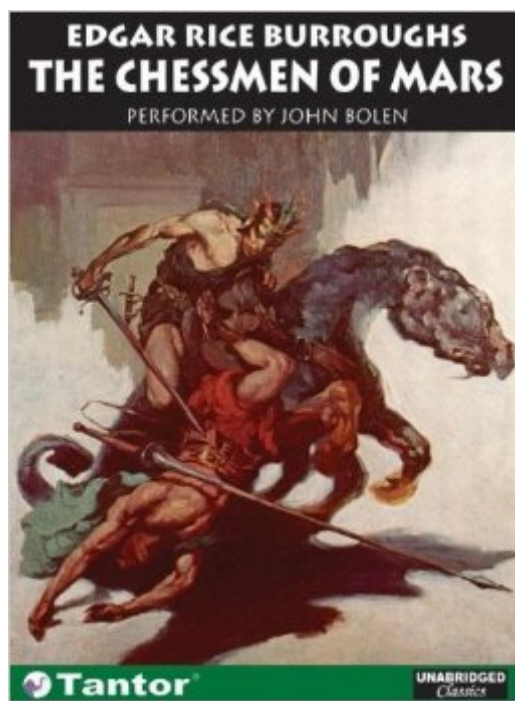


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The Chessmen Of Mars



Synopsis

Impetuous and headstrong, Tara, Princess of Helium and daughter of John Carter, defies the elements by flying into a rare, fierce Martian storm. Hurtled half a planet from her home she is threatened by grotesque, flesh eating monsters and barbarous warriors. Is the mysterious Panthan warrior friend or foe? As hero battles for maiden in the chess-like games of Jetan, the pieces are fighting men and the stakes are life and death! Mars series #5

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Conventional wisdom has it that the first three books of Burroughs' Martian series, "A Princess of Mars," "The Gods of Mars," and "The Warlord of Mars" form an excellent trilogy and all the rest of the Martian tales are quite poorly done in comparison. I disagree. I will cite two examples as to why "Chessmen" is Burroughs' best work in this series.[1] You can hardly conceive of a more ghastly creature than a spider-being who lives as a parasite on headless human bodies, but that is a perfect description of Ghek the Kaldane, one of the central figures of the book. Burroughs takes this repulsive monstrosity and makes him such a loveable character that you cannot help but like him.[2] Burroughs not only wrote a good yarn, he wrapped his tale around a striking boardgame that he had invented--jetan, or Martian chess. It's no real trick to invent a chess variant. There are thousands of them, and most of them are rubbish. What is so singular about jetan is that it is a good chess variant. I read "Chessmen" as a child, and after reading it, the first thing I had to do was make a jetan set and play the game. I whiled away several enjoyable hours with the game. John Gollon, a

noted authority on chess variants, had a similar experience when he was writing "Chess Variations." He thought he'd include a chapter on jetan for some comic relief, so he made a jetan set and played a few games. He found jetan "quite good--very playable and interesting." He then pronounced jetan "not a mere novelty, but ... a respectable game." These two singular achievements (Ghek & jetan) are not the only details that make "Chessmen" so enjoyable.

The first three volume of the Martian series of Edgar Rice Burroughs focused on how John Carter, former cavalier of Virginia, made his way to the planet Barsoom and won the hand of Dejah Thoris, princess of Helium after having to repeatedly rescue her from one danger after another. This volume collects the next two ERB pulp fiction adventures in the Martian series, which focus on the son and daughter of John Carter and his beloved princess. While John Carter is now a minor character in each, the two stories do reflect the combination of romance and pulp adventure that worked so well in the first three. "Thuvia, Maid of Mars" focuses on a new hero, Cathoris, son of the Warlord of Mars and his beloved princess. Cathoris is one of two princes and a Jeddak who are seeking the hand of the Thuvia of Ptarth. When she is kidnapped by the sinister Prince Astok of Dugar, the entire planet is about to be thrown into a bloody war and Cathoris has to follow in his father's footsteps and deal with savage beasts and phantom armies as he rescues Thuvia and saves Barsoom from a costly war. Of course, by the time he catches up with his beloved, Cathoris finds the situation is slightly more complicated than he thought, mainly because ERB never provides a smooth ending for his couples. "Thuvia, Maid of Mars" was originally serialized in "All-Story Weekly" in April 1916, which explains the novel's subtext about world war, since one was going on in Europe at that point in time. The original title was "Cathoris," but apparently when it was published as a novel in 1920 somebody wised up and changed it. Thuvia is not as great a name as Dejah Thoris, but it is not bad.

"The Chessmen of Mars" is the fifth novel in the Edgar Rice Burroughs Martian (a.k.a. John Carter of Mars, Barsoom) series. Originally published serially in "Argosy All-Story Weekly" in 1921 and in hardback the following year it is arguably one of ERB's most imaginative stories. This reputation rests on two things. The first is the relationship between the Kaldanes "heads" and the headless Rykors who are the "descendants of exceedingly stupid humanoid creatures bred by the Kaladane over eons for strength, health, beauty and microcephaly." True, this makes no sense from an evolutionary standpoint, but it is one of the more imaginative parasitic relationships in science fiction history. The second is jetan, the Martian version of chess, which is usually played on a 10 x 10

game board of alternating black and orange squares in the cities of Barsoom, but in the city of Manator is played with living pieces in a giant arena. Of course in the living version of the game a moving piece is not guaranteed a square but has to fight for it. The framing device for "The Chessmen of Mars" is told by John Carter, Warlord of Barsoom, on a visit home to Earth to see his nephew (rather remarkable given how long it took Carter to get back to Barsoom after his first adventure). Over a game of chess Carter tells of Jetan and the adventures of his daughter, Tara of Helium, in Manator. As was the case with the previous Martian novel, "Thuvia, Maid of Mars," ERB introduces a new hero for this adventure in Gahan, Jed of Gathol. The novel opens with the two of them dancing at a royal function in Helium. She has her eyes set on Djor Kantos, son of her friend's best friend, but he is interested in somebody else.

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