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THE HAUNTED CHESSMEN

by E. R. PUNSHON



"All about was fury, a hurrying to and fro of strange, evil things."

1. *The Black Queen*

IT WAS in Fred Kerr's rooms that I saw them first. For a wonder Kerr was by himself; he was the most popular man I ever knew, I think, and it was the rarest thing in the world to find him alone. But that I had done so this evening rather pleased me, for I was very full of my success against Jenoure Baume, and very anxious to tell Kerr all about it. Even he had never yet beaten Jenoure Baume.

Of course, Baume isn't a master of chess in the sense that are Lasker and Capablanca. Still, for a common or garden player like myself, with a purely local reputation, to beat him is something of an achievement, and I wanted very much to tell Kerr of my success. He was very sympathetic and very interested, and in analyzing the game with me he pointed out a move Jenoure Baume

might have made which would almost certainly have cost me my queen. Fortunately Baume had not seen it—nor had I for that matter—and I told Kerr he really ought to go in for chess seriously.

"Not enough open air about it for me," he answered laughingly. "I'll take it up when I'm sixty." When I rose to go he mentioned that the date of his wedding had been fixed for the following month.

I congratulated him warmly—Lady Norah was a charming girl, and the match most suitable in every way—and in one of his little confidential outbursts that everyone found charming he told me how happy he was and how fortunate he counted himself.

"And is that one of the wedding presents?" I asked, nodding toward a set of chessmen standing on a board on a small side-table.

I had noticed them as soon as I entered the room. Of Indian workmanship as I guessed, they were very beautifully carved and polished, and when I looked at them again I was conscious of a curious impression. I can not define it exactly—but it was almost as though they moved and stirred, as though they all watched eagerly, intently. The idle thought came to me that those inanimate carved pieces of polished bone were watching me as a spider from its web watches a fly hovering near.

Vexed with myself for having such foolish fancies—I remember I thought they were due to the strain of my game with Jenoure Baume—I went over to look at them more closely.

“Awfully fine carving!” I said, picking up one of the white pieces. “Indian, isn’t it? Are they a wedding present?”

“No,” Kerr answered. “The fact is, I bought them from poor Will Lathbury’s widow.”

“Oh, indeed!” I said.

I had only met Lathbury once or twice, but, of course, I knew him well by reputation as a sound, steady player, and the mysterious tragedy that had ended his life had been a great shock to me.

“Those were the pieces they found near him,” Kerr added.

Poor Lathbury had been discovered one morning lying dead across his chessboard, on which he had apparently been working out some problem, or analyzing a game. The razor with which he had cut his throat was in his hand, and there was no faintest explanation possible of his miserable deed. It was certainly shown in evidence that for a day or two before the end he had seemed slightly worried, and had spoken about some game of chess or problem that appeared to be troubling him. And he had complained of not sleeping very well, a most unusual thing with him. But that was all.

The coroner suggested that his mind had become affected by his intense application to his favorite game, but that was all rubbish. However, the jury returned the usual verdict, and there the matter had to rest.

“Are they ivory?” I asked, looking more closely at the piece I was handling.

“Well, the story goes,” answered Kerr, with a touch of hesitation—“the story goes that they are made from human bones.”

“Oh, Lord!” I said, putting down a little quickly the piece I was holding.

“I don’t know if it’s true,” Kerr added; “very likely it isn’t. It may be just a yarn. But the tale is that an Indian raja some time in the Middle Ages captured a hated enemy, killed him, and had these made from his bones.”

“Ugh!” I said. “What an idea! What on earth made you get them?”

“I hardly know,” he answered. “Mrs. Lathbury wanted to get rid of them—naturally. They hadn’t very pleasant associations for her. She asked me what they ought to fetch. I said I would take them if she liked. I thought it was a way to help her, and then it’s lovely carving.”

“Rather too lovely for me,” I said, and I could have sworn that the black queen turned her head and shot at me a glance of malignant and deadly hatred.

Of course, the notion was absurd, and when I looked again I saw the piece as immobile as any other bit of carved bone. And yet when I looked a third time I was once more aware of that air of cruel and furtive waiting as of some evil thing lurking patiently which before had seemed to me to hover over those two double rows of carved figures.

Determined to conquer my fancies, I picked up the black queen and, examining it more closely, I thought I made out that it was a trick in the

arrangement of the eyes which gave the piece that aspect of alert watchfulness I had noticed.

"Carved out of human bones!" I repeated, weighing the piece in my hand. "What an idea! Well, shall we have a little game?"

