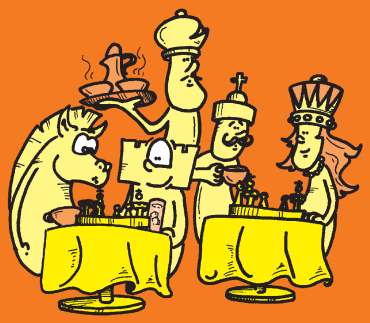


THE PUZZLING SIDE OF CHESS

Jeff Coakley

RETRACTORS: "Takeback Granted"

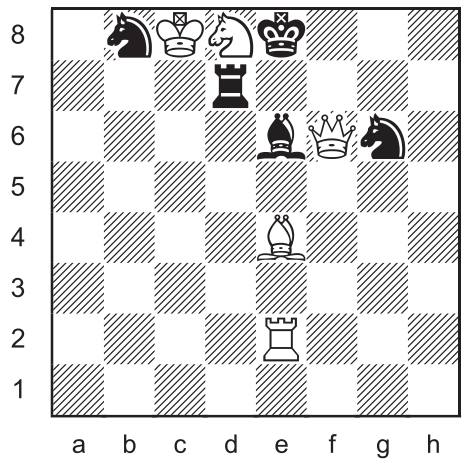
number 33 April 27, 2013

Did you ever make a move in a game and then immediately realize that you could have played something much better? In tournaments, we have to live with those missed opportunities. But that's not the case on the *Puzzling Side of Chess*. We let you take the move back.

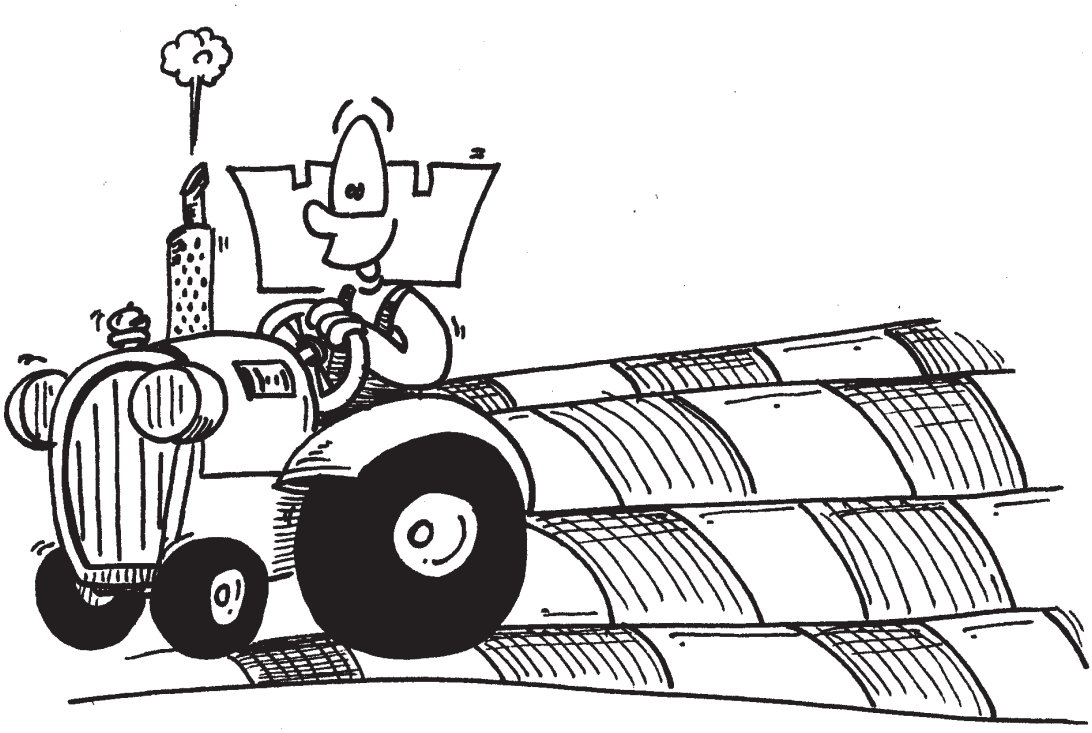
In a basic *retractor* problem, **White retracts any legal move of their choice**, and then checkmates Black with a different move. One step backward, one step forward. It's easy.

