

The Gods of Mars

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SYNOPSIS

John Carter, who has been translated twice to Mars, returns to earth and leaves the story of his adventures with his nephew, then goes again to Mars.

Carter aids a Martian warrior fighting a horde of plant men. He discovers in the warrior an old friend, Tars Tarkas.

CHAPTER III. A Forest Battle.

TARS TARKAS and I found no time for an exchange of experiences as we stood there before the great bowlder, surrounded by the corpses of our grotesque assailants. From all directions down the broad valley was streaming a perfect torrent of terrifying creatures in response to the weird call of the strange figure far above us.

"Come," cried Tars Tarkas; "we must make for the cliffs! There lies our only hope of even temporary escape. There we may find a cave or a narrow ledge which two may defend forever against this motley, unarmed horde."

Together we raced across the scarlet sward, I timing my speed that I might not outdistance my slower companion. We had perhaps 300 yards to cover between our bowlder and the cliffs and then to search out a suitable shelter for our stand against the terrifying things that were pursuing us.

They were rapidly overhauling us when Tars Tarkas cried to me to hasten ahead and discover if possible the sanctuary we sought. The suggestion was a good one, for thus many valuable minutes might be saved to us, and, throwing every ounce of my earthly muscles into the effort, I cleared the remaining distance between myself and the cliffs in great leaps that put me at their base in a moment.

My first cursory inspection of the face of the cliffs filled my heart with forebodings, since nowhere could I discern, except where the world herald stood still shrieking his shrill summons, the faintest indication of even a bare foothold upon the lofty escarpment.

Tars Tarkas was approaching me rapidly, and still more rapidly came the awful horde at his heels.

It seemed the forest now or nothing, and I was just on the point of motioning Tars Tarkas to follow me in that direction when the sun passed the cliff's zenith, and as the bright rays touched the dull surface it burst out into a million scintillant lights of burnished gold of flaming red, of soft greens and gleaming whites—a more gorgeous and inspiring spectacle human eye has never rested upon.

The face of the entire cliff was, as later inspection conclusively proved, so shot with veins and patches of solid gold as to present the appearance of a solid wall of that metal except where it was broken by outcroppings of ruby, emerald and diamond bowlders.

But what caught my most interested attention at the moment that the sun's rays set the cliff's face a-shimmer was the several black spots which now appeared quite plainly in evidence high across the gorgeous wall close to the forest's top and extending apparently below and behind the branches.

Almost immediately I recognized them for what they were—the dark openings of caves entering the solid walls—possible avenues of escape or temporary shelter could we but reach them.

There was but a single way, and that led through the mighty, towering trees upon our right. That I could scale them I knew full well, but Tars Tarkas, with his mighty bulk and enormous weight, would find it a task possibly quite beyond his prowess or his skill.

Martians are at best but poor climbers. Upon the entire surface of that ancient planet I before never had seen a hill or mountain that exceeded 4,000 feet in height above the dead sea bottoms, and as the ascent was usually gradual nearly to their summits they presented but few opportunities for the practice of climbing.

However, there was nothing else to consider than an attempt to scale the trees contiguous to the cliff in an effort to reach the caves above.

The Thark grasped the possibilities and the difficulties of the plan at once, but there was no alternative, and so we set out rapidly for the trees nearest the cliff.

Our relentless pursuers were now close to us, so close that it seemed that it would be an utter impossibility for the Jeddak of Thark to reach the forest in advance of them. Nor was there any considerable will in the efforts that Tars Tarkas made, for the green men of Barsoom do not relish flight, nor ever before had I seen one fleeing from death in whatsoever form it might have confronted him.

At length, however, we reached the

shadows of the forest, while right behind us sprang the swiftest of our pursuers—a giant plant man with out-reaching claws to fasten his blood-sucking mouths upon us.

He was, I should say, a hundred yards in advance of his closest companion, and so I called to Tars Tarkas to ascend a great tree that brushed the cliff's face while I dispatched the fellow, thus giving the less agile Thark an opportunity to reach the higher branches before the entire horde should be upon us and every vestige of escape cut off.

But I had reckoned without a just appreciation either of the cunning of my immediate antagonist or the swiftness with which his fellows were covering the distance which had separated them from me.

