

Coaching the Chess Stars

Vladimir Tukmakov



Thinkers Publishing

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COACHING THE CHESS STARS

by

Vladimir Tukmakov

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Preface

I published my autobiography, *Profession: Chessplayer*, in 2009, a time I believed the most suitable to take stock of my life. My career as a player had finished much earlier; as a coach and captain I achieved sensational success with Team Ukraine when we won the 2004 Chess Olympiad, but we never came close to repeating this triumph, so it was no accident that I completed my 2009 book with a chapter on our win in Calvia.

However life takes an unpredictable turn every now and then, and in 2010 Ukraine repeated its success at the Khanty-Mansiysk Olympiad. Even though I was soon forced to leave the team, my coaching career did not end. In the years that followed I worked with many elite players, either as captain of various teams or as personal coach. Many events took place; some brought me joy, others sorrow. Achievements make our life happier; the inevitable defeats force us to examine mistakes and to improve. The two books I have written in recent years (*Modern Chess Preparation* and *Risk and Bluff in Chess*) have their roots in these experiences and contain my reflections on chess players preparation and the secrets of success. The chess world has expanded enormously in recent years. Some 30 to 40 years ago the elite comprised almost exclusively Soviet chess players. Who would have predicted then that the World Champion would be Norwegian and representatives of the Philippines, China and India would be in the Top Ten!?

The perpetual domination of the Soviet Union is usually explained by invoking the notion of a mysterious and powerful Soviet School of Chess, but actually the phenomenon was extremely simple: in the Soviet Union the state cared so much about the game and its status that playing chess became a very attractive and prestigious prospect for children and their parents, hence a large number of professional players and coaches emerged. Nothing of this kind happened in the West, where chess talents were mostly left to their own devices. Naturally, competition between chess professionals and amateurs ended with predictable results. The USSR was rich in talented soloists, had a wealth of conscientious orchestra members and enough excellent conductors, i.e. chess coaches; the rest of the world sometimes gave birth to stars, but never had conductors or supporting cast

At some points throughout the book, I make some comparisons with betterknown openings, to illustrate where some ideas may have been borrowed from and to facilitate the readers pattern recognition. For instance, in Bauer-Valles from chapter 4, the position we reached out of the opening had significant similarities with a certain line from the Trompowsky. I also tried to offer diversity early on in the analysis of these games in order to suit readers of either a solid or a more daring style.

Nowadays the world chess orchestra has only one conductor the all knowing and infallible computer. Its authority is indisputable, its power over musicians absolute, and its influence extends to every corner of the world. In these circumstances practically everyone has an opportunity to learn and win. Does this mean that the profession of chess coach has outlived its usefulness? I think such a statement would be far from the truth. In the initial stages of training, a child definitely needs an understanding professional teacher, but even at the highest level the value of having a coach cannot be underestimated. Of course the time of coaches whose main responsibility was analysis is a thing of the past. At present, seconds perform the role of an accompanist in the orchestra, helping the chief

conductor, a.k.a. the cyber assistant, to rehearse parts with the performers and to speed up this process.

How does one achieve the unique sound and distinct technique that are absolutely necessary to become successful at the highest level? It can only be done via a deep understanding of the chess players personality and the unique talent that distinguishes him from other soloists. It is here that the role of a coach is of the utmost importance. First, it is necessary to understand the nature of your students chess talent, and second, it is important to identify the players character and personality traits. His style ought to be harmonious, so that the essence of the human being matches the characteristics of his chess talent. Since it is the same emotionless computer that is now in charge of the purely chess component, it falls upon the coach to deal with the chess players personality, mysterious and unknowable as it might be. Yes, a lot depends on the number and power of dependable cyber assistants, on the size and quality of various chess databases, on the enthusiasm of the seconds and on the ability to work with modern electronic gadgets, but at the highest level, almost all elite chess players have the same tools at their disposal. Th us, as always, everything is decided as in the good old days by the players talent, by his unique ability to create. The coachs task is to help his student develop this unique creative side to the maximum.

It has so happened that in recent years I have been able to work closely with great chess talents who were at the same time outstanding personalities. I hope that an inside look at this kind of work will be of interest to both specialists and chess fans. I faced several ethical problems when working on this book. Many of the chess players who appear in these pages are still young; their whole life, including their sports career, lies ahead. That is why I tried to avoid purely personal details and did not reveal any professional secrets. I hope that these players, like me, will be curious to reflect on their own achievements and mistakes, and to take the reader on the difficult journey that allowed them to become prominent chess personalities.

PART I. CAPTAIN

Dear reader, I think it is appropriate to discuss the specifics of team chess competitions before I tell you about my experiences as captain of various teams. In the times of Steinitz and Lasker, not to mention their predecessors, it would never have occurred to anyone to combine individuals into teams — and there is no doubt that most strong chess players are ultimately individuals. The first Chess Olympiads, or Tournaments of Nations as they were called before the Second World War, did not enjoy popularity amongst the general public or the few grandmasters who held this prestigious title at the time. It seemed that team dynamics and the subordination of personal interests to the interests of a group are as much in conflict with the spirit of chess as they are natural for football, basketball, volleyball and other team sports.

Strangely enough, over time, the Chess Olympiads began to gain in popularity. These team events became the most popular competition amongst chess fans, rivalled only by World Championship matches. The same thing happens in some other seemingly individual sports. For example, in tennis, the men's Davis Cup or women's Federation Cup sometimes create a level of excitement amongst fans that is very rare even at the most prestigious individual tournaments. Perhaps the patriotism of a fan is more clearly manifested when he is rooting for his country's team, not just for its individual representatives.

The situation with club teams is somewhat different. True, the popularity of club tournaments in chess does not match that of the competitions for national teams. Team tournaments have their own specifics and the concept of 'team player' is by no means a journalistic cliché. For team-based sports this is more or less obvious, but for a purely individual kind of activity, such as chess, this definition clearly needs additional explanation. After all, a game played for a team seems no different from a game played in an individual tournament. Moreover, in any team an individual result is just part of the contribution made by all teammates, whereas in an individual tournament you cannot hide behind someone else's back.

There always were chess players who showed their best in individual competitions but were completely nonremarkable when playing for their teams. On the contrary, some players achieve their best performances in team games.

Nor should one forget about ratings, which have become such an important factor in professional chess. Nowadays rating is calculated in all tournaments, and few players allow themselves to ignore it.

However the orderly alternation of colours is only natural for individual competitions, while in team events players are often asked to make sacrifices in the interests of the team. Any individual player would easily tolerate having more Whites, but rare are the players who are capable of a sustained sacrifice such as playing Black round after round. For instance, the famous grandmaster Eduard Gufeld willingly played with Black; nobody could prevent him from fianchettoing his favourite dark-squared bishop, and this was enough to keep him happy. Once upon a time, the Hungarian grandmaster András Adorján wrote a book with the pretentious title *Black is OK!*. With this statement, he condemned himself to the role of perennial Black player on any team.

At the European Team Chess Championship in England in 1973, I played Black in all five games. The Soviet national team was star-studded, and there was simply no other choice for me, still a young

grandmaster at the time. On the current Russian team, GM Peter Svidler often becomes a ‘water carrier’ for his more successful colleagues. One can certainly come up with more names of such helpers (or ‘domestiques’, to use cycle racing slang) who remain in the shadow of the leaders and work exclusively for the interests of their team.

I felt myself a captain long before it became my work. During my long professional career, I happened to play in countless team events. The calibre of these competitions varied greatly, but one thing remained unchanged: on almost all the teams I played the role of captain. Sometimes I played on first board, being formal leader as well, but this was not always the case. One way or another, I always took special responsibility when playing for a team and, as a rule, I played well. For many years I was able to play for the USSR student team. I started in the modest role of second reserve, and eventually got to first board. Many famous grandmasters, including the future World Champion Anatoly Karpov, passed through this student team. I played for the national teams of the Soviet Union and Ukraine, not to mention various clubs. Thus I was perfectly familiar with the specifics of team competitions, but had not yet had a chance to use this vast experience by becoming a coach. That’s why I was very enthusiastic about an offer to lead Team Ukraine in 2004. By that time I considered my career as a player complete, but I still had plenty of energy and ambitions.

UKRAINE: TRIUMPHS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

I did not have any doubts about the way to start in my new role. It was obvious that we needed to build a new team that would grow and mature on my watch. For the first time ever, Ukraine fielded its own national team at the 30th Chess Olympiad in 1992, but that was water under the bridge by the time I started as coach. The beginning of the 1990s was a very difficult period for the countries of the former Soviet Union. It was also difficult for chess players. Everyone was trying to find their place in a new and unusual world. Some leaders of the Ukrainian team found themselves in other countries while others had cooled to chess, so changes were overdue.

I clearly understood this at the Bled Olympiad in 2002, when my formal debut as captain of the Ukrainian team took place. The invitation from the federation and my agreement were, in fact, a spontaneous decision. The position of coach of the national team did not exist then, and the captains appointed changed from tournament to tournament. I took over the reins of an already-existing team, and it was in Bled itself that we all met for the first time. At the time, this circumstance did not seem significant; after all, the players on the team were all familiar to me, and most of them had only recently been my colleagues. Indeed, I didn’t take the whole affair sufficiently seriously because I still couldn’t imagine that coaching would become my vocation.

The result was shocking; the team’s performance was much worse than expected. It became obvious that there was no place for an amateur approach to coaching. The presence of good players in a team is desirable and even necessary, but in itself is not at all sufficient to achieve good and, most importantly, stable results. Thus I rejected without hesitation a similar temporary role as captain for the duration of the European Team Championship the following year. The idea of becoming head coach of the national team on a permanent basis seemed much more interesting.

The Ukrainian National Championship took place before the Olympiad using the knockout system,

which was also used at that time in the World Championship cycle. All the leading Ukrainian players, headed by Vassily Ivanchuk, took part. Naturally the results of this event were of great importance for the selection of the national team. Thus, in parallel with the championship, I organised a training camp for candidates, which was gradually filled by players who lost their matches.

Ivanchuk, who unexpectedly lost in the second round, became one of the first players at my disposal. However Ruslan Ponomariov, the only favourite who did not play in the championship, came to the camp even earlier. The dramatic relationship between the two undisputed leaders became my first serious test in putting together a new team. After all, the role of first board on any team is huge.

Vassily Ivanchuk had been the acknowledged leader of the Ukrainian team for many years. A bright talent who broke into the world chess elite at a young age, he remained one of the strongest players in the world even at thirty-five years of age. However in 2002 he unexpectedly lost the final match of the World Championship cycle to the eighteen-year old Ruslan Ponomariov. The champion's title that he had dreamt about for so long, the title which would have become the natural peak of his remarkable career, slipped away dramatically at the last moment. On the other hand, Ponomariov was just starting out in big-time chess, and the very fact of participation in the final match, which was then held separately from the main Candidates Tournament, was a huge success for the young player. The surprising result was a difficult test for both men. Vassily has never again approached the coveted summit; Ruslan, it seems, clearly overestimated his achievement. An outstanding natural talent, he lost his motivation too early and never realised his enormous potential.

The previous Olympiad in Bled took place shortly after their match. Of course, no-one seriously questioned who should play on first board. The reigning World Champion had every entitlement to the leader's role. Ruslan's performance at that Olympiad could not be called a failure, but one would be hard-pressed to call it successful. Vassily's result on board two was not bad either, however it was the lack of a clear leader that, in my opinion, became one of the reasons for the failure of the 2002 team.

Since then, two years had passed. Ivanchuk had already recovered from the shock, and Ponomariov had managed to settle into the world's elite, but his game was not of a champion's quality. The leadership question remained open. I had no doubt that the interests of the team demanded that Vassily play on first board. He was always highly motivated when facing the strongest rivals, and playing for the national team made him even more responsible and focused than in individual competitions. On the other hand, Ruslan did not play a lot after winning his title. His energy and morale were depleted by all the circumstances surrounding his would-be match against Kasparov that never took place. My choice was clear; the only thing that remained was to convince Ponomariov.

This proved to be a very difficult matter. Negotiations lasted several days, and at some stage Ivanchuk joined us. The two leaders made me a combined proposal that was completely unexpected. In essence, Ruslan agreed to give up first board to his erstwhile opponent, but in return I had to delegate the right to form the rest of the team to the two of them. Such a compromise was completely unacceptable to me, and not just because our views on possible team composition differed. It is my deep conviction that players, no matter how strong, should never have the right to affect the coach's choices. The responsibility for the final result lies with the captain, so it is his word that should be final.

In the end, the problem resolved itself. In addition to the two leaders, the new champion of Ukraine,

Andrei Volokitin, went to Calvia along with Pavel Eljanov and Alexander Moiseenko; at the very last moment, Sergey Karjakin joined them. Compared with the previous Olympiad, half of the players were new and the team had become noticeably younger: Eljanov was twenty-one years old, Volokitin eighteen and Karjakin just fourteen! Ivanchuk looked like a grizzled veteran by comparison. I planned for him to be the leader and absolute chess authority in the team; it was our key to success. Of course there was a risk in such rapid rejuvenation but, firstly, I tried to create a core that would serve the team for many years, and secondly, the results demonstrated by these young players had earned them the right to be their country's best team. The inclusion of a very young Sergey Karjakin was definitely an acknowledgment of his unique talent; as further events demonstrated, this decision proved to be an extremely successful investment in the future.

Our team started surprisingly well. We won the first three matches with a perfect score, and as early as the fourth round we prevailed over the favourites, Russia. The fate of the match was decided by a fascinating duel, albeit full of mistakes, on first board.

1

Alexander Morozevich (2758)

Vassily Ivanchuk (2705)

Calvià 2004

1.e4 c6

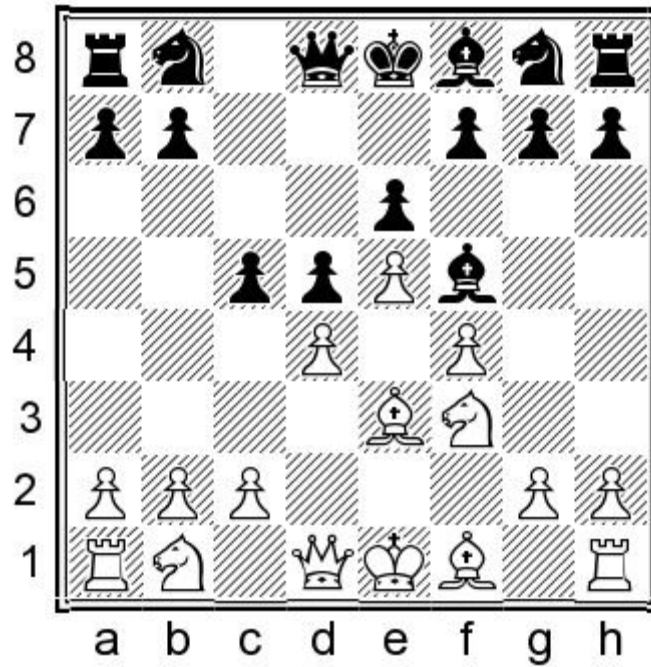
Ivanchuk can always be expected to deliver surprises in the opening, including on the very first move!

2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♟f5 4.f4!?

Morozevich is not the most predictable chess player either. Virtually no games at GM level featured the move he made.

In modern practice the natural 4.♞f3 has become the most popular. An early advance of the f-pawn does not seem too illogical, since a pawn storm on the kingside is one of the options in similar positions, however the weakening of the e4-square and chance for counterplay in the centre provide good opportunities for Black.

4...e6 5.♞f3 c5 6.♟e3



6...cxd4!?

An interesting move that sharpens the play. Another possibility worth considering was 6...♔b6.

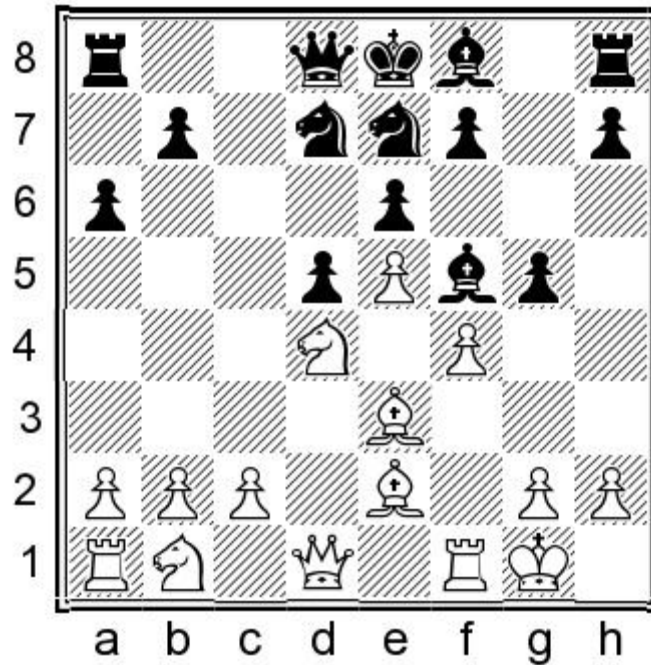
7.♘xd4 ♘e7 8.♙b5+ ♘d7

The natural 8...♘bc6 9.0-0 a6 could be countered by 10.♙xc6+! bxc6 (10...♘xc6? 11.♘xf5 exf5 12.c3) 11.g4!. In this case White's opening set-up would be completely justified.

9.0-0 a6 10.♙e2

10.♙d3!? ♙xd3 11.cxd3!? might be interesting, but White is methodical: the threat of 11.g4 becomes quite unpleasant.

10...g5!



Unexpected, but the sharpest and most principled move.

11.g4?!

Morozevich accepts the challenge!

Another option was 11.fxg5 ♖xe5 12.♘c3 (12.♘xf5 ♖xf5 13.♙xf5 exf5 14.♘c3 is a bit early because of 14...d4! 15.♙xd4 ♙g7) 12...♙g7 13.♚d2 (In this case 13.♘xf5 ♖xf5 14.♙xf5 is not too strong because of 14...d4! This position is very sharp and difficult to evaluate.)

11...gxf4!

The weak 11...♙e4 would allow White to start a dangerous attack with 12.f5!.

12.gxf5 ♖xf5!

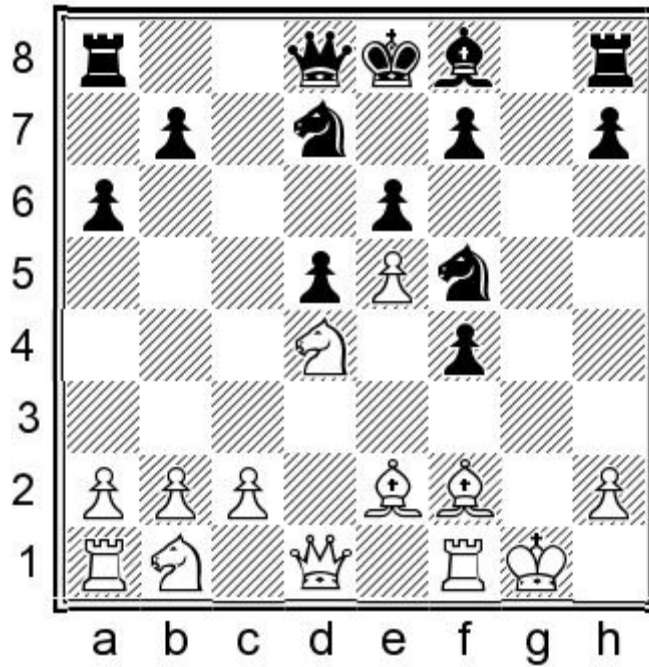
The most principled move again!

Black's position would also hold after 12...fxe3!? 13.fxe6 fxe6 (13...♘xe5 14.exf7+ ♖xf7 15.♘c3 is too dangerous) 14.♙h5+! (another option would be unexpectedly bad for White: 14.♘xe6 ♚b6) 14...♘g6 15.♚g4 ♖dxe5 16.♚xe6+ ♚e7 17.♘c3 ♚xe6 18.♘xe6 ♙c8 19.♘d5 ♙xc2 20.♘e3 ♙c6.

The move in the game is much more interesting.

13.♘xf5

Black would face a more difficult choice after 13.♙f2.



13...♖g8+!?

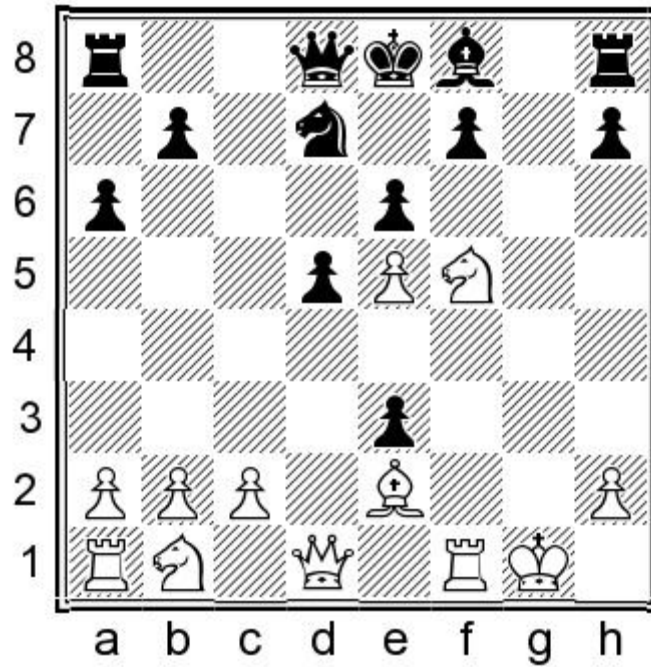
a) 13...♔g5+!? 14.♔h1 ♕g3+ (14...♕e3!? 15.♖xe3 fxe3 16.♖h5 0-0-0 17.♖xf7 ♔xe5 18.♕c3 ♖d6 19.♕f3) 15.♖xg3 fxg3 16.♖g1 ♔xe5 17.♖xg3 0-0-0;

b) 13...♕e3!? 14.♖xe3 fxe3 15.♕xe6 ♖g8+ 16.♔h1 fxe6 17.♖h5+ ♖g6 18.♔g4 ♔b6! 19.♖xg6+ hxg6 20.♔xg6+ ♔d8 21.♕c3 ♕c7.

14.♔h1 ♕g3+! 15.♖xg3 fxg3 16.♖g1 ♕xe5 17.♖xg3 ♖xg3 18.hxg3 ♔b6.

These lines are difficult to calculate and evaluate. It appears that Black would have enough compensation for a piece only in the last case.

13...fxe3

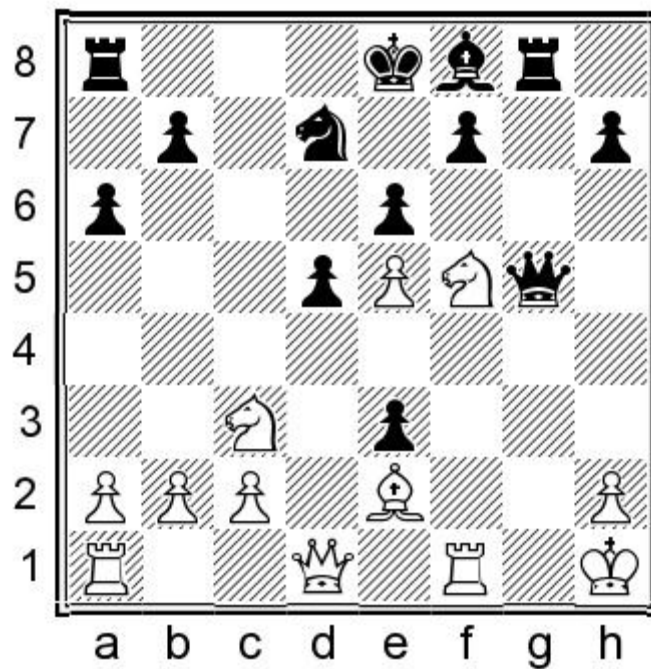


14. ♖c3!?

Morozevich attempts to match his inventive opponent.

The more natural 14. ♘d6+ (14. ♘g3 ♙c5) 14. ♘d6+ ♙xd6 15. exd6 ♚g5+ 16. ♔h1 ♜g8 17. ♜g1 (17. ♙f3 ♘e5) 17... ♚xg1+ 18. ♚xg1 ♜xg1+ 19. ♔xg1 ♘e5 20. ♔g2 ♙f5 21. ♔g3 ♘d4 would lead to an unpleasant ending.

14... ♜g8+ 15. ♔h1 ♚g5



16. ♙f3?

Yet another uncompromising move, however it is Black who has the initiative now. It would have been better to play the calm 16.♘g3, when Black has several enticing options, the strongest being 16...♙xe5! (16...♘xe5 17.♚d4 0-0-0; 16...0-0-0 17.♖xf7 ♜xe5) 17.♚d3 0-0-0, but the outcome has still not been decided.

16...♘xe5!

It is possible that Alexander did not foresee this strong reply. After 16...♙xf5 17.♙h5 ♜xe5 18.♙xf7+ ♔d8 19.♙xg8 ♙d6 20.♚e2 d4 Black has a dangerous initiative, but an extra rook is sufficient compensation.

17.♚e2

Both 17.♙xd5 0-0-0+ and 17.♘xd5 0-0-0+ are bad. A better move would be 17.♘xe3 ♜xe3 18.♙xd5, however Black is not obliged to capture. After the calm 18...0-0-0! 19.♙xb7+ ♔c7 20.♚e1 ♜g5 material is equal, but Black mounts a strong attack.

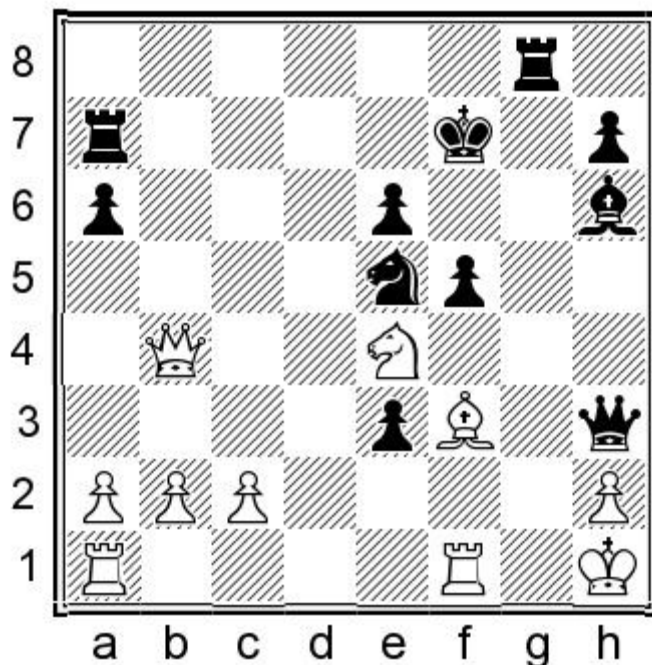
17...♙xf5 18.♙xd5 ♜h3! 19.♙xb7 ♖a7

19...♞d8! 20.♞ad1 ♞xd1 21.♞xd1 f5 would have been more precise.

20.♙f3 ♙h6 21.♘e4 ♔e7! 22.♚e1 f5?

It is peculiar how Vassily ignores White's only real threat. Any decent preventive move, such as 22...♞b7 or 22...a5, would have guaranteed him a decisive advantage.

23.♙b4+ ♔f7



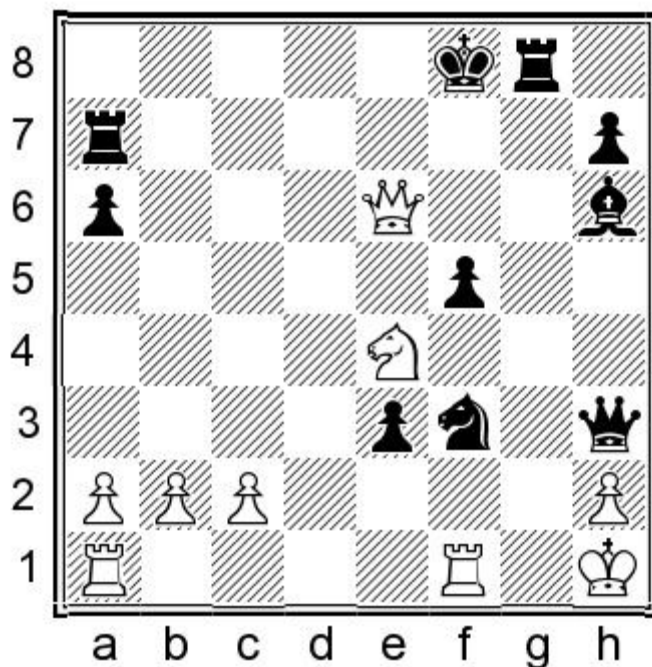
24. ♖d4

It would have been simpler to achieve a draw with 24. ♘d6+ ♔f6 (24... ♕g6 is possible, but even here White is in no risk of losing, for instance 25. ♖g1+ ♔f6 26. ♖xg8 ♚xf3+ 27. ♖g2) 25. ♘e4+ ♔f7 26. ♘d6+=.

24... ♘xf3 25. ♚f6+!

A worse option would be 25. ♚xa7+ ♔g6 26. ♖g1+ ♔h5 27. ♚f7+ ♔h4! 28. ♚e7+ ♖g5.

25... ♔e8 26. ♚xe6+ ♔f8



27. ♚f6+?

Morozevich's turn to make a mistake.

The only way to secure a draw was 27. ♚c8+! ♔f7 28. ♚c4+ ♔g7 29. ♚c3+! (29. ♖g1+ ♕g5!) 29... ♔g6 30. ♚c6+ ♔h5 31. ♘f6+ ♔h4 32. ♚xf3 ♚xf3+ 33. ♖xf3=.

27... ♖f7

Now there are no more chances for White.

28. ♚d6+ ♔g7 29. ♖g1+ ♔h8 30. ♘f6

0-1

Perhaps an opportunity lost on move 22 had somewhat upset the winner, but it did not affect the mood

of the team. On the contrary, the lucky outcome only added to our guys' optimism and confidence. From the 'dark horses' of the Olympiad, we suddenly turned into its favourites, but there were ten more rounds ahead and a lot of formidable rivals! It was necessary to maintain the players' confidence and fighting spirit, but at the same time protect them from excessive self-confidence and misplaced euphoria. A draw with a strong Israeli team in the next round only helped us to get into regular working mood. The next match, however, did not leave any room for errors. We were confronted by an ambitious and even younger team from Azerbaijan, none of whom had yet reached the age of twenty. At the time, these young men were taking their first steps in the international arena, but in a few years three of them would be among the ten best chess players in the world. I could never imagine that my bizarre chess fate would bring me close to these talented young men and that I would learn firsthand about their strengths and weaknesses. However, this is a tale for another day; let's return to 2004 now. The fight in the match against Azerbaijan was ferocious, and it was Ivanchuk again who brought us victory. Yet again, his game was remarkable for non-standard tactics.

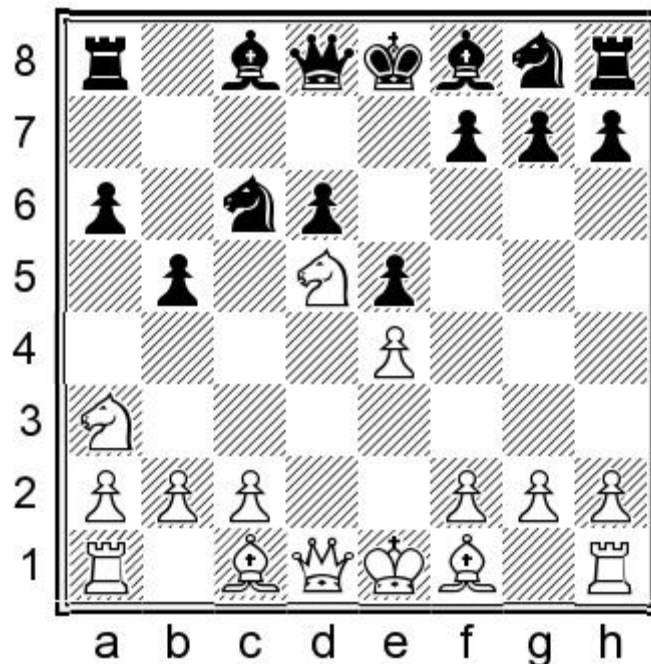
2

Vassily Ivanchuk (2705)

Teimour Radjabov (2663)

Calvià 2004

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 e5 5.♗b5 d6 6.♗1c3 a6 7.♗a3 b5 8.♗d5



This position is one of the most popular in modern chess.

8...♗ce7

Black's choice in this game is just one of several possible options. 8...♗ge7, 8...♗f6 and 8...♞b8 are even more popular.

9. ♖b4!?

It is extremely rare to see a novelty as early as the ninth move in a position that has occurred many times before. Before this game it was almost mandatory to play 9.c4!? ♜xd5 10.exd5.

The strange leap by the knight is not something most people would consider, and the fact that this novelty didn't become common at the highest level has nothing to do with Vassily Ivanchuk's creative genius.

9... ♙d7

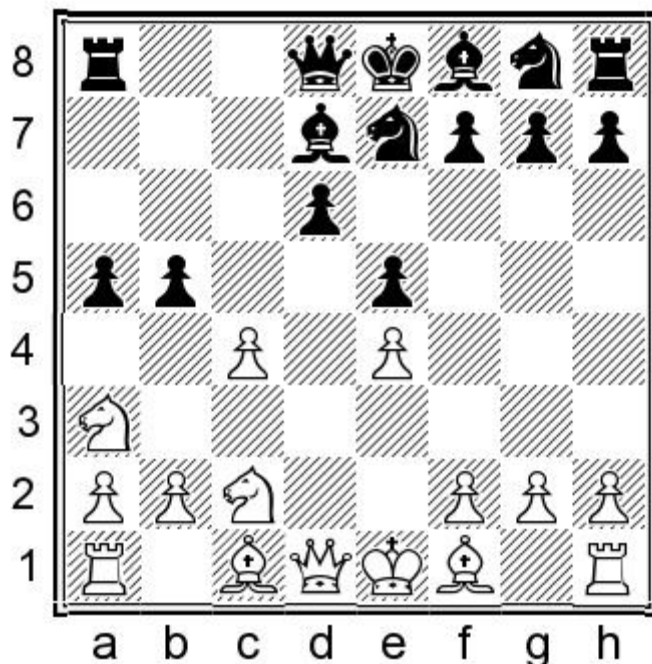
This is not the most principled reply, but Radjabov's motives are obvious. When one is faced with a novelty in the opening, the first order of the day is not to refute it, but to get away from the lines that your opponent has analysed at home.

White's strategy would have faced a heavier test after 9... ♜f6! 10.c4! (It is obvious that 10.f3 d5! is not acceptable.) 10... ♜xe4 11.cxb5. This position offers Black many tempting ways to continue, the most dynamic being 11...d5 (other interesting options are 11... ♖a5!? 12. ♙d2 d5!, 11...a5!? 12. ♜a6 ♙b7 or 11... ♖b6!?) 12.bxa6 ♙d7! when Black has more than enough compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

10.c4! a5

This is a logical consequence of the previous move. If 10... ♜f6 11.cxb5 ♜xe4 12. ♜xa6 the white knights would feel quite at home on the edge of the board.

11. ♜bc2



11... ♜f6

It would appear more natural to play 11...b4 12.♘b5 ♙xb5 13.cxb5 ♘f6, however after the strongest reply 14.♘e3! d5 (Capturing the pawn is disastrous: 14...♘xe4? 15.b6! ♚xb6 16.f3 ♘f6 17.♘c4+—) 15.exd5 ♘exd5 16.♘xd5 ♚xd5 17.♙e3 the two bishops would provide White with a comfortable advantage.

12.♘b5 ♙xb5

12...♘xe4 would have been refuted by the elegant 13.♚xd6!, when Black's best line is 13...♙xb5 14.♚xd8+ ♜xd8 15.cxb5 ♘d5 16.♙c4 ♙c5, but there is still not enough compensation for a pawn.

13.cxb5 ♘xe4 14.♙e3

Here too the bishop pair ensures White's advantage.

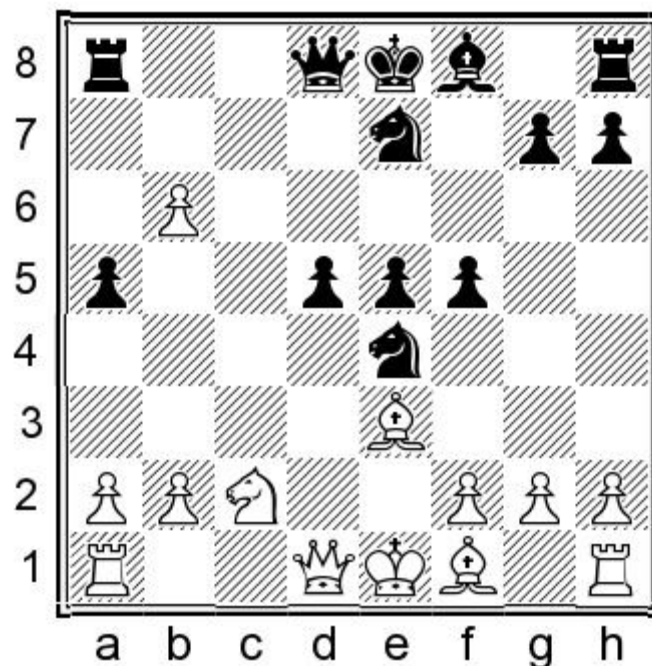
14...d5

It is obviously bad to play 14...♘f5? 15.b6 (15.♚d5), but even the following would not resolve the issue: 14...f5 15.f3 ♘f6 16.b6.

15.b6!

Two birds with one stone: a pawn moves closer to the promotion square while the b5-square is freed for the bishop.

15...f5



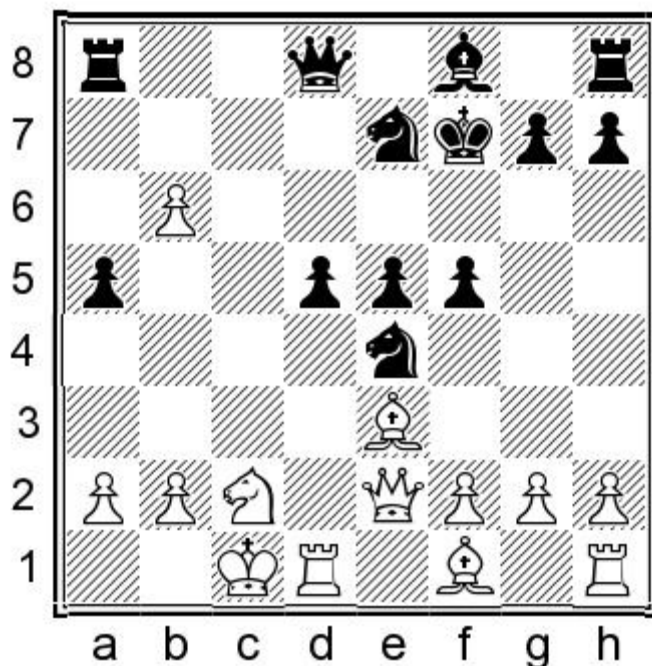
16.♚e2!?

Yet another non-standard move. It would be logical to play 16.♙b5+ ♔f7 17.f3, however this position is much more complex than it appears. 17...♘d6! is even more interesting because the tactical operation 18.♙c6!? ♘xc6 19.♚xd5+ ♔g6 20.♚xc6 ♖c8 21.♚a4 ♘c4 would have led to an unclear outcome. If 17...♘f6 18.0-0 ♖b8! with the idea of an exchange sacrifice on b6. (In case of 18...d4?! the most energetic refutation for White would be 19.♘xd4 exd4 20.♙xd4.)

16...♔f7

Prophylaxis. ♚b5+ would have been extremely unpleasant, as indicated by the following lines: 16...d4? 17.♚b5+ ♔f7 18.0-0-0!+- or 16...♖c8 17.♚b5+ ♚d7 (17...♔f7 18.b7 ♖b8 19.0-0-0 g6 20.♙c4) 18.0-0-0.

17.0-0-0



17...♚d7

17...♖b8, with the idea of an exchange sacrifice on b6, would have offered more resistance, but after 18.f3 ♘d6 (18...♘f6 19.♚b5!) 19.♚d2 ♘dc8 20.♚xa5 ♘xb6 the two bishops and precarious position of the black king would have ensured the better chances for White.

18.♔b1 ♚e6 19.f3 ♘d6

Black would not avoid difficulties with 19...♘f6 20.♚b5 (20.f4!? exf4 21.♙d4) 20...♖b8 21.g4! fxg4 22.fxg4 ♚xg4 23.♙d3.

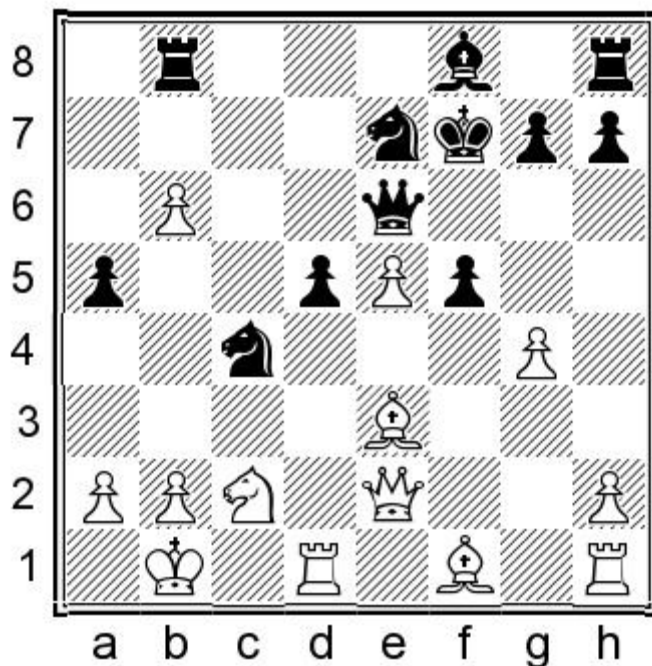
20.f4!

Destroying Black's pawn centre, his only pride and hope.

20...♘c4

After 20...e4 21.♘d4 ♕f6 22.♕d2 Black is in a bad way.

21.fxe5+- ♖b8 22.g4!



A decisive penetration of the black king's defences.

22...f4

Resistance could have been prolonged with 22...♕xe5 23.♙d4 ♕xe2 24.♙xe2 ♘c6 25.♙c3 ♘xb6, but 26.♖hf1 would have left no doubts about the outcome.

23.♕f3 g5 24.♙xc4 dxc4 25.h4 ♕c6 26.e6+!

An elegant finish.

26...♙g6 27.♕f2 ♕xe6 28.♙d4 ♙g7 29.hxg5 ♖bd8 30.♖de1 ♕d6 31.♙c5 ♕d2 32.♖e6+

An extraordinary and quite impressive game!

1-0

Of course, this battle became the focus of everyone's attention, but it is necessary to note Sergey Karjakin's win.

After an unconvincing game in round one, I left him out. Sergey was anxious to rejoin the action but it seemed to me that he needed time to adapt to the unusual atmosphere of a big tournament. Finally, his

hour came. On this day, he scored an important victory with Black over Rauf Mamedov; from that moment on, Sergey became a full member of the team.

Another key pairing occurred in round nine when we had to play Armenia. In the years that followed, this country's team triumphed at Olympiads. In Calvia, no-one suspected their brilliant future, but even then they were worthy rivals.



Ukraine wins the Chess Olympiad! In this amateur photo Sergey Karjakin looks like a child. Before the awards ceremony, it turned out that he was the only one in the team without a suit. Fortunately I found out that Ruslan Ponomarev had a spare one that he could lend him. Later, in addition to receiving congratulations, I had to chastise Sergey's parents for their lack of faith in our team. This experience proved beneficial. For all his future successes Sergey was prepared in every respect. (Photo from the author's archive)

When I needed to put my line-up for this match together, the main issue was with third board, where our opponent would be either Rafael Vaganian or Smbat Lputian. I had to choose between Andrei Volokitin and Pavel Eljanov. In both cases, the opponent's choice of opening was quite predictable, as Rafael and Smbat had absolutely similar tastes in their openings. In response to 1.d4 we were expecting the Queen's Gambit, while 1.e4 would almost inevitably be followed 1...e6. Thus if I were to choose Eljanov, the most likely outcome would be a long positional struggle in the Queen's Gambit Declined. On the other hand, if I chose Volokitin, he would have to face the French Defence. In Calvia Andrei was clearly playing with gusto, but for all its great punching power his style of play involved great risk, which I wanted to avoid on that day.

Therefore I gave a very ambitious task to Volokitin and his helper Karjakin: to refute a line of the French Defence that was regularly used by both his possible opponents. If they failed to accomplish this task, I would choose Eljanov instead. Obviously I understood well that such a task was next to impossible. On the other hand, I knew that Andrei was eager to fight.

There was also specific material to work with. The day before, Vaganian had confidently drawn against Grischuk using the line in question. The timeframe was very limited: the task had to be done before the team list for the match was submitted. The players had to share their interim results with me every hour. An exciting race against time began!

Those were the days when chess engines were still very far from today's heights, so the two young grandmasters had to work hard. Shortly before the deadline it became clear to me that Andrei had earned the right to play in the match. Take a look at the game:

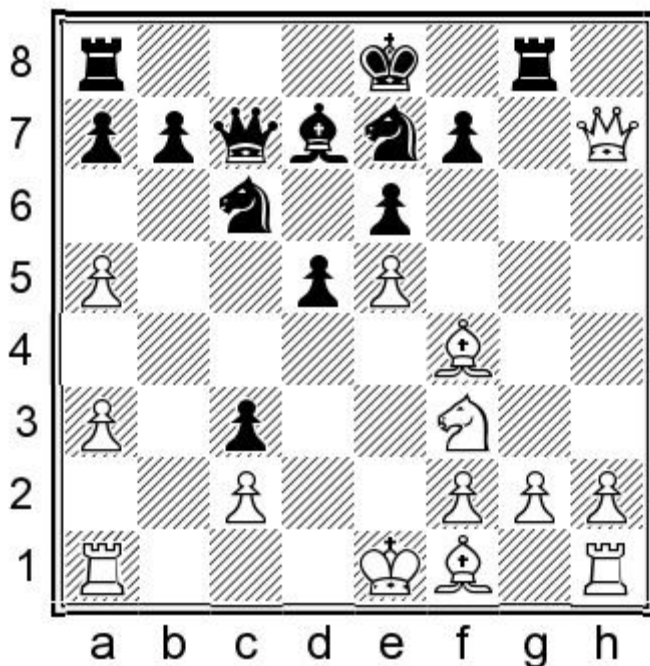
3

Andrei Volokitin (2652)

Smbat Lputian (2634)

Calvià 2004

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♘a5 6.b4 cxd4 7.♙g4 ♘e7 8.bxa5 dxc3 9.♙xg7 ♖g8 10.♙xh7 ♘bc6 11.♘f3 ♚c7 12.♙f4 ♙d7



13.a6!

An important and necessary inclusion!

13.♙d3!? 0-0-0 14.♙g3 ♙xa5 15.0-0 ♘f5 16.♙xf5 exf5 17.♙xf7 ♖df8 18.♙h7 f4 19.♙xf4 ♙f5 20.♙h4 ♖h8 21.♙g3 ♖hg8 22.♙h4 with a repetition was played in the above-mentioned Grischuk-Vaganian game.

13...0-0-0

This doesn't resolve the issue. White still has the advantage after 13...b6 14.♙g3 0-0-0 15.♙d3 ♖h8

16.♔g7 ♖dg8 17.♗f6 ♙e8 18.0-0 ♜h5 19.♗f4 ♘f5 20.♙xf5 ♝xf5 21.♗e3, Stellwagen-Bartel, Bundesliga 2006.

14.axb7+ ♔b8 15.♗d3 ♝g4

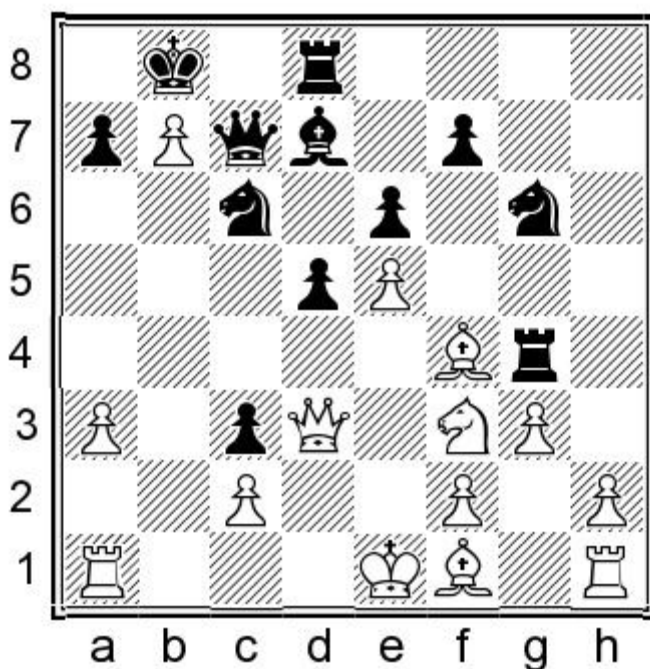
a) 15...♘g6 16.♙g3 ♘cxe5 17.♘xe5 ♘xe5 18.♗d4± f6 19.♝b1 ♝g7 20.♝b3 ♗d6 21.♝xc3 ♙c6 22.♙e2 has been known since Matulović-Osmanagić, Sarajevo 1965, and also gives White the advantage.

b) The following isn't much better: 15...d4 16.♝b1 ♝g4 17.♙g3 ♘f5 18.♙e2 ♘a5 19.0-0 ♙c6 20.♝b4.

16.g3!

The position after 16.♙e3 ♘f5 17.♙c5 ♝e4+ (17...♝c4!?) 18.♔d1 (18.♙e2 ♗a5) 18...♝c4 (18...♗a5!?) 19.♗xf5 ♝xc5 20.♗xf7 d4 arose in Ricardi-Forster, Elista Olympiad 1998, and seems better for White, but it is possible to improve Black's play. The following line is weaker: 16.♙g3?! ♝e4+ 17.♙e2 ♘f5.

16...♘g6



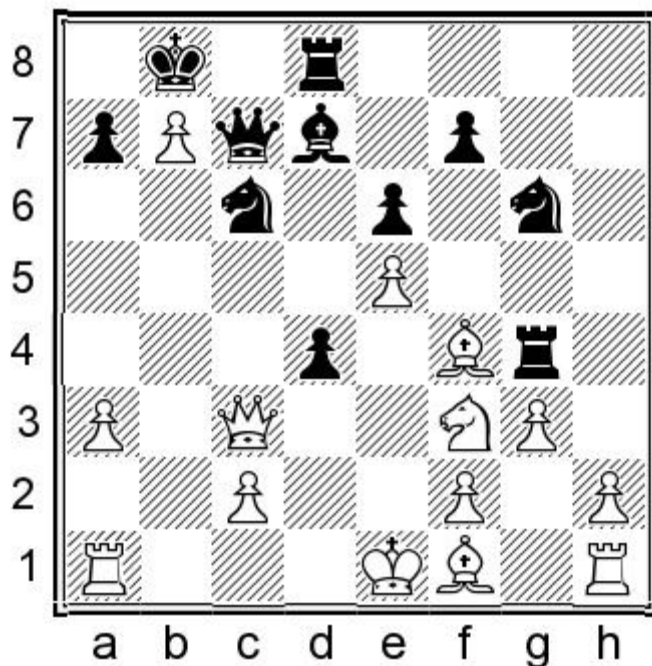
17.♗xc3

17.h3! ♘xf4 18.♗xc3! would have been equally good, but obviously not 18.gxf4? ♝xf4.

17...♘xf4

This line, which had seemed relegated to the history books, was suddenly revived when I was writing this manuscript. It is serendipitous that it was revitalised by Rafael Vaganian who could have well been in Lputian's place.

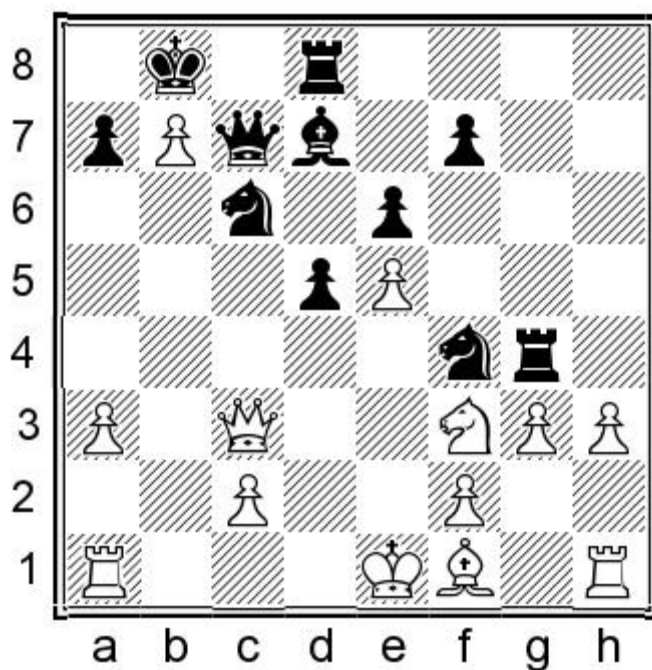
17...d4!?



This is obviously more interesting than the move played in the game, but it seems that Bacrot was prepared. 18.♞c5 ♔e8 (18...♜xf4 19.h3) 19.h3 ♞d5 20.♞c4 ♞xf4 21.gxf4 ♞a5+ 22.♜d2! (22.♚d1 ♞c5) 22...♜xf4 23.♚d1 ♞d8 24.♜b3 All these moves match the engine's first line. 24...♞c3? (Only 24...♞xe5! would maintain the tension.) 25.♞xc3 dxc3+ 26.♚c1 ♜xe5 27.♜c5 and White won quickly in Bacrot-Vaganian, Biel 2017.

18.h3!!

It is this beautiful idea which we found and worked on during our preparation that ensured Volokitin's participation in the match.



18... ♖xh3

18...d4 19. ♖c5 ♖xh3 20. ♙xh3 ♜e4+ 21. ♚f1 ♖xe5 22. ♖xc7+ ♚xc7 23. ♖g5! wouldn't be any easier for Black.

19. ♙xh3!

19. ♙xh3? ♜c4

19... ♖xe5N

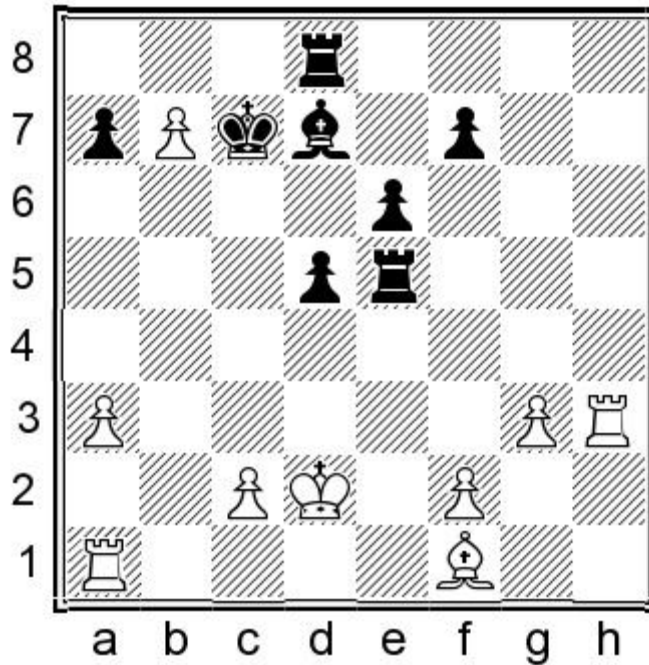
Other lines wouldn't change the evaluation:

a) 19... ♜a4 20. ♙e2 d4 21. ♖c5 ♜a5 22. ♖d6;

b) 19... ♜e4+ 20. ♙e2 ♖xe5 21. ♖xc7+ ♚xc7 22. ♖g5;

c) 19...d4 20. ♖c5 ♖xe5 21. ♖xc7+ (21. ♖xe5? ♜e4+! 22. ♖xe4 ♖c3+ 23. ♚d1 ♖xa1+ 24. ♚d2 ♖c3+=) 21... ♚xc7 22. ♖xe5 ♜e4+ 23. ♚d2 ♖xe5 24. ♜b1 ♙c6 25. ♜h7 — in all cases White has a clear advantage.

20. ♖xc7+ ♚xc7 21. ♖xe5 ♜e4+ 22. ♚d2 ♖xe5



23. ♙d3!

Our home preparation wasn't over, even in this position, which is already won to all intents and purposes.

23... ♜g5

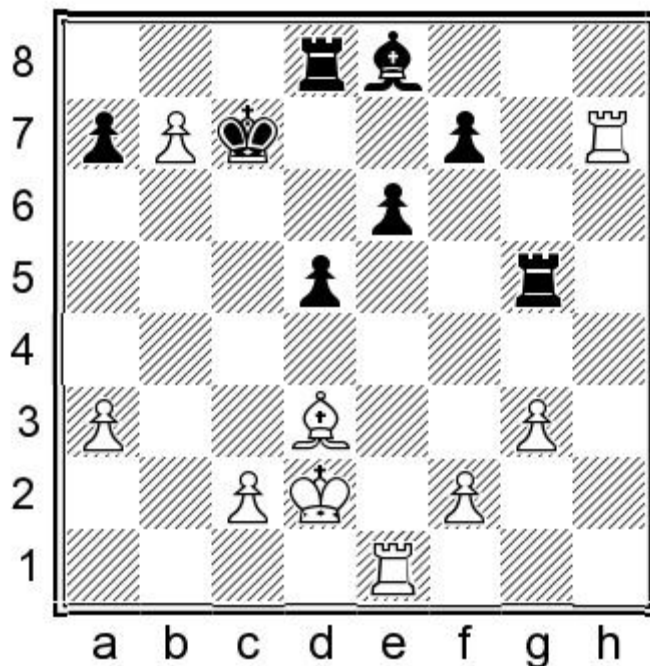
Other moves wouldn't help either: 23... ♚xb7 24. f4+— or 23...d4 24. ♜b1 ♜b8 25. ♜h7 ♙e8 26. ♙g6! ♜xb7

27. ♖xb7+ ♔xb7 28. ♗xf7 ♗xf7 29. ♖xf7+ ♔b6 30. ♕d3+-.

24. ♖h7! ♗e8

24... ♔xb7!? 25. ♖xf7 or 24... ♖f8 25. ♖b1 isn't much better.

25. ♖e1!



An impeccable realisation of an advantage!

25...e5

25... ♔xb7 26. ♖xe6+- or 25... ♔b8 26. ♖h8 ♔xb7 27. ♗b5 ♗xb5 28. ♖xd8+-

26.f4! exf4 27. ♖h8!

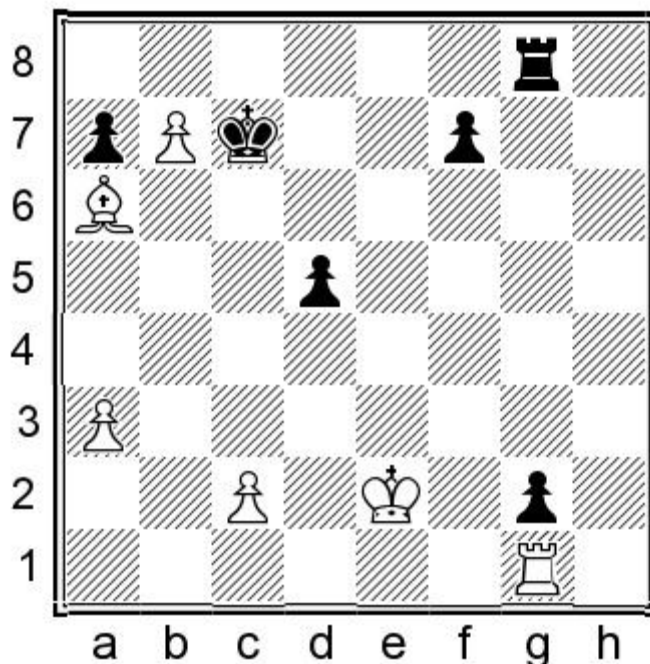
The strongest move again!

27...fxg3 28. ♗a6! g2

Nor would this line help: 28... ♗c6 29. ♖e7+ (29. ♖xd8? ♗xb7!) 29... ♔b6 30. ♖xd8 ♗xb7 31. ♖xb7+ ♔xa6 32. ♖b1.

29. ♖hxe8 ♖g8 30. ♖xd8 ♖xd8 31. ♖g1 ♖g8 32. ♔e2

One would normally resign here, but games in team tournaments are played to the very end.



32...♙b6 33.♘d3 ♙xb7 34.♙f3 ♙b6 35.♖xg2 ♖xg2 36.♙xg2 ♙a5 37.♙f3 ♙a4 38.♙e3 ♙xa3 39.♙d4 ♙b4 40.♙xd5 f5

This is an ideal example of home preparation, in fact, this game put this specific line out of business. That's how important motivation is in preparation! In those times one should have been very cautious about relying on chess engines.

1-0

Unfortunately, this victory only allowed us to draw the match since Vaganian managed to prevail over Ponomarev. Still, even this result brought us much closer to victory in the tournament. The following rounds did not change the situation materially: we stayed in the lead, keeping a comfortable distance ahead of our pursuers. Finally it was time for the last round where we had to play France. In practice, the fate of the gold medals was already decided since we were ahead of Russia by three points. At the time, the first tiebreak criterion was the amount of game points (not match points, like today), so in theory even a loss with a minimum score would make us winners.

A last-round match is always a difficult test for a team that aspires to the podium even though everyone, including our pursuers, understood that the outcome of the Olympiad was virtually certain, all the more so since our closest rivals Russia had Armenia breathing down their necks, and second place was by no means guaranteed.

But first we had our own mission to accomplish. It would have been a disaster to lose, on the last day, the title that we, in essence, had already won. Naturally the best option for the team and for me as captain would have been a guaranteed draw. Legally, this was possible. Nowadays there is a ban on such agreements, even in a single game. (I have no doubt that such a ban is both ethically correct and good for our sport.) Back then, such negotiations were not prohibited; captains could easily agree to arrange an outcome that would satisfy both teams, but the proposal from the French never came, so the

match began.



This was also taken in Calvià. The two youngest members of Team Ukraine, Sergey Karjakin and Kateryna Lagno, have since transferred to Russia. Holding the cup is Andrei Volokitin, also quite young at the time, and in the background is the then president of the Ukrainian Chess Federation, Viktor Petrov. (Photo from the author's archive)

Of course, all my players were instructed to play in the safest manner possible. Still, a game is a game, and anything can happen.

A couple of hours after the start of the round, the French captain, Joël Lautier, offered us a draw on all four boards. From the chess point of view, this made perfect sense for France: our opponents had the initiative on the odd-numbered boards where they had White, while our team was pressing on the even-numbered boards and Eljanov's game was already quite spectacular. I took a look at the matches of our pursuers and decided to continue the fight.

At first glance, it might seem controversial or, in any case, inconsistent, to reject a draw that would have guaranteed us overall victory. Yes, some minimal risk existed, but by taking this risk we finished the Olympiad in the same dominant and uncompromising fashion that we had demonstrated throughout the entire tournament. Moreover, the internal logic of individual games was not violated by the captains' intrusion.

We won the match 3–1 and Eljanov managed to deliver a great game.

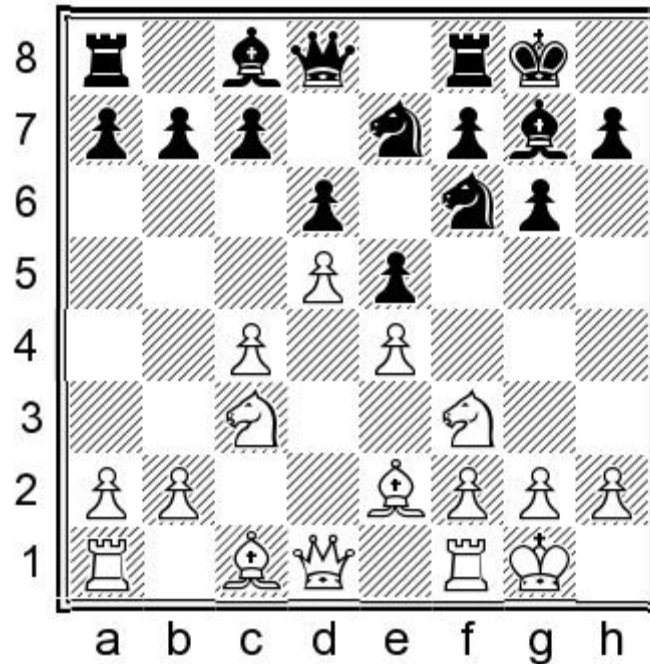
4

Pavel Eljanov (2629)

Igor Alexandre Nataf (2565)

Calvià 2004

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 ♙g7 4.e4 d6 5.♘f3 0-0 6.♙e2 e5 7.0-0 ♘c6 8.d5 ♘e7



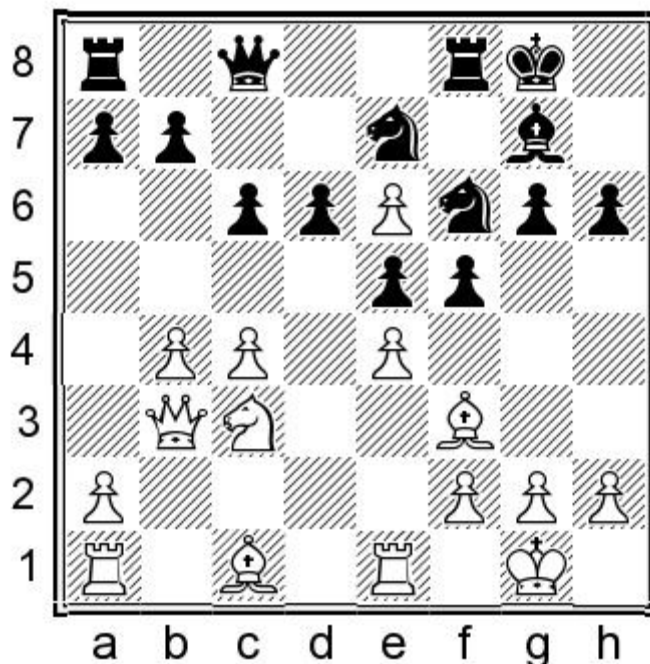
9.b4

This game was played at the time when the King's Indian Defence was experiencing yet another renaissance, while the 9.b4 system appeared on the scene to be the main weapon against it.

9...♘h5 10.♙e1 f5 11.♘g5 ♘f6 12.♙f3

12.f3 is also possible.

12...c6 13.♙b3!? h6 14.♘e6 ♙xe6 15.dxe6 ♙c8



16.b5!?

This move features in White's plans anyway, but Eljanov makes it with a new arrangement of his pieces in mind.

Not long before the Olympiad, this line had already been played by two top players: 16.♖d1 ♜d8 17.b5 ♜xe6 18.bxc6 ♞xc6 19.exf5 ♜xf5 20.♜xb7 ♞d4 21.♙d5+ ♚h7 22.♙e3 ♞ab8 23.♜xa7 ♞b2 24.♚h1 ♞g4 25.♞e4, Bacrot-Radjabov, Tripoli 2004. In the end, Black won, but not because of the opening.

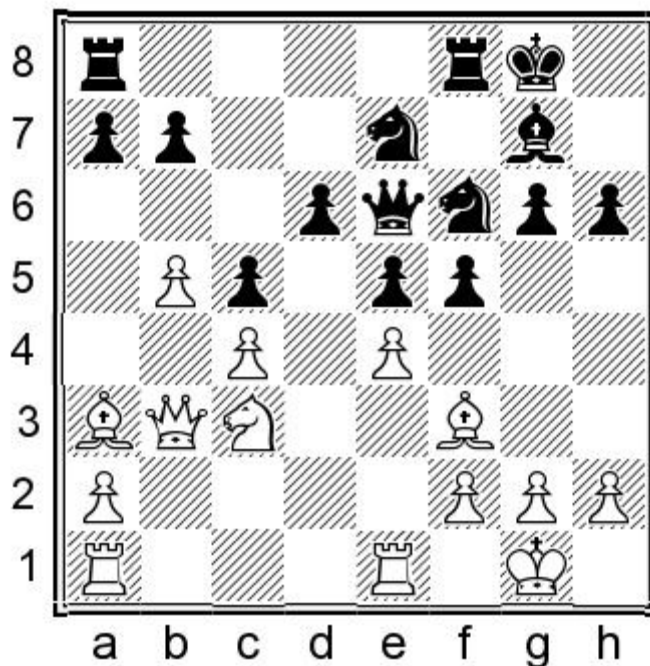
16...♜xe6 17.♙a3

A position that is typical for this system: White has sacrificed a pawn, but has obvious compensation in the two bishops and pressure on Black's pawn centre.

17...♚h7!?

Black maintains the tension and counts on playing ...d6–d5 when convenient.

A completely different idea is interesting: 17...c5!?



18.♞ad1

[The most promising. Opening the play wouldn't bring White any advantage, e.g. 18.exf5 gxf5 (18...♘xf5 19.♙xb7 ♘d4 20.♚a4 ♞ab8 21.♙e4 ♘xe4 22.♘xe4 seems better for White) 19.♙xb7 ♞ab8 20.♙f3 e4, then the knight moves via c6 to d4 and Black has equalised.]

18...f4! 19.♞d2 with complex play.

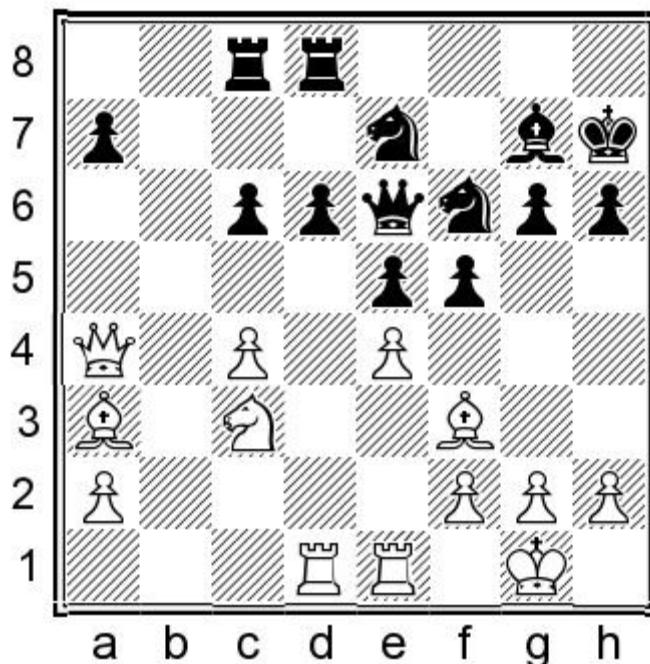
18.♞ad1 ♞fd8 19.bxc6

Later Eljanov attempted to position his pieces somewhat differently: 19.♞d2 ♞d7 (19...♞ac8) 20.♞ed1 ♞ad8 21.bxc6 bxc6 22.♚a4 f4, Eljanov-Radjabov, Moscow 2005.

19...bxc6

This is forced. 19...♘xc6? is bad: 20.exf5 ♚xf5 (not the losing 20...gxf5? 21.♚xb7 ♘d4? 22.♞xd4+—) 21.♚xb7 ♘d4 22.♙xd6!.

20.♚a4 ♞ac8



21. ♖a6!

It is difficult to remember the exact timeline from so many years ago, but I seem to recall that it was this move which made me turn down the French draw offer. Indeed, such a preventive move with a board still full of pieces is quite rare! Other moves would have presented no problems for Black, e.g. 21. ♜d2 d5! 22. exd5 cxd5 23. ♙xe7 ♚xe7 24. ♘xd5 ♞xd5 25. ♙xd5 e4 and Black's chances are no worse.

21... ♞e8?!

Nataf prefers a passive stance.

a) The pawn exchange in the centre 21... fxe4 22. ♞xe4!

[Another line would resolve the issues: 22. ♙xe4 ♞xe4 23. ♞xe4 d5 24. ♙xe7 (24. cxd5 ♞xd5) 24... ♚xe7 25. cxd5 cxd5 26. ♜xd5 ♝xd5 27. ♚xc8 ♚b4 28. ♚c1 ♜d4]

22... ♞xe4 23. ♙xe4 ♜d7 (23... c5 24. ♚xa7) 24. ♜d3 would have allowed White to keep the initiative.

b) 21... c5! would have been a much better option. In case of the ambitious 22. ♜b1 (More prudent is 22. exf5 ♞xf5 23. ♞d5 ♞d4 24. ♞xf6+ ♙xf6 25. ♙e4 with an equal game) then 22... ♜c6 23. ♚a4 (Even riskier is 23. ♚xa7 ♚xc4 24. exf5 ♜d7 25. fxf6+ ♞xf6) 23... ♜b6 and Black has no problems.

22. ♜c1

To protect the c4-pawn indirectly and free the queen for action.

22... ♚f7

22... ♞c7 23. ♚a5

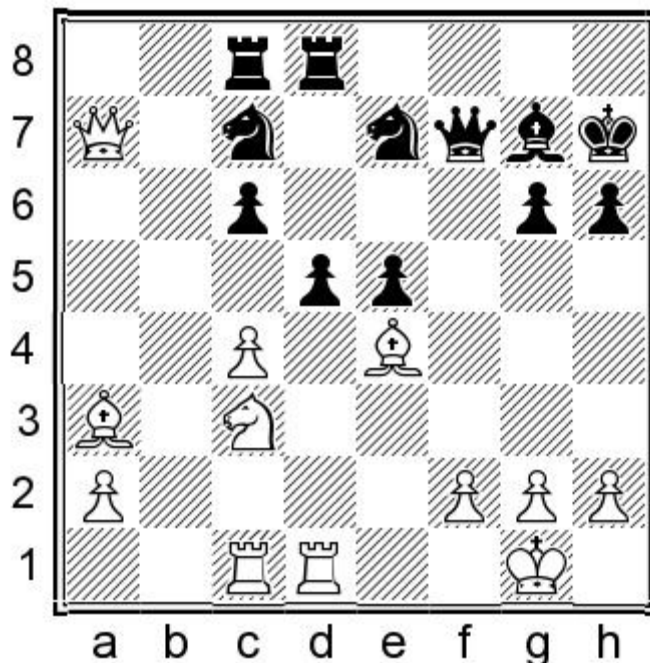
23. ♖e1 fxe4?!

He should have played 23...c5!, preparing to move the knight via c6 to d4.

24. ♙xe4!

Better than 24. ♘xe4 ♘f5.

24... ♘c7 25. ♚xa7 d5



A logical consequence of the previous move.

26. ♚b7!

An elegant and by no means obvious refutation of Black's idea.

After the intuitive 26.cxd5 ♘exd5 there would have been a lot of fight ahead.

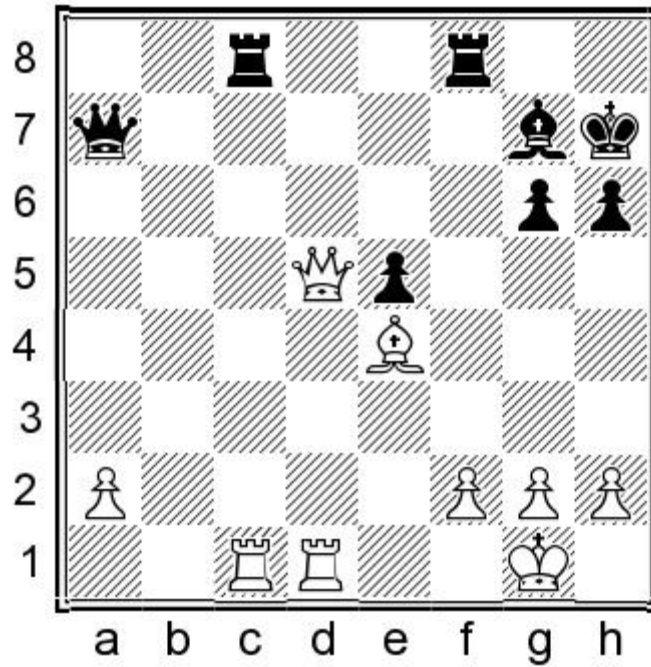
26... ♖f8

When a position is difficult, every move is bad!

a) There was nothing to envy about Black's position in the following line either: 26...d4 27. ♘a4 (27. ♘b5! cxb5 28. ♙xe7! ♚xe7 29. cxb5 ♖b8 30. ♚xc7 ♚xc7 31. ♖xc7 ♖xb5 32. h4 is more spectacular; material is equal but the endgame is very difficult for Black) 27... ♘f5 28. ♘b6 ♖b8 29. ♚xc6;

b) 26... ♚e6 27.cxd5 ♘cxd5 28. ♘xd5 ♘xd5 29. h3 also gives White the advantage.

27. ♙xe7 ♚xe7 28.cxd5 cxd5 29. ♘xd5 ♘xd5 30. ♚xd5 ♚a7



31. ♔d2

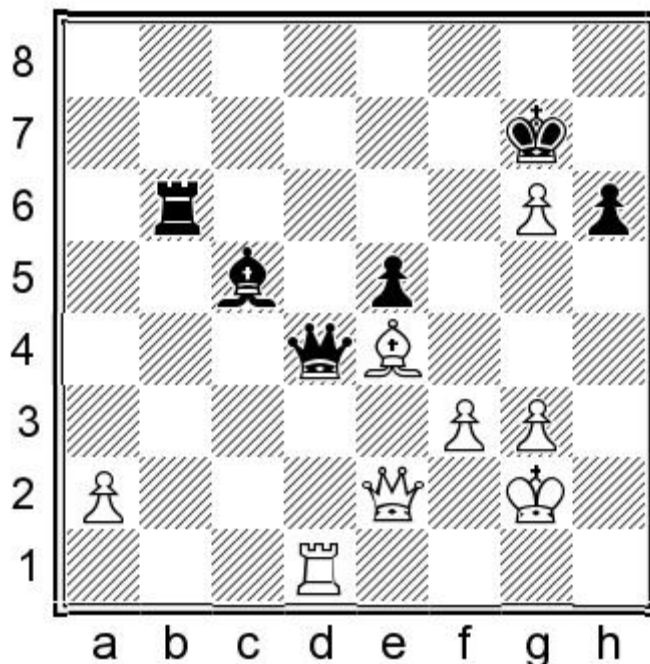
This is enough to secure victory, but the elegant 31. ♙xg6+! ♜xg6 32. ♔d3+ ♜h5 33. ♖xc8 ♔xf2+ 34. ♜h1 ♖xc8 35. ♔h3+ would have made this game even more spectacular.

31... ♖cd8 32. ♔e2 ♖d4 33. ♖xd4 ♔xd4 34. h4 ♖f4 35. ♖e1 ♙f8

35... ♖xh4? 36. g3+-

36. g3 ♖f6 37. h5 ♙c5 38. ♖f1 ♜g7 39. hxg6 ♖f8 40. ♜g2 ♖f6 41. f3 ♖b6 42. ♖d1!

Forcing an endgame with opposite-coloured bishops which is completely won for White.



42...♖b2 43.♗xd4 ♗xe2+ 44.♔f1 ♕xd4 45.♔xe2 h5 46.a4 ♖b6 47.♔f1 ♕c7 48.♔g2 ♔h6 49.♔h3 ♕d8 50.g4 h4 51.g5+ ♕xg5 52.a5 ♔g7 53.a6 ♕e3 54.♔xh4 ♔f6 55.♔g3 ♕a7 56.♔g2

1-0

History was made in Calvià: Ukraine won the Chess Olympiad for the first time ever, breaking the seemingly unshakable hegemony of the Russian team. It was the triumph of young men who were only starting their chess careers. Our victory was stunning for many reasons. I was impressed by the play of eighteen-year-old Andrei Volokitin, full of unrestrained pressure and courage. For Pavel Eljanov, it was the first serious success at such a high level. The solid and strong play by the very young Sergey Karjakin was totally unexpected. It looked as if several bright new stars had appeared in the chess firmament, and those stars seemed destined for greatness. Real life, as it often happens, proved much harsher.

Let's not jump ahead; we will meet our heroes again many times throughout this book. For the time being, they are basking in glory together with the biggest hero of the Olympiad, Vassily Ivanchuk, and other fellow members of the champion team. I was extremely happy too. Success in Calvia meant that my life in chess was not over. In fact, to my own surprise, I realised that this new profession was even more interesting for me than the one which I had been forced to leave. That was how a professional player who was ready to start collecting his pension transformed into a young coach.

Youth harbours illusions. Almost every young man who gets a taste of first victories starts to dream of conquering the world, giving no thought to the obstacles in his path. At its first attempt, our very young team jumped to the highest step of the podium. It was the best start I could have dreamt of. No-one would have been surprised if such a meteoric rise had led to a chess boom in Ukraine, a country that had great traditions and exciting young stars. I can hardly be called exceedingly naïve or ignorant of real life; even I believed for some time that the attitude towards chess in the country would change after such a great success. Alas, it was soon forgotten and everything returned to the way it had been.

To some extent an unfortunate coincidence played a role. It was at this time that the Orange Revolution took the country by storm. A celebration of the team's success and a promised audience with political leaders had to be postponed several times.

Finally, when the date was set and the whole team gathered in Kiev to receive the deserved honours, an unexpected event happened and extinguished all our hopes. Ruslan Ponomariov gave a speech at a rally in front of a huge crowd and angrily denounced the current regime. The political leaders who were going to reward us did not like it one bit. Celebrations were cut short, all monetary rewards were cancelled, and chess returned to the same sporting ghetto where it had languished before. Of course, sincere beliefs are worthy of every respect, but the problem is that Ponomariov was the person one would think least capable of such an outburst. After all the regime he cursed so artfully had showered him with money and benefits that other players could only dream of. He also wasn't shy in coming to a meeting where he was scheduled to receive his reward. Be that as it may, the expected changes in Ukrainian chess did not happen.

Naturally, apathy and disillusionment affected the performance of Ukrainian players in tournaments which followed, in both individual and team competitions. My job too brought little satisfaction. The only support I was able to give the players was moral, which is not enough in modern chess. I seriously considered resigning, but did not want to abandon the cause I liked or my young charges.

The next time we 'showed teeth' was at the 38th Olympiad in Dresden in 2008. However it was a completely different team. Not in terms of player names; changes were minimal compared to Calvia. As at the Olympiad in Turin, Ponomariov was absent; Moiseenko was replaced by Zahar Efimenko who had already been in the team in Turin. These men were now four years older and had gained a lot of experience; in fact, they had become even stronger in purely chess terms as the average rating of the team increased significantly. Alas, the winning spirit had disappeared and the exuberance of youth that had conquered everything in 2004 had been replaced by the pragmatism of adulthood. As a result, their play faded and victories had to be ground out. In this situation, we benefited from a radical change that FIDE introduced, starting with the 2008 Olympiad: now it was match points that determined places in the standings. In Calvià, we often won with a big score; in Dresden, our typical score was 2½-1½, but the new scoring system still allowed us to stay with the leaders. We were similarly close to a victory with a minimum score in a very important match with the reigning champions, Armenia.

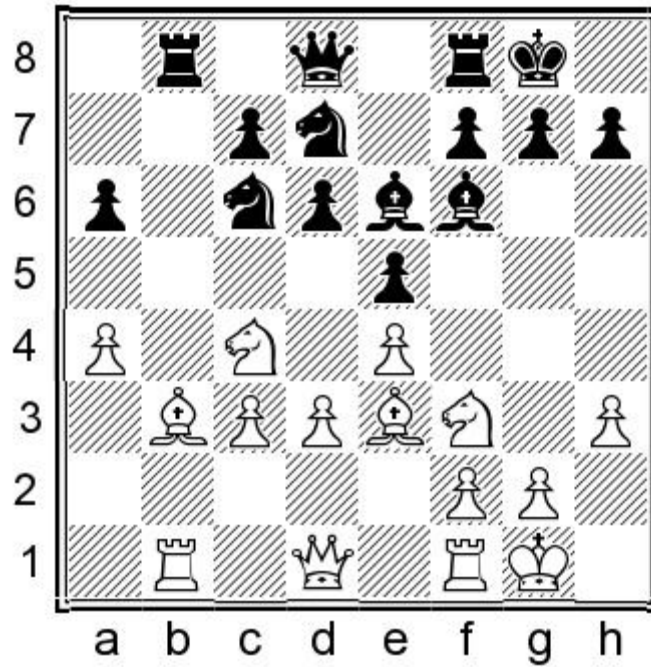
5

Vassily Ivanchuk (2786)

Levon Aronian (2757)

Dresden 2008

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.d3 b5 6.♙b3 ♙e7 7.a4 b4 8.♘bd2 0-0 9.♘c4 d6 10.h3 ♙e6
11.0-0 ♘d7 12.♙e3 ♙f6 13.c3 bxc3 14.bxc3 ♖b8 15.♖b1

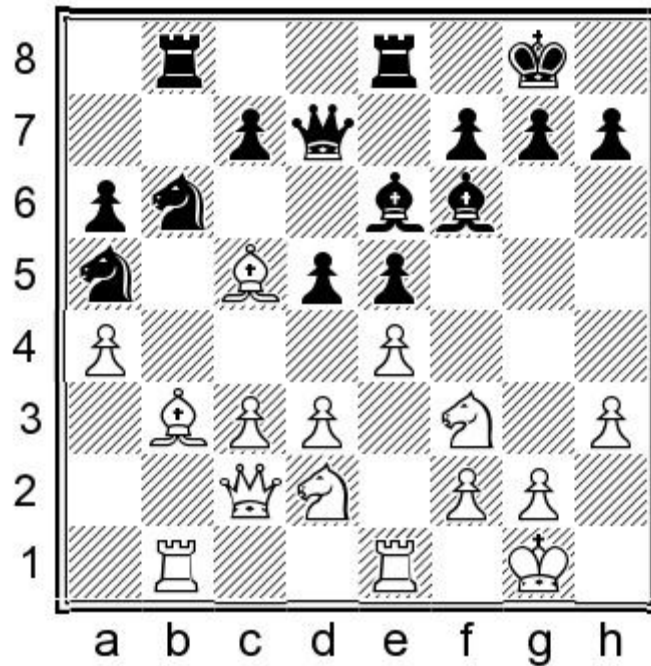


15...d5!?

This decision is typical of Aronian.

Instead of cautious moves like 15...h6 or 15...♖e8 he prefers to open the game immediately.

16.♘cd2 ♘b6 17.♞e1 ♞e8 18.♙c2 ♙d7 19.♙c5! ♘a5



20.♙a2!?

A far from obvious positional pawn sacrifice. 20.exd5!? ♘xd5 21.♙a2 was equally possible, and

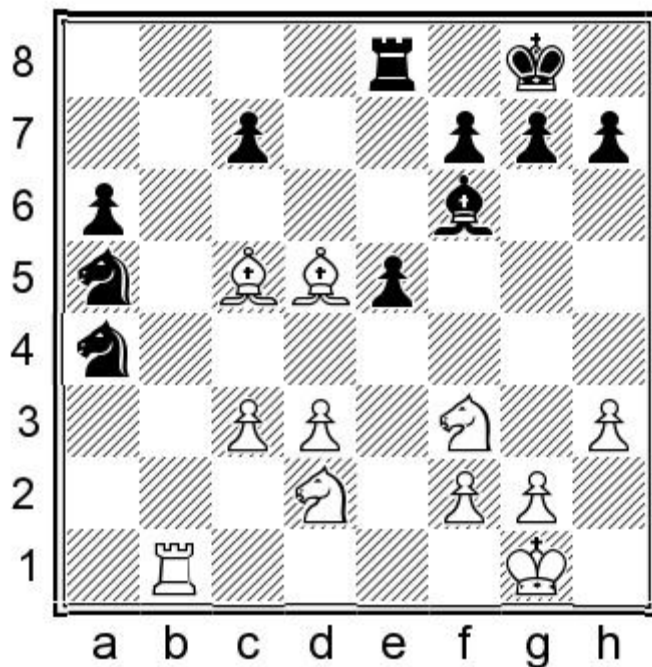
20.♙xd5!? ♖xd5 21.♖xb8 ♖xb8 22.exd5 ♗xd5 23.♗e4 is also interesting.

20...♗xa4

Accepting the challenge.

Another series of exchanges 20...dxe4 21.♙xe6 exd3 (21...♗xe6 22.♗xe4 would give the advantage to White) 22.♙xd7 dxc2 23.♙xe8 (or 23.♖xb6 cxb6 24.♙a3 e4 25.♙xe8 exf3 26.♗xf3 ♗b3=) 23...cxb1=♗ 24.♖xb1 ♖xe8 25.♙xb6 cxb6 26.♖xb6 ♖a8 would have led to an endgame somewhat better for White.

21.♗xa4 ♗xa4 22.exd5 ♖xb1 23.♖xb1 ♙xd5 24.♙xd5



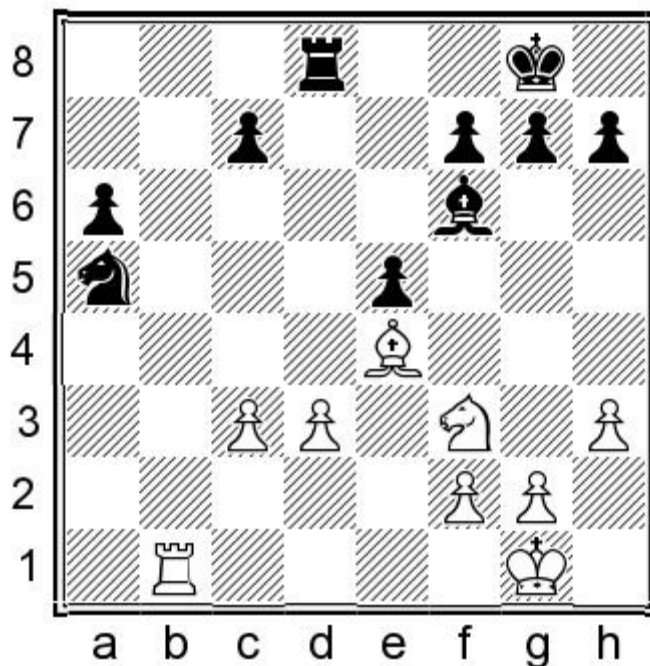
24...♗xc5

It would be a serious mistake to play 24...♗xc3? 25.♖a1.

25.♗e4 ♗xe4 26.♙xe4

A forced line has led to a position where White has obvious compensation for the pawn. All Black's pieces are far more passive than their white counterparts, and the knight on a5 gives serious cause for concern. Still, the reduced material makes a draw the most likely result.

26...♖d8



27.g4!

Vassily continues to keep the tension. After the straightforward 27.♖a1 ♜b3 28.♙xa6 ♜c5 29.♙c6 ♜xd3 30.♙xc7 ♜f4 there would not be enough material left to play for a win.

27...♙d6 28.♙b8+

28.♜xe5 ♙b6! would force an exchange of rooks.

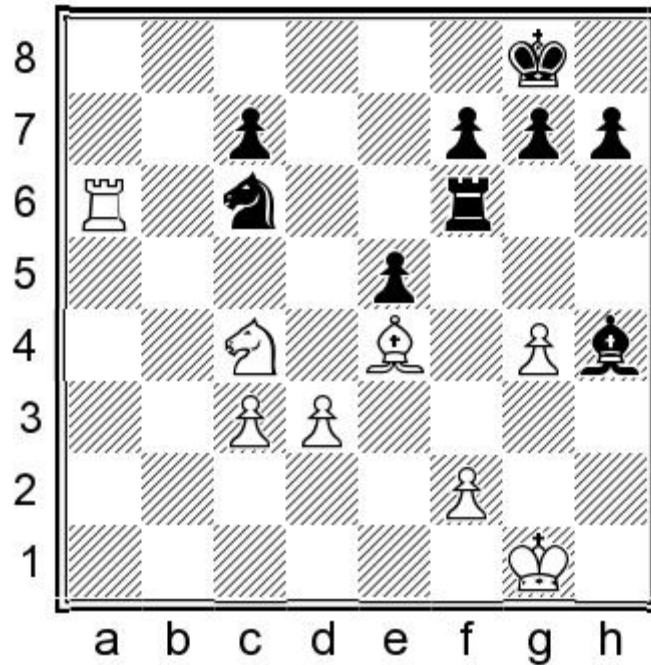
28...♙d8

28...♙d8? 29.c4! g6 30.c5 ♙d7 31.♜xe5 would be a big mistake.

29.♙b2 ♙d6 30.♜d2 ♙g5

30...♙b6 31.♙a2 ♜c6 32.♜c4 ♙b1+ 33.♚g2 ♜b8= is a bit more precise, but the move in the game also looks quite safe.

31.h4! ♙xh4 32.♙a2 ♜c6 33.♜c4 ♙f6 34.♙xa6



34...♖a7?!

Suddenly Black is faced with difficulties. Levon tries to defend by using tactics, but it would have been better to play 34...♖d8! 35.♖a8 ♖e6.

35.♖a2?!

The puzzle-like 35.♖a5! g6 (35...♙xf2+ 36.♔g2 g6 37.♙f3 e4 38.dxe4 loses) 36.f4! (36.♔g2 ♖c6!) 36...♖xf4 37.♔g2! ♖xg4+ 38.♔h3 h5 39.♖xa7 would have given White a serious advantage since the piece is much stronger than the pawns here.

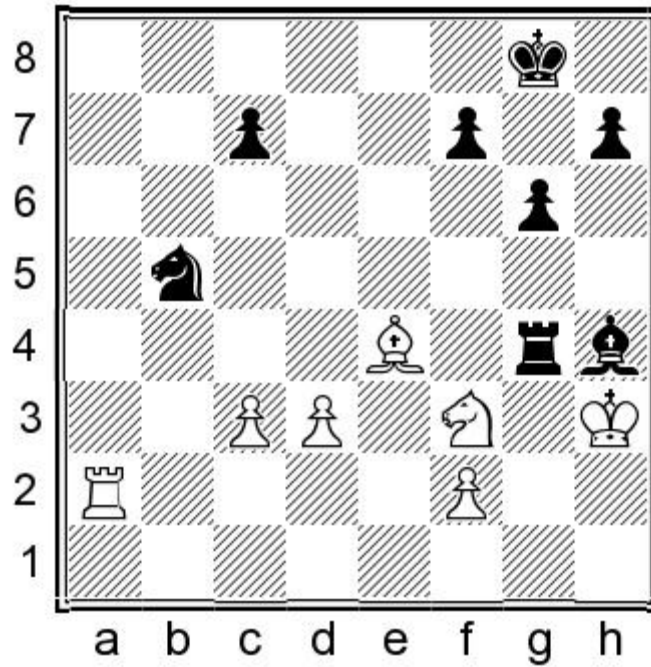
35...g6! 36.♖xe5 ♖f4?!

36...♖b5! 37.♖f3 g5 doesn't look elegant, but it was the best defence.

37.♖f3

The more nuanced 37.c4! would have deprived the black knight of the b5-square. After 37...♔g7 38.♖f3 ♖xg4+ 39.♔h2 ♖c8 40.♔h3 ♖xe4 41.dxe4 White has good chances of victory.

37...♖xg4+ 38.♔h2 ♖b5! 39.♔h3



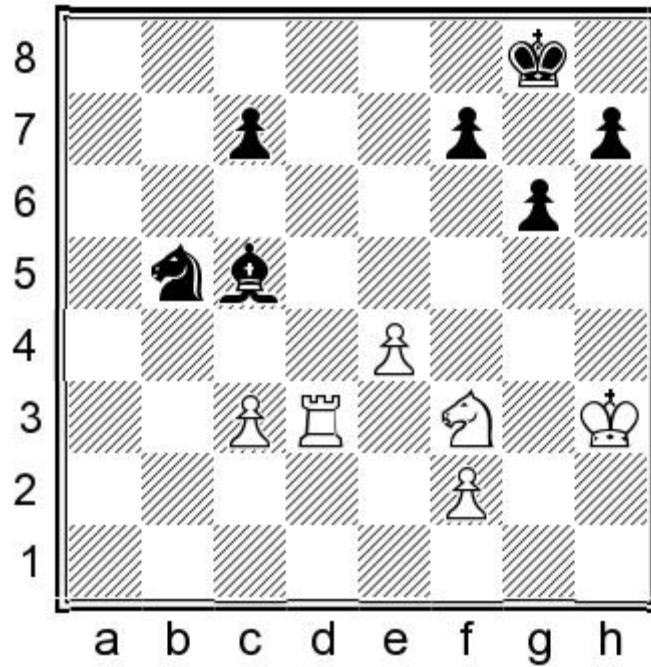
39...♖xe4

39...h5! 40.♗xh4 ♗xc3 41.♖a8+ ♔g7 42.f3 ♖g1 43.♖a7 ♗e2 44.♔h2 (44.♖xc7? ♖h1+) 44...♖c1 would have left Black with more hopes of a successful defence.

40.dxe4 ♗e7 41.♖c2

The endgame is very much like the one in the commentary to White's 37th move. However in the actual game the black pieces are more active, so White's task is more difficult.

41...♗d6 42.♖e2 ♗b5 43.♖e3 ♗c5 44.♖d3

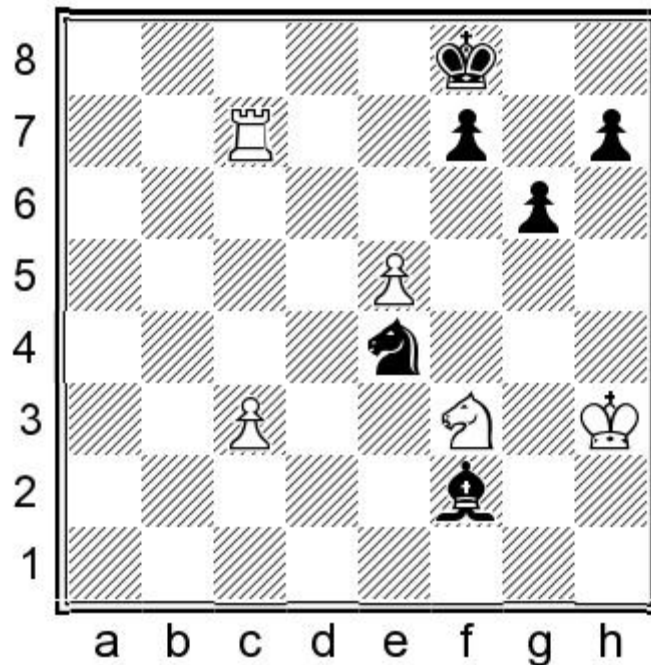


44...♞d6

44...♙xf2 45.e5 ♔f8 46.c4 ♞a7 47.♞d7 isn't much better.

45.♞d2?!

He should have played 45.e5!, when White would win after the almost forced 45...♞e4 46.♞d8+ ♔g7 47.♞d7 ♔f8 48.♞xc7 ♙xf2

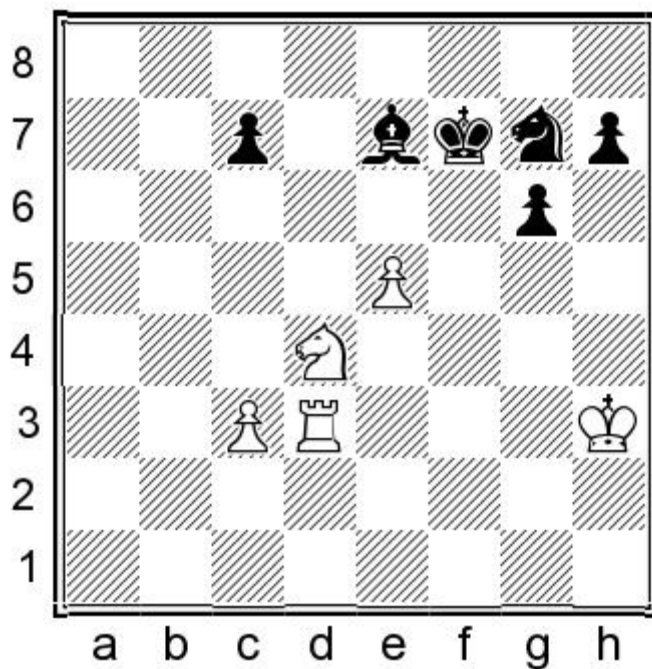


49.♞c4! ♞c5 50.♔g2 ♙e3 51.♞d4 ♞d7 52.♞c8+ ♔e7 53.♔f3.

45...f6

Black could have captured the pawn: 45...♙xf2 46.e5 ♘f5 47.♖d8+ ♔g7 48.♖d7 ♕f8 49.♖xc7 ♙g3 50.♗f3 h5, keeping good chances of survival.

46.f4 ♕f7 47.e5 fxe5 48.fxe5 ♗e8 49.♗b3 ♙e7 50.♗d4 ♗g7



51.c4

a) 51.♖f3+! ♕e8 52.♕g3 is stronger;

b) 51.♕g3 allows 51...g5, freeing the g6-square for the black king.

51...h5 52.♖b3?!

A strange move. He should have played 52.♖f3+.

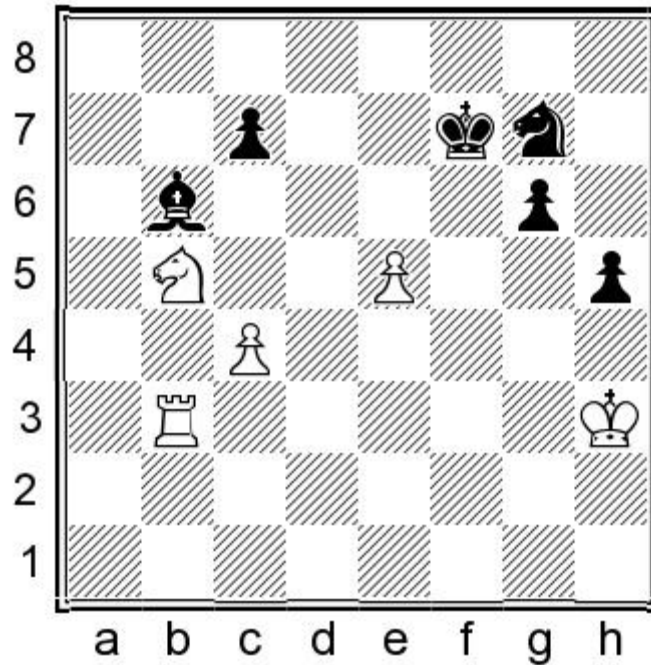
52...♙c5

52...g5!?

53.♗b5?

53.♖f3+ ♕e8 54.♗e2 would leave chances for success.

53...♙b6



54.c5

54.♖c3 ♜e6.

54...♙xc5 55.♞xc7 ♙d4 56.♞f3+ ♔e7 57.♞f6 ♙xe5 58.♞d5+ ♔d7 59.♞xg6 ♞e6 60.♔h4 ♞f4 61.♞b6+ ♔c7 62.♞h6 ♙g7 63.♞a8+ ♔b7 64.♞h7 ♞e6 65.♔xh5 ♔xa8 66.♔g6 ♞f8+ 67.♔xg7 ♞xh7 68.♔xh7 1/2-1/2

It was probably this game that decided the fate of the Olympiad. If only Vassily had been more accurate at critical moments, we would have had a serious advantage over our main competitors.

The four years that had passed had allowed Sergey Karjakin to turn into a mature chess player who was reliable and robust way beyond his age. Look at his crushing victory against one of the leaders of the Hungarian national team.

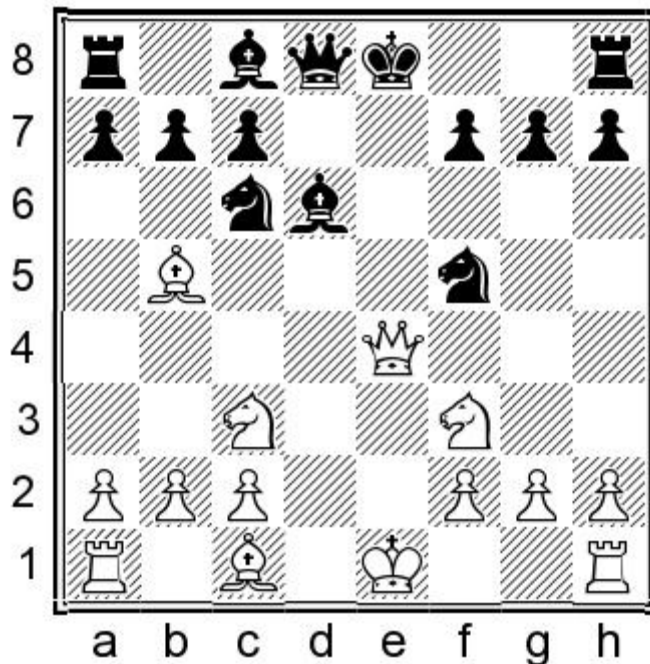
6

Sergey Karjakin (2730)

Judit Polgar (2711)

Dresden 2008

1.e4 e5 2.♞f3 ♞f6 3.d4 exd4 4.e5 ♞e4 5.♞xd4 d5 6.exd6 ♞xd6 7.♞c3 ♞c6 8.♞f4 ♞f5 9.♙b5 ♙d6 10.♞e4+



10...♘fe7

This line is not the most principled and White doesn't aspire to much.

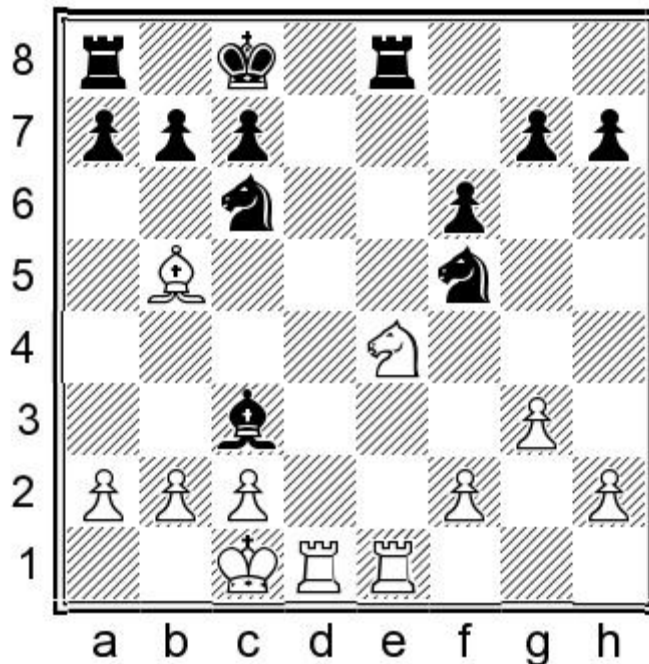
If 10...♙e7 11.0-0 0-0 12.♖e1 ♚xe4 13.♘xe4 ♜e5 14.♙e2 ♞e8 the position would be almost equal as well.

11.♙g5 ♙f5 12.♙xf5 ♜xf5 13.♙xd8 ♚xd8?!

It is only after this move that Black starts to experience real difficulties.

After the natural 13...♞xd8 14.♙xc6+ bxc6 15.0-0-0 0-0 White would have only a symbolic advantage.

14.0-0-0 ♞e8 15.♘g5! f6 16.♘ge4 ♜c8 17.g3 ♙e5 18.♞he1 ♙xc3



19.bxc3!

An unexpected and strong move! Even though there are very few pieces on the board, it is difficult for Black to coordinate their action.

The seemingly natural 19.♘xc3 ♜xe1 20.♞xe1 ♔d7 21.♘e4 b6 22.♞d1+ ♘d6 would leave White with only a minimal advantage.

19...♞e5 20.♙f1!

With the unpleasant threat of 21.♙h3.

20...♘d6

20...♘fe7 21.f4 ♞h5 22.h4 would not be as strong.

21.♘xd6+

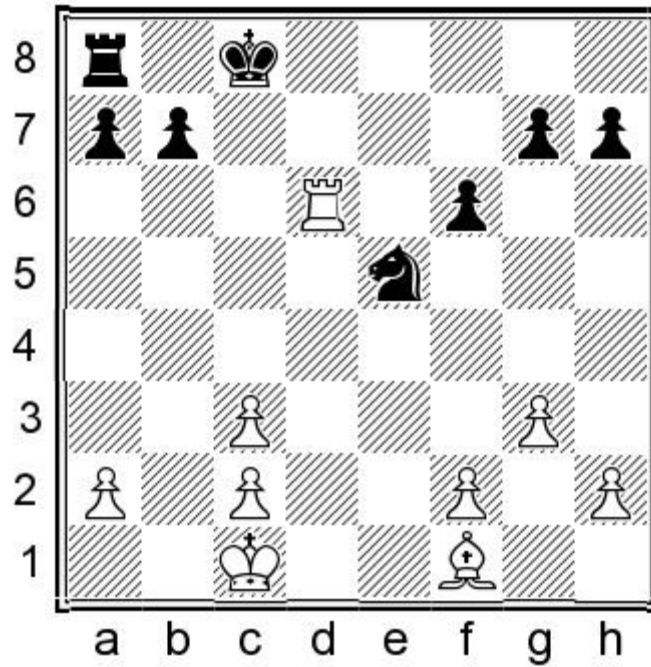
Not the most precise.

21.♙h3+! would lead to a technical ending which is won for White after 21...f5

[or 21...♔b8 22.♘xd6 cxd6 23.♞xe5 fxe5 (23...♘xe5 24.f4 ♘c4 25.♞e1) 24.♞xd6]

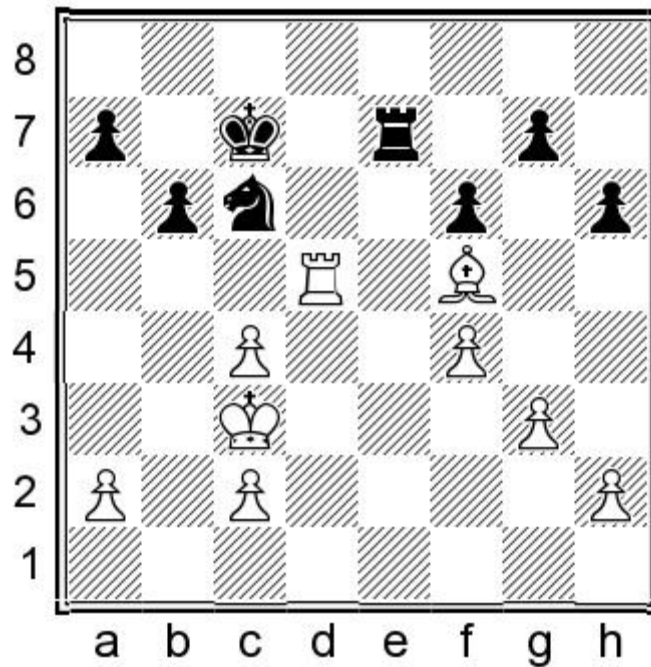
22.♘xd6+ cxd6 23.♞xe5 ♘xe5 24.♞xd6 ♘g4 25.♞d4 ♘h6 26.♞f4 and White collects another pawn.

21...cxd6 22.♞xe5 ♘xe5 23.♞xd6



Even though this also wins a pawn, White has to face enormous technical difficulties to convert this advantage.

23...♔c7 24.♞e6 ♞d8 25.f4 ♘c6 26.♙d3 h6 27.♕b2 ♞d6 28.♞e8 ♞d8 29.♞e1 ♞d7 30.c4 b6 31.♕c3 ♕d6 32.♙f5 ♞e7 33.♞d1+ ♕c7 34.♞d5



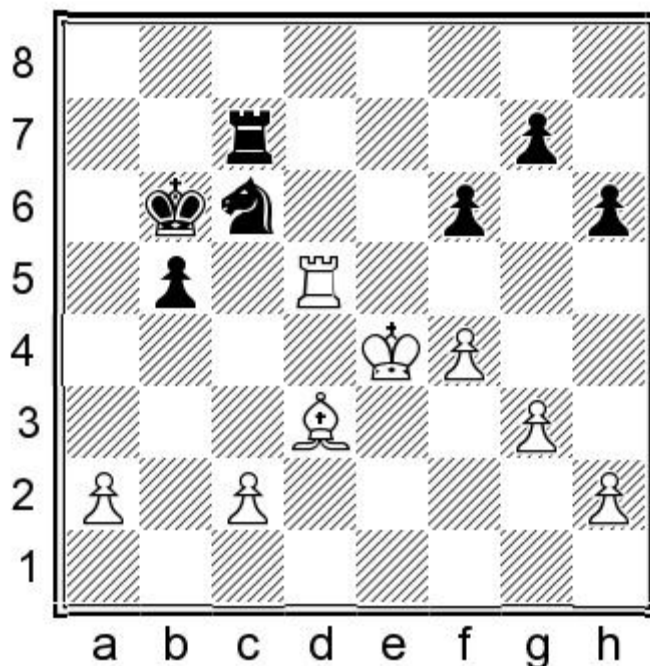
34...♞e3+

A loss of time. 34...♘a5 35.c5 ♘b7 36.cxb6+ axb6 would be more tenacious.

35.♕d2 ♞e7 36.c5 ♘a5 37.cxb6+ axb6 38.♞d4 ♕c6 39.♙e4+ ♕c5

Inappropriate activity. 39...♔c7 would have been better.

40.♔c3 b5 41.♞d5+ ♔b6 42.♙d3 ♞c7+ 43.♔d4 ♜c6+ 44.♔e4



Black's position has suddenly become hopeless. In addition to all the previous problems, the kingside light squares are weak.

44...♞e7+ 45.♔f5 b4 46.♔g6 ♔c7 47.g4 ♜d8 48.♙f5 ♜b7 49.♞d4 ♜d6 50.h4 h5 51.♔xh5 ♜xf5 52.gxf5 ♞e2 53.♔g6 1-0

In the all-important match in round nine, we had to face Russia. After Calvià, we did not have much success against the traditional favourites, so a victory against such a difficult opponent was a cause for optimism. Efimenko's game proved decisive.

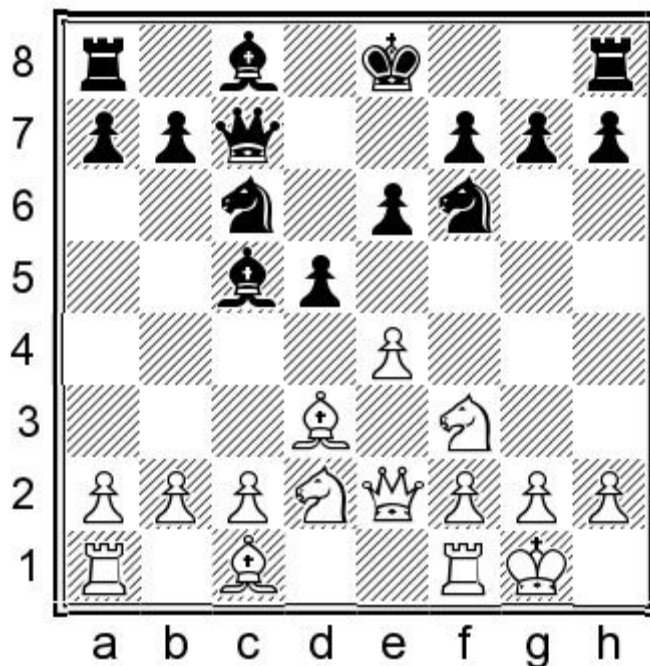
7

Zahar Efimenko (2680)

Alexander Morozevich (2787)

Dresden 2008

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♜d2 ♙e7 4.♙d3 c5 5.dxc5 ♜f6 6.♞e2 ♜c6 7.♜gf3 ♙xc5 8.0-0 ♞c7



9.c4!?

9.exd5 ♖xd5 10.♘e4 ♙e7 11.c4 ♘f4 12.♙xf4 ♚xf4 13.c5 0-0 14.♖fd1 would lead to a calmer game.

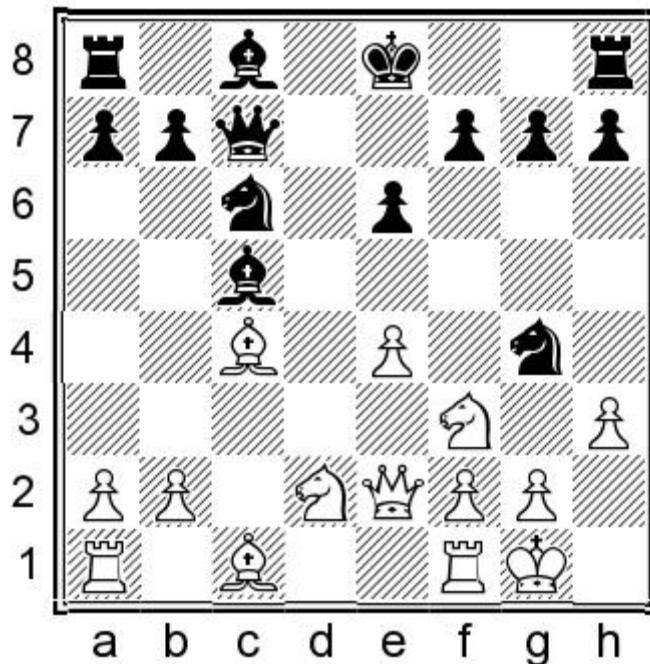
9...dxc4 10.♙xc4

10.♘xc4 e5 11.♙e3 is also possible.

10...♘g4

Morozevich sticks to his aggressive style and tries to threaten the white king immediately. The natural 10...0-0 would have been safer.

11.h3!

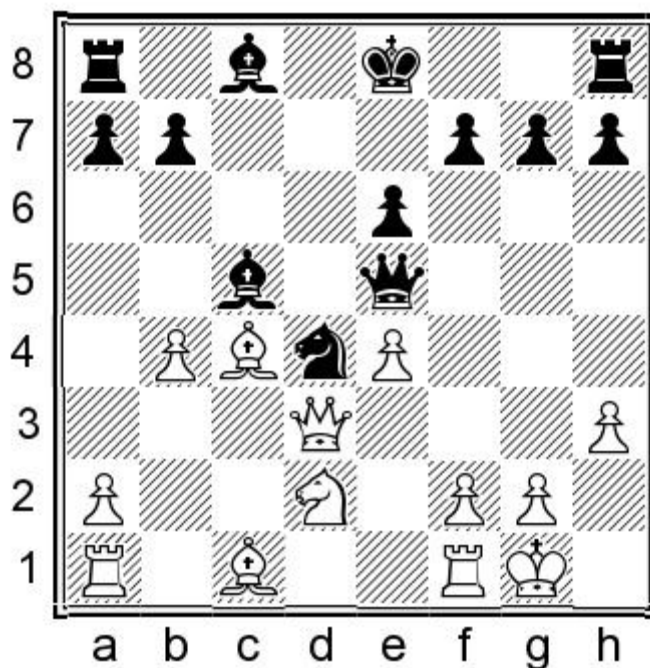


A cold-blooded response. White simply ignores his opponent's main threat.

11...h5!?

Keeping the tension.

a) It turns out that 11...♘d4 is not a lethal threat after all. After 12.♙d3 ♘e5 13.♘xe5 ♙xe5 14.b4!



Black faces a difficult choice. 14...♙b6 The most prudent, even though it has downsides.

[14...♙xb4 is bad, e.g. 15.♞b1 ♘c6 (15...♙d6 16.f4 ♙c5 17.e5 ♘c6+ 18.♔h2 ♙e7 19.♘e4 isn't much better) 16.♞xb4! ♘xb4 17.♙b5+ ♔e7 18.♙c4! a5 19.♘f3 ♙d6 20.♙e3 b6 21.a3 ♘a6 22.e5 ♙d5 23.♙h4+]

15.♙b2 0-0 16.♖h1 (16.♜ab1) 16...♞d8 17.♞ad1 With a clear advantage for White.

b) 11...♜ge5 12.♜xe5 ♜xe5 13.♙b5+ ♜c6 14.♜b3 doesn't solve the problems either.

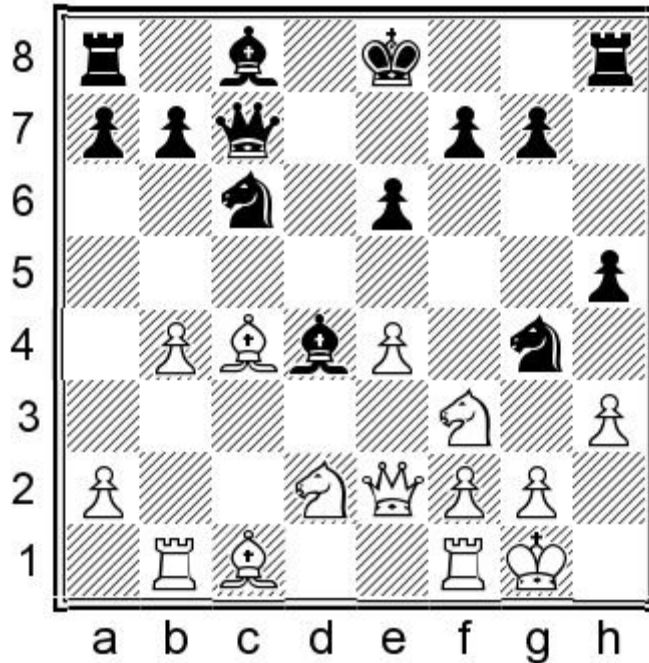
12.b4!

The most active response! The downside of Black's activity is obvious. His attack has come to an end and now it is the black king, stuck in the centre, that suffers severe discomfort.

12...♙d4

Once again, Morozevich chooses the most ambitious and most difficult path for himself, but other lines would also present him with serious problems: 12...♙xb4 13.♙b2 ♜f6 (13...♜ge5 14.♜xe5 ♜xe5 15.♞ac1) 14.e5 ♜d5 15.♜e4 or 12...♜xb4 13.♙b5+ ♜c6 14.♙b2.

13.♞b1



13...♙d7?!

Yet a not her manifestation of over-optimism. Alas, there is no satisfactory solution for Black, e.g. 13...♜ge5 14.♜xd4 ♜xd4 15.♞e3 ♜df3+ 16.gxf3! ♜xc4 17.♞c3 b5 18.♞xg7 ♞e5 19.♞xe5 ♜xe5 20.♙b2 ♞g8+ 21.♖h2 ♜d3 22.♙f6 or 13...♙f6 14.♙b2 ♙xb2 15.♞xb2 a6 16.♞c1.

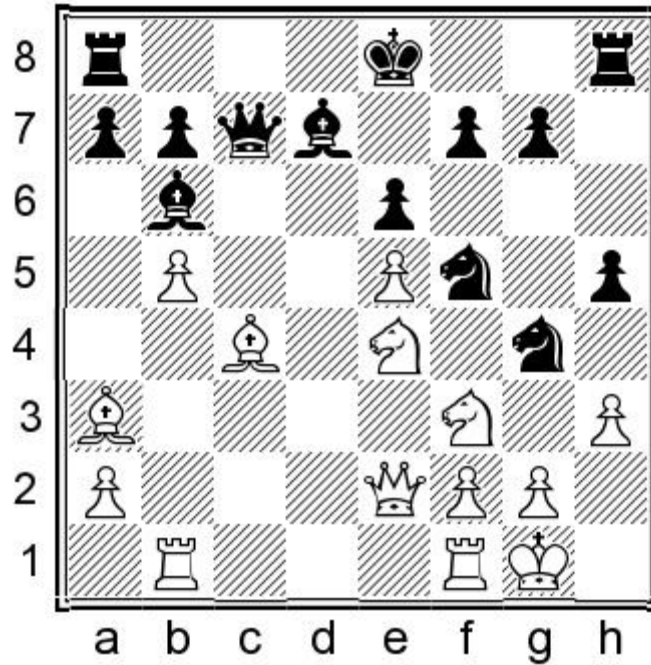
14.b5 ♜e7 15.e5!

The most active move again! The Black pieces that recently seemed so dangerous are, in fact, hanging.

15...♙b6

15...♙xf2+ 16.♖xf2 ♘xf2 17.♚xf2 ♜b6 18.♗e4 ♚xf2+ 19.♔xf2 would also lead to a hopeless position.

16.♙a3 ♗f5 17.♗e4+–



17...f6

Good advice in this situation would be invaluable.

18.♗d6+ ♗xd6 19.exd6 ♚d8 20.♙xe6 ♔f8 21.♙xd7 ♚xd7 22.♚e7+

Simplest! The rest is clear.

22...♚e7 23.dxe7+ ♔f7 24.hxg4 hxg4 25.♗d2 g3 26.♗c4 ♖h5 27.♗xb6 axb6 28.♖b3 gxf2+ 29.♔xf2 ♖d5 30.♖e1 ♔e8 31.♖c3 ♔f7 1–0

Strong and experienced teams from Israel were usually medal contenders in team competitions, and Dresden was no exception. We were paired against Israel in the penultimate round. Hard-fought matchups on every board did not promise us much success. As happened many times in Dresden, it was a single victory that allowed us to prevail in the match. Once again, Zahar Efimenko carried the day.

Thus, before the last round, we shared the lead with Armenia whose tiebreak coefficients were much better than ours due to the modest scores we posted throughout the tournament. Both teams had to face opponents of roughly equal strength: we were paired against Team USA while Armenia faced China. Even a victory in our own match did not guarantee us the gold medal — we needed some help from the Chinese. A draw would almost certainly ensure second place. However no-one was going to let us get a draw without a fight so I decided to use this chance to fight for victory.

I had no doubts about the line-up for the final round. According to my plan, Ivanchuk and Eljanov were to hold with Black while Karjakin and Efimenko had to press with White. Zahar Efimenko was my best

hope. By the end of the tournament, he had obviously found his groove and won his previous three games in a row. His solid and reliable style was the best fit for the last round. However, harsh reality quickly wreaked havoc with our plans.

Ivanchuk and Eljanov experienced serious difficulties in their openings. Karjakin chose not to take a threefold repetition and had to adopt a defensive stance. Only Efimenko kept some pressure on his opponent. I quickly stopped paying attention to the Armenia-China match because we were no longer in a fight for gold. In the end, both our Black players lost but Karjakin managed to salvage a draw. The match was already lost but suddenly it became clear that even a 1–3 defeat would give us a bronze medal. At this point, Zahar was a pawn down in a rook ending, so he still had some chances for survival. Unfortunately, it was he who made the last mistake so Sergey's half-point was our only achievement. The Americans caught up with us on match points and pulled ahead on tiebreak. Such a dramatic finish catapulted the winners to the top step of the podium and left our team without medals.

It is hard to find words that could express our feelings at that moment. As it turned out, this was not yet the last disaster to befall us. According to the rules, some players from the leading teams had to pass a doping test immediately after their games had finished. In our team, Ivanchuk was chosen for such a test. The problem was that the defeat in his game rendered him unresponsive; Vassily ignored the request of a doping control officer and disappeared from the playing venue. All attempts to find him were unsuccessful; he did not attend the closing ceremony either. We were faced with the very real possibility that Ivanchuk would be disqualified.

The Nona Gaprindashvili Cup for the best combined performance of the men's and women's teams seemed scant consolation for all the emotional upheaval we had suffered; we failed to appreciate it. The German customs officials confiscated this cup at the border, which was the last indignity we suffered in Dresden. Fortunately, like everything else in this world, troubles come to an end sooner or later. The Gaprindashvili Cup found its way to the office of the Ukrainian Chess Federation and Vassily Ivanchuk was pardoned by FIDE officials.

After such a disappointing finish, it was difficult to expect that the chess climate in Ukraine would improve. However the events that took place a year later, before the European Team Championship in Novi Sad, were a total surprise. Usually there were no problems with forming a team for a major tournament. Several grandmasters received salaries from the Ministry of Sport; for them, to play for their country was an obligation prescribed in the contract. Our long-time leaders Ivanchuk and Ponomariov chose not to enter such a relationship with the state but usually played on the national team anyway. The Ministry paid all the expenses associated with team competitions, however, shortly before the Novi Sad event, we were told that the budget for the fiscal year had already been spent, and our participation in the European Team Championship became problematic, to say the least. In addition, Ivanchuk's and Ponomariov's contractual obligations precluded them from playing in that team. The Federation officials even suggested that we cancel the trip completely — until better times, they said.

I knew that better times would never come, while our non-participation in the European Team Championship could set a dangerous precedent. The final decision was postponed several times due to financial uncertainty. As a consequence, there were serious problems with team selection. Most of the potential candidates had already committed to other tournaments and it was very difficult to find decent players. At the last moment, Eljanov, Volokitin and Efimenko were joined by two namesakes — Yuri

Drozdovskij and Yuriy Kryvoruchko, who would barely have made the second team at the time by their ratings.

Team selection was taking place against a backdrop of institutional turmoil, which only complicated the situation. In the end, the Ministry found only part of the required amount, asked us to look for funding elsewhere, and promised to pay off the debt as early as the following year. At the team meeting, I proposed two possible solutions for this extremely unpleasant problem. The first option would have all team members become stakeholders, with shares divided equally; that would require a unanimous vote. The second option had me, the head coach, assume all the risks. I was pleasantly surprised when the first option received unanimous support. Thus the rookies became an integral part of the team.

The tournament for us started with disappointments: we lost to Switzerland in round 1, and then drew with Carlsenless Norway in round 3. Such a start could only be deemed a complete failure. Obviously the logistics problems that I have already described played a role. Still, even without the strongest players, our team was rated way ahead of our opponents. After round 3, we held a team meeting and many harsh words were spoken. In retrospect, this provided a timely jolt.

Gradually, things got better. By the last round, it suddenly became clear that victory over Israel could give us the bronze medals, provided certain conditions were met. Any showdown requires a special state of mind and a lot of experience; unfortunately, it was experience that our 2009 team lacked. Furthermore, one of the experienced fighters — Zahar Efimenko — was clearly having a bad tournament and all his previous games had ended in draws. There was no choice; I needed Zahar for the optimal alignment of colours. It took me a lot of time and all my eloquence to plead with him but in the end he agreed to play. He not only played, it was he who brought us the decisive point. Third place gained in such circumstances was akin to victory. I consider the result in Novi Sad to be one of the highest achievements in my career as captain.

Before the next Olympiad, a long-brewing crisis in Ukrainian chess culminated in an event that attracted the attention of the whole world. Sergey Karjakin, the youngest and most promising grandmaster of a new generation, announced his transfer to Russia. This news came as a complete surprise to me although, as it turned out, some of his teammates knew of his plans. I will not discuss the morals of the matter here. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of its former republics paid no attention to chess. During these difficult years, many players, including those from Ukraine, changed both their citizenship and their federation.

I have already written in this book about the difficulties that chess experienced in Ukraine. The professionals with whom I worked were left to their own devices and received salaries that were meagre by western standards. Meanwhile, the status of players in post-Soviet times had changed dramatically. Chess had turned into an unenviable occupation for those who for some reason did not want to participate in the new game which gripped everybody else — the pursuit of wealth. Moreover, in this new situation, practising chess required money. No-one paid for coaches and tournament travel anymore; no-one paid for computers that were not needed in ‘old-time’ chess.

Sergey was made ‘an offer he couldn’t refuse’ — and he didn’t refuse it. Suddenly a delicate balance between Russia and Ukraine was sharply tilted in favour of our perennial rivals. Shortly thereafter, the

chess officials in our country were replaced. I do not know whether these two events were connected. There was some hope of improving a hopeless situation. Indeed, for the first time in the history of Ukrainian chess, the Olympiad team members received honorariums; they were even promised decent bonuses for a successful performance.

As always, everything had to be decided at the chessboard. I put my faith in proven fighters. The core of the team comprised the same players who had made a breakthrough in already distant 2004 — with two modifications: I've already explained the loss of Karjakin; Zahar Efimenko had become a familiar face on the team over the years. There was no doubt about the first four boards, but it was not clear until the last moment whom to choose as reserve. I had a very difficult choice between two members of the 2004 dream team — Andrei Volokitin and Alexander Moiseenko. Alexander was more stable and his rating was higher than his rival's but I believed that Andrei had better potential. If he was in his best shape this would be a major asset in our fight for the medals. In the end, I chose Alexander. It proved to be a mistake.

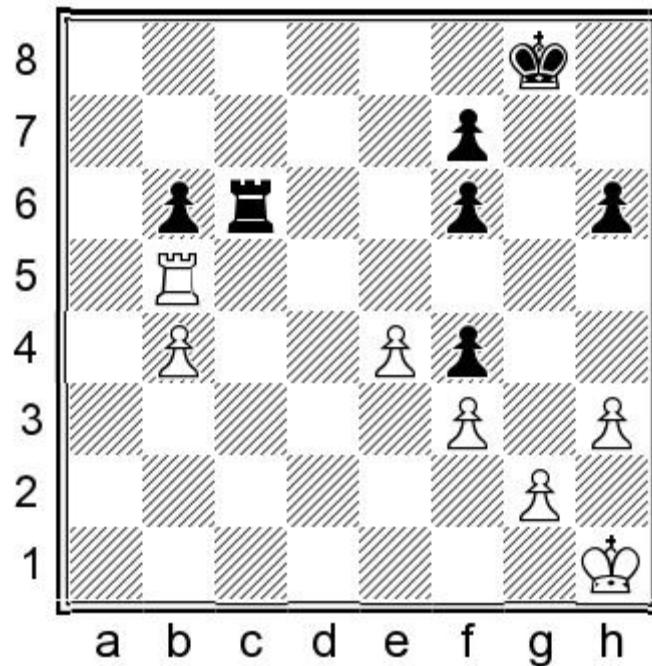
We did not have an impressive start at the Olympiad: as early as round three we drew with Croatia; the next day, we barely beat Slovenia who were not amongst the favourites, but gradually my boys found their groove and things went smoothly. In round six, we defeated Hungary. A victory against a strong opponent is always pleasant; moreover, successful play in rook endings had become a hallmark of our team in this tournament.

8

Pavel Eljanov (2761)

Judit Polgar (2682)

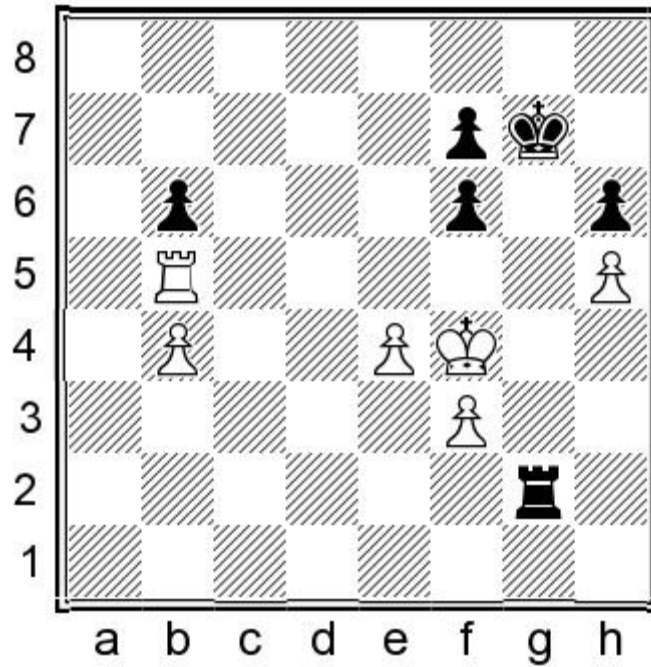
Khanty-Mansiysk 2010



This ending was a result of tense positional play.

The weakness of Black's pawns and White's greater activity give the advantage to the White, but is it enough for victory? This is a typical question for rook endings.

38.♔h2 ♕g7 39.h4 ♕g6 40.h5+ ♕g7 41.♔h3 ♜d6 42.♞d5 ♞c6 43.♞b5 ♞d6 44.♔g4 ♞d2 45.♔xf4
♞xg2



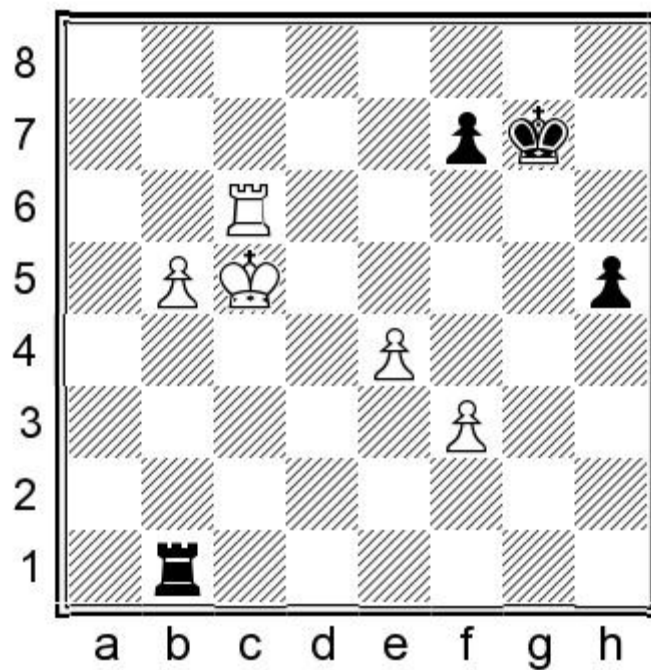
46. ♔e3!

Of course not 46. ♖xb6 ♜g5 and the passed h-pawn gives Black enough counterplay.

46... ♜h2

46... ♜g5 47. ♜f5 would just be a transposition of moves.

47. ♔d4 ♜h1 48. ♜f5 ♔f8 49. ♜xf6 ♜xh5 50. ♜xb6 ♜h1 51. b5 h5 52. ♜c6 ♜b1 53. ♔c5 ♔g7



54.b6?

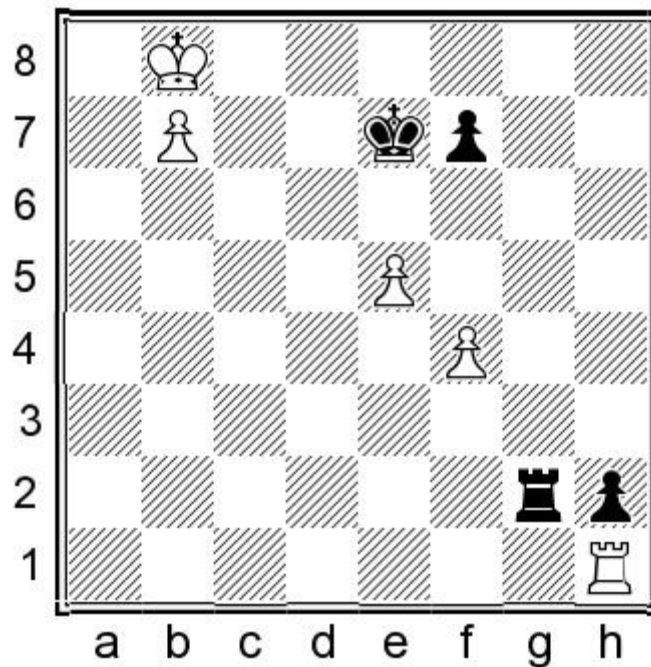
Too hasty! White is winning but had to understand that Black's only chance of saving the game — the h-pawn — should be stopped as soon as possible.

The clearest path to victory was 54.♖a6! h4 (54...♞b2 55.♖a1 h4 56.♞h1) 55.♖a2 ♔g6 56.b6 ♔g5 57.♞h2, when the pawn moves to b7, the white king to b8, the rook can cover c2 or a2 and Black's counterplay would be too late.

54...h4 55.♞d6 ♞b2!

55...h3 is too early because of 56.♞d2!.

56.♔c6 h3 57.b7 h2 58.♞d1 ♞c2+ 59.♔b6 ♞b2+ 60.♔c7 ♞c2+ 61.♔b8 ♞g2 62.♞h1 ♔f6 63.f4 ♔e7 64.e5



64...f6?

The fatal error! A draw was within reach and could have been secured with the natural 64...♔e6 65.♔c7 ♞c2+, when White cannot strengthen his position. Inappropriate activity cost Judit the game.

65.♔c7 ♞c2+ 66.♔b6 fxe5

The following line reveals why Black's error was so serious: 66...♞b2+ 67.♔c6 ♞c2+ 68.♔d5 ♞b2 69.♞xh2 and the b7-pawn is invulnerable. This is why Black shouldn't have weakened the seventh rank.

67.♞b1 h1=♞ 68.♞xh1 ♞b2+ 69.♔c6 exf4 70.♞h8 ♔f6 71.b8=♞ ♞xb8 72.♞xb8 ♔e5 73.♔c5 ♔e4

74.♔c4 ♕e3 75.♖e8+ ♔d2 76.♗f8 ♕e3 77.♔c3 1–0

As in Calvià, Ivanchuk shone brightly; he won his first six games in every style possible. There were fireworks in his game against the leader of Team Georgia who never shies away from a challenge.

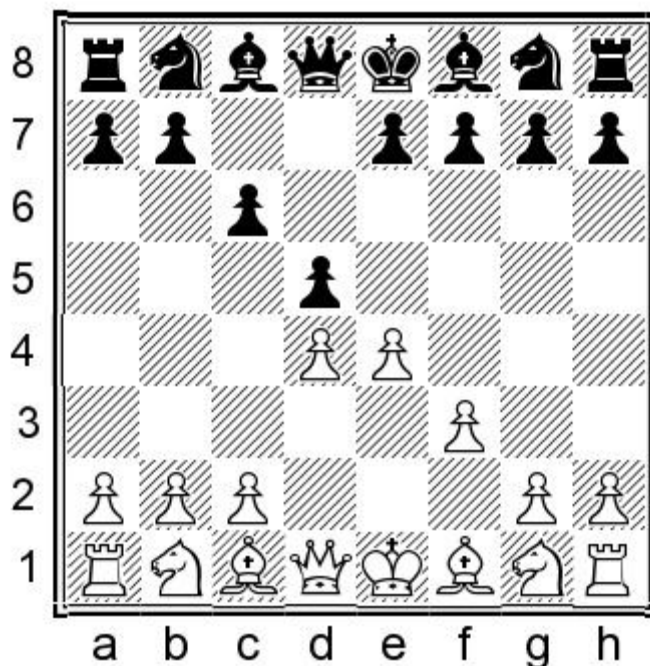
9

Vassily Ivanchuk (2754)

Baadur Jobava (2710)

Khanty-Mansiysk 2010

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.f3!?



Ivanchuk's openings are known to be unpredictable but in this case his opponent should have been prepared. Vassily had already played this line against Mchedlishvili, Jobava's Georgian teammate.

3...♖b6!?

Baadur is the first to stray from tried and tested openings.

3...dxe4 4.fxe4 e5 leads to sharp, open play. The more solid 3...e6 4.♘c3 ♗b4 5.♘ge2 was played in the above-mentioned game Ivanchuk — Mchedlishvili, Greek Team Championship 2009.

4.a3!?

Opening novelties are not common in modern chess, and it is even rarer to have a completely new position after only four moves. Alas, no matter how I tried, I was unable to understand the logic behind this pawn move. I suspect that its main advantage lay in the surprise effect! Black was surely ready for the normal 4.♘c3.

4...e5!

A natural response!

5.exd5

White already needs to be careful.

a) The following line leads to serious difficulties: 5.dxe5 ♖c5 6.♘h3 ♗xh3 7.gxh3 ♕f2+ 8.♔e2 dxe4 9.♘c3 exf3+ 10.♕xf3 ♘d7 and Black has an attack for free.

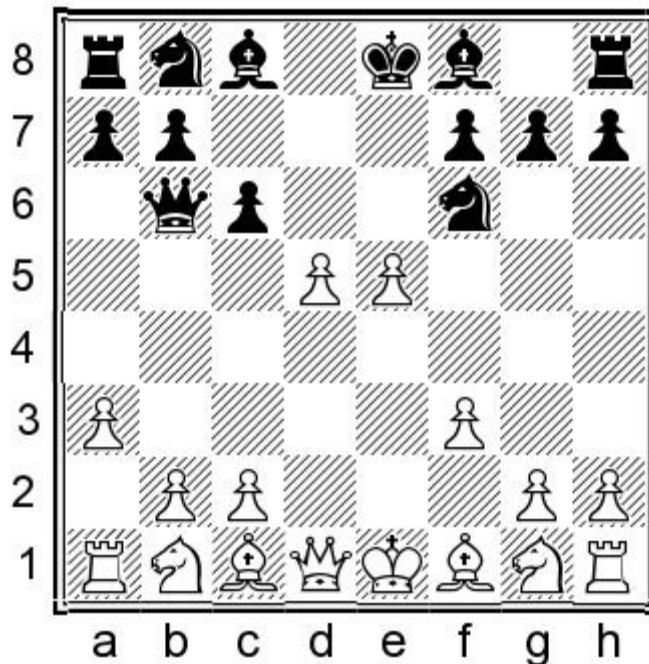
b) The position calls for something like 5.♗e2!? ♗xd4 6.♘c3 dxe4 7.♕d2 with the initiative as compensation for the sacrificed pawns.

5...♘f6

Jobava displays maximum activity.

The simple 5...cxd5! 6.♗e2 (not the losing 6.♘c3 exd4 7.♘xd5?? ♗a5+) 6...♘c6 7.c3 ♕e6 8.dxe5 ♖c5 9.♘h3 ♗xh3 10.gxh3 a5 would give Black comfortable play.

6.dxe5



6...♖c5!?

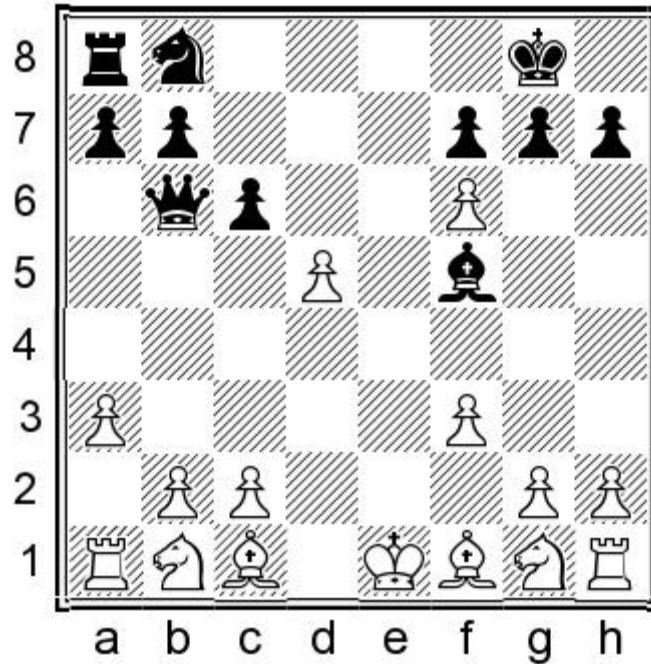
Continuing in the same way. 6...♘xd5 7.♘d2 ♗e3+ (7...♘e3 8.♘c4) 8.♘e2 ♗xe5 9.♘c4 ♗e7 is safer, with roughly equal chances.

7.exf6 ♕f2+ 8.♔e2 0-0! 9.♗d2! ♖e8+!

Another unobvious move.

9...♙xg1 seems natural, however after 10.♔d1! ♙d4 11.fxg7 ♙xg7 12.♘c3 the compensation for the sacrificed material appears inadequate.

10.♔d1 ♜e1+ 11.♞xe1 ♙xe1 12.♔xe1 ♙f5



Formally, White has a big material advantage, but the remaining Black pieces are tremendously active. In addition, don't forget that even though the white king is standing on its original square, White has lost the right to castle.

13.♙e2

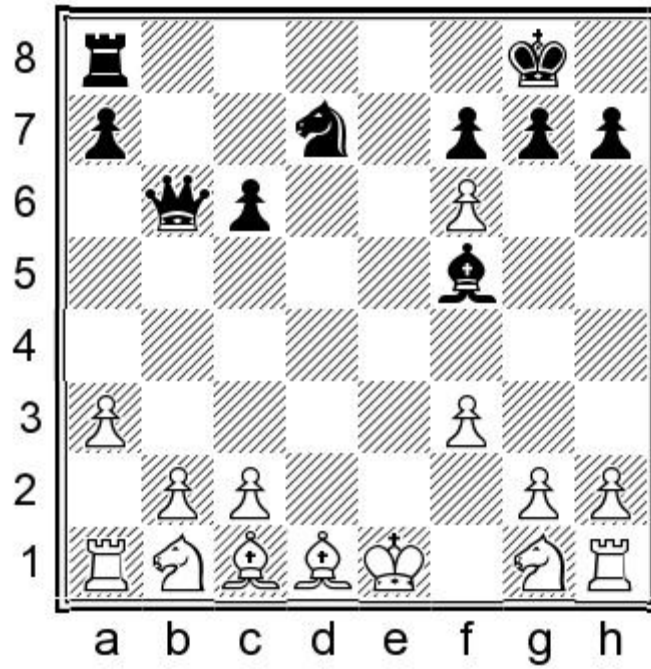
13.♘c3 ♘d7 is not clear either.

13...♘d7?!

Only after this natural move does White finally gain the initiative. Either 13...♙xc2!? 14.♘c3 ♘d7 or 13...cxd5!? 14.♙d1 ♞xf6 would have left the outcome of the game open.

14.dxc6 bxc6 15.♙d1!

A beautiful position! White has no queen and all his pieces except the bishop on d1 are on their original squares, but he has the advantage. It is difficult for Black to find targets of attack.



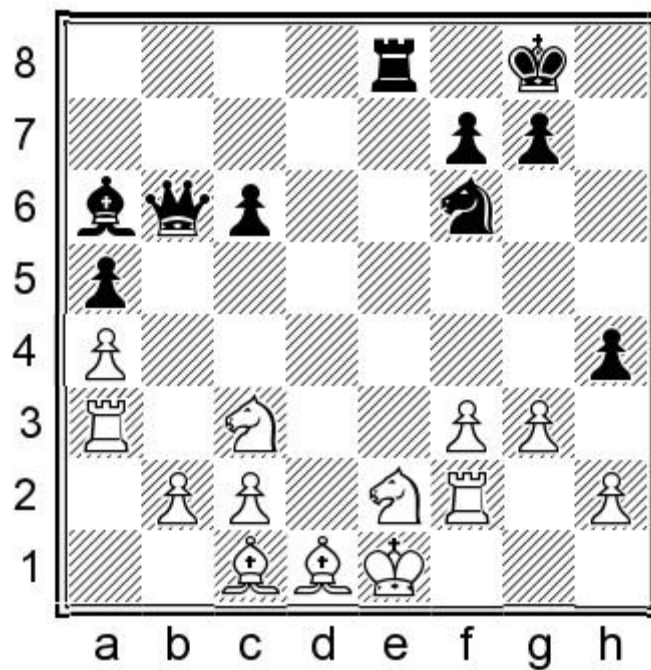
15...Rxe8+ 16.Ne2 Nxf6 17.Nbc3 Qc8?!

17...Nd5 18.Nxd5 cxd5 19.g4 Qg6 (19...Qc8 20.Rf1) 20.a4 would leave more chances.

18.a4! a5 19.Rf1

19.Ra3!

19...Qa6 20.Rf2 h5 21.Ra3 h4 22.g3



22...h3

22...hxg3 23.hxg3 ♖d5 is somewhat more tenacious.

23.g4! ♜d8

If he plays 23...♙c4 to stop ♜b3, then 24.♗e4! ♗xe4 25.fxe4 ♜xe4 26.♜xh3 is a strong response.

