

Chapter 5 - The Plot That Failed

For a month Tarzan was a regular and very welcome devotee at the shrine of the beautiful Countess de Coude. Often he met other members of the select little coterie that dropped in for tea of an afternoon. More often Olga found devices that would give her an hour of Tarzan alone.

For a time she had been frightened by what Nikolas had insinuated. She had not thought of this big, young man as anything more than friend, but with the suggestion implanted by the evil words of her brother she had grown to speculate much upon the strange force which seemed to attract her toward the gray-eyed stranger. She did not wish to love him, nor did she wish his love.

She was much younger than her husband, and without having realized it she had been craving the haven of a friendship with one nearer her own age. Twenty is shy in exchanging confidences with forty. Tarzan was but two years her senior. He could understand her, she felt. Then he was clean and honorable and chivalrous. She was not afraid of him. That she could trust him she had felt instinctively from the first.

From a distance Rokoff had watched this growing intimacy with malicious glee. Ever since he had learned that Tarzan knew that he was a Russian spy there had been added to his hatred for the ape-man a great fear that he would expose him. He was but waiting now until the moment was propitious for a master stroke. He wanted to rid himself forever of Tarzan, and at the same time reap an ample revenge for the humiliations and defeats that he had suffered at his hands.

Tarzan was nearer to contentment than he had been since the peace and tranquility of his jungle had been broken in upon by the advent of the marooned Porter party. He enjoyed the pleasant social intercourse with Olga's friends, while the friendship which had sprung up between the fair countess and himself was a source of never-ending delight. It broke in upon and dispersed his gloomy thoughts, and served as a balm to his lacerated heart.

Sometimes D'Arnot accompanied him on his visits to the De Coude home, for he had long known both Olga and the count. Occasionally De Coude dropped in, but the multitudinous affairs of his official position and the never-ending demands of politics kept him from home usually until late at night.

Rokoff spied upon Tarzan almost constantly, waiting for the time that he should call at the De Coude palace at night, but in this he was doomed to disappointment. On several occasions Tarzan accompanied the countess to her

home after the opera, but he invariably left her at the entrance--much to the disgust of the lady's devoted brother.

Finding that it seemed impossible to trap Tarzan through any voluntary act of his own, Rokoff and Paulvitch put their heads together to hatch a plan that would trap the ape-man in all the circumstantial evidence of a compromising position.

For days they watched the papers as well as the movements of De Coude and Tarzan. At length they were rewarded. A morning paper made brief mention of a smoker that was to be given on the following evening by the German minister. De Coude's name was among those of the invited guests. If he attended this meant that he would be absent from his home until after midnight.

On the night of the banquet Paulvitch waited at the curb before the residence of the German minister, where he could scan the face of each guest that arrived. He had not long to wait before De Coude descended from his car and passed him. That was enough. Paulvitch hastened back to his quarters, where Rokoff awaited him. There they waited until after eleven, then Paulvitch took down the receiver of their telephone. He called a number.

"The apartments of Lieutenant D'Arnot?" he asked, when he had obtained his connection.

"A message for Monsieur Tarzan, if he will be so kind as to step to the telephone."

For a minute there was silence.

"Monsieur Tarzan?"

"Ah, yes, monsieur, this is Francois--in the service of the Countess de Coude. Possibly monsieur does poor Francois the honor to recall him--yes?"

"Yes, monsieur. I have a message, an urgent message from the countess. She asks that you hasten to her at once--she is in trouble, monsieur.

"No, monsieur, poor Francois does not know. Shall I tell madame that monsieur will be here shortly?"

"Thank you, monsieur. The good God will bless you."

Paulvitch hung up the receiver and turned to grin at Rokoff.

"It will take him thirty minutes to get there. If you reach the German minister's in fifteen, De Coude should arrive at his home in about forty-five minutes. It all depends upon whether the fool will remain fifteen minutes after he finds that a

trick has been played upon him; but unless I am mistaken Olga will be loath to let him go in so short a time as that. Here is the note for De Coude. Hasten!"

