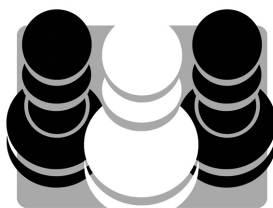


# Chess Behind Bars

By

## Carl Portman



Quality Chess  
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# Foreword

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In 1988, when I was living in West Hampstead, London, I received a letter from a young man who was on remand, for murder, at Bedford Prison. Carlton Bradbury was a chess lover, and also a great fan of mine. This led to a steady correspondence – which admittedly was rather more vigorously maintained by my wonderful wife, Rhea, a psychotherapist by profession. As he would later describe it, he acquired from me a lifelong teacher-pupil relationship, and from Rhea, a friendship. Carlton was duly convicted, and eventually this exchange of missives culminated in a visit to Wormwood Scrubs, to where he had been transferred. It was hard to understand how such a warm and, in many ways, gentle man could have committed so horrific a crime. Unfortunately, people are capable of doing terrible things when they become ravaged by narcotic addiction.

Since his release, he has striven hard to rebuild his life, aided by his fiancé, Hannah. We have met from time to time at the London Chess Classic, but mainly keep in touch via Facebook. Carlton has repeatedly said how important chess was to him during these very dark times, allowing him to focus on an enjoyable and intellectually stimulating pursuit, while the shadow of never-distant depression hung about him. He still treasures the Yugoslav-produced *Chess Informant* – the bible of the pre-computer age – that I gave to him then.

In 2016, I found myself, bizarrely enough, in Nuuk, Greenland, on the initiative of the indefatigable Hrafn Jokulsson – a great chess evangelist who believes that everyone, of whatever background, should be introduced to the game. The ostensible reason for the visit was a rapid chess match, held in a shopping mall, against his countryman and former World Championship Candidate, Johann Hjartarson. The very public venue was intended to attract spectators, and it succeeded, although not all of them were familiar with chess etiquette: I told off one man, in a green anorak, for talking right next to our board. It transpired that he was the Prime Minister. Thankfully, he took the rebuke in good humour. In other countries I could have received a custodial sentence for the crime of lèse-majesté.

Strangely enough, I ended up in prison rather sooner than expected. The following day was free from all official obligations, but Hrafn invited me to join him and three other reprobates (we were, collectively, an Englishman, an Icelander, an Egyptian, a Greenlander and a Swede) on a visit to the local slammer. The inmates were brought up to the reception room where they stood around eyeing us warily, at first. Our photographer, Max, asked the guard whether he was permitted to take pictures. She replied only with the agreement of the inmates. Some acquiesced, others refused point-blank – suspicious of our motives. We sat down to play. Within a few minutes, the atmosphere changed completely. The sheer joy of chess brought these two disparate groups together. Everyone relaxed; people were laughing and joking. After half an hour, even the most initially intransigent detainee willingly posed for a photograph.

Omar and Malik disappeared downstairs behind various locks to take on the high-security convicts. One of them – a Hungarian – played to a good level. Eventually though, our time was up and we had to depart. Hrafn spoke some words of thanks and we donated all the boards and sets that we had brought. Thanks were warmly returned and we left in high spirits.

From these small experiences, I know that chess has the power to bring pleasure and purpose to people behind bars. I thoroughly commend my friend Carl Portman for the outstanding volunteer work he has done in this field. Chess can transform lives for the better. It is not in the least bit glamorous to devote so many hours of time to helping those who have fallen foul of the law. Carl is a great guy, with an infectious, optimistic spirit. He also loves the game – one which teaches men and women to be responsible for their own actions. I do hope that this book finds a much wider audience than just the chess community. It certainly deserves to.

