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[Tarzan the Untamed](#)

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This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 17 - The Walled City

Dropping to the ground once more he picked up the trail of the girl and her captors, which he followed easily along what appeared to be a well-beaten trail. It was not long before he came to a small stream, where he quenched his thirst, and thereafter he saw that the trail followed in the general direction of the stream, which ran southwesterly. Here and there were cross trails and others which joined the main avenue, and always upon each of them were the tracks and scent of the great cats, of Numa, the lion, and Sheeta, the panther.

With the exception of a few small rodents there appeared to be no other wild life on the surface of the valley. There was no indication of Bara, the deer, or Horta, the boar, or of Gorgo, the buffalo, Buto, Tantor, or Duro. Histah, the snake, was there. He saw him in the trees in greater numbers than he ever had seen Histah before; and once beside a reedy pool he caught a scent that could have belonged to none other than Gimla the crocodile, but upon none of these did the Tar- mangan care to feed.

And so, as he craved meat, he turned his attention to the birds above him. His assailants of the night before had not disarmed him. Either in the darkness and the rush of the charging lions the human foe had overlooked him or else they had considered him dead; but whatever the reason he still retained his weapons -- his spear and his long knife, his bow and arrows, and his grass rope.

Fitting a shaft to his bow Tarzan awaited an opportunity to bring down one of the larger birds, and when the opportunity finally presented itself he drove the arrow straight to its mark. As the gaily plumaged creature fluttered to earth its companions and the little monkeys set up a most terrific chorus of wails and screaming protests. The whole forest became suddenly a babel of hoarse screams and shrill shrieks.

Tarzan would not have been surprised had one or two birds in the immediate vicinity given voice to terror as they fled, but that the whole life of the jungle should set up so weird a protest filled him with disgust. It was an angry face that he turned up toward the monkeys and the birds as there suddenly stirred within him a savage inclination to voice his displeasure and his answer to what he considered their challenge. And so it was that there broke upon this jungle for the first time Tarzan's hideous scream of victory and challenge.

The effect upon the creatures above him was instantaneous. Where before the air had trembled to the din of their voices, now utter silence reigned and a moment later the ape-man was alone with his puny kill.

The silence following so closely the previous tumult carried a sinister impression to the ape-man, which still further aroused his anger. Picking the bird from where it had fallen he withdrew his arrow from the body and returned it to his quiver. Then with his knife he quickly and deftly removed the skin and feathers together. He ate angrily, growling as though actually menaced by a near-by foe, and perhaps, too, his growls were partially induced by the fact that he did not care for the flesh of birds. Better this, however, than nothing and from what his senses had told him there was no flesh in the vicinity such as he was accustomed to and cared most for. How he would have enjoyed a juicy haunch from Pacco, the zebra, or a steak from the loin of Gorgo, the buffalo! The very thought made his mouth water and increased his resentment against this unnatural forest that harbored no such delicious quarry.

He had but partially consumed his kill when he suddenly became aware of a movement in the brush at no great distance from him and downwind, and a moment later his nostrils picked up the scent of Numa from the opposite direction, and then upon either side he caught the fall of padded feet and the brushing of bodies against leafy branches. The ape-man smiled. What stupid creature did they think him, to be surprised by such clumsy stalkers? Gradually the sounds and scents indicated that lions were moving upon him from all directions, that he was in the center of a steadily converging circle of beasts. Evidently they were so sure of their prey that they were making no effort toward stealth, for he heard twigs crack beneath their feet, and the brushing of their bodies against the vegetation through which they forced their way.

He wondered what could have brought them. It seemed unreasonable to believe that the cries of the birds and the monkeys should have summoned them, and yet, if not, it was indeed a remarkable coincidence. His judgment told him that the death of a single bird in this forest which teemed with birds could scarce be of sufficient moment to warrant that which followed. Yet even in the face of reason and past experience he found that the whole affair perplexed him.

He stood in the center of the trail awaiting the coming of the lions and wondering what would be the method of their attack or if they would indeed attack. Presently a maned lion came into view along the trail below him. At sight of him the lion halted. The beast was similar to those that had attacked him earlier in the day, a trifle larger and a trifle darker than the lions of his native jungles, but neither so large nor so black as Numa of the pit.

Presently he distinguished the outlines of other lions in the surrounding brush and among the trees. Each of them halted as it came within sight of the ape-man and there they stood regarding him in silence. Tarzan wondered how long it would be before they charged and while he waited he resumed his feeding, though with every sense constantly alert.

