

A QUIET GAME OF CHESS

Maurice Richardson

It was the Boxing-day after the last Christmas before the End of the World, and, together with a sizable handful of my fellow-members, I was lounging away the remaining shreds of the tattered epoch in the Trance-Room of the Surrealist Sporting Club.

We were engaged in the traditional Boxing-day pastime of shooting down our Hangovers. Chippy de Zoete, with a shrewd left and right from his trusty old elephant gun, had just put paid to a frightful fanged Apparition who had been pursuing him hotly ever since breakfast. Nodder Fothergill was taking aim at a great grey Cloud of Unknowing that hovered over the sofa on which he lay outstretched. Wally Warlock was blazing away at the Spots in front of his eyes. Engelbrecht, the dwarf surrealist boxer, had just brought the chandelier crashing to the floor and blown off several of the Oldest Member's members in a plucky but characteristically rash attempt to dispel by rocket-fire a hideous black Shape answering to the name of the Dark Night of the Soul which was harassing his trusty but congenitally melancholic old manager, Lizard Bayliss.

At that moment the Id, who had been shouting away to himself in the Silence Room, blew in and challenged all and sundry to a quiet game of chess.

I don't know whether you've ever played surrealist chess. It's a bit different from the ordinary kind. Not only does it include additional pieces such as the Tank, the Fighter Plane, and the Atomic Bomb which were introduced into the game by King Abdulla of Transjordan to bring it into line with modern power politics, but it is played with human Kings, Queens, Bishops, Knights, and Pawns, with genuine old machicolated castles for Rooks, all on a board of positively cosmic dimensions. So much so that the doors of the Surrealist Chess Stadium have proved before now to be the portals to several other worlds besides the next.

It was with some trepidation, therefore, that I accepted Engelbrecht's invitation to join the H.Q. staff of the scratch unit which

he undertook to put on to the board against the task-force of Grand Masters fielded by the Id. And, as so often happens in Surrealist Sport, there was a powerful whiff of dirty work in the ether. I noticed that nearly all the Old Hands—clutchers, most of them, if you ask me—had enlisted on the side of the big battalions, and Chippy de Zoete, always a tough and slippery customer, had been commissioned Pawn-Master.

Indeed, when our side assembled in the funereal dressing room—we had drawn Black, of course—we were reduced to Engelbrecht, Lizard Bayliss and myself, little Charlie Wapentake (as defective as he is devoted) and as much of the Oldest Member and his members as could be collected from the Club carpet.

“You haven’t been betting, have you, kiddo?” Lizard Bayliss asked nervously as he adjusted his crêpe chess-helmet.

Engelbrecht nodded vigorously. “You bet I have,” he said. “Everything we possess. Everything I could think of. Plus all the Time we got left plus what we won from Grandfather Clock. Why not?” He hiccupped and was immediately enveloped in a dense cloud of black smoke.

Plainly the fighting dwarf was still under the direct influence. He had not even begun to approach the Hangover stage.

Presently the professional umpire, Dreamy Dan, who umpires all surrealist sporting contests, wandered in to say it was time we were getting out on to the board as the pieces had arrived. We hurried out to look them over.

It was obvious that the Id had not been letting the grass grow under his feet. The Black pieces were the most moth-eaten collection of disintegrating old hams you ever set eyes on outside the waiting room of a theatrical agency. As for the pawns they were nothing but a gang of dead-end kids and I wasn’t a bit surprised to find they were out on ticket of leave from an approved school.

White, on the other hand, was as well disciplined a set as any turned out by old man Staunton himself. They lined up in formation and marched off, chanting in unison the daring slogan: “One, two, three, four! Pawn to Queen’s Bishop Four.”

Then the umpire's helicopter became airborne and not long after the boom of the Sunset Gun announced the start of play.

The Oldest Member took a pinch of gunpowder from his snuffbox and passed the flame of his lighter under his nostrils. He appeared to benefit from the resulting explosion. It enabled him to take in the situation at a glance. "The first thing to do," he said, "is to submit those pawns to a severe loyalty test."

