

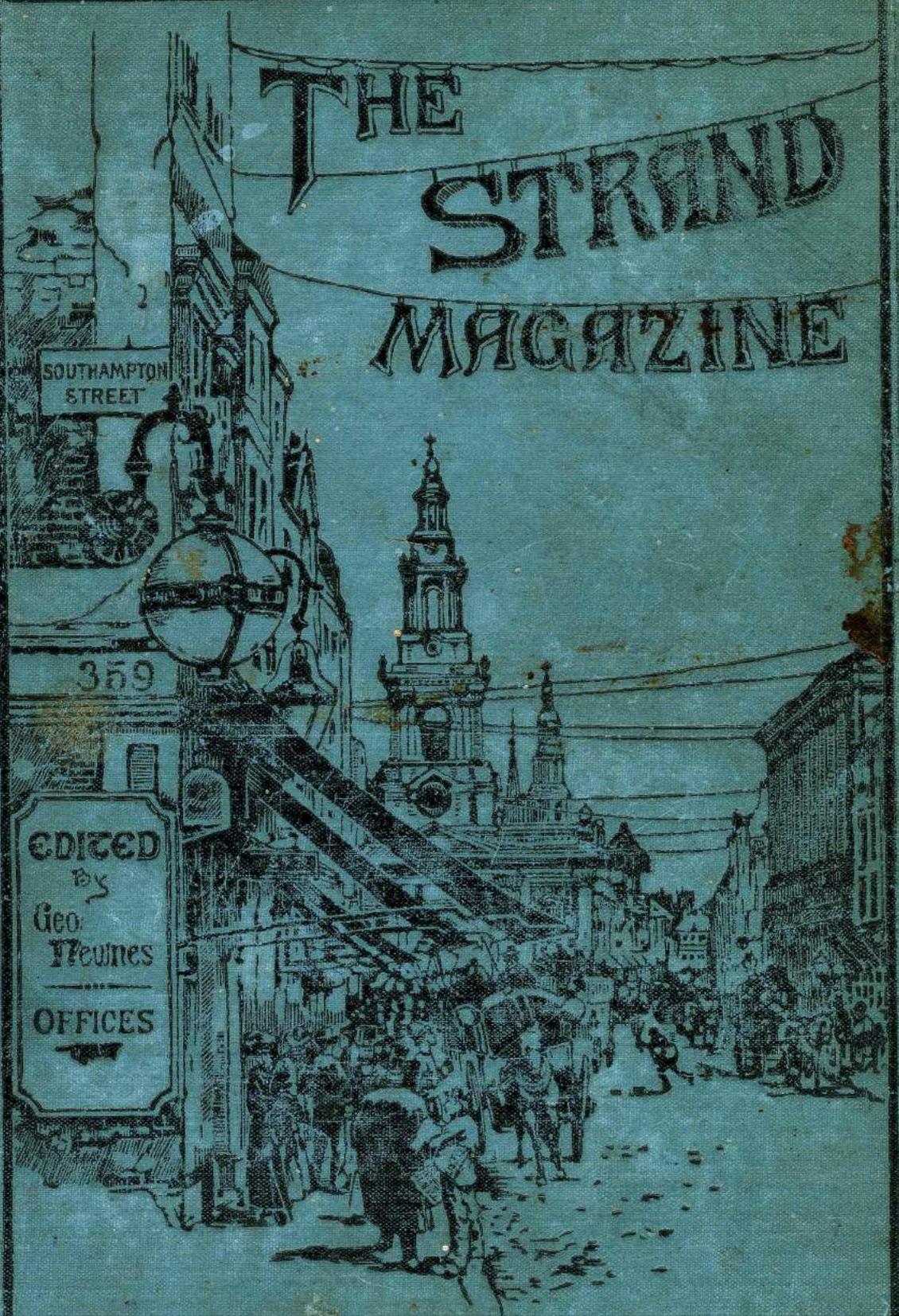
THE STRAND MAGAZINE

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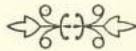


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An Illustrated Monthly

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GEO. NEWNES

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BEING THE ACCOUNT OF AN EXCITING GAME OF CHESS.

