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Chapter 20 - La

For a moment Tarzan thought that by some strange freak of fate a miracle had saved him, but when he realized the ease with which the girl had, single-handed, beaten off twenty gorilla-like males, and an instant later, as he saw them again take up their dance about him while she addressed them in a singsong monotone, which bore every evidence of rote, he came to the conclusion that it was all but a part of the ceremony of which he was the central figure.

After a moment or two the girl drew a knife from her girdle, and, leaning over Tarzan, cut the bonds from his legs. Then, as the men stopped their dance, and approached, she motioned to him to rise. Placing the rope that had been about his legs around his neck, she led him across the courtyard, the men following in twos.

Through winding corridors she led, farther and farther into the remoter precincts of the temple, until they came to a great chamber in the center of which stood an altar. Then it was that Tarzan translated the strange ceremony that had preceded his introduction into this holy of holies.

He had fallen into the hands of descendants of the ancient sun worshippers. His seeming rescue by a votaress of the high priestess of the sun had been but a part of the mimicry of their heathen ceremony--the sun looking down upon him through the opening at the top of the court had claimed him as his own, and the priestess had come from the inner temple to save him from the polluting hands of worldlings-- to save him as a human offering to their flaming deity.

And had he needed further assurance as to the correctness of his theory he had only to cast his eyes upon the brownish- red stains that caked the stone altar and covered the floor in its immediate vicinity, or to the human skulls which grinned from countless niches in the towering walls.

The priestess led the victim to the altar steps. Again the galleries above filled with watchers, while from an arched doorway at the east end of the chamber a procession of females filed slowly into the room. They wore, like the men, only skins of wild animals caught about their waists with rawhide belts or chains of gold; but the black masses of their hair were incrustated with golden headgear composed of many circular and oval pieces of gold ingeniously held together to form a metal cap from which depended at each side of the head, long strings of oval pieces falling to the waist.

The females were more symmetrically proportioned than the males, their features were much more perfect, the shapes of their heads and their large, soft, black eyes denoting far greater intelligence and humanity than was possessed by their lords and masters.

Each priestess bore two golden cups, and as they formed in line along one side of the altar the men formed opposite them, advancing and taking each a cup from the female opposite. Then the chant began once more, and presently from a dark passageway beyond the altar another female emerged from the cavernous depths beneath the chamber.

The high priestess, thought Tarzan. She was a young woman with a rather intelligent and shapely face. Her ornaments were similar to those worn by her votaries, but much more elaborate, many being set with diamonds. Her bare arms and legs were almost concealed by the massive, bejeweled ornaments which covered them, while her single leopard skin was supported by a close-fitting girdle of golden rings set in strange designs with innumerable small diamonds. In the girdle she carried a long, jeweled knife, and in her hand a slender wand in lieu of a bludgeon.

As she advanced to the opposite side of the altar she halted, and the chanting ceased. The priests and priestesses knelt before her, while with wand extended above them she recited a long and tiresome prayer. Her voice was soft and musical--Tarzan could scarce realize that its possessor in a moment more would be transformed by the fanatical ecstasy of religious zeal into a wild-eyed and bloodthirsty executioner, who, with dripping knife, would be the first to drink her victim's red, warm blood from the little golden cup that stood upon the altar.

As she finished her prayer she let her eyes rest for the first time upon Tarzan. With every indication of considerable curiosity she examined him from head to foot. Then she addressed him, and when she had finished stood waiting, as though she expected a reply.

"I do not understand your language," said Tarzan. "Possibly we may speak together in another tongue?" But she could not understand him, though he tried French, English, Arab, Waziri, and, as a last resort, the mongrel tongue of the West Coast.

She shook her head, and it seemed that there was a note of weariness in her voice as she motioned to the priests to continue with the rites. These now circled in a repetition of their idiotic dance, which was terminated finally at a command from the priestess, who had stood throughout, still looking intently upon Tarzan.

At her signal the priests rushed upon the ape-man, and, lifting him bodily, laid him upon his back across the altar, his head hanging over one edge, his legs over the opposite. Then they and the priestesses formed in two lines, with their little golden cups in readiness to capture a share of the victim's lifeblood after the sacrificial knife had accomplished its work.

In the line of priests an altercation arose as to who should have first place. A burly brute with all the refined intelligence of a gorilla stamped upon his bestial face was attempting to push a smaller man to second place, but the smaller one appealed to the high priestess, who in a cold peremptory voice sent the larger to the extreme end of the line. Tarzan could hear him growling and rumbling as he went slowly to the inferior station.

Then the priestess, standing above him, began reciting what Tarzan took to be an invocation, the while she slowly raised her thin, sharp knife aloft. It seemed ages to the ape-man before her arm ceased its upward progress and the knife halted high above his unprotected breast.