"Better save your strength," said Lizard. "Every piece we got's been got at, if you ask me. Might just as well line up the whole lot on the fifth column, bump 'em off and call it a day."

"You let me get at 'em," said Engelbrecht, lurching forward. "Listen to me, you spivs," he roared. "I don't care how often you've broken your old mothers' hearts or cheated the hangman. You're chessmen now, see. Black chessmen. And when I give the word I want you to get cracking into the middle of that board and knock hell outa them White bastards. Now..."

His voice was drowned in a ragged cheer. The Black King started to recite Henry V, and three pawns, fired by the general élan, dashed forward in a charge.

"Get back to your squares, you bloody little stoats," yelled Charlie Wapentake.

We held an emergency conference. Night was falling. Only one thing was clear, which was that our Captain did not know the first thing about the Game. Lizard Bayliss, living in the world of fisticuffs where the higher cerebral sports are but little esteemed, had never graduated beyond the draughts-board, and could only mutter "Huff him, chumps, huff the bleeders to death!" Charlie Wapentake was still concussed as the result of having been fool's-mated so often at his prep school. My own chess-lore is rudimentary. It seemed we should have to rely on the Oldest Member's Memory.

From the White end of the board a rocket soared up into the night and burst releasing a cluster of incandescent stars which arranged themselves in the symbols PK4. The Id had moved.

Engelbrecht reeled up to our King's Pawn and aimed a savage kick at the child. "Two squares forward! March!" he roared. Around midnight the KP got through on his Walkie Talkie Apparatus to say

that K4 was untenable. I jumped into a staff car and shot off to investigate.

I must say the route to PK4 was a pretty gruelling one. The car sank under me in a bog near the frontier of K3 and K4 and I had to do the last part on foot. I found the pawn skulking about under a Upas tree. "I don't like it 'ere, sir," he whined. "There's things, nasty things." "What of it," I roared, "there's nasty things everywhere. The Universe is stiff with 'em. You'll either do your duty and hold this square or be court-martialled and shot on the spot." Just then there was a moaning gibbering noise and something in a white sheet flitted by. I took a pot-shot at it and heard a frightful but all too familiar curse. It was Chippy de Zoete, trying some of his favourite psychological warfare tactics.

Shortly after I arrived back at H.Q. another rocket signal went up. The Id had castled on the King's side.

"Castled has he?" said Engelbrecht. "Well we'll castle too. How do we do it?"

How indeed? For no sooner did we start to move our King's Rook than the entire structure collapsed in a shower of brick-dust and plaster, jackdaws' nests, and bats. We heard a thin voice somewhere in the middle of it all say: "I'm very old and very tired." And that was how a very gallant edifice passed over to the other side.

We called for volunteers to rig a temporary structure on KB1, put Lizard Bayliss inside it to make it stand up, and just managed to get the job done before the time signal went for us to move. But we had reckoned without the Id. When the King took up his position on KKt1 there was a violent explosion. While we had been busy reconstructing enemy paratroops had mined the square. An attempt to take advantage of the confusion and kidnap the Queen was discovered in time by QP and QBP who heard the old girl holler and gave the alarm.

The preliminary phase of court intrigue was now over. The middle game, and with it all the horrors of mediaeval warfare, had begun in earnest. Soon the board was one vast panorama of carnage. The screams of hapless pawns being dragged away to captivity with all its nameless horrors, the wheezy death rattle of knights, the whining

supplications of crafty bishops, the sadistic frenzy of queens, resounded on all sides. It was too much for poor little Charlie Wapentake. He developed Chess-shock. "I can't stand it," he said, burying his face in his hands. "I can't stand it I tell you. It's too horrible."

"And what about me shut up in this here bloody tower," said the hollow cardboard voice of Lizard Bayliss. Sternly we ordered him back to his square...

