**Chess Story**

On the large passenger steamer that was to depart at midnight from New York to Buenos Aires, the usual bustle and activity of the final hour prevailed. Visitors crowded together to bid farewell to their friends; telegraph boys with crooked caps darted through the lounges shouting names; luggage and flowers were carried about; children ran up and down the stairs in curiosity, while the orchestra played unshakably for the deck show.

I was standing a little apart from this turmoil on the promenade deck, talking with an acquaintance, when suddenly, two or three times, a flashbulb flared sharply nearby — apparently some celebrity was being interviewed and photographed by reporters just before departure. My friend looked over and smiled. "You've got a rare bird on board — Czentovic." And since I apparently looked rather uncomprehending at this information, he added by way of explanation: "Mirko Czentovic, the world chess champion. He's been touring all across America from east to west with exhibition matches and is now heading to Argentina for new triumphs."

Indeed, I now remembered this young world champion, and even a few details of his meteoric career; my friend, a more attentive reader of newspapers than I, was able to add a whole series of anecdotes. About a year ago, Czentovic had suddenly placed himself beside the most accomplished old masters of chess — Alekhine, Capablanca, Tartakower, Lasker, Bogoljubow. Not since the appearance of the seven-year-old prodigy Rzecewski at the 1922 New York chess tournament had the intrusion of a completely unknown figure into this illustrious guild caused such a sensation. For Czentovic's intellectual qualities seemed in no way to predict such a brilliant career.

Soon, however, the secret leaked out — this chess master was, in his private life, utterly incapable of writing a sentence without spelling errors in any language, and as one of his irritated colleagues bitterly quipped, "his ignorance was universal in every field." The son of a destitute South Slavic Danube boatman whose tiny barge had one night been overrun by a grain steamer, the twelve-year-old Mirko had been taken in by the village priest out of pity after his father's death. The good pastor had earnestly tried through private tutoring to make up for what the slow, taciturn, broad-browed boy had failed to learn in school.

But all effort was in vain. Mirko continued to stare at the letters that had been explained to him a hundred times as if they were foreign symbols; even the simplest subjects could not stick in his sluggish mind. When he had to calculate, he still used his fingers at fourteen, and reading a book or newspaper was for the half-grown boy a special ordeal. Yet one could not call Mirko unwilling or defiant. He obediently did whatever he was told — fetched water, chopped wood, worked in the field, cleaned the kitchen — and carried out every assigned task reliably, though with maddening slowness.

What most exasperated the good priest, however, was the boy's total apathy. He did nothing without being told, never asked a question, did not play with other boys, and never sought any occupation unless explicitly instructed. Once his household chores were done, Mirko would sit stubbornly in the room, staring blankly, like a sheep in a meadow, utterly indifferent to everything happening around him.

While the priest, in the evenings, puffing on his long peasant pipe, played his usual three games of chess with the gendarme sergeant, the dull, blond-haired boy would sit silently beside them, gazing sleepily and indifferently under his heavy lids at the checkered board.

One winter evening, while the two men were absorbed in their daily game, the bells of a sleigh jingled rapidly from the village road outside. A farmer, his cap dusted with snow, burst in hastily — his old mother was dying, and the priest should come quickly to administer the last rites. The priest followed him at once. The gendarme sergeant, who had not yet finished his glass of beer, lit a new pipe before leaving and was just pulling on his heavy boots when he noticed how fixedly Mirko's gaze rested on the chessboard with the unfinished game.

"Well, do you want to finish it?" he joked, entirely convinced that the sleepy boy wouldn't know how to move a single piece correctly. The boy looked up shyly, nodded, and sat down in the priest's place. After fourteen moves, the gendarme was checkmated — and had to admit that it was by no careless mistake of his own. The second game ended no differently.

"Balaam's ass!" the priest exclaimed in astonishment upon returning — explaining to the less biblically minded gendarme that two thousand years ago, a similar miracle had occurred: a mute creature had suddenly spoken with the wisdom of men. Despite the late hour, the good pastor could not resist challenging his semi-illiterate servant to a match. Mirko beat him easily. He played slowly, tenaciously, unshakably, never once lifting his broad, bent forehead from the board. But he played with flawless certainty. In the following days, neither the priest nor the gendarme managed to win a single game against him.

The priest — better able than anyone to assess the otherwise backward mind of his ward — now grew seriously curious as to how far this one-sided, peculiar talent would hold up under stricter testing. After having Mirko's shaggy, straw-blond hair trimmed by the village barber to make him somewhat presentable, he took him by sleigh to the nearby town, where he knew a café on the main square frequented by zealous chess players who had always outclassed him.

The locals were astonished when the priest ushered in the fifteen-year-old, red-cheeked, straw-haired peasant boy, bundled in his sheepskin coat and high

boots. The boy stood shyly in a corner, eyes downcast, until someone invited him to a table. In the first game Mirko lost — he had never seen the so-called Sicilian Opening, which the priest never used. In the second, he managed a draw against the best player. From the third and fourth games onward, he beat them all, one after another.

Now, exciting events were rare in that small provincial town; thus, the appearance of this rustic champion at once became a sensation among the assembled notables. It was unanimously decided that the prodigy must remain in town until the next day so that the other members of the chess club could be summoned — and, above all, that old Count Simcic, a fanatical chess devotee, could be notified at his nearby estate.

The priest, looking upon his pupil with new pride but unwilling to neglect his Sunday mass out of mere excitement, agreed to leave Mirko behind for further testing.

The young Czentovic was lodged at the hotel at the expense of the chess club — and that evening, for the first time in his life, he saw a flush toilet.

The next Sunday afternoon the chess room was packed. Mirko, sitting motionless before the board for four hours, defeated one player after another without uttering a single word or even lifting his eyes. At last someone suggested a simultaneous exhibition. It took some time before the untrained youth could be made to understand that in a simultaneous match, he alone would have to play against several opponents at once. But once he grasped the idea, he adapted quickly — moved from table to table in his heavy, creaking shoes — and finally won seven of the eight games.

Now great deliberations began. Although this new champion did not strictly belong to the town, the citizens' local pride was ablaze. Perhaps, at last, this little place — hardly noticed on any map — might have the honor of sending a famous man into the world. An agent named Koller, who usually arranged engagements for singers and cabaret artists for the garrison, declared himself willing — provided that a subsidy for a year was raised — to have the young man trained in Vienna by a small but excellent chess master he knew. Count Simcic, who in sixty years of daily chess play had never encountered such a remarkable opponent, immediately subscribed the amount. Thus began the astonishing career of the boatman's son.

After half a year, Mirko had mastered all the secrets of chess technique — though with a strange limitation that later became widely observed and ridiculed among professionals. Czentovic never managed to play even a single game from memory — or, as experts say, "blindfold." He entirely lacked the ability to project the battlefield into the boundless space of imagination. He always had to see the black-and-white board of sixty-four squares and thirty-two pieces tangibly before him; even at the height of his fame, he constantly

carried a foldable pocket chessboard so that, when reconstructing a master game or solving a problem, he could visualize the position before his eyes.

This seemingly trivial defect revealed a lack of imaginative power and was discussed among connoisseurs as lively as if a distinguished musician or conductor had shown himself incapable of performing without a score. But this curious peculiarity in no way delayed Mirko's astounding rise. At seventeen he had already won a dozen chess prizes; at eighteen, the Hungarian championship; at twenty, the world championship itself. The boldest champions — each infinitely superior to him in intellect, imagination, and daring — succumbed to his tenacious, cold logic, just as Napoleon had to Kutuzov, or Hannibal to Fabius Cunctator, of whom Livy reports that in childhood he had shown similar traits of phlegm and dullness.

Thus it came about that into the illustrious gallery of chess masters — that company uniting in its ranks philosophers, mathematicians, calculators, dreamers, and creative minds of every sort — there entered, for the first time, a complete outsider to the world of intellect: a slow, taciturn peasant lad from whom not even the cleverest journalist could extract a single quotable sentence.

Yet what Czentovic withheld from the newspapers in polished remarks, he soon made up for in anecdotes about himself. For from the moment he rose from the chessboard — where he was a master without equal — Czentovic became a grotesque and almost comical figure. Despite his solemn black suit, his pompous tie with its rather ostentatious pearl pin, and his carefully manicured fingers, he remained in manner and bearing the same narrow-minded peasant boy who once swept the priest's parlor.

Awkwardly and often shamelessly crude, he sought — to the amusement and irritation of his colleagues — to squeeze from his talent and fame every penny possible, driven by petty and sometimes vulgar greed. He traveled from town to town, lodging always in the cheapest hotels, playing in the shabbiest clubs as long as his fee was guaranteed; he allowed his picture to be used in soap advertisements and even sold, heedless of his rivals' mockery (who well knew he couldn't write three correct sentences), his name for a *Philosophy of Chess* — actually ghostwritten by a small Galician student for a shrewd publisher.

Like all obstinate natures, he had no sense of the ridiculous. Since his victory in the world tournament, he regarded himself as the most important man on earth; the consciousness of having beaten all those clever, eloquent intellectuals at their own game — and, above all, the tangible fact that he earned more than they did — turned his original insecurity into a cold and often clumsily displayed pride.

"But how could such sudden fame fail to intoxicate such an empty head?" my

friend concluded, after telling me several classic examples of Czentovic's childish arrogance. "How could a twenty-one-year-old peasant from the Banat *not* go mad with vanity when, just by pushing a few wooden figures on a board, he earns in a week more than his whole village does in a year of chopping wood and hard labor? And after all, isn't it ridiculously easy to think oneself a great man when one has not the faintest notion that a Rembrandt, a Beethoven, a Dante, or a Napoleon ever existed? This fellow knows only one thing in his thick skull — that for months he hasn't lost a single chess game — and since he has no idea that there are other values on earth besides chess and money, he has every reason to be delighted with himself."

