

The game of chess

A young lawyer attends the funeral of his predecessor and meets at this occasion an old judge who was a close friend of the deceased. While they are following the coffin, the judge explains that he used to meet with the old lawyer once a month to play chess. The young lawyer responds (as they are approaching the crematorium) that he is also interested in the game. Both of them attend the ceremony, and as they are standing next to the grave, the judge asks the young lawyer whether he could also invite him for a game of chess. The lawyer accepts the invitation; they arrange to meet for dinner on the following Sunday evening. The young lawyer's wife is equally invited; the old judge is a widower, but he lives with his daughter who can keep the lawyer's wife company while they play chess.

On Sunday evening the young lawyer and his wife arrive at the judge's mansion punctually at seven o'clock. The house lies in a quiet suburb, the so-called 'English quarter' in the middle of a large park, surrounded by high trees. The meal is delicious, the wine exquisite.

After the dinner the judge's daughter and with lawyer's wife retreat into the living room, while the men take place in the library in front of the chess board. The old judge serves two glasses of brandy; he explains that before they start playing he wants to make a confession. He met the old lawyer twenty years ago, at the funeral of his own predecessor. During this funeral he had talked with the old lawyer about the chess game, because it turned out that the lawyer also had the habit to play chess with the deceased judge, but chess according to special rules. Every figure on the chess board represented a living person, designated by the player; the queen had to be the person closest to him. For the old lawyer it had been his sister, who had been running his household since the death of his wife, for the judge it had been his wife. The figures of the bishops represented some teachers and priests from their circles of friends, the knights represented some colleagues, the rooks stood for people from the local high society, and for the pawns they chose ordinary townspeople, including their servants and their milkman.

The rule of their game of chess was that every player – had he lost one of his figures – had to kill the person it represented. The game could only be continued when the murder had been committed. Moreover, whoever lost the game had to commit suicide, which meant that the game lasted for decades; every move was carefully planned, often for months. The old lawyer had played against the judge for fifteen years before finally defeating him – after having had to kill his wife, as had his opponent. The origin of this game was not known – the predecessor of the judge had played it with the predecessor of the just deceased lawyer, who in turn had taken the idea from the predecessor's predecessor – it seems that the local lawyer and judge had forever been playing this secret game.

This had been the explanation that the old lawyer had given him, the old judge, on their first meeting, and the explanation was followed by a confession of all the murders that the lawyer and his opponent, the deceased judge, had committed during their game. His own first reaction had been to have the old lawyer arrested, but then he had been unable to resist the temptation to begin a new game of chess. The old lawyer chose his oldest daughter as his queen – his wife was no longer among the living as a consequence of the previous chess match – and he chose his young wife. From then on, his life got a new meaning. Through this game of chess the players have the power of the gods – he and the old lawyer fought over their figures like Arimahn and Ormazd.

Twenty years they had played, he had fought bitterly, it had been both horrible and overwhelming when he was forced to sacrifice one of the figures; he would never forget the day when he had to sacrifice his wife to rescue himself – until finally a week ago the old lawyer had to end his life,

having lost the game. It was curious that none of the murders that they had committed during these twenty year had been discovered, but not only had they been planned and committed with great care – the old judge cited some examples – but also noone would ever suspect such an absurd motive as a game of chess.

The young lawyer listens to the confession with growing horror. The old judge leans back in his chair, from the room next door they hear the animated voices of the women. “You can have me arrested now” the judge said. The young lawyer pauses to think, then he thoughtfully takes the white queen and puts it on its place on the chess board. “I stake my wife”. “I stake my daughter”, replies the old judge, and reaches for the black queen.