

## CHAPTER II - 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, for 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 for ever 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, three hundred 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 and bounds that put me at their base in a moment.

The cliffs rose perpendicular directly from the almost level sward of the valley. There was no accumulation of fallen debris, forming a more or less rough ascent to them, as is the case with nearly all other cliffs I have ever seen. The scattered boulders that had fallen from above and lay upon or partly buried in the turf, were the only indication that any disintegration of the massive, towering pile of rocks ever had taken place.

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.

To my right the bottom of the cliff was lost in the dense foliage of the forest, which terminated at its very foot, rearing its gorgeous foliage fully a thousand feet against its stern and forbidding neighbour.

To the left the cliff ran, apparently unbroken, across the head of the broad valley, to be lost in the outlines of what appeared to be a range of mighty mountains that skirted and confined the valley in every direction.

Perhaps a thousand feet from me the river broke, as it seemed, directly from the base of the cliffs, and as there seemed not the remotest chance for escape in that direction I turned my attention again toward the forest.

The cliffs towered above me a good five thousand feet. The sun was not quite upon them and they loomed a dull yellow in their own shade. Here and there they were broken with streaks and patches of dusky red, green, and occasional areas of white quartz.

Altogether they were very beautiful, but I fear that I did not regard them with a particularly appreciative eye on this, my first inspection of them.

Just then I was absorbed in them only as a medium of escape, and so, as my gaze ran quickly, time and again, over their vast expanse in search of some cranny or crevice, I came suddenly to loathe them as the prisoner must loathe the cruel and impregnable walls of his dungeon.

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 quite present the appearance of a solid wall of that precious metal except where it was broken by outcroppings of ruby, emerald, and diamond boulders--a faint and alluring indication of the vast and unguessable riches which lay deeply buried behind the magnificent surface.

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 recognised 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, for Martians are at best but poor climbers. Upon the entire surface of that ancient planet I never before had seen a hill or mountain that exceeded four thousand 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. Nor would the Martians have embraced even such opportunities as might present themselves, for they could always find a circuitous route about the base of any eminence, and these roads they preferred and followed in preference to the shorter but more arduous ways.

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 Barsoom do not relish flight, nor ever before had I seen one fleeing from death in whatsoever form it might have confronted him. But that Tars Tarkas was the bravest of the brave he had proven thousands of times; yes, tens of thousands in countless mortal combats with men and beasts. And so I knew that there was another reason than fear of death behind his flight, as he knew that a greater power than pride or honour spurred me to escape these fierce destroyers. In my case it was love--love of the divine Dejah Thoris; and the cause of the Thark's great and sudden love of life I could not fathom, for it is oftener that they seek death than life--these strange, cruel, loveless, unhappy people.

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 claws outreaching to fasten his bloodsucking 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 earthly sinews and greater agility, in conjunction with the deathly 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 with infinite difficulty, 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 Barsoom.

My former experiences upon Mars had familiarized me thoroughly with them and their methods, and I may say that of all the fearsome and terrible, weird and grotesque inhabitants of that strange world, it is the white apes that come nearest to familiarizing me with the sensation of fear.

I think that the cause of this feeling which these apes engender within me is due to their remarkable resemblance in form to our Earth men, which gives them a human appearance that is most uncanny when coupled with their enormous size.

They stand 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.

It was into the eyes of such as these and the terrible plant men that I gazed above the shoulder of my foe, and then, in a mighty wave of snarling, snapping, screaming, purring rage, they swept over me--and of all the sounds that assailed my ears as I went down beneath them, to me the most hideous was the horrid purring of the plant men.

Instantly a score of cruel fangs and keen talons were sunk into my flesh; cold, sucking lips fastened themselves upon my arteries. I struggled to free myself, and even though weighed down by these immense bodies, I succeeded in struggling to my feet, where, still grasping my long-sword, and shortening my grip upon it until I could use it as a dagger, I wrought such havoc among them that at one time I stood for an instant free.

What it has taken minutes to write occurred in but a few seconds, but during that time Tars Tarkas had seen my plight and had dropped from the lower branches, which he had reached with such infinite labour, and as I flung the last of my immediate antagonists from me the great Thark leaped to my side, and again we fought, back to back, as we had done a hundred times before.

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 with tremendous power 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 ever had known; for Tars Tarkas and John Carter were names that the fighting men of the world of warriors loved best to speak.

But even the two best swords in a world of fighters can avail not for ever against overwhelming numbers of fierce and savage brutes that know not what defeat means until cold steel teaches their hearts no longer to beat, 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 half-way around 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 still were fighting furiously as we talked in broken sentences, punctured 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 Barsoom."

There was a grim smile upon his cruel, hard 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 before in his whole life of continual strife had he turned his back upon aught than a dead or defeated enemy.

"Haste, Tars Tarkas," I urged, "or we shall both go down to profitless defeat; I cannot hold them for ever alone."

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; but always flying from one opponent to another, hesitating but the barest fraction of a second to drink the lifeblood in the centre of some savage heart.

And thus I fought as I never had fought before, against such frightful odds that I cannot realize even now that human muscles could have withstood that awful onslaught, that terrific weight of hurtling tons of ferocious, battling flesh.