My friend's account naturally piqued my curiosity. All kinds of monomaniacs — people obsessed by a single idea — have always fascinated me, for the more one limits oneself, the nearer one comes, in a sense, to the infinite. Such seemingly isolated individuals build within their narrow material a strange, termite-like microcosm of the world. So I made no secret of my intention to study this curious specimen of intellectual one-sidedness more closely during our twelve-day voyage to Rio.

However — "You'll have little luck," my friend warned. "As far as I know, no one has ever managed to extract the slightest psychological material from Czentovic. Beneath all his bottomless stupidity, that cunning peasant conceals the great wisdom of never exposing himself — simply by avoiding conversation altogether, except with countrymen of his own class whom he finds in cheap inns. Whenever he senses an educated person, he retreats into his shell. No one can boast of having heard a foolish word from him, or of measuring the alleged depth of his ignorance."

My friend turned out to be quite right. During the first days of the voyage, it proved entirely impossible to approach Czentovic without gross intrusiveness, which is not my way. Sometimes he would stride across the promenade deck, his hands clasped behind his back in that self-absorbed posture familiar from portraits of Napoleon; moreover, he moved so hastily and abruptly on his peripatetic deck rounds that one would have had to trot to catch up with him. In the social rooms, at the bar, in the smoking lounge, he never appeared; as the steward confided to me, he spent most of the day in his cabin, practicing or reviewing games on a large chessboard.

After three days I began to grow genuinely irritated that his stubborn defensive technique was proving stronger than my will to make his acquaintance. Never before had I had the opportunity to meet a chess master personally, and the more I tried to imagine such a type, the more inconceivable it became — a mind revolving its whole life around sixty-four black and white squares.

I knew well from my own experience the mysterious fascination of the royal game — that unique game among all those invented by man which sovereignly escapes the tyranny of chance and awards its laurels solely to intellect, or

rather to a specific form of intellectual talent. But is it not almost an insult to call chess merely a *game*? Is it not also a science, an art — poised between these categories like Mohammed's coffin between heaven and earth — a unique fusion of all opposites: ancient yet ever new, mechanical in structure yet animated only by imagination, geometrically confined yet infinite in its combinations, ever evolving yet sterile, a thought leading to no conclusion, a mathematics without result, an art without works, an architecture without substance — and yet, undeniably, more enduring than any book or monument?

It is the one game belonging to all peoples and all times — and no one knows what god placed it upon the earth to kill boredom, sharpen the senses, and stretch the soul. Where does it begin and where does it end? Any child can learn its rules; any amateur can try his hand at it; yet within its immutable square it produces a special species of masters — men incomparable to all others — endowed with a gift unique to chess, specific geniuses in whom vision, patience, and technique are blended in proportions as precise as in mathematicians, poets, or musicians, only differently arranged.

In earlier times of physiognomic passion, a Gall might have dissected the brains of such chess masters to determine whether, in their gray matter, a particular convolution — a "chess muscle" or "chess bump" — was more pronounced than in others. And how such a physiognomist would have been intrigued by the case of Czentovic — where this specific genius appears embedded within absolute intellectual inertia, like a single thread of gold in a ton of dead stone!

In principle, I could understand that such a unique and ingenious discipline must produce its own peculiar champions. But how hard — how impossible — it was to imagine the life of an intelligent man whose world was reduced to the narrow one-way street between black and white; who sought his life's triumphs in the mere to-and-fro of thirty-two pieces; a man to whom the choice, in a new opening, of a knight instead of a pawn signified a great achievement and his pitiful fragment of immortality in the corner of a chess manual — a man, a thinking being, who could, without going mad, spend ten, twenty, thirty, forty years focusing all the power of his mind again and again on the absurd task of forcing a wooden king into a wooden corner!

And now such a phenomenon — such a strange genius or such a baffling fool — was, for the first time, physically close to me: only six cabins away on the same ship. And I, unlucky as ever, whose curiosity in matters of the mind always turns into a kind of passion, found myself unable to get near him.

I began devising the most absurd tricks — for instance, to tickle his vanity by pretending to conduct an interview for an important newspaper, or to appeal to his greed by proposing a lucrative tournament in Scotland. But finally I remembered that the best technique hunters use to lure the capercaillie is to imitate its mating call. What, then, could be more effective in catching a chess master's attention than playing chess oneself?

Now, I have never in my life been a serious chess player — for the simple reason that I've always treated chess lightly, purely as amusement. When I sit down at the board for an hour, it's not to strain myself but, on the contrary, to *relieve* mental strain. I "play" chess in the true sense of the word, while others — real chess players — "chess in earnest," if I may coin that expression for the German language.

For chess, like love, requires a partner, and I did not yet know whether there were any other enthusiasts on board. To lure them from their holes, I set a primitive trap in the smoking room: I sat down at a chessboard with my wife — who plays even worse than I — and we began a makeshift game. Indeed, we had played barely six moves when someone stopped to watch, another asked permission to observe, and finally the desired partner appeared — a man who challenged me to a game.

His name was McConnor, a Scottish civil engineer who, as I heard, had made a fortune drilling for oil in California. Outwardly he was a stocky man, with strong, almost square jawbones, firm teeth, and a ruddy complexion — the pronounced redness likely due, at least in part, to generous enjoyment of whisky. His broad, almost athletic shoulders revealed themselves also in his character at play: he belonged to that breed of self-assured success men who consider a loss, even in a trivial game, as a personal humiliation.

Accustomed to forcing his way through life and spoiled by constant success, this massive self-made man was so thoroughly convinced of his own superiority that any resistance struck him as insolence, even insult. When he lost the first game, he became sullen and insisted that only a moment's distraction could explain his defeat; after the third, he blamed the noise in the adjoining room. Never would he lose without immediately demanding a rematch.

At first, his stubborn competitiveness amused me; later, I tolerated it as an unavoidable side effect of my real purpose — to lure the world champion to our table.

On the third day, I succeeded — though only half. Whether Czentovic had been watching us through the lounge window from the promenade deck, or whether he had simply entered the smoking room by chance, I cannot say. In any case, as soon as he saw us amateurs practicing his art, he took an involuntary step closer and cast a single examining glance at our board. McConnor was in the middle of a move — and that one move alone was enough to convince Czentovic how little our amateurish efforts were worth his professional interest.

With the same casual gesture with which one of us might set aside a bad detective novel in a bookshop without even thumbing it, he turned away and left the smoking room. "Weighed and found wanting," I thought, a little irritated by that cool, contemptuous look. To vent my annoyance, I remarked to

McConnor, “Your move doesn’t seem to have impressed the master much.”

“What master?” he asked.

I explained that the gentleman who had just passed and looked disapprovingly at our game was the world champion, Czentovic. I added that we would no doubt survive his illustrious disdain — poor folks must make do with what they have. But to my surprise, my casual remark had an electrifying effect on McConnor. He grew visibly excited, forgot our game altogether, and his ambition began to pulse audibly.

He had no idea, he said, that Czentovic was on board — and now he *had* to play him. He had never played a world champion except once, in a simultaneous exhibition with forty other people; even that had been thrilling, and he had almost won then. Did I know the champion personally? I said no. Would I not approach him and invite him to join us? I declined, explaining that, to my knowledge, Czentovic was not particularly open to new acquaintances. Besides, what interest could a world champion have in playing with third-rate amateurs like us?

That last phrase — “third-rate players” — I should never have used with such an ambitious man. He drew back stiffly and said sharply that he did not believe Czentovic would refuse the courteous invitation of a gentleman. He would see to that himself. At his request, I gave him a brief description of the champion, and he immediately stormed out, leaving our board abandoned, his impatience entirely unrestrained.

I waited, rather curious about the outcome. After ten minutes, McConnor returned, not in the best of moods.

“Well?” I asked.

“You were right,” he said irritably. “Not a very pleasant man. I introduced myself, told him who I was. He didn’t even shake my hand. I tried to explain how proud and honored we’d all be if he’d play a simultaneous match against us. But he kept his back stiff as a poker — said he was sorry, but he had contractual obligations to his agent that explicitly forbade him from playing without a fee during his tour. His minimum fee is two hundred and fifty dollars per game.”

I laughed. “It never would’ve occurred to me that pushing figures from black to white could be such a profitable business. I hope you took your leave just as politely.”

But McConnor remained deadly serious. “The game’s set for tomorrow at three o’clock. Here in the smoking room. I hope we won’t be knocked to pieces too quickly.”

“What? You actually agreed to the two hundred and fifty dollars?” I exclaimed, astonished.

“Why not? *C’est son métier.* If I had a toothache and a dentist happened to be aboard, I wouldn’t expect him to pull my tooth for free. The man’s quite right to charge high fees — in every field, real experts are also the best businessmen. And as for me, the clearer a deal, the better. I’d rather pay cash than accept a favor from a man like Czentovic and have to thank him afterward. Besides, I’ve lost more than two hundred and fifty dollars in one evening at my club — and never against a world champion. For a ‘third-rate’ player, it’s no disgrace to be beaten by a Czentovic.”

I was amused to see how deeply my innocent phrase “third-rate player” had wounded his pride. But since he was willing to pay for the expensive amusement, I had no objection to his misplaced ambition, which at least would bring me the acquaintance of my curiosity’s subject.

We quickly notified the four or five other gentlemen who had declared themselves chess players of the coming event, and to avoid being disturbed by passersby, we reserved not only our table but the neighboring ones in advance.

The next day our small group gathered at the appointed hour. The central seat, opposite the champion, was of course assigned to McConnor, who released his nervous tension by lighting one heavy cigar after another and glancing repeatedly at his watch.

