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Chapter 22 - Out Of The Niche

Numa, the lion, growled futilely in baffled rage as he slipped back to the ground at the foot of the wall after his unsuccessful attempt to drag down the fleeing ape-man. He poised to make a second effort to follow his escaping quarry when his nose picked up a hitherto unnoticed quality in the scent spoor of his intended prey. Sniffing at the ground that Tarzan's feet had barely touched, Numa's growl changed to a low whine, for he had recognized the scent spoor of the man-thing that had rescued him from the pit of the Wama-bos.

What thoughts passed through that massive head? Who may say? But now there was no indication of baffled rage as the great lion turned and moved majestically eastward along the wall. At the eastern end of the city he turned toward the south, continuing his way to the south side of the wall along which were the pens and corrals where the herbivorous flocks were fattened for the herds of domesticated lions within the city. The great black lions of the forest fed with almost equal impartiality upon the flesh of the grass-eaters and man. Like Numa of the pit they occasionally made excursions across the desert to the fertile valley of the Wamabos, but principally they took their toll of meat from the herds of the walled city of Herog, the mad king, or seized upon some of his luckless subjects.

Numa of the pit was in some respect an exception to the rule which guided his fellows of the forest in that as a cub he had been trapped and carried into the city, where he was kept for breeding purposes, only to escape in his second year. They had tried to teach him in the city of maniacs that he must not eat the flesh of man, and the result of their schooling was that only when aroused to anger or upon that one occasion that he had been impelled by the pangs of hunger, did he ever attack man.

The animal corrals of the maniacs are protected by an outer wall or palisade of upright logs, the lower ends of which are imbedded in the ground, the logs themselves being placed as close together as possible and further reinforced and bound together by withes. At intervals there are gates through which the flocks are turned on to the grazing land south of the city during the daytime. It is at such times that the black lions of the forest take their greatest toll from the herds, and it is infrequent that a lion attempts to enter the corrals at night. But Numa of the pit, having scented the spoor of his benefactor, was minded again to pass into the walled city, and with that idea in his cunning brain he crept stealthily along the outer side of the palisade, testing each gateway with a padded foot until at last he discovered one which seemed insecurely fastened. Lowering his great head he pressed against the gate, surging forward with all the weight of his huge body and the strength of his giant sinews -- one mighty effort and Numa was within the corral.

The enclosure contained a herd of goats which immediately upon the advent of the carnivore started a mad stampede to the opposite end of the corral which was bounded by the south wall of the city. Numa had been within such a corral as this before, so that he knew that somewhere in the wall was a small door through which the goatherd might pass from the city to his flock; toward this door he made his way, whether by plan or accident it is difficult to say, though in the light of ensuing events it seems possible that the former was the case.

To reach the gate he must pass directly through the herd which had huddled affrightedly close to the opening so that once again there was a furious rush of hoofs as Numa strode quickly to the side of the portal. If Numa had planned, he had planned well, for scarcely had he reached his position when the door opened and a herder's head was projected into the enclosure, the fellow evidently seeking an explanation of the disturbance among his flock. Possibly he discovered the cause of the commotion, but it is doubtful, for it was dark and the great, taloned paw that reached up and struck downward a mighty blow that almost severed his head from his body, moved so quickly and silently that the man was dead within a fraction of a second from the moment that he opened the door, and then Numa, knowing now his way, passed through the wall into the dimly lighted streets of the city beyond.

Smith-Oldwick's first thought when he was accosted by the figure in the yellow tunic of a soldier was to shoot the man dead and trust to his legs and the dimly lighted, winding streets to permit his escape, for he knew that to be accosted was equivalent to recapture since no inhabitant of this weird city but would recognize him as an alien. It would be a simple thing to shoot the man from the pocket where the pistol lay without drawing the weapon, and with this purpose in mind the Englishman slipped his hands into the side pocket of his blouse, but simultaneously with this action his wrist was seized in a powerful grasp and a low voice whispered in English: "Lieutenant, it is I, Tarzan of the Apes."

