



SKITTLES
ROOM

Italian Chess 1560-1880

The Special Moves

and

Their Consequences

by Alessandro Nizzola

Fancy what a game of chess would be if all the chessmen had passions and intellects, more or less small and cunning; if you were not only uncertain about your adversary's men but a little uncertain about your own; if your Knight could shuffle himself on to a new square by the sly; if your Bishop, in disgust at your castling, could wheddle your Pawns out of their places, and if your Pawns, hating you because they are Pawns could make away from their appointed posts that you might get a checkmate on a sudden.

George Eliot, *Felix Holt*

You castle your way, and I'll castle my way...

George N. Treysman

Prologue

It all started with Orazio Gianutio and Alessandro Salvio. In their books, they allowed a form of *free castling*, in which King and Rook could jump to any square between e1-h1 or e1-a1. A few years later, Pietro Carrera denied the possibility of castling in one move only, qualifying it *a two headed monster*. Then time passed...



A page from Gianutio's Libro nel quale si tratta della maniere di Giuocar a Scacchi

We Did it Our Way

Did anyone ever deliver a *triple check* during a game of chess? Yes, very probably, if he was playing in Italy more than 120 years ago. To be honest, to this day I haven't been able to find a single specimen of such a check given in actual play, but this was possible in theory thanks to the *suspended Pawn*. The game of chess in Italy since about 1560, during the 17th, 18th and most of the 19th century, was indeed determined by three very particular laws, codificated by Ponziani in his 1769 book *Il Giuoco Incomparabile degli Scacchi*, laws which caused considerable isolation and diminished the practical value of the main Italian theoretical works. Make no mistake about it: many Italians were very proud of these rules and played an exciting game with them, but they were only losing time, in perspective, by their particular way of play. For instance, according to documents in my possession, the Modenese Francesco Discart, a strong player and problemist, had to decline his invitation to play in the Grand Chess Congress of London 1862, being unfamiliar with the international game. Let's briefly discuss the infamous rules and their often bizarre consequences.



Francesco Discart (1819-1893)

Free – As in Free Love

In Italy, castling was freer and more limited at the same time. The King and Rook, after jumping over each other, could go to any square up to and including the other's starting point, provided an enemy piece was not attacked by either piece. For instance, King's side castling for White would allow the following six options: 1. Kh1-Re1, 2. Kh1-Rf1, 3. Kh1-Rg1 (not always a good solution with a Black Knight in g4!), 4. Kg1-Re1, 5. Kg1-Rf1 (not very popular among Italians), and 6. Kf1-Re1. Depriving one's opponent of castling was a substantial advantage, named *vantaggio dell'arroccamento*. Christopher Becker translated Ercole del Rio's words in *The War of the Chessmen* as follows:

Italian and German usage is for the King and Rook to jump over each other, up to and including their starting squares, either on the King's or on the Queen's side, as long as none of the five obstacles enumerated in the Laws is present. French castling is much more limited, since the King takes but two steps in either direction and the Rook jumps over him to the adjacent square (f1 or d1). The King has the privilege of playing two pieces at once, but it is the gravest of abuses to play three pieces, as some do by also moving a Pawn.

In the following game, *free castling* on the Queen's side was the prelude for

a brilliant Queen's sacrifice.

Amateur – A. Severino

Naples, 1723

Sicilian Defence

1. e4 c5 2. Nc3 e5 3. Nf3 Nc6 4. Nd5 d6 5. c3 f5 6. exf5 Bxf5 7. Bb5 Qd7
8. d4 cxd4 9. cxd4 O-O-O *Free castling* Kb8-Re8 10. dxe5 Nxe5



11. Bxd7 Nxf3+ 12. Kf1 Bd3+ 13. Qxd3 Re1#



Often the *free castling* was played with a sacrifice of the f-Pawn in mind. Two striking examples of the sharp attacking possibilities offered by Italian castling are the following games. The former is taken from an unpublished 19th century chess manuscript by Francesco Discart, which I had the luck to discover in 1999.

