

PLAYING CHESS WITH GOD

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Playing Chess with God
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PROLOGUE

A hundred and fifty miles northeast of San Francisco, in California's Sierra Nevada foothills, John Sutter's new sawmill was ready for its first test. Water—brought from the American River in a manmade ditch—briefly rotated the huge main wheel then backed up, unable to exit the mill fast enough. The tailrace canal needed to be wider and steeper.

For the rest of the day, workmen dug and blasted the hard, rocky soil. That night, flood gates were opened to wash the channel clean. While inspecting their progress the next morning, Superintendent James Marshall found a shiny metal flake. Compared to a five dollar gold piece, its color was identical.

For the rest of that week Marshall and his men found fragments and finally a nugget big enough to be bitten, hammered, boiled in lye, and melted on hot coals. These tests left no doubt. The perplexing yellow metal was gold. Workers searched the river and found plenty more.

John Sutter feared a gold rush would threaten his fifty-thousand-acre agricultural empire, but it was too late to keep the news secret. First to take advantage were Mormons who had fled persecution and violence in Missouri and Illinois. Men from the Mexican War's Mormon Battalion left Sutter's Mill and his other businesses that employed them. More came from Mormon Island, bringing wives and children to work alongside them.

"Soon there won't be anyone involved in any other activity," Marshall told Sutter when the latter complained his workers were deserting him.

“Not with gold being scooped up at the rate of two thousand dollars a man per day.”

But there were other ways to get rich during a gold rush. Back when San Francisco was called Yerba Buena, Sam Brannan had brought two hundred fellow Mormons to California. He now owned stores in the Sierra Nevada foothills and learned about the momentous discovery when customers began paying for purchases with gold.

A natural-born promoter, Brannan hired local craftsmen to fill his stores with prospector’s tools and supplies—then hurried to San Francisco. Running up and down the streets, he waved his hat with one hand and rattled a bottle of gold with the other.

“Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!” he shouted over and over.

Soon Brannan’s stores were supplying four thousand ’48ers, so-called because it was 1848. Most found so much gold they feared an oversupply would drive the price down to almost nothing. When there were no more nuggets to be picked up off the ground or plucked from creeks, men needed only a knife to pry more from rocks. Or a pick and shovel to dig sand, dirt, and gravel so gold could be washed from it.

In the midst of this madness *Portales*, a Chilean schooner, put in at San Francisco to find the city deserted except for the aged and infirm, who eagerly passed along the momentous news. But their tale was suspect because of how easily they revealed information that could bring outsiders to compete with their friends in the Gold Country. Only two of *Portales’s* crew jumped ship. The rest brought the questionable tale to Talcahuano, halfway down Chile’s long coastline.

CHAPTER ONE

THE '48ERS

Talcahuano's principal attraction was dark-eyed, pigtailed whores. *Portales's* crew enjoyed them for two days and then continued their voyage. As they left, a gangly young Prussian named Henning Dietzel ran down the gangplank from another freighter and hurried toward the House of Smiles. He didn't want anyone to claim Encinas Peralta before he got there.

Five months earlier, Henning had stopped outside the bordello's door long enough to finger comb his thick blond hair. Inside he paused again and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light in a room with a busy bar against a purple wall. A tall, shapely girl rose from a couch of scantily clad ladies and ground out a cigarette in an abalone shell. To his delight, she glided up to him, her tight pink dress emphasizing a wasp-like waist.

"You have the nicest smile I've seen in the House of Smiles," she said, "and the bluest eyes."

"Thank you." Embarrassed by the accent he was trying to lose, Henning felt his face flush. "As pretty as you are, I'm sure you've seen more than your share of smiles."

She touched his arm with a manicured hand. "Are you here to enjoy women's bodies or practice your Spanish? You seem in need of both."

"Will you help me with my pronunciation if I buy you a drink?"

"We don't teach languages here. We pleasure lonely men."

"I'm looking forward to that too." His eyes were drawn to her cleavage.

"You don't have to tell me." She kissed his cheek. "I know men."

“My name is Henning.”

“Mine’s Encinas.” She took his arm and guided him toward a private table.

When the waitress came Encinas ordered a *ratafia*, brandy with fruit juice and almonds.

“What can I bring you, my love?” the waitress asked Henning.

“I don’t drink alcohol, *Fräulein*,” he replied, finishing in his native German.

“You have to if you sit with a girl,” the waitress said.

