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Mastering minor piece endgames

Part 1

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents 3
Key to symbols 5
Introduction 7
Editorial preface 9

Chapter 1. Bishop vs pawns 11
1.0. Two bishops mate 11
1.1. Bishop and pawn vs king 12
1.2. Bishop and pawn vs king and pawns 15
1.3. Bishop vs more pawns 31

Chapter 2. Same-colored bishop endgames 57
2.1. Bishop and pawn vs bishop 57
2.2 Bishop and two pawns vs bishop or bishop and pawn 84
2.3. Complex bishop endgames 102
2.4. Barrier 120
2.5. Practical games 141

Chapter 3. Opposite colored bishop endgames 173
3.1. Bishop and connected pawns vs Bishop 173
3.2. Bishop and separated pawns vs Bishop 184
3.3. Complex bishop endgames 193
3.4. Practical games 223

Chapter 4. Unusual practical games 247

KEY TO SYMBOLS

=	Equality or equal chances
⩲	White has a slight advantage
⩱	Black has a slight advantage
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+-	White has a decisive advantage
-+	Black has a decisive advantage
∞	unclear
⩯	with compensation
⇆	with counterplay
↑	with initiative
→	with an attack
∆	with the idea
□	only move

N	novelty
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesing move
?!	a dubious move
+	check
#	mate

INTRODUCTION

The second book of the series "The Modern Endgame Manual" is all about bishop endgames. We decided to share the "Minor pieces" endings between 2 books, "Bishop endgames" and "Bishop vs knight, and knight endgames".

Bishop endgames can basically be divided into 3 main chapters:

- Bishop vs bishop of the same color
- Bishop vs bishop of opposite colors
- Bishop vs pawns.

Bishop endgames are usually extremely tricky, with perhaps not so many theoretical positions to learn, but a lot of positions where the result is pretty unclear until the very end in a practical game. This is especially true of opposite-colored bishop endgames, where small nuances can decide the outcome of the game.

The bishop is a great fighter when it comes to stopping an opponent's pawns and is an extremely useful piece at long distance, for example when the pawns are running on both sides. On the other hand, when it comes to a short-range battle, we discover that sometimes a bishop is not much better than a lowly pawn.

Also, the bishop can cover only 32 squares, which makes him a piece that requires good-handling.

A great example of this are the positions where one side has a king+bishop+a- or h- pawn, but with a bishop operating on the opposite color to that of the promotion square, while the other side has just his king in the corner of the promotion square. This position is a theoretical draw, which is actually quite shocking! A full piece and a pawn up and just a draw?! A very special case indeed in the game of chess.

But never fear, the current book will lead you step-by-step - from the very simple to the hugely complex — and you will be introduced to the theoretical knowledge you need, and also how to apply it in bishop endgame praxis.

However, for most of the bishop endgames we should remember only one rule: The bishop is a long range piece and it is great in open positions, especially when the fight comes to a long diagonal, but on the other hand the bishop generally struggles when it finds itself in closed positions.

The material inside this book is very useful for players at every level, from the complete beginner up to GM standard! After a deep study of this book you will be able to call yourself quite an expert, something you will hopefully prove in your future games!

EDITORIAL PREFACE

In this series of nine endgame books, FIDE Senior Trainer Adrian Mikhalchishin, FIDE Senior Trainer Efstratios Grivas and IGM Csaba Balogh combine their experience as trainers and as practical players to create something very special.

The authors aim for very understandable explanations of every endgame position in each book.

The specification:

- 1st book — Queen and pawn endgames.
- 2–3 — Minor piece endgames (bishop and knight endgames).
- 4–5 — These will feature the fight between different material constellations.
- 6–8 — These books are going to focus on the most common endgames, which are of course rook endings.
- 9th — This book will focus on exchanges and simplifications.

The main concept of each book is to provide theoretical knowledge which can be used in practical games. It means the focus of the books will be on positions which are the most likely to occur - and the practical playing of them.

That's why you will firstly meet the theoretical part, and secondly the practical examples of how games actually continued in a particular endgame.

Yes, you're right, you won't find too many very complicated studies, stunning manouevres or rarely-appearing positions — and there is a simple reason why not!

How often do we see positions, for example two knights vs pawn where one knight is blocking the pawn and the other one tries to get the king to the corner before releasing the second knight for the mate? Or constellations with crazy material on the board? This might happen in one game out of 100! You could spend hundreds of hours working on something that might bring you "only" a single point more out of 100 games!

Our approach is quite different: let's make more points in the other 99 games! And who knows, we might also be lucky in the remaining one, but actually, statistically, it would almost not matter.

"The Modern Endgame Manual" will make an expert out of you in most of the endgames which are going to appear in your long career as a chess player!

