

I

It was the time of Wajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was plunged in pleasures. The young and the old, the poor and the rich—all were pleasure-bent. To kill time, some held dancing parties, others smoked or sipped opium with great gusto in company. Enjoyment was writ large across every aspect of life: administration, art, literature, industry and social conduct. The state officials were cradled in the lap of luxury; the poets sang of the pangs of love; and the craftsmen were engaged in manufacturing fineries, perfumes and paints. In short, every one of them was wrapped up in voluptuousness, unmindful of the world, its ways and its work. Quailfights and partridge-fights were wagered upon. There was among the people a passion for the chessboard and the playing-card. From the prince down to the poorest person, everyone was caught up in the whirlpool, so much so that when the beggars got as alms any money to buy some bread with, they spent the same on opium. Games like chess are a whetstone for the intellect of the players, who gradually cultivate the habit of tackling knotty problems. Arguments for and against are advanced clearly and cogently. (The world is not without such persons even today.)

Therefore, no thinking person could ever grudge Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali if they spent a major portion of their time on sharpening their intellects by playing chess. They both had some patrimony and so had no worry about eking out an existence. To relieve the tedium of the occasion, which hung heavily on their hands, they would preoccupy themselves with playing chess. Every morning, after breakfast, the chess-board would be set and the operations start. So absorbed would they become in the game that soon they grew oblivious of the passing hour. Morning would wear on to noon, and noon to evening. From the inner apartments would come repeatedly the message that dinner was ready, and every time the messenger was told to go and lay out the cloth and cover, till at last the cook, his patience strained to breaking-point, would bring the food into the very room where the two friends sat playing. And they would carry on eating and playing simultaneously. In Mirza Sajjad Ali's house there was no elderly person; so the game of chess was played in the drawing-room. But this did not mean that the other members of his family approved of his conduct. Not only they, but also even the servants of the house and the neighbors looked upon chess-playing as ominous, as the cause of the ruin of a family's fortune. It was a game which brought about drift and downfall in the life of those who succumbed to it. It was a disease, said they. The Begum (the wife of the Mirza) hated it to such an extent that on every available occasion she took him to task for being so fond of the game. But she had seldom such occasions. She would be still sleeping in the morning when the

chess-board was set; and at night, too, the Mirza would enter the inner apartments after she had gone to bed. She, however, wreaked her anger on the poor servants. "Does the Mirza want betel-nuts? Tell him to come in himself and take them. Has he no time for taking his food? Then take it and fling it at his head. It matters not whether he eats it or throws it to a dog." But she could not say anything to him face to face. She was not so indifferent to, or angry with, her husband as she was with his friend, the Mir. She had nicknamed the latter "Mir-Begaru" (*i. e.* Mir, the spoiler). Presumably the Mirza, in his own self-defense, used to father the whole blame on the Mir.

One day the Begum had a headache. She asked Hirya, the maid- servant, to run up to her master and to ask him to send for some medicine from the family physician. The maid-servant did her bidding. The Mirza said to her, "Go in, I am just coming." The Begum was all wrath. While she had a headache she could not bear that her husband should be busy playing chess. She grew red in the face. She ordered the servant to ask the Mirza to come there quickly, else she would have to go to the doctor by herself. The Mirza was playing at the time an intriguing game. He was on the point of inflicting in a few moves a crushing defeat on the Mir. He flared up: "Is she dying? Can't she wait a while?"

Mir: "You had better go in, Mirza. Women are very touchy in such matters."

Mirza: "Why? Because you are about to lose the game?"

Mir: "Do not be so cocksure, Sir; I have hit upon a move, which will paralyse all your plans. I repeat, you would do well to attend to the Begum, for why should you unnecessarily hurt her feelings?"

Mirza: "I will not move till I have defeated you."

Mir: "I will not play. I say again, go in."

Mirza: "I shall have to go to the doctor, don't you see? Her complaint about a headache is a mere pretext on her part to harass me."

