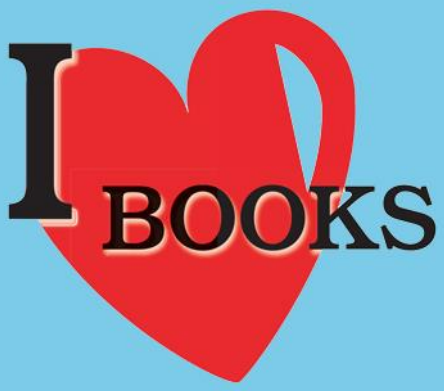


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Opening extract from

The Foolish King

Written by

Mark Price

Illustrated by

Martin Brown

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To my beautiful daughter, Holly, for whom I invented
this story one sunny day at Orchard Coombe

— Mark Price

To Ruth

— Martin Brown





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A Key to the Chess Pieces

Chess pieces look a little different nowadays – here's a guide to how they looked when the magical game of chess was first discovered . . .

Ants and Bees



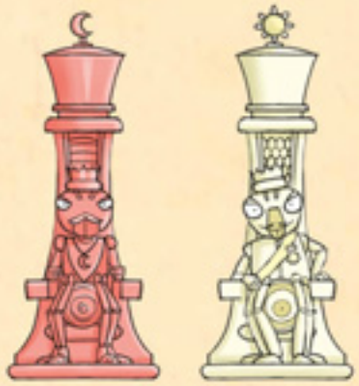
→ Pawn

The Queen



→ Queen

The King



→ King

Grasshoppers and Crickets!



→ Knight

Worms and Slugs!

