

The Chess Game

from *The Day and the Hour: Friday*

Chester Matthew was finishing the dinner dishes and anticipating a quiet evening at home with his wife. Perhaps they would watch a little TV; maybe he would do some reading ... when the phone rang.

His wife picked it up in another room.

It's one of her church friends, no doubt. They're always phoning one another.

The words "God is in control" came from the other room, confirming his suspicion. It was a phrase he heard repeatedly, and he hated it. The idea of an all-knowing Sovereign able to reach down and manipulate people and cause events to happen was contrary to all reason and experience. It was a superstition unworthy of modern man, and he wished his wife would tire of trying to believe it. Chester was willing enough to acknowledge that there were mysteries beyond his understanding, but this was not one of them. Never in his long life's experience had he encountered any human behavior that could be attributed to divine control, and he firmly believed that if God had given mankind minds with which to make decisions, he would not go around overruling what he had ordained. Prayers were a waste of time.

I'll be glad when this week is over and things get back to normal.

Presently his wife came into the kitchen announcing that she was going to a prayer meeting at the church—to pray for him.

It was a two-fold blow: a cause for more concern about his wife's mental condition and a painful assault on his pride. However, it was only a continuation of what he had been enduring all week. She had been badgering him about the Rapture. He maintained that she need not be concerned about him because although he was not a churchgoer neither was he a drunkard nor was he a carouser and he did not mistreat people. He was well in control of his life and quite successful. What more could God expect?

Although he had nothing but doubts concerning the Rapture, Chester found himself in this awkward position where his wife's belief forced him to defend what she called his spiritual condition. Suppose there *were* a meddling God as she believed: Chester knew he had accumulated enough virtue to come out better than most of her churchgoing friends. Though it would please his wife immensely and perhaps quiet her nagging if he would accompany her to church, he was virtually locked out by the thought of having to endure a preacher expounding nonsense about God answering prayer and manipulating affairs on earth.

With the dishes being finished and his wife being off to the meeting for the evening, Chester Matthew was unsure about what he wanted to do. He tried the TV, searching program listings for

something that looked interesting, but nothing appealed to him. Nevertheless, he started watching a reality show in which there was a party going on, and it was as inane as he expected it would be. Soon he was nodding, and he fell asleep.

Chester remembers that someone invited him to a party. He finds a card in his wallet with a date and an address written on the back. The party is tonight. It is going on right now in fact. The location is at one of those big old houses on Mansion Row, a mysterious one owned by someone who lives elsewhere. Never had he met the owner or any of its occasional occupants. Here is an opportunity if not an adventure. Quite possibly he will get a story for the paper out of it.

When Chester arrives at the address a surprising number of cars line both sides of the street. He parks in front of Claudia Nice's house and walks to the next block. As he approaches the brightly lit entrance he thinks about his wife with her simple-minded friends. He laughs.

They think God is causing me to do something or believe something tonight according to their specifications. Ha! They would never guess I'm doing this!

A man who appears to be the butler opens the door for him without asking his name or making any attempt to determine whether he is a legitimate guest.

Well, perhaps I'm not a legitimate guest; I don't even remember who gave me that card.

Chester is left to find his own way without any introductions.

Straight ahead is a long, wide hallway. He walks toward the sounds of voices. A doorway on his right reveals a sizable room in which several clusters of people are drinking and conversing.

His reporter's habit of gathering facts causes him to wonder about the number of people in the house. It is obvious from the congestion of cars outside that the party is large, but it will be hard to get a tally if several rooms are in use, as appears to be the case. He makes a quick estimate of the population in this room with the intent of surveying the rest of the house and doing the same in whatever other rooms he discovers more partyers.

But he forgets that idea and enters the room.

None of the faces are familiar—a strange occurrence in a town where he knows almost everyone. They all appear to be engrossed in their conversations with the exception of one gentleman who is standing alone. Chester makes his way toward him.

As he approaches he notices next to the man—somehow he did not see it before—a small table with two chairs and a marble chess board arranged for the start of a game. Chester is delighted and in his excitement forgets to introduce himself.

"What a nice-looking chess board!" he remarks to the stranger.

"Chess is a great game, isn't it?" comes the reply.

"I love it!" exclaims Chester. "Would you like to play one?"

"As a matter of fact, I would," says the stranger.

Without further ado, they sit down and began playing.

It turns out to be an enchanting game. Even though Chester

lost in the end, he planned and executed brilliant maneuvers that cost his opponent most of his men. Finally, when they were down to just a few pieces, his opponent made a clever move, trapping Chester's king and ending the game in checkmate.

