



COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer

Tim Harding

The Pierce Brothers and the *English Mechanic*

Last year I wrote two columns about the Pierce Gambit in the Vienna and promised to return to the topic before the end of the year. In the end that was not possible, as I wanted to find out more about the brothers who invented it. Now I am able to tell you a little more, although there is certainly more to be discovered.

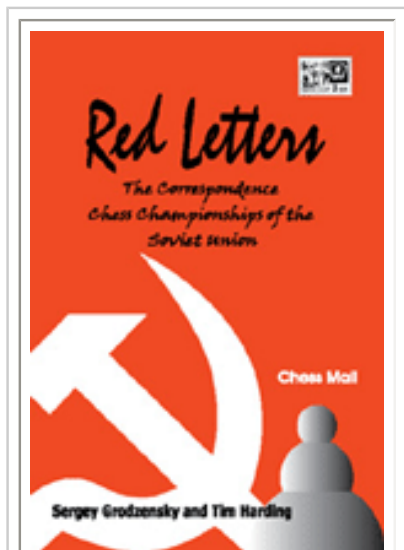
Unfortunately the completion of this column has been rushed, since I suffered with a bout of bronchitis after Easter, and almost overlooked the deadline to complete writing. Therefore I apologise to readers that the article is a little less polished, and rather shorter, than most of these columns.

Kibitzers [96](#) and [97](#) were the articles in which I wrote about the Pierces and their gambit. Of the two, James was the one who probably made the most impact while he was alive but his younger brother had a much longer life and chess career.

James Pierce was born in London on the first of July, 1833; he died in April 1892, either in Brighton (according to Jeremy Gaige's standard work *Chess Personalia*) or in Teignmouth (according to *Alumni Cantabrigienses*, the encyclopaedia of Cambridge University graduates). He had apparently been in poor health for several years but I don't know the nature of his illness. William Timbrell Pierce, usually referred to by his second Christian name in contemporary publications, was born on 30th March 1839 and died in May 1922. I am not sure of the exact date. Both "died with their boots on," in the sense that they were still playing chess to the end.

For more than a quarter of a century, up to his death, James Pierce had conducted the weekly chess column in the *English Mechanic*, which was a magazine for those interested in inventions and gadgets and new discoveries in science, technology and mathematics. According to the late Ken Whyld's *Chess Columns: A List*, the *EM* column was begun by J. W. Abbott in 1872 and James Pierce took it over in October 1876.

I haven't seen his earliest columns but over the past year I have read through



Red Letters
by Tim Harding

all the *EM* volumes from number 30 (starting 12 September 1879) until 17 August 1894 (the last issue in volume 59). Apparently the publication and its chess column continued for a few years after that. The full title of the publication when I saw it was *English Mechanic and World of Science* but at some earlier date it was *English Mechanic and Mirror of Science*.

The amount of space devoted to chess varied, and sometimes was little more than a problem, or was even omitted altogether for a few weeks when Pierce was ill, but at its peak in the mid-1880s it was a substantial item including chess news and book reviews and games.

When he died, the paper carried the following obituary notice in the issue of 13 May 1892, on page 275.

At an early age, whilst at school, he commenced composing Chess problems, and contributed to several of the leading papers. He was educated at King's College, London, and gained the first mathematical prize; also the Plumtre [sic] prize for English verse in 1852. In 1856 he graduated as sixteenth Wrangler at Cambridge. In 1866 he accepted the mathematical mastership of Bedford Grammar School, and filled that post for fifteen years, and during the whole of this period his problems were constantly appearing in several Chess columns. In 1873 he and his brother published a collection of 30 of their problems, which was very favourably received. Their next joint work was "English Chess Problems", a collection of 608 problems by English composers, principally their own selection. Their last joint production was "Pierce-Gambit, Papers and Problems", published in 1888. Mr. Pierce has also conducted this Chess column for about 20 years. He also co-operated as one of the editors of the British Chess Magazine, which periodical contains a great many of his Chess essays and poems. Mr. Pierce has published two volumes of his poems in recent years – one entitled "Stanzas and Sonnets", and the other "In Clouds and Sunshine". They are chiefly notable for their deep, contemplative spirit, and evince a highly appreciative sense of the beauty of Nature. They also were very well reviewed.

