

figured on a piece of smooth kid skin. This chart represented several groups of stars and the irregular band called the milky way was drawn with silver paint, while the large stars were indicated with gold ink; others were bright red, yellow, blue, green, orange, or purple. The old man continued to examine this mysterious parchment, never even noticing the waiting Arabs. If he did this to impress them with an idea of his learning, he could have hardly chosen a better means, for they were simply amazed at its various cabalistic devices, and thought that a man who could read a record like that was gifted with something resembling "second sight," at all events was above common mortals. It will not do to say that this was the design of Mesach, but we can assert that he had no objection to such an impression prevailing. But the old man was himself deceived. He profoundly relied on everything that he read in chart, and if anything failed to come as predicted, he laid the failure to his own ignorance in reading the stars. Just at this time, too, were mighty events taking place in the heavens—a comet with no less than three tails appeared last night. He thought the time had almost come for the delivery of his loved Judea from the hated violator, but what he did not read was that it was to go under a new oppressor—the Moslem superstition. He thought he read in the stars that he himself was to take an active part in the enterprise—only that morning had he visited the camp of the Persian General and showed to him a chess problem, but did not reveal to him the least word of its secret meaning. He was now on his way to the head quarters of Islam, where he would perform a similar service for their brave leader, and with the same silence as to the problem's mysterious significance. Mesach never breathed a word to either party to the detriment of the other, consequently he passed freely to and from them both, except in times of actual conflict.

At last Mesach raised his head from the mysterious parchment. "I will attend to your wants shortly," said he. "I know that you were appointed to meet me at this point, so I brought along the Damascus blade for you, Musa, and let me ask you to unstrap that bundle from the back of my camel and it shall soon be in your nervous grasp."

Musa hastened to obey this request and shortly had in his hands the rare scimitar. He never had seen its equal, the hilt was without precious gem of any kind, but was fashioned for a firm grasp; the color in its blade was intense blue and altogether it looked as if made for service.

Said Mesach, "It came directly from Damascus, but years ago, for it is very old—it has been in many a brave hand—still its temper is so perfect that there is not a nick to mar its perfect edge. It is so keen that it will sever a floating spider's-web. I wish one were here for you to try, but hold!" exclaimed the wily Jew, "I can procure a strand of silk from a scarf in that other bundle, Musa, my boy; but silk is, as you know, much tougher than spider's-web, and I will not promise that the first blow will sever it, but you can make the test."

A single strand was soon untwisted and thrown upon the light breeze. The scimitar flashed as it circled about Musa's head and passed through the floating silk without disturbing it. Yet it was evident that it was divided, for now two pieces were floating where there had been but one. "Oh," cried Mesach, "the blade is sharper even than I told them, but it will cut through a brass buckler or an iron breastplate or helmet like

so much camel's or goat's cheese, if it is only wielded by a strong wrist."

The Arabs murmured their approval and Musa showed evident excitement.

"Its price, considering its intrinsic worth, is, I think, low, for it came into my hands from a man who needed gold. I place its value at six webs of Bussora silk."

Now Musa's share of the plunder at the recent sack of that city had been but four pieces. He never considered the strangely exorbitant demand, but offered it eagerly; and Mesach, true to his nationality, while protesting he was ruining himself, finally accepted it, thus clearing one hundred per cent., but let us look charitably on this transaction. He took from Musa, it is true, four bales of silk which were of no earthly value to him except for barter. He exchanged for this a really serviceable weapon. It may seem strange that Mesach should have been allowed to carry on such a trade in "weapons of war," but the leaders of the two armies knew that it was really impossible for him to transport quantities of arms, and they found it often convenient to exchange shield, horse armor or lances,—so this traffic was overlooked, and as Mesach had always treated both armies exactly alike, he was a privileged character.

Musa proudly thrust the crooked scimitar into his sash and thought of how much more value it was than even a hundred bales of silk.

Before turning away said Mesach to him, "Bring the silk at sundown to me at Kulola," and asking Allah to protect them as he was in the habit of doing, turned his camel unerringly in the route of their main force, or rather, towards where their Sheik Haschem was guarded by a regiment of heavy dragoons.

