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From the Archives

Hosted by
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Chess Mazes
by Bruce Alberston

From the Archives...

Since it came online over eight years ago, **ChessCafe.com** has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online at least once each week, usually on Thursday or Friday. We will update the **ChessCafe** home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

Author’s Preface:

This article, a chess-based parody of Franz Kafka’s classic piece of literature *The Castle*, first appeared in the October 1998 issue of *Australian Chess Forum* and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the editors. That it is resurfacing here is largely Bruce Pandolfini’s fault. In his regular **ChessCafe** column [The Q & A Way Pandolfini](#), in his 24 May 2000 article entitled “[Write or Wrong](#),” discussed “chess writing” versus “literature.”

For me, this was like a red rag to a bull as I have, in the past, written extensively on this subject for a literary magazine. The connecting thread can be found in my *View From Down Under* column dated 14 June 1999, entitled “The Write Stuff.” At the end of that article I invited readers to compare and contrast *The Rook* to *The Castle*. For the uninitiated I should mention that reading Kafka is much like improving at chess: it is hard work, often frustrating, but brings a real sense of achievement in the end.

Chris DePasquale, Alice Springs, June 2000

The Rook

by Chris DePasquale

The Invitation

R. clutched to his chest the letter inviting him to be the twelfth participant in this year's Victorian Chess Championship. He had devoted all his life towards this task – for it is not all that easy to achieve such exalted status as a state championship participant – and, as he made his way through the wind-swept wasteland known as Ripponlea, he realized that all his endeavors had been worthwhile.

Of course, R. might have had doubts about his participation – after all, on other occasions had not fate intervened at the last moment to prevent him taking his place in the field? – but this time it was different. The letter that he had signed personally by Oysters, and it was well known that Oysters was a big man in these parts – perhaps even the highest official of them all, although this was doubted by a few who had never seen him – and that should be sufficient even for R. He put behind him the year he had been assured of participation, only to find that the event was not to be held at all that year, and that other occasion when his entry was accepted, only to find that the event was changed from a chess championship to an orienteering event.

R. was challenged – as he well expected to be – as he approached the entrance to the playing venue. “Who are you?” demanded the man at the door but, before R. could reply, one of the assistants of the doorman – and it was true, of course, that all people holding such exalted positions need at least two assistants – said, “No, don't tell us who you are. Go away, and if you are needed you will be sent for.”

“But I have been sent for,” explained R. patiently. “I am here as the twelfth man in the Victorian Championship,” and he permitted himself a little smile. “Impossible!” snapped the doorman, and turned his back on R. “This is not a village cricket match, where a twelfth man would be required, this is a chess championship – in fact, of course, it is *the* chess championship – and only ten players take part,” one of the assistants added, in a tone suggesting that anybody standing at the door – as indeed R. was doing at that time – would know that ten players only take part in the Victorian championship, and the assistant also turned his back on R.

At another time R. might have given vent to his feelings about this rude behavior, but his confidence in his position prevented him from doing so. “You must be mistaken,” he said drawing from his pocket the letter from Oysters, and thrust it under the nose of the second assistant. “Officials never make mistakes,” retorted the assistant, but he did at least take the time to read the letter. “So,” said R. once the assistant had finished reading, “how do you explain that?” The assistant permitted himself a smirk at this remark, wondering to himself how anybody with sufficient intelligence to play chess could be so lacking in knowledge and understanding about the workings of the officials. “You must talk to the arbiter; he will explain it,” said the official. “And where is the arbiter?” R. inquired, as patiently as he could under the circumstances. “Why, in the playing hall, of course,” the second assistant said, and R. stepped towards the door to the playing hall.

