

A Game at Chess



Q*uis separabit?* says the motto of the P. & O., the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company. *Quis separabit?* it says under a portly and dignified elephant, which stands for India and tells you who is never to be separated from whom — and in the spring of 1938, when the S.S. *Strathbogle* was sliding through the chilly Mediterranean, the proud question was still unanswered. She was taking home her usual cargo, her usual set of human samples from British India: in poorish condition at this moment (just east of Malta) through the usual epidemic of colds contracted where East turns to West at Port Said. They half pretended to enjoy, half really did enjoy, the rare sensations of streaming nose and tickling throat, the drag of tweed's heaviness at the back of their necks, and the light, dry, fitting touch of felt hat round the head, in place of the sticky rigidity of a topi. They marched round the decks and played their leaping games with much more briskness and much less dampness than a week earlier in the Red Sea's brazen trough; they exchanged their novels at the ship's library, and did not always fall asleep over them; even their attendance at the various religious services, also in the library, seemed both more numerous and more devotional. It was always a queer business, observable on these 'Home'-bound ships in the days of the British Raj, when they entered the Mediterranean: the British at once swelling and shrinking, for they put on shoulders with their thick jackets, they grew up from boyhood as the knees and throats disappeared beneath long trousers and ties, yet they were also and at the same time subsiding from rulers to subjects, from potentates to private persons. The glaze of sameness was peeling off them — that glaze which made the Westerners in the East tend to look and to feel all alike among themselves, because they both looked and felt so totally *unlike* the vast majorities who lived around them; they were reverting to separate distinguishable types and individuals — a soldier here; and to guess from his nervous loud-

ness, a not too successful one; or an administrator there, a cultured and cooing-voiced gentleman (he had clearly taken Greats some thirty years before), in whom the one small sign of the corruption of power might have been a bland, smiling, by now instinctive impenetrability to all criticism which did not come from senior members of his own service. Soldiers, administrators, businessmen, engineers, doctors, missionaries, teachers—all the sub-castes of the great caste of whiteness—seemed to trot the decks and sit down to the stupefying shipboard meals with a willingness to be different which they would never have allowed themselves a few degrees more eastward: and perhaps it was a sign of that willingness that Mitcham now found himself talking to Suvórov.

Mitcham did not take much 'placing'. Tall, thin, young, intelligent, academic, defensive—if you knew your British India, you would know the uneasy niche he filled in it, the niche of the University teacher in a society which regarded ideas and the teaching of ideas to 'natives' with a blend of suspicion and derision. You might remember (as he remembered) the young lady in Kipling who had said to her suitor, the teacher of Wordsworth to Indian students: 'But I like men who *do* things!' You might note (as he noted) that he did not join in the shipboard dances, and remember what Charcot, Freud's master, had said of that: '*Refus de danser? toujours mal psychologique!*' No: you would not find it difficult to place young Mitcham; and in 1938 you could be certain too that his politics would be Left and the ground-bass to all his thoughts, all his life, would be war: the fear of it and the denied desire for it, the memory of what he had read of the first war and the shapeless image which Spain and China and Abyssinia were building of the second. So much for Mitcham: but Suvórov was an odder fish, a harder case. For one thing, he was Russian; and what was a Russian doing in India? Well, this one was teaching mathematics in Allahabad—Ahmedabad?—or some such very Indian place: but he had none of Mitcham's caste-marks. His small, neat, plump-handed person moved with confidence through the alien corn; he smoked dark cheroots and used his arms when he talked; benign, expansive, inscrutable, he seemed enormously Continental. Over his past, over his reasons for being in India and not being in Russia, there hung a veil, thought Mitcham, like that which, in fiction at anyrate, conceals the past of the members of the Foreign Legion; and the more he talked, the less he told. He talked a great deal with Mitcham; he was talking now as they climbed the stairs after a lunch of Oriental curries and English sausages and mash; he was talking as they turned into the oak-and-leathery smoking-room and sat down at one of its small round tables.

On it were a chessboard and box of chessmen; Suvórov toyed with them, his white hands affectionate on the pieces.

'Do you play chess?' asked Mitcham.

'Yes,' said Suvórov. 'I did play, much, once. For Moscow Univair-sity. You will care for a game?'

'You will be far too good for me,' said Mitcham, 'if you played for Moscow University. I never played for Oxford. But I don't mind—time for a game before Malta. Why are Russians so good at chess?'

