

THE FORFEIT

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THE OLD MAN CLACKED HIS BISHOP ON KNIGHT FIVE, THEN mumbled to himself, as he did after every move. I met Darlington's brown eyes as they jumped from the board to me. From the way he lifted his brow and cocked his head I could tell he thought that the old man had blundered. To congratulate him for seeing the major's apparent move—queen to bishop four, check, saving both the queen and the rook—I smiled. But I also shook my head ever so slightly to let him know that the old man had not really made a mistake.

Then the major took a great deal of time. Although I had sat across the board from him only once, I had enough of a notion of his style of play to know this was unusual. I myself am a nervous player. Even after I've made a decision I'll hesitate over a piece or hover above a square. But the major sat behind a chess board as erectly as he stood and walked—belly sucked in, back slightly arched from the V of his waist to the T of his shoulders, head and neck on a plumb line down the axis of his torso, chin tilted upward without in the least elevating the plane of his eyes or slanting the sheer forehead. Yes, it was quite evident, the major thought, willed, moved with assurance. His very way of handling the pieces bespoke authority—seizing one of his own pawns or scooping up one of yours, stabbing the center of the square he was taking

possession of, firing a captured rook or knight into the trough at the side of the table. In the game we had played, a very tight affair in which he was under great pressure almost from the beginning, the major had never used more than five minutes to reply. Often, even at critical junctures, he had moved within seconds. So when after half an hour the major still had not answered the old man, I assumed that he realized the impossibility of his situation.

Much of the crowd that had collected around the table at the beginning had drifted off. Some to other boards to play among themselves or to watch a faster-moving game. Others to the recreation room beyond the French doors, through which we could see on one side a couple of sets of ping pong players stretching and slapping and scooping and slicing, and on the other, a succession of soldiers, sailors, and marines twirling, turning, pulling, backing, leading, throwing the same five or six tired U.S.O. girls to music we could not hear. Still others to the streets, shops, bazaars, bars, brothels of Honolulu.

Of the half dozen who along with Darlington and me remained at the table, one was the exquisitely beautiful Island girl the major had brought with him for the second time. Although no written rule prohibited women from entering the chess room, that its habitués were chiefly men was declared distinctly by the appointments and atmosphere of the place—the absence of drapes to soften the stippled salt and pepper walls; the lavatory-like floor of black and white tile discs; the heavy mahogany tables, their tops painted into brown and white squares, with troughs down each side for the massive lead-weighted chess pieces; the flat-seated, straight-backed chairs; the brass ash trays, almost as large as spittoons, always heaped with cigar and cigarette butts; the head, merely a closet, whose door did not properly close, containing a single smelly stool, in one corner of the room; the grey

smoke that writhed in the cone of yellow light under the green metal shade hanging above each table; the reek of tobacco; the prevailing silence and its sporadic interruptions: a grunted "check," a mutter of self-reproach or relief, the clack of a queen against the board or the clunk of a bishop into the trough, the scrape of a chair, the shuffle of feet, the crossing or uncrossing of legs. During the month I had been frequenting the chess room, in lieu of tasting the pleasures of Honolulu or drinking in the exotic scenery of the Islands or sunning on the sand and bathing in the warm sea at Waikiki, I had never seen any other woman so much as peer through the French doors, let alone enter.

The major had first brought the girl two days before—the afternoon of our encounter. For some reason we always came and went through the narrow door that led to the alley behind the building; even the few servicemen who moved back and forth between chess and ping pong or dancing invariably went around the outside way. So the breaking open of the French doors had been like an electric signal buzzed through the brains of the men poring over the boards. The girl herself, oval-faced, black hair elaborately coiffured, slim in a white sheath printed with large red and green poinsettia, held every eye as she sashayed across the floor at the brisk pace of her escort to where I sat alone, getting nowhere with a puzzle—white to play and mate in three. After having fairly ordered me into a game with him, the major slid the seat of a chair under the neatly rounded *derrière* of the girl—on his left he put her. The way in which he had managed the pageant made it perfectly clear that he was intending to use me, the game, the chess room to exhibit his mind.