CHAPTER 1

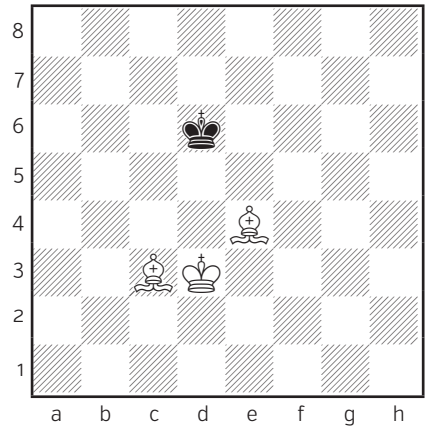
BISHOP VS PAWNS

1.0. TWO BISHOPS MATE

In this pre-chapter — before moving on to the 'real' bishop endgames — we learn how to deliver mate with two bishops. It is different to the knight and bishop mate, when we must know the technique otherwise we might fail. Here everything goes smoothly even if we have never studied it before. The pair of bishops in general are extremely powerful, and in an open position they cover the entire board.

1

Theoretical position



There is no good or bad corner with the two bishops: White can squeeze the king wherever he wants and then the mate is automatic.

1.♔d4

White must use all his pieces for the squeezing. Without the king, there will be no mate.

1...♔e6 2.♔c5 ♔e7 3.♔d5

The king cannot escape through the kingside as the bishops cover all the squares.

3...♔d7 4.♗e5 ♔e7 5.♗g6 ♔d7 6.♗d6

Within a few moves the king is already on the back rank.

6...♔c8 7.♔c6 ♔d8 8.♗f7 ♔c8 9.♗e7

The easiest method is to proceed square-by-square.

9...♔b8 10.♔b6 ♔c8 11.♗e6+ ♔b8 12.♗d6+ ♔a8 13.♗d5#

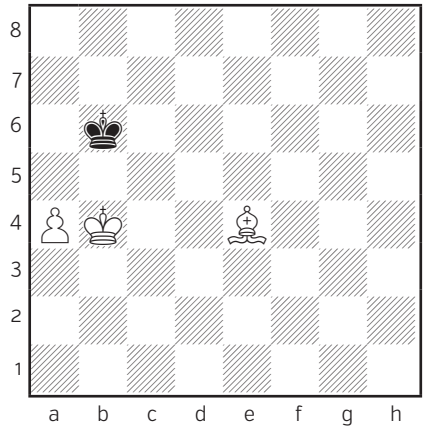
It's as easy as that. We don't need to memorize anything here.

1.1. BISHOP AND PAWN VS KING

In this chapter we get to learn about some essential theoretical positions which have huge practical importance.

1

Theoretical position



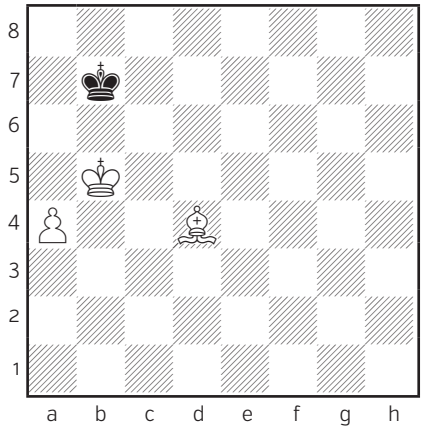
If we have an a- or h-pawn in a bishop endgame, we should always keep in mind the color of the pawn's promotion square; whether if it matches the color of our bishop or not. If it does, then we can easily make a queen from our pawn.

1.a5+ ♔a6 2.♗d5 ♔a7 3.♔b5 ♔b8 4.♔b6+-

The king must leave the corner and the pawn promotes.

2

Theoretical position



However if the promotion square of the a- or h-pawn does not match the color of the bishop and the opponent's king stands in front of the pawn, the position is a theoretical draw. This is an extremely important idea for the defensive side and everybody should know it.

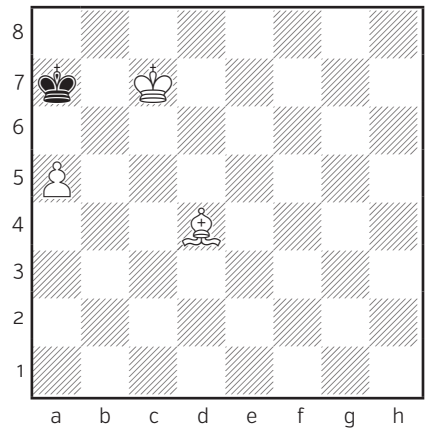
1.a5 ♔a8 2.♔b6

2.a6 does not change anything. 2... ♔b8 3.♔b6 ♔a8= White cannot make progress, Black just moves … ♔b8-a8 and stalemate saves him.

2...♔b8 3.♗e5+ ♔a8

White cannot squeeze the king out from the corner because of stalemate.

4.♔c7 ♔a7 5.♗d4+

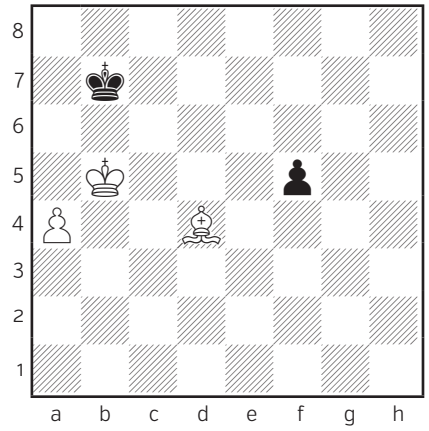


5...♔a8!=

Black must always stay in the corner and the game is drawn. But not 5...♔a6? which allows 6.♗b6 ♔b5 7.♔b7+-

3

Theoretical position



The result remains the same if the defensive side has an extra pawn. The idea could be that there will be no stalemate as Black has a pawn, but actually it does not affect anything as Black advances his pawn.

