

Carsten Hansen

The Sicilian Dragon

move by move

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About the Author

Carsten Hansen is a FIDE Master from Denmark. He has written numerous books on chess, particularly focusing on the opening, and his writing is renowned for its thoroughness and attention to detail. From 1999 to 2014, he was a columnist for the popular website Chesscafe.com, where he primarily reviewed opening chess books.

This is his first book for Everyman Chess.

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| About the Author | 3 |
| Bibliography | 6 |
| Introduction | 7 |
| Part 1 Non-Yugoslav Attack: 1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 ♘f6 5 ♗c3 g6 | |
| 1 Classical Dragon: Early Deviations | 10 |
| 2 Classical Dragon: Main Line – 6 ♖e2 ♗g7 7 0-0 ♗c6 8 ♗b3 0-0 | 44 |
| 3 ♖c4 Lines | 97 |
| 4 Levenfish, 6 g3 and Other Minor Lines | 108 |
| Part 2 Yugoslav Attack: 6 ♖e3 ♗g7 7 f3 0-0 8 ♗d2 ♗c6 – Lines without ♖c4 | |
| 5 9 0-0-0 d5 10 exd5 | 143 |
| 6 9 0-0-0 d5 – 10 ♖b1 and 10 ♗e1 | 191 |
| 7 9 0-0-0: 9...♗d7 and 9...♗xd4 | 212 |
| 8 9 g4 | 227 |
| Part 3 Yugoslav Attack: 6 ♖e3 ♗g7 7 f3 0-0 8 ♗d2 ♗c6 – ♖c4 Lines | |
| 9 Main Line – 9 ♖c4 ♗d7 10 0-0-0 ♗c8 11 ♖b3 ♗e5 12 h4 ♗c4 | 253 |
| 10 Soltis Variation – 9 ♖c4 ♗d7 10 0-0-0 ♗c8 11 ♖b3 ♗e5 12 h4 h5 | 272 |
| 11 The Modern Variation – 12 ♖b1 | 328 |
| 12 The Topalov Variation – 11...♗xd4 | 350 |
| 13 10...♗c7, 10...♗b8 and 10...♗a5 | 369 |
| 14 The Accelerated Variation – 10 ♖b3 ♗xd4 11 ♖xd4 b5 | 398 |
| 15 The Chinese Dragon | 412 |
| 16 Alternatives on Move 9 and 10 | 429 |
| Index of Variations | 459 |
| Index of Games | 463 |

Introduction

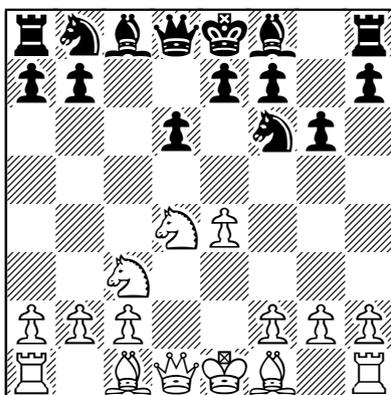
Let me take you on a little journey. We are going back to 1984. I had started playing the Sicilian Defence, in particular the Accelerated Dragon, with a particular line in mind: 1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♖c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 g6 5 ♖c3 ♗g7 6 ♗e3 ♗f6 7 ♗c4 ♖a5, where I got quite a bit of mileage out of tricks like 8 ♖d2 ♗xe4! and 8 f3 ♖b4 9 ♗b3 ♗xe4!, winning material and often the game without much of a battle.

However, as I rose in rating, my opposition got stronger. Most of them either played 8 0-0 (after which ...♖b4 shenanigans would not work) or entered the Maroczy Bind with 5 c4, which I found dreadfully boring for Black. In any case, my early days with the Accelerated Dragon were soon numbered and I started using different openings.

Then we skip to 1986 when I had just reached the rank of master player (Danish rating 1900) at the age of 14 (the youngest at the time, until my friend Peter Heine Nielsen later that year reached the same milestone at the age of 12), and I felt ready to conquer a broader variety of openings.

