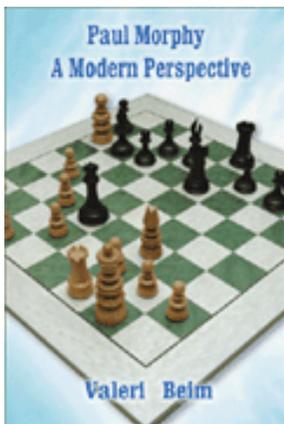




C O L U M N I S T S

New Stories about Old Chess Players

Jeremy P. Spinrad



We are pleased to present our newest columnist, Jerry Spinrad. We will let Jerry's own words tell you about himself – and his new column at ChessCafe.com.

I am a professor at Vanderbilt University, where I teach theoretical computer science. My specific research area is graph algorithms, and I have been an author of two books on that subject.

I have been playing tournament chess since my high school years during the Fischer boom. For many years, I have been either a high class A player or a low expert. My most impressive sounding achievement in chess is that I am 3-time quick chess champion of Tennessee; actually, the only time I beat out strong masters for the title, I was helped by a ridiculously favorable pairing in the last round and a great deal of luck in the tiebreak system. I have coached my daughters' school chess teams since they started school, and once had a team win the state championship.

When I started my investigations into chess history, I first considered writing an ambitious and scholarly review of a particular period of chess history. Although I might still like to write such a book, I found myself increasingly interested in the fascinating personalities of chess players in the time period, and these stories are the result.

Introduction

There have been many developments in chess history in recent years. Game scores of major tournaments, which once could only be found in old books, are now easily available on the Internet. Old chess journals have been reprinted, allowing anyone to own what once existed only in a small number of chess libraries. Some wonderful biographies of chess players have been published, as well as comprehensive game collections. This has been an exciting time for serious chess historians.

Unfortunately, there are relatively few serious chess historians. There are, on the other hand, many chess players who have some interest in chess history. These players enjoy the stories of the bizarre, larger-than-life individuals who have always made the world of chess a fascinating place.

We have not seen so many advances aimed at those who have a casual interest

in chess history. There has been some work in this direction. There have always been many sloppy authors who repeat false stories, but we now have a zealot, Edward Winter, who is willing to separate fact from fiction and embarrass the peddlers of tired old myths.

Instead of looking at the same old stories, this column attempts to use the newly available sources to find new stories, which are both entertaining *and* true, about old chess players. Some are actually much more interesting than the false stories, and this is a celebration of chess culture in all of its glorious strangeness.

These columns will fall into several categories, each really a separate investigation into chess history. There are sections dealing with serious chess players who have been forgotten, and others dealing with bizarre incidents only tenuously connected to chess, but which I feel are very entertaining. Some stories will be of interest to non-players, others to all chess players, and still others primarily to chess history buffs. Some deal with individual figures from chess (and occasionally non-chess) history, some with groups of chess players, while others are organized around general themes rather than studies of a particular player or type of player.

I hope that readers will come to realize that chess culture is much more than variations of obscure opening lines, and will thus have even more fun with the game. I hope non-playing readers will understand that chess is full of wild, wacky characters, and thus may even be lured into playing and becoming part of our eccentric world. Chess historians, I hope you will forgive my occasional lack of academic rigor. My hope is that some readers will become intrigued and come to enjoy your scholarly work as much as I do.

We hope you enjoy Jerry Spinrad and his *New Stories about Old Chess Players...*

James Mortimer

This article recalls a forgotten chess player of the past, James Mortimer. Born in 1833 in Richmond, Virginia, USA, Mortimer lived to 1911, and had a life full of great triumphs and great failures.

It was the failures at the chess board that first brought Mortimer to my attention. To explain how he first caught my eye, I must make a small digression.

I have wanted to get my hands on Gaige's four-volume set of tournament crosstables for a long time, and finally was able to obtain them through interlibrary loan. Or at least, to obtain all of them except the one I wanted

most, volume 1, which covers the years from 1851 to 1900. Frustrated, I hit upon a scheme of “reverse engineering” Gaige’s tables from Anders Thulin’s index to the tables, which is available on the net. During a month-long trip by my wife, I logged on late at night and managed to get the standings for the tournaments in Gaige’s book constructed; I am still in the process of determining the players’ actual scores for as many tournaments as I can find.

