



The First Women's International Tournament

As promised last month, I am following up my previous column on women's chess with an article about the First Women's International Tournament, which was played in London in the summer of 1897.

COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer
Tim Harding

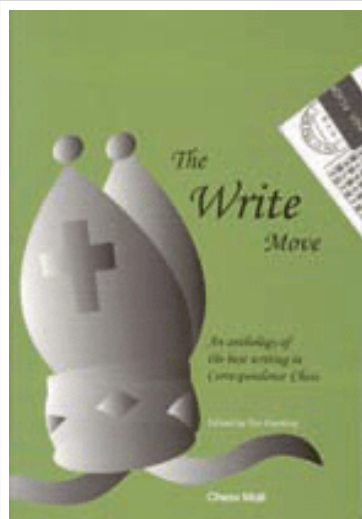
By this stage, there had been a number of women's chess tournaments in England, including one on the supporting programme for Hastings 1895 (see below). In other cases, prizes had been offered for the best performance by a woman in mixed events. However, the 1897 event does seem to be the first to involve women from beyond the United Kingdom; although most of the competitors in London had some British connection, this was not true in every case.

In this article I shall look at the inception of the event and the early rounds, with some games, and next month I shall give the conclusion and more examples of play. Although I have done a lot of research about this tournament, I doubt most readers will want to be bored by all the minutiae. Instead of trying to give all this material, I shall try to offer a flavour of the event.

Games from this tournament are not usually available in commercial databases and the online "Britbase" doesn't go back this far either. After the second article is published, I will post a downloadable file of the games I have so far been able to find from the tournament. This currently stands at 14 complete games and eight fragments. However, I think this is by far the largest collection of games from the event assembled in recent times.

John Richards's article on Mary Rudge, which I mentioned in my [column](#) last month, only has one of her games from the tournament. I have found two more and also two fragments.

There are several contemporary sources of information about the tournament. The best-known contemporary account of the event is to be found in the *British Chess Magazine* for August 1897, starting on page 285. Rather curiously, while this report does include many game finishes, and two games



The Write Move
by Tim Harding

(one by the organiser and one by the runner-up) it published no complete game from the event, preferring to give several examples of the decisive phase of play by a variety of competitors.

Fortunately, there are several other sources of information about the event, though I am sure I have by no means exhausted them. In particular, I would have liked to read what Mrs. Gunsberg presumably wrote about the event in her column in *The Lady's Pictorial*, but as yet I haven't been able to see that.

There was good daily coverage in *The Times* of London, which is now available in a wonderful searchable-text edition. This newspaper had reports almost daily (presumably by Tinsley). Also valuable were the accounts in *The Field* by Leopold Hoffer, one of the organising committee; perhaps because he was involved, the rival *Illustrated London News* published virtually nothing about the event. However, the main reason was the huge space that periodical was giving to all the jubilee processions and festivities, a department where *The Field* (a text newspaper) could not compete.

Many local newspaper columns no doubt reported the event also, especially if a local woman was competing, and that is where one must look to try to find more games. I looked through three Irish columns of the period and found a little more information, though no new games.

Origins of the Event

To find the probable origin of the Ladies International, one must go back a little earlier in the 1890s – in fact to 1893 when a group of women in New York formed what they at first called an International Ladies' chess association, and in 1894 it was properly organised. Miss Eliza Campbell Foot was, I believe, the President and prominent members were Mrs. Worrall and Mrs. Showalter.

Several leading British and Irish players and organisers were named as honorary members. In April 1896, the *Dublin Evening Mail* reported that this group was more realistically reconstituted as the "Women's Chess Club of New York."

The key year for British ladies chess was 1895. Mrs. Gunsberg's column began and the London Ladies Chess Club was founded, which was soon thriving under the energetic leadership of Mrs. Rhoda Bowles, whose husband (a keen player) had taught her chess when she nearly went blind (see *BCM* 1900 for that story). Mrs. Bowles was the principal organiser of the tournament, the idea of which began to be worked out during 1896. Financial backing came from the publisher Sir George Newnes MP and from Harry Nelson Pillsbury, who raised some of the prize money in America.

No doubt the interest that had been aroused in August 1895 by the event in

Hastings helped to show that this was an idea whose time had come. Although there was always intended to be an amateur tournament at Hastings, the ladies' tournament seems to have been an afterthought and I couldn't see anything about it in the tournament book. The results were probably published in local papers in Sussex and I found them in the *Dublin Evening Mail*.

