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Chapter 9 - Dropped From The Sky

Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick, Royal Air Service, was on reconnaissance. A report, or it would be better to say a rumor, had come to the British headquarters in German East Africa that the enemy had landed in force on the west coast and was marching across the dark continent to reinforce their colonial troops. In fact the new army was supposed to be no more than ten or twelve days' march to the west. Of course the thing was ridiculous -- preposterous -- but preposterous things often happen in war; and anyway no good general permits the least rumor of enemy activity to go uninvestigated.

Therefore Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick flew low toward the west, searching with keen eyes for signs of a Hun army. Vast forests unrolled beneath him in which a German army corps might have lain concealed, so dense was the overhanging foliage of the great trees. Mountain, meadow-land, and desert passed in lovely panorama; but never a sign of man had the young lieutenant.

Always hoping that he might discover some sign of their passage -- a discarded lorry, a broken limber, or an old camp site -- he continued farther and farther into the west until well into the afternoon. Above a tree-dotted plain through the center of which flowed a winding river he determined to turn about and start for camp. It would take straight flying at top speed to cover the distance before dark; but as he had ample gasoline and a trustworthy machine there was no doubt in his mind but that he could accomplish his aim. It was then that his engine stalled.

He was too low to do anything but land, and that immediately, while he had the more open country accessible, for directly east of him was a vast forest into which a stalled engine could only have plunged him to certain injury and probable death; and so he came down in the meadowland near the winding river and there started to tinker with his motor.

As he worked he hummed a tune, some music-hall air that had been popular in London the year before, so that one might have thought him working in the security of an English flying field surrounded by innumerable comrades rather than alone in the heart of an unexplored African wilderness. It was typical of the man that he should be wholly indifferent to his surroundings, although his looks entirely belied any assumption that he was of particularly heroic strain.

Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick was fair-hatted, blue-eyed, and slender, with a rosy, boyish face that might have been molded more by an environment of luxury, indulgence, and ease than the more strenuous exigencies of life's sterner requirements.

And not only was the young lieutenant outwardly careless of the immediate future and of his surroundings, but actually so. That the district might be infested by countless enemies seemed not to have occurred to him in the remotest degree. He bent assiduously to the work of correcting the adjustment that had caused his motor to stall without so much as an upward glance at the surrounding country. The forest to the east of him, and the more distant jungle that bordered the winding river, might have harbored an army of bloodthirsty savages, but neither could elicit even a passing show of interest on the part of Lieutenant Smith-Oldwick.

And even had he looked, it is doubtful if he would have seen the score of figures crouching in the concealment of the undergrowth at the forest's edge. There are those who are reputed to be endowed with that which is sometimes, for want of a better appellation, known as the sixth sense -- a species of intuition which apprises them of the presence of an unseen danger. The concentrated gaze of a hidden observer provokes a warning sensation of nervous unrest in such as these, but though twenty pairs of savage eyes were gazing fixedly at Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick, the fact aroused no responsive sensation of impending danger in his placid breast. He hummed peacefully and, his adjustment completed, tried out his motor for a minute or two, then shut it off and descended to the ground with the intention of stretching his legs and taking a smoke before continuing his return flight to camp. Now for the first time he took note of his surroundings, to be immediately impressed by both the wildness and the beauty of the scene. In some respects the tree-dotted meadow-land reminded him of a parklike English forest, and that wild beasts and savage men could ever be a part of so quiet a scene seemed the remotest of contingencies.

Some gorgeous blooms upon a flowering shrub at a little distance from his machine caught the attention of his aesthetic eye, and as he puffed upon his cigarette, he walked over to examine the flowers more closely. As he bent above them he was probably some hundred yards from his plane and it was at this instant that Numabo, chief of the Wamabo, chose to leap from his ambush and lead his warriors in a sudden rush upon the white man.

