
A long article on Kempelen's Turk (and the mystery of the legless Pole) will be published next month. We start the 'Automaton series' with ...

THE ENGLISH DEVIL

by Ken Whyld

There have been many chess-playing androids. The daddy of them all, and the best-known, was Kempelen's Turk. Two others merit special attention. They are Ajeeb, the only one with apparently supernatural powers, the subject of a future article, and Mephisto, much the best chess automaton, but the one least-loved by the public.

The creator of Mephisto was Charles Godfrey Gumpel, a London homeopath and manufacturer of artificial limbs, well-known for his inventions. He was a popular chess enthusiast and patron, a diligent attender at functions, a problem composer, and a weak player. He was

one of the founders of the West End Chess Club, whose 150 members met at his home at 8 New Coventry Street until he gave up the premises in 1877. He had a vast collection of journals, books, pamphlets and reviews on chess, and was described by the unctuous Alphonse Delannoy as a 'perfect gentleman'.

It was at his new home, 49 Leicester Square, that after six or seven years of experiments and expense Gumpel launched Mephisto. On 30th March 1878 he gave a dinner in honour of Rosenthal and Camille Morel of Paris, who were visiting London to detail the plans for a chess tournament to be held in conjunction with the forthcoming

Universal Exposition in Paris. Ballard, Bird, Duffy, Gastineau, Hirschfeld, Hoffer, Minchin, Potter, Wayte and Zukertort joined their host, but owing to gales in the channel the French party could not cross. After the meal Blackburne, Delannoy and one or two others joined the gathering to see Mephisto.

They saw a splendid figure in a brilliant red velvet dress trimmed with black and a pink hat with a black border and two superb feathers. The face was that of a conventional stage Mephistopheles, with a shrewd but not malevolent appearance, the head close shaven. The hands, the left of which wore a black kid glove, were slim and well-shaped, as was the torso, and under the table the feet were crossed, one a neatly proportioned human foot, the other a cloven hoof. The magnificently bejewelled figure was sitting in an easy attitude on a deep seat in front of an ordinary chess table with moderately stout legs. The only unusual feature was the large club-sized board. The chessmen, which differed from those of Ajeeb by being of various sizes, were centred on their squares by spikes. Later in the year the spikes were removed and the men rested in indented circles. The whole assembly was not attached to any chest or placed against a wall, and as viewers were allowed to examine the slim Mephisto, his table and his seat, even during play, it was clear to all that, for the first time, a chess automaton had been made that could not possibly have a player concealed within.

Mephisto's opponent had to grasp the piece he intended to move and press it down on the departure square and again on the arrival square. If he did not press sufficiently there was no reply. One account said that the squares went down like piano keys, but only slightly. One of the best reports,

that in *The Field* for 13th April 1878, said that they went down about one inch, rising with a spring. Captured pieces were removed beforehand, and always placed to either player's right side.

After a short delay Mephisto raised his right hand from the cushion on which it had been resting, lifted its elbow towards its shoulder a few inches and then thrust it forward until the hand was over the chosen square. Then the forearm relaxed allowing the hand to fall and grip the piece. He shook hands with some opponents. Each action was distinct and consecutive, unlike the human arm which could make them simultaneously. However, the movements of the human arm were reproduced extremely well. Several writers compared this favourably with a contemporary rival, Psycho, a whist-playing android exhibited by the great illusionist, Maskelyne. From time to time Mephisto moved his head, apparently taking a wide survey of the board, and occasionally he looked up at the opponent. He indicated check by touching the opponent's king. At this first trial Mephisto came off best against Potter, Delannoy, Minchin and Hirschfeld.

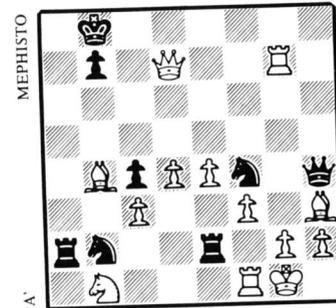
Gümpel was not a showman. He said at once that Mephisto possessed no extraordinary powers and was just a piece of machinery. He refused to call it an automaton, sagely adding that life is too short to construct a fully automatic chess player. The mystery lay in how the moves were communicated to the hidden operator, who was in fact in another room, and how the arm was controlled. Sometimes the board was screened by a newspaper to prove that the moves were not viewed through mirrors. No-one ever succeeded in deducing the method of operation.