With about 20 women entering, it was decided to split the Hastings event into two tournaments, one for the experienced players and one for weaker players. Preliminary rounds and a final were played in the top section; the other was an 8-player all-play-all, won by Mrs. Ridpath of Hastings.

I am not sure why the recognised leading English female player Mary Rudge did not enter at Hastings, but in her absence the victory went to Edith Margaret Thomas from Southsea, near Portsmouth. As the wife of a baronet, she had the title Lady.

The Thomas family, I gather, had only returned to England fairly recently after many years in Turkey where George Alan Thomas had been born in 1881. (The future Sir George, who was to hold the titles of British champion at both badminton and chess simultaneously for a time in the 1920s, was already a promising player at this time and gave a simultaneous display in April 1897 when the Ladies Club moved to new premises. In the lower section at Hastings, there was also a Miss Thomas in the final who was perhaps his sister?)

All four of the Hastings finalists played in the 1897 tournament. Apart from Lady Thomas (who scored 3/3 in the final), the other leading players at Hastings were Miss Gertrude Field (London) 2/3, Miss Fox of London (Christian name unknown to me) 1/3 and Miss Finn (also stated to be of London) 0/3. Miss Finn, who was not yet 25, was the daughter of a doctor from Cork in Ireland; her glory years were to come later. In the Edwardian decade, she became the first BCF British Ladies Champion, retained the title the next year (and never competed again after that), and also (according to Sergeant's *Century of British Chess*) she took two first prizes in women's tournaments in Ostend before the First World War.

Event is Announced and Plans Firm up

In March 1897, announcements about the London Ladies International began to appear in the press. Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee (the 60th anniversary of her accession to the throne) was due in late June so it was natural to plan the event to coincide with that great occasion.

For example, *The Field* for 20 March carried this statement:

LADIES INTERNATIONAL CHESS CONGRESS.— This

tournament will be held at the Hotel Cecil on June 22 next. Hours of play from 1 to 5pm and 7 to 11pm. The prizes will be: First, £60 (given by Sir George Newnes); second, £50, third £40, fourth £30, fifth £20 and sixth £15, with a special brilliancy prize of £20 from Baron Albert de Rothschild. Princess Maud of Wales has been pleased to become patroness, and among other distinguished patrons are the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, Lord Russell of Killowen, Earl Dartrey, &c.

The plan was very ambitious: a 20-player all-play-all with two rounds per day: a grueling schedule with potentially eight hours of chess day after day! Entries were invited and a committee would decide whom to include if, as was indeed the case, more names came in than could be accommodated. Originally it was hoped that America would be represented by three players but eventually only Mrs. Worrall (who had been born in England) came from the USA. Several continental countries were expected to be represented, as well as Britain and Ireland.

There was a slight setback in May when the Earl of Dartrey (formerly Lord Cremorne) died at the age of eighty years. He had probably promised to contribute to the prize fund, which had to be reorganised.

On 22 May, *The Field* reported the revised prize arrangements and the fact that the event was over-subscribed with 32 entries for 20 places:

THE LADIES' INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS.— *Thirty-two entries have been received for the forthcoming Ladies' International Congress on June 23 at the Hôtel Cecil. At a meeting of the selection committee (Mr Hoffer in the chair) twenty competitors and five reserves have been chosen, comprising ladies from America, Canada, Germany, France, Italy and Belgium. The programme will be issued forthwith. Two games will be played per day at twenty moves an hour. The prizes are: First, £60 (given by Sir George Newnes, Bart.); second, £50 (contributed by America), fourth £30 (contributed by the Ladies' Chess Club). The third, fifth and sixth prizes, amounting to £75, will be met by the subscriptions from various sources. Baron Rothschild, of Vienna, has given a brilliancy prize of £20.*

The Event Begins

The week the event began was mad in London. It was mid-summer and the weather was apparently doing the old queen proud. *The Times* reporting on the first day remarked on “the heat and the exciting conditions outside.” As *BCM* was to observe, the heat especially didn't make it any easier for the chess players, many of them unaccustomed to intense competition of this type.

The capital city was packed with visitors and there was an immense amount of distractions going on. Victoria's Accession had been on 20 June 1837 and she was Proclaimed on 21 June, so 21 June 1897 was the height of the festivities. The London Ladies Chess Club (it was announced in *The Times* for 15 June) welcomed the 20 selected competitors for an "at home" at which Pillsbury was present.