Grandmaster Nigel Short MBE



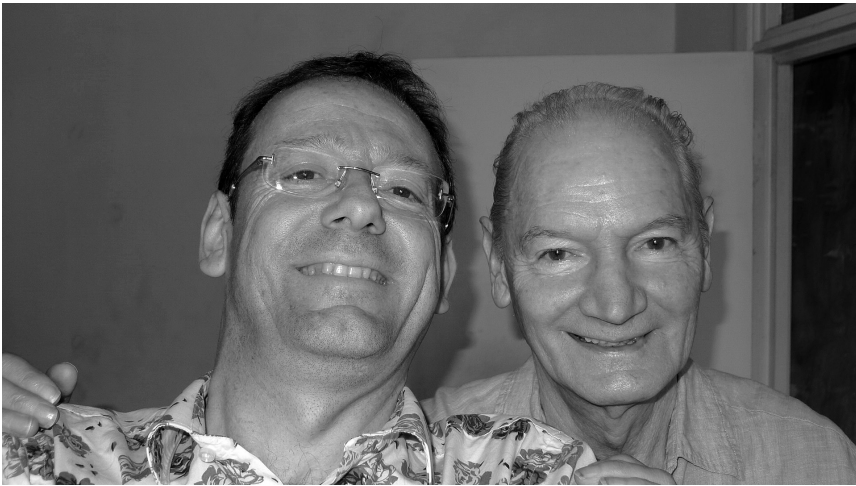
*Grandmaster Nigel Short at Nuuk prison*

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# Chapter 2

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## Why Chess in Prisons?



Author with John Healy

*Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life.  
For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realise  
that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe,  
but the maturity of the human soul.*

– Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

*Labour is the party of law and order in Britain today  
Tough on crime, and tough on the causes of crime*

– Tony Blair 1993

I admit that I used to be a hard-liner when it came to criminals. Lock 'em up and throw away the key; that was my opinion. After all, they are all baddies so why should we waste time, money and valuable resources trying to pander to them? They deserve everything they get. They made their choices. They should be left behind bars to do time for their crime.

The passing of time and my experiences with inmates has altered my opinion radically. If society removes raw emotion from the issue and applies its intellect, it must surely arrive at the conclusion that that we cannot tar everyone with the same brush. This applies as much on the inside as it does on the outside. To judge a person for their whole life based only on their misdemeanours or worst moments cannot be right and it is just not productive. I would truly hate it if someone thought of me in that way.

I was acutely aware upon taking up the role of managing chess in prisons on behalf of the English Chess Federation (ECF) that I would need to focus only on the chess and not wonder what crimes the people I would meet were locked up for. That is neither my business nor my interest.

The reader may find the next comment rather startling, but: There are actually some good people in prison just as there are some bad people roaming around the streets. That's just a fact. As one prisoner from America wrote to me, *'If you drop a diamond in the mud, it is still a diamond.'* Prison is host to myriad people incarcerated for a range of crimes, from terrorism, murder, robbery, sexual offences, drug trafficking and brutal violence, to VAT fraud and persistent minor offences such as stealing sausages from the local butchers (yes, that actually happens), or damaging a sign at a petrol station.

Consequently, some inmates have been locked up for most of their lives and will be behind bars until the day they die. They are simply too dangerous ever to be let out. Some inmates have absolutely no wish to come out of prison either and there are various reasons for that mindset. Some have absolutely nowhere to go to if and when they are released. No friends, no family and no accommodation. How would you cope? Quite rightly the public must be protected from dangerous people but there are a very high number of inmates who will only ever serve a short sentence perhaps once in their lives. I believe it used to be called getting a short, sharp shock.

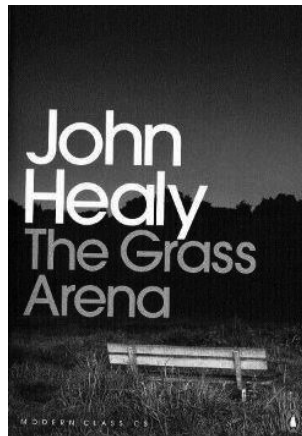
I have met and corresponded with inmates from across a wide spectrum of the prison community and one thing is very clear to me: They all want to play chess as a force for good. They want to use the game not only to pass time (which is absolutely crucial), but to improve their thinking and decision-making skills. On top of that, chess helps inmates to forge new and unlikely friendships, as we will hear later.

Like any chess player, inmates want to lose themselves in the complexity and beauty of the game. This is a way to spend time productively and beneficially. Who am I – indeed who are we – to stand in their way?

My ignorance with regard to prisons and their inmates was transformed into enlightenment through the words of just one man. That individual was John Healy – a man whom I had never met nor would I for many years.

