



Vol. 5

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August 23rd, will contain

"A Sleeper Bewitched," "The Green Monkey," "The Specter of Black Hills,"
and other thrilling tales of the supernatural

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The Magic



On January 19, 1928, a New York newspaper published the following item:

SKELETON AT CHESS

Find Grim Remains Before Unfinished Game in Cabin

Hollywood, Jan. 19, (N.P.)—Members of the Pathé-Bray Colorado River expedition have uncovered what they believe to be a murder of the early gold mining days in Arizona.

They found a skeleton seated before an unfinished chess game, in an adobe cabin, twenty miles below Lee's Ferry, Ariz. The murder theory was advanced because the chess game was unfinished and a chair, in which the other player apparently sat, was pushed back as though someone had left in a hurry.

NOBODY paid much attention to this news report, not even the police. But there was one man strangely fascinated by the weird story: my friend F. Spitzerberger, the Viennese occultist, living his strange and secluded life in the midst of the turmoil which is Manhattan. When I showed him the report, his eyes lit with that mysterious

gleam which I find in them whenever something queer, something beyond mere human ken comes to his attention. He thanked me and, rather hurriedly, asked me to go, after he had carefully put away the newspaper clipping.

And a few days later the mail brought me what I set down here without further comment. Whence this information came to Herr Spitzerberger I don't know. But I am sure that what he tells is the truth—strange and mysterious as it may seem. For time and again, he has proven to me that he possesses eyes which see further than normal eyes, and ears that understand words nobody else can hear.

And this is his story:

A NOVEMBER night in Venice. The streets drenched in rain; the heavens black with water. It rained incessantly, as if it were never to stop again. The lagoons and canals were so black that one did not know where the water began and where the rain stopped. Somewhere, a last lantern gleamed and flickered, and wet apparitions danced around it, in the guise of long, tattered bits of fog.

On one ramshackle house hung an old lantern, its light momentarily threatening to flicker out; from its roof the water ran as from a battered old umbrella. The dim light fell on a gondola which, suddenly, was there. Nobody had heard it come; it had appeared suddenly, unexpectedly, from nowhere. For a moment the *gondoliere* waited, then rapped on the roof of the *felze* to call his passenger.

Somebody kicked open the door to the little hut of the gondola, crawled out and, with a few quick strides, rushed through the downpour to the shelter of the door. But the door was closed. Cursing, the irate visi-

By

ERIC P. WARNDORF

CHESSMEN

Lasco, the master player, had been assured he could lose to no man—but there was a sinister catch in this pledge

tor banged against it with hands and feet. The gondola rested motionless on the water; no quick rocking, no slap-slap of the waves against its sides, indicated its presence. And when a moment later the house-door was thrown open, almost sending the late visitor sprawling down the stairs before he could rush inside, the gondola was gone as quickly and as mysteriously as it had appeared.

The stranger walked through a narrow, dark alley leading into the house; but he saw nobody who might have opened the door so brutally and upon whom he could vent his wrath. With heavy, splashing steps he made his way towards the other end of the alley, where a dimmed ray of light coming through a crack in another heavy oaken door showed him his goal. He pushed the great door open with a powerful heave, tore the rain-soaked cape from his shoulders, and found himself standing in a low-ceiled, dark paneled room in an inn.

Men and women half leaned, half sat in front of wine-spattered tables, drinking and smoking.

The heavy air was thick with the swirls of gray smoke and the greasy smells from an adjoining kitchen. Legs dangled loosely from across the arms of huge chairs, heads were buried in arms leaning on the massive tables. But nobody said a word, nobody made a sound. In this dingy room, life itself seemed to pause.

Raffaele Lasco, the newcomer, made for a corner of the room, and sank onto a wooden bench, while an old hag with a tremendous hump on her back shuffled towards him across the room, placed a pitcher of wine on the table and, muttering, disappeared again.

LASCO drank, at first gulping the wine down greedily, then drinking more slowly; but when he put the pitcher back on the table, not a drop was left in it. Lasco buried his head in his folded arms, and groaned.

"Tonight I should like to play chess with him," somebody in a corner whispered.

"Why?" his neighbor answered in an equally low voice. "To lose?"

"Tonight one could defeat him!" the first one responded.

"Never, you fool! Not as long as these hellish chess figures are his." The persons around the two nodded their heads and whispered their assent.

