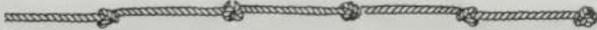


ERIK AMDRUP

Chess on Board



Albert is a primitive soul, but a shrewd businessman and stinking rich. I had successfully embellished his wife with a breast-lift, tummy-tuck—things of that sort. His invitation for me to join a one-week autumn cruise in the Baltic was in appreciation of my efforts.

“Martin Ask, MD, plastic-aesthetic surgery” is what’s written on my business card. While my field of expertise may not live up to the idealistic dreams of my youth, it is lucrative. My wife, Cora, is an attorney who legally guides wealthy women through a “satisfactory” divorce. Yes, we both serve those who are able to pay.

When I boarded the yacht in Copenhagen harbor around seven p.m., I was received by a humbly apologizing steward. “I’m so sorry, the director is delayed. Our chief and his other friends will board in Stockholm!” He smiled, subservient in a way that I’m used to and secretly despise. “The yacht is entirely at your disposal! Just call me for whatever you want!”

My cabin was rather small, but absolutely comfortable. I strolled ’round and inspected the yacht. It seemed only to have awaited my arrival before it was on its way out of the harbor. I leaned over the rail and enjoyed the lights glimmering from both coasts of Oresund. However, the evening became more and more chilly, and I went to the bar.

The bartender bowed his head and rapidly turned his back to me. I recognized him, however, at once: Gosta, my best companion throughout our college years and the first part of our professional studies. I’m well padded now, but he had grown thin. Most of his curly blonde hair was

gone and his face was pallid and heavily lined like a longtime prisoner's. I turned my back towards him, sipped my whiskey, and considered the situation.

His academic career ended in an odd way, and I came to hate him, but for other reasons. But once, in our youth, we spent a lot of time together, talking until late hours, drinking beer, enjoying music, and playing chess. *Why didn't we forget that our friendship had ended?*

"Don't you recognize me, Gosta?" I asked.

"Of course, I do. Mainly because I knew you were coming," he answered without enthusiasm.

Gosta had developed a habit of looking away, thus you couldn't catch his eye. I suddenly felt a nostalgic melancholy. He had been so brilliant, admittedly more than a match for me in every way.

"How is it? Do you still play chess?"

"I don't have a partner."

"What a pity. You were extremely good. I have joined a club and play regularly. Perhaps not at a high professional level, but I find it quite amusing. I'm sorry you have given it up."

"Did I say so? Newspapers and periodicals publish chess problems, and you can fight a computer program or even yourself!"

"So that's what you do? I wish we could take a game now just as in the good old days."

He gave me a quick glance. "Do you really want that?"

"Certainly. It would be a pleasure."

He shrugged. "Well, I was told that the entire ship is at your disposal, so why not? I close the bar at ten and will come directly to your cabin with a board and pieces. You may order drinks from the steward."

He turned away and I left. The Scandinavian September night was bright with a multitude of stars, and the sea quiet as the ship proceeded at full speed. The steward served an absolutely delicious dinner in the mahogany saloon, and upon returning to my cabin I called my wife.

"Incidentally, I met an old friend here, and we are going to have a game of chess!" I said as I ended the conversation.

"It's not Gosta, is it?"

"Why? Do you know him?"

"Of course I *did*. But I was just a young student then, and you two only had eyes for Inge!

Did she also know Inge? Why did she remind me of her? I had planned a nice game with Gosta, talking about our mutual time at college, breaking the ice but avoiding dangerous themes. Now the sad events from the past returned.

NEITHER GOSTA NOR I was a particularly good student in college. However, when Gosta began studying law he quickly rose to the top of his class, while I was a mediocre medical student. He was the ideal Scandinavian youngster: long, slender, blue-eyed, with blonde curly hair, and overwhelming charm. I must admit that I admired as well as envied him, as did most of his contemporaries.

Through college we continued our regular contact, including playing chess. Girls? Yes, of course. And we had the agreement that whenever one of us pointed one out and said "Madame," the other did not try to compete.

It was at a bottle party that I met Inge. She was invited by Gosta, who knew her from the tennis court, but he became absorbed in another girl and left Inge disappointed and alone. It was out of pity that I approached her. Inge was nineteen, not especially beautiful or bright, but a nice, natural girl, preferring sports like riding, swimming and tennis to reading, let alone studying. We danced, and I liked her and Gosta didn't protest to my "Madame" announcement.

That was the beginning of what I recognized as a close, however platonic, friendship. In fact, Inge and I spent more and more of our spare time together, and I grew terribly fond of her.