“Bring him a *ratafia* without brandy,” Encinas broke in. “Even nuns can drink that.”

Henning’s urge—inistent when he’d come in—gave way to fascination with Encinas’s easy laughter and surprising intelligence. He’d never thought about what prostitutes might be like aside from their specialty.

“You seem softer than the other girls,” he said.

“Are you saying I’m fat?” she asked.

“In case you’re not teasing, I meant being with you is nicer than being with other girls.”

“Who else have you been with?” Her eyes flashed flirtatiously.

Reddening, he looked down. “No one. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m well qualified to teach you, but I want to know you better first.”

For hours they explored their mutual interest in books, nature, travel, and the art of making money. A man paused beside their table and tried to start a conversation. Encinas said she was taken. When other girls slinked past with movements designed to tempt Henning, she put her hand protectively over his and said, “He’s with me.”

“To them you’re nothing more than a source of money,” Encinas said, leaning closer. “But this profession has given me special insight into humanity...well, men at least. And I see you as especially kind and thoughtful.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re also extremely shy and I sense you’re uncomfortable with my praise,” she continued. “But I can’t help it. I love your height and uniqueness. Look around. Everyone here has black hair. Yours is the color of wheat in the fields. Everyone else has brown eyes. Yours are bluer than a cloudless sky.”

“You talk like a poet.”

“I read a lot of poetry.”

Henning wasn't so innocent he believed her compliments. Expensive drinks were coming fast. She'd leave as soon as his wallet was empty, but he couldn't hold back a smile or stop his eyes from participating.

"You should do that more often," Encinas said. "Your teeth are perfect and white as pearls. Any other man would flash them often and to great advantage."

"Smiling makes me look boyish."

"What's wrong with that?"

"No one takes boys seriously."

"It's the other way around for females. We get more attention when we're young."

By midnight they had discussed songwriters and whether they used words as well as poets...fathers and whether they were ever as kind as mothers...food and whether God had intended for humans to eat three times a day or once every three days.

Without being asked, the waitress brought one refill after another. With several untouched drinks on the table between them, Encinas sent the next round back. Annoyed, the bartender marched to their table and told Henning, "If you're going to take this lady's time, you have to buy drinks."

"Don't be bad, Juanito," Encinas purred. "My shift ends soon. Let the gentleman stay until then. Please."

The bartender turned sullen. "Just this once. Never again. Understand?"

When they were alone, Henning reached for his glass. Encinas grabbed his hand in midair.

"Know what I like best about you?" she asked. "You weren't upset when I didn't invite you to one of the rooms on the second floor. I didn't want to because those are for sex, and I like you too much to have sex with you. But we can make love after my shift ends."

Later Encinas took Henning to her fastidiously clean one room cabin and lit its hanging lantern. In one corner a pot-bellied stove sat beside logs and tinder. Green curtains bracketed the only window. Below it, a wilting flower in a whiskey bottle sat on a bookcase stuffed with poetry. A pillow and open book rested on the red blanket covering a mattress on the floor.

Encinas closed the curtains and undid her pigtails. Released from its tight braids her black hair fluffed full. With long flowing strokes she brushed it into a dark frame around her face. Then she unbuttoned her dress and let it

slide to the floor, revealing the whitest skin Henning had ever seen. In corset and pantalets she knelt to untie and remove his shoes. Before wriggling from her undergarments, she helped him shed his shirt and pants.

Henning had never seen a woman's naked body. Seeing his first only increased the mystery. He stole glances at her firm bottom, pink nipples, and thick pubic hair as she led him to the mattress. When he was on his back she swung a leg over him and perched on his torso. Leaning forward, she put her hands on opposite sides of his face and touched her lips to his.

"I hope I don't taste of burning tobacco," she said. "I've been sucking on mints since I snuffed out my last cigarette. Should I not kiss you?"

"Only if you want to punish me." Henning usually found smoking offensive, but Encinas's cigarettes were only a tiny flaw.

During a series of increasingly passionate kisses, her long hair formed a tent, isolating them in a private world where she made Henning's first lovemaking exciting and memorable. Afterward she gave him luxuries her customers didn't get, a home-cooked dinner and a night's sleep with a warm, soft companion.

He woke up with Encinas already awake and nestled close. Sleeping through the night was a rare pleasure because he stood the night watch at sea. She made it obvious she wanted him again. He'd been told orgasms were best after long abstinence, but this one—on the heels of his best ever—was even more intense.