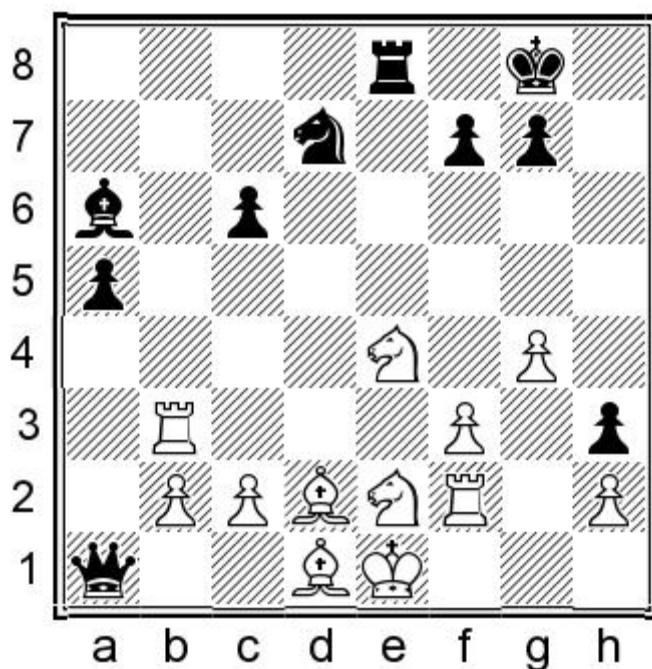
24.♗f4!

The white pieces are slowly becoming active, deciding the result of the game.

24...♗d7 25.♜b3

25.♙e2! is even stronger.

25...♜d4 26.♗fe2 ♜e8 27.♗e4 ♜xa4 28.♙d2 ♜a1



A last desperate attempt to create some counterplay.

29.♙c3 ♗e5 30.♜a3 ♜b1 31.♗d2 ♜c1 32.♜xa5

Not 32.♗xc1?? ♗xf3#.

32...♗g6 33.♜xa6 ♗f4 34.♜a8!

1-0

The crucial match of that Olympiad, Russia-Ukraine, took place in round eight after a rest day and the

election of the FIDE President. The confrontation between Kirsan Ilyumzhinov and two great champions, Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov, was very dramatic, but we had our own match to worry about. The price of victory was quite high, although not the same for both sides. Our team was in the lead so a draw would be satisfactory. The Russians desperately needed to win because they trailed us in team points.

It soon became clear that even a draw would be a success for our team and we would have to fight hard for it. On the first two boards, our opponents had some advantage; on board four, the game was slowly moving towards a draw; however, on board three, it was Sergey Karjakin who seized the initiative in the opening, a sharp line of the Caro-Kann, and the former Ukrainian's preparation proved to be much better. Pavel Eljanov had next to no chances and lost quickly. At this point, the games on the top two boards ended in draws. Zahar Efimenko had what appeared to be a drawn endgame with little hope for a win, but our player sought chances persistently.

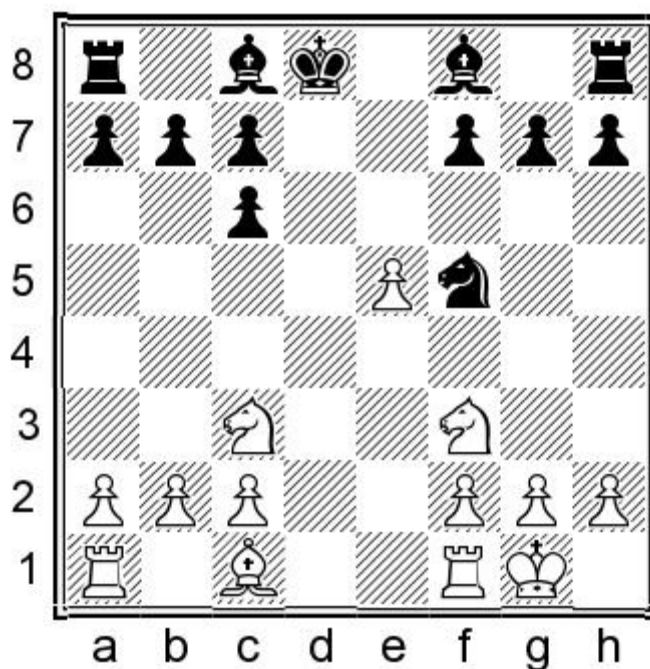
10

Zahar Efimenko (2683)

Vladimir Malakhov (2725)

Khanty-Mansiysk 2010

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♗xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♗xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♗f5 8.♙xd8+ ♔xd8 9.♘c3



This is one of the most popular tabiyas in modern chess. Each side has its trumps. White's pawn advantage on the kingside is compensated by the bishop pair. The early disruption of the strategic balance and huge range of plans have attracted the best players in the world to this system.

9...♔e8

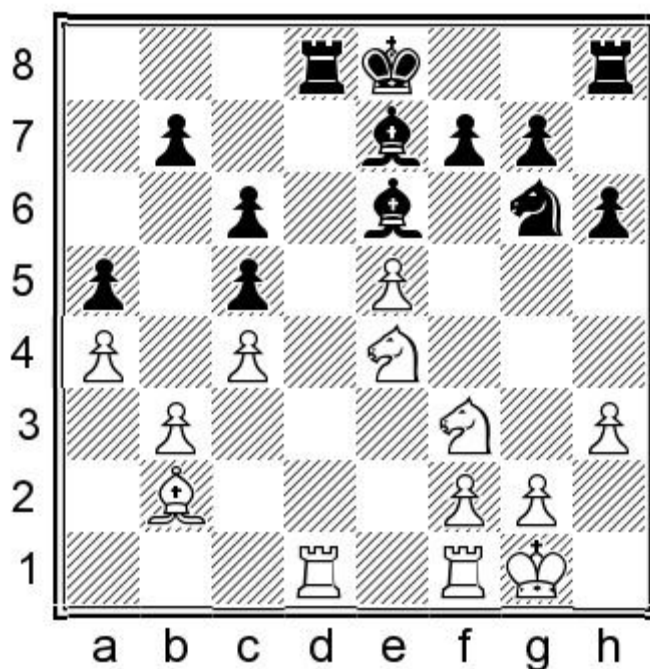
This is the line that is played most often although no one has refuted the plan where the black king goes to the queenside.

Efimenko has a lot of experience playing this system for both sides, in fact at this Olympiad he won against Ivan Šarić with Black.

10.♘e2

The game against Šarić took a different turn: 10.h3 b6 (recently Black has chosen 10...h5 most often.)
11.♞d1 ♙b7 12.♙f4 ♞c8 and Zahar managed to win a sharp game.

10...♘e7 11.h3 ♘g6 12.b3 h6 13.♙b2 c5 14.♞ad1 ♙e6 15.♘c3 ♙e7 16.♘d5 ♙d8 17.c4 a5 18.a4 c6
19.♘c3 ♙e7 20.♘e4 ♞d8



21.♞fe1

Malakhov has successfully resolved all his opening problems and equalised completely. However team strategy forced White to play for a win. Paradoxically enough, only a patient waiting game could give White practical winning chances; the active 21.♘d6+ ♙xd6 22.exd6 f6 would have eased Black's task.

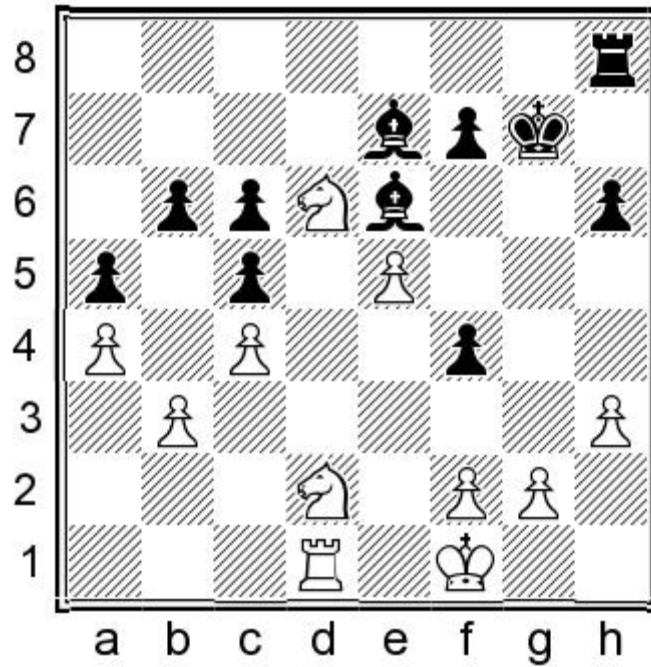
21...♞xd1 22.♞xd1 ♘f4

22...♙f5!?

23.♙a3 b6 24.♘d6+ ♔f8

Not 24...♙xd6? 25.♞xd6 ♙d7 26.e6 ♘xe6 27.♘e5 with a decisive advantage for White.

25.♔f1 g5 26.♙c1 ♔g7 27.♙xf4 gxf4 28.♘d2



It had become clear by now that the fate of the whole match depended on the result of this game. Black's position looks absolutely safe. He could have kept the two bishops, but Malakhov's choice isn't bad either.

28...♙xd6!?

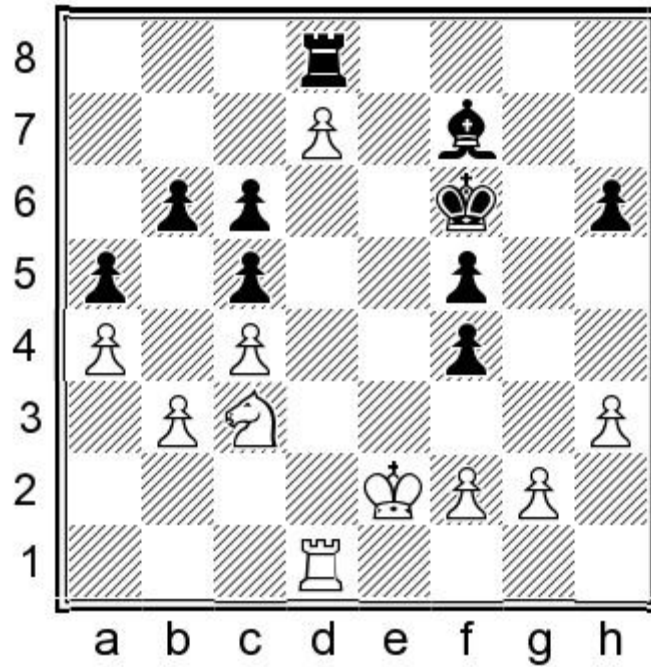
28...f6!?

29.exd6 ♖d8 30.♘e4 f5?!

This is imprecise. It would appear that Black gains the d6-pawn, but things are not that simple.

It would be better to play 30...♙f5 31.f3 f6 32.♖d2 ♔f7 when White cannot strengthen his position.

31.♘c3 ♔f6 32.♔e2 ♙f7 33.d7



33...♙h5+

This impulsive check only helps White, but Malakhov's task is more difficult than it might appear.

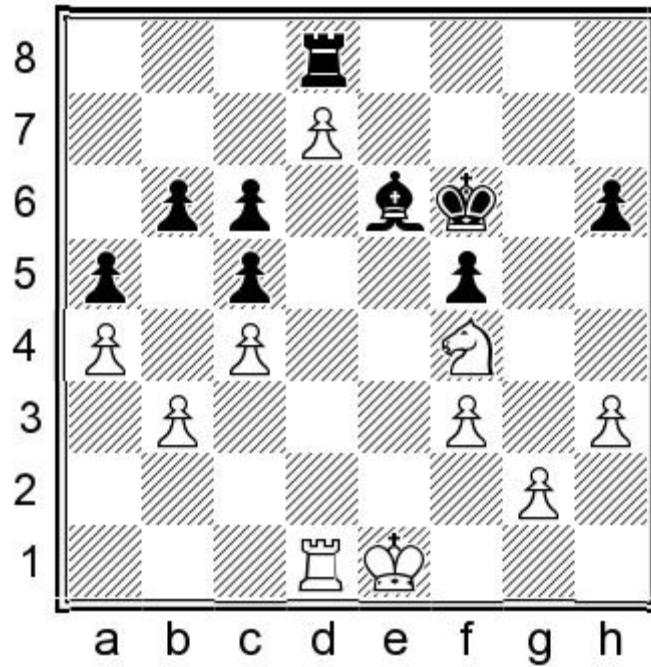
a) It turns out that 33...♙e6 34.f3 ♖xd7 35.♖xd7 ♙xd7 36.♙d3 ♙e6 37.♘e2 ♙e5 38.♙c3 (with a subsequent ♘c1) 38...♙f6 39.h4 leads to the loss of the f4-pawn.

b) A similar endgame occurs after 33...♙e5 34.f3 ♙e6 35.h4 ♖xd7 36.♖xd7 ♙xd7 37.♙d3. I wouldn't vouch that this endgame is already won for White, but he definitely has the better chances.

34.f3 ♙e6 35.♙e1! ♙f7

35...♖xd7 36.♖xd7 ♙xd7 37.♘e2

36.♘e2 ♙e5 37.♘c1 ♙e6 38.♘d3+ ♙f6 39.♘xf4



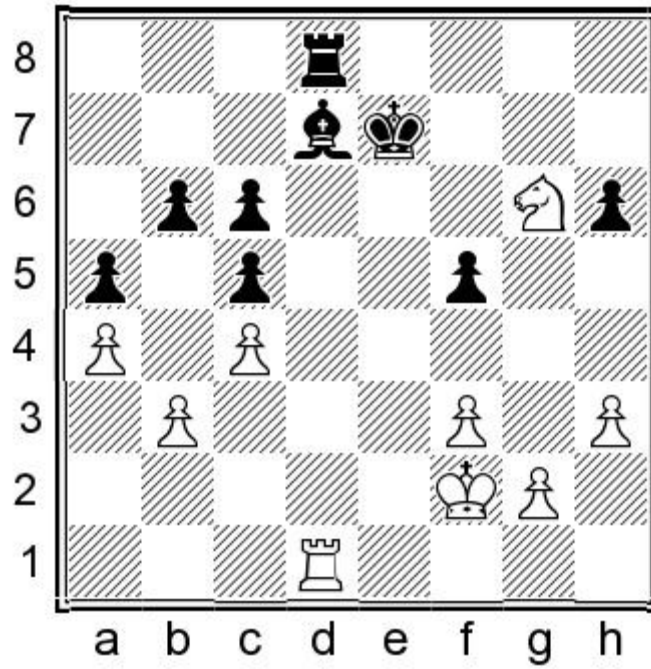
39...♙xd7?

A decisive error! Keeping the rooks on makes Black's problems worse. The correct 39...♖xd7 40.♖xd7 ♙xd7 reaches a position discussed above.

40.♔f2 ♖e7

White has a serious, probably decisive, advantage, however it is extremely difficult to keep cool under such enormous psychological pressure when the fate of a crucial match hangs on each move. We can only admire Efimenko's nerve. He didn't give his opponent the slightest chance.

41.♘g6+!



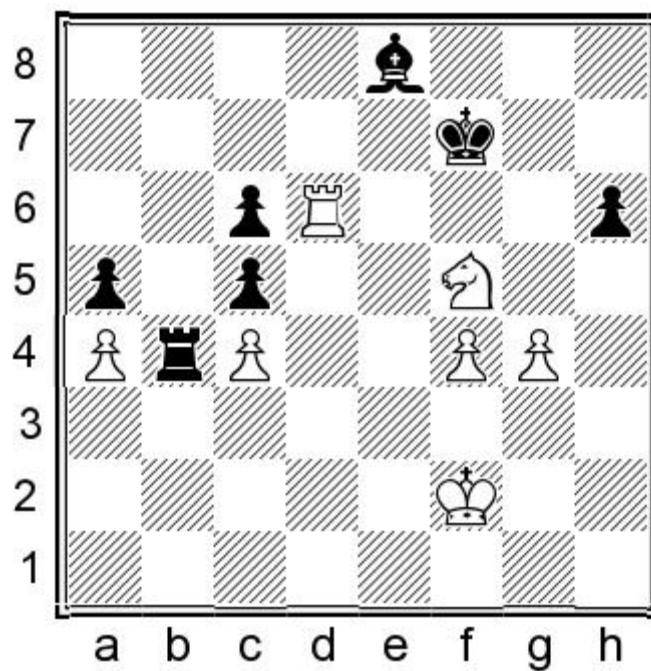
41...♔e6

The only option.

42.f4 ♖b8 43.g4! ♕e8 44.♘h4!

This is stronger than the 'logical' 44.♘e5. This way, White forces a capture on g4.

44...fxg4 45.hxg4 b5 46.♘f5 bxa4 47.bxa4 ♖b4 48.♖d6+ ♔f7



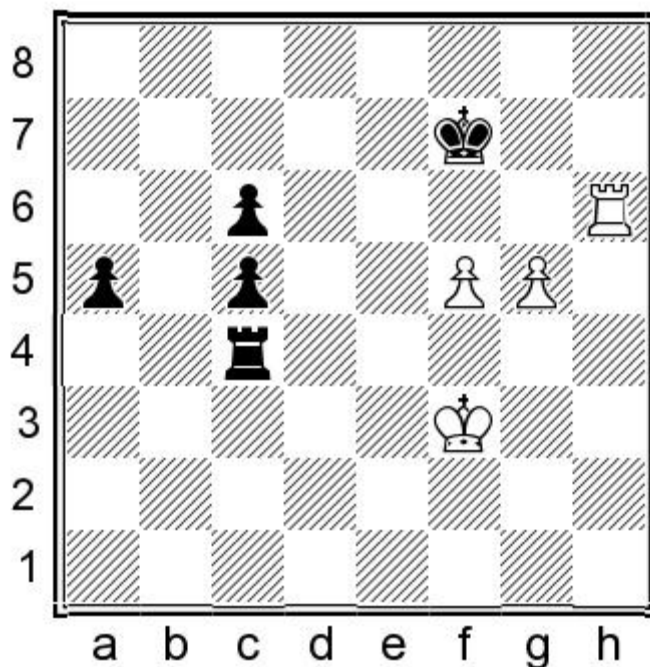
49. ♖xh6

Another non-trivial move. The c4-pawn is protected indirectly, and everything is now decided by the advance of the g-pawn.

49... ♜xa4 50. g5 ♔g8 51. ♖d6

Obviously 51. g6 ♜xc4 52. ♔f3 would also win, but Zahar was playing in a super-safe manner so that the team wouldn't worry.

51... ♕f7 52. ♖xf7 ♔xf7 53. f5 ♜xc4 54. ♔f3



The black pawns are irrelevant in this position.

54... ♜b4 55. ♜h7+ ♔g8 56. g6

1-0

Thus the match ended in a draw, and we maintained our position in the lead. However our lead remained minimal, so any mistake could prove fatal, while fatigue had become a significant factor.

Starting from round five, I always announced the same line-up, with Alexander Moiseenko warming the bench as reserve. Unfortunately, it sometimes happens in team competitions that some players are not in good shape. It is not a big deal if only one player is affected. Fortunately Ivanchuk, Efimenko and Eljanov were perfectly fine while Ponomariov, despite not showing his former brilliance, was still able to hold his own on board two.

For a captain, the main danger of leaving someone as reserve for several straight matches is the fact that such a decision cannot be reversed. Once a player has missed several matches, it is very difficult for him to re-enter and play well at a critical moment. Even though Team Armenia successfully used this

strategy, I am not in favour of splitting the team into regulars and reserve. Unfortunately, in our case the stakes were too high.

Our next match against Azerbaijan was not easy either. In the six years after Calvia, the young players from Azerbaijan had matured and turned into formidable rivals. Again, it was board four that decided the outcome of the match.

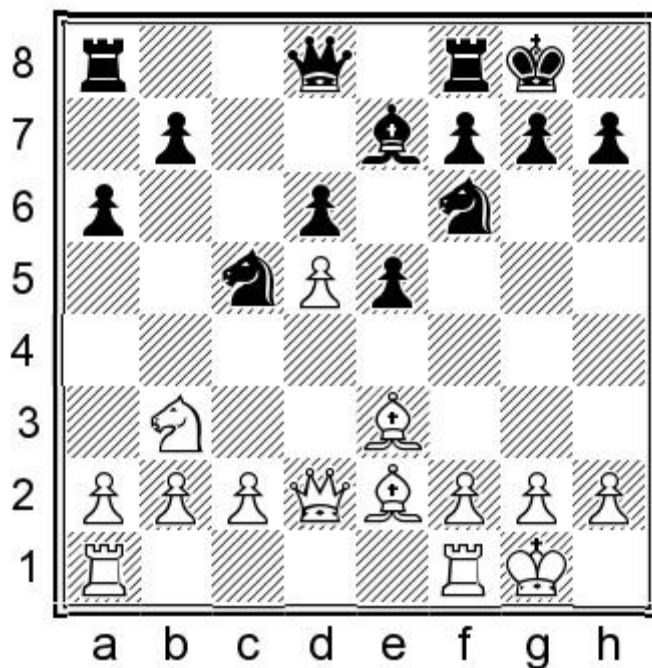
11

Zahar Efimenko (2683)

Eltaj Safarli (2607)

Khanty-Mansiysk 2010

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♘f6 5.♗c3 a6 6.♕e2 e5 7.♗b3 ♕e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.♕e3 ♕e6 10.♗d5 ♗bd7 11.♖d3 ♕xd5 12.exd5 ♗c5 13.♖d2



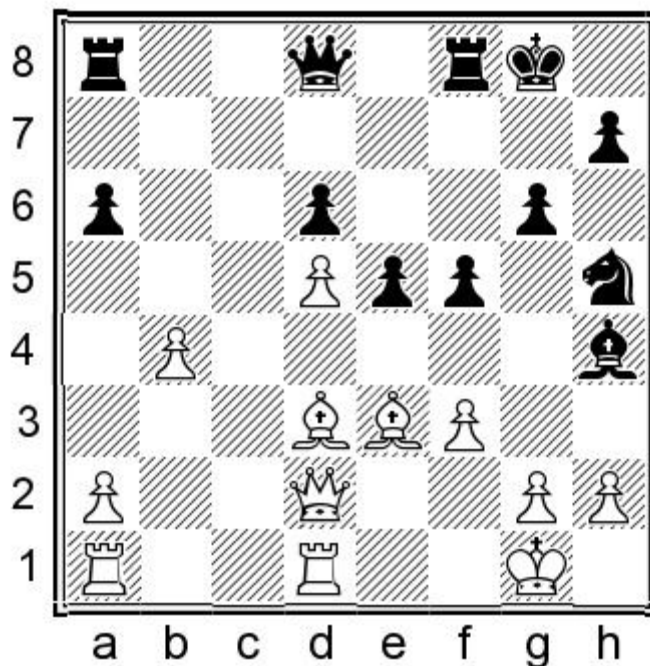
13...b6

13...♗fe4 14.♖b4 b6 15.f3 ♗f6 16.♖ad1 was played in Short-Efimenko, Wijk aan Zee 2009, so the position that has arisen was well-known to Zahar.

14.f3 ♗h5 15.♖fd1 f5 16.♗xc5 bxc5 17.c3 ♕h4 18.♕d3 g6?!

It was natural to follow the plan with 18...f4 19.♕f2 ♕xf2+ to exchange the dark-squared bishops.

19.b4 cxb4 20.cxb4



20...♙f6?!

This is out of place. Once more he should have played 20...f4 21.♙f2 ♜xf2+ 22.♚xf2 ♞f6, even though 23.♞ac1 gives the initiative to White.

21.♞ab1

21.♞ac1 gives additional options to Black after 21...e4 22.fxe4 f4 23.♙f2 ♙g5 because the c1-rook is hanging.

21...e4!?

An interesting way to sharpen the game.

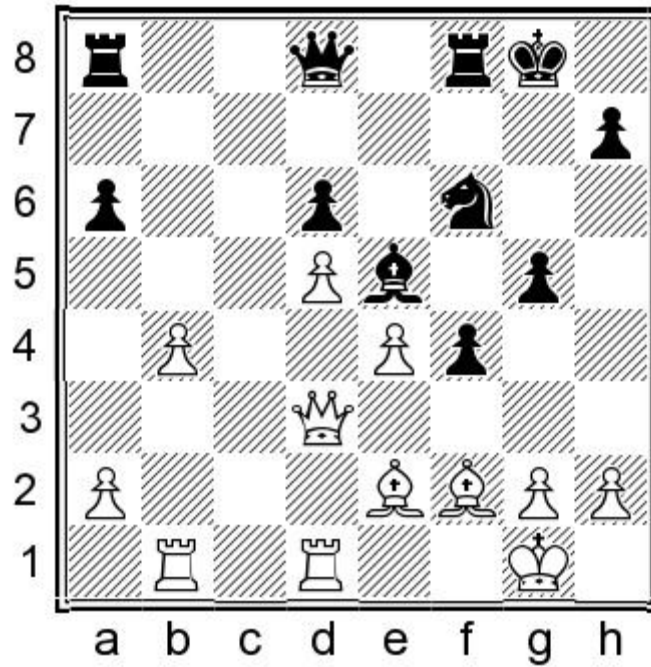
22.fxe4 ♙e5 23.♙f2!

23.exf5 ♚h4 would lead to unnecessary complications.

23...f4?!

There would be more hope for counterplay after 23...♞f4 (23...fxe4 24.♙xe4 ♞c8) 24.exf5 ♞xd3 25.♚xd3 ♞xf5.

24.♙e2 ♞f6 25.♚d3 g5



26. ♔h3!?

An unexpected decision which prevents ...g5–g4.

After the natural 26. ♖dc1 g4 27. ♖c6 the position would become extremely sharp: 27...f3! 28.gxf3 ♗h5. White rejected 26.h3 ♕e8 27. ♖dc1 ♕g6 for the same reason.

26... ♔g7

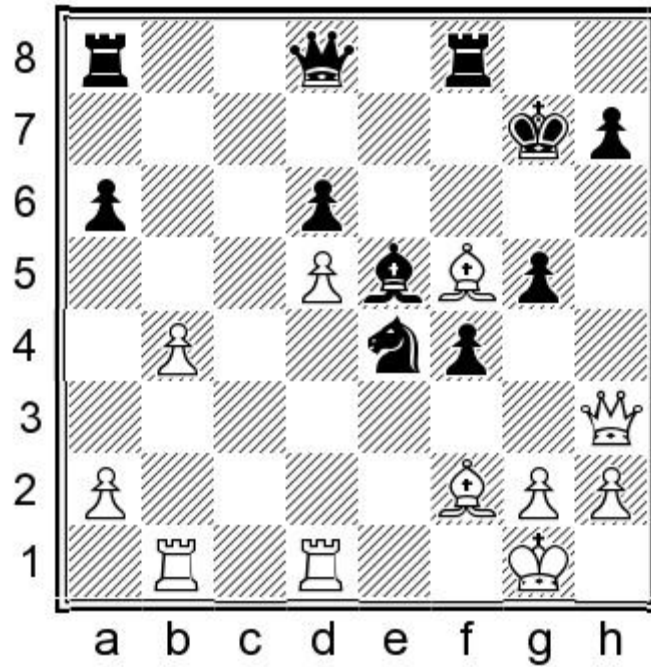
Or 26... ♗xe4 27. ♕d3 ♗f6 28. ♕f5 (28. ♖f5!?) 28... ♔g7 29. ♖dc1 with advantage to White.

27. ♕g4?

A serious inaccuracy.

The cold-blooded 27. ♖dc1! (27. ♖bc1 is equally good) 27... ♗xe4 28. ♕d3 ♗f6 29. ♖c6 g4 30. ♖h4 would preserve all the advantages of the position.

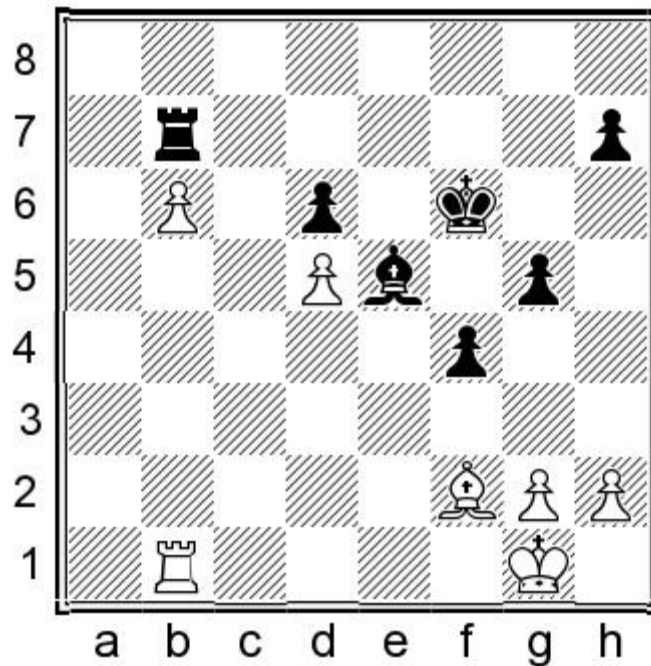
27... ♗xe4 28. ♕f5



28...♖xf5! 29.♔xf5 ♘c3 30.a4 ♜b8 31.♞e1 ♘xb1 32.♞xb1 ♜b7

The immediate 32...♔f6 is even more precise since 33.♔d7+ ♔g6 is not dangerous.

33.b5 axb5 34.axb5 ♔f6 35.♔xf6+ ♔xf6 36.b6

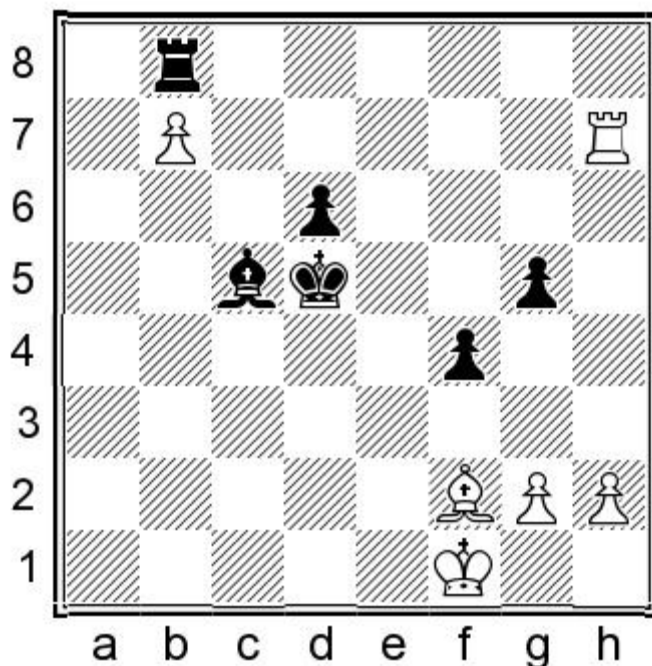


Black's position looks very dangerous in view of the threat of 37.♞c1, but he finds an unobvious defence.

36...♙c3! 37.♞c1 ♙a5 38.♔f1 ♔e5 39.♞a1

By this time all the other games in the match had finished and the players of both teams were following this game, either in hope or trepidation.

39...♙b4 40.♖a7 ♜b8 41.♖xh7 ♘c5 42.b7 ♔xd5



It feels like a draw is inevitable. At such moments it is important not to panic, but to continue to look for one's chances.

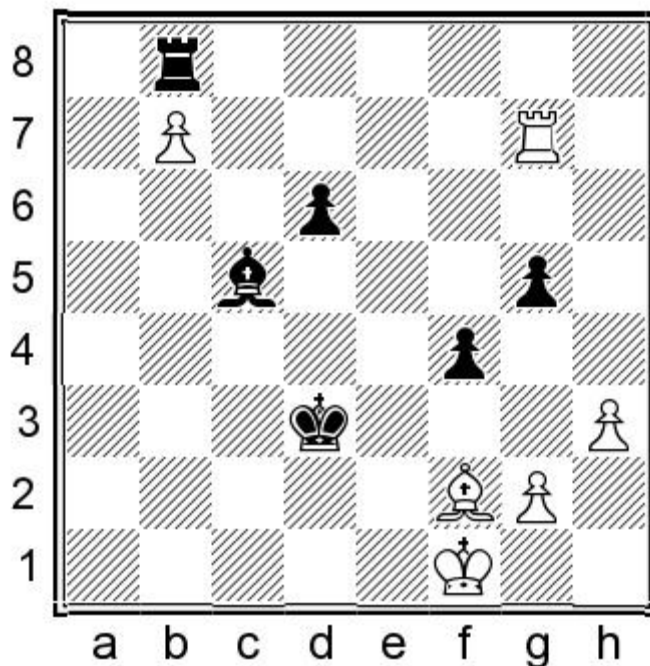
43.♖c7!

Preventing 43...♔c6. It was this move that sustained Zahar's — and our whole team's — hopes for victory.

43...♔c4 44.♖g7 ♔d3?

A mistake when Black was only one step away from a draw. Black moved — in the opposite direction! It was essential to play 44...♔b5! 45.♖xg5 ♜xb7 46.♖f5 ♔c6 47.♖xf4 (there is nothing special after 47...♙xc5 dxc5 48.♖xf4 ♔d5) 47...♜b1+ 48.♙e1 d5, when the black pieces are so active that reaching a draw is easy.

45.h3!



It was this quiet move that Safarli overlooked. Now he has to accept losing some tempi.

45...♙e3?

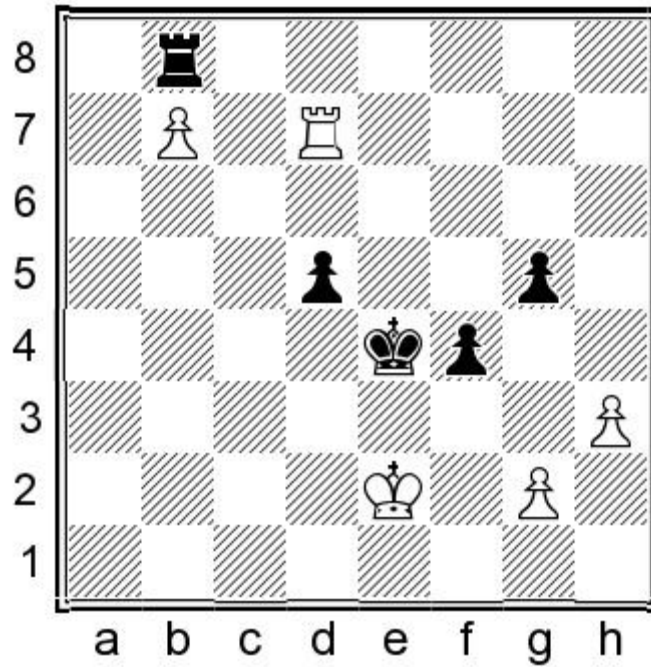
However difficult it is to admit one's mistake, it is always better to do so than continue on the wrong track.

The correct 45...♖c4! 46.♗e2 ♗b5 47.♙xc5

[47.♙e1 ♗c6 48.♙c3 ♙xf2 would give White more hope, but even in this case Black's chances of a draw are quite high.]

47...dxc5 would have led to a rook ending where Black holds.

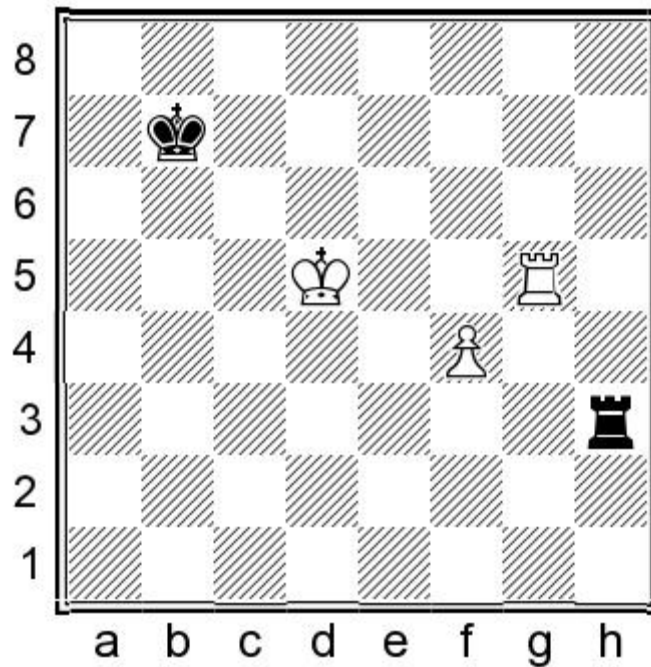
46.♞d7! ♗e4 47.♗e2 ♙xf2 48.♗xf2 d5 49.♗e2



49...♔e5

49...d4 50.♖e7+ ♔d5 51.♔d3.

50.♔d3 ♔e6 51.♞c7 ♔d6 52.♞h7 ♞f8 53.♞f7 ♞e8 54.♞g7 ♔c6 55.♞e7 ♞f8 56.♔d4 ♞d8 57.♞g7 ♞e8 58.♞g6+ ♔xb7 59.♔xd5 f3 60.gxf3 ♞h8 61.♞xg5 ♞xh3 62.f4



Now the position is theoretically won for White.

62...♔c7 63.♔e6 ♞h6+ 64.♔f7 ♞h7+ 65.♞g7 ♞h6 66.f5 ♔d7 67.f6 ♞h8 68.♞g1

1-0

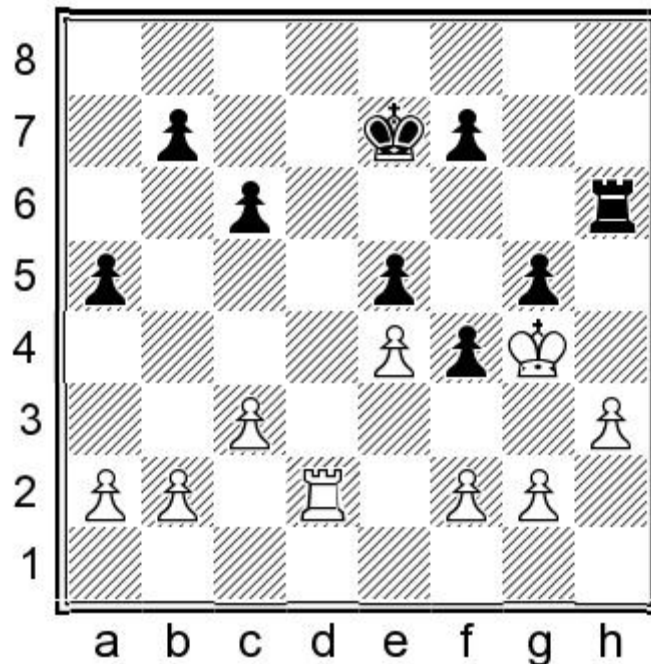
In the penultimate round we played against a strong French team that, along with Russia, was pursuing us closely. In contrast to the previous match, this one proved to be unexpectedly easy: we won $3\frac{1}{2}-\frac{1}{2}$, while Russia won against China. Thus the final showdown was postponed to the last day. We had to play Israel while Russia faced Spain. There was a rest day before the final round so there was enough time to evaluate the chances and determine the strategy for the final match. We were still one point ahead of Russia, but the tiebreak criteria were not in our favour; thus a tie with our main rivals would not suit us. No-one doubted that Russia would win against Spain; we could not afford any compromises in our own match. Winning the match by any score guaranteed us the gold medal, therefore our plan was simple and completely predictable: play safely, without great risk, and try to win with White. I did not have any issues with the line-up either; as I mentioned, it had remained the same since round five. I believed in my guys and hoped for good luck. It quickly became clear that the only game where we could hope for a win was on board four, however Zahar Efimenko had already accomplished several heroic feats at this Olympiad.

12

Zahar Efimenko (2683)

Victor Mikhalevski (2610)

Khanty-Mansiysk 2010



This rook ending arose following complex positional play. White has the advantage and is playing for two results.

40. ♔xg5

Another possibility is 40. c4 f6 41. ♖d3 ♔e6 42. c5.

After the text move the following sequence is forced.

40.♔xg5 ♖g6+ 41.♕f5 ♗xg2 42.♕xe5 ♖h2 43.♕xf4 ♗xh3

As is usual in rook endings, Black retains drawing chances. On the other hand, a pawn is a pawn. Would Zahar be able to convert this advantage? If we compare this position with the two previous examples, White's chances look better, however it was at this moment that an unexpected development in the other key match between Russia and Spain changed the calculations completely. With the score 2–1 in favour of the Russians, Peter Svidler ran into an inspired counterattack against Ivan Salgado and his position collapsed in just a few moves. When he resigned his game the question became irrelevant — a draw by Efimenko would guarantee us the gold medals. Of course, a draw was offered immediately, even though victory would have allowed Zahar to win gold medal on his board.

1/2–1/2

In such cases, personal interests are always secondary to the interests of the team. Our opponents also benefited from such an agreement. A draw in the final match allowed Israel to take third place.



On the podium in Khanty-Mansiysk — our second victory, a much more difficult one. (Photo by Vladimir Barsky)

It is interesting that, literally at that very moment, a similar drama occurred in the Women's Olympiad. The fate of silver and bronze was at stake, to be decided in the match between China and Ukraine. With the score tied at 1–1 and the Chinese women having the advantage on the two remaining boards, both teams would have been satisfied with a draw, which would have ensured silver for China and given

Ukraine an excellent chance of bronze. Alas, my colleague and fellow countryman, Viacheslav Eingorn, missed the favourable moment for offering the necessary draws and Ukraine lost both remaining games. As a result, Ukraine only came ninth and Eingorn lost his job. The gold and silver that the team had earned under his leadership at the previous two Olympiads were immediately forgotten. Once again, the infamous saying proved to be true: ‘It’s the team that wins, but the coach who loses’.



With the new president of the Ukrainian Federation, Viktor Kapustin. Who could have imagined at this happy moment that our paths would diverge very soon!? (Photo by Vladimir Barsky)

The second Olympic gold was much more difficult to win. In Calvia, the Olympiad was won in a sprint by young men who had no doubts about their talent and the brilliant chess future ahead. To most of them, it was just the first major victory which would inevitably be followed by others. They knew neither fear nor doubt. The six years that had passed had brought them not only achievements but also significant frustration; the way to the summit turned out not to be as easy and rosy as imagined. The years turned those young men into mature players who knew the true value of victories.

Of course, these words do not refer to Vassily Ivanchuk. He played brilliantly in Khanty-Mansiysk; his professionalism and attitude made him a great role model for his young comrades. Vassily always held a special place in teams that I led. Even in comparison to other elite players who devote a lot of time to preparation, Vassily is remarkable for his permanent immersion in chess. He was an undisputed

authority on purely chess matters; I did not require him to attend team meetings where we discussed board order and game strategy — and he never did! There was next to no doubt about whether he ought to play in any given match. In all the years I led the team, I can count the number of games Ivanchuk had to miss on the fingers of one hand. When he finds his game, he is absolutely unstoppable and becomes a huge inspiration for his teammates. In Khanty-Mansiysk, as in Calvia, he scored +6, an incredibly high result for board one, but while he needed fourteen games for this feat in 2004, this time ten were enough.

In many strong teams the leader is given quite a modest task: to ‘hold’ on board one. In practice, this means safety, first and foremost. I have never entertained such ideas about Ivanchuk. This was simply impossible for him. The only thing I had to do was to create optimal conditions for his work. However, such a thankless job was willingly done by Ruslan Ponomarev, of his own free will and without any compulsion. Therefore we did not have to worry about board two: a draw there was almost a foregone conclusion. In six years, Pavel Eljanov had developed into an elite chess player; of all the players on the 2004 team, his progress was the most noticeable. In addition, he is the only person from that team whom I can to some extent call my student. We held a couple of individual training sessions which, I hope, were useful to him. Pavel’s reliability and sense of responsibility made him a crucial player in the Ukrainian team. Finally, Zahar Efimenko became a real hero of the tournament. He played all eleven games, won six and lost none. Moreover, several of his wins were decisive for our matches. As with Andrei Volokitin six years previously, it seemed that Zahar’s progress was simply a matter of time. Unfortunately, in both cases, it did not happen. Finally, Alexander Moiseenko had a bad tournament from the very beginning and lost his place in the team after round four. It is a difficult test for any player, but Alexander passed it proudly, always remaining part of the team and helping his comrades.

Like six years previously, we were happy. This feeling was dampened by a realisation that this victory might well not have happened, that the future was not perfect and rosy but, rather, still vague and uncertain. For a while, it seemed that a new chance to correct the situation and to help Ukrainian chess would not be missed. The new president of the Federation attended the Olympiad in Khanty-Mansiysk and could not help but feel a part of the team’s success. I decided to strike while the iron was hot. The program to assist leading players and the most talented juniors had long been ready. My suggestions were met with genuine interest, so there were grounds for optimism, but time passed, the expected positive response from the capital was not forthcoming, and soon the federation began to send us formal letters devoid of any meaning. If you tried to decipher those lengthy, formal replies, the gist was as follows: the present state of Ukrainian chess is good, the future looks even better, so no change is required. In addition, as always happened in Ukraine, our victory was followed by another political crisis. Tired of endless bureaucratic and political games, I admitted defeat and tendered my resignation which was immediately accepted.

Thus ended seven years of my life when I worked as head coach of Ukraine. These years became an interesting professional challenge for me, as well as a source of much joy and many disappointments. I continue to follow the careers of the people with whom I have been through so many trials and tribulations. Their lives in chess took different turns. Sergey Karjakin (who has long been representing Russia) fully developed his bright talent. There are not too many players who have won the Candidates Tournament like him. His World Championship match against Magnus Carlsen was essentially equal.

Pavel Eljanov's chess career has been successful. Pavel was neither the youngest nor the brightest in the brilliant generation of Ukrainian chess players with whom I was fortunate enough to work, but his critical thinking and constant hard work allowed him to fully realise his potential. Andrei Volokitin and Zahar Efimenko, the heroes of the Olympiads in Calvia and Khanty-Mansiysk, are in a much more difficult situation.

I hope that real success will find them still. The experience I gained over those years was priceless and very useful to me in my future work. Unfortunately, my 'marriage' to the Ukrainian Chess Federation ended in an unpleasant divorce, like most do. On the other hand, there were new opportunities that I could not have even imagined before.

SOCAR, A STAR-STUDED TEAM

Dear reader, I was not entirely frank with you. Even before I had to leave Team Ukraine, I was presented with an offer I couldn't refuse. It did not require me to switch to another federation or to change citizenship. Azerbaijan, a country far from Ukraine, nurtured the idea of creating a chess club. It is no accident that this club took the name of a state-owned company that specialises in oil and gas exploration, extraction and sale. Mr Mahir Mammedov, CEO of SOCAR Georgia and Vice-President of the Azerbaijan Chess Federation, became president of the new club and asked me to be captain of the SOCAR chess team. Given the scope of the project and the president's personality, it did not take me long to accept.

The first meeting of the new team took place during the Olympiad in Khanty-Mansiysk, where all the members of the future star team were playing. As is customary in the Orient, such a seminal event (held during a rest day) took place at a lavishly set table. Four members of the national team of Azerbaijan (Teimour Radjabov, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, Rauf Mamedov and Eltaj Safarli), along with Alexander Grischuk, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, Alexei Shirov and Rustam Kasimdzhanov, had been invited to form the team and I joined them. Introductions were a mere formality because all the members of the newborn team had met each other at the chessboard. Still, this event — the symbolic birth of a new club — will remain etched in my memory forever, along with the subsequent years spent with the team.

It was clear that such a roster allowed me to make the most ambitious plans. The first test for the new team came shortly after the Olympiad in Plovdiv, a city that was familiar to me since I became European Champion there as a member of Team USSR in 1983. Unfortunately, there was no win in store for me this time. European Club Cups are very short, only seven rounds. Everything is resolved in the final matches. We lost our first important match against Economist Saratov in round five. As it turned out, this result determined the champions while we were left without any medals. A game in the final round proved decisive.

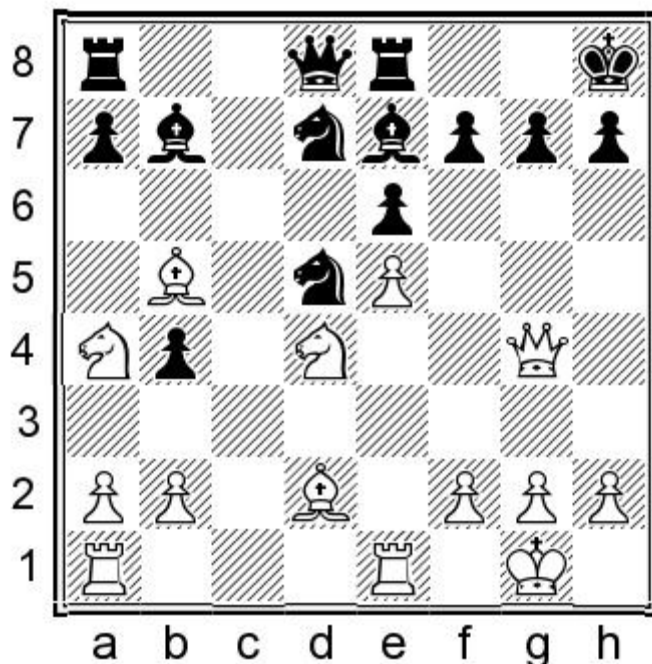
13

Alexander Riazantsev (2686)

Alexei Shirov (2749)

Plovdiv 2010

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♘f3 ♘bd7 6.♙d3 dxc4 7.♙xc4 b5 8.♙d3 ♙b7 9.e4 b4 10.♘a4 c5
11.e5 ♘d5 12.0-0 cxd4 13.♘xd4 ♙e7 14.♞e1 0-0 15.♚g4 ♞e8 16.♙b5 ♔h8 17.♙d2



17...Rc8!?

This was not a new position for Alexei Shirov; he had twice played 17...a6, when after 18.♙c6 ♚c7 (Another line also fails to solve the problems: 18...♙xc6 19.♘xc6 ♚c7 20.♞ac1 ♚b7 21.♘xe7 ♞xe7 22.b3 a5 23.♘b2, Kramnik-Shirov, Dresden Olympiad 2008) 19.♞ac1 ♘xe5 20.♙xb7 ♘xg4 21.♞xc7 ♘xc7 22.♙xa8 ♞xa8 23.♘c6 ♘d5 24.♘xe7 ♘xe7 25.♙xb4 ♘d5 26.♙d2 White has some advantage in the endgame, Grischuk-Shirov, Bilbao 2009.)

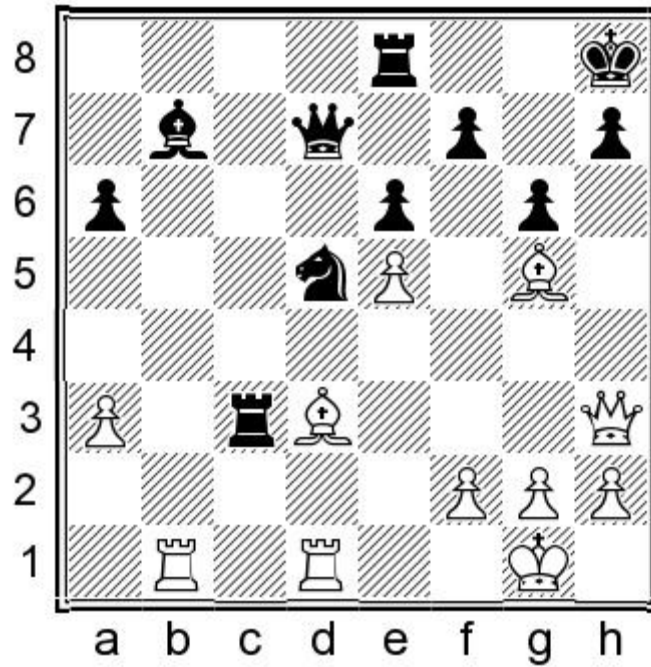
18.a3 a6 19.♙d3 bxa3

It was not necessary to open the b-file. 19...♚c7 was quite good.

20.bxa3 ♘c5

20...♘f8!?

21.♘xc5 ♙xc5 22.♞ab1 ♚d7 23.♚h3 g6 24.♘f3 ♙e7 25.♘g5 ♙xg5 26.♙xg5 ♞c3 27.♞ed1



27...♔c7

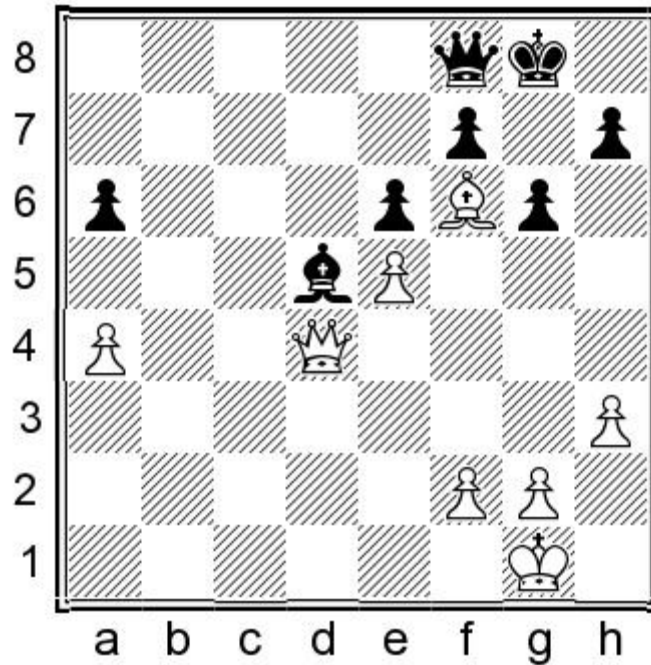
27...♖xa3 loses unexpectedly because of 28.♘h6!.

28.♘h4 ♕a8 29.♗e4

White gambles on opposite-coloured bishops and the attack.

Another possibility was 29.♗xa6 ♘xe5 30.a4 ♖g8 31.a5.

29...♔g8! 30.♗xd5 ♗xd5 31.♗f6 ♘c5 32.♖b4 ♘f8 33.a4 ♖ec8 34.h3 ♖3c4 35.♖xc4 ♖xc4 36.♖d4 ♖xd4 37.♘xd4



37...h6

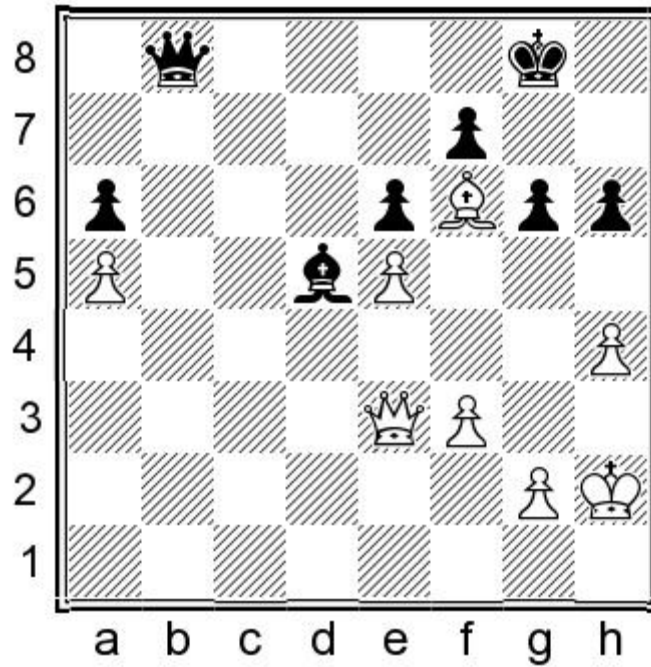
There is no doubt that White has the initiative, but the position looks drawn.

The easiest way to achieve this was with 37...♙a8 38.f3 a5!, when it is impossible to avoid an exchange of a-pawns and White simply does not have enough material for a win. However Shirov plays uncharacteristically passively. This would be OK in opposite-coloured bishops endings, but the presence of queens on the board makes Black's task much more difficult.

38.a5! ♖c8 39.♙e3 ♔h7 40.♔h2 ♚b7 41.♙c5 ♔g8 42.f3 ♖c6 43.♙e3 ♔h7 44.♙a7 ♚b7 45.♙c5 ♔g8 46.h4 ♚b8?!

Why not 46...h5?

47.♙e3



47...♔h7?

A serious mistake that fails to save the game. 47...♙f8 48.h5 g5 was imperative.

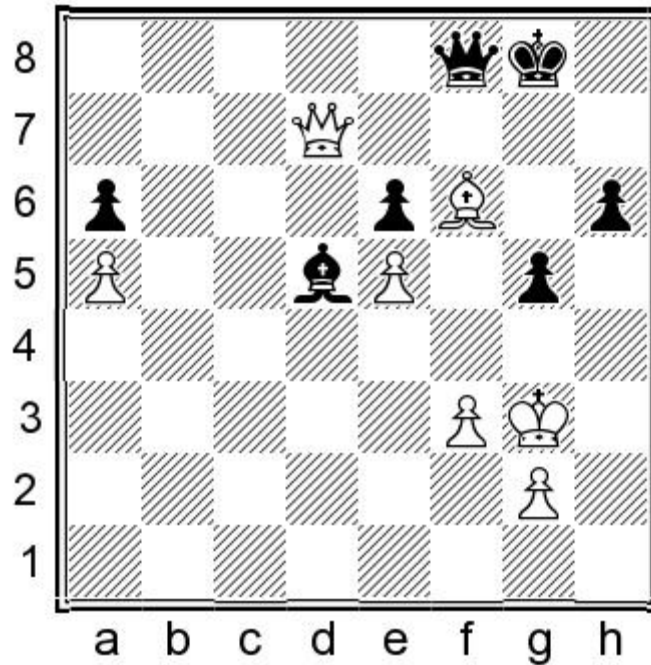
48.h5!

The rule of two weaknesses comes into force. Black is unable to defend his king and keep the a6-pawn at the same time.

48...♙c8

48...g5 49.♙d3+ ♔g8 50.♙xa6

49.hxg6+ fxg6 50.♙a3 ♔g8 51.♙e7 ♙f8 52.♙d7 g5 53.♔g3



53...♔f7

There might have been some chances to save the game after 53...♗c4! 54.♕c6 ♖b5 55.♕xe6+ ♕f7.

54.♕c8+ ♕f8 55.♕xa6

Now it's all over.

55...♕b4 56.♕c8+ ♔f7 57.♕d7+ ♔f8 58.♕d8+ ♔f7 59.♕d7+ ♔f8 60.♕d6+ ♕xd6 61.exd6 ♔e8
62.♔g4 ♔d7 63.♗e5 ♗c4 64.♔h5 ♗f1 65.g4

1-0

If Alexei had been able to defend his position, we would have been second. As it was, having tied for 2nd-5th places, we came fourth on tiebreaks. Of course, such a result was an obvious failure for the tournament favourites and we had to analyse the reasons underlying an unsuccessful performance. This was similar to my debut as captain of Team Ukraine in 2002. Then, as in Plovdiv, I had taken on an existing team and could not change the line-up.



SOCAR's first and most unfortunate performance. In the last-round match, Shirov and Riazantsev played on board four. The game between them decided the outcome of the match and the whole championship. (Photo by Vladimir Barsky)

Chess is not football; we cannot really talk about set plays or interaction between individual players, yet, as I emphasised above, the specifics of team competition do exist. This is especially true for star-studded teams. No-one would allege that a professional player at such a high level could neglect his duties; after all, rating is calculated the same way in team competitions as in individual ones. On the other hand, absence of prizes plays an important role. Typically, a player's honorarium in a team competition is fixed and does not depend on his final individual result. People react to such a stimulus (or lack thereof) in different ways. In addition, the very atmosphere of team competitions frequently brings out the best in a player. For instance, Alexander Grischuk often suffers from time trouble in individual events, but it doesn't happen when he plays for a team — extra responsibility makes him more disciplined. (Of course, there are opposite examples as well.) An experienced captain has to take all these details into consideration when he puts a team selection together. Unfortunately I did not have a chance to do so before Plovdiv since I was the last person to join a team that was already assembled. We were lucky that the club president demonstrated understanding and patience after our initial failure.

Before we could head to the next club championship, I suddenly got an extra job. Creation of a superclub in Azerbaijan at this time was not an isolated event. The country was already proud of its chess heritage (it is enough to name Garry Kasparov). At the beginning of the 21st century a new generation of players emerged. Such a concentration of talent was simply amazing for such a small country. Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, Teimour Radjabov, Vugar Gashimov, Gadir Guseinov and Rauf

Mamedov began their chess careers at about the same time and quickly replaced their predecessors in the national team. Gradually they gained experience and became stronger in both individual and team events. At the remarkable 2009 European Team Championship that I have already described, Azerbaijan won the gold medal. By that time, Radjabov, Gashimov and Mamedyarov had already settled amongst the world elite, so only the uninitiated would call this success a sensation. A veritable chess boom began in Azerbaijan; the creation of a superclub was just one of its manifestations.

Naturally SOCAR brought me closer to the chess and players of Azerbaijan. When the national team went through a crisis later in 2010 and its former captain Zurab Azmaiparashvili had to resign, it was logical that I was considered for the job. Naturally I understood that the environment would be very different from that to which I was used in Ukraine, but a chance to work with such talented young players was too tempting. Moreover, it was obvious that the new federation had access to much better funding than Ukraine did. In May 2011 I was appointed head coach and captain of the Azerbaijan national team, so for some time I led two teams simultaneously. However there was no conflict of interest since half the members of the national team played for me at SOCAR.

AZERBAIJAN, A FORCE OF NATURE

My debut in this new capacity was to take place quite soon — at the World Team Championship in China that July. Lack of time created additional problems in determining the squad. Until recently, this had been an easy procedure for Azerbaijan. The ‘Big Three’ of Mamedyarov, Radjabov and Gashimov played by default, and were usually joined by Rauf Mamedov and Gadir Guseinov. Suddenly though, the team experienced internal discord at the finish of the previous World Team Championship in Turkey, which led to Vugar Gashimov’s expulsion. A very young Eltaj Safarli had to replace Gashimov at the Olympiad in Khanty-Mansiysk, but the substitute was clearly not of the same calibre.



Vugar Gashimov, World Team Championship, Ningbo 2011. (Photo by Vladimir Barsky)

Sometimes an accidental spark can lead to a dramatic forest fire. What was initially perceived as a minor incident threatened to grow into a serious problem. It was obvious that chess and the national team were suffering greatly as the flames became bigger, but the allegations and accusations from both sides continued to fly. The players themselves were not really to blame; even though they were fierce rivals, they had maintained good — and sometimes friendly — relationships since early childhood. I was welcomed as a neutral who was very interested in finding a rapid resolution to the conflict.

The situation was exacerbated by Vugar Gashimov’s accepting an invitation to play in Biel at the dates which coincided with the World Team Championship. It took our joint efforts to extinguish the raging fires and reach an agreement with the organisers of the Biel Festival. The main issue was quickly

resolved: the substitute Safarli was replaced by the core player Gashimov and the national team featured all of the country's strongest players when we left for the championship in China.

Board order was determined at home according to the latest ratings: Mamedyarov, Gashimov, Radjabov, Mamedov, Guseinov. Still, I attempted to swap Shakhriyar Mamedyarov and Teimour Radjabov because Radjabov's play was more solid and reliable while Mamedyarov's had far greater attacking potential. However Mamedyarov, who already had experience of scoring victories on the lower boards, really wanted to test himself in a leading role.

Board order is usually finalised at the captains' technical meeting before the opening ceremony. For some reason, in Ningbo the order of these two events was reversed. The draw that determined opponents and colours preceded the submission of board order. We drew a number in the lower half. In team events, unlike in individual ones, it doesn't really matter because the total number of boards is even so every team has the same number of games with White and Black. However our player on board one would have to play five games with Black, including games against all our main rivals — Russia, Armenia, China, and Hungary. At the opening ceremony Mamedyarov was sitting beside me and I could see that he was not happy with the situation.

It would have been simple to leave things as they were, but I decided to verify my suspicions. Everything checked. Shakhriyar Mamedyarov would be glad to give up the leadership position. Now it was Teimour Radjabov who resisted such a swap. I understood his reasoning: he was preparing to play against specific opponents on board three and the impromptu games against the leaders of other teams on board one did not inspire much confidence. I suspect that it was not an easy decision for Teimour. Be that as it may, we replaced the leader.

Moreover, at the very last moment, I was persuaded to move Mamedyarov further down, to board four, in order to give him the maximum number of Whites. It was this arrangement that led Azerbaijan to the European Championship title.

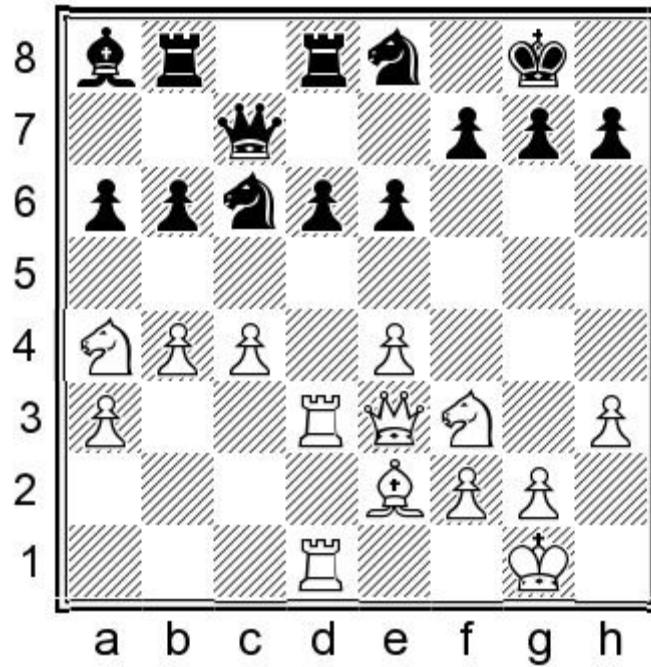
The initial rounds seemed to confirm that my decisions were correct. We missed victory against China but won against India, and Shakhriyar Mamedyarov brought us two points with White.

14

Shakhriyar Mamedyarov (2765)

Yu Yangyi (2672)

Ningbo 2011



This type of 'Hedgehog' clearly favours White, but it is difficult to imagine that his advantage is almost decisive.

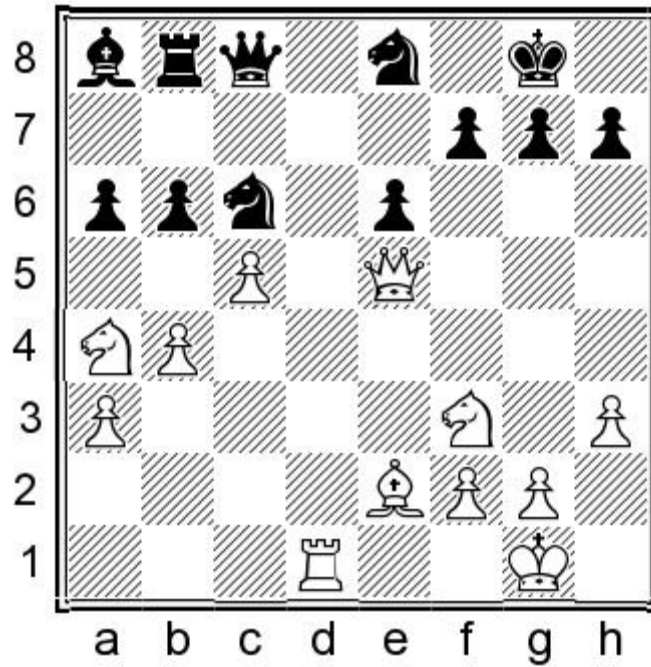
24.e5! dxe5

Not the best response, but other possibilities also leave White with a considerable advantage.

25.♖xd8 ♜xd8 26.♙xe5 ♚c8

The attempt to be active with 26...b5 would lead nowhere. After 27.♙xc7 ♜xc7 28.♖d7! ♜e8 29.cxb5 axb5 30.♙xb5 ♜f6 31.♖d6 Black has no compensation for the pawn.

27.c5! ♜c6



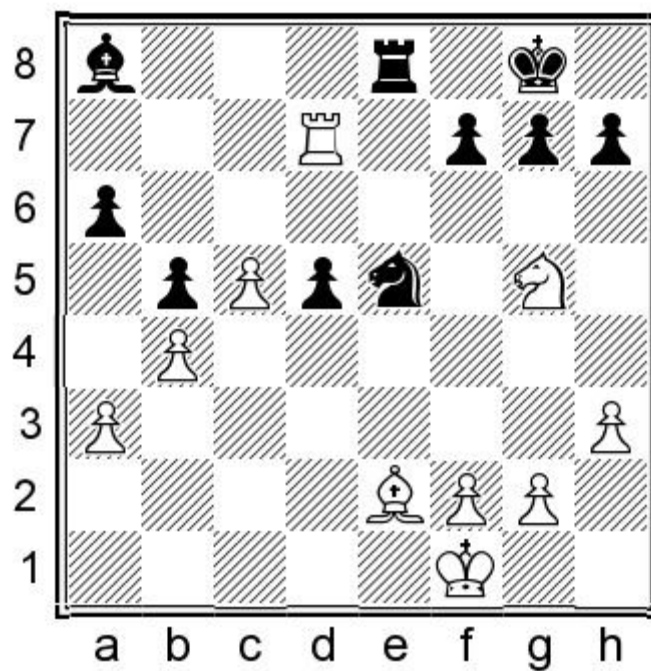
28. ♕f4

28. ♕e3! is stronger since 28...b5 29. ♘b6 is bad for Black.

28...b5! 29. ♘b6 ♕c7

Having allowed ...b5, White has a lot of work to do to convert.

30. ♕xc7 ♘xc7 31. ♖d7 ♘d5 32. ♘xd5 exd5 33. ♘g5 ♜e8 34. ♔f1 ♘e5



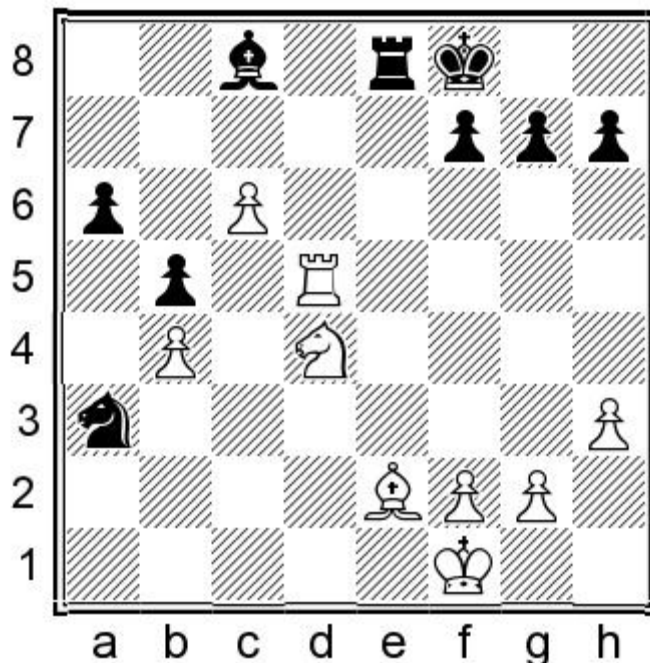
35.♞d6

Not a bad move, but it would have been even more forceful to play 35.♞a7! d4 36.f4! ♘c4 37.♞xa6.

35...♙b7 36.♘f3

36.f4! ♘c4 37.♞d7 ♙c8 38.♞c7 is even stronger.

36...♘c4 37.♞d7 ♙c8 38.♞xd5 ♘xa3 39.♘d4 ♖f8 40.c6



40...♖e7?

The only chance to save the game was 40...♘c4 41.♙xc4 bxc4 42.c7 f6.

41.c7!+- ♙d7 42.♙g4! ♙xg4 43.hxg4 ♞c8 44.♘f5+ ♖e6 45.♞d6+ ♖e5 46.♞c6 a5 47.bxa5 b4 48.♘e7

1-0

It was in round three, when we played Hungary, that we saw the flip side of the chosen strategy. When Mamedyarov could not eke out a win, team confidence was shattered. Rauf Mamedov lost with Black to Judit Polgar, which was enough for us to lose the match.

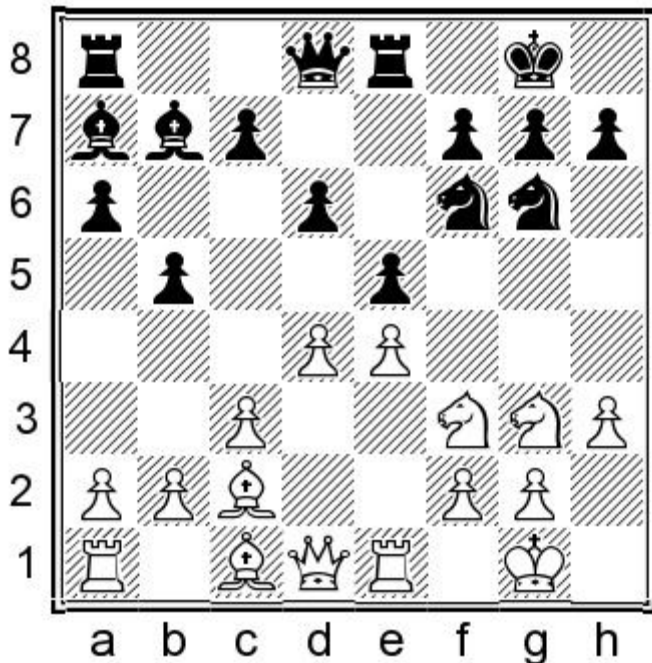
Our next opponents were Russia, and a victory was the shining moment for us in this tournament. We won 3-1, using a proven recipe: draw with Black and win with White.

This time Gashimov and Guseinov were our point-getters.

15

Vugar Gashimov (2760)

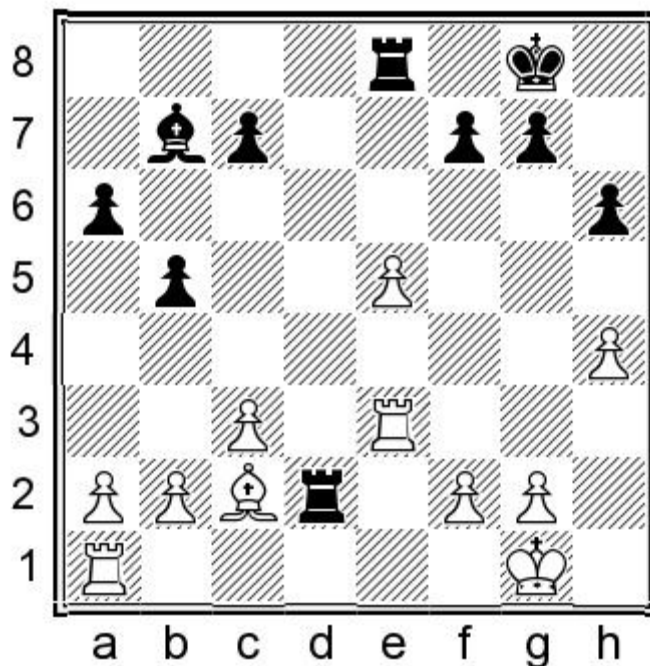
1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.d3 ♙c5 5.c3 0-0 6.0-0 d6 7.♘bd2 a6 8.♙a4 ♙a7 9.♙c2 ♖e8 10.h3
 ♘e7 11.♖e1 ♘g6 12.d4 b5 13.♘f1 ♙b7 14.♘g3



14...d5!?

Black tries to cut the Gordian knot of his problems with this standard breakthrough. A more complicated manoeuvring game would have arisen after 14...h6.

15.♘xe5 ♘xe5 16.dxe5 ♘xe4 17.♘xe4 dxe4 18.♙xd8 ♖axd8 19.♙f4 h6 20.h4 e3! 21.♙xe3 ♙xe3
 22.♖xe3 ♖d2



23.♖c1!?

The present position has arisen almost by force after the exchanges initiated by Black on move fourteen. Black has good chances of a draw, but he has to be very precise.

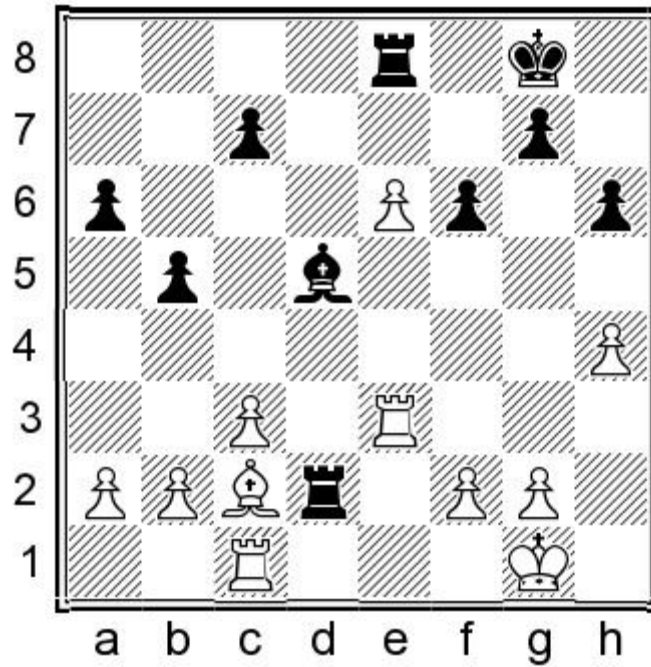
23...f6?!

This attempt to force the desired draw only causes additional difficulties. A more prudent approach was needed: 23...♙d5 24.b3 ♖f8 25.♕f1 ♜d8.

24.e6!?

It was worth considering 24.c4!? ♜xe5 (24...b4 25.e6; 24...bxc4 25.♙g6 ♜xe5 26.♜xe5 fxe5 27.♜xc4 ♜xb2 28.♜xc7) 25.♜xe5 fxe5 26.cxb5 axb5 27.♙g6! c6 28.♜e1 ♜d6 29.h5! when it is not easy for Black to defend.

24...♙d5



25. ♔f5!

It is likely that Alexander counted only on 25. ♔b3 c6!, when Black easily defends the rook ending.

25... ♔xa2?

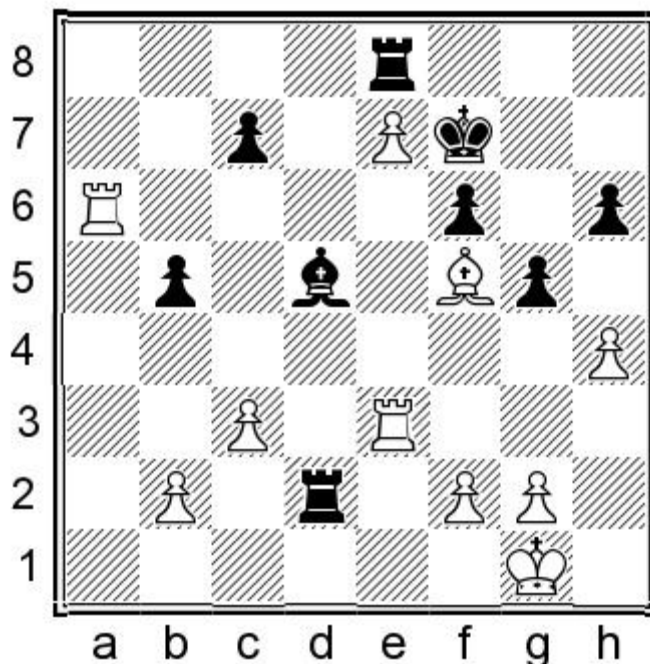
A serious mistake already!

Black should have continued 25...g6! 26. ♖g3 g5 27. ♗e3 ♖e7 with good chances of a draw.

26. ♖a1! ♔d5

It is possible that Black underestimated 26... ♖xb2 27. h5!, rendering his position precarious, e.g. 27... ♔f8 (27... ♔d5 28. e7) 28. ♖d1 and the passed e-pawn is worth a piece.

27. ♖xa6 g5 28. e7 ♔f7



29. ♔g4!

A very precise move which leaves Black no chances of survival.

29... ♜xe7 30. ♔h5+ ♚f8 31. ♜xf6+ ♚g7 32. ♜g6+ ♚f8 33. ♜xe7 ♚xe7 34. hxg5 hxg5 35. b4 ♜c2 36. ♜xg5 ♚d6 37. ♜g6+ ♚e5 38. ♜g3 ♜c1+ 39. ♚h2 ♜c2 40. ♜e3+ ♚f4 41. ♔e2

1-0

The very next day, we could not defend against Ukraine and lost all hopes of the championship. By the last round, our place in the standings was determined and the match against Egypt could change little. We would not finish on the podium under any circumstances. It was at this moment that a serious clash of personalities occurred.

The roots of the conflict were in an incident at the previous World Team Championship, also in a match against Egypt. Vugar Gashimov, who had lost two games in a row, asked to be replaced for his game against Egypt's strongest player, Ahmed Adly. I wasn't working with the team at that time so I cannot tell you why his request was not granted. Gashimov lost that game as well. The last round of the championship was very important: a victory against the USA would give Azerbaijan silver. Naturally, the team was supposed to use its strongest players. However, Vugar Gashimov refused to play Black against Nakamura. Teimour Radjabov, who had already played the majority of his games with Black, refused as well. Entreaties and negotiations lasted all night long but did not succeed. Without its two strongest players, Azerbaijan could only get a bloodless draw, which gave silver to the Americans. It was this conflict that led to the veritable forest fire that I described at the beginning of this chapter. I was aware of all sorts of allegations made by various parties and could only hope that we had turned over a new leaf.



Same event. The match between Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Where is my side, where are the opponents!?
(Photo by Vladimir Barsky)

Even before the championship started, Vugar Gashimov asked me not to play him against Egypt unless that match was decisive. Naturally I remembered his request and there were no heroics for us to perform, given our place in the standings. On the other hand, our team had a player who needed rest much more than Gashimov.

Rauf Mamedov had willingly accepted the role of ‘water carrier’ for his friend Shakhriyar Mamedyarov and had already lost three games with Black, including one against Armenia the day before. Unlike in Turkey, every team had five players rather than six so I could only rest one person. For me the decision was obvious — Mamedov deserved a day off. Vugar insisted and emphasised my alleged promise. No amount of explanations and persuasion could change his mind; he was clearly carried away by his emotions. It was pointless to continue a discussion in this situation, so I simply announced the team lineup for the final day with Gashimov on board two. In response, Vugar told me that we would not see him playing the following day and left the room.

I was genuinely shocked. I have seen many conflicts in my long career as a player and captain. For instance, it is quite logical that a player who has chances of an individual medal is not eager to put it at risk in the final round. Still, there were so many times when players lost their medals in the interest of their teams! There were also other, less typical situations. I remember a meeting of the USSR team before the final round against the World team in 1984. Our lead was minimal and the last day would

decide everything. Lev Polugaevsky used any pretext possible, including the most incredible ones, in order not to play Black against Viktor Korchnoi. The reserves, including me, were not eager to fight either. All of us remembered how, in the run-up to the competition, Polugaevsky was really passionate about confronting the ‘villain’, as the Soviet press called the defector Korchnoi. It was only his final argument that did the trick. When he yelled, “All of you, you want me dead!” I could resist no longer. Really, I couldn’t have had the loss of such an outstanding player on my conscience.

Yes indeed, I saw a lot, but never in living memory had a team member shown such open insubordination to his captain. Opinions were split. Most of the players on the team believed that Vugar would carry out his threat. I really hoped that his professionalism would prevail. Needless to say, the next day Gashimov showed up for the game and confidently delivered a win.

Well, once again, the first attempt came up short. It was difficult not to put the blame for this failure on myself. Did I really have to improvise and, at the very last moment, change the board order which had been previously drawn up? Would it not have been safer and simpler to leave things as they were? These questions still resonate in my head. I return to the events of that fateful day again and again, and am still unable to give a definite answer.

After all, one of the results of my controversial decision was Radjabov’s excellent performance on board one. Moreover it was in Ningbo that Teimour’s meteoric rise began. In less than a year, he added fifty FIDE rating points and rose to fourth place in the world. I am sure that his growth is a direct result of his courageous decision to take on a leadership role in that difficult situation.

On the other hand, my expectations that Shakhriyar Mamedyarov would excel with White were not realised. I could not blame him; he tried and did everything in his power, but a momentary weakness that he allowed himself prohibited him from feeling boundless confidence, which was absolutely necessary for someone in a role of point-getter. In general, it was too risky to create such an artificial imbalance within a team because of the uneven colour distribution. When someone is designated to be a hero, it is an extra burden which leads to additional stress. Even when such a gamble pays off and this person is able to provide wins consistently, success is still far from assured. After all, there are other people who have to do the ‘menial jobs’ — to hold and salvage games with Black. In our case, Rauf Mamedov was not up to this task.

There have been even more spectacular examples in the past. At the Olympiad in Khanty-Mansiysk, which I have already covered, Karjakin scored 8 points out of 10 — a great result! However, he played the vast majority of his games with White, so someone on the team had to defend with Black. Svidler and Malakhov were not up to par, so Russia did not get the coveted title. The 2017 Team Championship, held in Khanty-Mansiysk as well, was also typical. This time, the Russian coaches organised their strategy around Ian Nepomniachtchi’s regular wins with White. Ian was up to the task until the crucial moment in the key match against China, when he failed to win with White and Vladimir Fedoseev lost with Black. The race for the championship was decided in favour of China.

It so happened that the World Team Championship in China did not resolve the problems that existed within our team; in fact it created new ones. A European Club Cup loomed. In practice SOCAR, which included almost all the members the Azerbaijan national team, had a second chance to get on to the podium, more precisely to get on to its topmost step, since no other result would suffice. That

tournament was held in the small town of Rogaška Slatina in Slovenia. There were some changes to our team: Emil Sutovsky and Andrei Volokitin replaced Shirov and Vachier-Lagrave. These two rookies had a reputation as seasoned team fighters and were supposed to bring the whole team together.

Alas, our troubles started at the very beginning. In round three we faced the Bosna club from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the past this club had won multiple team championships, but in recent years had lost funding and their former glory. We were clear favourites in this match; still, no predictions could be a guarantee for success.

The match was very tense. In the end, the score was equal and the outcome was to be decided by a completely crazy game.

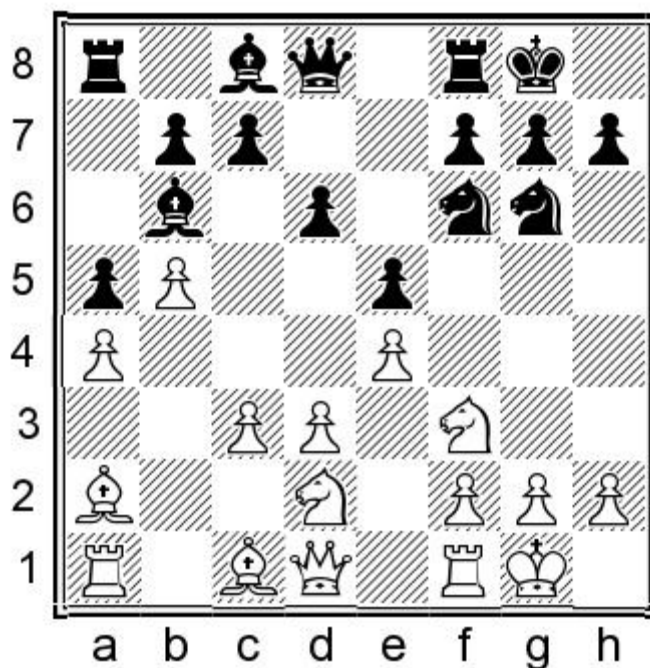
16

Borki Predojević (2643)

Shakhriyar Mamedyarov (2746)

Rogaška Slatina 2011

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♗c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.c3 ♗f6 5.b4 ♙b6 6.d3 d6 7.a4 a5 8.b5 ♗e7 9.0-0 0-0 10.♗bd2 ♗g6 11.♙a2



11...♙g4!?

The sharpest move in this position, leading to immeasurable complications.

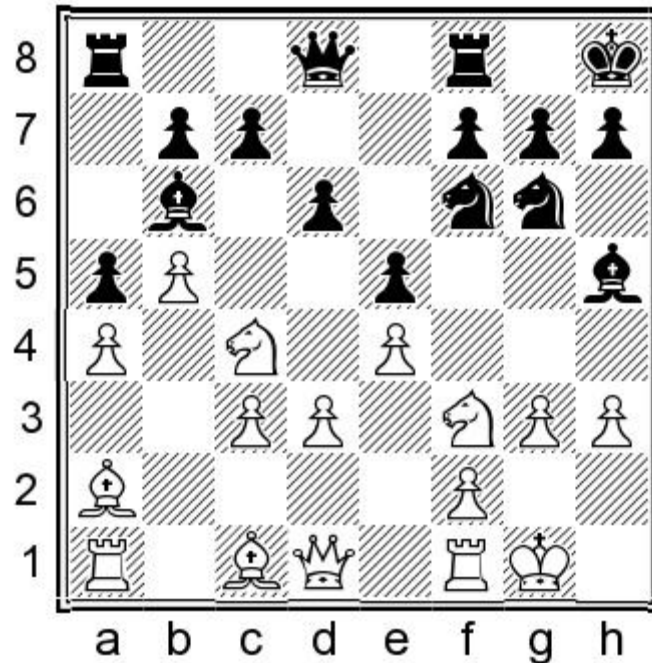
12.h3 ♙h5 13.g3

A good positional move. It would be dangerous to play 13.g4? ♗xg4 14.hxg4 ♙xg4 15.♖h1 ♗f6 16.♗g1 h5 with huge problems for White.

13...♔h8

A rather mysterious move. 13...♔d7 is more natural, and better.

14.♘c4



14...♔d7

14...d5!? was worth considering.

15.♔g2

It made sense to destroy the dangerous bishop first: 15.♘xb6 cxb6 16.♔g2.

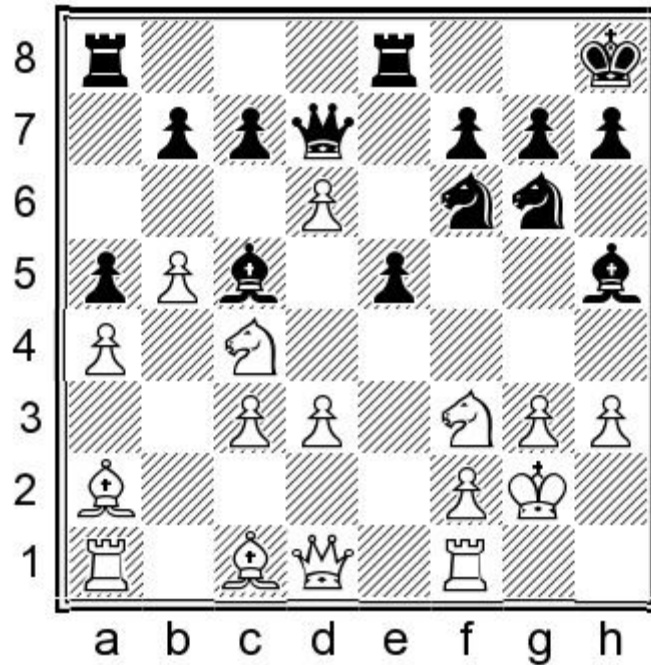
15...d5!?

And now Black turns down the possibility to keep it with 15...♔c5.

16.exd5 ♜fe8! 17.d6!?

Again, it seemed natural to play 17.♘xb6 cxb6 18.c4, however 18...e4 19.dxe4 ♘xe4 would lead to an unclear position.

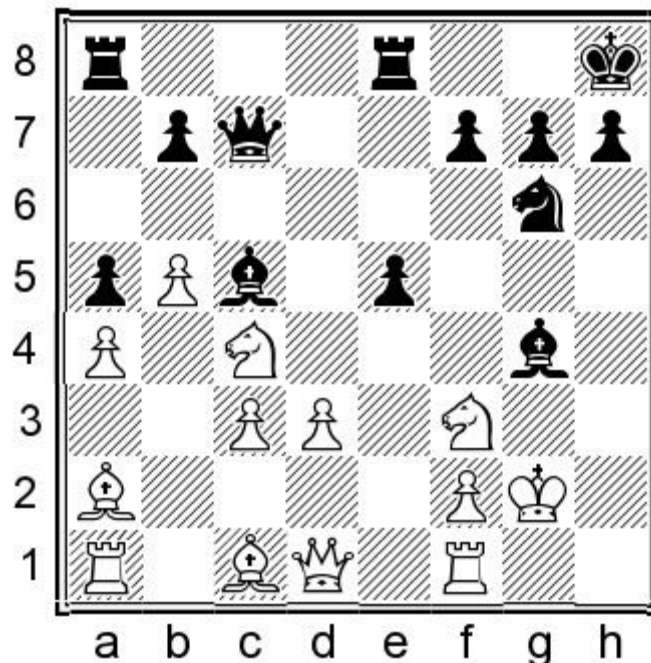
17...♔c5!



Better late than never!

18.dxc7 ♖xc7 19.g4!? e4!?

The logical 19...♘xg4! 20.hxg4 ♕xg4 was more dangerous for White.



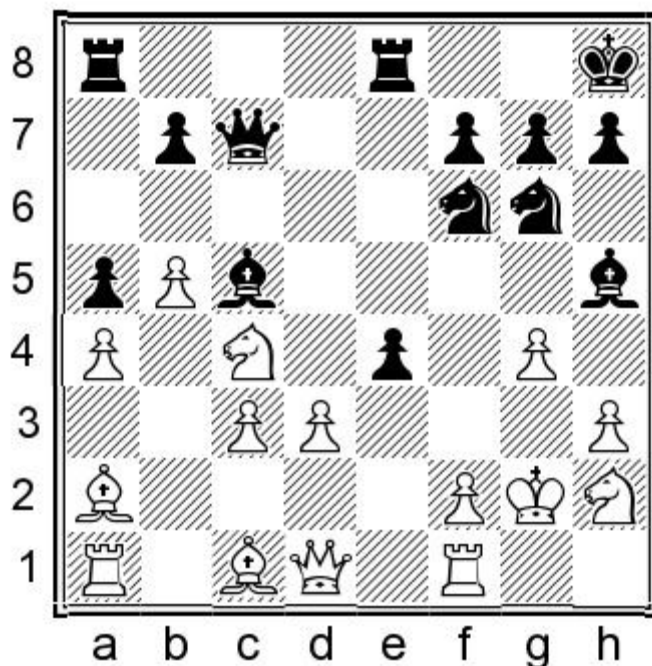
The threat of ♘h4 can be refuted in three ways. The best line is 21.♕g5!.

a) 21.♖c2? is weak: 21...e4 22.dxe4 ♕xf3+ 23.♔xf3 ♖h2!, when Black has a winning attack: 24.♔e2 (not much better is 24.♕e3 ♖h5+ 25.♔g3 f5! 26.exf5 ♖h4+ 27.♔g2 ♖g4+ 28.♔h2 ♘f4 29.♕xf4 ♖xf4+ 30.♔g2 ♖g4+ 31.♔h2 ♖e2-+) 24...♖ad8! 25.♕e3 ♖h5+ 26.f3 ♖h2+ 27.♖f2 ♘f4+ 28.♔e1 ♖h1+ 29.♖f1 ♖h4+ 30.♕f2 ♕xf2+ 31.♖xf2 ♖d3!-+

b) 21.♖h1 appears stronger, but White has big problems even here: 21...e4! 22.♖xh7+! (22.dxe4 ♖xe4 23.♙g5 ♜f4+ 24.♙xf4 ♙xf3+! 25.♚xf3 ♖xf4 with a winning attack) 22...♔g8! (22...♔xh7? 23.♜g5+ ♔g8 24.♚xg4+-) 23.dxe4 ♖xe4 24.♜e3 ♖ae8! The computer considers that Black has the advantage in this completely crazy position.

21...e4 (21...h6 22.♖h1 e4) 22.dxe4 h6 23.♖h1 ♖xe4 24.♜cd2 ♜f4+ 25.♙xf4 ♖xf4 26.♙d5! (26.♚e2 ♖d8) It is important to cover the d-file. 26...♖d8 27.c4 Although Black has enough compensation for the piece, there is still a lot of play ahead.

20.♜h2



20...exd3! 21.gxh5 ♜h4+

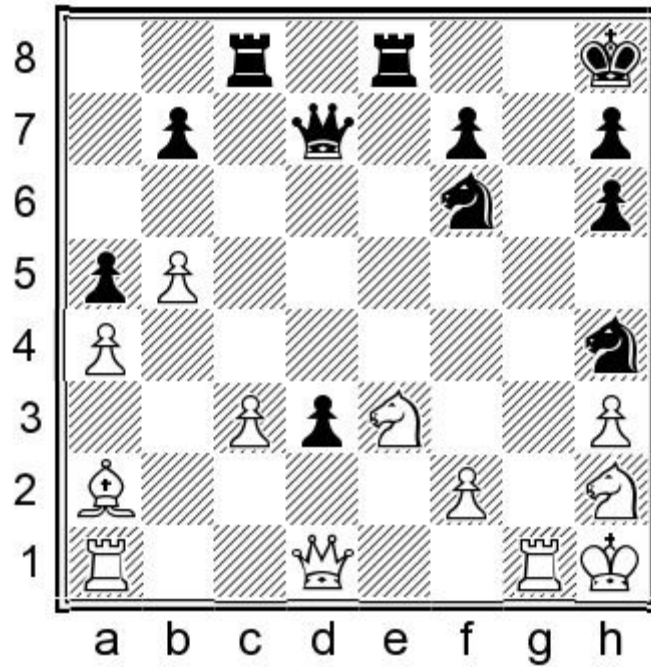
The all-seeing engine suggests another way to continue the attack:

21...♖e2!? 22.hxg6 (22.♚xd3 ♜xh5) 22...♙xf2! 23.♔h1 ♙e3 24.♚xe2 (24.♜f3 ♚g3) 24...dxe2 25.♙xe3 exf1=♚+ 26.♖xf1 fxg6. It is very difficult to assess the position with such a strange material balance. Black is probably better since the white king is weak.

22.♔h1 ♚d7 23.♙e3 ♖ac8?!

A completely unexpected response! In general, it is impossible to guess Shakhriyar's moves in this game. It seemed logical to play 23...♚xh3!, but one would have had to foresee not only 24.♖g1 ♖xe3! (24...♙xe3 25.♜d6!) 25.fx3 (25.♜xe3 ♙d6 26.♜ef1 ♜e4+-), but also the non-obvious 25...♚f5! with a continuing attack.

24.h6! gxh6 25.♖g1 ♙xe3 26.♜xe3



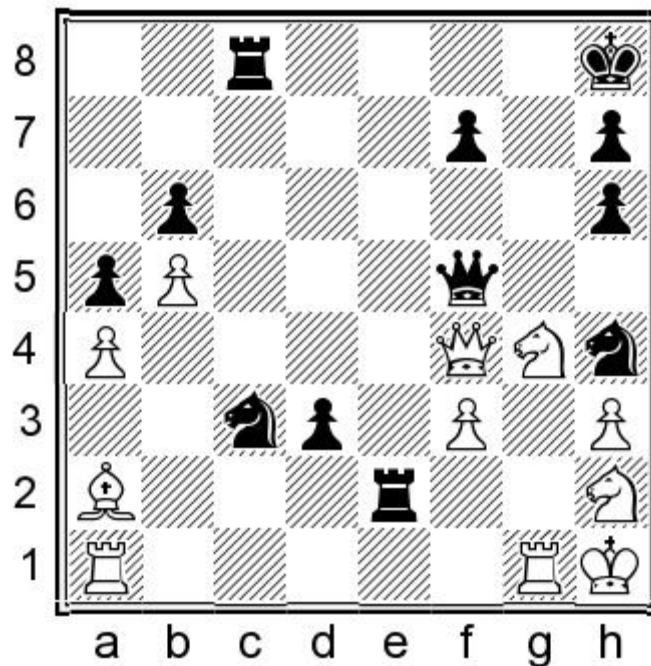
26...b6?!

Yet another enigmatic move. The natural 26...♖xc3! would have maintained the suspense, e.g. 27.♘eg4 ♘e4 28.f3 ♚d4! with a completely unpredictable outcome.

27.♘eg4! ♘e4 28.f3! ♘xc3 29.♚d2 ♞e2 30.♚f4!

Even stronger than 30.♚xh6 ♚e7.

30...♚f5

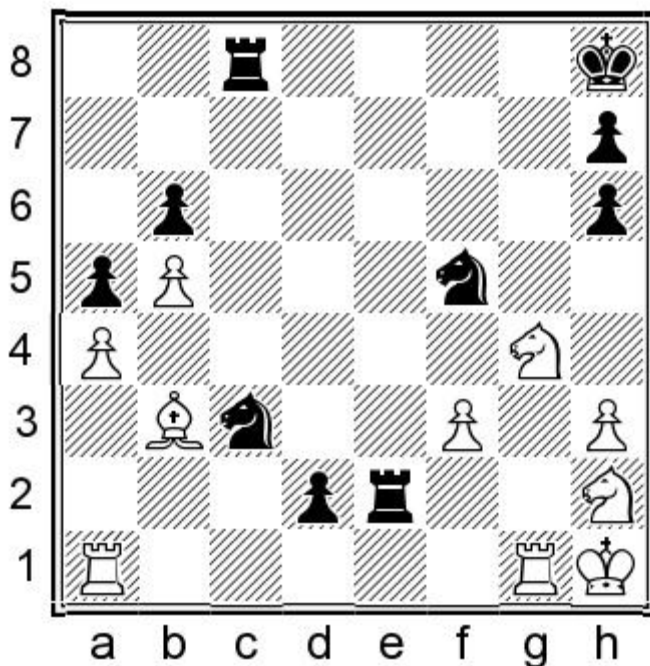


Even in a calm atmosphere, with a chess engine at hand, it is extremely difficult to follow all the ups and downs in this game. Pity the grandmasters who had to find good moves in time trouble!

31. ♖xf5?

It is natural to want to calm the play down. The strongest line, 31. ♖d4+!, appears natural, however it is not easy to discover a sequence of moves such as 31... f6 32. ♕c4! ♜xf3 33. ♖xc3 ♖f4 34. ♖g3! ♖xc4 35. ♖a3! ♖xh2+ 36. ♜xh2 ♖xg3 37. ♖f8+ ♖g8 38. ♖xf6+ ♖g7 39. ♖d8+ ♖g8 40. ♖xg8+ ♔xg8 41. ♜xf3 with good winning chances. Also good is 31. ♖xh6 ♜g6 32. ♕b3.

31... ♜xf5 32. ♕xf7 d2 33. ♕b3

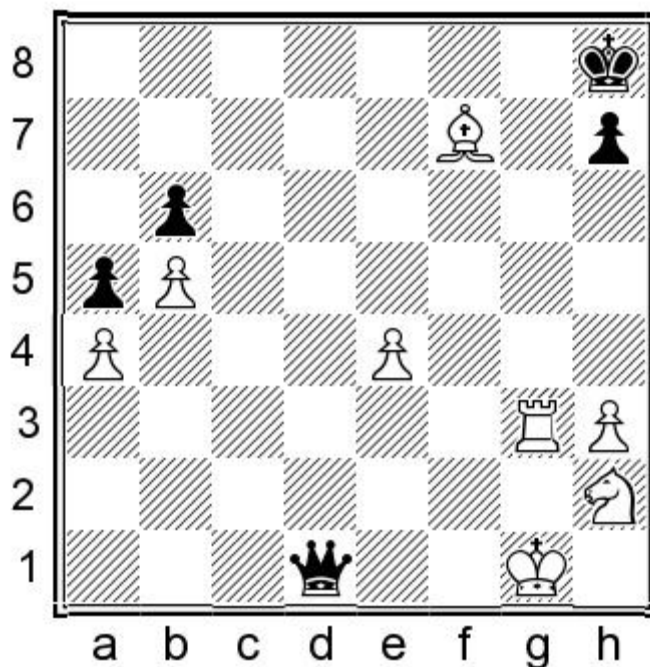


This is the most dramatic moment of the game and the whole match! Predojević suddenly offered a draw, undoubtedly the best decision in this position. Shakhriyar turned to me with a silent question since he understood perfectly well the importance of this game for our team. A draw in this game would guarantee us a draw in the match. Several moves ago, it appeared a dreamlike finale, but now I saw a move that would cause White serious trouble. Having checked the lines quickly I shook my head. Shakh still had a few minutes on his clock. After a while he turned to me again, but the move seemed simple and the chance to win the match was so tempting, so I instructed him to decline again. Alas, a few seconds later, Black thumped out...

33... ♜e4??

The happy solution was so close: 33... h5! 34. ♕c2 (If 34. ♜f6 then 34... ♜d4 is also winning.) 34... ♜d4 35. ♜h6 ♖f8. In the heat of battle I considered that this position was better for Black. The engine is even more categorical: it's a win for Black! Another good move was 33... ♖d8. After Mamedyarov's combination, Black's chances are gone.

34.fxe4 ♘g3+ 35.♞xg3 ♞e1+ 36.♔g2 ♞xa1 37.♘h6 ♞f8 38.♘f7+ ♞xf7 39.♙xf7 ♞g1+ 40.♔xg1
d1=♞+



White not only has a material advantage, but also an attack.

41.♘f1 ♞d4+ 42.♘e3 h5 43.♙d5 ♞xa4 44.♘f5 ♞a1+ 45.♔f2 ♞b2+ 46.♔f3

1-0

We lost the match and this defeat is entirely on my conscience. Usually in similar situations, I rely on a player completely; after all, my players are not amateurs, they are among the world elite. Exceptions happen when we need a victory at all costs and there is no difference between a draw and a loss.

In the match against Bosna, the dilemma was not that stark. Sure, a draw in a match against a weaker rival could be considered an unplanned loss, but a draw would still have kept us in the race for first place.

The game was complex and the initiative passed back and forth several times; it is not surprising that at a decisive moment Mamedyarov chose a wrong plan. I should have understood — if not at first, then the second time. In reality, my bad decision led to a situation where even winning all the remaining rounds with the maximum score would not guarantee us victory. This was, in fact, what happened.

Before the last round, our team was in third place, trailing St Petersburg and Baden-Baden by one match point. We were paired against Baden-Baden and SOCAR had to win the match. There was no place for draws in that showdown; all six games ended in someone's victory.

17

Michael Adams (2733)

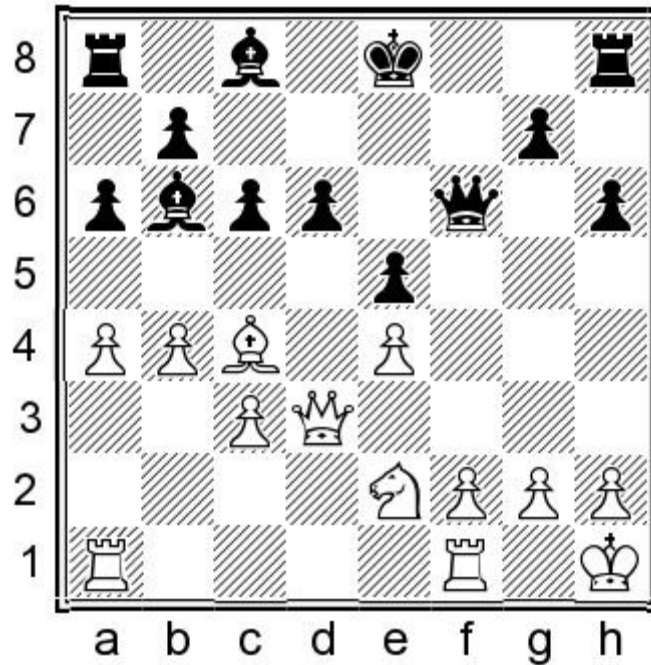
Teimour Radjabov (2752)

Rogaška Slatina 2011

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 f5

The Schliemann-Jänisch Gambit is a rare guest in games at this level, but as a surprise weapon it can be a good choice of opening.

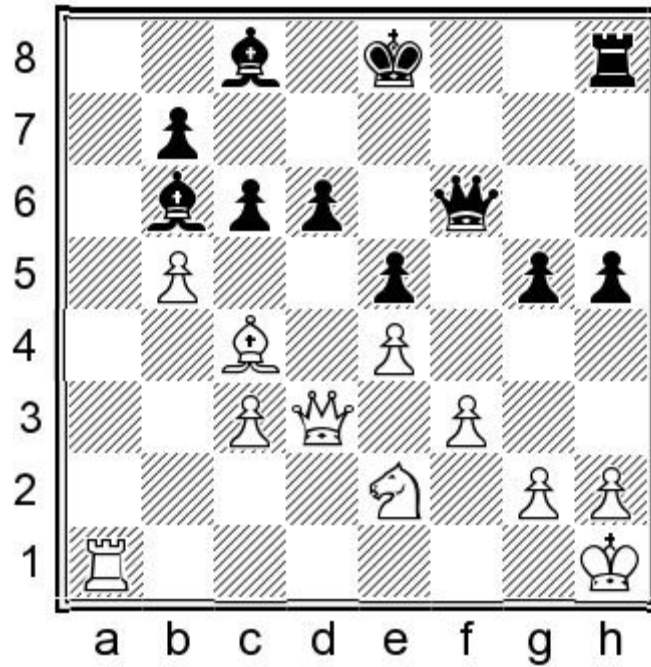
4.d3 fxe4 5.dxe4 ♘f6 6.0-0 ♙c5 7.♚d3 ♘d4 8.♘xd4 ♙xd4 9.♙c4 ♚e7 10.a4 a6 11.♘c3 d6 12.♙g5 c6 13.♘e2 ♙c5 14.c3 h6 15.♙xf6 ♚xf6 16.b4 ♙b6 17.♙h1



17...g5

To prevent an unpleasant f2–f4, but where will the black king find refuge now? Kingside castling is impossible and queenside castling is too dangerous...

18.f3 h5 19.b5 axb5 20.axb5 ♚xa1 21.♚xa1



21...♔d8!!

A skilful prophylactical move! This move ensures the safety of the king and simultaneously prevents White's pieces from penetrating on the queenside.

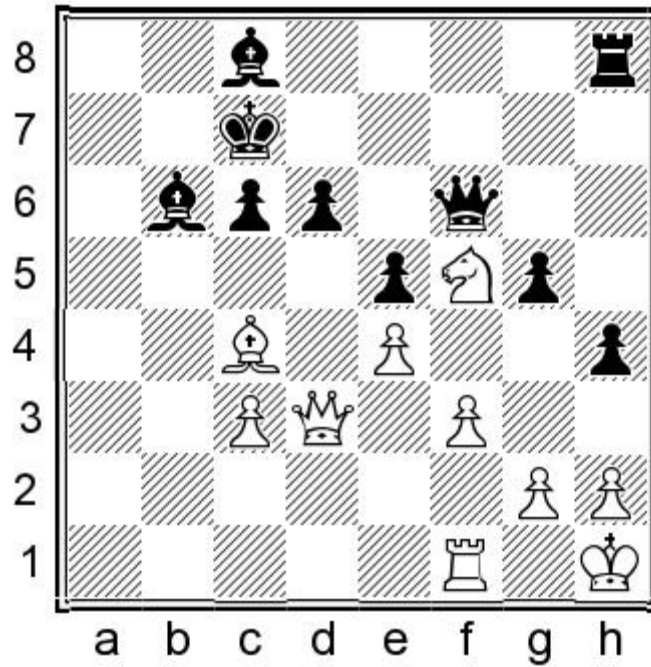
The natural 21...g4 22.bxc6 bxc6 would be met by the unpleasant 23.♙b1! ♕c5 24.♙b8.

22.bxc6 bxc6 23.♞f1

White goes over to passive defence. Strangely enough, it is difficult to recommend anything better. Black has covered all the possible entry squares on the queenside, while he dominates the centre and kingside.

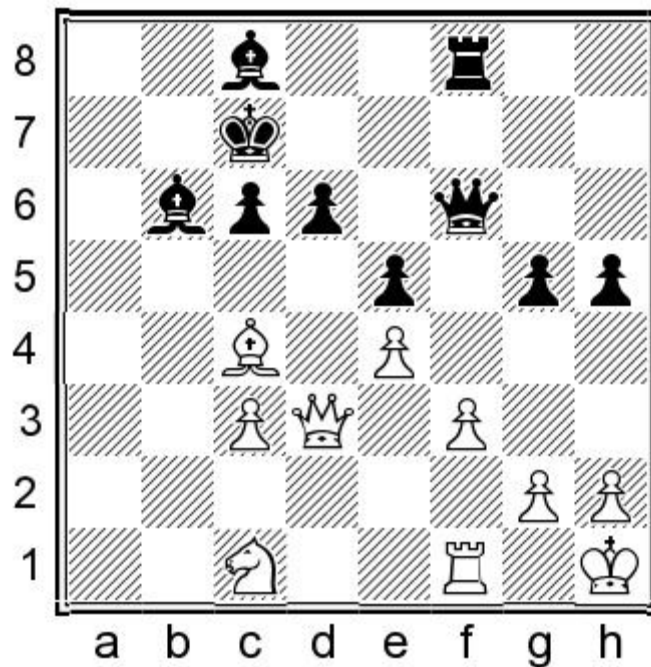
23...♔c7 24.♘c1

If 24.♘g3 h4 25.♘f5



25...Rf8! (this is even stronger than 25...Qxf5 26.exf5 d5) 26.Ke3 h3 27.g3 Qg6! Black's advantage is not in doubt.

24...Rf8



25.Qd1

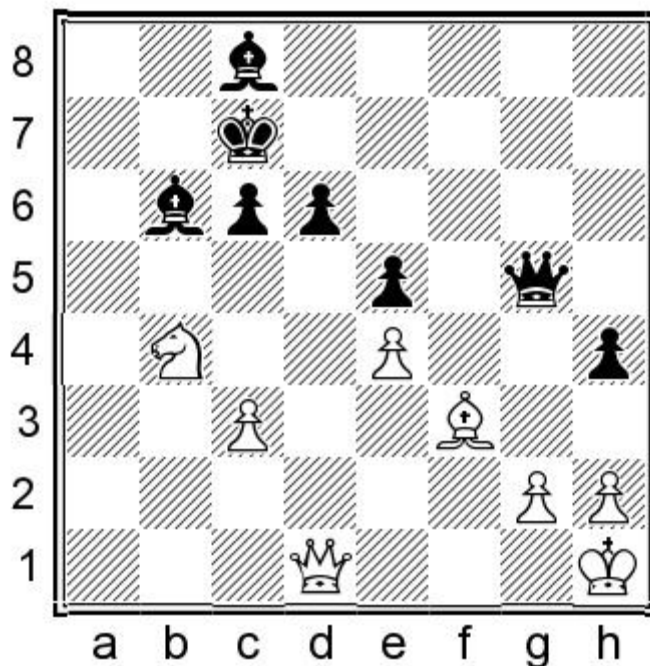
25.Ka2 followed by Kb4, with some hopes for counterplay, would be met by the sobering 25...Qf4! 26.Kb4 Qe3, when the two bishops ensure Black a comfortable advantage in the endgame.

25...Qg6 26.Qe2 g4!

Radjabov starts a decisive attack.

27.♖d3 gxf3 28.♞xf3 ♞xf3 29.♙xf3 h4 30.♗b4 ♚g5!

The black pieces have achieved complete domination of the board.



31.♚e1 ♙e6 32.♗d3 ♙c4 33.♗f2 d5 34.♗h3 ♚e3!

The simplest and most convincing way! Every black piece is much more active than its white counterpart. The fate of the game is decided.

35.♚xe3 ♙xe3 36.g3 hxg3 37.hxg3 ♙d2 38.♔g2 ♙xc3 39.g4 d4 40.g5 ♙d2 41.g6 ♙e3 42.♔g3 c5
43.♔h4 ♙g8 44.♗g5 c4 45.♗f7 ♙f4 46.♙e2 d3 47.♙f1 ♔d7 48.♔h5 ♔e7 49.♗h6 ♙xh6 50.♔xh6 ♔f6
51.g7 ♔f7 52.♔g5 ♔xg7 53.♔f5 d2 54.♙e2 c3 55.♙d1 ♙c4 56.♔xe5 ♙d3 57.♔d4 0-1

A formidable rival was outplayed despite not making any obvious errors. A huge victory for our leader! Radjabov had a great performance in this tournament, scoring 4½/5.

With team points being equal, we had more individual points than Baden-Baden and overtook them. However another match was still in progress, and we couldn't influence its result. If St Petersburg drew against the Armenian club Mica, it would hand the championship to SOCAR. We had no such luck. Yes, silver medals were certainly a step forward after the previous year's failure, but a coveted victory slipped away from us yet again.

Chess life continued according to schedule. Just a month later, about half the SOCAR players were in the Azerbaijan national team that arrived in Greece to take part in the European Team Championship.

As in China, Gashimov was in the team. The only new player was Eltaj Safarli; he replaced Mamedov who had a weak performance at the World Team Championship. Curious minds will ask whether the

conflict that marred the last round in Ningbo had been resolved. There were no consequences, everyone behaved as if nothing had happened. Apart from the emotions, what were the lessons learnt? I did not doubt that the decision I had made in China was correct. Vugar Gashimov showed up for the game and proved that the interests of the team were still more important than his personal ambitions. For me, this was the main takeaway from that conflict.



Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia 2011. Second place for SOCAR. Joy or disappointment? (Photo by Vladimir Barsky)

We started the tournament very well; in round two we defeated our perennial opponents, Team Armenia. This was an important victory and we achieved it using the familiar recipe for team events: draw with Black, win with White. Gashimov's win against Sergei Movsesian was not unexpected, however Guseinov's victory was a pleasant surprise, especially since he won against Gabriel Sargissian, who was always very motivated when he played in team events.

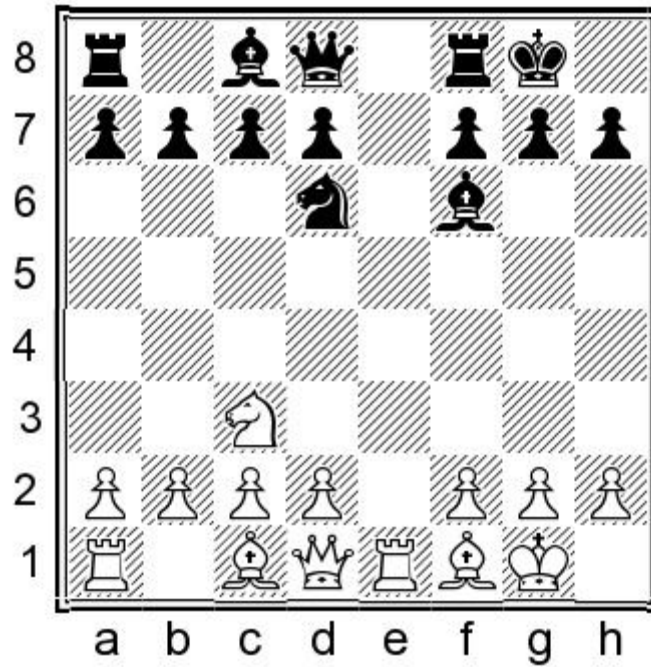
18

Gadir Guseinov (2636)

Gabriel Sargissian (2671)

Porto Carras 2011

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.♞e1 ♘d6 6.♘xe5 ♙e7 7.♙f1 ♘xe5 8.♞xe5 0-0 9.♘c3 ♙f6 10.♞e1



10...c6

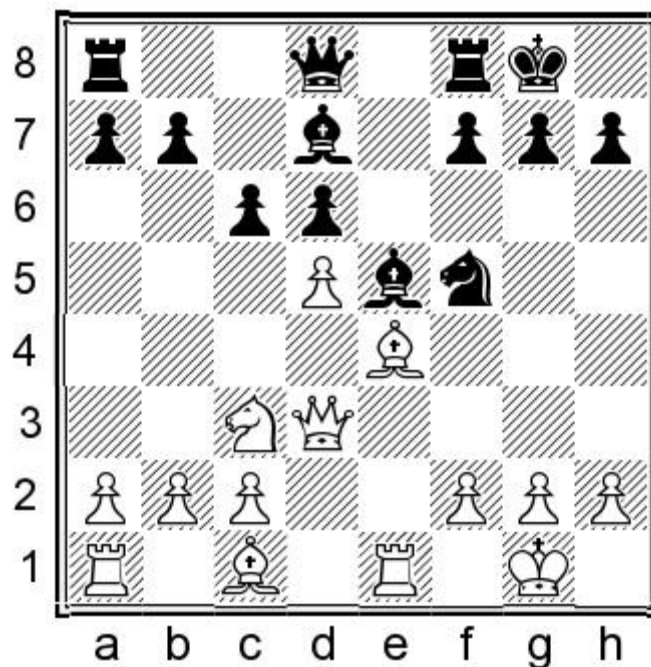
It would be more precise to play 10...♖e8.

11.d4 ♘f5 12.d5 d6 13.♙d3

An imprecision in return.

13.♙f4 would have been better since it would prevent Black's next move.

13...♙e5! 14.♙e4 ♙d7 15.♚d3



15...♔f6?

This natural-looking move leads to serious trouble. 15...g6 would have been safe.

16.g4!

This reply was obviously underestimated by the Armenian grandmaster.

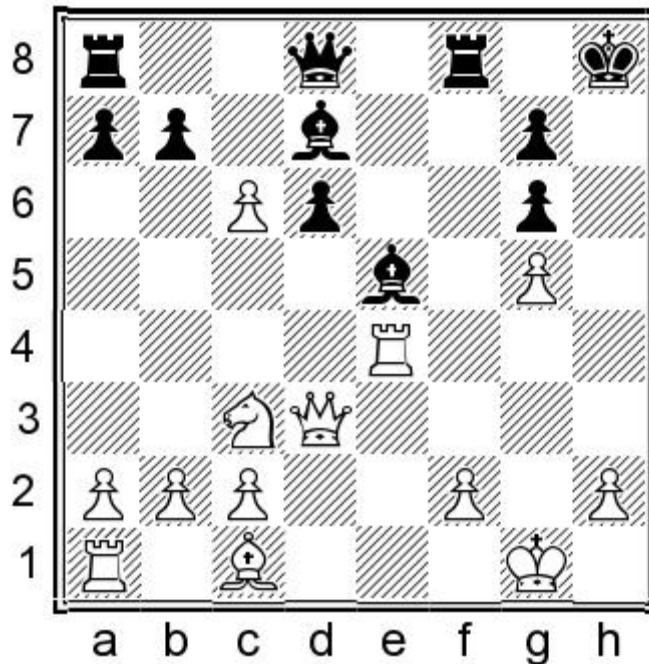
16...♘h4 17.g5 ♖d8 18.♙xh7+ ♔h8

White has won a pawn, but his king's position has been seriously weakened. He has to play decisively and precisely in order not to give Black the chance of dangerous counterplay.

19.♞e4!

19.♙e4 f5! 20.♞h3 fxe4 21.♞xh4+ ♔g8 22.♞h5 ♖f5 23.♘xe4 ♗e8 24.♞xe8+ ♞xe8 would lead to a very unclear position despite the two extra pawns.

19...♘g6 20.♙xg6 fxg6 21.dxc6



21...bxc6?

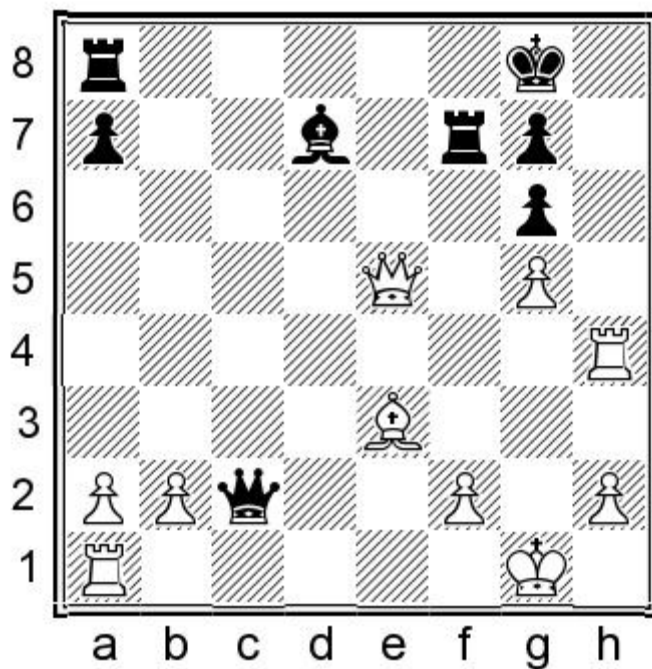
This natural move is also a serious error.

21...♙f5! was necessary, even though 22.♞h4+ ♔g8 23.♞d5+ ♖f7 24.cxb7 ♖b8 25.♙d2 ♖bxb7 26.♞e1 gives White an obvious advantage.

22.♞c4! d5 23.♘xd5! cxd5

Not much better is 23...♙e6 24.♞xe5 ♘xd5 25.♚h4+ ♔g8 26.c4 ♙f3 27.♙e3, when the two extra pawns would seal the result.

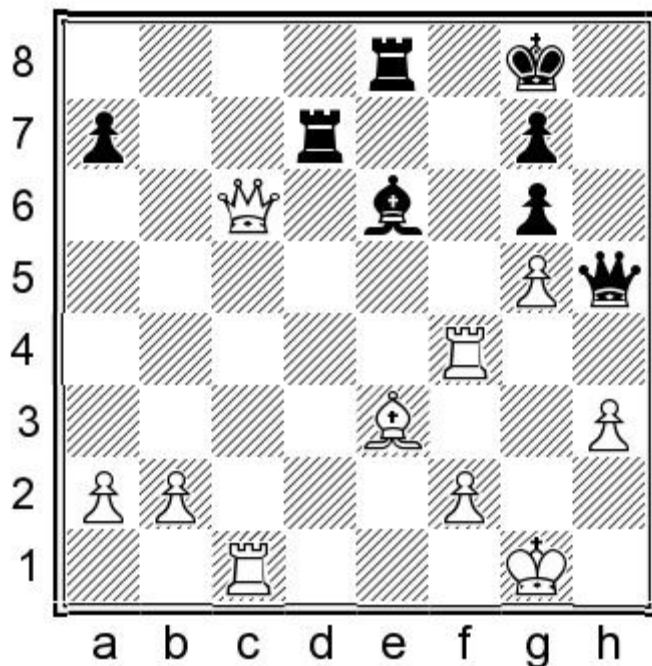
24.♞h4+ ♔g8 25.♚xd5+ ♞f7 26.♚xe5 ♞c8 27.♙e3 ♚xc2



28.♞c1

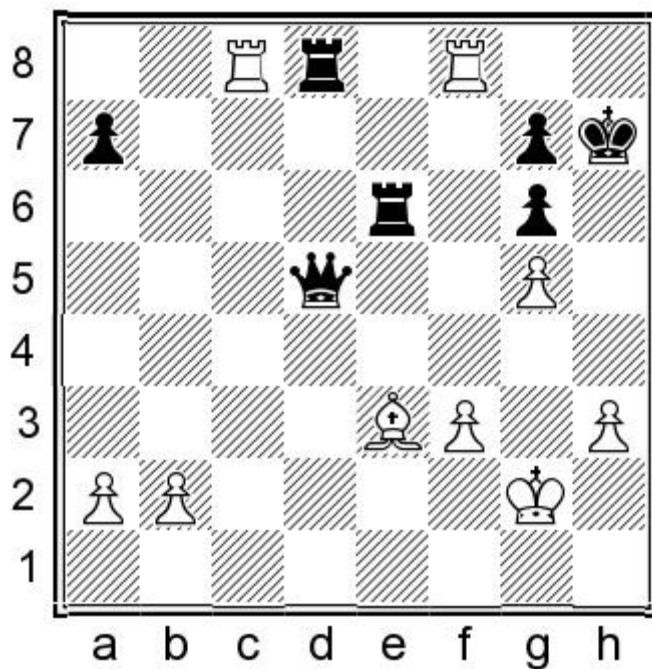
28.♚e4 ♞c8 29.♚xc2 ♞xc2 30.♙xa7 ♞xb2 would lead to an opposite-coloured bishops ending where Black would have chances to survive.

28...♚e2 29.♚d5 ♞e8 30.♞f4 ♙e6 31.♚c6 ♞d7 32.h3! ♚h5?



32...♖de7 would have kept possibilities of resistance. Now a spectacular combination follows.

33.♔xe6+! ♖xe6 34.♖c8+ ♔h7 35.♖ff8 ♔d1+ 36.♔g2 ♔d5+ 37.f3 ♖d8



Black has found a way to avoid mate, but it just delays inevitable defeat.

38.♖cxd8 ♔xd8 39.♖xd8 ♖xe3 40.♔f2

The two extra pawns leave the result in no doubt.

40...♖e5 41.h4 ♖a5 42.a3 ♖a4 43.♔g3 ♖c4 44.♖a8 ♖c7 45.b4

We faced a strong French team in round five. Right after the start of the round, I went to attend a coaches' meeting. It was short; the games were still in their opening phases, so there was no reason to hurry. From afar, I saw that there were no players in the area where our match was being played. The reason was extraordinary. It turned out that a few minutes previously Vugar Gashimov had fainted during the game! There was no doctor on site and chaos reigned supreme. Time dragged on endlessly. Empathy, fear, frustration — all the feelings were mixed together during those dramatic moments. Finally a doctor showed up and Vugar regained consciousness a while later. No one could countenance resuming play; all the players were in a state of shock. Although the actual fights were still to come, the French chivalrously offered draws on all boards and we gratefully accepted.

The tension eased some time later when we were back at the hotel. I was surprised how quickly Vugar recovered. We were concerned about his health, while he was animatedly discussing chess lines and the upcoming games. Nevertheless it was clear that his tournament was over. The doctor's opinion was unequivocal; we also had vivid memories of the health scare that had happened in front of our eyes. However, at a team meeting in the evening, Gashimov was fresh and cheerful. We had to play Russia and he claimed that he was ready. His confidence and insistence raised some doubt in me. If the next day's match had not been so important, the decision would have been obvious. In reality, a defeat in the match against Russia would surely kill our chances in a tournament that had started so well.

Our moral criteria are severely transformed by the game we love; we strive to achieve victory at all costs. I found myself in a very difficult situation. What decision to take? Do I have the right to risk the health of a human being? The last word belonged to the family, of course. By a truly unfortunate coincidence, Sarhan Gashimov, Vugar's older brother and loyal friend, had flown home the day before. I called Baku and told the family about Vugar's health scare. Their reaction did not make things simpler: "You are with him; the decision is yours to make". Vugar's father knew his son very well and understood that chess remained Gashimov's highest priority, more important than anything else, including his own health. I was tortured by anguish and doubt all the time that remained before the deadline for the submission of the team list. The 'flag' was almost falling when I finally made a decision, the most difficult during all my years as a captain.

Both teams featured their strongest players in that all-important match.



With three Azerbaijani musketeers. (Photo by Vladimir Barsky)

19

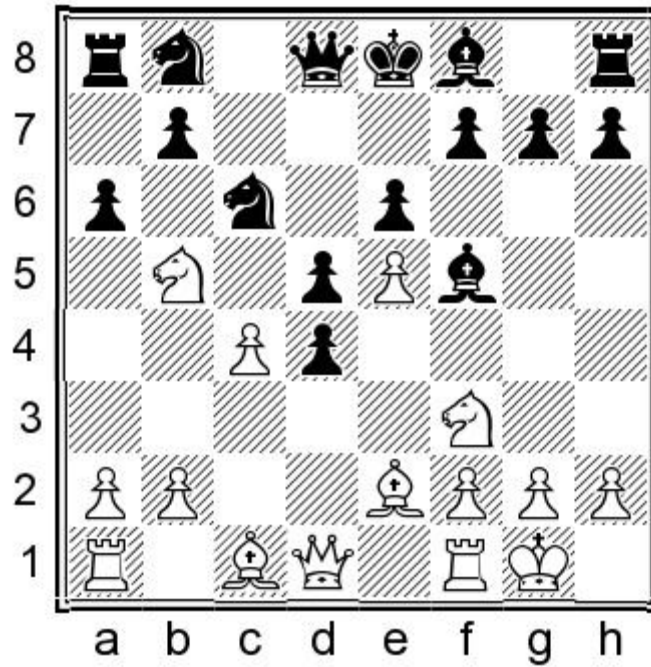
Vugar Gashimov (2757)

Alexander Grischuk (2752)

Porto Carras 2011

Naturally, this was the game I feared most.

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♘f5 4.♗f3 e6 5.♙e2 ♞e7 6.0-0 c5 7.♞a3!? ♞ec6 8.c4! cxd4 9.♞b5 a6

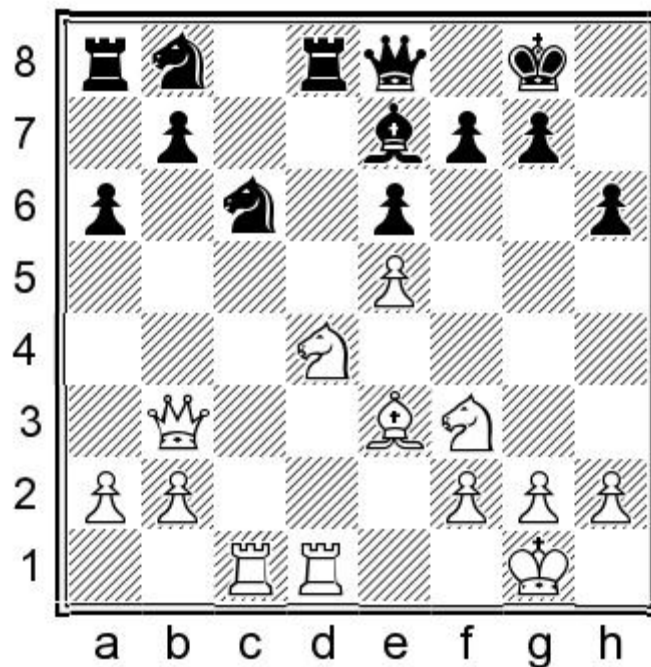


10. ♖g5!

True to his style, White chooses the most active moves throughout the game. The calmer 10. ♘bxd4 ♙e4 11. ♙e3 was also worth considering.

10... ♚d7 11. ♘bxd4 ♙e4 12. ♜c1 h6 13. ♙e3 ♙e7 14. cxd5 ♙xd5 15. ♙c4 0-0 16. ♚e2 ♜d8 17. ♝fd1 ♙xc4 18. ♚xc4 ♚e8 19. ♚b3

At first glance, Black's position is unpleasant, however Grischuk plays precisely and neutralises his opponent's initiative.



19...♖d7 20.a3 ♗f8 21.♘xc6

21.h3 would have presented more problems, but 21...b5! would allow Black to hold, e.g. 22.♙d3 ♘xd4 23.♘xd4 ♖d5 24.♙e4 ♘d7.

21...♘xc6 22.♖xd7 ♗xd7 23.♖d1 ♗c8 24.♖c1 ♗d7 25.♖d1 ♗c8 26.♖c1

1/2-1/2

The game showed that Vugar's chess health was fine. The outcome of the match would be decided on board one. Radjabov spent the entire game defending but found an opportunity for counter-play right before the time control. In time trouble, Peter Svidler was incapable of switching from attack to defence under Radjabov's relentless pressure.

Our win in the next round against Bulgaria was even more convincing. Only two rounds remained and the future seemed very bright. We were in clear first place, having won against our two most dangerous rivals. The title that we coveted so much seemed very close. Germany, our next opponents, had acclaimed grandmasters, but it was hard to imagine that our team would stray off course in this match.

As in other matches against the leaders, the German players preferred to err on the side of caution. In the games where they played White, draw agreements were struck in the opening. Mamedyarov had a clear advantage but something strange was going on in Radjabov's game. Teimour sometimes took liberties with Black while his openings with White were always solid. It is impossible to tell what made him choose a slippery path.

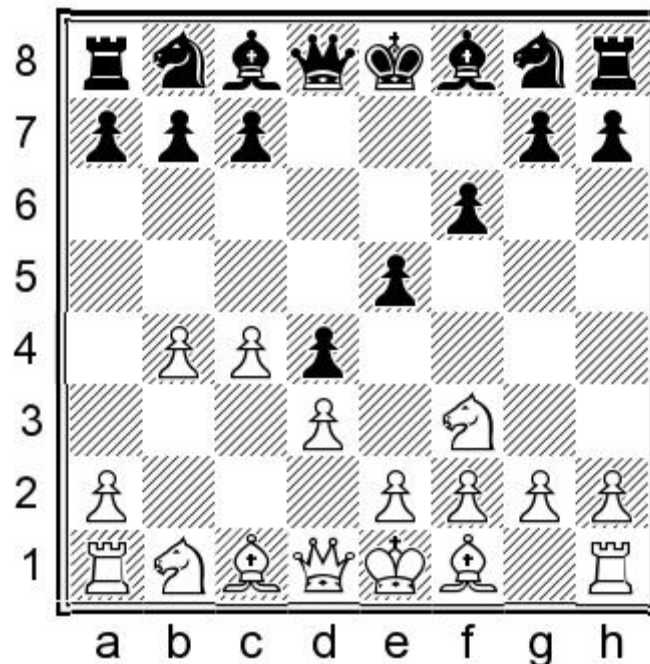


European Championship, Greece 2011. Before the start of the ill-fated match with Germany which cost us the gold medals. (Photo by Evgeny Surov)

1. ♘f3 d5 2. c4 d4 3. b4

The 'normal' 3. g3 would lead to King's Indian positions with which Radjabov has been familiar since his childhood. The move in the game is a step off the beaten track which Teimour had never tried before, or since.

3...f6 4. d3 e5



5. b5?

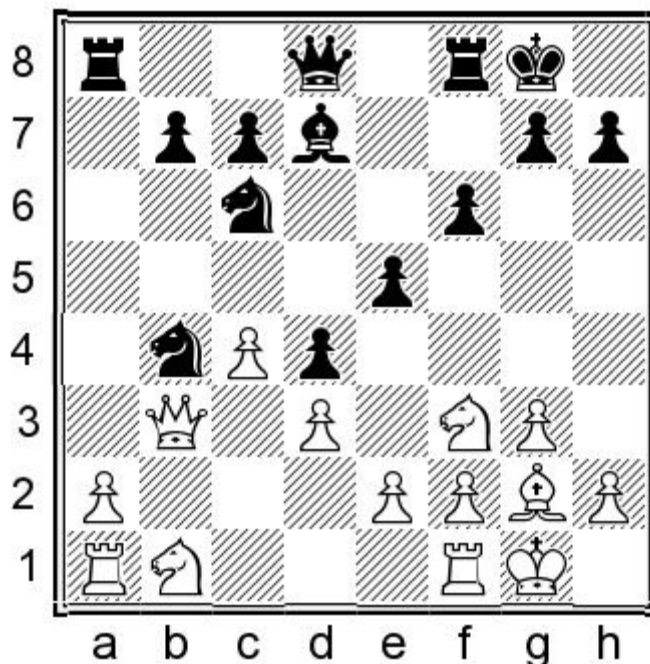
This move is already a serious mistake.

It was necessary to play 5. a3 in order to meet 5...a5 with 6. b5. If 5...c5 White has the chance to initiate an interesting struggle with 6. e3!? dxe3 7. fxe3 cxb4 8. d4.

5...a6! 6. bxa6?

This exchange only makes White's difficulties worse. 6. e3 would be the best decision now as well.

6... ♖xa6 7. g3 ♙b4+ 8. ♙d2 ♜e7 9. ♙g2 0-0 10. 0-0 ♙d7 11. ♙xb4 ♜xb4 12. ♚b3 ♜ec6



This is a good place to assess the results of the White's opening experiment. They are disappointing. His opponent has a clear advantage while White has no way to complicate the game. Radjabov defended stubbornly and I sometimes even entertained hopes of a positive outcome, but he was unable to defend successfully and lost on move fifty.

0-1 (50)

Our hopes rested with Shakhriyar. For a while, it appeared that he would deliver.

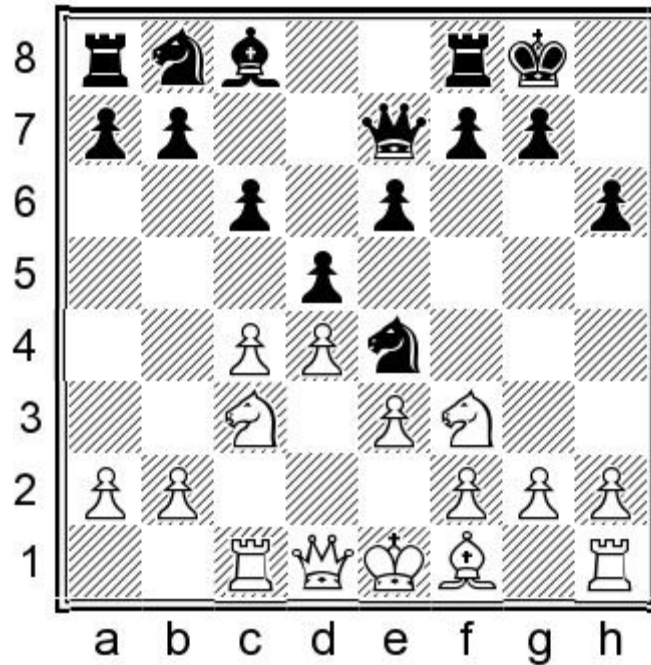
21

Shakhriyar Mamedyarov (2733)

Daniel Fridman (2661)

Porto Carras 2011

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗e7 4.♘f3 ♘f6 5.♗g5 h6 6.♗h4 0-0 7.e3 ♘e4 8.♗xe7 ♙xe7 9.♖c1 c6



10.g4!?

This decision is typical of Shakhriyar. If the position allows any choice, he will undoubtedly choose the most aggressive continuation. The natural 10.♔d3 is too bland for him.

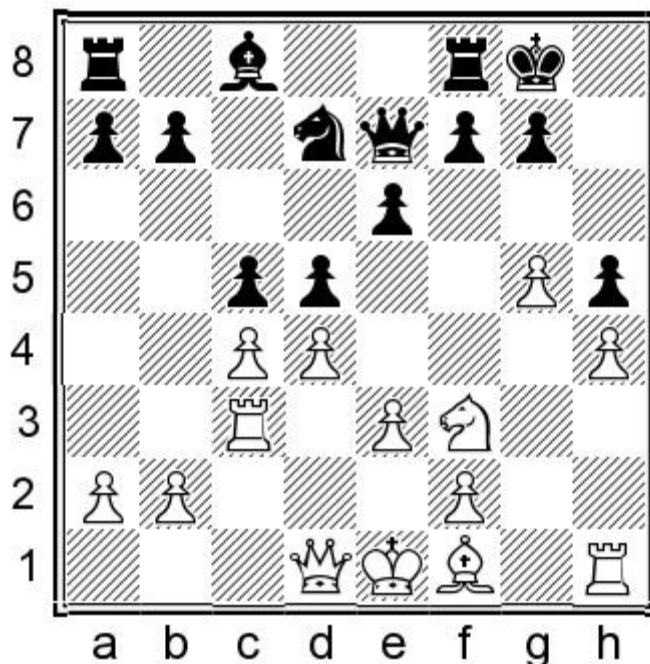
10...♘d7

This position was not new for Fridman. 10...f5 11.gxf5 ♔f6 12.♔g2 ♔xf5 13.0-0 ♘xc3 14.♖xc3 ♘d7 occurred in Halkias-Fridman, Warsaw 2010. Still, it was a blitz game. In games with a standard time control Daniel plays more solidly.

11.h4 ♘xc3 12.♖xc3 c5!

This move follows the classical recipe: Black reacts to his opponent's activity on the flank with a counter in the centre.

13.g5 h5



14.♔e2

White has a difficult choice, to play 14.g6!? fxg6 15.cxd5 exd5 16.dxc5, or the immediate 14.cxd5 exd5 15.dxc5 ♖xc5 16.♔xd5 ♗g4, but not 14.♗g2 or the actual move played in the game.

14...g6

Too academic.

The position called for 14...dxc4 15.♗xc4 b6 with a double-edged fight.

15.cxd5 exd5 16.dxc5 ♖xc5 17.♔xd5 ♖a4?!

Fridman doesn't want to play without a pawn long-term, but 17...♖e4! 18.♖b3 (18.♖c1?! ♗g4 19.0-0 ♖ad8 is weaker; or 18.♖c4 ♖e8 19.0-0 ♗g4) 18...♖e8 19.0-0 ♖b8 20.♖d1 b6 gives some compensation.

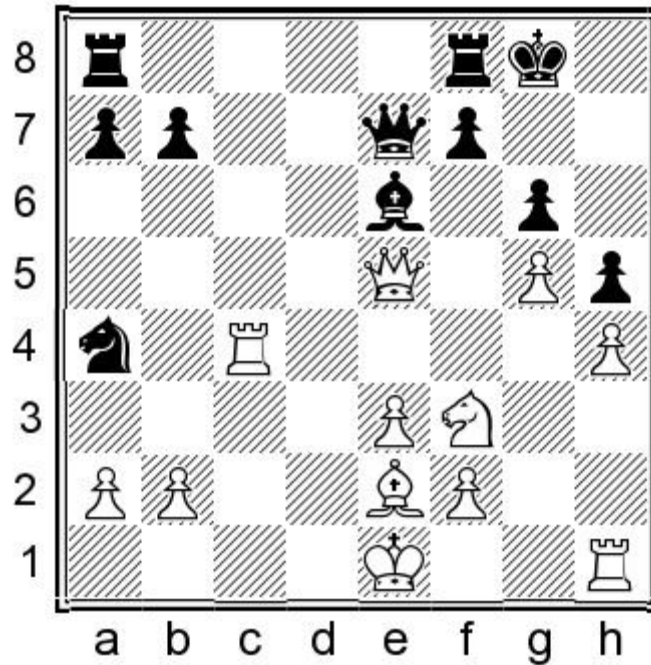
18.♖c4!?

Yet again the most active move! 18.♖c1 ♗g4 19.0-0 wouldn't be bad.

18...♗e6!

Stronger than 18...♖xb2 19.♖d4 ♗e6 20.♔b5 ♔a3 21.0-0.

19.♔e5



19... ♞xb2?!

A controversial decision. 19... ♞b6 20. ♖d4 ♜fc8 21. 0-0 ♜c5 22. ♕e4 ♛c7 was preferable, although after 23. b3 Black would have to prove that he has enough compensation for the pawn.

20. ♕xb2 ♙xc4 21. ♙xc4 ♕e4

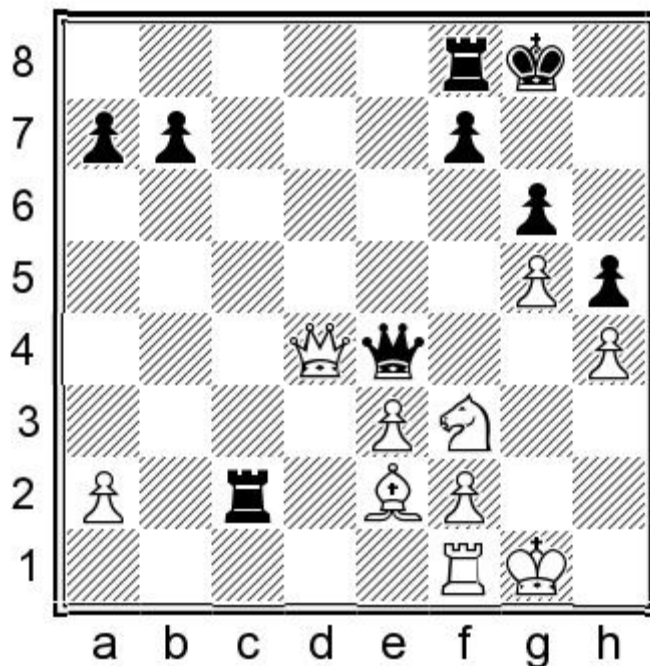
Positions with a non-standard material balance are usually difficult to assess properly. The open white king and chance to create a passed pawn on the queenside seem to give Black enough counterplay.

22. ♙e2!

The only move to retain hopes of an advantage.

22. ♕e2 ♛b1+ 23. ♕d1 ♛b4+ 24. ♞d2 ♜ad8 25. ♕c2 ♜xd2 26. ♕xg6+ ♔h8 27. ♕xh5+ would lead to a forced draw.

22... ♜ac8 23. 0-0 ♜c2 24. ♕d4!



24...♖e8

24...♔xd4 25.♘xd4 ♜xa2 26.♞c1 ♞d8 27.♔f1 ♞d7 28.f4 doesn't equalise either.

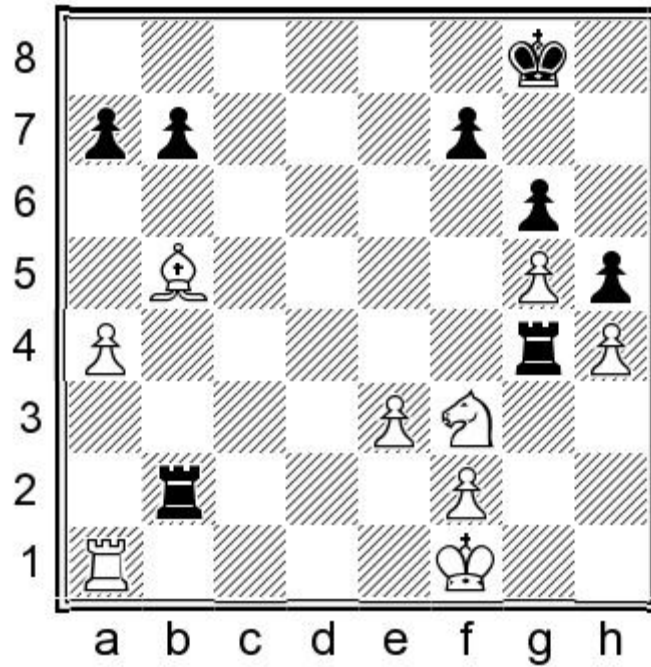
25.♙b5! ♞e7

25...♞e6?? 26.♙d3+-

26.♔xe4 ♜xe4 27.♞a1 ♞b2 28.a4 ♞eb4 29.♔g2 ♞g4+

In such endings, the weaker side usually benefits from an exchange of rooks, but in this specific situation this would be wrong, since after 29...♞b1 30.♞xb1 ♞xb1 31.♘e5 Black cannot avoid losing the f-pawn.

30.♔f1



30...♖g4

30...a6 31.♔d3 ♕g7 32.a5 wouldn't change much.

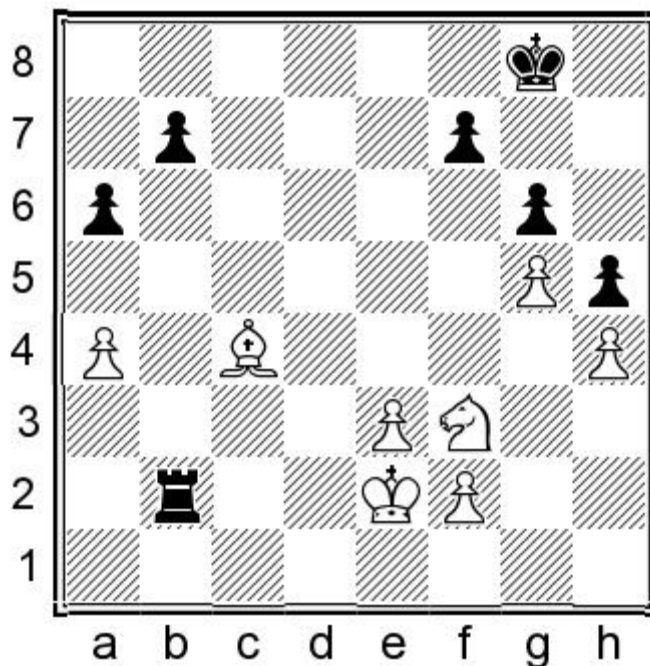
31.♖d1?!

Here it would have been better for White to allow the exchange of rooks: 31.♔d3! ♖4b3 (31...♖2b3 32.♜e5 ♖c3 33.♔g2) 32.♔e4 ♖b4 33.♜d4, with an obvious advantage.

