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Chapter 15 - Mysterious Footprints

As the British plane piloted by Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick rose above the jungle wilderness where Bertha Kircher's life had so often been upon the point of extinction, and sped toward the east, the girl felt a sudden contraction of the muscles of her throat. She tried very hard to swallow something that was not there. It seemed strange to her that she should feel regret in leaving behind her such hideous perils, and yet it was plain to her that such was the fact, for she was also leaving behind something beside the dangers that had menaced her -- a unique figure that had entered her life, and for which she felt an unaccountable attraction.

Before her in the pilot's seat sat an English officer and gentleman whom, she knew, loved her, and yet she dared to feel regret in his company at leaving the stamping ground of a wild beast!

Lieutenant Smith-Oldwick, on his part, was in the seventh heaven of elation. He was in possession again of his beloved ship, he was flying swiftly in the direction of his comrades and his duty, and with him was the woman he loved. The fly in the ointment, however, was the accusation Tarzan had made against this woman. He had said that she was a German, and a spy, and from the heights of bliss the English officer was occasionally plunged to the depths of despair in contemplation of the inevitable, were the ape-man's charges to prove true. He found himself torn between sentiments of love and honor. On the one hand he could not surrender the woman he loved to the certain fate that must be meted out to her if she were in truth an enemy spy, while on the other it would be equally impossible for him as an Englishman and an officer to give her aid or protection.

The young man contented himself therefore with repeated mental denials of her guilt. He tried to convince himself that Tarzan was mistaken, and when he conjured upon the screen of recollection the face of the girl behind him, he was doubly reassured that those lines of sweet femininity and character, those clear and honest eyes, could not belong to one of the hated alien race.

And so they sped toward the east, each wrapped in his own thoughts. Below them they saw the dense vegetation of the jungle give place to the scantier growth upon the hillside, and then before them there spread the wide expanse of arid wastelands marked by the deep scarring of the narrow gorges that long-gone rivers had cut there in some forgotten age.

Shortly after they passed the summit of the ridge which formed the boundary between the desert and the fertile country, Ska, the vulture, winging his way at a high altitude toward his aerie, caught sight of a strange new bird of gigantic proportions encroaching upon the preserves of his aerial domain. Whether with intent to give battle to the interloper or merely impelled by curiosity, Ska rose suddenly upward to meet the plane. Doubtless he misjudged the speed of the newcomer, but be that as it may, the tip of the propeller blade touched him and simultaneously many things happened. The lifeless body of Ska, torn and bleeding, dropped plummet-like toward the ground; a bit of splintered spruce drove backward to strike the pilot on the forehead; the plane shuddered and trembled and as Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick sank forward in momentary unconsciousness the ship dived headlong toward the earth.

Only for an instant was the pilot unconscious, but that instant almost proved their undoing. When he awoke to a realization of their peril it was also to discover that his motor had stalled. The plane had attained frightful momentum, and the ground seemed too close for him to hope to flatten out in time to make a safe landing. Directly beneath him was a deep rift in the plateau, a narrow gorge, the bottom of which appeared comparatively level and sand covered.

In the brief instant in which he must reach a decision, the safest plan seemed to attempt a landing in the gorge, and this he did, but not without considerable damage to the plane and a severe shaking-up for himself and his passenger.

Fortunately neither of them was injured but their condition seemed indeed a hopeless one. It was a grave question as to whether the man could repair his plane and continue the journey, and it seemed equally questionable as to their ability either to proceed on foot to the coast or retrace their way to the country they had just left. The man was confident that they could not hope to cross the desert country to the east in the face of thirst and hunger, while behind them in the valley of plenty lay almost equal danger in the form of carnivores and the warlike natives.

After the plane came to its sudden and disastrous stop, Smith-Oldwick turned quickly to see what the effect of the accident had been on the girl. He found her pale but smiling, and for several seconds the two sat looking at each other in silence.

"This is the end?" the girl asked.

The Englishman shook his head. "It is the end of the first leg, anyway," he replied.

"But you can't hope to make repairs here," she said dubiously.

"No," he said, "not if they amount to anything, but I may be able to patch it up. I will have to look her over a bit first. Let us hope there is nothing serious. It's a long, long way to the Tanga railway."

"We would not get far," said the girl, a slight note of hopelessness in her tone. "Entirely unarmed as we are, it would be little less than a miracle if we covered even a small fraction of the distance."

