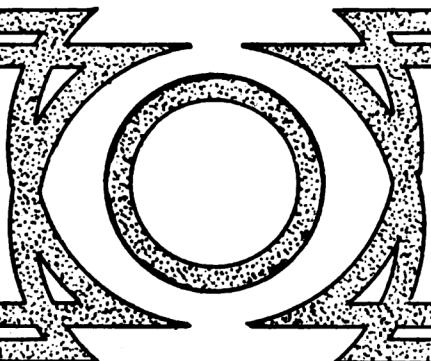


“ALLAH KNOWS BEST”

“WALLAHU d’ALAM”



A CHESS STORY
By
RAYMUND ALLEN
Illustrated by G. Henry Evison

A RAIN-LADEN gust of wind swept blustering into the Strand from a side street and, with a sudden wrench, turned inside-out the umbrella with which Jack Burnside was struggling to shelter the girl who clung to his arm.

“What a climate!” he exclaimed, with feeling.

The girl answered with a laugh and looked up at her *fiancé* with a face whose colour was heightened to a healthy red by the buffeting of the weather, her eyes dancing with a happiness that was not to be dimmed by any such trifles as an unseasonable squall in June. Her high spirits were infectious, and Jack Burnside laughed back at her as he reduced the rebellious umbrella once more to reason.

“Your hat, Lena, stands the weather better than my temper. Let’s go and get tea at some place where we can talk without having our words blown down our throats.”

He led her to a small *café*, where the hush from the ruffling wind gave a grateful sense of comfort. The click of a game of dominoes sounded from a corner, and there were chess-boards set out on some of the tables in

readiness for the customers who, later in the evening, might be expected to fill up the room. At this hour, however, there was no difficulty in finding a table out of earshot for quiet voices, and, when the waitress who brought their tea had retired again behind her counter, they were able to talk without fear of being overheard.

“Sugar, Jack? No, of course not! Cream, but no sugar—I must remember, or I shall be ‘giving the show away,’ as you call it, on our honeymoon. And now tell me all you have

been doing. Tell me how you are getting on with Messrs. Bosford and Tunning.”

“Bosford and Tunning? Fraudulent rascals! I am not getting on with them at all. I left them finally this morning.”

The girl looked at him with a tinge of anxiety in her expression.

“I couldn’t help it, Lena. They *are* rascals, and it was bound to come, sooner or later. This morning Bosford wanted me to lend a hand in one of their shady transactions, and when I refused he said that ‘if I wanted to come the lily-white saint over the firm’ I had better clear out at once—and I did.”

"Then what is the position now?"

"The position is 'where you was' or worse, because this won't make it any easier to get a job. The position is just this—that I am a recently-admitted solicitor who has chucked his first managing clerkship and whose total capital and credit amount to somewhere about five pounds. If you were a sensible girl you would cry off our engagement."

"Sense was never my strong point," she answered, with a confident smile. "But what about the Morton partnership? Is there really no chance?"

"My dear girl, you forget the condition. Where can I get a thousand pounds in two months, 'or at all,' as we say in pleadings?"

Her optimism was not to be damped. "Something else is sure to turn up. I feel certain you are going to get on—by hook or by crook."

"It would have been by crook if I had stayed with Bosford and Tunning."

Her manner sobered for a moment to a sweet seriousness.

"Don't worry, dear boy; you know I would wait for you all my life." He thanked her with his eyes, and she added, with a quick return to her lighter mood, "But, meanwhile, you must let me talk pots and pans and curtains, and settle what colour the drawing-room carpet is to be, and where the piano is to go."

The waitress came to remove the tea-tray and replaced the chess-board. Lena began to set up the pieces. "Let me see if I can remember where they have to go. I wish we had as much money as you can play chess."

"You stole that joke from *Punch*," Jack criticized.

"Well, I never pretended I got it honestly," she retorted; "but 'if you want to come the lily-white saint over the firm' you may send an acknowledgment."

Her merry spirit triumphed over the blankest of prospects, and for an hour they gave themselves up to the weaving of day-dreams.

