

STEINITZ
Steven Levery

Stifled by the dull conversation over tea and dessert, Lasker and a few intimates have fled the dining room for the upper deck, taking with them their snifters and a flask of the most ancient cognac they can find. Leaning against the forward railing of the steamer, looking out over the dark Atlantic as though they have just discovered it, they discuss the progress of their philosophical endeavors...the emerging world order...the stars. Their after-dinner cigars are nearly finished. As the ship slices neatly through the calm surface far below, the steady breeze created by its forward thrust is so exhilarating that Lasker can scarcely contain himself. He extends his arms to gather as much of the wind's force as his small frame will allow.

"Feel that, gentlemen!" he exclaims. "Out here, the engines of destiny run full throttle!" and all present embrace this utterance with dignified but vigorous assent, for his words seem to carry the buoyant energy of a generation that expects to live far into the twentieth century. They sense a sure hand at the tiller, guiding them to a strange country with efficient speed and safety. New waters welcome them. They can see for miles, in every direction a comforting emptiness.

In the distance, a glistening white shape looms. Within a few moments, the awesome dimensions of the object become apparent. It is the forehead of Steinitz, huge as though swollen with the ideas contained in it, pale, domelike, impenetrable; just below the waterline, his eyes glimmer with malevolent intensity. All attempts at maneuvering fail; there is a great wrenching and tearing, and Lasker is thrown from the deck, pitched headlong through space into the freezing sea. Stunned by the impact of landing, he finds a piece of driftwood and grasps it blindly. He floats alone in the terrible darkness. Screams resound behind him.

Before long the cacaphony of wreckage, panic, and dying fade away, and he is enveloped in a silence deeper than any he has ever experienced. The stars have disappeared. It is as though he were already fully submerged, far under water. But occasionally, at

intervals he is no longer competent to measure, there are sounds like something thrashing about nearby. He wonders if it's another passenger, perhaps one of his friends, making a last effort to find something to hang onto. In the savage cold, he isn't surprised when he discovers he can no longer feel anything below his chest. His grip loosens inexorably.

"So that's it, then? Nothing but a few adolescent dreams and a cold bath with my trousers still on?" He is overcome by an infantile peevishness.

"I thought there would be more," he says. Then he lets go.

The constant lurching of the ship in rather high winds has unsettled many of the passengers. If Lasker is at all disturbed by such energetic movement, he doesn't show it. He sets up the chessboard for another game, giving Crawford the white pieces, takes a fresh cigar out of his breast pocket and lights it, puffing thoughtfully while his opponent considers his first move. The smoke envelops his head like an aura, a tangible extension of his personality into the space around him. The cabin is filled with its drifting presence. Sometimes, watching the complex patterns formed by its motion, Crawford thinks he can detect fluctuations in Lasker's mood which are hidden on his face by a precocious buddha-like mask. Here and there, tendrils of agitation form and orbit, disperse and form again. Crawford refrains from bringing up what he believes to be their source—for who would presume to suggest even the slightest want of self-assurance in one who, scarcely in his twenties and having comparatively little experience, sets out to become world champion of chess? More so, to wrest the title from a Master in possession of so eminent a reputation, of such a distasteful, egotistical and defensive personality as that of Wilhelm Steinitz? As for the nightmares of drowning, these Lasker has dismissed as "incidental psychic episodes."

"Is it too early to send for a bottle of wine?" Crawford ventures. He moves his King's Pawn forward with a casual disregard for the tactical complexities that will evolve from so bold a gesture.

"Do you hope to bolster your attack with alcohol?" Lasker asks with a laugh. "It works for Blackburne—" He points to one of

several bottles scattered about the cabin. "That one may still be of service to you," he says.

"You're mistaken—we finished it off two nights ago."

"Maybe under here...." He begins to rummage under a pile of books and dinnerware.