31...♖b1 32.♖xb1 ♖xb1+ 33.♔e2 a6

The immediate 33...♖b2+ 34.♜d2 ♖a2 35.f4 a6 36.♔d7 ♔f8 37.♔c8 ♖xa4 38.♔xb7 a5 is more precise and gives good chances of a draw.

34.♔c4 ♖b2+



35.♔f1?!

Despite its seeming simplicity, this position is extremely difficult to play properly. White's last move is a serious error. It was necessary to play 35.♔e1! to keep the king as close as possible to the kingside.

Black has many possibilities: 35...♔g7

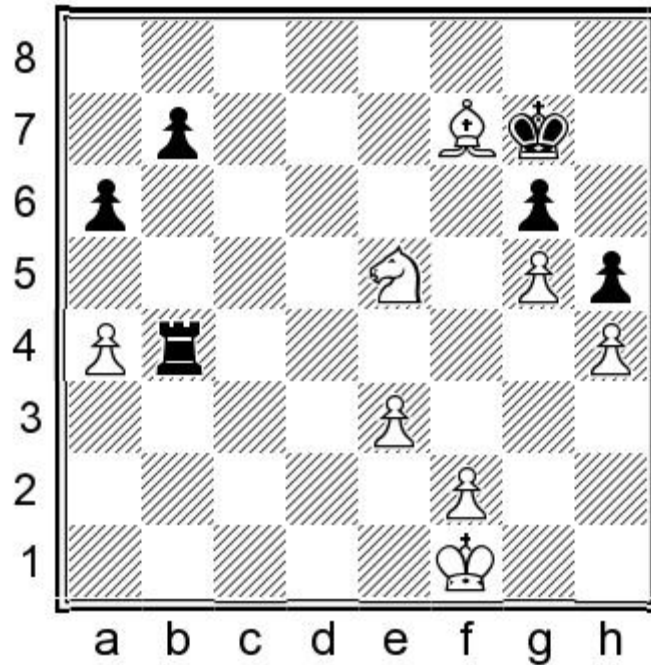
a) 35...♖b1+ 36.♔d2 ♖b2+ 37.♔c3 ♖xf2 38.♘e5 ♔g7 39.♙xf7;

b) 35...b5 36.axb5 axb5 37.♙d3 b4 38.♘d2;

c) 35...♖b4 36.♘e5! ♔g7 37.f4 (37.♙xf7 b5) 37...f6 38.gxf6+ ♔xf6 39.♙d3 ♖xa4 40.♙xg6 a5 41.♙xh5 ♖b4 42.♘d3;

36.♘e5 f6 37.gxf6+ ♔xf6 38.f4 b5 39.axb5 axb5. In all cases White would retain winning chances.

35...♖b4! 36.♘e5 ♔g7 37.♙xf7



37.f4 f6 38.gxf6+ ♔xf6 39.♙d3 ♖xa4 40.♙xg6 a5 41.♙xh5 ♖b4 is not much better, as the a-pawn would cost White a piece.

37...♖e4?

Both players were in serious time trouble. This move looks strong, but unfortunately White finds a strong refutation.

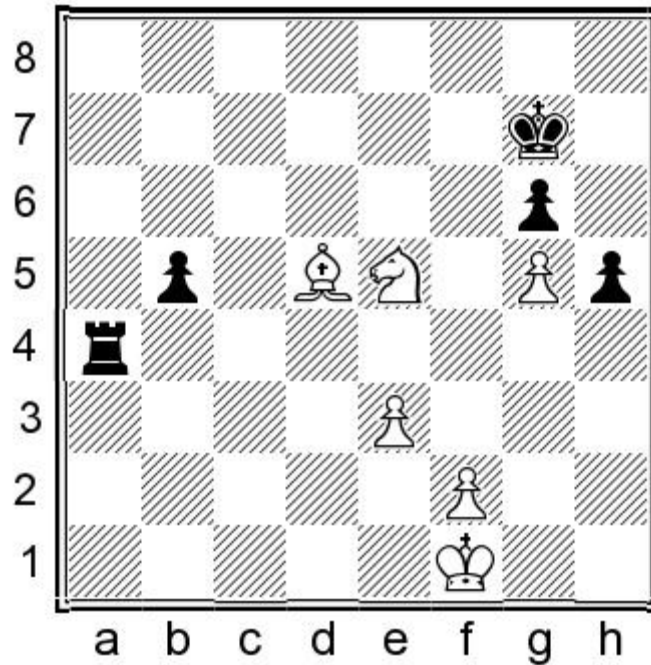
Black should have played 37...b5! 38.f4 (or 38.axb5 ♖xb5 39.♙xg6 ♖xe5 40.♙xh5 ♖e4) 38...bxa4 39.♙xg6 a3 40.♙f7 ♖b2 with a draw.

38.♘c4!

Shakhriyar found this only winning move with his flag about to fall.

The other options only led to a draw: 38.f4 ♖xe5 39.fxe5 ♔xf7 40.a5 ♔e6 41.♔e2 ♔xe5 42.♔f3! ♔d5 43.♔f4 ♔c6 44.e4 ♔d6!= and 38.♙xg6!? ♖xe5 39.♙xh5 ♖e4 40.♙e2 ♖xh4 41.f4, even though the most precise 41...b5! 42.axb5 a5 is not so simple to find.

38...b5 39.axb5 axb5 40.♙d5 ♖xh4 41.♘e5 ♖a4



Both players made the time control, but the outcome of the game is still unclear. By now it was obvious that only a win by Shakh would save the match for us.

42. ♖c6?!

This is the way to halt the dangerous b-pawn far from the promotion square.

a) Still, the direct 42.e4! would have been much stronger, e.g. 42...h4

[42...b4 43.f4 ♖h7 (43...♖a5 44.♗f3! ♖c5 45.♗d4+–) 44.♖f2! (It is too early to play 44.f5? gxf5 45.exf5 ♖a5 46.♗d7 b3 47.♖e2 ♖h8! and Black is saved.) 44...♖a3 45.♗c4 ♖a2+ 46.♖e3 h4 (46...b3 47.♗d2+–) 47.e5+–; 42...♖a1+ 43.♖g2 b4 44.f4 ♖d1 45.♖f3!+–]

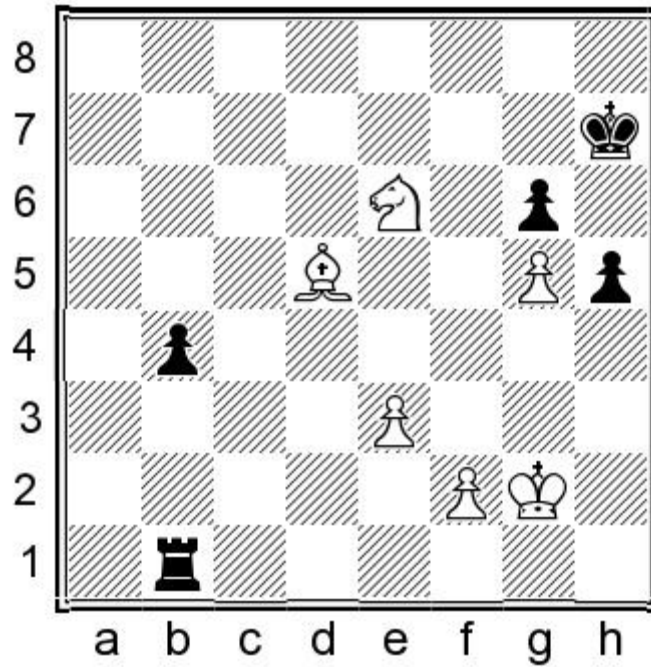
43.f4 h3 44.♖g1 ♖a1+ 45.♖h2 ♖f1 46.♖xh3 ♖xf4 47.♗c6 with good winning chances.

b) 42.f4 b4 43.e4 was also possible, but it is difficult to decide on this, given how important the game was for the team.

42...♖a1+ 43.♖g2!

43.♖e2 h4↗

43...♖b1 44.♗d4 b4 45.♗e6+ ♖h7



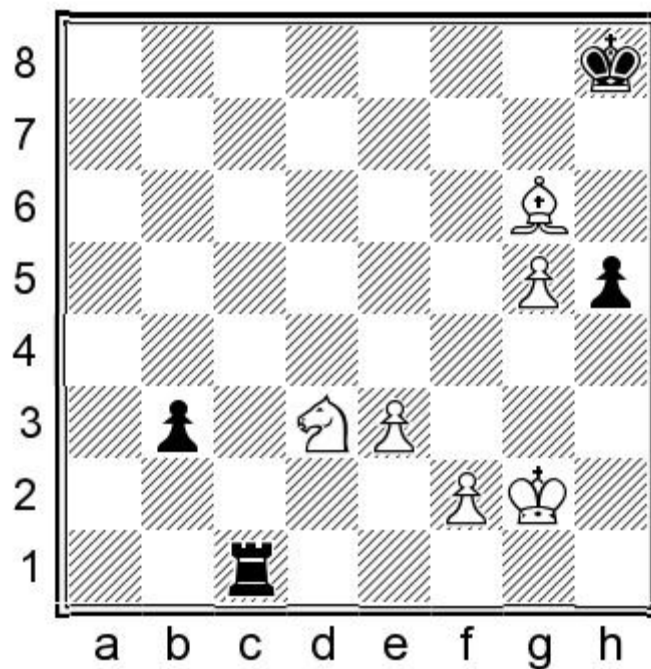
46. ♖f8+

It looked to us spectators that this combination would save the match. Unfortunately Black found a study-like way to escape.

It seems that a win for White was still possible: 46. ♖f4! b3

[46... ♔g7 47. ♕e4 ♖a1 48. ♗xg6! (48. ♕xg6 ♖a5=) 48... b3 49. ♖f4 h4 50. ♖h5+ ♔f8 51. g6 ♖a5 52. g7+ ♔f7 53. ♕d5+ ♖xd5 54. g8=♙!+ ♔xg8 55. ♖f6++-]

47. ♕f7 (47. ♕e4 ♖c1 48. ♕xg6+ ♔h8 transposes.) 47... ♔h8 48. ♕xg6 ♖c1 49. ♖d3

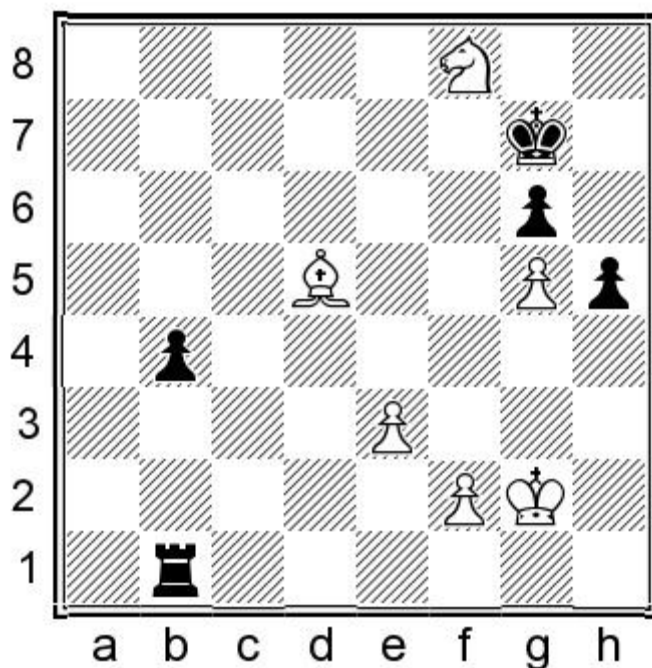


49... ♖d1 (49... ♖c2 50. ♕xh5+-) 50. ♔f3!

[50.f4 ♖g7 51.♙e4 b2 52.♜xb2 ♖d2+ 53.♗f3 ♖xb2 54.f5 h4 55.f6+ ♗f7 56.♙f5 (56.♙d5+ ♗g6=) 56...♖b5! (56...h3 seems to lose: 57.♙xh3 ♗g6 58.♗f4 ♖f2+ 59.♗g3 ♖a2 60.♙d7! ♖a5 61.♗f4 ♖xg5 62.f7 ♖g1 63.f8=♜+!) 57.♗f4 ♖xf5+ 58.♗xf5 h3 59.g6+ ♗f8 60.♗e6 h2 61.g7+ ♗g8 62.♗e7 h1=♙ 63.f7+ ♗xg7 64.f8=♙+ ♗h7□ and Black should survive.]

50...♖d2 51.♗g3 ♗g7 52.♙e4. Of course it would be impossible to see all these lines during the game.

46...♗g7



47.♜xg6?

White continues to implement his strategy. It was not too late to transpose to the lines above with 47.♜e6+.

47...b3 48.♜f4 b2 49.♜xh5+ ♗h8!

The only move!

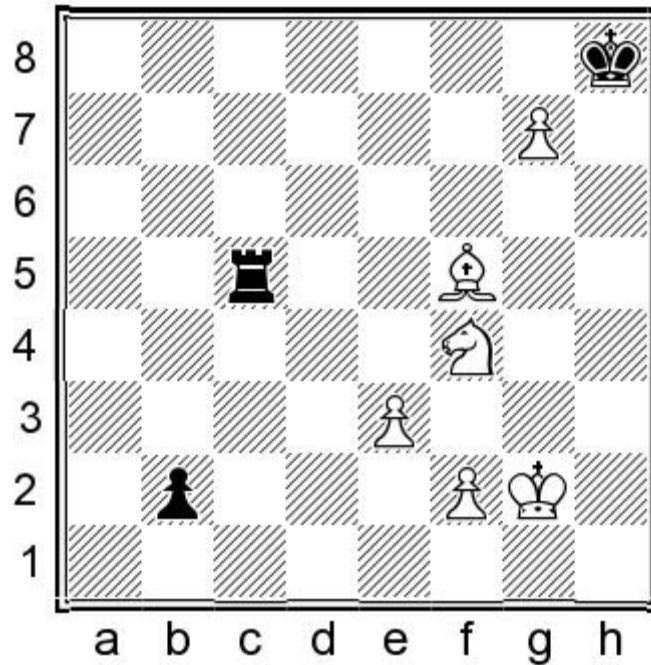
Otherwise 49...♗f8 50.♙e4 ♖c1 51.g6 ♖c5 52.♜f4 ♖c4 53.♙f5+- was losing.

50.♙e4

50.g6 ♖g1+ 51.♗xg1 b1=♙+ 52.♗g2 ♙h1+ 53.♗xh1=

50...♖c1 51.g6 ♖c5 52.♜f4 ♖c4! 53.♙f5 ♖c5 54.♙b1 ♖c1 55.♙d3 ♖c3! 56.♙b1 ♖c1 57.♙f5 ♖c5 58.g7+

There is no good way to escape the perpetual attacks by the rook.



58...♔xg7! 59.♙b1

59.♘e6+? ♔f6 60.♘xc5 ♔xf5 even loses.

1/2-1/2

We had a sense of déjà vu after this unexpected loss. We urgently needed a win in the final round, preferably with a big score, but such a win in itself would only give us silver. We needed a draw in another match, between the leaders Germany and their aggressive pursuers Armenia, in order to become champions. Our team completed its task with relative ease.

The other important match progressed in a less predictable manner. After two quick draws with Black, Armenia's chances looked better. Then, the 'defence-first' play of the German team delivered a win: Georg Meier used his favourite French Defence to beat Sergei Movsesian with Black. Our hopes rested with Gabriel Sargissian, and for a time it seemed that he was (and therefore we were) close to success. Alas, Jan Gustafsson managed to escape, snatching a sensational gold for Germany. Yet again, we missed out on top place on the podium by one short step.

At least Vugar Gashimov's health problems did not recur. He delivered a great performance in the final stages of the tournament, and his health scare appeared to be an isolated incident. The following January he played in Wijk aan Zee, but an examination thereafter revealed serious health problems.

Still, in the spring and summer of 2012 there was no indication of the coming tragedy. Our successful performance at the European Team Championship allowed my guys to believe in themselves again. The team was preparing for the next Olympiad and all of us were facing the future with optimism. When Vugar underwent his medical examination, the initial prognosis was good, and no-one, including him, doubted that all our strongest players would be on deck in Istanbul. Alas, the closer we got to the start of the competition, the more alarming the news from his family became. Vugar's brain tumour

proved to be malignant and he faced a fight for his life. Vugar's fight against the lethal disease was long and painful. All along, he dreamt of returning to competitive chess, and this dream sustained him as much as his family and friends did. Unfortunately, the fatal disease won. The chess community lost one its most talented young members who did not even have time to fully develop his enormous potential.



Silver medals — also a great success!. (Photo by Evgeny Surov)

Azerbaijan had to play at the Olympiad without him. We could not countenance not fighting for the title, so I decided to try an unexpected board order: Radjabov, Safarli, Mamedyarov, Mamedov and Guseinov. Of course it was a very risky decision to put the youngest and still-developing player on board two, but the logic behind the idea was simple: to create the best possible conditions for Shakhriyar Mamedyarov. An attentive reader will undoubtedly point out that the author is not consistent; just a few pages ago he argued against such experimentation. Believe me, it was not because of my poor memory that I took the same bait for the second time.

The climate inside the team was quite peculiar. All of the players belonged to the same generation; while still very young, they pushed out their older colleagues simply because they played chess better. For some time already there had been no alternative to those young players, while even the top five were clearly split into leaders and worker bees. Teimour Radjabov, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov and Vugar Gashimov competed fiercely with each other, progressed rapidly, and broke into the world chess elite. Rauf Mamedov and Gadir Guseinov seemed satisfied to stay in the background, especially since no-one

seriously competed for their spots on the team. Gradually a certain complacency took over: the overall team result depended on its leaders while the worker bees simply needed not to suffer dramatic failures. By the time I began coaching the team, Mamedov and Guseinov had voluntarily assumed the role of ‘domestiques’. As in cycle racing, they were ready to sacrifice their individual achievements (in this case, their ratings) for the success of the team. In particular, Mamedov did not mind playing most of his games with Black in order to allow his friend Mamedyarov to have White. When an even younger Safarli emerged it did not really make players compete for the last two boards; rather, it increased their desire for self-sacrifice.

Gashimov’s absence did not leave any other candidates for the team except for those five. My cunning plan was to let Eltaj Safarli, who had excellent opening preparation, hold the fort on board two with Black, while it made no difference for Rauf Mamedov what colour he played. We can conclude that it was team traditions and player preferences that influenced the board order — as well as the passion and ambition of the author.

At first, everything went as well as possible: after six rounds, we had five wins and a draw with Germany. Radjabov took revenge for his recent upsetting loss.

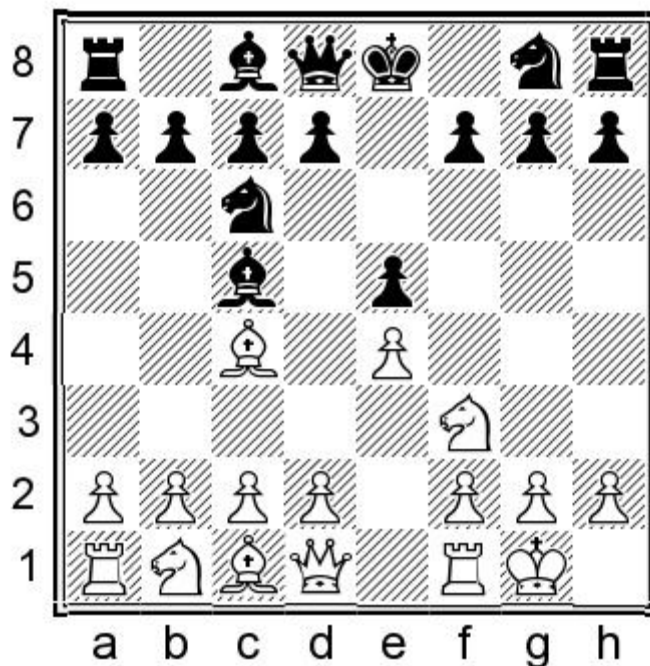
22

Teimour Radjabov (2788)

Arkadij Naiditsch (2712)

Istanbul 2012

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.0-0

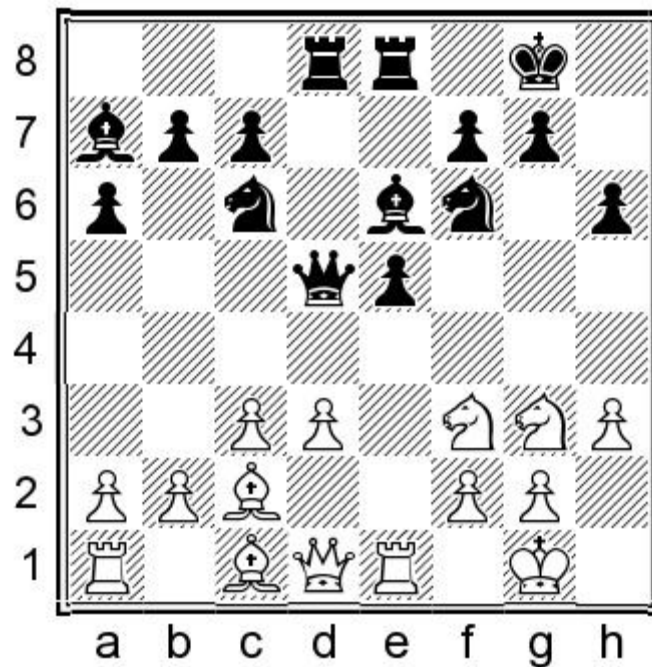


4...♘f6

Even at that time the Giuoco Piano was becoming an alternative way to counter the impenetrable Berlin

Defence.

5.d3 0-0 6.♘bd2 a6 7.c3 d6 8.♙b3 ♙a7 9.h3 h6 10.♞e1 ♞e6 11.♜f1 ♞e8 12.♙c2 d5 13.exd5 ♚xd5
14.♜g3 ♞ad8



Black has clearly resolved all his opening issues, moreover it would seem that it is now White's turn to switch to defence. However the situation is not that simple. A complicated game with chances for both sides lies ahead.

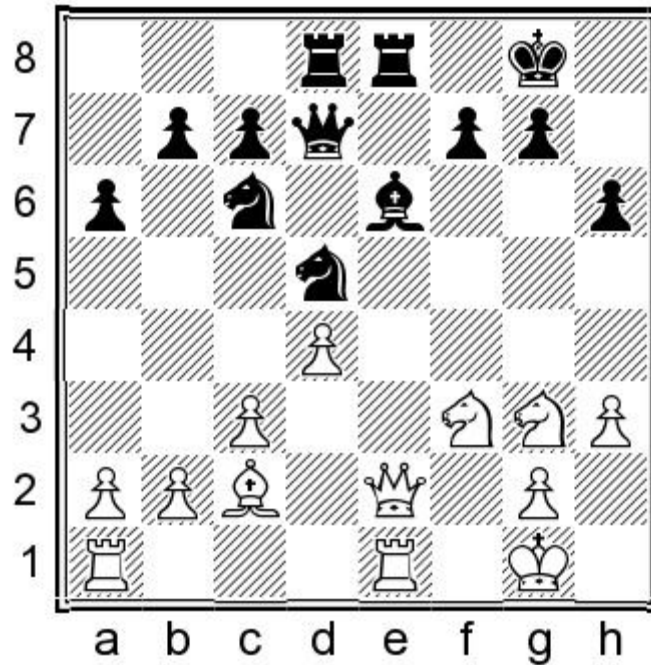
15.♚e2 ♚d7 16.♙e3 ♙xe3 17.fxe3!?

An interesting move! Black's task would be much easier after 17.♚xe3 ♘d5 18.♚d2 f6 19.d4 ♘f4.

17...♘d5 18.d4!?

Leading to a sharpening of the position.

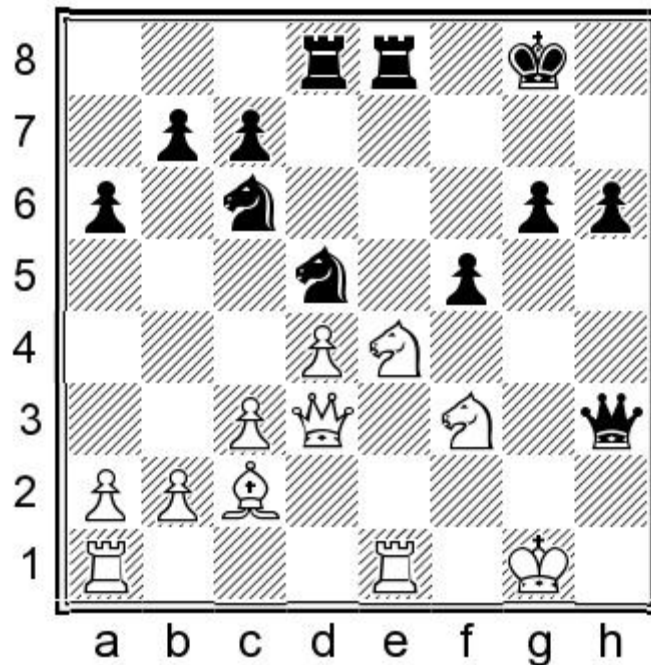
18...exd4 19.exd4



19...♙f5?

This natural-looking move proves to be a serious mistake.

Black had a variety of options of which the most appealing was 19...♙xh3!. After the forced 20.♙d3 g6 21.gxh3 ♙xh3 the position is quite interesting and analysis shows that Black's initiative compensates for the sacrificed material, e.g. 22.♘e4 f5



23.♘c5

[or 23.♘ed2 ♘f4 (the calm 23...♙g7 isn't bad either) 24.♙f1 ♙g3+ 25.♙h1 ♘e5!! 26.♙g1!? Everything else leads to perpetual check. 26...♙h3+ 27.♙h2 ♙xh2+ 28.♙xh2 ♘ed3]

23...♖f4 24.♚f1 ♚g4+ 25.♔h1 ♜e5!! This spectacular move saves Black. 26.♞xe5 ♞xe5 27.dxe5 (27.♜xe5 ♚h4+ 28.♔g1 ♚g3+) 27...♞d2 28.♜xd2 ♚h4+ 29.♔g1 ♚g3+ with perpetual check.

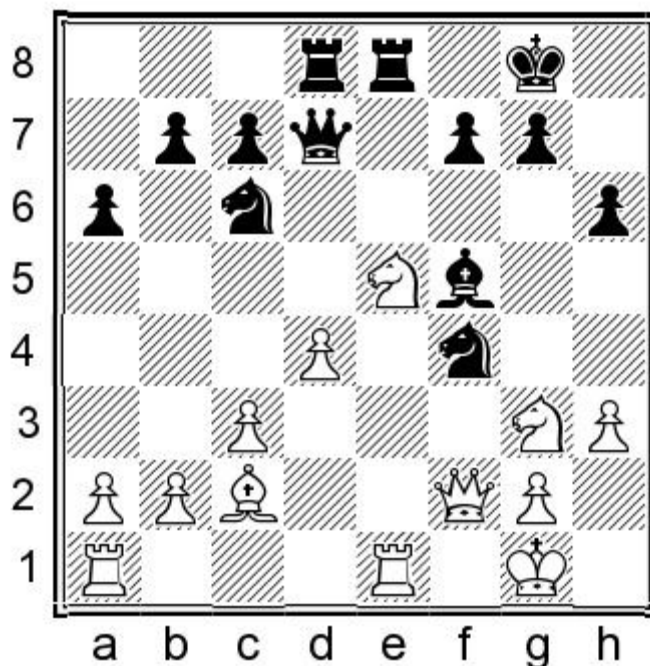
If Black isn't ready for complications, the calm 19...♜f6 or 19...b5 would be acceptable.

20.♜e5!

This intermediate blow changes the assessment dramatically.

Black only considered 20.♞xf5 ♞xe2 21.♞xd7 ♞xe1+ 22.♞xe1 ♞xd7 with a likely draw.

20...♜f4 21.♚f2



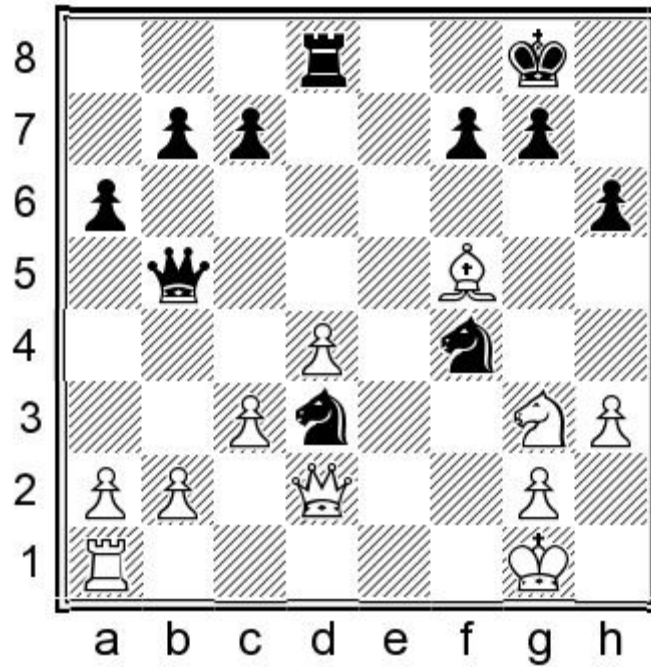
21...♜xe5?

The lesser evil was 21...♞xe5 22.dxe5 ♞xc2 23.♚xf4, although Black wouldn't have had any compensation for the lost exchange.

22.♞xf5 ♜ed3 23.♞xe8+

This is enough to win but a more precise way is 23.♚d2! ♚d6 (or 23...♚b5 24.♞xd3 ♜xd3 25.a4 ♚c4 26.b3+-) 24.♞xd3 ♜xh3+ 25.♔h2.

23...♚xe8 24.♚d2 ♚b5



25.b3!

25.♙xd3? ♘xd3 26.a4? ♚xb2.

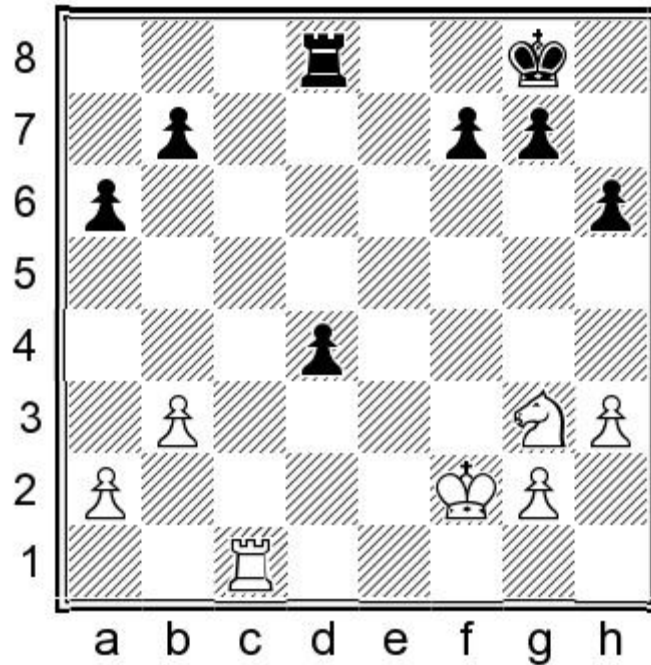
25...c5

25...♖e8 would be more tenacious, even though 26.♗f1 g5 27.♙e4 c5 28.♖d1 leaves no doubt as to the outcome.

26.♙xd3 ♚xd3

26...♘xd3 27.c4.

27.♚xf4 ♚xc3 28.♖c1 ♚xd4+ 29.♚xd4 cxd4 30.♙f2



This endgame is completely lost for Black.

30...♖d5 31.♘e4 ♜e5 32.♘d2 d3 33.♞e1 ♞a5 34.a4 ♞f5+ 35.♘f3 b5 36.♞e5 1-0

We soon found out that it was not my wisdom as captain, but rather the favourable pairings, that brought us initial success. When we had to face serious opponents, our team was unable to pass the test. We lost the matches against both Russia and Ukraine with a minimum score, which ended our pursuit of the championship title. Mamedyarov's brilliant performance in Istanbul was a small consolation. Radjabov played well too, but the rest of the team were not up to par in the decisive matches. The risky decision did not pay off. Would anything have been different if I had chosen the traditional board order?

I will never have an answer to that question; I'll never know, because this was the last time that I captained the national team of Azerbaijan.

It is difficult to assess that period in my career as a captain. Team Azerbaijan was unpredictable; I never knew what to expect from these players and in any case I was unable to understand the team dynamics properly. Exemplary fighting spirit and beautiful victories used to alternate with periods of unexpected underachievement. On the other hand, failure did not necessarily put players in the depths of despair, so revival could occur at any moment. I never managed to understand the logic behind these irregular waves while I worked with the team.

Team SOCAR continued to exist and we still hoped to win the most prestigious club title. Our next campaign began just a month after the Olympiad and brought us to the Israeli resort city of Eilat. It is a rule in any sport not to mess around with a winning squad, but since we had not yet managed to win gold, I kept tinkering in order to build a winner. I replaced Volokitin and Kasimdzhanov with Veselin Topalov and Gata Kamsky, who had recently faced each other in the Candidates matches. The team gained prestige and some rating points; now we needed to deliver the result. The Eilat tournament was the first one to use a new pairing system where strong teams faced serious competitors from the very

beginning, not in rounds three or four, as before. Given the short duration of the tournament, that innovation seemed quite reasonable but ultimately affected us in a bad way. We had to face the Ashdod club from Beersheba, which proved to be a tough nut to crack. The fight was fierce; surprisingly, it was the new players who influenced the result for both teams. On our side, Kamsky won while Topalov lost. The following game was the most fascinating.

23

Andrei Volokitin (2724)

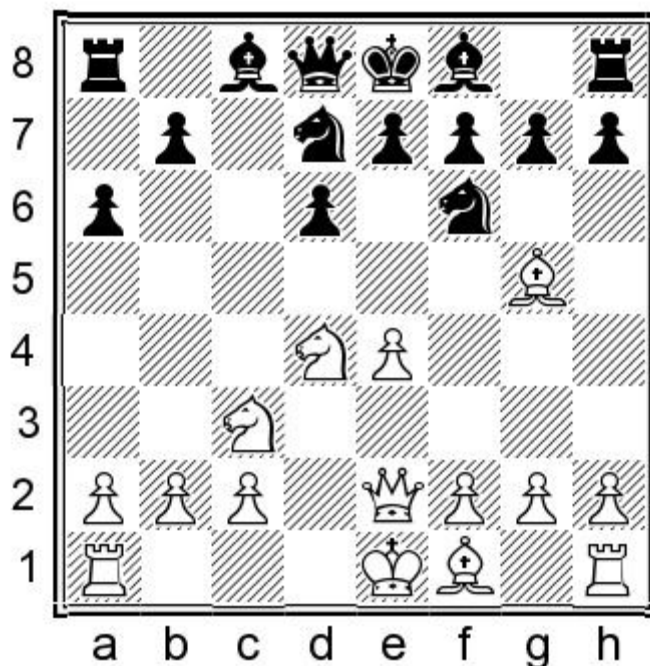
Shakhriyar Mamedyarov (2748)

Eilat 2012

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 a6

The Najdorf Variation is not Mamedyarov's main weapon, which makes it a controversial choice against such a sharp player as Volokitin.

6.♙e3 ♘g4 7.♙c1 ♘f6 8.♙g5 ♘bd7 9.♚e2



9...e6

9...b5 10.♘d5 ♙b7 11.♙xf6 ♘xf6 12.♘xf6+ exf6 13.a4 bxa4 14.♙xa4 Volokitin-Al Said, Istanbul 2012.

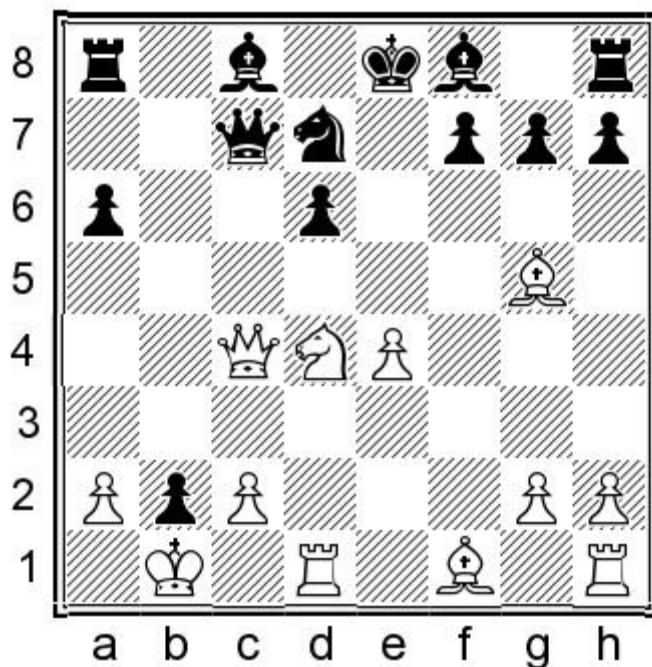
10.0-0-0 ♚c7 11.f4 b5 12.f5!?

The main line is 12.a3.

12...b4 13.fxe6 bxc3 14.exd7+ ♘xd7

This is stronger than 14...♙xd7 15.♚c4! cxb2+ 16.♗b1 ♚xc4 17.♙xc4 ♘e7 18.♞he1 and White is better.

15.♚c4! cxb2+ 16.♗b1



16...♗c5

16...♚xc4 17.♙xc4 ♗e5 18.♙d5 ♞b8 19.♙f4 f6 20.♞he1 was played as long ago as 1973 in the USSR Championship in the game between the author of this book and Lev Polugaevsky. White has a slight advantage.

17.e5!?

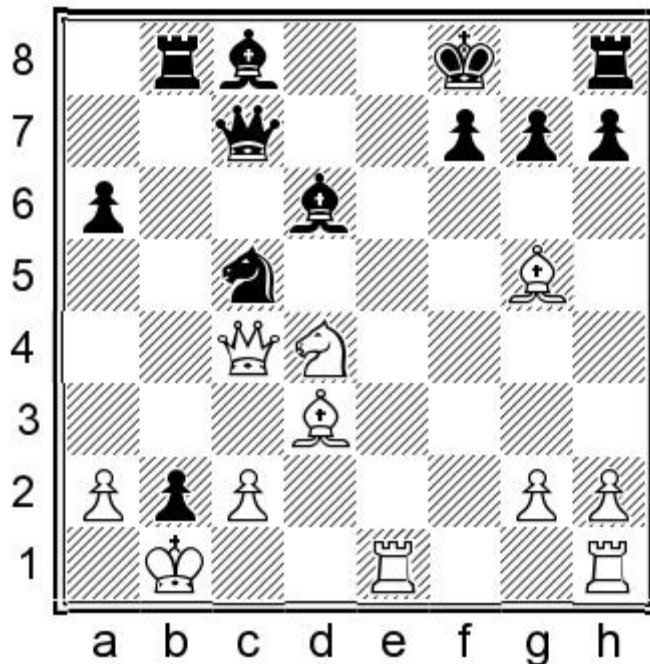
In keeping with his aggressive style, Volokitin chooses the sharpest line.

17.♙e2 is a calm and quiet way of completing development.

17...♞b8!

An excellent move that develops the rook. 17...dxe5?! 18.♗b5! axb5 19.♚d5 f6 20.♙xb5+ ♗e7 21.♚xa8! fxg5 22.♞hf1 when White has a strong attack is too dangerous, but 17...h6 is interesting.

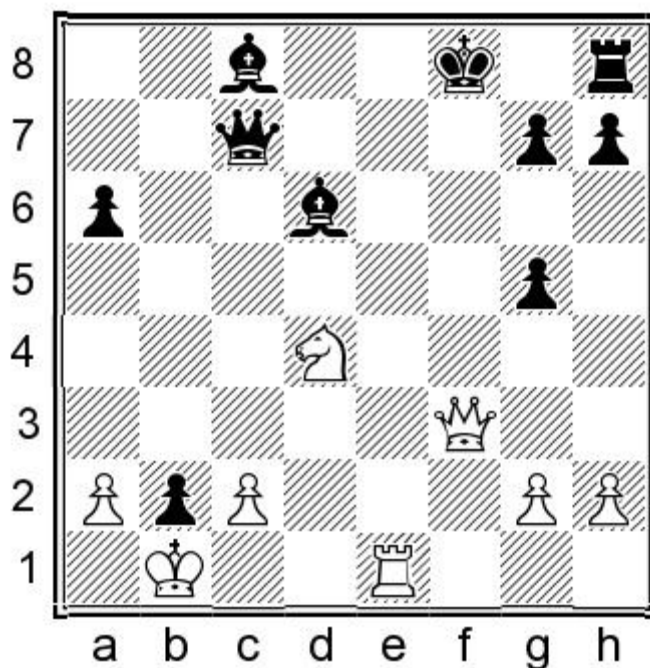
18.exd6 ♙xd6 19.♞e1+ ♗f8 20.♙d3



20...h6?

Natural, but losing.

20...♖b4! was necessary, even though only a sequence of ‘only moves’ leads to salvation. 21.♚c3!
 (Black has the advantage after 21.♚xb4 ♜xd3 22.♚d2 ♜xe1 23.♖xe1 h6) 21...f6! (21...h6?! 22.♙d2!
 ♜xd3 23.♚xd3 ♖a4 24.♖e4! ♙d7 25.♖he1 is dangerous) 22.♚xb4!? (Other lines don’t give an
 advantage either, e.g. 22.♙f4!? ♖xd4 23.♚xd4 ♙xf4 24.♖hf1 ♜e6 25.♖xe6 ♙xe6 26.♚xf4 ♚xf4 27.♖xf4
 ♜e7, or 22.♙h6!? g6 23.♜b5 ♙e5 24.♜xc7 ♙xc3 25.♖e8+ ♜g7 26.♖e7+ ♜f8) 22...♜xd3 23.♚b3
 ♜xe1 24.♖xe1 fxg5 25.♚f3+



25...♙f4! (25...♚f7 26.♚c6) 26.g3 g6! The only way! (If 26...g4 27.♚d5! ♙d6 28.♜e6+ ♙xe6 29.♖xe6

♙c5 30. ♖xd6+ ♗xd6 31. ♝xd6 Black has a difficult rook ending.) 27. ♘c6! ♕d7! 28. ♚c3 ♕e5! 29. ♗xe5 ♗xe5 30. ♘xe5 ♕f5.

21. ♕d8!!

A beautiful idea! A piece is sacrificed just for a tempo, but this tempo is crucial for the ensuing attack.

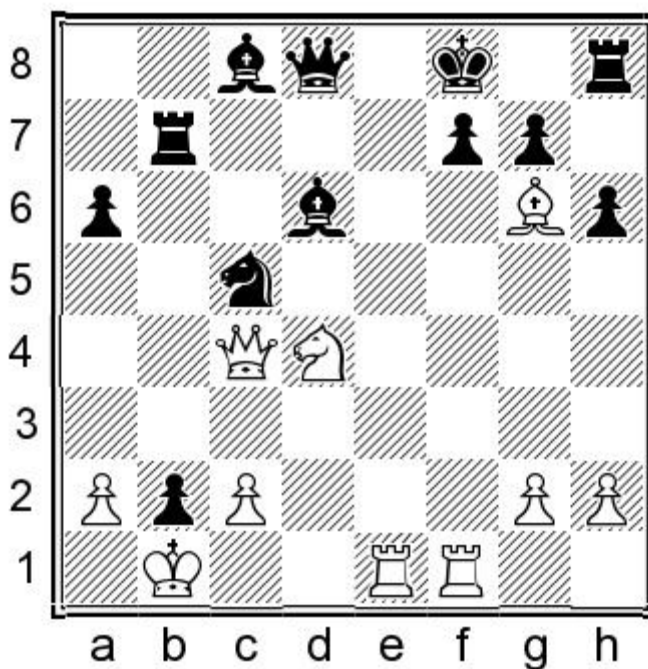
21... ♗xd8

The cunning 21... ♘e4 22. ♝xe4 ♗xc4 23. ♕xc4 ♕b7 wouldn't save Black. After the cold-blooded 24. ♝e2 (24. ♘e6+ isn't bad either) 24... ♝xd8 25. ♝f1 ♝d7 everything is decided by 26. ♘f5 ♕a3 27. ♘h4!.

22. ♝hf1 ♝b7

22... f6 23. ♘c6+–

23. ♕g6



23... f6

After 23... ♗d7 24. ♘f5! Black is completely defenceless.

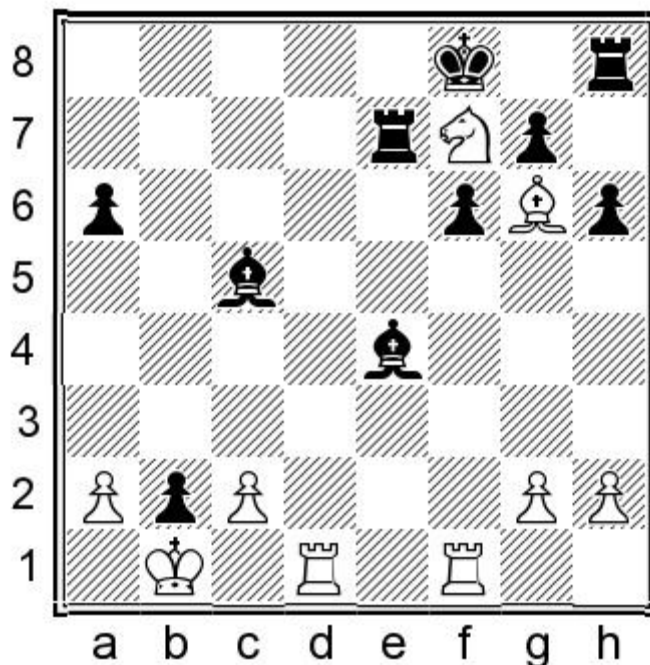
24. ♗d5??

An amazing mistake! White still had ten minutes on his clock, quite enough time to find one of the many winning lines. He only had to see that doubling rooks on the e-file is fatal for Black. The simplest way to achieve this was 24. ♝e3! ♝e7 25. ♘c6, but 24. ♘c6 ♗d7 25. ♝e2, and 24. ♝f3 ♝e7 25. ♝fe3 was just as solid.

24...♖e7!

The only defence, but sufficient. Now the game flares up anew.

25.♘c6 ♗b7 26.♙xc5 ♘xc5 27.♘xd8 ♗d5 28.♞d1 ♗e4! 29.♘f7



29...♞xf7??

Black fails to seize the chance to save the game: 29...♗xg6! 30.♘xh8 ♗e8! 31.♞d8 ♞e4! 32.♘g6+ ♔f7 33.♘f4 ♗b5 34.♘d3 ♗a3.

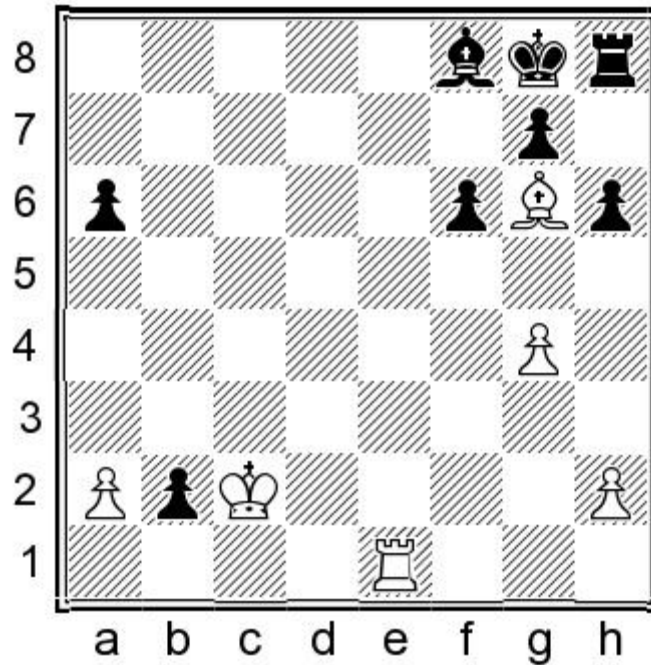
30.♞fe1!

Of course, such a move is easy to see.

30...♗xc2+ 31.♔xc2 ♔g8 32.♞d8+ ♞f8

32...♗f8 33.♞e6 a5 34.♗xf7+ ♔xf7 35.♞a6+-

33.♞xf8+ ♗xf8 34.g4!



An amazing position — in an ending with two extra pawns, Black is completely helpless!

1–0

Andrei Volokitin, as often happened, won a crucial game against the team for which he had played the previous season. Once again, Mamedyarov co-authored a chess masterpiece. This happens much more frequently when Shakhriyar is the solo act, but even as a foil his game made heads turn.

Like the year before, we lagged behind hopelessly — immediately after round one. Well, we were already familiar with the only life-saving strategy available: we had to win the remaining matches and then hope for some luck. We were able to accomplish our own task, despite some difficulties; a win in the penultimate round was the most important. We faced the St Petersburg club which had won all of its previous matches. Everything was decided by the following game.

24

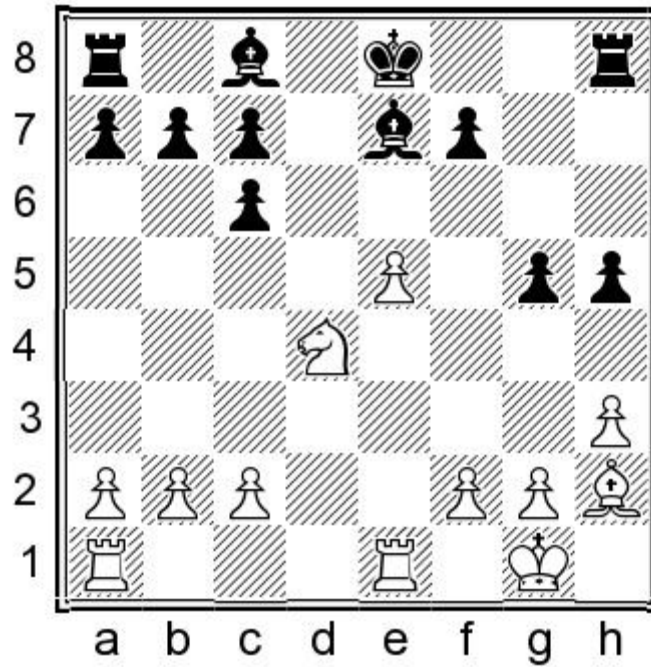
Alexander Grischuk (2752)

Sergei Movsesian (2699)

Eilat 2012

I admit I'm not a big fan of the Berlin Defence. Yes, a young player can learn a lot while analysing a complex ending, but an incredible number of games have already been played, and chess engines running round the clock have analysed absolutely everything. It is enough to read the commentary to the game Vachier-Lagrave-Karjakin from the 2017 Sinquefield Cup. I'm including the present game in the book only because of the sporting significance of the result. I also believe that the players didn't analyse at home the lines that appeared on the board — at least, Black didn't!

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♘xe4 5.d4 ♘d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♘f5 8.♚xd8+ ♔xd8 9.♘c3 ♔e8 10.h3 h5 11.♘e2 ♙e7 12.♖e1 ♘h4 13.♘xh4 ♙xh4 14.♙f4 ♙e7 15.♘d4 g5 16.♙h2



16...Rf6

This has occurred many times before, as has 16...Qe6 17.Rad1 Qc5 or 16...Qc5 17.Bb3 Qb6 18.c4 Qe6. In both cases Black can hold with precise play.

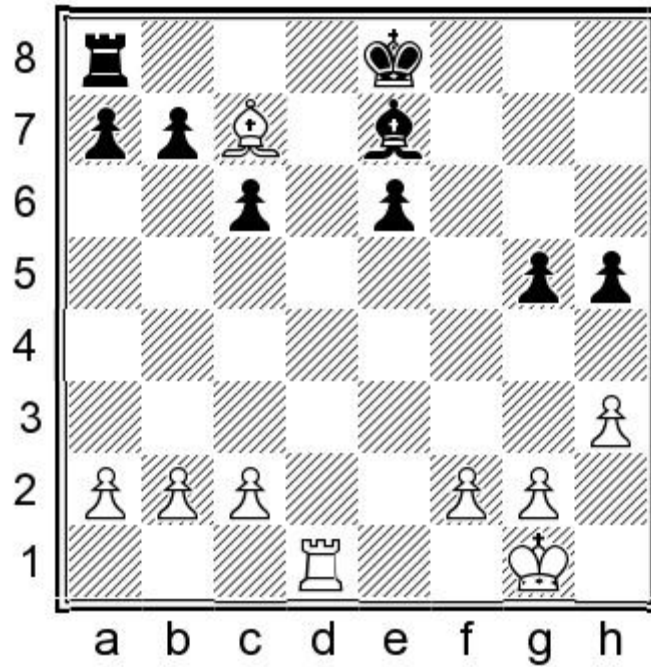
17.Rad1 Qd7?!

Imprecise. It would have been better to prevent any advance of the e-pawn with 17...Qe6.

18.e6! Qxe6 19.Nxe6

The position that has arisen would have been easier to achieve via transposition with 19.Qxc7 Rxc8 20.Nxe6 Rxe6 21.Rxe6 fxe6 22.Qe5.

19...Rxe6 20.Rxe6 fxe6 21.Qxc7



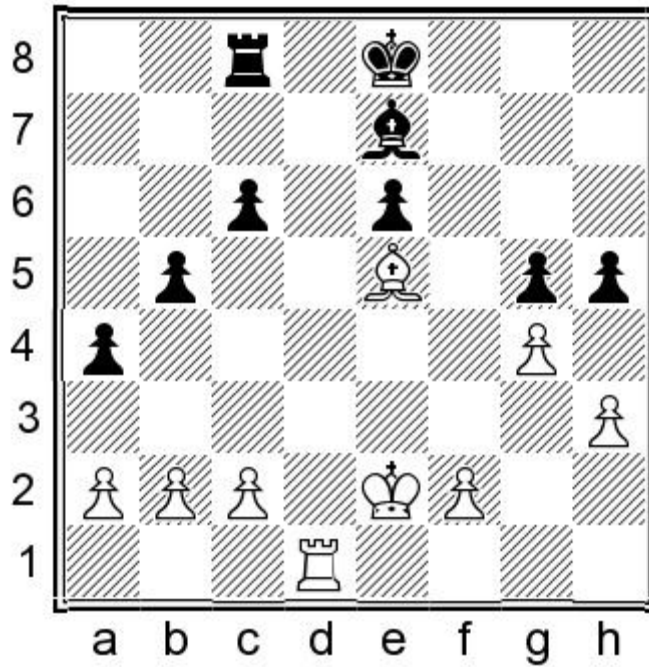
21...♖c8

Black could have prevented the white bishop from reaching its ideal location on e5 with 21...♙f6.

22.♙e5 b5

Movsesian keeps the rooks on since he hopes to create counterplay. After 22...♞d8 23.♞xd8+ ♙xd8 24.g4 he would be doomed to passive defence in a worse bishop ending. I cannot give a precise assessment.

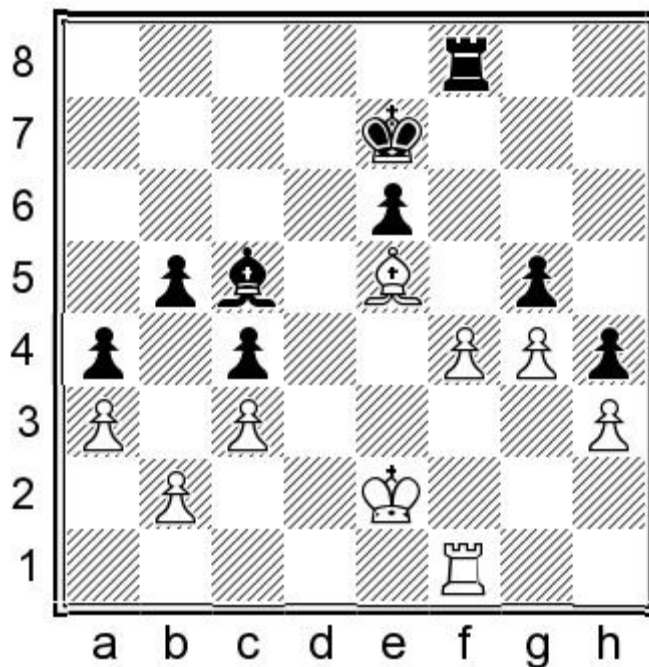
23.♙f1 a5 24.♙e2 a4 25.g4



25...h4

If 25...hxg4 26.hxg4 ♖d8 Otherwise the open h-file favours White. 27.♖xd8+ ♔xd8 28.b3 a3 (28...axb3? 29.cxb3 and the passed a-pawn decides the game) 29.♔d3 ♕e8 30.♙d4 ♖f7 31.♙e3 ♕f6 32.♕d4 The bishop ending is bad for Black.

26.♔e3 c5 27.c3 c4 28.a3 ♙c5+ 29.♕e2 ♕e7 30.f4 ♖f8 31.♖f1



31...♙d6?

The rook ending is lost. For better or worse, the status quo could have been maintained with 31...♔e8! 32.♖f3 ♕e7 33.♗e3 gxf4+ 34.♕xf4 ♖f7 35.♗e4 ♕d8, although White's advantage is not in doubt here either.

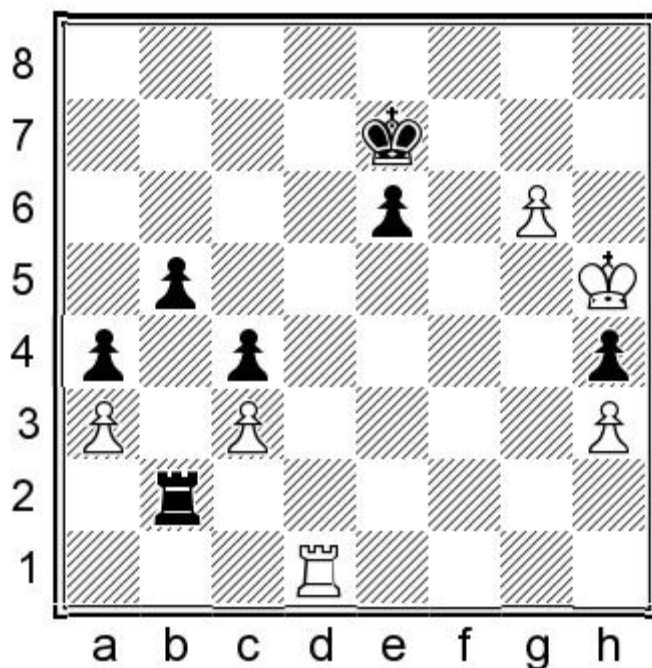
32.♕xd6+ ♗xd6 33.fxg5 ♖g8 34.♖d1+ ♗e7

34...♗e5 35.♗f3 ♖xg5 36.♖e1+ ♗f6 37.♗f4 changes nothing.

35.♗e3 ♖xg5 36.♗f4 ♖g8

36...♖c5 37.g5.

37.g5 ♖f8+ 38.♗g4 ♖f2 39.♗h5! ♖xb2 40.g6



40...♗f6

40...♖g2 41.♗h6.

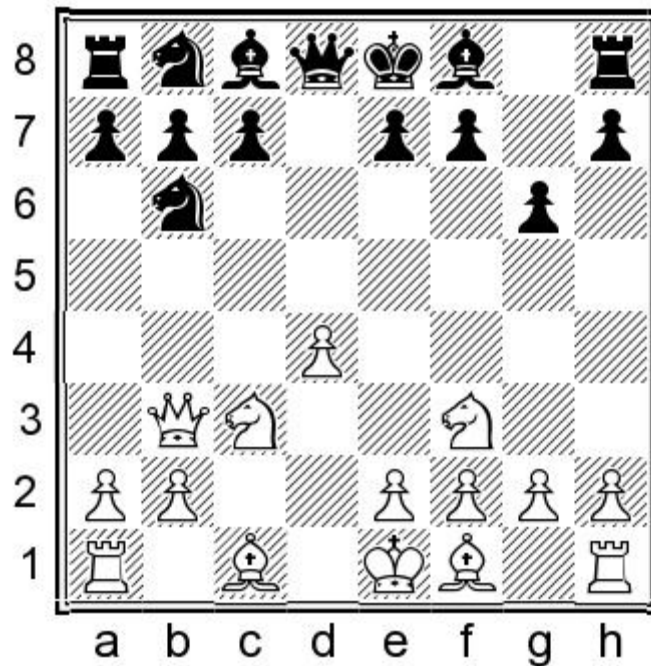
41.♖f1+ ♗g7 42.♖f7+ ♗g8 43.♗h6 ♖d2 44.♖g7+ ♗h8 45.♖h7+ ♗g8 46.g7 ♗f7 47.♖h8 1-0

The standings before the last round were complicated. As a result of our win, we joined the group of leaders with three other teams; these leaders would meet each other on the last day. SOCAR had to play Tomsk, while St Petersburg faced Beersheba. Even a win in our match wouldn't automatically mean gold; a lot depended on the outcome of the other match. The team meeting before the showdown was very animated; everyone hoped that Fortune would smile on us this time. In reality, SOCAR's chances were not too good. St Petersburg had much better tiebreak criteria; it was not enough for us to simply win the last match; we had to win it with a better score than our main rivals. No-one really expected St

Petersburg not to win.

In such cases, a team meeting doesn't usually last long: the line-up is determined, the goals are set, and everyone retires to their rooms for preparation. That evening, everyone was excited by the hope of victory that had emerged so suddenly. The discussion focused on the opening in the game where Mamedyarov would face Alexander Areshchenko. The strong Ukrainian grandmaster was known for playing the same openings, so we easily predicted the Grünfeld Defence. Our team had a lot of experts in this opening; they knew it well for both Black and White. An impromptu discussion naturally turned into a serious analysis session but everyone remained in a lively and relaxed mood. Frivolous jokes were interspersed with serious discussions of lines. In the end, the choice fell on a fashionable line where the theory was developing rapidly and a definite assessment had not yet been reached. As expected, this game became the focus of attention the next morning even though there was no real fight.

1.♘f3 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♗c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♗xd5 5.♕b3 ♗b6 6.d4

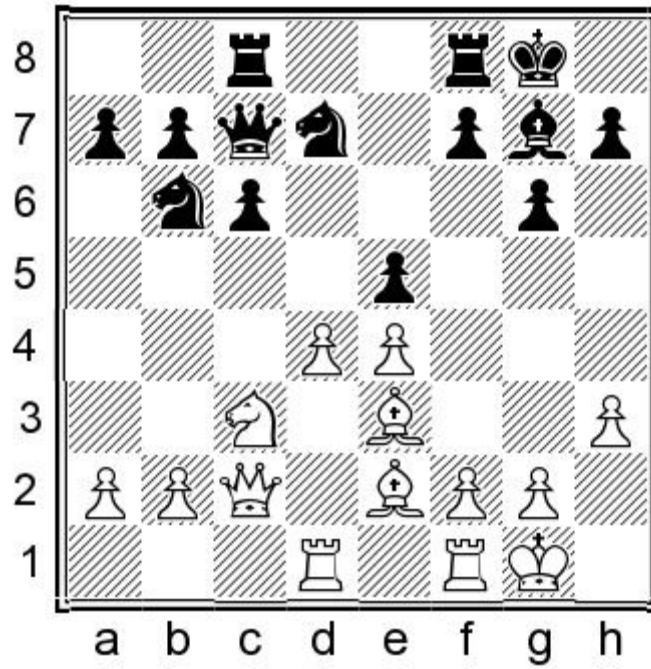


6...♗e6?!

It looks like Areshchenko was present at our team meeting! He decides not to play the most principled 6...♗g7 7.e4 ♗g4 8.♗b5+ c6 9.♗g5 0-0 10.♗e2 which was the main topic of our evening discussions.

Still, after the text move, White's advantage in the centre guarantees him a comfortable edge.

7.♕c2 ♗g7 8.e4 0-0 9.♗e3 c6 10.♖d1 ♗8d7 11.♗e2 ♗g4 12.0-0 ♕c7 13.h3 ♗xf3 14.♗xf3 ♖ac8 15.♗e2 e5?!



15...e6 would be the lesser evil.

16.d5!?

16.dxe5 ♙xe5 17.f4 is equally good.

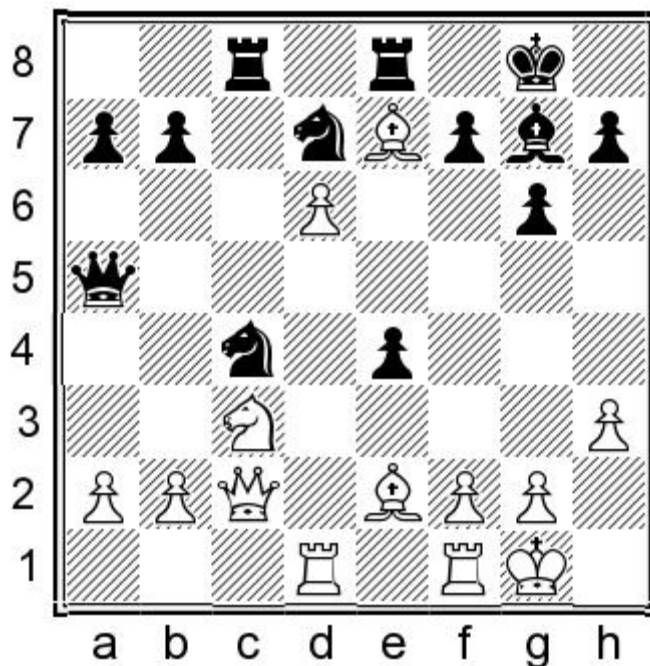
16...cxd5 17.exd5 ♘c4

It's hard to give Black good advice.

18.d6! ♚a5

The pawn is untouchable: 18...♘xd6 19.♚d3.

19.♙g5 e4 20.♙e7 ♜fe8



21. ♔b3!

It turns out that Black has no counterplay on the c-file.

21... ♖xb2

21... ♗cb6 22. ♗d5.

22. ♔xb2 ♖b6

22... ♗xc3 23. ♔xb7.

23. ♗b5

23.d7! ♗xd7 (23... ♗xe7 24. ♔xb6) 24. ♗xd7 wins instantly.

23... ♗xc3 24. ♔b3 ♗ed8 25.d7 ♗a8 26. ♗xd8 ♗xd8 27. ♗c4 ♗g7 28. ♗xf7 ♗xd7 29. ♗g8

1-0

Another game was much more dramatic. There were enough ups and downs for several games.

26

Emil Sutovsky (2685)

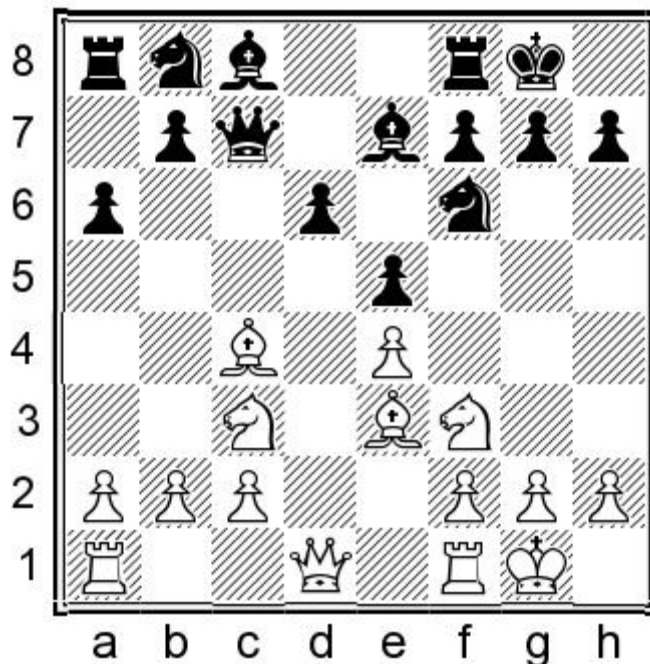
Denis Khismatullin (2638)

Eilat 2012

1.e4 c5 2. ♗f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4. ♗xd4 ♗f6 5. ♗c3 a6 6. ♗e3 e5 7. ♗f3

A small surprise. Sutovsky usually chooses the sharper 7.♘b3.

7...♙e7 8.♙c4 0-0 9.0-0 ♖c7



This line is perfectly OK for Black, however, faced with an opening surprise, Khismatullin started to take a long time over every move.

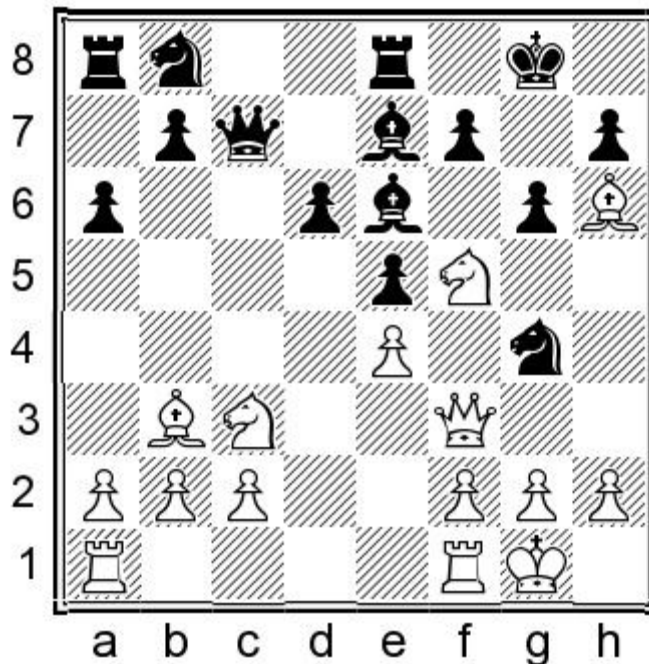
10.♙b3 ♙e6 11.♘h4! g6 12.♙h6 ♜e8 13.♞f3!?

Interesting, but not the strongest. 13.♞d2 ♘g4 (13...♘c6 14.♘f5!) 14.♘f3 ♘d7 15.♙g5 was played in Caruana-Anand, Baden-Baden 2013, when White had the initiative. Also worth consideration is 13.♘f3.

13...♘g4

It is difficult not to make this move, but a stronger line is 13...♘c6! 14.♘f5 (More interesting than 14.♙xe6 fxe6 15.♞h3 ♘d4 16.♘f3 ♙f8 17.♙xf8 ♘xf3+ 18.♞xf3 ♜xf8 which is equal.) 14...♙xf5 (14...gxf5? 15.exf5!) 15.exf5 ♘d4 16.♞d3 ♘xf5 17.♙g5 ♘d4 18.♙xf6 ♙xf6 19.♘d5 ♞d8 20.c3 ♘xb3 21.axb3. Black has an extra pawn, but White's strong knight on d5 balances the chances.

14.♘f5!



14...♙xf5

Black had a difficult choice. After 14...gxf5 15.exf5

a) 15...♘xh6 16.fxe6 ♖f8 (16...fxe6 17.♙h5) 17.exf7+ ♔g7 looks very dangerous for Black, even though the move that the engines consider strongest, 18.♞ae1!, is difficult for a human to find;

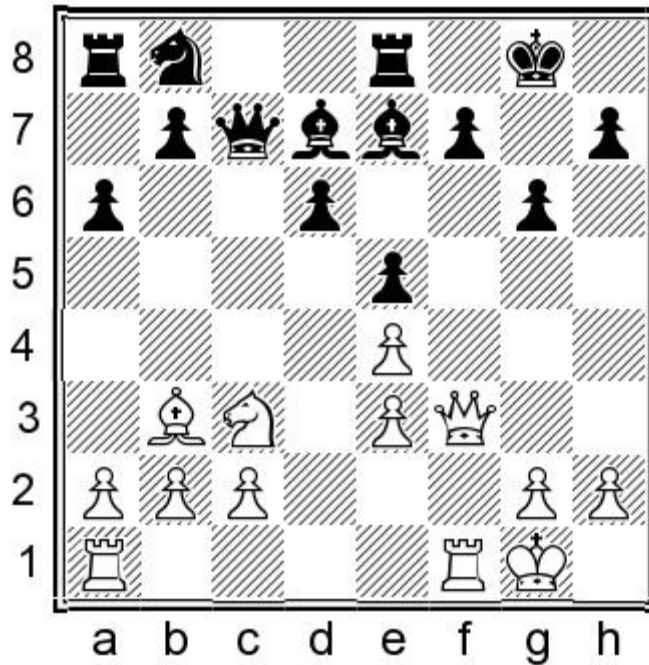
b) 15...♙xf5 looks stronger, but Sutovsky had prepared the computer-like 16.♙g5!! ♚c8 The most tenacious. (Worse is 16...♙e6 17.♘d5! ♙xd5 18.♙xg4 ♚d7 19.♙g3 ♔h8 20.♙xd5 ♞g8 21.f4) 17.♙xe7 ♞xe7 18.♘d5 ♘c6 19.♞ad1 Black has an extra piece, but it is very difficult to defend, especially in severe time trouble.

15.♙e3!?

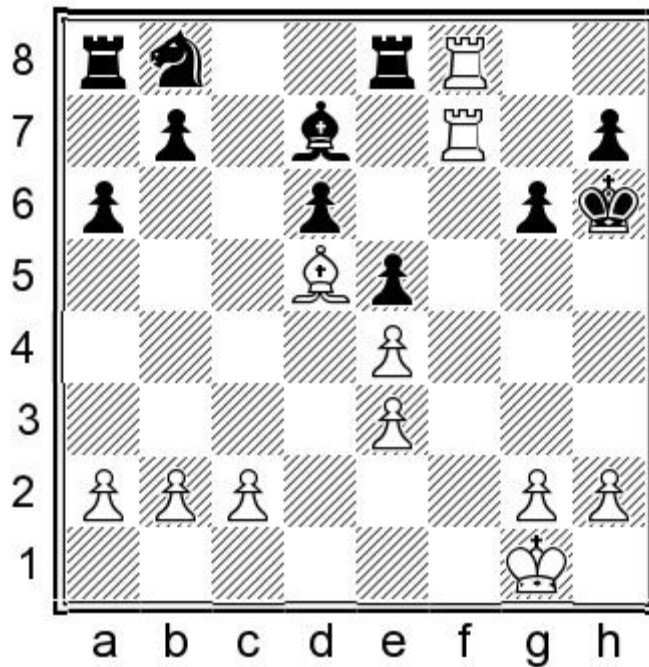
The objectively strongest 15.♙d2 would ease Black's task. After the natural 15...♙e6 16.♙xe6 fxe6 17.♙xg4 ♙f6 his position is a bit worse, but quite defensible.

15...♙e6?!

It was hard to go for 15...♘xe3! 16.fxe3 ♙d7,

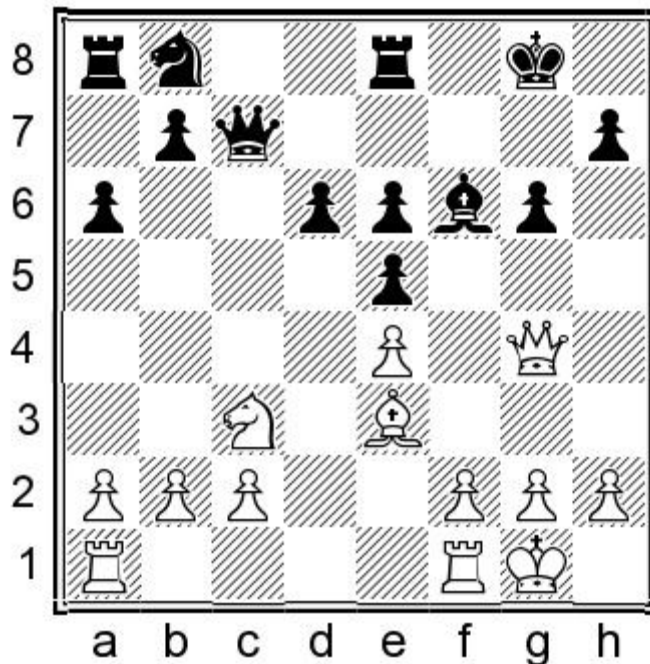


even with enough time on the clock, although this was the best defence. 17. ♖xf7+ (17. ♗xf7+ ♔g7 18. ♗xe8 ♗xe8 19. ♘d5 ♖d8 20. ♗h3) 17... ♔h8 If the game had continued this way, our chances of team victory would have been negligible since the objectively strongest and spectacular 18. ♘d5! (18. ♖f6, threatening 19. ♖xg6, would have been refuted by 18... ♗d8! 19. ♖xg6 hxg6 20. ♗xg6 ♗g5! 21. ♗h5+ ♔g7 22. ♗f7+ ♔h6) 18... ♗d8 19. ♘f6 (nothing is changed after 19. ♘xe7) 19... ♗xf6 20. ♖xf6 ♖e7 21. ♗f8+ ♗xf8 22. ♖xf8+ ♔g7 23. ♖af1 ♖e8 24. ♖1f7+ ♔h6 25. ♗d5



25... ♖xf8 (25... ♘c6 26. ♖xe8 ♗xe8 27. ♖xb7 a5 28. c3 is quite acceptable) 26. ♖xf8 ♗c6 leads to a position where the activity of the few remaining white pieces gives no more than a draw.

16. ♗xe6 fxe6 17. ♗xg4 ♗f6



The unintended bluff succeeded and the bishop's position on e3 is much more active than on d2. White has the advantage.

18.h4! ♔h8 19.f4!?

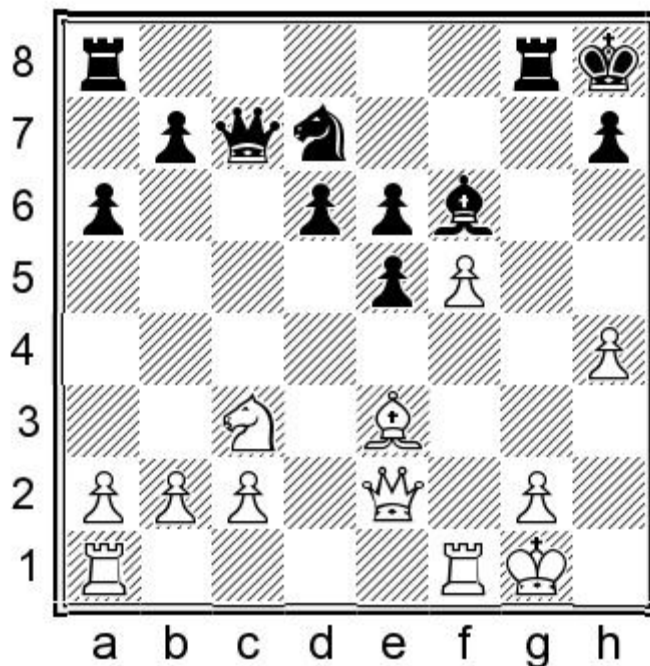
Once again White chooses the most energetic move! The simple 19.♖ad1 ♘c6 20.♗d2 retained all the advantages of the position.

19...♘d7

Yet again Black takes his opponent's word.

19...exf4! 20.♕xf4! ♙e5 (20...♘d7 21.♖ad1 ♙e5 22.♕f7 would lead to the same position) 21.♕f7 ♘d7 would equalise.

20.f5 gxf5 21.exf5 ♖g8 22.♕e2!



22...♖ae8

It is difficult to see, and even more difficult to decide on, the line 22...♙xh4 23.fxe6 ♘f6 24.♘d5 ♚g7! during the game, especially in time trouble.

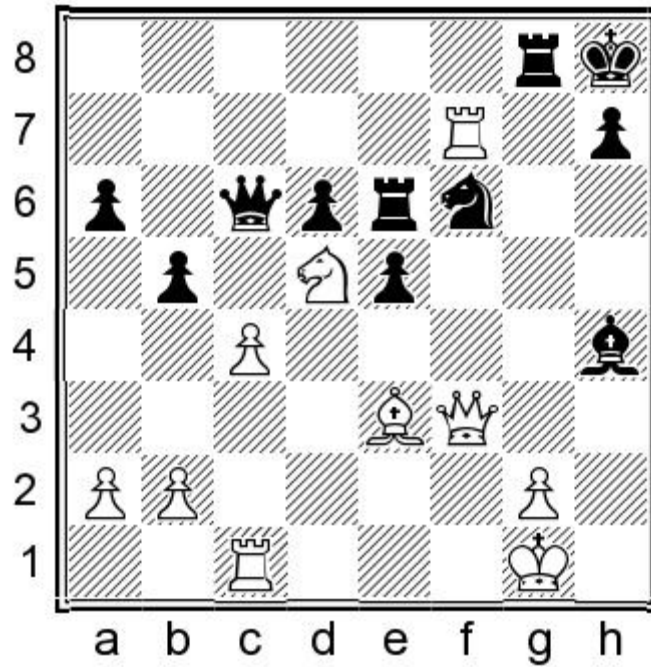
23.fxe6 ♜xe6 24.♘d5 ♚c6 25.c4! b5 26.♖ac1! ♙xh4 27.♖f7 ♘f6?

It is not easy to spot the only defence, 27...♙g5!, when playing only on increment. After 28.♙xg5 ♜xg5 29.♚f3 ♚c5+ 30.♙f1 e4 31.♚f4 e3 any result is possible.

28.♖f1?

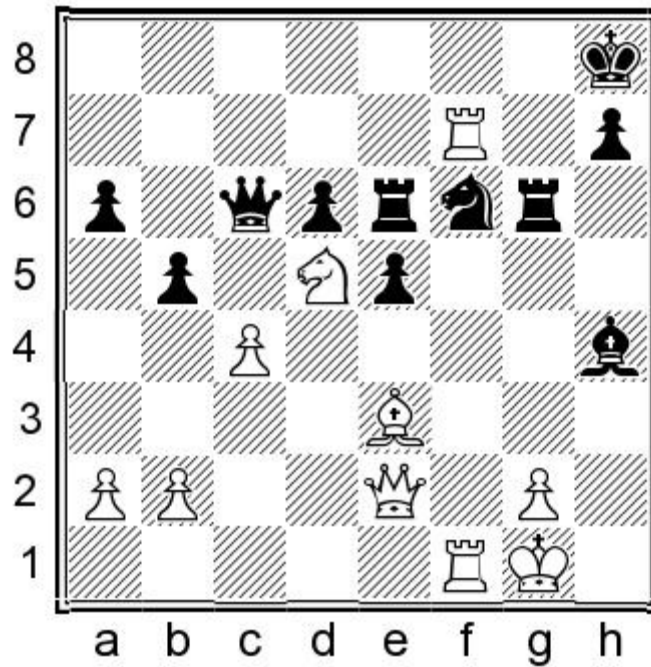
White returns the favour.

There was an immediate win after 28.♚f3!.,



with the deadly threat of 29. ♖f6.

28... ♜g6?



28... ♜g7! was better.

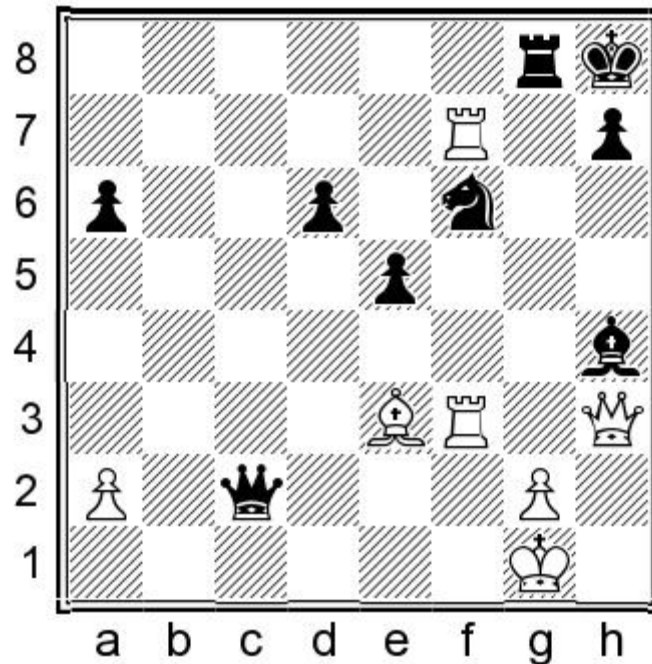
29. ♖e7?!

When you are only looking at the king, the simple but elegant 29. ♖c7! can be overlooked. It would lead to an extra exchange in a much better position.

29... ♜xe7 30. ♜xe7 bxc4 31. ♚f3 ♚c8

Time trouble makes its presence felt. It's all decided by a blunder.

32.♖a7 ♜g8 33.♞f5 ♞c6 34.♞f3 c3 35.bxc3 ♞xc3 36.♞h3 ♞c2 37.♞f7



37...♘g4??

The game would have continued after 37...♞g6 38.♞c7 ♘d5 39.♞c8 ♘d8 40.♞h6.

38.♞xh4 ♞b1+ 39.♞f1 ♞g6 40.♞f8

1-0

As sometimes happens in matches between equal opponents, the team that concedes a quick loss breaks down and suffers a major defeat. This is what happened. We won 5-1, which, of course, was not an accurate measure of our relative strengths.

Chess history knows many other cases where the results of crucial matches were completely unpredictable and changed the standings dramatically. I have already described the tragedy that befell Ukraine against the USA in Dresden. In 1971, a team that I led suffered an even more surprising defeat. I was a young grandmaster, playing for the Odessa Military District in my first-ever Soviet Army Championship. By the time we had to play against the Transcaucasian Military District, our team was leading the tournament and I was also playing well; there were no signs of trouble on the horizon. However we were not able to find our game and shortly after the start our team was trailing 0-3. Our rivals tried to secure a surprising result and offered draw on all the remaining boards. We proudly refused, despite the grim outlook. Our opponents repeated their gentlemanly offer twice more, while the number of remaining games dwindled. Our intransigence was justly rewarded by the final score of 0-7, which was, to a large extent, a mutual achievement.



European Champions' Cup, 2012. SOCAR's long-awaited and most precious victory. (Photo by Evgeny Surov)

My chess career had brighter moments as well. In 1963, eight years prior to the crushing defeat in the Soviet Army Championship, I played in the national junior team championship. In the last round, Ukraine played against Leningrad and we needed to win with a score of at least $6\frac{1}{2}-1\frac{1}{2}$. We managed to produce the coveted result even though our team was already trailing 0–1 after the first hour. Anything and everything can happen in junior chess.

In 1984 I had the honour to play for the Soviet team at the Olympiad in Thessaloniki. We managed to crush our biggest rivals, Hungary, 4–0 despite playing without Karpov and Kasparov (who were facing each other in their famous championship match). Other incredible results come to mind. In 1975 the Team Championship of the USSR was held in Riga. There were some youngsters playing but most of the team members were mature players. The match where Moscow played against the Russian Federation featured all sorts of famous players. Despite this, the final score was $7\frac{1}{2}-\frac{1}{2}$ in favour of the Russian Federation, which does not reflect the actual balance of forces. When Russia became an independent state, it was able to win 'on demand' in the last round of the World Team Championship in 2005. China was in the lead, so the Russians needed a win with a score of $3\frac{1}{2}-\frac{1}{2}$. They managed to accomplish that despite losing half a point in the very first game to finish.

There are different kinds of sensations. Random factors that are impossible to foresee and useless to

predict can contribute to a crushing defeat. The situations where a team has to win ‘on demand’ are quite typical in any sport. In chess, simply winning a match is not enough. A win with a big score — sometimes an unreal one — is needed. What should the captain do? What kind of words should he use to fire up the team? There are no universal magic spells. No scientific recommendations exist. Everything depends on the particular situation and the personalities involved. It is obvious that a team must be prepared to take risks in such cases. Unlike football or basketball, team risk in chess can be calculated as the sum of individual risks, when every team member is ready to share a common passion and put his personal interests aside. When elite chess players are involved, rating — a purely personal matter — plays a role. When you try to achieve a win at any cost you often suffer a loss. We were fortunate to create a team chemistry — quite rare for such star-studded teams — that made players value the team result over their personal ones. Thus our big victory was indeed unexpected but not sensational.

Even winning with such a big score did not guarantee us the title. St Petersburg also won their match convincingly, 4–2, and the outcome of the championship would be decided on tiebreak criteria that depended on outsiders. Mr Mahir Mammedov, the club President and avid chess fan, flew in for the last round to support the team. We were checking other teams’ results constantly. Safarli and Guseinov, who did not play that day, reported the results promptly as the games in other matches came to an end. The fate of first place hung in the balance. Finally, the situation became clear: whatever the results of the remaining games, we would not be able to catch our opponents.

When I received this sad message, I left the venue. Alone in my room, I replayed events again and again in my head, analysed current and previous tournaments, tried to comprehend the vicissitudes of fortune. In such an irritated state, I was annoyed when the phone rang unexpectedly. Eltaj Safarli was on the line. As usual, he began with small talk, “Good afternoon Vladimir Borisovich. How are you doing?”.

A very well-mannered young man indeed. I was not in the mood for pleasantries, especially since a wildly inappropriate joke followed: “Do you know that we won?”. I was ready to unleash my righteous anger on the poor young man — he was saved only because it was not a joke; we had won in some mysterious way. I wasn’t interested in figuring out how a blatant sports injustice had suddenly turned into a well-deserved triumph. This is the nature of sport and the fate of all coaches.

Next year, the SOCAR team underwent more changes, some of which were forced. Much to my regret, Alexander Grischuk, an excellent fighter who played for the club for the first three seasons, had to leave. He came to our team when his former club Ural Yekaterinburg declared bankruptcy. Alexander went back again when Ural was reborn as Malachite. Since we had to prepare for the 2016 Olympiad which had been awarded to Baku, SOCAR got a farm club called Odlar Yurdu whose squad was filled by young Azerbaijani chess players led by the former Baku resident Emil Sutovsky. SOCAR’s replacement players were even more famous than those who left — some of the world’s best players, Fabiano Caruana, Anish Giri from the Netherlands, and Wang Hao from China.

The next team club championship was held on the Greek island of Rhodes. It featured a mild autumn, great weather and perfect conditions for play and creativity. For most of the tournament, we were serene and happy. We did not lose a single game in the first five rounds and were confidently in the lead. Our team was undisputed favourite in the next match against Novy Bor. Shortly after the start of

the round, we were already ahead, our rookie Anish Giri having delivered a spectacular win.

27

Anish Giri (2749)

Mateusz Bartel (2638)

Rhodes 2013

1.♘f3 d5 2.d4 a6

Quite a rare move, but there is an idea behind it. Black shows that he is ready for 3.c4.

3.♙g5

This response is logical. 3.c4 would obviously be met by 3...dxc4, but 3.♙f4 is not bad either.

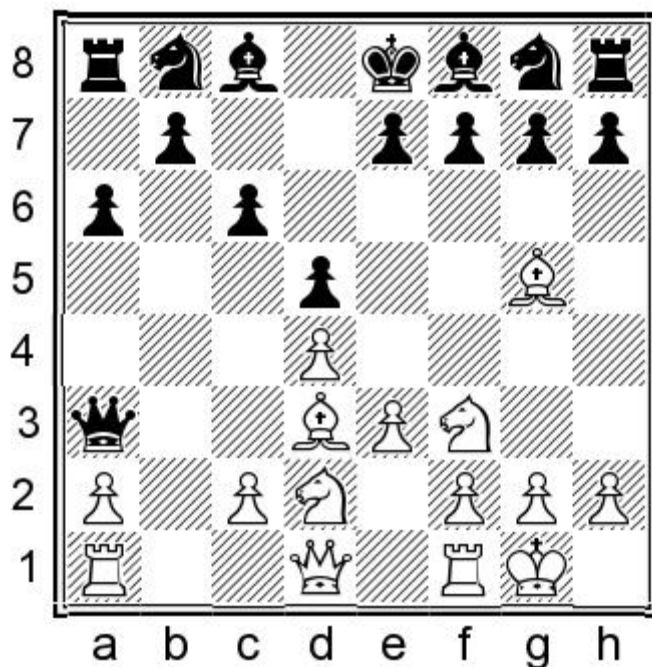
3...c6 4.e3 ♖b6 5.♙d3!

The most principled reply. Equally good is 5.♘bd2, leading to a transposition.

5...♚xb2

Black has to capture the pawn out of principle, even though it is clearly dangerous.

6.♘bd2 ♚a3 7.0-0



7...♙g4?!

But this is playing with fire. Black needed to start developing his pieces with 7...♘f6, even though such

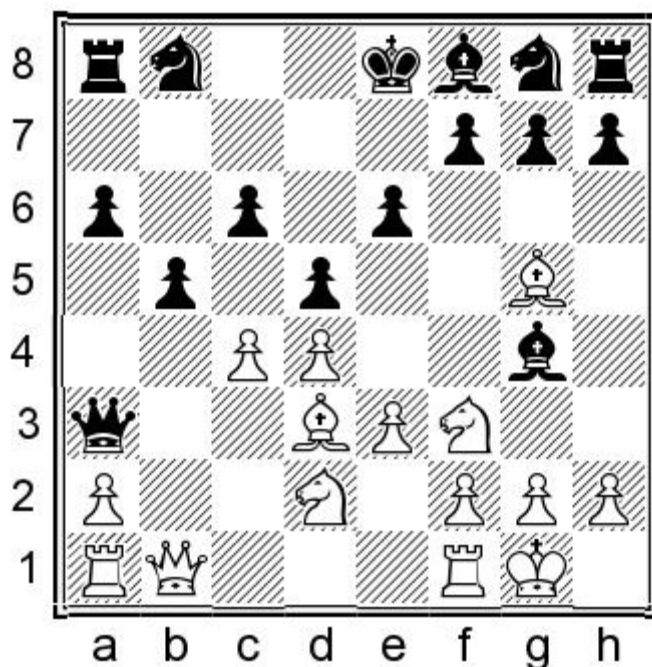
a natural move wouldn't eliminate his serious problems: 8.e4! ♖xe4 (8...dxe4 9.♗c4 ♚a4 10.♗b6 ♚a5 11.♗xa8 exf3 12.♙f4 fxg2 13.♞e1 is too dangerous) 9.♗xe4 dxe4 10.♙xe4 ♗d7 11.♞e1 and White has more than enough compensation for the pawn.

8.♚b1!

Underlining the speculative nature of Black's last move. Black cannot allow the b7-pawn to be captured, so he has to weaken his position even more. The unpleasant threat of ♗f3–e5 also arises.

8...b5 9.c4! ♙xf3

This is virtually forced since the following line is very dangerous for Black: 9...e6

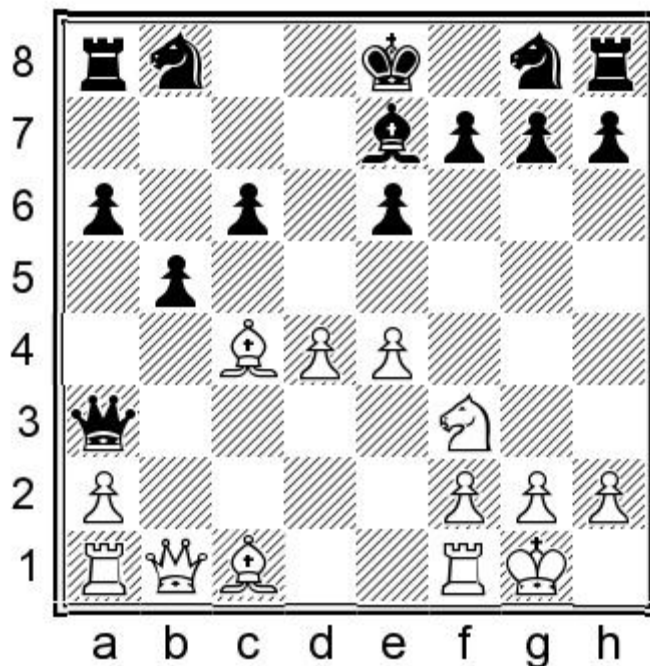


10.♗e5 ♙b4

[10...♙h5? 11.cxd5 exd5 (11...cxd5? 12.♚xb5+! — or 12.♙xb5+ — 12...axb5 13.♙xb5+ ♗c6 14.♙xc6#) but although material is level after 12.♙xh7!, White has a strong attack.]

11.♗xg4 ♙xd2 12.cxd5 cxd5 13.♗e5 ♗e7 14.♙xb5+! axb5 15.♚xb5+ ♔f8 16.♞fb1 and Black is suffering, even though he has an extra piece.

10.♗xf3 dxc4 11.♙xc4 e6 12.e4 ♙e7 13.♙c1



13...♔a5

13...♔b4 14.♕b3.

14.d5?!

Logical and beautiful, but wrong. 14.a4! is equally logical and would be much stronger. After 14...b4 (Forced!) 15.e5 ♖d7 16.♔e4 ♔c7 17.a5 h5 18.♕d3 White has a huge advantage.

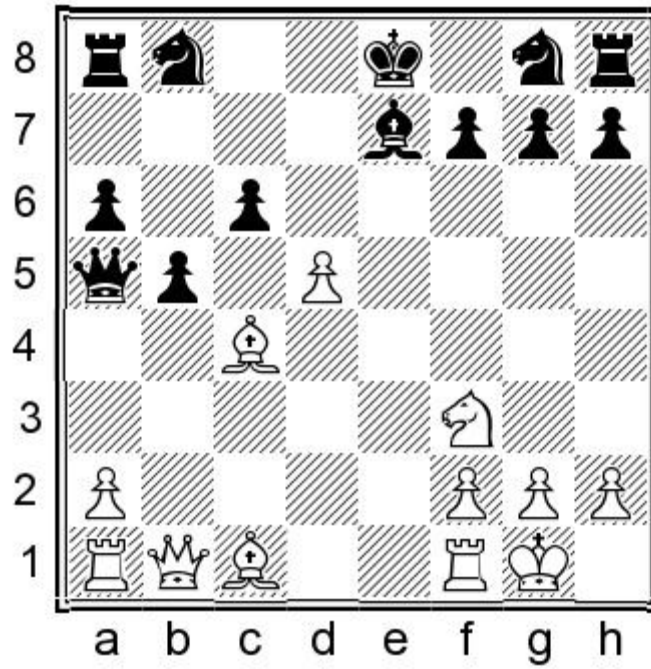
14...exd5?

Both players overlooked that after 14...cxd5! White has to play 15.♕b3!?, since after 15.exd5?? bxc4 16.♔b7 ♔xd5! he loses a piece. He gets some compensation for the sacrifice (as well as the unpleasant aftertaste of a blunder), e.g. 15...♖f6 16.exd5 exd5

[16...♖xd5 17.♕xd5 exd5 18.♖e1 ♖a7 (18...♖c6 19.♕g5 f6 20.♔f5!→) 19.♕e3 ♖d7 20.♕c5 ♔c7 21.♕xe7 ♖xe7 22.♔b4→]

17.♖e1 ♖c6 18.♕b2 0-0 19.♔f5 (19.♖g5 d4↔) 19...♔d8 20.♖ad1☞.

15.exd5

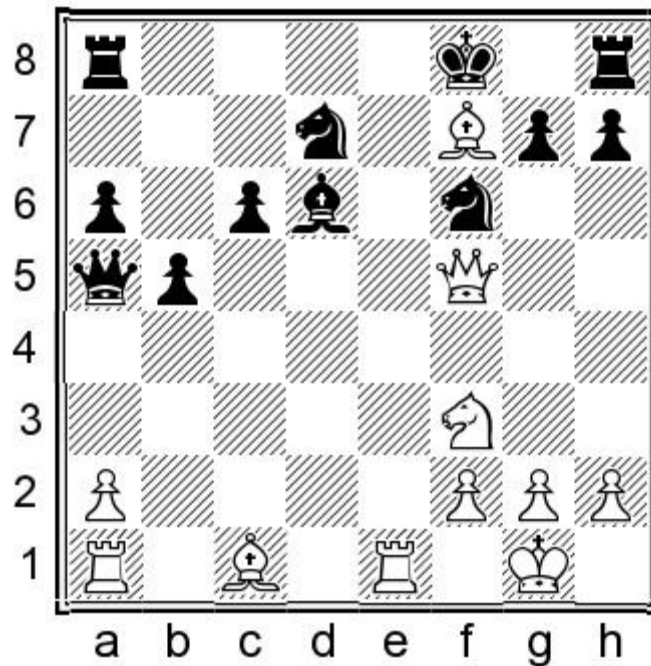


Now everything is back to normal.

15...♞f6 16.d6!

The most active move!

16...♙xd6 17.♖e1+ ♜f8 18.♚f5! ♞bd7 19.♙xf7!!



An elegant way to conclude the attack.

19...♞e5

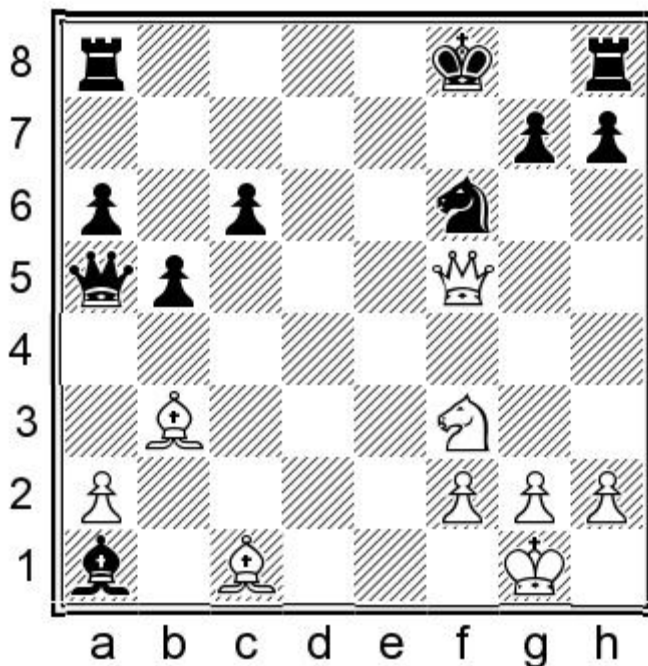
There was no way to save the game, e.g. 19...♔xf7 20.♖g5+ ♔f8 21.♚e6+- or 19...g6 20.♗h6+ ♔xf7 21.♚e6#.

20.♖xe5! ♗xe5 21.♗b3

21.♚xe5 would also win.

21...♞e8

21...♗xa1 would have allowed a nice finale:



22.♚c5+! (22.♚e6? ♞a7!) 22...♔e8 23.♚xc6+ ♔e7 24.♚b7+! ♖d7 (24...♔d6 25.♗f4+ ♔c5 26.♚e7+ ♔c6 27.♚e6+ ♔b7 28.♗d5+!) 25.♚e4+ ♔d6 26.♗f4+ ♔c5 27.♚d5+ with a mate in a few moves.

22.♗e3 b4 23.♗f4

A game in the style of the 19th century Romantics.

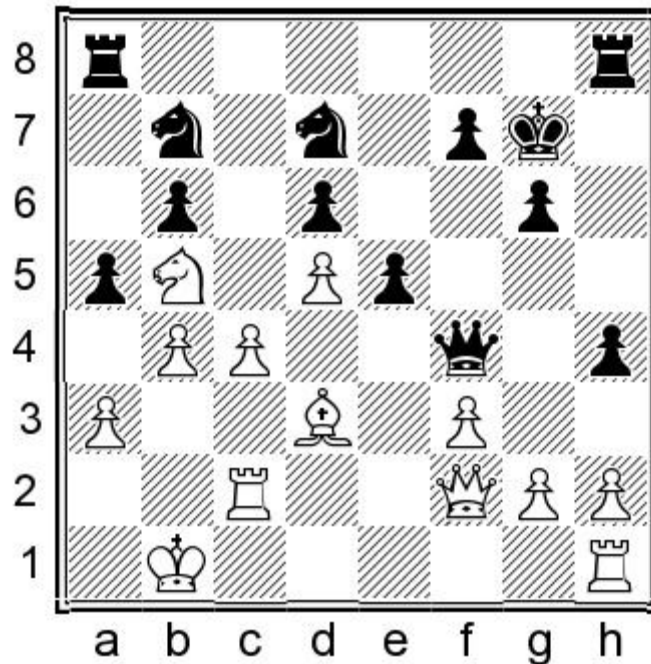
1-0

The other games were hard-fought, but the outcome of the match was not in doubt: our team had the initiative on the lower boards while the names of our players on the first three boards alone should have made our adversaries tremble. But, somehow, our opponents showed no deference. In a hard-to-assess position, David Navara turned down a threefold repetition against Caruana; Viktor Láznička courageously accepted a piece sacrifice offered by Kamsky. Still, Topalov seemed to be controlling his game confidently. It was all over in a matter of minutes: Wang Hao won, both Caruana and Kamsky were unable to defend their inferior positions and, as the last straw, Topalov committed hara-kiri.

Veselin Topalov (2771)

Radosław Wojtaszek (2698)

Rhodes 2013



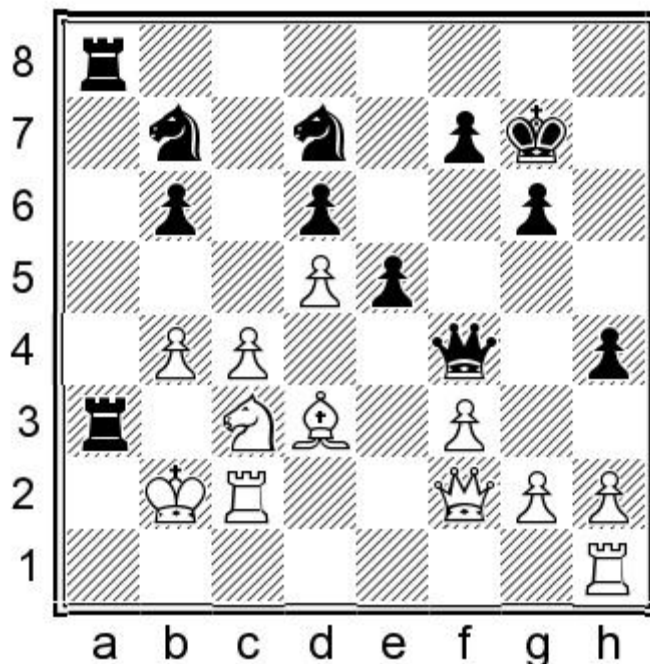
Up to this point there had been two possible outcomes, but several times Topalov had missed the strongest moves and the chance to obtain a decisive advantage; his chances were never worse.

46. ♖c3??

A terrible move that loses immediately. It was quite possible to play 46. ♜b2 axb4 47. axb4 ♜a4 48. ♔c2! ♜ha8 49. g3

or even 46. ♜a2 to prevent Black's counterplay along the a-file. In both cases, White is at least equal.

46. ♖c3?? axb4 47. axb4 ♜a3! 48. ♔b2 ♜ha8



49.♖d2

Otherwise 49...♔d4, but now another motif proves decisive.

49...♘bc5! 50.bxc5 ♘xc5 51.♙e4 ♖b3+ 52.♕c2 ♖aa3 0–1

Who would have guessed before the match that our three leading stars would suffer crushing defeats against opponents who were clearly not as skilled? Who would have guessed that this would lead to a loss for the team? How could this happen? The specifics of team competitions and mysterious ‘team spirit’ are not just overused journalistic clichés. They really exist and have to be taken into account, both when you put together your own team and when you assess the strength of your opponents. We’ll talk more about this later in the chapter. Meanwhile, I had to admit that our chances of retaining the championship had all but disappeared. On the contrary, a sensational win by Novy Bor made them the main favourites overnight. In the last round they were paired against a relatively weak opponent while we had the extra pleasure of facing St Petersburg. A hard-fought draw in the final match only gave us the bronze medals; all of a sudden, the team that vanquished us became champions.

The 30th European Club Cup took place in Bilbao in 2014. This event brought us so many positive emotions that we were finally able to put behind us the mistakes and disappointments of previous tournaments. As always, I will begin by telling you about the latest changes at SOCAR. Caruana returned to his original Italian club, while Kamsky no longer played at the level we demanded for such a star-studded team. They were replaced by Michael Adams and Anton Korobov, two excellent players and reliable team fighters. We went through some difficult times in this tournament and our strength was seriously tested by our opponents. As early as round two we prevailed against the strong Moscow club, SHSM, crushing them 5–1! In round four we took convincing revenge on Novy Bor, who had beaten us the previous year. Our most difficult match was against the Italian team from Padua. Caruana was not kind to SOCAR, the club he had played for just a year before, and beat Mamedyarov on board

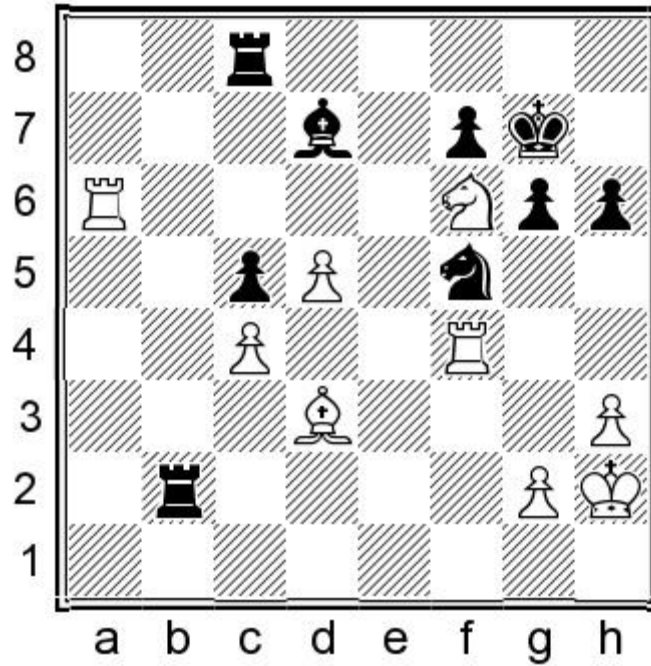
one. Korobov restored the balance. The outcome of the match was decided on board two.

29

Veselin Topalov (2784)

Hikaru Nakamura (2782)

Bilbao 2014



It is obvious that White has the better chances, but is his advantage enough for a win?

50...♖e3?

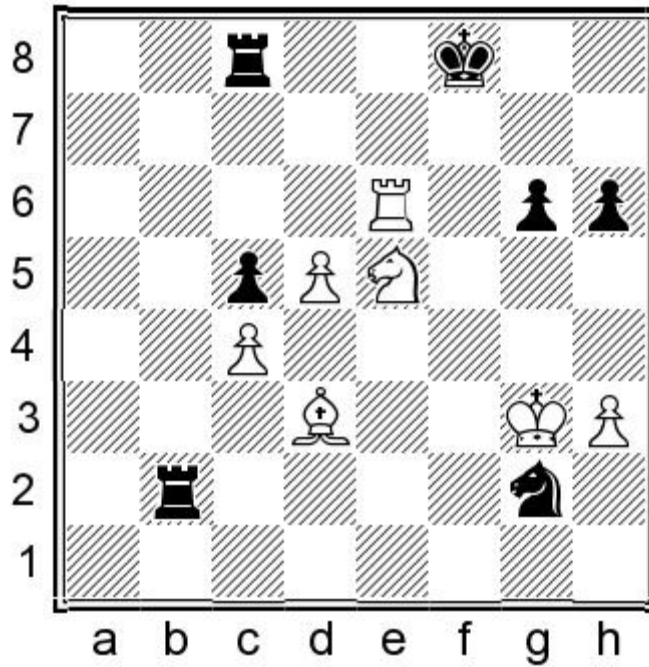
It was not that easy to find the right path.

a) The logical 50...♖d8 leads to a difficult rook ending after 51.♗xd7 ♖xd7 52.♙xf5 gxf5 53.♔g3! ♖e7 54.♖c6 ♖ee2 55.♖xf5 ♖xg2+ 56.♔h4 ♖bd2 57.♖f4.

b) Much stronger is the waiting move 50...♖d2! 51.♙e4, but only if followed by 51...♖d8. After 52.♗xd7 ♖xd7 53.♙xf5 gxf5 54.♔g3 ♖e7 55.♖xf5 ♖e4 56.♖a7 ♖d3+ 57.♔h2 ♖xc4 58.♖axf7+ ♔g6 Black has reasonable drawing chances.

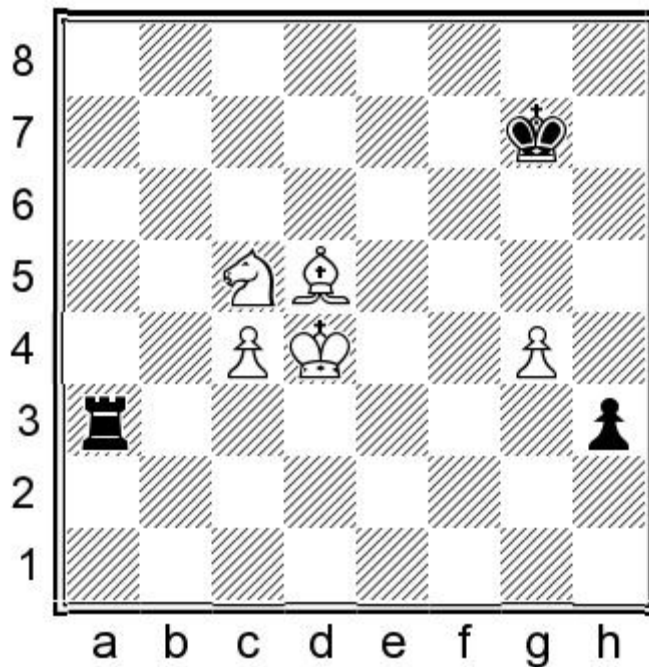
50...♖e3? 51.♗xd7 ♗xg2 52.♔g3

It was stronger to play 52.♖xf7+! ♔xf7 53.♗e5+ ♔f8 54.♖f6+ ♔e7 55.♖e6+ ♔f8 56.♔g3!



and White achieves complete domination, despite being an exchange down.

52...♖xf4 53.♔xf4 ♜f2+ 54.♕e5 ♜f3 55.♙e4! ♜e8+ 56.♜e6 fxe6 57.♙xf3 exd5+ 58.♕xd5 ♜e3 59.♙g4 h5 60.♙e6 g5 61.♖xc5 g4 62.hxg4 h4 63.♕d4 ♜a3 64.♙d5 h3

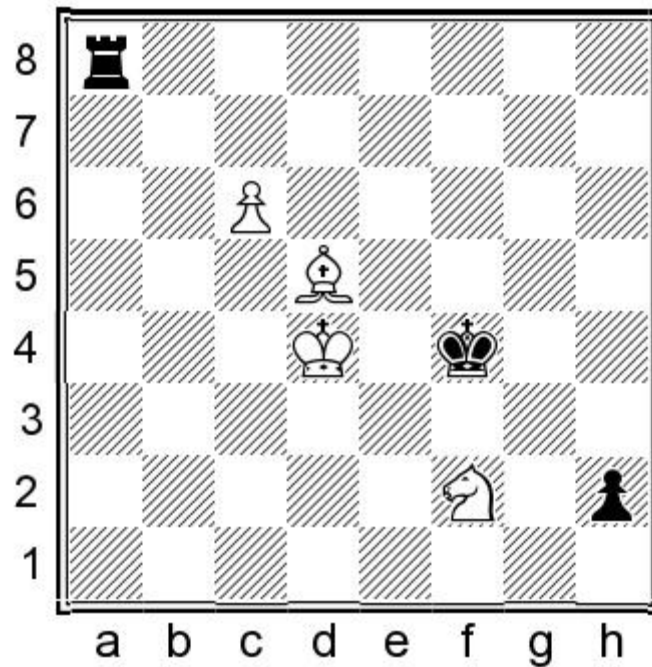


65.♖e6+?

This activity is unnecessary. White should make do with 65.♖d3! in order to block Black's dangerous passed pawn: 65...h2 66.♖f2 ♜a2 67.♕e3 ♜a3+ 68.♕f4 leads to the position that occurred in the game.

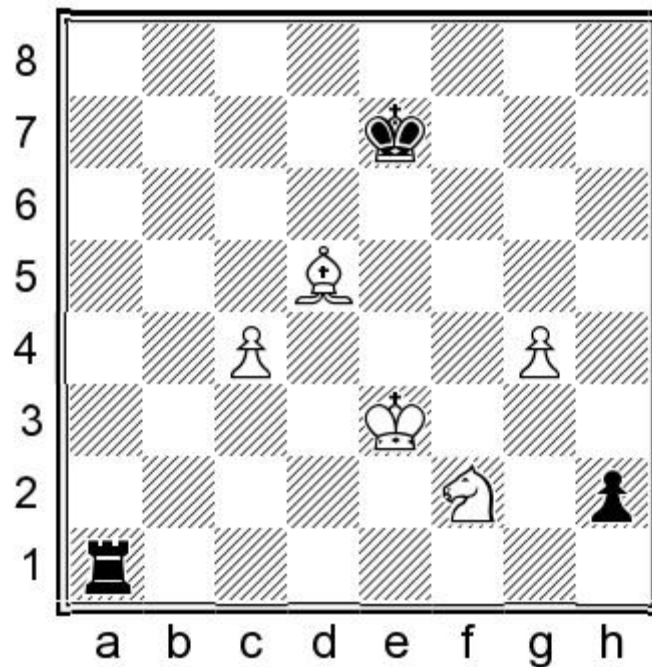
65...♕f6 66.♖c5 h2?

The decisive error. Black was one step away from the draw which could have been achieved via 66...♔g5! 67.♘d3 h2 68.c5 ♖xg4 69.c6 ♜a8 70.♙f2+ ♕f4, when White cannot improve his position.



If 71.♕c5, then 71...♜a5+ 72.♕d6 ♜xd5+ 73.♕xd5 ♕f3.

67.♘e4+ ♕e7 68.♘f2 ♜a1 69.♕e3



69...♜f1 70.c5 ♜c1 71.c6 ♕d6 72.♙g2 ♜c2 73.g5 ♕e5 74.g6 ♜c3+ 75.♘d3+ ♕f6 76.♙e4 ♕e6 77.♕d4 ♜a3 78.c7 ♜a4+ 79.♕c3 ♜a8

Any other move would lose as well.

In the penultimate round, we won with an ‘indecent’ 5–1 over Malachite, yet another pre-tournament favourite. With just one round left, we were almost assured of first place.

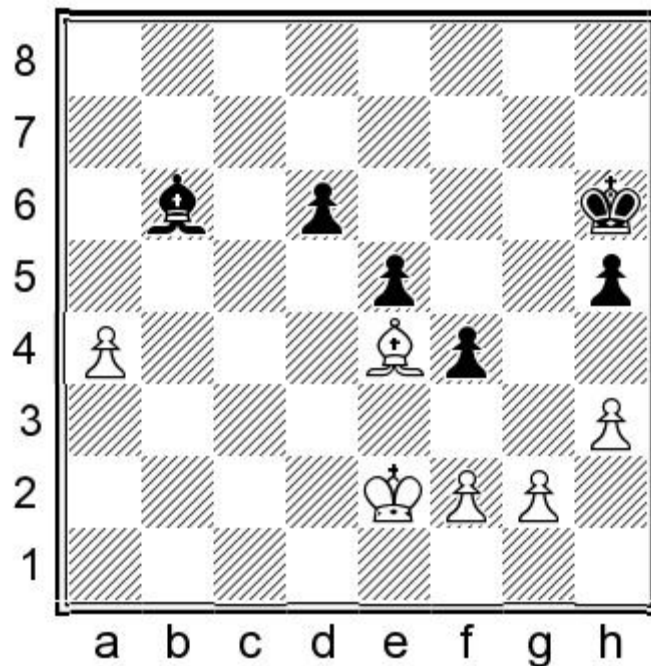
Obviously things can go wrong even in such a favourable situation, and a big defeat was not desirable. Given our team’s confident mood, this was out of the question. We faced our ‘traditional’ opponents, St Petersburg, in the last round. If they won, they would take the silver medals; if we won, we would have extra satisfaction since it is extremely rare to win every match in such a strong tournament. As usual, the match against St Petersburg was essentially equal. When Giri had an enormous advantage against Leinier Dominguez Perez, but missed a win, it appeared that the match would end in a draw. However Peter Svidler managed to lose the following endgame and we won.

30

Veselin Topalov (2784)

Peter Svidler (2732)

Bilbao 2014

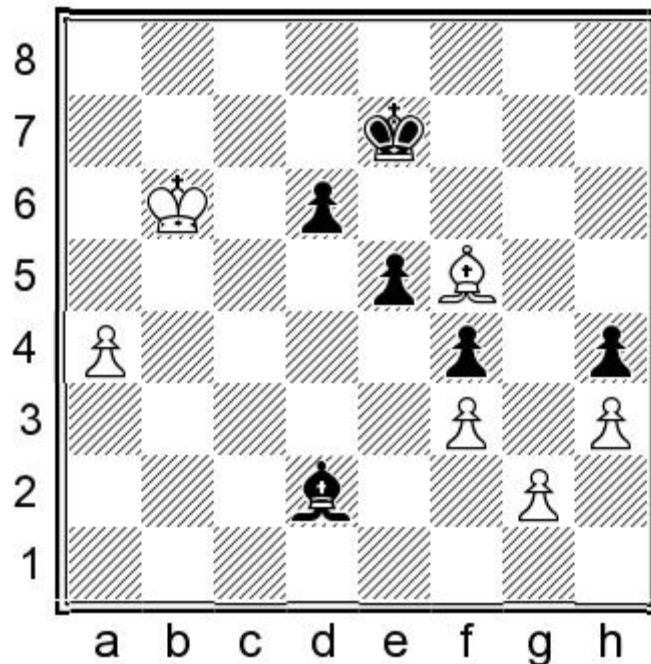


This game was a fierce fight with Topalov having the initiative. Now it appears that all possibilities have been exhausted and a draw is the only possible outcome.

43...h4?!

This is careless. It would have been better to keep the h4-square for possible counterplay with, for instance, 43...♔g5. However Black follows the classical recipe for endings with opposite-coloured bishops: the weaker side should defend passively and put his pawns on squares of the same colour as his bishop.

43...h4?! 44.f3 ♔g5 45.♔d3 ♔f6 46.♔c4 ♔e7 47.♔b5 ♕f2 48.♔c6 ♕e1 49.♕f5 ♕d2 50.♔b6



50...d5?

Panic for no reason. It was enough to prevent the advance of the a-pawn. One simple way to achieve this was with 50...♙e3+ 51.♚b5 ♔d8 52.♚c6 ♙d2 53.♚xd6 ♙c3 and the only thing White gets from his extra pawn is moral satisfaction.

51.a5

Now the game cannot be saved.

51...♔d6 52.a6 ♙e3+ 53.♚b7 ♙f2 54.♙c2 ♙g1 55.a7 ♙xa7 56.♚xa7 ♚c5 57.♚b7 ♔d4 58.♚c6 e4 59.♙d1!

The only move, but enough to win.

1-0

This was the triumph that our president Mahir Mammedov dreamt about, the triumph we were longing to achieve, starting with that memorable dinner in Khanty-Mansiysk. There was nothing left to aspire to after such a victory. Neither the quality of our play nor our final result could ever be surpassed. It was the best moment to leave the stage forever, to leave as victors. I wouldn't have been surprised if this fifth time that SOCAR had played in the European Club Cup had been its last.

Nevertheless, we dutifully showed up in Skopje to defend our trophy the following year. Caruana came back into the fold but Wang Hao and Korobov left. Events in Macedonia followed the familiar script of our previous four attempts, not in the fairytale manner of our championship year. We won the first four matches, then had to face our main rivals, a newly-constituted Siberia led by Vladimir Kramnik and Levon Aronian.



Bilbao, 2014. SOCAR's absolute victory, as evidenced by the captain's hat. (Photo from the author's archive)



The downside of a victory. SOCAR Club President Mahir Mammadov closely monitors the full observance of the ritual. (Photo from the author's archive)

Unfortunately there was no real competition in this match. When Kramnik and Topalov play each other, colour is usually a decisive factor; this time it was the Russian player who got White. Grischuk won against Caruana in yet another Berlin Defence. Adams's win did not change anything.

It appeared that any chances of gold had been lost. Siberia appeared very confident and were on track for the championship. Still, one has to keep fighting while there is still a chance, however small. Some hope was revived when we won against Novy Bor in the next round and Topalov took revenge on Radosław Wojtaszek for the game he had lost two years before, which had cost us first place at the

time. Topalov won in the same Najdorf Variation!

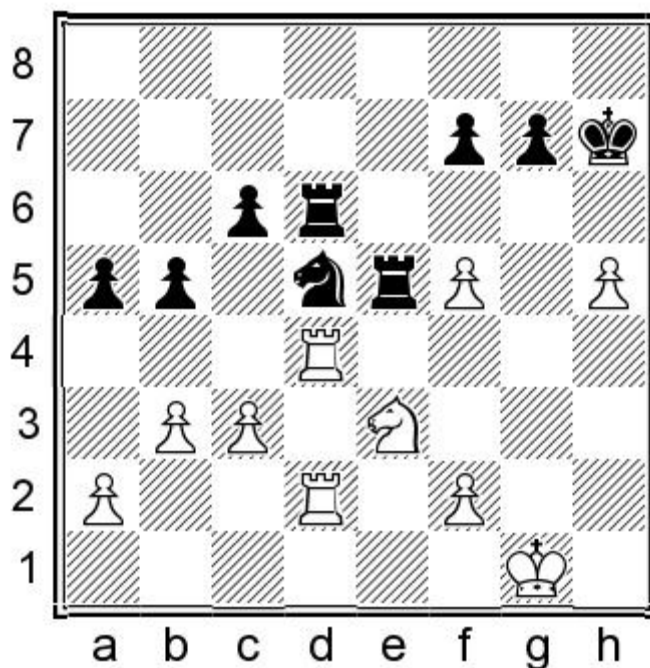
Meanwhile, Siberia were in trouble against the local club Alkaloid. In the board one game Ivanchuk was ingeniously looking for chances in an almost equal position.

31

Vassily Ivanchuk (2726)

Vladimir Kramnik (2777)

Skopje 2015



In the diagram position Ivanchuk has managed to squeeze the maximum advantage from the minimum edge that White had had for the previous dozen moves.

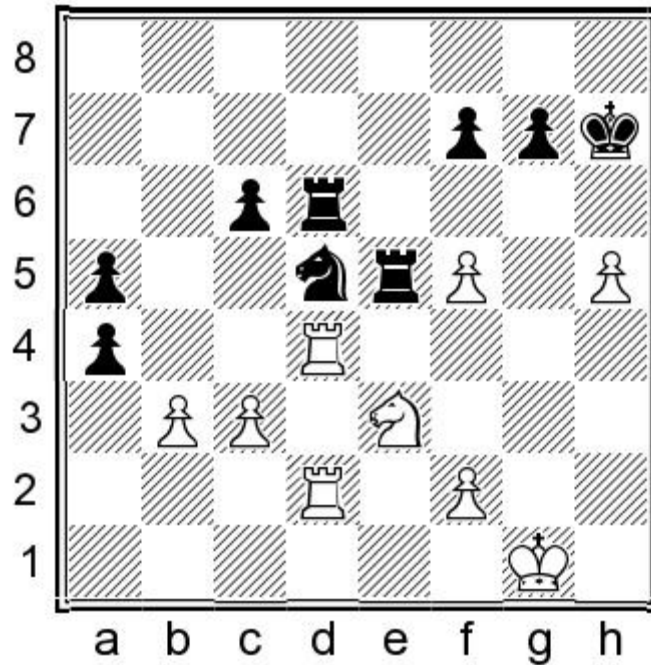
31. ♖xd5?

This choice is quite strange.

a) True, nothing would happen after 31.c4 bxc4 32.♗xc4 (32.bxc4 ♗xe3 33.♖xd6 ♗xc4=) 32...♞e1+ 33.♕h2 ♞f6 34.♗xa5 ♞xf5 35.♗xc6 ♞xh5+ 36.♕g2 ♞g5+ 37.♕f3 ♞f5+ 38.♕g4 ♞f6! with a draw, because 39.♖xd5?? ♞g1+ is bad for White.

b) Not much better is 31.♞d3 ♞f6 32.♗xd5 cxd5 33.♖xd5 ♞xf5 34.♖xe5 ♞xe5 35.♞d7 a4 36.♖xf7 ♞e2.

c) But much stronger is 31.a4! bxa4

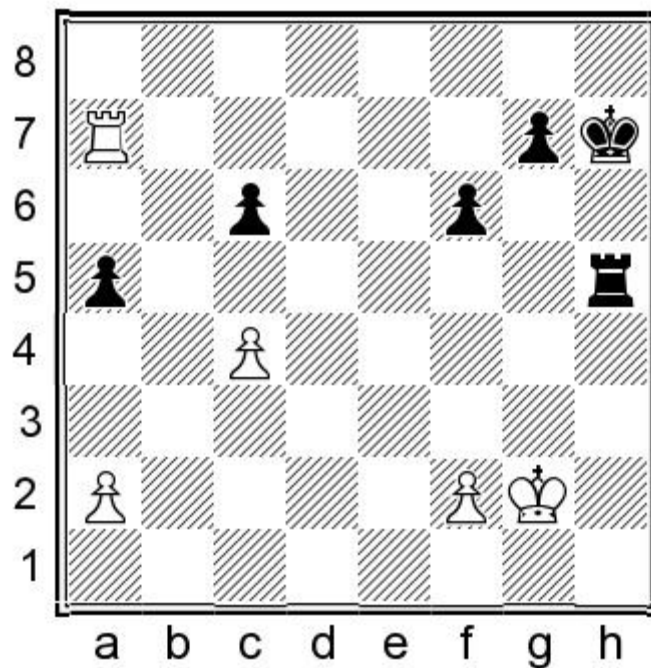


32.♖xa4 ♜d7! (Black cannot play 32...♜h6 33.♖xa5 ♜xh5 34.♘xd5 ♜hxf5 35.c4 ♜e1+ 36.♔g2 ♜g5+ 37.♔h2 cxd5 38.♖axd5) 33.♖xa5 ♘xe3 34.♖xd7 ♖xa5 35.fxe3 ♜xf5 36.b4. It is not clear whose chances would have been better — White's for a win or Black's for a draw. Now the game is heading for a draw.

31.♘xd5? ♜xd5 32.c4?!

The easiest way to reach the draw was 32.♖xd5 cxd5 33.f6 gxf6 34.♔g2=.

32...bxc4 33.bxc4 ♜xd4 34.♖xd4 ♜xf5 35.♖d7 f6 36.♖a7 ♜xh5 37.♔g2



37...♔g6 38.f4?

The last in a series of errors. White still had good chances to maintain the balance: 38.a4 ♖c5 39.♔f3 ♔f5 40.♔e3 ♖xc4 41.♖xa5+.

38...♖c5 39.♔f3 ♔f5 40.♔e3 ♖xc4 41.♖xa5+ c5 42.a4 ♖e4+ 43.♔d3 ♔xf4

0-1

Thanks to the result of this game, Siberia won the match by the minimum score, rendering our chances of overall victory almost non-existent. Such a pity; if Siberia had drawn there would still have been hope. In the last round, the leaders played Padua while our opponents seemed, in fact, predetermined even before the start of the tournament. No matter what happened in the interim, one thing remained constant: SOCAR always played St Petersburg in the last round!

We needed Siberia to lose by any score. In this case, even a minimal victory would bring us the championship. In theory, it was fairly improbable that both required outcomes would be achieved; in practice, everything hinged on two decisive games. At the time, spectators could not comprehend what was going on in the following game; only the computer's silicon brain provided some clarity.

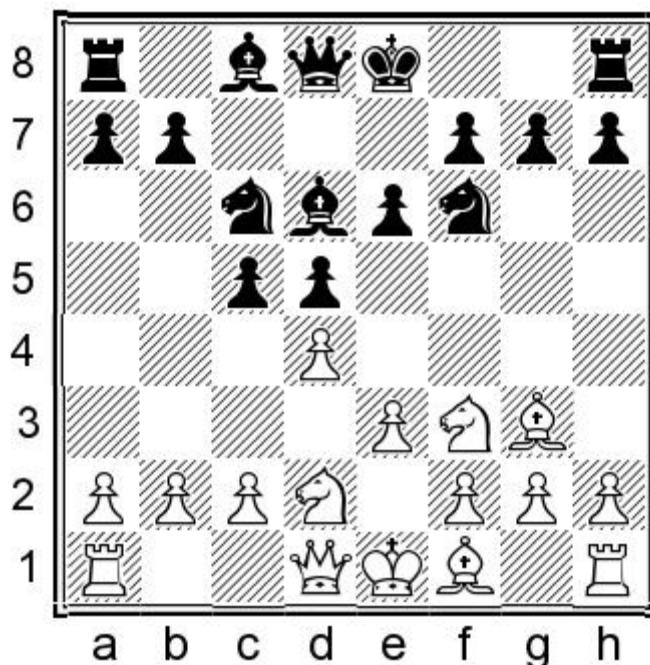
32

Alexander Grischuk (2774)

Hikaru Nakamura (2816)

Skopje 2015

1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♙f4 e6 4.e3 ♗d6 5.♙g3 c5 6.♘bd2 ♘c6



In recent years, the London System has moved to the forefront of theory. Even the World Champion, who is a trendsetter in chess, has become a fan, thus the theory of this opening has begun to develop

rapidly.

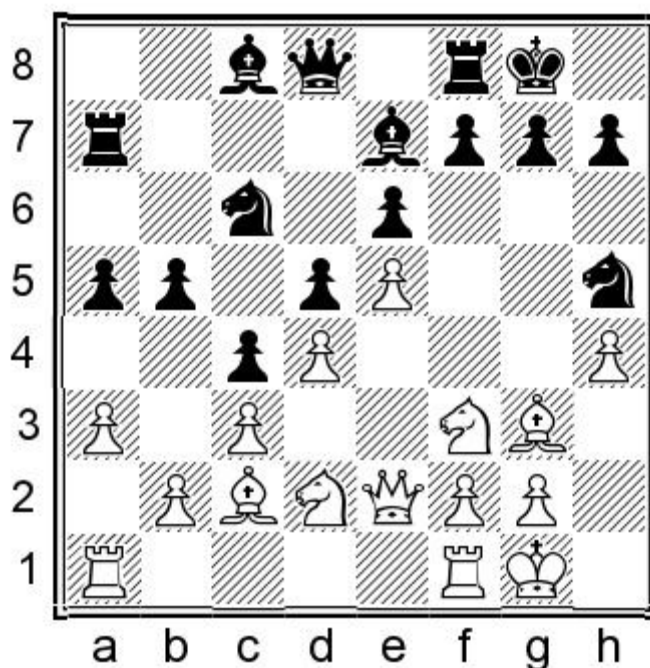
7.c3 0-0 8.♔d3 b6 9.e4

9.♘b5 is more frequent in such positions since White starts an active fight for control of the e5-square.

9...♘e7

9...♘xg3 10.hxg3 h6 11.e5 ♘g4 was an interesting option.

10.e5 ♘h5 11.a3 a5 12.♚e2 ♜a7 13.0-0 c4 14.♘c2 b5 15.h4!?



An interesting move that prevents ...g7–g5.

15...g6

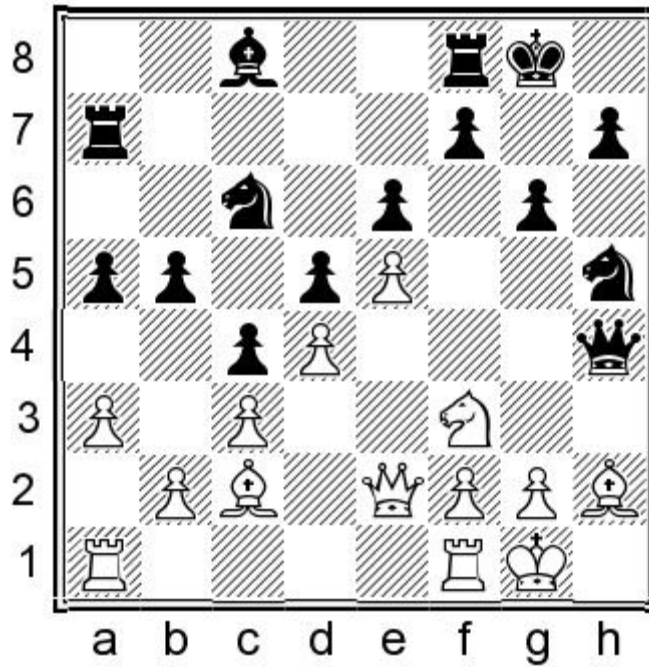
It would have been more principled, and also better, to play 15...♘xg3 16.fxg3 b4, when Black has achieved much more on the queenside than White on the kingside. Nakamura possibly thought that he wouldn't lose the chance to play it.

16.♘h2!

This is the second, less obvious, point behind the previous move. At the price of a pawn, White keeps his valuable bishop.

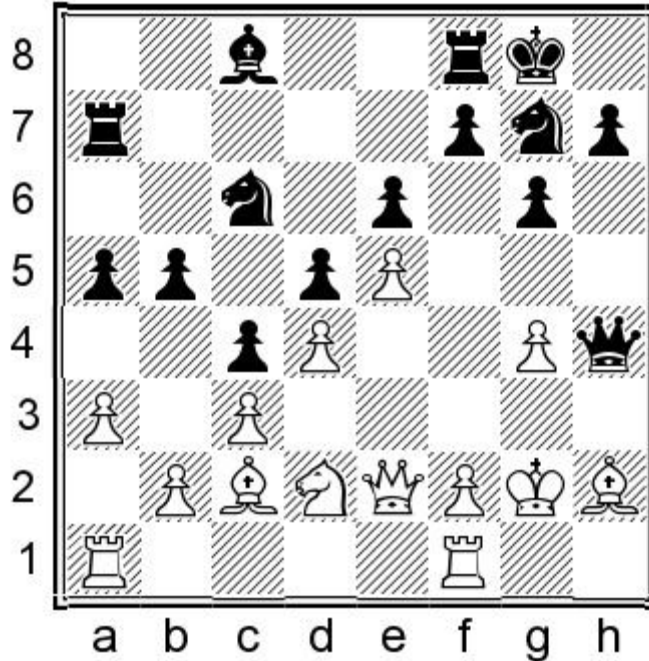
16...♘xh4 17.g4

A double-edged line. It was safer to play 17.♘xh4 ♚xh4 18.♘f3.



If then 18... ♔d8 (18... ♔g4 looks dangerous, since after 19. ♖e3 the threat of ♕d1 is quite unpleasant)
 19. ♖e3 f5 20. exf6 ♘xf6 21. ♖g5 and White has more than enough compensation for the pawn.

17... ♗g7 18. ♘xh4 ♙xh4 19. ♔g2



19... ♗f5!?

Another chance to exploit the somewhat weakened position of the white king was 19... h5!?.

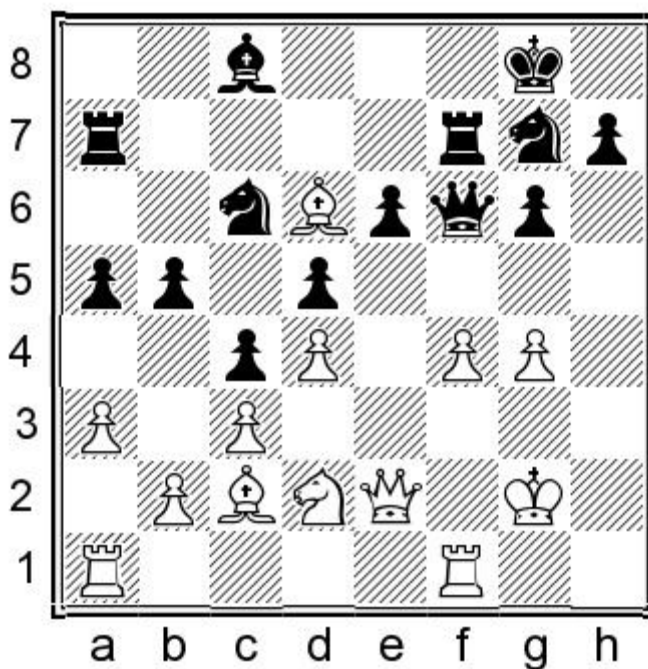
20. exf6 ♙xf6 21. ♕d6

Grischuk attempts to prevent the ...e6–e5 breakthrough which would have been possible after 21.♘f3 e5! 22.♗xe5 ♘xe5 23.♙xe5 ♚g5 24.f3 ♖af7 with a very sharp position.

21...♖ff7

21...♖e8!?

22.f4



22...e5!

Still the most principled and most active move!

23.dxe5!

It was weaker to play 23.fxe5 ♚h4 or 23.♙xe5 ♘xe5 24.dxe5 ♚h4 25.f5 ♖ae7! 26.♖ae1 d4!.

23...♚h4 24.f5!

The position is now at its sharpest. Moreover, both players were in time trouble.

24...gxf5?!

This capture is natural but not the best.

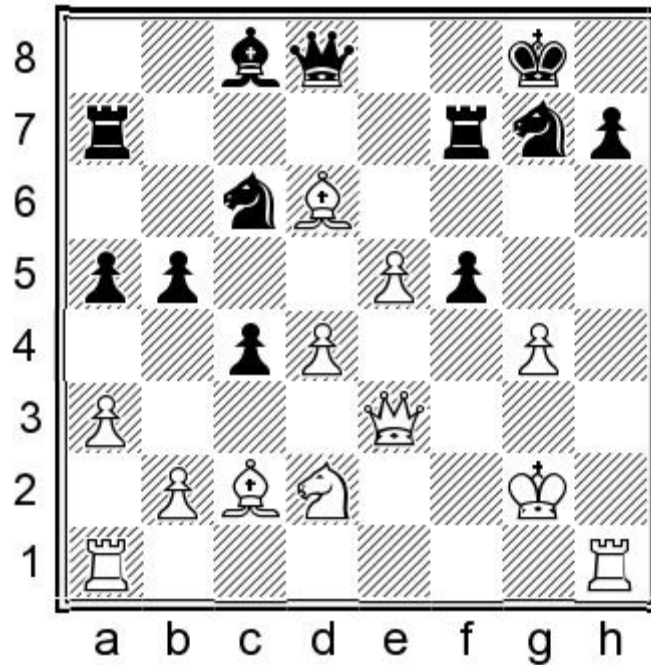
24...♗xf5!, confronting White with very complicated issues, would have been stronger, e.g. 25.e6 Relatively best. (25.gxf5? loses: 25...gxf5+ 26.♚f2 ♖g7+ 27.♗f3 ♚h5+! 28.♗e3 f4+! 29.♚xf4 ♖af7, while after 25.♙xf5 gxf5 26.♘f3 ♚xg4+ 27.♗f2 ♖g7 28.♖g1 ♚f4 White doesn't have enough compensation for the missing material.) 25...♖g7! The piece still cannot be captured and it would be

difficult even for Grischuk to find ‘only’ moves with his flag about to fall.

25.♖h1 ♕d8

Wisely avoiding the unpredictable complications arising after 25...♖g5 26.♘f3! ♕xg4+ (26...♖f4) 27.♔f2 d4! 28.♖ag1 d3 29.♖d2.

26.♖e3! d4! 27.cxd4



27...♘e8?!

This not the strongest move, but it is simply impossible to calculate all the lines in such a complex position, especially in severe time trouble. Only intuition can help in such cases.

a) 27...♗b7! is one of those moves that can be made ‘reflexively’, but it is virtually impossible to find the following sequence of only moves at the board: 28.d5 ♘d4! 29.♖xd4 ♘e6 30.♖e3 ♗xd5+ 31.♔h3! f4! 32.♖f2 c3! 33.bxc3 ♘g5+ 34.♔h2 ♖c8! The position is still very complex.

b) Another ‘intuitive’ move, 27...♘xd4, is much weaker: 28.♖xd4 ♘e6 29.♖e3 ♗b7+ 30.♔f2 fxg4+ 31.♔g3 ♗xh1 32.♖xh1 and Black is in trouble.

28.♖h6?!

The solid 28.♗c5! ♖ac7 29.♖af1 (or 29.♘f3) would provide White with a stable advantage.

28...♖g7 29.♖g1!? ♖ad7

Other possible lines are 29...♘xd6!? 30.♖xd6 ♖ad7 and 29...♖xg4+!? 30.♔f1 ♖xg1+ 31.♔xg1 ♘xd6 32.exd6 ♖g7+ 33.♔f1 ♖g6.

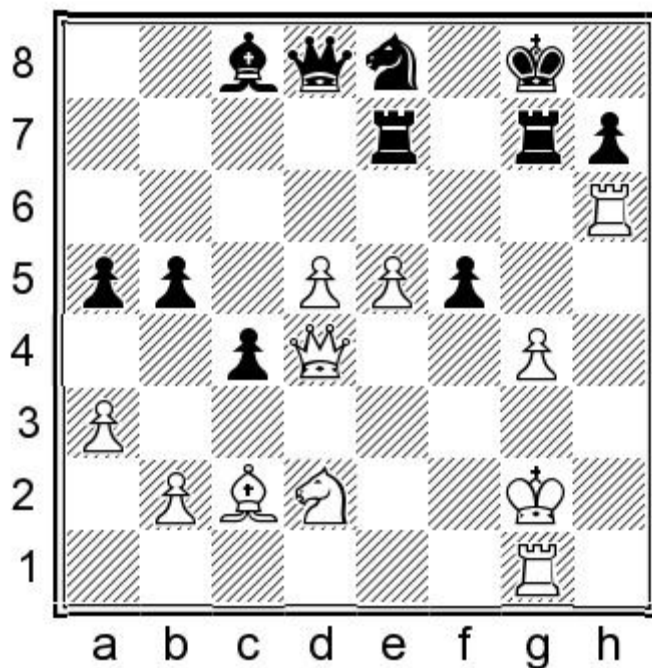
30.d5

30.♔f2!

30...♘e7 31.♙xe7?!

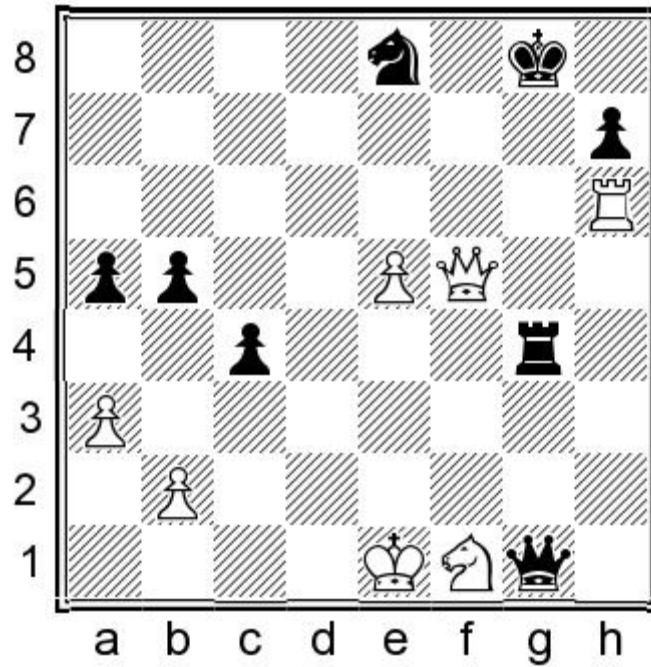
31.♚c5! was better, but when one is playing on increment only, it is natural to keep one's pieces together.

31...♞dx7 32.♚d4



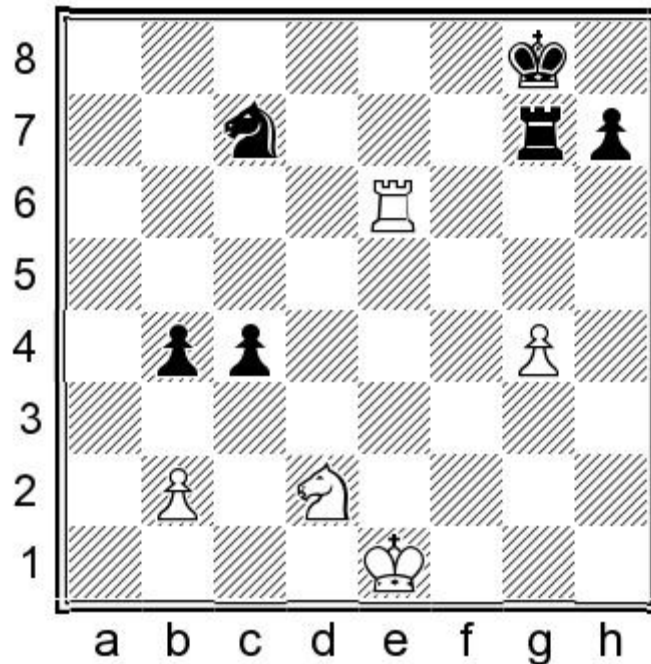
32...♙b7

There were some real chances left after 32...♞xg4+ 33.♔f1 ♞eg7 34.♞xg4 ♞xg4 35.♚f2 ♚xd5 36.♙xf5 ♙xf5 37.♚xf5 ♚g2+ 38.♔e1 ♚g1+ 39.♘f1



39...♖g6 (39...♚d4 40.♙xh7+ ♔f8 41.♙f5+ ♔e7 42.♙e6+ ♔d8 43.♙b6+ ♙xb6 44.♙xb6 ♖e4+ 45.♔d2 ♖xe5 46.a4! is insufficient, firstly, severe time trouble doesn't allow for such niceties and, secondly, the position arising is still closer to a draw.)

33.♔f2 ♚xd5 34.♙xd5+ ♘xd5 35.♙xf5 ♖xe5 36.♖e1 ♖xe1 37.♔xe1 b4 38.axb4 axb4 39.♙e6+ ♙xe6 40.♖xe6 ♘c7



And the players agreed a draw in view of 41.♖c6.

1/2-1/2

This was an absolutely crazy game, especially because its result was so important. If Black had won

this exciting duel, Siberia would have lost the match, satisfying one of the conditions necessary for our victory, but the draw virtually guaranteed them the championship. The result of the other important game between Maxim Rodshtein and Mamedyarov therefore lost its significance; even though Mamedyarov lost, we kept second place. Of course this was a step backwards compared to the previous year's triumph. This was the final page in the SOCAR story. The club existed for six years. Let's look back and reflect on its fate.

There was never a national club championship in Azerbaijan, so the only reason for the team's existence was to play in the European Club Cup. For some time, there were also rumours that a World Club Cup would come into being; naturally, SOCAR would have been one of the contenders. In any case, the team got together only once a year, for a single tournament.

Chess clubs in Europe function very differently. Baden-Baden has a bunch of star players and, like SOCAR, can truly be called a superclub, however its main objective is to maintain its chess hegemony in Germany. All its big name stars play in the key matches of the national club championship, while it is the reserves who represent Baden at the European Club Cup. Other leading clubs also have to earn the right to take part in European competitions by qualifying through the championships of their respective countries. The club championship of Russia is one of the hardest-fought; it is extremely difficult to get into the top four.

On the one hand, SOCAR's distinct philosophy made it easier to put together a strong team, since even the world's top players were able to free a ten-day slot in their busy schedules. On the other, there was no team chemistry. The super-GMs who played for SOCAR only came together as a team at one tournament per year and were unlikely ever to be on the same team again. Even though these foreign stars comprised only half of the team (the other half being, in effect, the national team of Azerbaijan), their presence caused a lot of problems.

The European Club Cup imposes virtually no restrictions on the number of 'imported' stars or their nationalities. SOCAR's management cared a lot about team image, so a lot of star players played for SOCAR at one time or another. Did their contribution match their status? Unfortunately, no. If I had had complete freedom in determining the team roster, there would have been more victories (unless this notion is just my illusion).