On the 23rd, under "Court Circular, Today's Arrangements," *The Times* announced the start of the ladies tournament, so clearly it was considered to be of high status. Play was to be held in the Masonic Temple (a large room) at the Hotel Cecil, and to be transferred in the second week to the premises of the Ladies Chess Club.

BCM reports that a large crowd gathered to see the inauguration of the event. According to *The Field*, the admission charge was one shilling per day, or five shillings for the whole duration of the tournament.

The first round began at 1 p.m. and the pairings (and results) were as follows. I shall then say something about the players (English unless otherwise stated).

- Miss Thorold drew with Miss Field.
- Miss Muller-Hartung (Germany) lost to Miss Eschwege.
- Mme. Bonnefin (Belgium) beat Miss Fox.
- Miss Hertzsch (Germany) lost to Miss Forbes-Sharp (Scotland).
- Mrs. Fagan (Italy) v Mrs. Worrall (USA), adjourned.
- Miss Gooding beat Miss Hooke.
- Mrs. Berry (Ireland) lost to Miss Rudge.
- Lady Thomas beat Miss Watson.
- Miss Finn (Ireland) v Mme. de la Vingne (France), adjourned.
- Mrs. Stevenson (Canada) lost to Mrs. Sidney.

The unfinished games were continued on a later date and were won by Mrs. Fagan and Mme. de la Vingne.

I don't know how the draw was done. Miss Hooke was a reserve, who got her chance when one of the originally selected players, Miss Foot, did not arrive from New York.

In most cases the more fancied players were meeting comparatively weak opposition but Mrs. Fagan and Mrs. Worrall were two of the favourites. As it turned out, there were not many draws in the event so any decisive result between the more experienced competitors was liable to be highly significant.

Of the English players, Miss Rudge and Lady Thomas (having previous

tournament victories to their credit) were the obvious favourites. Also Miss Thorold, from Bath, was a sister of Edmund Thorold, an amateur of near-master strength, so she was probably quite capable. Some of the others were regular players at the London club.

On the origin of the foreign players, *BCM* later pronounced that:

As there have been some misleading statements made in the press as to the right of some of these ladies to play for the respective countries they represent, we may be allowed to state that in every case they were fully warranted in playing for the countries to which their names are attached.

For example, Mme. Bonnefin was listed as Belgian but *The Times* of 5 July 1897 said she was a member of Leytonstone chess club (in Essex). *BCM* however said “she comes of a pure Belgian stock.” Mrs. Fagan, one of the favourites, was born in Naples in 1850 of an Italian mother; her brother, Dr. Ballard, was a well-known English amateur. The two Germans had traveled specially to England for the event as had the two North American players, and Mrs. F. Sterling Berry lived in Blackrock in south County Dublin. I shall have to do some genealogical research to find out her real names; she is always called “FSB” in Irish newspaper columns.

Mrs. Berry was an experienced and talented club player but this was probably the only time she traveled to play competitive chess and was prone to blunder. Her game with Mary Rudge is preserved but is not very instructive as the Irishwoman opened too passively and then nervously left a rook en prise. *BCM* gave the position after 18 moves, commenting: “Mrs. Berry played a Ruy Lopez against Miss Rudge, who speedily got a much freer opening than usually results.”

Mrs. Berry – Miss Mary Rudge

London, 23.06.1897

First published in The Field of 26 June 1897

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 d3 Bc5 6 0–0

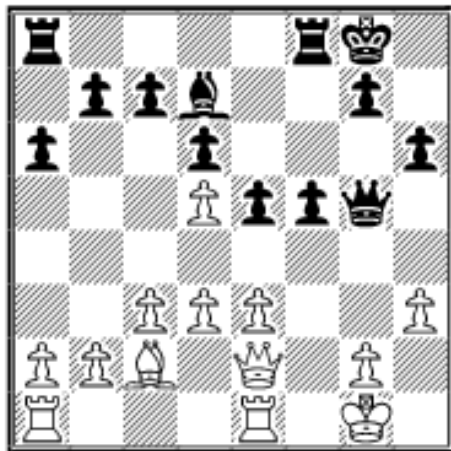
Illustrated London News 17 July 1897: “The pawn cannot be won in this position, for if 6 Bxc6 dxc6 7 Nxe5 Bxf2+ etc.”