In these puzzles, if the retracted move is a capture, you decide which type of piece was taken. Solutions are given in long algebraic notation (with the type of piece captured shown in parentheses).

Retractor 1



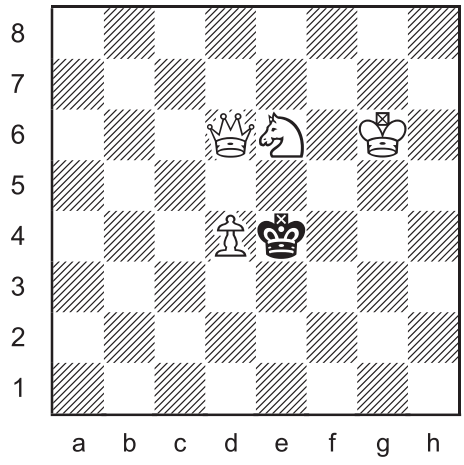
White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.



The retracted move in the previous puzzle was not a capture. In effect, White made two forward moves in a row. The problem was essentially a *series-mate in 2* (double whammy). However, most retractors cannot be solved in this way. The retraction usually involves more than the simple move of a piece.

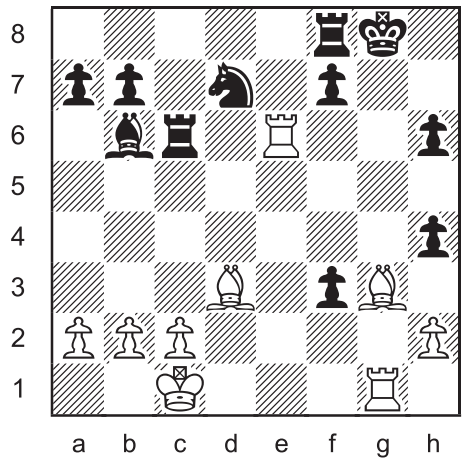
For more information on *double whammies*, see column 28.

Retractor 2



White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

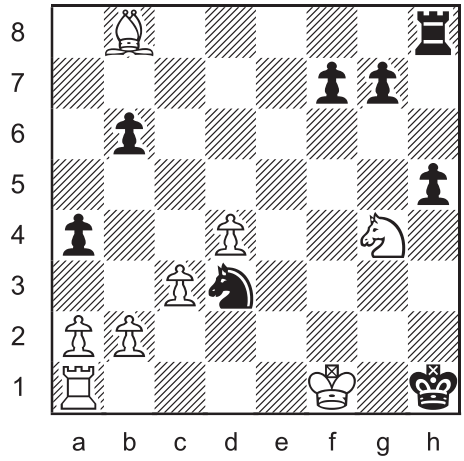
Retractor 3



White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

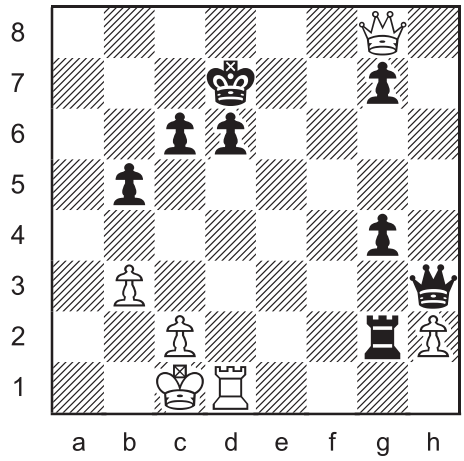
To the best of my knowledge, retractors were invented by Sam Loyd (1841-1911), the famous American chess composer known as “The Puzzle King”. The following problem was probably the first puzzle of this type. It was accompanied by a story about a Persian prince who requested a takeback from his tutor. Shocked that his pupil would suggest violating the laws of chess, the old man “sternly refused”. And the young prince went running to his mother’s arms!?

Retractor 4



White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

Retractor 5



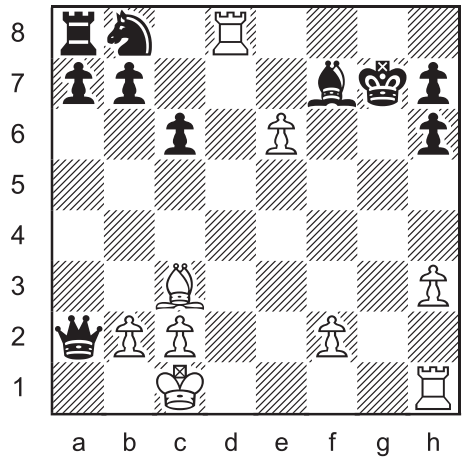
White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

Well done. You've plowed halfway through a ten puzzle field, but the terrain ahead is rougher. Time for a short break and a public service announcement.