### John Healy and ‘The Grass Arena’

Healy wrote the book ‘The Grass Arena’. I recall seeing a film about it many years ago in 1992 starring Mark Rylance, and I was profoundly affected by it. It is a true story about John Healy, who was raised in the London suburb of Kentish Town by Irish immigrants with an abusive father, and he soon learned to defend himself by taking up boxing. He joined the army in his formative years and developed into an excellent boxer, but was discharged for drunkenness and going absent without leave. His pugilistic ways got him into trouble as he fell victim to alcoholism in the fifties and sixties and ended up in The Grass Arena (an area of parkland in London) where he lived with other alcoholics. These winos sometimes murdered each other over money or prostitutes and Healy describes a nightmare life in and out of prison, convicted as he was of various petty crimes.



It was during one of Healy’s prison stretches that he learned to play chess from a cellmate, ‘Harry the Fox’, and this effectively changed his life forever. He certainly had a latent talent for the game and quickly became besotted with it. He says this:

*‘I had about a month to do when the Fox said to me one morning, just after we’d got in the shop, ‘Listen, if I told you about a game that if you were waiting for seven o’clock on a Sunday night for the pubs to open, and you was playing this game, you’d forget the pubs wasn’t open and not worry about the time, what would you say?’*

*‘I’d say there ain’t no such game.’*

*'There is, Johnny. It's not really a game though – more like olden day warfare. It's called chess. And I'll teach you the moves if you want to learn.'*

*'OK' I said, not really interested one way or the other.'*

A little later Healy wrote this:

*'Chess is a jealous lover. Will tolerate no other, especially in the form of too much drink. I gave myself to her completely, body and soul, and for the first time in my life I began to live without a constant nagging desire for drink. I was like a person who finds God, only this God was a warrior made out of wood who derives his power from man. I was thirty years old and had become besotted with chess; ate it, drank it, dreamed about it. It had replaced everything in my mind...'*

You see, it took John's mind off other less savoury elements of prison life. For the first time in his stretch, time was his toy and he utilised it productively. It was a win-win for John and the prison.

Chess players will be very familiar with this feeling of being captivated by the game. I fondly recall it happening to me at the tender age of twelve. I visited the school chess club initially because it was raining at lunch time and the football was off. I thought I would go and see what this chess was all about. I was hooked from the moment I walked into the room and saw those chess pieces standing ready for battle on the board. White and Black, perhaps a metaphor for good and evil. I picked them up, felt them in my hand and smelled the plastic. It was a very tactile moment. They felt strange those pieces, but there was a connection – this was destiny. Caissa, the goddess of chess, was working her magic. I listened intently to John Lenton, the chess teacher, as he welcomed me to the club and told me about the game. He said that it might even help me improve results in my exams! The room was buzzing with chatter from noisy kids and the feeling of something wonderful going on was all-pervading. I felt elated at that moment, I truly did.

Back to John Healy who, with the help of his probation officer, gave up drink and began to apply himself seriously to chess. Upon release he made his move back into some kind of normal life, and he has been sober ever since. He became very good at the game, beating strong players and even giving simultaneous exhibitions, where he took on many players at once. He played seriously for a decade but never became the grandmaster that he yearned to be. There is nothing like setting your goals as high as you can. He tried but it never happened, perhaps because he came to the game quite late in life, but also it could be that his goal was simply set too high. For most people it will be enough just to play and enjoy the game's many pleasures.

Healy therefore retired from competitive tournament chess and began to indulge in another love of his – and something he was equally talented at – writing. *The Grass Arena* was his life story and it has become a Penguin Classic. My own view is that it is a modern brilliancy. It is hard hitting and brutally honest, but a gripping and heart-rending read. It was reprinted in 2008 with an introduction by the actor Daniel Day-Lewis. Quite simply, every prisoner and prison official should read this book, then encourage someone else to read it.



