

CHAPTER XIX - THE MENACE OF THE DEAD

The night was still young when there came one to the entrance of the banquet hall where O-Tar of Manator dined with his chiefs, and brushing past the guards entered the great room with the insolence of a privileged character, as in truth he was. As he approached the head of the long board O-Tar took notice of him.

"Well, hoary one!" he cried. "What brings you out of your beloved and stinking burrow again this day. We thought that the sight of the multitude of living men at the games would drive you back to your corpses as quickly as you could go."

The cackling laugh of I-Gos acknowledged the royal sally. "Ey, ey, O-Tar," squeaked the ancient one, "I-Gos goes out not upon pleasure bound; but when one does ruthlessly desecrate the dead of I-Gos, vengeance must be had!"

"You refer to the act of the slave Turan?" demanded O-Tar.

"Turan, yes, and the slave Tara, who slipped beneath my hide a murderous blade. Another fraction of an inch, O-Tar, and I-Gos' ancient and wrinkled covering were even now in some apprentice tanner's hands, ey, ey!"

"But they have again eluded us," cried O-Tar. "Even in the palace of the great jeddak twice have they escaped the stupid knaves I call The Jeddak's Guard." O-Tar had risen and was angrily emphasizing his words with heavy blows upon the table, dealt with a golden goblet.

"Ey, O-Tar, they elude thy guard but not the wise old calot, I-Gos."

"What mean you? Speak!" commanded O-Tar.

"I know where they are hid," said the ancient taxidermist. "In the dust of unused corridors their feet have betrayed them."

"You followed them? You have seen them?" demanded the jeddak.

"I followed them and I heard them speaking beyond a closed door," replied I-Gos; "but I did not see them."

"Where is that door?" cried O-Tar. "We will send at once and fetch them," he looked about the table as though to decide to whom he would entrust this duty. A dozen warrior chiefs arose and laid their hands upon their swords.

"To the chambers of O-Mai the Cruel I traced them," squeaked I-Gos. "There you will find them where the moaning Corphals pursue the shrieking ghost of O-Mai;

ey!" and he turned his eyes from O-Tar toward the warriors who had arisen, only to discover that, to a man, they were hurriedly resuming their seats.

The cackling laughter of I-Gos broke derisively the hush that had fallen on the room. The warriors looked sheepishly at the food upon their plates of gold. O-Tar snapped his fingers impatiently.

"Be there only cravens among the chiefs of Manator?" he cried. "Repeatedly have these presumptuous slaves flouted the majesty of your jeddak. Must I command one to go and fetch them?"

Slowly a chief arose and two others followed his example, though with ill-concealed reluctance. "All, then, are not cowards," commented O-Tar. "The duty is distasteful. Therefore all three of you shall go, taking as many warriors as you wish."

"But do not ask for volunteers," interrupted I-Gos, "or you will go alone."

The three chiefs turned and left the banquet hall, walking slowly like doomed men to their fate.

Gahan and Tara remained in the chamber to which Tasor had led them, the man brushing away the dust from a deep and comfortable bench where they might rest in comparative comfort. He had found the ancient sleeping silks and furs too far gone to be of any service, crumbling to powder at a touch, thus removing any chance of making a comfortable bed for the girl, and so the two sat together, talking in low tones, of the adventures through which they already had passed and speculating upon the future; planning means of escape and hoping Tasor would not be long gone. They spoke of many things--of Hastor, and Helium, and Ptarth, and finally the conversation reminded Tara of Gathol.

"You have served there?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Turan.

"I met Gahan the Jed of Gathol at my father's palace," she said, "the very day before the storm snatched me from Helium--he was a presumptuous fellow, magnificently trapped in platinum and diamonds. Never in my life saw I so gorgeous a harness as his, and you must well know, Turan, that the splendor of all Barsoom passes through the court at Helium; but in my mind I could not see so resplendent a creature drawing that jeweled sword in mortal combat. I fear me that the Jed of Gathol, though a pretty picture of a man, is little else."

In the dim light Tara did not perceive the wry expression upon the half-averted face of her companion.

"You thought little then of the Jed of Gathol?" he asked.

"Then or now," she replied, and with a little laugh; "how it would pique his vanity to know, if he might, that a poor panthan had won a higher place in the regard of Tara of Helium," and she laid her fingers gently upon his knee.

He seized the fingers in his and carried them to his lips. "O, Tara of Helium," he cried. "Think you that I am a man of stone?" One arm slipped about her shoulders and drew the yielding body toward him.

"May my first ancestor forgive me my weakness," she cried, as her arms stole about his neck and she raised her panting lips to his. For long they clung there in love's first kiss and then she pushed him away, gently. "I love you, Turan," she half sobbed; "I love you so! It is my only poor excuse for having done this wrong to Djor Kantos, whom now I know I never loved, who knew not the meaning of love. And if you love me as you say, Turan, your love must protect me from greater dishonor, for I am but as clay in your hands."