"Wherever you take up residence becomes within a short while the unmistakable lair of an intellectual," Crawford observes, mindful of Lasker's numerous vehement and false disclaimers to that title. In every corner of the room are stacks of papers: newspaper articles, chess game scores, correspondence, manuscripts in preparation; boxes of books on diverse subjects: philosophy, history, anthropology, methods of burial, classification of criminals, the photoelectric effect; several volumes on Hinduism and Kabbalah are open or have their pages of interest marked with slips of paper. The only books on chess are those by Steinitz. The other evening, Crawford remarked upon his possessing, in a huge file, every published game of Steinitz, as well as every article, comment, word written by Steinitz about himself or anyone else, noting that his preparations enabled him to indulge freely in hero worship while carefully plotting his hero's destruction. To which Lasker replied, denying neither contention, "That's always the way with heroes, isn't it? It is my intention to crush him so utterly that there will be nothing left for his enemies to desecrate. Better for him to retire broken than to play on as a has-been. The display of a vanquished warrior's carcass before his enemies is an abomination."

But Crawford's last remark just brings another laugh. "What perversity of nature prompts you to make such a superficial observation? It usually means one is sorely in need of proper housekeeping."

"What other sort of creature is prepared to inform people over dinner, in polite Western society, that 'cremation is favored to protect the body from being devoured by crows and dogs' ? Who else but an intellectual would insist, as you did last night, that chess is not an intellectual game?"

"You might win more often if you approached the game in the same frame of mind as you would prepare for a boxing match—or more precisely a street brawl." Lasker thumbs his nose, kicks over

the chess table and swings his fist exuberantly. "Put up yer dukes!" he shouts in perfect back alley English, no mean accomplishment for one who spent his childhood in Berlinchen. But he's no boxer; it takes only a second for Crawford to send him sprawling to the floor. "That's quite a left you've got there, my good man," Lasker exclaims, retrieving his spectacles.

"Is this how you intend to vanquish the great Steinitz? I would suggest lessons in fisticuffs. Perhaps in swimming, also." There, it's out, a clumsy joke.

"I would be pleased—"

"Why let it disturb you? It's hardly surprising that you would encounter the man in your dreams."

Without his spectacles, his eyes seem unexpectedly large and hold an emotion Crawford can't at first identify. As though to help him, Lasker leans forward until their faces are less than a foot apart.

"You're afraid," Crawford whispers, waiting for his denial; "Seriously?" Lasker continues to stare at him. "Come on," Crawford exclaims, laughing nervously, "he's an old man. You're already as good as he was in his prime, and he's decades past that, now. You could beat him right here, right now, with no further preparation!"

"I don't fear him as a chess player."

"But you don't know him in any other way."

"Precisely...so why should I...fear him at all...you see?"

Lasker gets up, walks distractedly around the cabin, stops in front of a mirror, looks at his reflection, then turns to his friend, smiling abruptly, and says, "You know, I'm gonna try growing a moustache—what do you think? Hmm?"

Returning from Havana, where he has just successfully defended his world title against the Russian champion Mikhail Tchigorin, Steinitz arrives in New York sporting a plantation hat and clenching in his teeth a huge Cuban cigar—a magnificent, expansive figure with robust shoulders; yet, on further inspection one's admiration is foreshortened by the disappointment of his lower body: it is as though his Maker, starting too generously with the head before working downward, ran so short of material at the finish that there was hardly enough left for legs capable of bearing the

superstructure; leaving Steinitz as a living embodiment of the familiar graphic: P L A N A H E A d.

Supported by a pair of braces and a cane, he supervises the unloading of his belongings, two steamer trunks of clothing and personal necessities, and several cartons filled with manuscripts in his cramped, precise script. As a result of a porter's mishandling, one package becomes undone and bursts open, sending a shower of paper upon the other debarking passengers. The irreplaceable pages are rapidly dispersed by the feet of tourists, officials, and members of welcoming committees. Steinitz unleashed is demonic, screaming at the hapless porter and knocking people over in his attempts to recover the scattered pages which lie under their feet.

The porter, soon fed up and despairing of his tip, leaves Steinitz to fend for himself. The last the porter sees of Steinitz, he is engaged in a violent argument with a stout gentleman from Liverpool, who obstinately refuses to move off a sheaf of annotated games in spite of Steinitz' brandished cane and unending spew of insults. A few people turn briefly to the scene as they hurry to waiting cabs and trains. It is several hours before Steinitz is rescued by his own welcoming group, which has been delayed in the Lower East Side by snarled Manhattan traffic, a religious festival, and a five-alarm fire and building collapse.

