

CHAPTER 12



NOTTINGHAM, 1936

This event became one of the great chess moments of the 20th century and marked the long-awaited fight over the board between Alekhine and Capablanca. Relations between them had broken down, and the Cuban, tired of being denied a rematch by his eternal rival and of being excluded for years from the top tournaments, no longer even greeted him.

As we'll see, although they hadn't played a single game since the World Championship in Buenos Aires, they had recently crossed paths at a tournament in Czechoslovakia, which Capablanca attended as a spectator.

Olga Capablanca meets Alekhine

After leaving the Soviet Union and before heading to his next tournament in Nottingham, Capablanca and the woman who would later become his second wife, Olga, took a break at the Carlsbad spa. They then visited Podebrady, where a tournament was taking place featuring Alekhine, Flohr, and other strong players. It was there that Olga Chagodaef (who would not officially become Olga Capablanca until their wedding in 1938, after José Raúl obtained a divorce from Gloria, his first wife, in 1937) saw Alexander Alekhine for the first time, and their encounter turned out to be quite heated.



Capablanca with Olga, his second wife

Olga recalled being at a garden party, talking with the Swedish grandmaster Gideon Stahlberg. At one point, a man "with disheveled hair, who looked like a shop salesman" approached them, introduced himself as Alekhine, and asked Stahlberg to let him speak with her alone. "He was rather unsavoury", Olga Capablanca recounted.

He took her aside and told her that Capablanca could think whatever he liked about him, but in company they must greet each other. That Capablanca did not even bow to him, and so on. Olga defended her husband, pointing out that Alekhine had avoided a rematch with him, and apparently the Russian-Frenchman replied that although he had lost the title to Euwe, everyone knew that he and Capablanca were the strongest players. "I was not altogether well during my match with Euwe..." Alekhine explained. To this, according to Olga, she replied that Capablanca hadn't been at his best in the Buenos Aires match either. As the conversation became heated, Alekhine abruptly ended it, saying in French: "It's impossible to talk to you! You're a tigress!"⁴⁰ When Olga told the Cuban about the exchange, he said simply: "I hate Alekhine."

Nottingham, 1936: A historic tournament

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	Pts
1	Botvinnik	*	½	½	½	½	½	½	½	1	1	1	1	1	1	½	10
2	Capablanca	½	*	½	½	1	1	0	½	1	½	½	1	1	1	1	10
3	Euwe	½	½	*	½	1	0	½	0	1	½	1	1	1	1	1	9½
4	Fine	½	½	½	*	½	½	½	1	½	1	½	1	1	½	1	9½
5	Reshevsky	½	0	0	½	*	1	½	1	1	1	½	1	1	1	½	9½
6	Alekhine	½	0	1	½	0	*	1	½	½	1	1	½	1	½	1	9
7	Flohr	½	1	½	½	½	0	*	1	1	1	½	0	0	1	1	8½
8	Lasker	½	½	1	0	0	½	0	*	½	1	½	1	1	1	1	8½
9	Vidmar	0	0	0	½	0	½	0	½	*	1	½	½	1	½	1	6
10	Bogoljubow	0	½	½	0	0	0	0	0	0	*	½	1	1	1	1	5½
11	Tartakower	0	½	0	½	½	0	½	½	½	½	*	0	0	1	1	5½
12	Tylor	0	0	0	0	0	½	1	0	½	0	1	*	½	½	½	4½
13	Alexander	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	½	*	½	½	3½
14	Thomas	0	0	0	½	0	½	0	0	½	0	0	½	½	*	½	3
15	Winter	½	0	0	0	½	0	0	0	0	0	0	½	½	½	*	2½

40. Olga Capablanca's account is detailed in *The Essential Sosonko* by Genna Sosonko [p. 82] where the author reproduces conversations he had with Capablanca's widow at the time.

It was described as the greatest tournament in history, and only AVRO 1938 could rival it at the time. Not only did it feature the reigning world champion, Euwe, and three former champions—Lasker, Capablanca, and Alekhine—but also a future world champion, Botvinnik.

As if that weren't enough, three strong contenders for the world title were also included in the lineup. One of them was Salo Flohr, who had just won the Podebrady tournament, mentioned earlier, ahead of Alekhine. Reuben Fine and former child prodigy Samuel Reshevsky were the other two potential world champions. They were the great hope of American chess. In fact, Reshevsky held that role until Bobby Fischer came along and took it from him.