The doorman and his assistants blocked his path, and the doorman reminded him that he had no right to enter the room. R., who had seen an enormous collection of people enter the playing hall while he was trying to resolve his position with the doorman and his assistants, inquired who was permitted to enter. "Only players, officials and spectators, of course," explained the doorman. "Well, I am a player," insisted R. waving Oyster's letter in front of their faces. "You can't be," said the doorman, "as a twelfth player is not required." R. considered this for a moment. "Then I am a spectator," tried R., "and entitled to access." The doorman shook his head sadly. "This invitation refers to you as a player," he pointed out, "so you cannot be a spectator. And as this letter has been signed by as high-ranking an official as Oysters himself, we cannot take the liberty of ignoring it."

"Perhaps, rather than talk to the arbiter I should talk to Oysters to resolve this matter," R. suggested, whereupon the doorman and his assistants began to giggle, and then laugh uproariously. R. reddened as their laughs finally reduced to coughs and splutters, and eventually the doorman managed to tell him that the arbiter was, indeed, none other than Oysters himself. "But if you wait outside," he continued, "you might be able to catch him before he leaves."

Having no choice R. waited outside, where he was soon joined by one of the chess players who offered him a cigarette. "Why do you smoke?" asked R., keen to change the subject from his own predicament for a short time. "It kills all the germs in there," said the chess player, jerking his head in the direction of the playing hall. "In every chess tournament all the non-smokers come down with all sorts of ailments that prevent them from performing their best." R. pondered this. "Why don't they all smoke then?" he asked the obvious question. "Well, they must have some excuse, at least a cold or 'flu, in case they don't win all their games," the chess player pointed out. "Don't you need an excuse?" R. asked, and the chess player smiled. "They make me smoke outside, so I will be almost certain to catch pneumonia before the event is over, so I will have the best excuse of all." R. chatted a little with the player, and became quite friendly with him, and eventually grew in confidence enough to explain that he was waiting for Oysters, who had made some mistake that needed to be rectified. "Be warned," said the chess player, "that the officials never make mistakes. And the higher the official, the more he never makes mistakes. My brother once accused Oysters of making a mistake, and it ruined his life." And the chess player proceeded to tell Patrick's tale.

Patrick's Tale

Patrick was the best player around. Everybody knew it. The officials knew it. Patrick knew it. The other players knew it. As if there was any doubt, the officials surveyed the top twenty players, asking them to rank the top twenty players. Being the best player, Patrick naturally received one top ranking and nineteen second rankings. When it came to select the team for the interstate telephone match he was given a letter, signed by Oysters himself, offering him board two in the team. In a fit of rage, Patrick publicly destroyed the invitation.

In the next few days things began to happen. The students who he used to coach

stopped coming for their lessons. Entries that he sent off for various tournaments seemed constantly to go astray or not be received. His chess club withdrew his honorary life membership, and his regular blitz partners kept finding themselves unavailable. Patrick's brother – for this smoking chess player was none other – approached all the officials he knew, and even some who he didn't know, beseeching them to reverse their decision to ostracize Patrick. They claimed that no such decision had been made. He pointed out the students leaving, and they made the point that students give up coaching, or change their coaches, every day. He raised the disappearing entry forms, but the officials – while at considerable pains to point out that officials never made mistakes – expressed the view that mail failing to reach its destination was a daily event.

Within six months Patrick died, a broken and lonely man. The question you need to consider is: Did Oysters kill Patrick?

The Official View

When the chess player finished his tale R. became concerned for him at the amount of time he had spent away from the board. "Do not concern yourself," he said, "I got a bye today. Apparently the twelfth player did not turn up!" And with that, he took his leave, running for the bus. R. wanted to run after him, but was concerned that he might miss Oysters if he left his sentry post outside the door.

Some hours later players started leaving the venue as games finished, while R. waited patiently for Oysters to show himself. Several hours later, just as R. had given up hope, Oysters did appear. "I must talk with you," said R., but Oysters kept walking. R. ran after him and, upon catching him up, waved the letter in front of his face. "Yes," said Oysters, "I must talk to you about this, but I must also rush off to the radio station. You can travel with me if you like." R. said nothing, needing all his breath to keep pace with the fast-striding official. Reaching his car Oysters tore the numerous parking tickets from the front windscreen and tossed them in the gutter. He then climbed inside, and R. was barely alert enough to also climb in to the passenger seat before the car took off and began racing towards the outlying suburbs where R. knew the radio station was located. R. was not sure whether he should be speaking, but not wishing to offend the official he waited patiently. Finally, Oysters spoke.