As I raised my long sword to deal the creature its death thrust it halted in its charge, and as my sword cut harmlessly through the empty air the great fall of the thing swept with the power of a grizzly's arm across the sward and carried me bodily from my feet to the ground.

In an instant the brute was upon me, but ere it could fasten its hideous mouths into my breast and throat I grasped a writhing tentacle in either hand.

The plant man was well muscled, heavy and powerful, but my sinews and greater agility, in conjunction with the deathly strangle hold I had upon him, would have given me, I think, an eventual victory had we had time to discuss the merits of our relative prowess uninterrupted. But as we strained and struggled about the tree into which Tars Tarkas was clambering I suddenly caught a glimpse over the shoulder of my antagonist of the great swarm of pursuers that now were fairly upon me.

Now at last I saw the nature of the other monsters who had come with the plant men in response to the weird calling of the man upon the cliff's face. They were that most dreaded of Martian creatures—great white apes of Barsoom.

They stand fifteen feet in height and walk erect upon their hind feet. Like the green Martians, they have an intermediary set of arms midway between their upper and lower limbs.

Their eyes are very close set, but do not protrude, as do those of the green

men of Mars; their ears are high set, but more laterally located than are the green men's, while their snouts and teeth are much like those of our African gorilla. Upon their heads grows an enormous shock of bristly hair.

Time and again the ferocious apes sprang in to close with us, and time and again we bent them back with our swords. The great tails of the plant men lashed about us as they charged from various directions or sprang with the agility of greyhounds above our heads.

But every attack met a gleaming blade in sword hands that had been reputed for twenty years the best that Mars had ever known, for Tars Tarkas and John Carter were names that the fighting men of this world of warriors loved best to speak.

But even the two best swords in a world of fighters can avail not forever against overwhelming numbers of fierce and savage brutes, and so, step by step, we were forced back.

At length we stood against the giant

tree that we had chosen for our ascent, and then, as charge after charge hurled its weight upon us, we gave back again and again until we had been forced halfway round the huge base of the colossal trunk.

Tars Tarkas was in the lead, and suddenly I heard a little cry of exultation from him.

"Here is shelter for one at least, John Carter," he said, and, glancing down, I saw an opening in the base of the tree about three feet in diameter.

"In with you, Tars Tarkas!" I cried, but he would not go, saying that his bulk was too great for the little aperture, while I might slip in easily.

"We shall both die if we remain without, John Carter. Here is a slight chance for one of us. Take it and you may live to avenge me. It is useless for me to attempt to worm my way into so small an opening with this horde of demons besetting us on all sides."

"Then we shall die together, Tars Tarkas," I replied, "for I shall not go first. Let me defend the opening while you get in. Then my smaller stature will permit me to slip in with you before they can prevent."

We still were fighting furiously as we talked in broken sentences, punctuated with vicious cuts and thrusts at our swarming enemy.

At length he yielded, for it seemed the only way in which either of us might be saved from the ever increasing numbers of our assailants, who were still swarming upon us from all directions across the broad valley.

"It was ever your way, John Carter, to think last of your own life," he said, "but still more your way to command the lives and actions of others, even to the greatest of Jeddaks who rule upon Barsoom."

There was a grim smile upon his face as he, the greatest Jeddak of them all, turned to obey the dictates of a creature of another world—of a man whose stature was less than half his own.

"If you fall, John Carter," he said, "know that the cruel and heartless Thark, to whom you taught the meaning of friendship, will come out to die beside you."

"As you will, my friend," I replied. "But quickly now, head first, while I cover your retreat."

He hesitated a little at that word, for never in his whole life of continual strife had he before turned his back upon aught than a dead or defeated enemy.

As he dropped to the ground to force his way into the tree the whole howling pack of hideous devils hurled themselves upon me. To right and left flew my shimmering blade, now green with the sticky juice of a plant man, now red with the crimson blood of a great white ape.

And thus I fought as I never had fought before against frightful odds that I cannot realize even now.

With the fear that we would escape them, the creatures redoubled their efforts to pull me down, and, though the ground about me was piled high with their dead and dying comrades, they succeeded at last in overwhelming me, and I went down beneath them.

But scarce had I fallen ere I felt powerful hands grip my ankles, and in another second I was being drawn within the shelter of the tree's interior.

For a moment it was a tug of war between Tars Tarkas and a great plant man who clung tenaciously to my breast, but presently I got the point of my long sword beneath him and with a mighty thrust pierced his vitals.

