The Series Helpmate:
A Test of Imagination for the Practical Player

by Robert Pye

Practical play involves visualizing a promising position and then visualizing the moves needed to reach it successfully. Much of this visualization is analytic – the examination of specific moves – but an important element is purely imaginative.

Many chess coaches at grandmaster level are recommending to their students that they improve their analytical skills by solving endgame studies. The majority of composed endgame studies are designed to embody ideas and motifs that could conceivably occur in actual play. This means many of them can be of real practical value for training purposes. However the same cannot be said of chess problems.

To most players composed problems are both unnatural in appearance and time-consuming to solve. They generally lack a distinctive or instructive feature that can be carried over to the serious business of winning a game in practical play. This is why they are rarely used as training aids by chess coaches.

But there may be an exception. Recently I took an interest in a category of chess problem known as series helpmates. From the standpoint of the practical player these problems are highly paradoxical. They are so far removed from the realm of competitive chess that they would appear to offer nothing of value to the average player. However, as I will try to demonstrate in this paper, they are a surprisingly good way of exercising one's chess imagination.

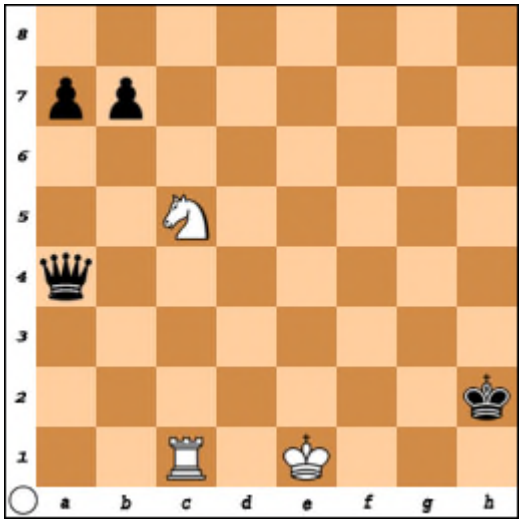
There is already a strong precedent for this kind of 'puzzle' as a coaching aid. Most readers will have heard of the challenging puzzle that Kasparov once gave to his students, only to find he couldn't solve it himself! They were required to construct a game, beginning with 1.e4, where Black mates in 5 moves, taking a rook with a knight on his final move. [If you are not already familiar with this excellent puzzle, please give it a try. Solution below.]

The whole purpose of these puzzles is to get one to think logically, outside more conventional chess patterns and conditioned modes of perception. As with the Kasparov puzzle, series helpmates require both sides to co-operate in producing the final position. However, they start from a composed setting and Black makes all the moves, with the exception of the last move, where White mates in one. Thus the stipulation is as follows:

> Construct a position, moving only the Black pieces, where, after a specified number of moves, White can checkmate Black in one move. There is one restriction: Black cannot give check in the course of the solution, except (if required) on his final move.

Consider the following position (**A**). Black plays eight successive moves to arrive at a position where white mates in just one move. It looks easy. After all, when you have free rein to do as you like, it should pose no difficulty. The real problem in practical play is dealing with your opponent's determination, move by move, to resist your plans. But there is no resistance in a series helpmate.

A. Series Helpmate in 8

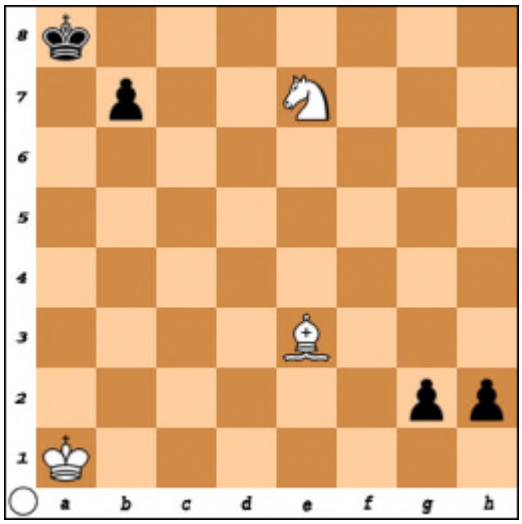


Robert Pye
Original
[Solution below.]

