Tales Between the Squares

64 chess stories and legends



JOSE SANDE

Tales Between the Squares

✦

64 chess stories and legends

JOSE SANDE

Tales Between the Squares
© 2026 Jose Sande
josesande.com/chess/en

Free to download and use.

INTRODUCTION

✦

Chess is more than a thousand years old and, in all that time, it has left stories along the way: a sage who asks for wheat, a master who turns the board around, a machine with a man inside, a king who will not leave his game even when cannon fire tears through his tent, a game played in space.

This book gathers sixty-four of those stories, as many as there are squares on the board, in order of time: from the legends of the origins to today's champions. Some are ancient legends; others are anecdotes about great players; and some are new tales that play with traditional motifs. Each one opens with a full-page illustration showing its key moment, together with a sentence. Then comes the story, with diagrams of the games and problems where there are any, and some curious facts.

At the end of each story there is a question to think about, alone or with others. You do not need to play well to enjoy these pages. All you need is to sit down in front of the board and want to look a little longer.

CONTENTS

✦

I. LEGENDS OF THE ORIGINS

1 The Price of a Chessboard 8
2 The Queen Who Beat Ravana 11
3 A Gift for Caissa 14
4 The Sage Who Answered with Dice 17

II. CALIPHS, KINGS AND KNIGHTS

5 Sacrifice Your Rooks 21
6 As-Suli's Diamond 24
7 The King's Cage 27
8 The City Saved by a Game 30
9 The Village That Learned to Play 33
10 The Board That Played by Itself 36
11 The Book That Held a Game 39
12 The Princess Who Chose to Lose 42
13 The Wise King's Book 45
14 Until the Last Move 48
15 Ali's Four Turns 51

III. RENAISSANCE AND GOLDEN AGE

16 The Lady of Valencia 55
17 The Sun in Their Eyes 58
18 The Lady Who Feared a Cross 61

IV. CAFÉS, AUTOMATA AND MASTERS

19 The King Who Would Not Leave the Game 65
20 The Trap at the Café de la Régence 68
21 The Man Inside the Machine 71
22 In America We Do Take Kings 74
23 Three Games Without Looking 77
24 The Emperor and the Machine 80
25 Two Knights After Napoleon 83
26 Eight Queens at Peace 86
27 The Immortal Game 89
28 Before the Final Chord 92
29 The Pawn Nobody Noticed 95
30 Alice, White Pawn 98
31 The Two Bishops of Amsterdam 101
32 The Rook Nobody Expected 104
33 The Rook Nobody Could Take 107
34 Pillsbury's Memory 110

V. THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

35 Any Piece 114
36 The Prince and the Master 117
37 The Shower of Gold 120
38 The Machine That Knew How to Mate 123
39 The Composer Who Beat Capablanca 126
40 The King Who Chased Two Hares 129
41 The Orangutan Who Gave Opening Advice 132
42 The Artist Who Stopped Painting 135
43 Vera's Club 138
44 The Servant Who Beat the Masters 141
45 The Boy Who Drew with the Champion 144
46 The Pawn Nobody Dared to Take 147
47 More Games Than Stars 150
48 The Champion Who Wanted to Sing 153
49 The Champion's Silence 156
50 Playing with His Hands 159
51 HAL's Game 162
52 The Writer Who Hid Labyrinths 165
53 Chess in Orbit 168
54 The Mate That Wasn't 171
55 The Match of the Century 174
56 The Champion Who Said No 177
57 The First Woman Grandmaster 180
58 The Suspicious Yoghurt 183
59 The Knight That Jumped Blindfold on TV 186

VI. FROM DEEP BLUE TO TODAY

60 The Champion and the Machine 190
61 Kasparov Against the World 193
62 A Girl Against the Champion 196
63 The Champion Who Arrived in a Tracksuit 199
64 The Game That Lasted a Hundred Years 202

HOW TO READ THE MOVES

✦

Each square is named by a letter, from *a* to *h*, and a number, from 1 to 8. The pieces are shown with these figures:

♔ king · ♕ queen · ♖ rook · ♗ bishop · ♘ knight

Pawns have no figure: *e4* means that a pawn moves to e4. An **x** shows a capture; +, check; and #, checkmate. **O-O** is kingside castling and **O-O-O**, queenside castling. =♕ means that a pawn promotes to a queen.

Three dots show a move by Black: *23...♕g3*. The signs **!** and **!!** mark a good or brilliant move, and **?**, a mistake.

In the diagrams, White plays up the board. The square h1 is always white.

PART I

✦

Legends of the Origins



✦ *There was not enough wheat in all the land to pay that reward.* ✦

STORY I

The Price of a Chessboard

The legend of Sissa

✦

The scribe had prepared a list of gifts. Land by the river, a house with a courtyard, a hundred horses. Everything had been arranged so that the king could appear generous without having to think too hard. Then Sissa asked for wheat.

"How much wheat?" asked the king.

"One grain for the first square of the board. Two for the second. Four for the third. After that, always double."

The king looked at the hands of the man who had just taught him the game. They wore no rings. It seemed to him that his wishes must be just as modest.

"I offer you a reward and you ask me for the leftovers of a kitchen."

Sissa did not argue. Sometimes, if you want someone to understand a quantity, it is best to let them walk up to it.

A servant brought a bowl. The scribe placed one grain, then two, then four. For the first few squares he could still count on his fingers. By the end of the first row, the king was already busy with another conversation.

I invite you to stay beside the scribe. He is the only one who is beginning to suspect what is happening. On the eighth square there are one hundred and twenty-eight grains; on the next he must put two hundred and fifty-six. Nothing starts again when the row changes. The condition keeps working.

They sent for another bowl. Then a sack.

"Haven't you finished yet?" asked the king.

The scribe went over his sums. He did not like correcting himself in front of so many people, but he liked handing over a wrong figure even less.

"Majesty, we need to consult the granaries."

The keeper of the granaries arrived full of confidence. He knew every storehouse, every door and every load. He bent over the parchment. His finger ran along the numbers until it stopped.

"Is this amount for the whole board?"

"For one square," replied the scribe.

There was a silence. The king stopped looking at his guests.

The figures kept growing even though nobody moved a piece. Each new square asked for as much as all the previous ones together, plus one grain. The carts the keeper imagined turned into roads full of carts; the granaries, into rows of buildings that no longer fitted in his memory.

Sissa stayed on the other side of the table.

"You could have warned me," said the king.

"I explained the condition to you."

We do not need to imagine a punishment or a banquet to end this tale. It is enough for me to leave the king in front of the first grain, trying to understand how something so small had managed to pledge so much wealth.

He had listened to the whole request. What he had not done was follow it all the way to the end.

Counting the board

If we count the first square as 1, the amount on square n is 2^{n-1}: we multiply 2 by itself n minus one times. The total up to that square is $2^n - 1$: we work out the power of 2 with exponent n and then subtract 1. These are two different quantities: what lies on one square and what we have gathered so far.

On square 64 there are 9,223,372,036,854,775,808 grains. To pay for the whole board you need 18,446,744,073,709,551,615. Each new square holds one grain more than the sum of all the previous ones.

The next board numbers the squares of the request: we start on a1, go on to h1 and continue with a2. This numbering is just an aid for the sum; the chess coordinates remain in the margins.

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	
8	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	8
7	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	7
6	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	6
5	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	5
4	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	4
3	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	3
2	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	2
1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1
	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	

The 64 squares of the request

To check it without enormous numbers, add up the first four squares: 1 + 2 + 4 + 8 = 15. The fifth asks for 16. By the eighth, the sum is 255 and the ninth asks for 256.

Did you know...?

- One of the first to write down the legend of the wheat was the historian Ibn Khallikan, in the 13th century. Since then it has been told in Persia, in India and all over Europe, with different kings and sages.
- Dante also knew the chessboard sum. In Canto XXVIII of the *Paradiso* he says the angels were more numerous than what you get by doubling along the squares of the chessboard.
- A grain of wheat weighs about 0.05 grams. The whole board would amount to more than 900,000 million tonnes: more than a thousand years of today's world wheat harvest.
- The first half of the board, squares 1 to 32, adds up to just over 4,000 million grains: about 215 tonnes, enough to fill around ten lorries. The impossible begins in the second half.
- Square 64 alone holds one grain more than the other 63 squares put together: just over half of all the wheat on the board.
- Answer to "Think about it": day 11. That day you would have 1,024 grains, the first amount above a thousand.

More to discover

- The exact total for the board is 18,446,744,073,709,551,615 grains. Curiously, it is also the largest unsigned whole number that fits in 64 bits of computer memory: programmers run into Sissa's sum without knowing it.
- Mathematicians call what happens on the board "exponential growth": each step multiplies the one before. The same thing happens with an epidemic, or with a rumour that each person passes on to two others.

Think about it

If you started with one grain and doubled it every day, on which day would you pass a thousand?



✦ *That night, Ravana lost a war in which nobody died.* ✦

STORY 2

The Queen Who Beat Ravana

A legend from India

✦

On the island of Lanka, south of India, there lived a king called Ravana. The legends say he had ten heads, that he was wise and powerful, and that he played music like no one else. But he had one flaw: he thought only of war. When he was not fighting, he walked through the palace among spears and shields, counting soldiers and planning battles that did not yet exist.

His wife, Queen Mandodari, was tired of so much war. One night she spread a cloth on the carpet, drew eight rows of eight squares on it and set out some small carved figures: a king and his counsellor, two elephants, two horses, two chariots and a row of foot soldiers. Opposite them she placed another army just the same.

"If you like war so much," she told him, "fight it here."

Ravana burst out laughing. He, who had defeated gods and demons, was going to lose to a few wooden figures?

"I will beat you before the lamp goes out," he replied, and sat down.

Mandodari explained the rules. The chariots race in straight lines from one side of the field to the other. The horses jump over anyone in their way. The elephants advance in diagonal leaps. The soldiers can only walk forward. And the king, the most important of all, barely moves: if he is trapped, the battle is over.

Ravana attacked as he always did: with everything and without waiting. He launched his chariots, pushed his soldiers forward and chased his wife's pieces all over the cloth. Mandodari, on the other hand, moved slowly. She protected her elephants, brought her horses closer and closed the roads one by one. Little by little, Ravana's pieces were left alone, far from their king.

The lamp went out. They lit another. And then another.

When Ravana's king found himself surrounded, with no square left to flee to, the great warrior sat staring at the board for a long time.

"Where did you learn to command an army?" he asked at last.

"Right here," answered Mandodari. "Tonight."

Ravana asked for a rematch. And another. At dawn the two of them were still bent over the cloth, arguing about moves and laughing at their mistakes. For the first time in a long while, nobody in the palace of Lanka spoke of war.

In India they say that this is how chess was born: so that kings could fight without anyone dying.

A LEGEND, NOT A SACRED BOOK

This story does not appear in the Ramayana, the great poem of India in which Ravana is the enemy of the hero Rama. It is a tradition passed on by word of mouth, and it has several versions. World champion Viswanathan Anand remembered the one his grandmother told him: Ravana taught the game to his wife to entertain her, and she ended up beating him.

What history does know is that by around the sixth century chaturanga, the ancestor of chess, was already being played in India.

Its name means “four parts”: the four divisions of the Indian army, chariots, horses, elephants and infantry. From them come our rooks, knights, bishops and pawns.

Did you know...?

- In chaturanga, next to the king stood a counsellor who could only move one square diagonally. Over the centuries it became the queen, the most powerful piece on the board.
- The Spanish name for the bishop, alfil, comes from the elephant: in Persian and Arabic it was called fil, “elephant”. With the Arabic article, al-fil, it reached Spanish as alfil.
- Viswanathan Anand, born in 1969, was India’s first grandmaster and five times world champion.
- Lanka, Ravana’s island, is often identified with present-day Sri Lanka.
- Many legends from different countries say that chess was invented to replace a war or to console a king.

More to discover

- One of the oldest mentions of chaturanga appears in the *Harshacharita*, a work written by the poet Bana around the year 625. Many historians believe the game was born in northern India one or two centuries earlier.
- The Indian board of eight by eight squares was called *ashtapada*. It was older than chess and was also used for race games played with dice.
- Around the year 1030, the Persian scholar al-Biruni described in India a chess for four players in which dice were thrown to decide which piece moved. Some thought it was the original game, but today it is believed to be a later variant.
- The *Ramayana*, which tells the story of Ravana, is attributed to the poet Valmiki. In India it is still performed every year in theatres and at popular festivals.
- India is today a chess superpower. In 2022 it hosted the Olympiad in Chennai, and in 2024 in Budapest it won both gold medals, open and women’s.
- In December 2024, India’s Gukesh Dommaraju became world champion at the age of 18. He is the youngest champion in history.
- In the *Ramayana*, Ravana is the demon king of Lanka who kidnaps Sita, the wife of the hero Rama. Mandodari, his wife, appears as a wise woman who tries to make him see reason.
- The chariot of chaturanga, *ratha*, became the Persian *rukh* and later our rook. That is why the rook moves in straight lines, like a war chariot on the battlefield.
- The Indian director Satyajit Ray made a film in 1977 called *The Chess Players*: two noblemen of Lucknow keep on playing while the British take over their kingdom.
- Viswanathan Anand was nicknamed “the Tiger of Madras”, after the city where he grew up, which today is called Chennai.
- The game passed from India to Persia in the sixth century. There it changed its name, but kept the pieces and the board almost unchanged.
- The legend also presents Ravana as a great musician: he is credited with inventing the *ravanahatha*, an ancient stringed instrument played with a bow.
- Between India and Sri Lanka there is a chain of sandbanks called “Rama’s Bridge”. According to the *Ramayana*, it was built by Rama’s army to reach Lanka.

Think about it

Why do you think so many legends say that chess was invented to avoid a war?



✦ *Mars brought him victories; she was looking at a flower that had just opened.* ✦

STORY 3

A Gift for Caissa

A poetic fable of Caissa

✦

Mars came into the garden telling of a victory. He had prepared the story all the way there: the moment of the charge, the gleam of the weapons, the retreat of the enemy.

Caissa listened to the end.

"It must have been hard," she said.

Then she crouched beside a flower that had just opened.

Mars waited for a question. None came.

Another day he tried a bigger exploit. Then he brought a precious object. The young woman thanked him for his visits, but she always seemed interested in something he had not foreseen: the water in the pond, an interrupted conversation, the name of a tree.

I would not say Caissa despised his gifts. I would say Mars did not yet know what he wanted to share with her, apart from his own importance.

In the poetic tradition of chess, Caissa receives a game that awakens her interest. In our version, Mars arrives one afternoon with a box that makes no noise.

"This time I am not going to tell you about a battle."

He opens it.

Inside are two small armies and a board.

Caissa picks up a knight.

"Why is it this shape?"

Mars begins to explain. At first he talks as if he were giving orders to his soldiers. She interrupts him with a question. Then with another.

"Wait," he says. "If you ask so quickly, I never finish."

"If I don't ask, I don't learn."

Mars falls silent. He was not used to a conversation going down a path he had not chosen.

Caissa sets out the pieces as he tells her. She discovers that the king needs help, that the queen can go a long way and that the smallest pawn holds a chance of change.

"And can I do something you haven't foreseen?"

"I hope so."

The answer surprises even him.

They begin to play.

Mars sees a combination and is about to move for both of them. He takes his hand back. Caissa needs to decide, to make mistakes, to try something else. The gift would lose its meaning if he used it to show that he always knows more.

She takes a long time over one move. He looks at the garden. For the first time he does not feel obliged to fill the silence with an exploit.

When Caissa moves, she has found a threat.

Mars leans towards the board.

"I hadn't seen that."

The young woman smiles.

There is no need to decide who wins. This afternoon has already changed enough. He has learned to hear a question without taking it as an interruption. She has accepted an invitation because she feels like it, not because someone else's victory obliges her to admire anyone.

As they put the pieces away, the knight is the last to go back into the box.

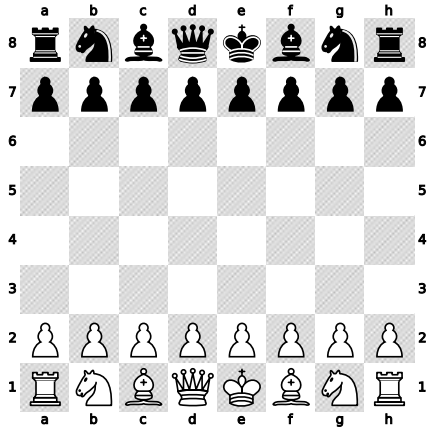
Caissa holds on to it for a moment.

"We'll carry on tomorrow."

Mars nods. This time he has something to look forward to that does not require conquering anything.

Did you know...?

- The poem *Caïssa* was written by the Englishman William Jones in 1763, when he was 17. He was inspired by a Latin poem by Marco Girolamo Vida, *Scacchia ludus*, of 1527.
- Jones later became a famous scholar. In India he discovered that Sanskrit, Greek and Latin came from a common language.
- Since then, Caissa has been the "goddess" of chess. Many clubs bear her name, and players sometimes say that Caissa has punished them after a mistake.
- The name reached computers too: Kaissa, a Soviet program, won the first world computer chess championship in 1974.
- Caissa sets up the pieces as we do today: each player has a white square in the right-hand corner, and the queen starts on a square of her own colour.
- In Jones's poem, Mars asks for help from Euphron, god of sport, who invents chess so that Mars can win Caissa's heart.
- In Vida's poem, chess appears in a game between Apollo and Mercury during the wedding of Ocean and Earth.
- The word "chess" comes, through Old French, from the Persian *shah*, "king". The game itself goes back to the Sanskrit *chaturanga*, "four limbs": infantry, cavalry, elephants and chariots.



Starting position: a white square in the right-hand corner and the queen on her colour

More to discover

- Almost all the European names of the game come from the Persian word *shah*, "king", through Latin: *chess* in English, *échecs* in French, *Schach* in German and *scacchi* in Italian.
- Although her name sounds like ancient Greece, Caissa appears in no Greek myth: she is a goddess invented by poets in the 18th century.

Think about it

What would you give someone to invite them to spend time with you?



✦ *To a game of wit, the sage replied with a game of chance.* ✦

STORY 4

The Sage Who Answered with Dice

A Persian legend of the sixth century

✦

One day an ambassador from India arrived at the court of Khosrow, the king of Persia. He came with elephants loaded with gifts: gold, fabrics, precious stones. But the most important gift fitted inside a wooden chest. The ambassador opened it before the throne. Inside there was a board of sixty-four squares and thirty-two ivory figures.

"My king sends you this game," he said. "If your wise men discover how it is played, India will pay you tribute. If they do not, it is you who will pay tribute to us."

The wise men of the court gathered round the chest. They touched the pieces, set them out in a thousand ways and argued until nightfall. No one understood anything. Why were there eight small identical figures? What did the elephants do? What use was a king who could barely move?

Then Bozorgmehr spoke, the youngest and wisest vizier in the kingdom.

"Give me three days."

For three days and three nights, Bozorgmehr did not leave his room. He moved the pieces by candlelight, looked at them, moved them again. He thought as a general would think. The king must stand in the centre, protected. Beside him, his counsellor, who does not stray far. The elephants, the horses and the chariots, on the flanks. In front, the foot soldiers, who only advance.

On the fourth day he appeared before the throne.

"I know how to play," he said. "Let the ambassador sit down with me."

They played in front of the whole court, and Bozorgmehr won. The ambassador could not believe it: this man had discovered in three days what had taken centuries in India.

But Bozorgmehr had not finished. He asked for another board to be brought, one that he himself had invented during those sleepless nights. It had pointed spaces, fifteen pieces for each player and two small dice.

"Now," he told the ambassador, "let your wise men discover how this one is played."

The wise men of India studied the new game for a long time. They could not work it out. And it was India that had to pay tribute to Persia.

And so, says the legend, chess came to Persia. And the grandfather of backgammon made the journey the other way.

What the legend tells

The story appears in a short Persian text, the Explanation of Chess, and centuries later in the Book of Kings by the poet Ferdowsi, written around the year 1010. Historians consider it a legend, but it holds something true: chess reached Persia from India in the sixth century, in the time of King Khosrow I.

In Persia the game was called chatrang and later, with the Arabs, shatranj. Its pieces were not like today's. The counsellor moved only one square diagonally, and the elephant jumped exactly two squares diagonally, even if another piece stood in between. The game Bozorgmehr invented was called nard.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- The word "check" comes from the Persian shah, "king". And "checkmate" comes from shah mat, which is usually translated as "the king is helpless".
- Khosrow I, called Anushirvan, "of the immortal soul", reigned in Persia between 531 and 579.
- Backgammon is one of the oldest board games still played all over the world.
- There are no dice in chess: everything depends on what the players decide. That is why it is called a game without chance.
- With an elephant that only jumped two squares, there were squares an elephant could never reach in the whole game.

More to discover

- In the Persian text, the sage is called Wuzurgmihr. He explains that the backgammon board represents the earth, that the thirty pieces are the days and nights of the month, and that the dice are like the turning of the stars, which decide the fate of men.
- In Persian chess was called *chatrang*. When the Arabs conquered Persia in the seventh century, they adopted the game and called it *shatranj*.
- Some of the oldest known chess pieces were found at Afrasiab, next to Samarkand, in present-day Uzbekistan. They are very small ivory figures, an elephant, a horse, a king, about 1,300 years old.
- In backgammon each player has fifteen pieces and two dice. The winner is the first to bear all their pieces off the board. It is one of the few games of that time that is played almost the same way today.

Think about it

Chess has no dice. What changes in a game when luck comes into it?

PART II

✦

Caliphs, Kings and Knights



✦ *“Sacrifice your two rooks, and do not sacrifice me.”* ✦

STORY 5

Sacrifice Your Rooks

A legend of shatranj

✦

Dilaram knew the wager was serious before she knew its terms. She saw it in the way the nobleman avoided looking at her. The others spoke of gains and losses as if they were counting sacks. She heard her own name.

They had wagered her freedom.

I want us to stop there. No game gives one person the right to dispose of another. If we follow this ancient legend, it will be without forgetting what the people at the table are willing to overlook.

The nobleman had a difficult position. He wiped his forehead, moved his lips and checked the same defence again and again. His opponent waited with his hands on his knees. His two rooks and his knight surrounded the nobleman's king: at the first quiet move, it would be mate.

"You can still resign," he told him.

Dilaram came closer. Not to plead, but to look.

She knew how the pieces moved. In that old chess, the bishop did not sweep along a whole diagonal as ours does: it made a short jump. You had to think with those rules. She knew it and began to follow a route the two men had dismissed.

One rook could come in with check. They would take it.

The other could do the same. It too would disappear.

After that, there was a path for the small pieces: the old bishop, a pawn and the knight.

Dilaram went back to the beginning. She worked out the replies. She did not want a beautiful idea that would collapse at the first defence.

The nobleman saw her when he raised his eyes.

"Do you have something to say?"

"Yes. Give up the rooks."

He looked at the two pieces. They were what was left of his pride.

"Both of them."

For the first time that afternoon, he stopped talking and listened to the end.

The first rook advanced. His opponent captured.

Then the bishop leapt over the knight, as the old bishops did, and uncovered the check from the other rook.

The second rook took its place in the combination. There was another capture and a look of relief on the opponent's face. He had received almost everything he could wish for.

Almost.

Dilaram did not take her eyes off the board. The nobleman followed the route she had found. Squares that had been closed became open. The final threat came with pieces that had seemed too weak a few moments before.

The opponent checked the mate in silence.

Someone began to congratulate the nobleman.

Dilaram stood up.

That moment interests me more than the applause. She could stay and listen while others turned her idea into a man's victory. Or she could remind them all why she had had to find it.

"You have won a game," she said. "You have not acquired the right to wager my life again."

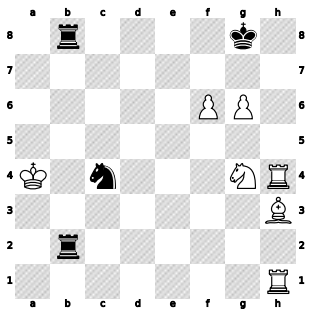
The nobleman lowered his eyes.

I do not know what answer to give him in this version of the tale. Sometimes the best way to leave a character facing what he has done is to let him be lost for words.

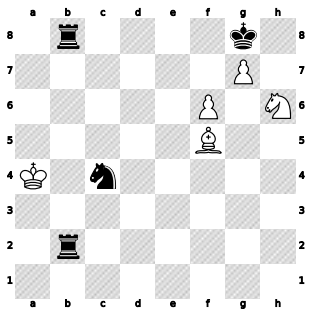
Dilaram left before they put the pieces away. Inside, two rooks remained off the board. The truly important decision was already being made outside the room.

Dilaram's position

This is the position preserved in the Arabic manuscripts. The nobleman plays White. His king, on a4, is lost if he lets his opponent breathe: Black threatens mate with the rooks. So every white move must be a check.



Dilaram's mansuba. White to play



After 5.♘h6: mate with the small pieces

In the diagram, the bishop on h3 is the *fil* of shatranj: it jumps exactly two squares diagonally, over whatever stands in between. In a whole game, each fil could only ever reach eight squares of the board.

Dilaram's solution: 1.♖h8+ ♔xh8, the first rook given up. 2.♗f5+, the bishop jumps over the knight and uncovers the check from the rook on h1; ♔g8. 3.♖h8+ ♔xh8, the second rook given up. 4.g7+ ♔g8 5.♘h6, mate.

If on the second move Black blocks with 2...♖h2, that rook is taken, 3.♖xh2+ ♔g8, and the combination goes on just the same: 4.♖h8+ ♔xh8 5.g7+ ♔g8 6.♘h6, mate.

A sacrifice means giving up material in exchange for another advantage. Dilaram's decision away from the board belongs to this book's literary adaptation.

Did you know...?

- In shatranj, the Arab and Persian ancestor of chess, there was no queen. In her place stood the ferz (from the Persian *farzin*, "counsellor"), which moved only one square diagonally.
- The powerful queen we know appeared at the end of the 15th century. One of the first texts to use her is *Scachs d'amor*, a poem written in Valencia around 1475.
- The Arabs called these chess problems *mansuba*. They were copied in manuscripts, and some, like Dilaram's, became famous for the story that came with them.
- In shatranj you could also win by leaving your opponent with a bare king, with no other piece. And in many periods, stalemating the enemy king did not give a draw, but victory.
- Pawns always advanced one square at a time, even on their first move, and on reaching the end they became a ferz.

THINK ABOUT IT

Who finds the solution in this story?



✦ *His problem took more than a thousand years to solve, as diamonds take to form.* ✦

STORY 6

As-Suli's Diamond

Abu Bakr as-Suli, Baghdad, around the year 905

✦

In Baghdad, one of the largest cities in the world at that time, Caliph al-Muktafi had a shatranj champion: the veteran al-Mawardi. No one could beat him. The courtiers bet on him the way you would bet that the sun will rise tomorrow.

One day a young poet called Abu Bakr as-Suli came to the palace. He knew about books, about history and about verse. And he said he also knew about shatranj.

The caliph, curious, sat them face to face. At first everyone watched al-Mawardi, as always. But As-Suli played in a different way: calm, patient, in no hurry to attack. He brought his pieces to the good squares and waited. Little by little, the champion began to make mistakes. And he lost.

The courtiers fell silent. The caliph looked at his old champion and then at the young poet.

"Today the rose water has changed jugs," he said, and everyone understood that there was a new champion.

From that day on, in Baghdad people said "he plays like As-Suli" to describe someone who played wonderfully. As-Suli became a teacher of princes, played games without looking at the board and wrote a book about the game, with openings, advice and problems.

When he was old, by the light of a lamp, he set just four pieces on his board: the two kings and two ferzes, the piece that would later become the queen, though back then it was very weak and only took one step diagonally. He wrote down the position and the first move. White to play and win.

It looked easy. Four pieces, nothing more. But those who tried it got lost in a maze of moves.

Centuries went by. Copyists copied the manuscript. Libraries kept it. Players from many countries looked at it and put it aside. Some published solutions, but they had mistakes.

In 1986, more than a thousand years later, a Russian grandmaster, Yuri Averbakh, at last published the correct solution in the bulletin of the Dubai Olympiad. Years later, a computer confirmed it.

That four-piece problem earned a name: As-Suli's Diamond. Because diamonds also take a very long time to form.

Four pieces and a thousand years

Abu Bakr as-Suli (around 870 – around 946) was a poet, historian, book collector and the best shatranj player of his time. Between 902 and 908 he defeated the champion al-

Mawardi in front of Caliph al-Muktafi. The line about the rose water belongs to this story, not to the chronicles.

His most famous ending has only two kings and two ferzes. The ferz is not our queen: it moves only one square diagonally. As-Suli left the first move written down, 1.♔b4, but no one published a correct solution until 1986, when the Russian grandmaster Yuri Averbakh did so. A computer program confirmed it later.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- In shatranj you also won by leaving your opponent with a bare king, without any other piece.
- There was no castling, and pawns always advanced just one square, even on their first move.
- A pawn that reached the end of the board could only become a ferz.
- Because the pieces were weak, shatranj games were slow: a lot of manoeuvring was needed to give mate.
- As-Suli wrote a Book of Chess with openings, problems and advice. Many players copied it for centuries.
- It is one of the problems that waited longest for its solution: more than a thousand years.

More to discover

- As-Suli did not only play chess: he was also a poet, a historian and a teacher of princes. One of his pupils became caliph under the name of ar-Radi.
- Arab authors sorted players into classes, much as titles are used today. Those of the first class were called *aliyat*, "the high ones". As-Suli was the most famous of them all.
- Before him, another great player, al-Adli, had written a book on shatranj. As-Suli knew it well and corrected some of its analysis.
- Baghdad was founded by Caliph al-Mansur in the year 762. In as-Suli's time it was one of the largest cities in the world, with libraries, markets and chess players in the squares.
- According to a much-repeated legend, Caliph Harun al-Rashid gave a chess set to Charlemagne. The pieces kept in Paris under the name of "Charlemagne's chessmen" actually date from around the year 1100.
- As-Suli wrote about *tabiyas*, the starting set-ups players prepared at home. It is what we call opening theory today.
- The shatranj pieces were called *shah* (king), *firz* (counsellor), *fil* (elephant), *faras* (horse), *rukh* (rook) and *baidaq* (pawn).
- A famous saying is attributed to Caliph al-Ma'mun: he found it strange that he could rule an empire from India to al-Andalus and yet be unable to rule thirty-two pieces on a board.
- At the end of his life as-Suli fell out of favour at court and died in hiding in Basra, around the year 946.
- Arabic manuscripts with hundreds of *mansubat* have survived. Some reached Christian Europe and appear in the *Book of Games* of Alfonso X, from story 13.
- From the Arabic word *shatranj* come the Spanish *ajedrez* and the Portuguese *xadrez*.

Think about it

How can a position with only four pieces be so difficult?



✦ *Every gift he accepted was one more bar in his cage.* ✦

STORY 7

The King's Cage

A composition by Jaenisch

✦

The black king counted his conquests by the size of the pile growing beside the board. A white piece disappeared and he felt safer. Another fell, and his army seemed richer.

"Keep advancing," he ordered.

His pawns obeyed. To capture, they had to change files, moving closer to one another. The king hardly noticed that detail. His eyes were fixed on the gifts he was being offered.

Let us imagine we can step onto that board. We would find a very pleased monarch and soldiers carrying so many victories that they can no longer step aside easily.

At first, the siege does not look like a siege. One pawn guards an exit. Another occupies a nearby square. They all belong to the same army: what danger can there be in having your own people so close?

In the composition that inspired this tale, the white pieces keep moving to squares where they will be captured. Each sacrifice forces a black pawn onto a new square. Winning material turns into building work.

The king is slow to understand what is being built.

"Remove that rook," he orders.

A pawn takes it.

"And that bishop."

Another pawn changes file.

The whiteness of the enemy army slowly fades. And yet the black king finds less and less room around him.

He tries to take a step. The square is occupied.

He turns the other way. Occupied too.

In front of him are his soldiers. Behind him, his soldiers. None of them can make way at the very moment he needs it.

I would say this is the most uncomfortable part of the tale: discovering that the obstacle did not come from outside. The king approved every small decision that left him there.

In the end, a white knight finds the decisive jump.

It does not need to knock down a wall. It attacks the king from a square the pawns cannot reach in time. The cage was already built.

The monarch tries to give an order and realises that an order does not create an empty square. Nor can he capture one of his own soldiers to escape. The rules do not step aside just because the situation is unpleasant for him.

The composition is called Tamerlane's cage and recalls the tradition of Bayezid's captivity. Here we have

turned it into the adventure of a wooden king who confuses winning pieces with improving his position.

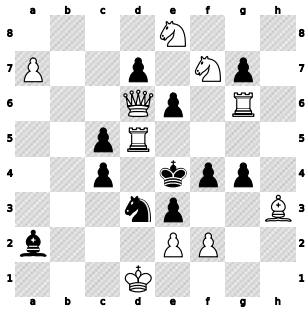
When I look at the board again, the pile of trophies interests me less than at the start. I prefer to watch the spaces the king kept losing.

The captures were not the end of the plan. They were the bars.

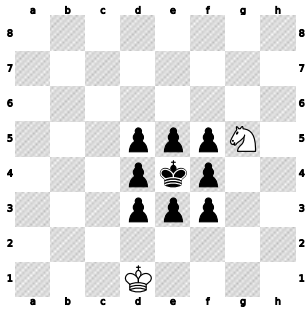
The captures that build the cage

This version of Jaenisch's composition stages the imprisonment in ten moves. One detail must be pointed out: White could already mate at once with ♘g5. The point of the long sequence is to build the figure of eight pawns surrounding their own king, not to show that ten is the shortest route.

The thematic line is 1.f3+ gxf3 2.exd3+ cxd3 3.♗f5+ exf5 4.♖d4+ cxd4 5.a8=♗+ ♗d5 6.♖e6+ dxe6 7.♗xd5+ exd5 8.♘f6+ gxf6 9.♕e5+ fxe5 10.♘g5#. The promotion on move five is part of the staging.



Starting position of the version reproduced



After 10.♘g5#: eight pawns form the cage

The black king stands on e4. His own pawns fill d3, e3, f3, d4, f4, d5, e5 and f5. Being surrounded is not enough for mate: the check from the knight on g5, which cannot be captured either, is needed.

Did you know...?

- Carl Jaenisch (1813-1872) was an analyst born in Finland who worked in Saint Petersburg. His name lives on in the openings: the Jaenisch Gambit of the Ruy Lopez begins 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♞c6 3.♗b5 f5.
- The name of the composition recalls Bayezid I, the Ottoman sultan defeated by Tamerlane at Ankara in 1402. Tradition says the victor carried him off as a prisoner in an iron cage.
- Composers call this kind of idea a "construction theme": what matters is not the speed of the mate, but the figure the pieces draw at the end.
- When a knight mates a king whose own pieces block all its exits, it is called a "smothered mate". The end of the cage is an extreme version of that idea: eight black pawns shut in their king.
- In 1862 and 1863 he published a three-volume treatise on the mathematics of chess, with a long study of the knight's tour.
- Tamerlane is credited with a giant variant, "Tamerlane chess", played on a board of ten by eleven squares with pieces such as the giraffe and the camel.

