

Analyzing the Chess Mind

By

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| List of Photographs | 4 |
| Key to Symbols used | 4 |
| Foreword by GM Lev Alburt | 5 |
| Introduction | 7 |
| 1 Perception | 13 |
| 2 Thinking and Uncertainty | 35 |
| 3 Mindreading in Chess | 55 |
| 4 Aggression | 65 |
| 5 Problems in Self-Confidence | 79 |
| 6 Reciprocal Understanding | 97 |
| 7 Psychology of Decisive Games | 109 |
| 8 Destroying Your Opponent's Thinking Process | 123 |
| 9 Losing Winning Positions | 147 |
| 10 Playing Against the Hedgehog | 161 |
| 11 A Question of Time | 173 |
| 12 Improving Your Chess Psychology | 183 |
| Appendices: | |
| Chess and Cognition by Daniel Saldano and Joel R. Sneed | 195 |
| Glossary of Technical Terms by Daniel Saldano and Joel R. Sneed | 217 |
| Game Index | 223 |

Foreword

I first met Boris Gulko in 1965 at the championship of the Student Sport Clubs of the USSR. In the following decades, Boris and I played together in many tournaments in both the USSR and USA. Three times I won the title of US Chess Champion but Boris set a unique record – he won the title of USSR Chess Champion and twice the title of US Chess Champion! He is the only player to have done so.

Gradually each of us came to the understanding that to achieve success in chess, it's not enough to master the secrets of strategy and tactics, to study openings and endings, and to improve the technique of calculating variations. It is also necessary to study the mysteries of psychology, to gain knowledge of not only the peculiarities of the opponent's style – to learn their strengths and weaknesses – but also to understand their human advantages and disadvantages. It is perhaps even more important to do the same work on oneself, with one's own style and character. I've done this work as a chess practitioner, fighting in competitions at the highest level. I received the best opportunities to comprehend the subtleties of practical chess psychology, however, when I started to work as a trainer and chess teacher in 1991. I have outlined my findings in these areas in my books. Boris has achieved comprehension of psychology in a more direct way. He received a Master's degree in psychology from Moscow State University and then worked for three years there as a research scientist. He has also published several scientific articles on psychology in Russian.

Boris uses his scientific knowledge, and experience as a chess grandmaster, as a coach (a good coach is always a good psychologist) and as a researcher in all of his books. This book on chess psychology, however, is a direct study of the subject. Among the many examples of the application of practical chess psychology presented in this book, his analysis of his victory over Garry Kasparov was particularly illuminating. His two other victories over the great Garry Kasparov can be found in his *Lessons with a Grandmaster* series, also written with his student and co-author Joel Sneed.

This book by GM Boris Gulko and Professor Joel Sneed considerably promotes the understanding of complex aspects of practical chess psychology, and will be interesting and useful to both chess players and trainers, as well as to researchers of psychology.

Lev Alburtt
New York 2021

Chapter 9

Losing Winning Positions



*“Give me a difficult positional game, I’ll play it...
But totally winning positions I cannot stand.”*

Jan Hein Donner

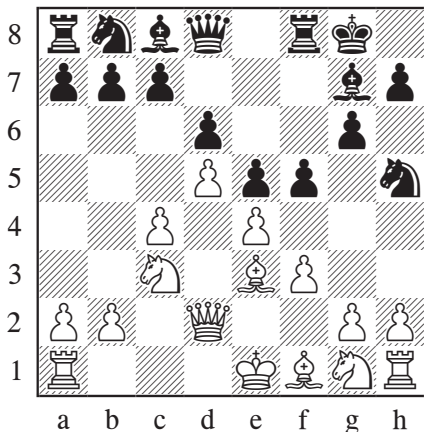
One of the most unpleasant experiences a chess player goes through is losing a winning position. Unfortunately, it is also a very common experience. The most common reasons for this unpleasant experience are obvious, such as fatigue and time shortage. There are also psychological reasons for losing a winning game. The player who is losing is like a wounded animal – they are desperate and fight hard to survive. The player in the winning position generally relaxes and thinks that the struggle is over, and therefore can become passive and complacent, so their play will lack energy.