Raffaele Lasco was the most famous chess player in Venice. At that time international chess matches were as yet unknown, and the best player of a given city was considered the best player in the world. Lasco in particular was believed invincible, because the chessmen he always used—so the public thought—came from the devil. Some claimed that he had pledged his soul to Satan in return for the pieces; others believed that



he had robbed and killed the former owner on one of his travels in Asia.

The chessboard itself was beautifully inlaid with ivory and ebony, surrounded by a mysterious floral design. The chessmen were figures with human or animals' heads; the castles were elephants, their trunks raised; the knights were beautifully carved horses from the steppes of Asia. The bishops were spindle-legged human figures with cats' heads. The king was a gargoyle; the queen, in rich array, wore a skull; while the pawns were nude human figures in cramped positions, with the heads of birds and dogs and fishes.

Nobody had ever been able to win a game from Lasco as long as he used his own chessmen—and he always used them. The hunchbacked old innkeeper kept them for him and, for years, he had never played anywhere else. Some of his adversaries claimed that during the game the figures became alive and upset his opponents by their weird movements, and their terrible grimacing, so that they always lost; others again claimed that all this was stuff and nonsense, and that Lasco was simply the best player alive.

ONLY once had Lasco lost a game; that was when he was brought before the Inquisition accused of witchcraft, and when the chief judge, himself an ardent chess player, before pronouncing sentence had challenged him to a game. Then Lasco lost—and won his life.

Playing chess was Lasco's only source of income. He invariably played for stakes, which could be as high as anyone desired. But as time went on he found fewer and fewer people willing to stake their ability against his. And so he became poorer and poorer, and lived at the inn, although nobody ever saw him pay his reckoning there. He never talked about his chessmen. He never answered a question about them, never—until a woman made him talk. She was Anita, the niece of the innkeeper, who had come from the country to Venice only a few weeks before. Lasco fell madly in love with her the moment he set eyes on her; and to the surprise of the rest of her numerous suitors, he seemed to find favor with her.

Anita was tall for a woman. Slim and graceful, she bent like a whip before the onrush of his passion, and before a week passed she had become his sweetheart. She loved him dearly, and plead with him to start

a new life, particularly to give up his chess playing. But he only shook his head. She entreated him, trying to win his confidence. In vain—until one day, when he said in a burst of confidence:

"No man can ever defeat me against my will, so long as I use these chessmen. And should I falter, it will be my last game."

NOISES were heard now from the lagoon. Torches flared through the narrow, grimy windows. Somebody knocked on the door. The alley leading to the guest room filled with gay young voices; and when the door was thrown open, a group of Venetian nobles in black half-masks burst into the room. The carelessness of youth lit the dingy place; laughter and shouts suddenly turned it into an abode for the living. Tables were moved, benches pushed aside for the newcomers. Candles were lit.

The entire group seemed to obey one leader, a handsome young blade with shining dark eyes whose wit sparkled, and whose gaiety outshone the others. With his melodious voice he invited everybody present to share their wine, asking their pardon at the same time for not lifting their masks. In an instant, the room seemed filled with one family; everybody shouted and sang, drank and shouted again. Only Lasco remained silent and gloomy in his corner. When the nobles entered the room and the candles had been lighted, he had looked up for a moment, and dubiously fastened his glance for a moment on the leader; but he buried his head again in his arms, remaining silent and sulky.

"Why do you despise our wine?" the young leader asked him. "Or, do you like our wine, but shun our company?"

Lasco refused to stir.

"Who is this killjoy?" the youth asked again.

Half a dozen voices shouted:

"Lasco, the chess player."

The youth jumped up.

"Lasco? Lasco? Do I find you at last? Would you like to play with me?" he demanded, agreeably surprised.

Lasco raised his head and laughed derisively.

"What will you play for?" he asked.

Quick as a flash, the youth answered: "For my entire fortune if you want, and that is not little. But what is your stake?"

"My head, if you want it," Lasco replied.

"That is not enough," the stranger laughed. "But—your chessmen against my

fortune. Are you willing to risk so much?"

Slowly Lasco rose. His long black hair fell over his haggard shoulders. Fire burned in his eyes, his features tightened and he seemed younger, fresher, more proud. Across the table from him stood the youth, slim and well kept, looking up to Lasco as if in admiration. The entire inn was in an uproar. His friends bore down on the strange youth, entreating him to give up his mad attempt to conquer the unconquerable. But he refused to listen. In fact, it seemed as if he did not even hear their words. He shook them off, fascinated by his adversary.

