

## CHAPTER XVII - THE DEATH SENTENCE

A few moments before the appointed time on the following morning a strong guard of Zat Arras' officers appeared at our quarters to conduct us to the great hall of the temple.

In twos we entered the chamber and marched down the broad Aisle of Hope, as it is called, to the platform in the centre of the hall. Before and behind us marched armed guards, while three solid ranks of Zodangan soldiery lined either side of the aisle from the entrance to the rostrum.

As we reached the raised enclosure I saw our judges. As is the custom upon Barsoom there were thirty-one, supposedly selected by lot from men of the noble class, for nobles were on trial. But to my amazement I saw no single friendly face among them. Practically all were Zodangans, and it was I to whom Zodanga owed her defeat at the hands of the green hordes and her subsequent vassalage to Helium. There could be little justice here for John Carter, or his son, or for the great Thark who had commanded the savage tribesmen who overran Zodanga's broad avenues, looting, burning, and murdering.

About us the vast circular coliseum was packed to its full capacity. All classes were represented--all ages, and both sexes. As we entered the hall the hum of subdued conversation ceased until as we halted upon the platform, or Throne of Righteousness, the silence of death enveloped the ten thousand spectators.

The judges were seated in a great circle about the periphery of the circular platform. We were assigned seats with our backs toward a small platform in the exact centre of the larger one. This placed us facing the judges and the audience. Upon the smaller platform each would take his place while his case was being heard.

Zat Arras himself sat in the golden chair of the presiding magistrate. As we were seated and our guards retired to the foot of the stairway leading to the platform, he arose and called my name.

"John Carter," he cried, "take your place upon the Pedestal of Truth to be judged impartially according to your acts and here to know the reward you have earned thereby." Then turning to and fro toward the audience he narrated the acts upon the value of which my reward was to be determined.

"Know you, O judges and people of Helium," he said, "that John Carter, one time Prince of Helium, has returned by his own statement from the Valley Dor and even from the Temple of Issus itself. That, in the presence of many men of

Helium he has blasphemed against the Sacred Iss, and against the Valley Dor, and the Lost Sea of Korus, and the Holy Therns themselves, and even against Issus, Goddess of Death, and of Life Eternal. And know you further by witness of thine own eyes that see him here now upon the Pedestal of Truth that he has indeed returned from these sacred precincts in the face of our ancient customs, and in violation of the sanctity of our ancient religion.

"He who be once dead may not live again. He who attempts it must be made dead for ever. Judges, your duty lies plain before you--here can be no testimony in contravention of truth. What reward shall be meted to John Carter in accordance with the acts he has committed?"

"Death!" shouted one of the judges.

And then a man sprang to his feet in the audience, and raising his hand on high, cried: "Justice! Justice! Justice!" It was Kantos Kan, and as all eyes turned toward him he leaped past the Zodangan soldiery and sprang upon the platform.

"What manner of justice be this?" he cried to Zat Arras. "The defendant has not been heard, nor has he had an opportunity to call others in his behalf. In the name of the people of Helium I demand fair and impartial treatment for the Prince of Helium."

A great cry arose from the audience then: "Justice! Justice! Justice!" and Zat Arras dared not deny them.

"Speak, then," he snarled, turning to me; "but blaspheme not against the things that are sacred upon Barsoom."

"Men of Helium," I cried, turning to the spectators, and speaking over the heads of my judges, "how can John Carter expect justice from the men of Zodanga? He cannot nor does he ask it. It is to the men of Helium that he states his case; nor does he appeal for mercy to any. It is not in his own cause that he speaks now--it is in thine. In the cause of your wives and daughters, and of wives and daughters yet unborn. It is to save them from the unthinkably atrocious indignities that I have seen heaped upon the fair women of Barsoom in the place men call the Temple of Issus. It is to save them from the sucking embrace of the plant men, from the fangs of the great white apes of Dor, from the cruel lust of the Holy Therns, from all that the cold, dead Iss carries them to from homes of love and life and happiness.

"Sits there no man here who does not know the history of John Carter. How he came among you from another world and rose from a prisoner among the green men, through torture and persecution, to a place high among the highest of

Barsoom. Nor ever did you know John Carter to lie in his own behalf, or to say aught that might harm the people of Barsoom, or to speak lightly of the strange religion which he respected without understanding.