BY RAYMUND ALLEN.

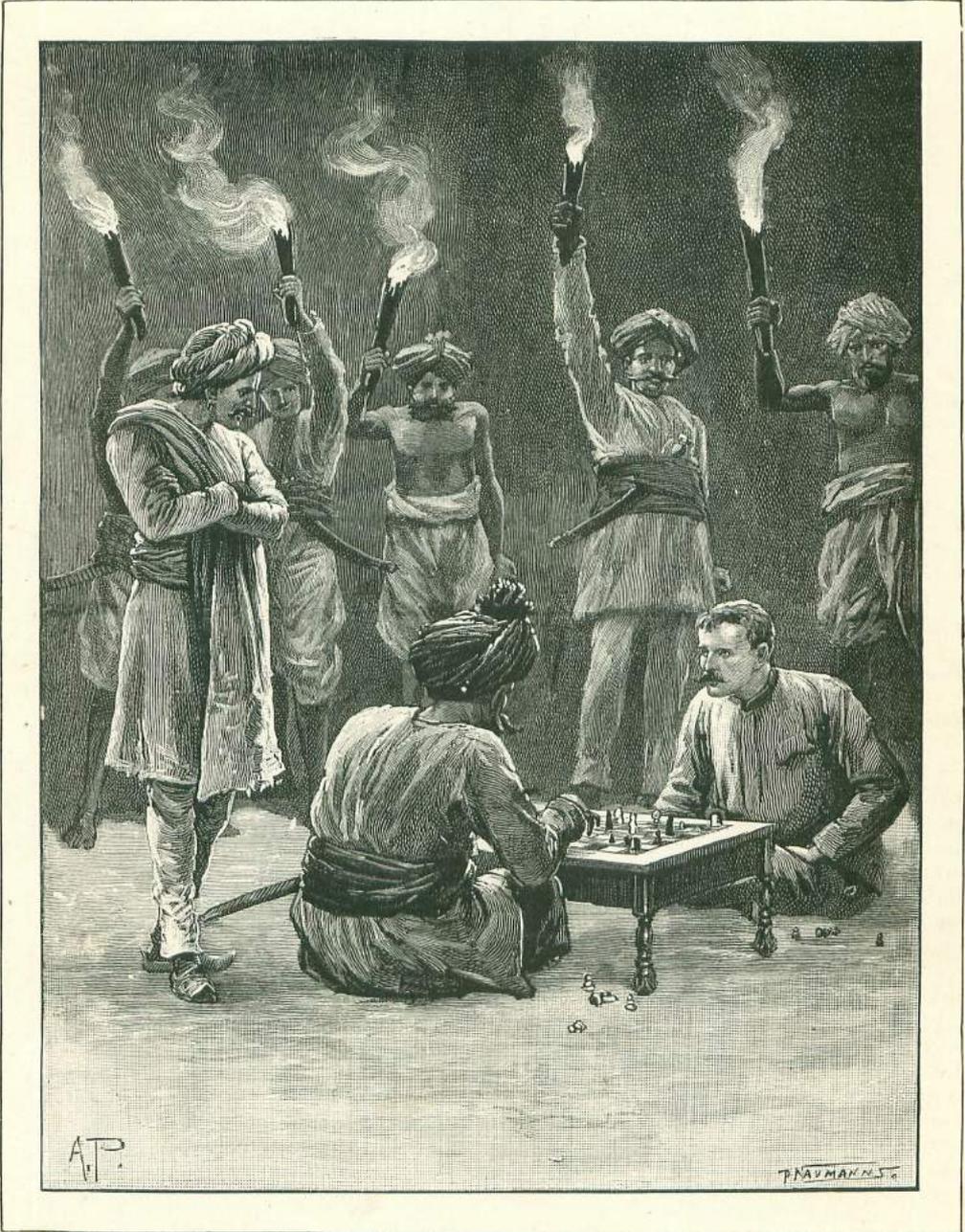


ASTORM of wind and rain had come on suddenly, and, as there were no cabs to be got near at hand, there was nothing for it but to set out on foot. I was going to dine with old Colonel Bradshaw, whose acquaintance I had lately made at the local chess club, and I was due at half-past seven, so I pulled my coat collar up to my ears and started off through the muddy streets. Several times in the course of my exceedingly unpleasant walk the foulness of the weather had given rise to a wish on my part that I had invented some excuse for staying by my own comfortable fireside. Once arrived, however, the cheery welcome of the old soldier quickly dispersed all regrets for my own hearth, and restored me to the good-humour necessary for the proper appreciation of a good dinner.

