Sherlock Holmes

and the

Mysteries

of the

Chess World

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Foreword by Andy Soltis

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Sherlock Holmes and the Mysteries of the Chess World
by Lenny Cavallaro

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Foreword

Chessplayers are not known for their love of fiction, even chess-themed fiction. But there are a few genres that have an enduring appeal to players. One is science fiction. There is a remarkable literature of chess-themed sci-fi novels, short stories and TV scripts. Much less explored is the nexus of chess and Sherlock Holmes.

Most of the small stock of Holmesian chess fiction relies on the detective's famous logic and personality. The actual chess content varies widely. There are diagrams in few of them. A notable exception is the retrograde analysis problems of Raymond Smullyan's *The Chess Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes*.

Another realm of Holmes/chess fiction touches on chess history. In *The Moriarty Gambit* the celebrated sci-fi writer Fritz Lieber has Holmes beat his arch-enemy during the great London 1883 tournament. Other writers have imagined Holmes posing as Harry Pillsbury in winning Hastings 1895 or the mysterious Colonel Moreau in his disastrous performance at Monte Carlo 1903. Holmes-the-player is either super-player or a patzer.

This book is different. It is a collection of Holmes mysteries in which he does what Arthur Conan Doyle had him do best: He solves murders and other deaths. He provides plausible—and more than plausible—explanations of events that have puzzled chess fans for well over a century.

Another novel aspect of this book: Holmers and his descendants are not limited to the Victorian era in which Conan Doyle placed him. Hollywood made Holmes more of a contemporary when he battled Nazis and other villains in the 1940s. Neither Holmes 2.0 nor 3.0 is a much greater a stretch when he solves mysteries in the late 20th century.

I look forward to new Holmes stories with a chess theme. There are many potential plots and subjects: Could he determine for certain how Leonid Stein died? It happened under suspect conditions, just before Stein was to travel to the West, amid speculation that he would defect and play a match with Bobby Fischer. Dr. Watson would, of course, provide invaluable medical insight.

And perhaps there is a serial chess killer for Holmes to catch. After all, isn't it strange that the great Hypermoderns – Gyula Breyer, Richard Réti and Aron Nimzovich – all died relatively young? Perhaps there was a disciple of Siegbert Tarrasch who wanted revenge for the assault on classical chess teaching.

I included Tarrasch as a character when I tried writing Holmes stories for my *Chess Life* columns many years ago. In one of them, I had Tarrasch explain why chess players make good, manic villains. "Chess, like love and music," he said, "has the power to make men crazy."

Andy Soltis
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Chapter 4

"Here's What We *Do* Know, Mr. Holmes."

"I suppose I should begin with the family connection. I'm not exactly sure, but it seems the late *Herr* Schlechter was some sort of very distant relative—fourth cousin, twice-removed, or maybe fifth cousin, once-removed. In our family the designations were simple: children of the same parents were brothers and sisters; their children were cousins, and after that one was simply *ein Verwandter*."

Holmes turned to me abruptly. "That's 'a kinsman,' Watson," he explained.

"I never met him, of course, and I heard about him only in December 1909, when my father mentioned that back in 'the Old Country' a distant relative of ours would play a match for the world chess championship the following month.

"I played a little chess, which is to say that I had learned how to move the pieces, though not very much more than that. Nevertheless, I felt the excitement, and I wanted him to win.

"We got news as it became available, and eventually we learned that the match had ended in a tie, 5-5. *Herr* Schlechter did not become champion, and he died shortly after the Great War ended.

"Meanwhile, we had already moved to the United States in May 1909. I was thirteen years old. I enrolled in the public school, and did quite well in English and history, though not so well with the mathematics.

Emanuel Lasker, the second world chess champion, held the title longer than any other player, 27 years.

"I never enjoyed the American sports, but I did become more interested in the chess, at which I improved. My real passion was reading, and after the War I learned much more about the match my kinsman had contested."

"Schlechter was still a young man, only in his mid-forties when he died in 1918. Did he succumb to the influenza?" I asked.

"The official cause was given as pneumonia," replied Holmes, "but from what I have heard, either the influenza or tuberculosis might instead have been to blame, and outright starvation may have been a factor, also. He was in abysmal financial straits toward the end of his short life." Turning to Wiedermeyer, he continued, "Please resume!"

"Well, I don't really know where to begin, but perhaps the first question is whether this was in fact a match for the championship at all. It seems that conditions changed notably before the first move could be played.

"Lasker had prevailed in some matches that required either ten victories or eight, with draws not counting. However, my distant relative apparently had a well-deserved reputation as 'King of the Draws,' and it was quite likely such a contest might have gone on for eighty to one hundred games. It was therefore decided that the match would run for thirty games, with draws counting as half a point for each side. It was also agreed that the challenger—Schlechter—would need to win by two points in order to become the next champion. In other words, if he prevailed by 15½-14½, he might claim the victor's share of the purse, but Lasker would retain the title.