One by one the lions lay down, but always their faces were toward him and their eyes upon him. There had been no growling and no roaring -- just the quiet drawing of the silent circle about him. It was all so entirely foreign to anything that Tarzan ever before had seen lions do that it irritated him so that presently, having finished his repast, he fell to making insulting remarks to first one and then another of the lions, after the habit he had learned from the apes of his childhood.

"Dango, eater of carrion," he called them, and he compared them most unfavorably with Histah, the snake, the most loathed and repulsive creature of the jungle. Finally he threw handfuls of earth at them and bits of broken twigs, and then the lions growled and bared their fangs, but none of them advanced.

"Cowards," Tarzan taunted them. "Numa with a heart of Bara, the deer." He told them who he was, and after the manner of the jungle folk he boasted as to the horrible things he would do to them, but the lions only lay and watched him.

It must have been a half hour after their coming that Tarzan caught in the distance along the trail the sound of footsteps approaching. They were the footsteps of a creature who walked upon two legs, and though Tarzan could catch no scent spoor from that direction he knew that a man was approaching. Nor had he long to wait before his judgment was confirmed by the appearance of a man who halted in the trail directly behind the first lion that Tarzan had seen.

At sight of the newcomer the ape-man realized that here was one similar to those who had given off the unfamiliar scent spoor that he had detected the previous night.

and he saw that not only in the matter of scent did the man differ from other human beings with whom Tarzan was familiar.

The fellow was strongly built with skin of a leathery appearance, like parchment yellowed with age. His hair, which was coal black and three or four inches in length, grew out stiffly at right angles to his scalp. His eyes were close set and the irises densely black and very small, so that the white of the eyeball showed around them. The man's face was smooth except for a few straggly hairs on his chin and upper lip. The nose was aquiline and fine, but the hair grew so far down on the forehead as to suggest a very low and brutal type. The upper lip was short and fine while the lower lip was rather heavy and inclined to be pendulous, the chin being equally weak. Altogether the face carried the suggestion of a once strong and handsome countenance entirely altered by physical violence or by degraded habits and thoughts. The man's arms were long, though not abnormally so, while his legs were short, though straight.

He was clothed in tight-fitting nether garments and a loose, sleeveless tunic that fell just below his hips, while his feet were shod in soft-soled sandals, the wrappings of which extended halfway to his knees, closely resembling a modern spiral military legging. He carried a short, heavy spear, and at his side swung a weapon that at first so astonished the ape-man that he could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses -- a heavy saber in a leather-covered scabbard. The man's tunic appeared to have been fabricated upon a loom -- it was certainly not made of skins, while the garments that covered his legs were quite as evidently made from the hides of rodents.

Tarzan noted the utter unconcern with which the man approached the lions, and the equal indifference of Numa to him. The fellow paused for a moment as though appraising the ape-man and then pushed on past the lions, brushing against the tawny hide as he passed him in the trail.

About twenty feet from Tarzan the man stopped, addressing the former in a strange jargon, no syllable of which was intelligible to the Tarmangani. His gestures indicated numerous references to the lions surrounding them, and once he touched his spear with the forefinger of his left hand and twice he struck the saber at his hip.

While he spoke Tarzan studied the fellow closely, with the result that there fastened itself upon his mind a strange conviction -- that the man who addressed him was what might only be described as a rational maniac. As the thought came to the ape-man he could not but smile, so paradoxical the description seemed. Yet a closer study of the man's features, carriage, and the contour of his head carried almost incontrovertibly the assurance that he was insane, while the tones of his voice and his gestures resembled those of a sane and intelligent mortal.

Presently the man had concluded his speech and appeared to be waiting questioningly Tarzan's reply. The ape-man spoke to the other first in the language of the great apes, but he soon saw that the words carried no conviction to his listener. Then with equal futility he tried several native dialects but to none of these did the man respond.

By this time Tarzan began to lose patience. He had wasted sufficient time by the road, and as he had never depended much upon speech in the accomplishment of his ends, he now raised his spear and advanced toward the other. This, evidently, was a language common to both, for instantly the fellow raised his own weapon and at the same time a low call broke from his lips, a call which instantly brought to action every lion in the hitherto silent circle. A volley of roars shattered the silence of the forest and simultaneously lions sprang into view upon all sides as they closed in rapidly upon their quarry. The man who had called them stepped back, his teeth bared in a mirthless grin.

