



## SKITTLES ROOM



by Nikolay Mineev

## Louis van Vliet: Master or Mugger?

by Olimpiu G. Urcan

The title of this column is one of those questions a chess historian wouldn't even consider worthy of serious consideration. It is well known that Louis Van Vliet – the London chess amateur and chess editor of *Sunday Times* and *Hereford Times* – was the *genius loci* of Simpson's Divan in London at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Still, the question proved reasonable enough to invite an investigation from Detective Dempster of the E Division of London Metropolitan Police on the Saturday evening of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1895 in the Charing-Cross Station on Bow Street; where a large crowd was waiting for the *Empress Frederick* to depart. The mob was anxious to greet William Gladstone, the former British prime minister, upon his expected arrival. The policemen were dispersed among the civilians and Detective Dempster thought he was defending the public interest and the safety of the pockets of those bustling to get a glance at the famous politician. Diligence was required; since there was no lack of pickpockets, small time gangsters, or desperate vagabonds who might attempt to ruin the afternoon of a respectable lady or gentleman.

Dempster saw a man, who under later interrogation declared his name was Louis van Vliet, trying to pickpocket a group of ladies that were apparently unaware of the imminent danger to their assets. A swift arrest followed and the prisoner was taken into custody. He was later brought to court in front of Mr. Vaughan and he was defended by a Mr. Crawshaw, whose hands held van Vliet's fate at the moment.

On 26<sup>th</sup> March 1895, any gentleman smoking his cigar at Simpson's Divan could have read the following report from *The Times* between his games of chess. The incident was reported in the police announcements with gripping details from Detective Dempster and another eye-witness, Mr. Thomas:

*(...) He [Dempster] saw the prisoner place his hands in the folds of the dress of a lady standing on the platform. She at once turned round and the prisoner walked into the yard in front of the station. He there placed himself behind four ladies who were accompanied by a gentleman who afterwards proved to be Mr. Thomas, of Newport. The prisoner attempted to cover his movements by means of his overcoat, but the detective saw him put his hands into the pocket of one of the ladies. Mr. Thomas stepped back, and the detective said: 'Did you see that?' Mr. Thomas replied: 'Yes, he tried to pick that lady's pocket.' The detective then took the prisoner in custody. The ladies, who had lost nothing, declined to go to the police station, as they were anxious to see Mr. Gladstone. On the way to the Bow-street the prisoner said to the detective: 'You have made a mistake. I know I have acted in a suspicious manner, but I was trying to see Mr. Gladstone.' He gave an address on Baker-street and it was found he was living there with his wife. The Mr. Thomas referred to, corroborated a portion of the detective's evidence. When he saw the prisoner take up his stand behind his lady friends he thought it very strange, for the prisoner was short and the ladies were tall. He therefore watched the prisoner, and would have given him into custody had he not found that the ladies carried their purses in their hands, and had lost nothing. When searched the prisoner had • 2 14s. 6.d in his possession. Mr. Crawshaw contended that the witnesses were mistaken as to the prisoner's object. He might have been pushed against the ladies, and his hands might have gone near their*

dresses, but his previous career and the high character he bore made it impossible to suppose that he was a pickpocket. He wrote on chess for various newspapers. He was instructor to the Sydenham and Forest-hill Chess Club, and was highly respected by the gentlemen who played chess at Simpson's Divan in the Strand, where he was in the habit of playing chess everyday. Several witnesses as to character gave evidence, but the prisoner was committed for trial. Mr. Vaughan offered to accept two sureties of •25 or one in •50.

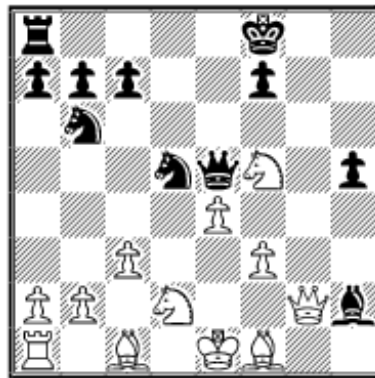
The fine he paid was a handsome sum and van Vliet would have been better off if he had won some first prizes at Simpson's Divan prior to his arrest. Not that this happened frequently; van Vliet scored the occasional victory over some of his higher rated opponents more often than he collected the pounds given to the tournament victor.

