

The Gods of Mars

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

Copyright by Frank A. Munsey Co.

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.

Carter and Tarkas escape their enemies by entering a hollow tree and making their way to a cliff cave above.

They explore the cave, and through a secret door enter a mysterious chamber. Unseen voices threaten them.

Quickly I walked toward the mournful voice, but it had ceased ere I reached the farther wall, and then from the other end of the chamber came another voice shrill and piercing.

"Fools, fools!" it shrieked. "Think ye to defeat the eternal laws of life and death? Would cheat the mysterious Issus, goddess of death, of her just dues? Did not her mighty messenger, the ancient Iss, bear ye upon her leaden bosom at your own behest to the valley Dor? Think ye, O fools, that Issus will give up her own? Think ye to escape whence in all the countless ages but a single soul has fled?"

"Go back the way ye came, to the merciful maws of the children of the tree of life or the gleaming fangs of the great white apes. There lies speedy succor from suffering. But insist in your rash purpose to thread the golden cliffs of the mountains of Otz, past the ramparts of the impregnable fortresses of the holy therns, and upon your way death in its most frightful form will overtake you."

And then the awful laugh broke out from another part of the chamber.

"Most uncanny," I remarked, turning to Tars Tarkas.

"What shall we do?" he asked. "We cannot fight empty air. I would almost rather return and face foes into whose flesh I may feel my blade bite, and know that I am selling my life dearly, than go down to that oblivion which is evidently the fairest and most desirable eternity that mortal man has the right to hope for."

"If, as you say, we cannot fight empty air, Tars Tarkas," I replied, "neither, on the other hand, can empty air fight us. I shall not be turned back by wind, who have faced and conquered in my time thousands of sneaky warriors and tempered blades, nor shall you, Thark."

"But unseen voices may emanate from unseen and unseeable creatures who wield invisible blades," answered the green warrior.

"Rot, Tars Tarkas!" I cried. "Those voices come from beings as real as you or I. In their veins flows blood that may be let as easily as ours. The fact that they remain invisible to us is the best proof to my mind that they are mortal, nor overly courageous mortals at that. Think you, Tars Tarkas, that John Carter will fly at the first shriek of a cowardly foe who dare not come out into the open and face a good blade?"

CHAPTER V. A Close Call.

AMONG the ornaments of Tars Tarkas' leather harness, which is the only manner of clothing worn by Martians other than capes and robes of silk and fur for protection from the cold after dark, was a small mirror about the higness of a lady's hand glass, which hung midway between his shoulders and his waist against his broad back.

As we stood looking around the dimly lighted apartment my eyes happened to fall upon this mirror, and in its shiny surface I saw pictured a sight that caused me to whisper:

"Move not, Tars Tarkas! Move not a muscle!"

He did not ask why, but stood like a graven image while my eyes watched the strange thing that meant so much to us.

What I saw was the quick movement of a section of the wall behind me. It was turning upon pivots, and with it a section of the floor directly in front of it was turning. It was as though you

placed a visiting card upon end on a silver dollar that you had laid flat upon a table so that the edge of the card perfectly bisected the surface of the coin.

The card might represent the section of the wall that turned and the silver dollar the section of the floor. Both were so nicely fitted into the adjacent portions of the floor and wall that no crack had been noticeable in the dim light of the chamber.

As the turn was half completed a great beast was revealed sitting upon its haunches upon that part of the revolving floor that had been on the opposite side before the wall commenced to move. When the section stopped the beast was facing toward me on our side of the partition.

But what had interested me most was the sight that the half turned sec-

tion had presented through the opening that it had made.

A great chamber, well lighted, in which were several men and women chained to the wall, and in front of them, evidently directing and operating the movement of the secret doorway, a wicked faced man, neither red as the red men of Mars, nor green as the green men, but white like myself, with a great mass of flowing yellow hair.

The prisoners behind him were red Martians. Chained with them were a number of fierce beasts.

"Watch the wall at your end of the chamber, Tars Tarkas," I cautioned.

So long as we remained each facing an opposite end of the apartment no attacks were made upon us, so it was quite clear to me that the partitions were in some way pierced that our actions might be observed from without.

At length a plan of action occurred to me, and backing quite close to Tars Tarkas I unfolded by scheme in a low whisper, keeping my eyes still glued upon my end of the room.

