

A GAME OF DRAUGHTS.

By FRED M. WHITE.*



LIFFORD STEELE quietly remarked that the game was over, which patent fact his opponent admitted cheerfully, with the rider that there was more in the game of draughts than people imagined. The

two were playing comfortably between their cigarettes in the luxurious lounge of the Brema Castle Hotel. A band was playing somewhere in the distance, there was a *crescendo* of chattering voices, the soft swish of draperies. A tall girl, with a white, sad face, passed along as Steele was packing up the draughtsmen. She paused suddenly.

"Perhaps you would like to play, Miss Denbury?" Steele hazarded. His late antagonist had strolled away. "If so——"

"I loathe the game," Angela said almost passionately. "To my mind, there is something so horribly weird—— Mr. Steele, are you a good player?"

The girl paused, and her manner changed suddenly. The keen-eyed, shrewd young barrister was regarding her intently. Surely mere dislike for an innocent pastime could not have touched her passions so deeply. Angela Denbury was more beautiful than she had been when Steele first met her at Davos Platz some eighteen months before, but then the white sorrow of her face had been the glowing happiness of irresponsible youth. The passing months had made sad history for Angela Denbury lately. She sat down by Steele's side and commenced to fan herself gently.

"Mr. Steele," she said abruptly, "do you remember Raymond Hare?"

Steele nodded. He was beginning to understand. Raymond Hare had been at Davos Platz at that time . . . Certainly a handsome, healthy young fellow, with everything good on his side. There was a flush on Angela's face now.

"If I can help you," Steele suggested, "pray command me."

"Yes, yes. You are very good. When I met you in the corridor yesterday, it occurred to me that you might be disposed . . . Raymond liked you; indeed, you were very friendly at Davos. Do you know that Hare Park, Raymond's place, is not far from here?"

"Then I shall certainly ride over and call," said Steele. "I hope he's well. But that class of athlete is never sick or sorry."

"Indeed, you are quite wrong," Miss Denbury replied. "Raymond is dying. He is dying of a broken heart. And it will be merciful if he is taken away before he loses his mind altogether."

Steele was deeply shocked. Something told him that he was to hear more, but he had too much tact and delicacy to ask questions. With the dreamy murmur of the band and the smiling faces about him, it seemed hard all at once to grapple with the tragedy hanging over two lives.

"It seems almost farcical," Angela went on—"at least, in one way. You were surprised a minute or two ago at an outburst of mine over a simple question about a game of draughts. If that game had never been invented, I should be a happy girl to-day with—with——"

"Raymond Hare," Steele murmured. "Won't you take me into your confidence? Anything that lies in my power to do I will do gladly."

It was some moments before Angela replied. Her dark eyes were fixed upon space.

"Do you believe in warnings and banshees and occult things?" she asked suddenly.

"Not in the least," Steele replied. "I have found the air of the police-courts wonderfully efficacious in solving mysteries of that kind."

"Then you would look with suspicious eyes upon a game of draughts played by invisible hands in an old castle at midnight."

"I should indeed. That is all very well in the pages of Christmas fiction."

"Mr. Steele, I have seen it myself; I have felt the icy draught; I have heard the clash of steel; I have seen the red and white men

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moved. And when the game has been played for the fifty-second consecutive Saturday night, Raymond Hare will die—if he does not go out of his mind first."

The last few words were uttered with the deepest sadness. They were none the less sad because they sounded so strangely out of place there.

"The fulfilment of a legend," Steele murmured. "Please tell me the story. You have no idea how deeply I am interested. Those spectral antagonists are playing for the life of a living man. As a champion performer, I should very much like to be present at one of those contests. Does one invariably win?"

"Oh, no! Sometimes one player, and sometimes the other. If red is successful in the majority of cases, then Raymond's life is spared. Otherwise—oh, Mr. Steele! is it possible that such things can really be?"

The man of the world smiled sceptically. Those family legends were generally very interesting. He intimated that he would much like to hear this one.

