

The Young Champion

by *Michael Fisher*

'Well, who's next?' said the boy, sitting back and grinning round him. 'Who else wants his pants taken off him?' The man opposite him got up and buttoned his coat. 'Cocky little bastard,' he remarked without any particular animosity to the men standing watching. He pulled a scarf round his neck and made his way between the crowded tables out into the night. Nobody moved to take the chair he left empty.

'Well, come on,' said the boy. 'You all scared or something?' He sat hunched up, his elbows on the arms of the wooden chair; his blue jacket with the red tartan lining rose high round his face. He peered up at them between the peaks of his collar. His short black hair stuck up in untidy oily spikes, and his glasses flashed as they caught the light. There was a thin-lipped grin on his narrow face.

'Well?' he said. 'Nobody want a game? Hell, I got to lose sometime. What's the matter with you? You all checker players or something?' He looked over to the other half of the room where the checker games were going on and contemptuously spat a tobacco grain from his tongue.

The men looked at the chess pieces on the table and at the hard intelligent face of the boy. One by one they turned and joined groups round other tables, becoming indistinguishable almost at once from all the other men in overcoats and rain-coats and ancient hats.

The boy sat alone and coughed in the thick smoky air, smelling of stale cigarettes and cheap cigars, wet cloth and dirty men. He dragged on his cigarette and coughed again. He drummed on the table with his fingers.

'Hey, Joe,' he called to a paunchy unshaven man in a leather jacket. 'You want a game, Joe?'

'I ain't got the time, kid,' said Joe. 'I got to get my truck on the road.'

'Too bad. Say, Joe, did you see in the paper where Resnikov got beaten last night?'

'Yeah. Paper said it was a tough game though.'

'Tough game hell. When Resnikov moved his queen to king's bishop four, he was finished. He should get his head examined.'

'Yeah. Well, look kid, I got to get my truck on the road. Another night, huh? See you.' He went out of the door into the night. The boy went on drumming his fingers and poked beady uncertain defiant glances round him like a bird.

Outside it was dark and snow lay on the ground. The small round building where the men played was on top of a hill; milky light came from its windows. Narrow paths led away into a wilderness of leafless woods. Occasional lamps lit up a few black footprints on the white winding paths. In the distance was the faint sound of music from the skating rink. At the edge of the snow-bound woods, tall buildings rose, glittering with light as they encircled the dark forest. Traffic hissed along Fifth Avenue and Central Park South, a hundred miles away from the small building in the middle.

The boy looked up as an old man approached him. The old man wore a thick black overcoat and a black homburg, which made him look very respectable here, where everyone else was roughly dressed.

'May I have a game with you?' the old man asked politely.

'Sure,' said the boy. 'Sit down, glad to have you.' He began to set up the pieces while the old man pulled off his black gloves and fished in an inside pocket for a pair of rimless spectacles which he carefully fitted to his wrinkled face. He tapped one of the hands the boy held out to him and got the white pawn.

'I seen you here before, haven't I?' said the boy.

'Yes, I come here quite often. I've seen you here too.'

'Oh, I'm always here. About the only place I can get a game, but there's not much competition. Do you play well?'

'I used to play quite a lot. I'm out of practice now, and of course I'm getting older.'

'Oh,' said the boy, looking at him doubtfully. To him it seemed unlikely that the old man had ever been younger. 'I just wanted to know if you was any good, so I would know how much I had to think,' he said.

The old man looked up at him. There was a gleam in his watery blue eyes, but he did not smile. 'Well, we'll see,' he said, and made the first move.

They sat opposite each other, their heads bent together over the table. The old man sat leaning forward stiffly, his elbows on the table, one hand lying flat on top of the other. His hands were white and dry; they looked as though they were made out of plaster instead of flesh. Purple veins ran over them like slow rivers. His nails were yellow and cracked, and the joints of his fingers were swollen. Every now and then he lifted his hands and kneaded the joints, then put his hands back precisely, one on top of the other. When he made a move, he did it quickly and jerkily, then returned his hand to its place and continued to study the board.

