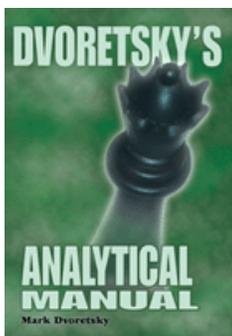




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Wing Attack with an Open Center
Part One

A wing attack only has chances to succeed when the center is either closed or under our firm control. The best way to meet an unprepared wing attack is by a timely counterblow in the center.

These strategic laws, as I have just formulated them, are known to every chess player (well, almost every one) from his childhood. And it's not that we take them on faith and follow them without question (for in chess, there are no rules without exceptions – this might in fact be the only rule that would be worth taking on faith). And over the board, as a rule, we rarely recall abstract principles: we just look for the strongest continuation, and try to calculate the variations a little more precisely. A chess player's knowledge shows on an instinctive level: sometimes the hand simply refuses to play a move that contradicts our previously-learned principles.

In order to widen our strategic understanding, it is useful to study games in which a fresh, non-standard strategy triumphed. Each time, it's important to investigate why this happened, which hidden characteristics of the position were revealed, to what extent the outcome of the game was influenced by either player's mistakes (which nearly always make their appearance), and to what extent these mistakes were a result of the complexity of the problems confronting the players. It would be good to deal with quality, well-annotated examples, because the variations and evaluations of the commentator can help us to better understand the content of the struggle.

Herewith, I present to you some "exceptions to the rules" – games in which a flank attack reached, or could have reached its goal, notwithstanding that the center had not been closed. Some of them have become classics, and have already been commented upon many times. And the first of those commentators, even highly ranked ones, falling under the spell of the bold play of one of the players (and, perhaps, as it happens, under the influence of the game's result), considered the game's outcome wholly justified. A more balanced assessment of events was worked out only much later.

In my first example, I made considerable use of the commentaries by Grigory Jakovlevich Levenfish (in italics), from his book, *Selected Games and Recollections*, published in 1967 (in a sharply condensed version, alas – the work of the Soviet censors). I prepared my own version many years ago, and sometimes used it for exercises with my students. And later, on the site [www.chesspro.ru](#), I saw some quality notes by Sergei Voronkov, who made significant corrections to a number of the variations.

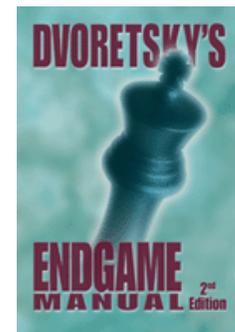
Romanovsky – Levenfish

II Russian Championship, Petrograd 1923

1 e2-e4 e7-e5 2 Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3 Bf1-c4 Ng8-f6 4 d2-d3 Bf8-c5 5 Nb1-c3 d7-d6 6 Bc1-g5 h7-h6 7 Bg5-h4

7 Bxf6 Qxf6 8 Nd5 Qd8 9 c3 is more often played, but after 9...Ne7 or 9...a6 10 d4 Ba7, the chances are about equal, according to theory.

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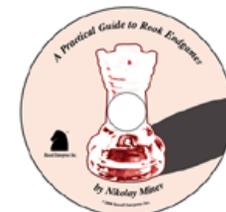


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7...Bc8-g4

After 7...g5 8 Bg3 Bg4 9 h4, White's position is preferable.

8 h2-h3 Bg4xf3

Black agrees to give up one of his bishops, in order to wrest the initiative. 8...Bh5 is a mistake, because of 9 g4 Bg6 10 Nd5, followed by the exchange on f6. On g6, Black's bishop is shut out of the game.

8...Be6 is quite acceptable.

9 Qd1xf3 Nc6-d4 10 Qf3-d1 c7-c6

Black threatens 11...b5 12 Bb3 a5 13 a4 Nxb3 14 cb, splitting White's pawns.