The young Englishman's first intimation of danger was a chorus of savage yells from the forest behind him. Turning, he saw a score of naked, black warriors advancing rapidly toward him. They moved in a compact mass and as they approached more closely their rate of speed noticeably diminished. Lieutenant Smith-Oldwick realized in a quick glance that the direction of their approach and their proximity had cut off all chances of retreating to his plane, and he also understood that their attitude was entirely warlike and menacing. He saw that they were armed with spears and with bows and arrows, and he felt quite confident that notwithstanding the fact that he was armed with a pistol they could overcome him with the first rush. What he did not know about their tactics was that at any show of resistance they would fall back, which is the nature of the native Negroes, but that after numerous advances and retreats, during which they would work themselves into a frenzy of rage by much shrieking, leaping, and dancing, they would eventually come to the point of a determined and final assault.

Numabo was in the forefront, a fact which taken in connection with his considerably greater size and more warlike appearance, indicated him as the natural target and it was at Numabo that the Englishman aimed his first shot. Unfortunately for him it missed its target, as the killing of the chief might have permanently dispersed the others. The bullet passed Numabo to lodge in the breast of a warrior behind him and as the fellow lunged forward with a scream the others turned and retreated, but to the lieutenant's chagrin they ran in the direction of the plane instead of back toward the forest so that he was still cut off from reaching his machine.

Presently they stopped and faced him again. They were talking loudly and gesticulating, and after a moment one of them leaped into the air, brandishing his spear and uttering savage war cries, which soon had their effect upon his fellows so that it was not long ere all of them were taking part in the wild show of savagery, which would bolster their waning courage and presently spur them on to another attack.

The second charge brought them closer to the Englishman, and though he dropped another with his pistol, it was not before two or three spears had been launched at him. He now had five shots remaining and there were still eighteen warriors to be accounted for, so that unless he could frighten them off, it was evident that his fate was sealed.

That they must pay the price of one life for every attempt to take his had its effect upon them and they were longer now in initiating a new rush and when they did so it

was more skilfully ordered than those that had preceded it, for they scattered into three bands which, partially surrounding him, came simultaneously toward him from different directions, and though he emptied his pistol with good effect, they reached him at last. They seemed to know that his ammunition was exhausted, for they circled close about him now with the evident intention of taking him alive, since they might easily have riddled him with their sharp spears with perfect safety to themselves.

For two or three minutes they circled about him until, at a word from Numabo, they closed in simultaneously, and though the slender young lieutenant struck out to right and left, he was soon overwhelmed by superior numbers and beaten down by the hafts of spears in brawny hands.

He was all but unconscious when they finally dragged him to his feet, and after securing his hands behind his back, pushed him roughly along ahead of them toward the jungle.

As the guard prodded him along the narrow trail, Lieutenant Smith-Oldwick could not but wonder why they had wished to take him alive. He knew that he was too far inland for his uniform to have any significance to this native tribe to whom no inkling of the World War probably ever had come, and he could only assume that he had fallen into the hands of the warriors of some savage potentate upon whose royal caprice his fate would hinge.

They had marched for perhaps half an hour when the Englishman saw ahead of them, in a little clearing upon the bank of the river, the thatched roofs of native huts showing above a crude but strong palisade; and presently he was ushered into a village street where he was immediately surrounded by a throng of women and children and warriors. Here he was soon the center of an excited mob whose intent seemed to be to dispatch him as quickly as possible. The women were more venomous than the men, striking and scratching him whenever they could reach him, until at last Numabo, the chief, was obliged to interfere to save his prisoner for whatever purpose he was destined.

As the warriors pushed the crowd back, opening a space through which the white man was led toward a hut, Lieutenant Smith-Oldwick saw coming from the opposite end of the village a number of Negroes wearing odds and ends of German uniforms. He was not a little surprised at this, and his first thought was that he had at last come in contact with some portion of the army which was rumored to be crossing from the west coast and for signs of which he had been searching.

A rueful smile touched his lips as he contemplated the unhappy circumstances which surrounded the accession of this knowledge for though he was far from being without hope, he realized that only by the merest chance could he escape these people and regain his machine.

