

Chapter 11 - John Caldwell, London

As Numa EL ADREA launched himself with widespread paws and bared fangs he looked to find this puny man as easy prey as the score who had gone down beneath him in the past. To him man was a clumsy, slow-moving, defenseless creature--he had little respect for him.

But this time he found that he was pitted against a creature as agile and as quick as himself. When his mighty frame struck the spot where the man had been he was no longer there.

The watching girl was transfixed by astonishment at the ease with which the crouching man eluded the great paws. And now, O Allah! He had rushed in behind EL ADREA'S shoulder even before the beast could turn, and had grasped him by the mane. The lion reared upon his hind legs like a horse--Tarzan had known that he would do this, and he was ready. A giant arm encircled the black-maned throat, and once, twice, a dozen times a sharp blade darted in and out of the bay-black side behind the left shoulder.

Frantic were the leaps of Numa--awful his roars of rage and pain; but the giant upon his back could not be dislodged or brought within reach of fangs or talons in the brief interval of life that remained to the lord with the large head. He was quite dead when Tarzan of the Apes released his hold and arose. Then the daughter of the desert witnessed a thing that terrified her even more than had the presence of EL ADREA. The man placed a foot upon the carcass of his kill, and, with his handsome face raised toward the full moon, gave voice to the most frightful cry that ever had smote upon her ears.

With a little cry of fear she shrank away from him--she thought that the fearful strain of the encounter had driven him mad. As the last note of that fiendish challenge died out in the diminishing echoes of the distance the man dropped his eyes until they rested upon the girl.

Instantly his face was lighted by the kindly smile that was ample assurance of his sanity, and the girl breathed freely once again, smiling in response.

"What manner of man are you?" she asked. "The thing you have done is unheard of. Even now I cannot believe that it is possible for a lone man armed only with a knife to have fought hand to hand with EL ADREA and conquered him, unscathed--to have conquered him at all. And that cry--it was not human. Why did you do that?"

Tarzan flushed. "It is because I forget," he said, "sometimes, that I am a civilized man. When I kill it must be that I am another creature." He did not try to explain further, for it always seemed to him that a woman must look with loathing upon one who was yet so nearly a beast.

Together they continued their journey. The sun was an hour high when they came out into the desert again beyond the mountains. Beside a little rivulet they found the girl's horses grazing. They had come this far on their way home, and with the cause of their fear no longer present had stopped to feed.

With little trouble Tarzan and the girl caught them, and, mounting, rode out into the desert toward the DOUAR of Sheik Kadour ben Saden.

No sign of pursuit developed, and they came in safety about nine o'clock to their destination. The sheik had but just returned. He was frantic with grief at the absence of his daughter, whom he thought had been again abducted by the marauders. With fifty men he was already mounted to go in search of her when the two rode into the DOUAR.

His joy at the safe return of his daughter was only equaled by his gratitude to Tarzan for bringing her safely to him through the dangers of the night, and his thankfulness that she had been in time to save the man who had once saved her.

No honor that Kadour ben Saden could heap upon the ape-man in acknowledgment of his esteem and friendship was neglected. When the girl had recited the story of the slaying of EL ADREA Tarzan was surrounded by a mob of worshiping Arabs--it was a sure road to their admiration and respect.

The old sheik insisted that Tarzan remain indefinitely as his guest. He even wished to adopt him as a member of the tribe, and there was for some time a half-formed resolution in the ape-man's mind to accept and remain forever with these wild people, whom he understood and who seemed to understand him. His friendship and liking for the girl were potent factors in urging him toward an affirmative decision.

Had she been a man, he argued, he should not have hesitated, for it would have meant a friend after his own heart, with whom he could ride and hunt at will; but as it was they would be hedged by the conventionalities that are even more strictly observed by the wild nomads of the desert than by their more civilized brothers and sisters. And in a little while she would be married to one of these swarthy warriors, and there would be an end to their friendship. So he decided against the sheik's proposal, though he remained a week as his guest.

When he left, Kadour ben Saden and fifty white-robed warriors rode with him to Bou Saada. While they were mounting in the DOUAR of Kadour ben Saden the morning of their departure, the girl came to bid farewell to Tarzan.

"I have prayed that you would remain with us," she said simply, as he leaned from his saddle to clasp her hand in farewell, "and now I shall pray that you will return." There was an expression of wistfulness in her beautiful eyes, and a pathetic droop at the corners of her mouth. Tarzan was touched.

"Who knows?" and then he turned and rode after the departing Arabs.

Outside Bou Saada he bade Kadour ben Saden and his men good-by, for there were reasons which made him wish to make his entry into the town as secret as possible, and when he had explained them to the sheik the latter concurred in his decision. The Arabs were to enter Bou Saada ahead of him, saying nothing as to his presence with them. Later Tarzan would come in alone, and go directly to an obscure native inn.

Thus, making his entrance after dark, as he did, he was not seen by any one who knew him, and reached the inn unobserved. After dining with Kadour ben Saden as his guest, he went to his former hotel by a roundabout way, and, coming in by a rear entrance, sought the proprietor, who seemed much surprised to see him alive.