Two-time world championship challenger Bogoljubow was another big name in this grand chess event. The rest of the field was made up of Tartakower, Thomas, Vidmar, Tylor, Alexander, and Winter. The most notable absence was Paul Keres.

Before the tournament

Some of the participants arrived accompanied by their wives. The most striking case was that of Botvinnik, since at the time it was not easy to get permission from the Soviet government. The future world champion reminded Krylenko how his performance had improved during the Moscow tournament on the days his wife had visited. Krylenko then made the necessary phone calls to quickly arrange tickets, passports, and a generous amount of money for expenses.⁴¹

Capablanca was accompanied by Olga, but he preferred that she wait in London. According to Miguel Ángel Sánchez, it is possible that, since he was still legally married to his first wife (Gloria), he chose not to appear in public with his future wife and "offend British formality [...] A photo of them in the newspapers could lead to a divorce suit for adultery."⁴²

Olga recalls in her memoirs how her stay at the Garden Club in London was rather dull, and she describes the letter she received after several days as "almost a miracle." "It was a letter from Capa, asking me to come without delay. He was alone without me, and I suspected he had already given up on the goal of winning the tournament. He needed me." When the Cuban met her at the train station, he brought good news: he had just defeated Alekhine.

Many of the participants had barely enough time to prepare and make the trip after their previous competition. Flohr and Alekhine had just come

from the Podebrady tournament. Fine, Euwe, Tartakower, and Bogoljubow had recently finished a tournament in the Dutch town of Zandvoort, where they placed 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th respectively. Euwe later admitted that participating in that event was probably not a good idea, given the short time available to rest and prepare for the Nottingham tournament. However, he didn't want to disappoint the organizers and Dutch chess fans.

Botvinnik and Capablanca traveled comfortably with their wives, taking their time and even doing some sightseeing along the way, which may have contributed to their strong performance in Nottingham.

Anecdote from round 1

According to Savielly Tartakower himself, the night before the first round, a Dutch ship had sunk in the Thames during a terrible storm, with no survivors. Everyone believed that Tartakower had been on board, but as there was no official confirmation of his death, the arbiter started the clock for his game against Capablanca.

After a few minutes, Tartakower had not shown up, and everyone took it as confirmation of the tragedy. "From now we will miss Tartakower's coffee-house style," one of the participants reportedly said. In fact, the Polish master had taken a different route that had been recommended to him, which involved several train changes before reaching Nottingham. That's why he was late, but alive.

When, 20 minutes after the round had begun, Tartakower walked into the playing hall, everyone looked at him in disbelief. Perhaps due to the emotional stress caused by the situation, Capablanca offered a quick draw. At the time, FIDE had a rule in place that prohibited players from agreeing to a draw before 30 moves, so before officially drawing the game, the players consulted the arbiter, Arthur John Mackenzie. He turned to Capablanca and asked what he would do in that situation. The Cuban's reply was memorable: "If two masters of the caliber of Dr. Tartakower and myself were to appraise the position as even, I would accept their opinion without the slightest hesitation."⁴³

Mackenzie himself, who was responsible for writing the introductory texts for each round in the tournament book (with the games annotated by Alekhine), states at the beginning of round 1: "Capablanca, who has missed

43. Tartakower told this entire story in the November 1952 issue of *Chess Review*, on page 331. However, Edward Winter has raised some doubts about its accuracy. On Chesshistory, he notes that Olimpiu G. Urcan reviewed the British press from those days and found only a report about a Dutch ship that lost its cargo of fruit that night <https://www.chesshistory.com/winter/extra/tartakower.html>.

41. *Achieving the Aim*, Botvinnik p. 44.

42. *Capablanca. Leyenda y realidad* (2), Miguel A. Sánchez, p. 155.

the opening luncheon through slight indisposition, is not in the mood for extending himself against Tartakower and draws in 19 moves. For the first time, in England at any rate, the FIDE rule that no game shall be agreed drawn in less than 30 moves is done away with, since the rule is so easily evaded when desired."

Capablanca and Alekhine face to face

The long-awaited clash between Capablanca and Alekhine didn't take long to happen. In the second round of the tournament, they once again faced each other at the board, something that hadn't occurred since the final game of the World Championship match in Buenos Aires, nine years earlier.

The game came with its share of controversy. Once the session was over, it was Alekhine's turn to write the sealed move for adjournment. The system used for many years consisted of writing down the next move without playing it on the board or revealing it to the opponent. The move was then sealed in an envelope under the arbiter's supervision until the game resumed.



