

THE
MAGIC CHESSMEN.

(A LEGEND OF GUERNSEY.)

BY MORTIMER COLLINS.

FYTTE I.

A JOCUND old fellow was Hugo de Lisle,
Too good for this somewhat monotonous isle,
A lover of chess-playing, dining, and Rhenish—
A collector of oddities,
Useless commodities—
Queer mixture of Cambacères, Beckford, and Jaenisch.

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Sat Hugo de Lisle in his library-chair,
Whose caoutchouc cushions were stuff'd with air,
And puzzled his brain with a problem rare—
An uncommonly complex and curious thing,
That had bother'd Maseres, and mystified Kling.
He toil'd at the poser—he shifted his rooks—
He sipp'd manzanilla—he look'd at his books—
But his efforts were vain; and he cried in derision,
“Egad, it would baffle a biologician!”

Just then, what happened? The window wide
Flew open: the chant of the surging tide
Came softly up from the ocean side;

And at once through the casement,
 To Hugo's amazement,
 Sprang a dapper young gentleman, cloth'd in silk,
 With cylindrical fingers, white as milk,
 And a laughing blue eye, with the merriest twinkle,
 And a cheek that had never known furrow or wrinkle;
 So golden a youth, in the cream of his age,
 Would have done for the Empress Titania's page.

"Who are you?" cried the chess-player, as you may
 guess.

Said his visitor, "Sir, I'm the Demon of Chess!

I've a hall near the centre

Of earth, which you enter

At Pontaberglasllyn, in rocky North Wales,
 Famed for salmon and artists, black cattle and gales.
 And I visit you here, sir, to make you an offer,
 Which will not take a single pound-note from your
 coffer.

But excuse me, before I proceed with my tale,
 I'll thank you to give me a glass of pale ale."

The ale appear'd.

The demon, cheer'd

By the amber draught from the shores of Trent,
 No further time on his prelude spent;
 But he placed on the table, with glances of malice,
 Chessmen more rare than in castle or palace
 Had ever been known.

In a wondering tone

Cried Hugo, "Those pieces *are* beauties, I own.
 What exquisite knights! Why, each pawn is a gem!
 The chessmen of Flaxman are nothing to them."

Said the stranger, "Ha! ha! I believe you, my boy.
They were made for Odysseus, by some one at Troy.
The white ones are Parian marble; the red
Are porphyry, cut when the Simoïs fled,
At the shout of the chiefs, from his glistening bed :

And the best of it is,

Let me tell you, sir, this—

They've a magical power. Were they yours," said
the elf,

"You could give pawn and move ev'n to Staunton
himself."

Old Hugo look'd glum.

"Young harlequin! come—

What does all this long rigmarole signify? I, sir,
Than to credit such nonsense, am verily wiser.
Beat Staunton! of course I could—that I'll admit.
But your chessmen from Troy wouldn't help me
a bit."

"Well, well," quoth his guest,

"You can play, that's confess'd :

As to Staunton, of course that's an innocent .
jest;

But your syllogisms now, howsoever you word 'em,
One game will at once, sir, reduce *ad absurdum*.
The power of my Trojans may quickly be seen—
Play me, Signor Hugo. I'll give you a queen."

The old man look'd aghast.

To the table he pass'd,

And the game was begun; but not long did it
last :

Spite of all his fine tactics, full soon in a mess
Was Hugo, done brown by the Demon of Chess.

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He sprang from his chair with a shout, and exclaim'd,

"Well, I think you *are* some one not fit to be named!"

"Precisely," his visitor

Said ; "but expliciter

I'll be : you are anxious the world to defy

At this game of all games. Well, sir, never say die !

I'll give you these chessmen on one slight condition :

You've a daughter of eighteen

For a husband who's waiting ;

Don't allow her to marry without my permission.

