

THE FORTUNE TELLER

“Do you believe in magic?”

This was a strange question, coming from the Baron.

“*Do you?*” he asked again.

“Well...” – I tried to give a diplomatic response – “...personally I don’t, but I’ve heard of some people who...”

He didn’t let me finish. “I do – I was a skeptic once, I admit, but not any more.”

“What is it that convinced you?”

“A chess game,” said Munchausen; “...a mere chess game.”

“Go on.” I didn’t want to miss that.

“Mr. Ashenby was a typical HTHIAC, like many others,” M. began his story.

“He was *what?*”

“He Thinks He Is a Champion,” said the Baron, as he explained the peculiar acronym. “But nobody else does. Anyway, this Ashenby lost many battles against me, and being an ambitious fellow, he wanted to take revenge. In fact, he wanted to beat me so badly that he even appealed for help from a magician.”

I’ve already learned to conceal any hint of surprise at anything the Baron might say.

“The night before we met in the great tournament at Oslo, 1993, Mr. Ashenby actually paid \$200 to a certain quack-wizard.

“‘*Give me a charm*’ – he pleaded – *‘for tomorrow I must gain victory over Munchausen!’*”

“The wizard gave him a talisman. But Ashenby was still not reassured. He went to a fortune teller and, for another \$200, asked him to predict the result of our game.

“You should be quite proud of yourself,” I noted. “A guy spends a substantial sum of money to overcome your skills...!?”

The Baron took it for granted. “Well, if one wants to defeat Munchausen on the chessboard, one has to take certain measures.”

Of course.

“Anyway, I learned about all this only after the event. Our game went like this:

MUNCHAUSEN – ASHENBY

1.d4 d6 2.♘f3 ♙g4 3.e4 ♙xf3

“Ashenby hurried with this move, and he looked at me with an air of victory. I couldn’t understand his sudden joy.”

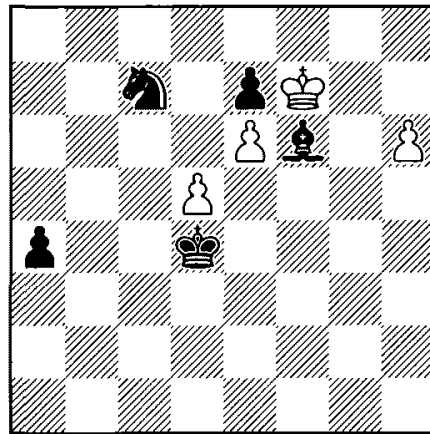
“This looks strange indeed,” I concurred.

“As I found out afterwards, the fortune-teller told Ashenby that he is going to win, on one condition.”

‘If your opponent reaches an endgame, having two knights vs. your rook, he will save himself’ Such was the warning.

“I see!” Ashenby’s third move suddenly made sense; “he exchanged your knight, to prevent the possibility of such an ending.”

“Correct” – agreed M. – “...and later on, he exchanged rooks as well. Soon I found myself in a very precarious position.”



White to play

“White’s position appears to be resignable. Ashenby, sensing that his great moment was about to arrive, bent over the table and told me the story I’ve just revealed to you. The wizard, the fortune-teller, and the danger of a certain endgame he skillfully avoided...”

“It’s not very smart to reveal one’s secrets while the game is still in progress,” I opined.

“I agree,” said M. “...because at that point, I suddenly knew precisely what I had to do.”

1.d6! ♖b5 2.dxe7

2.d7? ♜d6+ 3.♙g8 ♜b7.

2...♙e5 3.e8=♜! ♜h8 4.♙g8 ♙xe6

After 4...a3 5.♙xh8 a2 6.h7 a1=♚ 7.♙g8 ♚g1+ 8.♜g7 Black cannot win.

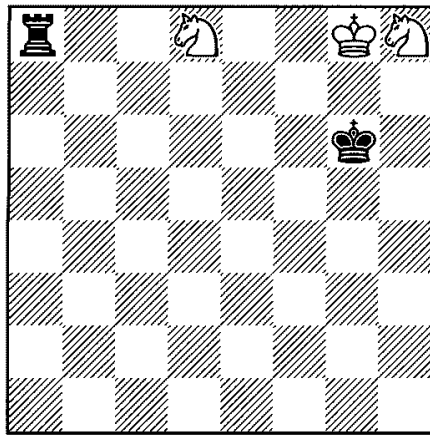
5.♙xh8 ♙f7 6.h7 a3 7.♜d6+! ♙f8

7...♜xd6? is a draw by stalemate.

8.♜xb5 a2 9.♜d4! a1=♚!

Promoting to a queen results in another stalemate.

10.♜e6+ ♙f7 11.♜d8+ ♙g6 12.♙g8 ♚a8 13.h8=♜+!



“Cold sweat was pouring from poor Ashenby.” Munchausen didn’t even try to hide his joy. “The prophecy turned out to be true!”

13...♔f6 14.♞hf7 Draw.

“So, you turned into a believer,” I observed.

“I sure did.”

“What if the magician predicted that you were bound to lose, no matter what you did?” I wondered.

“Be serious,” Munchausen snorted; “...there is a limit to what a magician can do.”

This “magical” position is the creation of the great Russian composer A.P. Kazantsev (1948).