1.a5 f4 2.a6+ ♔a8 3.♔b6 f3

And Black either sacrifices his pawn or after

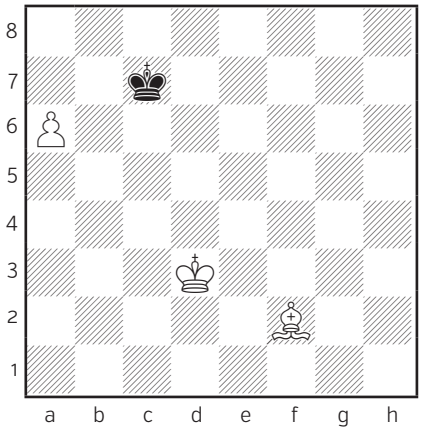
4.♗f2

White blocks it, but now it is the same as if it wasn't on the board at all.

4...♔b8=

4

Theoretical position



Now we will learn some techniques concerning how the black king could be prevented from occupying the corner if the promotion square does not fit to the bishop's color. One of the most important motifs is the following:

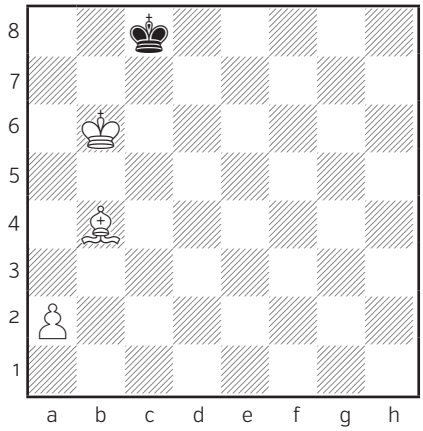
1.♗a7!

Otherwise Black goes to the corner.

1...♔c6 2.♔c4!

Please note, if the white king wasn't this close, the game would end in a draw because of the …♔b5 threat. White would be forced to move his bishop to save the pawn, but then the king gets back to the corner. Now, however, White manages to squeeze the king out from the c-file.

2...♔c7 3.♔b5 ♔c8 4.♔b6 ♔d7 5.♗b8+-

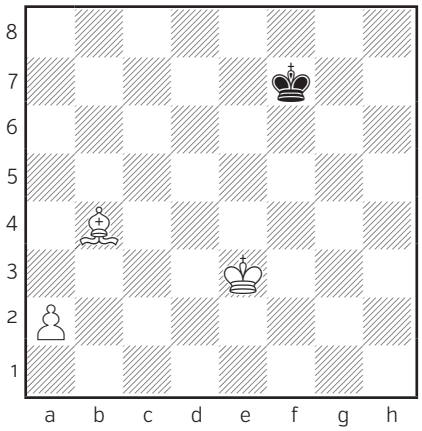


4.♗d6!+-

This is the key move and Black must forget about reaching the corner.

5

Theoretical position

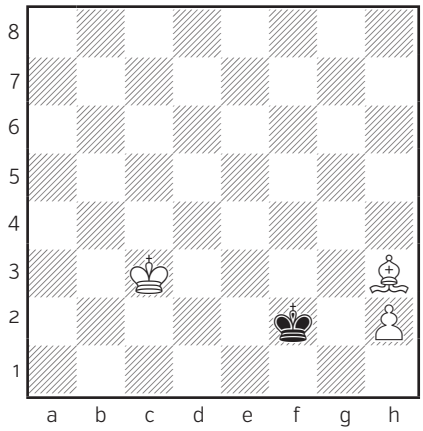


Another very important motif to avoid the king's occupancy of the corner is

1.♔d4! ♔e6 2.♔c5! ♔d7 3.♔b6! ♔c8

6

Frink

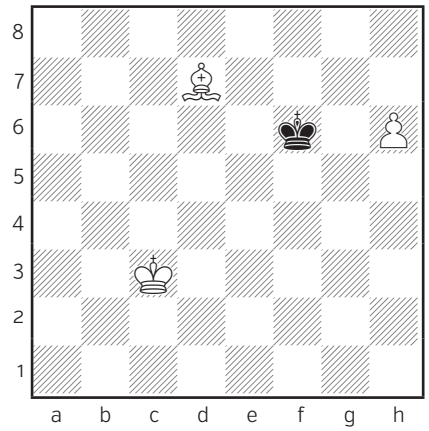


From Frink's study we learn another nice motif to stop the king from getting into the corner. Black is threatening ♔g1, therefore the bishop must move — but only one move is winning.

1.♗d7! ♔e3 2.h4 ♔e4!

2...♔f4 loses to 3.♔d4+- and the king is forced to move back to the 3rd rank.