Our first example of this phenomenon comes from a game I played against Averbakh in the first round of the Soviet Championship in 1970.

Yuri Averbakh – Boris Gulko

Soviet Championship 1970

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 ♙g7 4.e4 d6 5.f3
0-0 6.♙e3 e5 7.d5 ♘h5 8.♞d2 f5



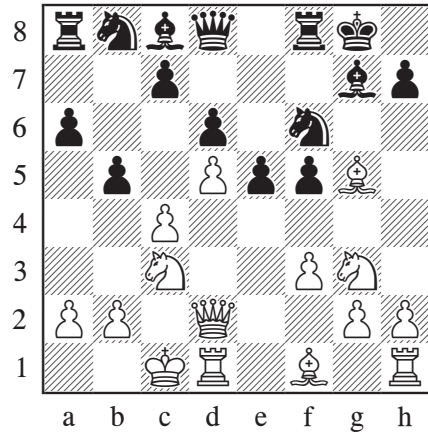
9.♘ge2?!

Not the most dangerous way. Theory prefers 9.exf5! or 9.0-0-0.

9...a6!

An aggressive approach. Black prepares to attack White's queenside castling position.

10.exf5 gxf5 11.0-0-0 b5 12.♘g3 ♘f6
13.♙g5



13...♞e8

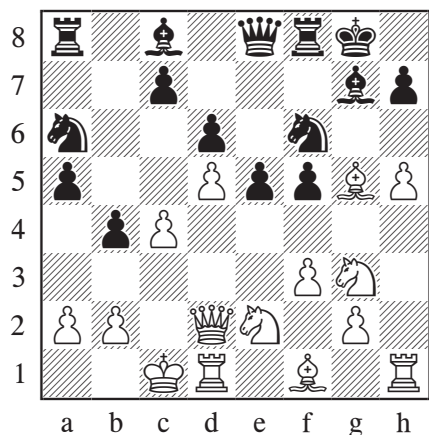
Black sacrifices a pawn, hoping for compensation.

Black could have kept the material balance by playing 13...b4?! 14.♘ce2 a5, but White would take the initiative after 15.♘h5.

14.h4?!

It was better to accept the sacrifice by playing 14.cxb5! but in this case Black would have open files against White's king. This would have been preferable to the game when Black's pawns become very useful.

14...b4 15.♘ce2 a5 16.h5 ♘a6



17.♔b1

White has already lost his opening initiative.

In the case of 17.h6?! ♕h8 Black would obtain the very cozy g6-square for his queen.

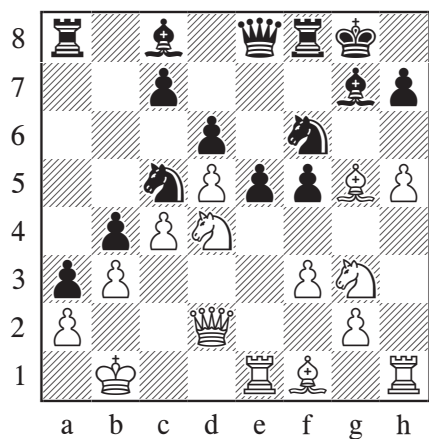
The continuation 17.♕h6?! f4 18.♕xg7 ♖xg7 is simply bad for White.

17...a4 18.♞e1 a3! 19.b3 ♘c5!?

The introduction to an amusing queen sacrifice.

Black could have had a good game simply by stepping away from the e-file pin with 19...♞f7! but Black was looking for an adventure.

20.♘d4



20...♞f7!?

Once again Black had a safe option, this time with 20...f4, based on the idea 21.♕xf4? ♞f7 and two pieces are hanging. But instead, with the text move, Black was continuing his idea.