"I can tell you in a few words," said Angela. "The Hares and the Monks have ever been bitter rivals; and when the War of the Roses broke out, the heads of the two houses took different sides. After the disaster of Bosworth Field, Alyward Monk fled home, and Amyas Hare betrayed him. The former surprised the latter at dead of night over a curious draughtsboard in the big hall. Then there was a scene. They were neither of them armed, but there were plenty of rapiers about. Monk swore that he or Hare should die. Then they played each for the life of the other across the draughtsboard, and Alyward Monk won. Amyas Hare handed a rapier to the victor, who stabbed him to the heart under the very eyes of the unhappy man's wife, who had come down to see why her husband had not gone to bed. And ever since then, for a year before the death of the head of the Hare family, that ghostly game is played every Saturday night. No doubt you have heard many similar legends, but I have seen the working of this one for myself. Sometimes the curse misses a generation, but it is working for Raymond Hare now as it worked for his father. The latter knew his end was coming, and it did. Within a week of the end of his year he broke his neck out hunting."

"It might have been a coincidence," Steele suggested.

"Oh, I grant you that!" Angela exclaimed.

"More especially as ever since that dreadful discovery by the distracted wife, the Hares have been a highly strung, emotional, imaginative race. But the thing is going on now, and Raymond will never be able to stand the strain. If he is not driven to suicide, his mind must give way. And we were so happy together; we loved one another so dearly. And now, and now——"

The girl paused, with the tears brimming on her lashes like diamonds. The deep sadness of her face touched Steele to the heart.

"Let me ask you one practical question," he said. "In the event of Raymond Hare's death, who comes into the property?"

Angela Denbury did not quite know. There was an elderly second cousin, a very nice kind of man who lived with Hare, who she imagined was next-of-kin. George Minton had once been marked out as a great geologist, or something of that kind, before he gave up his career for the sake of Hare. Steele nodded carelessly, but he made a note of the same.

"Now tell me something about the phenomena," he asked. "When and under what circumstances did you see it for yourself?"

"Well, of course I have known all about it for years," Angela replied. "Raymond told me how the thing had acted in his father's case. But that was some five years ago, and, after all, it rested on the evidence of servants. Moreover, Raymond's father was a very hard-living man, and in any case could not have survived long. Raymond had never seen those metal draughtsmen move till shortly after we were engaged, and then there was a big house-party at Hare Park. I shall never forget his face the next morning. At my urgent request the secret was kept from everybody but Mr. Minton. At the same time I could not quite bring myself to believe in the phenomena. I decided to see for myself the following Saturday night after the house was quiet.

"A little after midnight I came down into the great flagged hall. It was a warm night and I felt no inconvenience. I reached the place where the queer metal draughtsboard stood with the metal men ranged upon it. I had a queer feeling that somebody was watching me. One or two electric lamps were always left burning in the hall, so that I took courage. Then, with a kind of feeling that it was all so much nonsense, I hid behind a curtain.

"At the end of ten minutes an icy draught



"'I loathe the game,' Angela said almost passionately."

swept along the hall. There were murmurs like the sound of strife, a little pause, then, to my horror, one of the draughtsmen moved! It was only by a great effort that I kept myself from yelling aloud. . . . Well, I watched that clever, weird game played till white won—white, the colour of the House of York, whose cause Alyward Monk had espoused. If the material fingers of two champions had been on the table, it had been no better played. I saw the taken pieces rise in the air and fall on the table with a dull clink, then I heard the thud of a body and the clatter of a rapier, as the victor carelessly tossed it on the floor. If you ask me what happened after that, I frankly say that I don't know. When I came to myself again, I was lying on my bedroom floor, and the stable clock was striking three."

The girl paused with a long-drawn sigh; her dark eyes were full of pain. She half glanced at her companion to see if he were smiling at her. But there was no smile on Steele's keen, clean-shaven face.

"Can you find it possible to believe my story?" Angela asked.