Francesco Discart – Carlo Bonetti

Modena, 19th century

Giuoco Piano

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. O-O *Free castling* Kh1-Re1



4...Bxf2 5. Rf1 Bb6 6. d4 d6 7. Bxf7+ Kxf7 8. Nxe5+ Ke7 9. Nf7 Qe8 10. Nc3 Nf6 11. Nxb8 Qxh8 12. Nd5+ Ke8 13. Nxf6+ gxf6 14. c3 Bd7 14...Qg7 was better – Discart 15. Qh5+ Ke7 16. Rxf6 Qxf6 17. Bg5 Rf8 18. Rf1 Qxg5 19. Qxg5+ Ke8 20. Qh5+ Ke7 21. Qxh7+ Ke8 22. Qg6+ Ke7 23. Qg7+ and wins.

Yes, a Pawn is worth a little trouble indeed...

Giambattista Lolli – Ercole del Rio

Modena, before 1750

Giuoco Piano

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. Nc3 Nf6 5. Ng5 O-O *Free castling* Kh8-Rf8



6. Nxf7+ Rxf7 7. Bxf7 Qf8 8. Bc4 Bxf2+ 9. Kf1 d5 10. Be2 dxe4 11. d3 Bh4 12. Kg1 Qc5+ 13. d4 Nxd4 14. Be3 Nf3+ 15. Kf1 Qxe3 16. Qd8+ Ng8 17. Nd1 Qg1+ 18. Rxc1 Nxc2#

In this little-known game by Carlo Salvioli, the White Rook jumped directly to e1 with immediate effect.

Carlo Salvioli – Bartolomeo Forlico

Venice, 1879

Petroff Defence

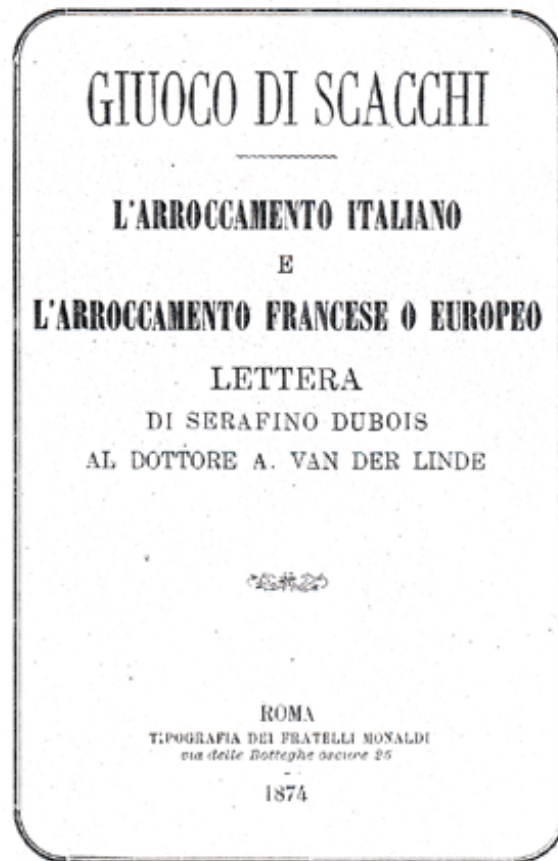
1. e4 e5 2. Bc4 Nf6 3. Nf3 Nxe4 4. Nc3 Nf6 5. Nxe5 d5 6. O-O *Free castling* Kh1-Re1



6...Be7 7. Nxd5 Nxd5 8. Nxf7 Kxf7 9. Qh5+ g6 10. Bxd5+ Kg7 11. Qf3 Rf8 12. Qe4 Bf6 13. d3 Bf5 14. Qf4 c6 15. Bb3 Na6 16. g4 Bd7 17. g5 Bc3 18. bxc3 Rxf4 19. Bxf4 h5 20. Be5+ Kh7 21. Bf6 Qe8 22. Re3 Nc5 23. Rae1 Qxe3 24. Rxe3 Re8 25. Kg2 Be6 26. Bxe6 Rxe6 27. Rxe6 Nxe6 27. Kf3 with a winning position – Salvioli.

In November 1873 Serafino Dubois wrote an

open letter of twenty-one pages to Antonius van der Linde, titled *L'Arroccamento Italiano e l'Arroccamento Francese o Europeo*, trying to defend the practice of *free castling*, without much success. The Dutch scholar dismissed the Italian castling with '*free – as in free love*'.



