

## The Gossage-Vardebedian Papers

My Dear Vardebedian:

I was more than a bit chagrined today, on going through the morning's mail, to find that my letter of September 16, containing my twenty-second move (knight to the king's fourth square), was returned unopened due to a small error in addressing--precisely, the omission of your name and residence (how Freudian can one get?), coupled with a failure to append postage. That I have been disconcerted of late due to equivocation in the stock market is no secret, and though on the above-mentioned September 16 the culmination of a long-standing downward spiral dropped Amalgamated-Matter off the Big Board once and for all, reducing my broker suddenly to the legume family, I do not offer this as an excuse for my negligence and monumental ineptitude. I goofed. Forgive me. That you failed to notice the missing letter indicated a certain disconcertion on your part, which I put down to zeal, but heaven knows we all make mistakes. That's life--and chess.

Well, then, the error laid bare, simple rectification follows. If you would be so good as to transfer my knight to your king's fourth square I think we may proceed with our little game more accurately. The announcement of checkmate which you made in this morning's mail is, I fear, in all fairness, a false alarm, and if you will reexamine the positions in light of today's discovery, you will find that it is your king that lies close to mate, exposed and undefended, an immobile target for my predatory bishops. Ironic, the vicissitudes of miniature war! Fate, in the guise of the dead-letter office, waxes omnipotent and--*voilà!*--the worm turns. Once again, I beg you accept sincerest apologies for the unfortunate carelessness, and I await anxiously your next move. Enclosed is my forty-fifth move: My knight captures your queen.

Sincerely,  
Gossage

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Gossage:

Received the letter this morning containing your forty-fifth move (your knight captures my queen?), and also your lengthy explanation regarding the mid-September ellipsis in our correspondence. Let me see if I understand you correctly. Your knight, which I removed from the board weeks ago, you now claim should be resting on the king's fourth square, owing to a letter lost in the mail twenty-three moves ago. I was not aware that any such mishap had occurred, and remember distinctly your making a twenty-second move, which I think was your rook to the queen's sixth square, where it was subsequently butchered in a gambit of yours that misfired tragically.

Currently, the king's fourth square is occupied by my rook, and as you are knightless, the dead-letter office notwithstanding, I cannot quite understand what piece you are using to capture my queen with. What I think you mean, as most of your pieces are blockaded, is that you request your king be moved to my bishop's fourth square (your only possibility)--an adjustment I have taken the liberty of making and then countering with today's move, my forty-sixth, wherein I capture your queen and put your king in check. Now your letter becomes clearer.

I think now the last remaining moves of the game can be played out with smoothness and alacrity.

Faithfully,  
Vardebedian

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Vardebedian:

I have just finished perusing your latest note, the one containing a bizarre forty-sixth move dealing with the removal of my queen from a square on which it has not rested for eleven

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days. Through patient calculation, I think I have hit upon the cause of your confusion and misunderstanding of the existing facts. That your rook rests on the king's fourth square is an impossibility commensurate with two like snowflakes; if you will refer back to the ninth move of the game, you will see clearly that your rook has long been captured. Indeed, it was that same daring sacrificial combination that ripped your center and cost you *both* your rooks. What are they doing on the board now?

I offer for your consideration that what happened is as follows: The intensity of foray and whirlwind exchanges on and about the twenty-second move left you in a state of slight dissociation, and in your anxiety to hold your own at that point you failed to notice that my usual letter was not forthcoming but instead moved your own pieces twice, giving you a somewhat unfair advantage, wouldn't you say? This is over and done with, and to retrace our steps tediously would be difficult, if not impossible. Therefore, I feel the best way to rectify this entire matter is to allow me the opportunity of two consecutive moves at this time. Fair is fair.

First, then, I take your bishop with my pawn. Then, as this leaves your queen unprotected, I capture her also. I think we can now proceed with the last stages unhampered.

Sincerely,  
Gossage

P.S.: I am enclosing a diagram showing exactly how the board now looks, for your edification in your closing play. As you can see, your king is trapped, unguarded and alone in the center. Best to you.

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Gossage:

Received your latest letter today, and while it was just shy of coherence, I think I can see where your bewilderment lies. From your enclosed diagram, it has become apparent to me that for the past six weeks we have been playing two completely different chess games-- myself according to our correspondence, you more in keeping with the world as you would have it, rather than with any rational system of order. The knight move which allegedly got lost in the mail would have been impossible on the twenty-second move, as the piece was then standing on the edge of the last file, and the move you describe would have brought it to rest on the coffee table, next to the board.

As for granting you two consecutive moves to make up for one allegedly lost in the mail-- surely you jest, Pops. I will honor your first move (you take my bishop), but I cannot allow the second, and as it is now my turn, I retaliate by removing your queen with my rook. The fact that you tell me I have no rooks means little in actuality, as I need only glance downward at the board to see them darting about with cunning and vigor.

