

The Chessmen of Mars

by

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Prelude

JOHN CARTER COMES TO EARTH

SHEA had just beaten me at chess, as usual, and, also as usual, I had gleaned what questionable satisfaction I might by twitting him with this indication of failing mentality by calling his attention to the nth time to that theory, propounded by certain scientists, which is based upon the assertion that phenomenal chess players are always found to be from the ranks of children under twelve, adults over seventy-two or the mentally defective--a theory that is lightly ignored upon those rare occasions that I win. Shea had gone to bed and I should have followed suit, for we are always in the saddle here before sunrise; but instead I sat there before the chess table in the library, idly blowing smoke at the dishonored head of my defeated king.

While thus profitably employed I heard the east door of the living-room open and someone enter. I thought it was Shea returning to speak with me on some matter of tomorrow's work; but when I raised my eyes to the doorway that connects the two rooms I saw framed there the figure of a bronzed giant, his otherwise naked body trapped with a jewel-encrusted harness from which there hung at one side an ornate short-sword and at the other a pistol of strange pattern. The black hair, the steel-gray eyes, brave and smiling, the noble features--I recognized them at once, and leaping to my feet I advanced with outstretched hand.

"John Carter!" I cried. "You?"

"None other, my son," he replied, taking my hand in one of his and placing the other upon my shoulder.

"And what are you doing here?" I asked. "It has been long years since you revisited Earth, and never before in the trappings of Mars. Lord! but it is good to see you--and not a day older in appearance than when you trotted me on your knee in my babyhood. How do you explain it, John Carter, Warlord of Mars, or do you try to explain it?"

"Why attempt to explain the inexplicable?" he replied. "As I have told you before, I am a very old man. I do not know how old I am. I recall no childhood; but recollect only having been always as you see me now and as you saw me first when you were five years old. You, yourself, have aged, though not as much as most men in a corresponding number of years, which may be accounted for by the fact that the same blood runs in our veins; but I have not aged at all. I have discussed the question with a noted Martian scientist, a friend of mine; but his theories are still only theories. However, I am content with the fact--I never age, and I love life and the vigor of youth.

"And now as to your natural question as to what brings me to Earth again and in this, to earthly eyes, strange habiliment. We may thank Kar Komak, the bowman of Lothar. It was he who gave me the idea upon which I have been experimenting until at last I have achieved success. As you know I have long possessed the power to cross the void in spirit, but never before have I been able to impart to inanimate things a similar power. Now, however, you see me for the first time precisely as my Martian fellows see me--you see the very short-sword that has tasted the blood of many a savage foeman; the harness with the devices of Helium and the insignia of my rank; the pistol that was presented to me by Tars Tarkas, Jeddak of Thark.

"Aside from seeing you, which is my principal reason for being here, and satisfying myself that I can transport inanimate things from Mars to Earth, and therefore animate things if I so desire, I have no purpose. Earth is not for me. My every interest is upon Barsoom--my wife, my children, my work; all are there. I will spend a quiet evening with you and then back to the world I love even better than I love life."

As he spoke he dropped into the chair upon the opposite side of the chess table.

"You spoke of children," I said. "Have you more than Carthoris?"

"A daughter," he replied, "only a little younger than Carthoris, and, barring one, the fairest thing that ever breathed the thin air of dying Mars. Only Dejah Thoris, her mother, could be more beautiful than Tara of Helium."

For a moment he fingered the chessmen idly. "We have a game on Mars similar to chess," he said, "very similar.

And there is a race there that plays it grimly with men and naked swords. We call the game jetan. It is played on a board like yours, except that there are a hundred squares and we use twenty pieces on each side. I never see it played without thinking of Tara of Helium and what befell her among the chessmen of Barsoom. Would you like to hear her story?"

I said that I would and so he told it to me, and now I shall try to re-tell it for you as nearly in the words of The Warlord of Mars as I can recall them, but in the third person. If there be inconsistencies and errors, let the blame fall not upon John Carter, but rather upon my faulty memory, where it belongs. It is a strange tale and utterly Barsoomian.

Chapter 1. Tara In A Tantrum

TARA of Helium rose from the pile of silks and soft furs upon which she had been reclining, stretched her lithe body languidly, and crossed toward the center of the room, where, above a large table, a bronze disc depended from the low ceiling. Her carriage was that of health and physical perfection--the effortless harmony of faultless coordination. A scarf of silken gossamer crossing over one shoulder was wrapped about her body; her black hair was piled high upon her head. With a wooden stick she tapped upon the bronze disc, lightly, and presently the summons was answered by a slave girl, who entered, smiling, to be greeted similarly by her mistress.

"Are my father's guests arriving?" asked the princess.

