

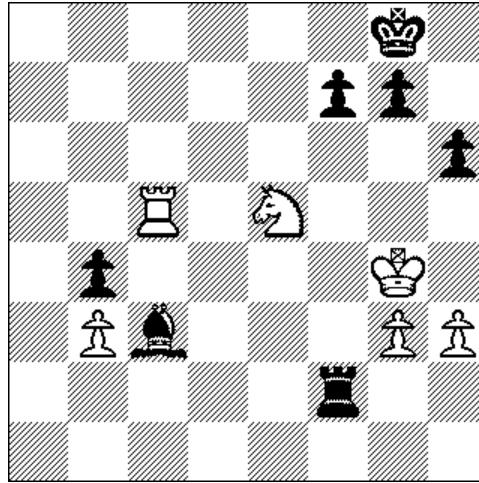
Antecedents

As in nearly any human activity, in chess it often seems as though there is nothing new under the sun. To be sure, there are always opening innovations being discovered, and recently computers have solved the mysteries of some exceedingly rare piece endgames. But, for the most part, most chess games are built upon well-established strategic and tactical themes.

This is precisely why we study the games of great players: to learn these motifs and patterns, and to hopefully apply them in our own games. A player who has not yet learned the common smothered mate process has virtually no chance of figuring this out over the board. However, those familiar with this mating scheme can not only apply it in their own games, but will be able to spot it quickly and can often “sense” its presence several moves in advance.

Knowing these common tactical patterns is essential to playing chess well, and must be part of every chess player’s toolkit. However, what can be truly rewarding is utilizing the more refined yet less common tactical ideas that have been played before us. Recognizing the possibility of discovering one of these gems from the past in one of our own games can connect us to the pioneers whose masterpieces have preceded our own feeble efforts. Of course, if you can use the knowledge of a past game in one of your own, that’s obviously the best scenario. But channeling the ideas of one of the champions of the past can be very exciting even if the motif is only discovered well after the game is over.

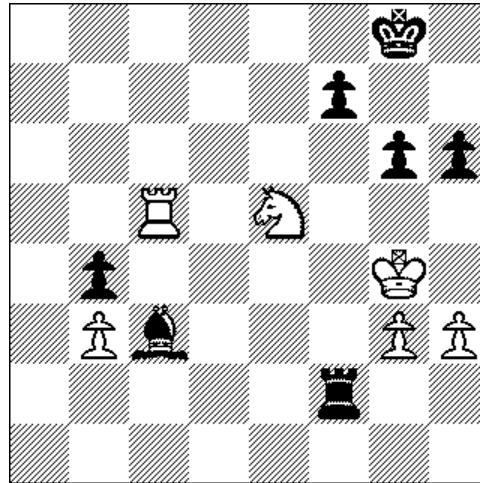
This is precisely what happened to me in a game I played many years ago. The following position occurred in a game that was part of a Masters-Junior Simul in Valencia, June 2003.



Tan - Smith, Masters-Juniors Simul, June 2003, after 37 Kg4

A pawn up with the better minor piece, Black should be winning here. Since going after the b-pawn right away gives White some sort of counterplay (37 ... Rb2 38 Rc8+ Kh7 39 Nxf7, I first drove the king off with 37... f5+?!). However, after 38 Kh5 I had to avoid White's potential mating threats by eliminating White's knight with 38 ... Bxe5, entering a difficult if still winning R+P ending after 39 Rxe5 Rf3.

A few days later I realized that in the above diagram a much better move would've been 37 ... g6. Not only does this natural-looking move deal with the latent threat to my f-pawn by allowing my king access to g7, it also contains an insidious threat:



Tan - Smith (variation), after 37 ... g6!

In the above position, Black is threatening checkmate in three moves via:

38 ... f5+
39 Kh4 Rf4+!!

