time approaches," he said to Lu-don. "Prepare the sacrifice."

Lu-don nodded to the priests who were gathered about Tarzan. They seized the ape-man and lifted him bodily to the altar where they laid him upon his back with his head at the south end of the monolith, but a few feet from where Jane Clayton stood. Impulsively and before they could restrain her the woman rushed forward and bending quickly kissed her mate upon the forehead. "Good-bye, John," she whispered.

"Good-bye," he answered, smiling.

The priests seized her and dragged her away. Lu-don handed the sacrificial knife to Obergatz. "I am the Great God," cried the German, "thus falleth the divine wrath upon all my enemies!" He looked up at the sun and then raised the knife high above his head.

"Thus die the blasphemers of God!" he screamed, and at the same instant a sharp staccato note rang out above the silent, spell-bound multitude. There was a screaming whistle in the air and Jad-ben-Otho crumpled forward across the body of his intended victim. Again the same alarming noise and Lu-don fell, a third and

Mo-sar crumpled to the ground. And now the warriors and the people, locating the direction of this new and unknown sound turned toward the western end of the court.

Upon the summit of the temple wall they saw two figures--a Ho-don warrior and beside him an almost naked creature of the race of Tarzan-jad-guru, across his shoulders and about his hips were strange broad belts studded with beautiful cylinders that glinted in the mid-day sun, and in his hands a shining thing of wood and metal from the end of which rose a thin wreath of blue-gray smoke.

And then the voice of the Ho-don warrior rang clear upon the ears of the silent throng. "Thus speaks the true Jad-ben-Otho," he cried, "through this his Messenger of Death. Cut the bonds of the prisoners. Cut the bonds of the Dor-ul-Otho and of Ja-don, King of Pal-ul-don, and of the woman who is the mate of the son of god."

Pan-sat, filled with the frenzy of fanaticism saw the power and the glory of the regime he had served crumpled and gone. To one and only one did he attribute the blame for the disaster that had but just overwhelmed him. It was the creature who lay upon the sacrificial altar who had brought Lu-don to his death and toppled the dreams of power that day by day had been growing in the brain of the under priest.

The sacrificial knife lay upon the altar where it had fallen from the dead fingers of Obergatz. Pan-sat crept closer and then with a sudden lunge he reached forth to seize the handle of the blade, and even as his clutching fingers were poised above it, the strange thing in the hands of the strange creature upon the temple wall cried out its crashing word of doom and Pan-sat the under priest, screaming, fell back upon the dead body of his master.

"Seize all the priests," cried Ta-den to the warriors, "and let none hesitate lest Jad-ben-Otho's messenger send forth still other bolts of lightning."

The warriors and the people had now witnessed such an exhibition of divine power as might have convinced an even less superstitious and more enlightened people, and since many of them had but lately wavered between the Jad-ben-Otho of Lu-don and the Dor-ul-Otho of Ja-don it was not difficult for them to swing quickly back to the latter, especially in view of the unanswerable argument in the hands of him whom Ta-den had described as the Messenger of the Great God.

And so the warriors sprang forward now with alacrity and surrounded the priests, and when they looked again at the western wall of the temple court they saw

pouring over it a great force of warriors. And the thing that startled and appalled them was the fact that many of these were black and hairy Waz-don.

At their head came the stranger with the shiny weapon and on his right was Taden, the Ho-don, and on his left Om-at, the black gund of Kor-ul-ja.

A warrior near the altar had seized the sacrificial knife and cut Tarzan's bonds and also those of Ja-don and Jane Clayton, and now the three stood together beside the altar and as the newcomers from the western end of the temple court pushed their way toward them the eyes of the woman went wide in mingled astonishment, incredulity, and hope. And the stranger, slinging his weapon across his back by a leather strap, rushed forward and took her in his arms.

"Jack!" she cried, sobbing on his shoulder. "Jack, my son!"

And Tarzan of the Apes came then and put his arms around them both, and the King of Pal-ul-don and the warriors and the people kneeled in the temple court and placed their foreheads to the ground before the altar where the three stood.