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Introduction

Here I would like to comment briefly on some general aspects of this book.

Contents

This book touches a wide range of subjects related to middlegame strategy. Each subject comes with some explanatory examples, and in the second half of the book you will find related exercises. I am a strong supporter of the intensive use of exercises in the learning process. In my opinion, the closer you can get to a game situation when you are training (or teaching) chess, the faster progress can be expected.

In his excellent work *Logika Sovremennyh Shahmat* (Modern Chess Logic), Belarusian writer and grandmaster Viacheslav Dydyshko mentions that one major problem faced by chess students is that the theoretical knowledge acquired from literature remains “alien” to us for a long time. In the heat of the battle we will probably rely on what our intuition tells us and, unfortunately, that doesn’t always coincide with our knowledge.

Advancing his thoughts a little further, it is one thing to read through and understand a couple of Rubinstein’s rook endgames, and quite another one to be able to play them like him! Naturally, any new chess knowledge has to be integrated in our mind with such depth that we are able to swiftly apply it in practice, even if a long time has passed since the learning moment. School kids often memorize a lot of facts before an exam, and forget most of it within a few weeks. (I, for one, would not like to repeat today my French or Maths exams from 1990.) In contrast, chess players need to store the information for a long time, and retrieve it without much delay. In this context I believe that exercises, alongside normal games and their posterior analysis, are one of the best tools. Compare the case of learning languages: few persons are able to speak a new language confidently after just reading through a few text and grammar books. What most of us need is practice, practice...

Style and level

I have tried to explain in the most didactical way possible what is actually happening on the board, without an excessive use of analysis, in order not to tire the reader. To experienced players some parts of the book will appear rather basic; and to others, more challenging. Club players will probably see a lot of things for the first time.

Material

There have been many different sources involved in the writing of this book, the most significant ones being *Chess Informant*, *ChessBase Megabase* and *Chess Today*. I have used a lot of my own games and fragments, simply because these are the games that I know best.

Technology

I used *Chess Assistant 8.1* for the elaboration of this book, with *Rybka 2.4* as the main analysis engine, and *Megabase 2008* as a main reference database.

How to read this book?

It makes sense to start with the first, short chapter since it touches upon several concepts that will be present during the rest of the book. In contrast, the rest of the chapters are rather independent, although I often make references to earlier examples. Each chapter is divided into several sections, which can be treated in the following, simple way:

1. Go through the explanatory examples;
2. Solve the related exercises;
3. Compare your solutions with the ones in the book.

Advice for trainers

It is easy to use this book as training material. Choose the section(s) that you need, go through the explanatory examples with your students, and then let them work with the related exercises. In practical terms, I suggest you always have the exercise positions arranged on chessboards. The time needed oscillates roughly between 5 and 20 minutes, depending on the exercise (they are presented in ascending order of difficulty) and the level of the student. The solutions can be presented in written form, or played out against the trainer, which creates a closer feeling for them. Please note that the solutions given in the book are not absolute truths – the important thing is to grasp the general strategic idea in each exercise.

One additional piece of advice: many of the explanatory examples, as well as some of the longer exercises, can easily be used as “quiz” games, where the students should find the best move at determined (for example, five) moments during the game, with the trainer awarding the corresponding points and giving hints if necessary.

Chapter Three

Exchanges

The exchange of pieces is an important idea at any stage of the game, one that can have a huge impact on the strategic balance. The following examples have been categorized according to the principal objective being supported by the exchange. However, it should be noted that sometimes one single exchange can support several objectives.

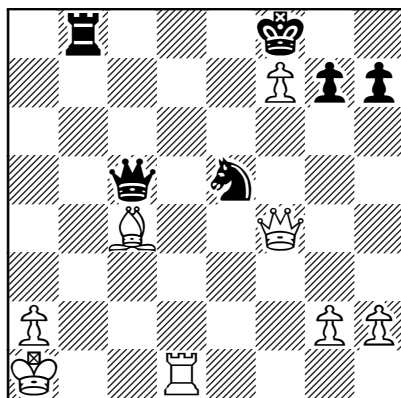
Realizing a material advantage

One of the first strategic principles taught to new chess players is that when you have more material, exchange pieces! Thus we are able to reduce the opponent's counterplay and simplify to an endgame, where the material advantage can be more easily realized. Let's see a few examples.

