



A Game of Chess

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ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK CRAIG

AND now we bid good-bye to that gallant swordsman, Count Saros, whom Mr. Beeston, with his craftsmanship, has made us follow breathlessly through adventure after adventure. And does Saros win his lady love and live happily ever after? That is one of the things told in this, the final story.

ON the afternoon of that memorable September day I played chess with Nicolas in a summer-house in the palace gardens, by the water-lily ponds.

We played abominably. It was not the fault of the table, which was of massive ivory; or of the chessmen, which were of ivory inlaid with gold. Our thoughts ran in other and different directions. Was I thinking of my Katrine? A pertinent question. I was, and with excellent reason.

Suddenly Nicolas leaned back and gave voice to his abstraction. He said:

"My clever police, having watched Paul Koschat—that lurid star—for three days, have let him slide behind a cloud. So much the worse. When he reappears there will be mischief. Now it has occurred to me that we, who play chess so magnificently, ought to deal with Koschat in our own fashion. We will seek to checkmate him, yielding him an equal chance to checkmate us. I foresee a splendid game."

He stroked his short golden beard and

regarded me reflectively. He went on:

"One cannot, in a way, withhold a species of admiration for Koschat, the enemy of kings. Only at times has his career been a visible thing, and then never without drama. One: we first see him as Pierre Cambon, a French conscript who deserted. Two: some years later as Ivan Vronski, one of the fiercest revolutionary spirits in the Moscow riots. Three—ah, you are not listening?"

"Intensely, sire," I lied.

"Three: we see him editor of that terrible Montmartre paper which was called *Le Fléau*. Four: he sails from behind a cloud as Karl Jungmann, maker of bombs for royal heads. Five: he appears frightfully as Luarez, in Barcelona. He flings one of his bombs at a visiting prince. For a second the glare of the exploding horror makes him visible; then he disappears for three years. A permanent eclipse? By no means. He shows himself again in Assila—here, by name Koschat. Why is he here in this little country of mine which seethes with conspiracy? I will tell you.

He probably has come for my life."

"Sire!" I cried, waking up.

"Then I have omitted one chapter. It is confidently credited that he was no other than Wilhelm Schonberg, who gained fame amongst savants by his treatise on siliceous minerals! Schonberg vanished on the eve of that triumph. What a man! He should be in the Apocalypse. A king in the under-world. What secrets he must know! But he has never learned how to rid himself of a huge mole on the back of his left hand.

"Well, this meteor who always portends trouble swims again into the field of the police telescope. He means harm. Now, Martin, we ought to play this serious game ourselves. I have an idea. The men are set up, the pieces on the board. Can we beat Koschat? Can we checkmate him everlasting?—The devil! Your thoughts are away."

"A thousand pardons, sire," I begged.

"What were you thinking about?"

"I will confess. You are aware how the Lady Katrine has treated me for so long?"

"As the polar wind treats the restless sea."

"Well, sire, she entreats me to go to her, and the written message breathes, not frost, but balm, perfume."

His brows contracted.

"The time of the appointment?"

"Is the present hour."

"Why did you not say so?"

"You have your scheme to unfold to me, sire."

"It will wait until you return. Go."

You will understand that I lost little time in obeying. Yet the expression of his voice, and that contraction of his brows, jarred.

And in spite of myself I felt arise those former fears that Katrine loved Nicolas of Assila indeed, those fears which the affair of the Chapel of the Madonna, of which I have told you, seemed to substantiate. Her sudden favor to me appeared to hurt Nicolas. Was it possible? No, no! I did him, doubtless, a great injustice. With all the force of my will I crushed back those unworthy suspicions.

Then I went to my happiness.

I was at once admitted to her house, shown into one of her rooms, and then—then Katrine entered, holding out her arms to me—*moi!*

For the merest fraction of a second of time I allow that amazement held me paralyzed. Katrine, who had ever killed an ardent regard by a haughty return, now extended her arms, her soft arms, her white arms to me in an attitude of—

Of what? It was that very question which created that fractional pause. Of affection, or of supplication? She was ever so pale, with a tense look of fear, almost terror, in her shining eyes. Should I take her hands, or take herself right into my arms? *Pardi*. I hesitated longer than a master of rapier play ever should hesitate over a crisis. Then I took the big chance; I drew her hands round my neck; I felt her bosom press upon my chest; for one moment, one long-drawn delirious moment, I kept my lips from hers, with intent, with the ecstasy of one who reaches out for his life's dearest prize, and then—the miracle was accomplished. I had kissed my beloved!