"There be no man here, or elsewhere upon Barsoom to-day who does not owe his life directly to a single act of mine, in which I sacrificed myself and the happiness of my Princess that you might live. And so, men of Helium, I think that I have the right to demand that I be heard, that I be believed, and that you let me serve you and save you from the false hereafter of Dor and Issus as I saved you from the real death that other day.

"It is to you of Helium that I speak now. When I am done let the men of Zodanga have their will with me. Zat Arras has taken my sword from me, so the men of Zodanga no longer fear me. Will you listen?"

"Speak, John Carter, Prince of Helium," cried a great noble from the audience, and the multitude echoed his permission, until the building rocked with the noise of their demonstration.

Zat Arras knew better than to interfere with such a sentiment as was expressed that day in the Temple of Reward, and so for two hours I talked with the people of Helium.

But when I had finished, Zat Arras arose and, turning to the judges, said in a low tone: "My nobles, you have heard John Carter's plea; every opportunity has been given him to prove his innocence if he be not guilty; but instead he has but utilized the time in further blasphemy. What, gentlemen, is your verdict?"

"Death to the blasphemer!" cried one, springing to his feet, and in an instant the entire thirty-one judges were on their feet with upraised swords in token of the unanimity of their verdict.

If the people did not hear Zat Arras' charge, they certainly did hear the verdict of the tribunal. A sullen murmur rose louder and louder about the packed coliseum, and then Kantos Kan, who had not left the platform since first he had taken his place near me, raised his hand for silence. When he could be heard he spoke to the people in a cool and level voice.

"You have heard the fate that the men of Zodanga would mete to Helium's noblest hero. It may be the duty of the men of Helium to accept the verdict as final. Let each man act according to his own heart. Here is the answer of Kantos Kan, head of the navy of Helium, to Zat Arras and his judges," and with that he unbuckled his scabbard and threw his sword at my feet.

In an instant soldiers and citizens, officers and nobles were crowding past the soldiers of Zodanga and forcing their way to the Throne of Righteousness. A hundred men surged up on the platform, and a hundred blades rattled and clanked to the floor at my feet. Zat Arras and his officers were furious, but they were helpless. One by one I raised the swords to my lips and buckled them again upon their owners.

"Come," said Kantos Kan, "we will escort John Carter and his party to his own palace," and they formed about us and started toward the stairs leading to the Aisle of Hope.

"Stop!" cried Zat Arras. "Soldiers of Helium, let no prisoner leave the Throne of Righteousness."

The soldiery from Zodanga were the only organized body of Heliumetic troops within the temple, so Zat Arras was confident that his orders would be obeyed, but I do not think that he looked for the opposition that was raised the moment the soldiers advanced toward the throne.

From every quarter of the coliseum swords flashed and men rushed threateningly upon the Zodangans. Some one raised a cry: "Tardos Mors is dead--a thousand years to John Carter, Jeddak of Helium." As I heard that and saw the ugly attitude of the men of Helium toward the soldiers of Zat Arras, I knew that only a miracle could avert a clash that would end in civil war.

"Hold!" I cried, leaping to the Pedestal of Truth once more. "Let no man move till I am done. A single sword thrust here to-day may plunge Helium into a bitter and bloody war the results of which none can foresee. It will turn brother against brother and father against son. No man's life is worth that sacrifice. Rather would I submit to the biased judgment of Zat Arras than be the cause of civil strife in Helium.

"Let us each give in a point to the other, and let this entire matter rest until Tardos Mors returns, or Mors Kajak, his son. If neither be back at the end of a year a second trial may be held--the thing has a precedent." And then turning to Zat Arras, I said in a low voice: "Unless you be a bigger fool than I take you to be, you will grasp the chance I am offering you ere it is too late. Once that multitude of swords below is drawn against your soldiery no man upon Barsoom--not even Tardos Mors himself--can avert the consequences. What say you? Speak quickly."

The Jed of Zodangan Helium raised his voice to the angry sea beneath us.

"Stay your hands, men of Helium," he shouted, his voice trembling with rage. "The sentence of the court is passed, but the day of retribution has not been set. I, Zat Arras, Jed of Zodanga, appreciating the royal connections of the prisoner and his past services to Helium and Barsoom, grant a respite of one year, or until the return of Mors Kajak, or Tardos Mors to Helium. Disperse quietly to your houses. Go."

No one moved. Instead, they stood in tense silence with their eyes fastened upon me, as though waiting for a signal to attack.

"Clear the temple," commanded Zat Arras, in a low tone to one of his officers.