Among the partially uniformed blacks was a huge fellow in the tunic of a sergeant and as this man's eyes fell upon the British officer, a loud cry of exultation broke from his lips, and immediately his followers took up the cry and pressed forward to bait the prisoner.

"Where did you get the Englishman?" asked Usanga, the black sergeant, of the chief Numabo. "Are there many more with him?"

"He came down from the sky," replied the native chief "in a strange thing which flies like a bird and which frightened us very much at first; but we watched for a long time and saw that it did not seem to be alive, and when this white man left it we attacked him and though he killed some of my warriors, we took him, for we Wamabos are brave men and great warriors."

Usanga's eyes went wide. "He flew here through the sky?" he asked.

"Yes," said Numabo. "In a great thing which resembled a bird he flew down out of the sky. The thing is still there where it came down close to the four trees near the second bend in the river. We left it there because, not knowing what it was, we were afraid to touch it and it is still there if it has not flown away again."

"It cannot fly," said Usanga, "without this man in it. It is a terrible thing which filled the hearts of our soldiers with terror, for it flew over our camps at night and dropped bombs upon us. It is well that you captured this white man, Numabo, for with his great bird he would have flown over your village tonight and killed all your people. These Englishmen are very wicked white men."

"He will fly no more," said Numabo "It is not intended that a man should fly through the air; only wicked demons do such things as that and Numabo, the chief, will see that this white man does not do it again," and with the words he pushed the young officer roughly toward a hut in the center of the village, where he was left under guard of two stalwart warriors.

For an hour or more the prisoner was left to his own devices, which consisted in vain and unremitting attempts to loosen the strands which fettered his wrists, and then he was interrupted by the appearance of the black sergeant Usanga, who entered his hut and approached him.

"What are they going to do with me?" asked the Englishman. "My country is not at war with these people. You speak their language. Tell them that I am not an enemy, that my people are the friends of the black people and that they must let me go in peace."

Usanga laughed. "They do not know an Englishman from a German," he replied. "It is nothing to them what you are, except that you are a white man and an enemy."

"Then why did they take me alive?" asked the lieutenant.

"Come," said Usanga and he led the Englishman to the doorway of the hut. "Look," he said, and pointed a black forefinger toward the end of the village street where a wide space between the huts left a sort of plaza.

Here Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick saw a number of Negresses engaged in laying fagots around a stake and in preparing fires beneath a number of large cooking vessels. The sinister suggestion was only too obvious.

Usanga was eyeing the white man closely, but if he expected to be rewarded by any signs of fear, he was doomed to disappointment and the young lieutenant merely turned toward him with a shrug: "Really now, do you beggars intend eating me?"

"Not my people," replied Usanga. "We do not eat human flesh, but the Wamabos do. It is they who will eat you, but we will kill you for the feast, Englishman."

The Englishman remained standing in the doorway of the hut, an interested spectator of the preparations for the coming orgy that was so horribly to terminate his earthly existence. It can hardly be assumed that he felt no fear; yet, if he did, he hid it perfectly beneath an imperturbable mask of coolness. Even the brutal Usanga must have been impressed by the bravery of his victim since, though he had come to abuse and possibly to torture the helpless prisoner, he now did neither, contenting himself merely with berating whites as a race and Englishmen especially, because of the terror the British aviators had caused Germany's native troops in East Africa.

"No more," he concluded, "will your great bird fly over our people dropping death among them from the skies -- Usanga will see to that," and he walked abruptly away toward a group of his own fighting men who were congregated near the stake where they were laughing and joking with the women.

A few minutes later the Englishman saw them pass out of the village gate, and once again his thoughts reverted to various futile plans for escape.

Several miles north of the village on a little rise of ground close to the river where the jungle, halting at the base of a knoll, had left a few acres of grassy land sparsely wooded, a man and a girl were busily engaged in constructing a small boma, in the center of which a thatched hut already had been erected.