Paulvitch lost no time in reaching the German minister's. At the door he handed the note to a footman. "This is for the Count de Coude. It is very urgent. You must see that it is placed in his hands at once," and he dropped a piece of silver into the willing hand of the servant. Then he returned to his quarters.

A moment later De Coude was apologizing to his host as he tore open the envelope. What he read left his face white and his hand trembling.

MONSIEUR LE COUNT DE COUDE:

One who wishes to save the honor of your name takes this means to warn you that the sanctity of your home is this minute in jeopardy.

A certain man who for months has been a constant visitor there during your absence is now with your wife. If you go at once to your countess' boudoir you will find them together.

A FRIEND.

Twenty minutes after Paulvitch had called Tarzan, Rokoff obtained a connection with Olga's private line. Her maid answered the telephone which was in the countess' boudoir.

"But madame has retired," said the maid, in answer to Rokoff's request to speak with her.

"This is a very urgent message for the countess' ears alone," replied Rokoff. "Tell her that she must arise and slip something about her and come to the telephone. I shall call up again in five minutes." Then he hung up his receiver. A moment later Paulvitch entered.

"The count has the message?" asked Rokoff.

"He should be on his way to his home by now," replied Paulvitch.

"Good! My lady will be sitting in her boudoir, very much in negligee, about now. In a minute the faithful Jacques will escort Monsieur Tarzan into her presence without announcing him. It will take a few minutes for explanations. Olga will look very alluring in the filmy creation that is her night-dress, and the clinging robe which but half conceals the charms that the former does not conceal at all. Olga will be surprised, but not displeased.

"If there is a drop of red blood in the man the count will break in upon a very pretty love scene in about fifteen minutes from now. I think we have planned marvelously, my dear Alexis. Let us go out and drink to the very good health of Monsieur Tarzan in some of old Plancon's unparalleled absinth; not forgetting that the Count de Coude is one of the best swordsmen in Paris, and by far the best shot in all France."

When Tarzan reached Olga's, Jacques was awaiting him at the entrance.

"This way, Monsieur," he said, and led the way up the broad, marble staircase. In another moment he had opened a door, and, drawing aside a heavy curtain, obsequiously bowed Tarzan into a dimly lighted apartment. Then Jacques vanished.

Across the room from him Tarzan saw Olga seated before a little desk on which stood her telephone. She was tapping impatiently upon the polished surface of the desk. She had not heard him enter.

"Olga," he said, "what is wrong?"

She turned toward him with a little cry of alarm.

"Jean!" she cried. "What are you doing here? Who admitted you? What does it mean?"

Tarzan was thunderstruck, but in an instant he realized a part of the truth.

"Then you did not send for me, Olga?"

"Send for you at this time of night? MON DIEU! Jean, do you think that I am quite mad?"

"Francois telephoned me to come at once; that you were in trouble and wanted me."

"Francois? Who in the world is Francois?"

"He said that he was in your service. He spoke as though I should recall the fact."

"There is no one by that name in my employ. Some one has played a joke upon you, Jean," and Olga laughed.

"I fear that it may be a most sinister 'joke,' Olga," he replied. "There is more back of it than humor."

"What do you mean? You do not think that--"

"Where is the count?" he interrupted.

"At the German ambassador's."

"This is another move by your estimable brother. Tomorrow the count will hear of it. He will question the servants. Everything will point to--to what Rokoff wishes the count to think."

"The scoundrel!" cried Olga. She had arisen, and come close to Tarzan, where she stood looking up into his face. She was very frightened. In her eyes was an expression that the hunter sees in those of a poor, terrified doe--puzzled--questioning. She trembled, and to steady herself raised her hands to his broad shoulders. "What shall we do, Jean?" she whispered. "It is terrible. Tomorrow all Paris will read of it--he will see to that."

