

The Gods of Mars

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

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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.

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.

They engage in desperate fighting with therns, people who inhabit that section, and meet an imprisoned maid, Thuvia.

She tells of her captivity, shoots a thern and Carter disguises himself in the thern's garments.

Carter plans an escape from the mysterious place. Thuvia leads the way to still other chambers.

The snows to the south, Tars Tarkas follows where John Carter leads. I have spoken.

"Let us go!" I cried. "We must make the start, for we could not be further from escape than we now are, in the heart of this mountain and within the four walls of this chamber of death."

"Come, then," said the girl, "but do not flatter yourself that you can find no worse place than this within the territory of the therns."

So saying, she swung the secret panel that separated us from the apartment in which I had found her, and we stepped through once more into the presence of the other prisoners.

There were in all ten red Martians, men and women, and when we had briefly explained our plan they decided to join forces with us, though it was evident that it was with some consid-



The Girl Raised Her Revolver and Fired Point Blank at Him.

erable misgivings that they thus tempted fate by opposing an ancient superstition, even though each knew through cruel experience the fallacy of its entire fabric.

One of these prisoners, a red Martian boy, particularly attracted me. There was something strangely familiar about his face, and yet I could not place him. I asked him his name, and he said it was Cathoris.

Thuvia, the girl whom I had first freed, soon had the others at liberty. Tars Tarkas and I stripped the bodies of the two therns of their weapons, which included swords, daggers and two revolvers of the curious and deadly type manufactured by the red Martians.

We distributed the weapons as far as they would go among our followers, giving the firearms to two of the women, Thuvia being one so armed.

With the latter as our guide we set off rapidly, but cautiously, through a maze of passages, crossing great chambers hewn from the solid metal of the cliff, following winding corridors, ascending steep inclines and now and again concealing ourselves in dark recesses at the sound of approaching footsteps.

Our destination, Thuvia said, was a distant storeroom, where arms and ammunition in plenty might be found. She was to lead us to the summit of the cliffs, from where it would require both wondrous wit and mighty fighting to win our way through the very heart of the stronghold of the holy therns to the world without.

"And even then, O prince," she cried, "the arm of the holy thern is long. It reaches to every nation of Barsoom. His secret temples are hidden in the heart of every community."

"Wherever we go, should we escape, we shall find that word of our coming has preceded us, and the air awaits us before we may pollute the air with our blasphemies."

We had proceeded for possibly an hour without serious interruption and Thuvia had just whispered to me that

the others edged toward the doorway as though to attempt a surreptitious escape from the presence of the mighty one.

"Ask them their mission here," whispered Thuvia at my elbow.

"What do you here, fellows?" I cried.

"Two from the outer world are at large within the dominions of the therns. We sought them at the command of the father of therns. One was white with black hair, the other a huge green warrior."

Here the fellow cast a suspicious glance toward Tars Tarkas.

"Here, then, is one of them," spoke Thuvia, indicating the Thark, "and if you will look upon this dead man by the door perhaps you will recognize the other. It was left for Sator Throg and his poor slaves to accomplish what the lesser therns of the guard were unable to do—we have killed one and captured the other. For this has Sator Throg given us our liberty. And now in your stupidity have you come and killed all but myself and like to have killed the mighty Sator Throg himself."

The men looked very sheepish and very scared.

"Had they not better throw these bodies to the plant men and then return to their quarters, O mighty one?" asked Thuvia of me.

"Yes. Do as Thuvia bids you," I said.

As the men picked up the bodies I noticed that the one who stooped to gather up the late Sator Throg started as his closer scrutiny fell upon the up-turned face, and then the fellow stole a furtive, sneaking glance in my direction from the corner of his eye.

That he suspected something of the truth I could have sworn, but that it was only a suspicion which he did not dare voice was evidenced by his silence.

Again, as he bore the body from the room, he shot a quick but searching glance toward me, and then his eyes fell once more upon the bald and shiny dome of the dead man in his arms. The last fleeting glimpse that I obtained of his profile as he passed from my sight without the chamber revealed a cunning smile of triumph upon his lips.

Only Tars Tarkas, Thuvia and I were left. The fatal marksmanship of the therns had snatched from our companions whatever slender chance they had of gaining the perilous freedom of the world.

So soon as the last of the grewsome procession had disappeared the girl urged us to take up our fight once more.

She, too, had noted the questioning attitude of the thern who had borne Sator Throg away.

"It bodes no good for us, O prince," she said, "for, even though this fellow dared not chance accusing you in error, there be those above with power sufficient to demand a closer scrutiny, and that, prince, would indeed prove fatal."

