



COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

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Subtle Clues

THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS to the general rule that chessplayers in a film are either devious crooks or madmen, but for *La partie d'échecs* (*The Chess Game*), a film that I saw a few months ago on Belgian TV, director Yves Hanchard has been faithful to tradition: World Champion Howard Staunton is depicted as a crook and his French opponent Master Max is mad.

It was a Belgian-French-Swiss co-production from 1994. Too many cooks in the kitchen may be good for subsidies from European cultural funds, but they tend to spoil the dish. This film is far from a masterpiece, but for chess addicts it has quite a few interesting points.

Master Max, who is, contrary to Staunton, a character that doesn't seem to be based on an actual chess player, is invited by Marquise De Theux (played by Catherine Deneuve) to play at her estate against the Englishman Howard Staunton, the reigning champion. The winner of a two-game match will not only be the new World Champion, he will also marry the beautiful daughter of the marquise.

Poor Staunton - he is the proverbial villain of chess history. I remember well how quite recently on **The Chess Café's** Bulletin Board in the great Historians' Quarrel of Ken Whyld against the gang of five, six, seven or whatever their number, he was still able to attract the ire of contemporary historians.

And in this film, being cast as the bad guy, Staunton has already secured the love of the marquise's daughter by means that have little to do with chess. He will get her whatever the outcome of the match. One cannot really blame him for this, or her, for the emotionally and socially disturbed Master Max is an unlikely candidate for marriage.

But indeed shameful is the proposal that Staunton makes after he has lost the first game. He promises to lose the second game also. Then Max will be champion and marry the daughter. Afterwards he will confess that the second game was fixed and then the title will revert to Staunton, but not Max's new wife.

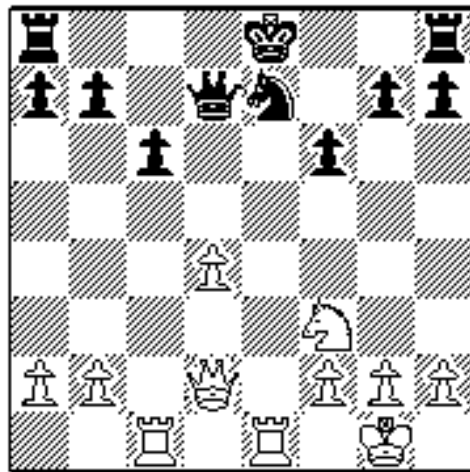
Max, madly in love with the marquise's daughter, believes Staunton and runs through a nice game that they will stage the next day.

The chess adviser of the film has not been able to prevent silly lines such as "I want to beat Staunton with a discovered check!," but he did choose some very nice historical games and they are presented in such a subtle way that only an attentive chess detective will be able to figure out which ones they are.

The second game starts. We see the opening moves played quickly with wildly flailing arms, as if the players are protecting themselves from a swarm of bees, instead of starting a chess game.

White Staunton Black Master Max

1. e2-e4 e7-e5 2. Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3. Bf1-c4 Bf8-c5 4. c2-c3 Ng8-f6 5. d2-d4 e5xd4 6. c3xd4 Bc5-b4+ This is the first time we get a glimpse of the board. We see the black bishop giving check. Aha, we think. Italian opening. **7. Nb1-c3 d7-d5 8. e4xd5 Nf6xd5 9. 0-0 Bc8-e6 10. Bc1-g5 Bb4-e7 11. Bc4xd5 Be6xd5 12. Nc3xd5 Qd8xd5 13. Bg5xe7 Nc6xe7 14. Rf1-e1 f7-f6 15. Qd1-e2 Qd5-d7 16. Ra1-c1 c7-c6** None of these moves we have seen on the screen, but at this point we get a clue again, enabling us to reconstruct them. (See Diagram)



We do not really see the position as it is given here, only a small part of the board: pawn d4, pawn c6, the Queen on d7 and the Knight on e7. It's clue enough for the chess detective, who realizes that they are duplicating Steinitz-Bardeleben, Hastings 1895. He briefly wonders in what year the film is set, as the real Staunton died in 1874, but realizes that such musings are irrelevant.

Back to the film, where the previous day Max had told Staunton that White could win in the diagrammed position with d4-d5 and that White, if he didn't make that move, "would lose in thirteen or fourteen moves," which must be another line that the chess adviser vainly struggled to keep out.

