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The Gods of Mars

By

EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

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Now a score of one man air scouts were launching from the upper decks of the nearer vessel, and in a moment more were speeding in long, swift dives to the ground about us.

In another instant we were surrounded by armed sailors, and an officer stepped forward to address us when his eyes fell upon Carthoris.

With an expression of surprised pleasure he sprang forward and, placing his hand upon the boy's shoulder, called him by name.

"Carthoris, my prince!" he cried. "Kao! Kao! Hor Vastus greets the son of Dejah Thoris, princess of Helium, and of her husband, John Carter. Where have you been, O my prince? All Helium has been plunged in sorrow. Terrible have been the calamities that have befallen your great-grandfather's mighty nation since the fatal day that saw you leave our midst."

"Grieve not, my good Hor Vastus," cried Carthoris, "since I bring not back myself alone to cheer my mother's heart and the hearts of my beloved people, but also one whom all Barsom loved best—her greatest warrior and her savior—John Carter, Prince of Helium!"

Hor Vastus turned in the direction indicated by Carthoris, and as his eyes fell upon me he almost collapsed from sheer surprise.

"John Carter!" he exclaimed, and then a sudden troubled look came into his eyes. "My prince," he started, "where hast thou?"

And then he stopped, but I knew the question that his lips dared not frame. The loyal fellow would not be the one to force from mine a confession of the terrible truth that I had returned from the bosom of Iss, the river of mystery, back from the shore of the sea of Korus and the valley Dor.

"Ah, my prince," he continued, as though no thought had interrupted his greeting, "that you are back is sufficient, and let Hor Vastus' sword have the high honor of being first at thy feet."

With these words the noble fellow unbuckled his scabbard and flung his sword upon the ground before me.

Could you know the customs and the character of red Martians you would appreciate the depth of meaning that that simple act conveyed to me and to all about us who witnessed it.

The thing was equivalent to saying: "My sword, my body, my life, my soul, are yours, to do with as you wish. Until death and after death I look to you alone for authority for my every act. Be you right or wrong, your word shall be my only truth. Whoso raises his hand against you must answer to my sword."

It is the oath of fealty that men occasionally pay to a jeddak whose high character and chivalrous acts have inspired their enthusiastic love of his followers. Never had I known this high tribute paid to a lesser mortal.

There was but one response possible. I stooped and lifted the sword from the ground, raised the hilt to my lips, and then, stepping to Hor Vastus I buckled the weapon upon him with my own hands.

"Hor Vastus," I said, placing my hand upon his shoulder, "you know best the promptings of your own heart. That I shall need your sword I have little doubt, but accept from John Carter upon his sacred honor the assurance that he will never call upon you to draw this sword other than in the cause of truth, justice and righteousness."

"That I knew, my prince," he replied, "ere ever I threw my beloved blade at thy feet."

As we spoke other fliers came and went between the ground and the battleship, and presently a larger boat was launched from above, one capable of carrying a dozen persons perhaps, and dropped lightly near us. As she touched, an officer sprang from her deck to the ground and, advancing to Hor Vastus, saluted.

"Kantos Kan desires that this party whom we have met be brought immediately to the deck of the Xavarian," he said.

As we approached the little craft I looked about for the members of my party and for the first time noticed that Thuvia was not among them.

Immediately Hor Vastus dispatched a dozen air scouts in as many directions to search for her. It could not be possible that she had come forward

to accompany her. "We others stepped to the deck of the craft that had been sent to fetch us and a moment later were upon the Xavarian."

The first man to greet me was Kantos Kan himself. My old friend had won to the highest place in the navy of Helium, but he was still to me the same brave comrade who had shared with me the privations of a Warhoon dungeon, the terrible atrocities of the great games and later the dangers of our search for Dejah Thoris within the hostile city of Zodanga.

Then I had been an unknown wanderer upon a strange planet and he a simple padwar in the navy of Helium. Today he commanded all Helium's great terrors of the skies, and I was a prince of the house of Tardos Mors, jeddak of Helium.