Clearly the depression of the squares was to signal moves by electrical contact. I suspect that the arm was operated entirely mechanically, probably from the room underneath the scene. Blinded by his own expertise Gümpel did not realize that the average spectator would much prefer to be wondering if Mephisto were a true automaton rather than pondering the skill behind its construction. It is of passing interest that Charles Babbage (1791-1871), the eccentric genius who invented the punched card computer a century prematurely, had interested himself in the theory of constructing a machine capable of physically performing any possible move on a chess board.

In 1878 Gümpel wrote 'How Mephisto was caught' to stimulate public interest. As it happens Mephisto was well established when the tale appeared in a shortened and anonymous version in *Gentleman's Magazine*, September 1881, followed by a condensed version in *Chess Player's Chronicle*. The full story, now called 'How the Devil was caught', was published in the short-lived and opulent *Brentano's Chess Magazine*. A rather curtailed translation was in *Deutsche Schachzeitung* for 1882. Briefly the tale goes like this.

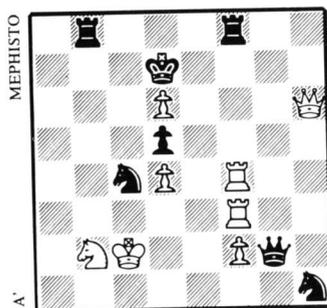
Mephisto visits 'A' who is obsessed with chess, offers to make him unbeatable, and first gives him a week's free trial. Mephisto's conditions are that they play each other three times, and if Mephisto wins all three games he will make 'A' the strongest player in the world, but in thrall to Mephisto. Should the man so much as scrape a single draw then Mephisto will become his slave.

In the first game 'A' thinks he is winning in this position when Mephisto, to move, announces mate in seven.



sonable, because this position did occur, with colours reversed, in a game that ended in a draw. However Mephisto announced mate in seven again, this time plagiarizing Lolli. 1 ... ♖d2+; 2 ♘a3, ♜a5+; 3 ♘b2, ♜e5+; 4 ♘a3, ♜c5+; 5 ♘b2, ♜d4+; 6 ♘a3, ♜a4+; 7 b×a4, ♜c3 mate (6 ♘b1, ♜×g1+; 7 ♘b2, ♜c1 mate).

In the final game the near-demoralized but plucky 'A' reaches this position



Mephisto, in his irritating manner, calls mate in seven - 1 ... ♘×b2+; 2 ♘c3, ♜×f3+; 3 ♘×f3, ♘×f3+; 4 ♜e3, ♘×e3+; 5 f×e3, ♘f2; 6 e4, ♘×e4+; 7 ♘d3, but, what horror! - he cannot make his mating move because then the piece formation would take the shape of the dreaded cross! Black has 24 other winning moves, in some cases forced mates, while only his remaining 10 moves lead to a draw, but the poor devil is so demoralized that, rather than pick another winning line, he offers a draw, becomes the man's slave and is taken on exhibition.

After the private launching ceremony Mephisto went to Paris to be shown at the exposition held from May to October 1878. This was the first experiment with large scale electric lighting and it may help to get a feel of the state of technology at the time to

read the following statement by a savant of the period, Professor Erasmus Wilson. 'With regard to electric light, much has been said for and against it, but I think I may say without fear of contradiction that when the Paris Exhibition closes electric light will close with it and very little will be heard of it'.

Gümpel suggested to Delannoy that he might like to give a French version of 'How the Devil was caught' as a curtain-raiser. Delannoy, who had an uncontrollable urge to write fiction even when supposedly reporting facts, and had won chess-literary prizes in England and France, preferred to write something original, and, he felt, more suited to French tastes, and it appeared in *La Stratégie* for April 1878. It is not too easy to summarize his lush style, but here is an outline of the tale.