How do we evaluate SOCAR's performances over the six years? I would use a criterion that I developed during my career, a criterion that could only be applied to the leading teams. In my opinion, if victory is still possible on the eve of the last round, no final result can be deemed a failure. The final round is a world apart from the rest. It features its own kind of stress and its own logic; anything can happen. When a team fights for victory till the very end with neither compromise nor cowardice, any outcome is possible, including the most unpleasant ones. In all six championships, we fought for the championship until the very end, no matter how small the chances were. I cannot reproach my players or myself.

THE NETHERLANDS — TEA(M) SPIRIT

The outcome of the 2013 European Club Cup had unexpected consequences for me. At the next Olympiad in Tromsø in Norway in 2014, I found myself in the role of captain of the Netherlands national team. An unpredictable but somewhat logical chain of events opened this new chapter in my life.

As I have already mentioned, SOCA R welcomed a new member — a young chess player from the Netherlands called Anish Giri. He acquitted himself very well on his debut with the team. Despite a big age difference, he and I instantly established a cordial and trusting relationship. The Netherlands Chess Federation soon invited me to work with Giri. This prospect was so tempting that I did not take too long to think it over. The role of captain of the national team was offered soon afterwards, as an afterthought. Thus I inherited all the responsibilities of my predecessor, Vladimir Chuchelov. (I will describe my work with Anish Giri in detail in the next chapter.)

First of all I had to learn more about the Dutch players. In the Netherlands, the rules for the selection of the national team are well-established and are based on rating; the team captain has practically no say in determining the squad. This is fundamentally different from Ukraine and Azerbaijan, where it is the captain who determines the composition of the team. It is hard to say which system is better; the Dutch one definitely made my job much simpler.

In Tromsø, the Netherlands were to be represented by two very young players, Anish Giri and Robin van Kampen, by two veterans, Loek van Wely and Sergei Tiviakov, and by Erwin l'Ami, whose age put him somewhere in between. Since I did not have a thorough knowledge of my new players' strengths and weaknesses, the easiest way was to assign board order by rating. The memories of my not-quite-successful experimentation with Team Azerbaijan were still fresh. However Team Netherlands was ranked 11th and if we chose a standard board order it would have been difficult to move higher in the standings.

After a long discussion with the players, I chose a more ambitious plan. Giri was our undisputed leader, so should stay on board one. Van Kampen would be on bottom board. I moved van Wely, who had the second-highest rating, to board four and gave boards two and three to l'Ami and Tiviakov. My thinking was as follows: Loek van Wely, our most ambitious and aggressive player, could bring in most points on the lower boards, while the solid and balanced l'Ami and Tiviakov were to hold the fort on the higher boards.

At first, everything went according to plan, moreover, in round three, we defeated a traditionally strong Team USA, with the decisive victory on board two, where Erwin l'Ami beat Gata Kamsky. I paid special attention to the games of my student. His game with the leader of Team Israel was entertaining.

33

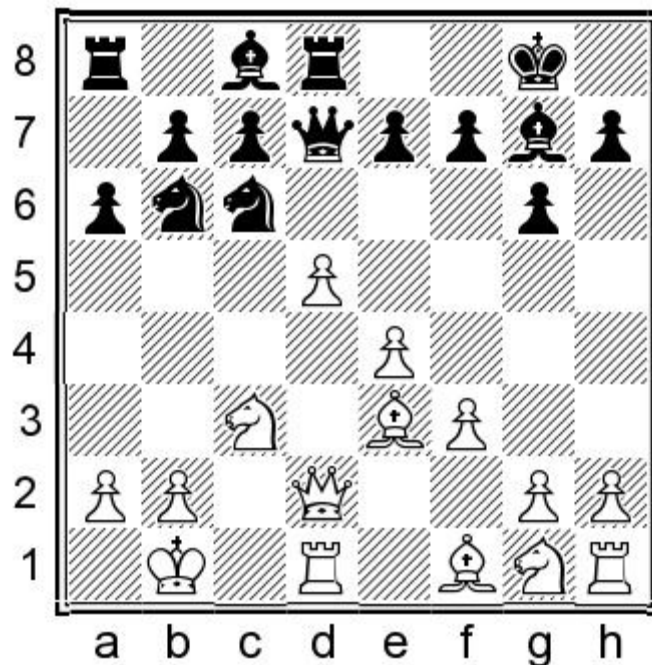
Anish Giri (2745)

Boris Gelfand (2753)

Tromsø 2014

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 g6 3.f3 d5 4.cxd5 ♗xd5 5.e4 ♗b6 6.♗c3 ♕g7 7.♕e3 0-0 8.♖d2 ♗c6 9.0-0-0 ♖d6

10.♘b5 ♖d7 11.♙b1 ♜d8 12.d5 a6 13.♘c3



13...♘a5

Recently, 13...♖e8 has become the main line, but the move made in the game is in solid second place.

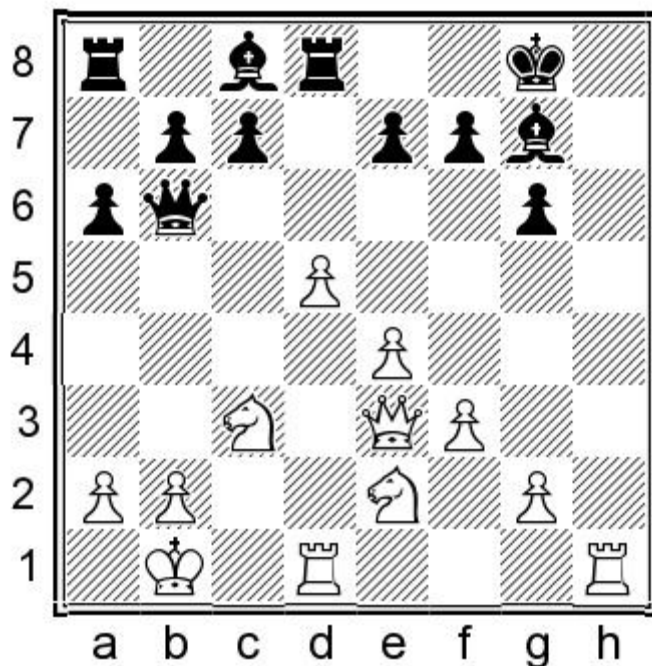
14.♖c1 ♖d6 15.h4!?

This is a novelty. 15.♘ge2 was a natural alternative.

15...♖b4

15...♘bc4!?!; 15...♘ac4!?!

16.h5 ♘ac4 17.hxg6 hxg6 18.♙xc4 ♘xc4 19.♘ge2 ♘xe3 20.♖xe3 ♖b6



Black has lost a tempo (his queen could have gone to b6 right away without stopping on b4), but has nothing to complain about. A powerful dark-squared bishop safeguards his king and looks towards the enemy king.

21. ♖g5 ♜f6 22. ♖g3 b5!?

The more cautious 22... ♜d6 23. f4 b5 was also possible, but the move in the game is more interesting.

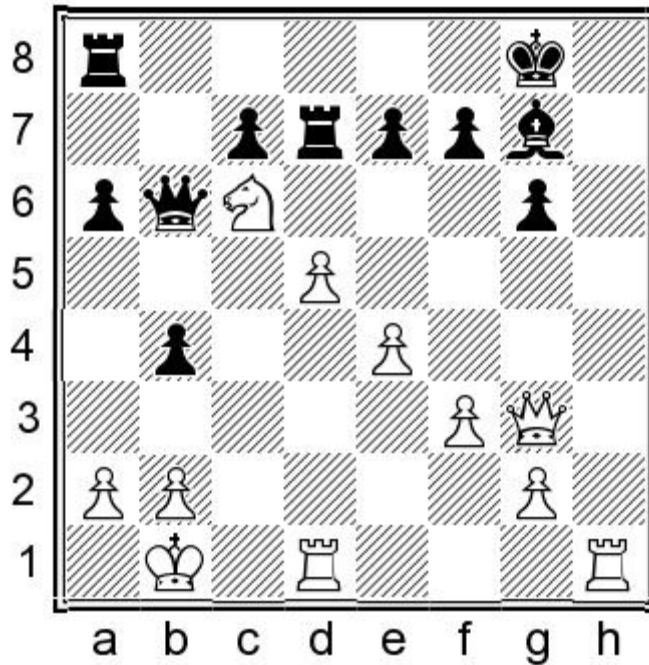
23. ♘d4

After the pawn capture 23. ♖xc7 ♙d7 24. ♘d4 b4 25. ♘ce2 e6 26. dxe6 ♙xe6 the position looks quite dangerous for White.

23...b4 24. ♘a4 ♙d7?

Another pendulum move by the queen, 24... ♖d6!, would have solved all the problems: 25. ♖xd6 (25. f4 ♙d7 26. b3 c5!) 25... exd6.

25. ♘c5 ♖b6 26. ♘xd7 ♜xd7 27. ♘c6



Now White has clear advantage. The bishop can be neutralised with e4– e5, but there is no way to chase the beautiful knight off the c6-square!

27...b3 28.a3 ♖c5 29.♞c1 ♜e3 30.♞e1! ♜d3+ 31.♔a1 e6 32.dxe6 fxe6 33.e5 g5?!

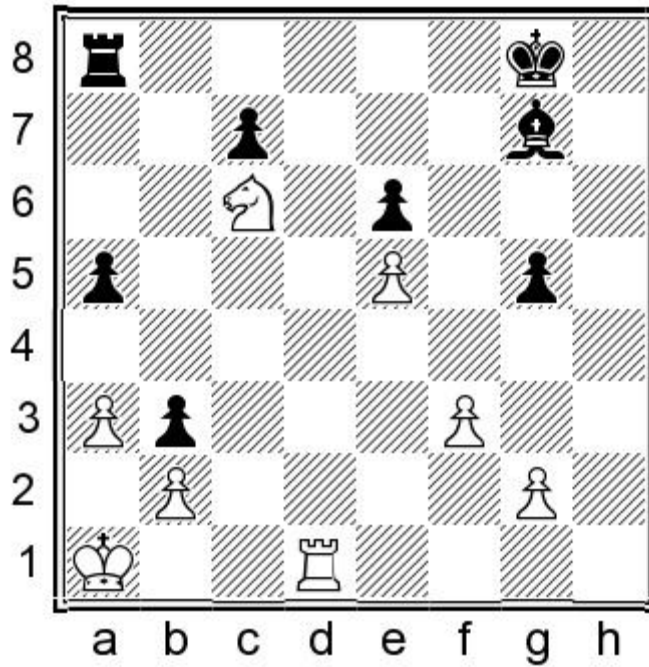
This smacks of desperation.

33...♔f7 34.♞c3 ♞d5 would have been more tenacious.

34.♞d1?!

The simple 34.♞c3 ♞d2 35.♞b1! (35.♞xb3 isn't bad either) 35...♞xg2 36.♞xb3 would essentially have sealed the fate of the game.

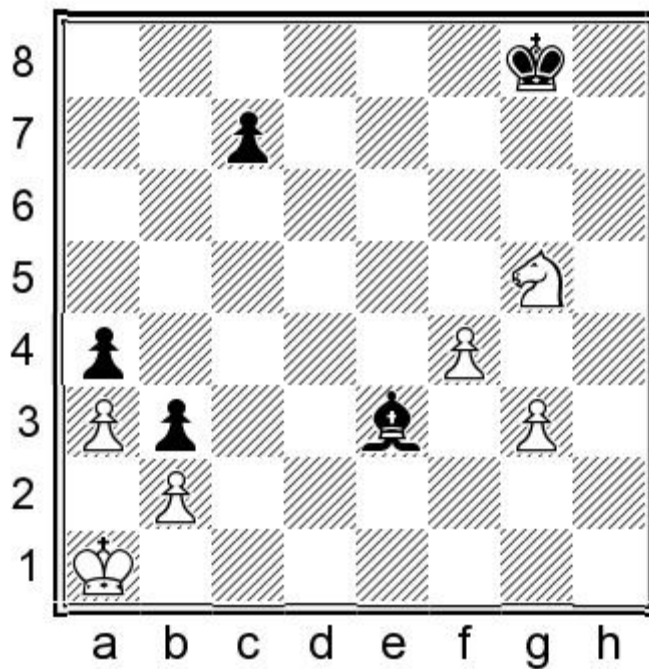
34...♞xd1+ 35.♞xd1 ♞xd1+ 36.♞xd1 a5



37. ♖d8+

I don't know what surprised me more: White's move (which to say the least appeared controversial during the game) or the speed with which it was made. After the game, Anish told me that he was convinced that the ending could be easily won. In fact, things were more complicated.

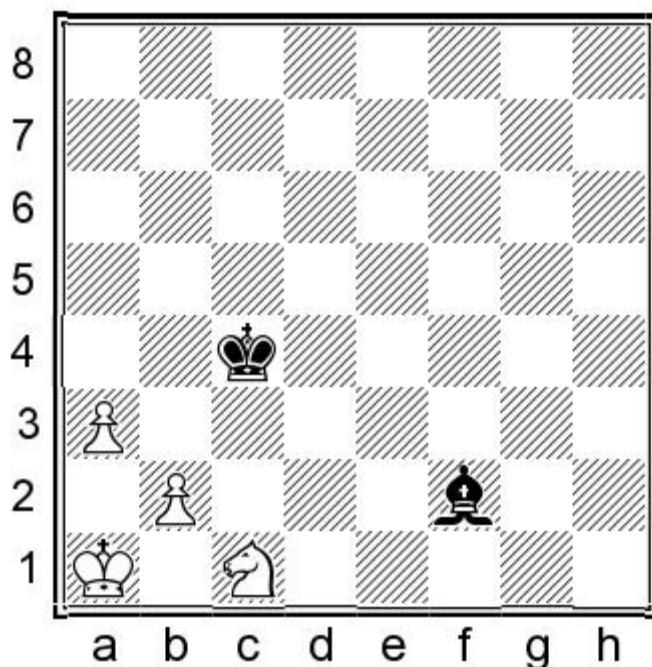
37... ♜xd8 38. ♘xd8 a4 39. ♗xe6 ♕xe5 40. ♗xg5 ♕d4 41. f4 ♕e3 42. g3



42... ♜g7?

Excessive activity is not appropriate in this position. After the accurate 42...c6! Black would hold:
 43.♖e4 ♜d4 44.f5 c5 45.g4 c4 46.g5 ♔g7 47.♗c3 What else? 47...♞xc3 48.bxc3 and the white pawns
 cannot advance by themselves.

43.♗e6+ ♕f6 44.♗xc7 ♕f5 45.♗d5 ♜f2 46.♗c3 ♞xg3 47.♗xa4 ♜f2 48.♗c3 ♕xf4 49.♗e2+ ♕e4
 50.♗c1 ♕d4 51.♗xb3+ ♕c4 52.♗c1



The resulting endgame is easily won. White just needs time and accuracy — things that Anish usually has in abundance.

52...♞c5 53.♕b1 ♕b5 54.♗e2 ♜e7 55.♗c3+ ♕c4 56.♕c2 ♜f8 57.♗b1 ♜e7 58.♗d2+ ♕b5 59.♕b3 ♜f8
 60.♗e4 ♜g7 61.♗c3+ ♕c5 62.♕c2 ♕c4 63.b3+ ♕d4 64.b4 ♕c4 65.♗d1 ♜f6 66.♗b2+ ♕d5 67.♕b3
 ♜d4 68.a4 ♕c6 69.♗d1 ♜g1 70.♕c4 ♕b6 71.♗c3 ♜f2 72.♗e4 ♜h4 73.♗c5 ♜g5 74.♗e6 ♜h4 75.a5+
 ♕a6 76.♗c5+ ♕a7 77.b5 ♜d8 78.♕b4 ♜c7 79.♕a4 ♜d8 80.♗e6

1-0

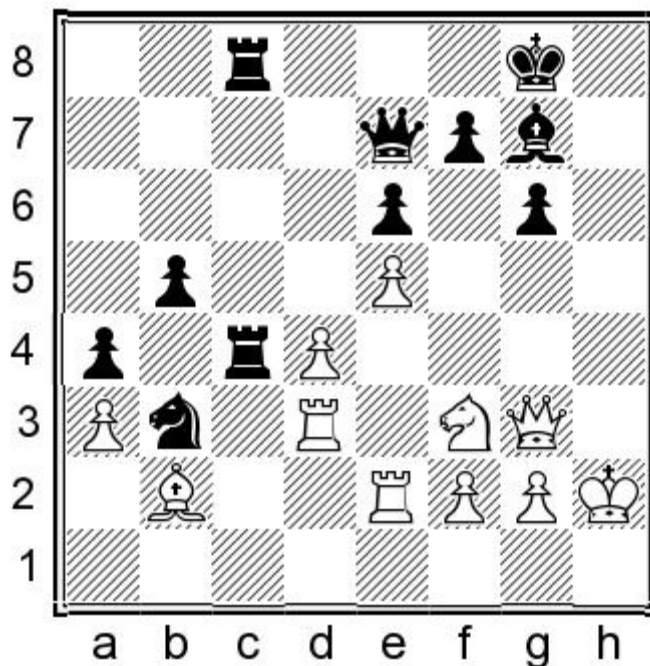
I consider the draws with Israel and China to be real achievements. After six rounds we were in the leading group with ten points. Our mood was excellent. In round seven we faced Bulgaria, who seemed quite a manageable opponent. Everything was decided a few minutes before the time control.

34

Valentin Iotov (2553)

Sergei Tiviakov (2664)

Tromsø 2014



Black has completely outplayed his opponent and the win seemed just a matter of time.

29...♖c2?

This is a serious error, not at all characteristic of Tiviakov. It was necessary to think about prophylaxis, which he stresses in his work with his students. 29...♗h6! would have prevented 30.♘g5 and ensured the complete domination of the black pieces.

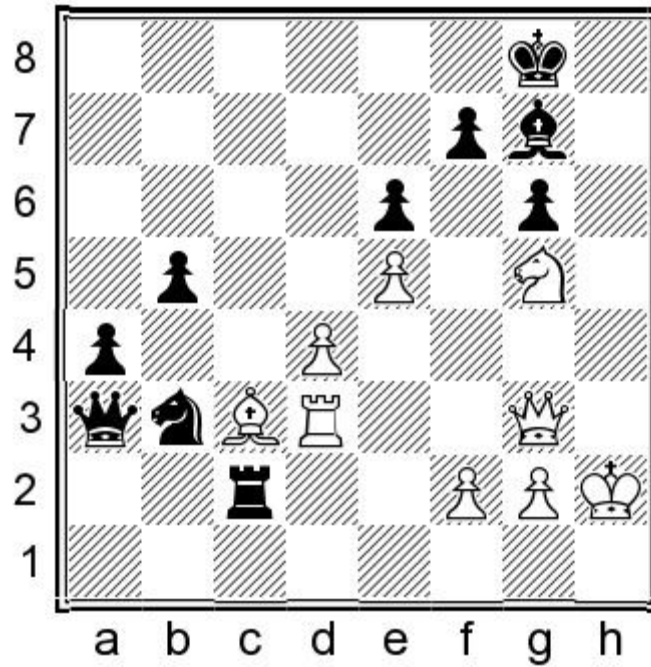
29...♖c2? 30.♖xc2 ♖xc2 31.♗c3

The dead bishop has suddenly come to life!

31...♙xa3??

A suicidal move. 31...♗h6 32.♗b4 ♙d8 would have kept things roughly equal.

32.♘g5



Now White's attack decides the game quickly.

32...♙e7 33.♞f3 f5 34.exf6 ♔xf6 35.♞b4 ♚c7 36.♙xc7 ♞xc7 37.♞xf6 ♘xd4 38.♞d6 ♖g7 39.♞f4 1-0

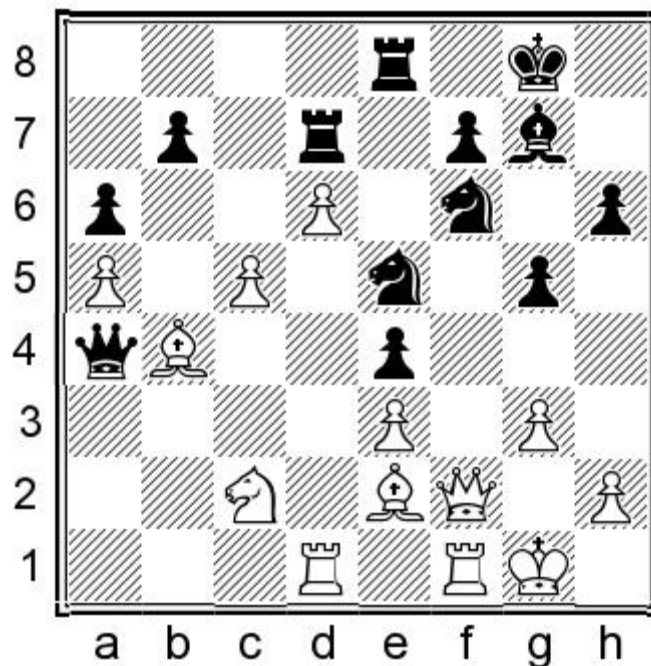
The other game featured even greater drama.

35

Loek van Wely (2662)

Krasimir Rusev (2548)

Tromsø 2014



Black's last move, 31...♙a4, attacked the knight on c2. Loek's answer seemed obvious, but he played

the incredible

32.♖a1??

32.♖d2 was the only, but obvious, answer. The position remained complex, but roughly equal. Now the game ends immediately.

32.♖a1?? ♔xc2 0–1

Such a dramatic mishap made our team lose its balance; nice victories were followed by annoying losses. Our final result was 12th place, by no means a failure, but all of us were disappointed at having missed our chance. The board order almost worked out. The players on the first two boards were good beyond belief; unfortunately the other team members committed inexplicable errors. We were just a tiny step away from success, but the history books will only record our uninspiring final result.

There is not much to tell about the 2015 European Team Championship in Reykjavik. Team Netherlands was ranked ninth and finished eleventh. All but one of the players turned in good performances and gained rating points. The sole exception was Ivan Sokolov who played only three games and lost all of them, a stunning failure for such a strong and experienced grandmaster. I believe there exists, if not a justification, then an explanation. Ivan had been working for a long time as a coach in the UAE, hardly playing in competitions, in fact he had played only a few tournament games in the whole year prior to the European Team Championship. The rating-based selection criteria gave him the right to be on the team, and Ivan exercised this right. His three individual defeats played a crucial role in the loss of match points, which determined our very modest final result.

The Baku Olympiad turned out to be the last tournament where I was captain of the Netherlands. A long-delayed infusion of new blood had finally been made. The only veteran who went to Baku was van Wely, who indisputably deserved his place on the team. A mixture of youth and experience offered us some chances of a successful performance. Naturally we had to display heroics to get ahead of much higher-rated teams, but all the players were very motivated. We started the tournament in the best way possible; after five straight wins the team was at the top of the standings. Our opponents were not weak at all, e.g. Vietnam and Belarus both had solid, grandmaster-only teams. Our proudest achievement was the 3½–½ victory over England, formidable opponents who were ranked significantly higher than us. Rookie Benjamin Bok had scored four out of four. Here is one of his games, which brought us victory in the match against Belarus.

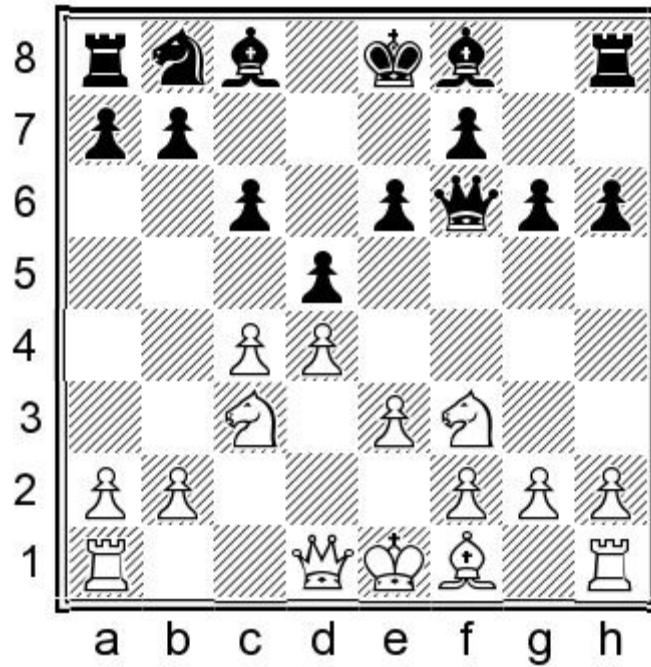
36

Kirill Stupak (2561)

Benjamin Bok (2592)

Baku 2016

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.♘c3 c6 5.♙g5 h6 6.♙xf6 ♔xf6 7.e3 g6



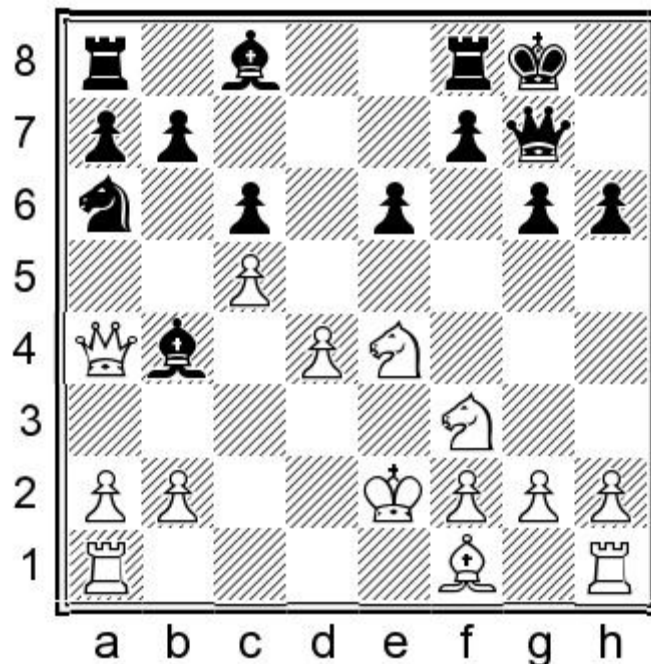
8.e4!? dxe4 9.♘xe4 ♙b4+ 10.♚e2

This is Kramnik's idea. Black faces no problems after the natural 10.♘ed2.

10...♙g7!?

Since Stupak had played this exotic line once already, it was not a complete surprise for Bok. The move in the game had already been prepared at home.

11.c5 0-0 12.♙a4 ♘a6



13.♔e3?!

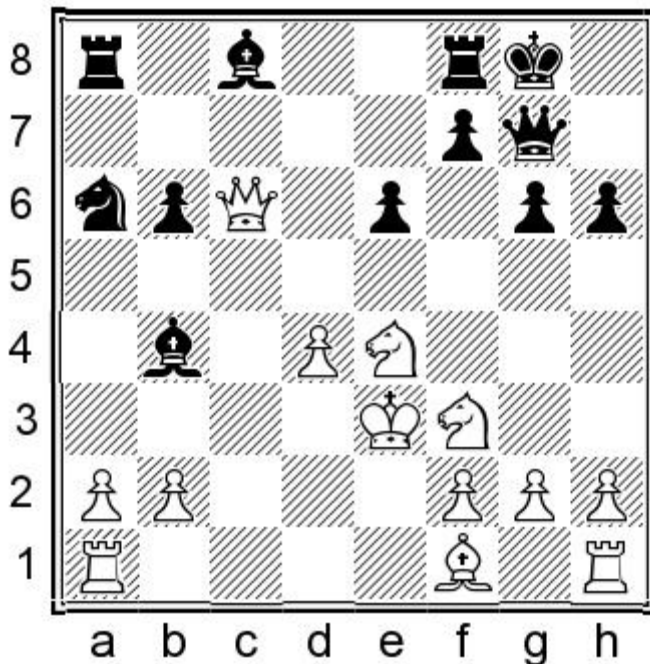
This move is also logical, but White takes on too many commitments with such an outrageous king position. On the other hand, a more reserved move such as 13.♖c1 or 13.♗d1 would postpone the issue, but not resolve it. From now on, the players were on their own, and the Dutch player spent more and more time in thought. Black faces a difficult choice.

13...b5!?

a) In addition to this it is worth considering 13...f5!? 14.♙xa6 (14.♘c3 b5) 14...fxe4 15.♔xe4 ♙xc5 16.dxc5 bxa6. Black's pawn structure is destroyed, but the king on e4 compensates for all the positional weaknesses.

b) Also interesting is 13...♘c7!? 14.♔e2 ♘d5 15.a3 f5.

14.cxb6 axb6 15.♙xc6



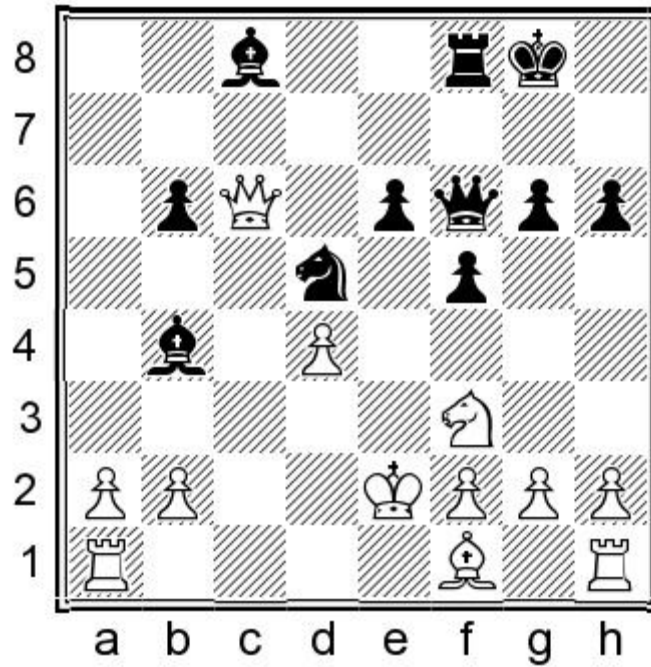
15...f5!?

Not obvious. 15...♖b8! would be logical, but it would be necessary to assess the position arising after 16.♙xa6 ♙xa6 17.♙a4 ♙a5 18.b4 correctly. Only the active 18...f5! 19.♘c3 ♙c7! (19...♖bc8!?) leads to Black's advantage, e.g. 20.♙b3 ♙c4 21.♙a4 g5 22.♘e5 f4+ 23.♔f3 b5! 24.♙c2 ♙xb4.

16.♙xa8 ♘c7 17.♘f6+!

The only move! 17.♙c6 ♘d5+ loses quickly.

17...♙xf6 18.♙c6 ♘d5+ 19.♔e2

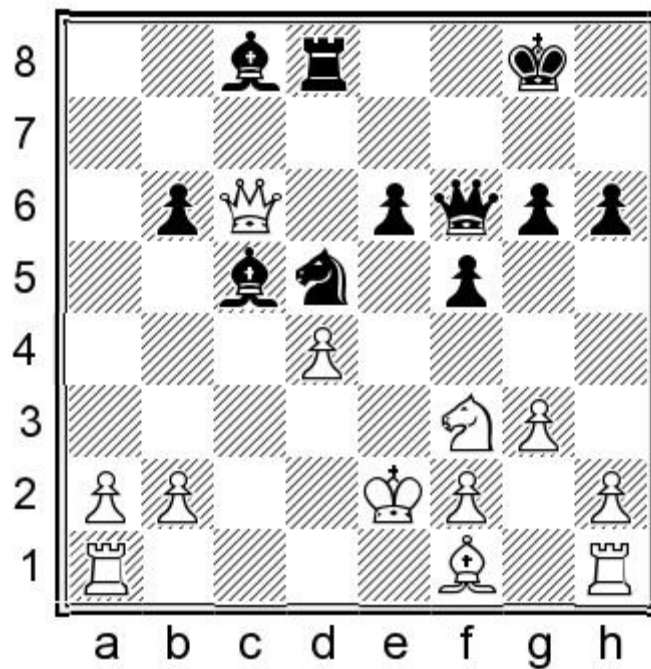


19...Rd8 20.g3?

To defend against the threat of 20...Bf4 and attempt to complete development, but there is no easy way to resolve these issues.

White should have played 20.a3! Bf4+! 21.Kd1 Bc5! 22.Kc2! Bd7 23.Qb7 Bxd4 24.Rd1! leading to a draw: 24...Bxb2 25.Rxd7 Qc3+ 26.Kb1 Qc1+ 27.Ka2 Qa1+ 28.Kb3 Qxa3+ 29.Kc2 Qc3+.

20...Bc5!



21.Qa4

There is no salvation in 21.♞d1 ♕a6+! 22.♔e1 ♖b4+ 23.♘d2 ♚xd4 24.♗xe6+ ♔f8–+ or 21.♞c1 ♕d7 22.♞xc5 (22.♗b7 ♕xd4–+) 22...♕xc6 23.♞xc6 g5!–+.

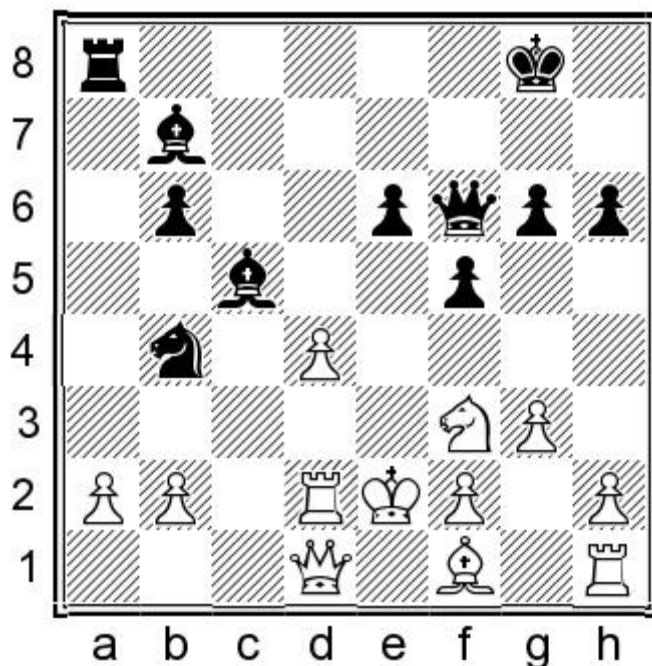
21...♘b4?

Having used up almost all his remaining time, Black didn't find the spectacular 21...♕xd4! 22.♗xd4 (22.♘xd4 ♘b4! 23.♗xb4 ♞xd4 24.♗b5 ♕a6!) 22...♘f4+ 23.♗xf4 ♚xb2+ 24.♘d2 ♕a6+ 25.♔f3 ♖b7+ 26.♔e2 ♗xa1–+.

22.♞d1

Now the battle starts anew. While White had about an hour on his clock, Black had to find the correct moves playing only on the 30-second increment.

22...♕b7 23.♞d2 ♞a8!? 24.♗d1



24...♕f8?!

It would be consistent and correct to play 24...♞xa2! 25.dxc5 ♞xb2 26.♗c1 ♞xd2+ 27.♗xd2 ♕a6+ 28.♔e1 ♗a1+ 29.♗d1 ♗c3+ 30.♗d2 ♗a1+ with a draw.

25.a3 e5?!

All in! After 25...g5 or 25...♘d5 the fight would continue, although considering his time trouble Black's chances would not be great. The position is now at its sharpest.

26.axb4 exd4 27.♗b3+ ♔h8 28.♞d1?

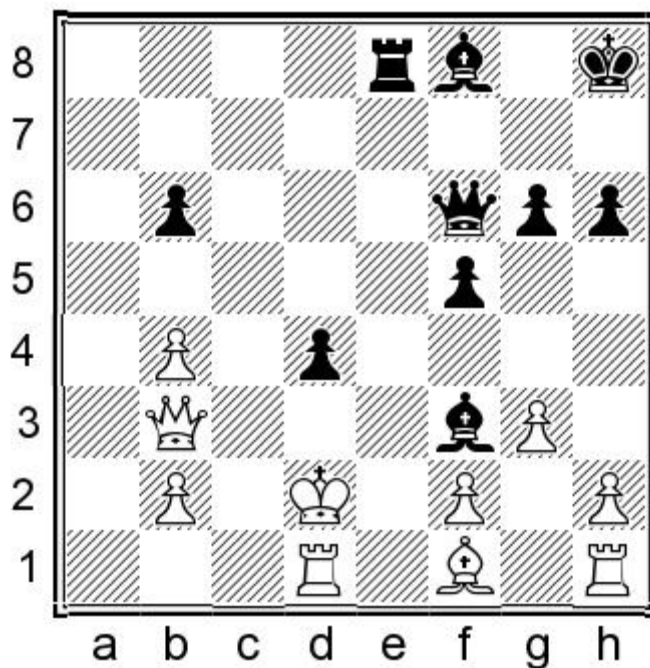
A strange move that was played pretty quickly.

After the natural 28.♙g2! the game would be decided by the White's huge material advantage.

28...♖e8+

Black already had a choice: 28...♔e7+ 29.♚d2 ♜xf3 30.♛xf3 ♛xb4+ with a strong attack.

29.♚d2 ♜xf3



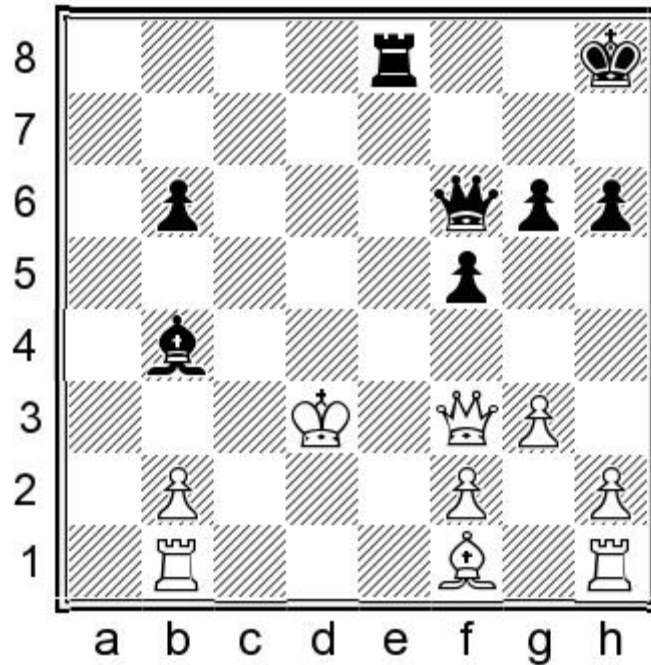
30.♛xf3?!

It was essential to play 30.♙b5! ♛g5+ 31.♚c2 ♜c8+ 32.♚b1 ♜xh1 33.♖xh1 with reasonable chances of salvation.

30...d3! 31.♖b1?

Of course it was quite difficult to find 31.♚xd3! ♛xb2 32.♛c6! ♜d8+ 33.♚e3 ♜xd1 34.♚f3!, but this was the only chance to save the game.

31...♜xb4+ 32.♚xd3



32...♔e6!

Now it's all over.

33.♔c2 ♖c8+ 34.♔c3+ ♜xc3 35.bxc3 ♔c6

0-1

This kind of game can sometimes have a detrimental effect on team stability. Watching rapid changes on the board causes such an expenditure of emotions that players can start feeling devastated.

Our next match was against India, a team that had also started with the maximum score. For a long time, things were going well. There was one quick draw, and our players had the initiative in the remaining three games. However, as often happens in team competitions, we could not win our better positions, and the outcome of the match hinged on the very last game.

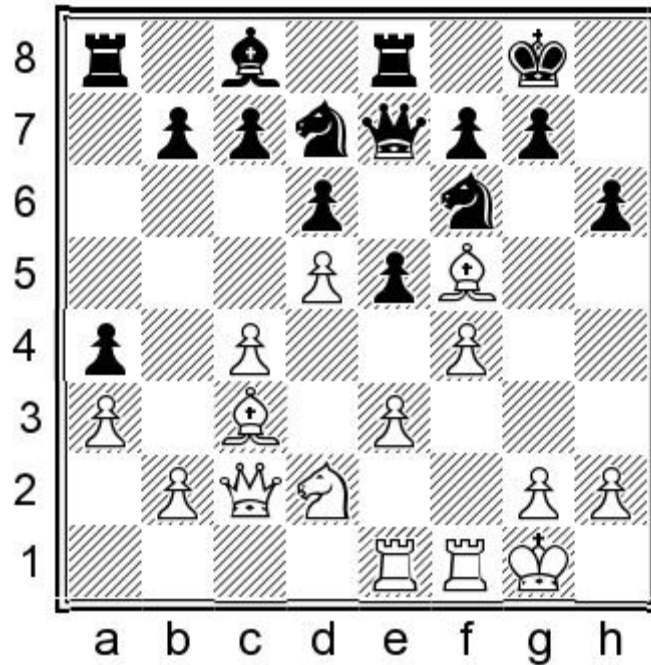
37

Erwin L'Ami (2611)

Baskaran Adhiban (2671)

Baku 2016

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.♔c2 ♘c6 5.♘f3 d6 6.♙d2 ♔e7 7.a3 ♙xc3 8.♙xc3 a5 9.e3 0-0 10.♙d3 h6 11.0-0 e5 12.d5 ♘b8 13.♘d2 a4 14.f4 ♘bd7 15.♞ae1 ♖e8 16.♙f5



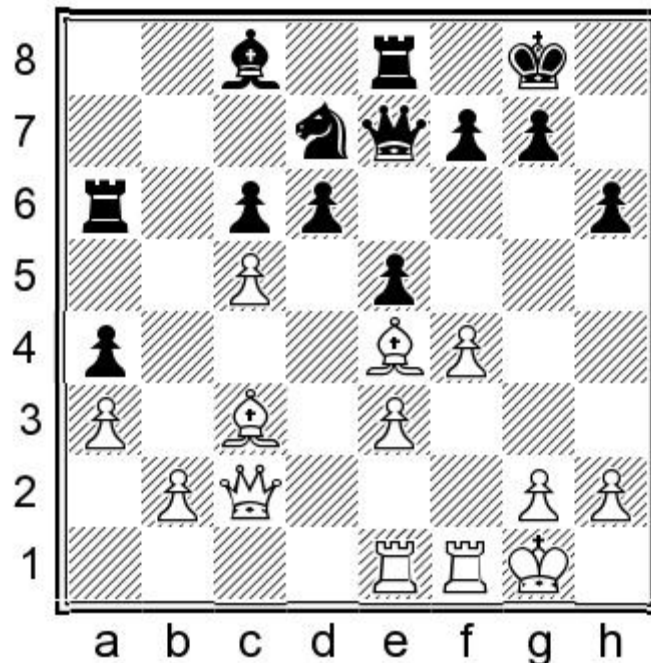
After an interesting opening, White has the two bishops and somewhat better chances in a complex middlegame.

16...c6!?

A controversial decision. 16...e4 was more in the spirit of the position.

17.dxc6 bxc6 18.♘e4 ♘xe4 19.♙xe4 ♖a6 20.♙d1

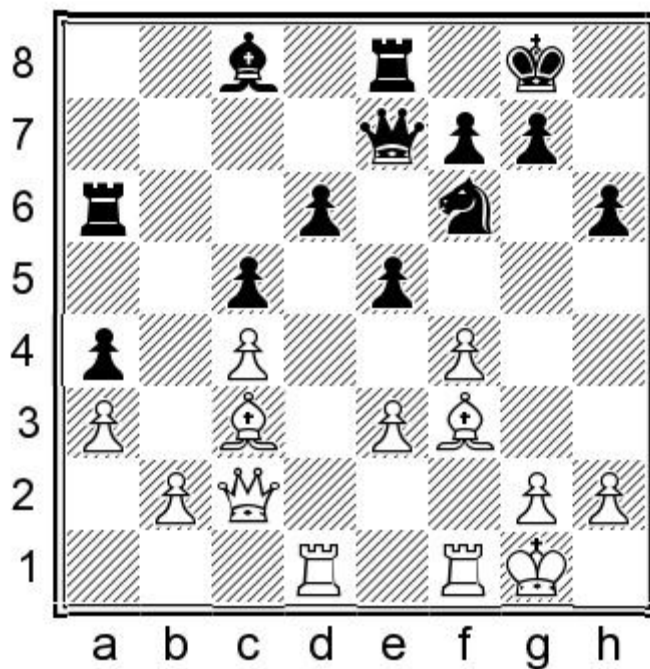
The engine found the curious 20.c5!



20...dxc5 (The tactical justification is 20...♘xc5?! 21.♙h7+ ♔h8 22.fxe5 dxe5?? 23.♙b4; if 20...d5,

21.♙h7+ ♔h8 22.fxe5 is good) 21.h3! A useful preventive move that makes it difficult for Black to find a good way to continue. 21...♘f6 22.♙d3 ♖a8 23.♙xe5 with advantage for White.

20...♘f6 21.♙f3 c5



22.♖xd6!?

The exchange sacrifice is very tempting but the cold-blooded engine doesn't share human optimism. However the normal 22.fxe5 dxe5 23.h3 ♙b7 24.♙xb7 ♖xb7 25.♖f5 ♖c7 doesn't promise White anything special.

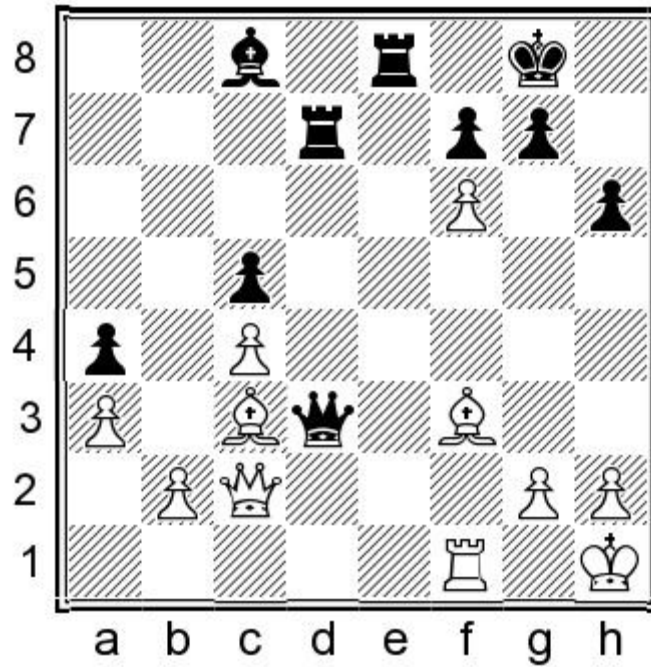
22...♖xd6 23.fxe5 ♖d7

23...♖a6 24.exf6 ♖xe3+ 25.♔h1 g6 would have been more precise.

24.exf6 ♖xe3+ 25.♔h1

Now 25.♖f2 is better for White since Black cannot play 25...♖d3 because of 26.♖xa4.

25...♖d3!



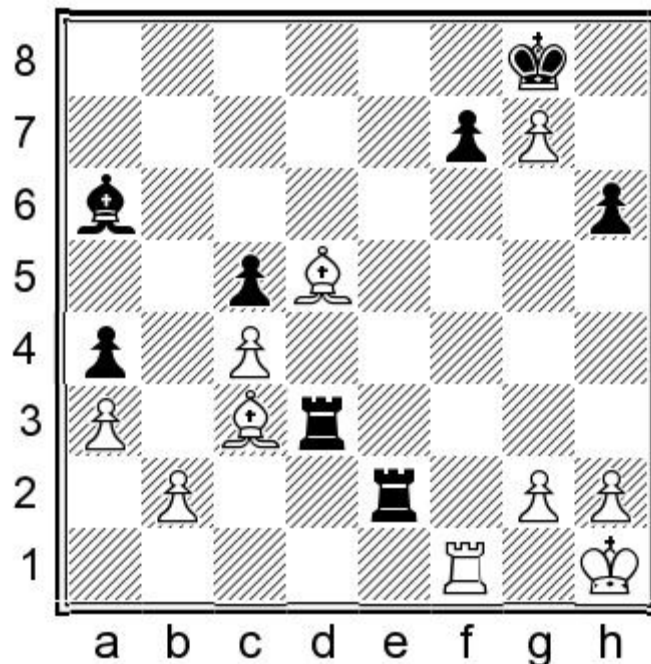
26. ♖xd3

This is forced since the rook on f1 is hanging. White probably overlooked this. A recurrence of such chess blindness would later have even more serious consequences for Erwin.

26... ♜xd3 27. fxg7 ♘a6 28. ♙c6 ♞e2?!

A draw could be reached simply by 28... ♞ee3 29. ♔g1 ♙xc4 30. ♞f4 ♞xc3 31. bxc3 ♞xc3 32. ♙xa4 ♔xg7.

29. ♙d5!



If the black rook had stayed on e3, this would have been impossible due to the capture on d5.

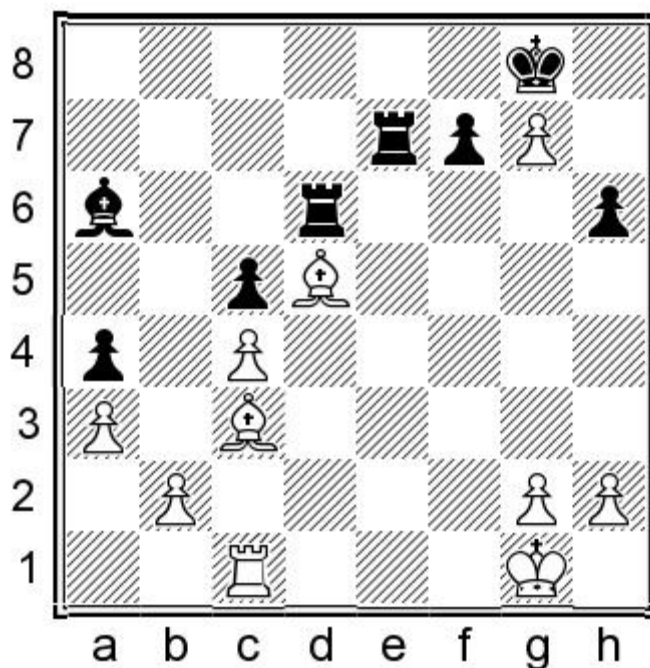
29...♖e7 30.♙f6

Threatening 30...♖xd5, but there was no need for such an intermediate attack. Any sensible rook move would have been better.

30...♖e8 31.♖c1 ♖e2 32.♔g1 ♖ed2 33.♙f3 ♖e3 34.♙c3 ♖d6

34...♖xc3! 35.♖xc3 ♖xb2 36.♙d5 ♙b7 would have resolved all Black's issues. However, knowing Adhiban's limitless optimism, we can be sure that he wasn't thinking about a draw.

35.♙d5 ♖e7



36.♖d1??

A serious blunder which changes the situation on the board dramatically. Granted, it was not easy to find the elegant 36.♖b1!, with the idea of 36...♙b7 (36...♙c8 is better) 37.b4! at the board. In this case Black would have had to fight for a draw. Any other sensible move would have kept things equal.

36...♙xc4 37.♙f3

37.♙xf7+ ♖xf7 38.♖xd6 ♖f1# is not complicated, but White overlooked it!

The rest of the game is not too interesting. We continued to hope for a miracle, but it didn't happen.

37...♖xd1+ 38.♙xd1 ♙b5 39.♙f3 ♖e6 40.♔f2 ♙c6 41.♙g4 ♖d6 42.♙e5 ♖d2+ 43.♔e3 ♖xg2 44.h3 h5 45.♙d1 h4 46.♔f4 ♙d7 47.♙f3 ♖g1 48.♙f6 ♖f1 49.♔e3 ♙xh3 50.♙xh4 ♔xg7 51.♙c6 ♖b1 52.♙xa4

♠xb2 53.♙e7 c4 54.♙b4 ♖g6 55.♖d4 ♙e6 56.♖c3 ♠a2 57.♙c6 f5 58.a4 f4 59.a5 ♖f5 60.♙b7 ♖e5
61.a6 ♙d5 62.♙c5 f3 63.♙d4+ ♖d6 64.♙xd5 ♖xd5 65.a7 ♖c6 66.♖xc4 ♖b7

0-1

As had happened many times before, this defeat left the Dutch team completely deflated. The players kept playing like automata, without any real hope of success. Although we did not lose many rating points, 36th place in the final standings was a complete failure.

Team chemistry, as people not directly involved in chess understand it, was perfect. There was a nice, friendly atmosphere, mutual help in preparation and joint tea parties. Team spirit gave birth to a ‘tea spirit’. No conflicts or aggression. “We’re having fun together!” As long as we played well, relationships within the team were ideal. Even the unavoidable losses couldn’t dampen the team spirit.

Losses did not force players to try harder next time; on the contrary, every loss was perceived as a threat to the players’ comfortable existence. Extra exertion often leads to psychological breakdowns, thus the players’ motto was: “It’s not the result that matters, but maintaining team spirit”. In my opinion, this was the main cause of the stable but fairly unimpressive results by the Netherlands.

Previous Dutch teams had had a very different experience. Conflicts and quarrels shook those teams to the core and often overflowed. Teammates were not on speaking terms; when something was drunk during team meetings, it wasn’t tea. Nevertheless, those teams often won. Even recently, the Netherlands won the European Championship in 2001 and 2005, even though I do not believe that those teams were stronger chess-wise than my current one. I do not want to say that it takes conflict within a team to become winners, or that good human relationships preclude victories. I am simply pointing out that the absence of true fighting spirit adversely affected several performances of the Dutch national team.

Team chess is fundamentally different from other team sports. Players are not neatly labelled as backs, halfbacks and forwards; cooperation and mutual understanding, which are so important in other games, are almost irrelevant in chess. A player sits at the same board and moves the same pieces as when he plays in individual competitions. The only differences are the teammates sitting beside him, and the addition of individual results into the final, most important, team score.

Everything would be simple enough if the strength of the team was determined solely by the sum of individual ratings. In reality, this number only determines the team’s starting rank. Once the competition begins, the results or pairings are unpredictable; this is a secret of the popularity of all sporting events. Sometimes team spirit, stamina and motivation produce real miracles that put all expectations and predictions to shame.



The captain's burden is heavy! (Photo by Boris Dolmatovsky)

What is team spirit in chess and how can it affect the outcome? The chess strength of a particular player comprises several components, such as talent, state of health, psychological and emotional stability and character. It is the sum of these qualities that is rather fairly reflected by his personal rating. Can we automatically extend these concepts to team events? Experienced players and coaches know that when a player becomes part of a team, his playing strength can differ vastly from the one he demonstrates when playing as an individual. I firmly believe that it is the level of motivation that causes such a crucial difference. How important is the team result for a given player? Is this player more or less motivated than when he plays 'just for himself'?

To prove my point, let us consider a situation where a 2800 superstar is facing a solid, 2650 GM. In an individual tournament where both opponents have their typical motivation, the favourite is clear. Now imagine that in a team tournament, the stronger player's motivation is reduced by only a small factor, say about 2%, and the weaker player's motivation is increased by the same 2%. This produces a matchup between 2744 and 2703 respectively, in other words a fairly balanced game!

If we define team strength as the sum of those adjusted 'team-play' ratings, then we have to conclude that boundless motivation can compensate for lack of skill. Of course you can't cross a chasm in two small jumps, so amateurs would typically lose to professionals. It is when relative playing strengths are similar that motivation can work wonders.

Are you wondering how to calculate the correction factor? There is no proven methodology yet, but I am confident that an answer exists. What else can explain the fantastic achievements of Armenia if not increased motivation? Only the team leader, Levon Aronian, one of the world's strongest grandmasters, knew individual success that would match the level of success enjoyed by this team. All the other players were, at best, simply solid grandmasters from the top 100. An opposite example is Russia. Before the start, it always tops the ranking lists, but the final standings paint a very different picture. It is easy to give more examples. There is no doubt that team victories allow Armenian grandmasters to earn sizeable financial bonuses; this is the result of state support for chess in their country. All of us would agree that money is an extremely powerful motivational tool, not to mention patriotism and excellent human relationships within the team.

A corollary follows: having many big names on the same team presents additional problems. Top Ten players are already well-off financially; they already have enough tournament opportunities. Additional factors are needed to increase motivation. It is no secret that when Magnus Carlsen plays for Norway, his results are much lower than in individual competitions. However, at the Baku Olympiad, the Norwegian team had an unexpected chance to finish high, so Magnus 'caught the fever' too. Also in Baku, two teams fought for the gold until the very last moment. Team USA had three elite players at the peaks of their careers. One would think that their motivation would not be too high, after all, relations within the American team are not as good as amongst the Armenians, and the US pays much lower bonuses for a victory. Still, the team leaders were inspired by the dream of winning the Olympiad for the first time since World War II, and their motivation was off the charts. Their main rival was a Ukraine without Ivanchuk, its long-time leader, which relied on players whose individual ratings were substantially lower than those of the Americans. Nevertheless, Team Ukraine always showed great

fighting spirit and the leader's absence only brought extra motivation.

A coach's work with a club differs greatly from that with a national team. In a club, the sky is the limit if the club management is ambitious enough. The national team, as a rule, has a much narrower choice of players. There was only one team among those I worked with where there was serious competition for a slot on the team — the Ukrainian national team. Azerbaijan's strength is roughly equal to that of Ukraine, but the bench is too short. Team Netherlands doesn't have many candidates to select from, and their average level is lower.

In addition a new trend has recently spread from the so-called western countries to the rest of the world. Young players became increasingly pragmatic. If they do not reach a sufficiently high level (say 2700) by the time of high-school graduation, they abandon competitive chess and choose another career. This has been, and remains, a typical occurrence in the Netherlands. In recent years the 'flight' from chess has become fashionable. Ilya Nizhnik and Yaroslav Zhrebukh from Ukraine, Vasif Durarbayli from Azerbaijan, Parimarjan Negi from India and the Ukrainian-born Turkish player Alexander Ipatov are just a few names to illustrate the wide geography of this phenomenon.

Obviously, intense competition for a place on a team raises battle preparedness. It is therefore not surprising that among all the teams I worked with, Ukraine always had the best fighting spirit (a.k.a. team motivation level). National mentality and traditions also played a role. As far as I remember, Ukrainian teams have always been remarkable for their indomitable spirit and healthy athletic arrogance, which is necessary for big victories. I dare to hope that, to some extent, I was able to serve as a living link to the glorious traditions of the past. No matter the circumstances, Ukraine's team motivation level has always exceeded 100%, which often helped us to get out of the most difficult situations.

When I look back on my life as a captain, I reflect not only on the wins at the Olympiads that demanded the most from all team members. I am equally proud to remember the third place in the 2009 European Team Championship, when not just our rivals but the circumstances were against us. The Netherlands also have a stable team motivation level but it never leaves the comfort zone. As for Azerbaijan, there is no stability at all. Relationships within the team and, therefore, motivation, vary so greatly that any predictions are meaningless.

I would venture to advance a subversive argument based on my personal experience. It is not the captain's role to create ideal team chemistry in a national team, and especially not in a club. Players in a team have usually known each other for many years; they are often friendly with each other, but explicit mutual rejection is not uncommon too. It is not practical to waste time and effort trying to patch up something that clearly cannot be fixed. It is wonderful if a team is like a band of brothers! If not, just try to extinguish open fires and focus on chess.

What, in my opinion, are the qualities of a perfect captain? Perfect people do not exist, but let's explore this issue. To start with, I believe that the captain is a key member of the team, perhaps even the most important one. The captain's goal is that the team as a whole, as well as its players individually, perform in the best way possible. As we noted, relationships between players within a team can vary greatly, but the captain cannot have a conflict with anyone. Every team member should know that he can always confide in the captain and ask advice at any time and on any subject. It follows that the

captain's most important traits are to have significant life experience and to maintain good, or at least neutral, relations with all the other members of the team.

Organisational skills and punctuality are of the utmost importance. If the captain doesn't have these qualities, it can result in a direct loss of points, especially due to the zero-tolerance rule. Team lists have also got to be submitted by a certain deadline. There have been many cases when a substitution that was agreed upon at an evening team meeting was not communicated properly because of an oversight on the captain's part. Even if the error was caught in time, it had extremely unpleasant consequences.

I happened to be involved in a unique situation in 1988. Then, the European Club Cup was played in several locations. The final tournament in Rotterdam was a double round-robin between four teams. I played on board one for CSKA, the Red Army team, and also performed the functions of captain. One round before the end our victory seemed assured; we had a two-point lead over Honvéd from Hungary, and it was they, the team in pursuit, whom we had to face in the last round. Given that their players were much weaker in all respects, our championship title was not in doubt. When the last round started, I was not at the board, but on a train heading for Biel, where a tournament was to start the very next day. It had been known about in advance, and I did not worry when I left. All the necessary instructions had been given; the only thing left was to submit the team list. Alas, the military people who accompanied and supervised the team were not up to a task of such tremendous difficulty. It appeared that they started drinking to the upcoming victory the night before. As a result, the match began with a forfeit for my non-appearance on board one. The demoralised team was barely able to preserve the lead by losing by the minimum score.

As to chess strength, I do not believe that a captain necessarily needs to be a very highly-rated player, especially when there are rules in place for team selection. I think there is a lot of logic in the US system where the players who were named in the team according to objective criteria choose their captain by a majority vote. Naturally a strong grandmaster can help during preparation, or advise whether to accept a draw. Now, when the captain is only allowed to inter vene after forty moves, such situations have become rare. No captain can help a player who overthinks, like in the Predojević-Mamedyarov game. An International Master is quite enough as a captain, even for a strong team.

A good captain will not be too emotional, Things happen, and it is very important to keep a cool head. This is especially true in the last rounds, when the stakes rise sharply and each game costs more. The story of Team SOCAR which I related in these pages can serve as documentary evidence.

The main requirement for being a captain is to remain an honest person in any circumstances. It is not so easy to be a captain!

PART II. COACH

To improve and grow, every chess player has to address the issues that prevent him from progressing. Collaboration with an experienced mentor or assistant can greatly accelerate a player's creative growth and improve his results. Since I never had a personal coach, I had to perform these functions on my own — with fair success — from time to time. Still, during the many years of forced communication with myself as a coach, I accumulated a lot of claims to myself as a player. Often, the coaching half of this peculiar duo had a desire to try itself with a more capable student. The first opportunity for coaching at a high level came quite early, perhaps too early, when I was completely unprepared for this type of work.

EFIM GELLER — A FALSE START

The outcome — which is, of course, what matters most — was a failure. The atmosphere within our small team was far from ideal. I am talking about the quarter-final match of the 1971 Candidates cycle between Viktor Korchnoi and Efim Geller, the cycle that was so brilliantly won by Robert Fischer. I was 'assigned' to Geller's team. At that time, graduates of Soviet universities did not have the opportunity to look for jobs of their own choosing; they were assigned to positions by a ministry in charge of a specific field. Thus, even though I barely had time to start my military service after university, the authorities assigned me to help my famous teammate. Like me, Geller was from Odessa. True, by that time he had already moved to Moscow, but Odessa is such a special place that people born there never forget their roots. Efim Petrovich and I had known each other for a long time; we had played for the same team more than once and relations between us were quite good. The problem lay in his permanent coach and close friend, Eduard Gufeld. Naturally it was Eduard who played first fiddle in our coaching tandem. Gufeld had a pretty bright personality, witty, with a ruddy complexion, and was a strong chess player with an interesting style. However all his ideas, chess projects and even jokes were superficial; at least that's how I perceived them. I didn't like him too much as a person and didn't agree with his methods of preparation for the match itself. Still, I was only an assistant to established professionals, so I had to do the work that was assigned to me.

From the very beginning, the match proved difficult for Geller. He started with a loss and was regularly in heavy time trouble. Game seven proved decisive. It evolved into a complex positional struggle and was adjourned in a somewhat worse position for Geller. Home analysis showed, however, that it was possible to hold a draw. It was then, much to our surprise, that the Korchnoi team took a timeout. The new generation of chess fans should bear in mind that adjourning games after five hours of play, home analysis and resumption of play on specifically designated days were normal components of all serious competitions. In tournaments, a player could have accumulated several such adjourned games by the day when they had to be completed and their results could change the tournament situation dramatically. In the Candidates matches, each participant had the right to individual days off and had to notify the arbiters in advance of his decision to use them. Each of the players reserved this opportunity for special situations; I do not remember anyone ever taking a day off for additional analysis of an adjourned position. Thus, the decision of the opposition camp came as a big surprise. Even more

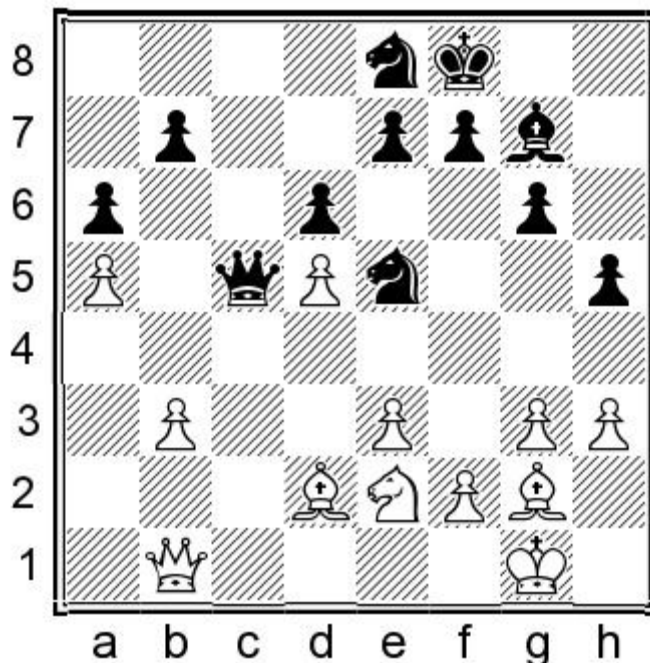
unexpected was the way the game went when it was finally continued.

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Viktor Korchnoi (2660)

Efim Geller (2630)

Moscow 1971



41. ♖d4 ♜d7

As was his custom, Geller spent a lot of time in reply to the sealed move. This was probably taken into account by his opponent when he chose this course of action.

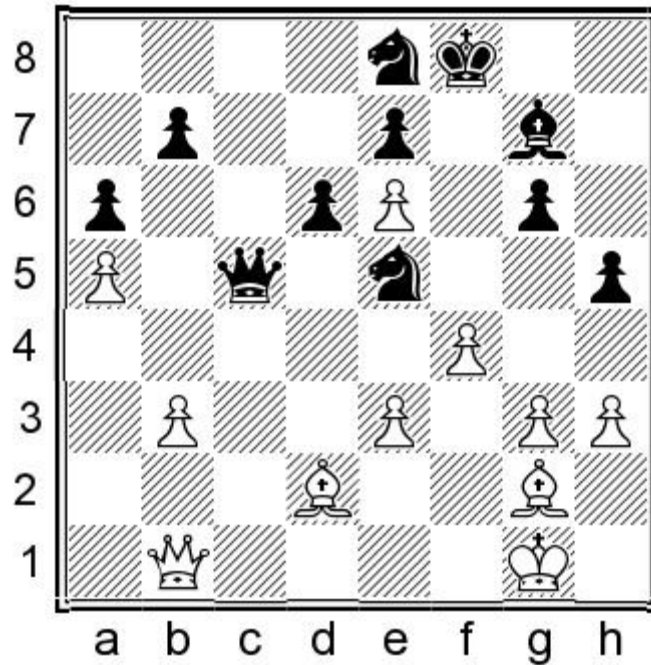
42. ♜e6+!

A bolt from the blue! It is surprising that such a relatively simple position can feature an absolutely correct piece sacrifice; even more surprising that three grandmasters with more than enough time to analyse the position did not even consider such a possibility — a completely unique case of collective chess blindness! On the other hand this decision also turned out to be very difficult for the Korchnoi team. Desperate to find an advantage in a normal game, they used an extra day to search for hidden possibilities. In the end, this bold plan proved decisive for the fate of the match.

42... fxe6 43. dxe6 ♜e5!

It was definitely weaker to play 43... ♜df6 44. ♚xg6 ♜g8 45. ♙xb7 with an obvious advantage for White.

44. f4



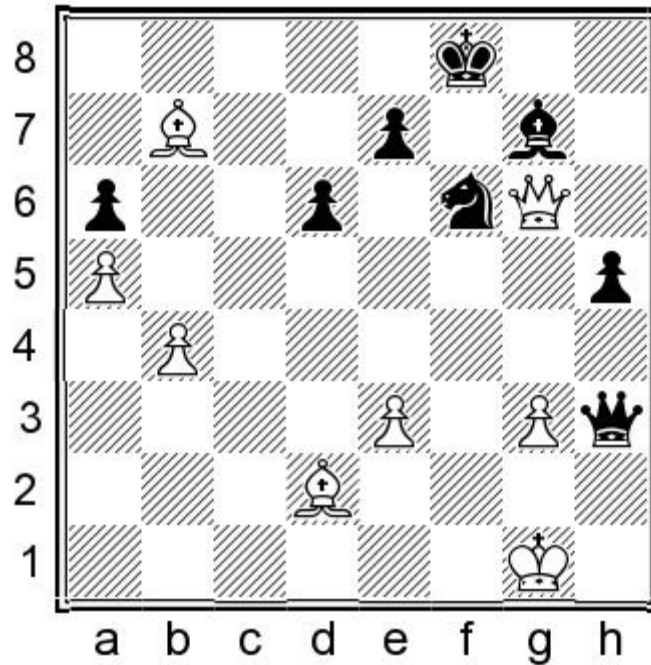
44...♞f6?!

In a difficult situation, Geller spent a lot of time searching for the best defence, but now he misses a chance to equalise. 44...♞c6! 45.♙xc6 (45.♙xg6!? ♞d8 46.♙f3 is a sharper and riskier way to continue. Perhaps Korchnoi would have followed this path, given his opponent's nerves and time trouble.) 45...♙xc6 46.♙xg6 ♔g8 47.♙f7+ ♔h7 48.♙xh5+ ♔g8 and White has to force a draw by perpetual check.

45.b4 ♙b5?

Mistakes come in pairs! Tougher resistance was offered by 45...♙c8! 46.fxe5 dxe5 47.♙xg6 ♙xe6 because 48.♙xb7?? is impossible due to 48...♙d7!.

46.fxe5 ♙xe5 47.♙xg6 ♙xe6 48.♙xb7 ♙xh3



49. ♔g5!

The strongest move, underlining White's decisive advantage.

49... ♕e6

If 49... ♖g4 then 50. ♗h4 wins.

50. ♗xa6 ♕a2 51. ♗c3 ♕c2 52. ♗xf6 ♗xf6 53. ♗h6+ ♔e8 54. ♗xh5+ ♔d8 55. ♗g4 ♕b1+ 56. ♔f2 1-0

This whole story would seem implausible to a modern chess player, indeed nowadays a computer-based chess engine would instantly come up with every option for White, including the knight sacrifice. With minimum effort you would have access to all the lines that I included in the comments and even those that did not make it for lack of space. However, in the 'good old days', even the world chess elite wandered in the dark, making vague guesses about the possibilities contained in a position. The next, eighth, game was the last in the match. As usual, Geller fell into severe time trouble and everything was decided then.



Odessa, 1974. With Efim Geller and Viktor Korchnoi before the Petrosian-Korchnoi Candidates' semifinal. It was after the scandalous dénouement of this match that Korchnoi started having problems that led to his defection to the West two years later. (Photo from the author's archive)

Obviously, any experience is important, and negative ones often prove even more useful. However, at that time, I was too busy thinking about myself and my own career, so I did not seriously analyse the reasons that led to my player's defeat. In addition, as I have already mentioned, the position of second in that match was not my free choice. However, even then, it seemed wrong to me to put an obvious emphasis on the openings in preparing for such a serious confrontation. Back then, Geller was one of the strongest grandmasters in the world, but serious shortcomings in his game were visible to the naked eye. The recurring problem of constant time trouble seemed to me a much more important aspect of the struggle. Yet again, I am afraid, we are discussing issues that are incomprehensible to a modern audience. Increments were unknown back then and cases of time trouble were just monstrous. The last 10–15 moves often had to be played with only a few seconds remaining on the clock. Geller's analytical personality made him one of the few players who approached a chess game as a research project and attempt to solve problems that are difficult, even for a modern computer. He clearly lacked a pragmatic approach to a game of chess. At that time, due to my youth and inexperience, I was not yet able to suggest a fundamental change of approach, while the experienced and celebrated Efim Geller would already have been unable to accept one.

VITALY TSESHKOVSKY — A BREAKTHROUGH THAT FAILED

I had a lot of luck during my first experience in fully-fledged coaching work. As I have already written, previously Tukmakov the coach worked with Tukmakov the player, which was not too inspiring. By the age of thirty, these two incarnations of my personality had another crisis in their relationship. I was drained due to the USSR Championships and the qualifying tournaments needed to take part in those events; constant psychological tension deprived my game of pleasure and lowered the results. I needed to take a timeout.

In 1976, I was lucky enough to become Vitaly Tseshkovsky's second at the Interzonal Tournament in Manila. Tseshkovsky and I had an excellent relationship and felt comfortable with each other, which was confirmed by the tournament in Leipzig where we had played earlier. He won the tournament, I took second place, and we agreed on cooperation right there.

I had suspected for a long time that the role of mentor could be very interesting, but somehow never had an opportunity to prove it. At the time, Vitaly was thirty-two years old, and this was his first tournament at such a high level. He was a very interesting player, with a deep understanding of the game and a great sense of dynamics. However, his quest for truth and the desire to calculate lines to the very end routinely led to sometimes horrific time trouble. In addition, in chess, as in life, he was completely devoid of pragmatism, which, even with huge natural talent, made his play unstable. He also lacked ambition and self-confidence.

Of course it is extremely difficult to change the psychology of a chess player during a short pre-tournament training session, but nevertheless we set lofty goals for ourselves.

The first three in the Interzonal would proceed to the Candidates matches. The main favourites were the established stars Boris Spassky, Lev Polugaevsky and Vlastimil Hort, as well as the up-and-coming Henrique Mecking and Ljubomir Ljubojević. At first, everything went according to our plan: Vitaly played solidly and cautiously against the leading competitors and carefully amassed points against weaker rivals.

After nine rounds, he was undefeated and his six points placed him in the leading group. It was at that moment that his trials and tribulations began. First, he lost to Mecking with White in a position where he had every chance of winning and, in the very next round, a real catastrophe happened.

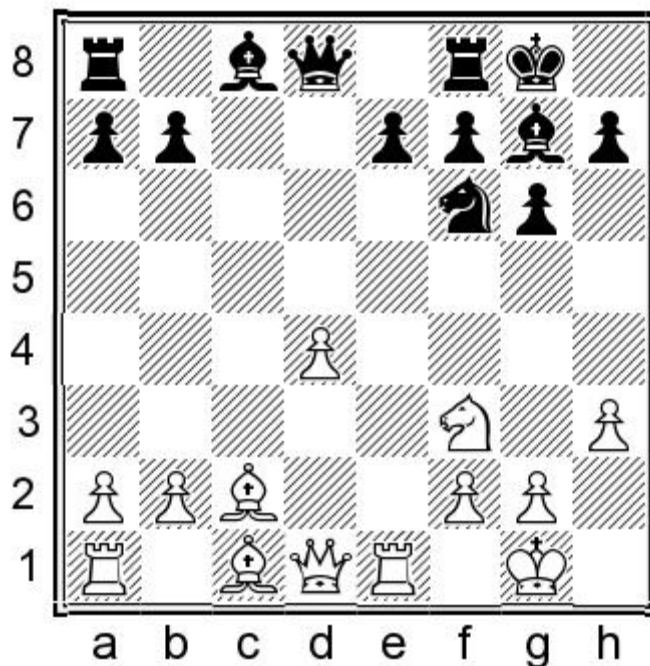
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Sergio Mariotti (2470)

Vitaly Tseshkovsky (2550)

Manila 1976

1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♘g7 3.♗c3 c6 4.♗f3 d5 5.h3 ♗f6 6.♙d3 dxe4 7.♗xe4 ♗xe4 8.♙xe4 ♗d7 9.0-0 0-0
10.♞e1 c5 11.c3 cxd4 12.cxd4 ♗f6 13.♙c2



13...♔e6?

With the idea of placing the bishop on d5, however the move has a serious flaw. It would have been simpler and safer to play 13...b6 with good play for Black.

14.♖xe6!

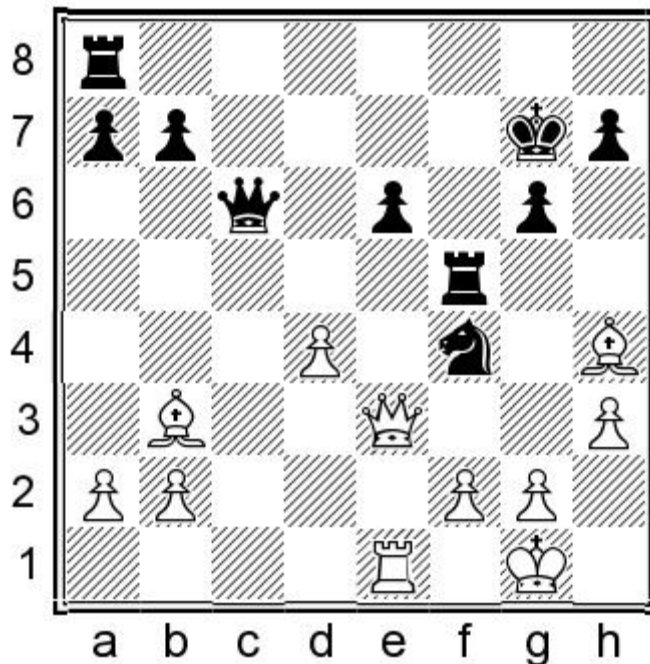
Of course!

14...fxe6 15.♘g5 ♖d6 16.♗e2 ♘d5 17.♘xe6?

Returning the favour.

Much stronger was 17.♗xe6+ ♖xe6 18.♘xe6 ♖f6 19.♔b3 ♖xe6 20.♔xd5 ♔f7 21.♔g5!, when Black would have had to fight hard for a draw.

17...♖f6 18.♘xg7 ♔xg7 19.♔g5 ♖f7 20.♔b3 ♘f4 21.♗e3 e6 22.♖e1 ♖f5 23.♔h4 ♗c6



23...♖af8 was safer.

24.d5!

Here too the Italian player chooses the most active option. If 24.f3 ♖af8 and Black faces no problems.

24...♗xd5

It was also possible to play 24...exd5!? 25.g4 ♖f7 26.♗g5 ♔d6.

25.♔d4+

No simplifications! White goes all-in.

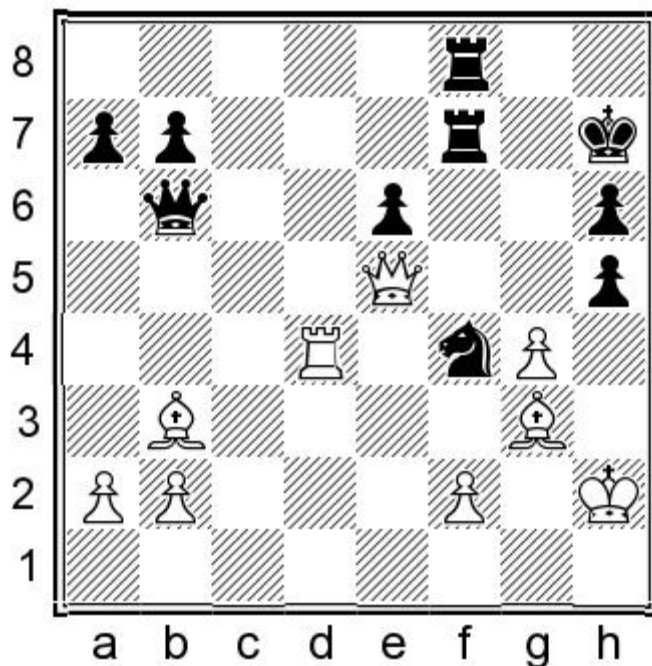
25.♔xe6 ♔xe6 26.♖xe6 g5 27.♗g3 ♖d8 would lead to an equal position.

25...♔g8 26.g4!? ♗f4 27.♖e4 ♖f7 28.♔h2 ♖af8 29.♔e5 h6 30.♗g3 ♔b6 31.h4 ♔h7 32.h5?!

Now it is White who plays dangerously.

32.♗c4 would maintain a dynamic balance.

32...gxh5! 33.♖d4



When you are in time trouble, it is not easy to understand this mysterious move.

33...h4??

The simple 33...♘g6! 34.♙c2 hxg4 leads to a big advantage for Black, since 35.♖xg4? is very bad due to 35...♖xf2+.

34.♙xf4

It turns out that with his last move, White simply attacked a piece! Now he is both ahead in material and has an attack. The game is, in fact, finished.

34...♙c6 35.♙d1 h3 36.f3 ♚b6 37.♙c2+ ♔g8 38.♙xh6 ♚xb2 39.♙e4 ♖c8 40.♙g6+ ♔h8 41.♖d2 ♙e5+ 42.f4 ♙e3

1-0



Premier League, Baku 1977. Vitaly Tseshkovsky closely watching the game of his second. (Photo from the author's archive)

Overnight, Vitaly's quest to qualify for the Candidates matches was derailed. There was a silver lining though: those losses erased all the stress. It seemed that he had no more chances to qualify, so Tsheskovsky started playing his best chess.

After a series of four wins in a row, the situation changed dramatically and he stood a real chance of finishing in the top three. Here's how Vitaly won against one of his main rivals.

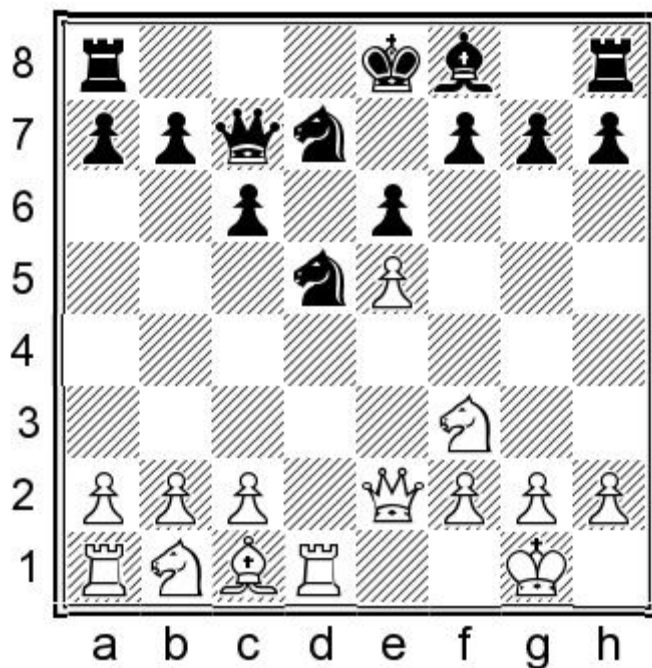
40

Vitaly Tsheskovsky (2550)

Vlastimil Hort (2600)

Manila 1976

1.e4 ♘f6 2.e5 ♗d5 3.d4 d6 4.♗f3 ♕g4 5.♖e2 c6 6.♗g5!? ♖xe2 7.♙xe2 dxe5 8.dxe5 e6 9.0-0 ♚c7
10.♞d1 ♗d7 11.♗f3



11...♗e7?!

It makes no sense to dwell on the opening intricacies. Then, as now, Alekhine's Defence was out of fashion, plus Vlastimil Hort was never a real specialist in it, which might explain his dubious last move. He deliberately moves the knight away from the centre, losing valuable time.

It would have been more logical to support the knight's position on d5 with 11...b5.

12.♗bd2 ♗g6?

Consistent with the previous moves, but bad. Granted, not many people would be able to admit their mistakes immediately with 12...♗d5, but 12...b5 13.c4 bxc4 14.♗xc4 ♗d5 was also much better than the move in the game.

13. ♖c4 b5

Too late.

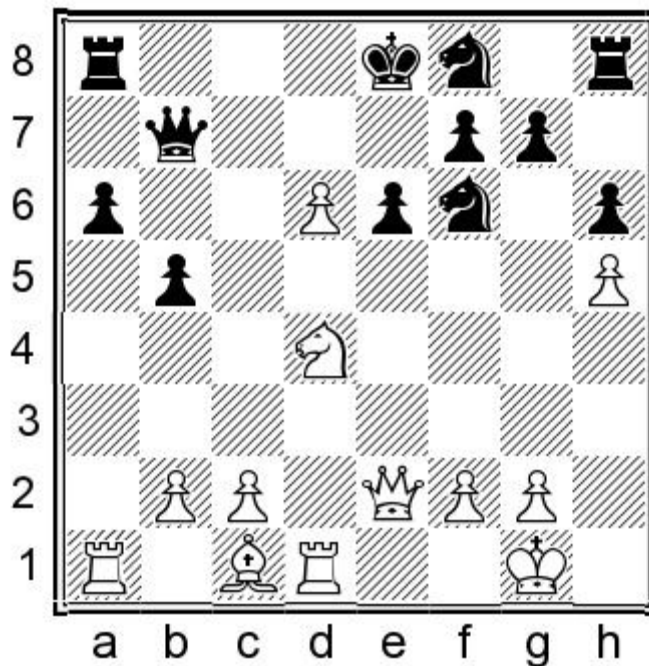
14. ♖d6+ ♙xd6 15. exd6 ♚b7 16. h4 h6 17. a4!

Starting another attack on the queenside.

17... ♖f6 18. h5! ♖f8

18... ♖xh5 19. d7+ ♔d8 20. ♖h4! ♖xh4 21. ♚xh5 ♖g6 22. ♙e3+- is bad.

19. axb5 cxb5 20. ♖d4 a6



21. ♚xf3!

Paradoxical, but very strong!

Instead of attacking the black king, which is stuck in the centre, Vitaly unexpectedly offers to exchange queens.

21... ♖d5

After 21... ♚xf3 22. gxf3! Black's position is destroyed.

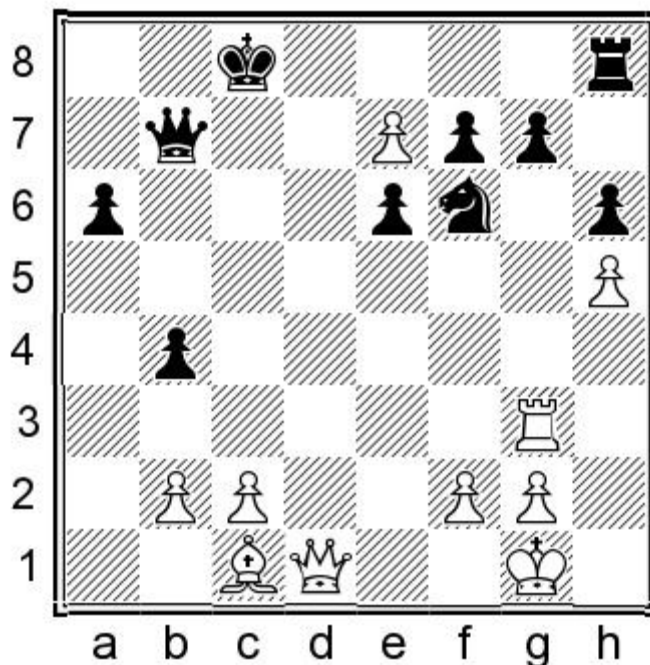
22. ♖f5 0-0-0 23. ♖e7+! ♖xe7 24. dxe7 ♜xd1+ 25. ♚xd1 ♖d7

25... ♚xe7 26. ♜xa6.

26.♖a3

Not bad, but 26.♔d6 ♖b6 27.♔g3! is much stronger.

26...b4 27.♖g3 ♘f6



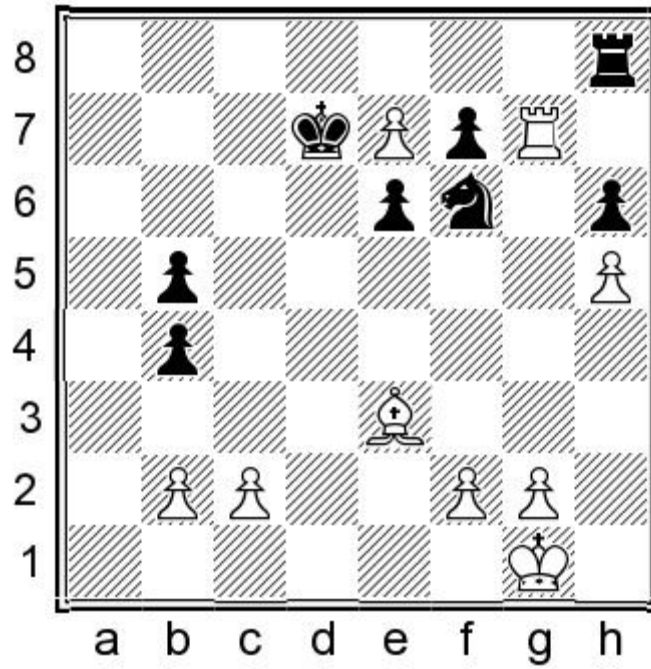
28.♔e2?!

28.♔d3! would have been much stronger, not allowing Black's reply.

28...♔d7!

An unexpected means of defence. White was only counting on 28...♔xe7 29.♔xa6+ ♖b7 30.♔xb7+ ♔xb7 31.♖xg7 when the win is just a matter of time.

29.♔e3 ♖b5! 30.♔xb5+ axb5 31.♖xg7



31...b3?

The last mistake. It was necessary to play 31...♔xe7! 32.♕c5+ ♔e8, although even in this case 33.g4! gives White a significant advantage in the endgame.

32.♖xf7+- ♜d5 33.♖f8 1-0



Rafael Vaganian joined the intrigued spectators. (Photo from the author's archive)

The only thing left was to play the remaining games calmly and confidently, especially since the final rounds were relatively easy. Unfortunately Vitaly had almost no energy left. Do not forget that the Interzonal was held in the Philippines, in terrible heat. The air conditioning in the tournament hall often failed; imagine how difficult the conditions were. In addition, such wild swings in his fortunes had exhausted Vitaly psychologically. In his game against Kavalek, he lapsed into time trouble yet again and lost. Still, there was a chance to qualify even after this: he needed to win his last two games against the tournament outsiders. Unfortunately he managed to get only one win. As a result, he finished in

fourth place, a mere half point behind third which would have allowed him to play in the Candidates. Such a sad outcome!

What were my feelings after that first serious coaching experience? Everything was very interesting, including the Philippines with their exotic Asian atmosphere. After all, this happened at a time when it was extraordinary for a Soviet citizen to travel abroad, especially to such faraway countries. As for professional impressions, it was useful to take a look at such a strong and important tournament from the outside, not as a player. My relationship with Vitaly remained good throughout the tournament, which was even a bit surprising, considering the ups and downs he experienced. Still, we didn't find a remedy for the serious malady called Time Trouble.

This Interzonal Tournament remained the first and only one in Vitaly's career. Later on, he would win two USSR Championships and be successful in international tournaments, but an uncompromising spirit coupled with a lack of practicality would not allow Tseshkovsky to take full advantage of his enormous natural talent.

MARK DVORETSKY — A PROFESSIONAL IN ACTION

My next stint as a coach began in an unexpected manner. I was approached by Mark Dvoretzky with a request to help him at the World Junior Championship, for which two of his students had qualified. There is no chess player nowadays who does not know his name, but back then Dvoretzky was a very young coach who had only recently ended a professional playing career.

He was a strong chess player, but did not stand out in junior or youth competitions. However, quite unexpectedly, he quickly improved once he moved into adult competitions. Not only did his results get better, the quality of his play also visibly improved. Twice in a row, Mark qualified for the Elite League finals, finishing in the top half of the table once, which was considered a great achievement at the time. It became obvious that his successes were the result of hard and serious work. The grandmaster title, the goal of many chess players, was not far away.

However it was at this point that Dvoretzky changed the direction of his chess activities dramatically and switched to full-time coaching. It was a bold decision. After all, the prestige of being a chess player was far greater than that of a coach. One could count Soviet grandmasters on the fingers of two hands, and their names were widely known. Meanwhile coaching was associated with activities for children in the Palaces of Pioneers and was perceived as being on a par with teaching elementary school. In other words, it was a decent but not lucrative job which wouldn't bring any glory. Of course grandmasters who were going to a serious official tournament were usually assigned a second, and some world champions had a large team of assistants, but these were exceptions which did not change the overall situation. As a rule, a coach's lot was to teach children and then send them off once they reached a certain age and level of play. Their further career would depend on the player himself.



USSR Championship, Frunze 1981. For Artur Yusupov, the transition from junior to chess elite was quick and painless. (Photo from the author's archive)

The concept of professional coaches for highly-skilled chess players did not actually exist. Mark became a pioneer. I do not know how he made this fateful decision, but I believe it did not happen overnight and was a result of serious contemplation, taken with significant hesitation.

Valery Chekhov became the novice coach's first student. He did not stand out as anything special among his peers, but managed to first qualify for, then win, the World Junior Championship in 1975. That is still not an easy feat. Back then, there was only one age category for such tournaments, under twenty years of age, and each country was represented by a single participant. Before Chekhov, only three players from the Soviet Union had managed to win the title: Boris Spassky and Anatoly Karpov, names that speak for themselves, and Alexander Beliavsky, who also went on to achieve great success in 'adult' chess. In terms of natural talent, Valery was clearly not their equal, however it turned out that systematic and focused work could help a lot. It is also significant that when Chekhov and Dvoretzky parted ways, the young chess player did not have any more success and switched to coaching work rather early.



Mark Dvoretsky with his students Artur Yusupov and Sergey Dolmatov. (Photo by Boris Dolmatovsky)

Meanwhile, Mark had a new student, Artur Yusupov, who became World Junior Champion in 1977 at the age of seventeen. It is interesting that he also was not considered a special talent as a child.

Sergey Dolmatov joined them later, having moved to Moscow from the regions. Thus it was not by chance that in 1978 two students of the same coach went to play in the World Junior Championship in Graz in Austria: Sergey won the qualification while Artur had personal rights as reigning champion. I helped them at the training camp and directly during the championship. We usually worked in pairs. At the training camp my main focus was on Dolmatov, while in Graz I actually became a second of Yusupov. Dvoretsky's focus during the event was completely on Sergey. The reason was simple: as the World Junior Champion, Artur had already managed to get all the privileges associated with the title. On the contrary, Sergey needed to win to get access to all those perks.

The competition turned into a race between the two Soviet players. Their understanding of chess and their level of play put them head and shoulders above the rest of the field even though this tournament featured many future grandmasters. It was the last round that decided everything: Dolmatov finished half a point ahead of his friend. It is also remarkable that, despite the uncompromising fight in the tournament, the boys invariably maintained warm relations. Their rivalry (as well as friendship) continued for many years and peaked at their Candidates match in 1991 that was extremely interesting both as a sports event and in terms of creative ideas.

Let me emphasise once again that there were a lot of bright talents in the tournament, but in terms of

chess proficiency — education, mastery of specific techniques, game preparation — the two Soviet participants were far superior to their foreign competitors. Such an advantage is usually explained by the catch-all expression ‘the Soviet School of Chess’. I have already written at length about this erroneous cliché in my book on modern chess training, but it would be useful to discuss this topic once again now. Soviet chess players achieved absolute domination in world chess in the post-war years. Chess, along with space, ballet and hockey, became brands of the state. Grandmasters, not to mention the world champions, were cult figures. Gifted children went to take lessons in chess clubs; skilful teachers took positions as children’s coaches. After the transition into adult chess, the competition was so fierce that only the most talented and psychologically stable players survived. It was Soviet chess organisation that created the hegemony of Soviet chess.

The West had nothing like it. There, talented autodidacts became professional players, but, lacking qualified trainers and real competition, they were disadvantaged from the very beginning in comparison with their Soviet counterparts. Once the Soviet Union disintegrated, state support disappeared and with it the total superiority of Soviet chess players.

At the same time, on the creative side of chess, there was no uniformity or common features apart from Soviet citizenship. There was little in common between Botvinnik and Bronstein, Petrosian and Tal, Karpov and Kasparov. On the other hand, if we use the expression ‘the Soviet School of Chess’ in the same sense that is implied in this concept in science or art, then the School of Mark Izrailevich Dvoretsky was an unquestionable reality. Dvoretsky published a huge number of wonderful books that became obligatory study material for several generations of chess players; his faithful disciples have become excellent coaches themselves. One could form several world-class teams from his students.

In fact Dvoretsky was the first coach who worked regularly not with one but with several top-level chess players. Using index cards, Mark created a completely unique database of various positions and techniques. A great methodologist, he found areas for improvement even with established chess players. Such experts are not uncommon now, but Dvoretsky was a pioneer. Being familiar with his methods was a big help to me many years later, when I fully concentrated on coaching.

VIKTOR KORCHNOI — IN LOVE WITH CHESS

My collaboration with Viktor Lvovich Korchnoi started suddenly. In 1991, the traditional festival in Wijk aan Zee was accompanied by the two quarter-final Candidates matches. I have already mentioned that one of them was between longtime friends Yusupov and Dolmatov. In the second match, Korchnoi played Gyula Sax. To tell the truth, I was not following the ups and downs of these duels closely since I had enough concerns of my own. I was playing in a side tournament, without much success, shall I say. Before the free day which was the same in all the events, I was approached by GM Dmitry Gurevich, Korchnoi's second in the match against Sax. He asked me to help Viktor prepare for the next game since Dmitry himself, for some reason, had to leave urgently. The only goal that made sense for me in the tournament I was playing in, first place, was already out of reach; there wasn't much entertainment in Wijk aan Zee, so I agreed without much hesitation.

Simple curiosity was an additional reason. Of course, the achievements of this former resident of Leningrad spoke for themselves. His brilliant career included, amongst other things, the final Candidates match in 1974, which ultimately brought the World Championship crown to Karpov, and two World Championship matches against Karpov in 1978 and 1982. Thus I realised that I would be working with an outstanding chess player — but I didn't understand the reason for his great success! By that time, he and I had already played a dozen games against each other and those encounters had not been especially difficult for me. I had a plus score against Korchnoi and didn't feel any particular reverence for him. Besides he was in his late fifties and the first half of his match against Sax showed how difficult it was for him to hold his own against a much younger player. The score remained equal after four games, which could be considered a success for Viktor since Sax missed an elementary win in one of the games.

Therefore I was pleasantly surprised by the energy and emotional focus of the veteran grandmaster. We spent a whole day analysing positions that had already occurred in the previous two games and Korchnoi never stopped generating ideas. My only role was to act on cue so that the main character's monologue flowed easily and smoothly. The next day I devoted my full attention to his game, which my chance student managed to win — to a large extent, thanks to successful home preparation.

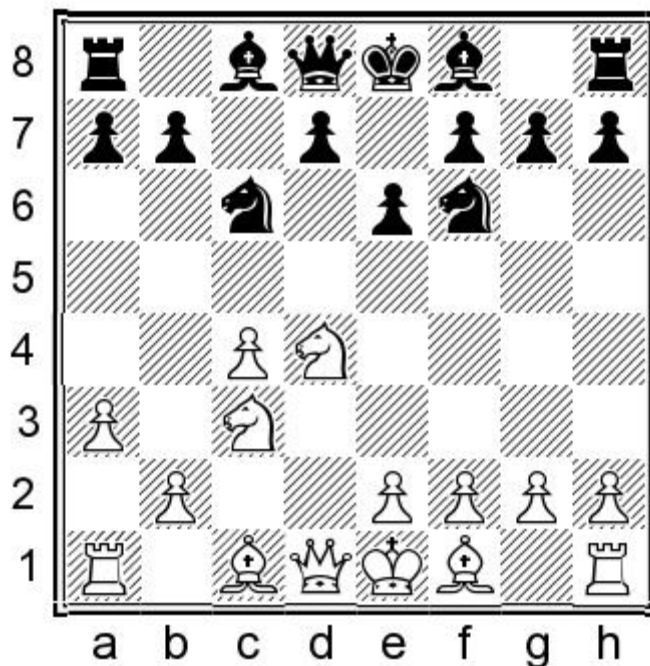
41

Viktor Korchnoi (2615)

Gyula Sax (2605)

Wijk aan Zee 1991

1.♘f3 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.♘c3 ♘c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e6 6.a3



This move was the subject of an opening debate that lasted for the whole match.

6...♞xd4

6...♙e7 was played by Sax in a rapid game which he won.

7.♚xd4 b6 8.♚f4!

8.♙f4 ♘c5 9.♚d2 ♙b7 was played in the first game of the match, when Black had no problems.

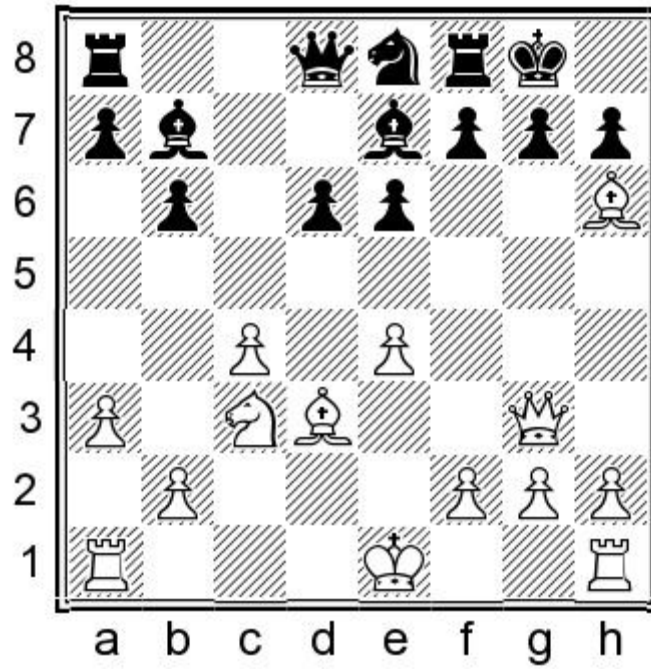
8...♙b7

During our preparation we also considered 8...♙c5!? and 8...♙a6!?, but Black decided to stick to the usual line.

9.e4 d6 10.♙d3

In game three Viktor played 10.♙e3 ♙e7 11.♙d3, but we found a better idea during preparation.

10...♙e7 11.♚g3! 0-0 12.♙h6 ♞e8



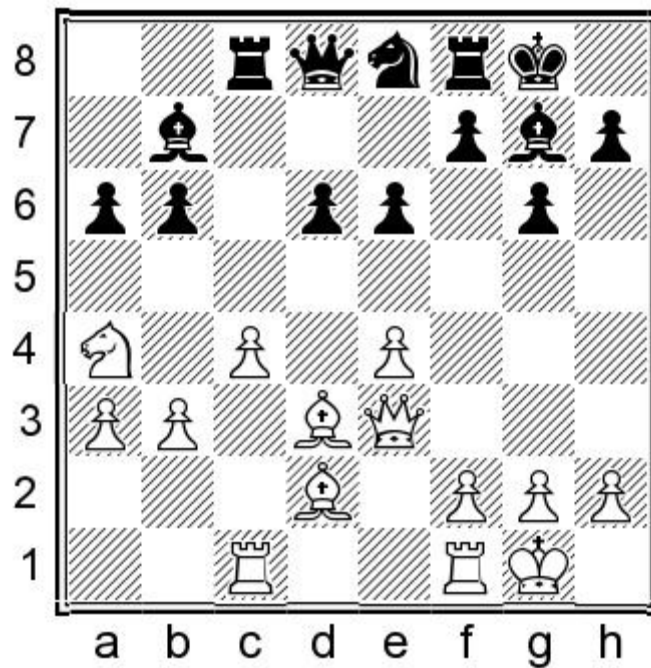
13.♙d2

Removing the threat of 13...♙h4.

13...♞c8 14.0-0 ♙f6 15.♞ac1 g6 16.b3 a6 17.♚e3!?

17.♞fd1 ♙g7 18.♙g5 was simpler.

17...♙g7 18.♞a4



18...♖c6

The position of the rook on c6 is unnatural.

18...♗f6 would present White with more problems, when only 19.♙b4! (19.f3 ♗d7 allows Black to arrange his pieces comfortably) 19...♖b8 20.♖fd1 a5 21.♙c3 ♙c6 22.♗b2 would keep White's space advantage.

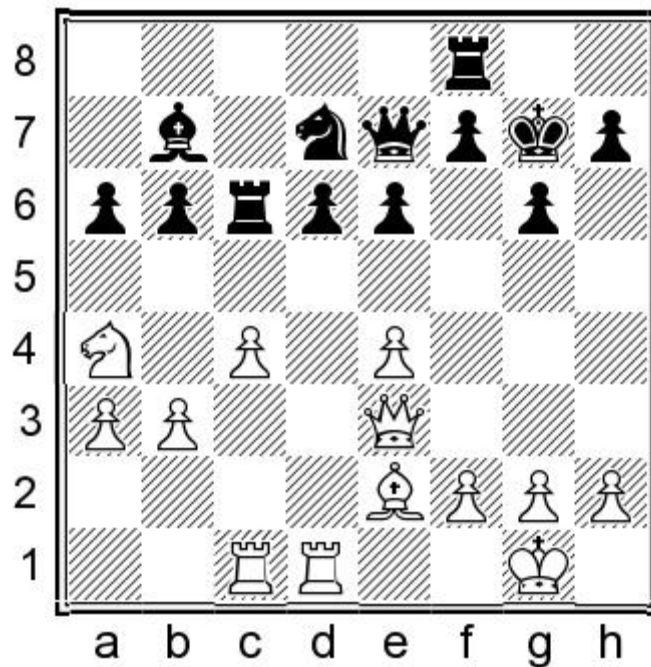
19.♙e2 ♗f6 20.♖fd1

20.♙c3!?

20...♗d7

20...b5!?

21.♙c3 ♖e7 22.♙xg7 ♔xg7



23.♗b2!?

23.b4 seems logical, but after 23...♖b8 White has nothing specific, so Korchnoi transfers his knight to a more central location.

23...♖d8 24.♖c2 ♖cc8 25.♖cd2 ♗f6 26.f3 ♖b8 27.a4 ♖c7 28.♗d3 ♗e8 29.♗f2!

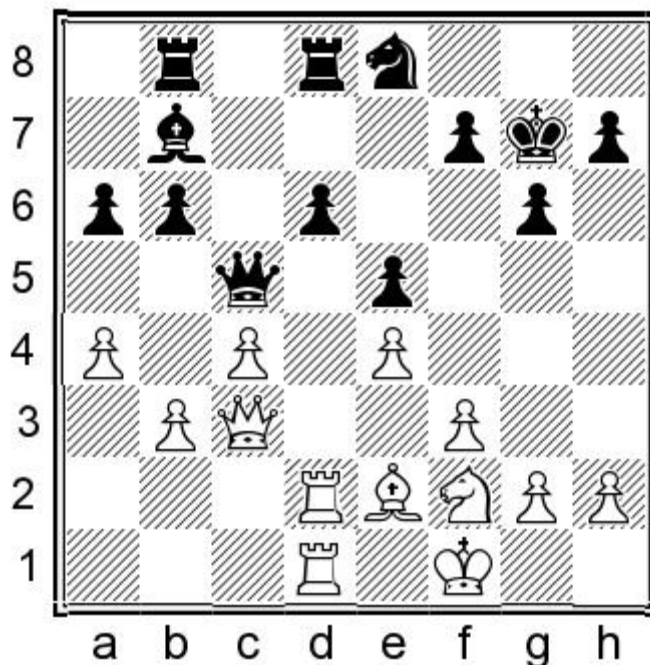
A multi-purpose move.

White opens the d-file for his rooks and provides extra defence for the e4-pawn. Moreover Black now has to reckon with a possible ♗g4.

29...♔c5

After 29...♘f6 30.♞d3 the black knight would have to return to e8 soon.

30.♜c3+ e5 31.♚f1



31...b5?

Time trouble is approaching and Sax cannot stand the pressure. This attempt at counterplay is clearly premature.

a) Also bad is 31...♘c7? 32.b4 ♜c6 33.♘g4! f6 34.♜e3.

b) It was necessary to play 31...a5! in order to prevent the advance of the b-pawn.

32.b4! ♜c7 33.axb5 axb5 34.c5 ♚g8

It is already very difficult to defend.

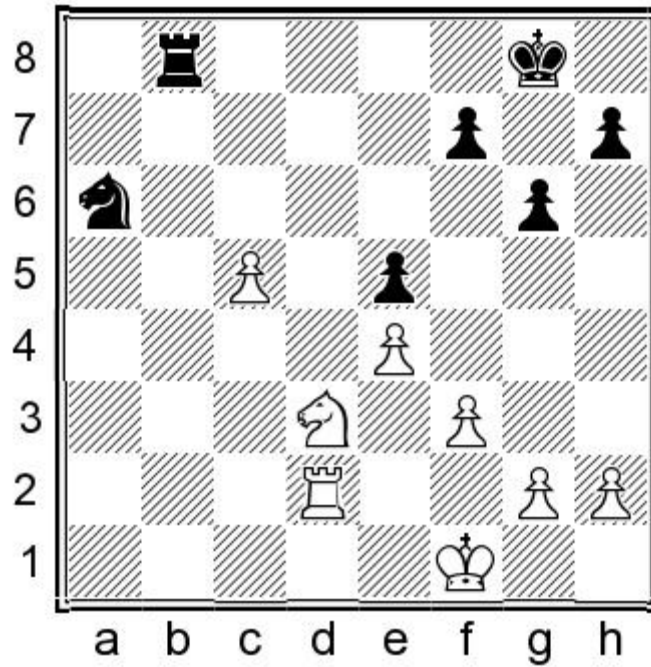
a) 34...dxc5 35.♞xd8 ♞xd8 36.♞xd8 ♜xd8 37.♜xe5+ is bad.

b) 34...♙a8! is relatively better, but even in this case after 35.♞d3! and 36.♜d2 Black's position is miserable.

35.♙xb5 dxc5 36.♜xc5

Even stronger is 36.♞xd8! ♞xd8 37.♞xd8 ♜xd8 38.♜xe5!, winning a second pawn.

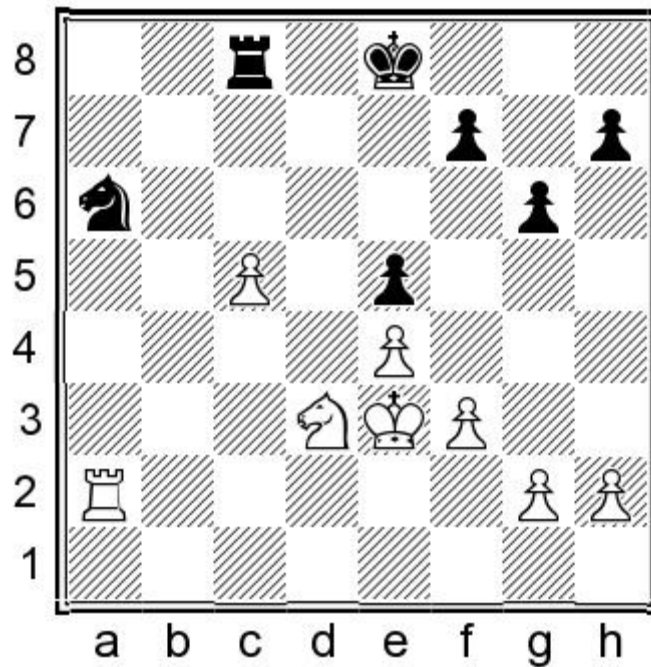
36...♞xd2 37.♞xd2 ♜xc5 38.bxc5 ♘c7 39.♙c4 ♙a6 40.♙xa6 ♘xa6 41.♘d3



41...Rd8

Black would have more practical chances after 41...Rb3 42.c6! Rc3 (42...f6 43.♘c5!) 43.♗xe5 f6 44.Rd8+ ♔g7 45.Rd7+ ♔g8 46.♘g4 Rxc6 47.♗h6+ ♔h8.

42.♕e2 ♕f8 43.Rb2 ♕e8 44.♕e3 Rc8 45.Ra2!



And Black resigned in view of the forced 45.Ra2 Rc6 46.♗xe5 Rxc5 47.♕d4 f6 48.♗xg6+--.

1-0

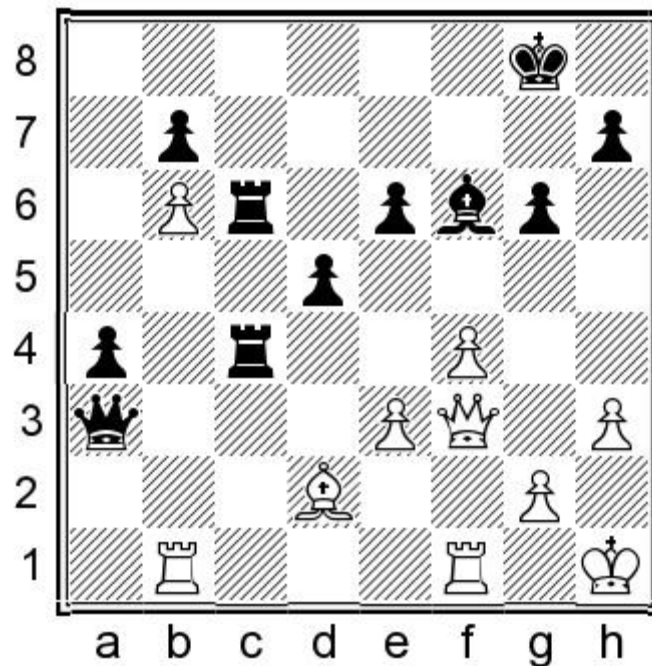
This victory did not lead to a breakthrough. In the next two games, Korchnoi blundered. Fortunately his opponent took only one of the chances provided. The eight regulation games failed to determine a winner; two rapid games would decide the tiebreak. My tournament was already finished and it was time for me to leave, but Viktor Lvovich asked me to stay. Of course we prepared thoroughly for the rapid games, but I believe that in the end my contribution was not significant, since sheer luck played a much bigger role. For example, this was the ending of the first tiebreak game.

42

Viktor Korchnoi (2615)

Gyula Sax (2605)

Wijk aan Zee 1991



It is easy to see that White's position is completely lost. Black has a passed pawn, each of his pieces is more active than its white counterpart, and White has no counterplay.

38.f5!

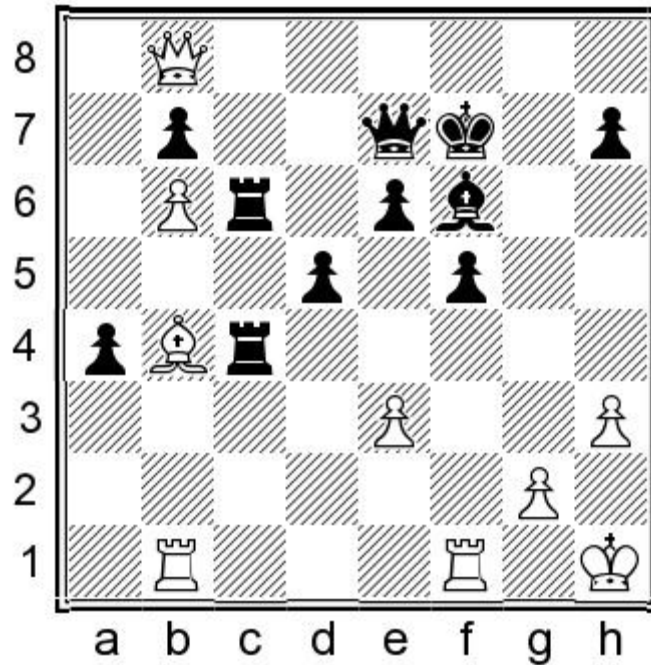
The only way to muddy the waters. Remember that this was a rapid game and both players were already in time trouble.

38...gxf5

Black has several choices. 38...exf5!? 39.♖xd5+ ♔g7 was equally good.

39.♖g3+ ♔f7 40.♖b8 ♖e7 41.♗b4!

Again the most active move!



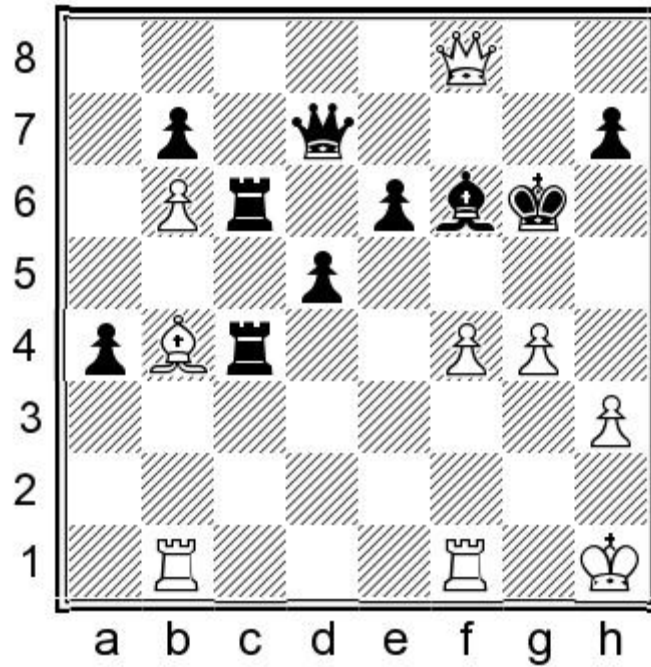
41...♔d7

Simple, reliable and strong. In time trouble it is not easy to go for lines like 41...♖xb4 42.♖xb4 ♔e5! 43.♗xe5 (or 43.♗a8 ♗xb4 44.♗xb7+ ♖c7! 45.♗b8 ♗c4 46.♖g1 ♗h4! 47.bxc7 ♗g3) 43...♗xb4 44.♗h8 ♗xb6.

42.♗f8+ ♔g6 43.g4! f4

- a) The engine prefers 43...♖c8 44.gxf5+ exf5, but it requires the ability to see in advance that after 45.♖g1+ the only move is 45...♖g4!.
- b) It is simpler to play 43...♔g7 44.gxf5+ exf5 45.♖g1+ ♔h6+, but the actual move played in the game is not bad at all.

44.exf4



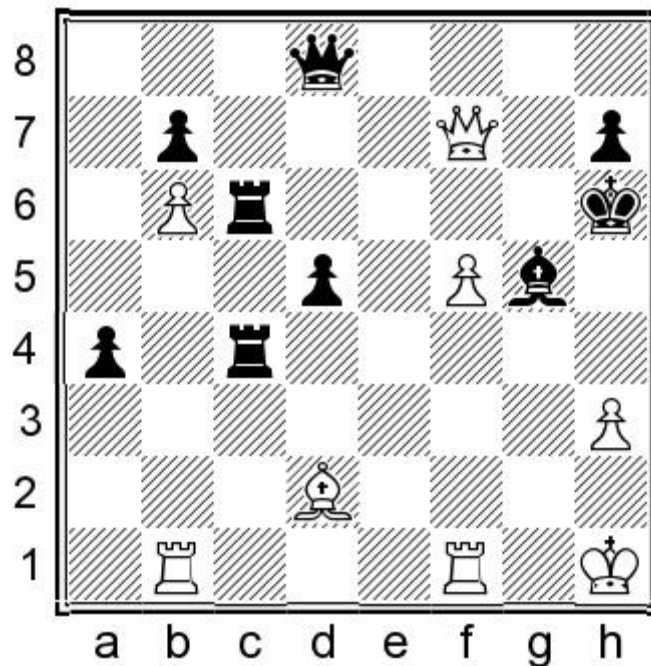
44...♔d8??

The only winning move in this position was 44...♖c8!, e.g. 45.f5+ exf5 46.gxf5+ ♔xf5! 47.♖xf5 ♖xf8 48.♖xd5 ♖d8.

45.f5+

Suddenly White starts a decisive attack.

45...exf5 46.gxf5+ ♔h5 47.♔f7+ ♔h6 48.♖d2+ ♖g5



49.f6! 1–0

That was not the end yet. Sax had a great opportunity to level the score in the next game, but on that day Fate clearly favoured Korchnoi. Viktor was quite attuned to such developments, since he believed that nothing in this world happened by chance. As a consequence, he asked me to continue our collaboration in that Candidates cycle.

Several days spent together analysing enabled me to understand Korchnoi the chess player much better. It was his all-consuming love for chess that was the motivation and driving force for his talent — plus a childish curiosity about the endless mysteries of the game. As a child tries to take apart a favourite toy in order to understand what makes it work, Viktor could endlessly analyse a position and still find new possibilities. He *played* chess in the literal sense of the word, that is, he played with pieces and squares. Finding a reasonable compromise between the objective requirements of a position and the unbearable thirst to try novel things required a certain amount of maturity. That is why his play blossomed at an age when many players are already thinking about wrapping up their careers. Emigration gave an additional emotional impulse to his development as a chess player. It was in the 1977–78 Candidates cycle that Korchnoi reached the apex of his unique career, both in terms of sporting results and creative achievements. He played extremely well in his match against Karpov in Baguio as well.

Of course, the years had taken their toll, and the Korchnoi who played against Sax was not the same person as in the late 1970s, but his unbridled enthusiasm captivated me. I was delighted at the prospect of working with him in the future, especially since his next opponent, Jan Timman, was not an insurmountable obstacle. The pre-match schedule seemed quite reasonable too: two weeks of intense training followed by a tournament in Biel, then another week to rest and make final adjustments, then Korchnoi would be off to battle. I wondered whether I'd be able to handle the intellectual overload myself. My protégé's energy and stamina even gave rise to a degree of inferiority complex.

In fact, events transpired differently. Korchnoi lost a match against Iván Morovic in Chile and came back home completely exhausted. It seemed that the fatigue that had built up over the years had finally caught up with him. Preparation was slow; there was no enthusiasm and ideas did not flow freely. It was obvious to me that playing in Biel would drain him of his remaining energy and the upcoming match would turn into a mere formality. I offered to sacrifice the tournament for the more important goal of advancing in the Candidates. Initially, this was met with a flat refusal. Such a decision would be contrary to all the principles that Korchnoi espoused in life and in sport; besides, it would put the organisers in a difficult position. Nevertheless, my conviction and perseverance prevailed; Viktor Lvovich did not play in Biel. Unfortunately, it was not enough to overcome a sudden emotional low. Korchnoi did not put up much resistance in the match. Essentially, the very first game decided everything. The players confronted each other head-on, a fierce fight featured several mistakes and finally ended with a win for Timman.



Wijk aan Zee, 1984. The first game against Korchnoi after the Soviet Federation lifted its boycott. 'Gens una sumus' once again. (Photo from the author's archive)

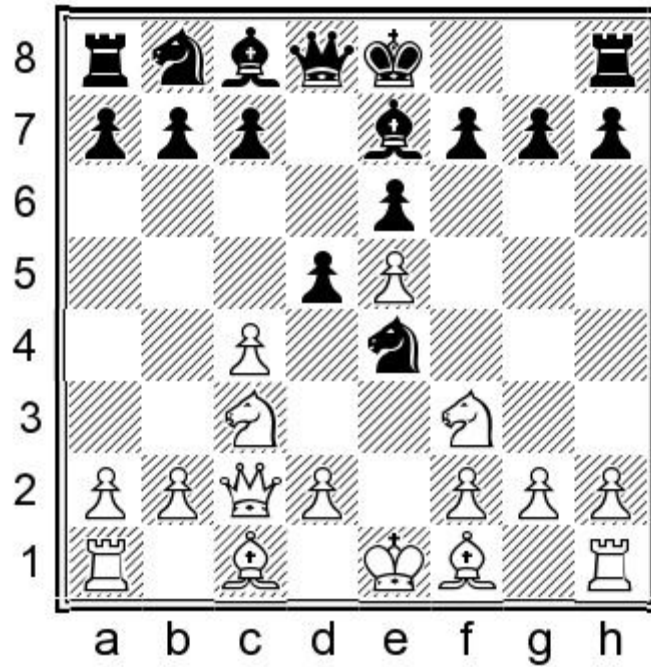
43

Viktor Korchnoi (2610)

Jan Timman (2630)

Brussels 1991

1.c4 ♘f6 2.♘c3 e6 3.e4 d5 4.e5 ♘e4 5.♘f3 ♙e7 6.♙c2!



6...♘g5

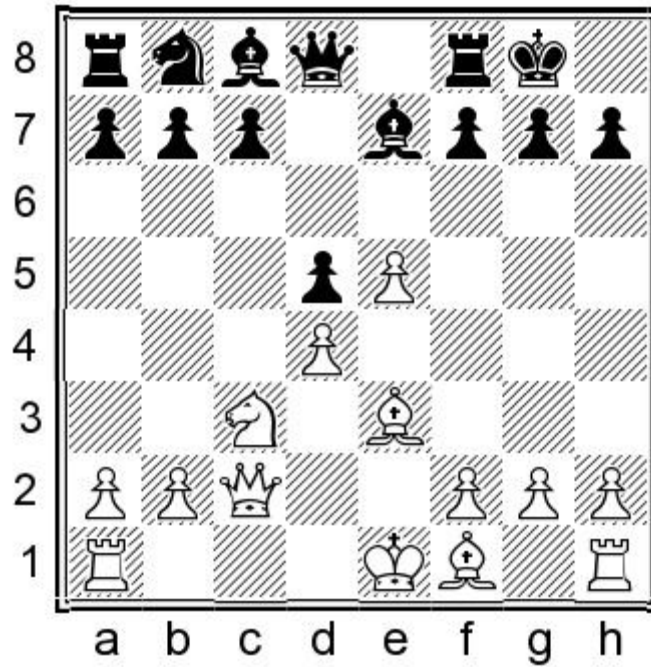
6...♘xc3 7.dxc3 would favour White, but 6...♘c6 7.♘xe4 ♘b4 is interesting.

7.♘xg5 ♙xg5 8.cxd5 exd5 9.d4 ♙e7!?

Even at this stage Timman gambles on making the play as complicated as possible.

9...♙xc1 10.♖xc1 0-0 11.♙d3 or 9...♘c6 10.♙xg5 ♜xg5 11.f4! would lead to clearer positions where White would have the initiative.

10.♙e3 0-0



11.0-0-0!?

Korchnoi accepts the challenge. He has a safer alternative in 11.♔d3!? h6 12.0-0 with a slightly better game.

11...♖c6! 12.a3 ♘a5 13.♙d3 h6 14.♚e2?!

A sluggish move. 14.f4!? is more in the spirit of the position.

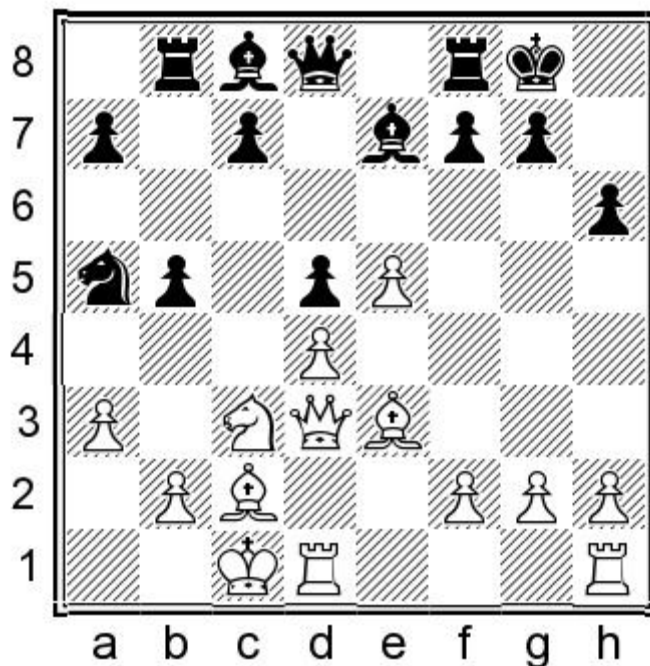
14...b5!

Black, by contrast, plays very energetically.

15.♙c2

15.♙xb5 ♖b8 would give Black dangerous counterplay.

15...♖b8 16.♚d3



16...g6!?

An interesting and completely unexpected move, especially since 16...f5 17.exf6 ♖xf6 isn't bad and would have given chances to both sides.

17.♙xh6 b4!

Consistent and strong. Black didn't give up the h6-pawn in order to go over to defence.

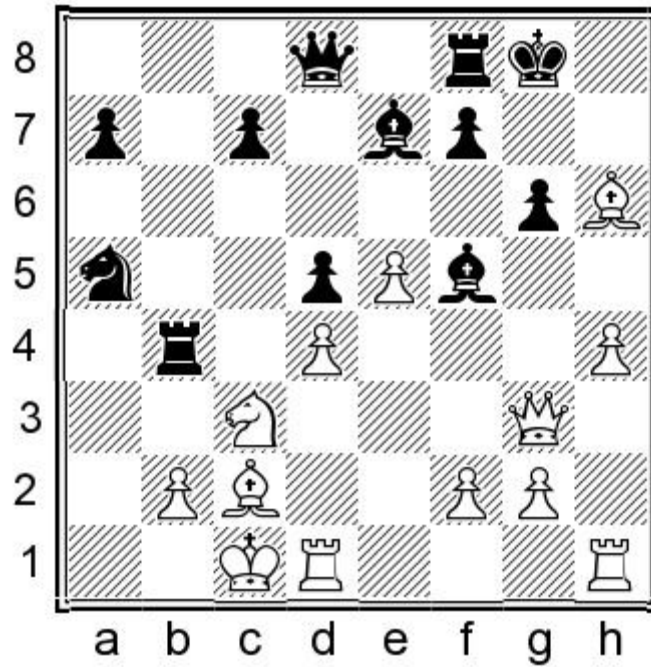
17...♙g5+ 18.♙xg5 ♖xg5+ 19.♚e3 or 17...♖e8 18.h4! clearly favours White.

18.axb4 ♖xb4 19.♚g3!?

The position is extremely complicated, but Black's task is much easier; he has already made his choice, while White has to do so with every move.

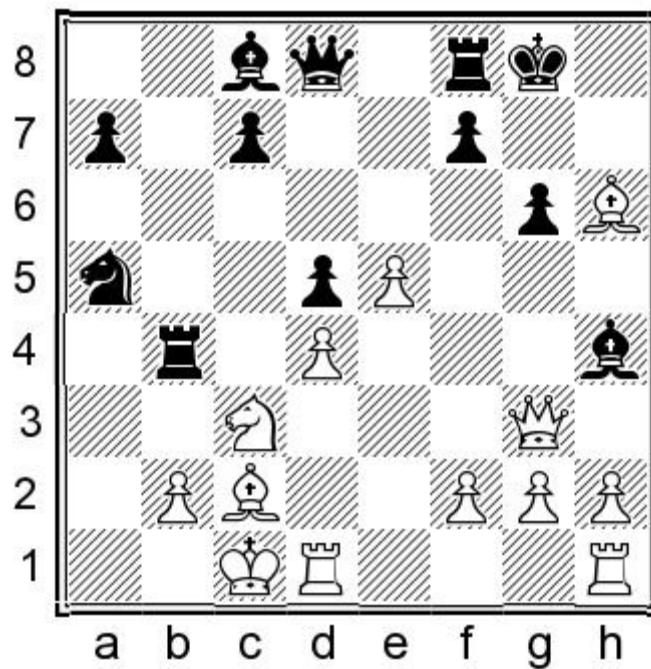
a) If 19.♙xf8 ♙xf8 20.♚g3 ♘b3+ 21.♙xb3 ♖xb3 the two powerful bishops provide Black with enough compensation for the pawn.

b) The line 19.h4 ♙f5 20.♚g3



20...♙xc2 (20...♘b3+ is interesting. After 21.♙xb3 ♖xb3 22.h5 ♚b8 23.♕d2 ♖xb2+ 24.♕e1 the engine says White is better, but it's not so clear to the human eye.) 21.♕xc2 ♘c4 22.♙c1 c6 23.h5 g5 leads to a completely irrational position.

19...♙h4!



20.♚f4

It is difficult to decide on 20.♙xf8 because of 20...♕xf8! (20...♙xg3 21.♙xb4 ♙f4+ 22.♕b1 ♘c6 23.♙c5 would be quite satisfactory for White) 21.♚f3 ♘c4.

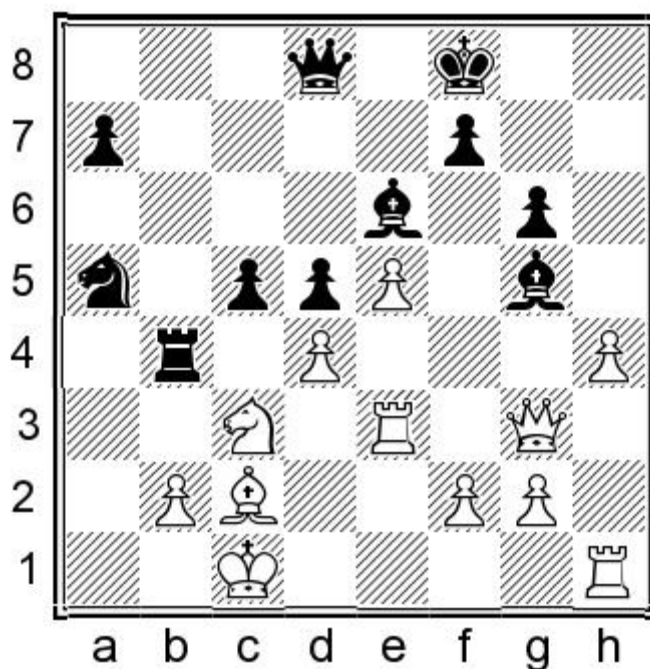
20...c6

20...c5!?

21.♖de1

The position is complex, as indicated by the line 21.g3 ♖e7 22.♙xf8 ♙xf8 23.♞d3 ♘c4 24.♞f3 ♙e6 25.b3. Up to this point the engine is convinced that White has the advantage, but suddenly it discovers 25...♙e7! and shamelessly changes its assessment in favour of Black. 26.h4 wouldn't save the game due to 26...g5!.

21...♙e6 22.♞e3 c5 23.♙xf8 ♙g5 24.♞g3 ♘xf8 25.h4



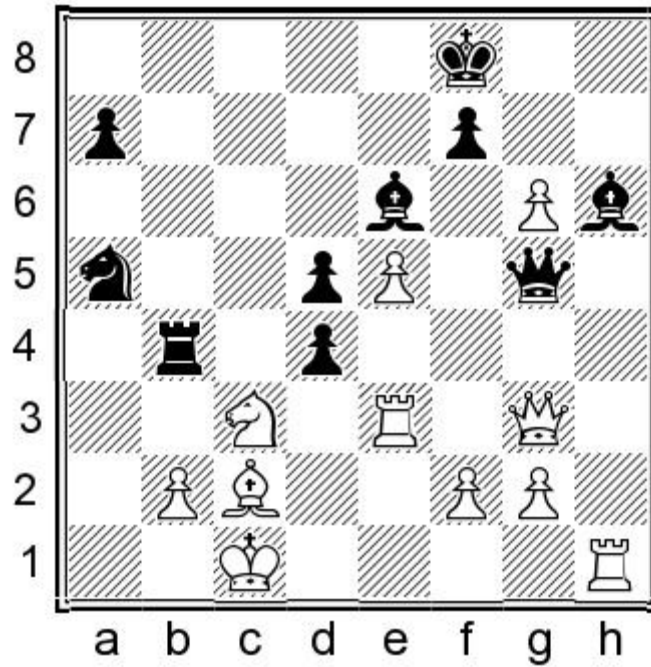
25...♙h6!

After this cold-blooded retreat Black's advantage becomes clear to both engine and grandmaster.

25...♙xe3+ 26.♞xe3 ♘g7 was more natural.

26.h5 g5!?

In practical terms this is the best move, especially since both players were in time trouble, however an objectively stronger line is 26...cxd4! 27.hxg6 ♞g5!



28. ♖h2! dxe3 29. ♖xh6+ ♖xh6 30. ♖xh6 exf2 31. g7+! ♔xg7 32. ♖f6 ♘c4 with a won endgame.

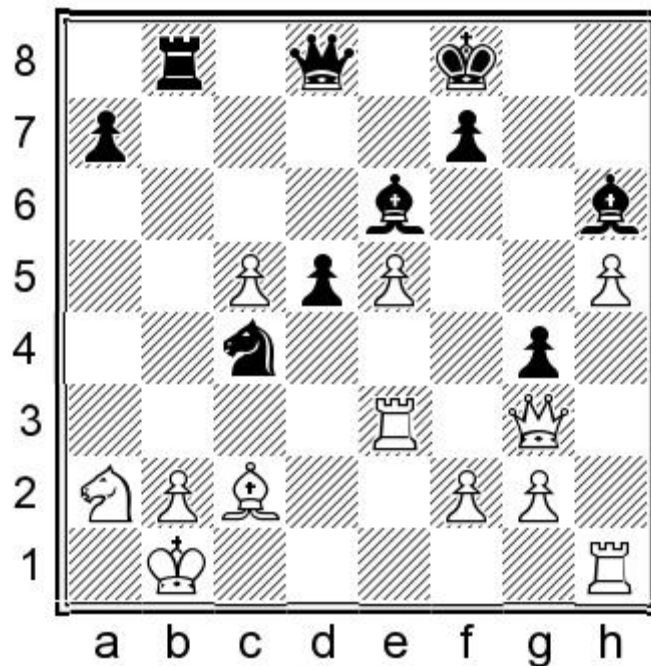
27. ♘a2 ♖b8?

Now it would have been stronger and more practical to play 27... ♖xd4!

28. dxc5?

It is virtually impossible to find the cold-blooded computer move 28. ♖e2! at the board.

28...g4 29. ♕b1 ♘c4!



30. ♖b3

The only move!

30... ♘d2+ 31. ♔a1 ♘xb3+ 32. ♙xb3 ♚a5 33. ♖d1?

A time trouble error that makes a bad position even worse.

33. ♙c2 d4 34. ♚a3 ♚xa3 35. bxa3 ♖c8 would have prolonged matters.

33... ♚b5! 34. ♖d3 ♙f5

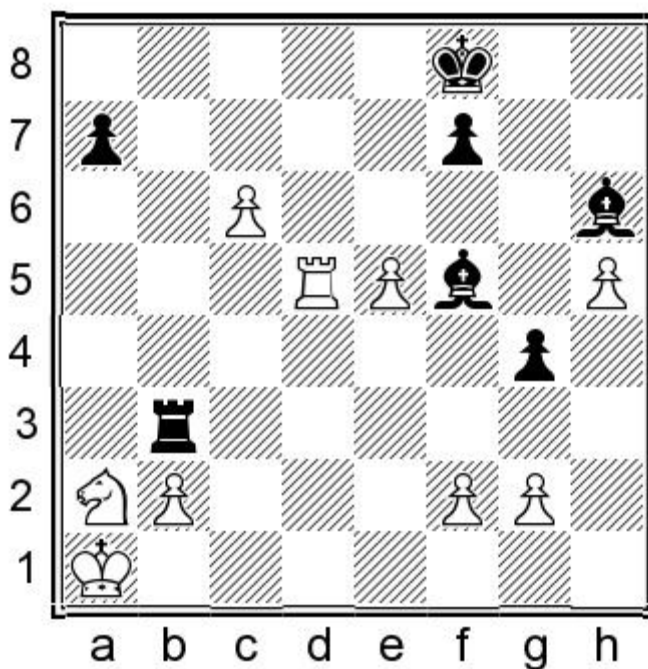
Good enough, but 34...d4! would have been even more convincing.

35. ♖xd5 ♚xb3

35... ♙e6!

36. ♚xb3 ♖xb3 37. c6

A critical position.



37... ♖d3?

Paradoxically enough, this natural-looking move lets the win slip. The road to victory lay in 37... ♖b8!

38. ♘b4?

Much stronger is 38. ♖xd3! ♙xd3 39. ♘b4 ♙f5 40. c7 ♔e8 41. ♘c6, when the single knight successfully

deals with the two bishops: 41...♙c8 42.♘xa7 ♔d7 43.b4 ♖xc7 44.♘xc8 ♖xc8=.

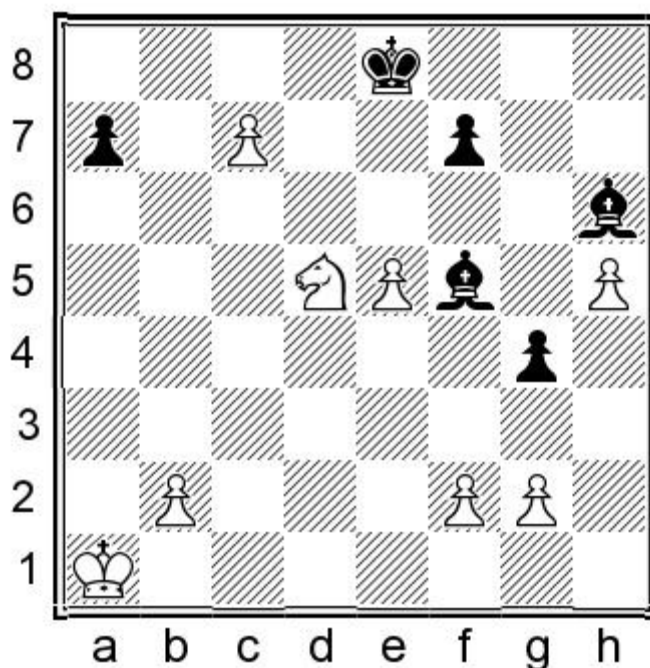
38...♞xd5 39.♘xd5 ♕e8?

The mutual errors in time trouble continue.

Two ways to win were 39...♙g7! and 39...♙e6!.

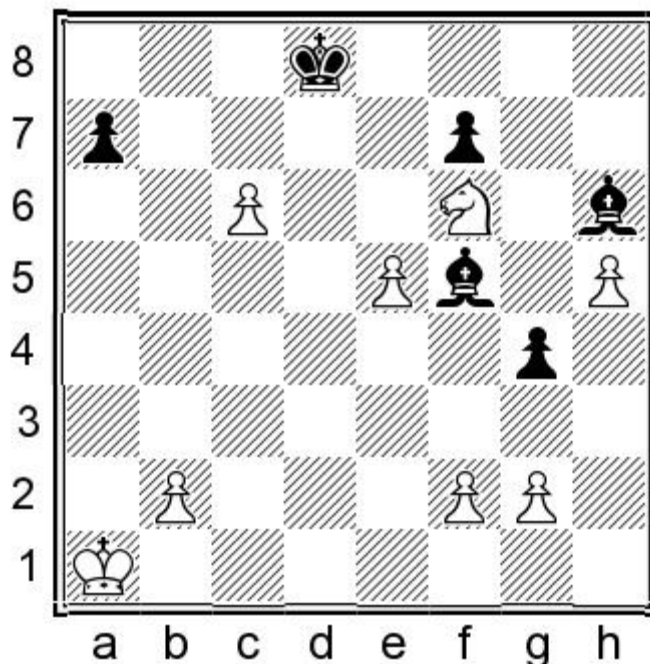
40.♘f6+?

The last move before time control — and the fatal error! Korchnoi's flag was hanging, but if he had managed to find 40.c7! he could have secured a draw.



Granted, it is not easy to find the sequence 40...♙g7 41.h6! ♙xe5 (41...♙xh6 42.♘f6+ ♔f8 43.♘e4!) 42.♘e3 ♙c8 43.♘c4 ♙f6 44.♘d6+ ♔d7 45.♘xf7 ♕e7 (45...♖xc7 46.h7) 46.♘d8, but the players would have had the time that they currently lacked.

40...♕d8



Nothing can save White now.

41.f3 gxf3 42.gxf3 ♖e6 43.♗g8 ♖f4 44.h6 ♗xe5 45.h7 ♗c7 46.f4 ♗g7 47.♗h6 ♗xc6 48.f5 ♗b3
49.♗b1 ♗d6 50.♗g4 ♗d5 51.♗h6 ♗e5 52.♗c2 ♗f4

0-1

Such a gripping drama!

The Dutch player won the second game as well and the result of the match became a foregone conclusion. In the remaining games, Timman controlled the play completely and did not let his opponent choose any sharp lines.

There is no special need to analyse the reasons for Korchnoi's defeat in this match. Timman was probably past his prime, but was twenty years younger. In general, Timman's play in that Candidates cycle was superb: he defeated Robert Hübner, then Artur Yusupov, then lost in the final to Nigel Short.

It was then that the chess world split apart. Kasparov and Short played for the title under the auspices of the newly-created Professional Chess Association, while Timman and Karpov suddenly found themselves playing a match for the FIDE World Championship.

Even if he was in ideal shape, Viktor Korchnoi would have had a hard time in that cycle. 1991 turned out to be a depressing year for him, so he was trying to replenish his ideas and energy from the most unexpected sources. Both at the training camp and during the match in Brussels, I often marvelled at unexpected moves he made in the openings. It was only after the match had finished that we had a long and confidential conversation in which Korchnoi admitted that he sometimes followed the advice of David Bronstein. Grateful to his old friend for his support in the confrontation with Karpov, Korchnoi invited Bronstein to advise him in Brussels. Neither Dmitry Gurevich nor I knew about the existence of a 'secret adviser'; it all felt very strange.

Korchnoi always experienced intense emotions and was prone to suggestibility. These character traits

usually brought him harm, but sometimes helped in a miraculous way.

A few years later, in 1995, I stopped by to see the Zonal tournament at Ptuj where Korchnoi was playing. Halfway through the tournament, Viktor was on a modest fifty percent, his play betrayed lack of confidence and he seemed to have already given up mentally. A one-hour conversation lifted his spirits. In the second half of the tournament, he was a new man and won a ticket to the Interzonal.

As for Biel, I still go back to that decision from time to time. I no longer have the absolute conviction that helped me to persuade my protégé back then. Maybe one should just go with the flow sometimes!?

ANATOLY KARPOV — THE SUBLIME AND THE MUNDANE

For a while, my activities as a coach and second were but an interruption in the orderly life of a professional player. My occasional collaboration with Anatoly Karpov was of the same nature. The FIDE World Championship Match between Karpov and Viswanathan ‘Vishy’ Anand was held in Lausanne at the beginning of 1998. I became familiar with both players long before they became famous, although their immense talent was evident when they were still teenagers. The way Vishy conducted his games was particularly impressive. Usually he spent no more than half an hour on the whole game, making seemingly random moves. Surprisingly, these moves turned out to be good, and often the strongest. Growing up in India, which did not have GMs or professional coaches at the time, Anand was a true autodidact. In 1986, I played against an unknown young man, but only five years later Vishy was already taking part in the Candidates Tournament.



*Tournament of the Generations, Moscow 1973. With Anatoly Karpov, a friend on the youth team.
(Photo from the author's archive)*

Karpov's life story is no less spectacular. His triumphal march from obscurity to the summit of world chess took about the same time. Of course, unlike India, the Soviet Union had plenty of top-level grandmasters, and eventually there formed a veritable queue of those willing to help the young Soviet genius.

Strangely enough, prior to Lausanne, I had never been a member of the World Champion's numerous coaching teams. Karpov and I played for the same club and our relations were quite friendly.

Moreover, Odessa, my hometown, was Anatoly's favourite place for pre-match preparation. However it

so happened that we only started to collaborate in chess, albeit for a short term, many years later, when he and I already lived in different countries and saw each other only occasionally. My eldest daughter and her family lived in Lausanne and I often visited them, so, in a sense, the match was held on my home turf. It was as a 'host' that I joined Karpov's team that arrived in Switzerland after a month-long training camp in Spain. In addition to long-term permanent assistant Mikhail Podgaets, the coaching team also included Alexander Onischuk, who was still representing Ukraine at the time, and Iván Morovic from Chile. It could be said that, to some extent, Karpov did not have enough practice before the match while Anand had too much! The so-called FIDE World Championship knockout tournament that had just finished in Groningen was in fact only a qualification event for the match in Lausanne. This played a serious, and probably decisive, role in the outcome of the match. Still, even when tired, Vishy was a formidable opponent.

The match started dramatically. The very first game was decided by a secret weapon that was prepared in Spain.

44

Anatoly Karpov (2735)

Viswanathan Anand (2770)

Lausanne 1998

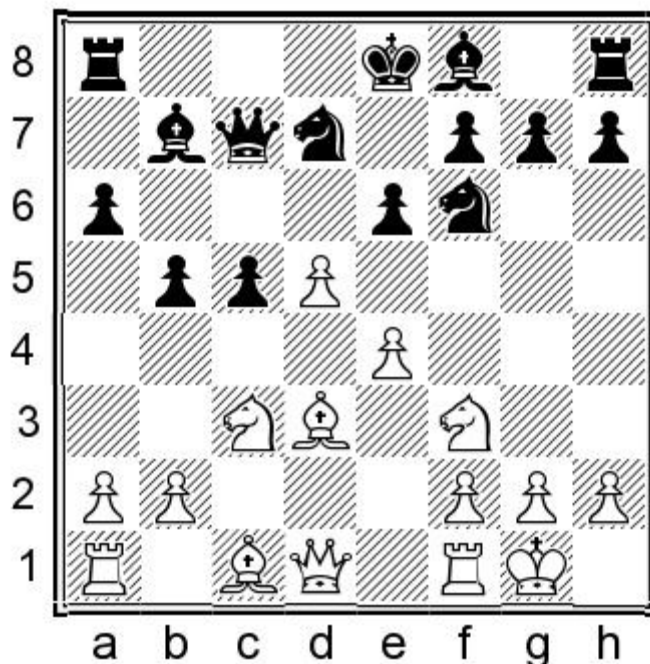
1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘c3 ♗f6 4.e3 e6 5.♗f3 ♗bd7 6.♙d3

6.♚c2 was played in the fifth game.

6...dxc4 7.♙xc4 b5 8.♙d3 ♙b7 9.0-0

Another popular line of the Semi-Slav arises after 9.e4 b4 10.♗a4 c5. In game three Karpov chose the calmer 9.a3.

9...a6 10.e4 c5 11.d5 ♚c7!?



12.dxe6 fxe6 13.♔c2

We had thoroughly studied this position when preparing for the match. 13.♘g5 ♖c6 14.♚e2 c4 15.♔c2 ♔c5 16.♔e3 0-0 17.♞ad1 h6 18.♘f3 ♚c7 19.♘d4 ♞ae8 20.a3 ♘e5 21.h3 ♘g6 (Karpov-Anand, Monte Carlo rapid 1994) doesn't promise much.

13...c4 14.♚e2

For a while 14.♘g5 ♘c5 15.e5 was popular, but experience showed that after 15...♚xe5 16.♞e1 ♚d6 Black faces no problems.

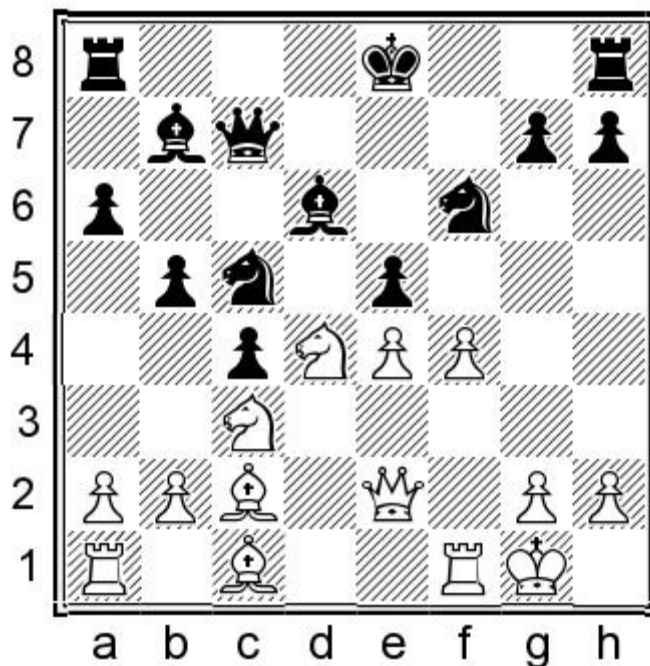
14...♔d6 15.♘d4

15.♘g5 ♘c5 16.f4 h6! is not dangerous for Black.