More to discover

- It is said that Tamerlane was playing chess when the birth of a son was announced to him, just as he was moving his rook, which in Persian was called *rukh*. That is why he named the boy Shah Rukh.

Think about it

Before accepting a gift, what would you look at?



✦ *A whole city was saved thanks to a game of chess.* ✦

STORY 8

The City Saved by a Game

A legend of Seville

✦

From the walls of Seville the army's tents could be seen. Ibn Ammar looked at them before setting out. He did not have enough soldiers to stop them. He carried a chess set he had ordered with extraordinary care.

The box was opened in the camp and several men stopped talking. The dark and light woods, the inlays and the fineness of the pieces made hands want to reach out.

Ibn Ammar let them look. The news soon found its way to Alfonso VI.

The king was fond of the game. He asked to examine that marvel and the envoy agreed to bring it before him.

I imagine the moment when Alfonso picks up a piece and turns it between his fingers. The game has not yet begun; and yet Ibn Ammar has already achieved what he was after: the king wants something he is prepared to offer him.

"You could keep the set," he says.

Alfonso looks up.

"In exchange for what?"

The deal is to play. If the king wins, the chess set will be his. If Ibn Ammar wins, he may make one request that Alfonso must grant.

The condition troubles the monarch. He likes to know the price of what he wants.

"First I would have to know what you are going to ask me."

Ibn Ammar does not change the deal. He orders the board to be packed away.

Then the courtiers step in. They speak of the beauty of the pieces and of the generosity to be expected of a king. In the versions of the legend, some of them have been won over by the envoy beforehand.

In the end Alfonso accepts.

They play before witnesses.

For a while, the richness of the set stops being the most interesting thing on the table. Both men have a small king to defend. Threats do not ask who rules outside the board.

Ibn Ammar finds the path to victory.

Alfonso checks the position and draws back his hand. He can no longer win the set he wanted. The other half of the wager still remains.

"Speak."

The envoy asks for the army to leave those lands and let Seville go on in peace.

The king turns to those who encouraged him to accept. Now no one can find a small condition hidden in those words.

I would leave a silence before the reply. Keeping a promise is easy while we still believe it will cost us

nothing.

Tradition says that Alfonso finally withdraws, after agreeing on the tributes and gifts that come with the negotiation.

Ibn Ammar returns with the board. From the walls they try to read the result in his stride.

As the gate opens, someone asks him whether the children will be able to go out into the street.

He puts the chess set away before answering.

"They will."

The object the king wanted to own has served to keep something that would never have fitted in its box.

What Ibn Ammar was wagering

In this legend, Ibn Ammar offers a luxury chess set if Alfonso VI wins. If the envoy wins, the monarch must grant whatever request he makes. Ibn Ammar asks for the army to withdraw. This is not the wager of the doubling grains: that belongs to the tale of Sissa.

Tradition adds a negotiation of tributes and gifts to secure the withdrawal. No score survives that would allow us to reconstruct the game as if it were a tournament game.

Did you know...?

- Ibn Ammar (1031-1086) was a poet, a childhood friend and vizier of the poet-king al-Mu'tamid of Seville. The chronicles present him as an almost unbeatable chess player.
- The story of the game with Alfonso VI is told, among others, by the chronicler al-Marrakushi in the 13th century.
- Ibn Ammar's life ended badly. Years later he turned against al-Mu'tamid, and the king killed him with his own hands in 1086.
- Two centuries later, Alfonso X the Wise, a descendant of Alfonso VI, had the *Book of Games* made in 1283. Its miniatures show Christians, Muslims and Jews playing chess together.
- Many chess words reached Spanish from al-Andalus. The Spanish word for bishop, *alfil*, comes from the Arabic *al-fil*, "the elephant", and "rook" comes from *rukh*, the Persian and Arabic name of that piece.
- Chess entered Europe through the Iberian Peninsula and Sicily, around the 10th century.
- The word "check" comes from the Persian *shah*, meaning "king". When we give check, we are really warning: "King!"
- Al-Mu'tamid did not end well either. In 1091 the Almoravids took Seville and exiled him to Aghmat, in Morocco, where he died a few years later.

More to discover

- Alfonso VI conquered Toledo in 1085, a year before Ibn Ammar's death. It was the first great city of al-Andalus to pass into Christian hands.
- This Ibn Ammar should not be confused with the Abenámar of the famous Spanish ballad, who speaks with King John II before Granada in the 15th century.
- Seville was then the capital of a taifa, one of the small kingdoms into which al-Andalus split when the Caliphate of Córdoba disappeared in 1031.

Think about it

What does a city gain when it avoids a battle?



✦ *A bored prisoner ended up teaching a whole village to play.* ✦

STORY 9

The Village That Learned to Play

The tradition of Ströbeck

✦

The guard had watched the prisoner carving for several days. First a knight appeared. Then a rook. The shavings fell by the window as if someone were slowly whittling away boredom.

"Who are they for?" he asked.

"For whoever wants to learn how to use them."

The guard looked at the locked door. There were not many candidates.

The man drew some squares on the table and set out the pieces. He did not begin by explaining everything. He showed him how a rook moved and let him try.

The guard soon lost.

"You didn't tell me you were going to do that."

"I don't have to tell you what I'm going to do. You have to try to find out."

The next day he came back with a question. The day after, with an objection. Soon he began bringing his own threats to the table.

The tradition of Ströbeck places the start of its passion in a prisoner who teaches his guards. The names and circumstances belong to legend. I want to follow the journey of the game once it passes through the tower door.

The guard gets home and sets out some makeshift figures on the dinner table.

"I've learned something."

His daughter sits down opposite.

The first difficulty is not winning. It is explaining the knight without moving it for her.

"Let me try," the girl says.

The man takes his hand away. He has just discovered that teaching needs a different patience from the one he needs to play.

When they finish, his wife asks why the king cannot go next to the other king. He answers, hesitates and decides to ask the prisoner the next morning.

The tower begins to receive questions from people who have never been inside it.

A neighbour makes a board. Another carves pieces that are less fine, but good enough. In the tavern they move a jug to make room. In a kitchen, someone complains because the game is taking up the place where the bread goes.

The game spreads from table to table. So do the mistakes. For a while they argue about whether a piece can do something the first guard explained badly. The news goes up to the tower and comes back corrected.

I like to imagine that village learning without any ceremony. An open door, a question from the street, a rematch at nightfall.

The prisoner is still behind his walls, but something of what he knows is already walking through the houses.

One day the guard comes back with a move his daughter has found.

They set it up on the board. The locked-up man studies it.

"It's good," he says.

The guard smiles as if he had invented it himself. Then he corrects himself:

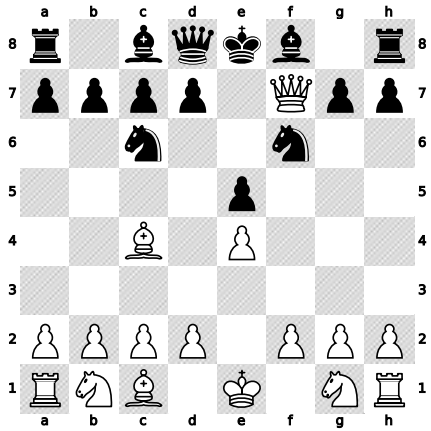
"She found it."

At dusk there are lights in several windows. Behind one, someone is teaching. Behind another, someone loses and asks to start again.

The prisoner's knowledge has not run out by being shared. Now it has more places in which to carry on.

Did you know...?

- Ströbeck is a village in Saxony-Anhalt, in Germany, known as "the chess village".
- According to tradition, chess arrived there in 1011 with a distinguished prisoner, Count Gunzelin, who taught his guards to play.
- Since 1823 chess has been a school subject in the village. Children learn to play as they learn to read.
- The chessboard appears on the coat of arms and on the house fronts, and the village has a museum devoted to chess.
- Living chess games are held in Ströbeck: people dressed as pieces move on a large board in the square.
- It is said that, for centuries, any outsider who wanted to marry a girl from the village first had to play a game against the mayor.
- In 1616 Duke Augustus of Brunswick, under the pen name Gustavus Selenus, published one of the first chess books in German and wrote in it about the chess of Ströbeck.
- According to village tradition, in 1651 the Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg gave it a valuable chessboard, which was kept for centuries like a treasure.
- Today Ströbeck belongs to the town of Halberstadt, but it still proudly calls itself *Schachdorf*, "chess village".
- The first thing any schoolchild who starts playing learns is not to fall for the Scholar's Mate, one of the best-known quick mates.



Scholar's Mate: 1.e4 e5 2.♗c4 ♘c6 3.♕h5 ♘f6?? 4.♕xf7#

Think about it

Who could you teach something you already know?



✦ *In that empty castle, someone answered every move.* ✦

STORY 10

The Board That Played by Itself

A motif from the Mabinogion

✦

The castle door was open. That was the first thing that troubled the traveller. He had expected guards, questions, perhaps a raised drawbridge. He found a silent hall and a table with the pieces set out.

"Is anyone there?"

The question ran along the arches and came back unanswered.

The young man left his bundle by a chair. He was hungry, but curiosity managed to sit him down before he went looking for the kitchen.

He pushed a pawn.

A piece from the other army replied by itself.

He jumped up so fast that the chair scraped against the wall. He looked under the table. He walked round the board. He touched the empty seat.

Nothing.

He sat down again.

The old tales of the Mabinogion know of marvellous boards. We take that motif and give the castle a new visitor, one whom magic will not spare the work of learning.

The young man lost the first game before he understood he was in danger.

He set up the pieces again.

This time he would play faster. He had seen how they moved and supposed it was enough to copy that confidence.

He lost even sooner.

The piece that beat him went back to its place with a delicacy he found almost insulting.

"Of course. You already know what's going to happen."

The board did not defend itself against the accusation. Nor did it boast.

The boy went to the window. Outside there was a clear moon and an empty courtyard. He could leave. No one was stopping him from walking through the door he had found open.

Before doing so, he looked at the final position.

Why had he lost?

At first he found comfortable answers: the castle was magic, the opponent was invisible, the pieces seemed to know the way. Then he saw something less comfortable. A threat had been in front of his eyes for several moves and he had never stopped to look at it.

He sat down for the third time.

He moved a pawn. He waited for the reply. Before touching another piece, he asked out loud:

"What do you want to do?"

No voice came from the empty seat. And yet the board began to seem less dark to him.

A rook had a file. A bishop was watching a diagonal. His king needed a way out.

I like that moment because the castle has not changed at all. What has changed is the way of being in it.

The third game was longer. The young man lost again, but this time he could point to where he had gone wrong.

When dawn came, he set up the pieces for the next visitor. He slung his bundle over his shoulder and left without taking a single one.

The door was still open.

Before going through it, he turned towards the empty chair.

"Tomorrow, if I pass this way, I want a rematch."

A piece gave a small tap on the wood.

The traveller decided to take it as an invitation.

Did you know...?

- The *Mabinogion* gathers Welsh tales of the Middle Ages, preserved in two 14th-century manuscripts: the White Book of Rhydderch and the Red Book of Hergest.
- In them appears *gwyddbwyll*, a Welsh board game whose rules we do not know well. So it is best not to confuse it completely with chess.
- In the tale of Peredur, the hero enters an empty castle and sees the pieces playing by themselves. When his side loses, he gets angry and throws the board into a lake.
- In another tale, "The Dream of Rhonabwy", King Arthur and Owain play on a board while their armies fight outside.
- Lady Charlotte Guest translated these tales into English between 1838 and 1845, and that is how they became famous throughout Europe.
- The traveller in the tale discovers the advice every coach gives: go over your lost games and look for the move where the trouble began.
- The famous Lewis chessmen, carved from walrus ivory in the 12th century and found in 1831 on a Scottish island, show what pieces looked like in the time of these tales.
- Some of their rooks are warriors biting the edge of their shields, like the frenzied berserkers of the Norse sagas.
- The Lewis hoard has 93 objects: 78 chessmen, 14 pieces from another board game and a buckle. 82 are in the British Museum in London and 11 in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.
- In 2019 a Lewis warrior thought to be lost turned up in an Edinburgh house. A family had kept it in a drawer for decades without knowing what it was, and it was auctioned for more than 700,000 pounds.
- The pieces of the magic chess game Harry and Ron play in the first Harry Potter film are inspired by the Lewis chessmen.
- Some scholars think *gwyddbwyll* was like the Vikings' *tafl*, in which a king surrounded by defenders tries to escape from a larger army.

Think about it

What would you change if you could play the same game again?



✦ *Ever since, the chessboard closes like a book.* ✦

STORY 11

The Book That Held a Game

The legend of the folding board

✦

The ban arrived with solemn words and a glance at the table.

"In this place, chess is not played."

The monk waited for them to finish explaining. Then he put the pieces into a bag. That was easy. The hard part was making a square board disappear in a library where even the order of the books seemed to be watched.

He leaned it against a wall. It stood out.

He put it under a cloth. It still looked like a board under a cloth.

He sat down and looked at the shelves.

I would stay with him at this moment, before the solution occurs to him. Stories of inventions tend to rush towards the discovery and leave little room for the time when a person looks at something they do not yet know how to use in another way.

He ran his finger along a spine.

He opened a book. He closed it.

Then he turned his head towards the board.

"If only I could do this..."

The idea was simple once thought of: divide it into two halves and join them so that it would close. Open, it would have its sixty-four squares. Closed, it could rest beside the other volumes.

He looked for wood and a way of hinging the two parts. The first attempt did not fit well. In the second, one half ended up a little higher. He had to check again that the hinge did not get in the way where the pieces should stand.

It was not enough for it to look like a book. It had to go on working as a board.

When he had finished, he held it in his hands. Closed, it showed a spine. Open, a space for a game.

He took it to the library.

A man saw him pass and nodded approvingly. The monk returned the greeting with a seriousness he had to work hard to keep.

The legend of the folding board preserves this clever idea and usually credits it to a monk who wanted to hide the game. We do not need to turn it into a sure date of invention to enjoy it.

That night, the chess lover took his strange volume off the shelf. He placed it on the table and lifted the cover.

Where other books offered words, this one offered squares.

Someone knocked at the door.

The man snapped it shut.

"What are you reading?" asked a voice from the doorway.

He looked at the spine, which did not yet have a title.

"Something I haven't finished yet."

In this version I prefer to leave the question free of suspicion and grant him a moment's peace. When the footsteps fade away, he opens the board again.

The pieces wait in the bag. The knight comes out first.

He has not defeated the ban with a speech. He has found a new shape for a familiar object. And now he has a game in front of him that, if visitors come, he can tuck away between two books.

Two halves and sixty-four squares

Folding a board in half does not change its number of squares. Each half holds four rows of eight, thirty-two squares; when you open it, the eight full rows appear again.

When you set it up to play modern chess, the corner nearest each player on their right must be white. With White at the bottom, that square is h1. The story of the monk is a legend about the idea, not a date of invention that we take as proven.

Did you know…?

- During the Middle Ages, some churchmen frowned on chess. In 1061 Cardinal Peter Damian wrote to scold a bishop for spending the afternoon playing.
- Over time opinions changed: chess came to be seen as a game of wit, and in many monasteries it was played quite normally.
- The legend of the board that looked like a book is usually placed around 1125, but there is no document to confirm it.
- Folding boards are still the most common: every club has dozens, and when closed they hold the pieces inside.
- There were also pocket and travel sets, with peg pieces or magnets, for playing on trains or ships.
- In the 19th century correspondence chess became popular: moves were sent by letter and a game could last for years.
- Each half of the folded board has sixteen white squares and sixteen black ones.
- One of the first famous correspondence matches was played by two clubs, London and Edinburgh, between 1824 and 1828. Edinburgh won.
- Today correspondence chess has its own international federation, the ICCF, founded in 1951, and its own world championship. The moves no longer travel by letter, but over the internet.
- The Codex Manesse, a book of songs painted around 1300, shows Margrave Otto IV of Brandenburg playing chess with a lady.
- FIDE rules ask for tournament squares between 5 and 6 centimetres wide, and a king about 9.5 centimetres tall.

More to discover

- The first Arab boards were usually of a single colour, with the squares marked by lines. Alternating white and black squares became common in Europe around the 11th and 12th centuries.
- On many old travelling boards, one side was for chess and the other for backgammon, which in Spain was called *tablas reales*.

Think about it

Which two objects would you combine to invent something useful?



✦ *Huon won, but he never knew whether she had let him win.* ✦

STORY 12

The Princess Who Chose to Lose

Huon of Bordeaux, a thirteenth-century chanson de geste

✦

Huon of Bordeaux was a young French knight with very bad luck. One day, in a forest, he defended himself against a man who attacked him and killed him without knowing who he was. It was the son of the Emperor Charlemagne.

The emperor, furious, gave him an impossible punishment: to travel to the East, enter the palace of the Emir of Babylon, kiss his daughter in front of everyone and come back with a lock of the emir's beard and four of his teeth. Huon set off without complaint.

On the way he came to a city called Monbranc. There ruled the Emir Ivorin, who had a very clever and very proud daughter. No one had ever beaten her at chess. Her father had made a terrible announcement: whoever played her and lost would lose his head. Whoever won would marry her and receive half the kingdom.

Huon, who was passing himself off as a humble servant, said that he would play.

They brought him a magnificent board and ivory pieces. The princess sat down opposite, looked him up and down and smiled. The game began badly for Huon. He lost pieces, grew nervous, hesitated. She laughed at him.

"Is this the brave man who came to beat me?" she said.

But as the game went on, the princess began to look more at Huon than at the board. And she began to make mistakes. First a badly moved piece. Then another. Huon, surprised, saw that the princess's king had been left without defence.

He stopped with his hand in the air. He could win. And he did.

Everyone expected him to claim his prize: the princess and half the kingdom. But Huon stood up and spoke to the emir:

"Keep your daughter for someone else. I have a lord to serve and a mission to fulfil."

The emir, relieved, gave him a hundred marks of silver, and Huon accepted them.

The princess left the hall very angry. As she passed him she said something nobody forgot:

"If I had known you were going to do this, I would have mated you."

Huon went on his way towards Babylon. Many more adventures awaited him. But he never knew for certain whether he had won that game or whether she had given it to him.

A poem of knights

Huon of Bordeaux is a French chanson de geste of the thirteenth century, a long poem of knightly adventures. Huon ac-

cidentally kills Charlemagne's son and is punished with an impossible mission in the East. He is helped by Oberon, the king of the fairies.

The chess game takes place on the way, in the city of Monbranc. The poem does not say whether the princess let him win: it tells us she began to make mistakes as she fell in love with Huon, and that at the end she confessed she would have mated him if she had known he was going to give up the prize.

Did you know...?

- Oberon, the fairy king of this poem, is the same character who appears centuries later in Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream.
- In the Middle Ages it was said that a knight should know how to ride, swim, shoot with a bow, fight, hunt, write verse and play chess.
- In many medieval tales a game of chess decides a wedding, a kingdom or someone's life.
- The queen of medieval chess was still very weak: it only moved one square diagonally.
- The prose version usually read today was published by the French philologist Gaston Paris in 1898.

More to discover

- *Huon of Bordeaux* is a French chanson de geste from around 1260. To win Charlemagne's pardon, Huon has to travel to Babylon and bring back the emir's beard and four of his back teeth.
- In the poem, Oberon is a fairy king who looks like a child, the son of Julius Caesar and the fairy Morgan. He gives Huon a magic horn that gets him out of many scrapes.
- The story was a great success centuries later. The German Christoph Martin Wieland turned it into the poem *Oberon* (1780), and Carl Maria von Weber into an opera of the same name (1826).
- In the chansons de geste the chessboard does not always end well. In the legend of Ogier the Dane, Charlemagne's son kills Ogier's son by striking him with a chessboard after a quarrel over a game.
- Around 1300 the Italian friar Jacobus de Cessolis wrote a sermon in which each chess piece represented a group in society: the king, the judges, the knights, the peasants. It was one of the most widely read books of the Middle Ages.
- Around 1474 the printer William Caxton published an English translation of that book. It was one of the first books printed in English.
- The poem belongs to the Charlemagne cycle, like the *Song of Roland*: stories of the knights who surrounded the emperor.
- In another chanson, *The Four Sons of Aymon*, the knight Renaud kills a nephew of Charlemagne by striking him with the chessboard after a quarrel over the game.
- In some versions of the legend of Tristan and Iseult, the two drink the love potion on the ship while playing chess.
- At the end of the fourteenth century a long poem called *Les Échecs amoureux* was written in France, in which a young man and a lady play a game that represents love.
- In the Middle Ages, a game of chess was one of the few occasions on which a knight and a lady could sit face to face and talk.

Think about it

Is it fair to lose on purpose? And to win knowing the other person let you?



✦ *A wise king had a book written to teach people to play.* ✦

STORY 13

The Wise King's Book

The Book of Games, Seville, 1283

✦

In the Alcázar of Seville, at the end of the summer of 1283, a tired king asked for the beginning of his book to be read to him once more.

His name was Alfonso. He had been king of Castile and León for more than thirty years, and throughout his kingdoms he was called the Wise. He had ordered laws to be written, chronicles, tables for following the movement of the planets and hundreds of songs to the Virgin. But this book was different. It dealt with something all his subjects understood without needing teachers: play.

The scribe opened the parchment and began to read.

The book told how in India there was a king who wanted to know what was worth more in life, wits or fortune, intelligence or luck. He gathered three sages. The first defended wits, and to prove it he brought a board of sixty-four squares on which nothing depended on chance: it was chess. The second defended fortune and brought dice, where the head was of no use at all. The third said the best thing was to use both at once, and brought tables, a game in which you threw the dice and then had to think how to move the counters.

King Alfonso smiled. He liked that story because it did not prove anyone entirely right.

For years his copyists and painters had worked on those pages. They had gathered more than a hundred chess problems, many of them from Arabic books, with the position drawn and the way to solve it. They had explained enormous games, such as "great chess", twelve squares a side, with griffins, unicorns and giraffes among the pieces. They had invented a chess for four players, with the colours of the four seasons of the year.

And they had painted players. Many players.

In the book's miniatures, kings and shepherds, ladies and monks, Christian knights, Muslim scholars and Jewish teachers sat facing the board. Some argued. Others looked at each other in silence, a piece still in their hand. In the Castile of those days they did not always live together in peace. On the board, at least, they played by the same rules.

"Why a book of games, my lord?" the scribe dared to ask. "Your other books teach serious things."

The king took a while to answer.

"God wished men to have joy to bear their cares and their labours," he said. "And play is one way of having it, even for someone who can no longer ride a horse or go to war."

Alfonso died in Seville the following year. His book of games outlived kings, wars and centuries. Today it is kept in the library of the monastery of El Escorial, and its painted players are still leaning over the board, waiting for the next move.

What is in the book

Its full title is *Libro de axedrez, dados e tablas*, the Book of Chess, Dice and Tables. It was finished in Seville in 1283, during the reign of Alfonso X, and it is one of the oldest and most beautiful books of games in Europe.

The first part, the longest, is devoted to chess. It explains how the pieces move and gathers 103 problems, each with its painted position and its solution.

The pieces had names that sound strange today: the king; the alferza, which played the part of the queen and moved only one square diagonally; the alfil, the bishop; the knight; the roque, which was the rook; and the pawns.

Then come dice, tables, which were like today's backgammon, and variants such as great chess, on twelve by twelve squares, or the chess of the four seasons, for four players.

Did you know...?

- Alfonso X was born in Toledo in 1221 and reigned in Castile and León from 1252 until his death in 1284.
- The book has about a hundred and fifty miniatures, painted in bright colours and gold.
- In the chess of the four seasons, each player had a colour: green for spring, red for summer, black for autumn and white for winter.
- Great chess included invented pieces, such as the "aanca", a fabulous bird rather like a griffin, or the "cocatriz", a monstrous creature.
- The Spanish word *ajedrez* comes from the Arabic *ash-shatranj*, and that from the Sanskrit *chaturanga*, the name of the game in India.
- Alfonso X made his court in Toledo a great centre of translation, where Christian, Muslim and Jewish scholars worked together.
- Today you can see reproductions of the book, called facsimiles, which copy even the stains and holes in the parchment.

More to discover

- The book has three parts: chess, dice and tables, as the game similar to backgammon was then called. At the end it adds rare games, such as alquerque, great chess and the chess of the four seasons.
- The problems in the book are solved with the old rules: the queen and the bishop were still weak pieces, and many end in mate in a fixed number of moves.
- In the prologue, Alfonso X explains that there are three kinds of games: those that depend only on wit, like chess; those that depend only on luck, like dice; and those that mix the two, like tables.
- Many of the problems in the book come from Arab collections of *mansubat*, which the court translators knew well.
- Alfonso X also commissioned the *Cantigas de Santa María*, the *Siete Partidas* law code and astronomical tables that were used in Europe for centuries.

Think about it

If you had to choose between a game of skill and a game of luck, which would you choose and why?



✦ *What he won was time to finish a letter.* ✦

STORY 14

Until the Last Move

An original tale

✦

The traveller carried an unfinished letter. He had written the greeting several weeks earlier and put it away, convinced that the next day he would find the right moment.

Then came another road. Another inn. A stagecoach he could not miss.

When he reached the sea, he found Death sitting at a stone table.

It surprised him less to see her than to realise that, at last, he no longer had a task to distract himself with.

"Were you expecting me?"

She nodded.

The man set his bag down on the ground. As he did so, he heard the paper of the letter crackle.

On the table there was a chessboard.

"Do you play?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then I propose a game."

Death watched him without impatience.

"What do you want to win?"

The traveller looked at the water. He could have asked to live for ever. It seemed an immense answer for someone who still did not know how to make the most of an afternoon.

"A little time."

She pulled up a chair.

This story does not claim to tell an old preserved game. We are inventing it around a motif that many tales have shared: sitting down to play with Death. I prefer to imagine that the traveller is not trying to cheat her, but to find out what he still has left to say.

They moved a few pieces.

The man was looking for a good move, but other thoughts came to him. A house with a lit window. The name he had written at the top of the letter. A conversation put off because there was always something more urgent.

Near the beach, some children began to run. One lost a sandal. The others stopped to wait for him and then started running again, laughing.

The traveller raised his head.

He had spent years chasing distant destinations. Now he would have traded many of them to sit for an hour beside one particular person.

Death did not touch the board.

"Now you know what you want it for," she said.

He nodded.

He took his hand away from the knight he had been thinking of moving and opened his bag. He

took out the folded paper. He smoothed it out on the stone.

"I don't need to promise great things," he murmured. "I need to say that I remember."

He wrote.

The afternoon went on changing colour. She waited on the other side of the table, without cheating and without claiming a victory.

I am not going to decide whether the letter arrived, or how much time he was granted. That ending would lead us to measure the gift by its length.

I prefer to stay with the man finally writing what he had left for tomorrow.

When he had finished, he folded the sheet carefully. Then he looked at the board. There was still a game in progress.

For the first time in a long while, he did not think about everything he still had to do. He thought about the person he had just written to.

Did you know...?

- The motif of playing chess with Death is very old. Around 1480, the painter Albertus Pictor painted her playing with a man in a church in Täby, near Stockholm.
- That painting inspired Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), in which a knight returning from the Crusades plays chess with Death to gain time.
- In competitive chess, time is also part of the game. The clock with two faces began to be used in tournaments at the end of the 19th century; when a player runs out of time, we say their "flag has fallen".
- In today's slow games each player can have more than two hours. In *bullet* chess, one minute.
- In the film, the knight does not manage to beat Death. But while the game lasts, a family of travelling players manages to escape.
- The expression "checkmate" comes from the Persian *shah mat*, usually translated as "the king is helpless".
- An old Italian proverb sums it up: when the game is over, the king and the pawn go back into the same box.
- At the London tournament of 1862, sand-glasses were used to control each player's time.
- The image of the knight playing chess with Death on the beach has been imitated many times, in comedies, adverts and cartoons.
- In correspondence chess the opposite happens: each move can be thought over for days.

More to discover

- In *The Seventh Seal*, the knight Antonius Block was played by Max von Sydow, who years later also became famous in films such as *The Exorcist*.
- The little flag that falls when time runs out was added to chess clocks around 1900. Before that, arbiters had to watch the hand very carefully.
- Today almost all tournament clocks are digital and add a few seconds for each move, an invention of Bobby Fischer.

Think about it

If you had a little more time, who would you share it with?



✦ *Four times around the table, and the solution appeared.* ✦

STORY 15

Ali's Four Turns

A legend from the court of Tamerlane

✦

Ali had been circling the table for so long that he had worn a little path in the dust. He would stop, look at the pieces, take a few steps and look again. He was not looking for cooler shade. He was looking for a move.

Tamerlane saw him from the entrance of his tent.

"What can keep my best player busy for so long?"

"A mate in two, my lord."

The king came over. Behind him came the courtiers, who knew how to follow a royal curiosity as if they had just felt it themselves. Mustasin stood where he could see the board and, above all, the monarch's face.

At first, Tamerlane studied the position with a smile. Then he folded his arms. A knight seemed to offer him a solution; he checked it and put it back. Ali kept walking.

Mustasin approached the master.

"Tell me the answer. I will find a moment to help him."

Ali barely heard the whisper. In his head he had just discovered another possibility.

"Enough," ordered the king. "Show us the solution."

Ali pushed a pawn to the last rank and changed it for a bishop. The black king had only one reply; then came mate.

An underpromotion. Tamerlane had been looking for a queen and, by looking for one, had walked straight past it.

"Majesty, Ali did not say which way the pawns were moving," Mustasin hurried to say.

Tamerlane accepted the excuse with a nod. The courtiers breathed again.

Ali turned the board a quarter turn.

"If you were thinking in this direction, there is also a solution."

Now the pawn had to become a knight. Ali showed the two moves with the quiet satisfaction of someone sharing something beautiful. He was not correcting the king: he was explaining the problem. That difference existed only in his head.

Tamerlane said that this was not the direction he had imagined either.

Another turn. This time, a rook.

I would like to stop Ali's hand here. Ask him to look around. To notice how Mustasin has stopped smiling and how the others are studying anything but the board. But the master sees an extraordinary construction: four directions, four different answers.

Mustasin gave the last turn.

"His Majesty meant, of course, this side."

It was a way out. Ali could admit a misunderstanding, bow and put the pieces away.

Instead, he moved another pawn.

"Then we must ask for a queen."

He showed the last mate. The four possible changes of a pawn had found their place. The work was complete.

Tamerlane took a long time to speak. When he did, he ordered Ali's head to be cut off.

I am not going to follow the guards. I prefer to stay beside the empty table. There, the problem was still admirable and the sentence was still unjust.

Ali had understood every position on the board. He had not understood the danger of explaining a truth to someone who always needed to stand above it.

ALI'S FOUR SOLUTIONS

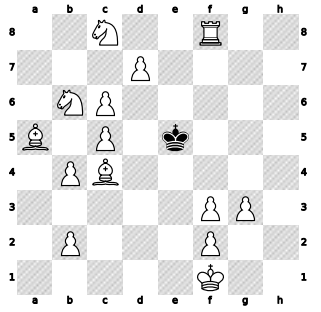
In all four diagrams White plays and mates in two. Each time we turn the arrangement of the pieces a quarter turn and draw it again on a board with normal coordinates, with h1 white. The pawns always advance towards the eighth rank.

First direction: 1.d8=♗! ♔d4 2.♗f6#. If the pawn becomes a queen, the squares available to the king change and this solution no longer works. The newborn bishop is exactly the piece the problem needs.

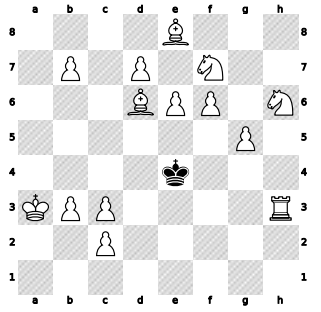
Second direction: 1.d8=♘! ♔d5 2.♗c6#. The new knight changes the squares White controls; the mate is given by the bishop that was already on e8.

Third direction: 1.g8=♖! ♔d5 2.♖d8#. This time the pawn needs to become a rook.

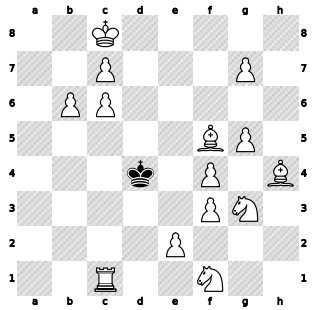
Fourth direction: 1.f8=♕! ♔e5 2.♕c5#. The last turn brings in the fourth legal promotion.



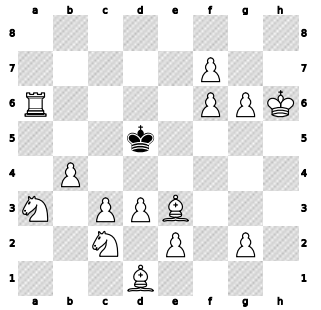
Direction 1 · Promotion to bishop



Direction 2 · Promotion to knight



Direction 3 · Promotion to rook



Direction 4 · Promotion to queen

Ali's execution belongs to legend; there is no historical record of it. The position is attributed to Cuppini and was added to a period tale. It is modern chess inside a fiction, not a preserved medieval game. In the fourth direction, the bishop on d1 cannot come from the usual starting position: the pawns on e2 and g2 block the f1-bishop and all eight white pawns are still there. The moves given do work from the composed diagram.

The anecdote is not about changing sides during a game: it is about reinterpreting the direction of one and the same set of pieces. Each turn creates a new problem.

THINK ABOUT IT

Can a smaller piece be the best choice?

PART III

✦

Renaissance and Golden Age



✦ *Three poets played a game in verse.* ✦

STORY 16

The Lady of Valencia

Scachs d'amor, around 1475

✦

In a hall of a palace in Valencia, lit by the afternoon light, three gentlemen gathered round a chessboard. They were not going to play just any game. They were going to play it in verse.

They were three poets of 15th-century Valencia, the richest and liveliest city of the Crown of Aragon: Francesc de Castellví, Narcís Vinyoles and Bernat Fenollar. They had decided to write together a poem in Valencian that would be both a game of chess and a love story. They called it *Scachs d'amor*, "chess of love".

Castellví would play the red pieces and speak for Mars, the god of war. Vinyoles would play the green ones and speak for Venus, the goddess of love. Fenollar would be the referee, with the voice of Mercury, and in each stanza he would explain the rules of the game.

But the rules he explained were new.

Until then, in European chess, the piece that stood beside the king was weak. It was called the ferz and could move only one square diagonally. In the poets' game, however, that piece was called the "queen", and it could cross the board along ranks, files or diagonals, as far as the path was clear. It was the most powerful piece in the game.

Nobody knows for certain who invented that new queen, or where. But *Scachs d'amor* is one of the oldest surviving texts in which she appears. And perhaps it is no coincidence that she arose at a time when a powerful queen, Isabella of Castile, was beginning to dominate the politics of the Spanish kingdoms.

The game in the poem moves forward stanza by stanza. Mars attacks boldly. His queen comes out early, enters Venus's camp and captures pieces. The poets compare each move with the stages of falling in love: the glance, the conversation, hope, desire.

At the end, on the twenty-first move, the red queen gives checkmate. Mars wins the game. Mercury announces it in verse and explains what each piece teaches about love.