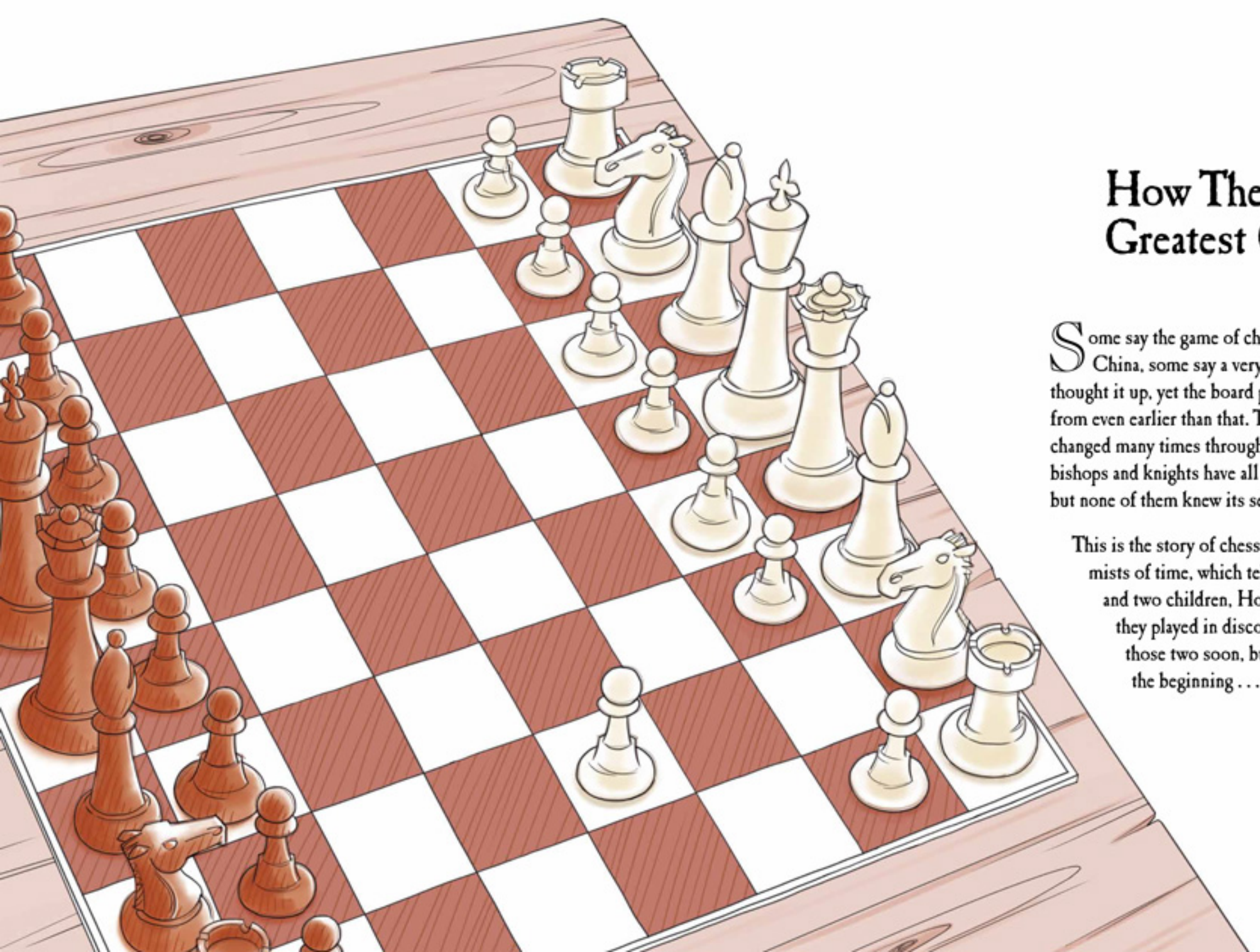


→ Bishop

Ladybirds and Woodlice



→ Castle



How The World's Greatest Game Began

Some say the game of chess was invented in ancient China, some say a very clever Maharaja from India thought it up, yet the board pieces in front of you come from even earlier than that. They have been reshaped and changed many times through history. Kings and queens, bishops and knights have all played this ancient game, but none of them knew its secret history.

This is the story of chess, a story lost in the mists of time, which tells of a far away kingdom and two children, Holly and Pip, and the part they played in discovering the game. We'll meet those two soon, but every story must start at the beginning . . .

Chapter 1
THE GOLDEN PEAR

Shortly before time began, when dragons still filled the sky and birds and even insects could talk, good King Marra ruled the Kingdom of Stur. King Marra was a great ruler: just, kind and wise. The gentle king loved his people and they loved him in return. His chief adviser was an ancient snowy owl called Woogle, who, like all owls, was very clever and wise.

King Marra loved to garden. He patiently showed his people how to care for their gardens and fields and so the kingdom prospered and flourished. King Marra particularly liked pears, and each year he held a competition to see who could grow the biggest and juiciest fruit. He would reward the winning gardener with The Golden Pear for their trouble. Everyone tried so hard to win.

Two children, called Holly and Pip, tried especially hard. They lived in the royal garden next to King Marra's palace. Mr Perry, their dad, was the king's head gardener and they did everything they could to help him win.

The royal garden was the most magnificent of all the gardens, with the biggest of all pear trees at the bottom. It was King Marra's pride and joy. Mr Perry was a huge man, with big rough hands the size of shovels and green fingers from a lifetime of gardening. He had won The Golden Pear more times than anyone could remember. One more win would make him the all-time champion!



Holly and Pip loved growing up in such a wonderful garden and exploring every nook and cranny. They became as knowledgeable as their father about the plants and the insects that helped the plants to grow. Holly was very clever, sensible and always reading. Pip liked to explore, especially the branches of the huge pear tree, and was always discovering new things. And like all children, they both loved playing games!



Every day Mr Perry worked hard in the garden, planting, raking and watering. And the creatures helped. The bees and butterflies fluttered from plant to plant, feeding on sweet nectar and spreading pollen. The slugs and snails nibbled on the dying plants, leaving space for new ones. Everything worked in harmony and everything grew well. Everyone was happy.

But there was one thing that really worried the king. It was his son, Royal Prince Parip.

Chapter 2

THE ROTTEN APPLE

Growing up in a royal palace, Prince Parip had become used to everyone waiting on him hand and foot. Nobody dared disagree with him, as he had the most terrible temper. Worse still, he was greedy, mean and jealous. Although his father tried to teach him to be kind and interested in others he only cared about himself, and even more terrible was that he thought gardening beneath him. Despite his father's gentle lessons, Plump Parip, as people called him, would laugh as slugs exploded into slimy bits under his feet, giggle when he pulled the legs off spiders, and roar with laughter as he shook the half-grown fruit off the trees. Then his favourite game was to stamp on it all and smash it to bits.



