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Chapter 21 - In The Alcove

As Smith-Oldwick realized that he was alone and practically defenseless in an enclosure filled with great lions he was, in his weakened condition, almost in a state verging upon hysterical terror. Clinging to the grating for support he dared not turn his head in the direction of the beasts behind him. He felt his knees giving weakly beneath him. Something within his head spun rapidly around. He became very dizzy and nauseated and then suddenly all went black before his eyes as his limp body collapsed at the foot of the grating.

How long he lay there unconscious he never knew; but as reason slowly reasserted itself in his semi-conscious state he was aware that he lay in a cool bed upon the whitest of linen in a bright and cheery room, and that upon one side close to him was an open window, the delicate hangings of which were fluttering in a soft summer breeze which blew in from a sun-kissed orchard of ripening fruit which he could see without -- an old orchard in which soft, green grass grew between the laden trees, and where the sun filtered through the foliage; and upon the dappled greensward a little child was playing with a frolicsome puppy.

"God," thought the man, "what a horrible nightmare I have passed through!" and then he felt a hand stroking his brow and cheek -- a cool and gentle hand that smoothed away his troubled recollections. For a long minute Smith-Oldwick lay in utter peace and content until gradually there was forced upon his sensibilities the fact that the hand had become rough, and that it was no longer cool but hot and moist; and suddenly he opened his eyes and looked up into the face of a huge lion.

Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick was not only an English gentleman and an officer in name, he was also what these implied -- a brave man; but when he realized that the sweet picture he had looked upon was but the figment of a dream, and that in reality he still lay where he had fallen at the foot of the grating with a lion standing over him licking his face, the tears sprang to his eyes and ran down his cheeks. Never, he thought, had an unkind fate played so cruel a joke upon a human being.

For some time he lay feigning death while the lion, having ceased to lick him, sniffed about his body. There are some things than which death is to be preferred; and there came at last to the Englishman the realization that it would be better to die swiftly than to lie in this horrible predicament until his mind broke beneath the strain and he went mad.

And so, deliberately and without haste, he rose, clinging to the grating for support. At his first move the lion growled, but after that he paid no further attention to the man, and when at last Smith-Oldwick had regained his feet the lion moved indifferently away. Then it was that the man turned and looked about the enclosure.

Sprawled beneath the shade of the trees and lying upon the long bench beside the south wall the great beasts rested, with the exception of two or three who moved restlessly about. It was these that the man feared and yet when two more of them had passed him by he began to feel reassured, recalling the fact that they were accustomed to the presence of man.

And yet he dared not move from the grating. As the man examined his surroundings he noted that the branches of one of the trees near the further wall spread close beneath an open window. If he could reach that tree and had strength to do so, he could easily climb out upon the branch and escape, at least, from the enclosure of the lions. But in order to reach the tree he must pass the full length of the enclosure, and at the very bole of the tree itself two lions lay sprawled out in slumber.

For half an hour the man stood gazing longingly at this seeming avenue of escape, and at last, with a muttered oath, he straightened up and throwing back his shoulders in a gesture of defiance, he walked slowly and deliberately down the center of the courtyard. One of the prowling lions turned from the side wall and moved toward the center directly in the man's path, but Smith-Oldwick was committed to what he considered his one chance, for even temporary safety, and so he kept on, ignoring the presence of the beast. The lion slouched to his side and sniffed him and then, growling, he bared his teeth.

Smith-Oldwick drew the pistol from his shirt. "If he has made up his mind to kill me," he thought. "I can't see that it will make any difference in the long run whether he infuriate him or not. The beggar can't kill me any deader in one mood than another."

But with the man's movement in withdrawing the weapon from his shirt the lion's attitude suddenly altered and though he still growled he turned and sprang away, and then at last the Englishman stood almost at the foot of the tree that was his goal, and between him and safety sprawled a sleeping lion.

Above him was a limb that ordinarily he could have leaped for and reached with ease; but weak from his wounds and loss of blood he doubted his ability to do so now. There was even a question as to whether he would be able to ascend the tree at all. There was just one chance: the lowest branch left the bole within easy reach of a man standing on the ground close to the tree's stem, but to reach a position where the branch would be accessible he must step over the body of a lion. Taking a deep breath he placed one foot between the sprawled legs of the beast and gingerly raised the other to plant it upon the opposite side of the tawny body. "What," he thought, "if the beggar should happen to wake now?" The suggestion sent a shudder through his frame but he did not hesitate or withdraw his foot. Gingerly he planted it beyond the lion, threw his weight forward upon it and cautiously brought his other foot to the side of the first. He had passed and the lion had not awakened.