15...♘c5

For some reason no-one has yet played the engine's suggestion 15...♔xh2+ 16.♙h1 ♘c5 17.g3 (another sharp line is 17.f4 e5) 17...♞d8 18.♘f3 ♔xg3 19.fxg3 ♚xg3, with not unfavourable complications for Black.

16.f4 e5



17. ♖dxb5!? N

This was the major novelty prepared by Karpov's team especially for this match.

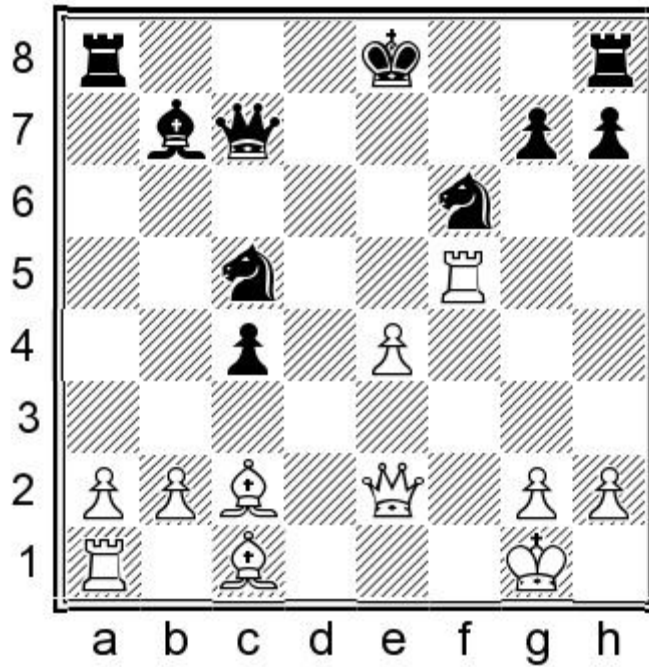
The old line 17. ♖f5 0-0 18. ♖xd6 ♕xd6 19. fxe5 ♕xe5 20. ♖f5 ♕c7 leads nowhere: 21. ♗g5 ♖fxe4! 22. ♖xf8+ ♖xf8 23. ♖xe4 ♕e5 24. ♖f6+ ♔ 24... gxf6 25. ♗xh7+! ♔xh7 26. ♕h5+ =, Kasparov-Akopian, Yerevan Olympiad 1996.

17... axb5 18. ♖xb5 ♕b6 19. ♖xd6+

19. ♕xc4? ♗a6.

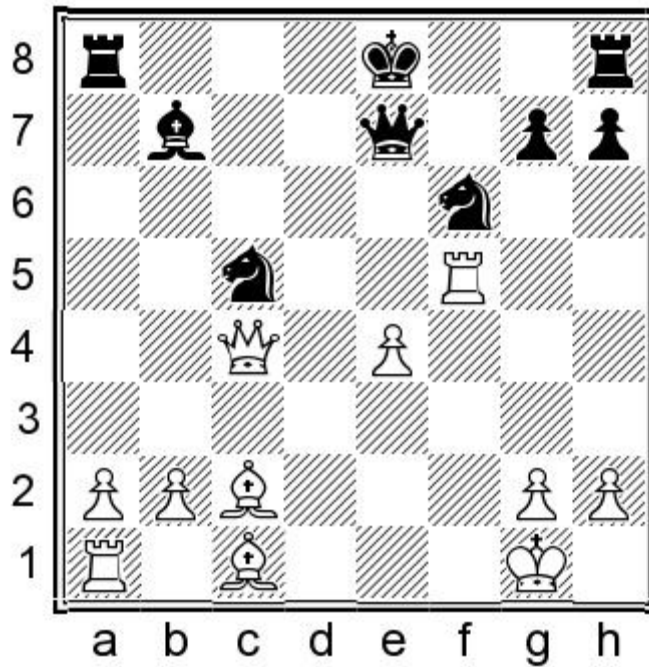
19... ♕xd6 20. fxe5 ♕xe5 21. ♖f5 ♕e7!

21... ♕c7? is bad:



22. ♔xc4 ♖c8 23. ♕f4 with the idea 23... ♔c6 24. ♖e5+ ♔f8 25. ♖xc5!+-, but 21... ♔d6!? is interesting.

22. ♔xc4



22... ♖c8!

This sacrifice was a complete surprise for Anand. Still, he was able to find a convincing reply at the board, which in turn was a complete surprise for his opponent.

a) 22... ♖cxe4?! 23. ♔b5+! ♔f8 24. ♕e3 ♖c8 25. ♖e5 ♕c6 26. ♔a5 ♖a8 27. ♖xe7 ♖xa5 28. ♖c7 is dangerous for Black.

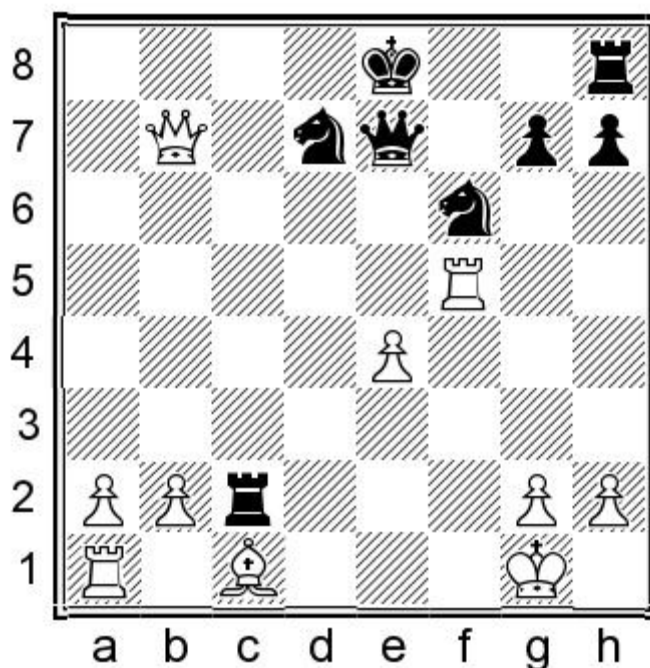
b) Even worse is 22...♞fd7? 23.♙g5 ♖e6 24.♞xc5 ♞xc5 25.♞xc5.

c) However 22...♞cd7!? 23.♙d2! is interesting. The only game where this position arose continued 23...♞c8 24.♞b3 ♞xc2 (24...♞d6! 25.♙f4 ♞b6+ 26.♞xb6 ♞xb6 27.♙b3) 25.♞xc2 ♙xe4 26.♞c8+ ♔f7 27.♞c4+ ♖e6 28.♞xe6+ ♔xe6 29.♞g5 and White can play for a win with no risk, Onischuk-Karjakin, Foros 2008.

23.♞b5+ ♞cd7!

The only move! All others are much weaker, e.g. 23...♞c6? 24.♙e3 ♞e6 25.♙b3+–, 23...♞fd7 24.♙g5 with a strong attack or 23...♔f7 24.e5+–.

24.♞xb7 ♞xc2



25.♙g5

Despite the flaw in the analysis, the sacrifice still turned out to be correct, as White has enough compensation for the piece.

25.e5? ♞c5+ would be a huge mistake.

25...♞d6

Now Black has a choice.

25...♞xe4? 26.♞xe4+ ♞xe4 27.♞e1 when White wins the piece back is best avoided, but 25...♞f8 or 25...h6 is quite possible.

26.♞a8+

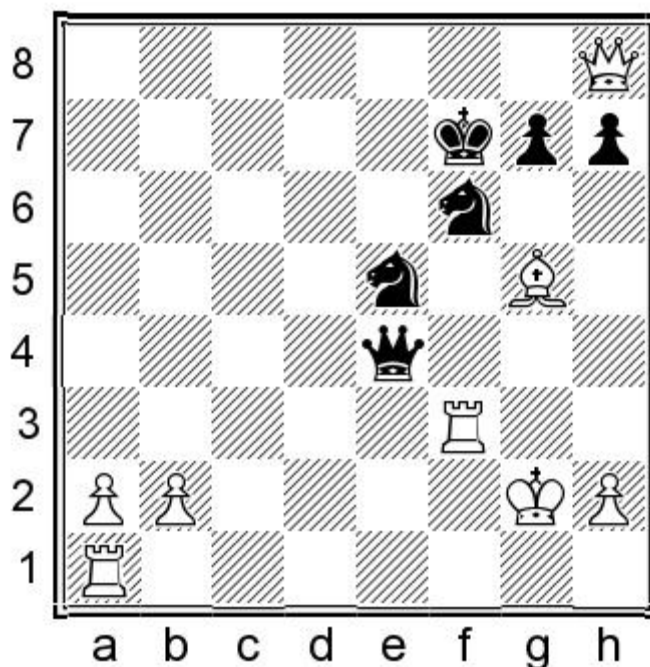
26. ♖xf6 gxf6 (26... ♜xf6? 27. ♚a8+ ♔f7 28. ♚xh8 ♚d2 29. ♝xf6+ ♔xf6 30. ♝f1++-) 27. ♚a8+ ♚b8 is no better.

26... ♔f7?

Having conducted a difficult defence well, Black drops his guard. Anand saw a beautiful line with a perpetual check, but overlooked a lovely refutation on move thirty-one.

He should have played 26... ♚b8! 27. ♚xb8+ (27. ♝e5+? ♔f7) 27... ♜xb8 and the game should end in a draw.

27. ♚xh8 ♚d4+ 28. ♔h1 ♚xe4 29. ♝f3 ♝xg2 30. ♔xg2 ♜e5



31. ♚xg7+!

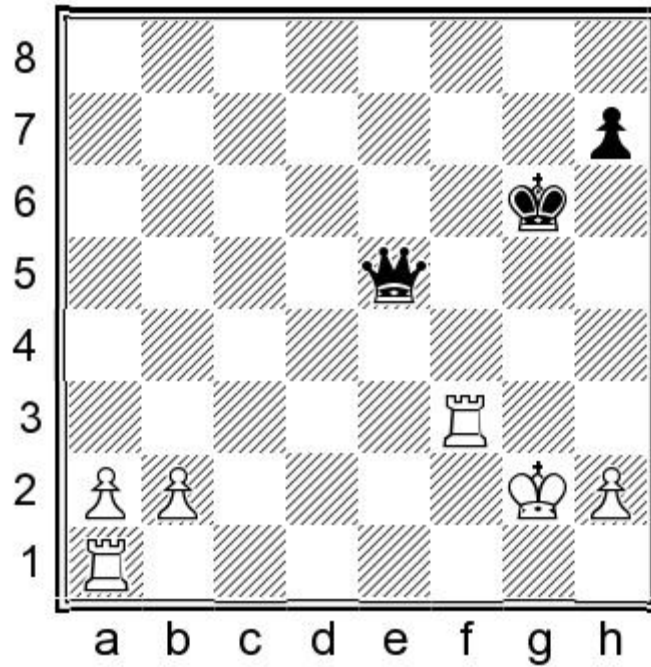
Overlooking such a blow is no surprise!

Natural moves would have led to a draw:

a) 31. ♖xf6 ♚xf3+ 32. ♔g1 ♚e3+=;

b) or 31. ♝af1 ♜xf3 32. ♝xf3 (32. ♖xf6 ♜e5+ 33. ♔f2 ♚f3+=) 32... ♚e2+=.

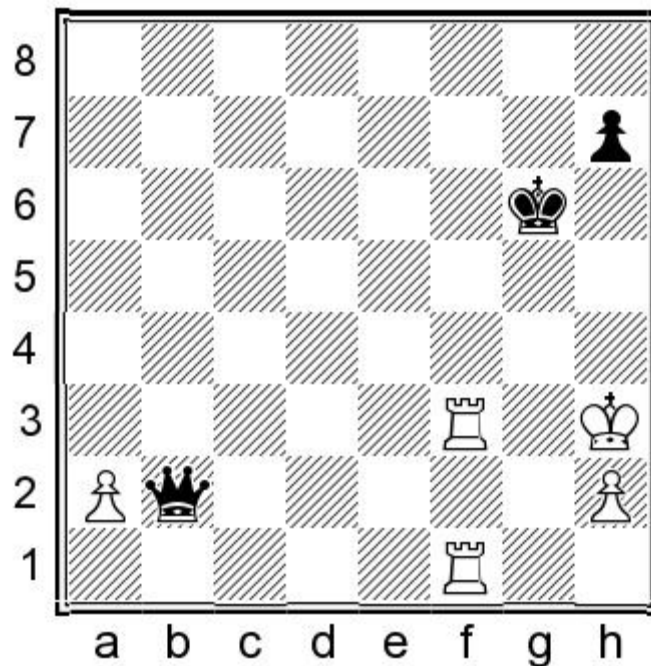
31... ♔xg7 32. ♖xf6+ ♔g6 33. ♖xe5 ♚xe5



34. Rg1

Despite White's big material advantage, the outcome is not yet clear. His king is open and Black can hope for perpetual check.

- a) There is no direct win after 34. Rf2 ♔h5!;
- b) 34. Rf1 ♚xb2+ 35. ♔h3 is interesting:



the natural-looking 35... ♚xa2? 36. Rg3+ ♔h6 37. Rf6+ ♔h5 38. Rgf3 loses since there is no defence against mate. However 35... ♚e5 would have kept the game going.

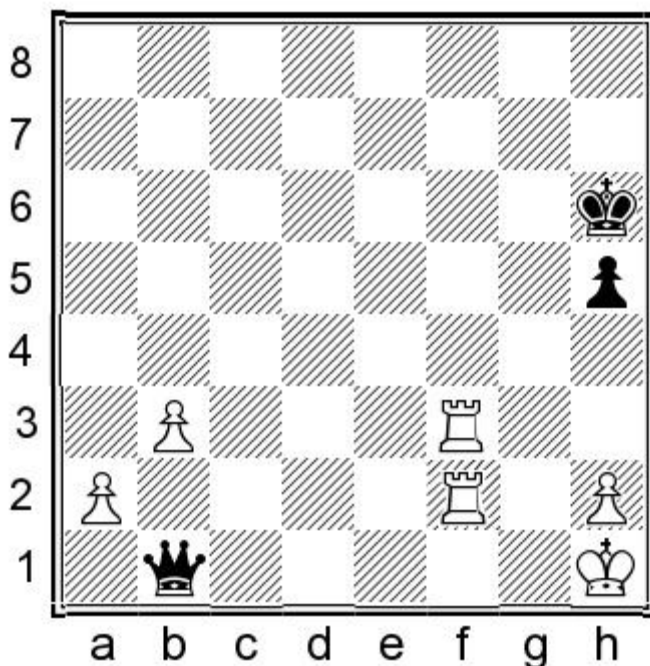
34...h5?

According to the machine, Black should have played 34...♔h5! 35.♖gf1 (35.b3 ♕e2+ 36.♔g3 ♖e5+) 35...♗g7+ 36.♔h1 ♕xb2.

35.b3 ♕e2+ 36.♖f2 ♖e4+ 37.♔f1+?!

The same machine points out a better move for White: 37.♔h3+! ♔h6 38.♖f6+ ♔h7 39.♖g3+-.

37...♔h6 38.♖g3 ♖b1+ 39.♔g2 ♖e4+ 40.♖gf3 ♖g6+ 41.♔f1 ♖b1+ 42.♔g2 ♖g6+ 43.♔h1 ♖b1+



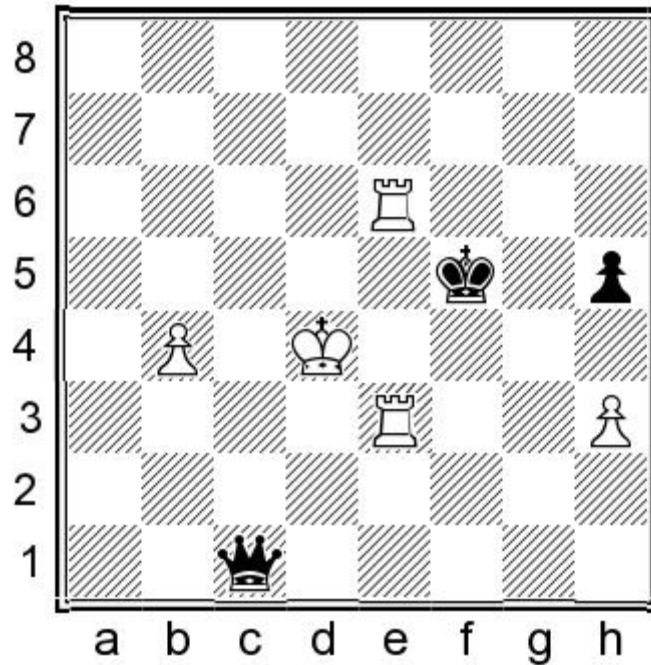
44.♖f1

White has to accept the loss of a pawn since 44.♔g2? ♖g6+ would lead to a threefold repetition.

44...♕xa2

The endgame that has arisen is too complex to analyse in detail in this book. In practice it is difficult to play for both sides. In the end, Karpov managed to outsmart his opponent.

45.♖f6+ ♔g7 46.♖f7+ ♔h8 47.♖f8+ ♔g7 48.♖8f7+ ♔g8 49.♖7f3 ♔g7 50.h3 ♖c2 51.♖1f2 ♖e4 52.♔g2 ♖b4 53.♖e2 ♖d4 54.♖e7+ ♔g6 55.♖e6+ ♔g7 56.♖g3+ ♔f7 57.♖ge3 ♖d5+ 58.♔g3 ♖g5+ 59.♔f2 ♖h4+ 60.♔e2 ♖d4 61.♖6e4 ♖a1 62.♔d3 ♔f6 63.♖e6+ ♔f5 64.b4 ♖c1 65.♔d4



65...♔c8?

The last mistake in the game. Black should have continued giving checks with 65...♔a1+ 66.♕c5 ♔a7+.

66.b5 ♔d8+ 67.♕c5 ♔c7+ 68.♕b4 ♔f4+ 69.♕b3 ♔c7 70.b6 ♔d7 71.♖3e5+ ♕f4 72.♖e4+ ♕g3
 73.♖e3+ ♕h2 74.♕c4 ♖h4 75.♕c5 ♔c8+ 76.♕d5 ♔d8+ 77.♕e4 ♔d7 78.♕f5 ♕g2 79.♕g5 ♔g7+
 80.♕xh4 ♕f2 81.♖3e5 ♔h8+ 82.♕g4 ♔g7+ 83.♕f5 ♔h7+ 84.♕f6 ♔h4+ 85.♕f7 ♔h7+ 86.♕e8 ♔b7
 87.h4 ♔b8+ 88.♕f7 ♔b7+ 89.♕g6 ♔b8 90.h5 ♔g8+ 91.♕f5 ♔h7+ 92.♕f6 ♕f3 93.♖e3+ ♕f2 94.♖e2+
 ♕f3 95.♖2e3+ ♕f2 96.♕g5 ♔g8+ 97.♕h4 ♔d8+ 98.♕h3 ♔d1 99.♖e2+ ♕f3 100.♕h2 ♔d8 101.♖6e3+
 ♕f4 102.b7 ♔b6 103.♖e4+ ♕f3 104.♖2e3+ ♕f2 105.♖e7 ♔d6+ 106.♕h3 ♔b8 107.♖3e5 ♕g1
 108.♖g7+

1-0

The nature of that game and its result had a profound impact on the further course of the match. The defeat forced Anand to act more decisively and to play in a riskier manner. For Karpov, such an early victory added confidence. The second game also evolved unpredictably. At one point, it seemed that its outcome (which would also mean the outcome of the entire match) had already been decided.

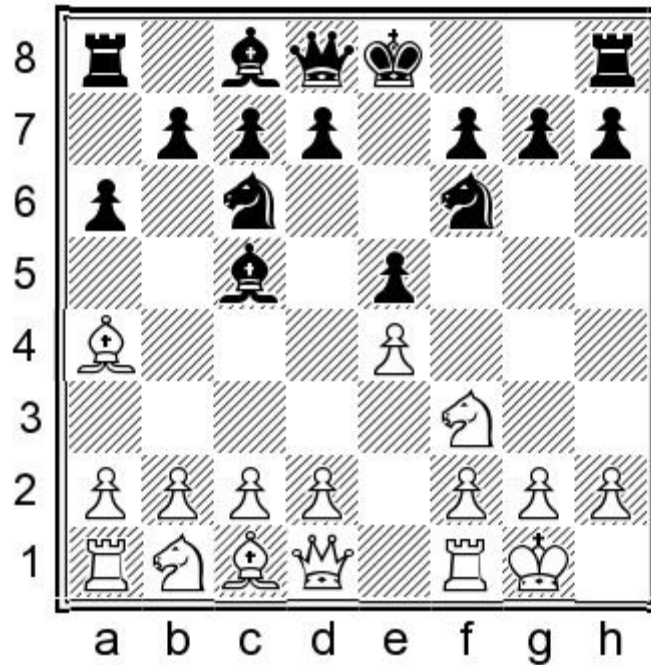
45

Viswanathan Anand (2770)

Anatoly Karpov (2735)

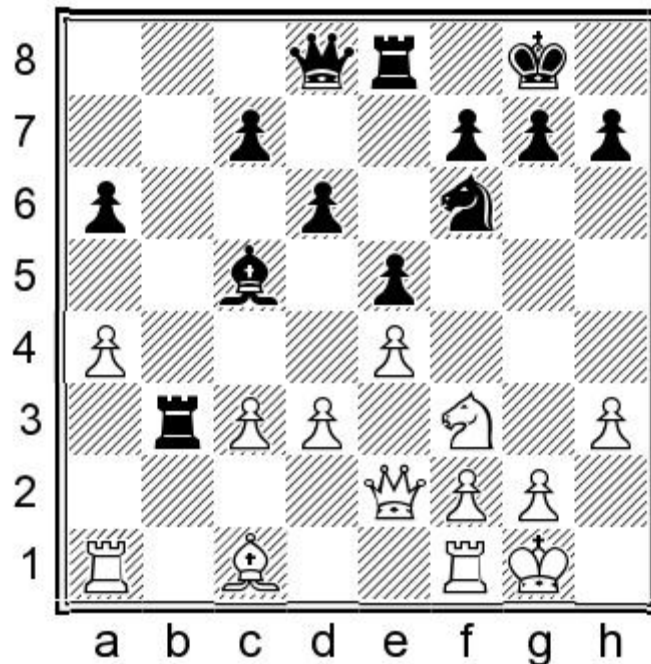
Lausanne 1998

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♖c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♖f6 5.0-0 ♗c5



We can see the influence of Alexander Onischuk, one of Karpov's seconds, who was a specialist in this system.

6.c3 b5 7.♘b3 d6 8.a4 ♘g4 9.d3 0-0 10.h3 ♙xf3 11.♙xf3 ♘a5 12.♙c2 b4! 13.♘d2 ♜b8 14.♙e2 ♞e8 15.♘f3 bxc3 16.bxc3 ♘b3 17.♙xb3 ♞xb3



18.d4

18.♙c2!? is interesting, in order to try for d3–d4 under more favourable circumstances. Still, it doesn't affect the overall assessment of the position. 18...♙b8! (18...♞b7 19.d4) 19.d4 ♙a7 and Black faces no problems. (19...exd4 20.cxd4 ♞xf3 21.gxf3 ♙xd4 22.♞b1 is less beneficial for Black in this situation.)

18...exd4 19.cxd4 ♖xf3!?

The most principled move!

Other ways to continue are also possible, e.g. 19...♞xe4 20.♙e3 ♙b4 21.♚xa6 c5 or 19...♙a7 20.♚xa6 ♚a8 21.♚c4 ♚b7.

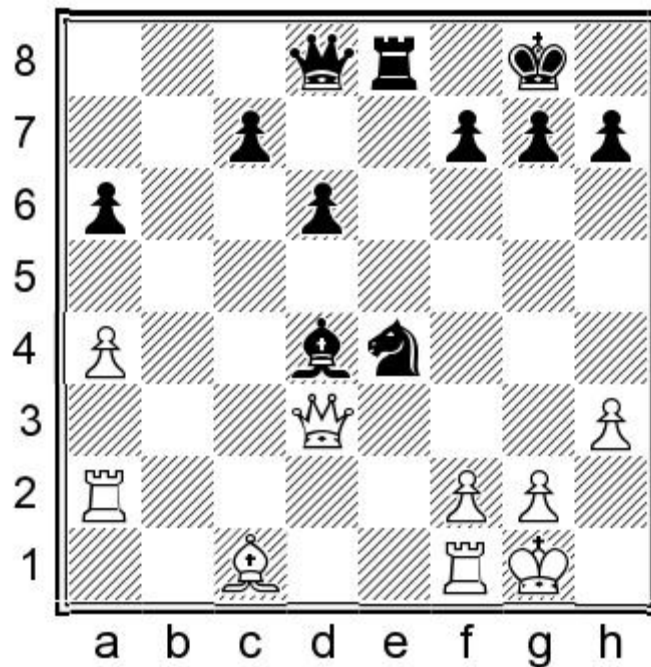
20.♚xf3

20.gxf3 ♙xd4 21.♞b1 (21.♙b2? loses to the elegant blow 21...♘h5!) 21...d5 is worse, but 20.dxc5!?! is quite possible.

20...♙xd4 21.♞a2

It would be better and more natural to play 21.♞b1! ♘xe4 22.♞b4! c5 23.♞b7.

21...♘xe4 22.♚d3



22...c5

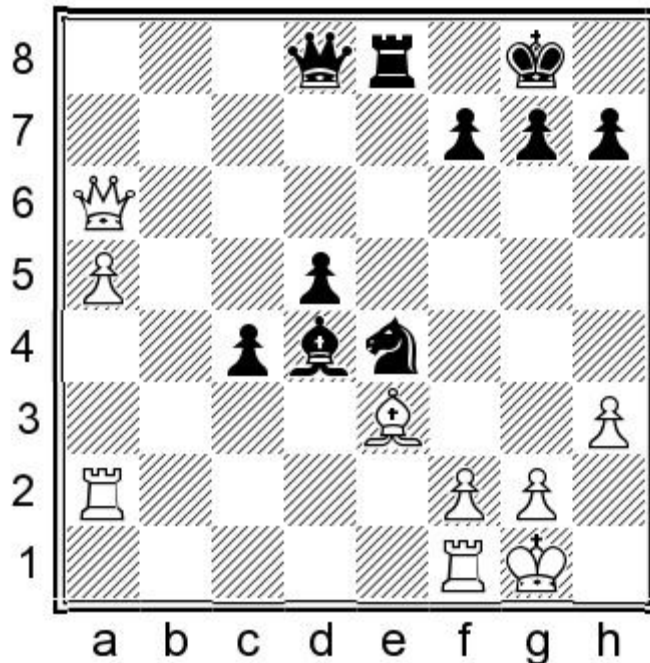
Black is confident with his position and goes all-in.

The way to equalise was 22...♚f6!?! 23.♚xa6 (23.♞e2 d5) 23...♘g3 24.♞d1 (weaker is 24.♚b5 ♚e6! 25.♞d1 ♘e2+ 26.♞xe2 ♚xe2) 24...♘e4.

23.♚xa6 d5 24.a5

Black's pieces in the centre are dangerous, while the c- and d-pawns are ready to advance at any moment. White's only asset is the passed a-pawn.

24...c4! 25.♙e3!



25...♙e5!?

25...♖e6? 26.♚xe6 fxe6 27.♙xd4 would lead to an unexpected loss, but 25...♙f6 26.♚c6! ♚a8 27.♚xa8 ♖xa8 is quite possible.

26.♙b6

The opponents' forces roughly balance each other out, but the position is very sharp and dynamic, so the price of every move is very high.

a) 26.♚b7?! would be met by the unpleasant 26...d4.

b) The preventive 26.♖c2!? is interesting; Black would be wise to respond with a preventive move of his own: 26...h6 (26...d4 27.♖xc4 dxe3 28.♖xe4 ♙h2+ 29.♙xh2 ♖xe4 30.fxe3 is worse).

26...♚d7

26...♚d6!?

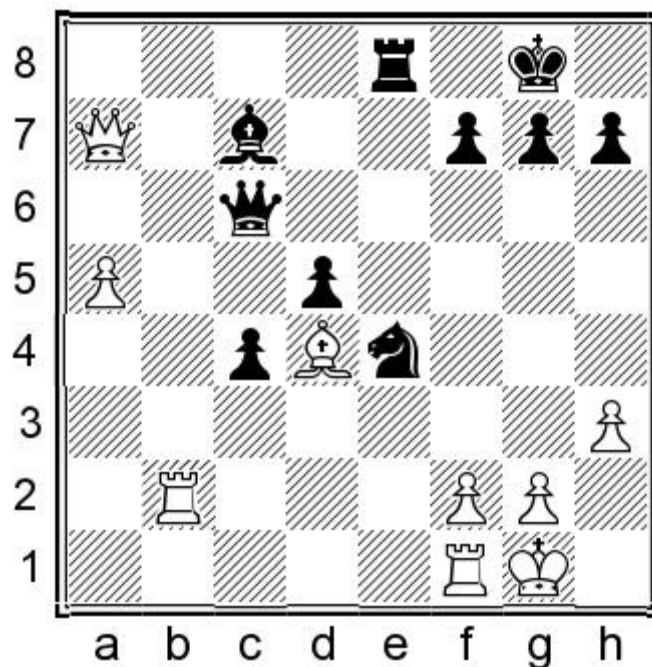
27.♚a7 ♚c6!

27...♚xa7 28.♙xa7 ♘c3 29.♖b2 with advantage for White.

28.♙d4! ♙c7!

White would have better chances in the ending after 28...♖a8 29.♚b6 ♚xb6 30.♙xb6 ♘c3 31.♖d2.

29. ♖b2!

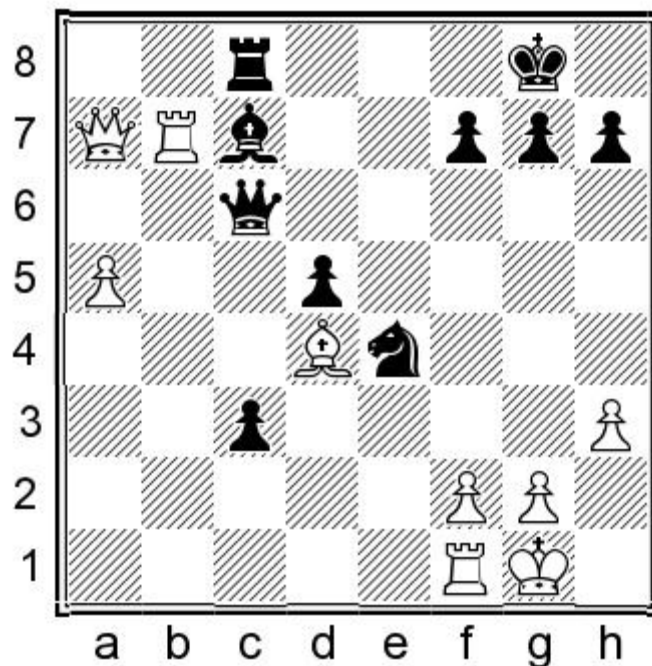


29...c3?!

A serious inaccuracy, but Black's task was difficult, especially since he was in time trouble.

29...♖a8? loses: 30. ♕b7 ♖xb7 31. ♖xb7 ♘xa5 32. ♖a1, while the tempting 29...♘g5, with the idea of sacrificing a knight and giving perpetual check, is refuted by the unexpected 30. ♖b6! ♘xb6 31. axb6. The correct move is 29...♕d6! 30. g3 h5, with a double-edged position.

30. ♖b7! ♖c8



31.♔b6?

Up until this point, Anand had played quite well, finding the best moves in a complicated position.

Now he had two options to increase his advantage.

a) 31.♖c1! was best. 31...h5 (All the others moves lose, e.g. 31...♔d6 32.♖xc7! ♔xc7 33.♔xc7 ♖xc7 34.a6; 31...c2? 32.♖b2 or 31...♘d6 32.a6! ♘xb7 33.♖xc3!) 32.a6 h4 33.♖xc7 ♖xc7 34.♔b8+ ♖c8 35.a7;

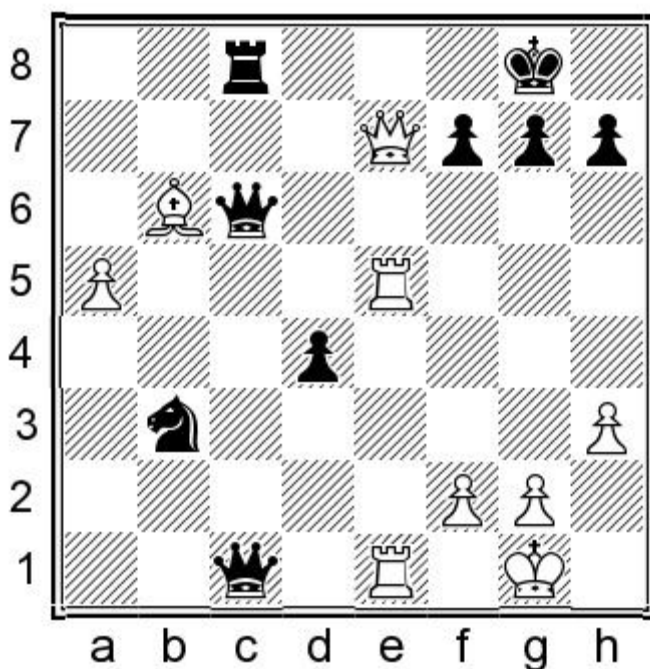
b) or an immediate 31.a6! h6 (31...♔d6 32.♖xc7 ♔xc7 33.♔xc7 ♖xc7 34.a7 ♖c8 35.♖b1 c2 36.♖c1+-; 31...c2 32.♖c1) 32.♖c1!.

31...♔e5 32.♖xf7?

In such positions, especially in time trouble, errors seldom come alone.

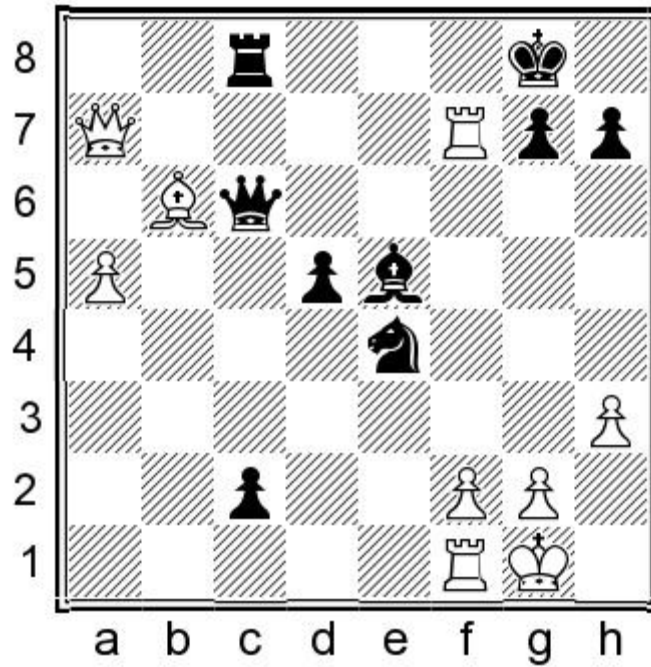
a) 32.♖c1 would have held, e.g. 32...♔f6! 33.♖e7 ♔f4 34.♔e3.

b) The engine's suggestion, 32.♖e7!, would have presented Black with difficult problems. It is extremely difficult to find the only good response 32...♘d2! (32...♔d6 33.♔b7 ♖b8 34.a6! is bad). The fantastic position after 33.♖c1 ♘b3 34.♖e1 c2 35.♖7xe5 c1=♔ 36.♔e7 d4



is assessed by you-know-who in White's favour.

32...c2

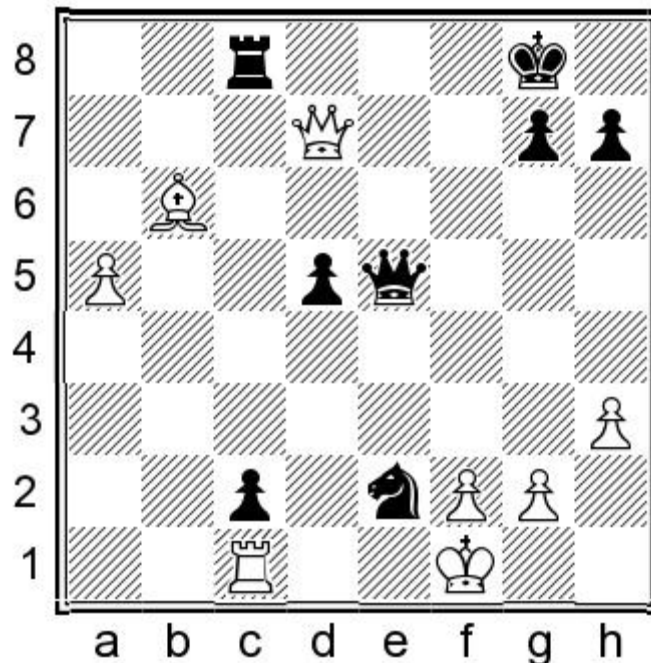


33. ♖c1

It is practically impossible for a human to find the line 33. ♔e3! d4 34. ♖f5! ♕c4 35. ♖xe5 dxe3 36. ♗xe3 c1=♗ 37. ♖xc1 ♗xc1+ 38. ♗xc1 ♖xc1+ 39. ♔h2 where White keeps chances of a draw.

33... ♗c3! 34. ♖f3

After 34. ♖f3 the simplest win is 34... ♕e6! followed by 35. ♖xe5 ♗xe5 36. ♗d7 ♗e2+ 37. ♔f1.



Black now has a choice: 37... ♖e8

[37... ♖f8 38. ♖xc2 ♗g3+ 39. ♔g1 ♗a1+! (the natural 39... ♗e1+? leads only to a draw: 40. ♔h2 ♗f1+

41.♔h1 ♖e3+ 42.♔h2 ♜xc2 43.♚xd5+ ♜f7 44.♚a8+) 40.♔h2 ♜f1+ 41.♔g1 ♜e3+ 42.♔h2 ♚e5+ 43.f4 ♚xf4+ 44.g3 ♚e4+-]

38.♙c7! ♚e4 39.♞xc2 ♜g3+ 40.♔g1 ♚e1+ 41.♔h2 ♜f1+ 42.♔h1 ♜e3+ 43.♔h2 ♜xc2+-.

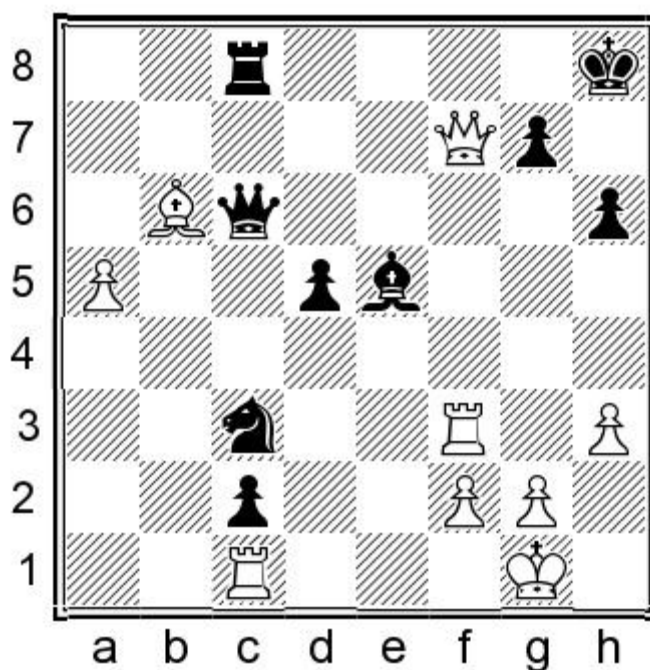
34...h6??

As the saying goes, our shortcomings are the continuation of our virtues. How many points have such preventive moves brought Karpov? However to make a preventive move in the current situation was a grave mistake. Black should have played 34...♜e2+!, e.g. 35.♔h1

[35.♔f1 ♙f4! (the exquisite recommendation of our silicon friend, 35...♚e8!, is also worth mentioning) 36.♞xf4 ♜xf4 37.♙e3 ♚c4+]

35...♚e6! (35...h6! Here a preventive move is quite acceptable!) 36.♙e3 d4 37.♙d2 ♜xc1 38.♙xc1 ♙b8+-.

35.♚f7+ ♔h8



36.♞e3!

The scenery has changed yet again, this time for good!

36...d4 37.♞xe5 d3 38.♙d4! ♞g8 39.♞e6 d2 40.♞xc6! dxc1=♚+ 41.♔h2 ♚d2 42.♞c8 1-0

Such an exciting game, with as much drama as the previous one!

The initiative in the match had swung back strongly in the opposite direction. However Karpov's strength was forged in gruelling battles against Korchnoi and Kasparov, and he did not flinch. After winning game four with Black, Karpov's final victory seemed almost inevitable; he only had to survive

the last day.

The game kept both participants and spectators in suspense, and ended in an unexpected manner.

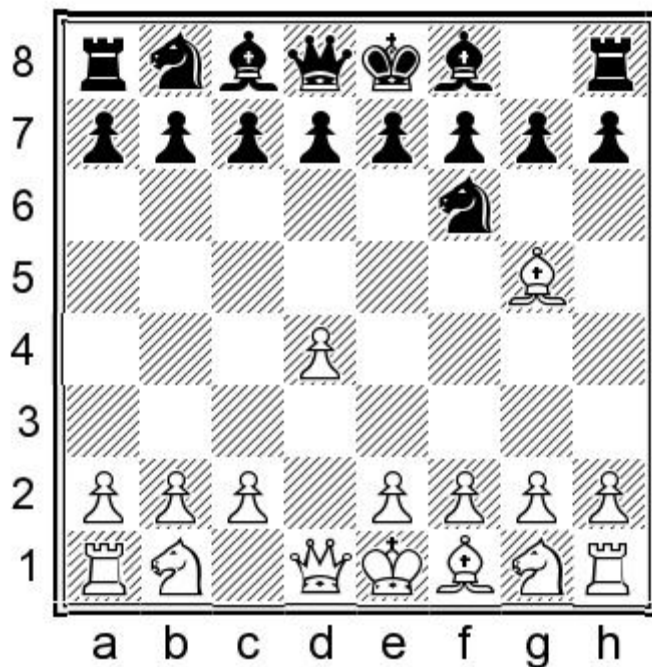
46

Viswanathan Anand (2771)

Anatoly Karpov (2735)

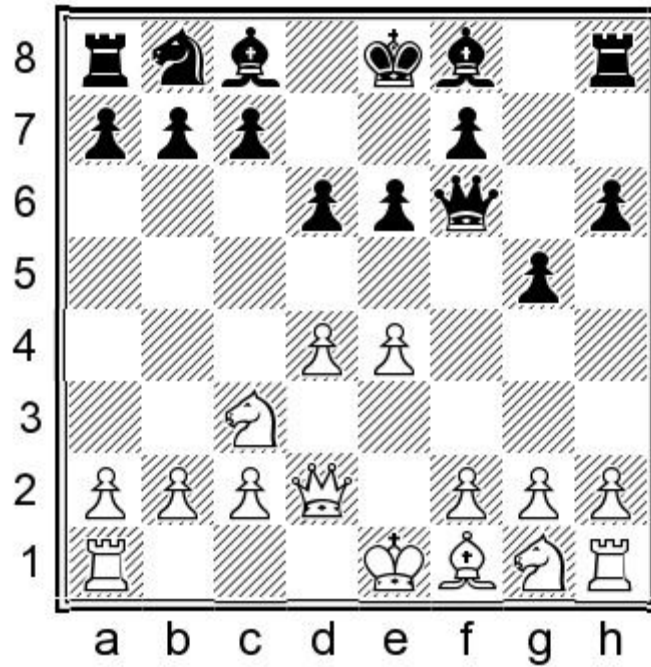
Lausanne 1998

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♙g5



A surprise! Anand had never played this before. If you can't prepare a big surprise for your opponent, prepare a small one.

2...e6 3.e4 h6 4.♙xf6 ♚xf6 5.♘c3 d6 6.♚d2 g5



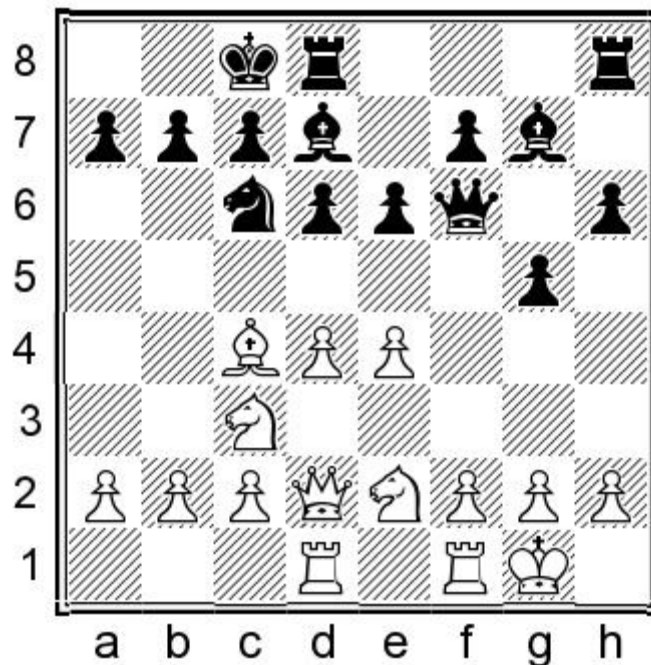
7.♙c4!?

a) By contrast, Karpov had already had this position: 7.0-0-0 ♔g7 8.e5!? dxe5 (8...♙e7!?) 9.dxe5 ♙e7 10.f4 ♘c6 11.♘f3 ♘d7 12.h4 gxf4 13.♙xf4 0-0-0 14.♘e4 ♘b8!, Adams-Karpov, Las Palmas 1994;

b) 7.g3 ♔g7 8.0-0-0 ♔d7 (avoiding 8...♘c6 9.♘b5 ♙d8 10.d5) 9.f4 gxf4 10.gxf4 ♘c6 11.♘f3 0-0-0 12.♙e3 ♔b8 13.♙g1 ♙hg8 14.a3 a6 15.e5 ♙e7, Topalov-Karpov (rapid) 1996. Black won both games.

The plan which Anand's team came up with gives the game an original character.

7...♘c6 8.♘ge2 ♔g7 9.♙d1 ♘d7 10.0-0 0-0-0



After ...g7–g5 it is scary to castle on the kingside, and Black castling on the queenside is a certain moral victory for White.

11. ♖b5!

Nothing would be gained by an immediate attack on the black king: 11.b4 g4 12.b5 ♖a5 13.♙d3 h5 and it is not clear how White can sustain the initiative.

11...a6

Forced. 11...♔b8 12.d5 exd5 13.exd5 ♖e7 14.♚a5 ♙xb5 15.♙xb5 is quite unpleasant since the rook joins the attack on the third rank, whereas 15...♚xb2? 16.♖d3 would be a generous gift for the enemy.

12. ♖a3

Now b2–b4–b5 becomes a real danger.

12...g4!?

In his turn, Black has to be active on the opposite flank.

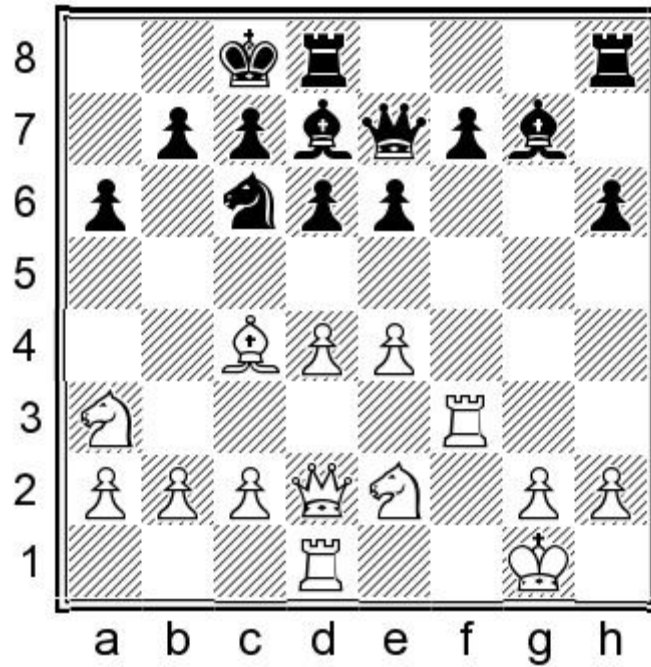
a) For the same reason 12...h5!? 13.b4 h4 14.f4 h3 deserved consideration.

b) The most active was probably 12...♚g6!? 13.♙d3 f5.

13.f4

13.b4?! ♚g5!.

13...gxf3 14.♖xf3 ♚e7



15.c3

White has to lose a tempo as the immediate 15.b4 is countered by 15...d5! 16.exd5 ♘xb4 17.dxe6 ♙xe6 18.♙xe6+ ♜xe6 and the position is simplified to Black's advantage.

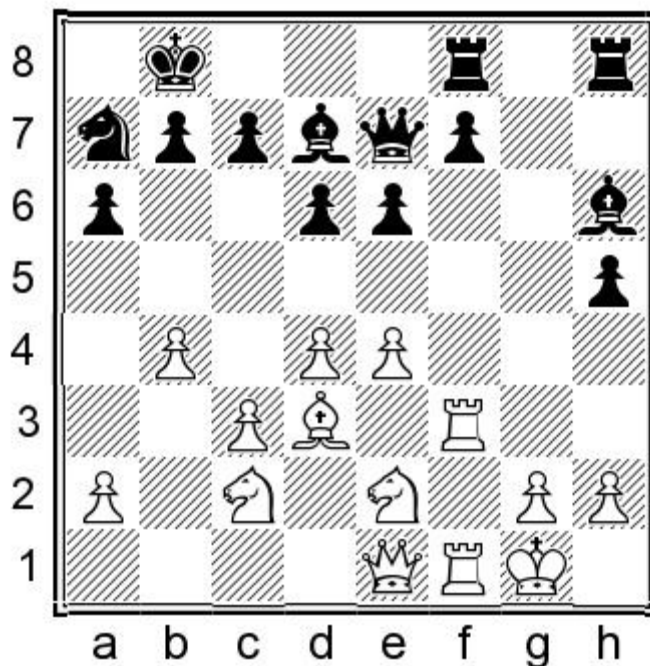
15...h5 16.♝df1 ♞df8 17.b4

The game has become very sharp, which favours White, but he has nothing tangible yet; there is a dynamic balance on the board.

17...♞a7!?

A preventive move typical of Karpov. 17...h4 18.b5 axb5 19.♞xb5 h3 would be sharper. However it was his opponent who needed to complicate the game.

18.♞c2 ♙h6 19.♞e1 ♜b8 20.♙d3



20...♔c6!⇒

Threatening 21...f5. Black has placed his bishops ideally and can face the future with optimism. However lack of time begins to be a factor.

21.♘f4 ♖fg8

A pawn sacrifice.

After 21...e5?! 22.♘xh5! would be even stronger, thus it made sense to play 21...h4!? to take this option off the table.

22.d5!?

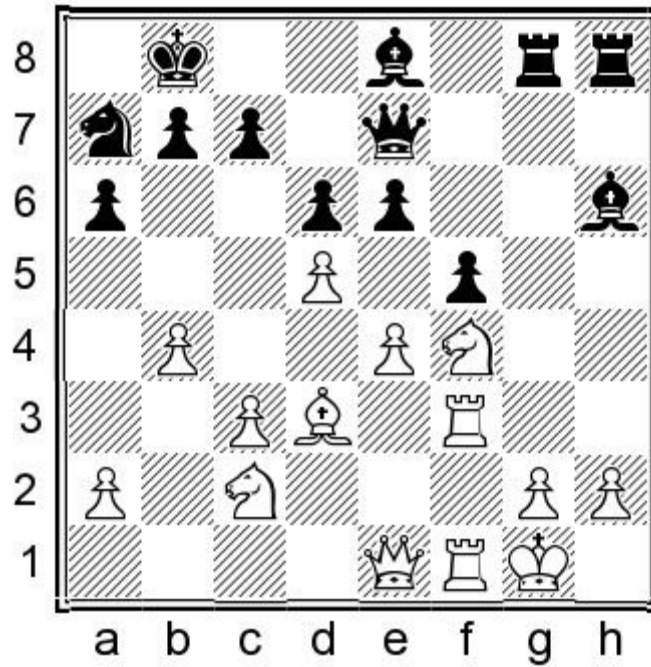
A fundamentally different plan to play for a win was 22.♘xh5 in order to keep the extra pawn. In this case, Black's task would have been simpler: 22...f5! 23.♖h3 ♔g5 24.♘f4 ♔g7! with tremendous compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

22...♔e8

It would be wrong to play 22...♔xf4? 23.dxc6!.

23.♔f2

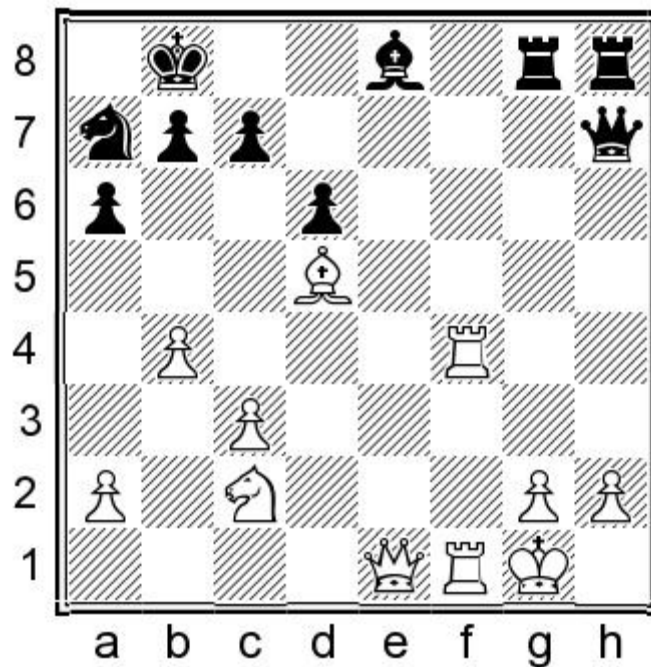
Capturing the pawn now deserved attention: 23.♘xh5!? f5 (everything is fine for White after 23...♔g5!? 24.♘f4 e5?! 25.♖g3 too) 24.♘f4



24...♙xf4

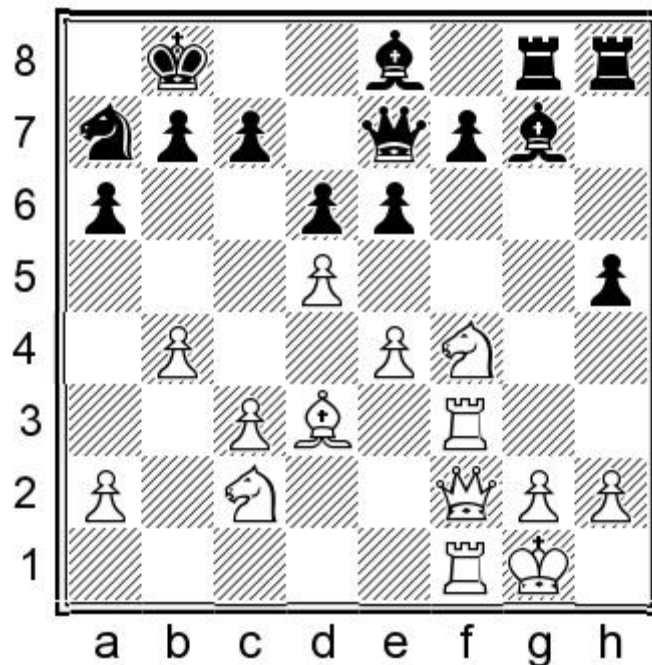
[24...e5!? is interesting, e.g. 25.♘e6 f4 26.c4 ♙d7 (after 26...♙h5 White just leaves his rook under attack — 27.b5 — and has enough compensation for the exchange) 27.b5 axb5 28.cxb5 ♘xb5 29.♚a5 White has good chances here.]

25.♞xf4 fxe4 26.♙xe4 exd5 27.♙xd5 ♚h7



Anand gives this line as a refutation of 23.♘h5. Indeed, after the automatic 28.h3 Black faces no problems. However the paradoxical 28.h4! changes the overall assessment dramatically: 28...♚xc2 29.♙xg8 ♞xg8 30.♞f2 ♚g6 31.♞f8. There is no way to defend after 32.h5 (the reason for 28.h4!) and White wins.

23...♔g7



Even now 23...h4!? would be appropriate.

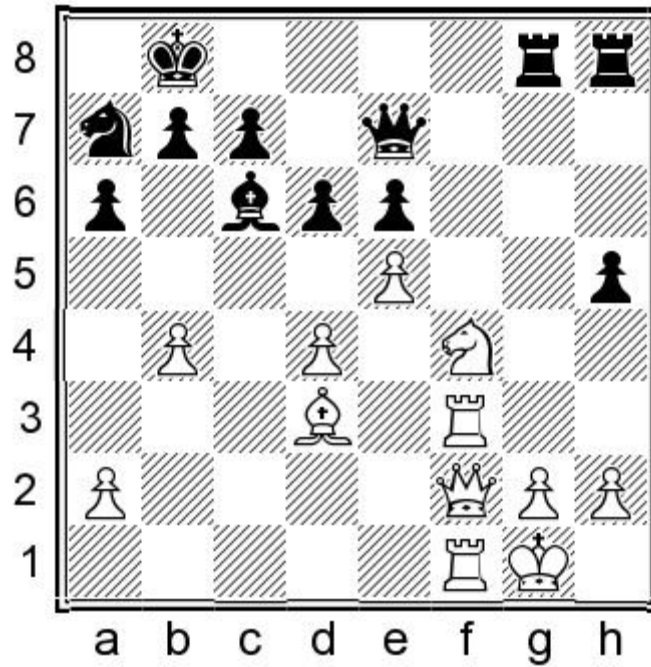
24.♘d4!?

It was somewhat more precise to play 24.dxe6 fxe6 25.♔c4 ♖h6 26.♘d4.

24...♔d7

In time trouble, Karpov prefers the safest option. It was harder to decide on 24...♘b5!? 25.dxe6 (25.♔xb5 ♔xd4 26.cxd4 ♔xb5; 25.♘xb5 axb5 26.c4) 25...♘xd4 26.cxd4 fxe6 or 24...♔xd4 25.cxd4 e5, even though all the lines here favoured Black as well.

25.dxe6 ♔xd4 26.cxd4 fxe6 27.e5 ♔c6



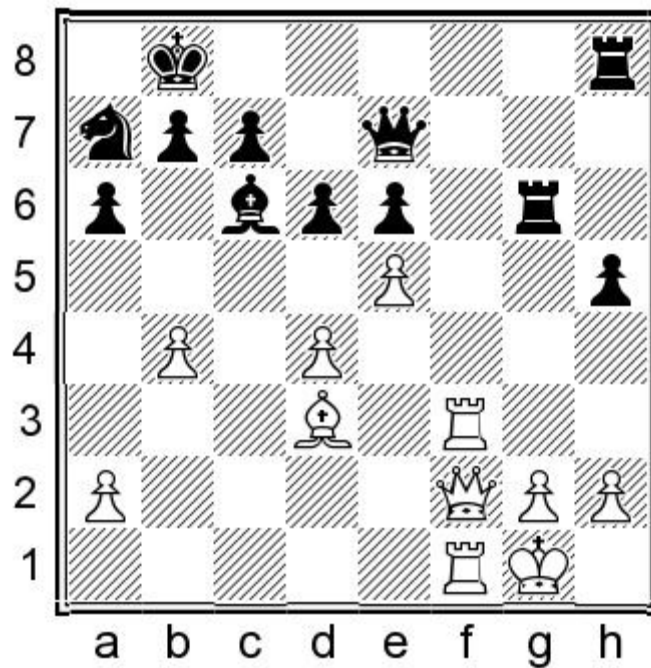
28. ♖g6

This is the logical consequence of the plan started by 25.dxe6. White had nothing better, e.g. 28. ♖g3 h4.

28... ♔d8??

This is basically the first mistake in the game — and a decisive one!

Black should have played 28... ♖xg6!



29. ♕xg6 (29. ♖f8+ ♘c8! — Karpov missed this option in his calculations — 30. ♕xg6 ♖xf8 31. ♗xf8

♖g5–+) 29...♙xf3 30.♗xf3 dxe5 31.dxe5 ♖xb4! (31...♘c6?! 32.♗f6 favours White) 32.♗f6 ♖d4+ 33.♔h1 ♜d8 and Black is at the very least no worse. However Karpov had practically no time, and any position can be lost in time trouble.

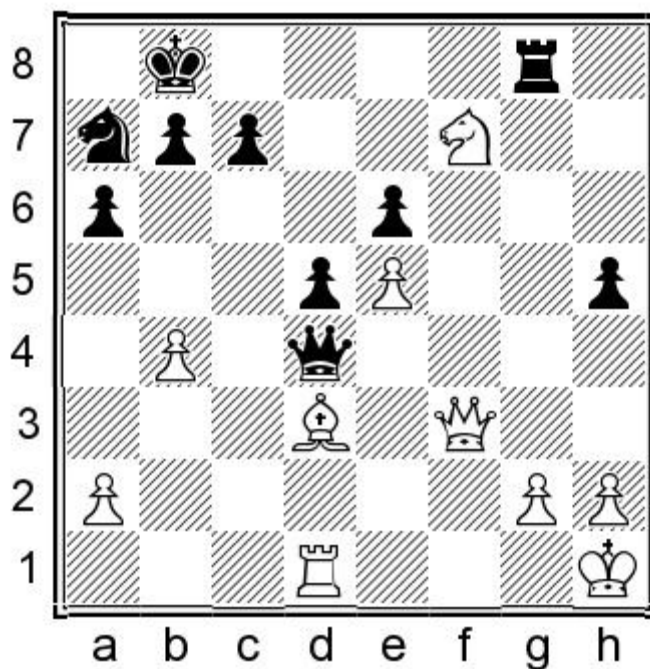
29.♘xh8 ♙xf3 30.♘f7 ♗h4□

This is the best defence, but it doesn't change anything. All White has to do is keep calm and composed.

31.♗xf3

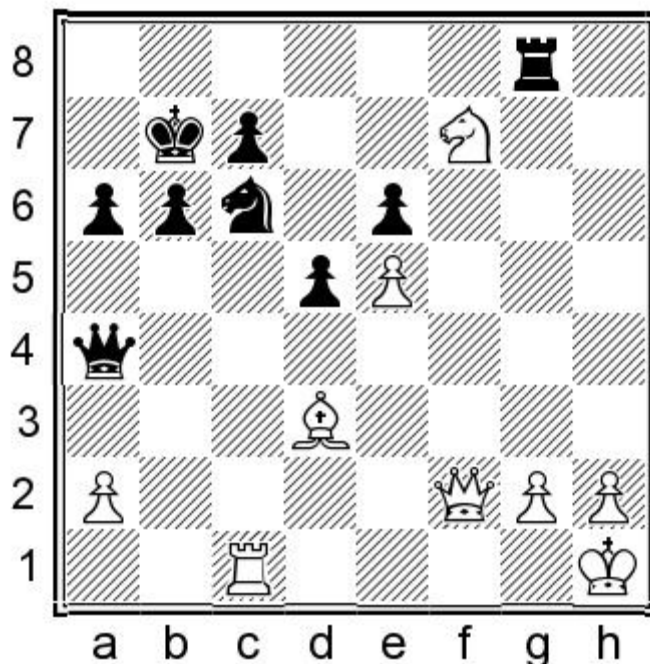
Obviously not 31.♗xh4?? ♜xg2+ 32.♔h1 ♜f2+=.

31...♗xd4+ 32.♔h1 d5 33.♞d1!



White's plan is simple: capture the h5-pawn, after which the passed h-pawn decides the game. The queenside is irrelevant.

33...♗xb4 34.♞b1 ♗a4 35.♗xh5 ♘c6 36.♗e2 ♔a7 37.♗f2+ ♖b6 38.♞c1! ♔b7



39.h3!

The game continues until time trouble is finished.

39...♖c8 40.♚f6 ♘d4 41.♘d8+!

41.♘d6+ also won.

41...♔b8 42.♘xe6

The time control has been reached and the game is over.

1-0

Frustrated and depressed by this unexpected result, the coaching staff was waiting for Karpov to come into the room. Finally he appeared. A vacant look and inhibited reactions were signs of the fatigue and apathy that had overwhelmed him. Victory had slipped from his hands at the very last moment. Now, instead of a triumphant celebration, he had to subject himself to a new test — two rapid games played at twenty-five minutes per game. Given the psychological state of the players, it was easy to predict the favourite. Besides, at the time, Vishy was considered to be an expert in rapid play. That was enough to slide into despair. Meanwhile, the daily grind continued like a broken record: Anatoly went to dinner with his wife as usual while we had to sift through opening variations for the following day.

Karpov's preparation for his games is a separate story. An enormous natural talent, Anatoly has never been too assiduous. In his youth, he survived because he was able to play quickly, was tenacious and had an amazing ability to balance on the very edge. Then came experience and class; the preparation of opening theory was outsourced to numerous coaches and seconds, whose duty was to report only the final results of their research and conclusions to their 'boss'. Overtime, Karpov got used to such

practice. He really believed that painstaking analysis with its possible discoveries and inevitable disappointments is something to be done by assistants. Karpov himself would learn only the gist of their final findings and would take care of the specifics at the chess board during the games. The actual play and combat were always of utmost interest to the World Champion; it was there that his immense talent was revealed in all its glory. Time passed, and Karpov's energy and motivation were on the wane. Besides, memory has never been his strong suit. Our game preparation during the match in Lausanne bordered on the grotesque. Here's a brief description of our process. Karpov's four seconds prepared suggestions for the upcoming game. The pairs were permanent: I worked with Podgaets, while Morovic worked with Onischuk. By the time the champion woke up, Mikhail Podgaets summarised our efforts in short, easily understandable files that were reported to the boss. Karpov's circadian rhythms made him a definite owl rather than a lark, so these meetings always took place in a situation of chronic time pressure. One can only wonder about the quality and effectiveness of such preparation. I did not attend the pre-match training camp, so it was while preparing for specific games that I became acquainted with the lines developed for Karpov. Pre-match preparation focused on sharp lines in the Meran Variation, but the champion was caught flat-footed in this opening in game one. Disappointed by his assistants' work, Karpov transitioned to simpler openings. Meanwhile we continued to analyse sharp lines and propose new ideas to Anatoly before every game. Alas, Karpov had neither the time nor desire to master the intricacies of our suggestions, especially since the match was proceeding quite well for him.

Suddenly, a force majeure situation plunged the whole team into a real stupor. Something had gone wrong with our fine-tuned preparation methods and decisive changes were needed. I proposed changing the preparation scheme completely. My radical manifesto included:

1. Get rid of the hectic morning scrum; instead, decide on the opening the previous evening.
2. Get ready for a tough and uncompromising battle.
3. Therefore, choose the sharpest variation with White. Since we analysed and discussed it every day, there would be no need to go further into details and the player would be able to rely on luck.
4. Drink alcohol instead of water during dinner in the evening, then take a hot and cold shower in the morning and go for a walk before the game.

Since the person to whom all these suggestions were addressed was wearing a sour expression that left no doubt about his opinion of all these innovations, my speech became more and more emotional.

I shall not give a detailed account of Anatoly's reaction since it was highly critical rather than constructive. Karpov didn't stop at using choice words and phrases. The champion objected to all the points of my marvellous programme; my suggestions on the choice of an opening and the use of alcohol angered him the most. Soon, our verbal duel moved to the chess board. Oddly enough, my chess arguments prevailed and Karpov left the room extremely irritated. This did not bode well for the future.

Much to the surprise of everyone who witnessed this argument, an hour later our whole chess team found itself in a restaurant that evening. I would not say that the wine flowed freely but it was present; the atmosphere was pleasant and very relaxed. Having suddenly implemented one point of my suggested programme, I dreamt that it would be adopted in its entirety. Alas, the all-important Meran

Variation was rejected once and for all; the very next morning, we were studying subtleties in the Reti Opening, something that Karpov had never used before. Needless to say, my wondrous concept of preparation for the great showdown did not pass the real-life test. Everything happened in the routine way: brunch, a cursory glance at the recommendations prepared by his seconds, then quickly head from the Beau Rivage Palace Hotel to the Olympic Museum where the match was taking place. I suspect that the couple of hundred meters that separated those two remarkable buildings were the only distance that Anatoly ever crossed on foot, and since he was always late for the games, he probably had to run. I considered it a bad omen to follow this stale ritual on the decisive day.

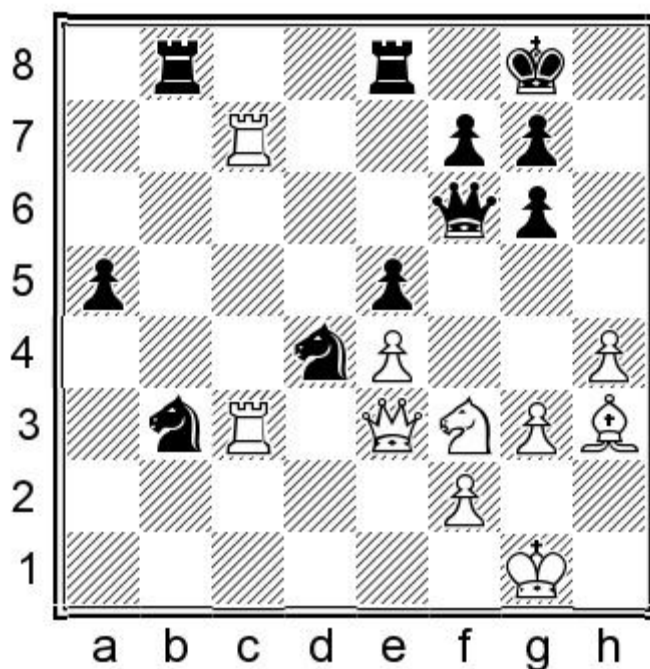
It was painful to watch the first tiebreak game. Anatoly played slowly and poorly. Vishy replied very quickly and made strong moves. It appeared that the game would reach a predictable climax when the situation changed suddenly.

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Anatoly Karpov (2735)

Viswanathan Anand (2770)

Lausanne 1998



You don't need to be an expert to give a proper assessment of this position. Black has an overwhelming advantage thanks to his extra passed pawn and dominating knight on d4. Besides, up to this point, Anand had been making his moves instantly while his opponent had just a few minutes remaining on his clock.

39...♘xf3+?

This move, which Vishy also made quickly, is difficult to explain.

The natural 39...a4 would have finished the game. White's best chance then is 40.♙d7! (40.♘g5 a3–+), but 40...♘xf3+ 41.♚xf3 ♚xf3 42.♞xf3 ♞e7 43.♙xa4 ♞xc7 44.♙xb3 ♔f8 gives Black a technically won

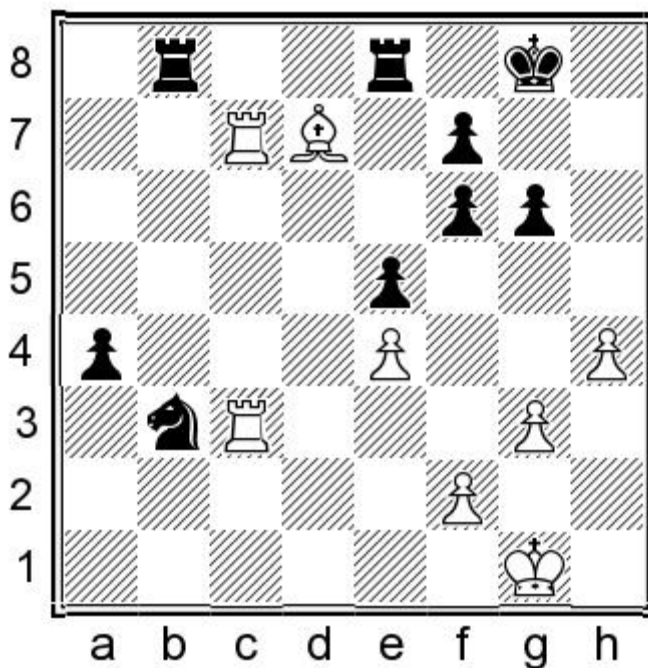
endgame.

39...♖xf3+? 40.♚xf3 a4?

It was only now that Anand stopped to think and, as a result, made another mistake.

Even though most of the advantage is lost, 40...♖d4! would still give Black chances for a win.

41.♚xf6 gxf6 42.♙d7

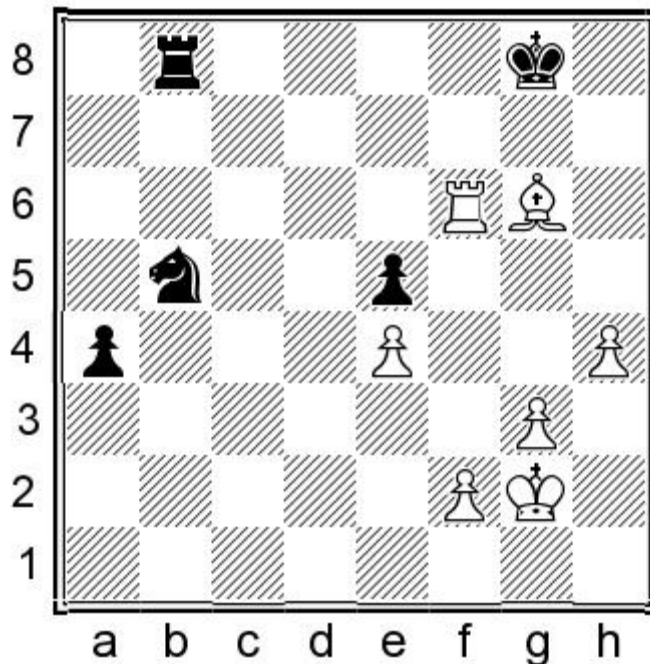


42...♖d4?

The suicidal moves continue.

Black should have settled for a draw with 42...♜e7 43.♙xa4 ♜xc7 44.♜xc7 ♖d4, but it appears that Anand had lost the plot completely.

43.♙xe8 ♖e2+ 44.♜g2 ♖xc3 45.♙xf7+ ♜f8 46.♙xg6 ♖b5 47.♜f7+ ♜g8 48.♜xf6



48...Ra8!

48...Kg7 is bad. After 49.Ra6 Bc7 50.Ra7 Kxg6 51.Rxc7 Ra8 52.Rc6+ Kg7 53.Rc2 a3 54.Ra2 the rook ending is won for White.

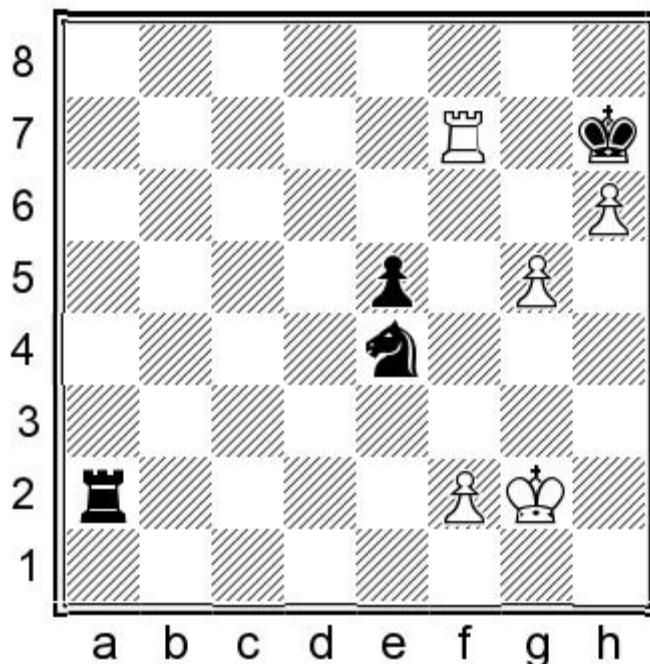
49.h5 a3 50.h6 a2 51.Qf7+ Kh7 52.Qxa2 Rxa2 53.g4!

Typical Karpov! In his place, with recent troubles in mind, and in deep time trouble, most grandmasters would have preferred to finish the game quickly with a draw after 53.Rc6 Ra4 54.Rxe5 Bc3 55.f3 Kh6, but Anatoly used up almost all his remaining thinking time and continued the fight.

53...Bc3?!

Black could still achieve a draw: 53...Ra8! 54.g5 (54.Kg3 Bc3 55.f3 Rg8 56.Kh4 Rg6) 54...Rg8 55.Rf5 Bd6 56.Rxe5 Bf7 57.Re7 Rxc5+ 58.Kf3 Kg6.

54.g5 Bxe4 55.Rf7+



55...♔g6?

The last mistake in the game!

55...♔g8! would still keep chances of salvation: 56.g6 ♖a8 It is better to play 57.h7+

[A direct line to a draw is 57.♖e7 ♜f6! 58.♖xe5 (58.f3 ♜d5; 58.h7+ ♔h8 59.♖xe5 ♔g7) 58...♜g4 59.♖h5 ♜xh6 60.♖xh6 ♔g7=.]

57...♔h8 58.g7+ ♔xh7 59.♖f8 ♔xg7 60.♖xa8 and this endgame appears drawn.

56.♖g7+ ♔f5 57.h7 ♖xf2+ 58.♔g1 ♔g4 59.h8=♚ ♔g3 60.♖e7 ♖g2+ 61.♔f1 ♜d2+ 62.♔e1

1-0

Anand, who was literally a step away from the title of World Champion, now had to win the second game simply to even the odds. Such an abrupt metamorphosis would knock anyone out of his stride, so it is not surprising that there was no real fight in game two. Karpov quickly equalised with Black, and then confidently repelled desperate attempts by his opponent to seize the initiative. A second tiebreak victory and another World Championship title!



In Odessa, during the World Champion's training camp. (Photo from the author's archive)

This was my only experience in a championship final and I was left with contradictory impressions. As a professional who belonged to one of the player's teams, it was my job to do my best to ensure victory for my player. It was only in Lausanne that I joined Karpov's team, so I cannot comment on the whole process of preparation, however it was obvious to me that no particular strategy was chosen for the match. From the very beginning, I had to question the quality of the analytical work. Naturally, computers at the time did not have a lot of processing power and the chess engines of yesteryear cannot be compared to modern ones. Therefore the only computer-based tools that we used were databases, while the analysis was performed manually.

Anand's situation was much more difficult since it was only three days before the start that Vishy learnt that he was to play a World Championship match. There was no time for targeted preparation; his main priority was to recover from the gruelling tournament in Groningen. This lack of energy and physical

fatigue became major, or even decisive, factors in his defeat. Even in such unequal conditions, Anand fought heroically to the very end. On the other hand, Karpov clearly dominated the play and the match should have been finished ahead of schedule. The odds were evened due to the errors committed by our team, both on the chess side and in the logistics. As a result, the world witnessed a thriller with an unpredictable and dramatic finale.

At that time, my playing career was gradually coming to an end. It might have been advisable to wrap it up sooner, but two factors prevented me from calling it a day. On the one hand, it is not easy to get rid of a chess ‘addiction’. When your whole adult life is lived from one tournament to another, it is extremely difficult to quit the race. On the other hand, there wasn’t a big demand for chess coaches in Europe, especially in Ukraine, back then. I was interested in working with top-level chess players, but there was a serious problem. Grandmasters, even those in the elite, earned a relative pittance at the time — at least their earnings were not enough to share with coaches. Therefore I did not have much choice.

For a while, I tried to combine the two occupations. The line was crossed only when I was appointed head coach of Team Ukraine in 2004. It was not a matter of salary, which was very modest even by my homeland’s standards. My perception of myself and my perception of the game had changed. Once I started dealing with the problems of others, it was no longer possible to handle my own problems with the same efficiency. My position did not involve individual work with team members; my responsibilities were more of a captain than of a coach — I have already described this job in the first part: ‘Captain’.

Of course, I watched the games of my players and dispensed occasional advice. I discussed the crises that inevitably happen when a player grows and improves — remember that the Ukrainian team at the time included mostly players who were very young.

I forged closer ties with Pavel Eljanov; we organised a couple of individual training camps. I would like to believe that I had something to do with his professional growth. Pavel was neither the youngest nor the most talented in the brilliant constellation of Ukrainian chess players with whom I was fortunate enough to work, but it is he (as well as Sergey Karjakin, who has been representing Russia long since) who has managed to have the most impressive and stable career. His critical attitude towards himself and his consistent and well-planned work effort allowed Pavel to come up with an optimum way to play.

Nowadays, young players are almost to a man passionate about working on the openings, especially since such work has been made easier by cyberassistants. Only some of them are posing more complex and fundamental questions. Pavel Eljanov is one of the rare exceptions. His successful professional career development is a logical result of his constant work to improve his chess and himself.

ANISH GIRI — A WISE TALENT

It was much later that I managed to concentrate fully on coaching. On January 1, 2014, I started working with Anish Giri. Anish was born in St Petersburg in Russia in 1994. He became interested in chess and played his first tournaments there. Even then his extraordinary abilities attracted a lot of attention. The real breakthrough came in the Netherlands, to where his family moved in 2009. In a short time, a promising teenager turned into one of the strongest juniors in the world. By the tender age of seventeen he had cracked the prestigious 2700 club. This was a product of his undeniable natural talent and a contribution from the renowned coach Vladimir Chuchelov, who took Giri under his wing when Anish moved to the Netherlands. Anish's progress was obvious, but his collaboration with Chuchelov stopped after a few years. Their relationship might have become complicated because Vladimir was also working with yet another talented junior, Fabiano Caruana. I wasn't involved in this separation in any way, so I had no moral qualms. I was looking forward to a new and interesting experience; not every coach is lucky enough to work with an enormous young talent. When we started working together, Giri was ranked nineteenth in the world, with a rating of 2734. He had already been the top under-20 junior, but clearly wanted more.

The first event where we were together was the traditional Wijk aan Zee tournament. I have visited this famous chess village many times as a player; once I even managed to combine playing in a tournament with being a second in a match.

The chess festival was in its eighth decade of existence; no drastic changes are possible at such a ripe old age. As in previous years, chess players from all over the world came to take part in the numerous tournaments that comprise the festival. Severe winds were howling relentlessly over Wijk, forcing chess fans to take refuge in the bars and restaurants that seemed to be everywhere. The main sponsor of the festival had changed once again. Now it was the well-known Tata Steel Corporation that was responsible for this most important chess festival in the Netherlands. Unfortunately, even such a powerful company could not ignore the world economic crisis. As a consequence, a huge tent in front of the tournament hall where local grandmasters entertained the public with their commentaries over the years disappeared completely. As another austerity measure, the number of players in the main event was reduced from the usual fourteen to twelve. On the other hand, field trips were added to the programme. One of them was an excursion to Eindhoven; yet another to the famous Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The draw for the grandmaster tournament also looked spectacular. The actors on stage interpreted Rembrandt's famous Night Watch painting; each player had to choose a character who would pass a starting number to him. In general, this long-established chess festival tried to adapt to rapidly changing times.

Prior to the tournament, Anish and I had planned a small training camp, but even before the work started I tried to figure out what kind of chess player my new student was. It was only recently, at the European Chess Club Cup, that I had become acquainted with him as a person and a player. Due to the lack of time and my student being quite young, I only studied his body of work for the last few years. At this age, players are growing so fast that it is often pointless to track the changes in their openings or in their style of play. I must admit that the results of this small study genuinely surprised me. When Giri played for SOCAR, I considered him to be an aggressive player who valued the initiative above material. His calculating ability clearly prevailed over general understanding of the game. Adding

youthful self-confidence to this mix, I expected to work with a gifted tactician who would simply have to learn the deeper layers of positional chess.

To put it mildly, reality proved quite difficult. Anish really felt at home in sharp dynamic positions — but only if he had the initiative. However, when his own king was threatened, he often switched to defence at the slightest hint of danger. In this case, the well-known adage ‘the threat is stronger than its execution’ worked on him without fail. Overall, Anish sensed the flow of a game well; the implementation of a minimum advantage in calm positions was his forte. I was greatly impressed by his theoretical knowledge, which was both broad and deep. During his short chess life, he seemed to have tried every opening, and was always aware of the latest developments and discoveries. In general, I had to work with a very talented and well-educated chess player who had certain weaknesses. We managed to fix certain things at the training camp, but given the lack of time, our preparation was mainly devoted to the upcoming competition. The main tournament at the Wijk aan Zee festival would be the third of Anish’s life and none of his previous performances had been successful.

My protégé started the tournament well. He won a very interesting game as early as round two.

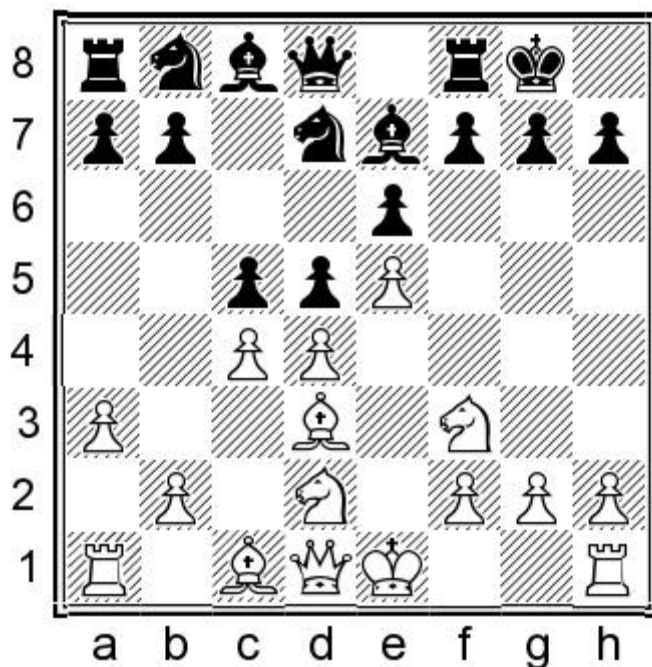
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Anish Giri (2734)

Arkadij Naiditsch (2718)

Wijk aan Zee 2014

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♙b4+ 4.♗bd2 0-0 5.a3 ♙e7 6.e4 d5 7.e5 ♘fd7 8.♙d3 c5



9.h4

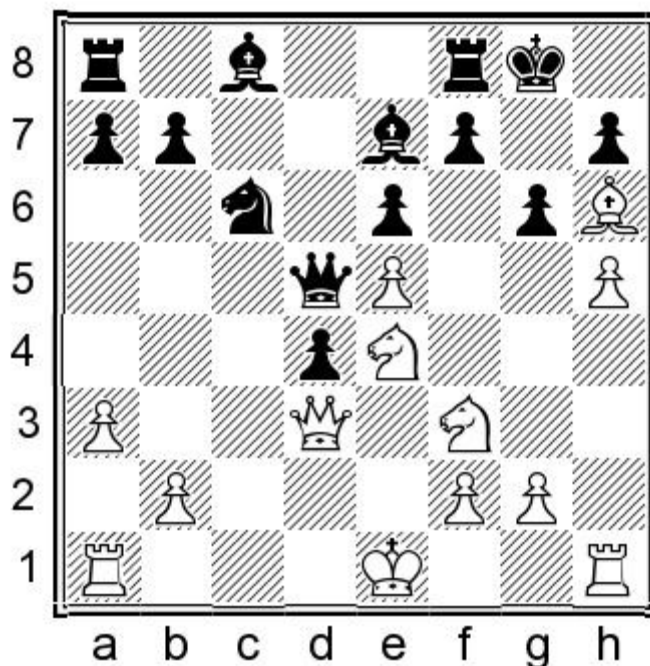
Without doubt the most aggressive move although 9.0-0, 9.cxd5 or 9.♙c2 are quite possible as well.

9...g6 10.h5 cxd4 11.♖c2 ♘c5 12.cxd5!?

A novelty!

After 12.♗f1 Black solves his opening problems with 12...d3 13.♗xd3 ♘xd3+ 14.♖xd3 b6 15.cxd5 ♗a6, and after 12.♗e2 he has the additional 12...dxc4 13.♗xc4 a5.

12...♘xd3+ 13.♖xd3 ♖xd5 14.♘e4 ♘c6 15.♗h6



15...♖a5+?!

Naiditsch clearly underestimated his opponent's reply.

a) 15...♖e8 was clearly stronger, followed by 16.♗g5 ♘xe5 17.♘xe5 ♖xe5 18.f4 ♖a5+ 19.♔f2 with a complex position.

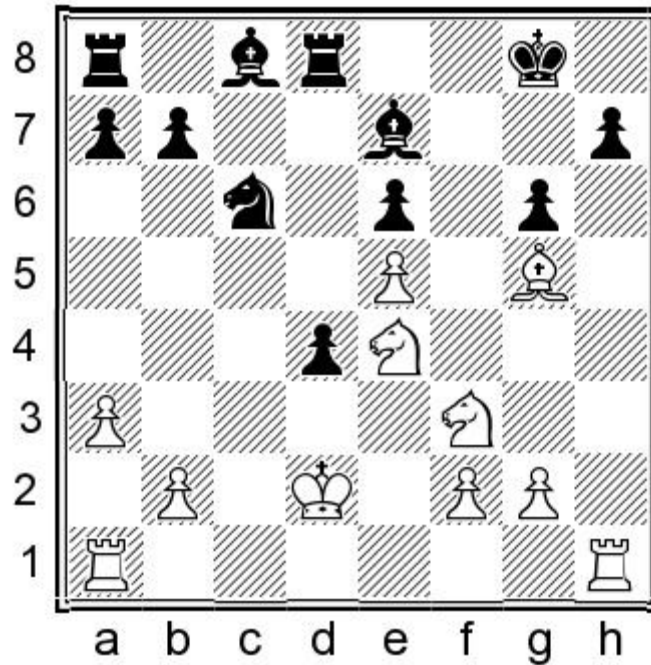
b) Also interesting was 15...♗d7!?.

16.♖d2!

Without doubt the strongest move! Even with queens exchanged the black king cannot feel safe.

16.♗d2 is much weaker because of 16...♘xe5, while after 16.♔e2 ♗d7! 17.♗xf8 ♖xf8 it is not clear which king is in greater danger.

16...♖xd2+ 17.♔xd2 ♖d8 18.hxg6 fxg6 19.♗g5!



19...h5

Suddenly it is Black who finds itself in a difficult situation. 19...♙xg5+ was relatively better, even though it wouldn't have solved all the problems either. For example even stronger is 20.♘fxg5!

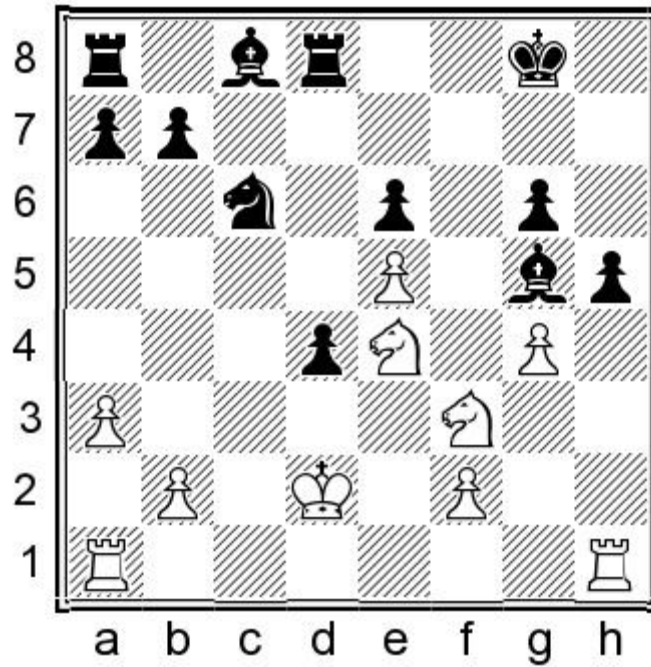
[20.♘exg5 h5 21.g4 ♖d5 (21...hxg4? 22.♗h6) 22.gxh5 ♘xe5 23.♘xe5 ♗xe5 24.♗ag1 and Black has a difficult defence.]

20...h5 21.♘f6+ ♔f8 22.♗ac1! (22.f4 ♘a5) 22...♙d7 (22...♘xe5? 23.♗c7) 23.f4, with a big advantage for White.

20.g4

The intermediate 20.♙xe7! ♘xe7 followed by 21.g4! would virtually win the game since White's attack is irresistible.

20...♙xg5+



21. ♖fxg5?

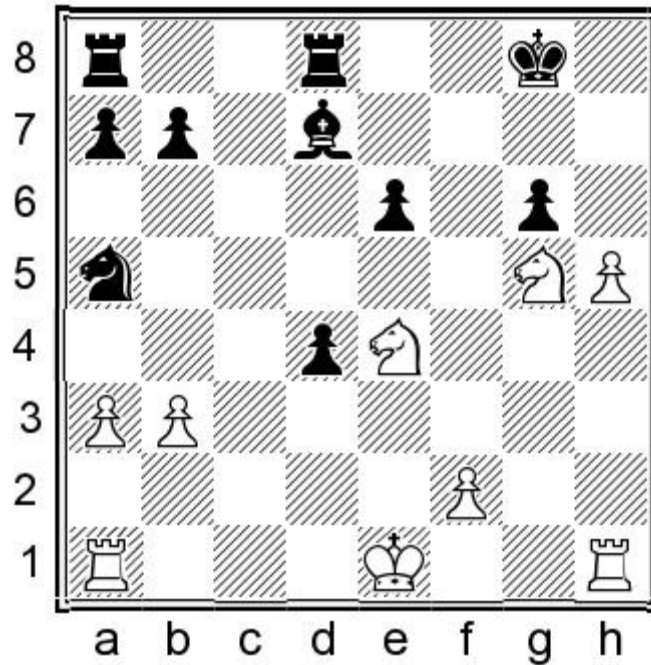
21. ♖exg5! ♜d5 22. gxh5 ♘xe5 23. ♖xe5 ♜xe5 24. ♜ag1 would still maintain a serious advantage.

21... ♘xe5

This couldn't be played if the black knight was on e7.

22. gxh5 ♘c4+ 23. ♕e1 ♘d7 24. b3 ♘a5

Black should have chosen 24... ♘e5! Why is the move played in the game bad? It attacks the b3-pawn and the black bishop is preparing to move to c6. Material is limited and a draw is likely.



25.♖c1!!

Even in endings material is often not the main factor. Sometimes the activity of the pieces is much more important!

Black holds after 25.hxg6 ♔g7.

25...♙c6

a) The black king is helpless after 25...gxh5 26.♞xh5 ♙c6 27.b4 ♘b3 28.♞b1 ♙a4 29.♔e2! ♙b5+ 30.♔f3;

b) 25...♘b3 26.hxg6! ♘xc1 27.♞h7! leads to a mate in a few moves.

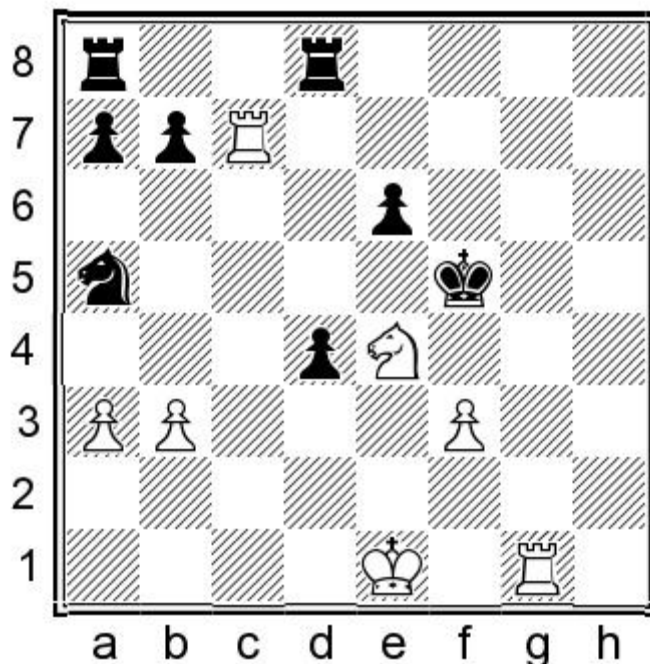
26.hxg6 ♙xe4

26...♔g7 27.♘xe6+ ♔xg6 28.♞g1+ ♔f5 29.♘d8 doesn't save the game either.

27.♘xe4 ♔g7 28.♞c7+ ♔xg6 29.♞g1+ ♔f5

No better is 29...♔h6 30.♞cg7 with inevitable mate.

30.f3!



30...e5

a) 30...♔f4 31.♔f2 ♖g8 32.♞e1! is bad.

b) 30...♞g8 31.♞xg8 ♞xg8 32.♞c5+ ♔f4 33.♞xa5 would prolong hopeless resistance; the extra piece should ensure the win for White.

31.♞g5+ ♔f4 32.♔f2 ♞f8 33.♞h7

1-0

The next day, however, Anish almost lost his game because he misjudged Loek van Wely's attacking prowess. He managed to calm down, won another game and in the end finished the entire tournament undefeated, sharing second and third places with Sergey Karjakin, only a step behind Levon Aronian.

For Anish, it was a great success, and an important psychological achievement. Of course no-one attributed his successful performance to a new coach, but it is well known that nothing unites a team like success. It was an important milestone for our small team since we had a lot of work ahead of us.

The young grandmaster was still not quite ready to take on the world elite and his next tournament in Stavanger proved it.

The Wijk aan Zee tournament featured both top-level players and those who were clearly not their equals. In Norway, Anish had to play against the best of the best, including the World Champion. Thus, in sporting terms, his final result, -1, wasn't too bad; it was the quality of his play that was very far from perfect. The tournament revealed the shortcomings that we had suspected before. We had to organise ourselves and get them fixed. For instance, we held a training camp that was devoted specifically to playing defence, a problem that is not merely technical but also psychological. Attack is a double-edged sword; an attacking player often exposes his own weaknesses that can be successfully

exploited by his opponent. Thus a defending player needs no less courage than an attacking one. Excessive timidity and attempts to nip an attack in the bud lead to the defensive side abandoning the sharpest lines, and the game becomes bland.



A rare sunny day in Wijk aan Zee. (Photo from the author's archive)

We held all our training camps at the National Sports Centre in Papendal, a development centre for the Netherlands Olympic Committee. It is a wonderful venue with a good hotel and reasonable restaurants

situated in a picturesque location. All this, plus a nice, friendly staff, contributed to the success of our work. A staunch adept of brisk walking, I convinced my young student to take up regular walks. We soon had our favourite routes. This way, in addition to intensive chess practice, we spent several hours a day in conversation and discussions outdoors. We came to know each other better. Many new ideas related to our future work were generated quite spontaneously during these walks.

Anish played a lot — too much, in my opinion. This was due to his chess growth being too fast. It was only recently that he had been grasping at any chance to play in a tournament, and an invitation to join any club team was seen as a gift of Fortune.

He had to move to the next level of maturity and choose his tournaments with care. Then again, Anish played easily and quickly; his love of chess and youthful optimism helped him survive jet lag and frequent changes of weather. Thus I viewed his insatiable desire to play as an inevitable childhood disease.

Giri got off to a very poor start in his next major tournament in Biel. In the first two rounds, he lost to Hou Yifan and Pentala Harikrishna. Such defeats could knock anyone out of the saddle, even a more experienced player. I was not present in Biel; from a distance, problems often look worse than they really are, after all, Anish had experienced such an unpleasant series before. This time, everything worked out; his finish in the middle of the pack shouldn't be regarded as a failure in such a situation.

His next event was the Tromsø Olympiad, which I have already discussed in the 'Captain' part. Anish's play was creative and produced excellent results. In addition to his game against Gelfand which I commented on earlier, another memorable game took place in the last round.

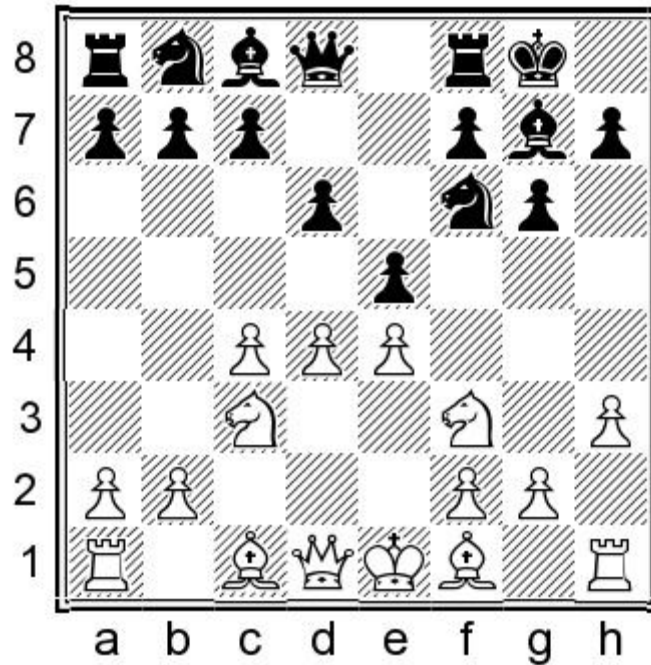
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Axel Bachmann (2644)

Anish Giri (2745)

Tromsø 2014

1.c4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 g6 3.♘c3 ♙g7 4.d4 0-0 5.e4 d6 6.h3 e5

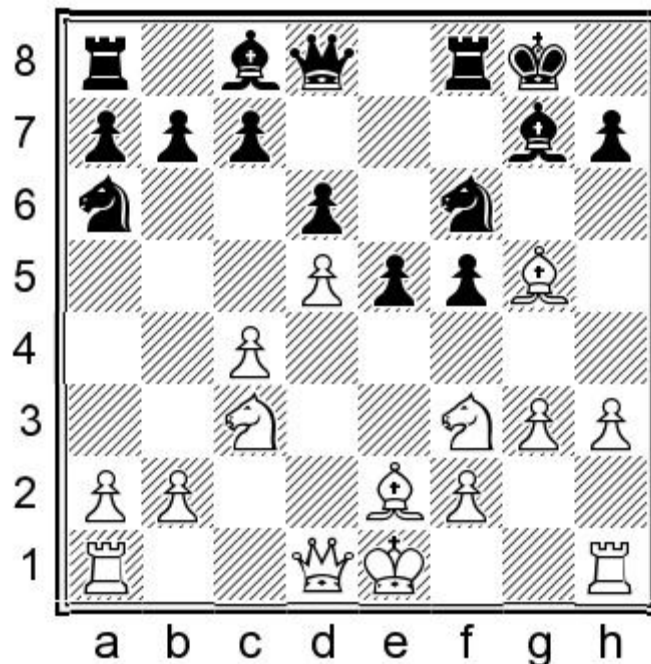


Anish rarely plays the King's Indian Defence, but specifically did so on this occasion. With White, Bachmann exclusively plays the 6.h3 system, but with a certain lack of confidence.

7.d5 ♖h5 8.g3 ♜a6

8...a5 used to be more popular for Black. After Ding Liren won against Radjabov and Aronian in Wijk aan Zee in 2015, it became fashionable to play 8...f5. Other options are 8...a5 and 8...f5 9.exf5 gxf5.

9.♙e2 f5 10.exf5 gxf5 11.♙g5 ♜f6



12.♜d2

Not the best. 12.♘h4 was more in the spirit of the position.

12...♞e8 13.♘b3?!

This is completely wrong.

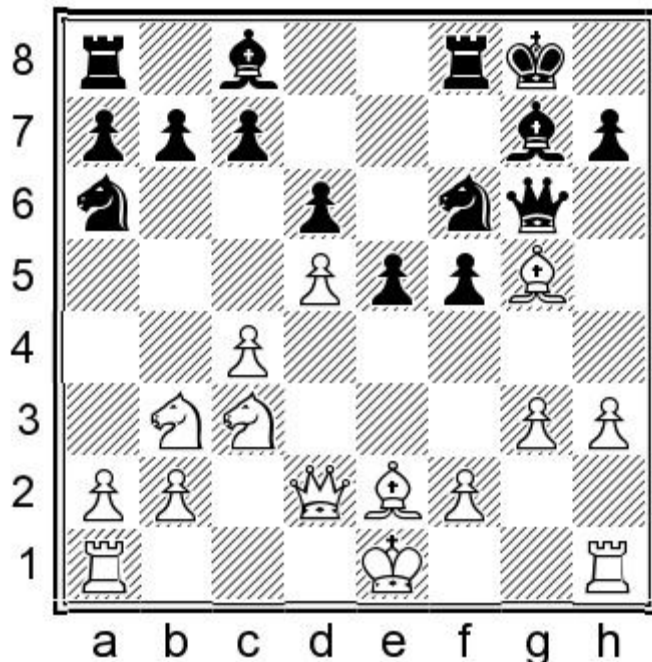
After 13.♞c2 ♞g6 it is not clear what to do with the bishop on g5.

a) 14.♙e3 loses immediately to 14...♘b4! followed by 15...f4, so White frees the d2-square for his queen. Unfortunately the knight on b3 is out of play.

b) Instead, the line above can be continued: 14.h4 h6 15.♙e3 ♘b4 16.♞b1 and 16...f4 is impossible because the black queen is undefended.

The b) line above is how White should have played.

13...♞g6 14.♞d2



14...♘b4!

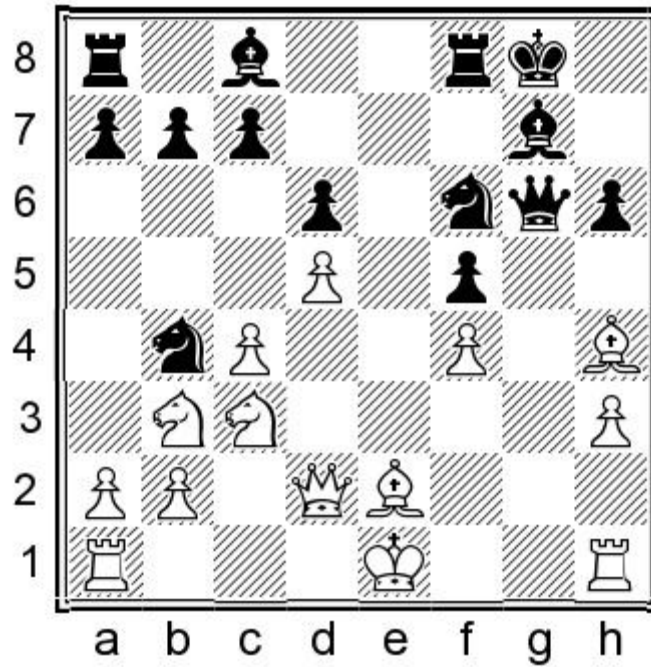
In this line too the knight feels quite comfortable on b4.

15.f4?

White is already experiencing some difficulties, and the pseudo-active move in the game only makes things worse.

A lesser evil would be to play 15.a3 ♘c2+ (15...f4!? 16.axb4 ♞xg5 is quite interesting) 16.♞xc2 ♞xg5 17.♘d2.

15...h6 16.♙h4 exf4 17.gxf4



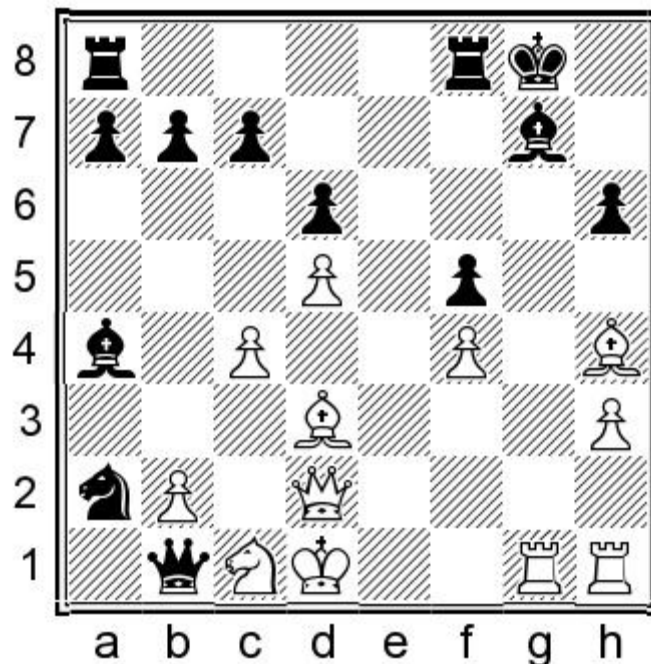
17...Qg2!

Our silicon friend suggests 17...Ne4! 18.Nxe4 fxe4 19.Qxb4 Rxf4; the move in the game is equally good, but much more human.

18.0-0-0 Ne4 19.Nxe4 Qxe4 20.Rdgl

20.Qxb4 Qxf4+ 21.Kb1 Qxh4 leads to a position a pawn down with no compensation for it.

20...Nxa2+ 21.Kd1 Qb1+ 22.Nc1 Nd7! 23.Nd3 Na4+



24.b3

Bad, but 24.♔e2 ♖xc1+ 25.♞xc1 ♞ae8+ 26.♕f1 ♜xb2 isn't much better.

24...♜xc1+ 25.♜xc1 ♘xb3+ 26.♜c2 ♘xc2+ 27.♘xc2 ♖c3+ 28.♕d2 ♖e4+ 29.♘xe4 fxe4 30.♕e3 ♕h7
31.♕xe4 a5 32.♞g2 a4 33.♞b1 a3 34.♞a2 ♞a4 0-1

It's amazing how easily a strong grandmaster was defeated with Black, but this ease is extremely deceptive. Not every elite player has such a deep knowledge of the openings as Anish or the courage to play a new variation unprepared. Of course such an approach is quite energy-intensive, and is not for everyone, but sometimes in chess it bears pleasant fruit, as happened in this case.

Numerous team tournaments followed, and now a match against Alexei Shirov was on the horizon. This was to be the main event at the Hoogeveen Chess Festival. Such matches are a rare phenomenon in modern chess life, especially when they are played with a standard time control. We took this competition very seriously. Shirov is a brilliant player who had remained one of the best in the world for many years. The summit of Alexei's career was his victory in the match against Vladimir Kramnik in 1998, which qualified him to play a match for the world championship against Garry Kasparov. Of course, Shirov's best years were already behind him but his practical strength and his serious match experience made him a dangerous opponent. In addition, it was interesting for Giri to test himself in a new format.



Our next training camp in beloved Papendal was devoted entirely to preparation for the upcoming match. We tried to take into account his opponent's choice of openings and also understand his strengths and weaknesses. I even wrote a short essay devoted to Shirov's body of work. Here I will highlight only the main provisions of this treatise.

1. Older players are less able to deal with adversity. This fancy wording means something quite obvious. Famous players who have already enjoyed their share of glory are less motivated than their young, ambitious rivals who are just setting out to storm the summit. In practice, this means that for older players, the final result depends to a large extent on the start. If the start of a tournament or match goes well, 'old' players are usually elated and even temporary setbacks during the competition do not knock them out of their stride. On the contrary, if something goes wrong in the early games, the 'old' players do not seek to reverse their fate but meekly play out the tournament to the end. Accordingly, Anish had to begin the match 'warmed up' and one hundred percent ready for the fight. It was a short match and there was no time to get one's play to its peak.

2. As a chess player, Alexei Shirov has the following well-known qualities: resourcefulness, a willingness to play irrational, unbalanced positions, and a great proclivity for risk. All these traits manifested themselves in unclear positions — that is to say, the critical ones. Given a choice between a regular, obvious line and an interesting but risky one, Alexei will almost certainly choose the latter. In these cases, Shirov usually relies on his intuition. If a position is clear and he has an advantage, he tries to find specific ways to victory, not limiting himself by general considerations, but calculating options and trying to find the strongest moves. Shirov plays endings well since he also relies on calculation. Hence we shall force him into a quiet positional game, where there is not much room for imagination and fantasy.

3. When I studied Shirov's recent games, I got the impression that he continued to use the openings that he had learnt in his youth. Since he learnt them well and played solidly, this was not too obvious, however a careful examination with the help of a cyberassistant might reveal errors and omissions in his old lines.

These considerations helped us choose an overall strategy for the match. Looking ahead, we can say that this strategy proved successful. In the very first game, not wanting to make do with a steady flow of play, Alexei, as usual, sowed the wind... and reaped the whirlwind.

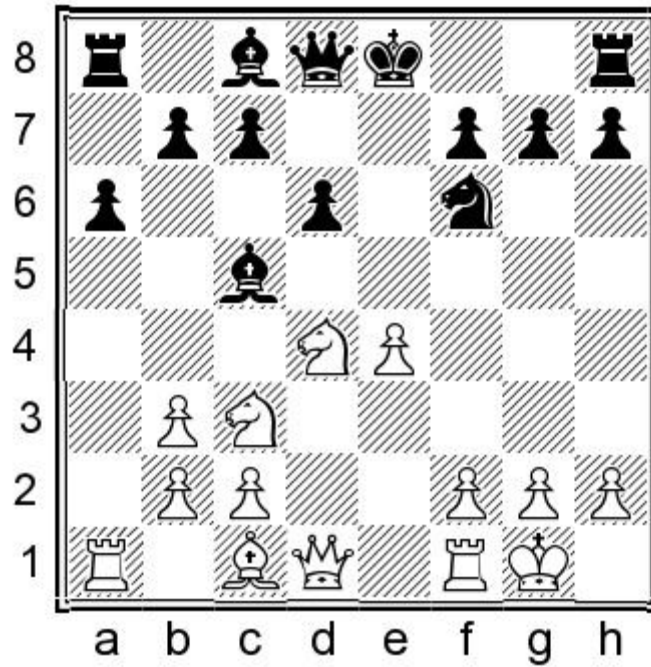
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Alexei Shirov (2691)

Anish Giri (2768)

Hoogeveen 2014

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.d3 ♘f6 5.♗c3 d6 6.0-0 ♗a5 7.♙b3 a6 8.d4 ♗xb3 9.axb3 exd4
10.♗xd4



10...h6

White doesn't have the slightest advantage from the opening, but Shirov isn't satisfied with an equal position.

11.♘f5?!

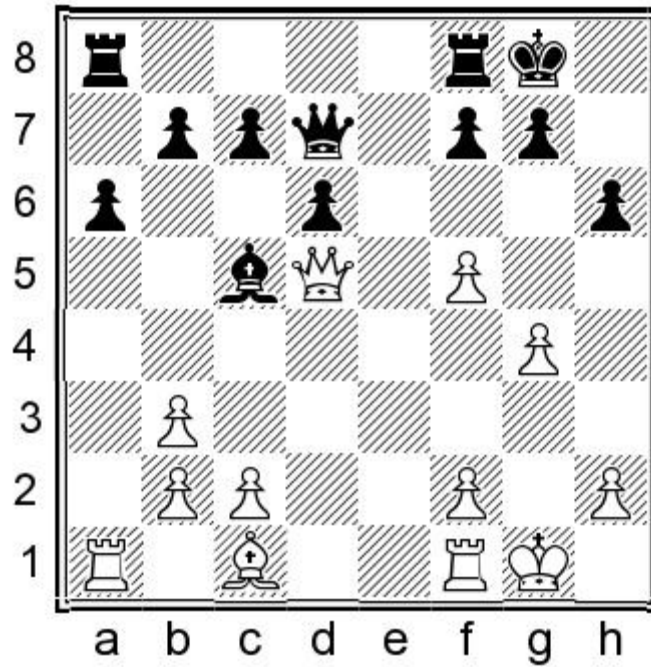
He should have chosen the modest 11.♖e1 0-0 12.♙f4.

11...♙xf5 12.exf5 0-0 13.g4

At least this is consistent.

After 13.♚f3 d5 14.♙f4 ♖e8 Black's pawn superiority on the queenside guarantees him the better prospects.

13...♚d7 14.♘d5 ♘xd5 15.♚xd5



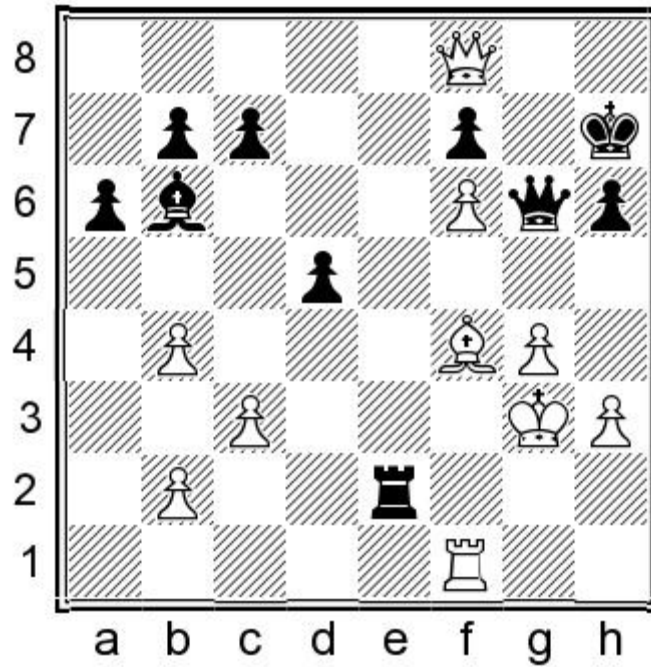
15...♔b5!

This move is not obvious at all and was probably underestimated by Shirov.

16.♔f3

As we would expect, Alexei refuses to play 16.♔e3 ♔xe3 17.♔xb5 ♔xf2+ 18.♔xf2 axb5 19.♔fe1 ♔fc8 20.♔f3 ♔f8 and hopes to emerge from the complications with equal material.

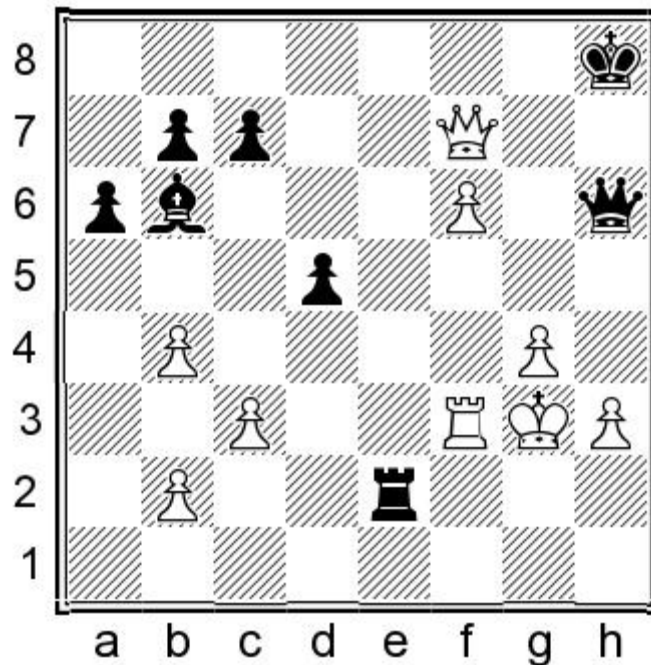
16...♔fe8 17.♔g2 ♔e2 18.c3 ♔e4 19.♔a4 ♔ae8 20.♔xe4 ♔xe4 21.h3 d5 22.b4 ♔b6 23.f6!? g5 24.♔f5 ♔e5 25.♔c8+ ♔h7 26.♔f8 ♔e4+ 27.♔g3 ♔g6 28.f4 gxf4+ 29.♔xf4 ♔e2



30. ♔xh6?

Time trouble is approaching so White sharpens play to the maximum. The passive 30. ♔c1 would not be typical of Shirov. After 30... ♔e3! (30...c6!? 31. ♖f5 ♔c7+ 32. ♕h4 ♖e5! Defending against ♔xh6. 33. ♗g7+ ♗xg7 34. fxg7 ♖xf5 35. gxf5 ♕xg7 36. ♕g4 when the resulting ending is closer to a draw) 31. ♔xe3 ♖xe3+ 32. ♖f3 ♖xf3+ 33. ♕xf3 ♗xf6+ White has to conduct a difficult defence.

30... ♗xh6 31. ♗xf7+ ♕h8 32. ♖f3



32... ♔g1!

It is easy to overlook such an unexpected ‘long’ move. It turns out that Black’s extra piece comes in handy during the attack.

33.h4

Equally bad is 33.♞d3 ♞e3+ 34.♞xe3 ♞xe3+ 35.♔h4 ♕f2+ 36.♔h5 ♞xh3+ 37.♔g5 ♞h7-+.

33...♕h2+ 34.♔h3 ♕d6!

0–1

In game two we decided to test yet another assumption made before the match. During preparation, I got the feeling that Alexei did not always analyse his past games with a chess engine, but rather trusted his own intuition. As we expected, Shirov decided to repeat a very sharp line that he had played recently in one of his games.

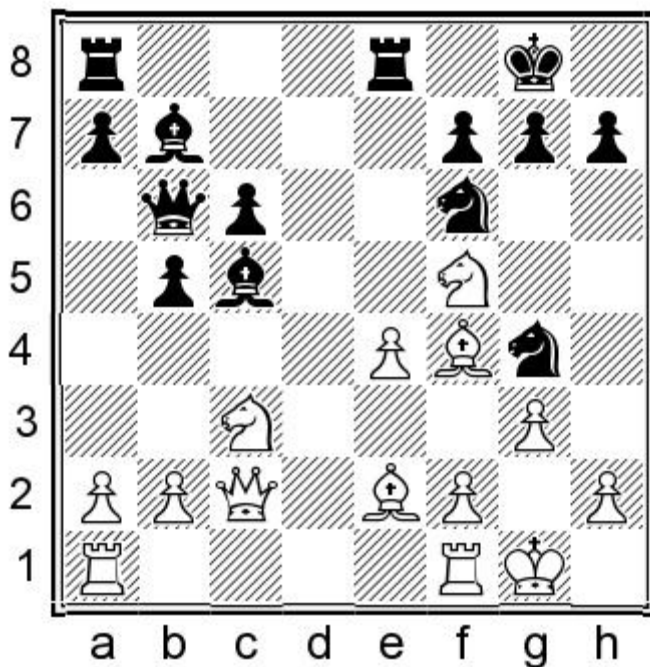
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Anish Giri (2768)

Alexei Shirov (2691)

Hoogeveen 2014

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e3 e6 5.♘f3 ♘bd7 6.♞c2 ♕d6 7.♕d3 0-0 8.0-0 dxc4 9.♕xc4 b5 10.♕e2 ♕b7 11.e4 e5 12.dxe5 ♘xe5 13.♘d4 ♘eg4 14.g3 ♕c5 15.♘f5 ♞e8 16.♕f4 ♞b6

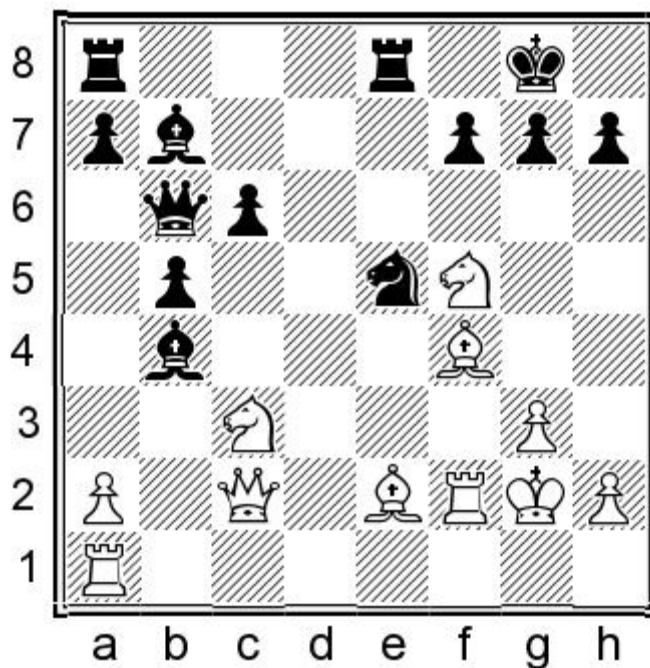


17.♔g2!?! ♘xf2?!

Our calculation worked!

Giri himself showed the correct way to play later: 17...g6! 18.h3 ♖e5 19.♗h6+ ♔g7 20.♙g5 ♙d4 21.♙xf6+ ♔xf6 22.f4 ♗c4 23.♙xc4 bxc4 24.f5 c5! 25.fxg6+ ♔xg6 26.♗xf7 ♜f8 27.♗d5 ♚xb2 28.♗e7+ ♔g7 29.♗f5+ ♔g6 30.♗e7+, Nakamura-Giri, Moscow 2016. Therefore home preparation succeeded twice, with both colours. Quite a rare case in our computer age!

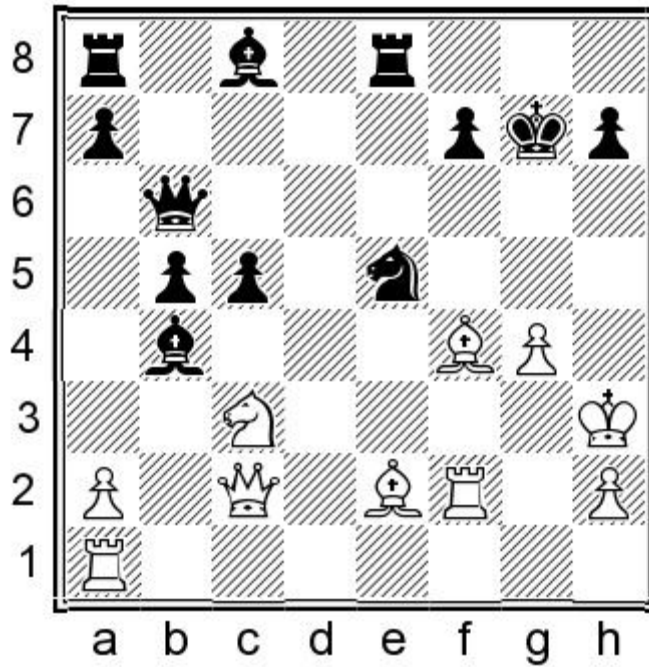
18.e5 ♗d7 19.b4! ♙xb4 20.♞xf2 ♗xe5



21.♗e4!

We bet that this move would improve the position considerably! Even the chess engine doesn't realise immediately how serious the situation is.

Wagner-Shirov, Bundesliga 2013–14, ended in a rather spectacular draw after 21.♗xg7 c5+ 22.♔h3 ♙c8+ 23.g4 ♔xg7

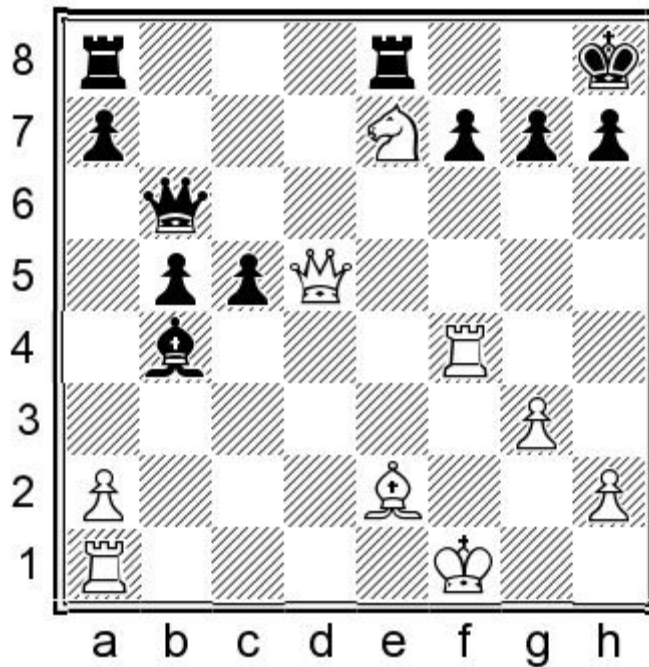


24. ♖xe5+ ♜xe5 25. ♝xf7+ ♔xf7 26. ♚xh7+ ♔e6 27. ♚g6+ ♔e7 28. ♚g7+ ♔e6 29. ♚h6+.

21...c5 22. ♕f1! ♖xe4

22...♞ad8 23. ♘g5!

23. ♚xe4 ♘g6 24. ♚d5! ♘xf4 25. ♘e7+! ♔h8 26. ♝xf4



Our home preparation stopped somewhere around here. Even though material is roughly equal, the assessment is clear: White has a big advantage.

26...c4!

26...♖ad8 27.♚xf7.

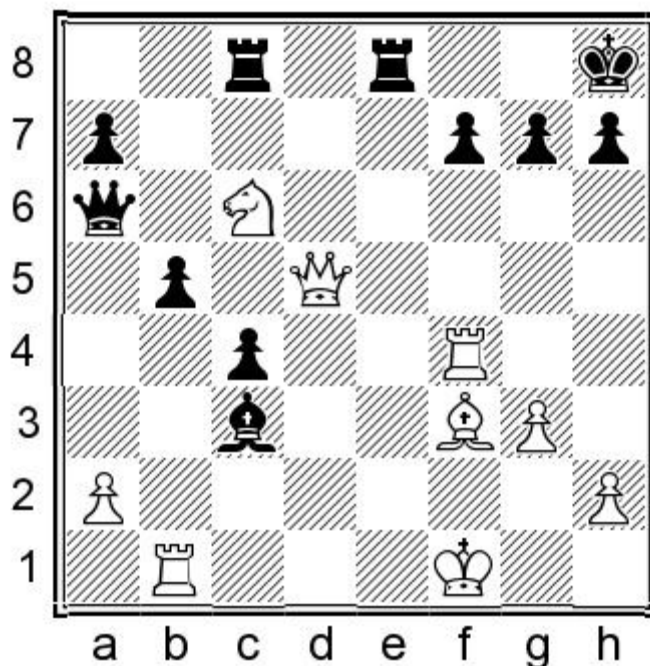
27.♘c6! ♕c3

27...♚e3 28.♘f3.

28.♖b1

Not a bad move, but 28.♖d1! would be even stronger.

28...♖ac8 29.♘f3 ♚a6



30.♖e4?!

White is afraid of possible counterplay along the e-file.

After the straightforward 30.♖xb5! ♖e1+ (30...♚xa2 31.♘e4!) 31.♔g2 ♚xa2+ 32.♔h3 the game would end quickly.

30...♚xa2 31.♖xb5

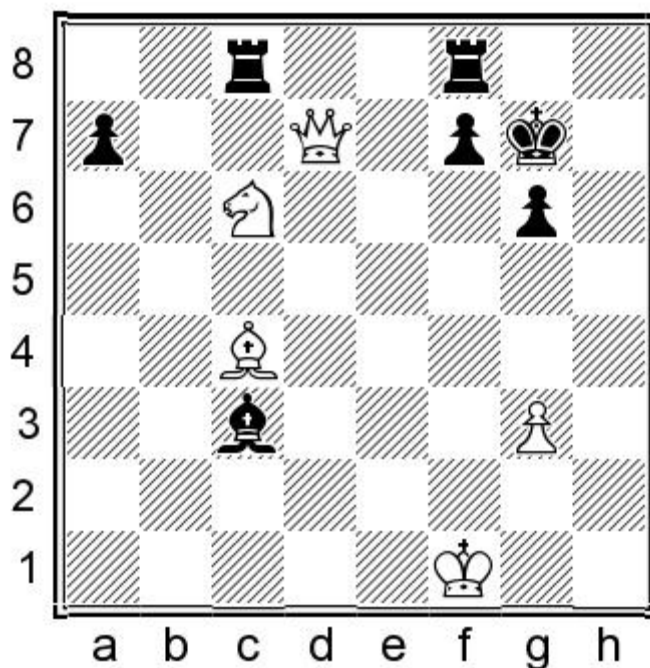
Once again White had stronger moves: 31.♖d1! or 31.♖xe8+ ♖xe8 32.♖d1.

31...♚xh2 32.♚d7! ♖f8 33.♖h4 ♚c2

33...♚xg3? 34.♖xh7+ ♔xh7 35.♖h5+ ♔g8 36.♘e7#

34.♖xh7+ ♚xh7 35.♖h5 ♚xh5 36.♘h5 g6 37.♘e2 ♔g7 38.♘xc4

The engine is satisfied with the outcome of the operation and assesses the position as won for White, but in practice it is not so easy to break through the fortress.

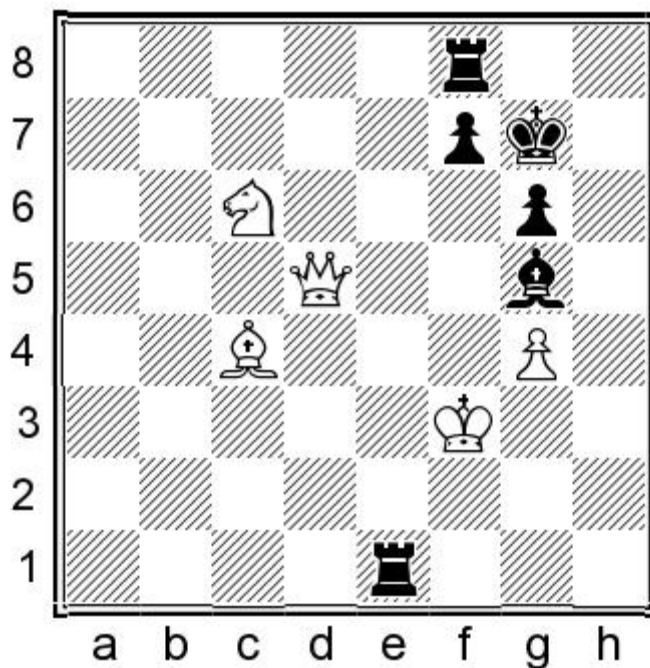


38...♖ce8 39.♚xa7 ♜f6 40.♚d7 ♜e3 41.♔g2 ♜c3 42.♚d5 ♜e3 43.♔f2

White needs the g-pawn to help in the attack.

It was time to play 43.g4!.

43...♜ee8 44.♚d7 ♜e4 45.♜d5 ♜ee8 46.♚c7 ♜c8 47.♚b7 ♜ce8 48.♚d7 ♜a8 49.♜c4 ♜ae8 50.♔f3 ♜e1 51.♚d5 ♜e6 52.♚d7 ♜e1 53.g4 ♜g5 54.♚d5



54...f5

It looks like Black has obtained some counterplay. Obviously Shirov couldn't pass up such an opportunity, but it's impossible to defend such a position passively.

55.♘e5! fxe4+ 56.♙g2! ♕e3 57.♚d7+

Unfortunately for Black it is White's turn to move, and the opposite-coloured bishops make White's attack even more dangerous.

57...♗h6 58.♘g4+ ♗h5 59.♘f6+ ♜xf6 60.♚h3+ ♗g5 61.♚g3+ ♗h6 62.♚xe1 ♕f4 63.♚h4+ ♗g7 64.♕g8 ♕h6 65.♚d4 ♕f4 66.♕e6 ♕b8 67.♗h3 ♕f4 68.♚d7+ ♗h6 69.♕g8 ♕e3 70.♚h7+ ♗g5 71.♕d5 ♕f2 72.♚e7 ♕d4 73.♕e4 ♗f4 74.♕c2 ♕e5 75.♚b4+

1-0

In essence, the outcome of the match was decided since it would be almost impossible to overcome a two-point deficit in such a short distance. In fact, in the next two games, Shirov didn't have a chance to engage Giri in a fight. Game five was the last where Shirov had White, but he didn't even try to complicate things. Giri won the match ahead of schedule, and the last game didn't matter. However Anish had an improvement in the Sicilian Sveshnikov based on an old game of his opponent which he had been eager to apply previously before we decided to go with a quieter opening. Now the time was right.

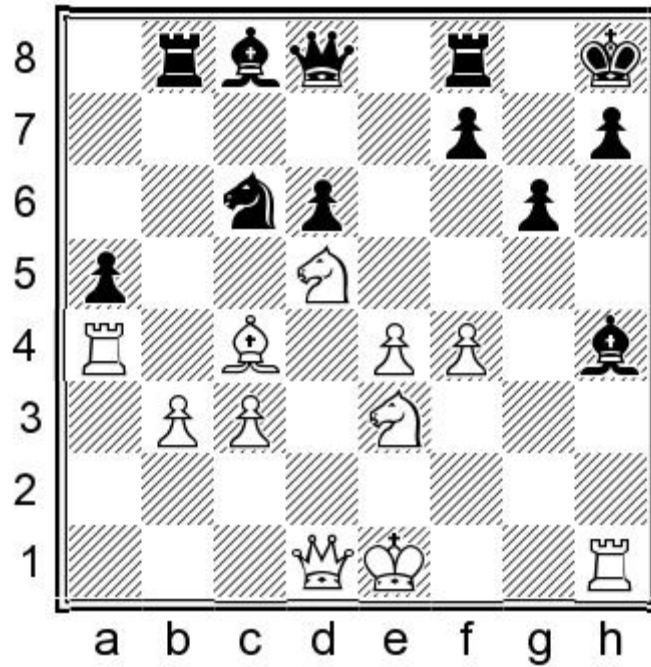
52

Anish Giri (2768)

Alexei Shirov (2691)

Hoogeveen 2014

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♗c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♗f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♗db5 d6 7.♕g5 a6 8.♗a3 b5 9.♘d5 ♕e7 10.♕xf6 ♕xf6 11.c3 ♕g5 12.♗c2 0-0 13.a4 bxa4 14.♜xa4 a5 15.♕c4 ♜b8 16.b3 ♗h8 17.♗ce3 g6 18.h4 ♕xh4 19.g3 ♕g5 20.f4 exf4 21.gxf4 ♕h4+

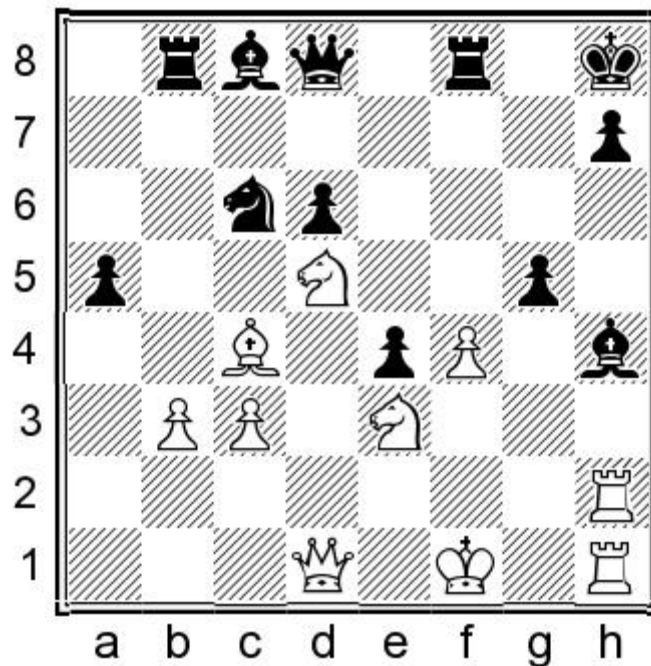


Both players had played very quickly up to here, trusting their analysis and memory.

22.♔f1!

22.♔d2 ♖e7! 23.♔c1 ♗xd5 24.♗xd5 ♕e6 25.♙d4+ ♔g8 occurred in Jakovenko-Shirov, Foros 2007. White has just enough compensation for the pawn. The move made in the game had been played before numerous times but was not considered dangerous for Black.

22...f5 23.♖a2 fxe4 24.♖ah2 g5



25.♙h5!

Formally, only this move is a novelty. After some thought our silicon friend considers it the best.

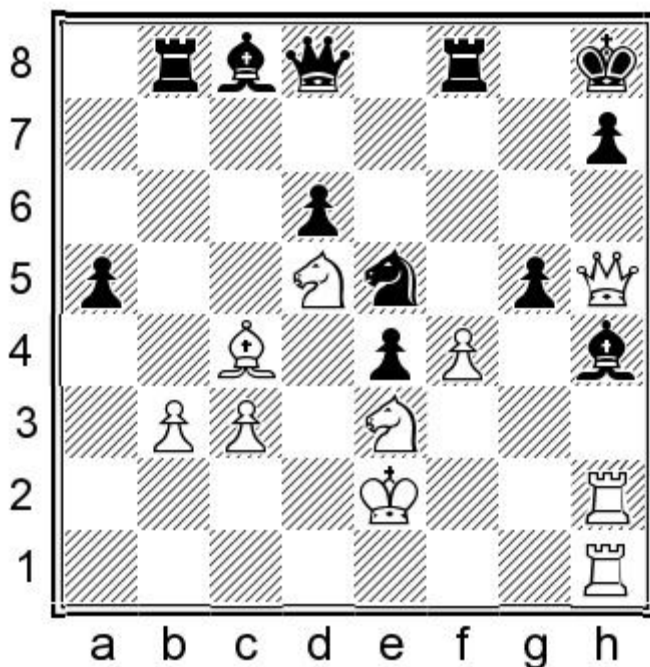
25.♘g2 ♖b7 26.♘h4 gxh4 27.♖xh4 was chosen by Radulski against V. Spasov in the 2012 Bulgarian Championship, when 27...♗e5 ensured equal play for Black.

25...♖b7

From this moment on Shirov started to think more and more, but alas, it was too late! Black is facing serious problems, while Anish's memory is excellent.

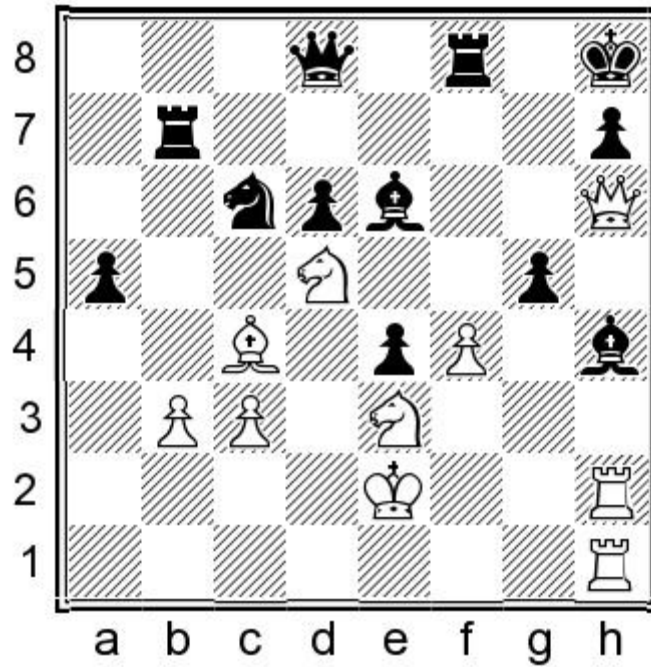
a) 25...♗e6 26.♔e2 ♖b7 would lead to the same position.

b) The following line is different: 25...♗e5 26.♔e2



26...♗g4+! (26...♗xc4 27.fxg5! ♖xb3 28.♖xh4 ♖b2+ 29.♔e1 ♖b1+ 30.♗d1 ♗f5 31.g6 ♖b7 32.♖f4 ♔d7 33.♖hf1) 27.♗xg4 ♗xc4 28.bxc4 ♔c8 29.♗ge3 ♔d7 30.♖h6!, but Black's fate is not enviable here either.

26.♔e2! ♗e6 27.♖h6!



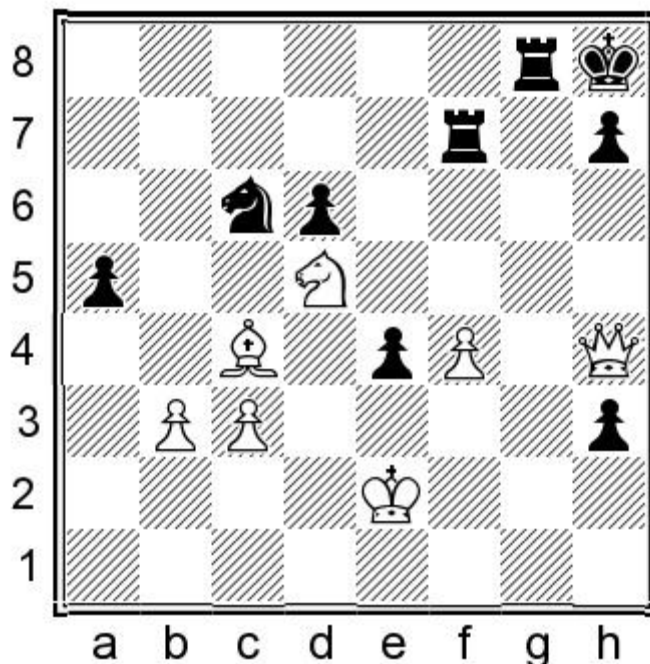
27...♔g8

Black cannot save the position with 27...♔xd5 28.♖xd5 ♜ff7 29.♚e6 ♜g7 30.♗f6! d5 31.fxg5 dxc4 32.♞d1 ♚f8 33.♞xh4+.

28.♞g2! ♜bf7

This natural move leads to a hopeless position. Anish had analysed this line as well, so Black had no real chances of rescue.

29.♞xh4! gxh4 30.♗f5! h3 31.♗h4! ♚xh4 32.♞xg8+ ♜xg8 33.♚xh4



Only here did our home analysis end. A triumph for modern methods of preparation!

33...♖g2+ 34.♔f1 ♜h2 35.♘e3 ♞g7 36.♞f6 ♜h1+ 37.♔f2 ♜h2+ 38.♔e1 ♜h1+ 39.♔d2 ♜h2+ 40.♔c1 ♘e7 41.♘f5 ♜hg2 42.♘xg7 ♞xg7 43.♞f8+ ♘g8 44.♔xg8 ♞xg8 45.♞f6+ ♞g7 46.♞h4 1-0

Giri's victory in this match was utterly convincing. It is fair to ask why I was paying such attention to what was, in effect, an exhibition match. It was after this match that it felt as if our joint work was starting to pay off. The player-coach interaction during the training camp and the match itself were close to ideal. On the other hand, an amazing, almost one hundred percent success in preparing openings for a specific opponent made Anish believe that this particular component of the game was the most important one. At some point, this illusion began to slow down his further progress.

The first stage of the next Grand Prix took place in Tashkent just a few days after the match against Shirov. I was very optimistic. It seemed that Anish had reached a new, higher level of play and that the Tashkent tournament was to confirm these expectations. As so often happens, reality was starkly different. Anish played with obvious difficulty. Up to a certain point, this led to better positions not being won, but since worse positions were not being lost either, it was not the end of the world. Still, six draws in a row were depressing. In the very next round, we attempted to change the course of the tournament, even though the pairing was not the best for such decisive action. Sergey Karjakin has always been an awkward opponent for Anish, however the Russian player had lost two games in a row and was looking a bit demoralised, so there were some grounds for taking risks.

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Sergey Karjakin (2767)

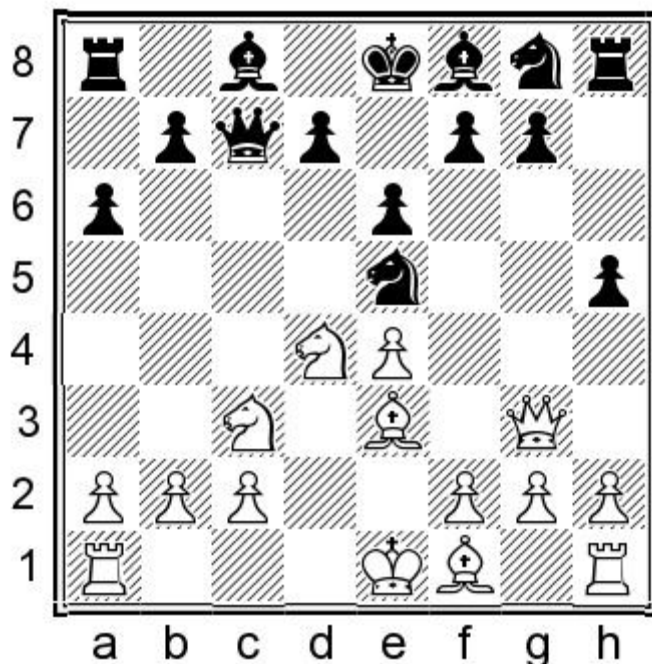
Anish Giri (2768)

Tashkent 2014

1.♘f3 c5 2.e4

An interesting psychological duel began with the very first move. Sergey refrained from playing his favourite 1.e4, apparently not wanting to have to deal with yet another Berlin. The Sicilian might have been a pleasant surprise for him, but we were also prepared for this scenario.

2...e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘c6 5.♘c3 ♚c7 6.♙e3 a6 7.♚f3 ♘e5 8.♚g3 h5!?

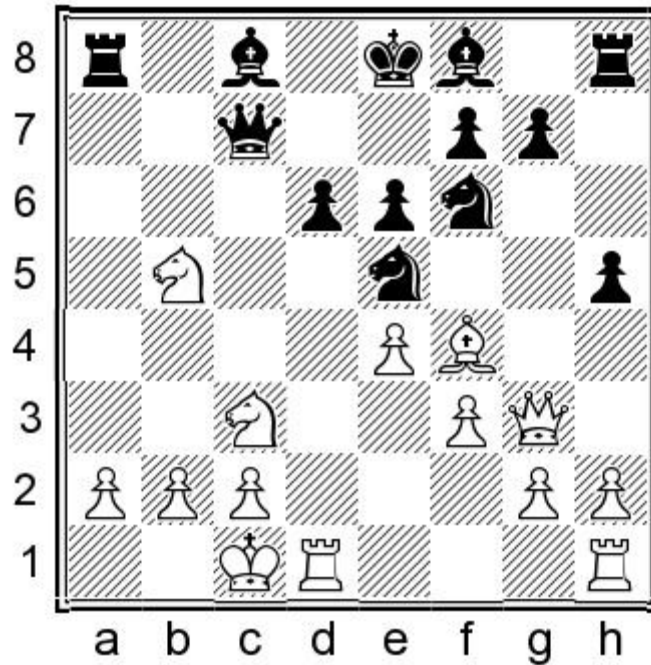


At that time, the Taimanov Variation was Anish's sharpest weapon against 1.e4, and the extravagant move in the game was a novelty at grandmaster level. Thus Giri won the first round of the confrontation.

9.f3 b5 10.0-0-0 d6

Now both rivals were in uncharted territory.

a) 10...♘f6 looks more appropriate for this position, but it is difficult to calculate at the board all the lines occurring after 11.♙f4 (11.f4 ♘eg4 12.e5 h4 13.♚h3 ♘xe3 14.♚xe3 b4 would be satisfactory for Black) 11...d6 12.♙xb5+ axb5 13.♘dxb5. White's advantage is clear.