Although in one source I saw him described as the Rev. James Pierce, that was probably incorrect. *Alumni Cantab* says that he was married on 2 July 1866 to Laura Marriott, but no children are mentioned. If anything, this obituary understates the work that James Pierce did for British chess at this period. Apart from his extensive writings in *English Mechanic* and *BCM*, and the books above mentioned, he almost continuously conducted problem-solving and problem-composing tournaments in *EM*.

A typical *English Mechanic* chess column would include both a 2-move and a 3-move problem, sometimes original and sometimes prize-winners from

competitions in other publications. This would be followed by the solutions to problems published two weeks previously and other items, depending on space and what news he had. “Notices to Correspondents” could sometimes be quite lengthy, but usually referred to problems just published.

Moreover, through his news items and answers to correspondents, James Pierce kept readers informed about all kinds of activities throughout the UK. He seems to have been a regular clearing-house for what was going on in local newspaper columns; the chess editors would keep him informed about any tournaments they were starting to attract readers from elsewhere in the country.

Finally, James Pierce organised a series of round-robin correspondence tournaments, which I am currently investigating in detail for my university history research and probably a future chess book. Between 1883 and 1886 he quite often published games played in these, and other, postal tournaments. The first of the *EM* events (1882-83) was won by James Russell of Glasgow; both Pierce brothers played in it. The second (1884-5) was won by one F. A. Vincent, whose origins I haven’t yet discovered. The strong player J. H. Blake from Southampton was a prize-winner both times.

After the experience of running two tournaments, Pierce wrote an article for *BCM* (1885, pages 78-80) in which he advocated the advantages of correspondence play and explained his method of running the events. Then he seems to have modified his ideas and his third (1885-7) event saw a change in rules. This was possibly the first correspondence tournament in which contestants played a game each with white and with black against every opponent. That was won by Charles James Lambert, an Exeter lawyer.

It is hard to find out much about the 4th English Mechanic tournament (1887-89/90?) as space in the column was reduced at this time and games were not published in the paper. On 15 November 1889 readers are told it is nearly complete, and that the winners were Lambert and a Mr. Balson, but I haven’t found the final result as yet. Meanwhile a fifth event started in February 1890 and ended in March 1892; this was won by W.T. Pierce and Tom Gedney Hart (1857-1921).

The last decade of James Pierce’s life was therefore perhaps the most active of all in chess productivity, since after giving up the job at the Bedford school (probably for health reasons) he would have had more free time. Last year I stated that he lived in Brighton, but that appears to have been only at the very end, and I think that I was wrong to say he was connected with the *Brighton Guardian*. However, the Pierce family does seem to have a strong Sussex connection and there was often news of Sussex developments in the chess columns of *English Mechanic*.

His movements can be traced to some extent through the pages of *English Mechanic* as his home address is sometimes given for correspondence; at other times, readers are asked to write to the paper's office at 31 Tavistock-street, Covent Garden, in London.

When the first *British Chess Magazine* postal tournament began in January 1882, James Pierce was stated to be living in Birkenhead, on the Wirral peninsula in Cheshire. Pierce did badly in this event, probably because of his health. In early 1882, the *EM* column was absent several times; illness was mentioned as the reason for this at least once.

By May 1883, James Pierce seems to have been in better health and he was living in west Wales. His address was given as Bryn Rhedyn, Llandwrog, Carnarvon. In October 1885 he has left Wales and moved to Langley House, Dorking — in Surrey, not far from London. In the Spring of 1889, he moves to “Knollside” in the seaside area of Lyme Regis, Dorset, but in October 1891 he has to give this up and the address for correspondence becomes the EM's office (now in The Strand). The paper for 13 November, 1891, referring to a chess problem composing tournament that was about to start, states that: “The new tourney, in consequence of the serious illness of Mr. James Pierce, must be deferred for the present.” Presumably his brother Timbrell covered for him by writing the column when James was unable to do it.

Nevertheless on 27 November the new tourney does commence, and on 11 March 1892 a new correspondence tournament is announced (as the previous one had just ended), and James Pierce himself as one of those intending to play. Moreover on 1 April a new address in Lyme Regis is given for James Pierce but unfortunately his hopes for recovery were dashed this time. According to Gaige, the death of James Pierce occurred on the 27th of April; presumably his source for that was a chess magazine obituary. However, the *English Mechanic* for Friday 29 April (page 217) said he died “on Tuesday morning, after a very short illness;” Tuesday was the 26th and that is also the date of death given in *Alumni Cantab*.

Here is a game he won. It appeared with more detailed notes by Pierce in *BCM* 1884, page 311.