None the less it was with an anxious mind that he returned a little later to the same table, after they had made an affectionate parting in the shadow of a doorway and he had seen her safely into her homeward-bound omnibus. The place afforded as cheap food and shelter as was to be obtained elsewhere, and was convenient enough for a mental review of the position in which he found himself. He must make enough money to marry Lena. That was the one point settled,

and his features set to a strong, almost fierce, look of determination as he tackled the question of how the resolve was to be carried out.

The death of his father, little more than a month before, had thrown him on his own resources, with his solicitor's qualification as his only asset of value. He had sought counsel from his father's old friend and legal adviser, "Cast-Iron" Morton, who carried inflexibility of dealing to the point of crankiness, and had never been known to fail by a jot in his undertakings or to bate by a tittle his claims. His pronouncement on Jack's case had been terse and characteristic. "I owe something to your father. I should like the luxury of a partner with some brains. If, in the next three months, you can come to me with a thousand pounds in your hand, I can afford to take you. Otherwise you must shift for yourself." And Jack's first shift for himself had been the association with the firm of Bosford and Tunning, that had been severed so abruptly that morning.

The chess-pieces remained as Lena had set them up at tea-time. His eyes were fixed upon them absently, while his mind was busy with the question whether Morton might be induced to modify the impossible condition of the thousand pounds, when he became aware that someone had taken the vacant chair at the opposite side of his little marble-topped table. As he glanced up it caused him only a mild degree of surprise to observe, from his complexion and cast of features, that the new-comer was of Indian nationality, for chess is the most cosmopolitan of games and London not the least so of cities.

"May I request the favour of a game with you?" the Indian asked, speaking with some formality, but no markedly foreign intonation, and bowing courteously as he waved a hand to indicate the chess-board. His eyes were fixed on Jack's face with a curious intensity, and he awaited his answer with an earnestness of manner that seemed hardly natural to so slight an occasion. Chess was Jack's favourite form of recreation, and it was an advertisement outside of that intellectual game as one of the inducements to enter that had led him to become an occasional customer of the *café*. He was always ready to play, and the nationality of the stranger would add some extra interest to the encounter.

"I shall be glad to play. Shall we draw for first move?"

"Will you begin, as you have the White?" the Indian offered, politely. "Do we play for a stake?"



"SHALL WE PLAY FOR OUR RINGS? A LESS IGNOBLE WAGER THAN FOR MONEY."

"If you prefer to, and so long as it is only a small one."

He imagined that the Indian had most probably visited the *café* before, and would propose the stake, customary among its frequenters, of a shilling.

Instead, he drew from his finger a ring, and pointed, as he laid it on the table, to the plain signet-ring, of small value, that Jack wore on his little finger.

"Shall we play for our rings? A less ignoble wager than for money."

Jack looked in surprise at the ring and the dark-skinned stranger. He held his knuckles towards him.

"Look, the stakes are not equal. My ring is not worth thirty shillings, while yours, even if it were paste—"

The Indian drew himself up, and there was a flash of offended pride from his eyes.

"The meanest servant of the Nawab Jahandar would scorn to wear a sham, and I, Hakim Yussuf, am among his most honoured."

The hauteur of his outraged dignity looked as real as did the fiery glints from the stone of his ring, and, if shams, the one was as masterly as the other.

Jack hesitated for a few moments and then laid his own ring on the table beside the other. His mettle was roused by the challenge, and he played well enough to risk a chance encounter with a stranger.

The Indian played cautiously, defending himself with a stubborn skill that taxed all his opponent's resources of attack. Some twenty moves or so were played on each side without any tangible advantage to either. Then the Hakim misjudged a critical position, and Jack found his opportunity to carry the Black entrenchment by assault, forcing mate a few moves later with an elegant sacrifice of a rook. He disguised his triumph with a polite commonplace on the luck of the game, but the Hakim seemed not in the least chagrined by his defeat. He bowed a graceful surrender and pushed the rings across the table.

"*Wallahu d'alam!* Truly you are a great player, and Allah knows best. The loss of my ring is a small matter, but the service you were born to do me is great, and the reward I offer no mean one."

"I born to do you a service! I never met you before in my life. How can I do you any service?"

"How else than by your great skill in the greatest of games? It is written on your forehead." Again he fixed Jack's eyes with

his deep, inscrutable gaze. "You will come with me to the house of my master, the Nawab Jahandar, and for this night the skill with which Allah has gifted you shall be used in his service. I swear by the Prophet there is no danger, but the rest I can better explain later."