When Encinas tried to get out of bed he wrapped his arms around her and held her against him, back first. She ran her fingertips along his arms, then recoiled from a jagged scar.

"How did you get that?"

"I was in a situation where someone else's safety took priority over mine."

"Which means?"

"I stopped a crewmate from attacking our captain with a knife."

Rolling over and staring with special intensity, Encinas said, "I'd gladly have your baby if you could guarantee your blue eyes and golden hair." She was clearly flirting, but not for money. She hadn't asked him to pay and would be offended if he offered.

Overwhelmed with loneliness after his ship sailed that afternoon, Henning soon hired on with another vessel, one that regularly called at Talcahuano.

Today was the five-month anniversary of their first meeting. At the House of Smiles Henning found Encinas arguing with men at the bar.

“The news brought by *Portales’s* crew is too good to be true,” one of them insisted.

“Before you can have a dream come true,” Encinas replied, “you have to have a dream.”

When she saw Henning, her brown eyes sparkled and a smile puckered her cheeks. As always when he saw her with other men, he felt betrayed. His jealousy evaporated after she draped her arms around his neck and her disappointed former companions went looking for other girls.

“You look wonderful,” he told her.

“And your Spanish will be perfect as soon as you start rolling your r’s,” she teased. Glancing at his mouth she added, “Show me your real smile—not that little half-grin.”

“If you want people to make changes,” he said mischievously, “you have to praise their first steps.”

She led Henning to a table and breathlessly told him about the gold that was the talk of Talcahuano. Disappointed by his lukewarm interest she said, “I’ll take the night off. Let’s go where there aren’t any distractions.”

“I’ll be more distracted if we go to your room,” he teased.

“We’ll do that first and then talk,” she said.

Her simple, lumpy mattress seemed like a cloud far above the rest of the world. There they made passionate love, then talked. And every time he changed subjects, she brought the conversation back to California’s gold.

“Go to San Francisco,” she urged before they fell asleep. “At worst you’ll lose a few months’ salary and the cost of a ticket. At best you’ll find enough gold to open your store now instead of someday.”

Henning spent shore leaves in other towns among merchants who told him what they could sell if only they had it. During his subsequent travels he found what he could and brought it to them, earning almost nine hundred dollars in three years. He’d saved every penny—along with most of his wages—hoping to open a store in Chile’s capital, Santiago.

The next day Encinas was up before dawn. Henning woke to see her dicing onions, bell peppers, cheese, and ham for omelets. He lay in bed reveling in her graceful efficiency.

“How long have you been watching?” she asked, noticing he was awake.

“I was enjoying you too much to keep track of time.” He stood and stretched, then pulled on his pants. “Why are you up so early?”

“I have things to do.” She poured their omelets into a frying pan. “Since we last saw each other, the owner put me on trial as manager at the House of Smiles.”

“Manager. That’s an honor.”

“Especially for someone my age.” Encinas—like Henning—was eighteen. “I’m earning more money, which is nice. But the best part is that now I only have to lie down with the man of my choosing—you. Be patient with my long hours. I want to keep this promotion.”

“You will.” He crept up behind and kissed her neck. “I’ve never seen you do less than a Prussian job.”

“What’s that?”

“According to my grandfather it’s the best job possible. If I did anything less, I got his cane across my backside.”

After breakfast, Henning walked Encinas to work. On the way, sailors leered at her and the town’s ladies glared. But businessmen took off their hats and greeted her respectfully. Talcahuano prospered when its bordello did, and under her leadership the House of Smiles was bringing more ships. Her newest innovation was a room for captains, first mates, and ships’ surgeons. Inside its wood-paneled walls they relaxed in easy chairs beside tables offering complimentary paper, envelopes, pens, cigars, rum, and sweets.

Seeing Talcahuano’s worthiest citizens confirm his lofty opinion of Encinas, Henning gave more weight to her insistence he go to San Francisco. Back at the ship he asked a fellow deckhand’s opinion.

“Haven’t you learned that ports are full of wondrous yarns that are never true?” his friend replied. “If there’s gold in California, why didn’t *Portales*’ crew jump ship?”

His other crewmates were equally discouraging.

That afternoon, Encinas answered his knock on her cabin door wearing a provocative maroon and gold dress. It left the top of her bosom bare and

clung from neck to ankles. She'd worn it to please, but he would've preferred something less revealing.

Once inside, he saw an overstuffed chair she'd added to her sparse furnishings.

