

Abolitionists of Mars

FREDERICK RICE DOUGLASS

A Fragment

Chapter 9: My Second Slavery

I awoke upon a rudimentary mat thrown on the hard stone floor. Sitting up and looking about me, I discovered myself in a low room, which I judged a dormitory from the rows of now untenanted mats covering the floor save for a central aisle. The painful throbbing in my head and the soreness of every joint and limb attested to the violence of my flier's collision with the watch tower. As I sat in a dull brown study, an angry red man appeared in the doorway and shouted, "You! Rejoin your group at once."

As I did not respond in any way, he crossed briskly to me, drawing a stout length of weighted cord from a hoop in his harness, and stood over me. "Will you rise, or must I beat you?"

"I will rise," I said, stiffly matching action to the words. "What place is this?"

"You are an ignorant man as well as an inept pilot," he replied curtly. "This city is Far Omoo, celebrated across Barsoom. Famous in particular, I might add, for the diligence and obedience of its slaves—none of whom, it bears noting, has escaped from the city in all its long history and lived to tell of it. Come with me."

Thus did I find myself enslaved again. My visit to the White City, my encounter there with the young lunatic in the motorcar and my pursuit of him along the Midway, the resulting curious encounter with Edison and my accidental passage via his experimental Projection Booth across the vacuums of space, my struggles with the green men and the red of Barsoom, the kind friendship of the cosmic Quaker Var Talus, the love of my mysterious Tara of Helium, her disappearance and my desperate search for her—all these wild and unaccountable turns had my long journey taken, only to deposit me

once more in the unchristian condition of chattel bondage.

The cruel irony of my situation and the insolence of my overseer's manner revolved ceaselessly in my thoughts, but I saw no gain in making trouble until I had learned something of my surroundings. I preceded him from the room and down a corridor, therefore, without protest. The corridor was made of smooth stone and sloped downward to intersect with a larger one. This also led downward, and we began to pass groups of slaves clad in plain harness or simple loin cloths. Among them went warriors like my overseer, stern-faced men who dispensed blows with their heavy whipping-cords when slaves moved too slowly or otherwise at variance with their wishes.

Neither slaves nor overseers, all of whom were of a uniform red shade in coloration of skin, paid any attention to me, and by surreptitious examination of my limbs I ascertained that the dyes Var Talus had applied to my body had not faded. With my reddened skin, cropped hair, and plain harness I made to all appearances a perfect red man.

After a time I noted the approach of a slave guarded, like myself, by his own overseer. Something about the slave's face and military bearing caught my eye, and I recognized instantly the officer I had glimpsed the day before when my flier had passed his in the fog bank. Face to face now in this subterranean corridor, we looked one another in the eye, and although he could not have recognized me (for I had seen him but he had not seen me as my flier soared silently above his), we both stopped as a wordless understanding coursed between us.

My overseer cursed my willfulness and dealt me a terrible blow to the head with the weighted cord. I went sprawling, and he leaped after, visibly intent upon further belaboring me. To that point he had been merely offensive in his bearing toward me, but had not struck me, and thus I had found the strength to suffer his insults without making rejoinder. Now, however, I threw my earlier reserve to the winds.

I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized him by the throat; and, as I did so, rose. He held on to me, and

I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that my overseer seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, the grip of my Earth-trained muscles causing the blood to start from the skin and run freely from the places where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. He soon called out for help.

The second overseer came—abandoning his charge, the mysterious air-captain—and, while the first held me, attempted to tie my right hand with his whip. While he was in the act of doing so, I watched my chance, and gave him a heavy kick close under the ribs. This kick fairly sickened my new opponent, so that he left me in the hands of my overseer. This kick had the effect of not only weakening the one I kicked, but my own overseer also. When he saw the other bending over with pain, his courage quailed.

In that moment I saw a strong red hand grasp each man at the nape, and in the next their heads drove together with such force that the two overseers hung senseless in the grasp of the air-captain. “Come with me,” he said, drawing the longsword from his overseer’s harness and setting off nimbly down a side passage. I looked about for a moment, noting the gathering crowd of excited slaves and a new commotion at its far edge as more overseers rushed up to disperse them. Seeing no avenue of escape but the one offered, I set off after my mysterious new ally, pausing only to strip my overseer of his blade.