GOSTA ARRIVED at ten sharp dressed in a worn blazer, white shirt with a blue tie, and grey trousers that hid his knobby knees. He hesitated but finally agreed to a small glass of red wine. I was lucky enough to get the white chess pieces, thus being the first draw, and rewarded myself with a stiff whiskey. The game started and I soon realized that Gosta had developed into a very slow player, probably because he wasn't used to considering an opponent. He bowed silently over the board, thus I had only his naked crown to admire.

"Are you married?" I couldn't keep from asking.

“Not at all!”

His answer wasn't commented further, and this made my question nearly improper. I tried to compensate by talking about Cora and our two teenage children. He didn't show any interest, and the game continued in silence.

INGE WAS BORN into a wealthy family. Her mother died when she was a young child and her father was always extremely busy. She could do whatever she wanted, had her own car, etc. I was very well received as her friend and a probable future partner, and accepted the situation without much reflection. I didn't want to marry as a student—but when I had passed my final examination, why not? I felt quite confident and didn't really think about what Inge might want.

“Chess!” Gosta interrupted my reflections. I had allowed myself to become too distracted and paid for it by having to exchange my castle for his knight, a damned reduction in power. He didn't comment or move, he just sat silently with his eyes fixed on the board.

Naturally, Inge met Gosta again, this time on the tennis court. They were both able tennis players and enjoyed a good match. I have never been the sporty type and had to remain an onlooker, but it didn't matter. No, that wasn't the reason for the disaster.

Damn, now Gosta threaten my only remaining castle and I had to abandon a pawn to rescue it. Well, it wasn't a large loss, but it increased Gosta's superiority. I decided to concentrate, to pull myself together.

We sat comfortably in my nice cabin with wine and liquors at hand, while the ship plowed its way through the small waves. A rich milieu, a good deal more showy than Inge's, but her father's holiday house was quite impressive to a student. Inge invited Gosta and me to a weekend there, and we certainly enjoyed everything. After a superb dinner on Saturday evening, we strolled lazily to the beach and further out to the end of the long bathing jetty.

“Let's take a swim!” Gosta suggested, and began to undress.

I shook my head and Inge admitted laughingly that she was naked under her dress. Gosta jumped into the sea, shouted with joy, and swam energetically back to the jetty.

“Why, my sweet, are you afraid of water?” he cried. Grabbing Inge,

he swung her around, threw her out into the sea, and followed headlong.

Inge was the first to return. The thin dress stuck to her body and I guess this was the first time I realized how pretty she was. She sent me an odd, apologizing glance and went back in the direction of the house.

When Gosta began to follow, I grabbed his arm. "She is shocked! How could you? You behaved like a bloody brute!"

"What a fucking fool you are!" he snarled. "Poor Inge has needed a *real* man for months. No girl will ever feel satisfied by your virginal politeness, stupid! Your 'Madame' has no value any more. It's my turn now!"

It was late. I couldn't find them and finally had to return to my room; but I wasn't able to sleep. All I could think of was finding Inge and apologizing for my friend. However, the hours passed and it was she who came to me, nervous and upset, face flushed.

"Martin, I have to speak to you!"

She turned toward the window. With her back to me she stammered in a hushed tone, "I spent the night with Gosta. Martin, I'm sorry, I'm in love with him. I thought it should be us, but . . . well, you never said, and . . ."

It was then that I realized how much she meant to me—*her*, not the wealth and power of her family. I tried to explain, but it was all too late. We both wept and Inge fled. I never saw her again.

CHESS! I WOKE up and saved my king, but again had to offer a pawn. My hatred for him blazed up as he sat there, motionless and silent, not for his ability to play chess but for his stealing the only girl I ever really loved. And yet . . . how reduced he was, so shabby and pitiable. How could it be that he had ended like that, the brilliant charmer, the star student?

I didn't learn anything for some weeks after it all happened. When I left the holiday house I hid in my room, buried myself among my books, and spent all my time studying. This led to some splendid results I didn't really enjoy. It was some months later that a colleague spoke of Gosta. "Why, didn't you hear? Gosta broke into the university administration office and copied the papers for the coming examinations. He confessed and naturally he was expelled."

I didn't hear a word and asked, timidly, if he knew Inge. My colleague eyed me suspiciously. "Tell me, have you been sick or abroad? She is dead! Suicide. She drove her car into the harbor."

I returned to my studies and tried to forget. I passed the final examination with one of the top scores and decided on plastic surgery as the most profitable speciality. My life might not be happy, but it would definitely be comfortable. I'm sure Cora shared this view and selected me for financial reasons, certainly not for my expertise as a lover.