During our two-hour battle the girl had sat silent, almost motionless. Her black eyes were fixed on the board, the heavy lids shading the almond-shaped scoops in her olive face as though she was a little weary. A captive

princess, I'd thought as I sat locked in battle with her white lord, staring at her between moves: now at her high-cheeked face; again at her neck, very long, slender, smooth; now at the tiny hands crossed partly on her faintly rounded belly, partly on her lap; again at the calf of her leg, slightly bulged from the pressure of the knee it was crossed over. I must confess that slowly forcing the major into an irretrievable position had given me considerable pleasure. For although I doubted that the girl knew the diagram of a knight move, let alone was capable of appreciating the intricacies of the variation of the Queen's Gambit I had offered, I was aware that the very manner of the major's entrance and challenge had led him into a most uncomfortable dilemma—when finally I finished him either he would have to acknowledge defeat before the girl or else he would have to worm out of the acknowledgment before me. Which, I didn't care.

Physically the major represented to perfection something that had always repelled me. Although he gave the impression of being short, actually he was above average height, just as the girl seemed to be tall but was really rather short, even with the inches her very high heels added—a corrected estimate I had come to on my way back to the hospital an hour or so after our game when the two of them stepped into a taxi I had been about to enter. (We had collided and separated too quickly for me to see whether the major's right hand had returned the abbreviated salute I'd offered as I'd backed away.) The impression of shortness came from the major's proportion and carriage. He was solid-fleshed, yet in no way ponderous. At once powerful-looking—the heavy-muscled legs and arms seeming to want to burst through the tight dress uniform, the left fist held clenched, the strings of his neck drawn taut, the jaw and eyes always set—yet quick in his movements. At once well-bred—the smooth cheeks, tan

but fair, the blue eyes, and the cropped blond hair stamped him as an American of Anglo-Saxon strain, the sort that before the war comprised the select ranks of executives in business and government, career diplomats, military officers—yet throwing off a warning of brutality—this from the pinch of the lips, the narrowness of the eyes, and most from the nose, a bit flat at the top and crooked along the bone, like a boxer's. Two rows of star-studded campaign ribbons, deployed over his heart on the immaculate dress coat of the Corps, sealed the major's worth for any skeptic.

And yet, what he symbolized was not what had really pricked me. On the contrary—since as a nation we were presently engaged in a *guerre à mort*, I, like all but a few cranks and cowards, was willing to turn my fate over to exactly the character the major's facade reflected so classically. The fact that I was at that very instant just enough restored after a mauling of body and soul I could never completely recover from—I could not grow another left hand, that was certain—to make my way to the chess room from the base hospital where I would remain for at least another six months of “rehabilitation,” in no way induced me to remember that precisely what the major was so perfectly a part of had not only directed the attack that had almost finished me, but had also led me—and how many more on both sides?—to the point at which attack and counterattack were inevitable. No, more—at that time I was so far from making any judgment *against* the major, and his class, with regard to my private catastrophe that I consciously associated him with the lieutenant junior grade who, in an act of conditioned bravery of which I was certain I was incapable, had undoubtedly saved what was left of me by entering a blazing five-inch mount and carrying me, broken and unconscious, out onto an open deck. The Purple Heart and the Silver Star,

which I recognized among the ribbons on the major's chest, probably prompted the connection. Yes, if anything, my prejudice was for the major.

Yet that prejudice was not strong enough to prevent me from bristling at the major's invasion of the chess room—our chess room. Just because it contrasted so radically with the clear open beauty of the Islands, where I was officially “recuperating,” with the vitality of the streets, shops, bazaars, with the sensuality of the beaches, bars, hotels, and brothels, I had come to consider the chess room a refuge for the part of me that all along, even before the wounding, I had refused to surrender to the war I seemed to have no choice but to become involved in. This refusal to give myself entirely, this stubborn reservation which at the moment I desperately needed to be able to express, in order to prove to myself the survival of the me I still controlled—the me I could will to do this or that, could make imagine what might win or lose, might prove workable or disastrous, might turn out to be beautifully possible or horribly impossible—it was saving my life and at the same time was becoming my life. Ah, the game of chess!

I can honestly say too that I felt outraged not only for myself. For I shared the chess room retreat with a few kindred, because broken, souls. There was Darlington, to whom since we had met at the hospital and while teaching him the rudiments of chess I had become a kind of father—a boy out of a parsonage in Mississippi, officially diagnosed as an “adjustment problem” in order to cover the blunder of inducting into an armed force to fight a war an eighteen-year-old child whose nerve was so frail that during the bombardment of Okinawa, clutching a Bible and wrapped inside a life jacket, he had jumped from the fantail of the battleship to which he had been assigned and had begun swimming across the ice-smooth Pacific toward the island eight miles away, with the intention of