This problem was deliberately designed to amuse the solver! (I hope you were amused.)

In more sophisticated problems of this type, one tries to combine both elegance and difficulty. For example, starting with the theme in **A** above, where a piece is deliberately entombed, we could try instead to construct a position where a second piece is also entombed in a similar fashion. I recently came across a series helpmate by William Hartston (**B**) which achieved this very nicely:

B. Series Helpmate in 10

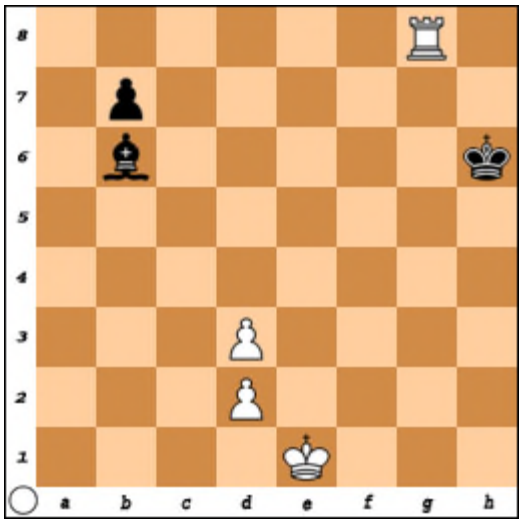


William Hartston
British Chess Magazine 1975
[Solution below.]

This is the same William Hartston who won the British Chess Championship in both 1973 and 1975 – a conspicuous achievement. I don't think he has composed other problems, but clearly he was struck by the idea in question and found a really first-class way to express it.

My next example (**C**) is also by someone who does not ordinarily compose problems. Pauli Perkonoja is better known as an endgame study composer of outstanding ability, as well as a top-class problem solver, having won the World Problem Solving Championship on no fewer than three occasions. Using a light setting he shows how two pieces, in this case the Black king and knight, can work together in a strategic and attractive manner to achieve the desired outcome. The way the knight, in the course of its journey, clears a space for the king on e3 adds greatly to the appeal of this composition.

C. Series Helpmate in 14

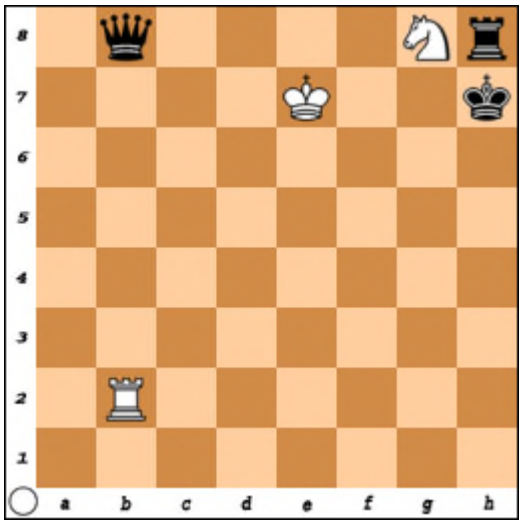


Pauli Perkonoja
Suomen Tehtäväniekat 2009
[Solution below.]

As an aside, I had the honour a few years ago of judging an endgame study tourney sponsored by the same Finnish chess magazine, *Suomen Tehtäväniekat.* Alas, any attempt on my part to extract some kudos from this came to nought. Most of the time I couldn't remember the name of the magazine, and on the few occasions when I could recall it, I was unable to pronounce it!

Our next example (**D**) utilises only 6 pieces. As a general rule, a strategic manoeuvre makes a more powerful impression when there are just a few pieces on the board. It also reduces the number of visual cues that might otherwise reveal the 'winning' idea:

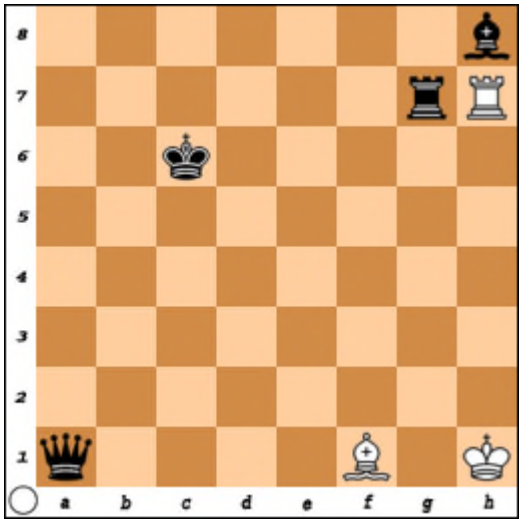
D. Series Helpmate in 5



Robert Pye
Original
[Solution below.]

