

Steve Giddins

Alekhine

move by move

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About the Author

Steve Giddins is a FIDE Master and a former editor of *British Chess Magazine*. He spent a number of years of his professional life based in Moscow, where he learned Russian and acquired an extensive familiarity with Russian chess literature and the training methods of the Russian/Soviet chess school. He's the author of several outstanding books and is well known for his clarity and no-nonsense advice. He has also translated over 20 books, for various publishers, and has contributed regularly to chess magazines and websites.

Also by the Author:

The Greatest Ever Chess Endgames

The English: Move by Move

The French Winawer: Move by Move

Nimzowitsch: Move by Move

Bronstein: Move by Move

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Introduction

Alexander Alekhine is one of the immortal names in chess history. The fourth world champion, and the first player to regain the world title after losing it, his life was a turbulent tale. Born into the Russian aristocracy, he narrowly escaped death at the time of the Revolution. Then, after settling in the West, he did what almost everyone thought was impossible, and dethroned the seemingly invincible Capablanca in their epic 1927 world championship match. After several years of the greatest domination of tournaments that the world had ever seen, culminating in colossal triumphs at San Remo 1930 and Bled 1931, he descended into heavy drinking, losing his title to the underrated Dutchman Max Euwe in 1935. Undeterred, he showed his enormous strength of character by sobering up, preparing hard, and thrashing Euwe in the return match two years later. Then his final years were marred by the Second World War, in which he found himself caught in occupied Europe, where his name was to be forever tainted by allegations of collaboration with the Nazis. Finally, scorned by the chess world, he died a lonely death in a hotel room in Portugal, the only world champion to die in possession of the title.

It is a story worthy of the movies; indeed, the Soviet GM and Alekhine author Alexander Kotov even penned a film script about his life. Even some 70 years after his death, many of the controversies surrounding his life have not been resolved. Did he really write the notorious anti-Semitic articles that appeared in the *Pariser Zeitung* in March 1941, for instance? The short answer is that we don't know for sure, although Alekhine's various different and inconsistent accounts of what really happened ("I didn't write them at all", "I wrote them, but the anti-Semitic bits were added later by the editors", "I wrote them because my wife was being held hostage", etc) don't make things look good for him. And even his death has been questioned, with suggestions he may have been murdered by a Soviet hitman. Admittedly, this latter theory has much less substance, and should probably be grouped with those that suggest the moon landings were faked and that Princess Diana was murdered by Lord Lucan, with Elvis Presley (or was it Dick Cheney?) driving the getaway car. Even so, the fact that we should still not know the truth, almost 70 years on, shows what a tangled and controversial life Alekhine led.

There is even a debate about how his name should be pronounced. It is certainly not "Ali-kine" (to rhyme with "bally-line"). Rather, it should be either "AlyEkhin" or "AlyOkhin", with a pronounced stress on the capitalized letter. But which of these is correct remains

unclear. Show the name to any native Russian speaker, and they will say “Alyokhin” (I once conducted a straw poll amongst colleagues in the Moscow office where I worked, and the result was 100% in favour of the latter). But the man himself used to get very angry about this pronunciation, insisting it should be “Alyekhin”, claiming that etymologically it derived from the name of a type of tree that grew near his family estate in Tsarist Russia. Strangely, he also used to claim that Alyokhin was a Jewish corruption of his name, but whenever I have discussed this with native Russian speakers, their reaction has always been that it is Alyekhin which sounds Jewish to their ears, Alyokhin being the natural Russian pronunciation. Ultimately, readers can take their pick which to use, although should you ever meet the departed shades of the great man in an afterlife, you would be wise to call him Alyekhin, if you want to curry favour with him!

But fortunately for us as chess players, there is much less that is unknown about his chess itself. We have the record of his games, which leaves little room for doubt. What we see there is a classic and highly inspiring story of how a player of admittedly enormous natural talent, by dint of a colossal amount of work, turned himself into a great all-round player, able to defeat an apparently unbeatable opponent to win the world championship.