Whatever the reasons were behind van Vliet's alleged behavior, he was at least feared if not respected among the British chess professionals or amateurs. If he was to be judged in a court in front of the same Mr. Vaughan on the degree of danger he presented towards his opponents over the board – he definitely would have been labeled as a very dangerous man. Testifying witnesses would have included Emanuel Lasker, a young German mathematician, who would become the world chess champion five years after the following game:

***Louis van Vliet – Emanuel Lasker***

Amsterdam, 28 August 1889

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 Bg4 4.dxe5 Nd7 5.exd6 Bxd6 6.Be2 Ngf6 7.Nc3 Qe7 8.Nd2 h5 9.f3 Be6 10.Nb5 Be5 11.c3 Rh6 12.Nd4 Rg6 13.Nxe6 Rxc2 14.Bf1 Rxc2 15.Rxc2 Bxc2 16.Nxc7+ Kf8 17.Nf5 Qe5 18.Qe2 Nb6 19.Qg2 Nfd5



20.Nc4 Nxc4 21.Bh6+ Ke8 22.Qg8+ Kd7 23.Qxf7+ Kc8 24.0-0-0 1-0

Source: *Der Internationale Schackcongress zu Amsterdam in August 1889 bearbeitet von Jhr. Drs. D. van Foreest und Cand. Jur. I.D. Tresling*, Utrecht, J.L. Beijers, 1891, page 38

Rudolph J. Loman, a Dutch master who lived in England until 1914 and who knew van Vliet quite well, would have been another character witness. The series of games played between the two gentlemen at Simpson's Divan persuaded Loman to take van Vliet's threats serious in the game that follows:

***Louis van Vliet – Rudolf J. Loman***

London Tournament, 28 September 1891

Notes by Loman

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.O-O Nxe4 6.d4 b5 7.Bb3 d5 8.dxe5 Be6

Stronger was 8...Be7.

9.c3 Be7 10.Re1 O-O 11.Nd4 Nxd4

Not 11...Qd7 which runs into 12.Nxe6 followed by 13.Rxe4 as played by Tarrasch against Zuckertort in 1887 and versus Gunsberg.

12.cxd4 h6

Van Foreest played against us at Utrecht 12...f5 13.exf6 Rxf6 14.f3 Nd6 15.Rxe6 Rxe6 16.Bxd5 Qc8 17.Qe2 Kf7, etc.

**13.Bc2 c5! 14.f3 Ng5 15.f4**



After 15.h4 Nh7 16.Qd3 g6 17.Bxh6 Bxh4 18.Bxf8 Bg3 Black won in Metger – Mackenzie in 1891.

**15...Ne4 16.Nc3**

Better than 16.Bxe4 dxe4 17.Rxe4 cxd4.

**16...Nxc3 17.bxc3 Qd7**

If now 17...f5 White wins after 18.exf6 Rxf6 19.f5 Bxf5 20.Bxf5 Rxf5 21.Bxh6 gxh6 22.Qg4+ Rg5 23.Qe6+ Kh8 23...Kf8 24.Rf1+ Ke8 25.Qc6+ 24.Qxe7.

**18.dxc5 Bxc5+ 19.Kh1 Rfd8 20.Qd3 g6 21.Qg3 Bf8!**

21...Bf5 22.e6 fxe6 23.Bxf5 exf5 24.Qxg6+ and White wins.

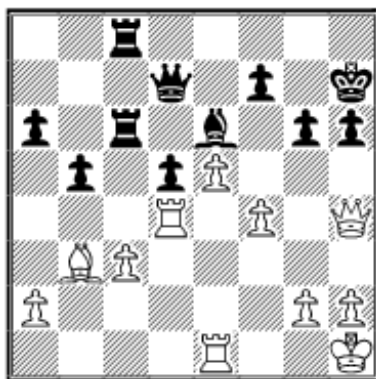
**22.Be3**

Naturally 22.Bxg6 runs dry after 22...fxg6 23.Qxg6 Bg7.

**22...Rac8 23.Bb6 Re8 24.Bb3 Rc6 25.Bd4 Rec8 26.Rad1 Bc5 27.Qh4 Bxd4 28.Rxd4!**

28...cxd4 29.a5!