But the world champion — as I had already suspected from my friend’s stories — made us wait a good ten minutes, which only enhanced the effect of his entrance. He approached calmly and deliberately. Without introducing himself — his manner seemed to say, *You know who I am, and I don’t care who you are* — he began, with professional dryness, to state the practical arrangements.

Since a simultaneous match on board was impossible for lack of chessboards, he proposed that we all play collectively against him. After each move, he would withdraw to another table at the end of the room, so as not to disturb our discussions. When we had decided on our countermove, we were to tap a spoon against a glass — since no bell was available. As the maximum move time, he suggested ten minutes unless we preferred otherwise. We, of course, assented meekly to every proposal like timid schoolboys.

Czentovic took black. Still standing, he made the first countermove, then turned and went to his designated waiting place, where he leaned back and began leafing through an illustrated magazine.

There is little point in describing the game. It ended, as it had to, with our total

defeat — by the twenty-fourth move. That a world champion should sweep aside half a dozen mediocre players with one hand was not surprising; what annoyed us all was his overbearing manner, his obvious effort to make us *feel* that he was doing it with one hand. He cast only fleeting glances at the board, looked past us as if we ourselves were wooden pieces, and his insolent gestures reminded one involuntarily of someone tossing a bone to a mangy dog without turning his head.

Had he possessed the slightest tact, he might at least have pointed out our errors or offered an encouraging word. But even when the game was over, this inhuman chess machine uttered not a syllable; after saying “Checkmate,” he stood motionless, waiting to see whether we wanted another round.

I had already risen, ready to signal — helplessly, as one always feels before such thick-skinned rudeness — that this paid amusement at least marked the end of our acquaintance, when, to my annoyance, McConnor beside me said hoarsely, “Rematch!”

I was startled by his tone — it was not that of a polite gentleman but of a boxer before striking a blow. Whether it was Czentovic’s unpleasant behavior or McConnor’s pathological pride, his whole demeanor had changed. His face was flushed to the hairline, his nostrils flared, sweat glistened on his forehead, and a sharp line cut from his clenched lips to his thrust-forward chin.

I recognized with unease that dangerous gleam of unrestrained passion — the same one that grips gamblers at the roulette table when, for the sixth or seventh time, the wrong color appears after each doubled bet. At that moment I knew that this fanatically ambitious man would play, and play, and play — single or double stakes — until he had won *at least once*, even if it cost him his entire fortune. If Czentovic chose to indulge him, he had found in McConnor a gold mine that could yield him a few thousand dollars before we reached Buenos Aires.

"Please," he replied politely. "Gentlemen, this time you play Black."

The second game unfolded much like the first — except that our little circle had grown, both larger and livelier, as more onlookers gathered. McConnor stared so fixedly at the board, it seemed as though he meant to magnetize the pieces by sheer force of will. I could sense that he would have gladly sacrificed a thousand dollars just for the thrill of crying *‘Checkmate!’* against this cold, impassive opponent.

Curiously, some of his tense excitement began to infect us all. Every move was now discussed with almost feverish passion. Time and again, just before deciding on a play, one of us would restrain another’s hand, unsure whether to give the signal that would summon Czentovic back to the table. By the seventeenth move, to our astonishment, a situation had arisen that seemed

surprisingly favorable: we had managed to advance the pawn on the *c*-file to the penultimate square, C2 — just one move away from queening.

Yet we felt uneasy about such an obvious opportunity. We all suspected that this apparent advantage had been deliberately offered to us by Czentovic as bait. But despite all our collective scrutiny, we could not detect the hidden trap. Finally, with the time limit almost reached, we decided to risk it. McConnor was already about to push the pawn to the last square when suddenly someone seized his arm and whispered urgently, "For God's sake, don't!"

We all turned around in surprise. A man of about forty-five, whose narrow, sharp face I had noticed before on the deck because of its strange, almost chalk-white pallor, must have stepped up behind us during our concentration on the board. Feeling our startled glances upon him, he quickly added in a low but tense voice:

"If you queen now, he'll take with the bishop on C1. You'll recapture with the knight, but then he'll advance his passed pawn to D2, attacking your rook. Even if you check with the knight, you'll lose — mated within nine or ten moves. It's almost exactly the same pattern Alekhine used against Bogoljubow in the Piestany Grand Tournament of 1922."

Amazed, McConnor dropped his hand from the pawn and stared at the stranger no less than the rest of us — as if an angel had descended to our aid. Anyone who could foresee checkmate nine moves ahead had to be a first-class expert, perhaps even a contender traveling to the same championship. His sudden appearance and intervention at such a critical moment seemed almost supernatural.

McConnor was the first to regain his composure.
"What would you advise?" he whispered excitedly.

"Don't push the pawn yet — pull back first! Most of all, move the king out of the danger line — from G8 to H7. He'll probably switch the attack to the other wing, but you can counter that with rook C8 to C4. That will cost him two tempi, a pawn, and with that, his advantage. Then you'll have pawn against pawn — and if you play solidly defensive, you can still draw. Nothing more, but nothing less either."

We were stunned again. The precision and speed of his analysis were bewildering — as if he were reading the moves from a printed book. Still, the sudden hope of drawing a game against a world champion, thanks to his guidance, worked like magic. We instinctively moved aside to give him a clearer view of the board.

"Then — King from G8 to H7?" asked McConnor.
"Yes! Move out of danger first!"

McConnor obeyed, and we tapped the glass. Czentovic returned with his usual calm step, took one glance at the board, and — exactly as our unknown savior had predicted — advanced the pawn on the kingside, H2 to H4.

“Rook forward, rook forward — C8 to C4!” whispered the stranger excitedly. “He’ll have to cover his pawn first, but it won’t help him. Then you take, never mind his passed pawn — knight from C3 to D5, and the position is equal again. Attack, don’t defend!”

We didn’t understand what he meant; his words were gibberish to us. But under his spell, McConnor obeyed without hesitation. We struck the glass again to call back Czentovic. For the first time, he hesitated — studying the board intently. His brows drew together. Then he made exactly the move our mysterious helper had predicted, turned to leave — and paused.

Something new and unexpected occurred. Czentovic lifted his gaze and scanned our group; clearly, he was trying to discover who among us had suddenly begun to challenge him so effectively. From that moment on, our excitement soared beyond measure. Until now we had played without hope, but now the thought of breaking through Czentovic’s icy arrogance sent a hot current of energy through every vein.

Our new friend immediately ordered the next move, and with trembling fingers I tapped the glass once more. And then came our first triumph: Czentovic, who until then had always played standing, *hesitated* — then slowly, heavily, sat down. Physically, he was now on the same level as we were — and in that simple act, the superiority he had maintained from above was symbolically broken.

He pondered long, his eyes motionless on the board, so still that we could scarcely see his pupils beneath the lids; as he thought, his mouth gradually fell open, giving his round face a somewhat foolish expression. After a few minutes, he made his move and rose again.

Our friend whispered quickly:
“A delaying move — clever! But don’t fall for it! Force an exchange — an exchange at all costs! Then it’s a draw, and no god can save him.”

McConnor obeyed. The next few moves became a mysterious to-and-fro between the two of them — we others had sunk to mere spectators. After about seven moves, Czentovic looked up after a long pause and said, “Draw.”

For a moment, there was absolute silence. One could suddenly hear the waves rushing outside, the faint jazz from the salon, the steps on the promenade deck, the soft hiss of the wind through the window cracks. None of us breathed — it had come too suddenly. We were all stunned that this unknown man had

managed to impose his will on the world champion in a game that had seemed half lost.

McConnor leaned back abruptly, exhaling a long, audible sigh of relief and joy. I, for my part, watched Czentovic. Even during the last moves, I thought I had seen him grow slightly pale. But he controlled himself well. He remained motionless, as if indifferent, and while calmly sweeping the pieces from the board, said coolly:

“Would the gentlemen care for a third game?”

He asked it in the driest, most businesslike tone — yet strangely, he hadn’t looked at McConnor but fixed his sharp gaze directly on our mysterious rescuer. Like a horse recognizing a firmer hand, he must have realized from the last few moves who his true opponent really was. Instinctively, we all followed his glance toward the stranger.

But before the man could think, much less answer, McConnor — caught up in his feverish pride — burst out triumphantly:
“Of course! But this time *you* must play him alone! You alone against Czentovic!”

At this, something unexpected happened. The stranger, who had still been staring intently at the now-empty chessboard, started violently when he felt every eye fixed upon him and heard himself thus addressed. His face grew confused.

“By no means, gentlemen,” he stammered, visibly shaken. “That’s out of the question... I’m in no condition... I haven’t sat before a chessboard in twenty — no, twenty-five years... and... and I see now how improper it was for me to interfere in your game without your permission. Please, forgive my intrusion — I really mustn’t disturb you further.”

And before we could recover from our astonishment, he had already withdrawn and left the room.

“But that’s impossible!” thundered the impetuous McConnor, striking the table with his fist. “Completely impossible that this man hasn’t played chess for twenty-five years! He calculated every move, every countermove, five or six turns ahead! No one can do that offhand — impossible, isn’t it?”

In his final question, McConnor instinctively turned to Czentovic. But the world champion remained imperturbably cool.

“I can’t judge,” he said evenly. “In any case, the gentleman played rather strangely — though interestingly. That’s why I deliberately allowed him a chance.” Then, standing up with studied indifference, he added:

“If the gentleman — or the gentlemen — wish another game tomorrow, I’ll be available from three o’clock onward.”

We couldn’t suppress a faint smile. Each of us knew that Czentovic hadn’t “allowed” our mysterious helper any chance at all — and that his remark was nothing more than a clumsy excuse to mask his own failure.

