



# *The* Hidden Player

By ROGER S. VREELAND

"The chessboard is the world; the pieces are the phenomena of the universe; the rules of the game are what we call the laws of

nature. THE PLAYER ON THE OTHER SIDE IS HIDDEN FROM US."—Thomas Henry Huxley.

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

*The next time you sit before a chessboard, remember . . . your opponent is a mysterious being of the occult*

IT WAS late at night. The big house stood in complete darkness—all but one corner of the drawing-room. Here a low lamp lighted the top of a small table, over which were inclined two shadowy faces.

The light was selfish, depriving the surrounding darkness of the smallest ray, seeming even loath to divulge details of the impassive countenances. But the squares of alternate ebony and mother-of-pearl and the pieces and pawns of chess shone clearly. Most of the chessmen were lined on the margins. Evidence of heavy battle.

A single spot of dull red in a nearby hearth was the sole surviving ember of a fire which had been roaring but a few hours earlier. A cold meerschaum and remnants of cigarettes were other evidences of the late hour.

Latent, however, in this quietness, a great battle raged to its climax. A battle of brains. Twenty minutes had passed since the last move was made. Both men were tense. The long silence was not disturbed even when Justin, the younger player, stole a nervous glance at Ivan, his superior, and thought he had never seen Ivan's face look so strained.

At last the venerable Ivan raised his head slowly. "I concede," he said deeply, and did not smile. Anxiety vanished from Justin's eyes, and with an impulsive smile he held up his five spread fingers, inquiringly.

"Yes, five moves," rumbled Ivan. "You have beaten me! The fifth move will mate me!" Only men who really knew the game could calculate like this.

"So, I have beaten my master," Justin breathed humbly. It was a significant victory. Ivan was a great man to Justin. There was an affection between them.

"You surprised me," said Ivan. "You played the most masterly game I have ever known of you." His dark eyes, and silver hair brushed straight back from the temples, and his small gray mustache, suddenly

shone in the darkness as he lighted his pipe.

"No," replied the modest Justin, "I think that I was merely more patient than usual. I tried a slight alteration of my old attack, using the knights sooner, and letting you take my queen's bishop."

"You realize, of course," said Ivan, "now that you've beaten me, you are eligible to the Prince Henry Chess Club?"

Justin nodded, and thought he noticed a queer smile settle upon his host's face. But the match went out and he couldn't analyze it.

"There was no one to witness," Justin said.

Ivan frowned. "The members of the Prince Henry Chess Club trust one another," he answered.

SEVERAL days later, and after an hour's journey, the two men arrived at a strange low building at the end of a mountain road. Justin read weather-dimmed words over a rustic doorway: "The Prince Henry Chess Club." His curiosity was high. Often he had heard of this legendary place, chiefly from Ivan, but had hardly dared hope that he ever would be admitted. A servant in uniform bowed almost reverently to Ivan and led them from the carriage. He was a curiously wizened individual, who spoke with French accent. He whispered to Justin, as they went through the door: "Ah; so Monsieur will meet the Prince too!"

Justin resented the liberty, but was mystified by a chuckle from Ivan. Then, as the queer servant took the newcomer's coat, he added: "Monsieur! Be sure to guard your queen!"

"Is your man interested in chess too?" asked the puzzled Justin.

Ivan appeared surprised. "Georges? Oh, yes. I should judge he does moderately well—from his conversation, that is. We've never played."

They were met at the inner door by a Mr. Scott who ushered them into a large low-ceilinged room. Massive beams—paneled walls—an expensive room. Smoking stands, book tables, and huge comfortable chairs and lounges were scattered informally. Fires burned in three hearths. Game trophies cluttered the mantels. There was warmth and cordial spirit. Twenty or more men, most of them passed sixty, were at leisure. The novice was introduced, served wine, made the object of sustained hospitality. Justin saw little more of Ivan—until later, in the chess room.

A clock struck nine and Mr. Scott raised his hand for silence. He made a brief speech of welcome for Justin, who, he mentioned, was the first new member to join the club in over a year. He was made eligible, Scott told the members, by defeating Ivan. Several men murmured surprise.