"Yes, Tara of Helium, they come," replied the slave. "I have seen Kantos Kan, Overlord of the Navy, and Prince Soran of Ptarth, and Djor Kantos, son of Kantos Kan," she shot a roguish glance at her mistress as she mentioned Djor Kantos' name, "and--oh, there were others, many have come."

"The bath, then, Uthia," said her mistress. "And why, Uthia," she added, "do you look thus and smile when you mention the name of Djor Kantos?"

The slave girl laughed gaily. "It is so plain to all that he worships you," she replied.

"It is not plain to me," said Tara of Helium. "He is the friend of my brother, Carthoris, and so he is here much; but not to see me. It is his friendship for Carthoris that brings him thus often to the palace of my father."

"But Carthoris is hunting in the north with Talu, Jeddak of Okar," Uthia reminded her.

"My bath, Uthia!" cried Tara of Helium. "That tongue of yours will bring you to some misadventure yet."

"The bath is ready, Tara of Helium," the girl responded, her eyes still twinkling with merriment, for she well knew that in the heart of her mistress was no anger that could displace the love of the princess for her slave. Preceding the daughter of The Warlord she opened the door of an adjoining room where lay the bath--a gleaming pool of scented water in a marble basin. Golden stanchions supported a chain of gold encircling it and leading down into the water on either side of marble steps. A glass dome let in the sunlight, which flooded the interior, glancing from the polished white of the marble walls and the procession of bathers and fishes, which, in conventional design, were inlaid with gold in a broad band that circled the room.

Tara of Helium removed the scarf from about her and handed it to the slave. Slowly she descended the steps to the water, the temperature of which she tested with a symmetrical foot, undeformed by tight shoes and high heels--a lovely foot, as God intended that feet should be and seldom are. Finding the water to her liking, the girl swam leisurely to and fro about the pool. With the silken ease of the seal she swam, now at the surface, now below, her smooth muscles rolling softly beneath her clear skin--a wordless song of health and happiness and grace. Presently she emerged and gave herself into the hands of the slave girl, who rubbed the body of her mistress with a sweet smelling semi-liquid substance contained in a golden urn, until the glowing skin was covered with a foamy lather, then a quick plunge into the pool, a drying with soft towels, and the bath was over. Typical of the life of the princess was the simple elegance of her bath--no retinue of useless slaves, no pomp, no idle waste of precious moments. In another half hour her hair was dried and built into the strange, but becoming, coiffure of her station; her leathern trappings, encrusted with gold and jewels, had been adjusted to her figure and she was ready to mingle with the guests that had been bidden to the midday function at the palace of The Warlord.

As she left her apartments to make her way to the gardens where the guests were congregating, two warriors, the insignia of the House of the Prince of Helium upon their harness, followed a few paces behind her, grim reminders that the assassin's blade may never be ignored upon Barsoom, where, in a measure, it counterbalances the great natural span of human life, which is estimated at not less than a thousand years.

As they neared the entrance to the garden another woman, similarly guarded, approached them from another quarter of the great palace. As she neared them Tara of Helium turned toward her with a smile and a happy greeting, while her guards knelt with bowed heads in willing and voluntary adoration of the beloved of Helium. Thus always, solely at the command of their own hearts, did the warriors of Helium greet Dejah Thoris, whose deathless beauty had more than once brought them to bloody warfare with other nations of Barsoom. So great was the love of the people of Helium for the mate of John Carter it amounted practically to worship, as though she were indeed the goddess that she looked.

The mother and daughter exchanged the gentle, Barsoomian, "kaor" of greeting and kissed. Then together they entered the gardens where the guests were. A huge warrior drew his short-sword and struck his metal shield with the flat of it, the brazen sound ringing out above the laughter and the speech.

"The Princess comes!" he cried. "Dejah Thoris! The Princess comes! Tara of Helium!" Thus always is royalty announced. The guests arose; the two women inclined their heads; the guards fell back upon either side of the entrance-way; a number of nobles advanced to pay their respects; the laughing and the talking were resumed and Dejah Thoris and her daughter moved simply and naturally among their guests, no suggestion of differing rank apparent in the bearing of any who were there, though there was more than a single Jeddak and many common warriors whose only title lay in brave deeds, or noble patriotism. Thus it is upon Mars where men are judged upon their own merits rather than upon those of their grandsires, even though pride of lineage be great.