The process described above is long and tedious, and you may feel free to question my sanity. However, there are a few advantages of entering every score by hand as opposed to buying a book: you end up looking at all the data, and noticing oddities which cry out for further inspection. For example, there have been a number of unknowns who did extraordinarily well in some particular tournament, never to be heard of again. Sometimes the player simply was lucky, but there often is a compelling story: some players died young, some were forced into exile, some gave up chess for business, and in at least one case (which I will discuss in a different article) the player was accused of cheating and was ostracized by the chess community.

Mortimer stands out in a different way. Mortimer had a reverse clean score in an 1887 London tournament, going 0-9 against top-flight competition. This type of wipe-out is fairly rare, but Mortimer’s case is not the worst. Famously, Colonel Moreau went 0-26 at Monte Carlo 1903. Moreau’s case is very different from Mortimer’s, however. Moreau agreed to be a last-minute substitute in a top-flight tournament; he does not appear anywhere else in Gaige’s books. Mortimer, however, continued to be invited regularly to top-level tournaments, almost always getting very low scores. These invitations seem odd because even when Mortimer played in non-master tournaments, he was not winning them.

Reviewing Mortimer’s tournaments from Gaige yields this summary:

- **London 1883:** 3-23, =13-14th out of 14 players
- **London 1885:** 6-9, =10-11th of 12
- **London 1886:** 4-8, 11th of 13
- **London 1887:** 0-9, last of 10
- **Bradford 1888:** 5½-10½, 13th of 17
- **London 1889:** 3-7, 10th of 11
- **Manchester 1890:** 8½-10½, 14th of 20
- **London 1891 (Simpson’s Divan summer tourney):** 5½-3½, 4th of 10
- **London 1891 (Simpson’s Divan winter tourney):** 4-5, =6-9th of 10
- **London 1892 (7th BCA tourney):** 3½-7½, 10th of 12
- **London 1896:** 4-7, =8-11th of 12
- **London 1900 (Simpson’s Divan):** ½-3½, last of 5
- **Paris 1900:** 2-14, 15th of 17
- **Folkstone 1901:** 2-3, =3rd-5th out of 6
- **Monte Carlo 1902:** 1-18, last of 20
- **Norwich 1902:** 2½-8½, =10-11th of 12
- **Tunbridge Wells 1902:** 4-5, 7th of 10
- **Canterbury 1903:** 4-4, 5th of 9

- **Plymouth 1903 (section II):** 4½-3½, =3rd-4th of 9
- **Brighton 1904:** 5-3, 4th of 9
- **London 1904:** 4-12, last of 17
- **London 1904 Rice Gambit:** 2½-13½, last of 9
- **Ostend 1907 (master tourney):** 5-23, last of 29
- **London 1907-8 (City of London Ch):** 10-9, =8-10th of 20
- **London 1909-10 (City of London Ch):** 6-11, 15th of 18
- **Paris 1910:** 2½-13½, 16th of 17
- **London 1910-11 (City of London Ch):** 2½-13½, 16th of 17

Where are the scores that justify invitations to major tournaments like London 1883, Paris 1900, Monte Carlo 1902, or even the Ostend 1907 Master Tourney, which was a second-tier event subordinate to the Grandmaster Tournament? Prior to beginning his tournament career (at age 50!) his only noteworthy result seems to have been an 1867 match in Paris with Simon Rosenthal, which Mortimer lost +2 –7 =1, including losses of only 25, 24, and 18 moves. His positive scores were generally in low-ranking events; for example, Plymouth 1903, where he finished 4½-3½, was a qualifying section featuring (in order of finish) the immortals Gunston, Emery, Allcock, Mortimer, Fawcett, R.B. Jones, A. West, Dunstan, and T. Taylor. Gunston was the only player besides Mortimer who ever played a major event, and he finished 3 points ahead of Mortimer with the kind of score (7½-½) which you would expect of a good player in a weak section. London 1907-8, where Mortimer scored +7 –6 =6, was not an international event but in effect a club championship, with no players of major stature.

