

9. Victor the Second – Part One

A Tragedy

William Harston

Dramatis Personae

VICTOR – a challenger

FIRST SECOND

SECOND SECOND } his attendants

THIRD SECOND

A CRONE

A GURU

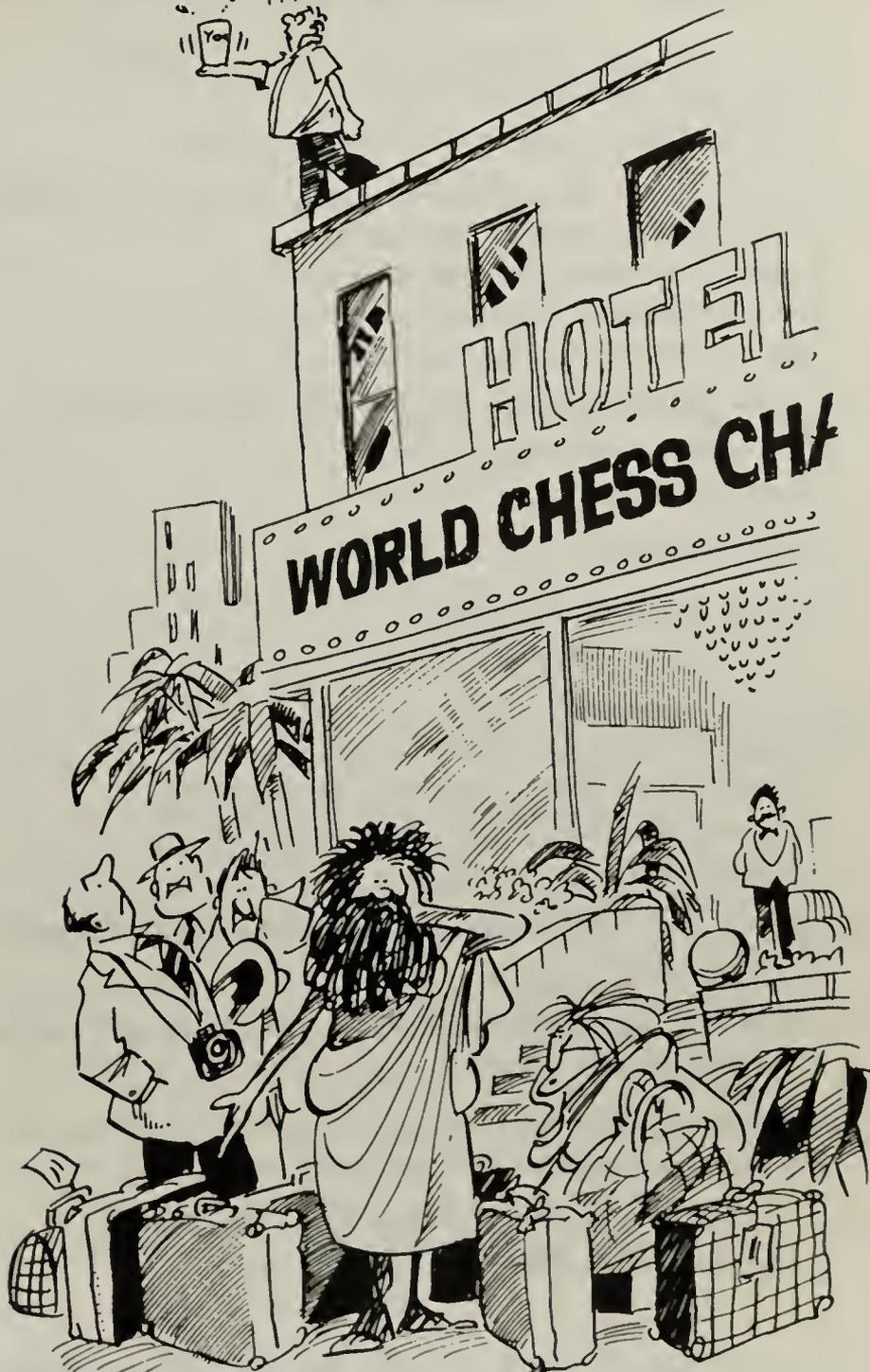
Scene: Somewhere in the Philippines

Act One – Scene 1: *A room in the challenger's camp. Victor sits alone at the chessboard.*

VICTOR My preparations are at last complete
this long-awaited battle to begin.
My plot to seize proud Anatoly's crown
is hatched. The prize is well within my reach.
My fingers itch to squeeze that scrawny neck
and from his greasy hair remove the jewels.
He calls himself a king although the throne
whereon he perches is itself maintained
by evil forces from an Eastern land
where once I dwelt but never shall return.
But wait, there's yet a little work to do.
I'll summon forth my valiant band of aides.
Come in, my seconds, we must analyse
the Nimzo-Indian and QGD.

[*Enter three seconds*]

ALAS, POOR YOGURT...
I KNEW IT WELL!



FIRST SECOND And not just those sweet Victor, we must plan
foul strategems to disconcert the foe.

SECOND SECOND I have some ready ruses to disturb
the equanimity of all who dare
combine their strengths our forces to oppose.

THIRD SECOND Delve first, my liege into my bag of tricks
as ne'er in a menagerie were seen.
I speak of yoghurt and reflecting specs
and evil eyes and electronic beams.
Against such weapons no one can resist.

VICTOR That sounds fair sport. If mischief be the game
I'll act upon vile Hecate's advice.
Come forth old crone

[Enter a crone]

and tell me what the days
ahead hold for my prospects.

CRONE Three months long
the battle will be fought and many wounds
sustained in the fight. But mark these words:
Look not upon the yoghurt when 'tis blue!