Just pledge me your word,

That the sweet little bird,

Miss Eva de Lisle, (nicest name ever heard,)

Shall marry no person whom I don't approve,

And you soon may give Staunton the pawn and his
move ;

And if this extremely fair compact endures,

The invincible chessmen for ever are yours."

Said Hugo, " I won't—yes, I will—I don't know—

They're beautiful men. What a capital show

I could make at the Great Exhibition with these !"

Quoth the demon, " Of course you can do as you
please :

But make haste and decide. I've a gig at the
door,

And must dine down at Pontaberglasllyn at four."

" The chessmen are mine,"

Cried Hugo. The wine

Flash'd just like Johannisberg, fresh from the Rhine :

The fire burnt quite blue—

Old Hugo look'd grue—

The sprite dash'd like lightning the oriel through :
 The chess-player found that his troubles had fled—
 The problem arranged itself clear in his head ;
 And he growl'd, as he tried each victorious move,
 " I'll soon invite Staunton to dinner, by Jove ! "

FYTTE . II.

O Eva de Lisle !
 From the banks of the Nile
 To the granite frontiers of this picturesque isle,
 There never was nymph of whom poet could weave a
 Pleasanter carol than sweet little Eva.
 Who shall depict her ?
 Venus had trick'd her
 Out in such charms as would soften a lictor :
 Clear were her eyes
 As the midsummer skies ;
 Clear was her voice as the chimes of a minster :
 Merry and free—
 It was easy to see
 Eva would not very long be a spinster.

There were three men at least who were resolute she,
 Sweet daughter of glee,
 No spinster should be.
 First, Gregory Brock—gaunt, long, angular, bony,
 Of her worshipful father's a chess-playing crony—
 Fond of Muzio gambits, Fianchetto defences,
 He'd play on for a fortnight when once he commences.
 'Twas a question if he or old Hugo play'd better :
 To Brock she was promised. *I wish he may get her !*

Away in the moorlands of Cornwall abode
One Ralph Penaluna, a wizard, who show'd
Better taste than your sorcerers commonly do,
For he was in love with the pretty one, too.
And it chanced—in some fashion I leave you to guess—
He had absolute power o'er the Demon of Chess ;
So sent him to tempt, with his magical pieces,

Old Hugo; and promised, if luck should befriend him,
He'd free the poor sprite from his toilsome caprices,

And away into frolicsome liberty send him.
So the demon was anxious sweet Eva should be "*Una
Uxor persuavis*" for Ralph Penaluna—

And tried all his skill the dear creature to fetter
To the grimy old wizard. *I wish he may get her !*

Oh, 'tis pleasant to wrap one in cricketing flannel,
And dip the long oar in these bays of the Channel !

So thought Oliver Carey :

His yacht, styled the *Fairy*,
Used to dance o'er the waves, howsoever might vary
The midsummer sky : never yachtsman more wary,

Or bolder in cresting

The foamflakes unresting,
Was known to the White Island's maritime annal.

But pleasanter still (so thought Oliver Carey)
To watch Eva's beautiful countenance vary,
As they wander'd together 'neath green forest fret-
work,

While the sun on the turf cast a shadowy network ;
To list as she sang some old troubadour's ballad ;
To tempt her to frolicsome picnics, with salad
Of lobster, and long flasks of icy Sauterne ;
To leave the rough headlands of Guernsey astern

In the swift-sailing *Fairy* (with *Eva*), and glance
 White sails by the vine-curtain'd coastline of France.
 Both the lady and Oliver liked nothing better ;
 On the whole, perhaps the Carey's most likely to get
 her !

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Sat Hugo de Lisle in his library-chair,
 Whose caoutchouc cushions were stuff'd with air,
 And his Trojan chessmen made rare havoc
 In the luck and the wits of Gregory Brock :

Game after game—

'Twas ever the same,

Checkmate like a thunderbolt always came.

'Twas vain to attempt to spend brilliance or fire on

The matter—or slowly his king to environ—

'Twas like fighting Napoleon, or rhyming with Byron.

