



*For the competition, he had
carved a beautiful set—
breathing life into every piece.*

THE CHESSMEN

BY WILLIAM G. SHEPHERD

Tomov was most innocent of all. It was this, perhaps, that caused the real confusion, challenged for a moment the course of history, and led eventually to Tomov's death. But Tomov, dead or alive and whatever part he played, is not an important element in this tale; being, as Tomov was, mere flesh and blood.

Our heroes are wood. Exquisitely carved; painted with infinite care; each one a child born through agonies of thought, months of uncertainty, a change here, a new idea there; but wood. Tomov made them.

After the long hours at the dyeing vats of the woolen mill at Rybinskh, it was joy to hurry home to the bench beside the sink, take his little box of tools from the cupboard, and live the evenings with the smooth, warm wood. It was worth the year it took, especially if one had but a small chance of winning the contest and of being rewarded with the trip to Moscow, visits to the shrines, the handshakes of the mighty ones, and—surely—the extra ration coupons. One might even see Comrade Stalin, or find a better job waiting at the mill when one returned.

So Tomov studied, first. He went to the shop of books and page by page looked through a hundred, or a thousand. Even those on back shelves, books so suspect they were like a ticking bomb if one dared have such in one's home, books of which private possession could bring, on any night, the silent thunder of disapproval; even those Tomov turned page by page. And on those pages were the things he sought. A queen, dressed in such flagrant riches it was enough to sicken Tomov, a queen whose very gown told of her faithlessness, her carnal loves. A churchman, pompous, fat, as lecherous as the queen. A king—ah!, these were what Tomov was after. No need to labor his dye-stained fingers with making sketches. Tomov would remember until each vicious line was shaped in the solid oak.

Then the carving. Tomov grew as each completed piece was set aside and a new one begun. The little, easier ones Tomov made first, the eight



chain-laden slaves, the eight strong, sickle-swinging comrades like he'd seen on the collective farms. These he made first so his hands could gain in skill for the master pieces. Next were the two castles, showing by their tumbling towers the decadence they represented. Almost with a shudder Tomov turned from them to shape the perfect tiny replicas of the new apartment house just built in Rybinskh for the faithful of the People's Republic. Then the soldiers. They were easy to think out, to plan, but hard to carve. The effeminate, weak, dull ones were the worst, but even the two broad Russian generals angered Tomov as he carved them, by bringing back to his mouth the taste of mud and snow, by causing the half-healed wound in his hip to ache, by arousing the shame a soldier of the Red Army must feel at remembering his fear. The two fat bishops brought some of the same trouble, for Tomov as a child had held his mother's hand and walked the long mosaic aisle to kiss a ring worn by a kind and gentle man. What one read and heard helped Tomov to the beady eyes, the obese jowls, but the sweat was heavy on his forehead before he felt quite sure his knife had cut the smile from the lips of both. With a sigh of relief he set the pieces with the others and began the commissars. These, when done, left him the task that brought the greatest pleasure. There was nothing the least bit personal, nothing to disturb Tomov in creating the wanton queen. Only ideas well learned went into finishing up the eroded frame and gold-crowned skull for the Capitalist king. And ideals precious to every Russian gave joy to shaping the healthy Peasant boy and girl in regal proportions.

With only one month to work before the contest deadline, Tomov spent every evening turning the carefully stolen bits of powdered dye to paint and bringing final life to every piece. There was not even time to ask Stolovkin to drop in and play a game before the set had to be bundled up neatly and sent off to the Culture Office in Moscow. Tomov regretted that, especially later, if only Stolovkin and he had tried but one game. It might have made Tomov pause, perhaps not send his proud entry to the contest at all. But there was no time.

Tomov shook off another regret. The set would not be returned to him, no one would have seen his handiwork completed. No one except the beggar who had knocked on Tomov's door and, while he waited for a bit of bread, had turned a bishop in his hand and certainly admired the work. The gesture the beggar made as he replaced the piece was odd, thought Tomov. It reminded him of the sign the priest used to make in blessing, back when there had been a priest in Rybinskh. Well the beggar, at least, had seen and liked his chessmen. That was something.

