

The Chessplayers

by Charles L. Harness

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Now please understand this. I'm not saying that all chessplayers are lunatics. But I do claim that chronic chessplaying affects a man.

Let me tell you about the K Street Chess Club, of which I was once treasurer.

Our membership roll claimed a senator, the leader of a large labor union, the president of the A. & W. railroad, and a few other big shots. But it seemed the more important they were *outside*, the rotter they were as chessplayers.

The senator and the rail magnate didn't know the Ruy Lopez from the Queen's Gambit, so of course they could only play the other fish, or hang around wistfully watching the games of the Class A players and wishing that they, too, amounted to something.

The club's champion was Bobby Baker, a little boy in the fourth grade at the Pestalozzi-Borstal Boarding School. Several of his end game compositions had been published in Chess Review and Shakhmatny Russkji Zhurnal before he could talk plainly.

Our second best was Pete Summers, a clerk for the A. & W. Railroad. He was the author of two very famous chess books. One book proved that white can always win, and the other proved that black can always draw. As you might suspect, the gap separating him from the president of his railroad was abysmal indeed.

The show position was held by Jim Bradley, a chronic idler whose dues were paid by his wife. The club's admiration for him was profound.

But experts don't make a club. You have to have some guiding spirit, a fairly good player, with a knack for organization and a true knowledge of values.

Such a gem we had in our secretary, Nottingham Jones.

It was really my interest in Nottingham that led me to join the K Street Chess Club. I wanted to see if he was an exception, or whether they were all alike.

After I tell you about their encounter with Zeno, you can judge for yourself.

In his unreal life Nottingham Jones was a statistician in a government bureau. He worked at a desk in a big room with many other desks, including mine, and he performed his duties blankly and without conscious effort. Many an afternoon, after the quitting bell had rung and I had strolled over to discuss club finances with him, he would be astonished to discover that he had already gone to work and had turned out a creditable stack of forms.

I suppose that it was during these hours of his quasi-existence that the invisible Nottingham conceived those numerous events that had made him famous as a chess club emcee throughout the United States.

For it was Nottingham who organized the famous American-Soviet cable matches (in which the U.S. team had been so soundly trounced), refereed numerous U.S. match championships, and launched a dozen brilliant but impecunious foreign chess masters on exhibition tours in a hundred chess clubs from New York to Los Angeles.

But the achievements of which he was proudest were his bishop-knight tournaments.

Now the bishop is supposed to be slightly stronger than the knight, and this evaluation has become so ingrained in chess thinking today that no player will voluntarily exchange a bishop for an enemy knight. he

may squander his life's savings on phony stock, talk back to traffic cops, and forget his wedding anniversary, but never, never, *never* will he exchange a bishop for a knight.

Nottingham suspected this fixation to be ill-founded; he had the idea that the knight was just as strong as the bishop, and to prove his point he held numerous intramural tournaments in the K Street Club, in which one player used six pawns and a bishop against the six pawns and a knight of his opponent.

Jones never did make up his mind as to whether the bishop was stronger than the knight, but at the end of a couple of years he did know that the K Street Club had more bishop-knight experts than any other club in the United States.

And it then occurred to him that American chess had a beautiful means of redeeming itself from its resounding defeat at the hands of the Russian cable team.

He sent his challenge to Stalin himself-- the K Street chess Club versus All the Russians-- a dozen boards of bishop-knight games, to be played by cable.

The Soviet Recreation Bureau sent the customary six curt rejections and then promptly accepted.

And this leads us back to one afternoon at 5 o'clock when Nottingham Jones looked up from his desk and seemed startled to find me standing there.

"Don't get up yet," I said. "This is something you ought to take sitting down."

He stared at me owlishly. "Is the year's rent due again so soon?"

"Next week. This is something else."

"Oh?"

"A professor friend of mine," I said, "who lives in the garret over my apartment, wants to play the whole club at one sitting-- a simultaneous exhibition."

"A simul, eh? Pretty good, is he?"

"It isn't exactly the professor who wants to play. It's really a friend of his."

"Is *he* good?"

"The professor says so. But that isn't exactly the point. To make it short, this professor, Dr. Schmidt, owns a pet rat. He wants the rat to play." I added: "And for the usual simul fee. The professor needs money. In fact, if he doesn't get a steady job pretty soon he may be deported."

