

Excerpt from *The Revenge of Capablanca* (chs. 6 and 15)

Fabio Stassi

translated by Elizabeth Harris

The match was held in an arena, semi-circular in shape, behind the town hall.

They set the table and chess board at the center of the back line. The audience crammed in up front. Most people sat on wood and wrought-iron bleachers. The younger men stood at the back. The children took over the empty patch of ground between the first row of bleachers and the two challengers. But not one child moved or made a sound. This was the same place, two years before, that their fathers took them to see the circus, just two wagons and three animal cages that had gotten lost on the unmarked dirt roads while trying to return to the coast, but that time, in the blink of an eye, a tiger slashed a tamer's throat, and now they were waiting for what might happen at any second, something they'd keep asking themselves about later, over time, how it happened and why.

Only one, the smallest, wasn't leaning against a parent's leg: he was off by himself, a meter closer than the others, and he wasn't chewing his lip or twisting his suspenders. His name was Xavier, and he was less than five years old. His hands were still and attentive, like the hands of an adult. He was staring at the Cuban champion with his striped jacket and that strange dark cloth knotted around

his neck. The champion reminded him of someone, but he couldn't think who, not that night or any other. Xavier's black bangs fell over his eyes and made him look cocky and insolent; his solid little build confirmed this, as did the small walnut muscle of each arm beneath his linen shirt. His eyes were two black, polished stones, etched below two long, drawn-out arches; in those eyes survived a migrant people from who knows where. Capablanca had felt those eyes on him since he entered the arena. They were as black as a spider in the tub. He'd glanced at the others only once, but it was enough. He knew the exact position of each person, as if he'd arranged every one of them on the board and the little boy was his first advanced pawn. The boy had to be his same age, years before, when he accused his father who'd just won a game against a friend, a Spanish colonel.

You cheated, Father.

What's that, José Raul?

Your knight. You moved it from one white square to another white square.

You arrogant brat, his father snapped. You don't know the rules to the game. The colonel was paying attention.

I learned the rules, José answered.

From who?

I watched you play for three days.

That's not enough—no one learns chess just by watching.

I know how to move the pieces.

I don't believe you.

I know how to launch an attack and how to defend myself.

You pretentious little liar.

I know how to castle a king on the board and how to bring out a bishop.

You spoiled son of a bitch.

I can put you in check.

Outraged, the father burst out laughing. So let's play, he said.

José Raul sat down across from his father and beat him in less than half an hour.

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Xavier, sitting on the ground in the arena, was still watching him. He'd seen him before but couldn't remember exactly where. An image came to him: a man on the deck of a transatlantic steamer, solid hands on the rail, eyes on the horizon, but maybe he was confusing him with someone he'd seen on a magazine cover in the village newspaper stand, clearly an important man: a prince, an actor, a diplomat. Capablanca didn't move a muscle. He knew the American would bring his other knight forward; he had to decide if he wanted to advance his bishop and then castle right after that or be more cautious and move another pawn, one step behind the first. The audience was frozen with the tension. It was like that day at the Nazaré Port, Xavier thought, when they were waiting for his father to return from fishing. Everyone there on the dock for hours, not moving. No one explaining why. He only understood when he saw the boat carried in by the current, toward the shore. Empty, upside-down.

Capablanca studied the situation a bit more, then made the more daring move with the bishop. He wanted to get this over with, even if he looked arrogant in the process. He felt great, like he used to when no one knew him and he could always surprise his opponent. The only thing bothering him now

was that spider in the tub. No doubt the American expected a cautious game from him; he'd caught the American off-guard with an offensive combination he hadn't attempted since he was a boy.

Of all his games, one especially stayed with him. One afternoon in Moscow, he'd stunned everyone as he told a journalist his exact moves in a match he'd won at the age of six.

His father had kept him away from chess a while, only letting him play some at night, in the kitchen. He was afraid it would turn into an obsession, and he was embarrassed by the boy's talent. Though it took intelligence, chess was still just a game, and only champions and aristocrats could ever make it a career. But one Sunday, José Raul went out the back door, jumped the garden gate, and headed straight for the Club. He'd been there only once, two years before, but remembered the exact way. Almost running, he reached the Club in an hour. It was always packed on Sunday afternoons. When they saw him come in, they figured he was lost.

What do you want, boy? a stranger asked, his voice extremely satisfied: he was about to announce a checkmate to his opponent.

I'm here to play.

Everyone broke out laughing.

I told you this Sunday was going to be interesting, the stranger said to the group. Sit down, boy. Just a minute—I'll be right with you.

He took a deep drag off his cigarette and finished the matter at hand.

I'm betting on the kid, someone laughed.

They set up the board, found the highest chair in the room, and lifting José Raul by the armpits, set him down on two stacked pillows.

Where are you from, little *malandro*? they asked.

José Raul didn't answer. He was staring at the board as though nothing else existed in the room.

He's really getting into his part.

Don't distract him...shhhh...

After much laughter and kidding, the stranger finally sat down at the table. It had been fun: now for the boring part.

Maybe it's time to go home, boy. We'll see you in a few years, okay? Don't feel bad now.

You go first, José Raul said.

Listen, listen—he really means it. All right, then. As you wish.

After a few moves, it was clear he wasn't just some kid.

All trace of joking had vanished from the stranger's face.

The layout of the pieces was incoherent, indecipherable. White was relying on scraps, three pawns and a rook, with no bishops or knights. What he could do in a situation like that was anyone's guess. It was Black's turn. José Raul picked his knight up between tiny fingers, announcing check and slipping the knight between his queen and rook, thanks to the protection of his bishop. The white king retreated to the last row. José slid his rook to Center. The stranger took the other bishop and started to feel more confident. But José's rook moved down for a second check. The king stepped to the side. But the queen attacked him. Another step. The stubborn rook gave chase. White blocked the rook with his own. José Raul took a pawn. Then the white queen, growing confident, got rid of the black knight. The stranger's smile had returned, as if it were Golmayo or Vazquez he was about to defeat instead of some six-year-old brat. José Raul set his queen down in the corner square and for the fourth time, in his tiny crystal voice, he said: King's in check. The king, feeling reassured, withdrew behind his rook. José Raul shamelessly moved his own rook forward, for a fifth check. So he's only a child after all, many of

them thought. Stubborn like a child. Insolent like a child. The stranger was growing tired. Once again, he fell back. But the queen cut across on the central vertical file and blocked his way. All he could do was retreat until he was sick to death. The queen flew up the other diagonal and blocked him again with a seventh check. The stranger felt a strange sense of unease. He made a cautious move toward home. On came the opposing rook, for the umpteenth time—he thought he'd be safe by his queen, but the black queen returned to Center, diagonal from him. Showing no emotion, José Raul said:

Checkmate.

No one in the room had ever seen a finish like it. José Raul, sacrificing a knight and bishop, with fewer pieces, had taken the initiative and didn't let up until the end. They could hardly believe it at the Club. His play had shown such force, had been so overwhelming, deceptive, unexpected.

Twenty years later, as the Russian journalist listened to him recall his moves, she almost believed Capablanca had made that game up just for her, that none of it ever happened, and maybe a boy with that name never existed and neither did an island called Cuba or the city Avana, and it was all just a fantasy, a seducer's bright and clever joke.