

Chapter 22 - The Treasure Vaults of Opar

It was quite dark before La, the high priestess, returned to the Chamber of the Dead with food and drink for Tarzan. She bore no light, feeling with her hands along the crumbling walls until she gained the chamber. Through the stone grating above, a tropic moon served dimly to illuminate the interior.

Tarzan, crouching in the shadows at the far side of the room as the first sound of approaching footsteps reached him, came forth to meet the girl as he recognized that it was she.

"They are furious," were her first words. "Never before has a human sacrifice escaped the altar. Already fifty have gone forth to track you down. They have searched the temple--all save this single room."

"Why do they fear to come here?" he asked.

"It is the Chamber of the Dead. Here the dead return to worship. See this ancient altar? It is here that the dead sacrifice the living--if they find a victim here. That is the reason our people shun this chamber. Were one to enter he knows that the waiting dead would seize him for their sacrifice."

"But you?" he asked.

"I am high priestess--I alone am safe from the dead. It is I who at rare intervals bring them a human sacrifice from the world above. I alone may enter here in safety."

"Why have they not seized me?" he asked, humoring her grotesque belief.

She looked at him quizzically for a moment. Then she replied:

"It is the duty of a high priestess to instruct, to interpret--according to the creed that others, wiser than herself, have laid down; but there is nothing in the creed which says that she must believe. The more one knows of one's religion the less one believes--no one living knows more of mine than I."

"Then your only fear in aiding me to escape is that your fellow mortals may discover your duplicity?"

"That is all--the dead are dead; they cannot harm--or help. We must therefore depend entirely upon ourselves, and the sooner we act the better it will be. I had difficulty in eluding their vigilance but now in bringing you this morsel of food.

To attempt to repeat the thing daily would be the height of folly. Come, let us see how far we may go toward liberty before I must return."

She led him back to the chamber beneath the altar room. Here she turned into one of the several corridors leading from it. In the darkness Tarzan could not see which one. For ten minutes they groped slowly along a winding passage, until at length they came to a closed door. Here he heard her fumbling with a key, and presently came the sound of a metal bolt grating against metal. The door swung in on scraping hinges, and they entered.

"You will be safe here until tomorrow night," she said.

Then she went out, and, closing the door, locked it behind her.

Where Tarzan stood it was dark as Erebus. Not even his trained eyes could penetrate the utter blackness. Cautiously he moved forward until his outstretched hand touched a wall, then very slowly he traveled around the four walls of the chamber.

Apparently it was about twenty feet square. The floor was of concrete, the walls of the dry masonry that marked the method of construction above ground. Small pieces of granite of various sizes were ingeniously laid together without mortar to construct these ancient foundations.

The first time around the walls Tarzan thought he detected a strange phenomenon for a room with no windows but a single door. Again he crept carefully around close to the wall. No, he could not be mistaken! He paused before the center of the wall opposite the door. For a moment he stood quite motionless, then he moved a few feet to one side. Again he returned, only to move a few feet to the other side.

Once more he made the entire circuit of the room, feeling carefully every foot of the walls. Finally he stopped again before the particular section that had aroused his curiosity. There was no doubt of it! A distinct draft of fresh air was blowing into the chamber through the intersection of the masonry at that particular point--and nowhere else.

Tarzan tested several pieces of the granite which made up the wall at this spot, and finally was rewarded by finding one which lifted out readily. It was about ten inches wide, with a face some three by six inches showing within the chamber. One by one the ape-man lifted out similarly shaped stones. The wall at this point was constructed entirely, it seemed, of these almost perfect slabs. In a short time he had removed some dozen, when he reached in to test the next layer of

masonry. To his surprise, he felt nothing behind the masonry he had removed as far as his long arm could reach.

