

THE DUEL

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THE DUEL

THE PARALLEL CHESS LIVES OF A. ALEKHINE AND J.R. CAPABLANCA

ALESSANDRO BOSSI, CLAUDIO BROVELLI

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Key to symbols

!	a good move	±	White has a serious advantage
?	a weak move	∓	Black has a serious advantage
!!	an excellent move	+−	White has a decisive advantage
??	a blunder	−+	Black has a decisive advantage
!?	an interesting move	→	with an attack
?!	a dubious move	↑	with initiative
□	only move	↔	with counterplay
=	equality	Δ	with the idea of
∞	unclear position	⊃	better is
≡	with compensation for the sacrificed material	N	novelty
±	White stands slightly better	+	check
∓	Black stands slightly better	#	mate

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF

ESTEBAN CANAL
and
FRANCESCO MONDINI

Foreword

By Michele Godena (*)

I am convinced that to cultivate the memory of the past and to study the classics is always useful and worthwhile, not least because it enables us to understand and face with greater awareness the facts and the problems of the present time.

Much has already been written about the giants who have preceded us, and in particular, the Cuban, José Raúl Capablanca, and the Russo-Frenchman, Alexander Alekhine, but a new approach can surely offer different and interesting perspectives.

In *The Duel*, Alessandro Bossi and Claudio Brovelli go deep into the lives of these two legendary World Champions, who have left their mark in an unforgettable manner on their epoch (the first forty years of the 20th century) and who remain – in part, due to their very different personalities and relationship with the game – inimitable examples for all the chess-playing generations to come. The choice to present in parallel the two biographies (in my opinion quite rightly so), shows clearly and effectively similarities and differences, not only in the style of play, but also in the approaches to life of the two protagonists.

With very precise historical descriptions and presenting the events in chronological order, the authors accompany us on a journey alongside the lives of these two legends of chess. In this fashion the personalities emerge, in many ways antithetical but equally fascinating: Capablanca, friendly and charming in society, precocious, genial and nearly invincible on the chessboard, and Alekhine, who combined a wonderful talent with a capacity for work, a competitive attitude and an energy which was truly enviable.

Alekhine was rational and focused in pursuing his objective to supersede his rival. The Cuban champion represented for the younger Russian player a reference and a model – firstly, to be studied from a critical and highly penetrating perspective and then to be surpassed and beaten. The fact that, after wresting the world title from him in the year 1927, Alekhine had always refused Capablanca

(*) *Grandmaster (1996), five-time Italian chess champion.*

the chance of revenge will always remain a cause of regret for chess fans, but it also demonstrates that the new World Champion was fully aware of having performed a feat that was perhaps not repeatable.

The many masterpieces that both of them created on the chess board, which constitute for the public their most important legacy, enrich this volume and underline key moments of their respective careers. The games are analyzed well by the authors, who enlighten the reader as to how the diverse conceptualization and the different styles of the “duelists” (the more strategic and positional of Capablanca’s versus the more aggressive and combinative of Alekhine’s) are instructive and entertaining even nowadays, for all those who love chess and who wish to improve their understanding of it.

The value of this volume lies also in the parts where Bossi and Brovelli, with painstaking accuracy, have quoted both direct impressions of the two protagonists (interviews, articles, letters and quotations from their works) and evaluations (in the comments and memories of their contemporaries). In such a way, a contest of wider significance is described, which helps in understanding the characters, the period and the specific contexts. Among the witnesses emerges, in particular, Esteban Canal, the great champion of Peruvian origin who spent much of his time in Italy. He had the privilege of fighting with both Capablanca and Alekhine and becoming acquainted, if not a friend, with them. One of the authors, Alessandro Bossi, was lucky enough to come to know Canal personally and to hear directly from him of the many episodes and anecdotes described in this book.

Enjoy your reading!

Introduction

0.1

This story, or this passion, begins at Christmas in 1971. I was 15 years old. As a present I received from my sisters a splendid book, the *Dizionario Enciclopedico Degli Scacchi* (Chess Encyclopedic Dictionary) by Adriano Chicco and Giorgio Porreca, two well-known players and authors of that period. In the book, among a plethora of other information, I found the biographies and most important games of Alekhine and Capablanca, which became for me two sources of chess happiness. Since then, I have tried to find out as much as possible about the two champions, studying their collection of best games and reading the comments of experts on how they had influenced the history of the game.