"And now, Justin," he went on, addressing the initiative, "we are all going to the chessroom. To prepare you, you will find this an unusual place. In that room no two of us have ever played together—*yet we all go in there and play chess!*"

Most of the men had lighted tobacco, and all eyes were keen upon Justin.

"Here is the explanation," continued Mr. Scott. "We have in our service a most distinguished, indeed, a most extraordinary master of chess. He is known only as Prince Henry. He is what you might call a mystery. His identity is unknown. The only three members who once knew who he was are now deceased. None of us has ever seen him, yet every member has played many games with him."

Faces were solemn as the speaker divulged the secrets of the club to the new member.

"Prince Henry, our common opponent, plays every member simultaneously. In fact—" He paused to consider his words. "In fact, Mr. Addison, we will not deceive you. *Prince Henry always wins!*"

Justin was speechless. The men filed into the room. The moment Justin found himself within it, he became steeped with an atmosphere he couldn't identify. It was a small room with simple but unconventional furnishings. The sides were covered with maroon drapes. On two sides, facing the drapes, were rows of heavy walnut chairs. A shaded lamp hung over each one. Between the chairs and drapes stretched a long mahogany panel, horizontal, bearing chess boards.

"Let us sit next to each other," said Ivan to Justin. "It will make you feel more at ease."

**A** STRANGE quietness came over all the men as they took their seats. Chess men were distributed, each player selecting his color. Ivan whispered to Justin: "There is a corridor behind the drapes. Prince Henry is back there." He pointed to slits in the curtain, one in front of each player, through which the Prince would extend his arm to make his moves. "A little higher," continued Ivan, "is a small aperture through which he studies your board."

"Astounding!" exclaimed Justin under his breath. "Are you sure this is not an initiation trick? How can I believe that one man is able to play us all—all at one time? It's beyond reason to suppose that he could defeat us all!" He reflected on the servant's behavior, and cast a skeptical look around the room.

Ivan smiled. "I'm glad that your mind is in good working order," he replied. "It will need to be. Now, have patience, and don't become nervous."

All the members now were seated, back to back, heads bowed over their set-up boards. Justin was about to whisper a reply to his friend, but the weight of the hushed room forestalled him.

Suddenly a black object appeared over Ivan's board. Justin started as he beheld a human arm covered with a tight-fitting

sleeve and glove of black satin—extending from the slit in the drape.

Ivan had black pieces, so it was therefore Prince Henry's first move (whites always moving first). The gloved fingers advanced the king's pawn two. Ivan came to attention.

Justin, with white pieces, hurriedly made his conventional first pawn move. The arm shot out and moved a black one. All along the line, silently, the seemingly bodiless arm moved in and back from the slits in the curtain. Its action were quick and certain.

The game was on.

The next day Justin dined at Ivan's mansion. The younger man had a great deal to say.

He was brimming with enthusiasm. "At first I thought I was going to hold the upper hand," he said. "I advanced both my knights and even castled before he seemed to have done anything worthwhile. Then he closed in from nowhere. All my efforts of resistance were futile. I had no power whatever. It was utterly weird. He seemed to divine every motive I could invent, and proceeded in his own way."

Ivan smiled patiently. "He was merely toying with you," he said.

"Without seeing this myself, I'd have declared it impossible." Justin's eyes grew wider as his admiration of Prince Henry took deeper hold of him. "Good Lord—he is more than a genius—he is perfection—perfection of unerring judgment, clairvoyant penetration of others' minds. His mind must be an omnibus of remembrance!"

This also revived Ivan's flame of enthusiasm. In him it had developed into a profound reverence. "Prince Henry is without question," he agreed, "the greatest chess player who has ever lived."

"I should very much like to see him."

Ivan's face grew strange, and he looked down at his plate. "So would I," he said. "So would all the others."

"He must have some very good reason for remaining so mysterious."

"Yes, there must be *some* reason. But no one has ever discovered what it is. He travels unseen, and the members have been pledged for years never to seek his identity. You will sign the pledge too. It is a matter of great honor among us. But the Prince is paid well for his service."

"But, it is bound to become known some day, who he is. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," pondered Ivan. "I suppose—some day. Perhaps he is some one we all would know. I've wondered if he is not really of royalty; a prince who for political reasons dares not reveal himself."

