

How good is your chess?

In chess terminology, I'm not entirely sure what defines a 'miniature'. The Oxford Companion to Chess (the Bible when it comes to this kind of thing) gives a miniature as 'a composition with seven or fewer men including kings'. Not what I was looking for. But you are also referred to 'short game' and 'brevity' found elsewhere in the book. Under 'brevity' we find 'interesting game of a few moves'. Under 'short game' we find 'a game completed in a small number of moves, say 20 or fewer, sometimes known as brevity or a miniature'; and so we go round in a circle again.

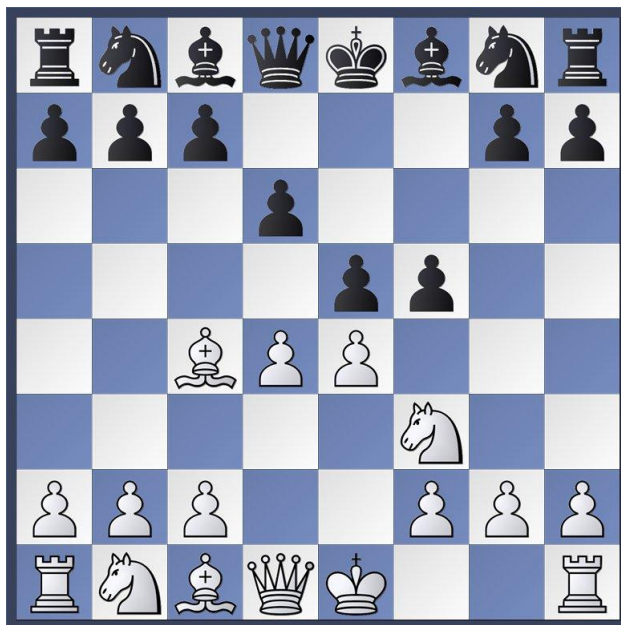
All this by way of introducing this month's game. There are a few more than 20 moves, but I would define this as a miniature as Black does not get out of the opening. There is a touch of the 19th century about this game. The opening, for one thing – it's the Philidor Counter Gambit (perhaps I should say 18th century?); the sacrifices; and, dare I say it, the poor defensive play of the loser.

The Philidor Counter Gambit (1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 d6 3 Bc4 f5 as here, or 3 d4 f5) is certainly a rare visitor at top-level chess. The last time it did visit, like a rogue meteor crashing into the earth, was through the hand of Jonathan Mestel. He employed the opening to win two games in the world junior championship in 1975, first against Paul van der Sterren from Holland, and then later against Peter Nurmi, the Canadian representative. After he had seen the opening of the game against van der Sterren, Nurmi apparently berated Mestel for playing 'such rubbish'. A few rounds later he had to eat his own words.

Nurmi - Mestel

World U20 Tjentiste, 1975

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 f5 4.Bc4.



This is meant to be the refutation. The key line is 4...fxe4 5.Nxe5! and now

(A) 5...d5 6.Qh5+ g6 7.Nxg6 Nf6 8.Qe5+ Be7 9.Nxh8 dxc4 10.Nc3 Nc6 11.Qg5 Be6 12.0–0 Qd7 13.d5 with advantage to White - Steinitz
(B) 5...dxe5 6.Qh5+ Kd7 7.Qf5+ Kc6 8.Qxe5 with a winning attack. Instead, Mestel chose...

4...exd4! 5.Ng5 Nh6 6.Nxh7? Ng4 7.Nxf8 Kxf8 8.exf5 Qe7+ 9.Kf1 Bxf5 10.Qxd4 Nxh2+ 11.Rxh2 Rxh2 12.Be3 Qe4 13.Qxe4 Rh1+ 14.Ke2 Bxe4 **0–1**

Those victories helped Mestel to win the bronze medal.

A couple of years later he used it against the Hungarian grandmaster, Andras Adorjan but with less success. Instead of 6 Nxh7?, Adorjan improved with 6.0–0 Nc6 7.exf5 Bxf5 8.Re1+ Kd7 9.c3 Qf6 10.Qb3 Be7 11.Ne6 Rab8 12.cxd4 (Adorjan-Mestel, Moscow 1977). Black's king never found total security, and he was finally ground down with Eastern European technical precision in a cheerless 84 moves.