21.♘dx5

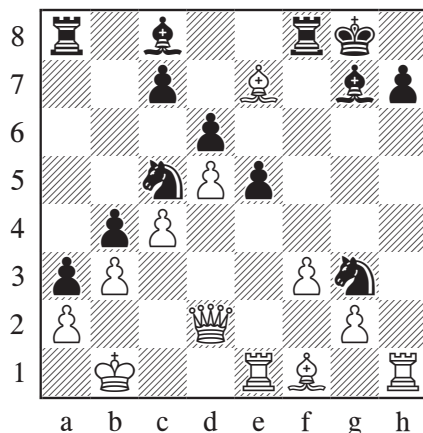
Playing 21.h6! first might have made Black regret the bold choices at moves 19 and 20.

21...♘hx5!! 22.♘e7†

White has to follow the path that Black prepared for him.

If he tries to avoid it with 22.♘hx5? there follows 22...♕xf5† 23.♔c1 ♘xb3† 24.axb3 a2 25.♔b2 e4† winning.

22...♞xc7 23.♕xc7 ♘xg3



24.♕d3!

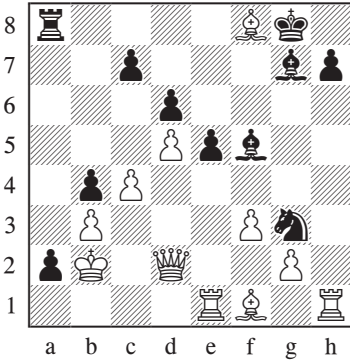
This position is more complicated than humans can calculate. But Averbakh chooses one of the two best moves.

It looked too scary to go in for:

24.♕xf8! ♕f5† 25.♔c1 ♘xb3† 26.axb3 a2

From afar, this position seems terrifying for White, but in fact he can survive, and even challenge Black to be accurate to keep the balance.

27. ♖b2



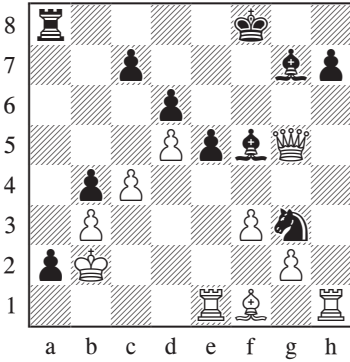
27... ♕xf8!

The more logical choice, keeping the rook supporting the a2-pawn.

27... ♖xf8 allows White a choice between 28. ♖e4! and 28. ♖xb4!. Both are complicated, but likely to favor White.

28. ♖g5!

Challenging Black to make a tough choice. Instead, taking on b4 would give Black a broader choice of moves that give at least equality.

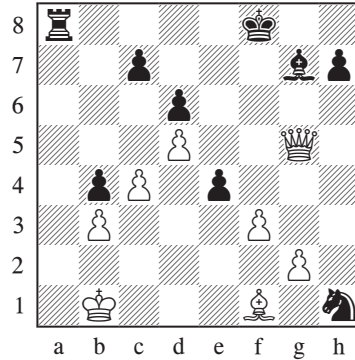


28... ♕b1!!

The correct call, but far from obvious.

28... e4? is tempting but wrong: 29. ♖c2. Alas the e4-pawn closes the diagonal, for the moment, to the f5-bishop. 29... a1=♖ (bad for Black is 29... exf3† 30. ♕d3) 30. ♖xa1 ♖xa1 31. fxe4! ♕xe4† 32. ♕d3 ♖a2† 33. ♖d1 ♕xd3 (after 33... ♖xh1 34. ♖d8† ♖f7

35. ♖xc7† ♖g8 36. ♖c8† White is winning)
34. ♖d8† ♖f7 35. ♖xc7† Black's position would be bad despite the material equilibrium.
29. ♖xb1 e4† 30. ♖c2 axb1=♖† 31. ♖xb1 ♖xh1



The position is sharp but with level chances, with perpetuals likely. For example:

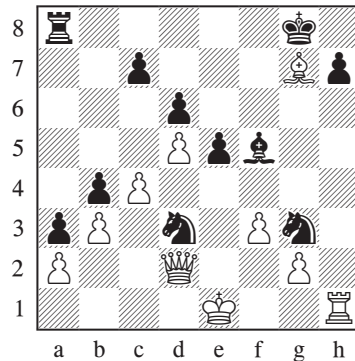
32. fxe4 ♖f2! 33. ♖f5† ♖g8

White cannot take the knight due to a rook check on a1 followed by another on a2, picking up the queen.