While the others still chattered wildly, gesticulating excitedly, the hunchbacked old hag brought Lasco's enchanted chessmen, and placed board and bag on the table. Then she went from one to the other of the loungers, whispering something in their ears. Some shrugged their shoulders; others protested; but in the end all of them seemed to agree with what the old woman had said, and while Lasco and the stranger stood still facing each other, they sneaked away.

THE group of newcomers, too, seemed suddenly listless and sad. A few moments later, the challenger turned to them and said:

"Whoever loves me will leave me, alone, with Lasco."

Again they protested and warned; but he insisted upon being left alone, and one after the other they reluctantly disappeared.

Lasco remained with his challenger. Only the old woman kept them company. They drew for sides. White was the stranger's color. One by one, he took the chessmen from their bag, looking carefully at each of them, smiling at some, shaking his head over the weird shapes of others. The queen with her white skull seemed to interest him particularly, and he stared down upon her for a long while before he finally placed her on the white field.

The game began. The youth played carefully, thinking over each move, although not inordinately long about it. The game seemed easier for him than for Lasco, who hesitated before making a new move. The game was turning against him. He rested his head on one hand, while with the other one he tugged nervously at his hair. Every now and then, he looked up and stared at his opponent as if he were trying to make him out, as if to pierce behind the black

mask and discover the youth's identity.

The youth had made a move and was leaning back in his chair. Lasco lost himself in deep thoughts and, after a long while, moved a piece. Then he sat straight up and mockingly stared at the other. The youth looked at the board. Without a moment's hesitation, he made his counter move. Astonished, Lasco contemplated its effect. The derisive smile faded from his lips; he leaned over, studied the position carefully; suddenly, a look of terror intermingled with surprise appeared on his features. Then he rose, leaning heavily on his hands, and hatefully, terror stricken, madly looked into the sparkling eyes of his conqueror.

"YOU spoke the truth, Lasco," the youth said in a friendly tone. "No man can win a game while you are playing with these pieces. No man—but a woman!" and with a quick gesture he tore the black half-mask from his face. Opposite Lasco sat—Anita!

With a wild shriek of anger Lasco hurled himself at her. The table toppled over, the chessmen rolled to the floor. Under the weight of their two bodies, Anita's chair crumpled and now he pinioned her, his clawing hands crushing her throat. Anita had no chance to make a move of defense. All of a sudden it was deadly quiet in the room. Then an ugly snicker came from over near the open hearth. Lasco looked up to the chair where, until a moment ago, the old hag had sat. She was gone. In her stead he saw a little old man, wrinkled, squatting on his crossed legs. On his head he wore the high cap of the Javanese priests and his garb was one of their robes. Everything on him seemed to be covered with sheer gold, but through the gold Lasco could see the dim outlines of the chair whereon the wicked figure sat. The priest stretched out a bony, trembling hand and, pointing at the lifeless form of Anita, an expression of undying hatred on his face, he croaked: "She will avenge me!" The next instant, he had disappeared.

With a howl of terror, Lasco bent over Anita, lifted her from the floor, pressed her to his heart, kissed her, caressed her, sobbing wildly. It was too late. She was dead.

Somebody knocked at the door. Lasco regained his senses. Hurriedly he collected his chessmen from the four corners of the room, putting them in his leather bag, listening again. The knocking became louder and louder. Stealthily, Lasco sneaked to one of the windows, opened it and dived into

the lagoon, swimming away into the dark. A four-masted schooner on her way from Venice to Boston carried a mysterious passenger. Like one broken to little pieces by fate, he squatted around in corners and under windlasses; or else he lay in his hammock for days without stirring, without even partaking of the humble repast of hard bread and salted beef with tea, the fare of the few passengers as well as the crew. He spoke to no one; no one ever attempted speaking to him a second time. He always carried with him a little old leather bag, stuffed with what might have been pebbles, but which were, in fact, chessmen. He was Raffaele Lasco, the Venetian.

How he had got aboard this vessel, he had forgotten. Somehow or other, the old witch of an innkeeper had helped him, had practically pushed him on board to save his head from the gallows. Eternally he heard her hissing voice: "Quick, quick, before they torture you."