Through the processes of bureaucracies, the decisions would be delayed for some months, the winners unknown. This

should have given Tomov a reprieve; yet in the period of deliberation danger threatened almost at once.

Dosiev, second in command at the Culture Office in Moscow, was struck immediately by the skill, the care, the unusual colors that had gone into entry K2726. He placed the box with the others, between the painting of the Leningrad boy and the bridge made of sticks and twigs, with half an idea in his mind. If Andreievich happened in at the right time, they might return to the office in the evening and play the interesting set. Andreievich was a fine partner for chess, relatively easy to beat yet capable on occasion of creating a difficult situation on the board. It made it pleasant, thought Dosiev, to be challenged and at the same time to know one could pretty surely win. He chuckled as it occurred to him to let Andreievich see what he could do with the king and queen while he, Dosiev—the better player—moved relentlessly on to the inevitable checkmate by the People's men. It would be a moral victory, as well as a personal one.

The evening came, and with it Andreievich. After expressing his pleasure at the workmanship of the pieces and demurring a bit over representing the enemy, Andreievich consented to play the Capitalist set. That he won was of little concern. He had bettered Dosiev once or twice before in the 20-odd times they had played. Besides, looking back, Dosiev remembered he had been rather sleepy that evening. But, somehow or other, Dosiev felt compelled to play again with Andreievich on the same basis with these chessmen.

At the second meeting in the office, Andreievich argued for his right to play the Peasants. Dosiev prevailed upon him to repeat their earlier sides, pointing out that his winning would balance the score not only between Andreievich and himself but between the sets as well. Not to Andreievich but to himself Dosiev admitted he was feeling a little tension about it. This tension, Dosiev reasoned afterwards, was no doubt the cause for Andreievich's winning again.

The third meeting Dosiev handled differently. He smuggled the box of pieces home so they might play in the morning on the holiday. No use letting end-of-day drowsiness or fatigue cause him to play poorly. Also, Dosiev went to bed early and had a full night's sleep. This time there was no trouble with Andreievich about the men. Having won twice with the gaily gruesome royalty, Andreievich was quite happy to stay with them. In fact, as he placed the chained-slave pawns, the fat bishops, the crumbling castles, the weakling knights, the wanton queen, and the skeleton king, Andreievich noticed a feeling of confidence new to him facing Dosiev across a chess board. A third time Andreievich won. Handily, too, with many pieces left and with Dosiev wiped out and helpless. Looking at Dosiev, however, An-

dreievich decided not to laugh aloud as he felt like doing. Instead, he said good day and left.

The following morning, wretched from a night disturbed by many shapeless feelings of anxiety, Dosiev decided to return the chessmen to the office and forget the whole affair. He would not be obliged to participate in the judging. His job was simply to arrange the entries, excluding the impossible works, so that Comrade Donovanich and the man from the Kremlin Culture Office could select the winners. For a moment he considered throwing out the chessmen along with the poorer sketches, the too-crude sculpture, and other futile offerings. But no, he was making too much of nothing at all.

On the street Dosiev passed Andreievich. Did his friend walk more erect, his head higher, his chest out? Ridiculous, Dosiev told himself. Even Andreievich's wide grin with his "Good morning!" aroused only a little resentment in Dosiev. But it was a new thing, that grin. The same evening, when Dosiev saw Andreievich looking through the shelves in the back of the shop of books, Dosiev came to a decision. He would somehow place the matter before Comrade Donovanich. Tomorrow.

Comrade Donovanich was first impatient, then supercilious, then plainly displeased.

"Fool! Because your friend improved and you grew careless at chess, you toss in bed and bother me over the shape of pieces of wood? Fagh! Bring me these chessmen. Let me see these midget monuments that shake you in your boots!"

