

THE GAME OF KINGS

by

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*Alas! How much pain could be avoided in life,
if only we could take back the bad moves and play them again!*
(Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

Characters

Elderly chess player	<i>Plays for money in Washington Square Park, New York</i>
Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine	<i>Fourth World Chess Champion</i>
Waiter	<i>Park Hotel, Estoril, Portugal</i>
María Graupera	<i>Mother of José Raúl Capablanca</i>
José María Capablanca	<i>Father of José Raúl Capablanca</i>
José Raúl Capablanca	<i>Third World Chess Champion</i>
New York Times newsboy	
Gloria	<i>One of Capablanca's conquests</i>
Olga Choubaroff	<i>Capablanca's wife</i>
Emanuel Lasker	<i>Second World Chess Champion</i>
Prostitute	
Julius W. "Nicky" Arnstein	<i>Entrepreneur, impresario, crook, gambler etc.</i>
Alexander Rueb, Passer-by, Porter, Errand boy, Arnstein's valet	<i>Non-speaking parts</i>

Note: for 6 men and 1 woman (or 2 women)

- "José María Capablanca" and "Julius W. "Nicky" Arnstein" could be played by the same actor.
- "Emanuel Lasker", "Passer-by" and "Arnstein's valet" could be played by the same actor.
- "New York Times newsboy", "Park Hotel waiter", "Alexander Rueb", "Porter" and "Errand boy" could be played by the same actor.
- "María Graupera", "Gloria", "Olga Choubaroff" and "Prostitute" could be played by the same actress.

Scene 1

Prologue.

The elderly chess player. From the poem by Abraham Ibn Ezra (Toledo, 1092 – Calahorra, 1167):¹

Elderly chess player: I will sing a song of battle
Planned in days long past and over.
Men of skill and science set it
On a plain of eight divisions,
And designed in squares all chequered.
Two camps face each one the other,
And the kings stand by for battle,
And twixt these two is the fighting.
Bent on war the face of each is,
Ever moving or encamping,
Yet no swords are drawn in warfare,
For a war of thoughts their war is.
They are known by signs and tokens
Sealed and written on their bodies.
Behold the Pawn, the first in battle,
Comes to fight upon the highway,
Ever marching straight before him,
But to capture moving sideways,
Straying not from off his pathway,
Neither do his steps go backwards;
He may leap at the beginning
Anywhere within two chequers.
Should he take his steps in battle
Far away unto the eighth row,
Then a Queen to all appearance
He becomes and fights as she does.
And the Queen directs her moving
As she will to any quarter.
Backs the Bishop or advances,
Stands aside as 'twere an ambush;
Swift the Horse is in the battle,
Moving on a crooked pathway;
Mid the Squares, three form his limit.
Straight the Rook moves o'er the war-path
In the field across or lengthwise;
Ways of crookedness he seeks not,

¹ From the translation by *Nina Davis* (now Mrs. Salomon), in "Songs of Exile" (pp. 129-131), issued by the Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1901.

But straight paths without perverseness.
Turning every way the King goes,
Giving aid unto his subjects;
In his actions he is cautious,
Whether fighting or encamping.
If his foe come to dismay him,
From his place he flees in terror,
Or the Rook can give him refuge.
Sometimes he must flee before him;
Multitudes at times support him;
And all slaughter each the other,
Wasting with great wrath each other.
Mighty men of both the sovereigns
Slaughtered fall, with yet no bloodshed.
Should a King in the destruction
Fall within the foeman's power,
He is never granted mercy,
Neither refuge nor deliv'rance,
Nor a flight to refuge-city.
Judged by foes, and lacking rescue,
Though not slain he is checkmated.
Hosts about him all are slaughtered,
Giving life for his deliverance.
Quenched and vanished is their glory,
For they see their lord is smitten;
Yet they fight again this battle,
For in death is resurrection.

Scene 2

Park Hotel, Estoril, Portugal, 9th March 1942.

Alekhine's room in the Park Hotel. Alekhine is sitting alone at the chessboard, the pieces in an endgame configuration: there are only two kings and two Pawns of each colour left. He is so completely absorbed in this solo match, it is as if the room around him, indeed the entire world, no longer exists. He moves the black King and conscientiously jots down the move in a notebook. He turns the board, so he is now playing White, pauses to think, then moves a white Pawn and notes down the move. He turns the board, pauses to think, picks up the black King again, but is interrupted mid-move by the waiter who knocks on the door. Alekhine doesn't respond. The waiter knocks again, and then again. Timidly, he eases open the door and enters: he is carrying a tray with Alekhine's supper and a bottle of vodka on it, as well as a telegram.

Waiter: *(Entering)* May I come in? Mr Alekhine, may I come in? I've brought your supper. I'm going to come in now. If I may? Here I am, I'm in! Your supper, Mr Alekhine. And the vodka you asked for. *(With a mixture of annoyance and indifference, Alekhine points to where the waiter should put the tray and carries on with his solo game)* As you wish. *(The waiter does as requested, but doesn't leave: he picks up the telegram)* There's... there... there's a telegram for you. Shall I leave it here? Or shall I read it to you? Mr Alekhine? Shall I read it? The concierge said it was very important. Urgent, he said. So I'm going to read it to you. Yes. So. Here goes. "From Alexander Rueb, president of the..."

Alekhine: *(Without looking up from the chessboard)* Fédération Internationale des Échecs.

Waiter: ...to Alexander Alekhine. New York, the 8th of March 1942. Capablanca is dead. Stop."

Alekhine: *(Without looking up from the chessboard, the black King still hovering in mid-air, where it will remain for the rest of the scene.)* Capa.

Waiter: "At the Manhattan Chess Club. Stop. He had just entered, and collapsed when taking off his coat. Stop. Cerebral haemorrhage. Stop. Thought you would want to know. Stop. Alexander Rueb. Stop."

Alekhine: Capa.

Waiter: That's all it says, sir.

Alekhine: Capablanca.

Waiter: I'll leave it here for you, ok? I'll be off then, sir. Good night, sir.

Just as the waiter is leaving:

Alekhine: Telegram.

Waiter: I beg your pardon, Mr Alekhine?

Alekhine: A telegram, you imbecile. Pen and paper.

Waiter: Right away. *(He gets a pen and paper and hands them to Alekhine, but Alekhine instructs him:)*

Alekhine: You write.

Waiter: Of course. Ready when you are.

Alekhine: To Olga Choubaroff Capablanca, New York, USA. José Raúl Capablanca has been snatched from the chess world much too soon. With his death, we have lost a very great chess genius the like of whom we shall never see again. Park Hotel, Estoril, Portugal, 9th of March 1942. Signed: Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine.

Waiter: *(Finishes writing)* ...xander Alexandrovich Alekhine. All done.

Alekhine reaches out his hand. The waiter understands and gives him the piece of paper. Alekhine rereads the telegram and then tears it up into tiny pieces and scatters them on the floor. Pause.

Waiter: I'll be off then.

The waiter is almost outside the door:

Alekhine: Wait!

Waiter: *(Re-entering)* Yes, sir.

Alekhine: Send it.

Waiter: I'm sorry?

Alekhine: Stick the pieces back together and send it!

Waiter: But, sir?

Alekhine: Stick the pieces back together and send it!

Waiter: As you wish, sir.

The waiter bends down, picks up the pieces of paper, and goes to leave again.

Alekhine: Wait!

Waiter: What can I do for you, Mr Alekhine?

Alekhine: No, nothing. Well, yes, no. *(Pause)* Send it. Send it tonight.

Scene 3

The Capablanca's House, Havana, Cuba, 1892, evening.

Maria Graupera is preparing dinner. From offstage, we hear the sound of the front door opening...

Maria: There you are! At last.

...and closing. Then, still offstage, the sound of a child's footsteps: it is Capablanca, running along the corridor and up the stairs to his bedroom. An angry voice calls after him (but there's a playfulness beneath the anger):

José María: *(Off)* Hide in your bedroom if you like, but this is not over! Little devil!

Maria: What's going on?

José María: *(Appearing onstage, but still speaking to his son)* I'll deal with you later.

Maria: What is all this?! What's happened?

Maria heads towards the corridor but José María blocks her.

José María: Don't go and comfort him, for goodness sake! That...

Maria: Then tell me what's happened. *(José María doesn't reply but bites his hand in anger)* José María Capablanca! Your son is four years old.

José María: Your son. He's your son.

Maria: What's he done this time?

José María: It's not possible. When I think about it.

Maria: Just tell me.

José María: So embarrassing! So embarrassing! And Don Miguel of all people.

Maria: Really? Oh, what did he do?

José María: We've finished our walk along the *paseo*, so we call into the club to say a quick hello. And Don Miguel's there, sitting at his table, as usual, smoking his big cigar. He asks me, "Quick match, Don José María?" You know he likes to play chess, no?

Maria: Yes, you told me.

José María: And Don Miguel is not a man you say no to. No way.

Maria: So?

José María: So we sit down and I order a glass of milk for José Raúl, who's sitting there good as gold, watching us play. Or at least that's what I thought.

Maria: Will you just tell me what he's done that's so terrible?!

José María: Let me finish. So, next thing I know, Don Miguel makes a move, he moves his Knight, and suddenly he cries out: "You can't do that! That's a wrong move!"

Maria: Don Miguel?!

José María: No, of course not Don Miguel! José Raúl, your son!

Maria: I don't believe you. You're winding me up.

José María: I couldn't believe it either. And neither could Don Miguel. But José Raúl keeps insisting: "No, Don Miguel. You've made a wrong move." "What are you saying?" I ask. "What do you know about chess?" "I know how to play," he says. Stubborn like his mother.

Maria: (*Amused*) Yes, yes, that's true.

José María: "Drink up your milk and leave the grown-ups to play" I say, just to shut him up, but Don Miguel, laughing as if it was all a hilarious joke, goes and says: "No, no, Don José María. Let him finish. What harm can it do? So, you know how to play chess, do you?" "Absolutely," your son answers.

Maria: Our son.

José María: "So tell me then, how did you learn?" "By watching you play." "And so you'd be happy to play a quick game with me now, would you?" "Of course."

Maria: How impertinent.

José María: "But Don Miguel," I say, "obviously the child is joking. He's only four. How on earth..." but Don Miguel interrupts me, still amused but a bit more severe now as well: "Then it'd be good if someone taught him a lesson, wouldn't it?"

Maria: Oh my Lord!

José María: But, Maria, it was Don Miguel who was taught the lesson! Just twenty moves in and José Raúl, deadly serious: "Checkmate".

Maria: That can't be true! It's not possible.

José María: “Not possible,” exactly what Don Miguel said, “another match. It's just luck.” And you know what José Raúl comes out with?

Maria: What?

José María: “No, no, Don Miguel. It's not luck.”

Maria: He said what?

José María: Five games in a row, he won, before Don Miguel officially declared himself the loser! The best player in the whole club humiliated by a little kid whose feet don't even touch the floor when he's sitting at the chessboard. He was furious!

Maria: Well, *did* you teach him?

José María: No, I swear. I just don't know. I don't know how... He genuinely must have learnt by watching me play. And when you think how badly I play. If he wiped the floor with Don Miguel, imagine with me!

Maria: Was Don Miguel angry?

José María: I told you, furious. His pride wounded. In front of everyone.

Maria: He'll get over it.

José María: Let's hope so.

Maria: What about you? Are you still angry?

José María: Yes. No. I don't know. I don't know what to think. It's incredible.

Maria: Oh, come on, incredible? He's your son, isn't he? I doubt there's anything incredible about him.

José María: Maria, you know perfectly well that I...

Maria: (*Embracing him from behind*) I know perfectly well that you're a wonderful father, and so your son could only ever be...

José María: A wonderful father...

Maria: And such a great dancer!

José María: Oh, yes, now there's something I really can teach him!

Maria: Will you take me out dancing on Saturday?

José María: Of course I will!

Maria: Can I go to him now?

José María: Off you go.

Maria: José Raúl, darling? Where are you hiding? *(She exits. From offstage:)* José Raúl? José Raúl? Will you show Mama how to play chess?

José María: Incredible.

Scene 4

Washington Square Park, New York, 1921.

As a newsboy advertises a special edition of the New York Times, the elderly chess player sits at his table (one of the ones that can still be found in the south-west corner of the park). He's on the lookout for someone who might want to play a game with him, preferably an easy target. Capablanca enters and stands with his back to the audience, watching the scene.

Newsboy: Guilty! Guilty! Sacco and Vanzetti! Sacco and Vanzetti guilty of first-degree murder! New York Times, special edition! Special edition! Sacco and Vanzetti guilty of first-degree murder!

Elderly chess player: Hey, boy!

Newsboy: Special edition! New York Times! Sacco and Vanzetti guilty of first-degree murder!

Elderly chess player: Hey, boy! Boy!

Newsboy: Sacco and Vanzetti! Sacco and...

Elderly chess player: Boy! Give me a copy.

Newsboy: Right away, sir. Here you are, sir. That'll be two cents, sir.

Elderly chess player: I'll give it to you later, boy, ok? I've nothing on me right now.

Newsboy: I can't do that, sir. It's two cents, sir.

Elderly chess player: Look, boy, trust me ok? I just need a few minutes.

Newsboy: I really can't do that, sir. My boss said I mustn't...

Elderly chess player: Listen, how about this: you just hold tight a few minutes, and I'll give you ten cents instead, ok? *(The newsboy has a think about it)* Ten cents instead of two, for one single copy. Whadda you say? *(He holds out his hand).*

Newsboy: Deal. *(He shakes the man's hand and gives him a copy of the paper)*

Elderly chess player: Good boy! That's how it's done. Now do me a favour and scoot a few feet over there, I've got work to do.

Newsboy: Right away, sir.

The newsboy takes a few steps away (and then slowly exits the scene) and they both start shouting in an attempt to sell their wares. A passerby, a casual chess player, is crossing through the park on his way to the office. He stops in interest.

Newsboy: *(Exiting)* Special edition! Sacco and Vanzetti! Sacco and Vanzetti!

Elderly chess player: Chess! Chess! A game of chess! *(To the passerby)* A game of chess, sir? You can play White. Winner gets ten cents. Whadda you say? Just to spice things up a little?

The passerby sits down at the chessboard.

Scene 5

A hotel room in New York. At the same time.

José María Capablanca and Alekhine knock, quietly at first, then increasingly loudly.

José María: José Raúl! José Raúl! Open the door.

Alekhine: Wake up, Capa, wake up – we're going to miss the crossing!

José María: Don't you want to play for World Champion? José Raúl! José Raúl!

Scene 6

Washington Square Park, New York. Continuation of Scene 4.

The fifth match between the elderly player and the passerby comes to a close, with the same result. All under the watchful eye of Capablanca.

Elderly chess player: And...checkmate! That's five. Now, we said "double or nothing" so that's: ten, twenty, forty, eighty, a dollar and sixty cents!

The passerby, angry, but mainly with himself for having got plucked like a chicken, pays and heads off without saying a word.

Newsboy: *(Re-entering)* Sacco and Vanzetti! Sacco and Vanzetti guilty of first-degree murder! New York Times, special edition!

Elderly chess player: Hey, boy! Here are your ten cents. Every promise is a debt.

The elderly chess player gives the money to the boy.

Newsboy: Thank you, sir.

Elderly chess player: *(To Capablanca)* How about you, sir, d'you fancy a game? Don't tell me you don't. You've been staring the whole time, like you was analysing the moves. That guy was a disaster, but you seem pretty clued up. Am I right? Your face is... There's something... I'm sorry, ignore me. You can play White. So... ten..., no, let's say twenty cents to the winner. Whadda you say? Just to spice things up a little? No, no, wait, you look like you got a real eye for the game, how 'bout we say a nice round dollar? *(Capablanca takes a seat at the chessboard, still without saying a word, and moves his Pawn from e2 to e4.)* Oh, the King's Pawn Game. You know that's my favourite opening?

Scene 7

A hotel room in New York. Continuation of Scene 5.

José María Capablanca and Alekhine are still knocking.

José María: José Raúl! José Raúl! Open the door.

Gloria, one of Capablanca's conquests, enters the living area (from the bedroom where she's been sleeping) and goes to open the door. She's still half asleep.

Gloria: Coming, coming. Why all the noise? Who the hell are you?