Alekhine’s talent first shone when he was just 15 or 16, in Russian events in and around St Petersburg before the First World War. What stands out from most of these games was his tremendous combinative ability. He was not a match for the best players in positional battles or endgame technique, but his tactical imagination was remarkable, and he had the vision and calculating ability to carry it into effect. But in order to be able to challenge Capablanca and have a realistic chance of beating him, he had to spend a vast amount of time in the 1920s perfecting his positional play and endgame technique, and his account of how he did this, in his famous book *On the Way to the World Championship*, remains one of the classic stories in chess history. Even after all this work, his 6-3 victory over the Cuban was a sensation.

To my mind, it is this story of how Alekhine turned himself into a complete player that makes him such a worthy figure to study, even today. His games provide a complete course in all aspects of chess, and I have therefore tried to choose a representative selection for the present volume. Naturally, his style remained one of a sharp attacking player and a brilliant exploiter of the initiative, and the reader will find many such examples in this book. But he also developed other aspects of his play, and there are some fine positional and technical games to be found here too, the study of which will do much to improve the play of every reader of this book.

In choosing the games, I should say a word or two about what I tried to avoid. I have endeavoured to reduce to a minimum the number of the most well-known Alekhine games included. Naturally, there are certain classics which are simply so good that they are a *sine qua non* of any selection – Games 3 and 10 are two obvious examples. But other very well-known games, such as the various wins against Capablanca in the 1927 world championship match, have been omitted, because I felt they were so well known that there was little

point in reproducing them here.

One other factor that I took into account was whether I, aided by the computer, could shed any new light on the games. The tactical nature of many of Alekhine's games means that they tend to be susceptible to computer analysis, and there are many new discoveries to be made by analysing them with the computer. Naturally, I have not done this in any spirit of *schadenfreude*, or a desire to make Alekhine look bad; on the contrary, I am impressed by how often his play and analysis proves to have been very accurate, even under computer scrutiny.

Desire to add something new also explains why there are no games in this book in which Alekhine faced his great rival Capablanca. As well as being very well known, all of these games have been annotated by Kasparov in his *Great Predecessors* series, and there is little or nothing to be added to his notes, so I took the decision to leave these games out. There are others included here which Kasparov also covered, but I have tried to keep these to a minimum, and the ones included are those which I simply felt were indispensable, either because of their brilliance or instructiveness.

I hope that even readers who are familiar with Alekhine's career will enjoy seeing these games analysed once again, with notes which, I hope, emphasize the instructional nature of his play above all. Studying the classics may have gone out of fashion with the top young GMs of today, but for the ordinary player it remains an indispensable tool of self-improvement, as well as a source of great pleasure.

Finally, I should like to thank the Everyman team for their usual efficiency of production; as well as Bernard Cafferty, whose wonderful chess library plugged a few gaps in my own.

Steve Giddins
Rochester, December 2015.

Game 2

Alekhine-Prat, Paris (simul) 1913

This game is a very lightweight example, taken from a simultaneous display and against what was clearly a weak opponent. I have included it for several reasons:

1. Alekhine was an inveterate player of simuls and exhibitions of all sorts, and produced many wonderful combinative games in those circumstances. It seemed only right to include at least one such example in the book.
2. Although Black's play is poor, the game provides a good illustration of exploiting such inadequate opening play.
3. The final announced mate involves a very nice king hunt, of the sort we all enjoy seeing from time to time.

Game 2

A.Alekhine-M.Prat

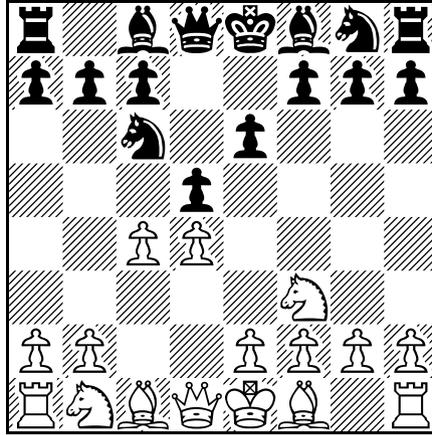
Paris (simul) 1913

Queen's Gambit Accepted

1 d4 d5 2 f3 c6

MegaBase inverts Black's 2nd and 5th moves, showing 2...f6 here. However, Alekhine's book gives the text, and his comments on the opening moves only make sense in that context, so I have taken this as correct. Skinner and Verhoeven also give this move order.