11 a2-a3 b7-b5 12 Bc4-a2 a7-a5 13 0-0

It would be safer to leave the king in the center for a while, and play 13 Ne2!?, a move that is useful for White anyway.



White's plan is clear. After castling, he intends to start operations in the center. Since a basic strategic principle holds that wing attacks are doomed to failure, if the opponent can deliver a counterblow in the center, White had very little fear of the move g7-g5.

13...g7-g5!?

Anyway!

14 Bh4-g3 Qd8-d7 15 Nc3-e2 h6-h5 16 Ne2xd4 Bc5xd4 17 c2-c3 Bd4-b6



18 Qd1-f3?

A tempting move, but a mistaken one, which hands the initiative over to Black. Pyotr Romanovsky expected 18...Rh6 (18...Qe7 gives the white queen the f5-square) 19 h4! g4 20 Qe2 (Black's assault on the queenside is stopped, and White's central counterstroke will not be long in coming). True, in this variation Black also retains full counter play by 19...gh! (instead of 19...g4) 20 Bxh4 Qg4 21 Qxg4 hg. But Levenfish played something even stronger.

White had to prepare a central counteraction by **18 Kh1!**. Then his opponent would have had 19 d4 to think about, as well as the positional piece sacrifice 19 f4!? g4 20 Bxf4 ef 21 Rxf4. Let's examine those variations.

18...h4 19 Bh2



After **19...g4 20 f4!**, the f-file is opened. At first, it seemed to me that the simplest reply to **20...gh** would be 21 gh Nh5 (21...Qxh3? 22 Rf3 and 23 fe+) 22 fe d5 (22...Ng3+ 23 Bxg3 hg is bad, because of 24 Bxf7+ Kd8 25 e6, followed by Qg4 and Kg2) 23 Qg4+-. But then, I found a clever counterattacking possibility, beginning with 22...0-0-0!. Now the cautious 23 Qg4!? leads to an approximately equal endgame after 23... Ng3+ 24 Bxg3 Qxg4 25 hg hg+ 26 Kg2 de, while the inviting 23 Bxf7 Ng3+ 24 Bxg3 hg 25 e6 allows Black to seize the initiative with a rook sacrifice: 25...Rxb3+! 26 Kg2 Rh2+! 27 Kxg3 Qe7 28 Qg4 (28 Kxh2? Rh8+) 28...Rdh8.

So White must enter complications that are difficult to assess: **21 fe! hg+ 22 Kxg2 Ng4!** (22...Rg8+ is much weaker: 23 Kh1 Qh3 24 Qe2+) 23 Bxf7+ Kd8 (Black finds himself in a lost endgame after 23...Qxf7 24 Qxg4 Rg8 25 Rxf7 Rxg4+ 26 Kh3) **24 Qf3!** (stronger than 24 e6 Ne3+ 25 Kf3 Qe7 26 Qd2 Nxf1 27 Rxf1 Kc7 28 d4, with unclear play) **24...de** (24...Ne3+ is bad: 25 Kh1 Nxf1 26 Rxf1) **25 Bxe5! Nxe5 26 Qf6+ Kc7 27 Qxe5+ Kb7 28 d4 Qg4+ 29 Kh1**, when the position appears to favor White.

These energetic actions in the center, even sacrificing material when necessary, were just the right way for White to successfully withstand his opponent's risky strategy.

Voronkov correctly noted that Black was not obliged to enter into this exchange of blows: it would have made sense for him to evacuate his king from the center by **19...0-0-0!?** (instead of 19...g4), and if 20 a4, then Black could play 20...g4!. But here also, White retains decent counterattacking possibilities. He could, for example, play 20 Qf3 Rh6 21 d4! g4! (21...ed 22 cd Bxd4 23 Rad1+/- is dangerous) 22 Qd3, with a complex game. And a decent alternative would be 20 f3 Nh5 21 Qe1 f5 (Voronkov) 22 ef Qxf5, and now either 23 Qe4 Qxe4, with an endgame that's still more pleasant for Black, or the sharp 23 a4!? Qxd3 24 ab, with great complications.

