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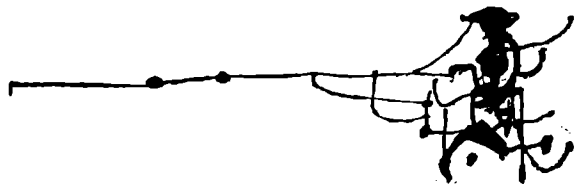
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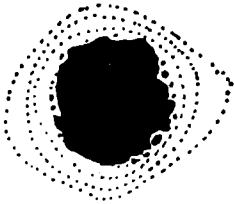
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The Players had only to pay a quarter a game. The Opponent wished to pay a higher price.



nor
the moon
by night

GAVIN HYDE

NOON seemed the darkest time of day in the Municipal Library of Science.

Everyone, knowing it was
nor the moon by night



daytime, would look up from the suddenly gray print and wonder what happened to the columns of ivy-edged yellow-

ness that had lanced down from the high windows moments before. In the morning and afternoon there would be colors, faces, glaring pages, but now there was no light to expose motion. The chairs, tables and bookshelves presented their most polished edges to the dimness. So it was, at this time of day, that a visitor would have noticed against the east wall a long bank of lustrous metal boxes with people darkly silhouetted in front in various attitudes of attention. If, at that instant, lights should have exploded into being and a band had scattered a few bars of music and some bells had rung, the people might have been playing at a row of one-armed bandits.

But the scene hung flatly silent as a tapestry against the wall. The figures weren't waving their arms about, and they were all wearing ear-phones.

There was a man—call him a man—whose name was Paul Andrist and who was there, thinking.

He was thinking of himself again, how he must seem to the people who came in to play chess with him. It could have been vain—wondering what they thought of his profile, but for Andrist it was

just more of the same desperate evaluation of position in life.

In life! No, position in death. The aspect of Paul Andrist, master chessplayer, described not in terms of bony hooked nose, wide brow, muscled chin. That was the clay they talked of in poetry, dust to dust returneth.

But he still had his clay. Was there a difference now that he had a flat steel face instead of one of flesh?

The mouth was still there, a dark little slot where the quarter came down and rang a bell, slamming against his "eardrums" like a glancing boulder.

And his skull, architecturally square now and bald—what could be more bald?—but still admitting the tubes which brought him nourishment, cradling the fetid soup around the mind.

He had one useless eye, which must have given him the look of a Cyclops. That was the clock that reminded his opponent that checkmate must be achieved before the half hour passed. Many were the games he had won from visiting chessmasters because they would have had to put in another quarter to think a bit.

He had a voice box too: a foot square and electronic as

anything! Never had a sore throat in his life (that is, his death).

And while he was counting his blessings, how many people lived in a million-dollar house? With neighbors like the late First - man - on - the - moon - Forest Berensen, old Dr. Life - in - a - Testube - Rogers, the lamented P. L. Durkee, who drove across the Atlantic seabottom in a jeep, or something. And more. Fourteen of them, wasn't it?

There they were, bolted down, stewing in their own juice, some wishing a friend would come along and plug in the earphones, others for an earthquake that might bring down the building—or at least rupture a tiny pulsing (but vital) nerve.

AS HE had done so often before, Andrist took a deep breath and whammed his fist on a table. He gave the order.

But there was no tension in the lungs, no crashing of furniture, since there was neither lung nor fist.

There was just the imagined hiss of fourteen soup bowls, the consciousness of plum-pudding dark wood in the silent noon in the cool building and far away the known rumble of file cabinets

nor the moon by night

and the remembered squeak of tennis shoes under the chair of the student and the brought-to-mind newspaper flap, clink of drinking-fountain handle.

If you could haul off and hit!

If you could cry tears!

But how could he have known? When he had gone to the Society, without conceit, knowing that he had progressed beyond certain limits of his contemporaries in the game of chess?

He remembered that when he had investigated the mind-library process he had been prepared for a cutting away of all except the chess mind and he had been resigned that his death at the end of life would be his real death.

It had not been that way, though! There was too much of the self left, the non-existent muscles reaching out to brush the hair out of a child's eyes.