MONTHS passed, and Justin became one of the most devoted members of the Prince Henry Chess Club. But there was always that insatiable curiosity concerning the Prince. They longed to hear his voice. If they could but meet face to face this super chess player, their god. They worshiped him.

Whence did he come? Where did he go? Why did he demand such secrecy? These and others were the questions they pondered, and as time passed he grew more exalted to them.

Justin was right. Some day the reason for the Prince's secrecy would become known. When it did, the truth so confounded the members of the Prince Henry Chess Club that they never recovered.

The catastrophe—for such it was—occurred four years after Justin joined the club. The mystery was cleared; the club was ended.

The fact was that Prince Henry was beaten. He was beaten by Justin. Early one morning Justin had journeyed to a nearby city on personal business. Late that afternoon he was in an old part of the city, making his way toward the stable where he had left his horse and carriage. It was a gloomy street of dark stone buildings,

straight square buildings, coldly ornate with weathered cornices and gargoyles—buildings that had outlived their fine purpose and now served miscellaneous, grimy, and mundane enterprises.

One of these, which Justin was about to pass, was a morgue. The carriage and team in front of it was vaguely familiar; a long, heavy, and dark carriage—but not a hearse.

The driver was holding the reins as though impatient to start.

Suddenly, as Justin was about to pass in front of the steps, the morgue doors were opened, and two men emerged carrying a rather small coffin. Justin paused to let them pass. They placed it in the carriage, closed the door, and signaled to the driver to start.

At that moment Justin's eye happened to meet the driver's—and he recognized the wizened creature—none other than Georges, the servant of the Chess Club. Justin called a friendly hello, and then stared in perplexity. Although Georges had looked directly at him, he showed no sign of recognition—only gave his horses an emphatic lash and started off abruptly over the cobblestones.

Moments later Justin was in his own carriage making his way out of the city. He drove briskly, for he had an appointment that night—a meeting at the Prince Henry Chess Club. On the outskirts of the city he unintentionally overtook the dark carriage driven by Georges, and in passing he turned to look at it and at the peculiar little man. Georges sat straight—never turned his head.

**A**N HOUR later, well into the country, the mystified chess player came into trouble. One of the wheels of his carriage had struck a deep rut and was wrenched off balance. It wobbled dangerously and threatened to be torn from the axle. But Justin drove on precariously to the next

village, where he found a wheelwright who repaired it in a half hour's time.

As he paid the fee, Justin asked: "Do you know where the Prince Henry Chess Club is?"

The man nodded.

"I'm going there, and I'm late," said Justin. "Can you by any chance tell me of some shorter route than the main road?"

"That I can," replied the wheelwright. "But it's a hazardous way, and to be honest I don't recommend it. Three miles from here, at the foot of the mountain, a road branches off to the left. If you take it you'll find that it climbs up the mountain from the back side, and that's the steep side. It will save you a few miles and some time, but the road is steep and rocky and seldom used. You can try it if you like, but mind I'm not recommending it."

Justin took the road, and found that the old wheelwright hadn't exaggerated. His light carriage was not made for such stony, tortuous, and steep going, and his horse was weary long before the mountain was half climbed. Finally he reached the cabin of a woodsman, and he stopped to give his horse a drink and a rest. It was already dusk.

The mountaineer was a bewhiskered, uncouth old soul, but he was polite enough to the traveler. He called to his mate: "Come on out—it ain't him after all!" And a small fattish woman hobbled out as though glad to greet a friendly stranger.

"We thought you was *him*," said the woodsman, without modifying the emphasized pronoun. "It ain't often anybody else comes this way. And *he's* a bad omen. We don't never come out when *he* goes by."

Justin didn't have time to ask for explanations, for a sound suddenly broke through the woods below them; the sound of groaning wheels, the shrill squeaks of agonized springs, and the noise of iron against stone, of digging hoofs.

"Here he comes now! In the name of all the saints—here he comes!" the old man called hoarsely, and the woman, her face sobering, turned back to the cabin. "You'd better come inside with us," the woodsman invited. "It's an evil thing. I don't want to see another good man go to the devil! Come on!"

"Wait!" said Justin. "What is there to be afraid of?"