The boy sat hunched up with his coat collar coming over his ears. His hands were never still. He drummed on the table and picked at his face and nose and scratched himself. When it was his move, his eyes stayed on the board and his hands appeared to be straying round like animals with a life of their own, until one went out and swept a piece to a new position, hovered over it a second, then returned to his nose. After he had made his move, he relaxed a little and surveyed the room, glancing up at the new group standing round their table and jerking his lips at them in what might have been a smile or a sneer, they could take it as they wanted. There were usually one or two people watching him when he played, although not many wanted to play with him, for he was one of the best players in the room, and his cocky self-assurance was amusing more than irritating when directed at someone else. And there was always the hope that somebody would beat him, taking him down a peg or two. The boy knew this; half his pleasure in winning lay in disappointing them.

He studied the old man's black coat and homburg, and the grey tie with a large loose knot exposing a brass collarstud. There was nothing tough or weather-beaten about the old man's frail white hands and face, and the boy marked him down as a rich East-sider who had never done any work in his life. He was half disgusted with this and half delighted at the distinction of playing with such a man. He was certainly a change from the truckdrivers and clerks and garment workers and bums who were his usual opponents.

The boy returned to study the board and found to his surprise that the old man's development was much further

advanced than his own. He worked hard for the next few moves, but his position did not improve. Indeed, it seemed to be getting worse.

After a few more moves, the boy pushed his pieces away from him in disgust. 'All right, all right,' he said, and grinned for the sake of the crowd. 'That's one to you.'

The old man looked up in surprise. 'You give up easily,' he said. 'There were many things you could have done.'

'No,' said the boy. 'You had me cold. I wasn't concentrating hard enough. You must be better than I thought. Let's play another.'

They changed the pieces over and started again.

The boy really tried this time, but again he found himself losing the advantage. He chewed his nails and twisted in his seat while the old man sat there implacably.

'You know what?' said the boy to the crowd. 'This old man can play chess. You know that, dad? You can play chess.'

The old man said nothing but tapped one hand on top of the other in an irritated manner. The boy went on with the game.

A little while later the old man fumbled through his overcoat into an inside pocket and brought out a bar of chocolate. He unwrapped it slowly, broke off a piece and put it in his mouth.

'So that's how you do it,' said the boy. 'Secret food. I think that's an unfair advantage.'

The old man looked up at him with a gleam in his pale blue eyes. He tapped the bar of chocolate across to the boy who broke off a large piece and munched noisily.

But it didn't do him any good, because he lost that game too.

'What's your name, boy?' said the old man at the end of the game.

'Matthew.'

'And how old are you, Matthew?'

'I'm sixteen.'

'You play quite a good game of chess, Matthew, for a boy of your age. Quite a good game.'

'Gee, thanks,' said the boy, meaning it to sound ironical. He knew he played a good game of chess. But he was pleased all the same.

'You want a last game?'

'You bet, old man. I'm going to take your pants off this time.'

The game was slower and more careful this time, and the boy managed to force a draw.

The old man stood up slowly. 'Thank you,' he said. 'I enjoyed that. We must play again some time. I must go off and have my supper now.'

'I'm still going to beat you,' said Matthew. 'Do you want to play tomorrow?'

'With pleasure. Shall we meet here, then, at the same time?'

'Okay. That's fine with me.'

The boy snorted and stood up. He looked quickly at the other chess games in progress, but there was nothing there to interest him. He wrapped a woollen scarf around his neck and, hunching his shoulders, went outside.

He usually got a kick out of standing outside the small building on the hill and looking at the far-off ring of lights round the Park. 'What city is at the centre of the whole world?' he used to ask himself. 'New York, of course,' he answered. 'And what's at the centre of New York?' 'Central Park.' 'And what's at the centre of Central Park?' 'Why, this chess place, where I've just beaten the pants off everybody,' he would laugh, and start his walk over to the West Side feeling very cheerful. But tonight of course it was different.