Mir: "Whatever be the fact, you had to honour her."

Mirza: "Very well, but before I go, let me, make one more move."

Mir: “Certainly not. Until you have attended to the Begum, I will not touch the pieces on the chess-board.”

The Mirza was, consequently, constrained to go in. When he entered the inner apartments, he found the Begum’s face framed in a frown. She ranted forth, “You are so mad after that ominous chess of yours that you do not care even if one is dying. The world would not be a loser if men like you were not there.”

Mirza: “That friend of mine, the Mir, would not let me come. It is with great difficulty that I have succeeded in coming away.”

Begum: “He is himself a drone; so, perhaps, he considers others also drones. Has he no children? Or has he done away with them?”

Mirza: “Whenever he comes he sits away glued to his seat; so I have perforce to play chess with him.”

Begum: “Why do you not drive him away from the door?”

Mirza: “He is of an equal status with me; nay, an inch or two taller in social stature and older in years, too. Therefore, one has to respect him.”

Begum: “Well, if you do not, then I will turn him out. Let him get angry. He cannot do us any harm, for we are in no way dependent upon him. Hirya, go and bring the chess-board from the drawing-room, telling the Mir that, as the Mirza will not play, he had better go home.”

Mirza: “No, no, do not be so hard on him. Do you wish to see me disgraced? Hirya, stop, do not go.”

Begum: “Why don’t you let her go? Swear that you will not stop her. If you do, then I will go myself.”

Saying this, the angry Begum moved towards the drawing-room. The Mirza’s countenance changed colour. He began to implore her. “By Hussain, by God, do not go.” But she did not heed him. She went up to the door of the drawing room, but then suddenly felt as if she had been fettered, and so could not muster courage to go into the presence of a stranger. She, however, peeped in. As luck would have it, the drawing room was empty. During the

absence of the Mirza the Mir had changed the positions of one or two pieces on the chessboard, and, to gloss over this foul game as well as to appear innocent, he was pacing outside. The Begum went in and turned the chess-board topsy-turvy. Then she threw away some of the pieces below the board, other outside, and bolted the room from within. The Mir, being near the door, saw the pieces being flung outside and also heard the jingling of the bangles. And when the door was closed, he at once concluded that the Begum was in a temper. So, softly, he slipped away home.

Mirza: "You have wrought havoc today."

Begum: "If the Mir comes again this side, I shall have him turned out. If you had loved your God, as much as you love him and your chess, you would have become a saint by now. You play at chess the whole day, while I have to attend all the time to the kitchen and your creature comforts. Will you now go to the doctor, or are you still incorrigible?"

The Mirza walked out of his house, but instead of going to the doctor's he went to the house of the Mir and told him all that had taken place. The Mir explained at the end of the Mirza's tale: "When I saw those pieces being flung out of the drawing-room, I immediately knew that was up. So I straightaway took to my heels. She seems to be a very angry woman. You have spoiled her by placing her on a pedestal. She should have no concern with what you do outside the inner apartments. She ought merely to keep house for you, and not put her nose in any other affairs."

Mirza: "Leave alone all that kind of talk. But tell me, where will be our *rendezvous* hereafter?"

Mir: "Do not worry. My whole house is at your disposal. Come on. We can start a game this very moment here."

Mirza: "But how shall I appease the anger of the Begum? When I played at chess at home, she made it so hot for me. When I play here, she will, I am afraid, flay me alive."

Mir: "Let the dogs bark. She will be once again her normal self within four or five days. But, you must do one thing from today: You should be rather stiff and stern with her and you ought also to stand on your dignity."

II

For some inscrutable reason the Begum of the Mir liked her husband to keep away from the house as much as possible. Therefore, she never really objected to his passion for playing chess. On the contrary, whenever he delayed in his playing she would particularly remind him. This led the husband to conclude that the wife was, on the whole, a very well-behaved and wise woman. But now when she saw that the carpet and the chess-board were spread out in the drawing-room every day from early morning and that the Mir stuck to them, she began to feel very miserable. For, now, her liberty of movement was clipped. She would always yearn for an opportunity, to stand in the door of the house and watch the world's passing-show.

