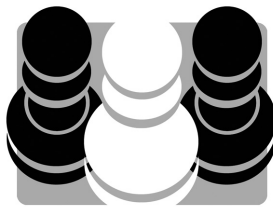


10th Anniversary Edition

Learn from the Legends

By

Mihail Marin



Quality Chess
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Contents

	Key to symbols used & Bibliography	4
	Preface	5
1	Akiba Rubinstein's Rook Endings	11
2	Alexander Alekhine and the Fourth Phase of the Game	83
3	In the Patriarch's Footsteps	117
4	Tal's Super Rooks vs. Two Minor Pieces	153
5	Petrosian's Exchange Sacrifices	189
6	Bobby Fischer's Pet Bishop	255
7	Karpov's Opposite Coloured Bishops Endings	307
8	Viktor, the "Non-Existent" Hero	375
9	Quo Vadis, Magnus?	423
	Biographies of Our Heroes	457
	Name Index	469
	Game Index	473
	Alphabetical Game Index	476

Preface



Preface to the third edition

Every time I publish a new book it feels as if I am blessed with yet another child. How else could I describe my thoughts when holding in my hands something created by me and which bears in it so much of my intimate self?

I remember very clearly the moment when I expressed this kind of feeling for the first time. In 1987 I took part in my first ever Zonal tournament. Among the 24 participants of the Warsaw Zonal, I was the only FIDE Master or, in other words, *the* outsider of the event. Very few would have taken my chances seriously and even I was mainly aiming for an honourable result, but after more than two weeks of battling, I emerged as one of the four happy qualifiers for the Interzonal!

My friends encouraged me to exploit the favourable moment to the maximum by annotating some of my crucial games (including two wins over Kiril Georgiev, then ranked in the top 20 in the world) for the *Chess Informant*, a sort of periodical Chess Bible in those times. This was my official start as a chess writer and I considered it a success since a few months later I received my free copy of the *Informant*.

Keeping my enthusiasm to myself is something I was never very good at, so I immediately told my girlfriend that I felt as if a baby had been born to me. She looked at me with her beautiful, deep, but on that occasion condescending eyes and after a short hesitation replied: “Why so, I thought getting an Informant for free was a good thing!” The whole episode ended with a disappointed “Never mind!” but I now realize that the joy offered by my new “chess babies” has not lost even a single bit of freshness over all these years.

The book you are holding in your hands is no exception, but since it is not a new book, but just a new edition of my first effort for Quality Chess, some explanation is needed. First of all, knowing that ten years after the first edition there might still be interest in what when I grow old I may call my principal work, feels the same as when a boy confirms the hopes of his parents by graduating from the best university around.

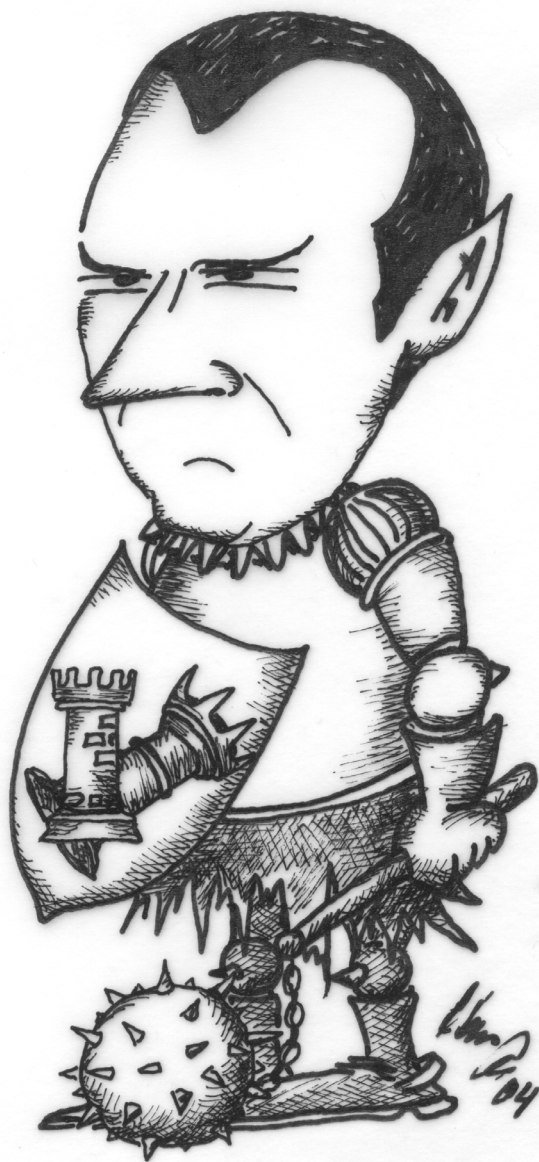
Besides, there is plenty of new material in it: the Carlsen chapter, a lot of corrections and additions, so to a certain extent this is a new book. Now is a good moment to express my gratitude to my friend Karsten Müller, renowned endgame expert and the perfect host for me during the live ChessBase Endgame Magic show whenever I visit Hamburg! Karsten provided me with a long list of possible mistakes and inaccuracies from the previous editions. Reviewing the respective paragraphs and making the needed corrections linked me emotionally with the past, creating the perfect illusion of rejuvenating myself by ten years.

