

CHAPTER III - THE CHAMBER OF MYSTERY

For moments after that awful laugh had ceased reverberating through the rocky room, Tars Tarkas and I stood in tense and expectant silence. But no further sound broke the stillness, nor within the range of our vision did aught move.

At length Tars Tarkas laughed softly, after the manner of his strange kind when in the presence of the horrible or terrifying. It is not an hysterical laugh, but rather the genuine expression of the pleasure they derive from the things that move Earth men to loathing or to tears.

Often and again have I seen them roll upon the ground in mad fits of uncontrollable mirth when witnessing the death agonies of women and little children beneath the torture of that hellish green Martian fete--the Great Games.

I looked up at the Thark, a smile upon my own lips, for here in truth was greater need for a smiling face than a trembling chin.

"What do you make of it all?" I asked. "Where in the deuce are we?"

He looked at me in surprise.

"Where are we?" he repeated. "Do you tell me, John Carter, that you know not where you be?"

"That I am upon Barsoom is all that I can guess, and but for you and the great white apes I should not even guess that, for the sights I have seen this day are as unlike the things of my beloved Barsoom as I knew it ten long years ago as they are unlike the world of my birth.

"No, Tars Tarkas, I know not where we be."

"Where have you been since you opened the mighty portals of the atmosphere plant years ago, after the keeper had died and the engines stopped and all Barsoom was dying, that had not already died, of asphyxiation? Your body even was never found, though the men of a whole world sought after it for years, though the Jeddak of Helium and his granddaughter, your princess, offered such fabulous rewards that even princes of royal blood joined in the search.

"There was but one conclusion to reach when all efforts to locate you had failed, and that, that you had taken the long, last pilgrimage down the mysterious River Iss, to await in the Valley Dor upon the shores of the Lost Sea of Korus the beautiful Dejah Thoris, your princess.

"Why you had gone none could guess, for your princess still lived--"

"Thank God," I interrupted him. "I did not dare to ask you, for I feared I might have been too late to save her--she was very low when I left her in the royal gardens of Tardos Mors that long-gone night; so very low that I scarcely hoped even then to reach the atmosphere plant ere her dear spirit had fled from me for ever. And she lives yet?"

"She lives, John Carter."

"You have not told me where we are," I reminded him.

"We are where I expected to find you, John Carter--and another. Many years ago you heard the story of the woman who taught me the thing that green Martians are reared to hate, the woman who taught me to love. You know the cruel tortures and the awful death her love won for her at the hands of the beast, Tal Hajus.

"She, I thought, awaited me by the Lost Sea of Korus.

"You know that it was left for a man from another world, for yourself, John Carter, to teach this cruel Thark what friendship is; and you, I thought, also roamed the care-free Valley Dor.

"Thus were the two I most longed for at the end of the long pilgrimage I must take some day, and so as the time had elapsed which Dejah Thoris had hoped might bring you once more to her side, for she has always tried to believe that you had but temporarily returned to your own planet, I at last gave way to my great yearning and a month since I started upon the journey, the end of which you have this day witnessed. Do you understand now where you be, John Carter?"

"And that was the River Iss, emptying into the Lost Sea of Korus in the Valley Dor?" I asked.

"This is the valley of love and peace and rest to which every Barsoomian since time immemorial has longed to pilgrimage at the end of a life of hate and strife and bloodshed," he replied. "This, John Carter, is Heaven."

His tone was cold and ironical; its bitterness but reflecting the terrible disappointment he had suffered. Such a fearful disillusionment, such a blasting of life-long hopes and aspirations, such an uprooting of age-old tradition might have excused a vastly greater demonstration on the part of the Thark.

I laid my hand upon his shoulder.

"I am sorry," I said, nor did there seem aught else to say.

"Think, John Carter, of the countless billions of Barsoomians who have taken the voluntary pilgrimage down this cruel river since the beginning of time, only to fall into the ferocious clutches of the terrible creatures that to-day assailed us.

