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DOUBLE NELSON

Translated from the Russian by Isabella L. Yanovsky

It was nearly two o'clock. The short June night was fading out. The café where the chess players met began to empty soon after midnight, and, by this time, even the most ardent players had left. The huge place was deserted; on the small tables with chessboards a few pieces stood in endgame position, kings rising high among the remaining pawns like biblical patriarchs, the position of one of them, as always, precarious, as behooves the prince of this world, and the played-out pieces were lying around like sinners at the Last Judgment or like citizens of a doomed town.

At one end of the hall, however, near the corner, some habitués had pushed their tables together and were still talking. One of them said:

"I want to crush him; I want to show the world my incontestable superiority. I will meet the Champion's resigning look and hear his sudden admission: 'Yes, I have lost. This is frightful. Everything I have known till now is only milk for babes in comparison to your mastery. I cannot even hate you.' And Bykov, that vulgar swine, will write in his paper: 'I have been a chess commentator for fifty years. For fifty years I have understood everything and explained everything, I have blamed and approved, I have wrecked reputations, and I have given advice. Now all is clear; gentlemen, you may spit in my ugly mug, I am a fool.'—I open with the king's pawn. The Champion smiles and moves the knight. Bykov puts through a call: 'Everything is going as expected.' But nevertheless I will choke him. The Champion loses quality, then a pawn. I finish him at the seventeenth move!"

This passionate philippic, buoyed by corresponding gestures, was uttered by a young man with a clay-green face and the empty, cruel eyes of a drug addict, a man possessed. He wore a short jacket over a dark shirt, a burned-out pipe stuck from his mouth.

"No!" he interrupted himself. "I would give him an advantage, I would concede a piece and, my friends already shaking their heads, I would rout my adversary by a lightning charge; in two moves I would change the game's fortunes as the appearance of the sun changes a landscape. Distracted, the Champion loses a castle; I offer to give it back—'Please, don't hesitate,' I

soothe him. The Champion thinks like a horse, hopelessly squints at the clock: time is up! I take the clock and throw it in the wastebasket. 'Play on,' I say, 'and forget these trifles.' Probably I will get quite fond of him in his misfortune. That is very dangerous: after affection comes pity. To stamp him under my boots, these old worn-out boots, to stamp upon the Champion…"

"To play him, Turgai," someone rejoined, "you better start by taking a few first prizes without scaring him. Then you have to find the money for the guarantee. And then you may think of meeting him."

"I cannot wait! I will not…"

"Good evening, or, rather, good morning, gentlemen!" came a soft, guttural, pleasant voice, and out of the adjoining dark corner stepped a corpulent and extraordinarily agile man in an old-fashioned derby hat. Swarthy, with a well-groomed beard, his hair graying at the temples, he approached the group with the light and dainty step of a ballet-master and offered Turgai his hand.

The sudden appearance of a stranger at the height of an intimate conversation filled with bitter confessions perplexed them all. "What is this…why… are we not alone?" came annoyed exclamations.

"Who are you?" Turgai asked sharply. Yet there was something so noble, so attractive and at the same time commanding in the face and bearing of the stranger, that Turgai shook the outstretched hand without waiting for an answer. The stranger nodded with satisfaction and explained:

"In Hamburg they called me Stolz; in Constantinople, Katch; in Odessa, Bayt. I traded in grain, hemp, wild beasts, many other things. Do you mind?" and with a smooth movement he pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Well," somebody murmured, and stopped. There was a painful silence that nobody knew how to break. Finally one of them took courage, awkwardly, painstakingly emphasizing the last words: "Well, gentlemen, it's late enough, let us go home!"

"That is a good idea," observed Stolz. "And Turgai and I shall stay on for a while."

"Turgai, what is the matter with you? Are you really going to stay?" For some reason they all seemed alarmed. But Turgai did not answer. He was staring at Stolz, piercing him with his eyes, and his smile betrayed many contradictory emotions. "They are closing the café," someone interposed, but in a totally different manner, halting and shy. Stolz replied, without taking his eyes off Turgai:

"Then we shall go to some other place."

