

CHAPTER VII - A FAIR GODDESS

For an instant the black pirate and I remained motionless, glaring into each other's eyes. Then a grim smile curled the handsome lips above me, as an ebony hand came slowly in sight from above the edge of the deck and the cold, hollow eye of a revolver sought the centre of my forehead.

Simultaneously my free hand shot out for the black throat, just within reach, and the ebony finger tightened on the trigger. The pirate's hissing, "Die, cursed thern," was half choked in his windpipe by my clutching fingers. The hammer fell with a futile click upon an empty chamber.

Before he could fire again I had pulled him so far over the edge of the deck that he was forced to drop his firearm and clutch the rail with both hands.

My grasp upon his throat effectually prevented any outcry, and so we struggled in grim silence; he to tear away from my hold, I to drag him over to his death.

His face was taking on a livid hue, his eyes were bulging from their sockets. It was evident to him that he soon must die unless he tore loose from the steel fingers that were choking the life from him. With a final effort he threw himself further back upon the deck, at the same instant releasing his hold upon the rail to tear frantically with both hands at my fingers in an effort to drag them from his throat.

That little second was all that I awaited. With one mighty downward surge I swept him clear of the deck. His falling body came near to tearing me from the frail hold that my single free hand had upon the anchor chain and plunging me with him to the waters of the sea below.

I did not relinquish my grasp upon him, however, for I knew that a single shriek from those lips as he hurtled to his death in the silent waters of the sea would bring his comrades from above to avenge him.

Instead I held grimly to him, choking, ever choking, while his frantic struggles dragged me lower and lower toward the end of the chain.

Gradually his contortions became spasmodic, lessening by degrees until they ceased entirely. Then I released my hold upon him and in an instant he was swallowed by the black shadows far below.

Again I climbed to the ship's rail. This time I succeeded in raising my eyes to the level of the deck, where I could take a careful survey of the conditions immediately confronting me.

The nearer moon had passed below the horizon, but the clear effulgence of the further satellite bathed the deck of the cruiser, bringing into sharp relief the bodies of six or eight black men sprawled about in sleep.

Huddled close to the base of a rapid fire gun was a young white girl, securely bound. Her eyes were widespread in an expression of horrified anticipation and fixed directly upon me as I came in sight above the edge of the deck.

Unutterable relief instantly filled them as if they fell upon the mystic jewel which sparkled in the centre of my stolen headpiece. She did not speak. Instead her eyes warned me to beware the sleeping figures that surrounded her.

Noiselessly I gained the deck. The girl nodded to me to approach her. As I bent low she whispered to me to release her.

"I can aid you," she said, "and you will need all the aid available when they awaken."

"Some of them will awake in Korus," I replied smiling.

She caught the meaning of my words, and the cruelty of her answering smile horrified me. One is not astonished by cruelty in a hideous face, but when it touches the features of a goddess whose fine-chiselled lineaments might more fittingly portray love and beauty, the contrast is appalling.

Quickly I released her.

"Give me a revolver," she whispered. "I can use that upon those your sword does not silence in time."

I did as she bid. Then I turned toward the distasteful work that lay before me. This was no time for fine compunctions, nor for a chivalry that these cruel demons would neither appreciate nor reciprocate.

Stealthily I approached the nearest sleeper. When he awoke he was well on his journey to the bosom of Korus. His piercing shriek as consciousness returned to him came faintly up to us from the black depths beneath.

The second awoke as I touched him, and, though I succeeded in hurling him from the cruiser's deck, his wild cry of alarm brought the remaining pirates to their feet. There were five of them.

As they arose the girl's revolver spoke in sharp staccato and one sank back to the deck again to rise no more.

The others rushed madly upon me with drawn swords. The girl evidently dared not fire for fear of wounding me, but I saw her sneak stealthily and cat-like toward the flank of the attackers. Then they were on me.

For a few minutes I experienced some of the hottest fighting I had ever passed through. The quarters were too small for foot work. It was stand your ground and give and take. At first I took considerably more than I gave, but presently I got beneath one fellow's guard and had the satisfaction of seeing him collapse upon the deck.