Nottingham looked dubious. "I don't see how we can help him. Did you say *rat*?"

"I did."

"A chessplaying rat? A four-legged one?"

"Right. quite a drawing card for the club, eh?"

Nottingham shrugged his shoulders. "We learn something every day. Will you believe it, I never heard they cared for the game. Women don't. However, I once read about an educated horse... I suppose he's well known in Europe?"

"Very likely," I said. "The professor specializes in comparative psychology."

Nottingham shook his head impatiently. "I don't mean the professor. I'm talking about the rat. What's his name, anyway?"

"Zeno."

"Never heard of him. What's his tournament score?"

"I don't think he ever played in any tournaments. The professor taught him the game in a concentration camp. How good he is I don't know, except that he can give the professor rook odds."

Nottingham smiled pityingly. "I can give you rook odds, but I'm not good enough to throw a simul."

A great light burst over me. "Hey, wait a minute. You're completely overlooking the fantastic fact that Zeno is a-- "

"The only pertinent question," interrupted Nottingham, "is whether he's really in the *master* class. We've got half a dozen players in the club who can throw an 'inside' simul for free, but when we hire an outsider and charge the members a dollar each to play him, he's got to be good enough to tackle *our* best. And when the whole club's in training for the bishop-knight cable match with the Russians next month, I can't have them relaxing over a mediocre simul."

"But you're missing the whole point-- "

"-- which is, this Zeno needs money and you want me to throw a simul to help him. But I just can't do

it. I have a duty to the members to maintain a high standard."

"But Zeno is a rat. He learned to play chess in a concentration camp. He-- "

"That doesn't necessarily make him a good player."

It was all cockeyed. My voice trailed off. "Well, somehow it seemed like a good idea."

Nottingham saw that he had let me down too hard. "If you want to, you might arrange a game between Zeno and one of our top players-- say Jim Bradley. he has lots of time. If Jim says Zeno is good enough for a simul, we'll give him a simul."

* * *

So I invited Jim Bradley and the professor, including Zeno, to my apartment the next evening.

I had seen Zeno before, but that was when I thought he was just an ordinary pet rat. Viewed as a chessmaster he seemed to be a completely different creature. Both Jim and I studied him closely when the professor pulled him out of his coat pocket and placed him on the chess table.

You could tell, just by looking that the little animal, from the way his beady black eyes shone and the alert way he carried his head, that here was a super-rat, an Einstein among rodents.

"Chust let him get his bearings," said the professor, as he fixed a little piece of cheese to Bradley's king with a thumb tack. "And don't worry, he will make a good showing."

Zeno pitter-pattered around the board, sniffed with a bored delicacy at both his and Bradley's chess pieces, twitched his nose at Bradley's cheese-crowned king, and gave the impression that the only reason he didn't yawn was that he was too well bred. He returned to his side of the board and waited for Bradley to move.

Jim blinked, shook himself, and finally pushed his queen pawn two squares.

Zeno minced out, picked up his own queen pawn between his teeth, and moved it forward two squares. Then Jim moved out his queen bishop pawn, and the game was under way, a conventional Queen's Gambit Declined.

I got the professor off in a corner. "How did you teach him to play? You never did tell me."

"Was easy. Tied each chessman in succession to body and let Zeno run simple maze on the chessboard composed of moves of chessman, until reached king and got piece of bread stuck on crown. Next, ve-- one moment, please."

We both looked at the board. Zeno had knocked over Jim's king and was tapping with his dainty forefoot in front of the fallen monarch.

Jim was counting the taps with silent lips. "He's announcing a mate in thirteen. And he's right."

Zeno was already nibbling at the little piece of cheese fixed to Jim's king.

* * *

When I reported the result to Nottingham the next day, he agreed to hold a simultaneous exhibition for Zeno. Since Zeno was an unknown, with no reputation and no drawing power, Jones naturally didn't notify the local papers, but merely sent post cards to the club members.

On the night of the simul Nottingham set up 25 chess tables in an approximate circle around the club room. Here and there the professor pushed the tables a little closer together so that Zeno could jump easily from one to the other as he made his rounds. Then the professor made a circuit of all the tables and tacked a little piece of cheese to each king.

