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OLD LADY**

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It was something Dejah Thoris knew, but she and John Carter rarely discussed—as there was really little to say. The fact that her husband "had a past" was not something a mature Barsoomian woman would dwell upon. That past was that John Carter had been married at least twice before.

John Carter, known in literature as that "deathless Virginian," had been in the Virginia Colony for many years—but only after a thirty year military career in Europe and then another twenty years in the Canadian territories. He had left that northern land of thick forests, deer and beaver only when the

war between the French and indigenous tribes against England grew to a fevered pitch.

In Virginia, John Carter found his home—the one he had long sought. Here he put down roots among the English colonists, going west far enough to find elbow-room and a large plot of land—a valley with rich loam fields along a river bottom, timber on the high slopes, and mid-level pastures where horses might be bred. He built a five room cabin and hired a few men. In time the fields began to produce cotton and more labor was needed. As his income enlarged, so did his slave holdings, and those gladly worked for the benevolent master of Carter Plantation. Master Carter was often in Richmond to manage sales of his plantation product to English buyers desperate for material to fill their looms.

It was there, in Richmond, that John Carter met his second wife and acquired a nephew by marriage: Eddie Burroughs, who would eventually become his biographer. But little Eddie had not been the reason for Carter's visits to the large Richmond house—the master of Carter Plantation conducted a very proper courtship of Eddie Burroughs' young aunt because that slim, laughing girl had reminded John Carter that it was *still* possible to love.¹

She was shot to death a few months after their marriage. This murder occurred at the beginning of the War Between the States. Mrs. Carter, visiting relations, was killed by a blue-bellied Northern aggressor. The future Warlord of Mars ultimately ex-

¹ Savannah Burroughs, 1842-1862, born Richmond, Virginia, died Manassas Junction, VA. Married John Carter, 1861.

tracted grim revenge—if not total satisfaction and solace—by tracking the man down and hewing open the murderer's skull with his saber.

Captain Carter then went into battle against the North, spurred by love for his State, and for the premature extinguishing of that bright, hot, spark which had been—

Carter—who could recall no childhood, and had been an apparent thirty years of age for many decades—had forgotten many things, but while on those war patrols, in the dark of night, he grieved for the one just lost. And remembered the one he had treasured before—the woman who became his "old lady" through the late 1700s and early 1800s.²

Marian, who had been his wife prior to his marriage to Silvannah—had been a true maid. Not the kind of maid who carries a feather duster and wears a dark skirt and lace cap with frilly trim, but a *lady* of the land—one *entitled* to the designation of "maid"—as an honorific—much as had been her namesake, the noble woman who was Robin Hood's friend.

Marian of the dark hair, sparkling eyes, dramatically kissable lips, and a shape that the modest clothing of that day was inadequate to disguise, had set her cap upon the tall, handsome figure of John Carter. She efficiently supervised the magnificent house that Carter's unceasing toils carved out of the valley near Richmond, a two-story Greco-Modern mansion at the center of a prosperous cotton plantation and horse farm.

² Marian Baldwin, 1740-1838, born, Boston, Massachusetts, died, Carter Plantation near Richmond, VA. Married John Carter, 1762.

For many years, after the Revolution, the Master and Mistress of Carter Plantation were blissfully happy—every day romantic in new and exciting ways. The balls twice a year, trips to European capitals and to the major cities of America. The contentment that existed at Carter Plantation was felt by all, from masters to servants to field hands.

Then—the inevitable happened.

John Carter stayed as he had always been, a relatively young man of about thirty. But Marian, upon reaching thirty-five, began to show her age. First there had been an ever-so-slight change in her voice—it became a little coarse. The crinkles at the corners of her once merry eyes began to take on the characteristics of wrinkles. And John Carter noticed his wife spending more time in front of the mirror—wincing as she located and then extracted certain hairs that were no longer a satisfying color.

None of this, however, altered John Carter's love for his wife. The southern gentleman remained just that, never commenting on any of Marian's changing physical characteristics. He never allowed his eyes to linger on younger and prettier women—who tended to give him the eye.

