

The King Is Dead

by Walter Tevis

The library had books, of course, and a lot of gray, open space and only a few people, and Will thought instantly, *This is going to be the best room to be in for that whole damned six months.* On one wall was a cheap Matisse print, an odalisque. There was a funny smell to the room.

The prisoner behind the desk was small, middle-aged, sandy-haired, with tight lines around his mouth. There were papers and books on the desk but no chessboard. Will walked over, waited for another prisoner to finish checking out a lawbook, then said to the man behind the desk, "Are you Findlay Baskin?"

The man blinked. "Do you want to check out a book?" His voice was toneless.

Will cleared his throat. "I understand your F.I.D.E. rating is over two thousand."

The other man's expression did not change. "What do the letters F.I.D.E. stand for?"

Will began to feel better. He felt a touch of anger at the man's little game, and anger was always his antidote for nervousness. "It stands for *Fédération Internationale des Echecs.*" He gave the enunciation his full City College, minor-in-French nasality, thinking, *If this man likes to play that kind of conversational chess. . . .*

The man looked toward the cheap Matisse print on the wall for a moment and said, "I'm Findlay Baskin. My rating is two-three-four—oh—two. Or was."

That would make him number 40 or 50 in the country. And then Will said, "*Was?*"

Baskin looked back from the picture and into Will's

face. "I've hardly had the opportunity to play in tournaments for three years."

"Three years? And I never heard. . . ."

Baskin smiled for the first time, and the smile was a surprisingly pleasant one. "I'm not Fischer, you know. My particular crime managed to draw a quarter column in the *Times*."

Will started to ask him what that crime had been, but he wasn't yet sure of prison protocol about that kind of question. "I embezzled, myself," he said. And then, "My rating is eighteen eighty-five."

Baskin looked at him thoughtfully for what seemed a long time. A couple of aging cons came into the room, whispering, sat at a table and began to flip through magazines. Then Baskin reached into his pocket, took out a quarter, spun it on the desk in front of him and then, like swatting a fly, flattened it with his right hand. "Heads or tails?" he said.

Will shrugged mentally. "Tails."

Baskin lifted the hand, revealing heads. "That makes you black." And then, no longer smiling, "Pawn to king four."

Will stared at him. "Where's the board?"

"No board," Baskin said. "Pawn to king four."

Will looked around him, at the six or seven quiet cons in the room, and then he said, "OK, but I've never done this before. Pawn to queen's bishop four."

"Don't make excuses," Baskin said. "I'd beat you on a board just as easily."

Baskin had him mated in 17 moves, with a bishop that seemed to come from nowhere. Will had blundered away two pawns and a knight anyway by that time, just from being unable to keep the imaginary board clear in his head. He started to ask Baskin, with irritation, why they couldn't use a board; but instead he said, "Now I'm white. Pawn to king four. . . ."

It took Baskin 24 moves to mate him this time, and Will made no serious blunders. Once he got that picture of a nice, sharp board, with clean-cut, Staunton-pattern pieces on it, it wasn't too difficult. He was even beginning to like it, did not even mind losing, which was inevitable, anyway. He had lost to pros before, in his hustling days in college, and had learned to take it. And of course he had

never played a grand master before. There was no real damage to his pride from losing, because the real game was just to see how long he could hang in there. And maybe learn something.

After the second game he said, "Another?" and Baskin pointed to the library clock. It was 9:30.

"Here," Baskin said, and he reached under the desk and pulled out a fat book. "Read this." The book was *Modern Chess Openings*, the bible on the subject.

"I've read it." That wasn't altogether true; but he had read most of the main variations of the Sicilian defense—the Najdorf, the dragon.

"Then memorize it," Baskin said.

"Memorize it?"

"What else are you going to do in your cell? Dance?"

Will grinned, taking the book. "OK. I'll try."

"And later," Baskin said, "I'll let you have the Fischer games book. And the Petrosian. And the Spassky."

"Jesus Christ!"

"Most chess is memory."

"I didn't mean that. I meant, what kind of a prison library is this?"

Baskin looked expressionless again. "Who do you think orders the books for it?" he said.

They played verbal chess every evening for a week before Will got his first draw game. And then a stalemate. And, finally, after three weeks and over 50 games, Baskin blundered and left a rook hanging. Will, his voice trembling as he called the move, snapped it off with a knight fork. And traded the grand master down until he, Will, got to say, for the first time, that lovely ancient and potent word, "Checkmate." Checkmate. *Shah mat*: The king is dead.

