

## Chapter 8 - The Fight in the Desert

As the three squatted upon the roof above the quarters of the Ouled-Nails they heard the angry cursing of the Arabs in the room beneath. Abdul translated from time to time to Tarzan.

"They are berating those in the street below now," said Abdul, "for permitting us to escape so easily. Those in the street say that we did not come that way--that we are still within the building, and that those above, being too cowardly to attack us, are attempting to deceive them into believing that we have escaped. In a moment they will have fighting of their own to attend to if they continue their brawling."

Presently those in the building gave up the search, and returned to the cafe. A few remained in the street below, smoking and talking.

Tarzan spoke to the girl, thanking her for the sacrifice she had made for him, a total stranger.

"I liked you," she said simply. "You were unlike the others who come to the cafe. You did not speak coarsely to me--the manner in which you gave me money was not an insult."

"What shall you do after tonight?" he asked. "You cannot return to the cafe. Can you even remain with safety in Sidi Aissa?"

"Tomorrow it will be forgotten," she replied. "But I should be glad if it might be that I need never return to this or another cafe. I have not remained because I wished to; I have been a prisoner."

"A prisoner!" ejaculated Tarzan incredulously.

"A slave would be the better word," she answered. "I was stolen in the night from my father's DOUAR by a band of marauders. They brought me here and sold me to the Arab who keeps this cafe. It has been nearly two years now since I saw the last of mine own people. They are very far to the south. They never come to Sidi Aissa."

"You would like to return to your people?" asked Tarzan. "Then I shall promise to see you safely so far as Bou Saada at least. There we can doubtless arrange with the commandant to send you the rest of the way."

"Oh, m'sieur," she cried, "how can I ever repay you! You cannot really mean that you will do so much for a poor Ouled-Nail. But my father can reward you, and he will, for is he not a great sheik? He is Kadour ben Saden."

"Kadour ben Saden!" ejaculated Tarzan. "Why, Kadour ben Saden is in Sidi Aissa this very night. He dined with me but a few hours since."

"My father in Sidi Aissa?" cried the amazed girl. "Allah be praised then, for I am indeed saved."

"Hssh!" cautioned Abdul. "Listen."

From below came the sound of voices, quite distinguishable upon the still night air. Tarzan could not understand the words, but Abdul and the girl translated.

"They have gone now," said the latter. "It is you they want, m'sieur. One of them said that the stranger who had offered money for your slaying lay in the house of Akmed din Soulef with a broken wrist, but that he had offered a still greater reward if some would lay in wait for you upon the road to Bou Saada and kill you."

"It is he who followed m'sieur about the market today," exclaimed Abdul. "I saw him again within the cafe--him and another; and the two went out into the inner court after talking with this girl here. It was they who attacked and fired upon us, as we came out of the cafe. Why do they wish to kill you, m'sieur?"

"I do not know," replied Tarzan, and then, after a pause: "Unless--" But he did not finish, for the thought that had come to his mind, while it seemed the only reasonable solution of the mystery, appeared at the same time quite improbable. Presently the men in the street went away. The courtyard and the cafe were deserted. Cautiously Tarzan lowered himself to the sill of the girl's window. The room was empty. He returned to the roof and let Abdul down, then he lowered the girl to the arms of the waiting Arab.

From the window Abdul dropped the short distance to the street below, while Tarzan took the girl in his arms and leaped down as he had done on so many other occasions in his own forest with a burden in his arms. A little cry of alarm was startled from the girl's lips, but Tarzan landed in the street with but an imperceptible jar, and lowered her in safety to her feet.

She clung to him for a moment.

"How strong m'sieur is, and how active," she cried. "EL ADREA, the black lion, himself is not more so."

"I should like to meet this EL ADREA of yours," he said. "I have heard much about him."

"And you come to the DOUAR of my father you shall see him," said the girl. "He lives in a spur of the mountains north of us, and comes down from his lair at night to rob my father's DOUAR. With a single blow of his mighty paw he crushes the skull of a bull, and woe betide the belated wayfarer who meets EL ADREA abroad at night."

Without further mishap they reached the hotel. The sleepy landlord objected strenuously to instituting a search for Kadour ben Saden until the following morning, but a piece of gold put a different aspect on the matter, so that a few moments later a servant had started to make the rounds of the lesser native hostelries where it might be expected that a desert sheik would find congenial associations. Tarzan had felt it necessary to find the girl's father that night, for fear he might start on his homeward journey too early in the morning to be intercepted.

They had waited perhaps half an hour when the messenger returned with Kadour ben Saden. The old sheik entered the room with a questioning expression upon his proud face.

"Monsieur has done me the honor to--" he commenced, and then his eyes fell upon the girl. With outstretched arms he crossed the room to meet her. "My daughter!" he cried. "Allah is merciful!" and tears dimmed the martial eyes of the old warrior.

When the story of her abduction and her final rescue had been told to Kadour ben Saden he extended his hand to Tarzan.