Example 76
Z.Efimenko-R.Vaganian
German League 2005

In this late middlegame position White is two pawns up but his king is rather ex-

posed on a1. Efimenko finds a technical solution.



34 ♕d4!

Forcing a queen exchange that will finish off Black's counterplay and produce a superior endgame. When carrying out such exchanges, we should be ready to return some of the extra material if needed, like the f7-pawn in this case. In contrast, the greedy 34 ♖b3? failed to 34...♔c3+ 35 ♔b1 ♕xb3+! 36 axb3 ♕xb3+ with a perpetual.

34...♕xd4+

After 34...♕e7 35 ♖b3 Black's counter-

play is gone, while 34...♖xc4? fails to 35 ♖d6+ ♜xf7 36 ♖xb8 ♖c3+ 37 ♖b2 etc.

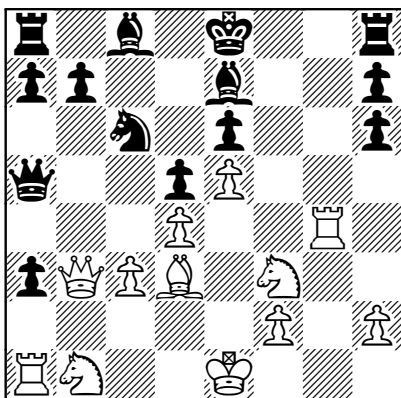
35 ♖xd4 ♜xc4 36 ♖xc4 ♜xf7 37 a4!

Passed pawns should move forward! In the game, afflicted by heavy time trouble, Efimenko preferred 37 ♖e4?!, when Black could have put up some resistance by 37...♖d8! 38 ♖e2 ♖a8!, hindering the advance of the a-pawn – Meyer/Efimenko.

37...♞e6 38 ♞a2

White wins by bringing up his king; e.g. 38...♖b7 39 ♞a3 ♞d5 40 ♖c2 ♖a7 41 ♞b4 ♖b7+ 42 ♞c3 (42 ♞a5 is also possible) 42...♖c7+ 43 ♞d3 ♖a7 (after 43...♖xc2 44 ♞xc2 ♞c4 45 a5 the white king is first to reach the kingside) 44 ♖a2 ♖a5 45 ♖a1! with a position reminiscent of the famous game A.Alekhine-J.R.Capablanca, World Championship (game 34), Buenos Aires 1927.

Example 77
R.Djurhuus-J.Hellsten
Asker 1997



White is two pawns down but is close to recovering one of them and enjoys a fair amount of activity for the other one. His next moves might be ♜xa3, ♖a2 and ♜b5 with some initiative.

13...♖b6!

Looking for a queen exchange to reduce White's initiative and lead the game into an endgame with an extra pawn.

14 ♖c2

After 14 ♖d1? ♖b2 15 ♜bd2 ♖xc3 the white queenside collapses, while 14 ♞b5 can be met by 14...♞d7 15 ♜xa3 a6! 16 ♖a4 ♖c8 and White is in trouble.

14...♖b2!

In the same spirit of the previous move. Now the queen exchange is inevitable.

15 ♖xb2 axb2 16 ♖a2 ♞d7 17 ♖xb2 0-0-0 18 ♜bd2 ♖dg8!

As often happens, a material advantage is transformed into a positional one, or vice versa. In this case, Black returns the second pawn in order to swap the opponent's most active piece.

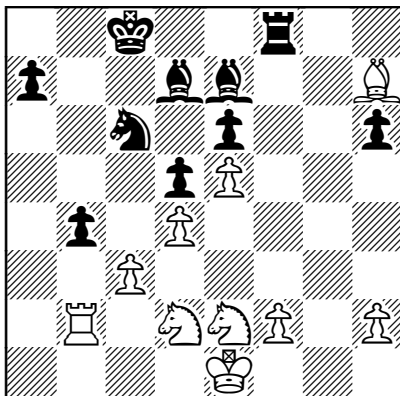
19 ♖xg8+ ♖xg8 20 ♞xh7 ♖f8 21 ♜g1

It is not easy to find any prospects for White's minor pieces.

