

Checkmate

W. S. McLEAN

Six men sat around a table. They had been sitting there for two hours. The ash trays gave evidence of the intensity of their thought. The glasses had been emptied and refilled, and now, they were empty again. The silence of the room was as thick as the cigar smoke. The grandfather's clock in the corner counted off the seconds with a heavy tread. The hour was past midnight.

One of the men changed his position, making an effort to do so quietly. No other sound disturbed the stillness of the room. Every face was turned toward the center of the table. Every eye was focused on the same spot. They seemed to have no other interest. Like giant birds perched about their prey, they seemed to be absorbed in the contemplation of the small objects before them.

Old Judge Thomas, with his flowing white beard carefully spread over his vest, sat holding his big black cigar in carefully tended fingers. The black ribbons of his pince-nez glasses curled with conscious dignity over the lapel of his perfectly tailored coat.

Mr. Parker—the Mr. Parker, of Parker and Brownley, Real Estate and Investments — sat in the richly over-stuffed chair which was his favorite, with a cold cigar between his big thumb and forefinger. His two hundred and forty pounds were hunched slightly as he studied the problem before him. His thin, greying hair was rumped. A perplexed frown scored his brow into ridges and valleys, like a miniature of some vast rolling plain. His steel grey eyes, behind the bifocals, were squinted, as they always were when in deep thought.

The other men, unimportant except that they were present, presented in more

or less detail the same deep concentration, varying only in personal appearance. There was Banker Hobbs, long, lean and lank, with a long beak nose, and a chin which seemed to try to touch the point of that nose. And there was Rothstein, of Rothstein's Department Store, with his short stubby legs and arms, and his great head of hair, which seemed always to be blown by a strong wind from behind.

Longman, who always tried to look the part of a sailor, and who controlled most of the shipping which came into the port, was there. Wilson, who had made a fortune in a gold mine of uncertain location and reality, giving off, as always, an air of long accustomed wealth, but falling, as always, a little short of making it convincing, sat beside him. His small, uncertain eyes were the only quickly moving things in the room. Those eyes were never still, darting from the face of one to the face of another of the men in the room, as though he wanted to make sure they knew he was there.

Small, loud-mouthed, bald-headed Brownley, Parker's partner, sat, as usual, slightly apart from the others. He fidgeted with his tie and then his handkerchief, which was always too much in evidence in his breast pocket.

Finally the tension was broken. Parker's face burst into a smile. He took some time to get his big body into motion. With an audible sigh, he leaned over the table, picked up the queen and moved it two spaces to the right, and said, "Check, doublecheck, and checkmate."

The game was over; the tension relaxed. The old Judge collected the chessmen in the center of the board, and the meeting was adjourned.