At dawn on the seventh day I returned to H.Q. weary and travel-stained after a long-distance recce up in the mountains at QR6 where one of our pawns, a boy scout type, had been making some progress. Engelbrecht was snoring on his camp bed. The Oldest Member was at the control panel. "Let me put you in the picture," he said. "We've had a pretty severe pranging but I think we can say that our position is still defensible. We've got rid of the worst of our fifth column by process of exchange which is whizzo so far as it goes and we've held our own in pieces. But we're badly behind in tempo, and I'm afraid we shall feel it as soon as the secret weapons come into play. The purple's up already."

Next moment Dreamy Dan's voice sounded on the loud speaker: "Tank to Tank's twelfth, Check. And Flame Thrower to Flame Thrower's sixth, Double Check."

"I expected as much," the O.M. went on. "Well, we must evacuate our King to safety. I've booked him a room at the Palace."

The next twenty-four hours were hellish. We were attacked on all sides by newly invented pieces including bacteriological warfare units in flagrant defiance of the rules of all forms of chess. All appeals to Dreamy Dan were met with his invariable formula—accompanied by a schizophrenic chuckle—of: "Can't say I noticed anything special. You must be seeing things."

Our own shock-pieces proved, as we had feared, markedly inferior to the enemy. The Tank moved straight into a trap. The Fighter Plane was held immobilized by a Ray apparatus on Rocket Bomb's ninth...

The concrete bunker which was our H.Q. was given over to black despair, so black you could scarcely see your hand in front of your face. Our Atomic Bomb had been taken *en passant* before it had had a chance to go off. The White pieces were milling all round the

Palace Hotel where our trusty old Monarch was sitting shivering in the Winter Garden humming *God Save the King* to keep his spirits up. "It's Mate in two whatever we do," said the Oldest Member. I had never seen Engelbrecht so downcast.

There was a scratch at the door and Lizard Bayliss poked his head round.

"What are you doing, Lizard" I said. "I thought you'd been taken years ago."

"So I was," said Lizard, "but I escaped. Had a hell of a job to get across the board. I got a message for you. It's from the little bleeder of a pawn, you know the boy scout type what was so keen. You should see where he's got to. Way out behind their lines 'e is. 'E couldn't let you know before because Chippy de Zoete smashed his Walkie Talkie App way back on QR3. 'Ere, read this. It's hot." He handed over a crumpled note.

Engelbrecht read out: "Have infiltrated to QR 666th disguised as brushwood stop Enemy's Atom Bomb en prise stop Chance of Mate in two stop Move me quick. Sgd. QRP."

The Oldest Member positively leapt to the controls. "QRP takes Atom Bomb and Atom Bombs, Check!" he announced. "It's Mate in two whatever they do."

We heard over the intercom a shaky voice saying: "White resigns!" But it was too late. The dizzy height of promotion from Queen's Rook's Pawn to Atom Bomb had gone to our little boy scout's head. "I'm not accepting any resignations," he squeaked, "I detonate."

Next moment there was a blinding flash and the Universe turned into a nebula.

"This," said the Oldest Member, "is where I came in."

The End

Maurice Richardson was born in 1907 and educated at Oxford. After leaving Oxford he became an amateur boxer and wrote the novel *A Strong Man Needed* (1931), a comedy about the trials and tribulations of a female boxer. This was the first of several peculiarly humorous and unique fictions which eventually included *My Bones Will Keep* (1932), *The Bad Companions* (1936) and the cult comedy *The Exploits of Engelbrecht* (1950). Richardson regularly contributed to *Lilliput* from the 1940s onwards, the British monthly magazine of humour and arts founded by Stefan Lorant. Richardson's pieces in *Lilliput* were an influence on Spike Milligan and Michael Moorcock. During the 1950s he specialised as a book reviewer. In the 1960s his journalistic career peaked and he became both the television critic for the *Observer* and sports writer for *The Guardian*. Richardson died in 1977. His collection of miscellaneous pieces, *Fits and Starts*, was published posthumously.

Rhys Hughes was born in 1966 and his first book, *Worming the Harpy*, was published in 1995. Since then he has published a further thirty titles, including *Engelbrecht Again*, a sequel to Richardson's classic, and has had his work translated into ten languages. His latest novel is the satirical comedy *The Young Dictator*. He currently lives in Wales.