18...Bb6-d8!

A difficult move, temporarily leaving my king in the center.

Analysis appears to support Levenfish's opinion. He thought the move he actually played was the strongest, despite the fact that later on, the bishop has to return to b6. Still, Black had other promising continuations at his disposal.

We have already noted that 18...Rh6!? 19 h4 gh! 20 Bxh4 Qg4 21 Qxg4 hg deserved consideration.

Voronkov suggested another interesting possibility: 18...Ke7 19 d4 g4, continuing 20 hg hg 21 Qe3 Rh5 22 f4 ed 23 cd Rah8, with a dangerous initiative for Black. But White could avoid the unfavorable opening of the h-file by playing 20 Qd3! h4 21 Bh2 Rad8 22 Kh1, or 20...gh 21 Bh4! hg 22 de! gfQ+ 23 Kxf1 Rh6 24 Bxf6+ Kf8 25 Rd1, with a sharp position that's difficult to evaluate.

19 d3-d4

19 h4 would be met by 19...Ng4 20 hg Bxg5, followed by h4.

19...g5-g4 20 h3xg4 h5xg4



21 Qf3-e3

If White trades queens by 21 Qf5 Qxf5 22 ef, Black gets the advantage by playing 22...Nh5 (22...Ne4!?) 23 Rfe1 Nxg3 (23...f6 24 Rad1 Bb6, with the idea of d6-d5, followed by e5-e4, as given by Levenfish, is weaker, in view of 25 Bh4!+/=) 24 fg Bb6-/+.

21 Qd3 Nh5 22 de Nxg3 23 Qxg3 was tempting, but the hidden riposte 23...f6!, with its threat of 24...Qh7, alters matters radically. After the forced 24 Rfe1 fe, followed by Bd8-h4, 0-0-0 and Rdf8, Black must win.

White's actual move was well thought-out. If 21...Nh5?, then 22 de Nxg3 23 fg! Rf8 24 Rf5 Rb8 25 Kf1 is clearly in White's favor. In the concluding position, 25 Qf4! would be even stronger, while a move earlier, White has 24 Rxf7! Rxf7 25 e6, or 24 e6! at once.

Voronkov offered a more stubborn defense: 23...Qa7!? (instead of 23...Rf8) 24 Bxf7+ Kd7, but whether White follows his suggested line 25 e6+ Ke7 26 Qxa7+ Rxa7 27 Kf2 Bb6+ 28 Ke1 Rh2 29 Rd1! Rxe2 30 Bg8, or 25 Qxa7 Rxa7 26 Kf2 de 27 Rad1+ Ke7 28 Bg6, he keeps his advantage.

21...Bd8-b6!

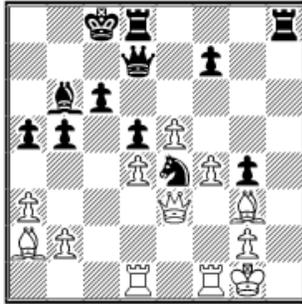
Threatening to castle long, followed by Rh5 and Rdh8. When we analyzed this game, Romanovsky indicated the following plan for White: 22 Rfe1 0-0-0 23 a4 Rh5 24 ab Rdh8 25 Kf1 cb 26 Bb3 Rh1+ 27 Ke2 Rxe1+ 28 Rxe1; but here also, after 28...Re8, Black keeps a strong attack. In fact, all is not clear here: 29 Kf1 ed 30 Qd3! d5 (30...dc? 31 Qxc3+) 31 ed Rxe1+ 32 Kxe1=/+ (Voronkov).

