

CHAPTER XIV - THE EYES IN THE DARK

My son! I could not believe my ears. Slowly I rose and faced the handsome youth. Now that I looked at him closely I commenced to see why his face and personality had attracted me so strongly. There was much of his mother's incomparable beauty in his clear-cut features, but it was strongly masculine beauty, and his grey eyes and the expression of them were mine.

The boy stood facing me, half hope and half uncertainty in his look.

"Tell me of your mother," I said. "Tell me all you can of the years that I have been robbed by a relentless fate of her dear companionship."

With a cry of pleasure he sprang toward me and threw his arms about my neck, and for a brief moment as I held my boy close to me the tears welled to my eyes and I was like to have choked after the manner of some maudlin fool--but I do not regret it, nor am I ashamed. A long life has taught me that a man may seem weak where women and children are concerned and yet be anything but a weakling in the sterner avenues of life.

"Your stature, your manner, the terrible ferocity of your swordsmanship," said the boy, "are as my mother has described them to me a thousand times--but even with such evidence I could scarce credit the truth of what seemed so improbable to me, however much I desired it to be true. Do you know what thing it was that convinced me more than all the others?"

"What, my boy?" I asked.

"Your first words to me--they were of my mother. None else but the man who loved her as she has told me my father did would have thought first of her."

"For long years, my son, I can scarce recall a moment that the radiant vision of your mother's face has not been ever before me. Tell me of her."

"Those who have known her longest say that she has not changed, unless it be to grow more beautiful--were that possible. Only, when she thinks I am not about to see her, her face grows very sad, and, oh, so wistful. She thinks ever of you, my father, and all Helium mourns with her and for her. Her grandfather's people love her. They loved you also, and fairly worship your memory as the saviour of Barsoom.

"Each year that brings its anniversary of the day that saw you racing across a near dead world to unlock the secret of that awful portal behind which lay the mighty power of life for countless millions a great festival is held in your honour;

but there are tears mingled with the thanksgiving--tears of real regret that the author of the happiness is not with them to share the joy of living he died to give them. Upon all Barsoom there is no greater name than John Carter."

"And by what name has your mother called you, my boy?" I asked.

"The people of Helium asked that I be named with my father's name, but my mother said no, that you and she had chosen a name for me together, and that your wish must be honoured before all others, so the name that she called me is the one that you desired, a combination of hers and yours--Carthoris."

Xodar had been at the wheel as I talked with my son, and now he called me.

"She is dropping badly by the head, John Carter," he said. "So long as we were rising at a stiff angle it was not noticeable, but now that I am trying to keep a horizontal course it is different. The wound in her bow has opened one of her forward raytanks."

It was true, and after I had examined the damage I found it a much graver matter than I had anticipated. Not only was the forced angle at which we were compelled to maintain the bow in order to keep a horizontal course greatly impeding our speed, but at the rate that we were losing our repulsive rays from the forward tanks it was but a question of an hour or more when we would be floating stern up and helpless.

We had slightly reduced our speed with the dawning of a sense of security, but now I took the helm once more and pulled the noble little engine wide open, so that again we raced north at terrific velocity. In the meantime Carthoris and Xodar with tools in hand were pattering with the great rent in the bow in a hopeless endeavour to stem the tide of escaping rays.

It was still dark when we passed the northern boundary of the ice cap and the area of clouds. Below us lay a typical Martian landscape. Rolling ochre sea bottom of long dead seas, low surrounding hills, with here and there the grim and silent cities of the dead past; great piles of mighty architecture tenanted only by age-old memories of a once powerful race, and by the great white apes of Barsoom.

It was becoming more and more difficult to maintain our little vessel in a horizontal position. Lower and lower sagged the bow until it became necessary to stop the engine to prevent our flight terminating in a swift dive to the ground.

As the sun rose and the light of a new day swept away the darkness of night our craft gave a final spasmodic plunge, turned half upon her side, and then with

deck tilting at a sickening angle swung in a slow circle, her bow dropping further below her stern each moment.

To hand-rail and stanchion we clung, and finally as we saw the end approaching, snapped the buckles of our harness to the rings at her sides. In another moment the deck reared at an angle of ninety degrees and we hung in our leather with feet dangling a thousand yards above the ground.