William Nash – James Pierce,J

William Nash's 3rd correspondence tourney, 1884-5
Scotch Game [C45]

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 exd4 4 Nxd4 Be7?!

This move is too defensive and invites the hot attack that follows.

5 Bc4 Nf6 6 Nf5 0-0 7 Ng3 Ne5

Better 7...d6.

**8 Bb3 d6 9 f4 Ned7 10 c4 Nb6 11 Nc3 c6 12 0-0 Be6 13 Qe2 Qc7 14 f5
Bd7 15 Bf4**



White's game is now far superior owing to moves 4 and 7.

15...c5 16 Rad1 Rfe8 17 Qd3 Nc8 18 Nd5 Nxd5 19 exd5 Qd8 20 Nh5 Bf6 21 Qg3 Kh8 22 Bc2 b5

The beginning of a combination that relieves Black's congestion.

23 b3 bxc4 24 bxc4 Rb8 25 Nxf6 Qxf6 26 Bg5 Qe5 27 Qh4 f6 28 Qh5? Rb2

White should not have allowed this move, which turns the tables.

(TH: White should probably have exchanged queens by 27 Qxe5.)

29 Bd3 Qd4+ 30 Kh1 Re7 31 Rf3?

Overlooking the reply

31...Rbe2!



32 Rff1

If 32 Bxe2 Qxd1+!.

32...Rf2 33 Rxf2 Qxf2 34 Qh4 Qb2 35 Bf4 Qxa2 36 Qg3 Qb3 37 Rb1 Qc3 38 h4 h6 39 Kh2 Qd4 40 Rb8 a5 41 Ra8 a4 42 Bc1 Re8 43 Rb8 Qc3 44 Qg6 Qxc1 45 Qf7 Qf4+ 46 Kh3 Bxf5+ 0-1

Timbrell Pierce

After James Pierce died, there was some discussion about what to do with the *English Mechanic* column. On April 29, the editor wrote: "The Chess column

has not attracted much support from the general body of our readers, but it has doubtless interested a limited section. If any reader so interested cares to continue the column, we shall be glad to hear from him.”

Professor Monck from Trinity College, Dublin, suggested that W. T. Pierce might take over, or if he didn't wish to, then William Monck himself would be willing to hold the fort on a short-term basis. He suggested the paper should give a game each week (“I think the column was too much confined to problems.”) and this was in fact done in 1893-4, though these were usually ‘brilliant brevities.’

O. Eyrie wrote in to say: “In my opinion, to give up the chess column would be a retrograde step on the part of “E.M.” There are doubtless one or two readers, at least, besides the ordinary contributors, who make it a point each week to go over the Chess problems carefully, to look for something new or original in the reports, yet who to my knowledge never contribute to solutions &c., simply because unable to spare the time for intricate game speculations.” A Scottish reader (on May 13) said he would prefer a draughts (checkers) column.

The editor thanked the readers on 6 May for their valuable suggestions. “We hope to announce next week that one of several gentlemen who have kindly placed themselves at our disposal has consented to take charge of the column.” The column did indeed continue, but by whom it was conducted was not stated.

On 20 May 1892 the new Chess Editor, whoever it was (perhaps Taylor), announced that the ongoing solving tourney would be completed but the problem [composing] tourney to end: “the number and quality of the problems entered not being such as would justify its continuance.” He also stated: “Practical suggestions for increasing the interest in this column will be gladly received and considered by the Chess Editor.”

The entry in Whyld's bibliography of columns is not very clear: “...Pierce, W T 10/76-99-; Taylor, J Paul.” However, in the years I have seen (1892-4) the new chess editor is not named. Maybe it was Taylor. It certainly wasn't Timbrell Pierce, as a note to a correspondent in the issue of 6 April 1894 confirms: “We do not understand your post-card. Mr. Pierce is not Chess Editor of “E.M.”.”

However, he was helping, to some extent, since he ran the sixth (and apparently last) correspondence tournament, the one which James Pierce was starting just before he died. However, the tournament is not mentioned in the column at all until it ends. Then, however, there is a bonus because on 22 June 1894 the final crosstable is printed, whereas James Pierce didn't print the tables of the events he ran. The winner of the sixth *EM* tournament was

the strong London amateur player A.E. Tietjen.

In 1897, F. R. Gittins, from Birmingham, published his book *The Chess Bouquet*, consisting of sketches of British problem composers and chess editors. The entry for W. Timbrell Pierce starts on page 223 and, although only living persons were featured, James is favourably mentioned in passing. (By the way, does anyone know for sure when Gittins died? This information is not in Gaige but he was probably still alive in the early 1920s as Weenink's book on chess problems did not show him to be dead.)