The cover of Dubois' letter to van der Linde

Passing By

Italian Pawns, when not sacrificing themselves in the first moves to open lines for their pieces, had an opposite tendency towards self-preservation. Christopher Becker translated the Italian term *passar battaglia* as *passing by the battle*, while David Hooper and Ken Whyld in their *Oxford Companion to Chess* opted for *dodging the fight*. My compatriots, probably in accordance with medieval tradition, did not allow the *en passant* capture. The Pawn using its privilege of moving two squares from, let's say, d7 to d5 on its first move was allowed to "evade combat" at d6 on its way to d5. Becker compared them to skillful Renaissance *condottieri*, and del Rio wrote in *The War of the Chessmen*:

In France and in England, any Pawn arrived at its fifth rank can prevent an enemy Pawn from taking two steps on its initial move by capturing it as it goes by (en passant). It is far from clear why soldiers, but not their officers, should have such a privilege. This rule was never accepted in Italy or in Germany, where any Pawn

can “pass by” an enemy attack, moving two squares forward as usual.

The following game and opening line are two good examples of the often frustrating consequences of the *passar battaglia* for an attacker.

Francesco Discart – Amateur

Modena, 19th century

Evans Gambit

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Bc5 4. b4 Bb6 5. O-O Free castling Kh1-Rf1 5 ...d6 6. a4 a6 7. d3 Nf6 8. Ng5 O-O 9. f4 h6 10. f5 hxg5 11. Bxg5 Re8 12. Qe1 Kf8 13. Qh4 Ke7 14. Qh7 Rg8 15. Bxf6+ Kxf6 16. Qh4+



16. Nc3 was better - Discart 16 ...g5 Now 17. fxc6+ en passant would be winning, but this simply was not allowed, and White had to start fighting for a draw. 17. Qh6+ Ke7 18. f6+ Ke8 19. Bxf7+ Kxf7 20. Qh7+ Ke6 21. f7 Rf8 22. Qf5+ Ke7 23. Qf6+ draw by perpetual check.

Opening Analysis by Francesco Discart, 19th century

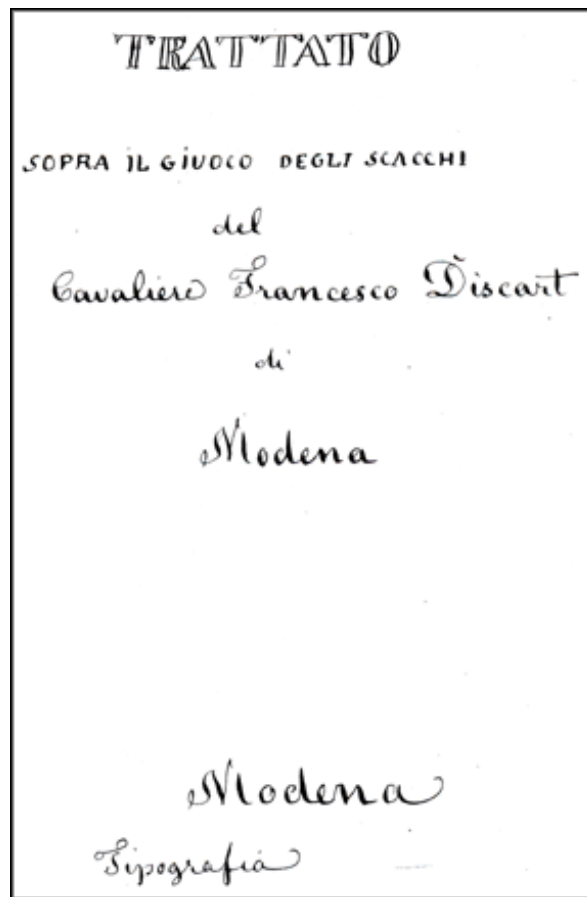
Philidor Defence

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 d6 3. Bc4 f5 4. d4 fxe4 5. Nxe5 dxe5 6. Qh5+ Kd7 Best - Discart 7. Qf5+ Kc6 8. Qxe5 a6 9. d5+ Kb6 10. Be3+ c5



11. b4 please forget about 11. dxc6+ en passant, nearly winning 11...Nd7 Maintaining the advantage of a piece, but with an inferior position – Discart.