**28...Kh7**



**29.f5 gxf5 30.Qh5 Rg8**

White threatened to win with 31.Rh4.

**31.Qf3 Rc5 32.Red1 Rg4 33.Rxg4 fxc4 34.Bc2+ Kg8 35.Qd3 Kf8 36.Qh7 Rxc3 37.Qxh6+ Ke8 38.Qh8+ Ke7 Draw.**

Source: *De Amsterdammer*, October 4, 1891, page 5

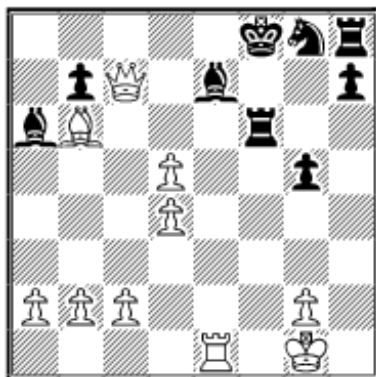
Then J. Mason, another British chess player, would have recollected without pleasure the way in which van Vliet conducted an assault initiated in one of the lines of the King's

Gambit in the London Tournament at Simpson's Divan from 1891.

*Louis van Vliet – J. Mason*

London, 1891

**1.e4 e5 2.f4 d5 3.exd5 exf4 4.Nc3 Qh4+ 5.Ke2 Bg4+ 6.Nf3 Nd7 7.Qe1 Qh5 8.Kf2+ Be7 9.Be2 O-O-O 10.d4 g5 11.h4 Bxf3 12.hxg5 Bxe2 13.Rxh5 Bxh5 14.Bxf4 f6 15.Nb5 fxg5 16.Qa5 Nb6 17.Bxc7 Rf8+ 18.Kg1 Be8 19.Bxb6 Bxb5 20.Bxa7 Ba6 21.Qc3+ Kd7 22.Bb6 Rf6 23.Qc7+ Ke8 24.Re1 Kf8**

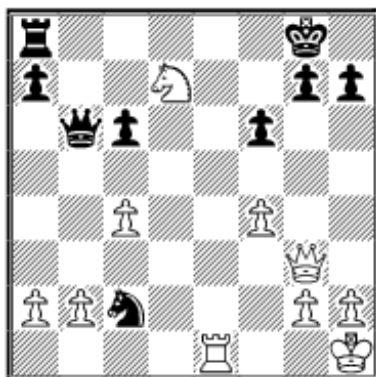


25.Rxe7 Nxe7 26.Bc5 Rf7 27.d6 Nc6 28.d7+ Kg7 29.d5 Nd8  
30.Bd4+ Rf6 31.Qd6 Rf8 32.Qe7+ Kg6 33.Bxf6 1-0  
Source: *De Amsterdammer*, March 29, 1893, page 5

Similarly J. Mortimer would have testified on the tactical aggressiveness of van Vliet by quoting a Falkbeer Counter Gambit game played at London in 1893.

*J. Mortimer – Louis van Vliet*  
London, 1893

1.e4 e5 2.f4 d5 3.exd5 e4 4.Bb5+ c6 5.dxc6 Nxc6 6.Qe2 Nf6  
7.Nc3 Bc5 8.Bxc6+ bxc6 9.Nxe4 O-O 10.d3 Re8 11.Nf3 Ba6 12.c4 Bxc4 13.Ne5 Nxe4 14.dxc4  
Nf2 15.O-O f6 16.Be3 Bxe3 17.Qxe3 Ng4 18.Qg3 Qb6+ 19.Kh1 Ne3 20.Rfe1 Nc2 21.Nd7  
Rxe1+ 22.Rxe1

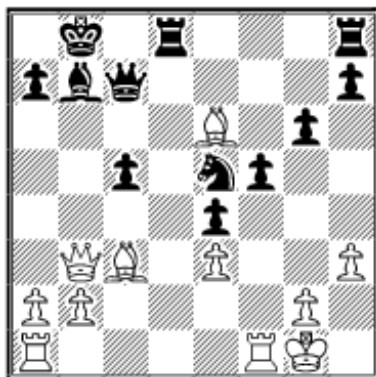


22...Qd4 23.Nxf6+ Qxf6 24.Rd1 Re8 25.c5 Ne3 26.Re1  
Qxb2 27.h4 Re7 28.Qf3 Qd2 29.Rb1 Qd5 30.Qh3 h6 31.Re1  
Nxb2 32.Re5 Rxe5 0-1  
Source: *De Amsterdammer*, November 15, 1891, page 5

But a decisive statement would have come from two esteemed British chess masters – Bird and Blackburne – who both suffered at the hands of Louis van Vliet.