6...Qe7 7 Nc3 h6 8 h3 0–0 9 Re1 Nd4 10 Nd5 Nxf3+ 11 Qxf3 Nxd5 12 exd5

ILN: “These wholesale exchanges are useless and pointless.”

12...d6 13 c3 Bd7 14 Bc2 Qd8 15 Qe4 f5 16 Qe2 Bb6 17 Be3 Bxe3 18 fxe3

Qg5



19 Bd1 f4 20 Qh5 Qg3 21 Qf3??

ILN: “White observed the necessity of exchanging, but does not notice the rook en prise. The game is thus lost.”

BCM: “White’s position is not comfortable, but 21 Bg4 would have held matters together. The move played is of course a blunder.”

21...Qxe1+ 22 Kh2 fxe3 23 Qe2 Rf1 24

Qxe1 Rxe1 0–1

Two other games from Round One are known.

Mme. Bonnefin – Miss Fox

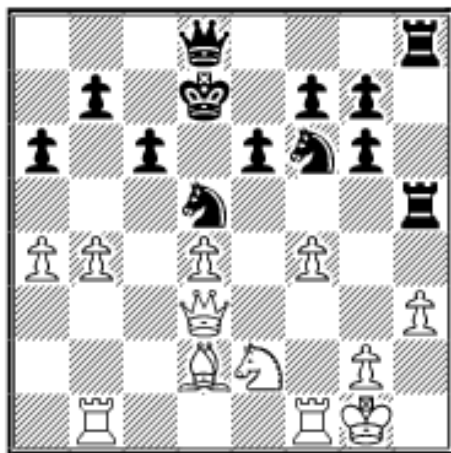
London, 23.06.1897

The Times 24/6/1897

1 e4 d5 2 exd5 Qxd5 3 d4 Nf6 4 Nf3 Bf5 5 c4 Qd8 6 Nc3 e6 7 Bd3 Bg6 8 0–0 c6 9 Bxg6 hxg6 10 Ne5 Qc7 11 c5 Bxc5 12 f4 Bd6 13 Ne2 Nbd7 14 b3 Nd5 15 Nc4 N7f6 16 Nxd6+ Qxd6 17 Ng3 Kd7 18 a4 Qc7 19 Qf3 Rh4 20 h3 Rah8 21 Bd2 Qb6

This must be right. *The Times* had the misprint “B-Kt3.”

22 Ne2 Qc7 23 Rab1 R4h5 24 Qd3 a6 25 b4 Qd8



26 b5 axb5 27 axb5 Qb6 28 bxc6+ Qxc6 29 Rfc1 Qa6 30 Qxa6 bxa6 31 Rb7+ Kd6 32 Ra7 Nd7 33 Rxa6+ Ke7 34 Nc3 Rc8

“Of course this was the real blunder, but Black’s game was not in any case very good.”

35 Nxd5+ exd5 36 Rxc8 f6 37 Bb4+ Kf7 38 Ra7 Ke6 39 Re8+ 1–0

Lady Thomas – Miss Watson

London, 23.06.1897

Notes by Hoffer, The Field, 26 June 1897

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 e3 Nf6 5 Bd3 Nc6

5...Nbd7, so as not to obstruct the advance of the c-pawn, is preferable. Chigorin plays the text move independent of principles; but Chigorin is very strong.

6 Nf3 Bd7 7 Bd2 Bxc3 8 Bxc3

8 bxc3 gives a very strong centre.

8...dxc4 9 Bxc4 Ne4 10 Qb3 Nxc3 11 Qxc3

Now 11 bxc3 would be followed by 11...Na5.

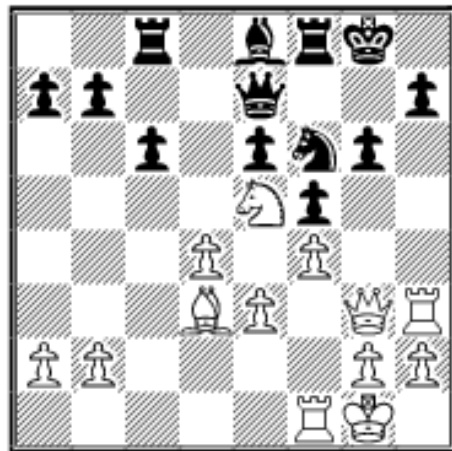
11...Qf6 12 Rc1 0-0 13 0-0 Ne7 14 Bd3 Nd5 15 Qd2 c6 16 Ne5 Qe7 17 f4 f5 18 Rf3 Be8 19 Rh3 Nf6 20 Qe2 g6

The alternative 20...h6 might be followed by 21 g4.