Smith-Oldwick was weak from loss of blood and the hardships he had undergone, but the realization of his situation impelled him to a show of agility and energy which he probably could scarcely have equaled when in possession of his normal strength. With his life depending upon the success of his efforts, he swung himself quickly to the lower branches of the tree and scrambled upward out of reach of possible harm from the lions below -- though the sudden movement in the branches above them awakened both the sleeping beasts. The animals raised their heads and looked questioningly up for a moment and then lay back again to resume their broken slumber.

So easily had the Englishman succeeded thus far that he suddenly began to question as to whether he had at any time been in real danger. The lions, as he knew, were accustomed to the presence of men, but yet they were still lions and he was free to admit that he breathed more easily now that he was safe above their clutches.

Before him lay the open window he had seen from the ground. He was now on a level with it and could see an apparently unoccupied chamber beyond, and toward this he made his way along a stout branch that swung beneath the opening. It was not a difficult feat to reach the window, and a moment later he drew himself over the sill and dropped into the room.

He found himself in a rather spacious apartment, the floor of which was covered with rugs of barbaric design, while the few pieces of furniture were of a similar type to that which he had seen in the room on the first floor into which he and Bertha Kircher had been ushered at the conclusion of their journey. At one end of the room was

what appeared to be a curtain alcove and near the wall opposite and closed door, apparently the only exit from the room.

He could see, in the waning light without, that the close of the day was fast approaching, and he hesitated while he deliberated the advisability of waiting until darkness had fallen, or of immediately searching for some means of escape from the building and the city. He at last decided that it would do no harm to investigate beyond the room, that he might have some idea as how best to plan his escape after dark. To this end he crossed the room toward the door but he had taken only a few steps when the hangings before the alcove separated and the figure of a woman appeared in the opening.

She was young and beautifully formed; the single drapery wound around her body from below her breasts left no detail of her symmetrical proportions unrevealed, but her face was the face of an imbecile. At sight of her Smith-Oldwick halted, momentarily expecting that his presence would elicit screams for help from her. On the contrary she came toward him smiling, and when she was close her slender, shapely fingers touched the sleeve of his torn blouse as a curious child might handle a new toy, and still with the same smile she examined him from head to foot, taking in, in childish wonderment, every detail of his apparel.

Presently she spoke to him in a soft, well-modulated voice which contrasted sharply with her facial appearance. The voice and the girlish figure harmonized perfectly and seemed to belong to each other, while the head and face were those of another creature. Smith-Oldwick could understand no word of what she said, but nevertheless he spoke to her in his own cultured tone, the effect of which upon her was evidently most gratifying, for before he realized her intentions or could prevent her she had thrown both arms about his neck and was kissing him with the utmost abandon.

The man tried to free himself from her rather surprising attentions, but she only clung more tightly to him, and suddenly, as he recalled that he had always heard that one must humor the mentally deficient, and at the same time seeing in her a possible agency of escape, he dosed his eyes and returned her embraces.

It was at this juncture that the door opened and a man entered. With the sound from the first movement of the latch, Smith-Oldwick opened his eyes, but though he endeavored to disengage himself from the girl he realized that the newcomer had seen their rather compromising position. The girl, whose back was toward the door, seemed at first not to realize that someone had entered, but when she did she turned quickly and as her eyes fell upon the man whose terrible face was now distorted with an expression of hideous rage she turned, screaming, and fled toward the alcove. The Englishman, flushed and embarrassed, stood where she had left him. With the sudden realization of the futility of attempting an explanation, came that of the menacing appearance of the man, whom he now recognized as the official who had received them in the room below. The fellow's face, livid with insane rage and, possibly, jealousy, was twitching violently, accentuating the maniacal expression that it habitually wore.