Fearing the result of an attempt to carry out this order by force, I stepped to the edge of the platform and, pointing toward the main entrance, bid them pass out. As one man they turned at my request and filed, silent and threatening, past the soldiers of Zat Arras, Jed of Zodanga, who stood scowling in impotent rage.

Kantos Kan with the others who had sworn allegiance to me still stood upon the Throne of Righteousness with me.

"Come," said Kantos Kan to me, "we will escort you to your palace, my Prince. Come, Carthoris and Xodar. Come, Tars Tarkas." And with a haughty sneer for Zat Arras upon his handsome lips, he turned and strode to the throne steps and up the Aisle of Hope. We four and the hundred loyal ones followed behind him, nor was a hand raised to stay us, though glowering eyes followed our triumphal march through the temple.

In the avenues we found a press of people, but they opened a pathway for us, and many were the swords that were flung at my feet as I passed through the city of Helium toward my palace upon the outskirts. Here my old slaves fell upon their knees and kissed my hands as I greeted them. They cared not where I had been. It was enough that I had returned to them.

"Ah, master," cried one, "if our divine Princess were but here this would be a day indeed."

Tears came to my eyes, so that I was forced to turn away that I might hide my emotions. Carthoris wept openly as the slaves pressed about him with expressions of affection, and words of sorrow for our common loss. It was now that Tars Tarkas for the first time learned that his daughter, Sola, had accompanied Dejah Thoris upon the last long pilgrimage. I had not had the heart to tell him what Kantos Kan had told me. With the stoicism of the green Martian he showed no sign of suffering, yet I knew that his grief was as poignant as my

own. In marked contrast to his kind, he had in well-developed form the kindlier human characteristics of love, friendship, and charity.

It was a sad and sombre party that sat at the feast of welcome in the great dining hall of the palace of the Prince of Helium that day. We were over a hundred strong, not counting the members of my little court, for Dejah Thoris and I had maintained a household consistent with our royal rank.

The board, according to red Martian custom, was triangular, for there were three in our family. Carthoris and I presided in the centre of our sides of the table--midway of the third side Dejah Thoris' high-backed, carven chair stood vacant except for her gorgeous wedding trappings and jewels which were draped upon it. Behind stood a slave as in the days when his mistress had occupied her place at the board, ready to do her bidding. It was the way upon Barsoom, so I endured the anguish of it, though it wrung my heart to see that silent chair where should have been my laughing and vivacious Princess keeping the great hall ringing with her merry gaiety.

At my right sat Kantos Kan, while to the right of Dejah Thoris' empty place Tars Tarkas sat in a huge chair before a raised section of the board which years ago I had had constructed to meet the requirements of his mighty bulk. The place of honour at a Martian board is always at the hostess's right, and this place was ever reserved by Dejah Thoris for the great Thark upon the occasions that he was in Helium.

Hor Vastus sat in the seat of honour upon Carthoris' side of the table. There was little general conversation. It was a quiet and saddened party. The loss of Dejah Thoris was still fresh in the minds of all, and to this was added fear for the safety of Tardos Mors and Mors Kajak, as well as doubt and uncertainty as to the fate of Helium, should it prove true that she was permanently deprived of her great Jeddak.

Suddenly our attention was attracted by the sound of distant shouting, as of many people raising their voices at once, but whether in anger or rejoicing, we could not tell. Nearer and nearer came the tumult. A slave rushed into the dining hall to cry that a great concourse of people was swarming through the palace gates. A second burst upon the heels of the first alternately laughing and shrieking as a madman.

"Dejah Thoris is found!" he cried. "A messenger from Dejah Thoris!"

I waited to hear no more. The great windows of the dining hall overlooked the avenue leading to the main gates--they were upon the opposite side of the hall from me with the table intervening. I did not waste time in circling the great

board--with a single leap I cleared table and diners and sprang upon the balcony beyond. Thirty feet below lay the scarlet sward of the lawn and beyond were many people crowding about a great thout which bore a rider headed toward the palace. I vaulted to the ground below and ran swiftly toward the advancing party.

As I came near to them I saw that the figure on the thout was Sola.

"Where is the Princess of Helium?" I cried.

The green girl slid from her mighty mount and ran toward me.

"O my Prince! My Prince!" she cried. "She is gone for ever. Even now she may be a captive upon the lesser moon. The black pirates of Barsoom have stolen her."