So at last, in complete intellectual beggary,

“If I play any more, you may eat me!” said Gregory.

“Well, well,” said old Hugo good-humouredly, “leave

The affair for the present :

To lose *is* unpleasant.

Let's have some more claret, and talk about *Eve*.”

But just at that moment flash'd on him the mess

He was in, with the quaint vested Demon of Chess.

And “Confound it,” he thought, “how excessively
 green—

What a most undeniable muff I have been ! ”

He'd scarce utter'd these words with the mouth of
 his mind,

Ere a footman came into the room, and behind

Two visitors very unwelcome—the Elf

Of Chess and old Ralph Penaluna himself.

Thought Hugo de Lisle, "This is pleasant, likewise!"
 Thought Gregory Brock, "What unparallel'd guys!"

"Excuse, my dear Mr. de Lisle, what may seem an
 Intrusion of mine,"
 Said the sprite, with benign
 Modulation (he *was* a most courteous demon);
 "But you see," he went on, "your fair daughter's
 renown

Is by no means confined to this island and town;
 It is carried o'er ocean, and blown by the gales
 To moorlands of Cornwall, to hills of North Wales:
 And I've brought Mr. Ralph Penaluna, whose ancestry
 With King Arthur of old did invincible lances try,
 A gentleman learn'd in magic, astrology,
 And pretty well everything ending in 'ology';
 Better still, who in landed estates, as I hear,
 Is worth at the least fifty thousand a-year.
 He'll marry the girl without even inspection:
 I suppose you're not troubled with any objection."

Old Hugo was gasping;
 But Gregory grasping
 The hilt of his sword, cried, "Confound your audacity!
 I'll run through the pair of you, by my veracity.
 Now then, you old vagabond, famous for sorcery,
 I'll very soon turn your impertinent course awry.
 There's a quiet green alley for skittles outside:
 Come on—with your heart's blood its turf shall be
 dyed."

"This is capital," quoth
 The sprite, nothing loth;

"I'm your second, my friend Penaluna: we'll soon
Checkmate this elongated insolent loon:
And Miss Eva de Lisle 'twon't take much to con-
vince—
She's mine by a special agreement long since."

To the alley they went;
The wizard content
To fight, for to him such a puissance was lent,
Not the keenest of rapiers could graze his exterior
Cuticle, ere of the world he grew wearier—
He could catch in the palm of his hand, a mere trifle,
The conical ball of a Minié rifle;
So, cool as an iceberg and firm as a rock,
He awaited the onset of Gregory Brock.

The rapiers flash—the blue steel rings—
Each combatant into queer postures flings
His legs and arms; they lunge—they parry—
They fight like the demon's friend, Old Harry;
While the sprite and Hugo quietly stay,
Not of course too near, to see fair play.

So fix'd their gaze, they didn't behold
Sweet Eva de Lisle with the tresses of gold
Chattering softly and musically
To Oliver Carey, down the alley;
Who, coming to where
The midsummer air
Was fill'd with the rapiers' dazzling glare,
Much marvell'd to find such brawl and riot
In a dusky nook that was commonly quiet—
Quiet enough for lovers to linger,
Heedless of grey Time's outstretch'd finger.

Oliver Carey's steel flash'd out,
And he suddenly ended the fighting bout;
Then he said, "What's this? What foaming flagon
is't

That sets Mr. Brock on his wither'd antagonist?"
Scream'd the Demon of Chess, with a sinister smile,
"They both want to marry Miss Eva de Lisle!"

Quoth Carey, "I think, Mr. Demon of Chess!

For a demon, your *nous* is excessively meagre,
And you've come from North Wales to get into a
mess.

If in bargaining you'd been a little less eager
T'other day with my friend, Mr. Hugo de Lisle,
You'd have saved many a mile

Of travel—and all this vexatious quandary.

Go back to your villanous Cambrian glen!

The lady you talk of is now, and was then,

My wife—MRS. OLIVER CAREY!"