It was a matter of but a few minutes to remove enough of the wall to permit his body to pass through the aperture. Directly ahead of him he thought he discerned a faint glow--scarcely more than a less impenetrable darkness. Cautiously he moved forward on hands and knees, until at about fifteen feet, or the average thickness of the foundation walls, the floor ended abruptly in a sudden drop. As far out as he could reach he felt nothing, nor could he find the bottom of the black abyss that yawned before him, though, clinging to the edge of the floor, he lowered his body into the darkness to its full length.

Finally it occurred to him to look up, and there above him he saw through a round opening a tiny circular patch of starry sky. Feeling up along the sides of the shaft as far as he could reach, the ape-man discovered that so much of the wall as he could feel converged toward the center of the shaft as it rose. This fact precluded possibility of escape in that direction.

As he sat speculating on the nature and uses of this strange passage and its terminal shaft, the moon topped the opening above, letting a flood of soft, silvery light into the shadowy place. Instantly the nature of the shaft became apparent to Tarzan, for far below him he saw the shimmering surface of water. He had come upon an ancient well--but what was the purpose of the connection between the well and the dungeon in which he had been hidden?

As the moon crossed the opening of the shaft its light flooded the whole interior, and then Tarzan saw directly across from him another opening in the opposite wall. He wondered if this might not be the mouth of a passage leading to possible escape. It would be worth investigating, at least, and this he determined to do.

Quickly returning to the wall he had demolished to explore what lay beyond it, he carried the stones into the passageway and replaced them from that side. The deep deposit of dust which he had noticed upon the blocks as he had first removed them from the wall had convinced him that even if the present occupants of the ancient pile had knowledge of this hidden passage they had made no use of it for perhaps generations.

The wall replaced, Tarzan turned to the shaft, which was some fifteen feet wide at this point. To leap across the intervening space was a small matter to the ape-man, and a moment later he was proceeding along a narrow tunnel, moving cautiously for fear of being precipitated into another shaft such as he had just crossed.

He had advanced some hundred feet when he came to a flight of steps leading downward into Stygian gloom. Some twenty feet below, the level floor of the tunnel recommenced, and shortly afterward his progress was stopped by a heavy wooden door which was secured by massive wooden bars upon the side of Tarzan's approach. This fact suggested to the ape-man that he might surely be in a passageway leading to the outer world, for the bolts, barring progress from the opposite side, tended to substantiate this hypothesis, unless it were merely a prison to which it led.

Along the tops of the bars were deep layers of dust--a further indication that the passage had lain long unused. As he pushed the massive obstacle aside, its great hinges shrieked out in weird protest against this unaccustomed disturbance. For a moment Tarzan paused to listen for any responsive note which might indicate that the unusual night noise had alarmed the inmates of the temple; but as he heard nothing he advanced beyond the doorway.

Carefully feeling about, he found himself within a large chamber, along the walls of which, and down the length of the floor, were piled many tiers of metal ingots of an odd though uniform shape. To his groping hands they felt not unlike double-headed bootjacks. The ingots were quite heavy, and but for the enormous number of them he would have been positive that they were gold; but the thought of the fabulous wealth these thousands of pounds of metal would have represented were they in reality gold, almost convinced him that they must be of some baser metal.

At the far end of the chamber he discovered another barred door, and again the bars upon the inside renewed the hope that he was traversing an ancient and forgotten passageway to liberty. Beyond the door the passage ran straight as a war spear, and it soon became evident to the ape-man that it had already led him beyond the outer walls of the temple. If he but knew the direction it was leading him! If toward the west, then he must also be beyond the city's outer walls.

With increasing hopes he forged ahead as rapidly as he dared, until at the end of half an hour he came to another flight of steps leading upward. At the bottom this flight was of concrete, but as he ascended his naked feet felt a sudden change in the substance they were treading. The steps of concrete had given place to steps of granite. Feeling with his hands, the ape-man discovered that these latter were evidently hewed from rock, for there was no crack to indicate a joint.

For a hundred feet the steps wound spirally up, until at a sudden turning Tarzan came into a narrow cleft between two rocky walls. Above him shone the starry sky, and before him a steep incline replaced the steps that had terminated at its

foot. Up this pathway Tarzan hastened, and at its upper end came out upon the rough top of a huge granite boulder.

