The MODERN SHORT STORY in the MAKING

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Howard Nemerov and W. R. Johnson

Exchange of Men

When the train pulled slowly out of Grand Central, Francis Baron took the miniature chessboard from his pocket and began to contemplate it. He did not set out the pieces, but simply studied the sixty-four black and white squares on which, you might say, he played not only chess but his whole life as well. Already as he watched the vacant board, invisible pieces moved and combined in his mind's eye, developing of themselves the studied complexities of his games. It was as he had once said, "When one passes a certain stage, one no longer moves the pieces, but simply watches them move." Francis Baron had passed that stage by the time he was twenty years old. What he was doing now, and expected to be doing until the train reached Boston, might be compared to the five-finger exercises which a great virtuoso performs faithfully every day. A discipline, a regimen, and more: he knew that from these simple diversions might come the inspiration that would save a game, the subtle but definite variation that had never appeared in books. It had happened so before, and the books had modified themselves agreeably: "The following brilliant line of play was employed for the first time in any tournament by the American master, Francis Baron. . . ."

Now, at the age of forty, on his way to the International Tournament, his appearance certainly suggested nothing so artistic and out of the way as a chess master. He was a small man, neatly and not distinctively dressed, and his only peculiarity was a rather oversize round head from which large eyes peered through silver-rimmed glasses. This

anonymity of appearance, coupled with his magnificent play, had caused someone to nickname him "the mighty pawn," a title which, with that other more grandiose one of "master" he had retained since his early tournaments.

Conductors and people passing through the car glanced curiously at the little man who nursed in his lap the unoccupied chessboard as though it were a treasure or a secret sorrow; and a personable young man, who sat with a pretty girl across the aisle, leaned over and asked, "Would you care to have a game?"

Baron looked up in some annoyance. "Thank you, no," he said primly, and while he spoke he exchanged queens with his invisible opponent, and came out with the advantage of a pawn. That was one thing about being a master: you could not play with anybody you happened to meet. Even a master dropped games surprisingly often, and such a loss to an unknown opponent in a railroad car would be embarrassing, not to mention the detriment to one's reputation. Also, though Baron was a young man compared to most of the masters he would meet in tournament play, he already had a strong respect, which soon would become fear, for the rising generation. He himself must have looked like a naive innocent when, at twenty-three, he defeated Orimund in the first of many games. Now he could not blame Orimund for behaving so ungraciously afterward.

Fearing he might have been rude, he said now, "I'm terribly busy, you see," and realized that it must have sounded ridiculous.

"Are you going to watch the tournament in Boston?" the young man asked.

Baron hesitated. "Yes," he said finally. "Yes, I expect to be there." Firmly his mind told him, rook takes rook, pawn takes rook, check . . . the ending would be simplicity itself.

"I guess it's really between Orimund, Savard, and Baron," said the young man. "No one else has much chance against those three."

The mate, Baron thought, would be accomplished with a very small force, because the white king was blocked in three directions by his own pawns.

"I admire Orimund very much," the young man continued. "He's the last of the old grand masters. He has the most intense attack I've ever seen. I rather hope he becomes champion again. It would be a victory not only for himself but for his style of play as well."

"You don't much care for the modern way?" asked Baron.

"Too much subtlety, too much caution," said the young man. "Modern chess isn't playing, it's waiting."

"It wins."

"Look," the young man offered. "How about a game? I'll spot you whatever you like—a rook, even."

Baron smiled slowly. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"Well, I feel I should tell you; I'm Richard James, that is—I don't suppose you've heard of me. I won the intercollegiate championship last year."

So this was Richard James. Baron remembered a piece in the papers, not about the intercollegiate tournament, but about another, a small affair in Chicago, in which a young man named Richard James had lost rather badly to Max Tarnes but carried off the brilliancy prize all the same for a rather exciting combination against Jacob Goldman. He could see the familiar old pattern as it began to repeat itself. In a year, or two years, or three, he would be facing the brilliant young master, Richard James, across the tournament board, and everything would be at stake. But nothing need be given away at this moment. He began to set up the pieces.

"I'd still prefer to play even," he said.

"Now are you satisfied?" asked the pretty girl. "You've trapped the innocent bystander into a game. That's what's such fun about being married to Dick," she explained to Baron, "you meet such a lot of interesting people. But by a strange coincidence, they all play chess."

The young man laughed. "I want you to meet my wife, Sally, Mr.—?"