"There is an ancient legend that once a red man returned from the banks of the Lost Sea of Korus, returned from the Valley Dor, back through the mysterious River Iss, and the legend has it that he narrated a fearful blasphemy of horrid brutes that inhabited a valley of wondrous loveliness, brutes that pounced upon each Barsoomian as he terminated his pilgrimage and devoured him upon the banks of the Lost Sea where he had looked to find love and peace and happiness; but the ancients killed the blasphemer, as tradition has ordained that any shall be killed who return from the bosom of the River of Mystery.

"But now we know that it was no blasphemy, that the legend is a true one, and that the man told only of what he saw; but what does it profit us, John Carter, since even should we escape, we also would be treated as blasphemers? We are between the wild thicket of certainty and the mad whirlwind of fact--we can escape neither."

"As Earth men say, we are between the devil and the deep sea, Tars Tarkas," I replied, nor could I help but smile at our dilemma.

"There is naught that we can do but take things as they come, and at least have the satisfaction of knowing that whoever slays us eventually will have far greater numbers of their own dead to count than they will get in return. White ape or plant man, green Barsoomian or red man, whosoever it shall be that takes the last toll from us will know that it is costly in lives to wipe out John Carter, Prince of the House of Tardos Mors, and Tars Tarkas, Jeddak of Thark, at the same time."

I could not help but laugh at his grim humour, and he joined in with me in one of those rare laughs of real enjoyment which was one of the attributes of this fierce Tharkian chief which marked him from the others of his kind.

"But about yourself, John Carter," he cried at last. "If you have not been here all these years where indeed have you been, and how is it that I find you here to-day?"

"I have been back to Earth," I replied. "For ten long Earth years I have been praying and hoping for the day that would carry me once more to this grim old planet of yours, for which, with all its cruel and terrible customs, I feel a bond of sympathy and love even greater than for the world that gave me birth.

"For ten years have I been enduring a living death of uncertainty and doubt as to whether Dejah Thoris lived, and now that for the first time in all these years my prayers have been answered and my doubt relieved I find myself, through a cruel whim of fate, hurled into the one tiny spot of all Barsoom from which there is apparently no escape, and if there were, at a price which would put out for ever the last flickering hope which I may cling to of seeing my princess again in this life--and you have seen to-day with what pitiful futility man yearns toward a material hereafter.

"Only a bare half-hour before I saw you battling with the plant men I was standing in the moonlight upon the banks of a broad river that taps the eastern shore of Earth's most blessed land. I have answered you, my friend. Do you believe?"

"I believe," replied Tars Tarkas, "though I cannot understand."

As we talked I had been searching the interior of the chamber with my eyes. It was, perhaps, two hundred feet in length and half as broad, with what appeared to be a doorway in the centre of the wall directly opposite that through which we had entered.

The apartment was hewn from the material of the cliff, showing mostly dull gold in the dim light which a single minute radium illuminator in the centre of the roof diffused throughout its great dimensions. Here and there polished surfaces of ruby, emerald, and diamond patched the golden walls and ceiling. The floor was of another material, very hard, and worn by much use to the smoothness of glass. Aside from the two doors I could discern no sign of other aperture, and as one we knew to be locked against us I approached the other.

As I extended my hand to search for the controlling button, that cruel and mocking laugh rang out once more, so close to me this time that I involuntarily shrank back, tightening my grip upon the hilt of my great sword.

And then from the far corner of the great chamber a hollow voice chanted: "There is no hope, there is no hope; the dead return not, the dead return not; nor is there any resurrection. Hope not, for there is no hope."

Though our eyes instantly turned toward the spot from which the voice seemed to emanate, there was no one in sight, and I must admit that cold shivers played along my spine and the short hairs at the base of my head stiffened and rose up, as do those upon a hound's neck when in the night his eyes see those uncanny things which are hidden from the sight of man.

Quickly I walked toward the mournful voice, but it had ceased ere I reached the further wall, and then from the other end of the chamber came another voice, shrill and piercing:

"Fools! Fools!" it shrieked. "Thinkest thou to defeat the eternal laws of life and death? Wouldst cheat the mysterious Issus, Goddess of Death, of her just dues? Did not her mighty messenger, the ancient Iss, bear you upon her leaden bosom at your own behest to the Valley Dor?"

