

A GAME OF CHESS

By Clinton Dangerfield



WHAT did it matter to me if she was the General's daughter, what that I was still merely a lieutenant? When does love take trifles like that into account? Also I might as well mention that he was a general on the wrong side, the side which had given us so much trouble. In a word, the man whom I elected as father-in-law to be, though he wasn't aware of my choice, was a hardened old campaigner of forty-nine, afflicted with rheumatism that kept him awake at night and gave him leisure to plan the most disagreeable surprises for us.

When the first of May came our armies were lying very near each other, and it required wary walking in all directions. Therefore when I informed my good comrade Heinrich that I purposed stealing out that night for a glimpse of Mademoiselle Mars he assured me that I was mad. I answered that I had heard such assertions before and had discovered them to be baseless, therefore I was going. And so, in spite of his mingled threats and entreaties, I crept out into the shadows.

When at home I used to spend days in the forest, and 'tis marvellous what a quick ear and a velvet foot will do for a man with the pickets. One by one I passed them all, step by step I drew nearer to the house where my love was quartered, for she was heroine enough to accompany her father, and he confident enough to believe himself invincible and therefore able to guard her. Closer, closer I drew. At last I was in the very garden of the old mansion and, thank Heaven! found gloriously thick shrubbery to shelter me. There I paused, for behold, not far away was an open window and near that window a piano, and by that piano the loveliest woman in the world. She was singing, not loudly, but in a soft, restrained key, singing a minor song of love and longing. I thought I was near the gates of Paradise, for something told me that the sweet loneliness in that voice meant that she was thinking of a certain Lieutenant von Rohritz, whom she had met before this detestable war was brewing. I could almost swear to the very waltz of ours on which her mind was lingering, and creeping, creeping, I drew closer still.

Her notes faltered; a second more, and I would have been tempted to spring through that window and console her, when suddenly, as though resolved to cast away all sadness, she threw back her beautiful

head and burst into that cursed Marseillaise, singing with a fire and abandon of which I never dreamed her capable, singing the war-song of all war-songs best calculated to stir fire in her countrymen. I drew back like one struck in the face. I consigned to perdition the man who wrote the detestable lines and the fellow who set them to music, and, wahrlich, I did so yet more truly when I saw the soldiers flocking to listen and discovered that her words had drawn a veritable cordon round me.

Nearer they came—nearer yet. On throbbed the wonderful voice, and to my imagination it changed to a death chant. I glanced around in desperation. Evidently she encouraged their coming, and in three minutes more I would be discovered!

By this time I was almost at the edge of the wide piazza, and there, lying on the ground, I spied a soldier's coat, the hateful uniform of my enemies. Temptation seized me, the frightful temptation that so often is the soldier's undoing. I had but to slip on the coat, to mingle with the Frenchmen, and I might yet escape unobserved. "But the consequences," whispered a warning thought in my ear,—“the consequences if you are taken.”

“And if I do not wear it, I will be taken,” I urged to myself in return, “I will surely be taken, and, Gott in Himmel, the weary months of imprisonment, the loss of all promotion!”

“But if you should not escape with the coat—the danger, the terrible danger—a spy's death!”

I wavered. I almost resolved to suffer the result of my folly openly, then the soldiers' voices took up the chorus of the war-song,—

“Aux armes, citoyens,
Formes nos bataillons!”

“To the devil with your battalions and you too,” I whispered. “One German can outwit the lot of you.”

I slipped on the coat, glided into the shadow, and mingled boldly with the throng.

Presently the song ceased, and Mademoiselle herself came to the piazza. How the soldiers cheered her as she stood there smiling, her fearless blue eyes shining on them, her cloud of golden hair just touched by the lamplight!

“Ah, mes braves,” she cried, “your singing makes me almost wish myself a man.”

“Then we should not fight for you as we do, Mamzelle,” cried a vieux mustache.

“Hein!” shouted the General himself, suddenly appearing at the door. “What's that? So you wouldn't fight as well for me, eh? Ah, ah,—you don't know that Mamzelle has one terrible fault!”

"That we don't believe," said the old mustache, so flatly that I could not help approving him.