They worked almost in silence with only an occasional word of direction or interrogation between them.

Except for a loin cloth, the man was naked, his smooth skin tanned to a deep brown by the action of sun and wind. He moved with the graceful ease of a jungle cat and when he lifted heavy weights, the action seemed as effortless as the raising of empty hands.

When he was not looking at her, and it was seldom that he did, the girl found her eyes wandering toward him, and at such times there was always a puzzled expression upon her face as though she found in him an enigma which she could not solve. As a matter of fact, her feelings toward him were not untinged with awe, since in the brief period of their association she had discovered in this handsome, godlike giant the attributes of the superman and the savage beast closely intermingled. At first she had felt only that unreasoning feminine terror which her unhappy position naturally induced.

To be alone in the heart of an unexplored wilderness of Central Africa with a savage wild man was in itself sufficiently appalling, but to feel also that this man was a blood enemy, that he hated her and her kind and that in addition thereto he owed her a personal grudge for an attack she had made upon him in the past, left no loophole for any hope that he might accord her even the minutest measure of consideration.

She had seen him first months since when he had entered the headquarters of the German high command in East Africa and carried off the luckless Major Schneider, of whose fate no hint had ever reached the German officers; and she had seen him again upon that occasion when he had rescued her from the clutches of the lion and, after explaining to her that he had recognized her in the British camp, had made her prisoner. It was then that she had struck him down with the butt of her pistol and escaped. That he might seek no personal revenge for her act had been evidenced in Wilhelmstal the night that he had killed Hauptmann Fritz Schneider and left without molesting her.

No, she could not fathom him. He hated her and at the same time he had protected her as had been evidenced again when he had kept the great apes from tearing her to pieces after she had escaped from the Wamabo village to which Usanga, the black sergeant, had brought her a captive; but why was he saving her? For what sinister purpose could this savage enemy be protecting her from the other denizens of his cruel jungle? She tried to put from her mind the probable fate which awaited her, yet it persisted in obtruding itself upon her thoughts, though always she was forced to admit that there was nothing in the demeanor of the man to indicate that her fears were well grounded. She judged him perhaps by the standards other men had taught her and because she looked upon him as a savage creature, she felt that she could not expect more of chivalry from him than was to be found in the breasts of the civilized men of her acquaintance.

Fraulein Bertha Kircher was by nature a companionable and cheerful character. She was not given to morbid forebodings, and above all things she craved the society of her kind and that interchange of thought which is one of the marked distinctions between man and the lower animals. Tarzan, on the other hand, was sufficient unto himself. Long years of semi-solitude among creatures whose powers of oral expression are extremely limited had thrown him almost entirely upon his own resources for entertainment.

His active mind was never idle, but because his jungle mates could neither follow nor grasp the vivid train of imaginings that his man-mind wrought, he had long since learned to keep them to himself; and so now he found no need for confiding them in others. This fact, linked with that of his dislike for the girl, was sufficient to seal his lips for other than necessary conversation, and so they worked on together in comparative silence. Bertha Kircher, however, was nothing if not feminine and she soon found that having someone to talk to who would not talk was extremely irksome. Her fear of the man was gradually departing, and she was full of a thousand unsatisfied curiosities as to his plans for the future in so far as they related to her, as well as more personal questions regarding himself, since she could not but wonder as to his antecedents and his strange and solitary life in the jungle, as well as his friendly intercourse with the savage apes among which she had found him.

With the waning of her fears she became sufficiently emboldened to question him, and so she asked him what he intended doing after the hut and boma were completed.

"I am going to the west coast where I was born," replied Tarzan. "I do not know when. I have all my life before me and in the jungle there is no reason for haste. We are not forever running as fast as we can from one place to another as are you of the outer world. When I have been here long enough I will go on toward the west, but first I must see that you have a safe place in which to sleep, and that you have learned how to provide yourself with necessaries. That will take time."