"Thinkest thou, O fools, that Issus wilt give up her own? Thinkest thou to escape from whence in all the countless ages but a single soul has fled?"

"Go back the way thou camest, to the merciful maws of the children of the Tree of Life or the gleaming fangs of the great white apes, for there lies speedy surcease from suffering; but insist in your rash purpose to thread the mazes of the Golden Cliffs of the Mountains of Otz, past the ramparts of the impregnable fortresses of the Holy Therns, and upon your way Death in its most frightful form will overtake you--a death so horrible that even the Holy Therns themselves, who conceived both Life and Death, avert their eyes from its fiendishness and close their ears against the hideous shrieks of its victims.

"Go back, O fools, the way thou camest."

And then the awful laugh broke out from another part of the chamber.

"Most uncanny," I remarked, turning to Tars Tarkas.

"What shall we do?" he asked. "We cannot fight empty air; I would almost sooner return and face foes into whose flesh I may feel my blade bite and know that I am selling my carcass dearly before I go down to that eternal oblivion which is evidently the fairest and most desirable eternity that mortal man has the right to hope for."

"If, as you say, we cannot fight empty air, Tars Tarkas," I replied, "neither, on the other hand, can empty air fight us. I, who have faced and conquered in my time thousands of sinewy warriors and tempered blades, shall not be turned back by wind; nor no more shall you, Thark."

"But unseen voices may emanate from unseen and unseeable creatures who wield invisible blades," answered the green warrior.

"Rot, Tars Tarkas," I cried, "those voices come from beings as real as you or as I. In their veins flows lifeblood that may be let as easily as ours, and the fact that they remain invisible to us is the best proof to my mind that they are mortal; nor overly courageous mortals at that. Think you, Tars Tarkas, that John Carter will

fly at the first shriek of a cowardly foe who dare not come out into the open and face a good blade?"

I had spoken in a loud voice that there might be no question that our would-be terrorizers should hear me, for I was tiring of this nerve-racking fiasco. It had occurred to me, too, that the whole business was but a plan to frighten us back into the valley of death from which we had escaped, that we might be quickly disposed of by the savage creatures there.

For a long period there was silence, then of a sudden a soft, stealthy sound behind me caused me to turn suddenly to behold a great many-legged banth creeping sinuously upon me.

The banth is a fierce beast of prey that roams the low hills surrounding the dead seas of ancient Mars. Like nearly all Martian animals it is almost hairless, having only a great bristly mane about its thick neck.

Its long, lithe body is supported by ten powerful legs, its enormous jaws are equipped, like those of the calot, or Martian hound, with several rows of long needle-like fangs; its mouth reaches to a point far back of its tiny ears, while its enormous, protruding eyes of green add the last touch of terror to its awful aspect.

As it crept toward me it lashed its powerful tail against its yellow sides, and when it saw that it was discovered it emitted the terrifying roar which often freezes its prey into momentary paralysis in the instant that it makes its spring.

And so it launched its great bulk toward me, but its mighty voice had held no paralysing terrors for me, and it met cold steel instead of the tender flesh its cruel jaws gaped so widely to engulf.

An instant later I drew my blade from the still heart of this great Barsoomian lion, and turning toward Tars Tarkas was surprised to see him facing a similar monster.

No sooner had he dispatched his than I, turning, as though drawn by the instinct of my guardian subconscious mind, beheld another of the savage denizens of the Martian wilds leaping across the chamber toward me.

From then on for the better part of an hour one hideous creature after another was launched upon us, springing apparently from the empty air about us.

Tars Tarkas was satisfied; here was something tangible that he could cut and slash with his great blade, while I, for my part, may say that the diversion was a marked improvement over the uncanny voices from unseen lips.

That there was nothing supernatural about our new foes was well evidenced by their howls of rage and pain as they felt the sharp steel at their vitals, and the very real blood which flowed from their severed arteries as they died the real death.