He set off down the narrow paths, his feet crunching and squeaking on the new snow. He walked quickly and nervously, for this was a gang's territory, and he knew they would beat him up if they caught him. He was a sort of part-time member of another gang, the Jokers, but that gave him no protection. Indeed, when he got out of the Park and walked up Central Park West and turned off down West 71st Street, he was just as nervous, although this was Joker territory, for fear the Jokers might see him and want to know where he had been. If they knew he played chess. . . Of course Hannibal, their leader, could have got away with it. If he wanted to play chess, he would just have played, and inside a week the whole gang would be playing chess. But he wasn't Hannibal.

He walked on, avoiding the boys screaming down the street on roller skates, playing ice-hockey. When he got to the door of the place where he lived and climbed the stairs, he was still nervous, for he was late for supper and the rest of them would

have eaten already. His mother would bang his head against the wall and shout at him. What a life, he thought.

The following day the old man was sitting waiting for the boy when he arrived. The old man stood up and smiled at him, making the boy feel ridiculously pleased to see his wrinkled face and amiable blue eyes again. The place was not full, so they were able to sit down at once. The boy blew on his fingers and rubbed his hands as the old man pulled off his gloves.

'Well, are you going to beat me today, Matthew?' asked the old man, smiling at him.

'You're damn right I am,' said Matthew, scowling up at him. But he found he could not maintain the scowl in the face of the old man's benign but satirical smile. He gave a snort of laughter and looked down at the table.

'I brought my own men today,' said the old man. 'To give me luck. I thought I would need it today. I hope you don't mind.'

'You go ahead,' said Matthew. 'You're going to need all the help you can get.'

The old man brought out a large polished wooden box from under his coat and set it carefully in the middle of the board. He loosened his coat and put on his spectacles. Then, reaching out with his white plaster hands, he undid the hasps on the box and lifted the lid, revealing a treasure of green velvet and black and white ivory.

Matthew was astonished and delighted. He took a piece from the box and loved the size and weight of it and the delicate carving. The pieces were of conventional design; the kings were not carved to look like human kings, nor the pawns like men-at-arms. These were chessmen to be used, not looked at. But what majestic proportions had the kings, and how pontifical yet sly were the bishops with their Jesuitical obliquity! How wild were the erratic knights and how forthright the pawns!

The first game Matthew lost. He told himself he was not concentrating properly, but was thinking more of how fine the chessmen looked.

'I got to get some help too now,' he said, and with a grin at the old man he pulled two bars of chocolate out of his pocket. 'I got one for you as well,' he said, passing it over.

They started a new game. Matthew broke off a bit of chocolate and put it in his mouth, then reached out for a pawn. The old man tapped his hand on the table in an irritated manner and passed a handkerchief to Matthew. Matthew dutifully wiped his fingers and they went on with the game. This time, for the first time, Matthew won.

The old man sat back and smiled at him, his spectacles flashing in the light. 'You played very well, Matthew,' he said. 'You might make quite a good player one day. With lots of work and practice. Tell me, you are still at school?'

'Yeah. This is my senior year of high school.'

'And what are you going to do when you leave high school?'

'Oh, I don't know. Any old thing. Get a job of some sort. I'll have to start earning some money then.'

'Don't you know what you want to do?'

'Yeah. I want to play chess. That's all I want to do. But I got to get myself a job instead. Can't earn any money playing chess.'

'No,' said the old man sadly. 'No, you can't.'

'I could be a good player if I could study properly. But I got to learn a job instead, and there isn't a damn job in this world that I want to do either. All I want to do is play chess.'

'It's a shame,' said the old man.

Matthew looked at him and wondered why he asked him all these questions. In this place, nobody asked questions. You played your game, then somebody else sat down in front of you, someone you'd never seen before usually, and you played again, saying nothing. You never even asked their name, let alone any private details. The chess was all that mattered. So what was the old man so interested for? Or was that the privilege of the rich, asking questions?

