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Chapter 17 - The White Chief of the Waziri

When the eyes of the black Manyuema savage fell upon the strange apparition that confronted him with menacing knife they went wide in horror. He forgot the gun within his hands; he even forgot to cry out--his one thought was to escape this fearsome-looking white savage, this giant of a man upon whose massive rolling muscles and mighty chest the flickering firelight played.

But before he could turn Tarzan was upon him, and then the sentry thought to scream for aid, but it was too late. A great hand was upon his windpipe, and he was being borne to the earth. He battled furiously but futilely--with the grim tenacity of a bulldog those awful fingers were clinging to his throat. Swiftly and surely life was being choked from him. His eyes bulged, his tongue protruded, his face turned to a ghastly purplish hue--there was a convulsive tremor of the stiffening muscles, and the Manyuema sentry lay quite still.

The ape-man threw the body across one of his broad shoulders and, gathering up the fellow's gun, trotted silently up the sleeping village street toward the tree that gave him such easy ingress to the palisaded village. He bore the dead sentry into the midst of the leafy maze above.

First he stripped the body of cartridge belt and such ornaments as he craved, wedging it into a convenient crotch while his nimble fingers ran over it in search of the loot he could not plainly see in the dark. When he had finished he took the gun that had belonged to the man, and walked far out upon a limb, from the end of which he could obtain a better view of the huts. Drawing a careful bead on the beehive structure in which he knew the chief Arabs to be, he pulled the trigger. Almost instantly there was an answering groan. Tarzan smiled. He had made another lucky hit.

Following the shot there was a moment's silence in the camp, and then Manyuema and Arab came pouring from the huts like a swarm of angry hornets; but if the truth were known they were even more frightened than they were angry. The strain of the preceding day had wrought upon the fears of both black and white, and now this single shot in the night conjured all manner of terrible conjectures in their terrified minds.

When they discovered that their sentry had disappeared, their fears were in no way allayed, and as though to bolster their courage by warlike actions, they began to fire rapidly at the barred gates of the village, although no enemy was in sight. Tarzan took advantage of the deafening roar of this fusillade to fire into the mob beneath him.

No one heard his shot above the din of rattling musketry in the street, but some who were standing close saw one of their number crumple suddenly to the earth. When they leaned over him he was dead. They were panic-stricken, and it took all the brutal authority of the Arabs to keep the Manyuema from rushing helter-skelter into the jungle--anywhere to escape from this terrible village.

After a time they commenced to quiet down, and as no further mysterious deaths occurred among them they took heart again. But it was a short-lived respite, for just as they had concluded that they would not be disturbed again Tarzan gave voice to a weird moan, and as the raiders looked up in the direction from which the sound seemed to come, the ape-man, who stood swinging the dead body of the sentry gently to and fro, suddenly shot the corpse far out above their heads.

With howls of alarm the throng broke in all directions to escape this new and terrible creature who seemed to be springing upon them. To their fear-distorted imaginations the body of the sentry, falling with wide-sprawled arms and legs, assumed the likeness of a great beast of prey. In their anxiety to escape, many of the blacks scaled the palisade, while others tore down the bars from the gates and rushed madly across the clearing toward the jungle.

For a time no one turned back toward the thing that had frightened them, but Tarzan knew that they would in a moment, and when they discovered that it was but the dead body of their sentry, while they would doubtless be still further terrified, he had a rather definite idea as to what they would do, and so he faded silently away toward the south, taking the moonlit upper terrace back toward the camp of the Waziri.

Presently one of the Arabs turned and saw that the thing that had leaped from the tree upon them lay still and quiet where it had fallen in the center of the village street. Cautiously he crept back toward it until he saw that it was but a man. A moment later he was beside the figure, and in another had recognized it as the corpse of the Manyuema who had stood on guard at the village gate.

His companions rapidly gathered around at his call, and after a moment's excited conversation they did precisely what Tarzan had reasoned they would. Raising their guns to their shoulders, they poured volley after volley into the tree from which the corpse had been thrown--had Tarzan remained there he would have been riddled by a hundred bullets.

