

*This very funny story was enthusiastically recommended to us by Laurence M. Janifer and, once read, just as enthusiastically acquired for publication in F&SF. It first appeared in Chess Review (but you need not be a chess-player to enjoy it). Its author writes that he is "30 years old, a graduate student in English at the University of Wisconsin, married, fat, and happy. I have published poetry, translations of modern Polish poetry, and book reviews in a variety of little magazines . . ."—And adds, "By the way, I'm a lousy chess-player." But a first-rate writer.*

## VON GOOM'S GAMBIT

*by Victor Contoski*

YOU WON'T FIND VON GOOM'S Gambit in any of the books on chess openings. Ludvik Pachman's *Moderne Schachtheorie* simply ignores it. Paul Keres' authoritative work *Teoria Debiutow Szachowych* mentions it only in passing in a footnote on page 239, advising the reader never to try it under any circumstances and makes sure the advice is followed by giving no further information. Dr. Max Euwe's *Archives* lists the gambit in the index under the initials V. G. (Gambit), but fortunately gives no page number. The twenty-volume *Chess Encyclopedia* (fourth edition) states that

Von Goom is a myth and classifies him with werewolves and vampires. His Gambit is not mentioned. Vassily Nikolayevitch Kryllov heartily recommends Von Goom's Gambit in the English edition of his book, *Russian Theory of the Opening*; the Russian edition makes no mention of it. Fortunately Kryllov himself did not—and does not yet—know the moves, so he did not recommend them to his American readers. If he had, the cold war would be finished. In fact, America would be finished, and possibly the world.

Von Goom was an inconspicu-

ous man, as most discoverers usually are; and he probably made his discovery by accident, as most discoverers usually do. He was the illegitimate son of a well known actress and a prominent political figure. The scandal of his birth haunted his early years, and as soon as he could legally do so he changed his name to Von Goom. He refused to take a Christian name because he claimed he was no Christian, a fact which seemed trivial at the time but was to explain much about this strange man. He grew fast early in life and attained a height of five feet, four inches, by the time he was ten years old. He seemed to think this height was sufficient, for he stopped growing. When his corpse was measured after his sudden demise, it proved to be exactly five feet, four inches. Soon after he stopped growing, he also stopped talking. He never stopped working because he never started. The fortunes of his parents proved sufficient for all his needs. At the first opportunity, he quit school and spent the next twenty years of his life reading science fiction and growing a mustache on one side of his face. Apparently, sometime during this period, he learned to play chess.

On April 5, 1997, he entered his first chess tournament, the Minnesota State Championship. At first, the players thought he was a deaf mute because he refused to

speak. Then the tournament director, announcing the pairings for the round, made a mistake and announced, "Curt Brasket—White; Van Goom—Black." A small, cutting voice filled with infinite sarcasm said, "Von Goom." It was the first time Von Goom had spoken in twenty years. He was to speak once more before his death.

Von Goom did not win the Minnesota State Championship. He lost to Brasket in twenty-nine moves. Then he lost to George Barnes in twenty-three moves, to K. N. Pedersen in nineteen, Fredrick G. Galvin in seven, James Seifert in thirty-nine. Dr. Milton Otteson in three and Baby George Jackson (who was five years old at the time) in one hundred and two. Thereupon, he retired from tournament chess for two years.

His next appearance was December 12, 1999, in the Greater Birmingham Open, where he also lost all his games. During the remainder of the year, he played in the Fresno Chess Festival, the Eastern States Chess Congress, the Peach State Invitational and the Alaska Championship. His score for the year was: opponents forty-one; Von Goom zero.

Von Goom, however, was determined. For a period of two and one-half years thereafter he entered every tournament he could. Money was no obstacle and distance was no barrier. He bought his own private plane and learned

to fly so that he could travel across the continent playing chess at every possible occasion. At the end of the two and one-half year period, he was still looking for his first win.

Then he discovered his Gambit. The discovery must surely have been by accident, but the credit—or rather the infamy—of working out the variations must be attributed to Von Goom. His unholy studies convinced him that the Gambit could be played with either the White or the Black pieces. There was no defense against it. He must have spent many a terrible night over the chessboard analyzing things man was not meant to analyze. The discovery of the Gambit and its implications turned his hair snow white, although his half mustache remained a dirty brown to his dying day, which was not far off.