Alekhine: *(He enters the room, almost shoving Gloria aside as he does so, and searches all round, even in the bathroom)* Capa! Capa! Hurry up or we won't make it!

Gloria: What is it you want? Who's Capa? How dare you just...

Alekhine: He's not here. We're going to miss the crossing.

José María: We've got less than two hours. Where is he, miss?

Gloria: Where's who?

José María: José Raúl Capablanca, miss. My son.

Gloria: Oh, right, Iosé.

José María: José!

Gloria: Iosé, José...oh, we danced all night. Your son really knows what he's doing...

José María: Well, yes, he... I... where is he?

Gloria: Iosé? I don't know. He snuck off early this morning. Does he never sleep?

Alekhine: Miss, where is he?

José María: Did he say where he was going?

Gloria: Umm? I don't know, I was half asleep...

José María: Try to remember, please. It's important.

Alekhine: Extremely important!

José María: I'm begging you.

Alekhine: Come on, miss!

Gloria: Don't rush me. When people rush me... Let me think.

José María: Let her think, Alekhine.

Gloria: I don't know...

Alekhine: Well then?

Gloria: ...he did say something about a park... Washington...

Alekhine: Washington Square Park! Of course! He went to play.

Scene 8

Washington Square Park, New York. Continuation of Scene 6.

The match between the elderly chess player and Capablanca is in mid flow. They both move their pieces with a calm confidence, all under the watchful eye of the newsboy, who is completely engrossed in the game:

Elderly chess player: *(Rook e8)* And...check!

José María Capablanca and Alekhine come running on. Capablanca makes his move.

José María: There he is! He's there!

Alekhine: What were you thinking?

Capablanca raises his left hand to silence him and makes the move with his right.

José María: Come on, let's go! The ship's not going to wait for us.

Alekhine: Come on! Come on!

Elderly chess player: *(Queen f1)* And that's check again.

In spite of the time pressure, neither Alekhine nor José María are able to stop themselves observing the players' positions and getting drawn into the match. They continue to hurry Capablanca, but with a little less conviction as the match progresses.

José María: Come on, hurry up!

Alekhine: *(To the two players)* What is it, a Spanish Game?

Elderly chess player: *(Almost taken aback by Alekhine's knowledge)* Yes, sir, a Marshall Attack...

Alekhine: *(To Capablanca)* And you've gone for the sacrificial variation...

Capablanca: *(Moving his King)* It gets your brain working, makes you practise being under attack.

Elderly chess player: *(As he makes his move)* Precisely, sir, a siege that is going to end with your capitulation.

Capablanca: *(He moves, King c2, and then addresses the elderly chess player)* Checkmate, my friend. I'm sorry.

Elderly chess player: What? Are you crazy? I just checked you myself.

José María: We've got a cab waiting.

Capablanca: *(To José María)* I'm all yours. *(To the elderly chess player)* Checkmate.

Elderly chess player: What the...

Capablanca: That is, not now: in thirteen moves' time.

Elderly chess player: Whadda you mean, in thirteen moves' time?!

Newsboy: Wow!

Elderly chess player: My dear sir, nobody can see thirteen moves ahead.

Alekhine: *(To the elderly chess player)* Of course they can! First there's a thematic sacrifice on f7... *(He starts to move the pieces himself)*

José María: The cab.

Capablanca: Yes, father, I won't be a moment. *(He stops Alekhine's hand and moves the pieces, both colours, to finish the match and prove himself right)* Yes, Alexander, that's right: the Bishop takes the Pawn on f7 and, there we are, all done.

José María: *(Resigned)* I'll go and tell him to keep waiting. *(He exits)*

Capablanca: *(To the elderly chess player)* You see? Every move is forced. Rook f7, Queen b8 check, King h7, Rook h6 check, King h6, Queen h8 check, and so on and so forth until Queen h5 checkmate.

Elderly chess player: But... But... No way!

Newsboy: No way!

Capablanca: Thirteen moves.

Elderly chess player: You're right. I've got no way out. *(He pulls the dollar he just won out of his pocket and hands it to him)* Here's your dollar. You really deserve it.

Alekhine: I recognise this match.

Capablanca: *(To Alekhine)* Yes, Alexander. Of course. *(To the elderly chess player)* No, my friend, thank you, but I really don't deserve it. I did win, yes, but only because I cheated, so to speak. You didn't know it, but we just recreated a match I played with Frank James Marshall in 1918.

Elderly chess player: You've played against Marshall?

Capablanca: I wanted to see if you were any good, and you really are. Sure, I was leading you along with White, playing exactly how I played back then, but you played like Marshall, move for move. You even repeated all his mistakes.

José María: *(Re-entering)* José Raúl! Enough now! We've got a World Championship to win and, before we can do that, an ocean to cross.

Elderly chess player: José Raúl?

Capablanca: Let me show you the correct defence: so Marshall's mistake, and yours, is on the fifteenth move: the Knight capture on f2 seems like a winning move, but actually...

José María: Let's go, Capa, hurry up!

Capablanca: I'm afraid I have to go. Anyway, you're the one who deserves a dollar! *(He takes a dollar from his wallet and hands it to the elderly chess player, who takes it almost mechanically, distracted as he is by the name of the person standing in front of him.)*

Elderly chess player: José Raúl? Capa? But you... you're... *(To the newsboy)* But he's...

José María: Well? José Raúl?!

Capablanca: Yes, I'm coming.

Elderly chess player: No, I can't accept it. *(He tries to give back the dollar, but Capablanca presses it into his hands).*

Capablanca: Of course you can. You must. Next time we'll play for real and I'll get it back then, don't you worry.

Elderly chess player: José Raúl Capablanca...

Capablanca: *(To Alekhine, as he rushes over to his father)* Come on, let's go Alexander, hurry up, it's so late! *(Already nearly offstage, to the elderly chess player)* Knight takes f2, that's the mistake.

Newsboy: What a bunch of madmen.

Elderly chess player: Do you realise who that was? José Raúl Capablanca. José Raúl Capablanca! One of the greatest chess players of all time. Perhaps the greatest. Look. It must be in here. Somewhere. *(He opens the newspaper and flicks through until he finds the article he was looking for)* Here. Look, look here. *(He reads)* "Capablanca triumphs at New York Tournament. Young Cuban, José Raúl Capablanca, won first place at the International Chess Tournament in New York, with ten wins and one draw." Ten wins and one draw, can you believe it? "Unbeaten for over two years, Capablanca is clearly on course to become the next World Champion in his challenge match against Emanuel Lasker, which will take place in London in the upcoming weeks." Unbeaten for over two

years. And he played with me. And I... His face seemed familiar, but in the flesh he looks so much younger than his drawing in the paper. I didn't recognise him at all.

Newsboy: My boss told me that soon they're gonna put photos, in the papers.

Elderly chess player: *(Admiring the dollar note and stretching it between his hands, as if it were made of elastic, almost ripping it in two)* Who could have imagined? Me, playing against Capablanca. What was it he said? The mistake is on the fifteenth move? Why? Why is it a mistake for the Knight to take f2? *(He tries to reconstruct the match)*

Newsboy: *(Exiting)* New York Times, special edition! Capablanca wins the New York Chess Championship, with ten wins and one draw! Special edition.

Elderly chess player: Why?

Scene 9

New York Port. Just after.

The Capablancas, father and son, and Alekhine arrive just in time to board the ship. They don't have much luggage. Alekhine and Capablanca are playing blindfold chess.

José María: Just in time, let's go, let's go!

Alekhine: Queen d1.

Capablanca: Queen takes the f6 Pawn.

Alekhine: Queen d6.

Capablanca: *(To José María)* Father, the trunk with the chess books?

José María: The hotel sent it over. The only thing that's missing now is us.

Capablanca: *(To Alekhine)* Queen takes Queen on d6.

Alekhine: Rook takes Queen on d6.

José María: Let's get onboard, we're the last.

(As they head off, still continuing the game, Olga Choubaroff comes running on, followed by a porter from the New York Port who is struggling to carry her many cases)

Olga: *(To the ship)* Wait! Wait! *(To the porter)* Hurry up, for God's sake!

Capablanca: *(To Alekhine and José María)* Watch out, watch out! Move out the way. After you, miss. *(To Alekhine)* Knight e6.

Olga stops and smiles, giving a little curtsy.

Olga: *(To the porter)* Come on, on we go. There's a generous tip on its way.

Olga and the porter exit (and get on board)

Capablanca: There, now we really are last.

José María: *(With a little whistle to flag up Olga's attractiveness)* She's quite a girl.

Capablanca: You're not wrong there. Alexander? Knight e6?

Alekhine: Oh, I got distracted! I can't picture the whole board any more. I'm in a fork, right?

Capablanca: Yes, from my Knight on e6.

Alekhine: And I've got a Pawn blockaded on f7?

Capablanca: Correct.

Alekhine: Then I've lost.

Capablanca: Of course. But you'll get there, sooner or later.

Alekhine: Sooner or later. For sure.

Scene 10

On the ship between New York and London, a few days later.

Capablanca and Alekhine are setting up the board to play a blitz game. José Maria is trying to speak to his son, and also to Alekhine, about the conditions of the World Championship match against Lasker. In the background, we can hear the ship's orchestra, playing dance music.

Capablanca: Grünfeld was right. Do you remember what he said to me when I beat him in New York? “You made me feel sea sick pushing me around the chessboard, but just you wait till you cross the Atlantic...”

José Maria: *(To Capablanca)* So, have you had another think? Lasker's expecting a reply straight away and I've already asked the wireless operator to...

Capablanca: Of course I've had another think, and I haven't changed my mind.

Alekhine: I'm sorry, Capa, but why?

Capablanca presses the button on his side of the clock to show he's started timing Alekhine's move. They continue to play as they talk, until Alekhine stops.

Capablanca: Play! *(Alekhine makes his move and starts the game: d4, d5, c4...)* Are you sure you want to play the Queen's Gambit again? You've lost twelve games that way already.

Alekhine: But you don't know what variation I've got in mind this time.

José Maria: Lasker said it's entirely your choice, in fact I even heard that, given your performance over the past few years, he'd prefer just to give you the title without playing.

Capablanca: Exactly. Without playing. But I want to play. And win. Uh, the exchange variation! There. *(He makes his move)* I want to win by beating Lasker in a game of chess. I don't want to be gifted the title just because I haven't lost any matches for the past two years.

José Maria: I understand that, yes.

Alekhine: I'd feel the same. You've never seen this one, right?

Capablanca: Steinitz played it against Tartakower.

José Maria: Listen to me! Why ask him to make his conditions harsher?

Capablanca: Because a champion should deserve to be champion. Same goes for the challenger.

José María: But let's just have one more look at these conditions together, shall we?

Capablanca: If it makes you happy. But I won't change my mind.

José María: Well, let's have a look at them anyway. So. *(He gets out a piece of paper, unfolds it and reads)* Rules for the World Chess Championship challenge match. Article one: the winner will be the first player to win six games. I'd say we all agree on that.

Capablanca: Yes, on that, yes.

Alekhine: And now Rook takes Pawn. Steinitz hadn't spotted that.

Capablanca: But Capablanca has.

José María: And same with the next two articles. Article two: play is limited to sessions of 5 hours per day. Article three: the time limit is forty moves in two and a half hours, then, after the first adjournment, one hour for the next twenty moves, and after the second, half an hour for the next twenty and so on and so forth.

Alekhine stops.

Alekhine: I'm not so sure about that. I mean, about the time control after the adjournments... I'm used to playing fast, and so are you, of course, even though you're more reflective and less impetuous than me, and that's your strength, obviously. But you won't be playing a blitz challenge in London, with matches of five minutes tops like this...

Capablanca: Exactly, move. It's your turn.

Alekhine: ...but you're going to be playing normal matches – what if the time set down in these rules isn't enough?

Capablanca: It's fine, it's fine as it is. I won't need more than forty moves per match anyway. Now make your move cos your clock is going tic tac, tic tac, tic tac.

José María: José Raúl, stop it! I don't like this attitude. This is the World Title. We've worked so hard to get here.

Capablanca: You're right, I'm sorry. Forgive me, both of you. But I can assure you, I am going to win.

José María: Of course you're going to win.

Capablanca: *(To Alekhine)* Play on, your flag's about to fal...

He cuts himself short because Olga crosses the stage: she's heading from the ship's ballroom to the deck, to look out at the stars and the sea. Capablanca follows her with his gaze, only half listening to what José María and Alekhine are saying.

Alekhine: Listen, Capa, it won't happen, but what if you lost? It won't happen, but what if?

Capablanca: It won't happen.

Alekhine: But what if it happened because of the time control?

Capablanca: I'm telling you, it won't happen. *(He gets up to follow Olga)*

Alekhine: Where are you going?

Capablanca: Your flag's fallen. You owe me another dollar.

Alekhine: Yes, Capa, fine, but have you really thought it through properly? Lasker's not the player he was, but he's still very strong.

José María: Exactly. Very strong.

Capablanca: Exactly, he is. And I want to beat him in a game of chess, so there's not a seed of doubt in anybody's mind. So that everyone knows who the best player in the world is. It's me and it will be for a long time. You'll see, it'll be your turn sooner or later.

Alekhine: Against you, maybe. It'd be nice to challenge each other for the title.

Capablanca: But I haven't got the title yet. I don't want to be handed it on a plate and I don't want to win it with conditions that make me unworthy. And now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go.

José María: What do you mean, you need to go?

Alekhine: To her.

Capablanca: *(Heading towards the deck)* As I said, I need to go. Please, Father, tell the wireless operator to write to Lasker and say we'll discuss it in London. End of discussion. See you later. Don't wait up. *(To Alekhine, as he exits)* Steinitz's variation is wrong.

José María: *(Calling after him with some advice)* José! Don't stay up late.

Alekhine: *(To himself and José María, not to Capablanca who has already left)* Come on, there's a championship to be won. You should study and rest, study and rest. I'd never act like this.

José María: Will you try and talk some sense into him?

Alekhine: You know perfectly well it won't make any difference. Once he's made his mind up.

José María: *(Almost with a sigh)* I'll go and find the telegraphist.

Alekhine looks at the board and the fallen flag.

Scene 11

The deck of the ship between New York and London, immediately after.

Olga is looking out to sea, gently swaying along to the music that is drifting over from the ship's ballroom. Capablanca comes up behind her, dancing a little himself. She turns:

Olga: Oh! You made me jump.

Capablanca: Forgive me, I didn't mean to.

Olga: I'd hope not.

Capablanca: I like it too. *(Olga looks at him, puzzled)* Dancing alone. The steps, the music it's... I often find myself dreaming of the perfect match, you see. And it can only be perfect in the way a melody can be perfect. A melody that you can dance to, but also that you can just listen to on your own, with your eyes closed. Or on a pitch black night like this one.

Olga: The perfect match?

Capablanca: Chess. I play chess.

Olga: Are you not a bit grown-up for games?

Capablanca: Oh, but chess isn't just any old game, Miss. Am I correct in saying Miss? *(Olga nods)* Chess is a serious thing, like music, like dance.

Olga: You're making fun of me.

Capablanca: I would never dream of doing that.

Olga: Yes you are, you're teasing me, I know you are.

Capablanca: You see, the mind of a great chess player works in the same way as that of a great musician. Just as a great pianist, for instance, can sit down and play for hours and hours without a score, a great chess player can go through endless games and variations, which he has unconsciously stored in his mind.

Olga: And I suppose you're able to do that, are you? Because you're a great chess player.

Capablanca: Well, yes, Miss, I am. Great musicians see the notes in their minds' eyes as though they were right there, in front of them. In just the same way, great chess players can visualise the moves and the positions of their pieces. And if a note or a move momentarily slips from their mind, it's the previous note or move that will remind them, that will help them to picture, what should come next. There's a logical progression that

helps the expert to overcome his difficulties. That's why chess is a serious thing, like music, like dance – a science, but also an art.

Olga: *(Clapping, amused)* Bravo, very good! Very, very good! I'll admit you almost had me convinced there, but I'm not falling for it.

Capablanca: Let me explain myself better then. *(He offers her his hand...)* If you'll allow me *(...which she takes and they begin to move slowly on the spot to the rhythm of the music that can be heard)* The game of chess is played on a chessboard, eight squares by eight squares, sixty-four in total. Not all that many, when you think about it, but they allow for almost infinite possibilities. The kings face each other, the white King and the black King, with their armies to their sides. And in front of them all stand the Pawns. Eight Pawns, edging forwards from one square to the next...