All the more did our desire grow to see such arrogant self-assurance finally humbled. Suddenly, we — peaceful, easygoing passengers — were seized with wild, competitive excitement. The thought that the world chess champion might be defeated *on our ship, in the middle of the ocean* — a record that would flash across telegraph wires around the world — thrilled and challenged us beyond measure.

To this was added the lure of the mysterious — the fascination of our rescuer’s unexpected intervention at precisely the critical moment, and the contrast between his almost timid modesty and the professional’s unshakable self-confidence.
Who was this stranger? Had chance here unearthed a yet undiscovered chess genius? Or was a famous master concealing his identity from us for some unfathomable reason?

We discussed all these possibilities with the utmost excitement; not even the boldest hypothesis seemed too far-fetched to reconcile the stranger’s shy reserve and his surprising confession with his unmistakable skill.
In one respect, however, we were all of one mind: under no circumstances should we forgo the spectacle of a new contest.

We decided to do everything possible to ensure that our helper would play a game against Czentovic the next day, for which McConnor pledged to assume any financial risk. Since we had meanwhile learned from the steward that the unknown man was Austrian, it fell to me, as his compatriot, to deliver our request.

It took me little time to find the fugitive. He was lying on his deck chair, reading. Before approaching him, I took the opportunity to study him more closely. His sharply defined head rested wearily on the cushion; again I noticed the strange pallor of his relatively young face, framed at the temples by dazzlingly white hair. I had the odd impression that this man had aged suddenly.

As soon as I stepped up to him, he rose politely and introduced himself with a name immediately familiar to me — that of a highly respected old Austrian family. I remembered that one bearer of that name had belonged to Schubert’s closest circle of friends, and another had served as one of the old emperor’s personal physicians.

When I conveyed our request to Dr. B., inviting him to accept Czentovic's challenge, he was visibly taken aback. It turned out that he had no idea he had held his own in that game against a world champion — and not just any, but the most celebrated of the time. For some reason, this revelation seemed to affect him profoundly; he asked me again and again, as if unable to believe it, whether I was certain that his opponent was indeed a recognized world champion.

Sensing that this fact would make my task easier, I tactfully refrained from telling him that McConnor had agreed to bear any financial loss. After some hesitation, Dr. B. finally agreed to the match — but only after expressly requesting that the others be warned not to place excessive hopes in his ability.

"For," he added with a thoughtful smile, "I truly don't know whether I'm capable of playing a proper game of chess according to all the rules. Please believe me, it's not false modesty when I say that I haven't touched a chess piece since my school days — more than twenty years ago. And even then, I was considered merely a mediocre player."

He spoke so naturally that I could not doubt his sincerity. Nevertheless, I could not help expressing my astonishment that he remembered in such detail every combination of the various masters; surely, I suggested, he must have studied chess theory extensively.

Dr. B. smiled again in that strangely dreamlike way.
"Studied it? My God, one could indeed say that I occupied myself with chess — but under quite exceptional, utterly unique circumstances. It's rather a complicated story, one that might serve, perhaps, as a small contribution to the chronicles of our charming, grand age. If you have half an hour to spare…"

He gestured toward the deck chair beside him. I gladly accepted his invitation. We were alone. Dr. B. removed his reading glasses, laid them aside, and began:

"You were kind enough to say that, as a Viennese, you remembered the name of my family. But I suppose you've scarcely heard of the law firm that I ran jointly with my father and later alone, for we never took cases that made the newspapers and avoided new clients on principle. In truth, we were hardly a practicing firm at all; our work was limited to legal advice and, above all, the management of the estates of the great monasteries, to which my father, a former member of the clerical party, had close ties.

Moreover—now that the monarchy belongs to history, one may speak of it openly—we were entrusted with the administration of the funds of several members of the imperial family. These connections with the court and the clergy — my uncle was the emperor's physician, another was abbot of Seitenstetten — went back two generations. Ours was a quiet, one might almost say silent profession, requiring little more than absolute discretion and

reliability — two qualities my late father possessed in the highest degree.

Indeed, through his prudence he managed to preserve for his clients considerable fortunes during the years of inflation and upheaval. When Hitler came to power in Germany and began his raids upon the property of the Church and monasteries, many negotiations and transactions passed through our hands to safeguard movable assets from confiscation; and of certain secret political dealings of the Curia and the imperial house we knew more than the public will ever learn.

But precisely the unobtrusiveness of our office — we had not even a nameplate on the door — and our deliberate avoidance of all monarchist circles in Vienna provided the surest protection against inquiry. In fact, no authority in Austria ever suspected that the secret couriers of the imperial family regularly collected and delivered their most confidential correspondence in our inconspicuous office on the fourth floor.

However, long before the Nazis armed for open war, they had organized another, equally dangerous army in all neighboring countries — the legion of the embittered, the slighted, the resentful. Their so-called ‘cells’ had infiltrated every office and every enterprise, up to the very private rooms of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg. Even in our obscure little office, they had, as I learned too late, planted their man.

He was merely a pitiful, untalented clerk, whom I had hired on a priest’s recommendation only to give the appearance of a regular business. In reality, we used him for nothing but errands and trivial tasks — answering the telephone, sorting the harmless files. He was never allowed to open the mail; I typed all important letters myself, kept no carbon copies, carried home every significant document, and held all confidential meetings in the monastery or my uncle’s consulting room.

Despite these precautions, the spy must have noticed that we distrusted him and that something of interest was going on behind his back. Perhaps one of the couriers, in my absence, had carelessly spoken of ‘His Majesty’ instead of the code name ‘Baron Fern,’ or perhaps the fellow had illegally opened letters. In any case, before I suspected anything, he had evidently received orders from Munich or Berlin to watch us.

Only much later, when I was already under arrest, did I recall how, during those final months, his earlier indifference had turned into sudden zeal; how he had pressed, almost obtrusively, to take my correspondence to the post. I cannot entirely absolve myself of carelessness — but after all, had not the greatest diplomats and generals been deceived by Hitler’s treachery?

How carefully and thoroughly the Gestapo had already focused its attention on me became painfully clear the very evening that Schuschnigg announced his

resignation. A day before Hitler entered Vienna, I was arrested by SS men. Fortunately, I had managed to burn the most incriminating papers the moment I heard Schuschnigg's farewell speech on the radio, and I sent the remaining documents — those indispensable proofs concerning the monasteries' and archdukes' foreign assets — hidden in a laundry basket, with my faithful old housekeeper, to my uncle just as they were battering down my door."

Dr. B. paused to light a cigar. In the flickering glow I noticed again the nervous twitch at the corner of his mouth that I had observed before — a fleeting movement, barely perceptible, yet giving his whole face a curious restlessness.

"You probably imagine," he went on, "that I am now about to tell you of a concentration camp — of humiliations, torments, and tortures I endured there. But nothing of the sort occurred.

I belonged to a different category. I was not thrust among those unfortunates upon whom the Nazis vented their stored-up resentment with physical and moral degradation, but among a small group from whom they hoped to extract either money or important information.

Personally, I was of no real interest to the Gestapo; but they had learned that we had acted as trustees and confidants for their most hated enemies. What they wanted from me was incriminating evidence — evidence against the monasteries (to prove alleged transfers of assets), against the imperial family, against all those who had loyally supported the monarchy.

They suspected — and not unjustly — that substantial portions of those funds, which had passed through our hands, still existed, hidden from their plundering grasp. So, on the very first day, they began applying their tried and tested methods to wrest these secrets from me.

Those from whom the Nazis hoped to extract valuable information or money were not sent to the concentration camps, but reserved for special treatment. You may recall that our Chancellor and Baron Rothschild, from whom they hoped to extort millions, were not herded behind barbed wire but taken — under the guise of privilege — to the Hotel Metropole, which served both as Gestapo headquarters and as a prison, where each detainee was allotted a separate room.

Even I, a man of no importance, received this 'distinction.'

A room of one's own in a hotel — that sounds humane, doesn't it? But believe me, the intention was not to be humane but to employ a subtler cruelty. Instead of twenty men crammed into a freezing barrack, we were isolated in tolerably heated rooms. For the pressure by which they meant to break us was not to come from physical pain, but from within — from the most refined form of torture: isolation.

They did nothing to us — they merely placed us in absolute nothingness. And nothing on earth exerts such pressure on the human soul as that void. Locked hermetically in a room completely cut off from the world, one was meant to implode, to collapse inward under the vacuum.

At first glance, my cell did not seem uncomfortable: it had a door, a bed, a chair, a washbasin, a barred window. But the door remained locked day and night. On the table there was no book, no newspaper, no scrap of paper, no pencil. The window faced a blank wall. Around me, and even on my own body, they had constructed nothingness itself. They took everything away — my watch, so I wouldn't know time; my pencil, so I couldn't write; my knife, so I couldn't open my veins; even the smallest solace, a cigarette, was forbidden.

I never saw a human face except that of the silent guard, who was forbidden to speak or respond. I never heard a human voice. Eyes, ears, all senses — starved from morning to night, night to morning — received no nourishment. One was left alone, hopelessly alone, with oneself and a few mute objects: table, bed, window, washbasin.

It was like living under a glass bell deep in the black ocean of silence — and knowing that the lifeline to the surface had snapped, that one would never be drawn up again from the wordless depths.

There was nothing to do, nothing to hear, nothing to see. Everywhere and always, around you, the void — space without space, time without time. One walked back and forth, and one's thoughts walked with you, back and forth, back and forth. But even thoughts, insubstantial as they are, need something to rest upon; otherwise they begin to whirl, to spin senselessly around themselves.

You waited — from morning to night, and nothing happened. You waited again. Still nothing. You waited, waited, waited — thought, thought, thought — until your temples ached. Nothing happened. You remained alone. Alone. Alone.