3.h5 ♔e5 4.h6 ♔f6

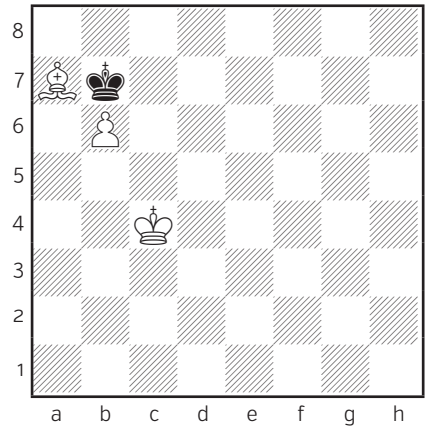


5.♗e8!+-

Cutting the king off from the corner. ♗h5 would be just as effective.

7

Theoretical position



If the stronger side has any pawn other than an a- or h-pawn, the position is always winning automatically. There is only one exception! Let's take a look at why White cannot win now.

1.♔b5 ♔a8

Black just repeats moves on the b7-a8 squares with his king and White cannot make progress. The problem is that he cannot release his bishop from the a7 square, because any attempts with the king to get closer (from a6 or c8) lead to stalemate!

2.♗b8

This leads to a draw as Black can take the opposition

2...♔xb8 3.♔a6 ♔a8=

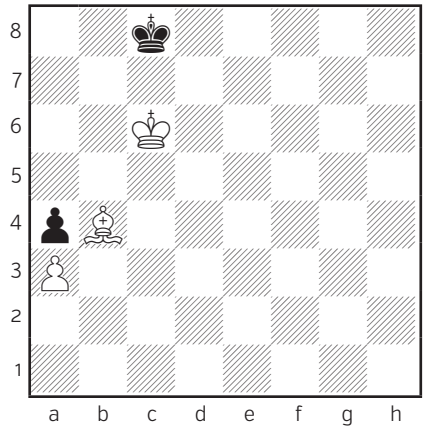
In the next chapter we will see some typical examples of how this endgame might easily arise from a practical game.

1.2. BISHOP AND PAWN VS KING AND PAWNS

This chapter continues with many theoretical positions which are essential knowledge for all players.

1

Theoretical position



Here is another famous and frequently-seen theoretical position. The a8 corner does not match the color of the bishop, but the king can be cut off from reaching the coner with ♗d6. However the a4 pawn saves Black, since whenever the white king returns to pick up the pawn, Black will have enough time to get back to the corner.

Rauzer made some very deep studies almost 100 years ago of this kind of positions. As we see, the defensive method is quite simple: the only important thing he must know is that he should always keep his king in the upper-half of the board...let's see how this looks in practice.

1.♗d6!

Otherwise the king gets to a8 and there is nothing to discuss.

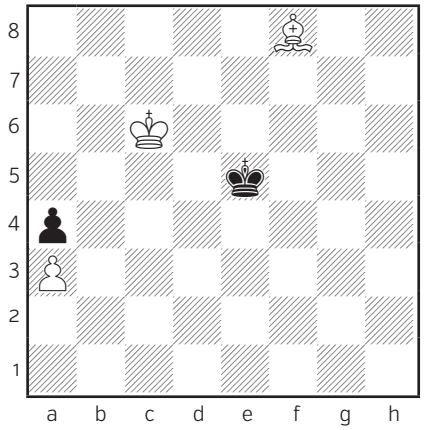
1...♔d8 2.♔b7 ♔d7 3.♗c7

White slowly squeezes out the black king. He must send it as far as possible from the a8 corner.

3...♔e6 4.♔c6 ♔e7! 5.♗b6 ♔e6 6.♗c5 ♔e5

There is nothing wrong with 6...♔f7 as after 7.♔b5 the black king gets back to the corner 7...♔e6 8.♔xa4 ♔d7 9.♔b5 ♔c7 10.♔a6 ♔b8=

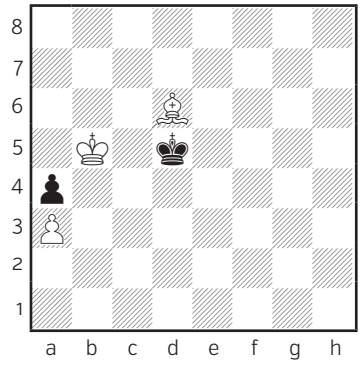
7.♗f8



7...♔e6!

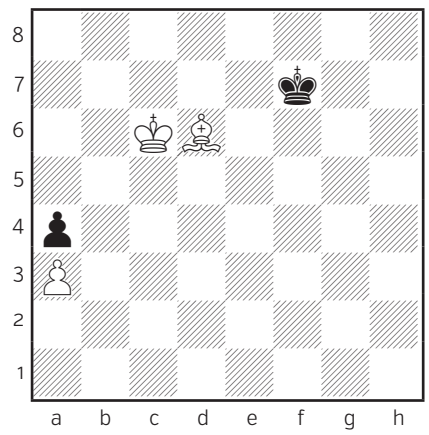
Always stay in the upper-half of the board! Let's study what happens if Black is not familiar with the correct defensive method and instead crosses the middle of the board to stay as close to the corner as possible. 7...♔d4? loses to 8.♗d6! The only winning move! We will understand soon the importance of occupying the h2-b8 diagonal... 8...♔e4 (*8...♔c4* is met

by *9.♗c5! ♔d3 10.♔b5* and the king never gets back to the corner. *10...♔e4 11.♔xa4 ♔d5 12.♔b5*+-) 9.♔b5 ♔d5