"Well," Baskin said, "you've been doing your homework." Then he reached beneath the librarian's desk and produced a rolled-up cloth chessboard and a box of large, Staunton-style pieces. "And for doing your homework, this is the reward."

"Beautiful," Will said, staring at the set. After over a month of playing on that board in his mind, he felt as Mozart must have felt when at last he heard the orchestra play the sounds that he had been hearing in his head. Still, it was possible that the real geniuses preferred the pure

and ideal music of their games. But to him, a man who loved women and food and freedom and several other substantial things more than chess, the set, with its cylindrical rooks and its dutiful, stubby pawns and its *solidity*—right there on the table as well as in his head and his memories—was a solid, existential joy.

They set the pieces up wordlessly, in a kind of mutual reverence, and began to play. Outside the room, in the lights of brilliant lamps around which night insects fluttered, guards patrolled. Four hundred other prisoners watched Mary Tyler Moore on television. Over the chessboard in the library only a dim 60-watt bulb shone, but it made sharp shadows of the pieces: king, rook, pawn, queen, knight.

In two months Will had memorized all of the useful lines of play and counterplay in the Sicilian defense and in the queen's gambit, games that Baskin, strangely, kept playing almost exclusively. Will had learned to play in his head, and during the morning-exercise walks in the prison yard, he would go over some of the Fischer-Spassky games, the Reykjavik ones, in his mind. As a bright child in New Haven, he had lived chess for several years, but never before like this.

Once, during a game in the library, while they were playing with a double-faced chess clock, playing a fierce, 20-minute game, and Will was wavering between setting up a bishop uncover or giving check with a knight, Baskin reached forward and stopped both clocks. Then he said, "How do you like prison life, Will?"

Will shook his head, trying to break the spell the move choice had over him. "The food is terrible," he said, "and most of the men are animals. But it's not quite so bad as I'd expected." And then, almost in appeal, "But it all makes me so goddamned nervous. . . ."

"Yes," Baskin said, "it makes you nervous. And chess makes you nervous, too. You should have taken the check with the knight. It loses you nothing. Then, while I was getting out of check, you could have made up your mind about the bishop-and-rook combination."

Will smiled weakly. "Being nervous doesn't necessarily——"

"How do you think Fischer would take to prison life? Would he cower at the guards?"

He knew what Baskin meant. He didn't exactly cower at guards, but he knew he was running scared. "Well, Fischer would complain about the lighting in the cells."

"He would have confidence," Baskin said. "Which you, Will, sorely lack. Do you know what Bogolyubov said, when somebody asked him whether he preferred playing white or black?"

"No."

"He said, 'It makes utterly no difference. When I play white, I win because I am playing white; when I play black, I win because I am Bogolyubov.'"

Will laughed out loud. "OK," he said, "I need confidence."

After three months, Will was finally able to get himself transferred to the library, where there was now time to play Baskin as many as eight games a day. He was lucky to win one out of the eight; but he was learning.

With a chess clock, they would sometimes play five- and ten-minute games, as well as the standard tournament-style two-hour ones. The short games made for more nerve-racking play, but they prevented dawdling and made for fast thinking. And with the clock, you didn't have to play touch move—where, if you so much as touch a piece with your sleeve, you have to move that piece. Instead, they used the rule where the move isn't final until you hit the button that stops your clock and starts the other player's ticking. He liked the clock: two clean faces, a teak case with brass trim and good solid German workmanlike ticking. Pawn to king four. *Click*, with the button, and the other man's clock began to tick away until he moved. Then *click* again and your clock started. It was all good and sound and rational and something to pull mind and spirit out of a brown prison where you were surrounded by ugliness, boredom, foulness, brutality. *Tick, tick, tick*, and then mate.

One afternoon during his fourth month in prison, after he had beaten Baskin on a very lovely combination that had come to him in a flash—as a whole *Gestalt*, a sudden pattern of check, interpose, uncover, and then the mate with a knight coming almost out of left field—Baskin stared at his mated king for a minute and then said, his voice flat, "I hear you're a C.P.A."

"That's right." The two of them had never talked about

their pasts. But Baskin was the sort of man who seems to have a way of finding out everything.

"What will you do when you get out of here? Nobody'll hire a C.P.A. with embezzlement on his record."

"I can open a tax-figuring office."

"Is that what you were planning to do with the money you embezzled?"

"Yes." And then, "What are *you* in here for?"

Baskin raised his eyebrows. "You don't know?" He picked up a bishop from the chessboard, deftly, and then twirled it between his grayish fingers. "Do you have enough money to open up a tax office?"

"I'm . . . I'm not sure."