ChessCafe.com is sponsoring a composition contest where you can win prizes by making up your own problems. Click here for all the details of the *Chess Cafe Puzzlers Cup*. Our operators are standing by. [*Well, they were standing by in 2013. Sorry, the link no longer works.*]

In the next diagram, the black king is in check. The retracted move must get rid of that check. Otherwise the position would be illegal. *It cannot be White's turn if Black is in check*.

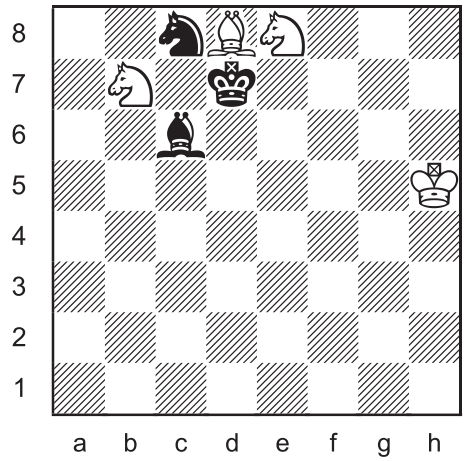
Retractor 6



White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

We have now covered all the special cases of retro play in retractor problems: pawn retreats, uncaptures, unpromotions, uncastling, and “unpassants”. That’s a lot of onions.

Retractor 7

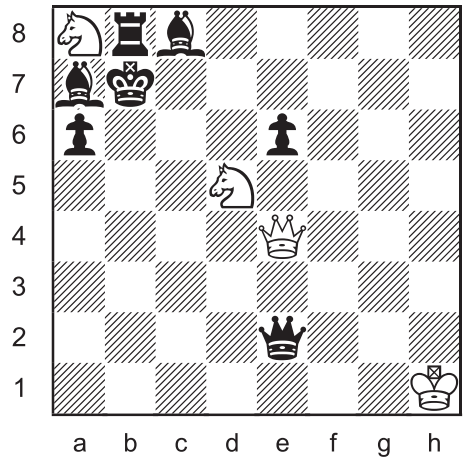


White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

In a retractor, **the position after the retraction** (and before White’s forward move) **must be legal.**

Problems 8-10 are quite complicated. A greater depth of *retrograde analysis* is required to decide which retractions are allowed. For more on retro thinking, see column 30.

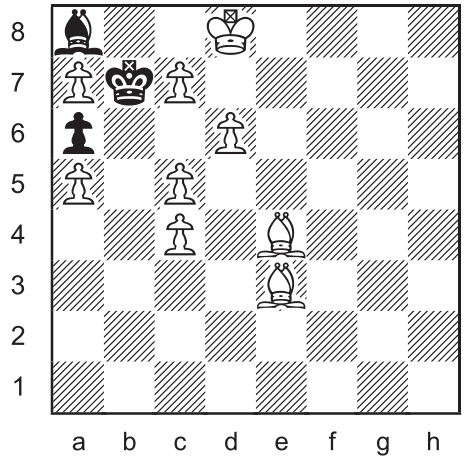
Retractor 8



White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

The next puzzle is by the great retro pioneer, Karl Fabel (1905-1975). Be careful. The obvious answer may not be correct.

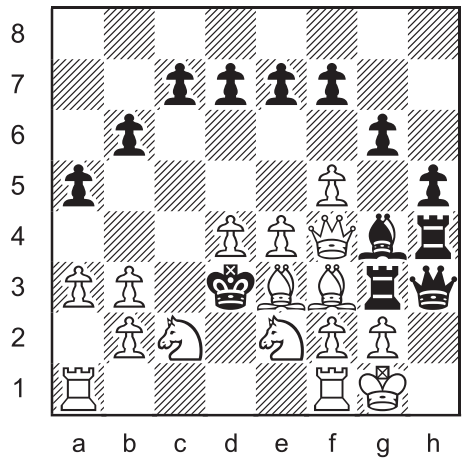
Retractor 9



White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

Our final position belongs in a book called *Alternative Strategy in Modern Openings*.