After that he mopped at his face, stepped outside the circle, and Zeno started his rounds.

And then we hit a snag.

A slow gray man emerged from a little group of spectators and approached the professor.

"Dr. Hans Schmidt?" he asked.

"Ya," said the professor, a little nervously. "I mean, yes sir."

The gray man pulled out his pocketbook and flashed something at the professor. "Immigration service. Do you have in your possession a renewed immigration visa?"

The professor wet his lips and shook his head wordlessly.

The other continued, "According to our records you don't have a job, haven't paid your rent for a month, and your credit has run out at the local delicatessen. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to come along with me."

"You mean-- deportation?"

"How do I know? Maybe, maybe not."

The professor looked as though a steam roller had just passed over him. "So it comes," he whispered. "I knew I should not have come out from hiding, but one needs money...."

"Too bad," said the immigration man. "Of course, if you could post a \$500 bond as surety for your self-support-- "

"Had I \$500, would I be behind at the delicatessen?"

"No, I guess not. That your hat and coat?"

The professor started sadly toward the coat-racks.

I grabbed at his sleeve.

"Now hold on," I said hurriedly. "Look, mister, in two hours Dr. Schmidt will have a contract for a 52-week exhibition tour." I exclaimed to the professor: "Zeno will make you all the money you can spend! When the simul is over tonight, Nottingham Jones will recommend you to every chess club in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Think of it! Zeno! History's only chess-playing rat!"

"Not so fast," said Nottingham, who had just walked up. "I've got to see how good this Zeno is before I back him."

"Don't worry," I said. "Why, the bare fact that he's a rat-- "

The gray man interrupted. "You men you want me to wait a couple of hours until we see whether the professor is going to get some sort of a contact?"

"That's right," I said eagerly. "After Zeno shows what he can do, the professor gets a chess exhibition tour."

The gray man was studying Zeno with distant distaste. "Well, okay. I'll wait."

The professor heaved a gigantic sigh and trotted off to watch his protégé.

"Say," said the gray man to me, "you people ought to keep a cat in this place. I was sure I saw a rat running around over there."

"That's Zeno," I said. "He's playing chess."

"Don't get sarcastic, Jack. I was just offering a suggestion." He wandered off to keep an eye on the professor.

* * *

The evening wore on, and the professor used up all his handkerchiefs and borrowed one of mine. But I couldn't see what he was worried about, because it was clear that Zeno was a marvel, right up there in the ranks of Lasker, Alekhine, and Botvinnik.

In every game, he entered into an orgy of complications. One by one his opponents teetered off the razor's edge, and had to resign. One by one the tables emptied, and the losers gathered around those who were still struggling. The clusters around Bobby Baker, Pete Summers, and Jim Bradley grew minute by minute.

But at the end of the second hour, when only the three club champions were still battling, I noticed that Zeno was slowing down.

"What's wrong, professor?" I whispered anxiously.

He groaned. "For supper he chenerally gets only two little pieces cheese."

And so far tonight Zeno had eaten twenty-three! He was so fat he could hardly waddle.

I groaned too, and thought of tiny stomach pumps.

We watched tensely as Zeno pulled himself slowly from Jim Bradley's board over to Peter Summers'. It seemed to take him an extraordinarily long time to analyze the position on Pete's board. At last he made his move and crawled across to Bobby Baker's table.

And it was there, chin resting on the pedestal of his king rook, that he collapsed into gentle rodent slumber.

The professor let out an almost inaudible but heart-rending moan.

"Don't just stand there!" I cried. "Wake him up!"

The professor prodded the little animal gingerly with his forefinger. "*Liebchen*," he pleaded, "*wach' auf!*"

But Zeno just rolled comfortably over on his back.

A deathly silence had fallen over the room, and it was on account of this that we heard what we heard. Zeno began to snore.

Everybody seemed to be looking in other directions when the professor lifted the little animal up and dropped him tenderly into his wrinkled coat pocket.

The gray man was the first to speak. "Well, Dr. Schmidt? No contract?"

"Don't be silly," I declared. "Of course he gets a tour. Nottingham, how soon can you get letters off to the other clubs?"