Capablanca takes a step forwards, forcing Olga to take a step back, if a little clumsily.

Olga: *(Amused)* What are you doing with me?!

Capablanca: ...or two squares on their first move *(They take two steps)*, and when they take, they do it diagonally, as if they were sinking their spears into their enemies, with a swoop. *(One diagonal step and a tango swoop, then they return to dancing on the spot)*

Olga: You're crazy!

Capablanca: Behind the infantry of Pawns, stand the officers. At the edge of the board, we have the piece that, depending on where you are in the world, is called the Castle or the Rook.

Olga: Such different names?

Capablanca: Yes, because when it's standing still, that is, when it hasn't been moved yet, it can offer refuge to its King in just one move, like a castle that... how can I explain? Yes, here, I know! If I was the King and you were my castle...

Capablanca lets go of one of her hands and gently leans her away, still holding her with the other hand, ...

Olga: Oh God!

... he pulls her towards him and wraps his arm around her, almost hugging her, and they do a pirouette and swap places. They continue to dance on the spot.

Capablanca: There, that's the castle!

Olga: I'm not sure I've entirely understood, but I am having fun!

Capablanca: But the word Rook comes from a Persian word meaning chariot and the piece also moves like a chariot, cutting through as many squares as it likes, forwards or

sideways. A bit like in the foxtrot. *(He leads her in a straight line in a foxtrot, turning through ninety degrees to change direction, singing to himself as he goes)* It goes this way, then goes that way... through as many squares as it likes. Starting from a1 it goes to a8, then from a8 it goes to h8, then from h8 it heads to h1, then from h1 to a1, tatta tara tatta...

Olga: Careful, careful.

Capablanca: And then there's the Knight, which is the funniest piece of them all.

Olga: Why?

Capablanca: Because it moves in an L-shape.

Olga: In an L-shape?

Capablanca: Yes, it's a quickstep! Two steps this way and one step that, one step that way and two steps this! *(They dance as described: two steps in one direction and one to the side, or one step followed by two)*

Olga: Yes, you're right, this is funny!

Capablanca: And now we come to the last remaining officer: the Bishop, who advances purposefully on the diagonal like in a polka! *(They dance it, quickly)*

Olga: Stop, stop, you're making me dizzy! And anyway, I don't like war games like this. Infantry, officers, they're boy things.

Capablanca: Au contraire mademoiselle! You see, we still haven't mentioned the piece that's even more important than the King, well, on a par. It used to be a weak piece called the Counsellor, but now it's known as the Queen, and that's why it's the strongest piece of all! She can move in whatever direction and through however many squares she likes, like this. *(He spins her round wildly)* Like in a waltz by Strauss.

Olga: *(Singing)* Our Lady the Queen, Her Majesty, so strong and so very powerfully, she moves herself here...then moves over there...and then goes here, then goes there, then goes up, then down and... Enough, stop, please! *(They stop and break apart)* You're not a bad dancer, I'll give you that, but it's making me dizzy. Where did you learn to dance like this?

Capablanca: From my mother, María Graupera Capablanca, and if she were still alive, she would be very touched by your compliment.

Olga: She must have been quite a mother.

Capablanca: One of the great chess champions of the past said that chess, like music, like love, has the power to make men happy.

Olga: Even when they lose?

Capablanca: In those instances, they postpone their happiness till their next match. *(He reaches out his hand, inviting her to shake it, and she does so)* José Raúl Capablanca.

Olga: Goodnight, José Raúl Capablanca.

Capablanca: My friends call me Capa. *(He kisses her hand)*

Olga: Thank you for the lesson.

Capablanca: I hope to give you more. In London? You're headed there too, I imagine?

Olga: Goodnight.

Capablanca: As you wish.

Olga: I'll be staying at the Ritz. Goodnight, José Raúl Capablanca.

Olga goes to leave but Capablanca calls her back with one last question.

Capablanca: Your name?

Olga: Olga Choubaroff.

Capablanca: Goodnight, Olga Choubaroff. *(Olga exits and Capablanca marks out a few dance steps)* Olga Choubaroff. Someday, you and I shall be married.

Scene 12

London, a few days later.

Lasker, José María and José Raúl Capablanca, and Alekhine discuss the conditions for the World Championship challenge.

Capablanca: Don't even say it, Lasker!

Lasker: To be honest, I would prefer it if...

Capablanca: I will not accept the title without playing.

Lasker: Well, in that case, all we need to do is agree on the conditions.

José María: Exactly. *(Again, he gets out the piece of paper with the conditions of the challenge, unfolds it and reads.)* We received your proposal. Article one: the winner will be the first player to win six games. Article two...

Capablanca: Let's keep it short, Father. Lasker, we're on board with everything except for one article. *(He takes the piece of paper from his father's hands)* Where is it? Here we are. Article eight...

José María: There we are, here we go.

Capablanca: ...the reigning champion is not obliged to accept a challenge unless the challenger is able to provide a purse of two thousand dollars, which will be given in its entirety to the winner of the challenge. Two thousand dollars?

Lasker: We could always say a thousand, if that's too much.

Capablanca: If it's too much? Too much?

José María: José Raúl!

Lasker: I'm not sure I like your tone. I'm the one who's champion at the moment, young man, don't forget that! If two thousand dollars is too much for you...

Capablanca: Too little! It's too little.

Lasker: Well, then let's say three thousand. It doesn't make any difference to me. I'm the champion, you're the one who has to offer it up.

Capablanca: Five thousand.

José María: José Raúl!

Lasker: Six thousand.

José María: José, stop it!

Alekhine: Capa, are you really sure?

Lasker: So?

Capablanca: *(To José María)* How much money do we have?

José María: One moment.

Lasker: I don't have all day.

Alekhine: *(To Lasker)* Just one moment, please.

Capablanca: *(To José María)* How much money do we have?

José María: Well, we've got all our savings...

Capablanca: How much money do we have?

José María: ...together with your grant from the Banco Central de Cuba!

Capablanca: How much?

José María: After expenses, I'd say just over ten thousand dollars.

Capablanca: *(To Lasker)* Ten thousand.

José María: *(To Capablanca)* Have you gone crazy?!

Capablanca: *(To Lasker)* Ten thousand.

Lasker: Ten thousand.

Alekhine: *(To Lasker)* Please, couldn't you...?

Lasker: What do you want me to do? The champion has nothing to lose, it's the challenger who has to provide the purse. It's him who...

Alekhine: Yes, you're right, but...

José María: *(To Lasker)* Yes, you're right, but... *(To Capablanca)* If you lose, we'll be going home without a single cent. And more crucially, nobody will want to back you any more, so you can wave goodbye to any future challenges.

Alekhine: Yes, Capa!

José María: It's pure folly.

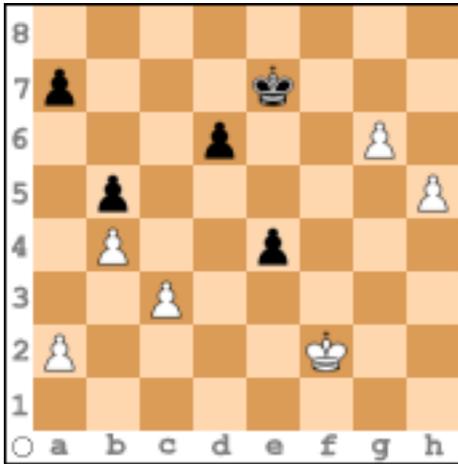
Capablanca: *(To Lasker, putting out his hand)* Ten thousand dollars.

Lasker shakes Capablanca's hand, sealing the deal.

Scene 13

London: the challenge. A few weeks later.

Capablanca and Lasker are playing. After several matches, Capablanca is just one win away from becoming champion. Endgame: the white King is on f2 and his Pawns are on a2, b4, c3, g6 and h5; the black King is on e7 and his Pawns are on a7, b5, d6 and e4.



Alekhine and José María Capablanca are watching the match. Alekhine is doing his own commentary. Capablanca moves his King to e3.

Alekhine: There we are, that's it. King to e3, nice move Capa, nice move. Obviously he's going to go for d5. But that's all right, that's absolutely fine. Just take your time, don't rush, but we both know your next move is going to be King f4. And then it's done, you've won the endgame, it's over.

Olga enters and approaches the two of them.

Olga: You must be Capa's father, is that right?

José María: Yes, Miss. I'm José María Capablanca. And you are...

Alekhine: *(A bit irritated by the interruption)* The one from the boat.

Olga: Olga Choubaroff.

José María: A pleasure.

Olga: I'm honoured to meet you, Mr Capablanca. *(To Alekhine)* And yes, you're right, I'm the one from the boat. Capa's told me so much about you, Alexander Alexandrovich. About both of you. How's it going?

José María: Well. Really well. Just one more win and he'll be champion.

Olga: *(Too loudly)* Just one?!

Alekhine: Sssh!

Olga: Oh gosh, I'm so sorry.

José María: *(Not as a reproach)* We have to be silent in here, Miss. It's worse than in church.

Alekhine: *(As if he was speaking to Capablanca, who gets up from the table to think)* Why is he thinking so much? King to f4, it's obvious.

Olga: Capa was so insistent that I come and see him play, but this was the soonest I could make it.

Alekhine: *(As if he was speaking to Capablanca, who heads back towards the table, then changes his mind and walks away again)* Why are you thinking so much? King to f4, it's obvious. What are you seeing that I can't see?

Olga: What's happening? What's f4?

José María: I'm sure he'll be delighted to see you. He talks of nothing but you. And I must say that now I've seen you, I can understand why. If I were twenty or thirty years younger, I'd give you some dance lessons myself.

Olga: You're very charming.

Alekhine: King to f4 and it's over.

Olga: It's so tense!

Alekhine: I don't understand why he's thinking so much. He's still got plenty of time, but I just don't understand. He must have something in mind, but what?

Olga: *(To Alekhine in Russian)* Vy russkij, ne tak li? Iz Moskvyy? [You're Russian, right? From Moscow?]

Alekhine: Yes, Miss, Moscow born and bred. But I don't like to speak in Russian any more.

Olga: Oh, no, really?! Why is that?

Alekhine: Well, I can never go back to Moscow, or the Soviets would arrest me.

Olga: I understand. I was brought up in New York, but born in Georgia, in Tbilisi, and since the Red Army invaded... Do you still have family in Moscow?

Alekhine: Yes, Capa, King to f4.

José María: His parents.

Olga: I'm sorry to hear that. I hope you get to see them again, one day.

Alekhine: I very much doubt I will.

At last, Capablanca returns to the table, sits down and moves the King to f4.

José María: There you go, Alexander! King to f4. Just like you said. He's done it, he's done it!

Alekhine: About time.

Olga: *(Far too loudly, so that everyone, including Capablanca and Lasker, turn to look at her)* Yes! King to f4!

Alekhine: Be quiet!

Olga: Oh my God, what have I done?! *(Capablanca gives her a little nod and she responds by blowing him a kiss)* Hi Capa.

Alekhine: Eyes on the board, eyes only ever on the board. Full concentration. Full concentration. Once you've brought your enemy down: finish him, destroy him! Now Lasker will make the only move possible, King e6 and...

Lasker makes his move, but strangely, as soon as he's moved his King to e6, before pressing the button on the clock he slumps back in his chair, as if he's realised he's made a bad move and can't hide his disappointment. Despairing, he presses the button on the clock.

Alekhine: ...no! No, no, no, don't be taken in, don't be taken in. He's pretending. He didn't get it wrong, that was the only move he could make. He's just pretending because there's nothing else he can do. H6 and you've won, don't...

But Capablanca, distracted by Olga and by Lasker's play acting, moves his Pawn from g6 to g7, instead of the one on h5 to h6.

Alekhine: ...no! Not g7! H6 not g7!

José María: What's happened?

With a smile playing on his lips, Lasker moves his King to f7. It's a draw now. Capablanca smiles too, but at his own mistake.

Alekhine: He's been had! Lasker's led him a merry little dance. *(To Olga)* He had the victory in hand and you distracted him.

Olga: He's lost? Because of me?!

Alekhine: He hasn't lost, but it's a draw now.

Olga: What does that mean?

José María: It means we won't be celebrating tonight, Miss.

Alekhine: Oh, why? King to f4. King to e6, h6, not g7! H6... Eyes on the board, eyes only ever on the board. Eyes on the board: h6.

Scene 14

*Washington Square Park, New York, a few days later,
and London (the final match of the Capablanca-Lasker challenge).*

The elderly chess player is stationed at his chessboard. The newsboy appears behind him, dressed far more smartly than before. He is holding a copy of the New York Times, which he places on the chessboard.

Newsboy: World champion! World champion!

Elderly chess player: Where, where?

Newsboy: On the front page this time!

Elderly chess player: Let me see.

Newsboy: Here, look. There's even a photograph.

Elderly chess player: *(Reading)* "London, United Kingdom. 20th of April 1921. With six wins, eight draws and no losses, young Cuban player José Raúl Capablanca has been crowned World Chess Champion in London, wresting the title from the defending champion: German player, Emanuel Lasker."

Newsboy: Six wins, eight draws and no losses. He's still unbeaten. And you've played with him.

Elderly chess player: I'm happy. I'm so, so happy. Oh, great, they've got the match transcript.

Newsboy: Yes, I've had a look at it, but it's written all funny...

Elderly chess player: In algebraic notation. I need to teach you.

Newsboy: Without a chessboard, it makes no sense.

Elderly chess player: But we've got one: a chessboard. Right here. Now then, let's see, let's see, Capablanca's White and Lasker's Black. D4 and then Knight to f6... Oh, an Indian Defence.

As the elderly chess player and the newsboy retrace the moves, the lights come up on the actual match. Capablanca and Lasker are sitting at the board, and Alekhine, José María Capablanca and Olga are watching.

José María: Come on, son, come on.

Alekhine and Elderly chess player: There, he's done it!

Olga: Really?!

Newsboy: But I don't get it, they look exactly equal. In fact, Lasker's position seems stronger.

Elderly chess player: It seems it, it does seem it, but look over here. Look at this beautiful windmill.

Newsboy: Windmill?

Alekhine: Yes, this time he's going to win, he's going to win!

José María: Are you sure?

Alekhine: Sure as you're born.

Elderly chess player: *(Using his forearm to act out the movement of a windmill blade)*
Tac, tac, tac... covered, uncovered, covered, uncovered, covered, uncovered...

Newsboy: I don't understand.

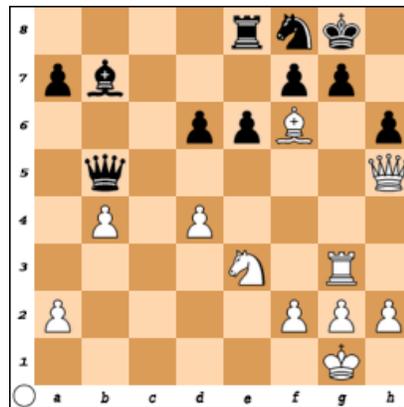
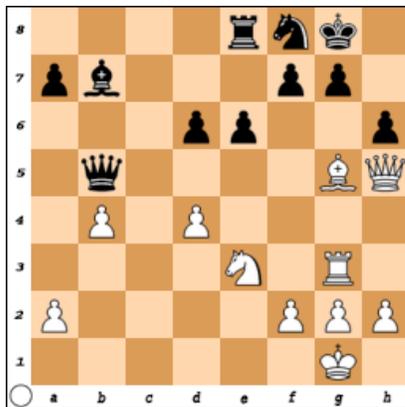
Elderly chess player: Watch.

Alekhine: Now he's going to set off a whole series of discovered checks. One, two, three. One, two, three.

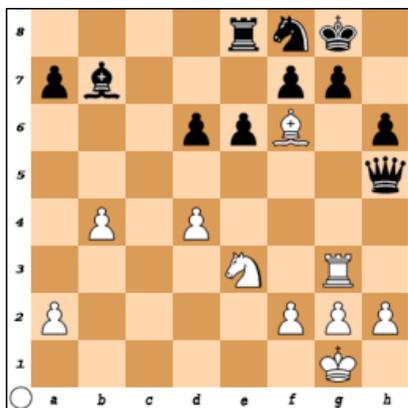
Olga: Like a waltz!