Staunton had agreed not to play d4-d5, but of course the scoundrel has no intention of keeping his promise and he plays it all the same. The moves that follow we do not get to see on the screen, but of course we know what they must have been: **17. d4-d5 c6xd5 18. Nf3-d4 Ke8-f7 19. Nd4-e6 Rh8-c8 20. Qe2-g4 g7-g6 21. Ne6-g5+**

Kf7-e8 22. Re1xe7+ Ke8-f8 23. Re7-f7+ Kf8-g8 24. Rf7-g7+ Kg8-h8 25. Rg7xh7+ This is the moment when Bardeleben left the playing room and let his time run out, after which a disappointed Steinitz showed what would have happened, had Bardeleben not sneaked out so unsportingly: **25... Kh8-g8 26. Rh7-g7+ Kg8-h8 27. Qg4-h4+ Kh8xg7 28. Qh4-h7+ Kg7-f8 29. Qh7-h8+ Kf8-e7 30. Qh8-g7+ Ke7-e8 31. Qg7-g8+ Ke8-e7 32. Qg8-f7+ Ke7-d8 33. Qf7-f8+ Qd7-e8 34. Ng5-f7+ Kd8-d7 35. Qf8-d6** Mate.

His treachery has brought Staunton the point; it's now 1-1 and a final decisive game is scheduled. Again we see the wild and quick arm movements in the opening stage.

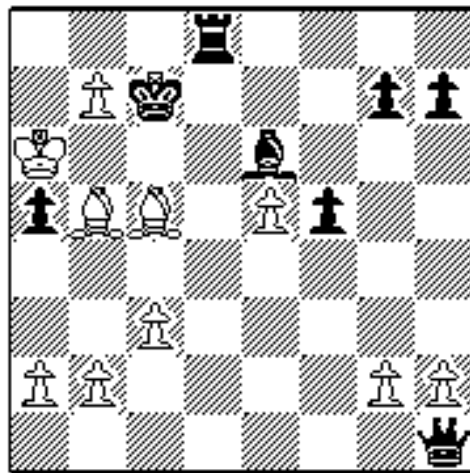
We see that Master Max, who plays White, moves a piece in the middle of his first rank, one square up, it appears. An important clue. It must be Ke1-e2. The Steinitz Gambit! A sharp game indeed. After this, we see no other recognizable moves made, except at the end.

Max has, inadvertently it seems, touched a piece that he doesn't want to play, and Staunton demands the traditional penalty: a King's move. Now we see Max moving his King at the far edge of the board, apparently to the square a7, and then Staunton, the marquise, her admirers and her daughter realize what Max has realized all along, that Staunton will be mated in a few moves.

And the chess detective now has enough information to know what game was enacted. Of course it was that fantastic game that ended with 26. Ka7.

White *Steel* Black *NN*, Calcutta 1886

1. e2-e4 e7-e5 2. Nb1-c3 Nb8-c6 3. f2-f4 e5xf4 4. d2-d4 Qd8-h4+ 5. Ke1-e2 The Steinitz gambit. **5...d7-d5 6. e4xd5 Bc8-g4+ 7. Ng1-f3 0-0-0 8. d5xc6 Bf8-c5 9. c6xb7+ Kc8-b8 10. Nc3-b5 Ng8-f6 11. c2-c3 Rh8-e8+ 12. Ke2-d3 Bg4-f5+ 13. Kd3-c4 Bf5-e6+ 14. Kc4xc5 a7-a5 15. Nb5xc7 Qh4-h5+ 16. Nf3-e5 Nf6-d7+ 17. Kc5-b5 Qh5xd1 18. Bc1xf4 Qd1xa1 19. Kb5-a6 Nd7xe5 20. Nc7xe8 f7-f6 21. d4xe5 f6-f5 22. Bf4-e3 Rd8xe8 23. Bf1-b5 Qa1xh1 24. Be3-a7+ Kb8-c7 25. Ba7-c5 Re8-d8** (*See Diagram*)



26. Ka6-a7 Black resigned.

Thanks to Tim Krabbé and Dutch IM Gerard Welling, we know that this was actually only analysis by Robert Steel, a British government official in India, not a game that was really played. But that is not the point here. Master Max did play a splendid game. And nice work too by the chess adviser, who knew that just a few clues would

suffice to recognize it.

His choice of Steinitz-Bardeleben as a model for the second match game in the film can be explained simply on the grounds of its beauty, but I think there is more to it.

In the final scene, Master Max is shown as a kind of mad king on the terrace of a mountain castle, playing with giant-sized chessmen on a giant board. Then he jumps off the edge of the board into Nothingness.

His disappearance mimics the death of the man whose moves he had copied, Curt von Bardeleben, who in real life jumped to his death in 1924.

It appears as if the chess adviser, whoever he is, in the margins of a somewhat trashy film played a game of his own, involving the few chess addicts who would see the film as a conspiracy of shared knowledge. The chess detective salutes him and purrs contentedly.

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