24... ♖xd3 25. ♕xf8 ♖xf8

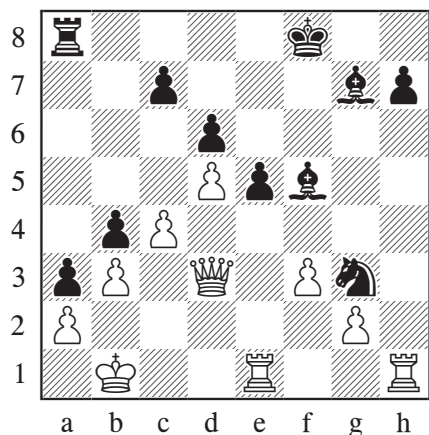
An unusual perpetual would occur after:

25... ♕f5 26. ♕xg7 ♖xe1† 27. ♖c1 ♖d3† 28. ♖d1 ♖b2† 29. ♖e1 ♖d3†



And White's king cannot escape Black's knights.

26. ♖xd3 ♕f5

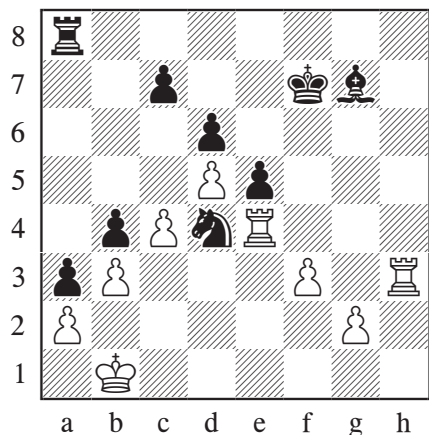


27. ♖xf5†?

Averbakh was an endgame expert and wrote what was, at the time, the standard three-volume treatise on the endgame that everyone owned and relied on. He transposes the game to an endgame, but it is not good for him.

Much better was 27. ♖e4!! ♜xh1 28. ♖f4! exf4 29. ♖xf5† ♔g8 and despite Black's material advantage, the position is far from clear. The chances appear to be about level.

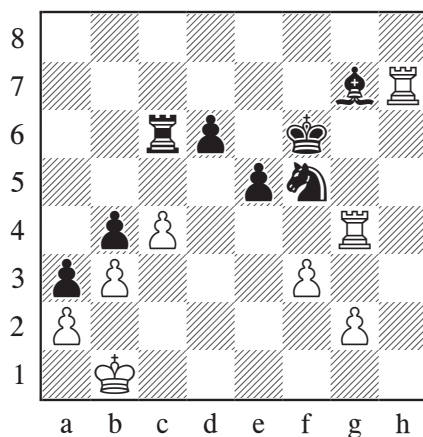
27... ♜xf5 28. ♖xh7 ♔f7 29. ♖h3 ♜d4 30. ♖e4



Averbakh hoped that the rook and pawn would be sufficient compensation for Black's two minor pieces. The decisive factor in this

position, however, is the two black pawns on a3 and b4 that White neglected to destroy earlier in the game. They create a cage around White's king. The only task for Black is to find a route for his rook into White's camp, which Black solves with his next maneuver.

30... ♖c8! 31. ♖h7 ♔g6 32. ♖h1 c6! 33. ♖g4† ♔f6 34. ♖h7 ♜f5 35. dxc6 ♖xc6



In this moment, Averbakh was in severe time trouble, and Black thought the game was over. I remember thinking that it would be enough for me to play ... ♖c6-c5 and ...d6-d5, and the game would be over. I recall thinking what a beautiful game it would be to win, and what a great way to start the championship. Generally, I was very proud of myself.

