

THE RAJAH'S CHESSMEN.

BY ERNEST DELANCEY PIERSON.



HE street he entered was remote and shabby. At one time in the city's history it must have been an aristocratic quarter, but now was given over to the poorest classes. The fine iron work about the doors and windows was eaten with rust, while the walls of the buildings were seamed and scarred as if they had stood through a bombardment.

The gloomy desolation of the place with its relics of former grandeur accorded well with the young man's mood. Life for him had lost its savor and only the memories of the past remained.

What surprised Lascelle was to find in such a mean street a shop devoted to the sale of curios. Loving art in all its phases, he could not resist the temptation to stop and peer in the window.

At first his eyes, unaccustomed to the light, caught only a confused jumble of colors, but he soon saw that he had stumbled upon a veritable museum of treasures.

Thinking to divert his mind, he stepped through the open doorway, almost tripping over a bronze idol with six outstretched arms that seemed set like a sinister guardian over the place.

Wherever his eyes turned he saw curios of unique value in grotesque confusion, like the refuse of an auction room.

A Roman chair of ebony, curiously inwrought with brass, supported a dancing girl of the modern French school, whose white throat was encircled with a shell necklace from the South Seas. A frail-looking spinet with mother-of-pearl keys, displayed on its top a silver mirror of Florentine design, before which a hideous Chinese monster was leering in squat ugliness. Near by a curious set of chessmen in ebony and ivory attracted the young man's attention, and he could not resist the temptation to take them up, one by one, and examine them.

"You are fond of chess?" said a voice at his elbow.

Lascelle started as if caught in some guilty act. It was only a withered old man in a long, faded dressing-gown, his gleaming

bald head partly hidden by a black velvet cap. Seen under any other circumstances this hawk-like face and shriveled figure would have seemed bizarre and grotesque, but here he was just suited to his surroundings, a curio come to life.

"Chess is a noble game," continued the old man, moving his thin, pale lips together. "When I was young it was my passion in life, but now that I am old, I must spare my brain and thought for more serious things."

"As you say," replied Lascelle, "it drains the brain—for that I have given up playing myself." Again he fingered the chessmen, feeling a pleasure in the contact like a gambler who touches the familiar cards after a long abstinence. He sighed deeply and put them down, feeling the old desire to play rise strong within him above all efforts of his will.

"It is always a pleasure for me to meet with a true lover of art," said the dealer, breaking the thread of his thoughts. "If you will trouble yourself to follow me I will show you the choicest of my collection and which the crowd never see. Come," and Lascelle followed, for despite his first feeling of repulsion there was something magnetic about the patriarch.

They passed to the end of the shop, and descending a short flight of steps entered a room, which in other days should have been the library of the mansion. Empty, it must have been a commodious apartment, but now every available corner was occupied with strange and curious things, the relics of the ages.

"Sit down," said the old man, pushing towards his guest a teak wood chair, richly inlaid with brass. "Look about you, while I prepare some refreshment," and he busied himself making coffee over a copper brazier, filled with glowing charcoal, which stood on a tripod nearby. The sunlight, sifting through the bamboo screens that hid the windows, caused every shining object in the room to coruscate like jewels of many facets. Wherever the young man's eyes wandered they encountered some masterpiece in its way, unique, matchless. All this magnificence was tossed recklessly about in prodigal profusion, but in a tortoise shell case, inlaid with gold, having a crystal front, the cream of the collection was preserved; uncut jewels, Tanagra figures, semi-precious stones carved curiously, and a set of chess of silver and iron exquisitely enameled and carved.

"Ah! I see you are admiring my chessmen," said the old man, at his elbow. "Truly, there are none others like them in the whole world."

He arranged two cups of delicate porcelain on the table and filled them with the blackest of coffee.

"They are for sale?" asked Lascelle, sipping his beverage.

"Never, nor anything else in that case. As for the chess, I bought them of an English sailor, who said they had once belonged to the Rajah of Hyderabad. I had them for twenty dollars."