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# Chapter 13

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## The Baker's Dozen A Game Collection



*They tried to bury us.  
They didn't know that we were seeds.*

– Mexican Proverb

## GAME 11

Nigel Towers – Carl Portman

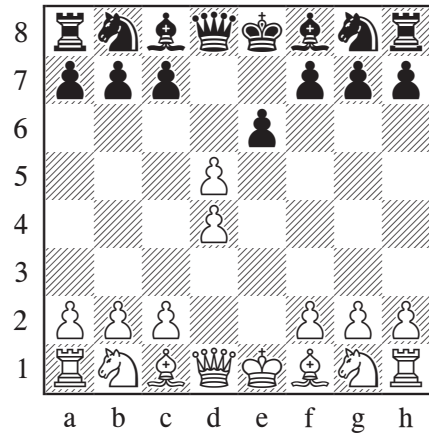
4NCL England 2014

I do hope that the reader will not mind me including material from my own games in this chapter. I do so not for narcissistic reasons, but that the reader might like to venture into my own head and share my thought processes from an amateur perspective. You might check to see if I followed some of the basic rules? What did I see? What did I miss? The truly great thing about a game of chess is that it belongs to us. We make the decisions. We command our army and we apply our wits and skills against an opponent equally determined to defeat us. It is competition and competition builds and reveals character.

I make far more mistakes in my games than I do excellent moves, that's a fact, but I learn a great deal from them. I make sure that when I lose, I do not lose the lesson. Here, though, I am going to lighten my mood and share one of my wins with you. I chose this game for reasons that will become clear as we go along – introducing certain aspects of the game, and what I was looking for in each phase of the game. It is far from perfect, but I do hope that you enjoy it and find it to be instructive in some way. I especially want you to think about what you have learned in the previous chapters and try to apply that knowledge throughout the game. My opponent was graded 176 under English Chess Federation rules and I was 151 so I expected a tough game. Oddly though, my FIDE rating was higher than his: I was not far off 2000 at the time.

**1.e4 e6**

My favourite French Defence. The marmite opening. You either like it or loathe it.

**2.d4 d5 3.exd5**

This is the Exchange Variation. It is fair to say that this is seen as a rather boring and timid line from White. In some ways it says that your opponent is not up for a fight and would be content with a draw. I am not saying that this reflects the character of my opponent here, but I let out an inner groan when he played it.

**3...exd5**

Usually in the French Defence, Black's light-squared bishop is a problem as it is often hemmed in. Not so in the Exchange Variation, where there is no pawn on e6 to obstruct it.

**4.c4**

Competing for the centre.

**4...Nf6 5.Nc3**

It is quite normal now for Black to play his pawn from c7 to c6 to support the pawn being attacked on d5, but I did not want to play this.

**5...Nc6**

I was in a combative mood and wanted no part of a stale French Exchange draw. This move has benefits and drawbacks, as most moves do. It keeps the position sharp – for a French Exchange anyway.

**6.Be3 Bb4**

I also considered playing 6...Be6. Note that I am carrying out my ABCD of chess. I activated central pawns, I am developing my minor pieces quickly and getting ready to castle my king into safety. White is some way off castling kingside as none of his pieces on that flank have left their starting positions.

**7.Bd3 Qe7?!**

I know this is an odd move and I agree it is probably not so good, but I wanted to mix it up a little. More in keeping with the opening would have been to castle or even take the knight on c3.

**8.Nge2 dxc4!**

Played at the right time according to the chess engine. The timing is good because the white bishop took two moves to get to c4, by contrast with capturing on c4 when the bishop was still at home. Also, White now has an isolated queen’s pawn (IQP) in the centre. This can be both an asset and a liability. An asset because it can be used (even sacrificed) to spearhead an attack. A liability because it has no supporting pawn and is therefore a vulnerable target.

**9.Bxc4 Bg4**

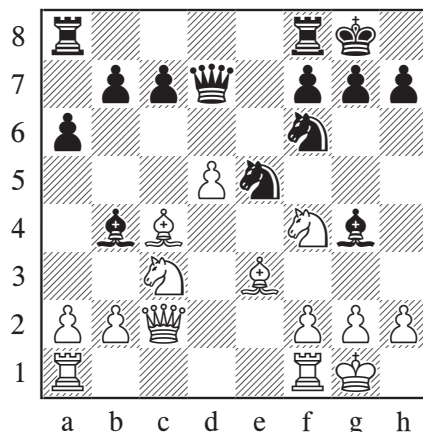
9...Be6 was better but I did not consider this. At least now I get the choice which side I want to castle.