Baron looked at the board. "Springer, John Springer," he said, using the German name for knight. His use of a pseudonym, he told himself, was not in the least disreputable. After all, he had a standing which must be jealously guarded at every moment. Suppose there should be a slip, an accident, the distraction of being aboard a rattling train, the disturbingly informal conditions generally—he did not intend that such an accident should affect the reputation or the tournament play of Francis Baron during the next week.

But in trying, temporarily, at least, to conceal his identity, he must not, he knew, employ his own style of play, which to an expert would at once reveal both his name and his quality. He must accept, then, the

disadvantage of meeting Richard James on the latter's own ground, which would probably be the ground of a violent attack, initiated as rapidly as possible. Ordinarily Baron would withdraw before such an attack and use his whole development for defense, for subtle probing and slow exploiting of weaknesses, occupying more and more space in the long wait for his opponent's critical mistake, which must come in time. Then, rapidly, the complexion of the match would change. From the reticence of his beginnings and his control of strategic area, Baron would open out the penetrating, incisive, and fatal counterattack. That was the way, the modern style, which had made Baron a master. But now he must fight by older and riskier methods.

Young James drew the white and opened with the Max Lange attack, quick and straight down the center of the board. It was evident that he was trying for immediate victory, and accepting a disadvantageous position if the attempt failed.

Baron countered along conventional lines, vigorously fighting for the center, for the points from which well-masked and defended powers could extend their grasp on positions within the enemy's lines. Both men were slightly nervous. There was a quality of chess, thought Baron, which made it absurd to say, "It's only a game." On the contrary, as you could judge from the way people played it, it was a warlike and representative struggle for mastery. It was a conspectus of life itself, with the illusion of power over life, which is why, though unthinking people laugh to hear of it, the chess master often dies worn out, overstrained from an incredible depth and complexity of concentration prolonged over a period of years.

As they entered the end game with an exchange of queens, James was a pawn behind, but occupied better immediate attacking position.

"You play extremely well, sir," he said deferentially to Baron, who nodded and smiled. The position, he saw, was critical. If Richard James possessed perfect book knowledge, he had what amounted to a winning game. On the other hand, he was nervous, just about trembling with eagerness for success. If that nervousness could be exploited properly, or improperly, for that matter, but exploited somehow—Francis Baron regretted exceedingly having been drawn into the match. This young man would be present at the tournament, he would recognize his opponent of the railroad car, there would surely be some publicity. He could imagine Savard's wry, crooked grin; and not alone Savard. Baron was not so well liked among the masters; they resented his youth and perhaps

his manner as well. There would be a good deal of laughter over this.

Abruptly he said, "I'm afraid I didn't tell you my real name." He smiled in apology, held out his hand. "I'm Francis Baron."

On the surface it was all right. It was even a compliment to the younger man. The master, by revealing his identity, seemed to be acknowledging a worthy opponent. And Richard James tried desperately to take the acknowledgement in that spirit. But there was now too much at stake. He was no longer playing a chess game. He was playing, with a chance to win, against Francis Baron himself. He blushed and stammered, "I hope you didn't think me rude—about Orimund, I mean. I had no idea—"

"Of course not." Francis Baron smiled. "Orimund plays his way, I play mine. It's your move, Mr. James."

Two moves later Richard James moved the pawn that cost him the game. His famous antagonist was gracious in triumph, quiet and assured as he complimented the younger man on playing a very strong game.

"We shall be seeing you in tournament play very soon, I fear," he said cordially when they parted in Back Bay Station.

"You're very kind to say so; we look forward to watching your games."

Both knew what had happened. For Baron the victory was rather empty, achieved by a trick in a class with blowing smoke in your opponent's face throughout a game (this being the favorite stratagem of one Russian master), or whistling, or tapping your fingers on the table. And worst of all, he did not know if he could have won that particular game without such a device.

As for Richard James, he said to his wife, "I don't know why he had to pick that moment to tell me who he was. I was doing all right until then, but Lord! to be up against Francis Baron! I just collapsed right there."

"And that," said Sally, "is just about what he wanted. Your Francis Baron may be a great master, but it strikes me he's just a little bit of a heel at the same time."

"Now, darling, he could have beaten me anyhow."

"Don't 'now darling' me. I don't know much about chess, and he may have been able to beat you hollow; but from what I saw of his face at the time, he didn't think so."