Yes, there was mail for monsieur; he would fetch it. No, he would mention monsieur's return to no one. Presently he returned with a packet of letters. One was an order from his superior to lay off on his present work, and hasten to Cape Town by the first steamer he could get. His further instructions would be awaiting him there in the hands of another agent whose name and address were given. That was all--brief but explicit. Tarzan arranged to leave Bou Saada early the next morning. Then he started for the garrison to see Captain Gerard, whom the hotel man had told him had returned with his detachment the previous day.

He found the officer in his quarters. He was filled with surprise and pleasure at seeing Tarzan alive and well.

"When Lieutenant Gernois returned and reported that he had not found you at the spot that you had chosen to remain while the detachment was scouting, I was filled with alarm. We searched the mountain for days. Then came word that you had been killed and eaten by a lion. As proof your gun was brought to us. Your horse had returned to camp the second day after your disappearance. We could not doubt. Lieutenant Gernois was grief-stricken--he took all the blame upon himself. It was he who insisted on carrying on the search himself. It was he who found the Arab with your gun. He will be delighted to know that you are safe."

"Doubtless," said Tarzan, with a grim smile.

"He is down in the town now, or I should send for him," continued Captain Gerard. "I shall tell him as soon as he returns."

Tarzan let the officer think that he had been lost, wandering finally into the DOUAR of Kadour ben Saden, who had escorted him back to Bou Saada. As soon as possible he bade the good officer adieu, and hastened back into the town. At the native inn he had learned through Kadour ben Saden a piece of interesting information. It told of a black-bearded white man who went always disguised as an Arab. For a time he had nursed a broken wrist. More recently he had been away from Bou Saada, but now he was back, and Tarzan knew his place of concealment. It was for there he headed.

Through narrow, stinking alleys, black as Erebus, he groped, and then up a rickety stairway, at the end of which was a closed door and a tiny, unglazed window. The window was high under the low eaves of the mud building. Tarzan could just reach the sill. He raised himself slowly until his eyes topped it. The room within was lighted, and at a table sat Rokoff and Gernois. Gernois was speaking.

"Rokoff, you are a devil!" he was saying. "You have hounded me until I have lost the last shred of my honor. You have driven me to murder, for the blood of that man Tarzan is on my hands. If it were not that that other devil's spawn, Paulvitch, still knew my secret, I should kill you here tonight with my bare hands."

Rokoff laughed. "You would not do that, my dear lieutenant," he said. "The moment I am reported dead by assassination that dear Alexis will forward to the minister of war full proof of the affair you so ardently long to conceal; and, further, will charge you with my murder. Come, be sensible. I am your best friend. Have I not protected your honor as though it were my own?"

Gernois sneered, and spat out an oath.

"Just one more little payment," continued Rokoff, "and the papers I wish, and you have my word of honor that I shall never ask another cent from you, or further information."

"And a good reason why," growled Gernois. "What you ask will take my last cent, and the only valuable military secret I hold. You ought to be paying me for the information, instead of taking both it and money, too."

"I am paying you by keeping a still tongue in my head," retorted Rokoff. "But let's have done. Will you, or will you not? I give you three minutes to decide. If you are not agreeable I shall send a note to your commandant tonight that will end in the degradation that Dreyfus suffered--the only difference being that he did not deserve it."

For a moment Gernois sat with bowed head. At length he arose. He drew two pieces of paper from his blouse.

"Here," he said hopelessly. "I had them ready, for I knew that there could be but one outcome." He held them toward the Russian.

Rokoff's cruel face lighted in malignant gloating. He seized the bits of paper.

"You have done well, Gernois," he said. "I shall not trouble you again--unless you happen to accumulate some more money or information," and he grinned.

"You never shall again, you dog!" hissed Gernois. "The next time I shall kill you. I came near doing it tonight. For an hour I sat with these two pieces of paper on my table before me ere I came here--beside them lay my loaded revolver. I was trying to decide which I should bring. Next time the choice shall be easier, for I already have decided. You had a close call tonight, Rokoff; do not tempt fate a second time."

Then Gernois rose to leave. Tarzan barely had time to drop to the landing and shrink back into the shadows on the far side of the door. Even then he scarcely hoped to elude detection. The landing was very small, and though he flattened himself against the wall at its far edge he was scarcely more than a foot from the doorway. Almost immediately it opened, and Gernois stepped out. Rokoff was behind him. Neither spoke. Gernois had taken perhaps three steps down the stairway when he halted and half turned, as though to retrace his steps.

Tarzan knew that discovery would be inevitable. Rokoff still stood on the threshold a foot from him, but he was looking in the opposite direction, toward Gernois. Then the officer evidently reconsidered his decision, and resumed his downward course. Tarzan could hear Rokoff's sigh of relief. A moment later the Russian went back into the room and closed the door.

Tarzan waited until Gernois had had time to get well out of hearing, then he pushed open the door and stepped into the room. He was on top of Rokoff before the man could rise from the chair where he sat scanning the paper Gernois had given him. As his eyes turned and fell upon the ape-man's face his own went livid.

