The Royal Game

The usual eleventh-hour bustle and commotion reigned on the big liner that was due to sail from New York to Buenos Aires at midnight. Visitors who were not sailing forced their way through the crowds to see their friends off, telegraph boys with caps worn at an angle called out names as they darted through the public saloons, cabin trunks and flowers were being delivered, children ran, full of curiosity, up and down the companionways, while the orchestra played imperturbably on deck. I was standing somewhat apart from this turmoil, talking to a friend on the promenade deck, when two or three flashbulbs went off near by. Apparently some important person was being quickly interviewed and photographed by the press just before we sailed.

My friend looked over and laughed. 'There's a rare bird you have on board. That's Czentovic.' And as I reacted to this information with a rather obviously blank expression, he went on to explain: 'Mirko Czentovic, the world chess champion. He has traipsed around the whole of America from the east coast to the west, playing tournaments, and now he's off to Argentina for fresh triumphs.'

In fact I did now recall this young world champion and even a few details connected with his meteoric career. My friend, a more observant reader of the newspapers than I, was able to supplement these with a whole string of anecdotes. At a stroke Czentovic had established himself about a year earlier

alongside such reputable past-masters of the chess world as Alekhine, Capablanca, Tartakower, Lasker and Bogoljuboff. Not since the appearance of the ten-year-old prodigy Reshevsky at the New York chess tournament in 1922 had the breakthrough of a completely unknown person into the magic circle caused quite such a sensation. For Czentovic's intellectual attributes didn't appear in any way to predict at the outset that he would have such a dazzling career. The secret soon leaked out that this champion was, in his private life, incapable of writing any sentence in any language without making spelling mistakes and, as one of his exasperated colleagues angrily jeered, 'his lack of education is almost universal in all departments'. He was the son of a poverty-stricken southern Yugoslav who worked as a boatman on the Danube, and whose small craft was run down one night by a barge carrying grain. After his father's death the twelve-year-old boy was taken in out of pity by the priest of his remote village. The good man strove honestly, by coaching him at home, to make up for what the taciturn, unresponsive boy with the broad forehead seemed unable to learn at the village school.

But his efforts continued to be fruitless. Mirko went on staring at the letters, which had been explained to him a hundred times, as though he had never seen them before. His slow-functioning brain also lacked any retentive capacity for the simplest lessons in any subject. He had to use his fingers for counting even at the age of fourteen; and to read a book or newspaper required even more effort for this lad already halfway to adulthood. No one, however, could call Mirko unwilling or difficult. Obediently he did as he was told, fetched water, chopped wood, worked in the field, cleaned the kitchen, and always punctiliously completed every task he was given, even if he did it with infuriating slowness. But what upset the good priest most about the strange boy was his total apathy. He did nothing unless someone particularly asked him to; he never put a question, didn't play with other lads, and never looked for any occupation beyond what had been specifically organised by someone else. As soon as Mirko had finished doing his household chores he would sit dourly looking round the room, with the empty expression of the sheep in the meadow, utterly ignoring any activity going on around

him. In the evenings, when the priest smoked his long, countryman's pipe and played his usual three games of chess with the village police sergeant, the fair-haired lad squatted dumbly beside them and stared from under his heavy lids, apparently half-asleep and with indifference, at the board with the black and white squares. One winter evening, while the two men were deep in their daily game, they heard out on the village street the bells of a fast-approaching sleigh. A farmer, his cap covered in snow, stepped quickly into the house. His old mother lay dying, and he wanted the priest to hurry to be in time to give her Extreme Unction. The priest went with him immediately. The policeman, who hadn't finished his beer, lit up his pipe again. When he was just putting on his heavy knee-boots ready to leave he noticed how Mirko's gaze was fixed unwaveringly on the chessboard with the unfinished game.

'Well now, would you like to finish the game?' he said jokingly, completely convinced that the sleepy youngster had no idea how to move a single piece on the board. The boy looked up shyly, then nodded, and sat down in the priest's chair. After fourteen moves the police sergeant was beaten and had to admit his defeat was not the result of a careless move on his part. The second game produced the same result.

'Balaam's ass!' the priest exclaimed in astonishment when he returned, explaining to the policeman – who was not so well versed in the Bible – that more than two thousand years ago a similar phenomenon had occurred, when someone who was dumb had suddenly discovered the gift of wise speech. Despite the late hour the priest couldn't resist challenging his semi-literate stand-in to a match. Mirko beat him easily, too. He played toughly, slowly, imperturbably, without once lifting his broad forehead from the board. But he played with undeniable certainty. Neither the policeman nor the priest was able to win one game against him over the next few days. The priest, who was better equipped than almost anyone else to assess the otherwise total backwardness of his protégé, was now eagerly curious to know how far this single, special gift would stand up to a more serious examination. After he had taken Mirko to the village barber to have his unkempt, straw-coloured hair cut, to make him more or less presentable, he

took him in his sleigh to the small town near by. He knew some really keen chess players gathered in a corner of the café in the main square, and that they were more experienced players than himself. There was no small stir among them when the priest pushed the fair-haired, red-cheeked lad of fifteen, with his inside-out sheepskin and heavy knee-boots, forward into the café. The youngster stood apart, shyly, in a corner, his eyes cast down, until he was summoned to one of the chess tables. Mirko was beaten in the first game because he had not seen the so-called Sicilian opening played at the good priest's table. In the second game he drew with the best player there. From the third and fourth games on he beat all his opponents without exception.

Now, exciting things rarely happen in a small provincial town in southern Yugoslavia; so for the assembled worthies the début of the peasant champion was an instant sensation. It was agreed unanimously that, whatever happened, the boy wonder must stay in the town until next day, so that the other members of the chess club could be called together; and above all, so that a message could be sent to the castle to tell the elderly Count Simczic, who was a chess-fanatic. The priest, who looked on his ward with quite new pride, but who did not wish to neglect his duties at the Sunday service merely on account of the pleasure of his discovery, agreed to leave Mirko behind for a further test. The chess group paid for young Czentovic to be put up at a hotel and that evening he saw a water-closet for the first time. The chess-room was full to capacity the following Sunday afternoon. Mirko sat for four hours continuously at the chessboard and, without saying a word or even looking up, defeated one player after another. Finally a simultaneous game was suggested. It took some time for the uninstructed boy to grasp that in a simultaneous game he had to play alone against a number of the other players at the same time. But once Mirko had grasped this procedure, he quickly got the hang of it, and walked in his heavy, creaking boots, slowly from table to table. In the end he won seven of the eight games.

Great consultations now began. Although strictly speaking this new champion didn't belong to the town, native and national pride was keenly aroused. Hardly anyone would have

noticed the existence of this little town on the map. But perhaps at last, for the first time, it would gain the honour of sending a famous man out into the world. An agent named Koller, who until now had dealt only in soubrettes and singers for the garrison cabaret, declared himself willing, if someone would guarantee his expenses for a year, to have the youngster taught all about chess professionally in Vienna, by an excellent local champion he knew. Count Simczic, who had not met such a notable opponent in sixty years of playing chess daily, guaranteed the sum immediately. That Sunday the astonishing career of the boatman's son began.

After six months Mirko had completely mastered the secrets of chess technique, but with one strange limitation, which was to be much noticed and made fun of later in chess circles. He never managed, even for one single game, to play from memory – or as the experts say – to play blindfold. He completely lacked the ability to visualise the board in the unrestricted space of the imagination. He always had to have the black and white board with the sixty-four squares and the thirty-two pieces physically in front of him. Even when he was world famous he carried a folding pocket chess set with him, so that if he wanted to reconstruct a championship game or solve a problem, he could have the positions displayed visually. This defect, trivial in itself, betrayed a flaw in imaginative power, and it was often discussed within the small world of chess in the same way that musicians do if an outstanding virtuoso or conductor proves unable to play or conduct without a written score.

But this odd peculiarity in no way slowed down Mirko's stupendous progress. By the time he was seventeen he had already won a dozen chess prizes. At eighteen he had won the Hungarian championship and at twenty the world championship. The most audacious champions, each one vastly superior to him in intellectual ability, imagination and daring, were nevertheless beaten by his tough, cold logic, as Napoleon was by the ponderous Kutusov, or Hannibal by Fabius Cunctator. The latter, according to Livy, had similarly shown in childhood conspicuous signs of impassivity and stupidity. So it came about that a complete outsider, a ponderous, taciturn, country lad, from whom even the most cunning reporters were

unable to extract even one usefully publishable word, fought his way into the illustrious gallery of chess champions, in whose ranks were assembled men of the most varied types of intellectual superiority – philosophers, mathematicians, calculating, imaginative and often creative temperaments. To be sure, what Czentovic denied the papers in the way of polished speech he soon more than adequately made up for in anecdotes about himself. Inescapably, the moment he left the chessboard, where he was undisputed master, Czentovic became a grotesque and almost comic figure; despite his formal black suit, his splendid cravat with the somewhat ostentatious pearl tie-pin, and his painstakingly manicured nails, he remained in behaviour and manners the same limited country bumpkin who had cleaned out the priest's room in the village. In a blatantly crude and clumsy way he set about extracting from his gift and his fame whatever money there was to be had. He did this, to the amusement and vexation of his professional colleagues, in a petty way, often showing what amounted to sheer vulgar greed. He travelled from town to town, always staying in the cheapest hotels. He played in the most awful clubs provided they paid his fee. He allowed himself to appear on advertisements for soap, and even lent his name – ignoring the jokes of his rivals, who knew well enough that he couldn't put three sentences together correctly – to a *Philosophy of Chess*, which was really written for its commercially-aware publisher by an insignificant student from Galicia. As with every truly stubborn person, he lacked a sense of the ridiculous. From the moment he won the world championship he thought he was the most important man in the world; and the knowledge that he had beaten all those clever, intellectual, brilliant speakers and writers in their own field, and above all, the plain fact that he had earned more than they had, turned his initial insecurity into a cold and tactless display of pride.

'But how could such an early rise to fame fail to turn such an empty head?' my friend concluded, having just given me a classic demonstration of Czentovic's childish propensities. 'How can a twenty-one-year-old peasant from the Banat fail to succumb to an attack of vanity if, suddenly, by moving a few pieces around on a wooden board, he can earn more in a week than his entire village back home in a whole year of wood-

cutting and bitter hard work? Besides, isn't it confoundedly easy to think you're a great man if you aren't burdened with the slightest idea that Rembrandt, Beethoven, Dante or Napoleon ever even lived? This lad knows only one thing in that walled-in brain of his: that for months now he hasn't lost a game of chess. And as he's really no idea that anything else in the world apart from chess and money has any value, he's every reason to be pleased with himself.'

The information given me by my friend couldn't fail to arouse my particular curiosity. All my life I have been attracted by every kind of monomania, by people obsessed with one single idea. For the more a man limits himself, the nearer he is on the other hand to what is limitless; it is precisely those who are apparently aloof from the world who build for themselves a remarkable and thoroughly individual world in miniature, using their own special equipment, termite-like. So I made no secret of my intention of examining this particular specimen of intellectual one-track-mindedness closely under the microscope during the twelve-day journey to Rio.

