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The Land Of Caissa

by John C. Knudsen



Caissa, Goddess of Chess
Domenico Maria Fratta, ca. 1800

Morton believed that he had led a good and decent life. He never hurt anyone on purpose, and had tried to be kind, and help people. He had his faith and tried to be ethical in his dealings with

everyone. He had his faults - everyone does, but he was basically a fine man.

Although it wasn't the most important thing in his life by any means, Mort had an obsession with Chess. Ever since he was a young boy, the sixty-four squares held a special fascination with him. He enjoyed the social aspects of chess a great deal. Every chess player, regardless of background, wealth, and status in life was equal at the chess board. You were either proficient, or you weren't. Snobbery doesn't count in chess. You prove your mastery over the board, while you engage in a struggle to the death with your opponent.

The stress of a serious chess game is hard to describe to a novice. Every *serious* chess player enters each encounter with every fiber of his being, trying to produce a game worthy of the contest. Every opponent is taken seriously, until he has proven, by his weak play, that such an assumption is unwarranted. During a challenging game, the emotions run back and forth, between hopefulness and despair, until the position on the board is clarified. The pulse quickens, and, sometimes, sweat appears on the brow. The physical effects can be uncomfortable, but it is the mental strain that takes the most out of you.

Morton was blessed (or cursed) to be one of those souls who engaged in correspondence chess. This

meant that positions were always in his head - that he was thinking about his games even when involved in family activities, going to church, or while doing something else. Chess played in this manner had impact on his sleep, as well can be imagined. It also meant that his strength at chess was raised two or three categories from his over the board ability. In correspondence chess, he could consult reference books and really study the positions of the game, with little concern with time controls or the chess clock. He enjoyed the fact that he was a better player at correspondence chess.

He still enjoyed over the board chess, because other forms were more sterile, without social interaction. As he grew older, he noticed a definite flagging of his physical and mental abilities over the board. There was still much he could do to enjoy his favorite game. He could visit tournaments, watch the masters - and also play speed chess. Both of these activities had very little or no stress, compared to *serious* chess. Once and awhile, he enjoyed playing in a tournament, and experienced the old highs and lows, depending on the outcome of the games.

It was during a local chess tournament that Mort encountered that endgame position that every mortal will eventually face in their life journey. Death, like check mate, decides things. There is no

going back, changing things - it is final. When it happened to Morton, he did not realize it at first. It just sort of happened, all of a sudden. And, it was not an unpleasant experience.

This is strange. I don't feel any pain any more. I can't remember how long it has been that I haven't suffered from some kind of ailment. Am I dead? I must be - there is no other explanation. It is nice to know that the ultimate mystery, whether there is life after death, or not, has been revealed to me. I am a bit anxious as to what comes next...

Mort found himself standing in a pleasant garden, with lovely trees all around. The path that he was standing on lead in only one direction - forward. He turned around and there was no path leading in the other direction. It was like he was dropped out of the clouds onto this spot. Turning around again, he debated what to do.

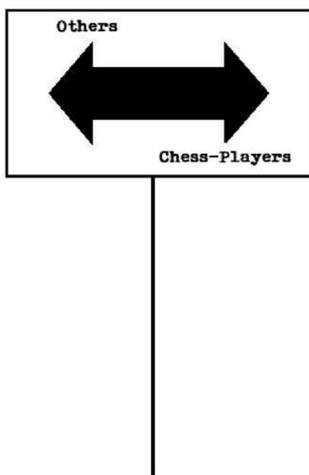
The choices are limited. For some reason, all I can think of is the scene from the Wizard Of Oz - "Follow the yellow brick road." In chess, there are always choices to be made. Apparently, not always in the afterlife...

As he started strolling down the path, Morton felt a strange calm come over him. He could see no dwellings, or any other sign of human activity. It was strangely quiet, and beautiful.

Is this heaven? If so, the only thing that is missing is human contact. I should be patient - I can't do anything about it anyway. Not a bad place to be, all in all. Perhaps this path will lead me to some answers.

He walked briskly now, anxious to see where he was going. After a mile or so, Mort noticed a change in the path. It grew bigger - but still only in one direction. Up ahead, off to the right, he saw an area clouded in fog, and mist. He resolved to stop there, to check it out.

