

**The Grandmaster Mindset  
– A First Course in Chess  
Improvement**

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# **The Grandmaster Mindset – A First Course in Chess Improvement**

**Alojzije Jankovic**

**Thinkers Publishing 2020**



# Key to Symbols

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

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# Preface

Every year chess knowledge increases rapidly, and it is getting harder and harder to find one's way through that giant forest of chess information. As a young player, I used to take lessons from respected coaches -- mostly grandmasters -- with the idea of learning to orientate myself in that forest by absorbing their great experience, but in a concise way. After my theoretical books about the Richter-Rauzer Sicilian (written together with former European Champion, GM Zdenko Kozul) which went into great depth, this time I wanted to focus more on general skills which I find essential for every young player, and even for club players who are already familiar with some of the ideas covered in this book.

By going through the chapters you will get acquainted with my way of grandmaster-type thinking. I can assure you of one thing: there are better and weaker grandmasters, but you won't find a GM who is playing without ideas or, let's say, without his way of thinking! As you will find out, I am basically trying to detect the problem or goal of the position and then I am starting to scan factors which can lead to the solution. That process you will find in many examples in the book.

To be able to correctly deal with positions in your games, first you need to know who stands better; that is, you need to assess the position correctly. Then when you are searching for moves, you should be able to find the best move in every position; my candidate-moves system will help you with that. In the book there are many examples from tournament praxis, mine and the top players', even of the World Champion himself! In my coaching career those examples were tested in individual lessons, and also in top group lectures like the one in Croatia which consisted of 1700-rated players and also strong GMs rated around 2600. These examples have stood the test of time and, what's even better, there are always some questions and suggestions from the participants and I have used these to update the examples, so now you are getting better quality out of my initial material.

To be able to raise your level of play you will need to work hard on your chess. This book will arm you with some important chess ideas and skills but, more importantly, you will get into the grandmaster's mind. I don't want you to play chess the following way: he attacked me -- I need to move away, I attacked him -- he needs to retreat. Everyone can play like that. No, I want something completely different, I want you to think this way: how can I make a counterattack? He is

controlling that square, I can't put my piece there, wait, or can I? By this critical and creative thinking you will dig deeper into the positions and be able to spot moves or bonds between pieces which you couldn't see before. And, what's even more important, you will see more than your opponent!

Take your time when going through the examples. Maybe sometimes you will have questions about some moves which I didn't mention and that's good, that's how I was improving when I was a young player. I can assure you, even the strongest books include unanswered logical questions, but only the one who is reading them correctly will find them! In the first chapter, about the pin, I give you some time to get warmed up with some basic stuff, but as you will notice quickly, already in Chapter Two (candidate moves) the examples are getting more complicated and you won't have too much time to rest!

I will tell you a secret: that chapter contains my favourite example, the one from the Boensch-Jankovic game. I will never forget the chance I missed. And I will also give you this advice: don't worry too much about losses, it's more important that you learn lessons from them so you can raise your level of play. Rating follows the quality of your play, not a few results! And last but not least, sometimes when you are working hard on new things, your results get worse for a short period, but after that your level of play rises one or even two categories! So be patient, your time will come for sure. Good luck!

Grandmaster Alojzije Jankovic  
Zagreb, April 2020



## **Back-rank mate**

**Example 1**

White to move wins



Back-rank weakness is an important tactical motif that is sometimes noticed only when it is too late. It is important that you develop a feeling for both your own potentially weak back rank and your opponent's.

Let's evaluate the position in the diagram.

A) Material? Black is a pawn up, but his pawns are not so safe that White would not be able to regain one if necessary. Conclusion: Black may be a little better, if better at all.

B) King safety? White's king is safer since he is only attacked by the black b6-bishop while around Black's king there are the white queen and two bishops. Conclusion: White is better.

C) Activity of the pieces? All the white pieces stand well while Black has poor

coordination, unconnected rooks, and in general pieces that attack a little and defend much more. There are also potentially unprotected black pieces. Conclusion: White is better.

D) Pawn structure? The first three factors are way more important, so this factor is not so significant. However, it could be said that Black's problems are related to the f5-pawn, which makes his king weak. Also, he has three pawn islands, which reduces the importance of the pawn surplus.

The overall conclusion is that White is better in dynamic factors (king, more active pieces) and the light should already be lit that White should seek some kind of winning stroke. But how do you find it? Let's start with candidate moves.

A) Every check should be considered -- queen checks we can reject quickly.