"Twenty dollars!" exclaimed Lascelle, in astonishment. "The man was mad!"

"No doubt, for he had all of a sailor's superstitions exaggerated through his slavery to drugs. He would have parted with them for less, but I was in a generous mood. They carried a curse, he said; misfortunes had followed him ever since they came into his possession." The old dealer smiled grimly. "That was years ago, but the fate that awaits the owner of these chess has not overtaken me—yet," and he dipped his lips in the cup.

"Do you know," he said, after a pause, "that sometimes I fancy there is something almost human about those chessmen. Often when I am half dreaming over a problem, some hidden force seems to guide my hand. Ah, my friend, I have laid out some famous campaigns with those men. I should not fear to meet a master of the game with those little fellows in my service."

So this absurd old man rambled on; evidently living so long among curious things had affected his brain, and made of his mind a storehouse of weird and wondrous fancies.

But as Lascelle looked again at the men in the case, it seemed to him that the Kings and Queens and Knights wore an alert look that was almost human, the tiny horses tugged at their bridles, and the faces of the little men and women became firm with resolve.

The old dealer took his treasures out of the case and set them upon a teak wood board inlaid with ivory, which he laid on the table, after removing the cups. To Lascelle, it seemed as if he were looking down on a battlefield through the wrong end of a field-glass. He felt that he would not have been surprised to hear the horses neigh and see the sparks of flashing swords. Mechanically he picked up a little ivory Queen. Had his misfortune of the last week unsettled his brain? He could have sworn that the Queen moved in his palm like a live thing.

So many chess-players of eminence had gone mad—was he to be numbered, too, with those who had fallen victims to the game?

"Come!" broke in the old man on his thoughts. "You look like one in need of distraction. Let us play a game; there is nothing like it to divert the mind. But," and a smile puckered up his thin lips, "I warn you that I am a formidable antagonist—I never lose."

Lascelle still felt a pride in his skill, and despite his determination never to play again, he could not pass such a challenge by unnoticed. He would teach this old fool a lesson—show him that the chessmen were not endowed with any supernatural powers, but were like any others, save in their workmanship. With nervous fingers he began to arrange the men on the board without saying a word.

Confident of success, Lascelle played an aggressive game. The old man, without betraying the least excitement, with half closed eyes, seemed far away in thought, yet his moves were brilliant and rapid. Mechanically his hand rose, and then rested on the piece he meant to play, trembled a moment, and then moved across the board. It was as if some other force was at work making the moves. There was something so uncanny about the old man's play as to suggest the supernatural. Lascelle watched him with a feeling akin to terror, and blundered in his game. He felt like one who is fighting with an opponent in the dark who could see him, but whom he could not see. One by one his men had been swept away, but suddenly the old man uttered a cry, let the piece fall he was about to play, and clutched at his heart.

Before Lascelle could even speak he had drawn a small vial from his breast, and uncorking it, pressed it to his lips. The color returned to his lips in a moment.

"Heart trouble," he said, briefly; "I am subject to it; don't be alarmed, it is not likely to happen again to-day. Besides, I have a sovereign restorer here," pointing to the vial which he had laid on the table. "It has saved my life many a time when I should have perished for want of it. Let us go on; I shall not make such a scene again." Lascelle, once more under the fascinating spell of the game, continued to play.

The attack had left traces on the old man's features, but if anything he played even more brilliantly than before. In vain did Lascelle put forth all his powers; the very evil one seemed fighting against him. There could be but one outcome to the game, he was beaten, and that, too, by a doddering old man, half palsied.

There was only one explanation, which, as absurd as it seemed, he could not dismiss, and that was that some mysterious force was at work which had won for his opponent the game.

What might he not accomplish with the Rajah's chessmen, how he could turn his enemy's triumph into defeat, and become the invincible chess player of the world!

He must, he would possess the chess, even if they cost him his entire fortune. But would the dealer sell?