In Inverness, capital of the Scottish Highlands, redolent of Stuart memories and the bloody sacrifices of their supporters, of the witches of Macbeth and the deeds of Shakespearian heroes is the City of Inverness Chess Club. One of its strongest players is a physician and chemist, Dr Faustin Lewis (a name more symbolic than Scottish). A great tournament is organized and everyone invited. The pairings are made leaving one man unmatched when the door opens and a stranger arrives to fill the vacancy. The new man, Macfire (a name symbolic and almost Scottish), plays so brilliantly that Lewis asks him to supper with the idea of persuading him to stay in Inverness.

Two features of the meal will interest the gastronomic historian. Spirits are served such as 'cognac and Jamaican rum, usually made in Scotland, where the industry has reached a level of true perfection'. In addition to many slices of superb roast beef, a cold goose is served. 'There is a

saying in this country that a goose is an awkward dish. It is a little too much for one person, but not enough for two'. As Macfire eats nothing, Lewis does not have to skimp his meal.

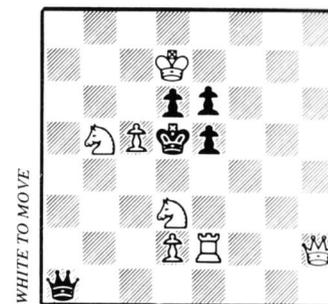
The two men then smoke and talk. Lewis says that he is so impressed by Macfire's play that he would give twenty years of his life to be able to match it. Macfire takes him up, and offers to do it for half price (the foreigner's idea of a sure bait for a Scotsman?) If he agrees Lewis will have the power at once, but must accompany Macfire for ten years and substitute for him in chess events, as he is getting rather tired. Macfire offers a twenty-four hour free trial, but the clock starts to chime midnight, and without waiting for a reply, or even saying 'Adieu', Macfire grabs his hat and departs.

Lewis's excited mind is racing over the events when doubts creep in and he begins to wonder if Macfire has supernatural powers. Then he remembers that Macfire never removed his gloves even at the table or to light his cigars, and those cigars smelled less like the products of Havana or Virginia than of Vesuvius or the Sicilian mines. He becomes sure that he has dined with the devil. Lewis tries to think of ways of turning the tables on Macfire, and has an inspiration. He remembers that somewhere in his large chess library is a four-move problem in which the final position imitates the form of a cross. He searches frantically through his books but is just despairing of finding it in time when a small volume of Sanscrit problems falls to the ground. In it is the one he seeks.

The next evening Faustin Lewis goes to the club to see if he has magically acquired the skills that Macfire promised. He allows himself to be drawn into playing for stakes. The first

game is for a shilling, but the stake soon becomes a pound. After many games culminating in victory over the grandmaster of the Edinburgh and Glasgow chess clubs, Lewis has won £200.

Lewis returns to his room and at nine o'clock Macfire appears at the door. After confirming that Lewis has proven his new skill Macfire asks if he is ready to enter into agreement. The ungrateful Lewis says that there is one condition. Macfire is to solve a problem on the chess board. If he succeeds Lewis will follow him for ten years but if he fails then he in turn must follow Lewis for that period.



After quickly making the first three moves Macfire seizes up, and the triumphant doctor takes his slave to the Paris Exposition.

1 ♘h4, ♜d4; 2 ♜×d4+, e×d4; 3 ♘×d6, e5; 4 ♘×e5 mate.

The sequel to this high melodrama was farce. The officials of the Exposition refused to allow Mephisto admittance. However Gümpel installed Mephisto in his Leicester Square home and put him on semi-public display. He issued a challenge to all except recognized grandmasters, and crowds came. One of the first masters to play was Potter.

