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Chapter 9 - The Nightmare

THE BLACKS OF the village of Mbonga, the chief, were feasting, while above them in a large tree sat Tarzan of the Apes--grim, terrible, empty, and envious. Hunting had proved poor that day, for there are lean days as well as fat ones for even the greatest of the jungle hunters. Oftentimes Tarzan went empty for more than a full sun, and he had passed through entire moons during which he had been but barely able to stave off starvation; but such times were infrequent.

There once had been a period of sickness among the grass-eaters which had left the plains almost bare of game for several years, and again the great cats had increased so rapidly and so overrun the country that their prey, which was also Tarzan's, had been frightened off for a considerable time.

But for the most part Tarzan had fed well always. Today, though, he had gone empty, one misfortune following another as rapidly as he raised new quarry, so that now, as he sat perched in the tree above the feasting blacks, he experienced all the pangs of famine and his hatred for his lifelong enemies waxed strong in his breast. It was tantalizing, indeed, to sit there hungry while these Gomangani filled themselves so full of food that their stomachs seemed almost upon the point of bursting, and with elephant steaks at that!

It was true that Tarzan and Tantor were the best of friends, and that Tarzan never yet had tasted of the flesh of the elephant; but the Gomangani evidently had slain one, and as they were eating of the flesh of their kill, Tarzan was assailed by no doubts as to the ethics of his doing likewise, should he have the opportunity. Had he known that the elephant had died of sickness several days before the blacks discovered the carcass, he might not have been so keen to partake of the feast, for Tarzan of the Apes was no carrion-eater. Hunger, however, may blunt the most epicurean taste, and Tarzan was not exactly an epicure.

What he was at this moment was a very hungry wild beast whom caution was holding in leash, for the great cooking pot in the center of the village was surrounded by black warriors, through whom not even Tarzan of the Apes might hope to pass unharmed. It would be necessary, therefore, for the watcher to remain there hungry until the blacks had gorged themselves to stupor, and then, if they had left any scraps, to make the best meal he could from such; but to the impatient Tarzan it seemed that the greedy Gomangani would rather burst than leave the feast before the last morsel had been devoured. For a time they broke the monotony of eating by executing portions of a hunting dance, a maneuver which sufficiently stimulated digestion to permit them to fall to once more with renewed vigor; but with the consumption of appalling quantities of elephant meat and native beer they presently became too loggy for physical exertion of any sort, some reaching a stage where they no longer could rise from the ground, but lay conveniently close to the great cooking pot, stuffing themselves into unconsciousness.

It was well past midnight before Tarzan even could begin to see the end of the orgy. The blacks were now falling asleep rapidly; but a few still persisted. From before their condition Tarzan had no doubt but that he easily could enter the village and snatch a handful of meat from before their noses; but a handful was not what he wanted. Nothing less than a stomachful would allay the gnawing craving of that great emptiness. He must therefore have ample time to forage in peace.

At last but a single warrior remained true to his ideals-- an old fellow whose once wrinkled belly was now as smooth and as tight as the head of a drum. With evidences of great discomfort, and even pain, he would crawl toward the pot and drag himself slowly to his knees, from which position he could reach into the receptacle and seize a piece of meat. Then he would roll over on his back with a loud groan and lie there while he slowly forced the food between his teeth and down into his gorged stomach.

It was evident to Tarzan that the old fellow would eat until he died, or until there was no more meat. The ape-man shook his head in disgust. What foul creatures were these Gomangani? Yet of all the jungle folk they alone resembled Tarzan closely in form. Tarzan was a man, and they, too, must be some manner of men, just as the little monkeys, and the great apes, and Bolgani, the gorilla, were quite evidently of one great family, though differing in size and appearance and customs. Tarzan was ashamed, for of all the beasts of the jungle, then, man was the most disgusting--man and Dango, the hyena. Only man and Dango ate until they swelled up like a dead rat. Tarzan had seen Dango eat his way into the carcass of a dead elephant and then continue to eat so much that he had been unable to get out of the hole through which he had entered. Now he could readily believe that man, given the opportunity, would do the same. Man, too, was the most unlovely of creatures--with his skinny legs and his big stomach, his filed teeth, and his thick, red lips. Man was disgusting. Tarzan's gaze was riveted upon the hideous old warrior wallowing in filth beneath him.

