

Blair must have seen the knife coming. He turned in his chair, but it was too late.

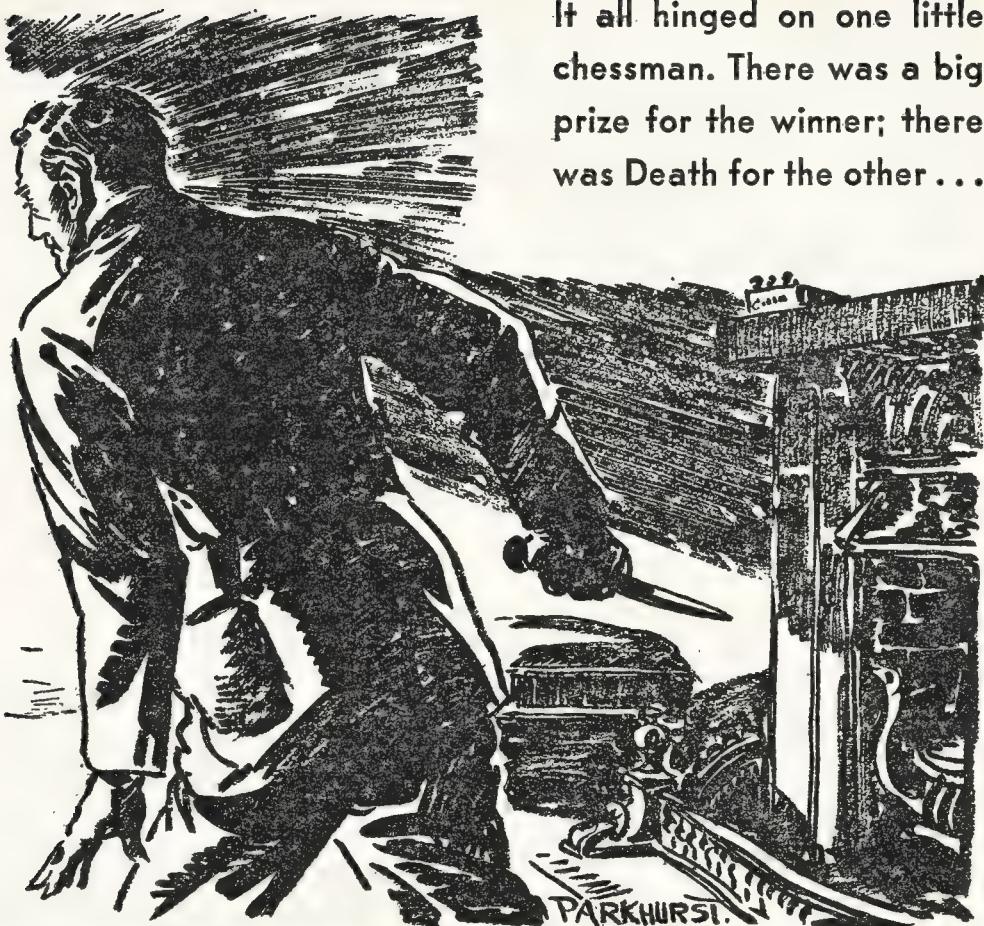


THE offices, show rooms, and small manufacturing plant of the Blair Game and Toy Mfg. Co. were located, not in the business section of Pleasant Grove, but about a mile near the edge of town. It was a small concrete building, with a railroad siding beside it. The place was dark, this warm Summer evening, with just a single glow of light in one of the

second floor office windows marking where young Rob Murdock, general manager of the company was still at his desk.

Murdock's lighted office was on the north side of the building. At the south corner the old watchman sat somnolent in his little shanty.

Rob Murdock was a big, handsome fellow in his late twenties. With the sleeves of



It all hinged on one little chessman. There was a big prize for the winner; there was Death for the other . . .

THE PAWN'S MOVE IS PECULIAR

By RAY CUMMINGS

his sport shirt rolled up he sat now at his desk, slumped back in his chair. His shock of wavy black hair was rumpled. In the heat of the evening his forehead was dank with sweat. A lock of his hair was plastered to it. Impatiently he brushed the hair back, and continued gazing moodily at the littered desk before him.

But young Murdock's mind was not on

his work. Since the sudden death of his wife Gloria a week ago—that Summer cold which had hung on and then suddenly run into pneumonia—since then his mind had been absorbed with many things beside the routine business details of the Blair Game and Toy Company. This cash account, for instant. The long columns of figures lay before him now on the desk. They seemed

to blur and sway, and then dance like little imps as he stared at them. Why had old man Blair sent for the auditor to come so unexpectedly? It was startling, frightening.

