# 3. A Chess Bluffer's Manual I

William Harston

*I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so.*
Reverend Sydney Smith

There are only two ways to secure a high reputation in the world of chess. The distinctly more onerous of these involves the consistent playing of good moves. As a medium for demonstrating one's mastery of the game, the board and pieces are, in fact, most unreliable. For that reason, the reader is strongly advised to take the alternative course and rely solely on the spoken and written word. With a little study he will find himself able to gain the esteem usually reserved for only the greatest of his brother practitioners. To impress others, the pen can be mightier than the pawn. This chapter begins the lessons.

## Lecture One: The Great Masters

This is the first of three lectures which together comprise a complete course in chess bluffing. I have distilled all the information essential to give a picture of complete chess erudition. We begin with the biographies.

Of all the celebrated names in chess, six stand out way above the rest, to be revered with unstinting admiration. No word of criticism may on any account be levelled against any of the demi-gods to whom this chapter is devoted. On even less account should their names ever be uttered in the same breath as those of lesser mortals. We shall deal with them in chronological order.

*PHILIDOR, André Danican* (1726–95).

Adoration of this great man is currently unfashionable, thereby adding to his value as a conversation piece. By modern standards he was not a particularly good player, but others around at the same time were generally so abysmally poor at the game that Philidor looked superhuman. Actually his name was not Philidor at all. Louis XIII called him that when he was going through a funny phase of naming musicians after an oboist called Filidori. If you are bad at remembering names, it is a useful trick to call everybody Philidor, but you need to be a King to get away with it.

When not playing the oboe at Versailles or playing chess to supplement his musician's income, Philidor spent his spare time composing operas, one of which was even revived recently for performance in England. When talking about Philidor, his music may safely be praised since hardly anybody has ever heard any of it. If you have the misfortune to find yourself in the company of one who has encountered a Philidor motet or two, cast doubt on his credentials by suggesting that his Philidor was in fact the father of our Philidor. There were several members of the Danican-Philidor stable who composed around that time, so one can safely mention the bagatelles of C.P.E. Danican-Philidor, or the pin-ball machine of Wolfgang Amadeus Danican-Philidor.

'Pawns are the soul of chess' is Philidor's most-quoted remark. But here too lie the seeds of doubt since in old French the word 'pions' could mean either 'pawns' or 'peasants'. One could thus make a reasonable case for Philidor as an early French revolutionary, advocating power for the workers and peasant control of the means of chess production.

If cornered on Philidor's chess, mention his blindfold win against Captain Smith in which ten of Philidor's first sixteen moves were with pawns.