**10.0–0 0–0**

Both kings are safe at the moment.

**11.Qc2 a6 12.Nf4 Qd7 13.d5**

Possibly a good move. Note though that it is committal because pawns don’t move backwards. The IQP is now used to spearhead an attack, or at least cause trouble!

**13...Ne5**

The pieces look like they have been thrown liberally onto the board from a great height. It is quite complicated and requires focus. What was my plan? In all honesty I wasn’t sure!

**14.Bb3**

Placed here to maintain support for the d-pawn.

**14...Bf5 15.Qd1**

A good move. This further defends the d-pawn. 15.Qe2 g5 is the line I was analysing. 16.Nh5 and now I cannot put my bishop on d3 because the black knight simply takes on f6 with check: 16...Bd3?? 17.Nxf6† Kg7 18.Qxd3 (best) 18...Nxd3 19.Nxd7 is totally winning for White.

**15...Bd6!**

After a very long think. I did not want to swap my dark-squared bishop on c3, not least because it would give him the open b-file for a rook. Placing the bishop on d6 lines up a possible attack with my other pieces against the white king. This illustrates my point about deciding when to exchange pieces and when to keep them on.

**16.Bc2 Rfe8 17.Nfe2**

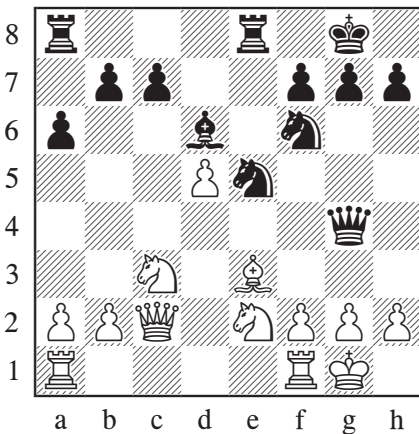
Another good move from my opponent as relocating the knight to d4 would be quite

nice for him. I took more time to think here. I looked at playing 17...Bg4 but time really was pressing and I needed a plan. Therefore I elected to play the text move then put my queen on g4.

### 17...Bxc2

My opponent does not want to swap bishops so I decided that this was a good time to do so. 17...Bg4 would maybe have been better though, keeping pressure and tension.

### 18.Qxc2 Qg4



Optically, this looks dangerous, but it isn't really. I only had half an hour left so I decided just to put my strongest piece in the general area of the king and see if it unnerved my opponent. This kind of strategy can make your opponent quite nervous and the mere threat of a checkmate or winning combination is often greater than its execution.

### 19.Ng3

19.h3 Nf3† (or 19...Qh4 20.Nd4 Nc4) 20.Kh1 Qh5 is possible.

### 19...Nc4 20.Bc1

This looks to be a very lamentable move indeed and one is bound to ask if there is

something better. Even the renowned chess engine 'Komodo' could find no alternative to this move, but feel free dear reader to test it for yourself.

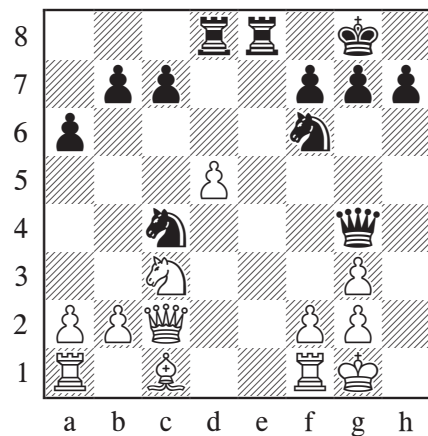
### 20...Bxg3

This is far from the best move and just developing my rook from a8 to d8 would have been fine. At least all of my army would have been developed and ready for further battle. But I wanted to make an exchange and I shall explain why. I considered that removing another defender from around his king and doubling a couple of pawns, might at least give me something to work at for attacking purposes.

### 21.hxg3

Chess literature tells us that in general we should capture towards the centre (as that is safer for the king) and that is what White has done here. I can see why he was reluctant to take with the f-pawn as there could be a nasty surprise check on the g1-a7 diagonal at some moment.

### 21...Rad8



21...Qg4-h5 straight away threatening knight to g4 would have been better but getting connected rooks into the centre is

seldom a bad thing. All of Black’s pieces are in play now.