The controversies between *passar battaglia* and *en passant* advocates were considerable and lasted for many years. In 1880 Luigi Centurini offered a prize of 200 lire to the man who could irrefutably demonstrate that *passar battaglia* was contrary to the spirit of the game. For the record, nobody won that contest.



Frontispiece and title page of Discart's unpublished treatise on the game of chess

Suspended

In Italy, Pawn promotion was only to a piece already captured by the opponent, and it wasn't possible for a player to have two Bishops of the same square color. If a Pawn reached the eighth rank before any piece of its color had been captured, it had to wait there "suspended" until a piece was captured, at which time the promotion was possible. Then a move was made, either with the new piece or with another. Moving the new piece didn't find acceptance in every part of Italy according to Adriano Chicco, but Ponziani and del Rio allowed it in their books. Again from *The War of the Chessmen*:

A Pawn, upon reaching the eighth rank, takes the office of any of its pieces already captured; and, if none have yet been captured, remains suspended and without denomination until one is captured (but may not become a Bishop on the same color of squares as its companion, since this would contradict the foundation of the game). Philidor rightly complains of his fellow-Frenchmen, who in certain cities allow a simultaneous plurality of Queens, so that as many Pawns as arrive on the last rank become as many Queens, on the premise that equality of merit should bring with it an equal reward. But one can hardly contain

one's laughter at the thought of the chess King in the role of a Sultan. Bishop Vida, who imagines that the Chess Queen portrays the Queen of the Amazons, would hardly allow, however, of two Popes. Still others would allow any Pawn arrived at the last rank to become arbitrarily a Queen, or Rook, or Bishop, or Knight, even with all the pieces still on the Board. But one must suppose the legislator in question to have been more capricious than reasonable, for any number of reasons: since in multiplying the pieces in contradiction of the pristine source, its native simplicity is muddled, while in increasing the number of officers one decreases the number of soldiers; and no teacher, ancient or modern, has taught the gentle art of managing two Queens, or three Rooks, Bishops, or Knights of one color – which is eloquent testimony to their having recognized neither the authoritativeness of such a law, nor its conformity to the ancient constitution of this war, and having therefore abstained from depicting such hippocentaurs.

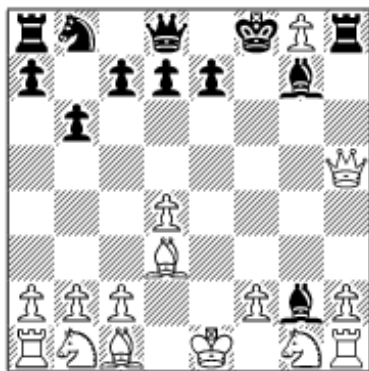
With the option of promoting a *suspended Pawn* and moving it or another piece at the same time, there was often the possibility to give amazing checkmates, as in the following instances.

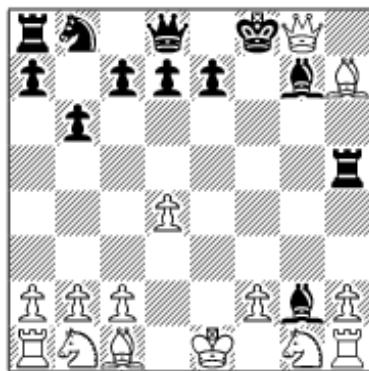
Opening Analysis by Francesco Discart

19th century

Queen's Fianchetto

1. e4 b6 2. d4 Bb7 3. Bd3 f5 *Inferior* - Discart 4. exf5 Bxg2 5. Qh5+ g6 6. fxfg6 Bg7 7. gxh7+ Kf8 8. hxg8 *Suspended pawn*
8...Rxb5? 9. Bh7 and g8=Q#





Yes, the passed pawn is really a criminal, who should be kept under lock and key...