Retractor 10



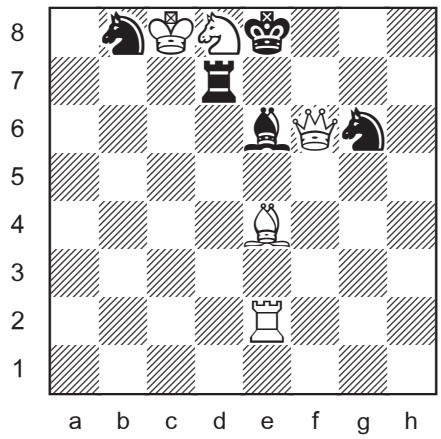
White takes back their last move,
then mates in one.

SOLUTIONS

Retractors 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 by J. Coakley. Problem 5 is from *Scholar's Mate 114* (2012). The others are *ChessCafe.com* originals (2013).

PDF hyperlinks. You can advance to the solution of any puzzle by clicking on the underlined title above the diagram. To return to the puzzle, click on the title above the solution diagram.

Retractor 1

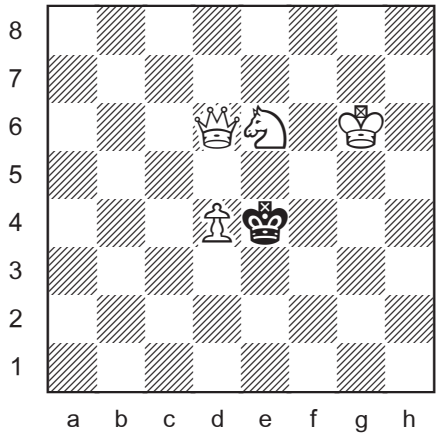


-1.Bc6-e4
+1.Qf7#

A move of the white bishop from c6 to e4 is taken back. (In other words, the bishop "unmoves" from e4 to c6.) Then, with the white bishop on c6, White plays queen to f7, mate. The black rook and bishop are both pinned.

A minus sign precedes the "retracted move". A plus sign is shown before the "forward move".

Retractor 2

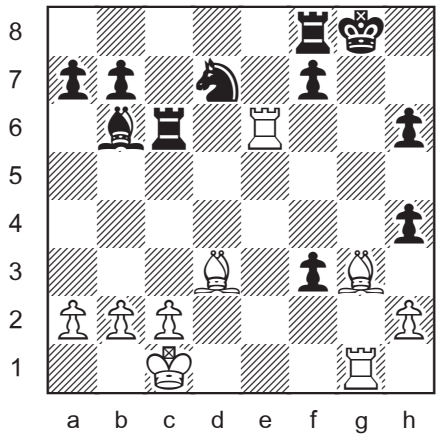


-1.d2-d4
+1.Ng5#

A simple problem which cannot be solved as a series-mate in 2 because a pawn cannot move backwards in normal play.

The pawn “retreats” to d2 where it guards the e3 square, and doesn’t block the queen’s control of d3.

Retractor 3



-1.Re3xe6(p)
+1.Be5#

The rook returns to e3 to obstruct the bishop on b6. The rook also “uncaptures” a black pawn on e6, indicated by (p). Uncapturing a queen, rook, bishop, or knight would allow that piece to block the discovered check (1.Be5+) from the rook on g1. If no piece is uncaptured (if the e6 square is left vacant), then the check can be blocked by 1...Rc6-g6.

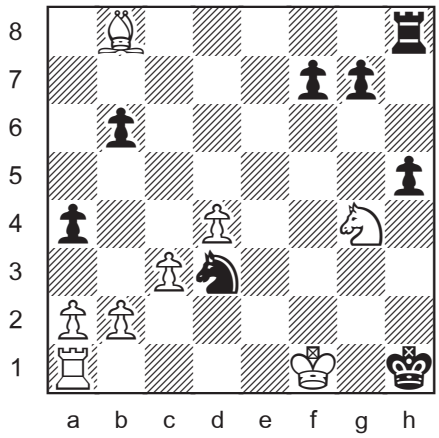
[*When retractor 3 was originally published, there was no pawn on h6. This allowed the dual solution -1.Rh6xe6(p) +1.Bf2#.*

It was suggested that the second solution actually improves the problem, since in one line the rook blocks the g1-a7 diagonal and the bishop covers h8, and in the other line the roles are reversed. Of course, the stipulation would have to be "find two solutions".]