But I confess that my best moments were those in which I could refute Karsten’s claims. This does not have anything to do with my innate competitive nature, but with the satisfaction of proving that the human mind can still be stronger than computers – if only we believe in it!

Now, please allow me to introduce my youngest baby-book: the third edition of my *Legends*!

Mihail Marin
Bucharest, May 2015

Alexander Alekhine and the Fourth Phase of the Game



We are all familiar with the magical attraction exerted by chess. Once a person (be it a child or an adult, it does not matter) has learned it properly he or she will long to play again and again and will feel the emotion of each game with intensity as if it was a matter of life and death.

Equally remarkable is the fact that even in the darkest periods of the history of mankind chess has managed to maintain its status as the royal game. Many of the greatest chess masters have also appeared to enjoy a protected status even when confronted by the most powerful dictators. A good example is the rather paradoxical attitude of the Soviet regime towards a certain refugee named Alexander Alexandrovich Alekhine.

Coming from a rich and influential family, Alekhine had every reason to disagree with the political changes during what could have been the best years of his youth. The new regime took from him practically all his goods and wealth. There were even rumours that if had he not been such a strong chess player he would have been killed. After having failed to embark on the last ship with emigrants departing from Odessa, Alekhine had to find a way of making a living. His broad education allowed him to gain very good jobs, which he fulfilled conscientiously.

However, in 1921 the chance to play a tournament in France arose and Alekhine chose liberty; he never returned to his homeland. The future World Champion was strongly focused on his chess career and avoided making political declarations, but one relatively innocent statement he apparently made was enough for the Soviet leaders to declare him an enemy of the state.

We now reach the most interesting part of the whole issue. By normal Soviet standards, Alekhine should have immediately become a *non-person* whose name would have disappeared from all the archives, never to be officially mentioned again. However, the leaders seem to have understood that Alekhine was a unique figure, not only as a player but also as a commentator. His books on the New York tournaments of 1924 and 1927 were published in Russian (what is more, with the author's approval!) as well as many other games annotated by Alekhine.

The man who made Chigorin's dreams come true

With the passing years Alekhine became, in the official Soviet view, an essential link in the long chain of glorious Russian players. He was the man who made Chigorin's dreams come true and inspired Botvinnik to take over the relay. The other communist countries naturally shared this point of view. It is quite significant that, in my youth, the three most outstanding chess books published in Romanian were the translations from Russian of the best game collections of the following players: Chigorin, Alekhine and Botvinnik.

My whole childhood and, indirectly, my entire chess career were influenced by a book I found in my father's library, *300 partide alese ale lui Alehin* (Alekhine's 300 selected games), published in 1957.

Alekhine's moves and comments were those of the hero that every child needs for inspiration. Even the biographical chapter written by Panov was melodramatic enough (though strongly politicised, the way I see it now) to match any best-selling novel from the Romanian market.

For years I spent countless hours working with that book, or simply reading it. I allowed myself to be separated from my hero's games only for such boring activities as my school duties, eating or sleeping. This attitude was directly encouraged and inspired by the book itself. Panov writes

that Alekhine's thoughts were permanently focused on chess even when he had to do something different, and that he always carried with him a pocket chess set.

Game collections of strong players are always instructive but are rarely presented in a systematic way. However, Alekhine's games were reserved by fate for a different treatment.

Soon after the champion's death one of the leading Soviet grandmasters, namely Alexander Kotov, started structuring the wealth of Alekhine's games according to tactical and strategic themes. This was intended to help the reader improve his understanding of chess. The final result of years of work was the two volume book *Shakhmatnoe nasledie A. A. Alekhina* (Alekhine's chess inheritance).

