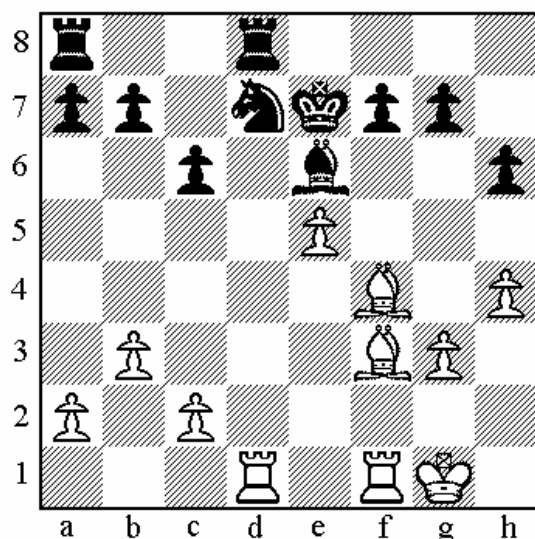


SNAGGING A BUTTON

By Bob Basalla

As one of my good chess friends likes to say, "Pawn grubbing is its own reward." While that may be overstating it a bit, most any time you can safely "snag a button" without any good compensation for the opponent you have improved your chances to win the game. A pawn more on your side of the scale often tips the balance decisively in your favor. Here are two examples from my own games where I was alert to the possibility of picking up an extra pawn. One is a commonplace combination, the other a more complex piece of larceny.

The first position is:

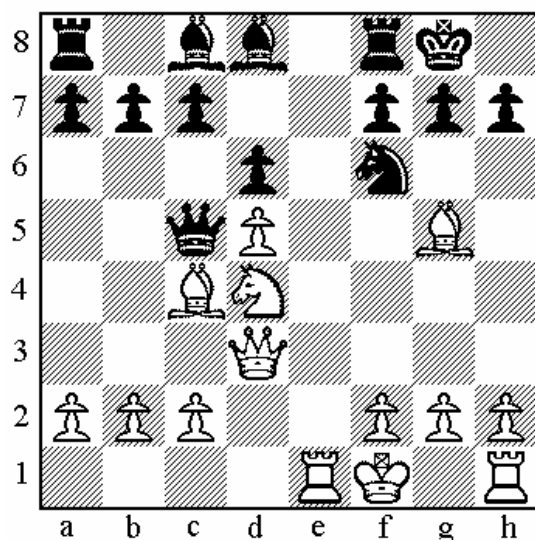


I had Black in this mid-1990's Cleveland Club League game. My strategy at this point was to eliminate whatever material I needed to so I could eventually gang up on and win the isolated, but cramping pawn on e5. Can I prove the e5 pawn to be a weakness? Meanwhile, White should try to open lines to make use of his space edge and two bishops.

Play continued with the reasonable looking 1.Rd1-d6 with the idea of doubling rooks. Then if I wanted to exchange rooks White could recapture on d6 with the pawn where it is easier to guard, and may be eventually supported by a pawn on c5. That would be very cramping indeed. Unfortunately for White he chose a tactically inaccurate moment for his occupation of d6 and an alert Black solved all his difficulties and snagged a button at the same time.

I played 1...Nd7xe5! Now if 2.Rd6xd8 I have the in-between move 2...Ne5xf3+ followed by 3...Ra8xd8 and I'm up a pawn. Besides the way the game went White should consider the exchange sacrifice 2.Bf4xe5 Rd8xd6 3.Be5xg7. Instead he rather quickly gave in with 2.Bf4xe5 (at least the other way there would have been bishops of opposite colors for Black to contend with) 2...Rd8xd6 3.Be5xd6+ Ke7xd6 4.Rf1-d1+ Kd6-e7 5.Kg1-f2 Ra8-d8 6.Rd1xd8 Ke7xd8 and Black converted the pawn up into an endgame win.

The second position is:



It is Black's (my) move in this interesting situation from the 2003 Parma Chess Club Championship. White has just made material equal by capturing a pawn on d4, avoiding a trade of queens that would give him space but no way in to Black's weakness free position. And before he could connect his rooks, he figures, Black would sneak away. I now tried to exploit White's loose pieces to steal back the pawn in broad daylight. (I did not run this through a computer so feel free to investigate if my thinking is correct. I'll just tell you what I saw during the game.)

I played 1...Nf6xd5. The first point is that if 2.Bg5xd8 I have 2...Nd5-f4 and the White queen seems stuck defending the d4 and c4 pieces, especially the White bishop, which if not defended could fall to Black with check. Then I can grab the

bishop on d8 and 4.Re1-e7 can be countered by 4...Qc5-g5 threatening both the rook and mate on g2! So White played a move that at first looks like it refutes Black's idea at once: 2.Nd4-b3, hitting both my Qc5 and Nd5, but I have a ready answer in the counterattack 2...Nd5-b4 hitting his queen in turn. See now that he can't move his queen away from the bishop on c4 without losing it with check and if he just sidesteps my knight's attack (3.Qd3-c3) I can get my own queen out of hock grabbing his other bishop. (3...Qc5xg5 when 4.Qc3xb4 is forced to not lose a piece, but it leaves me still up my ill-gotten gain of a pawn.) So when he took my queen and I his, 3.Nb3xc5 Nb4xd3 he couldn't escape by 4.Bg5xd8 because I can win material by 4...Nd3xe1. White spent a lot of time trying to squirm out of the complications but in the end he gave in and finished the sequence with 4.Nc5xd3 Bd8xg5, and I was up a pawn, with the two bishops to boot! As often happens in such games, the shell-shocked side does not put up serious resistance, and the game in fact ended in a few more moves: 5.Pf2-f4 Bg5-f6 6.Pc2-c3 Bc8-f5 7.Kf1-f2 Pd6-d5 and White resigns. A piece is now lost. See how Black was still alert till the very end and it paid off in a final trick that avoided a long endgame grind.

After seeing these examples on a board once more, I might have been wrong. Maybe pawn grubbing is its own reward!