Then it started downward, slowly at first, but as the incantation increased in rapidity, with greater speed. At the end of the line Tarzan could still hear the grumbling of the disgruntled priest. The man's voice rose louder and louder. A priestess near him spoke in sharp tones of rebuke. The knife was quite near to Tarzan's breast now, but it halted for an instant as the high priestess raised her eyes to shoot her swift displeasure at the instigator of this sacrilegious interruption.

There was a sudden commotion in the direction of the disputants, and Tarzan rolled his head in their direction in time to see the burly brute of a priest leap upon the woman opposite him, dashing out her brains with a single blow of his heavy cudgel. Then that happened which Tarzan had witnessed a hundred times before among the wild

denizens of his own savage jungle. He had seen the thing fall upon Kerchak, and Tublat, and Terkoz; upon a dozen of the other mighty bull apes of his tribe; and upon Tantor, the elephant; there was scarce any of the males of the forest that did not at times fall prey to it. The priest went mad, and with his heavy bludgeon ran amuck among his fellows.

His screams of rage were frightful as he dashed hither and thither, dealing terrific blows with his giant weapon, or sinking his yellow fangs into the flesh of some luckless victim. And during it the priestess stood with poised knife above Tarzan, her eyes fixed in horror upon the maniacal thing that was dealing out death and destruction to her votaries.

Presently the room was emptied except for the dead and dying on the floor, the victim upon the altar, the high priestess, and the madman. As the cunning eyes of the latter fell upon the woman they lighted with a new and sudden lust. Slowly he crept toward her, and now he spoke; but this time there fell upon Tarzan's surprised ears a language he could understand; the last one that he would ever have thought of employing in attempting to converse with human beings--the low guttural barking of the tribe of great anthropoids--his own mother tongue. And the woman answered the man in the same language.

He was threatening--she attempting to reason with him, for it was quite evident that she saw that he was past her authority. The brute was quite close now--creeping with clawlike hands extended toward her around the end of the altar. Tarzan strained at the bonds which held his arms pinioned behind him. The woman did not see--she had forgotten her prey in the horror of the danger that threatened herself. As the brute leaped past Tarzan to clutch his victim, the ape-man gave one superhuman wrench at the thongs that held him. The effort sent him rolling from the altar to the stone floor on the opposite side from that on which the priestess stood; but as he sprang to his feet the thongs dropped from his freed arms, and at the same time he realized that he was alone in the inner temple--the high priestess and the mad priest had disappeared.

And then a muffled scream came from the cavernous mouth of the dark hole beyond the sacrificial altar through which the priestess had entered the temple. Without even a thought for his own safety, or the possibility for escape which this rapid series of fortuitous circumstances had thrust upon him, Tarzan of the Apes answered the call of the woman in danger. With a little bound he was at the gaping entrance to the subterranean chamber, and a moment later was running down a flight of age-old concrete steps that led he knew not where.

The faint light that filtered in from above showed him a large, low-ceiled vault from which several doorways led off into inky darkness, but there was no need to thread an unknown way, for there before him lay the objects of his search--the mad brute had the girl upon the floor, and gorilla-like fingers were clutching frantically at her throat as she struggled to escape the fury of the awful thing upon her.

As Tarzan's heavy hand fell upon his shoulder the priest dropped his victim, and turned upon her would-be rescuer. With foam-flecked lips and bared fangs the mad sun-worshiper battled with the tenfold power of the maniac. In the blood lust of his fury the creature had undergone a sudden reversion to type, which left him a wild beast, forgetful of the dagger that projected from his belt--thinking only of nature's weapons with which his brute prototype had battled.

But if he could use his teeth and hands to advantage, he found one even better versed in the school of savage warfare to which he had reverted, for Tarzan of the Apes closed with him, and they fell to the floor tearing and rending at one another like two bull apes; while the primitive priestess stood flattened against the wall, watching with wide, fear-fascinated eyes the growing, snapping beasts at her feet.

At last she saw the stranger close one mighty hand upon the throat of his antagonist, and as he forced the bruteman's head far back rain blow after blow upon the upturned face. A moment later he threw the still thing from him, and, arising, shook himself like a lion. He placed a foot upon the carcass before him, and raised his head to give the victory cry of his kind, but as his eyes fell upon the opening above him leading into the temple of human sacrifice he thought better of his intended act.

The girl, who had been half paralyzed by fear as the two men fought, had just commenced to give thought to her probable fate now that, though released from the clutches of a madman, she had fallen into the hands of one whom but a moment before she had been upon the point of killing. She looked about for some means of escape. The black mouth of a diverging corridor was near at hand, but as she turned to dart into it the ape-man's eyes fell upon her, and with a quick leap he was at her side, and a restraining hand was laid upon her arm.

"Wait!" said Tarzan of the Apes, in the language of the tribe of Kerchak.

The girl looked at him in astonishment.

"Who are you," she whispered, "who speaks the language of the first man?"

"I am Tarzan of the Apes," he answered in the vernacular of the anthropoids.

"What do you want of me?" she continued. "For what purpose did you save me from Tha?"

"I could not see a woman murdered?" It was a half question that answered her.