At my parents' coffee table, I spent a great number of mornings in my school summer vacation on studying the Sicilian Defence from the *New In Chess* Keybooks (a two-volume set, covering all openings). I played through every single game and variation on the Sicilian, and felt I learned an awful lot, with the notion that nobody would be able to surprise me. I was, of course, entirely wrong. In the very first tournament (a rapid event), I ended up playing four Sicilians as Black, the Scheveningen, the Najdorf, the Sveshnikov and the Dragon. I lost all of them quickly. Several of the beatings were short and brutal. My experienced opponents knew the sub-variations far better than I did and punished me accordingly. That led to some introspection, mainly inspired by my dad who suggested that I should pick a few lines that I liked the best and then really work to understand them. The Sveshnikov and the Dragon ended up as my choices. I played both variations regularly for the next six months before I decided on settling for just the Dragon.

The Dragon Variation is usually arrived at from the following move order, **1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 ♗f6 5 ♖c3 g6**



It became my primary weapon as Black for several years and has always remained a reliable back-up even after I started using other openings to broaden my understanding and inject a bit of unpredictability into my opening repertoire. In the Dragon, I was locked and loaded to a greater degree than in any opening. I recall the time when I had just finished a game and was analysing it with my opponent when a mutual friend stopped by to see what we were figuring out. He then asked my opponent, "Why did you let Carsten play the Dragon? Were you trying to lose on purpose?" While by no means a guaranteed win, it provided a degree of security that allowed me to think that I had every chance of winning the game no matter which opposition I faced.

Of course, that belief was rocked from time to time, but I have certainly enjoyed many interesting battles with the Dragon as well studying and analysing it with friends over the years.

The material in this book has been split up in three parts:

1. Non-Yugoslav Attack
2. Yugoslav Attack without ♗c4
3. Yugoslav Attack with ♗c4

The first section covers the Classical lines involving 6 ♗e2 as well as other 'minor' lines. These are generally not considered particularly critical, but are important for the understanding of the opening. I could have easily spent more time and pages on several of the variations that fall into this section, but decided against it for practical reasons.

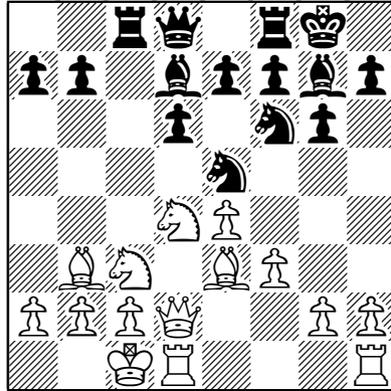
The second section deals with two variations, after 6 ♗e3 ♗g7 7 f3 ♖c6 8 ♗d2 0-0 and now Black essays either 9 0-0-0 and 9 g4.

In particular, the former, 9 0-0-0, has become a major weapon against the Dragon because it lets White set the tone for the game to come, in a manner which is very different from the main lines in the third section. The latter, 9 g4, is a positional option which has never been really popular, although it has had its peaks. Even today, it remains a viable option if White wants to play somewhat sharp, but is unwilling to enter the madness which we will look at in the third section.

There, in the final section, we are examining an abundance of variations that are very different from one another. Although some characteristics are repeated from line to line, the overall game plans vary tremendously. To enter them as White require excellent preparation and some degree of bravery, because if your opponent switches to a different line from the one(s) you prepared, then you can easily end up in severe trouble, trying to make your way through a labyrinth of established and complex lines that look similar, but where individual move orders and other finesses can decide a game rapidly.

After 9 ♗c4, there are already the first couple of alternatives for Black, such as 9...♖d7, 9...♖xd4, 9...a5 and ultimately, we will then examine the main lines with 9...♗d7 10 0-0-0 ♗c8 11 ♗b3 ♖e5 (see diagram below).