Steinitz as seen through the eyes of his son: this strange, fierce dwarf who cleaves to his mother. He entertains the boy with his impressions of wild animals. He bends his stunted body in figures of stalking beasts, now growling like a tiger, now howling like a wolf. Sprouting antlers, he charges a rival buck. Finally, he is a rabbit, springing about the room in short hops. Hop, hop. Delighted, his son laughs. Hophophop. He hops over to the child, lifts and embraces him, but this is a much less successful bid for affection—suddenly so close, his massive pale face and rough black beard startle the boy, who turns his head away and struggles to be let down. Steinitz sets him on the floor and addresses him with regretful seriousness.

"It is only natural for you to hate me," he says.

Later, his wife, Caroline, suggests a more palatable explanation for the boy's behavior.

"Perhaps he thought you were going to eat him. You frightened him by pouncing on him like that."

"But rabbits don't eat people."

"He doesn't know that."

"Yes, that's right," he says. A smile, the first she has seen in days, appears on his lips at the realization that his son's love may not be, after all, so remote from him. "He's a good boy. Maybe tomorrow I'll teach him to play chess."

"Sooner you should kill me," she says.

Seated at the desk in his study, Steinitz pours some wine into a tumbler and sips carefully. He is apprehensive he might become an alcoholic like Tchigorin. Steinitz has just written: "At the close of a contest, I am wrought to such a nervous tension that for weeks afterward I am in an almost uncontrollable state, living on champagne or some stimulant that will bring artificial strength." Draining the rest of the wine from the tumbler, he turns to the chessboard, on which is set up a position from a game played between Lee and Blackburne in a recent London tournament. After a long and bitter struggle, Blackburne forced Lee's resignation with a brilliant sacrificial combination. As Steinitz replays the game, he notices several inferior moves in the opening, which he notes in the margins of the printed score. Soon, he arrives at what he recognizes as the critical point in the game. Here Lee had an exceptional number of plans at his disposal, chose the wrong one, and lost. Steinitz extends him a measure of sympathy. Even he is dazzled by the unusual difficulty of the position.

He begins exploring unplayed ideas, rapidly shifting pieces into new configurations. The game unfolds, yielding its hidden riches to his eager questioning, revealing the other games implicit within it: in one a piece sacrifice offers White a promising assault on the Black King, only to be refuted by the timely return of the piece; another variation leads to rapid simplification and a draw; in others, it is Black who gains the upper hand. Then from his understanding grows the fantasy of an idea: a series of moves which keeps all

chances in balance, but increases the complexity of the position by an order of magnitude. It's a maneuver he might not dare in an actual game, when there wouldn't be sufficient time to work out all the possibilities to their decisive conclusions; but here, in his private encounters, where time seems unlimited, his mastery expands—he feels an excitement which God must feel during an act of creation. The dozens of wild, intricately executed variations which erupt from his imagination can be played out and evaluated. Such is his concentration that he no longer needs physically to move the pieces before him; with his inner vision he arrives at positions of increasing complexity, each one drawing him on to the next. Nothing can stop the flow. He is led through a labyrinth of ever-extending possibilities, where the last passage opens to the infinite.

From the street, an insistent clanking breaks in upon his thoughts. His fragile universe of possibility collapses into confusion. He half rises, startled, a cry escapes his lips, he sits heavily again in his chair. The idea he has felt himself approaching now recedes rapidly from sight. He plunges wildly through the labyrinth, trying to pick up the thread he has lost, but instead becomes hopelessly entangled in a net of useless, random moves.

He sits, paralyzed, unable to rouse himself to thought or action. Having entered another dimension, he is unable to free himself from it. Outside, the trees are turning yellow. A strong wind blows dead leaves against him. They curl up around his feet and deposit in his lap, but he does not brush them away. Soon it is snowing. His hair, beard, and shoulders are covered with snow. After a while it melts and cold water trickles down his face and back. Starlings build nests in his beard, leaving limey stains there and everywhere. A year has gone by. A hand touches him lightly, comes to rest on his shoulder. Caroline. The trance broken, he shivers almost imperceptibly.

"Wilhelm, it's so late. I'm frightened for you. Come to bed with me."

After a few moments of stillness, he turns, lays his face against her stomach, and weeps into the cloth of her nightgown.