While the elderly chess player demonstrates on his board, Capablanca and Lasker do the moves on their board. (Somehow, the audience is able to see the moves too).

Elderly chess player: Watch this. Capablanca moves his Bishop to f6.



Newsboy: But then Lasker'll take his Queen!



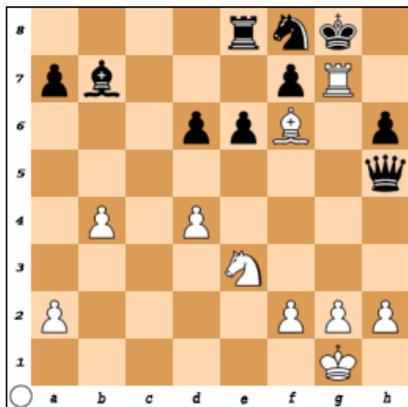
Elderly chess player: Of course, but there's the catch!

José María: Alexander, he's going to take his Queen!

Olga: Oh, God, no!

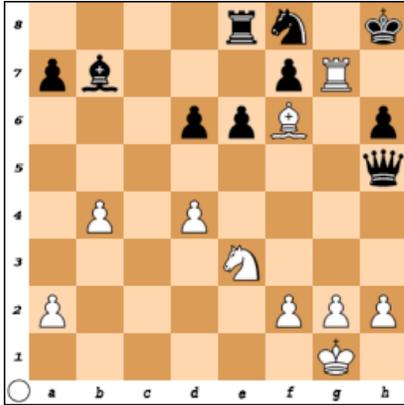
Alekhine: Of course he's going to take his Queen.

Elderly chess player: Rook takes Pawn on g7, check!



Alekhine: One.

Newsboy: Lasker's forced to move his King to h8.



Elderly chess player: Rook takes Pawn on f7: discovered check with the Bishop!

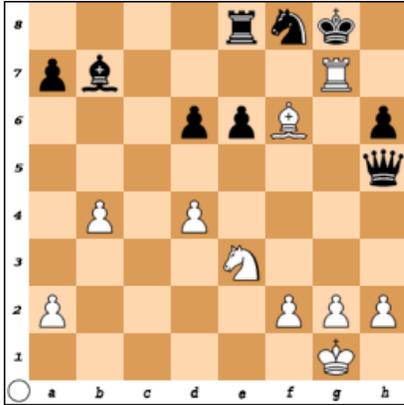


Alekhine: Two!

Newsboy: Black King back to g8.

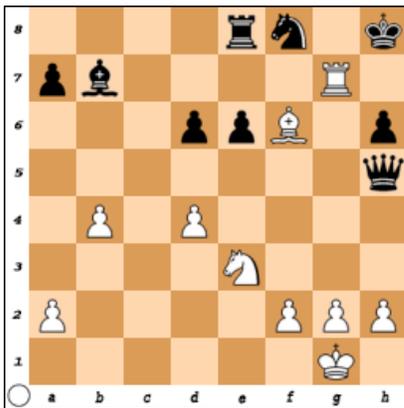


Elderly chess player: And again, Rook to g7: check.

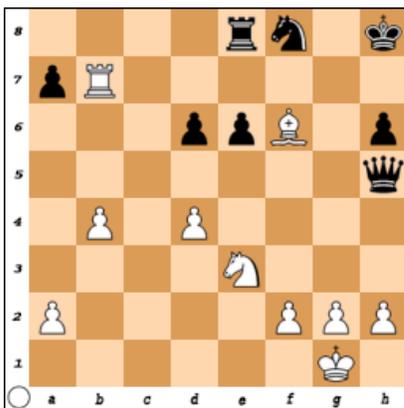


Alekhine: Three!

Newsboy: King back to h8.

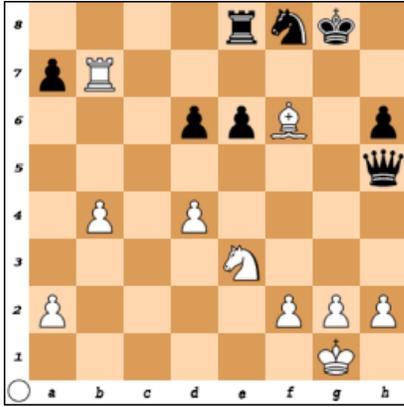


Elderly chess player: Rook takes Bishop on b7: and again, discovered check with the Bishop!

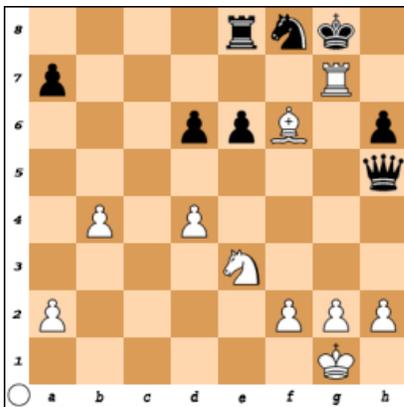


Alekhine: One!

Newsboy: King g8.

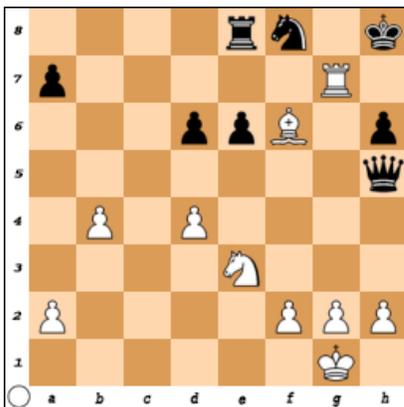


Elderly chess player: Rook g7: check.

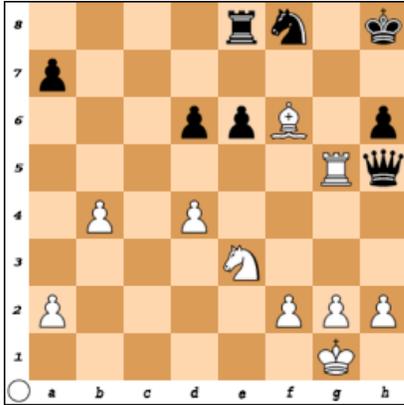


Alekhine: Two!

Newsboy: And again, King h8.

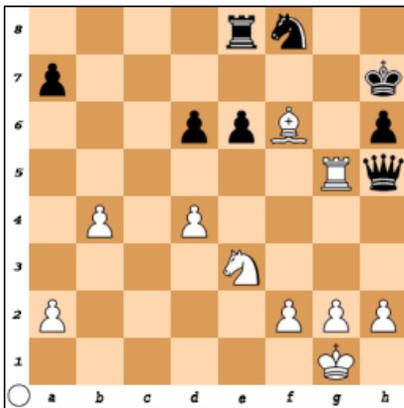


Elderly chess player: Rook g5: check.

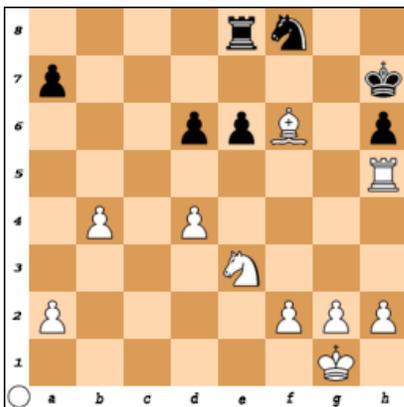


Alekhine: Three!

Newsboy: Well, now the King can only go to h7.



Elderly chess player: And the Rook gobbles up the Queen!



Newsboy: And now Capablanca is one piece and two Pawns up. Now I understand! The windmill!

Elderly chess player: Tac, tac, tac. Tac, tac, tac.

While Lasker decides whether or not to resign, José María starts to savour the taste of victory.

José María: Ah... ah... ah...

Lasker tips over his King.

Alekhine: World champion!

Olga: Yes!!!

Newsboy: World champion!

Elderly chess player: What a masterpiece!

Alekhine, José María and Olga head over to the chessboard to celebrate. Capablanca gestures for them to stay back and offers his hand to Lasker. Lasker stands and shakes Capablanca's hand warmly, kissing him on each cheek to congratulate him on his splendid victory. As Lasker leaves, José María initiates a round of applause for the defending champion. Everyone joins in. Lasker exits. Alekhine goes to shake Capablanca's hand, but Capablanca is distracted by Olga and his father, and ignores Alekhine's outstretched hand. Laughing, José María and Olga mark out some waltz steps.

José María and Olga: One, two, three, one, two, three...

José María: (A little out of breath) I'm not as young as I used to be, Miss Olga!

Freeing herself from José María's arms, Olga moves over to the chessboard and moves the pieces around at random, making them dance.

Olga: One, two, three, one, two, three. José Raul Capablanca, you have to teach me to play chess.

Capablanca: Olga Choubaroff, will you marry me?

Olga: (*Weighing up the question as if it were a chess problem, mimicking Capablanca's mannerisms and grimaces when he's at the chessboard*) Yes? No? Yes!

The lights go down on the scene in London, leaving only New York.

Elderly chess player: A match, young man? For free, of course.

Newsboy: I can't – we're gonna have to put it off till next time. Whadda you think? How do I look?

Elderly chess player: You cut a damn fine figure.

Newsboy: Wish me luck, old man. I got the job!

Elderly chess player: Where?

Newsboy: It's my first day on Wall Street.

Elderly chess player: Good luck to you, boy!

Newsboy: (*Exiting*) This is my big break, I can feel it.

Elderly chess player: You deserve it.

Scene 15

Alekhine's House, New York, 1924.

Alekhine is in his study, sitting at his desk, the chessboard to one side. He's rereading the notes he's been keeping for some time about Capablanca and about himself.

Alekhine: José Raúl Capablanca. From that moment in the game where exact science gives way to pure art, it is then that those qualities, which have given rise to Capablanca's almost legendary fame, shine at their brightest; most impressive is his exceptional speed in comprehending the current position, and after that his intuitive feel for future positions, which is practically flawless. Capablanca's "trick" is always to keep his openings simple, and then play the middlegame and endgame at a level of brilliance never before witnessed. However, when analysing all the matches he has played over the years, there is a noticeable drop in attention to detail, a consequence of his unshakeable faith in the infallibility of his own intuition, which, effectively, intimidates his opponents, who cannot conceive of how to beat the unbeatable, how to conquer the unconquerable, not even when they find themselves in the stronger position. *(To Capablanca, who is analysing a match he played against Nimzowitsch on the chessboard)* So, you see? I was right! Nimzowitsch almost had you, but then he got scared off. He was afraid of winning. Look, just look at your twentieth move: Pawn to g4.

Capablanca: Yes, so?

Alekhine: So?! It's a mistake!

Capablanca: No, why? Quite the opposite. It withdraws support from Nimzowitsch's Pawn on e4. He moves his Knight to f6 and I take his Pawn on f5 and isolate e4.

Alekhine: Nimzowitsch is an idiot! And so are you, Capa, I'm sorry, but haven't you realised how many mistakes you made in this match yet? The Pawn on g4 is the critical weakness.

Capablanca: I think you're exaggerating. My Pawn on g4 is just fine...

Alekhine: What do you mean exaggerating? How can you not see?! It's blindingly obvious! Your defeat was inevitable at that point, but what does he go and do? Bishop to f5. Bishop f5 – what was he thinking?!

Capablanca: Calm down, Alexander. It's not that bad a move.

Alekhine: Not that bad?! It's awful! Bishop f5... Knight to d5, not Bishop to f5! *(Alekhine, who has been sitting up until now, stands and moves over to what would have been Nimzowitsch's place.)* You'd set yourself up for an attack, look: him Knight d5, you Queen h3 forced, him Knight f4, you Queen e3 forced, him Queen g5, you Queen to e4 forced, and now him Bishop to f5! Now! There, all done. Nimzowitsch one, Capablanca nil. And he was playing Black!

Capablanca: No, no, no, you're wrong! Which is precisely why I won. I'd calculated all the variations, including yours. Which is nice, but wrong I'm afraid. Here, I'll show you.

Alekhine: There's nothing to show. I'm right. You got it wrong.

Capablanca: No, no, I didn't, there's a variation to your variation. I appreciate that you may not have spotted it yet, but...

Alekhine: You had blind faith in your own superiority.

Capablanca: ...when it comes down to it, it's me who's World champion.

Alekhine: And that imbecile, that Jew, prostrated himself like the sacrificial lamb he'd convinced himself he was before he'd even started playing. You've been lucky this time, Capa, but next time...

Capablanca: What can I say, Alexander? A great player is always lucky.

While Alekhine speaks his next lines, the lights slowly dim on Capablanca, and we return to Alekhine's study, where he sits alone, re-reading his notes.

Alekhine: It was miracle you won, or rather, you won because Nimzowitsch was convinced he needed a miracle to beat you, but also that miracles don't exist. (*Looking back over his notes, but still speaking to an imaginary Capablanca*) Yes, that's it! Your opponents cannot conceive of how to beat the unbeatable, how to conquer the unconquerable, not even when they find themselves in the stronger position. Not even when they've practically already won. And that's also why, in recent years, you've been able to win when playing moves that are barely good enough; but that means you've lost the habit of concentrating until you've ruled out all the possibilities. You've never truly dedicated yourself to chess. You play in the same way against all your opponents, you rarely ever prepare for a match. To beat you, all that needs to be overcome is the automatic assumption that you play a superior game.

Almost comforted by his own words, he now begins to read the file he keeps about himself.

Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine. I learned to play chess when I was seven, but only started playing seriously from the age of twelve. Depth of strategic planning, endless invention. But my true strength, which I've developed slowly and laboriously over the years, lies in my overall vision of the game: if there's even the tiniest chance of a combination, I'll spot it. I calculate all the sacrificial variations with ease and accuracy and I see combinations in places where others don't even suspect them. When a combination is revealed to me, I feel convinced it's the human mind that inspires the game, that dominates the inanimate pieces and breathes life into them.

Having finished reading, he raises his eyes and concludes his comparative evaluation of himself and Capablanca:

Eyes on the board, Alexander, eyes on the board and you'll win! Your pieces need to possess a destructive power that will blast through any resistance. And once you've got your victim in your clutches, may your grip be unrelenting, unsettling, devastating. Capablanca is World Champion. Lasker has been World Champion. Alekhine plays in the way a World Champion should!

Scene 16

Washington Square Park, New York, at the same time.

The elderly chess player, alone, sitting at the chess board.

Elderly chess player: One evening, during the 1920 International Tournament in Paris, the organiser decided to take Capablanca, who would eventually win the tournament, and Alekhine, who would come in third, behind Lasker, to a variety show. He said that Capablanca never took his eyes off the chorus girls, whereas Alekhine never looked up from his pocket chess set.

Scene 17

New York, 1926.

Alekhine nervously paces back and forth outside Capablanca's house. He's trying to find the right words and to pluck up the courage to ring the bell.

Alekhine: *(To an imaginary Capablanca)* Capa, how are you? It's been a while. Did you hear I won the Paris and Lisbon tournaments, and also the elite tournament in Buenos Aires? *(To himself)* Well, of course he heard, you idiot, get to the point! *(To imaginary Capablanca)* I won, Capa, I won Paris, Lisbon and Buenos Aires! Yes, you did well, you did well. *(To imaginary Capablanca)* Capa, listen, I think my moment has come. *(To himself)* Moment to do what? *(To imaginary Capablanca)* Capa, dearest Capa, this year I won Paris, Lisbon and Buenos Aires, and last year Portsmouth and Baden-Baden, and I really deserve... *(To himself)* Deserve? What do you deserve? Pathetic! *(To imaginary Capablanca)* Capa, I'm ranked second in the world! *(To himself)* Arrogant, presumptuous, eyes on the board, Alekhine, eyes on the board! *(To imaginary Capablanca who responds to him)* Capa, remember your promise? What? You don't remember? Come on, of course you remember. *(To himself)* Of course he remembers...

He rings the bell. Olga opens the door.

Olga: Alexander Alexandrovich! What a lovely surprise!

Alekhine: Olga!

Olga: It's been so long. Must be at least two years...

Alekhine: I... Capa...

Olga: What am I doing? Leaving you out there in the cold. Come in, come in. Capa will be so happy to see you. He's always shutting himself away in his study.