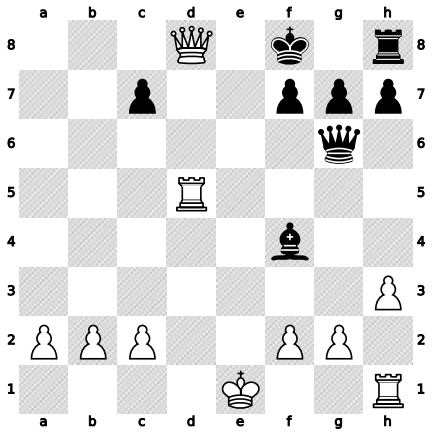
Chess with the new queen spread very quickly. Within a few years players in Italy, France and Spain had adopted it. They called it "queen's chess", or also *de la rabiosa*, "mad queen chess", because games became much faster and fiercer. The new chess gradually displaced the old one all over Europe.

Those three poets did not know it, but they were writing one of the first games of the chess we still play today.

The game in the poem

The game in *Scachs d'amor* is the oldest known game played with the modern rules for the queen. Translated into today's notation:

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 ♕xd5 3.♘c3 ♕d8 4.♗c4 ♘f6 5.♘f3 ♗g4 6.h3 ♗xf3 7.♕xf3 e6 8.♕xb7 ♘bd7 9.♘b5 ♖c8 10.♘xa7 ♘b6 11.♘xc8 ♘xc8 12.d4 ♘d6 13.♗b5+ ♘xb5 14.♕xb5+ ♘d7 15.d5 exd5 16.♗e3 ♗d6 17.♖d1 ♕f6 18.♖xd5 ♕g6 19.♗f4 ♗xf4 20.♕xd7+ ♔f8 21.♕d8#



Final position after 21.♕d8#: Mars's queen gives mate

Interestingly, Black begins with 1...d5, the Scandinavian Defence, which is still played in tournaments today.

Did you know...?

- The poem has 64 stanzas of nine lines, one for each square of the board.
- Bernat Fenollar was a priest and one of the best-known poets in Valencia. He organised literary contests in the city.
- A little later, in 1495, the Valencian Francesc Vicent published a book of problems with the new rules. It has been lost and no copy survives.
- The oldest surviving printed book of modern chess is the *Repetición de amores y arte de ajedrez* by Luis Ramírez de Lucena, published in Salamanca around 1497.
- In the old chess the bishop was not like today's either: it jumped two squares diagonally. It changed at the same time as the queen.
- Today Valencia has a trail and several exhibitions recalling that modern chess may have been born in that city.
- In 1474 Bernat Fenollar organised a poetry contest in Valencia. The poems were printed that same year in one of the first printed books in Spain.
- With the new queen, games became much shorter and more aggressive. Quick mates, which had been almost impossible before, became common.
- Other rules, such as castling or capturing en passant, still took a long time to become the same in every country.
- In the poem, the rook is called "roc", like the old Castilian name "roque". That is also where the Spanish word for castling, *enroque*, comes from.

More to discover

- In the poem, Castellví spoke for Mars; Vinyoles, for Venus; and Fenollar, for Mercury, who acted as arbiter.

Think about it

How would chess change if tomorrow the queen could once again move only one square?



✦ *Ruy López always sat with his back to the sun.* ✦

STORY 17

The Sun in Their Eyes

Ruy López de Segura, Rome, 1560

✦

In 1560, a priest from Extremadura called Ruy López de Segura travelled to Rome. He was going on Church business, to see the new pope, but he carried something else in his luggage: the reputation of being the best chess player in Spain.

In Rome a great deal of chess was played, in the cardinals' palaces and in the squares. The Italians considered themselves the best players in the world, and some came up with curiosity to this Spanish cleric who claimed to know so much.

Ruy López accepted every challenge. And he had his tricks. Before sitting down, he looked at the sky. If the game was in daytime, he placed the board so that the sun shone in his opponent's eyes. If it was at night, he put the candle on his opponent's side, so that the light would bother him.

"Chess is played with the head," he would say, "but also with the eyes."

It was also said that he advised playing when the opponent had just eaten or drunk, because then he would think more slowly. Today such advice makes us smile. Back then it was part of the game.

With or without tricks, Ruy López beat the best Italian players in Rome, among them a young Calabrian, Leonardo da Cutri, who went home determined to study until he could take his revenge.

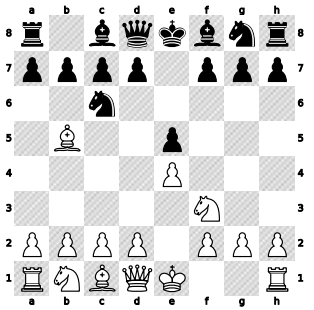
Back in Spain, Ruy López wrote a book: *Libro de la invención liberal y arte del juego del axedrez*, published in Alcalá de Henares in 1561. In it he explained the openings he knew, analysed the moves and, of course, gave his advice about the light and the sun. In the book he used a word he had heard in Italy, *gambetto*, "a trip", for openings in which a pawn is given up. That is where our word "gambit" comes from.

King Philip II thought highly of him and called him to court to watch him play. But in 1575 two Italians arrived in Madrid determined to defeat him: the same Leonardo da Cutri, who had been studying for fifteen years, and Paolo Boi, the Sicilian who was said to have beaten the devil. This time the Italians won.

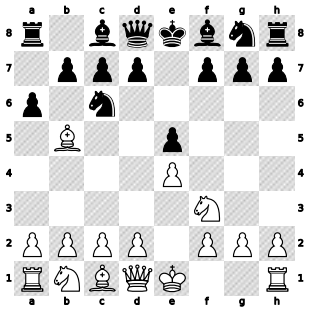
Even so, Ruy López's name was not forgotten. One of the openings he analysed in his book, in which the white bishop comes out to b5 on the third move, is known almost all over the world as "the Ruy Lopez", or simply "the Spanish". More than four hundred and fifty years later, it is still one of world champions' favourites. And it is played in whatever light each player prefers.

The Spanish Opening

The opening that bears Ruy López's name begins like this: 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5. The white bishop attacks the knight that defends the pawn on e5.



The Ruy Lopez after 3. ♗b5



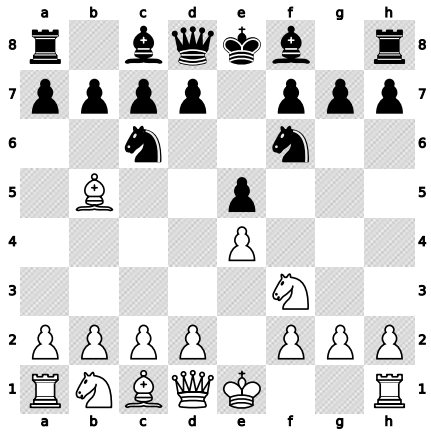
The Morphy Defence: 3...a6

The idea is not to capture at once, but to put pressure on Black's centre throughout the game. That is why the Spanish is an opening of patience and long-term plans.

Three centuries later, the American Paul Morphy made popular the reply 3...a6, which asks the bishop what it intends to do. Today it is the most played defence against the Ruy Lopez and bears his name: the Morphy Defence.

Did you know...?

- Ruy López was born in Zafra, in Badajoz, around 1530, and was a priest in that town.
- The Madrid tournament of 1575, held before Philip II, is considered one of the first international meetings between masters in history.
- It is said that Philip II rewarded Leonardo da Cutri for his victory with a thousand ducats and an ermine cloak.
- In English the opening is called the *Ruy Lopez*; in Russian, "the Spanish". Kasparov, Carlsen and almost every world champion have played it.
- The word "gambit" comes from the Italian *gambetto*, a trip made with the leg (*gamba*).
- In his book, Ruy López criticised the Portuguese Damiano, who had published another chess book in 1512, for recommending moves he considered bad.
- One of the most played lines today is the Berlin Defence, 3... ♘f6. Kramnik used it to win the world championship from Kasparov in 2000.
- Philip II was fond of chess and protected the best players of his time at his court.
- Ruy López's book was translated into Italian in 1584 and into French in 1609. For a long time it was one of the most widely read chess manuals in Europe.



The Berlin Defence: 3... ♘f6

More to discover

- Ruy López was the first to use the word "gambit" in a book, for openings in which a pawn is given up in exchange for a lead in development.
- Almost five hundred years later, the Spanish Opening is still one of the most played in great tournaments.

Think about it

Do you think it is fair to use the sun to win? Where is the line between cunning and cheating?



✦ *When he saw the cross, his rival vanished like smoke.* ✦

STORY 18

The Lady Who Feared a Cross

The legend of Paolo Boi

✦

The stranger did not celebrate the first win. Nor the second. She simply put the pieces back in their places, as if the result had been decided before Paolo Boi sat down.

"Another," he said.

Outside, a bell struck the hour. The woman did not even turn her head.

Paolo had met difficult opponents in many places, but this way of answering unsettled him. Every threat received an exact reply. Every sacrifice ended up benefiting the wrong person.

For a moment he admired his rival without reserve. Then he saw her shadow.

The candle was on the right. The silhouette stretched across the wall, long and broken. Paolo looked at the woman, then at the wall. Something did not match.

I am not going to describe a terrible apparition. To understand his fear, it is enough to imagine a familiar room in which, suddenly, one detail stops obeying what we know about the world.

Paolo took his hand away from the board.

"Have you finished thinking?" she asked.

He breathed slowly. He prayed in silence, not for a new piece, but to recover the calm he needed to look at the ones he still had.

There was a path. The first move looked like a gift. The second, an even bigger mistake.

He moved.

The stranger captured with a small smile. Paolo left another piece within her reach. Around the black king a figure was beginning to open up, one that was not yet easy to recognise.

The woman looked at the candle.

Paolo kept calculating. He was no longer just counting how much material he was losing. He was looking at where each survivor would stand when the captures were over. A knight had to arrive here; a rook, there. The pawns that seemed like mere leftovers had a precise place.

The smile vanished.

"You cannot win by giving everything away."

Paolo did not reply. His last important piece was still out of place.

The air in the room grew cold. The flame leaned over although the windows were shut. On the board, the combination was beginning to draw a cross.

The stranger stood up before the end. The chair scraped on the stone. Paolo looked up just as the candle went out.

When he managed to light it again, he was alone.

We can tell this ending in several ways: as a victory of faith, as a fantastic duel, or as a story about someone who recovers his calm when all seemed lost. The legends have mixed up different characters and compositions.

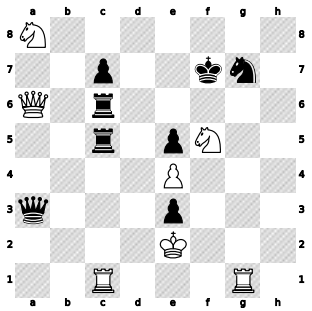
I prefer Paolo putting the pieces away afterwards. He is no longer in a hurry to prove he is the best in the room. He checks that each one goes back in its box and looks one last time at the empty chair.

The cross stays in his memory for a few seconds, even after he has packed up the board.

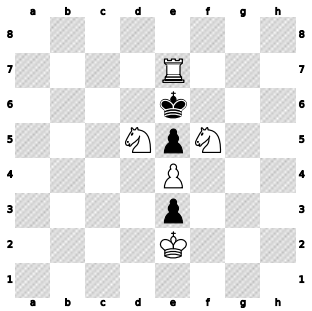
How the cross appears

Tradition has linked Paolo Boi with various stories about the devil. The combination we reproduce here is the version published by *Nuestro Círculo*, issue 138, hosted on Tabla de Flandes. We do not present it as a historical game of Boi's, nor as a unique solution against every defence.

Follow this thematic line: 1.♖xg7+ ♔f6 2.♕xc6+! ♖xc6 3.♖xc6+ ♕d6 4.♖xd6+ cxd6 5.♘c7 d5 6.♘xd5+ ♔e6 7.♖e7#. The successive captures remove pieces until the final figure is left.



The combination. White to play



After 7.♖e7#: the cross and the mate

In the final diagram, the e-file forms the vertical stroke and the pieces on d5 and f5 form the arms. The black king on e6 is in check from the rook on e7; the two knights and the other pieces cover its escape squares.

The story of a woman who changes the colour of a queen and that of the devil who refuses to complete a cross are not quite the same tale. Our fiction follows the popular version of the cross, with a new scene and new dialogue.

Did you know…?

- Paolo Boi was born in Syracuse in 1528, which is why he was called "il Siracusano". He travelled through Italy, Spain and Portugal playing for money.
- In 1575 he played in Madrid, before the court of Philip II, against the Extremaduran priest Ruy López. That meeting, in which Leonardo da Cutri also took part, is considered one of the first international tournaments in history.
- Legend gives him a life worthy of a novel: captured by pirates, freed thanks to chess and dead in Naples in 1598. Some accounts say he was poisoned.

More to discover

- It was also said that he could play three games at once without looking at the board, something astonishing in the 16th century.
- Italian chronicles always pair him with Leonardo da Cutri, "il Puttino", his great rival. The two of them defeated the best Spanish players in Madrid.
- Syracuse, his city, is in Sicily, one of the two gateways through which chess entered Europe, together with the Iberian Peninsula.

Think about it

What other figure would you like to build with pieces?

PART IV

✦

Cafés, Automata and Masters



✦ *A cannonball carried off a knight, and the king went on counting moves.* ✦

STORY 19

The King Who Would Not Leave the Game

A tale by Sam Loyd

✦

The minister raised his cup but did not drink. A blast shook the tent; the surface of the liquid trembled.

Charles XII was still looking at the board.

"Mate in three," he said.

The minister looked towards the entrance. The king was pointing at a square.

They could have been two different conversations: one about how to finish the game and another about how to get out of that place alive. The difficulty was that each man believed he was dealing with the most urgent matter.

In the scene Sam Loyd imagined for his problem, a shot tears through the tent and carries off a piece from the board.

Not a soldier. A wooden knight.

The minister steps back.

"Majesty, we must..."

Charles raises a hand.

He is counting again.

The missing piece has changed the position. The earlier solution no longer works. Where there was a precise combination there is now a gap that forces him to start from somewhere else.

I understand the king's fascination: whoever finds an idea wants to test it. I also understand the minister, who sees a new hole in the canvas and needs no variation to decide that this is dangerous.

"Mate in four," Charles announces.

The minister puts down his cup.

Another blow.

A pawn vanishes from the board.

For an instant, both look at the empty square. The minister hopes this second loss will achieve what the first did not.

Charles leans over again.

Now he is looking for a longer solution.

The noise outside continues. Inside, a rook travels along possible paths without anyone touching it. The king calculates. The minister imagines a much simpler path: from the chair to the exit.

"We can carry on later," he suggests.

Charles does not answer at once.

In some stories, the hero's calm is enough for us to admire his courage. In this one, I want us not to forget the person trying to remind him where he is sitting.

The problem has three stages: with all the pieces, without the knight and without the pawn. Each absence demands a different combination. That is Loyd's chess invention; the episode does not need to have happened to support it.

At last Charles finds the new finish.

"Mate in five."

The minister is already holding the tent flap.

"Now, then," he says, before knowing whether the king has finished his sentence.

I allow myself to end our version with the two of them on their feet. The king has a piece in his hand. The minister is in a hurry. Each has managed to keep something of what mattered to him.

The board stays behind for a few moments, with its gaps and its solutions.

I am not going to ask the reader to choose between concentration and prudence as if one had to defeat the other. It is enough to remember that a game can wait. Sometimes the best move is made by getting up from the table.

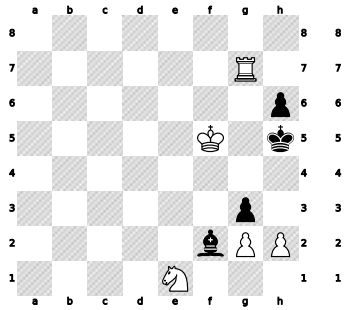
The problem changes as pieces are lost

Sam Loyd linked these positions to a scene with Charles XII at Bender. We show three stages of the composition and one thematic line from each, not a game played between the characters of the tale.

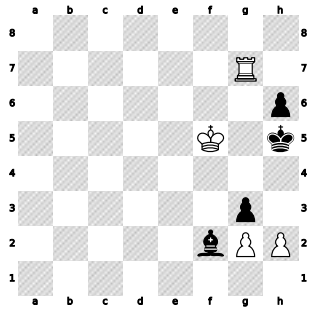
With the knight on e1: 1.♖xg3 ♗xg3 2.♘f3 ♗xh2 3.g4#. An alternative defence is 1...♗xe1 2.♖h3+ ♗h4 3.g4#.

Without the knight on e1: 1.hxg3 ♗e3 2.♖g4 ♗g5 3.♖h4+ ♗xh4 4.g4#. The disappearance of one piece demands a different solution.

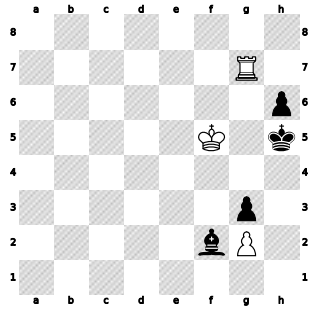
Without the knight on e1 or the pawn on h2: 1.♖b7 ♗e3 2.♖b1 ♗g5 3.♖h1+ ♗h4 4.♖h2 gxh2 5.g4#. The other defences and lines can be studied later; these show how the tale is built.



First stage: with the knight on e1



Second stage: the knight is removed



Third stage: the h2-pawn is removed too

The scene is a literary invention attached to the composition. Checking these moves does not prove that the shots in the tale passed through a real board.

Did you know...?

- After losing the battle of Poltava (1709), Charles XII of Sweden took refuge in the Ottoman Empire and lived for several years at Bender, in today's Moldova.
- In 1713 the Janissaries attacked his camp to force him to leave. The Swedes called that episode the *kalabalik*, "the tumult".

Think about it

What changes when something you took for granted disappears?



✦ *Légal smiled just before his most dangerous move.* ✦

STORY 20

The Trap at the Café de la Régence

Légal v Saint Brie, Paris, 1750

✦

In the centre of Paris, next to the royal palace, there was a café where hardly anyone went to drink coffee. They went to play chess. It was called the Café de la Régence, and at its marble tables, among the pipe smoke and the smell of chocolate, there gathered noblemen in wigs, famous writers, students and onlookers.

The king of that café wore no crown. His name was Légal, and for many years no one had beaten him. He was elegant and calm, and he had a habit that made his opponents nervous: he smiled just before making his most dangerous move.

One afternoon in 1750 an amateur called Saint Brie sat down opposite him. He was young and very sure of himself. He had read books and had watched the best players. That afternoon he intended to beat the great Légal.

The game began calmly. Légal brought out his pieces. Saint Brie put his bishop on g4, in front of the white knight, and smiled. Behind the knight stood Légal's queen.

"You can't move that knight any more, monsieur," he said. "If you do, you lose your queen."

The onlookers drew closer. Légal looked at the board for a moment, smiled... and moved the knight. He brought it to the centre, to e5, and took a pawn.

Saint Brie could not believe it. Légal's queen was there, unprotected! He reached out, took the queen with his bishop and swept it off the board with a triumphant gesture.

"Thank you for the gift, monsieur."

It was exactly what Légal wanted.

The white bishop leapt to f7. Check. The black king had to step out to e7, because there was no other square. And then the second white knight arrived on d5.

"Check," said Légal. "And mate."

Saint Brie sat staring at the board. He had his opponent's queen in his hand and he had lost the game. Three small pieces, two knights and a bishop, had trapped his king.

A murmur ran through the café, and then applause. Among those watching from behind was a young musician of little more than twenty, with his eyes wide open. His name was Philidor. Légal was his teacher. A few years later, the pupil would sur-

pass the master and become the best player in the world.

Légal's Mate

Légal de Kermeur (1702-1792) was for years the best player at the Café de la Régence and the teacher of Philidor, who eventually surpassed him. Only this game of his survives, played in Paris in 1750 against an amateur called Saint Brie.

1.e4 e5 2.♗c4 d6 3.♘f3 ♗g4 4.♘c3 g6? 5.♘xe5! ♗xd1 6.♗xf7+ ♔e7 7.♘d5#. The pin by the bishop on g4 was a false one: the knight could move because, if Black took the queen, mate followed.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- The Café de la Régence opened at the end of the seventeenth century and for two centuries was the great centre of French chess.
- Diderot, Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin and, in 1858, the American Paul Morphy all sat at its tables.
- Diderot mentions Légal in his work Rameau's Nephew, as one of the great players of the café.
- Today Légal's Mate is taught in schools as an example of a false pin: a piece pinned to the queen can move if there is something better.
- A mate like this, with three minor pieces after giving away the queen, still turns up now and then in amateur games.

More to discover

- The Café de la Régence owed its name to the regency of Philippe d'Orléans, who governed France while Louis XV was a child.
- In 1843 a famous match was played at the café between the Frenchman Saint-Amant and the Englishman Howard Staunton. Staunton won, and many considered him the best player in the world.
- In 1858 Paul Morphy played eight games there at once without looking at the board. He won six and drew two.
- Coaches distinguish two kinds of pin. If the king stands behind the pinned piece, the piece cannot move: it would be illegal. If the queen stands behind it, the piece can move, and that is what Légal's Mate exploits.
- Légal's Mate has many versions, and all of them rest on the same idea: the opponent takes the queen and, in return, the minor pieces are left in place to give mate.
- In 1854, because of the great works that transformed Paris, the café had to move to the rue Saint-Honoré, very close to its old site.
- In 1744 Philidor played two games at once at the café without looking at the board, a feat that amazed the Parisians.
- At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the great player of the café was Louis-Charles de La Bourdonnais. In 1834 he played a very long series of games in London against the Irishman Alexander McDonnell.
- The bishop that takes the queen in Légal's Mate ends up far from its king. That is the lesson: a piece that wanders off to capture can leave its king without defence.

Think about it

Which is worth more, the queen or the mate?



✦ *Inside the machine, a man held back a sneeze.* ✦

STORY 21

The Man Inside the Machine

Kempelen's Turk

✦

Inside the cabinet, the applause sounded muffled. The hidden man could not see the faces in the audience, but he could guess when someone leaned in too close. The floor creaked. A sleeve brushed against the wood. A voice asked whether that thing could really think.

The player held back a sneeze.

Above sat the Turk: turban, moustache, mechanical arm and the unshakeable seriousness of a puppet that never needs to shift in its chair.

Below there were aching knees and a back that had been hunched for far too long.

I prefer to enter this story through that uncomfortable place. From outside, the marvel lies in imagining a machine that plays. From inside, it lies in managing to play without the man being discovered.

The showman opened a door of the cabinet. The audience saw machinery. The player knew the routine and slid into the space that would stay hidden. It was not a disappearance: it was a carefully prepared hiding place.

The doors closed.

The game began.

The opponent took his time to move. Meanwhile, someone explained that the machine was calculating. The hidden man was calculating too, although he would have welcomed an explanation that came with a little more air.

He studied the position that the mechanism allowed him to follow. He found a reply and worked the levers.

The Turk's arm moved forward. The audience murmured.

A lady raised her fan to her mouth.

"It answered at once."

The player smiled where no one could see him.

Not every position was easy. In one of them he had to stop. His opponent had found a threat that demanded precision.

Above, the puppet sat still.

"It's thinking," someone whispered.

This time, at least, the sentence was right. They had just got the subject wrong.

The man tried two lines in his head. He rejected one because of a reply that appeared at the end. He went back to the other. He moved.

The game went on and the audience forgot the pause as soon as they saw a capture. The automaton seemed to have judgement, patience and even a temper. The player knew how many of those qualities he had put into the show himself.

When it was all over, he waited for the hall to empty.

He came out slowly. He stretched one leg, then the other. He wiped his forehead and looked at the puppet. The figure was still sitting there, without a new wrinkle, without heat, without weariness.

We do not know this particular player: we have invented him to bring us closer to the work of those who operated the Turk at different times. The automaton's trick, however, really did have that human basis.

Before putting out the light, the man set the puppet's arm back in place.

The next morning, the machine would receive the applause again. He would try, once more, not to sneeze.

Did you know...?

- The Turk was built by Wolfgang von Kempelen in 1770 to impress Empress Maria Theresa of Austria. For 84 years it toured Europe and America.
- It faced famous people: Benjamin Franklin played it in Paris, and Napoleon in Vienna, in 1809.
- Strong players hid inside, such as Johann Allgaier and William Schlumberger. From inside they followed the game thanks to magnets that moved under each square.
- The writer Edgar Allan Poe published an essay in 1836 in which he tried to prove that there was a person inside.
- The Turk was destroyed by a fire in a Philadelphia museum in 1854. Today an Amazon work platform is called *Mechanical Turk* in its memory.
- Kempelen never claimed that his machine could think. He presented it as a well-made illusion and played it down.
- In 1989 the American illusionist John Gaughan built a replica of the Turk that plays again like the original.
- After Kempelen's death in 1804, the Turk was bought by Johann Nepomuk Mälzel, the mechanic who patented the musicians' metronome.
- Mälzel took it on tour through Europe and, from 1826, through the United States, where thousands of people saw it.
- Besides playing games, the machine performed a much-applauded number: the knight's tour, which means visiting all 64 squares with a knight without repeating any. Here is a complete tour:

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	
8	50	27	12	35	64	25	10	7	8
7	13	36	51	26	11	8	61	24	7
6	28	49	34	59	44	63	6	9	6
5	33	14	37	52	47	60	23	62	5
4	38	29	48	43	58	45	54	5	4
3	15	32	41	46	53	20	57	22	3
2	30	39	2	17	42	55	4	19	2
1	1	16	31	40	3	18	21	56	1
	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	

Knight's tour: from a1 to square 64 without repeating

Think about it

What would you look at to discover the secret?



✦ *"Madam, in America we do not protect kings."* ✦

STORY 22

In America We Do Take Kings

Benjamin Franklin in Paris, around 1780

✦

In 1776 an elderly gentleman with round spectacles and a fur cap arrived in Paris. He wore no wig, unlike all the elegant gentlemen of the city, and that alone attracted attention. His name was Benjamin Franklin. He had invented the lightning rod, he had written books and newspapers, and now he had come to represent a newborn country: the United States of America.

Franklin had a great deal of work. He had to persuade France to help his country in the war against England. But at night, when the meetings were over, he had a weakness: chess. He played in the salons, in the cafés and in his friends' houses, sometimes until the candles went out.

One of his favourite opponents was the Duchess of Bourbon, a lady of the king's family. One afternoon, in a salon full of candelabra, they were playing as usual, amid laughter. The duchess moved a piece without paying attention, and her king was left attacked by one of Franklin's pieces.

Franklin reached out, took the duchess's king and lifted it off the board.

"Monsieur!" she exclaimed. "We do not take kings like that."

Franklin smiled over his spectacles.

"In America we do."

The whole salon burst out laughing. That joke held an entire revolution: Franklin's country had just rid itself of a king.

Years later, Franklin wrote down in a few pages what chess had taught him. He called them The Morals of Chess. The game, he said, teaches us three things that are very useful in life. Foresight: thinking about what will happen after each move. Circumspection: looking at the whole board, not just the part that interests us. And caution: not playing in a hurry.

He also asked people to play fair. No cheating. No distracting your opponent with noise or by hurrying them. No boasting when you win. And, in a game between friends, something that surprised many: warning the other player when they are about to make a mistake.

"Careful with that rook," Franklin would say to whoever was playing him. "There's no fun in winning like that."

For Franklin, you could lose a game of chess. What you should never lose was the friendship.

The Morals of Chess

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), inventor of the lightning rod and one of the founders of the United States, lived in France between 1776 and 1785 as his country's representative. There he played chess almost every night. The anecdote of the Duchess of Bourbon has been told for a long time, but it has no reliable source: it is a good story, and that is how it should be taken.

In today's chess the king is never captured. When it is attacked and cannot escape, it is mate and the game ends. In 1786 Franklin's essay The Morals of Chess was published in Philadelphia, one of the first texts on chess published in America.

Did you know...?

- Franklin learned to play around 1733. He said he studied Italian by playing with a friend: whoever won set the loser a grammar lesson to learn by heart.
- In Paris he became so famous that his face appeared on medallions, plates and snuffboxes.
- Franklin signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.
- In The Morals of Chess he advises not to lose heart when the game is going badly: it can often be saved with patience.
- In today's chess people say "check" to warn that the king is attacked. It used to be the custom to say it out loud; today it is not compulsory.

More to discover

- Franklin wrote *The Morals of Chess* around 1779, while he was living in France, seven years before it was published.
- Besides the lightning rod, Franklin invented bifocal spectacles, which let you see near and far through the same lens, and an iron stove that gave more heat while burning less wood.
- In Philadelphia, Franklin's city, a chess club bearing his name was founded in 1885, one of the oldest in the United States.
- Franklin is in the United States Chess Hall of Fame, not for his strength at the board, but for everything he did to spread the game.
- Franklin's face appears on the United States hundred-dollar bill.
- It is said that in Paris he often played with his neighbour, Madame Brillon, until very late, and that the game could go on even while she was in the bath.
- For years he published an almanac, *Poor Richard's Almanack*, full of sayings that are still quoted, such as "God helps them that help themselves".
- In 1731 he founded in Philadelphia one of the first lending libraries in America, paid for by its members.
- In a letter of 1784, half in jest, he proposed that Parisians should get up earlier to save candles. Some see in it the first idea of changing the clocks.
- Franklin was also a great swimmer: as a young man he swam a long stretch of the Thames in London, and in 1968 he was inducted into the International Swimming Hall of Fame.

THINK ABOUT IT

Franklin said that, in a game between friends, you should warn the other player about their mistakes. Would you?



✦ *Philidor played three games at once without looking at any of them.* ✦

STORY 23

Three Games Without Looking

Philidor, London, May 1783

✦

The room of the club in St James's Street, in London, was packed to the walls. Gentlemen in frock coats, ladies in enormous hats, journalists with their notebooks. They had all come to see something they thought was impossible.

In the middle stood three tables with three boards. In front of each sat a strong player from the city. And in an armchair, with his back to all three, sat a gentleman of fifty-six with his wig slightly crooked: François-André Philidor, the best player in the world.

He was going to play all three games at once without seeing any board.

While he waited, Philidor remembered when he was a boy. He sang in the king's choir at Versailles, and in the breaks he would stand watching the older musicians, who played chess in a corner. Ever since then he had had two passions: music and chess. He had composed operas that all Paris applauded. And he had written a chess book that said something nobody had said before: pawns are the soul of the game.

"Whenever you are ready, Monsieur Philidor," said a gentleman.

The exhibition began. An assistant called out the moves from each board, and Philidor replied without turning round.

"First board: king's pawn two squares. Second board: bishop to c4. Third board: knight to f3."

The audience murmured. Some kept count on a piece of paper, convinced that at some point the old man would mix up the boards, put a piece where it was not, or forget a capture.

It did not happen. Philidor remembered the three positions the way someone remembers three different melodies. Each game had its own music, and he did not confuse a single note. He moved his pawns with care, set them in chains, prepared his attacks slowly, just as he had written in his book.

The hours passed. The candles burned down. When the last game was over, the room fell silent and then burst into applause.

The witnesses did something unusual. They wrote a document describing what they had seen, and they all signed it, one after another.

"What for?" someone asked.

"Because nobody is going to believe us," one of them answered.

The musician of the pawns

François-André Danican Philidor (1726-1795) was both a great composer of operas and the best player of his time. When he was barely over twenty he published his Analysis of the Game of Chess (1749), in which he explained that pawns are the soul of chess: the plan for the whole game depends on how they are placed.

In May 1783, at a club in St James's Street, London, he played three games at once without seeing the boards, and the witnesses signed a document to record it. Philidor died in London in 1795: after the French Revolution he had been put on the list of exiles and could not return to Paris.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- The Philidor Defence, 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d6, is still played today at every level.
- The "Philidor position" is the first defence you learn in endings of rook against rook and pawn.
- In his day people thought that playing blindfold could damage the brain. Today there are players who play dozens of blindfold games at once.
- The Danican Philidor family was a family of musicians in the service of the kings of France for generations.
- Philidor composed more than twenty operas. One of the best known is Tom Jones, from 1765.
- His chess book was translated into many languages and went through more than a hundred editions.

More to discover

- Philidor was born in Dreux, near Paris, and died in London, where he spent long periods playing and composing.
- In 1747, in London, he won a match by a wide margin against the Syrian Philipp Stamma, author of a famous book of problems.
- At only eleven he composed a motet for the royal chapel that Louis XV liked so much that the king gave him five gold louis.
- Philidor was one of the creators of French opéra comique, in which sung parts alternate with spoken ones.
- The mate in which a knight mates the king hemmed in by its own pieces, after a queen sacrifice, is called "Philidor's Legacy" in many languages.

Think about it

Why would Philidor say that the pawns, the smallest pieces, are the soul of the game?



✦ *Napoleon cheated, and the Turk lost its patience.* ✦

STORY 24

The Emperor and the Machine

An attributed anecdote

✦

Napoleon sat down opposite the Turk and studied its motionless face. He had known ministers who hid their feelings better, but none of them kept such a constant expression.

The puppet wore a turban and had its hand ready beside the board. Its owner had just explained that it could take on any player.

"Any player," repeated the emperor.

A small stir ran through the audience.

The game began normally. Napoleon watched the pieces and, now and then, his opponent's arm. He was interested in the game, but also in the limits of the show.

In this anecdote, which circulates with different details, he decided to test it.

He made an impossible move.

The Turk picked up the piece and put it back where it had come from.

A spectator coughed to hide a laugh. The emperor raised an eyebrow.

"It seems to know the rules."

I imagine the man hidden inside the cabinet trying to decide how much anger a machine could show without seeming too human.

Napoleon tried again.

The mechanical arm corrected the move once more.

Now more people smiled. The showman kept the composure of someone who bears no responsibility for his automaton's character.

The emperor tilted his head towards the puppet. Perhaps he was looking for a reaction in its painted eyes. Perhaps it amused him to find that at that table there was an authority that wore no uniform.

Third offence.

For that instant the legend saves a less patient answer: the Turk swept the pieces away.

The little army was scattered across the board and some figures fell on their sides. For a moment no one knew whether to laugh or look at the floor.

Napoleon looked at the pieces. Then at the puppet.

And he laughed.

That laugh lets the scene end without turning it into a duel of pride. The emperor had provoked the machine, and the machine, or the person working it, had found a theatrical way of saying enough.

We need not suppose the automaton was really angry. The Turk was part of a show. An exaggerated correction could amuse more than an explanation.

Nor do we need to invent a score of those moves. What has come down to us is the episode, not a reliable

sequence we can replay like a game.

I like to think of the hidden player waiting for the comments to end. He would have to pick up the pieces he had scattered. The audience would remember a machine that could stand up to the emperor; he would remember a decision taken with his knees folded up.

When it was over, Napoleon could go back to giving orders.

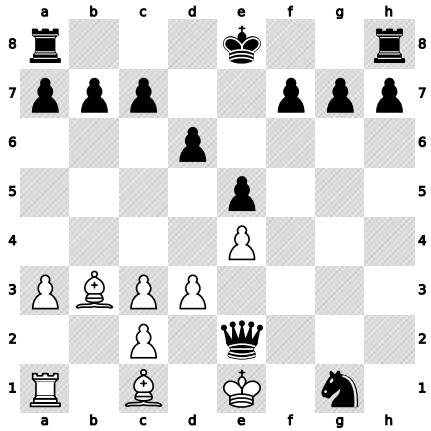
On the board, a knight would still be unable to move like a rook, however much anyone asked it to.