The only definite thought he had in his mind all these many days was, that he had murdered his sweetheart. And again and again he repeated to himself: "Yes, I have killed her. But not with my hands. When the chair fell over, she broke her neck. I did not kill her with my hands." And then he would look at his hands, rub them against each other, wipe them on his clothes. And again and again he would puzzle his mind, wondering how it could have happened that he, he, the greatest chess player in Venice, could have lost a game against a mere woman.

AT times, when he was sure that nobody could watch him, he would take a chessman from the bag. Oh, yes, he knew well the secret of these figures—he, and nobody else in the world! They were the devil's, they were bewitched. Had that charm turned on him? He stared at the pawns and they grinned back; he looked at the knights and it was as if they wanted to jump at his face. The elephant-castles seemed to spout at him and the gargoyle-king looked wise and mocking. Nothing was changed in them. But when he took the white queen, he dropped her in terror. Could it be? Was there a striking resemblance between her ivory skull and the face of his beloved Anita, the Anita he had murdered? Murdered—? No, he had not murdered her; his hands were clean, they bore no stain of blood! Hastily he picked up the queen, and with shaking fingers put her back in the bag.

But that night he dreamed of the queen; and, strangely enough, she seemed to be both the old witch and Anita at the same time while she was standing ominously, fully life-size by his bed. And in his dream he shrieked so loudly that the next day the captain bade him remove his hammock to a secluded corner of the lower deck so as not to disturb the other passengers. Then he remembered that he had seen the witch talking to the captain.

THE journey was endless; more than nine weeks had passed before the sailor in the crow's nest sang out his "Land ho! So' South-east!"

One passenger had finally overcome Lasco's aversion to conversation and had even befriended him in a way. It was his intention to go as far West as possible, far away from civilized life, there to hunt and to till the soil. He asked Lasco to come with him. And Raffaele Lasco agreed.

After their debarkation, they journeyed, westward, aimlessly, for weeks. Two days after they had passed the last lonely settlement, an Englishman's ranch, they reached a country which pleased them, and where they decided to settle down. They built an adobe house, broke an acre or two of land, and devoted the rest of their time to hunting. The Indians with whom they came into contact were friendly. After a few weeks, a regular trade began to develop; fur was exchanged for gunpowder and salt, and before they realized it a certain friendship had sprung up between them and their neighbors, particularly with the young Englishman and his wife whose farm they had passed on the way to their location.

But in spite of these facts, Lasco was utterly lonely. He never talked of his past, nor did his friend; in other words, they both led a life which had a present and perhaps a future, but which completely lacked a past. Lasco had to square his accounts with Venice and the past as best he could. His chessmen lay buried in a corner of the adobe house, and he never so much as looked at them. But at regular intervals, he was tortured by dreams as vivid as anything he went through in his actual life. He saw everything that had happened, saw the old witch and Anita and the inn; and ever and anon, he saw the tiny Javanese priest in the background with the look of tremendous hatred on his shriveled features. But no tortures, no matter how horrifying

they may be, can stand the power of habit; and after some months the ghastly dreams seemed to have lost some of their horror.

ONE afternoon—Lasco's friend was absent on a hunting trip from which he was never to return—a stranger found his way to the house, sat with Lasco and ate and drank whatever was on the table, for in those days it was the universal custom born of necessity to offer any stranger the hospitality of any house he entered. The stranger seemed well informed about Lasco's trade, looked over the stores the two friends had amassed in an adjoining hut, and inquired into prices and quality. In the course of the evening, he explained that he was a buyer, showed Lasco a heavy buckskin pouch of gold and offered to purchase most of the stock.

Lasco liked the stranger and was pleased at the opportunity of clearing away his stock. They drank together, and talked. The stranger told of his wanderings in South America, Europe, and parts of Asia. He had been in Java, too; and when he mentioned that enchanted island, a green light gleamed in his eyes, a light which did not escape Lasco and which, vividly recalling the horror of his dreams, made him shudder. But in the next instant he shook it off, realizing that the mere mentioning of the name was the reason for his momentary terror.

Finally the stranger proposed playing some game to wind up the congenial evening, and asked whether Lasco had cards. So Lasco produced an old deck which had served him and his friend ever since they had left the ship together, and they started a game of poker. At first the stakes were small, but gradually they were raised. Lasco was losing and, like all losers, insisted upon raising the stakes higher and higher. His losses grew the more his nerves were shaken; he drank a great deal, until he suddenly realized that he had lost most of his trading stock. This realization sobered him up completely, and without hesitating he stopped the game.