The fog and mist proved to be a thin layer. Morton walked through and soon found himself in a clearing. This time, the path continued in two directions. One to the left, and one to the right. There was a sign at the junction of the path.



What is this, some kind of joke? The afterlife is divided into two groups - "Others," and "Chess-Players?" Is it a test? Some kind of fateful choice that chess players have to make? What happens if you pick the wrong way? I've had plenty of forks, in my chess life, but this is serious - it could have serious consequences. To thine self be true...

Mort chose the path to the right, come what may. Perhaps he could come back to the junction if he didn't like this choice - maybe the choice could be changed. He continued down the path, glancing anxiously ahead in all directions.

There was a curious built-up area ahead. To the left, and to the right, there were two huge Rooks made of stone - castle turrets. In between them, there was a twelve foot high wooden gate. He noticed that the gate had a door with a huge metal knocker affixed to it. As he approached, he could not see beyond the Rook Towers, or the gate.

Still time to turn back, to take the other path. If this is the afterlife, and I have eternity to live, could I live with myself, knowing that chess players might be behind this wooden gate? What does one do for eternity, anyhow? This is all new to me, and it is a difficult choice. I've never calculated a position with such a small amount of information before.

Morton let out a small sigh, shrugged his shoulders, approached the door, and, using the knocker, knocked three times.

"Welcome to the Land of Caissa!" a voice from beyond the door boomed. "Are you a chess player?" "Yes, I am," Mort meekly replied, in a hesitant way. "We shall see, if you are, or are not," the voice retorted.

"You cannot be admitted until you pass a chess test. Many want to join our community, but few are allowed."

"I understand," Morton replied.

"What was the name of Alekhine's cat?"

"Chess," Mort instantly answered.

"You are correct." "How many pieces are on the chess board at the start of a game?"

Morton thought for a moment, and said - "Sixteen pieces and sixteen pawns."

"Again correct." "The last question is - Who won the match between Staunton and Morphy in 1858?"

Wait a minute - this is a trick question. Staunton and Morphy did not play a match in 1858. They could not agree on the terms of the proposed match. However, there were a few consultation games...

"You must answer quickly!"

Not enough time to think this one out. Have to go with my gut feeling...

"There was no match between Staunton and Morphy in 1858 - just a few casual consultation games."

"There is no doubt that you are a chess player - you may enter."

Mort gently opened the door and stepped inside. Standing inside was a short man with a smile on his face. The voice must have belonged to him. The short man stretched out his hand, offering a handshake. As he shook the short man's hand, Morton got his first impression of him. Besides his small stature, he had disorganized white hair, big blue eyes, small ears, and many worry lines on his face.

"What is this place? - What is the purpose here?" Mort asked, impatiently, "Why am I here?"

"It should be quite apparent by now - you are here because you are a chess player. This is the Land of Caissa. You yourself chose this path."

His eyes darting back and forth, Morton took in the sights all around him. Everything about this place revolved around chess. There were many huge rooms, none of them with doors. People were milling about. The rooms had labels on them, like "Kibitzer's Lounge," "The Great Tournament Hall," "Chess Library," and similar. Everyone who was milling about seemed to be smiling, and content with their circumstances. It seemed like a happy place.

"What do you think of our little community, Morton?" the small man asked with a hint of sarcasm. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir - for I do not know your name," Mort responded. "Oh, please forgive me - my name is Kord. I am the gatekeeper here."

"I have many questions - is this heaven? Or, at least my version of it?"

"No, it is the Land of Cassia. Here, there are no nations, or different languages - there is only the Chess."

"Are all of the great masters here?" Morton was trying hard not to be frustrated. "Will I see them here?"

"Some of them are, some of them are not - we do not really keep track," Kord replied.

"So, this is some sort of afterlife situation, then - people who were once alive, are now deceased, but live on in the eternal sense?"

"Yes."

"So, the members of this community get to enjoy Chess eternally?"

"That about sums it up," Kord said - "It is a happy place, with contented people - now, with all respect, enough questions for now - you must experience it - very soon, you will know all you need to know about the Land of Caissa."

This is getting interesting. I think I have a good grasp on what this place is now. There is nothing left to do but explore a little bit...

"Kord, you've been most helpful - and I appreciate it. Will you show me around, so that I can learn about my new home?"