"All that is Kadour ben Saden's is thine, my friend, even to his life," he said very simply, but Tarzan knew that those were no idle words.

It was decided that although three of them would have to ride after practically no sleep, it would be best to make an early start in the morning, and attempt to ride all the way to Bou Saada in one day. It would have been comparatively easy for the men, but for the girl it was sure to be a fatiguing journey.

She, however, was the most anxious to undertake it, for it seemed to her that she could not quickly enough reach the family and friends from whom she had been separated for two years.

It seemed to Tarzan that he had not closed his eyes before he was awakened, and in another hour the party was on its way south toward Bou Saada. For a few

miles the road was good, and they made rapid progress, but suddenly it became only a waste of sand, into which the horses sank fetlock deep at nearly every step. In addition to Tarzan, Abdul, the sheik, and his daughter were four of the wild plainsmen of the sheik's tribe who had accompanied him upon the trip to Sidi Aissa. Thus, seven guns strong, they entertained little fear of attack by day, and if all went well they should reach Bou Saada before nightfall.

A brisk wind enveloped them in the blowing sand of the desert, until Tarzan's lips were parched and cracked. What little he could see of the surrounding country was far from alluring--a vast expanse of rough country, rolling in little, barren hillocks, and tufted here and there with clumps of dreary shrub. Far to the south rose the dim lines of the Saharan Atlas range. How different, thought Tarzan, from the gorgeous Africa of his boyhood!

Abdul, always on the alert, looked backward quite as often as he did ahead. At the top of each hillock that they mounted he would draw in his horse and, turning, scan the country to the rear with utmost care. At last his scrutiny was rewarded.

"Look!" he cried. "There are six horsemen behind us."

"Your friends of last evening, no doubt, monsieur," remarked Kadour ben Saden dryly to Tarzan.

"No doubt," replied the ape-man. "I am sorry that my society should endanger the safety of your journey. At the next village I shall remain and question these gentlemen, while you ride on. There is no necessity for my being at Bou Saada tonight, and less still why you should not ride in peace."

"If you stop we shall stop," said Kadour ben Saden. "Until you are safe with your friends, or the enemy has left your trail, we shall remain with you. There is nothing more to say."

Tarzan nodded his head. He was a man of few words, and possibly it was for this reason as much as any that Kadour ben Saden had taken to him, for if there be one thing that an Arab despises it is a talkative man.

All the balance of the day Abdul caught glimpses of the horsemen in their rear. They remained always at about the same distance. During the occasional halts for rest, and at the longer halt at noon, they approached no closer.

"They are waiting for darkness," said Kadour ben Saden.

And darkness came before they reached Bou Saada. The last glimpse that Abdul had of the grim, white-robed figures that trailed them, just before dusk made it

impossible to distinguish them, had made it apparent that they were rapidly closing up the distance that intervened between them and their intended quarry. He whispered this fact to Tarzan, for he did not wish to alarm the girl. The ape-man drew back beside him.

"You will ride ahead with the others, Abdul," said Tarzan. "This is my quarrel. I shall wait at the next convenient spot, and interview these fellows."

"Then Abdul shall wait at thy side," replied the young Arab, nor would any threats or commands move him from his decision.

"Very well, then," replied Tarzan. "Here is as good a place as we could wish. Here are rocks at the top of this hillock. We shall remain hidden here and give an account of ourselves to these gentlemen when they appear."

They drew in their horses and dismounted. The others riding ahead were already out of sight in the darkness. Beyond them shone the lights of Bou Saada. Tarzan removed his rifle from its boot and loosened his revolver in its holster. He ordered Abdul to withdraw behind the rocks with the horses, so that they should be shielded from the enemies' bullets should they fire. The young Arab pretended to do as he was bid, but when he had fastened the two animals securely to a low shrub he crept back to lie on his belly a few paces behind Tarzan.

The ape-man stood erect in the middle of the road, waiting. Nor did he have long to wait. The sound of galloping horses came suddenly out of the darkness below him, and a moment later he discerned the moving blotches of lighter color against the solid background of the night.

"Halt," he cried, "or we fire!"

The white figures came to a sudden stop, and for a moment there was silence. Then came the sound of a whispered council, and like ghosts the phantom riders dispersed in all directions. Again the desert lay still about him, yet it was an ominous stillness that foreboded evil.

Abdul raised himself to one knee. Tarzan cocked his jungle-trained ears, and presently there came to him the sound of horses walking quietly through the sand to the east of him, to the west, to the north, and to the south. They had been surrounded. Then a shot came from the direction in which he was looking, a bullet whirred through the air above his head, and he fired at the flash of the enemy's gun.

Instantly the soundless waste was torn with the quick staccato of guns upon every hand. Abdul and Tarzan fired only at the flashes--they could not yet see

their foemen. Presently it became evident that the attackers were circling their position, drawing closer and closer in as they began to realize the paltry numbers of the party which opposed them.

But one came too close, for Tarzan was accustomed to using his eyes in the darkness of the jungle night, than which there is no more utter darkness this side the grave, and with a cry of pain a saddle was emptied.