An illegal move is still illegal

A normal game does not allow you to change how the pieces move in order to test your opponent. The knight, for example, lands on a square two steps in one direction and one at right angles. Being powerful off the board does not extend anyone's moves on it.

Did you know...?

- Napoleon was a great lover of chess, but not a strong player. The games attributed to him, such as those he is said to have played on Saint Helena, are of doubtful authenticity.
- Today the rules settle what the Turk settled by sweeping the pieces away. In an official slow game, an illegal move is corrected; the first time, the arbiter adds two minutes to the opponent's clock (one in rapid and blitz), and if the same player does it again, they lose the game.
- Another rule the emperor would have had to respect: "touch-move". If you deliberately touch one of your own pieces, you must move it, as long as it has a legal move.
- The knight, which appears so often in these stories, moves in an L shape: two squares in one direction and one at right angles. It is the only piece that can jump over the others.
- When a player wants to straighten a piece on its square without moving it, they must do it on their own turn and say "I adjust" first. That way no one can demand that they play it.
- It is said that the young Bonaparte played at the Café de la Régence in Paris, the same place where Philidor had played and where, years later, Morphy would play.
- The game said to have been played between Napoleon and the Turk at Schönbrunn Palace in 1809 was published years later. It is very short and ends with mate by Black, the machine, on move 24.



Napoleon v the Turk, Schönbrunn 1809 (attributed game). Final position after 24... ♕e2#

Think about it

Should a real king have advantages when he plays?



✦ *Two white horsemen chased him through the snow.* ✦

STORY 25

Two Knights After Napoleon

A composition by Petrov, 1824

✦

The first time we look at the board, the black king still has a path. He does not look like a fugitive. He carries the small dignity of every chess king: a crown, and the habit of expecting everyone else to step aside.

In this tale he is called Napoleon.

The snow begins where the table ends. The squares become roads, the black pieces a weary army and two white knights riders who know the shortcuts.

I suggest we follow the retreat from behind the king. We will not see the whole battle. We will hear the leaps of the knights, one on each side, forcing him to change course.

The first one gives check.

Napoleon moves to a square that looks safe. There he discovers the threat of the other knight.

"They weren't that close," he mutters.

They weren't. But a knight does not need to cross the squares a walker would have to cover. It jumps. While the king is working out a distance, his pursuers are already preparing another.

The retreat clings to the edge. On one side lies the end of the board; on the other, the ground the riders control. Napoleon finds a way out and takes it. A new jump turns the way out into the start of the next detour.

These are not two knights each chasing on their own. While one forces him to move, the other gets into position to carry on. If both went after the same check, the road might open.

The king runs upwards. Then he crosses the top of the landscape. The squares he leaves behind look much calmer than the ones ahead.

"A little further," he tells himself.

Chase stories know how to make use of that phrase. There can always be a little more road, until there isn't.

In the end, the piece that seemed to be standing still completes the picture. The white king steps aside and uncovers a line of attack that had been waiting the whole adventure.

Mate.

The snow turns back into a wooden surface. The riders get back their carved heads. All that remains is the black king, stopped beside the edge, after a journey far too long for such a small piece.

This chase was imagined by Petrov. It is not a game played by Napoleon: it is a composition that tells a retreat through moves.

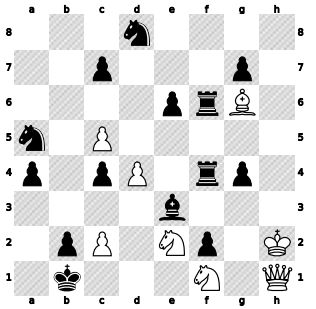
And there is a detail I like to keep when I explain it. In the old position a shorter mate can be found. That stops us from treating it as a perfect shortest-route problem, but it does not erase the invention of the journey.

We could finish sooner. The tale chooses to ride with the knights until they have drawn their map.

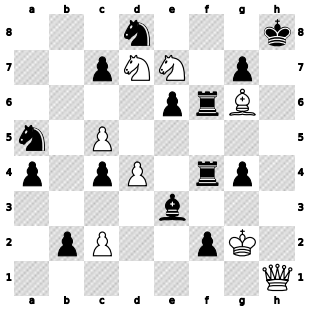
The chase across the board

This is the story-telling sequence of Petrov's composition of 1824: 1.♘d2+ ♔a2 2.♘c3+ ♔a3 3.♘db1+ ♔b4 4.♘a2+ ♔b5 5.♘bc3+ ♔a6 6.♘b4+ ♔a7 7.♘b5+ ♔b8 8.♘a6+ ♔c8 9.♘a7+ ♔d7 10.♘b8+ ♔e7 11.♘c8+ ♔f8 12.♘d7+ ♔g8 13.♘e7+ ♔h8 14.♔g2#.

The knights take turns giving check. At the end, the white king steps back from h2 to g2 and clears the h-file: the queen on h1 gives the decisive check.



Start of the retreat. White to play



After 14.♔g2#: discovered mate by the queen

As a shortest-mate problem the old position has flaws. After 5...♔a6, 6.♕a8# ends things before the chase. Pál Benkő pointed this out and suggested revisions. Here the journey is kept for its value as a chess tale, without calling it a shortest solution or a game of Napoleon's.

Did you know...?

- Alexander Petrov (1794-1867) was the first great Russian player. In 1824 he published one of the first great Russian chess treatises, and this composition appears in it.
- His name lives on in the openings: the Petrov Defence begins 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♞f6, and the best players in the world still play it today.
- In 1812, when Napoleon's army retreated from Moscow, Petrov was 18 years old. His problem turns that retreat into a journey of the black king from one corner of the board to another.
- Petrov dominated chess in his country so completely that he was called "the Philidor of the North", after the great French player of the 18th century.
- In November 1812 Napoleon's army crossed the river Berezina pursued by the Russians. Of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who entered Russia, only a small part came back.
- Two knights and a king cannot force mate against a lone king. They need the help of other pieces, as in Petrov's problem, or a mistake by the opponent.

More to discover

- In many countries the Petrov Defence is called the "Russian Defence". Petrov studied it with his friend Carl Jaenisch, the author of the cage problem.
- Petrov lived in Saint Petersburg and for decades was the strongest player in Russia.

Think about it

Why is it so hard to guess where a knight will come from?



✦ *Eight queens in one room, and none of them bothers the others.* ✦

STORY 26

Eight Queens at Peace

The eight queens problem, 1848

✦

Max Bezzel had spent the whole afternoon with eight queens in his hand. He was not thinking about any game. He was thinking about a question.

How can eight queens be placed on the board so that none attacks another?

A queen controls her rank, her file and her two diagonals. Eight queens are a lot of power for sixty-four squares. Bezzel placed one, then another, and by the fifth or sixth a treacherous diagonal always appeared.

In 1848 he sent the question to the Berlin *Schachzeitung*. He signed with a modest name: "a friend of chess". And he added what was really keeping him awake: how many solutions are there?

All over Germany, boards full of queens appeared. Some readers found one solution and were satisfied. Others found ten and gave up. Nobody knew when to stop looking.

Now let us travel two years later, to the table of Dr Franz Nauck.

According to an often-repeated tradition, though not well documented, Nauck was blind. He did not need to see the board: he went over it with his fingers. The squares were raised; the queens had a peg so they would not fall over. He placed the first one on the a-file and moved on to the next. If a diagonal was threatened, he removed the last queen and tried the next square.

It was slow, orderly work. What others did by leaps, he did in sequence.

File after file, Nauck dictated his findings. When he had finished, the list held ninety-two solutions. In 1850 the Leipzig *Illustrirte Zeitung* published it.

The news reached Göttingen, the desk of the most famous mathematician of his time. Carl Friedrich Gauss was seventy-three. He wrote to his friend Schumacher about the problem. At first he did not find them all, and he followed Nauck's count with interest.

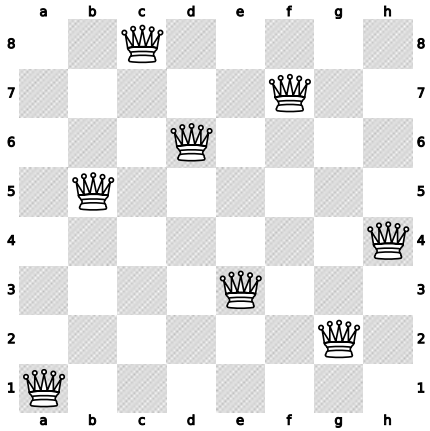
Gauss contributed a lovely idea: each solution can be written as a row of eight numbers, one per file, saying on which rank each queen stands. A whole board fits on a single line.

I like to imagine the three of them together: the one who asked the question, the one who went over it with his hands and the one who turned it into numbers.

The queens are still there. They are the most powerful pieces on the board and yet, in this problem, there is only one way to win: none of them must bother the others.

The 92 solutions

The problem has 92 solutions. If we count as the same those obtained by rotating or reflecting the board, 12 fundamental solutions remain.



One of the 92 solutions

In the solution in the diagram, the queens stand on a1, b5, c8, d6, e3, f7, g2 and h4. Written in Gauss's way, it is the row of numbers 1 5 8 6 3 7 2 4.

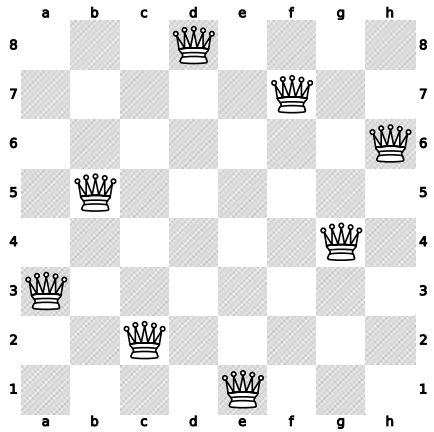
Nauck's method is now called **backtracking**: go forward while you can and, when you can't, undo the last step and try another. In 1972 the computer scientist Edsger Dijkstra used this very problem to teach computer programming.

The problem can be extended to any size: how many ways are there to place n queens on a board of $n \times n$ squares? On a 4×4 board there are 2; on a 10×10 board, 724.

Did you know...?

- Max Bezzel (1824-1871) was a chess problem composer from Ansbach, in Bavaria.
- Gauss ran the Göttingen observatory; he spent almost all his life there, and that is where we have drawn him.
- With rooks the problem is much easier: there are 40,320 ways to place eight rooks without them attacking each other, which is $8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1$.
- There is a sister problem: what is the smallest number of queens needed to attack or occupy every square of the board? Five are enough.
- In 2021 the mathematician Michael Simkin found a formula that estimates how many solutions there are on giant boards.
- If we count as the same the solutions obtained by rotating or reflecting the board, twelve remain. Written as eight-digit numbers, here they are:

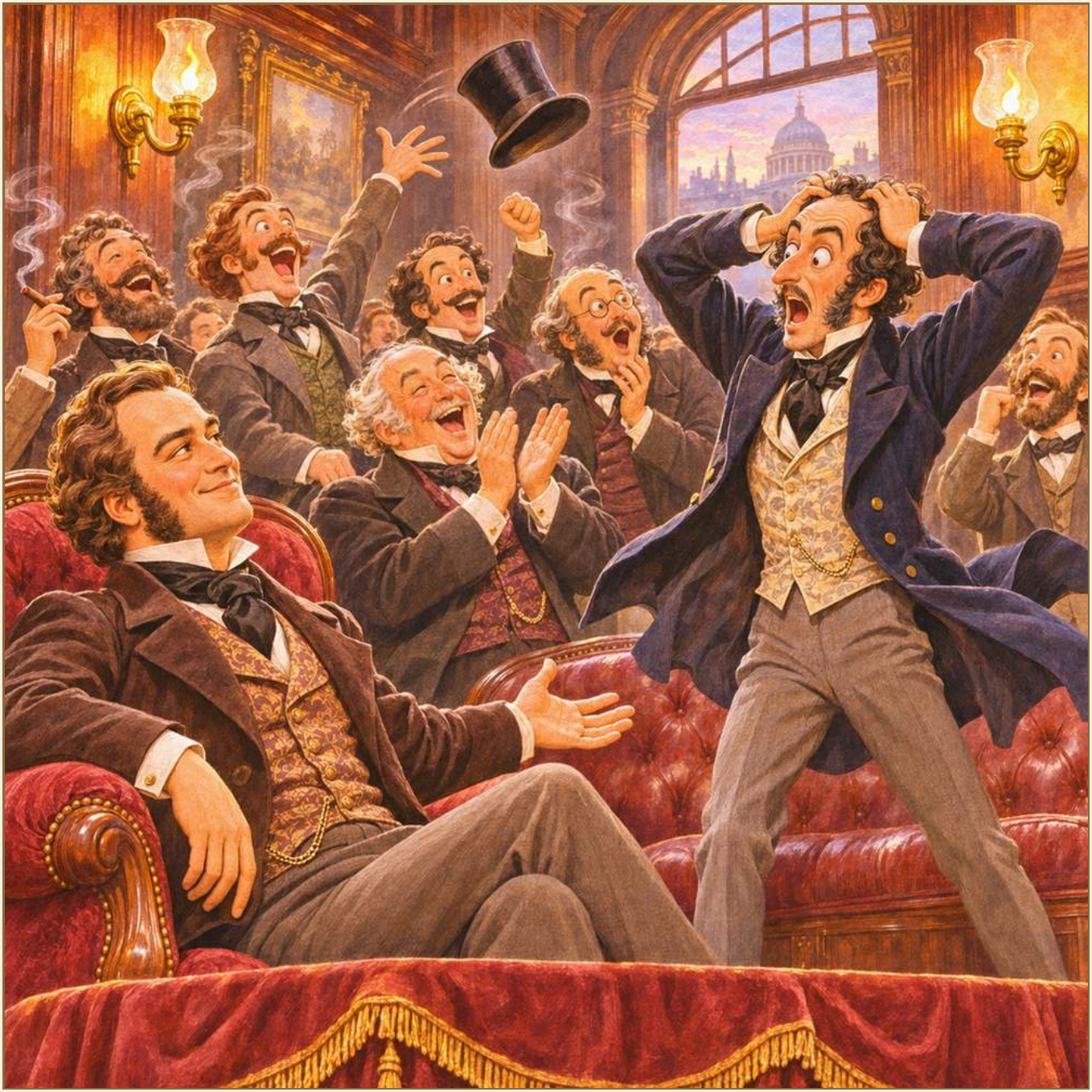
15863724	25741863	27581463
16837425	26174835	35281746
24683175	26831475	35841726
25713864	27368514	36258174



35281746: the only fundamental solution that stays the same when the board is turned half a turn

Think about it

How would you look for all the solutions without repeating any?



✦ *He gave away almost everything and won the most famous game in history.* ✦

STORY 27

The Immortal Game

Anderssen v Kieseritzky, London, 1851

✦

At Simpson's Divan, a café on London's Strand, cigar smoke hung over the tables like fog over the Thames. It was the summer of 1851. London was celebrating the Great Exhibition and the city was full of visitors. Among them, a mathematics teacher had come from Breslau: Adolf Anderssen, who had come to London to play the first great modern international tournament.

That afternoon he was not playing in the tournament. He was playing for pleasure against Lionel Kieseritzky, an elegant master who gave lessons at the Café de la Régence in Paris. It was a friendly game, the kind nobody writes down. Luckily, somebody did.

Kieseritzky opened forcefully and soon won a bishop. Anderssen did not seem worried. On the contrary: he began to offer pieces as if he were handing out invitations.

"Take the rook," he said, with his teacher's calm.

Kieseritzky took it. Onlookers drew near the table. Nobody gives away a rook without a reason, least of all a champion.

"And now the other one," Anderssen added a little later.

A murmur ran through the café. The black pieces entered the white camp devouring everything they found: the queen took a pawn; the bishop, a rook; and then the queen took the other rook. From outside it looked like a massacre. Kieseritzky had so much extra material that any amateur would have bet on him.

But Anderssen was looking at something else. While the black queen strolled far from her king, his minor pieces, two knights and a bishop, had been settling around the black king like the threads of a net. None of them was powerful alone. Together they formed a trap.

Then came the final blow. Anderssen put his queen within reach of a black knight. Kieseritzky captured it, because he had no choice. And the white bishop moved forward one square.

It was mate. With two knights and a bishop, against an entire army.

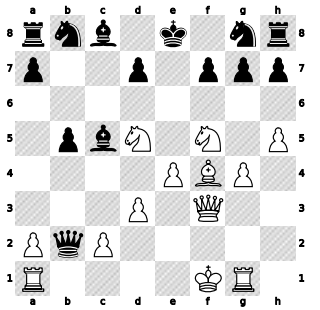
Kieseritzky sat staring at the board. Then he did something that does him credit: instead of hiding the game, he sent it to Paris to be published in the magazine he himself edited, *La Régence*. If one had to lose, better to lose something beautiful.

Years later, the Austrian master Ernst Falkbeer gave it the name it still bears: the Immortal Game. Today computer analysis has found better defences for Black and the odd mistake by White. It does not matter. The Immortal is not remembered for being perfect, but for

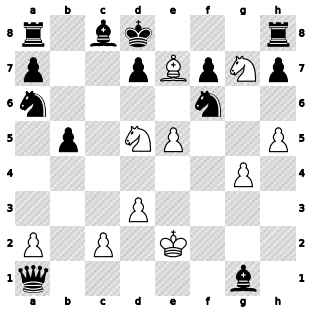
teaching something every player discovers one day: that pieces are worth what their work is worth, and that a well-placed knight can weigh more than a queen lost in a corner.

A NET OF MINOR PIECES

The game began with the King's Gambit, the favourite opening of the 19th century: 1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4. White gives up a pawn to open lines and launch an attack.



After 17... ♕xb2. White to play



Final position after 23. ♗e7#

In the first diagram, the black queen has just taken on b2. She threatens both white rooks. Anderssen replies 18. ♗d6!!, letting the rook on g1 go, and then the one on a1.

The game ended like this: 18. ♗d6 ♗xg1 19.e5 ♕xa1+ 20.♔e2 ♘a6 21. ♘xg7+ ♔d8 22. ♕f6+!! ♘xf6 23. ♗e7#. In the second diagram, White has only two knights and a bishop to give mate, and that is enough.

DID YOU KNOW...?

- The London tournament of 1851 was the first great modern international chess tournament. It was organised by the Englishman Howard Staunton, who gave his name to the pieces we use today.
- In 1852 Anderssen won another equally famous game, against Jean Dufresne. Because of its beauty it is called the "Evergreen Game".
- Simpson's Divan, on London's Strand, was the most famous chess café in England in the 19th century. It later became a restaurant.
- Kieseritzky (1806-1853) was born in Tartu, in present-day Estonia. He arrived in Paris in 1839 and made his living there giving lessons and playing games for money at the Café de la Régence.
- Anderssen taught mathematics at a secondary school in Breslau, today Wrocław, in Poland. He always played chess as an amateur.
- In the Romantic era it was considered bad form to decline a sacrifice. Many players preferred to lose while attacking rather than win while defending.
- Anderssen was never world champion, because that official title did not exist until 1886. But for years he was considered the best player in the world, until Paul Morphy beat him in Paris in 1858.
- In 1866 he lost a match against Wilhelm Steinitz, who twenty years later would become the first official world champion.
- In the King's Gambit, White gives up the f-pawn to open the file and attack f7, the weakest point in the black camp.
- The Immortal lasted only 23 moves. White finished with three minor pieces and a few pawns against almost the whole black army.

THINK ABOUT IT

Is the piece that moves most always worth more, or the one that best helps the others?



✦ *Morphy wanted to listen to the opera; his opponents did not.* ✦

STORY 28

Before the Final Chord

Morphy, Paris, 1858

✦

Morphy had gone to the opera to listen. That seems a simple enough intention, until two chess lovers discover he is sitting right next to them.

The duke kept a chessboard in his box. The count pulled up a chair. Between them they offered him a game which, in truth, they were already setting up.

"We shall consult on Black," said one of them.

Morphy looked towards the stage. Then he accepted.

I imagine him trying to sit so that he could see the pieces and still follow the music. His opponents, on the other hand, had found a way to attend one performance while discussing something else entirely.

The first moves went by without a sound. Morphy took the centre and began to bring out his pieces. A knight, a bishop, the queen. Each one found a job.

The noblemen conferred.

"If we take here..."

"But then..."

The young man waited. On stage someone was singing a phrase he would have liked to hear in full.

The moment came to choose between grabbing a pawn and continuing his development. Morphy chose to bring another piece into play. He was not collecting trophies. He was preparing an army that could act together.

Black pushed a pawn to drive away a bishop and gained, for an instant, the feeling of taking the initiative.

Morphy gave up a knight.

The capture opened lines. His bishop came in with check and the black king remained in the centre, surrounded by pieces that could not find the time to come out.

The duke and the count leaned over the board. The conversation grew quieter.

Morphy castled queenside. His rook appeared on the open file like a performer who walks on stage exactly when the music needs him.

Then he gave it up.

A rook for a knight seemed a high price. But the calculation did not end with the capture. The other rook took over the same file. The black pieces were still defending against immediate threats; the white ones could keep linking them together.

The queen was left.

Morphy took her to b8 with check. The black knight had to capture her.

If you stopped to count the pieces at that moment, you might think the young man had lost too much. I would ask you to wait one more move.

The rook went up to d8.

The bishop on g5 protected it. The black king could neither take it nor escape the net the two had woven.

Mate.

The count looked at the duke. The duke looked back at Morphy. Perhaps one of them wanted to comment on the final combination. In this version, the young man just smiled and turned his chair towards the stage.

The music had not finished yet.

I like to think that, at last, he could listen to it without interruptions. On the board he had already assembled a small orchestra: every piece had come in on time, and the last note had been played by a rook and a bishop.

The complete Opera Game

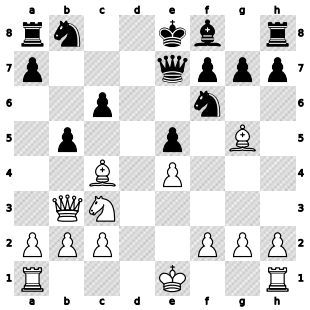
Paul Morphy played White against the Duke of Brunswick and Count Isouard, who consulted on Black. Paris, 1858. Result: 1-0. The dialogue in the tale is fictional; the moves that follow are those of the game.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 ♗g4 4.dxe5 ♗xf3 5.♕xf3 dxe5 6.♗c4 ♘f6 7.♕b3 ♕e7 8.♘c3 c6 9.♗g5 b5 10.♘xb5 cxb5 11.♗xb5+ ♘bd7 12.O-O-O ♖d8 13.♖xd7 ♖xd7 14.♖d1 ♕e6 15.♗xd7+ ♘xd7 16.♕b8+ ♘xb8 17.♖d8#.

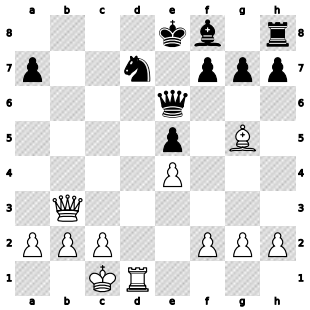
After 9...b5, Morphy gives up the knight with 10.♘xb5. Black takes it and 11.♗xb5+ opens the attack. Castling queenside on move 12 places a rook on the d-file.

13.♖xd7 removes a defender. After 13...♖xd7, 14.♖d1 brings the other rook to the same file. The activity of the white pieces makes up for the material given away.

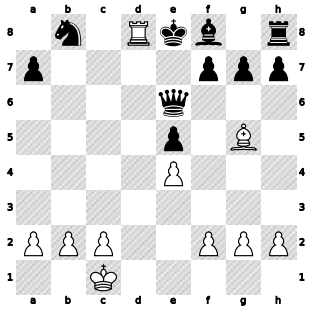
After 15...♘xd7 comes 16.♕b8+. Only 16...♘xb8 stops the check, but it pulls the knight away from d7. Then 17.♖d8# ends the game. The bishop on g5 protects d8 and controls e7.



After 9...b5: Morphy prepares the sacrifice



After 15...♘xd7: White to play and mate in two



17.♖d8#: rook and bishop complete the mate

How to read the score: x means a capture, + a check and # mate. O-O-O is queenside castling. In ♘bd7, the b tells us it is the knight that stood on the b-file that moves. In PGN files, used to replay a game in a chess program, the pieces are written with the letters K, Q, R, B and N.

Did you know...?

- Morphy was 21 when he played this game. Soon afterwards he went back to New Orleans and left competitive chess for good.

THINK ABOUT IT

If your pieces were an orchestra, would any of them not be playing?



✦ *The smallest one went further than anyone.* ✦

STORY 29

The Pawn Nobody Noticed

A composition by Sam Loyd, 1858

✦

The queen was used to being chosen for great occasions. If anyone asked which piece would give mate, she found plenty of reasons to raise her hand.

The rook had no doubts about its usefulness either. The bishop knew long diagonals. The knight had learned to turn up where nobody expected it.

The pawn on b2 listened.

In the Sam Loyd problem we call "Excelsior", that little pawn starts a long way from promotion. At first sight, it is hard to imagine it as the hero of the ending.

Loyd plays with that impression. We are going to let the pawn hear it as if it were a conversation among the pieces.

"It hasn't got time in five moves," says the rook.

"It would have to cross almost the whole board," adds the bishop.

The pawn looks ahead.

I would not give it a pep talk. I would give it its first chance.

It advances two squares.

The black army replies with a rook check. Now the pawn can capture it. It changes file and arrives on c5.

Two decisions have changed the place from which it was being judged.

The big pieces stop talking for a moment.

The pawn goes on to c6. It is not advancing for the sake of it. Each step keeps up threats that force the other army to reply. In a composition, the hero's path also depends on what the opponent does.

A black piece moves to defend itself.

The pawn captures on b7.

The eighth rank no longer looks like a distant frontier. There is a black knight on a8 and a chance of promotion just behind that last capture.

"It's still a pawn," someone mutters.

That is true.

Then it takes on a8 and becomes a queen. In the main line, that promotion gives mate. It can also become a bishop and produce the same ending.

The black king has not moved to where the pawn is: it is the small piece that has built the journey needed to reach him.

Let us imagine the silence among those who had ruled it out.

They do not need to apologise with a great ceremony. It is enough to look again at the square b2, empty since the first move, and admit that there was an answer there they did not want to consider.

I like this tale because it does not demand that all pieces be equal in order to matter. The queen is still powerful. The rook keeps its lines. The knight does not lose its jump.

The pawn had something different: a particular road that none of the others could travel in its place.

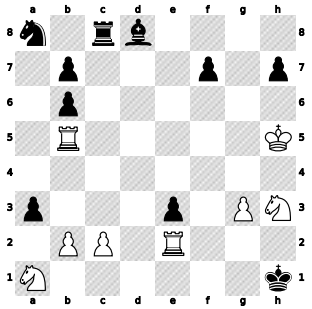
When we put the set away, it becomes a small wooden figure again. But it is now hard to put it back in the box with the same indifference.

It has gone from b2 to a8 in five moves. The board was the same. Our way of seeing its possibilities was not.

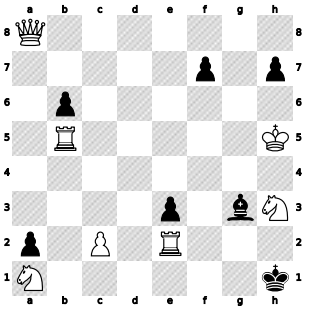
The journey from b2 to a8

The main line of Sam Loyd's Excelsior is 1.b4! ♖c5+ 2.bxc5 a2 3.c6 ♗c7 4.cxb7 ♗xg3 5.bxa8=♕#. 5.bxa8=♗# also mates. The pawn that stood on b2 completes the journey in five white moves.

It does not advance without paying attention to the opponent. The first move prepares rook threats; after the capture on c5 it threatens ♖b1#. The successive advances and captures change the defences available.



Excelsior: the hero starts on b2



5.bxa8=♕#: the promotion gives mate

The narration gives the pieces a voice to show the surprise of choosing the least expected pawn. The line given is the main one; it is not the only possible sequence if Black chooses other defences.

Did you know...?

- Sam Loyd (1841-1911) was America's great inventor of puzzles. He published Excelsior in 1858, at the age of 17.
- The title comes from a poem by Longfellow about a young man who climbs a mountain without stopping, like the pawn in the problem.
- Loyd bet a friend that he could not say which white piece would NOT give the mate. The friend chose the one that seemed most useless, the pawn on b2... precisely the one that mates.
- Excelsior is a mate-in-five problem: White mates in five moves against any defence.

More to discover

- Loyd published his problems in newspapers and magazines for more than fifty years, and edited the chess column of several of them.
- Loyd published his first problem at only fourteen, in a New York newspaper.
- He was also famous for the "15 puzzle", the one with tiles that slide in a frame. Loyd claimed to have invented it, although today we know it was not his.
- His son collected thousands of his puzzles in an enormous book, the *Cyclopedia of Puzzles*, published in 1914.

Think about it

Which character seemed secondary and turned out to be decisive?



✦ *On the other side of the looking-glass, the whole world was a game of chess.* ✦

STORY 30

Alice, White Pawn

Through the Looking-Glass, Lewis Carroll, 1871

✦

Alice was bored in the drawing room, by the fireplace, playing with her black kitten. Above the fireplace there was a large mirror. And Alice wondered what the house on the other side would be like.

"Let's pretend the glass has gone all soft like gauze," she said.

And the glass went soft, and Alice passed through to the other side.

At first everything seemed the same, only back to front. Then she went out into the garden and climbed a little hill. From there she saw a very strange landscape. The country was divided into squares by narrow brooks running from side to side, and between them green hedges cut it from top to bottom.

"It's a huge chessboard!" she exclaimed. "And a game is being played all over the world! I wish I were one of the pieces! I wouldn't mind being a pawn, if only I could join in... though of course I would rather be a queen."

Beside her appeared the Red Queen, very stiff and very serious.

"That's easily managed," she said. "You can be one of the White Queen's pawns. You start on the second square. When you reach the eighth, you'll be a queen."

And so Alice's journey began. As pawns do on their first move, she crossed two squares at once: she got on a train that jumped over a brook. On the fourth square she met Tweedledum and Tweedledee, two fat brothers who were always quarrelling. On the fifth she went into a very odd shop kept by a sheep, which suddenly turned into a boat. On the sixth she talked to Humpty Dumpty, an egg sitting on a wall who thought he was very clever. On the seventh, a forest, the White Knight saved her from the Red Knight and went with her as far as the last brook.

Alice jumped. As she landed on the eighth square she felt something heavy on her head. She put up her hands and touched a golden crown.

"I'm a queen!" she cried.

There was a banquet, with a pudding that talked and a soup tureen with a queen peeping out of it. Everything became so chaotic that Alice, fed up, grabbed the Red Queen and shook her hard. The

queen grew smaller, softer, rounder... until she turned into the black kitten.

Alice was back in her armchair, by the fireplace. She had captured the Red Queen and won the game.

A PAWN WHO BECAME A QUEEN

Lewis Carroll was the pen name of Charles Dodgson, a mathematics lecturer at the University of Oxford. In 1871 he published Through the Looking-Glass, the sequel to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. The book begins with a chess problem: "White Pawn (Alice) to play, and win in eleven moves".

It is not a real game. Carroll himself explained that the moves follow the story more than the rules: White moves several times in a row and nobody pays attention to a check. But Alice's journey really is a pawn's: she advances up the d-file, square by square, to the eighth rank, where she is promoted.

[DIAG]

DID YOU KNOW...?

- The girl who inspired the Alice books was called Alice Liddell. She was the daughter of the dean of the Oxford college where Carroll taught.
- The original illustrations are by John Tenniel, the most famous cartoonist of Punch magazine.
- Tweedledum, Tweedledee and Humpty Dumpty were characters from English nursery rhymes before they appeared in the book.
- The Red Queen says a very famous line: in her country you have to run as fast as you can just to stay in the same place.
- Carroll also invented riddles, word games and logic puzzles for his friends.

MORE TO DISCOVER

- Lewis Carroll was the pen name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a mathematics lecturer at Christ Church, Oxford. He was also one of the best amateur photographers of his day.
- At the beginning of the book, Carroll drew the position and wrote that the white pawn, Alice, plays and wins in eleven moves. He himself admitted that White and Black do not always move in turn, as real chess requires.
- On the book's board, each brook Alice crosses is the step from one rank to the next. When she reaches the eighth rank she becomes a queen, like a pawn that promotes.
- The same book contains the poem "Jabberwocky", full of invented words that have passed into many languages.
- In 1973 the biologist Leigh Van Valen gave the name "Red Queen hypothesis" to the idea that species have to keep changing just so as not to fall behind.
- On the book's board the pieces are not white and black but white and red, as in many English games of the time.
- Many readers believe that the White Knight, clumsy and kind, who keeps falling off his horse, is a portrait of Carroll himself.
- Carroll also invented word games, such as "doublets": getting from one word to another by changing a single letter at a time.

THINK ABOUT IT

If you were a chess piece, which one would you like to be, and why?



✦ *Two bishops sacrificed themselves to open up the castle.* ✦

STORY 31

The Two Bishops of Amsterdam

Lasker v Bauer, Amsterdam, 1889

✦

In the summer of 1889 a young German of twenty arrived in Amsterdam, thin, with a moustache and a cigar he almost never lit. His name was Emanuel Lasker. He studied mathematics, read philosophy books and had an odd idea about chess: he said you did not play against the pieces, but against the person sitting opposite.

In the Amsterdam tournament he was paired against Johann Bauer, a solid and careful Austrian master. Bauer had castled with care. His king sat behind a row of pawns, protected by a knight, like a lord inside his castle.

Lasker looked at the castle for a long time. His two bishops were aimed at it from far away, one along the white squares and the other along the black.

Bauer, confident, had taken his queen to the other side of the board. He captured one of Lasker's knights on h5 and waited for the logical reply: that White would win the piece back.

But Lasker did not win it back. He took his white-squared bishop and hurled it at the pawn on h7, right next to the black king.

"Check."

The onlookers held their breath. A free bishop? Bauer thought about it and took it with his king. The white queen came in on h5 and took the knight with check. The black king had to go back to g8.

Then Lasker did something nobody expected. He took his other bishop, the black-squared one, and gave it away too, on g7.

Now there were no white bishops on the board. But there was no castle either. The black king had been left alone, with no pawns in front of it, watching the white queen and rook approach from the other side.

"There's nowhere to hide," murmured Bauer.

To avoid being mated, he had to give up his queen. Lasker had given away two bishops and got back much more. Bauer fought on for a good while, but the game was already decided.

That night, in the cafés of Amsterdam, everyone was talking about the young man with the two bishops. Five years later, Lasker was world champion. And that attack is still taught in chess schools under his name: the Lasker sacrifice.

The double bishop sacrifice

Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941) was world champion for 27 years, from 1894 to 1921, longer than anyone in history. He played this game at the age of twenty in the Amsterdam tournament of 1889, against Johann Bauer.