"How much do you have left? After paying your lawyers?" He set the bishop down, neatly, on its home square. "I presume you weren't able to keep what you embezzled. Do you have any money left?"

Will wasn't certain whether to resent the question or not. But he answered it. "About five thousand dollars."

Baskin was looking at the odalisque. "That's not enough to start a business," he said. "You could play chess for money."

"Oh, come on. I could win a few hundred dollars in the chess parlors. Who plays strangers for more than five or ten?"

Baskin turned from the print and looked at Will closely. "You could play someone who plays rated players for money."

"Like who?"

"There's a man near Raleigh, North Carolina, who will play you for five thousand a game. Once you identify yourself and he's sure you are who you say you are. His name is Wharton."

Will started to say something sarcastic, then it hit him. "Is he rated?"

"About three hundred points higher than you. Than you *were*."

Will began to feel a little warm. He was still nervous, his stomach a bit tight, but he was confident. "And I've improved by about five hundred since you've been teaching me."

Baskin's face remained expressionless. "Four hundred. Perhaps." And then, "But you have another advantage." Baskin smiled slightly. "When he plays white, he generally

plays queen's gambit. On black, he plays the Sicilian with the drag-on variation."

"And that's what you've been playing against me all along."

Baskin smiled again. "Do you think you would have beat me at all if I had been varying my play as much as I can?"

Will was silent for a minute. Then, abruptly, he said, "What are you in prison for?"

Baskin looked genuinely surprised. "No one ever told you?"

"No."

"I was taken in *flagrante* with a sixteen-year-old boy."

Will shook his head, trying to shake off the shock, and the strangeness of it; he had never seen a trace of homosexuality in Baskin's manner. "You're gay?" he said.

"Not in here," Baskin said wryly. "Just queer."

Will's embarrassment became suddenly acute. Switching subjects desperately, he said, "This man . . . Wharton?"

"Yes," Baskin said, "Wharton. Thomas Jefferson Wharton." He picked up a knight between two fingers, set it gently down on a center square. "An oxymoron of a name."

Will had no idea what oxymoron meant, but did not want to ask. "Where does his money come from?"

"From his very peculiar mind," said Baskin abstractedly. "He started with nothing, made a fortune in textiles before he was thirty-five. In the Fifties, the Republicans gave him a fairly high appointive job in the Department of Defense—as a kind of appeasement to Joe McCarthy, it was rumored. Wharton was pretty well known for strong views on what he called the 'nigger-Red-faggot complex' in Washington. Anyway, getting into the Cold War suited him just right. You remember that game theory was starting to be very fashionable in those days? Wharton got seriously involved in chess as 'a way of reading the Soviet mind.'"

Will laughed cautiously. Everything Baskin said had such a tone of irony that Will couldn't be sure. "'A way of reading the Soviet mind'? But that's a stupid——"

Baskin looked at him sharply. "There's nothing stupid about T. J. Wharton," he said. "And don't forget it. Political mania, yes. Irrationality—maybe even paranoia. But nothing dumb. There are more of his kind around than

you may think, too." He picked up the knight again but this time held it in his fist, firmly. "On the outside, Mr. Wharton looks like a big, dumb Southern fat cat. And, in some ways, he has all the culture as well as the social views of Archie Bunker. But his intellect is frightening." Baskin smiled grimly. "That intellect isn't easy to see, at first, because men like him know it pays to hide an I.Q. of a hundred eighty. But the man can absorb almost *anything*. Anything that his manias tell him is necessary. He became a chess player of near-master strength in about four months. Which may have been his undoing."

"How could that be?" Will said.

Baskin looked at him quietly. "For you and me, Schneider, chess is an opposition of two intellects. Pure mind; no potent emotions. But to Wharton it got to be a life-and-death struggle. He got to feeling he was playing against the Politburo, or the Kremlin, instead of people like me." He paused, still clutching the knight firmly in his hand.

"And what happened?"

"I beat him, for one thing. He had got to be a damn good player, but I could beat him three times out of four. I think that may have had something to do with it. Or maybe the department chucked him when Joe McCarthy began to skid. Anyway, he seemed to have been checkmated in some vital way. One day he was just gone. The papers said he had resigned for 'family reasons.' I never saw him again. But I suppose he'll hate me as long as he lives."

Will took in a deep breath. "Is *that* why you've been . . . training me? To . . . carry on for you?"

Baskin set the knight back on the board very carefully, with a kind of reverence for the cleanly and handsomely carved piece of wood. "I'll tell you how to get in touch with him," he said. "Just don't let him find out that you know me."