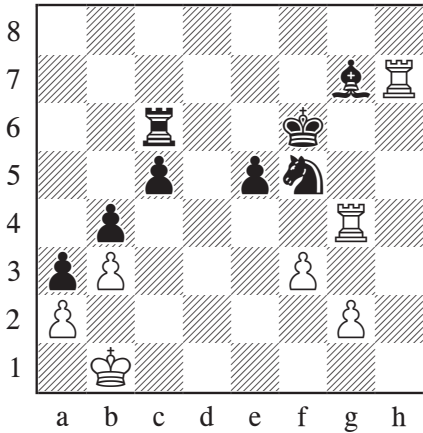
Then Averbakh, with only a few seconds left on his clock, played:

36.c5

I guessed this move must have been played in desperation, and without really thinking, I played:

36... dxc5??

Instead after 36... ♖xc5 37. ♖xb4 ♔h6 38. ♖c4 ♖d5 White's position would be hopeless.



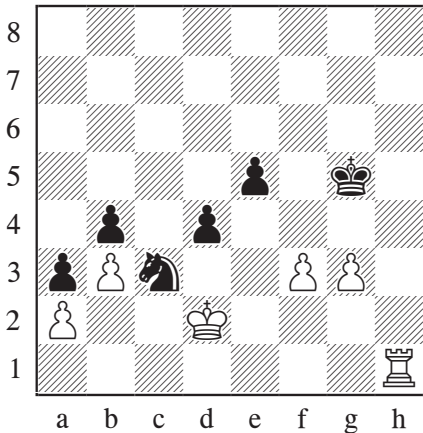
37.♖xg7! ♜d6

I had overlooked 37...♜xg7 38.♖h6†.

38.♜d7 ♜d4 39.♖xd4 cxd4 40.♔c1 ♜e3
41.g3 ♜d5 42.♔d2 ♜c3 43.♖h6†!

Before this move, the game was adjourned and in home analysis Averbakh found a nice way to win.

43...♔g5 44.♖h1



44...e4

44...♜xa2 did not promise salvation after 45.♖e1 ♔f5 46.♔d3 ♜c3 47.♔c4 a2 48.♖a1 e4 49.g4†! ♔e5 50.fxe4 ♔xe4 51.♔xb4.

45.fxe4 ♜xe4† 46.♔c2 d3† 47.♔c1 ♜xg3
48.♖g1 ♔f4 49.♖xg3!

1-0

White has time to run with his king and destroy Black's pawns, which were the cause of so much trouble for him during the game.

Such a sad result, after playing such a nice game, is unfortunately not a rare thing in chess. Chess players often say the most difficult thing to do is win a won game. The losing side is fighting hard and concentrating, whereas the 'winning' side often loses concentration and daydreams about their fine victory.

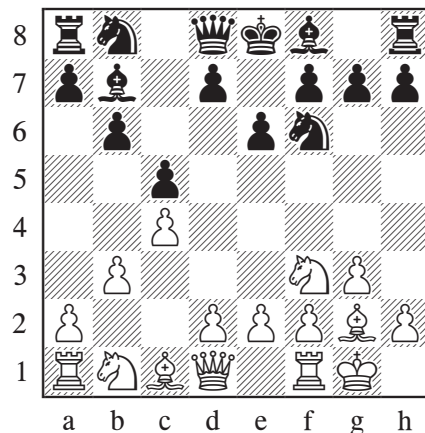
We will have more to say about this and offer specific advice for the improving player in Chapter 12, *Improving Your Chess Psychology*. Essentially, we need to follow Capablanca's example. He had a reputation for not being so aggressive in equal positions but with the advantage, he became extremely focused and would not give his opponent any chances.

In the following game between two great giants of chess, we will discuss a different reason for losing a winning position.

Mikhail Botvinnik – Jose Raul Capablanca

Moscow 1936

1.♜f3 ♜f6 2.c4 e6 3.g3 b6 4.♖g2 ♖b7 5.0-0
c5 6.b3



6...♘c6?!