1.f4 d5 2.e3 ♘f6 3.b3 e6 4.♗b2 ♗e7 5.♗d3 b6 6.♘c3 ♗b7 7.♘f3 ♘bd7 8.O-O O-O 9.♘e2 c5 10.♘g3 ♕c7 11.♘e5 ♘xe5 12.♗xe5 ♕c6 13.♕e2 a6 14.♘h5 ♘xh5.

15.♗xh7+! ♔xh7 16.♕xh5+ ♔g8 17.♗xg7!! ♔xg7 18.♕g4+ ♔h7 19.♖f3 e5 20.♖h3+ ♕h6 21.♖xh6+ ♔xh6 22.♕d7. The white queen attacks both black bishops and wins one of them. White won on move 38.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Lasker was a doctor of mathematics. One of his results in algebra is still studied at university.
- He was a friend of Albert Einstein, with whom he went for walks and argued about science.
- He invented a draughts game called Lasca, which is still sold.
- Lasker was not the first to sacrifice two bishops like this: there are games from 1867 and 1884 with the same idea. But his is the most famous.
- He said that in chess lies and hypocrisy do not last long: the board ends up exposing them.

More to discover

- Lasker was born in Berlinchen, today Barlinek in Poland, and studied mathematics in Germany.
- He won the title in 1894 from Wilhelm Steinitz, who was 58, and lost it in 1921 in Havana to José Raúl Capablanca.
- It was said that Lasker played against the person and not only against the position: he sometimes chose moves that were not the best, but which he knew would make his opponent uncomfortable.
- In 1935, at the age of 66, he finished third in the great Moscow tournament, without losing a single game and ahead of Capablanca.
- Because he was Jewish, in 1933 he had to leave Germany. He lived in the Soviet Union and then in New York, where he died in 1941.
- His *Manual of Chess*, from 1925, is still in print almost a hundred years later.
- The match with Steinitz was played in 1894 in three cities: New York, Philadelphia and Montreal.
- He defended the title against Marshall, Tarrasch, Janowski and Schlechter. Against Schlechter, in 1910, he only managed to level the match in the last game.
- As well as a chess player and mathematician, he was a good bridge player and wrote about philosophy.
- A defence to the Queen's Gambit bears his name: the Lasker Defence.
- Lasker lost only one title match in his whole life: the one in 1921, against Capablanca.
- His older brother, Berthold, a doctor, was his first chess teacher.

Think about it

When is it worth giving up pieces in exchange for attacking the king?



✦ *Asking for a queen would lose; a rook was enough.* ✦

STORY 32

The Rook Nobody Expected

The Saavedra study, 1895

✦

The position took up little space in the newspaper: two kings, a pawn and a rook. Around it were news items that would disappear the next day. Those four pieces, on the other hand, were about to stay in the memory of chess.

Saavedra looked again.

The white pawn could advance and promote. A queen seemed the natural choice. Who would give up the most powerful piece when all he had to do was ask for it?

The difficulty came afterwards.

The black rook found a check and offered itself for capture. If the new queen took it, the black king would have no legal moves and not be in check.

Stalemate.

A draw.

I suggest you sit beside the man reading the newspaper. There is no need to imagine a flash of genius. Sometimes, discovering something means not getting up when everyone else thinks it is already settled.

Saavedra goes through the sequence again.

The white king has dodged the checks. The pawn waits on c7. The black rook comes back to d4 and prepares its last resource.

Asking for a queen leads into the trap.

In his mind, Saavedra sets the queen aside.

What other piece can he choose?

A bishop. A knight. A rook.

The rook does not look along diagonals. That limitation changes the net around the black king.

Saavedra puts it on c8.

Now it threatens to come in along the a-file and give mate. Black must defend, but no longer has the same stalemate resource. The less powerful piece keeps a possibility that the queen had shut off.

He goes back to the beginning. He does not want a bright idea to become a solution just because he likes it. He checks the checks, the king's squares, the capture that used to lead to a draw.

The idea holds.

In our scene there are other people around the newspaper. One asks if he has found a mistake. Another insists that a rook cannot achieve more than a queen.

Saavedra lets them follow the line.

First they see the change of piece. Then its consequence.

That brief interval interests me: the moment when an answer seems absurd because we have not yet made the effort to check it.

The study became linked to Saavedra's name because of that discovery. He did not invent a promotion rule. He used a possibility that was already in the rules and that, in that position, allowed White to win.

The white rook stays on the board.

It does not have to pretend to be a queen. Its advantage lies precisely in not being one.

When the newspaper is folded, the news closes in again around the little diagram. Saavedra could have turned the page like any other reader. He stopped.

That is the gesture I would keep. After proud kings, apparent machines, fugitive knights and pieces that seem of little account, a man decides to look once more.

Sometimes, to find a story, that is all it takes.

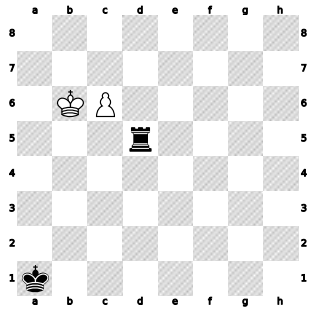
Why Saavedra needs a rook

In the usual position of the study, White has a king on b6 and a pawn on c6; Black, a king on a1 and a rook on d5. White to play.

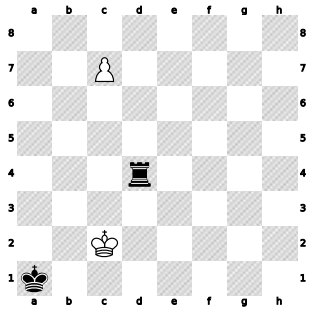
The main route is 1.c7 ♖d6+ 2.♔b5 ♖d5+ 3.♔b4 ♖d4+ 4.♔b3 ♖d3+ 5.♔c2 ♖d4!.

Now 6.c8=♕? allows 6...♖c4+! 7.♕xc4, and the black king is stalemated: it is not in check and has no legal move. It is a draw.

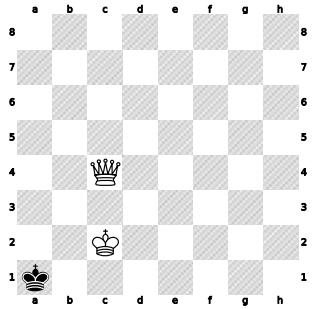
The solution is 6.c8=♖!!, threatening ♖a8 and mate. After 6...♖a4 7.♔b3, Black must lose the rook or allow ♖c1#. We do not finish the line with an imaginary mate: the study has shown a winning position.



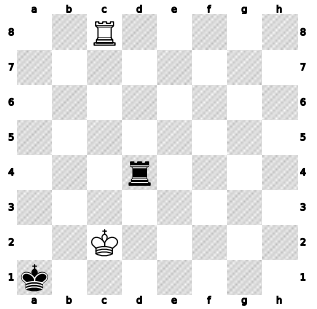
Starting position. White to play and win



After 5...♖d4: the promotion must be chosen



6.c8=♕? ♖c4+ 7.♕xc4: the black king is stalemated



6.c8=♖!!: the underpromotion keeps the win

Choosing a rook, bishop or knight instead of a queen is called underpromotion. The queen controls more squares, but here that extra control creates the stalemate Black needs. The rook wins precisely because it does not close all those exits in the same way.

Did you know...?

- Fernando Saavedra (1847-1922) was a priest from Seville who lived in Glasgow. The position had been published earlier by the Frenchman Georges Barbier, who was convinced it was a draw. In 1895 Saavedra found the promotion to a rook, and the study has borne his name ever since.

THINK ABOUT IT

Would you always choose the most powerful option?



✦ *Von Bardeleben stood up, left the room and never came back.* ✦

STORY 33

The Rook Nobody Could Take

Steinitz v von Bardeleben, Hastings, 1895

✦

In August 1895 the small English seaside town of Hastings brought together the best players in the world. There were champions from Russia, Germany, the United States and England. And there was an older man, short, with a big beard and a walking stick, who had been the first world champion: Wilhelm Steinitz. He was 59. The year before he had lost the title to the young Lasker, and many thought he was no longer the player he had been.

In the tenth round he was paired against Curt von Bardeleben, a tall and elegant German master.

The game began calmly, but Steinitz was preparing something. His pieces crept closer and closer to the black king, which had not been able to castle. And then, suddenly, his rook entered the seventh rank and gave check.

"He's giving it away!" someone in the audience whispered.

It was true. The rook was within reach of the black king. But if the king took it, the white queen and knight would mate. Von Bardeleben moved his king to one side.

The rook jumped again. Check. The king stepped aside. Check again. And again. The white rook went from square to square along the seventh rank, always next to the king, always offering itself, and nobody dared touch it. Taking it would have been like putting your hand in a bear trap.

After the fourth check, von Bardeleben sat staring at the board. He got up, left the room and did not come back. His clock kept running until his time ran out and he lost the game.

The spectators crowded round Steinitz. They wanted to know what would have happened. The old champion moved the pieces slowly and showed them the finish: a mate in ten moves, with the queen chasing the black king all over the board.

"If he had taken it... mate."

Some say von Bardeleben stormed off in anger, and some say he left so as not to have to resign in front of everyone. Nobody knows what he was thinking. What we do know is that the rook nobody could take made this one of the most beautiful games in history. It won the tournament's brilliancy prize, and more than a hundred years later it is still taught in every chess school.

A POISONED ROOK

Wilhelm Steinitz (1836-1900) was the first official world champion, from 1886 to 1894. This game, played in the Hastings tournament of 1895 against Curt von Bardeleben, is one of the most famous in history.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗c4 ♗c5 4.c3 ♘f6 5.d4 exd4 6.cxd4 ♗b4+ 7.♘c3 d5 8.exd5 ♘xd5 9.O-O ♗e6 10.♗g5 ♗e7 11.♗xd5 ♗xd5 12.♘xd5 ♕xd5 13.♗xe7 ♘xe7 14.♖e1 f6 15.♕e2 ♕d7 16.♖ac1 c6 17.d5! cxd5 18.♘d4 ♔f7 19.♘e6 ♖hc8 20.♕g4 g6 21.♘g5+ ♔e8 22.♖xe7+!

22...♔f8 23.♖f7+ ♔g8 24.♖g7+ ♔h8 25.♖xh7+. The rook cannot be taken: if 22...♕xe7, 23.♖xc8+ wins; if 22...♔xe7, 23.♖e1+ and White wins. This is where von Bardeleben walked out. Steinitz then showed the mate: 25...♔g8 26.♖g7+ ♔h8 27.♕h4+ ♔xg7 28.♕h7+ ♔f8 29.♕h8+ ♔e7 30.♕g7+ ♔e8 31.♕g8+ ♔e7 32.♕f7+ ♔d8 33.♕f8+ ♕e8 34.♘f7+ ♔d7 35.♕d6#.

[DIAG]

DID YOU KNOW...?

- Steinitz was born in Prague in 1836, the youngest of thirteen children.
- He was the first to explain that chess has laws: that you must pile up small advantages before attacking.
- As a young man he played very boldly; as an older man, very cautiously. He said the king is a strong piece that can defend itself.
- The Hastings tournament of 1895 was won by an unknown 22-year-old: Harry Pillsbury.
- Von Bardeleben went on playing for many years and won several tournaments. But everyone remembers him for this game.

MORE TO DISCOVER

- Steinitz won the title from Johannes Zukertort in a match played in three American cities: New York, St Louis and New Orleans.
- A very proud remark is attributed to him: that he could play against God and give Him a pawn start.
- He wrote books and for years edited a magazine, the *International Chess Magazine*, where he explained his ideas and argued with anyone who disagreed.
- He died in New York in 1900, poor and ill. Today he is considered the father of positional chess.
- Twenty-two masters played at Hastings in 1895, almost all the best in the world. It was one of the strongest tournaments of the nineteenth century.
- An opening bears his name: the Steinitz Gambit of the Vienna Game, in which the white king goes for a walk very early.
- He walked with a stick and was short, but very combative: in his articles he argued with almost every master of his time.
- Curt von Bardeleben (1861-1924) was a German nobleman who made his living from chess and journalism in Berlin.
- The game against von Bardeleben won the prize for the most brilliant game of the tournament.

THINK ABOUT IT

Why is it sometimes most dangerous to take what you are offered?



✦ *He repeated the whole list, and then recited it backwards.* ✦

STORY 34

Pillsbury's Memory

Hastings, 1895

✦

In the summer of 1895, when the great champions arrived in Hastings, nobody noticed a young American of 22 with a round face and short hair. His name was Harry Nelson Pillsbury. He came from Boston and it was the first time he had played a tournament in Europe. The journalists did not even know how to spell his name.

In the second round he was paired against Siegbert Tarrasch, the German doctor, one of the favourites. Tarrasch was famous for his rules: he knew how every position ought to be played. Pillsbury did not seem worried. He kept the position closed and, little by little, launched his pawns against the black king like a wave rising slowly. On move 52, his queen gave mate on h7.

Round after round, the unknown player kept on winning. In the end Pillsbury finished first, ahead of Chigorin, of Lasker, who was world champion, of Tarrasch and of Steinitz. Nobody could believe it.

But the most astonishing thing about Pillsbury was not how he played while looking at the board. It was how he played without looking at it. He would sit with his back turned, sometimes blindfolded, and play twenty opponents at once. They moved, someone called out the move and he answered without hesitating. In 1902, in Moscow, he played twenty-two games at once in this way.

Some people thought there was a trick. That is how one of the most famous stories in chess was born. It is said that some professors wanted to test his memory. They prepared a list of about thirty very strange words, in several languages: names of medicines, of cities, of illnesses.

"Antiphlogistine. Periosteum. Takadiastase. Plasmon. Ambrosia..." they read, slowly.

Pillsbury listened with his eyes closed. When they had finished, he repeated the whole list without a single mistake. The professors looked at one another.

"And now," said Pillsbury, "backwards."

And he recited it from the last word to the first. According to the story, the next day he still remembered it.

Pillsbury died very young, at only 33. But at Hastings he showed that an unknown player can beat all the champions put together. And his memory became a legend.

The unknown who won at Hastings

Harry Nelson Pillsbury (1872-1906) won the Hastings tournament of 1895 with 16½ points out of 21, ahead of Chigorin, Lasker, Tarrasch and Steinitz. This is his second-round game, of 6 August, against Siegbert Tarrasch.

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♗g5 ♗e7 5.♘f3 ♘bd7 6.♖c1 O-O 7.e3 b6 8.cxd5 exd5 9.♗d3 ♗b7 10.O-O c5 11.♖e1 c4 12.♗b1 a6 13.♘e5 b5 14.f4 ♖e8 15.♕f3 ♘f8 16.♘e2 ♘e4 17.♗xe7 ♖xe7 18.♗xe4 dxe4 19.♕g3 f6 20.♘g4 ♔h8 21.f5 ♕d7 22.♖f1 ♖d8 23.♖f4 ♕d6 24.♕h4 ♖de8 25.♘c3 ♗d5 26.♘f2 ♕c6 27.♖f1 b4 28.♘e2 ♕a4 29.♘g4 ♘d7 30.♖4f2 ♔g8 31.♘c1 c3 32.b3 ♕c6 33.h3 a5 34.♘h2 a4 35.g4 axb3 36.axb3 ♖a8 37.g5 ♖a3 38.♘g4 ♗xb3 39.♖g2 ♔h8 40.gxf6 gxf6 41.♘xb3 ♖xb3 42.♘h6 ♖g7 43.♖xg7 ♔xg7 44.♕g3+ ♔xh6 45.♔h1 ♕d5 46.♖g1 ♕xf5 47.♕h4+ ♕h5 48.♕f4+ ♕g5 49.♖xg5 fxg5 50.♕d6+ ♔h5 51.♕xd7 c2 52.♕xh7#.

While Black was attacking on the queenside, Pillsbury calmly prepared the advance of his g- and f-pawns against the black king. He arrived just in time: a black pawn was one square away from promoting.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Pillsbury learned to play at 16, quite late for a champion.
- Between 1898 and 1904 he was the player hidden inside Ajeeb, an automaton that played chess in New York.
- In his blindfold exhibitions he sometimes played games of draughts and a game of cards at the same time.
- The famous list included words from several languages, names of medicines and also Mississippi, Philadelphia and Cincinnati.

More to discover

- Pillsbury was born in Somerville, near Boston, and learned chess in that city's clubs.
- He played more than twenty blindfold games at once, one of the great records of his time.
- He played on top board for the United States in the cable matches against Great Britain, in which the moves crossed the Atlantic by telegraph.
- He died in 1906, at only 33, after a long illness.
- A set-up of pawns and pieces often used in the Queen's Gambit bears his name: the Pillsbury Attack.
- After Hastings he played a four-player tournament in Saint Petersburg with Lasker, Steinitz and Chigorin, the best in the world.
- At Hastings he won a famous game against the German Siegbert Tarrasch, the great favourite, with an attack on the king.
- Many thought he could have become world champion if illness had not taken him away from the board so soon.

Think about it

What trick do you use to remember difficult things?

PART V

✦

The Twentieth Century



✦ *“Any piece?” “Any one,” Capablanca replied.* ✦

STORY 35

Any Piece

A modern legend

✦

The visitor landed beside the palm trees and asked for something Capablanca did not expect: to be taught chess. He had crossed an immense distance to reach the Earth, but he still did not know why a wooden horse should move that way.

Capablanca began with the board. Then he introduced the pieces. The Martian listened, tilting a pair of antennae that seemed to be taking notes.

"And these little soldiers?"

"They are pawns. If one reaches the other end, it can turn into another piece."

"Any piece?"

Capablanca, who was already preparing the next explanation, answered too quickly:

"Any piece."

I suspect many adventures begin like this: someone believes they have said something precise, and someone else hears exactly the words that came out of their mouth.

They played. The visitor took his time over some decisions and found others with baffling speed. When a black pawn reached the last rank, he lifted his hands and announced:

"I want a king."

Capablanca smiled, thinking it was a joke.

The Martian waited. His expression did not change.

"Another black king," he explained.

The master explained that it was not possible. A pawn could turn into a queen, rook, bishop or knight, always of its own colour. A king was not on the menu.

"But you said any piece."

Capablanca looked at the board. There were two ways to continue that conversation. He could insist on a rule he had not explained properly, or find out how far his guest's imagination would go.

He chose the second.

They placed the new black king. The game no longer belonged to normal chess, even though the pieces still looked the same as ever.

A little later, a white pawn promoted. The Martian got ready to see a queen.

"I want a king too," said Capablanca.

"Then you will have two."

"I said I want a black king."

The visitor raised his antennae.

Now there were three black kings. The Cuban had taken the Martian's idea one step further: if they could invent which piece to ask for, they could also argue about which army it should belong to.

Black could now move only the new king, which stepped aside to b8. The other two were shut in. Capablanca pushed his h-pawn to h7, and the king went back to a8, because it had no other square.

Then the white pawn reached h8, and this time Capablanca asked for a white queen, as the rules demand. From h8, the queen gave check to all three black kings at once: the one on a8 along the rank, the one on h1 down the file and the one on a1 along the long diagonal. None of them could escape.

"Triple checkmate," said Capablanca.

The Martian contemplated the kings with the seriousness of someone who had just discovered that a word can hide a trap.

"Next time you will teach me all the rules."

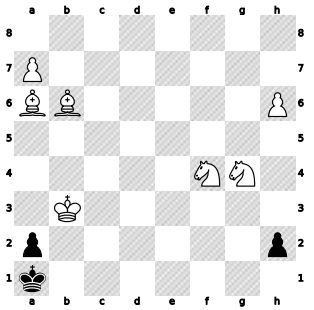
Capablanca gathered up the pieces.

"Next time I will start by explaining what 'any' means."

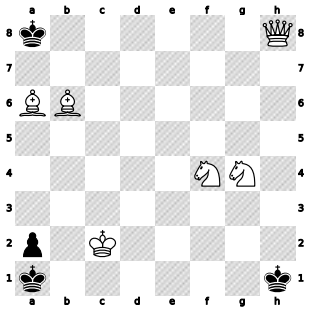
I like to imagine that, before going back to his ship, the visitor takes a chess set with him. He does not need three kings to have fun. It is enough for him to know when he is learning a rule and when he is inventing a different game.

The position of the legend

The legend circulates with this position. Capablanca plays White, and his king goes to c2 to threaten 2.♗d4, mate to the black king on a1.



The position of the legend. White to play



After 4.h8=♕: mate to all three black kings

There followed 1.♔c2 h1, and the black pawn became a second black king. Capablanca rejected 2.♗d4, which mated the king on a1 but left the one on h1 stalemated, and played 2.a8: his pawn became a third black king. Black could only move that king: 2...♔b8 3.h7 ♔a8 4.h8=♕, mating all three kings at once.

The promotions to a black king are invented. In a real game, a pawn can only become a queen, rook, bishop or knight of its own colour.

Did you know...?

- According to his own account, Capablanca learned to play at the age of four, watching his father play. One day he told him he had moved a knight wrongly, and he was right.
- He was world champion from 1921 to 1927. He was famous for playing very fast and making very few mistakes.
- In theory, one side can end up with nine queens: its own and eight promoted pawns. Since chess sets come with only one, in a tournament you must ask the arbiter for another queen: an upside-down rook is still a rook.

Think about it

Which rule would you explain first to someone who has just arrived from Mars?



✦ *Chigorin lost a tournament without playing, but he kept his word.* ✦

STORY 36

The Prince and the Master

Chigorin and Prince Dadiani, Monte Carlo, 1903

✦

Mikhail Chigorin was the best player in Russia. He had a thick beard, sad eyes and a brave style: he loved knights, complicated positions and impossible attacks. He had twice played for the world championship against Steinitz, and although he lost, in Russia people adored him.

At the same time there lived a very rich prince, Andria Dadiani, from Mingrelia, a region of the Caucasus. The prince loved chess. He organised tournaments, paid for prizes and, above all, published his own games. They were beautiful games, full of sacrifices, in which the prince always won with a brilliant combination.

Too brilliant, some thought. His opponents were almost always amateurs, guests at the palace, people who perhaps did not want to beat a prince. Chigorin read those games with a frown. And one day he said what he thought, honestly, in a Russian newspaper.

The prince did not like it at all.

In 1903 a great tournament was organised in Monte Carlo, by the sea, with the best players in the world. Chigorin was invited. He packed his suitcase, crossed half of Europe by train and arrived at the tournament hall. But a surprise was waiting for him there.

Prince Dadiani was the chairman of the committee.

"If he plays," he said, "I leave."

The committee had to choose between the best player in Russia and the man who was putting up the money. It chose the money. Chigorin was left out of the tournament.

The two sides told the story differently. Chigorin said it was revenge for his honest words. The prince said Chigorin had insulted him in the press. What is certain is that the prince, perhaps a little ashamed, paid Chigorin compensation of 1,500 francs: more money than the player who finished second in the tournament received.

Chigorin went home by train, with a travel chess set on his knees. He had not played a single game. But he had not said anything he did not believe either.

Today hardly anyone remembers the prince's games. But when a player answers 1.d4 d5 2.c4 with the knight, they still say the master's name: the Chigorin Defence.

The Chigorin Defence

Mikhail Chigorin (1850-1908) was the father of the Russian school of chess. He played two world championship matches against Steinitz, in 1889 and 1892, and lost both. He founded clubs and magazines, and taught a whole generation of Russian players.

Chigorin did not believe in fixed rules. He liked to play with knights in closed positions, even though the books said bishops were better. That is why he invented a defence that still bears his name: 1.d4 d5 2.c4 ♘c6. Black does not defend the d5-pawn with another pawn, as everyone recommended, but brings out the knight and puts pressure on the centre.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Chigorin worked as a civil servant and learned to play well quite late, after the age of twenty.
- In 1890 and 1891 he played two games by telegraph against Steinitz, between Russia and New York, and won both.
- Historians still argue today about whether any of the prince's brilliant games were arranged.
- The Monte Carlo tournament of 1903 was won by Siegbert Tarrasch.
- For decades tournaments in memory of Chigorin have been played in Russia.

More to discover

- He founded Russia's first chess magazine, *Shakhmatny Listok*, published between 1876 and 1881.
- At Hastings, in 1895, he finished second, half a point behind the winner, Pillsbury.
- He was very fond of knights, more than of bishops, at a time when almost every master thought the opposite.
- The first tournament in his memory was played in Saint Petersburg in 1909, a year after his death. Lasker and Rubinstein shared first place.
- Chigorin was a great champion of the Evans Gambit, an attacking opening in which White gives up a pawn.
- In the Ruy Lopez there is a line that bears his name: the Chigorin Variation, one of the most played throughout the twentieth century.
- He won the first all-Russian tournaments ever organised, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.
- He died in 1908 in Lublin, in present-day Poland.

Think about it

Which is better: to tell the truth and lose something, or to keep quiet and stay in favour?



✦ *They say the audience threw gold coins onto the board.* ✦

STORY 37

The Shower of Gold

Levitsky – Marshall, Breslau, 1912

✦

The black queen landed on g3 and it took the room a moment to understand that it was a deliberate move.

Levitsky looked at the piece. Then he looked at Marshall.

There were ways to capture it. Too many, perhaps, for a master not to have seen any of them.

One of the spectators leaned over another's shoulder. Nobody wanted to be the first to say that the queen was a free gift.

I would ask you to watch Marshall's hands. In our scene he is in no hurry to explain anything. He has made a move, and now it is up to the other man to find its meaning.

Levitsky began with the nearest capture. If he took with the h-pawn, the black knight jumped to e2 and it was mate.

He tried the other pawn. The knight gave check again and, after the king's reply, the rook finished the job.

Then he considered taking with the queen.

The room still saw a piece that could be eaten. Levitsky was beginning to see the positions that remained after eating it. They were not the same thing.

Marshall had chosen a square where his queen seemed defenceless, and yet every capture changed something decisive.

White went through one line. Then another.

In the end he resigned.

This is where the shower comes in.

The most famous version says that the spectators threw coins onto the board, unable to contain their excitement at the combination. I like to imagine the first clink of metal on the table: one coin rolling, another landing on its edge, a hand pulling back so as not to touch the pieces.

But I must separate what I tell from what I can vouch for. The game has been preserved. The shower of gold has come down to us as a disputed anecdote, with different explanations and versions.

I do not need to turn it into an official record to use its literary power.

In our scene, the sound spreads through the room. Marshall raises his eyes. Levitsky, who a few moments earlier was looking for a refutation, looks again at the queen on g3.

The piece has not moved. What has changed is the understanding of those around it.

Someone picks up a coin that has ended up under a chair. Someone else tries to reconstruct the final line without getting anyone to listen.

I would leave the loser a few seconds of silence. A combination so celebrated also has a man sitting opposite, searching for the moment when he ran out of good replies.

Marshall offers him his hand.

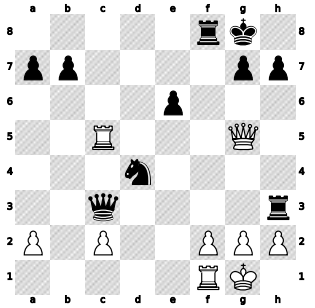
Afterwards, if we like, we can let all the coins of the legend fall. The real astonishment was already there: a queen offered up that no one could accept to any profit.

The queen on g3

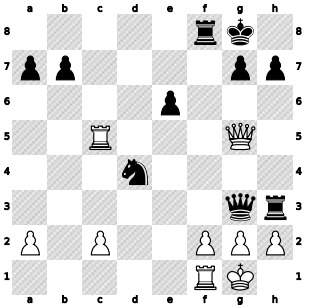
Stefan Levitsky had White and Frank Marshall Black in Breslau, 1912. The game ended with 23...♕g3!! and White resigned. It did not end with a mate actually played on the board.

The complete game: 1.d4 e6 2.e4 d5 3.♘c3 c5 4.♘f3 ♘c6 5.exd5 exd5 6.♗e2 ♘f6 7.O-O ♗e7 8.♗g5 O-O 9.dxc5 ♗e6 10.♘d4 ♗xc5 11.♘xe6 fxe6 12.♗g4 ♕d6 13.♗h3 ♖ae8 14.♕d2 ♗b4 15.♗xf6 ♖xf6 16.♖ad1 ♕c5 17.♕e2 ♗xc3 18.bxc3 ♕xc3 19.♖xd5 ♘d4 20.♕h5 ♖ef8 21.♖e5 ♖h6 22.♕g5 ♖xh3 23.♖c5 ♕g3!! 0-1.

If 24.hxg3, then 24...♘e2#. If 24.fxg3, 24...♘e2+ 25.♔h1 ♖xf1#. And if 24.♕xg3, 24...♘e2+ 25.♔h1 ♘xg3+ 26.♔g1 ♘xf1 leaves Black with a decisive material advantage. These are explanatory lines after the resignation, not moves from the game.



After 23.♖c5. Black to play



23...♕g3!!: three apparent captures

The story of the coins is told in different versions. The move can be checked even if we do not take the shower in the tale as proven.

Did you know...?

- Frank Marshall (1877-1944) was US champion for 27 years, from 1909 to 1936.
- In 1915 he founded the Marshall Chess Club in New York, which is still open.
- One of his favourite weapons bears his name: the Marshall Attack in the Ruy Lopez. He made it famous against Capablanca in 1918 and lost, but today it is one of the most respected defences.
- In 1907 Marshall played a world championship match against Emanuel Lasker and did not manage to win a single game.
- Breslau, where the game of the coins was played, is today the Polish city of Wrocław.

More to discover

- The 1912 Breslau tournament was won jointly by Akiba Rubinstein of Poland and Oldřich Duras of Bohemia.
- Marshall was famous for saving lost games with unexpected traps. In English those moves are called *Marshall swindles*.
- The 1912 Breslau tournament was also the congress of the German Chess Federation, which every two years brought together the best masters in Europe.
- Marshall told the story of his life and his best games in a book, *My Fifty Years of Chess*, published in 1942.

Think about it

Would you accept a queen without looking at the next move?



✦ *The first machine that chose its own moves.* ✦

STORY 38

The Machine That Knew How to Mate

Torres Quevedo's Chess Player, 1912

✦

In his workshop in Madrid, the engineer Leonardo Torres Quevedo had a table covered with gears, wires, magnets and small metal parts. He was not building clocks or toys. He was building a question: can a machine decide something by itself?

More than a century earlier Kempelen's Turk had amazed Europe, but that automaton hid a man inside. Torres Quevedo wanted no tricks. He wanted a machine that really chose its moves.

He knew that a whole game was too difficult. So he chose a small piece of chess, one that every player learns early on: the ending of king and rook against a lone king. The machine would have White, with its king and rook. The human would have the black king, free to move it wherever they liked.

"It's like teaching a child," he explained to his son, who helped him. "First, one rule. Then another. In the end, the child knows how to do it alone."

The machine had its rules written in metal and electricity. If the black king was far away, the rook cut it off. If it was close, the white king came nearer. Step by step, the human king was driven into a corner against the edge of the board.

In 1912 the device was finished. It had an upright board with metal squares and pieces fitted with pegs. When the machine decided on its move, a mechanical arm moved the piece. And when the human tried to cheat with an illegal move, a warning light came on.

When it gave check, the machine announced it. And a few moves later came mate.

In 1914 Torres Quevedo presented his Chess Player at the Sorbonne, in Paris. Journalists and scientists crowded round the machine, tried to escape with the black king into every corner, and always ended up the same way: trapped.

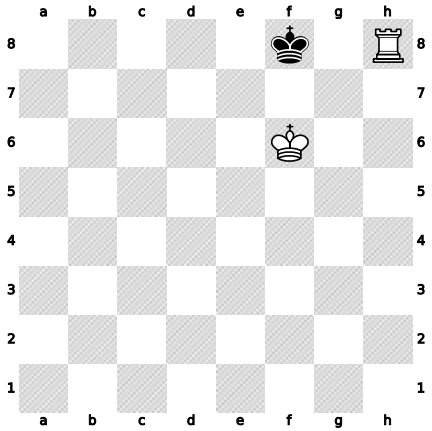
It did not always win in the fewest possible moves, and it could only play that one ending. But it played it with no help from anyone. For the first time, a machine had made decisions on a chessboard.

Torres Quevedo did not think his invention would play complete games. He was thinking of something bigger: that machines might one day do jobs that seemed reserved for human intelligence. He wrote about it in 1914, long before computers existed.

In 1920 his son built a second, improved version, with magnets under the board that moved the pieces without a visible arm. Both machines are still kept in Madrid and, according to those who have seen them work, they still know how to give mate.

The ending it knew how to play

King and rook against king is the first mate everyone learns. The rook cuts off the enemy king along a rank or a file, and your own king comes closer to help. In this way the lone king is gradually shut in against the edge.



King and rook mate: the rook controls the rank and the white king closes the exits

In the diagram, the rook gives check along the eighth rank and the white king covers the escape squares on the seventh. It is mate. Torres Quevedo's machine reached positions like this by following a few rules.

Did you know...?

- Leonardo Torres Quevedo (1852-1936) was born in Santa Cruz de Iguña, in Cantabria. He was a civil engineer and one of the great inventors of his time.
- He also designed the cable car that crosses above Niagara Falls, the Spanish Aero Car, which has been running since 1916.
- He invented the Telekino, presented in 1903, one of the first radio remote controls in history.
- In 1914 he published his *Essays on Automatics*, explaining how a machine could make decisions according to what happens around it.
- Both versions of the Chess Player are kept at the Torres Quevedo Museum, in the School of Civil Engineering in Madrid.
- Today a computer solves this ending in the fewest possible moves, because it has every position with few pieces worked out. With perfect play, in any winning position of king and rook against king, mate comes in sixteen moves at most.
- The Chess Player is considered one of the first computer games in history, although it had no screen and no electronics: it worked with relays, contacts and magnets.
- The machine knew where the black king was thanks to electrical contacts placed under the squares.
- Torres Quevedo also designed airships. The French and British armies used his Astra-Torres model during the First World War.
- In 1920 he was elected to the Royal Spanish Academy, where he helped to establish new technical words in Spanish.

More to discover

- The second version of El Ajedrecista, from 1920, was built with his son Gonzalo. Instead of an arm, it moved the pieces with magnets hidden under the board.

Think about it

If you had to explain to a machine how to mate with king and rook, which three rules would you give it first?



✦ *That afternoon, the musician found the right note.* ✦

STORY 39

The Composer Who Beat Capablanca

Prokofiev, Saint Petersburg, 1914

✦

In the spring of 1914, Saint Petersburg was the capital of chess. A great tournament was being played there by the world champion, Emanuel Lasker, and by a young Cuban everyone wanted to see: José Raúl Capablanca. He was 25, wore perfect suits and played so quickly and so easily that the pieces seemed to move by themselves.

As well as the tournament, Capablanca gave several simultaneous exhibitions in the city. He walked slowly round the inside of a large circle of tables, stopped for a second at each board, moved a piece and went on to the next.

At one of those tables sat a tall young man, fair-haired, in a bow tie, aged 23. His name was Sergei Prokofiev. He had just finished his studies at the conservatory and was beginning to be known as a pianist and composer. But that afternoon he was not thinking about music. He was thinking about chess, which he loved almost as much.