Arthur John Mackenzie

Alekhine, in a lost endgame, played his move on the board. The arbiter, Mackenzie, then asked Capablanca to seal his next move. Capablanca protested, arguing that the move Alekhine had played on the board should be considered the sealed one, since it wasn't his turn to adjourn. Capablanca ended up sealing his move, and after a long meeting of a provisional committee, the final decision was left to a committee of the British Chess Federation, which couldn't convene until a week later. This committee upheld the provisional ruling, and the entire controversy turned out to be pointless—Alekhine resigned the game without even looking at Capablanca's sealed move.⁴⁴



José Raúl CAPABLANCA Alexander ALEKHINE

NOTTINGHAM
ROUND 2
11.08.1936

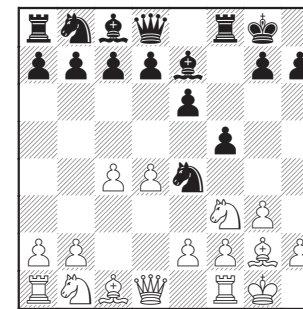
1.d4 e6

On the three previous occasions when Alekhine had replied this way to Capablanca's first move (St. Petersburg 1914 and the New York tournaments of 1924 and 1927), the game had ended up in a French Defense. The Cuban master has a different idea for this game.

2.♘f3 f5

Now the move 2...d5 would lead to a Queen's Gambit, as these two had played many times before.

3.g3 ♘f6 4.♙g2 ♙e7 5.0-0 0-0 6.c4 ♖e4



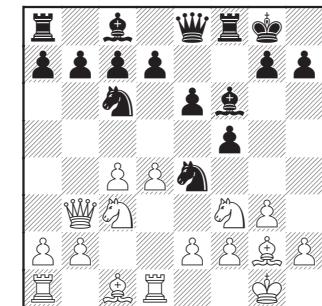
An idea by Alekhine, which he had already played a couple of months earlier against Saemisch and, just a month before, against Flohr. The knight is centralized, often ready to be exchanged for the one on b1. The f6-square is cleared so the bishop can be placed there, gaining control of the center. Depending on White's setup, Black plans to play either d6 or d5.

The queen will typically look for a path to the kingside via e8.

7.♚b3

An interesting idea by Capablanca: giving up d1 for the rook and hoping the queen's presence along the a2–g8 diagonal might prove bothersome. The knight is prepared to come out via c3, avoiding any pawn structure issues if an exchange takes place on that square

7...♙f6 8.♙d1 ♚e8 9.♘c3 ♘c6



Black launches an attack on White's center, aiming for active play from the very start.

10.♘b5

10.d5? may look tempting, but it is a strategic mistake. After 10...♘a5 11.♚b4 ♘xc3 12.bxc3 b6, White's queenside pawn structure is seriously weakened. In positions with doubled pawns on the c-file, having the d-pawn advanced usually does not help, as the doubled pawns also become backward. If the d-pawn is exchanged, the doubled pawns then become isolated as well.

10...♙d8 11.♚c2

At this point, since White no longer runs the risk of ending up with doubled pawns on the c-file, 11.d5 would actually be good: 11...♘a5

44. Mackenzie comments on the incident in his introduction to the second round of the tournament book. *Nottingham 1936*, A. Alekhine, p. 22.

12.♖d3, leading to some lack of coordination in Black's pieces.

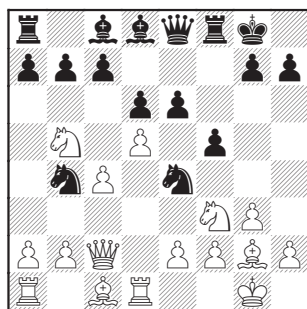
11...d6

Black is ready to play ... e5.

12.d5

12.♘g5 is Stockfish's recommendation. After 12...♙xg5 13.♙xg5, Black should play 13...♞e7, with a favorable position for White. (The engine finds that 13...♙xg5 14.♞xc7 ♜e7 15.♞xa8 is not good, as Black has no easy way to trap the knight on a8. A conclusion that would be hard for a human mind to reach.)

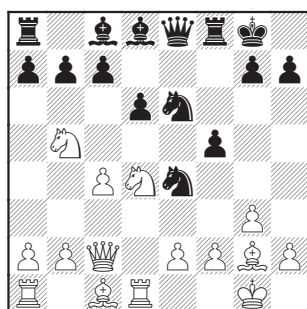
12...♞b4



13.♖b3 ♞a6

13...a5 was a good option. After 14.dxe6 ♙xe6 15.♞fd4 ♞c5, it seems White's best choice would be to settle for a draw by repetition: 16.♖c3 ♞c4 17.♖b3=.