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 for the second time that day, and once again felt those awful sucking lips against my flesh.

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.

Torn and bleeding from many cruel 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 tree, 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 left us, and our adventure 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, whither in this 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 semi-darkness 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 domicile others before our occupancy. 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 shelter 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 cave.

Quickly I mounted it, only to find that it connected at the top with the lower of a series of horizontal wooden bars that spanned the now narrow and shaft-like 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 mounted always as far above me as my eyes could reach, and as I ascended, the light from above grew brighter and brighter.

For fully five hundred 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 of which testified to its long continued use as an avenue for some creature to and from this remarkable shaft.

I did not venture out upon the limb for fear that I might be discovered and our retreat in this direction cut off; but instead hurried to retrace my steps to Tars Tarkas.

I soon reached him and presently we were both ascending the long ladder toward the opening above.

Tars Tarkas went in advance and as I reached the first of the horizontal bars I drew the ladder up after me and, handing it to him, he carried it a hundred feet further aloft, where he wedged it safely between one of the bars and the side of the shaft. In like manner I dislodged the lower bars as I passed them, so that we soon had the interior of the tree denuded of all possible means of ascent for a distance of a hundred feet from the base; thus precluding possible pursuit and attack from the rear.

As we were to learn later, this precaution saved us from dire predicament, and was eventually the means of our salvation.

When we reached the opening at the top Tars Tarkas drew to one side that I might pass out and investigate, as, owing to my lesser weight and greater agility, I was better fitted for the perilous threading of this dizzy, hanging pathway.

The limb upon which I found myself ascended at a slight angle toward the cliff, and as I followed it I found that it terminated a few feet above a narrow ledge which protruded from the cliff's face at the entrance to a narrow cave.

As I approached the slightly more slender extremity of the branch it bent beneath my weight until, as I balanced perilously upon its outer tip, it swayed gently on a level with the ledge at a distance of a couple of feet.



Five hundred feet below me lay the vivid scarlet carpet of the valley; nearly five thousand feet above towered the mighty, gleaming face of the gorgeous cliffs.

The cave that I faced was not one of those that I had seen from the ground, and which lay much higher, possibly a thousand feet. But so far as I might know it was as good for our purpose as another, and so I returned to the tree for Tars Tarkas.

Together we wormed our way along the waving pathway, but when we reached the end of the branch we found that our combined weight so depressed the limb that the cave's mouth was now too far above us to be reached.

We finally agreed that Tars Tarkas should return along the branch, leaving his longest leather harness strap with me, and that when the limb had risen to a height that would permit me to enter the cave I was to do so, and on Tars Tarkas' return I could then lower the strap and haul him up to the safety of the ledge.

This we did without mishap and soon found ourselves together upon the verge of a dizzy little balcony, with a magnificent view of the valley spreading out below us.

As far as the eye could reach gorgeous forest and crimson sward skirted a silent sea, and about all towered the brilliant monster guardian cliffs. Once we thought we discerned a gilded minaret gleaming in the sun amidst the waving tops of far-distant trees, but we soon abandoned the idea in the belief that it was but an hallucination born of our great desire to discover the haunts of civilized men in this beautiful, yet forbidding, spot.

Below us upon the river's bank the great white apes were devouring the last remnants of Tars Tarkas' former companions, while great herds of plant men grazed in ever-widening circles about the sward which they kept as close clipped as the smoothest of lawns.

Knowing that attack from the tree was now improbable, we determined to explore the cave, which we had every reason to believe was but a continuation of the path we had already traversed, leading the gods alone knew where, but quite evidently away from this valley of grim ferocity.

As we advanced we found a well-proportioned tunnel cut from the solid cliff. Its walls rose some twenty feet above the floor, which was about five feet in width. The roof was arched. We had no means of making a light, and so groped our way slowly into the ever-increasing darkness, Tars Tarkas keeping in touch with one wall while I felt along the other, while, to prevent our wandering into diverging

branches and becoming separated or lost in some intricate and labyrinthine maze, we clasped hands.

How far we traversed the tunnel in this manner I do not know, but presently we came to an obstruction which blocked our further progress. It seemed more like a partition than a sudden ending of the cave, for it was constructed not of the material of the cliff, but of something which felt like very hard wood.

Silently I groped over its surface with my hands, and presently was rewarded by the feel of the button which as commonly denotes a door on Mars as does a door knob on Earth.

Gently pressing it, I had the satisfaction of feeling the door slowly give before me, and in another instant we were looking into a dimly lighted apartment, which, so far as we could see, was unoccupied.

Without more ado I swung the door wide open and, followed by the huge Thark, stepped into the chamber. As we stood for a moment in silence gazing about the room a slight noise behind caused me to turn quickly, when, to my astonishment, I saw the door close with a sharp click as though by an unseen hand.

Instantly I sprang toward it to wrench it open again, for something in the uncanny movement of the thing and the tense and almost palpable silence of the chamber seemed to portend a lurking evil lying hidden in this rock-bound chamber within the bowels of the Golden Cliffs.

My fingers clawed futilely at the unyielding portal, while my eyes sought in vain for a duplicate of the button which had given us ingress.

And then, from unseen lips, a cruel and mocking peal of laughter rang through the desolate place.