“The limited space at our disposal,” wrote Gittins of W. T. Pierce, “scarcely enables us to do justice to this subject of this sketch, whose chess work extends over a quarter of a century.” (And this was 25 years before Timbrell died!) Like his elder brother, he was educated at King's College but then their paths diverged. Timbrell apparently went into architecture. He was articled to Lewis Cubitt, according to Gittins, and “subsequently practiced his profession for several years in London.”

In 1873 he authored a treatise on descriptive geometry, “which was very well reviewed. About this time he occupied the post of Lecturer of Practical Geometry at King's College, London, and for a short time at Harrow School.” Gittins has nothing more to say about his professional activities after that. He points that although in his early years Timbrell Pierce was best known as a problem composer who “has in two successive years won the Sussex Challenge Cup and several other prizes,” he gave up problems in later years for the analysis of chess openings “and has contributed articles thereon to the *British Chess Magazine* since its commencement.” And of course it was Timbrell Pierce who principally claimed credit (if that's the right word) for the invention of the branch of the Vienna Gambit which bears his name.

Of the two brothers, Timbrell seems to have been the more active (and probably the stronger) as a player, and both of them played more by post than ‘over-the-board.’ Several of the extant games of James Pierce are against his brother, including games evidently played when one visited the other. In at least one case, a game they began in a correspondence tournament was stated to have been completed ‘OTB.’

Last years of Timbrell

Those who outlive their day sometimes receive a much shorter obituary than they deserve and so it was in 1922 for two men who had been very important in correspondence chess circles in the 19th century.

Timbrell Pierce's death was noticed briefly in *British Chess Magazine* for 1922 on page 230 in the page devoted to the activities of the British Correspondence Chess Association, which (it said) he had joined in 1919, since competing regularly in Class I of their Trophies Tourney. “His chess

achievements are well known and his comparative failure in our tourneys was probbaly [sic] to advancing age and failing health.”

The references to his achievements being “well known” suggests to me that the person writing the notice was either very pressed for space, or wasn’t really quite sure what Pierce had achieved, or both. Similarly, the death of William Nash (1841-1922) a few weeks earlier was recorded only briefly (on page 182) without any mention of the fact that, even more so than James Pierce, he was an important organiser of correspondence tournaments.

The two veterans must have competed in numerous games over the years as their careers ran in parallel. Both Nash and W. T. Pierce would probably have each received more than a page of obituary in *BCM* (where their names quite often appeared) had they, like James Pierce, died in the 1890s. I am still doing research into Nash (who lived in St Neot’s, Huntingdonshire) and maybe will write about him in a future Kibitzer. If anyone can supply a photograph or personal details, I should be interested to hear from them.

Timbrell Pierce was not an organiser (except for the event he completed for his brother), but he was a competitor of extraordinary longevity. He has played in the very first Nash postal tournament which began in 1877, and before that he had in fact played in other tournaments. He played in several tournaments in the Edwardian decade (1901-10) and as already mentioned he joined BCCA at the rope old age of eighty. All his life he enjoyed open play and gambits.

Shortly before he died, *BCM* had published the following game by Pierce:

W.T. Pierce – Major E. M. Jones

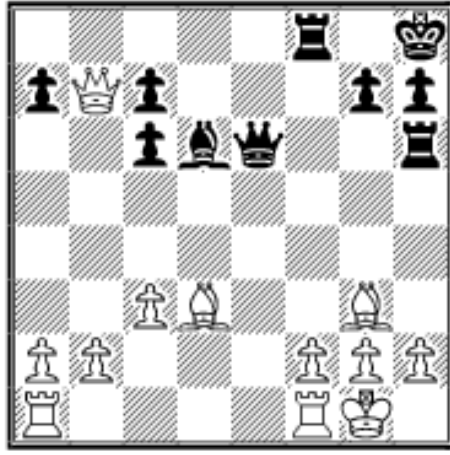
BCCA Trophies class–1 rd.1 corr, 1921

Ponziani Opening [C44]

**1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 c3 d5 4 Qa4 dxe4 5 Nxe5 Qd5 6 Nxc6 bxc6 7 Bc4 Qd7
8 0–0 Bd6 9 Be2! f5 10 d3 Nf6? 11 dxe4 fxe4 12 Nd2 0–0 13 Nxe4 Bb7?**

Black already has a bad position and this move, losing the bishop to a fork, makes it virtually resignable.

