

The Caissa-Morphy Puzzle

Edward Winter

(2004)



Paul Morphy

A puzzling affair is the identity of 'Caissa', who reminisced about Morphy in a letter to the editor on pages 124-126 of *Lasker's Chess Magazine*, January 1905. Below are some excerpts, with particular emphasis on

autobiographical references and matters of intrinsic interest regarding Morphy himself:

'I was a lad of 16 years only, and Morphy was my idol. He took a great notion to me, so young, and so very small for my age, as did Mr Mead, the President of the Club. Scharetts, of the Dey Street House, was my chaperone. I lost but one game, an entirely new defense to the Evans Gambit, by Leonard, during my three months' play in the two cities, New York and Brooklyn. I shall never forget how Morphy astonished the crowd of noted players during one of his games with Perrine ...'

'He seemed inspired with a perfect knowledge of the game. He was young, smooth-faced, modest as a girl, dressed in perfect taste, and never said a word when playing, unless spoken to. He sat leaning a little forward, at the table, his legs crossed and his hands free from the board. He never made a motion until ready to play, and then, quickly, he reached forward and with the thumb and two fingers he made his move and as quickly withdrew until ready for his next move. He looked as if he had just "jumped out of a band-box", so neat and boyish was he in his appearance. I loved him. I went three times to his hotel (the Fifth Avenue) to play with him, at his invitation, but I did not find him in. I published his games with Perrine, and criticized them in a chess column that I edited at the time. Paulsen took 75 minutes for one move in a game with Morphy during the American Chess Congress, in 1857. Thomas Frère, chess editor of *Frank Leslie's*, told me that it annoyed Morphy so that he told him (Frère), going to lunch at the noon adjournment, he would never let Paulsen win a game of him, and he kept his word. Morphy played from inspiration rather than from calculation. Everything possible in the game seemed revealed to him. He made Mead, President of the New York Club, angry when the \$1,500 gift was presented to him, in New York City, because he said in his reception speech that he differed with Mead in what he said about chess in his presentation speech, alluding to it as a profession. Morphy said it should never be so considered, but merely as a recreation. I was told that Mr Mead was so angry that he left the room and refused to have anything further to do with the ceremonies of the occasion.' [It is worth comparing this account with pages 213-214 of David Lawson's book on Morphy.]

[Regarding Steinitz, after his meeting with Morphy:] 'He came away grievously disappointed, but still glad that he had seen the only Morphy that the world had ever produced. He had the poor taste, we think, as well as the mistaken judgment, thereafter to say that Morphy's play was not up to that of the present day. Mr Samuel Loyd said, in the chess column he edited at the time, that the complete answer to Steinitz's statement was "the following game", which was given as one of Morphy's "every-day" games, without any effort to select one from among his best. And, so it was a most "complete answer" to Steinitz's statement not only, but to all those who were conceited enough to agree with him.'

'Poor Morphy. I loved him. When will we see his like again? I began to play chess at ten, and quit before I was 17 years of age to engage in the battle of life. I had everything I could find on the subject of chess, in all languages. I edited a chess column at 15 and knew most of the American players, many of whom contributed to my column. Forty-odd years having elapsed since then, I find myself interested again in the greatest of games. By the way, why is it that we hear but little now of the Evans Gambit, the most brilliant opening in the game?

Yours truly,

Caissa.'

To summarize, if all the personal statements in the above article are factual they indicate that the writer (still alive in late 1904/early 1905 and described on page 127 of Lasker's magazine as 'our friend "Caissa"') was born *circa* 1843, was already running a chess column around 1858 and gave up chess some two years later. Who could 'Caissa' have been?

At the outset of our item (C.N. 3389) we pointed out that in a passage on page 1692 of the *Scientific American Supplement*, 12 January 1878 (see page 62 of *Chess Facts and Fables*) Sam Loyd referred to 'Perine', instead of Perrin. It will be noted that Caissa's letter has a similar, though not identical, misspelling of his name: 'Perrine'. We therefore discussed whether 'Caissa' may have been Sam Loyd. The reminiscences contain various apparent clues to the writer's identity, but it has not been possible to match them with anybody of Morphy's time, including Loyd.

The next question is whether all Caissa's autobiographical details were factually correct. C.N. 4749 noted that if they were not, Loyd would revert to being a prime suspect. His track-record of dishonesty over his achievements is underscored by a book mentioned in C.N. 4406, *The 15 Puzzle* by Jerry Slocum and Dic Sonneveld (Beverly Hills, 2006). From page 75:

'Sam Loyd has been correctly described as "America's Greatest Puzzlist", by Martin Gardner and many other writers. Although he deserves credit for his many wonderful puzzle inventions, he also had a reputation for using puzzles invented by Henry Dudeney, "England's Greatest Puzzlist", without crediting Dudeney, and taking credit for puzzles he did not invent. Loyd used his remarkable talent for making up stories about his puzzles to make his puzzles interesting as well as to spin tales about his accomplishments.'

Another example is on page 79:

'Sam Loyd's first puzzle column for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* was published on 22 March 1896 with a biography of himself. He began by claiming that "At nine years of age, he was champion of the New York Chess Club".'

Our excerpts from *Lasker's Chess Magazine* (C.N. 3389 above) included an assertion by 'Caissa' that Steinitz 'came away grievously disappointed' from his meeting with Morphy. Lawrence Humphrey (Torrelles, Spain) considers it worth clarifying that Steinitz's (alleged) disappointment was not related to Morphy as a person.

It certainly was not, for, as is well known, after meeting Morphy in New Orleans, Steinitz spoke

highly of him: 'exceedingly pleasant and agreeable', 'a most interesting man to talk to', 'shrewd and practical', 'the most chivalrous soul alive', and 'a thorough gentleman'. (Source: the *New York Tribune* of 22 March 1883, as quoted on page 309 of David Lawson's book on Morphy.)

The claim by 'Caissa', which we cannot corroborate, was that Steinitz was disappointed by a refusal on Morphy's part to discuss chess. Steinitz himself, in the *Tribune*, expressed not disappointment but anger (on a different matter and, again, naturally not vis-à-vis Morphy):

'As a crowd collected round us on each occasion, he excused himself on the score of pressing legal engagements. I am very angry with that crowd still for interrupting us.'

(3411)

To the Chess Notes [main page](#).

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