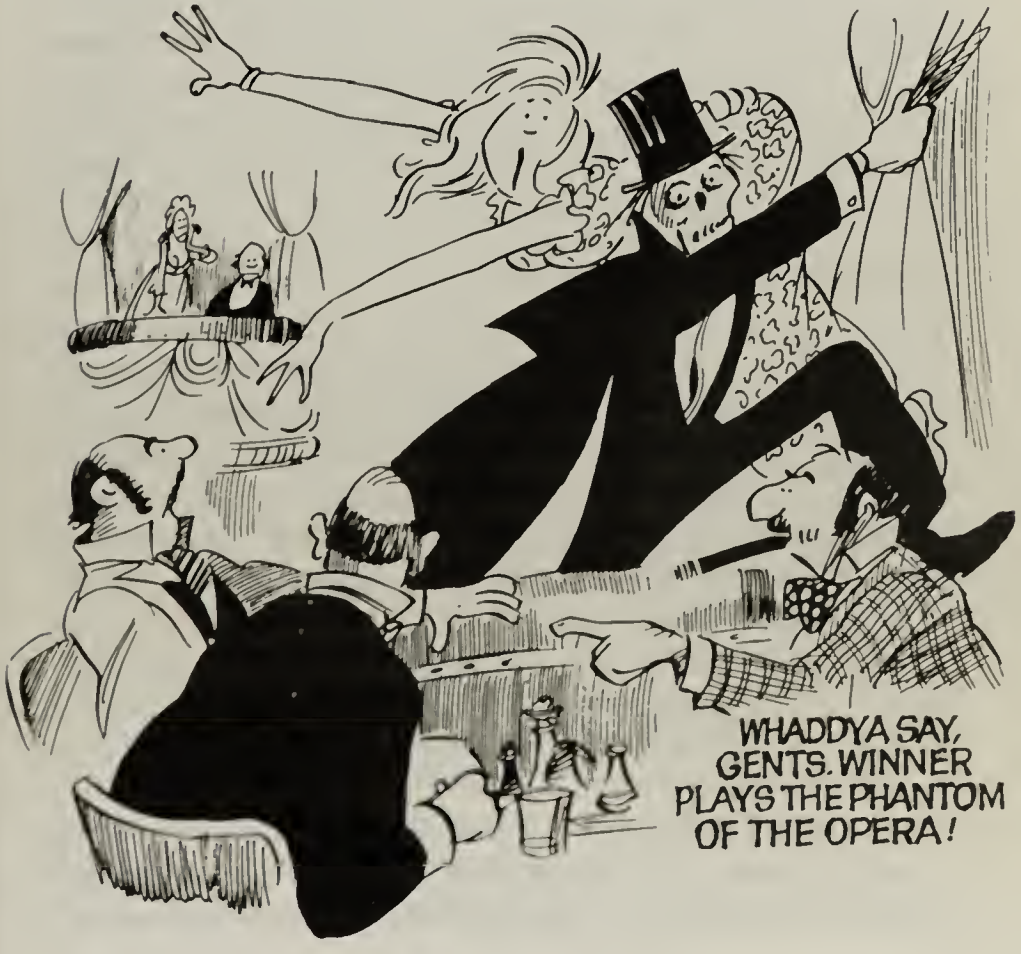
*MORPHY, Paul* (1837–84)

His middle name was Charles, which not many people realize. Morphy was famed for his combinational brilliance though it

was really the soundness of his attacking play which was so unusual for its time. Morphy shot to the top of the chess tree in the United States then took a trip to Europe where he beat up all the world's best players with some ease.

All was going well until Morphy suffered a mortal blow to his pride when an American girl refused his proposal of marriage because he was only a chessplayer. Rather than do the sensible thing and jettison the young lady in favour of one with better values, he took the rejection to heart, gave up chess and tried to gain acceptance and fame in his profession as a lawyer. Great success in that sphere eluded him, he developed a paranoid attitude towards chess and died of apoplexy fifteen years after giving up the game for good.

Followers of the Freudian School of psychoanalysis cite



Morphy as a case-book example of the Oedipus complex in chessplayers. Practitioners of this vile game are trying to kill the father-figure (the king), which they unconsciously loathe and fear, with the aid of the powerful mother-figure (the queen) whose love they want for themselves alone. The chess game is the sublimation of the unconscious desire to commit patricide, latent in all men, so they say.

But they have it wrong, of course. The queen, as anyone can see from its strident mode of gallivanting about the board, is quite definitely male. The king, on the other hand, is too mincing in his movements to be a father-figure. At best a distant uncle or perhaps an effeminate cousin. The most famous Morphy game was played in a box at the Paris Opera. Morphy had the white pieces against Count Isouard and the Duke of Brunswick, consulting about their moves. The opera was *not* the *Marriage of Figaro*. When referring to this game, suggest a hint of doubt about the number of Morphy's opponents. It has never been definitively stated that these were really two different men rather than a single player who held both titles. Historians could easily have been misled by failing to consider the latter possibility.

*LASKER, Emanuel* (1868–1941)

The first point to note is the spelling of Lasker's first name. Once you have mastered that, you are well on the way towards becoming an authority on the man. His greatness as a player may be judged by the fact that he was the first to be accused of witchcraft at the chessboard. He was also accused of using psychological tricks such as deliberate bad play to unnerve the opponent. Just imagine how well you have to play for people to think that the bad moves must be deliberate.

Since Lasker, of course, witchcraft has become quite common in tournament play, though the recent FIDE ban on the slaughter of sacrificial beasts at the board has brought some decrease in activity.