Entering the house:

Alekhine: I'd like to...I need to talk to him.

Olga: Of course, Alexander. Come on, come on. You're very welcome, always.

At the same time, in Washington Square Park.

Elderly chess player: Checkmate, so that makes two...

Newsboy: Enough, I give up!

Elderly chess player: Just one more, one more little game.

Newsboy: All right, but this one's the last.

Back in Capablanca's house. Olga leads Alekhine into Capablanca's study. He is sitting at his desk with a chessboard and a pile of papers in front of him, writing and drawing something on one of the pieces of paper.

Olga: José Raúl?! José?! José?!

Capablanca: Yes?

Olga: *(To Capablanca)* Look who's come to see you.

Capablanca: *(He looks up)* Alexander! Hi. How are you?

Alekhine: Good, Capa, listen, I need to speak to you.

Capablanca: *(Turning back to his papers)* Just give me one moment.

Olga: *(To break the awkwardness, in Russian)* Kak vy poživaete, Aleksandr Aleksandrovič? [How are you, Alexander Alexandrovich?]

Alekhine: *(Deliberately not in Russian)* I'm well, yes.

Olga: Any news of your parents?

Alekhine: Dead.

Olga: Oh! I didn't know. We didn't know. We didn't know, did we Capa?

Capablanca: No. I'm sorry to hear that.

Alekhine: Both of them. Last year. A few days apart.

Olga: My sincere condolences. *(Alekhine just responds with a simple nod)* Did they allow you to go back for the funer... ?

Alekhine: You really don't know the Soviets, do you, Mrs Choubaroff Capablanca! I'm an enemy of the soviet people. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs would lock me up and throw away the key!

Olga: I'm sorry. Truly. I truly am.

Alekhine: Listen, Capa, I need to speak to you.

Capablanca: And I to you. You've arrived right on cue.

Alekhine: It's important.

Capablanca: (*Gesturing to one of the chairs by his desk*) Sit, have a seat.

Olga: Don't forget we need to leave soon, José. We mustn't be late for the reception.

Capablanca: Don't worry, darling. This won't take a moment.

Olga: Good. I'll leave you to it then. I'll go and put my face on.

Capablanca: You're beautiful just as you are.

Olga: (*Exiting*) Liar!

Capablanca: Put on those earrings I gave you. And the necklace...

Alekhine: I won, Capa! I won! First the Paris tournament, then the Lisbon one, then the elite tournament in Buenos Aires. I won.

Capablanca: Congratulations! I'm really pleased for you.

Alekhine: Five wins, three draws, and no losses in Paris, six wins, four draws and no losses in Lisbon, ten wins, no draws and no losses in Buenos Aires. Ten wins, no draws and no losses.

Capablanca: Unbeaten in all three tournaments, and a perfect score in Buenos Aires! Hats off, Alexander, well done.

Alekhine: There was Lasker, Réti, Rubinstein, Maróczy, Nimzowitsch, Spielmann, Tartakover, Vidmar, Bogoljubov, Grünfeld... My match against Nimzowitsch won the brilliancy prize.

Capablanca: A-ha. How's old Lasker?

Alekhine: The only person missing was you.

Capablanca: Oh, well, yes.

Alekhine: It's been two years, Capa. Two years since you last played.

Capablanca: I play every day.

Alekhine: Alone at the chessboard. It's been two years since you took part in a tournament.

Capablanca: I don't find tournaments fun any more.

Alekhine: But you can't just retire from competitions! You're the defending champion.

Capablanca: I haven't retired.

Alekhine: Well you haven't put the title up for grabs.

Capablanca: Rubinstein and Nimzowitsch have both challenged me, but neither of them could provide the ten thousand dollar purse.

Alekhine: Ah, yes, the ten thousand dollars, I wanted to speak to you about that too.

Capablanca: But I've found the solution, you see. I've been working on it for months and now I've finally understood how to do it – how to make chess more exciting.

Alekhine: Chess is already exciting. Let me finish, Capa, it's important.

Capablanca: All I had to do was work out the real reason why I don't find it fun any more.

Alekhine: Capa...

Capablanca: I don't find it fun any more because I haven't lost for so many years.

Alekhine: Almost eight years.

Olga: *(Off)* José, do you know where my cloche hat is?

Capablanca: *(To Olga)* On your dressing table? *(To Alekhine)* But this is only the effect, not the cause. The cause is the game of chess.

Alekhine: There's nothing wrong with chess.

Capablanca: Yes there is. Us! It's us, we've got too good at it.

Olga: *(Off)* Oh, yes, I am silly, here it is. I must be going mad...

Capablanca: She can't find things that are right under her nose. And matches are so boring. They're no fun for the people watching, but above all, they're no fun for the people playing. Be honest, did you not get a bit bored in Paris, Lisbon and Buenos Aires. What was it? Twenty two wins and six draws, not even one single loss?

Alekhine: I enjoyed myself more than I ever have.

Capablanca: I don't believe you. I think that, deep down, you don't believe yourself either.

Alekhine: You're wrong, Capa. I play to win every match.

Capablanca: Exactly! But what about when you've won them all like I have? It's no fun any more.

Alekhine: It is for me. I feel stronger and stronger every day and the only thing I want is to carry on winning.

Capablanca: Look, look at these drawings. A chessboard that's not eight by eight, but ten by ten. And each player has two extra Pawns and two extra pieces: an Archbishop, who moves like a Knight and a Bishop combined, and a Chancellor, who moves like a mix between Rook and a Knight.

Alekhine: Interesting, but...

Capablanca: A hundred squares instead of sixty-four. A bigger battleground.

Olga: *(Off)* I'm ready, José. Shall we go?

Capablanca: *(To Olga)* We're nearly done. Just one moment. *(To Alekhine)* And ten pieces per player to move around the space bringing almost infinite new possibilities, infinite possibilities for your amazing combinations. Goodbye boredom, welcome back fun.

Alekhine: Let's discuss it some other time, shall we?

Capablanca: What is it that doesn't convince you? To me it seems like an almost perfect improvement.

Alekhine: I came here to ask you something.

Capablanca: Do you not like the Archbishop and the Chancellor? We could change the way they move.

Alekhine: My moment has come, Capa. Listen to me, please.

Capablanca: If we put our heads together, we can come up with something even more brilliant, you'll see.

Alekhine: One moment, just give me one moment.

Olga: *(Entering, all dressed up and ready to go out)* We need to get going, José. We'll be late.

Alekhine: *(Almost shouting)* Just a moment, I said! *(An awkward and embarrassing silence, before Alekhine tries to make up for his furious, if partly justified, outburst.)* Forgive me. Forgive me, Olga.

Olga: *(Embarrassed and still a bit shaken by Alekhine's outburst)* I... No, forgive me, Alexander Alexandrovich. *(In Russian)* Eto ja vinovata... Eto ja vinovata... [It's my fault, I... It's my fault, I...]

Alekhine: How many times do I have to tell you: don't speak to me in Russian! It doesn't exist for me any more! When the Bolsheviks came to confiscate our estate, they lined us all up – my father, my mother, me, all the labourers – with our backs to the wall of the house, they took aim, and only after their commander had shouted (*only the word “fire” is spoken in Russian*) “Ogon’!”, they raised their guns and shot into the air. Only then. Only then, do you understand?! “Ogon’!” Fire! Don't... ever... speak... to... me... again... in... Russian! Never... again!

Capablanca: (*Hurriedly putting on his jacket*) We really must get going.

Olga: (*Still afraid*) Yes.

Alekhine: (*Resigned*) Yes.

Olga goes to leave, followed immediately by Capablanca, who comes up behind Alekhine and rests his right hand on his right shoulder, leading him gently, but firmly, towards the exit.

Capablanca: Let's continue our chat another time, eh?

Alekhine: (*Lost even deeper in thought, to himself*) Yes... Yes... eyes on the chessboard, eyes on the board. Eyes only ever on the board.

Scene 18

Washington Square Park, New York, at the same time.

The elderly chess player and the newsboy are sitting at the chessboard. The newsboy is in evening dress.

Elderly chess player: And...checkmate!

Newsboy: Enough, I give up! I just can't get my head round chess. It's not worth me wasting your time. And look how late it is. I've really gotta go: I'm taking my missus to the Metropolitan Opera, you know? They're doing 'Il Trovatore' by Giuseppe Verdi. I promised her I would...

Elderly chess player: Every promise is a debt.

Newsboy: ...and if I'm not careful she's going to kick off. She's so patient, poor thing... But she's already started complaining that I'm working too much all the time and that... Here you go: *(counting the dollar bills as he draws them out of his wallet)* one, two, three. Three games, three dollars. *(He hands the money to the elderly chess player, who refuses to take it)*

Elderly chess player: No, come on, I can't take it.

Newsboy: *(He puts the money into his hand and walks away)* Whadda you talking about? Fair's fair. Until next time, old man.

Elderly chess player: Enjoy the opera. One, two... *(He counts out the money and realises that the newsboy has hidden a fifty dollar bill in between two dollar bills)* Hey! Boy, you've given me a fifty dollar bill!

Scene 19

Alekhine's house, New York, a few months later. Night.

Alekhine is sitting at the chessboard. He's analysing a match between Capablanca and Spielmann, but between one move and the next, he counts up his money, making notes (about the match as well as the money) in a notebook.

Alekhine: Seven plus four plus two plus six, nine and carry one. And then there's the two thousand dollars from the Buenos Aires elite tournament. Seven thousand, six hundred and forty-nine. Not enough. It's not enough! Wait, what if Spielmann hadn't moved his f Knight to d7 but his c Knight to e4? Yes, of course, there's still Capablanca's check on d8, but it's far less effective now, because now we've got the Bishop on f8. I need to play more tournaments, and more simultaneous exhibitions – they pay better. More, even more.

Prostitute: *(Enters from the bedroom in her underwear, holding a glass)* Come on... Stop keeping me waiting.

Alekhine: *(To the prostitute, but without raising his eyes from the chessboard and notebook)* I'm nearly done. *(To himself)* Two thousand, three hundred and fifty-one, I'm two thousand, three hundred and fifty-one dollars short. Do you understand, Capa, Spielmann hadn't spotted this variation, but I have, and this variation beats you. Two thousand, three hundred and fifty-one. Another two thousand, three hundred and fifty-one dollars.

Prostitute: It's your time.

Alekhine: Yes, Bishop f8.

The prostitute goes over to Alekhine, caresses him and starts kissing him on the neck, which Alekhine enjoys, even if a part of him is almost annoyed by it. His eyes remain glued to the chessboard and notebook.

A prostitute: You're the one paying but...you haven't even offered me a cigarette yet and you've left me to drink all by myself...

Alekhine: I'm off cigarettes and alcohol at the moment.

A prostitute: ...I'm just thinking of you... go on, have a little drink.

Alekhine: More. Even more.

The prostitute goes to sit on his lap and give him a glass of vodka, but she knocks the chessboard in the process and a few of the pieces fall over.

Alekhine: Look what you've done, you idiot! (*He snatches the glass and splashes the vodka in her face.*)

Scene 20

New York, 1928.

Death knell: it's José María Capablanca's funeral. Capablanca's eulogy is delivered to the congregation. Amongst them we can see Olga, Lasker and, alone to one side, Alekhine. It's the first time Capablanca and Alekhine have seen each other since Alekhine's visit to Capablanca's house in 1926.

Capablanca: We start to feel grown up the day we beat our own father at chess. We become grown up the day we let him win. My father, José María Capablanca, was a mediocre chess player, but he was a very special man and a dancer par excellence. *(From now on, he shares the speech with José María, who speaks from his deathbed)*

José María: It's my sense of humour,

Capablanca: he said,

José María: that makes me forget how embarrassed I am to dance. Especially when I have your mother pressed tight in my arms.

Capablanca: My mother passed away when I was little more than a boy. It felt too soon for me and, perhaps, even sooner for José María. But he never lost heart, right to the end – he carried on playing chess, losing on a regular basis. I did once try to let him win, but he got so offended and infuriated, I had to promise him I'd never do it again. No, José María never lost heart. He knew that chess is like life, that

José María: chess is life. And you have to face it with your chest thrust forward and a smile on your face, because you never know which side the attack's going to come from. It may seem like it's coming from the centre, but then maybe it'll be from the right instead, or the left.

Capablanca: My father loved the A and the H, the Rooks' columns, the ones down the side of the board,

José María: because from the side, you can get a different perspective on life,

Capablanca: he'd say,

José María: seen from there, the world, life, seems a bit more laughable, a bit less scary.

Capablanca: A few hours before he died, he wanted to play a match, and sitting there, with the chessboard in front of him, he told me that he needed to tell me something: something he'd never told me before.

José María: Son,

Capablanca: he said, in what little voice he had left.

José María: Son, I need to tell you something I've never told you before. I've never dared.

Capablanca: Tell me, Father, tell me.

José María: One evening, years ago, when you were playing in a tournament with all the other Grandmasters, a strange man comes up to me and asks if he can speak to you. I just assume he wants an autograph from the unbeatable Capablanca, so I tell him that you've gone out with the prima ballerina from the Opera House. This was before you'd met Olga.

Capablanca: But when was it? I can't remember. Which tournament was it?

José María: Don't interrupt me, every word is costing me. Now where were we? Oh, yes, I tell him that if he comes back the next day you'll be happy to give him an autograph. But he tells me that he absolutely must speak to you in person. I ask him to run whatever it is by me first and he tells me straight out: "I've solved chess." I'll admit my instinct was to make an excuse and get the hell away, in case he wasn't just crazy, but dangerous too. But then, what does he do? Calm as can be, he pulls a wodge of banknotes out his pocket and says, "This is yours if I don't checkmate you in twelve moves." Now, son, as you know very well, I'm not a great chess player.

Capablanca: Yes, Father, I'm well aware of that.

José María: But whether he was a madman or not, that was a big chunk of money, and I also really wanted to teach the guy a lesson. So I say yes – I've got nothing to lose. We sit down at the chessboard and he starts playing super simple, by the book, I'd say: Ruy Lopez opening and on from there. But after a couple of strange moves, once we're on the eighth move, I find myself in a desperate position, and you cannot even imagine my shock when he calls checkmate on the twelfth move. I couldn't believe it. I mean, I may not be very good, but I'm still father of the great Capablanca, thank you very much. So I ask him for a rematch right away and this time I go for a completely different opening, the Queen's Gambit, which couldn't possibly lead us to the same positions as earlier, but, same as before, after a couple of strange moves I could only respond to in a certain way, he checkmated me again on the twelfth move.

Capablanca: Then my father had a coughing fit, so I told him to rest, to finish the story another time. But he insisted:

José María: No, no, now. So, in short, something isn't right, I must have made some stupid mistake, but I just can't see what it is, so I tell the guy to wait for me there. You're not around so I go up to the room to get the notes of your matches. I want to see if he can beat the unbeatable José Raúl Capablanca as well. I choose one of your slow, very defensive openings, a "giuoco piano". But, twelve moves later, my King's already checkmated. It was terrible, not to mention embarrassing. I tried every single possible opening, the King's, Queen's, English, Vienna, Sicilian, and all the variations, with gambits and without, I even sacrificed a few pieces at random, just to see what would

happen, but there was no way round it: checkmate in twelve moves. What could I do? This was the end, that was it: this guy had solved chess.

Capablanca: But why did you never tell me this, Father? Perhaps I could have...

José María: You were out with your ballerina, and I was stuck there like an imbecile!

Capablanca: And so, what did you do?

José María: Well, this was the end, that was it: this guy had solved chess! What choice did I have? I made an excuse about needing to get some fresh air, led him up onto the hotel terrace and, then, when no-one was looking, I pushed him over the edge!

Capablanca: At this point, my father started laughing so hard, he couldn't breathe. A few hours later, he was no longer with us. That was my father, José María Capablanca, looking from the Rooks' columns, getting a different perspective on life.

Members of the congregation approach Capablanca to offer their condolences: Olga hugs him and so does Lasker. Alekhine is last, and when it's his turn, he approaches Capablanca in silence.

Capablanca: Alexander. I'm truly happy to see you, it's been so long. Father would have been so pleased to know that you'd come to say goodbye.

Capablanca reaches out his hand, but Alekhine doesn't shake it. Instead, he gives him an envelope, which Capablanca opens, astonished.