I was swinging quite close to the controlling devices, so I reached out to the lever that directed the rays of repulsion. The boat responded to the touch, and very gently we began to sink toward the ground.

It was fully half an hour before we touched. Directly north of us rose a rather lofty range of hills, toward which we decided to make our way, since they afforded greater opportunity for concealment from the pursuers we were confident might stumble in this direction.

An hour later found us in the time-rounded gullies of the hills, amid the beautiful flowering plants that abound in the arid waste places of Barsoom. There we found numbers of huge milk-giving shrubs--that strange plant which serves in great part as food and drink for the wild hordes of green men. It was indeed a boon to us, for we all were nearly famished.

Beneath a cluster of these which afforded perfect concealment from wandering air scouts, we lay down to sleep--for me the first time in many hours. This was the beginning of my fifth day upon Barsoom since I had found myself suddenly translated from my cottage on the Hudson to Dor, the valley beautiful, the valley hideous. In all this time I had slept but twice, though once the clock around within the storehouse of the therns.

It was mid-afternoon when I was awakened by some one seizing my hand and covering it with kisses. With a start I opened my eyes to look into the beautiful face of Thuvia.

"My Prince! My Prince!" she cried, in an ecstasy of happiness. "'Tis you whom I had mourned as dead. My ancestors have been good to me; I have not lived in vain."

The girl's voice awoke Xodar and Carthoris. The boy gazed upon the woman in surprise, but she did not seem to realize the presence of another than I. She would have thrown her arms about my neck and smothered me with caresses, had I not gently but firmly disengaged myself.

"Come, come, Thuvia," I said soothingly; "you are overwrought by the danger and hardships you have passed through. You forget yourself, as you forget that I am the husband of the Princess of Helium."

"I forget nothing, my Prince," she replied. "You have spoken no word of love to me, nor do I expect that you ever shall; but nothing can prevent me loving you. I would not take the place of Dejah Thoris. My greatest ambition is to serve you, my Prince, for ever as your slave. No greater boon could I ask, no greater honour could I crave, no greater happiness could I hope."

As I have before said, I am no ladies' man, and I must admit that I seldom have felt so uncomfortable and embarrassed as I did that moment. While I was quite familiar with the Martian custom which allows female slaves to Martian men, whose high and chivalrous honour is always ample protection for every woman in his household, yet I had never myself chosen other than men as my body servants.

"And I ever return to Helium, Thuvia," I said, "you shall go with me, but as an honoured equal, and not as a slave. There you shall find plenty of handsome young nobles who would face Issus herself to win a smile from you, and we shall have you married in short order to one of the best of them. Forget your foolish gratitude-begotten infatuation, which your innocence has mistaken for love. I like your friendship better, Thuvia."

"You are my master; it shall be as you say," she replied simply, but there was a note of sadness in her voice.

"How came you here, Thuvia?" I asked. "And where is Tars Tarkas?"

"The great Thark, I fear, is dead," she replied sadly. "He was a mighty fighter, but a multitude of green warriors of another horde than his overwhelmed him. The last that I saw of him they were bearing him, wounded and bleeding, to the deserted city from which they had sallied to attack us."

"You are not sure that he is dead, then?" I asked. "And where is this city of which you speak?"

"It is just beyond this range of hills. The vessel in which you so nobly resigned a place that we might find escape defied our small skill in navigation, with the result that we drifted aimlessly about for two days. Then we decided to abandon the craft and attempt to make our way on foot to the nearest waterway. Yesterday we crossed these hills and came upon the dead city beyond. We had passed within its streets and were walking toward the central portion, when at an intersecting avenue we saw a body of green warriors approaching.

"Tars Tarkas was in advance, and they saw him, but me they did not see. The Thark sprang back to my side and forced me into an adjacent doorway, where he told me to remain in hiding until I could escape, making my way to Helium if possible.

"'There will be no escape for me now,' he said, 'for these be the Warhoon of the South. When they have seen my metal it will be to the death.'

"Then he stepped out to meet them. Ah, my Prince, such fighting! For an hour they swarmed about him, until the Warhoon dead formed a hill where he had stood; but at last they overwhelmed him, those behind pushing the foremost upon him until there remained no space to swing his great sword. Then he stumbled and went down and they rolled over him like a huge wave. When they carried him away toward the heart of the city, he was dead, I think, for I did not see him move."