Rather than just presenting a repertoire for Black, I have tried to cover the main line as objectively as possible, and analysed all the variations I consider important. The intention was never to discuss all minor lines in excruciating detail so connoisseurs will undoubtedly be able to point to lines and sub-variations that I have missed out in my selection process. While this book is not intended to be the final word and verdict on the Dragon Variation, I have put a great deal of effort into analysing the games as well as go over the existing theory from books, databases and online sources. If I have misquoted some of my sources, I apologise and the same goes for overlooking if an idea has not been attributed to somebody who mentioned it prior to this work. However, I do feel that I have added a hefty chunk of new ideas and original analysis, in many cases overturning current evaluations and preferences. This of course in part comes from working with a strong engine on a fast computer, but in many cases, also from vast experience with the opening, because I do not always agree with the assessments provided by the engine I had worked with.



The Dragon Variation is a fun opening to study and play. Getting to know it well can seem like a daunting task, but as you work your way through the book, you will soon get a feel for the lines which appeal to you more than others. Stick with that feeling and put some additional effort into studying those particular lines and it will surely pay off.

I have played many, but not all, of the lines covered in this book. Some lines were considered highly suspect and some were only developed later than my Dragon-playing prime. As you will see, there is room for a lot of independent explorations in both the major and minor lines, allowing you to choose between lines that have been studied very deeply and lines where the development still only scratches the surface.

I wish great success with the Dragon Variation, both as Black and White and hope you will enjoy the battles as much as I have and enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost a big thank you to Stephanie Alexander, who has dealt with the long hours it took for this book to take shape. You have endured many solitary evenings while I typed and clicked away in the office. Your patience and understanding have been tested beyond measure.

Also, I would like to express my thanks to my colleagues at my day job in the shipping industry. They inspire me, on a daily basis, to test the boundaries for what I think is possible for me to accomplish.

A special thanks to John Emms and Byron Jacobs who have pushed and supported me throughout this process, despite the project getting considerably bigger and more time-consuming than any of us had initially envisaged.

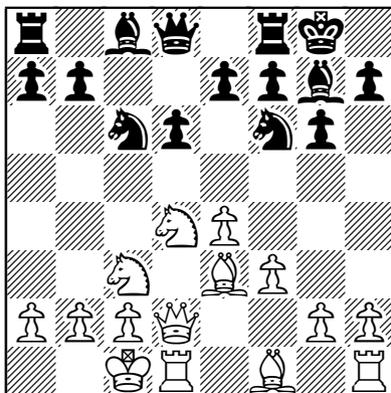
Finally, a tip of the hat to John 'Johnny Mags' Sigona, who had for years asked me when I would write a book on the Sicilian Dragon. Well, now it finally happened.

Carsten Hansen
Bayonne, New Jersey
July 2016

Chapter Five

Yugoslav Attack without ♖c4: 9 0-0-0 d5 10 exd5

1 e4 c5 2 ♗f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♗f6 5 ♘c3 g6 6 ♙e3 ♙g7 7 f3 0-0-0 8 ♚d2 ♗c6 9 0-0-0



This is the first of three chapters on this line, which is undoubtedly one of the most critical lines against the entire Dragon Variation. White eschews ♙c4 and instead castles queenside right away, allowing Black the typical ...d6-d5 break that we have already acquainted ourselves with in the chapters on the Classical Dragon. The lines that we will be looking at in this chapter, those with 10 exd5, are typically quite sharp, involving many pawn and exchange sacrifices from Black, several of which are mandatory if Black has to generate adequate counterplay. If you have to play the Dragon with confidence, it is important that you gain a good understanding of the lines and games in this chapter, because you are likely to run into them regularly, especially against players who are up on their theory.

We open our coverage with something of a softball move on White's part: 10 exd5 ♗xd5 11 ♗xc6 bxc6 12 ♗xd5 cxd5 13 ♙h6 which looks reasonably logical, but as we see in Game 24, Black is doing rather well.

A much more principled option is when White, instead of ♙h6, chooses to capture the d-pawn with 13 ♚xd5. This line is quite important for Black to meet well. In Game 25, Black plays 13...♚c7! to which White picks up the rooks with 14 ♚a8 ♙f5 15 ♚xf8+. Black is doing fine in this line, although winning this position is another struggle altogether. The more critical option for White is 14 ♚c5,

which we examine in the following two main games. In Game 26, after 14...♖b7, we see White opt for 15 b3, whereas in Game 27, we examine 15 ♖a3.