Again he crushed her to him and then as suddenly released her, and rising, strode rapidly to and fro across the chamber as though he endeavored by violent exercise to master and subdue some evil spirit that had laid hold upon him. Ringing through his brain and heart and soul like some joyous paeon were those words that had so altered the world for Gahan of Gathol: "I love you, Turan; I love you so!" And it had come so suddenly. He had thought that she felt for him only gratitude for his loyalty and then, in an instant, her barriers were all down, she was no longer a princess; but instead a--his reflections were interrupted by a sound from beyond the closed door. His sandals of zitidar hide had given forth no sound upon the marble floor he strode, and as his rapid pacing carried him past the entrance to the chamber there came faintly from the distance of the long corridor the sound of metal on metal--the unmistakable herald of the approach of armed men.

For a moment Gahan listened intently, close to the door, until there could be no doubt but that a party of warriors was approaching. From what Tasor had told him he guessed correctly that they would be coming to this portion of the palace but for a single purpose--to search for Tara and himself--and it behooved him therefore to seek immediate means for eluding them. The chamber in which they were had other doorways beside that at which they had entered, and to one of these he must look for some safer hiding place. Crossing to Tara he acquainted her with his suspicion, leading her to one of the doors which they found unsecured. Beyond it lay a dimly-lighted chamber at the threshold of which they halted in consternation, drawing back quickly into the chamber they had just quitted, for their first glance revealed four warriors seated around a jetan board.

That their entrance had not been noted was attributed by Gahan to the absorption of the two players and their friends in the game. Quietly closing the door the fugitives moved silently to the next, which they found locked. There was now but another door which they had not tried, and this they approached quickly as they knew that the searching party must be close to the chamber. To their chagrin they found this avenue of escape barred.

Now indeed were they in a sorry plight, for should the searchers have information leading them to this room they were lost. Again leading Tara to the door behind which were the jetan players Gahan drew his sword and waited, listening. The sound of the party in the corridor came distinctly to their ears--they must be quite close, and doubtless they were coming in force. Beyond the door were but four warriors who might be readily surprised. There could, then, be but one choice and acting upon it Gahan quietly opened the door again, stepped through into the adjoining chamber, Tara's hand in his, and closed the door behind them. The four at the jetan board evidently failed to hear them. One player had either just made or was contemplating a move, for his fingers grasped a piece that still rested upon the board. The other three were watching his move. For an instant Gahan looked at them, playing jetan there in the dim light of this forgotten and forbidden chamber, and then a slow smile of understanding lighted his face.

"Come!" he said to Tara. "We have nothing to fear from these. For more than five thousand years they have sat thus, a monument to the handiwork of some ancient taxidermist."

As they approached more closely they saw that the lifelike figures were coated with dust, but that otherwise the skin was in as fine a state of preservation as the most recent of I-Gos' groups, and then they heard the door of the chamber they had quitted open and knew that the searchers were close upon them. Across the room they saw the opening of what appeared to be a corridor and which investigation proved to be a short passageway, terminating in a chamber in the center of which was an ornate sleeping dais. This room, like the others, was but poorly lighted, time having dimmed the radiance of its bulbs and coated them with dust. A glance showed that it was hung with heavy goods and contained considerable massive furniture in addition to the sleeping platform, a second glance at which revealed what appeared to be the form of a man lying partially on the floor and partially on the dais. No doorways were visible other than that at which they had entered, though both knew that others might be concealed by the hangings.

Gahan, his curiosity aroused by the legends surrounding this portion of the palace, crossed to the dais to examine the figure that apparently had fallen from it, to find the dried and shrivelled corpse of a man lying upon his back on the

floor with arms outstretched and fingers stiffly outspread. One of his feet was doubled partially beneath him, while the other was still entangled in the sleeping silks and furs upon the dais. After five thousand years the expression of the withered face and the eyeless sockets retained the aspect of horrid fear to such an extent, that Gahan knew that he was looking upon the body of O-Mai the Cruel.

Suddenly Tara, who stood close beside him, clutched his arm and pointed toward a far corner of the room. Gahan looked and looking felt the hairs upon his neck rising. He threw his left arm about the girl and with bared sword stood between her and the hangings that they watched, and then slowly Gahan of Gathol backed away, for in this grim and somber chamber, which no human foot had trod for five thousand years and to which no breath of wind might enter, the heavy hangings in the far corner had moved. Not gently had they moved as a draught might have moved them had there been a draught, but suddenly they had bulged out as though pushed against from behind. To the opposite corner backed Gahan until they stood with their backs against the hangings there, and then hearing the approach of their pursuers across the chamber beyond Gahan pushed Tara through the hangings and, following her, kept open with his left hand, which he had disengaged from the girl's grasp, a tiny opening through which he could view the apartment and the doorway upon the opposite side through which the pursuers would enter, if they came this far.

Behind the hangings there was a space of about three feet in width between them and the wall, making a passageway entirely around the room, broken only by the single entrance opposite them; this being a common arrangement especially in the sleeping apartments of the rich and powerful upon Barsoom. The purposes of this arrangement were several. The passageway afforded a station for guards in the same room with their master without intruding entirely upon his privacy; it concealed secret exits from the chamber; it permitted the occupant of the room to hide eavesdroppers and assassins for use against enemies that he might lure to his chamber.