Tara of Helium let her slow gaze wander among the throng of guests until presently it halted upon one she sought. Was the faint shadow of a frown that crossed her brow an indication of displeasure at the sight that met her eyes, or did the brilliant rays of the noonday sun distress her? Who may say! She had been reared to believe that one day she should wed Djor Kantos, son of her father's best friend. It had been the dearest wish of Kantos Kan and The Warlord that this should be, and Tara of Helium had accepted it as a matter of all but accomplished fact. Djor Kantos had seemed to accept the matter in the same way. They had spoken of it casually as something that would, as a matter of course, take place in the indefinite future, as, for instance, his promotion in the navy, in which he was now a padwar; or the set functions of the court of her grandfather, Tardos Mors, Jeddak of Helium; or Death. They had never spoken of love and that had puzzled Tara of Helium upon the rare occasions she gave it thought, for she knew that people who were to wed were usually much occupied with the matter of love and she had all of a woman's curiosity--she wondered what love was like. She was very fond of Djor Kantos and she knew that he was very fond of her. They liked to be together, for they liked the same things and the same people and the same books and their dancing was a joy, not only to themselves but to those who watched them. She could not imagine wanting to marry anyone other than Djor Kantos.

So perhaps it was only the sun that made her brows contract just the tiniest bit at the same instant that she discovered Djor Kantos sitting in earnest conversation with Olvia Marthis, daughter of the Jed of Hastor. It was Djor Kantos' duty immediately to pay his respects to Dejah Thoris and Tara of Helium; but he did not do so and presently the daughter of The Warlord frowned indeed. She looked long at Olvia Marthis, and though she had seen her many times before and knew her well, she looked at her today through new eyes that saw, apparently for the first time, that the girl from Hastor was noticeably beautiful even among those other beautiful women of Helium. Tara of Helium was disturbed. She attempted to analyze her emotions; but found it difficult. Olvia Marthis was her friend--she was very fond of her and she felt no anger toward her. Was she angry with Djor Kantos? No, she finally decided that she was not. It was merely surprise, then, that she felt--surprise that Djor Kantos could be more interested in another than in herself. She was about to cross the garden and join them when she heard her father's voice directly behind her.

"Tara of Helium!" he called, and she turned to see him approaching with a strange warrior whose harness and metal bore devices with which she was unfamiliar. Even among the gorgeous trappings of the men of Helium and the visitors from distant empires those of the stranger were remarkable for their barbaric splendor. The leather of his harness was completely hidden beneath ornaments of platinum thickly set with brilliant diamonds, as were the scabbards of his swords and the ornate holster that held his long, Martian pistol. Moving through the sunlit garden at the side of the great Warlord, the scintillant rays of his countless gems enveloping him as in an aureole of light imparted to his noble figure a suggestion of godliness.

"Tara of Helium, I bring you Gahan, Jed of Gathol," said John Carter, after the simple Barsoomian custom of presentation.

"Kaor! Gahan, Jed of Gathol," returned Tara of Helium.

"My sword is at your feet, Tara of Helium," said the young chieftain.

The Warlord left them and the two seated themselves upon an ersite bench beneath a spreading sorapus tree.

"Far Gathol," mused the girl. "Ever in my mind has it been connected with mystery and romance and the half-forgotten lore of the ancients. I cannot think of Gathol as existing today, possibly because I have never before seen a Gatholian."

"And perhaps too because of the great distance that separates Helium and Gathol, as well as the comparative insignificance of my little free city, which might easily be lost in one corner of mighty Helium," added Gahan. "But what we lack in power we make up in pride," he continued, laughing. "We believe ours the oldest inhabited city upon Barsoom. It is one of the few that has retained its freedom, and this despite the fact that its ancient diamond mines are the richest known and, unlike practically all the other fields, are today apparently as inexhaustible as ever."

"Tell me of Gathol," urged the girl. "The very thought fills me with interest," nor was it likely that the handsome face of the young jed detracted anything from the glamour of far Gathol.

Nor did Gahan seem displeased with the excuse for further monopolizing the society of his fair companion. His eyes seemed chained to her exquisite features, from which they moved no further than to a rounded breast, part hid beneath its jeweled covering, a naked shoulder or the symmetry of a perfect arm, resplendent in bracelets of barbaric magnificence.

"Your ancient history has doubtless told you that Gathol was built upon an island in Throxus, mightiest of the five oceans of old Barsoom. As the ocean receded Gathol crept down the sides of the mountain, the summit of which was the island upon which she had been built, until today she covers the slopes from summit to base, while the bowels of the great hill are honeycombed with the galleries of her mines. Entirely surrounding us is a great salt marsh, which protects us from invasion by land, while the rugged and oftentimes vertical topography of our mountain renders the landing of hostile airships a precarious undertaking."

"That, and your brave warriors?" suggested the girl.

Gahan smiled. "We do not speak of that except to enemies," he said, "and then with tongues of steel rather than of flesh."

"But what practice in the art of war has a people which nature has thus protected from attack?" asked Tara of Helium, who had liked the young jed's answer to her previous question, but yet in whose mind persisted a vague conviction of the possible effeminacy

of her companion, induced, doubtless, by the magnificence of his trappings and weapons which carried a suggestion of splendid show rather than grim utility.