'You won't have much luck there,' my friend warned me. 'As far as I know no one's been able to extract the slightest bit of psychological material from Czentovic. Behind his abysmal stupidity the wily peasant conceals the ultimate in cleverness. He leaves no chinks in his armour, thanks to a simple technique. He talks only to fellow Yugoslavs from his own background. He looks for them in small bars. If he gets a whiff of education in a man he retreats into his shell. Then no one can boast of having heard him say anything stupid. And no one can claim he has sounded the allegedly boundless depths of his lack of culture.'

My friend was right, in fact. During the first day of the voyage it proved absolutely impossible to approach Czentovic without being boorishly importunate, which definitely isn't my way. Sometimes, to be sure, he would walk on the promenade deck, but always with his hands clasped behind his back and with a proud self-absorbed bearing, as in those well-known pictures of Napoleon. Besides, he took his walk round the deck with such speed and thrustfulness that you would have had to follow him at a trot to be able to speak to him. Again, he never appeared in the public rooms, in the bar,

in the smoking-room. As I was told by the steward of whom I inquired discreetly, he spent most of the day in his cabin practising or going over games of chess on a large board.

After three days it began really to annoy me that his skilful defence technique was stronger than my determination to approach him. I had never yet in my life had the opportunity of actually meeting a chess champion, and the more concerned I became about fitting a label to this specific type of man, so the thought processes involved seemed to me the more incredible – that a man could spend his whole life revolving exclusively round a space consisting of sixty-four black and white squares. I knew well enough from my own experience the mysterious attraction of 'the royal game', that game among games devised by man, which rises majestically above every tyranny of chance, which grants its victor's laurels only to a great intellect, or rather, to a particular form of mental ability.

But are we not already guilty of an insulting limitation in calling chess a game? Isn't it also a science, an art, hovering between these two categories as Muhammad's coffin hovered between heaven and earth? Isn't it a unique bond between every pair of opponents, ancient and yet eternally new; mechanical in its framework and yet only functioning through use of the imagination; confined in geometrically fixed space and at the same time released from confinement by its permutations; continuously evolving yet sterile; thought that leads nowhere, mathematics that add up to nothing, art without an end product, architecture without substance, and nevertheless demonstrably more durable in its true nature and existence than any books or creative works? Isn't it the only game that belongs to all peoples and all times? And who knows whether God put it on earth to kill boredom, to sharpen the wits or to lift the spirits? Where is its beginning and where its end?

Every child can learn its basic rules, every bungler can try it; and yet it requires, within those unchanging small squares, the production of a special species of master, not comparable to any other kind, men who have a singular gift for chess, geniuses of a particular kind, in whom vision, patience and technique function in just as precise divisions as they do in mathematicians, poets and musicians, only on different levels and in different conjunctions.

At an earlier stage of the great interest in research into physiognomy, someone like Gall would have dissected the brains of chess champions to establish if such geniuses had a unique coil in their grey matter, a kind of chess muscle or chess bump which was more intensively inscribed there than in other skulls. And how a case like Czentovic's would have excited such a physiognomist, where this precise type of genius appears to be deposited in intellectually totally inert matter, like a single vein of gold in a hundredweight of dead rock!

In principle I understood the time-honoured fact that such a unique, such an ingenious game must produce its own special matadors. But how difficult it is, how impossible even, to visualise the life of an alert, intelligent man who reduces the world to the narrow linear traffic between black and white, who looks for his life's apogee in the mere toing and froing, back and forth, of thirty-two pieces. How hard it is to understand a man who, through using a new opening, moving the Knight instead of the pawn, achieves a feat, and his tiny little scrap of immortality tucked away in a chess book reference – a man, an intelligent man, who without losing his reason, for ten, twenty, thirty, forty years, concentrates all his mental energy over and over again on the ludicrous exercise of manoeuvring into a corner a wooden king on a wooden board!

And now one such phenomenon, one such genius or incomprehensible fool, was physically near me for the first time, six cabins away on the same ship. And there was I, feeling wretched, because my curiosity about how the mind works has always been a kind of passion with me, and I was not in a position to approach him. I began to think up the most absurd stratagems: perhaps to flatter his vanity by pretending to interview him for an important paper, or to arouse his greed by offering him a lucrative tournament in Scotland. But eventually I remembered that the hunter's most successful technique for enticing the blackcock is to imitate its mating call; what could really be more effective in attracting the attention of a chess champion than to play chess oneself?

Now I have never in my life been a serious exponent of the art of chess, the reason being simply, in fact, that I have always entered into a game light-heartedly and entirely for pleasure. If I sit down at a chessboard for an hour, I am not going to exert

myself in any way. Quite the opposite: I shall be seeking relaxation from intellectual tension. I 'play' chess in the truest sense of the word while others, the real chess players, work at it. For chess, then, as for love, a partner is essential, and at that time I didn't know if there were any other chess enthusiasts on board. To lure them out of their hiding places I set up a rudimentary trap in the smoking-room. Although my wife is an even weaker player than I, she and I sat there at a chessboard like bird-catchers. In fact we hadn't completed six moves before someone passing by stopped, and a second asked permission to watch us. Eventually the partner I was hoping for arrived to challenge me to a game.

His name was McConnor and he was a Scots mining engineer. As I heard it, he had made a large fortune out of oil wells in California. He was stocky in appearance, with strong, firm, almost square, jaws, strong teeth, and a rich ruddy complexion for which, it would appear, a copious intake of whisky was at least in part responsible. His shoulders were strikingly broad and almost athletically mobile. Unfortunately and characteristically they drew one's attention as he played, for this Mr McConnor was one of that breed of successful self-made men for whom a defeat, even in the most unimportant game, diminishes their self-esteem. Accustomed in life to getting his own way ruthlessly, and spoiled by material success, this massive self-made man was so unshakeably convinced of his own superiority that any opposition provoked him as being unwarrantable, almost an affront. When he lost the first game he became bad tempered and began to explain dictatorially and at length that it could only have been because his attention must have wandered for a moment. In the third game he blamed the noise in the next room for his failure. He was never prepared to lose without at once seeking a return game. At first this driving determination amused me. In the end I accepted it only as an unavoidable accompaniment to the achievement of my own objective: to lure the world champion to our table.

On the third day it worked, but only by half. It could have been that Czentovic noticed us at our chessboard through the window from the promenade deck, or it could have been by pure chance that he honoured the smoking-room with his

presence – anyway, as soon as he saw us amateurs practising his art, he instinctively took a step over in our direction and from a measured distance cast a searching glance at our board. It was McConnor's move. And this one move was quite sufficient to tell Czentovic how little worthy of his expert interest a closer study of our unskilled efforts would be. With the same obvious gesture that one uses to put down a bad detective novel one has been offered in a bookshop, without even leafing through it, he walked away from our table and left the smoking-room. 'Weighed in the balance and found wanting,' I thought to myself, slightly put out by that cool, contemptuous look. To relieve my feelings a little, I said to McConnor, 'The champion didn't seem to be very enthusiastic about your move.'

'Which champion?'

I explained that the person who had just walked past and given our game a disapproving glance was Czentovic, the chess champion. However, I continued, the two of us would survive and come to terms with his illustrious contempt without breaking our hearts; beggars can't be choosers. But to my surprise my off-hand remarks had quite an unexpected effect on McConnor. He immediately became so excited he forgot our game, and you could almost hear his ambition building up steam. He had no idea Czentovic was on board. Czentovic simply must play him. He had only once in his life played against a world champion, and that was in a simultaneous match with forty others; even that had been frightfully exciting, and he had very nearly won. Did I know the champion personally? I said I didn't. Would I speak to him and ask him over? I declined, on the grounds that I knew Czentovic was not very responsive to new acquaintances. Besides, what sort of attraction would there be for a world champion in playing with third-rate players like us?

Well, I ought not to have spoken of third-rate players to a man of McConnor's overweening nature. He leaned back angrily and declared bluntly that, for his part, he couldn't believe Czentovic would decline the polite challenge of a gentleman; and he would soon see about that. At his request I gave him a brief description of the world champion. With uncontrolled impatience he soon rushed off after Czentovic on the

promenade deck, unconcernedly leaving our game abandoned. Once again I felt the owner of the broad shoulders was not to be restrained once he was determined to have something.

I waited quite anxiously. After ten minutes McConnor returned, not looking very pleased, it seemed to me.

'Well?' I asked him.

'You were right,' he replied, somewhat annoyed. 'He's not a very pleasant gentleman. I introduced myself, told him who I am. He didn't shake hands. I tried to explain how proud and honoured we would all be on board if he would play a simultaneous match against us. But he was damnably stiff-necked about it. Said he was sorry, but he had contractual obligations to his agent which expressly forbade him to play on the whole trip without payment of a fee. His minimum is 250 dollars a match.'

I laughed. 'It would never have occurred to me that pushing pieces about from black to white could be such a profitable business. Well, I hope you said goodbye just as politely.'

But McConnor remained utterly serious. 'The match has been arranged for tomorrow afternoon at three o'clock. Here in the smoking-room. I hope we won't let him make mincemeat of us too easily.'

'What? You've agreed to pay him 250 dollars?' I exclaimed in astonishment.

'Why not? It's his trade. If I had toothache and there happened to be a dentist on board I wouldn't ask him to extract the tooth for nothing. The man's right to ask a fat price. In every field the real experts are also the best businessmen. And as far as I'm concerned, the more straightforward the deal the better. I'd rather pay cash than have to be obliged to our Mr Czentovic and thank him afterwards. Besides, I've often lost more than 250 dollars in an evening at our club and still not played with a world champion. It's no disgrace for a "third-rate" player to be beaten by a Czentovic.'

I was amazed to note how deeply I had dented McConnor's self-esteem with that unforgivable phrase, 'third-rate player'. But as he was disposed to pay for this expensive amusement I had no objection against his misplaced vanity, which was after all to be the means of my meeting the object of my curiosity.

Quickly the four or five gentlemen who had already declared themselves chess players were told of the impending event. So that we wouldn't be disturbed too much by passengers walking by, we reserved in advance of the match not only our own table but also the neighbouring ones.

The next day our little group mustered in full strength at the appointed hour. The centre seat opposite the champion was naturally allotted to McConnor, who relieved his nerves by lighting up one strong cigar after another and frequently looking anxiously at his watch. But – as I suspected he would, after what my friend had told me – the champion kept us waiting a good ten minutes, so that the effect of his coolly superior entry was heightened. He walked quietly and calmly over to the table. Without introducing himself – 'You know who I am, and I am not interested in knowing who you are,' seemed to be the inference to draw from this rudeness – he began to give the necessary instructions in a dry, professional manner. As it was impossible to play a proper simultaneous match here on the ship owing to a lack of chessboards, he proposed that we should all combine together to play him. So as not to disturb our deliberations, after each move he would go to another table at the far end of the room. As soon as we had made our next move we should tap on a glass with a spoon, as there was unfortunately no small table-bell handy. He suggested ten minutes should be the maximum time for each move, unless we wanted some other arrangement. Of course we accepted every suggestion, like timid schoolchildren. The draw gave Czentovic Black. Without sitting down he made his first move in reply to ours and went immediately to his appointed table, where he sat back idly and leafed through an illustrated magazine.

