CHECKMATE.

In the center of the room stood a woman in a long, plain gown. Poverty was from her dragging robe. As well as from the troubled expression of her pale face as she drew her little muscle strain closely over shoulders. Her great limpid eyes gazed inwardly at a sight, pain laden, too, which stood, with his back turned to your hot, at one of the long windows. With a weary, supplicating voice she at last broke the long silence:

"Lee, hate you so that want for me? Have I really cause in truth?"

"Yes, in vain," he answered tonelessly. "I have often said you plainly that we were separated forever, and that you have nothing to hope for from me. You alone have brought about your transgression, yet will scarcely now you never loved me."

"You know how I loved you, and you left me to isolation, to an unequal age—left me to follow an adventurer—and why? Because one night at a ball he had softly whispered, 'I love you.' I find now you have found out what this love meant—sadness and sorrow. Is it so?"

"Yes, too, sorrow, bitter sorrow, but also considerable happiness. You cannot understand that, as you do not know my husband. You have hated him from the first and will not realize his worth. He could earn a better living for me, but I honor him doubly because he endeavors can honor him to degrade his art. He aims at the highest and will attain it in the great future when all his better strivings. I should never have come here today—but—but, the child, Lee—my child is ill."

The last words broke from her lips like a pained cry.

Her brother shuddered, but still stood at the window, gazing angrily out at the dark sky.

In a few moments a servant came and lighted the lamp and placed the chairs and table under the light, brought a polished box, which held the carved ivory men, and started from the room.

The man looked unspeakably weary as he took his seat in front of the chess table and arranged a problem with trembling hands. Somehow he could not keep his mind on the game, and his eyes constantly gazed over the board into space.

* * * * * * *

The lamplight flickered and almost died out, filling the room with a pale twilight, in which black balls seeming not many colored flashes danced up and down, suddenly those balls burst and flooded the place with a green light.

Cold shudders ran over the stone player's limbs, for right in front of the table stood a stalwart presence, who held a scythe in his bony right hand and an hourglass in his left. Through the years he has worn some intimate gleaned the white, fleshless bones.

Death laid his scythe and his glass by his side, drew a chair to the table and said, "Come, old man, we will play a game together for your life."

"Life has the first move." Guest heard his fearful opponent mutter, and as he raised his arm over the table to move a piece a little white hand was laid kindlingly on his arm.

Startled, he looked around and saw a beautiful little girl standing by his chair. Her face was round and rosy, and her golden hair and blue eyes were much like his sister's when she was a child.

"May I not play for you?" begged the little one, and then, without waiting for an answer, climbed into his lap and made herself comfortable.

"Yes, yes," laughed Life in pure joy and moved a piece so forcibly that Guest's hair stood on end with fright, for he feared this first play would lose the game.

Strangely—strangely—enough, although Life had played so unceremoniously, Death seemed to be blind and made no use of the advantage given Him.

Guest sighed with relief and even encouraged held hopes of victory. He followed the game so closely that he scarcely noticed that the Spirits in his lap grew constantly heavier, and that the child had grown to a beautiful girl.

At last Life stretched a single move, and Death pushed his knight into the opening. A second very slow, and the last move—checkmate—the most beautiful poem of the prime and its primeval strength.

Guest glared slightly at the now mature woman, saw her silver move by moving, saw the color leave her face and the wrinkles appear one by one, saw her eye dim and the gold of her hair change to dull gray.

* * * * * * *

"Be merciful, cruel Death! Let me take back this one play. You will always have time to win. I will not lose just yet—I will not die."

"Never!" roared Death, glaring from his empty eyesockets. "There is no hope for you, useless Life. You can do nothing more in the world."

Guest's heart almost stopped beating, for he knew that his own life was the stake of the game.

He saw the cold approaching move by move, Death constantly throwing out that fearful threat, "Checkmate—a check to Life!"

Life's king was in peril, and there were but two possible moves—a wrong one, which would lose the game, and a right one, by which the king would save himself behind the three moulding pieces.

Those three pieces beckoned the solitary king and seemed to have known forever, the features of a lovely child, the second, of a sad faced woman, and the third, of a man with a thoughtful, earnest expression—the face of that lofty creature on account of whom Guest had lost his will long since.

Which would the play? If they were only both good! But, lack! She grasped the king and pushed him toward the dangerous square.

In malicious glee Death laughed outright.

By a powerful effort Guest freed himself from the chairs which held him. "For heaven's sake, not that play—the other!" he cried, and, throwing his arms over the table to prevent the play, he knocked the figures to the floor.

* * * * * * *

The sleeper awoke from his ghastly dream and stared about with wide opened eyes. He was alone. The chessmen were scattered over the carpet. A hermaphrodite appeared upshot from the room.

"The hell, Jones, are you doin'? Make haste and come with me!" he said.

A few moments later, when he followed his master down the steps, he saw there in the old lady's eyes and heard him mutter, "CRAZY! to let go his hold! I can and do of not but pity other people." Check to and mate, Death! Guest! Life! Go to Nine Oaks's Cross Doctrine.

[illegible]

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