The other important innovation for which we must thank Lasker is money. Before he applied his great brain to the topic, it had not occurred to chessmasters that they ought to use their

talents for financial reward. Even for some time after Lasker it was considered rather bad form for a chessplayer not to die starving and penniless. Despite his good sense on this matter, Lasker ran into trouble with the hyper-inflation of the 1920s. He was already an ageing ex-world champion, but returned to chess to make some amazingly good results. His performance in finishing third at Moscow 1935 at the age of sixty-seven is perhaps the greatest-ever feat of chess longevity.

When not playing chess, Lasker studied philosophy and mathematics. Mention some of his contributions to the theory of Vector Spaces if you feel like a digression in the conversation. Remember to toast his birthday every Christmas Eve.

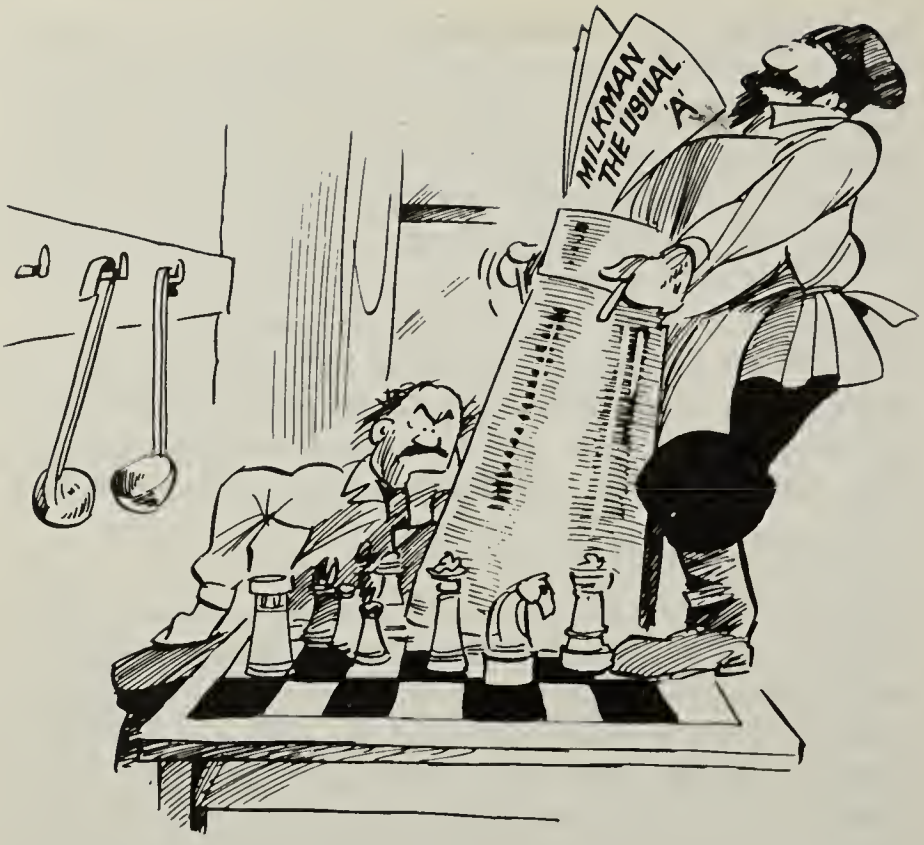
*ALEKHINE, Alexander* (1892–1946)

Alekhine was everything a chessplayer ought to be: an arrogant, selfish, alcoholic womanizer, with a talent for making enemies and a liking for cats. When sober he had a complete strategic mastery of the game and an unsurpassed ability to keep control of complex positions. This mastery became exaggerated when he published notes to his own games. He liked to include long variations, often discovered in analysis days after the game was played, claiming that he had seen them and calculated them correctly at the time. Sometimes too he would substitute a pretty finish which might have occurred for the more mundane ending which really happened.

Some tournaments he played with a higher than recommended level of alcohol in his blood. This led to reports of strange behaviour such as urinating in the corner of the stage during one event. After Dr Euwe had deprived Alekhine of the World Championship, the great man gave up drink, subsisting only on milk for two years until he had taken his title back.