### 22.Bf4!

This is a very good move and well found by my opponent who was under pressure. This move cuts off the queen from protecting my knight on c4 whilst simultaneously attacking the pawn on c7.

### 22...Qh5

Rather primitive. I just want to plonk the knight onto g4 and deliver checkmate with the queen on h2. Is that so much to ask?

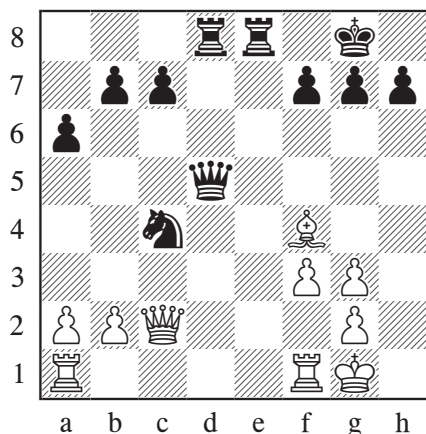
### 23.f3

White must stop ...Ng4.

### 23...Nxd5

Killing off the isolated pawn that White chose to push earlier. It was always going to be a target.

### 24.Nxd5 Qxd5



Stop for a moment and look at the kings. Which is safer? Although the position is actually fairly equal, it is easy to see that there are more ‘holes’ around the white king. The lesson is not to expose the monarch, especially when queens are still on the board.

### 25.Rad1

25.Bxc7? allows 25...Qc5† 26.Qf2 Qxc7 27.Rfc1 b5 28.b3 Rd3 29.bxc4 bxc4 and Black stands better with a safe extra pawn.

### 25...Qc5† 26.Qf2!

I think that moving the king to h2 was better. Swapping off queens when you are material down is generally not a good idea.

### 26...Qxf2† 27.Kxf2

If we look again at the kings there is an argument to say that White’s is better now. Why? Simply because he is in the thick of the action and he can support the troops now that queens are off. The down-side of course is that he is still more exposed to an attack.

### 27...Nd6!:

Played whilst short of time. I was going to take on b2 (which is best) but saw possibilities (ghosts?) for White to get counterplay after 28.Rb1.

### 28.Rd5 f6

Now there can be no back-rank checkmate later on and the king can come into play via the f7-square.

### 29.Rfd1

Doubling rooks – almost always a good principle.

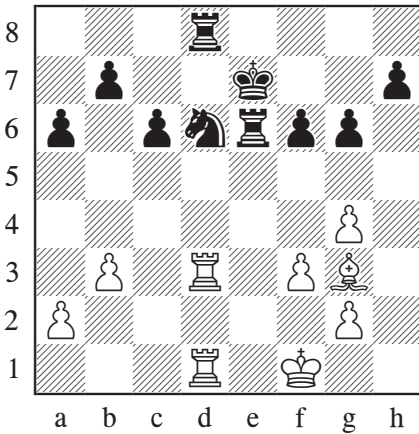
### 29...Re6 30.g4 Kf7 31.Bg3 g6

There is no need to rush. One does not have to throw pawns two squares all the time. The endgame is very much about tempo and calculation.

### 32.Kf1

An odd choice but my opponent was also short of time.

### 32...Ke7 33.b3 c6 34.R5d3

**34...Nf7**

Forcing an exchange when I am a pawn up seemed like a good idea to me.

**35.Rxd8 Nxd8 36.Bf2 Re5**

36...Rd6?? hoping to exchange rooks would be a disaster: 37.Bc5 Oops. This is how easy it is for a game to turn on its head. This is why we must not rush and always look at our opponent's possibilities as well as our own.

**37.b4 Ne6**

The bishop will only ever be able to cover the dark squares whereas the knight can hop from light to dark. The bishop will work well if it is not blocked by its own pawns. It can go from one side of the board to the other in only one move, so it is a long-range piece. The knight would take four moves to get from one side to the other but it is a tricky customer in these types of endgames. The battle is in full vigour.

**38.g3 Rd5 39.Re1**

39.Rxd5 cxd5 40.Ke2 b5 and Black keeps an extra pawn. It would still be difficult to win this endgame but I would certainly have given it my best.