**14 Nxf6+ Rxf6 15 Qb3+ Kh8 16 Qxb7 Raf8 17 Bg5 Rg6 18 Bh4 Qe6 19
Bd3 Rh6 20 Bg3**



Pierce wrote that Black was intending 20...Bxg3 for if then 21 fxg3 Qe3+ 22 Kh1 Rxh2+ 23 Kxh2 Qh6+ drawing. "Foolishly White sent 'if BxB 21 RPxB' which gave the show away and started Black on another route!"

20...Qd5 21 Be2 Rg6 22 Rad1 Qg5 23 Qxc6! Qe7 24 Bxd6 Qxe2 25 Qxc7 Re8 26 Be5 h5 27 Rd8 Rxd8 28 Qxd8+ Kh7 29 Bg3 1-0

Here is a relatively late game played with the Pierce Gambit by its author.

William Timbrell Pierce – J. Wilson

BCM corr tourney prelim-02, 1908-9

Pierce Gambit [C25]

1 e4 e5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 f4 exf4 4 Nf3 g5 5 d4 d6

Writing in *BCM* (1909 p. 494), Pierce wrote: "A safe defence. 5...g4 leads to a more exciting game."

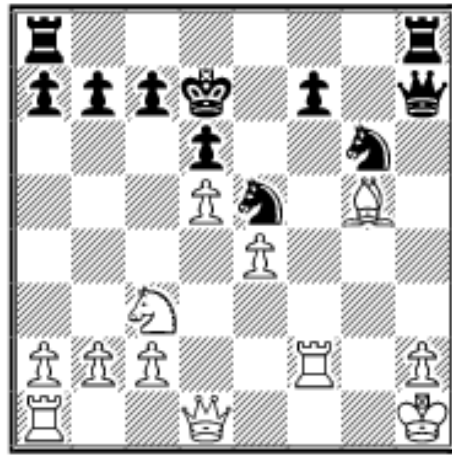
6 d5 Ne5 7 Bb5+ Bd7 8 Bxd7+ Kxd7

He said 8...Nxd7 would be met by 9 Qd4 but it isn't so clear now that White achieves any significant advantage in that line.

9 g3 Bh6

Pierce preferred 9...h5 here.

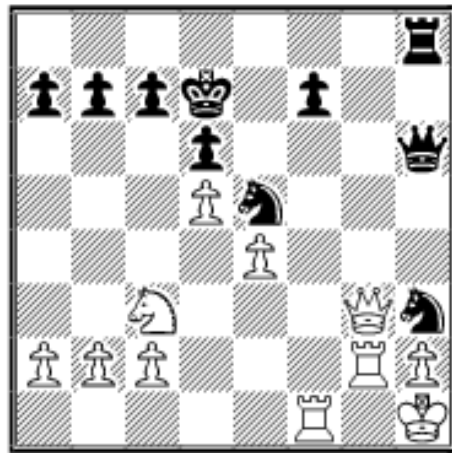
10 0-0 Ne7 11 Nxg5 Bxg5 12 gxf4 N7g6 13 fxg5 h6 14 Rf5 hxg5 15 Bxg5 Qg8 16 Kh1 Qh7 17 Rf2



17...Rag8

“The sacrifice of the exchange was very tempting, as it tends to produce a complicated attack, but I doubt if it is sound.”

18 Bf6 Nf4 19 Bxh8 Rxh8 20 Qd2 Nh3 21 Rg2 Nf3 22 Qe2 Ne5 23 Rf1 Qh4 24 Qe1 Qh6 25 Qg3



White is now out of danger and can resume the offensive.

25...Rh7 26 Ne2 Qg6 27 Qxg6 fxg6 28 Ng1

If 28 Nf4 Rf7.

28...Ke8 29 Nxh3 Rxh3 30 Rg3 Rh4 31 Re1 a5 32 Kg2 b6 33 Rh3 Rg4+ 34 Kf2 Kd7 35 Rh7+ Kd8 36 h3 Rf4+ 37 Kg3

Better than 37 Ke3 Rf3+.

37...Rf3+ 38 Kg2 Kc8 39 Re7 Rf4 40 Re3 Kd8 41 Rg7 1-0

To conclude, here is the earliest Pierce game I have been able to find. It's quite lively and without obvious blunders although the annotations (probably by J. Chatto) may not be so accurate.