Hurrying down the narrow byway, I followed the air-captain’s broad-shouldered, erect form in the dimness before me. This hallway was feebly lit by infrequent fixtures that cast a pallid light. He went on as if certain of his destination, turning now to the left and now to the right in the maze of close, dark corridors. We seemed to be in an older part of the subterranean vaults, judging from the weakness of the radium bulbs that lit our way, and the halls were empty but for the two of us.

At last our way ended at a thick iron door, before which my companion came to a halt. Turning to me, he made a little speech. “Beyond this door is a disused corridor that leads by devious ways to

the chambers of the jeddak. My business lies with him." He said this last with a meaningful movement of his sword. "In the other direction," he continued, "the corridor leads to a secret exit from the city where the swamp touches the outer wall. You will find a flier there, and you are welcome to it."

"I believe I will try the swamp," I said in my most reasonable tone. "I thank you for your kind assistance, though, and I wish you the best of luck in your private affairs concerning the jeddak."

"As you wish," he said with a shrug. Saying no more, he drew back the heavy door and we stepped through it. He pointed wordlessly with his naked sword to the left, then turned his back to me and proceeded in the other direction with long, purposeful strides. He had taken perhaps two dozen of these, and I was still looking after him in silent thanks, when there came a great shout from out of the darkness before him and warriors rushed upon him. In a moment he was engaged with a dozen foes, making brilliant play with his blade and calling back to me, "We are discovered! Sell your life dearly." As I stood weighing this advice, another shout came from behind me, and, turning, I made out another party of men-at-arms rushing likewise upon me.

In a moment, I was similarly besieged. Although I knew little of the art of swordplay, I swung the weapon about me with butcher's strokes, staying my enemies' first rush with my untutored vigor. They, however, at length combined, and came upon me. Some came in front with their swords held out before them, seeking to engage my blade. There were more at each side of me, and behind me. While I was attending to those in front, and on either side, one behind ran up and struck me a heavy blow upon the head, the sword mercifully turning in his grasp so that the flat of the blade and not the edge came flush against my skull. Remarkably, rather than braining me and rendering me insensate as such a stroke should, the blade gave way and not my skull, so that the weapon bent to conform to the shape of my head where the two encountered one another. I have since learned from a respected scientist in Zodanga that the lower density of Barsoom in relation to Earth may account for this

phenomenon, my head being relatively more dense on the red planet than it would be on my own.

My attackers were taken aback at this development, he who had struck me, in particular, standing dumbfounded, holding his fantastically warped blade before him as if to fathom its import. While they hesitated thus, I gave a sudden surge and burst through them, running up the corridor toward my ally, in whose masterful swordplay I placed my faith.

I was not a little surprised to see him rushing toward me with several warriors in hot pursuit. We met just at the doorway we had so recently passed through, and as one we leaped through it. There was not time even to shut the door against our pursuers, whose blades were at our very backs. We ran therefore, like deer through the maze of narrow ways we had recently negotiated. Just as we began to distance our pursuers, my ally stopped precipitously and peered ahead into the darkness. My heart sank as another party of warriors turned an angle just ahead and raced to close with us.

Caught as if in a vise, we cast about for an avenue of escape. I made out a narrow arch in the gloom and urged my ally through it. It gave onto a little hallway, too narrow for both of us to go abreast, and debouched into what appeared to be a disused storehouse—a square, low-ceilinged room with no other exit. We were trapped.

Chapter 10: John Carter, I Presume

Our pursuers filled the little hallway, but could only approach us one by one. My ally proved more than a match for them as they attacked single file in the cramped space. After he had skewered a half-dozen of them, making a kind of fleshy rampart in the doorway, they made a shuffling retreat through the arch to the corridor beyond. From there they hurled imprecations and small projectiles down the little hallway and into our cul-de-sac.

Presently, my companion drew up an empty crate and sat down upon it, putting his sword across his knees. I improvised a similar seat

and emulated him, and thus we sat on either side of the doorway, an occasional stone or piece of refuse flying between us to crash against the far wall.