Capablanca: But? I don't understand.

Alekhine: Ten thousand dollars. Consider yourself challenged.

Scene 21

New York, spring 1929.

The first match of the World Championship Challenge. The president of the World Chess Federation and arbiter of the match, Alexander Rueb, is setting up the chessboard in preparation. Capablanca and Alekhine approach the board from opposite directions. They don't even look at each other, apart from when quickly shaking hands, as the protocol dictates. They sit down. Capablanca plays White and Alekhine Black. Alekhine presses the button on the clock to start timing Capablanca's move, then instantly stands up and starts pacing around with his head down: he can't even bear to be seated at a chessboard with his now ex-friend. Capablanca makes his move (e2-e4) and presses the button on the clock to stop timing himself and start timing Alekhine. Having heard the click of the button, Alekhine returns to the board and sits. Out of spite, Capablanca immediately leaps up and begins pacing the room himself. Alekhine makes his move (e7-e5) and the dance continues. Capablanca is very sure of himself, and Alekhine a little more doubtful. After a few moves (with a blackout to signal the passage of time) the game has become more serious: one of Alekhine's moves propels Capablanca straight back to the board and this time Alekhine doesn't get up, but stays to watch his opponent, whose posture conveys the drama of the situation. The match has already been lost: Capablanca is well aware of this and so is Alekhine, who is looking more and more sure of himself now, almost smug and haughty. Capablanca's Queen to h1, Alekhine's Queen to f4, white Pawn to h5, black Rook to h2: Capablanca has no choice but to resign from the match. He tips over his King and instantly stands up and leaves: this is his first defeat in years.

The score is displayed on a board: Capablanca 0 – Alekhine 1.

Scene 22

New York, the day after.

The newsboy, who is now looking very elegant and refined, and the elderly chess player are bent over a copy of the New York Times: they are reading the write-up of the first match between Capablanca and Alekhine.

Newsboy: He'd never lost to Alekhine, never!

Elderly chess player: I don't understand. He had him in the palm of his hand, was clearly in a much better position and then...

Newsboy: Almost ten years with no losses, and now this?

Elderly chess player: I just don't get it.

Scene 23

Capablanca's house, at the same time.

Lasker knocks on the door. Olga opens.

Olga: Herr Lasker, thank you for coming.

Lasker: How is he?

Olga: I've never seen him like this. Whatever you do, please don't tell him I called you.

Lasker: Take me to him.

Olga leads Lasker to Capablanca, who is prowling around his study like a ferocious beast who has suddenly found himself trapped in a cage.

Lasker: *(To Capablanca)* "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same."

Olga: I'll leave you to it.

Lasker: Do you understand why you lost? You lost because the very idea of losing never even crossed your mind. Because you don't know how to lose any more. Think about it Capablanca, dig deep and try to understand why you lost.

Capablanca: I lost because I was winning, I had him in the palm of my hand, was clearly in a much better position than he was and then I let myself get distracted just for a moment.

Lasker: If that's truly what you think, I fear Alekhine will have it easy.

Capablanca: Forgive me if I don't accompany you, but you know where the door is.

Lasker: It's unbelievable. You're the greatest player since Morphy, perhaps the greatest of all time, but when it comes down to it, you're just a spoilt little boy.

Scene 24

New York, the following weeks, until 16th June 1929.

The World Championship Challenge continues. The board displays the change in score: from Capablanca 0 – Alekhine 1 to Capablanca 3 – Alekhine 5, so Alekhine only needs one more win to become World Champion.

<i>Capablanca</i>	0	½	½	½	½	½	1	½	½	½	½	½	1	½	½	½	½	1	½	½	½	½	½	½	0	½	½	½	½	0	0	0
<i>Alekhine</i>	1	½	½	½	½	½	0	½	½	½	½	½	0	½	½	½	½	0	½	½	½	½	½	½	1	½	½	½	½	1	1	1

The thirty-fourth match has already begun, but it went on for too long and has been adjourned overnight. The elderly chess player describes what we can see happening on stage between Alekhine, Capablanca and Rueb.

Elderly chess player: 16th of June, 1929. With Capablanca on three wins and Alekhine on five, the thirty-fourth match of the challenge is suspended when they reach the second time control, to be resumed the following day. Alexander Rueb, president of the World Chess Federation and arbiter of the match, approaches the chessboard and hands an envelope to Alekhine. Rueb doesn't need to say a word. Concealing himself from Capablanca, Alekhine writes down his next move, puts the piece of paper into the envelope, seals it and hands it back to Rueb who, only now, stops Alekhine's clock. The match will resume tomorrow morning at 9am.

Scene 25

The Capablanca's House, that night (through to the following morning).

Lasker knocks on the door. Olga goes to open it but Capablanca beats her to it.

Capablanca: I'll get it. *(Opening the door, to Lasker)* Thank you for coming.

Lasker: *(With a nod to Olga)* Mrs Capablanca.

Olga: *(With a little curtsy)* Oh, Herr Lasker.

Capablanca: *(Heading towards his study)* Come, come with me. I've already set up the chessboard in the adjourned position.

Lasker: Why did you ask me here? You called for me, Capa. Why? Why now?

Capablanca: My position seems solid, but, I don't know, I have a feeling that Alekhine's already clinched it.

Olga: And if he wins this match, the title's his.

Lasker: Maybe it would be best to look it all over from the beginning, right back from the first move.

Capablanca: You were right, Lasker. I've always found it so easy to win that I wasn't ready for... this. To have to put up a real fight. It was stupid of me not to lis...

Lasker: *(Moving a Pawn)* You opened with Pawn to e4.

Capablanca: Please forgive me.

Lasker: No more talking! I understand and it's fine. Right now, we've got a match to analyse.

Olga: I'll leave you *(Leaving, under her breath to Lasker)* Thank you.

Lasker: So, you opened with Pawn to e4...

Olga: *(Off)* Yes, and he replied with Knight to f6.

Lasker: Yes, Olga, a new defence. *(To Capablanca)* He's invented a new defence. In the analysis room, we've already christened it "Alekhine's defence".

Capablanca: Yes, but what's the point of it? I don't understand. It's a weak defence.

Lasker: Oh, that's what we all thought. Rubinstein was the only one who seemed intrigued, Tartakover laughed out loud, and Spielmann bet Reti that you'd win in 20 moves.

Capablanca: So then I pushed my Pawn further forwards to e5.

Lasker: A natural move. In the analysis room we all said "e5" in chorus: that would attack Alekhine's black Knight, forcing him to move a second time to d5.

Capablanca: And then I pushed another Pawn to c4, to threaten the Knight again.

Lasker: Correct. Correct. We said that in chorus too. Him: Knight b6.

Capablanca: And I push to d4.

Lasker: Correct. That's correct too.

The lights come up on Alekhine, who is speaking to an imaginary audience, almost as if there were students listening to his lecture.

Alekhine: Yes, it's true, it does seem like a sad waste of time to let the black Knight be chased around by the white Pawns, and also to allow all these Pawns to build up a powerful centre for White. But my plan was very simple: to provoke the white Pawns, to draw them forwards. This White centre isn't as strong as you might think: the Pawns are too far forwards. They've now become objects of attack. Obviously, this defence isn't for the timid or fainthearted. If Black misjudges the timing of the counterattack, he'll be squashed like an ant. But if he doesn't get it wrong... I've led you where you've never been before, Capa. To an unknown land. Knight to f6: it's madness, no? And yet the plan was so simple: to provoke your white Pawns and then...

Lasker: You're in a good position, now.

Capablanca: Yes, it's good, isn't it? It seems it to me, too. And what's more, when I played Knight on b to d2, he seemed surprised.

Alekhine: Capablanca will be Capablanca. Knight on b to d2.

Capablanca: He thought for a long time after that move, almost an hour.

Alekhine: We were only on the seventh move, but that's where the match was decided.

Lasker: And after an hour he moved the Rook. You went Pawn h3.

Alekhine: Even though I was probably the only one who knew it. a5.

Lasker: And it's here that Alekhine pushes his Pawn to a5.

Alekhine: Come on, Capa, I'm provoking you, can't you see? Move your Pawn to a4. I know you're tempted to. I know. Come on, do it, Pawn a4.

Capablanca: And so... so... I play a4.

Alekhine: Thank you. And that was when I looked at you. My eyes weren't on the board any more, They were on you. You had no idea what was happening any more, move after move. Oh, Capa, when we entered the middlegame I almost felt sorry for you, that vague trace of uncertainty when you pressed the button on the clock. Here, have a Bishop.

Capablanca: And here he completely takes me by surprise. He sacrifices a Bishop for three Pawns.

Alekhine: Come on, come and get me.

Capablanca: And I take it.

Lasker: Who wouldn't have? After that move, Rubinstein left the analysis room saying, "Gentlemen, I'm off to dinner, Alexander Alexandrovich has just committed suicide".

Alekhine: But I'd been preparing myself in a unique way. No smoking, no alcohol, no nothing. I am the perfect fusion between an ascetic monk and a predatory animal. Annihilate the mind of the person opposite you, there's the objective.

Lasker: I was almost certain he'd abandon the match at this point.

Capablanca: Me too. Me too! But instead he pushed his Pawn to a4.

Lasker: But why down the sides? Why is he letting you have the centre again?

Capablanca: Exactly, why?

Alekhine: I wasn't fighting on the chessboard.

Capablanca: And that's where the match was adjourned. After the sixty-second move.

Lasker: And here we are. With one night to work out how to win. What move has he put in that envelope?

Alekhine: I was fighting against my opponent, against my enemy, against him.

Capablanca: When he sealed the move in the envelope, he looked at me for a moment. He's convinced he's going to win. But why? Why? To me, it looks like my position's better, at worst it's a draw. What has he seen that I can't see? What? Help me, Lasker.

Lasker: I'll be you and you be him. Grünfeld and Reti reckon he's put f4 in the envelope.

Lasker makes a move, Capablanca responds. They make a few moves, but then Capablanca declares:

Capablanca: No, if he plays f4, I win. That can't be the move in the envelope.

Lasker: Why?

Capablanca: Grünfeld, Reti... *(He moves the pieces)* f4, Bishop g5, I win.

They put the pieces back in the positions they were in when the match was suspended and try another variation.

Lasker: Let's try again. I think Rook d6.

From now on they move the pieces, study each variation, and return to the starting position once they've understood that it's not the correct solution.

Alekhine: I was fighting against your power.

Capablanca: No, I win this way too! Again!

Alekhine: Against your feelings.

Capablanca: This way too! Again!

Alekhine: Against your ego.

Lasker: Zugzwang!

Capablanca: Yes.

Lasker: His Rook can't move. This is the right path, I can feel it!

Alekhine: And then last of all...

Lasker: Done!

Capablanca: *(Realising, suddenly, what's lying in wait)* No!

Lasker: What?

Alekhine: Last, but not least...

Lasker: What?

Alekhine: ...against your vanity.

Lasker: What?!

Capablanca: The side columns!

Alekhine: My Pawn goes to a5. Then a4, a3, a2. And the one on column h, he's marching forwards as well. All of them ready to become queens. My Pawns, preparing to launch a counterattack on both flanks against your pieces sitting heavy in the centre. I strung up a thread, the finest of threads...

Capablanca: The side columns!

Alekhine: ...and you couldn't resist. You just had to try and walk on it.

It is now the following morning. It's time to resume play. As the lights go down on Capablanca and Lasker, Alekhine sits at the chessboard. Rueb enters. He opens the envelope, does Alekhine's move and presses the button to start timing Capablanca, who still hasn't appeared.

Alekhine: Tic... tac... tic... tac... tic...tac...

But Capablanca doesn't arrive. In his place comes an errand boy, who hands Rueb an envelope with a letter inside. Rueb opens it and reads it. He places the letter back in the envelope and passes it to Alekhine, who reads it out loud:

Alekhine: I'm abandoning the game. I wish you every success as World Champion.
Signed: José Raúl Capablanca.

Scene 26

New York, the next day.

The elderly chess player, alone, reads the paper, with the match between Capablanca and Alekhine laid out on the chessboard in front of him.

Elderly chess player: It seemed impossible. But yes, dear Capablanca, you let yourself get plucked like a chicken. Like a chicken.

Scene 27

Paris, New York, Berlin, summer and autumn 1929.

Paris, a few days later: Alekhine makes a toast (he will continue to drink throughout the entire scene).

Alekhine: Paris, I thank you for offering me exile! From now on, you will be my home, and France my homeland. May the myth of the Bolsheviks' invincibility be shattered to pieces, just like the invincible Capablanca was.

New York: Capablanca sends a letter to Alexander Rueb and forwards a copy to Alekhine, for his information.

Capablanca: New York, 30th June, 1929. To Alexander Rueb, president of the World Chess Federation, and, for his information, to Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine, new World Chess Champion. Dear President Rueb, I would like to inform you of my obvious intention to request an immediate rematch with Mr Alekhine. I believe, however, that playing an unlimited number of games is counterproductive in a challenge worthy of the name. Given the large number of draws during our recent match, a full twenty-five draws in thirty-four matches, it is clearly necessary that we limit the number of matches to make the challenge more exciting. I propose, therefore, that we change the rules, declaring the winner to be the first player to win six matches or whichever player is in the lead after a maximum of sixteen matches. In the event of a draw, the defending champion will retain the title. With my best regards, José Raúl Capablanca.

Paris: Alekhine (who is drinking more and more) replies immediately:

Alekhine: Paris, 18th July, 1929. To Alexander Rueb, president of the World Chess Federation, and, for his information, to José Raúl Capablanca. President Rueb! It surprises me that, having lost the title so definitively, Mr Capablanca should now wish to repudiate the conditions that he himself imposed, in London, upon all his future opponents. He suggests limiting the number of matches to sixteen, referring to the "experience" he gained during our recent match. Although I easily could have won at any moment during that last challenge, I do not think that I, let alone the whole chess world, would be satisfied with a win of this type. Does Capablanca truly think that I will accept conditions for a rematch that reduce chess to a game of chance, like gambling at a roulette table? Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine, World Chess Champion.

Alekhine has also written to Lasker to invite him to propose a challenge match, but Lasker replies:

Lasker: Berlin, 2nd August, 1929. Alekhine, I received your letter of 18th July, in which you invite me to challenge you for the title of World Chess Champion. Thank you, but no. If Capablanca had won the challenge, I may well have agreed to fight him for it. Maybe. But to play against you for the title is something I just couldn't bring myself to do. Thank you, but no thank you.

Alekhine: Paris, 16th August, 1929. President Rueb. In the light of Lasker's cowardly refusal, I would like to inform you that a challenge from Bogoljubov interests me much more than a rematch with Capablanca. Bogoljubov is a far more dangerous opponent. He dominates a whole range of openings with absolute mastery and brings an exceptional sense of audacity to his game. Against him, I would even accept to play for five thousand dollars. Against Capablanca, only for ten thousand.

Capablanca: New York, 9th September, 1929. You know very well that I would never make the same mistake twice, and would approach a rematch in a completely different way. You know very well that you wouldn't stand a chance.

Alekhine: Paris, 30th September, 1929. I defeated you very clearly by winning six games and I will only accept that somebody is stronger than me if they beat me six times in a match.

Capablanca: New York, 22nd October, 1929. I accept everything. A rematch with the same conditions as London. I've got the ten thousand dollars. Just tell me where and when.

Scene 28

New York, 29th October 1929.

The Capablanca's House. Capablanca is in his study (he was reading his letters from here in the previous scene). Olga comes running in. She's upset.

Olga: José! José! Oh my God! Oh God, oh God, oh God!

Capablanca: Calm down, Olga, calm down! What's happened?

Olga: The radio. On the radio they just said...it's all gone, José! It's all gone.

Capablanca: Calm down, Olga! I don't understand.

Olga: José! The radio... I... us... It's all gone.

Washington Square, at the same time: the elderly chess player is in his usual position; the newsboy comes running on and throws a newspaper onto the chessboard, knocking over a few pieces.

Elderly chess player: Chess, chess, a game of chess, 5 cents to the winner. Chess, chess... What is it?

The newsboy, despairing and out of breath, points to the newspaper.

Newsboy: Everything! Everything up in smoke.