The relief from the nervous strain under which he had been laboring for so long, left Smith-Oldwick suddenly as weak as a babe, so that he was forced to grasp the ape-man's arm for support -- and when he found his voice all he could do was to repeat: "You? You? I thought you were dead!"

"No, not dead," replied Tarzan, "and I see that you are not either. But how about the girl?"

"I haven't seen her," replied the Englishman, "since we were brought here. We were taken into a building on the plaza close by and there we were separated. She was led away by guards and I was put into a den of lions. I haven't seen her since."

"How did you escape?" asked the ape-man.

"The lions didn't seem to pay much attention to me and I climbed out of the place by way of a tree and through a window into a room on the second floor. Had a little scrimmage there with a fellow and was hidden by one of their women in a hole in the wall. The loony thing then betrayed me to another bouncer who happened in, but I found a way out and up onto the roof where I have been for quite some time now waiting for a chance to get down into the street without being seen. That's all I know, but I haven't the slightest idea in the world where to look for Miss Kircher."

"Where were you going now?" asked Tarzan.

Smith-Oldwick hesitated. "I -- well, I couldn't do anything here alone and I was going to try to get out of the city and in some way reach the British forces east and bring help."

"You couldn't do it," said Tarzan. "Even if you got through the forest alive you could never cross the desert country without food or water."

"What shall we do, then?" asked the Englishman.

"We will see if we can find the girl," replied the ape-man, and then, as though he had forgotten the Englishman and was arguing to convince himself, "She may be a German and a spy, but she is a woman -- a white woman -- I can't leave her here."

"But how are we going to find her?" asked the Englishman.

"I have followed her this far," replied Tarzan, "and unless I am greatly mistaken I can follow her still farther."

"But I cannot accompany you in these clothes without exposing us both to detection and arrest," argued Smith-Oldwick.

"We will get you other clothes, then," said Tarzan.

"How?" asked the Englishman.

"Go back to the roof beside the city wall where I entered," replied the ape-man with a grim smile, "and ask the naked dead man there how I got my disguise."

Smith-Oldwick looked quickly up at his companion. "I have it," he exclaimed. "I know where there is a fellow who doesn't need his clothes anymore, and if we can get back on this roof I think we can find him and get his apparel without much resistance. Only a girl and a young fellow whom we could easily surprise and overcome."

"What do you mean?" asked Tarzan. "How do you know that the man doesn't need his clothes any more?"

"I know he doesn't need them," replied the Englishman, "because I killed him."

"Oh!" exclaimed the ape-man, "I see. I guess it might be easier that way than to tackle one of these fellows in the street where there is more chance of our being interrupted."

"But how are we going to reach the roof again, after all?" queried Smith-Oldwick.

"The same way you came down," replied Tarzan. "This roof is low and there is a little ledge formed by the capital of each column; I noticed that when you descended. Some of the buildings wouldn't have been so easy to negotiate."

Smith-Oldwick looked up toward the eaves of the low roof. "It's not very high," he said, "but I am afraid I can't make it. I'll try -- I've been pretty weak since a lion mauled me and the guards beat me up, and too, I haven't eaten since yesterday."

Tarzan thought a moment. "You've got to go with me," he said at last. "I can't leave you here. The only chance you have of escape is through me and I can't go with you now until we have found the girl."

"I want to go with you," replied Smith-Oldwick. "I'm not much good now but at that two of us may be better than one."

"All right," said Tarzan, "come on," and before the Englishman realized what the other contemplated Tarzan had picked him up and thrown him across his shoulder. "Now, hang on," whispered the ape-man, and with a short run he clambered apeline up the front of the low arcade. So quickly and easily was it done that the Englishman scarcely had time to realize what was happening before he was deposited safely upon the roof.

"There," remarked Tarzan. "Now, lead me to the place you speak of."