'It is,' said Suvórov slowly, 'it is that chess is *ours*. Of course, yes, I know, the Indians invented it. But now—no great Indian players. Chess is for them too rigorous, too stern, too unsentimental for their soft minds. In chess you are very alone. That is the quality of chess. All alone in this thing which is an art, and a game, and a science, and a battle. Indian students—you know how they imitate, how they learn by heart their text-books.' And the two alien teachers smiled at each other with that agreement in superiority which Orientals, justifiably, find so infuriating, especially when they know it to be justified. 'You choose for colour,' added Suvórov, holding out clenched fists, one piece in each. Mitcham touched the left fist: the piece was black. They began to set out the board.

'Yes,' said Mitcham, 'they *are* like that. But I like them all the same. They are sympathetic, there is a certain warmth about them.'

'Oh yes,' said Suvórov, 'yes certainly. Especially about the women. Ah they are in bed so smooth, so—so *flowing*' (his hand with the cheroot made patterns in the air) '—white women, compared with them, so lumpy, so angly—an Indian girl when she waits you, when she invites you, seems so open, so—' and again, his hand took over the task of expressing. He was lyrical and bawdy, enthusiastic and ironic; and above all, to Mitcham (who had bedded with no Indian woman), he was abominably knowing. Mitcham, to his fury and shame, felt the prickle of a blush on his face; he looked down at the chessboard, now set out, and wished Suvórov would move; but Suvórov was in no hurry.

'You must have noticed,' he continued (was there mischief in his voice?), 'that vun funny thing of Indian women in bed—you will have noticed, of course?'

'Well,' said Mitcham. 'Well, I don't quite know what—'

'Ah,' said Suvórov. 'Ah—no, I do not tell you.'

'Oh, go on,' said Mitcham, in a tone which he hoped was incurious.

'No,' said Suvórov, suddenly decisive. 'No, I do not. You must find. Now I move.' His hand, with a quick experienced plunge, like

a doctor's with a needle, descended on the board and he moved:

1. P-K4.

At least I know that one, thought Mitcham, switching his baffled mind from unprintable fantasies; and he answered with the obvious:

... P-K4.

'It is a long time since I play,' said Suvórov, who did not, it seemed, take the beginning of the game as a sign for the end of the talk. 'But I remember, when I play in Moscow, I often try this'—and he moved:

2. Kt-KB3,

and continued unpausing: 'I was there for many years, studying mathematics, and every night we play chess and often all through the night—it is your move,' he added politely.

I wish you would stop talking, thought Mitcham, whose mind was now like an Expressionist stage-setting, with three different sections performing at once: one, fading, the Indian woman; another, his curiosity about Suvórov's past; the third, the game before him. He resolutely blacked out the first; and while he played

... P-Q3

(protect my pawn, he thought, open the way for my queen's bishop), he asked Suvórov:

'What made you leave Moscow?'

3. P-Q4,

replied Suvórov without hesitation; and without hesitation also: 'There was trouble.' The answer, it seemed, was complete; he leaned back, blew out smoke, and looked at the board and at Mitcham, and at that 'trouble', with impartial satisfaction.

'Trouble?' said Mitcham, his hand over his bishop (is this a bit reckless?—well, at least it will pin his knight)—

... B-Kt5

—'trouble with the University?'

'N-no-o,' said Suvórov, 'no. Trouble with—well, as your newspapers would say, with the Men in the Kremlin.' And he played:

4. P × P,

and dropped Mitcham's pawn, with a dismissing rattle, into the box. Again, his voice seemed to hold a full-stop in it; yet it did not seem quite to discourage further questioning; it was as if he were a little drugged, as if the lovely abstract unfolding game had taken him a little from reality and he did not care if he were asked or were not asked. Mitcham did ask, as he played:

... B × Kt,

'What happened?'

'What happened?' said Suvórov dreamily. 'They took my father. They took my elder brother. They would have taken—me. And I—'

take,' with a pleasant smile, 'your bishop':

5. Q × B.

It was literal that Mitcham did not know which way to look: whether at the board or at Suvórov. He chose the former. He wondered, gazing down, if it were safe to take the offered pawn; he wondered if he should believe or suspect, if this was a victim or an enemy; he wanted to show, in one well-chosen phrase, sympathy for the individual and dubiousness about the type, disapproval of tyranny and disbelief that *that* regime could be tyrannical: he gave it all up, took the pawn quickly:

... P × P,

and looked up to see a face so sleek and unravaged, so utterly unlike a victim's, that sympathy died in him, and he said, with a sort of truculent and apologetic lameness:

'I suppose, in a revolutionary situation, when a new society is being made, things like that are bound to happen?'

'They are bound to happen,' said Suvórov quietly, and he played:

6. B—QB₄,

'but you must not think too much of that "newness". We are a very old people, you know; we are hid from you for so long, so many centuries—but I "put you off": it is, again, your move.'