I thought Kerr looked startled and even a little alarmed. He shook his head quickly without speaking. I felt relieved; for the idea was powerfully in my mind that it was not against him that I must play, but against some other—some unknown—antagonist.

I said good-night a little hurriedly and took myself off. The fact is, I had wanted to play so badly that I felt that if I stayed there much longer with that black queen in my hand and the pieces drawn up ready, I should find myself making the first move—against whom, I wondered? Whom or what?

I remembered very plainly that as I went out of the room I had a last impression of those pieces drawn up in line as though waiting—waiting with a malign and dreadful patience.

I know my heart was beating faster than usual, and my forehead was a little damp as I came out into the street. The idea was with me that I had escaped some great danger, but what or why I had no idea.

2. *A Soul in Torment*

A WEEK or two passed, and I remembered my experience of that night only to be ashamed of the inexplicable agitation I had felt. Then one day I happened to meet Baume. He knew Kerr fairly well, and declared he was wasting on other pursuits talents that had been meant for chess alone. Then I chanced to mention those curious carved bone chessmen.

"He says they are made of human bone," I remarked with a laugh. "Gruesome idea, isn't it?"

To my surprise Baume looked very grave. Apparently the old man knew

those chessmen well—and did not like them. Finally he blurted out: "You tell your friend to drop them in the river. That is best for them."

Going home that night I noticed on the placard of one of the evening papers, "Mysterious Suicide," and on that of another, "Strange West End Tragedy." I paid no attention just then, but the next morning over breakfast I noticed a column headed, "Mysterious Death of Well-known Sportsman," and, on glancing at it, I saw that it referred to poor Fred Kerr.

He had been found first thing in the morning lying dead with a bullet through his brain. The pistol with which he had committed the miserable deed was still clasped in his right hand, and the account mentioned that the body lay across a chessboard on which the pieces were arranged in what seemed an unfinished game.

It was a frightful shock to me—indeed it must have been so to all who knew Kerr. I could hardly believe that a man so full of life and spirit, so richly dowered with all good gifts, had ended his life in such a way. There was no explanation. At the inquest a verdict of accidental death was returned, the idea being that Kerr had shot himself while cleaning or examining his pistol.

An attempt was made to suggest foul play on the grounds that the position of the pieces on the chessboard showed that a game had just been concluded, that this game must have been played with someone, and that that someone had disappeared and was, therefore, under suspicion.

Conclusive evidence showed, however, that the unhappy man had been alone all that evening. Of course, the position of the pieces might be accounted for in many ways. He might have been working out an end game, or analyzing some position. It was not a problem he had been working

on, though, as black was winning and, of course, the problem convention is for white to win.

However, not much attention was paid to the chessmen; and as foul play was ruled out and suicide seemed incredible, the jury fell back on the idea of accident, though there was not the least support for such a theory.

Poor Kerr! I called to leave a wreath and express my sympathy. I asked if I might see my old friend for the last time, and they agreed. With feelings of the utmost sadness I looked my last on my friend's face, and as I did so there came upon me slowly, irresistibly, the idea that he had died in terror and anguish of soul and body.

I felt this impression slowly invade and possess my mind, till I shook and trembled with the knowledge that I stood in the presence of unnamable dread. I began to edge slowly away toward the door, very slowly, for I knew that if I went quickly my panic would overcome me, and I should run, and I knew that would be very dangerous, fatal perhaps. By an intense effort of will I kept my face toward the bed in which lay that which I no longer regarded as the earthly frame of my friend, but felt was changed into something unspeakably horrible and foul. My hair bristled; the flesh crept upon my bones; I forced myself to keep my eyes fixed steadily on the still form upon the bed, though I was sure it was watching me with an intent and evil patience as a spider in its web watches the fly fluttering near—the very sensation I had had before.

Somehow or other, I don't know how, I got to the bottom of the stairs. I stood there, a little dizzy, a little faint, trying to recover myself.

Presently I got out into the street somehow, and I know that for some time afterward I had no liking for the dark and no taste for being alone.

3. *The Gates of Hell*

POOR Kerr had been the owner of a good many curios he had collected, some of them of value, and when I heard after a time that his friends had decided to sell them at auction, I thought I would go and see if I could pick up some little memento of one I had so much admired and liked.

I bought two rather fine engravings by Meryon; very cheap they were, too. I noticed Mark Norand, the captain of our class chess club match team, and after speaking a word or two to him, I was thinking of going when the auctioneer put up the carved bone chessmen.

He did not repeat the tale that they were of human bone—perhaps he thought that wouldn't sound very attractive, or he may not have known the story—but he laid great emphasis on the excellence of the carving. Mark Norand made the first bid, and I know I was very startled. Somehow I hadn't thought of anyone actually buying the things. I said to him:

"I wouldn't have them if I were you."