After a long silence, in which he appeared to be thinking, my companion spoke. "Well, sir, a pleasant mausoleum you have smelt out for us. We are trapped fair enough. Then again, we still live." He essayed all this in a bantering tone, shrugging lightly as he said the last.

"Why, yes, we do," I rejoined, in the interest of politeness more than anything else.

"That's what I say," he said. "I have been in some tight spots, my friend, and if there is one thing that keeps me going it is the thought that, no matter how bad a fix I am in, I still live."

I had understood him the first time, but I nodded pleasantly as if new information had been imparted to me. "We are indeed alive," I agreed, "although I would imagine we will be dead soon."

We lapsed into silence. After a time the warriors outside attempted another assault on our little redoubt, but my formidable ally slew three or four and I throttled another who sought to go through the doorway on his belly under the corpses heaped there. They soon lost heart and retired.

Regaining our seats, we looked at one another in silence for a time. "So," he said at last, "have you been a slave long?"

"I was captured but yesterday, but I was born a slave and spent many years as one in another place."

"Born a slave, you say. Well, no doubt you earned your freedom at sword's point, eh?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"I knew it. You seem a noble fellow in your fashion."

"You are too kind. I have noted, speaking of nobility, that it is a quality rarely found in slave or slaveholder. What accidental nobility you might discern in me is indissolubly linked to the condition of full and unmixed liberty untainted by the ownership of other human beings in chattel bondage."

"Nonsense, my friend," and here a certain heat entered into his

tone beneath its continuing jovial aspect. "Nobility, like honor, like quality, is a thing ingrained—one is such a man or one is not. Slavery is a temporary and artificial condition which does not touch to the bones of a man's character."

"You, sir," I riposted with some small spirit, "are mistaken and innocent of the truth in every regard. The brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder extend to every aspect of character, and affect even the most exceptional man, who must rise above them in order to free himself. The condition of slavery or slaveholding rots a man from within—any man, even such as you or I who have escaped it. Slavery destroys the soul more surely even than addiction to strong drink. Did you not see how my overseer became unmanned by resistance from a slave, though I did not strike him a clear blow? A slaveholder, sir, who has lost his manhood to that way of life. No doubt a drunkard as well, and possibly an onanist."

My companion made as if to reply, but at that moment a new sound came from beyond our little catacomb. Peering carefully around our posterns, we saw that our besiegers had brought up heavy stones and were commencing to wall up the hallway at their end.

My ally, bounding from his stool, made to assault them, but a veritable barrage of rocks and other missiles discouraged the attempt. Our enemies essayed many jokes at our expense and speculated aloud upon what we would eat when the wall was completed. My companion tried another sortie, but was again driven to cover by a second volley hurled over the rising wall as it reached the height of a tall man's waist. He returned to his seat with marked irritation.

"Walled in. Buried alive," he muttered. "The worst of luck. Ah, well, I still live."

"No doubt you have kept slaves," I said, "but have you been a slave before?"

"Certainly," he returned, "and I got my freedom with my own hands."

"And you have traveled widely upon Barsoom?" As he nodded in assent, I proceeded. "In your experience, sir, is there no people of

Barsoom that does not keep slaves?"

He pondered a bit, ticking off his thoughts upon his fingers, the sword in his lap. "Let's see, the green men do, of course. I have enjoyed their hospitality myself. The yellow men. The black men."

"Black men, you say?"

"Indeed. Air pirates, criminals, low types for the most part. The white men keep slaves as well, I might add."

"And, of course, the red men."

"Of course. It is the way of Barsoom, and they are its greatest race. Only the wild animals do not keep slaves. Now, there are those who hold that the white apes of Barsoom are men of a sort, having degenerated from ancient peoples who built the old cities when the world was younger and the oceans watery. If that is so, then the white apes are men, and they do not keep men as slaves. It is laughable that they might keep slaves, for they are dumb beasts and they eat of human flesh."

"But men they are, nevertheless," I countered triumphantly. "And I therefore adjudge them the superior men of the planet, all others being degraded and brutalized by the inhuman practice of slavery. Including, and especially, our own, the vastly overrated and morally inept red men of Mars."