21 Qf2 Ne4 22 Qf3

22 Bxe4 fxe4 23 Qc2 would have won the advanced e-pawn eventually.

22...Nf6 23 Rf1 Rc8 24 Qg3



24...Ne4

An inferior move, as after 25 Bxe4 White gets his knight into an attacking position with 26 Ng4. 24...Nd7 was still the right move.

(It's amusing, or revealing, that Hoffer couldn't help writing "his" although this was an exclusively women's tournament!)

25 Bxe4 fxe4 26 Ng4 Kh8 27 Nh6 Rc7 28 Rh4 Qd7 29 Qg5 Qd6

Having allowed 29 Qg5, Black should have challenged queens at once with 29...Qe7.

30 Ng4 Rf5 31 Qh6 1-0

Miss Watson having exceeded her time limit resigned at once. She had still a good game with 31...Qf8 but not the move she intended to play, viz. 31...Rh5 because of 32 Rxb5 gxb5 33 Nf6 Bg6 34 Nxb5 etc.

Round Two was also played on the opening day but I have seen no games or positions from this round. Nerves and tiredness and heat were taking their toll already. Mrs. Worrall adjourned again (v Miss Fox) so she had a bad day, though she did eventually win that one.

The Field reported that Miss Finn overlooked mate on the move and Miss Hertzsch could have won a rook against Lady Thomas, but lost a piece instead.

If we count the adjourned games as decided, the following players had 2/2 after the first day: Mary Rudge, Lady Thomas, Mme. de la Vingne, Miss Gooding and Mrs. Fagan, while Miss Field had one and a half points.

The Second Day

On the second day, most of the players were settling into the event and Hoffer was more complimentary about the play. In round four, he wrote "Mrs. Fagan and Miss Rudge played very good games" but unfortunately he did not publish them and I have not seen them anywhere.

Several games from Round 3 are preserved, however.

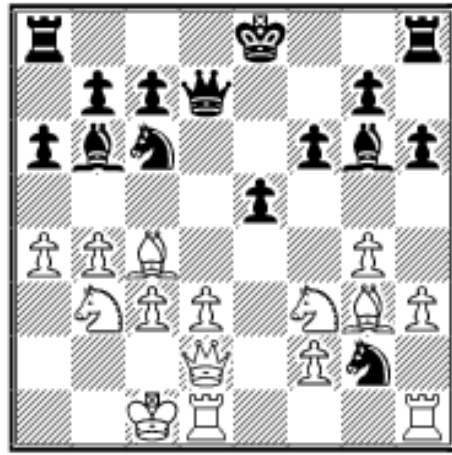
Mrs. Louisa Matilda Fagan – Miss Thorold

London, 24.06.1897

The Times 25/6/1897

"A well-played game between two of the strongest competitors yesterday."

**1 e4 e5 2 Bc4 Bc5 3 b4 Bb6 4 Nf3 d6 5 c3 Nf6 6 d3 Bg4 7 h3 Bh5 8 g4 Bg6
9 Bg5 h6 10 Bh4 Qd7 11 a4 a6 12 Nbd2 Nc6 13 Nb3 d5 14 exd5 Nxd5 15
Qd2 Nf4 16 0–0–0 Ng2 17 Bg3 f6**



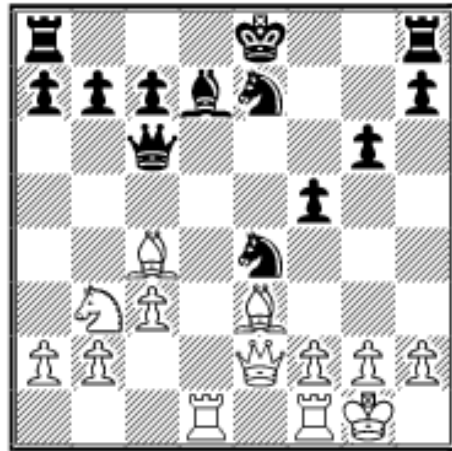
18 Rhg1 Nf4 19 Bxf4 exf4 20 Rge1+ Kf8 21 d4 Bf7 22 d5 Ne7 23 a5 Ba7 24 Re2 b5 25 axb6 cxb6 26 d6 Ng6 27 Bxf7 Kxf7 28 Qd5+ Kf8 29 Qxa8+ Kf7 30 Qd5+ Kf8 31 Rde1 1-0

The following finish from round 3 was one of three games that tied for the “Brilliancy prize” of 20 pounds presented by Baron Rothschild in the International Ladies Tournament, London, and judged some time after the event by Pillsbury.