The friends got up at the same time and, for a moment, froze in an awkward position: half-standing, half-sitting. During a complete, tangible, harsh silence—as when a coffin is lowered into the grave—Turgai and Stolz continued to measure each other with their eyes. The others felt an overwhelming desire to clear out, to escape as quickly as possible and regain their freedom.

Turgai was the first to concede; he averted his eyes and with a forlorn smile said in a tone which contrasted with the banality of his words: "Go ahead, boys, go ahead, I shall stay for a while."

There was a babble of relief, an awkward hustle of leave-taking, and the friends disappeared through the door. After they had already taken a deep breath of fresh air, one of them expressed his misgivings aloud: "We should not have left him…" But no one supported him, and he himself felt that it was impossible to go back to the oppressive closeness of the café.

"Did you hear us? Were you eavesdropping?" asked Turgai.

Stolz was silently observing, appraising him; suddenly he rose, the skirts of his cloak swept up, and he became at once alert, elusive, and variable, as he said:

"I will give you a chance to realize your desire!" and, after a tense pause, "I will give you supreme mastery in chess!" (He pronounced it "shess.")

"Who are you?" asked Turgai in a whisper. "Are you the devil?"

"Oh, but really…"

"Do you serve him?"

"Why dot the i's…it is in bad taste."

"Do you help him?" Turgai insisted.

"You are really all-powerful?" There was something in the terrified excitement of Turgai's voice that made Stolz brighten and nod with joy.

"Well now, I knew we were going to be friends," he said.

"And in exchange you want my soul?"

"No, that is not what I had in mind," Stolz explained in a dry, business-like manner, his smile smoothing away at once. "The object in question is your body."

"What?" Turgai was childishly surprised.

"I will help you. If this help becomes a burden and you want to free yourself of it, as you are entitled to do—then you die. And I get the difference."

"How's that?"

"I shall live out your life time."

"The difference…the difference…" repeated Turgai with disgust and gave himself up to thought.

"It's a mutual risk," Stolz hurried on. "I am spending my fortune, my power, and you might have not more than a month left to live. This no one can know for sure. I am taking a chance! Again, you might, if you have enough willpower, truly limit yourself and then you will never get tired of my help…"

"Yes," Turgai became interested, "and then…"

"Then, my dear boy, I am the loser!" said Stolz happily. "Use your power and live on to the end; there will be no 'difference' left for me. However, I think it my duty to warn you that in all my experience there was only one to reach his natural end."

"Who was that?" asked Turgai.

"Oh, that was many centuries ago." Stolz made a wry face. "Don't let us talk about it now. I shall tell you later."

"You really have been living that long?"

"I'll tell you all about it. It is very amusing. We shall be friends."

"And what if I cheat you somehow? I could hide in a church, or something?"

Stolz burst into soft, good-natured laughter. "They all ask that. My honest answer is: either you disbelieve in my powers altogether, or you will understand that I can invoke means to protect my interests. I am telling you as a gentleman: do not count on that."

Turgai was lost in meditation, his head bent down, an evil and beautiful smile lingering on his young, exhausted face. Stolz looked at him with pity.

"Strange," pronounced Turgai at last. "I had always thought that, there, you value souls above all—our souls; I even liked you for it. And now I see: it is, again, the wretched gut-filled body."

"We do need souls," Stolz explained reluctantly, "however, as you know, man's soul tends toward us by itself…why waste one's power on it. But why do we sit like this," he cried in playful horror. "Come along, please, I know a little place where we can continue our conversation over a bottle of white Bordeaux."

The news that Turgai, young master of a second-rate club, had challenged the Champion stunned all the amateurs; the professionals greeted it with unrestrained laughter. Some said that Turgai was sick, a mental case, others, that he was an impudent ignoramus, still others only shrugged virtuously;

his friends washed their hands of him (some promising to give him a good beating). In cafés, in clubs, on the chess exchange, everything was confusion and turmoil; people argued to dizziness; pandemonium reigned from noon to midnight. Experts and outsiders felt equally insulted. Bass, the champion of one of the city clubs, confessed that, although rated much higher than Turgai, he had never dreamed of such a challenge; Cleppe, champion of another club, admitted that he sometimes indulged in such daydreams, but he immediately retracted his words. One of Turgai's stauncher friends objected: "If you had his genius, you would speak differently." To which Bass retorted that he had often won from Turgai.

