

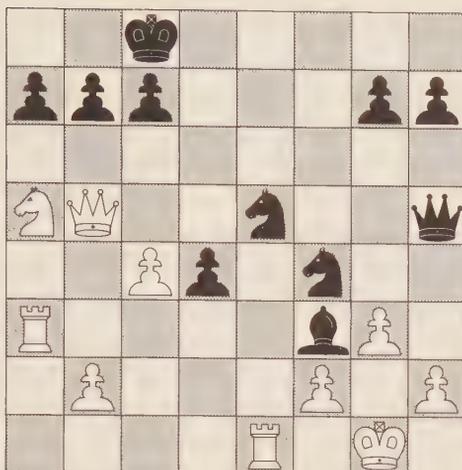
Alan Sharp

Night Moves

An obsession of another kind is the subtext of Alan Sharp's moody detective novel Night Moves. Harry Moseby, a private investigator, carries with him a pocket chess set on which he repeatedly replays a combination that could have occurred in an actual game from a tournament at Bad Oeynhausen, Germany, in 1922. Moritz (Black) had an opportunity to checkmate his opponent Emmrich ("Emmerich" in the novel and elsewhere, but "Emmrich" in the contemporaneous account of the tournament and in Jeremy Gaige's authoritative Chess Personalalia—A Biobibliography [McFarland, 1987]) in four moves, beginning with a surprising queen sacrifice and continuing with three knight moves. It would have been a memorable brilliancy. But Moritz missed it and played something else, and two moves later he resigned. To Moseby, the game represents the missed opportunities in his own life.

Here are the moves of the game: 1 d4 d5 2 c4 e5 3 dxe5 d4 4 Nf3 Nc6 5 Nbd2 f6 6 exf6 Qxf6 7 g3 Bg4 8 Bg2 0-0-0 9 0-0 Nge7 10 Qb3 Ng6 11 a4 Bb4 12 a5 Bxa5 13 Qa4 Rhe8 14 Nb3 Rxe2 15 Nxa5 Bxf3 16 Bh3+ Rd7 17 Qb5 Nce5 18 Bxd7+ Nxd7 19 Ra3 Re5 20 Qb3 Nh4 21 Bf4 Qg6 22 Bxe5 Nxe5 23 Qb5 Qh5 24 Qc5 Nhg6 25 Qb5 Nf4 26 Re1

Night Moves



Emmrich–Moritz; Black to play

Moritz now played 26 . . . Bd5, and after 27 cxd5 Nh3 + 28 Kf1 he resigned. The combination he missed was 26 . . . Qxb2 + 27 Kxb2 Ng4 + 28 Kg1 Nh3 + 29 Kf1 5 Nh2 mate. Pity.

The opening of the novel introduces Moseby and his chess set while he prepares to resolve a minor matter for his client Mr. Steegmeyer.

The old man stood occasionally on tiptoes as though the inch gained would reveal new horizons. Bonnie Brae Street remained empty, save for the black-and-white terrier dog that described multiple sniffing loops back and forth across the road and sidewalk and who at frequent intervals checked with the old man to see if everything was all right.

Moseby also checked, not as frequently as the dog, whose name was Sam, but regularly enough. The rest of his attention he gave to a point in history long past, but crystallized on his traveling set, a remote, trivial moment of truth that had once engaged two men he had never met just as intensely as it now did him. Emmerich and Moritz had, it appeared, played chess together in 1922 at a place called Bad Oeynhausen and Moritz, playing Black, had severely fucked up. Moseby, with a considerable sensitivity to the art of fucking up, studied this particular instance with a pained delight.

The Los Angeles day inclined to the gauzy, the sun filtered



heavily through the thin cloud and the smog, sounds rubbed smooth by the gentle abrasion of the atmosphere. Somewhere, implying drama, a police car yowled. Nearer, a tune spun a long strand of melody and once or twice Sam barked, causing Moseby to look up, each time to see the old man, who was called Mr. Steegmeyer, beckon the dog to him.

Sitting in his car on Bonnie Brae Street at eleven-thirty on a Tuesday morning looking at Mr. Moritz's mistake, Moseby had a strong sense of the meaninglessness of things. He had allowed four phone calls from Mr. Steegmeyer to badger him into a visit and the visit had led, on the promise of a ten-dollar retainer, to what Mr. Steegmeyer called a stakeout. They were waiting—Moseby, Mr. Steegmeyer, and Sam—for a lady called Rubicheck who had been for some time past trying to poison Sam with doctored chocolate chip cookies. Mr. Steegmeyer was incensed by the woman's cunning in having hit upon chocolate chip cookies—Sam's favorite kind.