"It's your turn!" said Gosta, the first sentence he uttered. My mind drifted far away and I tried to concentrate on a speedy analysis. Well, I couldn't win . . . or had Gosta really overlooked that possibility? If my bishop made this move, his queen would be in severe danger. Yes! "Madame," I warned smiling.

Surprisingly, he didn't touch his queen but moved a pawn. I didn't hesitate to snatch the black lady.

"Mate!" Gosta's bishop terminated the game. I had again been too quick and hasty.

"You haven't improved your chess," he concluded while collecting the pieces. "But of course you are doing well in all other respects?"

"Fine!" I assured him, not wanting to tell him how boring I found my career or about my domestic troubles, our spoiled children's unfairness, Cora's perpetual adultery. "Just fine!" I repeated.

"I'm glad to hear it!" He smiled equivocally, emptying his glass and filling it up with whiskey. "So, you have forgotten everything from the past? Even Inge?"

"I honor her memory," I answered with dignity.

"Absolutely appropriate! Do you know that she died because of you?" Our eyes met for the first time and I could see that his hatred was even deeper than mine.

"Spare me that damned nonsense! She left me because you seduced her!"

"I did!" He sipped his whiskey and shook his head. "At first I was just out for a good time. Besides, it was sickening to watch the romantic crush the two of you had on each other. However . . . well, I don't think you ever comprehended Inge's qualities. But I did. She was a very special girl with an unusual gift for caring, for loving. She bewitched me. I became mad about her, yes, I'm sorry to have to admit I fell in love, deeply so."

"But you had her! Or did she leave you? Was it because of that affair . . . ? Well, the papers for the examinations . . ."

"The *affair*? He aped the word. "Why not call it the 'theft'? Okay,

that could have ended in a better way. My pieces turned out to be in the wrong position and the same happened with my marriage. After a few weeks she began crying because she had deceived the wonderful Martin.”

“Why didn’t she come back to me, then? I would have been pleased!”

“Pleased! Christ, your gamut of emotions is certainly limited. I was in despair. I humiliated myself before her, even wept and begged her to stay. And at last . . .”

“But why . . . I mean, why did she kill herself? If it was like you say, it might have been your solution. But hers?”

“She sent me a farewell letter describing the nice time she was going to have with you.”

“I don’t understand. She didn’t come, I never saw her again after that bloody weekend!”

I felt thirsty and grasped the bottle. I had to hurry as long as there was some whiskey left. Gosta seemed to like it. “And this . . . this ‘theft’ as you call it?”

“It wasn’t me who copied the damned papers, but it was arranged that if it went wrong I was the one who would be suspected. In the beginning I thought it was you.”

“Me? Why the hell should I! I would never do a thing like that!”

“No, your fantasy is too limited. It was revenge, however. A girl I screwed when I met Inge. I feel sure it was her. An intelligent and ambitious young student. Incidentally, you know her.”

“But how could they . . . you were the star student, they couldn’t possibly think . . .”

“I confessed!” He smiled that ugly smile again. “You wondered why Inge didn’t come back to you. It was because I didn’t want her to. Don’t you get it? Inge wasn’t the driver when her car ended in the harbor. She sat beside me, sleeping heavily from a drugged drink. This is confidential, of course.”

“You’re trying to fool me, Gosta. You are lying!”

“Not at all, silly. It’s the truth, the whole truth and nothing . . .” He laughed and saluted with his glass. I felt sick, cold and sweaty at the same time.

“I’ve been looking forward to telling you all this!” he continued. “So you can go home to your bourgeois little family and have a nice time with your memories.”

“You are the most disgusting devil I’ve ever . . . why didn’t they arrest you? Inge was young, healthy, rich. Why should she want to die?”

“As I told you, she wrote me a letter. Poor girl, signed it herself, the most stupid thing one can do. It ended like something like, ‘Gosta, *you have to realize, that this is goodbye. I can’t take any more. Forgive me!*’ In general, the police accepted it. But one of them, an intelligent fellow, sensed foul play and came back to question me again and again. Then I had to confess!”

“Confess the murder?”

“God no! Confess that stupid theft at the faculty! It happened to have occurred the same night and it gave me a steady alibi.” He rose and went to the door, but before it closed behind him he stopped and looked back. “Well, I was expelled because of that, but still it rescued me from something worse. Best regards to Cora. I’m sure she remembers me!”

I messed up my bed so that it looked as if I had been sleeping and stayed in my cabin until Albert and his friends boarded. *Sorry I had to leave, but the good doctor had to return to one of his patients*, I explained in a note. I booked a room at a fashionable hotel in Stockholm. It was well heated but not warm enough to thaw out a frozen heart. I didn’t know which way to turn, only that I would never ever board a ship again.