When the Arabs and Manyuema discovered that the only marks of violence upon the body of their dead comrade were giant finger prints upon his swollen throat they were again thrown into deeper apprehension and despair. That they were not even safe within a palisaded village at night came as a distinct shock to them. That an enemy could enter into the midst of their camp and kill their sentry with bare hands seemed outside the bounds of reason, and so the superstitious Manyuema commenced to attribute their ill luck to supernatural causes; nor were the Arabs able to offer any better explanation.

With at least fifty of their number flying through the black jungle, and without the slightest knowledge of when their uncanny foemen might resume the cold-blooded slaughter they had commenced, it was a desperate band of cut-throats that waited sleeplessly for the dawn. Only on the promise of the Arabs that they would leave the village at daybreak, and hasten onward toward their own land, would the remaining Manyuema consent to stay at the village a moment longer. Not even fear of their cruel masters was sufficient to overcome this new terror.

And so it was that when Tarzan and his warriors returned to the attack the next morning they found the raiders prepared to march out of the village. The Manyuema were laden with stolen ivory. As Tarzan saw it he grinned, for he knew that they would not carry it far. Then he saw something which caused him anxiety--a number of the Manyuema were lighting torches in the remnant of the camp-fire. They were about to fire the village.

Tarzan was perched in a tall tree some hundred yards from the palisade. Making a trumpet of his hands, he called loudly in the Arab tongue: "Do not fire the huts, or we shall kill you all! Do not fire the huts, or we shall kill you all!"

A dozen times he repeated it. The Manyuema hesitated, then one of them flung his torch into the campfire. The others were about to do the same when an Arab sprang upon them with a stick, beating them toward the huts. Tarzan could see that he was commanding them to fire the little thatched dwellings. Then he stood erect upon the swaying branch a hundred feet above the ground, and, raising one of the Arab guns to his shoulder, took careful aim and fired. With the report the Arab who was urging on his men to burn the village fell in his tracks, and the Manyuema threw away their torches and fled from the village. The last Tarzan saw of them they were racing toward the jungle, while their former masters knelt upon the ground and fired at them.

But however angry the Arabs might have been at the insubordination of their slaves, they were at least convinced that it would be the better part of wisdom to forego the pleasure of firing the village that had given them two such nasty receptions. In their hearts, however, they swore to return again with such force as would enable them to sweep the entire country for miles around, until no vestige of human life remained.

They had looked in vain for the owner of the voice which had frightened off the men who had been detailed to put the torch to the huts, but not even the keenest eye among them had been able to locate him. They had seen the puff of smoke from the tree following the shot that brought down the Arab, but, though a volley had immediately been loosed into its foliage, there had been no indication that it had been effective.

Tarzan was too intelligent to be caught in any such trap, and so the report of his shot had scarcely died away before the ape-man was on the ground and racing for another tree a hundred yards away. Here he again found a suitable perch from which he could watch the preparations of the raiders. It occurred to him that he might have considerable more fun with them, so again he called to them through his improvised trumpet.

"Leave the ivory!" he cried. "Leave the ivory! Dead men have no use for ivory!"

Some of the Manyuema started to lay down their loads, but this was altogether too much for the avaricious Arabs. With loud shouts and curses they aimed their guns full upon the bearers, threatening instant death to any who might lay down his load. They could give up firing the village, but the thought of abandoning this enormous fortune in ivory was quite beyond their conception--better death than that.

And so they marched out of the village of the Waziri, and on the shoulders of their slaves was the ivory ransom of a score of kings. Toward the north they marched, back toward their savage settlement in the wild and unknown country which lies back from the Kongo in the uttermost depths of The Great Forest, and on either side of them traveled an invisible and relentless foe.

