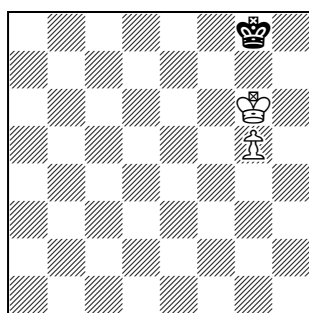


Second thoughts on asymmetry

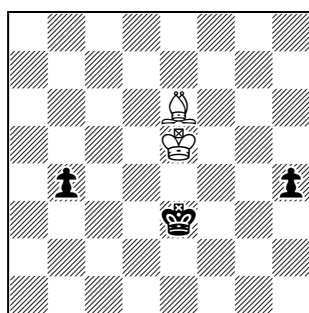
JDB, 6 July 2013

Those who took *British Endgame Study News* will know that I was not an enthusiast for the “asymmetry” theme (where the position is symmetrical about a file, but the different distances of the board edges from the centre line cause White to go one way rather than the other). In special number 1, I described it as tending to be a recipe for dullness, and I promptly received a strongly contradictory opinion from Walter Veitch (see March 1997, page 33). I was therefore interested to receive a copy of a recent book *ASymmetrie*, by Michael Schlosser and Martin Minski, which is devoted to this theme and includes no fewer than 67 endgame studies among its nearly 650 examples. The text is in German, which I don’t read, but fortunately the studies speak for themselves.

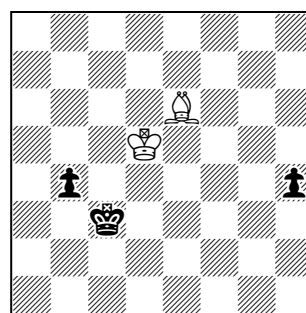
This book has caused me to have second thoughts. There are indeed some dull works, where White chooses the natural and obvious option (to take the wide side so as to outflank Black, or to crowd him against the edge on the narrow side) and the study seems to have little else to offer, but there are others where White’s choice of side is unexpected or paradoxical, or where the study has something to offer over and above the mere choice of side.



1 - White to play and win



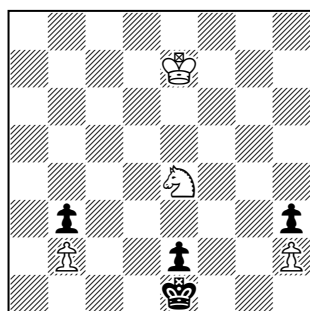
2 - White to play and hold the draw



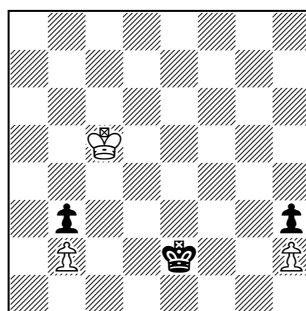
2a - after 3 Ke4

Take **1**, which the authors attribute to “Walker, 1841” but which Harold van der Heijden’s “Endgame study database IV” gives as having appeared in Lolli’s book of 1763. The natural move is 1 Kf6 going to the wide side, but after 1...Kh7 2 Kf7 Kh8 3 g6 White finds that he has given stalemate. Instead, it is Black who must go to the wide side. So **1 Kh6**, and after 1...Kf7 2 Kh7 there will be no stalemate; alternatively, 1...Kh8 2 g6 Kg8 3 g7 with the standard win. True, after 1 Kf6 Kh7 2 Kf7 Kh8 White can play 3 Kg6, and after 3...Kg8 he is back at the initial position and can try again, but such a “blind alley” dual is not normally regarded as significant.

2 is a position from a famous 1917 study by Aleksandr Selesnieff (throughout, I am omitting all introductory play). Black to play would be in zugzwang (1...Kd3 2 Kf4 etc, or 1...b3 2 Bxb3 h3 3 Bd5), but White can neither move his bishop nor block one of its lines, which leaves 1 Kd6 and 1 Kf6 as his only options. In fact the correct choice is **1 Kd6**, and after **1...Kd4 2 Kc6 Kc3** he temporarily blocks his bishop’s line by **3 Kd5** (see **2a**). Black naturally takes the opportunity to run his b-pawn, **3...b3**, but this gives White time for **4 Ke4** catching the h-pawn, and after **4...b2 5 Ba2** the b-pawn is stopped as well. Now we see why White chose Kd6 at move 1.