"I borrowed it from my new office," she explained. "You can read there while I'm at work tomorrow."

"How did you get something that heavy clear across town?"

"Pulled it on a cart. I want you comfortable on what may be our last day together until you get back from California." She gestured for him to sit at the table. "You're going, right?"

"Maybe I should wait until the rumors are confirmed."

"By then California will be overrun." She set a plate of steaming spaghetti in front of him. "News will travel to America's Atlantic coast by ship, a three month voyage. Leave now and you'll get there six months before Americans start flooding in."

"It's a long way to California and there's no guarantee I'll find gold even if it's there." He rolled a mouthful of spaghetti onto his fork. "I could be away from you for a year or more."

"On a sailor's wages, it'll take ten times that long for you to save enough money to open a store," Encinas said gently. "When you have your own business, I'll work for you and we can be together every day instead of two or three nights a month."

He sighed. "Okay. You win. I'll go."

"Good." She grinned. "That was easier than I expected."

On Henning's last afternoon in Talcahuano, a sudden inspiration sent him rushing to town. In the market he selected a dozen tightly closed roses. At the general store he bought glue and sheets of thin white pasteboard.

Sitting at the table back at Encinas's cabin, Henning cut an irregular piece of pasteboard, then folded and glued it, making a small lidless box. He poked a hole in the bottom, threaded a rose stem through it, and pulled until the bud was nestled inside. After repeating this eleven times, he put the roses in a pail of water and hid them under the porch.

The next morning, Encinas accompanied Henning to the dock, making him the envy of his shipmates. Before going aboard he stared at her for a long time.

“You’ve stopped blinking,” she said, embarrassed.

“I want to remember exactly how you look right now,” he said. “God I’ll miss you.”

“Write to me as soon as you find a ship to California.” Encinas wasn’t sure she’d ever see him again. Her doubts faded as his big, calloused sailor’s hand took a dozen red roses from their hiding place in his knapsack—each bud protected by an individual white box.

“I didn’t want them squashed,” he explained. “A perfect girl deserves perfect flowers.”

She buried her nose in the roses and inhaled, then looked up at him and promised, “I’m going to stop smoking. Next time you kiss me I’ll taste better.”

CHAPTER TWO

PROFESSOR VON DUISBURG'S DAUGHTER

As soon as Henning's ship reached Valparaiso, he started looking for someone going to California. Someone who'd bring him along and show him how to find gold. But he couldn't find anyone who took him—as young as he was—seriously.

"When you're older and look in a mirror, you'll see your father looking back," his grandfather had once promised. Henning could hardly wait. His father had been dashing and dangerous. Everyone had paid attention to him.

Sitting alone in a waterfront saloon, Henning was joined by five men. One climbed up on the table and addressed the other patrons in a booming voice.

"I'm Roberto Flores. Me and my friends," he gestured to the men around him, "are going to California. We need a man to do our chores. In return we'll show him how to pan gold."

"Sounds like you need a sucker to do your dirty work," an onlooker heckled.

"When he gets back from California with bags of gold," Flores said, "you'll wish you'd been that sucker."

"What do you know about gold, let alone California?" the heckler challenged.

"I was in Minas Gerais, Brazil, during the big strike there."

"In that case why aren't you rich?"

"Because I got there too late, but this time you'll be the one making that mistake...if you ever work up the gumption to go." Flores got down from the table, moving with exaggerated care to mask his inebriation. He rapped a shin against a chair, then cursed, "*Maldito sea.*"

“Is it true?” Henning asked the man sitting beside him. “Are you going to California?”

“Why?”

“I might be interested in joining you,” Henning replied.

“My name is Eduardo Vásquez.”

“I’m Henning Dietzel.”

“Nice to meet you. I’ll introduce my friends later if there’s any point in it.”

Vásquez was over six feet with broad, level shoulders. Perhaps because Henning was taller yet, though little more than a boy, he pulled himself erect and threw back his shoulders. Studying Henning’s threadbare clothes, he said, “It’ll cost four hundred U.S. dollars for supplies and passage to California. Do you have that much?”

“I can pay my way.”

“Your Spanish isn’t bad. How’s your English?”

In English Henning answered, “It’s passable.”

“What’s your native tongue?”

“Prussian.”

“If you can learn three languages, you can learn to pan gold. We’ll teach you if you work for us without wages and make a deposit to guarantee you won’t take off before putting in your time.”