"But what do you intend to do with me now?" she continued.

"Nothing," he replied, "but you can do something for me--you can lead me out of this place to freedom." He made the suggestion without the slightest thought that she would accede. He felt quite sure that the sacrifice would go on from the point where it had been interrupted if the high priestess had her way, though he was equally positive that they would find Tarzan of the Apes unbound and with a long dagger in his hand a much less tractable victim than Tarzan disarmed and bound.

The girl stood looking at him for a long moment before she spoke.

"You are a very wonderful man," she said. "You are such a man as I have seen in my daydreams ever since I was a little girl. You are such a man as I imagine the forbears of my people must have been--the great race of people who built this mighty city in the heart of a savage world that they might wrest from the bowels of the earth the fabulous wealth for which they had sacrificed their far-distant civilization.

"I cannot understand why you came to my rescue in the first place, and now I cannot understand why, having me within your power, you do not wish to be revenged upon me for having sentenced you to death--for having almost put you to death with my own hand."

"I presume," replied the ape-man, "that you but followed the teachings of your religion. I cannot blame YOU for that, no matter what I may think of your creed. But who are you--what people have I fallen among?"

"I am La, high priestess of the Temple of the Sun, in the city of Opar. We are descendants of a people who came to this savage world more than ten thousand years ago in search of gold. Their cities stretched from a great sea under the rising sun to a great sea into which the sun descends at night to cool his flaming brow. They were very

rich and very powerful, but they lived only a few months of the year in their magnificent palaces here; the rest of the time they spent in their native land, far, far to the north.

"Many ships went back and forth between this new world and the old. During the rainy season there were but few of the inhabitants remained here, only those who superintended the working of the mines by the black slaves, and the merchants who had to stay to supply their wants, and the soldiers who guarded the cities and the mines.

"It was at one of these times that the great calamity occurred. When the time came for the teeming thousands to return none came. For weeks the people waited. Then they sent out a great galley to learn why no one came from the mother country, but though they sailed about for many months, they were unable to find any trace of the mighty land that had for countless ages borne their ancient civilization--it had sunk into the sea.

"From that day dated the downfall of my people. Disheartened and unhappy, they soon became a prey to the black hordes of the north and the black hordes of the south. One by one the cities were deserted or overcome. The last remnant was finally forced to take shelter within this mighty mountain fortress. Slowly we have dwindled in power, in civilization, in intellect, in numbers, until now we are no more than a small tribe of savage apes.

"In fact, the apes live with us, and have for many ages. We call them the first men--we speak their language quite as much as we do our own; only in the rituals of the temple do we make any attempt to retain our mother tongue. In time it will be forgotten, and we will speak only the language of the apes; in time we will no longer banish those of our people who mate with apes, and so in time we shall descend to the very beasts from which ages ago our progenitors may have sprung."

"But why are you more human than the others?" asked the man.

"For some reason the women have not reverted to savagery so rapidly as the men. It may be because only the lower types of men remained here at the time of the great catastrophe, while the temples were filled with the noblest daughters of the race. My strain has remained clearer than the rest because for countless ages my foremothers were high priestesses--the sacred office descends from mother to daughter. Our husbands are chosen for us from the noblest in the land. The most perfect man, mentally and physically, is selected to be the husband of the high priestess."

"From what I saw of the gentlemen above," said Tarzan, with a grin, "there should be little trouble in choosing from among them."

The girl looked at him quizzically for a moment.

"Do not be sacrilegious," she said. "They are very holy men--they are priests."

"Then there are others who are better to look upon?" he asked.

"The others are all more ugly than the priests," she replied.

Tarzan shuddered at her fate, for even in the dim light of the vault he was impressed by her beauty.

"But how about myself?" he asked suddenly. "Are you going to lead me to liberty?"

"You have been chosen by The Flaming God as his own," she answered solemnly. "Not even I have the power to save you--should they find you again. But I do not intend that they shall find you. You risked your life to save mine. I may do no less for you. It will be no easy matter--it may require days; but in the end I think that I can lead you beyond the walls. Come, they will look here for me presently, and if they find us together we shall both be lost--they would kill me did they think that I had proved false to my god."

"You must not take the risk, then," he said quickly. "I will return to the temple, and if I can fight my way to freedom there will be no suspicion thrown upon you."

But she would not have it so, and finally persuaded him to follow her, saying that they had already remained in the vault too long to prevent suspicion from falling upon her even if they returned to the temple.

"I will hide you, and then return alone," she said, "telling them that I was long unconscious after you killed Tha, and that I do not know whither you escaped."

And so she led him through winding corridors of gloom, until finally they came to a small chamber into which a little light filtered through a stone grating in the ceiling.

"This is the Chamber of the Dead," she said. "None will think of searching here for you--they would not dare. I will return after it is dark. By that time I may have found a plan to effect your escape."

She was gone, and Tarzan of the Apes was left alone in the Chamber of the Dead, beneath the long-dead city of Opar.