"You are going to leave me here alone?" cried the girl; her tones marked the fear which the prospect induced. "You are going to leave me here alone in this terrible jungle, a prey to wild beasts and savage men, hundreds of miles from a white settlement and in a country which gives every evidence of never having been touched by the foot of civilized men?"

"Why not?" asked Tarzan. "I did not bring you here. Would one of your men accord any better treatment to an enemy woman?"

"Yes," she exclaimed. "They certainly would. No man of my race would leave a defenseless white woman alone in this horrible place."

Tarzan shrugged his broad shoulders. The conversation seemed profitless and it was further distasteful to him for the reason that it was carried on in German, a tongue which he detested as much as he did the people who spoke it. He wished that the girl spoke English and then it occurred to him that as he had seen her in disguise in the British camp carrying on her nefarious work as a German spy, she probably did speak English and so he asked her.

"Of course I speak English," she exclaimed, "but I did not know that you did."

Tarzan looked his wonderment but made no comment. He only wondered why the girl should have any doubts as to the ability of an Englishman to speak English, and then suddenly it occurred to him that she probably looked upon him merely as a beast of the jungle who by accident had learned to speak German through frequenting the district which Germany had colonized. It was there only that she had seen him and so she might not know that he was an Englishman by birth, and that he had had a home in British East Africa. It was as well, he thought, that she knew little of him, as the less she knew the more he might learn from her as to her activities in behalf of the Germans and of the German spy system of which she was a representative; and so it occurred to him to let her continue to think that he was only what he appeared to be -- a savage denizen of his savage jungle, a man of no race and no country, hating all white men impartially; and this in truth, was what she did think of him. It explained perfectly his attacks upon Major Schneider and the Major's brother, Hauptmann Fritz.

Again they worked on in silence upon the boma which was now nearly completed, the girl helping the man to the best of her small ability. Tarzan could not but note with grudging approval the spirit of helpfulness she manifested in the oft-times painful labor of gathering and arranging the thorn bushes which constituted the temporary protection against roaming carnivores. Her hands and arms gave bloody token of the sharpness of the numerous points that had lacerated her soft flesh, and even though she were an enemy Tarzan could not but feel compunction that he had permitted her to do this work, and at last he bade her stop.

"Why?" she asked. "It is no more painful to me than it must be to you, and, as it is claimed for my protection that you are building this boma -- no reason why I should not do my share."

"You are a woman," replied Tarzan. "This is not a woman's work. If you wish to do something, take those gourds I brought this morning and fill them with water at the river. You may need it while I am away."

"While you are away --" she said. "You are going away?"

"When the boma is built I am going out after meat," he replied. "Tomorrow I will go again and take you and show you how you may make your own kills after I am gone."

Without a word she took the gourds and walked toward the river. As she filled them, her mind was occupied with painful forebodings of the future. She knew that Tarzan had passed a death sentence upon her, and that the moment that he left her, her doom was sealed, for it could be but a question of time -- a very short time -- before the grim jungle would claim her, for how could a lone woman hope successfully to combat the savage forces of destruction which constituted so large a part of existence in the jungle?

So occupied was she with the gloomy prophecies that she had neither ears nor eyes for what went on about her. Mechanically she filled the gourds and, taking them up, turned slowly to retrace her steps to the boma only to voice immediately a half-stifled scream and shrank back from the menacing figure looming before her and blocking her way to the hut.

Go-lat, the king ape, hunting a little apart from his tribe, had seen the woman go to the river for water, and it was he who confronted her when she turned back with her filled gourds. Go-lat was not a pretty creature when judged by standards of civilized humanity, though the shes of his tribe and even Go-lat himself, considered his glossy black coat shot with silver, his huge arms dangling to his knees, his bullet head sunk between his mighty shoulders, marks of great personal beauty. His wicked, bloodshot eyes and broad nose, his ample mouth and great fighting fangs only enhanced the claim of this Adonis of the forest upon the affections of his shes.