"Before we go farther we must be sure," I said. "I cannot leave Tars Tarkas alive among the Warhoons. To-night I shall enter the city and make sure."

"And I shall go with you," spoke Carthoris.

"And I," said Xodar.

"Neither one of you shall go," I replied. "It is work that requires stealth and strategy, not force. One man alone may succeed where more would invite disaster. I shall go alone. If I need your help, I will return for you."

They did not like it, but both were good soldiers, and it had been agreed that I should command. The sun already was low, so that I did not have long to wait before the sudden darkness of Barsoom engulfed us.

With a parting word of instructions to Carthoris and Xodar, in case I should not return, I bade them all farewell and set forth at a rapid dogtrot toward the city.

As I emerged from the hills the nearer moon was winging its wild flight through the heavens, its bright beams turning to burnished silver the barbaric splendour of the ancient metropolis. The city had been built upon the gently rolling foothills that in the dim and distant past had sloped down to meet the sea. It was due to this fact that I had no difficulty in entering the streets unobserved.

The green hordes that use these deserted cities seldom occupy more than a few squares about the central plaza, and as they come and go always across the dead sea bottoms that the cities face, it is usually a matter of comparative ease to enter from the hillside.

Once within the streets, I kept close in the dense shadows of the walls. At intersections I halted a moment to make sure that none was in sight before I sprang quickly to the shadows of the opposite side. Thus I made the journey to the vicinity of the plaza without detection. As I approached the purlieus of the inhabited portion of the city I was made aware of the proximity of the warriors' quarters by the squealing and grunting of the thoats and zitidars corralled within the hollow courtyards formed by the buildings surrounding each square.

These old familiar sounds that are so distinctive of green Martian life sent a thrill of pleasure surging through me. It was as one might feel on coming home after a long absence. It was amid such sounds that I had first courted the incomparable Dejah Thoris in the age-old marble halls of the dead city of Korad.

As I stood in the shadows at the far corner of the first square which housed members of the horde, I saw warriors emerging from several of the buildings. They all went in the same direction, toward a great building which stood in the centre of the plaza. My knowledge of green Martian customs convinced me that this was either the quarters of the principal chieftain or contained the audience chamber wherein the Jeddak met his jeds and lesser chieftains. In either event, it was evident that something was afoot which might have a bearing on the recent capture of Tars Tarkas.

To reach this building, which I now felt it imperative that I do, I must needs traverse the entire length of one square and cross a broad avenue and a portion of the plaza. From the noises of the animals which came from every courtyard about me, I knew that there were many people in the surrounding buildings--probably several communities of the great horde of the Warhoons of the South.

To pass undetected among all these people was in itself a difficult task, but if I was to find and rescue the great Thark I must expect even more formidable obstacles before success could be mine. I had entered the city from the south and now stood on the corner of the avenue through which I had passed and the first intersecting avenue south of the plaza. The buildings upon the south side of this square did not appear to be inhabited, as I could see no lights, and so I decided to gain the inner courtyard through one of them.

Nothing occurred to interrupt my progress through the deserted pile I chose, and I came into the inner court close to the rear walls of the east buildings without detection. Within the court a great herd of thoats and zitidars moved restlessly about, cropping the moss-like ochre vegetation which overgrows practically the entire uncultivated area of Mars. What breeze there was came from the north-west, so there was little danger that the beasts would scent me. Had they, their

squealing and grunting would have grown to such a volume as to attract the attention of the warriors within the buildings.

Close to the east wall, beneath the overhanging balconies of the second floors, I crept in dense shadows the full length of the courtyard, until I came to the buildings at the north end. These were lighted for about three floors up, but above the third floor all was dark.

To pass through the lighted rooms was, of course, out of the question, since they swarmed with green Martian men and women. My only path lay through the upper floors, and to gain these it was necessary to scale the face of the wall. The reaching of the balcony of the second floor was a matter of easy accomplishment--an agile leap gave my hands a grasp upon the stone hand-rail above. In another instant I had drawn myself up on the balcony.

Here through the open windows I saw the green folk squatting upon their sleeping silks and furs, grunting an occasional monosyllable, which, in connection with their wondrous telepathic powers, is ample for their conversational requirements. As I drew closer to listen to their words a warrior entered the room from the hall beyond.