"The odds are evening, Abdul," said Tarzan, with a low laugh.

But they were still far too one-sided, and when the five remaining horsemen whirled at a signal and charged full upon them it looked as if there would be a sudden ending of the battle. Both Tarzan and Abdul sprang to the shelter of the rocks, that they might keep the enemy in front of them. There was a mad clatter of galloping hoofs, a volley of shots from both sides, and the Arabs withdrew to repeat the maneuver; but there were now only four against the two.

For a few moments there came no sound from out of the surrounding blackness. Tarzan could not tell whether the Arabs, satisfied with their losses, had given up the fight, or were waiting farther along the road to waylay them as they proceeded on toward Bou Saada. But he was not left long in doubt, for now all from one direction came the sound of a new charge. But scarcely had the first gun spoken ere a dozen shots rang out behind the Arabs. There came the wild shouts of a new party to the controversy, and the pounding of the feet of many horses from down the road to Bou Saada.

The Arabs did not wait to learn the identity of the oncomers. With a parting volley as they dashed by the position which Tarzan and Abdul were holding, they plunged off along the road toward Sidi Aissa. A moment later Kadour ben Saden and his men dashed up.

The old sheik was much relieved to find that neither Tarzan nor Abdul had received a scratch. Not even had their horses been wounded. They sought out the two men who had fallen before Tarzan's shots, and, finding that both were dead, left them where they lay.

"Why did you not tell me that you contemplated ambushing those fellows?" asked the sheik in a hurt tone. "We might have had them all if the seven of us had stopped to meet them."

"Then it would have been useless to stop at all," replied Tarzan, "for had we simply ridden on toward Bou Saada they would have been upon us presently, and all could have been engaged. It was to prevent the transfer of my own quarrel to another's shoulders that Abdul and I stopped off to question them. Then there is

your daughter--I could not be the cause of exposing her needlessly to the marksmanship of six men."

Kadour ben Saden shrugged his shoulders. He did not relish having been cheated out of a fight.

The little battle so close to Bou Saada had drawn out a company of soldiers. Tarzan and his party met them just outside the town. The officer in charge halted them to learn the significance of the shots.

"A handful of marauders," replied Kadour ben Saden. "They attacked two of our number who had dropped behind, but when we returned to them the fellows soon dispersed. They left two dead. None of my party was injured."

This seemed to satisfy the officer, and after taking the names of the party he marched his men on toward the scene of the skirmish to bring back the dead men for purposes of identification, if possible.

Two days later, Kadour ben Saden, with his daughter and followers, rode south through the pass below Bou Saada, bound for their home in the far wilderness. The sheik had urged Tarzan to accompany him, and the girl had added her entreaties to those of her father; but, though he could not explain it to them, Tarzan's duties loomed particularly large after the happenings of the past few days, so that he could not think of leaving his post for an instant. But he promised to come later if it lay within his power to do so, and they had to content themselves with that assurance.

During these two days Tarzan had spent practically all his time with Kadour ben Saden and his daughter. He was keenly interested in this race of stern and dignified warriors, and embraced the opportunity which their friendship offered to learn what he could of their lives and customs. He even commenced to acquire the rudiments of their language under the pleasant tutorage of the brown-eyed girl. It was with real regret that he saw them depart, and he sat his horse at the opening to the pass, as far as which he had accompanied them, gazing after the little party as long as he could catch a glimpse of them.

Here were people after his own heart! Their wild, rough lives, filled with danger and hardship, appealed to this half-savage man as nothing had appealed to him in the midst of the effeminate civilization of the great cities he had visited. Here was a life that excelled even that of the jungle, for here he might have the society of men--real men whom he could honor and respect, and yet be near to the wild nature that he loved. In his head revolved an idea that when he had completed his mission he would resign and return to live for the remainder of his life with the tribe of Kadour ben Saden.

Then he turned his horse's head and rode slowly back to Bou Saada.

The front of the Hotel du Petit Sahara, where Tarzan stopped in Bou Saada, is taken up with the bar, two dining-rooms, and the kitchens. Both of the dining-rooms open directly off the bar, and one of them is reserved for the use of the officers of the garrison. As you stand in the barroom you may look into either of the dining-rooms if you wish.

It was to the bar that Tarzan repaired after speeding Kadour ben Saden and his party on their way. It was yet early in the morning, for Kadour ben Saden had elected to ride far that day, so that it happened that when Tarzan returned there were guests still at breakfast.

As his casual glance wandered into the officers' dining-room, Tarzan saw something which brought a look of interest to his eyes. Lieutenant Gernois was sitting there, and as Tarzan looked a white-robed Arab approached and, bending, whispered a few words into the lieutenant's ear. Then he passed on out of the building through another door.

In itself the thing was nothing, but as the man had stooped to speak to the officer, Tarzan had caught sight of something which the accidental parting of the man's burnoose had revealed--he carried his left arm in a sling.