Mephisto then created a sensation by an act unique in the history of chess pseudo-machines. It entered a tournament! When Hoffer withdrew from the Counties Chess Association sixteen-player knock-out handicap tournament in the first half of August 1878, Gumpel asked if Mephisto could fill the vacancy. There was some irony in this because it was rumoured that the scheming Hoffer had tried to oust Mephisto's operator from his job, as well as from the job of editor of *Chess Player's Chronicle*, which he held in his own right. Gumpel had earlier donated a special prize and perhaps because of that and the fact that there were no other offers the committee accepted the entry.

In the first round Mephisto's opponent, who expected to be playing Hoffer, was G.A. MacDonnell, not to be confused, as he used to say, with the famous opponent of La Bourdonnais 'who has been living on my reputation ever since he died'. MacDonnell refused to play unless the name of Mephisto's operator were revealed, and although he had been a clergyman until he aroused the wrath of the authorities by performing a marriage for the guilty parties of a divorce, his objections were practical rather than theological. The hidden player could try out variations, look up books, need not be the same player each round, could indeed be two or more strong players in consultation. Added to that was the inconvenience of having to go to Gumpel's home to play. Most people regarded Gumpel's reputation as sufficient guarantee against fraud, but the objections were not unreasonable. After MacDonnell withdrew, Mephisto beat Col. Minchin, a last-minute substitute, level in the first round, Baxter at odds of pawn and two moves in the second, Coker level in the third round, and Ensor level in

the final. Well-known names among the also-rans were Gossip, Thorold, who had just won the C.C.A. Cup with 11½ points out of 12, Wayte and de Soyres, who became notorious for entering continental tournaments anonymously and then withdrawing after poor early results.

The Leicester Square premises were insufficient for the crowds that wanted to see Mephisto, and on Wednesday 2nd October 1878 it went on public show at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster. This was a combination of concert hall and side-shows, standing on the site of the present Central Hall. To celebrate the opening day, which was largely private, Gumpel gave a banquet for the strongest players and press representatives. The guests, including Ballard, Bird, Delannoy, Hoffer, Minchin, Potter, Steinitz and Zukertort, were addressed by Gumpel on the history of his invention and his experience with other so-called automatons. He stressed Mephisto's educational value.

Mephisto took on all comers from 12-5 and 6-10 p.m. The first three days takings were donated to the Lord Mayor's fund for relief following a South Wales mining explosion, which provoked the bitter remark from Delannoy that Mephisto had more charity than the Paris Exposition officials. During the next few months Mephisto was greatly successful, losing less than two per cent of its games and overcoming some of the strongest players such as Burn (twice), Potter and Blake. Here is an example from that period.

Game No.18257 King's Gambit Dec.
White: Mephisto Black: Beardswell
1 e4, e5; 2 f4, ♘c5; 3 ♖f3, d6; 4 ♘c4, ♗f6; 5 d3, ♘g4; 6 h3, ♘×f3; 7 ♖×f3, 0-0; 8 ♗c3, ♗c6; 9 f5, h6; 10 g4, ♗d4; 11 ♖g2, ♗h7; 12 h4, g5; 13 h×g5, ♗×g5; 14 ♖×h6, ♗df3+; 15

♗d1, ♖g7; 16 f6+, ♖×h6; 17 ♖×f3, ♗d7; and white mates in three.

After an unsuccessful attempt to form a chess club at the Aquarium Gumpel took the boards, men, etc. from the defunct West End Chess Club to form the Mephisto Chess Club. He advertised in the *Morning Post* starting on 13th February 1879 saying that Mephisto 'the unrivalled android' was on show from 2-10 p.m. at 9 Strand, admission 1/-, children 6d. A fortnight later the same organ carried an advertisement saying that Ajeeb 'the original Automaton Chess Player' was now back at the Royal Aquarium. There seems to have been no suggestion of a match between them.

During this whole period Mephisto had but one operator, and an excellent choice he was. He was a little-known young Hungarian, now resident in London. When he was twelve years old, in 1867, he had been shown in the Café de la Régence, Paris, as a child chess prodigy, and now, after disappearing from the public eye, he was developing ambitions of becoming a professional. His name was Gunsberg, but he soon modified it to Gunzberg, no doubt in resignation to English pronunciation. In later years he became a prolific chess journalist and surprised his contemporaries by getting near to the World Championship. In 1890 he tied a match against Chigorin, nine games each with five draws, and the following year lost a title match against Steinitz by four games to six with nine draws.