'No, you're not putting me off,' said Mitcham (this was untrue). He felt as if he did not know in which water he was out of his depth; he played, not quite at random:

... Kt—KB₃,

and blinked at the speed of Suvórov's answer:

7. Q—QKt₃.

'So many centuries,' went on Suvórov. 'You remember perhaps the Russian in your Kipling's story, that Dirkovitch the Cossack, who says, "So many million Slavs, we have done nothing yet—get a-way, you old peoples," he says—you remember?'

'Yes,' said Mitcham, whose childhood had been soaked in Kipling (he was rather ashamed of it now). He's threatening to take my pawn and check with his bishop—well, I can stop *that*, anyway:

... Q—K₂

—'but what do you mean, that you have been "hid" from us?'

'I mean,' said Suvórov, playing:

8. Kt—B₃,

and amiably pausing till Mitcham, to stop that advancing knight, had replied with:

... P—B₃,

'I mean that when we are, as you think, no longer hid from you, and you see things amongst us, you think these things are new. But they

are not. They have always happened. And you think'—

9. B—KKt5

—'that they happen because of ideas, ideologies, what Marx or Engels have written. I tell you, no. They are just people, people against each other. Russian people. I remember—' He paused again while Mitcham, like a Dutchman at a leaking dyke, turned to a fresh hole and stopped the bishop with:

... P—Kt4

—'I remember, when I was told they had taken my father and brother, I am playing chess, just like this.' He looked longer than usual at the board, his hand wavered above the pieces and sank down again without having moved, and he went on talking:

'It was in winter, very cold, in a seminar-room at the University, and the stove was out because of no fuel then, so we were all of us in coats and jerseys and boots and caps, and our hands in mittens—very hard to move the pieces without knocking over. Now I move'; and he did move, with a gesture as of crisis:

10. Kt × P.

But he loses his knight, thought Mitcham: well, if you *will* talk while you play. . . . And he took what was offered:

... P × Kt,

and instantly Suvórov answered:

11. B × KtP ch,

—'but we are right in the game—it was a long pawns ending—and we forget how cold. Now in comes my friend from the Ministry, and he stands behind me, watching while I move and my opponent moves—You are in check,' he said with a smile to Mitcham.

'I know,' said Mitcham, almost with a start. *What game are we playing?* he wondered, and blocked the check with:

... QKt—Q2.

'And then my friend bends down behind me, as if to say something about the game, and he says, very quietly: "Do not go home."—I think I castle now'; and he did:

12. O O O.

Mitcham, fascinated, distracted, with a sense of being helplessly moulded by a force beyond his understanding, did what he could—guarded the dangerous square, protected his knight:

... R—Q sq,

and asked Suvórov:

'And then, what did you do?'

'Oh, like your Drake. I finish the game'—

13. R × Kt

—he is offering his rook, thought Mitcham, and promptly took it,

feeling sure that was wrong but not much caring:

... R × R

—‘it took an hour more, I think—and I win it, I remember. You must be careful, my friend, or I win *this* one too’:

14. R—Q sq.

Mitcham, who by now was sure that Suvórov would win but not in the least sure how, answered with:

... Q—K3,

and looked up with a silent question.

‘Yes,’ said Suvórov, moving with his usual promptness:

15. B × R ch,

‘so I win the game, and then—I do not go home.’ This time the full-stop in his voice was not to be argued with. Mitcham, in silence, played:

... Kt × B,

watching the white powers massing round his king. There was something he resented, but he did not know what; somewhere he had gone wrong, but he did not see where. He watched Suvórov’s:

16. Q—Kt 8 ch,

and looked for a long, long time, it seemed, listening to the little noises of Suvórov’s cheroot, at a position which more than invited, which compelled him, to take the Russian’s queen:

... Kt × Q,

and accept the final move:

17. R—Q8 *mate*.

There it was now, the finished battlefield: the facts in black and white, pure victory and pure defeat. In the little contemplative silence which follows the end of a game, Mitcham stared at his boxed and helpless king, killed with an economy so deadly. That is mastery, he thought, and as for my game—nothing but blundering ignorance. Suvórov too was staring at the board: of what game *he* was thinking, Mitcham dared not ask. Then both of them became aware that their shipboard world had changed: the engines’ throbbing was slower, the smoking-room had emptied, on the decks were moving and talking unusual in the heavy afternoons.

‘We must be at Malta,’ said Suvórov. ‘Shall we look?’ and he rose with a stretch and yawn. ‘You could play well,’ he added with generosity, ‘but you have not had enough practice. Shall we see?’

They went on deck, looked out to where everyone was looking, and there was Malta. Small like a postcard view—they were still at some distance—the Grand Harbour expected them. Little could be made out as yet, only an impression of yellowish buildings and a moving of ships, like bees round a hive. A following wind, brisk

and chilly, was sweeping both sea and ship to the harbour's mouth. The chess-players leaned on the rail; around them knowledgeable Service voices were pointing out this feature or that.