"But we are not unarmed," replied the man. "I have an extra pistol here, that the beggars didn't discover," and, removing the cover of a compartment, he drew forth an automatic.

Bertha Kircher leaned back in her seat and laughed aloud, a mirthless, half-hysterical laugh. "That popgun!" she exclaimed. "What earthly good would it do other than to infuriate any beast of prey you might happen to hit with it?"

Smith-Oldwick looked rather crestfallen. "But it is a weapon," he said. "You will have to admit that, and certainly I could kill a man with it."

"You could if you happened to hit him," said the girl, "or the thing didn't jam. Really, I haven't much faith in an auto- matic. I have used them myself."

"Oh, of course," he said ironically, "an express rifle would be better, for who knows but we might meet an elephant here in the desert."

The girl saw that he was hurt, and she was sorry, for she realized that there was nothing he would not do in her service or protection, and that it was through no fault of his that he was so illy armed. Doubtless, too, he realized as well as she the futility of his weapon, and that he had only called attention to it in the hope of reassuring her and lessening her anxiety.

"Forgive me," she said. "I did not mean to be nasty, but this accident is the proverbial last straw. It seems to me that I have borne all that I can. Though I was willing to give my life in the service of my country, I did not imagine that my death agonies would be so long drawn out, for I realize now that I have been dying for many weeks."

"What do you mean!" he exclaimed; "what do you mean by that! You are not dying. There is nothing the matter with you."

"Oh, not that," she said, "I did not mean that. What I mean is that at the moment the black sergeant, Usanga, and his rene- gade German native troops captured me and brought me in- land, my death warrant was signed. Sometimes I have imagined that a reprieve has been granted. Sometimes I have hoped that I might be upon the verge of winning a full pardon, but really in the depths of my heart I have known that I should never live to regain civilization. I have done my bit for my country, and though it was not much I can at least go with the realization that it was the best I was able to offer. All that I can hope for now, all that I ask for, is a speedy fulfillment of the death sentence. I do not wish to linger any more to face constant terror and apprehension. Even physical torture would be preferable to what I have passed through. I have no doubt that you consider me a brave woman, but really my terror has been boundless. The cries of the carnivores at night fill me with a dread so tangible that I am in actual pain. I feel the rending talons in my flesh and the cruel fangs munching upon my bones -- it is as real to me as though I were actually enduring the horrors of such a death. I doubt if you can under- stand it -- men are so different."

"Yes," he said, "I think I can understand it, and because I understand I can appreciate more than you imagine the hero- ism you have shown in your endurance of all that you have passed through. There can be no bravery where there is no fear. A child might walk into a lion's den, but it would take a very brave man to go to its rescue."

"Thank you," she said, "but I am not brave at all, and now I am very much ashamed of my thoughtlessness for your own feelings. I will try and take a new grip upon myself and we will both hope for the best. I will help you all I can if you will tell me what I may do."

"The first thing," he replied, "is to find out just how serious our damage is, and then to see what we can do in the way of repairs."

For two days Smith-Oldwick worked upon the damaged plane -- worked in the face of the fact that from the first he realized the case was hopeless. And at last he told her.

"I knew it," she said, "but I believe that I felt much as you must have; that however futile our efforts here might be, it would be infinitely as fatal to attempt to retrace our way to the jungle we just left or to go on toward the coast. You know and I know that we could not reach the Tanga railway on foot. We should die of thirst and starvation before we had covered half the distance, and if we return to the jungle, even were we able to reach it, it would be but to court an equally certain, though different, fate."

"So we might as well sit here and wait for death as to use- lessly waste our energies in what we know would be a futile attempt at escape?" he asked.

"No," she replied, "I shall never give up like that. What I meant was that it was useless to attempt to reach either of the places where we know that there is food and water in abun- dance, so we must strike out in a new direction. Somewhere there may be water in this wilderness and if there is, the best chance of our finding it would be to follow this gorge down- ward. We have enough food and water left, if we are careful of it, for a couple of days and in that time we might stumble upon a spring or possibly even reach the fertile country which I know lies to the south. When Usanga brought me to the Wamabo country from the coast he took a southerly route along which there was usually water and game in plenty. It was not until we neared our destination that the country be- came overrun with carnivores. So there is hope if we can reach the fertile country south of us that we can manage to pull through to the coast."