The request was a strange one, and the whole situation entirely incomprehensible to Jack's common sense. In other circumstances the touch of the romantic in his nature might have inclined him to take the risks of the adventure, but the thought of Lena and of the interview with "Cast-Iron" Morton, which he intended for the next day, restrained him.

"I can't imagine how you think I could be of any use to you, and in any case I cannot come." His eyes sought the figure of a little man seated at the far side of the room—a Polish Jew, and a real master of the game, to whose instructions he owed his own proficiency. "If first-class chess is all you want, Levinsky over there can give me pawn and two, and I should think he would be ready to help you at a cheaper tariff than for diamond rings."

The Hakim shook his head. "Allah knows best. It is written on your forehead."

"I am sorry I am not able to oblige you," Jack answered, rather stiffly. He found it difficult to conceive how his knowledge of chess could be applied to the service of his late antagonist; and if there was not a mere pretence, hiding some darker motive, why should he refuse to enlist Levinsky? There was an uncomfortable mystery about the business, and he felt half inclined to insist on returning the ring. He said good evening, and crossed the room to where Levinsky was sitting. For a short space the Hakim stood, as though deliberating whether to offer some fresh inducement, and then went out.

"You know all about gems, Levinsky; tell me whether that is a real diamond."

The little Jew's eyes glittered almost as brightly as the facets of the stone that he held gloatingly in his fingers.

"Real? Yes, it is real. It is magnificent!" He turned it slowly to watch the sparkle of the coloured lights. "It is yours?"

"I have just won it from the Indian you saw me playing with."

Levinsky looked up with a little, cunning smile, and his fingers still played with the ring.

"You old rascal, I believe you think I stole it," Jack remarked, with a laugh. "It

was all perfectly fair. What do you suppose I ought to get if I sold it?"

"If you part with it for less than a hundred and fifty you will be swindled."

On leaving the *café*, half an hour later, Jack turned down one of the streets that lead to the Thames Embankment. It was not the shortest way to his lodgings, but the weather had cleared up and the fresh air was pleasant.

A hundred and fifty pounds! He must not count his chickens too soon, but he could find no flaw in his title to the ring that was hidden in his safest pocket, and he knew Levinsky to possess a knowledge of precious stones that made his estimate likely to be fairly accurate. True, a hundred and fifty pounds would not buy the Morton partnership, but it made a world of difference, all the same. It gave a respite from immediate necessity, before the expiry of which he might hope to find employment that would bring marriage a good deal nearer than it had seemed that morning as he slammed the door of Bosford and Tunning's office behind him. And Lena's delight when he should tell her! He was in a mood to look at the bright side of things, and he reflected that it was no small compensation for being out of a job that to-morrow he would be free to catch her on her daily walk across the Park to her morning's work—

The train of pleasant anticipations was snapped suddenly. In place of the illuminated clock-face of Westminster and the whisky advertisement on the south side of the river came a sudden darkness, a clinging compression about his head and shoulders. He tried to fling out his arms, but they were imprisoned. He tried to shout, but, though his mouth was free, his voice was stifled in narrow confinement, as though he had awokened in a coffin to find himself a victim of premature burial. But he still could breathe, and the immediate fear of death by suffocation was relieved. He felt himself lifted off his legs and laid down again on something soft. Had something fallen on him from Charing Cross Bridge? Or a gas-main exploded and deprived him of the senses of sight and hearing? Hardly, or he would have felt some pain. A sort of gurgle, something like that which precedes a voice through a telephone, sounded in one ear, and then the words, "I swear by the Prophet you are in no danger." It was the voice of the Hakim, and the same words that he had used in the *café*.

Jack made another effort to use his limbs and voice, and then lay still to await what

else might be in store. Presently, from the jolt and occasional impulse of his body to one side as they took the corners, he realized that he must be in a motor-car. This phase lasted but a few minutes only, and then he felt that he was being lifted out of the car and, as he surmised, carried into some house. Then, almost as suddenly as it had been imposed, the restraint was removed from his limbs and senses. A dazzle of bright light made it difficult to take in quickly the new surroundings. He recovered his effective vision just in time to see an Indian servant leave the room and carry with him some odd-shaped article that might have been made of steel and leather, the ingenious contrivance, as he guessed, by which his recent capture had been effected.

