

# Stefan Zweig

## Chess Story

### *Excerpt*

“And are we not guilty of offensive disparagement in calling chess a game? Is it not also a science and an art, hovering between those categories as Muhammad’s coffin hovered between heaven and earth, a unique link between pairs of opposites: ancient yet eternally new; mechanical in structure, yet made effective only by the imagination; limited to a geometrically fixed space, yet with unlimited combinations; constantly developing, yet sterile; thought that leads nowhere; mathematics calculating nothing; art without works of art; architecture without substance – but nonetheless shown to be more durable in its entity and existence than all books and works of art; the only game that belongs to all nations and all eras, although no one knows what god brought it down to earth to vanquish boredom, sharpen the senses and stretch the mind. Where does it begin and where does it end?

Every child can learn its basic rules, every bungler can try his luck at it, yet within that immutable little square it is able to bring forth a particular species of masters who cannot be compared to anyone else, people with a gift solely designed for chess, geniuses in their specific field who unite vision, patience and technique in just the same proportions as do mathematicians, poets,

musicians, but in different stratifications and combinations. In the old days of the enthusiasm for physiognomy, a physician like Gall might perhaps have dissected a chess champion's brain to find out whether some particular twist or turn in the grey matter, a kind of chess muscle or chess bump, is more developed in such chess geniuses than in the skulls of other mortals.

And how intrigued such a physiognomist would have been by the case of Czentovic, where that specific genius appeared in a setting of absolute intellectual lethargy, like a single vein of gold in a hundredweight of dull stone.

In principle, I had always realized that such a unique, brilliant game must create its own matadors, but how difficult and indeed impossible it is to imagine the life of an intellectually active human being whose world is reduced entirely to the narrow one-way traffic between black and white, who seeks the triumphs of his life in the mere movement to and fro, forward and back of thirty-two chessmen, someone to whom a new opening, moving knight rather than pawn, is a great deed, and his little corner of immortality is tucked away in a book about chess – a human being, an intellectual human being who constantly bends the entire force of his mind on the ridiculous task of forcing a wooden king into the corner of a wooden board, and does it without going mad!”