Will looked for a moment at the knight on the center of the board, at its equine, impassive, glistening presence. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks, Mr. Baskin."

It was a brilliant August day when they let Will out. With a prison suit, \$50 and the address of a halfway house. He spent the \$50 on a whore. She was worth every penny of it.

And there he was, walking on Broad Street in the sun in

Columbus, Ohio, and then getting his money out of his Columbus bank. Five thousand in traveler's checks and \$780 in cash. He had clothes in an uncle's house in Cleveland but hadn't bothered sending for them before leaving the state prison. Instead, he went to Dunhill's and bought a navy-blue double-knit blazer, light-gray, flared slacks, a pale-blue, buttondown shirt and a wide, bright silk Givenchy tie.

Getting through to Wharton on the hotel phone took four hours; in desperation, he decided, *What the hell?* and used Baskin's name. It couldn't really hurt. The name finally got him through secretaries and excuses to the man himself. "Wharton speaking." Deep Southern voice; tone of command—almost exactly what Baskin had made him expect.

"My name is Schneider, Mr. Wharton. Findlay Baskin told me you might like to play some chess." And then he thought again, *What the hell?* and said, "For money."

"You're not a player of Baskin's strength?"

Even in those few words, the tone of arrogance came through—but the words were also those of a man who never let a challenge go by. He could have said "Screw off" and hung up. So Will tried to sound as affable as he could.

"God, no. My rating is eighteen eighty-five."

"How do you know Baskin, then? He's an international master."

Will had thought one move ahead for that question. He said, "Postal chess."

Wharton snorted. "Baskin must be hard up there in the Ohio State Pen." Will had guessed the man would have that detail.

"Probably. Do you want to play me?"

"For how much?"

He tried not to let his sucking in of breath be heard on the telephone. "Five thousand dollars."

"How do I know you're not a hustler? A master in disguise?"

"You can look my rating up in *Chess Life and Review*. And I have identification." And then, "Do you want to play, Mr. Wharton?"

"By house rules. Two hours each on the clock. And the president of the Raleigh chess club will referee."

They would play then. The relief—with just a tinge of

fear—was exquisite. "Good. When?" And then, "What are 'house rules'?"

"We'll play Saturday afternoon at one. House rules around here mean things like touch move."

Will hesitated. "I hate touch move, Mr. Wharton. Why don't we let the clock punch make the moves final?"

Wharton didn't even snort. "Touch move," he said.

"OK, touch move." And then, "You have a Staunton set, don't you?"

The voice was plainly scornful. "Of course I have a Staunton set."

"Good. I'll be there Saturday afternoon."

"Flying?"

Actually, he had planned to save money by taking a Greyhound bus; his car was in Cleveland. But he said, "Yes."

"When you arrive, call me. I'll have a car sent."

"Fine," Will said, "fine." But it wasn't fine.

It was Thursday and he had one more night in Columbus. Instead of a whore this time, he found himself a girl. A student. At the art museum. But they drank some kind of foul college student wine and with the dumbness it gave his head—his first liquor in six months—and with the thought of the game coming up, he found making love to her a problem. But he managed, and afterward, naked in the hotel bed, he found himself staring at her good, sound, milk-fed body and abruptly he thought: *What's all this foolishness about hustling chess? A girl, a good, smooth girl like this, is worth the whole goddamn fugue of a game.* But the next day he caught the plane to Raleigh.

The car was, as he had halfway expected, a chauffeured Cadillac, but the chauffeur was white. They did not talk on the drive.

Wharton's house was big but not enormous. Not particularly Southern, just a rich man's house. Maybe \$250,000 worth of Permastone and garage and redwood and deck and fishpond at the side. And a putting green; and a swimming pool.

Wharton met him at the door. He looked exactly to be the "fat cat" that Baskin had called him. Big, tall, heavy, with busy eyebrows, a potbelly. Ban-Lon golf shirt and white slacks. And a tanned, enameled wife in a flowered hostess dress. The wife muttered something about "you

men and your games" and whisked off in a cloud of heavy perfume. Wharton took him through several rooms, one of which had a fountain with sentimental, fake-Bernini angels spitting water into a pool. And then into what Wharton called his game room, with—of course—animal-heads and rifles and a trophy case and real walnut paneling and real leather chairs, as though it had all leaped off the front page of a 1953 Abercrombie & Fitch catalog. Including the giant chess set that stood between two black-leather chairs on one of those tables that come from Calcutta or Bombay and have inlays crawling up their curved legs and around their edges. The set was huge, with rooks the shape of elephants bearing round howdahs on their backs, soldier pawns with spears, a queen in a sari and a king with a mustache. It was all ivory and filigreed gold—the kind of thing designed to arouse profound contempt in any serious chess player. The kind a rich *patzer*—a wood pusher—would buy while on tour in the Orient. Except Wharton was no *patzer*; he was a rated player.