So he had asked them Wednesday during the check-up if they might let him join his bones. After all, now Engstrom, untouchable at the board as Andrist had been in his day, had found significant defects in Andrist's theory. Okay, that was chess, but now he should be able to go.

They were very sorry. He

had to wait until Engstrom was ready to take his place, it was in the contract. And had Engstrom agreed to do that? Yes, he was checking in monthly at the lab already.

That had been no comfort. There was no telling how long Engstrom would live. Engstrom was sixty, and people live to be over a hundred sometimes. A man of sixty had years and years. In the sun, waving, in the shower stamping and roaring.

And what if, in such a shower, the soap slid down from the dish while Engstrom was washing his hair, down the wall, over to the foot, and he took a new stance?

On his head?

The lab might be only five blocks away, but it might as well be five hundred miles, if the brain itself were damaged.

This half-death forever?

ANDRIST felt a quarter penetrate the slot, slither past the magnets, and he steeled himself:

BONG!

"Good afternoon," he said, when he had recovered.

"It's me again, Mr. Andrist." The wonderful voice.

It was John Plum, a fifteen-year-old who was fast becoming a competent player. More

than that, he had the charm of being able to give unprejudiced answers to questions of the type that Andrist liked to ask.

"Good. Glad to hear you, John. You had black last time."

"Pawn to Queen four."

"Knight to King's Bishop three."

They always started with short greetings and he tried to wait before he began asking. But today was different. For three days he had been measuring the years that lay ahead of Engstrom like rooms full of people, touches, tastes.

And his own years, blushless, imprisoned as in a sea cave, covered on every side by the rigid shell and the clean stone underneath.

"What did you say?" said John.

"I was wondering if you had a root beer over in the store before you came in."

"Bishop to Knight five. Sure. As always."

Andrist asked greedily: "What do you mean, 'as always'? Sort of heavy and cool? With the icewater running off the bottle?"

"You mean—oh, I see," said the boy. "Yes, Mr. Andrist. And then I felt the ribbed bottle under my lips and the glass ticking against my

teeth. I tried to let all of it fall in one swallow, but the last part went down my chin and I rubbed off the drops with the back of my hand."

"Yes, yes!"

"Your move."

His move. If only he could! "Knight to King five." Then he tensed, bringing the muscles to the crystal ridge on the bottle, to drink.

He could have done it before. He could have done a lot of things. How many times had he been sitting in a smoke-filled hall waiting for his opponent to push a pawn, and seen the rumple-haired boys coming back from the courts with streaked faces and tennis rackets under their arms? Looking out of the window, he had seen the leaves trembling on the olive trees in Italy, the precise step of a fur-fringed donkey in Cuba, the pine needles sawing in Oregon.

But he had never touched them.

The unbearable longing had come too late.

One could not escape from the sixty-four square order. He had traced gambits on his wife's shoulder blades, God rest her soul. He was like a fistfighter who, upon entering a ballroom, must shuffle the same old dance of advance,

retreat, and make almost imperceptible movements across his chest with both hands, relaxed but ready to strike.

Not that he hadn't made the usual promises to himself.

He used to be in the dark beside the pinstripe wallpaper of a one-night room on the tournament loop and promise.

"When the children come, then the picnics, the circus. . . ." Sometimes he was afraid he had said it aloud and he would lean over his wife's face to see if she had heard. "Stop thinking about it, dear," she'd say, "I'm sure you'll win." Then he would dream, a child's footsteps on the stairs turning into the dull click and thud of felt-bottomed chessmen in rooms the color of cigars, among the bleary-eyed men in shirt-sleeves.

JOHN said: "I think this move will save the Knight. Rook takes Rook."

Andrist did not answer. He felt another question coming, a group of rivulets wild in his head, joining each other, overflowing from thought into speech. He felt fear now, when a man in his situation couldn't possibly fear anything.

"Baseball season still on?"

"Sure. Want to hear about the bats again?"

"Oh! I didn't mean to make you—" he said. Then, begging: "Anything."

"Name it, Mr. Andrist."