And now any of White's three legal responses all result in mate:

40 gf Be1#, or

40 g4 Be1#. or

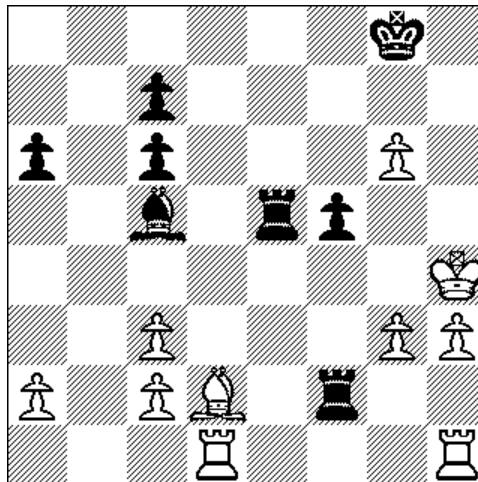
40 Ng4 Bf6#

This last variation is particularly pretty, as the bishop finds a different diagonal on which to administer the mate, thanks to White's opening of this diagonal by moving his knight! Note that White can avoid this finish by a move such as 38 h4, but Black then solidifies his advantage with 38 ... h5+ 39 Kh3 (not 39 Kg5 Bd2#; a third mating square for the bishop!) Rb2 with an easier win than as I played in the game.

As I wrote, this beautiful possibility didn't occur to me until a few days afterwards. I wasn't playing over the game at the time, either. The ... Rf4+ idea just occurred to me out of the blue, or so it seemed at first.

But something seemed too familiar about this position, and I soon realized who my true inspiration here was: Frank Marshall. I couldn't name the opponent or recall the exact position, but I remembered some game of Marshall's where he had played a similar ... Rf4+ idea.

Two months later, I found the position I was looking for in Andy Soltis's book, "Frank Marshall, United States Chess Champion":



Black to move

E.M. Jackson – Frank Marshall, London 1899

In Marshall's game, the continuation was:

28 ... Kg7!
29 Bf4 Kxg6
30 Bg5 Rf4+!! and mates after

31 gf Bf2#, or

31 g4 Bf2#, or

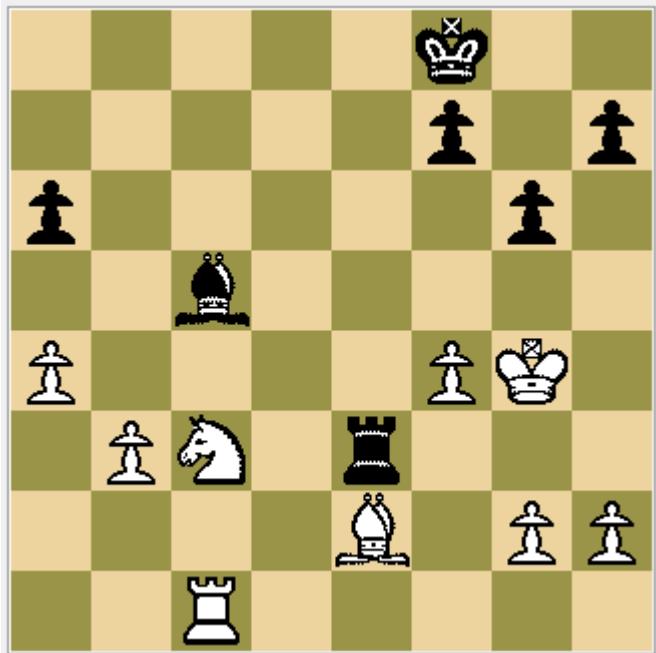
31 Bxf4 Be7+
32 Bg5 Bxg5#

The similarities of the two positions are inescapable: not only does the decisive diversionary sacrifice occur on the same square, but both of the possible bishop mates are also preserved, albeit on different squares. Even though I couldn't retrieve any recollection of the Marshall conception while the game was actually being played, perhaps it bubbled slowly up into my consciousness over the next few days.

Another possible antecedent to the position in my game occurred in the movie *The Luzhin Defense*, based upon Vladimir Nabokov's novel *The Defense*. Nabokov was an avid chess player and problemist, and the character Luzhin was supposed to have been based upon his friend Curt von Bardeleben. Von Bardeleben was a middling player in the late 1800s, and is

best known today, if at all, for losing to a brilliantly played game and timeless combination played by Wilhelm Steinitz at Hastings, 1895. As you may recall, von Bardeleben “resigned” by simply walking out of the playing hall and letting his time expire.