They started to play again.

'You know,' Matthew said, 'these are the best chessmen I ever seen.'

'Thank you,' said the old man.

A little later, Matthew said, 'You know, I could use a set of chessmen like these. What would you sell them to me for?'

'I wouldn't sell them,' said the old man.

'What would you do then? Would you play for them?'

'And what would you give me if I won?'

'Well, I don't know. What would you want? I ain't got nothing to give you.'

'Do you expect me to give them to you, boy?'

They went on playing, but Matthew was thinking of the chessmen and how much he wanted them. He lost the game.

'I tell you what, boy,' said the old man with his satirical smile. 'You beat me in three straight games, you can have them.'

'Okay,' said Matthew, lighting up. 'Okay, okay. When do you want to play? Tomorrow? You wait till tomorrow. You never seen me play yet.'

The old man got up and wrapped his coat round him.

'Can you get home all right?' asked Matthew. 'It's slippery outside. Do you want me to help you home? I don't want you to fall and break your neck, not before I win those chessmen.'

'No, no, thank you,' said the old man. 'I can manage. We'll meet again tomorrow . . .' He went out the door.

Matthew stayed to watch one or two games, but he was thinking of the chessmen. He knew the old man could well afford to part with them. He was wondering why the old man showed such an interest and asked him all those questions. Was the old man really interested in him? Did he want to train a new world champion? Would he keep Matthew and pay him while he studied chess? There was a world of possibilities that Matthew's imagination leapt at. He could see the old man paying for him to fly to Russia to study under the masters . . .

The old man walked home, sliding a little on the ice that had formed on yesterday's snow. It was bitterly cold. He pulled his threadbare overcoat tighter round him and tucked up under his chin the grey scarf that his sister had knitted for him ten years ago. He looked about him, as he too was nervous of the gangs. He walked over to the West Side, and, like the boy, went down a side street till he came to a tall building, where he climbed the stairs. He unlocked the door of his room and went in. He took his coat and suit off and hung them with care in a closet, and then took off his shirt and shoes, so that he was in his long thin brown-stained underwear, which he never took off. He was comfortable that way. He put some water on the heater and got out the coffee powder and a cold hamburger for his supper. After he had eaten, he sat on the bed and with an old

silk handkerchief polished the chessmen, one by one. He replaced them, one by one, in their correct compartments in the green velvet, and wrapped the box in the silk cloth. He put the box in a drawer, locking it carefully. He didn't think of anything very much while he was doing this. He had altogether forgotten the boy.

The following day Matthew was already seated at a table when the old man came in. Matthew gave him a hungry grin and searched with his eyes for the chessmen, which the old man was holding under his coat.

One or two others had wanted to sit down opposite the boy and play with him, but he had told them to push off, he was waiting for his regular opponent, they were playing a tournament. He also told them what the stake was, so there was a general stir of interest as the old man came in and sat down, putting the box of chessmen on the table. The old man looked up in some surprise at the men gathering round to watch them.

'I told them about our tournament,' said Matthew.

'Tournament?' said the old man. 'What tournament? I remember nothing about a tournament.'

'Oh, yes, you do. Don't try and get out of it now. You remember you said I could have those chessmen if I could beat you in three straight games. Well, that's what I'm going to do. I was up all night reading Krasky's latest book—he's got some very neat gambits there. The book only came out last week, so they should be new to you. You see, I want those chessmen, old man. I'm going to beat you.'

The old man looked at the boy over the top of his spectacles. His sparse eyebrows hooked upwards and his pale eyes were cold. 'So you took me seriously, did you, boy? You really want to take my chessmen away from me? All right, I'll stick by what I said. Let's see you do it.'

The old man was serious and hard. He no longer looked at the boy with an amused affectionate gleam in his eye. He was fighting now. His plaster hands moved swiftly, lining up his men. There was general admiration round the table for the chessmen. Someone picked up the polished box with the velvet lining, but the old man snapped it back from him testily and replaced it on the table. They began to play.