Wharton's voice boomed at Will. He must have been staring at the set for some time. "How do you like it?" he said. "It cost me over two thousand. Eighteen-carat gold and heart ivory. It's one of a kind—and there'll never be another one like it, because the maker is dead now."

Will smiled grimly. "I thought you said you had a Staunton set?"

There was just a hint of a sneer in Wharton's voice. "Of course I have a Staunton set, Mr. Schneider. I have three of them. But this is the one I feel most at home with, and it seems appropriate to a five-thousand-dollar game. House rules—we use *this* set."

Will almost said that it seemed appropriate for a whorehouse, but he was beginning already to feel put down by the man: by his size, the edge of irony in his voice, that goddamned *look* of being a born winner. For a moment he thought: *I should get out of this, I'm going to do something dumb and lose my ass.*

Wharton then shouted abruptly, "Arthur," and there were footsteps and then a mild, insurance-salesman type, in a brown suit, came into the room. "This is Mr. Schneider, Arthur," Wharton said. "Arthur is president of our Raleigh chess club, and will serve us as referee." Then Wharton walked to a sideboard that was made of what looked like elephant leather stretched over some kind of

bamboo frame. On it were glasses and about eight bottles of Jack Daniel's. "Whiskey, Mr. Schneider?" he said.

"No, thanks," he answered. He loved Jack Daniel's and could rarely afford it, but it would be stupid of him to risk any chance of fogging his mind now. Besides, he disliked Wharton's arrogance in having nothing else to offer his guests, however good the whiskey might be.

"Oh?" Wharton said, and he poured himself a generous shot into a brandy snifter. He did not offer a drink to Arthur. Then Wharton went over to the board and picked up a white and a black pawn and held them behind his back, switching them back and forth for a moment. "Take your pick, Mr. Schneider."

Suddenly Will felt his stomach muscles tighten. *Here we go.* "Your left hand," he said.

Wharton showed the piece. It was black. "Tough . . ." he said, and then he replaced the pieces on the board. They sat down. "OK," Wharton said. "Now it's touch move, two hours on the clock and five thousand dollars a game. Which reminds me, Schneider, do you have the money? I want to see it."

He had thought that might happen, but he still resented it. He took the book of traveler's checks from his breast pocket and handed it across the table, almost knocking over a seven-inch-high bishop. He cursed himself silently for the awkwardness and for the visible tremor in his hands.

Wharton flipped through the book cursorily and then leaned over the board and handed it back to him, smiling; his hand was as steady as a rock. "Fine," he said. "Do you want to start my clock now?"

Will had hardly noticed the clock before, so overwhelming were the chess-pieces, but he looked at it now. It was an oddly effete little thing, in contrast to all the phony *machismo* of the room: porcelain, with pink cherubs and gold buttons to push. He felt rather fond of it. He pushed the button on his side. *Click.* There was a faint ticking.

Wharton moved pawn to queen four. Beginning the queen's gambit, almost for sure. Then he pressed the button that stopped his side of the clock and started Will's.

"Pawn to queen four," Arthur said in an overloud voice.

My God! Will thought. *Must we have this nonsense, too?* But he said nothing and reached out gingerly—ner-

vous of the touch-move aspect of the thing, with these enormous and confusing pieces—and picked up his queen's pawn and set it on the fourth rank. The piece was as heavy as a billiard ball, but he found the weight satisfying.

"Pawn to queen four," Arthur said.

Will pushed the button on the clock and began thinking, trying to see through all those filigree-and-ivory ornaments and imagine the clean pattern of a classic board.

It turned out to be the queen's gambit, all right, and Will accepted it, taking the big, weighty white pawn and setting it on the side of the table. They played the opening routinely, by the book, for about 45 minutes, very carefully, setting up patterns and positions, neither of them trying anything unorthodox.

Then Wharton finished his snifter of whiskey and, coolly ignoring the fact that his own clock was running, got up from the table, went to the sideboard, picked up the bottle and said, "Still afraid to drink, Mr. Schneider?"

It was a cheap ploy, but he could not help himself. "Pour me a double, Mr. Wharton." He said it aloud, and thought *Yes, pour the goddamn fool a double.*

Wharton brought him the drink, sat down, abruptly picked up his white bishop and took Will's bishop's pawn from over Will's castled king.