Although Donovanich was without artistic background in any field except that of devising methods for eliciting greater efforts from inmates at a northern camp, he did in a sense justify his appointment as Director of the Moscow Culture Office in his reaction to Tomov's chessmen.

"Aha! Interesting!"

"Nice color. Nice knife work. Clever imagination. Dosiev! I am glad you show me these pieces. I take them home with me and still your fears. Yes, I like these. This fat fellow here, this cleric, looks almost alive. But you are an old woman, Dosiev. Tomorrow I tell you to stop seeing bogeymen in pieces of a tree."

The following morning a pale Comrade Donovanich walked worriedly into his office, mumbling to himself. He telephoned his colleague in the Kremlin Culture Office to make an early appointment. He was told to come at once if he was so upset.

Krakov listened closely till Donovanich had finished babbling and pacing. When Donovanich collapsed into a chair, Krakov reviewed:

"Your wife, you say? Three games, four games? Each time she with the—what did you call it?—with the 'corrupt' set? Then your son, who had never played before and had to be taught the moves? He also won? I do not wonder, Comrade, that you

are pale if you sat up all night playing chess—and teaching it to a child! But this foolishness about evil powers, plots, magic—surely you jest! But no, I see that you do not jest. Have you been well, Comrade?”

Upon Donovanich's protests that he had felt perfectly well until the previous evening, Krakov determined he should make some gesture to relieve the man.

“You brought the box? Good. I do not play the game, but leave the box with me. I have friends who play. Some, I believe, who play extremely well.

It was nearly a week later that Donovanich was summoned to Krakov's office. The Director of the Moscow Culture Office, his man Dosiev tagging along, entered to face Krakov and two unsmiling members of the Politburo itself standing behind the desk.

“Donovich!”

“Comrade Krakov.”

“These chessmen!”

“Comrade? You have tried them?”

“Donovich, this box is identified only as entry K2726 in our contest. What is the name of the man or woman who made them? The address?”

“Yes, yes. Dosiev, here, has it. Stop shaking, man, and give me the card with the name. Here you are, Comrades. One Alexovich Tomov, Woolen Mill, Rybinskh. You—confirmed my feelings?”

“Tomov, Alexovich, Woolen Mill, Rybinskh. Comrade Donovanich, this chess set has been played in exactly sixty-seven engagements. Five of the best players in Moscow have used these pieces, varying possession of the People's men and the enemy men.”

“And the results, Comrade Krakov?”

“As you know, Comrade.”

“The reason, Comrade, have you learned that?”

“We have! Or we have strong suspicions. Each player who used the proletarian pieces experienced a drowsiness as he played. There is evidence that these pieces are treated in some way, probably in the paint or dye, to produce this effect in the handling of the pieces. Very probably these chessmen are the agency of an imperialist design to create uncertainty and fear in our glorious People's Republic.

“We shall see this Tomov traitor, if there is such a one. He will be brought from Rybinskh. Meanwhile, Petroev will come from Stalingrad. Petroev, who has mastered the ablest of the foreigners in the tournaments in London and Paris, will try your chessmen. So superior is his skill, no drowsiness, however maliciously induced, will defeat him. He will win with the peasant pieces.”

Back in Rybinskh, Tomov was not too surprised to learn he would go to Moscow. He was surprised, though, that the message should be brought by two members of the secret police and that he must leave at once, that same night. His wonder at

this fact took away much of the pleasure he felt at winning the contest. (He was sure he had won, or else why the trip to Moscow?) Even at his trial, where he learned he was a traitor and a spy and that this was in some way connected with his chessmen, Tomov was not surprised, because there was not room for surprise amid his efforts to understand what was going on. No one thought—or took the trouble—to mention the “poison” in the dye used to color the proletarian pieces of Tomov's entry. But when the attendants carried his body from the bullet-studded wall, certainly the expression on Tomov's dead face was one of surprise.