When I eventually found a sound setting for the idea in our next problem (**E**), I was especially pleased. Some ideas, such as those involving heavy pieces on an open board, can be difficult to express. The solution to the following problem has several elements that add to its appeal – it covers the whole board, it actively utilises all of the black pieces, it contains a certain dance-like symmetry, and it executes a manoeuvre which at first glance would seem to require more than six moves:

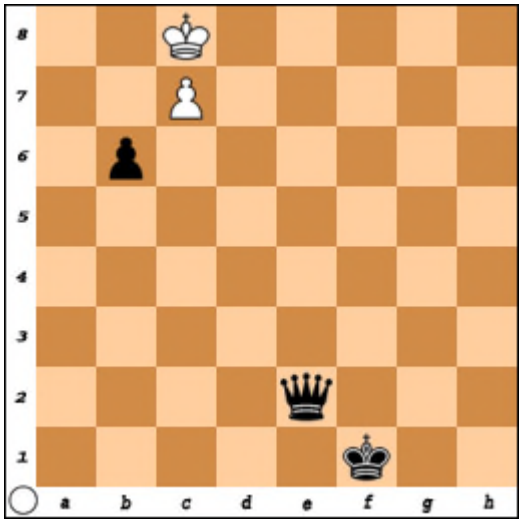
E. Series Helpmate in 6



Robert Pye
Original
[Solution below.]

Most readers, I suspect, will enjoy our next problem (**F**) and some will spot the mating manoeuvre almost immediately. Problems like this are a bit like watching David slaying Goliath – even though you know what's going to happen, it still holds your attention:

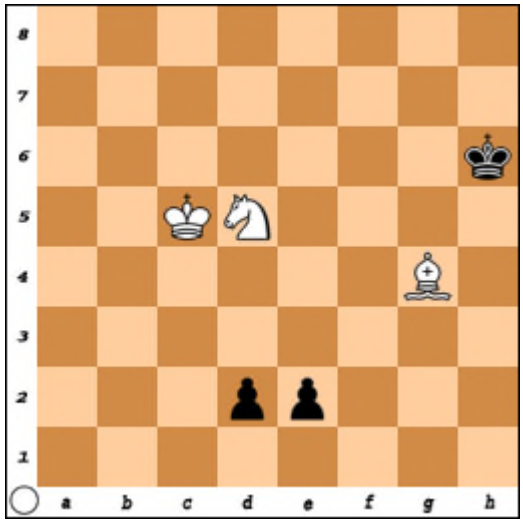
F. Series Helpmate in 10



Robert Pye
Original
[Solution below.]

Some problems derive much of their charm from what didn't happen (**G**). They remind us of Sherlock Holmes's dictum, "When you've eliminated the impossible…" Alas, it can take an awfully long time to eliminate the impossible, especially when a pair of pawns are on the 7th rank, offering a tantalising variety of promotion opportunities. Which, if any, is the right one?

G. Series Helpmate in 8



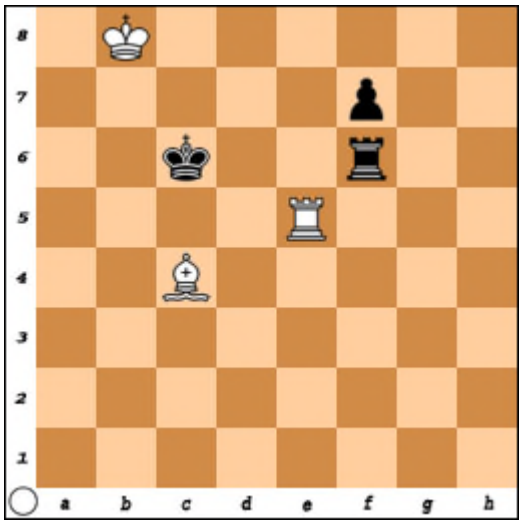
Robert Pye
Original
[Solution below.]