Her look, her attitude, her words were eloquent of the age-old appeal of defenseless woman to her natural protector--man. Tarzan took one of the warm little hands that lay on his breast in his own strong one. The act was quite involuntary, and almost equally so was the instinct of protection that threw a sheltering arm around the girl's shoulders.

The result was electrical. Never before had he been so close to her. In startled guilt they looked suddenly into each other's eyes, and where Olga de Coude should have been strong she was weak, for she crept closer into the man's arms, and clasped her own about his neck. And Tarzan of the Apes? He took the panting figure into his mighty arms, and covered the hot lips with kisses.

Raoul de Coude made hurried excuses to his host after he had read the note handed him by the ambassador's butler. Never afterward could he recall the nature of the excuses he made. Everything was quite a blur to him up to the time that he stood on the threshold of his own home. Then he became very cool, moving quietly and with caution. For some inexplicable reason Jacques had the door open before he was halfway to the steps. It did not strike him at the time as being unusual, though afterward he remarked it.

Very softly he tiptoed up the stairs and along the gallery to the door of his wife's boudoir. In his hand was a heavy walking stick--in his heart, murder.

Olga was the first to see him. With a horrified shriek she tore herself from Tarzan's arms, and the ape-man turned just in time to ward with his arm a terrific blow that De Coude had aimed at his head. Once, twice, three times the heavy stick fell with lightning rapidity, and each blow aided in the transition of the ape-man back to the primordial.

With the low, guttural snarl of the bull ape he sprang for the Frenchman. The great stick was torn from his grasp and broken in two as though it had been matchwood, to be flung aside as the now infuriated beast charged for his adversary's throat. Olga de Coude stood a horrified spectator of the terrible scene which ensued during the next brief moment, then she sprang to where Tarzan was murdering her husband--choking the life from him--shaking him as a terrier might shake a rat.

Frantically she tore at his great hands. "Mother of God!" she cried. "You are killing him, you are killing him! Oh, Jean, you are killing my husband!"

Tarzan was deaf with rage. Suddenly he hurled the body to the floor, and, placing his foot upon the upturned breast, raised his head. Then through the palace of the Count de Coude rang the awesome challenge of the bull ape that has made a kill. From cellar to attic the horrid sound searched out the servants, and left them blanched and trembling. The woman in the room sank to her knees beside the body of her husband, and prayed.

Slowly the red mist faded from before Tarzan's eyes. Things began to take form--he was regaining the perspective of civilized man. His eyes fell upon the figure of the kneeling woman. "Olga," he whispered. She looked up, expecting to see the maniacal light of murder in the eyes above her. Instead she saw sorrow and contrition.

"Oh, Jean!" she cried. "See what you have done. He was my husband. I loved him, and you have killed him."

Very gently Tarzan raised the limp form of the Count de Coude and bore it to a couch. Then he put his ear to the man's breast.

"Some brandy, Olga," he said.

She brought it, and together they forced it between his lips. Presently a faint gasp came from the white lips. The head turned, and De Coude groaned.

"He will not die," said Tarzan. "Thank God!"

"Why did you do it, Jean?" she asked.

"I do not know. He struck me, and I went mad. I have seen the apes of my tribe do the same thing. I have never told you my story, Olga. It would have been better had you known it--this might not have happened. I never saw my father. The only mother I knew was a ferocious she-ape. Until I was fifteen I had never seen a human being. I was twenty before I saw a white man. A little more than a year ago I was a naked beast of prey in an African jungle.

"Do not judge me too harshly. Two years is too short a time in which to attempt to work the change in an individual that it has taken countless ages to accomplish in the white race."

"I do not judge at all, Jean. The fault is mine. You must go now--he must not find you here when he regains consciousness. Good-by."

It was a sorrowful Tarzan who walked with bowed head from the palace of the Count de Coude.