"The mitt," said Andrist.

"Let's see. I told you at the beginning of the season how the ball stings through it. Well, you know how a new mitt feels, sort of like sticking your hand into the armpit of a horse, padded and smooth, and it's usually light colored, but after you play with it a while it gets darker and darker inside as the sweat sinks in and the darker it gets, the cooler it gets, kind of. A new mitt's hot." Andrist heard the quick, hard breaths of the boy.

"Then your hand, even though it's smooth, begins to wear against the inside leather until there are tufts and tabs sticking up all over. When you first put it on in the afternoon it feels encrusted like a scab. Then if you play a little pepper the sweat gets into the nap. You can swing your hand around and that mitt's still on. It clings to you."

"I see," said Andrist, with an effort. And another question nudged him. But if he asked it there would be more, would there not?

So he did something that he had never done before in his life. Intentionally, he moved his Queen into danger.

"I don't see it," John said.

"What?"

"The reason for the sacrifice."

He tried to make it sound convincing. "What? Oh, blasted oversight! But you know I never take moves back."

"I've never beaten you, Mr. Andrist. You *have* to take it back!"

"On the contrary," Andrist said desperately, "I resign! You just took me. That's chess. And it's a free half-hour of course—just wave to the girl at the desk."

"That's no win."

"Nonsense!" He waited for the boy to signal, listening.

"Okay, Mr. Andrist. She cut us in for another period, but I still wish you'd take your Queen back."

For a moment Andrist wavered. No. He must hurry, not think. The mitt! What was the use? This reaching. His mind hummed, groaned in its way when he heard these things. He was frantic putty! Curds. Rotten cauliflower.

"John, I want to ask you to do something for me."

"Sure, Mr. Andrist."
"Kill me."

PAUSE. Then the boy's voice, doubtfully:

"Pardon?"

"Don't you see? Wait. I'm going too fast for you. You know me, don't you John? You know exactly what I am. You can come in and drop your quarter in the slot and speak to me, but I'm not really alive. I said kill me. But it wouldn't be murder, because I'm already dead. Do you see?"

"No. What is it?"

"Look. I came here because I wanted to. The point is I can't *go*. I want to go. I lived my life, got myself immortality with the excuse that my chess knowledge was worth saving. There's nothing about me that's worth saving. What do I ask from you? More life. And I don't deserve it. There's Engstrom now.

"You must know what you're doing when you describe things to me! So what's the use of nursing me any more? Look at it objectively. You'd be doing something that I want you to do. Your conscience would be clear."

"Yeah, but . . . you sound crazy, Mr. Andrist! Why all of a sudden this depression?

You don't really want to die?"

"Die! I'm telling you, I'm *dead*. Ten years ago they made a machine, and my brain is just a part of it. Have you ever broken a toy? Or gotten mad because a watch wouldn't run and just tapped it on the table a little too hard?"

"All right. I admit I know what you're talking about. We're friends, Mr. Andrist. But I can't *kill* you. My chess partner."

"Exactly, just a chess opponent, and the thing can be carried out as logically as checkmate, with as little emotion."

"You forget that I've never checkmated you. How would I do it? Not that I'm going to, but theoretically."

He had the boy going. But the way would have to be perfect.

"To me you're just thick steel," John said. "I don't mean personally, but for the purposes of—of—"

Unless the method left not the slightest trace, there would be danger of the museum authorities apprehending John. It was none of their business, but he knew that they would never understand or believe John if he tried to tell them that the chessmas-

ter had ordered it. That ruled out drilling, hammering, explosive, and all the related violences.

A radioactive dose would be too difficult.

Then he had it. Just as easy as plugging in a floor lamp! Certainly if he were electrocuted they would blame it on a short circuit in the machine. There couldn't be an investigation with suspicion of murder, because there would be no conceivable motive.

"Yes," he said, "but John, this metal that you can touch is connected to more metal and that in turn rests on more and finally *I* touch it from inside here. All you have to do is get an extension cord, wait in the washroom until they close the place up, come over here and—I don't know how far the wall plug is from here."

"About twelve feet. However," said John.