Alekhine introduced hatred into the acceptable repertoire of match players. Against Capablanca in their 1927 match, there were periods when Alekhine refused to sit at the same board as his opponent. Karpov and Korchnoi adopted similar policies more than fifty years later, but nobody has ever really rivalled Alekhine for sheer personal venom.

To become a true Alekhine authority it is best to concentrate




on his losses. Firstly this is easier, since there are far fewer of them than his numerous wins, but also they are generally less well known. Some of his worst games, usually dismissed as aberrations of inebriation, nevertheless contain some remarkable original ideas. Had he but been sober enough to follow them up correctly, the whole of chess theory might have developed more quickly.

*TAL, Mikhail* (born 1936)

Tal was the youngest world champion ever and one of the very few real chess geniuses. He only held the title for a year, but the briefness of his tenure was due mainly to ill health. For this reason it is important to know his medical background correctly.

Firstly, and completely irrelevantly, Tal has only three fingers on his right hand. This congenital deformity might almost have been designed to lift chess pieces. Five fingers only get in each others' way. Tal's problems have always been

caused by a troublesome kidney. Once this was removed his results over the chessboard began to improve again, but he had suffered a decade of rather inconsistent play.

Talking about Tal poses certain difficulties owing to the strong temptation to use the word genius. Tal himself always correctly points out that that particular term shoud be reserved for Bronstein. Had Bronstein not made the unfortunate mistake of failing to win the world championship, he would probably have taken Tal's place in this list and we would not have this trouble.

Never refer to Tal as a Russian. He is the Latvian World Champion. (Latvia is first right when you get to Estonia.)

*FISCHER, Robert James* (born 1943)

There is no doubt whatsoever that Bobby Fischer is the greatest of all. Anyone pretending to hold opposite views should be treated with extreme condescension. On no account should one indulge in argument with such illiterates for they will always be impervious to reason. When talking of Fischer, one should also steer clear of the delicate question of his sanity. Such problems as he may have are clearly subordinate to his enormous creative achievements, and should be correspondingly ignored. Any comments on his play should be limited to the words, 'Aah, Fischer', followed by a wistful, slightly demented look into the far distance.

Owing to his special position, Fischer's games should not be treated in the same manner as those of other players. As with the works of Mozart, the only human with whom Fischer may sensibly be compared, a catalogue has been prepared of the games of the great American. Just as Köchel did the job for Wolfgang Amadeus, Wade and O'Connell collected all Bobby's creative masterpieces. Thus one does not need to go to the length of describing a game as, for example, Fischer–Spassky, sixth match game, Reykjavik 1972. One simply says O'C 755 and everybody knows that you are referring to the game of that number in the Wade and O'Connell catalogue. A typical conversation between two Fischerophiles ought to run something along the following lines:

'Just came back from a play-through of O'C 444. The Ruy Lopez, do you know it?'

'Ah, yes. Typically early Fischer; you recognized, of course, the quotation of thematic material from O'C 72.'

'How true. And doesn't he give us a tantalizing foretaste of O'C 702, the first great Ruy Lopez from his late period?'

'Poor old Stein never stood a chance.'

'Aah, Fischer.'

'Aah, Fischer.'

And both end the conversation staring blissfully through each other in trances of Fischerian ecstasy.

# 7. A Chess Bluffer's Manual II:

## The Politico-Socio-Geographico-Cultural and Economic History of Chess

*The thing is not beautiful, although it may still be waterproof.*
Woody Allen

This second lecture in the trilogy of complete chess knowledge comprises a total guide to chess history from all conceivable points of interest. The separate phases of chess history may be clearly delineated and we deal with them in chronological order. Readers who prefer the traditional alphabetical order may rearrange the following material without any loss in clarity.

### 1. **The Geographical Age** AD 550–1560

The earliest form of chess was a game called chaturanga played in north-west India. Persian and Sanskrit ballads of the mid-seventh century refer to this game so historians assume that it was invented about a hundred years earlier. What with the time it takes to sign up the strolling minstrel, wring a contract out of the publishers and correct the proofs, even in those days a century could pass before you had a book in the shops.