It was then that Tarzan first noticed that the fellow's upper canines were unusually long and exceedingly sharp. It was just a flashing glimpse he got of them as he leaped agilely from the ground and, to the consternation of both the lions and their master, disappeared in the foliage of the lower terrace, flinging back over his shoulder as he swung rapidly away: "I am Tarzan of the Apes; mighty hunter; mighty fighter! None in the jungle more powerful, none more cunning than Tarzan!"

A short distance beyond the point at which they had surrounded him, Tarzan came to the trail again and sought for the spoor of Bertha Kircher and Lieutenant Smith-Oldwick. He found them quickly and continued upon his search for the two. The spoor lay directly along the trail for another half-mile when the way suddenly debouched from the forest into open land and there broke upon the astonished view of the ape-man the domes and minarets of a walled city.

Directly before him in the wall nearest him Tarzan saw a low-arched gateway to which a well-beaten trail led from that which he had been following. In the open space between the forest and the city walls, quantities of garden stuff was growing, while before him at his feet, in an open man-made ditch, ran a stream of water! The plants in the garden were laid out in well-spaced, symmetrical rows and appeared to have been given excellent attention and cultivation. Tiny streams were trickling between the rows from the main ditch before him and at some distance to his right he could see people at work among the plants.

The city wall appeared to be about thirty feet in height, its plastered expanse unbroken except by occasional embrasures. Beyond the wall rose the domes of several structures and numerous minarets dotted the sky line of the city. The largest and central dome appeared to be gilded, while others were red, or blue, or yellow. The architecture of the wall itself was of uncompromising simplicity. It was of a cream shade and appeared to be plastered and painted. At its base was a line of well-tended shrubs and at some distance towards its eastern extremity it was vine covered to the top.

As he stood in the shadow of the trail, his keen eyes taking in every detail of the picture before him, he became aware of the approach of a party in his rear and there was borne to him the scent of the man and the lions whom he had so readily escaped. Taking to the trees Tarzan moved a short distance to the west and, finding a comfortable crotch at the edge of the forest where he could watch the trail leading through the gardens to the city gate, he awaited the return of his would-be captors. And soon they came -- the strange man followed by the pack of great lions. Like dogs they moved along behind him down the trail among the gardens to the gate.

Here the man struck upon the panels of the door with the butt of his spear, and when it opened in response to his signal he passed in with his lions. Beyond the open door Tarzan, from his distant perch, caught but a fleeting glimpse of life within the city, just enough to indicate that there were other human creatures who abode there, and then the door closed.

Through that door he knew that the girl and the man whom he sought to succor had been taken into the city. What fate lay in store for them or whether already it had been meted out to them he could not even guess, nor where, within that forbidding wall, they were incarcerated he could not know. But of one thing he was assured: that if he were to aid them he could not do it from outside the wall. He must gain entrance to the city first, nor did he doubt, that once within, his keen senses would eventually reveal the whereabouts of those whom he sought.

The low sun was casting long shadows across the gardens when Tarzan saw the workers returning from the eastern field. A man came first, and as he came he lowered little gates along the large ditch of running water, shutting off the streams that had run between the rows of growing plants; and behind him came other men carrying burdens of fresh vegetables in great woven baskets upon their shoulders. Tarzan had not realized that there had been so many men working in the field, but now as he sat there at the close of the day he saw a procession filing in from the east, bearing the tools and the produce back into the city.

And then, to gain a better view, the ape-man ascended to the topmost branches of a tall tree where he overlooked the nearer wall. From this point of vantage he saw that the city was long and narrow, and that while the outer walls formed a perfect rectangle, the streets within were winding. Toward the center of the city there appeared to be a low, white building around which the larger edifices of the city had been built, and here, in the fast-waning light, Tarzan thought that between two buildings he caught the glint of water, but of that he was not sure. His experience of the centers of civilization naturally inclined him to believe that this central area was a plaza about which the larger buildings were grouped and that there would be the most logical place to search first for Bertha Kircher and her companion.

And then the sun went down and darkness quickly enveloped the city -- a darkness that was accentuated for the ape-man rather than relieved by the artificial lights

which immediately appeared in many of the windows visible to him.