"Bishop takes pawn," Arthur said.

Will stared at it. It had come as a total shock. It did not look like an ordinary bishop sacrifice; he could not see the follow-up. He stared at it for five minutes, while his clock ticked and he held his snifter of whiskey, untasted, in his hand. And then he saw it. If he took the bishop, there would be the routine check by Wharton's queen. Nothing to worry about there. But he would have to interpose a knight and then Wharton could move—and this was it—his goddamned *rook* that looked like an elephant. Will somehow had been taking it for a knight, probably because it was an animal figure, because in a serious chess set the only animal figure on a chessboard is a knight. When Wharton moved his rook over three squares, Will would be under direct threat of checkmate unless he began sacrificing pieces like crazy. And even if Wharton didn't get the mate, after it was over he would have such an advantage in material that he could muscle Will out for the rest of the game.

But, astonishingly, maybe because of the anger he felt at these idiotic, ostentatious pieces, he did not panic. Instead, he sipped his drink and then looked at his clock. He had an hour and a half. He would find some way out; the right move had to be there.

And he found it. It took him 25 minutes, while Wharton did several cheap tricks, drumming his fingers on the table, clearing his throat, getting another drink, offering him one and clinking glasses. But he found it: First, of course, he would not take the bishop. That would give him a move to put his king's knight in the space the bishop had vacated, and avoid the check for two moves. Then, if Wharton began to try his combination, Will would be able to threaten a king-queen fork with the knight. Wharton would have to drop the attack and start scrambling.

Before reaching for the king's knight, he sipped the drink again, savoring the idea of the move more than the whiskey itself. His hand was trembling only slightly.

Then he reached forward over several tall pieces to move the knight and his fingers brushed against the big, ungainly black queen with her absurd Indian sari. The piece trembled heavily on the board. Wharton's voice came instantaneously, as if the finger had activated an alarm, "Touch move."

Will stared at the referee. "Sorry, Mr. Schneider. You must move the queen."

Jesus Christ, he thought, *Jesus Christ*.

It took him ten minutes to find a move for his queen that wasn't a total disaster. But Will's game was going to be lost in about four moves if Wharton followed the checkmate threat out. Will looked at the man's face, now flushed. Wharton was smiling, pleased completely with himself to be about to take a game on a technicality even after a strong move of his own. For a moment Will wanted to scream, and then he thought, *Goddamn it, Schneider, be like Baskin. Be cool.*

Then, he had an idea. During the past ten minutes, Wharton had been moving around restlessly, making himself a drink or finding a cigar—but always keeping an eye out for Will's queen move. Now, when he came back to the table, Will was squinting intently at Wharton's bishop, a strange Hindu figure of some sort.

"What are you looking at?" Wharton demanded.

"Oh, nothing," Will said. Then he moved his queen as

calmly as he could, Arthur announced the move, and then Will said, "I didn't care much for these pieces at first, but now I rather admire them. Wonderful workmanship. But it's a shame about your bishop. I suppose it got cracked in shipping?"

"What crack?" Wharton roared. He reached for the bishop, seized it, stopped cold with realization and remained bent over the table. Arthur, from his chair, made a couple of gasping sounds.

Will said gently, "Touch move."

He had embezzled once, from a crooked and mean-spirited employer, but he had never played a dirty trick in a game before in his life. And the feeling it gave him, looking at Wharton trapped, was simple elation. Because there was no place the son of a bitch could put that bishop where it would not both get in the way of his attack and give Will an extra move.

Wharton looked at Arthur, but there was nothing for Arthur to say. His hand was still on the piece. Then he looked at Will and said, "You goddamned cheap crook," and moved the bishop.

Will made the knight move and then began a slow trading game until he had a pawn advantage at the end game and had the tempo, too, to be able to be the first to queen a pawn and suddenly Wharton reached his big meaty hand out and laid his king on its side and said, "I resign."

Will stood up and stretched. He felt wonderful. Still nervous, but wonderful. Enjoying, for once, the nervousness itself. It might have been better to have won the game on the pure, fuguelike strategy of chess instead of by trick. But Wharton had asked for that kind of trickery, and Will had beat him at that game, too.

Then Wharton said, "Another game, Mr. Schneider? For ten thousand?"

That caught him off guard, like an unexpected gambit.

"I hadn't planned . . ."

"Come on, Mr. Schneider," Wharton said. "You're not going to walk out after winning by a trick."

And he thought, *Damn it, I am better than he is; I think I am. And with twenty thousand dollars. . .*

"OK," he said. Then he smiled. "Since I play white this time."

