

PATRICK SÜSKIND
A BATTLE

Early one August evening, when most people had already left the park, two men sat confronting one another across a chess-board. It was in the pavilion on the north-west side of the Jardin du Luxembourg. Although the aperitif hour was drawing near, their game was being followed with such close attention by a good dozen spectators that no one dreamt of leaving the scene until the battle had been decided one way or another.

The interest of the small crowd was concentrated on the challenger. He was a youngish man with black hair, pale in the face and with blasé, dark eyes. He uttered not a word; his expression never changed; only from time to time he rolled an unlit cigarette between his fingers. He was the very personification of nonchalance.

No one knew him; no one had ever seen him play before. And yet from the moment he first seated himself at the chess-board, pale, blasé and silent, and put his pieces in position, there emanated from him so strong an aura that everyone was overcome by the certainty that they were in the presence of a quite extraordinary personality of great and masterly talent. Perhaps it was just his attractive and yet unapproachable appearance, his elegant dress and his handsome physique. Or perhaps it was the calmness and self-assurance of his gestures, or the aura of strangeness and peculiarity that surrounded him—whatever it was, before the first pawn had been moved the onlookers were convinced that this man was a chess-player of the very first order and that he would achieve the miracle secretly desired by them all of beating the local chess star.

This character, a somewhat ugly little fellow of about seventy, was in every respect the exact opposite of his youthful opponent. He wore the blue trousers and woollen jacket flecked with food stains that were the traditional garb of the French pensioner. His shaky hands were speckled with the brown splotches of old age; his hair was sparse, his nose ruby-red, and purple veins marked his face. He possessed no aura whatsoever and he was in need of a shave. He puffed nervously at the butt-end of his cigarette, shifted about restlessly in his folding chair and apprehensively shook his head from side to side non-stop. The bystanders knew him very well. They had all played against him and lost, for, while he was anything

but an inspired player, he had the exasperating knack of wearing down his opponents and enraging them by never making a mistake. You could never count on his obliging you with even the smallest lapse of attention. To beat him you actually had to play better than he did. And that, it was presumed, was exactly what was going to happen today. A new master had arrived to knock the star out of the sky. A new master had come to humiliate him, to butcher him move by move, to trample him in the dust and make him taste at last the bitterness of losing. His fate would avenge many an individual defeat.

‘Careful, Jean,’ they all shouted during the opening moves, ‘you’re for it this time! You won’t beat this one, Jean! You’re no match for him! This is your Waterloo, Jean! Look out! You’re going to meet your Waterloo today!’

‘*Eh bien, eh bien . . .*’ responded the old man, shaking his head as with hesitant hand he moved his first white pawn forward.

As soon as the stranger, who had drawn black, began to play, silence reigned in the crowd. No one would have dared speak to him. Shyly attentive, they watched him as he sat silent before the chess-board, never lifting his supercilious gaze from the pieces. They watched as he rolled his unlit cigarette between his fingers and played with quick, assured moves whenever it came to his turn.

The first moves in the game followed the usual pattern. Then there were two exchanges of pawns, the second of which ended with Black keeping a doubled pawn back on a line—a move not usually regarded as advantageous. But the stranger must have accepted the doubled pawn quite deliberately so as to make a way clear for his queen. Obviously he had the same end in view when this led to the sacrifice of a second pawn in a kind of belated gambit which White accepted only with hesitation, indeed almost nervously. The spectators exchanged meaningful glances, nodded apprehensively, and turned expectantly to the stranger.

Momentarily he stops rolling his cigarette, raises his hand, moves it forward and—yes, he moves his queen! He moves her far out, right into his opponent’s lines, and by so doing he splits the battlefield in two. A murmur of approval runs through the ranks. What a move! What style! They had suspected that he would move

the queen—but to move her so far! Not one of the bystanders—and they were all connoisseurs of the game—not one of them would have dared make such a move. But after all, that's what really makes a true master. A true master plays with originality, daring, determination. To put it simply, a true master plays differently from your average player. And for that reason an average player does not need to understand each individual move made by the master. In fact the spectators did not at this moment quite understand what the queen was meant to be doing in her present position. She was not a threat to anything vital and she was attacking only figures which were well covered. But the purpose and deeper meaning of this move would soon become clear; the master had his own plan—this was certain: you could see it in his impassive expression and his calm and steady hand. After this unconventional move of the queen, it was clear to even the least perceptive spectator that at this chess-board was sitting a genius whose like they would be lucky to see again. For Jean, the old star, they felt only a malicious sympathy. What did he have to offer against such splendid verve? They knew all about him, anyway! He would probably try to extricate himself from the situation with some pettifogging, small-scale moves, by carefully arranged small-scale tactics. And then, after prolonged delay and thought, Jean, instead of making a correspondingly large-scale response to the large-scale move of the queen, pushes on to H4 a little pawn who had been deprived of his cover by the advance of the black queen.