"Every word of it," Steele said promptly. "I feel sure that your eyes did not deceive you. Also I feel pretty sure that there is some explanation. And now I am going to help you if I possibly can. In the first place, you are not to let anybody know what you have told me—not even Raymond Hare. He must be led to understand that the family secret is intact. In the next place you must contrive for me to become a guest at Hare Park for a few days. Does Hare come here at all—to see you, I mean?"

"Two or three times a week; indeed, I am in this hotel so as to be near him. He has insisted upon our engagement being broken off; but so long as there is life, there is hope, and I shall never give Raymond up, never!"

"Indeed, I hope there will be no reason," Steele said warmly. "Write and ask Hare to come and see you to-morrow. Say I am leaving for Scotland in the morning, and my room is already engaged. Under pretence that I cannot stay here, I am going to ask Mr. Hare to put me up for a day or two."

"He will be delighted. The face of an old friend distracts him from—"

"Then that is settled," Steele said cheerfully. "I'm going to my own room now, where I can think the matter out over a quiet cigarette. Also I shall have to write one or two important letters. Good night."

He pressed the girl's hand warmly, leaving

her with a glow and a feeling of happiness to which she had long been a stranger. He sat down beside his own window till the noise and clatter of the hotel had ceased; he looked out into the darkness with a cigarette glowing between his teeth. Gradually something like a theory began to shape itself in his mind. Then Steele switched on the light and wrote a couple of letters, which he decided to post personally. One was addressed to a well-known firm of private detectives. There was nothing in it besides a single person's name, written across the middle of the page, with a query after it. Steele smiled grimly as he fastened down the flap and sealed it; after which he dismissed the subject from his mind and went to bed.

II.

WITH a post-prandial cigarette well alight, Steele was thoughtfully regarding his host. There was another man present—a slight, tall man, with a pleasant face and open smile, who had been introduced to Steele as Minton. Raymond Hare himself was making pictures on the tablecloth with his breadcrumbs. He was deadly pale, fitfully silent, and feverishly gay. His dark eyes expanded strangely, the lids twitched in a quick, nervous way. Steele knew two men who had been all through the siege of Kimberley, and he recognised the same symptoms—nerves of the worst type.

"You ought to be a happy man here," he said. "I never saw a more perfect specimen of a Tudor house. A man who possesses seven Romneys could not possibly be miserable. What do you think, Mr. Minton?"

Minton smiled in his pleasant manner. Hare started. He seemed on the verge of an outburst, but checked himself.

"I am never quite happy on a Saturday night," he said, as if speaking more to himself than anything else. "What nonsense I am saying!"

Steele's air of polite bewilderment was perfect, Minton's expression was one of annoyance. On the far side of the electric flower-stand Steele could study the features of the other two. Electric lights in old copper fittings were everywhere. The night was a little chilly, so that an electric radiator gleamed in the deep, old-fashioned fireplace. Raymond Hare rose from his seat, muttering that he had forgotten something. His face was ghastly pale, and there were heavy drops on his forehead, though Steele affected to see nothing of this.

"My nephew is not quite himself lately," Mr. Minton said.

"Not enough to do," Steele laughed. "It is a favourite axiom of mine that the man who has everything is never really happy. Now, the change from a hotel to a house like this is a great treat to me. How wonderfully well the electric lights blend with these old walls! Do you run your stoves on the same set of wires?"

Minton explained that there was practically a second set for the stoves. If the ordinary lights went wrong, then they had always the stoves to fall back upon. The scheme was his own, though he did not profess to know anything of the technical part of the business.

"You have not studied electricity, then?" Steele asked carelessly.

"I am ashamed to say that I know nothing whatever about it," Minton laughed. "Take a cigar, and come and play a game of billiards. I dare say Raymond will be down again presently."

On the whole, it was an exceedingly dull evening, and more than once Steele wished himself at the hotel again. Hare was distraught and uneasy, and Minton appeared to be keeping an anxious watch over him. Steele put up his cue after the third game and refused to play any more.