For a long time now young Murdock sat moodily staring. The auditor was coming tomorrow or the next day. And old man Blair had insisted that Murdock stop in and see him tonight before he went to bed. Did the two have any connection? Was the old man suspicious?

Elias Blair was Murdock's father-in-law. When Murdock had married Gloria a year ago, old Elias had decided to retire. Why not? In the handsome young Murdock he had a son now. And Murdock had a smiling, engaging personality. It had been easy to win Gloria, and her father too. Absurdly easy, how in a short month or two he had stepped from the position of just a young man, unfortunately rejected by the Army and looking for a job, into being Gloria's husband and general manager of the Blair Company. Easy enough. Murdock had often chuckled as he thought of it. Just a question of playing the game skillfully.

But now Gloria was dead. Would that make any difference? The old man certainly had been acting queerly these last few days.

IMPATIENTLY MURDOCK shoved away the sheets of figures into the litter of his desk. He glanced at his watch which was in the little right hand fob pocket of his white flannel trousers. A tiny, furry rabbit's foot which Gloria had given him for luck when her father made him general manager hung from the watch. A rabbit's foot for luck. The thought was ironic. Well, maybe tonight was the night he'd really need it.

Ten o'clock. He might as well go home, stop in and see the old man and get it over with. On his desk was a big artist's sketch which Blair had put there this afternoon. "A THOUSAND DOLLARS IN PRIZES! SOLVE A CHESS PROBLEM WITH CHESTER'S CHERMASOL CHESSMEN! BUY YOUR CHESS SET TODAY AND WIN ONE OF THE BIG CASH PRIZES!"

Another of the old man's schemes. Murdock barely glanced at the artist's proposed drawing of little chessmen. Then he scribbled his okay on the sketch and tossed

it aside. A minute later he had put on his sport jacket, turned out the office light and left by the lower side door of the building. Old Sam, the watchman around at the south corner, didn't see him go.

It was just a mile of sandy road and a block or two of village streets from the Blair plant to the hotel where Murdock and his father-in-law lived. The Summer night was brilliant with stars and moonlight.

The little thing lying by the side of the road glinted with moonlight. The glint caught Murdock's attention as he came trudging moodily along. He stooped, picked up the shiny object. It was a small, white metal horseshoe, hanging on a link or two of silver chain. A little bauble for a watch fob. A lucky horseshoe. With an ironic grin Murdock attached it to his watch so that it dangled where the rabbit's foot had been. And he put the rabbit's foot into the side pocket of his jacket, the left side which was luckier. He was doubly fortified now against what the old man had to say. He was still ironically grinning as he walked on; he'd probably need all the luck he could get.

The handsome suite which Murdock and Gloria had occupied was on the second floor of the hotel. A small side entrance led directly to it. Murdock hadn't given up the large suite. He went up the single flight, then decided to go on, up another story to the smaller quarters of his father-in-law.

He knocked on the door.

"That you, Robert? Just a minute."

Elias Blair opened the door. He was a small weazened man of sixty-odd, with a shock of iron-grey hair that made his head seem overlarge for his shriveled little body. He was in his pajamas now, with a thin summer dressing gown wrapped around him.

"Come in, Robert. Where you been all evening?"

"I was at the office," Murdock said. "Those new orders from Jamison out on the coast—I was checking the credits."

The old man's living room was dim, shadowed. There was just a yellow sheen and round circle of glow from a standing lamp. The illumination fell upon a small table which held a chess board on which a few tiny black and white chessmen were

standing. And Murdock saw that on a chair nearby a sheaf of other artists' sketches were standing. The lettering on some of them was visible: "SOLVE A CHESS PROBLEM WITH CHESTER'S CHERMASOL CHESSMEN!" "WIN A HANDSOME CASH PRIZE!"

Elias Blair waved with a gesture at the discarded sketches, and then went back to the chair before his chessboard.

"None of that stuff's any good, Robert," he said contemptuously. "The only good one, I put on your desk. What'd you think of it?"

"Swell," Murdock said. He slumped into an easy chair across the room. "I okay'd it. I'll give it to Grinnel when he comes in in the morning."

"Yes, yes, do that. It seems pretty good. This contest, pretty clever idea, eh Robert?"

"Sure," Murdock agreed.

