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The Gods of Mars

By EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

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CHAPTER XV.

BETWEEN FLOOD AND FLAMES.
FOR the safety of our entrance upon Omean we depended largely upon the very boldness of it, believing that it would be some little time before the Black Pirates on guard there would realize that it was an enemy and not their own returning fleet that was entering the vault of the buried sea.

And such proved to be the case. In fact, 400 of my fleet of 500 rested safely upon the bosom of Omean before a shot was fired.

The battle was short and hot, but there could have been but one outcome, for the Black Pirates in the carelessness of fancied security had left but a handful of ancient and obsolete hulks to guard their mighty harbor.

It was at Carthoris's suggestion that we landed our prisoners under guard upon a couple of the larger islands and then towed the ships of the Black Pirates to the shaft, where we managed to wedge a number of them securely in the interior of the great well.

Then we turned on the buoyancy rays in the balance of them and let them rise by themselves further to block the passage to Omean as they came in contact with the vessels already lodged there.

We now felt that it would be some time at least before the returning Black Pirates could reach the surface of Omean and that we would have ample opportunity to make for the subterranean passages which led to Issus.

As Carthoris alone knew the hidden ways of the tunnels we could not divide the party and attack the temple at several points at once, as would have been most desirable, and so it was decided that he lead us all as quickly as he could to a point as near the temple's center as possible.

As we were about to leave the pool and enter the corridors an officer called my attention to the waters upon which the submarine floated. At first they seemed to be merely agitated as from the movement of some great body beneath the surface, and I at once conjectured that another submarine was rising to the surface in pursuit of us. But presently it became apparent that the level of the waters was rising not with extreme rapidity, but very surely, and that soon they would overflow the sides of the pool and submerge the floor of the chamber.

For a moment I did not fully grasp the terrible import of the slowly rising waters. It was Carthoris who realized the full meaning of the thing—its cause and the reason for it.

"Haste!" he cried. "If we delay we all are lost. The pumps of Omean have been stopped. They would drown us like rats in a trap. We must reach the upper levels of the pits in advance of the flood or we shall never reach them. Come."

"Lead the way, Carthoris," I cried. "We shall follow."

At my command the youth leaped into one of the corridors, and in columns of twos, and in good order, the soldiers followed him, each company entering the corridor only at the command of its dwarf, or captain.

I was the last to leave the chamber of the submarine, and as I followed the rear of the column toward the corridor I moved through water to my knees.

The corridor, too, was flooded to the same depth, for its floor was on a level with the floor of the chamber from which it led, nor was there any perceptible rise for many yards.

The march of the troops through the corridor was as rapid as was consistent with the number of men that moved through so narrow a passage, but it was not ample to permit us to gain appreciably on the pursuing tide.

Long ere the last of the column could hope to reach the upper pits which lay above the danger point, I was convinced that the waters would surge after us in overwhelming volume and that fully half the expedition would be snuffed out.

As I cast about for some means of saving as many as possible of the doomed men I saw a diverging corridor which seemed to rise at a steep angle at my right.

Raising my voice to its utmost, I shouted my commands to the dwarves ahead of me.

"Call back the last twenty-five utans," I shouted. "Here seems a way of escape. Turn back and follow me."



"Help, John Carter! We are suffocating!"

My orders were obeyed by nearer thirty utans, so that some 3,000 men came about and hastened into the teeth of the flood to reach the corridor up which I directed them.

As the first dwarf passed in with his utan I cautioned him to listen closely for my commands and under no circumstances to venture into the open or leave the pits for the temple proper until I should have come up with him "or you know that I died before I could reach you."

The officer saluted and left me. The men filed rapidly past me and entered the diverging corridor which I hoped would lead to safety.

The water rose breast high. Men stumbled, floundered and went down. Many I grasped and set upon their feet again, but alone the work was greater than I could cope with. Soldiers were being swept beneath the boiling torrent never to rise.

At length the dwarf of the tenth utan took a stand beside me. He was a valorous soldier, Gur Tus by name, and together we kept the now thoroughly frightened troops in the semblance of order and rescued many that would have drowned otherwise.

Djor Kantos, son of Kantos Kan, and a padwar of the fifth utan, joined us when his utan reached the opening through which the men were fleeing. Thereafter not a man was lost of all the hundreds that remained to pass from the main corridor to the branch.