It is Lasker's doing, of course, their encounter with this towering figure of British chess, Joseph Henry Blackburne. On the eve of

their departure for New York, Lasker insists they take advantage of an opportunity to meet Blackburne, on the grounds that he's had three matches with Steinitz.

"And lost all three," Crawford says. "What special insight do you suppose he might be able to offer you?"

As it turns out, Lasker has no real appointment with Blackburne, merely the names of several establishments Blackburne likes to frequent. After hours of searching, they track him down in a crowded, dingy little tavern at the edge of London's seafaring district. An ex-sailor with a sagebrush beard and a violent stare, Blackburne is taller than Crawford by a head. His long death-mask face is somewhat further lengthened by whiskey, his second love, after chess. In one hand he clutches a half-full glass, in the other a half empty bottle. Sitting opposite Blackburne, wedged between a pair of cronies, Crawford masks his discomfort by downing the better part of a pint of ale in a single gulp. Lasker sips alternately on a shot of bourbon and a tumbler of water. Next to Blackburne, Lasker reminds Crawford of a leprechaun, one with faintly Asiatic features and considerably more charm. Lasker allows Blackburne to hold forth on his legendary tournament victories, then calmly steers the conversation to his true interest.

"You must be joking," Blackburne says, and issues a laugh to convince him. "How good is Steinitz? He hardly deserves the title of player, let alone Master. He scorns the open fight, prefers to cower behind cramped, crabby defences, until his opponent, out of sheer frustration, or just plain boredom, commits an error and loses a Pawn, which is all the little worm needs to nurse through to victory. Where's the beauty in that?"

The man on Crawford's right interjects: "All he cares for is the point on the scoreboard and money in his pocket, Jew that he is. Hiding under his shell, you turn him over, and there's the soft, fat Jew's belly underneath."

Lasker casts a warning glance at Crawford to keep still.

"If only Morphy were alive!" puts in the man on Crawford's left.

Blackburne raps his glass on the table several times to indicate his agreement. "Now there was a gentleman *and* a chess player," he

says. "Morphy could have given Steinitz Pawn and move." This last statement he punctuates by downing another shot of whiskey.

From a corner of the room someone shouts: "I hear the fat Jew offered you his Rook!" which brings forth a roar of laughter.

Blackburne rises immediately against the mutinous patrons, wielding his bottle by its neck, ready to break it, if necessary. "Who said that?" he bellows, "Let the bastard step forward!"

His detractors fade like chameleons into a background of tables, chairs, and bottles. Satisfied by the quick restoration of order, Blackburne sinks back in his chair. Noticing again the whiskey bottle in his hand, he pours for himself the dregs, what he hasn't spilled. This he drinks in a gulp, belches, continues.

"And another thing...."

In the final round of his latest tournament, a sixteen-player round-robin of moderate prestige, Steinitz already holds such a commanding lead over the rest of the field that, even were he to lose his last game, and his nearest rival win his, he would still retain sole possession of first place—one more insufferable conquest to trumpet as proof of his superiority. His opponent is the lowest ranked of the competitors, a part-time journalist named Pflog, a mediocre player who has turned to writing chess columns for a living; to Steinitz a species of "literary cur" whom he detests. Facing Steinitz over a chess board is not easy. In reserve against opponents unimpressed by his abilities as a player and theoretician, he holds the temperament of a wounded boar and a vocabulary of insults unlimited by propriety. Those who lose to him must retreat behind journalistic trenches if they insist on continuing the battle. Thus his tenure as world champion is disputed as heatedly in the pages of magazines and newspapers as in actual play. In fact, the written campaign against him has been the more effective; he is defeated every week by editorials denying his right to the title, though he has vanquished every challenger with incredible ease. There is no lack of timeworn excuses, everything from the climate to hypnosis. On paper he is a pretender, a has-been, a duffer, a joke, an idiot fortunate enough to have puzzled out the moves of the pieces, lost before he sits down to play; only *he* seems to know, in

1892, that he has been champion for twenty-six years, nearly half his life.