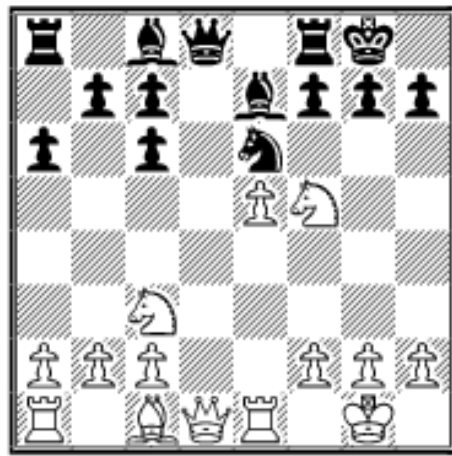
Charles Benbow – W. T. Pierce

Amateur Chess Magazine corr. tourney 2, rd.1, 1872

Spanish (C84)

[Notes from Amateur Chess Magazine vol.2 p39]

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Be7 5 0-0 Nf6 6 d4 exd4 7 e5 Ne4 8 Re1 Nc5 9 Bxc6 dxc6 10 Nxd4 0-0 11 Nc3 Ne6 12 Nf5



If 12 Nxe6 the following moves are not improbable: 12...Qxd1 13 Rxd1 Bxe6 14 f4 Bc5+ 15 Kh1 f6 16 Re1 fxe5 17 Rxe5 Bd5 18 Nxd5 cxd5 19 Rxd5 Rad8 20 Rd2 Rfe8 and Black must win.

12...Bg5

This appears the strongest move, if 12...Bc5 13 Qg4 g6 14 Ne4 &c.

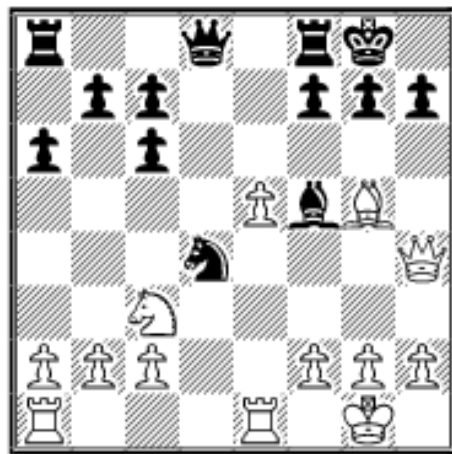
13 Qg4 Nd4

Another and perhaps better line of defence is 13...Bxc1 followed by 14...Qg5 &c.

14 Bxg5

If 14 Qxd4 Bxc1 is best, &c.

14...Bxf5 15 Qh4



Well played.

15...f6

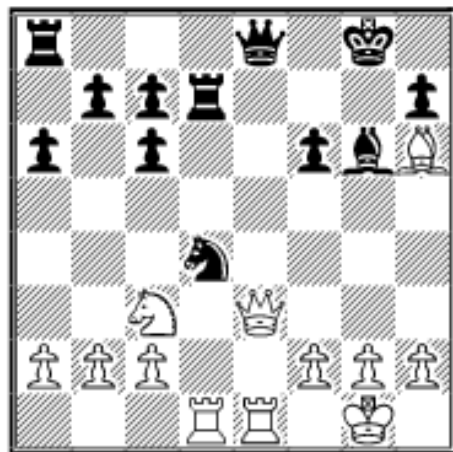
If 15...Qd7 16 Rad1 c5 17 Be7 Rfe8 18 Bxc5 &c.

16 exf6 gxf6 17 Bh6 Rf7 18 Rad1 Rd7 19 Qg3+ Bg6 20 Qe3

An interesting variation is 20 h4 Nf5 (best) 21 Rxd7 Qxd7 22 Qg4 Qd4 23 Bf4

Nh6 &c.

20...Qe8



The game is now very critical.

21 Qf4 Ne2+ 22 Nxe2 Rxd1 23 Rxd1 Qxe2 24 Rc1 Re8 25 h3 Qh5 26 Qd2 Qd5 27 Qf4 Qd6 28 Qf3 Bxc2 29 Qc3 Be4 30 Qb3+ Bd5 31 Qxb7 c5 32 Qa7 Qb6 33 Qxb6 cxb6 34 a3 Kf7 35 Rd1 Bc6 36 Rd6 Re6 37 Rxe6 Kxe6 1/2-1/2

“The game was continued to the 42nd move, and then abandoned as a draw.”

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