"Come, Tan Gama," he cried, "we are to take the Thark before Kab Kadja. Bring another with you."

The warrior addressed arose and, beckoning to a fellow squatting near, the three turned and left the apartment.

If I could but follow them the chance might come to free Tars Tarkas at once. At least I would learn the location of his prison.

At my right was a door leading from the balcony into the building. It was at the end of an unlighted hall, and on the impulse of the moment I stepped within. The hall was broad and led straight through to the front of the building. On either side were the doorways of the various apartments which lined it.

I had no more than entered the corridor than I saw the three warriors at the other end--those whom I had just seen leaving the apartment. Then a turn to the right took them from my sight again. Quickly I hastened along the hallway in pursuit. My gait was reckless, but I felt that Fate had been kind indeed to throw such an opportunity within my grasp, and I could not afford to allow it to elude me now.

At the far end of the corridor I found a spiral stairway leading to the floors above and below. The three had evidently left the floor by this avenue. That they had

gone down and not up I was sure from my knowledge of these ancient buildings and the methods of the Warhoons.

I myself had once been a prisoner of the cruel hordes of northern Warhoon, and the memory of the underground dungeon in which I lay still is vivid in my memory. And so I felt certain that Tars Tarkas lay in the dark pits beneath some nearby building, and that in that direction I should find the trail of the three warriors leading to his cell.

Nor was I wrong. At the bottom of the runway, or rather at the landing on the floor below, I saw that the shaft descended into the pits beneath, and as I glanced down the flickering light of a torch revealed the presence of the three I was trailing.

Down they went toward the pits beneath the structure, and at a safe distance behind I followed the flicker of their torch. The way led through a maze of tortuous corridors, unlighted save for the wavering light they carried. We had gone perhaps a hundred yards when the party turned abruptly through a doorway at their right. I hastened on as rapidly as I dared through the darkness until I reached the point at which they had left the corridor. There, through an open door, I saw them removing the chains that secured the great Thark, Tars Tarkas, to the wall.

Hustling him roughly between them, they came immediately from the chamber, so quickly in fact that I was near to being apprehended. But I managed to run along the corridor in the direction I had been going in my pursuit of them far enough to be without the radius of their meagre light as they emerged from the cell.

I had naturally assumed that they would return with Tars Tarkas the same way that they had come, which would have carried them away from me; but, to my chagrin, they wheeled directly in my direction as they left the room. There was nothing for me but to hasten on in advance and keep out of the light of their torch. I dared not attempt to halt in the darkness of any of the many intersecting corridors, for I knew nothing of the direction they might take. Chance was as likely as not to carry me into the very corridor they might choose to enter.

The sensation of moving rapidly through these dark passages was far from reassuring. I knew not at what moment I might plunge headlong into some terrible pit or meet with some of the ghoulish creatures that inhabit these lower worlds beneath the dead cities of dying Mars. There filtered to me a faint radiance from the torch of the men behind--just enough to permit me to trace the direction

of the winding passageways directly before me, and so keep me from dashing myself against the walls at the turns.

Presently I came to a place where five corridors diverged from a common point. I had hastened along one of them for some little distance when suddenly the faint light of the torch disappeared from behind me. I paused to listen for sounds of the party behind me, but the silence was as utter as the silence of the tomb.

Quickly I realized that the warriors had taken one of the other corridors with their prisoner, and so I hastened back with a feeling of considerable relief to take up a much safer and more desirable position behind them. It was much slower work returning, however, than it had been coming, for now the darkness was as utter as the silence.

It was necessary to feel every foot of the way back with my hand against the side wall, that I might not pass the spot where the five roads radiated. After what seemed an eternity to me, I reached the place and recognized it by groping across the entrances to the several corridors until I had counted five of them. In not one, however, showed the faintest sign of light.

I listened intently, but the naked feet of the green men sent back no guiding echoes, though presently I thought I detected the clank of side arms in the far distance of the middle corridor. Up this, then, I hastened, searching for the light, and stopping to listen occasionally for a repetition of the sound; but soon I was forced to admit that I must have been following a blind lead, as only darkness and silence rewarded my efforts.