Our final two problems involve multiple solutions. This would normally be a defect, but it becomes a special feature when the solutions are linked thematically. The first one (**H**) sees White mating twice from the same square with a different piece each time, while Black under-promotes his lone pawn in different ways.

In the second one (**I**) Black must undertake a strategic manoeuvre with one of his pieces in each solution – first the bishop, then the rook, and finally the king – in order to reach checkmate.

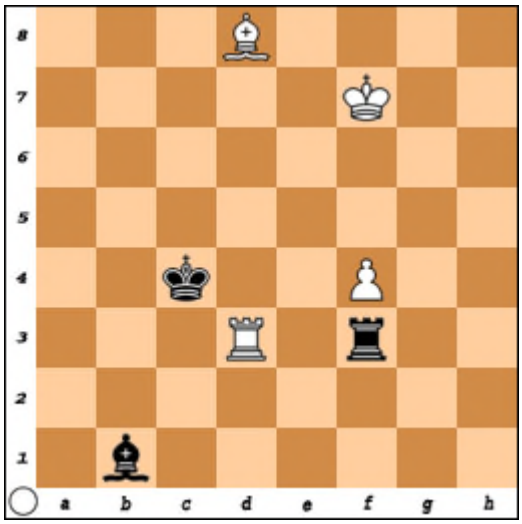
I would urge chess coaches to try these and similar lightweight series helpmates on their students. They are fun to solve and they exercise an important chess faculty – one's creative imagination!

H. Series Helpmate in 9
Two solutions



Robert Pye
Original
[Solutions below.]

I. Series Helpmate in 9
Three solutions



Robert Pye
Original
[Solutions below.]

SOLUTIONS

Kasparov puzzle: 1.e4 Nf6 2.f3 Nxe4 3.Qe2 Ng3 4.Qxe7+ Qxe7+ 5.Kf2 Nxh1#

A: Series Helpmate in 8

1-3. Kh2-e5
4. Qe8
5. Qa8
6-8. Ke5-b8…….Nd7#

B: Series Helpmate in 10

1. g1=B
2. h1=R
3. Rh8
4. Bh2
5. Bb8
6. Ba7
7. Kb8
8. Kc7
9. Ra8
10. Kb8……..Bf4#

C: Series Helpmate in 14

1. Bd4
2-6. b7-b1=N
7. Nxd2
8. Nc4
9. Ne5
10. Ng6
11-13. Kh6-e3
14. Nf4……..Rg3#

D: Series Helpmate in 5

1. Kg7
2. Rh1
3. Qh2
4. Qh8
5. Rh7……Rg2#

E: Series Helpmate in 6

1. Kb7
2. Ka8
3. Rg2
4. Be5
5. Bb8
6. Qh8……Bxg2#

F: Series Helpmate in 10

1. Qa2
2-8. Kf1-a8
9. Qa7
10. Qb8+…….bxc=Q#

G: Series Helpmate in 8

1. Kg5
2. Kh4
3. Kg3
4. Kf2
5. Ke1
6. Kd1
7. Kc2
8. Kd3……..Bf5#

H: Series Helpmate in 9

Two Solutions

A: 1. Kb6
2. Rc6
3-7. f7-f1 = R
8. Ra1
9. Ra6…….Rb5#

B: 1. Rd6
2-6. f7-f1 = N
7. Ne3
8. Nd5
9. Nb6…….Bb5#

I: Series Helpmate in 9

Three Solutions

A: 1. Bc2 2. Ba4 3. Bd7 4. Bf5 5.Rxf4
6. Rd4 7. Kd5 8. Ke5 9. Re4……...Bc7#

B: 1. Re3 2. Re4 3. Rd4 4. Kd5 5. Ke4
6. Kf5 7. Kg4 8. Kh5 9. Kh6……..Rh3#

C: 1. Kxd3 2. Ke4 3. Kf5 4. Kg4
5. Kh5 6. Kh6 7. Kh7 8. Kh8 9. Bh7…….Bf6#