Bleeding from many wounds, I lay panting upon the ground within the hollow of the tree, while Tars Tarkas defended the opening from the furious mob without.

For an hour they howled about the opening, but after a few attempts to reach us they confined their efforts to terrorizing shrieks and screams, to horrid growling on the part of the great white apes and the fearsome and indescribable purring by the plant men.

At length all but a score, who had apparently been left to prevent our escape, had departed, and our adventure seemed destined to result in a sleep, the only outcome of which could be our death by starvation, for even should we be able to slip out after dark where, in that unknown and hostile valley, could we hope to turn our steps toward possible escape?

As the attacks of our enemies ceased and our eyes became accustomed to the semidarkness of the interior of our strange retreat I took the opportunity to explore our shelter.

The tree was hollow to an extent of about fifty feet in diameter, and from its flat, hard floor I judged that it had often been used to house others. As I raised my eyes toward its roof to note the height I saw far above me a faint glow of light.

There was an opening above. If we could but reach it we might still hope to make the shelter of the cliff caves. My eyes had now become quite used to the subdued light of the interior, and as I pursued my investigation I presently came upon a rough ladder at the far side of the tree.

Quickly I mounted it to find that it connected at the top with the lower of a series of horizontal wooden bars that spanned the now narrower and shaftlike interior of the tree's stem. These bars were set one above another, about three feet apart, and formed a perfect ladder as far above me as I could see.

Dropping to the floor once more, I detailed my discovery to Tars Tarkas, who suggested that I explore aloft as far as I could go in safety, while he guarded the entrance against a possible attack.

As I hastened above to explore the strange shaft I found that the ladder of horizontal bars reached always far

above me as my eyes could reach, and as I ascended the light from above grew brighter and brighter.

For fully 500 feet I continued to climb until at length I reached the opening in the stem which admitted the light. It was of about the same diameter as the entrance at the foot of the tree and opened directly upon a large, flat limb, the well worn surface



I Ventured Out Upon the Limb, Then Beat a Hasty Retreat.

of which testified to its long continued use as an avenue for some creature to and from this remarkable shaft.

I ventured out upon the limb, then beat a hasty retreat for fear that I might be discovered by our enemies below and hurried to retrace my steps to Tars Tarkas.

I soon reached him, and presently we were both ascending the long ladder toward the opening above.

Tars Tarkas went in advance, and as I reached the first of the horizontal bars I drew the ladder up after me, and, handing it to him, he carried it a hundred feet farther aloft, where he wedged it safely between one of the bars and the side of the shaft.

In like manner I dislodged the lower bars as I passed them, so that we soon had the interior of the tree denuded of all possible means of ascent for a distance of a hundred feet from the base, thus precluding possible pursuit and attack from the rear.

CHAPTER IV.

The Chamber of Mystery.

WHEN we reached the opening at the top Tars Tarkas drew to one side that I might pass out and investigate, as, owing to my lesser weight and greater agility, I was better fitted for the perilous threading of this dizzy, hanging pathway.

The limb upon which I found myself ascended at a slight angle toward the cliff, and as I followed it I found that it terminated a few feet above a narrow ledge which protruded from the cliff's face at the entrance to a narrow cave.

As I approached the slightly more slender extremity of the branch it bent beneath my weight until, as I balanced perilously upon its outer tip, it swayed gently on a level with the ledge at a distance of a couple of feet.

Five hundred feet below me lay the vivid scarlet carpet of the valley. Nearly 5,000 feet above towered the mighty, gleaming face of the gorgeous cliffs.

The cave that I faced was not one of those that I had seen from the ground, and which lay much higher, possibly a thousand feet. But, so far as I might know, it was as good for our purpose as another, and so I returned to the tree for Tars Tarkas.

Together we warmed our way along the waving pathway, but when we reached the end of the branch we found that our combined weight so de-



Instantly I Sprang Toward It to Wrench It Open Again.

pressed the limb that the cave's mouth was now too far above us to be reached.

We finally agreed that Tars Tarkas should return along the branch, leaving his longest leather harness strap with me, and that when the limb had risen to a height that would permit me to enter the cave I was to do so, and upon Tars Tarkas' return I could then lower the strap and haul him up to the safety of the ledge.