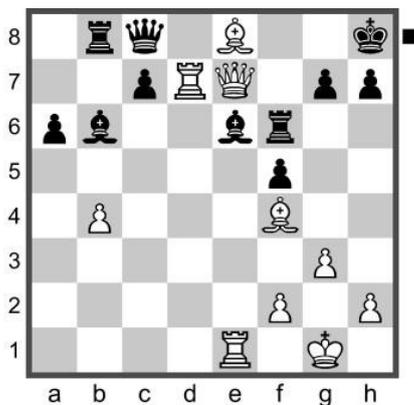
B) Each capture should be looked at -- 1. ♕xc7, 1. ♖xe6. while captures with the queen we quickly dismiss.

C) Now while the first two points on the list are easy to define, for the moves that pose a threat it is necessary to stop for a bit and notice some tactical features. What is most important in this position is the weakness of Black's back rank. It is defended by the black rook on f6 and the bishop on e6, since the bishop on e8 cuts the line of defense

along the back rank. The e6-bishop is potentially unprotected since it is defended by the queen and a rook, and any break of that defense could have serious consequences. It is also important to notice that the white e8-bishop is under attack and White should act energetically.

Attacking Black's rook or bishop does not make much sense since Black could ignore it and take the e8-bishop. So something bigger should be attacked, but the black queen is relatively safe so we are left with a direct attack on the king. What are the moves that threaten mate and can disrupt the defensive position of black's rook and bishop? Given that a potential mate is in the air, no need to worry about material (as the mate is more valuable), so we should think about sacrifices too!

1. ♖d7!!



Position after: 1. ♖d7!!

This stroke threatens mate on g7 and also disrupts the communication between Black's queen and bishop!

A) The capture 1. ♙xc7 needs to be examined as a candidate move, but it leads only to a draw. 1... ♙xc7 2. ♙d7!



Position after: 2. ♙d7!

2... ♙xd7 3. ♖xd7 ♙f8 4. ♖xc7 The position is equal.

B) No good is 1. ♖xe6 due to 1... ♙xe6 [of course not 1... ♖xe6?? 2. ♙f8#].

C) In case of 1. ♙d7 White keeps the initiative, but the victory is still far away after 1... ♙xd7 2. ♖xd7 ♙f8 3. ♙e5 ♙xe7 4. ♖xe7 ♖g6.

1... ♙xd7

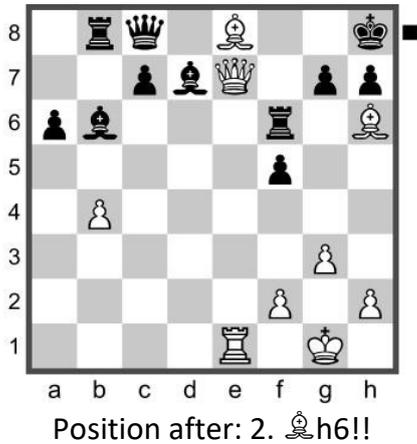
One guard of the back rank is dragged away, it's time for another!

A) 1... ♖g6 2. ♖xe6 And White has won a piece [but not 2. ♙xg6? because of 2... ♙xd7!].

B) White also wins a piece in case of 1... ♖f7 2. ♙xe6.

2. ♙h6!!

(see diagram next page)



Continuing to offer material just to distract the rook!

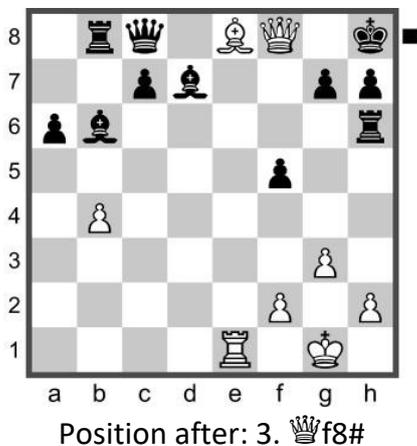
2. ♘e5? ♙xe8 As I said, something big (the mate) should be threatened.

2... ♖xh6

Mate also follows after 2... gxh6 3. ♙xf6+ ♔g8 4. ♘f7+ ♔f8 5. ♘d5#.

The goal has been achieved, mate is now inevitable.