In this variation, Black should not be in a hurry to trade off his active rook on h5 – the immediate 26...Re8!-/+ is stronger. And a move earlier, Voronkov suggested an excellent way to strengthen the attack: 25...c5!? (instead of 25...cb) 26 Bc4 (26 de? Qxb5+) 26...cd 27 cd ed! 28 Qf4 Nxe4!. On the other hand, White can still fight on in the endgame arising after 29 Rxe4 Rh1+ 30 Ke2 Rxa1 31 Qxf7 Qxf7 32 Bxf7.

22 f2-f4 e5xd4!

Black prevents the opening of the f-file, and switches over to attack the weak d4-pawn.

23 c3xd4 0-0-0 24 Ra1-d1 d6-d5! 25 e4-e5 Nf6-e4



Threatening to double his rooks on the h-file. White's reply is forced.

26 Ba2-b1 f7-f5 27 e5xf6

Otherwise, Black replies to the forced exchange on e4 with d5xe4, and the d4-pawn soon falls.

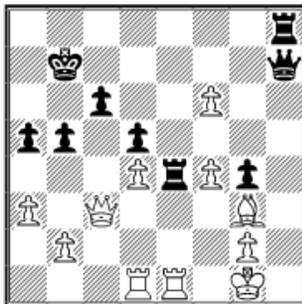
27...Rd8-e8

A natural move, but evidently not the best. It still made sense to leave the rook on d8, and answer the exchange on e4 with the pawn recapture, in order to increase the pressure on the central d4-pawn. For example, 27... Qf5! 28 Bxe4 de (threatening 29...Qxf6) 29 f7!? Qxf7 30 Qxe4 Qc4! 31 Bf2 (31 Qf5+ Kb7 32 Qxg4 Rh7!, and White's in trouble) 31...g3 32 Bxg3 (32 Qf5+ Kb7 33 Bg3 Bxd4+ 34 Bf2 Bxf2+ 35 Kxf2 Rhf8+) 32... Bxd4+ 33 Rxd4 Rxd4 (33...Qxd4+ 34 Qxd4 Rxd4 is also strong) 34 Qe5 Rh1+ 35 Kxh1 Qxf1+ 36 Kh2 Rd1, and Black's advantage is decisive.

28 Bb1xe4 Re8xe4 29 Qe3-c3 Kc8-b7

This move was also inaccurate. The pawn at f6 might be a problem for Black in some lines, so it would have been worthwhile to go after it at once: 29...Qe6! 30 f7 Kb7-/+, or 30 Rfe1 Qxf6 31 Rxe4 de-/+.

30 Rf1-e1 Qd7-h7



31 Kg2-f2?

The final mistake. White had to play 31 Rxe4 Qh1+ 32 Kf2 Qxd1 33 Re7 + Ka6. On 34 Qxc6?, 34...Qd2+! is immediately decisive (Levenfish gives the less forcing 34...Qxd4+ 35 Ke2 Qxb2+ 36 Kd3 Qxa3+ 37 Kd2 Qb4+ 38 Kc2 Qc4+): 35 Re2 (35 Kg1 Qxd4+) 35...Qxd4+, forcing mate.

However, Voronkov pointed out that 34 Ke3! leaves Black with no immediately decisive continuation; for example, 34...Qg1+ 35 Kd2 Qxg2 + 36 Kc1 Qf1+ (36...Rh1+? 37 Be1+-) 37 Kc2 =.

31...Rh8-e8 32 Re1xe4 Re8xe4 33 Kf2-g1 Qh7-h8!+-

Preventing 34 f7, because of 34...Rxd4.

34 Bg3-f2 Re4xf4 35 Bf2-e3

White had at his disposal a curious combination: 35 Bh4!?, and if 35... Qxh4, then 36 g3. The refutation would be 35...Rxd4! 36 Rxd4 Qxh4 37 f7 g3 38 f8Q Bxd4+.