I became acquainted with Kotov's book much later than with Alekhine's 300 selected games. Although I was familiar with most of the games, I understood that Kotov had done a really great job. His introductions to the chapters as well as the classification of the material are highly instructive.

It would have been, however, impossible to give deep comments to more than 360 games, so he limited himself to quoting Alekhine's own notes or stating some general considerations.

In this chapter, inspired by one of the sections of Kotov's work, I shall focus on a very interesting theme: positions where each side has only queen and one rook left (and pawns, of course). I have used examples cited by Kotov as well as some of his ideas. However, I have focused more than he did on the critical moments, dug deeper analytically and arranged the games in what seemed to me the most logical order.

General considerations

What makes these positions so special?

The first impulse is to classify them as endgames, because of the reduced number of pieces left on the board. On the other hand elements of the middlegame are also present: a queen in collaboration with a rook can be a devastating force, especially when attacking the enemy king.

This obvious difficulty of strictly classifying these positions caused Romanovsky to baptize them *the fourth stage of the game*, along with the opening, the middlegame and the endgame.

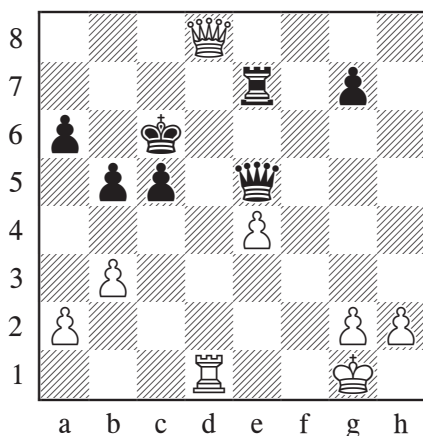
However, this definition only offers a limited solution from the abstract point of view of chess terminology. For practical reasons, it is more important to understand the way the dual character of the position is reflected in its evaluation and the choice of plans.

The most difficult decision to be made regards the kings' positions. For the eventuality that queens may be exchanged, the kings should be ready for rapid centralization. At the same time, kings are best advised not to abandon their residences while middlegame influences remain. This obvious contradiction makes long term planning quite difficult for both sides.

For instance, if one of the players attempts a mating attack, he should constantly take into account that the initially exposed enemy king could instantly become a strong centralized piece in case of simplifications. In the game fragment presented below I benefited from this interesting psychological situation by turning a basically losing position into a win.

Valentin Stoica – Mihail Marin

Eforie 1988



Right after the opening my experienced opponent (future friend and trainer) carried out a nice tactical operation, winning a pawn and forcing my king to travel from g8 to c6. The material advantage and attacking chances are sufficient reasons to consider White's position objectively winning. However, proving this in practice is not easy since there is no immediate technical solution, while attacking the king with a reduced number of forces requires imagination and precise calculation.

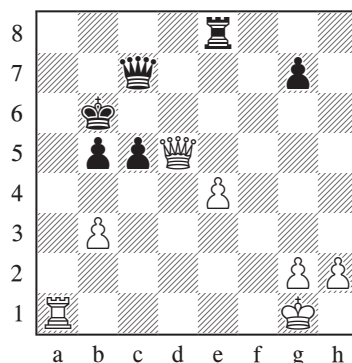
Judging from the course of the game, it seems that my opponent completely underestimated my potential resources for counterplay. They consist of the queenside majority supported by the king and would become quite significant in the case of simplifications.

33.♔c8†

Since the d-file does not offer White a direct path to the enemy king, he should have opened new lines on the queenside.

Therefore, the strongest move was 33.a4!. Facing the immediate threat of an attack along the a-file (or, in case of ...bxa4, the b-file) Black has to regroup with 33...♗c7. However, this move allows White to centralise his queen

with 34.axb5† axb5 (Although strategically undesirable, 34...♕xb5 would be relatively safer. The queenside weaknesses would be compensated by the vulnerability of the e4-pawn.) 35.♗d5† when after 35...♕b6 he can create decisive threats with 36.♖a1 ♖e8.



37.b4! The black king's shelter is destroyed and the attack is unstoppable. For instance 37...cxb4 38.♗d4† ♗c5 39.♖a6† winning the queen. Instead of 37.b4, the natural 37.♗d2 would be less clear because of 37...♕b7! and White has no clear continuation of the attack.