The great Thark grunted his assent to my proposition when I had done and in accordance with my plan commenced backing toward the wall which I faced, while I advanced slowly ahead of him.

When he had reached a point some ten feet from the secret doorway, I halted my companion, and, cautioning him to remain absolutely motionless until I gave the prearranged signal, I quickly turned my back to the door through which I could almost feel the burning and baleful eyes of our would be executioner.

Instantly my own eyes sought the mirror upon Tars Tarkas' back. I had not long to wait, for presently the golden surface commenced to move rapidly.

Scarcely had it started than I gave the signal to Tars Tarkas, simultaneously springing for the receding half of the pivoting door.

In like manner the Thark wheeled and leaped for the opening being made by the inswinging section.

A single bound carried me completely through into the adjoining room and brought me face to face with the fellow whose cruel face I had before seen.

He was about my own height and well muscled and in every outward detail molded precisely as are earth men.

At his side hung a long sword, a short sword, a dagger and one of the destructive radium revolvers that are so common upon Mars.

The fact that I was armed only with a long sword and so according to the laws and ethics of battle everywhere upon Barsoom should only have been met with a similar or lesser weapon seemed to have no effect upon the moral sense of my enemy, for he whiplashed me with his broad back.



It Did Not Take Me Long to Fall Easily into My Fighting Stride.

ped out his revolver ere I had scarce touched the floor by his side, but an upcurrent from my long sword sent it flying from his grasp before he could discharge it.

Instantly he drew his long sword, and, thus evenly armed, we set to in earnest for one of the closest battles I have ever fought.

The fellow was a marvelous swordsman and evidently in-practice, while I had not gripped the hilt of a sword for ten long years before that morning.

But it did not take me long to fall easily into my fighting stride, so that in a few minutes the man began to realize that he had at last met his match.

His face became livid with rage as he found my guard impregnable, while blood flowed from a dozen minor

wounds upon his face and body.

"Who are you, white man?" he hissed. "That you are no Barsoomian from the outer world is evident from your color. And you are not of us?"

His last statement was almost a question.

"What if I were from the temple of Issus?" I hazarded on a wild guess.

"Fate forefend!" he exclaimed, his face going white under the blood that now nearly covered it.

I did not know how to follow up my lead, but I carefully laid the idea away for future use should circumstances require it.

His answer indicated that for all he knew I might be from the temple of Issus, and so evidently there was a temple of Issus, and in it were men like unto myself.

Either this man feared the inmates of the temple or else he held their persons or their power in such reverence that he trembled to think of the harm and indignities he had heaped upon one of them.

But my present business with him was of a different nature than that which requires any considerable abstract reasoning. It was to get my sword between his ribs, and this I succeeded in doing within the next few seconds, nor was I an instant too soon.

The chained prisoners had been watching the combat in tense silence. Not a sound had fallen in the room other than the clashing of our contending blades, the soft shuffling of our naked feet and the few whispered words we had hissed at one another through clinched teeth the while we continued our duel.

But as the body of my antagonist sunk an inert mass to the floor a cry of warning broke from one of the female prisoners.

"Turn! Turn! Behind you!" she shrieked, and as I wheeled at the first note of her shrill cry I found myself facing a second man of the same race as he who lay at my feet.

The fellow had crept stealthily from a dark corridor and was almost upon me with raised sword ere I saw him. Tars Tarkas was nowhere in sight, and the secret panel in the wall, through which I had come, was closed.

How I wished that he were by my side now! I had fought almost continuously for many hours. I had passed through such experiences and adventures as most sap the vitality of man, and with all this I had not eaten for nearly twenty-four hours nor slept.

I was fagged out and for the first time in years felt a question as to my ability to cope with an antagonist. But there was naught else for it than to engage my man and that as quickly and ferociously as lay in me.

My only salvation was to rush him off his feet by the impetuosity of my attack. I could not hope to win a long drawn out battle.

But the fellow was evidently of another mind, for he backed and parried and parried and side stepped until I was almost completely fagged from the exertion of attempting to finish him.

He was a more adroit swordsman, if possible, than my previous foe, and I must admit that he led me a pretty chase and in the end came near to making a sorry fool of me and a dead one into the bargain.