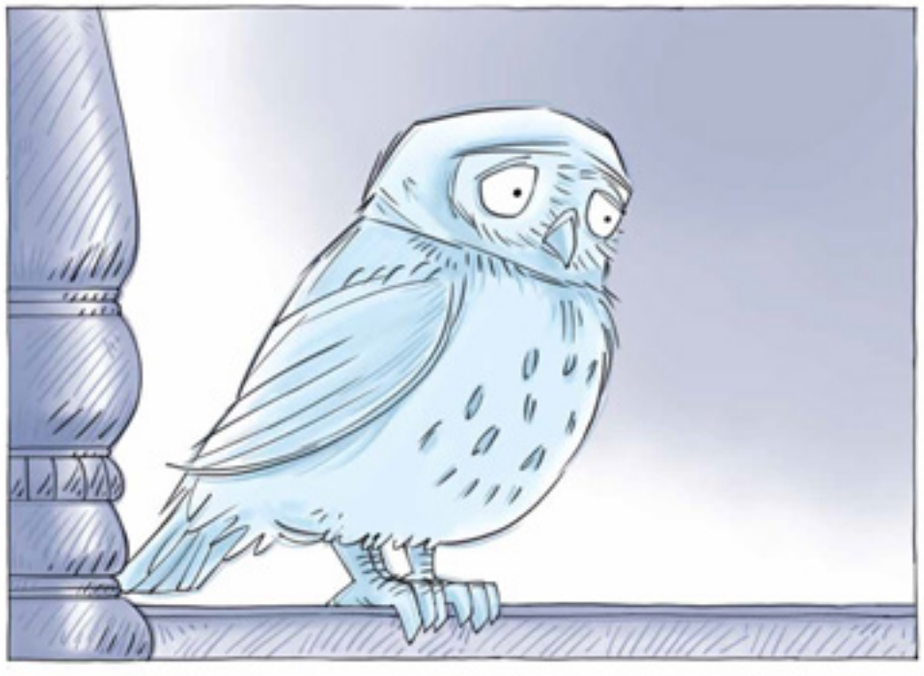


Parip's constant companion was Crow. Parip had found Crow as a fledgling in a flowerbed, scoffing hard-working earthworms, and instantly liked him!

As a child, Parip loved playing games, but no one would play with him. Other children didn't like the awful tantrums when he lost. It was easier to let him win, or not to play with him at all! So Parip spent most of his time with Crow thinking up mean games and tricks, like putting glue on flower heads so that when the bees landed for pollen they got stuck. Or pouring water down ant holes, when they were mixing the soil, and counting how many dead ants would float to the top. And firing poor snails over the castle wall with his catapult while Crow tried to catch them in his beak. Woogle, the king's owl, worried more and more about what would happen when Parip became king and Crow was his adviser.

King Marra ruled until a wrinkly old age. Every day he hoped that Prince Parip would learn to love the gardens and insects as much as he did. Maybe some of what he had taught might stick. But as the king looked out of his castle window one last time before he died, he saw his son shaking all the unripe pears out of the king's prize pear tree. A tear ran down his face as he beckoned over his faithful servant, Woogle. "Promise to help Prince Parip be a good ruler. Help him to change and to love our kingdom. I have failed, my friend, but Parip is still my son and the apple of my eye. Now everything rests with you, my good and faithful wise owl," said the king with his final breath.

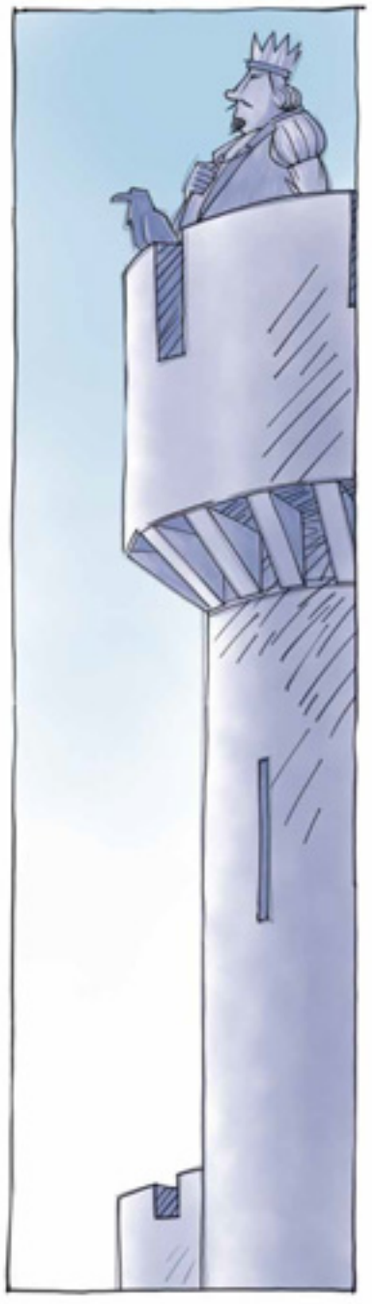
Woogle crossed her wings and promised to do her best, but she had a worried look in her wise old bird eyes that seemed to say that she didn't think Parip was a very rosy apple! *More like a crab apple!* thought Woogle.