The others redoubled their efforts. The crashing of their blades upon mine raised a terrific din that might have been heard for miles through the silent night. Sparks flew as steel smote steel, and then there was the dull and sickening sound of a shoulder bone parting beneath the keen edge of my Martian sword.

Three now faced me, but the girl was working her way to a point that would soon permit her to reduce the number by one at least. Then things happened with such amazing rapidity that I can scarce comprehend even now all that took place in that brief instant.

The three rushed me with the evident purpose of forcing me back the few steps that would carry my body over the rail into the void below. At the same instant the girl fired and my sword arm made two moves. One man dropped with a bullet in his brain; a sword flew clattering across the deck and dropped over the edge beyond as I disarmed one of my opponents and the third went down with my blade buried to the hilt in his breast and three feet of it protruding from his back, and falling wrenched the sword from my grasp.

Disarmed myself, I now faced my remaining foeman, whose own sword lay somewhere thousands of feet below us, lost in the Lost Sea.

The new conditions seemed to please my adversary, for a smile of satisfaction bared his gleaming teeth as he rushed at me bare-handed. The great muscles which rolled beneath his glossy black hide evidently assured him that here was easy prey, not worth the trouble of drawing the dagger from his harness.

I let him come almost upon me. Then I ducked beneath his outstretched arms, at the same time sidestepping to the right. Pivoting on my left toe, I swung a terrific right to his jaw, and, like a felled ox, he dropped in his tracks.

A low, silvery laugh rang out behind me.

"You are no thern," said the sweet voice of my companion, "for all your golden locks or the harness of Sator Throg. Never lived there upon all Barsoom before one who could fight as you have fought this night. Who are you?"

"I am John Carter, Prince of the House of Tardos Mors, Jeddak of Helium," I replied. "And whom," I added, "has the honour of serving been accorded me?"

She hesitated a moment before speaking. Then she asked:

"You are no thern. Are you an enemy of the therns?"

"I have been in the territory of the therns for a day and a half. During that entire time my life has been in constant danger. I have been harassed and persecuted. Armed men and fierce beasts have been set upon me. I had no quarrel with the therns before, but can you wonder that I feel no great love for them now? I have spoken."

She looked at me intently for several minutes before she replied. It was as though she were attempting to read my inmost soul, to judge my character and my standards of chivalry in that long-drawn, searching gaze.

Apparently the inventory satisfied her.

"I am Phaidor, daughter of Matai Shang, Holy Hekkador of the Holy Therns, Father of Therns, Master of Life and Death upon Barsoom, Brother of Issus, Prince of Life Eternal."

At that moment I noticed that the black I had dropped with my fist was commencing to show signs of returning consciousness. I sprang to his side. Stripping his harness from him I securely bound his hands behind his back, and after similarly fastening his feet tied him to a heavy gun carriage.

"Why not the simpler way?" asked Phaidor.

"I do not understand. What 'simpler way'?" I replied.

With a slight shrug of her lovely shoulders she made a gesture with her hands personating the casting of something over the craft's side.

"I am no murderer," I said. "I kill in self-defence only."

She looked at me narrowly. Then she puckered those divine brows of hers, and shook her head. She could not comprehend.

Well, neither had my own Dejah Thoris been able to understand what to her had seemed a foolish and dangerous policy toward enemies. Upon Barsoom, quarter

is neither asked nor given, and each dead man means so much more of the waning resources of this dying planet to be divided amongst those who survive.

But there seemed a subtle difference here between the manner in which this girl contemplated the dispatching of an enemy and the tender-hearted regret of my own princess for the stern necessity which demanded it.

I think that Phaidor regretted the thrill that the spectacle would have afforded her rather than the fact that my decision left another enemy alive to threaten us.

The man had now regained full possession of his faculties, and was regarding us intently from where he lay bound upon the deck. He was a handsome fellow, clean limbed and powerful, with an intelligent face and features of such exquisite chiselling that Adonis himself might have envied him.

The vessel, unguided, had been moving slowly across the valley; but now I thought it time to take the helm and direct her course. Only in a very general way could I guess the location of the Valley Dor. That it was far south of the equator was evident from the constellations, but I was not sufficiently a Martian astronomer to come much closer than a rough guess without the splendid charts and delicate instruments with which, as an officer in the Heliumite Navy, I had formerly reckoned the positions of the vessels on which I sailed.