The man shook his head dubiously. "We can try it," he said. "Personally, I do not fancy sitting here waiting for death."

Smith-Oldwick was leaning against the ship, his dejected gaze directed upon the ground at his feet. The girl was looking south down the gorge in the direction of their one slender chance of life. Suddenly she touched him on the arm.

"Look," she whispered.

The man raised his eyes quickly in the direction of her gaze to see the massive head of a great lion who was regarding them from beyond a rocky projection at the first turning of the gorge.

"Phew!" he exclaimed, "the beggars are everywhere."

"They do not go far from water do they," asked the girl hopefully.

"I should imagine not," he replied; "a lion is not particularly strong on endurance."

"Then he is a harbinger of hope," she exclaimed.

The man laughed. "Cute little harbinger of hope!" he said. "Reminds me of Cock Robin heralding spring."

The girl cast a quick glance at him. "Don't be silly, and I don't care if you do laugh. He fills me with hope."

"It is probably mutual," replied Smith-Oldwick, "as we doubtless fill him with hope."

The lion evidently having satisfied himself as to the nature of the creatures before him advanced slowly now in their di- rection.

"Come," said the man, "let's climb aboard," and he helped the girl over the side of the ship.

"Can't he get in here?" she asked.

"I think he can," said the man.

"You are reassuring," she returned.

"I don't feel so." He drew his pistol.

"For heaven's sake," she cried, "don't shoot at him with that thing. You might hit him."

"I don't intend to shoot at him but I might succeed in frightening him away if he attempts to reach us here. Haven't you ever seen a trainer work with lions? He carries a silly little pop-gun loaded with blank cartridges. With that and a kitchen chair he subdues the most ferocious of beasts."

"But you haven't a kitchen chair," she reminded him.

"No," he said, "Government is always muddling things. I have always maintained that airplanes should be equipped with kitchen chairs."

Bertha Kircher laughed as evenly and with as little hysteria as though she were moved by the small talk of an afternoon tea.

Numa, the lion, came steadily toward them; his attitude seemed more that of curiosity than of belligerency. Close to the side of the ship he stopped and stood gazing up at them.

"Magnificent, isn't he?" exclaimed the man.

"I never saw a more beautiful creature," she replied, "nor one with such a dark coat. Why, he is almost black."

The sound of their voices seemed not to please the lord of the jungle, for he suddenly wrinkled his great face into deep furrows as he bared his fangs beneath snarling lips and gave vent to an angry growl. Almost simultaneously he crouched for a spring and immediately Smith-Oldwick discharged his pistol into the ground in front of the lion. The effect of the noise upon Numa seemed but to enrage him further, and with a horrid roar he sprang for the author of the new and disquieting sound that had outraged his ears.

Simultaneously Lieutenant Harold Percy Smith-Oldwick vaulted nimbly out of the cockpit on the opposite side of his plane, calling to the girl to follow his example. The girl, realizing the futility of leaping to the ground, chose the remaining alternative and clambered to the top of the upper plane.

Numa, unaccustomed to the idiosyncrasies of construction of an airship and having gained the forward cockpit, watched the girl clamber out of his reach without at first endeavoring to prevent her. Having taken possession of the plane his anger seemed suddenly to leave him and he made no immediate move toward following Smith-Oldwick. The girl, realizing the comparative safety of her position, had crawled to the outer edge of the wing and was calling to the man to try and reach the opposite end of the upper plane.

It was this scene upon which Tarzan of the Apes looked as he rounded the bend of the gorge above the plane after the pistol shot had attracted his attention. The girl was so intent upon watching the efforts of the Englishman to reach a place of safety, and the latter was so busily occupied in attempting to do so that neither at once noticed the silent approach of the ape-man.

It was Numa who first noticed the intruder. The lion immediately evinced his displeasure by directing toward him a snarling countenance and a series of warning growls. His action called the attention of the two upon the upper plane to the newcomer, eliciting a stifled "Thank God!" from the girl, even though she could scarce credit the evidence of her own eyes that it was indeed the savage man, whose presence always assured her safety, who had come so providentially in the nick of time.

Almost immediately both were horrified to see Numa leap from the cockpit and advance upon Tarzan. The ape-man, carrying his stout spear in readiness, moved deliberately onward to meet the carnivore, which he had recognized as the lion of the Wamabos' pit. He knew from the manner of Numa's approach what neither Bertha Kircher nor Smith-Oldwick knew -- that there was more of curiosity than belligerency in it, and he wondered if in that great head there might not be a semblance of gratitude for the kindness that Tarzan had done him.