That lasted fourteen days — fourteen days outside of time, outside of the world. Had a war broken out then, I would not have known. My world consisted only of table, door, bed, washbasin, chair, window, and wall — and always the same wallpaper on the same wall. Every jagged line of its pattern engraved itself, like a chisel, into the deepest folds of my brain, so often had I stared at it.

Then finally the interrogations began. One was suddenly summoned, never knowing whether it was day or night, led through a few corridors, not knowing where to; then one waited somewhere, not knowing where, and suddenly stood before a table around which several uniformed men sat.

On the table lay a pile of papers — files whose contents were unknown — and

then came the questions: real ones and false ones, clear and tricky ones, cover questions and traps. While you answered, foreign, hostile fingers flipped through the papers whose meaning you did not know; foreign, hostile fingers wrote notes into a protocol — and you did not know what they were writing.

The most dreadful thing was that I could never tell how much the Gestapo already knew about my office and how much they were trying to force out of me. As I told you, I had sent the incriminating documents to my uncle through my housekeeper at the last moment. But had he received them? Had he not? How much had the clerk betrayed? How many letters had they intercepted? How much had already been extorted from the monasteries in Germany by now?

And they asked, and asked — about which papers I had purchased for this monastery, with which banks I had corresponded, whether I knew such and such a person, whether I had received letters from Switzerland or Steenokkerzeel. And since I could never calculate how much they actually knew, every answer became a terrible responsibility.

If I admitted something they did not yet know, I might needlessly betray someone; if I denied too much, I endangered myself.

Yet even the interrogation was not the worst. The worst was the return — back into that same nothingness, the same room, the same table, the same bed, the same washbasin, the same wallpaper.

For once alone again, I would reconstruct, over and over, what I should have said more cleverly, what I ought to say next time to divert suspicion that I might have aroused with a thoughtless remark. I analyzed, reconsidered, reviewed my every word, retraced each question they had asked, every answer I had given, tried to calculate what they might have recorded — and knew, of course, that I could never know.

But these thoughts, once set in motion in that emptiness, would not stop rotating — endlessly, ceaselessly, in ever new combinations — even into my sleep. After every Gestapo interrogation, my own thoughts took over the torture: questioning, probing, tormenting — perhaps even more cruelly, for their questioning never ceased. Such was the insidious torment of solitude.

And always around me only the table, the cupboard, the bed, the wallpaper, the window — no distraction, no book, no newspaper, no other face, no pencil to jot something down, not even a match to play with — nothing, nothing, nothing.

Only now did I realize how devilishly clever, how psychologically murderous this system of the hotel room truly was. In a concentration camp one might have had to haul stones until one’s hands bled and one’s feet froze in the shoes; one

would have lain packed together with two dozen others, in stench and cold — but one would at least have seen faces, a field, a cart, a tree, a star — something, anything to look at.

Here, however, it was always the same around me — always the same, the horrible *same*. There was nothing that could distract me from my thoughts, from my delusions, from my obsessive recapitulating. And that was precisely their intention: they wanted me to choke on my thoughts, to choke and choke until they strangled me, until I could do nothing but finally vomit them out — to confess, to confess everything, to hand over the “material,” to betray the people.

Gradually I felt my nerves begin to loosen under this terrible pressure of nothingness, and, aware of the danger, I strained them almost to the breaking point in search of some kind of diversion — anything I could find or invent.

To occupy myself, I tried to recite and reconstruct everything I had ever learned by heart — the national anthem, the children’s rhymes, the Homer I had read in school, the paragraphs of the Civil Code. Then I tried doing calculations, adding and dividing arbitrary numbers — but in that void, my memory had no foothold. I couldn’t concentrate on anything.

Always that same thought flashed and flickered in between: *What do they know? What did I say yesterday? What must I say next time?*

This truly indescribable condition lasted four months. Four months — the words are easily written: just a dozen letters! Easily spoken too: four months — four syllables. The lips form the sound in a quarter of a second: four months! But no one can describe, can measure, can make anyone understand — not another person, not even oneself — how long time lasts when one is outside space, outside time.

No one can explain how it eats into you, destroys you, this nothing and nothing and nothing around you — this eternal table and bed and washbasin and wallpaper — the endless silence, the same guard who, without looking at you, slides the food inside, the same thoughts circling in the void around the same point until you go mad.

By small signs I became alarmingly aware that my brain was starting to go out of order. At first, during interrogations, I had still been clear inside; I had spoken calmly and deliberately; that double awareness — of what to say and what not to say — had still functioned.

Now I could barely articulate the simplest sentences without stammering, for as I spoke, my gaze would become hypnotically fixed on the pen moving across the paper, as if I wanted to chase my own words as they were being written down. I felt my strength fading. I felt the moment drawing nearer when, just to

save myself, I would say everything I knew — and perhaps even more — when, to escape the strangling of this nothingness, I would betray a dozen people and their secrets for nothing more than a single breath of relief.

One evening it almost came to that. As the guard happened to bring me my food at the very moment of this suffocation, I suddenly cried out:
“Take me to interrogation! I’ll tell everything! I’ll confess everything! I’ll tell you where the papers are, where the money is! I’ll tell you everything — everything!”

Fortunately, he didn’t hear me. Perhaps he didn’t want to.

In this utmost despair something unforeseen happened — something that brought salvation, at least for a while.

It was the end of July, a dark, overcast, rainy day. I remember this detail precisely because the rain was drumming against the panes in the corridor as they led me to the interrogation.

In the anteroom of the examining officer I had to wait. One always had to wait — that too was part of their technique. First they would tear at your nerves by summoning you suddenly, dragging you out of your cell in the middle of the night; then, once your mind was braced for interrogation, once your will was taut with resistance, they made you wait — senselessly, yet purposefully wait — one hour, two hours, three hours before questioning, to weary the body, to break the spirit.

And on that Thursday, the 27th of July, they made me wait particularly long — two full hours standing in the anteroom. I remember the date exactly for a special reason: in that room, where I was not, of course, permitted to sit down, there hung a calendar. And I cannot explain to you the hunger with which my eyes devoured that one printed line — *27 July* — how I stared and stared at it, how I burned that small cluster of letters and numbers into my brain in my starvation for anything printed, for anything written.

Then I waited again, and waited, and stared at the door, wondering when it would finally open, trying to guess what the inquisitors might ask this time, though I knew full well they would ask something entirely different from what I was preparing for.

Yet despite everything, the torment of this waiting and standing was also a strange pleasure, almost a joy — for this room, at least, was different from my own. A little larger, with two windows instead of one, without the bed, without the washbasin, without that crack in the windowsill I had stared at a million times. The door was painted a different color; there was a different chair against the wall; and to the left a filing cabinet with folders, and a coat rack with hangers on which three or four wet military coats — the coats of my torturers — were hanging.

At last I had something new to look at — something different for my starved eyes — and they clung greedily to every detail. I studied every fold in those coats. I noticed, for instance, a drop of water hanging from one of the wet collars — and absurd as it may sound to you, I watched with breathless excitement to see whether that drop would finally run down along the fold or defy gravity and cling a moment longer. Yes — I stared and stared at that drop as though my life depended on it.

Then, when it finally slid down, I began counting the buttons on the coats: eight on one, eight on another, ten on the third. Then I compared the lapels. All those ridiculous, insignificant details caressed and fed my starved eyes with a greed I cannot describe.

And suddenly my gaze froze.
I had noticed that one of the coats bulged slightly at the side pocket. I stepped closer and, judging by the rectangular outline of the bulge, I thought I could guess what was inside that pocket: a book!

My knees began to tremble — a book! For four months I had not held a book in my hands, and the mere idea of one — of seeing words strung together, lines, pages, sheets; of reading other thoughts, new thoughts, foreign thoughts, anything to distract me — was intoxicating, dizzying.

Hypnotized, my eyes devoured the small bulge in the fabric, as if trying to burn a hole through the coat. Finally I could no longer control my desire. Unconsciously I moved closer, drawn as if by a magnet. The mere thought of touching a book, even through the fabric, made the nerves in my fingertips glow.

Almost without knowing it, I edged nearer still. Luckily the guard paid no attention to my strange behavior — perhaps he simply thought it natural that a man, after standing two hours, might lean a little against the wall.

At last I stood directly by the coat. I kept my hands behind my back so that I could discreetly touch the fabric. I felt it — something rectangular, flexible, faintly crackling — a book! A book!

And like a shot through my brain came the thought: *Steal it!* Maybe you can manage it — hide it in your cell — and then read, read, read — finally read again!

The thought, the instant it entered me, acted like a drug. My ears began to ring, my heart to hammer; my hands went ice cold and refused to obey. But after the first wave of dizziness, I pressed myself quietly, cunningly closer to the coat; keeping my eyes fixed on the guard, I pushed the book upward from the pocket with my hands behind my back — higher, higher.

Then — one quick, cautious tug — and suddenly I held the small, not very thick book in my hand. Only then did I realize what I had done. But there was no turning back.

Where to hide it? I slipped the volume behind my back, under my trousers, where the belt held firm, then gradually shifted it to my side so that I could keep it in place with my hand at the seam, as if standing at attention.

Now came the first test. I stepped away from the coat rack — one step, two steps, three. It worked. I could hold the book while walking, as long as I pressed my hand tightly against the belt.

Then came the interrogation. It demanded more effort from me than ever before, for while I answered their questions, I was concentrating all my energy not on what I said, but on keeping the book unnoticed. Fortunately, the session was brief, and I brought the book safely back to my room — though not without risk: once it nearly slipped from my trousers in the corridor, and I had to fake a violent coughing fit to bend down and push it back in place.

But what a moment that was — when I stepped back into my hell, at last alone, and yet no longer alone!