Wharton smiled back, "But I play like Bogolyubov."

So he knew that one, too. So what? But it bothered him.

Will began setting up his white pieces, but Wharton said, as if he were talking to a maid, "Arthur, set mine up," and walked over toward the trophy case on the wall. "Perhaps I shouldn't have called you a crook a minute ago, Mr. Schneider. But the term does fit an embezzler, doesn't it?"

Will blinked at him.

"Didn't you think I'd have you checked out?" Wharton said. "I had my lawyer call the warden at the penitentiary. The one where I had Baskin put away."

"Where *you* had him put away?"

Wharton was unlocking the door of the trophy case. "The boy was a paid prostitute. I helped the police set the whole thing up, including the witnesses."

Will stared at him. "But *why*?"

Wharton smiled. "I despise faggots. And Baskin beat me out of some money at chess once." He took a big trophy out of the cabinet; it looked like something one got for hunting or for golf. "I imagine that's why Baskin put you up to all these shenanigans." Then he went over and set the trophy on the middle of the table, as though it were a King Kong of a chesspiece. "But Baskin has been out of circulation for three years. So there are a few things even he doesn't know. Like this, for instance." He pushed the trophy toward Will.

Will looked at it. The figure on top was a large horse's head—a knight from a Staunton set. And the brass plate below read CHICAGO OPEN, NOVEMBER 1972. FIRST PLACE—T. J. WHARTON.

Will said nothing, but his guts had tightened as though Wharton's hammy fists had taken his duodenum and squeezed it physically.

"I've been studying under Zoravsky for two years," Wharton said. "Every now and then I beat him. Of course, I pay him well."

Jesus Christ, Will thought, *Zoravsky is at least 300 points better than Baskin. My God, he beat Fischer once, in Vienna.* But then he thought. *What the hell*, almost feeling, astonishingly, good about it. *So it'll be one god-damned tough chess game.* And he said, "Let's play chess, Mr. Wharton."

Arthur had finished setting up the black pieces and had reset the clock faces for two hours each.

Will opened with pawn to king four. . . .

Wharton started with a classic Sicilian defense, but then after a few pawn exchanges in the center, he made two unexpected moves with his queen's knight and, abruptly, Will found himself a pawn down and with his major pieces constricted. He had never seen that one before and it frightened him. It was brilliant. He remembered what Baskin had said about Wharton's intelligence. And when he reached to make his next move, he abruptly caught himself. He had almost touched that goddamn rock-elephant again, thinking it was a knight. It would have been disaster. And he shouldn't have let Wharton con him into drinking whiskey. Not after those dry six months in prison. And, of course, Wharton knowing about his prison term, had planned to get him high. The Jack Daniel's gambit.

Suddenly he folded his hands in his lap, as if not to contaminate them with these pseudo Oriental-baroque chessmen. *But Wharton hasn't won this chess game.* Then, his clock ticking, he looked at Wharton and said, evenly, "Do your . . . house rules allow the referee to move my pieces for me?"

Wharton stared at him. "What kind of chickenshit. . . ?"

"Do they?" Will looked at the big man steadily. *Go ahead, you bastard,* he thought. *Refuse.*

"You're scared of touching the wrong piece?" But Wharton's voice was unconvinced.

Will smiled. "Is that the kind of advantage you want, Mr. Wharton?"

Wharton reddened slightly. Then he looked at Arthur.

"It's all quite legal, Mr. Wharton," Arthur said, lamely.

"I know it's legal," Wharton said, "and I know it's chickenshit. And I know I'll beat his cheap ass, even if he brings in Raquel goddamn Welch to move his pieces for him."

"Thank you," Will said. Then he stood up, took hold of his big leather chair and began turning it around.

"What in God's good goddamn hell are you doing?" Wharton said.

Will had the chair turned facing completely away from the board. "I'm turning my back on you, Mr. Wharton. And on your chess set." Then he thought for a moment, composing himself, and said, "Knight to queen's bishop five."

He hardly heard Arthur making the move for him, or

the click of the punched clock. For the pure Staunton set of the brain, that beautiful abstraction as clean as the axioms of Euclid, had leaped before him in all its grace and sharpness. And that was where the game was at. Not in this cheap and tawdry business of tricks and one-upmanship and money and bluster. That was the whole beauty of chess: a lovely abstraction. A game. A trivial, exquisite game.

Wharton played dazzlingly. He whittled Will down by a second pawn—his king's pawn, a bad one to lose. And he had got an open rook file. But Will kept his mind there in that interior space and waited—watched it, the diagonals and lines, and patterns and configurations—and waited.