This we did without mishaps and soon found ourselves together upon the verge of a dizzy little balcony, with a magnificent view of the valley spreading out below us.

Below us upon the river's bank the great white apes were devouring the last remnants of Tars Tarkas' former companions, while great herds of plant men grazed in ever widening circles about the sward, which they kept as close clipped as the smoothest of lawns.

Knowing that attack from the tree was now improbable, we determined to explore the cave, which we had every reason to believe was but a continu-

ation of the path we had already traversed, leading the gods knew where, but clearly away from this valley of ferocity.

As we advanced we found a well proportioned tunnel cut from the solid cliff. Its walls rose some twenty feet above the floor, which was about five feet in width. The roof was arched.

We had no means of making a light, and so groped our way slowly into the ever increasing darkness. Tars Tarkas keeping in touch with one wall while I felt along the other. To prevent our wandering into diverging branches and becoming separated or lost in some intricate and labyrinthine maze we clasped hands.

How far we traversed the tunnel in this manner I do not know, but presently we came to an obstruction which blocked our further progress.

It seemed more like a partition than a sudden ending of the cave, for it was constructed not of the material of the cliff, but of something which felt like very hard wood.

Silently I groped over its surface with my hands and presently was rewarded by the feel of the button, which as commonly denotes a door on Mars as does a doorknob on earth.

Gently pressing it, I had the satisfaction of feeling the door slowly give before me, and in another instant we were looking into a dimly lighted apartment which, so far as we could see, was unoccupied.

Without more ado I swung the door wide open, and followed by the huge Thark, stepped into the chamber.

As we stood for a moment in silence gazing about the room a slight noise behind caused me to turn quickly.

To my astonishment, I saw the door close with a sharp click as though moved by an unseen hand.

Instantly I sprang toward it to wrench it open again, for something in the uncanny movement of the thing and the almost palpable silence of the chamber seemed to portend an evil hidden in this rock bound chamber.

My fingers clawed futilely at the unyielding portal, while my eyes sought in vain for a duplicate of the button which had given us ingress.

And then from unseen lips a cruel and mocking peal of laughter rang through the desolate place.

For moments after that awful laugh had ceased reverberating through the room Tars Tarkas and I stood in tense and expectant silence. But no further

sound broke the stillness, nor within the range of our vision did anything move.

At length Tars Tarkas laughed softly after the manner of his strange kind when in the presence of the horrible or terrifying. It is not a hysterical laugh, but rather the genuine expression of the pleasure they derive from the things that move earth and men to loathing or to tears.

I looked up at the Thark, a smile upon my own lips, for here, in truth, was greater need for a smiling face than a trembling chin.

"What do you make of it all?" I asked. "Where in the deuce are we?"

He looked at me in surprise.

"Where are we?" he repeated. "Do you tell me, John Carter, that you know not where you are?"

"That I am upon Barsoom is all that I can guess, and but for you and the great white apes I should not even guess that, for the sights I have seen this day are as unlike the things of my beloved Barsoom as I knew it ten long years ago as they are unlike the world of my birth. No, Tars Tarkas; I know not where we are."

"Where have you been since you opened the mighty portals of the atmosphere plant years ago after the keeper had died and the engines stopped and all Barsoom was dying that had not already died of asphyxiation?"

"Your body even was never found, though the men of a whole world sought after it for years, though the Jeddak of Hellum and his granddaughter, your princess, offered such fabulous rewards that even princes of royal blood joined in the search."

"There was but one conclusion to reach when all efforts to locate you had failed—that you had taken the long, last pilgrimage down the mysterious river Iss to await in the valley Dor upon the shores of the lost sea of Korus the beautiful Dejah Thoris, your princess."

"Why you had gone none could guess, for your princess still lived!"

"Thank heaven!" I interrupted him. "I did not dare to ask you, for I feared I might have been too late to save her. She was very low when I left her in the royal gardens of Tardos Mors that long ago night—so very low that I scarcely hoped even then to reach the atmosphere plant before her dear spirit had fled from me forever. And she lives still!"

"She lives, John Carter?"

"You have not told me where we are," I reminded him.

"We are where I expected to find you, John Carter—and another. Many years ago you heard the story of the woman who taught me the thing that green Martians are reared to hate—the woman who taught me to love. You know the cruel tortures and the awful death her love won for her at the hands of the beast Tal Hajus."