Tarzan had noticed that the roofs of most of the buildings were flat, the few exceptions being those of what he imagined to be the more pretentious public structures. How this city had come to exist in this forgotten part of unexplored Africa the ape-man could not conceive. Better than another, he realized something of the unsolved secrets of the Great Dark Continent, enormous areas of which have as yet been untouched by the foot of civilized man. Yet he could scarce believe that a city of this size and apparently thus well constructed could have existed for the generations that it must have been there, without intercourse with the outer world. Even though it was surrounded by a trackless desert waste, as he knew it to be, he could not conceive that generation after generation of men could be born and die there without attempting to solve the mysteries of the world beyond the confines of their little valley.

And yet, here was the city surrounded by tilled land and filled with people!

With the coming of night there arose throughout the jungle the cries of the great cats, the voice of Numa blended with that of Sheeta, and the thunderous roars of the great males reverberated through the forest until the earth trembled, and from within the city came the answering roars of other lions.

A simple plan for gaining entrance to the city had occurred to Tarzan, and now that darkness had fallen he set about to put it into effect. Its success hinged entirely upon the strength of the vines he had seen surmounting the wall toward the east. In this direction he made his way, while from out of the forest about him the cries of the flesh-eaters increased in volume and ferocity. A quarter of a mile intervened between the forest and the city wall -- a quarter of a mile of cultivated land unrelieved by a single tree. Tarzan of the Apes realized his limitations and so he knew that it would undoubtedly spell death for him to be caught in the open space by one of the great black lions of the forest if, as he had already surmised, Numa of the pit was a specimen of the forest lion of the valley.

He must, therefore, depend entirely upon his cunning and his speed, and upon the chance that the vine would sustain his weight.

He moved through the middle terrace, where the way is always easiest, until he reached a point opposite the vine-clad portion of the wall, and there he waited, listening and scenting, until he might assure himself that there was no Numa within his immediate vicinity, or, at least, none that sought him. And when he was quite sure that there was no lion close by in the forest, and none in the clearing between himself and the wall, he dropped lightly to the ground and moved stealthily out into the open.

The rising moon, just topping the eastern cliffs, cast its bright rays upon the long stretch of open garden beneath the wall. And, too, it picked out in clear relief for any curious eyes that chanced to be cast in that direction, the figure of the giant ape-man moving across the clearing. It was only chance, of course, that a great lion hunting at the edge of the forest saw the figure of the man halfway between the forest and the wall. Suddenly there broke upon Tarzan's ears a menacing sound. It was not the roar of a hungry lion, but the roar of a lion in rage, and, as he glanced back in the direction from which the sound came, he saw a huge beast moving out from the shadows of the forest toward him.

Even in the moonlight and at a distance Tarzan saw that the lion was huge; that it was indeed another of the black-maned monsters similar to Numa of the pit. For an instant he was impelled to turn and fight, but at the same time the thought of the helpless girl imprisoned in the city flashed through his brain and, without an instant's hesitation, Tarzan of the Apes wheeled and ran for the wall. Then it was that Numa charged.

Numa, the lion, can run swiftly for a short distance, but he lacks endurance. For the period of an ordinary charge he can cover the ground with greater rapidity possibly than any other creature in the world. Tarzan, on the other hand, could run at great speed for long distances, though never as rapidly as Numa when the latter charged.

The question of his fate, then, rested upon whether, with his start he could elude Numa for a few seconds; and, if so, if the lion would then have sufficient stamina remaining to pursue him at a reduced gait for the balance of the distance to the wall.

Never before, perhaps, was staged a more thrilling race, and yet it was run with only the moon and stars to see. Alone and in silence the two beasts sped across the moonlit clearing. Numa gained with appalling rapidity upon the fleeing man, yet at every bound Tarzan was nearer to the vine-clad wall. Once the ape-man glanced back, Numa was so close upon him that it seemed inevitable that at the next bound he should drag him down; so close was he that the ape-man drew his knife as he ran, that he might at least give a good account of himself in the last moments of his life.

But Numa had reached the limit of his speed and endurance. Gradually he dropped behind but he did not give up the pursuit, and now Tarzan realized how much hinged upon the strength of the untested vines.

If, at the inception of the race, only Goro and the stars had looked down upon the contestants, such was not the case at its finish, since from an embrasure near the summit of the wall two close-set black eyes peered down upon the two. Tarzan was a dozen yards ahead of Numa when he reached the wall. There was no time to stop and institute a search for sturdy stems and safe handholds. His fate was in the hands of chance and with the realization he gave a final spurt and running catlike up the side of the wall among the vines, sought with his hands for something that would sustain his weight. Below him Numa leaped also.