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Chapter 17 - The Deadly Peril of Jane Clayton

Lieutenant Albert Werper, terrified by contemplation of the fate which might await him at Adis Abeba, cast about for some scheme of escape, but after the black Mugambi had eluded their vigilance the Abyssinians redoubled their precautions to prevent Werper following the lead of the Negro.

For some time Werper entertained the idea of bribing Abdul Mourak with a portion of the contents of the pouch; but fearing that the man would demand all the gems as the price of liberty, the Belgian, influenced by avarice, sought another avenue from his dilemma.

It was then that there dawned upon him the possibility of the success of a different course which would still leave him in possession of the jewels, while at the same time satisfying the greed of the Abyssinian with the conviction that he had obtained all that Werper had to offer.

And so it was that a day or so after Mugambi had disappeared, Werper asked for an audience with Abdul Mourak. As the Belgian entered the presence of his captor the scowl upon the features of the latter boded ill for any hope which Werper might entertain, still he fortified himself by recalling the common weakness of mankind, which permits the most inflexible of natures to bend to the consuming desire for wealth.

Abdul Mourak eyed him, frowningly. "What do you want now?" he asked.

"My liberty," replied Werper.

The Abyssinian sneered. "And you disturbed me thus to tell me what any fool might know," he said.

"I can pay for it," said Werper.

Abdul Mourak laughed loudly. "Pay for it?" he cried. "What with--the rags that you have upon your back? Or, perhaps you are concealing beneath your coat a thousand pounds of ivory. Get out! You are a fool. Do not bother me again or I shall have you whipped."

But Werper persisted. His liberty and perhaps his life depended upon his success.

"Listen to me," he pleaded. "If I can give you as much gold as ten men may carry will you promise that I shall be conducted in safety to the nearest English commissioner?"

"As much gold as ten men may carry!" repeated Abdul Mourak. "You are crazy. Where have you so much gold as that?"

"I know where it is hid," said Werper. "Promise, and I will lead you to it--if ten loads is enough?"

Abdul Mourak had ceased to laugh. He was eyeing the Belgian intently. The fellow seemed sane enough--yet ten loads of gold! It was preposterous. The Abyssinian thought in silence for a moment.

"Well, and if I promise," he said. "How far is this gold?"

"A long week's march to the south," replied Werper.

"And if we do not find it where you say it is, do you realize what your punishment will be?"

"If it is not there I will forfeit my life," replied the Belgian. "I know it is there, for I saw it buried with my own eyes. And more--there are not only ten loads, but as many as fifty men may carry. It is all yours if you will promise to see me safely delivered into the protection of the English."

"You will stake your life against the finding of the gold?" asked Abdul.

Werper assented with a nod.

"Very well," said the Abyssinian, "I promise, and even if there be but five loads you shall have your freedom; but until the gold is in my possession you remain a prisoner."

"I am satisfied," said Werper. "Tomorrow we start?"

Abdul Mourak nodded, and the Belgian returned to his guards. The following day the Abyssinian soldiers were surprised to receive an order which turned their faces from the northeast to the south. And so it happened that upon the very night that Tarzan and the two apes entered the village of the raiders, the Abyssinians camped but a few miles to the east of the same spot.

While Werper dreamed of freedom and the unmolested enjoyment of the fortune in his stolen pouch, and Abdul Mourak lay awake in greedy contemplation of the fifty loads of gold which lay but a few days farther to the south of him, Achmet Zek gave orders to his lieutenants that they should prepare a force of fighting men and carriers to proceed to the ruins of the Englishman's DOUAR on the morrow and bring back the fabulous fortune which his renegade lieutenant had told him was buried there.

And as he delivered his instructions to those within, a silent listener crouched without his tent, waiting for the time when he might enter in safety and prosecute his search for the missing pouch and the pretty pebbles that had caught his fancy.

At last the swarthy companions of Achmet Zek quitted his tent, and the leader went with them to smoke a pipe with one of their number, leaving his own silken habitation

unguarded. Scarcely had they left the interior when a knife blade was thrust through the fabric of the rear wall, some six feet above the ground, and a swift downward stroke opened an entrance to those who waited beyond.