The three chiefs with a dozen warriors had had no difficulty in following the tracks of the fugitives through the dust of the corridors and chambers they had traversed. To enter this portion of the palace at all had required all the courage they possessed, and now that they were within the very chambers of O-Mai their nerves were pitched to the highest key--another turn and they would snap; for the people of Manator are filled with weird superstitions. As they entered the outer chamber they moved slowly, with drawn swords, no one seeming anxious to take the lead, and the twelve warriors hanging back in unconcealed and shameless terror, while the three chiefs, spurred on by fear of O-Tar and by pride,

pressed together for mutual encouragement as they slowly crossed the dimly-lighted room.

Following the tracks of Gahan and Tara they found that though each doorway had been approached only one threshold had been crossed and this door they gingerly opened, revealing to their astonished gaze the four warriors at the jetan table. For a moment they were on the verge of flight, for though they knew what they were, coming as they did upon them in this mysterious and haunted suite, they were as startled as though they had beheld the very ghosts of the departed. But they presently regained their courage sufficiently to cross this chamber too and enter the short passageway that led to the ancient sleeping apartment of O-Mai the Cruel. They did not know that this awful chamber lay just before them, or it were doubtful that they would have proceeded farther; but they saw that those they sought had come this way and so they followed, but within the gloomy interior of the chamber they halted, the three chiefs urging their followers, in low whispers, to close in behind them, and there just within the entrance they stood until, their eyes becoming accustomed to the dim light, one of them pointed suddenly to the thing lying upon the floor with one foot tangled in the coverings of the dais.

"Look!" he gasped. "It is the corpse of O-Mai! Ancestor of ancestors! we are in the forbidden chamber." Simultaneously there came from behind the hangings beyond the grewsome dead a hollow moan followed by a piercing scream, and the hangings shook and bellied before their eyes.

With one accord, chieftains and warriors, they turned and bolted for the doorway; a narrow doorway, where they jammed, fighting and screaming in an effort to escape. They threw away their swords and clawed at one another to make a passage for escape; those behind climbed upon the shoulders of those in front; and some fell and were trampled upon; but at last they all got through, and, the swiftest first, they bolted across the two intervening chambers to the outer corridor beyond, nor did they halt their mad retreat before they stumbled, weak and trembling, into the banquet hall of O-Tar. At sight of them the warriors who had remained with the jeddak leaped to their feet with drawn swords, thinking that their fellows were pursued by many enemies; but no one followed them into the room, and the three chieftains came and stood before O-Tar with bowed heads and trembling knees.

"Well?" demanded the jeddak. "What ails you? Speak!"

"O-Tar," cried one of them when at last he could master his voice. "When have we three failed you in battle or combat? Have our swords been not always among the foremost in defense of your safety and your honor?"

"Have I denied this?" demanded O-Tar.

"Listen, then, O Jeddak, and judge us with leniency. We followed the two slaves to the apartments of O-Mai the Cruel. We entered the accursed chambers and still we did not falter. We came at last to that horrid chamber no human eye had scanned before in fifty centuries and we looked upon the dead face of O-Mai lying as he has lain for all this time. To the very death chamber of O-Mai the Cruel we came and yet we were ready to go farther; when suddenly there broke upon our horrified ears the moans and the shrieking that mark these haunted chambers and the hangings moved and rustled in the dead air. O-Tar, it was more than human nerves could endure. We turned and fled. We threw away our swords and fought with one another to escape. With sorrow, but without shame, I tell it, for there be no man in all Manator that would not have done the same. If these slaves be Corphals they are safe among their fellow ghosts. If they be not Corphals, then already are they dead in the chambers of O-Mai, and there may they rot for all of me, for I would not return to that accursed spot for the harness of a jeddak and the half of Barsoom for an empire. I have spoken."

O-Tar knitted his scowling brows. "Are all my chieftains cowards and cravens?" he demanded presently in sneering tones.

From among those who had not been of the searching party a chieftain arose and turned a scowling face upon O-Tar.

"The jeddak knows," he said, "that in the annals of Manator her jeddaks have ever been accounted the bravest of her warriors. Where my jeddak leads I will follow, nor may any jeddak call me a coward or a craven unless I refuse to go where he dares to go. I have spoken."

After he had resumed his seat there was a painful silence, for all knew that the speaker had challenged the courage of O-Tar the Jeddak of Manator and all awaited the reply of their ruler. In every mind was the same thought--O-Tar must lead them at once to the chamber of O-Mai the Cruel, or accept forever the stigma of cowardice, and there could be no coward upon the throne of Manator. That they all knew and that O-Tar knew, as well.

But O-Tar hesitated. He looked about upon the faces of those around him at the banquet board; but he saw only the grim visages of relentless warriors. There was no trace of leniency in the face of any. And then his eyes wandered to a small entrance at one side of the great chamber. An expression of relief expunged the scowl of anxiety from his features.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "See who has come!"