There! the thing was struggling to its knees to reach for another morsel of flesh. It groaned aloud in pain and yet it persisted in eating, eating, ever eating. Tarzan could endure it no longer--neither his hunger nor his disgust. Silently he slipped to the ground with the bole of the great tree between himself and the feaster.

The man was still kneeling, bent almost double in agony, before the cooking pot. His back was toward the ape-man. Swiftly and noiselessly Tarzan approached him. There was no sound as steel fingers closed about the black throat. The struggle was short, for the man was old and already half stupefied from the effects of the gorging and the beer.

Tarzan dropped the inert mass and scooped several large pieces of meat from the cooking pot--enough to satisfy even his great hunger--then he raised the body of the feaster and shoved it into the vessel. When the other blacks awoke they would have something to think about! Tarzan grinned. As he turned toward the tree with his meat, he picked up a vessel containing beer and raised it to his lips, but at the first taste he spat the stuff from his mouth and tossed the primitive tankard aside. He was quite sure that even Dango would draw the line at such filthy tasting drink as that, and his contempt for man increased with the conviction.

Tarzan swung off into the jungle some half mile or so before he paused to partake of his stolen food. He noticed that it gave forth a strange and unpleasant odor, but he assumed that this was due to the fact that it had stood in a vessel of water above a fire. Tarzan was, of course, unaccustomed to cooked food. He did not like it; but he was very hungry and had eaten a considerable portion of his haul before it was really borne in upon him that the stuff was nauseating. It required far less than he had imagined it would to satisfy his appetite.

Throwing the balance to the ground he curled up in a convenient crotch and sought slumber; but slumber seemed difficult to woo. Ordinarily Tarzan of the Apes was asleep as quickly as a dog after it curls itself upon a hearthrug before a roaring blaze; but tonight he squirmed and twisted, for at the pit of his stomach was a peculiar feeling that resembled nothing more closely than an attempt upon the part of the fragments of elephant meat reposing there to come out into the night and search for their elephant; but Tarzan was adamant. He gritted his teeth and held them back. He was not to be robbed of his meal after waiting so long to obtain it.

He had succeeded in dozing when the roaring of a lion awoke him. He sat up to discover that it was broad daylight. Tarzan rubbed his eyes. Could it be that he had really slept? He did not feel particularly refreshed as he should have after a good sleep. A noise attracted his attention, and he looked down to see a lion standing at the foot of

the tree gazing hungrily at him. Tarzan made a face at the king of beasts. whereat Numa, greatly to the ape-man's surprise, started to climb up into the branches toward him. Now, never before had Tarzan seen a lion climb a tree, yet, for some unaccountable reason, he was not greatly surprised that this particular lion should do so.

As the lion climbed slowly toward him, Tarzan sought higher branches; but to his chagrin, he discovered that it was with the utmost difficulty that he could climb at all. Again and again he slipped back, losing all that he had gained, while the lion kept steadily at his climbing, coming ever closer and closer to the ape-man. Tarzan could see the hungry light in the yellow-green eyes. He could see the slaver on the drooping jowls, and the great fangs agape to seize and destroy him. Clawing desperately, the ape-man at last succeeded in gaining a little upon his pursuer. He reached the more slender branches far aloft where he well knew no lion could follow; yet on and on came the devil-faced Numa. It was incredible; but it was true. Yet what most amazed Tarzan was that though he realized the incredibility of it all, he at the same time accepted it as a matter of course, first that a lion should climb at all and second that he should enter the upper terraces where even Sheeta, the panther, dared not venture.