You probably imagine that I immediately seized the book, looked at it, began to read. Not at all. At first I wanted to savor the foretaste — the exquisite, nerve-tingling joy of knowing I possessed a book. I wanted to prolong the anticipation, to dream of what kind of book it might be: closely printed, above all, with many, many letters, many, many thin pages, so that I could read for a long time.

And I wished it might be a work that demanded mental effort — nothing shallow or easy, but something one could learn by heart — poems, perhaps — and best of all (what a daring dream!) Goethe or Homer.

But at last I could no longer restrain my hunger, my curiosity.
Lying stretched out on the bed, in such a way that if the guard suddenly opened the door he would not catch me, I tremblingly drew the book out from under my belt.

At first glance, it was a disappointment — even a kind of bitter anger:
the book I had obtained at such immense risk, saved up with such burning expectation, was nothing but a chess manual — a collection of one hundred and fifty master games.

Had I not been locked and bolted in, I would, in my first fury, have hurled it out of the window, for what use, what possible use, could this nonsense be to me? As a schoolboy, like most others, I had occasionally tried my hand at chess out of boredom.

But what was I to do with this theoretical stuff? One cannot play chess without a partner — least of all without pieces, without a board.

I leafed through the pages in irritation, hoping to find something readable — an introduction, some instructions — but there was nothing: only the bare square diagrams of various master games, and below them strange, incomprehensible symbols: *a1–a2, Nf1–g3*, and so on.
It all seemed a kind of algebra for which I possessed no key.

Gradually, I deciphered that the letters *a, b, c* stood for the vertical files, and the numbers 1 to 8 for the horizontal ranks, indicating the position of each piece; thus, the purely graphical schemes acquired a certain language.
Perhaps, I thought, I could construct some sort of chessboard in my cell and try to replay these games.
And — like a divine hint — it struck me that my bed sheet happened to be roughly checkered. Properly folded, it could be arranged into sixty-four squares.

So I hid the book under the mattress and tore out only the first page. Then, from tiny crumbs of bread saved from my meals, I began to model the chess pieces — king, queen, and so on — of course in ridiculously crude form. After endless effort, I finally managed to reconstruct on the checkered sheet the position shown in the chess book.

When I tried to play through the entire game, it went completely wrong at first with my pitiful little crumb pieces, half of which I had darkened with dust to tell them apart. I confused myself constantly in the first days; five, ten, twenty times I had to start the same game all over again from the beginning.

But who on earth possessed so much unused, useless time as I did — the slave of nothingness? Who else had such immeasurable hunger and patience at their disposal?
After six days I could play the game flawlessly to the end; after another eight days I no longer needed the crumbs on the bedsheet to visualize the position from the book; and after another eight days even the checkered sheet became unnecessary.

Automatically, the abstract signs of the book — *a1, a2, c7, c8* — turned into visual, tangible positions inside my mind. The transformation was complete: I had projected the chessboard inward. I could now grasp any position purely from the notation, as a practiced musician reads a score and hears all the voices and their harmony.

After another fourteen days, I could easily play any game from the book by memory — or, as the technical term goes, *blindfold*.
Only then did I begin to realize what an immense blessing my reckless theft had brought me.

For suddenly I had an occupation — senseless and purposeless, if you like, but one that annihilated the nothingness around me. With those hundred and fifty tournament games, I possessed a marvelous weapon against the crushing monotony of space and time.

To preserve the charm of my new occupation, I divided my day precisely: two games in the morning, two in the afternoon, and a quick review in the evening. Thus my day — which otherwise stretched shapelessly like jelly — was filled; I was occupied without exhaustion, for chess has the remarkable quality of focusing one's mental energy within a narrow field, sharpening the brain's agility and tension rather than dulling it, even under the most intense strain.

Gradually, in what had begun as purely mechanical repetition, a sense of artistry, of pleasure awoke within me. I began to grasp the subtleties, the tricks and sharpness of attack and defense; I learned the technique of anticipating, combining, countering. Soon I recognized the personal style of each chess master in his individual play as infallibly as one identifies a poet's verse from only a few lines.

What had begun as a mere time-killing exercise became delight.
The figures of the great chess strategists — Alekhine, Lasker, Bogoljubow, Tartakower — entered my solitude as beloved companions. Infinite variety animated my silent cell, and the very regularity of my exercises restored my shaken mental balance. I felt my brain refreshed, even newly sharpened by the steady discipline of thought.

That I thought more clearly and precisely showed itself above all during the interrogations: unconsciously, I had perfected myself in defense against false threats and hidden traps — as on the chessboard. From that point on, I made no more mistakes during questioning; I even fancied that the Gestapo officers began to regard me with a certain respect. Perhaps they secretly wondered from what mysterious source I alone drew the strength for such unshakable resistance.

This time of happiness — when I systematically replayed the hundred and fifty games day after day — lasted about two and a half to three months.
Then, unexpectedly, I reached a dead point.

Suddenly I was back before the void. For once I had played through each game twenty or thirty times, it lost the charm of novelty and surprise; its once stimulating power was exhausted. What sense was there in repeating again and again games whose every move I knew by heart?
No sooner had I made the opening move than the entire sequence unfolded automatically in my mind. There were no surprises anymore, no tension, no problems.

To keep myself occupied, to provide the exertion and diversion that had become essential to me, I would have needed another book with new games. But since that was utterly impossible, there remained only one path in this strange labyrinth: I had to invent new games myself — I had to try to play against myself.

I do not know to what extent you have reflected on the mental situation of this "game of games." But even a fleeting thought should suffice to see that, since chess is a pure game of thought, detached from all chance, it is a logical absurdity to attempt to play it against oneself.

The fascination of chess rests entirely on the fact that its strategy unfolds differently in two different minds — that in this intellectual war, Black does not know White's maneuvers and constantly strives to guess and counter them, while White in turn seeks to anticipate and parry Black's hidden intentions.

If, however, Black and White are one and the same person, there arises the contradictory condition that one and the same mind must at once know and not know something — that, acting as White, it must on command completely forget what it just intended as Black.

Such double-thinking presupposes a complete division of consciousness, the ability to switch the mind on and off like a mechanical device. To play chess against oneself is as absurd as trying to leap over one's own shadow.

Yet — to be brief — this impossibility, this absurdity, I tried for months in my desperation. I had no other choice than this contradiction, lest I fall into sheer madness or total mental paralysis. My terrible situation forced me to attempt this split — into a Black I and a White I — simply to avoid being crushed by the ghastly nothingness surrounding me."

Dr. B. leaned back in his deck chair and closed his eyes for a moment, as though he were struggling to repress a disturbing memory. Again that peculiar twitch, which he could not control, passed over the corner of his mouth. Then he straightened up slightly.

"So — up to this point, I hope I've made everything fairly clear to you.
But I'm by no means certain that I can describe the next part as clearly. For this new activity demanded such an absolute concentration of the brain that any simultaneous self-control became impossible.

I already hinted that, in my opinion, it is nonsense in itself to play chess against oneself; yet even that absurdity might have a minimal chance with a real chessboard, since the tangible reality of the board provides a certain distance, a material exterritoriality.

Before a real chessboard, with real pieces, one can pause, step to one side of the table or the other, and thus view the situation alternately from Black's and White's standpoint.

But as I was forced to project these battles against myself — or, if you prefer, with myself — into an imaginary space, I had to hold in my mind the position of all sixty-four squares, and not only that, but also calculate all possible future moves for both sides. And — absurd as it sounds — I had to imagine them doubly, triply — no, sixfold, eightfold, twelvefold — four or five moves ahead for each of my selves, for White and for Black.

I must beg your patience to follow this madness:
in this purely abstract game, I had to calculate four or five moves ahead as White, and likewise as Black — that is, to foresee all developing situations with two brains, the White brain and the Black brain.

But even this self-division was not the most dangerous part of my bizarre experiment. What truly swept me away was that, by inventing games of my own, I lost the ground beneath my feet and plunged into bottomlessness.

The mere replaying of the master games, as I had practiced in the preceding weeks, had been a reproductive act, a pure recapitulation of a given material — no more demanding than memorizing poems or legal paragraphs. It was a limited, disciplined activity, and therefore an excellent *exercitium mentale*."

"The two games I played each morning, and the two I practiced each afternoon, formed a fixed routine that I completed without any particular excitement.
They replaced normal occupation, and when, in the course of a game, I made a mistake or reached an impasse, I still had the book to fall back on.

It was precisely for that reason that this activity had been so salutary and soothing to my shattered nerves — because replaying other men's games did not involve *me* personally.
Whether Black or White won was of no concern to me; it was Alekhine or Bogoljubow who fought for the champion's crown, while my own self, my mind, my soul merely enjoyed, as spectator and connoisseur, the turns and beauties of those matches.

But from the moment I began to play against myself, I unconsciously began to challenge myself.
Each of my two selves — my Black-self and my White-self — strove to outdo the other, each became seized by its own ambition and impatience to win.
As Black I feverishly awaited each move White would make; each of my selves exulted when the other made a blunder, and simultaneously raged at its own clumsiness.

All this may seem senseless — and indeed, such an artificial schizophrenia, such a split of consciousness charged with feverish tension, would be unthinkable in any normal person under normal circumstances.
But remember that I had been violently torn from all normality — a prisoner, unjustly confined, tormented for months by refined solitude, a man whose accumulated rage had long sought something, *anything*, on which to discharge itself.
And since I had nothing else but this absurd game against myself, all my rage, all my thirst for revenge, poured fanatically into it.