Under Tarzan's guidance the black Waziri warriors stationed themselves along the trail on either side in the densest underbrush. They stood at far intervals, and, as the column passed, a single arrow or a heavy spear, well aimed, would pierce a Manyuema or an Arab. Then the Waziri would melt into the distance and run ahead to take his stand farther on. They did not strike unless success were sure and the danger of detection almost nothing, and so the arrows and the spears were few and far between, but so persistent and inevitable that the slow-moving column of heavy-laden raiders was in a constant state of panic--panic at the uncertainty of who the next would be to fall, and when.

It was with the greatest difficulty that the Arabs prevented their men a dozen times from throwing away their burdens and fleeing like frightened rabbits up the trail toward the north. And so the day wore on--a frightful nightmare of a day for the raiders--a day of weary but well-repaid work for the Waziri. At night the Arabs constructed a rude BOMA in a little clearing by a river, and went into camp.

At intervals during the night a rifle would bark close above their heads, and one of the dozen sentries which they now had posted would tumble to the ground. Such a condition was insupportable, for they saw that by means of these hideous tactics they would be completely wiped out, one by one, without inflicting a single death upon their enemy. But yet, with the persistent avariciousness of the white man, the Arabs clung to their loot, and when morning came forced the demoralized Manyuema to take up their burdens of death and stagger on into the jungle.

For three days the withering column kept up its frightful march. Each hour was marked by its deadly arrow or cruel spear. The nights were made hideous by the barking of the invisible gun that made sentry duty equivalent to a death sentence.

On the morning of the fourth day the Arabs were compelled to shoot two of their blacks before they could compel the balance to take up the hated ivory, and as they did so a voice rang out, clear and strong, from the jungle: "Today you die, oh, Manyuema, unless you lay down the ivory. Fall upon your cruel masters and kill them! You have guns, why do you not use them? Kill the Arabs, and we will not harm you. We will take you back to our village and feed you, and lead you out of our country in safety and in peace. Lay down the ivory, and fall upon your masters--we will help you. Else you die!"

As the voice died down the raiders stood as though turned to stone. The Arabs eyed their Manyuema slaves; the slaves looked first at one of their fellows, and then at another--they were but waiting for some one to take the initiative. There were some thirty Arabs left, and about one hundred and fifty blacks. All were armed--even those who were acting as porters had their rifles slung across their backs.

The Arabs drew together. The sheik ordered the Manyuema to take up the march, and as he spoke he cocked his rifle and raised it. But at the same instant one of the blacks threw down his load, and, snatching his rifle from his back, fired point-black at the group of Arabs. In an instant the camp was a cursing, howling mass of demons, fighting with guns and knives and pistols. The Arabs stood together, and defended their lives valiantly, but with the rain of lead that poured upon them from their own slaves, and the shower of arrows and spears which now leaped from the surrounding jungle aimed solely at them, there was little question from the first what the outcome would be. In ten minutes from the time the first porter had thrown down his load the last of the Arabs lay dead.

When the firing had ceased Tarzan spoke again to the Manyuema:

"Take up our ivory, and return it to our village, from whence you stole it. We shall not harm you."

For a moment the Manyuema hesitated. They had no stomach to retrace that difficult three days' trail. They talked together in low whispers, and one turned toward the jungle, calling aloud to the voice that had spoken to them from out of the foliage.

"How do we know that when you have us in your village you will not kill us all?" he asked.

"You do not know," replied Tarzan, "other than that we have promised not to harm you if you will return our ivory to us. But this you do know, that it lies within our power to kill you all if you do not return as we direct, and are we not more likely to do so if you anger us than if you do as we bid?"

"Who are you that speaks the tongue of our Arab masters?" cried the Manyuema spokesman. "Let us see you, and then we shall give you our answer."

Tarzan stepped out of the jungle a dozen paces from them.

"Look!" he said. When they saw that he was white they were filled with awe, for never had they seen a white savage before, and at his great muscles and giant frame they

were struck with wonder and admiration.