This move demonstrates that the opponents belong to different epochs in the history of chess. Capablanca follows a strategy developed by Morphy: develop your pieces as quickly as possible onto reasonable squares and then develop a strategic plan. Botvinnik ushered in a new, more scientific, approach to chess. He researched the opening and created strategic plans that were rooted in the opening while also having an eye on the endgame.

It can be said that this game reflects the old versus new guard in chess. This position was unusual in those years but strangely the correct plan for this position was formulated by Tartakower. In his annotations, he argued that Black's queenside knight belonged on d7.

In the 1970s, players such as Ulf Andersson, Ljubomir Ljubojevic, and Zoltan Ribli would play in this position:

6...♙e7! 7.♙b2 0-0 8.d4

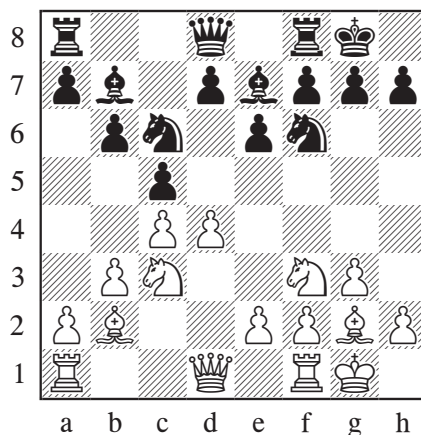
Thirty years after this game with Capablanca, Botvinnik developed a new strategy in this position: 8.e3 And after this move, White would put his queen on e2, his king's rook on d1 and then play d2-d4 as was demonstrated in Botvinnik – Larsen, Palma de Mallorca 1967.

8...cxd4 9.♖xd4 d6!

Not winning a tempo by attacking the queen with the wrongly conceived ...♘c6.

And then Black would put his pawn on a6, bring his queen's knight to d7 (as Tartakower suggested) and White would not be able to penetrate Black's rock-solid position. This construction is known as the Hedgehog, and we will devote an entire chapter to the psychological peculiarities of playing against it (see page 161).

7.♙b2 ♙e7 8.♘c3 0-0 9.d4!

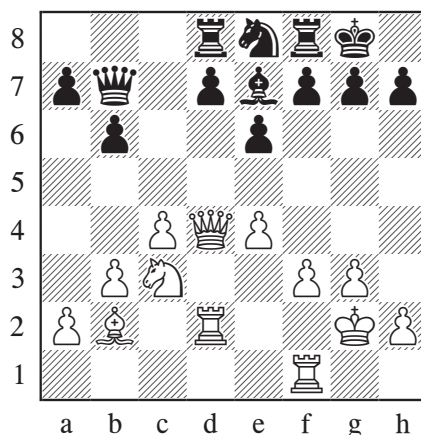


9...♘xd4 10.♘xd4 ♙xg2 11.♔xg2 cxd4
12.♖xd4 ♚c7 13.e4 ♞ad8 14.♞ad1 ♚b7
15.f3 ♜e8?!

Like all great players, Capablanca tries to avoid a passive position, but his plan to free his position with ...f7-f5 will only create weaknesses.

Better was: 15...d6! The difference between this position and the position after 9...d6 (in the note after 6...♘c6) is that there are fewer pieces on the board (two sets of minor pieces have been exchanged). This usually favors the side with less space, but this position is an exception. It is more difficult for Black to create counterplay and White, with his pieces ideally placed, will be able to start a pawn attack on the kingside.

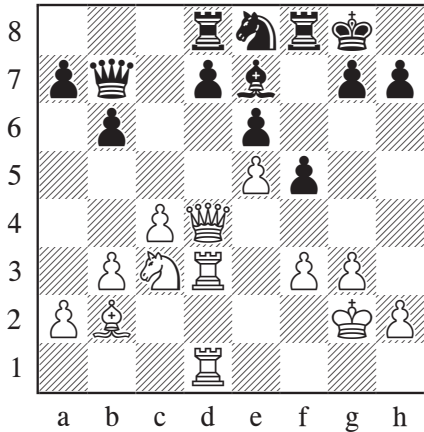
16.♞d2



16...f5?