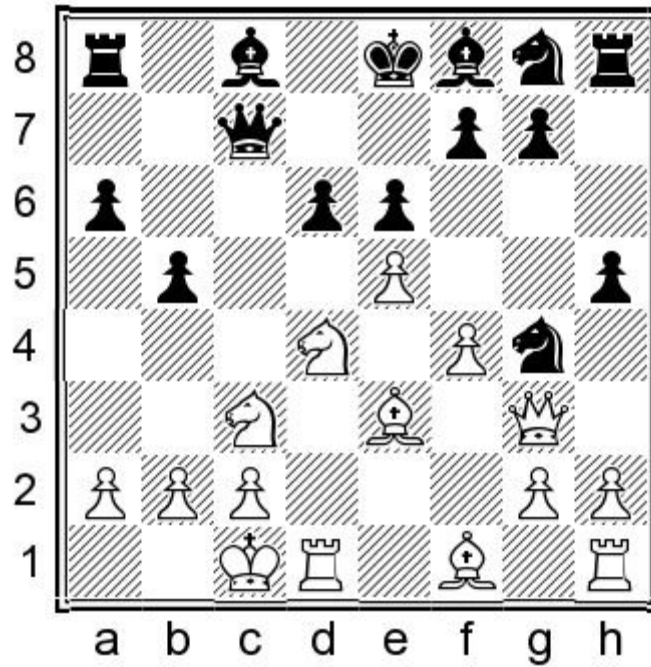
13...♖b8

[It is better to play 13...♖a5 14.b4 (14.♙xe5 dxe5 15.♚xe5 ♔d7 16.♘c7+ ♕d8 17.♘7b5=) 14...♚xb4 15.♙xe5 dxe5 16.♚xe5 ♘d7 17.♘c7+ ♕d8 18.♘xa8 ♚a3+ 19.♖b1 ♚xa8 leading to a very sharp position.; Also interesting is 13...♚c5 14.b4 (Black would have the advantage after 14.♘xd6+ ♙xd6 15.♗xd6 ♘g6!) 14...♚c6!? (14...♚xb4 leads to a position with ...♚a5) 15.♘xd6+ ♙xd6 16.♗xd6 ♚xd6 17.♙xe5 ♚xb4 18.♚xg7 ♗g8 19.♚xf6 ♗a7.]

14.♘xd6+ ♙xd6 15.♗xd6 ♚xd6 16.♙xe5 ♚c5 17.♚xg7 ♚xe5 18.♚xh8+ ♕e7 19.♚h6.

b) A safer alternative to the game was 10...h4 11.♚f2 ♘f6.

11.f4! ♘g4 12.e5!



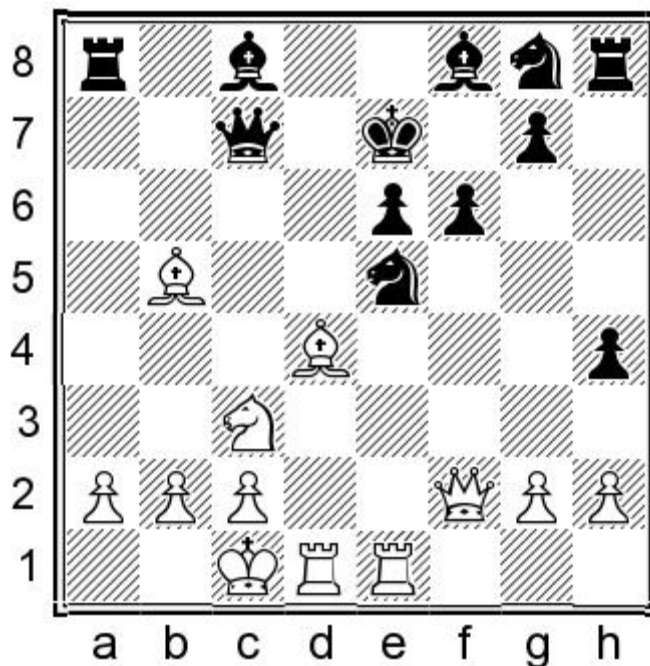
12...dxe5?

Playing with fire!

He should have preferred 12...♞xe3 13.♞xe3 d5.

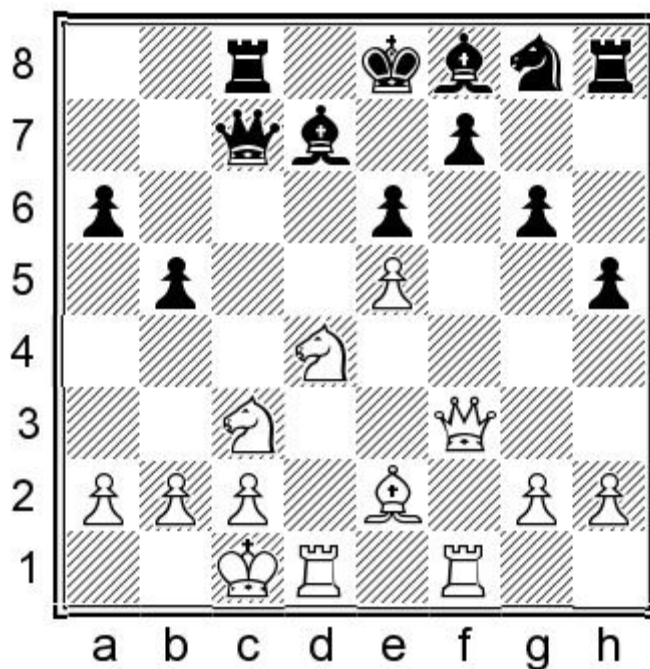
13.fxe5

The engine favours the swift and decisive 13.♞dxb5! axb5 14.♙xb5+ ♔e7 15.fxe5 ♞xe5 (15...♞xe3 16.♞f4! followed by 16...♞a5 17.♞g5+ f6 18.♞g6+— is easy for a computer, but such a geometrical idea is much more difficult for a human being) 16.♞he1 f6 17.♙d4 h4 18.♞f2 and White has a very strong attack.



The following illustrative line is practically forced: 18...♖h5 19.♙b6 ♗b7 20.♙c5+ ♕f7 21.♙xf8 ♕xf8 22.♖d8+ ♕f7 23.♙e8+ ♕e7 24.♙xh5 ♕xd8 25.♖xe5! fxe5 26.♗f8+ ♕c7 27.♗c5+! ♕d8 28.♘b5 ♘e7 29.♙f3 e4 30.♙xe4 ♗b8 31.♙xa8+–.

13...♘xe3 14.♗xe3 ♙d7 15.♙e2 g6 16.♗f3 ♖c8 17.♖hf1



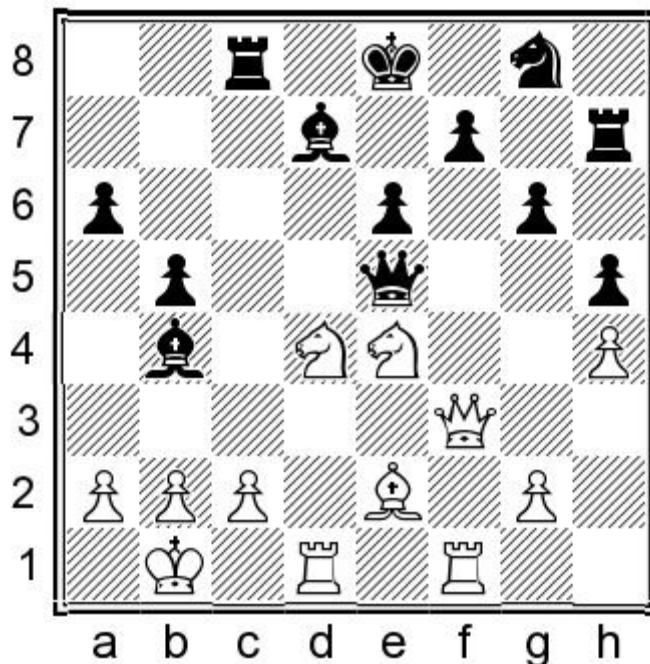
17...♖h7

Karjakin has chosen a quiet way to continue, but it is rather unpleasant for Black.

17...♘h6 18.♘e4 ♙e7 19.♘f6+ ♙xf6 20.♗xf6 0-0 21.♙xh5 ♘f5 22.♖xf5 exf5 23.♙xg6 cannot satisfy

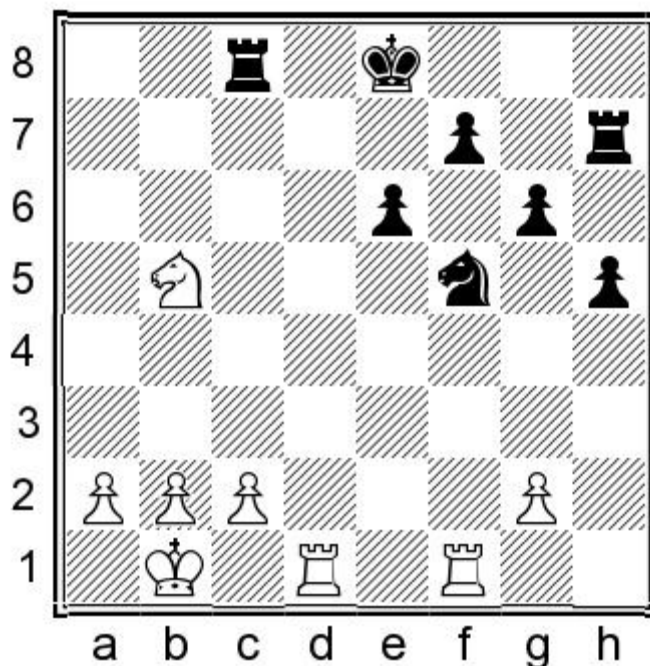
Black.

18.♖b1 ♜b4 19.♘e4 ♚xe5 20.h4!?



20...f5?

This is playing with fire again! He should have played 20...♙e7! when after 21.♘g5 ♜xg5 22.hxg5 ♚xg5 23.♚b7 ♚c5 24.♚xa6 ♘e7 25.♙xb5 ♙xb5 26.♚xb5+ ♚xb5 27.♘xb5 ♘f5



the position is unusual and difficult to assess; there are lots of passed pawns on both sides of the board.

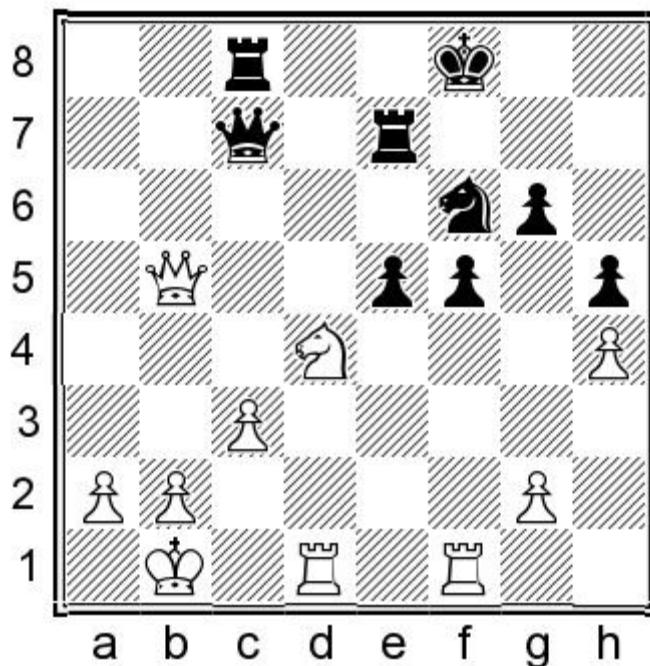
21.♘g5 ♜e7 22.♚b7! ♙c5 23.♘gf3?!

struggle was still to come.

27. ♖xb5 ♗xb5 28. ♕xb5

28. ♘xb5 was more precise.

28...e5?



The third and last mistake in the game. Curiously enough, all of them were caused by pseudo-active pawn moves.

After the preliminary 28... ♔g7 followed ...e6–e5 the result of the game would still have been wide open.

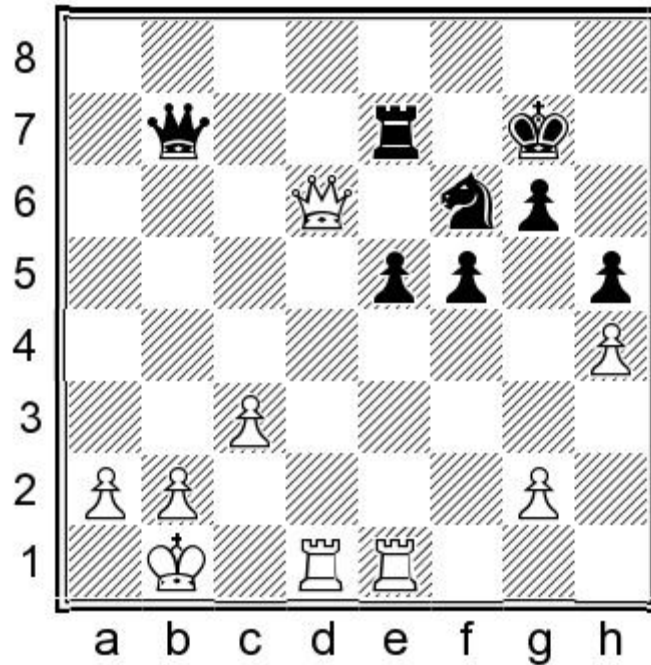
29. ♕a6!

Anish completely missed this unpleasant intermediate blow. Now there's no escape for Black.

29... ♔g7

29... ♔f7 30. ♘b5 was even worse.

30. ♘e6+ ♗xe6 31. ♕xe6 ♗e8 32. ♕d6 ♕b7 33. ♗fe1 ♗e7



34.g3

This doesn't let the win slip, but 34.a4 was even more decisive.

34...♖e4 35.♔b4 ♕xb4 36.cxb4 ♗xg3 37.b5 f4 38.b6 f3 39.♖g1 ♗e2 40.♖gf1 e4 41.a4 ♗g3 42.♗f2

1-0

It is always unpleasant to lose, but was this loss a product of a wrong strategy? After all, Karjakin's actions in this game were marked by hesitation, probably caused by the previous failures. The problem was that at this stage Anish himself was not fully prepared to play such a game.

Anish finished the tournament with no wins. For me, Tashkent became yet another mystery related to the player's mental shape. As a professional player, I often had to deal with this mysterious phenomenon.

Sometimes I failed in a competition when I felt in perfect physical shape and seemed to be fully prepared for the tournament. On the contrary, big success often came quite unexpectedly, in spite of my inner feelings and expectations. Back then, I treated this as yet another mystery of my profession. As a coach, I needed to avoid mysteries and get to the bottom of things.

We had thought that Giri was in excellent shape during the match against Shirov. Now I believed it was luck that was undoubtedly on our side in opening preparation. We hit the target every time, which is extremely rare. The resulting positions were so good that it was difficult to ruin them, even with imperfect play. In general, the balance between opening preparation and subsequent play by one's self when it finishes is, in my opinion, central to modern chess. Even mediocre players can play openings well since their cyberassistants work 24/7 with no downtime. The better the opening preparation, the deeper and more dangerous the precipice that has to be crossed later, in the transition to playing by one's self. Of course, at the elite level, such a difference is not so obvious, but it is still quite

substantial. I found it interesting and useful to discuss this subject using the example of Vishy Anand when Anish raised this topic during one of our regular walks together. I sent the text which was born as a result of these deliberations to the Netherlands. Let me quote it here with almost no cuts.

ANAND AND GIRI

‘Yes indeed, it is interesting to discuss whether Anand is one of the greats. There are many interesting topics to discuss in the world, even if we limit ourselves to chess, however it was not by chance that you asked, and it seems to me that such a discussion could be useful for your own improvement. At first I thought we could simply talk on Skype, but as I gave the matter more thought it became unwieldy, so I decided to write about what came to my mind, trying not to miss any details, then we can discuss what is written.

Without a doubt, Vishy has a spectacular natural talent, he is a true gem. This talent allowed him to feel chess harmony and the secrets of interaction between the chess pieces at a very early age. He did not learn those as a result of systematic work, book study and the like — no, he literally felt them. Until he turned 19–20 years old, Anand played on a whim, actually making the first move that came to his head. The magic lay in the fact that in most cases this move turned out to be good. Making good moves with incredible speed, he put additional pressure on his opponents. This made a big impression, as I can tell you from my own experience. An even more amazing thing happened later. As Anand moved gradually to higher and higher levels of play, his approach to the game changed gradually and naturally as well, which is quite remarkable. As if he were a self-tuning system, Anand responded to external challenges and constantly adapted to them. The better his opponents played, the deeper Anand’s game became. The percentage of good moves grew steadily, often punctuated by moves that were extremely strong and sometimes brilliant. No-one, not even he, can probably understand how it happened. Since I don’t know him well as a person, it is difficult for me to say in what way and to what extent these chess qualities correlated with his essence as a human being. I believe this was the main secret of his undeniable genius that he confirmed by his whole distinguished career. It is also important to note that his approach to openings matched his chess development in a natural and harmonious way. He employed simple and in some cases primitive openings at first, gradually increased their complexity and eventually transitioned smoothly into modern chess. It seems to me that for many years already he has been the best practitioner of ‘advanced chess’ in the world, certainly of his own generation.

Having discussed the Anand phenomenon briefly, let’s talk about you — after all, this is why we started this conversation, isn’t it?

I think the talents that both of you have are quite similar. You, too, feel chess harmony naturally and you play easily because the actual choice for you is limited — you do not consider bad moves at all. As a result, your progress was very rapid. Skipping steps on the way up, you climbed to the top — almost to the very top. This is where problems appeared. Of course, all parallels with Vishy are only approximate. No two people are alike, especially no two people blessed with tremendous talent. Yet if we still compare you to Anand, we shall pay attention to an important detail. Anand’s formative years coincided with the advent and maturation of chess engines; to some extent, they developed side-by-side. Thus Vishy’s approach to openings changed gradually and did not impact significantly upon the harmony of his style of play.

I will not expand on this topic too much; I believe you understand what I’m saying.

On the other hand, you came to chess when engines had already reached incredible heights far surpassing human abilities. Since you interact with computers very well, you naturally like this aspect

of preparation. What Anand experienced smoothly and gradually happened for you very abruptly. As a result, harmony dissolved.

What happens in your case? You play an impeccably verified opening with well-placed traps for your opponent, prepared and fine-tuned on a computer. Long forced variations are supported by engine assessments. At first glance, everything is simple and clear, you only need to remember all these variations. Thank God, that is not a problem since you have an excellent memory. The problems appear when your preparation ends sooner or later and you have to start to play by yourself. There are no more flawless moves verified by an engine; instead, you play your own game. Your moves are mostly good, but now you are playing by ear; these moves are not backed up by long computer-generated variations and they do not claim to be the strongest. As a result, harmony collapses and your play fades.

Such a large gap likely affects your emotional state, even if you do not realise this consciously. This is exacerbated by your priorities as a human being: safety and caution above all. This is how it manifests itself on a chess board: once you have gained an advantage as a result of your opening preparation, you try, above all, not to lose this advantage; you enjoy the comfort zone when you are not in danger yourself and can do anything you want to your opponent. Hence, your endless repetitions, your moves back and forth, your delaying of decisive action.

Up to a certain level, such a manner of play brought victories. Your opponents did not survive these tests and committed serious errors. Thus you doubled the pleasure by playing safe chess that was comfortable for you and ensured the desired end result. At the highest level, this strategy doesn't usually work. Your opponents look for counterplay much more doggedly, while your advantage gradually dissolves after you make imprecise moves. I will not give specific examples here; you will remember a lot of them yourself.

Naturally, we shall ponder what to do. The general answer is quite obvious: to harmonise your play. One possible approach is to simplify opening preparation. Please take note that it is in relatively simple symmetrical openings that your play looks much more harmonious; there is no huge gap between a highly refined and very specific opening and a blurred, bumbling middlegame. This leads to better results. (I haven't studied the statistics, so I'm relying only on my perceptions.)

Another approach is more difficult and probably more painful. You need to change your attitude to the middlegame and start making this stage more complex. Should you achieve this, your focus would shift. The small, instant gratification of a safe, comfortable existence would be replaced by a quest for greater enjoyment of the final victory. This requires a willingness to take more risks and to work harder during the games.

To look at examples in modern chess, Carlsen chose the first path while Caruana took the second (all analogies are approximate, of course). The important thing is that both implemented their choices in a natural and balanced way.

It goes without saying that it would be ideal to master both techniques and to vary them at will as necessary.'

Let me add a brief postscript to this text. I believe that such discussions with students are useful in many ways. A young chess player's horizons are expanded. Most importantly, his shortcomings are exposed, which clarifies the objectives for future work.

Giri started his next tournament with an avalanche of wins. Of course, a Swiss tournament cannot be compared with an elite round robin, but Qatar featured very strong participants. In the first six rounds, Anish collected the scalps of some decent 2600+ players and even won against Shakhriyar Mamedyarov. After such a brilliant start, he had a real chance of winning the tournament, but first had to overcome a significant obstacle named Vladimir Kramnik.

It is well-known that each chess player has opponents against whom he plays in a surprisingly easy and pleasant manner. He reads these opponents' minds like an open book and maintains a skewed positive score against them. Opposite examples are also common. For Anish, Kramnik was one such extremely unpleasant opponent. It is possible that such a relationship was formed at a time when a young and inexperienced player fell under the psychological pressure of a far superior grandmaster. It is also possible that Anish's style was easily refuted by his formidable opponent. Whatever the reason, Giri had a truly disastrous score against Kramnik, especially in classical games. This time too he was unable to break the pattern and lost the game virtually without a fight.

Still, even after this defeat, Anish continued to lead the tournament. Unfortunately the loss to Kramnik certainly affected his next game against Yu Yangyi. Instead of playing solidly, Anish was timid; instead of being reliable, he was indecisive. The Chinese player took the initiative in the opening and the only question that remained was whether it was still possible to salvage half a point. Anish failed to do so.

As a result, on the eve of the final round, we found ourselves in a new and extremely uncomfortable situation. Victory in the tournament was out of the question since the two successive losses had pushed Giri down the standings. Yet another setback would transform a would-be triumph into a real nightmare. The pairings determined that Giri's last-round opponent would be Vladimir Akopian. Akopian was a strong grandmaster who had almost retired from competitive play in recent years. How to approach this important game? Which opening to choose? Vladimir always started the game by moving his king's pawn, so our choice was essentially limited to the Berlin Defence or the Taimanov Variation. We didn't hesitate for long and decided to go all-in.

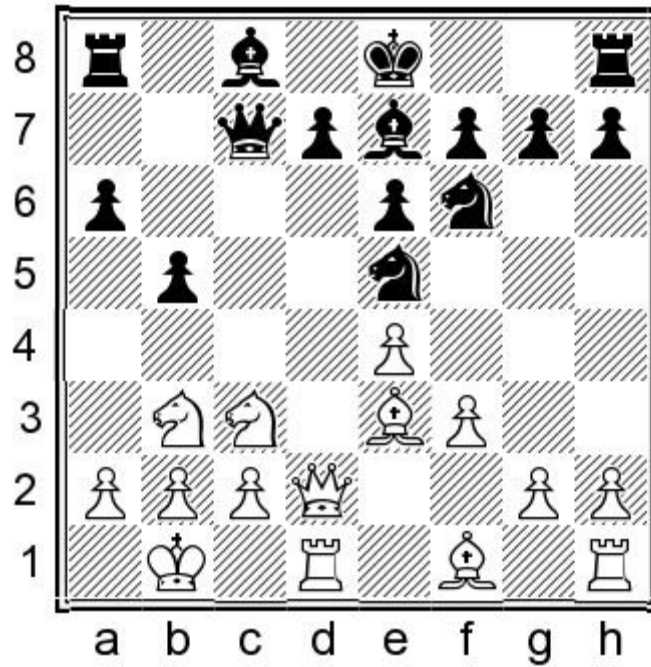
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Vladimir Akopian (2657)

Anish Giri (2776)

Doha 2014

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♘c6 5.♗c3 ♚c7 6.♙e3 a6 7.♚d2 ♗f6 8.0-0-0 ♙b4 9.f3 ♗e5
10.♗b3 b5 11.♖b1 ♙e7



12. ♔f2

When Black decided to go for this line, he could have been sure of the position which has arisen, as Akopian had played it three times already, scoring three victories!

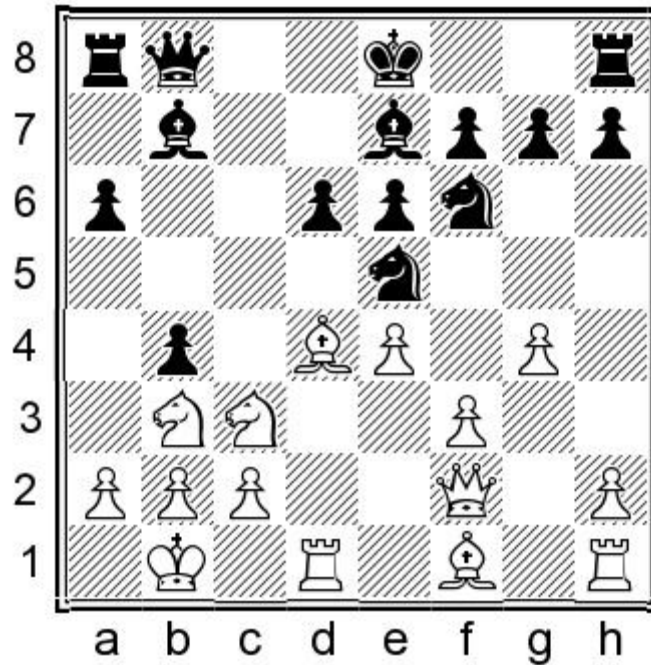
12... ♖b7

It is always useful, and sometimes even necessary, to surprise your opponent. Akopian's three previous games featured 12...d6 13.g4 and he won them all.

13. ♖b6 ♜b8 14. ♖d4

Black's natural-looking twelfth move is not too popular because of 14. ♘a5, but Black can simply reply with 14...0-0, not fearing the loss of his light-squared bishop. His activity on the queenside is enough compensation for the two bishops.

14...d6 15.g4 b4



16. ♖a4?

This is probably a blunder. 16. ♖e2 0-0 (Now 16... ♖xf3 is impossible due to 17. ♗xf6) 17. g5 ♗fd7 18. ♖a5 ♜c8 with a very complicated and double-edged position would be more prudent.

16... ♗xf3

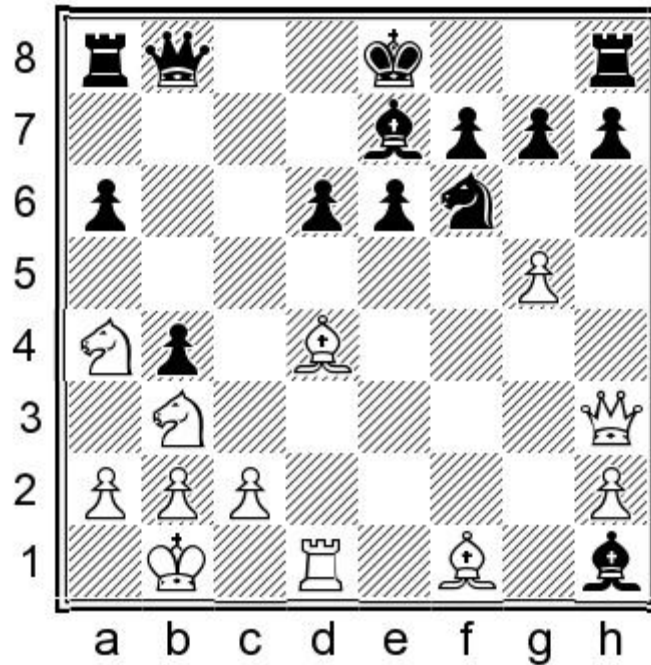
It appears that White can't survive such a blow.

17. ♕xf3!

White thought for a long time before making this decision. This audacious move is undoubtedly best from a practical point of view.

The line 17. ♗xf6 ♗xf6 18. ♖b6 (It is possible that when Akopian made his sixteenth move he overlooked that 18. ♕xf3 would be met by 18... ♗c6 with advantage for Black.) 18... ♗xe4 19. ♖xa8 ♕xa8 20. ♜xd6 ♕b8! gives the advantage to Black.

17... ♗xe4 18. ♕h3 ♗xh1 19. g5



19...♖e4

Suddenly it turns out that, despite Black's huge material advantage, the position is unclear after both 19...♖d5 20.♙xg7 ♘f4 21.♚h4 ♘g6 22.♚h3 ♜g8 23.♚xh7 and 19...♖d7 20.♙xg7 ♜f8 21.♚xh7.

20.g6!

This is the strongest move!

20.♙xg7? would be inappropriate due to 20...♘f2 21.♚g3 ♘xd1 22.♙xh8 ♙c6.

20...f6?

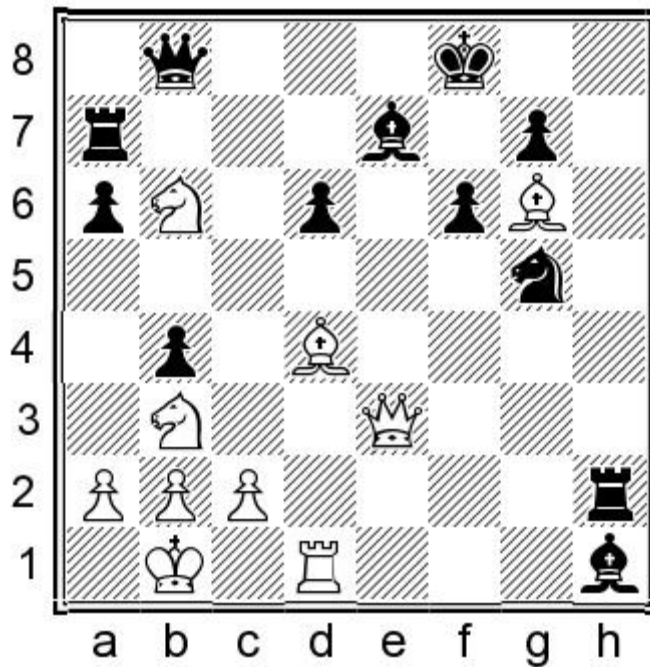
20...♘g5 21.gxf7+ ♔xf7 22.♚g3 ♙c6 23.♘b6 leads to a completely unclear position, but this is how Black should have played. The thing about such positions is that their specific logic can only be understood by trial and error. Striving for the maximum, Anish underestimated the hidden resource of his opponent.

21.♚xe6?

a) It is difficult not to capture such a pawn, but it was better to play 21.♙d3 ♘g5 (21...♚b7 22.♜xh1 ♘f2 23.♙xf2 ♚xh1+ 24.♘c1 is too dangerous; the three light pieces are stronger than the two rooks) 22.♚e3 ♙f3 23.♜g1 e5 24.♜xg5 ♙c6 25.♜g1 with a dangerous initiative.

b) Undoubtedly the strongest move was 21.♙e3!!, an unexpected preventive move against ♘g5. After 21...f5 22.♘d4 d5 23.♙d3 White wins the bishop and continues the attack.

21...♘g5 22.♚e3 hxg6 23.♘b6 ♜a7 24.♙d3 ♜xh2 25.♙xg6+ ♔f8



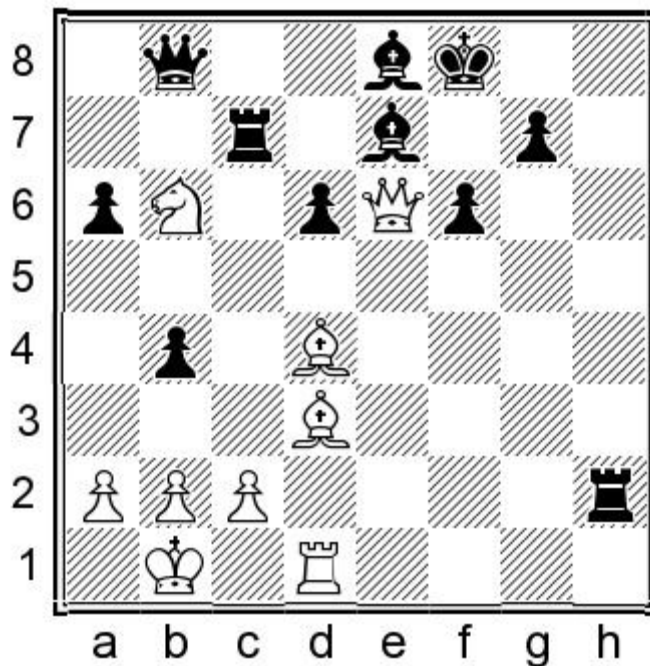
26. ♖c5!

Despite the inaccuracies, Akopian finds a way to maintain the tension.

26... ♙c6

Or 26... dxc5 27. ♙xc5 ♖g8 (27... ♙xc5 28. ♗xc5+ ♖g8 29. ♖c8! ♗f7 30. ♖xa7) 28. ♙xe7 with compensation for the sacrificed material.

27. ♖e6+ ♗xe6 28. ♗xe6 ♙e8 29. ♙d3 ♜c7



30.♞e1?

Once again the most natural move turns out to be an error.

White had two ways to keep up the pressure:

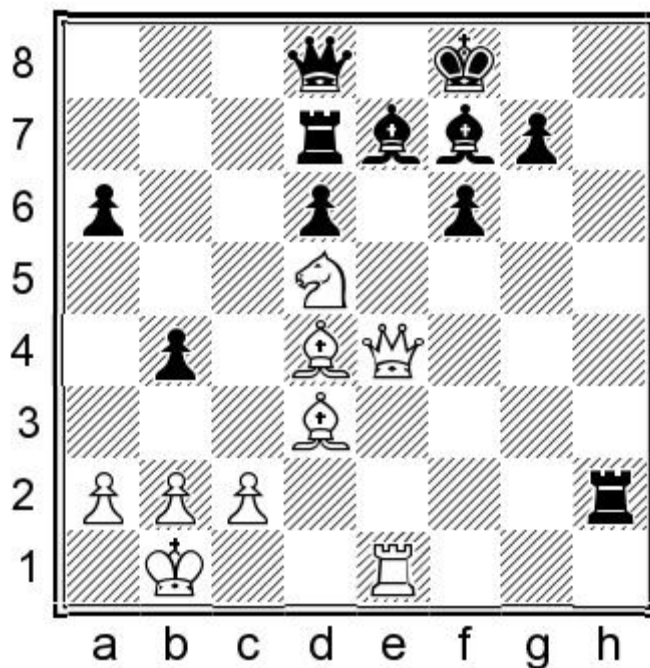
a) 30.♙e4!? ♜f7 31.♘d7+ ♞xd7 32.♚xd7;

b) or 30.♞g1!? Threatening 31.♙xf6. 30...♞h6 31.♙e3.

30...♚d8?

Black doesn't avail himself of the elegant 30...♚b7!, threatening 31...♞h1 31.♙e4 ♜f7! (31...♙c6?? 32.♙g6+-) 32.♚f5 ♞h5! 33.♚xh5 (33.♚f4 d5+-) 33...♙xh5 34.♙xb7 ♞xb7, winning.

31.♘d5 ♜f7 32.♚e4 ♞d7



33.♘f4?

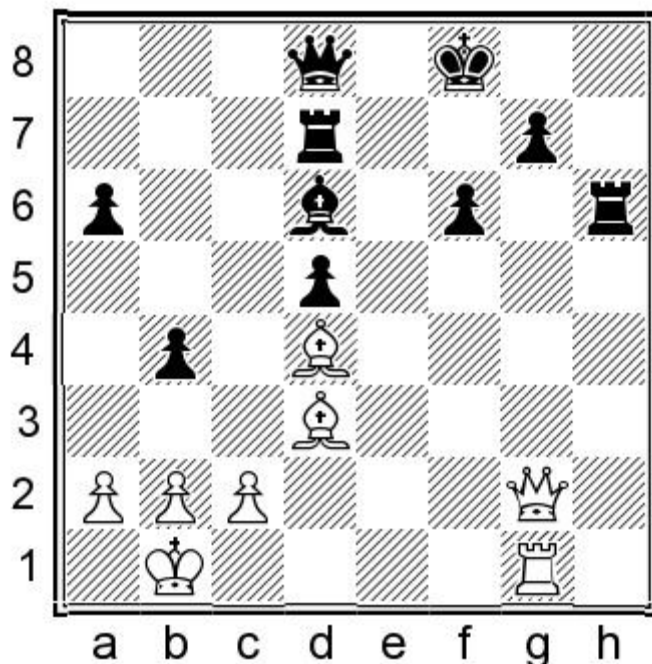
A mistake in time trouble.

33.♘b6! ♞c7 34.♘d5 was necessary.

33...d5 34.♘g6+

34.♘e6+ ♙xe6 35.♚xe6 was somewhat better, even though Black's advantage is obvious after 35...♞d6.

34...♙xg6 35.♚xg6 ♞h6 36.♚g2 ♙d6 37.♞g1



37...♖h4

The consolidating move 37...♔e7 would have been stronger.

38.♔xd5?

38.♕f2 was the lesser evil.

38...♕e7

Finally the scales have tipped in Black's favour.

39.♔g2 ♖dxd4 40.♔xg7+ ♔e8 41.♔g6+ ♔d7 42.♔f5+ ♔c7 43.♔a5+ ♔b8 44.♔xa6 ♖d6 45.♔a4 ♔b6 46.♖e1 ♖g4 47.b3 ♖g1 48.♕f1 ♖d8 49.a3 ♕f8 50.♔a2 ♔c5 51.axb4 ♔xb4 52.♔a6 ♖g5 53.♔b2 ♖a5 0-1

Of course, the importance of the result of this game far exceeded its creative content. Thanks to this win, Anish shared second and third places with Kramnik, while another player to whom he lost, Yu Yangyi, won the tournament. The psychological implications of that last-round game were even more important. Playing under extremely uncomfortable circumstances, the young chess player managed to overcome adversity and bend the situation to his will, perhaps for the very first time in his career. It was also the first tournament that he played without any draws. With his reputation as a peaceful prince, the result was simply outstanding. Such an experience is worth a lot!

From Doha, Anish flew to London. The schedule of the London Chess Festival was intense. It began with a huge rapid tournament that stood out not only for the number of participants — around 400 — but also for their high calibre. Suffice it to say that all the participants in the upcoming London Chess Classic were contractually obliged to play in the rapid event. The first day was relatively simple since

the skill gap was simply too great. The second half of the tournament began with a game against a traditionally difficult opponent.

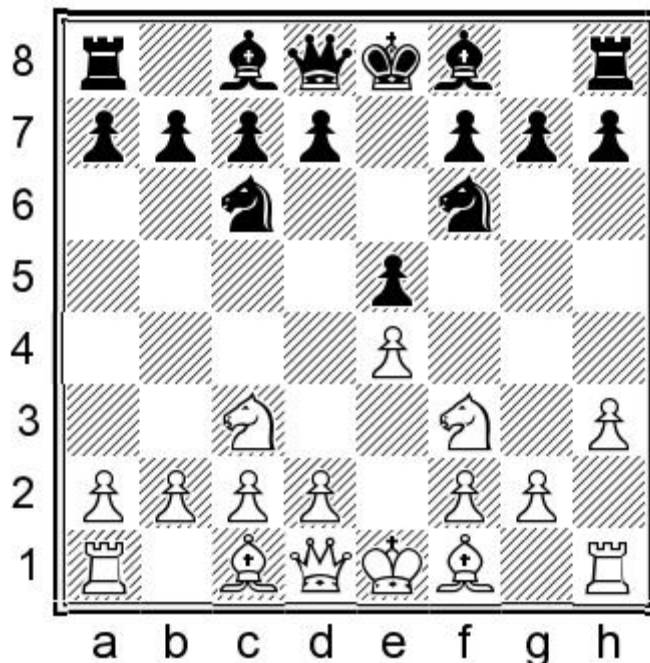
55

Anish Giri (2768)

Vladimir Kramnik (2769)

London 2014

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.h3!?



This is obviously not a novelty, however it was the first time the position had arisen at grandmaster level.

4...♗b4

The most natural response. At least two other lines deserve attention: 4...♗c5!? and 4...d5!?.

5.♗d3!?

Now the game leaves the beaten track. White tries to play a Berlin Defence with the additional (and useful) move h2–h3. Of course it is difficult to claim an opening advantage this way, but it provides original play from the very first moves.

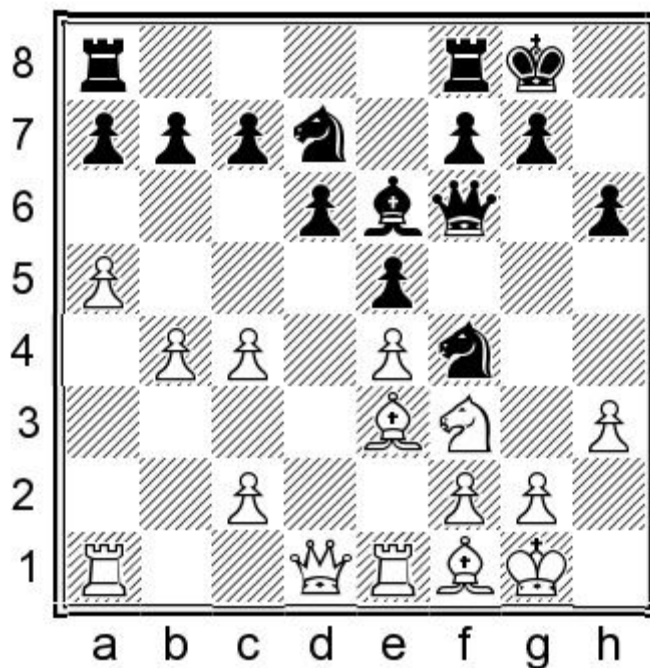
5...0-0

5...d6 6.a3 ♗a5 7.b4 ♗b6 8.♘a4 0-0 9.0-0 d5 10.exd5 ♙xd5 11.♖e1 occurred in Giri-Adams in round nine. White managed to win there as well.

6.0-0 d6 7.a3

7.♖e1!? ♜e7 8.♞e2 d5 9.♝g3 was Giri-Caruana in round seven.

7...♙xc3 8.dxc3 ♜e7 9.a4!? h6 10.a5 ♜g6 11.c4 ♙e6 12.♙e3 ♜d7 13.b4 ♜f4 14.♖e1 ♚f6 15.♙f1



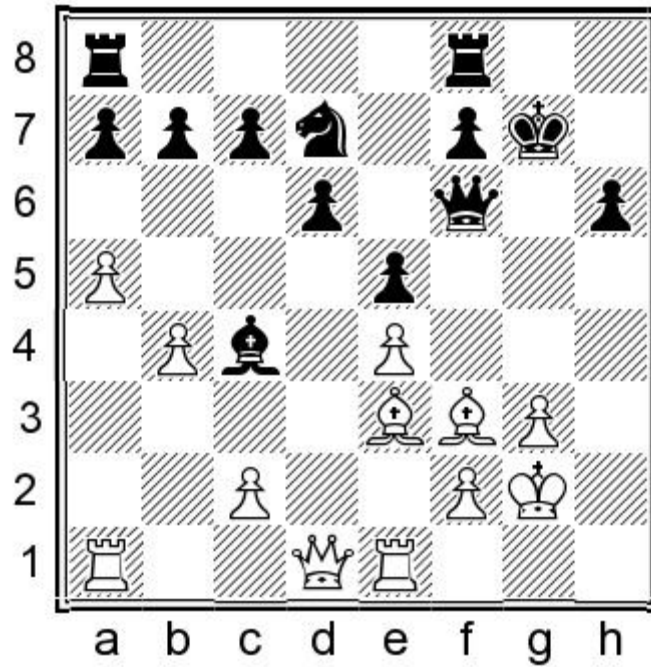
15...g5?!

Excessive activity. Black should have adopted waiting tactics.

16.♙h2 ♙h8 17.g3 ♜xh3?

It was worth choosing 17...♜g6 and agreeing to a somewhat worse position.

18.♙xh3 g4 19.♙g2 gxf3 20.♙xf3 ♙xc4 21.♙g2 ♙g7



22. ♖h1

As a result of his active moves, Kramnik has managed to win a pawn, but at a high price, as the pressure along the h-file more than compensates for this minimum loss.

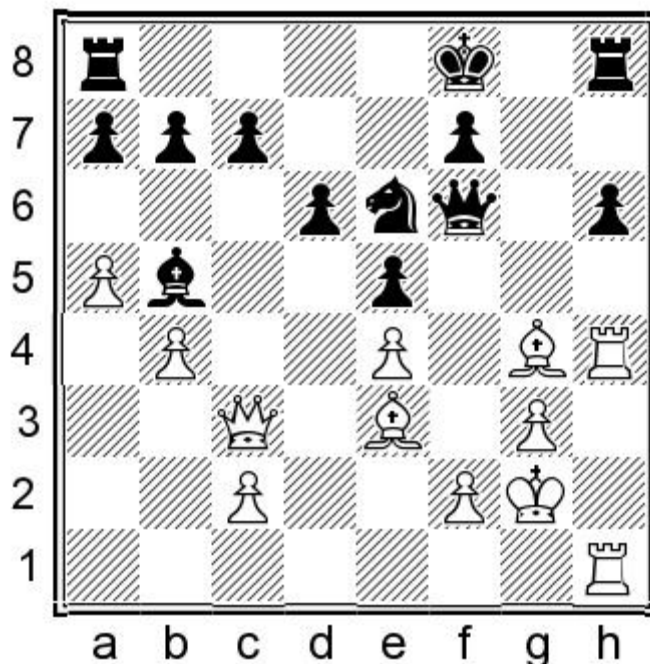
22... ♜h8 23. ♖h4

23. ♖h5! is even stronger.

23... ♘f8 24. ♕d2 ♘e6 25. ♖c3! ♙b5 26. ♖ah1 ♔f8

After 26...h5 27. ♖xh5 ♖xh5 28. ♖xh5 ♖h8 29. ♖xh8 ♔xh8 30. ♙xa7 White has an extra pawn.

27. ♙g4!



Material losses become inevitable now.

27...♙c6 28.♙xe6 ♚xe6 29.b5 ♙xb5 30.♖xh6 ♖xh6 31.♖xh6 ♚g4 32.f3 ♚g7 33.♚xc7 a6 34.♚xd6+ ♜g8 35.♖h5 1-0

Of course, this game cannot be regarded as full revenge for the recent loss in Doha, however it is always nice to win against Kramnik, especially considering the running total of the previous games. A loss to Nakamura in round eight proved decisive in determining the tournament winner, but Anish managed to take second place after he won his last two games. It is significant that the last-round game against Matthew Sadler was won in the same Sicilian as against Akopian. This time, Black played with much more confidence.

The classical time control tournament started well. Giri's trademark weapon bore fruit as he demonstrated excellent technique in realising a minimum advantage in the endgame.

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Anish Giri (2768)

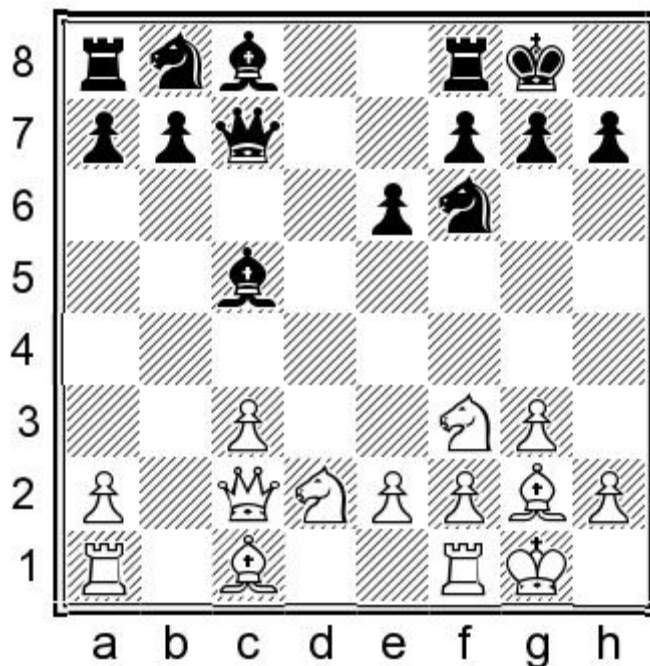
Michael Adams (2745)

London 2014

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 d5 4.♙g2 ♙b4+ 5.♘d2

A worthy alternative to the more usual 5.♙d2.

5...0-0 6.♘gf3 dxc4 7.♚c2 c5 8.dxc5 c3 9.bxc3 ♙xc5 10.0-0 ♚c7



Black has a slightly better pawn structure on the queenside, but the powerful Catalan bishop, combined with pressure along the b-file, provides White with the more pleasant prospects.

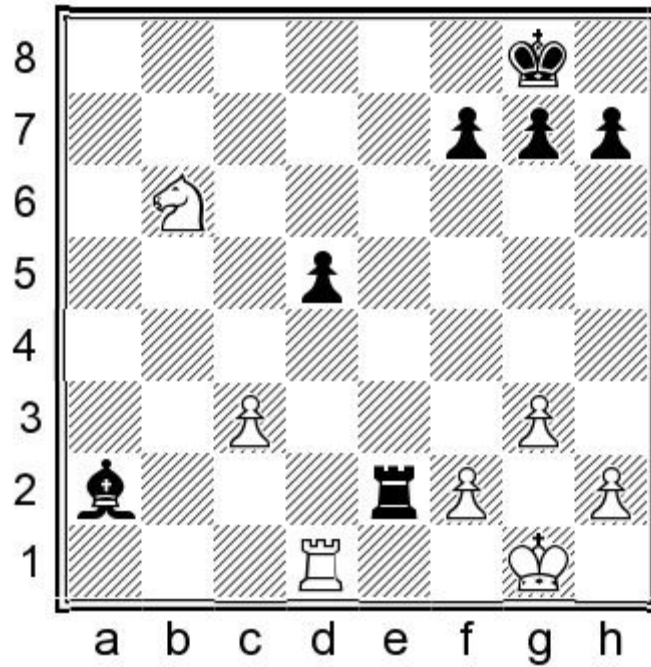
11. ♖e4! ♜xe4 12. ♚xe4 ♜d7 13. ♙f4 ♙d6 14. ♙xd6 ♚xd6 15. ♝fd1 ♚c7 16. ♚b4 ♜f6 17. ♖d4 a6

If the a-pawn has to be moved, it's better to move it two squares at once.

18. ♜b3! a5?!

Even without this move the white queen was ready to move to c5. 18...♞a7 19.♞d6 ♙d7 would keep a somewhat worse but quite defensible position.

19. ♚c5 ♚b8 20. ♞ab1 b6



29.c4!

If 29.♘xd5 the rook ending after 29...♙xd5 30.♖xd5 ♔f8 is theoretically drawn.

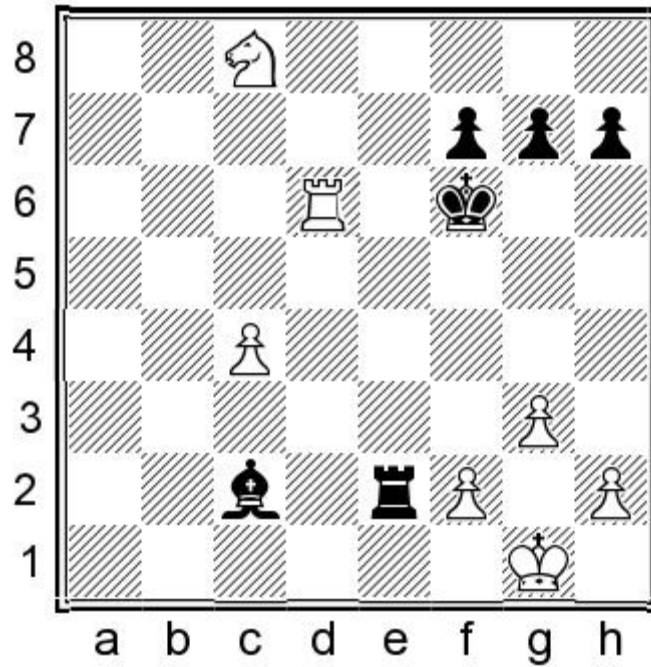
29...♔f8 30.♖xd5 ♙b1

It would be more prudent to play 30...♔e7.

31.♖d8+ ♔e7 32.♖d1 ♙c2

32...♙e4 33.♔f1 ♙f3? 34.♖d3 loses, but after 33...♖b2! (instead of 33...♙f3?) Black would retain excellent chances of a draw.

33.♘c8+ ♔f6 34.♖d6+



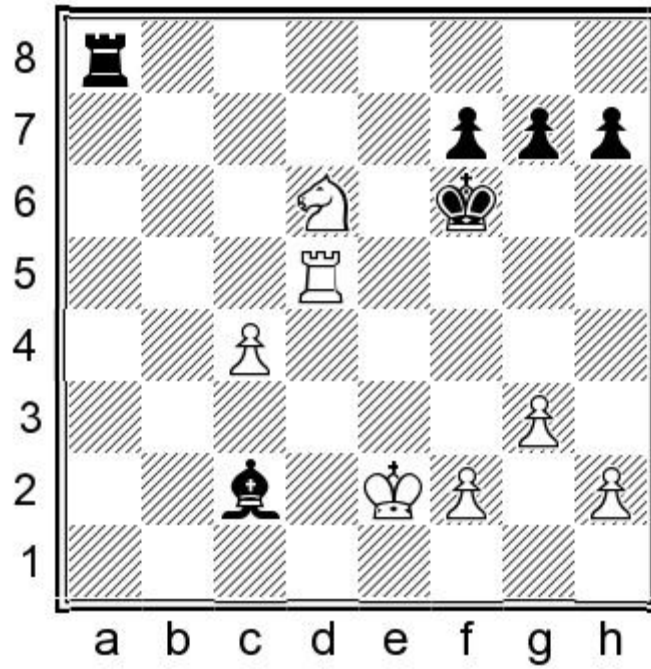
34...♔g5?

It was necessary to play 34...♖e6! followed by 35.f4 ♖xd6 36.♘xd6 ♔e6 37.c5 ♔d5 38.♘e8 g6 39.♘f6+ ♔xc5 40.♘h7 ♔d6, when Black would be capable of holding this ending.

35.♔f1 ♖e8 36.♖d5+

It is understandable that White wants to move the knight to a more central position, but now the black king joins the defence. It was worth considering 36.♘b6 ♔f5 37.c5.

36...♔f6 37.♘d6 ♖a8 38.♔e2



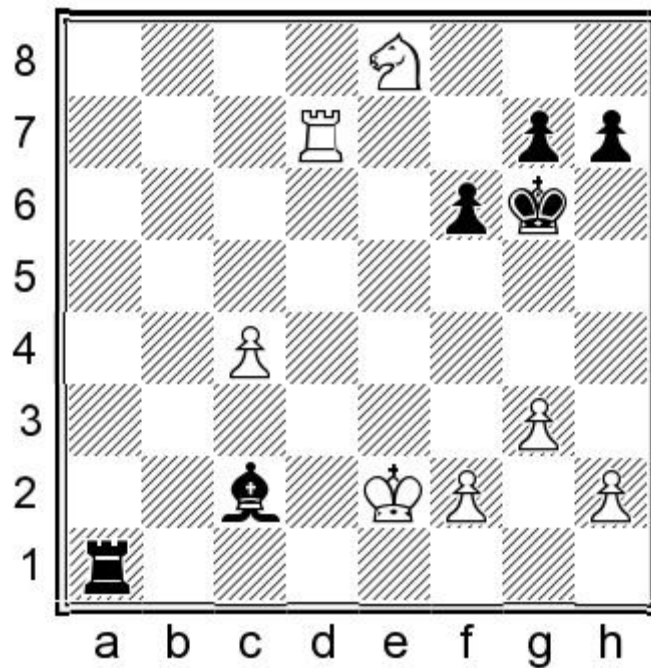
38...♖a1?

Instead of defending the e8-square once more with 38...♔a4, Black carelessly leaves it free.

39.♘e8+! ♕g6

39...♖e7 40.♘xg7

40.♖d6+! f6 41.♖d7+-



41...♔h6

41...♙a4 42.♞xg7+ ♔h6 43.♞e7 would not save the game either.

42.♜xg7 ♞a2 43.♔e3 ♞a5 44.♞e7 ♞c5 45.♔d4 ♞e5 46.♞xe5 fxe5+ 47.♔c3

1–0

This victory remained the only one in the tournament for Anish. Since this event was super-short, with only five rounds, it was enough for him to share first place with Anand.

Thus the year ended well and results proved that our joint work had been successful. Anish gained fifty rating points and took seventh place in the world rankings; his play became more harmonious and balanced. Many shortcomings remained, but we knew what they were and were keen to fix them.

The new chess year 2015 started in the same village of Wijk aan Zee where we had begun our collaboration. The chess festival recovered after the previous year's crisis. The main event featured fourteen grandmasters, led by World Champion Magnus Carlsen, and the calibre of players in general was better than the previous year. Giri's status had changed significantly as well; now he was regarded as one of the favourites, at least by the Dutch chess fans. We were optimistic due to the success achieved at the end of the previous year and to our fruitful preparation at the usual place, the National Sports Centre in Papendal. Initially, it appeared that events would follow the Tashkent scenario. Giri made several draws, won unconvincingly against Baadur Jobava and then lost to Maxime Vachier-Lagrave. Five rounds before the finish, Anish was on fifty percent and his play was not too impressive. The revival came only after the second weekend. It started with a difficult game against Ding Liren, then three more wins followed. Here is the last game from that series.

57

Anish Giri (2784)

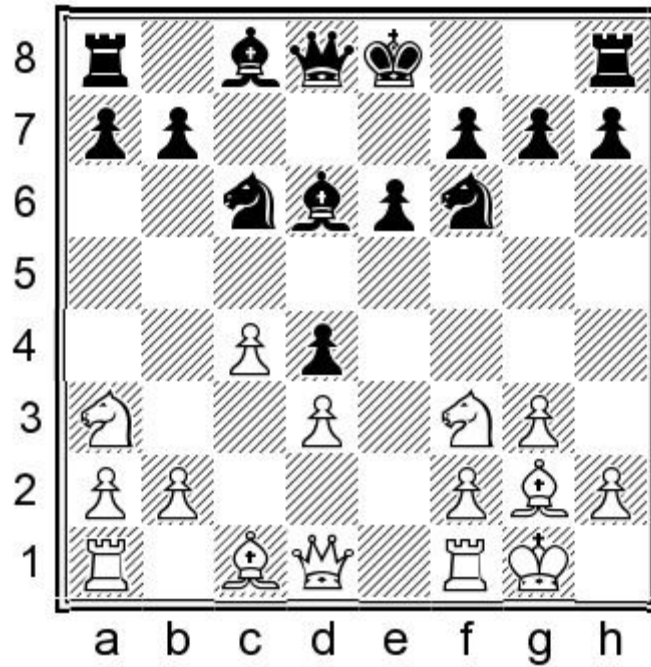
Wesley So (2762)

Wijk aan Zee 2015

1.c4 e6 2.g3 d5 3.♙g2 ♜f6 4.♜f3 d4

This is the most interesting of Black's many options. Now an Indian Defence with reversed colours appears on the board with ...e7–e6, which can be seen as a loss of half a tempo.

5.0-0 c5 6.e3 ♜c6 7.exd4 cxd4 8.d3 ♙d6 9.♜a3



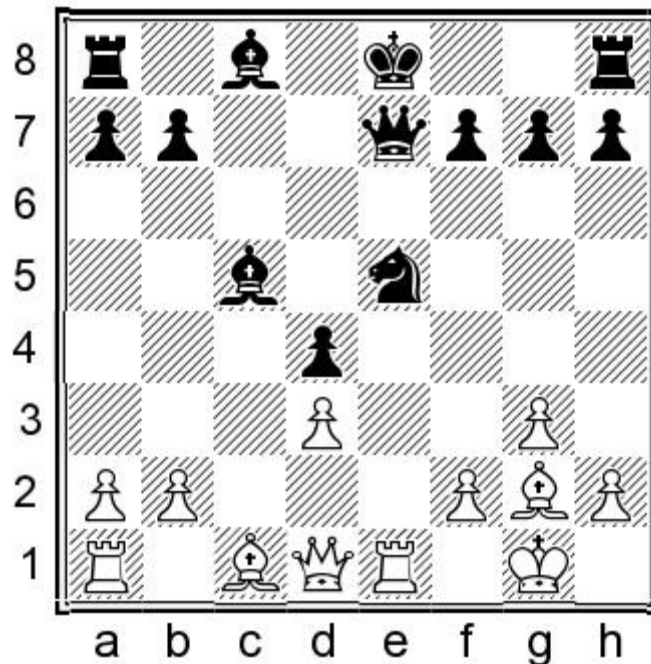
9...e5

Now Black loses another half tempo, which creates additional chances for White.

It was more prudent to play 9...0-0.

10.c5! ♕xc5 11.♖c4 ♗d7 12.♞e1

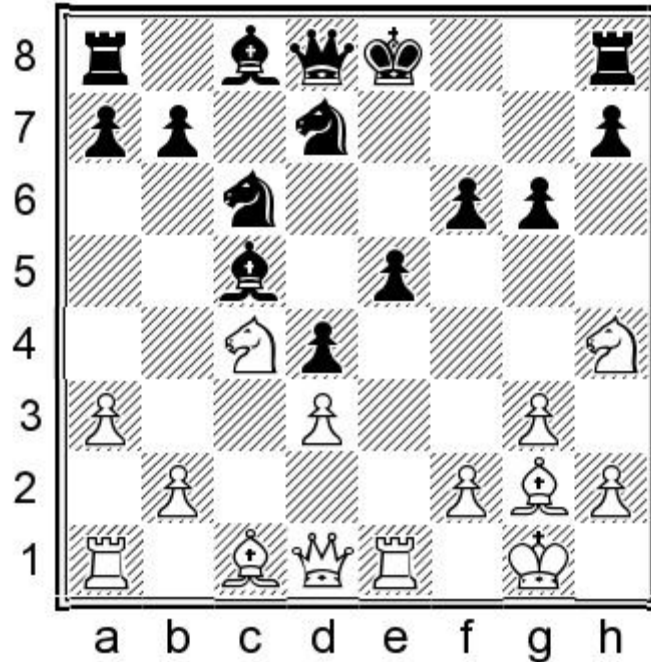
It is possible to play 12.♗fxe5 ♗dxe5 13.♗xe5 ♗xe5 14.♞e1 immediately, but after 14...♙e7



15.♕f4 ♕g4! (15...f6 16.♕xe5 fxe5 17.♙h5+ g6 18.♙xe5+-) 16.f3 ♕e6 17.♕xe5 0-0 the position is about equal.

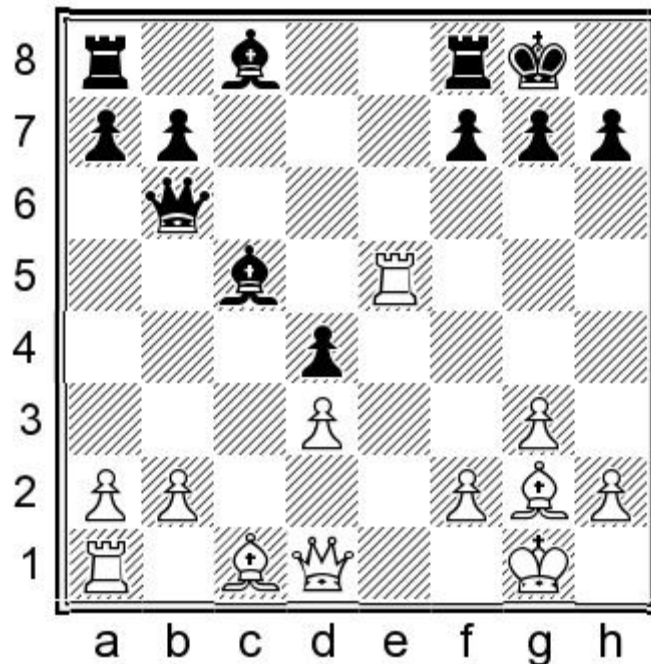
12...0-0

The position after 12...f6 13.♘h4 g6 14.a3



14...a5 (After 14...0-0 15.b4 ♖e7 16.♗h6 ♜e8 17.b5 ♘cb8 18.♗d5+ ♔h8 19.♗f7 White wins the exchange.) 15.♗h6 ♗f8 16.♚c1 looks dangerous for Black, but now White wins back the pawn with a small but clear advantage.

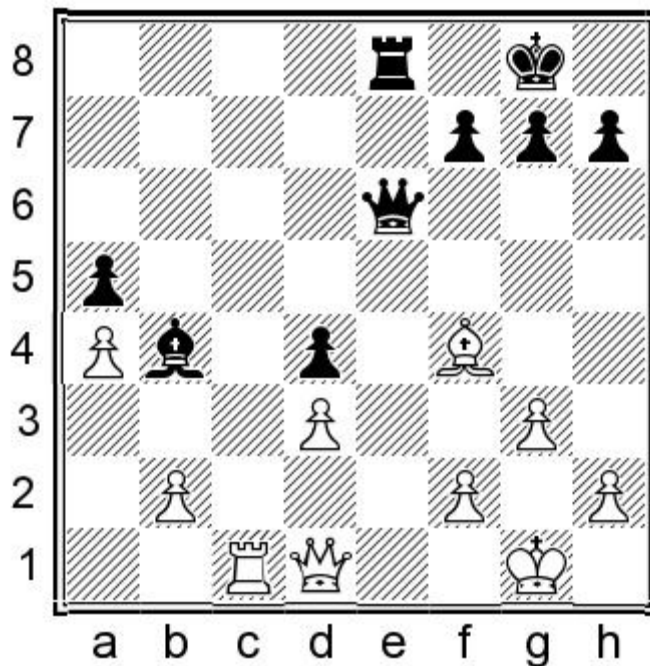
13.♗fxe5 ♗cxe5 14.♗xe5 ♗xe5 15.♞xe5 ♚b6



16.a4! a5 17.♚c2 ♗b4 18.♞b5 ♚e6 19.♗f4 ♗d7 20.♗d5 ♚f6 21.♞xb7 ♞ac8 22.♚d1 ♗e6

22...♔c6 23.♔xc6 ♚xc6 24.♖b5 ♚c2 is more tenacious.

23.♖b6! ♜fe8 24.♔xe6 ♜xe6 25.♖c1! ♜ce8 26.♖xe6 ♚xe6



27.♔d2

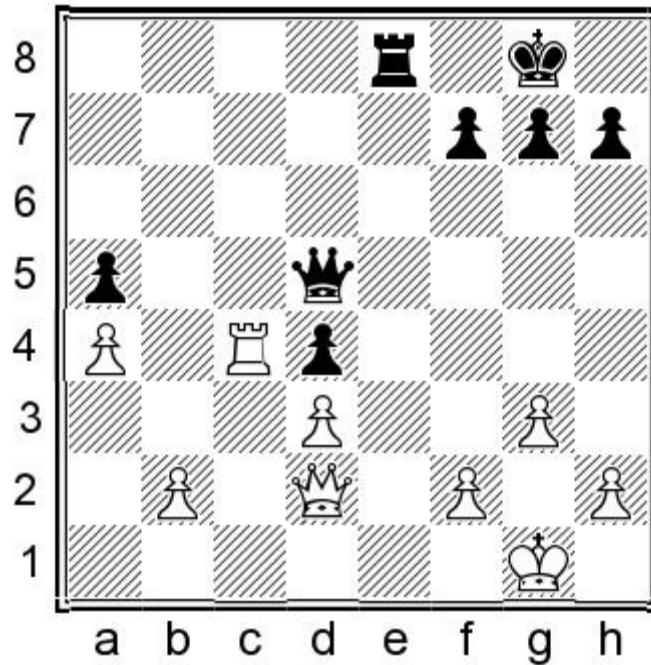
The decision to exchange bishops is understandable since it is the only way to realise the pawn advantage on the queenside.

Another idea worth considering was 27.♚h5 h6 28.♚b5, trying to use the activity of the white pieces to the maximum.

27...♔xd2 28.♚xd2 ♚f5 29.♖c4

29.♖e1!

29...♚d5



30.b4?

White implements his plan consistently, but unfortunately it has a flaw. He should have played 30.♔c1! ♕d7 (30...g6? 31.♖c8 ♜xc8 32.♔xc8+ ♔g7 33.♔b8 leads to a won queen ending) 31.♔g5!, keeping an advantage.

30...axb4?

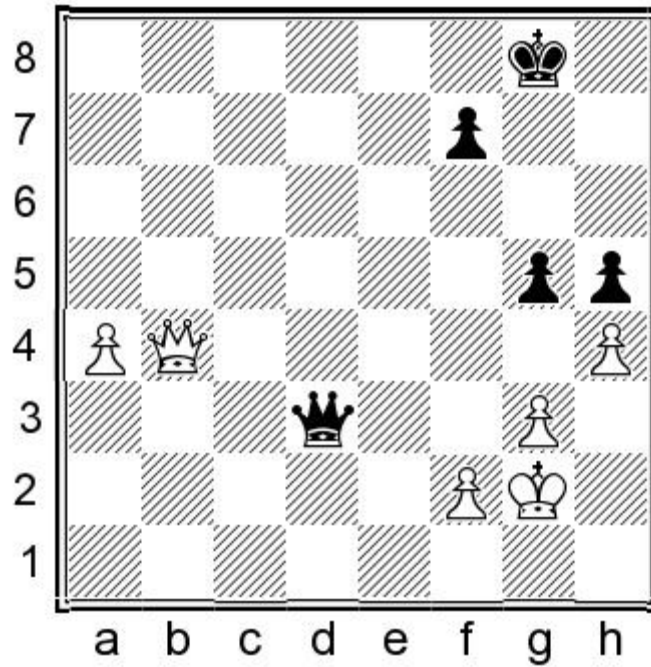
This natural response justifies White's previous moves. 30...h5! would virtually save the game, e.g. 31.b5 (if 31.h4 ♕f3 32.♖xd4 ♜e2 33.♖f4 ♜xd2 34.♖xf3 axb4=) 31...h4 32.gxh4 ♜e6 33.♖c6 ♜xc6 34.bxc6 ♕xc6.

31.♕xb4 h5

Now this counterplay is too late.

31...♜d8 32.a5.

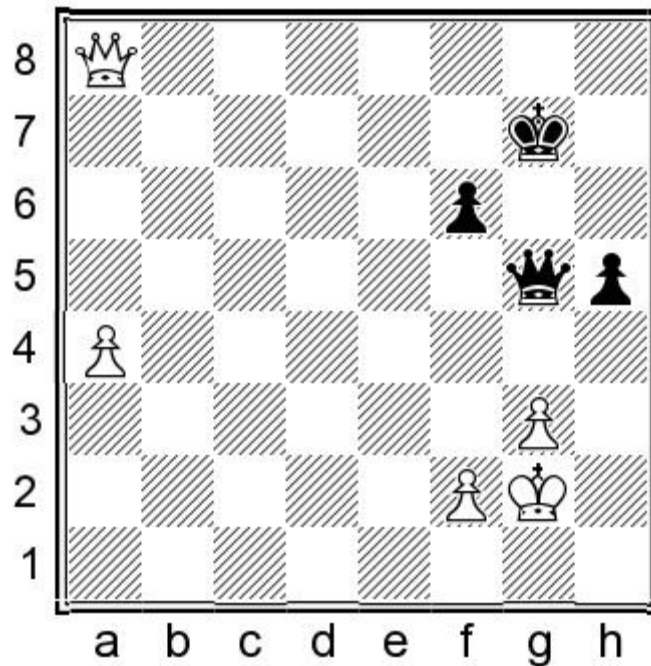
32.♖xd4 ♕f3 33.♖e4 ♜d8 34.♖e3 ♕d1+ 35.♔g2 ♜xd3 36.♖xd3! ♕xd3 37.h4 g5



38. ♖b8+

It would be more precise to play 38. hxg5! ♖d5+ 39. ♔g1 ♖xg5 40. ♖b5.

38... ♔g7 39. ♖e5+ f6 40. ♖e3 ♖c4 41. hxg5 ♖d5+ 42. ♖f3 ♖xg5 43. ♖b7+ ♔h6 44. ♖a8 ♔g7



45. ♖a7+

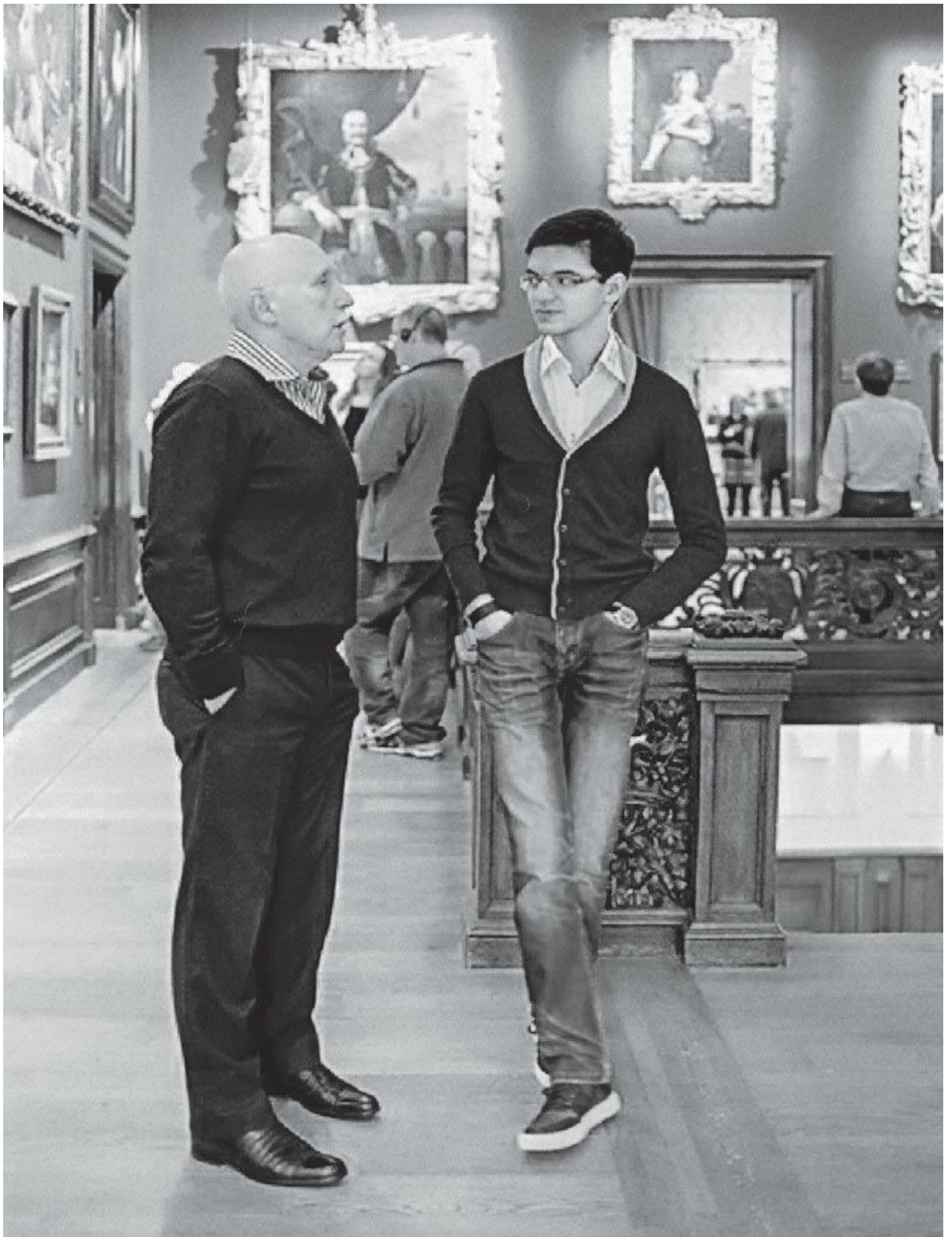
White attempts to win 'by hand' without having to calculate variations.

It would be more correct to play 45. a5 h4 46. a6 hxg3 47. ♖a7+ ♔g6 48. ♖e3. Anish later made matters

more difficult for himself, although without ever losing his decisive advantage.

45...♔g6 46.♚a8 ♚f5 47.♚f3 ♚e5 48.♔h2 ♔f7 49.♚b3+ ♔g7 50.♚b4 ♚c7 51.♚e4 ♚c5 52.♔g2 ♚g5
53.♚e7+ ♔g6 54.♚e8+ ♔g7 55.♚d7+ ♔h6 56.♚d6 ♔g6 57.♚d3+ ♔g7 58.♚e4 ♚c5 59.♚b7+ ♔g6
60.♚b1+ ♔g7 61.♚e4 ♚g5 62.♚e7+ ♔g6 63.♚e8+ ♔g7 64.♚b5 ♚g4 65.♚b7+ ♔g6 66.♚b1+ ♔g7
67.a5 h4 68.♚d3 ♚c8 69.a6 ♚c6+ 70.♔h2 ♚b6 71.♔g2 h3+ 72.♔xh3 ♚xf2 73.♚c4 ♔g6 74.♚f4 ♚g1
75.♚e4+ f5 76.♚g2 ♚a1 77.♚c6+ ♔g5 78.♔g2 ♚a2+ 79.♔f3 ♚a3+ 80.♔e2 ♚a2+ 81.♔d3 ♚b3+
82.♚c3 ♚d5+ 83.♚d4 ♚b5+ 84.♚c4 ♚b1+ 85.♔d2 ♚b2+ 86.♔e3 ♚a3+ 87.♔f2 ♚a5 88.♚f4+ ♔g6
89.♚d6+ ♔h5 90.♔e3 ♚a4 91.♔d2 ♚b3 92.♚d3 ♚a2+ 93.♔e3 ♔g5 94.♔f3 ♚a1 95.♚d8+ ♔h5
96.♚e8+ ♔g5 97.♚e7+ ♔g6 98.♚e6+ ♔g5 99.♚e3+ ♔f6 100.a7 ♚f1+ 101.♚f2 ♚h1+ 102.♔e2 ♚e4+
103.♚e3 ♚c4+ 104.♔e1 ♚b4+ 105.♔f1 ♚b1+ 106.♔g2 ♚b7+ 107.♔h2 ♔f7 108.♚a3 ♚a8 109.♚b3+
♔g7 110.♚b8 ♚f3 111.a8=♚ 1-0

This spurt at the finish allowed Anish to join the fight for first place. He was unable to catch Carlsen, but managed to share 2nd-5th places; it was definitely a step forward, even after the previous year's successful performance. The obvious progress in his play pleased us even more. This time he managed to achieve greater harmony between opening and middlegame. Anish remained superior to his opponents in the early stages, but now his advantage was of a more conceptual nature. It was not the case that his opening preparation included one move more than his opponent's; Anish was better-prepared for the types of positions that emerged. His winning streaks were a testament to his growing ambitions. On the other hand, yet another flaw became evident since he lost focus in positions that were already decided and therefore had to win some games several times. There was a lot of room for improvement.



In the Rijksmuseum before the start of the round. Is chess still art!?! (Photo from the author's archive)

In a short time, Anish had developed from promising young player to elite grandmaster, but the transition was too abrupt and his tournament calendar did not quite match his new status. His legal commitments forced him to play for several clubs which did not fit in with the unexpected avalanche of invitations to prestigious tournaments. In addition, a new super-tournament circuit called the Grand Chess Tour was established. Giri was invited — the significant jump in his rating proved to be very helpful — but there was almost no time to rest. And even more significant changes were coming in his personal life. Anish and his long-term girlfriend Sopiko Guramishvili decided to get married. The pleasant problems associated with planning a wedding inevitably distracted him from chess.

All these apparently unrelated issues seemed to adversely affect Giri's concentration and physical shape. He entered a period of a protracted decline starting with the Grand Prix stage in Tbilisi. The start of this tournament in the Georgian capital was quite successful. In round one, Peter Svidler blundered in an equal position and resigned immediately. Unfortunately several months would pass until Giri's next tournament win. He played badly both in Tbilisi and in the Gashimov Memorial in Shamkir. Novelties in the openings and attempts to complicate the middlegame artificially did not help Anish out of this quagmire. His winless streak continued at the final Grand Prix event in Khanty-Mansiysk. Disaster loomed: having lost two games in the first half, Anish was languishing at the bottom of the standings.

Sooner or later, all troubles come to an end. Disaster was avoided and Giri managed to finish the tournament with a decent result of fifty percent. This did not indicate that the crisis was over. Ironically, it was his participation in the French club championship that helped Anish to leave the bad times behind. This was really a blessing in disguise. Just recently I lamented that Anish had commitments to play in all sorts of leagues and championships, however it was playing for a French club which was not a real contender that enabled my student to taste victory once again. The sad streak of bad luck ended as suddenly and unpredictably as it started. A series of successful performances began.

The Stavanger tournament was the first in that series. In our hectic times, any competition that is held for the third time in a row can already be called traditional. However the current incarnation of the tournament was significantly different from the previous ones. First of all, it became a part of the Grand Chess Tour, a recently created circuit of three super-tournaments. Overall winners received impressive additional money, so the importance of Norway Chess increased further. Secondly, the time control changed. This seemingly insignificant detail played a major role in the way the competition unfolded and in the final standings.

In general there is quite a frivolous attitude to the rate of play in modern chess. There are no strict standards and tournament organisers are free to implement their own schemes. This is difficult for the players who have to re-adjust to different time controls. A new trend had recently emerged — to combine games with different time controls in the same event. Such experimentation would be appropriate for an exhibition tournament; one would hope that official championships have more stability. In Stavanger, a very original time control was used: two hours for the first forty moves, then an hour was added — not for the next twenty moves, as was the case at the previous Norway Chess, but

till the end of the game. Moreover, the customary thirty second increment started only with move forty-one — a very unusual regulation. Of course, the introduction of Fischer increment saved players from the worst time troubles that led to inevitable blunders. On the other hand, as a spectator, I liked the raw emotions associated with the old time control. The 2013 Candidates Tournament became the most spectacular of the elite competitions in recent years largely because of its rate of play.

If we really care about players, their health and longevity in chess, the ideal solution appears to be a delay-based time control, long popular in the US and now adopted for the GCT circuit. The use of delay kills two birds with one stone. Like the increment, the delay alleviates time trouble so it no longer influences the result of a game in dramatic fashion. Additionally, the use of delay makes it impossible to accumulate time, which makes the flow of the game more natural.

In Stavanger the players were only informed about the experimental time control before the start of the first round. The World Champion was late for his game and paid a high price. In a completely won position against Topalov on move sixty-one, he took time to think since he was sure that an additional fifteen minutes had been added. Alas, his ignorance of the regulations cost him a full point. After this dramatic episode, the paths of the two players diverged. Topalov was inspired by his good fortune and started winning one game after another. Carlsen was clearly upset and his disastrous final result was probably the worst of his chess career.

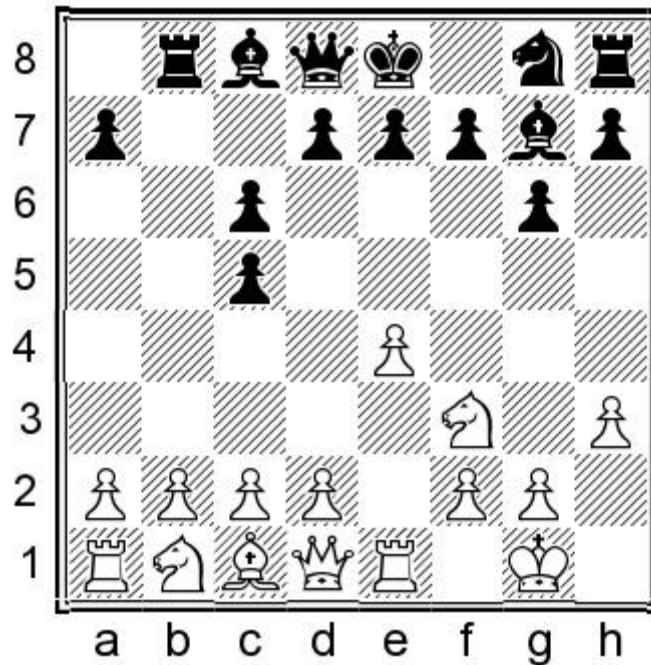
Starting rank played an important role in Anish's successful start, but it was not sheer luck that awarded him the no. 1 starting number. Starting positions were determined by a blitz tournament that was held in the Hidle Island famous for its Flor og Fjaere, or Garden of Eden. Just twenty minutes by boat from Stavanger, it was a veritable tropical paradise. Created by human genius in northern latitudes, it was a riot of colours and hues. A year before, Anish had had a catastrophic finish in the same tournament and dropped to the bottom of the standings. This time, such an extraordinary setting proved more fortunate for him. He earned the no. 1 starting number in the classic and the right to play his first two games with White.

1.♘f3 c5 2.e4

The logic behind these first moves is similar to that of the Karjakin-Giri game above.

2...♗c6 3.♙b5 g6 4.♙xc6 bxc6 5.0-0 ♕g7 6.♖e1 ♜b8 7.h3!

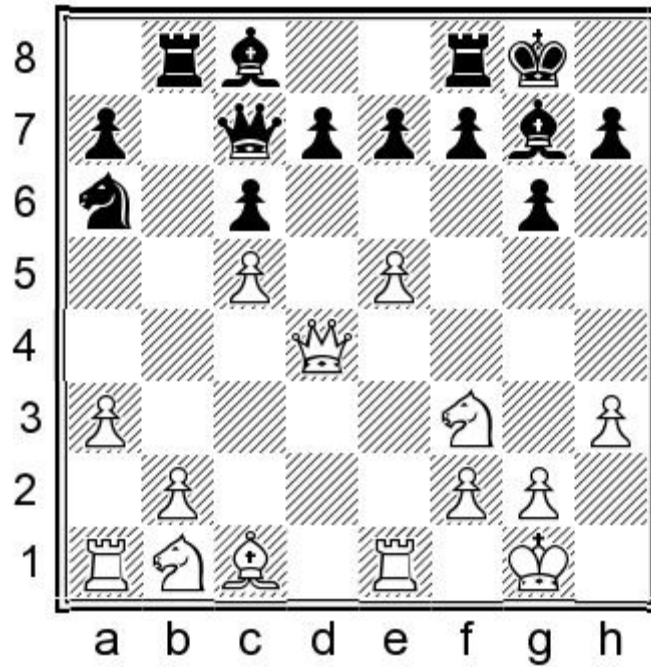
This is a new move! White takes preventive action on the kingside while ignoring his opponent's obvious threat on the queenside.



7...♞c7

Black thought for a long time before making this move, but it turns out that taking on b2 is not too dangerous. After 7...♙xb2 8.♙xb2 ♜xb2 9.♗c3, White is seriously ahead in development and has excellent compensation for the pawn, especially in view of the weakening ...g7–g6. After 7...♜xb2 8.♙xb2 ♙xb2 9.♗c3 ♙xa1 10.♞xa1 ♗f6 11.e5 ♗d5 12.♗e4 White wins back the pawn and keeps the initiative.

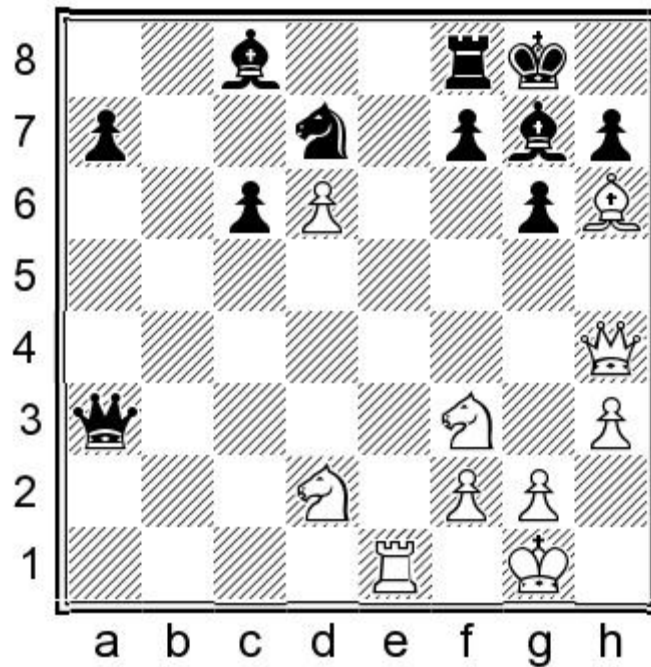
8.c3 ♗f6 9.e5 ♗d5 10.c4! ♗b4 11.d4 cxd4 12.a3 ♗a6 13.♞xd4 0-0 14.c5



14...d6?

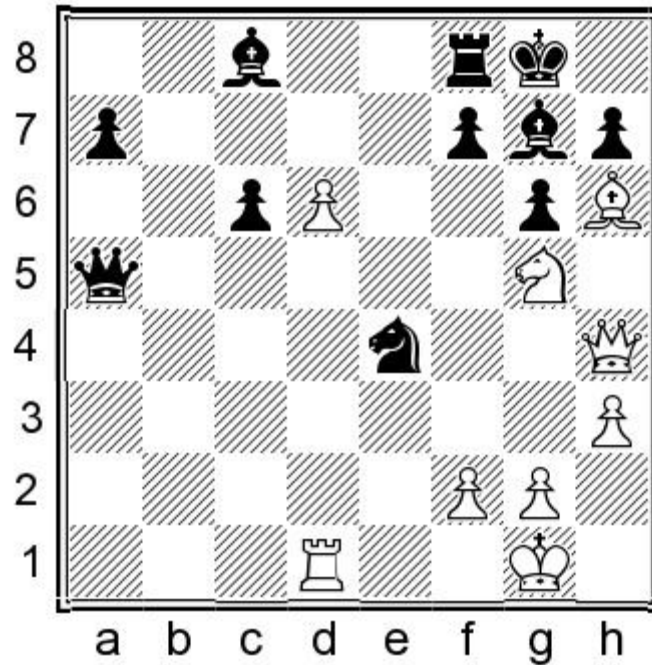
This attempt to solve the problems with tactics leads to additional difficulties. It would have been preferable to play 14...♔d8 15.♘c3 ♘c7.

15.cxd6 exd6 16.exd6 ♖b6 17.♔h4 ♘c5 18.♙e3! ♔xb2 19.♘bd2 ♘d7 20.♙ab1 ♔xa3 21.♙xb8 ♘xb8 22.♙h6 ♘d7



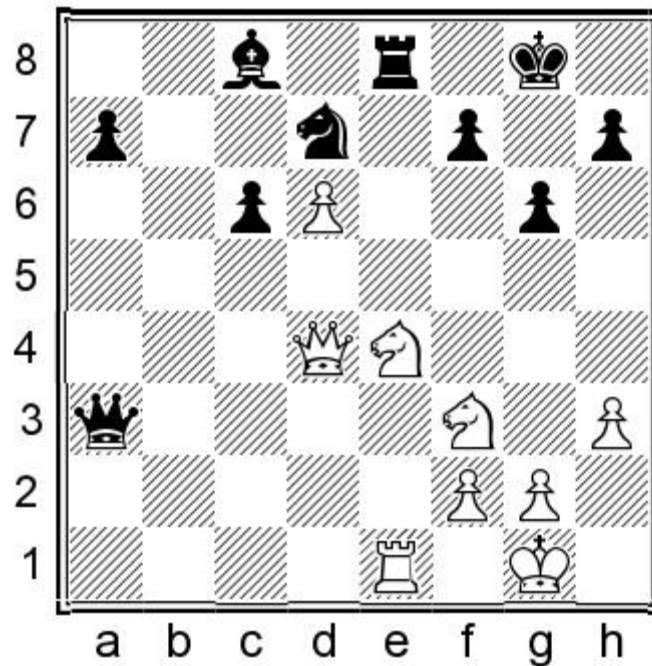
23.♙xg7?!

Giri refused to play 23. ♖g5! ♜f6 24. ♜de4 because of 24... ♚a5, but upon closer inspection it turns out that this defence is insufficient. 25. ♜d1! ♜xe4



26. ♜xe4! (More convincing than 26. ♜xg7 ♜xg5 27. ♜xf8 ♜xf8 28. d7 ♜xd7 29. ♜xd7 ♚a1+ 30. ♜h2 ♚f6.) 26... ♚f5 27. d7! ♜xd7 28. ♜g3 ♚e6 29. ♜xg7 ♜xg7 30. ♚d4+ and White wins.

23... ♜xg7 24. ♚d4+ ♜g8 25. ♜e4 ♜e8



26. ♜h2!

Such quiet moves are especially unpleasant in time trouble. At this moment, Grischuk had only a few

seconds left on his clock. By contrast, the objectively stronger 26.♘fg5 ♚a5 27.♞e3 ♚d5 28.♚xa7 would have been less effective in practice.

26...a5?

The only defence was 26...♚a5! 27.♞e3 h6!, but it is extremely difficult to spot this line even when one has plenty of time. The immediate 26...h6 is much weaker due to 27.♚d2! ♔g7 28.♞e3 ♚a1 29.♘d4 and White wins.

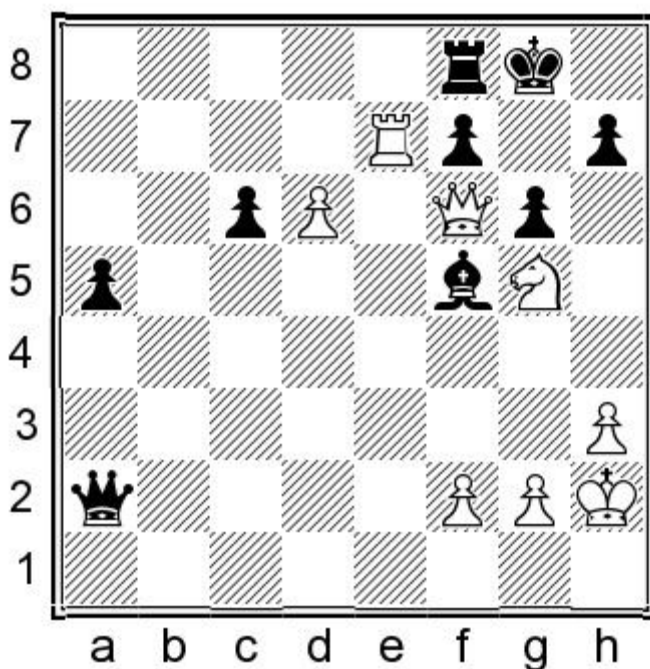
27.♘fg5!

Now Black is absolutely helpless.

27...♞f8

27...h6 28.♘f6+ ♘xf6 29.♚xf6 Now the logic behind White's twenty-sixth move becomes clear. The rook on e1 is untouchable.

28.♘f6+ ♘xf6 29.♚xf6 ♚a2 30.♞e7 ♔f5



31.♘xf7

The rest is simple.

31...♚xf7 32.♞xf7 ♞xf7 33.♚d8+ ♔g7 34.♚xa5 ♔d7 35.♚c5 ♞f5 36.♚a7 ♞f7 37.g4 ♔f6 38.f4 ♔g7 39.♔g3 ♔g8 40.♚e3 ♔g7 41.h4 ♔g8 42.♚e5

1-0

My student faced his most difficult test in round three. The World Champion had lost his first two games and was eager for revenge. Only one move separated him from victory in this game.

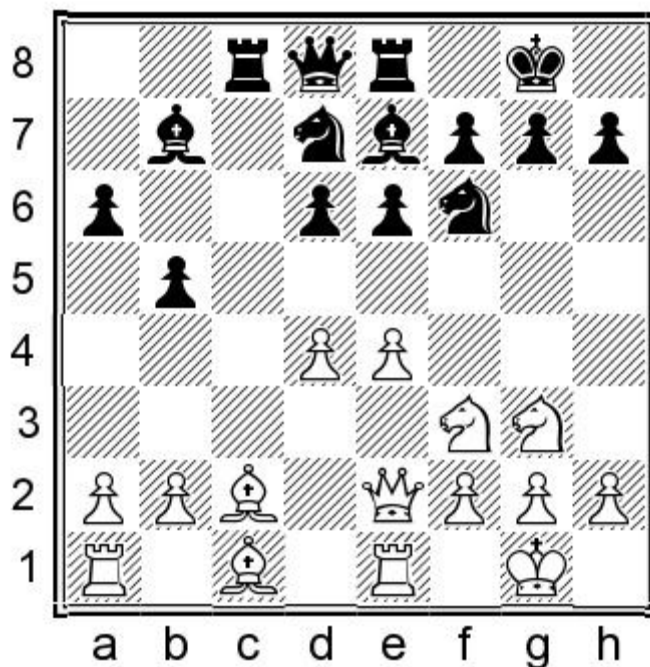
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Magnus Carlsen (2876)

Anish Giri (2773)

Stavanger 2015

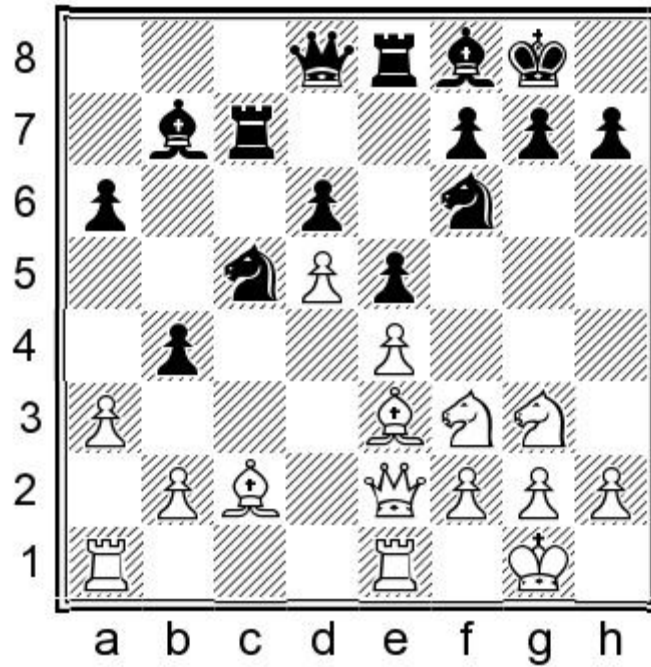
1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♙b5+ ♘d7 4.c3 ♘gf6 5.♚e2 a6 6.♙a4 b5 7.♙c2 e6 8.d4 ♙b7 9.0-0 ♙e7 10.♞e1 0-0 11.♘bd2 cxd4 12.cxd4 ♞c8 13.♘f1 ♞e8 14.♘g3



14...♙f8

The position that has arisen is reminiscent of the Ruy Lopez and would be completely identical after 14...♞c7 15.♙d3 e5, when Black has nothing to complain about.

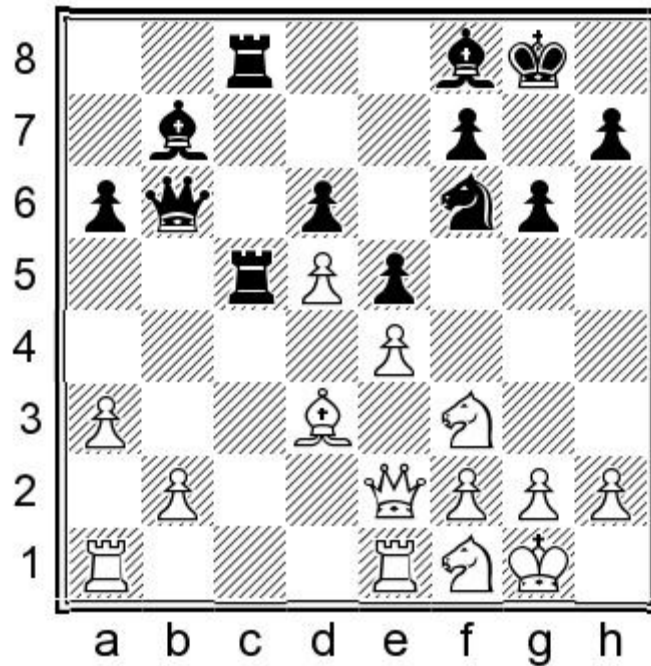
15.♙e3 ♞c7 16.♙d3 e5 17.d5 ♘c5 18.♙c2 b4 19.a3



19...b3!

Unexpectedly it turns out that Black is facing some problems. This pawn sacrifice is the best way out. After 19...a5 20.axb4 axb4 21.♙a4! ♘fd7 (21...♘xa4 22.♞xa4) 22.♙b5 White has a serious advantage.

20.♙xc5 ♞xc5 21.♙xb3 ♚b6 22.♙c4 ♞ec8 23.♙d3 g6 24.♘f1



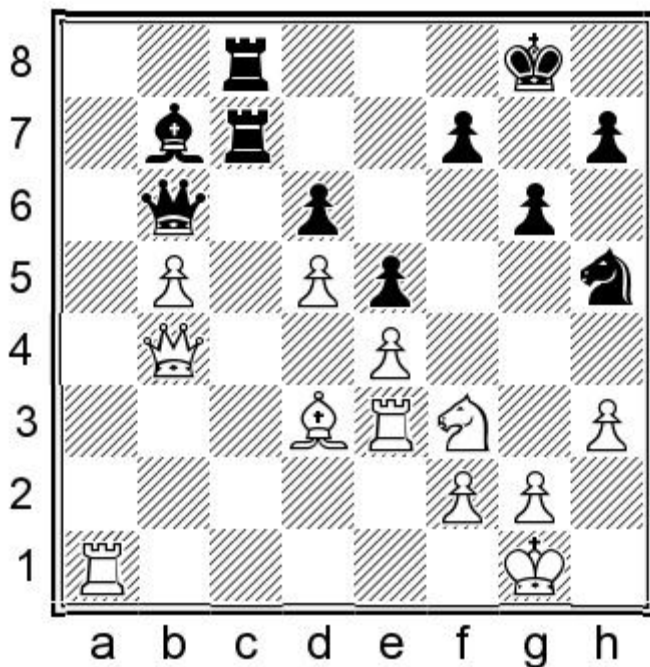
24...♙h6

24...a5 25.b4 would lead to roughly the same position as in the game.

25.♘e3 a5 26.b4 axb4 27.axb4 ♖5c7

It was worth considering 27...♖c3. After 28.♘c4 ♗xb4 29.♖ab1 ♖8xc4 30.♙xc4! (30.♖xb4 ♖xb4 is weaker, as the activity of the black pieces ensures sufficient counterplay) 30...♗xc4 31.♖xb7 ♖c2 32.♗xc4 ♖xc4 the e4-pawn cannot be held and Black has chances to defend successfully.

28.b5 ♗c5 29.h3 ♘h5 30.♗b2 ♗b6 31.♗b4 ♙xe3 32.♖xe3



The 'illogical' 32.fxe3! would be stronger since it wouldn't allow the black knight to come to f4.

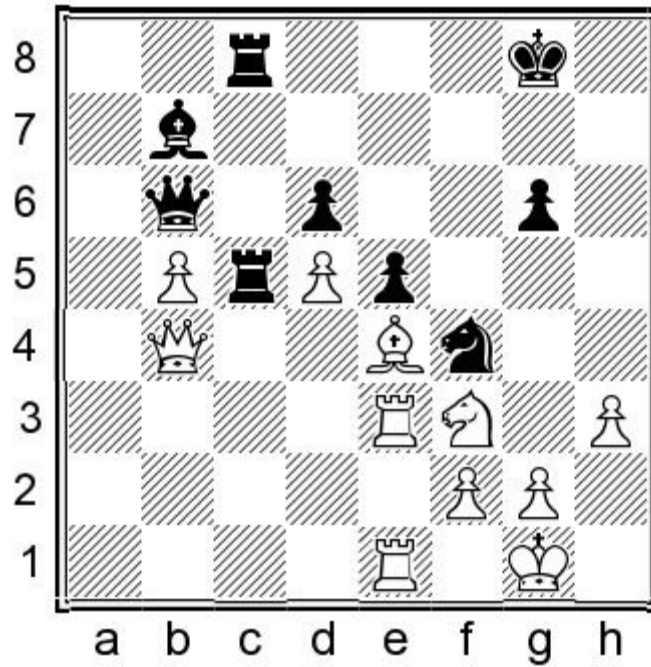
32...♖c3

Black should have seized his chance to get the knight into play: 32...♘f4! 33.♙f1 f5.

33.♖ae1 f5?!

This is consistent, but the black king's position becomes dangerously open. 33...♘f6 would be better.

34.exf5 ♘f4 35.♙e4 ♖3c5 36.fxg6 hxg6



37. ♔xg6!

An unexpected and beautiful move!

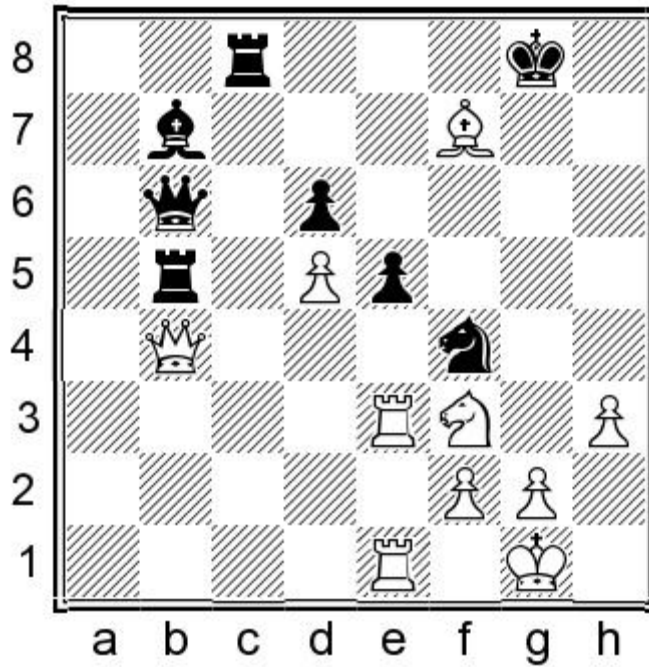
However Carlsen had a quieter way to an advantage: 37. ♘h4!? ♙xb5 38. ♚xb5 ♜xb5 39. ♘xg6 ♘xg6 40. ♜g3.

37... ♜xb5

There was no satisfactory defence. 37... ♘xg6 38. ♚g4 is just bad. 37... ♜xd5 is a bit better, but even here Black loses after 38. ♚b1!.

38. ♚e4?

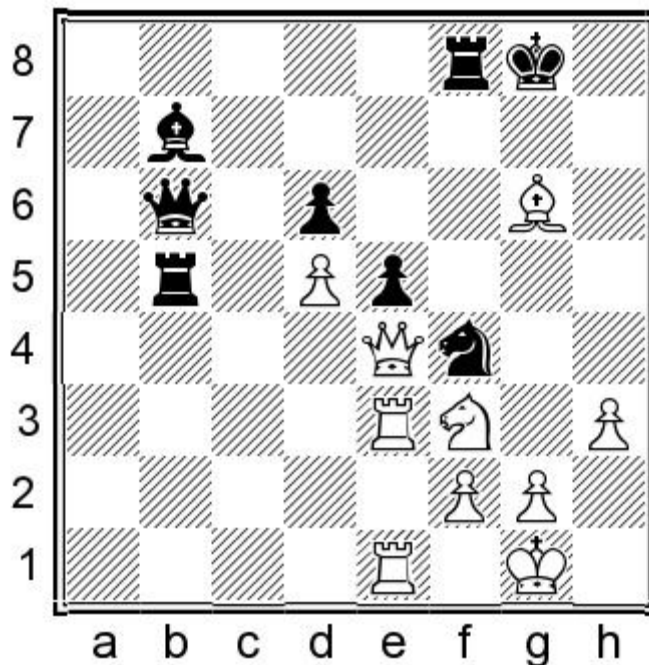
a) It is difficult for a human to find the beautiful blow 38. ♔f7+!!, when Black's position collapses in a few moves:



38...♔xf7 39.♚e4 ♔g7 40.♛f5 ♜f8 41.♛g5+ ♖g6 (41...♔f7 42.♞xe5) 42.♘h4 ♜f6 43.♞f3.

b) There was, however, a human move: 38.♛a4!? ♜b4 39.♛d7 ♛c7 40.♛f5, keeping a big advantage.

38...♞f8!



After this cold-blooded move, Black is over the worst.

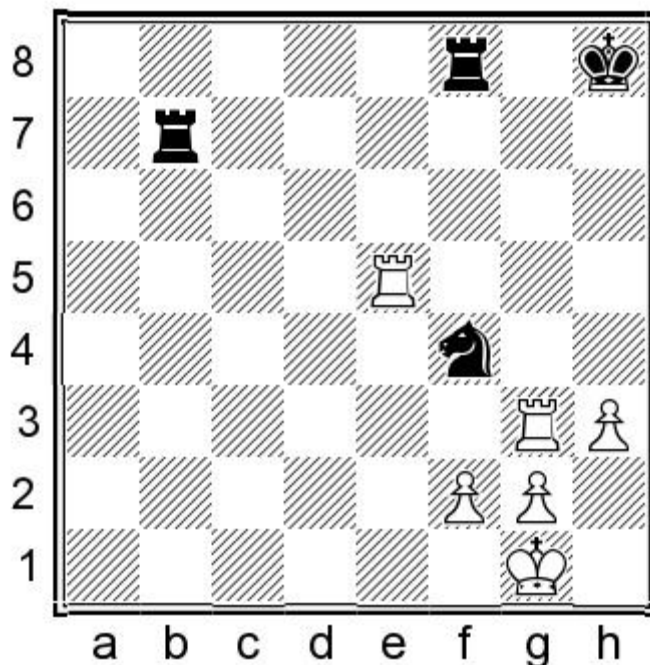
39.♘xe5!?

If 39.♞b1 ♜xb1+ 40.♛xb1 ♛xb1+ 41.♙xb1 ♙xd5 the activity of the black pieces is enough compensation for the minimum material deficit.

39...dxe5 40.♖g3 ♜xd5! 41.♞b1

41.♞b1 ♜d1+ 42.♔h2 ♜xb1.

41...♞xb1 42.♙xb1+ ♔h8 43.♙e4 ♜d7 44.♙xb7 ♜xb7 45.♞xe5



The ending which has arisen is non-standard and leads to a draw. The next thirty moves do nothing to change this assessment.

45...♞h7 46.♞e4 ♜hf7 47.♔h2 ♔h7 48.♞f3 ♔g6 49.h4 ♖h5 50.♞xf7 ♜xf7 51.♞e2 ♖f4 52.♞d2 ♖h5 53.g3 ♖f6 54.♔g2 ♜d7 55.♞a2 ♜d5 56.♞a4 ♞e5 57.g4 ♞e4 58.♞xe4 ♖xe4 59.♔f3 ♖d6 60.♔f4 ♖f7 61.♔e4 ♔f6 62.f4 ♖d6+ 63.♔d5 ♖b5 64.h5 ♖c3+ 65.♔d4 ♖b5+ 66.♔c4 ♖d6+ 67.♔c5 ♔e6 68.♔c6 ♖f7 69.♔c7 ♖h6 70.g5 ♖f7 71.g6 ♖h6 72.♔d8 ♔f5 73.♔e7 ♔xf4 74.♔f8 ♔g5 75.g7 ♔xh5 76.g8=♞ ♖xg8 ½-½

Lucky to resist the onslaught of the strongest player in the world, Anish remained in the top half of the standings, albeit far behind Topalov. It was against the tournament leader that Giri played his best game.

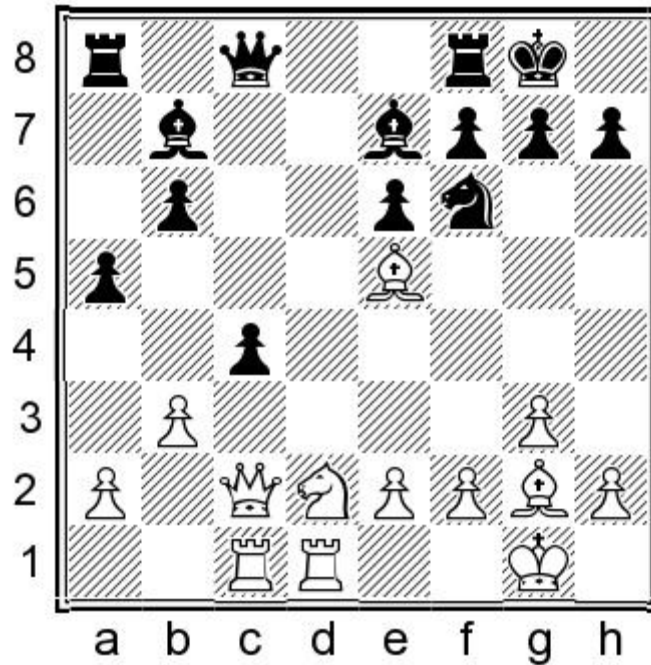
60

Anish Giri (2773)

Veselin Topalov (2798)

Stavanger 2015

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 e6 3.♖f3 d5 4.g3 ♙b4+ 5.♙d2 ♙e7 6.♙g2 0-0 7.0-0 c6 8.♞c2 ♖bd7 9.♞d1 b6 10.b3 a5 11.♙c3 ♙b7 12.♖bd2 c5 13.♖e5 cxd4 14.♙xd4 ♖xe5 15.♙xe5 ♞c8 16.♞ac1 dxc4

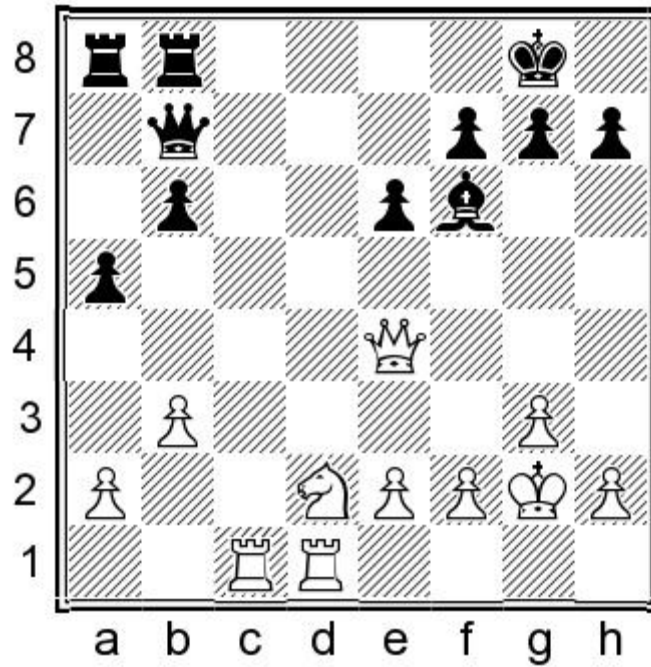


17. ♖xf6!?

In this line of the Catalan, as in most of the others, White can, at the most, count on a minimal advantage. Implementing it is problematical and depends on numerous nuances. The unobvious exchange of his beautiful black-squared bishop for a seemingly nondescript knight is one such.

Alternatives such as 17. ♘xc4 ♕xg2 18. ♖xg2 ♖c6+ 19. f3 ♘d5 (19...b5 20. ♘d6 ♖xc2 21. ♖xc2 ♘d5) 20. ♖d2 ♕b4 21. ♖d3 ♖ad8 or 17. ♖xc4 ♕xg2 18. ♖xc8 ♖fxc8 19. ♖xg2 ♘d5 would give Black additional ways to defend due to that very knight's activity.

17... ♕xf6 18. ♖xc4 ♕xg2 19. ♖xg2 ♖b7+ 20. ♖e4! ♖fb8



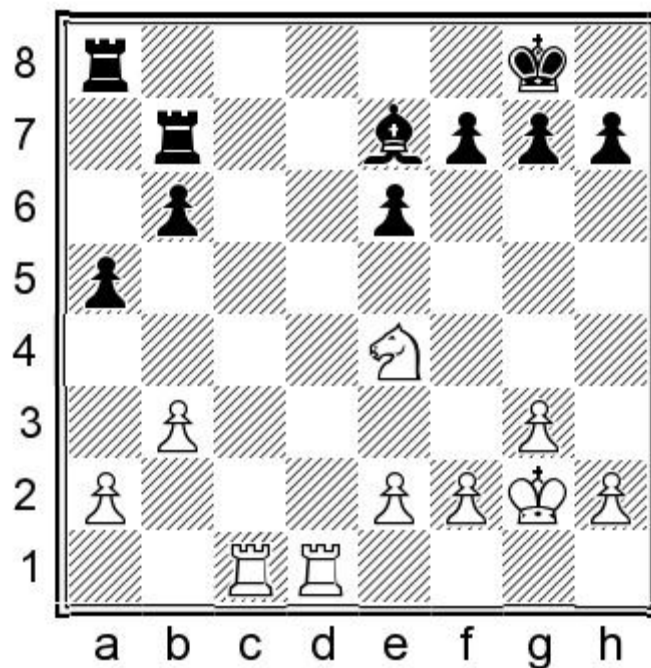
21.♖c6

The immediate 21.♕xb7 ♜xb7 22.♘e4 ♙e7 23.♘d6 would be somewhat more precise.

21...♔d7

It was possible to exploit White's small inaccuracy with 21...♜d8! 22.♜d6 ♕xe4+ 23.♘xe4 ♙e7.

22.♜cc1! ♕b7 23.♕xb7! ♜xb7 24.♘e4 ♙e7



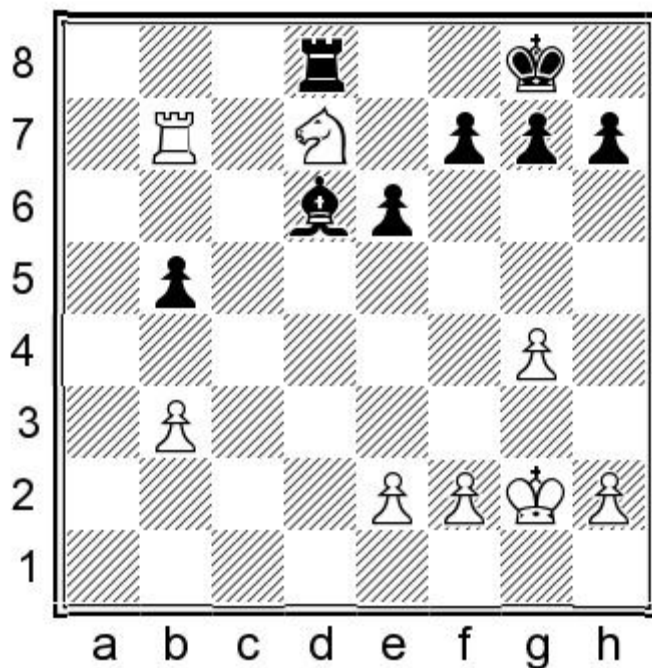
25.♖d6

Another way to play for a win was with 25.♖c6.

25...♗d7

Such positions seem worse but appear quite defensible. The problem is that up to a certain moment there appear to be no real threats, so the weaker side doesn't need to look for only moves, but then, when they suddenly find themselves in such a situation, the necessary concentration has already been lost. Black also has reasonable chances of a draw in the rook ending arising after 25...♔xd6 26.♖xd6 ♕f8.

26.♗c4 ♖xd1 27.♖xd1 b5 28.♗e5 ♕f6 29.♗d7 a4 30.♖c1! axb3 31.axb3 ♔e7 32.♖c7 ♖d8 33.♖b7 ♔d6 34.g4!



34...h5?!

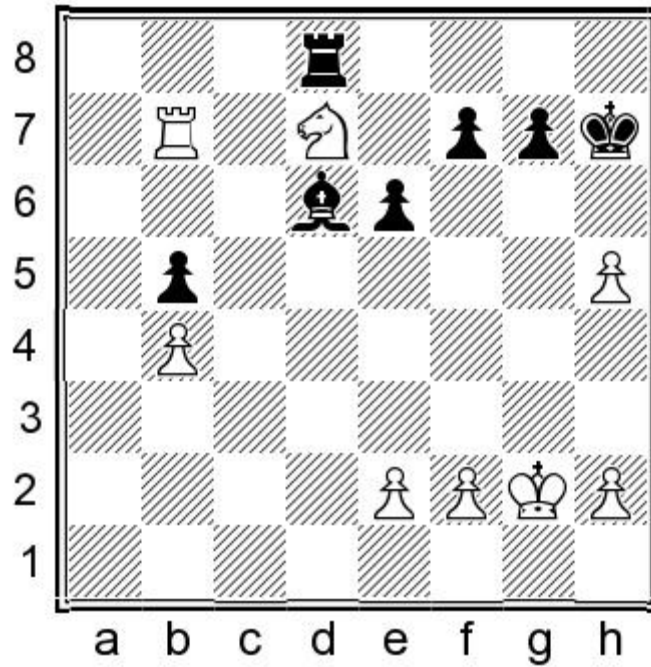
True to his style Topalov seeks active counterplay.

After the more cautious 34...b4 White would increase the pressure with 35.h4.

35.gxh5 ♕h7

This is a natural consequence of the previous move, but 35...f5 was also worth consideration.

36.b4!



A beautiful move that sets Black difficult problems.

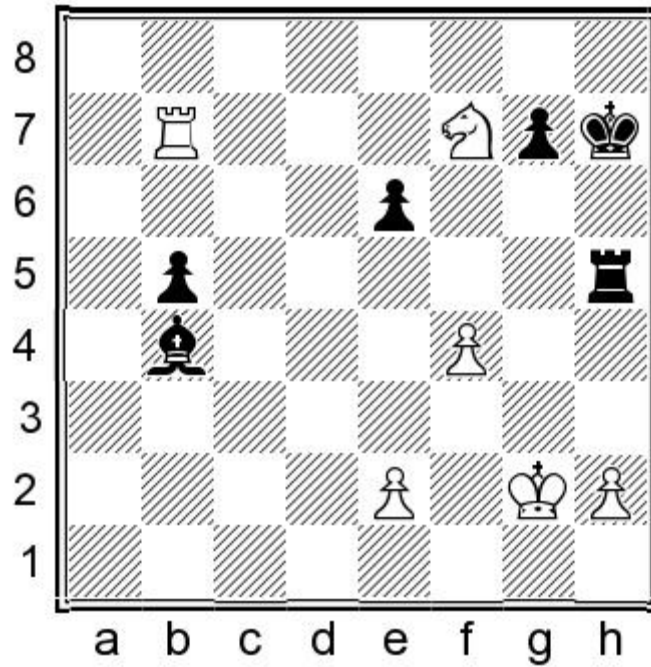
36...♙xb4

It was quite possible to play 36...♙h6 37.♘c5 ♜b8 38.♞xf7 ♙xc5 39.bxc5 ♞c8 (or 39...b4 40.c6 ♞c8 41.♞b7 ♞xc6 42.♞xb4 ♙xh5) 40.♞e7 ♞xc5 41.♞xe6+ ♙xh5 42.♞b6 when Black is balancing between a draw and a defeat.

37.♘e5 ♞d5

The most natural defence. 37...♞d2 38.♘xf7 ♞xe2 39.♙f3 ♞c2 40.♞xb5 ♙e1 would be more active, but even in this case White keeps an advantage after 41.♘g5+ ♙h6 42.♘e4.

38.♘xf7 ♞xh5 39.f4!



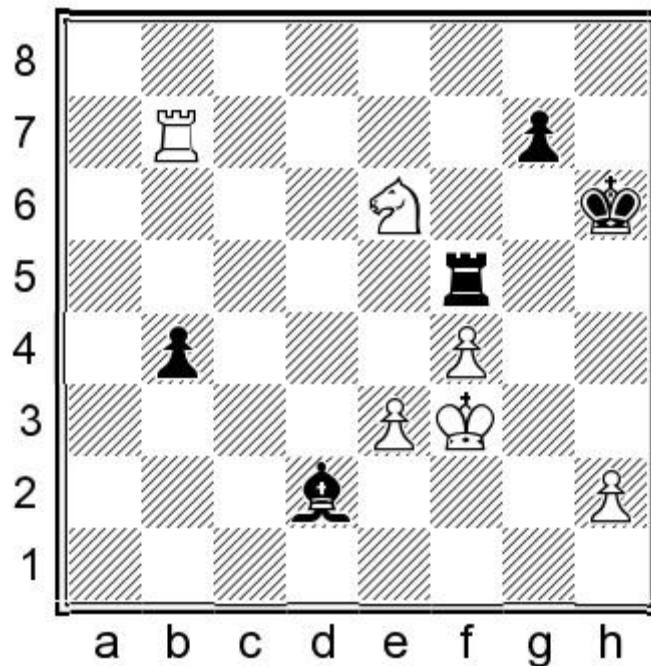
39...♔g6

The computer suggests 39...♙d2 40.♘g5+ ♔g6 41.♘xe6 ♖h4!, which is beyond human capabilities.

40.♘e5+ ♔h7 41.♘f7 ♔g6 42.♘e5+ ♔h7 43.♘f3! ♖f5?

The only real mistake in the game, but even the stronger 43...♔g6 44.e4 ♖c5 45.♔g3 doesn't promise Black an easy life.

44.♘g5+ ♔h6 45.♔f3 ♙d2 46.e3 b4 47.♘xe6



There is no salvation now.

47...♖h5 48.♗xg7! ♖xh2 49.♗f5+ ♕g6 50.♗e7+ ♕f6 51.♗d5+ ♕e6 52.♕e4 ♖h3 53.♖b6+ ♕d7
54.♕d3 ♗c1 55.♖xb4 ♕d6 56.♕d4

1–0

This victory was achieved in Giri's trademark style.

The game wasn't particularly flashy, but his subtle exploitation of his opponent's mistakes and his flawless realisation of the advantage are deeply impressive.

Finishing in fourth place was not a resounding success, but two wins and no losses in such a star-studded tournament were definitely an achievement. The increase in rating also came in handy. Suddenly there was a chance to qualify by rating for the upcoming Candidates Tournament. One place was firmly reserved for Veselin Topalov while the second was contested in a veritable fight, mainly against Alexander Grischuk. Its fate would be determined by the tournaments that were scheduled before the end of the year, first of all, the Sinquefield Cup and the World Cup.

Life continued outside chess. The professional chess player's calendar was so densely packed that it was even difficult to schedule a wedding. Having won the Dutch championship once again, Anish flew to Tbilisi. It was there that a new chess family was born, uniting two GMs, Anish Giri and Sopiko Guramishvili. All the pleasant tasks related to the wedding, the honeymoon and setting up a new home were carried out under the usual time pressure. Not much time remained until St Louis; focused preparation for the tournament remained out of the question, however Anish and Sopiko planned to arrive a few days before the start and we hoped to brush up on the forgotten skills. Alas, this was not to be. Due to an unexpected storm in New York, the newlyweds were stuck in the airport, which made the run-up to the tournament even more chaotic. There was barely enough time to recover after a tiring journey and to become familiar with the new location.

Even ten years ago, St Louis was known only to chess historians, as the venue of the 1886 match between Steinitz and Zukertort. Today, this city, though small by American standards, is recognised as the chess capital of the USA, and faces very little competition from the rest of the world. A single person, Rex Sinquefield, and his love for chess, are responsible for this boom. The chess projects conceived and implemented by the world's top chess patron and his family are too numerous to mention. I was pleasantly surprised and won over by the calm, cosy family atmosphere of the elite tournament. Gradually you get used to the absence of the format of a typical playing hall. There is no stage and no chairs for the audience; spectators who wish to follow the games directly have to stand. Everything is very simple and democratic. The owner of this wonderful chess home, like his spouse, is surprisingly modest, and looks no different from an ordinary chess fan. Everything in St Louis is imbued with love and respect for chess and chess players.

As in Stavanger, Anish received starting number one, and again, as in Norway, his round one game was with White against Alexander Grischuk, his main rival in the race to qualify for the Candidates.

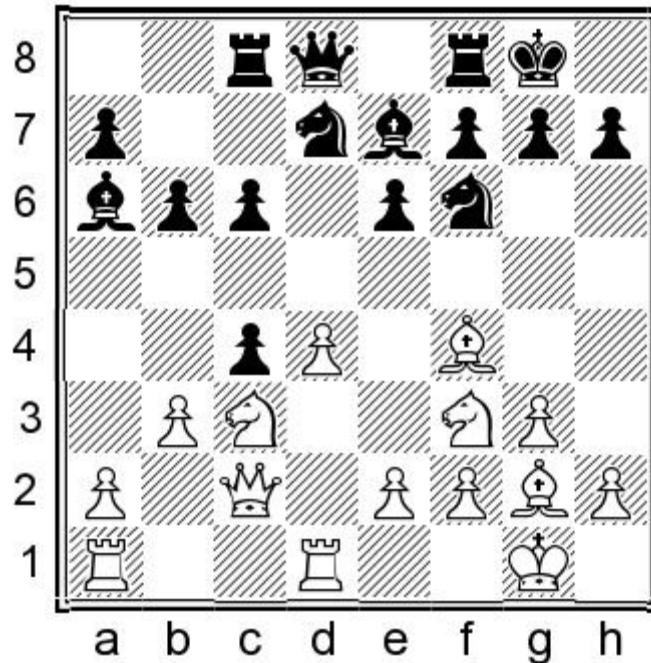
61

Anish Giri (2793)

1.♘f3 d5

No Sicilians this time!

2.d4 ♘f6 3.c4 e6 4.g3 ♙b4+ 5.♙d2 ♙e7 6.♙g2 0-0 7.0-0 ♘bd7 8.♚c2 c6 9.♞d1 b6 10.♙f4 ♙a6 11.b3 ♞c8 12.♘c3 dxc4



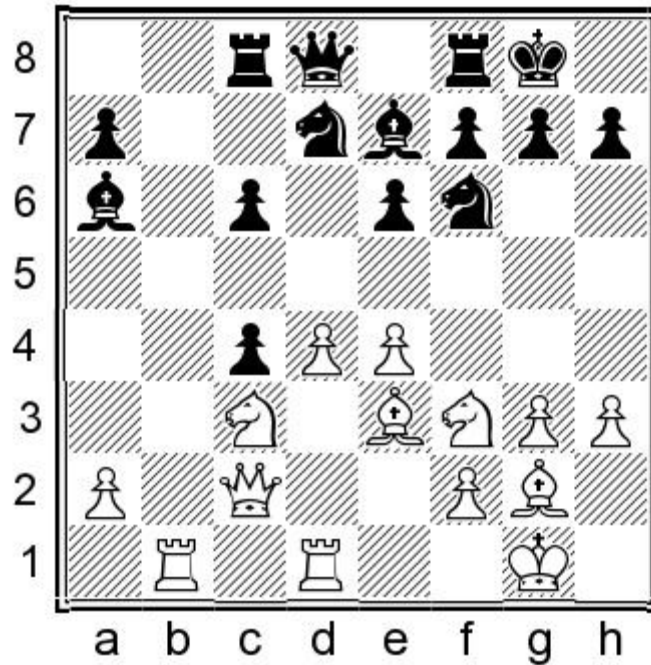
13.e4

A well-known position. In addition to the move in the game, 13.bxc4, 13.♘e5 and 13.♘d2 have also been played.

13...♘h5 14.♙e3 ♘hf6 15.h3 b5

From here the game takes a new direction. Black's last move is by no means bad, but it sharpens the position considerably, so that the price of each move increases.

16.bxc4 bxc4 17.♞ab1



17...♔a5

17...♖b8 is more prudent.

18.♙d2 ♔a3?!

And this is the first step in a dangerous direction.

After 18...♔c7 there is a complicated battle with chances for both sides.

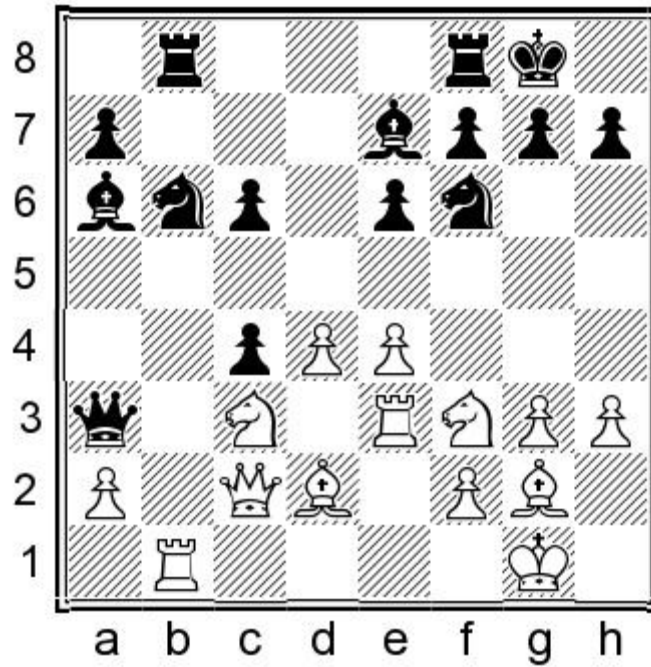
19.♖e1!

It appears that Alexander overlooked or underestimated this move. Suddenly the black queen is in danger.

19...♘b6?!

19...♖b8 was the lesser evil, although after 20.♖e3 ♔a5 21.e5 ♘e8 22.♖xb8 ♘xb8 23.♘e4 White has more than enough compensation for the pawn.

20.♖e3 ♖b8



21. ♖xb6!

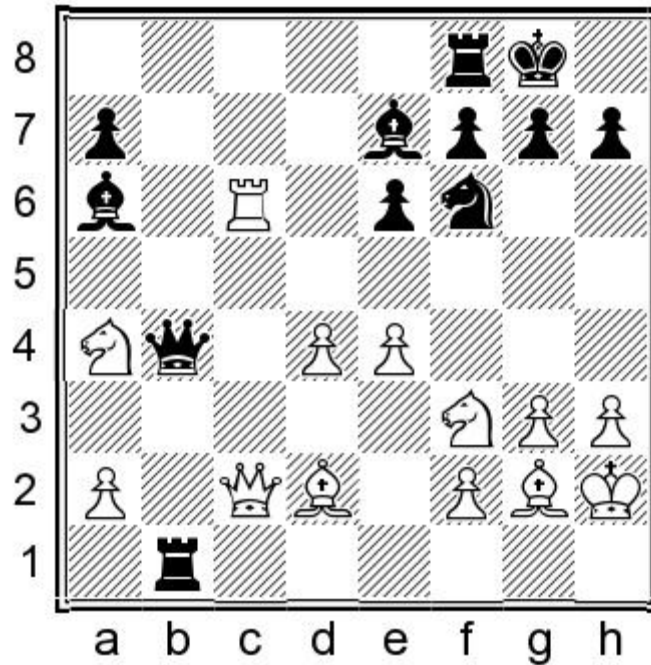
Giri thought for along time and chose the least obvious but most unpleasant move for his opponent.

In lines such as 21.e5!? ♜fd7 22.♘d5 ♜xd5 23.♖xa3 ♖xb1+ 24.♙xb1 ♙xa3 25.♘g5 g6 or 21.♘d5!? cxd5 22.♖xa3 ♙xa3 23.♙f4 ♖b7 White would win the queen, but the black pieces would become active. Instead of winning material, Anish sacrifices the exchange.

21... ♖xb6

21...axb6 22.e5+-

22.♘a4 ♖b1+ 23.♙h2 c3 24.♖xc3 ♙b4 25.♖xc6



25...♔b5

It is very difficult for Black to defend such a position, in fact almost impossible in the severe time trouble in which Grischuk found himself.

The lines 25...♕d3 26.♖xd3 ♖xa4 27.♞c7 ♕d8 28.♞xf7 ♞xf7 29.♖xb1 or 25...♖b7 26.♞c7 ♖xe4 27.♖xe4 ♗xe4 28.♞xe7 make White's task more complex, but wouldn't solve all of Black's problems.

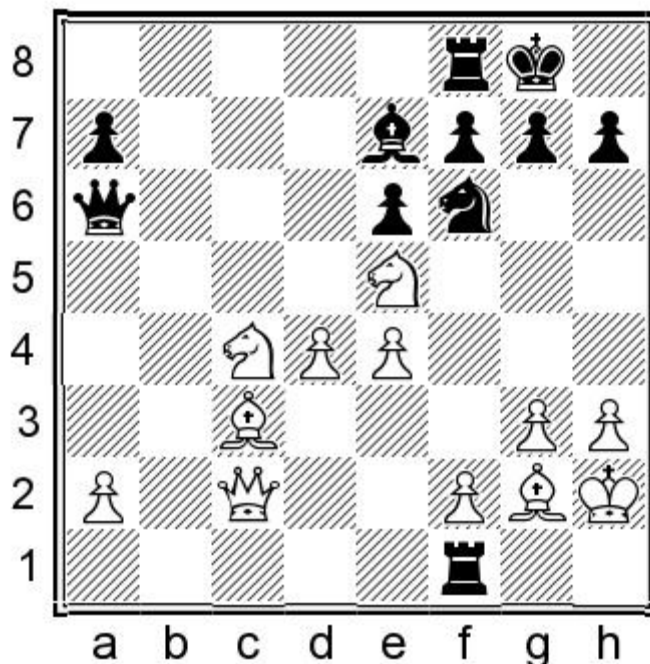
26.♗e5 ♞a1 27.♕c3 ♞f1 28.♗b2!

Suddenly the black rook is trapped.

28...♔b7?

The only way to save the hapless piece was with 28...♖e2 29.♖xe2 ♕xe2 30.♕xf1 ♕xf1, but then 31.f3! ♕b5 32.♞c7 ♕d6. However this was the last real chance to save the game.

29.♞xa6! ♖xa6 30.♗bc4!



30...♖xe4

30...♖xf2 31.♙xf2 ♖c8 32.♙f1 is also hopeless.

31.♙xe4 ♖b8 32.♙xh7+ ♔f8 33.♙e2 ♖c1 34.♙h5

1-0

A decisive victory and yet another important step on the way to the Candidates Tournament.

Curiously enough, a bizarre twist of fate brought Carlsen and Topalov together in round one, also as in Norway. The World Champion had White and lost again after being completely outplayed.

The first round win was the only one achieved by Giri in the tournament. Still, he managed to repeat his Stavanger feat, finishing with no losses, so the tournament as a whole could be considered a success, despite all expectations. Giri's strategy of playing a solid, cautious game proved right given the circumstances. He gained some rating points and his odds in the race against Grischuk became even better.

The World Cup competition opened just a few days after St Louis. This was a tournament that offered Anish (as well as the other 127 participants) an additional chance to get into the Candidates Tournament. It was this opportunity, rather than the Cup itself, that brought most favourites to Baku, even though the competition format made both possible targets difficult to reach.

For me, it proved difficult from the outset to reach the Azerbaijani capital. My journey began with a rather routine mishap: the flight from Odessa to Istanbul departed an hour late. That was enough for me to miss my connecting flight from Istanbul to Baku. This has happened to almost everyone who has ever travelled by air. The next flight wasn't until early the following morning. At first, luck seemed to be on my side since I even managed to get a hotel room. To extend my night's sleep, I didn't use the

hotel shuttle, but called a taxi that quickly brought me to the airport. It was only when I was passing through a metal detector that I felt my bag was suspiciously light. My worst fears were immediately confirmed: in my haste I had left my precious laptop at the hotel. There was still a chance that both the computer and I would make it to Baku, but quick and decisive action was needed. Fortunately, I hailed a taxi whose driver understood some English and knew the location of the official airline hotel, the name of which I couldn't remember. Unfortunately, the driver failed in his quest to locate the hotel; time passed and I missed the morning flight.

More troubles followed. When I tried to pay the fee for yet another change of flight, I discovered that I didn't have my wallet. I gathered all my willpower and tried to concentrate. Somehow, I managed to do so. Fortunately, not all my cash and credit cards were in the missing wallet. I went back to the ticket counter and handed over the money...

It was at this moment that something clicked and the pendulum of fate swung in the opposite direction. To start with, the gate attendant offered me the same ticket, but for free! Feeling that my bad luck was coming to an end, I quickly began to spin the wheel of fortune. A dispatcher gave me the name of the hotel; when I got there, my laptop was waiting patiently for me. Then I was happily reunited with my wallet which had been left at the security check. Not only that, I was given the same hotel room and spent a few hours until the next flight ensconced there with my cyberassistant.

The rest of my journey was easy. When I finally arrived at the Fairmont Hotel in Baku, the first person whom I met in the lobby was Anish — he had just drawn a marathon game against Arthur Ssegwanyi (2357) from Uganda.

This story might seem to have no direct relation to chess, but to me it illustrates how unpredictable the path to achieving your goal can be. It also shows that not everything in this life depends on intellect, skill and talent. In addition to all these very valuable qualities, there is another important component. Some call it patronage of the higher powers, some a favourable alignment of the celestial bodies, while others call it plain luck.

The next game against the same opponent was not among Anish's accomplishments, nor were the following two games with Alexander Motylev. Anish played as if under a heavy strain. Contrary to his custom, the openings did not turn out well; it was against his nature to take risks and force the position in the middlegame. Something clicked for him only in the ensuing tiebreak. A convincing victory lifted his mood and renewed his hopes of a good performance.

One can continue researching the role of good luck in chess by examining the factor of geography. From a scientific point of view, it is impossible to explain why the location of a tournament should affect the outcome, but there is no doubt that it does. It doesn't matter whether a host city is large or well-known. Kasparov triumphed many times in Linares while Dortmund is the happiest place for Kramnik. Other players, not being world champions, showed the same pattern.

For me, the luckiest city was Baku. It was there, in faraway 1972, that I finished second in the USSR Championship and qualified for the Interzonal tournament for the first time. Five years later, I also finished second in the Premier League which featured many very strong players. Later on, I came to Baku many times as a captain and coach. Baku is somewhat similar to Odessa, my hometown; both of them have sun, sea and wind. The residents are equally friendly and cheerful. I took many long walks

on the famous Baku Boulevard, which runs along the sea shore. During the World Cup, it became the place for my daily walks with Anish; it was in the tea houses on the Boulevard that we made many important and crucial decisions. I would say a turn of fate was quite natural.

Giri's next mini-match against Peter Leko played out to a completely different scenario. Anish played the sharp Najdorf Variation with Black and his pregame preparation was clearly better than his opponent's; it took a minimum of work at the board to achieve the desired draw. With White, Giri masterfully exploited minor inaccuracies by Peter.

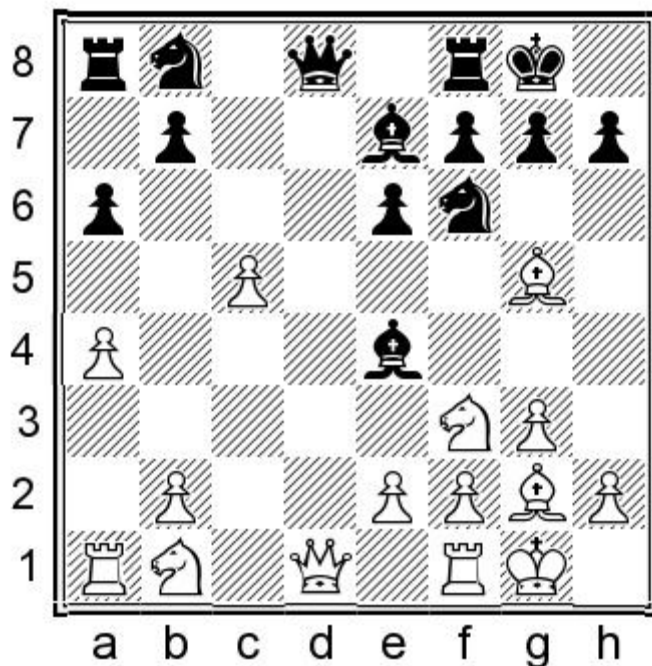
62

Anish Giri (2793)

Peter Leko (2707)

Baku 2015

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 d5 4.♙g2 ♙e7 5.♘f3 0-0 6.0-0 dxc4 7.♚xc2 a6 8.a4 ♙d7 9.♚xc4 ♙c6 10.♙g5 ♙d5 11.♚xc2 ♙e4 12.♚d1 c5 13.dxc5



13...♙xc5

13...♘bd7 was worth consideration.

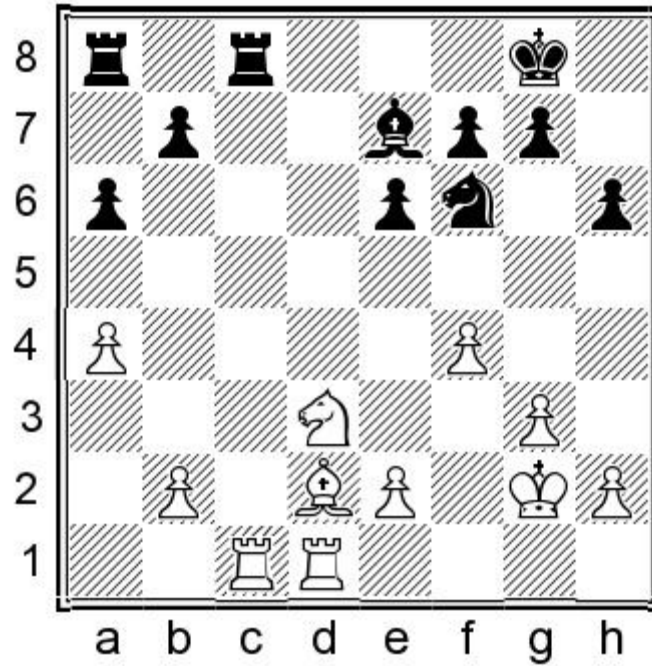
14.♘bd2 ♙c6 15.♘e5 ♙xg2 16.♙xg2 ♙e7 17.♙c1 ♘bd7 18.♘xd7 ♚xd7 19.♘f3 ♚xd1

19...♙fd8 is more precise.

20.♙fxd1 ♙fc8 21.♘e5 h6 22.♙d2 ♙d8 23.♘d3 ♙dc8

23...♘d5!?

24.f4

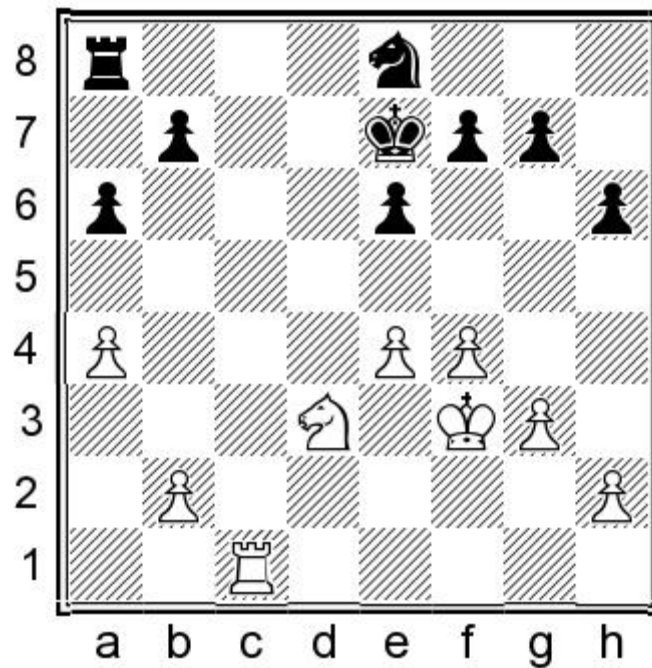


24...♔f8

Too routine.

After the more principled 24...♖e4 25.♗e3 f5 Black has no problems.

25.♔f3 ♖d7 26.♗e3 ♔e8 27.♗d4 ♗f6 28.♗xf6 ♖xf6 29.♖e5 ♔e7 30.e4 ♗xc1 31.♗xc1 ♖e8 32.♖d3



32...a5

It would be more accurate to play 32...♖d8 33.♔e3 ♖d7.

33.♖c5! ♔d6?!

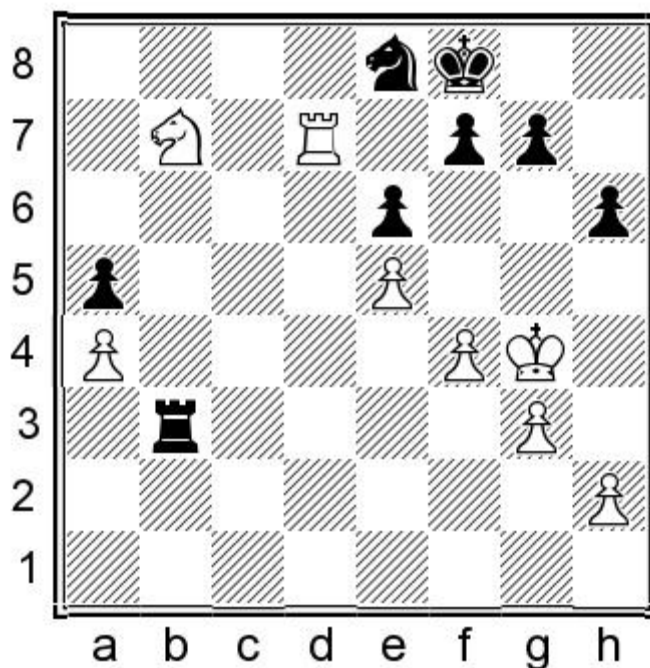
It is only after this pseudo-active move that Black gets into real trouble.

He should have chosen 33...♖d8 34.♔e3 b6 35.♖c6 ♖d6 with chances of a successful defence.

34.♖c3! ♖a6 35.e5+ ♔e7 36.♗c5 ♖b6 37.♖d3!

The only way! The cautious 37.b3 would let all his advantage slip after 37...♗c7.

37...♖xb2 38.♖d7+ ♔f8 39.♗xb7 ♖b3+ 40.♔g4



40...♖b4

White's task is simplified after this move.

40...f5+ 41.♔h5 was equally bad. The most stubborn move is 40...g6, but even here Black's defensive resources are insufficient: 41.♗xa5! (stronger than 41.♗d8 f5+ 42.♔h4 ♗g7 43.♗f7 g5+ 44.fxg5 ♖b4+ 45.♔h3 hxg5 46.♗xg5 ♖xa4) 41...♖b4 42.♗c6 ♖xa4 43.♗d8 f5+ 44.♔h3 ♖a6 45.♖b7! ♗g7 46.♗f7 and the position is won for White.

41.♗d8! ♔g8 42.♖e7 f5+ 43.♔h5 ♔h7 44.♖xe8 ♖b2 45.h3 ♖h2 46.♔h4

1-0

As he successfully progressed through more and more rounds, Giri's calm and self-confidence grew. He was unable to get any advantage against Radosław Wojtaszek with a classical time control but

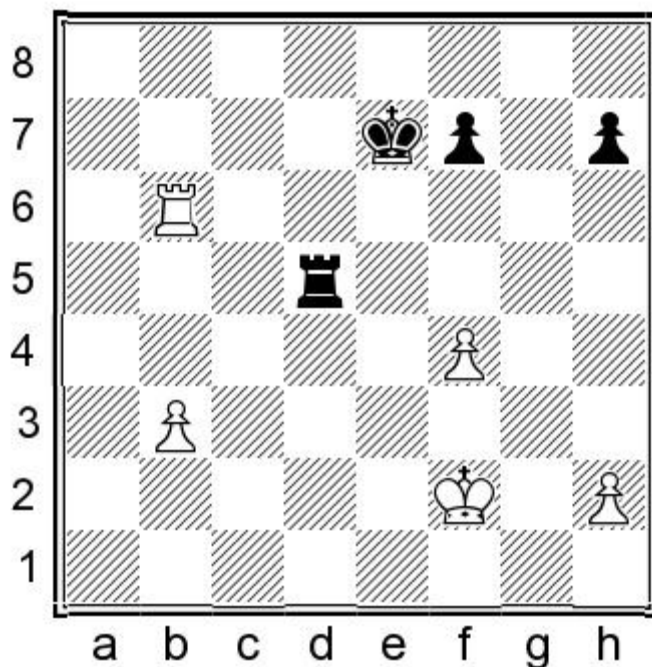
convincingly prevailed in rapid. The match against Maxime Vachier-Lagrave unfolded the same way as the one against Leko: an easy draw with Black and a skilful exploitation of a minimal advantage in the second game.

