

Tilburg University

Down to earth

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K.'S GAMBIT
An Editorial

Kent felt vaguely dissatisfied. He reached into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, found it and was slightly unhappy when, reaching for his trusted Dromedaries, he found his hand touching the flat chess set that, bound in genuine imitation morocco, sat next to it. True enough, that set had been his mainstay on the long and boring voyages between planets. Yet he despised it when remembering the trouble he had had to go to in order to convince his opponents that its imitation morocco hid no chip. His irritation slightly abated when he rethought the course of these six months of his perceived time. In all, the chess set had stood him in good stead: even in this 21st century, fools still lost their money on a fool's mate. Nor did he lose to self-styled sophisticated Westerners: his reminiscences of famous contests would gain an average of seven games out of ten (especially, the 24th move of the 17th game of Karpov-Kasparov, 1988, fooled almost all of them). And of course, he never played those confessing they hailed from East of Berlin: it was not a matter of principle, it was a matter of his pocketbook.

Kent Alexis Ugradov - also known to the Western world as Kent Alexis for short - was not greatly surprised when he was invited to captain Thoren's table. After the eighth serving of the smörgåsbord and between his fifth and sixth glass of akvavit he nodded yes to an invitation of the captain's: "why don't you play a real game in stead of milking the Bishop's last badge of novices?"

- "Can do", - the words had escaped Kent by pure reflex.

- "Can do, join me tomorrow in my cabin. Ten o'clock suitable to you?"

- "Sure enough", Alexis grunted.

He did not even notice, though Thoren did, that, when pronouncing those fateful words, he was lighting half a Dromedary for the second time even while puffing on it.

The next morning saw them joined in battle in the modest space still, by tradition, called the captain's cabin. The board was a fixture of the desk, on which the *Nautical Almanac* was piled high in three impressive yellow volumes. Alexis thought it was a fair game and so it was, by his standards. Nothing unusual whatever: the clock was digital, reporting times to the nearest hundredth of a second without human intervention. Landing a piece on its square switched it between opponents; should the limit be reached, Kent knew, his King would be lifted from the board under derisive hooting.

It was not the first time Kent knew he had pitched his wits against a computer. In his opinion, computers were to be lived with. Vicious, true; menacing, true too; but not too badly so; worse than the Germans, but not nearly as threatening as your average Kharkov semi-professional.

Eleven moves resulted in a early but distinct middle-game struggle. At his 14th move, Kent felt the captain's play to be very sluggish. On this next move Kent castled. Just when moving his Rook he was struck by an absurd association: am I not, myself, Kent, castling, rather like mr. K. in Kafka's castle? He suppressed the thought: after all, his ancestors had emigrated out of Czechoslovakia and its superstitions more than a century ago....

It may have been his self-congratulation on his clever castling, it may have been his memories of far-away Prague, it may have been K.'s momentary inattentiveness, but K. never noticed that captain Thoren lightly scratched the edge of his right-hand bottom white square

Or did he? All K. was aware of is that the pace increased furiously. A countermove which took a decent minute before now flashed on in milliseconds, nor were they routine moves

Thinking as fast as could move, K. wondered while losing: was he back in Prague? Step by step, he was forced off strategic control of the middle board. He was tricked into sacrifices promising advantages which somehow never materialized and found himself mated, somewhat shamefully, at the 23th move.

Thoren smiled compassionately: "When you castled, I switched chess control from shipboard to Galactic, so you were outprogrammed". Captain Thoren extended a hearty spacefaring hand: "Shall we shake to make it up?" K.'s reply was simple: "No, I won't. You lost, you see!!"

DOWN TO EARTH

An \$Editorial

The piece above lifted you into space. However, the Editors, down on our planet Earth, have a few \$problems to contend with. We urged those of you who have not paid yet their renewal fees to do so at once, whenever possible by International Money Order. Of course, other forms of payment are welcome too, though please consider that recent experience has taught us that, when you remit by check, banking fees take 20% out of your modest subscription.

Incidentally, we shall soon publish a membership list. Furthermore, we encourage our readers to contribute with letters (less than 500 words) commenting on articles in the Journal and other issues of interest.

Bob Herschberg and
Jaap van den Herik