Even his obituary in the *London Times* (Feb 25, 1911; he died while he was covering the chess tournament in San Sebastian as a reporter) notes that Mortimer was well known as a chess player, though as a personality rather than a master.

When I mentioned this oddity to my younger daughter, she replied with the cynicism of modern youth that Mortimer must have “had connections.” I am not sure whether this is exactly correct, but I do believe that the invitations came because of Mortimer’s interesting life beyond the chessboard.

Mortimer had done a little writing, both as a journalist and playwright, before joining the US diplomatic service. While stationed in Paris, he became friends with Morphy during Morphy’s first visit. In fact, he was one of the privileged few who witnessed the famous Anderssen-Morphy match. The situation is described in the *New York Times* of Jan 11, 1859:

“The greatest excitement prevailed, and an arrangement was made by which the game was kept on three boards at the Café de la Régence (only a few blocks distant), a domestic carrying the moves every half hour. Thus the large crowd collected at the Café were enabled to follow the progress of the game. The game was commenced in the presence of Messrs. Lequesne, of the Institute, De Saint-Amant,

Arnous de Riviere, Journoud, Prete [*sic*], Carlini, F. Edge, Jams. Mortimer, and your correspondent, all invited especially by Messrs. Morphy and Anderssen as witnesses for the game.”

After being stationed for a time in St. Petersburg, Mortimer returned to Paris and worked as a journalist. His articles supporting Napoleon III brought him many rewards, including the Cross of the Legion of Honor; he is said to have been the last person to speak to Napoleon III. Mortimer was made responsible for the princess' arrangements when she fled to England, where the emperor had previously given Mortimer funds to set up a newspaper, the London *Figaro*. *Figaro* chess columnists were, at various times, Löwenthal and Steinitz, so there may be some truth in the notion that Mortimer's connections were responsible for some tournament invitations.

Mortimer was now free to practice two of his three passions. The third was chess, first and second were journalism and theater, in which he was both a critic and a playwright. He could be delightfully nasty as a critic, which made him some powerful enemies. He despised one of the most famous tragic actors of the time, whom he called “The Eminent I”; you can find Mortimer's poem “The Fall of the Eminent I,” fantasizing about the actor being killed by irate fans stuffing playbills down his throat, reprinted in *Appleton's Journal*, Nov 16, 1875.

These journalistic assaults had repercussions for his own plays. The following incident is described in *Appleton's Journal*, June 10 1875, p. 59, during a positive review of a Mortimer adaptation.

“On the first night, by the way, there was an amusing scene. Mr. Mortimer is out of the good books of the ‘gods.’ In his paper, some time ago, he called them ‘rabble,’ and they have never forgiven him for it; wherefore, whenever he appears in a theater, they hoot and hiss at him, and address to him remarks anything but complimentary. On this first night they made an energetic attempt to ‘damn’ his piece. Again and again were the opening scenes interrupted by them; they ‘chaffed’ the actors and actresses, and jeeringly called for their arch-enemy, Mr. Mortimer himself. Suddenly, while Miss Barry was standing alone upon the stage in a pathetic attitude, in rushed Mr. Eignold, his eyes flashing fire, his great fists clinched. ‘Stop! Stop!’ he yelled. ‘If you are an Englishman, those of you who have mothers, wives, or daughters, remember there is a lady before you! For myself,’ he went on, still at the top of his powerful voice, ‘all I ask is justice! Hiss me, howl at me, if you like, but don't abuse me before you see the picture I am about to draw.’ This exhortation saved the piece. The ‘gods’ were completely cowed. Probably if they had known, as I did, that Mr. Eignold had merely repeated a bit of ‘copy’ — that, as opposition was foreseen, he had learned the words by heart, in order to rush in with them on his tongue at the most fitting moment — they only would have laughed at him.”

Mortimer specialized in liberal adaptations of plays which he would translate from the French, usually light comedy. His own life took a strange turn, worthy of a play with farcical moments but ending as a tragedy, as a result of a libel action against his paper.