Through the opening stepped the ape-man, and close behind him came the huge Chulk; but Taglat did not follow them. Instead he turned and slunk through the darkness toward the hut where the she who had arrested his brutish interest lay securely bound. Before the doorway the sentries sat upon their haunches, conversing in monotonous tones. Within, the young woman lay upon a filthy sleeping mat, resigned, through utter hopelessness to whatever fate lay in store for her until the opportunity arrived which would permit her to free herself by the only means which now seemed even remotely possible--the hitherto detested act of self-destruction.

Creeping silently toward the sentries, a white-burnoused figure approached the shadows at one end of the hut. The meager intellect of the creature denied it the advantage it might have taken of its disguise. Where it could have walked boldly to the very sides of the sentries, it chose rather to sneak upon them, unseen, from the rear.

It came to the corner of the hut and peered around. The sentries were but a few paces away; but the ape did not dare expose himself, even for an instant, to those he feared and hated--thunder-sticks which the Tarmangani knew so well how to use, if there were another and safer method of attack.

Taglat wished that there was a tree nearby from the over-hanging branches of which he might spring upon his unsuspecting prey; but, though there was no tree, the idea gave birth to a plan. The eaves of the hut were just above the heads of the sentries--from them he could leap upon the Tarmangani, unseen. A quick snap of those mighty jaws would dispose of one of them before the other realized that they were attacked, and the second would fall an easy prey to the strength, agility and ferocity of a second quick charge.

Taglat withdrew a few paces to the rear of the hut, gathered himself for the effort, ran quickly forward and leaped high into the air. He struck the roof directly above the rear wall of the hut, and the structure, reinforced by the wall beneath, held his enormous weight for an instant, then he moved forward a step, the roof sagged, the thatching parted and the great anthropoid shot through into the interior.

The sentries, hearing the crashing of the roof poles, leaped to their feet and rushed into the hut. Jane Clayton tried to roll aside as the great form lit upon the floor so close to her that one foot pinned her clothing to the ground.

The ape, feeling the movement beside him, reached down and gathered the girl in the hollow of one mighty arm. The burnoose covered the hairy body so that Jane Clayton believed that a human arm supported her, and from the extremity of hopelessness a great hope sprang into her breast that at last she was in the keeping of a rescuer.

The two sentries were now within the hut, but hesitating because of doubt as to the nature of the cause of the disturbance. Their eyes, not yet accustomed to the darkness of the interior, told them nothing, nor did they hear any sound, for the ape stood silently awaiting their attack.

Seeing that they stood without advancing, and realizing that, handicapped as he was by the weight of the she, he could put up but a poor battle, Taglat elected to risk a sudden break for liberty. Lowering his head, he charged straight for the two sentries who blocked the doorway. The impact of his mighty shoulders bowled them over upon their backs, and before they could scramble to their feet, the ape was gone, darting in the shadows of the huts toward the palisade at the far end of the village.

The speed and strength of her rescuer filled Jane Clayton with wonder. Could it be that Tarzan had survived the bullet of the Arab? Who else in all the jungle could bear the weight of a grown woman as lightly as he who held her? She spoke his name; but there was no response. Still she did not give up hope.

At the palisade the beast did not even hesitate. A single mighty leap carried it to the top, where it poised but for an instant before dropping to the ground upon the opposite side. Now the girl was almost positive that she was safe in the arms of her husband, and when the ape took to the trees and bore her swiftly into the jungle, as Tarzan had done at other times in the past, belief became conviction.

In a little moonlit glade, a mile or so from the camp of the raiders, her rescuer halted and dropped her to the ground. His roughness surprised her, but still she had no doubts. Again she called him by name, and at the same instant the ape, fretting under the restraints of the unaccustomed garments of the Tarmangani, tore the burnoose from him, revealing to the eyes of the horror-struck woman the hideous face and hairy form of a giant anthropoid.

With a piteous wail of terror, Jane Clayton swooned, while, from the concealment of a nearby bush, Numa, the lion, eyed the pair hungrily and licked his chops.

Tarzan, entering the tent of Achmet Zek, searched the interior thoroughly. He tore the bed to pieces and scattered the contents of box and bag about the floor. He investigated whatever his eyes discovered, nor did those keen organs overlook a single article within the habitation of the raider chief; but no pouch or pretty pebbles rewarded his thoroughness.

Satisfied at last that his belongings were not in the possession of Achmet Zek, unless they were on the person of the chief himself, Tarzan decided to secure the person of the she before further prosecuting his search for the pouch.