To the very top of a tall tree the ape-man clawed his awkward way and after him came Numa, the lion, moaning dismally. At last Tarzan stood balanced upon the very utmost pinnacle of a swaying branch, high above the forest. He could go no farther. Below him the lion came steadily upward, and Tarzan of the Apes realized that at last the end had come. He could not do battle upon a tiny branch with Numa, the lion, especially with such a Numa, to which swaying branches two hundred feet above the ground provided as substantial footing as the ground itself.

Nearer and nearer came the lion. Another moment and he could reach up with one great paw and drag the ape-man downward to those awful jaws. A whirring noise above his head caused Tarzan to glance apprehensively upward. A great bird was circling close above him. He never had seen so large a bird in all his life, yet he recognized it immediately, for had he not seen it hundreds of times in one of the books in the little cabin by the land-locked bay--the moss-grown cabin that with its contents was the sole heritage left by his dead and unknown father to the young Lord Greystoke?

In the picture-book the great bird was shown flying far above the ground with a small child in its talons while, beneath, a distracted mother stood with uplifted hands. The lion was already reaching forth a taloned paw to seize him when the bird swooped and buried no less formidable talons in Tarzan's back. The pain was numbing; but it was with a sense of relief that the ape-man felt himself snatched from the clutches of Numa.

With a great whirring of wings the bird rose rapidly until the forest lay far below. It made Tarzan sick and dizzy to look down upon it from so great a height, so he closed his eyes tight and held his breath. Higher and higher climbed the huge bird. Tarzan opened his eyes. The jungle was so far away that he could see only a dim, green blur below him, but just above and quite close was the sun. Tarzan reached out his hands and warmed them, for they were very cold. Then a sudden madness seized him. Where was the bird taking him? Was he to submit thus passively to a feathered creature however enormous? Was he, Tarzan of the Apes, mighty fighter, to die without striking a blow in his own defense? Never!

He snatched the hunting blade from his gee-string and thrusting upward drove it once, twice, thrice into the breast above him. The mighty wings fluttered a few more times, spasmodically, the talons relaxed their hold, and Tarzan of the Apes fell hurtling downward toward the distant jungle.

It seemed to the ape-man that he fell for many minutes before he crashed through the leafy verdure of the tree tops. The smaller branches broke his fall, so that he came to rest for an instant upon the very branch upon which he had sought slumber the previous night. For an instant he toppled there in a frantic attempt to regain his equilibrium; but at last he rolled off, yet, clutching wildly, he succeeded in grasping the branch and hanging on.

Once more he opened his eyes, which he had closed during the fall. Again it was night. With all his old agility he clambered back to the crotch from which he had toppled. Below him a lion roared, and, looking downward, Tarzan could see the yellow-green eyes shining in the moonlight as they bored hungrily upward through the darkness of the jungle night toward him.

The ape-man gasped for breath. Cold sweat stood out from every pore, there was a great sickness at the pit of Tarzan's stomach. Tarzan of the Apes had dreamed his first dream.

For a long time he sat watching for Numa to climb into the tree after him, and listening for the sound of the great wings from above, for to Tarzan of the Apes his dream was a reality.

He could not believe what he had seen and yet, having seen even these incredible things, he could not disbelieve the evidence of his own perceptions. Never in all his life had Tarzan's senses deceived him badly, and so, naturally, he had great faith in them. Each perception which ever had been transmitted to Tarzan's brain had been, with varying accuracy, a true perception. He could not conceive of the possibility of apparently having passed through such a weird adventure in which there was no grain of truth. That a stomach, disordered by decayed elephant flesh, a lion roaring in the jungle, a picture-book, and sleep could have so truly portrayed all the clear-cut details of what he had seemingly experienced was quite beyond his knowledge; yet he knew that Numa could not climb a tree, he knew that there existed in the jungle no such bird as he had seen, and he knew, too, that he could not have fallen a tiny fraction of the distance he had hurtled downward, and lived.

To say the least, he was a very puzzled Tarzan as he tried to compose himself once more for slumber--a very puzzled and a very nauseated Tarzan.