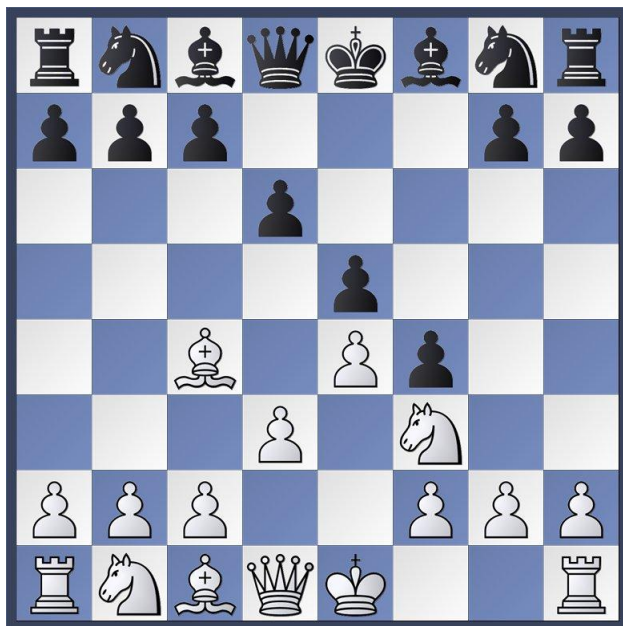
To my knowledge, Mestel never chanced the opening again.

In this game, the winner, experienced International Master Robert Bellin, declines to play the 'refutation' (Nurmi-Mestel shows how easy it is to go wrong). Instead he opts for a comparatively modest but strong continuation (played by Adolf Anderssen, among others). His opponent, thrown back on his own resources, soon finds himself in difficulties. The game won the brilliancy prize at the recent Guernsey Open tournament.

Cover the page with a card with a card or sheet of paper, lowering it gradually to reveal it a line at a time. Begin after the first diagram. Whenever Black has moved, stop and try to guess Black's reply which will be on the next line. Try to analyse as much as you would in a game – it could earn you bonus points. The article will test your standard of play or, if you prefer, just enjoy a fine game.

R. Bellin – K. Goater
31st Guernsey Open, 2005

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bc4 f5 4.d3 f4



5.d4

Three points. I know that Philidor is supposed to have said that ‘pawns are the soul of chess’, but the player of the black pieces has taken this too far. He has played four pawn moves and developed no pieces. If Black were castled, had his pieces in play, and White’s king were on the kingside, then forming a pawn wedge as the prelude to an attack would have some point to it. But that is too many ‘ifs’.

White’s response, breaking through in the centre, is a strong and classic reaction. Attacking the e5 pawn is better than 5 g3. In that case Black is, to some extent, let off the hook: 5...fxg3 6 hxg3 Bg4 or 6 fxg3 Nf6 are both playable. The difference between this line and the game continuation is that 5 d4 puts Black under immediate pressure. Once the threats start, Black can’t develop as he would wish.

Remarkably, I have found a couple of precedents. Yes, 4...f4 has actually been played before. In Jukic-Mihalopoulos, Box Hill 2000, White attempted to exploit the open diagonals around Black’s king with the radical 5.Nxe5 dxe5 6.Qh5+ Kd7 7.Qxe5. Assessing this position is not easy, but if I were playing Black, I think I would be delighted to come out of this appalling opening with a half decent position. True, the f4 pawn is about to drop, and from White’s viewpoint three pawns and the chance to attack Black’s king is certainly attractive; but with an extra piece the game could swing round in Black’s favour.

5...Nc6

Before guessing the next move, I should give the other precedent I unearthed. Instead of this last move, 5...Qf6 was tried in Van der Blom-Knipscheer, Soest 2000. White responded with 6.Nc3 c6 7.dxe5 dxe5 8.Bxg8 Rxc8 9.Qd3 Bg4 10.Bd2 Nd7 11.0–0–0 0–0–0 12.Qc4 Be6 13.Qe2 Nb6 14.Ne1 g5, and Black, with his bishop pair and space advantage went on to win quite smoothly. What should White have played instead on the 6th move?