There is little point in going into the details of the game. It ended, as of course it had to, with our total defeat, and after only twenty-four moves at that. Well, it wasn't surprising that a world champion had defeated half-a-dozen average or below average players, using his left hand. What really did leave a bad impression on us all was the arrogant, unpleasant way Czentovic made us all feel very clearly that he was indeed beating us with his left hand. Each time, he appeared to give the board the most casual glance, and looked right through us

as though we were wooden chessmen ourselves. This rudeness unconsciously reminded me of how one throws a morsel to a mangy dog without looking at him. In my opinion he might have had the tact to point out our mistakes or to encourage us with a friendly word. But even after the match was over this inhuman chess automaton never uttered a syllable, once he had said 'Mate', but waited stolidly at the table to see if we wanted a second game. Being helpless, as one always is in the face of thick-skinned, boorish behaviour, I had already decided to indicate by a gesture that now this dollar transaction had been completed, the pleasure of our acquaintance was at an end, at least as far as I was concerned. To my annoyance McConnor, sitting next to me, said huskily, 'Return game!'

I was taken aback by his challenging tone; in fact at that moment McConnor gave more the impression of being a boxer about to cut loose than a well-mannered gentleman. Was it Czentovic's unpleasant behaviour towards us or just his own pathologically sensitive ego? Whichever it was McConnor's personality had completely changed. His face flushed right up into the roots of his hair, his nostrils flared stiffly with inner tension; he was visibly perspiring, and there was a sharp crease between his tight-set lips and his belligerently thrust-out chin. Uneasily I recognised in his eyes that flickering of uncontrolled passion that you sometimes see gripping people at the roulette table when, after they have doubled their stakes six or seven times, the right colour doesn't come up. I knew, then, that this was driving ambition, and if it were to cost him his entire fortune McConnor would go on playing Czentovic over and over again, for single stakes or double, until he had won at least one game. If Czentovic kept at it he would find a goldmine in McConnor. He should be able to extract several thousand dollars from him before we reached Buenos Aires.

Czentovic remained impassive. 'As you wish,' he answered politely. 'You gentlemen will take Black this time.'

The second game went the same way, the only difference being that our circle was not only enlarged by interested bystanders but through them it became more lively. McConnor stared fixedly at the board as though he wanted to magnetize the pieces and will them to win. I sensed he would gladly have sacrificed a thousand dollars for the satisfaction of shout-

ing 'Mate' at our cold, insensitive opponent. Strange to say, some of the determination in his excitement seemed to rub off unwittingly on to us. Every single move was discussed with considerably more heat than hitherto; repeatedly we would hold one another back until the last moment, before giving Czentovic the signal to return to the table. Eventually we came to the seventeenth move. To our own astonishment a position on the board had been reached which appeared amazingly advantageous to us because it was possible to move one of our pawns from the third file (QB6) to the last square but one, at QB7. We had only to push it forward to QB8 to change it into a second Queen. We weren't, of course, altogether comfortable about this all too obvious chance. To a man, we suspected that Czentovic, who assessed the situation over a much wider range of moves than we did, must have deliberately put this apparent advantage in our way as a bait. But despite the closest study and discussion we couldn't between us discover the hidden trick. Eventually, already nearing the agreed time limit, we decided to chance the move. McConnor already had his hand on the pawn to move it to the last square when he felt someone grab his arm quickly. In an urgent undertone a voice whispered: 'For God's sake! Don't!'

Involuntarily we all turned round. In the last few minutes a man of about forty-five, whose thin, sharp features I recognised – for I had noticed him on the promenade deck on account of his pale, almost chalky, complexion – must have come over to us while we were concentrating on our problem. Aware that we were looking at him, he went on rapidly.

'If you make a Queen now he will take her immediately by moving his Bishop to QB8. You will take that with your Knight. But meanwhile he will move his pawn to Q7, threatening your Rook. And even if you check the King with your Knight you will lose in nine or ten moves. It is almost the same combination Alekhine used against Bogoljuboff at the tournament at Pistyan in 1922.'

Astonished, McConnor took his hand off the pawn and stared in no less wonderment than the rest of us at this man, whom we took to be an unexpected guardian angel from heaven. Anyone who could see check-mate nine moves ahead must be a first-class player, possibly in the running for the

championship, travelling to the same tournament. His sudden arrival and intervention at precisely such a critical moment had something of the supernatural about it. McConnor was the first to react.

'What would you advise?' he whispered excitedly.

'Don't advance straight away. For the moment act defensively! First withdraw your King out of the line of fire from KKt1 to KR2. He'll probably then move his line of attack over to the other flank. But you parry that with Rook QB1–QB5; that will cost him two moves, a pawn, and consequently his advantage. Then it will be pawn against pawn, and if your defence is sound you'll make a draw of it. That's the best you can hope for.'

Once more we were astonished. The precision, no less than the speed, of his calculation was quite bewildering. It was as though he had been reading the moves from a book. Anyway, the unexpected chance for us to force a draw in a game with a world champion, thanks to this man's intervention, worked wonders. By common consent we stood back to give him a clearer view of the board. McConnor asked again:

'So it's King from KKt1 to KR2?'

'That's right. Play safe!'

McConnor obeyed, and we tapped on the glass. Czentovic came over to our table at his customary even pace and at a glance assessed the counter-move. Then he moved his pawn on the King's side, KR2–KR4, exactly as our unknown helper had forecast. And immediately our man whispered excitedly:

'Advance your Rook, the Rook QB8 to QB4. Then he'll have to cover his pawn. But that won't help him! Don't bother about his other pawn. Attack with your Knight QB6–Q4, and you'll be back on even terms again. Press the attack instead of defending!'

We didn't understand what he meant. It was double-Dutch as far as we were concerned. But once under his spell McConnor did as he was told, without stopping to think about it. We tapped on the glass again to re-call Czentovic. For the first time he didn't decide on his move quickly but looked intently at the board. Then he made his move exactly as the stranger had told us he would, and turned to go. Before he went, though, something new and unexpected happened. Czentovic raised his eyes

and looked at us all. Clearly he wanted to find out who was offering him such energetic opposition for once.

From this instant our excitement grew immeasurably. Until now we had played without real hope, but now the thought that we might break Czentovic's cold pride made all our pulses race. Our new friend had soon directed our next move, however, and we could call Czentovic over – my fingers were trembling as I tapped the glass with the spoon. And now we had our first triumph. Until this moment Czentovic had played standing up, but now he hesitated, went on hesitating, and finally sat down. He sat down slowly and heavily, but this action was enough to neutralise – purely physically – the 'high and mighty' distance between us. We had forced him, at least spatially, to put himself on the same level as ourselves. He reflected for a long time, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the board, so that you could scarcely see the pupils under the heavy lids. The effort of concentration gradually made his mouth fall open, which gave his round face a slightly silly expression. Czentovic considered for a few minutes, then he made his move and stood up. And soon there was our friend whispering.

'A delaying tactic! Good thinking! But don't go along with it! Force an exchange, make him exchange, then we'll have a draw and even the gods can't help him.'

McConnor did as he was told. In the next few moves between the two – the rest of us had long since been reduced to being inactive extras – there began what was to us meaningless interplay. About seven moves later Czentovic, after a long pause for thought, looked up and said, 'Draw.'

For a moment everything was very still. You could suddenly hear the sound of the waves, and the jazz on the radio in the saloon, you were aware of people walking on the promenade deck and of the light, gentle sighing of the wind as it came in through the open windows. No one breathed: it happened too suddenly and we were all frankly startled by the improbability of what had occurred – that this unknown man should have imposed his will on the world champion in a game that was already half lost. McConnor leaned back all at once, releasing his pent-up breath from his lips in an audible, happy 'Ah!' I looked again at Czentovic. I had already thought he seemed to

grow paler while the final moves were being made. But he knew how to conduct himself. He maintained his apparently imperturbable equanimity and merely inquired in an off-hand way, while he removed the pieces from the board, 'Do you gentlemen want a third game?'

He asked the question in a purely matter-of-fact way, purely businesslike. But what was noteworthy was that he didn't look at McConnor as he spoke, but directed his eyes searchingly and straight at our rescuer. As a horse recognises a new and better rider from the firmness of his seat, Czentovic must have recognised from the last few moves who his real – his only – opponent was. Instinctively we followed his gaze and looked anxiously at the stranger. Before he could think about it, however, or had a chance to answer, McConnor, in his boundless excitement had already called out to him triumphantly.

'Of course! But now you must play him on your own! Just you against Czentovic!'

Now, however, something unforeseen happened. The stranger, who oddly enough was still staring intently at the now empty chessboard, took fright when he saw everyone was looking at him and how enthusiastically he was being appealed to. He seemed embarrassed.

'Oh no, gentlemen,' he stumbled, visibly disconcerted. 'That's quite out of the question ... count me out ... it's twenty years, no, twenty-five, since I sat down at a chessboard ... and I have just realised how rude it was of me to meddle in your game without being asked. Please, excuse me for being so presumptuous. I really won't disturb you further.' And before we could recover from our surprise he had withdrawn from the group and left the room.

'But that's really quite impossible!' McConnor boomed out boisterously, gesticulating with his fist. 'It's not credible that that man hasn't played chess for twenty-five years! He calculated every move, every counter-move, five or six moves ahead. No one can do that right off the cuff. It's totally impossible – isn't it?' McConnor had without thinking turned to Czentovic with his last question. But the world champion remained completely impassive.

'It isn't for me to give an opinion on that. However, the gentleman did play a quite surprising and interesting game;

that's why I deliberately left him a chance.' As he spoke, he stood up languidly, and continued in his matter-of-fact way. 'If he, or you, should wish to play another game tomorrow I shall be at your disposal from three o'clock.'