Facing the chair in which he had been placed sat the Hakim, with unmoved countenance. Jack stared at him in bewilderment. The violence of the sensations through which he had just passed had deprived him, for the time, of his full grip on reality. Keen resentment at the outrage he had been subjected to would, he felt vaguely, have been natural to the occasion, but, in fact, a pleasant sense of physical comfort, a curiosity devoid of apprehension to learn what the next turn of events would be, were his dominant sensations. It was the Hakim who spoke first.

"I implore you to accept my most humble apologies." He accompanied the words with a bow that might have swept away a hundred insults. "If you can stifle your just resentment till you have heard my explanation, I shall offer you substantial amends."

"Your action does seem to call for some sort of justification," Jack answered, with mild irony.

"Legally it has none whatever," the Indian answered calmly. "You have a case against me for assault and false imprisonment so clear that I should not think of resisting it. So much of the law of tort I can still remember from the days when I was a student of the Inner Temple."

"Then why, in the name of all you hold sacred, have you dragged me into this Arabian Nights' adventure?"

"You name it well," the Hakim said, with a smile. "You may well feel that your experiences would have been more appropriate to the Bagdad of Haroun al-Raschid than to the present day and Park Lane. That is where you are, in the house of the Nawab Jahandar and—let me assure you again—in no kind of danger."

He rose from his chair and, in proof that his intentions were not inhospitable, placed by Jack's side a small table holding fruit and cigarettes, as though it had been set out in expectation of a guest.

There seemed to be no better course than to accept the strange situation at its face value. Jack lighted a cigarette and the Hakim began his explanation. "I, Hakim Yussuf, owe my position of physician and secret counsellor to the Nawab to what poor skill I possess in the game of chess—and now the same cause threatens my destruction."

"Your destruction? I should have rather thought it threatened mine," Jack exclaimed, remembering that it was his favourite hobby that had led him into his present position.

The Hakim again reassured him, and continued: "The Nawab is devoted to the game with a passion that perhaps you cannot understand—that perhaps only the fiery sun of our Indian climate could engender. And the Khan of Zamin—my master's great rival in politics, as his ancestors were in war—is as mad, if you call it so, in the same way. To either a triumph on the board is as glorious as a victory in battle, and the stakes they play for are sometimes as great. To-night the deciding game is to be finished in a contest between the two Courts for the surrender of a coveted bit of territory on their side against a Royal palace on ours. No mean stakes, you will concede. And, further, my own position—perhaps my life—hangs on the issue."

"Your life? On the win or loss of a mere game of chess!"

"It sounds fantastic," the Hakim admitted, "but 'East is East and West is West,' as your Kipling says. What may seem incredible in Park Lane may be commonplace in the realm of the Nawab Jahandar. It is a condition of the match that members of the household on either side may consult as to the moves that should be played. Yesterday, at one point in the game that remains unfinished, the Nawab said, 'We will take their knight.' But I said, 'May I be your ransom! If we take their knight they will defeat us, but if we take the pawn there is a sure road to victory.' The Nawab insisted that his move was the right one, and I, for the sake of the great stakes, was obstinate to take the pawn, till at last he flushed with anger and said, 'Be it so, then. You shall finish the game without my help—to your reward and honour if you win, to your disgrace if you lose.' And thus it is that I am threatened with destruction, for I had over-

looked a manœuvre of the other side. I can find no answer to what I foresee will be their next move. Unless you can, it may well be that my days in the sun are numbered."

"But how," Jack asked, "did you come to pitch upon me as the one to help you? There may be a hundred better players in London, and one of them, Levinsky, I pointed out to you in the *café*."

Hakim Yussuf paused for a moment, embarrassed to confess to what the Englishman might think a foolishness.

"It was thus, though to your Western mind it may seem idle superstition. This evening I thought I would revisit the Inner Temple, where, as I have told you, I once was a law student. As I passed along the Strand, wondering how, if Allah willed, my fate might be averted, the word 'Chess' stood suddenly before my eyes. I entered, feeling that I was guided from above. I found you sitting there. In front of you was an empty chair and the pieces set up in readiness, as though you expected me. *Wallahu d'alām*. It was surely the guiding of Allah."