Katrine disengaged herself. A little color had come again into her cheeks; she said, in almost a panting voice:

"I know that you love me, Martin. I have known that for a long time. I will not disappoint you any longer. I promise to give myself to you, to marry you; but first you must help me. I am in need of your assistance. Say that you will do as I ask, and that you will not question me."

"*Pardi*, it is already done—or as good as done."

Katrine looked round the room as though there was something in it which terrified her, and she lowered her voice to no more than a whisper:

"At midnight you will be outside the gates of the Horticultural Gardens."

"I will."

"I am hoping that a carriage will drive past. If so, I shall be inside. The moment you see me wave my hand, step up and climb in."

"I will."

"Do not wait after one o'clock. You may think this conduct singular, unusual—"

"Pardon, I do not question it."

She panted: "I can tell you nothing more—now. You see, I am placing myself in your hands to-night."

"And for ever after."

"Yes, yes. But you must never—never doubt me—"

"Do I doubt that the sun will rise tomorrow?"

"I trust you, then. Go, now. Pray God I see you at the hour named."

Ah, ah, how unlike her old self she was at that moment! Something was torturing her poor little heart. To my finger ends I burned with curiosity; but I had promised to ask no question.

So I said *au revoir*, taking her into my arms again, kissing her eyes, her hair, her brow. Then, with great abruptness, she pushed me back.

"Hark!" she cried, her fingers to her lips, her eyes dilated.

I flashed a lightning glance towards the door. It was open a few inches. For a second I was spell-bound; then I leaped towards it, tearing it wide ajar.

At one end of a long corridor a shaded lamp was burning. The passage was deserted.

Katrine clasped my right arm. She gasped:

"You did not see anything? You did not see anyone?"

There was that in her tone which said, more plain than words: "I hope to God you did not!" So I took my cue and fought down the rush of questioning that rose to my lips.

"No," I answered, slowly. "I saw nothing at all."

I lied.

I had seen a human hand upon the door's edge, pressing it ajar. And on the back of that hand was an immense mole.

What did I think of all this? Well, I tried to toss off conjecture with a shrug of the shoulders. I was to ask no questions. True, Katrine was deeply troubled about something, but in a few hours I was to carry her away. Was she in danger? I hoped so with all my soul, since that meant giving her my protection. That was my hour of delirious joy. Not any menace to Katrine could have marred its perfect sweetness, but I

must allow that right down in my heart the sight of a man's hand upon the door of her room was one which recollection declined to forego. Who was that mysterious interloper? I began to count the moments between me and midnight.

Then I went back, as commanded, to the palace gardens, where Nicolas was still in the summer-house by the water-lily ponds, still regarding the ivory chessmen.

"Listen, Saros," said he as though I had not left him. "I have been working out the game we must play with this man. I have decided on a simple opening. Here it is:

"My bureaux of police have every fear that my life is threatened. That is nothing new. But Paul Koschat threatens it. That is something fresh. Such a man is not likely to work alone. My habits cannot be unfamiliar with him. He is probably perfectly well aware that I am given to certain unconventional wanderings, mostly nocturnal, with you, my master of fence. This would suggest to him a path of access. We play him on that ground, therefore. We make the attacking move. Believing that he may try to reach me through you I suggest that to-night, at or about the midnight hour, you go for a quiet stroll. You wish for solitude. You choose the most deserted route. You become lost in meditation. Suddenly this charming walk is interrupted. You are set upon—seized—hurried away. Koschat has got hold of you—his decoy.—What do you think of this first move?"

"Admirable, sire; only—"

"Wait. What is Koschat likely to do? Obviously, invite you to draw me into the net. You decline. He threatens. You laugh. He shows his teeth. You falter."

"I?"