We couldn't suppress a mild chuckle. We all knew Czentovic hadn't left our unknown helper a chance out of generosity at all, and that his remark was nothing but a naive excuse to cover up his own failure. It only intensified our desire to see such an unshakeably arrogant man humiliated. All at once a wild, overpowering wish to do battle came over us peaceful, relaxed sea voyagers; for we were fascinated in a challenging way by the thought that right here on our ship, in the middle of the ocean, the victory wreath could be taken from the champion – a record that would then be flashed around the whole world by the telegraph offices. Moreover, there was the fascination of the mystery of the unexpected intervention of our rescuer at precisely the critical moment, and the contrast of his almost timid diffidence and the unshakeable self-confidence of the professional. Who was this unknown man? Had a hitherto undiscovered chess genius been brought to light here by chance? Or was a famous champion keeping his name from us for reasons of his own? We debated all these possibilities in a state of great excitement. Even the most far-fetched hypotheses were not outrageous enough for us to reconcile the stranger's puzzling shyness and astonishing avowal with his undeniable ability at the game. In one respect, however, we remained united: whatever happened we were not going to turn down the spectacle of another contest. We resolved to try every way of inducing our helper to play Czentovic the next day. McConnor undertook to put up the stake. As, meanwhile, inquiries of the steward had established that our man was an Austrian, it fell to me, as his compatriot, to put our request to him.

It didn't take me long to find our swiftly disappearing fugitive on the promenade deck. He was sitting in a deckchair, reading. Before I went up to him I took the opportunity to have a good look at him. His sharply chiselled head was resting on the cushion as though he was a little tired. Once again I was struck by the noticeable pallor of his relatively young face, and by how the hair framing his temples was absolutely white. I

had a feeling, I don't know why, that this man must have aged suddenly. I had scarcely approached him before he stood up politely and introduced himself. I recognised the name immediately as belonging to an old and well-respected Austrian family. I recalled that a bearer of that name had been one of Schubert's closest friends, and that one of the physicians of the old Emperor came from the same family. When I put our request to Dr B., that he should take up Czentovic's challenge, he was visibly taken aback. It turned out he had had no idea that in that game of ours he had stood up magnificently to a world champion and, indeed, the most succeessful player of the day. For some reason this information seemed to make a particular impression on him, because he kept on asking me if I was sure his opponent was really an acknowledged grand master. I soon realised this made my task easier, but I thought it advisable none the less, in order to spare his sensibilities, not to tell him that McConnor would be taking the financial risk if he were defeated. After hesitating a long time Dr B. eventually declared he was prepared to play, but not without expressly asking me to warn the others not in any way to set too much store by his ability.

'Because', he went on with a pensive laugh, 'I honestly don't know if I'm capable of playing a match according to all the rules. Please believe me, it wasn't false modesty at all when I said I haven't touched a chess-piece since my schooldays, that's to say more than twenty years ago. And even then I wasn't considered a player of any special merit.'

He said this so naturally that I couldn't entertain the slightest doubt about his sincerity. Yet I couldn't refrain from expressing my surprise that he had been able to remember every detail of combinations by a variety of champions; at least he must have made a serious study of chess theory. Dr B. laughed again in his curiously dreamy way.

'A serious study! – God knows, that's true. I have studied chess a great deal. But that happened in quite special circumstances; indeed they were absolutely unique. It's quite a complicated story and one that could be taken, possibly, as a little contribution to the delightful, splendid times we live in. If you have the patience to listen for half-an-hour ...?'

He motioned me towards the deckchair next to his. I

accepted his invitation gladly. We had no neighbours. Dr B. took off his reading glasses, put them away and began.

'You were good enough to say you remembered my family name, being Viennese yourself. But I don't suppose you will have heard of the firm of solicitors I ran with my father, and later alone, because we didn't take any cases that would get into the papers and we avoided new clients on principle. Strictly speaking we didn't actually have what you could call a proper legal practice. Instead we restricted ourselves exclusively to advising the great monasteries, and above all to administering their estates. My father had connections with them, having been earlier a Member of Parliament representing the Catholic Party. In addition – now that the Empire is part of history one can talk about these things – we were entrusted with the management of the finances of several members of the Imperial family. Our connection with Court and Church went back two generations – my uncle was physician to the Emperor, another was an abbot in Seitenstellen. We had only to supervise their investments, and it was an unobtrusive, I might say, silent function which was allotted to us through this inherited trust. Really it called for no more than the utmost discretion and trustworthiness, two qualities my late father possessed in the highest degree. He managed, in fact, substantially to maintain the value of his clients' fortunes through the years of inflation and at the time of the fall of the Empire. Then when Hitler took the helm in Germany and began his raids on the property of the Church and the monasteries, many negotiations and transactions to save at least the movable assets from confiscation passed through our hands from across the frontier. The two of us knew more about certain secret political matters concerning the Curia and the Imperial family than the general public would ever imagine. But it was precisely the inconspicuousness of our office – we didn't even have a name-plate on the door – as well as the precaution we both took of pointedly avoiding all monarchist circles, that gave us the surest protection from over-zealous investigation. It was a fact that in all those years no official in Austria ever suspected that the secret couriers of the Imperial household collected or delivered their most important mail in our insignificant fourth-floor office.

'But the Nazis had begun, long before they re-armed their military forces against the world, to organise another army – just as dangerous and well-trained – in all neighbouring countries: the legion of the underprivileged, the down-trodden, the maladjusted. In every office, in every business, they established their so-called 'cells'; in every government department, right up to the private offices of Dollfuss and Schuschnigg themselves, they had their eavesdroppers and spies. They even had their man in our insignificant office, as unfortunately I only found out too late. It's true he was only a wretched, run-of-the-mill clerk, whom I had taken on on the recommendation of a priest, just to give our office the outward appearance of a bona fide business. All we used him for really was running innocent errands, answering the telephone and filing papers, unimportant and harmless papers, that is. He wasn't allowed to open the post. I typed all the important letters myself, without taking copies for the files. I took every important document home with me, and confidential conversations were held exclusively in the priory-house of the monastery or in my uncle's consulting room. Thanks to these precautions our eavesdropper obtained no information about what was really going on. But by some unlucky accident this place-seeking and self-important young man must have become aware that he wasn't being trusted and that whatever was of interest was happening behind his back. Perhaps in my absence one of the couriers had carelessly spoken of 'His Majesty' instead of the agreed 'Baron Bern', or disobeying instructions, the scoundrel must have opened letters. Anyway, before it occurred to me to suspect him, he had instructions from Munich or Berlin to watch us. It wasn't until much later, long after my arrest, that I remembered how his initial idleness at work had suddenly changed over the previous few months into enthusiasm, and how more than once he practically insisted I let him post my letters. I am not free from blame myself, therefore, for a certain amount of negligence; but weren't the most important diplomats and generals craftily outmanoeuvred in the end by Hitler?

'How closely and with what loving care the Gestapo had been keeping me under surveillance for so long became very tangibly evident from the fact that I was arrested by the SS on

the very evening that Schuschnigg announced his resignation, and one day before Hitler took possession of Vienna. Luckily I was able to burn the most important documents the moment I heard Schuschnigg's resignation speech. The rest of the papers, along with the essential certificates for the securities held abroad on behalf of the monasteries and two archdukes, I sent – literally at the last minute, just before those fellows smashed my door in – to my uncle, hiding them in a laundry basket carried by my elderly and reliable housekeeper.'

Dr B. broke off to light a cigar. I saw in the flickering light a nervous tic at the right-hand corner of his mouth. I had noticed it before, and observed that it happened every minute or two. It was only a slight movement, not much stronger than a breath, but it made his whole face look remarkably restless.

'I expect you are thinking I'm going to tell you now about the concentration camp where everyone who was loyal to our old Austria was sent, and about the degradations, suffering and torture I endured there. But nothing of the kind happened. I was in a different category. I wasn't one of those unfortunates on whom they vented their long accumulated resentment by inflicting physical and spiritual degradation. I belonged to that other quite small group from whom the Nazis hoped to extract money or important information. In my own right I was, of course, too insignificant to be of interest to the Gestapo. They must have discovered, though, that we were the front-men, the administrators and confidants of their bitterest opponents. What they hoped to extract from me was incriminating evidence: evidence against the monasteries to prove financial malpractices, evidence against the royal family and everyone who devotedly supported the monarchy. They suspected – and, in fact, rightly so – that of the money which had passed through our hands substantial amounts were still hidden and out of reach of their rapacious designs. That's why they sent for me on the first day, to force those secrets out of me by their tried and tested methods. People like me, from whom important information or money might be extracted were, therefore, not bundled into concentration camps, but were reserved for special treatment. You may perhaps recall that our Chancellor and also Baron Rothschild, from whose relatives they hoped to extort millions, weren't put behind barbed wire in a prison

camp at all, but were taken, apparently as a favour, to a hotel, the Hotel Metropole – which was at the same time Gestapo headquarters – where each had his own room. This consideration was also extended to my unimportant person.

'A single room in a hotel – that sounds extremely liberal, doesn't it? But, believe me, what they had in mind for us wasn't at all liberal. It was merely using a refined method when they didn't cram us "big-wigs" twenty to a freezing army hut, but lodged us in tolerably warm, separate hotel rooms. The pressure they were going to put on us to obtain the required information was to be more subtle than crude beating or physical torture. It was to be through the most complete isolation you could conceive. They did nothing to us – they just placed us in a complete vacuum, for as everyone knows, nothing on earth puts more pressure on the human spirit than a vacuum. Locking each of us up alone in a complete void, in a room hermetically sealed from the outside world, was to produce the pressure from within ourselves that would finally make us speak, without resort to beatings and freezing conditions.

'At first sight the room I was allotted didn't seem at all unpleasant. It had a door, a bed, a chair, a wash-basin, a barred window. But the door stayed shut day and night. There was no book, newspaper, sheet of paper or pencil on the table. The window looked out on to a blank wall. A total void surrounded me physically and spiritually. They had taken away every possession: my watch, so I couldn't tell the time; my pencil, so I couldn't write anything; my pocket knife, so I couldn't slash my wrists; even the smallest narcotic, like a cigarette, was denied me. I saw no human face except for the warder, who wasn't allowed to speak or answer any questions. I heard no human voice. Eyes, ears, none of one's senses received the slightest stimulus from morning to night, from night to morning. I was alone with myself and the four or five silent objects, table, bed, window, wash-basin, inescapably alone. I lived like a diver in his bell in the black ocean of that silence; and, at that, a diver who suspects his cable to the outside world has snapped and he will never be hauled back out of the soundless deep. There was nothing to do, nothing to hear, nothing to see. All around, and unbroken, was a void, a

complete vacuum in time and space. I walked up and down, up and down, endlessly. But even thoughts, however trivial, need an anchorage, otherwise they begin to spin and chase themselves in mad circles. And they can't bear a vacuum either. You waited for something to happen, from morning to night, but nothing did. You were waiting, waiting, waiting and thinking, thinking, thinking until your head ached. Nothing happened. You were alone. Alone. Alone.