A mile away lay the ruined city of Opar, its domes and turrets bathed in the soft light of the equatorial moon. Tarzan dropped his eyes to the ingot he had brought away with him. For a moment he examined it by the moon's bright rays, then he raised his head to look out upon the ancient piles of crumbling grandeur in the distance.

"Opar," he mused, "Opar, the enchanted city of a dead and forgotten past. The city of the beauties and the beasts. City of horrors and death; but--city of fabulous riches." The ingot was of virgin gold.

The boulder on which Tarzan found himself lay well out in the plain between the city and the distant cliffs he and his black warriors had scaled the morning previous. To descend its rough and precipitous face was a task of infinite labor and considerable peril even to the ape-man; but at last he felt the soft soil of the valley beneath his feet, and without a backward glance at Opar he turned his face toward the guardian cliffs, and at a rapid trot set off across the valley.

The sun was just rising as he gained the summit of the flat mountain at the valley's western boundary. Far beneath him he saw smoke arising above the tree-tops of the forest at the base of the foothills.

"Man," he murmured. "And there were fifty who went forth to track me down. Can it be they?"

Swiftly he descended the face of the cliff, and, dropping into a narrow ravine which led down to the far forest, he hastened onward in the direction of the smoke. Striking the forest's edge about a quarter of a mile from the point at which the slender column arose into the still air, he took to the trees. Cautiously he approached until there suddenly burst upon his view a rude BOMA, in the center of which, squatted about their tiny fires, sat his fifty black Waziri. He called to them in their own tongue:

"Arise, my children, and greet thy king!"

With exclamations of surprise and fear the warriors leaped to their feet, scarcely knowing whether to flee or not. Then Tarzan dropped lightly from an overhanging branch into their midst. When they realized that it was indeed their chief in the flesh, and no materialized spirit, they went mad with joy.

"We were cowards, oh, Waziri," cried Busuli. "We ran away and left you to your fate; but when our panic was over we swore to return and save you, or at least

take revenge upon your murderers. We were but now preparing to scale the heights once more and cross the desolate valley to the terrible city."

"Have you seen fifty frightful men pass down from the cliffs into this forest, my children?" asked Tarzan.

"Yes, Waziri," replied Busuli. "They passed us late yesterday, as we were about to turn back after you. They had no woodcraft. We heard them coming for a mile before we saw them, and as we had other business in hand we withdrew into the forest and let them pass. They were waddling rapidly along upon short legs, and now and then one would go upon all fours like Bolgani, the gorilla. They were indeed fifty frightful men, Waziri."

When Tarzan had related his adventures and told them of the yellow metal he had found, not one demurred when he outlined a plan to return by night and bring away what they could carry of the vast treasure; and so it was that as dusk fell across the desolate valley of Opar fifty ebon warriors trailed at a smart trot over the dry and dusty ground toward the giant boulder that loomed before the city.

If it had seemed a difficult task to descend the face of the boulder, Tarzan soon found that it would be next to impossible to get his fifty warriors to the summit. Finally the feat was accomplished by dint of herculean efforts upon the part of the ape-man. Ten spears were fastened end to end, and with one end of this remarkable chain attached to his waist, Tarzan at last succeeded in reaching the summit.

Once there, he drew up one of his blacks, and in this way the entire party was finally landed in safety upon the boulder's top. Immediately Tarzan led them to the treasure chamber, where to each was allotted a load of two ingots, for each about eighty pounds.

By midnight the entire party stood once more at the foot of the boulder, but with their heavy loads it was mid-forenoon ere they reached the summit of the cliffs. From there on the homeward journey was slow, as these proud fighting men were unaccustomed to the duties of porters. But they bore their burdens uncomplainingly, and at the end of thirty days entered their own country.

