

It's Your Move

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Old Man White was a checker player. He was a longshoreman, too, but he only made his living at that. Checker playing was his life. I never saw anybody take the game like he took it. Hour after hour, when there was nobody for him to play with, he'd sit at a table in the Seaman's Institute and study the board and practice his moves. He knew every possible layout there could be. There was this little book he carried, and he would arrange the checkers on the board, and then move through each game with an eye for every detail and chance. If anybody ever knew the checkerboard, it was him.

He wasn't a big man, but he was keen-eyed, and had a temper like nobody I ever saw. Most of the time he ignored people. Everybody but other checker players. I mean guys that could give him a game. They were few enough, and with the exception of Oriental Slim and MacCready, nobody had ever beat him. They were the best around at the time, but the most they could do with the old man was about one out of ten. But they gave him a game and that was all he wanted. He

scarcely noticed anybody else, and you couldn't get a civil word out of him. As a rule he never opened his face unless it was to talk the game with somebody who knew it.

Then Sleeth came along. He came down from Frisco and began hanging around the Institute talking with the guys who were on the beach. He was a slim, dark fellow with a sallow complexion, quick, black eyes, and he might have been anywhere from thirty to forty-five.

He was a longshoreman, too. That is, he was then. Up in Frisco he had been a deckhand on a tugboat, like me. Before that he had been a lot of things, here and there. Somewhere he had developed a mind for figures, or maybe he had been born with it. You could give him any problem in addition, subtraction, or anything else, and you'd get the answer just like that, right out of his head. At poker he could beat anybody and was one of the best pool shots I ever saw.

We were sitting by the fireplace in the Institute one night when he came in and joined us. A few minutes later, Old Man White showed up wearing his old pea jacket as always.

„Where's MacCready?“ he said.

„He's gone up to L.A., Mr. White,“ the clerk said. „He won't be back for several days.“

„Is that other fellow around? That big fellow with the pockmarked face?“

„Slim? No, he's not. He shipped out this morning for Gray's Harbor. I heard he had some trouble with the police.“

Trouble was right. Slim was slick with the cards, and he got himself in a game with a couple of Greeks. One of the Greeks was a pretty good cheat himself, but Oriental Slim was better and cashing in from the Greek's roll. One word led to another, and the Greek went for a rod. Well, Oriental Slim was the fastest thing with a chiv I ever saw. He cut that Greek, then he took out.

Old Man White turned away, growling something into his mustache. He was a testy old guy, and when he got sore that mustache looked like a porcupine's back.

„What's the matter with that guy?“ Sleeth said. „He acts like he was sore about something?“

„It's checkers,“ I said. „That's Old Man White, the best checker player around here. Mac and Slim are the only two who can even make it interesting, and they're gone. He's sour for a week when he misses a game.“

„Hell, I'll play with him!“

„He won't even listen to you. He won't play nobody unless they got some stuff.“

„We'll see. Maybe I can give him a game.“

Sleeth got up and walked over. The old man had his book out and was arranging his men on the board. He never used regular checkers himself. He used bottle tops, and always carried them in his pocket.

„How about a game?“ Sleeth says.

Old Man White growled something under his breath about not wanting to teach anybody; he didn't even look up. He gets the checkers set up, and pretty soon he starts to move. It seems these guys that play checkers have several different openings they favor, each one of them named. Anyway, when the old man starts to move, Sleeth watches him.

„The Old Fourteenth, huh? You like that? I like the Laird and Lady best.“

Old Man White stops in the middle of a move and looks up, frowning. „You play checkers?“ he said.

„Sure, I just asked you for a game!“

„Sit down, sit down. I'll play you three games.“

Well, it was pitiful. I'm telling you it was slaughter. If the old man hadn't been so proud, everything might have been different, but checkers was his life, his religion; and Sleeth beat him.

It wasn't so much that he beat him; it was the way he beat him. It was like playing with a child. Sleeth beat him five times running, and the old man was fit to be tied. And the madder he got, the worse he played.

Dick said afterward that if Sleeth hadn't talked so much, the old man might have had a chance. You see, Old Man White took plenty of time to study each move, sometimes ten minutes or more. Sleeth just sat there gabbing with us, sitting sideways in the chair, and never looking at the board except to move. He'd talk, talk about women, ships, ports, liquor, fighters, everything. Then, the old man would move and Sleeth would turn, glance at the board, and slide a piece. It seemed like when he looked at the board, he saw all the moves that had been made, and all that could be made. He never seemed to think; he never seemed to pause; he just moved.

Well, it rattled the old man. He was sort of shoved off balance by it. All the time, Sleeth was talking, and sometimes when he moved, it would be right in the middle of a sentence. Half the time, he scarcely looked at the board.