If he noticed, as the years passed, that Marian bought new clothes in a slightly larger size because the old threads no longer fit, he made no negative comment. Rather, the deathless Virginian went the extra mile to complement his wife when she would come to dinner in a new outfit.

When Marian was forced to obtain a pair of eyeglasses, she asked if they made her eyes look

too big. John Carter kissed her cheek, smiled, and said, "The better to see those lovely blues, my dear."

Little did Marian know, but the future Warlord of Barsoom had undertaken initiatives of his own—devised to assuage the angst of the Mistress of Carter Plantation over advancing age—to reduce the discrepancy of their outward appearance, and to still the comments that others visiting the plantation might utter.

From an apothecary John Carter purchased a small bottle of grey hair dye, which he dabbed surreptitiously into his temple areas from time to time, to give the illusion that he was aging, too. The grey boots in his closet provided an excuse to have the dye. He cut his hair to give the illusion of receding hairlines. His waist sash, or his vests, were slightly padded to hide the military trim of his body. He adopted a slump-shouldered stance and, as the years advanced, slowed his step and habitually carried a silver-headed cane. He grew a beard, suitably greyed.

Carter hoped Marian was fooled, but he was never sure. And he loved her the more for not making an issue regarding the elephant in the room—*he did not age as did other men.*

There were awkward social moments when one or another might speak to John Carter and mistakenly refer to Marian as "your mother". Eventually these observations grew worse when people would greet the couple and say to John Carter, "—and this must be your grandma."

Those last years together were teeth-clenching times for John Carter—not out of any sense of embarrassment for himself but out of concern for Marian's feelings. As for Carter, he exerted extraordinary self-control—that he might not fire an angry fist in the direction of an unaware and insensitive speaker's chin. But self-control was an impossibility whenever some wise arse offered up the term "*old lady*". A fellow military officer, during Carter's West Point days, had once elbowed a then Lieutenant Carter in the ribs, grinning as if they shared a private joke: "So John—how's your old lady?"

Carter's reply was a crashing blow from his big right hand. That blow nearly sent the speaker, a Louisiana fellow, to "the promised land." Only his inborn sense of restraint, exercised in cases of friends vs. foes, saved the thoughtless speaker from a death worse than any which *Fate* might otherwise have in store some day.

At a different time, years later and far from Carter Plantation and his ailing wife, John Carter visited one of his partnership holdings, a gold mine. A big-boned Irish logger made a ribald crack about Carter's "old lady" in the hearing of the Virginian. Almost instantly the logger found himself crying out—and praying as fast as his heart beat. John Carter's fists—one seemingly of iron and the other of steel—pummeled the logger on both sides at once.³

³ Coweta County, Georgia, "Mike Duggan Laid Low", *Coweta Chronicle*, April 13, 1830.

In her final years Marian Carter could pass for John's great-grandmother. Along the way she acquired a hearing aid trumpet to go along with a full set of false teeth, a cane, and a wheeled chair. In spite of the trumpet it seemed that no conversation was now possible between the two—unless punctuated by "what?" and "eh?" in response to every sentence of his. But she needed no words when, at the end of the day, her gray-haired husband effortlessly took her into his arms and carried her up the grand staircase. She needed no words to understand the love—and sadness—in his startling grey eyes. She did not need words to find joy in the touch of his lips upon hers before he blew out the candles.

A year later John Carter's true heartbreak began. One morning Marian simply did not know who he was. She prattled of her childhood—dolls which had been her companions in the Boston home of her parents, that pesky fox which had taken six of their egg hens when she first came to the small home (now the servants quarters) and had been theirs before the great house was built, or little Becky being underfoot.⁴

Though his Marian had departed, a gentle, wonderful soul remained, one who *needed* care and love, even if could never be returned. John Carter would see to that!

⁴ Becky (Tolver) 1809-1885, born Carter Plantation of M'mbo and Sally (Nigerian Slaves); emancipated 1827 by J. Carter. Remained in Service, Carter Plantation. Married John Tolver (1806-1881, white, foreman), 1828, 3 children, 6 grandchildren, 8 great-grandchildren.