35...Rf4xf6 36 Rd1-f1 g4-g3 37 Rf1xf6 Qh8xf6 38 Qc3-d3 Bb6-c7 39 b2-b3 Bc7-f4 40 b3-b4 a5xb4 41 a3xb4 Qf6-h6 42 Be3xf4

42 Kf1! Bxe3 43 Qxe3 Qf8+ (43...Qxe3?? is stalemate) 44 Ke2 Qxb4+.

42...Qh6xf4 43 Qd3-f3 Qf4-c1+ 0-1

“In this game, I made no serious errors; I think that I just played too routinely, and failed to formulate my plans concretely enough. Whereas my opponent played brilliantly, demonstrating in this game the best features of his creativity.” (Romanovsky)

The game was interesting from a strategic point of view. How did Black succeed with his flank attack? Could it be that a basic tenet of strategy, which holds that a flank attack will be refuted by a central counterblow, has become outmoded? No – it remains in full force. I decided to play 13...g5 for two reasons: the White king was on the kingside, and White had played the move h2-h3, which made it easier to open the h-file. But even with these two points in my favor, the attack required exceptional accuracy, and literally hung by a thread (see the variation after White’s move 21 Qd3). Games which are decided by a wing attack with a closed or firmly controlled center are many; but games such as this one are very rare. One example of an analogous strategy would be the famous game Vidmar – Nimzowitsch, from the New York tournament of 1927.

Well, OK, let’s look at the Nimzowitsch game, then. We shall rely on Alexander Alekhine’s comments from the tournament book.

Vidmar – Nimzowitsch
New York, 1927

1 d2-d4 Ng8-f6 2 Ng1-f3 e7-e6 3 c2-c4 Bf8-b4+ 4 Bc1-d2 Qd8-e7 5 Nb1-c3

The usual move is 5 g3.

5...0-0 6 e2-e3

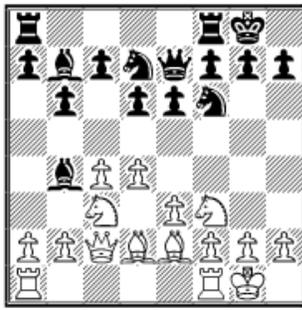
A passive move. In such positions, the fianchetto with 6 g3 is preferable. Alekhine recommended 6 Qc2 (intending e2-e4 and Bd3) – but Black, if he wishes, can break up this plan by playing 6...c5!?

6...d7-d6!?

White’s preceding move was so meaningless that Black, before fianchettoing his queen’s bishop, can permit himself the luxury of feinting at e6-e5, thus forcing his opponent to make the humble move Bf1-e2 (instead of Bf1-d3).

7 Bf1-e2 b7-b6 8 0-0 Bc8-b7 9 Qd1-c2 Nb8-d7

Since Black is trying to occupy the e4 square, it would have been better to play 9...Bxc3 10 Bxc3 Ne4 now. After the text, White could have prevented this maneuver.



10 Ra1-d1

Savielly Tartakower's recommendation of 10 Nb5 is not convincing, in view of 10...Bxd2 11 Nxd2 a6 12 Nc3 c5=+.

Since the d-file will eventually be opened, occupying it with the rooks is indicated in principle. But here, White had a different plan at his disposal, giving him the opportunity to reduce the pressure exerted by his opponent's queen bishop on the center squares: 10 Ng5!, and if 10...h6 11 Bf3 d5, then simply 12 Nh3, and if now 12...g5, then 13 cd! ed (13...g4 14 d6) 14 Qf5, with full play.

Note that, instead of 12...g5?!, 12...c6 would be preferable. And White was not obliged to retreat his knight to h3 – the intermediate move 12 cd! was stronger, practically forcing the reply 12...Bxc3+/- (12...hg 13 d6 +/-; 12...ed 13 Nxd5 Bxd5 14 Bxb4 Qxb4 15 Bxd5 hg 16 Bxa8 Rxa8 17 Qxc7 Qxb2 18 Qb7+/-).

10...Bb4xc3

Black correctly plays no more "moves that strengthen his position," but clarifies the position immediately. Indeed, in this position it is impossible to decide which file the rooks should control; and his other waiting moves also give him nothing.