White could have won a pawn with 6.dxe5 dxe5 7.Bxg8 (7.Qd5 Bd6 isn’t as good) 7...Rxc8

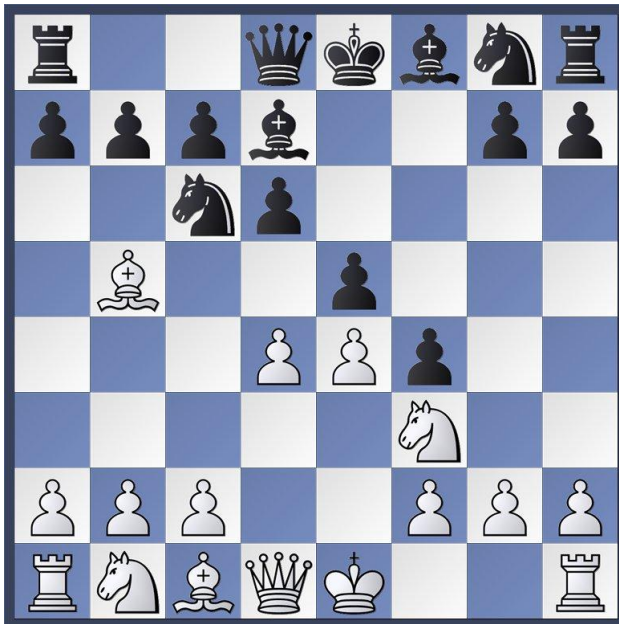
8.Qd5. The rook must move and e5 drops. Two bonus points if you spotted this.

6.Bb5

Four points. The pressure intensifies on Black's centre. If you were to reset the pieces to the start of the game, then play the moves 1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 d6 4 d4, you would have the position here – with the exception that Black's f-pawn is in a different position. What difference does that make? First, Black's centre is more rigid: capturing on d4, as in the Spanish, simply isn't possible because the f-pawn would drop. Second, with the f-pawn hurled up the board, Black's king is significantly weaker. Look at all those open diagonals.

White could also open the position: 6.dxe5 (two points) dxe5 (6...Nxe5? 7.Nxe5 dxe5 8.Qh5+ Kd7 9.Qxe5) 7.Qxd8+ Kxd8 8.Ng5 Nh6, but now it is necessary to waste a move with 9.c3 to prevent ...Nd4. Nevertheless, White stands better here.

6...Bd7



7.Nc3

Three points. Simple and strong development. After this, the e5 pawn is threatened.

It is too early to cash in: 7.dxe5 dxe5 8.Bxc6 Bxc6 9.Qxd8+ Rxd8 10.Nxe5 Bxe4 is satisfactory for Black.

7...Nge7

Black defends the e-pawn, but in so doing, blocks in the bishop.

8.d5

Six points. Given that White has a lead in development, it might appear illogical to close the position; but Bellin has seen a clear line of attack. From here on, the situation gets worse and worse for Black.

8.0–0 (three points) is the best of the alternatives. White’s options are left open – the d-pawn might push or capture depending on circumstances – and Black’s development is far from straightforward.

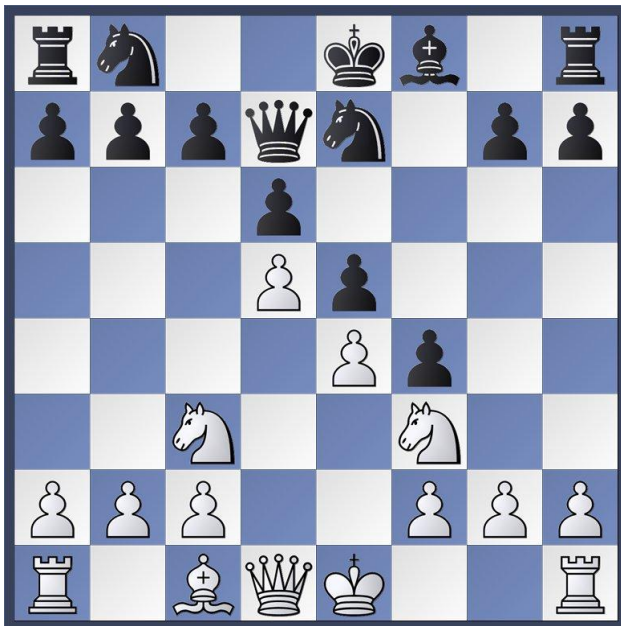
Two points for 8.dxe5 dxe5 followed by 9.0–0 or 9.Nd5.