My companion started visibly and peered closely at me in the pale light cast by the room's one radium fixture. "I have not heard Barsoom called 'Mars' for many years," he said. "Where have you learned that word?" Perceiving my error, I blustered a bit, cobbling together a feeble story involving a friend in Helium who was both an amateur linguist and a planetary cartographer.

I was saved from closer interrogation just then by a shout from our besiegers, who, jeering, gave us to understand that the last stone was about to be placed. Peering again from our doorway, we could see that they spoke the truth. As one, we started forward in the narrow hallway to pull down the wall from our side, now that they could not shoot at us. Our tugging and heaving soon proved to be of no use, however, for the blocks of the wall were set smoothly one against the other, and without mining tools we could find no purchase to

separate them. Having notched our blades in vain against this newly erected barrier, we turned to examining the other walls that formed our prison. The rest of the hallway and the walls of the storeroom proved sound, and, concluding that we had indeed been buried alive, we returned to our seats and our discussion.

It soon became apparent that my slip of the tongue had led my companion to new thoughts. He noted that the red men enslaved members of their own race for the most part, and that many jeds had at one time or another been enslaved before assuming the jed's or even jeddak's seat and the ownership of slaves that redounded to it. "The lesson here," he went on, "is this: the red men are by nature a virtuous and masterful people, and the force of their breeding precedes and overwhelms in every instance the effects of servitude. No red man is materially altered in character by the condition of slavery, be he slave or master."

I would have countered here, but he held up a hand and argued further at length. "Now, I have heard that on Jasoom the white race enslaved the black until recently. If you know anything of Jasoom, and I think you might"—here he fixed me with a penetrating look—"you will agree that the white men are now and have always been the superior people of that planet, while the black have been in no sense ennobled by their newfound freedom. The heritage of each race, the blood that flows from one generation to the next, shapes the character of the people. The piddling details of ownership and property only demonstrate what's bred in the bone. That the black people could not free themselves by their own violent hands, relying instead on the outcome of a great war fought between factions of the white, speaks most forcefully to their inferiority. That we change a few words in the law books means nothing to the immutable book of nature's law." He had half risen from his stool in delivering this speech, and was almost shouting by the time he finished it. I kept my place, and a long pause ensued in which the only sound was his forceful breathing. After a time I got up and began inspecting the walls of the storeroom once more for a crack or a hidden door.

"An engaging interplanetary perspective," I mused aloud as I

worked around the perimeter of the room, my back to him. "Although I know nothing of this Jasoom, I, too, know of a place in which a white race also enslaved a black race, and in which a recently concluded war has resulted in the partial freedom of the black. What I find of particular interest here is the fact that the slaveholding whites were so degraded by their ownership of human souls that they could not sustain a manly resistance and retired from the field utterly routed."

I confess that my shoulders tensed a bit in expectation of further and more violent expostulation from my companion, but none was forthcoming. I turned to look at him. He had settled himself in his seat and commenced to polish his sword with a rag taken from the harness of one of our dead foes. He spoke. "Apparently our homelands are similar in some ways but very different in others, because on Jasoom the white men of a place called Virginia, who did hold slaves and fought splendidly to defend their right as free men to do so, are the best men of that planet, not unlike the red men of Barsoom's Helium in that regard."

Dumbstruck, I made no reply. He held up his blade this way and that to catch the radium fixture's pale light, seemingly lost in thought.

This moment was broken by a drumming noise and muffled shouts from beyond the newly built wall.

He rushed into the hall, and I followed a pace behind. Reaching the wall, he hallooed loudly and beat upon it with the pommel of his sword. "I had hoped my comrades would search me out," he told me excitedly over his shoulder, continuing to beat upon the wall. "I have friends in this city, and powerful allies outside the walls." Answering noises and the grinding of tools against rock attested to this fact. "I knew my friends would find us in the end. The men of Helium are, as I say, the most stalwart of Barsoom. And I am their warlord. You see, I am not just a common prisoner, nor was I captured against my will. I am, in fact, not a red man at all. I am—"

And here he would have gone on, except that, seizing what I deemed to be a singular opportunity, I took hold of him nape and

crotch by the harness from behind and swung him head foremost like a battering ram against the stones of the wall, rendering him senseless. .

Chapter 11: I Fall in with Revolutionaries

The fragment ends here.

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