"You failed to play your game today, so we have had to withdraw you from the tournament," he began. R. felt compelled to argue his case, but the events of the day had exhausted him. Now all he wanted to do was relax back into the comfortable car seat and drift off to sleep. As he fought to stay awake, as was only correct for here was this high and mighty official giving him the benefit of his time, knowledge and experience – and when it came to wisdom, who knew what pearls Oysters might produce – Oysters droned on.

"My initial reaction was to suspend you for two years for forfeiting the game, and a further twelve months for being an unapproved withdrawal, although it can be argued that your withdrawal was directed by an official and hence

cannot be unapproved, but it is really a question of fault and apportioning blame – which can, of course, never be applied to officials who are always blameless – but then I would have to decide whether the suspensions would be served consecutively or concurrently. Of course, it is understood that you would argue that you were not allowed in the playing hall by the officials, but we – the officials, that is – would point out that you were given a letter of invitation to avoid that precise problem, and all that has really happened is that you have failed to use that letter properly. On the other hand, one might consider that no harm has been done, and that you might play your game on another day, just as if it had been postponed for whatever reason. Of course, realistically, there are no reasons for postponing games, for if the players are unable to play their games on the scheduled days why would they enter the tournament in the first place? What would happen if you tried to enter one of the great chess tournaments in the world, like Hastings or Wijk an Zee, and proposed on your entry form that you would like to play all your games on dates different to those proposed by the organizers, and, preferably, in a different location? Of course, they would send you a polite letter thanking you for your entry and apologizing for the fact that it had gone astray and never been received. Here, of course, we generally like postponements, because they disrupt the whole flow of things and require us to organize things like venues for the postponed games, arbiters to look after them, and numerous other pieces of paperwork in duplicate or even triplicate – for what is the point of paperwork if not to be produced in multiple copies for all the different officials – and in this way we can fill all our time. Some might argue that the officials should be spending their time encouraging more people to play organized chess, developing corporate and business plans, obtaining commercial sponsors and government support, but the plain fact of the matter is that we are no good at that sort of thing – although, if truth be told, it must be confessed that we have never attempted such a thing, yet we are fairly confident that we would be no good at it, and as the officials are never wrong, it seems likely, nay, almost certain, that we are right on this point – and so we content ourselves with filling our time organizing events in the most disorganized way possible. So, it is not possible for you to play in the Victorian championship this year. But while you cannot participate and, for reasons which have probably been explained to you, you cannot be a spectator at the event, we might see our way clear to giving you the job as demonstration board operator. And as there are no demonstration boards to operate this will give you time to participate in the reserves section which, should you win, will qualify you to play in the Victorian Championship to be held next year. Now, I understand that you will probably want to dispute this decision but, as you have probably become aware, I am the leading official in this organization, and my decision can only be appealed to the full council of officials at the Annual General Meeting.”

R. had appeared to be dozing through this long monologue, but, at the mention of a possible channel of appeal, enabling him to take his rightful place in the championship, he became alert. “When will the AGM take place?” R. inquired, trying not to get his hopes up. “We don’t know at this stage, of course,” Oysters replied, “as we never have anything organized more than a day or two in advance. I can tell you, however, that the last AGM was held yesterday. Now, I have reached my destination, and must ask you to leave the car.”

A surprised R. bundled himself out of the vehicle, which Oysters was kind enough to slow to about thirty kilometers an hour to enable R. to do so, and commenced the long walk home. As he walked, R. considered his options. Ultimately he realized that his goal of participating in the Victorian Championship this year was not going to be achieved, but perhaps he could take a step nearer his new goal of playing in the following year's championship, by taking the place offered to him in the Reserves event with every hope of winning the event and qualifying directly for the following year's championship.