Elderly chess player: *(Starts reading)* New York Times, 29th of October, 1929, special edition. Wall Street Crash! Billions up in smoke. Markets in panic.

Olga: You told me to take care of it and I, I...

Capablanca: You what? You what?

Olga: ...I did what the bank advisor told me. Our savings.

Newsboy: My money. My clients' money. Everything. Everything. Everything!

Capablanca: What do you mean? But why?

Olga: You were so busy with your own things...

Capablanca: And you invested our savings.

Olga: All of them.

Scene 29

Alekhine's house, Paris, 1st November, 1929.

Alekhine replies to a telegram from Capablanca. He's drinking.

Alekhine: “Received your telegram. Stop. Sorry to hear of your misfortune. Stop. But the purse is still ten thousand dollars, just as you wished it to be. Stop. Ten thousand. Stop. In gold, given that the dollar is no longer worth what it was. Stop.”

Scene 30

Washington Square Park, New York, spring 1930.

The elderly chess player is sitting at his table, calling out to passers-by, inviting them to play (but nobody stops). Next to him, subdued, is the newsboy. The months of poverty and homelessness have taken their toll.

Elderly chess player: We all live on a chessboard of nights and days, where someone with men for pieces plays: hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays, and one by one back in the empty box lays. *(To the passers-by)* A game of chess, sir? No? And you, sir? You can play White. Five cents to the winner. Whadda you say? Just to spice things up a little? Two cents? Just two cents? And you, sir? One cent? One cent, that's all? A game of chess for one cent. Come on, ladies and gents, roll up!

None of the passers-by stop. One of them drops a newspaper, which the newsboy snatches up straight away. He reads the headline and bursts out laughing: a laugh of amusement at first, which rapidly becomes more and more hysterical.

Elderly chess player: What is it, boy? Make me laugh too.

The newsboy tries to respond to the elderly chess player, but he's laughing so much he can hardly breathe. He shows the headline to the elderly chess player, who reads:

Elderly chess player: President Hoover declares "Prosperity is just around the corner. The crisis will be over in the next sixty days." Oh, who does he think he's kidding?

Newsboy: *(Finally managing to speak, although still with some difficulty)* And look below. Steel shares are at twenty-two. I was trading them two months ago at over two hundred and fifty! Steel down at twenty-two is the end of the world! Prosperity's round the corner?! Prosperity's round the corner?! I'll tell you what's round the corner, Hoover: the bread line, that's what!

Scene 31

*The Capablancas' House, at the same time,
and then in Washington Square Park, New York, a short while later.*

Capablanca is sitting at the chessboard, but he's not analysing a match or coming up with a new variation: with a paper and pencil, he is adding up all his possessions.

Capablanca: One thousand six hundred and twelve. The jewellery! How much for the jewellery? Seventy-five, maybe a hundred, not more. It's not enough. It's not enough.

Olga: *(Appearing at the study door)* José? Dinner's ready, José.

But Capablanca doesn't even look up.

Capablanca: Not even including the house. I need to play tournaments again, and win them. And exhibition games and simultaneous displays, they pay better. More, even more.

Olga: José?

No response from Capablanca. Olga, gently closes the door behind her.

Washington Square Park: the elderly chess player at his table.

Elderly chess player: Chess, chess, a game of chess, one cent! One cent! Chess, chess...

Scene 32

Amsterdam, 1935.

A 3-minute Blitz Tournament is underway, organised by Lasker: there are players at each table, making their moves quickly and agitatedly. At the end of each match, they leap up, change places and start playing another game. The matches continue in the background throughout the scene (it's as if Alekhine and Lasker, and Capablanca who will join the scene later, have shut themselves off in a glass-walled office, so as not to disturb play.)

Relations between the two ex-friends are now so completely beyond repair that Alekhine refuses to participate in tournaments with Capablanca (he even puts pressure on the organisers, forcing them not to invite Capablanca, or not to allow him to take part). Unbeknownst to Alekhine and Capablanca, Lasker has planned a match between the two of them during this tournament, but not even his intervention will help heal the rift.

Alekhine: *(To Lasker)* I refuse! I refuse to play if he's here!

Lasker: Calm down, Alekhine! Calm down. You promised.

Alekhine: I didn't promise a damn thing.

Lasker: This is the first blitz tournament I've organised and I decided to invite the two strongest players in the world. Don't make a fool of yourself.

Alekhine: I demand respect!

Lasker: You must have known he'd be here.

Alekhine: I demand respect!

Lasker: Of course. Of course. Who here doesn't respect you? *(Gesturing to the players)* Look at them, they're all beside themselves with excitement at the thought of playing the World Champion.

Alekhine responds with a little grunt of approval and satisfaction, and looks at the players. He's almost convinced.

Lasker: All of them.

Alekhine: All of them?

Lasker: All of them.

Alekhine: Even him?

Lasker: Even Capa, of course. He'll be delighted to hear that you're taking part as well.

Alekhine: Why, does he not know yet?

Lasker: I wanted to tell him in person. He'll be here any minute.

Alekhine: I refuse to take part in any tournament he's playing in, I've made that very clear.

Lasker: Alekhine, be reasonable.

Alekhine: Why should I?

Lasker: Because it's Capablanca. Capa. José Raul.

Alekhine: And I'm Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine. So what?

Lasker: You can't pretend that he's just any old opponent. Not so long ago...

Alekhine: Not so long ago. Not so long ago...

Lasker: Is it a question of money? Because if that's the case I'll...

Alekhine: No, it's not a question of money! Typical Jew!

Lasker: What's that got to do with anything? You do pick your moments.

Alekhine: Not so long ago, he says. Not so long ago! Not so long ago, I was his faithful little puppy, following him around everywhere, desperate just to be stroked by him, to lick his hand when he let it hang by the side of his chair. His throne. But now it's me on the throne. Now it's his turn to scabble around for crumbs under the master's table.

Capablanca: *(Entering)* Sorry I'm late, Lasker – the taxi driver was a chess player! And he wanted some advice on the Dutch Defence. How banal is that? To be playing the Dutch Defence in Amsterdam... Alekhine!

Alekhine: *(With a nod of the head, as if reaching his hand to his hat as a form of greeting)* Capablanca.

Capablanca: Did you know about this, Lasker? Did you know that Mr Alekhine would be here too?!

Lasker: *(To Capablanca)* This is the first blitz tournament I've organised and I decided to invite the two strongest players in the world. Don't make fools of yourselves.

Capablanca: You know damn well I don't want to play against Mr Alekhine unless it's for the title!

Lasker: Capa, be reasonable, please.

Alekhine: And everyone knows damn well that I refuse to take part in a tournament if Mr Capablanca is going to be there.

Lasker: Alekhine...

Capablanca: You admit it! He admits it! He's admitted it! Nottingham, San Sebastian, Hastings, Rio de Janeiro, I was sent initial invites for all those tournaments and then, for some strange reason, I never heard a thing from them again. I knew you were behind it!

Lasker: Stop it, please.

Alekhine: Alekhine will not play if Capablanca is playing too.

Capablanca: You've managed to stop me raising those ten thousand dollars, haven't you? You've managed very well.

Alekhine: Nobody's stopping you from taking part in minor tournaments, or from doing exhibition games and simultaneous displays. You can earn a fair bit from those as well.

Capablanca: I am Capablanca!

Alekhine: And I am World Champion!

Capablanca: Only because you've done everything you can to avoid a rematch. I'm still the greatest. I have the right to a rematch!

Alekhine: I wrote to you, I told you in person, and then I wrote to you again. Wherever you want, whenever you want, with the same conditions as London – the conditions you insisted upon yourself. All you need to do is put ten thousand dollars on the table, in gold.

Capablanca: How? How? Tell me how! You know damn well it's impossible to raise that amount in this economic climate!

Alekhine: It seemed impossible in 1921 as well, didn't it Lasker?

Lasker: Well, I...

Alekhine: And even in the run up to 1929! And yet...

Capablanca: Nobody's prepared to invest that kind of money nowadays.

Alekhine: Not my problem. All you need to do is track down someone crazy enough to back you against me. Good luck with your search.

Capablanca: Coward! You're just a coward!

Alekhine: You're wrong. I am, quite simply, World Champion. It's my turn, Capablanca. It's my turn to reign supreme. You should just step aside. It happens to everyone, once

they've lost their spark, once their game has become outdated and stale. Isn't that true, Lasker? Remember 1921? You've been through this as well...

Lasker: This isn't fair, Alekhine.

Capablanca: I... Olga...

Alekhine: *(Leaving)* You were a great player, Lasker, such a great player. I expected more of you as a tournament organiser. Call me when you've resolved the situation and I'll be delighted to come back and win your tournament.

Capablanca throws himself at Alekhine but Lasker holds him back.

Capablanca: You dirty, ungrateful little coward! I'm going to...

Lasker: No, Capa, no. It's not worth it. You'd be disqualified forever.

Scene 33

Alekhine's House, Paris, early October 1939.

Olga plucks up the courage to knock on Alekhine's door. Alekhine answers, quite drunk.

Alekhine: Olga!

Olga: Mr Alekhine.

Alekhine: What do you want? Capablanca?

Olga: I... he...

Alekhine: He hasn't even got the balls to come in person – he just sends along his wife...

Olga: He doesn't know I'm here. He's in Kent, at the Margate tournament.

Alekhine: Oh, yes, second-rate tournament. He'll win it hands down but the pickings are slim.

Olga: I told him I was going to visit an old aunt who lives here in Paris.

Alekhine: And have you seen her?

Olga: Who?

Alekhine: Your dear old aunt.

Olga: She died years ago.

Alekhine: *(Reproachfully, as if she were a child)* Ah, ah, ah, little wifey's lying to her husband!

Olga: You're drunk.

Alekhine: And you're pathetic. You've come here to beg for him.

Olga: I've come...

Alekhine: He sends his wife, instead of...

Olga: ...I've come to remind you that you owe it to *him*: the fact that you're champion. To the person who taught you like a brother.

Alekhine: Don't make me laugh! I don't owe anything to anyone, least of all him! I've had to sweat for every victory. I've invented a new way of playing – that's the reason I'm still champion. I'm the present and the future. Capablanca's a thing of the past.

Olga: What a horrible man you've become.

Alekhine: Do you mind closing the door behind you on your way out?

Olga goes to leave, but turns back.

Olga: It was *me* who decided to come and talk to you. By myself, *I* made that decision. José doesn't know anything about it, in fact, if he knew... he still hasn't really forgiven me for losing all our savings... And if we'd still got those, he'd have made you eat your arrogant words by now, that's for sure. Everything was in place. But I was too trusting and we lost it all and now... let him, or rather, let me have a rematch. Do it for me, if not for him. We've been waiting for over ten years.

Alekhine: *(Clapping and laughing)* No, no, you're very good. Really excellent. Well done. You should be an actress. But you don't move me.

Olga: I'm begging you. I'm begging you, Alexander Alexandrovich. Do you want to see me on my knees? Here. *(She kneels down)* I'm on my knees in front of you. I've got to go back to England tonight, but you could play as soon as next week, even. I'll give you everything we have and you can keep it all – all of it, no matter who wins.

Alekhine: Ten thousand dollars, in gold.

Olga: We don't have it! Please. It's dangerous for us to spend too long in Europe with a new war on its way. Now Germany's invaded Poland, they say fighting is going to break out soon. *(In Russian)* Ja prošu vas, Aleksandr Aleksandrovič. Ja prošu vas. [I beg you, Alexander Alexandrovich, I beg you.]

Alekhine: A war on its way?! Freedom is on its way! I hope Hitler and his followers don't limit themselves to Poland, I hope they march on east and wipe out the Soviets! Blessed be the Third Reich if it delivers us from Stalin and his henchmen!

Olga stands, calmly rearranges her dress, slaps Alekhine in the face and leaves.

Scene 34

The deck of the ship between London and New York, a few days later.

Capablanca is looking out at the ocean. He stands motionless, in spite of the music that's wafting up from the ship's ballroom. Olga comes up behind him, dancing a little.

Olga: José? José? Have you heard what lovely music they're playing?

Capablanca: *(He responds, but really he's still lost in thought)* Mmm-hmm.

Olga: José? *(She strokes his neck and he finally turns around)* José?

Capablanca: Yes?

Olga: Have you heard what lovely music they're playing?

Capablanca: I hadn't noticed.

Olga: Have you thought about it?

Capablanca: About what?

Olga: My suggestion. That you go and speak to my friend Fanny's husband. We could send him a telegram right now and organise...

Capablanca: Of course I've thought about it, and I haven't changed my mind.

Olga: Oh, come on, José, why not? Arnstein could really help you, help us, to get some money together. He's a big entrepreneur – he's certainly not short of money for...

Capablanca: I don't care if he's as rich as the King of Peru, I will not be associated with... with a swindler, a common cheat who's even done time in Sing Sing.

Olga: He got caught up in something bigger than himself, that's all. Fanny assured me...

Capablanca: I was thinking...

Olga: Yes? Tell me, what were you thinking?

Capablanca: You never told me how your aunt is.

Olga: Aunt? What aunt?

Capablanca: The one you went to visit in Paris last week. Which other aunt would I be talking about? You said she's the only relative you've got left in Europe.

Olga: Oh, yes, sorry, what an idiot! What's wrong with me? I'd completely forgotten. No, yes, she's well, yes yes, really well. Considering her age and everything. You know, physical problems and all... but us Georgians are a stubborn old bunch. Stubborn even in the face of death.

Capablanca looks at her, not really knowing what to say, and then turns back to look at the sea. As the music gets a little louder (we're in the middle of George and Ira Gershwin's "Love is here to stay"), Olga hugs him from behind and rocks him gently to persuade him to dance.

Olga: Listen! It's that new Gershwin song: "Love is here to stay". It's wonderful. Dance with me.

Capablanca: Not now.

Olga: Dance with me, please. *(Trying to persuade him, Olga carries on dancing on the spot and sings along under her breath)* La la la la, our love is here to stay...please. Please.

Capablanca finally turns and puts his arms around her to dance...

Olga: Hold me, hold me tight.

...but after a few slow steps, the music finishes.

Olga: What? But, why?

Capablanca: *(Looking at his watch)* It's midnight. Time to go to bed.

Olga: No! It can't be! One more! I'm going to ask the orchestra to play one more.

Olga runs off.

Scene 35

Washington Square Park, New York, 8th March, 1942.

The elderly chess player is stationed at his chessboard. He's playing on his own, moving a piece from one side of the board, then turning it round and moving a piece from the other, and so on and so forth. A little while later, the newsboy arrives. Many years on, he's finally found a job in an arms factory. He's dressed in workers' overalls and is carrying a stack of old issues of the New York Times under his arm.

Newsboy: Evening, old man. I brought you a few old newspapers to keep you warm.

Elderly chess player: Wait, wait. This bastard's gone and lured me into a complicated and dangerous position.

Newsboy: What do you mean? Isn't it you who...?

Elderly chess player: Ah, yes, there we are, that's the best countermove. *(To his imaginary opponent)* See how you get on with that, buddy! Ha! You're screwed. *(To the newsboy)* You see, in chess, it's always better to sacrifice your opponent's pieces.

Newsboy: Where shall I put these? *(He puts them down next to the elderly chess player's chair)* Is here ok? I'm lucky I've still got friends at the New York Times. You know, they were going to just throw those away. Cos no-one cares about old news, right?

Elderly chess player: Read me the headlines, would you? You know I like it.

The newsboy starts reading the headlines and the elderly chess player slowly closes his eyes and lowers his head.

Newsboy: Let's kick off with today's: "8th of March, 1942. Nazi advance continues. Germans soon to reach Stalingrad." Then, let's see... *(He takes another paper)* Ah, this is a collector's issue! "7th of December, 1941. Surprise attack on Pearl Harbour, Hawaii. The United States declares war on Japan."

Elderly chess player: I'm tired. Really beat, you know? But don't let that stop you – carry on, carry on. Don't worry.

Newsboy: As you wish. "6th of January, 1942. State of the Union Address by President Franklyn Delano Roosevelt."

Elderly chess player: *(Giving a nod of approval)* Good old Franky.