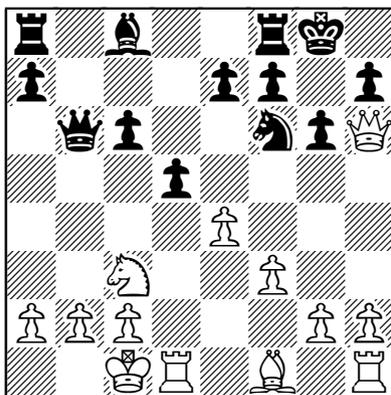
From there, we move on to the more popular main lines. In Game 28 we look at 11 ♘xc6 bxc6 12 ♙d4 ♘xc3, while 12...♙xd4 is discussed in Game 29 between two top American grandmasters.

In Games 30 and 31, we enter the 'real' main line after 12...e5 13 ♙c5, which has been the topic of discussion for many years. In the former, Black decides to sidestep White's threat to win the exchange with 13...♖e8, whereas the latter game has Black welcoming White to capture the exchange on f8 with 13...♙e6 14 ♘e4 and then again with 14...♖b8. Finally in Game 32, Black tries the less provocative 14...♖e8, which is also considered the main line.

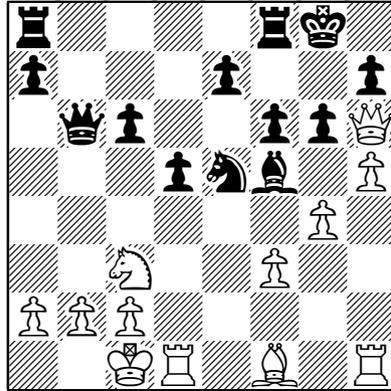
Game 24 M.Kuijf-G.Rechlis Beersheba 1987

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 g6 6 ♙e3 ♙g7 7 f3 0-0 8 ♖d2 ♘c6 9 0-0-0 d5 10 exd5

White has a few alternatives available here. The more important ones, 10 ♖e1 and 10 ♘b1, will be dealt with in the next chapter. Another move, which has been played regularly and not with bad results and often by quite strong players, is 10 ♘xc6 bxc6 11 ♙h6 (11 exd5 ♘xd5 takes us to the main lines) and here, Black should reply 11...♙xh6 12 ♖xh6 ♖b6!



Black doesn't hesitate a second and gets his counterplay along the open b-file going immediately:
a) 13 e5 ♘d7 14 h4 ♘xe5 15 h5 ♙f5 16 g4 (16 hxg6 ♙xg6 is pleasant for Black as White's attack will have a hard time finding a footing with Black's light-squared bishop now actively taking part in both defence and attack) and now Black slips in a clever premeditated tactic with 16...f6!



17 ♕f4 (the point behind Black's previous move is that 17 gxf5 is met by 17...g5, and the queen is trapped as...♗f7 follows) 17...♖ab8 18 b3 g5!? (another fascinating idea, the white queen may get trapped on f5 as well though 18...♗d7! is quite possibly a bit stronger after 19 hxg6 hxg6 20 g5 ♕f2 21 ♖e2 ♖f5 22 gxf6 exf6 23 ♕h6 ♗f7 and the king is heads for safety on e6 and Black has the better chances) 19 ♕xf5 ♕e3+ 20 ♗b2 ♖f7! (this was the point behind Black's 18th move and Black sets up the threat of 21...e6 22.♕xe6 ♗c4+, winning the queen) 21 ♖d3 (White finds a narrow escape) 21...e6 22 ♖he1 (the only sensible way to save the queen) 22...♕xe1 23 ♕xh7+ ♖xh7 24 ♖xh7+ ♗xh7 25 ♖xe1 ♖b4 with a complicated endgame, where Black should be better due to his pawn mass in the centre and the weak f3-pawn, V.Rogovski-M.Golubev, Ordzhonikidze 2001.

b) An interesting alternative is 13 h4 ♖b8 14 b3 ♕c5 15 ♗b2 dxe4 16 h5 which has been played before, but here Black can improve over our existing knowledge with 16...exf3! 17 hxg6 fxg6 18 gxf3 ♖f5 with an interesting position where both sides have chances.