Something within me wanted to be right — and I had only this other self within me to oppose.
Thus, during play, I whipped myself into a kind of manic excitement.
At first I still thought calmly and deliberately; I even paused between one game and the next to recover from the strain.
But gradually my frayed nerves no longer allowed any waiting.
Hardly had my White-self made a move than my Black-self pounced feverishly forward; hardly was one game over than I challenged myself to another, for each time one of the two chess-selves had been beaten by the other and demanded revenge.

I shall never be able to say, even approximately, how many games I played against myself in that cell during those last mad months — perhaps a thousand, perhaps more.
It was an obsession I could not resist.
From morning till night I thought of nothing but bishops and pawns and rooks and kings, of a’s and b’s and c’s, of mates and castlings — my whole being and feeling driven into that checkered square.

Play-pleasure became play-passion, and passion became compulsion — a mania, a frenzied delirium that invaded not only my waking hours but gradually my sleep as well.
I could think only in chess, move only in chess — in chess combinations, chess problems.
Sometimes I awoke with damp forehead and realized that I must have gone on playing unconsciously in my sleep; and when I dreamed of people, they appeared only as bishops and rooks, moving backward and forward in knight’s jumps.

Even when I was summoned for interrogation, I could no longer think coherently about my situation.
I have the feeling that, during those final interrogations, I must have spoken quite confusedly, for the examiners sometimes exchanged puzzled glances.
But in truth, while they questioned and discussed, I was only waiting — waiting in my accursed craving to be led back to my cell so that I could continue my game, my mad game — another match, and yet another, and another still.

Every interruption became torment.
Even the quarter-hour while the guard tidied my cell, the two minutes while he brought my food — they tortured my feverish impatience.
Sometimes, in the evening, the bowl of food still stood untouched: I had forgotten to eat over my game.

The only physical sensation I had left was a dreadful thirst — doubtless the fever of constant thinking and playing.
I drained the bottle in two gulps, begged the guard for more, and yet, the next moment, my tongue was dry again.

Finally my excitement during play — and by now I did nothing else from morning to night — reached such a pitch that I could no longer sit still for even a moment.
I paced ceaselessly as I pondered my games — back and forth, faster and faster, ever faster — and the closer the game came to its climax, the hotter my agitation grew.
The greed to win, to triumph, to overcome myself, turned gradually into a kind of frenzy.
I trembled with impatience; one chess-self was always too slow for the other.

One urged the other on; absurd as it may sound to you, I began to scold myself —
“Faster! Faster!”
or
“Come on, forward! Forward!” —
whenever one of my selves failed to respond quickly enough.

Of course, I now understand perfectly that my condition had become a truly pathological state of nervous over-excitation — for which I can find no better name than one not yet known to medicine: **chess poisoning**.

In the end, this monomaniacal obsession began to attack not only my mind but my body.
I grew thin; I slept fitfully and restlessly; every morning it took great effort to force open my heavy eyelids.
Sometimes I felt so weak that, when I tried to lift a glass of water, my hands trembled so badly I could scarcely bring it to my lips.
But once the game began, a wild strength possessed me again: I strode up and down with clenched fists, and through a red haze I sometimes heard my own voice, hoarse and harsh, shouting to myself:
“Check!” or “Mate!”

How that ghastly, indescribable state reached its crisis I cannot tell.
All I know is that one morning I woke up — and it was a different kind of awakening than before.

My body seemed detached from me; I lay soft and calm.
A dense, soothing weariness, such as I had not known for months, lay upon my eyelids, so pleasantly, so warmly, that I could not at first bring myself to open them.
I had already been awake for minutes, savoring that heavy numbness, that gentle lying still with voluptuously dulled senses.

Suddenly I thought I heard voices behind me — living, human voices, soft, whispering voices speaking words.
You cannot imagine my rapture: for months, nearly a year, I had heard no other words than the hard, sharp, hateful ones from the tribunal bench.
"You're dreaming," I told myself. "You're dreaming! Don't open your eyes — not yet! Let the dream go on! Otherwise you'll see again that cursed cell — the chair, the washstand, the table, the wallpaper with its eternal pattern. You're dreaming — keep dreaming!"

But curiosity prevailed.
I slowly and cautiously opened my eyes.

And — miracle! — it was another room I was in, wider, larger than my hotel cell.
An unbarred window let in free light and a view of trees — green, swaying trees in the wind — instead of my rigid fire wall.
The walls shone white and clean; the ceiling rose white and high above me.
Truly, I lay in a new, strange bed — and indeed, it was no dream — for behind me whispered real human voices.

I must have stirred in surprise, for I heard approaching footsteps.
A woman came softly near — a woman in a white cap, a nurse, a sister.

A shudder of delight ran through me: I had not seen a woman in a year.
I stared at the gentle apparition, and it must have been a wild, ecstatic gaze, for she said urgently:
"Quiet! Stay calm!"

But I only listened to her voice — was that not a *human* being speaking?
Could it be that there still existed on earth someone who did not interrogate or torment me?
And what a miracle — a soft, warm, almost tender *woman's* voice!

Greedily I stared at her mouth; it had become almost unimaginable to me during that hellish year that anyone could speak kindly to another human being.
She smiled at me — yes, she smiled; there were still people who could smile kindly! — then pressed a finger warningly to her lips and moved on quietly.

But I could not obey her command.
I had not yet feasted enough on the miracle.

I tried to raise myself in bed to look after her — to look after this wonder of a human being who was kind.

But when I tried to support myself on the edge of the bed, I could not.
Where my right hand should have been — fingers and joints — I felt something foreign: a thick, heavy, white mass — evidently a large bandage.
At first I gazed at that white, bulky thing in incomprehension.
Then slowly I began to understand where I was — and to wonder what had happened to me.

They must have injured me — or I had injured myself.
I was in a hospital.

At noon the doctor came — a kind elderly man.
He knew my family's name and spoke with such respect of my uncle, the imperial physician, that I immediately felt he meant well by me.

In the course of conversation, he asked various questions — one in particular that surprised me: whether I was a mathematician or a chemist.
I said no.

"Strange," he murmured. "In your fever, you kept shouting odd formulas — *C3, C4*. None of us could make sense of them."

I asked what had happened to me.
He smiled oddly. "Nothing serious. An acute irritation of the nerves."
Then, glancing cautiously around, he added in a low voice:
"After all — quite understandable. Since March 13th, eh?"

I nodded.

"No wonder, with that method," he muttered. "You're not the first. But don't worry."

From the way he whispered this reassuringly — from the kindness of his eyes — I knew I was safe with him.

Two days later the kind doctor explained to me, quite openly, what had occurred.

The guard had heard me shouting loudly in my cell and had at first thought someone had broken in, someone I was fighting with.
But when he appeared at the door, I had thrown myself upon him, screaming wildly — words something like, *"Go on, make your move, you coward, you scoundrel!"* — and had tried to grab him by the throat, attacking him so violently that he had to call for help.

When they dragged me in that rabid state to the medical ward, I suddenly broke free, rushed at a window in the corridor, smashed the pane, and cut my hand — you can still see the deep scar here.

The first nights in the hospital I had spent in a kind of brain fever, but now, he said, my senses were perfectly clear.
“Of course,” he added softly, “I’d rather not report that to the authorities — otherwise they might send you back there. You can rely on me — I’ll do my best.”

I have no idea what the doctor reported about me to my tormentors.
In any case, he achieved what he intended: my release.
Perhaps he declared me insane, or perhaps by that time I had simply become unimportant to the Gestapo, for Hitler had since occupied Bohemia, and thus the Austrian affair was finished for him.

I merely had to sign a declaration promising to leave my homeland within fourteen days. And those fourteen days were so consumed by the thousand formalities that a former citizen of the world must now undergo to obtain permission to emigrate—military papers, police clearance, tax certificates, passport, visa, medical forms—that I had no time to think much about the past.

Apparently, there are mysterious self-regulating forces in the brain that automatically suppress what might be harmful or dangerous to the soul. For whenever I tried to think back to my time in the cell, it was as if a light went out in my head. Only after weeks and weeks—actually only here on the ship—did I find the courage to recollect what had happened to me.

And now, you will understand why I behaved so strangely, so inappropriately toward your friends.
I had merely been strolling, quite aimlessly, through the smoking room when I saw your friends seated before a chessboard. Instinctively I froze—rooted to the spot in astonishment and horror. For I had completely forgotten that one could play chess on a *real* board, with *real* pieces; forgotten that, in this game, two entirely separate human beings could actually sit facing one another.

It truly took me a few minutes to recall that what these men were doing there was in essence the same game I had, in my helplessness, played for months against myself. The ciphers I had used during those grim exercises had been only a substitute—a symbol—for these carved figures. My amazement, that this physical shifting of pieces corresponded to my imaginary brooding over numbers and squares, might have resembled the wonder of an astronomer who, having calculated a new planet on paper, suddenly sees it shining in the sky, a white, substantial star.

As if magnetically drawn, I stared at the board and saw there my familiar

patterns—knight, rook, king, queen, pawn—translated into tangible form.
To grasp the position, I first had to reconvert it, instinctively, from my abstract world of notation into one of moving pieces. Gradually, curiosity overcame me—to watch such a real game played between two living opponents.

And then the embarrassing thing happened: I forgot all manners and intruded upon your game.
But that mistaken move by your friend struck me like a stab to the heart—it was pure instinct when I stopped him, an impulsive gesture, like catching a child who leans too far over a railing. Only later did I realize the rudeness, the unpardonable presumption of my interference."

I hastened to assure Dr. B. that we were all grateful for the chance encounter that had led to his acquaintance, and that after all he had confided to me, it would be doubly fascinating to watch him play tomorrow in our little improvised tournament.
Dr. B. made a nervous movement.