8...Nb8

9.Bxd7+

One point.

9...Qxd7



10.g3

Four points. The kingside starts to break open. In this case, it suits White to have his king in the middle: the centre is closed, so there is no danger; and the rook, on its starting square, is ready to join the fight.

10...fxg3

11.hxg3

Two points. Please see the comments above! Therefore only one point for 11.fxg3. That is still good for White, but it takes longer to get the rook into play.

11...h6



12.Ng5

Five points. This would also have been strong on move 10 (take three points if you wanted to play it then). The knight heads for its dream square.

By the way, Black's last move, 11...h6, didn't have much point given that the pawn is pinned. Black could have kept a little hope alive by playing 11...c6, followed by ...Na6 to c7 or c5, trying to undermine White's control over the e6 square.

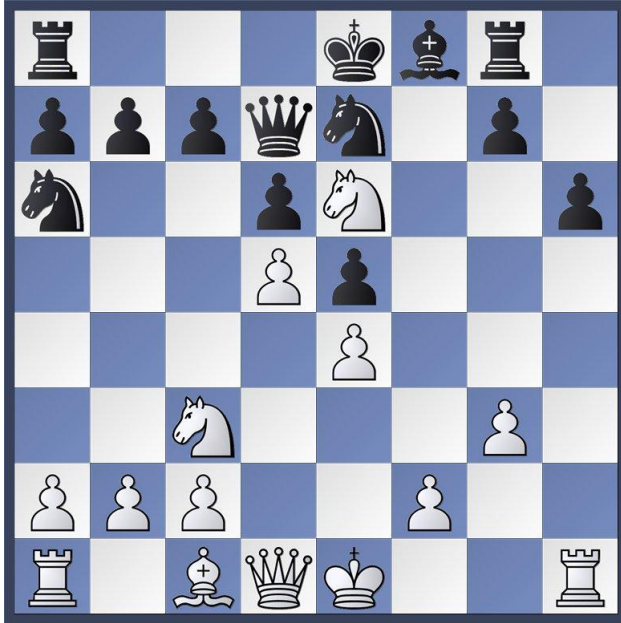
12...Rg8

13.Ne6

Two points. Of course, we slam the knight in without thinking. Black's king is well and truly caught in the middle.

Here is a very Fritzzy alternative: 13.Nh7!? No human would ever dream of playing such a move (please check your connection if you went for this). The point is that Black cannot prevent Bxh6 winning a pawn.

13...Na6



14.Qh5+

Three points. The simplest way to winkle open Black's position.

However, 14.f4 (three points) is also excellent: 14...exf4 15.gxf4 Nc5 16.f5 keeps Black in the box.

14...g6

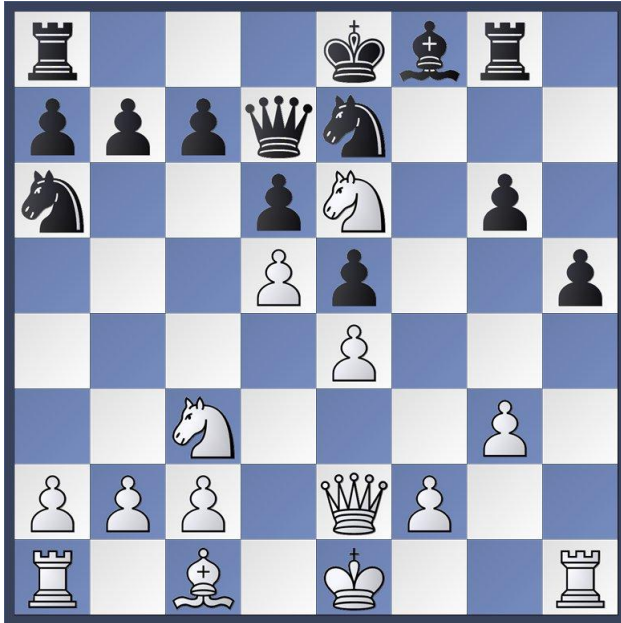
15.Qe2

Four points. Almost any of the retreats are good for White. The real point of the check was to create a weakness on h6. But 15 Qe2 is particularly sneaky.