"She, I thought, awaited me by the lost sea of Korus."

"You know that it was left for a man from another world—for yourself, John Carter—to teach this cruel Thark what friendship is, and you, I thought, also roamed the care-free valley Dor."

"Thus were the two I most longed for at the end of the long pilgrimage I must take some day, and so as the time had elapsed which Dejah Thoris had hoped might bring you once more to her side—for she has always tried to believe that you had but temporarily

returned to your own planet—I at last gave way to my great yearning, and a month since I started upon the journey the end of which you have this day witnessed. Do you understand now where you are, John Carter?"

"And that was the river Iss, emptying into the lost sea of Korus, in the valley Dor?" I asked.

"This is the valley of love and peace and rest to which every Barsoomian since time immemorial has longed to pilgrimage at the end of a life of hate and strife and bloodshed," he replied. "This, John Carter, is—heaven."

His tone was cold and ironical, its bitterness but reflecting the terrible disappointment he had suffered. Such a bitter disillusionment, such a blasting of lifelong hopes and aspirations, such an uprooting of old age tradition, might have excused a vastly greater demonstration on the part of the Thark.

I laid my hands upon his shoulder. "I am sorry," I said, nor did there seem anything else to say.

"Think, John Carter, of the countless billions of Barsoomians who have taken the voluntary pilgrimage down this cruel river since the beginning of time, only to fall into the ferocious clutches of the terrible creatures that today assailed us."

"There is an ancient legend that once a red man returned from the banks of the lost sea of Korus, returned from the valley Dor, back through the mysterious river Iss. The legend has it that he narrated a fearful blasphemy of horrid brutes that inhabited a valley of wondrous loveliness, brutes that pounced upon each Barsoomian as he terminated his pilgrimage and devoured him upon the banks of the lost sea, where he had



"This, John Carter, is—heaven." looked to find love and peace and happiness.

"But the ancients killed the blasphemer, as tradition has ordained that any shall be killed who return from the bosom of the river of mystery."

"But now we know that it was no blasphemy, that the legend is a true one and that the man told only of what he saw. What does it profit us, John Carter, since even should we escape we also would be treated as blasphemers? We are between the wild throat of certainty and the mad titling of fact. We can escape neither."

"As earth men say, we are between the devil and the deep sea, Tars Tarkas," I replied, nor could I help but smile at our dilemma.

"There is nothing we can do but take things as they come and at least have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever race or horde slays us eventually will have great numbers of dead to count."

"But about yourself, John Carter," he cried at last. "If you have not been here all these years, where indeed have you been, and how is it that I find you here today?"

"I have been back to earth," I replied. "For ten long earth years I have been praying and hoping for the day that would carry me once more to this grim old planet of yours, for which, with all its cruel and terrible customs, I feel a bond of sympathy and love even greater than for the world that gave me birth."

"For ten years I have been enduring a living death of uncertainty and doubt as to whether Dejah Thoris lived. Now, for the first time in all these years, my prayers have been answered and my doubt relieved."

"Yet I find myself, through a cruel fate, in the one tiny spot of all Barsoom from which there is apparently no escape and if there is at a price which would put out forever the last flickering hope which I may cling to of seeing my princess again."

"Only a bare half hour before I saw you battling with the plant men I was standing in the moonlight upon the banks of a broad river that taps the eastern shore of earth's most blessed land. I have answered you, my friend. Do you believe?"

"I believe," replied Tars Tarkas, "though I cannot understand."

As we talked I had been searching the interior of the chamber with my eyes. It was perhaps 200 feet in length and half as broad, with what appeared to be a doorway in the center of the wall directly opposite that through which we had entered.

As I extended my hand to search for the controlling button that cruel and mocking laugh rang out once more so close to me this time that I involuntarily shrank back, tightening my grip upon the hilt of my great sword.

And then from the far corner of the great chamber a hollow voice chanted: "There is no hope, there is no hope; the dead return not, the dead return not; nor is there any resurrection. Hope not, for there is no hope."

Though our eyes instantly turned toward the spot from which the voice seemed to emanate, there was no one in sight, and I must admit that cold shivers played along my spine and the short hairs at the base of my head stiffened and rose up, as do those upon a hound's neck when in the night his eyes see those uncanny things which are hidden from the sight of man.

(Continued next week.)