Doubtless in the little, savage brain there was a well-formed conviction that this strange she belonging to the Tarmangani must look with admiration upon so handsome a creature as Go-lat, for there could be no doubt in the mind of any that his beauty entirely eclipsed such as the hairless white ape might lay claim to.

But Bertha Kircher saw only a hideous beast, a fierce and terrible caricature of man. Could Go-lat have known what passed through her mind, he must have been terribly chagrined, though the chances are that he would have attributed it to a lack of discernment on her part. Tarzan heard the girl's cry and looking up saw at a glance the cause of her terror. Leaping lightly over the boma, he ran swiftly toward her as Go-lat lumbered closer to the girl the while he voiced his emotions in low gutturals which, while in reality the most amicable of advances, sounded to the girl like the growling of an enraged beast. As Tarzan drew nearer he called aloud to the ape and the girl heard from the human lips the same sounds that had fallen from those of the anthropoid.

"I will not harm your she," Go-lat called to Tarzan.

"I know it," replied the ape-man, "but she does not. She is like Numa and Sheeta, who do not understand our talk. She thinks you come to harm her."

By this time Tarzan was beside the girl. "He will not harm you," he said to her. "You need not be afraid. This ape has learned his lesson. He has learned that Tarzan is lord of the jungle. He will not harm that which is Tarzan's."

The girl cast a quick glance at the man's face. It was evident to her that the words he had spoken meant nothing to him and that the assumed proprietorship over her was, like the boma, only another means for her protection.

"But I am afraid of him," she said.

"You must not show your fear. You will be often surrounded by these apes. At such times you will be safest. Before I leave you I will give you the means of protecting yourself against them should one of them chance to turn upon you. If I were you I would seek their society. Few are the animals of the jungle that dare attack the great apes when there are several of them together. If you let them know that you are afraid of them, they will take advantage of it and your life will be constantly menaced. The shes especially would attack you. I will let them know that you have the means of protecting yourself and of killing them. If necessary, I will show you how and then they will respect and fear you."

"I will try," said the girl, "but I am afraid that it will be difficult. He is the most frightful creature I ever have seen." Tarzan smiled. "Doubtless he thinks the same of you," he said.

By this time other apes had entered the clearing and they were now the center of a considerable group, among which were several bulls, some young shes, and some older ones with their little balus clinging to their backs or frolicking around at their feet. Though they had seen the girl the night of the Dum-Dum when Sheeta had forced her to leap from her concealment into the arena where the apes were dancing, they still evinced a great curiosity regarding her. Some of the shes came very close and plucked at her garments, commenting upon them to one another in their strange tongue. The girl, by the exercise of all the will power she could command, succeeded in passing through the ordeal without evincing any of the terror and revulsion that she felt. Tarzan watched her closely, a half-smile upon his face. He was not so far removed from recent contact with civilized people that he could not realize the torture that she was undergoing, but he felt no pity for this woman of a cruel enemy who doubtless deserved the worst suffering that could be meted to her. Yet, notwithstanding his sentiments toward her, he was forced to admire her fine display of courage. Suddenly he turned to the apes.

"Tarzan goes to hunt for himself and his she," he said. "The she will remain there," and he pointed toward the hut. "See that no member of the tribe harms her. Do you understand?"

The apes nodded. "We will not harm her," said Go-lat.

"No," said Tarzan. "You will not. For if you do, Tarzan will kill you," and then turning to the girl, "Come," he said, "I am going to hunt now. You had better remain at the hut. The apes have promised not to harm you. I will leave my spear with you. It will be the best weapon you could have in case you should need to protect yourself, but I doubt if you will be in any danger for the short time that I am away."

He walked with her as far as the boma and when she had entered he closed the gap with thorn bushes and turned away toward the forest. She watched him moving across the clearing, noting the easy, catlike tread and the grace of every movement that harmonized so well with the symmetry and perfection of his figure. At the forest's edge she saw him swing lightly into a tree and disappear from view, and then, being a woman, she entered the hut and, throwing herself upon the ground, burst into tears.