

12. Bobby and the Devil

William Harston

One winter's evening, just after he had won the Interzonal, Bobby was sitting alone in his hotel suite thinking how nice it would be if he could become World Chess Champion. As the storm outside gathered force, he watched the rain beating against the window-pane and thought about his forthcoming match with Teastrainov. 'I'll beat him easily enough,' he muttered to himself. 'He might have been pretty good twenty years ago, but he's getting past it now. It's the opponents in the later matches who might cause some trouble.' He paced up and down, listening to the thunder. 'Gee, I'd give anything to be sure of winning the title,' he mumbled.

At that moment there was a sudden flash of lightning illuminating the whole room. Bobby was startled to notice, sitting in the corner, a wizened old man, resting on his stick and staring at him with a sharp and penetrating glare. 'Who let you in?' shouted Bobby. 'I didn't ask for room service. Anyway, can't you read the Do Not Disturb notice on the door?'

The visitor smiled. 'You did send for me, though perhaps somewhat inadvertently. I believe I can be of use to you.'

'Waddjer mean?' asked Bobby, rather taken aback at the stranger's equanimity. 'How can an old man help me?'

'Think back on your words just before you noticed me here. I can give you what you most crave for, and in exchange, you possess something in which I have a certain interest.'

'Wattcher mean?' asked Bobby, somewhat perplexed by the strange nature of the conversation. 'I was just saying something to myself about the World Cham . . .' His voice trailed off into a low murmur. 'It's impossible. You mean you're the . . . and you will let me win the . . . in exchange for my . . .'

'You catch on quicker than most,' said the Devil. 'Still, that was only to be expected in one of your mental capabilities. Let's get down to business.'



Thus began the negotiations. At first Bobby suggested that he exchange his soul in return for a guarantee that he would win every future game of chess he ever played. He was, however, soon dissuaded from this immodest ambition when it was pointed out just how dull his life would then become. It is only enjoyable scoring victories when one has the occasional loss in between; winning them all would be too monotonous. Eventually, having decided that his soul was not worth much to him anyway, Bobby settled for a straight swap: his soul for the World Championship. And Devil took out a contract from his inside pocket.

'There is a standard form for this agreement,' he explained. 'I've done similar deals with most of your predecessors during the past century. As you see the normal procedure is to exchange your soul for a fixed number of victories. I'm afraid this is a hangover from the days when World Championship matches were always decided by the first player to win ten games. When they changed the rules we never got round to

modifying the contracts. It's so much trouble seeing one's solicitors about that sort of thing, and their fees are hellish expensive. So we've kept to the old format and all we need do is work out just how many victories you need to be assured of the title.'

'Looks a bit fishy,' said Bobby; 'I've heard that you try to trick people in these contracts. Still if, as you say, it was good enough for Alekhine, I expect we can agree something.'

And so they began to calculate precisely how many wins would be necessary. 'Let's see,' mused Bobby, 'it's Teastrainov to start with. He's no problem. I can't possibly lose more than one game in ten to him, so if I beat him twice it'll be easy enough. Then there's Grandmaster Larcenist; he's a crooked customer. I'd better be more careful there. Still, three wins will do fine. That's five so far, isn't it? And the Candidate's final will be against Petroleum. That's the easiest of all. He never beats anyone unless they get fed up with his boring play and overreach in frustration. I can just draw all the games until we get to the last one, then I flatten him. Yeah, one win will be okay there. Right, that gets me to the match with Spasstik. It'll be twice as long as the qualifying rounds, so I'd better take six wins to be quite certain. That's twelve altogether. Okay, I'll settle for a dozen wins.'

Bobby smiled, happy with his calculations, and was on the point of inserting the figure 12 into the contract when a further thought occurred to him. He paused and looked suspiciously at his companion. 'Hey! I'm not so sure about this deal. What's to stop you selling out to one of these other guys. How do I know you haven't already got contracts with Petroleum and Spasstik – they both won the title too, and it seems to me that it wasn't on their playing strength.'

'Sir!' said the Devil, looking grievously offended, 'you do me an injustice. I may be a bit satanic at times, but I am still a gentleman. Anyway, as you'll see from clauses 63 and 64 of the contract, it is guaranteed that any deal which may earlier have been made with the aforementioned persons will, by the time you meet them, have lapsed. Furthermore on appending my name to this agreement, I am explicitly forbidden to enter into discussions with any of your future opponents.'

'Just to show my goodwill, and because twelve is in any case such an unlucky number, let's give you thirteen victories and call it a deal.' He inscribed the number 13 on the contract and signed. He passed the quill pen to Bobby, which he dipped into the bottle of virgin's blood and signed also. They shook hands, and suddenly Bobby found himself alone again.