I could feel myself growing weaker and weaker until at length objects commenced to blur before my eyes, and I

staggered and blundered about more asleep than awake, and then it was that he worked his pretty little coup that came near to losing me my life.

He had backed me round so that I stood in front of the corpse of his fellow, and then he rushed me suddenly, so that I was forced back upon it, and as my heel struck it the impetus of my body flung me backward across the dead man.

My head struck the hard pavement with a resounding whack, and to that alone I owe my life, for it cleared my brain and the pain roused my temper, so that I was equal for the moment to tearing my enemy to pieces with my bare hands. I verily believe that I should have attempted it had not my right hand, in the act of raising my body from the ground, come in contact with a bit of cold metal.

As the eyes of the layman, so is the hand of the fighting man when it comes in contact with an implement of his vocation, and thus I did not need to look or reason to know that in my grasp was the dead man's revolver, lying where it had fallen when I struck it from him.

The fellow whose ruse had put me down was springing toward me, the point of his gleaming blade directed straight at my heart.

As he came there rang from his lips the cruel and mocking peal of laughter that I had heard within the chamber of mystery.

And so he died, his thin lips curled

in the snarl of his hateful laugh, and a bullet from the revolver of his dead companion bursting in his heart.

His body, borne by the impetus of his headlong rush, plumed upon me. The hilt of his sword must have struck my head, for with the impact of the corpse I lost consciousness.

It was the sound of conflict that roused me once more to the realities of life. For a moment I could neither place my surroundings nor locate the sounds which had aroused me.

Then from beyond the blank wall beside which I lay I heard the shuffling of feet, the snarling of grim beasts, the clank of metal accoutrements and the heavy breathing of a man.

As I rose to my feet I glanced hurriedly about the chamber in which I had just encountered such a warm reception. The prisoners and the savage brutes rested in their chains by the opposite wall eyeing me with varying expressions of curiosity, sullen rage, surprise and hope.

The latter emotion seemed plainly evident upon the handsome and intelligent face of the young red Martian woman whose cry of warning had been instrumental in saving my life.

It was several seconds before the sounds upon the opposite side of the partition jolted my slowly returning faculties into a realization of their probable import, and then of a sudden I grasped the fact that they were caused by Tars Tarkas in what was evidently a desperate struggle with wild beasts or savage men.

With a cry of encouragement I threw my weight against the secret door, but might as well have essayed the down hurling of the cliffs themselves. Then I sought feverishly for the secret of the revolving panel, but my search was fruitless, and I was about to raise my long sword against the sullen gold when the young woman prisoner called out to me:

"Save your sword, oh, mighty warrior, for you will need it more where it will avail to some purpose. Shatter it not against senseless metal which yields better to the lightest finger touch of one who knows its secret!"

"Know you the secret of it then?" I asked.

"Yes; release me and I will give you entrance to the other horror chamber, if you wish. The keys to my fetters are upon the first dead of your foemen. But why would you return to face whatever other form of destruction they have loosed within that awful trap?"

"Because my friend fights there alone," I answered, as I hastily sought and found the keys upon the carcass of the dead custodian of this grim chamber of horrors.

There were many keys upon the oval ring, but the fair Martian maid quickly selected that which sprung the great lock at her waist, and freed, she hurried toward the secret panel.

Again she sought out a key upon the ring. This time a slender, needle like affair which she inserted in an almost invisible hole in the wall. Instantly the door swung upon its pivot and the contiguous section of the floor, upon which I was standing, carried me with it into the chamber where Tars Tarkas fought.

The great Thark stood with his back against an angle of the walls, while facing him in a semicircle half a dozen huge monsters crouched waiting for an opening.

Their blood streaked heads and shoulders testified to the cause of their wariness as well as to the swordsmanship of the green warrior whose glossy hide bore the same mute but eloquent witness to the ferocity of the attacks that he had so far withstood.

As he saw me enter a smile touched those grim lips of his, but whether the smile signified relief or merely amusement at the sight of my own bloody and disheveled condition I do not know.

As I was about to spring into the conflict with my sharp long sword I felt a gentle hand upon my shoulder and, turning, found to my surprise that the young woman had followed me into the chamber.

"Wait," she whispered, "leave them to me," and, pushing past me, she advanced upon the snarling bantus.

When quite close to them she spoke a single Martian word in low but peremptory tones. Like lightning the great beasts wheeled before her, and I looked to see her torn to pieces before I could reach her side, but instead the creatures slunk to her feet like puppies that expected a merited whipping.