If you read the *Oxford Companion to Chess* version of the case, Mortimer bravely went to prison, rather than revealing the source for his story. What actually happened was much stranger; you can find accounts in the *London Times* (Nov 25, 1879) or the *New York Times* (Dec 25, 1879).

Mortimer chose to defend himself in a libel case, which proved to be a serious mistake. Besides not having a grasp of important nuances of the law (he didn't realize that a witness should be cross-examined, instead waiting patiently for his turn to tell his side), acting as his own counsel meant that he was unable to testify on his own behalf. Thus, it was not until after the jury had found him guilty that Mortimer was able to show the judges compelling evidence that he had no personal knowledge of the article printed. The article had been handled by a sub-editor who was in America during the trial. The judges were surprised at this, and eventually ruled that although the evidence might very well have cleared him, they could not overturn the verdict of the jury. More surprisingly, the senior judge ruled that instead of simply paying a fine, Mortimer would be subject to three months imprisonment. He argued that fines are not enough of a punishment for libel, since this just encourages newspapers to print more scandalous material, which increases their circulation by more than the costs of the fine. Mortimer's specific extenuating circumstances seem to have had no effect at all on the sentence.

Mortimer was sent to prison, though as the *New York Times* article makes clear, this was considered by many to be an unjust outcome. Besides striking me as unjust, the trial illustrates Mortimer's most famous line about chess: "It will be cheering to know that many people are skillful chess players, though in many instances their brains, in a general way, compare unfavourably with the cognitive facilities of a rabbit."

The *Figaro* went under as a result of Mortimer's imprisonment. When he got out, Mortimer's livelihood came from the theater, in which he continued to be both a playwright and a critic.

I do not get the impression that Mortimer was a very good playwright. However, in those pre-television days, London was crowded with theaters, and audiences had a great appetite for new material. In fairness to Mortimer, some of his plays got mildly positive reviews. As is generally the case in theater, the bad reviews are more fun to read. He was accused in some reviews of changing plays solely in order to make himself an author rather than a translator. The worst reviews came from his attempt to mimic "The Pirates of Penzance" with an operetta called "Polly, the Pet of the Regiment." Although panned in the *London Times* ("If popular taste has latterly been falling away from the comic opera it is not likely to be stimulated by the new

production”), it managed to cross the Atlantic, where the *New York Times* declared that “Of the many worthless operettas that have been brought out for the delectation of the New York public ‘Polly’ is undoubtedly the most unsatisfactory. It contains nothing original, nothing novel, and nothing good.”

However, Mortimer’s most lasting influence may be on a most unlikely artistic medium, the comic strip. An article called “London Literary Letter,” which appeared in the *New York Times* on January 27, 1900, investigates a dichotomy of British humor which exists to this day: British comedy seems to go in for either the extremely clever or extraordinarily stupid. The author laments the fact that some good rivals for *Punch* have fallen by the wayside, wondering if the French are right that the typical Englishman is ...

“a grim melancholy person, who only smiles when he beats his wife. On the other hand, there is a swarm of professedly comic papers, some of which make fortunes for their owners. Nearly twenty years ago Mr. James Mortimer, in his weekly paper called *Figaro*, invented a bottle-nosed drunken Londoner, whom he named Ally Sloper, and who was every week represented by getting himself into difficulties, chiefly through too much drink. Ally Sloper became such a favorite among the class which has never heard of Meredith or Stevenson that a comic illustrated paper called *Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday* was started, part of which is every week devoted to chronicling the deeds of the bottle-nosed drunkard. There is not a gleam of humor rightly so-called in the paper, but it has an enormous sale, and now owns a large building, which it calls with its peculiar humor, ‘The Sloperies.’ This is but one of the alleged comic illustrated papers which flourish in London, and its success shows that the Londoner is extremely fond of what he conceives to be humor.

“Just at present, the sort of person who takes in *Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday* remarks a dozen times a day, ‘What ho! She bumps!’ This is regarded as a killer ...”