THE OLD MAN was supposed to be retired. He had been, but he couldn't stay that way. He'd always been a nut on chess. It was his hobby. At home here he played chess games with himself. Studied the chess problems in all the big city newspapers he could find. And he had a shelf of books on chess. Just give him half a chance and he'd spout for an hour on checkmates in two, or maybe three. And King's Gambits and what the ethics should be when a pawn wanted to move *en passant*. It was all Greek to Murdock; just a lot of nutty stuff.

Old Blair's enthusiasm for chess was reflected in the business. The line of games put out by the Blair Game and Toy Mfg. Co. was topheavy with chess sets of every size and design and price. Then about a month ago, the Chester Metal Products Co. had talked Blair into handling a new type of chess set. They were made in black and white, of "Chermasol"—a metal alloy, extremely light in weight, a product of the Chester Company's war research. Blair had gotten the exclusive rights to handle the "Chermasol Chessmen." They were very tiny, which was Blair's idea of a novelty, the King, the tallest figure was hardly more than an inch high.

Old Blair was thrilled. And now he had doped out this contest, which would launch the new chessmen with a bang.

"Come here, Robert, I want to show you something." Blair was scribbling intently in a little notebook on his knee. "Draw up a chair. I want to show you." He gestured toward the chessboard where the few little black and white pieces were standing, gleaming in the light. "I've got the contest problem worked out," he added triumphantly. "My own invention, why should I use somebody else's problem? Black to play and checkmate in three moves. I've got it set up here. Only involves one pawn and five other pieces. Come take a look. It's pretty neat if I do say it myself. Whoever figures this out deserves to win a prize, and yet it's perfectly obvious once you see it."

Just nutty on chess. Was this why the old man had insisted that Murdock stop in here tonight? A sudden sense of relief swept him. Of course that's all it was.

"Yes, I see. Very nice," Murdock murmured absently. At the old man's insistence he had drawn up a chair on the opposite side of the chessboard. With its six tiny gleaming pieces it stood at the level of their knees between them.

"Wait, I'll show you," the old man was saying. "I've got the set-up written down. White King—he's the one who gets checkmated, see? He's on Black King's Rook four. He's already been chased about half way across the board. Now the problem starts with a move of the black pawn—the only pawn on the board. You don't know anything about chess, Robert! If you did, you'd realize—the pawn's move is peculiar—"

He had sent for the auditor to come tomorrow, to look over the Blair books. Why had he done that, when the auditor wasn't due for nearly another three months? Murdock had counted on those three months to get things right again. His system for playing the races surely couldn't go wrong any further. The law of averages would have to bring it back.

"You sent for Keenan to come tomorrow." Murdock suddenly heard his voice blurting it out. "What's the idea? And why didn't you tell me? Why did I have to find it out from an employee?"

HE shouldn't have said it! He shouldn't rasp it out like this! Murdock's nerves

were more taut than he realized. He tried to smile. "What I mean, it puzzled me."

"Eh? Auditor? Oh—just a minute, Robert." The old man finished scribbling in his notebook, and then he looked up. "I sent for Keenan to come? Why yes, so I did. Why shouldn't he come, if I want him?"

He was a queer character, this old man Blair. Absorbed, enthused over this chess problem he had invented, there had been nothing abnormal in his manner toward his son-in-law. But now suddenly a vague hostility leaped into his tone. And there was hostility stamped on his thin, seamed face and in his grey eyes as he stared across the chessboard at Murdock.

"Don't you want him to come, Robert?" he added caustically. "You're not afraid to have him come, are you?"

Murdock sat tense, with a chill running through him. "You—I don't know what you mean, afraid? Is that—is that why you wanted to see me tonight?"

But he mustn't stammer! This old buzzard, suddenly taunting him! A hot thrill of anger seemed to follow the chill in Murdock's veins. This damned old buzzard—

It had come so quickly it startled Murdock. Just a minute ago there was only his vague fear as he watched this ineffectual old man fooling with his chess problem. But Blair wasn't that now. He was a canny businessman, the man who had built up the Blair Game and Toy Company. A man you couldn't trifl with, not in a matter involving sizable money.

An antagonist, to be feared. There was an edge of menace in Blair's voice as he crisply answered. "You want straight dope, Robert? Well, poor Gloria's death was quite a shock to me. And in the last few days, I've done a lot of thinking. While she was alive, my hands were sort of tied. But they're not now."

"I—I don't know what you mean," Murdock mumbled.