"I am afraid that we are neither of us up to championship form," he said. "As it is just eleven o'clock, I dare not play, lest the game should carry us into Sunday, which is one of the drawbacks of Saturday night."

"To-night is Saturday," Hare said suddenly. "Ugh! somebody is walking over my grave. I hope I shall be better to-morrow."

Steele murmured something appropriate. Personally he would have liked to have suggested sending for the doctor, and the advisability of having somebody to look after his host, but that was out of the question. Outside the walls of an asylum, he had never seen anything like the face his friend turned to him just for the moment. No mind could stand a strain like that for long.

The house grew quiet presently; there was a faint light or two in the hall and corridors. For the best part of an hour Steele sat in his room smoking. A few minutes before midnight he put down his cigarette and crept out into the corridor. It looked very dim and lonely, despite the specks of light here and there. The black walls, with their strong portraits, the ghostly figures in armour, all appealed to a strong

imagination. Well in land, as he usually held himself, Steele was conscious of an extra heartbeat or so as he crept downstairs. He stood presently on the polished oak floor close by where stood the fatal draughtsboard, with the men neatly arranged thereon.

Steele proceeded to examine the curiosity carefully. The board stood on a slim iron leg fantastically decorated with beaten copper. The foot was ornate with the same rich scroll-work; the top was a perfect specimen of the ironworker's art. The foot was bolted into the floor, as it was liable to topple over. The twenty-four draughtsmen were made of some kind of metal; the tops were enamelled in red and white. Altogether it was the kind of graceful work of art that one might see at Christie's, and which might fetch anything up to a thousand pounds. As Steele stood there, the clock struck midnight.

Almost instantly the corridor was filled with an icy current of air. Steele looked round, expecting to find an open window somewhere; but there was no sign of that, and the cold air continued. There was a faint moaning sound that came from somewhere overhead, a weird sound calculated to fray a set of nerves not too highly tempered. Steele was feeling the influence of it.

He stepped back for a moment, and as he did so, one of the red draughtsmen moved a square. Steele could distinctly hear the slide of metal on metal. A curious sensation shot up his spine, there was a queer tingling at the roots of his hair. Just for a moment he had a wild impulse to rush back to his room and lock himself in there.

"I'm not surprised at Hare," he muttered. "Seen unexpectedly, it would try the nerves of the strongest man."

The phantom game continued. Steele crushed down the fear that held him. He was watching with a vivid curiosity that almost amounted to pain. Not only was a ghostly contest in progress, but it was a masterly one. A man would be pushed forward and taken, it would rise with a little quick motion in the air, and fall with a dull click on the side of the table. Steele watched the whole thing with eyes that fairly started from his head. He saw the skill of attack and parry, and saw that gradually the unseen white foeman was getting the best of the contest. At the end of a quarter of an hour the game was won. White had two men left. It was a strange feature of the game that neither antagonist ever made the smallest effort to get a king. The contest

was a cutting down one from start to finish. Perhaps the king at draughts was an innovation since the early Tudor days. The game was over. Almost immediately upon its termination came a dull sound like the falling of a body, then the rattle of steel, as if somebody had carelessly tossed a rapier on the oak floor.

The sound brought Steele out of his waking dream. He felt that he had had quite enough of it for one night. There was bound to be some explanation for this uncanny performance; but all the same, Steele felt that he could work it out better in the light of his bedroom. As he turned, he ran into something soft and yielding. It was Raymond Hare, standing petrified and absolutely unconscious of the fact that he was not alone.

"White won!" he whispered hoarsely. "White again! That is three Saturdays in succession—nearly two to one against me. God be good to me!"

He was swaying from head to foot in terror. As he suddenly realised Steele's presence, he opened his lips for a cry of despair. Steele's hand was over his mouth instantly.

"Not a sound," he commanded sternly. "Come up to my room with me, and I'll give you some brandy from my flask."

