

Looking-Glass Chess

Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* is the best known of all books to do with chess. Yet the game which provides the framework of the story has always puzzled chess players because it seems to break so many rules.

The position at the beginning of the book is this (in Forsyth notation): 6n1; 8; 2K5; 5N2; 4k3; 8; 3Pq3; 2Q2R2. (The reader unfamiliar with chess technicalities will find an explanatory diagram in *Through the Looking-Glass*.)

The moves made during the course of Alice's adventures are as follows (with notes by Carroll himself¹): 1. . . . Q-R4; 2. p-Q4 (by railway; Tweedledum and Tweedledee); 3. Q-B4 (after shawl); 4. Q-QB5 (becomes sheep); 5. p-Q5 (shop, river, shop); 6. Q-B8 (leaves egg on shelf); 7. p-Q6 (Humpty Dumpty); 8. Q-B8 (flying from Red Knight); 9. p-Q7 (forest), N-K2ch.; 10. NxN; 11. N-B5; 12. p-Q8 (Q) (coronation), Q-K1ch. (examination); 13. Q-R6 (goup); 14. QxQ mate (feast).

There are two things seriously wrong with this sequence of moves from the point of view of ordinary chess. Firstly, White makes thirteen moves to Red's three. Secondly, White's last move but one, Queen to Rook six, ignores the check on the White King.

For these reasons, commentators on *Through the Looking-Glass* have taken the view that the chess is part of the nonsense fantasy and therefore not subject to the rules. F. Madan complains that "the chess framework is full of absurdities and impossibilities" and that "hardly a move has a sane purpose."² A. L. Taylor thinks that the author "was not interested in the game as a game."³ Even Lewis Carroll seems to have felt the need of some sort of explanation. In a new Preface written in 1896 he says: "As the chess-problem . . . has puzzled some of my readers, it may be well to explain that it is correctly worked out, so far as the *moves* are concerned. The *alternation* of Red and White is perhaps not so strictly observed as it might be."

D. M. Liddell in his brilliant article on "The Chess of Alice Through the Looking Glass"⁴ takes this to be an admission that the game might be improved upon: "We are indeed to agree with him as to 'alternation,' for White takes eight moves in succession, enough to wipe out the entire Red force, which is scarcely to be called Chess, while the above play is not 'Alice,' because a large number of the characters she meets in the book are not to be found on the board." Liddell goes on to present a game of his own composition beginning with the bizarre Bird's Opening (pawn to King's Bishop four) and ending with Alice mating the Red King at the sixty-sixth move.⁵

M. Gardner allows that the queening of Alice and the checkmate as described in the text are orthodox but despairs of a rational explanation of the other apparent violations of the rules.⁶

The trouble with all these interpretations is that Lewis Carroll (alias Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, lecturer in logic and mathematics at Christ Church, Oxford) was the last man to break any rules. He loved complicated games and invented many of his own, including Court Circular (card game), Croquet Castles, Syzygies (word game) and Lannick (using a chess board).⁷

Suppose *Through the Looking-Glass* is based on a real game of chess. Is there any possible set of circumstances that would allow for such seemingly irregular moves?

Carroll learned to play chess as a child at Croft Rectory. But his mature knowledge of the game must have come from his reading. This is confirmed by the fact that, after his death, three chess books were found in his rooms: Walker's *Art of Chess-Play*⁸, Staunton's *Chess-Player's Companion* and Staunton's *Chess Tournament*.⁹ Carroll's literary biographers have noted his ownership of these books, but none appears to have examined their contents. The works of both Walker and Staunton are historical as well as instructive and both include codes of law that differ in important respects from the rules of modern chess. Difficulties vanish away when Alice's adventures are looked at anew in the light provided by these early Victorian masters. Not only does the chess become intelligible, it reveals something fresh and disturbing about the meaning of the looking-glass world.