Gradually, the idea of a book was conceived: I thought of a triangle, with Capablanca and Alekhine looking at each other directly, but also through a mirror, placed on one side. I imagined myself to be that mirror.

Books, videos and other materials were my principal sources, but they were not the only ones. Luckily, I could rely on an eyewitness, a man who had met both of them and become their friend: Esteban Canal (1896 – 1981). This fascinating character and strong player (FIDE awarded him the title of Honorary Grandmaster in the year 1977) lived many years of his eventful life near Gavirate (in the province of Varese, northern Italy) where the chess club, to which I now belong, was located and named after him. It seemed to me nothing short of a miracle to come to know, speak and play with a person who had known, spoken and played with these two giants! It was a great pity that this could happen only in the last years of his life, since he passed away in 1981 at the age of 85.

0.2

What is the reader going to find in this book?

- All the games (49) played between Alekhine and Capablanca, with commentaries;
- Some games played by them against other opponents, considered relevant in the context of the discussion;
- Short biographies of the main chess players mentioned in each chapter and the charts of the tournaments where the two champions played together.

Before starting to write the book, I had to consider some technical aspects. Firstly, much has already been written about Capablanca or Alekhine; secondly, nowadays, with the simple push of a button, long and flawless variations can be obtained through a computer; finally, any work purporting to analyze games in the context of contemporary opening theory becomes outdated a few days after publication. Therefore, I decided on an approach that was not a full biography of either player, but a sketch of their lives, *each seen also through the eyes of the other*. It would not be a detailed analysis of moves (with the exception of those which are really critical), rather the discussion of ideas and plans; not contemporary opening assessments, but an attempt to set the games in the context of the theory of their time.

I owe the idea of the title to the great biographer of the past, Plutarch (I/II century A.D.). In his *Lives*, he was the first to adopt the method of juxtaposing two subjects in order to better describe, by comparison, their characters and accomplishments.

Finally, preparing such a book is not an easy task and it took approximately two years. I could count on the help of a friend and fan of chess history, Claudio Brovelli, who took charge of the analytical part of the work – he fully deserves to be considered a co-author.

We have tried to write a book which is both passionate and accurate. We now entrust it to the benevolence of the readers.

Milan, November 2021

Alessandro Bossi, Claudio Brovelli



Esteban CANAL (1896 – 1981)

Canal was born in Chiclayo (Peru), his family being of Spanish origin. Still very young, he moved to Europe where he lived a bohemian and eventful life. He finally settled in Cocquio (a province of Varese, Italy), where he spent many years, to the point of considering himself Italo-Peruvian – and where he died in 1981.

His participation in chess tournaments was episodic and his results were often affected by insufficient preparation and practice. Nevertheless, mentioning only international events, he came first in Budapest (1933), second in Trieste (1923), Merano (1926), Venice (1947 and 1948), and tenth out of 22, in the prestigious tournament of Carlsbad (1929), always showing an imaginative and lively style of play.

He met all the great players of the 20's and 30's, winning against Bogoljubov, Euwe, Eliskases and Spielmann and drawing with Capablanca, Nimzowitsch and Rubinstein.

In 1948 he wrote a middlegame treatise, based on his games, titled *Strategia di Avanzposti* (Strategy of Outposts). In Canal's interpretation, an "outpost" is the most advanced pawn in one's position and it dictates the plan to be followed.