Newsboy: Such a great speech. *(Reading from Roosevelt's speech)* "What we're fighting is a conflict between good and evil. Each year we shall produce 45,000 tanks, 60,000 planes, 20,000 pieces of artillery, and 6,000,000 tons of shipping. Let's make this happen!" We sure will, Mr President! For starters, the destroyer USS Jenkins DD-447

will be ready for launch in a few months' time. And I'll have tightened a bunch of those bolts with my own two hands. *(To the elderly chess player)* Maybe you could come along too, the ceremony'll be a lot of fun, you know? And then we could... *(He realises the old man's eyes are now completely closed.)* We could... I'll leave these here for you, ok? Don't get too cold, will ya? Use them, I'll bring you some more tomorrow. *(He puts the newspapers back down and leaves a dollar on the chessboard, underneath one of the pieces)* And here's a dollar. It's not much, I know, but it's better than nothing and it's all I have... the shifts at the factory are pretty tough and, in a way, it doesn't sit too well with me to be helping build warships, but whadda you want me to say? It's a job and it means I can eat and sleep, so I'm not complaining. Not too much, anyway. I'm gonna get going now, ok? I'll be back tomorrow.

Scene 36

*Central Park, New York, 8th March 1942, at the same time,
and Alekhine's House, Paris, a few months before.*

Capablanca is waiting for Nicky Arnstein, who has given him a rendezvous in Central Park. After years of persuasion from Olga, Capablanca has finally decided to follow her advice and try asking Arnstein for money, also because he hasn't been able to secure any other funding, despite exploring every possible avenue.

Capablanca: *(To himself)* I... I... need... I, this match, I've got to play it... I've got to play it... I've got to! Seven thousand five hundred. Seven thousand five hundred. Seven thousand five hundred.

Nicky Arnstein enters, walking through the park with his valet. Arnstein is carrying a bag. Every so often he fishes peanuts out of it and throws them on the floor for the squirrels.

Arnstein: Here he is, the great champion!

Capablanca walks towards Arnstein, changes his mind and goes to turn back, but then stops himself and presses on.

Capablanca: Mr Arnstein? Julius W. Arnstein? I'm José Raúl Capablanca.

The valet approaches him menacingly to make sure everything's as it should be (and that Capablanca doesn't pose any danger to his employer) but Arnstein holds him back and greets Capablanca warmly: he grabs his hand and shakes it firmly, not letting it go for a good while, as he engulfs Capablanca in a torrent of words (Arnstein has built his whole career as a businessman and con artist on his gift of the gab).

Arnstein: Nicky, just Nicky, dear, dear Capa. *(To his valet, with a nod)* Everything's fine. *(Back to Capablanca)* Such a pleasure, such a pleasure. It's ok if I call you Capa, right? Fanny's told me so much about you. She and Olga are such good friends. How is she, dear Olga? *(Capablanca spreads his arms and is about to respond "I don't know" but Arnstein is a river that's bursting its banks)* Thank you for agreeing to meet us here. I love taking a stroll in Central Park, it stretches my mind as well as my legs. Especially this time of year, when it's cold. Spring's just around the corner though, you can feel it in the air, and the squirrels need food. I'm helping them find some. Can I get you something? Wanna peanut? No, I'll tell you what. You're Cuban, right, Capa? So, in your honour, how about a Habana? Oh, the cigar, now there's an invention! No really, 'cos it's more than a discovery, you know, leaving those green tobacco leaves to dry up and ferment and then smoking them? That's a bona fide invention. A stroke of genius. And what a thrill – an almost sensual pleasure – to think that those leaves have been manipulated by expert female hands, that they've rolled them on their thighs... you can almost smell it, can't ya? *(To his valet)* Yes, two Habanas and another bag of nuts. There's tons of squirrels here. *(His valet bows and heads off to buy the cigars and peanuts, still*

without uttering a word, and so Arnstein adds) That's my valet. He's mute. You know, that's the best piece of advice my old friend Arnold Rothstein ever gave me. And he didn't hold back on giving advice, let me tell ya, king of gamblers, was Arnold, great man of honour. He had a real passion for anything to do with Lady Luck, anything at all, dice, carts, sport, races, and he always had the name of a dead-cert horse in his back pocket. But the best piece of advice he ever gave me, truly the very best, was, "Nicky, you listen to me: your valet? Get yourself a mute. Understood?" Now there's a fine mind, Capa, there's a man of integrity.

Capablanca: *(Finally manages to speak)* Seven thousand five hundred! Seven thousand five hundred dollars. I need seven thousand five hundred dollars.

Arnstein: *(Suddenly becoming serious: if we're talking money...)* I understand. I understand.

His valet arrives with the cigars and peanuts. He hands them to Arnstein, who immediately offers a cigar to Capablanca. Capablanca refuses.

Capablanca: No, thank you, I don't...

Arnstein: As you wish. *(He puts the cigars in his pocket and opens the bag of peanuts, scattering them as they walk, with his valet following a few steps behind)* Walk with me. Let's talk business.

Capablanca: *(Goes to leave)* No, thank you, I have to go.

Arnstein: Please, stay. Your wife's been so insistent. And I promised mine that I'd hear you out. We sure don't want to let the ladies down, now do we? Seven thousand five hundred, right?

Capablanca: In gold. I've managed to put aside two thousand five hundred, so I still need at least another seven thousand five hundred.

Arnstein: That's a lot of money.

Capablanca: But? What? You handle tens of thousands of dollars every day, they say maybe even hundreds.

Arnstein: You know, you shouldn't believe everything you hear.

Capablanca: But the papers...

Arnstein: Exactly, the papers. And you need this money for...

Capablanca: For the World Championship Challenge.

Arnstein: Oh, that's right, checkers.

Capablanca: No, chess.

Arnstein: Checkers... chess...

Capablanca: If you need guarantees I...

Arnstein: Capablanca. Forgive me, but let's say it like it is. If you really had guarantees, you'd have knocked on your bank manager's door, not mine.

Capablanca: I can guarantee you that I will win back my title and I will pay you back every cent, with interest.

Arnstein: Don't insult me, Capablanca.

Capablanca: No, I...

Arnstein: I'm not a loan shark. I'm not interested in interest. I'm an investor, what interests me is return on investment.

Capablanca: But when it comes down to it, are they not the same thing?

Arnstein: No. They're not.

Capablanca: But...

Arnstein: But let's just assume that I do want to trust you, that I do want to invest this sum of money you're asking me for. When will this challenge be taking place?

Capablanca: Alekhine...

Arnstein: Who is...?

Capablanca: The World Chess Champion. The one who stole the title from me in 1929.

Arnstein: And he's still champion?

Capablanca: Yes, but only because he's always refused to let me...

Arnstein: Thirteen years have passed since he beat you. That's a long time. What makes you think you'll win this time round?

Capablanca: I am Capablanca!

Arnstein: *(Doubtful, but also with a hint of admiration)* Hmmm... *(To his valet)* He's Capablanca.... And this Al...

Capablanca: Alekhine.

Arnstein: Is he a strong player?

Capablanca: Yes. Very strong.

Arnstein: And he'll accept the challenge?

Capablanca: Yes, he's said that if I bring him ten thousand dollars in gold we can play the match wherever and whenever I want.

Arnstein: Here in New York. This certainly isn't the moment to start crossing the Atlantic, with all those Nazi submarines lurking around.

Capablanca: The thing is Alekhine's found a safe haven in Portugal. I'm afraid I don't think he can...

Arnstein: And you want to travel to him in Portugal?

Capablanca: Yes. If he can't come here, then I will go...

Arnstein: And take my money along with you?

Capablanca: I can guarantee you that...

Arnstein: Doesn't sound like a good deal to me.

Capablanca: Of course it is!

Arnstein: Forgive the bluntness, Capablanca, but I think I'll be the judge of that.

Capablanca: You are Jewish, aren't you? I thought business for you guys was...

Arnstein: What's that got to do with anything?! You're not one of them are you? One of the ones who sees people differently.

Capablanca: No, Alekhine is! He's the Nazi! He published an article called "Jewish and Aryan Chess" where he looks down on Jews like you! Like Lasker.

Arnstein: Who's Lasker?

The scene expands to take in Alekhine's house in Paris, a few months earlier. A completely drunk Alekhine recites part of his article.

Alekhine: Emanuel Lasker and his predecessor, Wilhelm Steinitz, were Jews who tried to convince the world that they were great strategists or discoverers of new ideas, when really they were just a pair of skilful tacticians who never expressed a single original idea about chess.

Capablanca: Poor Lasker. He hadn't even been dead a month.

Alekhine: Aryan chess is aggressive, devoted to the idea that attacking is something optimistic, something creative. The Jewish player, however, is characterised by a lack of personality and creativity, and by a complete inability to take initiative; he adheres to two mediocre aims: material gain at all costs, and opportunism pushed to the highest point, a cowardly approach that seeks to eliminate even the shadow of potential danger and which means that victory can only be achieved through a mistake on one's opponent's part. Yes, the Jews are extremely well endowed with the ability to exploit the ideas of chess, but no real chess artist of Jewish origin has ever existed, nor ever will exist, and so they are, and always will be, an inferior race, that will never shine with the splendour and courage of the Aryan race.

We return to the scene in New York.

Arnstein: There's even Aryan chess now, is there?

Capablanca: Is that not enough to convince you?

Arnstein: Huh! Typical Nazi ramblings. No, I'm sorry, it's just not a good deal.

Capablanca: But you're the one who rigged the finals of the World Series in 1919! You went to Sing Sing for it!

Arnstein: That was old Arnold, Arnold Rothstein. I've never had anything to do with baseball.

Capablanca: But ...?

Arnstein: I'm not a crook, I'm a businessman. An entrepreneur, an impresario.

Capablanca: An impresario who wound up in prison.

Arnstein: A misunderstanding.

Capablanca: A misunderstanding?!

Arnstein: Yes.

Capablanca: They sent you to Sing Sing over a misunderstanding?!

Arnstein: A misunderstanding. *(He stops walking and signals to his valet, who approaches, clearly intending to let Capablanca know that it's time to leave)* And now, if you'll forgive me, Capablanca, I'd better be off. It's gotten late.

Capablanca: But I...

Arnstein: We really must get going.

Capablanca: *(Resigned)* Yes.

Capablanca sets off, and as he's leaving:

Arnstein: Let's continue our chat another time, eh?

Capablanca exits with his back turned, in silence, while Arnstein scatters a few more peanuts for the squirrels.

Scene 37

Park Hotel, Estoril, Portugal, 9th March 1942, following on from Scene 2.

Alekhine's room in the Park Hotel. Alekhine is still seated at the chessboard, putting the pieces back in their starting positions, with some difficulty, given how drunk he is. He hums the tune of his favourite song from childhood: the Russian folk song "The Red Sarafan" (original title: "Krasnyi Sarafan") by Nikolaj Grigorjewitsch Ziganof and Alexander Warlamoff. The waiter knocks on the door. Alekhine doesn't respond. The Waiter knocks again, and then again. Timidly, he opens the door and enters: he is carrying a tray with another bottle of vodka on it.

Waiter: *(Entering)* May I come in? Mr Alekhine, may I come in?

Alekhine: Capablanca. In your honour, and to your everlasting memory, I'm going to play one of our old games. And this time, I'll even let you win.

Waiter: Another bottle, as requested.

As Alekhine starts playing, the waiter puts down the bottle and tidies the room. The supper hasn't been touched.

Alekhine: A-ha! Nice move, Capa. But my reply is even nicer.

Waiter: The telegram has been sent, as requested.

Alekhine: *(He starts singing the song again, but with the words this time, in Russian)*

“Ne shej ty mne, matushka,
krasnyj sarafan,
ne vkhodi, rodimaja,
popustu v iz"jan.
Rano moju kosyn'ku
na dve raspletat',
prikazhi mne rusuju
v lentu ubirat'!
Pushchaj ne pokrytaja
shelkovej fatoj
ochi molodeckije
Radujet soboj!
To li zhit'je devich'je,
chtob jegu menjat',
toropit'sja zamuzhem
okhat' da vzdykhat'?
Zolotaja voljushka
mne milej vsego.
Ne khochu ja s voljushkoj
v svete nichego!”
“Ditja mojo, ditjatko,

dochka milaja!
Golovka pobednaja,
nerazumnaja!
Ne vek tebe ptashechkoy
zvonko raspevat',
legkokryloj babochkoy
po cvetam porkhat'.
Zableknut na shchechen'kakh
makovy cvety,
priskuchat zabavushki,
stoskujesh'sja ty!
A my i pri starosti
sebjja veselim,
mladost' vspominajuchi,
na detej gljadim!
I ja molodeshen'ka
byla takova,
i mne te zhe v devushkakh
pelisja slova.”

Waiter: But there's no reply.

Alekhine sings more and more loudly, as he continues to play, the moves getting faster and more frenetic.

Waiter: Forgive me for allowing myself, sir, but you haven't eaten a bite and this is your third bottle and... Sir?

Alekhine: *(As he continues to play, frenetically)* Listen! Listen to this song, boy! *(He sings the first two verses again)* Such wise words. My mother, Anisya Ivanovna Alekhina, would always sing me to sleep with them: “On the gay red sarafan, dear Mother, work no more. Lay the fruitless task aside, that time long since was o'er. Daughter, dearest Daughter, come sit thee down by me; do not hope my darling, that youth will stay with thee. Let me see you dance, dear, in this red sarafan: make your dear mama feel young, as only you can.”

Waiter: Beautiful words, sir.

Alekhine starts singing again in Russian, until he reaches the end of the song and the end of the match.

Alekhine: Hah! Actually, it's *me* who's won!

Just as he speaks these words, Alekhine suddenly grabs his chest, feeling a pain so sharp it is almost sweet, and instantly collapses face-forward onto the chessboard.

Scene 38

Epilogue. New York, 1918.

The elderly chess player is sitting at his table in the park, just as we left him in scene 35. He opens his eyes.

Elderly chess player: Alas! How much pain could be avoided in life, if only we could take back the bad moves and play them again!

Capablanca is sitting at a chessboard too (in some other part of New York), setting up the pieces. A young, intimidated Alekhine, slowly approaches Capablanca, who is only a few years his senior. Alekhine only speaks Russian, so they communicate above all through gesture, until they land upon chess, the common language.

Alekhine: Prostite, vy čempion? [Forgive me for disturbing you, are you the champion?]

Capablanca: I'm sorry, I can't understand you.

Alekhine: Vy Capablanca? [Are you Capablanca?]

Capablanca: Yes, I'm José Raúl Capablanca.

Alekhine: *(Taking Capablanca's hand and shaking it vigorously)* Velikij čempion Capablanka! Eto ogromnaja cest' dlja menja! [The great champion, Capablanca! It's a great honour to meet you!]

Capablanca: *(Amused by this euphoric handshake)* Woah! Steady on. It's a pleasure for me too.

Alekhine: Ja Aleksandr Aleksandrovič Alëchin. [I'm Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine.]

Capablanca: *(Pronouncing it wrong)* Alekhine?

Alekhine: Alëchin. Aleksandr Aleksandrovič. Aleksandr. [Alekhine. Alexander Alexandrovich. Alexander.]

Capablanca: *(Gesturing to the chessboard in front of him)* Do you play chess, Alexander?

Alekhine: Ohotno! Počtu za čest'. [Certainly! It's an honour.] Capablanca. Počtu za čest'. For me, great honour.

Alekhine sits at the board. Capablanca picks up a white and a black Pawn and hides one in each hand, then stretches his arms up in front of him. Alekhine chooses a hand and Capablanca uncurls his fist: Alekhine will play Black.

Capablanca: You're Black...

Alekhine: Ciorni.

Capablanca: Ciorni?

Alekhine: Ciorni.

Capablanca: So that makes me...

Alekhine: Bieli.

Capablanca: Bieli?

Alekhine: Bieli.

Capablanca: Bieli. White.

Alekhine: White.

They begin to play, quickly, each commenting on the moves in their own language, enjoying themselves, smiling and laughing.

Elderly chess player: Should a King in the destruction

Fall within the foeman's power,
He is never granted mercy,
Neither refuge nor deliv'rance,
Nor a flight to refuge-city.
Judged by foes, and lacking rescue,
Though not slain he is checkmated.
Hosts about him all are slaughtered,
Giving life for his deliverance.
Quenched and vanished is their glory,
For they see their lord is smitten;
Yet they fight again this battle,
For in death is resurrection.

The match continues, as the lights slowly fade to black.