"Our natural barriers, while they have doubtless saved us from defeat on countless occasions, have not by any means rendered us immune from attack," he explained, "for so great is the wealth of Gathol's diamond treasury that there yet may be found those who will risk almost certain defeat in an effort to loot our unconquered city; so thus we find occasional practice in the exercise of arms; but there is more to Gathol than the mountain city. My country extends from Polodona (Equator) north ten karads and from the tenth karad west of Horz to the twentieth west, including thus a million square haads, the greater proportion of which is fine grazing land where run our great herds of thoats and zitidars.

"Surrounded as we are by predatory enemies our herdsmen must indeed be warriors or we should have no herds, and you may be assured they get plenty of fighting. Then there is our constant need of workers in the mines. The Gatholians consider themselves a race of warriors and as such prefer not to labor in the mines. The law is, however, that each male Gatholian shall give an hour a day in labor to the government. That is practically the only tax that is levied upon them. They prefer however, to furnish a substitute to perform this labor, and as our own people will not hire out for labor in the mines it has been necessary to obtain slaves, and I do not need to tell you that slaves are not won without fighting. We sell these slaves in the public market, the proceeds going, half and half, to the government and the warriors who bring them in. The purchasers are credited with the amount of labor performed by their particular slaves. At the end of a year a good slave will have performed the labor tax of his master for six years, and if slaves are plentiful he is freed and permitted to return to his own people."

"You fight in platinum and diamonds?" asked Tara, indicating his gorgeous trappings with a quizzical smile.

Gahan laughed. "We are a vain people," he admitted, good-naturedly, "and it is possible that we place too much value on personal appearances. We vie with one another in the splendor of our accoutrements when trapped for the observance of the lighter duties of life, though when we take the field our leather is the plainest I ever have seen worn by fighting men of Barsoom. We pride ourselves, too, upon our physical beauty, and especially upon the beauty of our women. May I dare to say, Tara of Helium, that I am hoping for the day when you will visit Gathol that my people may see one who is really beautiful?"

"The women of Helium are taught to frown with displeasure upon the tongue of the flatterer," rejoined the girl, but Gahan, Jed of Gathol, observed that she smiled as she said it.

A bugle sounded, clear and sweet, above the laughter and the talk. "The Dance of Barsoom!" exclaimed the young warrior. "I claim you for it, Tara of Helium."

The girl glanced in the direction of the bench where she had last seen Djor Kantos. He was not in sight. She inclined her head in assent to the claim of the Gatholian. Slaves were passing among the guests, distributing small musical instruments of a single string. Upon each instrument were characters which indicated the pitch and length of its tone. The instruments were of skeel, the string of gut, and were shaped to fit the left forearm of the dancer, to which it was strapped. There was also a ring wound with gut which was worn between the first and second joints of the index finger of the right hand and which, when passed over the string of the instrument, elicited the single note required of the dancer.

The guests had risen and were slowly making their way toward the expanse of scarlet sward at the south end of the gardens where the dance was to be held, when Djor Kantos came hurriedly toward Tara of Helium. "I claim--" he exclaimed as he neared her; but she interrupted him with a gesture.

"You are too late, Djor Kantos," she cried in mock anger. "No laggard may claim Tara of Helium; but haste now lest thou lose also Olvia Marthis, whom I have never seen wait long to be claimed for this or any other dance."

"I have already lost her," admitted Djor Kantos ruefully.

"And you mean to say that you came for Tara of Helium only after having lost Olvia Marthis?" demanded the girl, still simulating displeasure.

"Oh, Tara of Helium, you know better than that," insisted the young man. "Was it not natural that I should assume that you would expect me, who alone has claimed you for the Dance of Barsoom for at least twelve times past?"

"And sit and play with my thumbs until you saw fit to come for me?" she questioned. "Ah, no, Djor Kantos; Tara of Helium is for no laggard," and she threw him a sweet smile and passed on toward the assembling dancers with Gahan, Jed of far Gathol.

The Dance of Barsoom bears a relation similar to the more formal dancing functions of Mars that The Grand March does to ours, though it is infinitely more intricate and more beautiful. Before a Martian youth of either sex may attend an important social function where there is dancing, he must have become proficient in at least three dances--The Dance of Barsoom, his national dance, and the dance of his city. In these three dances the dancers furnish their own music, which never varies; nor do the steps or figures vary, having been handed down from time immemorial. All Barsoomian dances are stately and beautiful, but The Dance of Barsoom is a wondrous epic of motion and harmony--there is no grotesque posturing, no vulgar or suggestive movements. It has been described as the interpretation of the highest ideals of a world that aspired to grace and beauty and chastity in woman, and strength and dignity and loyalty in man.

Today, John Carter, Warlord of Mars, with Dejah Thoris, his mate, led in the dancing, and if there was another couple that vied with them in possession of the silent admiration

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