10...♗xd5 11 ♗xc6

The other central trade with 11 ♗xd5 ♕xd5 12 ♗xc6 ♕xc6 does not present Black any problems:

a) 13 ♕b4 ♖f5 14 ♖d3 ♕e6 15 ♖d4 ♖xd3 16 ♖xd3 ♕xa2, and Black is a pawn up without a shadow of compensation for White, E.Dolukhanova-G.Jones, Warsaw 2010.

b) 13 ♖h6 ♖e6 14 ♖xg7 ♗xg7 obviously doesn't cause Black any headaches.

11...bxc6 12 ♗xd5 cxd5 13 ♖h6

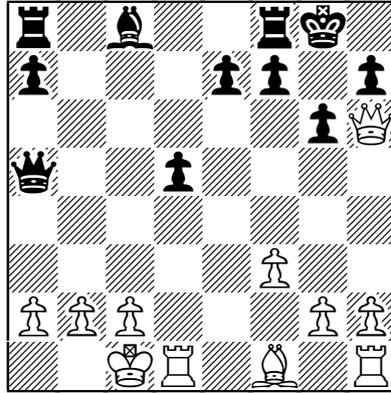
The take-everything-in-sight line 13 ♕xd5 ♕c7 14 ♕xa8 is covered in our next main game.

13...♖xh6 14 ♕xh6

Question: I am not sure I understand, why does Black want to invite the White queen to h6?

Answer: This is actually a theme which you are going to become very familiar with throughout this book. Often, the white queen will be somewhat out of play on h6 and unable to assist in defending his own king. Moreover, dragging the queen to the h6-square allows Black to place his queen actively with a tempo gain.

14...♕a5



The alternative 14...♖b8!? is also not bad, for instance after 15 h4 ♕f5 16 ♔d3 ♜b6 (16...♕xd3 has also been played and also leads to approximately even chances) 17 b3 ♜f6 18 ♖b1 e6 19 h5 ♖b7 and the chances are split down the middle, A.Kuzmin-S.Tiviakov, Belgrade 1989.

15 ♖b1 e5

Once again, 15...♖b8 is playable with 16 h4 ♕f5 (16...e5 would transpose into our main game) 17 ♔d3 ♜a3 (17...♜c3 18 b3 e6 19 ♕xf5 gxf5 leads to a fascinating heavy piece only ending (or middle-game without minor pieces) when it is not easy to determine who is better as both sides have some king safety issues) 18 b3 ♕xd3 19 ♖xd3 ♖fc8 20 ♜d2 e6 giving mutual chances though I would probably prefer Black while the computer favours White slightly, M.Panarin-E.Can, Voronezh 2007.

16 h4 ♖b8 17 h5?!

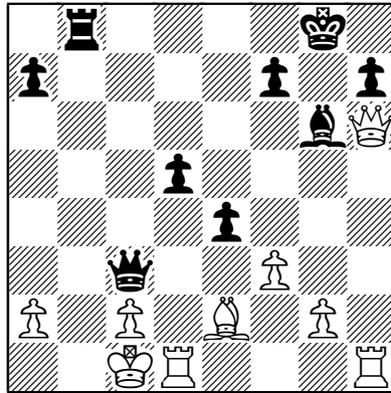
Question: It looks like White is about to open the h-file, isn't this dangerous for Black?

Answer: No, in fact White's last move immediately causes him problems as Black's pieces are already prepared to do bad things to the white king.

