CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

A Princess of Mars

Edgar Rice Burroughs · *1912 (book 1917) · original English text*

John Carter, a Virginia gentleman and Confederate veteran prospecting in Arizona, is somehow carried to Mars. The lighter gravity makes him a fighter beyond any native's strength. He is taken captive by the green Tharks, meets the human princess Dejah Thoris, and must save her city, Helium, and a dying world. It is the first of Burroughs's Barsoom books and a model for later planetary romances.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does a man owe to the people who take him in, and can honor and love win where armies and kings fail?

Carter's strength is the means, but his character is the point. He wins the green Martians' respect by fairness and courage, and Tars Tarkas becomes his friend. His love for Dejah Thoris pushes him past the code of the Tharks to the rescue of Helium. The book treats honor as a practical force. It also, like its time, is a romance of a strong white hero among aliens, so the adventure is better read as a good yarn than as a model of how people should be treated.

KEY CHARACTERS

John Carter
A Virginian soldier of fortune, strong on Mars and loyal.

Dejah Thoris
The princess of Helium, brave and proud.

Tars Tarkas
A green Martian chief, Carter's ally.

Sola
A Thark woman who shows kindness against her people's rules.

Tal Hajus
The cruel jeddak of the Tharks.

Sab Than
The Zodangan prince who wants Dejah.

Grades 7–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

Arizona and the Cave

CHAPTERS I–II

Carter, a former Confederate captain, is chased into a cave by Apaches. A strange paralysis seizes him, and he sees his own body lying behind him as he rises into the sky.

- The narrator, we are told, is Carter's nephew, passing on the story.
- The dying Indians' chase is the first hint of the strange.
- The jump from the cave to Mars is abrupt and magical.

02

Among the Tharks

CHAPTERS III–XII

Carter wakes on Mars and discovers his leaps and strength. He is captured by the green Martians, learns their language, gains standing in a fight, and meets Tars Tarkas and Sola.

- The eight-foot Tharks are nomads who have no family life and prize combat.
- Carter's fairness is the thing that wins friends.
- Dejah Thoris is brought in as a captive.

03

Love and Escape

CHAPTERS XIII–XVII

Carter is drawn to Dejah Thoris. He fights to keep her safe from the cruel Tal Hajus, and they plan an escape. Sola tells her story, and the escape is a costly failure.

- Sola's tale shows a gentler side of Thark life.
- The duel to the death proves Carter's loyalty.
- The recapture takes them deeper into Thark hands.

04

Warhoon and the Arena

CHAPTERS XVIII–XXI

Carter is chained in the city of Warhoon, fights in the arena, and escapes with Tars Tarkas, a fellow captive. He learns of the plant that makes Mars's air.

- The arena battle is a set piece.
- The atmosphere plant gives the planet a stake in the story.
- Zodangan treachery grows as the story turns toward war.

05

Zodanga and Helium

CHAPTERS XXII–XXVI

Dejah is taken by the Zodangans. Carter disguises himself, takes service in their forces, and rescues her. With Tars Tarkas, he leads a combined army to relieve Helium.

- The air scout in Zodanga is his first sky flight.
- Tars Tarkas's army comes in on Carter's side.
- The final battle ends with Dejah's return and a wedding.

06

The Atmosphere Factory

CHAPTERS XXVII–XXVIII

The air plant fails, and Carter reaches it to save the planet before dying, or seeming to die, in the process. He wakes in the Arizona cave.

- The race against the dying air is the climax.
- The ending leaves Carter on Earth, looking at Mars.
- The book closes with a promise of more.

Honor · War · Love · A Dying World · Adventure

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 7–12

1. The book is a framed narrative: a nephew passes on Carter's manuscript. Ask why Burroughs uses the frame.
2. Watch how Carter wins the Tharks' respect. Is it by strength alone?
3. The Thark way of life is deliberately unlike a human one. Think about what the book likes and dislikes in it.
4. Burroughs's characterization of the green men and of women belongs to 1912. Read it with some distance.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the original English text (Project Gutenberg #62 (Edgar Rice Burroughs, A Princess of Mars; first book edition Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1917; text checked against the Internet Archive scan of a Grosset & Dunlap edition dated 1917, princessofmars00burriala)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/a-princess-of-mars/.