Retractor 4

Sam Loyd 1860

Chess Monthly



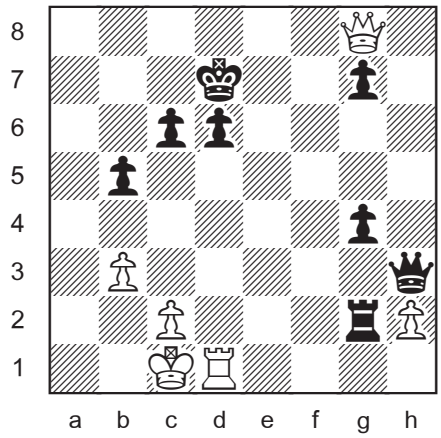
-1.a7xb8(B)=B
+1.a7-a8=Q# (or =B#)

The white bishop "unpromotes" into a pawn on a7 by uncapturing a black bishop on b8. The pawn then advances to a8, promoting into a queen (or bishop) for the mate.

The piece uncaptured on b8 had to be a bishop. Other black pieces would prevent an immediate mate.

Puzzling Sidebar. The problems in this column are sometimes called "help retractors" because we can choose to uncapture whatever type of piece helps us. There is another class of problems known as "defensive retractors" in which Black is supposed to defend against the mate. In that kind of retractor, the defence decides whether a retracted move is a capture, and if so, what type of piece is captured. The solution must work against all possibilities.

Retractor 5

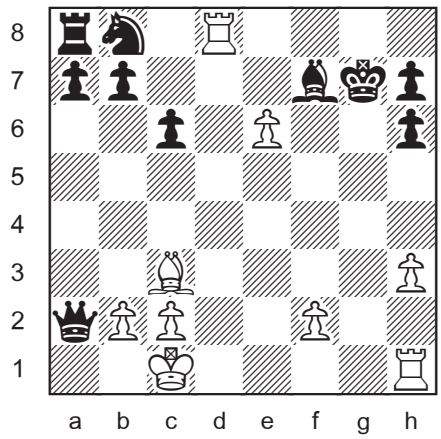


-1.0-0-0
+1.Ra1-a7#

White “uncastles”, returning the rook to the open a-file.

In retractor problems, castling is allowed as a backward or forward move unless it can be proven illegal.

Retractor 6



-1.f5xe6 e.p.+
+1.Bxe5(p)#

White “unchecks” the black king by retracting an *en passant* capture. In the position before the last move, White has a pawn on f5 and Black has a pawn on e5 which just moved from e7.

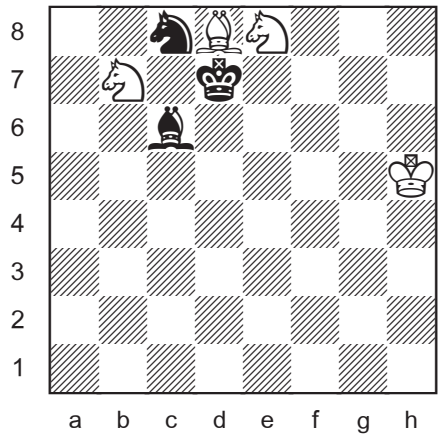
In retractor problems, the convention concerning *en passant* captures is different for the backward and forward moves.

continued next page

An *en passant* capture is allowed as a retracted move unless it can be proven illegal.

An *en passant* capture is not allowed as a forward move unless it can be proven that it is legal. (Such proof would demonstrate that Black necessarily moved a specific pawn two squares on the previous turn.)

Retractor 7



-1.f7xe8(N)=N
+1.f7-f8=N#

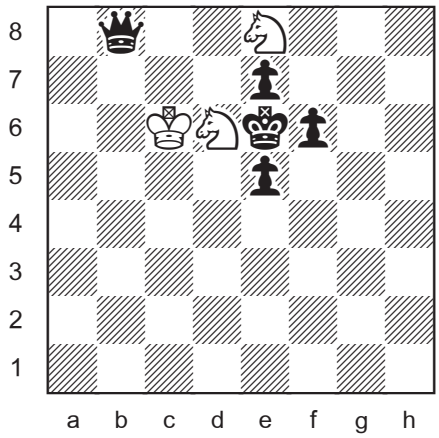
It's a field day for minor pieces. White unpromotes the knight on e8 by uncapturing a black knight, then promotes again by advancing to f8. The uncaptured black piece must be a knight. A bishop or queen would check the white king. A rook could take on f8.