White has also tried 17 ♔d3!? e4 18 fxe4 ♜b4 (18...♕g4 can lead to a draw rather quickly after 19 ♖df1 ♖xb2+ 20 ♖xb2 ♜b4+ 21 ♖c1 dxe4 22 ♜f4 ♜a3+ 23 ♖d2 ♜b4+) 19 b3 dxe4 20 ♕e2 ♜c5 21 h5 g5 22 ♖hf1 (22 ♖d6!? is much better and after 22...♕e6 23 ♜f6 ♖fc8 24 ♖xe6 fxe6 25 ♜xe6+ ♖h8 26 ♜xe4, White should definitely not lose) 22...♖b6 23 ♖f6 ♕e6 and White is in trouble, B.Podlesnik-M.Justin, Yugoslavia 1989.

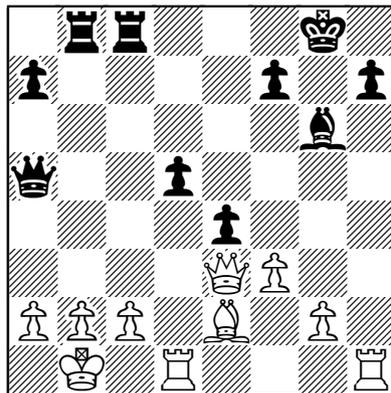
17...♕f5 18 ♔d3 e4 19 hxg6 ♕xg6 20 ♕e2 ♖fc8

This looks decidedly simpler than the computer's solution as it offers the following solution to the problem: 20...♖xb2+! 21 ♖xb2 ♖b8+ 22 ♖c1 ♜c3.



Black only has a pawn for the rook but the attack is simply irresistible. After 23 fxe4 dxe4 24 ♖f4 ♜c8 25 ♟c4 ♜xc4 26 ♟d2 e3+ 27 ♜xe3 ♜c6 (or 27...♜d8+ 28 ♟e1 ♜xd1+ 29 ♟xd1 ♜xc2+ 30 ♟e1 ♜b1+ 31 ♟f2 ♜xh1 and Black is also winning here) 28 ♜h3 ♜d8+ 29 ♟e1 ♜e8, Black has a decisive material advantage.

21 ♜e3



Exercise: So Black has gotten his big guns trained on the white king's abode. How can he make further inroads?

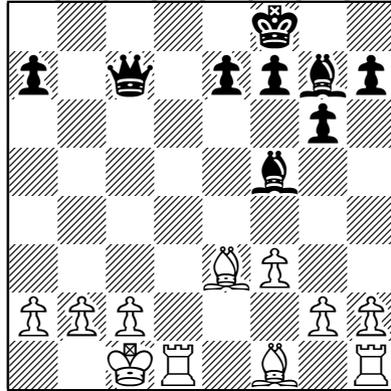
Answer: Black further accelerates his already dangerous attack by nudging the queen off the third rank.

21...♜c3!

Note that 21...exf3?! is met adequately with 22 ♟d3 and Black has no breakthrough.

22 ♜d4??

A very significant error by White, though it mercifully ends his suffering considerably sooner. The better move is 22 ♜f4 but it soon gets ugly anyway after 22...♜b6 23 ♜c1 e3 24 ♜d3 ♜bc8 25 ♜xc3 ♜xc3 26 ♟d1 and now Black just picks up material with 26...e2 27 ♟xe2 ♜xc2 28 ♜xc2 ♟xc2+ 29 ♟xc2 ♜g6+ which should win for Black without too many issues.



Question: So White has gained two rooks and a pawn for the queen. That seems like a mighty good deal, does it?

Answer: You are absolutely right, if we were only counting points, it would be. But here White is well behind in development and Black has completed his, which means that Black has full compensation for the small investment he has made.

16 ♖d2

Surprisingly often White has managed to get himself in trouble fast by playing 16 ♖d3 here. Black deals with it by issuing a simple double threat with 16...♗e5 17 ♖d2 (17 c3?? is of course worse and after 17...♗xe3+ 18 ♖c2 ♗e2+ 19 ♖d2 ♖xd3+ 20 ♖c1 ♖h6, White resigned in F.Khrapatin-M.Golubev, Internet (blitz) 2004) 17...♖xd3 18 ♖xd3 ♗xb2 19 ♖xa7 f5 (note that 19...♗a3+ does not win a piece since after 20 ♖e2, Black cannot capture the bishop on account of his own back rank) 20 ♖e3 f4 21 ♖d2 ♗d4+ 22 ♖e2 ♗c4+ 23 ♖e1 ♗e6+ 24 ♖f1 ♗xa2 and while the game is far from over, White's pieces are terribly coordinated.

