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**The Gods of
Mars**



By
**EDGAR RICE
BURROUGHS**

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**CHAPTER III.
A Forest Battle.**

TARS TARKAS and I found no time for an exchange of experiences as we stood there before the great boulder, 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 boulder 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 weird 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 boulders.

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 Barsom 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 tail 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 deadly 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 Barsom.

They stood 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 beat 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 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 Barsom."

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 fail, 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.

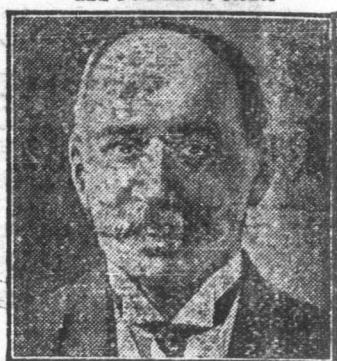
At length all but a score, who had apparently been left to prevent our escape, had departed, and our adventure



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seemed destined to result in a siege, 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 sliver 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



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