"But I really can't recommend him," demurred Nottingham. "After all, he defaulted three out of 25 games. He's only a *Kleinmeister*-- not the kind of material to make a simul circuit."

"What if he *didn't* finish three measly games? He's a good player, all the same. All you have to do is say the word and every club secretary in North America will make a date with him-- at an entrance fee of \$5 per player. He'll take the country by storm!"

"I'm sorry," Nottingham said to the professor. "I have a certain standard, and your boy just doesn't make the grade."

The professor sighed. "*Ja, ich versteh'.*"

"But this is crazy!" My voice sounded a little louder than I had intended. "You fellows don't agree with Nottingham, do you? How about you, Jim"

Jim Bradley shrugged his shoulders. "Hard to say just how good Zeno is. It would take a week of close analysis to say definitely who has the upper hand in my game. He's a pawn down, but he has a wonderful position."

"But Jim," I protested. "That isn't the point at all. Can't you see it? Think of the publicity... a chess-playing *rat*...!"

"I wouldn't know about his personal life," said Jim curtly.

"Fellows!" I said desperately. "Is this the way all of you feel? Can't enough of us stick together to pass a club resolution recommending Zeno for a simul circuit? How about you, Bobby?"

Bobby looked uncomfortable. "I think the school station wagon is waiting for me. I guess I ought to be getting back."

"Coming, doc?" asked the gray man.

"Yes," replied Dr. Schmidt heavily. "Good evening, chentlemen."

I just stood there, stunned.

"Here's Zeno's income for the evening, professor," said Nottingham, pressing an envelope into his hand. "I'm afraid it won't help much, though, especially since I didn't feel justified in charging the customary dollar fee."

The professor nodded, and in numb silence I watched him accompany the immigration officer to the doorway.

The professor and I versus the chessplayers. We had thrown our Sunday punches, but we hadn't even scratched their gambit.

Just then Pete Summers called out. "Hey, Dr. Schmidt!" He held up a sheet of paper covered with chess diagrams. "This fell out of your pocket when you were standing here."

The professor said something apologetic to the gray man and came back. "*Danke*," he said, reaching for the paper. "Is part of a manuscript."

"A *chess* manuscript, professor?" I was grasping at straws now. "Are you writing a chess book?"

"Ya, I guess."

"Well, well," said Pete Summers, who was studying the sheet carefully. "The bishop against the knight,

eh?"

"Ya. Now if you excuse me-- "

"The bishop versus the knight?" shrilled Bobby Baker, who had trotted back to the tables.

"The bishop and knight?" muttered Nottingham Jones. He demanded abruptly: "Have you studied the problem long, professor?"

"Many months. In camp... in attic. And now manuscript has reached 2,000 pages, and we look for publisher."

"We...?" My voice may have trembled a little, because both Nottingham and the professor turned and looked at me sharply. "Professor"-- my words spilled out in a rush-- "did Zeno write that book?"

"Who else?" answered the professor in wonder.

"I don't see how he could hold a pen," said Nottingham doubtfully.

"Not necessary," said the professor. "He made moves, and I wrote down." He added with wistful pride: "Zenchen is probably world's greatest living authority on bishop-knight."

The room was suddenly very still again. For an overlong moment the only sound was Zeno's muffled snoring spiraling up from the professor's pocket.

"Has he reached any conclusions?" breathed Nottingham.

The professor turned puzzled eyes to the intent faces about him. "Zeno believes conflict cannot be generalized. However, has discovered 78 position in which bishop superior to knight and 24 positions in which knight is better. Obviously, player mit bishop must try-- "

"-- for one of the winning bishop positions, of course, and ditto for the knight," finished Nottingham. "That's an extremely valuable manuscript."

All this time I had been getting my first free breath of the evening. It felt good. "It's too bad," I said casually, "that the professor can't stay here long enough for you sharks to study Zeno's book and pick up some pointers for the great bishop-knight cable match next month. It's too bad, too, that Zeno won't be here to take a board against the Russians. He'd give us a sure point on the score."

"Yeah," said Jim Bradley. "He would."

Nottingham shot a question at the professor. "Would Zeno be willing to rent the manuscript to us for a month?"