He looked at me with rather a puzzled and slightly suspicious air.

"Why, do you want them yourself?" he asked.

"Good heavens, no!" I answered, but I could see he did not quite believe me.

In the auction room everyone is inclined to be suspicious of everyone else. It is a warfare there without quarter and without scruple. Mark Norand was a friend of mine, but he did not mean to be done out of any bargain that was going. He bought the chessmen for three guineas—cheap enough, considering the excellence of the carving.

He was very pleased with himself and his purchase, and his idea that he had got ahead of me. He asked me to go round and play a game with his new possessions. I refused pointblank, and he laughed. I think he believed I

was a little piqued at losing the chessmen.

We got busier than ever at the office, and I was kept very much occupied for some time. I could not even get a spare hour to slip round to the club for a game, and it was quite by accident that I happened to hear someone mention Mark Norand and say that he was looking very ill.

I knew where it was he generally lunched. The place was out of the way for me, and I didn't like the cooking there, but I went the next day. Almost the first man I saw when I entered was Norand. He was sitting at one of the tables with food before him, but he had pushed it away untasted and was pouring over a chess-board.

"Hullo, Norand," I said, "working out a problem?"

He looked up at me. I could not help starting. He was greatly altered, but it was not that I noticed so much as the horrid fear I saw peeping out from his bloodshot eyes and lurking in the new lines that had come about his mouth.

"Oh, you?" he said, and to mingle with the fear I read in his eyes there came a fierce dull resentment, so that he looked at me as though he held me for his deadliest enemy.

"You knew, didn't you? Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded.

"Knew what? Tell you what?" I asked.

"Those chessmen," he muttered, shuddering. He added: "Why did you let me buy them?"

"I told you not to; I warned you," I said.

"Told me not to, warned me not to!" he repeated, and gave me a look of deadly hate. "If you saw a man knocking at the gate of hell without knowing it, would you just tell him not to do that and then walk away?"

"Why, what's the matter?" I asked.

He did not answer, and the waiter came up just then. I ordered the

first thing I saw on the bill. Norand had become intent on his game again. I noticed it was a position in a game and not a problem he was working at—and the waiter, who knew him as an old customer, and saw I was a friend, observed to me:

"The gentleman's worrying too much over his chess. He hardly eats anything now."

"Has he been long like this?" I asked.

"Only about a week, sir," the man answered.

He brought me what I had ordered, and Norand looked up presently.

"What do you think of this position?" he asked.

"Well, white looks in rather a fix," I answered. "Good Lord, what's the matter?"

I really thought he was going to have a fit; he fell back in his seat, panting for breath and ghastly pale. I might have pronounced his death warrant. I jumped up with some vague idea of getting a doctor, but he stopped me.

"No, no, I'm all right," he said—croaked, rather. "For God's sake, look at the board, and see if you can find any way out!"

"For white?" I asked.

"For white," he repeated.

I bent over the board. It seemed to me mate was pretty sure to come in three or four moves. I said:

"Is it a game you're playing?"

He nodded.

"Who's your opponent?" I asked.

He did not answer, and I could see well that a secret and terrible agitation possessed him.

"I don't know," he stammered.

And the idea came to me that he did know but that he dared not say. This seemed to me highly absurd and at the same time quite reasonable.

He wiped his face again.

"You see," he argued, "the thing's impossible."

"I don't know what you mean; I

don't know what you are talking about," I said angrily.

But the idea burnt in my mind like fire, that I did know and that I also dared not say.

He leant across the table, his eyes alight with that mingled desperate fear and deadly hate I had seen in them before.

"You ought to have warned me," he muttered. "Mind this, if I lose I will leave you the things in my will."

I remember it did not seem in any way absurd that he should couple together the ideas of losing the game and of making his will.

I was studying the position of the pieces so intently that I, like him, pushed aside my lunch almost untasted. Gradually there was coming back to me a memory of the move poor Kerr had suggested. Jenoure Baume might have tried in the game he lost to me. It seemed to me a variation of Kerr's idea might be effective in Norand's present position.

I explained the move. Norand jumped at the idea. We developed it together and, so far as we could see, an attack pressed on those lines was practically sure to win the game. Norand's relief was tremendous, mine scarcely less so. Then all at once his expression changed. He said:

"Suppose when I play the knight it slips of itself on to some other square when I'm not looking?"

I stared at him and laughed. The suggestion seemed so absurd I could not help it.

"Well, of course," I said, "if your pieces do that, I don't see much chance."