The Arabs disappeared behind a low elevation on the oasis. It was not many hours thereafter when Mesach might have been seen dismounting from his kneeling camel near the tent of Sheik Haschem. He took from its back a simple tent of goat's hair and erected it on sharpened rods that were bound up with it; then, evidently bethinking himself, shook his white head in a dissenting way, took the tent down again and merely took a faded blue bag from his pack, and in his hand a twisted staff of pomegranate, fabled to possess magic virtues. Thus armed he entered Sheik Haschem's tent unchallenged by the guards.

"The blessings of Allah rest on you all," said the old man in Arabic, and seated himself between two bowls of mutton fat, each supplied with five or six wicks of twisted cotton that were flaring, sputtering and smoking without giving much light. It was already quite dark in the tent. The Arabs immediately stopped their earnest discussion and returned Mesach's courteous salutation, and one and all betook themselves to silently watching the old man's actions. He first drew from the bag a folding chess board; he then took out a smaller bag from which he emptied a set of white and red chessmen. The Pawns were mounted on horses, as were also the Bishops and Knights; they had the same movements as the different pieces do now, the only difference being that the Pawns were archers and spear-men, the Bishops were bearers, while the Knights bore scimitars.

"I beg, most worthy sheik," said Mesach to Haschem, "to invite your notice to this quite curious, although easy problem. I know you of old as a clever chess expert. I am almost ashamed of its sad lack of difficulty, neither is it at all perfect or like perfection, for it bears one or two inevitable faults, but they all teach important truths. Let me ask if you will place it upon your board, as I am due elsewhere. I gave the same problem to the

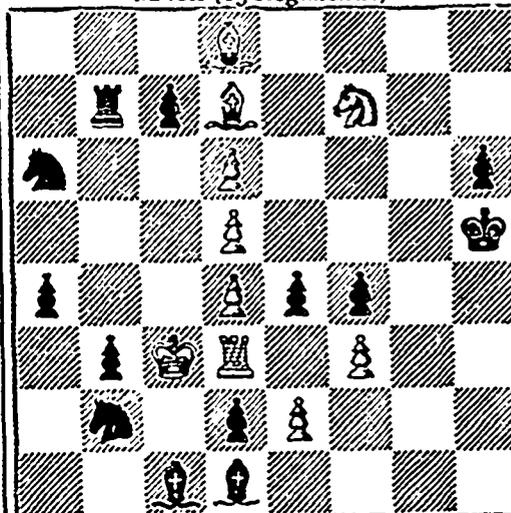
Persian leader this morning, but he failed to find the secret, though he solved one of the problems quickly, for it is composed of two. Either White or Red being given the first move mates the other in two moves."

By this time Haschem had put in like manner on his board the problem. Mesach hastily gathered the chessmen into the bag, took up his chessboard and his pomegranate staff, wished the Arabs Allah's blessing, and quickly departed. The Arab generals were all disciples of Caissa, but only a few were expert problematists. So, after a long time it seemed, but it was only a few moments, the others silently withdrew, leaving Sheik Haschem profoundly absorbed in the problem. Here it is:

Problem

By Mesach the Israelite.

BLACK (13 Regiments.)



WHITE (10 Regiments.)

Black or White to play and mate in two moves.

CHAPTER II.

THE CONFLICT.

Haschem was alone. But two sentries remained to guard the tent, one on either side. The camp was wrapped in the silence of night; no sound was heard save the discordant cries of a troop of jackals near the camp. The full moon had risen, and was shedding a radiance only seen in the land of the desert. Haschem regarded the problem until the lamp wicks smoked still more, showing that the mutton fat was almost exhausted.

"I see," said he, speaking aloud, as he often did when alone, "how each mate can be done in two moves, but why the old Jew should make a mystery of so simple a problem puzzles me. He said it was 'important,' but he said it was 'easy' at the same time. How a problem can be solved with so little difficulty and be at once important is the question. Did he not say that he showed the same problem to the Persian General this very morning, and that he failed to discover its secret meaning? What could the old Israelite mean? Oh! I think I see it. By the holy beard of Mahomet, I have it at last. The chessmen are placed exactly to show the arrangement of our own forces, and, I expect, do as much for the Persians. The white men represent us, and I presume that our enemies are dealt by with equal faithfulness. How cunningly he shows our force almost surrounded by the idolaters, but two quarters are left unguarded, the northeast and the southeast. If only those two regiments that are coming from Medina next week were here to make my army nearer in number to the Persians, I would give battle right away. But what if they make the first move? Here let me solve the problem anew