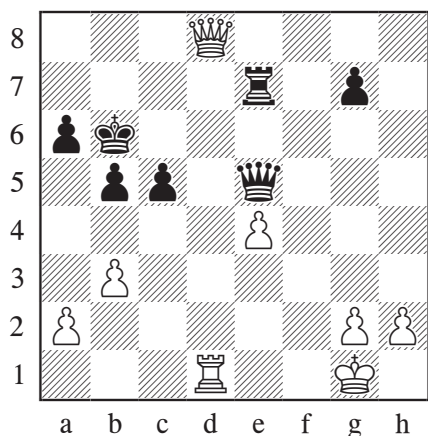
This variation was not easy to foresee from the beginning, although after 33.a4 intuition could have led White, step by step, on the right path.

A second best continuation was 33.h4!? securing the first rank (an important detail, as we shall see) and preparing a dangerous candidate for promotion in the endgame. Black would not be able to organize any counterplay, since his pieces would be practically tied up to the defence of the king.

If 33...♕b7, with the aim of placing the king on a safer square, White could play 34.♗d5† ♗xd5 35.exd5 with a clear extra tempo compared to the game, which would have made his winning chances significantly higher.

33...♕b6 34.♗d8†

34.a4 would still have been unpleasant for Black.



34...♔b7!?

Vali's intention might have been to repeat moves once in order to approach the time control, but he only helped me improve my king's position. The threat ...♙xe4 became real now.

35.♙d5†?

This move allows the biggest part of the advantage to slip away.

Failing to find an attacking plan, Vali decides to give the game a technical character. He might have hoped that the concession of exchanging queens would be compensated by the creation of a strong passed pawn, supported by the rook. This overlooks that the previously exposed black king will easily block it. This is an important detail because the black rook will be allowed to start dangerous counterplay.

35.♞e1, defending the pawn, should have been preferred. In this case, Black would have faced a difficult defence but no immediate danger of losing.

35...♙xd5

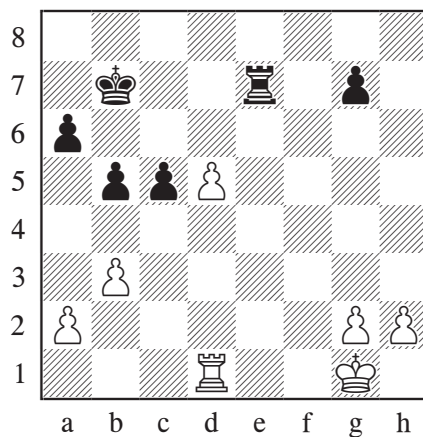
I had no interest in continuing to play with the queens on the board. After 35...♔b6, the queen incursion 36.♙a8 would lead nowhere because of 36...♞e8 when the queen has to return to d5, since 37.♞d8 even loses to

37...♙a1† 38.♔f2 ♙f6†.

Instead, White could have continued 36.♙d3 since 36...♙xe4 is not a threat anymore because of 37.♙d6† ♔b7 38.♙xc5 with a clear advantage.

36.exd5

Finding himself in time pressure, my opponent must have been seduced by the idea that the immediate 36...♔c7, planning to block the pawn from d7, is not possible because of the fork on d6. As the further course of the game will prove, this detail is not sufficient for a win.



36...♞e2

During the game I did not hesitate for a moment to activate my rook.

However, the more solid 36...♞d7, intending to block the pawn with the king on d6, would have been entirely playable.

A possible continuation is 37.h4 ♔c7 38.d6†!?. Allowing the king to reach the d6-square would mean giving up any winning attempts. In fact, I would already prefer Black's position.

38...♙xd6

This capture is also forced. Otherwise the black rook will stay passive for the rest of the game.

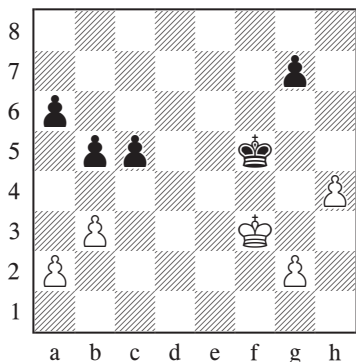
39.♖xd6 ♔xd6 40.♔f2

White's kingside majority is an important positional factor, but it is compensated by the black king's superior activity.

40...♗e5 41.♔e3 ♕f5

Threatening to attack the pawns with ...♗g4.

42.♔f3



42...a5

After general pawn exchanges the most probable outcome would be a position with white king and a-pawn versus black king. Since the black a-pawn is likely to be the last one to fall, it is useful to advance it as far as possible in order to allow the black king to reach the b8-square in time.