Chess was a slower game at that time, played exclusively by the aristocracy. The pieces on each side were a king, a counsellor, two elephants, two horses, two chariots and eight footsoldiers, with occasional guest appearances by dogs and camels. Since the queen or counsellor could only move one square diagonally and the bishop's move was also restricted,

nothing much happened in the game. The problem of this era was how to transport such a ponderously lethargic game to Europe. But for two fortunate accidents, this geographical impasse might never have been surmounted.

The first accident happened during a Crusade. Richard the Lionheart was feeling bored on one of the rest days, so Saladin invited him over for a drink. During his visit the good King learnt the game of chess and brought it back to England. That incident is not fully authenticated but sounds convincing enough to be taken as true. Meanwhile, the other accident was that the Moors decided to go to Spain for their holidays, presumably because Morocco was fully booked. They took their chess sets with them and evidently left some behind. Thus, one way or the other, chess came to Europe.

## 2. The Cultural Era 1561–1726

As soon as the game reached Italy, the Renaissance trendies decided to soup it up a little. The queen and bishops were given huge increases in power, pawns were allowed to move two squares on their first go, and castling was thrown in. The volatile Italians savoured the newly created violence of the game.

Despite this obvious pandering to popular taste, the upper classes maintained their exclusive rights to the game. To Philip II of Spain we owe the introduction of true culture into the development of chess. He was a keen player and, when asked what he wanted for Christmas 1561, he demanded a chess book. His favourite priest, Ruy Lopez, was consequently dispatched to Italy to buy one. While he was there, Ruy Lopez took time off to beat the leading Italian players and came home with a book by Damiano called *Questo libro e da imparare giocare a scachi et de li partiti*. This had been published in 1512 and had probably been remaindered by the time Ruy Lopez bought it. Anyway, the Spanish priest did not like the book at all, so on his flight home wrote his own work, entitled *Libro de la invencion liberal y arte del juego del Axedrez*. This came out just in time to put in Philip II's stocking.

They really knew how to name books in those days. Why is it that when there were only two or three chess books in the whole world they had titles a yard long, while now, with thousands on the market, they are all called *Chess* or *An Introduction to Chess* or some equally undistinguished title?

Back in sixteenth-century Italy, however, they were seething with rage because good old Ruy Lopez had beaten their best players and rewritten their book. After a dozen years training they sent a two-man hit squad consisting of Leonardo da Cutri and Paolo Boi to do for old Lopez. They duly arrived in Madrid and both beat the Spaniard in matches to retrieve their national honour.

## 3. The Sociological Revolution 1726–1850

Chess was now becoming too important to be left to the aristocrats. The eighteenth century began to see the balance of power shifting towards artists and scientists. France had a surfeit of artists at the time, so several of them decided to dominate world chess. The great Philidor, who was the best player in the world from the day of his birth in 1726 until he died sixty-nine years later, was followed by Deschapelles and La Bourdonnais. Between them they reigned supreme for a century.

But already the chess epidemic was uncontrollable. Having infected the artists and scientists, nothing could stop its spread to the middle classes. And England, who had invented the middle classes, had a natural advantage over the more primitive nations. In 1843 Howard Staunton won a long match against Saint-Amant to bring the unofficial world championship across the channel. It may even be that this single occurrence was the reason for Saint-Amant's canonization; history is obscure on that issue.

## 4. The Political Era 1851–1971

By now chess had been played for around 1300 years, but nobody had yet thought of holding a tournament. Staunton

himself remedied this omission by arranging for all the world's best players to compete at London in 1851. All of Staunton's plans for the event went well, except for the fact that he only finished fourth. The winner was Adolf Anderssen, a man of somewhat Germanic persuasion. The modern era of chess as an international sport was truly under way, with all powerful nations of the world anxious to prove they were the best.

Naturally the Americans were quick to muscle in on the scene. They sent Paul Morphy across to win matches against all the greatest European players. Staunton, by a combination of quick footwork and good sense, avoided meeting the American, thereby keeping his own reputation reasonably intact. Morphy returned to America and never played again. This left the Europeans rather confused and suffering from a justifiable feeling of inadequacy.

The death of Morphy finally gave Europe back its sense of self-respect, which they cashed in by arranging an official world championship match between Steinitz and Zukertort. The latter is, I believe, some sort of sweet confectionery, so it should be no surprise to hear that the ravenous Steinitz won with consummate ease. That was in 1886 and the title was to stay in central Europe for many years in the hands of Steinitz and Lasker.