"Oh yes you do. You never made her very happy, Robert. Your damned arrogance. Your cursed ugly temper that she had to cope with. You never made her very happy. Quite the reverse, but I could not butt into it."

"You—you lie! You damned—" Take

it easy now! Let him talk! Find out his plans! This damned, foxy old buzzard!

Blair's calm, crisp voice ignored his son-in-law's mumbling anger. "My hands were tied, Robert. Even when I was puzzled where you were getting all the money you threw around, and gambled with—and when I found out you were keeping the books instead of getting somebody to take old man Jones' place when he left. I could not have a scandal—not for Gloria's sake. But I don't mind it now."

"Why, you damned slimy—"

Murdock's eyes, like the eyes of a trapped animal, were roving the room. And then he saw, almost here at his elbow, some of the old man's letters which he had been opening with a big silver paperknife. The letters and knife lay here, discarded. When Blair got interested in his chess problems. A knife, here beside Murdock. He swung sidewise a little, furtively reached for it—a knife that was cool and sleek in his hot trembling grip. Take it easy now; the old man hadn't noticed. . . .

Murdock had leaned out, partly to the left over the Chessboard. And then he stood up, shoving his chair backward.

"You—you damned—if you think I'm going to stay here and be insulted—"

DON'T let him see the knife! The thought leaped into Murdock's confused brain. And with it came the startling realization that he was clutching the knife, tensed to leap! Don't do it! Stop and think! Take it easy now! It seemed that half his mind was warning him to turn and run. But there was the old man's damning voice:

"I'm not going to trust you with an interest in the business, Robert. I put that in my will at Gloria's pleading. I'll fix that. And if it should be that Keenan finds our accounts are short—I'm not a fool, you know. I've been down to the plant quite a bit lately, and I've looked over the books—if there's anything wrong, I'm not going to baby you, Robert. If you deserve jail, that's what you're going to get! Son-in-law or not, I'll—"

Damned, sneaky old buzzard! Murdock had stepped sidewise, away from the chess table. . . . One leap, a stab into his back—

Blair must have seen the knife coming. He slid back his chair and tried to rise



"We didn't even cross the threshold," Murdock said. "It wasn't necessary."

THE little two room and bath hotel apartment of Elias Blair was noisy with voices now, and glaring with its lights. In a corner of the living room young Murdock sat watching the local police as they moved around, trying to find some clue. It was getting on toward midnight now. One Captain Rance was in charge here. He was a big, good-looking fellow, intelligent-looking, and with a friendly smile for young Murdock. It was Murdock who, with one of the hotel bellboys and the hotel manager, had discovered the murder. That was only about half an hour ago. Murdock hadn't planned anything of the kind. There had been a moment when he stood numb-ed, stricken with horror at what he had done.

to his feet. But he never made it. He just seemed to groan as the knife sank between his shoulder blades, a mumbling cry which in another instant was choked with the blood that gushed from his mouth as he coughed.

Murdock had staggered away, panting. And in the chair for just an instant the old man's crumpled figure lay twitching. Then his head dangled and he slumped sidewise, limp in death over the chair-arm, and with the knife buried to its hilt, standing up like a little silver cross from his back.

Then, with no thought of anything but escape, he had turned and fled from the apartment. Blair's door locked by a spring
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FOR that same instant, Daigh sat holding the tiller, staring at the dying Simpkins. Relief swept Daigh. For a moment he had been horribly startled. Queer that he had always assumed that Katie had the money in her own right! She had always spoken of it casually like that, and Daigh had never dared question her too closely. . . . But this was just as good. Better, for now she would have all her inheritance. . . . And Simpkins' death would be so easy to explain. This unfortunate trip in the storm, the excitement of it bringing on this fatal heart attack. . . .

Daigh's swift, triumphant thoughts were only for a second or two. And then suddenly he was conscious that the body of Simpkins had fallen toward the middle of the launch—had fallen on the little engine. There was a weird, grinding thud. The engine stopped.

With the launch lurching, wallowing in the trough of the waves, Daigh staggered to his feet. Then he was bending down over the engine and the body lying there. Daigh knew his danger. The launch was in mid-stream now; and the swollen current was swift. Already the little boat was swinging, helpless, being whirled along in the maelstrom of white, lashing water. And Daigh could see the narrowing banks—the bottleneck where the bridge went across. There was always a swift current in that bottleneck. He must get the engine started at once!

With panic rising in him, Daigh stooped,

gripping the body. Then he saw that the engine had stopped because one of Simpkins' arms had hit the flywheel, was ground in it. . . .