"He comes this way every fortnight. He's been coming for years and years. A dozen years ago my nephew was helping here with the wood. He stopped them and looked into the back of the carriage—and—whatever it was he saw—it made him scream as though he'd seen the devil—and he ran off yelling into the woods and never came back. But come on, now, stranger. See! Here he comes around the bend. If you're set on staying outside here, you'll have to stay alone." With that the old woodsman hurried into his cabin to join his wife.

But Justin remained by the road while his horse lapped more water from the spring.

The noisy coach, drawn by a team, hove into closer sight, the horses straining as though not only to climb but to hurry. Justin stepped back to view it better. It was a long, dark, and heavy carriage. In fact, it was the one he had seen leave the morgue in the city, driven by Georges!

IT CLATTERED past him, the shriveled, stoic Georges holding the reins high, and looking neither to right nor to left.

Soon Justin took to the road again. It was still a long ride, and he arrived at the club just in time for the gathering of chess players. Near the rear of the building he saw the carriage Georges had driven. *He realized now that this was where he had seen it before.*

When he joined his colleagues his head was in a whirl of perplexity. But he said

nothing. Nor little did he realize that the events of the day were leading toward a climax.

The games were started as usual. But—as was said—the fact was that Prince Henry was beaten—by Justin. The scene would never die in the memory of any man present that night. For some reason Mr. Scott wasn't there. Justin, however, has verified the details. He had won the game fairly. The Prince was guilty of a technical error. Early in the game Justin had taken his unseen opponent's queen. He had used good strategy and clever play. Then a situation arose which he had seen months before in a similar game. It had been too late to attempt the maneuver at that time.

Even so, Justin failed to realize the significance of the move, the overwhelming advantage it gave him. He noticed that from then on the black arm, reaching from its slit in the curtain, acted queerly. The Prince knew, Justin later realized, that he had made a serious blunder, and that it would be impossible for him to take the game if Justin maintained his usual alertness.

The great moment lived in death-like silence before the shattering crash. When Justin checkmated the Prince he himself was so astounded that he gazed at the situation for several moments before uttering a sound.

He arose shaking with excitement.

"Men!" Justin exploded. "*I have won!*" His voice echoed briefly, and the members turned black faces to him.

Again silence, and the air seemed thick and weighted. Coldness and paralysis swept over each man. Something more than the uttered fact was penetrating them. It was like being in the presence of something harrowingly supernatural.

A sound, then. It came from behind the curtain. Not pleasant. Not human. Rasp-ing respiration like the panting of a jungle beast. Scuffling—commotion. The draperies

parted, and a bulging form pushed itself awkwardly into the center of the room.

The members of the Prince Henry Chess Club jumped to their feet and stood frozen. Chairs fell over. Chess men clattered to the floor. This noise, then again silence—as if a fine invisible net had dropped from the ceiling to strangle every person.

Now the members of the Prince Henry Chess Club beheld for the first time the person of Prince Henry himself! Some groaned. Some closed their eyes. Those near the door staggered out. For that which they saw was a deformity, monstrosity.

The ugly figure squatted in the middle of the floor and turned its repulsive head—wrenched it in a semi-circle. The red wrinkled skin of its short neck formed nasty folds. Its hideous, gargoyle expression met every face, with red gelatinous eyes bulging from a frightfully misshapen skull, drastically out of proportion to the rest of its body. The mouth, distorted and toothless, grimaced and snarled. It seemed wholly unpossessed of intelligent vocal ability.

The thing was imbecile, squalid, evil. A few filthy strands of hair exempted its shiny moist pate from utter baldness. The long black covered arms—now horribly familiar—dangled awkwardly. And, this inhuman object was plainly fraught with a forbidding emotion.

Transfixed with horror, the chess players stood pale and dumb while an instinctive loathing crept up their spines. What a crushing and humiliating anti-climax to their noble and refined career in the art of chess!

HERE, at last, was their master—an abnormality—a freak. While nature had, perhaps supplied a full share of energy in the making of this creature, she had been careless in the matter of proportions. The thing had an uncanny

intelligence, but this intelligence was squeezed into a single narrow furrow. That proportion of the brain in charge of the faculties of logic, calculation, and memory, as applied to chess, was developed to the extreme.