"Only blitz games."

"Who has won a blitz can also…"

"You have achieved perfection only in the café technique of the blitz games."

"What do you mean, café technique?"

"To count out the seconds, to stamp with your boot, to raise your voice threateningly before the time is up; in a word, to behave like a hydraulic press."

Then Bass swore that he, at least, never claimed the pot without having the opening pair of jacks. Slander!—and there was a general brawl.

Bykov, leading reporter among chess players and king of chess among journalists, said in the *New Dawn*: "By this impudent act the young man proves himself the new Herostratus or, even better, the Gorguloff of chess. The Champion need not take the trouble of answering; we will all understand his silence and respectfully bow our heads. As a matter of fact…" (and so on). But the next day brought a telegram: the Champion accepted the challenge. The philistines opened their gaping mouths still wider (it is what they are good for); young masters quite lost their heads and became over-insolent; the grand masters looked more jaundiced and shrunken than ever.

Some people talked of a million francs; others, of a million dollars; others again, of a million pounds sterling. Bykov wrote a long leader, taking up six columns, in which he advanced a conjecture that the Champion apparently wished to encourage young players, to pave the way for the rising generation. "They are talking of millions"—his ravings were entirely disinterested—"they are naming the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, Onassis, but how would this be possible, since not one of our most venerable competitors can find the necessary funds for such a match? Or is this a new form of art patronage? A

polite way of making the Champion a present?" Here Bykov quoted a game of Turgai's, played at an inter-club competition. Bykov had found there, at last, a move worthy of an exclamation mark.

The venerable ones exchanged their comments in sullen whispers. In their opinion, the Champion had a direct advantage in playing, apart from the question of money: it would give him the chance to decline, for this year, the meeting with his real rival, whose name was well enough known.

The day of the tournament was drawing near, and frenzy, confusion, and envy grew in inverse ratio to the remaining time. As the flood waters carry along with them wreckage, debris, and dirt, so, in this overflow of passions, all the refuse of men's souls was washed up and brought to the surface; this added a special piquancy, recklessness, and gaiety to the situation.

Long before opening time, crowds of people were swarming over the streets that lead to the Federation Building. The fortunate ones who had stood in line since dawn, and so managed to get tickets, called from the windows to those left outside. The unlucky ones arranged themselves comfortably near loudspeakers in sidewalk cafés displaying huge chessboards with the pieces outlined in electric lights. Hordes of enthusiasts, petty professionals, their mistresses and friends, and flocks of queers (always present whether it is a parade or the opening of an exhibition) overflowed the corridors, gallery, stands, and boxes of the immense, many-tiered hall prepared for the tournament.

Turgai arrived by bus; he jumped off without waiting for it to stop and carefully elbowed his way to the Federation Building. Patiently he pushed through the idlers, dodged old people, women, and children, was pressed back and rowed through again, making for the entrance. Scarcely any of the officials knew him, and only after a long series of explanations did he manage to get in.

The amphitheater hummed challengingly, like a stock exchange, like a robbed beehive. Then, far below, on the enormous platform, Turgai's lonely, stooped figure appeared. He slouched with nerve-racking slowness, in his canvas shoes, across the highly polished, splendid parquet floor; he shook hands with the steward and sat down at the heavy, gilded table with the chessboard. He had entered with the habitual patient gait of a civil servant making his way to a familiar place of work. The jury, the honorary guests, the journalists, headed by Bykov, all found him rather arrogant, this curly-headed boy, about to play for the world mastership. He wore the same gray

suit and a dark brown pullover for a vest; a cloud of tobacco billowed, as usual, about his Slavonic head. Those who were obliged to do so came over to him; the others merely nodded in reply to his elaborate bow, their eyes riveted to the doors through with the Champion was due to appear at any moment. Only one, the correspondent for a second-rate Balkan paper who could not hope for the Champion's attention, ran up to Turgai and loaded him with questions; several contributors to other publications followed suit, rather reluctantly (they were afraid to miss the Champion).

"What are you going to do if you win the match?" the man from the Balkans asked.

"I might go to China."

"And if you lose?"

"Really, I had not thought about it."