The strong mind bore down the weaker one. With a shaking hand, Hare began to place the draughtsmen in order again. He whispered something about the servants, and that they must have no opportunity to gossip. Perhaps he was not so far gone, after all, Steele thought. He was bound to admit to himself that he should not have cared for the task.

With a feeling of pleased satisfaction he found himself in his room again. A spoonful of brandy brought a little colour into Hare's cheeks.

"How long has this been going on?" Steele asked.

"Getting on for a year," Hare replied. "I suppose you found out. Well, I am not sorry, Steele; if I don't tell somebody, I shall go mad. Sometimes white wins and sometimes red wins, but always the balance against me. And when this year is up, I shall die, as my father did before me."

"I hope not, old fellow. Was your father's case authenticated?"

"I suppose so," Hare said hopelessly. "Not long before he died, an old servant said she came down one morning and found the draughtsmen lying on the side of the

table, as if somebody had been playing a game."

"That's a coincidence, of course. At the same time, a careless servant may have swept them off by accident in passing. Personally, I refuse to believe that there is anything occult about this business at all. Let's talk about something else. I was saying to your uncle how well those electric fittings go with the old house. Have you had them for very long?"

"The light was first used on December 19 of last year," said Hare.

"Well, there's nothing the matter with your memory, anyway," Steele smiled—"if a man can recollect things like that."

"But, my dear fellow, I have the best possible reasons for remembering," Hare broke in. "It was on the third day after that that the ghosts came back again to play their hideous game for my life."

"In that case you would recollect," Steele said thoughtfully. "Did you see the game for yourself, or did one of the servants?"

"The servants know nothing of the present trouble. My uncle saw it first. He was so fearfully upset and agitated that I guessed what had happened, and taxed him with it. As a man of honour he was bound to tell the truth. And for many a weary Saturday since then have I watched the game. God only knows why I am sane to tell the story now."

There was a deep pity in Steele's heart, a pity steeped in a more violent emotion. He was beginning to see his way. Meanwhile he wanted to be alone to think. Most part of the next day he wrote letters. Two long telegrams he despatched, and waited for the reply personally. Later on in the evening he called at the post-office for letters, receiving one small parcel that looked like a bottle of some kind. It was a tiny phial of white liquid that he slipped into the pocket of his dress waistcoat as he sat down to dinner. If there were anything in his theory, Steele was determined to put it to the test before long; and if he were right, he promised himself a pretty piece of comedy before the week had elapsed.

It was a quiet evening and a quiet dinner, like the others. Steele, pleading that he had letters to write, retired early, as did the others. But the letter-writer must have been quick over his work, for a little later, in his shirt-sleeves, he marched boldly out into the corridor and thence into the hall. In his hand he carried a hammer, a pair of pliers, and a screwdriver. He let the hammer fall with

a loud clang in the corridor. Not a sound followed. Then he made his way down into the hall and proceeded to turn on an extra light or two.

One o'clock was striking as Steele returned



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to his room again. There was a smile in his eyes, but his lips were grimly set. On the whole, he had the air of a man who is satisfied with himself.

"If I were a novelist," he said, "I would make a rattling good thing out of this."

III.

THE great clock over the stables boomed the midnight hour. Before the second stroke had sounded, Steele was out of the room and

into the corridor. There was no disguise about his movements now. He reached the door leading to Mr. Minton's room and rapped sharply. He waited for no reply, but entered without ceremony.

The lights were up, and as yet Minton was fully dressed. There was just the shade of annoyance on the elder man's face. He was coldly demanding to know the meaning of Steele's intrusion when the latter cut him short.

"It is a very pressing matter," he said. "I want you to be good enough to come with me without delay. I have made a discovery."

"Ah! so you have found out the secret of the house! Did you ever hear of anything so distressing, so—so—you know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean perfectly well," said Steele drily. "And I can quite understand why this thing is never mentioned to a stranger. Mean-

while, it seems to me I have found a way to save your unhappy nephew. Will you come this way?"