He lost the first simultaneous. In the second he played very carefully. After a few opening moves, Capablanca reached his board and stopped. Prokofiev noted it that night in his diary: the great champion stood in front of him for two or three minutes, frowning and tugging at his hair.

"I have made Capablanca think," he told himself proudly.

But in the end Capablanca won that game too.

Prokofiev did not give up. He sat down again at the third simultaneous. This time he played without fear. Capablanca went round once, and again, and again, and every time he reached his board the position was worse for him. Until, on one of his rounds, the Cuban champion smiled and held out his hand.

"Well played."

That night Prokofiev wrote in his diary in a hurried hand, as happy as if he had premiered a symphony.

Over the years he became one of the great composers of the twentieth century. He wrote operas, ballets such as Romeo and Juliet and a musical tale that millions of children have heard: Peter and the Wolf. But he never gave up chess. He played with his musician friends, read magazines and followed the tournaments. One of his favourite opponents was the great violinist David Oistrakh. They played a

match with a very special stake: the loser would have to give a concert for the members of the club.

An afternoon facing the champion

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) played in all three simultaneous exhibitions Capablanca gave in Saint Petersburg in May 1914, during the city's great tournament. He lost the first two and won the third.

In his diary he wrote down the start of the second game, with Capablanca playing White: 1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♗f5 3.c4 ♘c6. It was in this position that the Cuban champion stopped to think in front of him. The rest of that game has not survived.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- The Saint Petersburg tournament of 1914 was won by Lasker. Capablanca finished second and Alekhine third.
- It is said that Tsar Nicholas II gave the title of "grandmaster" to the five finalists of the tournament, although historians doubt it happened.
- Prokofiev composed Peter and the Wolf in 1936 to teach children the instruments of the orchestra: each character is an instrument.
- Prokofiev lived for many years outside Russia, in the United States and in Paris, and everywhere he looked for opponents to play.
- David Oistrakh, his opponent in the club match, was one of the finest violinists in history.

More to discover

- Prokofiev began composing at five and wrote his first opera at nine. He entered the Saint Petersburg Conservatory at thirteen.
- He also composed the ballet *Cinderella* and the music for Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevsky*.
- In his diaries he writes a great deal about chess: about tournaments, games, opponents. At times it seems to have mattered to him as much as music.
- He died on 5 March 1953, the same day as Stalin. That is why the news of his death hardly appeared in the Soviet newspapers.
- Capablanca gave many simultaneous exhibitions, against twenty, thirty or more opponents at once, and lost very few games. That is why this win was so celebrated.
- His opera *The Love for Three Oranges* was premiered in Chicago in 1921, when Prokofiev was living in the United States.
- He also composed the music for the film *Ivan the Terrible*, again for Eisenstein.
- Capablanca was 25 at the time and the great favourite. Seven years later he would be world champion.

Think about it

In what ways are music and chess alike?



✦ *Whoever chases two hares sometimes catches both.* ✦

STORY 40

The King Who Chased Two Hares

Réti's study, 1921

✦

In a corner of the board, far from everything, lived a white king. From there he could see, on the other side, his only friend: a white pawn who dreamed of reaching the last rank and becoming a queen. But very close to the pawn stood the black king, ready to gobble it up.

And as if that were not enough, on the far edge of the board a black pawn was running. It was going down the h-file, square by square, on its way to promote.

"You're too far away," the black pawn told him, grinning cheekily. "You'll never catch me. And you won't be able to save your friend either."

The white king counted the squares. The black pawn needed four moves to promote. He needed many more to catch it if he went in a straight line. It seemed impossible.

But the king did not run in a straight line. He took one step diagonally, towards the centre of the board.

"Where are you going?" mocked the black pawn. "I'm over here!"

The king took another diagonal step. And another. And then the black pawn noticed something strange. With every step, the white king was getting closer to it... and also to the white pawn. A king takes the same time to go diagonally as in a straight line, so the white king could chase both things at once.

The black king began to get nervous.

"If you go after my pawn," the white king told him, "I'll arrive in time to help it. And if you stay to stop mine, the white pawn will promote."

The black king had to choose. He took the white pawn. But while he was doing so, the white king had already reached the centre, and from there, in two more steps, he caught the black pawn just before it became a queen.

Only the two kings were left. A draw.

This little story was invented in 1921 by a Czechoslovak master called Richard Réti, a quiet man with glasses who liked to look for new ideas where nobody else was looking. With only four pieces he showed that on the board a straight line is not always the shortest way. And that whoever chases two hares, if he knows how to run diagonally, can catch both.

Réti's study

Richard Réti (1889-1929) published this study in 1921. It is probably the most famous in history: White to play and draw, even though the white king seems to be too far from everything.

1.♔g7! h4 2.♔f6 ♔b6. If 2...h3, 3.♔e7 h2 4.c7 ♔b7 5.♔d7 and both pawns promote: a draw. 3.♔e5! ♔xc6 4.♔f4 h3 5.♔g3 h2 6.♔xh2 and it is a draw.

The secret: on a diagonal, the king covers the same distance as in a straight line. That is why it can approach two targets at once without losing any time.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Réti was one of the leaders of the hypermodern school, which proposed controlling the centre from a distance instead of occupying it with pawns.
- An opening bears his name: the Réti Opening, which begins 1.♘f3.
- In 1924, in New York, he beat Capablanca, who had gone eight years without losing a single game.
- In 1925, in São Paulo, he played 29 games at once without looking at the board, a record in his day.
- It is said that after that record he left his suitcase behind. He had a memory for games, but not for his belongings.

More to discover

- Réti was born in Pezinok, in present-day Slovakia, and died in Prague at only 40, of scarlet fever.
- He also composed endgame studies. The one in this story, from 1921, is the most famous, and is taught in every chess school.
- He wrote two widely read books, *Modern Ideas in Chess* (1923) and *Masters of the Chessboard*, published after his death.
- In 1910, in Vienna, Réti beat Tartakower in only eleven moves: he sacrificed his queen and mated with the two bishops.
- His brother Rudolf was a composer and music theorist.
- The idea of the study, a king advancing diagonally to approach two targets at once, turns up in many endings of real games.
- Coaches teach the "rule of the square": if the king can step into the square formed by the pawn and its promotion square, it catches the pawn.
- The great book of the hypermodern school was *My System*, by Aron Nimzowitsch, published in 1925.
- In many books the idea of this study is called the "Réti manoeuvre".
- Today computers have worked out every position with seven pieces or fewer. They have confirmed that the position in the study is a draw, just as Réti discovered.

Think about it

Why does a king take the same time to go diagonally as in a straight line?



✦ *Tartakower found an opening by watching an orangutan.* ✦

STORY 41

The Orangutan Who Gave Opening Advice

Tartakower, New York, 1924

✦

In March 1924, the best players in the world gathered in a New York hotel for a great tournament.

There was the champion Capablanca, the veteran Lasker, the ambitious Alekhine... and Savielly Tartakower, a gentleman with a thin moustache, a monocle and a bow tie, who spoke several languages and always had a witty remark ready.

On a rest day the players went for a walk and visited the zoo. The others looked at the lions and the bears. Tartakower, however, stood still in front of one cage. Inside was an orangutan called Susan.

Susan would not keep still. She climbed up a rope, crossed to a branch, clambered up to a higher one, came down and started all over again. Tartakower watched her very closely, as if he were studying a game.

"Tell me, madam," he said, raising his hat, "what would you play tomorrow?"

Susan looked at him for a moment with her calm eyes and went on climbing.

The next day, in the fourth round, Tartakower had White against Géza Maróczy, a very solid Hungarian master, the kind who knows every opening. Everyone expected Tartakower to begin as usual, with the king's pawn or the queen's.

But Tartakower reached out and pushed the queen's knight's pawn two squares. 1.b4.

Maróczy raised his eyebrows. Some spectators laughed. What kind of opening was that? The pawn was climbing up the side of the board like Susan up her rope.

After the game the journalists asked him where he had got the idea. Tartakower smiled and replied that, in a way, the orangutan at the zoo had suggested it to him.

The game ended in a draw after 54 moves. Maróczy had not been able to show that the move was bad. And ever since, 1.b4 has had a very special name: the Orangutan Opening.

Tartakower was not the first to play it, but he was the one who gave it its name. He used to say that in chess you have to dare to try new things. And that a good idea can come from anywhere. Even from a cage at the zoo.

The Orangutan Opening

Savielly Tartakower (1887-1956) played 1.b4 against Géza Maróczy in the fourth round of the New York tournament

of 1924. The game ended in a draw after 54 moves.

The opening 1.b4 is also called the Sokolsky Opening, after the Soviet master who studied it years later, and the Polish Opening. The pawn on b4 prepares ♗b2, from where the bishop aims at the centre and at the opponent's kingside.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- The New York tournament of 1924 was won by Lasker, at the age of 55. Capablanca finished second.
- Tartakower is famous for his sayings. One of them: "The mistakes are there, waiting to be made."
- Another: "No one ever won a game by resigning."
- During the Second World War he fought in the French Resistance under a false name: Lieutenant Cartier.
- Nobody knows for certain which New York zoo Susan lived in.

More to discover

- Tartakower was born in Rostov-on-Don, in Russia, studied law in Vienna and played for the teams of Poland and France.
- With Poland he won the Hamburg Olympiad of 1930, together with Akiba Rubinstein.
- In 1924 he published a book, *The Hypermodern Game of Chess*, which gave its name to the school of Réti and Nimzowitsch.
- Another of his sayings: "Tactics is knowing what to do when there is something to do. Strategy is knowing what to do when there is nothing to do."
- The opening 1.b4 has many names: Orangutan, Polish or Sokolsky, after the Soviet master Alexei Sokolsky, who studied it in depth.
- In 1910 he lost to Réti one of the shortest and most famous games in history: eleven moves, with a queen sacrifice and a two-bishop mate. He himself used to comment on it with humour.
- Another saying attributed to him: "The winner of the game is the player who makes the next-to-last mistake."
- In the Queen's Gambit there is a defence named after him, the Tartakower Defence, which many world champions have played.
- Eleven masters played in the New York tournament of 1924, among them three world champions: Lasker, Capablanca and Alekhine.
- During the First World War he served as an officer in the Austro-Hungarian army.
- With Julius du Mont he published a large collection of annotated games, *500 Master Games of Chess*, which many players have used to learn.

Think about it

Can you find a good idea by looking at something that has nothing to do with chess?



✦ *He gave up painting for an art he found more difficult.* ✦

STORY 42

The Artist Who Stopped Painting

Marcel Duchamp, artist and chess player

✦

In 1911, Marcel Duchamp painted a picture called *Portrait of Chess Players*. It did not show two people sitting at a board, but shapes crossing each other, as if the painter had wanted to draw the players' thoughts rather than their faces. Duchamp was twenty-four and about to change the history of art.

A few years later, in New York, he did something that shocked everyone: he submitted a porcelain urinal to an exhibition, signed it with an invented name and called it *Fountain*. He said a work of art did not have to be pretty, but had to make people think. Young artists admired him. The critics did not know what to say.

And then, when he was one of the most famous artists of his time, Duchamp almost stopped making art. He devoted himself to chess.

"Chess has all the beauty of art," he explained, "and what's more, it can't be sold."

In 1923 he went to live in Brussels and later in Paris to play in clubs and tournaments. He spent hours analysing positions. His first wife said, years later, that one night, while he was asleep, she glued the pieces to the board, fed up with him spending their honeymoon studying games.

Duchamp became a strong player. He earned the title of master in France and played for the French team in four Chess Olympiads, between 1928 and 1933. He was not a champion, but he held his own with dignity against some of the best in the world.

He was most interested in pawn endings, those positions with few pieces in which everything depends on one square. In 1932, together with the master Vitaly Halberstadt, he published a very strange book about them, with diagrams he designed himself. Hardly anyone understood it. He was proud of it.

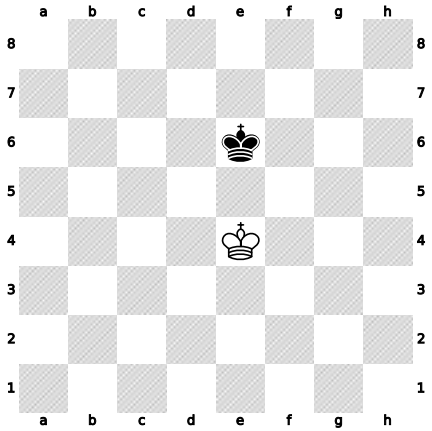
He also designed his own chess set and drew posters for chess championships. In a 1924 film he appears playing a game with his friend, the photographer Man Ray, on a Paris rooftop.

Many people believed Duchamp had given up art for good. But when he died, in 1968, it was discovered that for twenty years he had been secretly working on one last piece. He never stopped being an artist. He had only changed studios.

Duchamp is credited with a sentence many chess players repeat with pride: not all artists are chess players, but all chess players are artists.

The opposition

Duchamp was fascinated by endings with few pieces, above all king and pawn endings. In them, the opposition is very important.

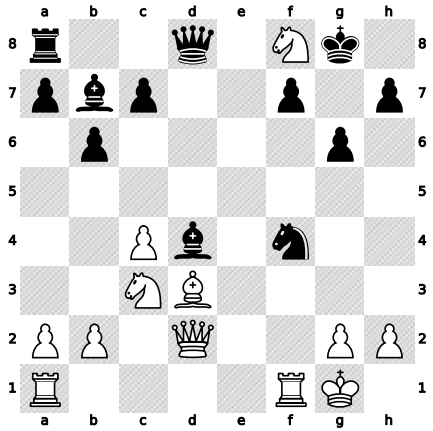


Kings in opposition: whoever has to move must give way

The kings are in opposition when they stand face to face on the same file or rank with a single square between them. Since two kings can never touch, in this position, with the two kings alone, the one that has to move must step aside and let the other through. This is direct opposition; there is also distant and diagonal opposition.

In king and pawn against king endings, having the opposition often decides whether the pawn promotes or the game ends in a draw.

Duchamp could attack too. In Paris, in 1929, he had Black against George Koltanowski: 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 d6 4.e4 b6 5.f4 ♗b7 6.♗d3 ♘bd7 7.♘f3 e5 8.d5 g6 9.O-O exf4 10.♗xf4 ♗g7 11.e5 dxe5 12.♘xe5 O-O 13.♕d2 ♘xd5 14.♘xd7 ♘xf4 15.♘xf8 ♗d4+, and White resigned.



Koltanowski – Duchamp, Paris 1929. After 15... ♗d4+

DID YOU KNOW...?

- The painting *Portrait of Chess Players* (1911) is kept at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, together with many other works by Duchamp.
- His brother, the painter Jacques Villon, and his sister Suzanne were artists too. Duchamp learned to play chess as a child with his brothers.
- The book he wrote with Halberstadt was called *Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled*. Today it is a collector's item.
- In 1963, at an exhibition of his work in California, Duchamp played a public game that became famous thanks to a photograph.
- His painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) caused an enormous scandal when it was shown in New York in 1913.
- In 1925 he designed the poster for the French chess championship, played in Nice.

THINK ABOUT IT

How is thinking of a move like painting a picture?



✦ *The club's first member was the one who had invented it.* ✦

STORY 43

Vera's Club

Vera Menchik, the first women's world champion

✦

In 1929, in the spa town of Carlsbad, today Karlovy Vary, the best players in the world gathered for a great tournament. Among them was a woman: Vera Menchik. She had been women's world champion since 1927, but many masters did not take her seriously. They thought a woman could not play chess as well as a man.

One of them, the Austrian Albert Becker, made a joke out loud. He said that any master who lost to her would join the "Menchik Club". The others laughed.

A few days later, Becker sat down opposite Vera. She moved her pieces unhurriedly, as always, in the sober style she had learned in England. Becker, overconfident, attacked too early. Vera defended, counter-attacked and won.

And so Albert Becker became the first member of the club he himself had invented.

Vera was born in Moscow in 1906, to a Czech father and an English mother. She learned to play as a child. After the Russian Revolution the family moved to England, and there, at the Hastings club, she found a teacher: the Hungarian Géza Maróczy, one of the great players of his time, who taught her to play solidly, to give nothing away and to think about the position before tricks.

In 1927 the first women's world championship was played, in London. Vera won it without losing a single game. Then she won it again, and again, and again. She was world champion for the rest of her life.

But she wanted something more: to play against the best, whether men or women. For years she was the only woman in many masters' tournaments. She often lost, because her opponents were the strongest in the world. But now and then she won, and the Menchik Club kept adding distinguished members.

Among them, in time, was Max Euwe, who soon afterwards would become world champion.

Vera married a chess journalist and went on teaching chess in London. She died in 1944, during the Second World War, when a German flying bomb fell on her house.

Since 1957, the trophy awarded to the winning women's team at the Chess Olympiad has been called the Vera Menchik Cup. And Becker's joke, meant to mock her, became the finest tribute: today nobody remembers the club for the man who founded it, but for the woman who made it grow.

The members of the club

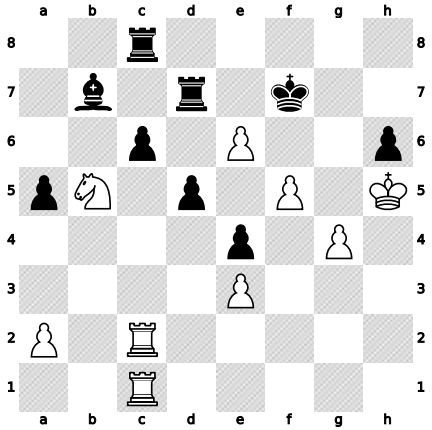
The "Menchik Club" never had premises, fees or membership cards. Its members were the masters who had lost a

tournament game to Vera.

Among them were the Austrian Albert Becker, the founder; the Dutchman Max Euwe, world champion from 1935 to 1937; the Belgian Edgar Colle; the Indian Sultan Khan; and the Englishmen Frederick Yates and Sir George Thomas.

Vera played in a solid, patient way, as Maróczy had taught her. She did not set traps. She waited for her opponent's mistake, and when it came, she punished it without mercy.

The game that gave the club its first member has survived: Menchik, with White, against Becker, Carlsbad, 2 August 1929. Vera exchanged queens early and handled a long endgame patiently. On move 40 her pawn gave check on e6 and Becker resigned.



Menchik – Becker, Carlsbad 1929. After 40.e6+, Black resigns

Did you know...?

- Vera Menchik won seven women's world championships between 1927 and 1939. In all of them together she lost only one game.
- Her sister Olga was also a good player and took part in several world championships. She died with her in 1944.
- For many years women played little chess because clubs and cafés were places almost only for men.
- The Hungarian Judit Polgár, the best woman player in history, was among the ten best players in the world in 2005 and beat several world champions.
- Today there is a women's world championship and an open one, in which men and women can both take part.
- Géza Maróczy, her teacher, was one of the strongest players of the early 20th century and a great endgame specialist.
- In 1937 she defended her title in a match against the German Sonja Graf and won it clearly.
- The Hastings Christmas tournament, where Vera learned to compete, has been played since 1920 and is one of the oldest in the world.
- FIDE, the International Chess Federation, was founded in Paris in 1924 and organised the first women's world championship three years later.
- After the war, in 1950, FIDE organised a tournament to choose a new champion. It was won by the Soviet Lyudmila Rudenko.
- The first Women's Chess Olympiad was played in 1957 in Emmen, in the Netherlands. The Soviet Union's team won.
- Vera also wrote about chess and gave lessons. Many English women players learned with her.

THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think Becker's joke ended up working in Vera's favour?



✦ *From the shade of a tree in the Punjab to the halls of London.* ✦

STORY 44

The Servant Who Beat the Masters

Mir Sultan Khan, 1929-1933

✦

In the fields of the Punjab, in the India then ruled by the British, a boy called Sultan Khan learned to play chess sitting on the ground in the shade of a tree. His father taught him. But the chess he learned was not quite ours: in India it was played with some different rules. Pawns did not advance two squares on their first move, and a pawn that reached the end could not freely choose what to become.

Sultan Khan played so well that his fame reached the ears of a nobleman, Sir Umar Hayat Khan, who took him into his service. To the nobleman he was a servant, but also his champion. When Sir Umar travelled to London in 1929 to attend government conferences, he took Sultan Khan with him.

In London, Sultan Khan had to learn the European rules quickly, along with the openings the English masters had known since childhood. He could not read English, so he could not study from books. He learned by watching and playing.

That same year he entered the British Championship. And he won it.

The English could not believe it. This quiet man in a turban, who barely spoke their language, played in a strange way. He did not look for brilliant attacks. He moved his pieces patiently, built up the position for hours and waited. When his opponent grew impatient, Sultan Khan already had the game won.

At the Hastings tournament of 1930 he faced José Raúl Capablanca, the former world champion, one of the best players of all time. Capablanca was famous for almost never losing. Sultan Khan defeated him.

For four years he played in the best tournaments in Europe. He won two more British Championships, in 1932 and 1933, and beat great masters such as Akiba Rubinstein. He played for England in three Chess Olympiads.

But his life did not belong to him. When Sir Umar decided to return to India in 1933, Sultan Khan went back with him. He left the tournaments, the London cafés and the games against champions. He returned to his fields in the Punjab, which after 1947 became part of Pakistan, and lived there as a farmer until his death in 1966.

He never wrote a book or taught anyone his secrets. He left only his games. And in them, today's players are still discovering the patience of a man who came from far away, adapted to new rules and sat down as an equal with the best in the world.

The chess he learned in India

In the Punjab of his childhood people played a chess very like ours, but with some important differences:

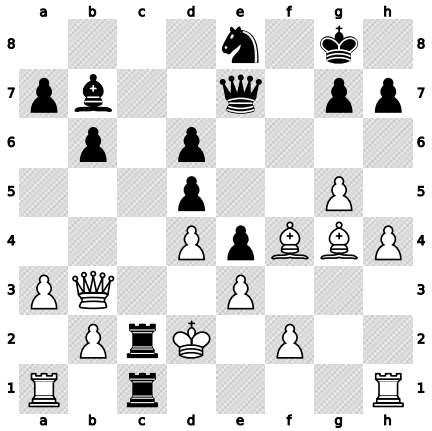
Pawns always advanced one square at a time, even on their first move. So there was no capturing en passant.

There was no castling as we know it. In some variants, the king could make a special leap, like a knight's, once in the game.

A pawn that reached the end of a file became the piece that had started the game on that file. It could not choose a queen if it had come up the knight's file.

With those rules, openings were much slower. Sultan Khan had to adapt to the European rules and to the openings his opponents had been studying for years.

The game against Capablanca survives complete. Sultan Khan had White. On move 22, the black rooks had broken into his camp with check:



Sultan Khan – Capablanca, Hastings 1930. White to play

Sultan Khan was not frightened: 23.♕xc2 ♖xc2+ 24.♔xc2. He gave up his queen for the two rooks. Then he manoeuvred calmly for forty more moves, until his rooks and his b-pawn broke the defence. Capablanca resigned on move 65.

Did you know...?

- His full name was Mir Sultan Khan. "Mir" was a title of respect in his region.
- Several forms of chess were played in India. In some, the king could make a special leap once per game, and pawns could only promote to the piece that had started on that file.
- Chess Olympiads are team tournaments between countries. The first official one was played in London in 1927.
- According to historical rating lists, Sultan Khan was at one time among the ten best players in the world.
- Sir Umar Hayat Khan also brought a young woman, Fatima, to England; she won the British Women's Championship in 1933.
- Capablanca was world champion from 1921 to 1927. He lost so few games that his defeats were news.
- At the Olympiads of Prague (1931) and Folkestone (1933), Sultan Khan played on top board for the English team, the board reserved for the strongest player.
- His style was like Capablanca's: simple positions, few complications and very precise technique in the endgame.
- Sultan Khan spoke hardly any English. At tournaments he communicated with his opponents by gestures and with the help of an occasional interpreter.
- After independence in 1947, his village became part of Pakistan, which today remembers him as one of its great sportsmen.
- In many photographs of the tournaments of the 1930s he appears in his turban, seated among the best masters in Europe.

THINK ABOUT IT

Which do you think is harder: learning new rules, or forgetting the ones you already know?



✦ *He was twelve, and his feet did not reach the floor.* ✦

STORY 45

The Boy Who Drew with the Champion

Arturo Pomar, Gijón, 1944

✦

In the summer of 1944, in Gijón, on the Cantabrian Sea, a very special chess tournament was held. The world champion, Alexander Alekhine, had come to Spain: a tall Russian with an intense gaze who played like a hurricane. Every chess fan wanted to see him.

But on the list of players there was another name that caught the eye. It belonged to a twelve-year-old boy from Palma de Mallorca. His name was Arturo Pomar, although everyone called him Arturito.

Arturito had started playing when he was very small and was soon beating many grown-ups. Now there he was, in the tournament hall, among men in jackets and ties, with his feet dangling from the chair.

In the third round he was paired against Alekhine.

"He's playing the world champion!" someone in the audience said.

The champion sat down opposite him, serious. He opened with the king's pawn. Arturito answered without trembling. He played a Ruy Lopez, like the great players, and defended his position move by move. The hours went by. Some spectators went off for lunch and came back. The game was still going on.

Alekhine attacked on the kingside, looking for a crack, but Arturito did not take fright, did not rush, did not give anything away. Little by little the pieces disappeared from the board. And in the ending something incredible happened: it was the boy who was a pawn up. Alekhine had to save himself by giving checks with his rook to the black king, again and again. After seventy-one moves, the game ended in a draw.

The next day, newspapers all over Spain were talking about the boy who had drawn with the world champion. No one so young had ever done it in a tournament.

Alekhine was not annoyed. He grew fond of that serious, shy boy, gave him advice and treated him as a friend. Pomar always remembered him as his teacher.

Arturito grew up. At fourteen he was champion of Spain. He played all over the world, against the best, and in 1962 he became the first grandmaster in Spanish history. But for many people he remained that boy from Gijón who was not afraid of the champion.

Arturito against the champion

Arturo Pomar (1931-2016) drew with world champion Alexander Alekhine on 16 July 1944, in the third round of the Gijón tournament. He was twelve years old.

It was a Ruy Lopez: 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.O-O d6 6.c3 ♗g4 7.d4 b5 8.♗b3 ♗e7. Alekhine attacked on the kingside, but Pomar defended well and reached a rook ending a pawn up. The game ended like this: 69.♖d7+ ♔h6 70.♖d6+ ♔h7 71.♖d7+ ♔h6, a draw by repetition.

[DIAG]

Years later Pomar said that Alekhine treated him with great affection and advised him like a friend. When the champion died, in 1946, the young man from Mallorca wrote a few words in his memory: he would never forget his advice.

He was champion of Spain seven times, the first at only fourteen, and played in many Olympiads with the Spanish team. In 1962 FIDE awarded him the grandmaster title, the first ever given to a Spanish player.

Did you know...?

- Arturo Pomar was born in Palma de Mallorca on 1 September 1931.
- In Spain he became so famous that he appeared in the newspapers and in cinema newsreels. They called him "the child prodigy".
- Alekhine died in Estoril, Portugal, in 1946, while still world champion.
- Pomar went on playing tournaments until he was very old, and was much loved by chess fans.
- Today there are chess tournaments and clubs that bear his name.

More to discover

- Arturo Pomar was champion of Spain seven times.
- In 1962 he played in the Stockholm Interzonal, the first step towards fighting for the world title. There he faced players such as Bobby Fischer.
- He played in many Olympiads with the Spanish team over more than twenty years.
- The Gijón tournament of 1944 was won by Alekhine. It was one of several the champion played in Spain and Portugal in the last years of his life.
- Alekhine spent the last years of his life in Spain and Portugal, and played several tournaments in Spanish cities.
- A draw can come about in many ways: by agreement, by stalemate, by repetition, by the fifty-move rule, or because there is not enough material left to mate.
- Drawing with a world champion at the age of twelve is still, eighty years later, extremely rare.

Think about it

What would you say to a child who is about to play the best player in the world?



✦ *Sometimes what we imagine is more frightening than what is there.* ✦

STORY 46

The Pawn Nobody Dared to Take

Averbakh v Kan, Moscow, 1940s

✦

In the 1940s, in a chess club in Moscow, a young engineering student sat holding his head in both hands. His name was Yuri Averbakh. Opposite him was Ilya Kan, a very experienced master, one of those who had played against world champions.

Averbakh thought. And thought. And went on thinking.

The clock was running. The minute hand went half way round, then a little further. The onlookers got bored, wandered off to other tables and came back. Averbakh still had not moved. He calculated one move, then another, then went back to the first. He could not make up his mind.

At last, after a very long time, he reached out and pushed a pawn forward. A small pawn, left within reach of Kan's pieces. It could be taken.

Kan looked at the pawn. Then he looked at Averbakh, who was very serious. Then he looked at the pawn again.

"This boy has thought for almost an hour to play this," Kan said to himself. "Nobody thinks that long to give away a pawn for no reason. There's a trap here. If I take it, I'm sure a terrible combination is waiting for me."

Kan looked for the trap. He did not find it. But the less he could see it, the surer he was that it was there. The best-hidden traps are the ones you cannot see, aren't they?

So he did not take the pawn. He played something else, a quiet, safe move.

The game went on. When it was over, as players do, they stayed for a while analysing together. Kan, curious, pointed at the pawn.

"What had you prepared if I took it?"

Averbakh went a little red. And then he burst out laughing.

"Nothing. There was no trap. I spent all that time trying to find a good move, I didn't find one, and in the end I put the pawn there almost without meaning to. If you had taken it, I would have been lost."

Kan sat there with his mouth open. That pawn, which had looked like a bomb, was just a pawn.

Over the years Averbakh became a great master, one of the finest endgame experts in history, and he lived to be a hundred. And he never forgot the lesson of that afternoon: sometimes your opponent is more afraid of what he imagines than of what is really on the board.

Poisoned or not?

Yuri Averbakh (1922-2022) told this story himself. It refers to a game against Ilya Kan (1909-1978), probably from the 1940s. The game has not survived, so we do not know which pawn it was.

In chess, a "poisoned" pawn is one that looks free but hides a trap. But not every pawn that is offered is poisoned. The most famous example is the Queen's Gambit: 1.d4 d5 2.c4. White offers the c4-pawn, and Black can take it without any danger (2...dxc4). The only thing to avoid is trying to hang on to it at all costs.

Before turning down a gift, look for the trap calmly. If, after looking carefully, you cannot find one, perhaps it does not exist.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Yuri Averbakh was the grandmaster who lived longest: he died in 2022, aged a hundred.
- He wrote an encyclopaedia of endings in several volumes that coaches still use.
- For some years he was head of the Soviet chess federation.
- Ilya Kan played several times in the championship of the Soviet Union, the strongest tournament in the world at that time.
- Many players lose time on the clock for fear of traps that do not exist. Coaches call it "seeing ghosts".

More to discover

- Ilya Kan gave his name to a much-played line of the Sicilian Defence: the Kan Variation.
- Yuri Averbakh played in the great Candidates tournament in Zurich in 1953 and was champion of the Soviet Union in 1954.
- A way of playing against the King's Indian Defence, with one bishop on e2 and another on g5, is called the Averbakh System.
- Averbakh was also a chess historian and wrote a book on its history, from chaturanga to the present day.
- The most famous poisoned pawn is in the Najdorf Variation of the Sicilian: the black queen takes the pawn on b2. Fischer often took it, and it nearly always worked out for him.
- Before taking a pawn that seems to be a gift, coaches advise asking what the opponent will get in return: time, open files or squares for his pieces.
- Averbakh was awarded the grandmaster title in 1952.
- He also composed endgame studies, artistic positions in which there is only one way to win or draw.

Think about it

Has fear of a trap ever made you miss a chance?



✦ *There are more possible games than atoms in the universe.* ✦

STORY 47

More Games Than Stars

The Shannon number, 1950

✦

In 1950, at Bell Laboratories in New Jersey, a mathematician called Claude Shannon asked himself a question that sounded like a game: how many different games of chess can be played?

Shannon was a curious man. He rode a unicycle along the laboratory corridors while juggling, built mechanical mice that learned to find their way out of a maze, and thought about machines that could reason. Two years earlier he had written a paper that would give rise to the whole of modern computing: he had explained how any message, a letter, a song or a photograph, can be turned into a long row of zeros and ones.

Now he wanted to teach a machine to play chess. And the first thing was to know what it was up against.

He began to count. At the start of the game, White has twenty possible moves: sixteen pawn moves and four knight moves. Black, another twenty. After one move by each side, there are already four hundred different games. After two, almost two hundred thousand. After three, more than a hundred million.

Shannon reckoned that in each position there are roughly thirty possible moves, and that a game lasts about forty moves for each side. Multiplying and multiplying, he arrived at a gigantic number: a one followed by a hundred and twenty zeros. Ten to the power of a hundred and twenty.

It is hard to imagine a number like that. In the whole observable universe, with its billions of galaxies, there are estimated to be about ten to the power of eighty atoms. In other words, there are far more possible chess games than atoms in all the stars, planets and gas clouds of the universe.

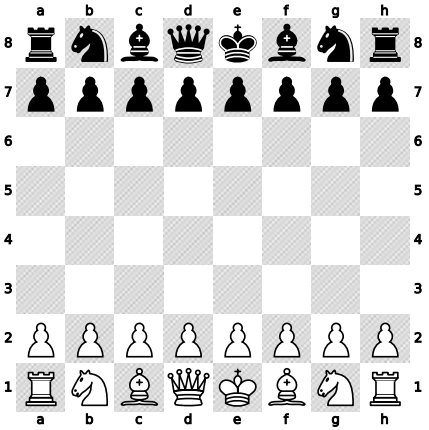
Shannon drew an important conclusion: no machine could ever calculate every game in order to play perfectly. If a computer wanted to play chess well, it would have to do what people do: look only at some moves, the most promising ones, and judge positions sensibly. Count the material, see whether the king is safe, see which pieces are active.

His article, *Programming a Computer for Playing Chess*, was the starting point for every program that came after. Forty-seven years later, a machine built along those lines beat the world champion.

That enormous number, a one with a hundred and twenty zeros, is now called “the Shannon number”. Every time someone plays a reasonably long game, they are most probably playing a game that nobody has ever played before in the history of the world.

Counting the games

From the starting position, each side has twenty possible moves: each pawn can advance one or two squares (16 moves) and each knight has two jumps (4 moves).



The starting position: twenty possible moves for each side

If we count the different game openings, the number grows like this: after White's first move, 20; after one move by each side, 400; after two by each side, 197,281; after three by each side, 119,060,324.

Did you know...?