21...b5! 22 ♜e2

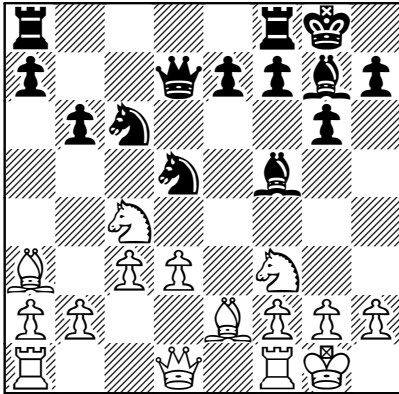
Or 22 ♖xb5 ♜xd4 23 ♖b1 ♜c6 and the e5-pawn is in trouble.

22...b4



Hitting the base of the pawn chain. Thanks to the bishop pair, the passed a-pawn and White's weaknesses, Black is clearly better.

Example 78
E.Sveshnikov-D.King
 Bern 1992



Black has sacrificed a pawn in return for a slight initiative. He is now planning either ...b5-b4, intimidating the bishop on a3 and softening up White's queenside, or 15...dxf4 with kingside activity and pressure on d3. Sveshnikov resorts to a simple idea, always worthy of consideration in positions with a material advantage: swap off pieces.

15 dxe3!

Thus White ensures at least one piece exchange, and avoids the ...b5-b4 advance being effected with tempo.

15...dxf4

After 15...dxe3?! 16 fxe3, followed by e3-e4, White seizes the centre, while 15...e6 16 dxd5 exd5 17 d4 ffd8 18 d2! also favours him, now that 18...e5? runs into 19 c4 e6 20 d5.

16 dxf5 fxf5 17 g3!

Looking for more exchanges. Not 17 e1 ffd8 18 d4 e5 19 b5 fc8!, when 20 exd6 fxc6 21 dxe5?? fails to 21...xg2 mate.

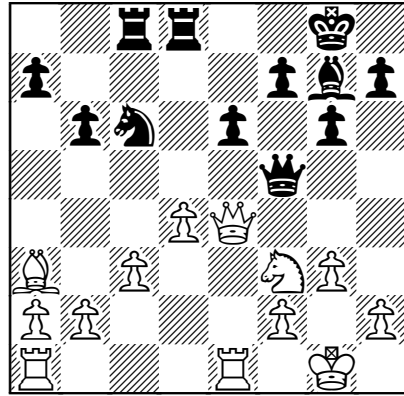
17...dxe2+

Otherwise the knight will just become misplaced.

18 fxe2 ffd8 19 d4 ffd8

Or 19...e5 20 dxe5 dxe5 21 dxe5 exd5 22 ffe1 with a sound extra pawn.

20 ffe1 e6 21 ffe4!



Sveshnikov continues with his simplification policy.

21...f4!

Being a pawn down, queen exchanges should be rejected unless there is a good reason. Black could count on more practical chances after 21...f4, when White still has a slight problem with the bishop on a3.

22 fxe4 d7

Black covers the e7-square, aware that after 22...d5 23 e7! d7 24 eg5 dc4 25 e2 White may soon start to advance his queenside pawn majority, with moves such as d1, c1, b2-b3, b2 and c3-c4.

23 b3!?

Avoiding the ...d5-c4 plan and enabling a3-b2. In contrast, the game continued 23 ffe1 d5 24 d2 fd5 (24...e5!? is also interesting) and White's queenside was somewhat paralysed, although Sveshnikov won in the end.

23...e5

A temporary pawn sacrifice to create some counterplay. Besides, the exchange of pawns tends to favour the defending side.

24 dxe5

Another good option is 24 ♖xe5 ♜xe5 25 dxe5 ♜xc3 26 ♔d6 ♜c2 27 ♜d4!, parrying the threat of 27...♜xd6 while preparing a2-a4 and b4-b5.

24...♜d3 25 ♔g2 ♜xc3 26 ♜ae1

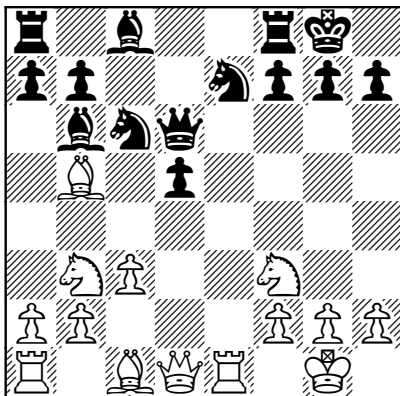
Preparing to answer 26...♜c2 by 27 ♜1e2. With ♔a3-d6 coming up, White enjoys a sound extra pawn in the endgame.