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Anish Giri (2793)

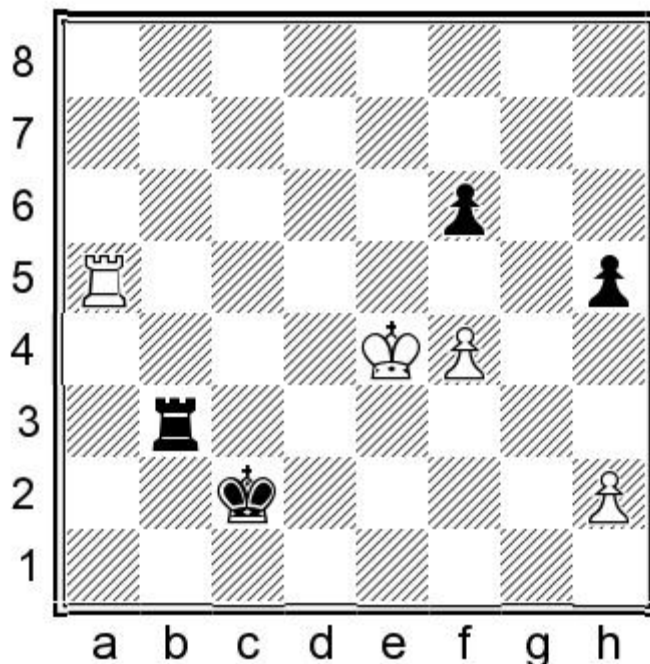
Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (2744)

Baku 2015



Giri had obtained a minimal advantage in the opening and continued to exert pressure on his opponent. White's advantage had changed several times without ever becoming decisive. He has an extra pawn in this rook ending, but the drawing tendencies of such endings are well known.

41.♔g3 h5 42.♔h4 ♖f5 43.♞b4 ♞d5 44.♞c4 ♔f6 45.b4 ♔g6 46.♞c6+ f6 47.♞c2 ♞b5 48.♞b2 ♔f5
49.♔g3 ♔e4 50.♞b1 ♔d3 51.♔f3 ♔c2 52.♞a1 ♞xb4 53.♞a5 ♞b3+ 54.♔e4



54...h4

As usual, Maxime chooses the most active plan and wins back the pawn, and with very little material left on the board, salvation seems to be at hand.

However the bad position of the black king spoils everything as it cannot get back to participate in the defence.

Other moves wouldn't save Black either, e.g.

a) 54...♖b4+ 55.♔f5 ♕d3 56.♞a3+ ♔e2 57.♞h3 ♞c4 58.♞xh5 ♔f3 59.♔g6+–;

b) or 54...♞h3 55.♞a2+ ♔d1 56.♔f5 ♞h4 57.♞a4! ♔e2 58.♔xf6 ♔f3 59.♔f5!+–.

55.♔f5 ♕d3

a) After 55...♞b6 the winning line is 56.♔g6 ♕d3 57.♞a4;

b) and after 55...♞f3 the following is enough to win: 56.♔g4 ♞f1 57.♞f5 ♕d3 58.♞xf6 ♔e4 59.♞e6+.

56.♔xf6 ♔e4 57.f5 h3 58.♞a4+ ♔f3 59.♔g5 ♞b5 60.♞a2 ♞b4 61.f6 ♞g4+ 62.♔f5 ♞f4+ 63.♔e6 ♞e4+ 64.♔d6 ♞d4+ 65.♔e7 ♞e4+ 66.♔f8 ♞b4 67.f7 ♞f4 68.♞b2 ♞a4 69.♞b6

1–0

Only one step remained to get into the coveted final, which would earn Anish a trip to the Candidates Tournament. He faced a very serious opponent — Peter Svidler. Having defeated Vachier-Lagrave quickly, Giri suddenly had two free days, so there was more than enough time for preparation. Looking ahead, we can say that it was the disruption to the normal rhythm of preparation, plus a certain euphoria felt by my student, that had an important effect on the final result. Giri failed in his game with White

completely. The opening was quite predictable since Svidler had used this variation not long before the tournament. White's position looked more promising, but it turned out that Peter had a deeper understanding of this type of position. It was still not too late to change the goal and play for a draw, but White overestimated his chances of an attack. After that loss, the only thing left for us was to rely on luck, but Svidler never gave us any chances.

The fate of a ticket to the Candidates was essentially decided in the first game. In this regard, it is appropriate to discuss the role of the opening in games between top-level players. When powerful computers made comprehensive game databases and ever-improving chess engines available, it revolutionised opening preparation, which remains the most important aspect of chess. Players were no longer categorised into so-called 'theoreticians', who bet on the opening, and 'practical players', who put emphasis on the middlegame. On the one hand, it became much easier to practice your openings, since a cyberassistant corrects and guides you along the way. The chess player himself has only to choose an opening and set the direction of research. On the other, perfunctory opening preparation can have much more serious consequences than in the pre-computer era, since the fight might be over before it begins. A player's memory is more important than ever since it is necessary to remember huge amounts of information. It is no coincidence that most of the elite players have a very limited opening repertoire, especially with Black. This makes preparation for a game much easier. The emphasis is on the search for nuances that take time to discover, even for an omnipotent cyberassistant.

The real problems arise when, sooner or later, home preparation reaches its end. Flawless moves verified by a computer are replaced by human moves that inevitably bring inaccuracies and errors. Therefore it is the balance between computer-based preparation and independent play during the game that is very important in modern chess. It is much easier to avoid a sudden deterioration in the quality of play if the opening repertoire suits the player's personality and character. Harmonious play unfolds when fundamental preparation at home allows the player to achieve positions that match his style and temperament in the best way possible. In this case, the integrity of the game is preserved and the inevitable decline in the quality of play does not become a significant factor.

Most of the world's top players adhere to this approach, consciously or intuitively. However there are exceptions. The World Champion and, without a doubt, the strongest modern chess player, Magnus Carlsen, manages to combine a wide opening repertoire with a lack of thorough preparation. His huge natural talent and unique positional sense help him to avoid failures in the openings and to carry the fight to his opponents from the very first moves. Anish Giri is at the opposite end of the spectrum. His stunning general knowledge of openings, combined with an excellent memory and ability to work with a cyberassistant, usually ensure his superiority in the openings. Unfortunately, this upsets the necessary balance, and the inevitable drop in the quality of his later play leads to significant losses. That's what happened in the game against Svidler. I thought that if we managed to fix this problem Anish would achieve even more in chess.

My impressions of Giri's performance in Baku were ambivalent. It is a great success for any chess player to get into the World Cup semifinal. However this didn't qualify him for the Candidates Tournament and it was especially maddening to fail just a step away from the coveted goal. Moreover, a loss of some rating points tightened his race against Alexander Grischuk.

In the end, my protégé achieved his goal to qualify by rating. After the December FIDE rating list was

published, all the participants in the Candidates Tournament were determined and Anish became one of the eight players who would contest the right to play against the World Champion. Still, before we started thinking about the battle for the chess crown, we wanted to complete the Grand Chess Tour circuit successfully. Anish was one of the leaders and, if he did well in the last tournament, he could well claim overall victory.

The traditional London Chess Classic was held for the seventh time. The chief organiser, Malcolm Pein, tried to diversify the festival programme every year. In 2015, the main event became the final stage of the Grand Chess Tour. At the same time, the rapid tournament was not as strong as the previous year. Those who played in the main event did not take part in the rapid; only one member of our small team, Anish's wife Sopiko, played in the rapid and in the subsequent Open. The Olympia Conference Centre was teeming with hundreds of people playing in a wide variety of tournaments from dawn to dusk. Scores of children enrolled in the Chess in Schools programme played chess, then rested right there on the floor. Malcolm Pein himself introduced the players before each round in the best traditions of professional boxing. It was the children again who made the symbolic first moves in the games between the famous grandmasters. This all contributed to the totally unique atmosphere of the London Chess Classic, which miraculously managed to combine the scale and egalitarian spirit of the Wijk aan Zee festival with the comfort and intimacy of the Sinquefield Cup.

The details of our stay in London and of our daily routine were no different from the year before. Our rooms were in the same gloomy Hilton Hotel a few minutes away from the playing hall. Fortunately, the Kensington Gardens were nearby, so we spent a lot of time there. Our favourite Asian restaurant was still there and was often frequented by other players.

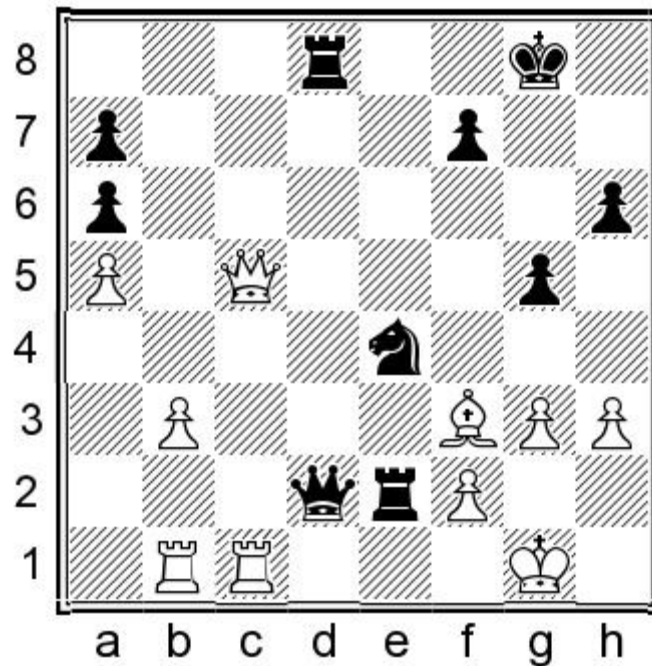
As in previous tournaments, Anish started with a win. To be fair, I shall say that this time it was his opponent who had the initiative for most of the game, while Anish only tried to fight back with Black. As often happens with Topalov, he went too far in his quest for a win, and Anish didn't miss his chance.

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Veselin Topalov (2803)

Anish Giri (2778)

London 2015



33. ♔xa7?

White should have exchanged the knight with 33. ♕xe4, leading to an equal position.

33. ♔xa7? ♖xf2!!

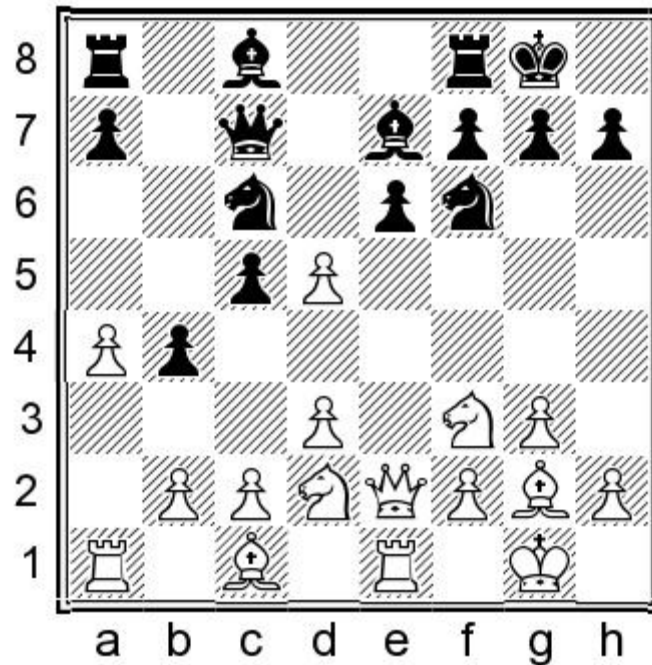
Topalov overlooked this beautiful shot, but the more pedestrian 33... ♖d7 34. ♔b8+ (34. ♔xd7?? ♖e1+!) 34... ♖d8 would lead to a draw. Thus White's risky thirty-third move was not justified.

34. ♕xe2 ♖xh3+ 35. ♔f1 ♔d5!

The only move, which White should have foreseen when he calculated the sacrifice. There is no salvation now.

1.♘f3 d5 2.g3 ♘f6 3.♙g2 e6 4.0-0 ♙e7 5.d3 0-0 6.♘bd2 c5 7.e4 ♘c6 8.♖e1 ♚c7 9.♚e2 b5 10.a4 b4
11.exd5

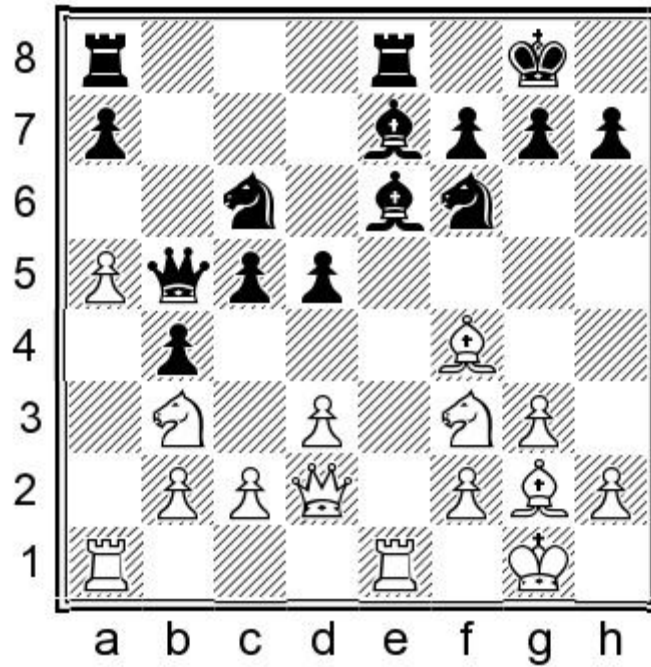
An appropriate way to clarify the situation in the centre.



11...exd5

After 11...♘xd5 12.♘c4 there arises a King's Indian reversed which looks advantageous for White.

12.♘b3 ♖e8 13.♙f4 ♚b6 14.a5 ♚b5 15.♚d2 ♙e6

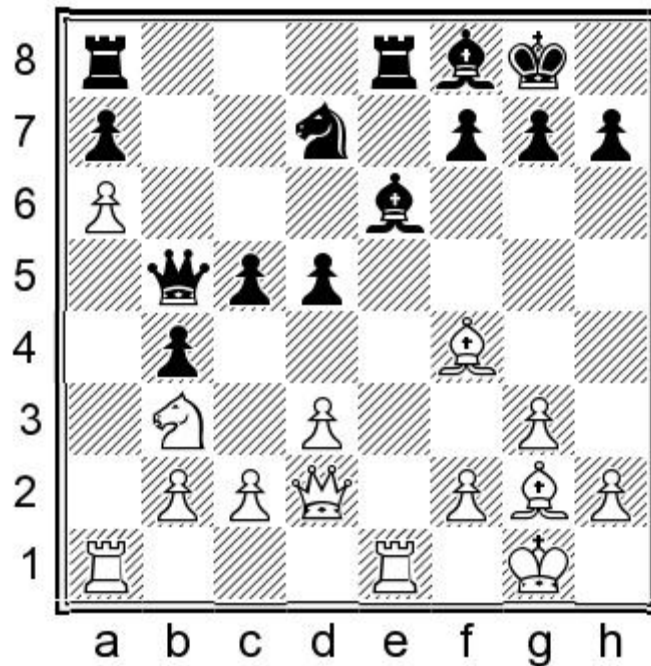


As expected, White doesn't have the slightest advantage from the opening, but it is still a tricky position to handle.

16.a6!?

Such a far-advanced pawn can often give rise to extra tactical motifs.

16...♙f8 17.♘e5 ♜xe5 18.♙xe5 ♞d7 19.♙f4



19...♞b6

A slight inaccuracy. After 19...h6 the chances are about equal.

20.c3

Half a step in the right direction. 20.c4! is much stronger, forcing 20...bxc3 21.bxc3 h6 (of course not 21...♙xb3? 22.♖eb1) 22.♗eb1 ♔d8 23.d4! c4 24.♘a5 and White has the initiative.

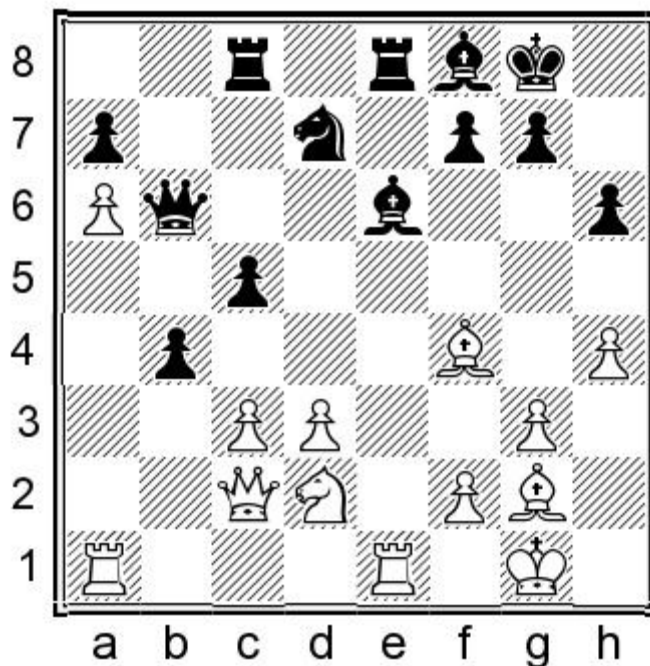
20...♗ac8

Now 20...bxc3 is not necessary.

21.♙c2

21.♘a5 was an interesting option.

21...d4!? 22.♘d2 h6 23.h4 dxc3 24.bxc3

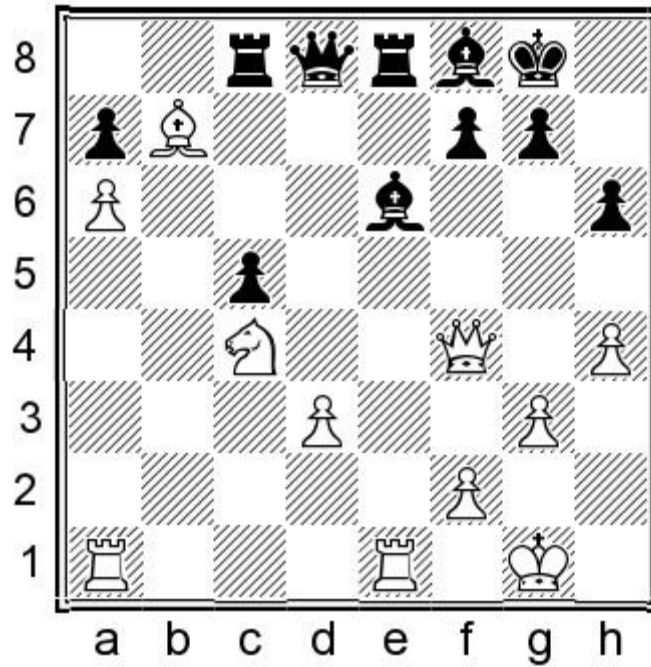


24...bxc3?!

By releasing the pawn tension on the queenside, Hikaru makes his opponent's task easier.

24...♙f5!? is better, while 24...b3!? 25.♙b2 c4 26.♘xc4 ♙xc4 27.dxc4 ♘c5 is also interesting.

25.♙xc3 ♘f6 26.♘c4 ♙d8 27.♙b7! ♘d5 28.♙d2 ♘xf4 29.♙xf4

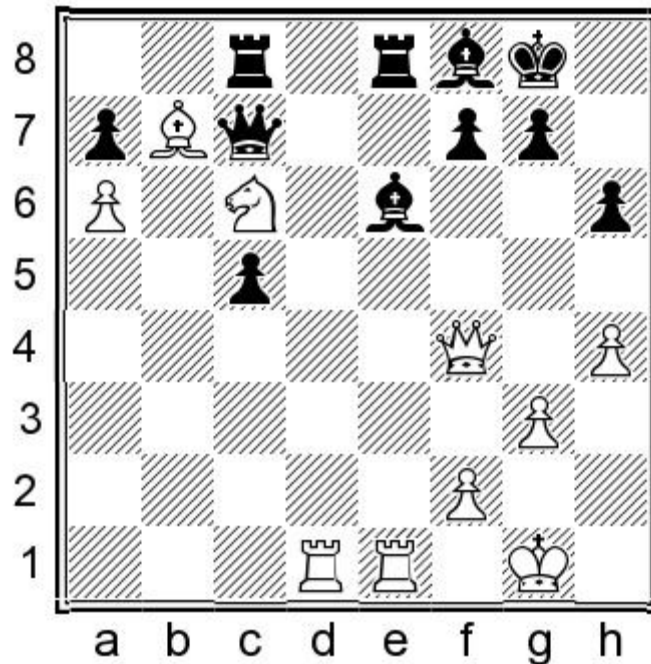


29...♙xd3

The exchange sacrifice looks pretty tempting.

The natural 29...♖c7 30.♗ab1 ♜ee7 31.♗e3 ♚d4 leads to a somewhat better position for White.

30.♘e5! ♚d6 31.♗ad1 ♜c7 32.♘c6!



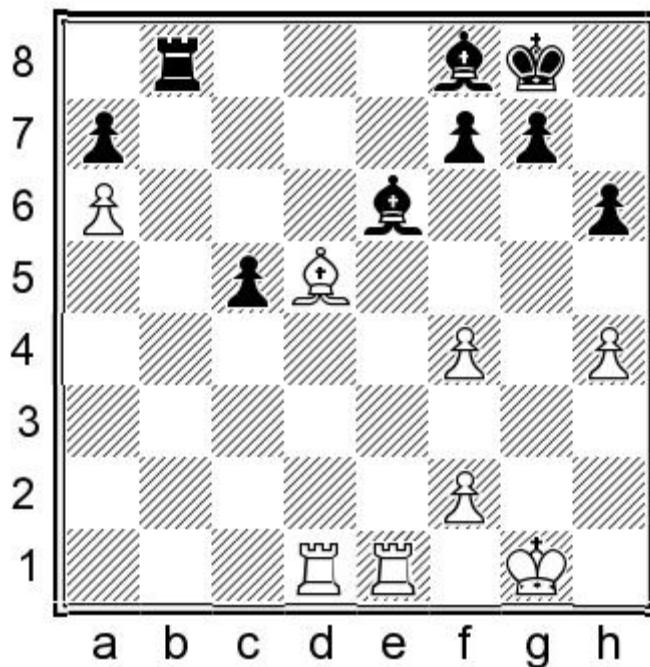
The last few moves have significantly changed the assessment of the position.

It is interesting to note the important role played by the a6-pawn.

32...♔xc6?

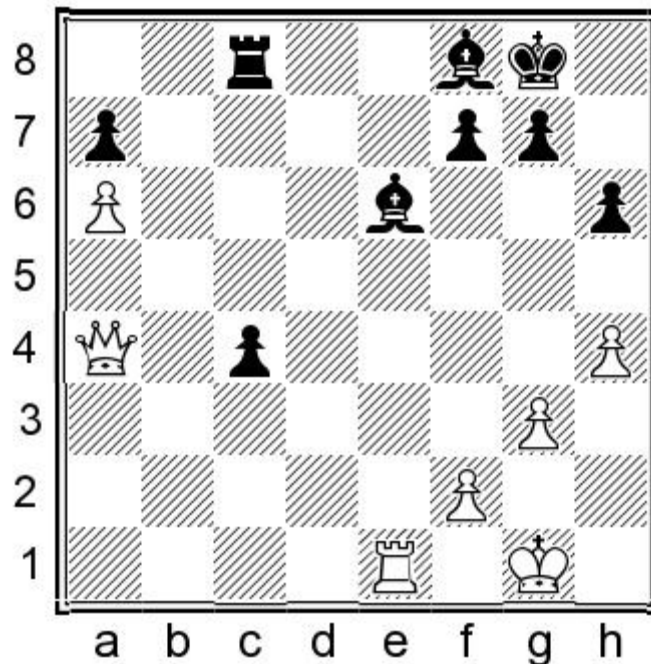
Black is in time trouble and panics. He hopes to win the annoying a-pawn and build a fortress, but his dreams aren't going to come true.

He should have played 32...♔xf4 33.gxf4 ♖xc6 34.♙xc6 ♜b8, but even in this case he would face a difficult defence after 35.♙d5!.



Now the most tenacious is 35...♜b6 (35...♙g4 36.♜b1 ♜d8 37.♙c4! — if 37.♙g2 c4 — 37...♜d4 38.♙e2!) 36.♙xe6 fxe6 37.♜d7 ♜xa6 with chances of a draw, though Black's task is not simple here either.

33.♙xc6 ♜xc6 34.♔a4! ♜ec8 35.♜d8! c4 36.♜xc8 ♜xc8



37.♖xe6! fxe6 38.♔d7

A fortress cannot be built, and there is no counterplay based on the c-pawn. The game is decided by the evil white pawn on a6.

38...♖c5 39.♔xe6+ ♔h7 40.♔f7 ♔d6 41.h5 ♖g5 42.♔g2! c3 43.f4 1–0

It is hard to overestimate the significance of this victory. Anish took a decisive step towards winning the tournament and the circuit overall. It was extremely important for him to feel that he could outplay elite opponents, not only in the opening, but in the middlegame as well. This was especially important for the upcoming games in the Candidates Tournament.

The tournament ended in a dramatic way. There was no real fight in the Anand-Giri game. The game between Levon Aronian and Maxime Vachier-Lagrave took an unexpected turn. Everyone expected the Armenian Grandmaster to wage an uncompromising battle, but he preferred to reach a safe draw. As it turned out, Levon had diligently studied all the regulations and realised that such a result would guarantee him a place in the top three overall. The most unpredictable events, however, occurred in the only decisive game of the last round. Carlsen had held an advantage against Grischuk for a long time, but at some point took more risks than warranted. In serious time trouble, Alexander first missed a forced win, then missed a simple draw, then finally lost the game. Thanks to this victory, the World Champion caught up with both leaders, Vachier-Lagrave and Giri, and overtook them on tie-break criteria. According to the regulations, the winner was supposed to be decided by tiebreak matches. Carlsen had already secured a place in the finals, while a match between Vachier-Lagrave and Giri would determine his opponent.

Giri achieved an unexpectedly easy victory with Black in game one. The Frenchman's situation appeared hopeless, but Maxime showed amazing composure. First, he took revenge by cleverly beating Anish in an equal endgame, then gave Giri little chance in the Armageddon. Winning this match,

Maxime earned the right to face Magnus in a midnight duel for first place both in the tournament and overall. The only thing left for Anish, Sopiko and me was a late dinner, which was very small consolation after the previous traumatic experiences.

The failure appeared enormous. Anish's defeat meant that he would earn no bonus money for his overall result in the current circuit and would also miss the following year's cycle. My flight was scheduled to leave in a few hours and the night promised to be dreadful. However, the wheel of fortune turned again and our mood improved dramatically. It was announced that Carlsen and Vachier-Lagrave were playing only for the winner's title in the London tournament; if the World Champion won then Anish, who was second on tiebreak indicators, would remain in second place both in that tournament and in the circuit overall. Fortunately Magnus did not disappoint. He proved a lot to himself, having won the tournament at the very last minute, which propelled him to win the circuit overall after a disaster at the start. Giri's second place in the tournament and overall was also a great success. In twenty-seven games against the top players in the world, he had five victories and not a single defeat. This informal indicator put him 1.5 points ahead of the World Champion.



After a successful tournament. (Photo from the author's archive)

It was time to rest, but the 2015 chess year proved to be very long. Right after London, Anish and Sopiko flew to Doha. He had accepted an invitation to play in the Qatar tournament way before the situation with the Candidates Tournament became clear, and it was too late to withdraw. Anish did not achieve anything special in that event. He started with three wins and was expected to repeat the previous year's success, but all his other games ended in draws. Still, the opponents were more than worthy, so he gained even more rating points in addition to the big increase achieved in London.

Overall, 2015 was, without doubt, the most successful in the young grandmaster's career. Even though there were no 'clear' tournament victories, there were a lot of successful performances. The very fact of qualifying for the Candidates by average rating signified that his play was stable and his achievements were not coincidental; third place in the January FIDE rating list was further confirmation of it.

Analysis of his game also showed that most of the work we had done was not in vain; Anish's play had become more mature and balanced. It was obvious that he rightfully belonged to the world elite now. Still, it would take additional arguments to compete for victory in the Candidates Tournament. First of all, we had to look at psychology. In Moscow, Anish would have to fight for first place, but he had not yet learnt to win major tournaments.

The 2016 competitive cycle started, as always, in Wijk aan Zee. This tournament has always been very important for Dutch players, including Anish. A small village that once upon a time started hosting a humble chess festival has become a world-famous place where loyal fans can watch and mingle with their favourite stars. This time, Anish Giri was thought of not simply as the national team leader, but also as a representative of the chess elite and one of the tournament favourites, an additional burden on his shoulders. On the other hand, playing in Wijk was, in fact, the last rehearsal before the Candidates Tournament, so we considered it to be an important stage of the overall training plan. It was psychologically difficult to pursue both of these goals successfully. This might have been the reason for Anish's uncertain play at the start.

In round one, Giri lost to Wesley So, then got into trouble against Navara and Caruana. Anish even looked unusually nervous and agitated. Once he made his own move, he immediately switched to watching the other games since there was definitely a lot to watch. Without a doubt, the main tournament in Wijk aan Zee is the most egalitarian amongst its elite counterparts. The top players in the world compete on a stage that is separated by only a few feet from hundreds of ordinary chess lovers who play in a variety of different events. Once those players finish their games, they instantly become interested and knowledgeable spectators. Sandwiches and the famous pea soup are available on site. There is constant background noise which is so annoying for top players; you have to make an additional effort to maintain required concentration. Anish's wife Sopiko was playing not far from the main stage, so his curiosity was understandable. Unfortunately, this had a negative effect on the quality of his play and results.

Luckily, a free day helped Anish to get back into fighting shape. He won twice and his tournament situation improved significantly. After ten rounds, Carlsen was in the lead, followed by Caruana. We analysed the tournament situation and decided to use it for training purposes. If we considered the World Champion to be playing *hors de concours* then we could look at this situation as an ideal testing ground before the Candidates Tournament; after all, only first place would matter in Moscow. Therefore we set the goal of catching Caruana. In the remaining rounds, Anish would have to play Black against Adams and Karjakin, then White against Hou Yifan. To pursue first place in the tournament, he had to give up his usual approach of equalising with Black and needed to marshal all his strength. This was an extremely difficult task, but Moscow wouldn't be easy either. It was encouraging that none of the three tournament leaders played well.

Alas, the very first step failed. Playing the Sicilian Defence against Adams, Giri managed to achieve a promising position, but an unexpected exchange sacrifice by his opponent transformed the situation radically and it was a miracle that he managed to save a hopeless position. His next opponent, Karjakin, also seemed to be using the event as preparation for the Candidates, after all, 1.b3 is not an everyday move for the Russian player. Both grandmasters seemed to be satisfied when the game ended in a draw. Finally, the London System that Giri used in his last game was not a surprise for Hou Yifan. The

Chinese player solved all her opening problems and seized the initiative later on. Three draws in the final three rounds were not too bad, even though the result fell short of our goals. Well, a negative experience is also an experience. Living through negativity in training sometimes allows a player to succeed in competition. This was how we looked at the Wijk tournament: while the result was satisfactory, old problems remained and new ones appeared.

The final training camp before the Candidates Tournament was held, as usual, in Papendal, but our team expanded. In addition to me and Erwin I'Ami, who had already been helping Anish with opening preparation for a long time, two new members were added. Even before the London tournament, I authored a thick volume under the spectacular title 'Anish Giri through the Eyes of His Opponents in the Candidates Tournament'. It was an attempt to analyse our hero's body of work. Of course, I was privy to insider information and put the emphasis on Giri's shortcomings. I was guided by a famous Russian author, Mikhail Zhvanetsky, who once said, "If you make your joys as big as your troubles, you'll really be able to enjoy them".

The distribution of work at the training camp was patently unfair. All the troubles were supplied by yours truly. I forced Anish to analyse lost and problematic games, and also forced him to play practice games designed to improve game-playing skills and to verify ideas found during analysis. The young members of the team took pleasure indeed in making these troubles as big as possible and also enjoyed honing the opening ideas. In theory, Anish was supposed to do both, but gravitated towards working with his friends and a tireless cyberassistant until this aspect consumed all of his time. He was an excellent practitioner and a true leader who produced things for himself and followed up on the ideas of others. It was pure creative work, whereas my tedious approach threatened to spoil all the fun for these young people. It took me progressively more and more effort to convince my student to carry out the unpleasant components of the training program.

Sometime in the middle of the training camp, Anish departed for Zürich to play in Oleg Skvortsov's tournament. This rapid event did not really fit into the training programme, but he had agreed to play a long time before, so we had no choice. He didn't play well in Zürich; moreover, he finally got fed up with playing and lost interest in practice games. I remained convinced that this component was necessary and stuck to my guns, but my persistence was a discordant note in the festive atmosphere that reigned within our small but friendly team. Finally, the long training camp came to an end, and Anish was very pleased with the results. I, however, was dissatisfied, since not all the work we had planned had actually been covered.

Giri's opening preparation was excellent, but a real game starts when the opening ends. This was the first time when I felt that our paths in life were starting to diverge. Anish had got older and matured noticeably; he understood his priorities in life better. It seemed that my constant perfectionism was becoming a bit tiresome for him.

The start of the Candidates Tournament pushed all these concerns into the background. This was the major test that we had been preparing for all that time. Eight of the best players in the world arrived in Moscow to fight with each other for the right to play against the World Champion. I have no doubt that all the players in the Candidates Tournament had championship potential; in fact, Veselin Topalov and Vishy Anand had already worn the champion's crown. What qualities does a player need to contend for the world championship title? The first and the most important ingredient is talent. Without a certain

ability at chess, you cannot even become an ordinary master; to compete at the highest level, outstanding natural talent is required. It is an absolutely necessary ingredient; the lack of talent cannot be compensated for by anything else. Genius might be desirable, but often has unwelcome side effects, so I would not list it amongst the required qualities. When I was young, one could literally discern the talent of a true champion with the naked eye. The World Champions themselves were quite unlike each other. Nowadays, cyberassistants make everyone look as similar as new recruits in the army. The times of Tal, Fischer, Karpov and Kasparov have gone forever; these days, the elite grandmasters have many more things in common. Still, extraordinary chickens are occasionally hatched, even in a computerised incubator.

The second component is love for chess. At first glance, this appears to be less obvious and in any case less important. Yes, everyone who is successful loves the game to some extent. However I am talking about true love, a passionate and inexplicable emotion that requires nothing in return. Such love can work wonders; it can help to overcome constant stress and unavoidable frustration. Daily work ceases to be routine when there is true passion (I'm only talking about chess here). Fischer, Tal, Geller and Korchnoi are just a few names from a long list who felt a true passion for chess.

The third component is health. Chess is undoubtedly a sport, so this factor is extremely important. I am not talking about perfect abs or the ability to run a marathon. The physical strength and reactions that are extremely important in other sports do not have the same significance for chess, however it is crucial to maintain a high degree of concentration and focus throughout the whole game. Unlike other sports, you cannot predict the duration of a chess game; a momentary loss of concentration can undo the results of hours of painstaking work. On the contrary, keeping focused can help you out in a completely hopeless situation. Most combat sports are played under the elimination system; in chess, participants are forced to continue playing even after defeats. To be able to succeed, a player needs to remain psychologically stable during an entire tournament. This is an extremely important component of success and all great individual players have mastered it.

It is interesting to note that most people have an extremely distorted image of a chess champion formed by books, movies and the mass media. Such renowned writers as Stefan Zweig (*The Royal Game*, or *Schachnovelle*) and Vladimir Nabokov (*The Luzhin Defence*) used their immense literary skills to create tortured characters for whom chess became an all-consuming addiction. The recent Hollywood movie *Pawn Sacrifice* is supposed to portray the life and fate of Robert Fischer. I could not believe the director's view of the 1972 World Championship match. Fischer is depicted as a totally inadequate, mentally ill person who is not able to concentrate for a single moment. Needless to say, if he had been in such a state, he would never have been able to play chess at any serious level, let alone win the match against the reigning World Champion Spassky. Such images and interpretations could not be further from the realities of modern professional chess.

Yet another important component is character, the ability to take blows in a single game, in a long tournament, in one's whole playing career; the ability to overcome difficulties, to persevere after defeats, to rise again after victories — the so-called champion's character that is required to reach the summit.

The final ingredients are work ethic and efficiency — at the chess board during the game, and in preparation for it. The willingness and ability to work hard are directly correlated with the love for

chess that we have already discussed. Naturally it is much easier to be efficient when you are doing something that you like, but factors other than emotion also play an important role: self-discipline, the ability to organise oneself, punctuality. On the one hand, there are such examples as Fischer, Korchnoi and Geller; on the other, there are Botvinnik, Polugaevsky and Portisch. In modern chess, this quality is not as important as it was before, since a lot of work is done by inanimate cyberassistants that have no passion and do not have to be disciplined.

This is not an exhaustive list of the qualities required to become a chess champion. Every titleholder had something specific and mixed those ingredients in different proportions.

The upcoming Candidates battle promised to be interesting. The day before the tournament started in Moscow was so unusual that I shall describe it in detail. Every minute of the participants' schedules was accounted for: an outdoor photo session, hairdressers, stylists, fitting and adjustment of clothes, then another photo session. We felt as if the Mr Universe contest rather than a chess event was to start the following day. The opening ceremony confirmed these suspicions. The beau monde gathered for a party while the players themselves felt like poor relations. I am sure that many of the guests who attended this pompous event did not even know the reason for the loud party. Thankfully, the tournament began. The games were played in the Central Telegraph building located in the very heart of Moscow, not far from the famous Red Square. Literally beside Red Square was the Four Seasons Hotel that had been built on the site of the historic Hotel Moskva. Having known the old hotel, I was pleasantly surprised by the changes. Placing players in a modern new hotel with absolutely stunning breakfasts was a great gesture by the tournament organisers.

Our work schedule during the tournament was stable and predictable. During the round, while my protégé was playing, I prepared recommendations for his next opponent. Dinner was followed by a short debriefing and a discussion of plans for the next round. Usually it was right then, in the evening, that we determined the opening to be played; the details were worked out by Anish and his assistants later. In the morning, we had breakfast, coordinated all the details for the last time, then took the obligatory walk along the Russian capital's Boulevard Ring which was right nearby.

The start of the Candidates Tournament inspired moderate optimism. In round one we managed to create serious problems for Aronian. In a variation of the Queen's Gambit that was considered safe for Black, Anish cleverly regrouped his pieces. It was only with great difficulty that Levon managed to escape. Our fundamental opening preparation in Papendal had borne the first fruit, unfortunately only of a moral variety. In round two against Caruana, it was Anish who had to defend. There were no more reasons to worry in the first half, and Anish even missed a good chance to win against Topalov. The Bulgarian grandmaster appeared unprepared for such an important tournament and became the main source of points for his opponents in the first half. The other participants played more cautiously and delayed decisive action until the second half. It is surprising that the two youngest players did not manage a single win in the first half. Having won against Nakamura in a previous round, Caruana decided to strike while the iron was hot. Giri took up the challenge. This is what happened.

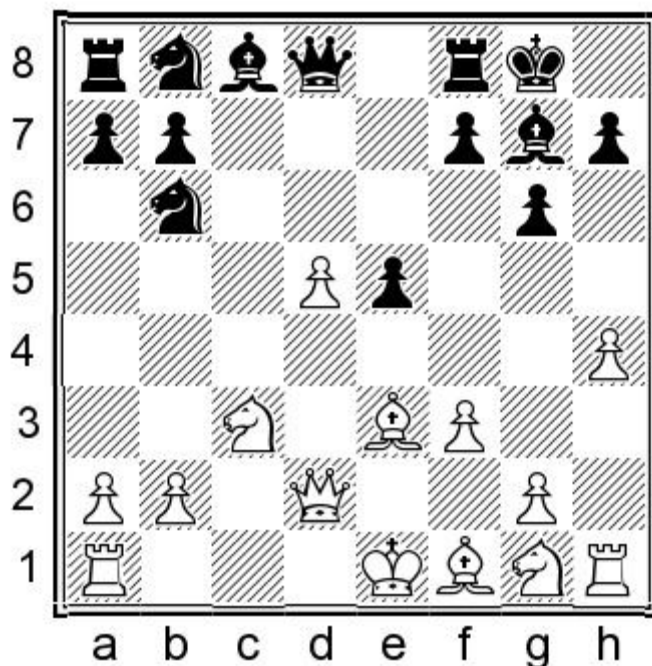
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Anish Giri (2793)

Fabiano Caruana (2794)

Moscow 2016

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.f3 d5 4.cxd5 ♘xd5 5.e4 ♘b6 6.♗c3 ♙g7 7.♙e3 0-0 8.♚d2 e5 9.d5 c6 10.h4 cxd5
11.exd5



11...♗a6!?

a) 11...h5 is followed by the unpleasant 12.g4 hxg4 13.h5.

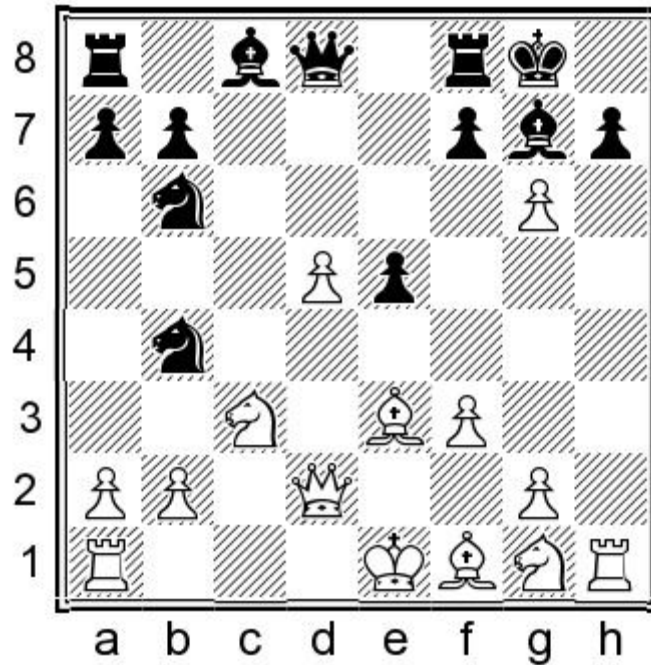
b) 11...♗8d7 12.h5 ♘f6 13.hxg6 fxg6 has been tried several times, leading to a complicated position where White's chances are still a bit better.

The move in the game came as a complete surprise for Giri.

12.h5 ♘b4

Formally, this move is the novelty. In the only game to reach this position, Black chose 12...♙d7 13.hxg6 fxg6, but lost quickly after 14.♗h3 ♘c4 15.♙xc4 ♚h4+ 16.♗f2 ♚xc4 17.♗fe4 (Golod-Herrera, Ubeda, 2001).

13.hxg6



13...♙f5

The lines 13...hxg6 14.g4 ♘6xd5 15.♖d1 ♙e6 16.♗xd5 ♗xd5 17.♚h2 f6 18.♚h7+ ♔f7 19.♖h6 and 13...fxg6 14.♙c5 ♗4xd5 (14...♖f4 15.♗e4) 15.♗xd5 ♗xd5 16.♖d1 ♙e6 17.♙c4 ♗c7 18.♚c2 ♚e8 19.♙xf8 ♙xf8 20.♗e2 were apparently rejected by Black during his preparation. In both cases, White has a clear advantage.

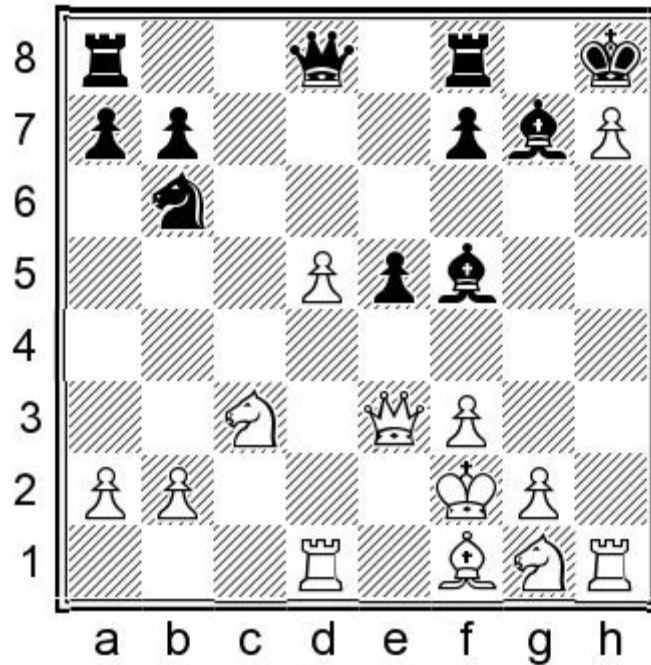
14.gxh7+ ♔h8?

This is clearly not the best move, but, like all the previous ones, Fabiano played it instantly.

14...♙xh7 was much stronger. Most probably Black didn't like 15.♙h6 ♗c2+ 16.♔f2, however 16...e4! [16...♗d7 17.♙d3! (17.♙xg7 ♚b6+ 18.♔g3 ♚g6+ 19.♔h2 ♔xg7 20.♖c1 ♖h8 is less clear) 17...♙xd3 18.♚xd3 ♚b6+ 19.♔f1 ♙xh6 20.♚xc2 is definitely in White's favour]

17.fxe4 (17.♗xe4 ♙d4+ 18.♔g3 ♙xe4 19.fxe4 ♙e5+ 20.♔f2 ♗xa1 21.♗f3 ♗d7 is interesting) 17...♚f6+ 18.♗f3 ♗xa1 19.♙xg7 ♚xg7 20.♙d3 ♗d7 21.♖xa1 f5 would lead to a very sharp position not easy to fathom at the board.

15.♖d1 ♗c2+ 16.♔f2 ♗xe3 17.♚xe3



17...♔d7?!

Black barely spent a minute on this far from obvious move, but Caruana, apparently realising his mistake, decided to bluff to the very end.

17...♖c8 was better, even though White undoubtedly has the advantage here.

18.♘h3 f5 19.f4! ♖c8 20.g3

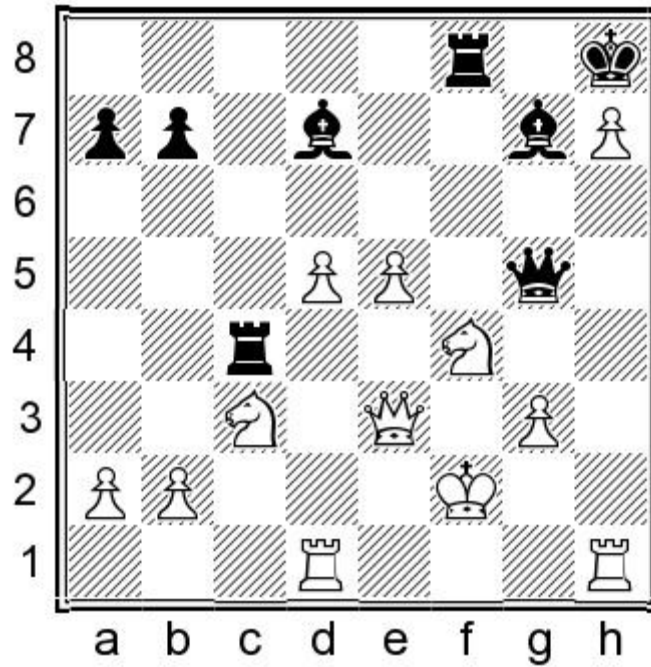
Unlike his opponent, Anish was thinking over every move, but he understood the position perfectly. It is clear that Black has no compensation for the sacrificed material.

20...♘c4?

Strictly speaking, this is the losing move.

A lesser evil would be 20...e4 21.♘g5 ♔c7 22.♔b5! ♘c4 23.♔xc4 ♔xc4, when the situation is still not completely clear.

21.♔xc4 ♖xc4 22.fxe5 f4 23.♘xf4 ♔g5

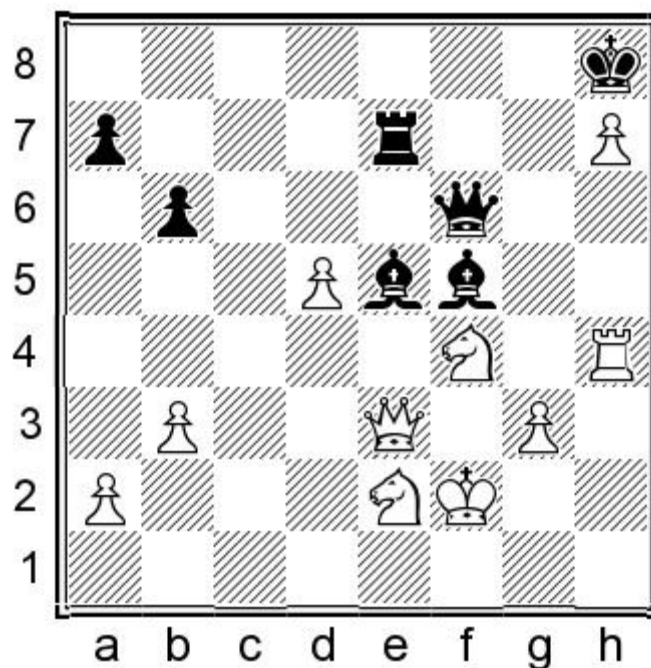


24.♞d4?!

White has achieved a completely won a position, but begins to play too cautiously.

The simple 24.♔e1!, which Anish saw at the board, won. After 24...♞f5 (24...♙xe5 25.♘g6+ ♚xg6 26.♚xe5+ ♚f6 27.♚xf6+ ♞xf6 28.♞d2+- is bad) 25.♞h5! ♚xh5 26.♘h5 ♞xe5 27.♞d3 (or 27.♔f2) the two extra pawns would be a decisive factor to win the game.

24...♞xd4 25.♚xd4 ♙xe5 26.♚b4 ♞f7 27.♘ce2 ♙g4 28.♚e4 ♚f6 29.♞h4 ♙f5 30.♚e3 ♞b6 31.♞b3 ♞e7



32.♚d2?!

A cautious move in time trouble. 32.♖h5! ♟xh7 (32...♟d6 33.♞c3!) 33.♞f3 ♔g8 34.♜e6+- is stronger.

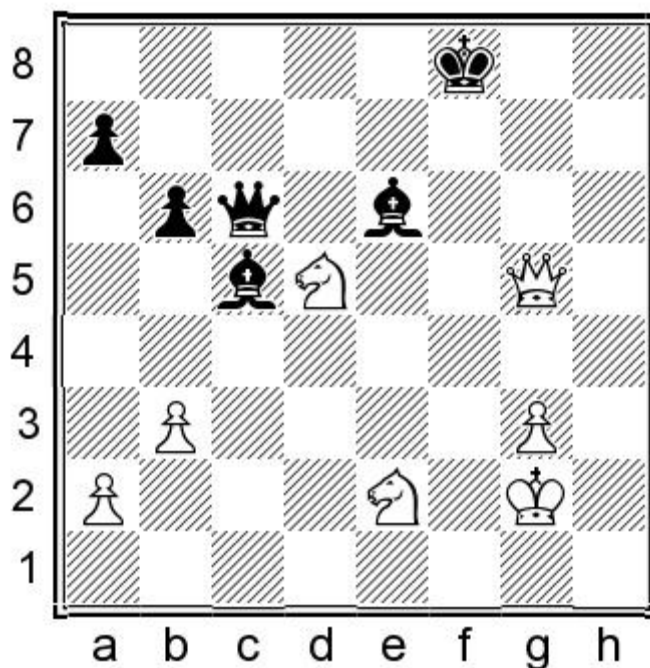
32...♞c7 33.d6?

A strange decision! White voluntarily gives up his protected passed pawn. The threat of 33...♞c2 is imaginary; all of his pieces are well protected, therefore any reasonable move would be good.

33...♟xd6

It was even better to capture with 33...♞xd6.

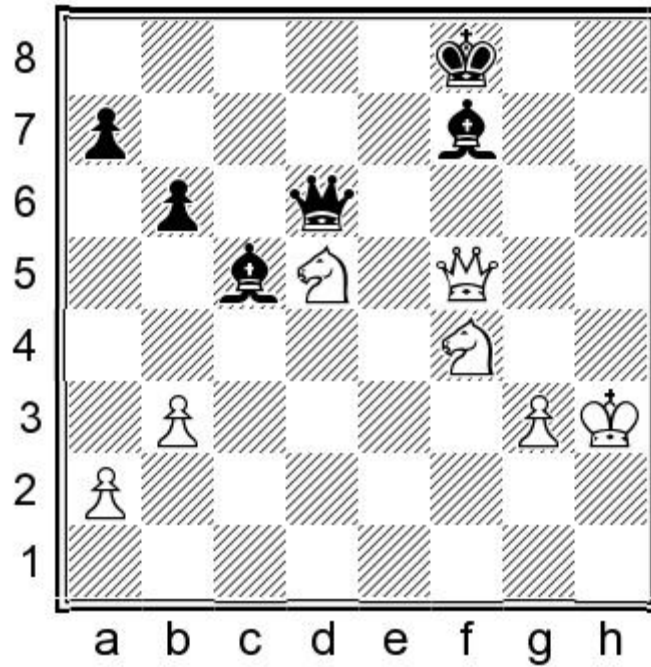
34.♞d5 ♜f7 35.♔g2 ♟c5 36.♖h5 ♟g4 37.♖h6 ♞xh6 38.♞xf7 ♞c6+ 39.♜d5 ♟e6 40.♞f6+ ♔xh7
41.♞h4+ ♔g7 42.♞g5+ ♔f8 43.♞f6+ ♔g8 44.♞g6+ ♔f8 45.♞h6+ ♔g8 46.♞g5+ ♔f8



47.♜ef4

Even after giving up the pawn for no reason, White has kept a serious advantage. To be honest, I still had no doubt that Anish would win this game since he is a master of such technical positions!

47...♟f7 48.♞e5 ♔g8 49.♔h3 ♞d6 50.♜f6+ ♔f8 51.♞f5 ♔e7 52.♜6d5+ ♔f8



53.♔g4

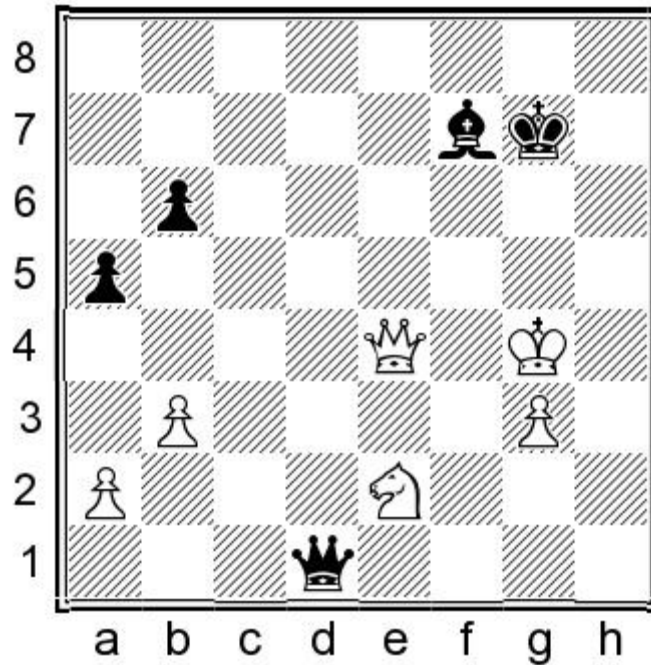
If White had played 53.g4! it would have been game over.

53...♙d4 54.♘c7

The computer's suggestion 54.♚c8+! ♔g7 55.♚b7! a5 56.♘e7 ♙e6+ 57.♔f3 is good but incomprehensible.

The next forty-odd moves changed the assessment slightly: if Black defends well, White's advantage is not enough to win — and Caruana is one of the best defenders in the world!

54...♙e5 55.♘cd5 a5 56.♚c8+ ♔g7 57.♘e3 ♔h7 58.♚b7 ♔g8 59.♚a8+ ♚b8 60.♚e4 ♚d6 61.♘f5 ♚d1+ 62.♘e2 ♙g7 63.♘xg7 ♔xg7



64. ♖e5+

The endgame arising after 64. ♖d4+ ♜xd4+ 65. ♘xd4 ♔f6 66. ♔f4 a4 leads to a draw.

64... ♔g6 65. ♔f3 ♜d3+ 66. ♔f2 ♜c2 67. ♜d6+ ♔g7 68. ♜d4+ ♔g8 69. ♜g4+ ♔f8 70. ♜a4 ♔e8 71. ♜a3+ ♔g8 72. ♜e7 ♔f7 73. ♜d8+ ♔g7 74. ♜d4+ ♔g8 75. ♜a4 ♜d2 76. ♜g4+ ♔f8 77. ♜c8+ ♔e7 78. ♜c7+ ♔f8 79. a3 ♔xb3 80. ♜b8+ ♔f7 81. ♜b7+ ♔g8 82. ♜xb6 ♜a2 83. ♜d8+ ♔f7 84. ♜d7+ ♔g8 85. ♜e8+ ♔g7 86. ♜e7+ ♔f7 87. g4 ♜d2 88. ♜c5 ♔e6 89. ♜e5+ ♔f7 90. g5 ♜a2 91. ♜f6+ ♔e8 92. ♜h8+ ♔e7 93. ♜h7+ ♔f8 94. ♜h8+ ♔e7 95. ♜g7+ ♔e8 96. ♜h8+

And there's nothing to be done, so the players shook hands.

½-½

Many players would despair after such a game, but Anish was still full of energy. It is amazing that after a seven-hour game that brought a disappointing result he didn't appear fatigued or irritated when giving interviews, and even his famous sense of humour was intact. This was very important, because, even though he hadn't won during the ten rounds, Giri still had a chance of winning the tournament.

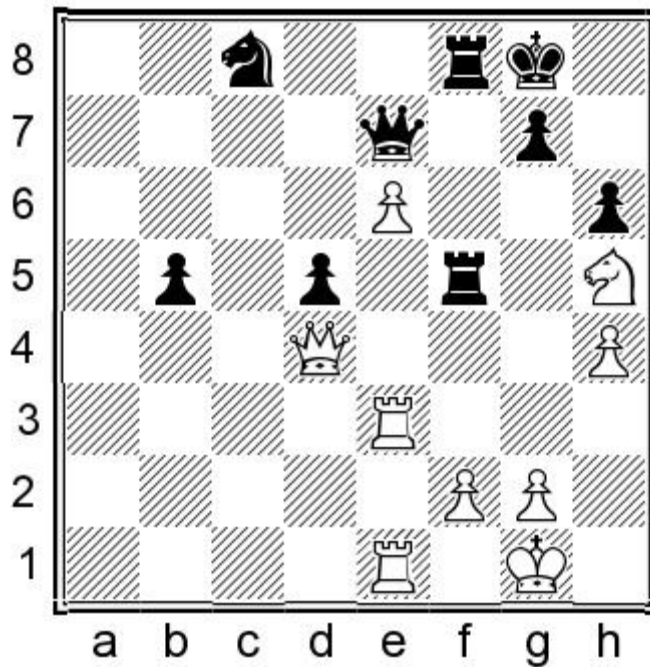
In round eleven he was to play White against Nakamura. As in his game against the same opponent in London, the stakes were high.

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Anish Giri (2793)

Hikaru Nakamura (2790)

Moscow 2016



White is dominating completely. All that remains is to deliver the decisive blow.

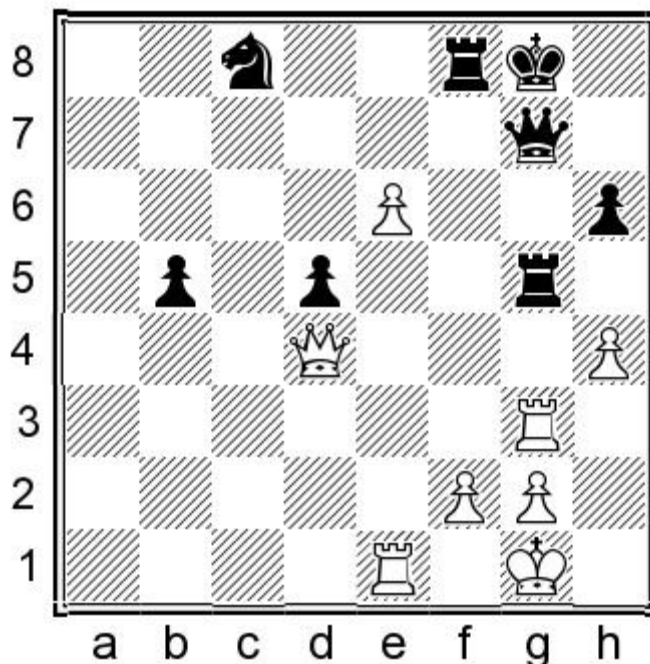
50. ♘xg7?

Is this it!? Alas, the combination has a flaw.

It was necessary to keep calm and find 50. ♖e5!, after which Black is in need of good advice, e.g. if 50... ♗d6 the strongest is 51. ♖xd5 ♖xd5 52. ♗xd5 ♖f5 53. ♖e5 ♖xe5 54. ♗xe5 and White's win is just a matter of time.

50. ♘xg7? ♗xg7 51. ♖g3 ♖g5!

A nasty surprise.



This beautiful but simple defence was overlooked by White. Fortunately, even such an oversight cost only half a point.

52. ♖xg5! hxg5 53. ♕xd5

White is in no risk of losing after 53. ♕xd5 ♞e7 54. ♕xb5 gxh4 55. ♕h5 ♔f6 56. ♖e4.

1/2–1/2

Yet another unfortunate failure to realise an advantage seemed to have buried all hopes of winning the tournament. The tiny chance left was to win all three remaining games. We had clearly failed to do this during the dress rehearsal in Wijk aan Zee, so we couldn't realistically expect success in Moscow, especially since two of the three games were yet again with Black. Still, hope springs eternal... Alas, like in the Netherlands, we failed. This time Anish played with more confidence and had the initiative in each game, but he always lacked the little extra something to convert this into a win. As a result, his performance was in a sense quite remarkable: he drew all his games. As the saying goes, such an achievement can only be repeated, never surpassed. Naturally he became the object of teasing, but even those who joked at his expense showed respect for his achievement.

After all, he had fought aggressively in all his games and the draws were achieved despite, rather than because of, his wishes. Apart from one part of his game against Caruana, it is difficult to point out a single game where he had any problems. At the same time, there were many missed opportunities. If he had converted at least the most obvious ones, his chances of winning the tournament would have become very real. We had to admit that these obvious errors he committed when trying to convert an advantage were not accidental; his game definitely suffered from the same imbalance that I discussed earlier. Excellent, well-prepared play in the opening contrasted with much less confident play in the middlegame. Summing up, we can say that in this tournament Anish didn't take advantage of all his chances, but showed enormous potential for further growth.

It was Sergey Karjakin who won the Candidates Tournament. He was not considered a favourite before the start, but his success cannot be called accidental. No-one amongst the chess elite lacks ambition, but it was Sergey who was the most determined to win. His opening preparation did not feature profound depth or unexpected discoveries; its role was to allow a convenient transition to the middlegame, where he waged his principal battles. His play in this tournament was the most balanced among all the participants. Karjakin also achieved a very high average rating of all moves made in this tournament, 2825, admittedly not quite as high as Giri's 2850, but still far superior to the average rating of the moves by his opponents, 2675 (compared to Giri's 2820). Think what you like about these statistics calculated by Dr Kenneth Regan, but it is obvious that the type of chess Karjakin played forced his opponents to make mistakes.

It is time to mention yet another essential ingredient that makes a chess champion. I am talking about luck. Luck is not controlled directly by a player, but is necessary for any kind of success, especially such a big one. We can say that luck always favoured the Russian player; it is enough to remember the World Cup in Baku, where he punched his ticket for the Candidates Tournament. In Moscow, Lady Luck seemed to run out of tricks and did not favour Karjakin at the expense of the other players. Having written his name into chess history, Sergey more than repaid her.

After such a complex and intense tournament, all the accumulated fatigue hits players at once; the only thing they can wish for is sleep. Thus Anish's morning call and an invitation for a walk came as a surprise. There was wonderful spring weather outside, so rare in Moscow, and I had no reason to give up our daily ritual. We talked at length about the outcome of the tournament, about the unfortunate failures that had not allowed him to achieve the desired goal, and about the need to restructure in order to make further progress. To be precise, it was mostly me who did the talking while Anish seemed to be deeply immersed in his thoughts. It was the longest walk in our three weeks in Moscow.

A few days later, when I was already at home, I received a letter which said what Anish had probably intended to say that spring morning: our work together was finished. However there is another possibility: it might have been my monologue that finally pushed him to make this decision.

In addition to all his other talents, Anish also proved to be wise beyond his years. He possessed the worldly wisdom which typically comes only with age, experience and the inevitable disappointments, the wisdom that is expressed by popular proverbs such as 'Better safe than sorry', 'Don't go looking for trouble' and the quintessential 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush'. Unfortunately all these wonderful qualities do not always lead to winning in chess. Anish Giri is still very young. I sincerely wish him well in finding his own path in chess which will lead him to new heights.

WESLEY SO — AN ONLINE ROMANCE

After several months of very intensive work, I needed a break. I also needed to reflect on the stage of my life that had just finished, thus I was looking forward to a serene, worry-free summer. As sometimes happens, life took an unexpected turn. In the middle of May, I received an offer to work with Wesley So. I was not too familiar with the young Filipino player. Obviously our paths had crossed at the Chess Olympiads, where he led his country's team, but our teams usually played in different areas of the playing hall. We had found ourselves in closer proximity at the last two Tata Steel tournaments, but even there we had only exchanged a few words during occasional meetings at breakfast. It was Wesley's body of work that I knew better. His name became widely known in 2009 when, as a sixteen-year-old boy, he knocked Vassily Ivanchuk and Gata Kamsky out of the World Cup. In both cases, he won the first game with Black, then held the second with White. I even put his game against Ivanchuk in a decisive games section in one of my books. I remember being very surprised by So's pragmatic approach when he chose the Exchange Variation of the Slav Defence with White. Ivanchuk's class and ingenuity almost translated into success, but So was able to defend the position. There were no such problems after winning with Black against Kamsky. It was only Vladimir Malakhov who managed to knock the teenager out of the World Cup when he outplayed him in the tiebreak games. The next time the young Filipino became the centre of attention was a few years later when he moved to the United States. His game against Garry Kasparov became known across the whole world. Yes, it was only a blitz game, but Wesley So defeated the great champion in an impressive manner.

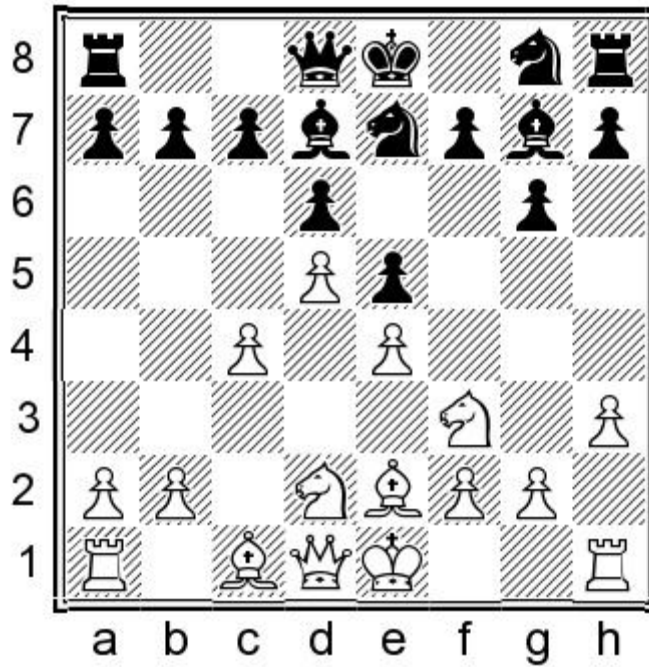
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Wesley So (2773)

Garry Kasparov (2812)

Saint Louis 2016

1.♘f3 g6 2.e4 ♕g7 3.d4 d6 4.c4 ♕g4 5.♕e2 ♖c6 6.♗bd2 e5 7.d5 ♗ce7 8.h3 ♕d7



9.c5!

The start of an energetic and very impressive course of action.

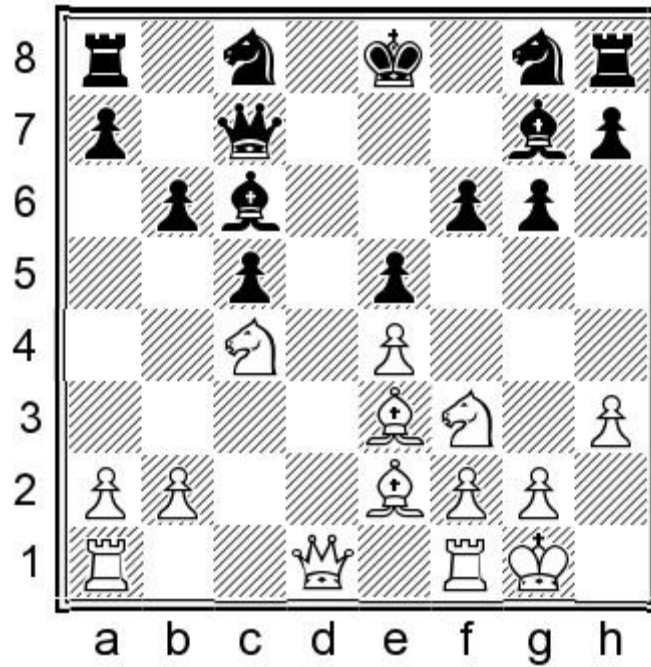
9...dxc5 10.♘c4 f6 11.d6 ♘c8!

The best defence. The natural 11...♘c6 is followed by 12.dxc7 ♙xc7 13.♘d6+ ♔e7 14.♘b5! ♙b8 15.♙d5 which is bad for Black.

12.♙e3 b6

Black should have played 12...b5! 13.dxc7 ♙xc7 14.♘a3 ♘d6 with an unclear position. Let's not forget though that it was a blitz game.

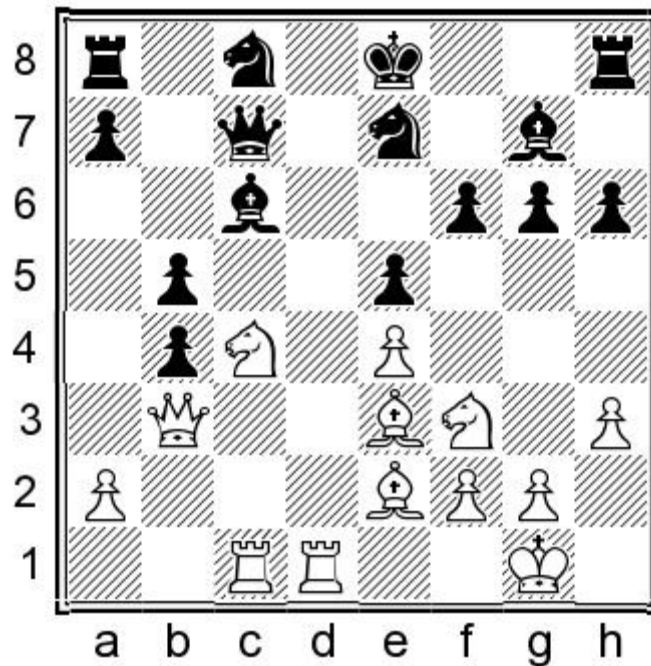
13.0-0 ♙c6 14.dxc7 ♙xc7



15.b4!

So handles the conclusion beautifully.

15...cxb4 16.♖c1 ♘ge7 17.♙b3 h6 18.♗fd1 b5



19.♘cxe5! fxe5 20.♙xb5 ♜b8 21.♙a4! ♜b7 22.♗xc6! ♘xc6 23.♙e6+ ♘8e7 24.♙c5! ♜c8 25.♙xe7 1-0

In recent years while working as a coach, I saw Wesley's games much more often, but acquainted myself mostly with the openings he played. I didn't have a complete picture of the young grandmaster

as a chess player and human being. Naturally the offer to work together seemed very tempting, but from the very beginning I remained a bit sceptical about the prospects of our collaboration. It was suggested that we only work via Skype. Nowadays this is a very common form of collaboration because it is much easier to arrange, not to mention less expensive. Long-distance work is somewhat less efficient than face-to-face communication, but it can be a very successful teaching method. You can teach from a distance and your student's skill level does not really matter. Paradoxically enough, long-distance work can prove even more efficient when studying openings, however it is clearly better to communicate in person with a top-level player. I was also a bit concerned about the language barrier. The most basic English is enough to work on the openings. A chess coach will make sure that his student gets the gist, but is not required to be absolutely fluent in the student's language. However verbal communication is extremely important for collaboration at the highest level. Hidden resources can usually be found in the realm of psychology and it is the absolute understanding between coach and student that helps to uncover them.

Moreover, as it turned out, Wesley had never had a personal coach before, a circumstance which was a matter of concern for both of us. When we started our negotiations, So was ranked tenth in the world with a rating of 2770. I know of no other cases in modern chess history, with the possible exception of Bobby Fischer, where a player working alone has climbed so high. In such circumstances, outside help can be very useful, but it is also quite likely that the two personalities would prove incompatible. Taking everything into account, we agreed to start with ten trial sessions.

The very first sessions dispelled many doubts. There was no discomfort or misunderstandings. Wesley enjoyed performing the tasks that I set him. I got to know him as a chess player who looks at the game from an interesting angle and employs an original approach to problem solving. In preparation for our work, I looked over his recent games, but to paraphrase a familiar expression, 'a spoken word paints a thousand pictures'. Most often, he found the optimum solution in a given position; sometimes his solution was unexpected and the line of reasoning that led to his conclusion was utterly original. We got acquainted with each other better during those several sessions held prior to the Grand Chess Tour stages in Paris and Leuven. There was no mutual rejection; in fact, the newly minted partners seemed to like each other.

The GCT was significantly revamped for its second season. The organisers of the Stavanger event decided to continue on their own way while two new tournaments (Paris and Leuven in Belgium) were added to the Tour. An important novelty was that these were not classical time control events, but rapid and blitz; special weighting factors were applied when players' results from those tournaments were entered into the overall standings. Only a few days separated the French and Belgian stages so they could easily be considered one big tournament. This was the first tournament for Wesley So where I was involved, albeit remotely.

The Paris Rapid started with a generous gift from the World Champion to my new student. The players took turns in finding interesting opportunities to complicate the game and Carlsen turned out to be more successful. Suddenly, in a completely won position, his flag fell. As a result, Wesley took fourth place in the rapid behind such specialists of fast time controls as Nakamura, Carlsen and Vachier-Lagrave. Given that he was the lowest-rated player in the starting list, such a result was definitely a big success. Wesley's achievements in blitz were way more modest, but he still managed to retain fourth place

overall. In each of the tournaments, Wesley struggled to find the necessary rhythm, which is crucial in games played at fast time controls. His lack of competitive experience was evident.

Between the two Grand Chess Tour stages, we practiced tactics and it bore some fruit. Wesley's play in Leuven was much more confident. He took second place in the rapid, behind the World Champion, then handled the blitz very cautiously, constantly keeping an eye on the end result, which allowed him to retain second place overall. Wesley was already pragmatic in his youth and this character trait had not disappeared over the years. Taking second place overall in Leuven behind Carlsen was a real sensation. After two stages, So shared second and third places in the GCT standings with Nakamura, with Carlsen ahead of them. Given that Magnus would not be playing the stages with classical time controls because of his preparation for the World Championship match, Wesley's chances of a GCT win looked excellent.

Our lessons continued, albeit sporadically, as Wesley's travel to Europe was time-consuming. Wesley and his adoptive mother prudently arrived at the tournaments in advance to adapt to the time difference. My participation in the direct preparation for the games was limited to general advice. Throughout his chess career, Wesley had been forced to study openings on his own and it would have been unwise to change his long-established habits. The Leuven tournament was followed by a double round-robin in Bilbao which proved to be extremely boring. It seemed that only one person, Magnus Carlsen, wanted to play chess, whereas all the others were just serving time. It was to the World Champion that Wesley lost with Black. He managed to get back to a respectable 50% after a win against Giri in the second half.

It was not accidental that Wesley's play was cautious and pragmatic. These traits were the product of his development as a player. The young Filipino didn't have a lot of chances to face elite players, so he was way too reverent and timid. An articulated respect for one's elders is also a function of an Oriental upbringing. Needless to say, such an attitude did not permit him to be too aggressive at the board. I found that Wesley felt quite comfortable both in dynamic positions and in those that required a lot of specific calculation, thus, for the most part, his problems were of a psychological nature.

Our next training sessions were devoted to exercises that used games of the great masters of the past. Along the way, we talked about their creative sides, about strong and weak aspects of their play. This was my way of modifying Wesley's mental make-up at the same time as we worked on purely chess issues. I gradually realised that my concerns about the effectiveness of our collaboration were exaggerated. For all his undeniable talent and enormous practical skills, So had serious gaps in his chess knowledge which we had to fill. My being less than eloquent in English proved beneficial since I discussed problems using simple and accessible language. Even the big time difference between our two countries was useful. Our training sessions were held when it was morning in Wesley's time zone so he had a whole day to contemplate and internalise the material we discussed.

We began to understand each other better, and it allowed us to talk about more intricate things. I got the impression that Wesley's play was too simple. His natural positional sense usually saved him from serious errors, while his natural skill in playing simple positions allowed him to amass points at will. Alas, all of this worked only against players who were markedly inferior to him. At the top level, such an approach to the game produced mindless manoeuvring and conflict-free draws. For the sake of safety, Wesley sacrificed his indisputable ability to find tactical moves and calculate lines deeply and

cleanly. It is impossible to achieve big success without risk, at least risk of a limited and well-calculated nature.

In such conversations, I relied on parallels with the great players of the past. By the nature of his talent and his approach to chess, Wesley reminded me of Tigran Petrosian. Like the former World Champion, a heightened sense of danger and a great ability to calculate tactics made Wesley seek ways to curtail a fight rather than to escalate it, thus his huge natural potential remained untapped. It is difficult to say in what way our lessons affected the mind of my unusual student, but it was obvious to me that he took chess seriously and soaked up information like a sponge.

The first really serious test of our work together was the tournament in St Louis. In the previous Sinquefeld Cup, So finished dead last; there was truly limitless space for improvement. The very first round was successful. A novelty in a side line of the Catalan proved effective.

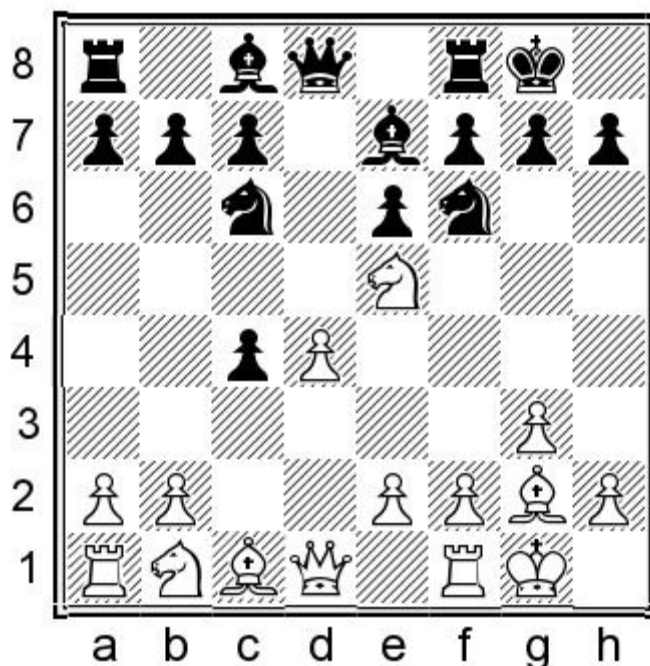
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Wesley So (2771)

Hikaru Nakamura (2791)

Saint Louis 2016

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 d5 4.g3 ♕e7 5.♖g2 0-0 6.0-0 dxc4 7.♗e5 ♗c6



8.♗xc6!?

8.♕xc6 bxc6 9.♗xc6 is much more popular and has been played several times by both players.

8...bxc6 9.♗a3 ♕xa3 10.bxa3 ♕a6 11.♙d2

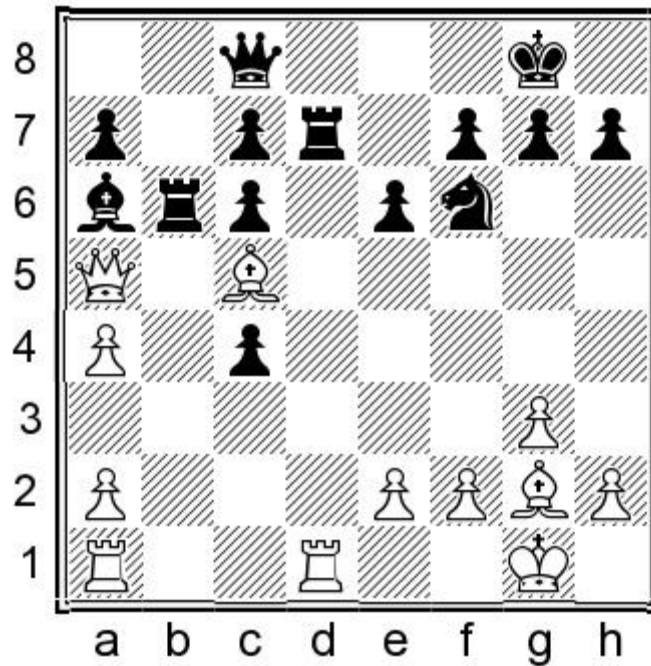
It is only recently that this move has become fashionable. Previously White almost always played 11.♕xc6.

11...♖b8 12.♚a5 ♜c8 13.a4 ♝d8 14.♙a3 ♞xd4 15.♞fb1!?

This is a novelty, and a sublime one.

After the much more natural 15.♞ab1 ♞b6 16.♙c5 ♝d7 17.♞fd1 ♚d8! Black would regain the initiative.

15...♞b6 16.♙c5 ♝d7 17.♞d1!



17...h6?!

a) It was possible to avoid the exchange sacrifice: 17...♞xd1+ 18.♞xd1 ♞b8 Black has two extra pawns, but White has enough compensation.

b) Another interesting line is 17...♘d5 18.e4 ♘f6 19.♙xb6 cxb6 20.♚e5 h6.

18.♞xd7 ♘xd7 19.♙xb6 cxb6 20.♚d2

Black has two pawns for the exchange and it is his move, but it is already difficult to defend such a position.

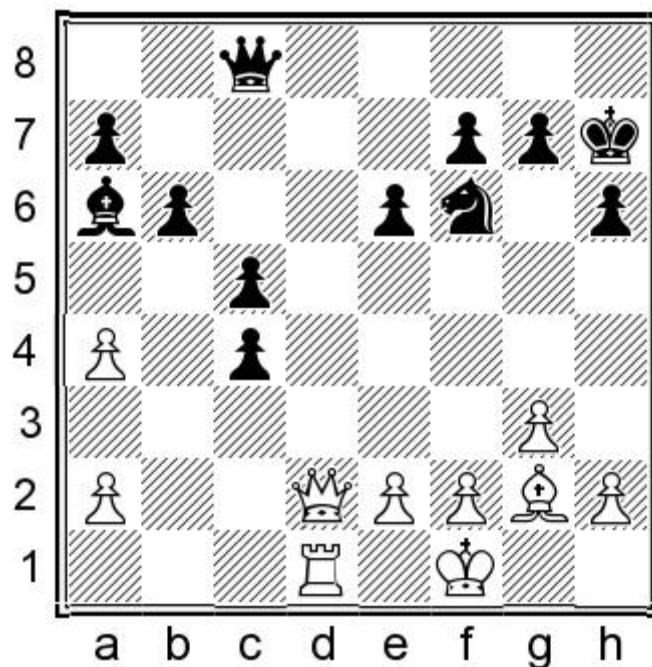
20...c5

After both 20...♘f6 21.♚d6 c5 22.a5 and 20...♘c5 21.♞d1! ♘xa4 22.♚d8+ ♚xd8 23.♞xd8+ ♔h7 24.♔f1! the only possible results are a white win or a draw.

21.♞d1 ♘f6 22.♔f1!

22.♚d8+! ♔h7 (22...♚xd8 23.♞xd8+ ♔h7 24.♔f1!) 23.♚xc8 ♙xc8 24.♔f1! ♙d7 25.a5 was simpler.

22...♔h7



23.♙c2+?

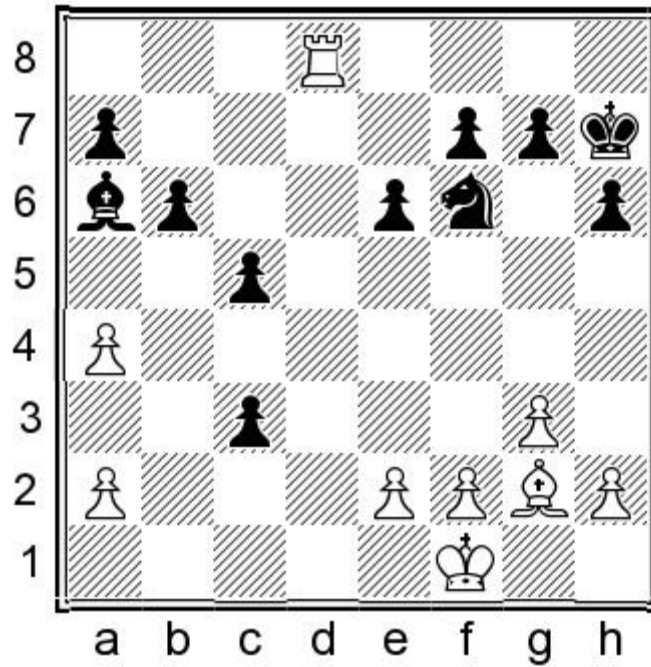
An inaccuracy which fortunately doesn't affect the outcome. White should have played 23.♙d8!, transposing to lines discussed above.

23...♔g8?

Black doesn't sense the danger and carelessly repeats moves.

It was necessary to play 23...g6! when Black holds on, e.g. 24.♙c3 ♔g7 25.♙e5 ♙e8!.

24.♙d2 ♔h7 25.♙d8! ♙xd8 26.♙xd8 c3



27.♔e1

The logic behind White's twenty-second move is revealed. The white king neutralises the passed c-pawn and Black has nothing to oppose the raging rook.

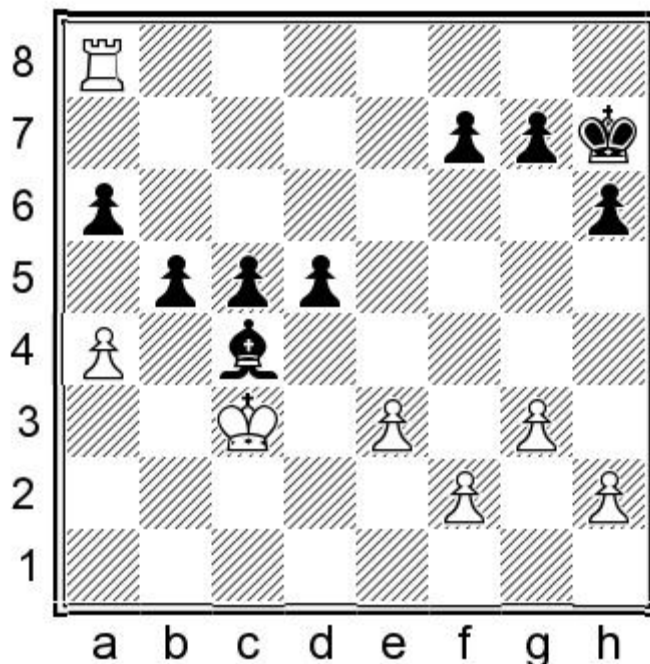
27...♙c4 28.♔d1 ♙xa2 29.♔c2 ♙c4 30.e3

30.e4 e5 31.♔xc3 ♙e6 32.f3 wasn't bad.

30...b5

30...♙d5 31.♙xd5 exd5 (31...♘xd5 32.e4 ♘f6 33.f3+-) 32.f3 ♔g6 33.♔xc3 ♔f5 34.♖b8 loses.

31.♔xc3 a6 32.♖a8 ♘d5+ 33.♙xd5 exd5



34.a5!

The most convincing move. White would face considerable technical difficulties after 34.♖c8 bxa4 35.♞xc5 ♕b3.

34...b4+ 35.♔d2 ♕f1 36.♞c8 c4 37.♞b8 b3 38.♔c3 1-0

A successful start usually improves a player’s mood and makes him more confident. On the contrary, Wesley appeared to clam up and began to play with extreme caution and precision, as if he had already achieved his goal. He managed to avoid big trouble in the next few games, but it was obvious that his approach was wrong. A crucial game was played in round six. Wesley had to play White against the tournament leader, Veselin Topalov. In theory, a draw would be a great result for Black in this situation, but it is well known that the Bulgarian grandmaster always aims as high as possible, thus we developed the following guidelines for this game: maintain tension on the board as long as possible and avoid obvious simplifications. Suddenly, such primitive methods brought success.

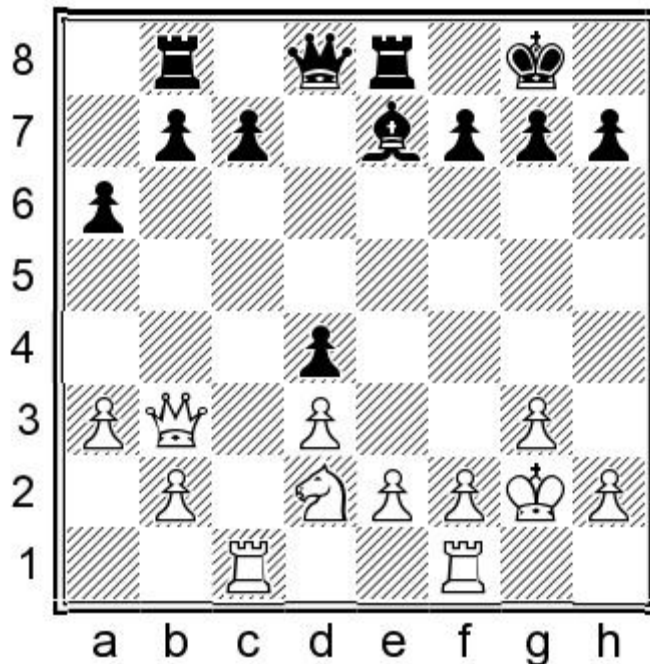
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Wesley So (2771)

Veselin Topalov (2761)

Saint Louis 2016

1.c4 e5 2.g3 ♘f6 3.♙g2 d5 4.cxd5 ♘xd5 5.♘c3 ♘b6 6.♘f3 ♘c6 7.0-0 ♙e7 8.d3 0-0 9.a3 ♙e6 10.♙e3 ♘d5 11.♘xd5 ♙xd5 12.♙a4 ♞e8 13.♞ac1 a6 14.♘d2 ♙xg2 15.♔xg2 ♘d4 16.♙xd4 exd4 17.♙b3 ♞b8



After this natural move, the game becomes sharper.

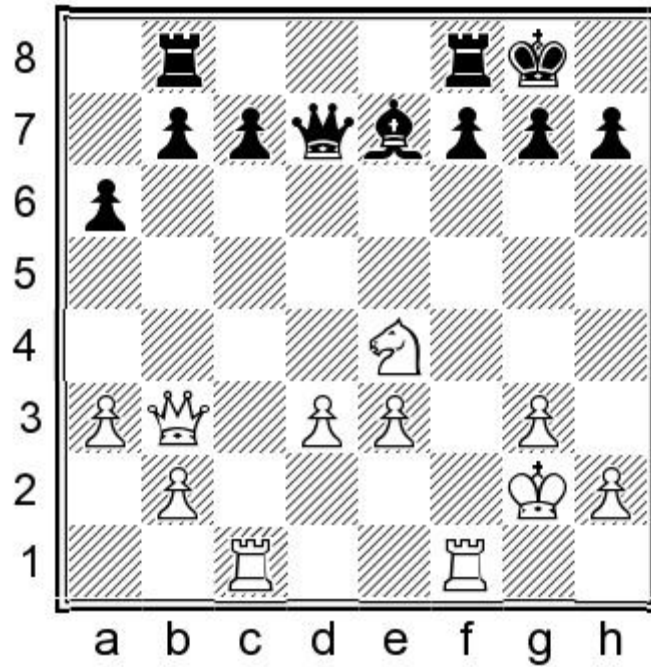
The long forced line 17...♔g5!? 18.f4 ♜xe2+ 19.♞f2 ♞xf2+ 20.♕xf2 ♔f6 21.♝xb7 ♞b8 22.♝xc7 ♞xb2 23.♝xd8+ ♔xd8 24.♞c8 ♕f8 25.♞xd8+ ♕e7 26.♞xd4 ♞xd2+ unexpectedly leads to complete equality.

It appears that Topalov had underestimated the following unexpected pawn break and as a result White seizes the initiative.

18.e4! dxe3

The position after 18...c5 19.f4 b5 20.♘f3 c4 21.♝a2! favours White as well.

19.fxe3 ♞f8 20.♘e4 ♝d7



21. ♖f3

It is not easy to decide where to place the rook.

After 21. ♖f4 Black solves his problems with 21...c5! 22. ♖cf1 (22. ♘xc5?? ♙c6+ 23. ♖f3 ♚xc5 24. d4 ♙b6 loses) 22... ♙e6!. The same reply would follow 21. ♖f2.

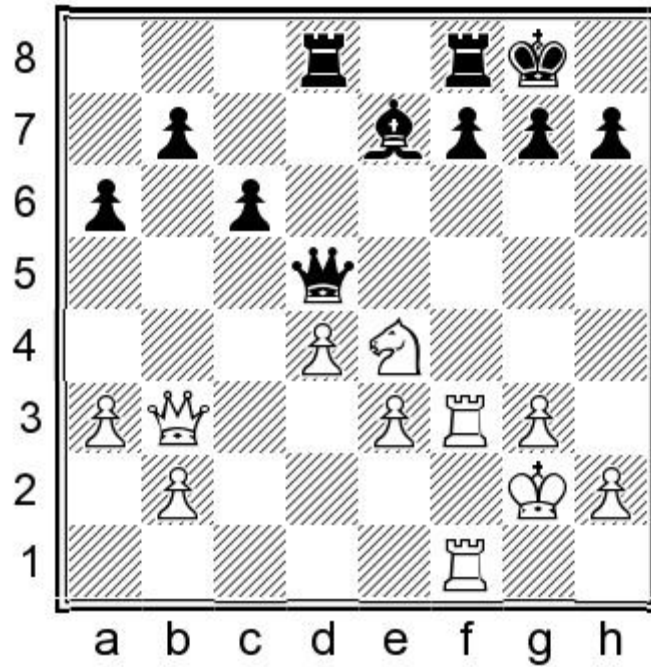
21... ♖bd8

Now 21...c5 is bad because of the simple 22. ♘xc5.

22.d4

Black would also hold the position after 22. ♙xb7 ♙xd3 23. ♖c3 ♙b1 24. ♖f1 ♖b8!.

22...c6 23. ♖cf1 ♙d5!



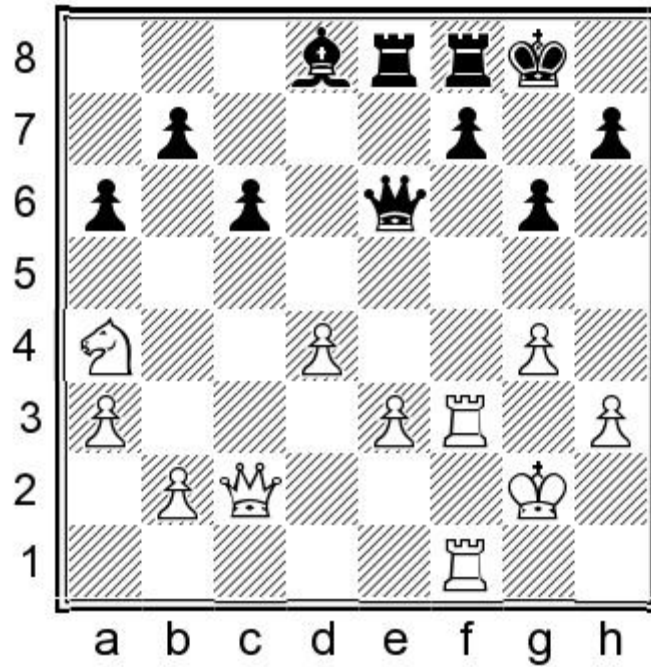
It turns out that the position of the rook on f3 is a liability. If it was on f4, then White would simply have captured the b7-pawn.

24. ♔c2

A subtle psychological calculation. 24. ♔xd5 ♖xd5 (24...cxd5 25. ♘c5 ♙xc5 26.dxc5 f6 isn't bad) 25. ♘c3 ♖d7 leads to an absolutely equal endgame.

The move in the game does not change the assessment of the position, but it provokes Black into taking action. In such cases, Topalov does not need to be asked twice.

24...g6 25.g4! ♖de8 26.h3 ♙d8 27. ♘c3 ♔e6 28. ♘a4



28...b6!?

After 28...♔d5 White has nothing better than 29.♘c3, repeating moves.

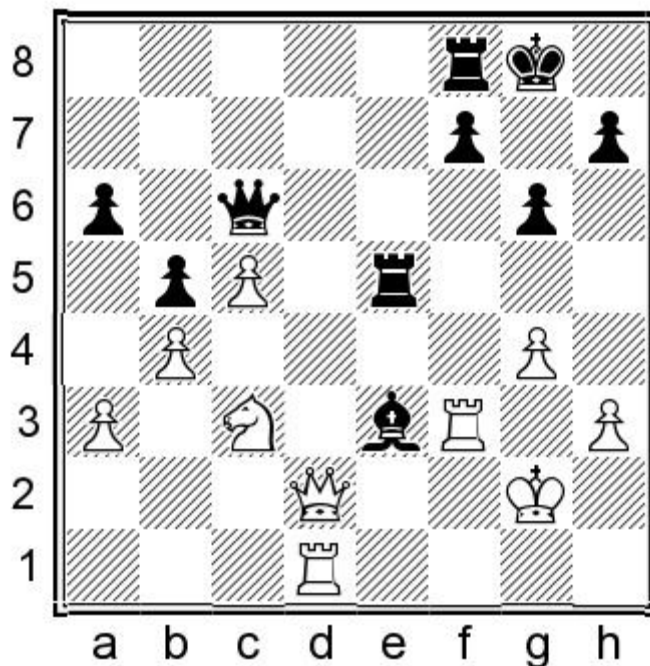
29.♖c1 c5!? 30.dxc5 b5 31.♘c3 ♔c6 32.♗d2 ♖e5?

This is too risky. 32...♗xc5! 33.♘d5 ♔a7 would still keep the balance.

33.b4 ♙g5

33...h5 is insufficient. After 34.♖d1 hxc4 35.hxc4 ♔e6 36.♗d7! ♖xe3 37.♗xe6 ♖xe6 38.♖d7 Black has to conduct a difficult defence despite material being equal.

34.♖d1! ♙xe3



35. ♔d7

It was even stronger to play 35. ♔d6! ♕e8 36. ♔xa6 and not be afraid of ghosts.

35... ♔a8

35... ♔e6 36. ♔xe6 ♖xe6 is objectively better, but Topalov is still hoping for counterplay. Anyhow White would stand much better after 37. h4!.

36. ♘d5 ♙g5 37. c6 ♙h4 38. ♖d2

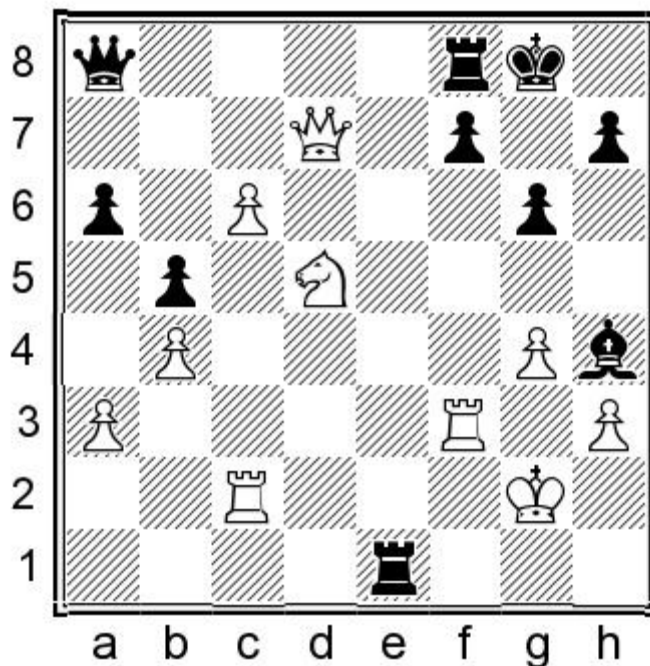
This preventive move was not necessary.

The straightforward 38. c7! ♖e2+ 39. ♔g1 ♖c2 40. ♖df1 would win.

38... ♖e1

38... ♔e8 is more stubborn, though after 39. ♔xe8 ♖fxe8 40. c7 ♖c8 41. ♖c3 ♙g5 42. ♖dd3 White will eventually win.

39. ♖c2!+-



39...♔g7 40.♘b6 ♚b8 41.♙d4+

1-0

As a result, the two opponents swapped places in the standings and it was So who led the race now. Wesley drew his final three games, confidently controlling the play in all of them. This was enough to become clear winner of the tournament. In addition to the other perks, winning the first super-tournament of his career had important psychological value. A humble boy from the Philippines realised that he could fight the best players in the world on equal terms — and even beat them. He created the springboard necessary for his further growth. Even before the tournament in St Louis, I had a conversation with Lotis Key, Wesley’s foster mother and his manager. We agreed to extend our collaboration until at least the end of the year.

We got a chance to discuss joint work further during the 42nd Chess Olympiad in Baku. The Azerbaijani capital was very familiar to me; I arrived there as the captain of Team Netherlands while it was the first time that Wesley played for the United States. Naturally both of us were busy with our own work, but we still found a few hours to get to know each other better. We developed even better trust and understanding, which was extremely important for further progress.

In Team USA, Wesley played on third board after Nakamura and Caruana. Naturally the level of his opponents was quite different from that of the elite players whom he had faced recently. The chess he played in the Olympiad was quite different, too, much more free-flowing and liberated.



Wesley and Lotis. Always close to each other. (Photo by David Llada)

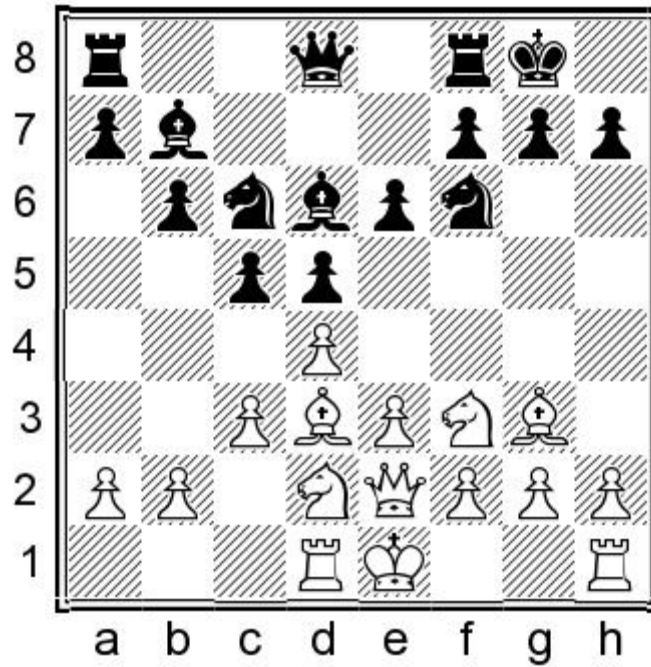
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Nikola Sedlak (2537)

Wesley So (2782)

Baku Olympiad 2016

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♗f3 d5 3.♙f4 c5 4.e3 ♘c6 5.♗bd2 e6 6.c3 ♙d6 7.♙g3 0-0 8.♙d3 b6 9.♔e2 ♙b7 10.♞d1



10...♖e8

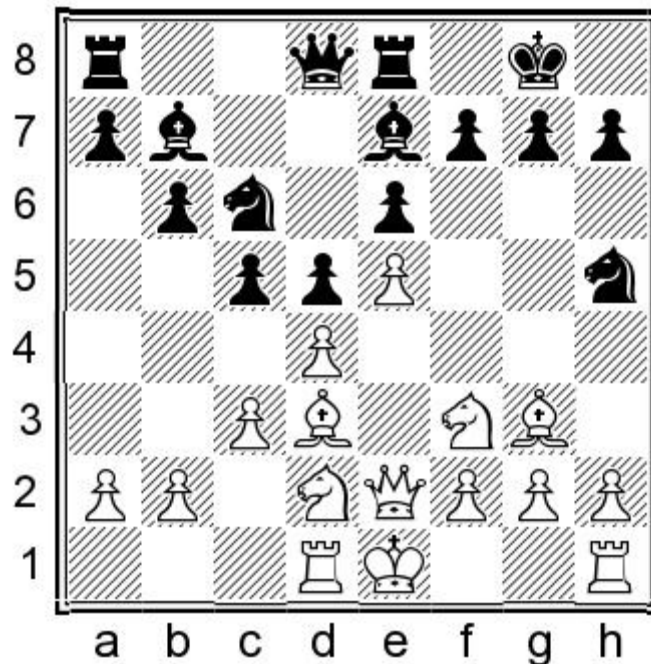
This move is not necessary. There are several options, for example 10...♗xg3 11.hxg3 h6.

11.e4 ♕e7!?

Black tries to keep the tension.

Another interesting possibility is 11...♗xg3!? 12.hxg3 ♘g4 13.e5 g6.

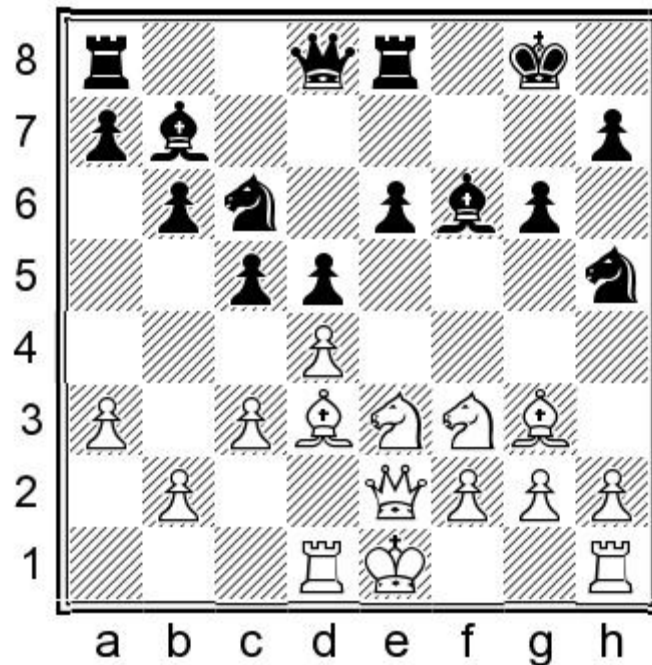
12.e5 ♘h5



13.a3

Wesley feared 13.h4!? with ideas like ♕xh7 and ♖g5. In practice this setup is not that dangerous, for example a very sharp line is 13...♗xg3 (or 13...g6!? 14.♕h2 ♕xh4) 14.fxg3 ♔c7 (White wins after 14...f6? 15.♕xh7+ ♖xh7 16.♖g5+) 15.0-0 (15.♖g5 g6) 15...cxd4 16.cxd4 f5.

13...g6 14.♖f1 f5! 15.exf6 ♕xf6 16.♖e3



A critical position.

16...e5

This was a difficult decision. It is obvious that Black has successfully solved all his opening problems. There are several ways to play ...e6– e5, but opening the game can simplify the position quickly.

a) 16...♗xg3 17.hxg3 e5 18.dxe5 ♖xe5 19.♖xe5 ♔xe5 transposes into the game.

b) 16...cxd4 17.cxd4 ♗xg3 18.hxg3 e5 19.dxe5 ♖xe5 20.♖xe5 ♔xe5 21.0-0 ♔e7 was played in Artemiev-Sevian, Martuni 2016.

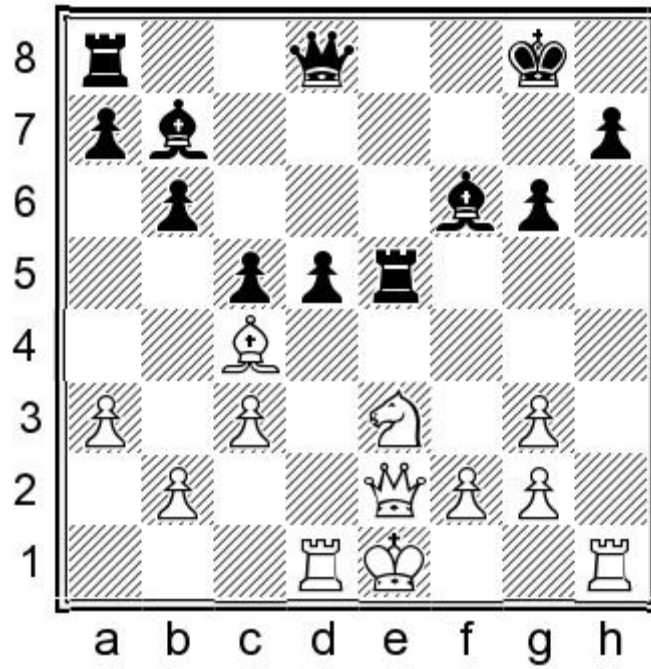
17.dxe5 ♖xe5

17...♗xg3 18.hxg3 ♖xe5.

18.♖xe5

Black has no problems after 18.♕xe5 ♕xe5 19.♖xe5 ♔xe5 20.0-0.

18...♗xg3 19.hxg3 ♔xe5 20.♕c4

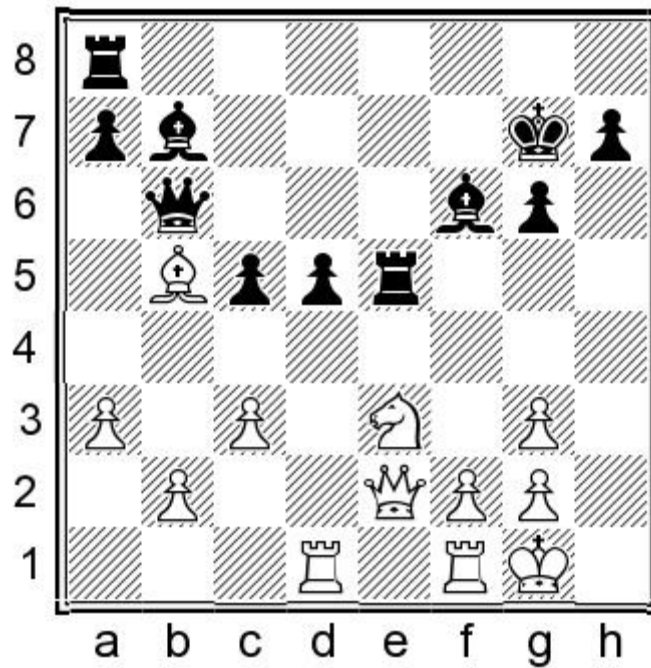


Threatening ♔f3.

20...b5!

The only way to avoid an unpleasant pin and the resulting simplifications.

21.♙xb5 ♖b6 22.0-0 ♔g7



This is a useful move that creates the threat of ...d5-d4.

23.♙d3 ♙g5

The intermediate 23...c4!? leads to a virtually forced draw: 24.♙c2 ♗g5 25.♞de1 ♞ae8 26.♔h2 ♙xe3 27.fxe3 ♞xe3 28.♞f2 ♞xe1 29.♞f7+ ♔h6 30.♞xe1 ♞xe1 31.♞f8+ ♔h5 32.♞f3+.

On the other hand, the text move gives White additional options

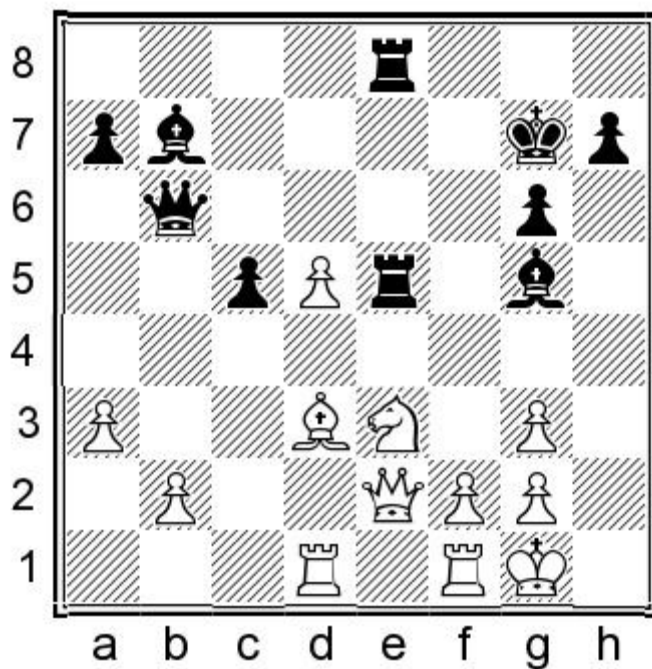
24.c4!?

And this is one of them. Another is 24.♘c4!? dxc4 25.♞xe5+ ♙f6 26.♞f4 cxd3 27.♞xd3 ♞c6 28.f3 ♞e8 29.♞fd1.

24...♞ae8

24...d4 would not win due to 25.♘d5.

25.cxd5



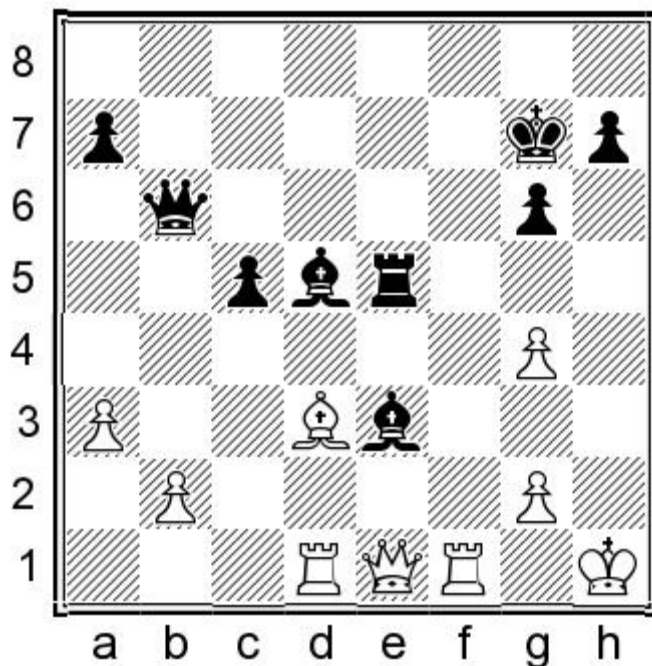
25...♞xe3!

The only way to continue playing for a win.

26.fxe3 ♙xe3+ 27.♞f2?!

Now it is White who faces a difficult choice. The move in the game is a very risky decision.

a) There would be more chances of salvation after 27.♔h1!? ♞e5 28.g4 ♙xd5 29.♞e1



29...c4! (after 29...g5 30.♖g3 ♜e6 White is miraculously saved with 31.♙g6!! ♙d4 32.♞xd4 cxd4 33.♞f2) 30.♙xc4 (30.♙b1? g5 31.♖g3 ♜e6) 30...g5 31.♖xe3! ♞xe3 32.♙xd5 and it is difficult to penetrate White's defences.

b) Another way to defend was 27.♔h2!? ♜e5 28.♞de1! ♙xd5 29.♞g4.

27...c4!

Wesley used almost all of his time, but found his only chance for a win.

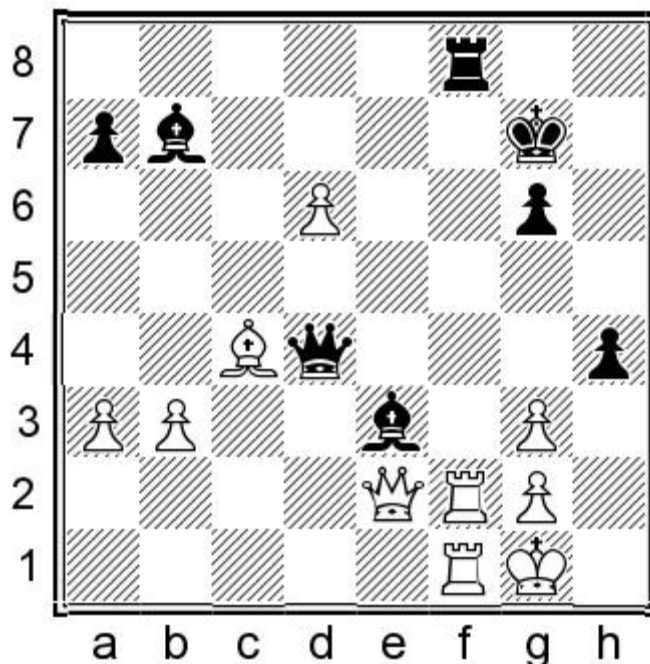
All other moves lead to a draw:

a) 27...♞e5 28.♙c4 ♙d4 29.♞c2 ♙xd5 30.♙xd5 ♞xd5 31.♔f1;

b) 27...♙xd5 28.♙xg6 ♞xg6 29.♞xd5 ♞xg3 30.♔f1;

c) or 27...♞d6 28.♙c4 ♞xg3 29.♞f3 ♞xf3 30.gxf3.

28.♙xc4 ♞f8 29.♞df1 ♞d4!



32.♔h1

There is no salvation. 32.gxh4 ♖e4 and 32.g4 ♖f4 33.♔h1 h3! are equally bad.

32...♞xf2

The immediate 32...hxg3 is good as well.

33.♞xf2 hxg3 34.♞f7+ ♔h6 0-1

Wesley's selection for the team had instantly made the Americans one of the main contenders, and his play justified the most generous advances. The decisive match of the Olympiad took place in round eight. Team USA led the tournament while Team Russia was a point behind. This head-to-head match would decide the fate of the gold medals. On third board, So was to play against Ian Nepomniachtchi, who had won all of his previous seven games.

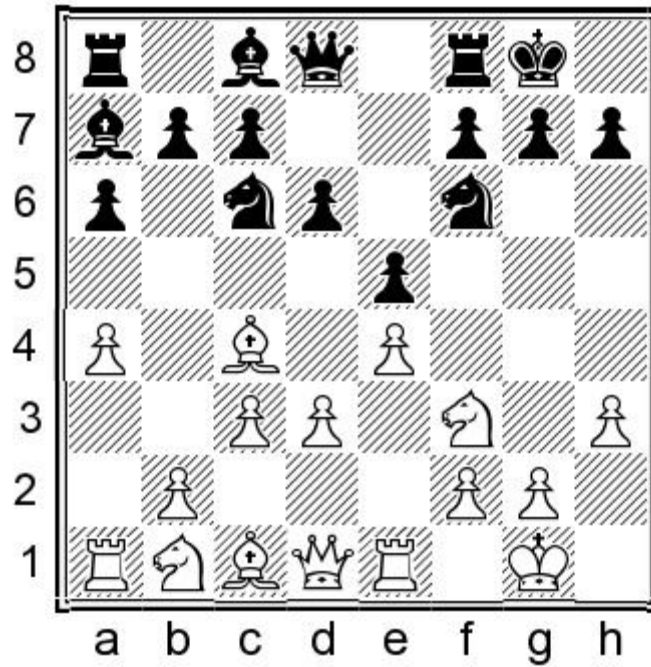
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Ian Nepomniachtchi (2740)

Wesley So (2782)

Baku Olympiad 2016

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.0-0 ♘f6 5.d3 0-0 6.a4 d6 7.c3 a6 8.h3 ♙a7 9.♞e1



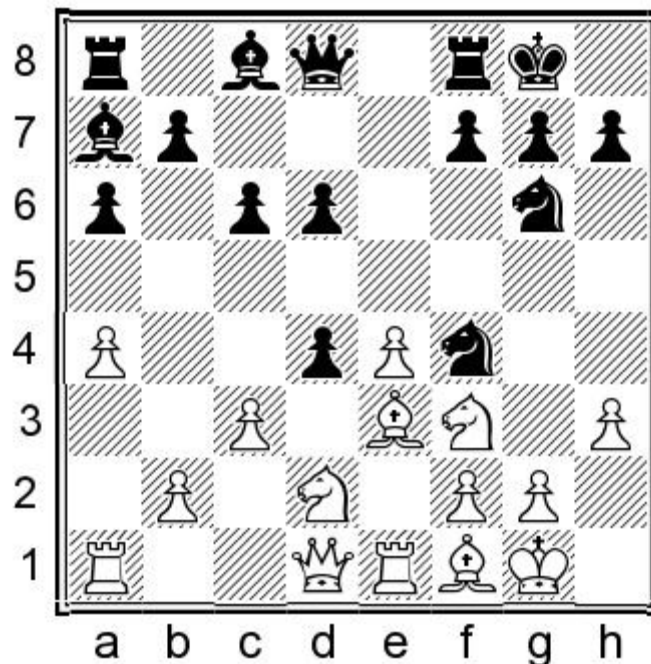
9...Nxe7

The Giuoco Piano is extremely popular nowadays, unthinkable even five years ago! In addition to the standard knight transfer, Black has other options such as 9...b5!? 10.Bb3 b4 or 9...h6.

10.d4 Ng6 11.Bd3 c6

Other possible lines were 11...Re8 and 11...Nh5.

12.Bxe3 Nh5 13.Nbd2 Nh4 14.Bf1 exd4!?



15. ♖xd4

15. cxd4 d5.

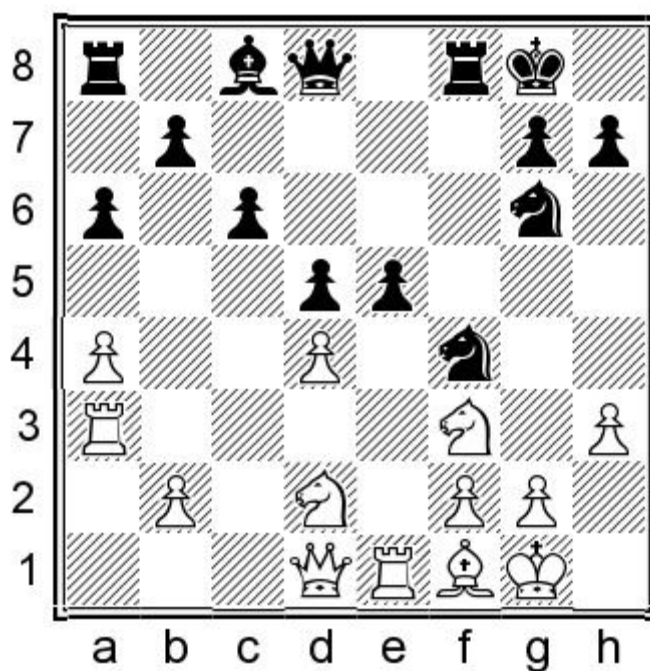
15... ♖xd4 16. cxd4 d5 17. e5

White raises the stakes. 17. exd5 or 17. a5 was more cautious.

17... f6!?

Natural and strong. It is in Black's interests to open the f-file.

18. ♖a3 fxe5!



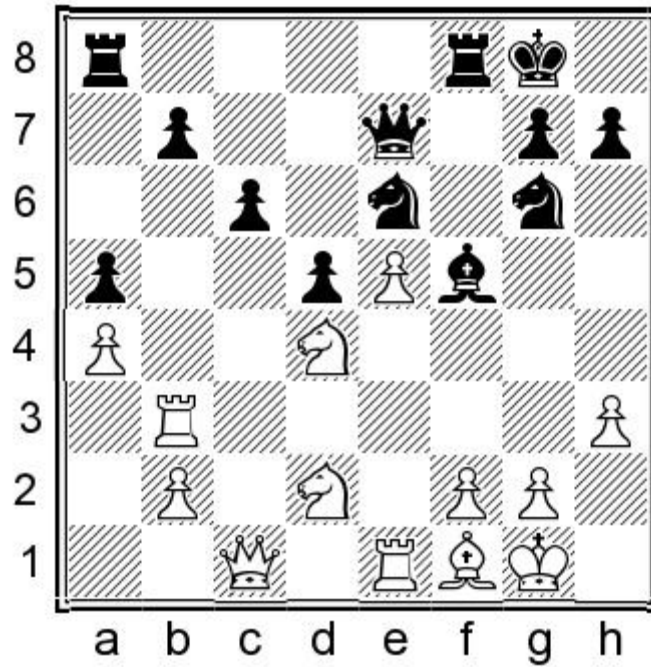
19. dxe5?!

19. ♖xe5 ♖xe5 20. ♖xe5 would lead to an equal position.

19... a5!?

A nice positional move.

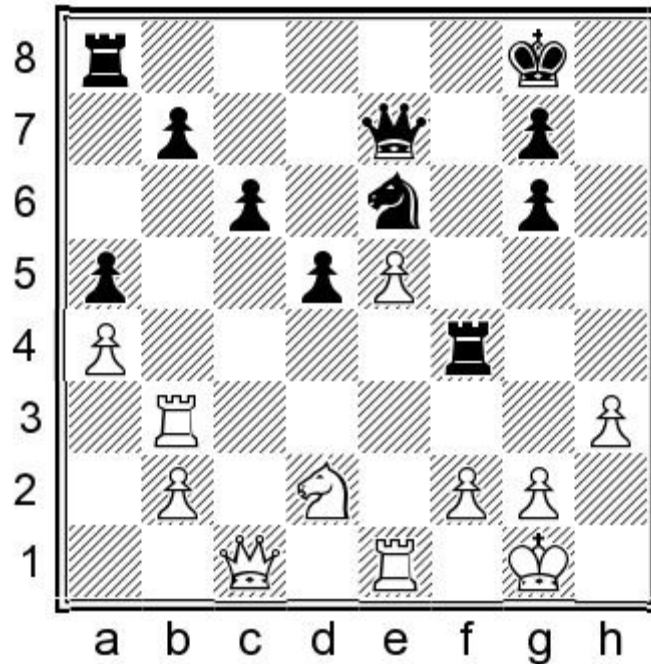
20. ♖c1 ♖e7 21. ♖b3 ♖f5 22. ♖d4 ♖e6



23. ♖xf5?!

Only after this careless exchange does the initiative finally pass to Black. The accurate 23. ♖xe6 ♘xe6 24. g3 still kept an approximate balance.

23... ♜xf5 24. ♘d3 ♜f4! 25. ♘xg6 hxg6

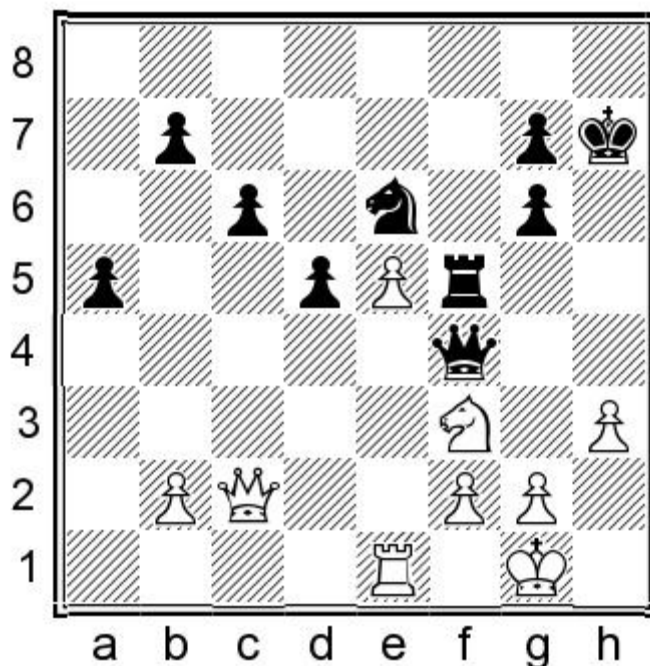


Every black piece is more active than its counterpart, and the a4-pawn needs to be defended. The American grandmaster realises his advantage confidently.

26. ♚d1 ♜af8 27. ♜f3 ♚b4 28. ♜xf4 ♜xf4! 29. ♖f3 ♚xa4 30. ♚d3 ♜f5

30...♖e4! was also strong.

31.♙b1 ♖f4 32.♙c2 ♔h7!



A good preventive move that highlights the complete domination of the black pieces.

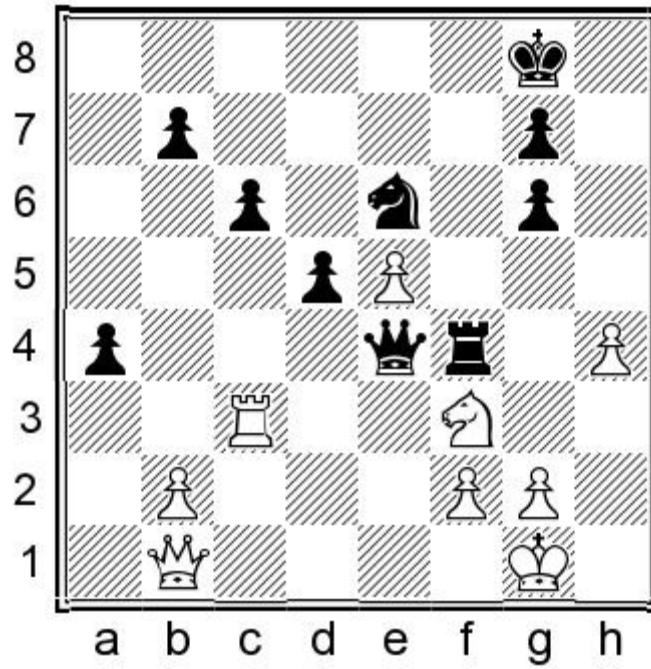
33.♖e3 ♙c4

This solution is fairly typical of So. He believes that the easiest way to exploit the extra material is in the endgame. However the strongest move was 33...♙b4.

34.♙d1

White should have accepted the offer to exchange: 34.♙xc4 dxc4 35.♖a3 b6 36.♖a4 ♖f4 37.♖a1, but Nepo prefers to seek his chances with queens on the board.

34...♖f4 35.♖c3 ♙b4 36.♙c1 a4 37.h4 ♔g8 38.♙b1 ♙e4



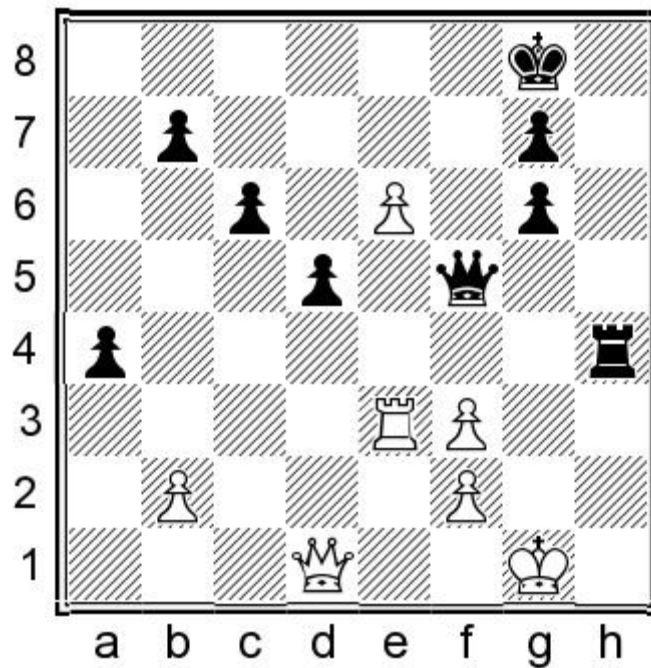
39. ♔d1

After 39. ♔xe4 ♖xe4 the endgame is completely hopeless.

39... ♘d4 40. ♖e3 ♘xf3+ 41. gxf3 ♔f5!

Everything is decided by an attack on the weakened white king.

42. e6 ♖xh4!



43.♖e4

After 43.e7 ♖h3 44.e8=♖+ ♔h7 not even an extra queen can save White.

43...♗xe4 44.fxe4 ♖xe4 45.♖d2 ♖xe6 46.♖a5 ♖g4+ 47.♔f1 b5 48.♖c7 g5 49.♖b8+ ♔h7 50.♖d6 b4

0–1

It is amazing how easily Wesley managed to win against an elite grandmaster. It is typical that So managed to win all the games he played with Black at the Olympiad. The USA drew their match against Russia, which allowed the Americans to keep the lead. The Olympiad reached its climax in the very last minutes of the final round. In a dramatic fight against Team Ukraine, the USA snatched gold and Wesley So had the best score on his board.

Wesley increased his rating even more in his next tournament, the Isle of Man Open. Although he was not among the winners, this tournament was important for his further improvement. His successful play with Black in Baku was not accidental; Wesley seemed to feel more confident when he played second fiddle. He had a good sense of dynamics, he noticed critical moments in the game and he often caught out opponents who lost their sense of danger. Such a successful game with Black was laudable. The problem was that So often played in a similar manner with White and waited for his opponent to initiate action. As a result, many of his games with White featured no fight at all. To overcome this disadvantage, we needed to diversify and to sharpen his opening repertoire. Almost two months were left until the London Classic, the last and most important tournament of the year, so we could afford to focus on preparation.

Very little time had passed since the start of the yearly GCT cycle, but the chess community's perception of Wesley So had changed dramatically. In Paris, he started as one of the outsiders; in St Louis, he was still a dark horse; he arrived in London as the leader of the circuit and the main contender for overall victory. Such abrupt changes in status worried me. Wesley is not a public person at all; heightened expectations could cause too much stress and excessive pressure. I was quite satisfied by the progress we had managed to achieve, eliminating certain shortcomings and even preparing individually for the opposition. Our sessions in London also confirmed that Wesley was in good playing shape. Still, only the tournament itself would be able to provide final answers.

So had an extremely successful start. In round one Nakamura blundered in the opening, which essentially determined the outcome of the game, but victory in round two proved much more difficult to achieve.

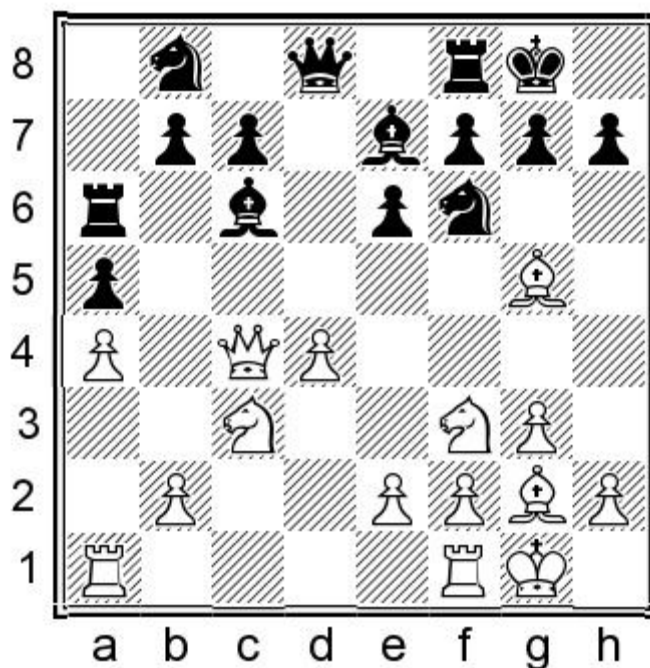
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Wesley So (2794)

Michael Adams (2748)

London 2016

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 d5 4.♙g2 ♙e7 5.♘f3 0-0 6.0-0 dxc4 7.♚c2 a6 8.a4 ♙d7 9.♚xc4 ♙c6 10.♙g5 a5
11.♘c3 ♞a6



12.♚d3!?

No-one had played this way before! The move in the game, preparing the e2–e4 advance, is quite logical. Previously White usually chose 12.e3.

12...♞b6 13.♚c2 h6

The most natural way to continue. Another option was 13...♙xf3 14.♙xf3 ♘c6 15.♙xf6 (15.e3 ♘b4 16.♚e2 ♘d7 is less promising) 15...♙xf6 16.e3 ♘b4 17.♚e2 when White has the initiative.

14.♙d2 ♙b4

Not allowing White to implement his main plan.

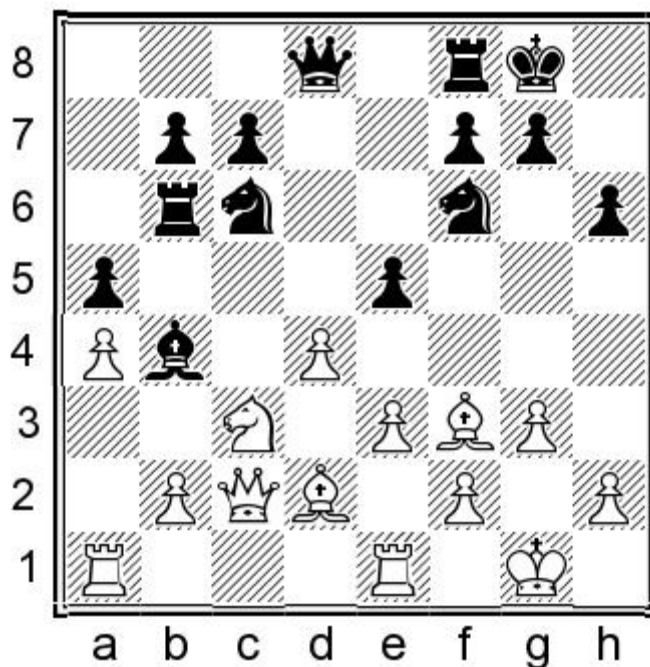
15.♞fe1

But White insists.

15...♙xf3

It was possible to give up the other bishop: 15...♙xc3!? 16.bxc3 ♙e4 17.♚a2 ♘c6 18.♞ad1, but the two bishops ensure the better prospects for White.

16.♙xf3 ♘c6 17.e3 e5



This reveals the logic behind the plan that Black started on move fifteen. In calmer lines the two bishops would ensure White a small but persistent advantage.

18.♙xc6!

The most principled response.

18...exd4

a) 18...♙xc3 19.♙xc3 exd4 20.♞ad1! ♞xc6 21.♞xd4 leads to a position where the white bishop is considerably stronger than the knight.

b) An interesting line is 18...♞xc6 19.dxe5 ♘d7 20.f4 ♘b6, with some compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

19.♙f3

Covering the g4-square, just in case.

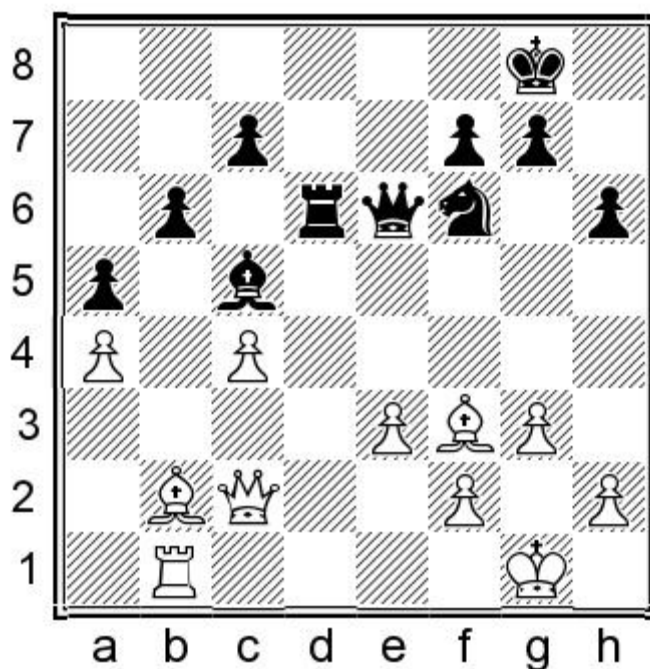
A more natural and better move was 19.♙g2, keeping the future advance of the e- and f-pawns in mind.

19...dxc3 20.bxc3 ♙c5 21.♞ab1!?

So spent almost half an hour on this modest move.

Another plan is also possible, viz. 21.♞ed1 With the idea of 22.c4. 21...♘d7 22.c4 ♚f6 23.♙xa5 ♚xf3 24.♞xd7 ♞e6 25.♞d5 b6 26.♙e1, but in this case the black pieces are too active.

21...♞d6 22.♞ed1 b6 23.c4 ♚e7 24.♙c3 ♞fd8 25.♙b2 ♚e6 26.♞xd6 ♞xd6



27.♞d1!?

It was possible to strengthen the position calmly with 27.♔g2

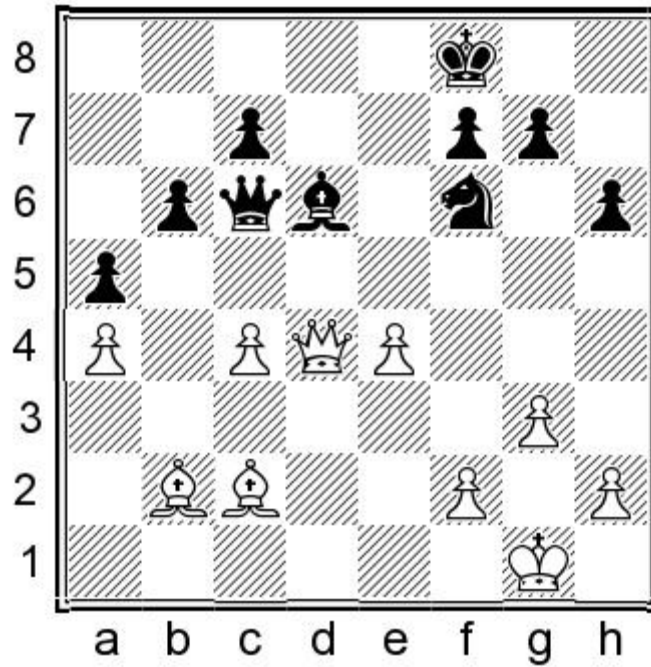
27...♞xd1+ 28.♚xd1 ♙d6

28...♚xc4 29.♙xf6 gxf6 30.♙d5 ♚b4 31.♚h5 does not lose because there is a defence: 31...♚b1+ 32.♔g2 ♚h7. However the position after 33.♚g4+ ♔f8 34.♚c8+ ♔g7 35.♚xc7 is very unpleasant for Black.

29.♚d4 ♚e8 30.♙d1 ♚c6

There were more chances of a successful defence after 30...♚e4.

31.♙c2 ♔f8 32.e4



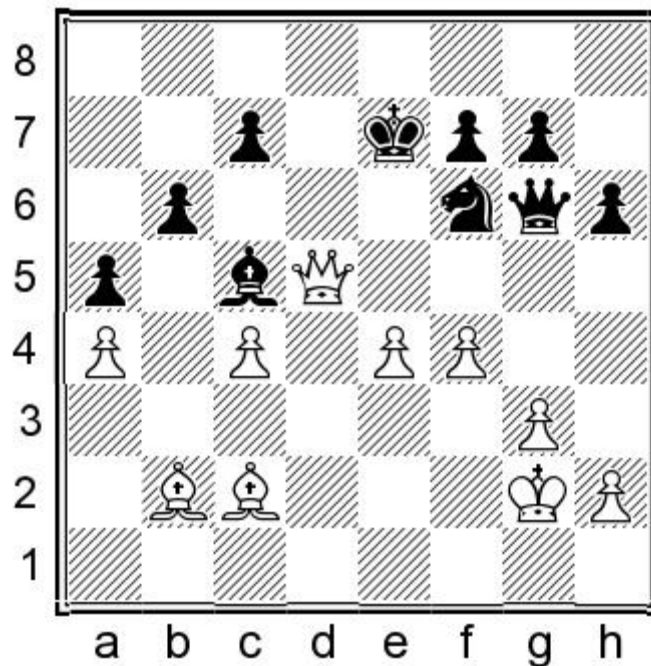
In this position too the pair of bishops and mobile pawn centre ensure a persistent advantage.

32...♙c5 33.♚d8+ ♘e8 34.♙d5 ♚g6 35.♗g2 ♜e7 36.f4

There was no rush for this advance. The preventive 36.h3 was quite good.

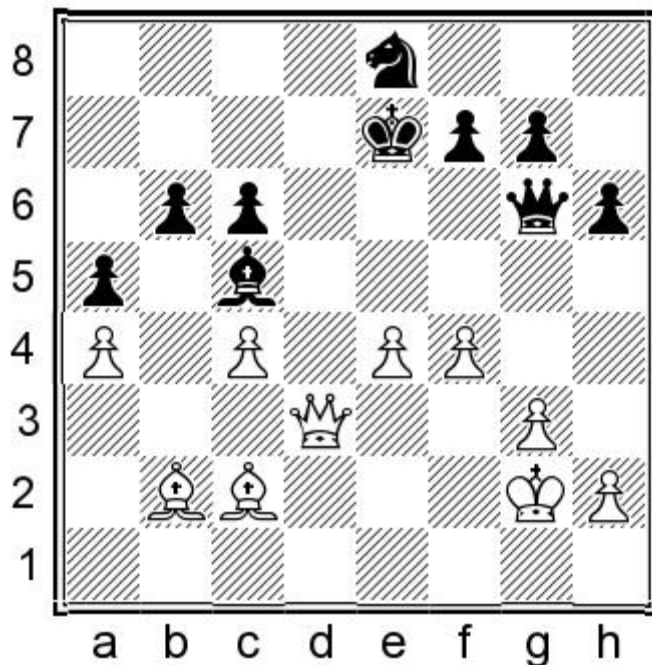
36...c6?!

It was better to activate the knight another way: 36...♞f6!



37.♚e5+ (37.♚c6 ♚g4!)=) 37...♜d7 38.h3 ♙d6 39.♚c3 ♞xe4 40.♚xg7 ♚e6 41.♚g4 f5 and the fight is still ahead.

37. ♔d3



37... ♘c7?

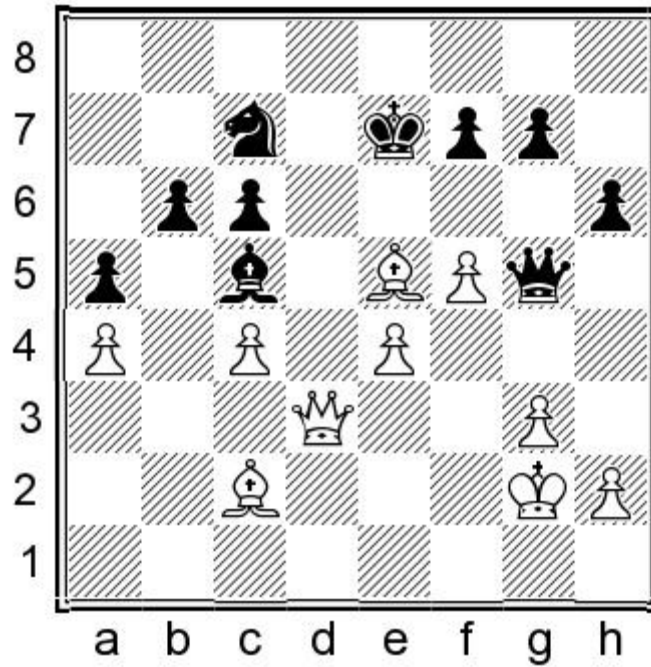
This move loses.

37... ♕e6 was necessary.

38. f5! ♔g5

The position after 38... ♕h7 39. e5 is bad, while after 38... ♕d6 39. ♔xd6+ ♖xd6 40. ♗xg7 Black would lose both a pawn and the game.

39. ♗e5!



39...♞e6

Black has to give up a piece since after 39...♞e8 40.♙f4 ♚h5 41.♙d1 he would lose his queen.

40.fxe6

1-0

The next three games ended in draws but this time there was no trace of the former caution and pragmatism. Wesley finally believed in himself and began to play real fighting chess. In round six he met his opponent head-on.

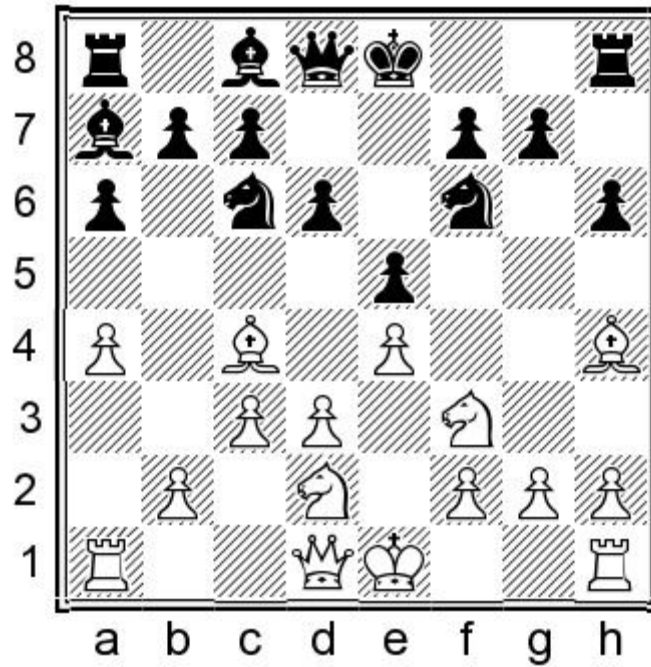
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Veselin Topalov (2760)

Wesley So (2794)

London 2016

1.e4 e5 2.♞f3 ♞c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.c3 ♞f6 5.d3 a6 6.a4 d6 7.♙g5 ♙a7 8.♞bd2 h6 9.♙h4



9...g5

A very bold and ambitious decision, but not forced at all. The solid 9...♔e7 isn't bad.

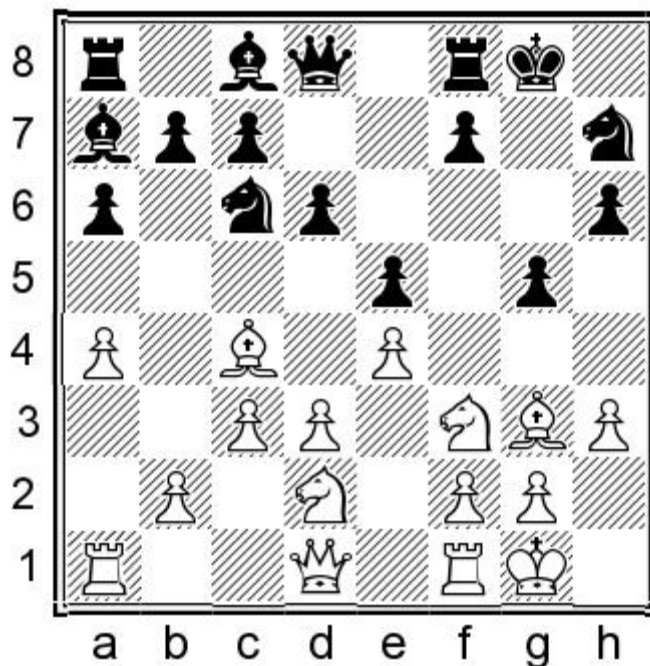
10.♙g3 0-0

10...g4 would be met by the unpleasant 11.♙h4! Black has to keep this possibility in mind all the time.

11.0-0 ♘h7!?

A strong move that So prepared specifically for this game. In Leuven, Wesley played 11...♙g7 12.♖e1 ♙e6 against Topalov and also won. However that was a blitz game.

12.h3



A good move, but not the only option. From this moment on, the opponents were on their own at the board.

12...h5!?

Pawns cannot retreat. The risky plan chosen by So is testament to his fighting spirit.

The more solid 12...♔g7!? 13.b4 f5 was worth considering.