For a moment he seemed paralyzed by anger, and then with a loud shriek that rose into an uncanny wail, he drew his curved saber and sprang toward the Englishman. To Smith-Oldwick there seemed no possible hope of escaping the keen-edged weapon in the hands of the infuriated man, and though he felt assured that it would draw down upon him an equally sudden and possibly more terrible death, he did the only thing that remained for him to do -- drew his pistol and fired straight for the heart of the oncoming man. Without even so much as a groan the fellow lunged forward upon the floor at Smith-Oldwick's feet -- killed instantly with a bullet through the heart. For several seconds the silence of the tomb reigned in the apartment.

The Englishman, standing over the prostrate figure of the dead man, watched the door with drawn weapon, expecting momentarily to hear the rush of feet of those whom he was sure would immediately investigate the report of the pistol. But no sounds came from below to indicate that anyone there had heard the explosion, and presently the man's attention was distracted from the door to the alcove, between the hangings of which the face of the girl appeared. The eyes were widely dilated and the lower jaw dropped in an expression of surprise and awe.

The girl's gaze was riveted upon the figure upon the floor, and presently she crept stealthily into the room and tiptoed toward the corpse. She appeared as though constantly poised for flight, and when she had come to within two or three feet of the body she stopped and, looking up at Smith-Oldwick, voiced some interrogation which he could not, of course, understand. Then she came close to the side of the dead man and kneeling upon the floor felt gingerly of the body.

Presently she shook the corpse by the shoulder, and then with a show of strength which her tenderly girlish form belied, she turned the body over on its back. If she had been in doubt before, one glance at the hideous features set in death must have convinced her that life was extinct, and with the realization there broke from her lips a peal after peal of mad, maniacal laughter as with her little hands she beat upon the upturned face and breast of the dead man. It was a gruesome sight from which the Englishman involuntarily drew back -- a gruesome, disgusting sight such as, he realized, might never be witnessed outside a madhouse or this frightful city.

In the midst of her frenzied rejoicing at the death of the man, and Smith-Oldwick could attribute her actions to no other cause, she suddenly desisted from her futile attacks upon the insensate flesh and, leaping to her feet, ran quickly to the door, where she shot a wooden bolt into its socket, thus securing them from interference from without. Then she returned to the center of the room and spoke rapidly to the Englishman, gesturing occasionally toward the body of the slain man. When he could not understand, she presently became provoked and in a sudden hysteria of madness she rushed forward as though to strike the Englishman. Smith-Oldwick dropped back a few steps and leveled his pistol upon her. Mad though she must have been, she evidently was not so mad but what she had connected the loud report, the diminutive weapon, and the sudden death of the man in whose house she dwelt, for she instantly desisted and quite as suddenly as it had come upon her, her homicidal mood departed.

Again the vacuous, imbecile smile took possession of her features, and her voice, dropping its harshness, resumed the soft, well-modulated tones with which she had first addressed him. Now she attempted by signs to indicate her wishes, and motioning Smith-Oldwick to follow her she went to the hangings and opening them disclosed the alcove. It was rather more than an alcove, being a fair-sized room heavy with rugs and hangings and soft, pillowed couches. Turning at the entrance she pointed to the corpse upon the floor of the outer room, and then crossing the alcove she raised some draperies which covered a couch and fell to the floor upon all sides, disclosing an opening beneath the furniture.

To this opening she pointed and then again to the corpse, indicating plainly to the Englishman that it was her desire that the body be hidden here. But if he had been in doubt, she essayed to dispel it by grasping his sleeve and urging him in the direction of the body which the two of them then lifted and half carried and half dragged into the alcove. At first they encountered some difficulty when they endeavored to force the body of the man into the small space she had selected for it, but eventually they succeeded in doing so. Smith-Oldwick was again impressed by the fiendish brutality of the girl. In the center of the room lay a blood-stained rug which the girl quickly gathered up and draped over a piece of furniture in such a way that the stain was hidden. By rearranging the other rugs and by bringing one from the alcove she restored the room to order so no outward indication of the tragedy so recently enacted there was apparent.

These things attended to, and the hangings draped once more about the couch that they might hide the gruesome thing beneath, the girl once more threw her arms about the Englishman's neck and dragged him toward the soft and luxurious pillows above the dead man. Acutely conscious of the horror of his position, filled with loathing, disgust, and an outraged sense of decency, Smith-Oldwick was also acutely alive to the demands of self-preservation. He felt that he was warranted in buying his life at almost any price; but there was a point at which his finer nature rebelled.