I shrugged my shoulders. It seemed that in any event the outcome of our plight must end in death. I was refreshed from my sleep, but still weak from loss of blood.

I was discouraged. Never had a feeling of such utter hopelessness come over me in the face of danger. Then the long, flowing yellow locks of the holy thern, caught by some vagrant draft, blew about my face.

Might they not still open the way to freedom? If we acted in time,

might we not even yet escape before the general alarm was sounded? We could at least try.

"What will the fellow do first, Thuvia?" I asked. "How long will it be before they may return for us?"

"He will go directly to the father of therns, old Matal Shang. He may have to wait for an audience, but since he is very high among the lesser therns—in fact, a thorian among them—it will not be long that Matal Shang will keep him waiting."

"Then, if the father of therns puts credence in his story, another hour will see the galleries and chambers, the courts and gardens filled with searchers."

"What we do, then, must be done within an hour. What is the best way, Thuvia, the shortest way out of this celestial hades?"

"Straight to the top of the cliffs, prince," she replied, "and then through the gardens to the inner courts. From there our way will lie within the temples of the therns and across them to the outer courts. Then the ramparts—O prince, it is hopeless! Ten thousand warriors could not hew a way to liberty from out this awful place!"

"Since the beginning of time, little by little, stone by stone, have the

therns been ever adding to the defenses of their stronghold. A continuous line of impregnable fortifications circles the outer slopes of the mountains of Otz.

"Within the temples that lie behind the ramparts a million fighting men are ever ready. The courts and gardens are filled with slaves, with women and with children.

"None could go a stone's throw without detection."

"If there is no other way, Thuvia, why dwell upon the difficulties of this? We must face them."

"Can we not better make the attempt after dark?" asked Tars Tarkas. "There would seem to be no chance by day."

"There would be a little better chance by night, but even then the ramparts are well guarded, possibly better than by day. There are fewer abroad in the courts and gardens, though," said Thuvia.

"What is the hour?" I asked.

"It was midnight when you released me from my chains," said Thuvia. "Two hours later we reached the storeroom. There you slept for fourteen hours. It must now be nearly sundown again. Come; we will go to some nearby window in the cliff and make sure."

So saying, she led the way through winding corridors until at a sudden turn we came upon an opening which overlooked the valley Dor.

At our right the sun was setting, a huge red orb, below the western range of Otz.

A little below us stood the holy thern on watch upon his balcony. His scarlet robe of office was pulled tight about him in anticipation of the cold that comes so suddenly with darkness as the sun sets.

So rare is the atmosphere of Mars that it absorbs very little heat from the sun. During the daylight hours it is always extremely hot; at night it is intensely cold. Nor does the thin atmosphere refract the sun's rays or diffuse its light as upon earth.

The declining sun lighted brilliantly the eastern banks of Korus, the crimson sward, the gorgeous forest. Beneath the trees we saw feeding many herds of plant men.

Thuvia lost so time in leading us toward the corridor which winds back and forth up through the cliffs toward the surface thousands of feet above the level on which we had been.

Twice great banths, wandering loose through the galleries, blocked our progress, but in each instance Thuvia spoke a low word of command, and the snarling beasts slunk sullenly away.

"If you can dissolve all our obstacles as easily as you master these fierce brutes I can see no difficulties in our way," I said to the girl, smiling. "How do you do it?"

She laughed and then shuddered. "I do not quite know," she said. "When first I came here I angered Sator Throg because I repulsed him. He ordered me thrown into one of the great pits in the inner gardens. It was filled with banths."

"In my own country I had been accustomed to command. Something in my voice, I do not know what, cowed the beasts as they sprang to attack me."

"Instead of tearing me to pieces, as Sator Throg had desired, they fawned at my feet. So greatly were Sator Throg and his friends amused by the sight that they kept me to train and handle the terrible creatures. I know them all by name."

"There are many of them wandering through these lower regions. They are the scavengers. Many prisoners die here in their chains. The banths solve the problem of sanitation, at least in this respect."

"In the gardens and temples above they are kept in pits. The therns fear them. It is because of the banths that they seldom venture below ground except as their duties call them."

An idea occurred to me, suggested by what Thuvia had just said.

"Why not take a number of banths and set them loose before us above ground?" I asked.

Thuvia laughed. "It would distract attention from us, I am sure," she said.

She commenced calling in a low singsong voice that was half purr. She continued this as we wound our tedious way through the maze of subterranean passages and chambers.

Presently soft padded feet sounded close behind us, and as I turned I saw a pair of great green eyes shining in the dark shadows at our rear. From a diverging tunnel a sinuous, tawny form crept stealthily toward us.