The players in the tournament, thought Baron, had all the solemnity and high seriousness of a conclave of cardinals met to elect a new Pope, and all the jealousy, to be sure, of a boy's ball team electing a captain. It was the first international tournament since before the war, and the meeting was marked by the absence of a few faces formerly well known: Estignan, who was dead; Zinuccio, who had turned Fascist and was in prison; Einrich, who was not allowed to leave his country. But the others he knew well enough: the English master, Cranley, looking in his rich tweeds like an aged schoolboy; Savard, the Frenchman, a dumpy little man who resembled a chef and played the most eccentric games of any master; Jasoff, from Russia, looking more than usually peaked and unhappy; and several other masters from all over the world. Second-rate, thought Baron. And yet, not really second-rate: so little distance, in chess, separated the master from the expert, the merely brilliant player. It was more than probable, he reflected with distaste, that he would lose games to more than one of them. But fortunately, in a chess tournament one was not eliminated for losing a game. Elimination occurred at definite stages, on the basis of point score: one for a win, one-half for a draw. After a complete round, the contestants with the lowest scores went out and the remainder began again.

And there was Orimund, at last. The aged master whose white hair stood out like a wiry halo over his head, who always wore a high white collar and shiny black suit. Orimund, nearing seventy, with his trembling hands, his gentle voice and perfect manners, and that mind whose keenness had probably suffered somewhat during the last years. They said he had spent time in a concentration camp, and looking at him now, Baron found it easy to believe this. He had not remembered the old man as so gentle, so meek. They met in the lobby of the hotel, and Orimund seemed to have forgotten his resentment of Baron. They called each other, conventionally, Master, and were for a moment almost friendly.

"Ech, life passes, Master Baron," the old man said. "You, too, are no longer exactly of the youngsters."

Was that the way of it? Did one creep gently out of life, shedding the old antagonisms, ridding oneself gradually of the vicious desire for success?

"I am glad to have the honor once again, Master," he replied.

"Perhaps for the last time," Orimund said. "You know, years ago,

when I was asked 'How can you waste your life playing chess?' I was able to reply 'How can you waste your life writing books, or making money, or painting pictures, or whatever?' And it was a good, an acceptable answer. Now, I confess, I begin to wonder, what have I done? I was given my life, and what have I made of it?"

"You leave an immortal name," replied Baron gravely.

"An immortal name—better to have died ten years ago, much better. Perhaps you will understand that someday, Master." This last, Baron recognized, was said with a familiar cold, deadly anger that he remembered as an element in the former Orimund. But Baron understood what the old man meant: better to have died champion of the world, rather than face the failing of one's powers, the uprising of the young just when one is no longer able to oppose them with success. Better than the last cold years in which, if a master makes a mistake, he believes himself to be losing his mind.

That was the last time they spoke together except over the board. Almost angrily, Baron put down the pity he felt for the old genius. If that's the way it is, that's all, he told himself. When my time comes, I don't expect to weep on the conqueror's shoulder. That's what life is, and if we were the same age I would still be confident of winning. For that matter, if the position were reversed would he show any mercy to me? I doubt it.

The tournament was not easy. Few can go through the nervous strain of game after game against excellent players without feeling a sense of desperation, and Francis Baron was no exception. The competition grew progressively more severe, and in the last matches of the opening round one came up against players who, knowing already that they would be eliminated, played with violence and extravagance in the hope of taking home by way of consolation at least one victory over a possible world's champion. Baron was beaten in this way by Jasoff and Cranley, while Orimund dropped games to Savard and to Baron himself.

Baron, however, was superbly confident. In the first round he had beaten Savard, and his victory over Orimund was achieved, if not easily, at least with certainty and power from the opening move of a solid, invulnerable game. The old man played with a brilliance matching his former great tournament play, but finding his attack met at all points he overextended his defenses slightly and was unable to withstand the vicious counterattack when it finally came.

Richard and Sally were present at all his matches, and though Baron did not in any way acknowledge their interest, he felt intensely and uncomfortably that they had in some sense seen through what had occurred on the train, that it would give them pleasure if he lost, that they were in fact simply waiting for him to make a mistake. He smiled ironically to himself. There would be no mistakes, there must be none —perfection. And forthwith he proceeded roundly to trounce Dr. Anderson, his last opponent in the first round.

Orimund, Savard, Francis Baron and an Irishman named Brian alone escaped elimination. In the second round Brian realized suddenly that he was very close to being world's champion, and simply collapsed, losing to everyone. Savard lost to Baron and Orimund, and these last drew their games and entered the final with a score of two and a half each for the round.

On the night before the last match, Baron was sitting in the hotel lobby, reading, when he was approached by the secretary of the local chess club.