Ally Sloper was an incredibly influential comic strip, and has been called the first comic-strip superstar. Echoes of its humor remained long after the strip died; W.C. Fields seems to have consciously fashioned his screen persona after Ally Sloper, and even a cartoon as recent as *Andy Capp* seems to follow the same tradition. I should say that according to current sources Mortimer is not usually credited as the inventor, but from other gleanings (an 1875 article talks of Mortimer trying to raise capital for the first London illustrated paper) I feel that he must have had something to do at least with its early success.

In chess, Mortimer was far from a hopeless patzer, but he was afflicted with terrific inconsistency. On rare occasions he could hold his own with some of the best: in tournament games he defeated Zukertort, Chigorin, Blackburne, Bird, Mieses, and Tartakower, and drew with Steinitz, Mason and Mackenzie. In casual games he twice defeated Lasker. But he was much more often “off” than “on,” as we will see.

Earlier I mentioned Mortimer's short losses in his 1867 match with Rosenthal. Sixteen years later against the same opponent, in his big-league tournament debut, Mortimer seemed not to have learned much:

Rosenthal-Mortimer

London 1883

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6 4.d3 Ne7 5.Nc3 Ng6 6.0-0 c6 7.Ba4 d6 8.Bb3 Bg4 9.h3 Bd7??

Already a serious error; 9...Be6 or Bh5 was required.



10.Ng5 d5 11.exd5 h6 12.Nge4

Also good was 12.dxc6 hxg5 13.cxd7+ Nxd7 14.Qf3 Nf4 15.Qxb7 etc.

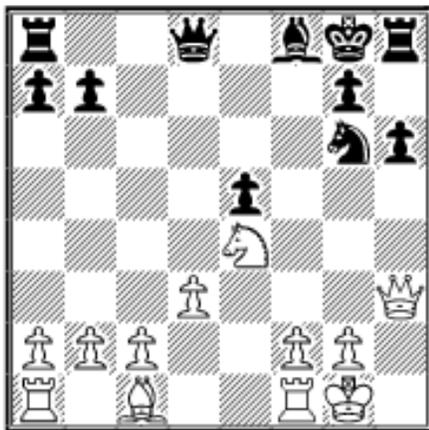
12...cxd5 13.Nxd5 Nxd5 14.Bxd5 Bxh3

Realizing he's busted, Mortimer lashes out, but to no avail.

15.Bxf7+

Or 15.Qf3 Be6 16.Bxe6 fxe6 17.Qh5 Kf7 18.f4 etc.

15...Kxf7 16.Qf3+ Kg8 17.Qxh3



17...Kh7??

The tournament book comments wryly, "It requires good luck as well as talent to fall into so superb a blunder as this."

18.Ng5+

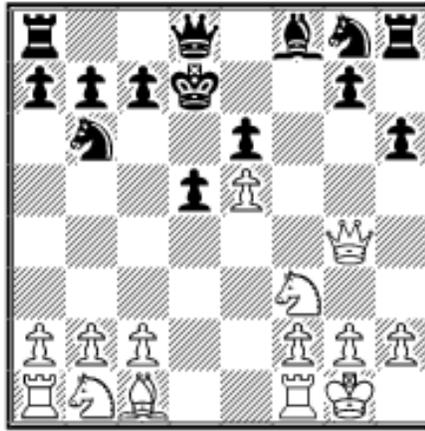
Forcing either 18...Kg8 19.Qe6# or 18...Qxg5 19.Bxg5, hence: **1-0**.

Years later, Mortimer had still not lost his penchant for quick losses:

Marco-Mortimer

Paris 1900

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 Nd7 4.Bc4 Nb6 5.Bb3 exd4 6.Qxd4 Be6 7.0-0 h6 8.Bxe6 fxe6 9.e5 d5 10.Qg4 Kd7?



Mortimer has played the opening badly, and now makes matters worse by sticking his king in the center. Why he preferred this to the more natural 10...Qd7 is a mystery.

11.b3 Qe8 12.c4 c6 13.Be3 Qf7?

What little chance remained lay in 13...c5, to prevent exchange of the Nb6, the defender of d5.