"You may trust me," said Tarzan. "So long as you do as I tell you, and harm none of my people, we shall do you no hurt. Will you take up our ivory and return in peace to our village, or shall we follow along your trail toward the north as we have followed for the past three days?"

The recollection of the horrid days that had just passed was the thing that finally decided the Manyuema, and so, after a short conference, they took up their burdens and set off to retrace their steps toward the village of the Waziri. At the end of the third day they marched into the village gate, and were greeted by the survivors of the recent massacre, to whom Tarzan had sent a messenger in their temporary camp to the south on the day that the raiders had quitted the village, telling them that they might return in safety.

It took all the mastery and persuasion that Tarzan possessed to prevent the Waziri falling on the Manyuema tooth and nail, and tearing them to pieces, but when he had explained that he had given his word that they would not be molested if they carried the ivory back to the spot from which they had stolen it, and had further impressed upon his people that they owed their entire victory to him, they finally acceded to his demands, and allowed the cannibals to rest in peace within their palisade.

That night the village warriors held a big palaver to celebrate their victories, and to choose a new chief. Since old Waziri's death Tarzan had been directing the warriors in battle, and the temporary command had been tacitly conceded to him. There had been no time to choose a new chief from among their own number, and, in fact, so remarkably successful had they been under the ape-man's generalship that they had had no wish to delegate the supreme authority to another for fear that what they already had gained might be lost. They had so recently seen the results of running counter to this savage white man's advice in the disastrous charge ordered by Waziri, in which he himself had died, that it had not been difficult for them to accept Tarzan's authority as final.

The principal warriors sat in a circle about a small fire to discuss the relative merits of whomever might be suggested as old Waziri's successor. It was Busuli who spoke first:

"Since Waziri is dead, leaving no son, there is but one among us whom we know from experience is fitted to make us a good king. There is only one who has proved that he can successfully lead us against the guns of the white man, and bring us easy victory without the loss of a single life. There is only one, and that is the white man who has led us for the past few days," and Busuli sprang to his feet, and with uplifted spear and half-bent, crouching body commenced to dance slowly about Tarzan, chanting in time to his steps: "Waziri, king of the Waziri; Waziri, killer of Arabs; Waziri, king of the Waziri."

One by one the other warriors signified their acceptance of Tarzan as their king by joining in the solemn dance. The women came and squatted about the rim of the circle, beating upon tom-toms, clapping their hands in time to the steps of the dancers, and joining in the chant of the warriors. In the center of the circle sat Tarzan of the Apes--Waziri, king of the Waziri, for, like his predecessor, he was to take the name of his tribe as his own.

Faster and faster grew the pace of the dancers, louder and louder their wild and savage shouts. The women rose and fell in unison, shrieking now at the tops of their voices. The spears were brandishing fiercely, and as the dancers stooped down and beat their shields upon the hard-tramped earth of the village street the whole sight was as terribly primeval and savage as though it were being staged in the dim dawn of humanity, countless ages in the past.

As the excitement waxed the ape-man sprang to his feet and joined in the wild ceremony. In the center of the circle of glittering black bodies he leaped and roared and shook his heavy spear in the same mad abandon that enthralled his fellow savages. The last remnant of his civilization was forgotten--he was a primitive man to the fullest now; reveling in the freedom of the fierce, wild life he loved, gloating in his kingship among these wild blacks.

Ah, if Olga de Coude had but seen him then--could she have recognized the well-dressed, quiet young man whose well-bred face and irreproachable manners had so captivated her but a few short months ago? And Jane Porter! Would she have still loved this savage warrior chieftain, dancing naked among his naked savage subjects? And D'Arnot! Could D'Arnot have believed that this was the same man he had introduced into half a dozen of the most select clubs of Paris? What would his fellow peers in the House of Lords have said had one pointed to this dancing giant, with his barbaric headdress and his metal ornaments, and said: "There, my lords, is John Clayton, Lord Greystoke."

And so Tarzan of the Apes came into a real kingship among men--slowly but surely was he following the evolution of his ancestors, for had he not started at the very bottom?