"You have lost too much," the stranger said; "and I don't want to win everything. Why not play another game—perhaps you'll have better luck."

Lasco in the meantime had calculated his losses, and felt very depressed; but, experienced gambler that he was, he would not touch another card that night. He knew that he was playing in a run of bad luck.

"Perhaps you play chess?" the stranger asked.

It was the first time Lasco had heard the word chess since he had fled from Venice; and it was as if somebody had struck him on the head. For a moment he was dumb, unable to answer.

"I love to play chess," the stranger innocently proceeded. "I am probably like everyone who plays a fairly poor game, but still believes he knows something about it. Do you by any chance have chessmen?"

This question, Lasco realized, was not an unusual one, for it was the rule rather than the exception to find cards, chessmen and checkers in these lonely settlements where the solitude forced their owners to provide entertainment against the long nights. And yet he hesitated. Against his will the thought forced itself on him that he must murder the stranger and get his money. Lasco was not a murderer—even though, once upon a time—He drove back this thought even before it came. To Lasco it seemed that a mocking smile played around the stranger's lips whenever the thought of murder came into his mind. Suddenly the chessmen stood before him in a vision; and for the first time since Venice he knew he was strong again, unconquerable, the master and owner of a set of pieces which made him invincible.

Without answering, he rose, went to a corner of the hut and, from beneath a litter of odds and ends, he produced the leather bag containing the chessmen.

"All right," he said, "let's play chess. But I warn you: if you are a poor player you are going to lose. I used to be quite a good hand at it."

"So much, the better for you," the stranger laughed. "Then you have a chance to make good your losses."

They sat down at the table and, one by one, took the pieces from the bag.

"What unusual men!" the stranger exclaimed, looking at each single figure for a long time before he set it on the board. In fact it seemed as if he were caressing them, were loath to let them out of his hands.

"How did you get this strange set?" the stranger queried before they began their play.

"I won it from the former owner," Lasco answered gaily. Now he was light and free; he could not lose. His opponent seemed suddenly serious and thoughtful. Once again Lasco was in his own element; he felt young and strong and sure of himself. He

laughed and chatted and drank excitedly. They filled their glasses and began the game. After the first few moves, Lasco realized that his adversary was a poor player who played a fast, rather unintelligent game. And he won easily. The stakes had not been high, and Lasco proposed to double them for the next game. The stranger accepted. This time he had the white pieces and started with a daring attack which only a very good player could end victoriously. Lasco knew the gambit forward and backward, and after a few minutes he had trapped his opponent into a position which practically meant the loss of the game. The stranger gave up. Lasco felt completely happy; by now, he had won back half of his poker losses. He stood up and, walking up and down the small room, he explained the mistakes the stranger had made like a benevolent champion lecturing his pupil. And time and again he offered drinks, and drank himself. Finally he said:

"But in spite of all these mistakes, I feel sure that you can play a much better game if you try a little harder. How about a third and last one?"

The stranger laughed and shook his head.

"All right then. What about odds? Suppose I offer you two to one!"

Lasco's unknown guest sat in his chair, rocking to and fro, and thoughtfully blowing the smoke from his pipe toward the ceiling.

"You can't lose anything," Lasco insisted. "Either you win back whatever you have lost in the first two games, or else you lose your poker winnings. In other words, if the worst comes to the worst for you, you simply wind up the evening without winning anything."

THE stranger sat up, put both of his hands in his trousers' pockets and stared smilingly, but in a strangely, almost ominously penetrating manner, at Lasco. "Very well," he said.

Lasco had been sitting on the elbow rest of his chair; now he swung his legs in a semicircle over the table and fell into the seat. He was not a bit excited; rather he was keyed up. Eagerly he set his own and the pieces of his guest on the board. The black queen with the white skull was the last. For a moment he held it in his hand, looking at it derisively; then he put it down with a bang.

"You'd better set her in place yourself," he said. "It's always bad luck if you permit

your opponent to move the queen for you."

The stranger took the queen, holding it upright on the palm of his outstretched hand.

"I love this young queen," he said mysteriously. "I love her pale face with its slick black hair."

Lasco stared at him aghast. What did he mean? This figure had a white skull, not a face, and no hair! Slick and black had been the hair of Anita, the Venetian girl. Why did he think of her again?