That a northerly course would quickest lead me toward the more settled portions of the planet immediately decided the direction that I should steer. Beneath my hand the cruiser swung gracefully about. Then the button which controlled the repulsive rays sent us soaring far out into space. With speed lever pulled to the last notch, we raced toward the north as we rose ever farther and farther above that terrible valley of death.

As we passed at a dizzy height over the narrow domains of the therns the flash of powder far below bore mute witness to the ferocity of the battle that still raged along that cruel frontier. No sound of conflict reached our ears, for in the rarefied atmosphere of our great altitude no sound wave could penetrate; they were dissipated in thin air far below us.

It became intensely cold. Breathing was difficult. The girl, Phaidor, and the black pirate kept their eyes glued upon me. At length the girl spoke.

"Unconsciousness comes quickly at this altitude," she said quietly. "Unless you are inviting death for us all you had best drop, and that quickly."

There was no fear in her voice. It was as one might say: "You had better carry an umbrella. It is going to rain."

I dropped the vessel quickly to a lower level. Nor was I a moment too soon. The girl had swooned.

The black, too, was unconscious, while I, myself, retained my senses, I think, only by sheer will. The one on whom all responsibility rests is apt to endure the most.

We were swinging along low above the foothills of the Otz. It was comparatively warm and there was plenty of air for our starved lungs, so I was not surprised to see the black open his eyes, and a moment later the girl also.

"It was a close call," she said.

"It has taught me two things though," I replied.

"What?"

"That even Phaidor, daughter of the Master of Life and Death, is mortal," I said smiling.

"There is immortality only in Issus," she replied. "And Issus is for the race of therns alone. Thus am I immortal."

I caught a fleeting grin passing across the features of the black as he heard her words. I did not then understand why he smiled. Later I was to learn, and she, too, in a most horrible manner.

"If the other thing you have just learned," she continued, "has led to as erroneous deductions as the first you are little richer in knowledge than you were before."

"The other," I replied, "is that our dusky friend here does not hail from the nearer moon--he was like to have died at a few thousand feet above Barsoom. Had we continued the five thousand miles that lie between Thuria and the planet he would have been but the frozen memory of a man."

Phaidor looked at the black in evident astonishment.

"If you are not of Thuria, then where?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned his eyes elsewhere, but did not reply.

The girl stamped her little foot in a peremptory manner.

"The daughter of Matai Shang is not accustomed to having her queries remain unanswered," she said. "One of the lesser breed should feel honoured that a member of the holy race that was born to inherit life eternal should deign even to notice him."

Again the black smiled that wicked, knowing smile.

"Xodar, Dator of the First Born of Barsoom, is accustomed to give commands, not to receive them," replied the black pirate. Then, turning to me, "What are your intentions concerning me?"

"I intend taking you both back to Helium," I said. "No harm will come to you. You will find the red men of Helium a kindly and magnanimous race, but if they listen to me there will be no more voluntary pilgrimages down the river Iss, and the impossible belief that they have cherished for ages will be shattered into a thousand pieces."

"Are you of Helium?" he asked.

"I am a Prince of the House of Tardos Mors, Jeddak of Helium," I replied, "but I am not of Barsoom. I am of another world."

Xodar looked at me intently for a few moments.

"I can well believe that you are not of Barsoom," he said at length. "None of this world could have bested eight of the First Born single-handed. But how is it that you wear the golden hair and the jewelled circlet of a Holy Thern?" He emphasized the word holy with a touch of irony.

"I had forgotten them," I said. "They are the spoils of conquest," and with a sweep of my hand I removed the disguise from my head.

When the black's eyes fell on my close-cropped black hair they opened in astonishment. Evidently he had looked for the bald pate of a thern.

"You are indeed of another world," he said, a touch of awe in his voice. "With the skin of a thern, the black hair of a First Born and the muscles of a dozen Dators it was no disgrace even for Xodar to acknowledge your supremacy. A thing he could never do were you a Barsoomian," he added.