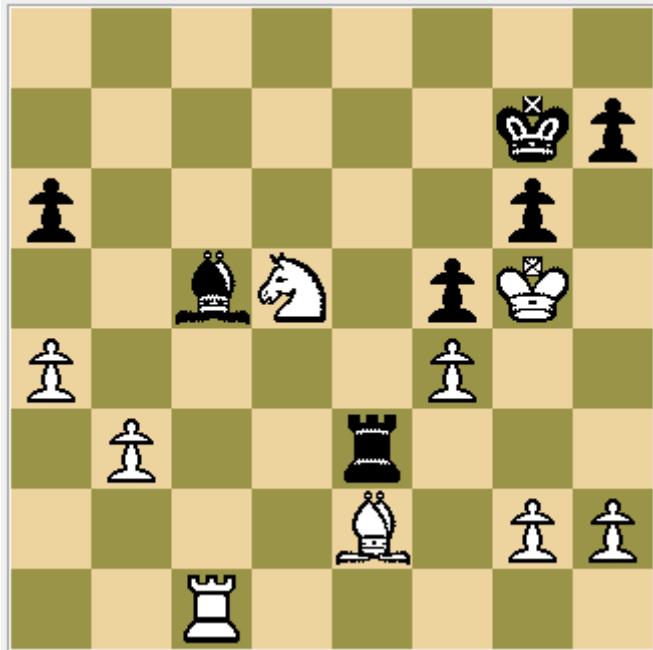
In the movie, the following position occurs. White’s king has just played 1 Kf3-g4 to escape Black’s checking rook. Of course, 1 Kf3-f2 would have lost prosaically to 1 ... Rxc3+.



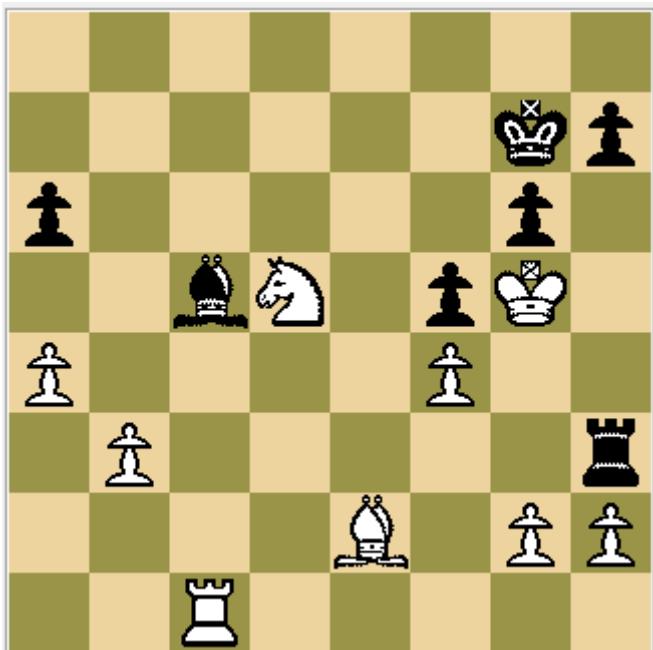
If you compare this position to the two previous examples, you will see similarities. In both cases the White king has been abandoned by its fellow pieces, and has been confined to a small sector of the board somewhere between his and his opponent’s kingside pawns. Also, in both cases a Black rook and dark-squared bishop are conspiring to hunt down the White king.

In the movie, the game was adjourned at this point, never again to be resumed. I won’t explain why that is the case, as the movie is worth watching if you haven’t seen it. John Turturro does a great job portraying Luzhin/von Bardeleben in the movie. (And look for a lovely Teichmann combination that appears as part of a simultaneous exhibition given by Luzhin!)

But the solution is revealed as follows: After 1 Kg4, f5+ 2 Kg5 (2 Kh4 Be7#) Kg7 threatens mate by ... Be7. White plays the only move, 3 Nd5, reaching the following position:



Now both the rook and the bishop are under attack, so Black has to act quickly... and he does, playing the stunning 3 ... Rh3!!:



This rook move cuts off the White king's escape, so that 4 ... h6# is threatened. The only move for White is 4 gxh3, after which Black mates with 4 ... h6+ 5 Kh4 Bf2# - the "bishop's square."

While there was no diversionary rook sacrifice on f4, moving the rook to h3 did divert White's g-pawn so that the move 5 ... Bf2+ could not be answered by 6 g3, as that pawn was now on h3, blocking the White king's last potential escape square.