Then, there was a crowd around. Old Man White being beat was enough to draw a crowd, and the gang all liked Sleeth. He was a good guy. Easy with his dough, always having a laugh on somebody or with somebody, and just naturally a right guy. But I felt sorry for the old man. It meant so much to him, and he'd been king bee around the docks so long, and treating everybody with contempt if they weren't good at checkers. If he had even been able to make it tough for Sleeth, it would have been different, but he couldn't even give him a game. His memory for moves seemed to desert him, and the madder he got and the harder he tried, the more hopeless it was.

It went on for days. It got so Sleeth didn't want to play him. He'd avoid him purposely, because the old man was so stirred up about it. Once Old Man White jumped up in the middle of a game and hurled the board clear across the room. Then he stalked out, mad as a wet hen, but just about as helpless as an Armenian peddler with both arms busted.

Then he'd come back. He'd always come back and insist Sleeth play him some more. He followed Sleeth around town, cornering him to play, each time sure he could beat him, but he never could.

We should have seen it coming, for the old man got to acting queer. Checkers was an obsession with him. Now he sometimes wouldn't come around for days, and when he did, he didn't seem anxious to play anymore. Once he played with Oriental Slim, who was back in town, but Slim beat him, too.

That was the finishing touch. It might have been the one game out of ten that Slim usually won, but it hit the old man where he lived. I guess maybe he figured he couldn't play anymore. Without even a word, he got up and went out.

A couple of mornings later, I got a call from Brennan to help load a freighter bound out for the Far East. I'd quit my job on the tug, sick of always going out but never getting any place, and had been longshoring a little and waiting for a ship to China. This looked like a chance to see if they'd be hiring; so I went over to the ship at Terminal Island, and reported to Brennan.

The first person I saw was Sleeth. He was working on the same job. While we were talking, another ferry came over and Old Man White got off. He was running a steam winch for the crew that day, and I saw him glance at Sleeth. It made me nervous to think of those two guys on the same job. In a dangerous business like longshoring—that is, a business where a guy can get smashed up so easy—it looked like trouble.

It was after four in the afternoon before anything happened. We had finished loading the lower hold through No. 4 hatch, and were putting the strong-backs in place so we could cover the 'tween decks hatchway. I was on deck waiting until they got those braces in place before I went down to lay the decking over them. I didn't want to be crawling down a ladder with one of those big steel beams swinging in the hatchway around me. Old Man White was a good hand at a winch, but too many things can happen. We were almost through for the day as we weren't to load the upper hold 'til morning.

A good winch-driver doesn't need signals from the hatch-tender to know where his load is. It may be out of sight down below the main deck, but he can tell by the feel of it and the position of the boom about where it is. But sometimes on those old winches, the steam wouldn't come on even, and once in a while there would be a surge of power that would make them do unaccountable things without a good hand driving. Now Old Man White was a good hand. Nevertheless, I stopped by the hatch coaming and watched.

It happened so quick that there wasn't anything anyone could have done. Things like that always happen quick, and if you move, it is usually by instinct. Maybe the luckiest break Sleeth ever got was he was light on his feet.

The strong-back was out over the hatch, and Old Man White was easing it down carefully. When it settled toward the 'tween decks hatchway, Sleeth caught one end and Hansen the other. It was necessary for a man to stand at each end and guide the strong-back into the notch where it had to fit to support the floor of the upper hold. Right behind Sleeth was a big steel upright, and as Old Man White began to lower away, I got nervous. It always made me nervous to think that a wrong move by the winch-driver, or a wrong signal from the hatch-tender spotting for him, and the man with that post at his back was due to get hurt.

Sleeth caught the end of the strong-back in both hands and it settled gradually, with the old winch puffing along easylike. Just then I happened to glance up, and something made me notice Old Man White's face.

He was as white as death, and I could see the muscles at the corner of his jaw set hard. Then, all of a sudden, that strong-back lunged toward Sleeth.

It all happened so quick, you could scarcely catch a breath. Sleeth must have remembered Old Man White was on that winch, or maybe it was one of those queer hunches. As for me, I know that in the split second when that strong-back lunged toward him, the thought flashed through my mind, „Sleeth. It's your move!“

And he did move, almost like in the checker games. It was as if he had a map of the whole situation in his mind. One moment he was doing one thing and the next...

He leaped sideways and the end of that big steel strong-back hit that stanchion with a crash that you could have heard in Sarawak; then the butt swung around and came within an eyelash of knocking Hansen into the hold, and I just stood there with my eyes on that stanchion thinking how Sleeth would have been mashed into jelly if he hadn't moved like Nijinsky.

The hatch-tender was yelling his head off, and slowly Old Man White took up the tension on the strong-back and swung her into place again. If it had been me, I'd never have touched that thing again, but Sleeth was there, and the strong-back settled into place as pretty as you could wish. Only then could I see that Sleeth's face was white and his hand was shaking.

When he came on deck, he was cool as could be. Old Man White was sitting behind that winch all heaped up like a sack of old clothes. Sleeth looked at him then, grinned a little, and said, sort of offhand, „You nearly had the move on me that time, Mr. White!“