The servants, too, whispered to one another how angry they were over the new order of things. Formerly, they used to spend their time in slothful ease, not caring at all about the incoming and outgoings in the house. But now they had to be at the beck and call of their master, who would at one time order for betel leaves, and, at another, for sweets. So they would often complain to their mistress: "The master's passion for chess has taken the life out of us. We have to go on his errands so frequently that our feet have got blisters. From morning to evening, he is at it all the time. One could understand if he played it for an hour or two by way of diversion. However, we are your servants and we shall carry out every order of yours. But one thing he must say, that the game of chess is very unlucky. No chess player has ever prospered. Some calamity or other befalls him. Street after street full of players has been blotted out of existence. Now-a-days every one in the locality is talking about the matter. We have eaten your salt and we feel deeply grieved, indeed, whenever any one talks evil against our master. But we are helpless. Thereupon the Begum would chime in: "I myself do not like the game. But I, too, am helpless, as he does not listen to any one."

There were in the neighbourhood a few persons who belonged to the older generation. They began to entertain all sorts of imaginary fears about the future of the chess-players. They would say, "No good can now ever happen to the people. When our leading men have come to such sorry pass, then God help the country. The present rule will perish as a consequence of the prominent persons' passion for chess-playing. The signs are ominous."

There was confusion in the country. In broad daylight the people were robbed. None attended to their complaints. The wealth of the villages was being attracted to the cities, and spent over prostitutes and professional actors and on several other forms of pleasure. The debt to the East [India](#) Company was daily mounting higher and higher. The blanket was becoming wetter and

heavier. On account of inefficient administration the collection of annual rent had fallen in arrears. The Resident had over and over again warned the [King](#). But all was in vain, for the people were steeped in the pleasures of the senses.

For months the Mir and the Mirza went on playing chess in the former's drawing room. They would plan new conquests of each other's [kings](#) and castles. Sometimes however, in the course of their play, they would quarrel and indulge in abuse, but soon they would make up. Some times the play would be stopped abruptly and both would go home. The nightly sleep, however, would smooth over their differences, for, in the morning, both would be present again in the drawing room.

One day the two friends were floundering through the intricacies of the game when a military officer on horseback arrived outside and began to inquire about the exact location of the Mirza's house. The Mir was out of his wits. "What a bolt from the blue" said he, "Why this summons from His Majesty? I am in for some trouble." So he closed the doors and asked one of the servant to tell the messenger that he was not at home.

Messenger: "If your master is not at home, then where is he?"

Servant: "I do not know. But what is your mission?"

Messenger: "Who are you to whom I should reveal that? The king has summoned your master. Perhaps, a few recruits for the army are required. Your master is an estate-holder, and he has received it from the King. He must be ready, therefore, for service in the wars. He will then know, to his cost, what it is to be an estate-holder"

Servant: "Very well, your message will be delivered to my master."

Messenger: "That is not sufficient. I shall come again tomorrow, for I have orders to conduct him into the presence of his Majesty."

The messenger went away. The Mir began to shake with fear. He turned to the Mirza, "What next?"

Mirza: "An ordeal, indeed! I am afraid lest I too might be called."

Mir: "The cursed fellow said he would come again tomorrow."

Mirza: “If we are sent to the battlefield, we shall die before our time.”

Mir: “There is only one way of escape; namely, not to be at home from tomorrow. Hereafter we shall make the wilderness on the bank of the Gomti ur *rendezvous*. I am sure, no one could track us down there. And so the messenger would necessarily have to go .”

Mirza: “By God! you have hit upon the right ruse, other way of escape.”

Outside, the Begum was saying to the messenger, “You threatened him all right.” He replied, “I can make such simpletons dance on my finger-tips. All their courage and intelligence have been sapped away in playing chess. Now, you will see that he dare not stay at home!”