surrendering to the Japanese defenders, confessing his sin against the enemy, and begging their forgiveness. (Within fifteen minutes he had been fished from the sea by an efficient destroyer and the following morning found himself in the base hospital at Pearl Harbor, "under observation.") There was MacDowell, an army captain in his mid-sixties, who had been graduated from West Point in 1904 and who would never be promoted to major if he lived to be a hundred and sixty, the chance of which was rather remote, what with most of his natural plumbing cut away, as he good-humoredly told me one afternoon when I blunderingly made a remark about having to use the stool in the smelly little head in the corner. There were a few derelicts like the old man the major was engaged with, about whom no one knew anything except that for years he had been appearing in the chess room shortly before noon, playing constantly until late afternoon, at which time he disappeared until the next morning; and the bald, yellow-faced Russian—the old man and the Russian were the two strongest boards but they never played or spoke to each other—who rolled his own cigarettes out of tobacco he salvaged without embarrassment from the brass ashtrays, whom I had often seen begging on the streets of Honolulu within minutes of having been checkmated by him. And some half dozen others.

Then the major had come strutting through the French doors, exhibiting himself and the Island beauty he had commandeered, invading our last citadel. On the instant the old ease vanished, our camaraderie was broken, our sense of security threatened. I found myself conscious that my neckerchief was off, my right sleeve rolled up. And instead of greeting MacDowell, who, entering passed the table at which the major and I sat without his usual scatological joke, as "Mac," I heard myself bringing out a "Good afternoon, Captain MacDowell." I noticed, too,

that as he began to play against the Russian two tables away, MacDowell did not remove his shoes or drop his tie, as was his custom.

I'll concede it's probable the girl also had had something to do with my desire to humiliate the major. That the major happened to be left-handed and so displayed a gold wedding band each time he moved a piece—I could picture the mannequin bride, graduate of Vassar or Bryn Mawr, he had led down the nave of swords one June afternoon—was an unhappy coincidence. I had moved with my right hand of course, and had kept the claw, which every morning I was struggling with all of my will and nerve and muscle to learn to use and which I had just succeeded in making twitch for the first time, hidden beneath the table.

Thirty-five minutes passed. The old man chewed and spit tobacco. Every so often he muttered to himself, or his fingers found their way into the trough and toyed with a couple of captured pieces. Of the original knot of spectators only the girl on her chair and Darlington and I standing behind the table on opposite sides were left. But others, drawn by the invisible magnetism of the major and the girl, had clustered around, making the crowd the largest it had yet been. I wished it still larger—so much sweeter would I find the taste of the major's ultimate defeat.

That the major would finally be beaten I had not the least doubt from the instant, having met my eyes, recognized me, then looked through me, the major had commanded the old man to set up the pieces. For I could measure precisely the relative strength of the two chess minds. In our encounter I had forced the major into what was clearly a losing position in the end game. And from the character of his play throughout I knew that I could do so again and again—every time I really set myself to it, as you do in match play but ordinarily don't in the strings

of games that run out the hours for you afternoon after afternoon.

And the old man? The old man was a stronger board than I. I remember the surprise with which I'd discovered this the first time I'd sat across from him. Darlington—having just learned the moves from me, he had stumbled across the chess room a week or so before I was permitted to leave the hospital—had described for me the old man, the Russian, MacDowell, and three or four other regulars. But I had not expected to find a level of play equal to that in the clubs back in the city—Honolulu seemed an unlikely place for serious chess. As a matter of fact, I had imagined myself creating quite a stir my first afternoon of competing. But the instant the old man answered my king's opening with a seldom-used variation of the Sicilian defense, I knew. And playing black, he crushed me in that first game. We drew the second. Somehow I managed to beat him in the third. He won the fourth. After one of the finest endings I have ever played I took the fifth. Weary, but jubilant, I tilted back on two legs and smiled.

"That evens it up—a draw and two wins apiece," I announced grandly.

Until this instant we had not spoken to each other outside of grunting a few checks. Nor had either of us expressed the least surprise at finding such respectable opposition, although, to tell the truth, I'd been half expecting the old man to declare his amazement in some way, perhaps to question me or even to throw out a compliment. Now that I'd broken the ice he had the opportunity.

As I spoke, his fingers, purple and rock-like at the joints, were already arranging the pieces for the next game. Suddenly he glanced up at me, his grey eyes obviously astonished, his white brush mustache, stained brown with tobacco juice, never so much as quivering. Then he shrugged his shoulders until they almost

touched the lobes of his ears, and with a pawn in each hand turned his palms upward. Immediately he resumed setting up the pieces. I doubt that he would have known, or cared, if Alekhine, the Russian grandmaster who was then world champion, or Darlington, a chess babe of a mere few weeks, had been sitting across the table from him. For having so nakedly exposed myself, I was mortified.