Once outside his thoughts took definite shape, to the end that twenty minutes later he entered a police station not far from the Rue Maule. Here he soon found one of the officers with whom he had had the encounter several weeks previous. The policeman was genuinely glad to see again the man who had so roughly handled him. After a moment of conversation Tarzan asked if he had ever heard of Nikolas Rokoff or Alexis Paulvitch.

"Very often, indeed, monsieur. Each has a police record, and while there is nothing charged against them now, we make it a point to know pretty well where they may be found should the occasion demand. It is only the same precaution that we take with every known criminal. Why does monsieur ask?"

"They are known to me," replied Tarzan. "I wish to see Monsieur Rokoff on a little matter of business. If you can direct me to his lodgings I shall appreciate it."

A few minutes later he bade the policeman adieu, and, with a slip of paper in his pocket bearing a certain address in a semirespectable quarter, he walked briskly toward the nearest taxi stand.

Rokoff and Paulvitch had returned to their rooms, and were sitting talking over the probable outcome of the evening's events. They had telephoned to the offices of two of the morning papers from which they momentarily expected representatives to hear the first report of the scandal that was to stir social Paris on the morrow.

A heavy step sounded on the stairway. "Ah, but these newspaper men are prompt," exclaimed Rokoff, and as a knock fell upon the door of their room: "Enter, monsieur."

The smile of welcome froze upon the Russian's face as he looked into the hard, gray eyes of his visitor.

"Name of a name!" he shouted, springing to his feet, "What brings you here!"

"Sit down!" said Tarzan, so low that the men could barely catch the words, but in a tone that brought Rokoff to his chair, and kept Paulvitch in his.

"You know what has brought me here," he continued, in the same low tone. "It should be to kill you, but because you are Olga de Coude's brother I shall not do that--now.

"I shall give you a chance for your lives. Paulvitch does not count much--he is merely a stupid, foolish little tool, and so I shall not kill him so long as I permit you to live. Before I leave you two alive in this room you will have done two things. The first will be to write a full confession of your connection with tonight's plot--and sign it.

"The second will be to promise me upon pain of death that you will permit no word of this affair to get into the newspapers. If you do not do both, neither of you will be alive when I pass next through that doorway. Do you understand?" And, without waiting for a reply: "Make haste; there is ink before you, and paper and a pen."

Rokoff assumed a truculent air, attempting by bravado to show how little he feared Tarzan's threats. An instant later he felt the ape-man's steel fingers at his throat, and Paulvitch, who attempted to dodge them and reach the door, was lifted completely off the floor, and hurled senseless into a corner. When Rokoff commenced to blacken about the face Tarzan released his hold and shoved the fellow back into his chair. After a moment of coughing Rokoff sat sullenly glaring at the man standing opposite him. Presently Paulvitch came to himself, and limped painfully back to his chair at Tarzan's command.

"Now write," said the ape-man. "If it is necessary to handle you again I shall not be so lenient."

Rokoff picked up a pen and commenced to write.

"See that you omit no detail, and that you mention every name," cautioned Tarzan.

Presently there was a knock at the door. "Enter," said Tarzan.

A dapper young man came in. "I am from the MATIN," he announced. "I understand that Monsieur Rokoff has a story for me."

"Then you are mistaken, monsieur," replied Tarzan. "You have no story for publication, have you, my dear Nikolas."

Rokoff looked up from his writing with an ugly scowl upon his face.

"No," he growled, "I have no story for publication--now."

"Nor ever, my dear Nikolas," and the reporter did not see the nasty light in the ape-man's eye; but Nikolas Rokoff did.

"Nor ever," he repeated hastily.

"It is too bad that monsieur has been troubled," said Tarzan, turning to the newspaper man. "I bid monsieur good evening," and he bowed the dapper young man out of the room, and closed the door in his face.

An hour later Tarzan, with a rather bulky manuscript in his coat pocket, turned at the door leading from Rokoff's room.

"Were I you I should leave France," he said, "for sooner or later I shall find an excuse to kill you that will not in any way compromise your sister."