Colonel Bradshaw had served in India during the time of the Mutiny, had received a severe wound in the left leg, which still caused him to limp, and had led to his comparatively early retirement from the service. He had returned to England on his retirement, and had lately leased a snug little house in our town, which he apparently intended to occupy for the rest

of his days in the quiet enjoyment of peaceful obscurity. I had made his acquaintance, as I have said, at the chess club, where, I believe, he used to spend most of his evenings, and where he had earned the reputation of a decidedly strong player. I had not as yet encountered him over the board.

In his note of invitation, the Colonel had asked me to bring my men with me, as he had left his own at the club-rooms, on the occasion of a match for which they had been called into requisition, and it was accordingly my set of chessmen which we now arranged in the customary order of battle. To my annoyance, however, I found that one of my black knights was missing, and I cast my eyes round the room in search of some article on which we might for the occasion confer the spurs of knighthood. On the Colonel's writing-table, acting as a paperweight, I saw the very object we were in want of—a black knight. Not of the orthodox Staunton pattern, it is true, nor indeed were its grotesquely protruding eyes and maliciously grinning mouth characteristic of any pattern with which I was familiar; but still it was undeniably a black chess knight, and would serve our turn admirably. My host hesitated, and even seemed the least trifle



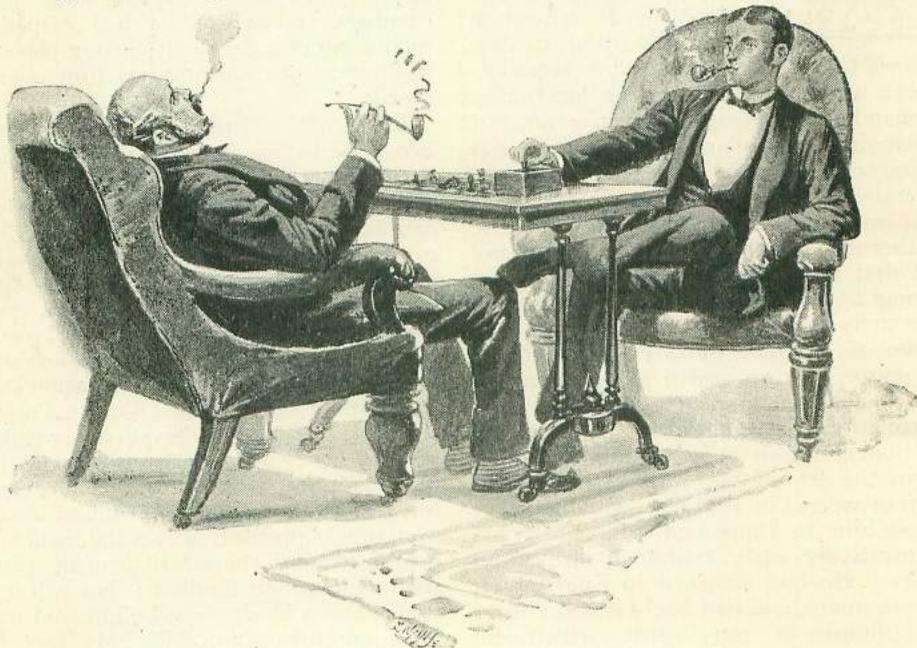
THE BLACK KNIGHT.

annoyed when I suggested the expediency of pressing it into the service. The beast certainly looked incongruous among my Stauntons, but something in his human eyes and lifelike expression of malicious humour caught my fancy, and I asked to be allowed to play with the black men. The Colonel acquiesced, but declined the privilege of first move, which usually goes with the white. We accordingly drew for the move, and I won it.