'I lived out of time and out of the world for a whole fortnight. Had war broken out I wouldn't have known. My world consisted only of table, door, bed, wash-basin, chair, window and wall, and I stared continuously at the same wallpaper on the same wall. Every line of its crenellated pattern registered as though engraved with steel on the innermost folds of my brain, I stared at it so often. Then at last the interrogation began. They summoned you suddenly, without your really knowing if it was day or night. They sent for you and you were taken along a corridor or two. You didn't know where you were going. You waited somewhere, and you didn't know where you were. Then abruptly you were standing in front of a table with a few people in uniform sitting at it. On the table was a pile of papers: documents whose contents you knew nothing about. Then the questions started, genuine and fake, straightforward and crafty, superficial questions and catch questions. And while you answered, the hands of strangers with evil intent leafed through the papers whose contents you didn't know, malicious hands wrote things in a record of the proceedings and you didn't know what they were writing. But what I found most frightening about this interrogation was that I couldn't guess or work out what the Gestapo already knew about the workings of my office, and what they wanted to get out of me. As I've told you already, at the last moment I had sent my housekeeper to my uncle with the really incriminating documents. But had he received them? Had he not? And how much had that clerk betrayed? How many letters had they intercepted? How much had they meanwhile wormed out of some naive cleric in one of the German monasteries with whom we dealt? And they went on with question after question. What securities had I bought for this monastery, what banks did I deal with, did I know Mr So-and-so, did I receive

letters from Switzerland or Timbuctoo? And as I couldn't tell how much they knew already every answer was a terrible responsibility. If I gave something away that they didn't know I might perhaps be needlessly sending someone to his execution. If I told too many lies I might be putting myself at risk.

'But the interrogation was not the worst part. The worst was being returned afterwards to my vacuum, to the same room with the same table, the same bed, the same wash-basin, the same wallpaper. Scarcely was I alone again than I tried to recapitulate, to think what I ought to have said if I had been clever, and what I must say next time, to divert any suspicion that a careless remark of mine might perhaps have aroused. I reflected on, pondered over, examined and checked every word of my own testimony, everything I had told the chief interrogator. I repeated every question they had asked me, every answer I had given. I tried to assess what they had been able to put in their report, and yet I knew I couldn't ever possibly do that. But these thoughts, once conjured up in the empty room, wouldn't stop going round in my head, always in new or different combinations, and they seeped into my sleep. After every interrogation by the Gestapo my own thoughts took over, just as relentlessly, the torment of questioning and searching and harassment. Perhaps it was even more horrible in that every interrogation did end after an hour but this recapitulation never ended, thanks to the insidious torture of my isolation. And still I had only the table, the wash-basin, the bed, the wallpaper, the window. No diversion, no book, no newspaper, no other face, no pencil to write with, no matchstick to play with, nothing, nothing, nothing.

'It was then that I first became aware of how devilishly clever, how psychologically murderous the concept of this system of using hotel rooms was. In a concentration camp you might have had to cart stones, perhaps, until your hands bled and your feet froze in your shoes. You might have been crammed together with two dozen others, stinking and shivering. But you would have seen faces, had a field, a square, a tree, a star, something, anything, to look at; instead of here, where everything was never changing, always the same, always unbearably the same. There was nothing here that could release me from my thoughts, from my obsession with them, from my

pathological reiteration of them. And that was exactly what they intended. I was to choke and choke on my thoughts until they asphyxiated me, and until I couldn't do other than spit them out, in the end to confess, to tell all, everything they wanted, to hand over, finally, information and men. Gradually I could feel how my nerves were beginning to break up under the terrible pressure of the vacuum; and recognising the danger, I braced myself to my nerve-ends, to try to find or invent some kind of diversion. To occupy myself I tried to recite and reconstruct everything I had ever learnt by heart: the national anthem, nursery rhymes, schoolboy jokes, clauses of the Code of Civil Law. Then I tried arithmetic, adding and dividing random figures, but I had no power of concentration in that void. The same thought kept on flickering in and out. What do they know? What did I say yesterday? What must I say next time?

'This really indescribable state of affairs lasted four months. Well – four months, that's easy to write: just one figure, one word! Easy to say, too: four months – two syllables. The lips can articulate a sound like that in no time at all: four months! But no one can describe, can measure, can visualise for someone else, for himself even, how long such a time seems within an infinity of time and space. You can't explain to anyone how this vacuum, this void, this nothingness around you corrodes and destroys; how you go mad having nothing but table, and bed, and wash-basin and wallpaper, and always the silence, always the same warder pushing the food into the room without looking at you, always the same thoughts going round in circles in the void. I became uneasily aware from small signs that my mind was falling into disarray. At first I had been quite clear in my own mind at the interrogations. I had answered calmly and with deliberation; the process of thinking of both sides – what I should say and what I should not – still functioned. Now I could only haltingly articulate the simplest sentences, for while I answered, I would be staring hypnotically at the recording pen as it ran across the paper, as though I wanted my own words to run after it. I sensed that my strength was failing. I sensed the moment was drawing ever nearer when, to save myself, I would tell them everything I knew and perhaps even more; when, to escape the asphyxiation of this

vacuum, I would betray twelve men and their secrets without gaining anything for myself beyond a breathing space. One evening it had really gone that far. When the warder by chance brought me my food at that moment of asphyxiation, I suddenly screamed after him. "Take me for questioning! I'll tell them everything! I'll confess it all! I'll tell them where the papers are, where the money is! I'll tell them everything, everything!" Luckily he was too far away to hear me. Perhaps he didn't want to hear me.

'In my extreme moment of need, however, something unexpected happened. It held out salvation, at least salvation for a certain time. It was the end of July, a dark, gloomy, rainy day. I remember those details quite clearly because the rain was beating on the windows in the corridor along which I was taken for interrogation. I had to wait in the ante-room belonging to the chief interrogator. You always had to wait before every session. Making you wait was also part of the technique. First your nerves would be ripped apart by the summons, by suddenly being fetched from your cell in the middle of the night. Then when you'd adjusted to the idea of being questioned, had tensed your mind and will to resist, they made you wait, pointlessly, pointlessly waiting, one hour, two hours, three, before the interrogation, to exhaust your body and break down your spirit. And they made me wait particularly long that Thursday, 27th July. Two solid hours I stood waiting in the ante-room. I remember the exact date, too, for a particular reason, because in the ante-room, where – of course I wasn't allowed to sit down – for two hours my legs had to hold my body up, there was a calendar. I don't have to tell you how I stared at those figures, that word on the wall, "27 July", in my hunger for the printed or written word. My brain devoured them. And then I went on waiting and waiting and staring at the door to see when it would eventually be opened. I pondered, too, over what my interrogators would ask me this time. I knew even then that they would ask me something quite different from what I expected.

'But despite everything the ordeal of waiting and standing was nevertheless a blessing, a pleasure, because this room was after all different from my own. It was slightly bigger, had two windows instead of one, and had no bed or wash-basin, and

didn't have the same crack in the window sill that I had looked at a million times. The door was painted a different colour, there was a different chair against the wall, and on the left a filing cabinet with documents, as well as a coat-stand with hangers, on which hung three or four wet uniform overcoats, my torturers' coats. So I had something new, something different to look at, at last something else for my staring eyes, and they pounced eagerly on every detail. I noticed every fold of those coats. I noticed, for example, a raindrop hanging on the wet collar of one of them, and however ridiculous it may sound to you, I waited with absurd excitement to see if that droplet would eventually run down the collar or would defy gravity and just stay there. Yes, I stared at that droplet and went on staring for several minutes, with bated breath, as though my life depended on it. Then, when it had eventually rolled down, I counted the buttons on the coats: eight on the first one, eight on the second, ten on the third; then I compared the insignia of rank. My hungry eyes took in, played with and seized on, all those silly, unimportant details with an avidity I can't describe.

'Suddenly my gaze was riveted on something. I had discovered that the side pocket of one of the coats was bulging slightly. I stepped nearer and believed I recognised the rectangular shape of the protrusion: what was in the swollen pocket – a book! My knees began to tremble: a BOOK! For four months I hadn't held a book in my hand, and already the mere idea of a book, in which you could see words following one another, lines, pages, a book in which you could read different, new, strange, entertaining thoughts, follow them up, absorb them into your brain, was both intoxicating and stupefying at the same time. My eyes were hypnotized by that little bump in the pocket made by the book. They bored into that insignificant spot as though they wanted to burn a hole in the coat. In the end I couldn't control my greed; instinctively I drew nearer. Already the thought of at least feeling a book through the material made my fingers tingle to their tips. Almost without realising it I was going closer and closer. Luckily the warder ignored my odd behaviour. Perhaps it seemed natural to him that after two hours standing up a man wanted to lean on the wall. At last I was standing right up against the coat and I

deliberately put my hands behind my back so that I could touch the coat unobtrusively. I fingered the material and there, right enough, through it was something rectangular, something flexible, that rustled slightly – a book! A book! A thought struck me like a shot: steal the book! Perhaps you can do it, and you can hide it in your cell and then read, and read, and read, read again at last!

'Scarcely had the thought entered my head than it began to work like a strong poison; all at once there was a singing in my ears and my heart began to pound, my hands were ice-cold and unresponsive. But after the first moment of paralysis I moved slowly and slyly ever nearer the coat. All the time keeping an eye on the warder, and with my hands behind my back, I lifted the book from the bottom of the pocket higher and higher. And then, gripping it, I gave a slight and cautious tug and suddenly I had the small, slender volume in my hand. Now for the first time I was frightened by what I had done. But there was no going back. Still, where could I put it? Behind my back I pushed the volume inside my trousers, where the belt would hold it, and then gradually moved it round to my hip so that when I walked I could hold it there by keeping my hand military-fashion straight down the seam of my trouser leg. Now came the first test. I moved away from the coat-stand, one step, two steps, three. It worked. It was possible to keep the book in position while I walked, if I pressed my arm against my belt.

'Then came the interrogation. It required more attention from me than ever, for really while I was answering I was concentrating all my effort, not on what I was saying, but above all on holding on to the book without arousing suspicion. Luckily the hearing was a short one, and I carried the book safely to my room – I won't waste your time with all the details, but once the book slid dangerously down my trouser leg in the middle of a corridor, and I had to pretend to have a bad bout of coughing to be able to bend down and push it safely back up under my belt. But what a moment that was when I went back into my hell-hole, alone at last, yet not alone any more!

'I expect you think I seized upon the book straightaway, examined it and read it! Oh no! First I wanted to enjoy to the

full the pleasure of anticipation, of having a book. I wanted the artificially protracted pleasure – which stimulated my senses wonderfully – of day-dreaming about what kind of book I most hoped this stolen one would be. Very closely printed, above all, containing many, many letters, many, many thin pages, so that there would be more in it to read. And then I wanted it to be a work that stretched me intellectually, not shallow, light reading; something I could learn, memorise, poetry, and best of all – what a bold dream – Goethe or Homer. But at last I couldn't contain my eagerness and curiosity any longer. Stretched out on the bed so that the warder couldn't catch me by surprise if he opened the door, I pulled the book out from under my belt, trembling.