"Did you put up a million guarantee?"

"The financial question does not interest me," explained Turgai, turning away. The rest of the questions he did not answer; apparently he was not listening. He merely sat there, the journalists standing near him in a circle; a few guests and stewards had drifted up; everyone was silent. Those in the back row smiled derisively, those in front felt somehow embarrassed. An old gentleman, the Honorary President, fussed, smiled, tried to joke; all of a sudden he felt unaccountably freighted; oppressed by a heavy foreboding, his heart contracted with a vague dull ache. Being a man of the world, he understood at once: "There's something wrong here." But he did not know how to set it right.

A thunderous roar was muffled by the walls, a many-throated elemental rumble of thousands of people: the mob outside was greeting the Champion. The stewards hurried toward the entrance; everyone assumed a dignified attitude, straightened up, tense yet trying to keep an air of naturalness. The thunder grew and rolled, now rising high over the heads of the audience: it was the voice of the gallery joining in the ovation. The Champion made his entrance in the best cinema manner. Stewards in black coats surrounded him, members of the Honorary Board hastened toward him. Turgai got up and remained standing as he approached. The Champion made his excuses gaily: his watch was five minutes late. "I quite understand, it does not matter," Turgai said. The Champion smiled and asked an irrelevant question of the steward, who answered eagerly. There was some laughter, and as by that time they had all turned their backs on him, Turgai sat down again.

Then there was the draw, and other preliminary formalities. The Champion drew white, with which he won easily. Bykov printed a full report of the proceedings in the *New Dawn*, quoted the steward's speeches, repeated everything the Champion had said. The game itself rated no more than a couple of lines. Without going into details, evidently uncertain of his ground, he declared that, as there were some seventeen more or less similar games ahead (eighteen points to win), it would be more expedient to report on them in batches—once a week.

The next day, they played the Caro-Kann defense. It ended in a draw at the fifty-third move. Bykov changed his mind and inserted a short paragraph: in his opinion the Champion had overdone it, had set too fast a pace. The following day was a Sunday. On Monday, Turgai—white—played the Queen's Gambit Declined and won, in elegant style, at the seventeenth move.

And that was the beginning of something completely preposterous. Day after day, the papers announced a new victory for Turgai. The Champion abused his time allowance, often touching the limit after the tenth move. Turgai sucked his pipe indifferently; slowly, sip by sip, he drowned the smoke in the ice-cold milk that was served him and, when his turn came, made his move absentmindedly. He aroused envy and terror equally in the grand masters, professionals, amateurs, in all those poisoned by chess. And although no one liked him, they were already imitating his mannerisms and dress. All of them started to smoke the same brand of tobacco in their pipes, so that the air in the upper tiers became unbreathable. Once, when the Champion, playing white, began to ponder even before the first move, Turgai got a book from his pocket and began to read. The chairman, considering this impolite under the circumstances, moved resolutely towards Turgai but, as he came close, felt embarrassed and said nothing. The Champion just looked up, shook his head as if commiserating with himself, and again lowered his lackluster eyes.

So they played: the Champion straining every nerve urgently and fruitlessly (clearly, he was making cyclopic efforts to concentrate); Turgai reading, smoking, sipping his milk and, promptly, making his move whenever it was due. Around them people went about as though poisoned, stunned, out of their wits; they seemed to have lost all willpower, all skill and memory. One day, at the seventh move, Turgai declared that he had lost, and surrendered. But the Champion, to his shame, could not see his own victory, compelling Turgai to show him the right development: by a sharp play Turgai would be

obliged to lose a major piece at the fifteenth move. Everyone was impressed by this wealth of imagination, by these depths of reasoning; the Champion felt ashamed and ridiculed by such a victory. On the morrow, Bykov prepared to cite this game in his paper with unstinted praise but could not reconstruct the moves: the situation appeared most ordinary for the seventh move, nothing, absolutely nothing in it hinted at Turgai's variant. Bykov appealed for help to the Champion. But this grand master confessed in a broken voice—to make everything worse he had started to drink and reeked unbearably of alcohol—the grand master confessed that he could understand nothing and doubted all: he had tried to analyze the game at home and could neither remember nor deduce the development shown to him. So they left the thing alone: it seemed undignified to bother Turgai about it, and, what's more, they both felt somehow frightened.