10.♗h2! This is the point! White controls the h2-b8 diagonal with his bishop and the king cannot get back to the corner... 10...♔e6 11.♔xa4 ♔d7 12.♔b5 ♔c8 13.♔b6+-

8.♗d6 ♔f7



If the bishop was somewhere on, say, the f4-g3-h2 squares, White could win with ♔b5-♔e6, ♔xa4-♔d7, ♔b5-♔c8 and ♔b6. However Black goes …♔e6 with a tempo (attacking the bishop), which is enough to get back to the corner in time. White cannot improve things by having the bishop on h2, because then from e6 the king could go to e7, staying close enough to the corner. Therefore White tries to the squeeze the king even further.

9.♔d7 ♔f6 10.♗h2 ♔f7 11.♗e5 ♔g6

Using the position of the e5 bishop, so that if the white king goes towards the a4 pawn, …♔f5 wins an important tempo. 11...♔f8= also holds.

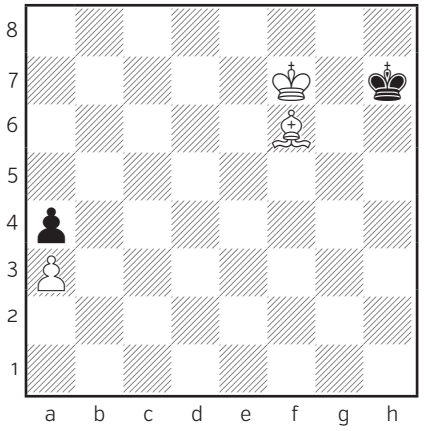
12.♔e6

12.♔c6 ♔f5!=

12...♔g5

12...♔h7 is also possible.

13.♗b2 ♔g6 14.♗f6 ♔h6 15.♔f7 ♔h7



Black cannot get further from the corner, but it costs White also if he strays too far from the a4 pawn. We must stop here for a moment and imagine if the white pawn was on a2 in the initial position. In this case, White wins by playing ♗g7, stalemating the black king and forcing him to push a3, which could then be taken by the bishop.

16.♗e5 ♔h6 17.♗g7+ ♔h7 18.♔f8 ♔g6 19.♔g8

White tries to force the king to leave the upper-half of the board, but he cannot succeed...

19...♔f5 20.♔f7 ♔g5 21.♗f8

21.♔e6 ♔g6=; 21.♗f6+ ♔h6=

21...♔f5 22.♗e7

22.♗g7 ♔g5=

22...♔e5

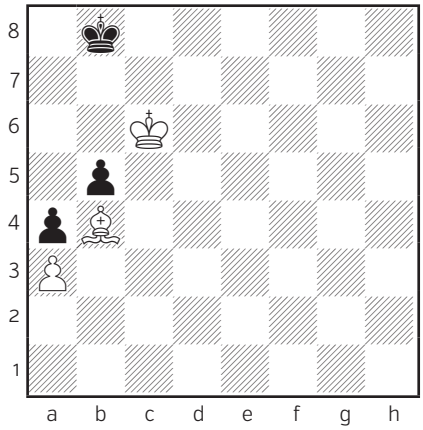
White has done his best to get the black king to the center, but now it threatens to run back to the corner through d5-c6-b7. This has to be prevented, but then the king gets back comfortably to its rightful position in the upper half of the board.

23.♔e8 ♔e6 24.♗f8 ♔f6=

White cannot make progress.

2

Theoretical position



It is very important to note that an extra b-pawn changes the outcome, despite the wrong color of the promotion square and the fact that the black king is already in the corner. The reason for this is a 'stalemate' concept, which eventually forces Black to push b4...

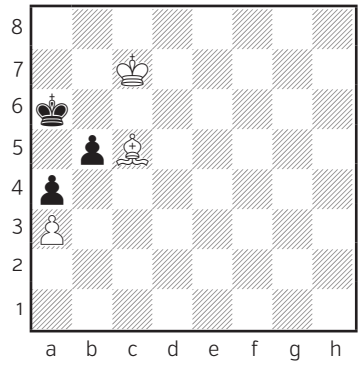
1.♗d6+ ♔a7

1...♔c8 2.♗c7+-

2.♔c7 ♔a6 3.♗b4!

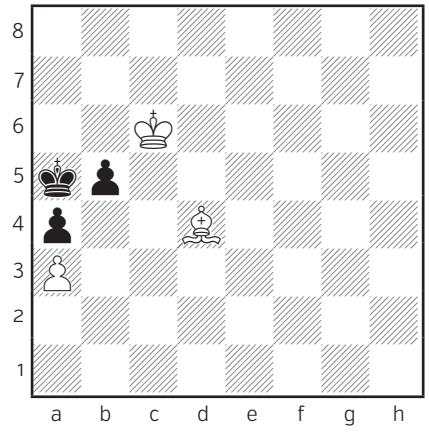
White must avoid a trick before stalemating the king...