"But she has," returned their General. "She always beats her own father—in chess! She never lets me have one little game, and she has the assurance to say that she can outplay any man that ever lived. Peste! she marches her knights and bishops down on you so fiercely that there's no escape. Do you know what I mean to do? Some day when we have wiped those German pigs off the earth I shall find some brave fellow who can win a game from her, and he shall—take the queen when he checkmates the king. But there—off with you!"

They turned, grinning and half cheering over his last speech, and I muttered in a rage to myself at the name given my countrymen and his freedom in jesting over his daughter. Then Clarice's clear voice cried:

"But wait, mes braves. That coat I made old Pierre give me that I might have it properly mended,—where is it? You know his right hand was badly wounded and I am going to darn it myself."

Heaven! how I cursed the weakness which had betrayed me. They surged back, carrying me with them, and suddenly a voice hissed:

"Who is this rascal in old Pierre's coat? There's the tear on the shoulder."

I was in for it! They dragged me up the steps, the coat was torn off, and there I stood, facing the purple-faced General and his startled daughter clad in my proper uniform—one of the hated Uhlans! I saw Clarice grow white as death, then her lips shaped one word, but so softly that only her father and I heard,—

"Caspar!"

Ah, rapture! She had never called me so before! I bowed to the ground, enraging the old General yet more.

"Dog of a spy!" he ground out, "how dare you bow to my daughter? Bring him in here, Corporal, and you, Clarice—get you gone!"

The change in him was complete. Every vestige of playfulness gone, he stood glaring at me, hawk-nosed, eagle-eyed, a very bird of prey in expression.

"So, Monsieur," he said, and his tones were like ice, "this is the way you Germans serve your country, is it,—playing a spy's part?"

I glanced round the room for Clarice,—we had gone in,—but she was nowhere visible.

"General," I said quietly, "if I may see you alone, I will tell you exactly why I came and how I came to wear this coat."

He signalled abruptly to his men, and they left him after searching and disarming me.

"Well," he said curtly, sitting at ease while I stood before him, "explain—if you can!"

I told him—all, simply and clearly, and then half regretted it, so

bitter a light crept into his stern old eyes, and I perceived how little his playful mood of the few moments ago had had to do with the man's true character.

"And so, Monsieur," he said, with a sudden change to a suave irony that I did not fancy at all, "and so you did all this for the sake of my daughter. I do recall you now. You are that officer, that penniless lieutenant, who hung so devotedly about her in Paris before this trouble began. I am most honored."

"I am not penniless now," I returned coolly, "I have since inherited a modest fortune."

"Indeed? And pray, Monsieur, if I may ask, have you no inducements to offer in yourself besides this same fortune? The teller of so pretty a tale should be accomplished."

I felt myself flushing hotly. Then I said daringly:

"A thousand thanks for your inquiry, sir. I can play chess."

"You miserable German," he began, then swallowed his words and said as smoothly as ever:

"Indeed? Most interesting! Are you a good player?"

"Yes," I said confidently, and, in truth, I had yet to meet a superior player, though, of course, I had never dealt with professionals.

"Hm!" he pursued, caressing his mustache, a wicked look gleaming in his old eyes, "then I think we shall let your chess-playing settle your fate. Now listen to me. We are like to have a quiet evening, and I do not object to a little relaxation. Therefore my daughter shall return and you—shall play with her."

"With her," I echoed, amazed, for it was plain I had not heard all.

"Yes, with her, Monsieur. If you win, you shall return to your camp."

"Oh, Monsieur," I cried, starting forward, "your generosity——"

"If you lose, you shall be strung up near the guard-house at sunrise and die as the spy that you probably are."

The blood fled in to my heart. I roused my courage and sent it back again. What had I to fear? With my finesse and skill I could win from any amateur. And my darling would see my anxiety and would not strive too hard!

"I accept," I answered, bowing.

He rose. "Understand one thing. You are to give me your pledge that neither by word nor sign will you let her know your peril. She is to think it but an ordinary game."

"I promise," I said slowly.

"Very well." He called his Corporal. "Ask Mademoiselle Mars if she will kindly join me."

The Corporal bowed and vanished, and presently my love appeared.

I read the keen anxiety on her face, and so, unfortunately, did her father. I heard him mutter under his breath. Then he said quietly:

“Ma fille, this gentleman is a friend of yours, it seems. I had forgotten him.”