The repeated loss of a pawn means nothing to the young man. He does not reflect for a moment before his queen moves to the right, striking into his opponent's order of battle, and lands on a square from which she at once attacks two pieces—a knight and a rook—and now she pushes forward dangerously near to the king's rank. Admiration widens the eyes of the spectators. What a devil of a fellow Black is! What courage! 'He's a professional,' they whisper, 'a grand master, a veritable Sarasate of chess.' And they all wait impatiently for Jean's counter-move, impatient more than anything to see what Black's next trick will be.

And Jean hesitates. Thinks, torments himself, shifts around in his chair, jerks his head. It is an ordeal to watch him—move, Jean, move, and don't hold up the inevitable progress of events!

And Jean moves. At last. With trembling hand, he places the knight on a square where he is not merely secure from the queen but actually attacks her and covers the rook. Well, well! Not a bad move. But then what else could he have done in this embattled situation? All of us standing here would have done the same. 'But it won't help him,' the whisper goes round, 'Black saw that move coming.'

For already Black's hand is hovering like a hawk above the battlefield. He seizes his queen and moves her—no, he's not moving her back, anxiously, as we would have done, he's moving her just one square to the right! Incredible! People are speechless with admiration. No one really understands the purpose of the move, for the queen is now standing at the edge of the board, threatening nothing, covering nothing. Her position is completely meaningless, and yet she looks so good, maddeningly good, no queen has ever looked so good, solitary and proud in the middle of the opponent's ranks. Jean, too, cannot understand what his sinister opponent is aiming at with this move; he cannot see what trap he is being enticed into; and after much thought and with an uneasy conscience he decides to take another unprotected pawn. He is now, the spectators calculate, three pawns up on Black. But what does that matter? What's the point of numerical superiority when you're faced with an opponent who is obviously thinking strategically, who isn't concerned with numbers but with position, development, super-sudden lightning-fast strokes? Beware, Jean! You'll still be chasing pawns when the next move traps your king.

Now it's Black's turn. The stranger sits there quietly rolling his cigarette between his fingers. This time he thinks for a bit longer than usual, two minutes perhaps. Total silence reigns. Not one of the bystanders dares whisper. Scarcely one of them is still looking at the chess-board. All eyes are fixed on the young man, on his hands and his pale face. Is there not a tiny smile of triumph perceptible in the corners of his mouth? Can one not perceive a very slight flaring of the nostrils such as always precedes great decisions? What will his next move be? What devastating blow is the master about to deal?

The cigarette-rolling stops, the stranger leans forward; a dozen pairs of eyes follow his hand. What will his next move be, what will it be? He takes the pawn from G7—who'd have thought of that? The pawn from G7! The pawn from G7 on to . . . G6!

There follows a moment of complete silence. For a moment even old Jean himself stops trembling and shifting around. Out-and-out rejoicing almost breaks forth in the crowd. They breathe once again; they dig their neighbours in the ribs. Did you see that? What a devil of a fellow he is! *Ça alors!* He lets his queen just be a queen, and simply moves a pawn to G6. Naturally that leaves G7 free for his bishop, that's clear enough, and in the next move but one he'll call check, and then? And then? What then? By then in any case Jean will be finished; that much is quite clear. Just look at him, how strenuously he's thinking.

And yes, Jean is thinking. He thinks for an eternity. Damn the man! Now and again his hand stretches forward and then draws back again. Come on! Move, Jean, for heaven's sake, move! We want to see the master.

Then at last, after five long minutes, as people are beginning to shuffle their feet, Jean dares to make his move. He attacks the queen. With a pawn he attacks the black queen. He tries to escape his fate by means of this delaying tactic. How childish! Black need only withdraw his queen two squares and everything will be back to where it was. It's all over for you, Jean! You've run out of ideas. It's all over . . . Black moves towards—you see, Jean, he doesn't have to spend time thinking. Now it's just a case of blow upon blow. Black moves towards his qu— . . . and for a moment every heart stands still, for Black, contrary to all apparent reason, does not move his queen to save her from that absurd attack by the pawn, no: Black carries out his original plan and puts his bishop on G7.

Baffled, they stare at him. They take half a step backwards, as if awestruck, and look at him uncomprehendingly. He is sacrificing his queen and putting the bishop on G7! And he does it with absolute deliberation and an imperturbable demeanour, sitting there calm and supercilious, pale, blasé and handsome. Their eyes grow a little moist and their hearts warm to him. He's playing as they would love to play and never dare to. They cannot understand why he's playing as he does and they really don't care. Perhaps they even suspect that he is playing suicidally, gambling everything. But all the same, they would love to be able to play like him—splendidly, certain of victory, Napoleonically.