“How long would I have to work for you?”

“What do you suggest?”

“Half-days for a month.”

“Negotiations seldom succeed if the opening bid is unreasonable,” Vásquez growled. “Would you like to start again?”

“Isn’t it your turn now?” Henning asked.

“Dawn to dusk for three months.”

“If I agree to that, the gold will be gone before I can gather any for myself.”

“Gather?” Flores snorted drunkenly. “Sounds like you expect it to be scattered on the ground where girls could frolic around on their tiptoes filling their aprons with it.”

“Two months,” Vásquez broke in, holding up that many fingers.

Henning crossed his arms over his chest. “Why would I spend four hundred dollars to go where everyone but me will get rich?”

“The only ones getting rich will be those with the necessary skills.” Vásquez covered a yawn with his fist. “The others will be wasting their time.”

“How about six weeks?”

Vásquez waited in vain for Henning to improve his offer, then said, “Your deposit will have to be at least four hundred dollars to discourage you from taking off before living up to your side of the bargain.”

“You have a deal.” Henning extended his hand.

“We leave for California tomorrow,” Vásquez said as they shook hands. “Meet us at noon in front of the cathedral and bring your money.”

“If there’s really gold in California, what are our chances of finding it?”

“Prospecting is like playing chess with God.” Vásquez flashed a conspiratorial wink. “You can’t win unless He lets you, and you don’t know if He will until you try.”

Slow to fall asleep that night, Henning relived the changes in his life after his mother died of cholera. He had been thirteen, living in Hamburg, Germany. Unable to force himself to attend her burial he’d walked a solitary pilgrimage to her favorite places, imagining her beside him.

The next day he was sent to live with his father’s father. Grandpa Dietzel sharecropped a worn-out patch of land belonging to wealthy Lord Marcus Herr Becker who provided seed, tools, and living quarters in exchange for a share of the profits. His grandfather put him to work but otherwise ignored him.

Henning’s loneliness eased when a stray black and white dog adopted him. For two days it furiously wagged its tail when it saw him and slept by his feet at night. After his grandfather complained that he had no food to spare, the dog disappeared. Henning suspected the old man had killed it.

Peasants like Henning weren’t entitled to an education. Because his father was in the Prussian cavalry, he’d previously attended a military school. No such facility was available near Grandpa Dietzel. But Herr Becker saw something special in Henning and enrolled him in the exclusive Maximilian Academy for Boys. And since Henning’s twelve-hour work days saved his grandfather the expense of a hired hand, Herr Becker had to force the old man to let Henning attend.

On the eve of his first day at the Academy, Henning looked forward to something for the first time in months. Starved for the company of other boys and eager to make a good impression, he begged his grandfather to cut his hair. Begrudgingly the old man slapped a bowl over his head and snipped off the protruding locks with scissors.

Next Henning washed his shirt and trousers. Already tall, he was still growing. Frayed at the cuffs, his shirtsleeves ended well above both wrists. And baggy, patched pant legs left his bony ankles exposed. But these were his only clothes and he ironed them, knowing the shirt's wrinkles would return and the trousers' creases would disappear during his walk to school.

At the academy, senior class president Hans Krüger made himself the center of attention in a hallway full of students who wore the latest styles and were professionally barbered.

"I hereby dub thee the foul and pestilent congregation of vapors," he pungently greeted Henning. Turning to his audience, he added, "That insult was the only useful thing I learned in my Shakespeare class."

A week later, schoolbooks Henning needed to study for his first exam vanished from the locker for which he couldn't afford a lock. They reappeared after he flunked the test. He was positive Krüger was the culprit.

One of that seemingly endless year's rare pleasures was Professor von Duisburg's gorgeous daughter, Christiane. Henning's secret infatuation with her didn't rise to the level of unrequited love because she didn't know he existed. And when she finally detected his interest, she responded with callous public mockery.

Shunned by his peers, Henning felt lucky if even the teachers and staff spoke to him. The one exception—*Fräulein* Lange, the librarian—sensed that characters in books were his only friends. She recommended two novels with poverty stricken protagonists who were otherwise superior to those who ridiculed them.

"Like the main characters in these books," she said, handing both to Henning as the library closed one evening, "you shouldn't be embarrassed by your economic standing. That's only one measure of a person, and a poor one." Reminding Henning of his mother she gently asked, "Are you open to a little advice?"

“From you...yes,” he replied.