The careless 3.♗c5? falls into the instructive trap.



3...b4! 4.axb4 (*4.♗xb4 ♔a7=*) 4... ♔b5!= and Black advances his a-pawn, forces White to stop it with the bishop and give up his b4 pawn.

3...♔a7 4.♗c5+ ♔a6 5.♔c6 ♔a5 6.♗d4!



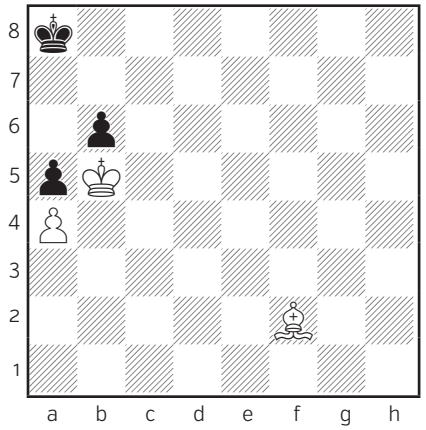
6...b4

6...♔a6 leads to the same after 7.♗b6! b4 8.axb4 a3 9.b5#

7.♗b6+! ♔a6 8.axb4 a3 9.b5#

3

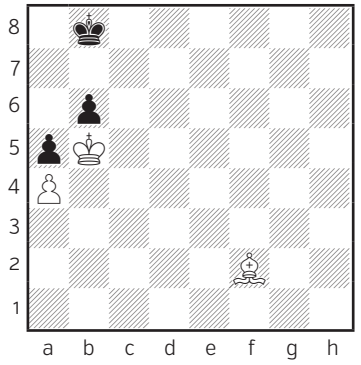
Theoretical position



If we move all the pawns one rank forward, the position is drawn again because the stalemate idea does not exist anymore, although Black must still be a bit careful.

1...♔b7!

This or …♔a7 must be played. Black cannot allow the white king get to a6, because once again the stalemating tricks become valid, viz: 1...♔b8?



loses to 2.♔a6! ♔c7 Black must leave the corner, but he will never get back there again after (*2...♔a8 3.♗g3!*+- is the problem.) 3.♔a7! ♔c8 (*3...♔c6 4.♗xb6*+-) 4.♗xb6 ♔d7 5.♔b7+-

2.♗e3 ♔a7

Without the king on a6, White cannot win.

3.♔c6 ♔a6

3...♔a8 or ♔b8 are also possible now, as White cannot play ♔a6...

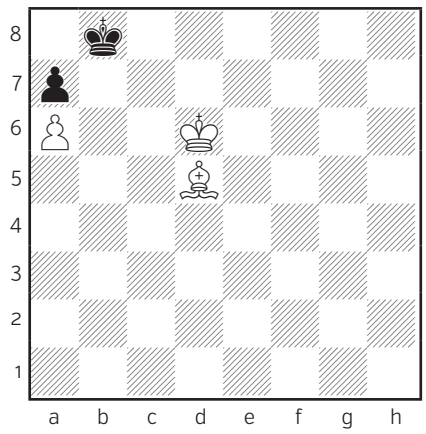
4.♔c7

4.♗xb6=

4...♔a7=

4

Theoretical position



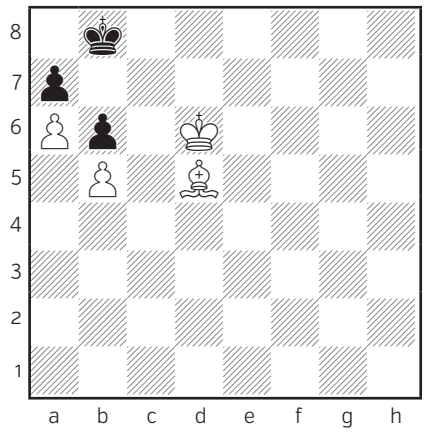
This is another very important theoretical position. Despite the fact that the a8 square matches the color of the bishop, White cannot win. Black just plays …♔b8-c8 and White has no chance to win the a7 pawn because attempts to squeeze the black king out lead to stalemate.

1.♔c6 ♔c8 2.♗e6+ ♔b8 3.♗d7 ♔a8=

White cannot make progress.

5

Theoretical position

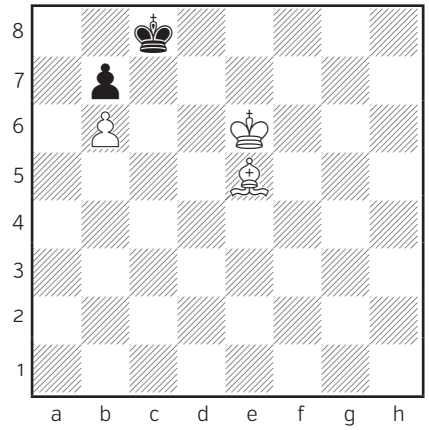


This one is quite funny, as the pawn chain might continue as long as we want (pair of pawns on c4-c5, d3-d4) and the position remains drawn. The only vulnerable pawn is still the one on a7, but White cannot get access to it, because of the usual stalemate motifs.