In less than a dozen offhand moves, he builds up an impressive positional advantage. With a time limit of thirty moves in two hours for each player, he has used up a mere ten minutes, while Pflog has taken over an hour. Steinitz reclines, thinking about dinner, with what wine he will celebrate, how he will excoriate his critics in the next issue of his *International Chess Magazine*. The name of Emanuel Lasker does not even brush the steep approaches to his ego. Pflog, playing Black, clock ticking away, sweats visibly over his next move. There is always a moment when even a mediocre player knows he is utterly lost, knows he has no resources left. For Pflog, this moment is nearly upon him. In fourteen campaigns, he has yet to win or draw. He is a frustrated man and feels his last chance slipping away. "Already your resignation would shock no one," Steinitz announces.

Pflog, trying to act nonchalant, raises his head and fixes Steinitz with a look of disdain. Compared with that of Steinitz, his understanding of the position is superficial. His maneuvers, Steinitz has joked, "are like those of a man with devious sexual intent—made with a heavy-handed pretense of subtlety which can never quite disguise his true intentions." Steinitz has insulted him throughout the tournament.

"Even though you are an imbecile, and even though your time is running out," says Steinitz, glancing pointedly at Pflog's clock, "I will offer you a draw because I would like to have an early dinner. My wife is preparing a wonderful soufflé."

Pflog considers the alternatives. The draw offer, incredibly wonderful as it is contemptuous, is an easy, face-saving way to get a positive number in his score—only half a point, but against the great Steinitz, fixed forever in the won-lost records of the game; while if he plays on he will in all probability end up with nothing. He shifts his glance from piece to piece, looking for some connection between their various powers and potential movements, for some deeper vision into the network of influences that causes the sixty-four squares to vibrate with the richness and purpose of life. Growing in his mind is the certainty that Steinitz is right. He

sees nothing but stylized wooden carvings of animals and men. He understands nothing about chess, never has.

"I think our honor as gentlemen obliges us to continue," he answers finally, making his move.

With unnerving ease, Steinitz presses his advantage forward. Mindful of criticism that his play has become dull, he resurrects the style of his youth, slashing, adventurous, wide-open. Exerting furious pressure on the Kingside, he assails the Black monarch brilliantly, destroying its haven of safety, laying it bare to the malicious whims of his pieces. Pflog has to give up one piece after another to stave off checkmate, but to every amused, questioning glance from Steinitz, he replies only "I will never resign!" Steinitz then begins to play a different game. He makes meaningless pawn moves. He shifts his pieces into irrelevant, amusing patterns, delaying the final blow without permitting Pflog any salvation. He makes his moves with casual speed while Pflog's time dwindles to the limit. Finally he closes in; Pflog makes his last possible move and presses the lever that stops his clock and starts that of Steinitz, which shows an hour and a half remaining.

Abruptly Steinitz gets up, apologizing, tells Pflog he has to relieve himself, and leaves his opponent seated alone at the board, waiting for the last, mating, move. Twenty minutes go by. Pflog, impatient now for the end, wanders about the playing hall, keeping one eye on the board. After a while he checks the men's room. It is empty. Returning, he asks other players if they have Steinitz; pacing near his chair, he tells them when they interrupt their games to come over, "He's trying to annoy me. I don't care." They look at the position on the board and walk away shaking their heads.

"Maybe he's had an accident," one of them suggests.

"Fallen under a wagon, perhaps." Pflog laughs. "Serve him right."

He passes the time by checking the progress of other games, relaxing, until the clock shows only fifteen minutes remaining. He begins to search all the stairwells in the building, every closet that can be opened, goes outside and looks down the street in either direction. Steinitz is nowhere to be found. Again he returns to the board, expecting to find Steinitz seated there, administering the

coup de grace. The chair is empty. With only five minutes left, he commits what he knows to be an unpardonable error, what he originally cautioned himself not to do. He allows himself to believe that Steinitz might actually be detained somewhere and might, just possibly, not return in time. He calls the tournament director over to witness the time running out and award him the game by forfeit. As the remaining seconds tick away, a crowd gathers around Pflog and the director. At the rear of the hall, there is a disturbance. The entrance doors swing open and Steinitz, with the aid of his cane and braces, shuffles forward to his chair. Before his time can run out, he delivers checkmate, to the wretched Pflog, before the eyes of every gentleman in the room.