"No, that is not possible - I am the gatekeeper. But we do have guides who show the new folks around. Wait here and I'll find you one." Kord dashed off.

What am I supposed to do now - just stand here? I hope it doesn't take too long. Kord seems a decent fellow - a little quirky, but aren't all chess players quirky? I mean, if you looked in a dictionary for "quirky," it would probably give "likely a chess player" as one of the examples. Nothing wrong with quirky, as long as it doesn't involve being creepy.

Mort was pondering this line of thought when Kord returned with another gentleman. This guy was stocky, had a full beard, and dressed as if he was stuck in the 19th Century.

"Morton, Wilhelm will show you around the community - it is one of his extra duties here." Wilhelm rolled his eyes and grinned as Kord finished the introduction. "I will leave you two alone, while I get back to the gate," Kord said, as he slowly walked back in the direction of the gate.

"Very pleased to meet you," Mort said, glad to have another companion to talk to. "Of course you are - everyone is," Wilhelm said with a weary voice. "But let's get one thing straight, before we begin - I am not doing this because I want to - I am doing

this because I have to..." Morton was puzzled at that last remark, "What do you mean?" he asked.

"It's my *additional duty*, as Kord is fond of saying. You see, here there are definite consequences to our behavior while we were living. I offered to play God in a chess match, giving Him the odds of pawn and move, and God was not amused..."

I thought there was something familiar about him - Wilhelm - yes- it must be the great Steinitz, one of my chess heroes. Quite a step down in stature, guiding amateurs around the community.

"Mr. Steinitz," Mort gushed, "It is truly an honor to meet you." Wilhelm frowned - "We do not use last names here - only first names. So, you may call me Wilhelm, or William, as you wish." "Very sorry - I am new here, and not familiar with the proper protocol." Morton was embarrassed now. "Very well, but just remember - never use last names. And don't ask me why that is a rule - it just is."

Morton accompanied Wilhelm as he showed him the Library. "You may avail yourself of the library at any time, except during a tournament in which you are playing," Wilhelm explained. "Of course, if you are playing correspondence chess, that rule does not apply." "There is correspondence chess here?" Mort asked in obvious excitement. "Do I need to repeat myself, young fellow?" Wilhelm

said in agitation. "No, sir - you do not." As he surveyed the Library, Morton saw nearly all the chairs filled with people studying, and talking in small groups.

Wow, it's no wonder that the rooms are so huge - so many people. I have never seen so many chess enthusiasts gathered in one place. Plenty of people to socialize with, and play chess with. This must indeed be Heaven.

Mort's thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a slight man who ambled up to them, and, directing his query to Mort, said "Care to have a game?" "Knight odds only."

"Now Paul," Wilhelm chastised, "I'm showing Morton around the place - he's new here." The man he called Paul backed up and walked away.

Did I just see what I think I saw? Paul Morphy being chastised by Wilhelm Steinitz? Can it be true?

"Try and avoid that pest," Wilhelm explained. "He doesn't get out of his room very much, and he is quite mad."

Interesting, a man who was committed to a lunatic asylum by his wife calling Paul Morphy mad. Well, I'd better leave that particular item alone for now, because no good can come of it.

As Wilhelm and Morton made their way to the Kibitzer Lounge, Wilhelm said, "This is the place where most of the unwashed masses hang out. There are exceptions, but mostly, the chess knowledge in this room could be placed on a thimble, with plenty of space left over on said thimble. I try to avoid this place whenever possible..." In the Kibitzer Lounge, there were rows and rows of long banquet-type tables with chess sets neatly arrayed. On the walls were demonstration boards manned by lesser-known masters, with runners going back and forth from the Great Tournament Hall. Chess devotees were seated at the tables, following the games being demonstrated. The noise generated by the mad activity in the lounge was deafening.

I can see why they put the kibitzer room far away from the tournament hall. It is much too noisy, and all the chatter and hollering would detract from the serious play in the tournament hall. I don't think I'll be spending much time in this place...

They eventually made their way to the Great Tournament Hall, where it appeared that there were multiple tournaments taking place simultaneously. "Wilhelm," Mort asked in a hushed tone - "I see many tournament directors and arbiters in this room - are they assigned this additional duty, like you are assigned your extra task?" "Yes, that is correct," was the response. "Of

course, it is Heaven for them - because they get to ply their peculiar talent for being officious and in charge for eternity."