16...♖e6

Black has to play...h7-h5 at some point.

In our main game, Golubev, a major Dragon expert, decides first to provoke another pawn weakness on the queenside before playing the restraining move. There are several examples of Black playing it right away, deciding to keep the bishop on f5, apparently the more active square. With 16...h5 17 ♖e2, and now:

a) 17...♖f6, White has a few choices:

a1) 18 g3?! ♗b7! 19 c4 ♗a6 20 a3 ♗a4, and White is beginning to have real problems keeping the many holes in his position covered, E.Kislik-S.Husari, Budapest 2010.

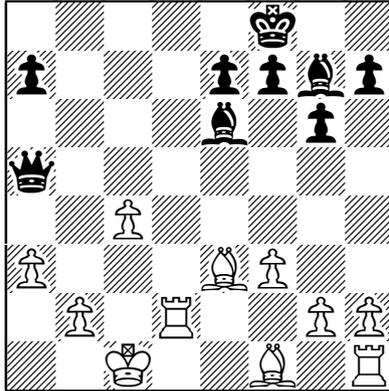
a2) 18 ♖b1 ♗e5 19 ♖d4 ♗f4 20 ♖hd1 ♖xd4 21 ♖xd4 ♗xh2 22 ♖f1 h4 and while Black has the initiative, there is nothing decisive.

a3) 18 ♖hd1!? ♗xh2 19 ♖c4 ♗c7 20 ♖b3 h4 and White has managed to coordinate his pieces and is not really worse off, but it is also hard to see where any potential winning chances should come from.

b) 17...♗b8!? 18 b3 ♖c3 19 ♖d5 ♗b4 20 ♖c5 ♗f4+ 21 ♖b1 ♖e6 22 ♖d8+ ♖g7 23 ♖xe7 ♗c7 24 ♖d3 ♖f5 25 ♖d6 ♗c6 26 ♖a3? (weirdly desperate as 26 ♖hd1!? is relatively best with 26...♖d4 27 ♖a3 (obviously not 27 ♖xd4?? ♗xc2+ 28 ♖a1 ♗c3 mate) 27...♖f6 28 ♖b2 ♖xb2 29 ♖xb2 ♖xd3 30 ♖xd3 ♗d6 31 h3 ♗d4+ 32 ♖b1 a5 reaching an ending that either side would need help from their counter-

part to win) 26...♗xd3 27 ♗xd3 h4 28 h3 ♖f6 and while there is still work left to be done, Black has chances in this endgame, N.Grigore-V.Jianu Bucharest 2005.

17 c4 ♖a5 18 a3

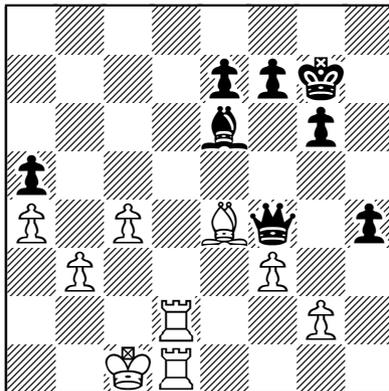


White has to walk the fine line of keeping everything covered and not making any unnecessary weaknesses. Over the next few moves, he manages quite well while Black has his pieces on their best squares to continue applying pressure.

18...h5 19 ♗e2 ♖g8 20 ♖hd1 ♗e5 21 ♗d4 ♗xh2 22 ♗xg7 ♖xg7 23 ♗d3

Though the h2-pawn has been snared, a pair of bishops have been exchanged and there are no longer any immediate threats against the king, so White is in decent shape. The next step for Black is to start pushing the kingside pawns forward to put White under pressure to defend correctly.