Motioning for Chulk to follow him, he passed out of the tent by the same way that he had entered it, and walking boldly through the village, made directly for the hut where Jane Clayton had been imprisoned.

He noted with surprise the absence of Taglat, whom he had expected to find awaiting him outside the tent of Achmet Zek; but, accustomed as he was to the unreliability of apes, he gave no serious attention to the present defection of his surly companion. So long as Taglat did not cause interference with his plans, Tarzan was indifferent to his absence.

As he approached the hut, the ape-man noticed that a crowd had collected about the entrance. He could see that the men who composed it were much excited, and fearing lest Chulk's disguise should prove inadequate to the concealment of his true identity in the face of so many observers, he commanded the ape to betake himself to the far end of the village, and there await him.

As Chulk waddled off, keeping to the shadows, Tarzan advanced boldly toward the excited group before the doorway of the hut. He mingled with the blacks and the Arabs in an endeavor to learn the cause of the commotion, in his interest forgetting that he alone of the assemblage carried a spear, a bow and arrows, and thus might become an object of suspicious attention.

Shouldering his way through the crowd he approached the doorway, and had almost reached it when one of the Arabs laid a hand upon his shoulder, crying: "Who is this?" at the same time snatching back the hood from the ape-man's face.

Tarzan of the Apes in all his savage life had never been accustomed to pause in argument with an antagonist. The primitive instinct of self-preservation acknowledges many arts and wiles; but argument is not one of them, nor did he now waste precious time in an attempt to convince the raiders that he was not a wolf in sheep's clothing. Instead he had his unmasker by the throat ere the man's words had scarce quitted his lips, and hurling him from side to side brushed away those who would have swarmed

upon him.

Using the Arab as a weapon, Tarzan forced his way quickly to the doorway, and a moment later was within the hut. A hasty examination revealed the fact that it was empty, and his sense of smell discovered, too, the scent spoor of Taglat, the ape. Tarzan uttered a low, ominous growl. Those who were pressing forward at the doorway to seize him, fell back as the savage notes of the bestial challenge smote upon their ears. They looked at one another in surprise and consternation. A man had entered the hut alone, and yet with their own ears they had heard the voice of a wild beast within. What could it mean? Had a lion or a leopard sought sanctuary in the interior, unbeknown to the sentries?

Tarzan's quick eyes discovered the opening in the roof, through which Taglat had fallen. He guessed that the ape had either come or gone by way of the break, and while the Arabs hesitated without, he sprang, catlike, for the opening, grasped the top of the wall and clambered out upon the roof, dropping instantly to the ground at the rear of the hut.

When the Arabs finally mustered courage to enter the hut, after firing several volleys through the walls, they found the interior deserted. At the same time Tarzan, at the far end of the village, sought for Chulk; but the ape was nowhere to be found.

Robbed of his she, deserted by his companions, and as much in ignorance as ever as to the whereabouts of his pouch and pebbles, it was an angry Tarzan who climbed the palisade and vanished into the darkness of the jungle.

For the present he must give up the search for his pouch, since it would be paramount to self-destruction to enter the Arab camp now while all its inhabitants were aroused and upon the alert.

In his escape from the village, the ape-man had lost the spoor of the fleeing Taglat, and now he circled widely through the forest in an endeavor to again pick it up.

Chulk had remained at his post until the cries and shots of the Arabs had filled his simple soul with terror, for above all things the ape folk fear the thunder-sticks of the Tarmangani; then he had clambered nimbly over the palisade, tearing his burnoose in the effort, and fled into the depths of the jungle, grumbling and scolding as he went.

Tarzan, roaming the jungle in search of the trail of Taglat and the she, traveled swiftly. In a little moonlit glade ahead of him the great ape was bending over the prostrate form of the woman Tarzan sought. The beast was tearing at the bonds that confined her ankles and wrists, pulling and gnawing upon the cords.

The course the ape-man was taking would carry him but a short distance to the right of them, and though he could not have seen them the wind was bearing down from them to him, carrying their scent spoor strongly toward him.

A moment more and Jane Clayton's safety might have been assured, even though Numa, the lion, was already gathering himself in preparation for a charge; but Fate, already all too cruel, now outdid herself--the wind veered suddenly for a few moments, the scent spoor that would have led the ape-man to the girl's side was wafted in the opposite direction; Tarzan passed within fifty yards of the tragedy that was being enacted in the glade, and the opportunity was gone beyond recall.