The professor was about to agree when I interrupted. "That would be rather difficult, Nottingham. Zeno doesn't know where he'll be at the end of the month. Furthermore, as treasurer for the club, let me inform you that after we pay the annual rent next week the treasury will be as flat as a pancake."

Nottingham's face fell.

"Of course," I continued carefully, "if you were willing to underwrite a tour for Zeno, I imagine he'd be willing to lend it to you for nothing. And then the professor wouldn't have to be deported, and Zeno could stay and coach our team, as well as take a board in the cable match."

Neither the professor nor I breathed as we watched Nottingham struggling over that game of solitaire chess with his soul. But finally his owlish face gathered itself into an austere stubbornness. "I still can't recommend Zeno for a tour. I have my standards."

Several of the other players nodded gloomily.

"I'm scheduled to play against Kereslov," said Peter Summers, looking sadly at the sheet of manuscript. "But I agree with you, Nottingham."

I knew about Kereslov. The Moscow Club had been holding intramural bishop-knight tournaments every week for the past six months, and Kereslov had won nearly all of them.

"And I have to play Botvinnik," said Jim Bradley. He added feebly, "But you're right, Nottingham. We can't ethically underwrite a tour for Zeno."

Botvinnik was merely chess champion of the world.

"What a shame," I said. "Professor, I'm afraid we'll have to make a deal with the Soviet Recreation Bureau." It was just a sudden screwy inspiration. I still wonder whether I would have gone through with it if Nottingham hadn't said what he said next.

"Mister," he asked the immigration official, "you want \$500 put up for Dr. Schmidt?"

"That's the customary bond."

Nottingham beamed at me. "We have more than that in the treasury, haven't we?"

"Sure. We have exactly \$500.14, of which \$500 is for rent. Don't look at me like that."

"The directors of this club," declared Nottingham sonorously, "hereby authorize you to draw a check for \$500 payable to Dr. Schmidt."

"Are you cuckoo?" I yelled. "Where do you think I'm going to get another \$500 for the rent? You lunatics will wind up playing your cable match in the middle of K Street!"

"This," said Nottingham coldly, "is the greatest work on chess since Murray's History. After we're through with it, I'm sure we can find a publisher for Zeno. Would you stand in the way of such a magnificent contribution to chess literature?"

Pete Summers chimed in accusingly. "Even if you can't be a friend to Zeno, you could at least think about the good of the club and of American chess. You're taking a very funny attitude about this."

"But of course you aren't a real chessplayer," said Bobby Baker sympathetically. "We never had a treasurer who was."

Nottingham sighed. "I guess it's about time to elect another treasurer."

"All right," I said bleakly. "I'm just wondering what I'm going to tell the landlord next week. He isn't a chessplayer either." I told the gray man, "Come over here to the desk, and I'll make out a check."

He frowned. "A check? From a bunch of chessplayers? Not on your life! Let's go, professor."

Just then a remarkable thing happened. One of our most minor members spoke up.

"I'm Senator Brown, one of Mr. Jones's *fellow chessplayers*. I'll endorse that check, if you like."

And then there was a popping noise and a button flew by my ear. I turned quickly to see a vast blast of smoke terminated by three perfect smoke rings. Our rail magnate tapped at his cigar. "I'm Johnson, of the A. & W. *We chessplayers* stick together on these matters. I'll endorse that check, too. And Nottingham, don't worry about the rent. The senator and I will take care of that."

I stifled an indignant gasp. I was the one worrying about the rent, not Nottingham. But of course I was beneath their notice. I wasn't a *chessplayer*.

The gray man shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, I'll take the bond and recommend an indefinite renewal."

* * *

Five minutes later I was standing outside the building gulping in the fresh cold air when the immigration officer walked past me toward his car.

"Goodnight," I said.

He ducked a little, then looked up. When he answered, he seemed to be talking more to himself than to me. "It was the funniest thing. You got the impression there was a little rat running around on those boards and moving the pieces with his teeth. But of course rats don't play chess. Just human beings." He peered at me through the dusk, as though trying to get things in focus. "There wasn't really a rat playing chess in there, was there?"

"No," I said. "There wasn't any rat in there. And no human beings, either. Just chessplayers."