'The first glance brought disappointment and indeed a kind of bitter anger. This book, captured at such awful risk, anticipated with such glowing expectation, was nothing more than a chess handbook, a collection of 150 championship games. If I hadn't been barred and bolted into the room I would have hurled the book through an open window in my initial rage. For what should I do, what could I begin to do, with this nonsense? As a schoolboy I had tried playing chess from time to time, like most other boys, out of boredom. But what was I to make of this theoretical stuff? You can't very well play chess without an opponent and certainly not without chessmen and a board. I thumbed through the pages sullenly, hoping even now to find something readable, an introduction, some instructions; but I found nothing except the bare squared-off diagrams of the individual championship games and beneath them what were to me the almost unintelligible symbols QR2-QR3, KKt1-KB3 and so on. It all seemed a kind of algebra to me, to which I could find no key. Only gradually did I puzzle out that the numbers stood for the ranks and the letters for the files, so that you could establish the position of each piece. That way the purely graphic diagram had a language of its own.

'I wondered if perhaps I could make some sort of chessboard in my cell and then try to play these games through. It seemed like a sign from heaven that my bed-cover happened by chance to have a coarse check weave. If I folded it correctly I could make sixty-four squares out of it. Next I tore the first page out

and put the book under the mattress. Then I saved some of my bread and began to model little chessmen, King, Queen, and so on, out of it – of course they were comically inadequate. After endless attempts I was finally able to reconstruct the positions shown in the book on the chequered bed-cover. But when I tried to play the whole game through, my comical bread men, half of whom I had differentiated by darkening them with dust, failed completely. I repeatedly got into a muddle for the first few days. I had to begin this one game from the beginning five, ten, twenty times. But who on earth had so much spare and useless time as I, the slave of the void? Who could command as much boundless eagerness and patience? After six days I could play this game right through without a mistake. A week later and I didn't even need the bread men on the bed-cover to be able to visualise the positions in the book. And another week after that the bed-cover was unnecessary. The signs, which had at first been mere abstractions in the book – QR1, QR2, QB7, QB8 – were transformed automatically in my head into real objects, actual positions. The transition was indefatigably achieved: I had projected the chessboard and its pieces into my mind and, thanks to the basic rules, could survey the current position in the same way that a musician can hear all the instruments and their harmony just by looking at the full score. In another fortnight I could play every game in the book from memory without effort, or as the terminology has it, blindfold.

'I began for the first time to understand the immense benefit of my daring theft. For I had all at once an occupation – pointless, useless, if you like – but nevertheless an occupation, which negated the vacuum around me. With these 150 tournament games I possessed a wonderful weapon against the crushing monotony of space and time. To preserve intact the attractiveness of this new occupation, I divided my day exactly from now on: two games in the morning, two in the afternoon, and a quick recapitulation in the evening. In that way my day, hitherto as formless as unset jelly, took shape. I was occupied without exhausting myself, because chess possesses a wonderful quality: it concentrates one's mental energy on one narrow area, so that the brain isn't worn out by the most strenuous effort of thought. Its agility and vigour are actually improved.

'I played these championship games quite mechanically at first, but gradually they awoke in me artistic and pleasurable understanding. I learned to appreciate the finer points, the tricks and stratagems in attack and defence. I grasped the technique of thinking ahead, of combinations and counter-attacks, and soon came to recognise the personal mark of each chess champion in his individual play as unerringly as one recognises a poet from just a few of his lines. What began merely as a way of filling in time became a pleasure, and the great chess strategists such as Alekhine, Lasker, Bogoljuboff and Tartakower joined me in my isolation like valued friends.

'My silent cell was blessed every day with continuous variety; and, indeed, the regularity of the exercises restored the soundness of my thought processes, which had been disturbed earlier. I was aware that my brain felt refreshed and even newly sharpened by the regular discipline of thinking. It was noticeable at the interrogations that I was thinking more clearly and to the point. Without realising it the chessboard had improved my defence against false threats and concealed tricks. From that time on I gave them no openings through contradictory statements and even fancied that the Gestapo was beginning gradually to view me with a certain respect. Perhaps when they saw everyone else breaking down they asked themselves privately what the secret source of strength was that enabled me alone to put up such unshakeable resistance.

'This happy time during which I played the 150 games in that book systematically day by day, lasted about two-and-a-half to three months. Then unexpectedly I came to a standstill. Suddenly the void opened up again in front of me, because once I had played every single game twenty or thirty times the pleasure of novelty and surprise was lost, and their power, which had been so exciting and so stimulating until then, was spent. What point was there in playing games over and over again when I long since knew every move off by heart? No sooner had I made the opening move than the completion of the game sewed itself up quite automatically in my head. There was no longer any surprise, any tension, any problem. I needed a different book with different games in it to occupy me and produce essential exertion and diversion. As this was completely

impossible there was only one way out of this peculiar maze: instead of the old games I had to invent new ones. I had to try to partner myself or, rather, to play against myself.

'Now I don't know how much thought you have given to the intellectual character of this royal game. But even the most superficial reflection should be enough to make it clear that, chess being a game of purely mental processes with no element of chance, it is absurd, logically speaking, to want to play against yourself. The attraction of chess lies, therefore, only in the fact that its strategy evolves in two different brains, that in this battle of the mind Black doesn't know what White's next move will be, and he is constantly trying to guess and to thwart it. While for his part White, countering him, strives to outdo Black and oppose his concealed intentions. Imagine Black and White being one and the same person, then, and you have the contradiction that the same brain knows something, and yet isn't supposed to know it, simultaneously; that when it is functioning as White's partner it can completely forget on command what a minute earlier it wanted to do and what it intended when it was Black's partner. Such two-way thinking really presupposes a complete split in one's consciousness, an arbitrary ability of the mind to switch on and off as though it were a mechanical machine. Wanting to play chess against oneself involves a real paradox, like jumping over one's own shadow.

'Well, to be brief, I was so desperate that I explored this absurd impossibility for months. But I had no choice apart from this nonsense, if I wasn't to go quite mad or lapse into a total mental decline. The frightful situation I was in forced me at least to try to split myself into this White ego and Black ego, if I was not to be overwhelmed by that awful void.'

Dr B. leaned back in his deckchair and closed his eyes for a minute. It was as though he was trying forcibly to suppress a disturbing recollection. Once again I noticed the nervous tic that he couldn't control at the corner of his mouth. Then he pulled himself up a little in his chair.

'So – I hope up to now I have explained everything to you reasonably clearly. But I don't know, unfortunately, if I can be as clear about what happened next, because this new occupation required such absolute harnessing of the brain that it

made it impossible to exercise self-control at the same time. I have already told you that I think it is absurd to want to play chess against yourself; but even this absurdity might possibly have a minimal chance if you had a real chessboard in front of you. For the board, being real, allows after all a certain distance, a physical separation of territory. Faced with a real board and real pieces you can introduce pauses for reflection, you can actually stand first at one side of the table and then at the other and see the position from Black's viewpoint and from White's. But to conduct this battle, as I had to, against myself or, if you prefer, with myself, projecting it in space in my imagination, I had to hold firmly in my mind's eye the current positions on the sixty-four squares; and not just the existing configuration. I also had to calculate the possible further moves of both players, and that meant – I know how absurd it all sounds – imagining double or treble, no, six, eight, twelvefold for both my selves, for Black and White, always four or five moves ahead.

'I apologise for expecting you to follow this madness. In this game in the abstract space of fantasy I had to calculate four or five moves ahead for White and the same for Black. So I had to work out with two brains – a White and a Black – all the combinations for deploying the pieces in given situations. But even this division of myself was not the most dangerous element of my abstruse experiment; instead, through having to invent my own independent games, there was the risk that I would no longer be standing on firm ground, but would fall into an abyss. Playing through championship games mechanically, as I had done in the earlier weeks, was after all nothing but an achievement of recall, a pure recapitulation of given material, and as such not more demanding than when I had learnt poetry by heart or had memorised sections of the Civil Code. It was a limited, disciplined activity and therefore an excellent mental exercise. The two games I played in the morning and the two in the afternoon represented a definite task I could complete without getting worked up about it. They took the place of normal employment, and furthermore, I had the book to fall back on if I went wrong in a game or forgot the next move. This task was healing and calming for my shattered nerves because I could be objective in re-playing

someone else's game. It didn't matter to me who won, Black or White. It was either Alekhine or Bogoljuboff fighting for the champion's laurels and I personally – my mind, my heart – was involved only as an onlooker, as a connoisseur of the crises and highlights of each game. However, from the moment I began to play against myself I began involuntarily to compete. Each of my egos, my Black self and my White, had to vie with the other and strive ambitiously and impatiently to gain the upper hand and win. After every move as Black I was in a fever to know what my White ego would do. One side of me triumphed as the other made a mistake; and each was equally downcast over its own incompetence.

'All that sounds senseless; and indeed it was a form of artificial schizophrenia, of split personality in fact, which contributed to a dangerous state of inner turmoil inconceivable in a normal person in normal circumstances. But don't forget that I'd been dragged violently away from all normality. I was a prisoner, locked up although I was innocent, and for months suffering intense loneliness. I was a human being who wanted to vent my accumulated rage on something. And as I had nothing but this senseless game against myself, this is what my rage, my lust for revenge focussed on single-mindedly. Something within me wanted to win, but I had only this other ego to fight, so an almost manic state of agitation grew in me while I played.

'At first my thoughts had been calm and deliberate. There had been a pause between one game and the next, so I could recover from the effort involved. But gradually my overwrought nerves wouldn't allow me to wait. My White ego had scarcely made a move before my Black ego feverishly pushed itself forward. Scarcely was one game finished before I was challenging myself to the next, because every time one of my chess egos was, of course, beaten by the other, it wanted a return game. I couldn't ever tell you, even approximately, how many games I played against myself in my cell as a result of this insatiable madness – a thousand, perhaps, possibly more. It was an obsession I couldn't resist. From morning to night I thought of nothing else except Bishops and pawns, Rooks and Kings, ranks and files, and Castling and Mate. My entire being and senses were concentrated on the chequered board. Playing

for fun turned into enthusiasm, which became a compulsion, a mania, a frenetic madness that gradually invaded not only my waking hours but my sleep, too. I could think only in terms of chess, chess moves, chess problems. Sometimes I woke with sweat on my forehead and realised I must have been playing a game of chess in my sleep without knowing it. If I dreamed of people they immediately seemed to move like a Bishop, or a Rook, or jump back or forward like a Knight. Even when I was called for interrogation I couldn't concentrate on my responsibility any more. I had the feeling I must have expressed myself in a rather confused way at the last few hearings because my questioners sometimes looked at each other in surprise. But while they were asking questions and deliberating I was really waiting, just wretchedly eager to be returned to my cell, to go on with my game, my mad game: a new one, and then another and another.