I noticed during the period of this new persecution that the beasts appeared only when our backs were turned; we never saw one really materialize from thin air, nor did I for an instant sufficiently lose my excellent reasoning faculties to be once deluded into the belief that the beasts came into the room other than through some concealed and well-contrived doorway.

Among the ornaments of Tars Tarkas' leather harness, which is the only manner of clothing worn by Martians other than silk capes and robes of silk and fur for protection from the cold after dark, was a small mirror, about the bigness of a lady's hand glass, which hung midway between his shoulders and his waist against his broad back.

Once as he stood looking down at a newly fallen antagonist my eyes happened to fall upon this mirror and in its shiny surface I saw pictured a sight that caused me to whisper:

"Move not, Tars Tarkas! Move not a muscle!"

He did not ask why, but stood like a graven image while my eyes watched the strange thing that meant so much to us.

What I saw was the quick movement of a section of the wall behind me. It was turning upon pivots, and with it a section of the floor directly in front of it was turning. It was as though you placed a visiting-card upon end on a silver dollar that you had laid flat upon a table, so that the edge of the card perfectly bisected the surface of the coin.

The card might represent the section of the wall that turned and the silver dollar the section of the floor. Both were so nicely fitted into the adjacent portions of the floor and wall that no crack had been noticeable in the dim light of the chamber.

As the turn was half completed a great beast was revealed sitting upon its haunches upon that part of the revolving floor that had been on the opposite side before the wall commenced to move; when the section stopped, the beast was facing toward me on our side of the partition--it was very simple.

But what had interested me most was the sight that the half-turned section had presented through the opening that it had made. A great chamber, well lighted,

in which were several men and women chained to the wall, and in front of them, evidently directing and operating the movement of the secret doorway, a wicked-faced man, neither red as are the red men of Mars, nor green as are the green men, but white, like myself, with a great mass of flowing yellow hair.

The prisoners behind him were red Martians. Chained with them were a number of fierce beasts, such as had been turned upon us, and others equally as ferocious.

As I turned to meet my new foe it was with a heart considerably lightened.

"Watch the wall at your end of the chamber, Tars Tarkas," I cautioned, "it is through secret doorways in the wall that the brutes are loosed upon us." I was very close to him and spoke in a low whisper that my knowledge of their secret might not be disclosed to our tormentors.

As long as we remained each facing an opposite end of the apartment no further attacks were made upon us, so it was quite clear to me that the partitions were in some way pierced that our actions might be observed from without.

At length a plan of action occurred to me, and backing quite close to Tars Tarkas I unfolded my scheme in a low whisper, keeping my eyes still glued upon my end of the room.

The great Thark grunted his assent to my proposition when I had done, and in accordance with my plan commenced backing toward the wall which I faced while I advanced slowly ahead of him.

When we had reached a point some ten feet from the secret doorway I halted my companion, and cautioning him to remain absolutely motionless until I gave the prearranged signal I quickly turned my back to the door through which I could almost feel the burning and baleful eyes of our would be executioner.

Instantly my own eyes sought the mirror upon Tars Tarkas' back and in another second I was closely watching the section of the wall which had been disgorging its savage terrors upon us.

I had not long to wait, for presently the golden surface commenced to move rapidly. Scarcely had it started than I gave the signal to Tars Tarkas, simultaneously springing for the receding half of the pivoting door. In like manner the Thark wheeled and leaped for the opening being made by the inswinging section.

A single bound carried me completely through into the adjoining room and brought me face to face with the fellow whose cruel face I had seen before. He

was about my own height and well muscled and in every outward detail moulded precisely as are Earth men.

At his side hung a long-sword, a short-sword, a dagger, and one of the destructive radium revolvers that are common upon Mars.

The fact that I was armed only with a long-sword, and so according to the laws and ethics of battle everywhere upon Barsoom should only have been met with a similar or lesser weapon, seemed to have no effect upon the moral sense of my enemy, for he whipped out his revolver ere I scarce had touched the floor by his side, but an uppercut from my long-sword sent it flying from his grasp before he could discharge it.

Instantly he drew his long-sword, and thus evenly armed we set to in earnest for one of the closest battles I ever have fought.