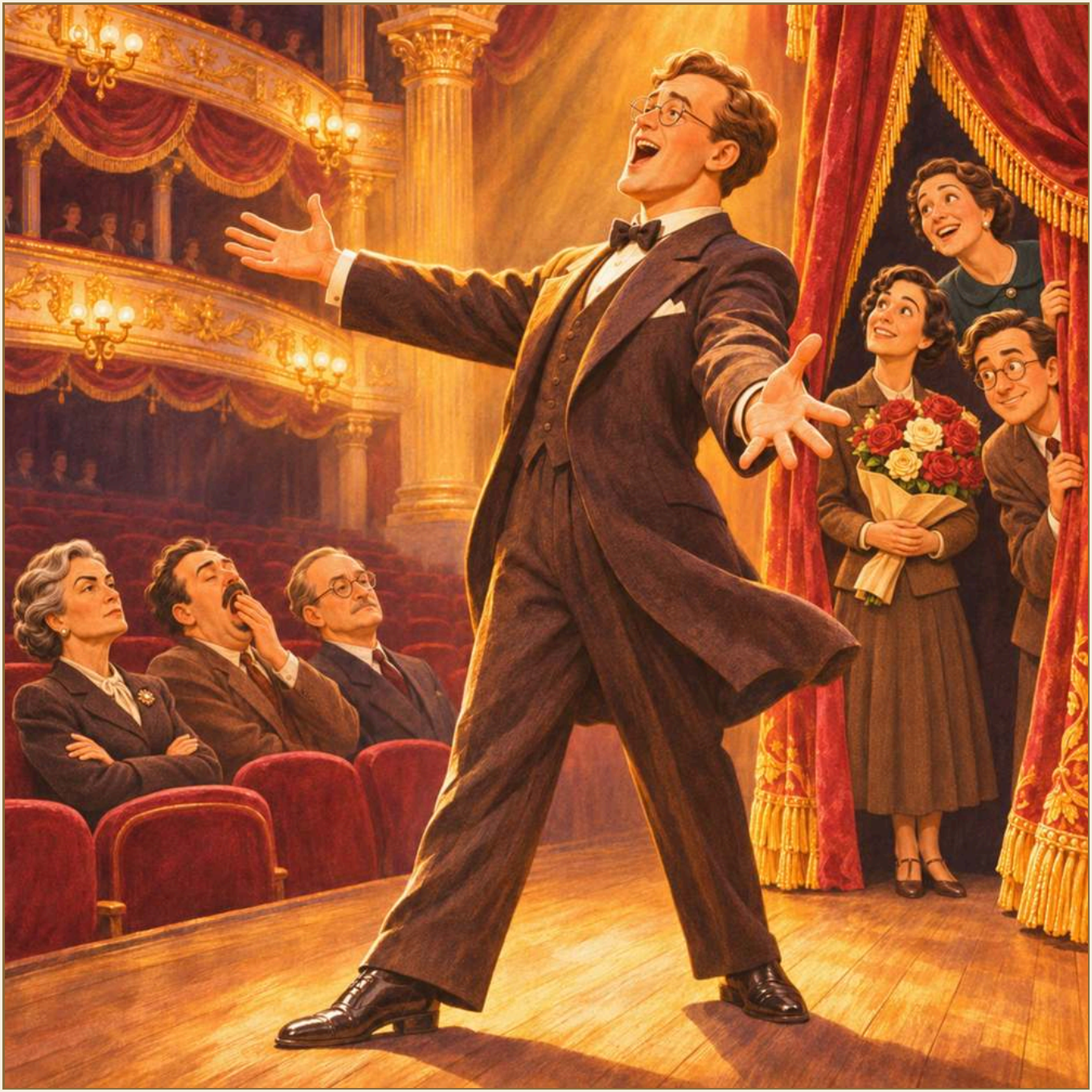
- Claude Shannon (1916-2001) is considered the father of information theory. We owe him the word "bit" in its modern sense, although it was coined by his colleague John Tukey.
- The Shannon number is an estimate: nobody knows exactly how many possible games there are.
- The number of different positions that can arise on a board is much smaller than the number of games, but still enormous: it is estimated at around ten to the power of forty-four.
- Positions with seven pieces or fewer have already been completely solved: computers know the perfect result of every one.
- English draughts (checkers), on an 8 × 8 board, has been solved: in 2007 it was proved that, if neither player makes a mistake, the game ends in a draw.
- In 1950 Shannon built a relay machine that played simple chess endings. He called it Caissac, in honour of Caissa, the goddess of chess.
- Around 1948 Alan Turing wrote a chess program on paper. Since there was no computer able to run it, he did the calculations by hand himself, taking about half an hour per move.
- One of the first programs to play complete games was written at Los Alamos, in the United States, in 1956. It played a reduced chess: a six-by-six board and no bishops.
- Shannon distinguished two ways for a machine to play: look at every move up to a certain depth, or look only at the most promising ones, as a person does.

More to discover

- Deep Blue, the computer that beat Kasparov in 1997, basically followed Shannon's first idea: look at every move up to a certain depth, and very fast.

Think about it

If no machine can calculate everything, how does a good player decide which moves to look at first?



✦ *The Bolshoi did not call him; chess did.* ✦

STORY 48

The Champion Who Wanted to Sing

Smyslov, Moscow, 1950

✦

Vasily Smyslov was tall and calm, with glasses and a deep, low voice. When he was a boy in Moscow, his father taught him two things: how to move the chess pieces and how to love music. And Vasily grew up with two dreams at once.

By his mid-twenties he was already one of the best players in the world. But in 1950 he decided to try his luck with his other dream. He went to an audition to sing at the Bolshoi Theatre, the most famous in the whole Soviet Union, where the finest opera singers performed.

He walked out onto the empty stage. In front of him, in the dark, sat the panel. He took a deep breath and sang in his baritone voice.

When he had finished, there was silence.

"Thank you," said someone on the panel. "We'll call you."

They did not call.

Smyslov could have been sad. But he went home, opened the board and went on playing. And he never stopped singing. He sang at home, with friends, at parties after tournaments. He said that chess and music are looking for the same thing: harmony. In a good game, as in a good song, every piece has to sound at the right moment and in the right place.

That is why his chess was so special. He did not play strange or noisy moves. He put his pieces on their best squares, one by one, like notes in a score. And in endings, when few pieces were left, he was almost impossible to beat.

In 1957 he played a match for the world championship against Mikhail Botvinnik. In one of the games they reached an ending with very few pieces: he had a bishop and Botvinnik a knight. It looked as if nothing was happening. But Smyslov's king began to walk slowly, square by square, until it slipped in behind the white pawns. Botvinnik had to resign.

Smyslov won the match. Seven years after that failed audition, he was world champion.

And music waited for him. Later in life Smyslov sang with an orchestra in a great Moscow concert hall and made records of opera arias and Russian songs. That "we'll call you" was not an ending. It was just the beginning of another road.

The king who walked slowly

Vasily Smyslov (1921-2010) was world champion from 1957 to 1958. Famous for his endgame technique, he won

the title from Mikhail Botvinnik by 12½–9½.

In game 17 of the match, Botvinnik–Smyslov, Moscow 1957, this position with bishop against knight was reached. It looks quiet, but the black king is about to break in on the kingside: 41.♘e1 ♔h6 42.♘c2 ♗e7 43.♔g3 ♔h5 44.♔f3 ♔xh4. Then it marched on to g2, f2 and e1, behind the white pawns, and Black won on move 69.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Smyslov learned to play at the age of six from a book of his father's, who was also a good player.
- He played three title matches against Botvinnik: in 1954 they drew, in 1957 Smyslov won and in 1958 Botvinnik won the title back.
- At 63 he reached the final of the 1984 Candidates cycle, one step away from playing for the title again.
- As well as playing, he composed chess studies.
- He said the pieces must work together, like the instruments of an orchestra.

More to discover

- In the 1948 world championship tournament he finished second, behind Botvinnik.
- He was a baritone and recorded an album of Russian songs and romances. At the closing ceremonies of some tournaments he was asked to sing.
- In 1991, at the age of seventy, he won the first World Seniors Championship.
- In his last years he lost almost all his sight, but he went on composing chess studies.
- People said his play was like his voice: calm, harmonious and without a note out of place.
- He won the Candidates tournaments of Zurich, in 1953, and Amsterdam, in 1956. That is how he twice earned the right to play Botvinnik.
- He won that match by 12½–9½ and became the seventh world champion.
- He won several Chess Olympiads with the Soviet Union team.
- In the Ruy Lopez there is a defence that bears his name, the Smyslov Defence, with the g-pawn going to g6.
- He died in Moscow in 2010, aged 89.
- Smyslov and Botvinnik played three title matches, in 1954, 1957 and 1958: 69 games between them in all.

Think about it

Has a "no" ever led you to discover something you were better at?



✦ *In chess he found a place where nothing could hurt him.* ✦

STORY 49

The Champion's Silence

Tigran Petrosian

✦

Tigran Petrosian was born in Tiflis, in Georgia, in 1929, into a very poor Armenian family. When the Second World War broke out he was still a child, and the war took almost everything from him: he lost his parents and was left practically alone.

To be able to eat, Tigran worked sweeping the streets. It was cold, the broom was bigger than he was and the work was hard. Something from those years stayed with him for ever: he began to lose his hearing.

But he also found a refuge. In the afternoons he went to the Palace of Pioneers, a club for children, and there he played chess. The board was a calm, orderly place where nothing could hurt him. There he learned to defend himself.

And he learned it so well that he became famous for it. Petrosian saw danger long before anyone else. When an opponent was preparing an attack, he had already placed his pieces to stop it. They called him "Iron Tigran", because breaking through his defence was almost impossible.

As a grown man he played with a hearing aid. And sometimes, when the game became difficult, he did something nobody else could do: he switched it off. Then, in the hall, the coughs, the footsteps and the murmurs of the audience vanished. Only he and the board were left.

It is said that once, in a tournament, an opponent offered him a draw out loud. Petrosian did not answer. His opponent thought he was refusing and played on, more and more nervous. Petrosian, with his hearing aid switched off, had not even noticed. He went on thinking calmly... and won the game.

"Were you saying something?" he asked afterwards, as he put the device back in.

In 1963 the boy who had swept the streets of Tiflis beat Botvinnik and became world champion. He held the title for six years.

Petrosian showed that defending is an art too. And that sometimes, to hear what really matters, you need a little silence.

The exchange sacrifice

Tigran Petrosian (1929-1984) was world champion from 1963 to 1969. His speciality was the exchange sacrifice: giving up a rook for a bishop or a knight, not to attack, but so that his pieces would be better placed and his opponent could do nothing.

The most famous example is Reshevsky–Petrosian, Candidates tournament, Zurich 1953. White was threatening to advance his centre pawns. Petrosian played 25... ♖e6!, offering the rook. After 26.a4 ♘e7 27.♗xe6 fxe6 28.♕f1 ♘d5, the black knight was settled on d5, a square from which nobody could drive it away, and the white centre pawns were blocked. The game ended in a draw.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Petrosian won the title in 1963 against Botvinnik and defended it in 1966 against Boris Spassky. He lost it in 1969, also to Spassky.
- He was one of the hardest players to beat in history: in some years he lost almost no games at all.
- His wife, Rona, went with him to every tournament.
- In Armenia he is a national hero, and chess is a compulsory school subject.

More to discover

- For years he edited the chess magazine *64*, and he earned a doctorate in philosophy with a thesis on the logic of chess.
- The exchange sacrifice means giving up a rook for a bishop or a knight. You lose material, but in return you gain a more active piece, a strong square or a weak enemy pawn.
- Armenia, his family's country, won the Chess Olympiad in 2006, 2008 and 2012.
- In Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, there is a Chess House that bears his name.
- He died in Moscow in 1984, aged 55.
- He was champion of the Soviet Union four times, and in 1962 he won the Candidates tournament in Curaçao, which gave him the right to play for the title.
- In 1971, in the Candidates final, he lost to Bobby Fischer, who would become world champion the following year.
- As a boy he learned at the Tiflis Palace of Pioneers. He said his great teacher was a book, *My System*, by Aron Nimzowitsch.
- His speciality was "prophylaxis": guessing what the opponent wanted to do and preventing it before it started.
- In the King's Indian Defence there is a system named after him: the Petrosian System.
- He had a reputation for making many draws, but when he decided to attack he was fearsome.
- Against Botvinnik, in 1963, he won by 12½–9½.
- In 1966 he beat Spassky and became the first champion to win a title defence match since Alekhine in 1934.

Think about it

What helps you concentrate when you play or study?



✦ *He learned to see the board with his fingertips.* ✦

STORY 50

Playing with His Hands

Ray Charles, 1965

✦

Ray Charles went blind when he was seven. But he learned to read music with his fingers, to play the piano like nobody else and to sing with a voice that made theatres shake. Over the years he became one of the great music stars of his time. He always wore dark glasses and, when he played, he swayed his head from side to side, smiling.

In 1965 Ray Charles had to spend some time in a clinic near Los Angeles to recover from an illness. The nights there were very long. There were no concerts, no tours, no audience. And Ray could not sleep.

A doctor at the clinic played chess and suggested he learn. Ray hesitated.

"How am I going to play if I can't see the board?"

But there was a special board. The black squares were a little higher than the white ones, so you could feel them with your fingers. Each piece had a peg underneath that fitted into a hole in the square, so it would not fall over when touched. And the black pieces had a small mark, to tell them apart from the white ones by touch.

Ray learned. After each of his opponent's moves he ran his hands gently over the whole board, as if he were reading a score. That way he knew where every piece was.

"I play with my hands," he used to say.

From then on chess was always with him. He took it on the plane on his tours and played with the musicians in his band between concerts. He loved winning, but he also knew how to lose with a big laugh.

Many years later, in 2002, the American grandmaster Larry Evans went to interview him. They played two games. Ray lost both, but he had a wonderful time and learned a few lessons from a master.

"Castle early," Evans told him. "And don't move the same piece twice in the opening."

Ray Charles died in 2004. His peg board, with its raised squares and its pieces worn by his fingers, is kept today in the National Museum of American History, in Washington. It is the board of a man who could not see the pieces, but who could see the game.

A BOARD FOR PLAYING WITHOUT SEEING

Ray Charles (1930-2004) learned to play chess in 1965 and played for the rest of his life. None of his games have survived.

Blind players use special boards: the black squares are a little higher than the white ones, the pieces have a peg to fit

them in, and the black ones carry a mark so they can be told apart by touch. Each player calls out his move, and each has his own board.

The advice Ray remembered from his games with Larry Evans holds for every beginner: develop your pieces, do not move the same one twice in the opening and castle early. For example, in the Italian Game: 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗c4 ♗c5 4.O-O. Two pieces developed and the king castled in just four moves.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- There have been chess olympiads for blind players since 1961.
- A blind player can go a long way: several have earned the title of master.
- Ray Charles won a great many Grammy awards, the most important music prizes in the United States.
- His life was told in the film Ray, released in 2004, the same year he died.
- His board is kept in the museum, but it is not on display to the public.

More to discover

- Ray Charles lost his sight at seven because of glaucoma. He studied at a school for blind children in Florida, where he learned to read music in braille.
- On boards for blind players the black squares are a little higher than the white ones, and the pieces fit into a hole so they do not fall over when touched. The black pieces have a little point on top.
- When two people play and one of them is blind, each uses his own board, and the moves are called out loud.
- His song "Georgia on My Mind", from 1960, has been the official song of the state of Georgia, in the United States, since 1979.
- Braille, the system of raised dots that lets you read with your fingers, was invented by the Frenchman Louis Braille when he was a teenager, around 1824.
- His full name was Ray Charles Robinson. He stopped using his surname so as not to be confused with the boxer Sugar Ray Robinson.
- In the United States he was called "the Genius", for the way he mixed gospel, blues and jazz.
- In 1962 he recorded *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*, one of the best-selling albums of his career.
- In 1986 he entered the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, in the first group of musicians chosen.
- A blind player needs to touch the pieces to "see" the position. That is why, on his board, he may touch them without being obliged to move them.

Think about it

Close your eyes and try to picture the board. Where is the e4 square? Is it white or black?



✦ *An old game from Hamburg ended up travelling into space.* ✦

STORY 51

HAL's Game

2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968

✦

In 1910, in a café in Hamburg, two players with moustaches, Roesch and Schlage, played a game.

Black won with a beautiful attack against the white king. The game was published in a book and forgotten, like so many others.

About forty years later, in New York, a young photographer spent his afternoons playing chess in the parks. It is said he played for a few coins. His name was Stanley Kubrick. He played very well, and he said chess had taught him something very useful for his work: to think calmly before deciding, even when you are in a hurry.

Over the years Kubrick became one of the most famous film directors in the world. In 1968 he released a film that changed science fiction: 2001: A Space Odyssey.

In the film a spaceship travels towards Jupiter. On board are several astronauts and a computer that controls everything, that speaks in a soft voice and never makes a mistake. It is called HAL 9000. Its eye is a small red light.

To pass the time, the astronaut Frank Poole plays chess against HAL on a screen. Kubrick did not want an invented game. He looked through his books for a real one, and chose that game from Hamburg. Frank played Roesch's white pieces and HAL Schlage's black ones.

In the film the black queen comes in on f3. And HAL speaks in its calm voice. It is sorry, it tells Frank, but it thinks he missed it:

"Queen to bishop three. Bishop takes queen. Knight takes bishop. Mate."

Frank looks at the screen, thinks for a moment and gives up. Yes, it looks as if HAL is right. He resigns.

Attentive viewers noticed something curious: HAL had called out the queen move with a small mistake in the notation. Some think it was a slip. Others think Kubrick did it on purpose, as a first sign that this perfect computer was not so perfect after all. And in the film, sure enough, HAL ends up being very dangerous.

Thirty years after the film, in 1997, a real computer, Deep Blue, won a match against the world champion. But that is another story.

Roesch–Schlage, Hamburg, 1910

The game seen in the film is real: Roesch–Schlage, Hamburg 1910. Kubrick, a good player, chose it for the

scene between Frank Poole and HAL 9000.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.♕e2 b5 6.♗b3 ♗e7 7.c3 O-O 8.O-O d5 9.exd5 ♘xd5 10.♘xe5 ♘f4 11.♕e4 ♘xe5 12.♕xa8 ♕d3 13.♗d1 ♗h3 14.♕xa6 ♗xg2 15.♖e1 ♕f3!

This is the position in the film. If 16.♗xf3, ♘xf3#, as HAL announces. Against almost any other move, 16...♘h3#. White is lost.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- HAL says "queen to bishop three" in the old descriptive notation. Seen from Black's side, the correct square would have been "bishop six".
- Kubrick played chess with the actors during breaks in filming and nearly always beat them.
- A game of chess also appears in another of his films, Lolita.
- The film was shot in England and released in 1968, a year before human beings reached the Moon.
- The name HAL has three letters, and each one comes just before the letters of IBM in the alphabet. Kubrick always said it was a coincidence.

More to discover

- Kubrick wrote the script of the film with the British writer Arthur C. Clarke.
- As a young man Kubrick played chess for money in Washington Square Park, in New York, to earn a living.
- In the film HAL says it became operational at a plant in Urbana, Illinois, on 12 January 1992.
- When it is being disconnected, HAL sings "Daisy Bell". It was a tribute: in 1961 an IBM computer at Bell Labs had sung that same song, the first song ever sung by a machine.
- The game in the film is real, although it was played in a German café sixty years earlier, and hardly anyone knew it until Kubrick chose it.
- While filming *Dr. Strangelove*, Kubrick beat the actor George C. Scott at chess, and it is said that this is how he won his respect.
- *2001* won the Oscar for best special effects. It was the only Oscar Kubrick ever received.
- Arthur C. Clarke published his novel *2001* the same year the film came out. In the book HAL becomes operational in 1997, the year Deep Blue beat Kasparov.
- Today any phone plays much better than HAL. But it is still the most famous computer in the cinema.
- In 1967 a program called Mac Hack VI became the first computer to play in a tournament against people. It played much worse than HAL.

Think about it

Do you always trust what a machine tells you?



✦ *He hunted butterflies and hid labyrinths in his books.* ✦

STORY 52

The Writer Who Hid Labyrinths

Vladimir Nabokov, Montreux

✦

Vladimir Nabokov was born in Saint Petersburg in 1899, into a rich family with an enormous house, governesses and a library full of books in three languages. As a child he learned three things at once that would stay with him all his life: writing, catching butterflies and playing chess.

When the Russian Revolution came, his family had to flee. Nabokov lived in England, Germany, France and the United States. He was a teacher, a translator, a tennis coach... and above all a writer. One of his first novels is called The Defence, and it tells the story of a great chess player who only feels safe inside the board.

Later in life, by then famous, Nabokov went to live in an old hotel in Montreux, in Switzerland, beside a lake surrounded by mountains. He wrote standing up, leaning on a lectern, on small index cards. And sometimes, when he grew tired of words, he took out a small board and began to compose chess problems.

A problem is not a game. It is a puzzle. The composer sets out some pieces and writes underneath: "White to play and mate in two moves." The reader has to find the first move, the key.

Nabokov said that composing a problem was very like writing a novel. In both you have to hide something. The solution has to be in plain sight, right in front of the reader's eyes, and still the reader does not see it, because he is looking the other way.

In one of his problems there is a white pawn about to promote. Everyone tries to promote it, because that is the most natural thing to do. But that is exactly the trap. The real solution is a quiet bishop move, which seems to do nothing and yet prepares everything.

Nabokov was proud of that problem. He said it had taken him months to make it work. He published it with his poems in a book called Poems and Problems.

He liked hiding things: in his novels, words and games that only attentive readers discover; in his problems, keys that nobody sees; and in the countryside, among the flowers, butterflies that only those who know how to look can find.

A problem by Nabokov

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), author of The Defence and Lolita, composed chess problems all his life. He pub-

lished eighteen in his book Poems and Problems, and others in the British magazine The Problemist.

White to play and mate in two moves. The temptation is to promote the b7-pawn, but then 1...d6 uncovers a check from the rook on g7 against the white king.

The key is 1.♗c2!, a quiet move. Now every black reply is met by mate: 1...d6 or 1...c5 2.♖f5#; 1...d5 2.♕c7#; 1...♔d5 or 1...♔d6 2.♕c5#; if the knight on e2 moves, 2.♕d4#. Checked by computer: there is no other key.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Nabokov had synaesthesia: he saw each letter in a colour.
- He was a great expert on butterflies. He worked at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology, and several butterflies bear his name.
- He wrote first in Russian and later in English, and translated his own books.
- In The Defence the hero, Luzhin, sees his whole life as a game of chess.
- In chess, the "key" of a problem is its first move. In a good problem it must be unique.

More to discover

- His novel *The Defence*, from 1930, was filmed in 2000 under the title *The Luzhin Defence*.
- Before he became famous he taught literature at Cornell University, in the United States.
- As a student at Cambridge he was goalkeeper for his college football team.
- He said that composing a chess problem was very like writing: you have to hide the solution and, at the same time, leave clues for anyone who knows how to look for them.
- In the 1920s he lived in Berlin and published chess problems in *Rul*, a newspaper of the Russian exiles.
- In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, he describes a whole night spent composing a problem, until dawn.
- Some scholars think the hero of *The Defence* is partly inspired by Curt von Bardeleben, Steinitz's opponent in story 33.
- In 1940, fleeing the war, he left Europe for the United States with his wife and son.
- He became a great expert on the "blue" butterflies, and one of his ideas about their origin was confirmed by genetic analysis many years after his death.
- His son Dmitri was an opera singer and translated several of his father's novels into English.

Think about it

Why do we enjoy finding something that was hidden in plain sight so much?



✦ *The first game ever played off the Earth.* ✦

STORY 53

Chess in Orbit

Soyuz 9, 1970

✦

On 1 June 1970 the Soviet spacecraft Soyuz 9 lifted off. On board were two cosmonauts: Andriyan Nikolayev, the commander, and Vitaly Sevastyanov, an engineer who was also a great chess lover. Their mission was a very important one: they had to spend almost eighteen days in space, longer than anyone before them, to study how living without gravity affects the body.

The days were long. They did experiments, photographed the Earth and exercised so their muscles would not lose strength. And on 9 June, on a rest day, they did something nobody had ever done: they played a game of chess in space.

The problem was how to play without gravity. If you let go of a piece, it stayed floating in the air. Nor could they use magnetic pieces, because magnets might damage the spacecraft's instruments. So an engineer designed a special board: each piece had a peg that fitted into a slot in its square. Nothing could escape.

The cosmonauts played White, deciding every move together. Their opponents were hundreds of kilometres away, on Earth, at mission control: General Nikolai Kamanin, head of the cosmonauts, and Viktor Gorbatko, another cosmonaut. The moves travelled by radio.

"Earth, this is Soyuz. Pawn to d4."

"Soyuz, this is Earth. Pawn to d5."

It was a Queen's Gambit. The game lasted almost six hours. While the players on Earth were thinking, the spacecraft was circling the planet at full speed. When mission control lost contact with them, they had to wait for the next orbit to get the move.

In the end the cosmonauts gave up a rook to exchange pieces and reach a level ending, queen against queen. The two teams shook hands by radio. A draw.

Nobody won. But that day chess left the Earth for the first time. And that board with pegs, which went round and round the planet, is kept today in a museum in Moscow.

The first game in space

On 9 June 1970 the cosmonauts Andriyan Nikolayev and Vitaly Sevastyanov, on board Soyuz 9, played White against Nikolai Kamanin and Viktor Gorbatko at mission control. It was the first game of chess in space.

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e3 e5 4.♗xc4 exd4 5.exd4 ♘c6 6.♗e3 ♗d6 7.♘c3 ♘f6 8.♘f3 O-O 9.O-O ♗g4 10.h3 ♗f5

11.♘h4 ♕d7 12.♕f3 ♘e7 13.g4 ♗g6 14.♖ae1 ♔h8 15.♗g5 ♘eg8 16.♘g2 ♖ae8 17.♗e3 ♗b4 18.a3 ♗xc3 19.bxc3 ♗e4 20.♕g3 c6 21.f3 ♗d5 22.♗d3 b5 23.♕h4 g6 24.♘f4 ♗c4 25.♗xc4 bxc4 26.♗d2 ♖xe1 27.♖xe1 ♘d5 28.g5 ♕d6 29.♘xd5 cxd5 30.♗f4 ♕d8 31.♗e5+ f6 32.gxf6 ♘xf6 33.♗xf6+ ♖xf6 34.♖e8+ ♕xe8 35.♕xf6+ ♔g8, a draw.

At the end White gave up the rook on e8 to win material back with check. What is left is a queen ending with the same pawns.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Soyuz 9 spent almost eighteen days in space, a record at the time.
- Vitaly Sevastyanov was later, for nine years, president of the Soviet chess federation.
- Andriyan Nikolayev was married to Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman to travel into space.
- In 2020, fifty years later, another game was played between space and Earth, from the International Space Station.
- Astronauts have also played games from space against chess fans all over the world.

More to discover

- The spacecraft landed on 19 June. Because of the time spent without gravity, the two cosmonauts took days to walk normally again.
- To play in space they used a special board, with pieces held in place so they would not float off around the cabin.
- Vitaly Sevastyanov went back into space in 1975 and spent more than sixty days on the Salyut 4 space station.
- In 2008 the American astronaut Greg Chamitoff played a game from the International Space Station against mission control and chess fans around the world, who voted on the moves.
- Andriyan Nikolayev had already flown in 1962, on Vostok 3. He was the third Soviet cosmonaut.
- The first human being in space was Yuri Gagarin, on 12 April 1961.
- Today astronauts on the International Space Station exercise for about two hours a day so that their muscles and bones do not weaken.
- During the flight the cosmonauts also carried out medical experiments to study how the human body adapts to the lack of gravity.

Think about it

Which game would you take with you on a journey lasting several months?



✦ *Before resigning, Pablo always asks all his pieces.* ✦

STORY 54

The Mate That Wasn't

A childhood memory

✦

It was a rainy afternoon and Lucía and Pablo could not go outside. In their grandmother's cupboard they found an old wooden box, with a board that folded in half and some rather worn pieces. The white knight was missing an ear.

They both knew how to move the pieces. They had learned at school. They sat down on the rug and set everything out very carefully: the queen on her own colour, the king beside her, the rooks in the corners.

Lucía had White. She began by pushing her king's pawn two squares. Pablo, who did not want to take risks, moved his queen's pawn just one square.

Then Lucía smiled. She brought out her bishop and sent it a long way, to b5, on the diagonal towards the black king.

"Check!" she shouted.

Pablo looked at his king. It was surrounded by its own pieces: the bishop, the queen, the pawn... It had no free square to go to.

"Your king can't move," said Lucía. "It's mate! I've won!"

Pablo sat very still. His chin was trembling a little. Had he lost in just two moves? Slowly he reached out to his king to knock it over.

And then, if anyone had been able to hear the pieces, they would have heard an uproar.

"Hey, hey, hey!" protested the pawn on c7. "We're here, you know!"

"I can get in the way!" said the knight on b8.

"So can I!" said the other knight.

"And me!" said the bishop.

"And me too!" said the queen, very offended that nobody had counted on her.

Pablo did not hear anything, of course. But just before he touched his king, he looked at the board again. And he saw it. Between the white bishop and his king there were empty squares. He could block the check!

"It isn't mate!" he shouted. "I'll block it!"

And he put his pawn on c6, between the bishop and the king.

Lucía went red. Pablo burst out laughing. And the two of them went on playing until it got dark, on that rug where a king had nearly surrendered for no reason.

Ever since then Pablo has had a rule. Before he resigns, he asks all his pieces.

Three ways out of check

This story is inspired by a childhood memory told by the Scottish grandmaster Paul Motwani: two children thought a game had ended in mate because the king could not move.

After 1.e4 d6 2.♗b5+, the black king has no free squares. But it is not mate. There are three ways out of check: move the king, capture the checking piece or put a piece in between. Here Black can block the check in five ways: c6, ♘c6, ♘d7, ♗d7 or ♕d7.

It is only mate when the king is in check and none of the three ways works.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- The fastest possible mate is "Fool's Mate": 1.f3 e5 2.g4 ♕h4#.
- Many children lose games by resigning too soon. Coaches keep repeating: "No one ever won a game by resigning."
- Paul Motwani was Scotland's first grandmaster.
- In chess, blocking a check is also called "interposing".
- A king with no free squares is not always in danger: what matters is whether something can attack it.

More to discover

- A check can only be stopped in three ways: move the king, take the checking piece or put another piece in between. If none is possible, it is mate.
- If it is a double check, because two pieces attack the king at once, the only way out is to move the king: you cannot take or block two pieces with a single move.
- Some mates have their own names: the back-rank mate, when the king is shut in behind its own pawns; the smothered mate, with a knight; or Scholar's Mate, which so many beginners suffer.
- Scholar's Mate takes only four moves: 1.e4 e5 2.♗c4 ♞c6 3.♕h5 ♞f6 4.♕xf7#.
- Do not confuse mate and stalemate. In mate, the king is in check and cannot escape. In stalemate, it is not in check but its side has no legal move, and the game ends in a draw.
- Before resigning, it is worth looking at the three ways out one by one. Many games have been saved like that.
- The quickest mate White can give comes in three moves, if Black is careless: 1.e4 f6 2.d4 g5 3.♕h5#.
- A discovered check happens when a piece moves aside and lets another one, which was behind it, attack the king.
- Perpetual check is a series of checks that cannot be avoided. If nobody can give mate, the game ends in a draw by repetition.
- Before moving, coaches advise always asking one question: what does my opponent's last move threaten?

Think about it

What are the three ways out of check?



✦ *The whole Cold War fitted on one table in Reykjavik.* ✦

STORY 55

The Match of the Century

Fischer v Spassky, Reykjavik, 1972

✦

In the summer of 1972, the eyes of the world were on a small island in the North Atlantic. In Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, the world champion, the Soviet Boris Spassky, was going to face the challenger, the American Bobby Fischer.

It was the time of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union competed in everything: in space, in weapons, in sport. And in chess the Soviets had been winning the world championship for twenty-four years. Fischer, a lonely genius from Brooklyn, was going to try to break that run single-handed.

Before it began, there was almost no match. Fischer complained about everything: the prize money, the lighting, the television cameras, which he said distracted him. He arrived late in Iceland and only turned up when an English millionaire doubled the prize.

In the first game, Fischer made a strange mistake and lost. For the second he did not even show up, because of the cameras, and lost it without playing. He was 2–0 down. Everyone thought he would go home.

Spassky then did something that says a great deal about him. He could have insisted on playing on the main stage, with the cameras. Instead he agreed to play the third game in a small back room, away from the public, so that Fischer would feel comfortable. There, Fischer beat Spassky for the first time in his life.

In the sixth game something even stranger happened. Fischer, who almost always opened with the king's pawn, began by moving the queen's bishop's pawn. He played a game so clear, so beautiful, that at the end Spassky himself stood up and applauded his opponent, along with the audience.

From that moment on, Fischer was master of the match. He won memorable games and on 1 September, after twenty-one games, he became the eleventh world champion. It was the first time an American had done it.

At home he was welcomed as a hero. Chess became fashionable and thousands of children started to play.

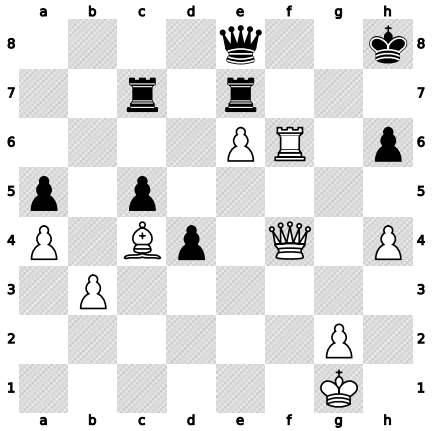
But Fischer never played another official game. In 1975 he gave up the title without defending it. He and Spassky, who had faced each other as symbols of two hostile worlds, ended up as friends. Twenty years later they met again to play a rematch, and when Fischer died, in 2008, Spassky remembered him fondly. On the board they had been rivals. Off it, they respected each other.

The game Spassky applauded

Game six: Fischer–Spassky. Fischer, with White, opened with 1.c4, a move he had hardly ever used, and reached a Queen's Gambit with a very simple plan: bring his pieces together against the black king.

The game lasted 41 moves. In the final position, the white rook dominates from f6 and the queen comes in via f4. Spassky re-

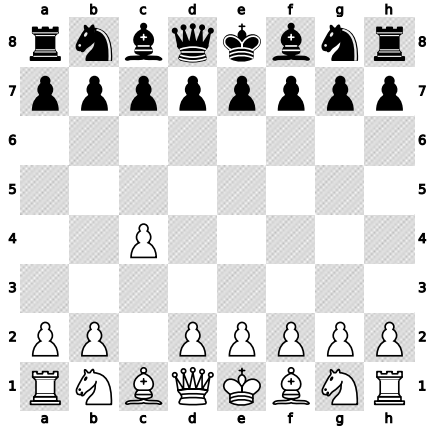
signed and joined in the audience's applause.



Final position after 41.♕f4. Spassky resigned

Did you know...?

- The match ended 12½–8½. Fischer won seven games, Spassky three (one of them because Fischer failed to appear), and there were eleven draws.
- Before Fischer, every world champion since 1948 had been Soviet: Botvinnik, Smyslov, Tal, Petrosian and Spassky.
- Fischer became US champion at only 14, in 1958, and a grandmaster at 15.
- He invented a variant in which the pieces on the back rank are set up at random: Fischer Random Chess, also called Chess960 after the number of possible starting positions.
- He also patented the increment clock, which adds a few seconds for each move. Today it is used in almost every tournament.
- Fischer spent his last years in Iceland, the country of the match. He is buried there, in a small cemetery near Selfoss.
- The match was played in the Laugardalshöll, a sports hall in Reykjavik.
- The Soviets even asked for Fischer's chair to be examined for devices that might distract Spassky. Nothing was found.
- In Selfoss, the town where Fischer is buried, there is a small museum devoted to him, the Fischer Center.
- Spassky settled in France and played in several Chess Olympiads for the French team.
- The games were broadcast move by move on radio and television. In the United States, a television programme explained them live for hours.