He did not answer, and I left the restaurant and went back to the office feeling relieved in one way, but a good deal worried about poor Norand all the same. His obvious terror, my own odd impressions, all seemed to me fanciful and even ridiculous in the face of his wild suggestion of pieces that moved of their own volition.

All the same I was not surprised

when, a day or two later, I heard that the poor fellow had drowned himself in a small pond that lay at the foot of his garden. The account in the papers said he had been sitting up late at chess and that he must have gone straight from the chessboard to his doom.

4. *The Invisible Antagonist*

I COULD not help making some inquiries about the position of the men on the board. I found, as I had half expected, that they indicated the close of a game in which black had just brought off a mate. My informant told me that presumably poor Norand had been analyzing some game. He had not been working out a problem, as black was the winning side; and he had not been playing with anyone, as the evidence showed conclusively that he had been alone all the evening.

The usual verdict was returned, and I wrote to Norand's solicitor to say that I absolutely refused to accept any legacy he might have left me.

But I did not post the letter. At one time I had the feeling that the whole thing was pure fancy and that it would be foolish and cowardly to refuse the chessmen if he had really left them to me. And then, again, the idea would come to me that it was all true, but that I was forewarned, and forearmed.

As it happened, they were delivered one evening while the vicar was with me. While he was there I opened the parcel and showed him the chessmen. He was mildly interested and mildly shocked when I told him the tale that they were carved from human bone. He thought it a most repulsive idea, but remarked on the excellence of the carving.

"That black queen, for example," he said, "what an idea of—of—well, vitality, almost, that figure has."

I agreed, and after I had seen the vicar to the door I went back to my room. I found those chessmen I had

left lying on the table where the vicar had been looking at them, now all drawn up in position on the board.

No living soul, I knew well, had been in the room during my short absence. I stood for a moment or two on the threshold, a little daunted, a little confused, and as I watched I understood that I was expected to play—I saw, too, a thrill of sinister impatience run through the drawn-up lines of the pieces.

I sat down in front of them. I could not help myself. Each separate piece, from king to pawn, showed animate, palpitating, ready, one and all a-quiver with desire and greed, like hungry beasts of prey waiting for their living victim to be thrown to them. The impression grew in my mind that I was in a more dreadful and more imminent danger than any other living man that night, and that this danger was one that threatened not my life only.

I would have fled, but flight, I knew well, was no longer possible. I tried to mutter a prayer, but the words would not come. I tried to lift my hand to push board and pieces to the ground, but I seemed to have lost control of my arm. The quivering, eager, evil impatience of the pieces increased; I should not have been surprised to see them break into some wild dance of hideous ritual.

All at once they grew quiet, though still instinct with vivid, hungry eagerness, and I felt come upon me a sudden awe and fear and horror as I realized that my antagonist was there.

I could see nothing, I heard nothing, only I knew well that he was there, that he had come and was seated opposite.

I understood the game was about to begin.

I could not help myself. Slowly I lifted my hand. I swear I did not touch it, but the king's pawn it had been my thought to move slid forward two squares.

A moment's pause and then the

black king's pawn, untouched, moved forward in reply. I made my next move, or rather, when I raised my hand with the intention of doing it, the piece transferred itself untouched to the position I had in mind. The answering move came almost at once. And so the game was played on.

All the time I never touched a piece; once I had made up my mind and raised my hand the piece I was thinking of immediately took up the position I wished. The black pieces did the same; they moved, advanced, retreated, but all in harmony and all in evident obedience to the will of my unseen, unknown antagonist.

Invisible, but not unknown.

For I was very sure there sat opposite me a man long dead, with an evil face and cruel eyes and hungry, slobbering mouth, wearing the jeweled robes of an Indian prince, and playing with all his skill this game for his master in which the prize was—myself.

I knew that now the game had begun, it had to be finished. I called up all my powers to my aid. I felt my mind grow clear; my nerves were calm and steady. I played my best. I played as I had never played before; I believe I played that night a game that would not have disgraced a master.

More than once I felt I had my antagonist in difficulties, but each time he retrieved himself. I won a pawn, but lost it again. Still, I began to believe I had a chance of winning.

I pressed hard. I felt a clearness in my brain, a vividness of thought and clearness of vision I have never known before or since. Once or twice, when I was tempted to make a move that might have been dangerous, it was as though I heard a secret whisper warning me to be careful. I knew, too, that my antagonist was troubled, and I understood that the pieces themselves, both black and white, felt this, and were troubled also.