By the summer of 1879 Gumpel could no longer sustain the financial loss of the Mephisto Chess Club. He arranged for the re-formed West End Chess Club to have sole use of a room in the Café Monico, and moved Mephisto to 79 Kings Road, Brighton. He opened on Saturday 23rd August and played daily from 11-2, 3-6,

admission 1/-, children 6d, and again in the evening 7-10, admission 6d. Mephisto stayed there for nearly two years, and it was perhaps the interest he created that led to the formation of the Brighton Chess Club during that period. The sea air might have caused Mephisto's play to be much worse in the new location, but more likely Gunsberg was not the operator.

Early in 1881 Gunsberg played a match against Blackburne, and although he lost 4-7 with three draws, this was considered a fine achievement by the young man, especially as Blackburne had also given two games start and had therefore won by only the odd game. Shortly afterwards, in May, Mephisto went on display at 48A Regent Street, playing from noon to 6 and 7 to 11 p.m. These hours confirmed what everyone thought, that there was no possibility of a player being confined within the apparatus.

If not continuously Mephisto certainly played regularly for the next two years, and it was during this spell that the following dashing Hamppe-Allgaier gambit was played.

Game No.18258 King's Gambit
White: Mephisto Black: Chigorin
21 April 1883

1 e4, e5; 2 ♗c3, ♗c6; 3 f4, e×f4; 4 ♗f3, g5; 5 h4, g4; 6 ♗g5, h6; 7 ♗×f7 ♖×f7; 8 d4, f3; 9 g×f3, ♘e7; 10 ♘c4+, ♖g7; 11 ♘e3, ♘×h4+; 12 ♗d2, d5; 13 e×d5, ♗a5; 14 ♘d3, ♘e7; 15 f×g4, ♗f6; 16 ♘×h6+, ♖×h6; 17 g5, ♖×h1; 18 ♖×h1, ♖h8; 19 g×f6+, ♘×f6; 20 ♖g1+, ♖f7; 21 ♖e4, ♖h6+; 22 ♗d1, ♘d7; 23 b4, ♖e8; 24 ♖g6+, ♖×g6; 25 ♘×g6+, ♖f8; 26 ♘×e8, ♘×e8; 27 ♖f1, ♖e7; 28 d6+, c×d6; 29 ♗d5+, ♖d8; 30 ♗×f6, Resigns.

Clearly Gunsberg was back at the helm. Earlier in the year, on 17 February 1883, Mephisto had played

simultaneously against twenty members of the North London Chess Club, but I can only guess that for this event the operator stepped outside the machine.

Two unique claims have been made - lack of concealed player and entry into a tournament - but there was a third. Mephisto was editor of a chess column in the London popular science periodical *Knowledge*, from its first issue on 4 November 1881 until 1890 by which time the author's identity was known. Gunsberg was for part of that time editor of the *Chess Player's Chronicle*, the job from which Hoffer had tried to dislodge him.

In the summer of 1885 Mephisto re-opened at the Royal Aquarium, but public interest was waning. By coincidence it is at the Paris Exposition of 1889, the one for which the Eiffel Tower was built, that the last accounts

of Mephisto appear. On 6 July Mephisto opened at the *Théâtre international* and, in his daily seances, won almost all of countless games against members of the *Café de la Régence* club and others. This time the operator was the well-established Franco-Polish master Jean Taubenhäus. Although he never reached the greatest heights as a professional he was noted for his power against weaker players, which he demonstrated here.

Gümpel's interest shifted. He wrote a number of pamphlets on health and natural cures published around the turn of the century. A few months before the outbreak of the 1914-18 war his last leaflet was published — *The Solution of the Alsace-Lorraine Question and the Maintenance of Peace*. He died, largely forgotten, in 1921, and the fate of his creation remains unknown.