Low growls and angry snarls assailed our ears on every side as we hastened on, and one by one the ferocious creatures answered the call of their mistress.

She spoke a word to each as it joined us. Like well schooled terriers, they paced the corridors with us, but I could not help but note the lathering jaws nor the hungry expressions with which the terrible beasts eyed Tars Tarkas and myself.

Soon we were entirely surrounded by some fifty of the brutes. Two walked close on either side of Thuvia, as guards might walk. The sleek sides of others now and then touched my own naked limbs.

It was a strange experience, the almost noiseless passage of naked human feet and padded paws; the golden walls splashed with precious stones; the dim light cast by the tiny radium bulbs set at considerable distances along the roof; the huge, maned beasts of prey crowding with low growls about us; the mighty green warrior towering high above us all; myself

crowned with the priceless diadem of a holy thern, and leading the procession the beautiful girl Thuvia.

I shall not soon forget it.

Presently we approached a great chamber more brightly lighted than the corridors. Thuvia halted us. Quietly she stole toward the entrance and glanced within. Then she motioned us to follow her.

The room was filled with specimens of the strange beings that inhabit this underworld, a heterogeneous collection of hybrids—the offspring of the prisoners from the outside world, red and green Martians and the white race of therns.

Picking our way carefully, we threaded a winding path across the chamber, the great banths sniffing hungrily at the tempting prey spread before them in such tantalizing and defenseless profusion.

Several times we passed the entrances to other chambers similarly peopled, and twice again we were compelled to cross directly through them. In others were chained prisoners and beasts.

"Why is it that we see no therns?" I asked of Thuvia.

"They seldom traverse the underworld at night, for then it is that the great banths prowling the dim corridors seeking their prey. The therns fear the awful denizens of this cruel and hopeless world that they have fostered and allowed to grow beneath their very feet."

"The prisoners even sometimes turn upon them and rend them. The thern can never tell from what dark shadow an assassin may spring upon his back."

"By day it is different. Then the corridors and chambers are filled with guards passing to and fro. Slaves from the temples above come by hundreds to the granaries and storerooms. All is life then. You did not see it because I led you not in the beaten tracks, but through roundabout passages seldom used."

"Yet it is possible that we may meet a thern even yet. They do occasionally find it necessary to come here after the sun has set. Because of this I have moved with caution."

But we reached the upper galleries without detection, and presently Thuvia halted us at the foot of a short, steep ascent.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Black Pirates of Barsoom. "A BOVE us," Thuvia said, "is a doorway which opens on to the inner gardens. I have brought you thus far. From here on for four miles to the outer ramparts our way will be beset by countless dangers."

"Guards patrol the courts, the temples, the gardens. Every inch of the ramparts themselves is beneath the eye of a sentry."

I could not understand the necessity for such an enormous force of armed men about a spot so surrounded by mystery and superstition that not a soul upon Barsoom would have dared to approach it even had they known its exact location.

I questioned Thuvia, asking her what enemies the therns could fear in their impregnable fortress.

We had reached the doorway now, and Thuvia was opening it. "They fear the black pirates of Barsoom, O prince!" she said. "From whom may our first ancestors preserve us."

The door swung open. The smell of growing things greeted my nostrils; the cool night air blew against my cheek.

The great banths sniffed the unfamiliar odors, and then with a rush they broke past us with low growls, swarming across the gardens of the therns beneath the lurid light of the nearer moon.

Suddenly a great cry arose from the roofs of the temples, a cry of alarm and warning that, taken up from point to point, ran off to the east and to the west, from temple, court and rampart, until it sounded as a dim echo in the distance.

The great Thark's long sword leaped from its scabbard, Thuvia shrank, shuddering, to my side.

"What is it?" I asked of the girl. For answer she pointed into the sky. I looked, and there, above us, I saw shadowy bodies flitting hither and thither high over temple, courts and garden.

Almost immediately flashes of light broke from these strange objects. There was a roar of musketry and then answering flashes and roars from temple and rampart.

"The Black Pirates of Barsoom, O prince!" said Thuvia.

In great circles the air craft of the marauders swept lower and lower toward the defending forces of the therns.

Volley after volley they vomited upon the temple guards. Volley on volley crashed through the thin air toward the fleeing and illusive fliers.