Unlike Jean, whose timid, hesitant game they are able to understand since they play no differently, only less well. Jean's game is sensible. It is orderly, played by the rules, and enervatingly tedious. Black on the other hand creates a miracle with his every move. He offers his own queen as a sacrifice just to put his bishop on G7. When had anyone ever seen anything like it? They are deeply moved by his act. From now on Black can play as he likes, they'll follow him move for move till the very end, whether it be glorious or bitter. For now he is their hero, and they love him.

And even Jean, the opponent, the sober player, preparing with quivering hand to move his pawn into the onslaught on the queen, hesitates as though shy in the face of the glorious hero, and speaks, excusing himself softly as though asking not to be forced into this deed: 'If you give her to me, monsieur . . . I must, yes, I must.' He casts a beseeching look at his opponent. The latter sits there with a face of stone and does not reply. The old man, bruised and shattered, makes his strike.

A moment later the black bishop calls check. Check to the white king! The spectators' emotion turns to enthusiasm. The loss of the queen is already forgotten. To a man they stand behind the young challenger and his bishop. Check to the king! That's how they would have played! Exactly the same, no other way! Check! Cool analysis of the situation would show them straight away that White still has a wealth of possible moves for his own defence, but that thought interests no one. They don't want sober analysis; they only want to see brilliant deeds, attacks of genius and powerful strokes which will knock the opposition out. The game—this particular game—has now only one meaning and interest for them: they want to see the young stranger win and the old star knocked out of the sky.

Jean hesitates and reflects. He knows that no one would put a penny on him any more. But he doesn't know why. He doesn't understand that the others—all of them experienced chess players—do not see the strength and security of his position. He is the stronger by a queen and three pawns. How can they think that he will lose? He cannot lose! Or can he? Is he deceiving himself? Is his concentration failing? Do the others see more than he does? He grows uncertain. Perhaps the fatal trap is already set and at the next

move he will tumble into it. Where is the trap? He must avoid it. He must wriggle his way out of it. In any case, he must sell his skin as dearly as he can . . .

And now, clinging to the rules of the game even more cautiously, with ever-increasing care and hesitation, Jean weighs up and considers the situation, and decides to remove a knight and insert him between the queen and the bishop so that the black bishop now stands within the range of the white queen.

Black's response comes without delay. He does not break off the now-impeded attack, but brings up reinforcements: his knight covers the threatened bishop. The audience rejoices. Now the battle proceeds blow upon blow. White calls upon a bishop for help, Black sends a rook to the front, White brings up his second knight, Black his second rook. Both sides mass their forces round the square where the black bishop stands. The square on which the bishop would have had nothing more to do has become the centre of the battle. Why, nobody knows—it is just that Black wants it like this. Every move of Black's, as he escalates the game and brings on a new figure, is greeted with long, open applause. On the other hand White's every move, in his enforced self-defence, is received with undisguised grumbling. Then Black, once again defying all the rules of the game, embarks upon a series of murderous exchanges. The rule-book lays down that such ruthless carnage can scarcely benefit a player at a numerical disadvantage. Black begins it all the same and the audience cheers him on. Never before have they witnessed such a slaughter. Recklessly Black mows down everything within range; he pays no heed to his own losses, pawns fall in rows, knights, rooks and bishops likewise, to the frenetic applause of this expert audience . . . After seven or eight moves and counter-moves the chess-board is laid waste. For Black the result of the battle is grim: he has only three pieces left—the king, one rook and a single pawn. White on the other hand has saved from the Armageddon not just his king and rook but also his queen and four pawns. Any reasonable observer could have no doubt what the end must be and who will win. And in truth there is not doubt in anyone. For now, as before—it is written on the faces still lit up with the dazzle of battle—the spectators hold fast to the conviction that, even if faced with disaster, their man will win. They would still put any money on

him and angrily toss aside the merest suggestion of his possible defeat.

The young man too seems completely unmoved by the catastrophic situation. It is his move. He calmly takes his rook and advances him one square further to the right. Silence again reigns in the circle of watchers. Indeed tears come to the eyes of these grown-up men in their devotion to a player's genius. It is like the end of the Battle of Waterloo when the Emperor sends his bodyguard into the conflict long since lost. With his last important piece Black once again goes onto the attack.

White now has his king placed in the last row on G1, with three pawns in the second row in front of him, so that the king is hemmed in and would be in mortal peril were Black to succeed in his apparent plan of moving into the first row with his rook.