Two older problems with the same "unknight/reknight" theme are given below.

Retractor 7b

Manfred Zucker 1959

Die Schwalbe



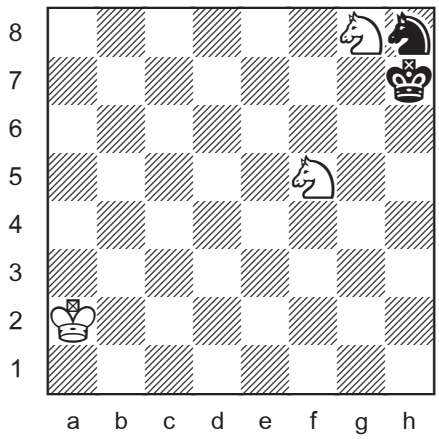
-1.f7xe8(N)=N
+1.f7-f8=N#

In the diagram, White would like to play Ng7#, but any retraction eliminates that mate.

Retractor 7c

Günther Weeth 2003

Stuttgarter Zeitung



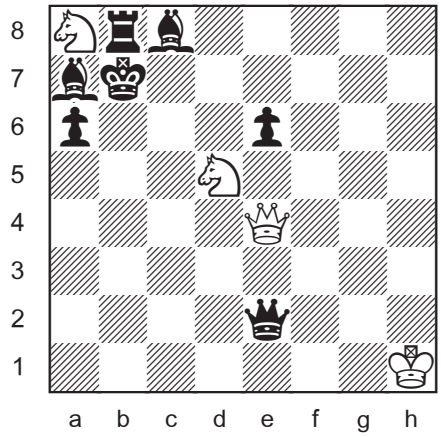
-1.f7xg8(N)=N
+1.f7-f8=N#

A classic four knight endgame. The economy of forces in this problem by German composer Günther Weeth is impressive.

Retractor 8

Benjamin Milnes Neill 1882

Bretano's Monthly



-1.Kg1xh1(N)
+1.Ne3#

White uncaptures a knight on h1, and then, with the white king on g1, blocks a check from the bishop at a7 by interposing on e3 with the knight from d5. Mate.

In the diagram position, White wants to play Ne3#, but first they must retract a move which does not undo that mate. The only possibility is with the king from h1 back to g1. However, the white king seems to be in an impossible check on g1 from the black bishop at a7. The bishop had no legal move on the previous turn. It could only go to a7 from along the g1-a7 diagonal, where it would already be giving check. The solution to the mystery is a discovered check by a black knight from f2 which was then captured on h1 by the white king. Black's last move (with K on g1) was ...Nf2-h1+.

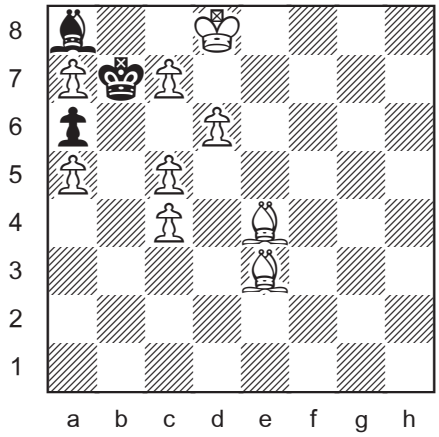
Chess master and composer Benjamin Neill (1853-1922) was a Philadelphian.

Retractor 9

Karl Fabel 1956

Arbejder-Skak

Kurioses Schach (*1960*)



-1.e5xd6 e.p.+
+1.c5xd6 e.p.#

One *en passant* capture is replaced by another.

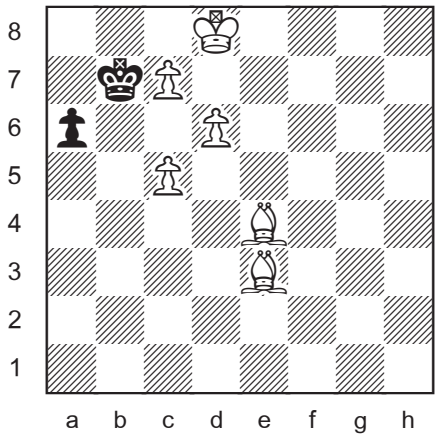
White uncaptures on d6 with a pawn from e5, returning a black pawn to d5. Since an *en passant* capture was taken back, we know that the black d-pawn just moved two squares. (The backward e.p. justifies the forward e.p.) White then mates by an *en passant* capture with the pawn from c5. The bishop on e3 defends a7.