As he thought deeply upon the strange occurrences of the night, he witnessed another remarkable happening. It was indeed quite preposterous, yet he saw it all with his own eyes--it was nothing less than Histah, the snake, wreathing his sinuous and slimy way up the bole of the tree below him--Histah, with the head of the old man Tarzan had shoved into the cooking pot--the head and the round, tight, black, distended stomach. As the old man's frightful face, with upturned eyes, set and glassy, came close to Tarzan, the jaws opened to seize him. The ape-man struck furiously at the hideous face, and as he struck the apparition disappeared.

Tarzan sat straight up upon his branch trembling in every limb, wide-eyed and panting. He looked all around him with his keen, jungle-trained eyes, but he saw naught of the old man with the body of Histah, the snake, but on his naked thigh the ape-man saw a caterpillar, dropped from a branch above him. With a grimace he flicked it off into the darkness beneath.

And so the night wore on, dream following dream, nightmare following nightmare, until the distracted ape-man started like a frightened deer at the rustling of the wind in the trees about him, or leaped to his feet as the uncanny laugh of a hyena burst suddenly upon a momentary jungle silence. But at last the tardy morning broke and a sick and feverish Tarzan wound sluggishly through the dank and gloomy mazes of the forest in search of water. His whole body seemed on fire, a great sickness surged upward to his throat. He saw a tangle of almost impenetrable thicket, and, like the wild beast he was, he crawled into it to die alone and unseen, safe from the attacks of predatory carnivora.

But he did not die. For a long time he wanted to; but presently nature and an outraged stomach relieved themselves in their own therapeutic manner, the ape-man broke into a violent perspiration and then fell into a normal and untroubled sleep which persisted well into the afternoon. When he awoke he found himself weak but no longer sick.

Once more he sought water, and after drinking deeply, took his way slowly toward the cabin by the sea. In times of loneliness and trouble it had long been his custom to seek there the quiet and restfulness which he could find nowhere else.

As he approached the cabin and raised the crude latch which his father had fashioned so many years before, two small, blood-shot eyes watched him from the concealing

foliage of the jungle close by. From beneath shaggy, beetle-browed brows which glared maliciously upon him, and with a keen curiosity; then Tarzan entered the cabin and closed the door after him. Here, with all the world shut out from him, he could dream without fear of interruption. He could curl up and look at the pictures in the strange things which were books, he could puzzle out the printed word he had learned to read without knowledge of the spoken language it represented, he could live in a wonderful world of which he had no knowledge beyond the covers of his beloved books. Numa and Sabor might prowl about close to him, the elements might rage in all their fury; but here at least, Tarzan might be entirely off his guard in a delightful relaxation which gave him all his faculties for the uninterrupted pursuit of this greatest of all his pleasures.

Today he turned to the picture of the huge bird which bore off the little Tarmangani in its talons. Tarzan puckered his brows as he examined the colored print. Yes, this was the very bird that had carried him off the day before, for to Tarzan the dream had been so great a reality that he still thought another day and a night had passed since he had lain down in the tree to sleep.

But the more he thought upon the matter the less positive he was as to the verity of the seeming adventure through which he had passed, yet where the real had ceased and the unreal commenced he was quite unable to determine. Had he really then been to the village of the blacks at all, had he killed the old Gomangani, had he eaten of the elephant meat, had he been sick? Tarzan scratched his tousled black head and wondered. It was all very strange, yet he knew that he never had seen Numa climb a tree, or Histah with the head and belly of an old black man whom Tarzan already had slain.

Finally, with a sigh he gave up trying to fathom the unfathomable, yet in his heart of hearts he knew that something had come into his life that he never before had experienced, another life which existed when he slept and the consciousness of which was carried over into his waking hours.

Then he commenced to wonder if some of these strange creatures which he met in his sleep might not slay him, for at such times Tarzan of the Apes seemed to be a different Tarzan, sluggish, helpless and timid--wishing to flee his enemies as fled Bara, the deer, most fearful of creatures.