"You are travelling several laps ahead of me, my friend," I interrupted. "I glean that your name is Xodar, but whom, pray, are the First Born, and what a Dator, and why, if you were conquered by a Barsoomian, could you not acknowledge it?"

"The First Born of Barsoom," he explained, "are the race of black men of which I am a Dator, or, as the lesser Barsoomians would say, Prince. My race is the oldest on the planet. We trace our lineage, unbroken, direct to the Tree of Life which flourished in the centre of the Valley Dor twenty-three million years ago.

"For countless ages the fruit of this tree underwent the gradual changes of evolution, passing by degrees from true plant life to a combination of plant and

animal. In the first stages the fruit of the tree possessed only the power of independent muscular action, while the stem remained attached to the parent plant; later a brain developed in the fruit, so that hanging there by their long stems they thought and moved as individuals.

"Then, with the development of perceptions came a comparison of them; judgments were reached and compared, and thus reason and the power to reason were born upon Barsoom.

"Ages passed. Many forms of life came and went upon the Tree of Life, but still all were attached to the parent plant by stems of varying lengths. At length the fruit tree consisted in tiny plant men, such as we now see reproduced in such huge dimensions in the Valley Dor, but still hanging to the limbs and branches of the tree by the stems which grew from the tops of their heads.

"The buds from which the plant men blossomed resembled large nuts about a foot in diameter, divided by double partition walls into four sections. In one section grew the plant man, in another a sixteen-legged worm, in the third the progenitor of the white ape and in the fourth the primaeval black man of Barsoom.

"When the bud burst the plant man remained dangling at the end of his stem, but the three other sections fell to the ground, where the efforts of their imprisoned occupants to escape sent them hopping about in all directions.

"Thus as time went on, all Barsoom was covered with these imprisoned creatures. For countless ages they lived their long lives within their hard shells, hopping and skipping about the broad planet; falling into rivers, lakes, and seas, to be still further spread about the surface of the new world.

"Countless billions died before the first black man broke through his prison walls into the light of day. Prompted by curiosity, he broke open other shells and the peopling of Barsoom commenced.

"The pure strain of the blood of this first black man has remained untainted by admixture with other creatures in the race of which I am a member; but from the sixteen-legged worm, the first ape and renegade black man has sprung every other form of animal life upon Barsoom.

"The therns," and he smiled maliciously as he spoke, "are but the result of ages of evolution from the pure white ape of antiquity. They are a lower order still. There is but one race of true and immortal humans on Barsoom. It is the race of black men.

"The Tree of Life is dead, but before it died the plant men learned to detach themselves from it and roam the face of Barsoom with the other children of the First Parent.

"Now their bisexuality permits them to reproduce themselves after the manner of true plants, but otherwise they have progressed but little in all the ages of their existence. Their actions and movements are largely matters of instinct and not guided to any great extent by reason, since the brain of a plant man is but a trifle larger than the end of your smallest finger. They live upon vegetation and the blood of animals, and their brain is just large enough to direct their movements in the direction of food, and to translate the food sensations which are carried to it from their eyes and ears. They have no sense of self-preservation and so are entirely without fear in the face of danger. That is why they are such terrible antagonists in combat."

I wondered why the black man took such pains to discourse thus at length to enemies upon the genesis of life Barsoomian. It seemed a strangely inopportune moment for a proud member of a proud race to unbend in casual conversation with a captor. Especially in view of the fact that the black still lay securely bound upon the deck.

It was the faintest straying of his eye beyond me for the barest fraction of a second that explained his motive for thus dragging out my interest in his truly absorbing story.

He lay a little forward of where I stood at the levers, and thus he faced the stern of the vessel as he addressed me. It was at the end of his description of the plant men that I caught his eye fixed momentarily upon something behind me.

Nor could I be mistaken in the swift gleam of triumph that brightened those dark orbs for an instant.

Some time before I had reduced our speed, for we had left the Valley Dor many miles astern, and I felt comparatively safe.

I turned an apprehensive glance behind me, and the sight that I saw froze the new-born hope of freedom that had been springing up within me.

A great battleship, forging silent and unlighted through the dark night, loomed close astern.