As the last utan was filing past us the waters had risen until they surged about our necks, but we clasped hands and stood our ground until the last man had passed to the comparative safety of the new passageway. Here we found an immediate and steep ascent, so that within a hundred yards we had reached a point above the waters.

For a few minutes we continued rapidly up the steep grade, which I hoped would soon bring us quickly to the upper pits that led into the temple of Issus. But I was to meet with a cruel disappointment.

Suddenly I heard a cry of "Fire!" far ahead, followed almost at once by cries of terror and the loud commands of dwarves and padwars, who were evidently attempting to direct their men away from some grave danger. At last the report came back to us:

"They have fired the pits ahead!"
"We are hemmed in by flames in front and food behind!"

"Help, John Carter! We are suffocating!"
Back upon us at the rear swept a wave of dense smoke that sent us stumbling and blinded into a choking retreat.

There was naught to do other than seek a new avenue of escape. The fire and smoke were to be feared a thousand times over the water, and so I seized upon the first gallery which led out of and up from the suffocating smoke that was engulfing us.

Again I stood to one side while the soldiers hastened through on the new way. Some 2,000 must have passed at a rapid run when the stream ceased, but I was not sure that all had been rescued who had not passed the point of origin of the flames, and so to assure myself that no poor devil was left behind to die a horrible death unsuccored I ran quickly up the gallery in the direction of the flames, which I could now see burning with a dull glow far ahead.

It was hot and stifling work, but at last I reached a point where the fire lit up the corridor sufficiently for me to see that no soldier of Helium lay between me and the conflagration. What was in it or upon the far side I could not know, nor could any man have passed through that seething hell of chemicals and lived to learn.

Having satisfied my sense of duty, I turned and ran rapidly back to the corridor through which my men had passed. To my horror, however, I found that my retreat in this direction had been blocked. Across the mouth of the corridor stood a massive steel grating that had evidently been lowered from the ceiling place above for the purpose of effectually cutting off

my escape.
A thousand times I berated myself for being drawn into such a trap as I might have known these pits easily could be. Now I saw that it would have been much better to have kept our force intact and made a concerted attack upon the temple from the valley side, trusting to chance and our great fighting ability to have overwhelmed the Black Pirates and compelled the safe delivery of Dejah Thoris to me.

The smoke from the fire was forcing me farther and farther back down the corridor toward the waters which I could hear surging through the darkness.

With my men had gone the last torch. Nor was this corridor lighted by the radiance of phosphorescent rocks as were those of the lower levels. It was this fact that assured me that I was not far from the upper pits which lie directly beneath the temple.

Finally I felt the lapping waters about my feet. The smoke was thick behind me. My suffering was intense.

There seemed but one thing to do and that to choose the easier death which confronted me, and so I moved on down the corridor until the cold waters of Omean closed about me and I swam on through utter blackness toward—what?

The instinct of self preservation is strong even when one, unafraid and in the possession of his highest reasoning faculties, knows that death—positive and unalterable—lies just ahead.

So I swam slowly on, waiting for my head to touch the top of the corridor, which would mean that I had reached the limit of my flight and the point where I must sink forever to an unmarked grave.

To my surprise I ran against a blank wall before I reached a point where the waters came to the roof of the corridor. Could I be mistaken? I felt round. No; I had come to the main corridor, and still there was a breathing space between the surface of the water and the rocky ceiling above.

Then I turned up the main corridor in the direction that Carthoris and the head of the column had passed a half hour before. On and on I swam, my heart growing lighter at every stroke, for I knew that I was approaching the point where there would be no chance that the waters ahead could be deeper than they were about me.

A few more strokes brought me to a point where my feet touched the floor, and soon thereafter I was above the water level entirely and racing like mad along the corridor, searching for the first doorway that would lead me to Issus.

If I could not have Dejah Thoris again I was at least determined to avenge her death, nor would any life satisfy me other than that of the fiend incarnate who was the cause of such immeasurable suffering upon Barsoom. Sooner than I had expected I came to what appeared to me to be a sudden exit into the temple above. It was at the right side of the corridor, which ran on probably to other entrances to the pile above.