The same score for 15.Qf3. It isn't too difficult to breakthrough. For example: 15...h5 16.g4 hxg4 17.Qf6 Nb4 18.Rh8 will win.

I also like 15 Qh4 (four points), as the queen gets in to f6 in a similar way.

15...h5



16.g4

Two points. White prepares the final attack. First the h-file is opened.

Other moves such as 16.Be3 or 16.Bg5 are good, but lack the drive of 16 g4.

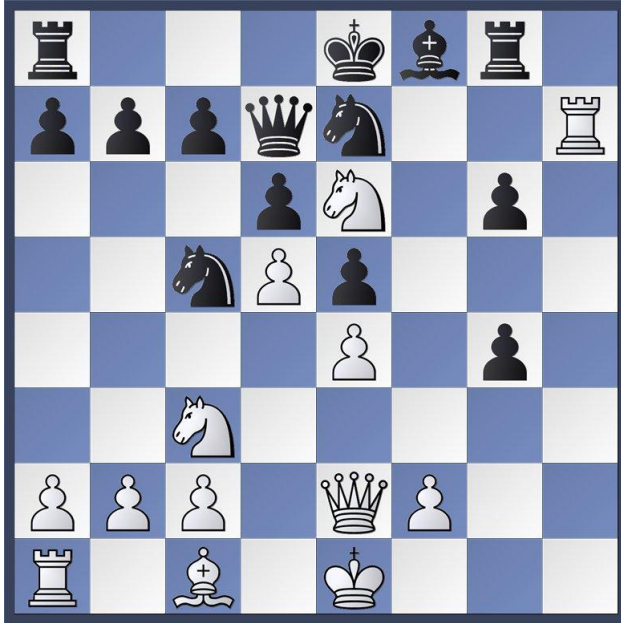
16...hxg4

After this Black is utterly lost. The only possible way out was to get rid of the knight on e6: 16...Nc5. And now the most straightforward continuation is 17 Nxc5 dxc5 18 gxh5, winning a pawn for nothing. If the king runs, 18...0-0-0, then White just plays 19 h6 followed by Bg5. Black's position is still a complete tangle.

17.Rh7

Three points.

17...Nc5



18.Bg5

Three points. White's pieces are pointing in the right direction. 17 Rh7 and 18 Bg5 could have been transposed. Balance your score if you did so.

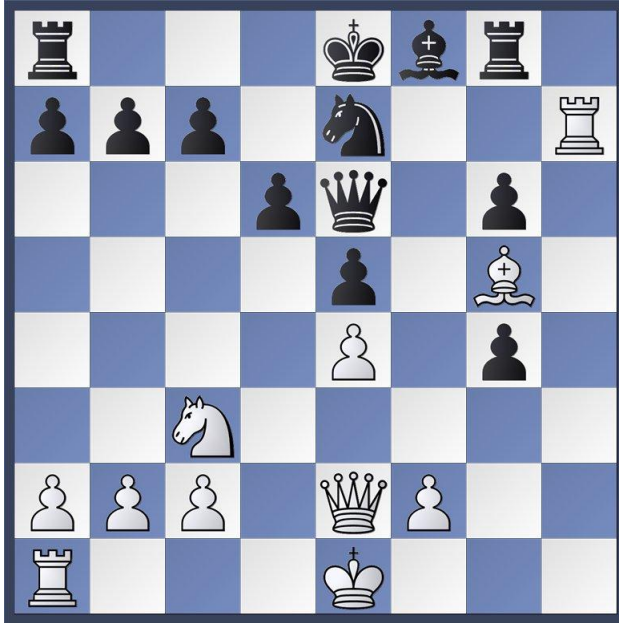
18...Nxe6

19.dxe6

One point.

19...Qxe6

Declining the pawn would not have helped the situation: 19...Qc6 20.Bxe7 Bxe7 21.Nd5 is catastrophic.



20.Nd5

Six points. Black is lost. White had plenty of winning moves here, but this is the most effective.