Turgai had become unapproachable—grim, forbidding; his face was even more somber, grayer (heavy and swollen with all the milk he had drunk). His eyes—those black inflated pupils of a man homeless, spending his nights anywhere—lost their light; boredom and dread peered through them instead of the sacrificial, inspired fire of old. He acquired the habit of glancing round, half turning, as if seeking for someone in the gallery, and often he made a spitting sound with his dry lips. He scarcely looked at the board, made his moves indifferently. Once or twice a game he would lose himself in thought, his face darkening and brightening by turns from the internal effort, then, as if retreating behind some barrier, he would regain his reserve, stiffen, and finish the game phlegmatically with a loud, drawn-out yawn. His friends found him much changed—downcast and cheerless—which they laid to the overwhelming strain of the tournament. He was losing strength, and so they tried to make him eat well, amuse him, and take care of his creature comforts. But Turgai angrily brushed these little services aside, and to one girl (there are wonderful girls!) he said: "You'd better not count on me: I do not intend to stick around long, anyway." And these words, ordinary as they were, coming from his ashen lips, with his cruel smile and yawn (at the very steps of the throne of chess), drove his last remaining would-be friends to despair. Put it this way: as victories grew, those closest to him became more and more despondent.

The general depression was further increased by the extraordinary dry heat under which the city was melting that summer. Because of this sultry closeness—or for another cause—there were frequent fainting fits among

the public. Once, while the game was in progress, one of the spectators, evidently unable to stand the strain, suddenly began to shout in a hysterical voice: "They are fooling us, the games are fixed…" Then he took off his shoes and, foaming at the mouth, in a paroxysm of rage, hurled them down below. To crown it all, the old chairman, that truly European gentleman who could not even at the end escape his uneasy feeling that "something here was wrong," fell sick at this inconvenient time and passed away without waiting for the match to end.

It was during the nineteenth game (Turgai—sixteen and a half points). They were playing Janovsky's Gambit of Pawns. Turgai was seated, his back almost turned to his partner, lazily reading Jakob Boehme. Suddenly he lifted his eyes and looked attentively around; for a minute he seemed to absorb his surroundings with astonishment, as one brusquely awakened or recovering his sight. The Champion was frantically biting his nails, stooping over the board, almost resting his forehead against it. There was something in his pose, in the turn of neck and shoulder, that made Turgai tremble—that pierced him to the soul. Pity shook Turgai, pity cut him to pain, to tears, to happy exaltation. He half raised himself, carried on the crest of his aching love for this adversary, for his brother, so fully, so ruthlessly abandoned, drowning, perishing. "How hard, how unfair it is to be fated to lose!" he thought. "How turbid his eyes, and what of his soul?" In one whole impulse of compassion he stood up, shaking himself free of the spell, for the first time, perhaps, clearly conscious, fully aware of everything: the curious spectators around, and the midday sun thrusting its crimson arms on the parqueted floor, and the emptied face of the Champion, and the board where icy, immovable pieces—full of the potentialities of rapture and fever—floated. He took conscience of this mortal slaughter—finally. The position seemed as dead as the moon's landscape. But suddenly he noticed: on the right wing, creative possibilities were still concealed. They must be immediately realized, as the spilled colors of a sunset must be selected and put on the canvas. Shadows of doubt and uncertainty again passed over Turgai's face—he looked gray and tense once more—but in another moment, with a friendly, brotherly smile at his adversary, he moved the knight with a generous, brusque movement.

Was it a wind blowing in from the field, life-giving, refreshing—the rustle of forest leaves? Everything stirred, sighed with relief, lit up, came out of leaden sleep, of sullen vigil. Stewards hustled with renewed activity, jour-

nalists squeezed forward, discussing among themselves in whispers; in the gallery, they jumped up from their places and hung over the rails, trying to see the moves before the electric signal, commenting, wondering, arguing. And the Champion seemed to grow younger all at once. Steely and taut, all gathered together, he sat and thought over his return move, and muscles played under his shaven jaws as if he were chewing on something very hard. Routed, he resembled, now, a captured regal beast, hopelessly ill, but suddenly escaped to freedom, and therefore triumphant even in its agony.