Finally, that diagram of what you fantasize the board to look like indicates a freewheeling, Marx Brothers approach to the game, and, while amusing, this hardly speaks well for your assimilation of *Nimzowitsch on Chess*, which you hustled from the library under your alpaca sweater last winter, because I saw you. I suggest you study the diagram I enclose and rearrange your board accordingly, that we might finish up with some degree of precision.

Hopefully,  
Vardebedian

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Vardebedian,

Not wanting to protract an already disoriented business (I know your recent illness has left your usually hardy constitution somewhat fragmented and disorganized, causing a mild breach with the real world as we know it), I must take this opportunity to undo our sordid tangle of circumstances before it progresses irrevocably to a Kafkaesque conclusion.

Had I realized you were not gentleman enough to allow me an equalizing second move, I would not, on my forty-sixth move, have permitted my pawn to capture your bishop. According to your own diagram, in fact, these two pieces were so placed as to render that impossible, bound as we are to rules established by the World Chess Federation and not the New York State Boxing Commission. Without doubting that your intent was constructive in removing my queen, I interject that only disaster can ensue when you arrogate to yourself this arbitrary power of decision and begin to play dictator, masking tactical blunders with duplicity and aggression--a habit you decried in our world leaders several months ago in your paper on "De Sade and Non-Violence."

Unfortunately, the game having gone on non-stop, I have not been able to calculate exactly on which square you ought to replace the purloined knight, and I suggest we leave it to the gods by having me close my eyes and toss it back on the board, agreeing to accept whatever spot it may land on. It should add an element of spice to our little encounter. My forty-seventh move: My rook captures your knight.

Sincerely,

Gossage

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Gossage:

How curious your last letter was! Well-intentioned, concise, containing all the elements that appear to make up what passes among certain reference groups as a communicative effect, yet tinged throughout by what Jean-Paul Sartre is so fond of referring to as "nothingness." One is immediately struck by a profound sense of despair, and reminded vividly of the diaries sometimes left by doomed explorers lost at the Pole, or the letters of German soldiers at Stalingrad. Fascinating how the senses disintegrate when faced with an occasional black truth, and scamper amuck, substantiating mirage and constructing a precarious buffer against the onslaught of all too terrifying existence!

Be that as it may, my friend, I have just spent the better part of a week sorting out the miasma of lunatic alibis known as your correspondence in an effort to adjust matters, that our game may be finished simply once and for all. Your queen is gone. Kiss it off. So are both your rooks. Forget about one bishop altogether, because I took it. The other is so impotently placed away from the main action of the game that don't count on it or it'll break your heart.

As regards the knight you lost squarely but refuse to give up, I have replaced it at the only conceivable position it could appear, thus granting you the most incredible brace of unorthodoxies since the Persians whipped up this little diversion way back when. It lies at my bishop's seventh square, and if you can pull your ebbing faculties together long enough to appraise the board you will notice this same coveted piece now blocks your king's only means of escape from my suffocating pincer. How fitting that your greedy plot be turned to my advantage! The knight, groveling its way back into play, torpedoes your end game!

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My move is queen to knight five, and I predict mate in one move.

Cordially,  
Vardebedian

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Vardebedian:

Obviously the constant tension incurred defending a series of numbingly hopeless chess positions has rendered the delicate machinery of your psychic apparatus sluggish, leaving its grasp of external phenomena a jot flimsy. You give me no alternative but to end the contest swiftly and mercifully, removing the pressure before it leaves you permanently damaged.

Knight--yes, knight!--to queen six. Check.

Gossage

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Gossage:

Bishop to queen five. Checkmate.

Sorry the competition proved too much for you, but if it's any consolation, several local chess masters have, upon observing your technique, flipped out. Should you want a rematch, I suggest we try Scrabble, a relatively new interest of mine, and one that I might conceivably not run away with so easily.

Vardebedian

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Vardebedian,

Rook to knight eight. Checkmate.

Rather than torment you with the further details of my mate, as I believe you are basically a decent man (one day, some form of therapy will bear me out), I accept your invitation to Scrabble in good spirits. Get out your set. Since you played white in chess and thereby enjoyed the advantage of the first move (had I known your limitations, I would have spotted you more), I shall make the first play. The seven letters I have just turned up are O, A, E, J, N, R, and Z--an unpromising jumble that should guarantee, even to the most suspicious, the integrity of my draw. Fortunately, however, an extensive vocabulary coupled with a penchant for esoterica, has enabled me to bring etymological order out of what, to one less literate, might seem a mishmash. My first word is "ZANJERO." Look it up. Now lay it out, horizontally, the E resting on the center square. Count carefully, not overlooking the double word score for an opening move and the fifty-point bonus for my use of all seven letters. The score is now 116--0.

Your move.