As time passed, Bobby almost forgot about that strange evening. He prepared as usual for the matches. When he sat down eventually to play Teastrainov, he spared no thoughts for that visitor of months ago. This was serious chess and demanded his full concentration. The first game was an interesting struggle which Bobby was pleased to win. He won the next game, too. By the time the score was 3-0 the match was virtually decided. Bobby would even not have minded conceding a few draws but his opponent seemed destined to lose every game. The final result was a 6-0 clean sweep.

Then came Larcenist. The chess journalists of the world were unanimous in predicting a much tougher struggle. A score of 6-0 against such a player would be quite unthinkable. Yet, it happened again. It almost seemed that Bobby was indeed destined to suffer the boredom of winning every game he played. Yet he still had a few detractors. They pointed out the curious features of the earlier victories. Both Teastrainov and Larcenist had been ill during the matches. And both could easily have taken draws in the later games, but lost unnecessarily through trying to make up the deficit in points. The match with Petroleum would be the real test. He is the most difficult player in the world to defeat.

After the first game, it looked as though Petroleum would go the way of his predecessors. Bobby recovered from a poor opening to create complications and force a good win in the end-game.

That night, Bobby's old devilish friend visited him in a dream. He appeared full of glee, waving their contract around in the air and shouting, 'Tricked you! Tricked you! Thirteen wins as agreed and now you're on your own, kiddo.' Bobby woke up, trembling, but soon brought his nerves back under control. 'I'm not gonna be scared by any lousy dream,' he thought. 'It's just superstition.'

Then he was demolished by Petroleum in game two.

Bobby rushed to his friend and mentor General Edmonton. 'Ed! You gotta get me outa this. I've been tricked. Do something, willya?'

General Edmonton calmed him down after some minutes and listened quietly as Bobby told the whole story. When he had taken it all in, he realised the awful truth and began to think what he could do to help extricate his friend from his predicament. 'Okay, Bobby,' he said without apparent emotion, 'just leave things with me and I'll see what I can do.' His reassuring manner considerably eased Bobby's mind, but Edmonton knew he had to start negotiations quickly before game three started.

When he took his leave of Bobby, Edmonton flew straight to Hell to begin bargaining with the Devil. 'Let's not beat about the bush, Mr Satan; I guess you know why I'm here. You've tricked our guy, which I can't say I'm too pleased with, but I suppose that's just the way you work, so I won't hold it against you. Just say what you want and we'll see what we can arrange.'

'Oui, mon général,' said the Devil, in a terrible imitation of a French accent, 'But I seenk you know zair eez only one commodité een wheech I 'ave dealeengs.'

'Okay,' continued Edmonton, refusing to betray his annoyance at the lack of seriousness with which his adversary was treating the proceedings, 'What'll you offer for the souls of ten club players, five U.S. Masters, three International Masters and two Grandmasters?'

'And a partridge in a pear tree,' sung the Devil to himself. 'That's a pretty poor catch. I can't give you more than three extra wins for that lot.'

'I guess I could always arrange for President Ni . . .'

'Not that old one,' interrupted Satan. 'Got him years ago.'

'I suppose we could manage as many Vietnamese souls as you require.'

'I only deal in Western currencies.'

'You make it very difficult for me,' said Edmonton after an awkward silence had descended on the proceedings. 'What is it you want?'

The Devil moved closer and put his arm around General Edmonton. 'Ed, old chap, there is one soul under your control which you haven't offered yet.'

Ed gulped but bravely penned his name on the document thrust before him. Thus was his own soul consigned to ensure Bobby's successful path to the World Championship.

When his private jet arrived back in the United States, Ed was surprised to realise that a full week had passed while he had been negotiating. He smiled on reading in the newspaper that all games had been drawn during this period. Clever of Satan to think of arranging that. A real professional, thought General Edmonton.

Ed winked at Bobby as game six began, and opened his jacket to display the new contract in his inside pocket. Bobby gave a big grin of relief and proceeded to score his first win since the opening game. The rest of the match was sheer slaughter. Bobby scored three more straight victories to end a convincing $6\frac{1}{2}-2\frac{1}{2}$ winner.

The match with Spasstik was a formality. Bobby took the title with no trouble at all, much to the relief of General Edmonton. Even though their best lawyers had examined the contract, he was still worried about possible loopholes, particularly when Bobby took it into his head to tease the Devil by losing a couple of games early on just to make it more difficult for him to fulfil his part of the deal.

After winning the Championship, Bobby was, of course, a little reticent to play any more. He was highly suspicious of any devilish tricks that might be inflicted on him once he set foot in a tournament room. He knew now that he could lose to anyone; anyone, that is, who had bargained away his soul for a win against the World Champion.

The real problems came when the time neared for him to defend his title. The Satan-Kosygin-Edmonton tripartite talks did finally reach a conclusion, but the only result I am at liberty to reveal was the decision that the match would be played in Hell itself. It would be good for the tourist trade, said Satan, and with so many strong players there already, they would have the best team of commentators ever assembled.