3 c4 e6?



Question: That looks odd!

Answer: Yes, it is just a bad move. Black's second move, although unusual, is not so bad in itself, if used as an introduction to Chigorin's Defence with 3...♗g4. Admittedly, the Chigorin has always been regarded with suspicion by most GMs, but it is better than its reputation, and the ever-creative Alexander Morozevich had much success with it, even at the highest level. It is certainly worth using at the club and county level, and the North of England ace Jeff Horner, who dominated the congress scene in the North West for decades, used it as a mass destruction weapon for years.

On the other hand, after his third move in the game, Black just has a bad Queen's Gambit Declined. The knight on c6 is clearly misplaced, obstructing the c-pawn, and makes it impossible for Black to exert sufficient pressure on the centre.

4 ♞c3 dxc4?!

Another dubious decision, abandoning the centre to his opponent.

5 e3

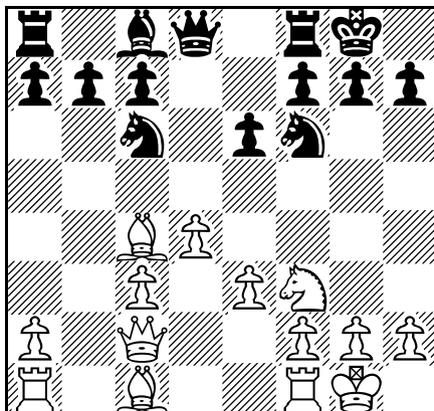
Simply 5 e4 is also very strong.

5...♞f6 6 ♗xc4 ♗b4 7 0-0 ♗xc3?!

Question: Is there any good reason to give up the bishop pair?

Answer: Not that I can see. This is typical of many weak players, who tend to fear knights, since they find their movements difficult to track and control. As a result, they have a tendency to try to give up their bishops for the enemy knights wherever possible. In the present case, the exchange also strengthens White's centre.

8 bxc3 0-0 9 ♔c2



Question: Black's position looks very poor.

Answer: Yes, he already has a dreadful game; no central control, a cramped position, and serious trouble developing his queen's bishop and rook. He has given an excellent illustration of how not to play the opening.

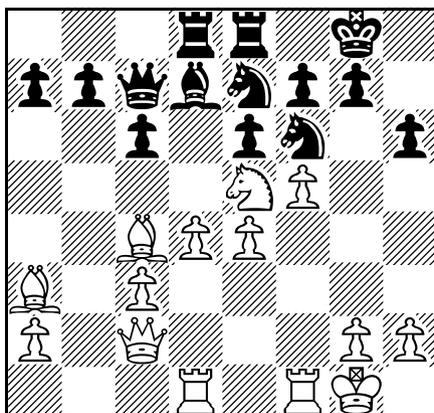
9... Nf5 10 Qa3 c6 11 e4 h6

Black was afraid of the threat 12 e5 Nfd5 13 Ng5, but now his king position is weakened and he soon pays a high price for weakening g6.

12 Rfd1 Qd7 13 Nf5

White's game is very simple and easy to play; even so, it is instructive to see how Alekhine methodically exploits his advantages. He just develops all of his pieces to good squares, then establishes the knight on a powerful outpost, all in classical style.

13... Re8 14 f4 Qc7 15 f5! Rfd8



After a simple and crushing build-up, we reach the point at which White has strengthened his position to the maximum. Now it is time to exploit his advantage by combinative means, and you may like to think about how this can be done.

16 ♖xf7!

Of course, this is the way. The weakness of f7 cries out to be exploited.