[Exit Crone]

THIRD SECOND What mean these words? I fear they bode no
good.

SECOND SECOND Methinks the crone's completely out to
lunch.

FIRST SECOND But soft! 'Tis possible the room is bugged
and Russian buggers* hear our every word.

VICTOR Then we perchance may play a merry jape;
with information false we'll ply their ears.

*In the First Folio this appears as 'rushing Bulgars', considered by some scholars to be a reference to itinerant Bulgarian gentlemen visiting the Russian camp.

Let's talk of king's pawn openings and such
 defences which I have no mind to play.
 And if our foes o'erhear thereby ensure
 by their own bugs the buggers bugged be.

Scene 2: *The same – two weeks later*

VICTOR Six draws and now a seventh seems at hand.
 I thought this game was won and yet I erred
 when pressed for time and now the villain can
 escape. Where lies the cause of my poor play?

FIRST SECOND Remember'st thou the words of Hecate?
 Methinks the answer's in his dairy foods.

SECOND SECOND Nay that is not to blame. The reason lies
 in something parapsychological.
 Hast thou not seen that wicked staring face
 which sits each day upon the seventh row?

THIRD SECOND We must protest upon't, and have him
 thrown
 back to the chamber's rear where he belongs.
 I'll pen a missive to the arbiter
 Meanwhile put on these glasses which reflect;
 they'll turn his evil magic on himself.

FIRST SECOND But don't forget the yoghurt in your note;
 for if complaint is menu for the day,
 be sure we do complaint both well and long.

VICTOR [*aside*] These seconds do protest too much,
 methinks.
 See this position wherein I've adjourned.
 There's tricks yet to be found. Come analyse!

FIRST SECOND That's best!

SECOND SECOND Nay this!

THIRD SECOND No, something else instead.

VICTOR Work well, dear friends. I'm shagged and off to bed.

Scene 3: *Victor's bedroom, seven weeks later. Victor sits alone.*

VICTOR My efforts have not captured much success.

Five battles have I lost, and won but two.

One more defeat will surely be my last.

Is my ambition to be thwarted thus
without a fight? That master of man's fate
appears to have it in for me betimes.

Those sixty-four vile squares have oft conspired
to dash my hopes and yet one chance remains.

If I can but four victories secure
before I lose again then all is well.

But how to tame that unresponsive wood
whereof the men who dwell upon my board
are fashioned? How to make them do my will?

Those kings, queens, rooks, knights, bishops, e'en the
pawns

will ne'er do as they're bid. Those bishops foul!

Aye, 'tis the bishops do upset me most.

They practise their ecclesiastic walk
upon those vain diagonals of life.

There on c1 one smugly sits as if
to tell me I know not where he should move
and will not, should I wrack my very brain
another million years. Which square is best?
d2? e3? f4? g5? h6?

Or with a craven fianchetto end it.

b2 or not b2, that is the question.

[Enter a Guru]

GURU Say, man, what's all this uptight misery?

You know what's wrong? Your aura's all screwed up.

Like, transcendental meditation, man
is what you need to cool the current scene.

VICTOR What says this apparition? His strange tongue
lies outside my experience, and yet

I feel there might be aught in what he says.
 Speak on, good friend, I'll follow your advice.

GURU Good thinking, man, together we can beat
 this parapsychic mumbo-jumbo crap.
 I'll teach you lots of mantras to recite,
 and how to win by standing on your head.

VICTOR Upon my head? Can this indeed be true?
 I'll try it! After all, I lag five-two.

[Exeunt, performing head stands]

Act Two – Scene 1: *A room in the challenger's camp, two weeks later. All enter.*

VICTOR Five two, five three, five four and now five five.
 Like Banquo's ghost I've come back from the grave.

FIRST SECOND We've got him now, just two more games
 methinks;
 one black, one white and then the trophy's ours.

SECOND SECOND For once we're all agreed, the match seems
 won;
 and Anatoly's crown ripe to be plucked.

THIRD SECOND Go out and draw today with pieces black.
 The thirty-third game will foretell his doom.

VICTOR This day my Pirc Defence will make him work
 For half-a-point, and then on Friday morn*
 with these same white men which today he holds
 I'll break down his defences. Then the prize
 for which we've laboured o'er these past long months
 will be at last ensconced in my own hands.
 Farewell, dear friends, I'm off to play the Pirc.

GURU Keep cool, man, don't forget the headstand bit.

*Friday afternoon actually, but the demands of scansion transcend temporal accuracy.

CRONE When the battle's lost and won.
 When the yoghurt's overdone,
 Tooth of gerbil, eye of cat,
 leg of Yorkshire's opening bat,
 makes a magic foul and hairy,
 warning that thou must be wary,
 for the teabags do foretell
 death for one we all know well.

[*Exeunt*]

Scene 2: *But five hours later.*

FIRST SECOND Oh dear

SECOND SECOND Oh dear

THIRD SECOND Oh dear

CRONE I told you so!

You heeded not the warning in the tea.
 And now you've paid the price and lost the match.

VICTOR The match and all for which we fought so hard
 are lost indeed. My destiny was not
 so easily o'ercome. It seems I'm doomed
 to rise not to the first place but must stay
 at second. Yet I live to fight again.
 So, gloating crone, your prophecy was false;
 I am not dead. Yet may it still come true.
 That death of which you spoke could be thine own.

[*Takes dagger and stabs crone*]

CRONE Oh perfidy, oh treachery, oh hell!

VICTOR With that I'm freed from her pernicious spell.
 Come goodly Seconds, I've still faith in you,
 There'll be a better ending to Part Two.

[*Exeunt*]