Here, instead of continuing on toward the northwest and their village, Tarzan guided them almost directly west, until on the morning of the thirty-third day he bade them break camp and return to their own village, leaving the gold where they had stacked it the previous night.

"And you, Waziri?" they asked.

"I shall remain here for a few days, my children," he replied. "Now hasten back to thy wives and children."

When they had gone Tarzan gathered up two of the ingots and, springing into a tree, ran lightly above the tangled and impenetrable mass of undergrowth for a couple of hundred yards, to emerge suddenly upon a circular clearing about which the giants of the jungle forest towered like a guardian host. In the center of this natural amphitheater, was a little flat-topped mound of hard earth.

Hundreds of times before had Tarzan been to this secluded spot, which was so densely surrounded by thorn bushes and tangled vines and creepers of huge girth that not even Sheeta, the leopard, could worm his sinuous way within, nor Tantor, with his giant strength, force the barriers which protected the council chamber of the great apes from all but the harmless denizens of the savage jungle.

Fifty trips Tarzan made before he had deposited all the ingots within the precincts of the amphitheater. Then from the hollow of an ancient, lightning-blasted tree he produced the very spade with which he had uncovered the chest of Professor Archimedes Q. Porter which he had once, apeline, buried in this selfsame spot. With this he dug a long trench, into which he laid the fortune that his blacks had carried from the forgotten treasure vaults of the city of Opar.

That night he slept within the amphitheater, and early the next morning set out to revisit his cabin before returning to his Waziri. Finding things as he had left them, he went forth into the jungle to hunt, intending to bring his prey to the cabin where he might feast in comfort, spending the night upon a comfortable couch.

For five miles toward the south he roamed, toward the banks of a fair-sized river that flowed into the sea about six miles from his cabin. He had gone inland about half a mile when there came suddenly to his trained nostrils the one scent that sets the whole savage jungle aquiver--Tarzan smelled man.

The wind was blowing off the ocean, so Tarzan knew that the authors of the scent were west of him. Mixed with the man scent was the scent of Numa. Man and lion. "I had better hasten," thought the ape-man, for he had recognized the scent of whites. "Numa may be a-hunting."

When he came through the trees to the edge of the jungle he saw a woman kneeling in prayer, and before her stood a wild, primitive-looking white man, his face buried in his arms. Behind the man a mangy lion was advancing slowly toward this easy prey. The man's face was averted; the woman's bowed in prayer. He could not see the features of either.

Already Numa was about to spring. There was not a second to spare. Tarzan could not even unsling his bow and fit an arrow in time to send one of his deadly poisoned shafts into the yellow hide. He was too far away to reach the beast in time with his knife. There was but a single hope--a lone alternative. And with the quickness of thought the ape-man acted.

A brawny arm flew back--for the briefest fraction of an instant a huge spear poised above the giant's shoulder--and then the mighty arm shot out, and swift death tore through the intervening leaves to bury itself in the heart of the leaping lion. Without a sound he rolled over at the very feet of his intended victims--dead.

For a moment neither the man nor the woman moved. Then the latter opened her eyes to look with wonder upon the dead beast behind her companion. As that beautiful head went up Tarzan of the Apes gave a gasp of incredulous astonishment. Was he mad? It could not be the woman he loved! But, indeed, it was none other.

And the woman rose, and the man took her in his arms to kiss her, and of a sudden the ape-man saw red through a bloody mist of murder, and the old scar upon his forehead burned scarlet against his brown hide.

There was a terrible expression upon his savage face as he fitted a poisoned shaft to his bow. An ugly light gleamed in those gray eyes as he sighted full at the back of the unsuspecting man beneath him.

For an instant he glanced along the polished shaft, drawing the bowstring far back, that the arrow might pierce through the heart for which it was aimed.

But he did not release the fatal messenger. Slowly the point of the arrow drooped; the scar upon the brown forehead faded; the bowstring relaxed; and Tarzan of the Apes, with bowed head, turned sadly into the jungle toward the village of the Waziri.