Dr. Watson Solves a Problem

(OR DOES HE?)

As Related by Himself

By Dr. P. G. Keeney, Bellevue, Kentucky

As everyone knows, who is familiar with the Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, that I am a skilled physician a close friend of the great detective, and, according to the latter's quite frequent but I am sure endearing disclosure to me, "a blundering idiot".

Now if you, the reader, have been a close follower of the Sherlock Holmes tales in which my actions and sayings are set forth in a manner to enhance the wonderful acumen of the great Holmes, undoubtedly your opinion of me is the same. You also have me categorized as "a blundering idiot".

In the episode I am about to relate I hope to be able to show you that this opinion of yours is not justified. Should I fail in this, however, I am sure you will at least enjoy having another chuckle at my expense and once more marvel at the amazing deductions of the master mind of my good friend Holmes.

Some time ago, to be exact it was July 24, 1944, I received an envelope postmarked Belleview, Ky., U.S.A. A study of the outside of the envelope gave me no clue to its contents so I astutely decided that, in order to learn what was inside, I would open it.

I did so. Imagine my amazement at the enclosure! It was an arrangement of chess figures on a diagram and purported to be a two-move problem, by (to me) an unknown U.S. problem enthusiast. Following is a fac-simile of the diagram and the enclosed note: By Dr. P. G. Keeney, Belleview, Ky., U.S.A.

Black: 5 men
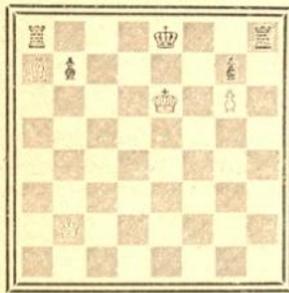
White: 4 men

White mates in two moves

"Dear Dr. Watson: Can you solve this? "I played a game and arrived at this position. To my surprise it developed to be a sound two-mover! (This is a clue)."

Now before I proceed with a study of the position, I feel called upon to inform you, my readers, that I am regarded here in London and throughout England as a first class amateur chess player and an expert problem solver, although as a player and solver I am not near the equal of my friend Holmes.

My gaze wandered to the diagram. I interested myself in the position but confess I was irritated by the written query on the side of the diagram: "Can you solve this?" And again I was mystified at the written "a sound two-mover" on the opposite side of the diagram.

What nonsense, what drivel, what idiocy

for anyone to challenge my ability to solve a two-move problem! And also the statement: It is sound. What did it mean? Surely the composer had little regard for my solving ability. I would prove whether it was sound or not! As to my ability as a solver—well, I had won numerous solving contests of suimates, helpmates and direct mates having lengthy solutions. Two-movers were "duck soup" for me, never requiring over three minutes study of the diagrammed position before I mastered it. I never set up a two-mover on the board for solving. I always solve them from the diagram! I took another glance at the position. The key seemed quite obvious. In fact, there appeared to be two keys! And then the thought: "Why won't both work?" And then I noted something odd about the position that set me off on another track. "What's this?", I queried of myself. "A problem with two solutions". Hardly likely to have a composer who would bother me to solve an unsound problem. Besides hadn't he written "it is sound"? What had he meant by this? As I remarked before—I would prove the problem's soundness. The composer's word was not going to influence my judgement.

By this time I was thoroughly aroused and interested. I became absorbed in a study of the position, so much so that I was quite oblivious of anything transpiring about me. (I later ascertained that it was at this juncture Holmes entered my apartment, although I was not conscious of it at the time).

The problem grew more puzzling as I pursued my study of it. I had now discovered that in some way or other the solution seemed to hinge on "what was Black's last move and how could that move be proved? If proved it could be.

I became more and more absorbed. Subconsciously I was thinking and audibly speaking my thoughts which I now set down in writing so that you may follow the trend of my reasoning:

These were my thoughts:

(1) If Black moved his King last, he could not castle on either side.

(2) If he didn't move his King last, he must have moved one or other of the Rooks. But which one? It apparently could have been either. And then again, whichever Rook moved would forfeit the King's right to castle with the Rook doing the moving. So far, so good. But how could I prove which one has moved? Time passed, fifteen minutes thirty minutes, an hour; then I had an inspiration and loudly ejaculated, "Eureka, I have it!"

"You have what?" a mild voice at my elbow spoke in my ear. Glancing up somewhat startled, I beheld my friend Sherlock grinning at the diagram over my shoulder. So intrigued had I been with the study of the problem, I had been quite unaware of his entrance. (I previously indicated when he entered. Unquestionably the old fox had listened to my audible thoughts, as his quick summing up of the position later proved to me).

"You have what?" he repeated. "The solution to this problem", I answered, pushing the diagrammed position in front of him so that he could study it better. He took an indifferent glance at it and then meekly asked: "What is your solution?". "Why, my dear Holmes," I exclaimed triumphantly, "don't you see it? Where is your great genius? Has the great Holmes been baffled by a two-mover? The solution unquestionably is 1. QxKNP, O-O-O; 2. Q-B3 mate!"

As I concluded Holmes burst into uproarious laughter. I thought he was going to have a fit. I didn't see anything to laugh about or at, and I didn't hesitate to tell him so in no gentle terms. But he ignored my rebuke and continued to writhe in merriment, but his reply was electrifying: "You dear old blundering idiot", he howled in a paroxysm of mirth. "Do you not realize that in your solution you castled with the Queen's Rook? In doing this you have proven that Black's King's Rook must have moved last. Therefore, my dear Watson, if you assume your solution to be correct, you have actually cooked the problem. Now replace the pieces as they were before you disclosed your enlightening solution, and you will find that since you so convincingly proved the King's Rook moved last, Black cannot castle on the King's side and QxQNP will also solve the problem. My dear hopeless but esteemed Watson, you have blundered again. But your blunder, in this case, is excusable since it revealed to me the author's intention.

"The author's key, it is true, is QxKNP, but Black, as you just demonstrated, cannot answer with O-O-O or he will prove the problem unsound. Now the author on one side of the diagram wrote: 'I played a game and arrived at this position. To my surprise it developed to be a sound two-mover! (This is a clue).'

"Unquestionably he had previous knowledge of Black's last move. The piece that Black moved last could only have been the Queen's Rook. Soundness can only be maintained by proving the Queen's Rook moved last. That was the clue the composer gave. Ergo with my contention—which I am positive is the author's idea, the real solution is Black's last move was with the Queen's Rook so: 1. QxKNP, K-Q8; 2. Q-Q7 mate. 1....., R-R7; 2. Q-KN8 mate. 1....., other (cannot O-O-O); 2. Q-K7 mate.

"Any attempt to prove the King or King's Rook moved last will cook the problem. To prevent a cook, the right to castle on the King's side must be preserved."

As Holmes finished, he hurriedly seized his hat and left. I could still hear him laughing after he closed the front door.

I must admit my face was quite red, but I must also confess despite my confidence in Holmes' deductive powers, for once I am not absolutely satisfied with his logical reasoning in this case. I still am at a loss to understand whether the problem has one solution, two solutions, or any.

One thing I am certain of and that is I refuse to admit I am "a blundering idiot" even though you, the reader, may believe otherwise.