

THE  
LANGUAGE  
OF CATS  
*and Other Stories*

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# Chess



ONCE upon a time there was a demonstration of Russian courtesy.

There is a fair-sized city in Russia, the center of a great gray barren region.

In this town there is a chess club and anyone in the whole area at all seriously interested in chess belongs to this club.

For a number of years there had been two old men who were head and shoulders above all the rest of the club members. They weren't masters, but in this area they were the chief players, and for years the club members had been attempting to decide which of them was the better; each year there was a contest, and each year these two tied: First one would win, then the other, and then they would draw, or stalemate; the club was divided, half the members thought one was superior, half the other.

The club members wanted to have one champion.

So they decided this year to hold a different sort of contest: They decided to bring in an inferior player, an utterly unknown person from outside the area, and each of the candidates would play him a game, and they simply assumed each of the candidates would win against the mediocre player so there was no question of winning or losing; but rather they decided to vote afterward, after studying and discussing each of the candidates' games, and award the championship to him who played with better style.

The tournament evening arrived, and the first candidate played with the inferior player—until the inferior player finally shrugged his shoulders and said, “I concede. You obviously win.” Whereupon the first candidate leaned over and turned the chessboard around, himself taking the position the inferior player had given up, and said, “Continue.” They played longer until finally the inferior player was checkmated.

Then the second candidate played the inferior player until finally the outsider threw up his hands and said, “I concede.” And the second candidate, exactly as the first candidate had done, turned the board around, and said, “Continue.”

They played for a while until the harassed inferior player, looking blank, leaned back and shrugged his shoulders and said, “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to move. What should I do?”

The second candidate twisted his head around to get more of his opponent’s view of the board, and then said tentatively, “Well, why don’t you move *that piece there*.” The outsider stared at the board uncomprehendingly, and finally shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “Well, it can’t do any harm, and after all, what does it matter, as I know I’m going to lose anyway.” With that gesture he moved the piece *there*.

The master frowned and pondered the board for several minutes before moving.

His frown deepened.

The corners of his mouth turned down.

His eyes hardened, he turned a sullen, stony, defiant stare at his audience for a moment before whispering in a choked voice all could hear, “I concede!”

He leaped up from his chair, raised his gold-headed cane quickly into the air, smashed it down onto the ebony and ivory chessboard, and split it in half.

He rushed from the room muttering loudly a long, strong string of profanities that were marvelous to hear.

He was, of course, awarded the club championship, and had, I think, incidentally demonstrated the proper way to lose a game.