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Inside Chess

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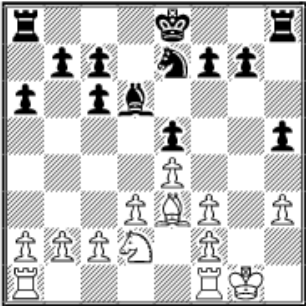
Yasser Annotates

Shirov–Topalov, Madrid 1997

The following game was to play a crucial role in the outcome of the tournament. Alexei had started of with two fine wins and was looking for a hat trick.

Alexei Shirov – Veselin Topalov
Madrid (3) 1997
Ruy Lopez Exchange [C68]

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Bxc6 dxc6 5.O-O Bg4 6.h3 h5 7.d3 Qf6 8.
Be3 Bxf3 9.Qxf3 Qxf3 10.gxf3 Bd6 11.Nd2 Ne7



A well-known ending that is supposed to give White a slight advantage. Normally White plays for the pawn breaks d3-d4 and f3-f4, but Alexei takes a different approach.

12.Rfb1

A move the late Dutch GM Jan Hein Donner would loudly condemn as “Modern Chess!”, rolling his eyes to indicate his opponent’s complete lack of understanding of the game. From a classical perspective, the move does appear paradoxical. White is about to force play on the side where Black’s doubled pawn majority is happily waiting, but White’s plan of forcing queenside events isn’t as primitive as it looks. He intends to grab space on the queenside, thereby preventing Black from doing so, with that accomplished, White will turn his attention back to the center and the g-file.

12...Ng6 13.b4 f6 14.a4 Kf7 15.Kf1!

This is what White really has in mind: centralization! The f3-pawn is vulnerable to the possibility of ...Ng6-h4 and White takes time out to protect the pawn and prepare a knight jump.

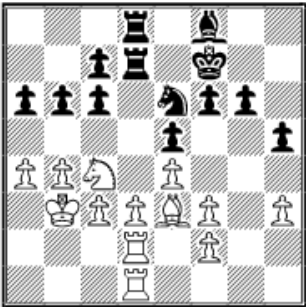
15...Nf8!

Black has his own plans. He repositions the knight to the e6-square giving it maximum flexibility. Given the opportunity, the plan of ...g7-g6 and ... f6-f5 will be compelling.

16.Ke2 Ne6 17.c3 Rhd8 18.Nc4

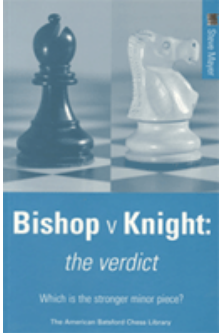
I would prefer 18.Nb3, angling for Nb3-a5 and supporting d3-d4. After 18...b6!? 19.a5 b5 20.Rd1, the break ...c6-c5 has been well prevented.

18...b6 19.Kd2 Be7 20.Kc2 Rd7 21.Rd1 Rad8 22.Rd2 g6 23.Rad1 Bf8
24.Kb3

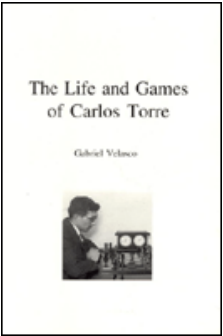


Since the previous diagram, White has realized his plan. He is now all set

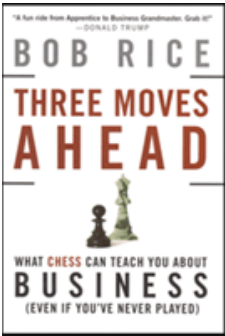
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for d3-d4 and further expansion. Very nice, but is it good enough for a win?

24...c5

Black decides to fix the queenside and stop d3-d4 altogether. Consideration had to be given to 24...Bg7!? 25.d4 exd4 26.cxd4 f5 27.d5! cxd5 28.exd5 Nf8 29.d6 b5 30.axb5 axb5 31.Na3 when White will have an advantage.

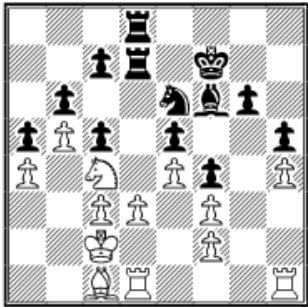
25.b5 a5 26.Kc2 Bg7! 27.Rh1?

I don't understand this move. Black's plan of ...f6-f5-f4 is obviously in the offing and it is crucial that White prevent this by putting pressure on the e5-square. 27.Re2 f5? 28.exf5 gxf5 29. Bc1 Rd5 30.Rde1, with a clear advantage, was necessary.

27...f5! 28.Rdd1 f4 29.Bc1 Bf6!

Now it is Black's turn to assume the initiative. White had prepared an obvious trap for 29...Ng5? in 30.h4 Nxf3? 31.Rh3 Rxd3 32.Rxd3 Ne1+ 33.Kd2, winning a piece. Now the threat of ...Ne6-g5 is quite real.