Overnight John Carter dropped his charade. He visited his wife in her room each day, received reports of her condition from the servant girl who cared for Marian with tenderness, and set about dealing with his loss by working hard. As political matters with the North grew increasingly grim, John Carter was immensely grateful Marian would know *none* of the coming horror he envisioned.

That November morning, when he entered Marian's room, his eyes focused on the girl seated on the brocade-seat ladder-back chair beside his wife's bed. Her little hands were folded and she wept silently. She looked up as John Carter's tall, broad-shouldered figure filled the doorway. The girl could not find her voice. Carter patted her shoulder. Then he bent low and kissed Marian's cold lips for the last time.

John Carter was sad as he thought about the many good times, but, he had to admit—though with a twinge of guilt—her passing was also a tremendous relief. Marian was in a better place now—and so was he.

Carter's thirty year (childless) marriage convinced the deathless Virginian he must *never* marry again. He knew should he ever commit to the love of any woman his character was such that he would see it through—out of sheer will if nothing else. But having witnessed—and *endured*—the inexorable aging of a woman he loved, Captain Carter was loath to *ever* subject himself to that process again.

For nearly five years the plantation business was all that occupied the thoughts of John Carter—

that and the growing discord between the industrial North and the agricultural South. There were the necessary meetings with trading partners in Boston, Washington DC, Charleston, Philadelphia and, of course, Richmond, and it was there that—as all too often in life—things changed for Master John Carter.

A chance meeting—caused by a galloping horse through the streets. A slim girl in the road. A man's warning shout and strong arm sweeping her to safety. An instant later Captain John Carter met Eddie's aunt. She captivated him so intensely that he voided his vow to never marry, courted her honorably, then happily walked the aisle once more.⁵

As reported above, the War of Northern Aggression abruptly ended Carter's second American marriage.

All his life, at least that which he could remember, he had been a warrior. He now bitterly loathed the martial life; yet, it was the only life left to him in these grim times.

The war raged across the continent. Captain John Carter, CSA, answered the call to maintain the Honor of Virginia—but he also carried in his heart the love—and deep devotion—he had once shared with two *very* special women. On those late night patrols, keeping an eye on the Yankees and capturing their spies, John might let some of those happy

⁵ In preparing his house to accept the installation of the new wife, John Carter discovered several diaries maintained by Marian, in which she revealed knowledge of his many kindnesses concealing his agelessness and his undiminished love throughout her mortal life.

memories enter into his thoughts. Yet, all those memories were attached to the sure and certain knowledge that he would outlive any woman and that—!

"I wish I could find someone who is ageless—like me," he often thought.

The scent of wood smoke from Yankee fires across the river filled his nostrils as Carter glanced to the heavens. He noticed a particularly bright star, just a little to the left of the planet Mars. John Carter looked around to make sure there was no one to hear. He gazed at the star and whispered:

*"Star light, star bright,
First star I see tonight.
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have this wish I wish tonight."*

And he wished for an ageless woman.

Captain Carter felt a bit silly for reciting a child's nursery rhyme. He may have forgotten much of his ages-long past life, but somehow that singsong little poem had remained ensconced in his brain—from a childhood he *truly* could not recall.

Ah, if wishes were fishes, he thought. He knew there was no such woman for him.

The South had all but lost.

The antebellum Carter Plantation was now in other hands. Units were disbanding on every front. Worn and haggard from years of campaigns, Carter

and his friend Captain James K. Powell sipped coffee by a small fire—two commanders with no men left to command.

The war-weary Virginian had out-lived all his friends and Marian's family—and had never become close to Silvannah's—except for that brat nephew Eddie... That curious-minded youngster might be worth looking up some time in the future, but for now there was nothing holding Captain Carter, late of the Confederate States of America cavalry to this part of the country.

Tomorrow he and Powell would ride West—to seek gold in Arizona. Rumors of that desert vastness sounded like a good place to lose oneself—and one's memories.

As far from any woman as you might be—he mused—and still be on the planet Earth.

The Beginning