"We have about ten people collected," this functionary said, "and we wondered if you'd care to give some sort of exhibition. We should be honored, greatly honored, Master, and I can say definitely that there will be no publicity. Of course, I realize that you may not feel inclined to make the effort on the eve of the final, but I was instructed to ask you all the same." He hesitated, looked apologetic, and seemed, as though realizing the enormity of his request, to be ready to retire without an answer; but Baron stopped him.

"Under the conditions you specify," he said, "I shouldn't object to the exercise. In fact, I'm grateful for the compliment of your interest. But understand, I'll hold you to strict silence on the subject. In the first place, it would be a reflection on my opponent if it got out that I was so careless of him as to play for fun on the night before our game. I can play tonight only if it is understood that the results don't matter, that it is simply a relaxation from the tournament."

"I quite understand," the secretary said. "This is the arrangement. The members will be told that a master, whose name will not be given, will play blindfolded against all ten of them simultaneously. The master will be in a room apart, and will not meet the other players either before or after the match. In that way the secret of your identity can be

kept between the president and myself until after tomorrow night. And besides, the other players will be asked to keep silent about the whole event."

These terms proving to Baron's satisfaction, he was driven to the quarters of the Copley Chess Club, where he was placed in a small antechamber and left alone. Presently the secretary came in.

"It has been arranged," he said, "that you are to have white in the even-numbered games and black in the odd. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," replied Francis Baron.

"Then the first move in all the odd-numbered games is pawn to king four," said the secretary.

"My reply is the same, and my opening move in the even-numbered games is pawn to queen four."

That was the way of it, he thought. In this blindfolded game one allowed the opponents to open up a little, and then when the weak sisters among them disclosed themselves, they must be whipped rapidly, allowing one to concentrate on the difficult games.

The amateurs did show themselves very soon. Games one, two, four, eight, and nine took less than fifteen moves for the establishment of overwhelming superiority on Baron's side. Few of the boards presented any great difficulty. There was the usual zealot who felt that the queen-side pawns could do everything necessary, one who thought that to *finchetto* both bishops was to solve all his troubles, another who brought out his queen and proceeded to do damage to the extent of a rook and a pawn before falling into a cleverly prepared trap. Few of the games were in any way rewarding, except as an exercise in concentration for the master.

At last game number seven sorted itself out from the rest; there was something there. A Max Lange attack, with a curious variation in the placement of the queen's knight. Going over the position in his mind, Baron began to recognize the style. His opponent, he was almost certain, could be no one but Richard James. A few minutes later an astonishingly rapid attack confirmed his belief. Baron felt himself being pressed with some severity and marshaled his forces to defend. It would be a close game.

The other games expired in something over the fortieth move. He had won them all, but then, the competition had been very nearly nothing. The seventh game, however, was close and even threatening. James was playing for a brilliant win and as things stood it was well

within the possible for him to achieve it. And this time there was no way of breaking the boy's nerve; instead, Baron knew, his own nerve might go. It was so easy to make a mistake; he was holding precariously in his mind the crossing, tangling threads of thirty-two pieces moving altogether more than eighty times over sixty-four squares. The possibilities were infinite. If one forgot a move, or misplaced a move in memory, it was over: defeat. One defeat, of course, in ten blindfold games, is nothing; but to lose to young James! And he was certain that James knew his opponent; he felt an intellectual rapport that enabled him to picture the handsome young face as it bent over the board, and realized that James knew perfectly that he was playing—and winning—against Francis Baron.

And then it came. The secretary entered, said, "Game number seven. Pawn to bishop six."

"Is he certain of that?" Baron asked, incredulous.

"That is his move, sir."

"My reply—queen takes rook."

Francis Baron breathed easily. Richard James had made a mistake, a subtle mistake, to be sure, and not immediately apparent, but the master could now foresee the imminent collapse of his opponent's game. After the sacrifice of the queen, knight and two rooks would accomplish the rest. He called after the secretary, "I announce checkmate in six moves."

It went as he planned, now. On the fifth move he forced the white rook to occupy the square adjacent to the white king, thus blocking all escape squares and enabling the knight to mate at bishop seven. He returned to his hotel.

But he was troubled in his mind. A mistake like that, it was unnatural, considering how masterful James's play had been up until then. It was tantamount to deliberate surrender, it was . . . it was deliberate surrender! He saw it now. James had recognized his adversary, had realized that Baron, strained by the tournament, could be upset beyond measure by a defeat of any sort at this moment, and he had deliberately opened up his board so as to be defeated. It was a gesture of the most subtle and keen sportsmanship; it was, in a way, a moral revelation. After all, he reflected, when you consider that he probably dislikes me intensely, and realized that he had it in his power to hurt my game and refrained—that shows the greatest delicacy.

