

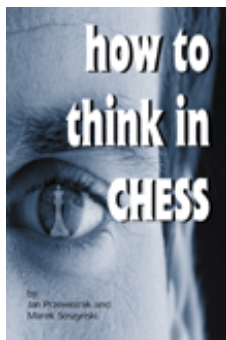


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A Tale of Splendor and Woe

John S. Hilbert

“This work is issued as a small tribute to the memory of a dear friend, who was one of the brightest ornaments in Caissa’s diadem.” *Pollock Memories*, Preface, p.1

Pollock Memories: A Collection of Chess Games, Problems, Etc., Edited by Mrs. F.F. Rowland (original publication, Dublin 1899); reprint 2001 Publishing House Moravian Chess,

The literature of chess history is strewn with the might-have-been, the many players who showed great promise and yet, for one reason or another, were taken from us all too soon. Early death robbed the chess world of such luminaries as Rudolf Charousek, who died at twenty-six, and Harry Nelson Pillsbury, who died at thirty-three. Ill health has radically cut short the playing careers of men whose brilliance might well have been expected to give the chess world many more years of astonishing wonder, players such as Carlos Torre, and even, one might suggest, Bobby Fischer.

Yet such players are still remembered today, more or less, for the accomplishments they achieved over the chessboard as well as for the tragic circumstances that surrounded them. Some of them are recalled despite the sadness of their circumstances, as their achievements were of a high enough order to overcome the obfuscation passing time so often brings.

Others, of lesser light, have understandably fared far worse, though their stories, some may argue, are no less interesting. Until recently their obliteration has been taken for granted by many of the few who still recall their names, let alone by most of us, who perhaps never heard their names to begin with. Such a figure was William Henry Krause Pollock, better recalled, when recalled at all, as W.H.K. Pollock.

Those who dimly recollect Pollock today often do so because of his appearance at the great Hastings 1895 tournament. There he finished a dismal nineteenth out of twenty-two, between the better remembered Marco and Mieses, with a score of only six wins, four draws, and eleven losses. And yet only two players at Hastings 1895 had the honor of defeating both Steinitz and Tarrasch during the course of play. One of them was, not surprisingly, Pillsbury, the tournament winner. The other was Pollock. Thirteen months after Hastings, Pollock was dead, gone at the relatively young age of thirty-seven.

By all accounts Pollock was an amiable man, one endowed not only with substantial chess ability (his Elo Historical Chess rating was 2400), but with great charm and wit, as well. Though he does not receive a biographical entry in Hooper and Whyld’s *The Oxford Companion to Chess* (Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 1992), we do read there of the “Pollock Defense,” which is characterized as, to say the least, “an uncommon line in the Spanish Opening” (1.e4 e5, 2.Nf3 Nc6, 3.Bb5 Na5). Pollock and several consulting players used this defense, with sad consequences, during a simultaneous exhibition performance by Emanuel Lasker in Baltimore on November 30, 1892. That game, not at all surprisingly, does not appear in *Pollock Memories*, nor, apparently, does 3...Na5 in the Spanish appear elsewhere in the annals of chess literature. In the same short Hooper and Whyld entry, we learn Pollock wrote of the Alapin Defense, in relation to his own 3...Na5 in the Spanish, as follows: “It is even worse than my move, if only because less



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ridiculous.” No man who can speak in print of his own disastrous opening experiments in such words could be less than a congenial companion. Indeed, it is to Pollock we owe the better known, and rather more insightful, statement that “It is no easy matter to reply correctly to Lasker’s bad moves” (*Pollock Memories*, p. 78, note b). Such wry humor speaks volumes about Pollock’s endearing character, that subtle blend of irony and insight so rare in chess masters of any century, and yet so defining of the able companion everywhere: the ability to laugh at oneself.