The old man won the first game.

Then the old man won the second game.

Finally, the old man won the third game.

It was all over fairly quickly. The old man displayed a brilliance of which the boy had not thought him capable. The boy tried as hard as he could, but never once was he in a commanding position. The old man was in an altogether superior class.

When it was over, the old man replaced the chessmen in the box, one by one, and snapped the lid shut. He tucked the box inside his coat. His eyes glittered as he looked at the boy. 'Well, Matthew?' he said.

'Well, thanks,' said the boy, hating it, and hating the men round him. 'Did you ever see such play?' they were saying. 'The old man wiped the floor with him. Beautiful play,' and 'Why don't you go back to school, kid? You're still in the junior league. Come back when you're grown up.'

'Yes, thanks for the game,' said the boy, carefully keeping a hold on himself. 'I guess I have to practise a bit before I get those chessmen. You want to play here again tomorrow?'

'I don't think so,' said the old man. 'I don't think so. I think you would learn more by playing with people in your own class.'

The old man stood up and went out, and Matthew hurried after him. Outside it was cold and dark. Snow still lay on the ground; the paths were hard with ice. It was very cold and clear and dark after the bright smoky chess room.

'Let's play again tomorrow,' the boy said.

'I don't want to play with you,' said the old man.

'Please. Play with me. I know you're better than I am, but I got to have someone to play with. Please play with me.'

'No. You only want to take my chessmen.'

'I don't want to take your damn chessmen.'

'You won't get a chance. I'm not going to bring them again.'

'You're not going to bring them? All right, to hell with them, don't bring them. But play with me.'

The small house was out of sight now. They were walking on a narrow path winding through the bare woods. Occasional gleams of light came from lamps. Far away they could hear the music of the skating rink.

'I'm not going to play with you,' said the old man obstinately.

'And I'm not bringing my chessmen again.'

'For God's sake play with me. And let me have a last look at your chessmen. I got a big kick out of playing with them.'

The old man held the box tight to his chest.

'Well, you can let me look at them, can't you? Can't you? Here, come on, let me have a look at them.'

The boy put his hands on the box inside the old man's overcoat. The old man twisted away. 'Take your hands off,' he said in a nervous old man's voice. 'You're not going to get them.'

'I am,' said the boy, 'I damn well am. I want them, I tell you, I want them.'

He pulled on the box, but the old man would not let go. They struggled on the icy path.

'Give them to me,' shouted the boy. 'Give them to me.' But the old man clung to them.

'Damn you!' shouted the boy in a rage. He let go the box suddenly and hit the old man. The old man staggered back and the boy hit him again. The old man slipped on the ice and fell down hard on his hip. He gave a cry of pain.

'Give me the box,' said the boy. 'Give me the box.' He pulled the box out of the old man's coat and the old man did not resist any more. He was holding his broken hip and crying with pain.

The boy tore open the box and looked with a gasp at the quiet handsome rows of men, his if he wanted them. But he realised that he could never use them. He could never take them to the chess room and play with them; everyone knew now that they belonged to the old man. He too started to cry, with rage and disappointment. He heard the sounds of the old man's pain.

'Damn you,' he shouted. 'Shut up, damn you. Shut up!'

He took the useless chessmen out of the box and hurled them one by one at the old man. 'Shut up,' he cried. 'Shut up.'

His throwing was wild and the men hit the bank of snow beside the path without a sound. They made small dark holes in the snow and disappeared.

The old man's face grew pale as the snow and he stopped crying. He had fainted. He lay in the snow, black and twisted like a fallen tree, the surrounding whiteness pockmarked by his men.

The boy stood and wondered what to do.

He hurled the polished box as far as he could into the woods. It looked as though he would never be able to come here to play chess again. Not after someone found the old man. He bent down and fumbled through the old man's clothes till he found his wallet. He took it out and put it in his pocket. It was proof that he had rolled an old man in the Park, on someone else's territory, too. It would stand greatly to his credit with the Jokers.