“Your devotion to Professor von Duisburg’s daughter, Christiane, is touching, but I sense that you don’t think you deserve her. The truth is the other way around. She isn’t worthy of your exceptional mind and compassionate heart.”

Though embarrassing, Fräulein Lange’s words were comforting.

CHAPTER THREE

THE DUEL

Henning almost quit school after his freshman year. But with foresight unusual for boys his age, he decided four miserable years were preferable to a lifetime of poverty—Hans Krüger notwithstanding. Krüger, a Prussian general's son, was the underclassmen's most persistent tormentor and had taken special interest in Henning.

Tired of being bullied, Henning enrolled in the Academy's boxing class.

"Your physical skills are adequate, *Herr* Dietzel," his instructor told him early on. "Your attitude, however, is all wrong. Why do we learn to box?"

"To be able to defend ourselves," Henning replied.

"Would you like to make another feeble guess?"

"No, *Herr* Instructor."

"We learn boxing to help us project confidence so we don't have to fight."

The Friday before final exams, Henning rushed through his work in the fields and hurried to the school library where he studied furiously. By the time the library's doors closed behind him, he was exhausted. Trudging down an otherwise empty hall he rounded a corner and saw two boys in front of his open locker. One, Hans Krüger, held Henning's year-end essays in his meaty hand, reading aloud while his constant companion, Helmut Meyer, chuckled contemptuously.

"Those are mine," Henning cried out. Half his annual grade depended on those pages. They had taken months to research and were due before final exams on Monday.

Briefly Henning and Krüger stood eye to eye, then Henning looked away. They were the same height, but Krüger was older and much more substantial.

"I'm going to read these to my other friends," Krüger said, cramming Henning's essays into his coat pocket.

"Give them to me or I'll tell the headmaster you stole them."

"Whiny babies run to headmasters. Men stand up for themselves," Krüger snarled. "And calling me a thief slanders my good name, obliging me to do this." He slapped Henning's cheek with a glove as though challenging him to a duel.

"This is the Maximilian Academy—not the University of Heidelberg," Henning said, convinced Krüger was joking.

Heidelberg's students often settled disagreements with sabers. The antagonists wore leather armor and steel goggles, and tried to draw first blood from their opponents' faces. To many, the resulting scars were sought-after badges of honor. But dueling with swords was forbidden in pre-university schools.

"Heidelberg's duels usually end quickly," Krüger said. "Here, however, we use wooden canes instead of swords and the head is out of bounds. Our contest will continue until you yield unless you're afraid to face me."

"Where and when?" Henning asked.

"In the gym in a half hour. Don't be late."

"*Herr* Krüger has been the Academy champion four straight years," Meyer needled as Henning turned away. "You'd better bring an assistant in case you need stitches."

Twenty minutes later Henning entered a white gymnasium with a high ceiling supported by massive timbers. Krüger was warming up, a protective leather suit clinging to his barrel chest and tapered torso. His hardwood cane hissed as he swung it. Rumor was, the tip had been drilled and a weight inserted to deliver a heavier blow.

"Where are my essays?" Henning asked with bravado he didn't feel.

Krüger pointed to wads of paper on the floor. While Henning gathered them, Helmut Meyer slammed down a wicker basket of dueling canes and commanded him to, "Choose your weapon and pay me."

"I don't have any money," Henning said.

"Pay by this weekend." Meyer handed over the shortest cane.

“I won’t have money by then either.”

“You’d better find some.”

The Academy required protective pads and adult supervision for these contests. In the absence of either, Krüger sent Meyer outside as a lookout. Alone now Henning and Krüger raised their canes in the mandatory salute, then began circling, their footsteps echoing in the big empty room.

Krüger was cat-quick. Powerful. Unpredictable. Henning never knew where the hardwood blade would pound him next. First, his thighs were crisscrossed by stinging welts. Then his shoulders. Finally his elbow—with no cushion between skin and bone—was split open.

Dripping blood, Henning swung until exhausted. Sometimes he missed because his cane was too short, but usually for lack of skill. Frustration and anger replaced his fear. He wanted Krüger to pay for being a bully. To feel pain. To doubt himself.

“It’s time to cry uncle, whiny boy,” Krüger goaded.

“Not yet.”

Conserving energy, Henning swung his cane less often. Krüger stepped up his attack. Burning spasms radiated from blows to Henning’s hip, shin, and forearm. In total command now, Krüger hadn’t yet been hit. But he had to open his mouth to suck in enough air. And he was no longer enjoying himself.