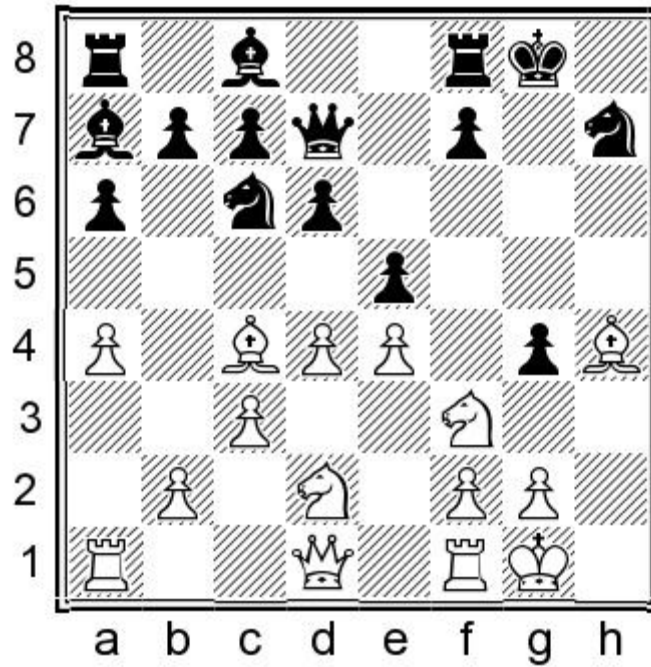
13.d4!?

As usual, Topalov takes up the challenge. His move is the most principled, although not the only one.

It was possible to play 13.h4 g4 14.♘e1 or 13.♕h1 h4 14.♙h2 g4 15.hxg4 ♙xg4.

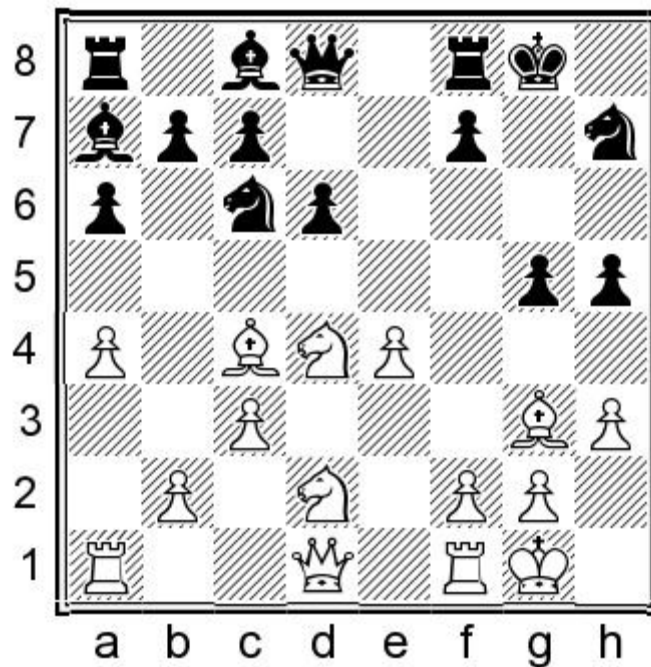
13...exd4!?

The interesting 13...g4!? wins a pawn, but after 14.♙h4 ♔d7 15.hxg4 hxg4



16. ♖h2 exd4 17. cxd4 ♜xd4 (17... ♙xd4 18. ♙e2) 18. ♖a3 the open position of the black king provides White with good compensation.

14. ♜xd4



14...g4

Black can now take the pawn: 14... ♜xd4 15. cxd4 h4 (15... ♙xd4 16. ♚xh5) 16. ♙h2 ♙xd4, but the position after 17. ♜f3! ♙xb2 18. ♖b1 ♙g7 19. e5 is not to everyone's liking.

15. hxg4

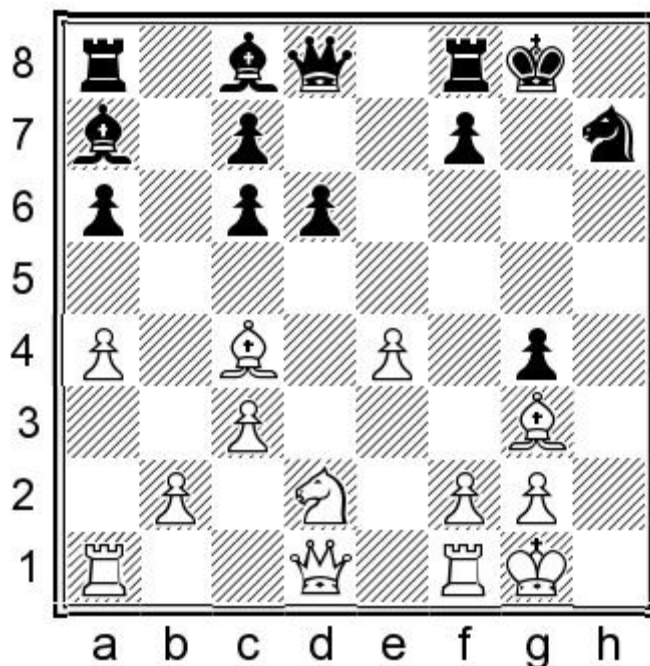
If White had played 15. ♖xc6! bxc6 16.h4 he could have avoided the trouble that occurred in the game.

15...hxg4!

Black chooses the most principled line.

15... ♖xd4 16.cxd4 ♙xg4 17. ♙e2 ♙xe2 18. ♚xe2 ♙xd4 19. ♖f3 would hand the initiative to White.

16. ♖xc6 bxc6



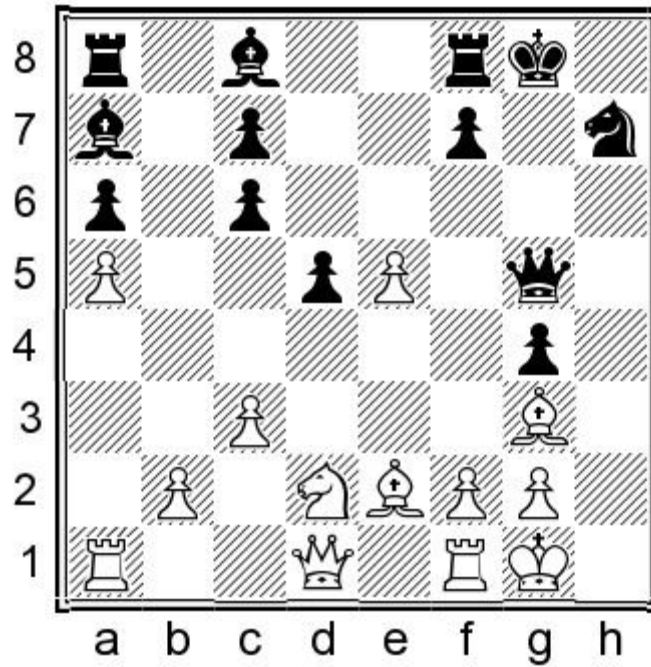
17.e5

17. ♖b3 ♖g5 leads to a double-edged position where any result is possible.

17...d5 18. ♙e2?!

A sluggish move. It was necessary to play 18. ♙d3! ♚g5 19. ♖b3 ♚h5 20. ♖d4 ♖g5 and now not 21. ♖xc6? ♖f3+! 22.gxf3 ♙g7!, where Black wins with a direct attack, but 21. ♚d2, and the main fight is still ahead.

18... ♚g5! 19.a5?

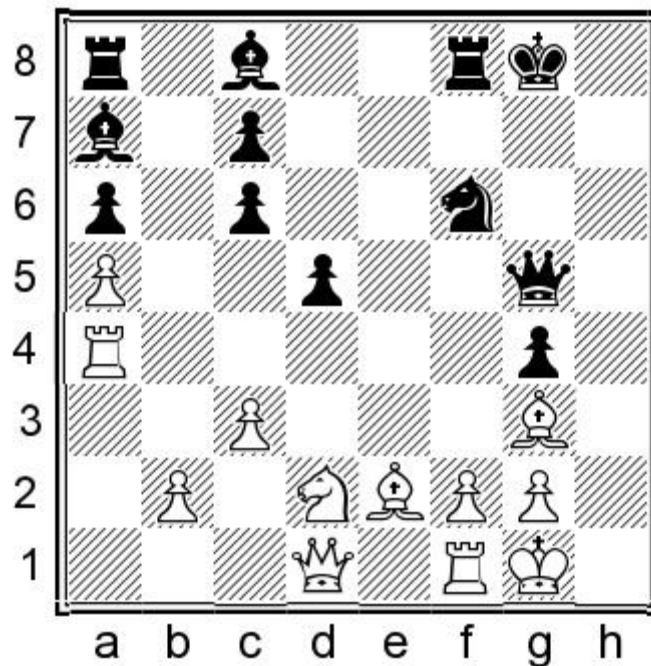


Topalov wants to bring the rook into play via a4, but there is no more time for such a luxury. Even after the stronger 19.♘b3 f5! 20.exf6 ♜xf6 it is not simple for White to defend.

19...f5!

Now Black wins.

20.exf6 ♜xf6 21.♞a4



21...♞f7

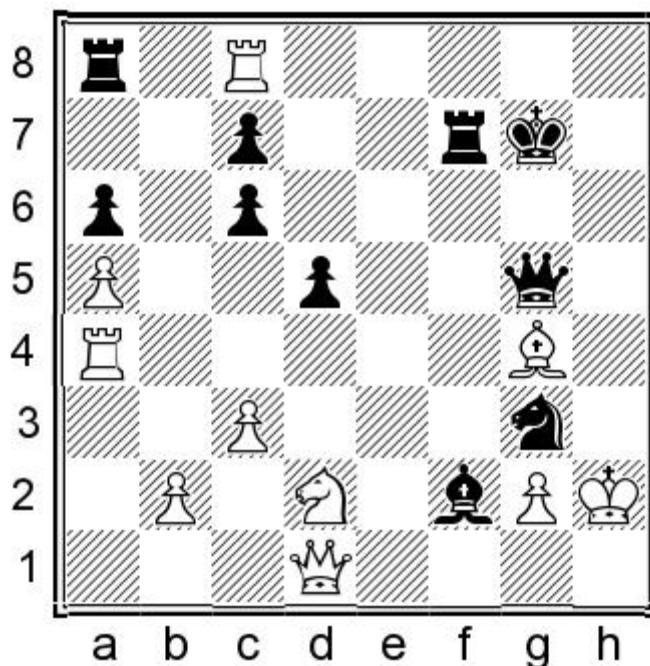
Black already had a choice.

21...♔g7 was very strong, with a decisive attack along the h-file.

22.♞e1

22.♞f4 ♞h7.

22...♘h5! 23.♙xg4 ♘xg3 24.♞e8+ ♔g7 25.♞xc8 ♙xf2+ 26.♔h2



26...♙e5!

The most spectacular move, although the pedestrian 26...♞xc8 wins as well.

27.♔h3 ♘e2

0-1

Wesley played the remaining games in a very confident manner and his lead was never in danger. He became the sole winner of the London Chess Classic and therefore won the 2016 Grand Chess Tour overall by a wide margin, 11.5 points ahead of second-placed Nakamura. In the January FIDE rating list, he was fourth in the world and crossed the magical 2800 threshold for the first time. Improvements in his play brought no less joy than his results. His games became richer and more interesting, and his immense talent revealed its new sides. His results for the year exceeded our most optimistic expectations. It was natural for us to continue the collaboration. As usual, it was Lotis who helped Wesley and took care of him during tournaments while I continued to teach him chess long-distance.

Following established tradition, the new chess year 2017 began with the tournament in Wijk aan Zee. I was not on site, but there was no particular need to be since I knew the environment and the realities of

that tournament all too well.

However it was a somewhat unusual role that my student was forced to play. An ordinary participant not too long ago, he was now already considered one of the tournament favourites. His most recent achievements justified this since Wesley had won the last two super-tournaments in convincing style. Since Carlsen hadn't played in either of them, everyone was anticipating his duel with So in Wijk. How would the new situation affect my student? Even though we were communicating every day, it was difficult for me to gauge his psychological condition at a distance. The only conclusion I was able to make was that Wesley played the most creative game that I had ever seen from him. When we started working together, he felt most comfortable in quiet and relatively calm positions; now he was the one who began to rock the boat, as the next game illustrates well.

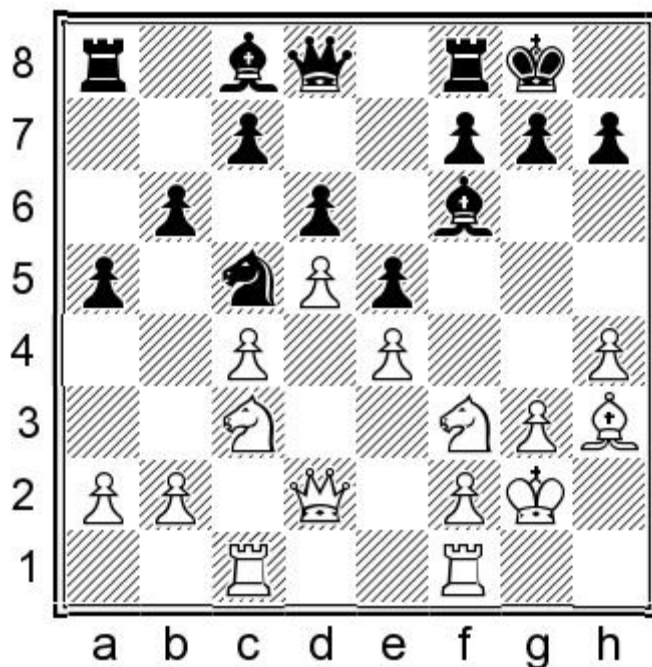
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Wesley So (2808)

Richard Rapport (2702)

Wijk aan Zee 2017

1.♘f3 ♘f6 2.g3 b6 3.d4 ♙b7 4.c4 e6 5.♙g2 ♙e7 6.0-0 0-0 7.♘c3 ♘e4 8.♙d2 ♙f6 9.♞c1 ♘xd2
10.♞xd2 d6 11.d5 e5 12.e4 ♘d7 13.h4 a5 14.♙h3 ♘c5 15.♔g2 ♙c8

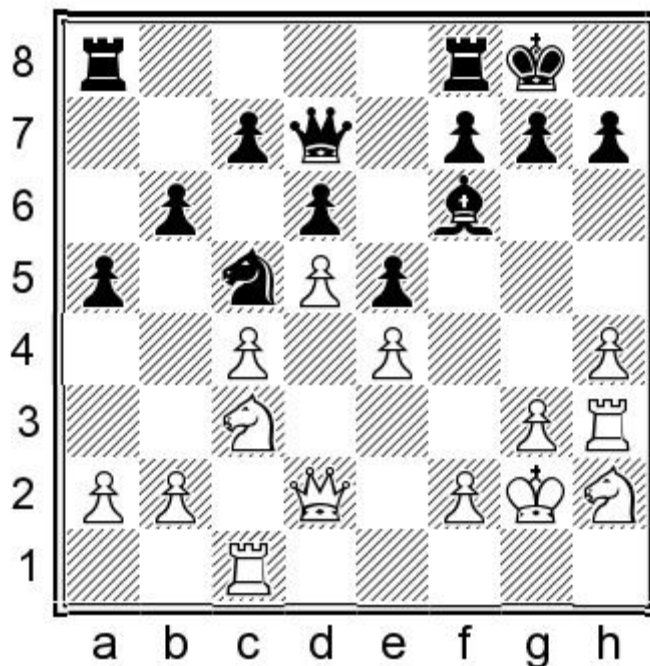


Is there anything new in this calm position!?

16.♞h1!?

This is! At first glance it appears quite strange. 16.♙xc8 ♞xc8 17.♞e2 ♙e7 18.♘d2 was played in Tomashevsky-Ponomarev (Baku Olympiad 2016) and is much easier to understand. White has a small but comfortable advantage.

16...♙xc8+ 17.♞xc8 ♞d7 18.♘h2!?



This is even more surprising, and it took So a lot of time to choose it, but at least White's plan is becoming clearer. He is going to launch a pawn storm on the kingside, when the rook on the third rank would be useful.

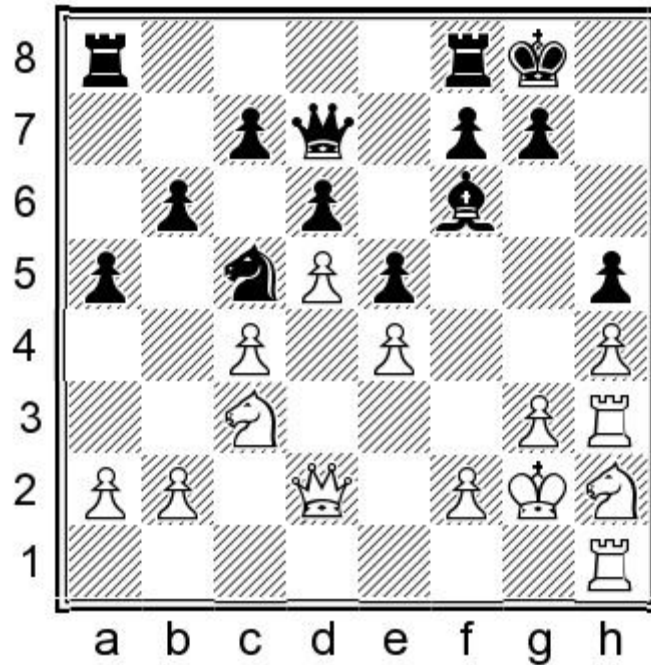
18...h5

18...♔e7 19.g4 h5 20.♖g3! is a good illustration of this idea.

19.f3?

The twenty-two minutes spent on this move indicate that the original idea was improvisation rather than the result of home preparation. My favourite maxim that non-standard positions demand non-standard solutions could have been confirmed again.

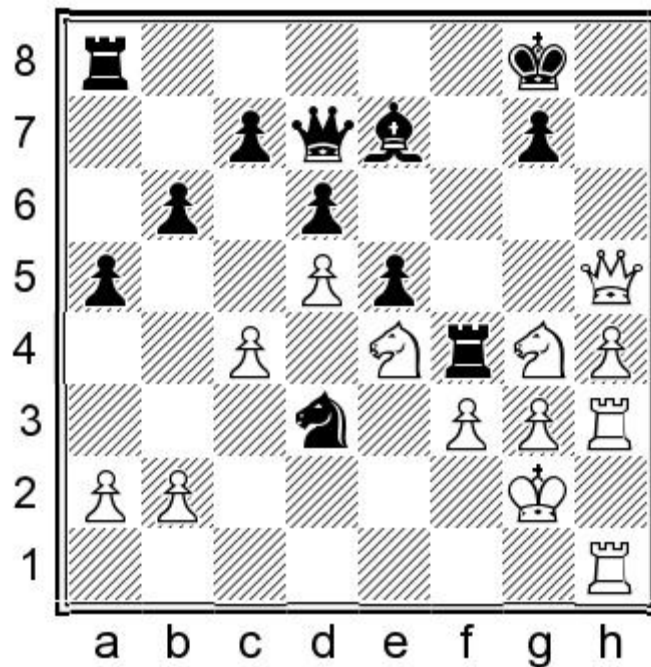
In any case, the move 19.♖h1! cannot be called obvious!



White's plan is revealed in the following, stronger, lines. 19...♙e7!

[19...g6 20.g4! ♙g7 (or 20...hxg4 21.♞g3 ♙g7 22.♜xg4 f5 23.♞h6+ and miraculously all the white pieces are in the correct places) 21.gxh5 f5 22.♞g3! fxe4 23.h6 ♙f6 24.h5 g5 25.♞e2 ♞f5 26.♞g4 White's position is better.]

20.♞e2 f5 21.♞xh5 fxe4 22.♞g4 ♞d3 (22...♞f5 23.♞g6 ♜h8 24.♞e1) 23.♞xe4 ♞f4 24.f3

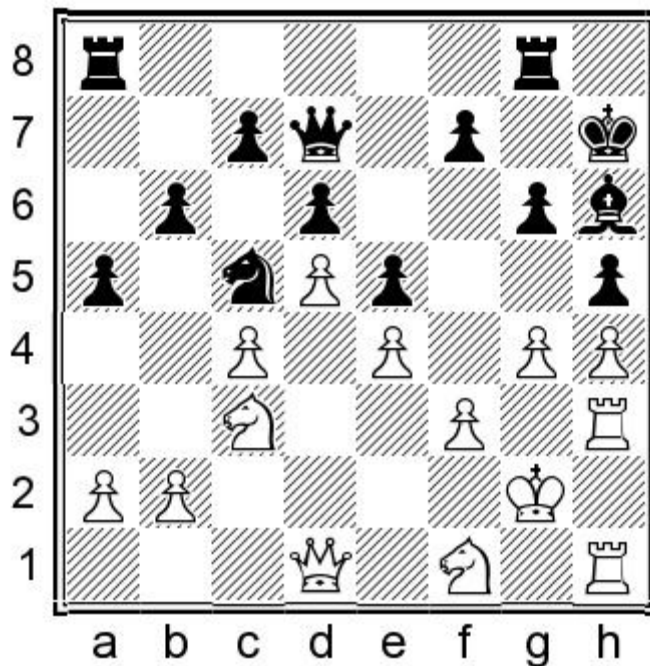


In this case too the strong knights determine White's advantage. The weak move in the game closes the important d1-h5 diagonal for the white queen and also weakens the king's position.

19...g6 20.g4 ♜h7 21.♞h1 ♞g8

It would be even more active to play 21...♔g7 immediately in order to prepare ...f7–f5.

22.♚d1 ♔g7 23.♘f1 ♔h6



24.♕f2?

This natural move has a technical flaw. It would have been better to play 24.♘g3 ♖af8 25.♕f1! with a position that is still possible to defend.

24...♔c1!

Quite spectacular! The bishop attacks the b2-pawn and is ready to move to a more important diagonal.

25.♘g3

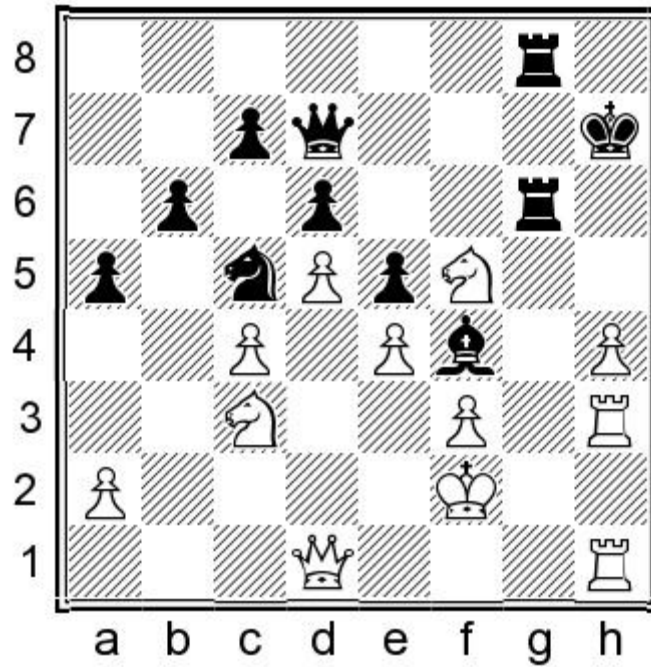
White prefers active defence.

25.b3 ♔b2 26.♘b5 f5 would cede the initiative to his opponent.

25...♔xb2 26.♘b5 ♔c1!?

26...c6!? 27.dxc6 ♚xc6 28.gxh5 ♘e6!?

27.gxh5 ♔f4 28.♘c3 f5!? 29.hxg6+ ♖xg6 30.♘xf5 ♖ag8



31. ♔f1?

31. ♘e2 b5 32. ♕c2 would be the lesser evil, even though in this case White's position is not attractive.

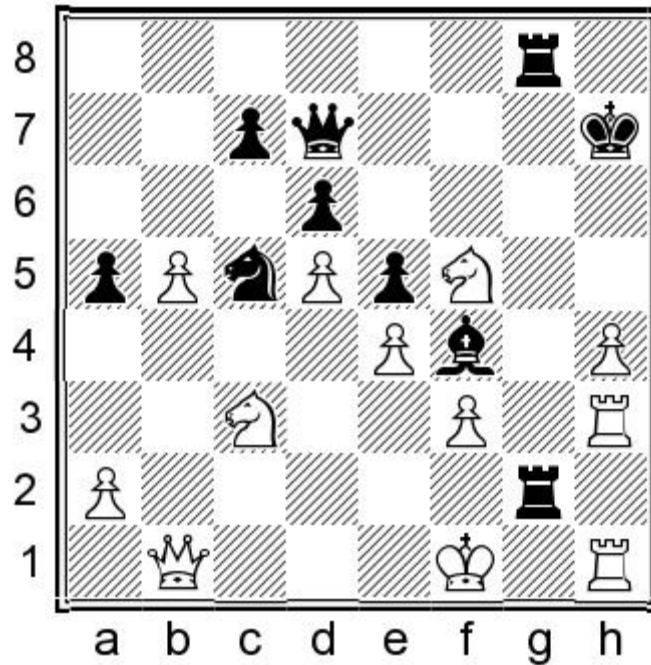
31...b5!!

A beautiful solution! Much weaker is 31... ♖g2 32. ♘e2 b5 33. ♘xf4 exf4 34. ♖3h2 ♖xh2 35. ♖xh2 bxc4 36. ♖g2 and White can hold the position.

32.cxb5

This is virtually forced. After 32. ♕e2 b4 White would have to face the additional danger of a passed pawn on the queenside.

32... ♖g2 33. ♕b1



33...♔f7?

With more than enough time on his clock, Rapport manages to lose a game he had played so well in the space of a few moves.

a) The simplest way was 33...♖d2! 34.♖g1 (34.♘e2 is bad: 34...♘d3 35.♖3h2 ♔xb5!) 34...♖xg1+ 35.♔xg1 ♘d3 36.♘e2 ♙e3+ 37.♔f1 ♘b2!-+.

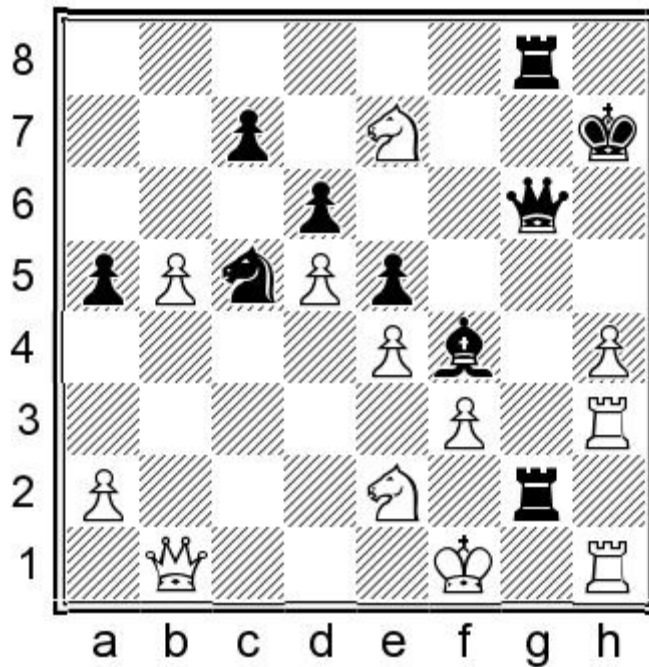
b) There is also a way suggested by the computer: 33...c6! 34.dxc6 (34.♘e2 ♔a7 35.♖g3 ♖f2+! 36.♔e1 ♙xg3 37.♘fxg3 ♖xf3-+) 34...♔a7 35.b6 ♔a6+ 36.♔b5 ♔xb5+ 37.♘xb5 ♘d3.

34.♘e2! ♔g6??

Yet another mistake, this time decisive.

Black had already allowed the win to slip, but he still had chances of a draw with 34...♖xe2! 35.♔xe2 ♖g2+ 36.♔f1 ♔g8 when White is forced to repeat moves: 37.♘e7 ♔g7 38.♘f5.

35.♘e7!+-



35...♖f2+

Only now did Rapport take time to think and find the best practical move. Alas, it didn't help.

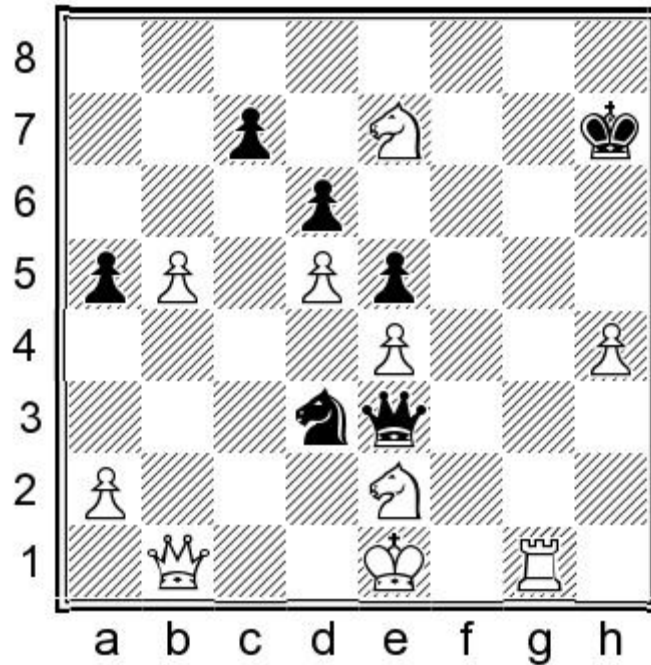
35...♕f7 36.♘xg8 ♕xg8 37.♖g1 loses trivially.

36.♔xf2 ♕g2+ 37.♔e1 ♖g3 38.♖xg3!

The only move that wins!!

38.♘xg3 ♕xg3+ 39.♔d1 ♕xf3+ leads to a draw by perpetual check, but after 38.♖1h2 ♕xf3 any result is possible.

38...♕xh1+ 39.♖g1 ♕xf3 40.♘xf4 ♕e3+ 41.♘e2 ♘d3+



42. ♔xd3!

Finally White gets a chance to play a beautiful move.

42. ♔d1 ♖f2+ 43. ♔c2 ♔xe2+ would lead to a draw.

42... ♔xd3

Now White has a big material advantage and a deadly attack.

43. ♖g8! ♔f3 44. h5

A very nice setup; ♖g6/♖f6 is unavoidable.

44... ♔h8 45. ♖g6 ♔h1+ 46. ♔d2 ♔xe4 47. ♖f6 ♔b4+ 48. ♔e3 1-0

‘Fortune favours the brave’ seemed to be the motto for that game and some others played by So in this tournament. The following one, however, was different.

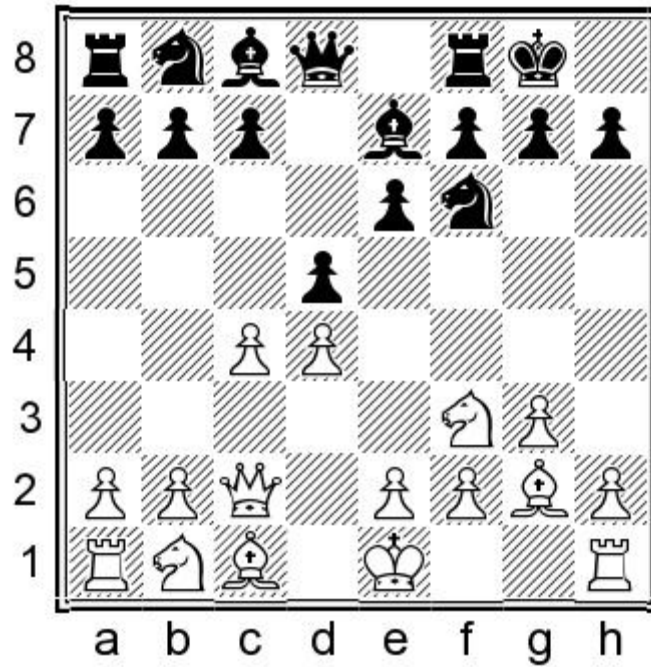
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Wesley So (2808)

Radosław Wojtaszek (2750)

Wijk aan Zee 2017

1. c4 ♖f6 2. ♖f3 e6 3. g3 d5 4. d4 ♔e7 5. ♔g2 0-0 6. ♔c2



In this way White tries to avoid the classical lines of the Catalan that involve a capture on c4, however it gives Black additional options and Wojtaszek uses one of them.

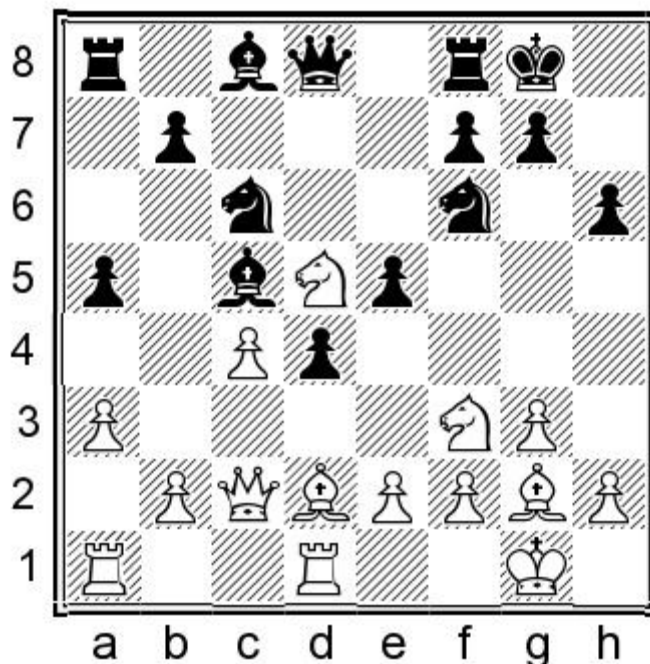
6...c5 7.0-0 ♖c6

Much more frequent is 7...cxd4 8.♗xd4 followed by 8...♖c6 (or 8...e5).

8.dxc5 d4 9.a3

This is not the only possible move. Other players have tried 9.♞d1, while Wojtaszek himself played 9.♙g5 against Krivoruchko.

9...a5 10.♞d1 e5 11.♗c3 ♙xc5 12.♗d5 h6 13.♙d2!?



This move hasn't been tried before. It threatens 14.b4.

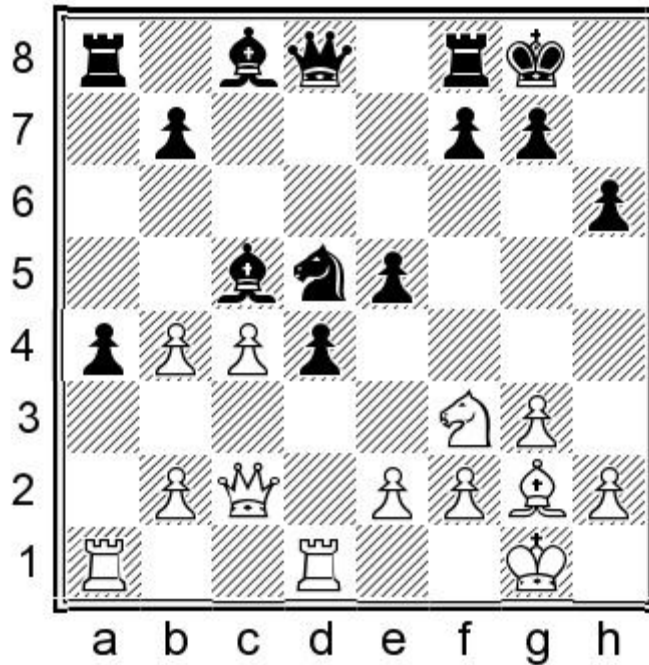
13...a4 14.♙b4 ♜xb4

Black's choice was not simple.

a) 14...♙xb4 15.axb4 ♚d6 (or 15...♞xd5 16.cxd5 ♚xd5 17.♞g5 e4 18.♞xe4 ♙f5 19.♚c5 ♙xe4 20.♚xd5 ♙xd5 21.♙xd5 with the better endgame for White) 16.♞xa4 (16.♞xf6+ ♚xf6 17.♞xa4 ♙f5 leads to the same position) 16...♙f5! 17.♞xf6+ ♚xf6 (it is dangerous to play 17...gxf6 18.♚xf5 ♞xa4 19.♚g4+ ♜h8 20.♚h5 ♜g7 21.b5 ♞e7 22.b3 when White has full compensation for the exchange) 18.♚b3 ♞xa4 19.♚xa4 d3 (19...e4 20.♞e1! ♞e5 21.b3 also favours White) 20.exd3 ♙g4 21.b5 ♞e7 22.♞d2 ♙xd1 23.♚xd1 and White's chances are better.

b) 14...♙d6 was probably the best solution, but it is difficult for a human being to discover such a move.

15.axb4 ♞xd5



16.bxc5!

Obviously not 16.cxd5? ♔d6 which cedes the initiative to Black.

16...♞b4 17.♚d2 ♞c6 18.b4

It is difficult not to make such an appealing move.

18.e3 is a good alternative.

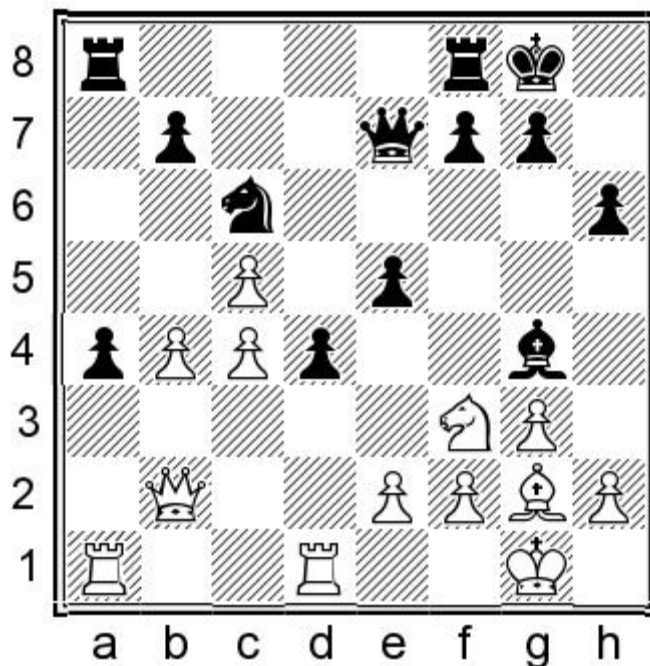
18...♚e7

It is difficult to decide on 18...♔e6 19.b5 ♞a5 20.♞xe5 ♞b3 21.♚b4 ♞xa1 22.♞xa1, so it was worth considering 18...♚c7, preparing ... ♔e6.

19.♚b2!

This prepares the b4-b5 advance. An immediate 19.b5 ♞a5 20.♞xa4 ♞b3 21.♚b4 ♞xa4 22.♚xa4 ♞xc5 is too early since Black gets excellent play.

19...♔g4



20. ♖e1!

20. b5 ♘d8 21. ♚a3 was not bad either, but the subtle move in the game poses his opponent more problems. Now Black has to reckon with ideas like e2–e3 and ♘f3–d2.

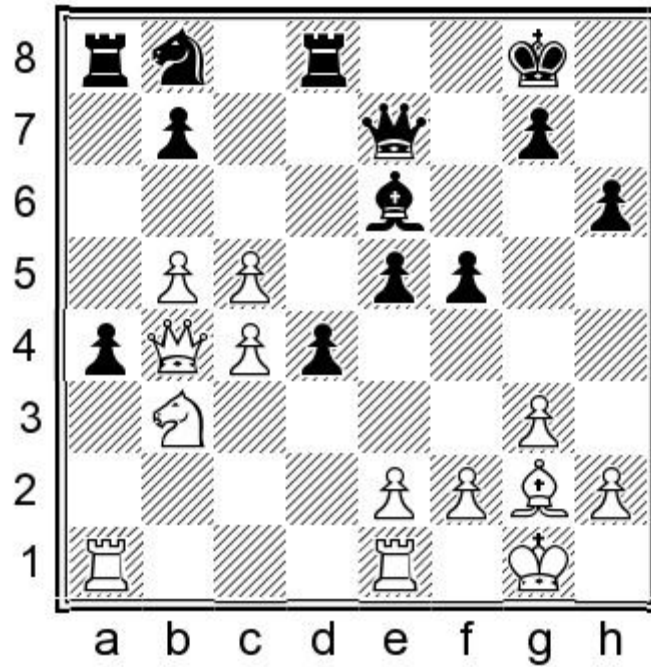
20... ♜fd8 21. ♘d2! ♙e6

The active 21...d3!? wouldn't solve Black's problems either due to 22. e3! ♙f5 23. b5 ♘b8 24. ♙d5.

22. b5 ♘b8

Yet again, an attempt at active counterplay wouldn't succeed: 22... ♘a5 23. ♜xa4 ♘xc4 24. ♜xc4 ♙xc4 25. ♘xc4 ♚xc5 26. ♜c1 and White has a clear advantage.

23. ♚b4 f5 24. ♘b3!

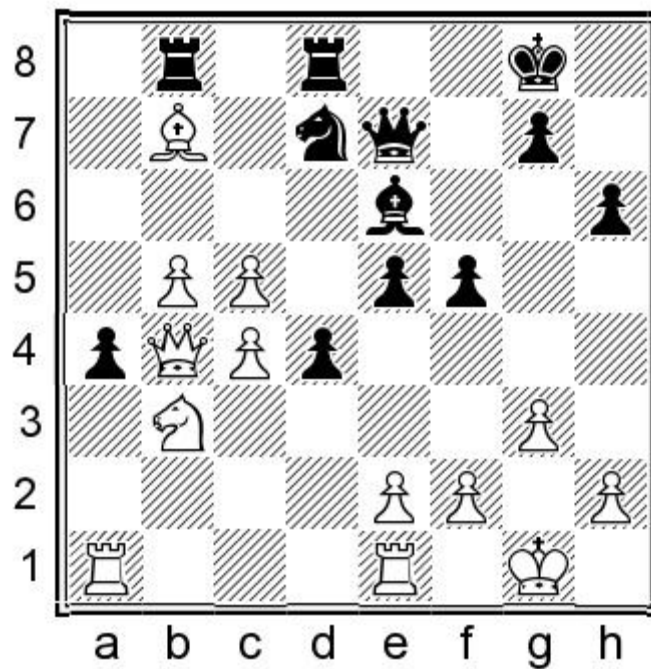


Using the same idea of a pin along the a-file.

24...♞d7?

24...♙f7 25.♖xa4 ♜xa4 26.♚xa4 e4 would be more tenacious, but even here White's chances are clearly better after 27.♞d1.

25.♙xb7 ♜ab8

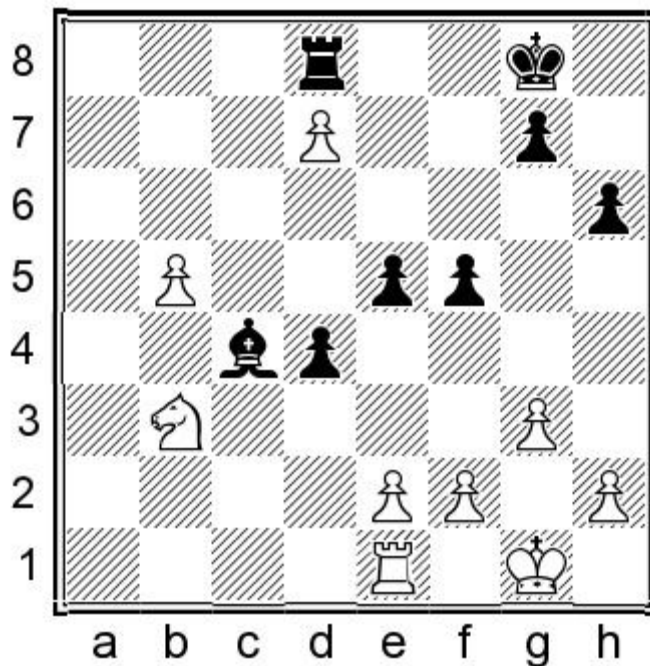


26.♜xa4!

A final combination.

Even the more straightforward 26.♘a5 ♖xc5 27.♘c6 was possible, but in this case Black can still offer resistance with 27...♚d6 28.♘xb8 ♜xb8 29.♙g2 ♞b6.

26...♜xb7 27.c6 ♞xb4 28.♜xb4 ♝c7 29.cxd7 ♜xc4 30.♜xc4 ♙xc4



31.♜c1! ♙e6 32.♜c8

32.b6 would win equally easily.

32...♜xc8 33.dxc8=♞+ ♙xc8 34.b6

And White wins a piece.

1-0

There was plenty of intrigue before the last round. So was in the lead but only half a point separated him from Carlsen and Aronian. Wesley had Black against Nepomniachtchi, Aronian had Black against Andreikin, and Carlsen had White against Karjakin, his recent opponent in the World Championship match, which made the plot even thicker. It appeared that So would have to share first place, especially since the World Champion seemed to be gaining the upper hand as his game progressed. However, Karjakin managed to escape, so Carlsen failed to win. As for Aronian, he even lost, although this no longer mattered for first place since Wesley quickly won his game by punishing his opponent for taking too many risks in the opening.

Yet another tournament win allowed So to climb the rating list once again, taking third place, just behind Carlsen and Caruana. We liked it, but at the same time I realised that my student's level of play in Wijk was not as good as the number of points he had earned. It is nice to be favoured by fortune, but

one shouldn't count on receiving her favours endlessly, thus it was very important to understand the strong and weak sides of Wesley's transformed game.

Modern technologies can create the illusion of being present at a tournament. Spectators have an opportunity to follow games in real time and see the time players spend on each move. I added this information to Wesley's detailed reports about his daily tournament routine and his decision-making mechanism.

Almost two months remained until the next tournament, the US Open.

We had training sessions twice a week; it didn't appear enough but my student was so serious and focused that such a schedule had obvious merits. I had enough time to plan an upcoming meeting in detail and to prepare appropriate material, while Wesley also had time to analyse his coach's proposals and recommendations. As we got closer to the tournament, we began to put more focus on specific training. We took into account all the details of the opponent's play and his psychological makeup; we chose a specific opening variation together, then Wesley fine-tuned the opening on his own directly before the game. Given the time difference between our two countries and the excellent results in St Louis, it was quite logical to continue using this approach. Moreover, the US Championship was traditionally held in St Louis as well.

The upcoming tournament was of particular importance for Wesley, especially after his recent high-profile successes. It was the third US Championship of his career. His debut in 2015 was spoiled by factors that were not directly related to chess — suffice it to remember a forfeit that was given to him by an arbiter for making notes during the game. The following year, he shared second and third places with Nakamura, behind the winner, Caruana. This year, Fabiano Caruana and Hikaru Nakamura were Wesley So's principal opponents once again. Although Wesley remained the only one from the Big Three American players who had not yet managed to win his country's championship, no-one, let alone his main rivals, was going to give him any gifts.

The tournament unfolded in a different way from the previous year. Whether it was due to a more balanced field or to the favourites' excessive focus on the end result, for a long time there was no clear leader. Round nine proved to be decisive. With White against Alexander Onischuk, Nakamura wanted to win at all costs, took unacceptable risks, and lost. In parallel, a veritable drama played out in the game between Varuzhan Akobian and Caruana. Fabiano completely outplayed his opponent and obtained a totally won position. After the first time control, he had two extra pawns while his opponent had no compensation at all. Incredibly, he managed to lose. Wesley, on the other hand, managed to win, producing an excellent game that was certainly his best of the tournament.

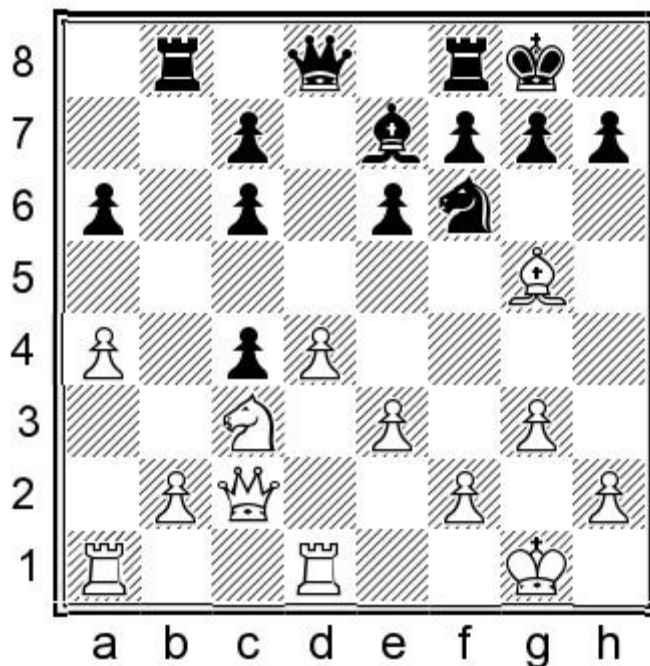
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Jeffery Xiong (2674)

Wesley So (2822)

Saint Louis 2017

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 d5 4.♙g2 ♙e7 5.♘f3 0-0 6.0-0 dxc4 7.♚c2 a6 8.a4 ♙d7 9.♞d1 ♙c6 10.♘c3
♙xf3 11.♙xf3 ♘c6 12.♙xc6 bxc6 13.♙g5 ♞b8 14.e3



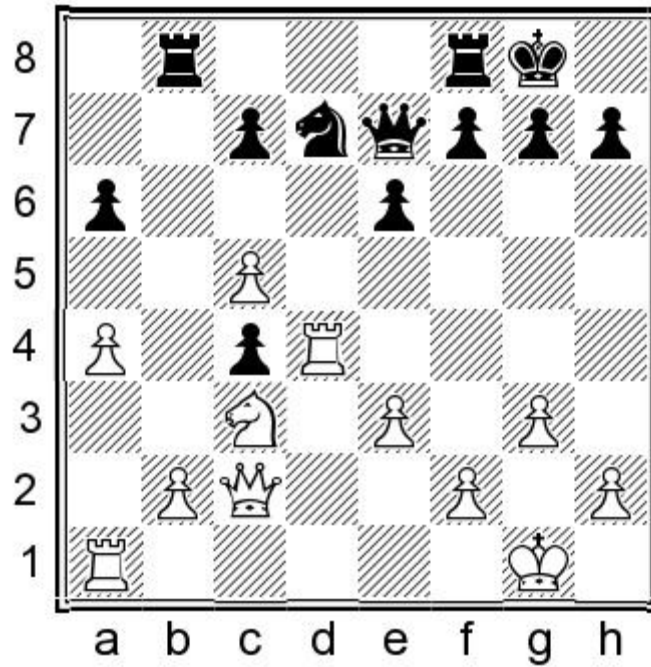
14...c5

This position has occurred many times before. In addition to the move in the game, Black has also tried 14...a5, 14...♘e8 and 14...h6. 14...♘d5 15.♙xe7 ♚xe7 16.♘e4 was played in Xiong-Harmon-Vellotti, USA 2016. The pawn weaknesses on the c-file give White some advantage. So chooses a different plan.

15.dxc5 ♜e8 16.♞d4 ♘d7N

In the only game where this position had occurred before, Black went with 16...♞b4, but after 17.♘a2 ♜xa4 18.♘xb4 ♜xa1+ 19.♙g2 he was still unable to solve all his problems (Sjugirov-Smirnov, Novosibirsk 2012). During home preparation, Wesley found a way to equalise immediately.

17.♙xe7 ♜xe7



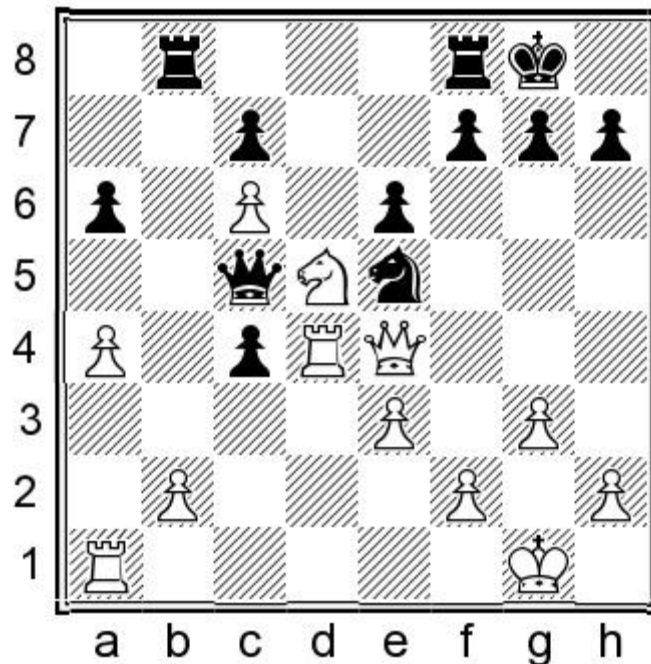
18.c6?!

Xiong took a lot of time over this move. Indeed, the position is not as simple as it first appears. Objectively the move in the game is not bad, but it requires White to be extremely precise later.

a) The strongest way to continue was the by no means obvious 18.f4, e.g. 18...♘xc5 19.♙xc4 ♘b3 20.♞d1 ♘a5 21.♞cd4 ♚c5=.

b) By contrast, the natural 18.♙xc4 would lead to serious problems for White: 18...♘e5 19.♞e4 ♚xc5.

18...♘e5 19.♞e4 ♚xc5 20.♘d5



Jeffery was counting on this spectacular move.

20...♖d3 21.♗xc7

Suddenly, the position has sharpened and as a result the price of every move increases dramatically. It would be worse to play 21.b4 cxb3 22.♕xd3 exd5 23.♖b1 b2 or 21.♗f4 ♗xb2 with advantage for Black in both cases.

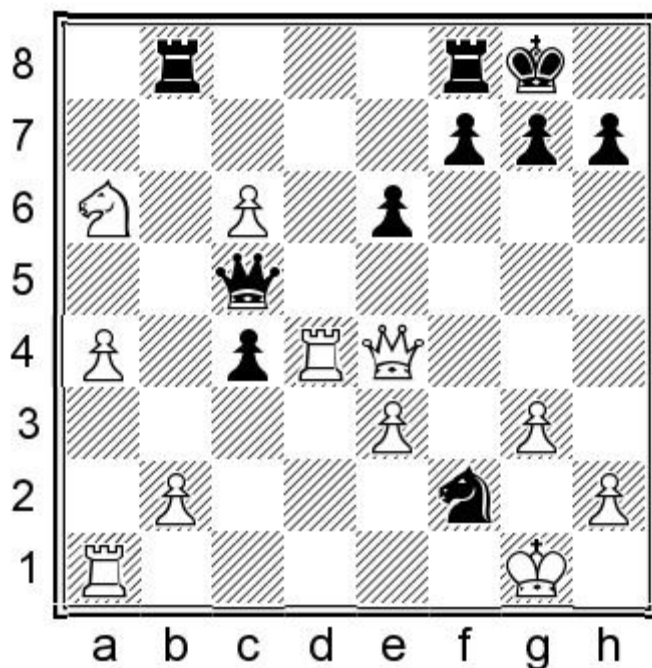
21...♗xf2!

A spectacular shot that Black had planned far in advance.

21...♖xb2 22.♖xc4 ♗xf2 23.♕xh7+ ♔xh7 24.♖xc5 ♗h3+ 25.♔h1 ♗f2+ would only lead to an equal position.

22.♔xf2?

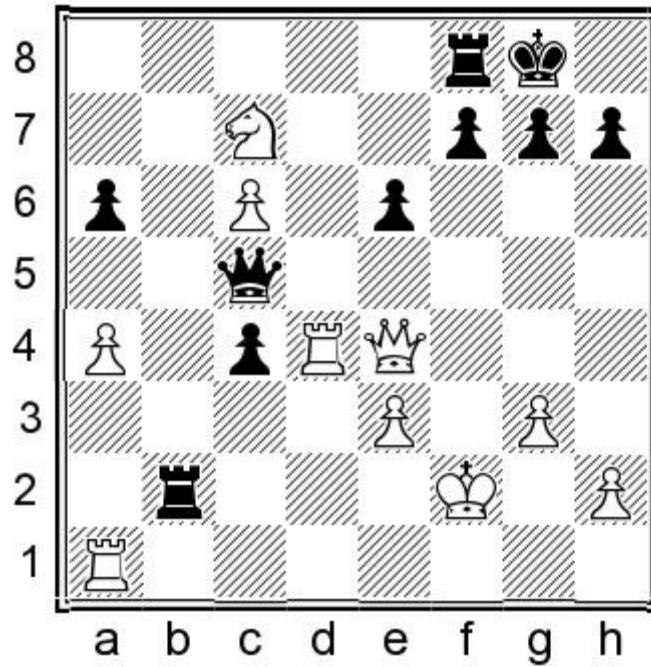
This mistake is, in fact, the only one in the game. It was difficult to find a path to a draw, especially since White was already in serious time trouble. The intermediate move 22.♗xa6! was necessary:



22...♕g5! (22...♗xe4 23.♗xc5 ♗xc5 24.♖xc4 ♗a6 25.c7 ♖bc8 26.♖ac1 is weaker, when Black has to fight for a draw; An interesting line was 22...♗h3+!? 23.♔f1 ♕b6 24.♗xb8 ♕xb2 25.♕f3 ♕xa1+, but after 26.♖d1 ♕xa4 27.c7 c3 the chances are equal) 23.♔xf2 is much stronger now, e.g. 23...♖xb2+ 24.♔e1 ♖xh2 25.♕f3 ♖h1+ 26.♕xh1 ♕xe3+ 27.♔f1 ♕xd4 28.♖e1 ♕b6 29.♕h5! ♕xa6 30.♕b5.

It is difficult to find this sequence of moves in time trouble. But why is the immediate capture bad?

22...♖xb2+



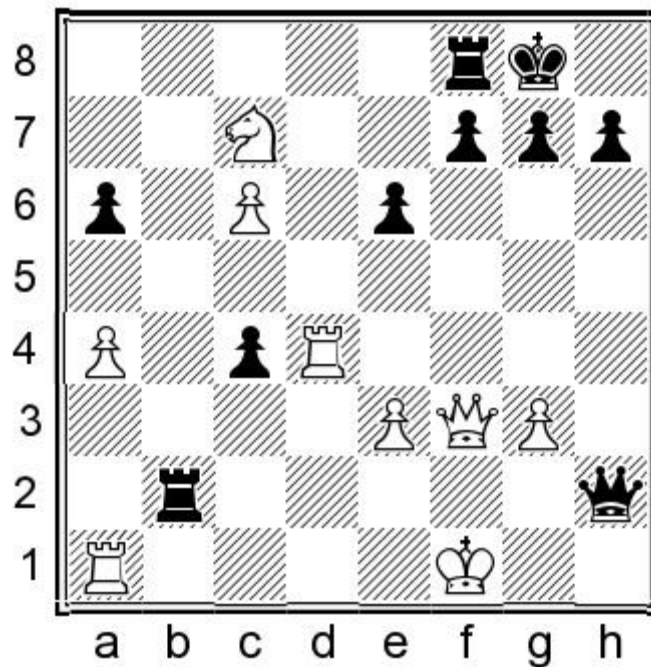
23.♔f1

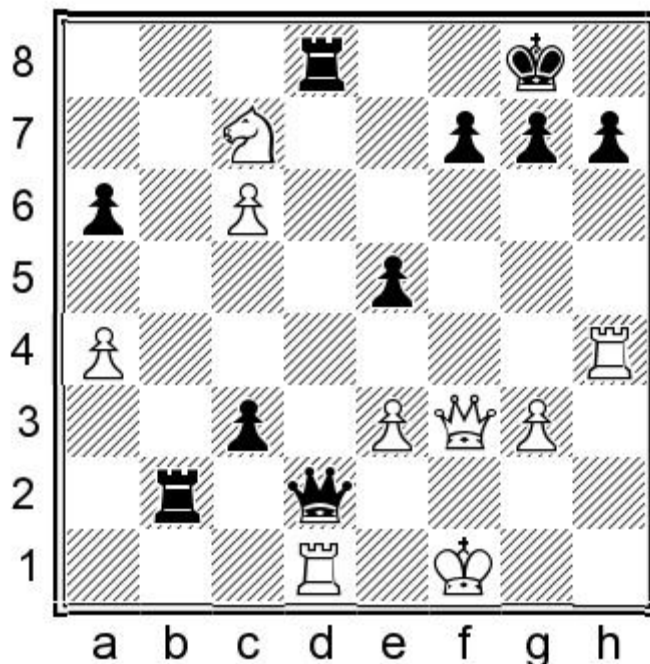
a) It would be very bad to play 23.♔g1? ♕h5+.

b) A better line is 23.♔e1, but even this does not solve the problems: 23...♕h5 24.♖d2 ♖xd2 25.♔xd2 ♖d8+! 26.♔c3 ♕a5+ 27.♔xc4 ♕xc7.

23...♕h5 24.♖g4 ♕xh2 25.♕f3

Our silicon friend doesn't see any particular problems for White, but in this case the grandmaster's intuition proves better than brute force.





Quite spectacular!

29. ♘d5

29. ♖xd2 ♜xd2 30. ♔g1 ♜b1+ 31. ♚f1 c2–+

29... ♖xd5 30. ♖d4 ♖xd4!

Accuracy till the very end!

It wasn't too late to lose: 30...exd4?? 31.c7.

31.exd4 ♚xd1+

Followed by 31... ♚xd1+ 32. ♚xd1 c2.

0–1

Three players were in the lead before the last round, but they were not the favourites that everyone expected. The three contenders for the title were Wesley So, Alexander Onischuk and Varuzhan Akobian. All three had to play with Black, and Wesley's chances looked best. His opponent was the young grandmaster Daniel Naroditsky; Akobian was playing Nakamura while Onischuk faced Gata Kamsky. I have already compared my student's playing style with former World Champion Petrosian. Whenever possible, Tigran Vartanovich generally tried to avoid any risk, and he never took risks on his own in the last round. This approach often brought him success. His opponents were too excited by a real chance to win a tournament, lost their composure and stumbled at a crucial moment.

The great champion's recipe worked well for Wesley. Following a bloodless draw in his game, So quickly found himself in the role of spectator. Onischuk and Kamsky also drew; Akobian was unable to hold an equal position and lost. Onischuk and So shared first place and had to determine the title by

tiebreaks. Wesley managed to win the first game with White. In the second game, he was too direct in playing for a draw and found himself in a losing position. However, with some assistance from his opponent, he managed to escape and won the coveted title.

Our lucky streak continued. Wesley remained unbeaten in sixty-seven classical games and moved up to second place in the world rankings. Only the World Champion was ahead of him and the distance between them did not appear too great.

To outsiders everything seemed fine, but I was concerned by Wesley's striving for safety, which had manifested itself once again in the US Open. It was markedly pronounced at the finish of the tournament when he was in with a real shout of overall victory. In the penultimate round against Kamsky, he tried to eliminate all risks, and in his last game he didn't even try to fight. It is impossible to beat such a strong and experienced player as Kamsky in a bland game completely devoid of dynamics; it is also easy to lose one's sense of danger, which is what happened to So in this game. It seemed to me that we could improve results significantly if Wesley intensified his game. In practical terms, it would mean not playing for a draw, even with Black. I believed that Wesley would gain an advantage in complicated positions due to his intense concentration during games and to an almost complete absence of gross errors. Alas, plain common sense and prudence were central to Wesley's character. In this sense, he had so much in common with Anish Giri that I experienced a feeling of déjà vu. These two players were similar in their approach to solving purely chess-related problems and in the dynamics of their results.

The upcoming Gashimov Memorial in Shamkir appeared to be an excellent testing ground for our new strategy. Alas, a more aggressive approach failed in the very first game.

78

Wesley So (2822)

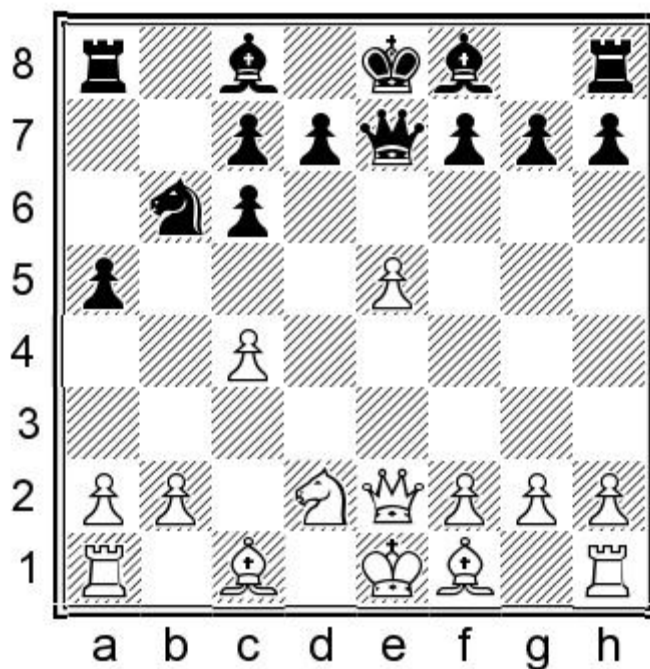
Shakhriyar Mamedyarov (2772)

Shamkir 2017

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4

A rare choice by So who usually prefers 3.♘b5 or 3.♘c4.

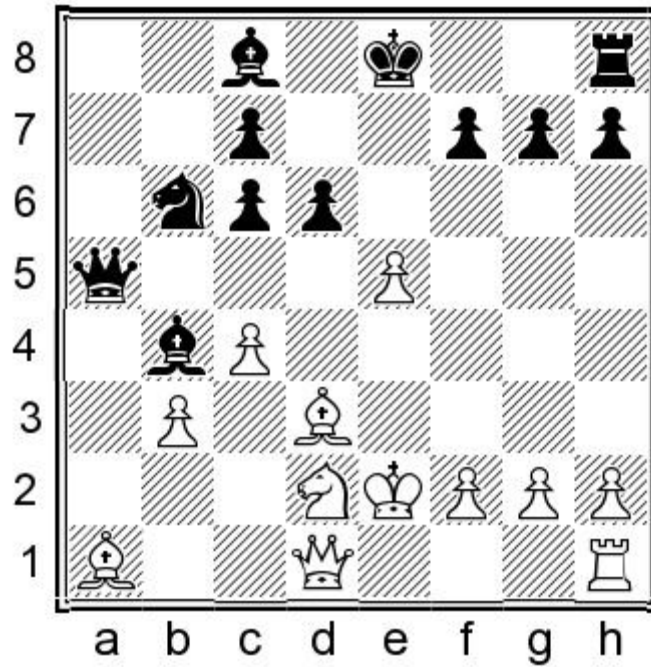
3...exd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘xc6 bxc6 6.e5 ♔e7 7.♚e2 ♘d5 8.♘d2 a5!? 9.c4 ♘b6



10.b3

White spent more than forty minutes on his two last moves. Shakhriyar, on the contrary, was playing very quickly.

10...a4 11.♘b2 axb3 12.axb3 ♖xa1+ 13.♘xa1 ♚a3 14.♚d1 ♘b4 15.♘d3 ♚a5 16.♔e2 d6



17. ♔c2

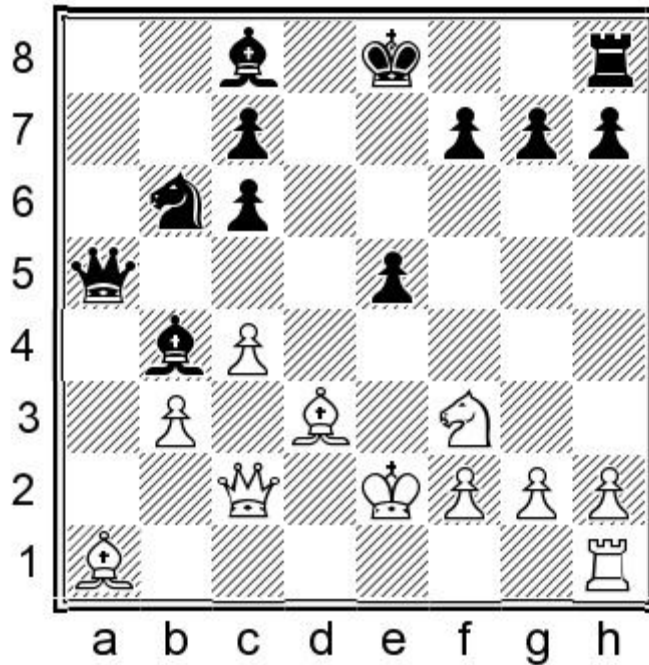
This position had occurred several times before, but was a new one for So. By this stage he had spent more than an hour thinking.

a) A natural alternative to the move in the game is 17. ♘f3.

b) By contrast, 17. exd6? is clearly bad because of 17...0-0 with a strong attack on the white king which is stuck in the centre.

17...dxe5 18. ♕b2!?

It is only this move that leads the game off the beaten path. Previously White had always played 18. ♘f3.



After 18...♙g4 19.h3 ♗xf3+ 20.♕xf3!? (Also possible is 20.gxf3 g6 21.f4 0-0 22.fxe5 ♘d7) 20...g6 21.g3 0-0 22.♕g2 the bishop pair provides compensation for the pawn.

18...♛c5

It was only now that Black sank into deep thought. This move took him forty minutes!

19.♘f3 ♗g4

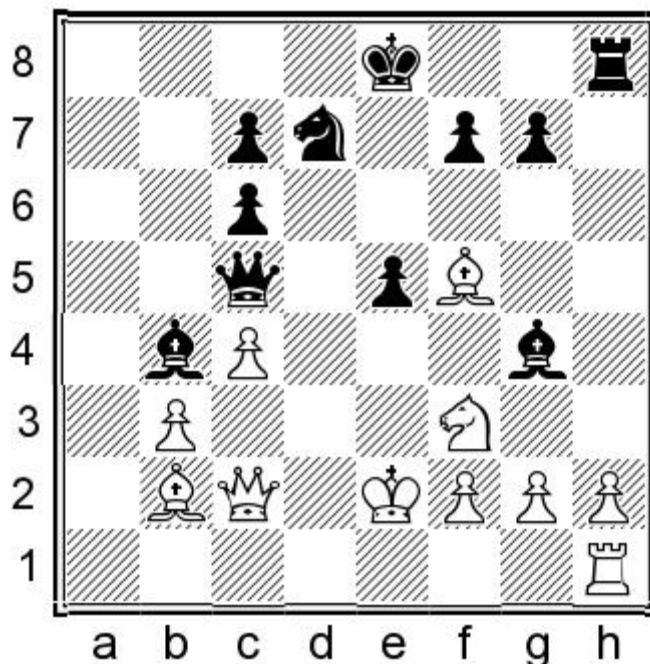
A natural response, but now White regains the initiative.

19...♛e7!? 20.♗e4 ♛e6 21.♘g5 (21.♘xe5? f6) 21...♛h6 22.h4 leads to a more complex game.

20.♗xh7! ♘d7

20...g6 21.♗xg6 ♗xf3+ 22.♕xf3 fxg6 23.♛xg6+ is bad.

21.♗f5!



Most likely Mamedyarov underestimated this strong move.

21...♙xf3+ 22.♘xf3! g6 23.♙xd7+

The simplest solution.

White had other options as well:

a) 23.♖a1!? is interesting;

b) 23.♖d1 is attractive, 23...gxf5 24.♙xf5 ♖e7 25.♖xd7 e4+ 26.♔e2 ♙xd7 27.♙e5+ would be weak, but 23...♗f6! solves all the problems.

23...♘xd7 24.♙e4!?

It is strange that Wesley, who always cares about his own king's safety, ignores the simple 24.g3!, preparing a useful spot for the evacuation of his king. In this case White's position is somewhat better and, most importantly, completely safe.

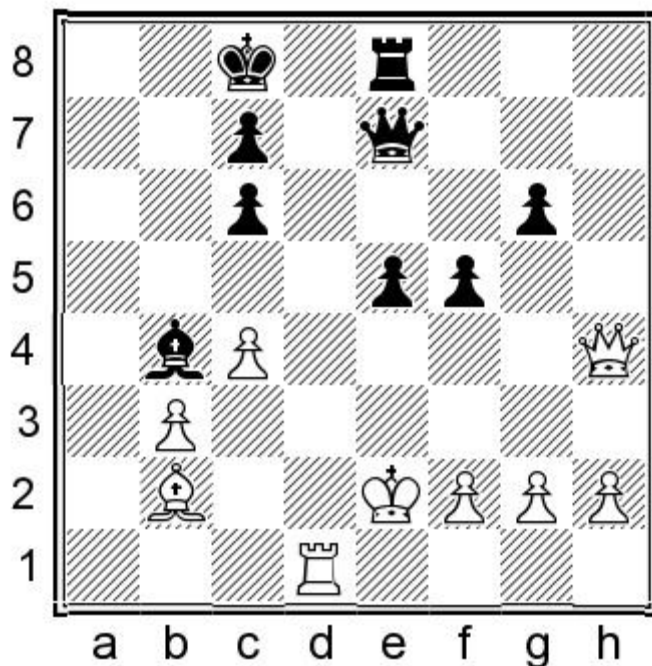
24...♖e8

24...♖h5!?

25.♔e2

The position asked for 25.g3! f5 26.♙e2 e4+ 27.♔g2.

25...♔c8 26.♖d1 f5 27.♙h4 ♖e7



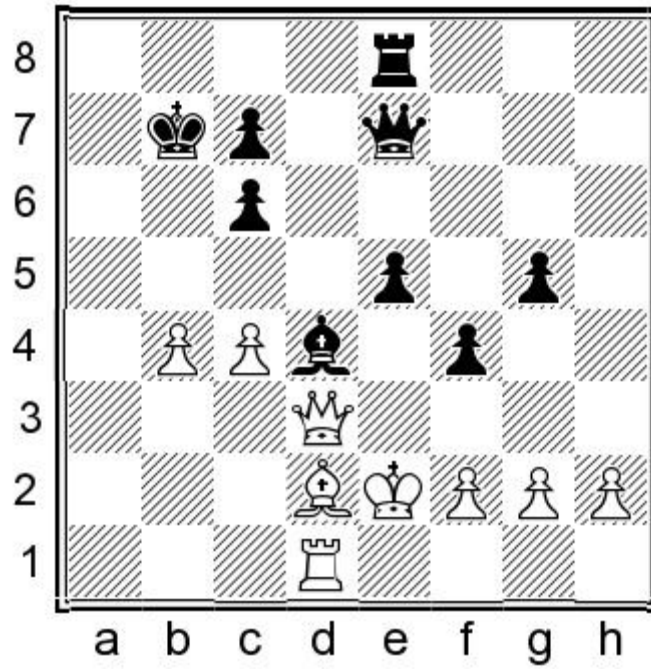
28. ♖g3?!

This move doesn't spoil anything, but it would be stronger and more natural to play 28. ♜xe7 ♞xe7 when Black needs to be accurate in order to avoid serious trouble, e.g. 29. h4 ♟d6 30. ♞a1 ♚d7 (30... ♚b7 31. ♞a5) 31. ♞a8 ♞e8 32. ♞xe8 ♚xe8 33. c5 ♟xc5 34. ♟xe5.

28...g5 29. ♟c3 ♟c5

Our silicon friend still evaluates the position as equal, but from a human point of view, it is much easier to play for Black.

30. ♟d2?! f4 31. ♜h3+ ♚b7 32. b4 ♟d4 33. ♜d3



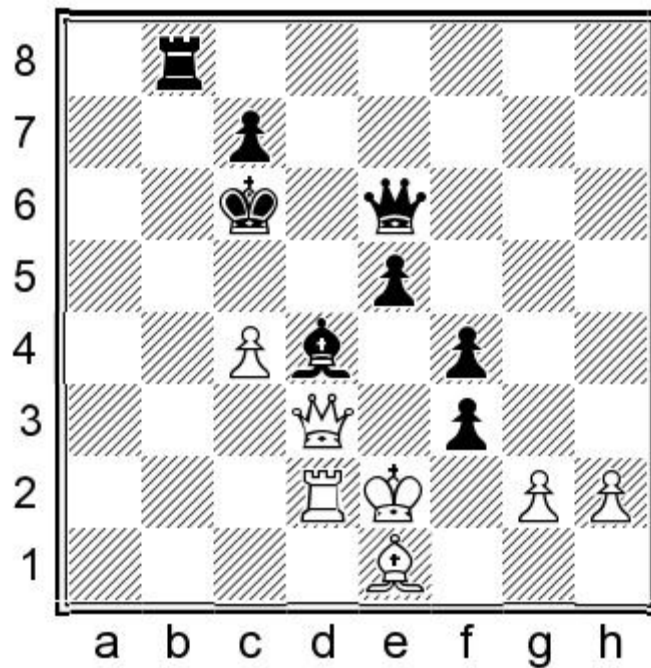
33...♖d8

White would face more problems after 33...♔d7!.

34.b5 ♖e6 35.bxc6+ ♔xc6 36.f3

36.♔f1!

36...♖b8 37.♗e1 g4 38.♖d2 gxf3+



39. ♖xf3+??

It is amazing that the White blitzed out this terrible move instantly. Granted, the game was played without the usual increment, but his flag wasn't falling yet.

After the correct 39.gxf3 the position is equal.

39...e4

0-1

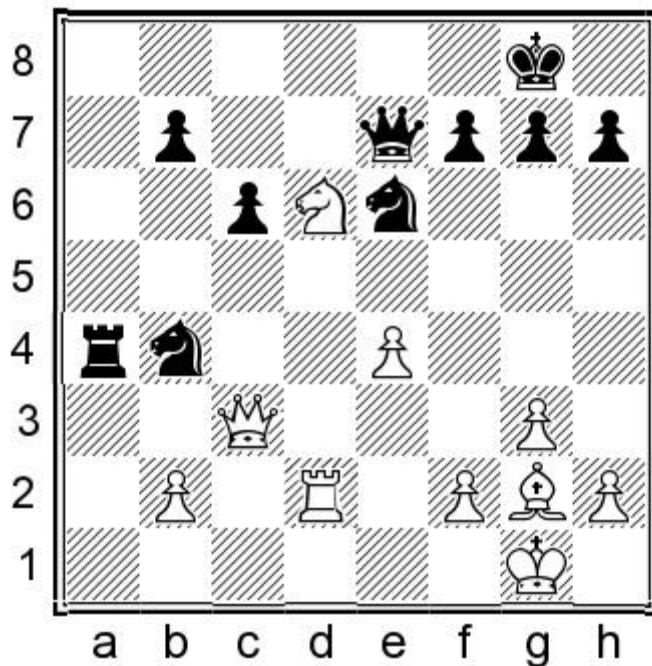
Wesley made an inordinate number of atypical decisions in this game. What was the reason? An aggressive handling of the game that was fundamentally inappropriate for him? A lack of adaptation due to the huge time difference between Shamkir and St Louis? A different time control to that used in the US (two hours for forty moves and one hour for the next twenty moves, without the habitual increment)? In any case, his undefeated series came to an abrupt end. Fortunately this painful failure did not lead to serious consequences. As if nothing had happened, Wesley played in his usual style and made the most of having two Whites in a row.

79

Wesley So (2822)

Vladimir Kramnik (2811)

Shamkir 2017



White had achieved a lot during the previous manoeuvring, but the main events are still ahead.

30... ♖a1+?

This natural move is a serious mistake. 30...c5 was necessary.

30...♖a1+? 31.♙f1 ♘a6

After 31...c5 32.♖g2 followed by ♙c4, it turns out that Black has lost several important tempi.

32.♖g2! ♘ac7

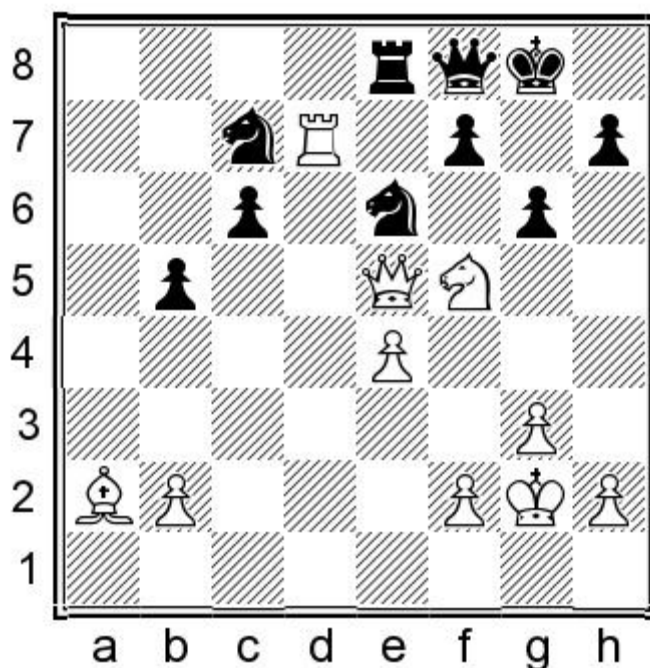
Kramnik understands that the position cannot be held after 32...h6 33.♙c4, so decides to sacrifice a pawn.

33.♘f5!

Wesley prefers to play for domination.

33.♘xb7 h5 34.h4 (34.♙xc6?! ♙b4! 35.♖d7 ♙e1 36.♙c4 h4⇒) isn't bad, but after 34...g5! play becomes sharper.

33...♙e8 34.♙c4! ♖a8 35.♖d6! ♙f8 36.♖d7 ♖e8 37.♙e5!? b5 38.♙a2 g6



39.♘e3?!

White's spectacular play would be crowned by the logical 39.♖xf7! ♘xf7 40.♙xc7+ ♘f6 (40...♖g8 41.♘d4+-) 41.e5+! (41.♙xc6! is also convincing as 41...gxf5 becomes impossible: 42.exf5! ♘xf5 43.♙xe6+ ♖xe6 44.♙f3+-) 41...♘xf5 42.♙b1+ ♘g5 43.♙xh7 There is no satisfactory defence against the threat of mate. The line could continue with 43...♘f4+ 44.♖g1! ♙h8 45.h4+ ♘g4 46.♙d7+ ♘h5 47.gxf4 and White wins.

39...♖e7?

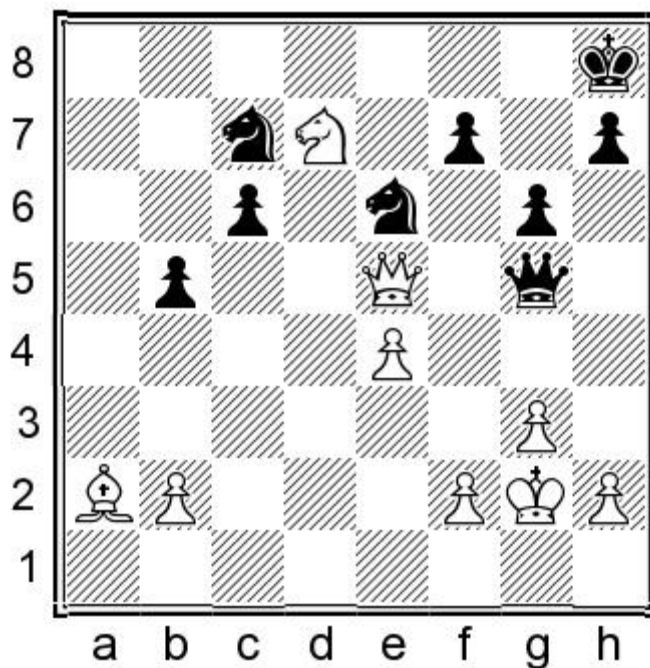
39...♘c5 40.♙xf7+ ♚xf7 41.♞xf7 ♞xe5 42.♞xc7 ♞xe4 43.♞xc6 ♘d3 was more tenacious.

40.♞xe7

Both grandmasters are affected by time trouble.

40.♘g4! ♞xd7 41.♘f6+ ♔h8 42.♘xd7+ ♚g7 43.♙xe6 ♘xe6 44.♚b8+ ♚g8 45.♚d6 was much stronger.

40...♚xe7 41.♘g4 ♚g5 42.♘f6+ ♔h8 43.♘d7+



43...♚xe5

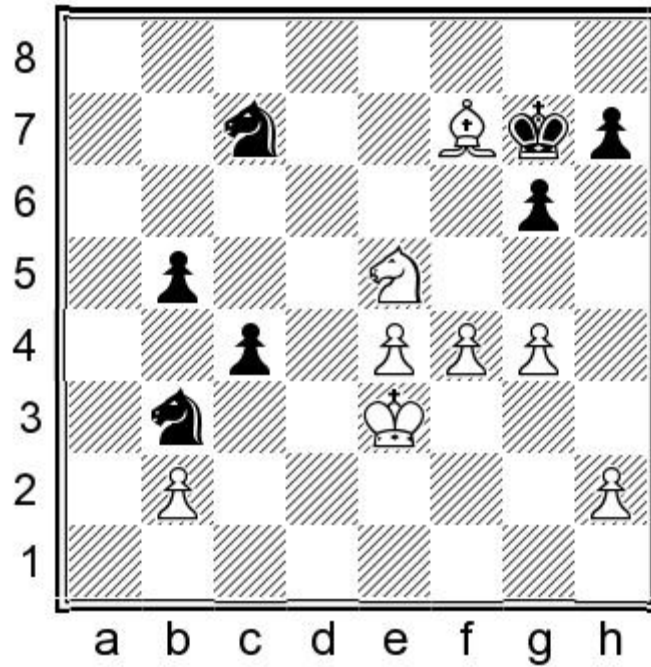
The exchange of queens is an achievement for Black in this position.

43...♔g8 44.♚d6! would have been much more unpleasant for him.

44.♘xe5 ♘d4

There were more practical chances of salvation after 44...♔g7 45.♘xc6.

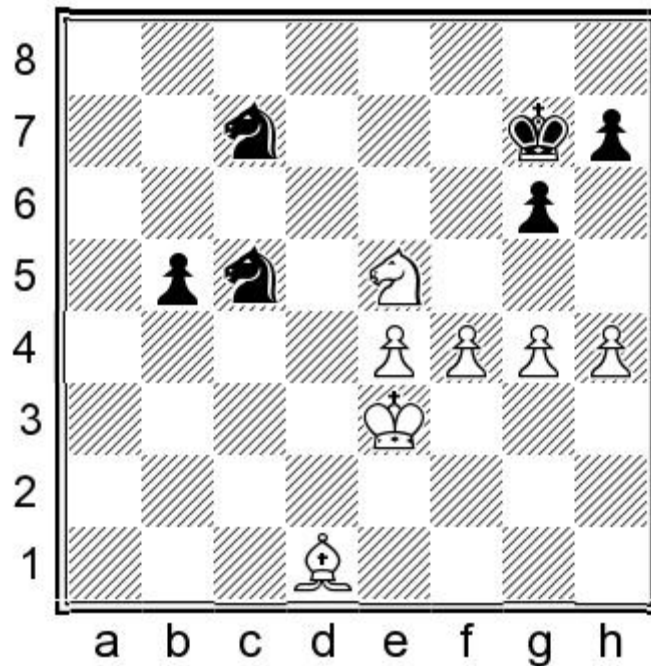
45.♙xf7 c5 46.f4 c4 47.♔f2 ♔g7 48.♔e3 ♘b3 49.g4



49...♞c5

White will eventually win after 49...♞a1!? 50.g5 ♞c2+ 51.♔f3 too.

50.h4 ♞a4 51.b3! cxb3 52.♙xb3 ♞c5 53.♙d1



The march of the white pawns is unstoppable.

53...h6 54.♞c6 ♞7a6 55.♔d4 ♞e6+ 56.♔e5 ♞ec5 57.♙c2 b4 58.♞d4 g5 59.hxg5 hxg5 60.f5 ♞d7+ 61.♔d6 ♞f6 62.e5 ♞xg4 63.♞e6+ ♔h6 64.f6 ♞b8 65.♙a4

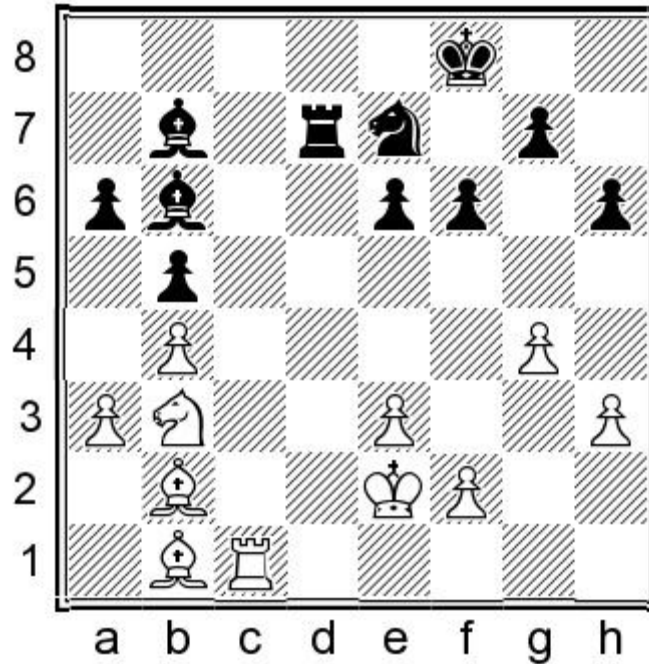
The next game didn't feature any dramatic developments for a long time.

80

Wesley So (2822)

Sergey Karjakin (2783)

Shamkir 2017

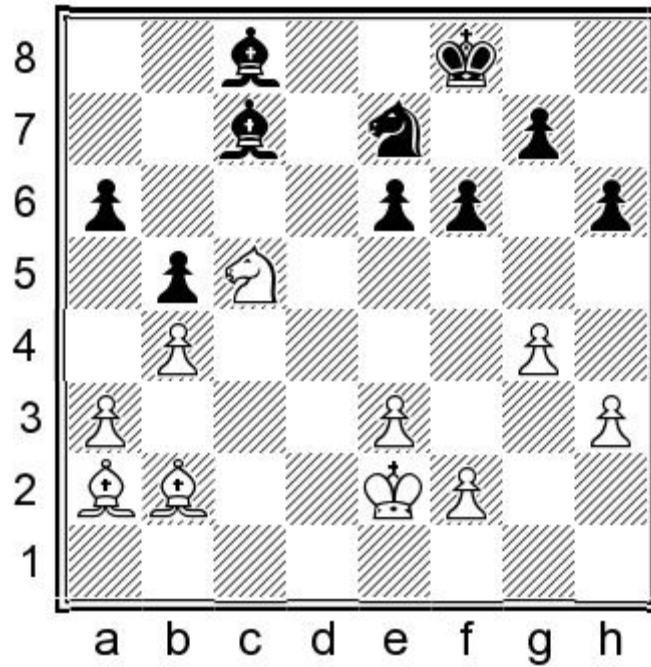


Queens were exchanged early and the position had been equal for a long time. Karjakin's attempt to simplify the game even more leads to sudden trouble.

27...♖c7?!

Black would have nothing to fear after the cold-blooded 27...♔f7, e.g. 28.♘c5 ♕xc5 29.♖xc5 ♕d5 and White's bishop pair ensures only a symbolic advantage.

27...♖c7?! 28.♖xc7 ♕xc7 29.♘c5 ♕c8 30.♕a2



30...♞d5

30...♞f7 31.f4 ♞c6 32.f5 ♞d8 is also possible but such a situation is too passive.

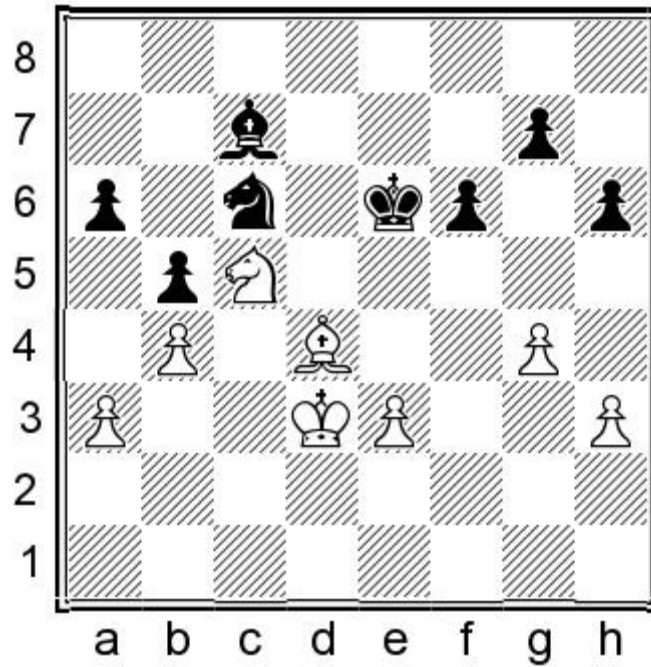
31.f4 ♞d6?!

It would be better to play 31...a5! 32.bxa5 ♞xa5 in order to get rid of one of the weaknesses.

32.♞d4 ♞f7 33.♞d3 ♞e7 34.♞e4 ♞c7 35.f5

Suddenly Black loses a pawn.

35...♞c6 36.fxe6+ ♞xe6 37.♞xe6+ ♞xe6 38.♞c5+



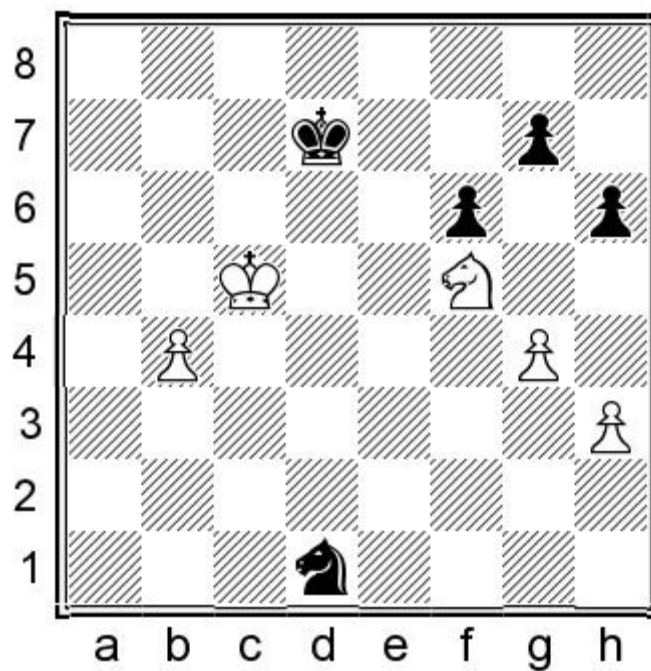
38...♔e7?!

It would be more stubborn to play 38...♔d5 39.e4+ ♔d6 40.♖xa6 ♕d8.

39.♖xa6 ♕d6 40.♕c5 ♜e5+ 41.♔e4!

This move to the centre is important and timely.

41...♜c4 42.♔d5! ♕xc5 43.♔xc5 ♜xa3 44.♜c7! ♔d7 45.♜xb5 ♜c2 46.♜d4! ♜xe3 47.♜f5! ♜d1



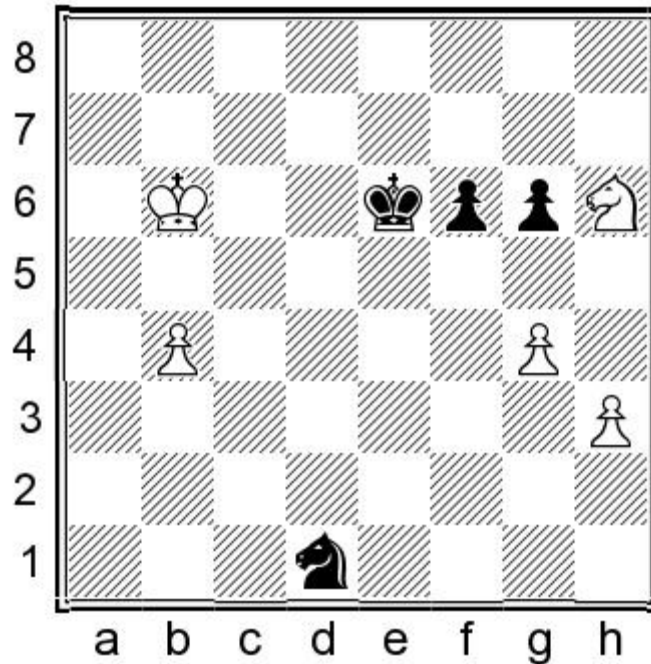
48.♔b6?

Wesley has handled this part of the game perfectly and achieved a completely won position. The simplest path to victory was 48.♖xg7! ♜f2 49.♜h5 ♜xh3 (49...f5 50.gxf5 ♜xh3 51.b5 ♔c7 52.f6 ♜g5 53.♜g3 wouldn't help) 50.♜xf6+ ♔c7 51.♜g8. 48.b5! is also sufficient for victory.

The strange move in the game lets the win slip away.

48...g6! 49.♜xh6 ♜e3?

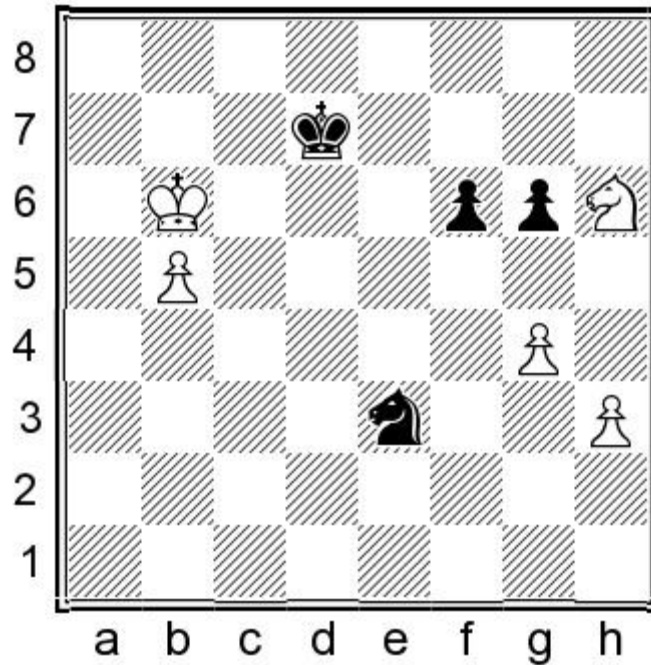
On the contrary, Black's reaction appears quite natural, to keep the king closer to the passed pawn, however the correct move was the paradoxical 49...♔e6!, e.g.



50.♔c6 (50.b5 ♜c3 51.♔c6 ♜a4 52.b6 ♜xb6 53.♔xb6 f5=) 50...♜c3 51.♔c5 f5 52.♔c4 ♜d5 53.b5 f4 54.g5 f3 55.♜g4 ♔d6 56.h4 ♜e7=.

50.b5+-

The situation on the board changes once again, this time for good.



50...f5 51.♔a6 fxg4 52.hxg4 ♖d5 53.b6 ♗c6 54.b7 ♖c7+ 55.♔a7 ♖b5+ 56.♔a8 ♖c7+ 57.♔b8 ♖b5 58.♔a8 ♖c7+ 59.♔b8 ♖b5 60.♖f7 ♗b6 61.g5 ♔a6 62.♖d8 ♗b6 63.♗c8 ♖d6+ 64.♗d7 1-0

Wesley didn't manage to build upon his success. Still, sharing 2nd–4th places in such solid company could not be called a failure, even though the level of expectations had risen dramatically.

The series of super-tournaments continued in Stavanger. An interesting observation: although the elite roster remains virtually unchanged, it is absolutely impossible to predict in advance how a particular competition will unfold. Sometimes games between the world's strongest players resemble a dull tug of war between equal teams. In other cases, it happens that most of the grandmasters are spoiling for a fight and viewers are enthralled by the live broadcasts. That's exactly what happened at Norway Chess this time. Alas, Wesley stayed away from the fun — all his games were drawn. The feeling of déjà vu appeared once again. Yes, Wesley tried to win, and the quality of his play remained high enough, but he rarely put pressure on his opponents. His only real opportunity to win was in round four. He seemed to have done everything right: he used a new idea in the opening, outplayed his opponent in the middlegame and unearthed unexpected tactics, but, alas, a momentary loss of concentration robbed him of a well-deserved victory.

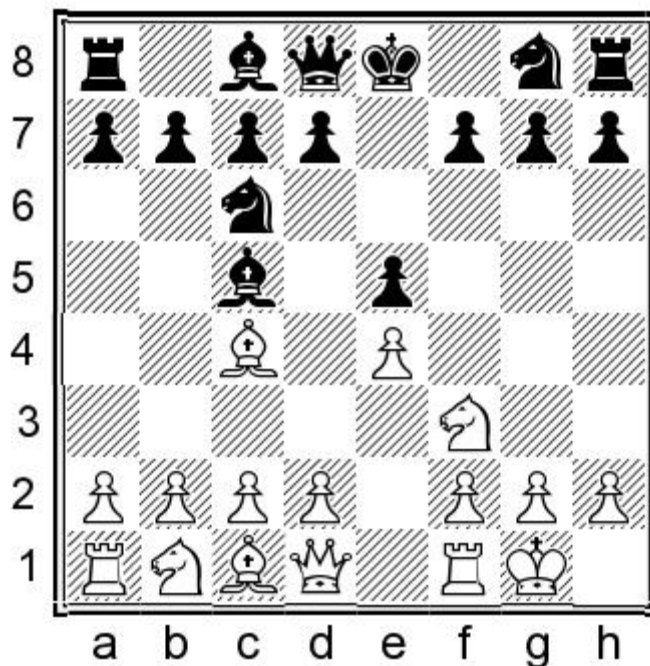
81

Wesley So (2812)

Sergey Karjakin (2781)

Stavanger 2017

1.e4 e5 2.♖f3 ♖c6 3.♗c4 ♗c5 4.0-0



This was So's third Giuoco Piano in this tournament, albeit the first one where he had the white pieces. The next day he had to defend the same position with Black against Anand. Instead of the despised Berlin Defence, the elite have found a new toy.

4...♘f6 5.d3 0-0 6.a4 a6 7.c3 d6

Against Anand Wesley played 7...d5.

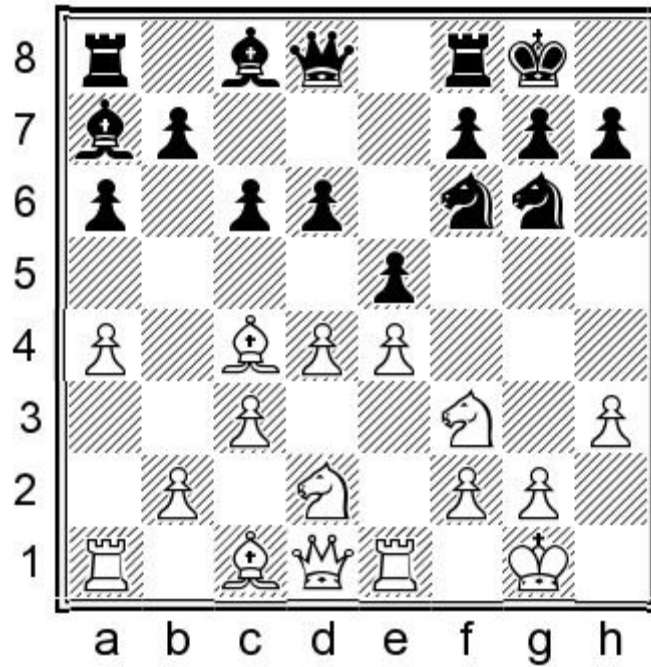
8.♖e1 ♕a7 9.h3 ♘e7

This is one of the standard set-ups for Black.

a) Another option is 9...♕e6, the way Wesley himself played against Carlsen and Kramnik.

b) An interesting way to proceed is 9...b5, as favoured by Aronian.

10.d4 ♘g6 11.♘bd2 c6



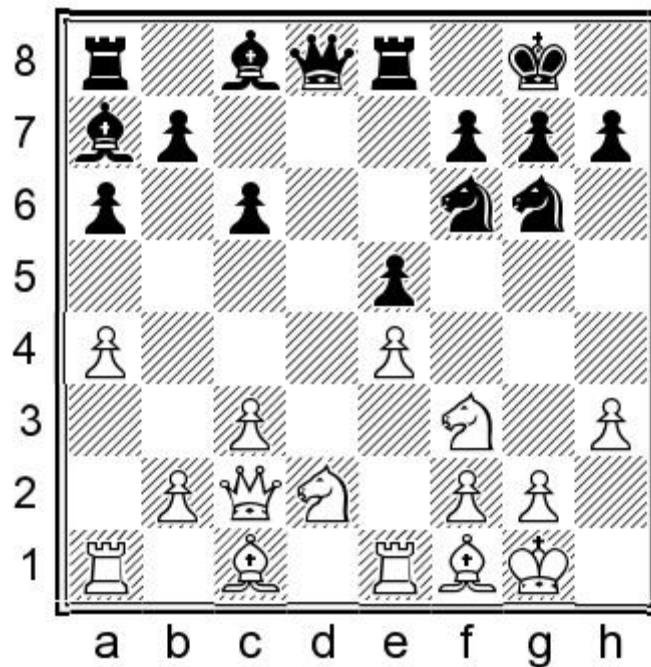
12.♙f1!?

A new plan. The bishop goes to a safe location and frees the c4-square for the knight. Previously White preferred to leave the Bishop on the a2-g8 diagonal.

12...♜e8 13.dxe5 dxe5

It was quite possible to play 13...♞xe5 14.♞xe5 dxe5 15.a5 ♔e6.

14.♚c2

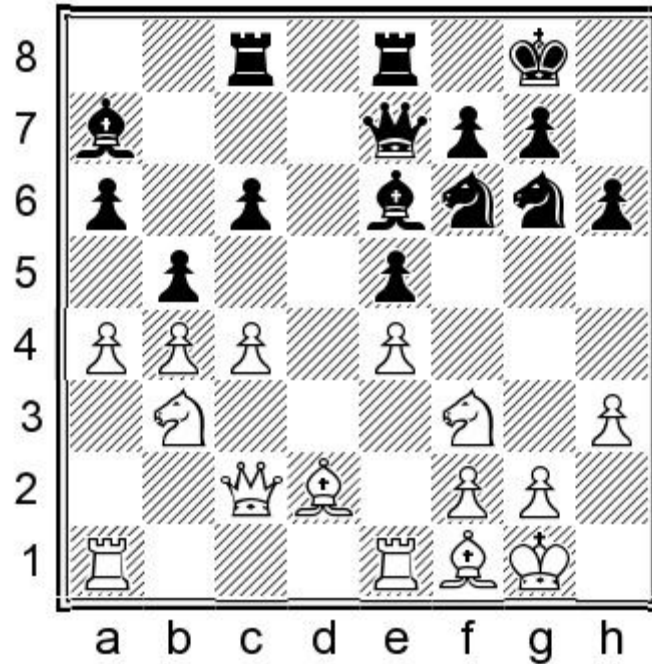


14...b5?!

The threat is stronger than its execution! Black fears a squeeze with a4–a5 and weakens his queenside, thus completely justifying the positioning of the white pieces.

After 14...♙e6 15.a5 h6 he had nothing to fear.

15.b4 ♙e6 16.♘b3 ♚e7 17.♙d2 h6 18.c4 ♜ac8

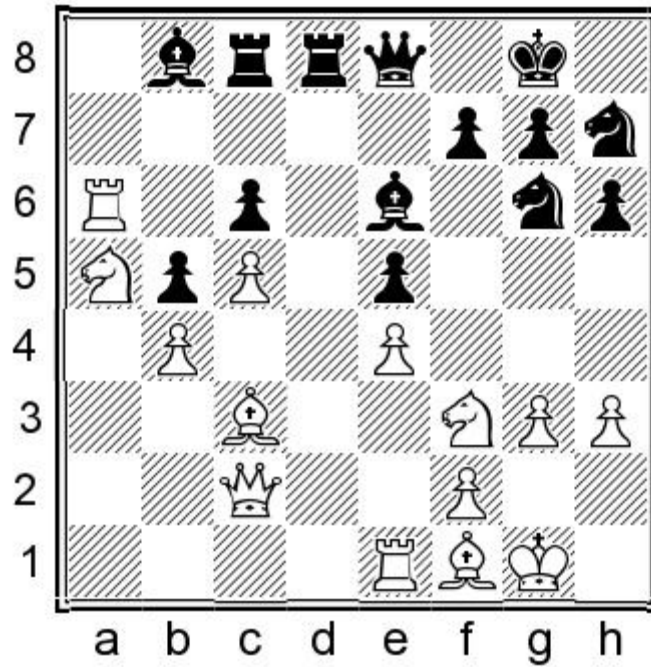


19.c5

An interesting move. White stifles his opponent's counterplay and hopes to increase the pressure on the a-file.

Another possibility was 19.axb5 axb5 20.♘a5.

19...♙b8 20.axb5 axb5 21.♜a6 ♜ed8 22.♘a5 ♚e8 23.♙c3 ♘h7 24.g3!

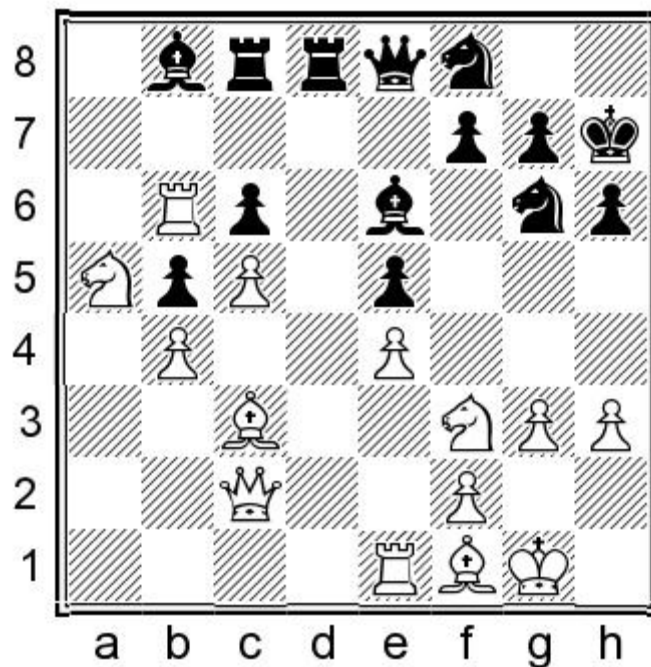


White continues to restrict his opponent's play.

24... Nhf8 25. Rb6

Black always has to keep in mind the idea of 25. Nxc6 Rxc6 26. Qxb5 which, in this case, is not very dangerous. After 26... Qd7 27. Qxc6 Qxc6 the white pawns on the queenside are securely blockaded.

25... Kh7



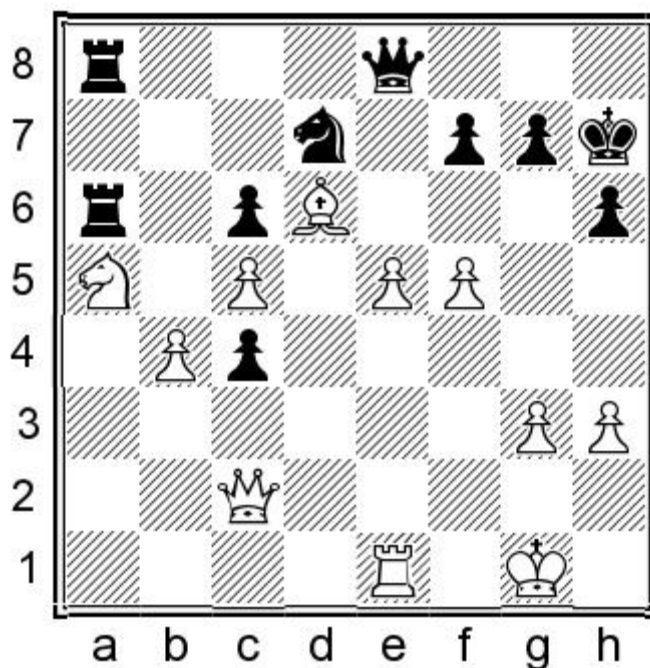
26. Rxb8!

It turns out that White's last move gave rise to yet another, less obvious, threat.

26...♖xb8 27.♘xe5 ♘xe5 28.♙xe5 ♖a8 29.♙d6

It is time to assess the consequences of the exchange sacrifice. Material is about equal, but the white pieces dominate the board. The further advance of the white pawns in the centre will likely be decisive.

29...♖a6 30.f4 ♖da8 31.f5 ♙c4 32.♙xc4 bxc4 33.e5 ♘d7



34.♙xc4?

Having achieved complete domination, So loses concentration for a moment. Any move which prevents Black's only defensive idea would lead to a win, for example 34.♔f2 or 34.♖e2!.

34...♘f6!

Suddenly the knight which was doomed to languish on the sidelines breaks free!

35.e6 ♘d5 36.♙e4 f6?!

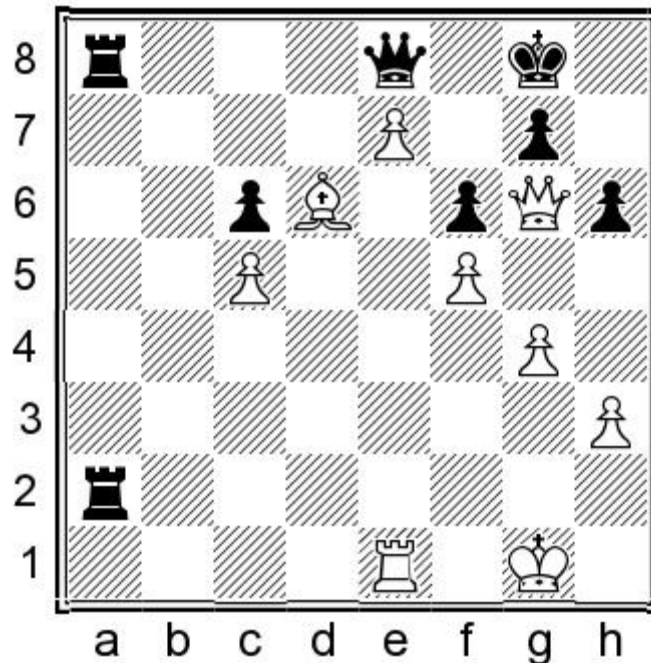
Black defends himself against f5–f6.

However this is an imaginary threat, so the immediate 36...♘xb4! was possible, when 37.f6+ ♔g8 38.♙g4 g6 39.exf7+ ♙xf7 40.♖e7 ♖xa5! 41.♖xf7 ♖a1+ 42.♔g2 ♖8a2+ 43.♔f3 ♖a3+ leads to a draw. However it is very difficult to decide on a sequence like this in time trouble.

37.e7

After 37.♖a1 ♖8a7 it is not clear how White can improve his position.

37...♖xb4 38.♗xb4 ♜xa5 39.♗g4 ♔g8 40.♗g6 ♜a2 41.g4



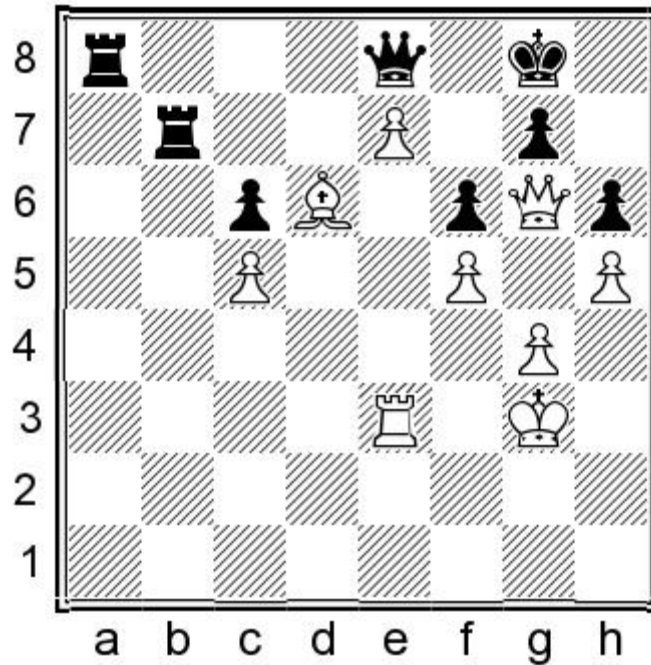
The players have made the first time control. At first glance, White has let the win slip by his blunder on move thirty-four, an opinion which our silicon friend shares.

However things are not so simple.

41...♜c2 42.♔f1 ♜b2 43.h4 ♜b4 44.h5

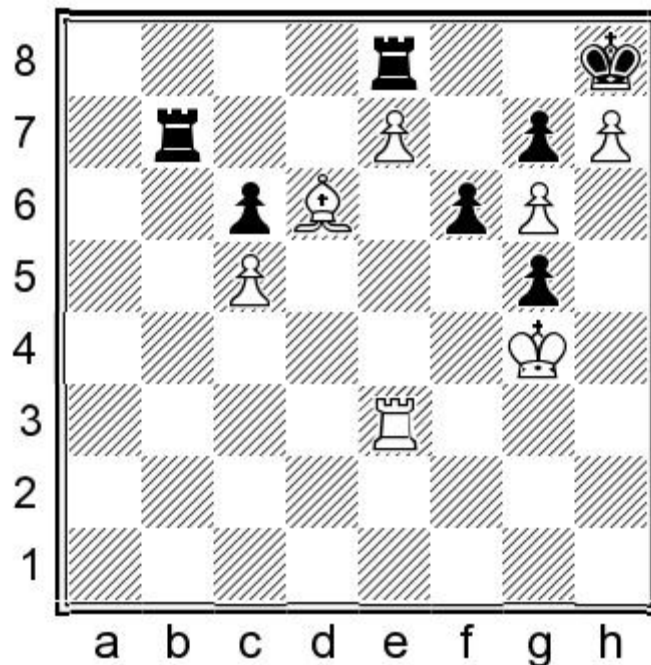
Black has to wait. However, with his last move, it appears that his opponent has finally closed the position.

44...♜b2 45.♙c7 ♜d2 46.♙f4 ♜d4 47.♙d6 ♜b4 48.♜e2 ♜b1+ 49.♔f2 ♜b3 50.♙c7 ♜d3 51.♙f4 ♜d4 52.♙d6 ♜b4 53.♔g3 ♜b3+ 54.♔h4 ♜ba3 55.♜e6 ♜3a7 56.♜e3 ♜a4 57.♔g3 ♜b4 58.♙c7 ♜d4 59.♙f4 ♜d7 60.♙d6 ♜b7



The players have made the second time control. Essentially, the position hasn't changed, however White has a winning plan which he proceeds to carry out now.

61.g5! hxg5 62.h6 ♔xg6 63.fxg6 ♖e8 64.h7+ ♕h8 65.♔g4



It looks like it's all over. The white king triumphantly marches across the light squares while Black is completely helpless since his king has no moves. However it is this last circumstance that grants Sergey a miraculous rescue.

65...f5+!! 66.♔xg5

Nothing changes after 66.♔xf5 g4 67.♔xg4 ♖bx7 68.♕xe7 ♖xe7 69.♖a3 ♖e4+ and the 'perpetual' rook

ensures a draw.

66...♖b1! 67.♗a3 ♖g1+ 68.♕xf5

68.♕g3 f4 69.♕xf4 ♖g2 70.♗d3 ♖e2 doesn't help.

68...♖e1! 69.♗a2 ♖8xe7

It is difficult for Black to make a mistake now. The same result would be achieved after 69...♖1xe7 70.♕xe7 ♖f8+ or virtually any other rook move along the e-file.

70.♕xe7 ♖e5+ 71.♕xe5

½–½

If Wesley had won that game, the second half of the tournament would have turned out quite differently for him.

The results of the tournament left an ambivalent feeling. Unimpressive play at Stavanger could be seen as a brief break before a new growth spurt, but tangible signs of an incipient crisis could not be ignored either.

How does a great talent prove itself in chess? At first, results come by themselves, without any apparent effort on the part of the player. Sooner or later though, natural potential is exhausted and it becomes necessary to use personal resources in order to achieve further progress. After all, if we recall the list of ingredients for success, talent is a very important — in fact mandatory — factor but by no means the only one. Not every player who is blessed with great talent has the character of a champion. Anish and Wesley were similar, not only in the enormity of their chess talents. Although completely different people in everyday life, they nevertheless adhered to a very similar chess philosophy. The sporting character of my two students also had a lot in common, which is why their roads to the top seemed so similar. Fate decreed that our paths should cross when they had already reached considerable heights in their professional lives. While Anish had also managed to get a perfect chess education, Wesley, being self-taught, still had many fundamental gaps. The increase in his chess erudition led to a sharp spike in his results. For such a great talent, it was easy to learn, and the young American player soaked up new information like a sponge. It is relatively easy to teach new skills; to nurture a young person and to reform his character is a much more subtle and delicate process, not to mention much more painful. With Anish, I started to work on these difficult tasks from the very first day. With Wesley, things were a bit different, but even his enormous natural chess potential began to dwindle. I thought it was time to proceed to the next stage, especially since his chances to get into the Candidates Tournament were becoming more and more realistic. In competition with other great talents, purely chess factors do not play a decisive role; most of the outcome is decided by a player's character.

Like a year before, the 2017 Grand Chess Tour started with the tournaments in Paris and Leuven. It was in Paris that I joined the small So team on site for the first time, becoming the third person in addition to Wesley and Lotis. I already missed the atmosphere of big tournaments and was looking around with interest and curiosity. As usual in the GCT, the programme was not limited to a grandmaster

tournament. The opening ceremony, held at the headquarters of one of the tournament sponsors in the very heart of Paris, ended with an already-traditional show. It was fun to watch a pro-am tournament where the chess stars alternated moves with their VIP amateur partners: a prominent politician, a businessman or an actor. The GM team was reinforced by Garry Kasparov, which increased interest in the event sharply. The most recognisable amateur was Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former head of the IMF known not just for his financial talents. However he turned out to be a weak chess player and the focus of attention quickly shifted to Kasparov. I had not seen Garry play for a long time, but he did not disappoint. It is quite remarkable how he immerses himself completely in the game. The legendary champion plays every game, be it a simul or an exhibition blitz, as if it was the most important one of his life.

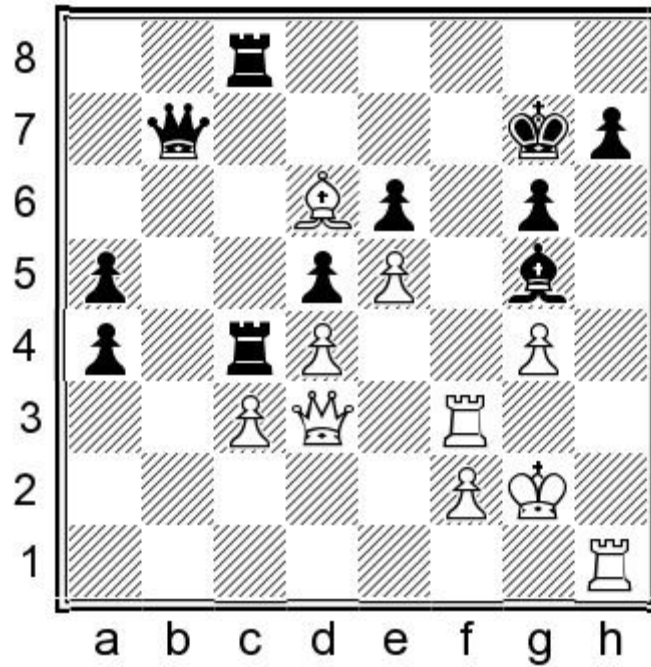
According to the rules, players had to make moves in turn. At some point, his partner, Gilles Betthaeuser (president of the real-estate enterprise Colliers International, one of the principal sponsors of the Paris event), took a long time to ponder an obvious, and in fact only possible, reply. Kasparov endured this forced break stoically for some time but then the audience had an opportunity to watch a veritable show. For a couple of minutes, Garry demonstrated his famous range of grimaces and antics in its entirety. However his teammate was not perturbed by the great champion's emotions. Gilles Betthaeuser appeared to be totally immersed in studying the position. Soon, Garry lost patience and started to express his outrage, first by whispering, then loudly. Suddenly everyone realised that it was in fact Kasparov's turn to move, whereas his partner was behaving respectfully, not daring to interrupt the chess maestro's thoughts. It is hard to imagine how such a situation would have ended had the stakes been a little higher. The main event, which started the next day, did not lack dramatic turns either.

82

Fabiano Caruana (2808)

Wesley So (2812)

Paris 2017

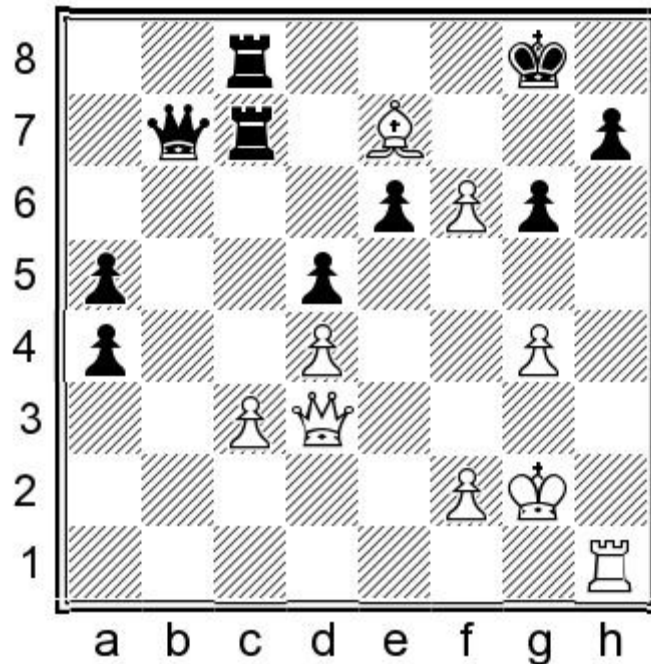


This position arose after a tense battle. Black had the initiative on the queenside, while White was looking for success by attacking the enemy king. At first glance there is a dynamic balance on the board, however Caruana thought for a long time and continued with the unexpected

31. ♖f6!! ♕xf6

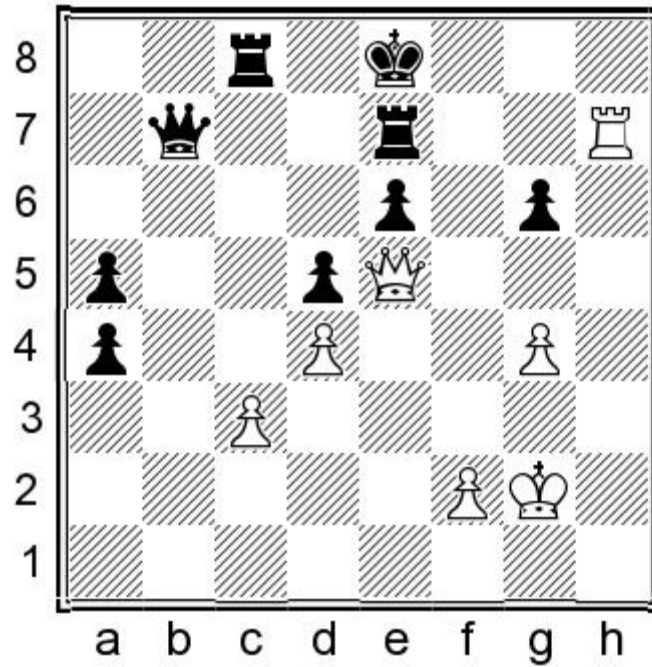
There was a threat of 32. ♖xh7+.

32. exf6+ ♔g8 33. ♕e7! ♝4c7



34. ♕d6?

A tragic mistake! In serious time trouble, Caruana was unable to calculate this variation to the end:
 34.f7+! ♔g7 (34...♔xf7 35.♖xh7+ is bad) 35.♕e3 ♖xe7 36.♕e5+ ♔xf7 37.♖xh7+ ♔e8

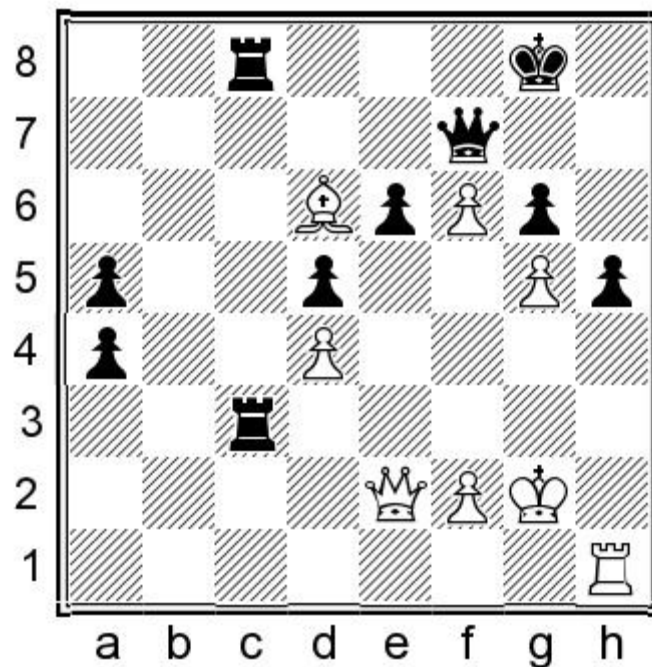


38.♕h8+! This was the move that Fabi missed. 38...♔d7 39.♖xe7+ ♔c6 40.♕f6 (40.♕g7 and 40.♕h7 are equally good) 40...♖c7 41.♖xe6+ ♔b5 42.♕xg6 and White should win.

34...♖xc3

Now White has no attack and no material.

35.♕e2 ♖f7 36.g5 h5!



Black conducts the finish flawlessly.

37.♖b5

37.gxh6 ♔h7.

37...e5! 38.♙xe5 ♖e6 39.♗h4 ♜f5! 40.♜xd5+ ♔h8 41.f7+ ♔h7 42.♜b7 ♜xg5+ 43.♙g3 ♜xg3+!
44.fxg3 ♜c2+ 45.♔f3 ♜f5+ 46.♔e3 ♜c3+ 47.♔e2 ♜d3+ 48.♔e1 ♜c1+ 49.♔f2 ♜c2+ 0–1

At the beginning, luck was obviously on Wesley's side. He was in the lead after the first day, although he could have easily been at the bottom of the standings. Then everything changed dramatically. After a very weak game against Carlsen, Wesley seemed to fall into a deep psychological pit from which he was not able to escape for a long time. It was not only a matter of points — his game crumbled into fragments and lost all integrity. The seventh-place finish reflected his poor level of play. Outwardly, Wesley was not perturbed by this failure; he remained as friendly and as calm as usual.

When the tournament ended, the stars moved from the French capital to the small but picturesque Belgian town of Leuven. Each of the nine core GCT participants had the right to play in only two out of three stages with fast time controls, so the line-up of the Belgian tournament differed somewhat from Paris. Even more noticeable was the difference in the organisation. In Paris, games were played in one of the studios of the Canal+ French cable channel. There was barely enough room for the participants, arbiters and television cameras; spectators could only follow the games online. In Leuven, the players and large numbers of spectators had at their disposal the beautiful main hall of the historic Stadhuis. A masterpiece of medieval architecture, located in the heart of the city, the building itself helped create a special atmosphere for the tournament. Participants and accompanying persons stayed in a hotel situated in the same central square just a few steps from the playing venue. The enervating Parisian heat was replaced by pleasantly cool weather.

My student's play also underwent a miraculous transformation. Bland games and horrific blunders disappeared; the old Wesley was back, a very focused player who made almost no mistakes and did not forgive opponents' inaccuracies. Yet again, his game against the World Champion became the turning point. In an equal position, Wesley refused to go into a drawn ending and convincingly beat Carlsen in Magnus's own style. The final result in the rapid was pleasantly surprising: first place, two points ahead of Vachier-Lagrave and three points ahead of Carlsen. The World Champion had no equals in blitz, which gave him overall victory. Wesley took second place, a pleasant surprise after the Paris debacle.

What is the reason for such a dramatic metamorphosis? The easiest way to explain it would be to invoke the fickleness of Fortune whose frivolous nature is totally unpredictable. Changes in the weather are also determined in the skies but are of a more rational character. Oddly enough, for a native of the Philippines, Wesley, like Lotis, did not tolerate the heat well. The weather in Leuven was infinitely more comfortable for him. Another possible explanation lies in the changes we made to the way we collaborated. During the rapid in Paris, Wesley and I discussed upcoming opponents, openings and game strategy as usual. During the blitz — probably influenced by a bad previous performance — Wesley prepared himself. In Leuven, he found his game from the very beginning and it did not make sense to change anything. Apart from purely chess issues, the relationships within our small team

remained cordial and trustful.

We held several information-packed training sessions during the time that remained until the Sinquefield Cup. I believed that Wesley was in fine shape; we seemed to have left the Paris crisis behind. In St Louis, we used the same training model that had brought success in Leuven. Wesley prepared for the games himself while my participation was limited to general advice and good wishes. It was not in my power to change anything.

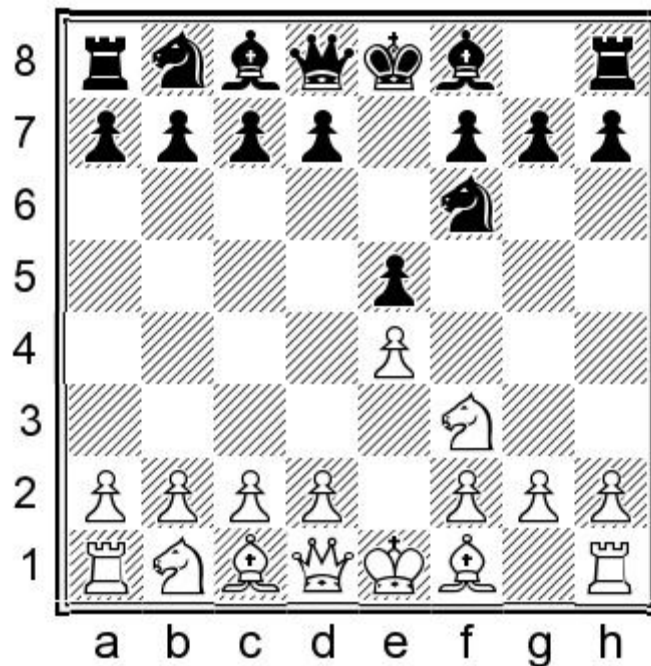
In team sports — and chess is no exception — the captain who is the most important. It is he who determines the team selection and strategy for a given match; his decisions are final, which is usually enshrined in the contracts. Of course, there is federation or club management above him in the hierarchy, but this never affects relationships within the team. However the relationship between a chess player and a personal coach is built on entirely different principles. It is the player who is more prominent in this tandem. It is the player's results that form the basis of assessing the work of his coach. It is the player who pays. Thus, paradoxically, in addition to following the coach, the player assumes a leading role, the role of president of a tiny sports club that is comprised of two people. It is the player's mood that determines the intensity and quality of training. It is the player who has the final say in selecting an opening and strategy for a given game. It is the player who assesses the coach's competence and has the right to terminate their cooperation if he is not satisfied with something. This is the reality, and I had to obey its rules.

As for the chess component, Wesley played very poorly in his very first game, against Vachier-Lagrave. The game resembled his recent encounter with Mamedyarov. It featured an unnecessarily long time spent on the opening, illogical and uncharacteristic moves in the middlegame, and the last crucial error on the same fortieth move right before the time control. In the very next round, So managed to win against Ian Nepomniachtchi. So is a very uncomfortable opponent for the Russian player, and the game in St Louis was no exception. The status quo was restored; given that Wesley played both of his first two games with Black, we were looking ahead with optimism. As often happened before, a game against the World Champion became crucial. In a better position, So made an incorrect pawn sacrifice and later missed a chance to equalise.

After this defeat, Wesley's game went off the rails completely. He lost twice in the second half of the tournament and finished at the very bottom of the standings. So's results in the Sinquefield Cup demonstrate huge swings: last in 2015, first in 2016 and last again in 2017. Such abrupt swings would drive anyone to despair. In addition, the fiasco in St Louis put in jeopardy the place in the Candidates Tournament that was virtually guaranteed before. There was very little time remaining until the World Cup. It was essential to recover from the shock and to regroup in order to meet the new serious test. There was no place for chess study in such a situation.

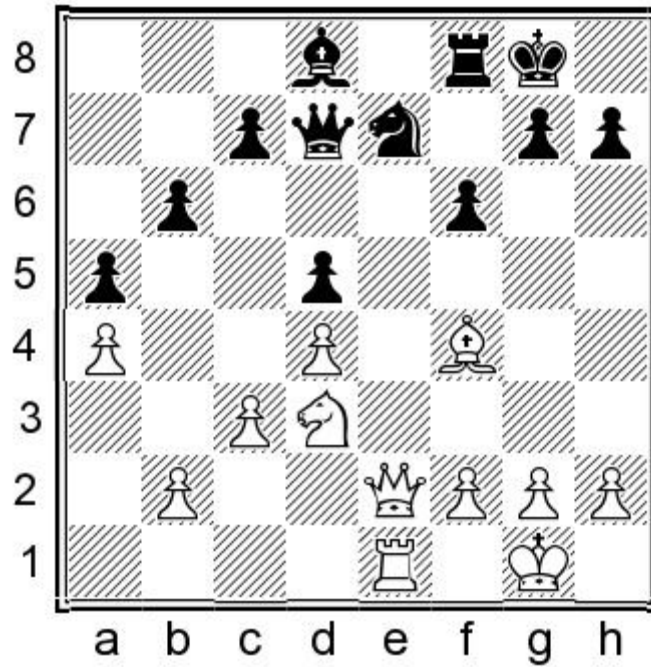
Fortunately, everything went well at the World Cup in Tbilisi. Wesley played cautiously and avoided taking serious risks. Given the circumstances, this tournament strategy was probably the only correct one. Once again, my participation in the decision-making was reduced to a minimum. Even though I wanted to help my student succeed, in practice I was unable to really help him. Meanwhile, So exploited his opponents' mistakes carefully and reached the semifinals. His game against a young and very ambitious Russian grandmaster was typical for So's play in that tournament.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6



A somewhat strange choice of opening for such an aggressive player, especially since Petroff's Defence is not part of Vladimir's main repertoire.

3.♗xe5 d6 4.♗f3 ♗xe4 5.d4 d5 6.♙d3 ♙e7 7.0-0 ♗c6 8.♗bd2 ♙f5 9.♞e1 ♗xd2 10.♞xd2 ♙xd3
 11.♞xd3 0-0 12.c3 ♞d7 13.♙f4 a6 14.♞e2 ♞ae8 15.♞ae1 ♙d8 16.♗d2 ♞xe2 17.♞xe2 a5 18.♗b3 b6
 19.♗c1 f6 20.a4 ♗e7 21.♗d3



21...g5?!

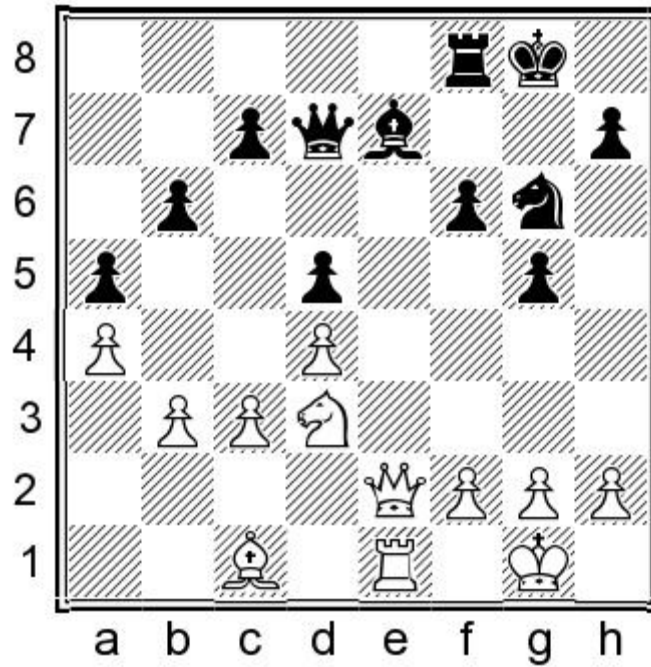
This move itself is not bad at all — the ?! is because the attempt to start active play is inappropriate in such a position.

For the same reason 21...♙xa4?! 22.♘xc7 ♘xc7 23.♙xe7 ♖f7 24.♙e3 can be rejected too, but 21...♖f7 with a subsequent rook transfer to the e-file would be the safest and most natural way to continue. Most likely, the game would end in a draw.

22.♘c1 ♖g6

In this line too 22...♙xa4?! is risky due to 23.h4 h6 24.f4.

23.b3 ♘e7?



The logical continuation of the plan.

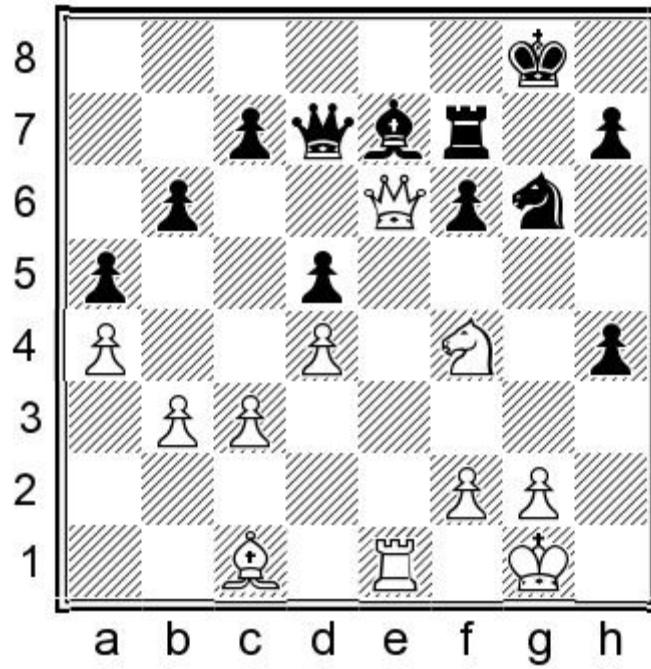
If Black succeeds in transferring his bishop to d6, his strategy would be completely justified, but it was not too late to choose the correct 23...♖f7.

24.h4!

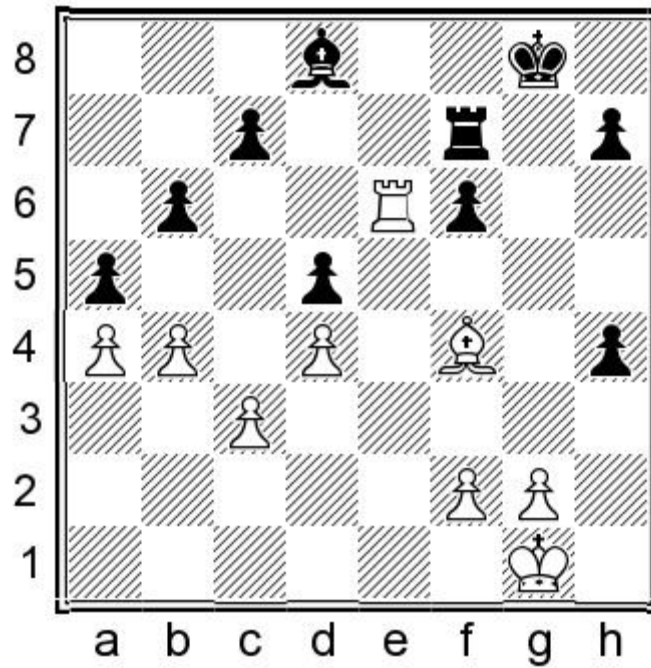
Unfortunately for Black, two people play a game of chess, and White's unexpected reply changes the situation dramatically. Black's excessive activity starts to work against him.

24...gxf4 25.♘f4 ♜f7 26.♙e6!

Yet another unexpected but strong move. Black will face very difficult issues in the ending.



26...♔xe6 27.♖xe6 ♜xf4 28.♙xf4 ♕d8 29.b4!



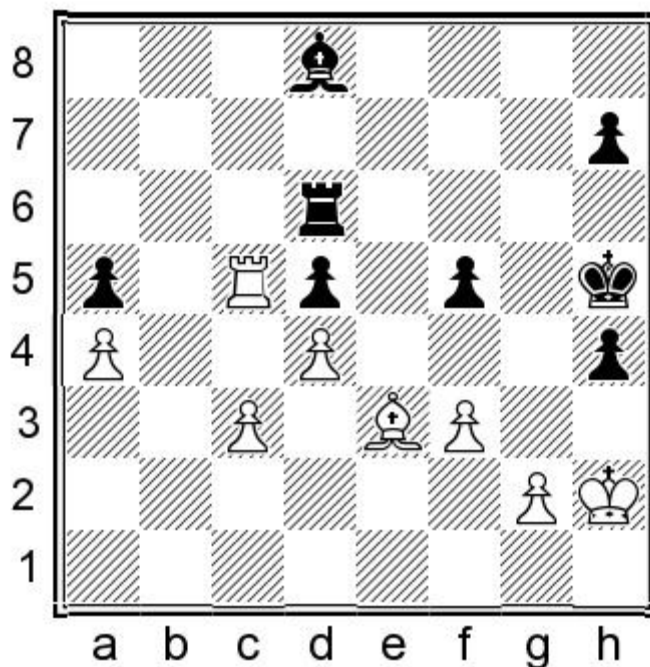
29...♔g7

After 29...axb4 30.cxb4 the passed a-pawn can become a decisive factor.

30.bxa5 bxa5

Now it is impossible to defend all the pawns on the queenside.

31.♖a6 c6 32.♞xc6 ♔g6 33.♞c5 ♞d7 34.f3 ♕f5 35.♞d2 ♕e6 36.♞c6+ ♕f5 37.♞e1 ♕g5 38.♞c5 f5
 39.♕h2 ♕h5 40.♞f2 ♞d6 41.♞e3

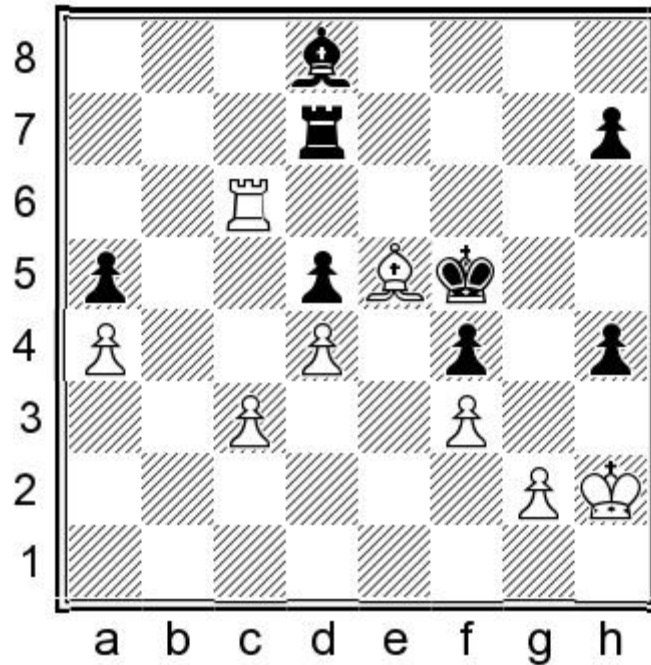


The players have passed the first time control. White doesn't have to rush since his opponent is doomed to passive defence.

41...♞b6 42.♞b5 ♞d8 43.♞f4 ♞d7 44.♞e5 ♕g5 45.♞c5 f4

This way, the black king gains activity, but another chronic weakness appears on f4.

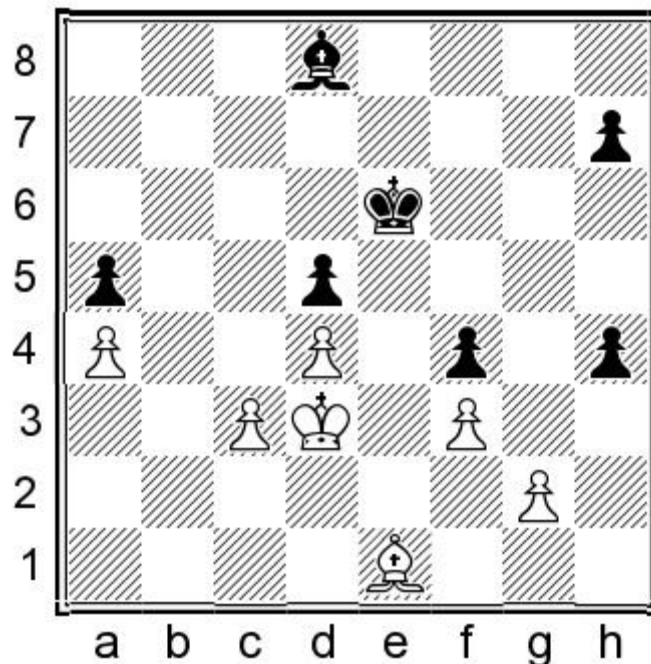
46.♞c6 ♕f5 47.♞a6 ♕g5 48.♕h3 ♕f5 49.♞c6 ♕g5 50.♞e6 ♞e7 51.♞c6 ♞d8 52.♞d6 ♕f5 53.♕h2 ♞g7
 54.♞e5 ♞d7



55.♖d6!

A paradoxical decision, voluntarily exchanging his much more active rook. The computer doesn't like this move, but in this case human assessment turns out to be deeper. The bishop ending is won for White.

55...♗xd6 56.♕xd6 ♔g5 57.♔g1 ♕f5 58.♕f2 ♔g5 59.♕f1 ♕f5 60.♖a3 ♕e6 61.♕e2 ♕f5 62.♖c1 ♔g5 63.♕f1 ♖c7 64.♖d2 ♖d8 65.♖e1 ♕f5 66.♕e2 ♕e6 67.♕d3



After some manoeuvring in order to gain time, Wesley moves on to the final stage. White's plan is quite simple; create a passed pawn, then use zugzwang to win one of the pawns on f4 or a5.

67...♔d7 68.c4 ♕c6 69.♙c3 ♖b6 70.♙b2 ♗d8 71.♙c1 ♘c7 72.♙d2 h5 73.♙c3 ♖b6 74.♙b2 ♙c7
75.♙a3 ♗d8 76.♙f8 ♙g5 77.♙g7 ♕d6 78.♙e5+ ♕c6 79.♕c3 ♙h6 80.♙f6 ♙f8 81.♕d3 h3 82.gxh3 ♗d6
83.♙e5

1-0

In the semifinals, So and Ding Liren each missed a real chance to take the lead in the classics, and the Chinese grandmaster proved stronger in the tiebreak games. Like two years before, my student was unable to go further. Oddly enough, even though he lost a few rating points in the World Cup, Wesley's position in the quest to qualify by rating only improved. His main rival, Vladimir Kramnik, lost even more points in Tbilisi. Everything was decided in the Isle of Man tournament. Wesley did not take part, while Kramnik's desire to maximise the result led to a failure. Thus, history repeated itself. Like Anish, Wesley qualified for the Candidates Tournament by rating.

For me, there would be no trip to Berlin for the Candidates. From the very beginning, our work together did not fit the usual mould. Sometimes simple and obvious recipes led to unexpected success. At others, advice that seemed deep and intelligent to me yielded no results. While I doubted at first the effectiveness of long-distance communication, it proved extremely useful. Wesley and I established such a level of mutual trust and understanding that the impact of our Skype training was absolutely amazing. By contrast, a closer personal acquaintance somehow shattered the mysterious chemistry of our relationship. Gradually, we realised that our cooperation had exhausted itself.

The more powerful and original the talent, the less it is susceptible to outside influences. This does not mean that it follows straight paths; sometimes it can develop in a very circuitous manner. In any case, the choice of a path in life is made by instinct rather than by intellect, especially not according to an outsider's ideas. On Wesley So's life path, chess has for many years remained the only refuge where he felt himself comfortable and confident; his huge natural talent allowed him to achieve recognition in the global chess community. Finding a new family provided Wesley with much-needed support and the impetus for a new breakthrough. I hope that our joint work has not been in vain. At some point, our views on the nature of our future work diverged. My student chose to go his own way. Good luck, Wesley!

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