For the related exercises, see page 316.

Realizing a positional advantage

The previous examples showed how the realization of a material advantage was facilitated by exchanges. This also applies to positional advantages, such as the bishop pair (compare Miles-Sunye Neto, p. 86), weak points in the enemy pawn structure, a mobile pawn majority, etc. Let's see a few examples.

Example 79 A.Kharlov-A.Villavicencio Martinez Linares 1997



The structure with an isolated queen's pawn is typical for this topic. White is

happy to swap pieces since the weak d5-pawn will make any endgame favourable for him. Black, on the other hand, should avoid exchanges and try to exploit the dynamic advantages of the isolated pawn, such as more space and the strong squares on e4 and c4.

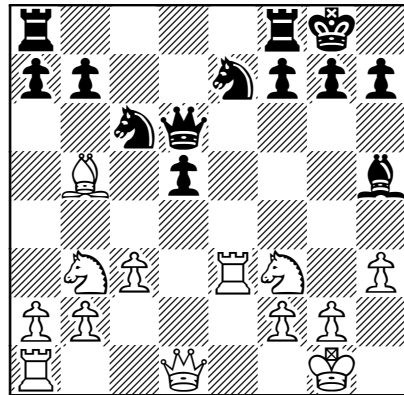
12 ♔e3!

A key move, in order to trade bishops before Black manages to play 12...♜f5.

12...♔xe3

Black has no choice since 12...♔c7? loses material after 13 ♔c5!.

13 ♜xe3 ♔g4 14 h3 ♔h5



15 ♔e2!

Preparing more exchanges.

15...♜ad8 16 ♜fd4! ♜xd4?

16...♔g6 was correct, keeping more pieces on the board, when 17 ♜d2 followed by ♜d1 or ♜e1 leads to a slight white advantage.

17 ♜xd4 ♔xe2 18 ♜xe2 ♜c6 19 ♜d1!

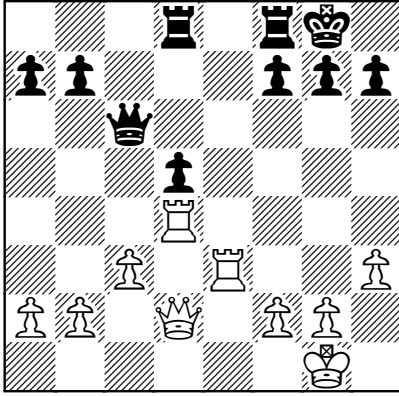
The last piece is brought into play with focus on the d5-pawn. In contrast, the further exchange by 19 ♜xc6?! permits 19...bxc6!, when the d5-pawn is no longer a problem and might even turn into a passed pawn after ...c6-c5 and ...d5-d4.

19...♜xd4?!

Maintaining the tension with 19...♜d7

seems better. If now 20 ♖ed3, then 20...♗fe8 preparing ...♘e5-c4 with some activity.

20 ♖xd4 ♗c6 21 ♗d2!



Evidently, the absence of minor pieces on the board has made it easier for White to increase the pressure on the d5-pawn.

21...♗d6 22 ♖ed3 ♗fd8 23 c4!

A typical tactical resource in the fight against isolated pawns.

23...h6 24 ♖xd5 ♗xd5 25 ♖xd5

A pawn up, White is happy to exchange as many pieces as he can.

25...♖xd5?!

25...♖e8 26 ♖d8 h5 was preferable when, contrary to the game, White still has to work for a while to create a passed pawn.

26 cxd5!

The apparently logical 26 ♗xd5? ♗xd5 27 cxd5 fails to 27...♔f8 and Black's king soon eliminates the extra pawn.

26...♗d6 27 ♗d4!

Centralization is a key idea in queen endings, in order to exploit the range of this piece fully.