“No, please, do not expect too much. It will be nothing more than a test for me… a test to see whether I am capable at all of playing a *normal* game of chess—one on a real board, with real pieces, and a living partner. For I am beginning to doubt more and more whether those hundreds, perhaps thousands, of games I played were truly *real* games at all—or only some kind of dream chess, fever chess, fever play, in which, as in dreams, intermediate steps were skipped. You surely cannot expect me seriously to challenge a master—a world champion, no less! What interests and intrigues me is only the posthumous curiosity to discover whether what I played in that cell was still chess—or already madness. Whether I stood then just before, or already beyond, the fatal edge—nothing more, only that.”

At that moment, the gong at the stern sounded for dinner.
We must have been talking for nearly two hours, though I have summarized his words much more briefly here. I thanked him warmly and took my leave.

But I had not yet reached the end of the deck when he caught up with me, visibly nervous and even a little stammering.
“One more thing! Would you please tell the gentlemen beforehand—so I may not seem discourteous later—that I shall play only *one* game. It is meant to be the final line drawn under an old account—a conclusion, not a new beginning. I do not wish to fall again into that feverish passion for play, the very thought of which now fills me with dread. And besides… the doctor warned me—expressly warned me. Anyone who has once succumbed to a mania remains forever endangered. And with a—though cured—*chess poisoning*, one should best not approach a chessboard again. So please understand—only this one trial game for myself, and nothing more.”

The next afternoon, at precisely three o’clock, we gathered again in the

smoking room.
Our circle had grown by two: a pair of ship's officers, ardent lovers of the royal game, who had taken special leave from duty to witness the match.
Czentovic, unlike the previous day, was punctual.
After the customary drawing of colors, the memorable duel began—this *homo obscurissimus* against the world champion himself.

I regret only that it was played before us, mere amateurs, and that its course, like Beethoven's piano improvisations, is lost to the annals of chess forever.
We tried, in the following days, to reconstruct it from memory—but in vain. We had all been too absorbed in the players themselves rather than in the progress of the game.

For the contrast between their two natures became more and more visible as the game went on.
Czentovic, the pure technician, sat motionless as a block, eyes fixed on the board, his thinking seemingly a physical exertion that engaged his entire body in concentration.
Dr. B., on the other hand, was relaxed and unselfconscious—the true amateur, in the best sense of the word, to whom the game itself, the *diletto*, is joy.
He sat loose-limbed, chatting amiably during the pauses, lighting a cigarette with an easy hand, glancing at the board only when his turn came, as though he had anticipated each of Czentovic's moves in advance.

The standard openings unfolded swiftly. Only around the seventh or eighth move did something like a definite plan begin to emerge.
Czentovic's thinking intervals grew longer; we sensed that the real struggle for initiative had begun.

Yet, to be honest, for us laymen the match was a disappointment.
As the pieces became ever more intricately interwoven into some mysterious pattern, the actual position grew opaque.
We could not discern what either opponent intended, nor who was in advantage.
We saw only that certain pieces advanced like levers to break open the enemy front—but, since each move by such masters was calculated several steps ahead, we could not grasp the underlying strategy.

Gradually a numbing fatigue set in—caused chiefly by Czentovic's interminable deliberations, which visibly began to irritate our friend.
I noticed with concern how he shifted restlessly in his chair, lighting one cigarette after another, reaching for a pencil to jot something down, then ordering mineral water, which he drank glass after glass.
It was obvious that his mind worked far faster than Czentovic's; every time the latter finally moved a piece, after endless brooding, Dr. B. smiled faintly—as one who sees a long-expected event arrive—and instantly replied.

He must have foreseen all possible continuations; and the longer Czentovic delayed, the more our friend's impatience grew, the tighter his lips pressed into a thin, hostile line.
But Czentovic refused to be hurried. He pondered doggedly, silently, pausing longer the emptier the board became.

By the forty-second move—after nearly three hours—we were all weary and almost indifferent.
One of the officers had left; another had opened a book.
Then, suddenly, something unexpected happened.

As soon as Czentovic reached for his knight, Dr. B. hunched forward like a cat before a leap. His whole body trembled.
And the moment Czentovic made the move, Dr. B. thrust his queen forward sharply, exclaimed aloud, "There! Finished!"
Then leaned back, arms folded, his eyes blazing with a strange fire.

Instinctively, we bent over the board to understand the announced triumph. At first glance, no direct threat was visible; clearly his exclamation referred to a longer combination we simpletons could not yet see.

Czentovic alone remained unmoved, as though he had not heard the provocation.
Silence. We could hear the ticking of the little clock on the table.
Three minutes. Seven. Eight. He did not move.
It seemed his broad nostrils dilated with inward strain.

To our friend, this mute waiting was unbearable. Suddenly he jumped up and began pacing the room—first slowly, then faster and faster.

We all watched, puzzled—but none more anxious than I, for I noticed that his strides, though furious, always measured exactly the same narrow span; it was as if he struck against an invisible barrier at each end of the space.
And I shuddered to recognize that this pacing unconsciously reproduced the dimensions of his former cell—the same nervous, caged movement, the same clenched hands, the same stooped shoulders. He must have paced thus a thousand times, the red light of madness burning in his fevered gaze.

Yet his intellect still seemed intact, for from time to time he turned toward the table, as if impatient for Czentovic's move.
Nine minutes… ten…

Then the incredible occurred.
Czentovic slowly lifted his heavy hand—not to move a piece, but to sweep all the pieces from the board.
Only then did we understand: he had resigned.

The world champion—the victor of countless tournaments—had capitulated before an unknown man who had not touched a chessboard for twenty-five years.
Our friend, the anonymous, the nameless one, had defeated the strongest player on earth!

Without realizing it, we all rose to our feet. Only Czentovic remained still.
After a moment, he looked up and said quietly:
“Another game?”

“Of course!” cried Dr. B., with an almost feverish eagerness, and before I could remind him of his promise to stop after one game, he was already seated again, hastily resetting the pieces.
His trembling hands twice dropped a pawn.
Anxious unease overcame me: visible excitement had replaced his calm.

“Don’t,” I whispered. “Not now. Enough for today. It’s too much for you.”

“Too much!” he laughed harshly. “I could have played seventeen games in the time this dawdler takes! Too much? The only danger is that I’ll fall asleep at his pace! Now, come on—start already!”

The tone was sharp, almost aggressive.
Czentovic looked at him coolly, but the stare was like a clenched fist.
A dangerous tension filled the air: no longer two players testing skill, but two enemies bent on destruction.

Czentovic delayed his first move deliberately; clearly he had seen how his slowness unbalanced the other. After four full minutes he made the simplest of openings—the king’s pawn two squares forward.

At once Dr. B. answered—but again Czentovic sank into those unbearable pauses.
It was like waiting for thunder after lightning—long, oppressive silence.

Meanwhile, I saw Dr. B. drink his third glass of water in haste; his forehead gleamed with sweat, the scar on his hand glowed red.
He still mastered himself—until, at the fourth move, he snapped:
“For heaven’s sake, *play!*”

Czentovic looked up coolly.
“As agreed, I have ten minutes per move. I never play faster.”

Dr. B. bit his lip. Beneath the table, his foot tapped restlessly, and my own nerves tightened with foreboding.

At the eighth move, another incident.
Unable to contain himself, he began tapping his fingers on the table.

Czentovic raised his head. “Please—don’t drum. It distracts me.”

“Ha!” laughed Dr. B. “So it seems.”

Czentovic flushed. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” snapped Dr. B. “Only that you appear a little nervous.”

Czentovic made no reply, bent his head again, and after seven more minutes moved.
The deadly tempo dragged on.
Czentovic grew ever more rigid, always using the full time, while Dr. B.’s behavior became stranger—he seemed no longer engaged with the actual game.

His gaze turned vacant; he muttered unintelligibly; sometimes he had to be reminded that it was his turn, as if he were playing a different game entirely.
I feared what I knew was coming.

And indeed, at the nineteenth move the crisis broke.
Barely had Czentovic moved when Dr. B., without truly looking, thrust his bishop three squares forward and cried out so loudly that we all started:
“Check! Check to the king!”

We looked—there was no check.
Czentovic slowly lifted his head; a faint, mocking smile spread across his lips.

“Sorry,” he said, turning politely to us. “Do any of you see a check to my king?”

We looked down—no, a simple pawn blocked the line.
Panic flickered in me.

Had our friend moved the wrong piece? Miscounted a square?

Realizing our silence, he stared at the board, stammering:
“But the king belongs on e1—he’s wrong, all wrong! You’ve set it wrong! Everything’s wrong—this pawn should be on g5, not g4—this is a completely different game—it’s—”

He broke off.
I had gripped his arm—hard enough for him to feel it even in his fevered state.
He turned to me, dazed.
“What—what do you want?”

“Remember,” I said quietly—and ran my finger over the scar on his hand.

He stared at it; his eyes froze on the red line.
Then his whole body trembled.
“My God,” he whispered, “have I… have I done something foolish? Am I—again—?”

“No,” I whispered. “But you must stop. At once. Remember what the doctor said.”

He rose abruptly.
“I beg your pardon for my foolish mistake,” he said with his old courteous tone, bowing slightly to Czentovic. “Of course, nonsense—please, the game is yours.”
Then turning to us:
“Gentlemen, I must apologize to you as well. But I warned you not to expect too much. Forgive the embarrassment—it was the last time I shall ever touch a chessboard.”

He bowed and left as quietly and mysteriously as he had first appeared.
Only I knew why that man would never again play chess—while the others remained uncertain, with the uneasy feeling of having barely escaped something dangerous.

“Damned fool,” muttered McConnor in disappointment.
Czentovic, the last to rise, glanced at the unfinished board.

“A pity,” he said magnanimously. “The attack wasn’t badly conceived. For an amateur, that gentleman was unusually gifted.”