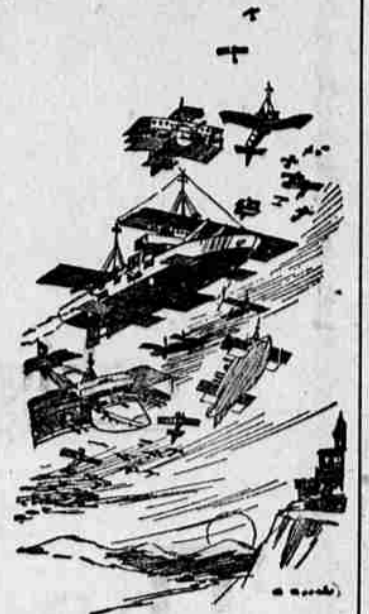
As the pirates swooped closer toward the ground thern soldiery poured from the temples into the gardens and courts. The sight of them in the open brought a score of fliers darting toward us from all directions.

The therns fired upon them through shields affixed to their rifles, but on, steadily on, came the grim black craft. They were small fliers, for the most part, built for two to three men. A few larger ones there were, but these kept high aloft, dropping bombs upon the temples from their keel batteries.

At length, with a concerted rush, evidently in response to a signal of command, the pirates in our immediate vicinity dashed recklessly to the ground in the very midst of the thern soldiery.

Scarcely waiting for their craft to touch, the creatures manning them leaped among the therns with the fury

of demons. Such fighting! Never had I witnessed its like before. I had thought the green Martians the most ferocious



On, Steadily on, Came the Grim Black Craft.

warriors in the universe, but the awful abandon with which the Black Pirates threw themselves upon their foes transcended everything I ever before had seen.

Beneath the brilliant light of Mars' two glorious moons the whole scene presented itself in vivid distinctness. The golden haired, white skinned therns battled with desperate courage in hand to hand conflict with their ebony skinned foemen.

A little to one side stood Thuvia, the Thark, and I. The tide of battle had not reached us, but the fighters from time to time swung close enough that we might distinctly note them.

The Black Pirates interested me immensely. I had heard vague rumors—little more than legends they were—during my former life on Mars, but never had I seen them nor talked with one who had.

They were popularly supposed to inhabit the lesser moon, from which they descended upon Barsoom at long intervals. Where they visited they wrought the most horrible atrocities and when they left carried away with them firearms and ammunition and young girls as prisoners.

All about us in the garden lay their sinister craft, which the therns for some reason, then unaccountable to me, made no effort to injure. Now and again a black warrior would rush from a nearby temple bearing a young woman in his arms. Straight for his fier he would leap, while those of his comrades who fought near by would rush to cover his escape.

The therns, on their side, would hasten to rescue the girl, and in an instant the two would be swallowed in a maelstrom of yelling devils, hacking and howling at one another.

But always, it seemed, were the Black Pirates of Barsoom victorious and the girl, brought miraculously unharmed through the conflict, borne away into the outer darkness upon the deck of a swift flier.

Fighting like that near us could be heard in all directions as far as sound carried, and Thuvia told me that the attacks of the Black Pirates were usually made simultaneously along the entire ribbon-like domain of the therns, which circles the valley Dor on the outer slopes of the mountains of Otz.

As the fighting receded from our position for a moment Thuvia turned toward me with a question.

"Do you understand now, O prince," she said, "why a million warriors guard the domains of the holy therns by day and by night?"

"The scene you are witnessing now is but a repetition of what I have seen enacted a score of times during the fifteen years I have been a prisoner here. From time immemorial the Black Pirates of Barsoom have preyed upon the holy therns."

"Yet they never carry their expeditions to a point, as one might readily believe it was in their power to do, where the extermination of the race of therns is threatened. It is as though they but utilized the race as playthings, with which they satisfy their ferocious lust for fighting, and from whom they collect toll in arms and ammunition and in prisoners."

"Why don't they jump in and destroy these fliers?" I asked. "That would soon put a stop to the attacks, or at least the blacks would scarce be so bold. Why, see how perfectly unguarded they leave their craft, as though they were lying safe in their own hangars at home!"

"The therns do not dare. They tried it once, ages ago, but the next night and for a whole moon thereafter a thousand great black battleships circled the mountains of Otz pouring tons of projectiles upon the temples, gardens and courts until every thern who was not killed was driven for safety into the subterranean galleries."

"The therns know that they live at all only by the sufferance of the black men. They were near to extermination that once, and they will not venture risking it again."

As she ceased talking a new element was instilled into the conflict. It came from a source equally unlooked for by either thern or pirate. The great banths which we had liberated in the garden had evidently been awed at first by the sound of the battle, and the loud report of rifle and bomb.

But now they must have become angered by the continuous noise and excited by the smell of new blood, for all

(Continued next week.)