This particular way of declaring checkmate on one's opponent is the best known and most commonplace move in the game of chess; one might even say it is the most childish of all moves, since its success depends solely on the opponent failing to recognize the obvious danger and taking no steps to counter it. The most effective of these steps is to open up the line of pawns and so devise an escape route for the king. To try and checkmate an experienced player or even a reasonably advanced beginner with this sleight of hand verges on frivolity. Nevertheless, the delighted audience marvel at their hero's move as though they were witnessing it for the very first time. They shake their heads in boundless admiration. It's true that they know White will have to make a fundamental error to let Black win. But they still believe in Black's victory. They believe wholeheartedly that Jean, the local star, who has beaten all of them, who never permits himself to slip up, will slip up now. And more: they hope he will slip up. They yearn for it to happen. In their hearts they pray fervently that Jean will make this slip . . .

And Jean considers. Nods his head reflectively back and forth, weighs up, as is his wont, the possibilities one against another, hesitates once more—and then his trembling hand, speckled with the brown splotches of old age, clasps the pawn on G2 and sets it down on G3.

The clock on St Sulpice strikes eight. All the other chess players in the Jardin du Luxembourg have long since gone home to their

aperitifs. The man who hires out the boards has long since shut up his shop. The group of spectators standing around the two opponents in the centre of the pavilion are the only people left. With wide cow-like stares they contemplate the chess-board, where one small white pawn has settled the fate of the black king. And they still do not want to believe it. They avert their cow-like stares from the depressing terrain of the battlefield and turn them upon the general himself, sitting pale, blasé, handsome and motionless in his folding chair. 'You haven't lost,' their stares are saying, 'you're going to bring about a miracle now. You've foreseen this situation from the very outset, you've brought it about. Now you're going to annihilate your opponent. How you'll do it we don't know—we're just simple players. But you, you miracle-worker, you can do it, you will do it. Don't let us down! We believe in you. Work the miracle, miracle-man, work the miracle and win!'

The young man sat there in silence. Then he rolled his cigarette between thumb and tips of forefinger and middle finger, and put it to his mouth. He lit it, pulled on it, puffed out the smoke over the chess-board, swept his hand through the smoke, let it hover for a moment over the black king and then knocked him over.

To knock a king down as a sign of one's own defeat is a deeply vulgar and ill-tempered gesture. It is as though one is destroying the whole game retrospectively. And it makes a hideous sound when the overturned king hits the board. It strikes into the heart of every chess-player.

After the young man had knocked the king over so contemptuously he rose, disdained to glance at either his opponent or his audience, uttered no word of farewell and walked away.

The spectators stood there disconcerted and abashed. They looked at the chess-board in helpless embarrassment. After a moment one or another of them cleared his throat, shuffled his feet and took out a cigarette. What time is it? Quarter past eight already! Heavens, is it as late as that? *Au revoir!* Goodbye, Jean . . . ! And whispering some apologies, they quickly disappeared.

The local star alone remained. He stood the king upright again

and began to collect the pieces together into a small box, first the ones which had been taken and then those still standing on the board. As he did this all the individual moves and positions went through his mind, as they always did when a game was over. He had not made a single false move—naturally he hadn't. And yet it seemed to him that he'd never played so badly in all his life. He should have been able to checkmate his opponent in the very opening phase. Anyone capable of that wretched queen's gambit had to be an ignoramus at the game. Usually Jean dismissed such amateurs, mercifully or unmercifully according to his mood, but always swiftly and without misgiving. This time quite clearly his feel for his opponent's true weakness had let him down. Or had he simply grown cowardly? Had he not had sufficient confidence to make short work of this arrogant charlatan in the way he deserved?

No, it was worse than that. He had not wanted to believe that his opponent was so wretchedly bad. And even worse than that: almost to the end of the game he had wanted to believe that he, Jean, was not a match for his opponent. The self-confidence, brilliance and youthful aura of the young stranger had made him feel his opponent was invincible. That was why he himself played with such exaggerated caution. And even that was not enough: if he was to be really honest with himself he had to admit that he had admired the stranger, just as the others had done—yes, he had wanted the stranger to win and bring about his, Jean's, downfall in the most impressive and inspired way possible, a downfall he had tired of waiting for over the years, and which would at last have released him from the burden of being the greatest and of always having to beat the others, so that the odious crowd of spectators, envious lot that they were, would finally have been satisfied and he would have had peace at last . . .

But there he was: he had won again. And to him the victory was the most distasteful of all his career, for in his attempt to avoid it he had, throughout the whole game, been forced to disavow and debase himself and lay down his arms before the most miserable, blundering player in the world.

Jean, the local star, was not a man given to great moral perceptions. But this much was clear to him as he shuffled off home with his chess-board under his arm and the box of pieces in his hand:

that he had in truth suffered a defeat today, a defeat which was all the more dreadful and final because there was no way of avenging it and no way of getting even with it through a brilliant victory in the future. And so he decided—he who had never been a man of great decisions either—to call it a day with chess, once and for all.

From now on he would play boules like all the other pensioners: a harmless and sociable game, of more modest moral pretensions.

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