16... ♔xf7 **17 e5** ♗eg8

Question: What if he moves the knight?

Answer: After 17... ♗fd5, say, there follows simply 18 fxe6+ ♔xe6 19 ♕e4 and the king will soon be mated in the centre. Indeed, the computer announces a forced mate in eleven: 19... ♖f8 (relatively best) 20 ♕g4+ ♗f5 21 ♕g6+ ♖f6 22 exf6 and the fact that the desperado queen sacrifice on h2 is now Black's best move says it all!

18 ♔d6!

Question: Not even bothering to regain the piece?

Answer: No, Alekhine has bigger fish to fry.

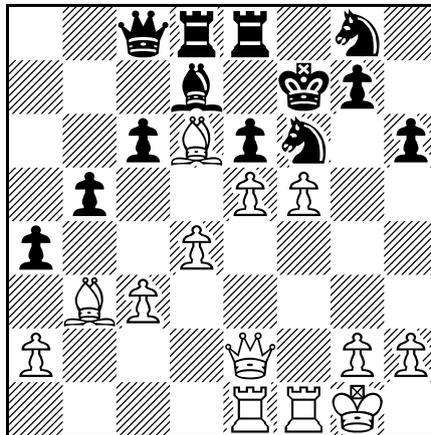
18... ♕c8 **19** ♕e2!

Taking aim at the weak light squares around the enemy king. The helplessness of Black's stranded monarch is really quite comical.

19...b5 **20** ♗b3 **a5** **21** ♖de1

The final link in the chain.

21...a4



Now the stage is set for Alekhine's party piece. Announcing mate was a fine old tradition in 19th century chess, which has now died out. Admittedly, one could look a bit of a fool if one announced a mate and turned out to be wrong, but Alekhine was not the sort to

Alekhine: Move by Move

do so!

Here he announced mate in ten: I invite you, dear reader, to try to calculate it for yourself, without moving the pieces!

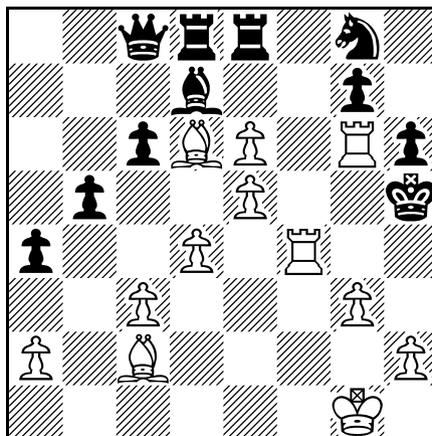
22 ♚h5!!

A lovely queen sacrifice to start the ball rolling.

22...♘xh5 23 fxe6+ ♚g6 24 ♙c2+ ♚g5

Now the black king has to walk the plank.

25 ♜f5+ ♚g6 26 ♜f6+ ♚g5 27 ♜g6+ ♚h4 28 ♜e4+ ♖f4 29 ♜xf4+ ♚h5 30 g3! 1-0



A lovely final touch: there is no defence to 31 ♜h4 mate.

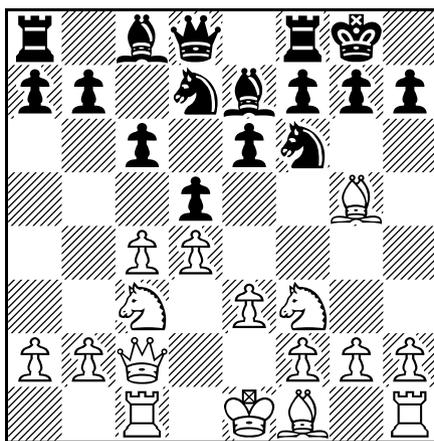
A very lightweight encounter, but a thoroughly enjoyable one – the sort of game one can turn to when the present-day diet of Berlin endings gets too much to bear!