He did not ask me where I had been. Like Hor Vastus, he, too, dreaded the truth and would not be the one to wrest a statement from me. That it must come some time he well knew, but until it came he seemed satisfied to but know that I was with him once more.

He greeted Carthoris and Tars Tarkas with the keenest delight, but he asked neither where he had been. He could scarcely keep his hands off the boy.

"You do not know, John Carter," he said to me, "how we of Helium love this son of yours. It is as though all the great love we bore his noble father and his poor mother had been centered in him. When it became known that he was lost 10,000,000 people wept."

"What mean you, Kantos Kan," I whispered, "by 'his poor mother'?" for the words had seemed to carry a sinister meaning which I could not fathom.

He drew me to one side. "For a year," he said, "ever since Carthoris disappeared, Dejah Thoris has grieved and mourned for her lost boy. The blow of years ago when you did not return from the atmosphere



He Flung His Sword Upon the Ground Before Me.

plant was lessened to some extent by the duties of motherhood, for your son was born that very night.

"That she suffered terribly then all Helium knew, for did not all Helium suffer with her the loss of her lord?"

"But with the boy gone there was nothing left, and after expedition upon expedition returned with the same hopeless tale of no clue as to his whereabouts our beloved princess drooped lower and lower until all who saw her felt that it could be but a matter of days ere she went to join her loved ones within the precincts of the valley Dor."

"As a last resort Mors Kajak, her father, and Tardos Mors, her grandfather, took command of two mighty expeditions and a month ago sailed away to explore every inch of ground in the northern hemisphere of Barsom."

"For two weeks no word has come back from them, but rumors were rife that they had met with a terrible disaster and that all were dead."

"About this time Zat Arras renewed his importunities for her hand in marriage. He has been forever after her since you disappeared."

"She hated him and feared him, but with both her father and grandfather gone Zat Arras was very powerful, for he is still jedd of Zodanga, to which Mors appointed him after you had refused the honor."

"He had a secret audience with her six days ago. What took place none knows, but the next day Dejah Thoris had disappeared, and with her had gone a dozen of her household guard and body servants, including Sola, the green woman—Tars Tarkas' daughter, you recall."

"No word left they of their intentions, but it is always thus with those who go upon the voluntary pilgrimage from which none returns. We cannot think aught than that Dejah Thoris has sought the icy bosom of Iss and that her devoted servants have chosen

to accompany her."

"Zat Arras was at Helium when she disappeared. He commands this fleet, which has been searching for her since. No trace of her have we found, and I fear that it be a futile quest."

CHAPTER X.

Under Arrest.

WHILE we talked Hor Vastus' fliers were turning to the Xavarian. Not one, however, had discovered a trace of Thuvia. I was much depressed over the news of Dejah Thoris' disappearance, and now there was added the further burden of apprehension concerning the fate of Thuvia.

I felt keen responsibility for the welfare of this girl, whom I believed to be the daughter of some proud Barsomian house, and it had been my intention to make every effort to return her to her people.

I was about to ask Kantos Kan to prosecute a further search for her when a flier from the flagship of the fleet arrived at the Xavarian with an officer bearing a message to Kantos Kan from Arras.

My friend read the dispatch and then turned to me.

"Zat Arras commands me to bring our 'prisoners' before him. There is naught else to do. He is supreme in Helium, yet it would be far more in keeping with chivalry and good taste were he to come hither and greet the savior of Barsom with the honors that are his due."

I smiled.

"You know full well, my friend," I said, "that Zat Arras hates me. Nothing would please him better than to humiliate me and then kill me. He has an excellent excuse. Let us go and see if he has the courage to take advantage of it."

Summoning Carthoris and Tars Tarkas, we entered the small flier with Kantos Kan and Zat Arras' officer and in a moment were stepping to the deck of Zat Arras' flagship.

As we approached the jed of Zodanga no sign of greeting or recognition crossed his face. Not even to Carthoris did he vouchsafe a friendly word. His attitude was cold, haughty and uncompromising.

"Kao, Zat Arras," I said in greeting, but he did not respond.

"Why were these prisoners not disarmed?" he asked of Kantos Kan.