"Good! Plug in and give this contraption about a minute of juice. Roll up the wire and hide it somewhere. Call the number of the information desk from around the corner by the checking-out desk, and let it ring until the night watchman comes in and answers it. He won't bother to lock the door just for the minute that he'll be on the phone,

and while he's around there in the next hall you can walk out. You can come back and remove the extension cord some other day."

He paused. There was no more to say. "John? We don't have to be sentimental with each other!"

John was pleading now. "But what difference does it make how simple it is? I'd do it for you if it were *only* dangerous! It's just that I don't believe . . . I come in to play chess with you and perhaps tell you some of the things that you like to hear, and you ask me to end it. . . ."

"Because you *are* the only one I can ask! Because you're close enough so that you've had to see some of my misery! I'm no more than an old phonograph, after the years have seen every record broken but one! A kindness, John!"

And the word "kindness" echoed hollowly in his mind, loudly and then softly until he thought perhaps he was talking to no one, that he had scared John away. He waited. He heard a breath.

"Then good-by, Mr. Andrist."

He wasn't sure of the boy's meaning, but to the last he had to keep drawing him with confidence. "Tonight."

"I—yes, all right. Tonight."

THE late afternoon sun was staring against the marble of the outside wall, jumping from there through the wide air inside the library, coming to rest against the metal and finally seeping through. He wished he couldn't imagine it so well. He wanted to think darkness, evening with clouds over the moon, night under a dense tree, because time was of himself now.

It no longer mattered whether or not his time agreed with that of every swinging wristwatch out on the street. For him there was only one more appointment. He wanted to bring it to himself instantly. He could see death coming like a checkmate: there was no difference between a time before checkmate and the moment of the final stroke, was there? So what was time? The end was implicit in the now.

As a chessplayer, he could find only hard logic between the two.

But as a man he wanted to see noon, then the morning sun, and after that dawn, and after that. . . .

Because he had cheated himself of self-portraits. Other men carried theirs, accumulated through years of vacillation, a waywardness of purpose that Andrist had

hated, but which he now longed for, though it was too late.

He had been like the others once, free to measure by touch the pockets, the new images into which one is constantly reborn. But even in his earliest memories he had begun with un-childlike method to burn the nerve-ends. To close all avenues to risk.

Like, for instance, he remembered, the time he was visiting the little Polish girl.

Her hair was so long it hung down the silver handlebars of her tricycle. She was very rich, and she had wheeled across the firm red rug of the living room floor and stopped in front of him with her feet still slightly pressing on the pedals. And he and she were suddenly huge. In the middle of the wide rug, with the voices of the adults from out in the garden creeping at the windows, they were giant and giantess. He had stepped forward and pressed his lips into her cheek and felt her hair thickly alive on his forehead. But the tricycle moved and he saw her riding quickly away, wiping her face with her tiny fingers. She had looked very small then, and the grownups' voices began to rattle the

spindly doors of the antique cabinet that loomed beside him.

He had waited for his mother and father in the car.

He remembered again:

There was the pigeon he had got for his birthday, a heavy thing with fluttering heart that he had held in his hand. Slim as an ivory shoe-horn, it pecked and tottered back and forth on its rice-kernel toes for the first few days and then stopped and stood still for a day and a half with its tail hanging, until, puffed and dirtied, eyes half gray, it died.

There were few things that he remembered with this unique vividness after he learned chess. While still a boy, he had become cautious in life, daring in chess. Perhaps the last was the pale blue morning on which he flung himself from his bed and ran through the wet grass to the pepper tree to cut himself a fishing pole. He had been thinking about it all night. He had never been fishing. The pepper tree wasn't so good for poles as he had imagined, but he couldn't change his mind and he got a scraggly limb and carved off the bark with his knife. Then he tied the end of his ball of string to the tip of the pole and be-

gan playing it out, walking backwards, over the lawn, through a hole in the stone wall, past the tool shed and finally down into the vegetable garden, where he tied on a safety pin. He dug up a fresh carrot and embedded the hook in it, placing it in the ground conspicuously between two rows of lettuce. Then he had taken the long way around the house to his pole under the pepper tree, to wait for the rabbits to bite. With lungs stinging in the cold air, he had held his pole against the morning stars until they disappeared. With the sun came the gardener, who, slapping his knees, went up to the house to tell the story.