11 Bd2xc3 Nf6-e4 12 Bc3-e1

As a counter to Black's significant advantage in the center, White has hopes (true, they are rather weak ones) of eventually exploiting the activity of his bishops. After 12 Nd2 Nxc3! 13 Qxc3=+/, White would have no counterplay whatever.

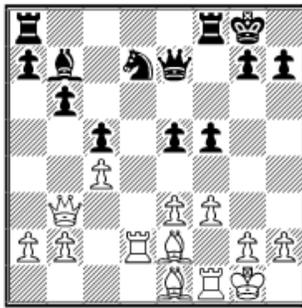
12...f7-f5 13 Qc2-b3

White prepares an exchange of knights. On the immediate 13 Nd2, Black has the standard reply 13...Qg5!, preventing 14 f3 and practically forcing the undesirable move f2-f4.

13...c7-c5!?

Black wants to clarify the situation in the center before beginning a wing attack. This desire costs him the d-file; and in view of this, many would have preferred, instead of the text move, weakening d6, a different way of preparing e6-e5, for example, 13...Kh8. But – the world belongs to the brave.

14 Nf3-d2 Ne4xd2 15 Rd1xd2 e6-e5 16 d4xe5 d6xe5 17 f2-f3



On the natural reply 17...Nf6, White pins the knight with 18 Bh4, exchanges it, and then has no difficulties inducing a general exchange by means of pressure on the open file. Nimzowitsch quite simply cuts short this plan and overturns all White's calculations.

17...g7-g5!

“The tactical basis for this move is to prevent the threatened sortie 18 Bh4. And its strategic idea consists of a *positionally prepared-for* storm of the enemy king's fortress” (Tartakower).

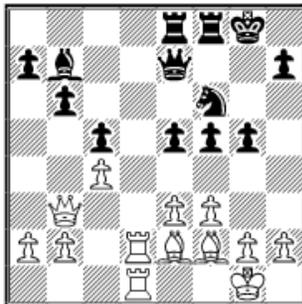
This move, beautiful in its immediacy, sets a difficult task before the opponent: from now on, White will have to spend all his time defending against two possible breaks: with e5-e4 and with g5-g4. In addition, the Black knight is now secure from the aforementioned exchange.

18 Be1-f2?

White prepares to double rooks (not a very effective idea, since there are no squares he can invade on), but this takes the bishop further away from its designated post on c3. Igor Bondarevsky proposed the stronger move 18 Qd3!, with the idea of a queen invasion at d6. For example, 18...Rad8 (18...Nf6? 19 Qxf5! [19 Qd6] 19...Ne4 20 Rd7+– [20 Qd7+–]) 19 Qd6 Qxd6 20 Rxd6 Nb8! (20...Nf6 21 Rxd8 Rxd8 22 Bc3+/= or +/– or 21 Re6!?) 21 Rxd8 Rxd8 22 Bc3 Nc6 23 Kf2+/= (or 23 Rd1+/=).

As this short analysis shows, objectively speaking, Black should have played 17...Nf6 18 Bh4, or the slightly more accurate 17...Rad8!? 18 Bg3 =, since the attacking plan he actually chose is strategically dubious.

18...Nd7-f6 19 Rf1-d1 Ra8-e8!



This shows that Black's determination to win, and the game's further course affirms that he was correct. Black's playing for the win deserves even more approbation, in that here, it involves the complete abandonment of the open file – a choice that many experienced fighters would not make. For example, I have, in my many years' experience, known masters of the first rank, who in analogous positions, put both of their rooks on the open file to be exchanged without a second thought – and afterwards complained of how chess was approaching a draw-death... I must admit to being unable to bring myself to share such views.