"You would have done better to get Levinsky," Jack answered, with a touch of scepticism. He smiled as he remembered that it was Lena who had set up the pieces. It added a whimsical touch to events that his lover's hand should have fired such a train of adventure. Yet, after all, the Indian might be right. Jack was not so materially-minded as to doubt that the ways of Providence—or Allah—were strange, or that they might be working for his own as well as the other's good.

"Your method of seeking my help was, to put it gently, unconventional. But, since you think I can give it, I am willing to try."

"Then I hereby appoint you, as is within my authority, a member for the time being of the Nawab's household."

As he spoke he held in his hand a seal with an inscription engraved in Arabic characters on the stone.

"Here is your firman, your badge of office. You need only show it if your presence should be questioned, and afterwards, if you care to, you may keep it as a memento." He presented the seal to Jack. "Your salary for the one night of your employment will be five hundred guineas, as much, I should think, as you would get from a jury if you took proceedings. You will decide the moves that we shall play, and if you win the amount shall be doubled."

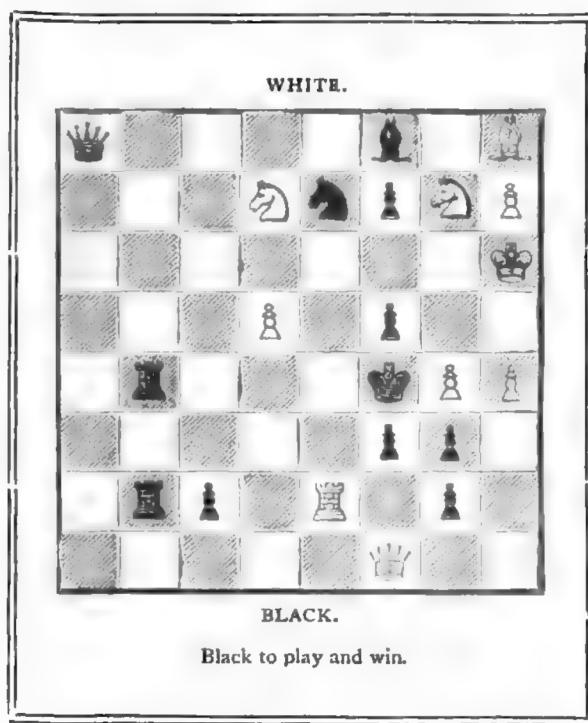
"And if I lose?"

"If you lose you take five hundred and we cry quits. But—for me—I must bow to the will of Allah."

Before a low table, inlaid with exquisite workmanship in squares of gold and ebony, Jack Burnside sat striving to keep his mind concentrated on the ivory pieces. At his shoulder was Hakim Yussuf, and to one side, on a seat raised on a sort of dais to command a better view of the board, the Nawab Jahan-dar sat grimly watching the progress of the struggle, but offering no comment or suggestion on the play. That was the Hakim's responsibility. He sat there as impassive and motionless as an image of Fate, awaiting the issue.

At a similar table at the other end of the long room sat another group—the camp of the Khan of Zamin—and at long intervals, for the play was slow, an attendant marched solemnly from one board to repeat on the other each move as it was played.

In forces on the board the Nawab, for whose side Jack played the Black, had some advantage—a rook against a knight on the balance and two extra pawns. But the position was intricate, and the Black king was threatened with an attack that appeared irresistible—as the following diagram will



show. It was a case where desperate risks must be ventured. Jack played his queen to a square where it could be captured for nothing—a Greek gift, for, if taken, he

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could give mate in two. It was too much to expect that the other side should fall into the shallow trap, but there was nothing better and a move had to be played. The Khan and his advisers took a long time to consider their reply, and when at last the attendant approached to register their answer on Jack's board his pulses beat quicker in the suspense of the moment. The dark fingers hovered for an instant or two over the pieces, and then Jack found that the fatal gift was rejected. The White queen was moved to a square where she threatened mate on the next move. Jack leant forward once more to the board, and for half an hour, it might have been, strained every faculty of his mind to find an answer. A check seemed the only way to avert the impending disaster, and even that, so far as he could see, would only delay the inevitable end. In desperation he gave the check. It involved an offer of a rook, but again the Khan refused. The White king was moved to a place of safety, to a square where he could only be checked by the sacrifice of a rook for nothing. The checks must be kept up. Jack accepted the inexorable logic of the case. His second rook followed the first to destruction.