Who was Pollock? With the reprint now available from Publishing House Moravian Chess, and thanks to the efforts of Pollock’s friend, Ms. Rowland, we are better able to see his short life as a whole. Born on February 21, 1859, at Cheltenham, Pollock was educated at Clifton College and Somersetshire College, Bath. From 1880 through 1882 Pollock was a resident pupil at a hospital in Dublin, and in the latter year qualified “as a licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons, Dublin” (*Pollock Memories*, p.2). We learn on the same page that Pollock learned chess early, played it well, and had his first game published in *The Practical Farmer*, then Dublin’s only newspaper containing a chess column, the same year he completed his medical studies.

Unlike more recent players, who have forsaken chess for a path holding the hope of a more secure income, such as Kamsky switching from chess to the study of medicine, Pollock took the opposite route, forsaking the healing arts to follow his passion on the chessboard. By 1885 he was competing in the Master Tournament of the British Chess Association (forerunner of today’s British Chess Federation). After a disastrous 0-4 start, he nearly swept his remaining games, finishing with 10½ out of 15, in fourth place. One should keep in mind, too, that while these early British Chess Association events were hardly world class in makeup, Pollock’s accomplishment should not be discounted. The winner of this event, known now as London 1885, was Gunsberg, with Bird garnering second place. Here is the finish to the game Pollock – Mortimer, with comments from the book:



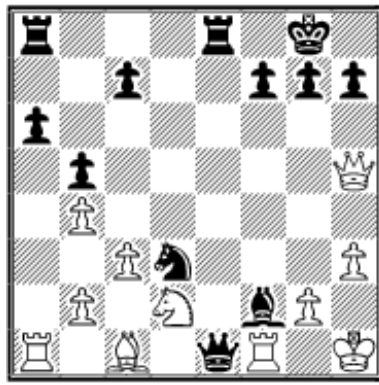
Pollock – Mortimer London 1885 Position after 26...Bxg8

27.Re2 The moves all explain themselves. The late Herr. B. Horwitz expressed himself several times as greatly pleased with White’s management of this game. **27...Qh4 28.Rxe7+ Kd8 29.Qe2 Qg5+ 30.Bg2 Qxf5 31.Bd6 Qg6** and White mates in four moves [*Rather, in three, with 32.Rd7+ Kxd7 33.Qe7+ Kc8 34.Qc7 mate—JSH*]. **1-0** *Pollock Memories*, p.28.

In 1889 Pollock traveled to the United States as Irish champion, lured there by New York 1889, the Sixth American Chess Congress. Although he finished in the middle of the pack, in eleventh place out of twenty, he finished higher than did Bird and also had the satisfaction of defeating Max Weiss, eventual co-winner of the event with Chigorin, in what was later awarded a brilliancy prize (\$50, thanks to Professor Isaac L. Rice, of later Rice Gambit notoriety) for the most brilliant game in the second round (that is, in rounds twenty through thirty-eight):

Max Weiss – Pollock Sixth American Chess Congress New York May 11, 1889

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.d3 b5 6.Bb3 Bc5 7.c3 d5 8.exd5 Nxd5 9.Qe2 0-0 10.Qe4 Be6 11.Nxe5 Nxe5 12.Qxe5 Nb4 13.0-0 Nxd3 14.Qh5 Bxb3 15.axb3 Re8 16.Nd2 Qe7 17.b4 Bxf2+ 18.Kh1 Qe1 19.h3



19...Nxc1 Steinitz would write in the tournament book that “This sacrifice of the Queen for no more than two pieces is based on a most profound and brilliant idea, such as has very rarely occurred in actual play.” 20.Rxe1 Rxe1+ 21.Kh2 Bg1+ 22.Kg3 Re3+ 23.Kg4 Ne2 24.Nf1 g6 25.Qd5 h5+ 26.Kg5 Kg7 27.Nxe3 f6+ 0–1 And mates in two moves (28.Kh4 Bf2+ 29.g3 Bxg3 mate). Steinitz, again quoting from the tournament book, would write that “Mr. Pollock’s play from the seventeenth move renders this game one of the finest monuments of chess ingenuity, and altogether it belongs to

the most brilliant gems in the annals of practical play.” Heady praise indeed, coming from the world champion.