Steinitz in the synagogue, praying: the tears which collect below his eyes are for his daughter: she is dead. Feverishly he mourns, rocking back and forth in the metronomic obeisance that characterizes Orthodox worship, reciting, as if it were not already too late for words, the memorial prayer for the dead. So tortured are his movements, he appears to be suffering bodily pain. Among the rows of oscillating figures of normal stature, the exaggerated flailing of this crippled dwarf rivets the attention, seems as though it must be an act for public appreciation. But no, it is simply that, like everything else in his life, his grief too must be a manifestation of his genius. He just can't help himself.

The rabbi raises overhead the Torah, the Law and Chronicle of the Hebrew people, the sacred scrolls that record the lives of men whom the Lord has forsaken, Uzziah and Jehoshaphat, Solomon before them, and Saul before him ("And the Lord was angry....And they put Saul's armor in the temple of their gods, and fastened his head in the temple of Dagon....And the ships were wrecked and were not able to go to Tarshish....") As the Torah is covered, hidden away in its silken case and silver ornaments, placed carefully behind the wooden doors of the inner sanctuary, for a brief instant, like a man suddenly aware that he has been dreaming, Steinitz recognizes his isolation, that it is, has always been, upon him, like a sheet he has drawn over his face to ward off the threatening spirits of the night. Who can share his grief? Whom would he permit to do

so? There he is, isolated, with the image still fresh in his mind's eye of his child's body slowly consuming itself, shrinking into the fabric of her bedclothes, her halting words repeated endlessly now in the silent dialogues of his torment.

He aches to share the secret that makes his grief so much more unbearable than that of others: that he was the agent of her destruction—that is, despairing of a cure by medical science or even by God's mercy, he had proposed that they play a game of chess for her life, and then, to make the proposal more attractive, offered to undertake the contest at the generous odds of Pawn and move, only later realizing the implicit insult. The Almighty did not even dignify with a reply. The next day Flora was dead. The connection is firmly established in his mind. She died of his arrogance. He is alienated from all, now even, especially, from God.

Steinitz, alone, eyes tightly shut, retreats from his vision. He hasn't come here to see, but to blind himself, if only for an hour, down to the very core.

After defeating the best contemporary British players, including Blackburne, Gunsberg, Bird, and Mason, in tournament as well as match play, Lasker, a young upstart only twenty-three years old, arrives in New York in the Fall of 1892.

Invited to the Manhattan Club's 1893 tournament, where he will face such luminaries as Pillsbury, Showalter, and Albin (but not Steinitz), he is the guest of honor at the opening celebration, a banquet attended by the players, club officials and their wives, the deputy Mayor, and assorted New York City royalty, some enthusiasts of the game, some merely curious about the strange creatures who play it. Great quantities of wine and exotic foods are distributed by a brigade of uniformed waiters and consumed amid a crescendo of chatter. Members of the tournament committee are introduced, all of whose names end in Esquire, a title some of the foreign players deduce confers the right to insult tradespeople and get away with it. Minor functionaries with sashes and obscure chest decorations present lengthy speeches concerning the past and future of chess. Lasker, sitting at a table to the right of the speakers, produces from somewhere in his clothing a small package, which

turns out to be a well worn deck of cards. These he deals face down into a four-by-four matrix, three cards deep. The playing of the last four cards in the deck initiates a series of rearrangements which are incomprehensible to those around him. No one can tell if this is a game of solitaire he learned from the daughter of a physicist on the trip from London, an exercise in probability, or a meaningless charade. Abruptly he picks up the cards, makes a notation on his napkin, and starts over. After recording the results of five or so deals, he folds the napkin, and inserts it with the deck of cards in the pocket of his waistcoat.

Later, there is live music, a charming string quartet composed by one of the lower seeds of the tournament, a young local amateur considered to be a rising chess talent as well as gifted musician. Not yet old enough to grow a real moustache, he occasionally fingers self-consciously the few tentative hairs he has found above his upper lip.

There is dancing, hilarity. An amusing story circulates about Blackburne throwing Steinitz out a window at Paris, 1867, after being spat upon. Lasker, asked to settle a dispute concerning the value of one of Steinitz' ugly-looking opening innovations, announces, to everyone's amazement, that Steinitz "is the greatest chess thinker of this century, living or otherwise." While no one ventures to argue the statement, neither does anyone drink to it; nor is anyone perceptive enough to sense that Lasker speaks as one who knows Steinitz and his ideas better than Steinitz.