"Mate!" exclaimed the old man, "as I told you at the start, I should win, but you play a pretty game, young man, a very pretty game; one might say almost as good as a professional."

Lascelle winced.

"I am out of practice," he said, a little sullenly, "and my thoughts were elsewhere. Had I been in better form, you would not have had such an easy victory." He was fencing for an opening to make a bid for the chess.

"It would have been just the same," continued his opponent, with a provoking smile. "The owner of these chess can never be beaten," and he began to roll a cigarette with his long tobacco-stained fingers.

Lascelle was silent for a moment, and chewed the end of his mustache reflectively.

"I will give you ten thousand dollars for those chessmen," he said, briefly. "Not because they possess any occult power, but on account of their workmanship, which is unique and precious."

"I told you they were not for sale," said the dealer, puffing slowly on his cigarette.

"Come, I will double it; you have other sets almost as beautiful." The man must certainly be mad to refuse such an offer. His provoking calmness was unbearable, but he knew that to gain his point he must appear outwardly calm. To every offer he made, the dealer repeated with monotonous reiteration, "They are not for sale."

"But you are an old man; you have not many years to live," urged Lascelle; "you cannot carry them with you to the grave——"

"But I can destroy them before I go. No, it is useless to tempt me—it is only a waste of time. As for dying, I have many years before me to enjoy life. I am strong——"

He never completed the sentence, the old look of agony came into his face, and a hoarse cry broke from his parted lips. He struggled to reach the vial on the table. Lascelle, with a quick

jerk of his wrist, sent the tiny bottle out of reach. It shattered in fragments on the floor. The old man tried to struggle from his chair, clinging desperately to the edge of the table to steady himself. Lascelle huddled where he sat, watched him with hard, unpitying eyes. With a convulsive effort, summoning up the last atom of his strength, the dying man staggered to his feet, and pointing a shaking finger at Lascelle, uttered a word which faded on his lips. For a moment only he stood there, then his long arms helplessly beat the air, and crashing down upon the table, he rolled over on the floor.

Lascelle had not moved, and for some time he sat there staring at vacancy. The strange surroundings, the rapidity with which the scene had passed, all seemed so unreal that his mind at first could not grasp its deadly import. He waited as if hoping that presently he should wake up and find that after all it was only a dream of a disordered brain.

But there lay that *thing* on the floor, and though he turned his face away, he could not shut out the sight. Hurriedly he tore down a piece of tapestry from the wall and flung it over the body, but the fierce eyes seemed to pursue him still.

On the table stood the chess huddled in irregular groups, and to his frightened fancy they seemed to have drawn together to discuss the tragedy. They were his now to do with as he willed, and for the moment he forgot the lifeless clay at his feet. After all, what was the snuffing out of that feeble taper compared to the prize he had won? He had but forestalled fate a very little while.

With eager hands now grown calm he crowded the chessmen into his pockets and hurried to the door. Here he paused a moment to listen, but only the ordinary street sounds fell on his ear. Yet as he glided through the doorway he thought he heard a mocking laugh, harsh and discordant from within, that dodged his steps, and all the walls took up the sound and re-echoed it. With a shudder of horror he turned and fled as if for his life out into the street. After the gloom of the shop the blessed sunlight seemed to fall on him like a benediction, and he breathed more freely. Casting a hurried look around to satisfy himself that he had not been observed, Lascelle glided away.

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"George, it cannot be too late for you to withdraw; you can plead illness—anything! Do it for my sake." She laid her hand

lightly on his shoulder as she spoke and looked earnestly down in his eyes.

The lamps had not been lit in the drawing-room, and they sat in the embrasure of the window. She was a pretty girl, and there was tenderness in her touch and tone that moved Lascelle, and for the moment he found himself wavering. Then he laughed uneasily.

"It would be absurd at this late hour, Leila, and you know I have so much at stake. Every penny I own has been placed on this game. Instead of having to face the world with respectable penury we shall be quite rich——"

"But if you should lose?"