It was at this juncture that a loud knock sounded upon the door of the outer room. Springing from the couch, the girl seized the man by the arm and dragged him after her to the wall close by the head of the couch. Here she drew back one of the hangings, revealing a little niche behind, into which she shoved the Englishman and dropped the hangings before him, effectually hiding him from observation from the rooms beyond.

He heard her cross the alcove of the outer room, and heard the bolt withdrawn followed by the voice of a man mingled with that of the girl. The tones of both seemed rational so that he might have been listening to an ordinary conversation in some foreign tongue. Yet with the gruesome experiences of the day behind him, he could not but momentarily expect some insane outbreak from beyond the hangings.

He was aware from the sounds that the two had entered the alcove, and, prompted by a desire to know what manner of man he might next have to contend with, he slightly parted the heavy folds that hid the two from his view and looking out saw them sitting on the couch with their arms about each other, the girl with the same expressionless smile upon her face that she had vouchsafed him. He found he could so arrange the hangings that a very narrow slit between two of them permitted him to watch the actions of those in the alcove without revealing himself or increasing his liability of detection.

He saw the girl lavishing her kisses upon the newcomer, a much younger man than he whom Smith-Oldwick had dispatched. Presently the girl disengaged herself from the embrace of her lover as though struck by a sudden memory. Her brows puckered as in labored thought and then with a startled expression, she threw a glance backward toward the hidden niche where the Englishman stood, after which she whispered rapidly to her companion, occasionally jerking her head in the direction of the niche and on several occasions making a move with one hand and forefinger, which Smith-Oldwick could not mistake as other than an attempt to describe his pistol and its use.

It was evident then to him that she was betraying him, and without further loss of time he turned his back toward the hangings and commenced a rapid examination of his hiding place. In the alcove the man and the girl whispered, and then cautiously and with great stealth, the man rose and drew his curved saber. On tiptoe he approached the hangings, the girl creeping at his side. Neither spoke now, nor was there any sound in the room as the girl sprang forward and with outstretched arm and pointing finger indicated a point upon the curtain at the height of a man's breast. Then she stepped to one side, and her companion, raising his blade to a horizontal position, lunged suddenly forward and with the full weight of his body and his right arm, drove the sharp point through the hangings and into the niche behind for its full length.

Bertha Kircher, finding her struggles futile and realizing that she must conserve her strength for some chance opportunity of escape, desisted from her efforts to break from the grasp of Prince Metak as the fellow fled with her through the dimly lighted corridors of the palace. Through many chambers the prince fled, bearing his prize. It was evident to the girl that, though her captor was the king's son, he was not above capture and punishment for his deeds, as otherwise he would not have shown such evident anxiety to escape with her, as well as from the results of his act.

From the fact that he was constantly turning affrighted eyes behind them, and glancing suspiciously into every nook and corner that they passed, she guessed that the prince's punishment might be both speedy and terrible were he caught.

She knew from their route that they must have doubled back several times although she had quite lost all sense of direction; but she did not know that the prince was as equally confused as she, and that really he was running in an aimless, erratic manner, hoping that he might stumble eventually upon a place of refuge.

Nor is it to be wondered at that this offspring of maniacs should have difficulty in orienting himself in the winding mazes of a palace designed by maniacs for a maniac king. Now a corridor turned gradually and almost imperceptibly in a new direction, again one doubled back upon and crossed itself; here the floor rose gradually to the level of another story, or again there might be a spiral stairway down which the mad prince rushed dizzily with his burden. Upon what floor they were or in what part of the palace even Metak had no idea until, halting abruptly at a closed door, he pushed it open to step into a brilliantly lighted chamber filled with warriors, at one end of which sat the king upon a great throne; beside this, to the girl's surprise, she saw another throne where was seated a huge lioness, recalling to her the words of Xanila which, at the time, had made no impression on her: "But he had many other queens, nor were they all human."