Opening Analysis by Domenico Lorenzo Ponziani

18th century

Cunningham Gambit

1. e4 e5 2. f4 exf4 3. Nf3 Be7 4. Bc4 Bh4+ 5. g3 f3 6. O-O *Free castling* Kh1-Rf1 6...d5 7. Bxd5 Bh3 8. Bxb7 g2+ 9. Kg1 gxf1 *Suspended pawn* 10. Bxa8 Bf2+ and f1=R#



Opening Analysis by Francesco Discart

19th century

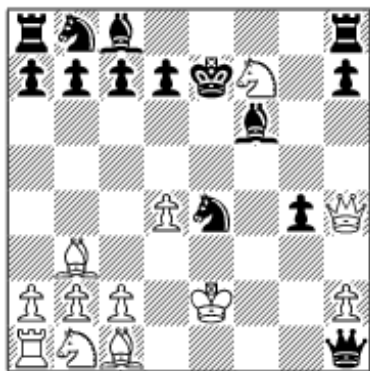
Salvio Gambit



1. e4 e5 2. f4 exf4 3. Nf3 g5 4. Bc4 g4 5. Ne5 Qh4+ 6. Kf1 f3 7. d4 Nf6 *best* – Discart 8. Bxf7+ Ke7 9. Bb3 Bg7 10. Nf7 Nxe4 11. Qe1 f3 12. Ke2 gxh1 *Suspended pawn*

13 Qxh4+ Bf6 and h1=Q *With a won game* – Discart





I would appreciate any specimen of a *triple check* from 18th or 19th century games, played with Italian rules.

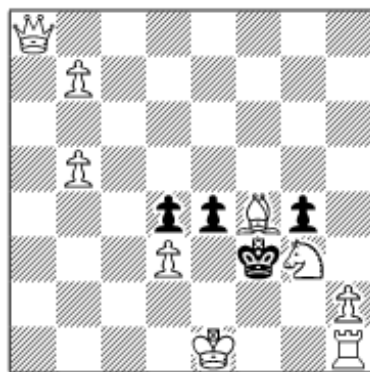


Wonderland

The following problems were composed by two late and great scholars, to show the exotic effects of the Italian rules.

Adriano Chicco

White mates in two moves.



Cristopher Becker

White mates in three moves.

Solutions

Chicco, #2

Key: **1. Ng7!** waiting. If **1...f6N** random **2. Re8 #**; **1...Nxf8** **2. b8=R** and **Re8#**; **1...g4B** random **2. Nf5 #**; **1...Bxe2** **2. b8=Q** and **Qf8 #**; **1...b7N** random **2. Bd8 #**; **1...Nxa5** **2. b8=B** and **Bd6 #**; **1...Bxg7** **2. b8=N** and **Nc6 #**

Becker, #3

Illegal moves: **1. O-O** (Kg1 or h1-Rf1) #; **1. O-O** (Kg1 or h1-Re1) attacking Black; **1. b8=Q**; **1. b8=B**; Key: **1. h4!** if **1...Kxf4** (**1...gxh3 en passant** illegal) **2. b8=B+** **Kf3** **3. Qxe4 #**; **1...exd3** **2. O-O** (Kg1 or h1-Re1) **d2** (**...Kxf4** **3. b8=B #**) **3. Rf1 #**; **1...e3** **2. Rh2 e2** **3. Rf2 #**; **1...Kg2** **2. b8=N** or **R** **Kf3** **3. Qxe4 #**.

Down to Earth

Thanks to the efforts of Carlo Salvioli and the magazine *La Nuova Rivista degli Scacchi*, the special rules were finally abandoned in 1880, and beginning with the National Tournament of Milan 1881 the international laws were adopted.

Epilogue: the 20th Century

Although officially abandoned in Italy for over 120 years, the *free castling* is not dead. It is frequently adopted in blitz and in one-minute chess, in Italy and all over the world, especially by chess hustlers, when there is some money on the table. For example, as Arnold Denker vividly recalled in *The Bobby Fischer I Knew*:

On one memorable occasion George N. Treysman was extending Queen odds to an opponent just a bit too strong for such an overwhelming advantage. So he devised a new way of castling by which he put his Rook immediately on e1. The adversary scratched his head and inquired how it was that when he castled, his Rook ended up on the Bishop's square, and when George castled, it ended up on the King's square. To which George replied: "You castle your way, and I'll castle my way, okay?"

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Many thanks to Dale Brandreth of Caissa Editions for his kind permission to quote extensively from *The War of the Chessmen*. A copy of this outstanding book may be ordered directly from him (P.O. Box 151, Yorklyn, DE 19736, U.S.A.) for \$ 30 plus postage.

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