The other prize-winners were Mrs. Berry and Miss Hertzsche, Germany.

Miss Forbes-Sharpe – Mme. De la Vingne

Ladies’ International London (3), 24.06.1897



1 Na5 Qa4 2 b4 Nxc3 3 Qd2 Nxd1 4 Rxd1 0-0-0 5 Rc1 b6 6 Qc3 Kb8 7 Ba6 Nd5 8 Qc4 c6 9 Bf4+

9 Qf4+ would have been more brilliant but not more decisive - *BCM*.

9...Nc7 10 Bxc7+ Kxc7 11 Qf4# 1-0.

The above game also took the special prize presented by Mr. Leith, Glasgow, for the prettiest mate.

This was the day that ruled both Madame de la Vingne and Lady Thomas out of contention, both scoring two losses. In round 3, Lady Thomas lost a pawn in the early middle game. Whereas this might not have mattered against some of her rivals, against the solid and efficient Mary Rudge it meant a slow and painful death (54 moves).

In the evening round, Lady Thomas had Black again and lost again, this time to Miss Thorold.

I found this game from an unidentified chess column in the scrapbook collection that I mentioned in my earlier [column](#) about the British Library. The finish was given by *BCM*.

Miss Thorold – Lady Thomas

London, 24.06.1897

Notes from the scrapbook

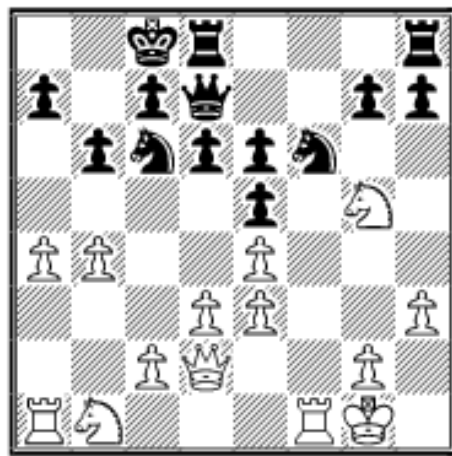
1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 d3 Nf6 5 Be3 Bb6 6 0-0 d6 7 h3 Be6 8 Bb3 Qd7 9 Ng5 0-0-0

9...0-0 would have been safer; but the previous move Q to Q2 indicated the intention of bringing the king over to the queen's side.

10 a4 Na5

10...Bxb3 11 cxb3 h6 12 Nf3 d5 or 12...Bd4 would have simplified the position.

11 Bxe6 fxe6 12 b4 Bxe3 13 fxe3 Nc6 14 Qd2 b6



Meeting the attack half-way. 14...h6 15 Nf3 Rdf8 or 15...Ne7 was quite safe.

15 c4 Nb8 16 b5 Rde8

16...Rdf8 was the right move.

17 a5 h6 18 Nf3 g5

Either R to f8 was necessary previous to this advance.

19 Nxe5 Qg7

19...Nxe4 "would be tit for tat" - *BCM*.

20 Nc6 Nxe4 21 Qa2 Nxc6

Little improvement is possible now upon Black's play. The game would be lost eventually, however Black might continue.

22 bxc6 Nc5 23 d4 Nd7 24 cxd7+ Qxd7 25 axb6 cxb6 26 Qxa7 Qxa7 27 Rxa7 Kb8 28 Rff7 1-0

Apart from the leaders, Miss Finn and Miss Fox also won both their games this day, but they had scored nothing in the early rounds. So nobody had three points and after four rounds the leading standings were as follows:

- Mary Rudge and Mrs Fagan 4 pts.
- Miss Gooding 3½ (she had drawn with Mrs. Worrall).
- Miss Field 2 ½ (she was Miss Rudge's evening victim).

There were still 15 rounds to go!

In next month's column, I discuss the decisive rounds of the event and assess its significance and its aftermath.

Copyright 2005 Tim Harding. All rights reserved.



[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About The Chess Cafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2005 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.
"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.