Minton nodded. He seemed to be swallowing something hard. Steele's request sounded more like a command. Down below in the

hall, Raymond Hare was standing watching that infernal game of draughts in dazed, sick fascination. No murderer waiting for the verdict could have had a more agonised look in his eyes. He was absolutely unconscious of the other two, he had no gaze for anything but the ghastly shifting pieces. The game went on; red made his last fatal move; it was obvious to the meaneast understanding that the contest was finished, though a piece or two stood on the table. Then came the sound of the falling body, the clash of steel on wood.

Steele touched Raymond Hare on the shoulder. He looked up with a start. Minton would have hurried him away, but Steele interfered.

"I am not quite satisfied," he said quietly. "Personally, I have yet to be convinced that there is no material reason in this thing. I am going to put the men on the board again, and when I have done so——"

"For Heaven's sake," Minton said hoarsely, "be careful! This is no time——"

"I know it; but I am not in the least afraid. I set the men out so; I am going to challenge the spirit of the House of York to a little game. Now, sir, if you are quite ready."

Steele bowed mockingly. He just reached forward and touched the board, and a white piece moved of its own volition. Immediately a red man jumped from one square to another. Steele turned with a smile to his deeply interested audience. A queer, shaky cry came from Hare's lips.

"It is a new game," he said—"the moves are different. Heaven knows I should be able to tell, seeing that they are burnt into the very matter of my brain!" He was trembling from head to foot with a sudden, sickening hopefulness. The moves of the new game were terribly one-sided. Almost before it had commenced, white's men were slaughtered right and left, and the conflict over.

"We have brought the science up to date," Steele said flippantly. "The shade of your departed ancestor has evidently been attending a tournament or two. A *coup* or two like that will always give him the best of his old antagonist. Really, my dear Hare, you need have no further anxiety in future. Stay quietly tucked up in your bed Saturday nights, and at the end of the year white will find himself in a hopeless minority as regards wins. Again!"

Once more he placed the men, and once more they started of their own volition. This time the moves were slightly different from the last, but after half-a-dozen squares were covered white was once more in diffi-

culties. The weird element seemed to have dropped out of the situation almost. The white, drawn agony had left Hare's face; he was looking on with the air of a man who sees something new and strange in the way of machinery for the first time.

"Come away," Minton said hoarsely. "There is something almost blasphemous in this. And in any case, this fippancy——"

He moved over towards the wall, and immediately the place was in darkness. The electric lights had suddenly failed. Hare cried in affright, his nerves all frayed out at once, and fearful of some ghostly visitation. But Steele took one step near to the draughts-board and waited. Presently he felt a hand just creeping past his own fingers. He fastened on it at once. He uttered no sound, he only held on with a vicelike grip. It was useless for his unseen antagonist to struggle.

"Switch on the stove in the fireplace," he said. "I'm told that's on a separate current, and it will give us plenty of light. Aha! I thought so."

A dull red glow from the big radiator filled the hall and disclosed the figure of Minton on the other side of the board. His wrist was firmly grasped by Steele, his pleasant face was pallid, dark, and scowling.

"He's pulled away the 'cut out' fuse," said Steele coolly. "Mr. Minton, kindly give me a fragment of copper wire, so that I can restore the circuit again. I know you usually carry some in your pocket. Your uncle is a clever man, Hare; he is quite a specialist in electrical matters."

Minton muttered something. All the same, he produced what Steele required. It was only a moment's work to restore the circuit again, almost as easy as a child knots two pieces of string. Hare looked from one face opposite to the other. A light was dawning upon him.

"I have been fooled," he said. "Some infernal jugglery——"

"To the top of your bent," Steele replied. "So far as Mr. Minton is concerned, the thing is finished. So much for a family carefully nurtured on old superstitions. Your ancestors before you have told that story till they came to believe it. Your father's death looked like a case in point. And that gave the wicked uncle yonder his cue. I did not really suspect him till he assured me he knew nothing whatever about electrical matters. When I ascertained that it had been a study with him, I began to put two and two together. See here."