I had begun a hot attack on the black queen. If I could win her I

felt the game would be mine. It was not only that the queen is the most powerful piece, but I realized also that in her lay the focus of the opposing power, that from her or through her there radiated a sort of vigor and encouragement all the other pieces felt—and not the black only but my own white as well.

My attack on the queen failed. I was a move too late, and she slipped out of the net I had so nearly drawn around her. The failure left my position less strong, and I found myself attacked in my turn. I rallied my forces, but the pressure grew stronger and stronger.

The critical point was on my left, where I was beginning to plan a counter-attack. It promised well, and I was beginning to make progress when I found a return thrust aimed at me.

I was puzzled, and, on looking, found that the position of my pieces was no longer as it had been, but a much weaker one. I could not understand, for I was sure I had not moved them. As I looked and wondered I was aware that my unseen antagonist smiled evilly to himself, and the black queen shook with a horrid, secret merriment that spread and spread till every piece upon the board, black and white, was laughing wickedly to itself, rejoicing in the prospect of my defeat.

I realized in a flash that one of my pawns had turned traitor and, when I was not looking, had slipped back from the square where I had placed it to the one behind, where it was so much less effective.

5. *At the Eleventh Hour*

IT COST me my bishop before I could re-establish my position, and the small inner voice I had seemed to hear before whispered to me that I must watch closely and unceasingly, or the same thing would happen again. I understood that my antagonist, smiling evilly to himself, could make any one of my pieces betray me, and

that this foul play he kept ever in reserve to help him at need. No wonder that he always won his games all through the centuries!

I was a piece to the bad now, and I had the double strain of playing and of watching to see that none of my men slipped from the squares on which I had placed them. I set my teeth and played my best. I lost another piece, and my king, hotly attacked, was pinned into one corner. Still I fought on, though my brow was wet and my hands shook, and upon me lay the consciousness of impending doom.

I made one last feeble attempt at a counter-attack. I do not think it could possibly have saved me, but it was audacious, a little disconcerting, and meant delay at the least. And that was something, for I knew that if I could hold out till cock-crow I should earn at least a day's respite. That my antagonist knew also, and he grew, one must suppose, impatient.

I was watching my pieces intently, since there was not one of them but would have played the traitor had chance offered. My new attack hinged on the one rook I had remaining, and suddenly I saw it sliding away from where it stood to an adjoining square, where it would have been comparatively useless. It stopped when my eye fell on it, for apparently they had no power to move when I was watching, and then something made me look away again. Instantly the rook slipped off to the adjoining square, and at once again all the other pieces, black and white alike, shook with a passion of secret, evil laughter.

For a moment despair overcame me, for now it was only a question of mate in two moves.

But, as before a tiny voice had whispered to me to be cautious when I had contemplated an unsound move, so now again I heard that small, still voice sound clear and vivid in my ear. I knew that my one hope was to do as it advised.

I sprang to my feet.

Pointing at the rook that had moved I cried with a loud voice:

"I appeal."

I was aware of an instant, fierce commotion all around me; I saw the pieces, black and white, all palpitant; I heard no sound, but I knew that my antagonist was dismayed and troubled.

Again I cried:

"I appeal."

The fierce tumult and commotion I was aware of all round, grew yet wilder and more fierce. Though I heard nothing, saw nothing, I knew that all about was fury, dismay, excitement, a hurrying to and fro of strange and evil things, a passage of vast and awful shadows. The pieces were all quivering with hatred and alarm. My dread, long-dead antagonist seemed to me to be screaming hoarsely in an agony of protest and pain. Though still I heard, saw, felt nothing, I was somehow conscious that I stood in the very center of a chaos of invisible, conflicting powers; that unimaginable forces were aimed against me, but that nevertheless I stood protected. For the third time I cried out very loudly:

"I appeal."

That strange and awful tumult passed. All was still and silent, all that had filled my small room so dreadfully fled swiftly far away. The chessmen were no longer animate and palpitant, but were quiet as any other bits of carved bone; I had a vision of my antagonist, baffled, howling, far in the depths of the nethermost space.

I knew I was safe now, and I knew also what next I had to do. The still, small voice I had heard before had whispered that to me also, and I hurried to obey. I swept the chessmen into their box, and carrying it carefully in my hands, I went into the garden, out by the side gate, and up the lane that leads to the churchyard.

Dawn was gray in the east; the cocks were crowing as I reached it. There amidst the graves, in the earth consecrated by holy words for the last resting-place of men, I dug with my bare hands and buried deep the box and the pieces of carved bone it held, deep in the shadow of a cross reared on a grave near by. There I left them to rest for ever; and so, drunk with weariness and terror, went back to my home to rest in peace and thankfulness and safety.