He had vowed that he would never again fish for rabbits.

THAT was what made it comforting now to Andrist to be near the end of it.

Soon it would be impossible for him to fish any more, with or without illusions. He knew that he would never be able to stop desiring; on the other hand it was too late to become a fifteen-year-old John Plum. Between these there was only one safe place for the heart—where nothing could touch it. In death. So black as to be devoid of darkness, silent as

fission, slow as light in its journey to the end of space.

There was sound—low at first, but mounting like a siren. John!

It was metallic, as if the mechanism around him had begun to shear and twist. A jingling, rhythmic sound began to shake him. He felt as though he had a real head again and someone were hitting him along the temples with a sack of silver dollars. And then he was sinking and the clean noise of air things stopped and there was the low cough of surf in caves. He was in a crowd of deep bubbles. One by one they ruptured, the leaden noise coming closer and closer with each explosion, until he knew that the next one would be all.

It would be over. He lost thought in the blast.

Nothing.

Wait.

Silence.

Death?

"Hm?" He had a voice!

"I am Paul Andrist," he said. Then he thought, "Oh, don't be such a bloody fool!"

And waited in the hush, longer.

Then as he let his memory spread and his thoughts whirled away from their fear-inspired closeness, he knew, he saw. He was filled instantly

with dark hate. It was treachery, a . . . trick! And it was so——

Funny!

He laughed momentarily, as suddenly moaned wretchedly.

Because he still heard the firs hissing in Oregon, and felt the faintly moist eyelid of the beautiful young girl against his cheekbone. It was all there, and more, in the loud darkness! Clumping bats, thudding balls, whacking diving boards, chattering skiis, a fox trot, an ice cream cone with a mushy bottom, neighbor kids calling, a kite with tugging string diving round and round——

And he should have known, should he not? Because death is implicit in life. He had said it. Just as checkmate is implicit in any given position on the chessboard. Nothing changes until the players pick up the pieces and start a new game.

But as he waited there surprised and left wondering even by death, he was filled with a strange satisfaction: How much more terrible it would have been if he had brought nothing with him! The emptiness of death cries to be filled! For the first time, he turned happily to his desires, ghostly and meagre as

they now seemed to be in the vastness of death. He wished he could somehow tell John about it.

HE HAD almost slept. Then he heard the voice.

"Hello, Andrist! Are you all right? This is Dr. Williams—the janitor called me down here because the alarm was flashing on the switchboard. Have you felt anything?"

It was like a hot bath, driving up your own driveway at two o'clock in the morning.

A hundred and ten volts had not been enough, then!

"I'm—I seem to be all right, Doctor!" he said.

"Indeed! You're bursting my eardrums," said the doctor. "Well, good night, Mr. Andrist."

"Pleasant dreams to *you*, Doctor," said Andrist. "And Doctor, have them give me an early call, will you please?"

"Certainly."

Two or three lights were shining from the high ceiling of the Municipal Library of Science at a surprisingly late hour that night and three kids on their way home from the last movie were left not a little curious by a sight that

could be seen through the after-hours book return slot: A large, bespectacled man in a white smock and a boy were filling a burlap bag. They put in a baseball bat, several lengths of heavy chain, a bugle, an egg beater and finally, with some difficulty, a battered garbage can top. The younger one shouldered the bag and the man walked to the switchbox on the wall and turned out the lights.

The kids ran behind a hedge and presently the man and the boy came through the doors. They paused on the steps.

"I did the right thing?" The boy was asking, not stating. After all, he was only fifteen years old.

"You did the right thing, John." The older one hefted the bag of sound effects. "I think he thought he was dead. But he sounded—he sounded very good, John. I'm glad you came to me. I'm glad you didn't help him to die." He shouldered the bag. "Still," he said, "it's too bad he can't see those stars."

The boy stared at the sky. Then he said, "He's looking at them now," and stepped out toward the sidewalk.