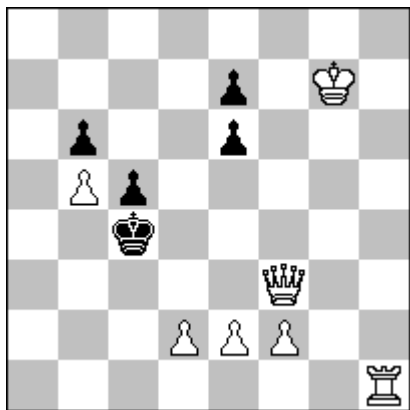


## THE JOY OF CHESS PROBLEMS

From an early age until a couple of years ago I have enjoyed the stimulation and competitiveness of over-the-board chess, but at around the age of twenty I began to develop an interest in chess composition. At first, this took the form of being introduced by John Nunn to some really surprising and beautiful endgame studies. In itself, of course, this is not a big departure, as good studies often start from game-like positions; many players enjoy them, and studies often are used in the training of chess players – often for their educational value in the field of endgame technique, sometimes for the leaps of imagination that the solver must make, which may awaken him to unlikely possibilities lurking just below the surface of game positions.

In my case, I was also attracted by the puzzle element in chess compositions. This extended to ‘mate in ~’ problems, where there is still a connection to the game as it is played, albeit the position is usually one that would have been resigned some time ago by Black in actual play! Columns such as that of Leonard Barden in *The Guardian* stood me in good stead, and I think it was there that I first saw the 3-mover that I inflicted on ECF Newsletter readers a little while ago -



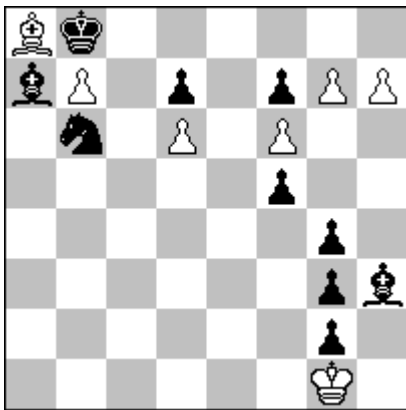
Mate in 3

Johann Berger, *Didaskalia* (*Frankfurter Rundschau*) 1887

(The key is 1.Rf1!! . The main line is 1...Kd4 2.Qd3+ Ke5 3.f4#. Side lines are 1...e5 2.Rb1 e4/Kd4 3.Qxe4/Qd3#, 1...Kxb5 2.Rb1+ leading to 3.Qa8# or 3.Qd3# depending upon Black's reply.)

I also enjoyed the problem pages of *British Chess Magazine* and in particular enjoyed the puzzle element of helpmates published there. As you may know, the idea of helpmates is that the composer sets up a position in which with Black doing all he can to collaborate we can reach a position in which he is mated in a specified number of moves. We are now at a far remove from anything recognizably game-like (though it is required that the position should be one that could arise, in however unlikely fashion, in a legal game of chess, and the play that follows must also follow the laws of chess), although I have a theory that in looking for unlikely possibilities below the surface of a position, an interest in helpmates may be beneficial in stimulating a chess-player's imagination and also his capacity for pattern recognition. (My far from stellar chess-playing career, sadly, doesn't bear this out, and includes, like that of many other players, moments of extreme ruefulness upon unwittingly creating crude helpmates in the course of play! On the other hand, quite a few strong players enjoy helpmates; John Nunn is among a few who actually enjoy composing them.)

To give you an idea of the sort of spectacular effect that attracted me to helpmates, you may like to glance at the following diagram –



Helpmate in 7

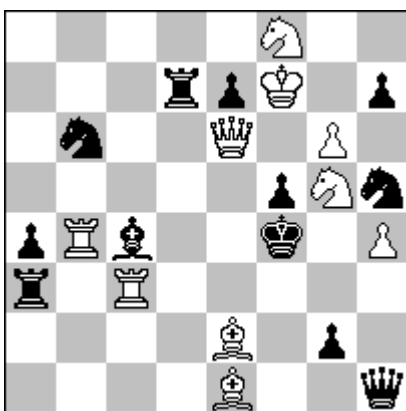
Arpad Molnar, 2<sup>nd</sup> Honourable Mention, *Magyar Sakkelet* 1961

“Helpmate in 7” means that we are looking for a BWBWBWBWBWBWBW series of moves in which Black lands up mated. At first glance it looks as though this could not be a sound problem because there are surely any number of ways to inflict mate, even without Black’s collaboration. However, it then becomes clear that the difficulty is that Black has few moves available and moves of the b6N will inflict mate on White – so if White plays g8=Q+ Black is forced to play Nc8 – mate! You may be able to see how to keep feeding Black non-mating moves until mate is possible on move 7, though it’s one of those positions that an experienced solver may solve quickly but the mighty computer takes ages over, so if you can’t see the solution you’re in good company!

The solution (in which by convention we show black moves first) is 1.f4 h8=N 2.f3 Ng6 3.fxg6 g8=B 4.g5 Be6 5.dxe6 d7 6.Kc7 b8=R 7.e5 d8=Q#.

All four possible white promotions (to N, B, R and then Q) – quite a task achievement in a sound helpmate.

There is a wide diversity of types of chess problem to explore, including some that are more arcane than helpmates, but still many enjoy composing and enjoy solving traditional problems, such as this one, selected almost at random from the works of Britain’s first Grandmaster for Chess Composition, Comins Mansfield –



Mate in 2

Comins Mansfield, 1<sup>st</sup> Prize, BCF Tourney 1968-9

The key is the unpinning move 1.Rb5!, threatening 2.Rxf5. Now there are three defences that unpin the wQ – 1...Bxb5 2.Qe3; 1...Bd3 2.Qe5 and 1...Bxe2 2.Qxf5. Further defences are 1...Bxe6+ 2.Nfxe6; 1...Bd5 2.Bd2; 1...Rd5 2.Qe3; 1...Nd5 2.Rxc4; 1...Qh3 2.Nxh3; 1...hxxg6 2.Nxxg6; and 1...Ng3 2.Bxxg3.

In the late 1980s I joined the British Chess Problem Society and began to receive their magazine, published every other month, *The Problemist*, which encouraged me to start solving the new problems appearing in every issue, and then trying my own hand at composing, to see if I could emulate the qualities I admired in the problems I solved. Some (like myself) finish up being more engaged by composing, others continue principally to enjoy solving. (Also, there is enjoyment to be had from browsing through the compositions of top composers, even if you don't exert yourself to solve them and simply read through the solutions!) For me it seems that, both in solving and in composing, you can set your sights on improving your skills (which may enhance your enjoyment), without that aspiration being associated with the stressfulness that can accompany efforts to improve your ELO playing grade! If you flourish on competition, though, there are events such as the annual British Chess Solving Championships (sponsored by Winton), whose finals I can best liken to an exam hall in which the exam papers comprise sets of chess problems to solve... (And for composers, in a gentler vein there is recognition for especially meritorious problems when they are included in the prize list in annual tournaments in which the year's problems are judged by experts.)

For more details of these activities, and to get more of a feel for what the chess problem world is like, you can go to the BCPS website - [www.theproblemist.org/](http://www.theproblemist.org/) - where you can also find plenty of problems to have a look at. For myself, chess composition has been an absorbing pastime, one of whose advantages is that you can indulge it in any idle moments you may have. (Particularly useful during lock-downs.)

Christopher Jones  
cjajones1@yahoo.co.uk