1.c4: Fischer's surprise in the sixth game

More to discover

- The prize fund was doubled at the last minute, to 250,000 dollars, thanks to an English banker, Jim Slater, who wanted to persuade Fischer to play.
- It is said that Henry Kissinger, President Nixon's adviser, phoned Fischer to encourage him not to leave Iceland.

Think about it

What do you think Fischer thought when he saw his opponent applauding him?



✦ *They offered him millions, and he said no.* ✦

STORY 56

The Champion Who Said No

Bobby Fischer, 1972-1996

✦

In September 1972 Bobby Fischer came back from Reykjavik as the most famous man in the United States. He had beaten Boris Spassky, the Soviet champion, and was the first American world chess champion. He was on the covers of magazines and on television. Children all over the country wanted to learn to play.

And then the men in suits started to arrive. They brought contracts, pens and offers: to advertise shampoo, watches, cars, food, clothes. They offered him millions of dollars to put his face in an advert.

Fischer listened to them, read the papers... and said no. To one, to another, to all of them. It is said that he turned down one of those men with a very simple explanation: he could not advertise a product he did not use.

The newspapers could not understand it. Who turns down that much money? But Fischer was like that. He was not interested in being famous. He was interested in chess, and he had his own way of seeing it.

Soon afterwards Fischer stopped playing tournaments. He disappeared for years. Hardly anyone knew where he was or what he was doing. But he was still thinking about chess, and about two things he did not like.

The first was the clock. Many games were lost on time in winning positions, with players moving pieces in a frantic rush in the last few seconds. Fischer drew a different clock: one that added a few seconds after each move. That way nobody would ever be left without time to think at least a little. He patented it in 1989.

The second was the openings. Players spent months memorising moves from books. "That isn't chess, it's memory," Fischer thought. So in 1996, in Buenos Aires, he presented an invention: a chess in which the pieces on the back row are placed at random before the start. With so many possible positions, memorising is no use. You have to think from the very first move.

Today, in almost every tournament in the world, the clocks add seconds on each move: they are Fischer clocks. And the best players on the planet compete in random chess. The champion who said no to advertising ended up leaving his name on every board, without being paid for a single advert.

Random chess

Bobby Fischer (1943-2008) was world champion from 1972 to 1975. After the Reykjavik match he turned down advertising contracts worth several million dollars.

In Fischer Random Chess (now called Chess960 or Freestyle), the pawns are set up as usual, but the pieces on the first rank are drawn by lot, with two rules: the bishops must be on squares of different colours, and the king must stand between the two rooks, so that it can castle. Black sets up its pieces as in a mirror. There are 960 possible starting positions.

His other invention, the clock that adds a few seconds after each move, is now called the "Fischer increment" and is used in almost every competition.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Fischer was champion of the United States at only 14.
- He applied for the patent on his clock in 1988, and it was granted in November 1989.
- He presented random chess in Buenos Aires on 19 June 1996.
- One of the 960 positions is the normal chess starting position.
- In 1975 he did not defend his title and lost the crown without playing: the new champion was Anatoly Karpov.

More to discover

- Fischer was born in Chicago and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. He died in Reykjavik aged 64: as many as there are squares on the board.
- To reach the 1972 match he beat the best Candidates in an incredible way: 6–0 against Mark Taimanov and 6–0 against Bent Larsen.
- In 1992 he played a match against Spassky again, in the former Yugoslavia, despite the international sanctions on that country. He won and never played in public again.
- His book *My 60 Memorable Games*, from 1969, is considered one of the best chess books ever written by a champion.
- In 2019 FIDE held the first official World Fischer Random Chess Championship. It was won by the American Wesley So.
- For 1975 he asked that the match be won by the first to reach ten wins, not counting draws, and that the champion keep the title if it was tied at nine. FIDE did not accept all his conditions.
- For twenty years, from 1972 to 1992, he did not play a single official game.
- In 2005 Iceland granted him citizenship, and he spent his last years there.

Think about it

Would you agree to advertise something you don't use, if they paid you a lot of money?



✦ *She did not want to be the best among women, but the best among everyone.* ✦

STORY 57

The First Woman Grandmaster

Nona Gaprindashvili, Lone Pine, 1977

✦

Nona Gaprindashvili was born in 1941 in Zugdidi, a small town in Georgia. There were lots of boys in her house: her brothers played football, ran about and fought. And they also played chess. Nona watched, learned and began to play with them. Very soon her brothers no longer wanted to play against her, because she always beat them.

At 21, in 1962, Nona became women's world champion. She was champion for sixteen years. In Georgia people adored her: girls wanted to be like her, and thousands of them started playing chess.

But Nona wanted something more. Being the best among women was not enough for her. She wanted to measure herself against everyone.

In the spring of 1977 she travelled to Lone Pine, a small town in California at the foot of the mountains, where a very strong open tournament was held. Grandmasters from all over the world went there. Almost all the players were men.

Some looked at her with curiosity. Others thought she would be an easy opponent.

They were wrong. Nona played bravely, attacking whenever she could. In the seventh round, against grandmaster Leonid Shamkovich, she gave up a rook to strip the black king of its defences, while her pawn on c7 waited, one step from promoting. Shamkovich had to resign. Round after round, Nona piled up points. She beat several grandmasters.

When the tournament was over, her name was right at the top, in first place, tied with other players. With that result she achieved something no woman had ever done before: a grandmaster norm, for the highest title in chess, the same one the men hold.

The next year, in 1978, FIDE made her a grandmaster. She was the first woman in history with that title.

Many years later, a famous television series said Nona had never played against men. She, who had played against hundreds of them, protested. And she was right: the producers had to admit it.

Nona never stopped playing. Even when she was very old, she still sat down at the board with the same enthusiasm. It was not the first time a woman had taken on the men. But at Lone Pine the whole world saw it.

A ROOK FOR A PAWN

Nona Gaprindashvili (1941) was women's world champion from 1962 to 1978. In the 1977 Lone Pine Open she

scored 6½ points out of 9 and finished joint first. In 1978 she became the first woman grandmaster in history.

Gaprindashvili–Shamkovich, Lone Pine 1977, round seven. The white pawn on c7 is one step from promoting. White attacks: 39.♖xf7 ♗e4 40.♖xg7+! ♔xg7 41.♕xe4. White has given up a rook, but the c7-pawn and the bishop on d6 are too strong. 41...♕f5 42.♕e3 ♔f7 43.♖b4 b2 44.♖xb2 ♔g7 45.♖f2 ♕h5 46.♖f4 ♖h8 47.♕g3+ and Black resigned.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- In Georgia, after her triumphs, many parents named their daughters Nona.
- She won many Olympiads with the Soviet team.
- There was a Georgian perfume called "Nona" in her honour.
- In 2021 she sued Netflix over the line in the series The Queen's Gambit. They reached a settlement in 2022.
- FIDE awards a trophy in her name to the country with the best combined results in the open and women's Olympiads.

More to discover

- Nona lost the title in 1978 to another Georgian, Maia Chiburdanidze, who was only 17.
- After her, Georgia produced several of the best women players in the world: Maia Chiburdanidze, Nana Alexandria and Nana Ioseliani.
- At the Lone Pine tournament, in California, she shared first place with several grandmasters. It was a result nobody expected.
- She went on playing for many years and won the women's World Seniors Championship several times.
- In 1962 she won the title from Elisaveta Bykova by 9–2.
- She defended it four times: three times against Alla Kushnir and once against her compatriot Nana Alexandria.
- The Lone Pine tournament, in California, was paid for by a millionaire chess fan, Louis Statham, and brought together grandmasters from all over the world every year.
- After independence, Georgia won the women's Olympiad in 1992, 1994 and 1996.

Think about it

Why did so few women play chess for such a long time?



✦ *A purple yogurt nearly stopped a world championship.* ✦

STORY 58

The Suspicious Yoghurt

Karpov v Korchnoi, Baguio, 1978

✦

In the summer of 1978, in Baguio, a mountain city in the Philippines, the strangest world championship match in history was played. On one side was the champion, Anatoly Karpov, young, slim and calm, the great pride of the Soviet Union. On the other, Viktor Korchnoi, older, nervous and a fighter, who had fled the Soviet Union two years earlier and was now its enemy.

The two would not look each other in the face. They did not even shake hands. And their teams watched each other as if they were spies.

One afternoon, in the middle of a game, a waiter brought Karpov a blueberry yoghurt. Karpov had not ordered it, or so Korchnoi's team thought, and they jumped up at once.

"A purple yoghurt? Why purple? What if it's a coded message? Maybe the colour means 'attack on the queenside'!"

The arbiters had to meet to discuss the yoghurt. In the end it was agreed that, during the games, Karpov could only be brought his yoghurt at a fixed time and always of the same colour.

But the yoghurt was only the beginning. There were protests about the chairs, which were examined in case they hid some device. There were protests about the flags beside the board. Korchnoi began playing in mirrored glasses, so that nobody could see his eyes.

And in the front row of the audience sat a man called Vladimir Zukhar, a psychologist from Karpov's team, who stared at Korchnoi for hours on end.

"That man wants to hypnotise me!" Korchnoi protested.

The match lasted three months. The winner would be the first to score six wins, and draws did not count. Karpov went 5–2 up. It looked as if it was all over. But Korchnoi, with incredible strength, won three of the next four games and levelled at 5–5.

Everything depended on game 32. Karpov played with great precision, and Korchnoi, exhausted, ended up resigning. Karpov won 6–5 and remained champion.

Nobody ever proved that the yoghurt meant anything. It was probably just that, a yoghurt. But in Baguio, nerves made people see traps everywhere.

Game 32

The Karpov–Korchnoi match in Baguio (Philippines) lasted from 18 July to 18 October 1978. The first to score six wins would take the title. After 32 games Karpov won 6–5, with 21 draws.

In game 32 Karpov, with White, gained space on the queenside with his pawns. After 41.b6 ♖b7 the game was adjourned, and Korchnoi resigned without resuming it. The b6-pawn and the attack of the white pieces against the black king were unstoppable.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Karpov and Korchnoi met in three great matches: in 1974, in 1978 and in 1981.
- Korchnoi went on playing tournaments until he was past eighty.
- In 1981 they met again for the title, in Merano (Italy). Karpov won again.
- Today world championship matches have very strict rules about what may be brought to the table.

More to discover

- The Baguio match was won by the first player to win six games. Karpov won 6–5, with 21 draws: 32 games in three months in all.
- Korchnoi had left the Soviet Union in 1976, during a tournament in Amsterdam. That is why the match was lived almost like a war.
- The organiser of the match, the Filipino Florencio Campomanes, later became president of FIDE.
- Korchnoi was born in Leningrad in 1931 and as a child survived the terrible siege of the city during the Second World War.
- He was called "Viktor the Terrible" for his character and for the way he fought in every game.
- In Baguio Karpov was at one point leading 5–2. Korchnoi won three games and levelled at 5–5, but the next win went to Karpov.
- They had already met in 1974, in the Candidates final. Karpov won by 12½–11½.
- In his career Karpov won more than a hundred and sixty tournaments, more than any other champion.
- From 1978 Korchnoi lived in Switzerland, and he played for the Swiss team at the Olympiads.
- Karpov was world champion from 1975 to 1985, when he lost the title to Garry Kasparov.

Think about it

Why do nerves make us see traps where there are none?



✦ *Blindfolded, the knight visited every square.* ✦

STORY 59

The Knight That Jumped Blindfold on TV

"¿Qué apostamos?", Spanish TV, 1994

✦

In the 1990s many Spanish families sat down in front of the television to watch a game show called "¿Qué apostamos?" ("What do you bet?"). The contestants bet that they could do something almost impossible: recognise hundreds of dogs by their bark, stack enormously tall towers of glasses, guess songs from a single note. And if they managed it, they won money.

One night in 1994 a calm man in a suit, who did not look at all like an acrobat, walked onto the set. His name was Daniel Elguezabal. He was a chess master and ran La Casa del Ajedrez in Madrid, a school and shop where children and grown-ups went to learn.

His bet left the audience silent.

"I bet that, blindfolded, I can take the knight over every square on the board without landing on any of them twice. And starting from whichever square you choose."

On the stage there was a giant board, standing upright, and a big white knight. The presenter chose the starting square. They blindfolded Elguezabal. The clock began to run.

"Knight to..." he said, and named a square.

An assistant moved the knight. The square it left was marked. Elguezabal named another. And another. And another. He did not hesitate. His lips moved almost without stopping, as if he were reading something nobody else could see.

The audience counted under their breath. Ten jumps. Twenty. Forty. The board was filling up with marked squares, and the knight always found a free one. A boy in the stands was counting on his fingers.

Sixty-three jumps. Sixty-four squares.

When they took off the blindfold, the whole board was lit up. He had not repeated a single square. It had taken him about four and a half minutes. The audience rose to its feet and applauded.

Elguezabal won the bet and three million pesetas. He said, smiling, that he planned to spend it with his friends.

How did he do it? It was not magic, nor an impossible memory. He knew a method for touring the board and knew how to adapt it to any starting square. But doing it blindfold, in front of millions of people and with the clock running, was another matter. That night chess came into homes all over Spain through the most unexpected door.

The knight's tour

The "knight's tour" is a very old problem: to take a knight over all 64 squares of the board without landing on any of them twice. The great mathematician Leonhard Euler studied it in 1759.

This tour starts on a1 and ends on h5. The numbers show the order of the jumps. It has been checked by computer: there are 63 knight jumps and no square is repeated.

A trick for finding tours: always jump to the square from which the fewest free exits remain. It is called Warnsdorff's rule, after the German who proposed it in 1823.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- "¿Qué apostamos?" was the Spanish version of a famous German game show, "Wetten, dass..?".
- It is said that on that German show, years earlier, another contestant had made a similar bet with the knight.
- There are more than 26 trillion closed knight's tours, which end on a square from which the knight could jump back to the first one.
- The knight is the only piece that can jump over the others.
- If you try the tour on a 4×4 board, you will see that it is impossible.

More to discover

- The knight changes the colour of its square on every jump. That is why, in a closed tour, the last jump always ends on a square of a different colour from the first.
- The Belgian master George Koltanowski did the tour blindfold on a board on which the audience had written words or numbers in every square, and he recited them all as he passed.
- On a five-by-five board the knight can visit every square, but it cannot get back to the first. The smallest closed tour needs a six-by-six board.
- The show was presented by Ramón García and Ana Obregón, and was broadcast by TVE for much of the 1990s.
- Knight's tours already appear in Arabic manuscripts more than a thousand years old.
- There are "semi-magic" tours: if the squares are numbered in the order of the jumps, every rank and every file adds up to 260. In 2003 a computer proved that there is none in which the diagonals also add up to 260.
- The knight is one of the few pieces that moves today just as it did in chaturanga, more than fourteen hundred years ago.
- A knight is usually said to be worth the same as a bishop, about three pawns. But in closed positions, where it can jump about, it is often worth more.
- On the eight-by-eight board there are so many open knight's tours that nobody has managed to count them all.
- A knight in the centre controls eight squares; in a corner, only two. That is why coaches say a knight on the edge is worth less.

Think about it

Take a board and a coin. How many squares can you reach with the knight without repeating any?

PART VI

✦

From Deep Blue to Today



✦ *For the first time, a machine beat the world champion.* ✦

STORY 60

The Champion and the Machine

Kasparov v Deep Blue, New York, 1997

✦

On 11 May 1997, in a room on the 35th floor of a New York skyscraper, Garry Kasparov sat down at a chessboard. On the other side there was no one doing the thinking. There was an IBM engineer who moved the pieces according to what a screen told him. The one doing the thinking was a machine called Deep Blue, a set of black cabinets full of processors that calculated some two hundred million positions per second.

Kasparov was world champion and, for many, the best player in history. A year earlier he had already faced Deep Blue and won the match. But the machine had come back improved, and this time the contest was level: one win each and three draws. Everything would be decided in the sixth game.

In the lobby, hundreds of people followed the game on big screens. Millions more followed it on the internet, which was then almost a novelty.

Kasparov had Black. He chose a defence he knew well, but on the seventh move he put a pawn on a square the books advised against. It was a known position: White could sacrifice a knight and open up the black king. Many thought Kasparov believed the machine would not dare. He was wrong.

Deep Blue sacrificed the knight without hesitation. The black king was left exposed, unable to castle, with its pieces badly placed. Kasparov put his head in his hands. Nineteen moves after the first, he got up from his chair and resigned. The game had lasted little more than an hour.

The next day, newspapers all over the world reported it: for the first time, a machine had beaten the world champion in a match at classical time controls.

Kasparov did not accept it easily. He suspected that someone had helped the machine during the games and asked for a rematch that was never played. IBM dismantled Deep Blue soon afterwards. Over the years, Kasparov himself acknowledged that the machine had played well and that his defeats had been real.

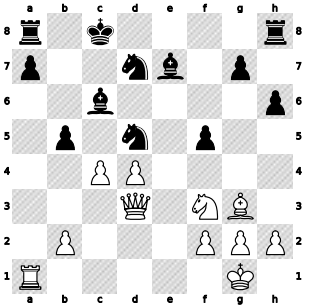
That day many people thought chess had died. The opposite happened. Today programs play far better than any person, and nobody stops playing because of it. Players use them to train, to analyse their games and to learn. Machines never get tired or nervous, but chess is still, above all, a game between two people looking at each other across the board.

Nineteen moves

Game 6: Deep Blue–Kasparov, 1997. 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 dxe4 4.♘xe4 ♘d7 5.♘g5 ♘gf6 6.♗d3 e6 7.♘1f3 h6? 8.♘xe6!



After 8.♘xe6: the sacrifice that opened up the black king



Final position after 19.c4. Kasparov resigned

After the sacrifice, the attack will force the black king to move and lose the right to castle (10.♗g6+ ♔d8), and the white pieces come in along the e-file. The game went on: 8...♕e7 9.O-O fxe6 10.♗g6+ ♔d8 11.♗f4 b5 12.a4 ♗b7 13.♖e1 ♘d5 14.♗g3 ♔c8 15.axb5 cxb5 16.♕d3 ♗c6 17.♗f5 exf5 18.♖xe7 ♗xe7 19.c4, and Kasparov resigned.

Did you know...?

- The match ended 3½–2½ in Deep Blue's favour: two wins for the machine, one for Kasparov and three draws.
- In the first match, played in Philadelphia in 1996, Kasparov had won 4–2, although he lost the first game.
- Deep Blue weighed more than a tonne. Today a free program on a mobile phone plays much better than it did.
- One of the two machines that made up Deep Blue is on display at the Computer History Museum in California, and the other at the Smithsonian in Washington.
- Since then, grandmasters have prepared their games with chess programs. That helper is called "the engine".
- Kasparov later proposed "advanced chess", in which each player may consult a computer during the game.
- In the second game, the machine declined to take a pawn that seemed free. Kasparov thought that move was too "human" for a computer.
- The first time a computer beat a grandmaster in a slow tournament game was in 1988: the program Deep Thought defeated the Dane Bent Larsen.
- In 2017 the program AlphaZero learned to play chess by playing against itself for a few hours, without anyone teaching it a single opening.
- In 2016 another machine, AlphaGo, beat the go champion Lee Sedol. Go was considered a much harder challenge than chess.
- Kasparov was world champion from 1985 to 2000.
- To prepare Deep Blue, IBM hired grandmasters, such as the American Joel Benjamin, who helped to fine-tune the way it judged positions.

More to discover

- Deep Blue could analyse about 200 million positions per second. Kasparov, by his own reckoning, a few per second, but very well chosen.
- The name Deep Blue came from Deep Thought, the earlier machine, and from IBM's nickname, "Big Blue", after the colour of its logo.

Think about it

Why do we still play chess if a machine plays better than we do?



✦ *One champion against thousands of people all over the planet.* ✦

STORY 61

Kasparov Against the World

The internet, 1999

✦

In the summer of 1999 the internet was still something new. Few homes had a computer, and to get online you had to listen to a long, screeching noise. But it already allowed something that had never been possible before: thousands of people all over the planet playing together.

That year the world champion, Garry Kasparov, accepted an enormous challenge. He would play a game against the whole world.

The rules were simple. Kasparov had White. Black was "the World": anyone who wanted could go to a website and vote for the move. Each day the move with the most votes won. To help the voters, four young players published their analysis. The youngest was a fifteen-year-old American girl: Irina Krush.

The game began with a Sicilian. On move ten Irina, sitting at her computer late at night, proposed a move that was not in any book: bringing the black queen to e6.

"It's risky," many thought.

But the World voted for it. And Kasparov, for the first time in the game, had to think hard.

From then on the game became an adventure. Votes came in from more than seventy countries. There were teachers, children, grandmasters, fans playing on a computer in an internet café. In the forums people argued, analysed, quarrelled and made up again. Kasparov, at home, spent hours in front of the board.

The game lasted four months. It reached an ending with both queens on the board and pawns about to promote, so complicated that not even the computers of the time could tell who was winning.

In the end, on move 62, the World resigned. Kasparov had won. But he admitted that he had never put so much effort into a single game. He said it had been the hardest game of his life.

Irina Krush switched off her computer and smiled. She had lost. But she had made the world champion sweat, together with tens of thousands of people she would never meet. Years later she became a grandmaster and was United States champion several times.

Everybody's game

Kasparov–The World was played on the internet between 21 June and 22 October 1999. Black's moves were decided by a vote among thousands of fans from more than 75

countries, helped by the analysis of Irina Krush, Étienne Bacrot, Elisabeth Pähtz and Florin Felecan.

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♗b5+ ♗d7 4.♗xd7+ ♕xd7 5.c4 ♘c6 6.♘c3 ♘f6 7.O-O g6 8.d4 cxd4 9.♘xd4 ♗g7 10.♘de2 ♕e6!?, Irina Krush's novelty. The game ended in a queen ending: ...59.♕g1+ ♔b2 60.♕f2+ ♔c1 61.♔f6 d4 62.g7 and the World resigned, because the white pawn promotes.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- More than 50,000 people voted.
- Kasparov wrote a whole book about this game.
- Étienne Bacrot, another of the analysts, had been the youngest grandmaster in the world, at 14.
- Irina Krush won the United States women's championship eight times.

More to discover

- The game was played between June and October 1999 and lasted 62 moves. One move was published each day, and there was a day to vote on the reply.
- The World team was advised by four young players: Étienne Bacrot, Florin Felecan, Irina Krush and Elisabeth Pähtz.
- Kasparov was number one on the world rating list almost without a break from 1984 until he retired in 2005.
- The game began with a Sicilian Defence and reached a very long and difficult queen ending, which analysts are still studying.
- The game was organised by Microsoft on its MSN portal. The English grandmaster Daniel King commented on it live.
- That same year, in July 1999, Kasparov reached a rating of 2851, the record at the time.
- Kasparov became world champion in 1985, at 22, the youngest up to then.
- Irina Krush became a grandmaster in 2013, and Elisabeth Pähtz is one of the best players in Germany's history.
- Kasparov retired from professional chess in 2005 and went into politics in Russia.
- He wrote a series of books, *My Great Predecessors*, about the world champions who came before him.
- Today "one against all" games are often repeated on the internet, with thousands of players voting on each move.

Think about it

Do many heads think better than one? What happens when they can't agree?



✦ *The board does not know whether a boy or a girl is playing.* ✦

STORY 62

A Girl Against the Champion

Judit Polgár v Kasparov, Moscow, 2002

✦

Judit Polgár was the youngest of three Hungarian sisters. Their father, a teacher, was convinced that any child can become a genius if taught lovingly from an early age. He chose chess. All three sisters became great players. And Judit, the youngest, went further than anyone: at fifteen she was a grandmaster, younger than Bobby Fischer himself.

Judit did not want to play in women's tournaments. She wanted to play against the best, whoever they were.

In 1994, at the Linares tournament, at the age of seventeen, she was paired against Garry Kasparov, the world number one. At one point in the game Kasparov moved a knight, let go of it... and picked it up again to put it on another square. The rules say that once you let go of a piece, the move is made. Judit saw it and froze, but she was very young and did not dare protest to the champion at that moment. The arbiter did not see it. Kasparov won the game. For years they hardly spoke.

Eight years went by. In September 2002 a great match was organised in Moscow: Russia against the Rest of the World. Rapid games, the best players on the planet. And in the fifth round they met again: Judit Polgár with White, Garry Kasparov with Black.

They shook hands without looking at each other.

Kasparov chose a very solid defence, the Berlin, in which the queens are exchanged straight away. It was the defence with which Vladimir Kramnik had taken the title from him two years earlier. Judit was not frightened. She knew how to play those quiet positions. She placed her pieces patiently, pushed her kingside pawns and brought her rooks onto the seventh rank.

Kasparov clutched his head in both hands. He looked for a way out and did not find one. Finally he stopped the clock and held out his hand.

It was the first time a woman had beaten the world number one in a competitive game. Judit put the pieces away smiling. Years later she and Kasparov made peace.

Judit Polgár rose to be among the eight best players in the world, men and women together. She always said the same thing: on the board there are only white pieces and black pieces. The board does not know whether the player is a boy or a girl.

Two rooks on the seventh

Judit Polgár (1976) is the best woman player in history: she reached eighth place in the overall world list. On 9 September 2002, in the Russia–Rest of the World match (Moscow, rapid games), she beat Garry Kasparov, the world number one, with White.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.O-O ♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♗xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5 8.♕xd8+ ♔xd8. This is the Berlin Defence: the queens disappear straight away.

In the ending the white rooks reached the seventh rank: ... 39.♖cc7 ♖xf5 40.♖b7+ ♔c8 41.♖dc7+ ♔d8 42.♖xg7 ♔c8, and Kasparov resigned. The white rooks rule the seventh rank and the black king is trapped.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Her sisters, Zsuzsa and Zsófia, were also great players. Zsuzsa was women's world champion.
- Judit became a grandmaster at 15 years and 4 months, a month younger than Fischer had been.
- In her career she beat eleven world champions, in rapid or classical games.
- She never wanted to play in the women's world championship: she preferred to compete with everyone.
- Today she organises a great chess festival in Budapest and has created a method for teaching chess in schools.

More to discover

- Her father, László Polgár, believed that geniuses are not born but made. He taught his three daughters at home, with chess as the main subject.
- Judit reached a rating of 2735, in 2005, and was the eighth player in the world, counting men and women.
- She retired from competition in 2014.
- In that game Judit played a Ruy Lopez with White and Kasparov chose the Berlin Defence, his weapon at the time.
- In 1993 she won a match against Boris Spassky, the former world champion.
- Her sister Zsuzsa was, in 1991, the first woman to earn the grandmaster title by playing ordinary tournaments, just like the men.
- Her other sister, Zsófia, played a tournament in Rome in 1989 so well that it was called "the Sack of Rome".

Think about it

Are there boys' games and girls' games? Why doesn't the board know?



✦ *He arrived late and in a tracksuit, and he still won.* ✦

STORY 63

The Champion Who Arrived in a Tracksuit

Magnus Carlsen, Almaty, 2022

✦

On 29 December 2022, in Almaty, a big city in Kazakhstan surrounded by snowy mountains, the World Blitz Championship was about to begin. In each game every player had only three minutes for all his moves, plus two seconds per move. Blink once too often and you could lose.

On the hour, the arbiters started all the clocks. At one of the tables, grandmaster Vladislav Kovalev was waiting with White. In front of him was an empty chair. It belonged to Magnus Carlsen, the world champion, the best player on the planet.

Carlsen's clock was running. Thirty seconds went by. A minute. Kovalev looked at the arbiter and raised his hand.

"Can we wait for him?"

"No," the arbiter answered. "Rules are rules."

Kovalev made his first move and pressed the clock. But he was not pleased: he did not want to win like that.

Two minutes went by. Two and a half. And then the door burst open. Carlsen came running in, in a tracksuit, with his rucksack still on his shoulder. He sat down without taking off his jacket. There was half a minute left on his clock. On Kovalev's, almost three.

What happened next seemed impossible. Carlsen moved the pieces at top speed, almost without thinking, but every move was good. He exchanged pieces, reached a rook ending and, little by little, his opponent's time advantage stopped mattering. Kovalev had minutes, but Carlsen had ideas. And Carlsen won the game.

Then he won the second, the third, the fourth and the fifth. Five wins in a row on the first day. By the next round he had put on a suit. And the following day he was world blitz champion, as he already was world rapid champion.

Kovalev never tried to beat him on time, even though the rules allowed it. He preferred to play chess. And that game is remembered today as a sign of two things: the talent of a champion who can win with half a minute, and the sportsmanship of an opponent who would not take advantage of a slip.

Half a minute

Magnus Carlsen (1990) was classical world champion from 2013 to 2023 and has also won many world titles in rapid and blitz. He has collected around twenty world titles.

Kovalev–Carlsen, Almaty 2022, round one of the World Blitz Championship. Carlsen started with half a minute against almost three for Kovalev. After exchanging queens he reached a rook ending and won: ...56.♖xb3 ♖g2+ 57.♔e1 g4 58.♖b8 f5 59.b4 ♖b2, and Black won.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- Carlsen became a grandmaster at 13.
- In 2014 he beat Bill Gates in just nine moves on a television programme.
- In December 2024, in New York, FIDE fined him for playing in jeans, and he walked out of the rapid tournament.
- Carlsen stopped defending the classical title in 2023, because he said it no longer motivated him.
- His rating of 2882 is the highest in history.

More to discover

- Carlsen was born in Tønsberg, in Norway. He won the title in 2013 from Viswanathan Anand, in Chennai, his opponent's home city.
- Between 2018 and 2020 he played 125 classical games in a row without losing one.
- He was a model for a denim brand and, in 2019, he was briefly number one among millions of players of the Premier League's fantasy football game.
- In the World Rapid Championship each player has fifteen minutes for the whole game; in the World Blitz, only three, plus two seconds per move.
- Many experts consider him the best player in history, for how long he dominated and for the variety of his play.
- At 13, in 2004, he drew a rapid game with Kasparov in Reykjavik.
- He defended the title against Anand in 2014, Karjakin in 2016, Caruana in 2018 and Nepomniachtchi in 2021.
- In 2021, in Dubai, he won the longest game in the history of world championship matches: 136 moves.
- He learned to play with his father, Henrik, who also taught his sisters.
- On the internet he plays under funny nicknames, such as "DrNykterstein", and sometimes streams his games live.

Think about it

Why do you think Kovalev did not want to beat him on time?



✦ *One move a year, for a whole lifetime.* ✦

STORY 64

The Game That Lasted a Hundred Years

A story to finish with

✦

In the spring of 1926, in a small village, two twenty-year-old friends said goodbye at the station. Tomás was going away to work in another country, on the far side of the sea. Andrés was staying in the village. They had both played chess since they were children, and they did not want to stop.

"I'll write you a move in every letter," said Tomás. "One a year, on my birthday."

"And I'll answer with mine."

That was how the game began. The first letter came in an envelope with colourful stamps. Inside there was a single line: "1.e4".

The years went by. The letters came by ship, then by plane. In them the friends told each other about their lives: weddings, children, wars, happy times. And at the end, always, the move. Each kept a board with the position in a drawer.

Andrés died first, when he was very old. His daughter Elena found the board in the drawer and a bundle of letters tied with a ribbon. She read the last one. The reply was missing. So she studied the position for days, and wrote her father's move. On the other side of the sea, Tomás's son did the same when his turn came.

The letters went on travelling. Then came emails and mobile phones. Everything changed except one thing: one move a year.

In 2026, a hundred years after the first letter, the game had reached its end. Only two kings and a white pawn about to promote were left. The great-grandchildren, Lucas and Sara, who had never met, decided to play the last move together. Sara crossed the sea. They met in the square of Andrés's village, with an old wooden box and a bundle of letters.

They set out the pieces. The white pawn was on a7. The white king protected it from b6. The black king, cornered on a8, had to move... and it had no square to go to. But it was not in check either.

"Stalemate," said Lucas.

"A draw," Sara smiled.

They shook hands. Nobody had won. Or perhaps everyone had: two families joined by a board for a hundred years.

That afternoon, in the square, Lucas and Sara set up the pieces again, in the starting position. And they began a new game. This time without waiting a year between one move and the next.

Drawn by stalemate

This story is made up, but correspondence games really exist: for centuries many players sent each other their moves by letter, and some games lasted years. Today they are played on the internet, with several days for each move.

The final position is stalemate: it is Black's turn, the king is not in check, but it has no legal move. The black king cannot go to b8, because the pawn attacks it; nor to b7, because the white king controls it; nor take the a7-pawn, because it is protected. When there is stalemate, the game ends in a draw.

[DIAG]

Did you know...?

- The International Correspondence Chess Federation (ICCF) was founded in 1951.
- Before the post, in the nineteenth century, games were played between cities by telegraph, like those between Chigorin and Steinitz.
- In correspondence games you are allowed to consult books.
- Many chess clubs have played games by letter between schools in different countries, so that the children write to each other.
- Stalemate has saved many games that looked lost: a king with no moves can be a hero.

More to discover

- The longest game in a tournament was played in Belgrade in 1989, between Ivan Nikolić and Goran Arsović. It lasted 269 moves and more than twenty hours, and ended in a draw.
- Today you can claim a draw if fifty moves go by without any capture or pawn move. At seventy-five, the arbiter declares it on his own.
- It is also a draw if the same position is repeated three times.
- In England, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, stalemating the opponent's king did not give a draw: it was counted as a loss for the player who did the stalemating.
- The first correspondence chess world champion was the Australian Cecil Purdy, who won the title in 1953.
- Today, in ICCF correspondence chess, consulting computer programs is allowed. That is why the games are very accurate and almost all end in draws.
- Correspondence chess uses a numerical notation, so that moves can be understood in any language: 5254 means the piece goes from e2 to e4.
- Today correspondence games are played on an internet server, with a number of days for each group of moves.
- An ending of king and pawn against king can be won or drawn depending on a single square. That is why it is the first thing endgame students learn.

Think about it

What can be handed down besides objects? What is the point of playing if nobody wins?

✦

More free chess books at

josesande.com/chess/en

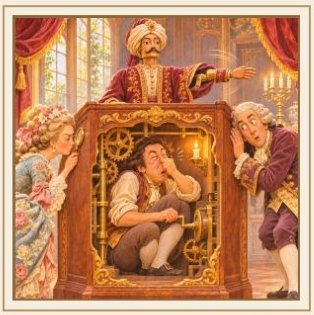
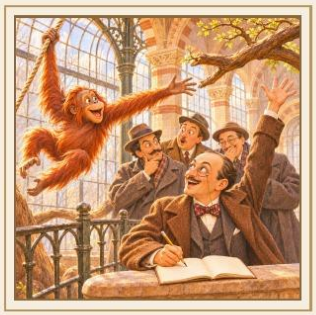
Tales Between the Squares

✦

A sage who asks for wheat for every square. A queen who wins a war without anyone dying. An automaton with a man inside. A champion who turns up late, in a tracksuit.

Sixty-four chess stories and legends, as many as there are squares on the board, in order of time from the origins of the game to the present day. Each one opens with an illustrated plate, followed by the story, the real games and problems, and a few curiosities.

For the whole family to read, whether you play or not.



JOSESANDE.COM/CHESS/EN