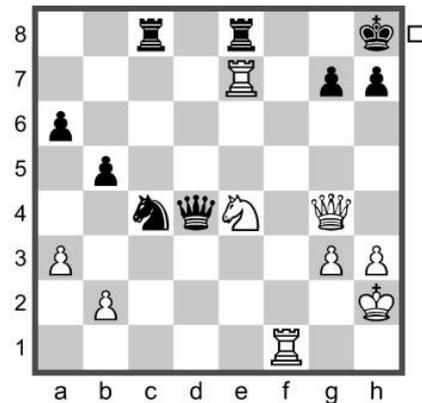
3. ♙f8#



1-0

### Example 2

White to move wins

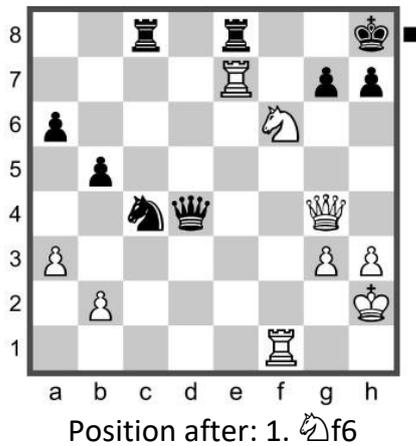


We can also see a back-rank weakness motif in this example. In general it is very important that you notice the current attacks (connections) between the pieces. Black has several potentially unprotected pieces (queen, rooks), which, combined with the weak back rank, should be a sign that it's time for a deadly blow.

Here if there were no black queen on d4 it would be mate on g7, while if there were no rook on e8 its colleague on c8 would be taken by White's queen. Checks and captures lead nowhere, so it's time for a move that poses a threat.

1. ♞f6

Interruption of communication (defense) between the black queen on d4 and the pawn on g7! And the move is also one that poses two threats -- mate on g7 or taking the queen on d4.

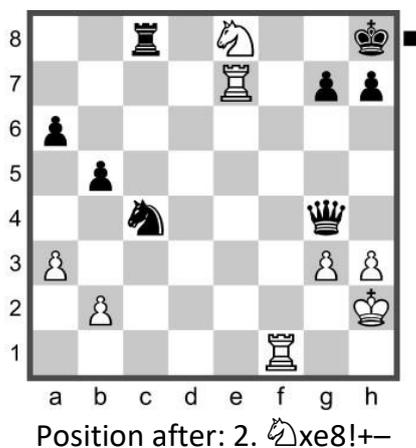


1...  $\text{Qxg4}$

A) Of course after 1...  $\text{Rxe7}$  White can take the queen. 2.  $\text{Qxd4}$  [However, as I have mentioned, the rook on c8 is unprotected as well so 2.  $\text{Qxc8+}$ .]

B) In case of 1...  $\text{Qd2}$  + 2.  $\text{Kh1}$ ! you can see clearly why it is important that the c8 rook is attacked by the queen and that the e8 rook is obliged to defend it! 2...  $\text{Rxe7}$  3.  $\text{Qxc8+}$  Mate follows.

2.  $\text{Nxe8!+-}$



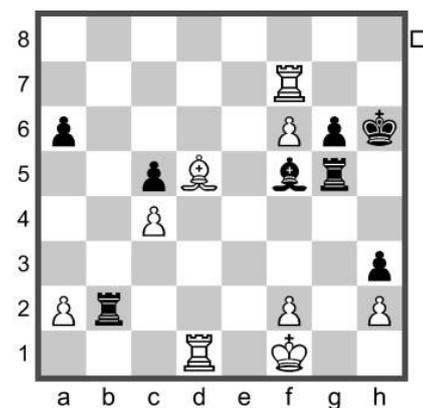
This intermezzo move is the point of the

combination. Mate on f8 is threatened and at the same time the black queen is under attack. Black's rook cannot parry both threats.

1-0

### Example 3

From Safarli – Rasulov  
Nakhchivan 2012



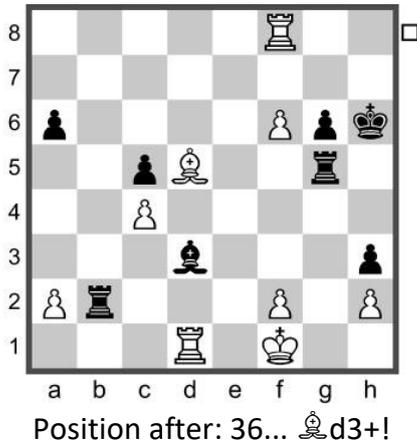
White, although a top grandmaster, did not sense the danger associated with the weakness of his back rank, and moved carelessly.