Again she spoke to them, but in tones so low I could not catch the words, and then she started toward the opposite side of the chamber with the six mighty monsters trailing at heel.

One by one she sent them through the secret panel into the room beyond, and when the last had passed from the chamber where we stood in wide eyed amazement she turned and smiled at us and then passed through herself, leaving us alone.

CHAPTER VI. Thuvia.

FOR a moment neither of us spoke. Then Tars Tarkas said: "I heard the fighting beyond the partition through which you passed, but I did not fear for you, John Carter, until I heard the report of a revolver shot. I knew that there lived no man upon all Barsoom who could face you with naked steel and live, but the shot stripped the last vestige of hope from me, since you I knew to be without firearms. Tell me of it."

I did as he bade, and then together we sought the secret panel through which I had just entered the apartment—the one at the opposite end of the room from that through which the

girl had seen her savage companions.

To our disappointment the panel eluded our every effort to negotiate its secret lock. We felt that once beyond it we might look with some little hope for success for a passage to the outside world.

The fact that the prisoners within were securely chained led us to believe that surely there must be an avenue of escape from the terrible creatures which inhabited this unspeakable place.

Again and again we turned from one door to another, from the baffling golden panel at one end of the chamber to its mate at the other, equally baffling.

"When we had about given up all hope one of the panels turned silently toward us, and the young woman who had led away the bantus stood once more beside us.

"Who are you," she asked, "and what is your mission that you have the temerity to attempt to escape from the valley Dor and the death you have chosen?"

"I have chosen no death, maiden," I replied. "I am not of Barsoom, nor have I taken yet the voluntary pilgrimage upon the river Iss. My friend here is Jeddak of all the Tharks, and, though he has not yet expressed a desire to return to the living world, I am taking him with me from the living life that hath lured him to this frightful place."

"I am of another world. I am John Carter, prince of the house of Tardos Mors, Jeddak of Hellum. Perchance some faint rumor of me may have leaked within the confines of your hellish abode."

She smiled. "Yes," she replied; "naught that passes in the world we have left is unknown here. I have heard of you, many years ago. The therns have oft-times wondered whether you have down since you had neither taken the pilgrimage nor could be found upon the face of Barsoom."

"Tell me," I said, "and who are you and why a prisoner, yet with power over the ferocious beasts of the place that denotes familiarity and authority far beyond that which might be expected of a prisoner or a slave?"

"Slave I am," she answered, "for fifteen years a slave in this terrible place, and now that they have tired of me and become fearful of the power which my knowledge of their ways has given me I am but recently condemned to die the death."

She shuddered. "What death?" I asked.

"The holy therns eat human flesh," she answered me, "but only that which has died beneath the sucking lips of a

plant man—flesh from which the defiling blood of life has been drawn. And to this cruel end I have been condemned. It was to be within a few hours had your advent not caused an interruption of their plans."

"Was it then holy therns who felt the weight of John Carter's hand?" I asked.

"Oh, no; those whom you laid low are lesser therns, but of the same cruel and hateful race. The holy therns abide upon the outer slopes of these grim hills, facing the broad world, from which they harvest their victims and their spoils."

"Labyrinthine passages connect these caves with the luxurious palaces of the holy therns, and through them pass upon their many duties the lesser therns and hordes of slaves and prisoners and fierce beasts—the grim inhabitants of this sunless world."

"There are within this vast network of winding passages and countless chambers men, women and beasts, who, born within its dim and grewsome underworld, have never seen the light of day—nor ever shall."

"They are kept to do the bidding of the race of therns; to furnish at once their sport and their sustenance."

"Now and again some hapless pilgrim, drifting out upon the silent sea from the cold Iss, escapes the plant men and the great white apes that guard the temple of Issus and falls into the remorseless clutches of the therns, or, as was my misfortune, is coveted by the holy thern who chances to be upon watch in the balcony above the river where it issues from the bowels of the mountains through the cliffs of gold to empty into the lost sea of Korus."

"All who reach the valley Dor are, by custom, the rightful prey of the plant men and the apes, while their arms and ornaments become the portion of the therns, but if one escapes the terrible denizens of the valley for even a few hours the therns may claim such a one as their own."