During the final few minutes of the game he was aware that someone had come by and was standing over them, apparently watching the play. But Chester had not looked up, being intent on winning. Even now, as he revels in the feeling of having played well, he continues to ignore that someone's presence. He is about to propose to his opponent that they play another game when his reverie is shattered by the voice of the observer:

"You were predestined to lose."

Looking up, Chester recognizes Rev. MacDonald, a retired minister whom he had last seen at the reverend's wife's funeral. Although he would normally show respect to such a man, he is more than a little annoyed at his importunity, and he replies emphatically:

"That's utter nonsense!"

"Not at all," insists the old minister with a wry smile. "You didn't have a chance."

Thoroughly annoyed yet self-controlled enough to try proving the cleric wrong, Chester launches into a replay of his better moves in the early part of the game, showing that he could easily have won but for a slight slip. Apparently this bores the winner, for he excuses himself, gets up, and goes to join a group standing near a piano at the end of the room.

Chester is doubly sorry to see him leave because he knows he would do better in a follow-up game, and that would allow him to show the nosy minister that he is not a predestined loser. Now, with frustration added to his annoyance, he exclaims to the preacher:

"The fact that I lost is a small matter! It could easily have gone either way. That's plain as day to anybody who knows anything about chess."

"Son," says Rev. MacDonald, "your opponent is not only a Grandmaster, he is none other than the World Champion. He set you up for some nice moves so that the game would last awhile. But I assure you, he knew pretty well every move you were going to make before you made it."

At that the reverend turns and walks away.

Chester, stunned by this revelation, remains sitting at the little table for several minutes. When he finally looks up he spots Richard, who has apparently just arrived. Chester gets his attention and motions for him to come over. Richard begins talking immediately.

"I saw Rev. MacDonald over here just now. You look a little perturbed. I suppose he was talking nonsense as usual. He's a nice old gentleman—wouldn't intentionally upset anyone—but he says odd things that can be unnerving."

"By the way," says Chester, eager to forget the clergyman, "who is the man on the left by the piano?"

"Oh, I thought you knew him. He's the World Champion chess

Grandmaster. This is his house, you know."

"I didn't know," admits Chester. "I was invited by someone else and hadn't actually been introduced to the host yet."

"Oh, yes. He likes to do that. Every time he hears of someone who is a decent chess player and who might not know about him, he gets someone else to invite him to a party. He never introduces himself, but somehow he always gets into a game with the unsuspecting guest. By the way, how did the game go? I know you couldn't have won, but was it a good game?"

"It was. Well, I thought it was," Chester replies. Then, abruptly, "Excuse me. I'm going to find Rev. MacDonald."

"He said he would be in the library. It's out that door and just across the hall. He told me you would be looking for him and to tell you where to find him."

As Chester walks across the room to the door, he glances toward the piano. It appears that the Grandmaster has left the room ahead of him.

I wouldn't be surprised to find him in the library too, along with God and my wife no doubt. Checkmate.

Crossing the hall, he enters the library and finds Rev. MacDonald alone, standing with a book in his hand. It appears that he has just taken it from a shelf.

"Excuse me, Reverend; I think I'm beginning to believe God could be controlling everything. But I don't like it. If that's the way it really is, why should I do anything? It's like the chess game. It was fun playing before I knew I was being manipulated. But

now that I know he's the World Champion, I really don't want to play him anymore."

"Now you're thinking clearly, my son. You're no longer God's opponent. Are you ready to be on his side? If so, you will find he is the most magnanimous of captains. You will find he has good things in store for you. He has designs for you to do some rather specific things which nobody else can do quite as well. You will find that you have been doing some of them all along, but now you can act freely and gladly. He won't have to manipulate you anymore."

"It seems that God, along with you and that Grandmaster—and my wife—have worked this out quite effectively tonight. It was a clever strategy, and the results were dramatic, I must say."

"I suggest that you go home to your wife and explain to her what you've discovered."

"She's at the prayer meeting, you know."

"No, I didn't know. How wonderful! Is she a believer already?"

"Yes, but I thought you knew that. Do you mean to tell me that you and the Grandmaster planned this yourselves? Did God give you specific directions?"

"No, I can't say he gave me any specific directions. I can't speak for the Grandmaster; he's so eccentric it's hard to tell what he thinks. Sometimes he invites me to these parties; sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes I come, and sometimes I don't. Tonight there was nothing much on TV, so I came."

"Yes, I know about the TV. So all this just came together—sort

of miraculously?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," replies MacDonald.

"Well, you came over at the end of the chess game and said something about predestination, which in that context struck me like a thunderbolt. Did God somehow direct you to do that?"