"Wait, *mon cher*. You falter, I say, and finally you yield under compulsion. You write me a note—you have often done so—suggesting adventure—immediate, and you name such a meeting-place as Koschat will assuredly dictate. Simplicity. Only—and this is where we first cry check to him—you insert somewhere in your brief message the word 'perhaps.' That is your cry of danger which will show me that our little plan



"So, so," said the man encouragingly, seeing realization in my gaze. "I must apologize for this unconventional action, Count Saros."

has taken effect. The rest you will leave to me."

"Willingly, sire; but—"

"You will admit that it is worth trying?"

"Yes, only—"

"It will present too grave an element of risk?"

"Ah, you insult me, sire!"

"Yet you object?"

"I have another appointment at midnight."

"You will cancel it."

"Alas, I—I—" The sweat broke upon my forehead. I stammered:

"At the hour you name I have promised to meet the Lady Katrine, who—who—" I blurted out the rest.

Nicolas heard me in profound silence. I saw shadow after shadow cross his face. Though I mentioned my fear that Katrine was in peril I said nothing about what I had seen.

He shaded his forehead with his left hand and sighed. Why had my news affected him in a sorrowful fashion? Up rolled the black clouds, the clouds of jealous fears, spoiling my happiness.

Presently he looked up and said: "She loves you, then?"

I tried to answer, but could not.

He left the summer-house and paced up and down by the lake. Presently he returned and said quietly:

"You will keep your appointment with her."

I cried out, vehemently now:

"On the contrary, sire, I shall do nothing of the sort."

"I say you will meet her to-night and do—just what she asks of you."

"Ah, sire, I hesitated a minute ago. Will you forgive me?"

"Willingly."

"Then command me to-night."

"I do. I command you to go to Katrine."

"But—"

"No more," he smiled. "Go to her. She will make you a fortunate man, Saros; but I fear your long rapiers will rust upon your walls."

I went away with my spirits in some measure dashed, but the prospect ahead was too glorious to permit of lasting depression. I was to go with Katrine—

where? I neither knew nor cared. I was to be with her. First I had to arrange a matter or two. I went straight to my *salle*, which is over the most fashionable jeweler's on the Ramparts. Here I found three letters awaiting me. The first was from a French vicomte. The second from an Oregon millionaire.

Both these gentlemen begged for appointments in my school with a view to lessons. Well, they must wait. I opened the third letter. Its message was as brief as it was amazing. It ran:

To the Count Saros: I have the honor and the sorrow to inform you that she whom you hold dearest on earth belongs by bond of marriage to another. You will understand that I cannot explain in a mere letter. I mean well to you, and if you choose to be at your rooms between the hours of ten and eleven to-night I will call upon you.

That was all.

Pardi, it was more than enough.

What did I do? I laughed. Would you have done anything else? Yes, probably, for I cannot imagine anyone loving as I loved.

My next act was to remove from one of the paneled walls of the *salle* that Italian rapier of which Nicolas had once spoken, which was fifty inches long, which had been used by Carranza, and which bore on its slender length of Milan steel, inlaid in gold, the words "*Sans pitié*."

I said, aloud: "This liar who 'means well to me,' I shall fight with this weapon, with which I will pierce the precise center of his heart."

I pressed the point upon the hard oak floor. It doubled back almost to the hilt. Released, it flew to straightness again with a vicious twang. I replaced it in its former position.

Then I went out and dined, taking my time. I returned to my rooms over the *salle* at nine o'clock.

I switched on the electric light in my sitting-room, drew the curtains. Ten minutes passed and I sat down at a writing-table.

The deep hum of speeding motor cars penetrated my windows. I finished a reply to the French vicomte, and was

in the act of commencing one to the American millionaire when—

I was seized from behind in a grip enough to snap the bones of my arms. At the same instant something soaked with a powerful anaesthetic was crushed over my mouth and nostrils. In the circumstances, I did the only thing possible: I became unconscious.

II

That a man was standing by my side watching me was a fact which emerged slowly from a mist of cloudiness of pain, of nausea, of the feeling of one who is desperately ill. That he was in my room over the *salle*, that I was upon my back on my well-worn sofa there, and that I had been attacked, were events which surged gradually out of remembrance.

