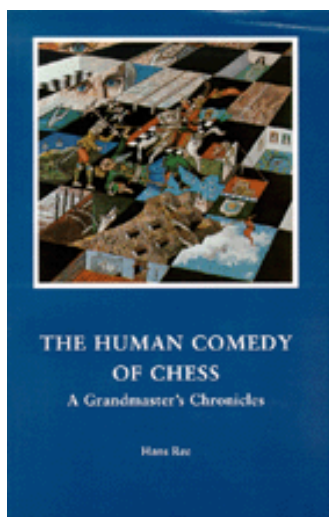




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree

*The Human Comedy
of Chess*

by Hans Ree

Sin of Pride

The next two days would be free, so we had a long evening before us without worrying about chess preparation. There were always two consecutive free days at the Lone Pine Open, to comply with Bobby Fischer's religious principles in case he would ever turn up to play there. Of course he never did, but we were happy with our Fischer schedule. The next day some of us would ride to Las Vegas, where we would arrive in the evening, gamble at night and return the next morning to Lone Pine.

The evening before this trip was devoted to international brotherhood. "Shall we exchange shoes?" asked the Mexican, as he was already pulling them off. His shoes were beautiful small boots that looked very expensive. My shoes were old and cheap. We exchanged them and the boots fitted me perfectly. It could hardly be called a fair exchange. It was a gift.

However much you drink, eventually the conversation will turn to chess. The Mexican was a weaker player than I and he made a remark which I found wrong. I reacted strongly and aggressively, and the fact that I had just received a valuable present from him must have been the very reason for my intemperate behaviour.

"Do you think I am a patzer?" asked the Mexican. He was shocked. "Yes, I think you are a patzer," I said, though I knew that he wasn't. For a moment he could hardly believe his ears and then he wanted his boots back. I pulled them off feeling relieved, for I am not good in accepting presents. When you are given a present, you are in debt and the giver has an advantage on you.

When it is said that pride comes before the fall, it is usually understood that pride is a cause of the fall. But often the connection is opposite. Someone is feeling that his fall is imminent, and that makes him proud, a sign of weakness. He is building a wall of defence.

Raymond Keene has said that when three chessplayers pass through a revolving door, they do so in order of rating. We cherish our hierarchy. When the new rating list is published, we consider our standing for the next months and who will be ahead of us at the revolving door. The hierarchy is tough, but even tougher is contact with the outside world where nobody has an inkling of the subtle nuances of our hierarchy.

"The beautiful thing about chess is that it teaches you the humility of defeat," said Kasparov once. Wise words, but one might add that victory also should be no

obstacle to humility. I wonder if Kasparov knows that the DNA of baker's yeast is a match with 50 percent of that of humans, even if they are very high on the FIDE list. Our close cousin baker's yeast doesn't care about victory or defeat and we should learn a lesson from it.

Apart from the pride of the strong chessplayer, there is also the pride of the honest chessplayer.

We had made our trip to Las Vegas and now we were playing the last round in Lone Pine. At that time games were adjourned after forty moves and five hours of play and I had two hours to analyse my adjourned position against a Yugoslav grandmaster. There was a farewell party at the home of the rich inventor who was the sole sponsor of the tournament, but of course I went to my motel room first to look at my game. Fifteen minutes sufficed to see that it was a dead draw. If one of us would try to win, he would lose.

I went to the party at the inventor's home, which was quite impressive. Outside were huge radio aerials. It was said that the inventor wanted to have radio contact with the whole world, night and day, to play his radio chess games. Armed guards were patrolling the lawns and when you had entered the house you understood why. A quick look at the gallery of paintings provided a Frans Hals, a Hieronymus Bosch and a small Rembrandt. It was sheer irresponsibility to let chessplayers loose here, a squalid tribe that might carelessly extinguish their cigarette butts on old masterpieces.

I didn't know it at the time, but this would be the last chess party at the inventor's home. Next year he would still pay for the tournament, but there would be no party, presumably because the year before drunken Icelanders had done gymnastics hanging on the splendid chandeliers in the toilet room and destroyed them.

Of course the Yugoslavs had also found out that my adjourned position was a dead draw. My opponent was not present, but one of his compatriots came to me smiling and said: "It is better to share the money, then to share the point."

It was obvious what he meant. If one of us should win, whoever it was, our total prize money would be much higher than in case of a draw. A draw or a loss wouldn't make much difference financially, but a win would secure a good prize.

My opponent was poorer than I and he had a sick old mother who he had to provide with medicines that were not available in Yugoslavia.

Now, come on, if we would have to make a deal with every poor chessplayer who has a sick mother, would this be the end?

On my way to the tournament hall I met him outside. He explained that it would be best if he would win the game, because at first sight it might seem that he had a tiny advantage. On the other hand, if I would prefer to win instead of losing, that would be fine too, though the division of the prize money would have to be a little different in that case. This stood to reason. Winner gets glory, loser gets money.

I said that I understood his point of view, but that our adjourned position was so obviously a draw that it would provoke a scandal if one of us would win. I offered a draw. "Then we will play," he said.

We played and he tried to win and he lost, which he would have known from the start. "What a scandal" exclaimed a spectator who had followed our game and apparently understood that I could never have won it in a normal way.

I had shown the pride of the incorruptible, but my opponent had his pride too. He preferred an almost certain defeat, rather than grant me my honest draw. The incorruptible is insufferably arrogant, because in a world of professionals he behaves as a rich amateur, who doesn't really care about results.

As we get older and our play becomes weaker, a new form of pride emerges: the pride of fake humility. One imagines oneself an enlightened soul who doesn't play to win anymore, but just to experience the beauty and harmony of the game.

There is a story about a tribe of Papuans in the former Dutch colony New Guinea who were taught the game of soccer by Dutch missionaries. When they came back after a few years they found that the Papuans were still playing soccer, but with an extra rule added: they only stopped playing when the score was equal.

One might say that they were not really enlightened yet, for exactly by avoiding victories and defeats they were still recognizing the force of the concept. But they were on their way.

It might be true what they say, that some old chessplayers exist who are beyond feeling pain when they lose.

If so, this is the path to enlightenment: one starts out to win, but after some time one doesn't succeed anymore. Then one tries to convince oneself that the difference between winning and losing is illusory. Again one doesn't succeed. The next step is to realize that this latest failure is unimportant too, and again one will not succeed. But then one will see that this is the end and that no further failures on this path of infinite regression are possible, because the next step would be conceptually too complicated to even consider.



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