Led partly by my fancy for the black knight, and partly "to take my opponent out of the books," I began the game by making the paperweight first take the field. As I did so, I fancied my host gave a little start, and, as he certainly appeared to be annoyed at my irregular opening, I was sorry that I had begun by a move which I supposed he objected to on the ground that it generally leads to a close game. He said nothing, however, and the game was continued for some time by very ordinary moves on both sides, and presently I began to be absorbed in the study of the position and in the endeavour to gauge the strength of my opponent. For a time he seemed to play a decidedly good game, and, in spite of continuous concentration on my part, to maintain some superiority of position. Presently, however, he embarked on a series of moves which appeared to give me a decisive

advantage and to have no more rational object than the capture of my swarthy champion at a ruinous sacrifice of his own pieces. This eccentric proceeding puzzled me, and, added to his previous hesitation about using the substitute, excited my curiosity. So, relinquishing the object of winning the game in the ordinary way, I devoted all my skill to the defence of my king's knight, as though it were a *pièce coiffée* with which I was pledged to give checkmate. Rooks were sacrificed for bishops, and bishops exchanged for inoffensive pawns, while the kings stood disregarded on their knights' squares, and the fight raged hotly round the black knight, who seemed to bear a charmed life and sprang nimbly about the board, always evading my opponent's headlong attempts at his capture. At last, in desperation, he offered the bribe of the white queen, but I obstinately refused to part at any price with my dusky cavalier, and a few moves later brought the game to a successful end with a smothered mate, the very bone of contention inflicting the deathblow.

The Colonel leaned back in his armchair and for some minutes continued silently to blow out thick clouds of smoke. After a pause, during which his brow was compressed into a frown, as though by the contemplation of some bewildering enigma to which he could not find the clue, he broke



"THE COLONEL LEANED BACK IN HIS ARMCHAIR."

silence with the remark, that "there were more things in heaven and earth—" and then again relapsed into silence in apparent forgetfulness of my presence. As he made no further remark for some time, I rose from my seat, and, muttering something about its being late, prepared to take my leave. "Wait a moment; look here," said the Colonel, rising to stop me with the air of a man who has formed a sudden determination, and pointing to the board, "I daresay you wonder what on earth I was driving at in that game?"

"Well, you appeared to me to be driving mainly at that outlandish black knight instead of at my king," I replied.

"Exactly, and perhaps I ought to apologise for having spoilt the game by giving way to an absurd fancy; but if you will sit down again and refill your pipe, I will tell you a curious experience which I had many years ago in India, and which you will perhaps admit as an excuse for my eccentric play to-night."

"Nothing I should like better," I replied; "for I confess you have considerably roused my curiosity."

"Well then, I think I can partly satisfy it;" and my host threw a fresh log on to the fire, stretched himself in the chair, and began.

"I don't know whether you take any interest in such subjects as hypnotism, thought-reading, and so on; but, if you do, you may perhaps be able to form some scientific theory to explain my story. Personally I used to be very unbelieving in such matters, but my scepticism was considerably modified by the adventure I am going to tell you of. Very well, then. On one occasion in India, many years ago, I had got leave from my regiment for a few weeks in order to join a shooting expedition which had been got up by one of my greatest friends, a man many years older than I was then, and of much higher rank in the service. When, however, I arrived at our appointed meeting-place, I found my friend, the General, preparing for a more warlike excursion against a marauding tribe who had lately been extending their cattle raids across our frontier. The shooting expedition having fallen through, I readily accepted the General's suggestion that I should accompany his force as a volunteer, and see some sport of a more exciting kind. A common risk, even when comparatively insignificant, inclines men to readier cordiality towards the companions they may

shortly be going to lose, and I was soon on excellent terms with the other officers, who were as pleasant a set of fellows as I have ever met. Nothing of any interest happened till we were across the enemy's frontier and the force was encamped one night under a brilliant moon on a hill overlooking a thickly wooded valley.