E. Canal – P. Johner

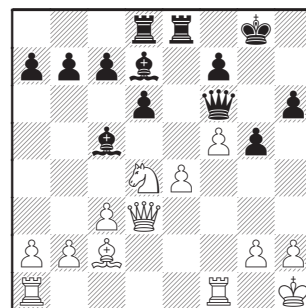
Carlsbad, 1929

Giuoco Piano [C50]

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♗f6 4.♙c4 ♙c5
 5.d3 d6 6.♙g5 h6 7.♙xf6 ♖xf6 8.♗d5
 ♗d8 9.c3 ♗e7 10.d4 exd4 11.♗xd4 ♗xd5
 12.♙xd5 0-0 13.♖d3 ♖f6 14.♙b3 ♗e8
 15.0-0 ♙e6 16.♙c2 g6 17.♖h1 ♗ad8 18.f4
 ♙d7 19.f5 g5

(see diagram next column)

20.♗e6 fxe6 21.fxe6 ♖g6 22.exd7 ♗xd7
 23.♗f5 ♗de7 24.♗af1 ♖g7 25.e5 ♗h8
 26.e6 ♖xe6 27.♗f6 1-0



Chapter 1

ORIGINS AND JUVENILIA

1.1

We start with a tale of two cities which are even more different from each other than London and Paris: they are Havana and Moscow.

José Raúl Capablanca y Graupera was born in Havana, Cuba, on 19 November 1888. At that time, Cuba had a population of one and a half million inhabitants and was a colony of Spain. José Raúl's father was serving as an officer in the local garrison of the Spanish army. Later on, he started to deal with the business of sugarcane, one of the main natural products of Cuba. Capablanca's mother was a pretty lady, coming from the colonial aristocracy. Canal says that many presents were made by the goddess Fortune to this baby (beauty, talent, wealth)... but adds that a bit of wisdom was lacking: we shall see what he meant.

Moscow was the place of birth of Aleksandr* Aleksandrovich Alekhine, on 31 October 1892. As the capital of Russia, its population surpassed one million after a few years (in 1895). Russia was a kingdom, under the dynasty of the Romanovs: Nicholas II was to become Tsar within two years (1894). He and his family were destined to be killed during the turbulent years of the Russian Revolution (1917 ff).

Alekhine's father was a noble and a Member of Parliament, often out of the family house because of his duties. Of more importance than him in relation to Alexander's upbringing was Agnessa Prokorova, his mother, a substantial shareholder in a textile enterprise and a skillful trader herself. It was not only she but also her mother who influenced Alekhine's character, which may explain the preference he showed in his life for older women. It is already possible to see remarkable similarities in the stories of Capablanca and Alekhine.

* Anglicized to "Alexander" throughout this book.

For those who think that not only the place but the time of birth may influence the character of a person, they both came to life under the zodiac sign of Scorpio – described by astrologers as a sign of water (which represents the collection of mental energies), fixed and shaped by feelings.

No less important were the many other chess players born in the 19th century, who suffered hardships at an early age: Charousek, Rubinstein, Steinitz. Capablanca and Alekhine could grow and develop without these kinds of problems.

A third similarity has to do purely with chess: the two cities, Havana and Moscow, had both hosted a world chess championship. In Havana there had been the match between Steinitz and Chigorin in the year 1889, whilst in Moscow the (revenge) match between Lasker and Steinitz, took place in the year 1896. Maybe these events left something in the air...

As far as the learning of the game was concerned, Alekhine was taught by his mother at an early age and remained immediately fascinated, while Capablanca's father was his "teacher", but in a different way. Capablanca himself recalls the episode in his book, *My Chess Career*. He was not yet five years old when he saw his father playing with a fellow officer. Captured by the game, he followed it closely, understanding the movement of the pieces as it unfolded before him. Suddenly he realized that his father had moved a knight from a light square to another light square, without his opponent noticing it. After the end of the game, Capablanca teased his father who, irritated, challenged him to a game: José Raúl won that game easily and a subsequent one – and a star was born.

1.2

In order to keep the great passion of the two boys for chess under control, both their families introduced some restrictions: Capablanca was allowed to attend the Havana Chess Club only after he became eight years old, and only strictly during the week-ends. Alekhine's parents thought to prohibit the use of the chess board, but the resourceful kid discovered that he was able to analyze positions in his mind!

Once, during an algebra lesson at school, he jumped onto his feet and the professor asked, "*Alekhine, have you solved the problem?*"

"Yes," replied the pupil. "*I sacrifice the knight and White wins!*"

Even the professor joined the laughter of the class.