"Lose? I cannot! I cannot explain to you, nor would you understand if I attempted to, but there is no possible chance of my losing."

He spoke up bravely, but even as the words left his lips it seemed to him as if he felt a cold breath of air pass across his face, damp and grave-like. He shuddered. It was silly of him to become fearful at this hour when victory was so near at hand.

"I must leave you now, Leila," stooping to kiss her softly. "Have no fear of the outcome, and I promise you that after to-night I will never play again."

She sighed, seeing that it was useless so attempt to dissuade him further.

"And you will come and tell me when it is all over?" she said, following him to the door. "You know I shall not sleep a wink until I am sure of the result."

"You shall be the first to hear the good news," he said; then, as if not daring to trust himself longer in her presence, he hurried away.

If Lascelle's conscience had troubled him since he came into possession of the mysterious chessmen, the world in which he moved saw nothing of it. He was, if anything, in better spirits than when he went away. If his gayety had a false ring and his laughter was at times forced, no one troubled himself analyzing the causes.

As for the chess, he had often tested their curious powers, and they had never failed him. Secretly he had made a good deal of money in private wagers, and to-night he would win a fortune that would enable him to marry the woman he had loved so long. He would not let her sacrifice herself for a life of polite penury, so he had planned this last *coup* to raise his

fortune to a comfortable figure. It was strange that the secret which had lain so lightly upon him all these weeks to-night should be so heavy to bear. Why should he feel despondent? No accusing voice could now rise up against him. The only witness was under ground and forgotten. What had he to fear?

Promptly at eight o'clock he sat down before a chess table in the Progress Club, where the members and a few admirers of the game had assembled to witness the contest. His opponent—a bearded German with an abnormally high forehead—was drumming impatiently on the table with his fingers. Lascelle provided his own chess, and it was remarked that he seemed to be ill at ease, and did not play with his usual calmness. Several times he let a piece fall when making a move, but as the game proceeded some of his old confidence returned. Like slaves of his will the little pieces were doing their duty. A frown gathered on his opponent's face as he saw his men swept away with monotonous regularity. Lascelle, now confident of victory, began to think of Leila, the future, and a hundred other things that had no connection with the game. He lapsed into a dreamy mood, assured that the chess would work out their own salvation. He was like a man playing on in a dream.

Suddenly he started. One of his Knights had been taken! He was wide awake now and on the alert. A Queen was captured! What could this mean? Were the chess about to play him false? His brain was reeling with a sudden dizziness and all the pieces seemed staggering about the board. He played on with a dogged fury, losing ground by degrees and gaining nothing. He tried to bend his mind on the game, but it was too late, and he blundered hopelessly. The professorial-looking opponent lost his frown and brightened visibly, for he thought he saw his way to victory. Lascelle, with parted lips and breathing hard, played on with a strangling feeling in his throat.

The provoking coolness of his opponent only served to excite his feelings further. "Mate in five moves," said the German, in a low voice. "One," bringing down his Queen on the table. Lascelle could not solve his neighbor's method of reasoning, or see how it was possible to force a mate in five moves. He was soon to learn.

They played on, then Lascelle saw that he had been led into a skillfully laid trap. His King had now only one move followed by mate. The chess that he had aimed to possess had betrayed

him! He nerved himself to make the last move, hoping for the impossible. What a strange hand had his opponent—long-fingered, wrinkled with age, with pointed, claw-like nails!

He raised his eyes with a feeling of horror. The German sat smiling in his place, but beside him, bending over and guiding his hand, stood a gray, indistinct figure. It raised its face and looked at Lascelle with burning eyes.

Again he heard that mocking sound which had rung in his ears since that dreadful day he had fled in terror from the scene of his sin.

“Five—mate!” cried the opponent, jubilantly.

But Lascelle did not hear; he was staring fixedly before him. Then he threw back his head and laughed. His mind was broken.