His first opportunity to play the Gambit came in the Greater New York Open. The pre-tournament favorite was the wily defending Champion, grandmaster Miroslav Terminsky, although sentiment favored John George Bateman, the Intercollegiate Champion, who was also all-American quarterback for Notre Dame, Phi Beta Kappa and the youngest member of the Atomic Energy Commission. By this time, Von Goom had become a familiar, almost comic, figure in the chess world. People came to accept his silence, his withdrawal,

even his half mustache. As Von Goom signed his entry card, a few players remarked that his hair had turned white; but most people ignored him. Fifteen minutes after the first round began, Von Goom won his first game of chess. His opponent had died of a heart attack.

He won his second game too when his opponent became violently sick to his stomach after the first six moves. His third opponent got up from the table and left the tournament hall in disgust, never to play again. His fourth broke down in tears, begging Von Goom to desist from playing the Gambit. The tournament director had to lead the poor man from the hall. The next opponent simply sat and stared at Von Goom's opening position until he lost the game by forfeit.

His string of victories had placed Von Goom among the leaders of the tournament, and his next opponent was the Intercollegiate Champion John George Bateman, a hot-tempered, attacking player. Von Goom played his Gambit, or, if you prefer to be technical, his Counter Gambit, since he played the Black pieces. John George's attempted refutation was as unconventional as it was ineffective. He jumped to his feet, reached across the table, grabbed Von Goom by the collar of his shirt and hit him in the mouth. But it did no good. Even as Von Goom fell, *he made*

*his next move.* John George Bateman, who had never been sick a day in his life, collapsed in an epileptic fit.

Thus, Von Goom, who had never won a game of chess in his life before, was to play the wily grandmaster, Miroslav Terminsky, for the championship. Unfortunately, the game was shown to a crowd of spectators on a huge demonstration board mounted at one end of the hall. The tension mounted as the two contestants sat down to play. The crowd gasped in shock and horror when they saw the opening moves of Von Goom's Gambit. Then silence descended, a long, unbroken silence. A reporter who dropped by at the end of the day to interview the winner found to his amazement that the crowd and players alike had turned to stone. Only Terminsky had escaped the holocaust. The lucky man had gone insane.

A few more like results in tournaments and Von Goom became, by default, the chess champion of America. As such he received an invitation to play in the Challengers Tournament, the winner of which would play a match for the world championship with the current champion, Dr. Vladislav Feorintoshkin, author, humanitarian and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Some officials of the International Chess Federation talked of banning the Gambit from play, but Von Goom took midnight jour-

neys to their houses and *showed them the Gambit.* They disappeared from the face of the earth. Thus it appeared that the way to the world championship stood open for him.

Unknown to Von Goom, however, the night before he arrived in Portoroz, Yugoslavia, the site of the tournament, the International Chess Federation held a secret meeting. The finest brains in the world gathered together seeking a refutation to Von Goom's Gambit—and they found it. The following night, the most intelligent men of their generation, the leading grandmasters of the world, took Von Goom out in the woods and shot him. The great humanitarian Dr. Feorintoshkin looked down at the body and said, "A merciful end for Van Goom." A small, cutting voice filled with infinite sarcasm said, "Von Goom." Then the leading grandmasters shot him again and cleverly concealed his body in a shallow grave, which has not been found to this day. After all, they have the finest brains in the world.

And what of Von Goom's Gambit? Chess is a game of logic. Thirty-two pieces move on a board of sixty-four squares, colored alternately dark and light. As they move they form patterns. Some of these patterns are pleasing to the logical mind of man, and some are not. They show what man is capable of and what is beyond his

reach. Take any position of the pieces on the chessboard. Usually it tells of the logical or semi-logical plans of the players, their strategy in playing for a win or a draw, and their personalities. If you see a pattern from the King's Gambit Accepted, you know that both players are tacticians, that the fight will be brief but fierce. A pattern from the Queen's Gambit Declined, however, tells that the players are strategists playing for minute advantages, the weakening of one square or the placing of a Rook on a half-opened file. From such patterns, pleasing or displeasing, you can tell much not only about the game and the players but also about man in general, and perhaps even about the order of the universe.

Now suppose someone discovers by accident or design a pattern on the chessboard that is more

than displeasing, an alien pattern that tells unspeakable things about the mind of the player, man in general and the order of the universe. Suppose no normal man can look at such a pattern and remain normal. Surely such a pattern must have been formed by Von Goom's Gambit.

I wish the story could end here, but I fear it will not end for a long time. History has shown that discoveries cannot be unmade. Two months ago in Camden, New Jersey, a forty-three year old man was found turned to stone staring at a position on a chessboard. In Salt Lake City, the Utah State champion suddenly went screaming mad. And, last week in Minneapolis, a woman studying chess suddenly gave birth to twins—although she was not pregnant at the time.

Myself, I'm giving up the game.

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