Thus, with a dream, came the first faint tinge of a knowledge of fear, a knowledge which Tarzan, awake, had never experienced, and perhaps he was experiencing what his early forbears passed through and transmitted to posterity in the form of superstition first and religion later; for they, as Tarzan, had seen things at night which they could not explain by the daylight standards of sense perception or of reason, and so had built for themselves a weird explanation which included grotesque shapes, possessed of strange and uncanny powers, to whom they finally came to attribute all those inexplicable phenomena of nature which with each recurrence filled them with awe, with wonder, or with terror.

And as Tarzan concentrated his mind on the little bugs upon the printed page before him, the active recollection of the strange adventures presently merged into the text of that which he was reading--a story of Bolgani, the gorilla, in captivity. There was a more or less lifelike illustration of Bolgani in colors and in a cage, with many remarkable looking Tarmangani standing against a rail and peering curiously at the snarling brute. Tarzan wondered not a little, as he always did, at the odd and seemingly useless array of colored plumage which covered the bodies of the Tarmangani. It always caused him to grin a trifle when he looked at these strange creatures. He wondered if they so covered their bodies from shame of their hairlessness or because they thought the odd things they wore added any to the beauty of their appearance. Particularly was Tarzan amused by the grotesque headdresses of the pictured people. He wondered how some of the shes succeeded in balancing theirs in an upright position, and he came as near to laughing aloud as he ever had, as he contemplated the funny little round things upon the heads of the shes.

Slowly the ape-man picked out the meaning of the various combinations of letters on the printed page, and as he read, the little bugs, for as such he always thought of the letters, commenced to run about in a most confusing manner, blurring his vision and befuddling his thoughts. Twice he brushed the back of a hand smartly across his eyes; but only for a moment could he bring the bugs back to coherent and intelligible form. He had slept ill the night before and now he was exhausted from loss of sleep, from sickness, and from the slight fever he had had, so that it became more and more difficult to fix his attention, or to keep his eyes open.

Tarzan realized that he was falling asleep, and just as the realization was borne in upon him and he had decided to relinquish himself to an inclination which had assumed almost the proportions of a physical pain, he was aroused by the opening of the cabin door. Turning quickly toward the interruption Tarzan was amazed, for a moment, to see bulking large in the doorway the huge and hairy form of Bolgani, the gorilla.

Now there was scarcely a denizen of the great jungle with whom Tarzan would rather not have been cooped up inside the small cabin than Bolgani, the gorilla, yet he felt no fear, even though his quick eye noted that Bolgani was in the throes of that jungle madness which seizes upon so many of the fiercer males. Ordinarily the huge gorillas avoid conflict, hide themselves from the other jungle folk, and are generally the best of neighbors; but when they are attacked, or the madness seizes them, there is no jungle denizen so bold and fierce as to deliberately seek a quarrel with them.

But for Tarzan there was no escape. Bolgani was glowering at him from red-rimmed, wicked eyes. In a moment he would rush in and seize the ape-man. Tarzan reached for the hunting knife where he had lain it on the table beside him; but as his fingers did not immediately locate the weapon, he turned a quick glance in search of it. As he did so his eyes fell upon the book he had been looking at which still lay open at the picture of Bolgani. Tarzan found his knife, but he merely fingered it idly and grinned in the direction of the advancing gorilla.

Not again would he be fooled by empty things which came while he slept! In a moment, no doubt, Bolgani would turn into Pamba, the rat, with the head of Tantor, the elephant. Tarzan had seen enough of such strange happenings recently to have some idea as to what he might expect; but this time Bolgani did not alter his form as he came slowly toward the young ape-man.

Tarzan was a bit puzzled, too, that he felt no desire to rush frantically to some place of safety, as had been the sensation most conspicuous in the other of his new and remarkable adventures. He was just himself now, ready to fight, if necessary; but still sure that no flesh and blood gorilla stood before him.