23...♗f4 24 b3 a5 25 a4 h4 26 ♗e4?!

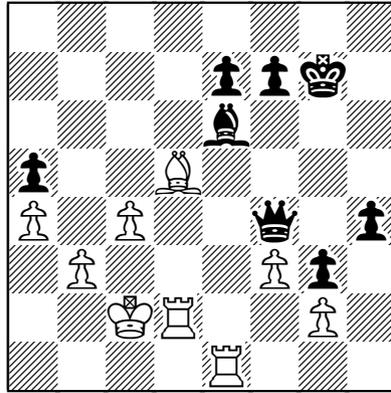


It is easy to think that this is a better square for the white bishop than d3, but from e4, it is basically shut off from the defence against Black's kingside pawn advances. Simply waiting with 26 ♖f1 would have been a better strategy.

26...g5 27 ♗e1?

White gets quite careless at this point, making his defensive task potentially much more difficult. The correct defence would be to play 27 ♖h1!, preventing Black from playing...g5-g4 directly due to the hanging h-pawn. Now Black's kingside advance will be considerably more complicated. For in-

stance, after 27... ♖g3 (27... f5 28 ♖d5 ♖xd5 29 cxd5 ♚e5 leaves Black with the better chances, but how much better is a good question) 28 ♜c2 g4 29 ♖a8 gxf3 30 gxf3 h3 31 ♜hh2, while Black is definitely better with the the h-pawn certainly a major thorn in White's side, this is far from easily won because the white rooks are connected and at present keeping the second rank guarded very nicely.
27...g4 28 ♜c2 g3 29 ♖d5!?



This is not a bad idea, challenging Black to make an extremely important decision on whether to keep the bishops on the board or to exchange them. The alternatives do not look promising for White. Both 29 ♜de2 h3 30 gxh3 ♖xh3 31 ♜g1 ♜f8 32 ♜d2 e6 or 29 ♜g1 ♚e3 30 ♜dd1 ♜f6 31 ♖d3 ♚f2+ 32 ♜c3 h3 33 gxh3 ♖xh3 look similar in their outcome as White has an uncomfortable position, attempting to defend against a far advanced black g-pawn without any chance of real counterplay.
29...♖xd5?

The exchange of bishops seems like a good decision because it seems difficult for White to defend himself against the passed pawn Black is about to create on the kingside. However, the opposite turns out to be the case. Black needs the bishop to support his action on the kingside as well as to create threats against White's king when the time comes. One of the key issues for White is that his bishop has a real hard time getting back to defend against the passed pawn that will emerge on the g-file, because the f-pawn is in the way. Furthermore, White cannot rid himself of the f-pawn because then Black gets an additional two passed pawns. For that reason, Black should have avoided the exchange of bishops and instead opt for 29... ♖f5+! 30 ♖e4 h3 31 gxh3 (31 ♖xf5? is even worse as after 31... ♚xf5+ 32 ♜b2 h2 intending amongst others... ♚f5-c5-g1, White cannot keep both the back rank and the g2 – pawn guarded at the same time) 31... ♖xh3 32 ♜g1 ♜f6 33 ♜d3 g2 34 ♜d2 ♚h2 35 ♜dd1 ♚g3, and while far from easily won for Black, White has a long defence ahead of him.
30 ♖xd5 h3

Black can also try 30...e6 31 ♜d3 (31 ♜h5? doesn't help White as he both loses time and the ability to coordinate the rooks to efficiently defend against Black's action on the kingside after 31... ♜g6 32 ♜he5 h3) 31...h3 32 gxh3 ♚h4 33 ♜g1 ♚xh3 34 ♜d2 ♚f5+ 35 ♜d3 and Black cannot make any progress as 35... ♚h3 is answered with 36 ♜d2 and the g-pawn gets no further.

31 ♖e4 hxg2 32 ♜xf4 g1 ♚ 33 ♜g4+ ½-½

Here a draw was agreed because Black's king cannot avoid the perpetual checks from White's rooks.