"So, so," said the man encouragingly, seeing realization in my angry gaze. "I must apologize for this unconventional action, Count Saros. And now listen very carefully to the few words which I can spare. You are recovered enough to understand?"

My gaze wandered from his face to his hands. On the back of the left I was not astonished to see a large mole. This was Paul Koschat, then? He had a long, grave countenance; a scraggy throat rose from a narrow double collar which held a neat black tie. He was tall, and thin, and wore spectacles, and looked like a stage type of deacon.

"I will be as straight with you as one of your rapiers, Count," he went on. "I am Koschat. What do I want? A brief line in your handwriting to Nicolas, such as your intimacy with him has permitted you to send him before now. You will hint at adventure, secret adventure such as his soul loveth. You will beseech him to come to you—here. That is all. You will do it at once. If you refuse, you will not see your Katrine at midnight, or at any other night or time. Yes, I know of that proposed arrangement, having heard with my own ears. Frankly, if you decline to oblige me in this trifile, I shall put an end to your existence by shooting you through the head. Perhaps you had better see

the pistol. Here it is. And now we have arrived at a cordial understanding. You will write this note?"

And he regarded me with the cold eyes, the sleepy eyes, the compassionate eyes of a fed leopard.

I closed mine. So, without deliberate action on my part, the King's move in the game had opened as he had planned.

I hesitated. Why? *Pardi*, in the first place I must not appear eager or he would suspect; and then, in the second, should Nicolas bungle his next move he might come to his death.

But would he bungle it? Most improbable, knowing his customer, his deadly opponent. He would act with infinite caution, would play to win. And, before just Heaven, I really reckoned upon that caution, and his own scheme, and not upon any selfish desire to live. To refuse this demand would mean indeed an end to life and love; yet I would have refused it with a laugh of contempt, only—only—there was no necessity for refusal, you see; rather the reverse.

I declined—once, for appearance sake. He answered: "I believe you are a man of your word, Count. Grant me a like honor. It is not therefore desirable for either of us to waste time. If you repeat that refusal I shall know what to do."

And he pressed the orifice of his revolver in the hollow under my right temple.

So he counter-moved. I could have said "No!" But that would have been the eternal upsetting of the table, the scattering of the pieces. I said "Yes," therefore, after a pause in which spectral death regarded me. I got up, moved dizzily, ill, to my writing-table, and wrote as follows:

I have the honor, sire, to wait in my *salle*, where, perhaps, we may continue our play.

Koschat read over my shoulder. He questioned—"That will be sufficient?"

"Yes."

"It will reach him?"

"All letters bearing my seal are privileged to reach him immediately and direct."

He went out a minute later, turning

the key of the door upon me. If he had attempted to pistol me I should not have been astonished. Leaving me comparatively free was more a matter for surprise. Still, I was too wretchedly weak to force an exit; and then there was no necessity for quick action. I was over my *salle*, with time for reflection, in the place where impending events ought to find me.

Why had Katrine sheltered Paul Koschat? Unanswerable. Had he come here with her knowledge? Impossible. He must have forced a way into the room while I was dining; and yet the lock of the door was whole. While I was writing he had been hiding behind the sofa, doubtless.

My little onyx clock ticked at one end of the mantelpiece; at the other end was a rose bowl. I looked round the room. Nothing had been touched.

What ought I to do? Nothing, nothing at all. The next move was with Nicolas; any violent action on my part would frustrate his game. The clock indicated the hour of ten. The affair should be over in time to permit me to keep my appointment with Katrine.

I flung myself upon the sofa, anxious to shake off the effects of the stupefying fumes in my brain; and I dropped into a dreadful, uneasy doze. I awoke greatly refreshed.

The place was still as mid-heaven. The accursed drug must have affected my nerves, for a sensation of fear, of terror, had set them quivering. How long had I slept? I glanced at the clock. It still indicated the hour of ten, which was strange, for the feeble ticking of the pendulum had not ceased.

Why should this simple fact redouble the ghastly apprehension chilling my blood? I cannot say, but it certainly had that effect. I tugged open the onyx case; the brass pendulum was motionless; the mechanism had stopped.