The obvious but incorrect solution is to take back the discovered check -1.d5-d6+ followed by +1.c5-c6#. However, the retraction -1.d5-d6+ results in an illegal position. Black would not have a legal move on the previous turn. The black king could only have moved to b7 from b6, b8, or c6, and he would be in an impossible check on those squares.

This clever deception works because of the black bishop on a8 and the white pawns on a5, a7, c4. If they are removed, we have a simplified version of the puzzle with the same solution, but without the try -1.d5-d6+. See diagram next page.

Retractor 9b

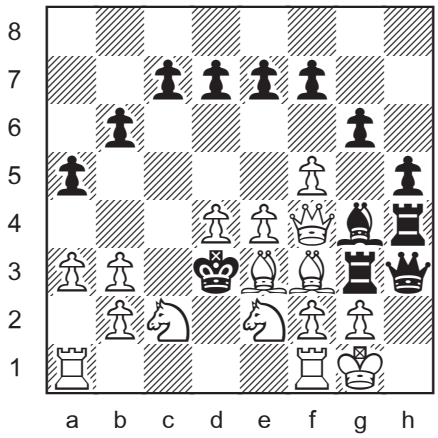
J. Coakley 2013
(version of Karl Fabel 1956)
ChessCafe.com



-1.e5xd6 e.p.+
+1.c5xd6 e.p.#

Retractor 10

Sigmund Steiner 1912
Aachener Anzeiger



-1.0-0
+1.0-0-0#

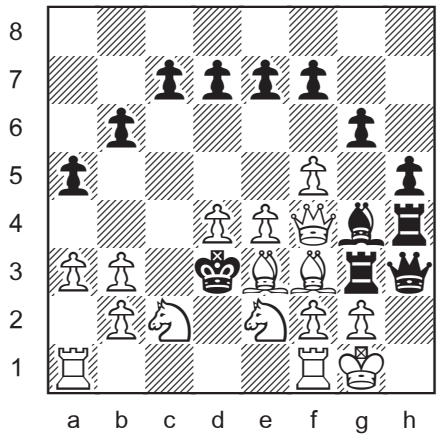
White uncastles short, then recastles long!

By uncastling, White gives the black queen a legal move on the previous turn (...Qh2-h3).

continued next page

The following seventeen tries are all incorrect solutions because the retracted move cannot be an uncapture and therefore Black would have no legal move on the previous turn, as shown by the argument below.

-1.a2-a3 +1.Ne1#
-1.Rc1-a1 +1.Rfd1#
-1.Rc1-a1 +1.Ne1#
-1.Rb1-a1 +1.Ne1#
-1.Ra2-a1 +1.Ne1#
-1.Rc1-f1 +1.Ne1#
-1.Rb1-f1 +1.Ne1#
-1.Re1-a1 +1.Ne1#
-1.Re1-f1 +1.Ne1#
-1.Bc1-e3 +1.Qd2#
-1.Bc1-e3 +1.Ne1#
-1.Bd2-e3 +1.Ne1#
-1.Qd6-f4 +1.Ne1#
-1.Qe5-f4 +1.Ne1#
-1.Qg5-f4 +1.Ne1#
-1.Qh6-f4 +1.Ne1#
-1.Nc3-e2 +1.Ne1#



Black is missing three pieces (BNN). All of them were captured previously by the white pawns on b3 (from c2) and f5 (from the h-file). Therefore, none of the retractions in the list could be an uncapture.

Since the retractions are not uncaptures, Black's last move would have to be with the king, queen, or pawns. The black king would be in an impossible check on any square he could have moved from. The black queen would be checking the white king on both squares (h1 or h2) that she could have moved from. The black pawns at a5, b6, g6, h5 all needed to move to their current location much earlier to let the rooks and bishops out. Therefore, Black would have no legal move on the previous turn.

A true retractor gem by Austrian composer Sigmund Steiner.

Until next time!