"They are not prisoners, Zat Arras," replied the officer. "Two of them are of Helium's most noble family. Tars Tarkas, jeddak of Thark, is Tardos Mors' best beloved ally. The other is a friend and companion of the Prince of Helium. That is enough for me to know."

"It is not enough for me, however," retorted Zat Arras. "More must I hear from those who have taken the pilgrimage than their names. Where have you been, John Carter?"

"I have just come from the valley Dor, Zat Arras," I replied.

"Ah," he exclaimed in evident pleasure. "You do not deny it then? You have returned from the bosom of Iss?"

"I have come back from a land of false hope, from a valley of torture and death. With my companions I have escaped from the hideous clutches of lying fiends. I have come back to the Barsom that I saved from a painless death again to save her, but this time from death in its most frightful form."

"Cease, blasphemer!" cried Zat Arras. "Hope not to save thy cowardly carcass by inventing horrid lies to—"

He got no further.

One does not call John Carter "coward" and "liar" thus lightly, and Zat Arras should have known it.

Before a hand could be raised to stop me I was at his side, and one hand grasped his throat.

"Come I from heaven or hell, Zat Arras, you will find me still the same John Carter that I have always been, nor did ever man call me such names and live—without apologizing."

And with that I commenced to bend him back across my knee and tighten my grip upon his throat.

"Seize him!" cried Zat Arras, and a dozen officers sprang forward to assist him.

Kantos Kan came close and whispered to me:

"Desist, I beg of you! It will but involve us all, for I cannot see these men lay hands upon you without aiding you. My officers and men will join me, and we shall have a mutiny then that may lead to revolution. For the sake of Tardos Mors and Helium, desist!"

At his words I released Zat Arras and, turning my back upon him, walked toward the ship's rail.

"Come, Kantos Kan," I said, "the Prince of Helium would return to the Xavarian."

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None interfered. Zat Arras stood white and trembling amid his officers. Some there were who looked upon him with scorn and drew toward me, while one, a man long in the service and confidence of Tardos Mors, spoke to me in a low tone as I passed him.

"You may count my metal among your fighting men, John Carter," he said.

I thanked him and passed on. In silence we embarked and shortly after stepped once more upon the deck of the Xavarian. Fifteen minutes later we received orders from the flagship to proceed toward Helium.

Our journey thither was uneventful. Carthoris and I were wrapped in the gloomiest of thoughts. Kantos Kan was somber in contemplation of the



"Seize him!" cried Zat Arras.

further calamity that might fall upon Helium should Zat Arras attempt to follow the age old precedent that allotted a terrible death to fugitives from the valley Dor.

Xodar alone was care free. He could be no worse off in Helium than elsewhere.

"Let us hope that we may at least go out with good red blood upon our blades," he said.

It was a simple wish and one most likely to be gratified.

Among the officers of the Xavarian I thought I could already note a division into factions ere we had reached Helium. There were those who gathered about Carthoris and myself whenever the opportunity presented, while about an equal number held aloof from us.

They offered us only the most courteous treatment, but were evidently bound by their superstitious belief in the doctrine of Dor and Iss and Korus. I could not blame them, for I knew how strong a hold a creed, however ridiculous it may be, may gain upon an otherwise intelligent people.

By returning from Dor we had committed a sacrilege; by recounting our adventures there and stating the facts as they existed we had outraged the religion of their fathers. We were blasphemers, lying heretics.

Even those who still clung to us from personal love and loyalty, I think did so in the face of the fact that at heart they questioned our veracity—it is very hard to accept a new religion for an old, no matter how alluring the promises of the new may be. But to reject the old as a tissue of falsehoods without being offered anything in its stead is indeed a most difficult thing to ask of any people.

Kantos Kan would not talk of our experiences among the therns.

"It is enough," he said, "that I jeopardize my life here and hereafter by countenancing you at all. Do not ask me to add still further to my sins by listening to what I have always been taught was the rankest heresy."

I knew that sooner or later the time must come when our friends and enemies would be forced to declare themselves, openly. When we reached