"I was strolling round camp with a cigar, when I was joined by one of the younger officers, who, not being on duty, was refreshing himself after the day's march in the same way, and we continued our walk together. We stopped to admire the view at a point where we could look down on the valley, and presently we fell into an argument as to whether a bright surface which caught the moonlight in a glade of the wood below was water or a smooth slab of rock. It happened that my companion particularly prided himself on the keenness of his sight, and a few days before had won a small bet from me on the subject. I, too, thought that I had good eyes, and, feeling sure that he was wrong in his contention that he could detect a gentle ripple on the surface in dispute, I offered him a second bet that it was rock, and proposed to settle the question by myself going down to the spot. He accepted my bet, and, as he was not at liberty to leave the camp, I gaily started down the hill alone, telling him with a laugh to have the stakes ready by the time I returned, and never for a moment supposing that I was running any risk in the affair.

"I rapidly made my way down over the short grass of the hillside, and, marking the direction of the spot in question, soon plunged into the darkness of the wood, the cavernous depth of whose shadows was enhanced by an occasional glint of moonshine. I am not naturally superstitious. I have no particular aversion to midnight graveyards or haunted rooms, but I must confess I felt an uncommonly disagreeable feeling of something like dread when I got inside that wood. Everything was absolutely dead and still. Not the faintest rustle of a leaf, not the crick of an insect, nor murmur of water, but dense and awful blackness! It excited my nerves. I almost imagined I saw black shapes moving under the trees, though it was quite impossible that anything not luminous should show against such an inky background. I felt my way cautiously, stopping constantly to hear if anything was moving near me. What cracks the twigs under my feet gave!

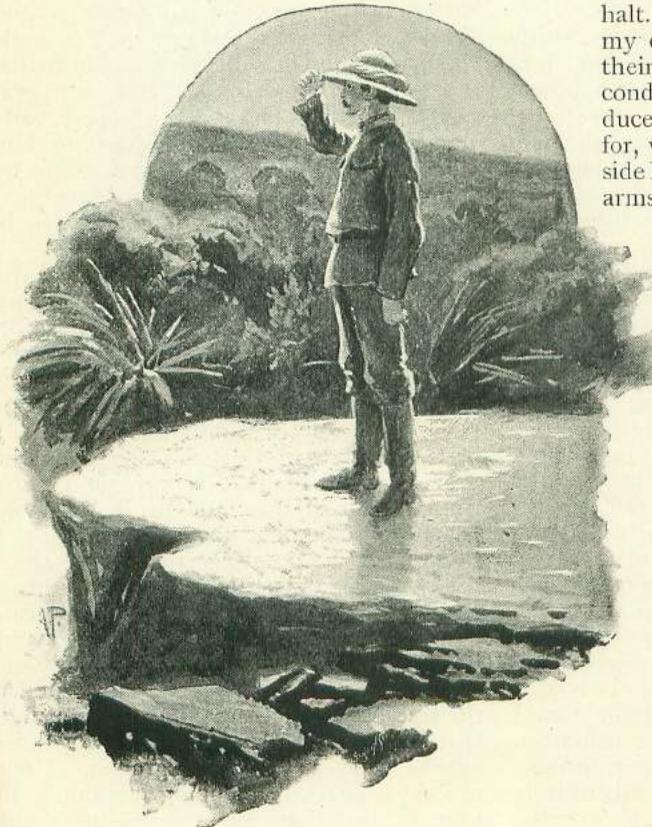
What a resounding crash reverberated in the gloomy shades when my foot set a loose stone rolling! My nerve was gone, and I felt horribly uncomfortable. I would gladly have paid my bet to be back again in camp, but I was bound to go through with my search now that I had once begun, and I should make myself a butt for the wit of the regiment if I turned back half-way to confess myself scared by the dark. After a longer time and with more difficulty than I had anticipated, I reached the slab of rock, for such it proved to be. Here I was clear of the trees, and I stood for a few moments in the bright moonlight, so that my friend above, who I knew would be watching for me to emerge from the shadow, might see that it was not water on which I stood. Then I turned, and struck out energetically for the camp.