The next day, his opponent in the first round happens to be the composer of the string quartet, an unkempt, at closer hand, faintly morose individual, who takes advantage of Lasker's indifferent opening play to build up a powerful attacking position, seemingly irresistible. He is miserable in anticipated victory, a study in grimaces, contortions, twitches, and fits of coughing that grow more frequent and frenzied as his advantage appears more decisive. Lasker finds, however, a clever, unexpected defensive resource. The musician thinks over his reply, reaches for a piece, hesitates, reaches again, withdraws; finally, trembling, he makes his move. He realizes immediately that it is a blunder; not a terrible one, but so disconcerting is its effect that his game collapses in a few more

moves. He resigns, embarrassed to have let such an overwhelming advantage slip away, yet proud to have built it up in the first place against so strong a player as Lasker. He begins to discuss the game, timorously waiting for the helpful suggestions which are the prize of defeat. Instead, Lasker reaches across the board and firmly encloses his opponent's damp, irresolute hands, preventing him from placing the pieces back on their original squares. "You're wasting your time here," he says. "You haven't the killer instinct."

Lasker wins the tournament with thirteen victories, no losses, and no draws.

A match is arranged with Herr Steinitz.

In the stillness of the room the wooden clack of Steinitz' King being turned over on its side for the last time echoes above the silent breath and rustling of the spectators. The movement has been carried out with tortured slowness, as though in fear of disturbing anyone by a sudden noise. It is nevertheless loud enough for everyone to hear, and to distract Lasker from his study of Steinitz's face, which has shown no forewarning of the coming resignation.

Throughout the fifteen games of the match, Lasker has displayed a substantial tactical superiority, combined with a grasp of strategical ideas far in advance of any other player in the world. In fact many of the ideas belong to Steinitz. Only Lasker, of all the leading players, has recognized the value of Steinitz's original concepts and found ways to use them against their creator. Steinitz's deep plans, which have baffled and frustrated opponents for almost thirty years, have been analyzed, anticipated, neutralized, and demolished.

Lasker's heartfelt impulse, while watching the face of this overbearing man he has admired and secretly feared for so long, is to console and protect him, to shield him somehow from the wrath of vengeful critics, who will descend on him with their journalistic lances, ignoring that Lasker's victory is Steinitz's vindication, that the refutation of his plans is proof of their validity.

Only yesterday, during an adjournment, Steinitz was referred to, within Lasker's hearing, as a "doddering Neanderthal." Lasker whirled furiously, stabbing with his black cigar at the speaker's

face. "You incomparable moron! The concepts of that 'Neanderthal,' as you call him, the value of which you can't even begin to comprehend, because they can barely penetrate your thick skull to the insect-sized brain within, will one day...."

Here Lasker launched into a long tirade, which later to Crawford he admitted was excessive, but excused himself, saying that he got carried away in the face of "aggressive stupidity." "...and then, Mister Fucking Chess Journalist, I will come and carve those ideas on your gravestone." Lasker inhaled deeply on his cigar and blew a thick jet of acrid vapor into the face of the journalist, who, now that the match is over, will write that the new champion is ten times more obnoxious than the last, that his abilities are overrated, that chess no longer seems to be a gentleman's game, and that Morphy, if he were alive, could give Lasker odds of Pawn and move. But in private moments, when he knows he is alone, he will take out a miniature chess set and gaze intently into the mystery of its sixty-four squares until his eyes twist in their sockets, and often stare at his reflection in mirrors, where he will see the ideas of Steinitz chiselled deeply into the thick bone of his forehead.