30.h4



White's last move was no doubt played with a heavy heart, as now the possibility of ...g6-g5 will give Black a passed h-pawn and a winning advantage. Now all Black has to do is nurse this chance along and victory will fall into place. A stunning transformation!

31...Kg7! 31.Rh2 Kh7!

A really fine move. White wakes up to the bad news that none of his pieces are working. The knight on c4 is pretty in a cosmetic way only and the c1-bishop has no role to play. White's king can't move and the d1-rook is stuck defending d3. If Black can manage to trade the g6-pawn for the h4-pawn, push ...h5-h4 and worm his king to the h5-square, then ... Ne6-g5 will be devastating. Simple as your ABCs. Can White stop this plan?

32.Rg2 Kh6 33.Rdg1 Rg7 34.Rh1 Kh7

This move was likely made for time control reasons. Black's strategic advantage is not going away.

35.Rhg1 Rdg8 36.Rh1 Kh6 37.Kd2 g5 38.hxg5+ Nxg5 39.Ke2 Ne6

Keeping an eye on White's only counterplay: the d3-d4 break.

40.Rgh2 h4



41.Rxh4+

Absolutely forced as other moves allow ...Kh6-h5 and White can only await execution.

41...Bxh4 42.Rxh4+ Kg5 43.Rh1 Kf6 44.Bb2

Trying to make Black's task as difficult as possible. Black would like to trade a pair of rooks and claim the game. But he has to keep an eye on the break d3-d4 and cover the e5-pawn. It's still not a snap to win.

44...Rg5 45.Rh7 Re8

Black intends to use his g5-rook to cover the e5-pawn and play ...Re8-e7, ...Kf6-g6 and ...Re7-h7, forcing a swap. White’s only chance is to get in d3-d4.

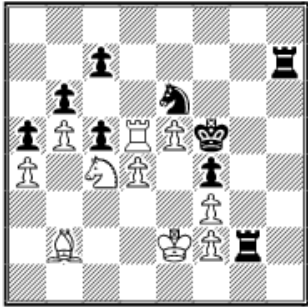
46.Rd7 Re7

White achieves his chance after 46...Rd8 47.Rxd8 (47.Rd5) Nxd8 48. d4 cxd4 49.cxd4 exd4 50.Bxd4+ with some holding chances because of the active pieces.

47.Rd5 Rh7

This forces the issue, as ...Rh7-h2 and ...Rg5-g2 spell curtains.

48.d4 exd4 49.e5+ Kf5 50.cxd4 Rg2

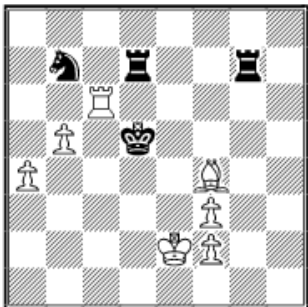


Black’s breakthrough appears complete. White’s play on the queenside is too slow and we might expect Shirov to go quietly into that long, good night, but Alexei is one of the trickiest players around and finds an amazing resource.

51.Nd6+! cxd6 52.exd6+ Kg6

Around here Topalov had to be asking himself: “Why in the world didn’t I keep my rook on g5? Then I’d be winning a tempo.” The move 50...Rg2 is a blunder. The simple 50...Rh2 would have done nicely.

53.d7 Nd8 54.dxc5 bxc5 55.Bc3 Kf7 56.Bxa5 Ke6 57.Rxc5 Rxd7 58. Bc7 Rgg7 59.Bxf4 Nb7 60.Rc6+ Kd5



Yet another crossroads is reached and another diagram called for. A rook for four pawns. Does White have enough? Put the a4-pawn on a6 and the answer is yes.

61.Be3 Rg1!

Scurrying to play ...Rg1-a1 and Black is back in control.

62.Rh6

Hoping to defend the a4-pawn from the side. After 62.f4 Ra1 63.Ra6 Nc5 64.Bxc5 Kxc5, White’s king will be a marked monarch. Now 62...Ra1 63. Rh4 Nc5?? 64.Rh5+ would be embarrassing.

62...Kc4! 63.Rc6+ Kb3 64.b6 Kxa4 65.f4 Kb5 66.Rc2 Nd6 67.Rc5+ Ka6 68.Rd5 Rgg7 69.Kf3 Nc4 70.Rc5 Nxb6 71.Rc6 Rb7 72.f5 Rgc7!

This is the clincher. After 73.Rxb6+ Rxb6 74.Bxb6 Kxb6 75.Ke4 Kc6 76. Ke5 Kd7, Black’s king arrives with time to spare.

73.Re6 Kb5 74.Re5+ Kc4 75.Ke4 Nd7 76.Ra5 Nf6+ 77.Ke5 Rc6 78. Bg5 Rb5+ 79.Rxb5 Nd7+ 80.Ke4 Kxb5 81.Kd5 Rc5+ 82.Ke6 Nf8+ 0-1

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