There was no question in Tarzan's mind but that Numa recognized him, for he knew his fellows of the jungle well enough to know that while they oftentimes forgot certain sensations more quickly than man there are others which remain in their memories for years. A well-defined scent spoor might never be forgotten by a beast if it had first been sensed under unusual circumstances, and so Tarzan was confident that Numa's nose had already reminded him of all the circumstances of their brief connection.

Love of the sporting chance is inherent in the Anglo-Saxon race and it was not now Tarzan of the Apes but rather John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, who smilingly welcomed the sporting chance which he must take to discover how far-reaching was Numa's gratitude.

Smith-Oldwick and the girl saw the two nearing each other. The former swore softly beneath his breath while he nervously fingered the pitiful weapon at his hip. The girl pressed her open palms to her cheeks as she leaned forward in stony-eyed, horror-stricken silence. While she had every confidence in the prowess of the godlike creature who thus dared brazenly to face the king of beasts, she had no false conception of what must certainly happen when they met. She had seen Tarzan battle with Sheeta, the panther, and she had realized then that powerful as the man was, it was only agility, cunning, and chance that placed him upon anywhere near an equal footing with his savage adversary, and that of the three factors upon his side chance was the greatest.

She saw the man and the lion stop simultaneously, not more than a yard apart. She saw the beast's tail whipping from side to side and she could hear his deep-throated growls rumbling from his cavernous breast, but she could read correctly neither the movement of the lashing tail nor the notes of the growl.

To her they seemed to indicate nothing but bestial rage while to Tarzan of the Apes they were conciliatory and reassuring in the extreme. And then she saw Numa move forward again until his nose touched the man's naked leg and she closed her eyes and covered them with her palms. For what seemed an eternity she waited for the horrid sound of the conflict which she knew must come, but all she heard was an explosive sigh of relief from Smith-Oldwick and a half-hysterical "By Jove! Just fancy it!"

She looked up to see the great lion rubbing his shaggy head against the man's hip, and Tarzan's free hand entangled in the black mane as he scratched Numa, the lion, behind a back-laid ear.

Strange friendships are often formed between the lower animals of different species, but less often between man and the savage felidae, because of the former's inherent fear of the great cats. And so after all, therefore, the friendship so suddenly developed between the savage lion and the savage man was not inexplicable.

As Tarzan approached the plane Numa walked at his side, and when Tarzan stopped and looked up at the girl and the man Numa stopped also.

"I had about given up hope of finding you," said the ape-man, "and it is evident that I found you just in time."

"But how did you know we were in trouble?" asked the English officer.

"I saw your plane fall," replied Tarzan. "I was watching you from a tree beside the clearing where you took off. I didn't have much to locate you by other than the general direction, but it seems that you volplaned a considerable distance toward the south after you disappeared from my view behind the hills. I have been looking for you further toward the north. I was just about to turn back when I heard your pistol shot. Is your ship beyond repair?"

"Yes," replied Smith-Oldwick, "it is hopeless."

"What are your plans, then? What do you wish to do?" Tarzan directed his question to the girl.

"We want to reach the coast," she said, "but it seems impossible now."

"I should have thought so a little while ago," replied the ape-man, "but if Numa is here there must be water within a reasonable distance. I ran across this lion two days ago in the Wamabo country. I liberated him from one of their pits. To have reached this spot he must have come by some trail unknown to me -- at least I crossed no game trail and no spoor of any animal after I came over the hills out of the fertile country. From which direction did he come upon you?"

"It was from the south," replied the girl. "We thought, too, that there must be water in that direction."

"Let's find out then," said Tarzan.

"But how about the lion?" asked Smith-Oldwick.

"That we will have to discover," replied the ape-man, "and we can only do so if you will come down from your perch."

The officer shrugged his shoulders. The girl turned her gaze upon him to note the effect of Tarzan's proposal. The Englishman grew suddenly very white, but there was a smile upon his lips as without a word he slipped over the edge of the plane and clambered to the ground behind Tarzan.

Bertha Kircher realized that the man was afraid nor did she blame him, and she also realized the remarkable courage that he had shown in thus facing a danger that was very real to him.