The next important event in chess history was the Soviet Revolution. Lenin was looking for a suitable way to honour his pledge of culture for the masses. It had to be cheap and had to be something he could understand. Not having had Marx's advantage of the British Museum library ticket, Lenin found his choices limited. In a moment of inspiration the Great Leader decided to give his people chess. They deserved it, and he played it quite well. Thus began mass chess education in the USSR.

Meanwhile, back in the West, chess theory was developing into a polemical debate. The squabbles which were taking place gave the Russians time to catch up. Dr Tarrasch was the man to blame. He was a humourless character with pince-nez, whose main intention was to take all the pleasure out of playing chess by reducing the game to a set of dogmatic principles. He

confused the issue by playing much better than he wrote, but this seemed to fool his opponents and only made them angrier. He had been arguing with anyone who came his way, but his most concerted opposition came from the Hypermodern school, the Pre-Raphaelites of chess.

Reti, Breyer and Nimzowitsch* were the leaders of the hate-Tarrasch club. Breyer had all the good ideas, but died far too young. Reti was the most complete player, but Nimzo had the charisma and eccentricity to be Tarrasch's greatest opponent in debate. Among other odd pieces of behaviqur, Nimzowitsch is reputed to have performed headstands on the stage of tournaments and would also wrap his leg tightly round the chair as an aid to concentration. Nobody knows whether it is true that he once broke his leg by standing up too abruptly when in such a pose. Such ideas were in any case far too hypermodern for old Tarrasch whose hairstyle was too immaculately greasy to permit headstands.

Back in Moscow, Stalin had assumed Lenin's mantle of the Great Theorist. His ideas for world domination were more practical and his great buddy Krylenko set to the task of a five-year plan for chess. By the time Stalin had him shot, Krylenko had really done quite well and the young Russians were well on the way to capturing the world championship. Just to make sure, Stalin annexed Estonia so that he could claim Keres as a Soviet player. But he need not have worried; Botvinnik won the title for Russia in 1948.

The next quarter of a century was dull. The Soviet Union went into the business of stock-piling ex-World Champions with Botvinnik losing to various people then regaining the title. By 1970 the USSR had one reigning champion and four ex-champions. But the political era was coming to an end.

## 5. The Economic Revolution 1972–

Until 1972 it was considered poor form for a chessmaster to make any money from the game. If he died other than in

*Nimzowitsch himself was unsure how to spell this difficult name, but Keene has sorted out the problem for him.

penury he was hardly playing the game at all. Bobby Fischer changed all that. With the impertinence of Paul Morphy he not only beat all the best players in Europe, but he demanded and received goodly sums of money for doing so. Almost overnight an enormous change had come over the world of chess. Other players quickly followed his example and asked to be paid too. Of course, they did not, in general, receive so much at first, but the chess grandmaster suddenly became a piece of hot property desired by all men of wealth. By 1978, the prize and bribe fund for the World championship had increased tenfold even over 1972.

And so, as the twentieth century draws to a close chess has finally caught up with the modern era. Even the Russians are beginning to want more than roubles for playing. Perhaps we can all now afford to slow down a little.

# 11. A Chess Bluffer's Manual III

## How to Succeed at Chess Without Actually Playing

*How can someone who calls himself a logical positivist be a Tottenham Hotspur supporter?*

Letter to A. J. Ayer in the *Guardian*

We all know how difficult it is to impress people by playing chess. They always tend to judge by our results rather than appreciating the quality of our moves. This makes matters difficult since, owing to the natural perversity of the game, the result is not within the control of its practitioners. Chess is, in fact, largely a matter of luck and there is no way the congenitally unfortunate can gain success within its domain. This is simply demonstrated: in most positions nobody has the ability to calculate fully the consequences of any single move; we are therefore all stumbling around blindly hoping something will turn up. Thus good fortune is an essential ingredient of successful chess.