20 Qb3-a4

Threatening 21 Qxa7 or 21 Rd7. *Black's reply shows the futility of this sortie. 20 Bg3 would have been somewhat better, warding off the threat of e5-e4, at least.*

20...Bb7-a8! 21 Rd2-d6

21 Rd7? Nxd7 22 Rxd7 Qf6 23 Qxa7 h6 fails (Nimzowitsch). As before, it would have made sense to play 21 Bg3, preventing 21...e4? because of 22 Bd6+-. This would have left his opponent a difficult choice:

a) 21...f4 22 ef (22 Bf2? e4 would be worse) 22...ef 23 Bf2+/-.

b) 21...g4 22 Bh4! (but not 22 fg Ne4! 23 Rd7 Qg5, when White's position becomes shaky). Now 22...gf?! 23 Bxf3 Bxf3 24 gf hands the advantage over to White. 22...Qg7 is better, when White will play either 23 Bxf6 Qxf6 24 Qxa7 Qg5 unclear, or 23 Kh1 gf 24 Bxf3 (24 gf? is a mistake: 24...Ng4! 25 Rd6 – defending against Qh6 – 25...Qf7!, followed by 26...Qh5) 24...Ng4 unclear.

c) 21...Qg7 22 Qc2!?, and Black must do something about the positional queen sacrifice 23 Qxf5!? Ne4 24 fe Rxf5 25 ef.

21...Qe7-g7!

A palpable strengthening of the breakthrough threat. 21...e4 would still have been premature, in view of 22 f4, for example: 22...gf 23 Bh4! f3 24 Bxf6 Rxf6 25 Rxf6 fe 26 Re1, with advantage.

22 Be2-f1?

Inconsistent and bad. White had to take the threat of e5-e4 into account, and play 22 Be1!; if Black then plays 22...e4?, then 23 Bc3, and White obtains some chances (in reality, White would have a great advantage here, threatening to take twice on f6; 23...Qe7 is bad, because of 24 Rd7!; and if the rook leaves the e8-square, White has 24 Rd7 or 24 Rxf6 Rxf6 25 Rd7). In view of this, Black would of course have preferred 22...g4; but even in this case, despite his indisputable advantage, the game's outcome would still not have been entirely clear. For example: 23 fg Nxg4 24 Bxg4 (24 Rd7 Qg5 25 Bxg4 Qxg4 26 Qc2 Bc6 27 R7d6 leads to the same thing) 24...Qxg4 25 Qc2, etc.

I believe Alekhine overrates Black's position: after 25...Be4 26 Qf2=+/, he doesn't have even the hint of an indisputable advantage.

22...e5-e4! 23 Bf2-e1

Joyless – just like all the alternatives. If 23 fe, then 23...Nxe4, with Qg7xb2 to follow. Let's extend this variation: 24 Rd7 Qxb2 25 Be1 a5-/+ (but not Tartakower's recommendation: 25...Nc3 26 Bxc3 Qxc3, in view of 27 Qxa7 unclear.

Another defensive try, 23 f4!? gf 24 Bh4 (of course not 24 ef? e3-+) is convincingly refuted by 24...Ng4! 25 ef e3 26 Re1 Nxh2! 27 Kxh2 e2.

23...e4xf3 24 Be1-c3 Qg7-e7! 25 Rd6-d3

A sad retreat.

White gets mated after 25 Bxf6 Qxe3+ 26 Kh1 fg+ 27 Bxg2 Qe1+. But a more stubborn defense was 25 R1d3!? Ne4 26 Rd7 f2+ 27 Kh1 Rf6! (threatening Ng3+) 28 Bxf6 Qxf6 (Tartakower's variation) 29 R7d6! Nxd6 30 Rxd6 Qe5 31 Rd2.

25...f3xg2 26 Bf1xg2 Ba8xg2 27 Bc3xf6

27 Kxg2 Qe4+ is no better.

27...Qe7-e4! 28 Rd1-d2 Bg2-h3 29 Bf6-c3 Qe4-g4+ 0-1

And mate in two.

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