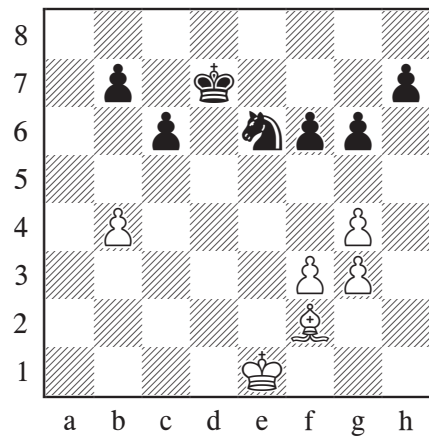
**39...Kd7 40.Re2 a5 41.a3 axb4?!**

41...a4 was better, fixing a weakness on a3. Later Black can aim to get his knight to b5 or

c4, tying the white bishop down to defensive duties. I also mentioned a rule early on: when a pawn ahead, try to swap pieces, not pawns.

**42.axb4 Rd1† 43.Re1?**

A huge surprise. White thinks he can draw the bishop v knight ending but I believed (correctly, as it happens) that after this I would prevail. White should keep pieces on and exchange pawns when a pawn down – this move violated that rule.

**43...Rxe1† 44.Kxe1**

Now the kings really are called upon to influence the outcome. The endgame is my favourite phase and calls for timing, accuracy, knowledge and determination. A straightforward, standard plan is to play ...b5 and then ...Kd6 and ...c5, creating a remote passed pawn that will force a win with correct play.

**44...Kd6 45.Kd2 Kd5**

When monarchs meet with chests puffed out, anything is possible.

**46.Kc3?**

An easy mistake to make. He needed to go to d3 to stay in touch with both flanks.

**46...Ng5**

The game has effectively gone for White but Black still has to actually win it.

**47.Bd4 f5**

47...Nxf3 48.Bxf6 Nh2 49.g5 Nf1 50.g4 Ne3–+

**48.gxf5 gxf5 49.Bc5**

If he plays his pawn to f4 my knight simply comes into e4 with check, winning the g3-pawn.

**49...Nxf3**

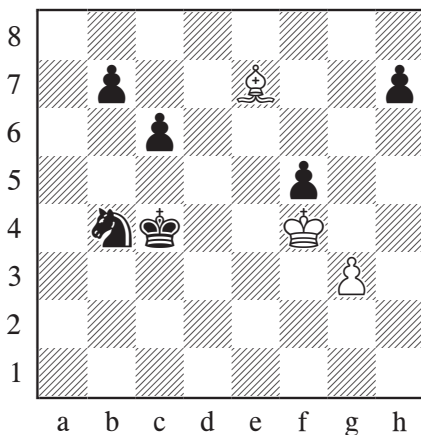
It is clear now that it is so important to choose in the middlegame what pieces you might want to take into the endgame. Here, White has the bishop which can attack none of the black pawns at the moment, even though it does have long range scope and freedom. Black has the knight which is picking off vulnerable pawns and threatening horrible forks!

**50.Kd3 Ne5† 51.Ke3 Kc4 52.Bd6**

After 52.Kf4? Nd3† 53.Kxf5 Nxc5 54.bxc5 Kxc5 Black’s b-pawn runs through to promote.

**52...Nd3 53.Be7 Nxb4 54.Kf4**

0–1



My opponent picked up his king, put it on f4, saw that this would lose a bishop after 54...Nd5† so he resigned. This game lasted four and a half hours. I have been on the receiving end of plenty of these endgames too so I know how it feels. Some days you are the statue and some days you are the pigeon.

**GAME 12****Carl Portman – LT**

HM Prison Bure (simultaneous) 2016

As Manager of Chess in Prisons for the English Chess Federation, my role is to foster interest in the game in prisons. On this particular visit I played 24 opponents, losing, I think, three (definitely two) and drawing three as well. The opposition played to a good standard and LT (as I shall refer to him) has not been playing chess for long, which means his result is all the more impressive. He was coached by a fellow inmate, which is excellent to see and he clearly enjoyed his game against me which he recorded and sent to me. Where he has annotated I will make reference.

**1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Bg4 3.g3 Bxf3**

Now White’s pawns will be doubled, but not necessarily weak.