"Then something very strange happened. Despite the great reputations of both men, they were unable to obtain adequate funds for thirty-games.

They settled for a ten-game match.

Carl Schlechter

"Thus, the first question that arises is the most obvious. Was this truly a match for the world chess championship at all, or was it merely an exhibition?

Wiedermeyer paused, glanced over in my direction, and then turned back toward Holmes.

"The next question is where the mystery deepens. We know the original terms governing a thirty-game contest, but no one seems to have a copy of the documents—signed by both—governing the ten games they ultimately played."

"Forgive the interruption," said Sherlock, "but why does that matter?"

"Because, Mr. Holmes, the original match required Schlechter to win by two points, or by at least 16-14. The question is whether he was required to win this abbreviated match by the same margin."

"It would seem an insufferable handicap," said Sherlock, "but pray continue."

"Some claim Lasker's title was at stake, but others say it was not, because the match was too short."

I shook my head. "Boxing championships have been contested over the course of twenty-six rounds, but they have also been scheduled for only six. We should assume that a title match is a title match, regardless of its duration."

"That is probably true, Watson," replied my friend. "However, a champion may agree to a shorter match in which his title is not at stake. You may remember that Chigorin defeated Lasker in a "Rice Gambit" match in 1903, winning two, losing one, and drawing the other three. The loser remained champion, since the title was not at stake."

Holmes now turned to our visitor. “Please resume. You have more, I am certain.”

Weidermeyer frowned and bit his upper lip nervously. “Have you played through that last game, Mr. Holmes?” he asked.

“Of course! In fact, if the doctor will bring us his set and board, I can go through it for you from memory.”

The other man let out a gasp of surprise, but then shook his head. “Oh, that won’t be necessary, Mr. Holmes. I don’t really play well enough to understand chess at that level. However, many people have said that Schlechter played uncharacteristically. He seemed far more aggressive and played as though *he* was the one who needed the win. Is that not true?”

Holmes nodded. “One might question such a strategy, given his one-game lead.”

“And what about the mistakes? I was told Schlechter made some similarly uncharacteristic blunders toward the end, overlooking a possible win and later a probable draw.”

Now, I should mention that while Sherlock’s father used cocaine and tobacco, and was a connoisseur of French wines, his son had a much lesser “addiction,” if we may call it that. The younger Holmes positively loved to pick his teeth, particularly when he needed to think clearly. “Kindly get out your board, Watson,” he directed, “and let us review the tenth game for clues.”

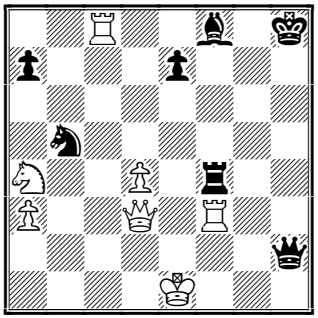
While I set up the pieces, Holmes began staring out the window, even as he picked food particles out from between his teeth. “We are ready, Sherlock,” I said, as Mr. Wiedermeyer pulled up closer to the board.

“Excellent! Move the two Queens’s pawns out two squares,” he instructed. “Then push the Queen’s Bishop pawn ahead two squares for White, but only one for Black.”

Picking away yet more vigorously—he was on his third toothpick by this point—Holmes brought us up to the critical thirty-fifth move. “It would

seem he had far more promising prospects by moving his Rook to the half-open Queen's file, wouldn't you say?"

He then led us to the position after White's 39th move.



"Suppose he checked on the diagonal instead?" Sherlock asked. "Study that alternative, while I seek solace from this thin stick of wood."

Wiedermeyer and I tried a few lines, and in each of them White either allowed a threefold repetition or else lost his Rook on the eighth rank. If we could see this, surely Schlechter should have seen it!

Our visitor soon became rather defensive. "Now see here, Mr. Holmes," he protested. "You aren't suggesting that my kinsman lost the game deliberately, are you?"

There was no reply, whatsoever, from the other. In fact, he seemed to have frozen in place. Wiedermeyer was baffled, of course, while I knew exactly what was coming next.

Some three minutes later Holmes snapped back to life. "Ah! Now it all comes to light!" he declared. "Watson, let me indulge in some of your excellent port—a celebratory glass on the occasion of solving this case almost before my client could articulate it."

I more or less knew what to expect from my old friend by this time, but Wiedermeyer was positively overwhelmed. "You, you, you…you mean that you know what actually happened?" he stammered.

"Of course!" replied the detective.

"Then I shall be very much in your debt, sir!"