"What voluptuous lips!" the stranger proceeded. "Did this carver from far-away Asia want to depict a queen who was also a queen at kissing?"

With a painful effort, Lasco forced himself to enter into the spirit of his guest's remarks.

"Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps—or else, in order to make her loss doubly painful. So you'd better protect her well. And," he added after a pause, "in her honor I am going to play the dangerous queen's gambit."

EVERYTHING was in readiness. But holding his fingers on the first man he was about to move, Lasco hesitated another second and said:

"But please play this last game a little more carefully. I know you can do it, if you want to."

"I think you are right—I can play a better game, only I hesitate to do it," he said.

"Why?" Lasco asked.

"I need time to think over my moves; I haven't enough practice to play a fast game. And most chess players take it amiss if you think too long before moving."

"Think as long as you want, as long as it is necessary for you to play a good game," Lasco laughed. "Don't consider me at all. I'll sit here until doomsday if you want me to."

The stranger jumped up. "I'll take your word for that," he said, taking Lasco's hand and shaking it.

As he had announced, Lasco opened with the queen's gambit. The stranger declined to accept it, choosing the safe way in doing so. The two played slowly. In spite of the fact that he knew every move and counter move by heart, Lasco pondered over each single one. The stranger limited himself to a purely defensive game, evading every possibility for counter attacks. He surrounded his queen and the king with their warriors, as if with a stone wall. He thought for a long time before each move,

much longer than Lasco did. It was a serious game, and the two opponents seemed resolved to do their utmost to win.

HCURS passed. Night fell. The lamp had gone out for lack of fuel; they played on by the light of candles Lasco had brought from his locker. A careless move of Lasco's had changed his opponent's defensive position into an attack. Lasco realized the danger in a flash. But in the next instant, he remembered that his were magic chessmen and whoever owned them could not lose. It was as if a heavy load fell from his chest. Yes, indeed, he had murdered to own these chessmen!

That had been in Java where he had played with an old priest, and had lost and lost. How the thought that the priest was playing with a set of magic chessmen had come into his head, he did not know. He simply knew it. Later, much later, he seemed to remember that a voice had whispered it into his ear from behind, and that when he turned he had seen standing at his elbow a skeleton-like creature with tremendous eyes in a tremendous head. He had pointed to the chessmen who suddenly seemed alive, nodding their heads rhythmically. He had jumped up—and then the old priest was lying on the stone floor, his skull crushed under a terrific blow. Lasco had torn the priest's habit from the corpse and had wrapped the chessmen in it.

Thereafter he had been invincible. On the ship which carried him back to Venice he had played a few times against a very strong player who, after a dozen lost games, had said Lasco was like the famous Javanese priest who could never be conquered as long as he owned his magic chessmen. And careful investigation had proven that the set of figures had never failed their owner—never, providing he did not play against woman. Lasco had done that only once; and now his opponent was—Lasco looked up. He could not finish his thought. Opposite him sat Anita, his murdered sweetheart! Not dressed as a man, as once before, nor in the Venetian garb he knew. She now wore the precious robe of his black queen, a skull instead of her face, and yet—her face! Lasco made an immense effort to collect his thoughts, in vain. They refused to obey. Who sat there, on the other side of the table? Anita? His guest? His queen? He looked down on the board: there he saw his opponent's queen, her neck broken!

"It's your move," he heard the stranger croak. "It has been your move for the last day."

He raised his head with a terrific effort and looked at his partner: once more it was the stranger who had won his money at poker.

How long had they been playing? Two or three times, Lasco had been on the point of getting up and walking about for a moment as he was accustomed to do after finishing a particularly difficult move. But every time a look from the stranger had frozen him into his chair. A terrifying thought crept into his head. He was chained by his promise: "I'll sit here until doomsday if you want me to." What did the stranger mean when he said: "It has been your move for the last day?" How long had they been playing?

Dim light came through the window shutters. Was it dawn or dusk? Had he been asleep? Was he dreaming?

HE was unbearably tired, his limbs ached, the blood hammered against his temples. He probably had been asleep, had awakened, and must now finish his game. He stared at the board and gradually realized his position. Every single figure was still in the game, and the men of his opponent had closed in on him as if to crush him. Yet nothing had been decided, no sign of immediate danger was to be found anywhere. He saw his own move, the one his guest's last one required. He had to do it. And yet he hesitated, desired to play safe, wanted to convince himself that his partner had not laid a trap for him. Slowly, deliberately, cautiously he thought, and wanted to raise his arm to move. But his arm refused to obey the command of his will, so heavily it lay on the arm rest. He wanted to shout, but his voice had gone.