"Well, no, I don't think so. I was just a little bored with the party, and I said something that was, I'm afraid, rather extravagant under the circumstances though I meant it to be humorous. 'That was rash,' I said to myself as I walked away, and I had the feeling you were a bit upset with me and probably would want to seek my apology for embarrassing you in front of your opponent. I was quite prepared to apologize, but I did not want to make another scene, so I asked Richard if he would tell you where to find me—in case it appeared that you were looking for me, you know."

"You mean to say you didn't know that Richard is a friend of mine?"

"I had no idea."

"Well, he is my neighbor, and as soon as I saw him I motioned him over because I was sitting there at the chess board, still rather stunned, and wanted someone to talk to."

"Ah, well, the Lord does work all things together for good, doesn't he? "

"Indeed. I was certain that you and the Grandmaster had something worked out between you. Richard says he regularly invites people like me to these parties—I guess because he gets his

kicks by doing that fancy manipulation."

"It's the first I've heard of that. But I'm sure Richard knows a few things I don't."

"Well, I did hear your suggestion that I should be going home. But If you don't mind, I've just been struck with another troubling thought that I'm sure you can help me with."

"Go ahead," says the reverend.

"What if you had stayed home? Then I might still be sitting there playing another sham game and none the wiser, still thinking I was in control of my life. Would some other minister have been here to do your part?"

"How could I have stayed home?" said Rev. MacDonald with a chuckle. "Or even if I could have, I would not have missed this conversation for anything."

"Oh, I see. You mean everyone always does exactly what God wants them to do?"

"No, I don't think that's the case at all. If it were, this world would not be such a sad place. But he has his ways of getting things done in spite of all that—subtle and, I must say, inscrutable at least to me. But before you go, Mr. Matthew, let me give you a tip that may save your thoughts from going in circles: God never tells us what might have happened if someone had done something different, so it appears that he doesn't want us speculating about that."

"Thank you, Rev. MacDonald. I'll be going now. ... Another thing just popped into my head. My wife is at a prayer meeting, as

I said. Why would anyone want to ask God to do something if he already has everything under control?"

"How do you know that he doesn't need us to ask him in order to get things done? Did the Grandmaster ask you to play that game of chess? Or did you ask him?"

"I asked him."

"Was he waiting for you to ask him?"

"It appears that he was. But why, if what Richard said is true, did he go to so much trouble to get me here and then leave it up to my whim as to whether we would play the game?"

"Was it simply your whim?"

"Well, there was that chess board all laid out; I must admit that was a real enticement. And something about his demeanor made me a little nervous, making the chess game a natural relief. I guess he couldn't ask me to play. That would have been a bit heavy-handed."

"Precisely," says the reverend.

"Now have we gotten to the bottom of it? Do you suppose my wife and her friends have asked God to open my eyes, and that's really why we're here having this conversation?"

"I doubt that we'll ever get to the bottom of it. But there's no doubt in my mind that prayer had something to do with it. I've seen him do things just like that a thousand times, and it always thrills me—just to know that he's that close and using me to help him bring someone into the kingdom. But you have much to learn, sir, if you don't mind me saying so. It is well to understand

about God's sovereignty, but you must go on and get to know your new master, who is Jesus Christ of the Godhead, for he will also be your best friend. Serving him will take all the courage you have and more, but it will be a happier experience than you can imagine. ... Ah, here it is. I was looking up something in Spurgeon when you came in. If you don't mind I'd like to read it to you."

"Yes, go ahead please."

If you wear the livery of Christ, you will find him so meek and lowly of heart that you will find rest unto your souls. He is the most magnanimous of captains. ...

Startled by the ringing of a phone in a TV commercial, Chester woke up with the last words of the dream still fresh in his mind. He liked what he had heard but could not remember the name of the author.

Oh, well, it was just a dream. Who knows where those words came from.

Nevertheless, he picked up a Uninet pad and repeated the words, "most magnanimous of captains." A listing of several web sites featuring Charles Spurgeon's *Morning and Evening* devotionals came up. He pointed to the first one and read:

If you wear the livery of Christ, you will find Him so meek and lowly of heart that you will find rest unto your souls. He is the most magnanimous of captains. There never was His like among the choicest of princes. He is always to be found in the thickest part of the battle. When the wind blows cold He always takes the bleak side of the hill. The heaviest end of the cross lies

on His shoulders. If He bids us carry a burden, He carries it also. If there is anything that is gracious, generous, kind and tender, yea, lavish and superabundant in love, you will always find it in Him. His service is life, peace, joy. Oh, that you would enter on it at once! God help you to enlist under the banner of Jesus Christ!

Chester laid the pad down, leaned forward in his chair, and struggled to his feet. It was late, and his wife's footsteps were at the door. He had wanted to kneel and pray as he had done once long ago. But instead he went to the door and opened it for her.

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