43.g4†

The careless 43.a4?? even loses to 43...c4 44.bxc4 bxa4.

43...♗e5 44.♔e3 a4 45.bxa4 bxa4 46.a3 c4 47.h5 ♔f6 48.♔f4 c3 49.g5† ♔e6 50.♔e3 ♔f5

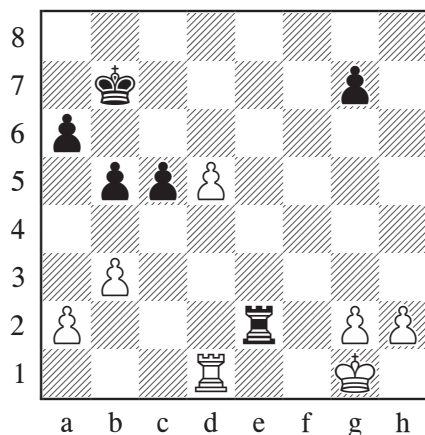
It is easy to establish that the black king will reach the b8-square in time.

White can try a different move order, starting with 37.♔f2, when for a while play continues in similar fashion:

37...♔c7 38.d6† ♖xd6 39.♖xd6 ♔xd6 40.♔e3 ♔e5 41.♔d3 ♔d5

Compared with the previous variation, the kingside has not yet been weakened. This allows the king to stay closer to the other wing in order

to win space with 42.a4 ♔e5 43.a5 ♔d5 44.h4 ♔e5 45.♔e3 ♔d5 and the threat of playing ...c4 followed by ...♔xc4 winning, forces White to repeat the position with 46.♔d3.



37.d6 ♔c8 38.♖d5 ♖c2

While talking to my opponent fifteen years later, I considered that there was a good chance his wounds had healed so I finally opened the subject of this dramatic game.

Among other interesting things, Vali told me that he considers 38...♖xa2 to be sufficient for a draw as well, suggesting the following variation:

39.♖xc5† ♔d7 40.♖c7† ♔xd6 41.♖xg7 ♖a3 42.h4 ♖xb3 43.h5 ♖e3!

The most efficient way to fight against White's advancing passed pawn.

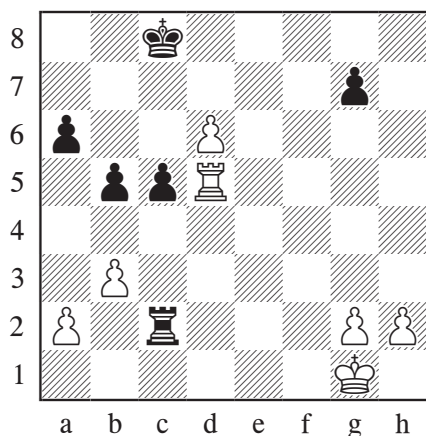
44.h6 ♖e1†!

An important intermediate check.

45.♔h2 ♖e6 46.h7 ♖h6† 47.♔g3 ♔e5 48.♔g4 ♔f6

Black is just in time to eliminate the main source of danger.

During the game I did not want to give up my c5-pawn so easily, as if anticipating the further course of the game. Vali even asked me whether I was playing for a win at this point of the game, but such a thought was beyond my ambition.

**39.d7+**

With this nervous move exposing the passed pawn even more, White makes things easier for his opponent.

Black would have needed to show greater accuracy after 39.♖g5. The drawing path would have been quite narrow as we can see from the following variations.

39...♙d7 40.♞xg7 ♙xd6 41.h4

Capturing the a6-pawn with 41.♞g6 ♙d5 42.♞xa6 would lose too much time, allowing Black strong counterplay with 42...c4 when the only one risking a loss would be White.

41...♞xa2

The pawn race that will start now is quite exciting, but its outcome will be peaceful. Optically, it might look as if White's connected pawns will be more dangerous. However, the centralized black king has a significant influence on the evaluation of the position. For instance, it prevents the white rook from holding the c-pawn from behind. This variation is a clear illustration of how the exchange of queens can reverse the situation of the kings.

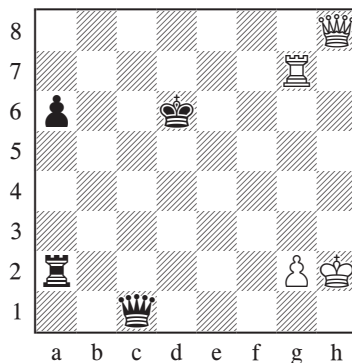
42.h5 c4 43.bxc4 bxc4 44.h6

White could stop the enemy pawn with 44.♞g3 but after 44...♞a5 he will not be able to defend his own runner, for instance 45.♞h3 c3 with a draw.