Frantically cursing, Daigh pulled and jerked at the corpse. But it took so long! A minute . . . then another. . . .

Daigh was aware that the launch, heavily rolling as the waves hit it sideways, was shipping water now. Then suddenly the body came loose, and with a curse Daigh staggered erect with it, to cast it out of his way. In the plunging, wallowing launch the horrible dead thing sagged limply against him. It was almost as though the dead man were trying to wrestle with him! Little Simpkins, fighting now in death the way he never could fight in life!

Then Daigh heaved the ghastly thing overboard. It went down into the white water with a little splash that was lost in the roar of the storm. And frantically Daigh tried to spin the flywheel. But it was too late now! He looked up and saw the looming, broken bridge coming like a monster out of the darkness. . . .

The crash of the little launch as it struck the dangling, broken wreckage of the bridge mingled faintly with the crying wind and the roar and pound of the water. The launch sank in a moment. And then there was only Daigh's crushed body hanging there, pressed against one of the broken struts, with the white torrent swirling over it.

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(Continued from page 71)

lock when he closed it. In the hall, no one had seen him scurrying down the single flight to his own quarters. But he had no sooner entered them than a bellboy had knocked on his door. A telegram had come for Mr. Blair. It was especially important, because Mr. Blair earlier in the evening had notified the office that he expected it, and to bring it right up to him.

But the boy, pounding on Blair's door, could get no answer. So the bellboy and the manager, and Murdock with them, had

gotten the passkey and gone in, gazing numbly with horror at the terrible scene. Already they had all three told Captain Rance about it.

"We didn't cross the threshold," Murdock said. "We just took a look, slammed the door again and ran downstairs and telephoned for you, Captain Rance."

Rance nodded. "That was natural."

Then Murdock had explained how he hadn't seen his father-in-law all day, except for a minute at the plant this after-

noon. He had worked late tonight, he explained, had just gotten home when the bellboy knocked on his door about the telegram.

"I see," Rance agreed.

And now Rance and his men were poking around to see what they could find that would lead them to this dastardly murderer. But there didn't seem to be anything. As he sat in the corner silently watching, Murdock found himself calm and composed now. The horror at what he had done had faded, and a quiet triumph had taken its place. The thing was done. He couldn't have planned it, but now that it was done he could see it was for the best. He'd be half owner of the Blair Game and Toy Co. now. In supreme command.

He'd order Keenan away tomorrow. The books wouldn't be audited. Not now. There'd be big money, if he worked this thing right. With the money he had available with nobody to check on him, he could buy out the small stockholders. Big money, for himself—and Vivian. He hadn't seen Vivian since Gloria died. What a change this past week had brought to his life, and Vivian's!

"The old man was pretty interested in chess, by the look of things around here, wasn't he?"

Captain Rance's voice jerked Murdock out of his roaming thoughts.

"Eh? Why yes, captain, he sure was."

RANCE was standing gazing at the artists' sketches lying on the chair across by the opposite wall. Murdock chuckled. This big policeman couldn't find any clues, so that all he could do was stall around and talk about chess while he waited for the county medical examiner to come and pronounce Elias Blair dead of a knife-thrust in his back. Murdock had had one frightening moment a while ago. He had fled from the room with no wits to think about anything. And he might have left his fingerprints on that knife handle. But Rance's man had already failed to find any; the knife-handle was all crinkled, ornately carved.

"Evidently was planning some sort of contest," Rance was saying as he gazed at one of the sketches. "'Buy a set of Chester's Chermasol Chessmen, solve a

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chess problem and win a big cash prize," Rance read from the sketch.

"I can tell you about that, captain," Murdock volunteered. "A business scheme of his. He's been talking about it for a week or two. I'm general manager of the company, you know."

He explained the thing to Rance. The big policeman's interest was obvious. "I see," Rance said. "Sure sounds like a swell scheme. You buy a set of chessmen, and use the coupon that comes with them to enter the contest. Solve a tricky chess problem? Well, that sure would hook me, all right." He grinned at Murdock. "You see, I'm sort of fond of chess myself," he added. "In my spare time. It's the best indoor game in the world."

"Is it?" Murdock smiled. "I wouldn't know."

And now Rance was standing, gazing down at the chessboard. It hadn't been touched. It still stood on its low table under the light which shone down on the five tiny black and white chess figures. So Rance was another daffy chess enthusiast? It seemed so. He just stood pondering. A couple of his men gazed at him in disgust, and one of them offered a suggestion about how the killer might have fled unseen so easily down the hotel side stairway. But Rance waved him away.