He leant back in his chair, when he had played the move, for a brief rest from the strain of calculation. To his hard-wrought brain there came a curious sense of unreality in his surroundings. Those Indians over there, their dark faces fixed solemnly on the little ivory figures of the chess-men, were they real? That idol-like figure of a grim Nawab, was he really part of a sane, substantial world? Or were they all parts merely of some dreamlike delusion? Was he, Jack Burnside, solicitor in search of a job, really playing chess for an Indian palace and a man's life?

The attendant approached and removed a rook from the board. The sense of unreality was brushed away. Fantastic as the situation was, it was real enough, and his personal stake in the matter the Morton partnership and Lena's happiness.

Spurred by the thought, he bent his mind to a final, straining effort. His brain responded. It seemed gifted with a flashing, unwonted clearness. Through a long series of checks his mental vision followed the movements of the pieces, till his pulses throbbed and fluttered at a sudden glimpse of victory. He could force a brilliant mate!

Twice again he ran through the series of moves to make quite certain before, with a trembling hand, he dared to play the queen.



"HE WAS GLARING AT THE BOARD WITH A

"*Kaza wa Kadar!*" The last move had startled the Nawab from his assumed composure. He was glaring at the board with a light of malignant ferocity in his dark eyes.

"What does he say?" Jack asked the Hakim.

"Fate and destiny are against him.' He thinks we are surely mad to throw away our queen."

"Tell him that in seven more moves we shall mate them."

"Is it truly so?" the Hakim asked, and Jack nodded.

"*Wallahu d'alam!* It was surely the guiding of Allah!"

The remaining moves on the part of White were practically forced, and the game went more quickly. Jack's eyes followed the attendant as he crossed the room to communicate a move to the other side. He had exchanged a pawn that had reached the eighth square for a knight and not a queen. He could see from their startled gestures and hurried consultations that the reply had taken them by surprise, and, presently, that

they realized its fatal import in the game. The attendant did not return. Instead the Khan of Zarnin himself rose from his seat and, with the dignity of a conquered monarch, advanced to present to the Nawab Jahandar the White king in token of surrender.

Lena entered the Park at the Marble Arch, and a little farther on her face lighted up with a gleam of happy recognition, as she caught sight of Jack Burnside coming towards her. "Why, Jack! How perfectly lovely! I never thought of meeting you. But what have you been doing? You look as though you had been up all night, and, my dear boy, what have you done to your hat?"

"You've guessed it in one. I have been up all night. No, you needn't look dismayed. Everything is all right. A thousand times more than all right, Lena darling. But you have given me a time!"

"I have?"

"Yes, you. Wasn't it your hand that set up the pieces on the board?"

She looked puzzled, but she could see from

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LIGHT OF MALIGNANT FEROCITY IN HIS DARK EYES."

his face that the mystification was a pleasant one. "Tell me at once what you have been doing. Tell me where you have been and where you are going. Tell me in three words, or we part for ever."

"I have been breakfasting with the Nawab Jahangir and the Khan of Zamin, and I am on my way to the City to arrange a deed of partnership with a man called Morton. But I see you don't believe the first word of my story, so I sha'n't tell you the rest."

"If you can't help being a tantalizing, teasing pig, I suppose you can't. I wish you a very good morning, Mr. Burnside."

She turned away with a mock air of displeasure and walked to the nearest chair under the trees. He drew another chair up

beside hers and sat down. "If you can't help being a dear, snappy, beautiful pig, I suppose you can't. But look at this." He put an envelope into her hand and watched her expression of wonder as she examined the contents. "One thousand and fifty pounds in genuine Bank of England notes, my golden goose! And a diamond ring and—wait a moment—you must look at this before I begin." He gave her the seal that had been presented to him by Hakim Yussuf.

"What are the words, Jack? What do they mean? What does the whole affair mean?"

"The words are '*Wallahu d'alam*.' They mean 'Allah knows best.' I rather think that is the meaning of the whole affair as well."