“Oh, yes, papa,” she murmured. “You know, of course, that he was not really a spy?”

“No doubt he is above suspicion,” returned her father dryly. “Well, Clarice, he has been captured and we must make things amusing for him. To that end you will play a game of chess. He thinks he can beat you with ease.”

“Indeed?” She tossed her bright head and looked at me coldly. Quite sure that I was safe, the softness melted from her eyes. She remembered again that I was an enemy. But she indicated the chess-board with a wave of her hand, and I hastened to bring it for her. She would be courteous and no more, and I could see she was slightly piqued by her father’s order to amuse me.

We seated ourselves, and the General, after calling in his Corporal and murmuring a few words to him, sent the man away and drew his own chair near to us.

The game began, and I made a desperate endeavor to pull myself together. My situation was cruel beyond words. Before me sat the girl I adored, and in her slender fingers lay life or death. And yet she knew it not! Once, as I made my gambit, I glanced across to a mirror and saw the General’s face, and his look sickened me—so viciously heartless was his cynical amusement in the little drama he had created for himself. I began to recall the tales told of his youth—how the peasants, from whom he sprang, had nicknamed him *Cœur d’acier*, “Heart of Steel,” and how it was said Clarice alone moved him to any gentleness. I understood how little chance of mercy there was if I failed—I, one of the enemy he hated, who would make love to the one human being he held dear. I understood how great must be his faith in her skill that he was willing to punish me in this way. A wave of foreboding swept over me, then anger roused me again and I played quietly, steadily, then brilliantly.

I saw with exultation that my presence exercised an influence over Clarice—how strong I could not judge, but she faltered in her playing, she retreated when she should have advanced, and presently she lost a rook. A dark scowl rose to the General’s face. I fancied his internal whispers. Spurred on by success, my brain grew clearer. I forgot the horrible cord hanging over me. I made a coup after a subtle approach, and lo, her queen was taken!

An oath that he could not quite repress rose to her father’s lips, and a hot blush of shame stained my love’s cheeks, for the General cast a taunting look at her as who should say,—

“Are you so interested in this fellow that you cannot play?”

And that look was my undoing. She covered her confusion with a merry laugh.

“Ça va bien, Monsieur—that goes well—for you. But wait, we shall see—all is not yet lost.”

“By Heaven, no,” I said, “all is not lost!”

She flashed another look at me, then dropped her dainty chin into her white hand and set to work to slay the man before her. My God, I shiver when I recall the next hour! The lamp burned near us, and winged creatures, poor moths and beetles, fluttered in and dropped into the flame. Once a scorched body fell like an evil omen upon my king, and the General smiled. The atmosphere in the room seemed stifling. Clarice herself began to grow as it were far away, and her face to take on new outlines—the outlines of the Medusa I had once seen. I lost a bishop, followed by two pawns. I dared not play too slowly! I feared to play too fast! and ever beside me smiled the mocking face of the commander, growing momentarily more satisfied in his expression. Then I became aware of figures stealing in, and the same crowd of soldiers was in the background leaning forward with eager faces, looking malice at me and adoration at “Mamzelle.”

This last piece of cruelty roused me to new courage. What! could he not be content to watch my agony alone, but must his evil caprice share it with his men? And doubtless he had boasted of his generosity in letting the German spy play for his life and with Mademoiselle. Chess is a difficult game at any time. None but myself know the nightmare it may become when twenty pairs of eyes bend maledictions on you and follow every move in the hope it may be your last. Clarice herself showed a touch of surprise, but she was too used to the soldiers to pay any attention and was good-naturedly willing that the game should amuse them. She was playing daringly, wonderfully,—enmeshing my men in a fatal web with every step. It seemed as though the loss of her queen—always the most valuable piece on the board—was all she needed to bring out her fine powers.

And I? God help me, I kept my face as unmoved as I could, trying to play like a soldier, trying to lose gallantly if I must, but every fresh triumph of my love stung me with two pains—one that my life was ebbing, and the other, and the bitterest, that she in her unconsciousness should have been made my executioner. My second bishop went—they are always my favorite pieces—and my queen was in danger. I felt the cold sweat rise to my brow in beads, and as I wiped it away I saw the nearest soldier point at my damp forehead mockingly. Then Clarice laughed, a silver peal of merriment.