14.dxe6 ♞ac5 15.♖c2 ♞xe6 16.♞fd4



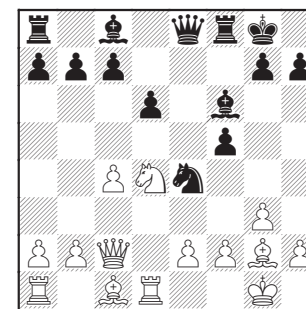
White has achieved a slight advantage. Black will need to be precise to complete development, and there are several factors tipping the balance slightly in White's favor:

1.- It is unclear whether Black can launch a serious kingside attack. That would be the main strategic justification for having the pawn on f5. If the attack does not succeed, the pawn will be better placed on f7. With the pawn on f5, Black's kingside is weaker, the e6-square is compromised, and the a2–g8 diagonal becomes more vulnerable—especially for as long as the king remains on g8. In the long term, the f5-pawn rather than one on f7 may also lead to weakness along the seventh rank.

2.- The d5-square is what I like to call a “relative weakness.” A square is usually considered weak when none of our pawns can control it, meaning an enemy piece on that square cannot be driven away. In this case, if White places a piece on d5, Black can expel it with the c6 advance—but doing so would create new weaknesses, notably a backward pawn on d6. All that said, it is worth noting that while these strategic ideas are helpful, they must always be verified by concrete lines. Stockfish, better than anyone at that task, evaluates the position as giving White a slight edge.

16...♞xd4 17.♞xd4 ♙f6

We have reached a position that could well serve as a practical exercise in a chess strategy lesson. How should White play?



18.♞b5

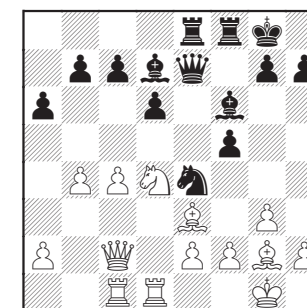
The engine suggests an original plan, activating the a1-rook via the third rank: 18.a4 a5 19.♞a3, and the rook could then shift to e3 or f3. We might think that Stockfish has simply come up with an interesting plan. In fact, there is a strategic reason that explains the value of this idea.

It is White to move, and one might naturally worry about how to bring the c1-bishop into play, since it appears to be the piece in need of development. But that is not entirely true, or at least, only partly so, which opens the door to an important strategic theme. There are positions, like this one, where a player might worry about developing the bishop, but in reality, the bishop already has an active scope. The c1-bishop is aimed at and controls key squares on the kingside. At the moment, there is no better square for it than c1. It does not need to be “developed” to become more active. It would not be better placed on d2, e3, f4, or g5. The real issue with the bishop remaining on c1 has more to do with the development of the a1-rook than with the bishop itself.

It is important to keep this in mind,

because if the rook can enter the game without the bishop having to move, then there is no real development issue. This type of situation arises fairly often in some positions of the Ruy Lopez Opening, where the c1-bishop is often the last piece to be developed. In some cases, White plays a4 and the a1-rook becomes active along the a-file or is exchanged for the opposing rook.

18...♖e7 19.♙e3 a6 20.♞d4 ♙d7 21.♞ac1 ♞ae8 22.b4



White has made routine moves that have not significantly improved the position.

Capablanca now hints at a break on c5 to create weaknesses on Black's queenside.

22...b6?

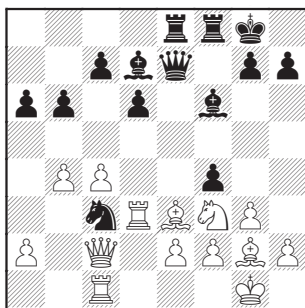
Alekhine misses a good opportunity to play 22...g5!, aiming for the break with f4. The placement of Black's pieces on the kingside favors dynamic action in that area. It becomes clear that the bishop on e3 is not well placed, as the enemy pawn advance puts its position under pressure.

23.♞f3

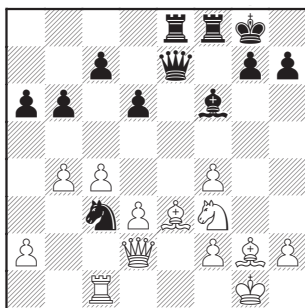
The logical follow-up to White's plan was 23.c5.