III

From the next day the Mirza and the Mir began to set out before daybreak from their homes, bound for the bank of the Gomti. They would carry with them a small carpet and a box full of betel-leaves, and make for an old, deserted and dilapidated mosque, built by [Nawab Asafuddowlah](#). On the way they would buy some tobacco and *chilam* (the top of the hubble-bubble) and bits of charcoal. On arrival at their destination, they would spread the carpet, feed the hubble-bubble and begin their game of chess. And before long they would be so absorbed in it that they were lost to the world. During the play no words except ‘checked’, ‘conquered’, would escape their lips. In their concentration they outstripped even the ascetics. At noon when they felt hungry, they would go to a baker near by, finish their meal in haste, draw a few hurried puffs at the hubble-bubble and resume the game. Sometimes they even forgot to take food!

The political condition of the country was growing from bad to worse. The Company’s forces were advancing towards Lucknow. The whole city was in a panic. The inhabitants rushed to the villages. But the two chess-players were absolutely unconcerned. They would return home through the by-lanes, lest any one in the King’s service might detect them and conscript them. They were waiting to come into possession of their estates, which yielded an annual income of several thousands, as freeholds.

One day they were playing at chess in the ruins of the mosque. The Mirza was being defeated at every move by the Mir. Just then, in the distance, a regiment of the Company’s English soldier

was seen coming. It was proceeding to Lucknow to assert its authority over the city and the kingdom.

The Mir exclaimed, "The English army is advancing towards the city. God help us!"

Mirza: "Let it come, but you had better first save your position."

Mir: "Come, let us have a look at the solders. We can watch them from this hidden vantage-ground."

Mirza: "You could do all that afterwards. Be quick, else you will lose another move."

Mir: They appear to be about five thousand strong. They have a frightening look. They have also an artillery.

Mirza: "I am too experienced a player to be trapped by you like that!"

Mir: "You are a strange man, indeed. The city is in the grip of a great calamity, while you are pre-occupied with your play. Have you any idea that if a siege is laid to the city, you and I shall not be able to return home."

Mirza: "We shall think of that when the time to go home comes. Look to your game; otherwise one more move on my part and you will be defeated."

The army marched past them. It was 10 a.m. They set the chess-board again for a fresh game.

Mir: "What about our food today? Aren't you feeling hungry?"

Mirza: "No, not at all. But I wonder what is happening in the city at this hour."

Mir: "Nothing whatsoever. The people must have finished their meals and enjoying their usual mid-day rest. And the nawab, too, will be in his pleasure-house."

This time they went on playing till 3 p. m. The Mirza's game was weak. Just when the gong was sounding the hour of four, the sound of the footsteps of the English soldiers, on their return march, was heard. Nawab Wajid Ali had been made prisoner and the English were taking him to an unknown destination. There had been neither confusion nor carnage in the city. Not a single drop of blood was spilled. Never in history had an independent kingdom been conquered so

swiftly and without a blow struck in defence. It was, on the contrary, cowardice at which even the most cowardly would weep. The Nawab of Oudh had been captured while the people of Lucknow were pronged in pleasure! This was, indeed, the limit of political degradation.

The Mirza said, "The tyrants have taken away the Nawab, as a prisoner."

Mir: "Here is my next move."

Mirza: "Pray, wait a while. I cannot put my heart into the game at the moment. The poor nawab must be shedding tears of blood."

Mir: "That is but natural, for where will he have his round of pleasures under the changed conditions? Here, then, is my next move."

Mirza: "No one's days are uniformly alike. What a dreadful sight!"

Mir: "That is true. But, now, you are in a tight corner. My next move will kill you. It will be impossible for you to escape."

Mirza: "By God! you are a heartless fellow. Even such a catastrophe does not move you. Ah! poor Wajid Ali Shah."

Mir: "You had better first save your own chess-king, then there will be time enough for you to lament for the King of Oudh. One more move and you will be dead."