Again I retraced my steps toward the parting of the ways, when to my surprise I came upon the entrance to three diverging corridors, any one of which I might have traversed in my hasty dash after the false clue I had been following. Here was a pretty fix, indeed! Once back at the point where the five passageways met, I might wait with some assurance for the return of the warriors with Tars Tarkas. My knowledge of their customs lent colour to the belief that he was but being escorted to the audience chamber to have sentence passed upon him. I had not the slightest doubt but that they would preserve so doughty a warrior as the great Thark for the rare sport he would furnish at the Great Games.

But unless I could find my way back to that point the chances were most excellent that I would wander for days through the awful blackness, until, overcome by thirst and hunger, I lay down to die, or--What was that!

A faint shuffling sounded behind me, and as I cast a hasty glance over my shoulder my blood froze in my veins for the thing I saw there. It was not so much fear of the present danger as it was the horrifying memories it recalled of that

time I near went mad over the corpse of the man I had killed in the dungeons of the Warhoons, when blazing eyes came out of the dark recesses and dragged the thing that had been a man from my clutches and I heard it scraping over the stone of my prison as they bore it away to their terrible feast.

And now in these black pits of the other Warhoons I looked into those same fiery eyes, blazing at me through the terrible darkness, revealing no sign of the beast behind them. I think that the most fearsome attribute of these awesome creatures is their silence and the fact that one never sees them--nothing but those baleful eyes glaring unblinkingly out of the dark void behind.

Grasping my long-sword tightly in my hand, I backed slowly along the corridor away from the thing that watched me, but ever as I retreated the eyes advanced, nor was there any sound, not even the sound of breathing, except the occasional shuffling sound as of the dragging of a dead limb, that had first attracted my attention.

On and on I went, but I could not escape my sinister pursuer. Suddenly I heard the shuffling noise at my right, and, looking, saw another pair of eyes, evidently approaching from an intersecting corridor. As I started to renew my slow retreat I heard the noise repeated behind me, and then before I could turn I heard it again at my left.

The things were all about me. They had me surrounded at the intersection of two corridors. Retreat was cut off in all directions, unless I chose to charge one of the beasts. Even then I had no doubt but that the others would hurl themselves upon my back. I could not even guess the size or nature of the weird creatures. That they were of goodly proportions I guessed from the fact that the eyes were on a level with my own.

Why is it that darkness so magnifies our dangers? By day I would have charged the great banth itself, had I thought it necessary, but hemmed in by the darkness of these silent pits I hesitated before a pair of eyes.

Soon I saw that the matter shortly would be taken entirely from my hands, for the eyes at my right were moving slowly nearer me, as were those at my left and those behind and before me. Gradually they were closing in upon me--but still that awful stealthy silence!

For what seemed hours the eyes approached gradually closer and closer, until I felt that I should go mad for the horror of it. I had been constantly turning this way and that to prevent any sudden rush from behind, until I was fairly worn out. At length I could endure it no longer, and, taking a fresh grasp upon my long-sword, I turned suddenly and charged down upon one of my tormentors.

As I was almost upon it the thing retreated before me, but a sound from behind caused me to wheel in time to see three pairs of eyes rushing at me from the rear. With a cry of rage I turned to meet the cowardly beasts, but as I advanced they retreated as had their fellow. Another glance over my shoulder discovered the first eyes sneaking on me again. And again I charged, only to see the eyes retreat before me and hear the muffled rush of the three at my back.

Thus we continued, the eyes always a little closer in the end than they had been before, until I thought that I should go mad with the terrible strain of the ordeal. That they were waiting to spring upon my back seemed evident, and that it would not be long before they succeeded was equally apparent, for I could not endure the wear of this repeated charge and countercharge indefinitely. In fact, I could feel myself weakening from the mental and physical strain I had been undergoing.

At that moment I caught another glimpse from the corner of my eye of the single pair of eyes at my back making a sudden rush upon me. I turned to meet the charge; there was a quick rush of the three from the other direction; but I determined to pursue the single pair until I should have at least settled my account with one of the beasts and thus be relieved of the strain of meeting attacks from both directions.

There was no sound in the corridor, only that of my own breathing, yet I knew that those three uncanny creatures were almost upon me. The eyes in front were not retreating so rapidly now; I was almost within sword reach of them. I raised my sword arm to deal the blow that should free me, and then I felt a heavy body upon my back. A cold, moist, slimy something fastened itself upon my throat. I stumbled and went down.