1.♔c6 ♔c8 2.♗e6+ ♔b8 3.♔d6 ♔a8=

6

Theoretical position



If we move all pieces one file to the right, the outcome remains the same. White should try to win the b7 pawn, but he does not have access to it. Black just waits with ♔c8-d8 or, if White allows, he can also move into the corner. White cannot make progress either way.

1.♔d6 ♔b8

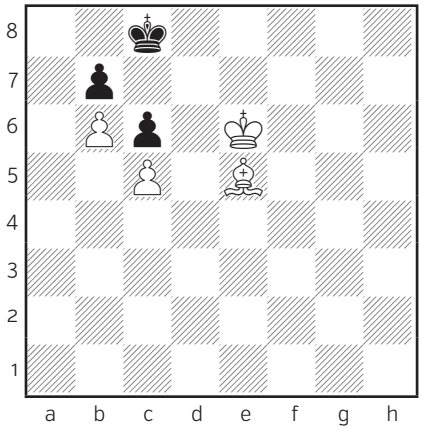
1...♔d8=

2.♔d7+ ♔a8=

If we move all the pieces one more square to the right in the initial position, it is already winning, as White has access to the c7 pawn with his king via a6-b7.

7

Theoretical position

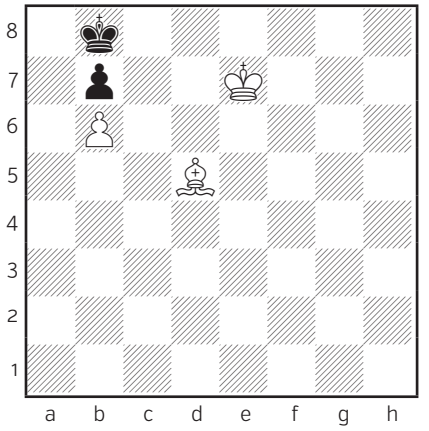


This pawn chain might also continue as long as we want, but the outcome remains the same: White should attempt get to the b7 pawn, but he cannot because of the stalemate.

1.♗f6 ♔b8 2.♔d7 ♔a8=

8

Theoretical position



Even if White had a light-squared bishop the outcome remains the same. Black just waits with …♔b8-a8 and White cannot play ♔c7 because of stalemate.

1.♔d7 ♔a8

A nice trick is

2.♗c6

Or ♗a6 at some point, but Black just ignores it and plays

2...♔b8! and after

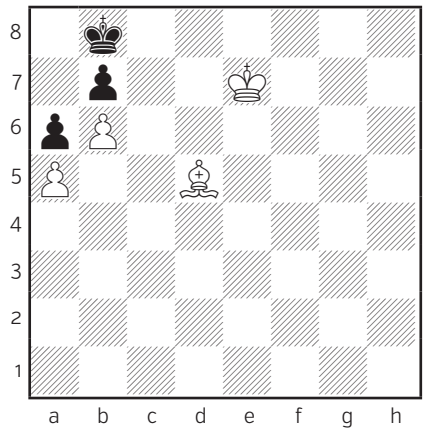
3.♔d6

he can already capture the bishop.

3...bxc6 4.♔xc6 ♔c8=

9

Theoretical position



Surprisingly the position is still drawn if we add two a-pawns to the board.

1.♔d8 ♔a8 2.♗c6

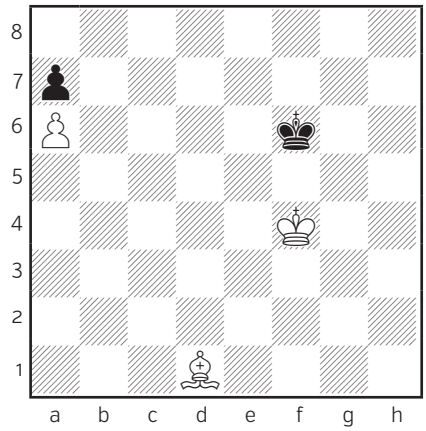
2.♗c4 ♔b8 3.♔d7 ♔a8 4.♗xa6 bxa6 with a theoretically-drawn pawn endgame because of the stalemate when the white king moves to the c-file. 5.♔c6 ♔b8 6.b7 ♔a7 7.♔c7=

2...♔b8!=

There is no way to make progress.

10

Theoretical position

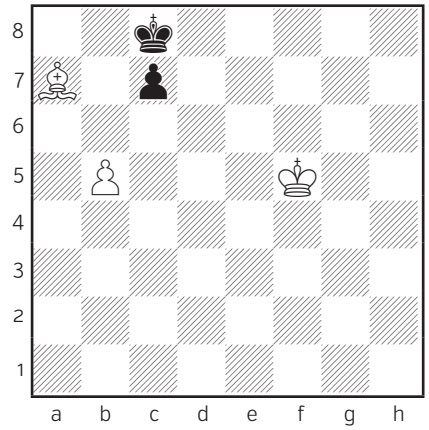


Here is a trick which allows White to fight against the black king's march to the b8 square. The only winning move is

1.♗g4! ♔e7 2.♔e5 ♔d8 3.♔d6+-

11

Theoretical position



Here are some practical examples illustrating how we can get to that unusual theoretical draw with the pawn on b6 and bishop on b7.