And yet that steady ticking.... What, in heaven's name? Ah, it was not uttered by the clock, but by the rose bowl! Or, rather, the rose bowl was not the ornament which had always been on my mantel, but, though its counterpart outwardly, was a solid affair; and as I lifted it the pulsing blood in my fingers

seemed to come from the thing itself, lent it a semblance of throbbing energy—the life of the horror which at any second might explode under my eyes.

I confess that I have a detestation of such cowardly inventions which for a few moments threw me into a panic. The door would not yield. I rushed to the window, tugged aside the curtains and received a second shock of astonishment. Green-painted shutters closed the panes. Now the window of my room has no shutters at all!

I fumbled for the fastening, flung back the shutters. No view of the electric-lighted Ramparts, that fashionable promenade, met my eyes. I saw but a narrow gulf between me and a blank wall, a gulf which seemed unfathomable, filled with darkness! Up this abyss whistled a draught of cold air which in a measure cleared my brain and brought perception.

This room was not mine, but one precisely like it in every detail, and to which I had been brought in a senseless condition. Why? Clearly that Nicolas might be drawn by my appeal to quite a different direction, a different place, entrapped beyond my reach of aid. He would not come *here*, where I insanely waited, but to my *salle*, where I had sent him, where his enemies lurked. But Koschat's scheme had failed in one particular: he had omitted to wind up the clock.

I picked up the rose bowl and hurled it into the well of the court; I snatched up a chair and shivered the lock of the door. The place was in pitch darkness. I groped for the stairway and went stumbling down at a breakneck pace, found an exit at last and rushed into open air.

At that moment I heard the deep cry from the cathedral belfy of the midnight hour. I counted those twelve lonely notes which told me that perhaps I had lost my Katrine forever.

I dared not think of her, however. The immense crocketed spire of the cathedral guided me in a quick dash from a labyrinth of narrow streets, a race of half a mile to the Ramparts. I have told you before that my *salle* is over a jeweler's establishment, and is reached

through a private door. I opened this door, my heart sinking.

Though my school of fence is one of the most exclusive, its approach is not ornate, being just a slip of a passage with a remarkably steep staircase rising to the *salle*. The hall was in darkness, and not a sound came from above. If my note had brought Nicholas here, and he had a key, had he come alone, secretly? I feared so; that was his way. His single wit against Koschat, who in cunning was master of us both! In that case it was likely—terribly likely, that my dear master had fallen.

I crept up the stairway, making as much noise as a crawling cat. The profound silence seemed ominous. I peered into the *salle*, which was in darkness save for a gleam from an outside electric light, which flung a white splash on the floor, on the oak floor hard as stone and polished like black marble. I crept in a pace or two and reached out a hand to switch on the light when I heard a dull murmur of a voice speaking.

At the other end of the *salle*, in a corner of it, behind a velvet portière, was a door which admitted to that private sitting room of mine in which I had been attacked, from which I had been removed. Stooping low I made out a thin thread of light streaming from under the door.

My next act was to feel for, and take down that long rapier, fifty inches long, to which I have already called your attention. Then I tip-toed towards the door, pulled aside the curtain ever so gently, laid a hand upon the handle, which I knew made no sound when turned. When I had opened the door an inch I released the handle by degrees and stood listening. Instantly I recognized the voice of Koschat, who was observing:

"I can read most men's minds, with the exception, possibly, of my own. That you loved Katrine Thalberg I admit. You did her no hurt, are incapable of doing it. Your fortune was her sorrow. The abrupt deaths of two between you and Assila's throne were wholly unforeseen. The hour which made her your bride divorced her, still a maiden. As prince you could, and you would, I dare

say, have acknowledged her; as king, you could not. The moment of your accession widowed her. Only royal brides consort with Assila's kings. Any other marriage is—no marriage at all."

I will not ask you to imagine the effect of these words upon me, of these words which explained so much. I drew a deep breath or two, then pressed upon the door.

I perceived a singular sight. On each side of my writing table in the middle of the room was seated a man. One, whose back was towards me, was Koschat. His arms were extended flat upon the table, and in either hand rested an automatic pistol, the muzzles directed towards Nicolas, who was on the other side, a-straddle a chair. He saw me appear in the doorway, yet such was his self-control that not so much as an eyelid flickered; yet I saw a faint contraction of his brows, which said: "Keep quiet!"