"I had not, however, pushed my way far through the undergrowth when I was tripped up suddenly by what I at first took to be some stout creeper or protruding root. I fell forward on my hands, and had

not time to get on my feet again before I learnt that it was no accident which had overthrown me. Before I had time to offer the least resistance, or even to utter a shout for help, I felt myself seized round the neck by a grip like a vice; a few seconds more, and I was gagged, bound, and carried off through the forest, quickly, but in silence. As soon as subsiding astonishment left room for any other sensation, I felt a paroxysm of rage, as well against my own folly in running into such a trap as against my sudden assailants, whom I cursed none the less heartily for my inability to utter a sound. The futility of passion under the circumstances gradually subdued me, if not to philosophic fortitude, at least to sufficient calmness to speculate on my probable fate and on the chances of escape. For some time I seemed to be borne down hill and over irregular ground; then we must have emerged from the jungle on to more even ground, for the pace became quicker and smoother. This may have gone on for some twenty minutes or half an hour,

and then my captors came to a halt. I was set on my feet, and my eyes and mouth released from their bandages. This change of condition did not, however, conduce to my comfort or reassurance; for, while an armed native on each side held me firmly by my pinioned arms, a third presented a huge horse-pistol at my head at a yard's distance. For a few instants I endured an agony of suspense. I involuntarily shut my eyes, and waited for the bullet to crash through my brain.

"I have met many men who have at some time or other looked death pretty closely in the face, and you must often have heard it said that a man's mind at such moments reviews in a flash long periods of past time with an almost supernatural vividness of perception, but I didn't feel anything of this. I only felt that I might be dead in another second, and then, with a determination to 'die game,' which was rather an animal sensation than an articulate thought, I set my teeth and opened my eyes to



"IN THE BRIGHT MOONLIGHT."

meet those of my enemy. The pistol was still directed at my head, and the grim Indian still kept his finger on the trigger. I faced him defiantly, and, as though unwilling to change a dramatic situation which interested him, he still

chance of escape by leaving me the management of my horse.

"After about an hour's hard riding, during which the rapid motion and the blowing of the cool night air on my face and hands acted as a sedative on my racked nerves, we reached the encampment of the hostile tribe against which the expedition had been sent out. And now came the strangest part of my adventures; the part which bears on my eccentric play to-night."

Here Colonel Bradshaw paused to stir the smouldering log in the grate to a bright blaze, and then, staring into the fire and keeping the poker in his hands as he leaned forward in his chair, went on with his story, more slowly at first, but with growing animation of voice, which gradually rose to the eloquence of excitement as he seemed to forget his immediate surroundings, and to live once again through the distant scene he was describing.

"The human brain," he resumed, "is incapable, I imagine, of continuing to experience any intense sensation for very long. It reaches the maximum tension, and then one set of perceptive faculties becomes deadened. The previous incidents of the night had exhausted my capacity for fear, and, as I was led before the chief of the tribe to hear his decree concerning me, I awaited the decision with indifference. I was keenly alive to every detail of my surroundings, and noted the expression of every face, and yet I seemed somehow to have lost my own individuality; to be watching myself as an actor in a scene with which I had no personal concern, but only looked at from some outside point of view. The moon was now hidden behind a hill,



"THE PISTOL WAS STILL DIRECTED AT MY HEAD."

kept the same menacing posture, while I longed for the flash and the end before my nerve should fail.

"At last he spoke. He spoke a dialect which I only imperfectly followed, but I understood him to say that if I tried to escape I should be shot on the spot. I felt no confidence that I was not being reserved for a more horrible death, but the instinct of self-preservation kept me passive. When at last the pistol was lowered, and I no longer stood in momentary expectation of death, I looked round me and perceived that I was in the middle of a group of some half dozen Indians, and as many horses. On to one of these latter I was lifted, and secured in the saddle by leathern thongs, my captors not choosing to give me the

but some twenty torches lit up the spot with their lurid flames. The party that had caught me had obviously been sent out to reconnoitre the movements of the English force, and the chief had been beguiling the time of their absence with nothing less than a game of chess.