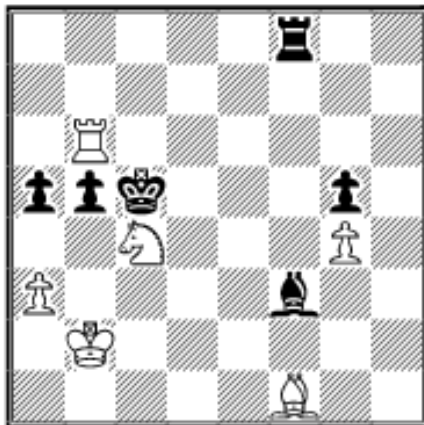
When R. arrived back at the tournament venue the next week he was allowed to pass through the door to the playing hall and take his position in the Reserves event. Finding his way to the tournament chart he discovered that he had been given a zero in the first round for forfeiting his game. R. initially reacted angrily, and intended to dispute this decision, but recalled with horror the lecture Oysters had given him the week before, and bit his lip. Besides, was he not the best player in the Reserves field? He was fairly confident that if they surveyed the 12 players in that event he would rank himself top, and be ranked second by the other eleven players. Deciding against the distractions of the off-board disputes R. squared his round shoulders and resolved to settle matters on the chess-board.

The Reserves Tournament

R. played that Reserves event as though his very life depended on it. He cut a swathe through the opposition, scoring win after win, and with one round to play had scored 9/10 – he had, of course, forfeited the first round – enough to win most tournaments comfortably. His last round opponent, Dogswellington, however, had 9½/10, and only a win would do.

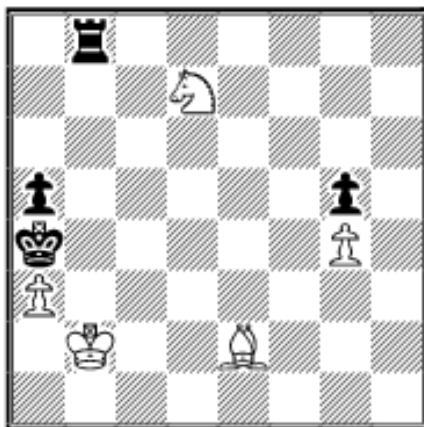
During the course of the game Dogswellington used advanced techniques for distracting R. from his game, in particular, blitzing R., playing a series of moves without recording any of them on his scoresheet. R. found that he could not concentrate on the game properly, and sought out Oysters to lodge a formal complaint, and to ascertain how the rules dealt with such a situation. Oysters appeared most sympathetic to his plight, and advised R. that the rules required the arbiter to issue a formal warning to the player breaching the rules, which Oysters duly did. A couple of moves later, however, Dogswellington was at it again, and once more R. sought out Oysters, and once again a formal warning was issued. Still Dogswellington proceeded with scant regard for the rules, and R. found himself completely unable to concentrate on what was happening on the board. After Oysters had issued Dogswellington with his seventh official warning, R., who at this stage was in a desperate position a piece down, inquired of Oysters what the purpose of the official warnings was, as Dogswellington seemed to be able to ignore them without penalty. Oysters consulted his massive folder of papers and, after a long examination concluded that the rules provided for a player to be forfeited for continual breaches of the rules after official warnings.

This gave R. tremendous heart, and he fought back bravely to reach this position.