Smith-Oldwick had no difficulty in locating the trap in the roof through which he had escaped. Removing the cover the ape-man bent low, listening and sniffing. "Come," he said after a moment's investigation and lowered himself to the floor beneath. Smith-Oldwick followed him, and together the two crept through the darkness toward the door in the back wall of the niche in which the Englishman had been hidden by the girl. They found the door ajar and opening it Tarzan saw a streak of light showing through the hangings that separated it from the alcove.

Placing his eye close to the aperture he saw the girl and the young man of which the Englishman had spoken seated on opposite sides of a low table upon which food was spread. Serving them was a giant Negro and it was he whom the ape-man watched most closely. Familiar with the tribal idiosyncrasies of a great number of African tribes over a considerable proportion of the Dark Continent, the Tarmangani at last felt reasonably assured that he knew from what part of Africa this slave had come, and the dialect of his people. There was, however, the chance that the fellow had been captured in childhood and that through long years of non-use his native language had become lost to him, but then there always had been an element of chance connected with nearly every event of Tarzan's life, so he waited patiently until in the performance of his duties the black man approached a little table which stood near the niche in which Tarzan and the Englishman hid.

As the slave bent over some dish which stood upon the table his ear was not far from the aperture through which Tarzan looked. Apparently from a solid wall, for the Negro had no knowledge of the existence of the niche, came to him in the tongue of his own people, the whispered words: "If you would return to the land of the Wamabo say nothing, but do as I bid you."

The black rolled terrified eyes toward the hangings at his side. The ape-man could see him tremble and for a moment was fearful that in his terror he would betray them. "Fear not," he whispered, "we are your friends."

At last the Negro spoke in a low whisper, scarcely audible even to the keen ears of the ape-man. "What," he asked, "can poor Otobu do for the god who speaks to him out of the solid wall?"

"This," replied Tarzan. "Two of us are coming into this room. Help us prevent this man and woman from escaping or raising an outcry that will bring others to their aid."

"I will help you," replied the Negro, "to keep them within this room, but do not fear that their outcries will bring others. These walls are built so that no sound may pass through, and even if it did what difference would it make in this village which is constantly filled with the screams of its mad people. Do not fear their cries. No one will notice them. I go to do your bidding."

Tarzan saw the black cross the room to the table upon which he placed another dish of food before the feasters. Then he stepped to a place behind the man and as he did so raised his eyes to the point in the wall from which the ape-man's voice had come to him, as much as to say, "Master, I am ready."

Without more delay Tarzan threw aside the hangings and stepped into the room. As he did so the young man rose from the table to be instantly seized from behind by the black slave. The girl, whose back was toward the ape-man and his companion, was not at first aware of their presence but saw only the attack of the slave upon her lover, and with a loud scream she leaped forward to assist the latter. Tarzan sprang to her side and laid a heavy hand upon her arm before she could interfere with Otobu's

attentions to the young man. At first, as she turned toward the ape-man, her face reflected no mad rage, but almost instantly this changed into the vapid smile with which Smith-Oldwick was already familiar and her slim fingers commenced their soft appraisal of the newcomer.

Almost immediately she discovered Smith-Oldwick but there was neither surprise nor anger upon her countenance. Evidently the poor mad creature knew but two principal moods, from one to the other of which she changed with lightning-like rapidity.

"Watch her a moment," said Tarzan to the Englishman, "while I disarm that fellow," and stepping to the side of the young man whom Otobu was having difficulty in subduing Tarzan relieved him of his saber. "Tell them," he said to the Negro, "if you speak their language, that we will not harm them if they leave us alone and let us depart in peace."

The black had been looking at Tarzan with wide eyes, evidently not comprehending how this god could appear in so material a form, and with the voice of a white bwana and the uniform of a warrior of this city to which he quite evidently did not belong. But nevertheless his first confidence in the voice that offered him freedom was not lessened and he did as Tarzan bid him.