“Don’t look so serious, Monsieur the enemy. Surely you know the French always win?”

"You have not won yet," I said, and she looked at me in astonishment, so hoarse, so changed was my voice.

"Not yet, but wait——"

I had not long to wait. Presently the General said, with a sharp click, like the jaws of a snapping wolf,—

"Checkmated!"

I rose and bowed to my antagonist, who, flushed with pleasure, lay back and smiled in her chair.

"As he says, Mademoiselle, I am indeed—checkmated!"

"You take the game so earnestly," said Clarice, "you must be glad to have it over."

"Yes," I said quietly, "I am glad that it is over," and that was only the truth. The last hour had been such torture as I never thought to endure, and now I hoped for only one thing—that she might never know what she had done.

The next instant the General said to his men:

"Mes braves, behold a true daughter of France! You heard her wish to be a man that she might fight at your side, and now she has proved her loyalty to the great Republic. With skill, not strength, she has sent this rascal to a deserved halter!"

"Father," cried the girl, "for Heaven's sake, what are you saying? I send this man to a halter! I, who——"

I stepped forward and interrupted her.

"Monsieur," I said, "spare your daughter any further account of this. For her sake—for your manhood!"

He flamed with rage.

"Mille diables! do I need you to teach me? You who shall rot in a disgraced grave? All my army shall know that you played for your life with my Clarice, that she won and sent you where you belong."

They answered with a loud hurrah. For an instant I thought it must be some passing nightmare, then I remembered that in these wild days of France military commanders were despots, answerable to few indeed. And Clarice? When that cheer died away she came forward, and, snatching up the lamp, held it to her father's face. There she read what he had done, read with her woman's wit that he had divined her interest in me and had punished us both. She would have dropped the lamp but that the Corporal caught it. Then she turned to me with such horror in her great eyes that I could have killed myself for taking the chance of the game.

"I am a murderer," she cried, "and I have killed—you!" Then darkness fell on her, and she lay white and senseless at my feet.

They would not let me stay by her. They tore me away as roughly as they could and threw me into a stout guard-house, and there I sat until late into the night, my hands pressed on my brow, wondering how

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one little world could hold so much wretchedness. The sentry thrust his head in the door:

“See thou here,” he said brusquely, “there is a priest without. Wouldst thou have him?”

“Admit him,” I said wearily. To say truth, I am a good Protestant, but in the misery of my thoughts I so longed for a touch of human sympathy that I resolved to confess as though I had been a Catholic, and perhaps the man of God would tell me if I had been as damnable as I seemed in letting my dear one play that game.

The priest, a short, fat man, glided in, and without more ado I knelt at his feet. To my surprise he checked me at once.

“Nay, nay, stay!” he said gruffly. “I’ve too many sins of my own to hear those of others! Hark thee—canst use file and rope when need falls?”

I sprang up, light as a feather.

“God bless you,” I choked, “give it me!”

“When all is quiet,” cautioned the seeming priest. “Heaven forgive me who have so imitated our good father Anselm! But what can a poor man do when an aristocrat like Mamzelle throws her pretty self at his feet and swears by all the saints in the calendar that she will be haunted forever if you are hung? And, in truth, the General treated her scurvily. We all thought she knew the stakes. But hark you, get out as softly as may be, and ’ware the passing of the sentinel. There’ll be a lad to guide you.”

“And Mademoiselle,” I whispered, “am I not to see her again, not to have one word of parting?”

“Parting!” returned the soldier furiously, “the devil! You are of no interest to her beyond her woman’s squeamishness not wanting your neck wrung because of her skill! Peste, get you gone as soon as you may!”

He left me, and you may swear it was not long before my feet touched earth. I heard the lad’s voice whisper “Follow!” and like ghosts we glided into the shadows—on and on till we were past all danger.

We stood in the fair rays of the moon, and I for one bore a thankful heart. I turned to my guide. What a slip of a lad he was, after all! Then a wild current shot through my veins. That figure, that glint of gold under the cap! I sprang forward. I caught away the cap.

“Clarice!” I cried. “Oh, beloved! beloved!”

She looked up from my arms, half tears, half smiles.

“Alas! I dare not return,” she said. “And besides, did you not—take the queen?”