14.Bxb6 axb6 15.cxd5 cxd5 16.Rd1 Ne7 17.Nc3 Nf5

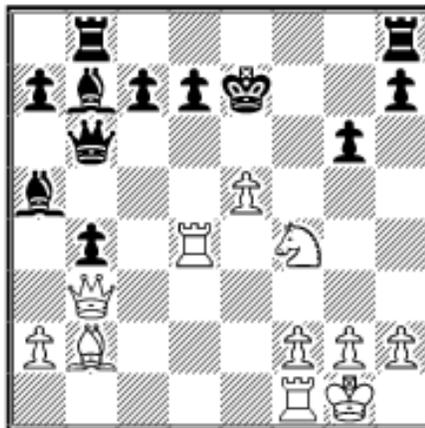
Trying to unpin the e-pawn, but to no avail.



18.Nxd5! exd5 19.Nd4 Ke8 20.Nxf5 Rd8 21.e6 Qf6 22.Qa4+ 1-0.

Still, now and then, Mortimer got lucky. In the great London tournament of 1883, he scored only three points, but two of his wins came at the expense of Zukertort and Chigorin, then among the top three or four players in the world! Zukertort beat Mortimer easily in the early going, but by their second meeting, in one of the last rounds, he had long since clinched 1st

prize and was virtually exhausted. Still, by move 23, his Evans Gambit had Mortimer on the ropes:

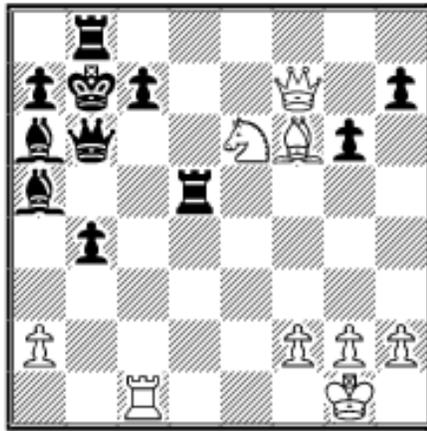


Several moves win, but strongest is 23.Qh3, when if, say, 23...Rbd8 24.Rfd1 Qc6 25.e6 is crushing. But Zukertort, who had been keeping himself going in the last rounds by means of drugs, hallucinated:

23.Rxd7+? Kxd7 24.Qf7+? Kc8 25.e6 Ba6 26.Rc1 Rd8 27.e7 Kb7 28.exd8=Q Rxd8 29.Ne6 Rd5 30.Bf6?

The position was roughly equal, and with 30.h3 would have remained so. But now

Mortimer gets to show *his* combinative powers.



30...Qc6!

Even Mortimer could see that if 31.Rxc6 Rd1#.

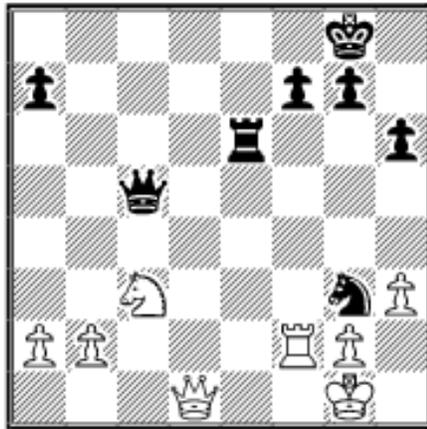
31.Ra1 Bc4!

Threatening 32...Rd6.

**32.Qe7 Qd6 33.Qxd6 Rxd6 34.Nc5+ Kc6
35.Ne4 Re6 36.f3 Bb6+ 37.Kh1 Bd5
38.Rc1+ Kb5 39.Bg5 Bxe4 40.fxe4 Rxe4**

41.h4 h6 42.Bd8 c5 0-1.

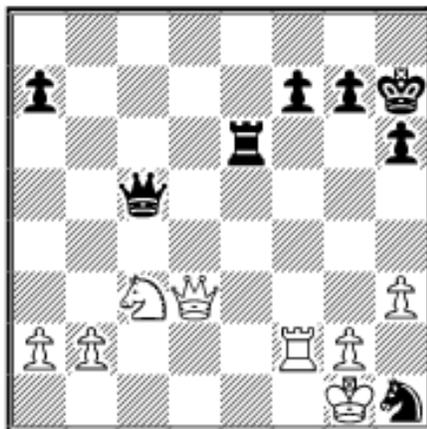
Mortimer got a similar break in the same tournament versus Chigorin, who in an early round had destroyed him in only 19 moves. And when they met very late in the event, the Russian was winning again:



31...Nh1!