The English army and the Nawab passed out of sight. No sooner were they gone than the chess-board was spread out again, because for a chess-player the blow of defeat is unbearable.

Mir: "Come, let us pray for the peace and welfare of the Nawab."

But the loyalty of the Mirza had been drowned in his defeat. He was impatient to take his revenge.

IV

It was evening. The bats in the ruined mosque began to cry. The swallows clung to their nests. But the Mirza and the Mir were still playing at chess with as much zeal as if they were two warriors thirsting for each other's blood. The Mirza had lost three games in succession. It was

now his fourth game, the prospects of which, too, were far from rosy. Again and again, he played a cautious game as he was keen on winning, but some faulty move on his part would always mar his chances of success. With every defeat his desire to avenge himself became more intense. On the other hand, the Mir was singing lustily and snapping his fingers in token of joy at his victory, as if he had come into possession of some hidden treasure. This incensed the Mirza all the more, but to covet up his sorrow at his repeated defeats he pretended to approve of his associate's behaviour. But as his game became weaker, he grew more nervous. The result was that he began to lose his temper at every trifle. "Sir," he said angrily to the Mir, "Do not be changing your plans and positions so frequently. Be a little more steady in your game. Why have you kept your hand firmly on that piece? Let it go. You should not even touch any of the pieces before you have first decided in your mind what your next move is going to be. Your movement is very slow; in half an hour you make only one move. If hereafter you take more than five minutes to make any move, you will be penalized. Again, you have changed your move? Keep the piece in its previous position. The Mir's anger was aroused, as he feared a defeat. "When did I make a move at all?"

Mirza: "You have had your move. Keep the piece there."

Mir: "Why? I never let it go!"

Mirza: "If you do not let the piece go till Doomsday, shall we stop the play for your sake? When you see you are about to be defeated, you try all these tricks."

Mir: "It is you who make a row. Victory or defeat is a matter of luck. None can win through stratagem or quarrelling."

Mirza: "Well, you are defeated in the game."

Mir: "Why?"

Mirza: "Otherwise return that piece to its original position."

Mir: "No, I will not."

Mirza: "You must"

The dispute began to deepen. Both of them remained entrenched in their respective positions. They indulged in irrelevancies. The Mirza roared “Your forefathers never played chess. How could you, then, ever know the laws of the game? They were grass-cutters. What do you, therefore know of chess playing! Nobility or culture is a different matter altogether. None can become cultured overnight, simply by getting an estate.

Mir: “It is your forefathers who must have been grass-cutters. For in our family, chess has been played for generations.”

Mirza: “You have spent your whole life in serving as a cook of Ghazi-ud-din Haidar. Today you style yourself a *rais* (a noble). True gentility is not so easily acquired.”

Mir: “Why do you stain the memory of your ancestors? They were cooks, not mine, for we have been always the companions of the King at table.”

Mirza: “Don’t tell lies! You braggart!”

Mir: “Behave yourself,” otherwise you will come to harm. I cannot stand such insults from anyone. I shall pluck out the eyes of the person who insults me. Will you have it out then?”

Mirza: “Do you want me to prove my mettle? Come out, then, and let us have a duel.”

Mir: “Well, I am not going to be daunted like that.”

They forthwith unsheathed their swords. In those days the nobles went about with swords in their waistbands. Both were, no doubt, pleasure loving, but not cowards. They had no loyalty left for their King, it is true, but each of them possessed courage. Their swords gleamed in the sun and the sound of their clash began to be heard. Before long they were both mortally wounded and lay dead on the ground. They, who did not shed a tear for their King, now gave away their lives in defending their ministers on the chess-board!

Darkness was creeping on. The chessboard was set. The two kings of the chessboard sat, as it were, weeping at the fate of the two warriors. Silence reigned everywhere. The broken arches, the dilapidated walls and the dust-soiled minarets of the mosque looked at the corpses and nodded.