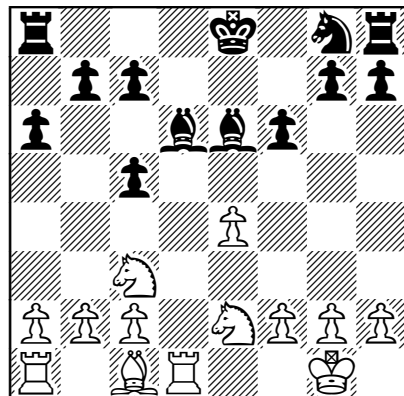
27...a6 28 ♔f1 ♔f8 29 ♔e2 ♗e7+ 30 ♗e3 ♗b4?

In a difficult endgame Black overlooks the opponent's idea.

31 ♗a3! ♗xa3 32 bxa3

Now the queen exchange is correct since the d5-pawn can be defended. The pawn ending concluded 32...♔e7 33 ♔d3 ♔d6 34 ♔c4 b6 35 a4 h5 36 h4 g6 37 g3 f6 38 f4 ♔d7 39 a5! bxa5 40 ♔c5 a4 41 a3 and Black resigned.

Example 80
S.Brynell-K.Moberg
Gothenburg 1996



This structure, typical of the Spanish Exchange variation, is another case where virtually any piece trade clearly favours one of the players. Black possesses the bishop pair but also suffers from a defective pawn structure, in the sense that his queenside pawn majority cannot be easily converted into a passed pawn. Thus White's next move suggests itself.

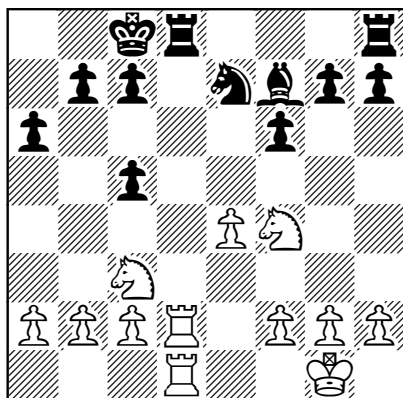
11 ♔f4!

Depriving Black of the bishop pair, and taking the game one step further towards an endgame, where the pawn structure speaks in White's favour. For this reason, contemporary games in this variation usually see Black postponing or omitting ...♔f8-d6.

11...0-0-0 12 ♖d2 ♘e7

Or 12...♙xf4 13 ♖xd8+ ♔xd8 14 ♘xf4 followed by ♖d1+ with similar consequences.

13 ♖ad1 ♙xf4 14 ♘xf4 ♙f7



15 f3

A natural move that prepares ♙f2-e3, but 15 ♖xd8+! ♔xd8 16 ♖xd8+ ♔xd8 17 f3 was more precise – Brynell. By exchanging both pairs of rooks, White reduces the opponent's counterplay and avoids any drawish rook endgames.

15...♖xd2 16 ♖xd2 ♔d8?!

16...♖e8!, keeping the rook on the board, was preferable for reasons explained in the previous note.

17 ♖xd8+ ♔xd8 18 ♙f2

Now White has a small but enduring advantage thanks to his mobile pawn majority on the kingside.

18...♙d7 19 ♙e3 ♙d6 20 ♘d3

Clearing the way for the f-pawn.

20...♙g6?!

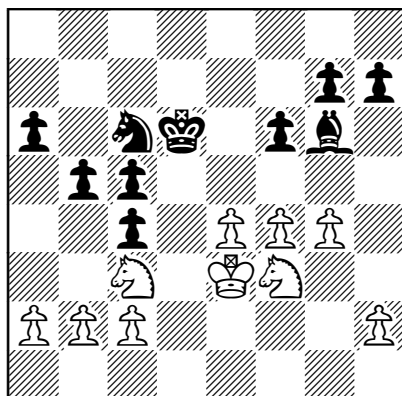
A passive diagonal for the bishop. 20...b5 was more natural, trying to make progress on the queenside. Now the tempting 21 e5+ fxe5 22 ♘e4+ doesn't really achieve much after 22...♙d5! 23 ♘dxc5 a5. Thus 21 a3!?, safeguarding the a-pawn, might be a better try and if 21...♘c6, then White plays 22 ♘e2, preventing the knight jump to d4 –

Brynell (who kindly supplied me with some comments on this game).