Game 4

Alekhine-Yates, London 1922

Game 4
A.Alekhine-F.Yates
London 1922
Queen's Gambit Declined

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♗f3 d5 4 ♗c3 ♙e7 5 ♙g5 0-0 6 e3 ♘bd7 7 ♖c1 c6 8 ♚c2



Question: That looks a little unusual.

Answer: Slightly, yes. The main line is 8 ♙d3 dxc4 9 ♙xc4 ♘d5 etc. Alekhine's choice is part of the "battle for the tempo", which often sees White trying to avoid committing himself to ♙d3 at once in this position. To that end, he sometimes plays ♚c2, and also a2-a3 and even

h2-h3, in the hope of extracting a micro-concession from Black, in the form of ...d5xc4, while the white bishop is still on f1.

Question: Seems reasonable – after all, “many a mickle makes a muckle”, as they say north of the border!

Answer: True, but in the first place, this particular mickle is pretty diminutive, and secondly, Black himself is not short of similar semi-useful waiting moves, such as ...♖e8, ...a7-a6, etc. In practice, White rarely secures any real gain from these tempo games, but at least it breaks the monotony.

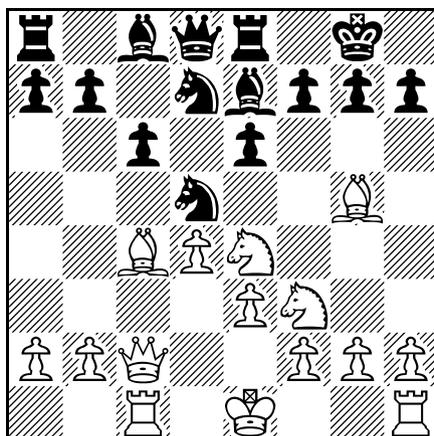
8...♖e8

Like the proud Yorkshireman he was, Yates declines to give away even half a tempo.

9 ♖d3

Abandoning the games and going back into more normal lines.

9...dxc4 10 ♗xc4 ♘d5 11 ♘e4



Question: Isn't that also unusual?

Answer: Yes, although in Alekhine's games, it was pretty much the main line in this and similar positions. He was always very fond of this idea, trying to retain more pieces on the board than after the routine exchange 11 ♗xe7. With best defence, the move does not confer any advantage, but it is a useful extra resource, which often bore fruit in his games.

11...f5?

As it does here! This really is a pretty vile-looking lunge, which creates serious weaknesses on the dark squares in Black's position. It is all the more reprehensible that it should come in a position where Black is already committed to exchanging off dark-squared bishops.

12 ♖xe7 ♚xe7 13 ♞ed2 b5

Alekhine condemned this as a further error, whereas the computer actually thinks it is best.

Question: So what did Alekhine recommend?

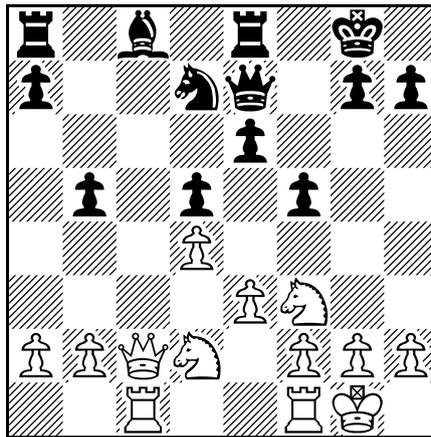
Answer: He gave 13... ♞5b6 14 ♙d3 g6 “preparing e5”, but this looks very suspicious, as Black is behind in development and has a weak king. Sure enough, after the further moves 15 0-0 e5 16 e4!, White has an obvious advantage and Black still has to solve his development problems.

14 ♙xd5

Question: That is a surprise? Why get rid of Black’s backward c-pawn?

Answer: Alekhine is trading advantages. He decides that he will eliminate the backward pawn, but in return will be able to seize control of the open c-file. He was probably influenced by the fact that after 14 ♙b3 ♙b7 15 0-0 ♚ac8, Black is ready to advance ...c6-c5, which cannot really be stopped. The position remains murky after a line such as 16 e4 ♞b4 17 ♚c3 c5, when it is not clear that White has any objective advantage. Alekhine’s course is simpler and secures a safe edge.