'Every interruption disturbed me, even the quarter of an hour when the warder cleaned the cell; and the two minutes it took him to bring my food tortured my burning impatience. Sometimes the bowl with my supper in it was left untouched: I had forgotten to eat because of playing a game. The only physical thing I noticed was a frightful thirst. It must have been the fever of this continuous mental effort and playing. I drank the water jug dry in two goes and pestered the warder for more; and yet my tongue still felt dry in my mouth a moment later. Eventually my frenzy mounted during the game itself – and I did nothing else from morning to night – to such a pitch that I couldn't sit still any more. I walked up and down ceaselessly while I thought out the moves, going faster and faster, up and down, up and down; and the nearer I came to the winning move the more rapidly I walked. The driving desire to win, to dominate, to defeat myself, gradually became a kind of madness.

'I trembled with impatience, because the one chess ego in me was always too slow for the other. The one urged the other on. It will seem laughable to you, I'm sure, but I began to berate myself. "Faster, faster," I would shout, or "Move! Do get on with it!" if one of my egos didn't respond quickly enough to the other. I understand perfectly today, of course, that my behaviour was nothing less than a thoroughly pathological

form of mental overstrain. The only name I can find for it isn't in the medical textbooks: chess-poisoning. In the end this monomaniac obsession began to attack my body as well as my mind. I lost weight, my sleep was disturbed and restless. When I woke up I had to make a special effort every time to force my leaden eyelids open. Sometimes I felt so weak and my hands were shaking so much I had difficulty in raising a tumbler to my lips. But as soon as I had begun a game I was in the grip of an overwhelming force. I rushed up and down with clenched fists, and sometimes I heard my own voice shouting hoarsely and angrily at myself through a red fog, or so it seemed, "Check!" or "Mate!"

'How this horrible, unspeakable situation came to a head I can't tell you myself. All I know about it is that I woke up one morning and the process was different from usual. It was as though I was outside my body. I was lying there comfortably relaxed. A warm, pleasant drowsiness of a kind I hadn't experienced for months caressed my eyelids, so warm and comforting that I couldn't bring myself, at first, to open my eyes. I lay awake for several minutes and savoured this languid torpor; just lying there with my senses agreeably numbed. Then I thought I heard voices behind me, living, human voices, using words – and you can't imagine my delight, for it was months, almost a year, since I had heard any speech except the hard, sharp and evil questions of the panel of interrogators. "You're dreaming," I told myself. "You're dreaming! Whatever you do, don't open your eyes! Let it go on, this dream. Otherwise you'll see that accursed cell again, the chair and the wash-basin and the wallpaper with that same eternal pattern. You're dreaming – go on dreaming!"

'But curiosity got the upper hand. I opened my eyes slowly and cautiously. It was a miracle! I was in a different room, wider, more spacious than my hotel cell. An unbarred window let light in freely and gave a view of trees, green trees stirring in the wind, instead of my blank wall. The walls of the room shone white and smooth, the ceiling was white and high above me – surely, I was lying in a new, different bed, and indeed, it wasn't a dream, there really were soft human voices whispering behind me. Without realising it I must have moved noticeably, I was so surprised, for at once I heard an

approaching step behind me. A woman came softly over. A woman with a white cap on her head, a nurse, a nun. I felt a thrill of delight: I hadn't seen a woman for a year. I stared at this charming apparition, and it must have been a wild, ecstatic look, because she said soothingly but firmly, "Quiet! Keep still!" But I hung only on her voice – was this really a human being who spoke to me? Was there really still someone on earth who didn't question and torment me? And wasn't it – inconceivable miracle – the gentle, warm, almost tender voice of a woman? Greedily I stared at her mouth, for this year of hell had made it seem unlikely that one person could speak to another in a kindly way. She was smiling at me – yes, smiling. There were still people who could smile sympathetically. Then she put her finger to her lips as a warning, and went gently away. But I couldn't obey her order. I hadn't seen enough yet of this miracle. I struggled to sit up in bed to gaze after this apparition of a human being who was kind. But as I went to support myself on the edge of the bed I couldn't do it. Where my right hand had formerly been, with fingers and wrist, I discovered something strange: a thick, large, white lump, apparently an all-embracing bandage. I stared at this white, thick, strange object at first without understanding it. Then slowly it began to dawn on me where I was, and I started to consider what could have happened to me. They must have injured me, or I must have damaged my hand myself. I was in hospital.

'The doctor, a friendly, elderly man, came at midday. He knew my family and made such a deferential reference to my uncle, the physician to the Imperial household, that I felt at once he was on my side. In the course of conversation he asked me all sorts of questions, but there was one which particularly astonished me: was I a mathematician or a chemist? I said no, I wasn't. "Odd," he murmured. "In your fever you kept crying out such strange formulae – QB3, QB4. We didn't know what to make of it." I asked him what had happened to me. He smiled wrily. "Nothing serious. An acute nervous upset."

'After he had looked round cautiously, he went on in a low voice, "Quite understandable, too. It started on March 13th, didn't it?"

'I nodded.

"It's no wonder with that way of doing things," he murmured. "You aren't the first. But don't worry."

'I knew from the soothing way he whispered this to me and from his reassuring expression that I was safe with him.

'Two days later the kindly doctor explained to me quite frankly what had happened. The warder had heard me shouting out in my cell and thought at first someone was in there with me and I was fighting him. He had scarcely appeared at the door before I had set on him and screamed wildly at him, such things as, "Will you ever move then, you scoundrel, you coward!" I had tried to grab him by the throat and had attacked him so furiously he had to call for help. As they were dragging me out to be medically examined, I had suddenly broken loose in my mad frenzy, thrown myself at the corridor window, broken the glass and cut my hand. You can still see the deep scar here. The first night in hospital I had had a kind of brain fever, but now the doctor found my mental faculties quite healthy. "Of course," he said in an undertone, "I had better not report that to the authorities, otherwise they'll take you back there in the end. Leave it to me. I'll do my best."

'I don't know what that helpful doctor told my torturers about me. Anyway he achieved his aim: my release. It's possible he declared me insane; or perhaps in the interval I had ceased to be important to the Gestapo, for Hitler had by then occupied Bohemia and that settled the outcome in Austria as far as he was concerned. So I had only to sign an undertaking to leave our homeland within a fortnight; and those two weeks were taken up to such an extent with all the hundred and one formalities the would-be citizen of the world needs today for a journey abroad – military papers, police, tax, passport, visa, health certificate – that I had no time to dwell on the past. Apparently there is some mysterious regulating capacity in the brain which automatically cuts out anything that can be disturbing or dangerous to the mind. Whenever I wanted to think back about my imprisonment it was as though a light switched off in my brain. Only now, here on this ship weeks later, have I found the courage to reflect on what happened to me.

'So now you will understand my impertinent and apparently puzzling behaviour with your friends. It was quite by chance that I was strolling through the smoking-room and saw your

friends at the chessboard. Instinctively my feet felt rooted to the spot, I was so surprised and frightened. I had completely forgotten that you can play chess with a real board and real chessmen; that for this game two quite different men sit physically opposite each other. It took me a couple of minutes to remember that what those players were doing was basically the same as I had tried to do, playing against myself while I was helpless all those months. The code I had used in my ferocious exercises had been nothing more than a substitute and a symbol for these solid figures. I was astonished that the movement of figures on the board was the same as the imaginary moves I had made in my head. It must be similar to how an astronomer feels when he has used some complicated method to calculate on paper the position of a new planet and then really sees it in the sky as a white, distinct, substantial object. I stared at the board as though held there by a magnet. I saw my diagrams there – Knight, Rook, King, Queen, and pawns, as tangible figures carved out of wood. To grasp the state of play I had first instinctively to change my abstract world of symbols into the moving pieces. Gradually I was overcome with curiosity to watch a real game like this one between two opponents. It was then that I so embarrassingly forgot all good manners and interfered in your game. But that bad move your friend was going to make cut me to the quick. It was pure instinct, an impulsive movement that made me hold him back, as you grab a child who is leaning over a parapet. It was only later I realised just how rude my impetuous intervention had been.'

I hastened to assure Dr B. how very pleased we all were to have made his acquaintance through this occurrence and that I would be doubly interested, after everything he had told me, in seeing him at our improvised tournament next day. Dr B. shifted uneasily.

'No, really, don't expect too much. It will just be a test for me ... a test to see if ... if I can really play an ordinary game of chess, on a real board with actual chessmen and a live opponent ... for I'm now more doubtful than ever whether those hundreds or possibly thousands of games I played were in fact played by the rules and weren't just a form of dream-chess, fever-chess ... a hallucinatory game in which, as always in dreams, intermediate steps were left out. I hope you don't

seriously expect me to presume I can stand up to a grand master, and the best in the world at that. What interests and motivates me is purely retrospective curiosity, to establish whether it was really chess I played in my cell or if it was madness – if I was right on the brink of the slippery slope or had already gone down it – that's all, there's no other reason.'

At that moment the gong sounded, calling us to dinner. We must have been talking for two hours or so, for Dr B. had told me everything in much greater detail than I have put down here. I thanked him warmly and said goodbye. But I hadn't gone the length of the deck before he came after me and said nervously and somewhat haltingly:

'One more thing. Would you please tell your friends in advance, so that I don't appear to be uncivil later on, that I'll play one game only ... it has to be the closing line beneath an old account – a final settlement, not a new beginning. I mustn't fall into that passionate obsession with the game a second time. It fills me with horror to recall it. And besides – besides, the doctor warned me, expressly: the victim of any mania is always in danger. With chess-poisoning – even if you are cured – it's better not to go near a chessboard. So, you understand – just this one trial game for my own sake – and no more.'

The next day we gathered in the smoking-room punctually at the agreed time of three o'clock. Our circle had increased by two more lovers of the royal game, two ship's officers who had sought leave from their duties to watch the match. Even Czentovic didn't keep us waiting as he had done the day before. After the necessary choice of colours the memorable game between this *homo obscurissimus* and the famous world champion began. I regret it was played before such thoroughly incompetent spectators as we were, and that its course is as lost to the annals of chess as Beethoven's piano impromptus are to music. True, we tried the next afternoon between us to reconstruct the game from memory, but without success. Quite possibly we had all concentrated too much on the two players during the game instead of taking note of its progress. For in the course of the game the intellectual contrast between the two opponents became more and more physically apparent in their manner. Czentovic, the man of routine, remained as

immovably solid as a rock the whole time, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the board. Thinking seemed almost to cause him actual physical effort, as though he had to engage all his senses with the utmost concentration. Dr B., on the other hand, was completely relaxed and unconstrained. Like the true dilettante in the best sense of the word, who plays for the pure joy – the *diletto* – of playing, he was physically relaxed and chatted to us during the early pauses, explaining the moves. He lit a cigarette with a steady hand and when it was his move looked at the board only for a minute. Each time it seemed as though he had expected the move his opponent made.

The routine opening moves were made quite quickly. It was only at about the seventh or eighth move that a definite plan seemed to emerge. Czentovic was taking longer over his pauses for thought; from that we sensed the real battle for domination had begun. But to tell you the truth the gradual unfolding of the positional play was something of a disappointment for us non-specialists – as in every true tournament game. For the more the pieces wove in and out in a strange design the more impenetrable the actual position seemed to us. We couldn't perceive what either opponent had in mind or which of the two really had the upper hand. We noticed only that individual pieces were being moved like levers to breach the enemy front, but we were unable to grasp the strategic objective behind these manoeuvres. For with these two experienced players every move was combined in advance with other projected moves.