One thing Morton noticed immediately upon entering the tournament hall was a distinct lack of any odor - that bad smell that happens when you get huge numbers of players sitting playing chess for hours and hours in a tournament room.

Well that is an improvement. That was one of the things that used to keep me away from large tournaments - the smell. This place is a more sterile atmosphere. Which makes sense, as it is all about the chess.

There was also an area roped off where various simultaneous exhibitions, blindfold exhibitions, and similar pursuits were ongoing. On a small stage, there was a man playing women, one game after another.

"Wilhelm - what is the story about the man on the stage, playing chess with one woman after another?" "That's poor Bobby - in life he boasted that he could give any woman Knight odds. Here he must prove that boast eternally. I told you that there were consequences to what we do in life. Vera, in particular, has been cleaning his clock on a regular basis."

Bobby Fischer is here! A pity he is reduced to proving his boast, again and again, forever.

"Is he allowed to take part in tournaments once and awhile?" Mort asked. "Not very often," was the response. "He plays speed chess with Paul sometimes, but they keep arguing about the conditions, and Paul keeps insisting that their games must be at Knight odds."

In the other corner, Morton noticed that a Grandmaster was giving a huge simultaneous exhibition to hundreds of people at once.

"Let me guess - that is Miguel in the corner, giving the simul - right?" "Yes, of course. You learn quickly, my friend."

I'm getting a bad vibration about this place. Is it really such a great place? The only ones who seem to be happy are the amateurs, the ones without a clue in the chess sense. They seem happy. I shudder to think what my additional duty might be - will I be one of the happy ones, or not?

"Wilhelm - do folks here engage in non-chess activity?" Mort cut to the chase.

"I don't understand your question. The Land Of Caissa is for chess players to live out their chess aspirations eternally, without end."

"But, there is no eating, drinking, sleeping, socializing with friends - activity of that nature?"

"No, all of that is unnecessary, of course." Wilhelm gave him a puzzled look.

I knew it. It is a nightmare - nothing but chess, chess, and more chess, forever. Who would sign up for something like that? Morton, old buddy, old pal, you've really stepped into it this time. This is a position which will be hard to wiggle out of...

"Wilhelm, would you take me back to speak with Kord now?" "Certainly," Wilhelm responded. As they walked back to the front gate, Wilhelm started to whistle, under his breath. His mood seemed to improve with each step they took. "This is my last tour today - I can get back to studying for my match with Aaron tomorrow. And, I promise you, after I beat him - if he comes up with that *Why must I lose to this idiot?* routine, I will cause him bodily harm." Morton chuckled, "Of course - and I want to thank you for the tour." Wilhelm gave him a quizzical look and said, "No need for thanks - it is my task..."

As they approached the gatekeeper's area, Wilhelm ambled away, still whistling under his breath. Mort could see Kord now, by the gate.

"Well, Morton - tell me - what you think of the place?" Kord asked. "Honestly - I don't know if this is Heaven or Hell," Mort replied.

"I understand. Are you afraid?"

"If I ask you a question, do you have to answer it truthfully?"

"Of course."

"Well, then, is it possible to leave this place - to go back to the path, and choose another way for oneself?"

"Yes, it happens quite frequently - it is, after all, your decision. Eternal chess is not for everyone."

Thank goodness - I can go back out. What a relief!

"Kord, just one more question - would I have been one of the happy ones here, or would I have had a task to do, like Wilhelm?"

"Well, I'm not really supposed to answer questions like that. I suppose I could answer it in a roundabout way. We *have* been looking for someone to run our correspondence chess program. It is quite large, about 3,000 sections, and involves a lot of work. It would keep someone like you busy, for say, an eternity..."

"Thank you for the offer - but I will pass. I think I would like to leave now," Morton stated firmly. "Suit yourself," Kord replied, while opening the door. "You can come back any time."

Mort felt free again, as he stood *outside* the door.

I wonder if I am making the right decision. Who knows what awaits me, when I follow the other direction on the path. Only one way to find out...

Morton sauntered down the path, and decided to whistle. He was strangely happy, and content. He had learned the one lesson that was the most important:

Man cannot live on chess alone.

(From my book, *Assembling Chess III*)