14...cxd5 15 0-0



Question: So you think White is better here?

Answer: Yes, he certainly has a small, but enduring edge. He controls the c-file and the c5-square is weak, towards which White will direct his knights. In addition, the black bishop on c8, traditionally something of a problem piece in the orthodox QGD, is ineffective, ham-

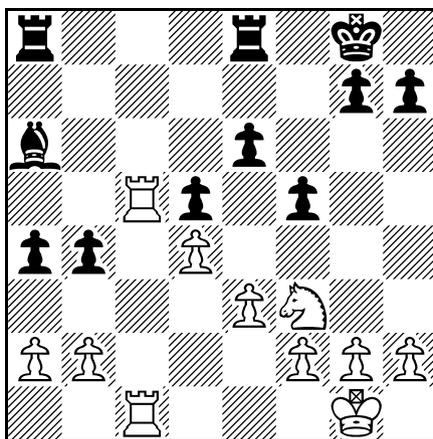
pered by the abundance of black pawns on light squares.

15...a5

Question: Why not just 15...♖b7, intending to contest the c-file by bringing a rook to c8?

Answer: Then after 16 ♖c7 ♘b6 17 ♙c5, Black's position is quite difficult; e.g. 17...♙xc7 18 ♙xc7 ♙ab8 19 ♙fc1 ♙ec8 20 ♙1c5 a6 21 ♘b3 and the prospect of the knight landing on a5 is horrible for Black, while 21...♘c4? drops a piece to the tactic 22 ♙xb7!.

16 ♘b3 a4 17 ♘c5 ♘xc5 18 ♙xc5 ♙xc5 19 ♙xc5 b4 20 ♙fc1 ♙a6



Question: Black seems to have eased his position somewhat – he has exchanged a few pieces and dug his bishop out of mothballs.

Answer: True, but his game remains depressingly passive. The exchange of knights has left White with the classic good knight vs. bad bishop scenario.

Question: Why is the black bishop “bad”? It looks quite active.

Answer: Actually, if you look closer, what is it really doing? It controls the empty diagonal a6-f1, but that is all. By contrast, the white knight, when it lands on e5, will be hugely influential over almost the whole board. In addition, Black's advanced queenside pawns can prove vulnerable and his dark squares stink. This is actually a very unpleasant position for Black, possibly objectively even lost.

21 ♘e5

This also stops the threat of 21...♙c4.

21...♙eb8

Question: I don't understand that at all. Why didn't Black challenge the c-file?

Answer: As Alekhine himself points out, after 21...♖ec8, White can simply win a pawn at once: 22 ♜xc8+ ♜xc8 23 ♜xc8+ ♟xc8 24 ♘c6, with the twin threats of 25 ♘e7+ and 25 ♘xb4. This is an illustration of what we said in the note to move 20, about the potential vulnerability of the advanced black queenside pawns.

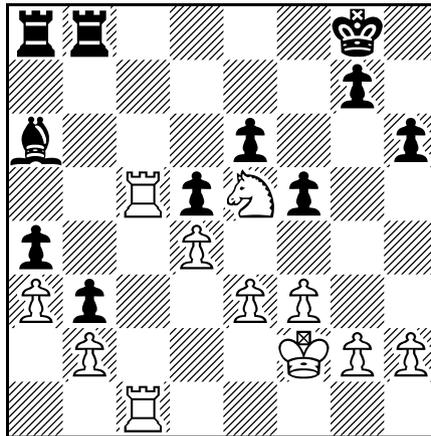
22 f3

White prepares his long-term plan of infiltrating with his king via the weakened central dark squares. The fact that Black is entirely passive makes White's task fairly simple, although, as we will see, Alekhine the great artist manages to find a highly attractive way to crown what might otherwise have seemed a rather routine technical process.