Dogswellington, playing White, was on the move. Although piece for a pawn up, his rook, knight and g-pawn were all under attack, and R. seemed certain to gain some material. Dogswellington sunk into a long trance before playing 51.Rxb5+ R. had no choice but to capture this with 51 ...Kxb5 and Dogswellington then played 52.Ne5+. Realizing that moving the king to a dark square would cost a rook to Nd7+, R. played the only move: 52...Ka4 and started to rejoice inwardly that he now had a winning material advantage, but after 53.Nd7 threatening mate by Nb6 or Nc5 it was R.'s turn to have a long think. The more he thought the more insoluble he found the problems facing him. There was no square for his rook where he could cover the mates. R. realized that his only hope was for Dogswellington to commit one final, fatal breach of the rules by not recording his moves. To confuse the issue as much as possible he played 53...Be2 to which Dogswellington immediately replied 54.Bxe2. Looking beseechingly at Oysters,

R. threw in 54...Rb8+ creating this position:



Dogswellington spotted the stalemate trap that would be sprung by capturing the rook and immediately played 55.Bd1+, still without having recorded the previous moves, whereupon Oysters stepped in and advised that Dogswellington had forfeited the game through breaches of the rules despite seven official warnings.

R.'s heart was filled with joy when he heard those words, for he had now, finally achieved his aim of qualifying for the

Victorian championship, and nothing could prevent him from participating in it next year. He followed Oysters to the official cross-table on the wall, where Oysters filled in a large zero for Dogswellington, but R.'s joy turned to dismay when, in the row alongside R.'s name, Oysters wrote not 1, but ¼. R. demanded that Oysters explain himself, which Oysters did at some length.

“Of course, your reaction that, as your opponent receives zero points for the game you should be entitled to one point from it is perfectly natural, there was a time when I – this being a time, of course, long before I had years of experience as a high-ranking official – would have thought exactly the same thing. But let us consider the facts of the matter. If, in the final position, your opponent had

spotted that he was in check, and captured your rook, a stalemate would have occurred and the rules, which are quite clear on this point, allow for half a point to be awarded to each player. You are probably about to tell me that, as he had touched his bishop, he was obliged to make with it the only legal move, which was Bb5+. But then what happens? If you capture this with the King he takes your rook with a completely winning position. If on the other hand you capture the bishop with your rook, he moves his king to a2 and you are in zugzwang. Only your rook can legally move, but every move will allow its capture either directly, or after a knight check. So you would lose. So it is clear that you could score at best half a point from this game and at worst – and in fact, the most likely outcome – a loss and zero points. In the circumstances, my awarding you one quarter of a point seems most fair, and bordering on the generous.”

The Appeal

This time R. did appeal the decision, and an appeals committee was formulated, taking written submissions from both sides. R. argued generally that if his opponent had been forfeited for breaching the rules, then he should be entitled to a full point. He further argued that, even if that was not so, Oysters had placed too great an emphasis on the final position for, was it not so that Dogswellington had been forfeited not specifically for that final infraction of the laws, but for repeated breaches despite repeated warnings – and during those earlier occurrences the position was not as cut and dried as the final position – and it was only the continual distraction he suffered from the repeated infractions that caused his position to deteriorate to the final one? Oysters, for his part, argued that he was a high-ranking official, and that it is well known and accepted throughout the community that officials never make mistakes, and that therefore his decision was correct. The appeal committee deliberated well into the next year, when, finally, just as R. had given up hope, he received a telephone call from the appeal committee coordinator advising that the committee had ruled in his favor, and that their written decision would be issued in the next couple of days. R. was overjoyed, and immediately rang Oysters, but Oysters replied that he had not received any formal notification of a decision and hung up. Two days later the promised missive arrived, and R. read the findings with great satisfaction, and again telephoned Oysters, who again advised that no official decision had been notified to him, and hung up. Two days later R. received a letter from Oysters, which he opened trembling with anticipation. It read:

“As the time for deciding your appeal has expired and no decision on the appeal has been reached, I regret to advise you that your appeal cannot be successful, and Dogswellington is the qualifier from last year for the next Victorian championship. You are, however, hereby invited to be the twelfth participant in this year’s championship.”

The Next Championship

R. clutched to his chest the letter inviting him to be the twelfth participant in this year’s Victorian Chess Championship. R. was challenged – as he well expected to be – as he approached the entrance to the playing venue. “Who are you?” demanded the man at the door. R. fled down the stairs, out onto the street, and threw himself in front of a passing truck.



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