"Seems like he had a chess problem set up here," Rance was saying musingly. "The problem he was going to use for this contest, maybe?"

"I wouldn't know," Murdock said.

Rance turned to gaze at him. "A few things are clear here. Mighty interesting. Blair was seated here at his chessboard, just about where the body is now."

That dead thing in the chair was so horribly gruesome! The corpse had been straightened up a little by one of the policemen. It was almost as though Blair was slumped here, still pondering his problem.

"I figure the killer was well known to him," Rance was saying slowly. "The killer sat in this other chair across the board from him. See where the chair has been pushed back and scuffed up the rug? And here are some of Blair's letters, some of them opened, others not. The opened ones were slit with a paper knife. Then if the knife lay there with them, the killer on

sudden impulse would reach for it; and then jump up, avoiding the chessboard and leap around to stab his victim in the back. Just a guess, but that could be pretty damn' near what happened."

IT was indeed! In his chair across the room, Murdock sat tense, staring. Several of the uniformed men were gathered near Rance now, watching him, but he ignored them.

Then again Rance looked over at Murdock. "This problem won't work!" Rance exclaimed suddenly. "I'm a monkey's uncle if it will. You can't checkmate that White King in three moves, or three hundred. Not with just these five pieces involved. You need more."

What was he getting at? Was he trying to solve this murder by doping out a chess problem?

"What do you mean?" Murdock said involuntarily.

Rance had Blair's little note-book in his hand now. "His notes are here," Rance said. "Listen, here's what he had scribbled: '*Contest problem devised by Elias J. Blair. White King on Black King's Rook 4.*' See, that's where it's standing now," Rance went on. "And then he lists the other four pieces, placing each of them just where they are now. The problem's all set up; it didn't get disturbed at all by the killing. And he says in his notes, '*Black to play and checkmate in three.*' But you can't do it, not with these pieces! And he hadn't finished his notes, that's obvious the way the pencil trailed off. Could be that the murderer interrupted him."

Again the room was silent. This strange detective, who just stood fussing over a chess problem! But somehow it sent a thrill of fear through Murdock. As though there were a menace here. Those tiny gleaming chessmen down there on the board, little warriors, ready to march upon him.

"I've got the idea!" Rance's voice was suddenly triumphant. "With a black pawn this thing works out! I can't say I've solved the problem—not yet. But it does seem as though a black pawn ought to be here. It sure does. With a black pawn on the board the thing looks reasonable."

A tiny black pawn! Murdock's mind swept back. Old Blair had said something about a black pawn. . . . The pawn's move

is peculiar. He had said something like that. And now it seemed to Murdock he could remember that there had been *six pieces on the board*. Five, and the tiny black pawn. The men were searching the room now. On a shelf they found the box of the remaining chessmen. Seven black pawns, not needed for the problem, were in it. But the other was gone. They searched, futilely, the floor of the room.

"Queer," Rance was saying. He was still staring at the chessboard, and in the tense silence his pondering words were clear. "There surely was a black pawn here, or this problem's impossible. Now let's see, suppose it was here on the lower left hand side of the board. The knight's pawn, still on knight two. That would make mate in three look reasonable. I'm convinced it was here, but where the devil did it go?"

WHY did this thing seem to hold such a menace? Murdock found himself involuntarily rising from his chair.

"A pawn missing, captain?" Murdock said. He took a step or two forward.

Rance was still pondering. "That pawn was here. And if that killer leaned over to seize the knife—" Rance had turned, with his puzzled gaze on Murdock. And suddenly the police captain's jaw dropped and he gasped.

"Well, I'm a monkey's uncle, *there it is!*" Then he leaped at Murdock, gripping the lapel of Murdock's sport jacket, drawing it further aside. "There it is! Well I'll be damned!"

Blankly Murdock gazed down at his belt, at the small horseshoe watch fob that hung there. And his mind swept back to when he had reached for the knife, and the horseshoe bauble just for an instant had dangled over the left hand corner of the chessboard! The lucky horseshoe bauble that he had found in the road! But it was more than that! It was a little gleaming steel magnet!

"We've got you, Murdock!" Rance's triumphant voice was saying.

"Got me? I—guess you have, I never realized—"

Murdock couldn't help stammering it. Numbly he gazed down at the damning magic of magnetism—that tiny, light-metal black pawn clinging so tenaciously against the prongs of the little horseshoe!

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