“You’ve had enough. I’m declaring victory,” Krüger proclaimed. Sweat glistening on his forehead, he turned away. Henning’s cane touched him for the first time. Just the tip. Gently, between the shoulder blades.

“I think you’re the one,” Henning managed between breaths, “who’s had enough.”

Krüger whirled and raised his sword.

The gym door slammed against the wall. Without coming inside, Meyer gasped, “Headmaster’s coming.”

Krüger dashed outside. His victory had been absolute, but Henning’s refusal to yield seemed to have disheartened him.

Fighting for breath Henning made his blood on the floor less visible by smearing it with his shoe. His wounds throbbed but the pain was tolerable. Never again would Krüger back him down with the threat of physical punishment. The humiliation that came from being pushed around was far worse.

Bathed in sweat, Henning slid the rented cane down his pant leg as footsteps in the hallway grew louder.

“Good evening, Headmaster Klein,” he greeted the formidable man who came in.

“I’m surprised to find you here at this late hour, *Herr* Dietzel.” The headmaster paused, waiting for an explanation.

“I’m just leaving, sir.”

“For good reason, you’re required to wear exercise clothes here,” Klein said with a disgusted glance at Henning’s sweat-soaked shirt.

“I don’t have any.”

“Buy some.”

Facing his bloody sleeve away from the headmaster, Henning started for an exit.

“Why the stiff leg?” Klein asked.

“I twisted my ankle, but it’s not serious.”

That weekend, Henning cut wheat fourteen hours a day while his grandfather stacked it in shocks to dry. He also stayed up most of both nights, neatly copying the essays Krüger had wrinkled and smudged. Monday he handed them in and took his final examinations, then rejoined Grandpa Dietzel in the field.

Though the afternoon was chilly, the hard work soon overheated him. He removed his shirt. Pausing to inspect his itchy, throbbing elbow he saw thick yellow pus in a violently red gash.

“You should have the school nurse take care of that,” his grandfather told him.

“If I do, she’ll ask who did it,” Henning said. “When I refuse to tell her, I’ll be suspended from school.”

“Make up a story.”

“Can’t you please buy some iodine?”

“Why would I buy something you can get free? If you’re too proud to lie to a nurse, you can steal some.”

“I’m not a thief.”

“And I’m not rich.”

Later that day, Herr Becker saw dried blood on Henning's sleeve and insisted on examining his elbow. Pressed to explain the festering split there, Henning briefly described the duel, without names. Becker bought him iodine, a padlock, and three changes of the nicest clothes he'd ever owned—adding to previous kindnesses and making Henning feel he wasn't alone in the world.

Before padlocking his locker that afternoon, Henning opened it and found a note demanding he return the dueling cane and pay by Friday. 'If you don't,' the message ended, 'what you owe will double every day until you do.'

Henning rushed to the library. Breathing in the aromas of old leather bindings, furniture polish, and incense he studied until alone. Then he searched for coins beneath cushions on sofas and chairs, lifting them gingerly because touching velvet gave him chills. Almost done, he heard voices and turned to see Hans Krüger standing behind him.

"Well if it isn't the foul and pestilent congregation of vapors stealing money that belongs to his betters," Krüger snarled. "How much have you found?"

Henning opened his hand, displaying three *pfennigs*. Then he closed it into a tight fist and said, "I almost have enough to pay the rent on my dueling cane."

Krüger held out his palm. "Those must have fallen from my pocket. I recognize them."

"They're for *Herr Meyer*." Henning slipped the coins into his pocket.

"Do you honestly think I'll let you pay for your dueling cane with my money?" Krüger stepped forward aggressively.

Henning held his ground, face showing the steely determination it had during their duel. Krüger retreated a step.

"Pay your rental fee by tomorrow night or you'll be sorry," he growled, a clear attempt to regain any respect he might have lost by backing off.

As Krüger ambled away, Henning realized his boxing instructor had been right about the advantages of confidence. But poverty had no advantages. He resumed his search for coins, vowing that one day he'd have all the money he could possibly want.

Now, four years later on the other side of the world, Henning had an opportunity to fulfill that pledge. But he had doubts about Eduardo Vásquez,

Roberto Flores, and their companions. He could've found out whether or not they were trustworthy if they'd been from Valparaiso, but they weren't.

For all he knew they planned to take him to California, ditch him, and steal his deposit.