Koschat continued, in a calm voice:

"How did I know of that secret marriage? You were then an officer in a regiment of chasseurs. You provided yourself with a single witness, a fellow officer. Later on, high play and deep losses brought him disgrace; he drifted down under the surface, into the underworld. There I met him, learned his secret. He is dead now. So is the priest who wedded you, who wedded you to Katrine Thalberg secretly. When you parted from her in the same hour, sundered by the intelligence that you were King, it was agreed between you that no word should ever be breathed. She was pure; but would the world believe it? Questionable. You ascended the throne; she went back to her maidenhood.

"She loved you for long after; but in time your affection for her, which never could be realized, perished.

"Why do I recall these things? I will tell you. The moment I entered this city I was recognized by your police. I went to Katrine Thalberg. I demanded that she should conceal me, that, if she refused, I would make public her secret marriage to you of five years ago, and which cannot be made public without her name suffering. She yielded. Well, strange though it may seem to you, I

came to respect this lady, even to pity her. Would you believe it? I am a man of sentiment. I came to Assila to add one more name to the long list of kings who suddenly fall. I meant to kill you; I expect I shall kill you now. All the same, this queer sentiment offers you a chance. Resign your throne, abdicate. Then, descending once more to the level of the Lady Katrine, take her in truth and in deed. Come, is not that a fair chance?"

Nicolas lifted his eyebrows. Never had I seen him so intensely interested. He answered:

"Truly you are a most remarkable man, Monsieur Koschat. I am not sure that this rencontre is not in the nature of a privilege for me. I came here to match my wits against your own. You beat me in a simple game of hide and seek. I begin to be pleased, since if I had killed you, this charming interview—"

"Do not mock."

"But you are jesting with me?"

"On the contrary, I am very much in earnest."

"What! If I give you this promise, you will spare my life?"

"Yes."

"A verbal promise, *mon ami*?"

"Yes."

"*Pardi*, as Count Saros would say if he were here, I was never so flattered."

"You agree, then?"

"You tempt me."

"Then—"

"But I perceive an obstacle. The affection of this lady, though somewhat more persistent than mine, has, nevertheless, perished like mine. Of late she has given away her heart—to Count Saros."

"I do not believe it."

"All the same it is true. That is the end to my romance—an end which saddened me a little, but a just, a happy conclusion. She loves Saros."

"You are mistaken."

"But, listen. She has arranged to go away with him to-night."

"That was because she was frightened of me."

"Half an explanation. I repeat, she loves him."

"And I deny it. Listen, in your turn: Count Saros is dead."

"Ah, ah, you are sure of that?"

"Perfectly. He was overcome and taken from here to another house, in which, by the aid of friends which I have, was prepared an apartment precisely similar in every detail to this. I left him there—waiting for you! Then I came here."

"But you have not proved to me that Count Saros is dead."

"Nevertheless, he is."

"You killed him in that other house?"

"No, but—"

"Well, I think that he is alive."

"Your reason?"

"Because he happens to be standing just behind you!"

Now if there is one quality I love in any man it is that of lightning-like decision. Koschat had it, by the great devil! Without the slightest pause, without even lifting his hand, he fired one of his pistols at Nicolas, and wheeling round like a flash he fired the second pistol where he guessed me to be—for he had not time even for a glance. The first shot grazed Nicolas' left cheek; the second missed me by a foot, at least. For one thing, Koschat drew trigger at a wild venture; for another, the monstrous long rapier of old Carranza passed through his heart and brought up with a crash upon his breastbone.

He sprawled back upon the writing-desk, sending ink and papers flying.

Nicolas wiped his cheek. He panted:

"Checkmate! We win the game!"

Pardi, it had been a thought too thrilling.

And did Katrine marry me? Yes. And did she love me? Yes, truly. And was Nicolas right when he prophesied that my rapiers would rust upon my walls? Partly.

However, in my *salle d'escrime*, in Assila's capital, in its most fashionable promenade, you may find me—if you care to pay my price, which is not small. And I will teach you—in the Italian method, with the long foil, with rigid arm and most subtle-playing wrist—the parries of Capo Ferro, the time-thrusts of that eternal master.