36.  $\text{Rf8??}$

If White had been aware of Black's threat, he would have played 36.  $\text{Rb7}$ ! and kept a pull.

Now comes the wonderful punishment.

36...  $\text{Qd3+!}$

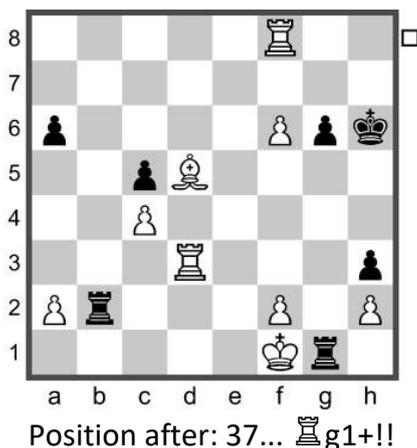


37. ♖xd3

37. ♔e1 ♖g1#

And now comes the point -- dragging the king onto the square where White will not be able to defend the back-rank mate!

37... ♖g1+!!

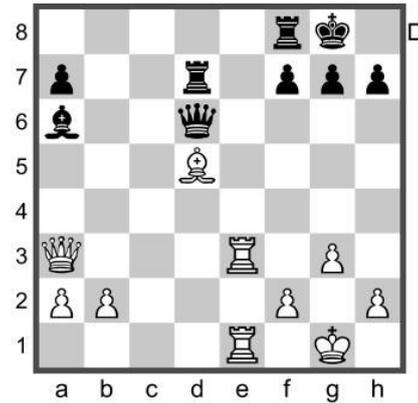


38. ♔xg1 ♖b1+ 39. ♖d1 ♖xd1#

0-1

**Example 4**

From Lombardy – Kramer  
New York 1957

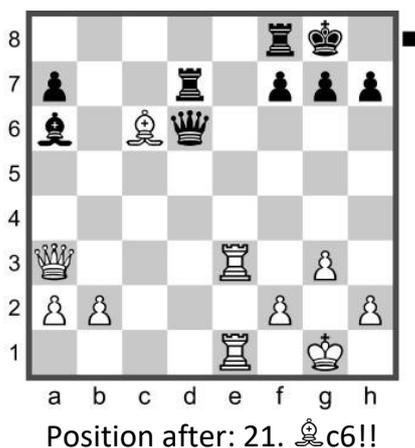


The weakness of the back rank can be very hidden, as in this example. It's hard to believe that Black will face problems caused by a weak back rank, but that's exactly what happens! White is a pawn up, but given that there are few potentially unprotected pieces in Black's camp, he is looking for a killing blow. Let's try to ask ourselves a question, what would happen if we remove some pieces from the board?

If there were no rook on d7, White could take the black queen on d6. If there were no rook on f8, it would be mate on the back rank. If there were no queen on d6, the bishop on a6 would be lost. But what else would happen if there were no queen on d6? The queen sacrifice on f8 would lead to mate when the rook comes to e8! So Black's communication is on very shaky ground --

what move can disrupt it? The answer lies in the move

21. ♖c6!!



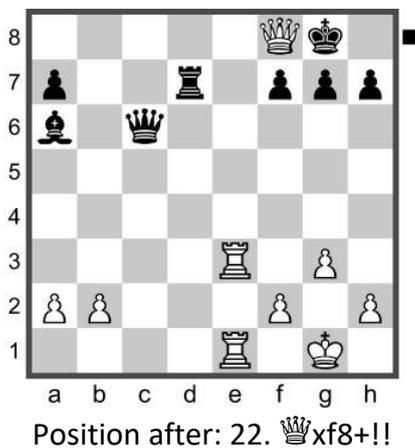
21... ♙xc6

A) Moving the d7-rook loses material.  
21... ♖c7 22. ♙xd6

B) Or 21... ♖dd8 22. ♙xa6.

C) No better is 21... ♙xa3 22. ♖xa3 when White attacks two pieces and must win one of them.

22. ♙xf8+!!



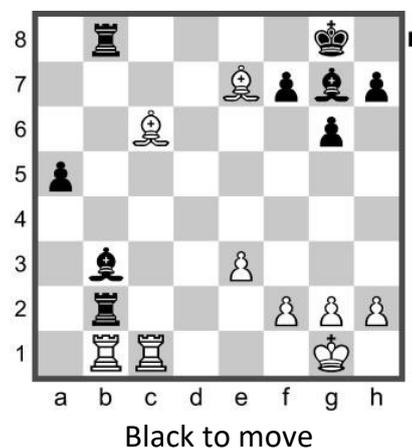
This is the combination I mentioned.