José Raúl Capablanca

Though the royal game was well-known and practiced in Cuba, this could not be compared with the situation in Russia, and particularly in Moscow. The presence of a challenger for the world title, as Chigorin was, had strengthened an already-heightened interest. Many strong players were present in the city.

One of them was Fyodor I. Duz-Khotimirsky, who gave Alekhine private chess lessons for the fee of 15 rubles each; showing a good sense of humor, he said afterwards that this could explain some shortcomings in the style of the future world champion. Alexander had an older brother, Alexei (1888 – 1939), who shared his passion: during the years 1902 – 1904 they played and analyzed together many correspondence chess games.

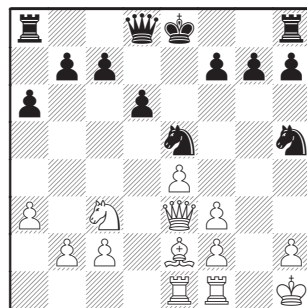
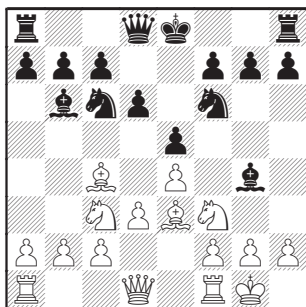
Returning to Cuba from mid-1901, Capablanca became a regular visitor of the Havana Chess Club, rapidly gaining in strength and recognition. Unfortunately, few games of this period have survived. The one we present, which shows already some traits of his mature play, was a casual game against José Antonio Blanco, a strong club player (brother of the even stronger Rafael Blanco, artist by profession).

José Antonio Blanco – José Raúl Capablanca

Havana CUB, 21.10.1901

Giuoco Piano [C50]

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♗f6 4.0–0 ♙c5
5.♗c3 d6 6.d3 ♙g4 7.♙e3 ♙b6



Black is under pressure.

In the Giuoco Piano both players develop their pieces quietly (“piano” in Italian). According to the position reached after the opening, White will plan in the middlegame an expansion in the center or a direct attack on the enemy king. At the turn of the 19th century the opening was popular enough – Lasker and Steinitz, for instance, played it six times in their world championship matches (1894 and 1896).

8.a3 ♗e7

8...♗d4 deserves consideration.

9.d4 ♙xf3 10.gxf3

The position is equal.

10...♗g6 11.♙h1 exd4 12.♙xd4 ♙xd4
13.♙xd4 a6 14.♙ae1 ♗e5 15.♙e2! ♗h5
16.♙e3

16...♙h4 17.♗d5 ♙d7? 18.f4 ♗g6
19.♙xh5 ♙xh5 20.♙c3! c6 21.♗b6+

Not 21.♙xg7? ♙f3+ 22.♙g1 cxd5 and Black wins.

21...♙c7 22.♗xa8+ ♙xa8 23.e5

Stronger was 23.f5 ♗f4 24.♙e3.

23...d5 24.♙g3 ♙f5 25.♙e3

White should play 25.♙g5 ♙xf4
26.♙g3.

25...♙xf4 26.♙xf4

White should play 26.♙f3 ♙e4 27.♙g1.

26...♗xf4 27.♙g1 ♗e6 28.f4 g6 29.♙f3
♗d4 30.♙f2 ♗f5 31.♙e1 ♙d7 32.♙f3 ♙e6
33.h4 h5 34.♙h3 ♗g7 35.♙g2 ♙f5 36.♙b3
b5 37.♙c3 ♙c8! 38.♙g3 ♗e6 39.♙d1 d4

40.♙f3 c5 41.c3 ♙d8 42.b4
42.cxd4 cxd4 43.♙b3. The game is equal.

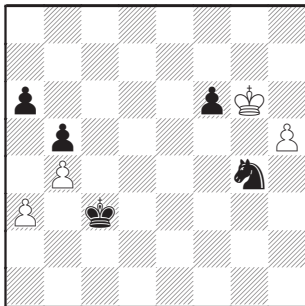
42...c4 43.♔f2 dxc3 44.♙xd8 ♖xd8
 45.♔g3? ♜e4-+ 46.♙xc3 ♔d4 47.♙c1
 Black must now prevent ♙d1+.