"I was the less surprised at the nature of his pastime, as I knew that the game was widely spread in India, and had played it with natives myself, and knew in what points their game differed from our European rules. The chief's antagonist was a man whom I imagined, though I can't say exactly what suggested the idea, to be the priest of the tribe. He was shorter than the others, but his face suggested an extraordinarily active mind, and this, combined with his regularity of feature, would have made him a strikingly handsome type if it had not been for the fearful malignity of his expression. I wish I could give you some faint idea of that man's face, for it was the most terribly sinister face I have ever seen. His back had been turned towards me at first, but from the moment when I met the scrutiny of his black deep-set eyes, which glared on me with a look of mocking, triumphant devilry that must have been borrowed from the fiend below, I was fascinated, and could see nothing but that one diabolical face. If there is any truth in the Eastern belief in possession by evil spirits, a demon looked through that man's eyes. A shiver ran through my frame as I met his gaze, and I felt that he was exercising some subtle influence over me, against which every fibre of my body, every atom of my being, stiffened in revolt. I felt that unless I exerted the whole of my will-force in resistance to the dread spell he was casting over me, I should lose myself in his identity, and become the creature of his wicked will. It was not physical fear that I felt. I had passed through that stage, and I believe I should have met death with firmness, but I felt that my whole personality was at the death-grapple with that fearful being—a mysterious deadly struggle, fought in neither act nor word, with the powers of darkness impersonated.

"While all this was going on in me, the chief must have been listening to an account of my capture, though I was unconscious of any words being spoken near me, till the priest turned from me to him, and, pointing to the chessboard which stood on a sort of low table, made a suggestion which at first I did not fully grasp.

Its meaning was soon made clear to me, however. I had some knowledge of their dialect, and most expressive pantomime conveyed the rest. I was to play a game of chess with the chief; the stakes, my life against a safe conduct to the English lines. Never before had I encountered so terrible an opponent, and never in the history of the royal game had so fateful an issue been fought out on the battlefield of the sixty-four squares. I took my seat opposite the chief, and the torchbearers formed a wide ring round the table, looking, as the dancing torch-flames shone on their dark faces and limbs, like so many stalwart statues of bronze. Within the circle, and a little behind the king, stood the evil priest, motionless, with folded arms, including me and the board in his keen, hateful gaze. I knew exactly where he stood before I looked at him, and again I felt the same dread fascination working on me that I had felt when I first set eyes on him. The chief moved the pieces indeed, but I was conscious in some subtle way that it was against his attendant's mind that I was pitted—that the former was scarcely more than an automaton under the thralldom of the priest's marvellous will, and the game itself only a sort of emblem or shadow of our inward contest of mind and personality.

"I played appropriately enough, with the white pieces, and the game itself might have afforded an expressive symbol of the antagonism of the light and dark races, of the clear, bright West with the mystic, sombre East, but the thought did not occur to me then. To me it was rather a struggle between the intangible powers of good and evil—a realisation in my own self of the eternal struggle of the universe. We played very slowly, and in absolute silence. No word was spoken nor sign made when either king was checked. Hour after hour the priest kept the same motionless posture behind his chief, who played with the same monotonously mechanical movement of the hand, the same vacant mesmerised expression on his face. Hour passed after hour, unmeasured by any clock, unmarked by any change except in the position of the pieces on the board. The chief, or rather the priest, played well; and, though time after time I seemed on the point of gaining a decisive advantage, some unforeseen move always deferred my victory.

"One piece in particular repeatedly thwarted my combinations. Again and

again it constituted the weak point in a series of moves which should have brought me victory. Again and again, when, after straining every faculty of my brain, I made my move and raised my eyes to watch in the priest's face the effect of a stroke to which I saw no reply, a faint mocking smile would curl for a moment his cruel lips, and the black knight would be moved once more, threatening dangers which I had overlooked, and dashing my premature hopes to the ground. It was as though some secret link existed between that particular bit of bone and the grim, ghoulish spectator of our game. Piece after piece was taken from the board and dropped on the sand at our feet; the ranks of pawns grew thinner and thinner, but still that one black knight, now the only piece left to my antagonist, sprang over the board, evading my deep-laid plans for his capture. The opening was long passed, the wavering fortune of the middle-game had waned with the long hours to an end-game. The inexorable moment which must decide my fate was close upon me.