Steele took a strong screwdriver from his

pocket and proceeded to release the quaint old draughtsboard from its fastenings. Under the floor there were a score or more of fine electric wires running up the hollow stem of the table.

"The top of the table is hollow," Steele explained. "Hence the little arrangement was rendered all the easier. If you will examine the top of that board with a strong glass, you will find a tiny copper disc has been let into each of them. This once being done, the rest is easy. You only wanted a certain combination of moves to be arranged, and the electric agency does the rest. There is a little time-clock attached, so that the apparatus could be made to work at a given hour, and there you are. Night after night you have stood watching the thing with fascinated horror, whilst all the time it has been merely mechanical. And yet I was quite able to understand your feelings."

"What were your own the first time you saw it?" Hare asked hoarsely.

Steele freely admitted that the thing had touched his nerves.

"The icy draught was easy," he continued. "It was easy to open a skylight window in which was placed an electric fan. One of those things will soak that air all through the house in less than thirty seconds. As to the clash of steel, a flat piece of metal under the floor attached to one of these wires would do that. The whole thing has been most ingeniously arranged and carried out. You had an utterly unscrupulous rascal to deal with, and everything fitted most beautifully into his hands. If I were in your place, I should not prosecute; I should merely kick him out of the house in the morning. And if ever a scoundrel deserved to be hanged——"

Hare turned round passionately. But already Minton had discreetly disappeared. The sullen bang of his door could be heard, and the quick, grinding rasp of the key in the lock.

"Exit Minton," said Steele grimly. "If you are not too tired——"

"Tired!" Hare cried. "Tired! I feel as if I should never want to sleep again. If you could but faintly imagine what a load has been removed from my heart, if you could only understand the rush and joy of life, and know that the curse——"

"The curse never existed at all," said Steele. "But come to my room, and over a cigarette I'll tell you everything, from the moment that Miss Denbury confided in me and I promised my assistance."

Hare followed eagerly enough. He lay

back, puffing his cigarette with exquisite enjoyment. Already there was a healthier tinge on his sallow cheek.

"First of all, I had to suspect somebody," said Steele. "I gave your uncle first choice; as a matter of fact, there was nobody else. I took the trouble to inquire into his antecedents. They were very bad; he was deeply in debt, and trading upon what might happen if you died. If you died, he came into everything. If you lost your reason, he would only be a little worse off than a wholesale inheritance. Then I found that your relative was an electrical expert. Also I found that the vision of the draughts-players had never been actually seen till the introduction of the electric light into the house.

"After this my case was pretty clear. I read up the subject, I drugged your dear uncle's whisky-and-soda one night, and then set to work. I took that said draughts-board to pieces, and before daylight had not only mastered all its secrets, but reset the mechanical part to a problem of my own. I was going to have a certain amount of fun at your uncle's expense, but he got frightened, and so I had to act on the spur of the moment. Did you see his face when he saw the new combination move under a touch of my hand? No? I dare say you had no room for any thought but your own."

"He wanted to drive me mad!" Hare whispered.

"I fancy he wanted to drive you to suicide," Steele replied. "And when I saw you the first time I came here, he was not far off the accomplishment of his design."

A bright wave of colour came into Hare's checks. He seemed to have some little difficulty in getting out his words.

"Very nearly," he said in a low voice. "But for the fact that there is a girl who loves me and who would have so keenly felt the disgrace and sorrow of it, more than once I was on the verge—but why speak of that now? Steele, how can I possibly thank you? How can I——?"

He broke down utterly; then presently his eyes grew bright and sunny as they had been in the old days at Davos. He rose and came across to Steele with outstretched hands.

"Let this be a secret between us for all time," he said.

"Granted, on one condition," Steele laughed. "It is for me to make conditions."

"Of course; but I fancy I can guess what it is. You want to be——"

"Your best man," Steele said quietly. "It is my right, I fancy."