22... ♙xf8 23. ♖e8#

1-0

### Example 5

From Vasquez – Van Riemsdijk  
Sao Paulo 1972



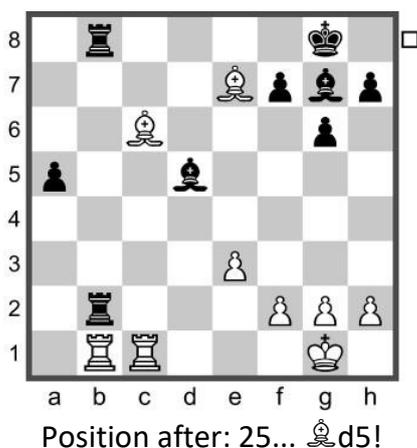
Tactical combinations associated with the back-rank motif can also be found in endgames. Often one detail, that neither White nor Black have a “luft” (escape route) for their king, can drastically change the assessment of a position from safe to lost! Sometimes, on account of a complex fight earlier in the game, one side could not create a luft with a move like h2-h3 because that would have been a waste of time in the opening or middlegame.

Sometimes this problem with the back rank is related to a lack of the sense of danger that would prevent later

unpleasant surprises! However, a basic motif can rarely be individually crucial to a tactical combination so at least one more element is needed, and most often it is an unprotected piece. Considering that captures do not favor Black in this example, you have to think of a move that poses a threat. But to be able to do so, you still need to recognize the function of the pieces! Here, virtually all the white pieces are potentially unprotected because they are not defended by pawns.

Your focus should be on one black piece, namely the b3-bishop. If we removed it from the board Black would take the rook on b1. This means that all of that bishop's moves should be considered as candidate moves. When you see everything, you will come to the winning move.

25... ♗d5!



White now has virtually no choice, he

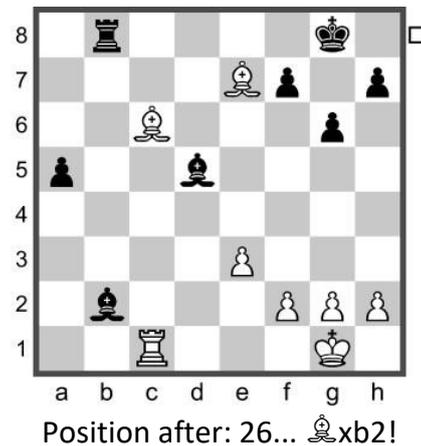
has to exchange the rook, which means that one piece defending the back rank is gone.

26. ♖xb2

A) Black wins easily after 26. ♖a1 ♗xc6 27. ♖xc6 ♗b1+ 28. ♖c1 ♗xa1.

B) Or 26. ♗xd5 ♖xb1.

26... ♗xb2!

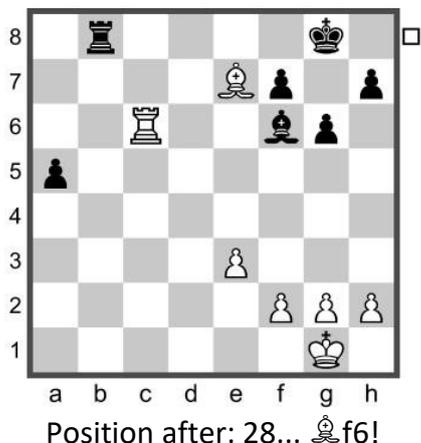


The essential move! The white rook is overloaded. It must support its bishop, so with a heavy heart it will leave the back rank.

27. ♖c2 ♗xc6 28. ♖xc6

Again, if there were no black bishop on b2 it would be mate, which means that all the bishop's moves should be considered!

28... ♗f6!



The most concrete move since besides the threat of the mate, Black also attacks the bishop.

### 29. ♗a3

The only move that does not lose immediately, but now further distraction will follow.

### 29... ♗e7!

But not the immediate 29... ♖b1+ because of 30. ♖c1.