"I turned for a moment from the board to ease the throbbing fever of my brain. A black veil of formless mist hid the stars and gave back the earth's heat, till I gasped for breath, and drops of nervous sweat ran down my forehead. There was a stifling oppression in the still air, as in the minutes before the first lightning flash darts from the charged thunder-cloud. The chief moved, and I spurred my flagging energies once more to the study of the game. Suddenly I seemed to be gifted with extraordinary powers

of calculation. I shut my eyes, and saw mentally the position change through every possible variation like the moving pattern of a kaleidoscope. I could have announced a mate. I knew, to the exclusion of any doubt, that I must win. I made my move, and then, concentrating every particle of the hatred and loathing with which the diabolical priest had inspired me into one flashing look of defiance, I tried to hurl from me the cursed influence of his malignant spirit and to crush it into subjection to mine. His face changed with a hideous contortion of defeated evil purpose, and then the whole devil in him rose to one supreme effort in answer to mine. He passed his hand lightly across his eyes, and leaning over his chief scored his forehead with a malevolent frown, the glare of his glittering eyes seeming to pierce to the brain of the head they nearly touched. The new spell began to work on the chief. An uneasy, puzzled look came into his face, and this

time it was with an uncertain, vacillating movement that he raised his hand to play. Again I looked at the priest. His expression was more bitterly mocking and more exultingly fiendish than ever as he directed my glance by a movement of his own to the hand which hovered over the board. His treacherous design was transmitted in a flash to my mind by some unexplained interaction of our brains.

An illegal move with the black knight, in defiance of the rules of the game, was to snatch the nearly won victory from my grasp. I saw the fatal square on which the piece would be placed, and I felt that if it reached it I was lost. There were no spectators to whom



"HIS FACE CHANGED WITH A HIDEOUS CONTORTION."

I could appeal against the glaring illegality, unconscious, no doubt, on the part of the hypnotised chief, and I should never be able to convince him afterwards of having won unfairly. I must prevent the move.

"The struggle entered on the final phase. I had shaken off the priest's mesmeric influence over my own will; now I must wrest the chief's will from the same thralldom by the exertion of a counter influence. It was the critical moment, the culminating point of conflict which must at last be decisive. The chief's hand raised the black knight slowly from the board, and as it began more slowly still to descend, I exerted all my power of will in one burst of straining endeavour to compel another move than the false one the priest intended. Every nerve in my body seemed strung to cracking. The wonderful sensation of my individuality, of the intangible essence which constitutes self, wrestling grimly for life with the demon-possessed priest, became intensified till my brain reeled. The chief's hand came slowly, slowly down; wavered as though uncertain on which square to place the piece. One final effort of will exhausted my faculties of brain and volition.

"The ordeal was over; light had triumphed over darkness as day had risen on night. I knew the priest's influence had been overcome, his spell cast off, without the evidence of the chess-board; I saw him fall backwards on the ground, every muscle of his body twisted in horrible contortion, as though some invisible power of the air were wreaking its vengeance on his ghastly, spasm-shaken form. The gruesome

sight ended quickly, the violence of the seizure was resistless; the muscles relaxed, the limbs stretched out, and he lay a corpse.

"How I parted from my strange entertainers I can't tell you. I only know that the chief honourably fulfilled his pledge, and that, as I galloped away with a guide for the English camp, over the fair, green earth, the woods and fields dancing to the breeze in the sunlight, the bright clouds carrying my thoughts to the depths of the blue expanse they sailed in, I experienced a new sensation of keen, ecstatic enjoyment of life for its own sake. All nature seemed to have a fuller, better meaning to me than ever before, to be the physical expression of boundless power and happiness moving with all-inclusive purpose towards some eternal end, and I myself was filled with a thrilling vitality in the consciousness of being a part of the joyous whole."

The Colonel made a long pause, and then, with a reluctant sigh, as he dismissed the wide expanse of glorious landscape which lay stretched out before his mind's eye, to return to the commonplace of his immediate surroundings, he picked up the paperweight from the board, and replacing it on the writing-table, concluded:—

"Later in the day, and after my return to the English camp, I found this little fellow in a pocket of my coat. Whether I had put it there myself or how it got there I don't know, and to what extent the incidents of the night were coloured by my own excited imagination is a chess problem I must leave to your own solution."