The thing should be fading away into thin air by now, thought Tarzan, or changing into something else; yet it did not. Instead it loomed clear-cut and real as Bolgani himself, the magnificent dark coat glistening with life and health in a bar of sunlight which shot across the cabin through the high window behind the young Lord Greystoke. This was quite the most realistic of his sleep adventures, thought Tarzan, as he passively awaited the next amusing incident.

And then the gorilla charged. Two mighty, calloused hands seized upon the ape-man, great fangs were bared close to his face, a hideous growl burst from the cavernous throat and hot breath fanned Tarzan's cheek, and still he sat grinning at the apparition. Tarzan might be fooled once or twice, but not for so many times in succession! He knew that this Bolgani was no real Bolgani, for had he been he never could have gained entrance to the cabin, since only Tarzan knew how to operate the latch.

The gorilla seemed puzzled by the strange passivity of the hairless ape. He paused an instant with his jaws snarling close to the other's throat, then he seemed suddenly to come to some decision. Whirling the ape-man across a hairy shoulder, as easily as you or I might lift a babe in arms, Bolgani turned and dashed out into the open, racing toward the great trees.

Now, indeed, was Tarzan sure that this was a sleep adventure, and so grinned largely as the giant gorilla bore him, unresisting, away. Presently, reasoned Tarzan, he would awaken and find himself back in the cabin where he had fallen asleep. He glanced back at the thought and saw the cabin door standing wide open. This would never do! Always had he been careful to close and latch it against wild intruders. Manu, the monkey, would make sad havoc there among Tarzan's treasures should he have access to the interior for even a few minutes. The question which arose in Tarzan's mind was a baffling one. Where did sleep adventures end and reality commence? How was he to be sure that the cabin door was not really open? Everything about him appeared quite normal--there were none of the grotesque exaggerations of his former sleep

adventures. It would be better then to be upon the safe side and make sure that the cabin door was closed--it would do no harm even if all that seemed to be happening were not happening at all.

Tarzan essayed to slip from Bolgani's shoulder; but the great beast only growled ominously and gripped him tighter. With a mighty effort the ape-man wrenched himself loose, and as he slid to the ground, the dream gorilla turned ferociously upon him, seized him once more and buried great fangs in a sleek, brown shoulder.

The grin of derision faded from Tarzan's lips as the pain and the hot blood aroused his fighting instincts. Asleep or awake, this thing was no longer a joke! Biting, tearing, and snarling, the two rolled over upon the ground. The gorilla now was frantic with insane rage. Again and again he loosed his hold upon the ape-man's shoulder in an attempt to seize the jugular; but Tarzan of the Apes had fought before with creatures who struck first for the vital vein, and each time he wriggled out of harm's way as he strove to get his fingers upon his adversary's throat. At last he succeeded--his great muscles tensed and knotted beneath his smooth hide as he forced with every ounce of his mighty strength to push the hairy torso from him. And as he choked Bolgani and strained him away, his other hand crept slowly upward between them until the point of the hunting knife rested over the savage heart--there was a quick movement of the steel-thewed wrist and the blade plunged to its goal.

Bolgani, the gorilla, voiced a single frightful shriek, tore himself loose from the grasp of the ape-man, rose to his feet, staggered a few steps and then plunged to earth. There were a few spasmodic movements of the limbs and the brute was still.

Tarzan of the Apes stood looking down upon his kill, and as he stood there he ran his fingers through his thick, black shock of hair. Presently he stooped and touched the dead body. Some of the red life-blood of the gorilla crimsoned his fingers. He raised them to his nose and sniffed. Then he shook his head and turned toward the cabin. The door was still open. He closed it and fastened the latch. Returning toward the body of his kill he again paused and scratched his head.

If this was a sleep adventure, what then was reality? How was he to know the one from the other? How much of all that had happened in his life had been real and how much unreal?

He placed a foot upon the prostrate form and raising his face to the heavens gave voice to the kill cry of the bull ape. Far in the distance a lion answered. It was very real, and, yet, he did not know. Puzzled, he turned away into the jungle.

No, he did not know what was real and what was not; but there was one thing that he did know--never again would he eat of the flesh of Tantor, the elephant.