Francis Baron found it difficult to get to sleep. His own face kept

appearing to him, saying, "I am Francis Baron, I am Francis Baron," over and over with the utmost pomposity imaginable. What was it for? he asked himself. For a game of chess. Chess is not, after all, life itself. Chess, if you regard it properly, is a game. A great game, true; but is it worth the demands it makes? Fancy a man like Orimund, now, decrepit, feeling bitterly the decline of his powers, yet playing with the most religious courtesy and chivalry.

He could imagine Orimund after the final match, returning alone to Europe. There would still be many admirers, would still be the satisfaction of a good game, not a great game, mind; but deeply, essentially, he would be an old man, nearing death, alone.

Orimund won the final game. Francis Baron would never forget how the reporters gathered around after the game, nor how the old man wept far more over his success than he would have wept over his defeat. And how Orimund called him "Master" and said good-by in the most touching and friendly way, his hand on the younger man's shoulder. "After me," he had said, "in a year, less perhaps, who knows?"

Between dejection and satisfaction, Francis Baron, runner-up for the world's chess championship, packed his bag and prepared to return to New York. The analysis of that final game, he knew, would give many people reason enough to laugh at him.

"Come in," he said in response to a knock.

Richard and Sally James stood at the door. He invited them in, and Richard said, "We just wanted you to know we saw what you did in that game." Sally nodded in agreement. "And we'd like to tell you we thought it was wonderful."

"Did? I didn't do anything—except lose, of course."

"You gave him the game. You did it purposely, and you did it so that no one who didn't know both your styles perfectly would ever realize."

Francis Baron smiled at them. "There's no need to shout it all over the place," he said. "Anyhow, I've got you to thank for my quixotic behavior. You taught me a great deal about games and other things last night."

"Last night?" James looked blank.

"Yes. At the Copley Club, you know, game number seven."

"I don't get it," Richard James said, "I've never been to the Copley Club in my life."

A Collaborative Venture

BIOGRAPHY—Howard Nemerov was born in New York City in 1920, and after graduation from Harvard College served in the Royal Canadian Air Force from 1942 to 1944, and in the United States Army Air Corps from 1944 to 1945 as a pilot. He was professor of English at Bennington College from 1948 to 1962, later a writer-in-residence at Hollins College, Virginia, and Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress. He is the author of numerous short stories, some of them collected in *A Commodity of Dreams;* books of verse; two satiric novels, *The Melodramatists* and *Federigo or the Power of Love;* and *The Home Coming Game.* In 1955 Nemerov received the *Kenyon Review* Fellowship in fiction. In a biographical note, Nemerov once wrote, "If we may count the Armed Forces as a school, I stand convicted of having been at school almost steadily from the age of five; a career which I have heard to be the worst one for a person pretending to imaginative writing. Whether it is so in fact I cannot, of course, say; I have seen dangers in the academic life, but so are there dangers everywhere; and I think I have seen one advantage, that teaching absorbs a great deal of one's bent for explaining things—a doubtless praiseworthy trait which, however, in my opinion, ought to be allowed the least possible play in writing fictions, whether in verse or in prose."

BACKGROUND—"Exchange of Men" was printed in *Story* under the pseudonym of Joseph Cross in November, 1946. Joseph Cross turned out to be the pen name, for a time, of two men, Howard Nemerov and W. R. Johnson, a writer now connected with the United States government. Mr. Nemerov writes: "Joseph Cross was the pseudonym chosen by W. R. Johnson and myself for a collaboration entered upon with the object of making money by writing, I think in 1946. 'Exchange of Men' was one of our (I think) two successes, gaining the sum of $25 from *Story* Magazine. The other, a much cheesier affair altogether, was accordingly much more munificently compensated. As a money-making venture the col-

laboration was not vastly successful, probably because the two halves of Joseph Cross spent so much of the working day playing chess."

POINT OF VIEW—"My views of writing tend to be a touch complicated, idiosyncratic, purposely vague and even bland—so as not to exclude possibilities for the future. When someone asks me 'What is your favorite this or that,' or 'Who are the ten authors on your hit parade,' I back up and begin to mumble. To say 'Judge not,' that is probably beyond mortal powers; but one can at least say, 'Judge as little as possible.' "

INTERVIEW—"I will risk one answer: at the moment of writing, I am convinced that the most useful book for a writer of short stories would be the *Collected Stories of Isaac Babel.* And I might add: if only novelists were lazier, books would be shorter."