The problem of the disregarded check on the White King is easily solved. Walker's Law XX states: "When you give check, you must apprise your adversary, by saying aloud 'check'; or he need not notice it, but may move as though check were not given."¹⁰ The Red Queen did not say, "Check"! Her silence was entirely logical because, at the moment of her arrival at King one, she said to Alice, who had been crowned on Queen eight, "Speak when you're spoken to!" Since no one had spoken to *her* she would have been breaking her own rule had she said, "Check."

There remains the second and greater difficulty. How, under any circumstances, could White make thirteen moves while Red makes only three?

Four possible explanations suggest themselves. Firstly, Red might move the White pieces by mistake. Under Law IX White could insist that the moves stand. Secondly, according to Law XIV, if White were moving out of turn Red could insist that the moves stand. Neither of these contingencies is very likely in view of the number of consecutive moves made by White. Thirdly, the game might be played at odds. Both Walker and Staunton devote much space to various methods of giving odds to a weaker player. But the order of the moves—one Red, eight White, one Red, three White, one Red, two White—would imply an impossibly difficult mathematical basis for the giving of odds.

There remains a fourth possibility. Book V of Staunton's *Companion* is entitled "On Odds."¹¹ Staunton begins with a discussion of the origins of chess and remarks that at first the giving and receiving of odds was unnecessary because the game was not one of pure skill.

At the remote period of its birth in India it belonged to the widespread family of human games based on chance and "the moves were governed by the casts of dice"¹². These significant words occur in the very first sentence of the treatise Staunton wrote and Lewis Carroll bought. They provide a key that turns easily in the lock of the door to Alice's secret garden. White has more moves than Red because White wins on the throw of the dice more often than Red!

"They don't keep this room so tidy as the other," thought Alice to herself when she arrived behind the looking-glass and discovered a world beyond the care of providence or the decrees of fate. How disturbing if Carroll is suggesting that this 'other world' is, after all, the real one and that it is ruled by the principle of uncertainty! A pawn's progress towards the eighth rank is hazardous in the hands of a skilled chess player. In looking-glass chess its survival depends on the casting of unseen dice by an invisible master. No wonder Alice cried as she threw herself down on the last square, "Oh, how glad I am to get here!"

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NOTES

1. The reference to the castling of the three Queens is disregarded since the meaning is explained in the Preface: "Merely a way of saying that they entered the palace.
2. Sidney H. Williams and Falconer Madan: *A Handbook of the Literature of the Rev. C. L. Dodgson* (1931), p. 48.
3. Alexander L. Taylor: *The White Knight: A Study of C. L. Dodgson* (1952), p. 101.
4. Donald M. Liddell in *The British Chess Magazine*, May 1910 (Vol. 30, p. 181).
5. Liddell's ingenuity deserved a kinder fate than was accorded it in a letter in the subsequent (June 1910) number of the *B.C.M.*: "We played over the whole of Mr. Liddell's game for the benefit of a young lady of about Alice's own age who wanted a story to be read to her, and she wasn't a bit pleased. Indeed, not to mince matters, she was very cross."
6. Martin Gardner: *The Annotated Alice* (1960), p. 170.
7. The rules of these and other Carrollian games may be found in *The Works of Lewis Carroll* edited by Roger Lancelyn Green (1965), p. 1007f.
8. George Walker (1803-1879): *The Art of Chess-Play: A New Treatise on the Game of Chess* (1846).
9. Howard Staunton (1810-1874): *The Chess-Player's Companion; Comprising a New Treatise on Odds, and a Collection of Games* (1849); *The Chess Tournament, A Collection of the Games Played at this Celebrated Assemblage* (1852). The "celebrated assemblage" was the tournament held at the St. George's Club in 1851 to mark the Great Exhibition.
10. These are the Rules of St. George's Chess Club, London, drawn up in 1841 and still in force in England when *Through the Looking-Glass* was written in 1871.
11. It is based on *Il Gioco degli Scacchi* of D. Pietro Carrera (1617).
12. Staunton, *op. cit.*, p. 380.