20.Qb5+ (three points) is also strong: 20...Qd7 21.Bxe7! Bxe7 (21...Qxb5 22 Nxb5 Be7 23 Nxc7+ reaches a winning ending) 22.Qxb7 Qc8 23.Qc6+ Kf8 24.Nd5 and White has a winning attack.

Three points if you chose this variation: 20.Bxe7 Bxe7 21.Nd5 Bd8 22.Rxc7! Once again, Black's king has no security.

20...Nxd5

21.Qb5+

One point. Now we can see why the queen retreated to e2 on move 15. Black's king is shot from both sides.

Deduct five points if you played 21 exd5 instead. That lets Black off the hook. Simply 21...Qxd5 is a decent reply, and there is still a big fight ahead.

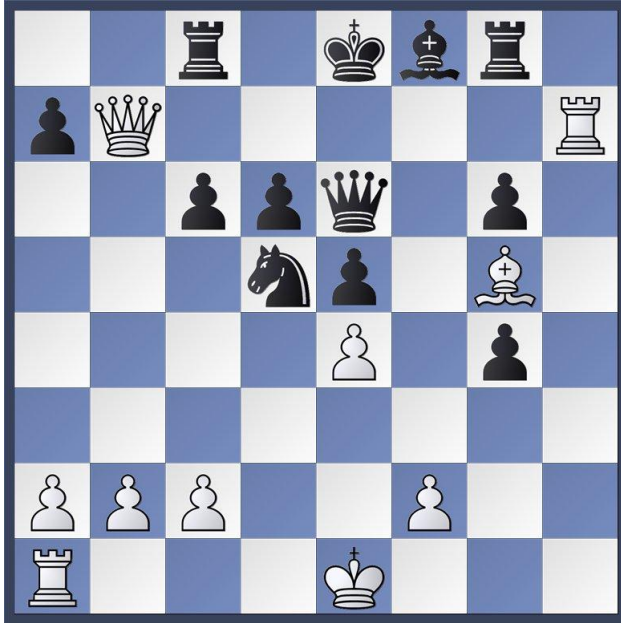
21...c6

22.Qxb7

One point. Check out the seventh rank. Yum.

22...Rc8

That is to defend against the mate on c6.



23.exd5

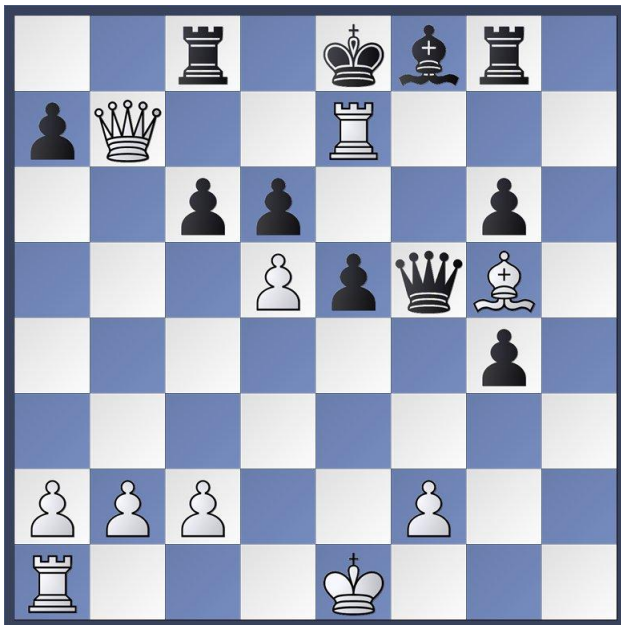
One point.

23...Qf5

Instead, 23...Qxd5 is met by 24.Qd7 mate; and 23...cxd5 leads to mate after 24.Qb5+.

24.Re7+

One point. Here **Black resigned**.



Incidentally, what is the quickest way to finish the game after 24...Kd8...?

Two bonus points if you spotted the mate in two: 25 Rd7+ Ke8 26 Qxc8 checkmate.

Now add up your points.

53-60 Grandmaster

45-52 International Master

36-44 FIDE or National Master

28-35 County player

19-27 Strong club player

11-18 Average club player

0-10 Unlucky

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