22...b3 23 a3

Exchanging on b3 would needlessly open the a-file, which Black might be able to use for counterplay (going after the b2-pawn, for example). The text keeps a lid on everything.

23...h6 24 ♘f2



24...♗h7

Question: Now that he has got his pawn off the vulnerable b4-square, can't Black challenge the c-file?

Answer: That is a good thought, and one Alekhine does not mention. Nevertheless, after 24...♜c8, White can just continue 25 ♜xc8+ ♜xc8 26 ♜xc8+ ♟xc8 and now 27 ♘d3 wins a pawn anyway, since Black does not have time to arrange the defence of both e6 and a4 – the knight will land on c5 next move and win one of them.

25 h4 ♜f8

Question: Black seems to be coming rather quietly! If White intends to advance his king via f4 and e5, can't Black try to stop it with 25...g5, for example?

Answer: Again, a worthy thought, but this creates new weaknesses and White has several ways to win after that. One of the simplest is 26 ♖c7+ ♔g8 27 hxg5 hxg5 28 ♘f7 and the black g-pawn drops off; 26 hxg5 hxg5 27 ♖h1+ ♔g8 28 ♖h5 is also very strong.

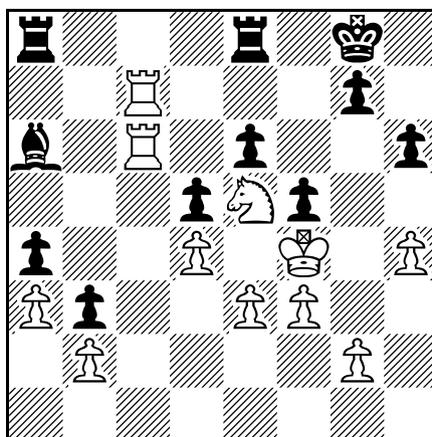
26 ♔g3 ♖fb8

Black is reduced to aimless shuffling, just waiting for the axe to descend on his outstretched neck. Sadly, as we have seen, attempts to play more actively are also doomed, so Yates just asks Alekhine how precisely he intends to break through.

27 ♖c7 ♘b5 28 ♖1c5 ♘a6 29 ♖5c6 ♖e8 30 ♔f4

White gradually tightens his grip to the maximum.

30...♔g8



31 h5

A nice little move, putting an end to any thought of ...g7-g5 and securing an outpost on g6 for the white knight.

31...♘f1 32 g3 ♘a6 33 ♖f7

Now White prepares to double rooks on the seventh rank. Black cannot oppose this, since moving the e8-rook to either f8 or c8 drops the e6-pawn, while moving the a-rook to c8 loses the bishop.

33...♔h7 34 ♖cc7 ♖g8 35 ♘d7!

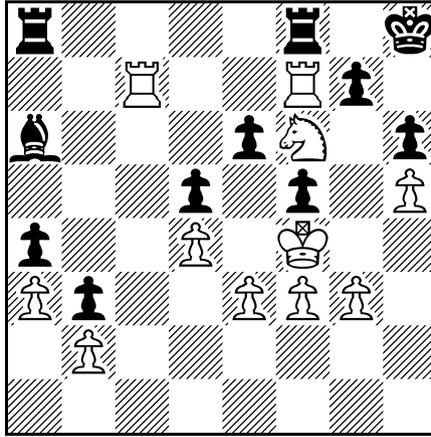
The start of the final combination. 36 ♘f6+ is the immediate threat.

35...♔h8 36 ♘f6

Even though not check, this move is playable anyway, since taking the knight allows mate on h7.

36...♖gf8

Putting the rook anywhere else allows simply 37 ♖xg7. The text move is directed against that threat, due to the X-ray attack on f6.



Question: Can you find a nice win here?

Answer: 37 ♖xg7! ♖xf6 38 ♔e5!! 1-0

A beautiful and piquant finish. The only way to save the rook on f6 is to put it or its colleague on f8, but that allows mate in two with 39 ♖h7+ ♔g8 40 ♖cg7 mate.