44...c3 45.h7 c2 46.h8=♞ c1=♞†

And here is where the unfavourable position of the white king comes into account. If Black had promoted without check, his king would have been quickly mated.

47.♙h2



After a break of more than 10 moves, we are back in the world of major pieces endgames.

And again Black seems to be in trouble because of his exposed king.

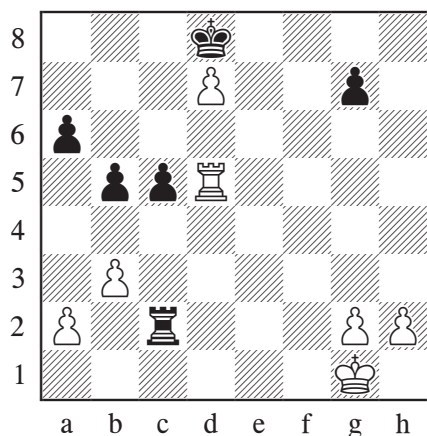
However, he has the accurate 47...♞f4† 48.♞g3 ♞a4! defending the queen and the a-pawn at the same time while also creating the threat of simplification with ...♞h4†. Neither player can do anything to win.

An interesting attempt to improve over this last variation is the immediate 43.h6!? without capturing on c4.

Black is best advised not to take on b3, because from b1 his newly born queen would have no possibility of checking the white king after ♙h2, thus leaving her own king exposed to the attack. White's main idea is that after 43...c3 44.h7 c2 45.h8=♞ c1=♞† 46.♙h2 ♞f4† 47.♞g3 his b3-pawn considerably restricts Black's pieces.

However, the black king now has a reliable shelter on the queenside and after the calm 47...♙c7 his chances would not be worse at all.

39...♙d8

**40.a4??**

A horrible mistake just before the time control. Seven moves ago this would have been the winning move, but now it leads to disaster. After exchanging queens, Vali might have understood in a flash that a4 instead would have been an efficient method of increasing his advantage. This thought might have followed him subconsciously and, under time pressure, he could have advanced the pawn as a reflex caused by disappointment.

After a normal continuation, such as 40.h4, the game would have ended in a draw, for instance 40...b4 41.♔h2 ♖xa2 42.♖xc5 ♖a3! 43.♖c6 ♔xd7 with complete equality.

40...b4!

Suddenly the threat ...c4 is very strong. Because of the unfavourable position of his king, White is in big trouble.

41.♖d1?!

More stubborn would have been:

41.♔f1

Play might have continued:

41...c4 42.♔e1 cxb3 43.♔d1 ♖c7 44.♖d2 a5!

Threatening to transpose to a winning pawn ending with ...♖xd7.

The immediate 44...♖xd7 would be premature because of 45.a5!.

45.♖b2

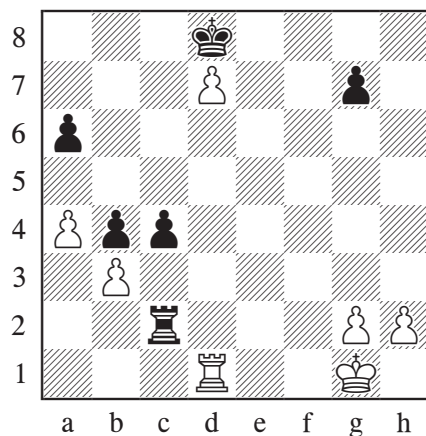
There is nothing else left for White.

45...♖c3

By defending the b3-pawn, Black threatens to capture the d7-pawn with his king, when the win should not present any difficulties.

46.♖d2 g6! 47.h3 g5

Now, dominated on both wings, White is in zugzwang.

41...c4**42.h4**

42.bxc4 loses to 42...b3 when the weakness of White's back rank will allow the pawn to promote without needing help from the black king.

42...cxb3 43.♔h2 b2

Threatening 44...♖c1.

44.♖b1 ♔xd7 45.♔g3 ♔e6**0-1**

Although its first step was made to the left, the king is aiming for b3 in order to support the pawn's promotion. (The path is longer only from an optical point of view. Chess geometry differs from what we learn in mathematics.) Therefore, White resigned.