47...♖e6 48.♔f3 c3 49.♙d1+ ♔c4 50.♔e3
 c2 51.♙c1 ♔b3?
 Black should try 51...♔c3 52.♙h1 ♖d4

52.♙f1?
 52.♔d3.

52...♔b2 53.♔e4 c1Q 54.♙xc1 ♔xc1
 55.f5 gxf5+ 56.♔xf5 ♖d4+ 57.♔g5 ♖f3+
 58.♔xh5 ♖xe5 59.♔h6 f6 60.h5 ♔b2
 61.♔g7 ♖g4 62.♔g6
 Intending ♔f5.

62...♔c3?



62...♔xa3 63.♔f5 ♖h6+ 64.♔g6 f5
 65.♔xh6 f4 Black is winning.

63.♔f5= ♖h6+ 64.♔g6?
 64.♔xf6 ♔d3 65.♔g6.

64...♖g4?

The right move was 64...f5! 65.♔xh6 f4.

65.♔f5 ♖e3+ 66.♔e4 ♖c4

Aiming for ...♖d6+.

67.h6 ♖d6+ 68.♔f4!

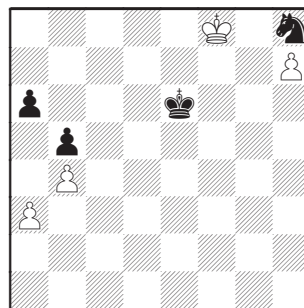
Hoping for h7.

68...♔d4 69.h7 ♖f7 70.♔f5 ♔d5 71.♔xf6

♖h8 72.♔g7 ♔e6

Threatening to win with ...♔e7.

73.♔f8?



The decisive mistake! 73.♔g8 was necessary: 73...♔e7 74.♔g7.

73...♔f6-+ 74.♔e8 ♔g7 75.♔d7 ♖g6

76.♔c6 ♖e5+ 77.♔b6 ♖c4+ 0-1

Gradually it became clear that José Raúl had only one peer on the island, the master Juan Corzo.

1.3

Juan Corzo y Príncipe (1873 –1941) was born in Madrid on 24 June 1873 but spent most of his life in Cuba, to which he had moved in the subsequent decade. Starting with fourth place in the Havana Chess Club Championship of 1896, he had clinched the title of national champion by the year after and remained one of the best local players for a long time.

He was also an active chess journalist and organizer, thus contributing substantially to the knowledge and development of the royal game on the island. As far as playing style was concerned, he had a good tactical eye and was most dangerous in the middlegame.

The match between Capablanca and Corzo was played in 1901 (not in 1900, as given by many sources including *My Chess Career*) and the title of national champion was not at stake. Victory was to be awarded to the first player to win four games and the final score appears to be +4 –2 =5 in favor of Capablanca. (After the fourth win, two further games were played, with one draw and one win for Corzo.)

Juan Corzo – José Raúl Capablanca

Habana CUB (8), 06.12.1901

Vienna Game [C25]

1.e4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘c6 3.f4

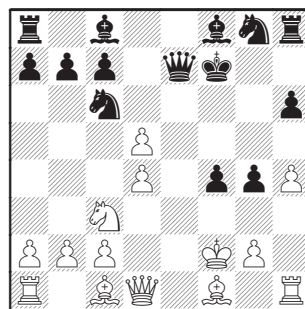
The purpose of the Vienna Game is to play a delayed version of the King's Gambit, firstly consolidating the d5-square.

3...exf4 4.♘f3 g5 5.h4 g4 6.♘g5 h6
7.♘xf7 ♖xf7 8.d4 d5 9.exd5

White should try 9.♙xf4 dxe4 10.♘xe4 ♗xd4 11.♗xd4 ♘xd4 12. 0–0–0; 9.♘xd5 f3.

9...♗e7+! 10.♙f2

Black is better.



10...g3+ 11.♙g1 ♘xd4! 12.♗xd4 ♗c5
13.♘e2 ♗b6!