The day following this correction of Tomov's error, Petroev, Champion of Chess, arrived in Moscow. When Petroev and the peasant chessmen, playing before several members of the Politburo, lost to each of the five local experts, to Donovanich, to Dosiev, and to Donovanich's ten-year-old son, the final confirmation had to be sought. It had to be sought if only because word had somehow got to the people of the city. Quietly, but very widely, in the shops, in garages, on the streets, discreet questions were being asked about the losing proletarian chessmen. So wide this knowledge seemed to be that the affair could not be handled by a few swift moves after dark. Faced with the prospect of purging all of Moscow and probably beyond, one realized other measures were demanded.

The Laboratory for Chemical Analysis sent its report:

“Except for the usual chemical elements found in dyes (no doubt stolen from the Woolen Mill at Rybinskh), there are no chemical properties in these wood pieces. The same dyes, in identical color combinations, were used for pieces of both sets. The slightly different appearance of one piece is not due to any detectable additional material used in its manufacture, nor is this one piece part of the set suspected of poisoning.”

The laboratory report was labeled “SEKRETNOSTI” and “ABSOLUTELY, COMPLETELY SECRET,” and rushed to a special meeting of the Politburo to be presented to Comrade Stalin and his immediate lieutenants. Since Comrade Stalin was indisposed for two days, the meeting had to be postponed.

Comrade Stalin became disposed. The meeting was held. Petroev was invited. Krakov and Donovanich were allowed to wait just outside the door for word. A table was placed, and two chairs. The chessmen were set up on the board. Comrade Stalin challenged the evil and himself sat down behind the peasant king. The other chair was taken by that one man in the Politburo most skilled in military maneuvers, most read in the battles of Bonaparte, Caesar, and von Clausewitz, ablest of all the lieutenants at chess. That he had been hurriedly recalled from a foreign post because of a developing taste for western ways added

spice and a touch of humor to the game.

Stalin moved a sickle-swinging pawn. A chess expert? Not he. But a leader with faith in the peasant people represented by his chess set, a leader with faith in the principles for which he lived and fought, a leader with faith in his power over the lieutenant playing opposite him.

Whatever Muses, Fates, or gods watch over games of chess, they were sorely abused that day and are no doubt shuddering still. Perhaps the spirit of Tomov also watched. Justice, not one to understand a special need, soon turned her eyes and dimmed her lamp. For none of the leader's faith had been misplaced. The lieutenant, however hard he tried, could not make an intelligent move. The Donovanich boy would have shrieked with delight at the ineffectiveness, but there were only serious faces on the Politburo members crowded around the table. In less than a dozen steps the gaudy queen was gone, the puny soldier-knights and shoddy castles lay aside. Only the bishops, king, and a few stray pawns remained. Yet it happened.

Breath stopped in every watcher, in both players. Not to make the move would have been too absurd. So a bishop stepped a single pace and stared down open passage to the peasant king.

“Check.”

Perhaps it wasn't ever said aloud, the whisper was so low. But every ear heard it. And in the stillness following the word, there was time, too, for every ear to hear the quiet questions of the people of the city.

It was Stalin, the leader, who dared to lead now, to break the stillness. The words came softly in the exhale of a long-held breath:

“Not mate.”

His fist then thundered on the board, hurling the pieces far. His voice was large now, strong and low:

“Check, yes. But not check mate!”

Then still the leader, still the one with strength to act, Stalin picked up the pieces one by one, from the floor, the table, the board. He walked to the fire, dropped the chessmen in. He waited while they burned. For a minute, and another, he watched the smoke.

And then he turned. Again, and quietly, he spoke:

“Always there is a way: by skill, or then by cunning, or by force.”

The others hurried out to tell the people of the city that Stalin, again, had won.

The last to leave knew better. They saw the leader's fist still clutch the wooden bishop. They saw the fist compress and crush till veins stood out and flesh was white. They saw—those last to leave—one tear from the hardened eye run down the cheek and “plop” upon the hearth.

They saw what they would never say: without the skill, the cunning, or the force, the chessmen won. ∞