21 g4!

Gaining some space before advancing the f- and e-pawns.

21...c4 22 ♘e1 c5 23 f4 b5 24 ♘f3 ♘c6



25 e5+!

Using some minor tactics Brynell finally manages to break through on the kingside.

25...fxe5 26 f5 ♙e8 27 ♘e4+ ♙e7

If Black hangs on to the pawn by 27...♙d5, then 28 f6! g6 29 ♘fg5 ♘d8 30 ♘xh7 gives White a huge edge thanks to the strong passed pawn.

28 c3!

Less technical was 28 ♘xc5?! ♘b4 with counterplay.

28...a5

Black has run out of active plans and from now on White just has to advance his kingside majority to achieve the passed pawn. The c5-pawn can wait.

29 h4 h5 30 g5! g6?

Leaving the opponent with a protected passed pawn can't be right, but there was no satisfactory defence to 31 f6+ anyway.

31 f6+ ♙e6 32 a4!

Before taking on c5, White softens up the c4-pawn.

32...b4 33 ♘xc5+ ♙d5 34 ♘b7!

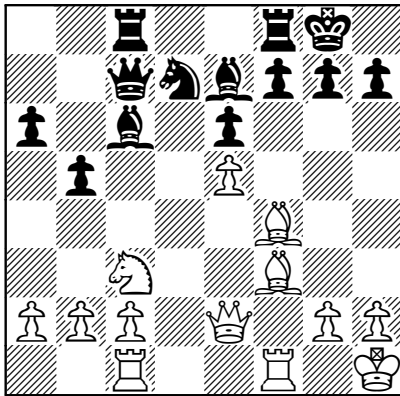
Tying the black knight to the defence of the a-pawn.

34...♙f7 35 ♘d2 bxc3 36 bxc3 ♘d8?

Black resigned without waiting for 37 ♘xd8. In any case, even without this time-trouble blunder, he was lost in view of the inevitable ♘e4(xc4)-d6.

Of course there are also pawn structures where the simplifications tend to favour Black. One case is the Open Sicilian, where White, in the event of an unsuccessful attack, often ends up in an inferior endgame. Here is one simple example.

Example 81
S.Bouaziz-V.Jansa
Sarajevo 1979



By means of an earlier e4-e5 advance White gained some space and took steps to a future kingside attack. However, from a long-term perspective the e5-pawn is weak, while the queenside pawn structure also favours Black, whose pawn on b5 restricts the white majority. In this context, Jansa's subsequent play is easy to understand.

17...♙xf3

Also interesting is 17...b4!?, asking the question of the knight; e.g. 18 ♘e4?! ♘xe5

or 18 ♙xc6 ♗xc6 19 ♘e4 ♗c4! in the same spirit as the game continuation.

18 ♗xf3

After 18 ♗xf3?! ♘xe5 19 ♗g3 f6 Black will have a clear advantage in the endgame due to the backward c-pawn.

18...♗c4!

A key move, in order to transpose to a favourable endgame. Less clear is 18...b4?! 19 ♘e4 ♘xe5 20 ♗g3 with ideas like ♗h5 and ♘g5.

19 ♗xc4

Or 19 ♗f2!? b4 20 b3 ♗c5!, insisting on the queen swap; e.g. 21 ♘e4 ♗xf2 22 ♗xf2 ♘b6 followed by ♘d5, with a comfortable edge.

19...♗xc4 20 ♗d1 ♘b6 21 ♙e3 ♙c5!

The bishop exchange will further emphasize White's problems with the e5-pawn.

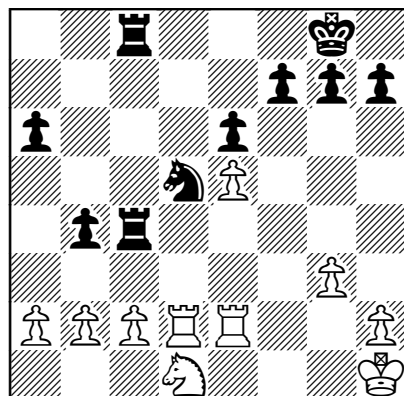
22 ♗d2?!

22 a3 was a lesser evil, avoiding the course of the game, when Black could consider a timely ...a6-a5 followed by ...b5-b4.