"And again the holy thern on watch, should he see a victim he covets, often tramples upon the rights of the unreasonable brutes of the valley and takes his prize by foul means if he cannot

gain it by fair.

"It is said that occasionally some deluded victim of Barsoomian superstition will so far escape the clutches of the countless enemies that beset his path from the moment that he emerges from the subterranean passage through which the Iss flows for a thousand miles before it enters the Valley Dor as to reach the very walls of the temple of Issus. But what fate awaits one there not even the holy therns may guess, for who has passed within those gilded walls never has returned to unfold the mysteries they have held since the beginning of time."

"The temple of Issus is to the therns what the valley Dor is imagined by the peoples of the outer world to be to them. It is the ultimate haven of peace, refuge and happiness to which they pass after this life and wherein an eternity of eternities is spent amid the delights of the flesh which appeal most strongly to this race of mental giants and moral pygmies."

"The temple of Issus is, I take it, a heaven within a heaven," I said. "Let us hope that there it will be meted to the therns as they have meted it here unto others."

"Who knows?" the girl murmured. "The therns, I judge from what you have said, are no less mortal than we, and yet have I always heard them spoken of with the utmost awe and reverence by the people of Barsoom as one might speak of the gods themselves."

"The therns are mortal," she replied. "They die from the same causes as you or I might—those who do not live their allotted span of life, 1,000 years. By the authority of custom at that time they may take their way in happiness through the long tunnel that leads to Issus."

"Those who die before are supposed to spend the balance of their allotted time in the image of a plant man, and it is for this reason that the plant men are held sacred by the therns, since they believe that each of these hideous creatures was formerly a thern."

"And should a plant man die?" I asked.

"Should he die before the expiration of the thousand years from the birth of the thern, whose immortality abides within him, then the soul passes into a great white ape. Should the ape die short of the exact hour that terminates the thousand years the soul is forever lost and passes for all eternity into the carcass of the slimy and fearsome sillan, whose writhing thousands seethe in the silent sea beneath the huriling moons when the sun has gone and strange shapes walk through the valley Dor."

"We sent several holy therns to the sillans today, then," said Tars Tarkas, laughing.

"And so will your death be the more terrible when it comes," said the maiden. "And come it will. You cannot escape."

"One has escaped, centuries ago," I reminded her, "and what has been done may be done again."

"It is useless even to try," she answered helplessly.

"But try we shall," I cried, "and you shall go with us, if you wish."

"To be put to death by mine own people and render my memory a disgrace to my family and my nation? A prince of the house of Tardos Mors should know better than to suggest such a thing."

Tars Tarkas listened in silence, but I could feel his eyes riveted upon me, and I knew that he awaited my answer as one might listen to the reading of his sentence by the foreman of a jury.

What I advised the girl to do would seal our fate as well, since, if I bowed to the inevitable decree of age old superstition, we must all remain and meet our fate in some horrible form within this awful abode of horror and cruelty.

"We have the right to escape if we can," I answered. "Our own moral senses will not be offended if we succeed, for we know that the fabled life of love and peace in the blessed valley of Dor is a rank and wicked deception."

"We know that the valley is not sacred. We know that the holy therns are not holy; that they are a race of cruel and heartless mortals, no more cognizant of the real life to come than we."

"Not only is it our right to bend every effort to escape; it is a solemn duty from which we should not shrink, even though we knew that we should be reviled and tortured by our own peoples when we returned to them."

"Only thus may we carry the truth to those without, and, though the likelihood of our narrative being believed is remote, we would be craven cowards were we to shirk the plain duty which confronts us."

"Again there is a chance that with the weight of the testimony of several of us the truth of our statements may be accepted and at least a compromise effected which will result in the dispatching of an expedition of investigation to this hideous mockery of heaven."

Both the girl and the green warrior stood silent in thought for some moments. The former it was who eventually broke the silence.

"Never had I considered the matter in that light before," she said. "Indeed would I give my life a thousand times if I could but save a single soul from the awful life that I have led in this cruel place. Yes, you are right, and I will go with you as far as we can go, but I doubt that we ever shall escape."

I turned an inquiring glance toward the Thark.

"To the gates of Issus or to the bottom of Korus," spoke the green warrior; "to the snows to the north or to

(Continued next week.)



I Looked to See Her Torn to Pieces.