He won that sixth game, which I'd made so crucial, by way of a brilliant combination after a mere ten or twelve moves. And afterward, although I resolved to profit from the beauty of his disinterestedness, to achieve for myself the magnificent innocence of playing each game for its own sake rather than for the satisfaction of accumulating wins or points or credits, I couldn't help being aware that I ran consistently behind him, and also behind the Russian, that MacDowell and I balanced our score to perfection, that I had the upper hand with everyone else who frequented the chess room.

And so I was confident that, outside of the sort of mechanical oversight which had cost me the game I really had already won against the major, who contrary to the custom of all casual play (in contrast to match play where the "touch" rule was absolute), made no offer to allow me to replay—I was confident that the old man would win. The chance of the major's being reprieved a second time by such a stroke of luck was remote indeed. The old man blundered less in casual play than almost anyone I had ever encountered, less than all but the top-rung players back in the city. And my confidence was about to prove justified, for having followed the game from the opening pawn move as closely as any I myself had ever engaged in, I could see that, despite the evenness of the material on the board, the old man had his win already.

Because the revenge was to be vicarious, I waited for it none the less hungrily. To have forfeited through mere

carelessness the victory I had earned two days before, to have had to take the major's condescending "Too bad, sailor," and his curt nod, still galled me. The impossibility of explaining to Darlington, my pupil and worshiper, as keen to see me beat the major as I myself had been to do it, or to the little crowd that had watched, all of whom knew and respected me, or to the girl, for whom the exhibition had been staged, the impossibility of explaining that regardless of his apparent assurance the major realized how lucky he was, realized indeed that he had been beaten, salted the wound. And yet somehow it seemed more than adequate compensation that a piece of insignificant-looking humanity, which at some unknown time had drifted into Honolulu and for some reason had never been floated out again, should be the one to topple the haughty major before his mistress.

Forty-five minutes passed. I'll give the man credit—there was no fisting and stretching his fingers around captured pieces, no twitching his shoulders, no crossing and uncrossing his legs, no sliding his bottom, no shuffling his feet, as there would have been had I been in the major's place, or as there was on the part of the old man. No, the major hardly moved a muscle the whole time he sat there thinking. The girl was just as still.

And I'll give the major credit too for the style with which he finally did it. Had he been ordered to lead a platoon of men across an open field under the control of an enemy's automatic weapons, or had he found himself lashed to a post facing a squad of enemy muzzles at fifteen feet, the major, I realize, would have preserved the angle of his chin just as steadily, would have held his ice-blue eyes just as unblinkingly. As his left hand suddenly rose from his lap, grasped the black pawn at knight two, advanced it harmlessly a single square into territory that was without the least significance, the little crowd collected around the board seemed to rise on tiptoe, heave,

and hang. Even before the major's hand was snapped back, eyes from the neighboring games had jerked toward the major's table, and instantly every loose man in the room was gravitating toward this center.

Again I felt Darlington's child eyes leap onto mine. Again those eyes were wide with excitement. And again I knew that Darlington was both right and wrong—right in seeing that the major had indeed blundered in that through thinking and rethinking and still rethinking he had erased from his mind what we well knew and what was obvious even to a beginner—his queen, the black queen, was *en prise*; wrong in believing that it made any difference. So once more I shook my head and smiled. And then, on surely the same sort of impulse that had made him jump from the fantail of his battleship that morning off the coast of Okinawa, Darlington suddenly shouted, "The black queen! the black queen!" Yes, and then I saw his lips round themselves into a little O and I heard the same Mississippi whoop of triumph and joy that I had heard one evening on the sun deck of the base hospital when a lapse on my part allowed the pupil to set his rook down on king eight and in the most elementary way checkmate his teacher for the first time.

The yell filled the hollow cube of the chess room; echoing, it seemed to swell louder and louder. Those of us already at the table lifted our eyes from the board and stared at Darlington, his mouth still round as a choir boy's, his throat tremulous as if holding a high note, his soft brown eyes floating dead center, seemingly too much in exultation any longer to see. Those who were being drawn irresistibly from other parts of the room stopped, the circuit of the electro-magnet attracting them cut by Darlington's whoop of victory. Poised on their toes they hesitated, trying, it appeared, to prevent themselves from tumbling into some great abyss. All at once I realized that my mouth too was open wide. Whether I had involuntar-

ily joined Darlington in his ecstasy, I had no way of knowing, although the fact that no attention was paid to me leads me now to believe that if any sound issued from my lips it was a moan of agony. I snapped shut my mouth and smashed closed my eyes. In the darkness I still saw Darlington's radiant expression and I heard the ring of his cry.