'We can go on shore,' said Mitcham. 'Are you going?'

'Perhaps,' said Suvórov. 'I am not sure. It depends—on my passport.' And he pulled from an inner pocket a narrow greyish document, limp and somehow furtive, certainly very different from that which Mitcham carried, the stiff-backed tribal warrant, Navy blue, gilt-stamped with the Royal arms. Suvórov would not hand over his to Mitcham's curiosity; he looked at its outside with a quizzical doubt and put it back in his pocket.

'It depends,' he repeated, 'on what your police may do. They may be satisfied. If not—I stay on board.'

'I don't suppose you'll miss much,' said Mitcham, who had never been there himself. 'It's very much an Army-and-Navy place.' They could, indeed, see now that many of the ships were warships. The Grand Harbour's narrow entrance picked itself out from the coast-line behind it; the buildings defined themselves into a promontory of honey-coloured walls, so solid, so all-covering, that they seemed a part of the island itself, no less old and no less indestructible: nothing could ever crumble those tailored blocks of stone. The liner slid through the harbour's entrance, easy and confident, a proud ship in her own waters. The bright calm harbour was splashy with small craft; they had white awnings; standing rowers, facing the prows, propelled them with long thin oars: and in the midst of them, vast and motionless, a battleship lay at anchor. She lay at right angles to the approaching *Strathbogle*, which turned slightly to round her stern; ratings looked up, grinning and waving, fussy and human, from their little domesticities with mop or polish or paint-brush. She was grim and ugly—and beautiful; she looked as invulnerable as Valetta's walls. The liner turned again and glided very close past her stern, where under the ensign was her name—

'Hood?' said Suvórov enquiringly. 'Why is she called that?'

'He was an English admiral,' said Mitcham shortly. He was more moved than he wanted to show; patriotism and anti-militarism were fighting the perpetual battle of his type and age-group.

'She is a fine ship,' said Suvórov.

Mitcham did not answer; he was looking at a naval launch puttering alongside the battleship, with a young rating, in shorts and singlet, standing in the bows and swinging a boathook. As the launch came up to a gangway, he reached out lazily with the hook and missed first whatever he had aimed at; tried again, and this time secured it; but now, perhaps because the launch had gone too far, he

half-lost his balance, almost fell overboard, and saved himself only by leaving the hook, which hung swinging from the gangway railing. He had made, in fact, a thorough mess of it; but what was odd was that somehow he had given to his blunder more grace than most men can give to their successes, and that he himself seemed completely unperturbed: he stood on the prow, hands on hips, fair-haired and laughing in the brilliant sunlight, as the launch swung round to try again. I shall never forget that, thought Mitcham suddenly; he knew it at the moment itself. Suvórov too was watching, looking back at the now receding *Hood*.

'*Quis separabit?*' he murmured, his gesture and tone attaching the phrase to everything about them—to the great warship and the harbour, to the *Strathbogle* and her passengers. 'And now'—they had come to a stop, gangways were rattling out, passengers beginning to move down them—'now let us see. . .'

They joined the queue, Suvórov in front. At the bottom of the gangway, on a sort of pontoon, passengers were showing their passports to a pair of dark languid little men in slightly exotic uniforms. The chattering queue, light-headed as one always is at landing, moved up to the trestle-table at which the policemen sat. Mitcham, now alongside Suvórov, looked at him idly as his turn came near: and was fixed, almost shocked, by a change in the Russian's—more than appearance, more than attitude, it seemed in his very nature. His face had sharpened, his talkative hands were clenched and still, he was braced and pointed with suspicion and fear. He is like a cat, thought Mitcham, a wild cat, who's been caught in a trap before and thinks that this may be another. And he felt an acute desire, for his own sake and for his people's, that this trap would not be sprung. Now it was Suvórov's turn: he advanced very quickly, pulled out the greyish document, and dropped it on the table. The little policemen, bored and sighing, flipped through its pages, asked one question—Mitcham could not hear it—banged one stamp on one page, handed the document back, and waved for the next—for Mitcham himself. The trap had not sprung.

Suvórov waited while Mitcham was passed. Both of them, as they rejoined each other, were smiling broadly, each for his own reasons delighted and relieved. 'No trouble?' said Mitcham. 'No trouble,' repeated Suvórov, and they turned to go ashore. 'Yes,' he added with more than common emphasis, 'you *are* a great people, you are a very great people'; and Mitcham was left to wonder, as they ran the gauntlet of Valetta's touts, if he had really heard, or merely imagined, a sly and prophetic irony lurking in the stranger's praise.