At sight of Metak and the girl, the king rose from his throne and started across the chamber, all semblance of royalty vanishing in the maniac's uncontrollable passion. And as he came he shrieked orders and commands at the top of his voice. No sooner had Metak so unwarily opened the door to this hornets' nest than he immediately withdrew and, turning, fled again in a new direction. But now a hundred men were close upon his heels, laughing, shrieking, and possibly cursing. He dodged hither and thither, distancing them for several minutes until, at the bottom of a long runway that inclined steeply downward from a higher level, he burst into a subterranean apartment lighted by many flares.

In the center of the room was a pool of considerable size, the level of the water being but a few inches below the floor. Those behind the fleeing prince and his captive entered the chamber in time to see Metak leap into the water with the girl and disappear beneath the surface taking his captive with him, nor, though they waited excitedly around the rim of the pool, did either of the two again emerge.

When Smith-Oldwick turned to investigate his hiding place, his hands, groping upon the rear wall, immediately came in contact with the wooden panels of a door and a bolt such as that which secured the door of the outer room. Cautiously and silently drawing the wooden bar he pushed gently against the panel to find that the door swung easily and noiselessly outward into utter darkness. Moving carefully and feeling forward for each step he passed out of the niche, closing the door behind him.

Peeling about, he discovered that he was in a narrow corridor which he followed cautiously for a few yards to be brought up suddenly by what appeared to be a ladder across the passageway. He felt of the obstruction carefully with his hands until he was assured that it was indeed a ladder and that a solid wall was just beyond it, ending the corridor. Therefore, as he could not go forward and as the ladder ended at the floor upon which he stood, and as he did not care to retrace his steps, there was no alternative but to climb upward, and this he did, his pistol ready in a side pocket of his blouse.

He had ascended but two or three rungs when his head came suddenly and painfully in contact with a hard surface above him. Groping about with one hand over his head he discovered that the obstacle seemed to be the covering to a trap door in the ceiling which, with a little effort, he succeeded in raising a couple of inches, revealing through the cracks the stars of a clear African night.

With a sigh of relief, but with unabated caution, he gently slid the trapdoor to one side far enough to permit him to raise his eyes above the level of the roof. A quick glance assured him that there was none near enough to observe his movements, nor, in fact, as far as he could see, was anyone in sight.

Drawing himself quickly through the aperture he replaced the cover and endeavored to regain his bearings. Directly to the south of him the low roof he stood upon adjoined a much loftier portion of the building, which rose several stories above his head. A few yards to the west he could see the flickering light of the flares of a winding street, and toward this he made his way.

From the edge of the roof he looked down upon the night life of the mad city. He saw men and women and children and lions, and of all that he saw it was quite evident to him that only the lions were sane. With the aid of the stars he easily picked out the points of the compass, and following carefully in his memory the steps that had led him into the city and to the roof upon which he now stood, he knew that the thoroughfare upon which he looked was the same along which he and Bertha Kircher had been led as prisoners earlier in the day.

If he could reach this he might be able to pass undetected in the shadows of the arcade to the city gate. He had already given up as futile the thought of seeking out the girl and attempting to succor her, for he knew that alone and with the few remaining rounds of ammunition he possessed, he could do nothing against this city-full of armed men. That he could live to cross the lion-infested forest beyond the city was doubtful, and having, by some miracle, won to the desert beyond, his fate would be certainly sealed; but yet he was consumed with but one desire -- to leave behind him as far as possible this horrid city of maniacs.

He saw that the roofs rose to the same level as that upon which he stood unbroken to the north to the next street intersection. Directly below him was a flare. To reach

the pavement in safety it was necessary that he find as dark a portion of the avenue as possible. And so he sought along the edge of the roofs for a place where he might descend in comparative concealment.

He had proceeded some little way beyond a point where the street curved abruptly to the east before he discovered a location sufficiently to his liking. But even here he was compelled to wait a considerable time for a satisfactory moment for his descent, which he had decided to make down one of the pillars of the arcade. Each time he prepared to lower himself over the edge of the roofs, footsteps approaching in one direction or another deterred him until at last he had almost come to the conclusion that he would have to wait for the entire city to sleep before continuing his flight.

But finally came a moment which he felt propitious and though with inward qualms, it was with outward calm that he commenced the descent to the street below.

When at last he stood beneath the arcade he was congratulating himself upon the success that had attended his efforts up to this point when, at a slight sound behind him, he turned to see a tall figure in the yellow tunic of a warrior confronting him.