He managed, by playing with great care, to free up his pieces. But it cost him another pawn. And Wharton—whom he now did not even picture in his mind—had his king safely castled.

But something was beginning to show finally in the pattern. Will was getting only the edges of it into his perception, because it was so overwhelmingly hard to see that far ahead. But it was there. He could feel the potential of it. It would have to start with opening the bishop's file, and then maybe a check. But a check with what? The queen? But that would cost the queen, and you can't afford that. He shook his head, trying to penetrate it. *First I trade knights, and that puts his pawn over on the other file. Then I threaten his rook with my queen. . . .* He shook his head again and tried it the other way. *I don't trade knights, I bring out the queen first, and he'll threaten it with the rook, because he'll be going for the position, and there are at least seven alternatives from there, and I have to know where each one leads. . . .*

And then Arthur said, "You have ten more minutes on your clock, Mr. Schneider. Mr. Wharton has fifty-three." And his whole body seemed to shake in one tremor, as if the ground had quaked. *Had it been that long?* Then his mind pushed itself up and over the hump and it was like the Red Sea opening at his feet and he saw the whole thing. As Isaac Newton must have seen it that day he wept when he saw how things really worked. *You check with the knight, his mind told him, and he must take with the pawn. And then you bring out the queen. And if he doesn't interpose the rook, he loses a piece. And that's as far as he'll see it.* He could almost taste it.

"Knight to king's bishop six, check," he said, quietly. He hardly heard Arthur repeat it.

Wharton took the knight with the pawn. He was forced to.

Then Will said, "Queen to bishop three." And then he waited. He knew it would be a long wait, while Wharton studied, and it was. But it was Wharton's clock that was ticking now—not his. Once he became frightened that Wharton would see what was coming, but he stopped his mind from that thought. Fischer maybe would see it, or Petrosian. He stared at the far wall, at the head of a hapless lion, stuffed, mounted, wasted.

Then Wharton moved and when Arthur called out his own move, Will knew that he had won the game. "Queen takes pawn, check," he said. He heard Wharton draw in his breath.

The wait was almost intolerable. For a moment Will felt, with panic, he had gone insane, like Paul Morphy—that mad New Orleans chess genius—and it was only his delusion that this combination of moves would work.

But then he heard the pieces move and Arthur's voice said, "Rook takes queen."

Instantly, Will said, "Rook to rook eight, check."

Wharton, just as quickly, said, "It's not going to work, Schneider. You've lost your queen for nothing," and the cold, sharp ring in his voice, an edge in it that Will had not heard before, abruptly brought back Baskin's words the man—about his "frightening intellect."

But his own mind told him, *It's a won game, Schneider. It's a won game.* So he said, aloud, "Mr. Wharton, I'll bet you two thousand dollars against your chess set that it works."

And Wharton's voice shot back, with a contempt that was palpable in the air of the room, "It's a bet, Schneider. It won't work."

His heart was trembling, but there was relief in hearing the other man's words—because Will knew what that move was going to be.

Not waiting for Arthur to announce it, Wharton said, "Rook to bishop one." Loudly. And then, "I *interposed*, you dumb motherfucker."

And then Will's words came out steady and soft. "Bishop to knight three, check," and he stood up and turned around and looked straight into Wharton's face.

Wharton's face, red now with whiskey and emotion, was fierce and confident. For about five seconds. And then it crumbled. Because, finally, he saw what was coming. There was only one legal move and Wharton, not resigning, made it. King to rook one. And for a moment, weariness hit Will's entire body. He pressed his right hand to his forehead. Then he said, "Rook takes rook." He looked at Wharton, dizzily, strangely. "Checkmate."

Wharton said nothing. He merely sat there, staring at the board, his red, fleshy face sagging. Finally he said, "Son of a bitch." The tone of his voice was flat, cold, hardly human. "Son of a bitch."

Something about that tone took some of the weariness out of Will. He looked toward a window and was surprised to see that it had grown dark outdoors. Then he looked back at the chessboard, at those ivory pieces that he hated. *His* pieces now. Then he reached over and picked up the white king and held it in his two fists, while Wharton stared at him, and, twisting with all his strength, he cracked the ivory and filigreed gold into fragments. Then he put the fragments into his coat pocket and said, "You can keep the rest of the set, Mr. Wharton. And after you pay me the money, you can have your man take me back to the airport."

Wharton looked at the chessboard, with its white king gone, as if in profound disbelief. His face was blank.

Then he reached into the drawer, took out the checkbook and a pen and began to write.