### 30. ♗c1

### 30. ♗xe7 ♖b1+

### 30... ♖b1

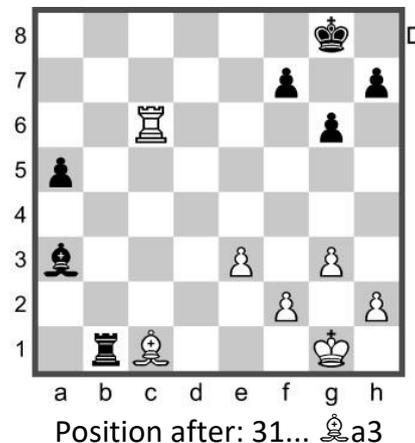
Now a second tactical element emerges -- the pin, which will win White's bishop.

### 31. g3

Neither does 31. ♖c3 help, because of 31... ♗a3!

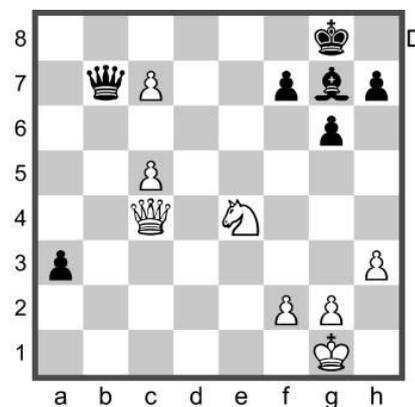
### 31... ♗a3

0-1



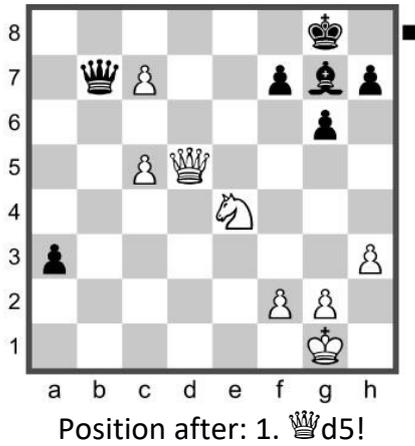
### Example 6

From Ni Hua – Vidit  
Qatar 2015



Back-rank weaknesses can be related to other tactical factors, such as the knight geometry that you can find in this example. It is the black queen that holds Black's position together, since it stops the white pawn from queening. The move that unlocks the black position is

### 1. ♕d5!

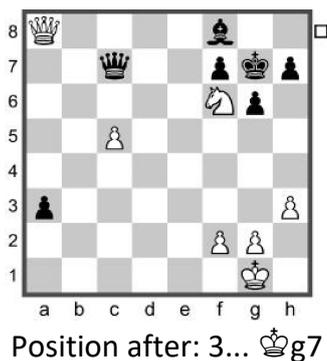


1... a2

An attempt to avoid losing the queen.

A) Of course 1... Qb1+ leads nowhere for Black because of 2. Kh2.

B) The knight geometry combined with the back-rank motif is best seen in case of 1... Qxc7 2. Qa8+! Bf8 3. Nf6+! Kg7



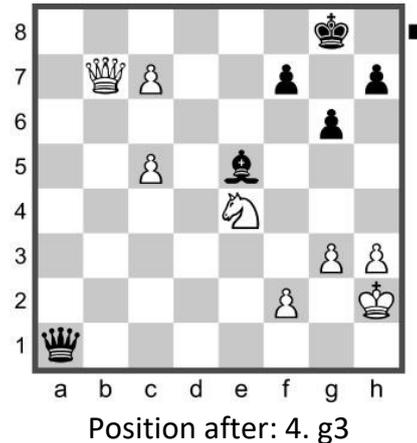
And since the black king had to defend its bishop, the geometry is set up: 4. Ne8+! wins the queen.

C) Similar is after 1... Qxd5 2. c8=Q+ Bf8 3. Nf6+!

Again the black queen falls.

However, White wins easily after

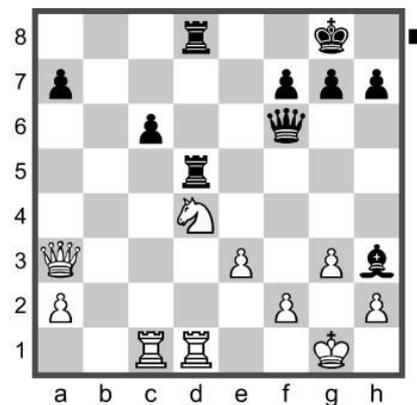
2. Qxb7 a1=Q+ 3. Kh2 Be5+ 4. g3



1-0

### Example 7

From Garcia Palermo – Todorovic  
Novi Sad 2017



The weakness of the back rank can exist even if the king has an open square in front of its castled position, which is the