A positional mistake. He was not familiar with the kind of positions that would become popular and well researched forty years later. He still had to play 16...d6.

17.♖fd1 ♜g5 18.♞d3 ♜f6 19.e5 ♜e7



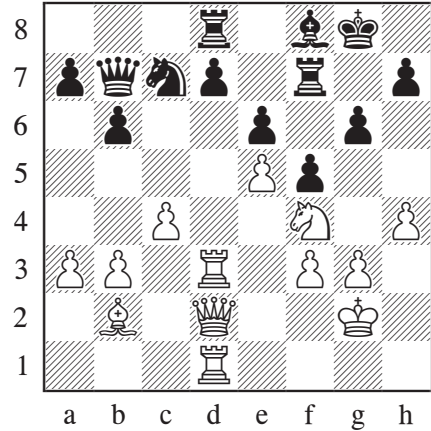
20.♞f2!

Botvinnik's style has been compared to a steamroller. He transfers his queen from d4 to f2, significantly increasing the pressure on Black's position (White's d3-rook belongs in front of the queen).

20...♞f7 21.♞d2 ♜b4 22.a3 ♜f8 23.♘e2!

White brings his last piece to its ideal attacking position on f4.

23...♘c7 24.♘f4 g6 25.h4



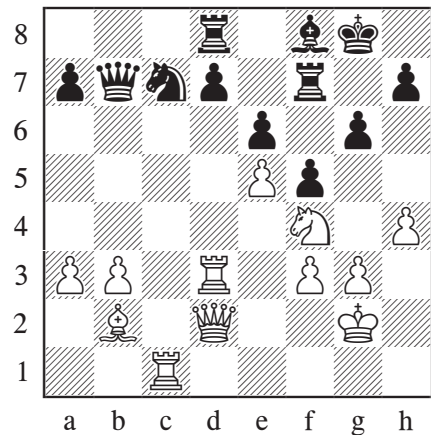
25...b5!?

25...♜h6 would not have worked after: 26.♘xe6! ♘xe6 (if 26...♜xd2 27.♘xd8 ♞c8 28.♘xf7 and Black will lose quickly) 27.♞xb6 f4 28.g4 With a winning position for White.

In the case of the passive 25...♞c8, Black would suffocate after 26.a4 ♜h6 27.♞d6.

Instead, Capablanca understandably tries to create counterplay.

26.cxb5 ♞xb5 27.♞c1! ♞b7



28.♞xc7?

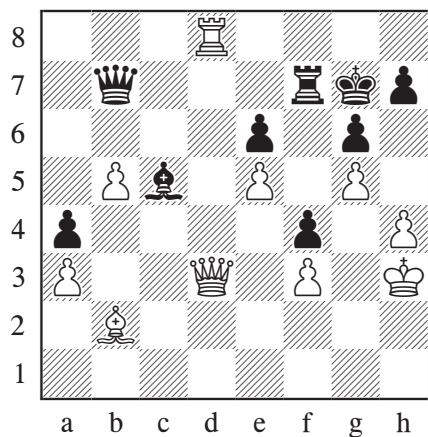
In his annotations, Botvinnik complains more than once about his lack of tactical

vision. He was a great strategist, but he did not sense dynamic positions as well. Now he wins a pawn, but instead he could have resolved the game quickly with: 28. ♖a5! d5 29. exd6 ♙xd6 (even worse would be 29... ♗xd6 30. ♖e5) 30. ♙e5 And Black has to resign.

28... ♗xc7 29. ♘xe6 dxe6 30. ♗xd8 f4 31. g4 ♖e7 32. ♔h3 ♗b7 33. ♗d3 ♔g7?!

More resilient was 33...a5!. Instead now White's extra pawn starts to move.

34. b4! a5 35. b5 a4 36. g5 ♙c5



37. ♗d6?!