23...♟c3

This is a poorly timed knight incursion that will end up creating difficulties for Black. 23...g5 is much less effective now, but it was still Black's best plan.

24.♞d3 f4

Alekhine goes after material gain, but the exchange will be well compensated for White, especially considering the awkward position of the black knight and the resulting difficulty in getting it out.

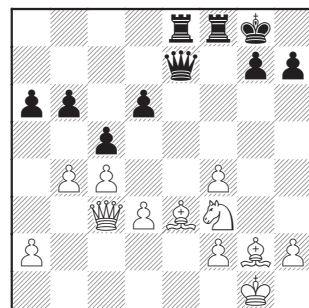
25.gxf4 ♟f5 26.♞d2 ♟xd3 27.exd3!

The black knight's situation is now precarious. Black should be concerned about it right away.

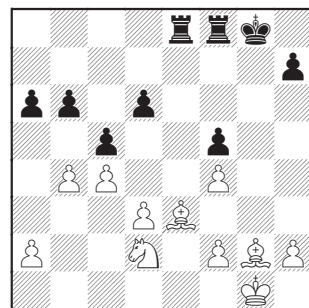
27...c5

27...♟a4 is the only move to stay in the game, since, as we will see,

allowing White to trade the rook for Black's two minor pieces would leave the game decided in Capablanca's favor.

28.♞xc3 ♟xc3 29.♞xc3

An important strategic point that often plays a role in positions where one side has the exchange: if there are no open and usable files, rooks become less valuable. It is true that the e-file is open, since it contains no pawns, but the bishop on e3 keeps it blocked, preventing Black's rooks from entering through it. In a position like this, Black's typical plan should be to open files as soon as possible for the rooks.

29...♞f6 30.♞xf6 gxf6 31.♟d2 f5

There is no doubt that White's three minor pieces are superior to Black's two rooks.

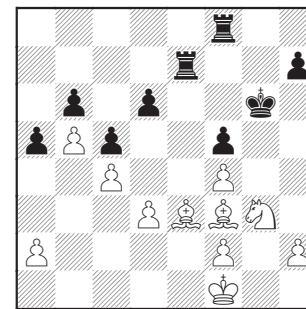
32.b5

It is interesting that it is White who makes a break that could open a file. Is it not Black who wants to open files for the rooks? General principles should always be considered, but the specific details of the position are what ultimately matter. In this case, if the a-file is opened by an exchange on b5, Black will not be able to occupy it quickly, since the a8-square is controlled by the bishop on g2. The exchange on b5 would also free up the c4-square for the white knight, with disastrous consequences for Black.

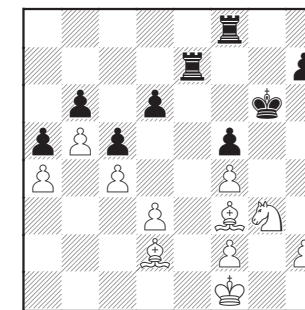
32...a5

Although 32...♞a8 was a desperate move, it may have been Black's best opportunity. Naturally, White did not have to accept the material.

33.♟d5+ ♟g7 34.♟b1, and the knight will come to c3, with a clear advantage.

33.♟f1 ♟f7 34.♟g3 ♟g6 35.♟f3 ♞e7 36.♟f1

White maneuvers without concern, as Black has no counterplay. Moreover, once the game is adjourned, Capablanca would have time to calmly analyze the endgame. **36...♟f6 37.♟d2 ♟g6 38.a4**



The game was adjourned here, although Alekhine did not show up for the resumption.

Capablanca explained the winning method (or at least one of them):

- 1.- He would bring the bishop to c3 and the pawn to h5 (while Black's best response would be to play h6 and keep the king on h7).
- 2.- White would then place the bishop on h3, bring the king to f3, and the knight to e3. Black would be unable to prevent this progress.
- 3.- The knight would go to d5, attacking b6, and when a rook defends it, ♟f6+ would follow, winning.

This was Capablanca's intended plan, shown here in a possible line: 38...♞c7 39.h4 h6 40.h5+ ♟h7 41.♟c3 ♞c7 42.♟g2 ♞c7 43.♟h3 ♞cf7 44.♟e2 ♞e7+ 45.♟f3 ♞cf7 46.♟f1 ♟g8 47.♟e3 ♟h7 48.♟d5 ♞b8 49.♟f6+, winning.

1-0