Without waiting to be again discovered and thwarted, I ran quickly up the short, steep incline and pushed open the doorway at its end.

The portal swung slowly in, and before it could be slammed against me I sprang into the chamber beyond.

Though not yet dawn, the room was brilliantly lighted. Its sole occupant lay prone upon a low couch at the farther side, apparently in sleep.

Cautiously I approached the recumbent figure on noiseless feet. Closer and closer I came to it, but I had crossed but little more than half the chamber when the figure stirred and, as I sprang, rose and faced me.

At first an expression of terror overspread the features of the woman who confronted me, then startled incredulity, hope, thanksgiving.

My heart pounded within my breast as I advanced toward her. Tears came to my eyes.

The words that would have poured forth in a perfect torrent choked in my throat as I opened my arms and took into them once more the woman I loved—Dejah Thoris, princess of Helium.

CHAPTER XVI.

Victory and Defeat.

"JOHN CARTER! John Carter!" she sobbed, with her dear head upon my shoulder. "Even now I can scarce believe the witness of my own eyes. When the girl, Thuvia, told me that you had returned to Barsoom I listened, but I could not understand, for it seemed that such happiness would be impossible for one who had suffered so in silent loneliness for all these long years! At last, when I realized that it was truth and then came to know the awful place in which I was held prisoner, I learned to doubt that even you could reach me here."
"As the days passed and moon after moon went by without bringing even

the faintest rumor of you, I resigned myself to my fate. And now that you have come scarce can I believe it."

"For an hour I have heard the sounds of conflict within the palace. I knew not what they meant, but I have hoped against hope that it might be the men of Helium, headed by my prince."

"And tell me—what of Carthoris, our son?"

"He was with me less than an hour since, Dejah Thoris," I replied. "It must have been he whose men you have heard battling within the precincts of the temple."

"Where is Issus?" I asked suddenly. Dejah Thoris shrugged her shoulders.

"She sent me under guard to this room just before the fighting began within the temple walls. She said that she would send for me later. She seemed very angry and somewhat fearful. Never have I seen her act in so uncertain and almost terrified a manner."

"Now I know that it must have been because she had learned that John Carter, prince of Helium, was approaching to demand an accounting of her for the imprisonment of his prisoners."

The sounds of conflict, the clash of arms, the shouting and the hurrying of many feet came to us from various parts of the temple. I knew that it was needed there, but I dared not leave Dejah Thoris, nor dared I take her with me into the turmoil and danger of battle.

At last I bethought me of the pits from which I had just emerged. Why not secrete her there until I could return and fetch her away in safety and forever from this awful place? I explained my plan to her.

"I cannot bear to be parted from you now even for a moment, John Carter," she said. "I shudder at the thought of being alone again where that terrible creature might discover me. You do not know her."

"None can imagine her ferocious cruelty who has not witnessed her daily acts for over half a year. It has taken me nearly all this time to realize even the things that I have seen with my own eyes."

"I shall not leave you, then, my princess," I replied.

She was silent for a moment; then she drew my face to hers and kissed me.

"Go, John Carter," she said. "Your son is there and the soldiers of Helium, fighting for the Princess of Helium. Where they are you should be."

"I must not think of myself now, but of them and of my husband's duty. I may not stand in the way of that. Hide me in the pits and go."

I led her to the door through which I had entered the chamber from below. There I pressed her dear form to me, and then, with all my heart to do it and with me only with the blackest shadow of terrible foreboding, I guided her across the threshold, kissed her once again and closed the door upon her.

Without hesitating longer I hurried from the chamber in the direction of the greatest tumult. Scarce half a dozen chambers had I traversed before I came upon the theater of a fierce struggle.

The blacks were massed at the entrance to a great chamber, where they were attempting to block the further progress of a body of red men toward the inner sacred precincts of the temple.

As I struck the first blow I cried aloud, "For Helium!" And then I rained out after cut upon the surprised warriors, while the reds without took heart at the sound of my voice and with shouts of "John Carter! John Carter!" redoubled their efforts so effectually that before the blacks



"I shall not leave you, then, my princess," I replied.

could recover from their temporary demoralization their ranks were broken and the red men had burst into the chamber.

Five hundred men fought there that day, the black man against the red. No man asked quarter or gave it. As though by common consent they fought as though to determine once and for

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