Woogle was right. The new King Parip was very ambitious. He wanted to be grander and greater and more admired than his father. Instead of visiting the gardens of Stur and advising his people, he made them hold great banquets in his honour. If he didn't think the food was magnificent enough he would order the cooks to be thrown into the dungeons. Who knew what would happen to them there?

And unlike his father, King Parip had no interest in pears, or fruit-growing competitions. "Pears are silly and stupid and a waste of my time. I have far better things to do than tell smelly farmers how nice their fruit is. And I'm not wasting money on giving away Golden Pears. I shall spend that money on beautiful clothes and carriages and throw wonderful parties just for me. Then all the people will love me more because I look so nice and have such fun."

"Quite right, Your Great Cleverness," said Crow, but then he was a very bad apple, rotten to the core in fact. Woogle tried to persuade Parip that Stur needed to grow food but the king wouldn't listen.





Chapter 3
THE INSECTS DEPART

All the people started to fear King Parip. Some even began to move away from Stur because he took so little interest in the land. Less and less grew in Stur so there was less and less food for everyone to eat. Greedy King Parip commanded that more and more of the food grown be used for his enormous banquets. Of course nobody wanted to go to royal parties because the king was so bad-tempered and so most of the food was thrown away. King Parip could see that he was losing the goodwill of his people. He just couldn't see why! He began to lose his temper at the slightest thing. One day, when he saw a worm eating a fallen apple at the end of his garden, he rushed forward and angrily jumped on it, exploding both the apple and the worm into hundreds of slimy wet bits. Yuck!

Creepy Crow quickly leaped forward and gobbled up the bits of worm. Even more yucky!

"How dare that little worm eat my food!" said the jealous king to Crow. "I decree that any insect eating my food will be punished."

Whoever heard of punishing insects? What a crazy idea!

"I will make sure that happens to all the insects, Your Magnificence," said the creepy Crow, even though he had no idea how to punish insects. He did like eating them though. Perhaps he thought he could eat them all. Soon he became the fattest crow in history because he gave gobbling them all up a good go!

The insects didn't like that one bit and decided to go elsewhere. Nobody knew where they were going. It was a mystery. Little by little all the insects disappeared from the fields and gardens until there were hardly any left to pollinate the plants or enrich the soil.



"We don't need those unimportant silly little insects," said Parip to Crow when he heard the news. "They are ugly and messy and yucky. I am sure the Court Magician can make some potions to help things grow."

"You are so right, Your Utter Brilliance, I will instruct him to do so right now," said Crow.

But the potions couldn't replace the hard-working insects. Rather than help things grow they upset the remaining insects and turned the rivers bright red. Before long the countryside was full of dead plants and the crops stopped growing completely.

There was, however, one place where plants still grew. That was the royal gardens. There, Mr Perry worked day and night just to keep a little food on the royal table. He kept the compost heap for the worms and the beetle bank that he had built up with King Marra, and with his wonderful kindness to all creatures he managed to persuade a few insects to stay. But even with his great gardening skills he couldn't grow much.

With fewer crops being grown and sold, the king started to run out of money, and his castle started to crumble. Boards covered broken windows, carriages with damaged wheels stood abandoned and awaiting repair, and there was hardly anyone to be seen. Many of the hungry people of Stur had gone away – who knows where? The king had become very thin and his once-splendid coat was now fastened with string. His breeches, now scruffy and patched, were held up by cord. With no gold to pay them, all the king's servants left, leaving only a very thin Woogle and a very fat Crow.

King Parip was becoming crosser and crosser. "I want gold and I want gold now!" demanded King Parip and he commanded Crow to collect taxes from the people. Woogle tried to explain that the farmers had little money and barely enough food for themselves. But Crow carried on anyway and took their farms instead if they had no money. That just made things worse, as more farmers and their families left Stur, and their once bountiful farms were left abandoned. Stur became poor and the people unhappy and afraid of their king.

The kingdom was in a terrible mess, and King Parip continued to blame everyone but himself for the land's misfortune.

