

UNDER THE MOONS OF MARS

BY EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

CHAPTER XXII—Continued

FINALLY a lucky cut brought down a second guardian, and then, with only two opposing me, I changed my tactics and rushed them down after the fashion of my fighting that had won me many a victory. The third fell with ten seconds, and the last one down on the bloody floor a few moments later.

They were brave men and noble fighters, and it grieved me that I had been forced to kill them; but I would have willingly depopulated all Barsoom, could I have reached my Dejah Thoris in no other way. Sheathing my bloody blades, I advanced toward my Martian princess, who still stood gazing at me without sign of recognition.

"Who are you, Zodanga?" she whispered. "Another enemy to harass me in my misery?"

"I am a friend," I answered, "once cherished friend."

"No friend of Helium's princess wears that metal," she replied, "and yet the world may hear of it before." It is not, I cannot help, for he is dead."

"It is, though, my princess, none other than John Carter," I said. "Do you not recognize, even through paint and strange metal, the heart of your chieftain?"

As I came close to her she swayed toward me with outstretched hands, but as I reached to take her in my arms she drew back with a shudder and a little moan of misery.

"Too late—too late," she grieved. "You have sealed his death-warrant, my princess—Sab Than dies."

"Nor that, either," she hastened to explain. "I may not wed the man who stays my husband, even in self-defense. It is custom. We are ruled by custom upon Barsoom. It is used to be."

"You must share the sorrow with me. That, at least, we may share in common. That, and the memory of the brief days among the Tharks. You must go now, nor ever see me again. Good-by, my chieftain that was."

Disheartened and dejected, I withdrew from the room; but I was not entirely discouraged, nor would I admit that Dejah Thoris was but a mere unit in the ceremony had not been performed.

I wandered along the corridors. I was as absolutely lost in the mazes of the winding passageways as I had been before I discovered Dejah Thoris' apartments.

I knew that my only hope lay in escape from the city of Zodanga, for the matter of the four dead guardians would have to be explained, and as I could never reach the funeral cortège of a jeddak again place the seal of death upon him. I am as good as married, John Carter. No longer may you call me your princess. No longer am I your chieftain."

"I know but little of your customs here, and on Barsoom that is final. The ceremonies which follow later are but meaningless formalities. They make the fact of marriage no more certain than does the funeral cortège of a jeddak again place the seal of death upon him. I am as good as married, John Carter. No longer may you call me your princess. No longer am I your chieftain."

"I know that I live," she said. "I have given my heart to you yesterday, and today to another? I thought that it lay buried with your ashes in the pits of Warhoom, and today I have promised my body to another to save my people from the curse of a victorious Zodangan army."

"But I am not dead, my princess. I have come to claim you, and all Zodanga can do is to prevent it."

"It is too late, John Carter, my promise is given, and on Barsoom that is final."

"Ah, if you had only known our ways, my friend," she continued, half to herself, "the promise would have been yours long months ago, and you could have claimed me before all others. It might have meant the fall of Helium, but I would have given my empire for my Tharkian chief."

"Then aloud she said:

"Do not remember the night when you offended me. You called me your princess without having asked my hand of me, and then you boasted that you had fought for me. You did not know, and I should not

have been offended; I see that now. But there was no one to tell you what I could not, that upon Barsoom there are two kinds of women in the cities of the red men."

The one they fight for that they may ask them in marriage; the other kind they fight for also, but they never ask their hands. When a man has won a woman he may address her as his princess, or in any of the several terms which signify possession.

"You had fought for me, but had never asked me in marriage, and so when you called me your princess, you see," she faltered. "I was hurt; but even then, John Carter, I did not repulse you, as I should have done, until you made it doubly worse by taunting me with having won me through combat."

"You were brave men and noble fighters, and it grieved me that I had been forced to kill them; but I would have willingly depopulated all Barsoom, could I have reached my Dejah Thoris in no other way. Sheathing my bloody blades, I advanced toward my Martian princess, who still stood gazing at me without sign of recognition."

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"Another enemy to harass me in my misery!"

"I am a friend," I answered, "once cherished friend."

"No friend of Helium's princess wears that metal," she replied, "and yet the world may hear of it before."

"It is, though, my princess, none other than John Carter," I said. "Do you not recognize, even through paint and strange metal, the heart of your chieftain?"

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"Nor that, either," she hastened to explain. "I may not wed the man who stays my husband, even in self-defense. It is custom. We are ruled by custom upon Barsoom. It is used to be."

"You must share the sorrow with me. That, at least, we may share in common. That, and the memory of the brief days among the Tharks. You must go now, nor ever see me again. Good-by, my chieftain that was."

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