The clarity and logic of this point are unfortunately lost on most people. Too easily they have been waylaid by the centuries of propaganda that chess is a game of skill. They are misled by the linguistic trick of referring to 'good' and 'bad' chessplayers instead of using the more appropriate designations, 'lucky' and 'unlucky'. Hence one must, as far as possible, avoid playing chess if the desire is to impress. It is too chancy. Fortunately, however, talking a good game is just as effective, if not more so, than playing one. The art is easily acquired with but a modicum of study.

## The Opening

In the last hundred years a vast library of accumulated literature on chess openings has developed which the zealots study and revere. One is generally expected to be conversant with the latest opinions of the theoreticians if any attention is to be given to one's pronouncements. Keeping up with this great move factory is, however, a full-time job. Fashions change with every tournament and what one day was considered a main-line variation will the next be relegated to a footnote. This is all very confusing since no firm conclusions are ever reached about whether particular openings are good or bad. They just meander in and out of fashion at the whim of the trendsetters.

The only acceptable policy when talking about openings is one of non-committal omniscience. The conversation should proceed along the following lines:

'What do you think of Karpov's opening?'

'Really interesting. I'm so glad he played that. I was looking at it only last week; it's theoretically crucial, you know.'

'What do you think he'll play now?'

'I can't quite remember what I decided was the best move. I have all the analysis written down at home. There were so many complicated possibilities.'

'He's taken the pawn; is that an innovation?'

'I think not. I seem to remember Bronstein playing something like that in the 1950s.'

Almost anything may safely be attributed to Bronstein. He has gone through a long chess career with the rather depressing habit of thinking of most ideas about twenty years before they occurred to anyone else. If you fancy a change from invoking Bronstein, an equally apposite attribution would be to 'an old suggestion of Bondarevsky'. Alternatively one may quote obscure games from recent events. The Greek master Z. Grophulous may always be credited without fear of contradiction.

Writing about openings is a far more complicated matter. In general adding to the opening literature mountain is not to be

recommended except as a possible cure for penury. For some reason books on opening theory do sell well. People seem to believe that they help.

## The Middlegame

This is a portion of the game between the opening, where everybody is expected by familiarity to understand what is happening, and the endgame where so few pieces remain that once again one may hope to have some idea of who is winning. The middlegame is thus characterized by a jumbled position with vast numbers of pieces cluttering the board. Trying to understand this part of the game is a hopeless exercise. The only sensible policy is to maintain an expression of pained concentration and total silence instantly hushing anybody who dares ask your opinion of the position. What you are really doing while watching this phase of the game is composing alternative sets of comments to make immediately a result is reached, according to who wins.

Thus, adopting the normal procedure that all moves of the lucky winner are to be praised and all moves of the loser condemned, you must prepare two (or three if really conscientious to include the possibility of a draw) sets of comments extolling the virtues and decrying the insufficiencies of each move played by both sides. A typical pair of alternatives is: 'Desperation, but white was lost anyway', and 'A fine combination, rounding off a well-played attack'. One of these annotations may be appended to any sacrifice according simply to whether it works or not.

If you watch leading chess journalists watching tournament games, never be fooled into thinking that they are working out what is happening in the positions. They are just knocking their comments into shape to be ready when the games finish. Easy once you have the knack.

## The Endgame

Here you must be careful. Bluffing is easy in the opening, where mock erudition is as good as the real thing, and not so

hard, with the benefit of hindsight, in the middlegame. But the endgame can be a precise science where one might be expected not only to know what is happening but to be able to demonstrate and justify one's conclusions. The only policy here is to avoid giving any precise opinion on the position under discussion. Refer instead to similar positions, where one's knowledge will not be undermined by anything that might happen in the game. The typical conversation might run something like this.

'That's a difficult rook ending. Is it a win?'

'Well, if the white f-pawn were on the g-file, there would be no doubt, but of course, on the f-file it can be different.'

'What's the difference?'

'There's more room to the right of the f-file than the g-file.'

'Does he win if it's a g-pawn?'

'Well, it's certainly a win if the pawn is far enough advanced.'

'Oh, they've just agreed a draw.'

'Yes, I thought that extra file would make all the difference.'

That really is all there is to know about endgame theory. The positions you want to know about are never in the books anyway, so why bother studying them when you can be just as impressive without the effort.