1...c6! 2.b6

2.bxc6 ♔c7=

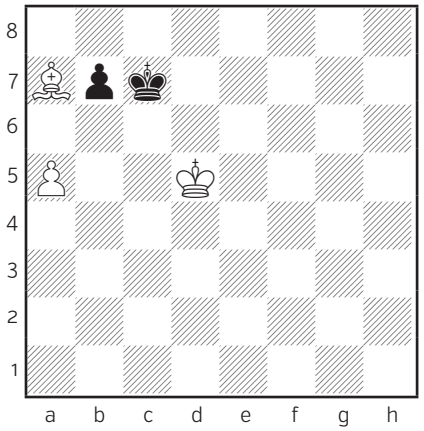
2...♔b7=

and Black sacrifices his c-pawn followed by waiting with his king on b7-a8.

In the next example we meet with the same motif, just in a slightly different form. This theoretical position has arisen many times in practical games and the stronger side has often forgotten about the hidden trap:

12

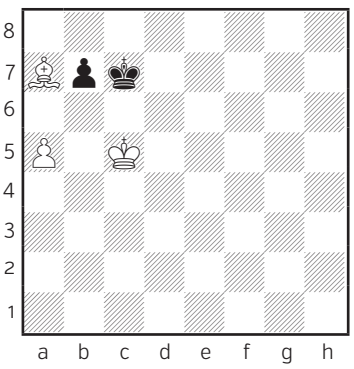
▹ L. Paulsen
▸ J. Metger
Nurnberg, 1888



The corner does not match the bishop, but the black king is cut-off. All White needs to do is drive his king to b5. However, the execution requires care!

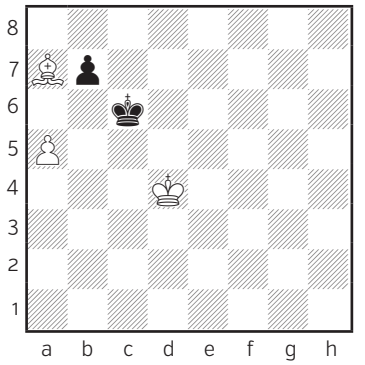
1.♔c4?

The most direct move also fails: 1.♔c5?



1...b6+!= and the black king either enters the corner or after 2.axb6+ ♔b7= we reach the theoretical draw.

The winning move was 1.♔d4! Going around with the king, sidestepping the c5 and c4 squares. 1...♔c6



(*1...b5 2.a6!* and the king cannot get to the corner. *2...♔c6 3.♔c3+-; 1...b6* can be answered by *2.a6! ♔c6 3.♔c4+-*) 2.♗b6! Precision is needed again. (*2.♔c3?* allows *2...b6! 3.a6 ♔b5=*) 2...♔d6 (*2...♔b5 3.♔d5 ♔a6 4.♔d6+-*) 3.♔c4 ♔c6 4.♔b4 ♔d7 5.♔c5 ♔c8 6.♗a7! Preventing ...♔b8 and the white king reaches the b6 square soon. 6...♔c7 7.♔b5 ♔d7 8.♗b8! White can already extract his bishop. 8...♔c8 9.♗f4+-

1...b5+!

Black escapes to a theoretical draw.

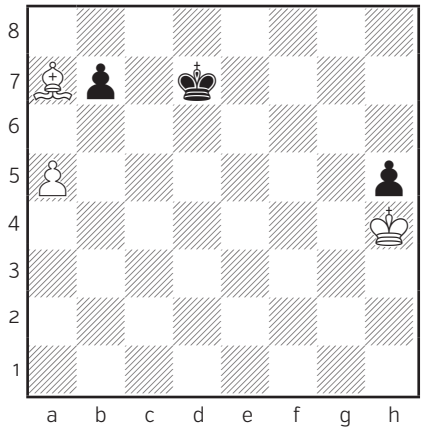
2.axb6+

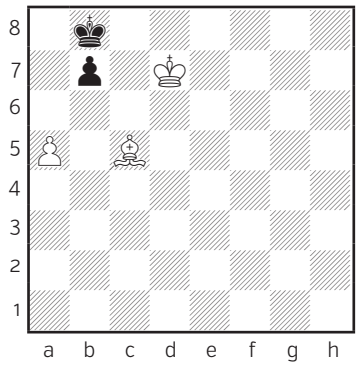
2.♔xb5 ♔b7=

2...♔b7=

13

▹ P. Harikrishna
▸ R. Edouard
Gibraltar, 2014



65.♔xh5

Another attempt to win was 65.♗d4 ♔c7 66.♔xh5 (If White tries to cut off the path to b8-a8 with 66.♗e5+ then 66...♔c6 and the bishop is forced to retreat because of the b6 threat. 67.♗d4 (*67.♔xh5 b6 68.a6 b5=* holds easily.) 67...♔c7=) 66...♔b8 67.♔g6 ♔a8 68.♔f7 ♔b8 69.♔e7 ♔a8 70.♔d7 ♔b8 71.♗c5