After New York 1889 Pollock remained in the United States, editing the chess column in the *Baltimore Sunday News* (according to scrapbooks at the John G. White Collection in Cleveland, Pollock’s first *Sunday News* column was dated June 30, 1889, the month after New York 1889 concluded). Later, beginning in 1893, he would edit for a time both that chess column as well as one in the *Albany Evening Journal*. According to one of Mrs. Rowland’s correspondents, Howard J. Rogers, who gave over his chess column in the *Evening Journal* to Pollock in part to lure the master to that city, Pollock’s “Bohemian ways,” which included starting work not long before midnight in his capacity as a part-time general reporter for the *Journal*, was much appreciated by both his fellow reporters and the area’s chessplayers. Unfortunately, his boss found Pollock’s habits less endearing. Pollock simply could not be relied upon to report the events to which he had been assigned. He would, instead, provide copy about some other matter that had caught his fancy, and so his part-time career as a *bona fide* general reporter was cut short. Given Pollock’s whimsical attitude toward the performance of his chosen craft, one can only be thankful he did not practice as a surgeon.

In May 1894 Pollock traveled to Montreal to report on the Steinitz-Lasker world championship match. As Roger’s would write, “He dined with me on the evening of his departure for Montreal, and I accompanied him to the train. At that time he expected to return to Albany, but he never did, and I never saw him again” (*Pollock Memories*, p.12). The next year Pollock would sail for Hastings, then return to Montreal, only to shortly thereafter sail again to the other side of the Atlantic, where he died at his parents’ home in Clifton, England, on October 5, 1896.

Though he died well before reaching his fortieth birthday, Pollock, through the agency of Mrs. Rowland, has left us a rich and revealing collection of his games, 145 of which appear in *Pollock Memories*. As the Preface tells us, Pollock himself selected and annotated the games from his English periods, and additional contributions were solicited and received from a number of sources on this side of the Atlantic, including those from Rogers in Albany and Miron Hazeltine, chess editor of the *New York Clipper*. Although the biographical notes and reminiscences run only a dozen pages, the print is relatively small and the information useful for anyone interested in something more than the stark print of game scores has to offer. Annotations of one degree or another appear with almost every game, including detailed notes from the *British Chess Magazine* on Pollock’s win over Tarrasch at Hastings, as well as Pollock’s own detailed commentary surrounding the game that appeared in the April 10, 1896, edition of the St. John, New Brunswick *Globe*. Pollock’s comments make for very interesting reading, and will not be found elsewhere but by those willing to comb carefully microfilm copies of the *Globe* itself. Several problems composed by Pollock, as well as a number of his endings, appear at the back of the book.

The only discouraging aspect of *Pollock Memories* is the indexing. While the player indexes are alphabetical, Mrs. Rowland hit upon the particularly unfortunate idea of

separating the games played in England from those played in Ireland, and the same for those played in the United States and in Canada. Similar, further subdivisions greet the perplexed reader in terms of games played at odds, played on “the Continent” (of which only one appears), and so forth. Hoping to locate a specific game quickly, the reader of the index is likely to think of Mrs. Rowland in less flattering terms than those reserved for her work in bringing the collection together in the first place.

Such a complaint, however, is a small one in light of the author’s efforts in putting the book together, and potential readers should hardly be surprised to find late nineteenth century chess indexing less successful than ECO codes and other formats.

Rogers concluded his detailed letter to Mrs. Rowland by writing that “Mr. Pollock will be chiefly remembered in America for his genial, unaffected manner, his devotion to the royal game, and as a chess writer of remarkably pure and vigorous English. His style of play was of the old school, and he lacked the impassiveness necessary to conduct the ‘drawing matches,’ so prevalent at the present time. His analytical powers were conceded to be of the highest order, and had his health permitted he would undoubtedly have contributed much of worth to the literature of the game of chess. We have the kindest memories of his stay amongst us” (*Pollock Memories*, p.13).

And the kindest memories of all are those included in *Pollock Memories*, a curious and intriguing volume that deserves a place on the history shelf of any chess book reader.

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