Then there was stillness throughout the chess room. I forced my eyes to open. The crowd on the left side of the table, behind the girl on her chair, had split apart, forming a human corridor. On its floor I saw Darlington's face—the eyes still wide, the mouth still round. But his little snub nose had disappeared and in its place a spring gushed red. I blinked and then Darlington's skinny body, crumpled in white cloth, came into focus. On the black and white tiles it seemed two-dimensional, like paper or rag.

The major was on his feet at the left side of the table, obliquely facing the corridor that had opened. His right foot was forward. Directly in front of the ribbons on his chest the clenched fist of his left hand was poised. My eyes hung on the gold wedding band. His white-gloved right hand dangled down his side. All at once I heard my teeth chattering and I felt drops of sweat oozing through the skin all over my body. They were red hot. Then I realized that I was straining every muscle and nerve in me to move the hooks attached to the stump of my left wrist. I jerked my eyes onto the steel fingers that refused to obey my will.

A movement by the major, a twitch of his white-gloved right hand, yanked my eyes from the fingers that were mine but not me. It was as if a tiny motor, the sort that powered the erector sets some of us had when we were boys, were located underneath the tight skin of the major's temples, turning little wheels which pulled invisible strings or wires attached to his right wrist. The motor was

obviously too small for the job. And yet slowly, very very slowly, the white-gloved hand came up, reached a plane just above the level of the table, and then, as though turned into an overhead crane being operated by someone at a distant control panel, the hand moved forward toward the board. Over the black king it stopped, hovered, dropped a trifle. Without changing its frozen position the hand then moved forward again until the gloved middle finger bumped the cross on top of the black king's crown, toppling the piece. The whole maneuver reminded me of the operation of the mechanical claw in vending machines found in amusement centers, whose controls you manipulate for a dime or a quarter in the hope of scooping up and dumping out a cheap cigarette lighter or a Mickey Mouse wrist watch. In the hush of the chess room the bang of the falling piece against the table resounded like the blast of a sixteen-inch gun. Propelled by the lead weight in its base, the black king rolled back and forth in a little arc. The major's left fist was still cocked.

"I forfeit the game to you."

Without even flinging the old man the curt nod I had received for losing, the major turned toward the girl. There was an instant, not a very long one but still a distinct emptiness of time, before she responded. It was as though the moment were offering someone, anyone, the opportunity to cry out the very words that echoed in the vault of my mind—"Wait! You can't forfeit this game. You know perfectly well that you are about to be checkmated. This boy doesn't understand the position. Your oversight of allowing your queen to be captured has nothing to do with it. The old man won't even pick up the queen. His knight checks you at rook six and wherever you go he checkmates you next move with the bishop. It's inevitable. There's nothing left for you to forfeit. You can't use the boy's breach of chess etiquette to get yourself off the hook. You are beaten, soundly beaten. Now own it."

I've often wondered how many of them knew.

But as I stared at the rolling black king my lips merely trembled. They refused to open in the same way that my newly got steel fingers refused to move. In desperation I turned from where the king had finally settled to the face of the old man on the other side of the table. If none of the other witnesses knew, he, the antagonist and victor, did. His grey eyes were as expressionless as those of an ancient turtle. All at once his stone-like hands came out over the board, palm up, fingers extended toward the major, and his shoulders rose toward his ears.

The girl stood up. She was very beautiful. Then the major broke the fist of his left hand and flourished with his palm toward the French doors. As the spectators opened another corridor, the girl glided through the ranks. The major strode behind her. The angle from which I watched their withdrawal allowed me a view of the wobble of one of the lobes of the girl's buttocks just beyond the white glove of the major's right hand, swinging dead-weight.

When they reached the French doors, the girl stepped aside and the major broke them open with his left hand. Again there was an instant, a measurable pause in time and event. Again I heard words echoing in my head—"Wait! Who gave you the right to smash in the face of a boy? Why do you think you will not be called to account? No, you must not be permitted to go your way without making recompense. Stand right where you are until justice is done." But in my throat rose only an empty heat.

Then they were through, diminishing as they walked between the ping pong players and the dancers—disappeared. Before I went over to Darlington, with my rigid hooks I scooped the chess men remaining on the board into the trough. Then the old man commenced setting up the pieces.