Lasker has imagined for himself the role of one of the valiant men of Jabesh-gilead, riding all night to retrieve the mutilated and desecrated body of Saul from the Philistines. But meanwhile an odor of smoldering cloth has reached his nostrils. Steinitz is burning. Flames leap up around his torso and upper body, engulf his enormous head, which seems to expand from the pressure of trapped gases. His beard disappears in a second or two, followed by his hair; then the flesh of his face disintegrates, dropping off in charred, sizzling layers. Fire pours through the orifices of the black skull, through the sockets which held the glaring, intelligent eyes, from the mouth deprived of its vitriolic tongue, from the nose and earholes. Because it is too large to be consumed completely in the pyre, the skull must be broken by a blow from a blunt instrument; struck solidly with a sledgehammer, it splits, shatters into small, oddly shaped fragments—and releases from its interior two birds: a pure white dove which, with a tender cry, ascends through the skylight and disappears; and a jackdaw, which remains for several minutes to harangue the spectators before exiting through a side

door. A buffalo is slaughtered. After three days of fasting, the ashes are tossed into a river, or buried in a holy place.

No, Steinitz is there, seated across from him, meditating profoundly on his lost position. A few observant spectators will remark later that Lasker, in that final game, seemed to study the face of his opponent almost as much as the board. Now, near the end, he suddenly feels like a boy who has mastered a sport in which his father excelled before him. He finds himself expecting to see on Steinitz's face the sort of condescending approval such a father would grant, or at least some hint that the man understands what has just occurred, but his study is interrupted by the sharp though in fact nearly inaudible clack of Steinitz' King being turned over for the last time in the match. The final moment of Lasker's glance reveals only the bitterness of a stubborn old man humiliated by defeat.

Following a tradition as old as chess itself, Steinitz puts the blame for his defeat on "indisposition." A rematch is agreed upon, in principle.

With his wife and children away visiting relatives, Steinitz awakens naked and chilly in an empty house. He rises, shivering, to put up a fire, and begins to dress. He puts on his shorts, undershirt, a white silken shirt mended in numberless places. He puts on black dress trousers. He puts on his celluloid dickey and collar. He puts on a vest and long coat. He puts on his tall opera hat, brandishes an old cane. Then he goes out to the back yard and shuffles around in his bare feet for several hours, absorbing electricity from the ground. When he thinks he has accumulated enough, he goes back inside, to a wireless telephone he has invented, and places a call to a cousin in Strasbourg. He makes the bell ring using the electrical impulses stored in his body.

"Otto, are you there? I'm calling long distance from New York. Otto? It's me, your cousin Wilhelm...can you hear me? Otto?"

Steinitz, in the madhouse, August 12, 1900: while the machinery of the nineteenth century rumbles into the twentieth, Steinitz lives out his remainder in a cell of the Manhattan State Hospital on Ward's Island, a mental institution he has inhabited since February.

Very little rumbling penetrates the thick walls of his cell to interrupt the progress of his final project, a monograph entitled, "My Advertisement to Antisemites in Vienna and Elsewhere, by a 'Schacher Jude' or An Essay on Capital, Labor, and Charity." All copies will be destroyed after his death, which will come upon him shortly. When they find him in the morning, he will have clutched to his breast a pocket chess board, with the pieces, having been set up as if in anticipation of a game, scattered about his body.

But he has a few hours left. On the small writing table they have allowed him rest the objects of his truncated existence: the chess set, the corrected galleys of his essay, a packet of letters, pen and ink, a photographic portrait of Flora, which lies flat on the table and cannot be seen from the bed where he lies recovering from a fit of dizziness. She is very much on his mind; her long illness and death are now the only memories which disturb his work. Perhaps God had been offended, and it cost her life; yet he experiences hope, for, when he passes from this realm to the next, when he is drawn finally to the bosom of his Lord, there will be, he is certain, an opportunity for one more challenge.

"Das Spiel ist nicht fand statt," he whispers to the dead girl in the photograph. "Der König wurde nicht schachmatt gesetzt."

The game has not been played. The King has not been mated.

Even as Steinitz is breathing his last on Ward's Island, Lasker is naming his own eventual successor. After playing several offhand games with an eight-year-old prodigy named Hans Eckard, Lasker announces to those present that the boy will succeed him as world champion. To demonstrate his faith in the keenness of his perceptions, as well as his own sporting nature, he wagers Crawford £10 on the boy's future.

It's a bad bet. After twelve years of struggle with the game, Eckard will just begin to score major successes—second at Leipzig, 1911; a shared first with Tarrasch at Brussels, 1912—when his life will be terminated by a knife in the throat during a scuffle between two political fringe groups outside a cafe in Munich. Lasker, holding the world title until 1921, will make no more predictions.