Again he felt the terrifying shock he had experienced some time before when he had seen Anita sitting opposite him; he realized that this terror had paralyzed him. He was doomed to sit here to die, to hold this position as in a death chair until—doomsday.

IT had grown dark again, but the chessmen were still visible; they seemed to cast shadows from a light which came from behind Lasco's opponent. Slowly he raised his eyes. And then it seemed to him that the chair had been pushed back a bit, and that his guest had drawn up his legs, that he squatted on them like the figure of an old

Buddha. His gaze slowly crawled upward; he recognized the robe of an Asiatic priest, saw the shriveled face, saw looking at him in unspeakable hatred the eyes of the murdered Javanese priest.

Lasco tried to close his own eyes, and realized that he had lost even the power to do that. He tortured himself to evade the icy, malevolent eyes of the priest—and knew at the same time that he could not, that he would have to die in that position. And then—what time passed he did not know—he felt his heart beat more slowly; had the sensation of limitless terror, and yet at the same time expected delivery—death!

But he was still alive; he understood everything, saw everything with torturing clarity; all his senses were still awake, only his body seemed asleep forever. Suddenly he felt his upper body swaying, realized that he had been sitting stiffly upright, and fell back with a thud against the back of his chair. The priest never ceased watching him with those piercing eyes. Finally he stood up, took a bag from a pocket hidden in his robe and put the chessmen into it, one by one, slowly, enjoying his task to the utmost. Carefully he took them off the board, as if they were made of glass; some of them he caressed in his fingers for a long time, gazing lovingly at them as a youth gazes at the picture of his beloved. His lips moved as if in prayer—thin, hard lips one would have thought incapable of softening.

The last piece was still on the table; it

was the black queen with the white skull. Three times the priest bowed deeply before her. When he rose the third time, the queen had disappeared.

Slowly, ceremoniously the priest turned, went towards the door and, as if in a religious rite, opened it and walked out without ever looking at Lasco again.

Desperately, Lasco tried to rise, to cry out. He saw the door close, heard the stealthy steps of the priest outside the door dying away in the darkness, saw the chess board where chessmen stood in exactly the same position as the magic ones had stood before, only this time they were ordinary, everyday chessmen. Then the opposite chair seemed to rise on its rear legs, rise and topple over—

Between the fallen chair and the chessboard stood Anita, Lasco's sweetheart, the black queen of the chessmen—motionless, staring down at him with dead, dreary eyes.

"She is holding the vigil," Lasco thought, "holding it while I am still alive."

THE next morning, the riderless horse of Lasco's friend came galloping toward their shack, and fled again as if the devil incarnate were astride it. Its rider never returned. He had been crushed to death when he had fallen headlong into a canyon.

In the chair sat Lasco, dying. And there, first his body, and then his skeleton sat through the years until it was found on January 18, 1928—an unfinished game of chess still on the table in front of it.

MIRRORS FRIGHTEN AWAY GHOSTS

ACCORDING to those versed in ghost lore and ghost habits, the only thing which a phantom fears—and which will send it scurrying for cover in the blackest darkness—is its reflection in a mirror. A case illustrating this point came to light recently in a little hamlet a few miles outside of Philadelphia.

In the village was a large, roomy but very old house, in which Daniel Morrow had lived the life of a recluse for many years. He seldom left it, made no friends among his neighbors and permitted no one to enter his home. Following his death a few months back, relatives sold the place and it passed into the hands of a man who decided to demolish it and erect a hotel on the site.

When the wreckers began work upon the

place, they were amazed to discover that the four walls of the bedroom formerly occupied by the old man consisted of mirrors, so that everything in the room would be reflected many times. Recalling the story that ghosts feared their reflection, the new owner made many inquiries, finally learning that years previous Morrow had been in partnership with a man who had committed suicide after the two had engaged in a bitter business quarrel. Soon after the tragedy, he sold his business and took up his lonely residence in the old house.

The natural belief was that the old man, fearing the specter of his partner would return to make trouble for him, constructed the mirror-lined room and spent all his hours there after dark, for self-protection.