We were gradually overtaken by mild fatigue, principally because of Czentovic's interminable pauses for reflection. These began visibly to annoy our friend as well. I noticed uneasily how the longer the game went on the more restlessly he began to fidget about on his chair. Soon he was so tense he began to light one cigarette after another. Then he grabbed a pencil to make a note of something. Then he ordered mineral water, which he gulped down quickly, one glass after another. It was obvious that he could plan his moves a hundred times faster than Czentovic. Every time the latter, after endless reflection, decided to move a piece forward with his heavy hand, our friend smiled like someone who had seen something he

had long expected, and made his counter-move immediately. With his agile mind he must have worked out in advance all the possibilities open to his opponent. The longer Czentovic delayed his decision the more Dr B.'s impatience grew, and as he waited his lips were pressed together in an angry and almost hostile line. But Czentovic didn't allow himself to be hurried. He studied the board stubbornly and silently and his pauses became longer the more the field was emptied of chessmen. By the forty-second move, after two and three-quarter hours had gone by, we were all sitting wearily round the tournament table, almost indifferent to it. One of the ship's officers had already gone, the other had taken out a book to read and looked up for a moment only when a move was made. But then suddenly the unexpected happened, following a move by Czentovic. As soon as Dr B. saw Czentovic touch his Knight to move it forward he gathered himself together like a cat about to pounce. His whole body began to tremble, and scarcely had Czentovic moved his Knight than Dr B. pushed his Queen forward with a flourish, and said loudly and triumphantly: 'There! That settles it!' He leaned back, folded his arms on his chest and looked challengingly at Czentovic. His eyes were suddenly aglow with a burning light.

Instinctively we bent over the board to try to understand this move that had been proclaimed so triumphantly. At first sight no direct threat was visible. Our friend's exclamation must therefore have referred to a development we, as amateurs who couldn't think far ahead, were unable to calculate as yet. Czentovic was the only one among us who hadn't stirred when the challenging statement was made. He sat quite unmoved as though he had completely missed the insulting 'That settles it!' Nothing happened. You could hear us all involuntarily draw in our breath and also the ticking of the clock that had been placed on the table to measure the time for each move. Three minutes, seven, eight passed – Czentovic didn't stir, but it seemed to me that his thick nostrils were flaring as a result of inner tension.

Our friend found this silent waiting just as unbearable as we did. He stood up suddenly in one movement, and began to pace up and down the smoking-room. At first he walked slowly, but then faster and faster. Everyone looked at him in

surprise but none as uneasily as I did. For it struck me that in spite of the vigour of the way he paced up and down his steps covered only a precisely measured area: it was as though in the middle of this spacious room he ran up against an invisible cupboard which forced him to turn back every time. And I recognised with a shudder that without his being aware of it this reproduced the limits of the area of his former cell. He must have paced rapidly up and down like a caged animal in exactly this way during the months of his incarceration, with his hands clenched and his shoulders hunched. He must have rushed up and down exactly like this a thousand times, with the glowing light of madness in his staring expression.

His thought processes seemed completely unimpaired, however, for occasionally he would turn to the table impatiently to see if Czentovic had made a decision yet. But nine minutes, ten minutes went by. Then what no one had expected finally happened. Czentovic slowly lifted his heavy hand, which until then had rested motionless on the table. Intently we all hung on his decision. But Czentovic didn't move a piece; with a sweep of the back of his hand he pushed all the pieces slowly off the board. It took us a moment to grasp the situation: Czentovic had conceded the match. He had given in to avoid our seeing him being checkmated. The improbable had happened. The world champion, winner of countless tournaments had struck his colours in the face of an unknown player – and one who hadn't touched a chessboard for twenty or twenty-five years. Our friend – anonymous, unknown – had beaten the strongest chess player on earth in open battle!

Without thinking, one after another of us jumped up, we were so excited. We all felt we had to say or do something to release our pent-up joy. The only one who remained calmly unmoved was Czentovic. After a measured interval he raised his head and looked stonily at our friend.

'Another game?' he asked.

'Of course,' Dr B. answered with an eagerness that made me apprehensive. He sat down again before I could remind him of his intention of being satisfied with one game only, and began to set up the pieces with desperate haste. He assembled them with such passionate intensity that twice a pawn slipped to the floor through his shaking fingers. My earlier embarrassed

unease in the face of his abnormal agitation grew to something approaching alarm. This hitherto calm, quiet man was now visibly over-excited. The nervous tic at the corner of his mouth was more frequent, and his body was quivering as though racked with fever.

'No!' I whispered to him softly. 'Not now! That's enough for one day! It's too much of a strain for you.'

'Strain! Ha!' He laughed loudly and with contempt. 'I could have played seventeen games in the time instead of dawdling like that. The only strain I have, playing at that speed, is to stop myself falling asleep! Well! Go on, begin!'

He addressed these last remarks to Czentovic in a vehement, almost churlish, tone. Czentovic looked at him calmly and evenly but his stony expression had something of the clenched fist in it. All at once a new element had sprung up between the two players: a dangerous tension, a violent hatred. They were no longer two opponents wanting to test each other's playing skill, but two enemies who had sworn to annihilate each other. Czentovic hesitated a long time before he made the first move, and I had a definite feeling his delay was deliberate. Clearly this trained tactician had already noted that he wearied and annoyed his opponent by playing slowly. So he sat for at least four minutes before he made the most normal and simplest of all openings, pushing the King's pawn the customary two squares forward. Our friend immediately followed by advancing his own King's pawn, but again Czentovic created an almost unbearably long pause. It was like seeing a fierce flash of lightning and waiting with bated breath for the thunder – and then the thunder not happening. Czentovic didn't move. He thought silently and slowly, and I was increasingly certain his slowness was malicious. However, he gave me ample time to observe Dr B., who had just gulped down a third glass of water. I recalled involuntarily how he had told me about the feverish thirst he had had in his cell. He was showing clearly all the symptoms of abnormal excitement. I saw the perspiration on his forehead, and the scar on his hand growing redder and standing out more distinctly than it had done before. But he was still self-controlled. It was not until the fourth move, when Czentovic again went on thinking interminably, that he could no longer restrain himself.

'For heaven's sake make a move, will you!'

Czentovic looked up coldly. 'As I recall, we agreed ten minutes per move. I don't play to a shorter limit on principle.'

Dr B. bit his lip. I noticed how he was moving his foot up and down under the table more and more restlessly and I became uncontrollably more nervous myself. I had an awful premonition that some kind of madness was working itself up inside him. In fact there was a further incident at the eighth move. Dr B. had been growing increasingly impatient while he waited and couldn't contain his tension any further. He shifted about on his chair and started involuntarily to drum on the table with his fingers. Once again Czentovic lifted his heavy, peasant's head.

'Would you mind not drumming, please? It disturbs me. I can't play if you do that.'

'Ha!' Dr B. gave a curt laugh. 'That's obvious.'

Czentovic went red in the face. 'What do you mean by that?' His question was sharp and angry.

Dr B. gave another tight and malicious laugh. 'Nothing. Only that you are obviously feeling the strain.'

Czentovic was silent and lowered his head again.

It was seven minutes before he made his next move, and the game dragged on at this funereal pace. Czentovic became more like a block of stone than ever, in the end always taking the maximum of agreed time for thought before deciding on a move. And from one interval to the next our friend's behaviour grew stranger. It seemed as though he was no longer interested in the game but was occupied with something quite different. He stopped walking up and down and remained motionless on his chair. He had a fixed and almost crazed expression as he stared into space, ceaselessly muttering unintelligible words to himself. Either he was lost in endless combinations or – as I suspected deep down – he was working through completely different games. For whenever Czentovic eventually moved Dr B. had to be brought back from his private reverie. Then he always needed a whole minute to find out exactly how the game stood. The suspicion was borne in on me more and more that he had long since quite forgotten Czentovic and the rest of us in this chilling form of madness, which could suddenly explode in violence of some kind. And

indeed the crisis came at the nineteenth move. Czentovic had scarcely made his move before Dr B. suddenly, without looking at the board properly, pushed his Bishop forward three squares and shouted out so loudly that we all jumped.

'Check! The King's in check!'

We looked at the board at once in expectation of a particularly significant move. But after a minute what happened was not what any of us had anticipated. Czentovic raised his head very, very slowly towards our circle – something he hadn't done before – and looked from one man to the next. He seemed to be relishing something immensely, because slowly a satisfied and clearly sarcastic smile began to play about his lips. Only after he had savoured to the full the triumph that we still didn't understand, did he turn with pretended courtesy to our group.

'I'm sorry – but I see no check. Do any of you gentlemen see a check against my King, by any chance?'

We looked at the board and then uneasily at Dr B. The square Czentovic's King occupied was in fact – a child could see it – fully protected from the Bishop by a pawn, so the King couldn't possibly be in check. We were uneasy. Had our friend in his excitement mistakenly pushed a piece one square too far or too short? Roused by our silence Dr B. now gazed at the board and began to stammer and protest.

'But the King should be on KB7 ... its position is wrong, quite wrong. You've moved incorrectly! Everything is quite wrong on this board ... the pawn should be on KKt5, not on KKt4. That is a completely different game ... That's ...'

He stopped abruptly. I had grabbed him fiercely by the arm, or rather had gripped his arm so tightly that even in his fevered and confused state he must have felt my hold on him. He turned round and stared at me like a sleep-walker.

'What do you want?'

All I said was 'Remember!' and lightly drew my finger at the same time over the scar on his hand. Involuntarily he followed my movement, his eyes staring glassily at the inflamed line. Then he began to shiver suddenly and his whole body shook.

'For God's sake,' he whispered, his lips pale. 'Have I said or done anything untoward? Has it really happened again?'

'No,' I whispered gently. 'But you must stop playing at once.

It's high time you did. Remember what the doctor told you!'

Dr B. stood up quickly. 'Please excuse me for my stupid mistake,' he said in his earlier polite voice. He bowed to Czentovic. 'What I said was of course complete nonsense. Clearly, it's your game.' Then he turned to us. 'I must also ask you to forgive me. But I did warn you at the outset not to expect too much. Excuse me for making a fool of myself – that's the last time I shall try my hand at chess.' He bowed and left us, in the same modest and mysterious way as he had first appeared. I alone knew why this man would never again touch a chessboard. The others remained slightly bewildered. They had a vague feeling they had only just escaped something unpleasant and dangerous. 'Damned fool!' McConnor growled with disappointment. The last person to stand up was Czentovic. He glanced at the half-finished game.

'Pity,' he said generously. 'The attack was quite well conceived. That gentleman is really exceptionally able. For an amateur.'