*H. E. Bird – Louis van Vliet*  
London, 28 February 1893

1.f4 d5 2.Nf3 g6 3.e3 Bg7 4.c4 e6 5.Nc3 Nf6 6.d4 b6 7.Bd3 Bb7 8.cxd5 exd5 9.O-O Nbd7  
10.Ne5 Ne4 11.Nxe4 dxe4 12.Bb5 Bxe5 13.fxe5 Qe7 14.Bc4 f5 15.Bd2 O-O-O 16.Qb3 Nxe5  
17.Bb4 c5 18.dxc5 bxc5 19.Be6+ Kb8 20.Bc3 Qc7 21.h3

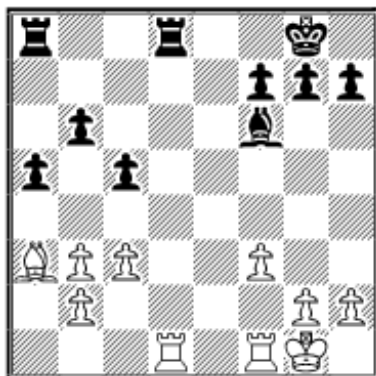


21...Nf3+ 22.Rxf3 exf3 23.Bxh8 Rd2 24.e4 Rxc2+ 25.Kf1  
Rg1+ 26.Kf2 Qg3+ 27.Ke3 f2+ 0-1  
Source: *Black and White*, Volume 5, 1893, page 333

*J. H. Blackburne – Louis van Vliet*  
City of London Chess Championship, April 1900

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nf6 4.O-O Nxe4 5.d4 Be7 6.dxe5 O-O  
7.Be3 d5 8.exd6 Bxd6 9.Nbd2 Nxd2 10.Qxd2 Ne5  
11.Nxe5 Bxe5 12.Rad1 Qxd2 13.Bxd2 Bf5 14.Bb4 Rfd8  
15.c3 Bf6 16.Ba4 Be6 17.Bb3 Bxb3 18.axb3 b6 19.f3 c5

20.Ba3 a5 (see next diagram)



21.Kf2 Be7 22.c4 Bf6 23.Rxd8+ Rxd8 24.Ke2 Kf8 25.f4 Bd4  
26.Rf3 Ke7 27.g4 Kf6 28.h4 h5 29.gxh5 Kf5 30.Rg3 Re8+  
31.Kd2 Kxf4 32.Rg5 Bf6 33.Rg1 Rh8 34.Re1 Rxh5 35.Re8  
Re5 36.Rb8 Re6 37.Rf8 Bxh4 38.Rxf7+ Bf6 39.Rc7 Be7  
40.Rc8 g5 and Black won.

Source: *The Times*, April 23, 1900, page 11

Louis van Vliet was born in 1868 in the Netherlands and he sailed to England in the 1880s where he became a naturalized Englishman. In 1889 he participated in the first International Chess Congress in Amsterdam where he finished fourth and defeated Emanuel Lasker. After this event he was a frequent visitor to Simpson's Divan or the Vienna Café from London. At the age of 27 he was already married in London and he played many tournaments; usually finishing in the middle or the second half of the crosstable. Besides the performance in Amsterdam, van Vliet's best result was a second place at the London Tournament in 1891. He was described as a professional chess player and teacher in London and in 1907 he participated in the Ostend Tournament where he tied for the 27-28<sup>th</sup> position. Hereafter van Vliet's name disappears from serious chess events except some small London events. He died on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1932. Van Vliet, a totally neglected and underestimated chess expert, invites further research. A diligent researcher would find more van Vliet games played against the masters who used to visit Simpson's Divan by visiting the small Mecca of British chess at the bridge between centuries: Simpson's-in-the Strand.

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 TOP OF PAGE

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