Turgai played on. There was a sound as though of French horns singing in his ears. He moved a piece and silence set in—as during a saber duel. He played on, and each consecutive move was like a newly opened window in springtime: the knights raced—colts freed from their winter enclosure—pawns quickened with blood—queens' crowns already dimly shimmering on them. Everything filled with life, flowered, glowed with a warm light, and in every section of the board there were as many possibilities of truth and lies as in existence itself (from life to death). Turgai, inspired, was breaking through. He stood there, menacingly stretched out, like a scythe, ready to fall on the crouching, exhausted Champion. This lasted for about twenty minutes, maybe more—no one had counted, to their shame or credit. And then, unexpectedly, on the penultimate white square, on B-K7, suddenly blossomed a pawn. Victory emerged out of miraculous depths with such palpable, impetuous force that all in the amphitheater rose as one, spellbound, many-handed being and applauded in a unanimous ovation. Turgai shivered, looked round bewildered, slowly coming to himself. The applause was loudest from one direction. Suddenly anxious, he lifted his face, trying to see who was making all the noise: in the front row, hanging over the rails directly above him, the familiar gentleman with the old-fashioned black derby was applauding sonorously and smiling at Turgai.

Oaah…something thinly sobbed in Turgai's breast, and, arms spread widely, he hurled himself blindly toward the smiling man, got entangled with a chair, overturned it, and with a long-drawn dull moan collapsed onto the floor. The onlookers remained frozen, petrified. Someone moved at last, then others, and soon the enormous hall—stands, gallery, and boxes—was howling, groaning, and shrieking. People squeezed each other's hands, stamped with their boots, hoarsely explained, swore, argued, and all had the feeling that they had been foreseeing this, had been waiting for something of the sort, but now—enough, the spring was loosened, the danger past. And, as

though in confirmation, rain clouds, so vainly expected for two months, had densely covered the sky and, blinking impudently its Tartar eyes, the storm came down with a deafening crash.

Journalists, judges, guests, all who were able to, rushed at last to Turgai's motionless, prone form. "Fetch a doctor...a priest," they shouted, running aimlessly to and fro, blabbering, eager to put the responsibility on another man's shoulders. "A doctor..." But someone was already approaching, confidently fraying his way through the pressing crowd. It was Stolz, offhanded as a clergyman, self-assured as a surgeon. The crowd opened for him, retreated, recognizing in him either a doctor or someone else customary and necessary at such moments. "May I…although I am not practicing…" he briskly explained to the steward. They breathed with relief, stepped back, made more room. He bent over Turgai. A minute later he straightened up. His face was sorrowful and tender. He nodded helplessly at the steward and disappeared through the side door.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning. The tourists, attracted to this tavern by the display of medieval fetters, torture pincers, and tibiae, had left long ago. In the basement, gigolos and prostitutes were peacefully dividing tips. The owner, a man with an enormous, diseased belly, stopped running to the toilet every few minutes and, glancing round warily with the air of a counterfeiter, broke wind loudly behind the bar.

Low voices were still to be heard from the room where the poets met from time to time. Writers and critics and guests had already gone to catch the last subway train. Only a few close friends and some nightbirds were left. They sat on hard benches, at a low refectory table, facing the wall with the stone tablet inscribed with the names of the famous men who had visited this tavern; they were listening to N., the poet (later on, his name adorned that same tablet). N. said:

"I would like to write one page only. One real page. A pure one. Depths and heavens—sifted. There is a German tale about a maker of rare clocks. Everything was measured, perfect, but the clock would not work. How was he to find the missing, unique weight? Whatever he tried went wrong. So the watchmaker hanged himself on the spring and died. But the clock started going. And it is alive to this day. It is the same with us: in order that a line should live, we must hang ourselves on it, body and soul; choke, choke slowly, such is the nature…"

"Good evening, or, rather, good morning, gentlemen!" came unexpectedly a low, manly voice. Out of a dark corner by the chimney a corpulent gentleman in a long coat resembling a cassock appeared and moved towards the talking group. Lightfooted as an acrobat, pompous as a master of ceremonies, he approached N. and respectfully stretched out his pale fleshy hand.

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