Moseby knew he should have gone away, pleaded a downtown appointment, been rude, whatever, but he hadn't. Partially because under his long-nosed, quavery craziness the man actually cared about the dog, and because in his distorted, pathetic old way he was fascinating, with his head full of plots and police parlance and prejudice and paranoia, and because there was something relaxing about sitting in his car looking at the position from that long gone game and anyway he didn't have anything else to do.

Moritz had had that most flamboyant of possibilities for a chess player. Back to the wall, in danger of defeat, he had a Queen sacrifice leading to an exquisite mate by means of three little knight moves, prancing in interlocking checks, driving the King into the pit. Moritz, in the heat of something now cold, had missed it, played defensively, and lost. If he were still alive he would be about Mr. Steegmeyer's age; another elliptic reason for being here.

"She's coming."

Moseby wound down the window to meet the gazes of Steegmeyer and Sam. Glancing down Bonnie Brae Street, he could see a woman pulling a shopping cart along behind her. This discomfited him for some reason. He had expected her to arrive in a car.

"You ready then?"

Moseby closed over the chess case, nodded. "I'm ready."

* * *



[*Moseby, hired by an aging actress to locate her sexually precocious sixteen-year-old daughter, Delly, has found the girl living with her stepfather and a woman named Paula Hirsch in the Florida Keys.*]

Delly sat cross-legged on the bed with the contents of Moseby's suitcase spread out in front of her. She looked up at him and smiled. "Hi. I'm getting your stuff sorted out." The traveling chess set was open beside her, the men set in random positions. Moseby picked it up, irked in a trivial, old-mannish way about the illogic of both bishops being on the same diagonal, and started to rearrange the pieces. Delly watched him for a moment, then picked up a pair of his underpants. "Hey, why don't you get some of those little jockey shorts, these things are a real turn-off."

Moseby glanced at her, uncertain whether to be amused or irritated by the flagrancy of the child. "They keep selling them to all those little jockeys."

Delly didn't know how to take that. She dropped the shorts and in order to refrain from sucking her thumb got up from the bed. "Is chess hard to learn?"

"It ain't easy," hearing as he said it Joey Zeigler's voice and being oddly comforted by the recall. He looked at Delly and smiled. There was a knock at the door and then it opened and Paula came in, carrying a bowl of ice.

"Brought you some ice."

"Thanks."

He was aware of Delly starting to tighten up beside him and he looked at Paula to see if she had noticed. She put the ice on the table and sat down in a chair.

Delly moved toward the bathroom. "You don't mind if I use your shower, do you? Mine doesn't work so good."

"Be my guest."

Delly went in with a little flounce, and closed the door firmly behind her.

Paula crossed her legs. "Did she offer you the key to the city?"

"It was more of a guided tour."

"How did you resist?"

"I thought of good clean things like Thanksgiving and George Washington's teeth." And Paula laughed, a low, quick sound but



unmistakably a laugh. She reached up for the board. Moseby moved another piece and gave it to her.

She looked at it for a moment. "You beating yourself?"

"It's a position from a game played in nineteen twenty-two . . . do you play?"

A shrug, still looking at the board. "I know the moves."

Moseby came around behind her. "Black had a mate and he didn't see it . . ." and for the first time he caught her scent, faintest odor of skin and its chemistry with the elements of air and salt and soap, ". . . Queen sacrifice in the corner . . ." moving the piece and the inside of his wrist near enough to sense her shoulder, its exhalation through the soft fabric of the shirt, ". . . then three little knight moves, check, check, check . . ." and with the dance complete, ". . . mate."

Paula nodded, twice, put the pieces back in position. "That's nice."

The bathroom door opened and released a waft of steam into the room. Delly reached out through it and picked up one of Moseby's shirts, went in again. Paula looked up at him and winked her left eye, her face otherwise expressionless. The door opened again and Delly came out, wearing the shirt, damp in patches from her body.

"I'll give you your shirt back in the morning. Okay?"

"Sure."

Delly paused for a moment and looked at Paula, who winked at her, her right eye this time. Delly went without a response, padding off down the porch.

"You didn't know we had a laundry service."

"Are you protecting me from something?"

Paula smiled, then looked back at the board. "Show me that again." Moseby played the moves again. "It's a beauty."

"He didn't see it. Name was Moritz. He played something else and lost." The sadness of it touched him again, faint, like a twinge of pain remembered. "He must have regretted it every day of his life—well, I know I would . . ." then, lest that sound unduly portentous, he smiled, ". . . fact is I do, and I wasn't even born."

Paula stood up, gave him back the set.

"That's no excuse."

"No, I guess not," and she went, almost abruptly, without further word, leaving Moseby with the chess board like a little graveyard in his hand and his mind full of lost opportunities and frail fragrances.