The fellow was a marvellous swordsman and evidently in practice, while I had not gripped the hilt of a sword for ten long years before that morning.

But it did not take me long to fall easily into my fighting stride, so that in a few minutes the man began to realize that he had at last met his match.

His face became livid with rage as he found my guard impregnable, while blood flowed from a dozen minor wounds upon his face and body.

"Who are you, white man?" he hissed. "That you are no Barsoomian from the outer world is evident from your colour. And you are not of us."

His last statement was almost a question.

"What if I were from the Temple of Issus?" I hazarded on a wild guess.

"Fate forfend!" he exclaimed, his face going white under the blood that now nearly covered it.

I did not know how to follow up my lead, but I carefully laid the idea away for future use should circumstances require it. His answer indicated that for all he KNEW I might be from the Temple of Issus and in it were men like unto myself, and either this man feared the inmates of the temple or else he held their persons or their power in such reverence that he trembled to think of the harm and indignities he had heaped upon one of them.

But my present business with him was of a different nature than that which requires any considerable abstract reasoning; it was to get my sword between his ribs, and this I succeeded in doing within the next few seconds, nor was I an instant toosoon.

The chained prisoners had been watching the combat in tense silence; not a sound had fallen in the room other than the clashing of our contending blades, the soft shuffling of our naked feet and the few whispered words we had hissed at each other through clenched teeth the while we continued our mortal duel.

But as the body of my antagonist sank an inert mass to the floor a cry of warning broke from one of the female prisoners.

"Turn! Turn! Behind you!" she shrieked, and as I wheeled at the first note of her shrill cry I found myself facing a second man of the same race as he who lay at my feet.

The fellow had crept stealthily from a dark corridor and was almost upon me with raised sword ere I saw him. Tars Tarkas was nowhere in sight and the secret panel in the wall, through which I had come, was closed.

How I wished that he were by my side now! I had fought almost continuously for many hours; I had passed through such experiences and adventures as must sap the vitality of man, and with all this I had not eaten for nearly twenty-four hours, nor slept.

I was fagged out, and for the first time in years felt a question as to my ability to cope with an antagonist; but there was naught else for it than to engage my man, and that as quickly and ferociously as lay in me, for my only salvation was to rush him off his feet by the impetuosity of my attack--I could not hope to win a long-drawn-out battle.

But the fellow was evidently of another mind, for he backed and parried and parried and sidestepped until I was almost completely fagged from the exertion of attempting to finish him.

He was a more adroit swordsman, if possible, than my previous foe, and I must admit that he led me a pretty chase and in the end came near to making a sorry fool of me--and a dead one into the bargain.

I could feel myself growing weaker and weaker, until at length objects commenced to blur before my eyes and I staggered and blundered about more asleep than awake, and then it was that he worked his pretty little coup that came near to losing me my life.

He had backed me around so that I stood in front of the corpse of his fellow, and then he rushed me suddenly so that I was forced back upon it, and as my heel struck it the impetus of my body flung me backward across the dead man.

My head struck the hard pavement with a resounding whack, and to that alone I owe my life, for it cleared my brain and the pain roused my temper, so that I was equal for the moment to tearing my enemy to pieces with my bare hands, and I verily believe that I should have attempted it had not my right hand, in the act of raising my body from the ground, come in contact with a bit of cold metal.

As the eyes of the layman so is the hand of the fighting man when it comes in contact with an implement of his vocation, and thus I did not need to look or reason to know that the dead man's revolver, lying where it had fallen when I struck it from his grasp, was at my disposal.

The fellow whose ruse had put me down was springing toward me, the point of his gleaming blade directed straight at my heart, and as he came there rang from his lips the cruel and mocking peal of laughter that I had heard within the Chamber of Mystery.

And so he died, his thin lips curled in the snarl of his hateful laugh, and a bullet from the revolver of his dead companion bursting in his heart.

His body, borne by the impetus of his headlong rush, plunged upon me. The hilt of his sword must have struck my head, for with the impact of the corpse I lost consciousness.