A clever way to win the exchange. Mortimer tries his best to wriggle out of it.

32.Qd8+ Kh7 33.Qd3+



33...f5??

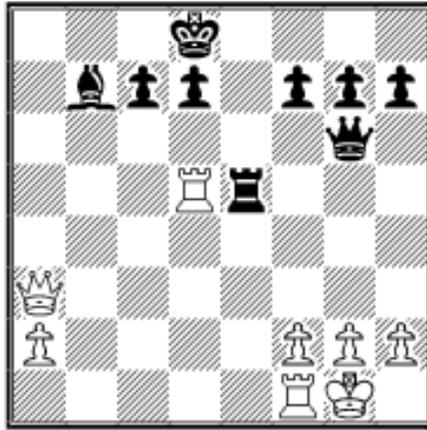
“An almost inconceivable blunder,” says J.I. Minchin in the tournament book. Correct was 33...g6, when if 34.Ne4 Nxf2 35.Nxc5 Nxd3, and either 36.Nxd3 or 36.Nxe6 fxe6 leaves Black with a winning material advantage.

34.Qxf5+ Qxf5 35.Rxf5 Ng3 36.Ra5 Rf6?

“There was no necessity for abandoning another Pawn” (Minchin).

37.Rxa7 and 1-0, 55. Sometimes it is better to be lucky than good.

Mortimer managed to beat the great Lasker twice: once in an August 1891 simul (in which Lasker may have played *sans voir*), and again in what apparently was an offhand game at the British Chess Club in September 1892. The latter was perhaps a more technically precise performance, but the in the former Mortimer managed what for him was practically an “evergreen” combination.



With his rook doubly attacked and unable to move because of the threat of mate at g2, things look bad for Mortimer, but Caïssa smiles and grants him an inspiration:

23.Qf8+ Re8 24.Rxd7+!!

A most un-Mortimer-like shot that Lasker apparently did not foresee. And unlike Zukertort's similar sacrifice above, it's sound.

24...Kxd7 25.Rd1+ Bd5

Better than 25...Kc6 26.Qxe8+, which leaves Black an exchange down.

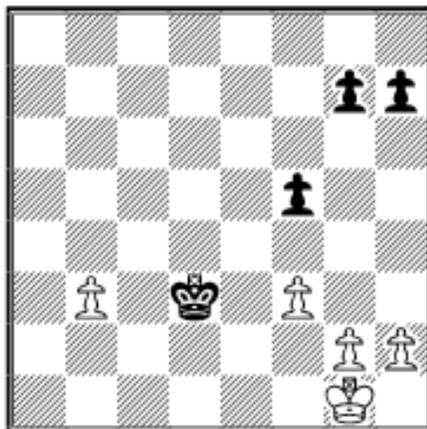
26.Rxd5+ Ke6 27.Qxe8+ Kxd5 28.Qd7+ Ke4 29.Qxc7 Qe6 30.f3+ Kd3 31.Qd8+ Ke2 32.Qd4 f5

Of course not 32...Qxa2?? 33.Qf2+.

33.Qb2+!

An immediate 33.a4 was feasible, but Mortimer wants to get queens off the board and simplify.

33...Kd3 34.Qb3+ Qxb3 35.axb3



Black cannot both stop the b-pawn and protect his own pawns. The game concluded:

35...Kc3 36.Kf2 Kxb3 37.Ke3 Kc4 38.Kf4 g6 39.g4 fxg4 40.fxg4 Kd4 41.Kg5 Ke4 42.Kh6 Kf4 43.h3 Kg3 44.Kxh7 Kxh3 45.g5 1-0.

How could a player with such a sorry history beat these all-time greats? It gives all of us a little hope in our quixotic

battles, which Mortimer carried out both on and off the board. Or, to put it another way: "What, ho! She bumps!"



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