"You!" he gasped.

"I," replied Tarzan.

"What do you want?" whispered Rokoff, for the look in the ape-man's eyes frightened him. "Have you come to kill me? You do not dare. They would guillotine you. You do not dare kill me."

"I dare kill you, Rokoff," replied Tarzan, "for no one knows that you are here or that I am here, and Paulvitch would tell them that it was Gernois. I heard you tell Gernois so. But that would not influence me, Rokoff. I would not care who knew that I had killed you; the pleasure of killing you would more than compensate for any punishment they might inflict upon me. You are the most despicable cur of a coward, Rokoff, I have ever heard of. You should be killed. I should love to kill you," and Tarzan approached closer to the man.

Rokoff's nerves were keyed to the breaking point. With a shriek he sprang toward an adjoining room, but the ape-man was upon his back while his leap was yet but half completed. Iron fingers sought his throat--the great coward squealed like a stuck pig, until Tarzan had shut off his wind. Then the ape-man dragged him to his feet, still choking him. The Russian struggled futilely--he was like a babe in the mighty grasp of Tarzan of the Apes.

Tarzan sat him in a chair, and long before there was danger of the man's dying he released his hold upon his throat. When the Russian's coughing spell had abated Tarzan spoke to him again.

"I have given you a taste of the suffering of death," he said. "But I shall not kill--this time. I am sparing you solely for the sake of a very good woman whose great misfortune it was to have been born of the same woman who gave birth to you. But I shall spare you only this once on her account. Should I ever learn that you have again annoyed her or her husband--should you ever annoy me again--should I hear that you have returned to France or to any French possession, I shall make it my sole business to hunt you down and complete the choking I commenced tonight." Then he turned to the table, on which the two pieces of paper still lay. As he picked them up Rokoff gasped in horror.

Tarzan examined both the check and the other. He was amazed at the information the latter contained. Rokoff had partially read it, but Tarzan knew that no one could remember the salient facts and figures it held which made it of real value to an enemy of France.

"These will interest the chief of staff," he said, as he slipped them into his pocket. Rokoff groaned. He did not dare curse aloud.

The next morning Tarzan rode north on his way to Bouira and Algiers. As he had ridden past the hotel Lieutenant Gernois was standing on the veranda. As his eyes discovered Tarzan he went white as chalk. The ape-man would have been glad had the meeting not occurred, but he could not avoid it. He saluted the officer as he rode past. Mechanically Gernois returned the salute, but those terrible, wide eyes followed the horseman, expressionless except for horror. It was as though a dead man looked upon a ghost.

At Sidi Aissa Tarzan met a French officer with whom he had become acquainted on the occasion of his recent sojourn in the town.

"You left Bou Saada early?" questioned the officer. "Then you have not heard about poor Gernois."

"He was the last man I saw as I rode away," replied Tarzan. "What about him?"

"He is dead. He shot himself about eight o'clock this morning."

Two days later Tarzan reached Algiers. There he found that he would have a two days' wait before he could catch a ship bound for Cape Town. He occupied his time in writing out a full report of his mission. The secret papers he had taken from Rokoff he did not inclose, for he did not dare trust them out of his own possession until he had been authorized to turn them over to another agent, or himself return to Paris with them.

As Tarzan boarded his ship after what seemed a most tedious wait to him, two men watched him from an upper deck. Both were fashionably dressed and smooth shaven. The taller of the two had sandy hair, but his eyebrows were very black. Later in the day they chanced to meet Tarzan on deck, but as one hurriedly called his companion's attention to something at sea their faces were turned from Tarzan as he passed, so that he did not notice their features. In fact, he had paid no attention to them at all.

Following the instructions of his chief, Tarzan had booked his passage under an assumed name--John Caldwell, London. He did not understand the necessity of this, and it caused him considerable speculation. He wondered what role he was to play in Cape Town.

"Well," he thought, "thank Heaven that I am rid of Rokoff. He was commencing to annoy me. I wonder if I am really becoming so civilized that presently I shall develop a set of nerves. He would give them to me if any one could, for he does not fight fair. One never knows through what new agency he is going to strike. It is as though Numa, the lion, had induced Tantor, the elephant, and Histah, the snake, to join him in attempting to kill me. I would then never have known what

minute, or by whom, I was to be attacked next. But the brutes are more chivalrous than man--they do not stoop to cowardly intrigue."

At dinner that night Tarzan sat next to a young woman whose place was at the captain's left. The officer introduced them.

Miss Strong! Where had he heard the name before? It was very familiar. And then the girl's mother gave him the clew, for when she addressed her daughter she called her Hazel.

Hazel Strong! What memories the name inspired. It had been a letter to this girl, penned by the fair hand of Jane Porter, that had carried to him the first message from the woman he loved. How vividly he recalled the night he had stolen it from the desk in the cabin of his long-dead father, where Jane Porter had sat writing it late into the night, while he crouched in the darkness without. How terror-stricken she would have been that night had she known that the wild jungle beast squatted outside her window, watching her every move.

And this was Hazel Strong--Jane Porter's best friend!