22...b4 23 ♘d1 ♙xe3 24 ♗xe3

After 24 ♘xe3? ♗e4 the e5-pawn falls.

24...♘d5 25 ♗ee2 ♗fc8 26 g3



White is doomed to passivity and Jansa proceeds with the creation of a new weakness.

26...♖4c5! 27 ♔g2 h5 28 ♕f3 ♖a5

Winning a pawn.

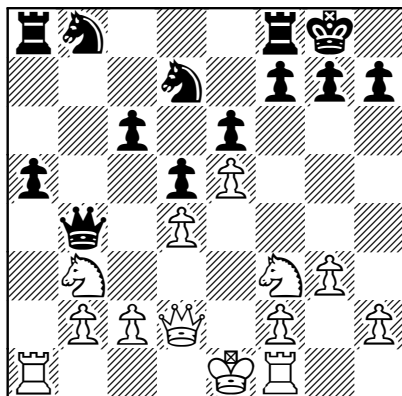
29 ♜e3 ♜xe3 30 ♖xe3 ♖xa2 31 ♖b3 a5

Black soon realized his extra pawn.

Example 82

Y.Seirawan-Alexa.Ivanov

US Championship, Salt Lake City
1999



Black is about to take a major decision: to exchange the queens or not?

15...♜xd2+?

Now White obtains a superior endgame thanks to Black's weak queenside pawn structure. Correct was 15...♜c4!, sacrificing a pawn for counterplay with focus on the exposed white king. There can follow 16 ♜xa5 (or 16 ♖xa5 ♜a6!, heading for b4) 16...♜b5 17 b4 ♜a6 (17...f6!? is another interesting option) 18 c3 c5! 19 dxc5 (after 19 bxc5?! ♜c7 the knight on a5 is in trouble) 19...♜axc5 20 ♜d4 ♜d3+ 21 ♕d1 (or 21 ♕e2 ♜c1+ 22 ♕e1 ♜d3+ with a perpetual) 21...♜a6 22 b5 ♜b6 with excellent compensation.

16 ♕xd2 a4 17 ♜e1!

Heading for the protected square at c5.

17...f6?!

17...♖a6! was correct, preventing the ♜d3-c5 manoeuvre. After 18 ♜c5 ♜xc5 19 dxc5 ♜d7 20 ♜d3, preparing ♖a3 and ♖fa1, White has a slight edge due to the weak a4-pawn, but nothing more.

18 ♜d3 fxe5 19 dxe5

With a clear grip on the queenside.

19...♕f7 20 f4 ♕e7 21 h4!

Preventing the ...g7-g5 counter-strike. Here, or later, 21...h6 is well met by 22 h5, freezing the pawn structure.

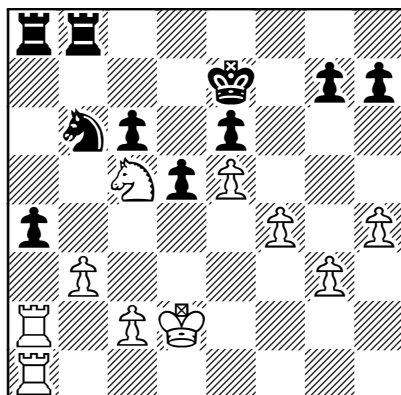
21...♖c8 22 ♜bc5

Just in time, before Black goes ...c6-c5. Now the a4-pawn has turned into a serious problem.

22...♜b6 23 ♖a2 ♜8d7

Or 23...♖c7 24 ♖fa1 ♖ca7 25 b3! a3 26 c3 intending ♜b4-c2.

24 ♖fa1 ♜xc5 25 ♜xc5 ♖cb8 26 b3!



The cleanest way of conquering the a4-pawn. 26 ♜xa4?! ♜xa4 27 ♖xa4 ♖xa4 28 ♖xa4 ♖xb2 is less clear.

26...axb3?

Any other move allows 27 ♜xa4 with a decisive endgame plus, but now Black gets much bigger problems after 27 ♖a7+! ♖xa7 28 ♖xa7+ ♕e8 29 cxb3. In fact, Ivanov resigned without waiting for 27 ♖a7+.

For the related exercises to this section, see page 317.