Suddenly Justin's own words of four years ago echoed mockingly in his ears: "Good lord! He is more than a genius—he is perfection!"

Then another figure appeared in the room. It was Georges. The thin, pallid man, usually humble, strode in with imperial wrath; he glared at the now cringing men and then at the repugnant prince—who cowered at the sight of him. There was something spectral about the wizened man. He seemed to have grown in stature, and he inspired a terrorizing awe. He pulled aside a curtain, and pointed to a long black object on the floor. Justin beheld the coffin he had seen carried from the morgue that afternoon.

"Back into your box!" he shouted to the heavily breathing thing. "Bungling filth! Back into it—and stay in it. Your days are over! You're of no further use to me!"

It scuttled toward the coffin, then as a beast at bay it turned, faced its master and the men whose master he had been.

A change was taking place within the powerful mind of the monster. The lurking thought was beyond the ken of every normal man there, save Georges. Or *was he normal?*

At any rate the eyes of the gruesome creature rose slowly and met those of Georges—and a gurgle caught in the throat of the carriage driver. A meaningful revelation had struck him. The men saw defiance kindling in the bulbous eyes of the chess wizard. They saw it grow to something burning and terrible. Georges, again a shrunken and withered man, was white and still.

Justin and the others were riveted

where they stood. The monster's eyes grew larger, seemed to take in the whole room, and threw the occupants into a state of ecstatic delirium. A whirling motion possessed everything until the monster's eyes became the vortex of a spinning blur. He was hurling an uncanny power over them, calling desperately upon some great reserve of his mind, until all virtually were bound in his spell. Then a powerful, transitory function began. No one dared guess what weird, metaphysical secret was being invoked.

Gray blankness closed about them, and they lost all sense of time and place though they retained their consciousness. The monster's eyes had faded from sight. The single definite sense of which they were aware, was speed—terrific speed, like an interminable falling—yet without any "down" about it.

**A**T LAST stillness came, mists parted, and they saw rocks and cliffs, bright and russet in the sun. Their eyes followed upward. Mountain peaks towered into the blue. They gazed in wonderment, grouped just as they were in the chess room.

Hot breezes struck their faces in this narrow desert valley. Barren ravines cut jaggedly through the rocky foothills and enormous canyons rose between the mountain towers, spreading into the gleaming deltas of crystal azure. Through a gap at the distant foot of the valley and far beyond they saw white domes and turrets of a city.

Justin's astonishment was so great that it was several moments before he thought of Prince Henry. Then the monstrosity's motion caused them all to turn. There he was hobbling off with Georges at his side. Little whirlwinds of dust danced fantastically on the sand. The air was vibrant with a distant monotone. Then from the black mouth of a ravine a fast-moving ob-

ject appeared. It sped toward them and took the form of a chariot drawn by small horses. It raced toward the monster and Georges, who had by now advanced several hundred feet from them, and halted in a great cloud of sand.

A lean figure leapt from the chariot. He wore a tall peaked cap, a tunic reaching to his knees, and shoes with upturned ends. He was a fierce looking individual, with receding forehead, large nose, marked-cheekbones, and protruding upper jaw.

He snatched the monster and sprang with him back into the chariot, while Georges boarded the ornate two-wheeled vehicle voluntarily. The charioteer stared momentarily at the men, then sped off toward the city.

Justin and his companions had no time to find their voices, hardly enough to move, when the mists began closing about them once more. Again the sensation of speed, the whirling blur, and a space of timeless ecstasy. Abruptly, they were back in the chess room. They looked at one another, stupefied, and about the room. Prince Henry and Georges were gone.

Ivan was the first to speak:

"My friends, I think our fears may be over. I am piecing together some bits of knowledge I have acquired on the occult, some of metaphysics, and on the history of chess—one moment."

He moved toward the coffin and peered into it. Finally he reached into a corner and withdrew an object about four inches long. It was of yellowish ivory.

"As I thought," he said, examining it closely. "This is a Persian chess queen. The head rises from a pulpit of acanthus-leaf design. And I assure you it is at least 2,000 years old." He drew a breath. "Now do you understand? It was Prince Henry's talisman. They should have taken it with them. It must be destroyed by fire as soon as possible!"