Numa standing close to Tarzan's side raised his head and glared at the young Englishman, growled once, and looked up at the ape-man. Tarzan retained a hold upon the beast's mane and spoke to him in the language of the great apes. To the girl and Smith-Oldwick the growling gutturals falling from human lips sounded uncanny in the extreme, but whether Numa understood them or not they appeared to have the desired effect upon him, as he ceased growling, and as Tarzan walked to Smith-Oldwick's side Numa accompanied him, nor did he offer to molest the officer.

"What did you say to him?" asked the girl.

Tarzan smiled. "I told him," he replied, "that I am Tarzan of the Apes, mighty hunter, killer of beasts, lord of the jungle, and that you are my friends. I have never been sure that all of the other beasts understand the language of the Mangani. I know that Manu, the monkey, speaks nearly the same tongue and I am sure that Tantor, the elephant, understands all that I say to him. We of the jungle are great boasters. In our speech, in our carriage, in every detail of our demeanor we must impress others with our physical power and our ferocity. That is why we growl at our enemies. We are telling them to beware or we shall fall upon them and tear them to pieces. Perhaps Numa does not understand the words that I use but I believe that my tones and my manner carry the impression that I wish them to convey. Now you may come down and be introduced."

It required all the courage that Bertha Kircher possessed to lower herself to the ground within reach of the talons and fangs of this untamed forest beast, but she did it. Nor did Numa do more than bare his teeth and growl a little as she came close to the ape-man.

"I think you are safe from him as long as I am present," said the ape-man. "The best thing to do is simply to ignore him. Make no advances, but be sure to give no indication of fear and, if possible always keep me between you and him. He will go away presently I am sure and the chances are that we shall not see him again."

At Tarzan's suggestion Smith-Oldwick removed the remaining water and provisions from the plane and, distributing the burden among them, they set off toward the south. Numa did not follow them, but stood by the plane watching until they finally disappeared from view around a bend in the gorge.

Tarzan had picked up Numa's trail with the intention of following it southward in the belief that it would lead to water. In the sand that floored the bottom of the gorge tracks were plain and easily followed. At first only the fresh tracks of Numa were visible, but later in the day the ape-man discovered the older tracks of other lions and just before dark he stopped suddenly in evident surprise. His two companions looked at him questioningly, and in answer to their implied interrogations he pointed at the ground directly in front of him.

"Look at those," he exclaimed.

At first neither Smith-Oldwick nor the girl saw anything but a confusion of intermingled prints of padded feet in the sand, but presently the girl discovered what Tarzan had seen, and an exclamation of surprise broke from her lips.

"The imprint of human feet!" she cried.

Tarzan nodded.

"But there are no toes," the girl pointed out.

"The feet were shod with a soft sandal," explained Tarzan.

"Then there must be a native village somewhere in the vicinity," said Smith-Oldwick.

"Yes," replied the ape-man, "but not the sort of natives which we would expect to find here in this part of Africa where others all go unshod with the exception of a few of Usanga's renegade German native troops who wear German army shoes. I don't know that you can notice it, but it is evident to me that the foot inside the sandal that made these imprints were not the foot of a Negro. If you will examine them carefully you will notice that the impression of the heel and ball of the foot are well marked even through the sole of the sandal. The weight comes more nearly in the center of a Negro's footprint."

"Then you think these were made by a white person?"

"It looks that way," replied Tarzan, and suddenly, to the surprise of both the girl and Smith-Oldwick, he dropped to his hands and knees and sniffed at the tracks -- again a beast utilizing the senses and woodcraft of a beast. Over an area of several square yards his keen nostrils sought the identity of the makers of the tracks. At length he rose to his feet.

"It is not the spoor of the Gomangani," he said, "nor is it exactly like that of white men. There were three who came this way. They were men, but of what race I do not know."

There was no apparent change in the nature of the gorge except that it had steadily grown deeper as they followed it downward until now the rocky and precipitous sides rose far above them. At different points natural caves, which appeared to have been eroded by the action of water in some forgotten age, pitted the side walls at various heights. Near them was such a cavity at the ground's level -- an arched cavern floored with white sand. Tarzan indicated it with a gesture of his hand.

"We will lair here tonight," he said, and then with one of his rare, slow smiles: "We will CAMP here tonight."

Having eaten their meager supper Tarzan bade the girl enter the cavern.

"You will sleep inside," he said. "The lieutenant and I will lie outside at the entrance."