Not practical and giving away the advantage, but not yet a total disaster.

Botvinnik was under time pressure and received very valuable advice from Capablanca after the game: When you have a winning position, don't rush. Let the opponent collapse of his own accord under the pressure. Botvinnik repeated this advice often in his writings.

Here it made sense to protect his f3-pawn with 37. ♔g2! keeping all the advantages in his position.

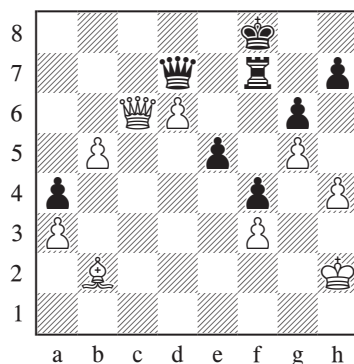
37... ♙xd6 38. exd6 ♠ ♔f8?

The black king needed to go to g8, when it is level. The difference will be explained below.

39. ♙f6?!

A new mistake just before the time control, probably because of time pressure.

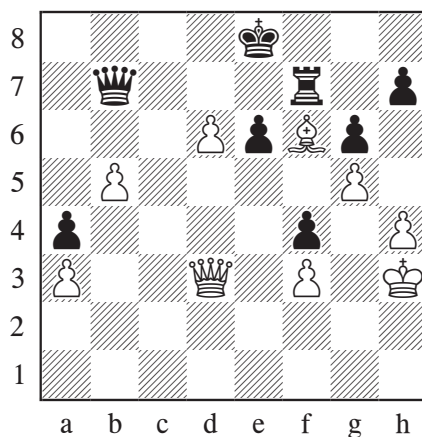
Correct was: 39. ♗c3! e5! The best try (after 39... ♔e8 40. ♗c6 ♠ ♗d7 41. ♙e5 Black is paralyzed). 40. ♗c6 ♗d7 ♠ 41. ♔h2!!



41... ♗e6 42. b6 And White wins, as the black queen cannot find counterplay with 42... ♗b3 because it would allow a killing queen check on c8.

In the related position that could have resulted after 38... ♔g8, 42... ♗b3 would draw because the queen check on c8 could be met by ... ♗f8.

39... ♔e8



40. ♙e7??

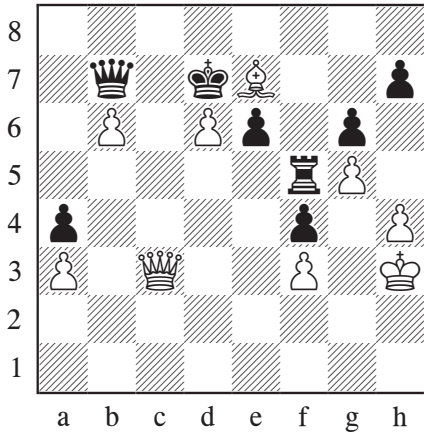
The last move in time trouble.

Botvinnik could have played 40.♔g2 ♕d7
41.♖c4 but this position only offered equality.

40...♜f5!

Suddenly the rook obtains freedom and Black is winning.

41.♖c3 ♕d7 42.b6



42...♖c6

White's last hope was connected with:
42...♜b5 43.♖c7† ♖xc7 44.bxc7 ♜b3? (correct
and winning is 44...♜b2!) 45.♔g2 ♜xa3?
46.c8=♖† ♕xc8 47.d7† ♕xd7 48.♙xa3 And
White wins, but Capablanca does not overlook
such simple tactics.

43.♖g7 ♖xf3† 44.♔h2 ♖g3† 45.♔h1
♖xh4† 46.♔g1 ♖e1† 47.♔h2 ♕c6 48.♖b2
♜d5 49.♖c2† ♕b5

0-1

Botvinnik won the strategic struggle in this game, but he was too impatient to use his advantage. Botvinnik repeated Capablanca's advice very often: Do not rush in a winning position. Maintain the pressure and allow the opponent to self-destruct.