"They want to know what you want," said Otobu, after he had spoken to the man and the girl.

"Tell them that we want food for one thing," said Tarzan, "and something else that we know where to find in this room. Take the man's spear, Otobu; I see it leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. And you, Lieutenant, take his saber," and then again to Otobu, "I will watch the man while you go and bring forth that which is beneath the couch over against this wall," and Tarzan indicated the location of the piece of furniture.

Otobu, trained to obey, did as he was bid. The eyes of the man and the girl followed him, and as he drew back the hangings and dragged forth the corpse of the man Smith-Oldwick had slain, the girl's lover voiced a loud scream and attempted to leap forward to the side of the corpse. Tarzan, however, seized him and then the fellow turned upon him with teeth and nails. It was with no little difficulty that Tarzan finally subdued the man, and while Otobu was removing the outer clothing from the corpse, Tarzan asked the black to question the young man as to his evident excitement at the sight of the body.

"I can tell you Bwana," replied Otobu. "This man was his father."

"What is he saying to the girl?" asked Tarzan.

"He is asking her if she knew that the body of his father was under the couch. And she is saying that she did not know it."

Tarzan repeated the conversation to Smith-Oldwick, who smiled. "If the chap could have seen her removing all evidence of the crime and arranging the hangings of the couch so that the body was concealed after she had helped me drag it across the room, he wouldn't have very much doubt as to her knowledge of the affair. The rug you see draped over the bench in the corner was arranged to hide the blood stain -- in some ways they are not so loony after all."

The black man had now removed the outer garments from the dead man, and Smith-Oldwick was hastily drawing them on over his own clothing. "And now," said Tarzan, "we will sit down and eat. One accomplishes little on an empty stomach." As they ate the ape-man attempted to carry on a conversation with the two natives through Otobu. He learned that they were in the palace which had belonged to the dead man lying upon the floor beside them. He had held an official position of some nature, and he and his family were of the ruling class but were not members of the court.

When Tarzan questioned them about Bertha Kircher, the young man said that she had been taken to the king's palace; and when asked why replied: "For the king, of course."

During the conversation both the man and the girl appeared quite rational, even asking some questions as to the country from which their uninvited guests had come, and evidencing much surprise when informed that there was anything but waterless wastes beyond their own valley.

When Otobu asked the man, at Tarzan's suggestion, if he was familiar with the interior of the king's palace, he replied that he was; that he was a friend of Prince Metak, one of the king's sons, and that he often visited the palace and that Metak also came here to his father's palace frequently. As Tarzan ate he racked his brain for some plan whereby he might utilize the knowledge of the young man to gain entrance to the palace, but he had arrived at nothing which he considered feasible when there came a loud knocking upon the door of the outer room.

For a moment no one spoke and then the young man raised his voice and cried aloud to those without. Immediately Otobu sprang for the fellow and attempted to smother his words by clapping a palm over his mouth.

"What is he saying?" asked Tarzan.

"He is telling them to break down the door and rescue him and the girl from two strangers who entered and made them prisoners. If they enter they will kill us all."

"Tell him," said Tarzan, "to hold his peace or I will slay him."

Otobu did as he was instructed and the young maniac lapsed into scowling silence. Tarzan crossed the alcove and entered the outer room to note the effect of the assaults upon the door. Smith-Oldwick followed him a few steps, leaving Otobu to guard the two prisoners. The ape-man saw that the door could not long withstand the heavy blows being dealt the panels from without. "I wanted to use that fellow in the other room," he said to Smith-Oldwick, "but I am afraid we will have to get out of here the way we came. We can't accomplish anything by waiting here and meeting these fellows. From the noise out there there must be a dozen of them. Come," he said, "you go first and I will follow."

As the two turned back from the alcove they witnessed an entirely different scene from that upon which they had turned their backs but a moment or two before. Stretched on the floor and apparently lifeless lay the body of the black slave, while the two prisoners had vanished completely.