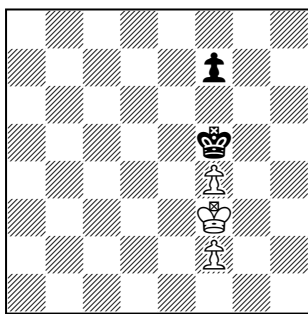


3 - White to play and hold the draw

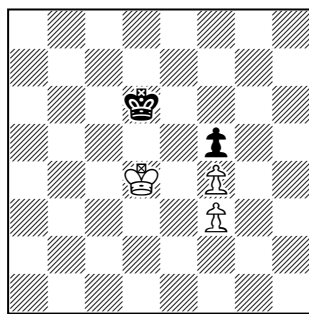


3a - after 4 Kc5

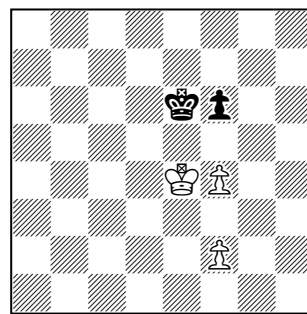
3 is a version of a 1924 study by T. R. Dawson. **1 Kd6 Kd1 2 Nc3+ Kd2 3 Nxe2 Kxe2 4 Kc5** gives **3a**, and if 4...Kd2 then 5 Kb4 Kc2 6 Ka3 and it is Black who is fighting for the draw. So Black goes the other way, **4...Kf2**, but after **5 Kd4 Kg2 6 Ke3 Kxh2 7 Kf2** he is fenced in; a splendid Réti manoeuvre by the White king. Dawson actually had the king on e6, with intention 1 Kd5 etc, but then 1 Kd6 was noticed as a striking cook; well, why not put the king on e7, and make Kd6 the solution? The alternative line starting with 1 Kf6 is now refuted by 4...Kf2 as well as by 4...Kd2, but I think most of us will regard the more sparkling play in the “right” line as more than making up for the fact that the “wrong” line has two refutations instead of one.



4 - White to play and win

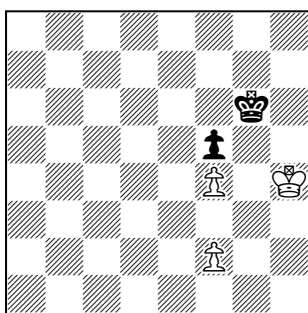


4a - 1 Ke3, 2...f5+, 4 f3

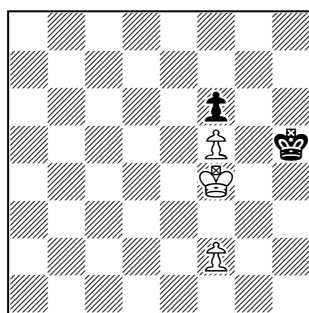


4b - 2...f6

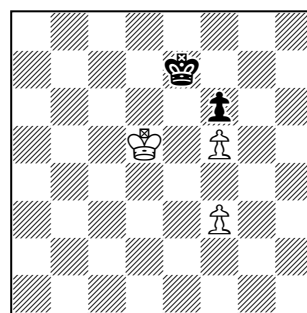
4 is from a 1936 study by Grigoriev. Play the obvious 1 Ke3, going to the wide side; yes, 1...Ke6 2 Ke4 f5+ 3 Kd4 Kd6 4 f3 (see 4a), and after 4...Ke6 5 Kc5 it is obvious why White should choose this side. But Black also has 2...f6 (see 4b), and this proves unexpectedly tricky. If 3 Kf3 then now 3...f5, and with the kings one rank lower Black can keep White at bay; illustrative lines are 4 Ke3 Kd5 5 Kd3 Kc5 and Black will patrol c5/d5, and 4 Kg3 Kf6 5 Kh3(!) Kf7/Kg7! and Black will patrol f6/f7/g7 ready to meet Kh4 by ...Kg6 (see 4c below). So, from 4b, White tries 3 f5+ instead, but after 3...Kd6 4 Kf4 Kd5 5 f3 Kd6 6 Kg3 Ke7 7 Kg4 Kf7 8 Kh5 Kg7 we have 4c up a rank and again White is not going to get through.



4c - 3 Kf3 f5+, after Kh4 Kg6



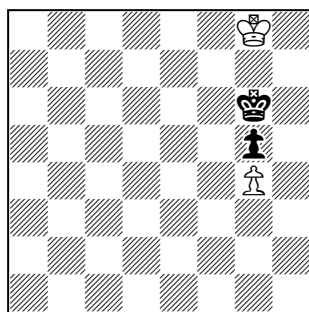
4d - 1 Kg3, 2...f6, 4...Kh5



4e - after 8...Ke7

In fact it's not at 4a that White needs to be on the wide side, but at 4c. So let's go back to the start and try 1 Kg3, going to the narrow side first. Best defence is again 1...Kg6, and after 2 Kg4 f6 3 f5+ Kh6 4 Kf4 Kh5 (see 4d) 5 f3 (4 Ke4 Kg4, 4 Ke3 Kg5) Kh6 6 Ke3 (the position with the kings on e4 and g5 is reciprocal zugzwang, so White avoids Ke4) Kg7 (6...Kg5 7 Ke4 etc) 7 Ke4 Kf7 8 Kd5 Ke7 we have 4c up a rank but with the kings on the wide side (see 4e), and 9 Kc6 is available. But by playing 1 Kg3 instead of 1 Ke3, haven't we kippeded 4a? No, because the situation is recoverable; after 1...Kg6 2 Kg4 f5+ White has time to come back to the wide side, 3 Kf3 Kf6 4 Ke3 Ke6 5 Kd4 Kd6 6 f3, and again we have 4a.

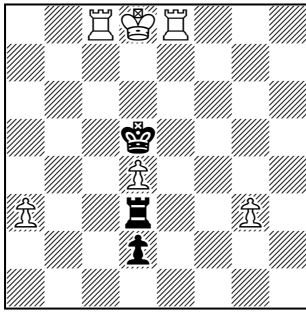
There are minor alternatives for White at various points, but his basic strategy, of probing on the narrow side in order to provoke the fixing of the pawns on f5/f6 or f4/f5 before switching to the wide side, is forced.



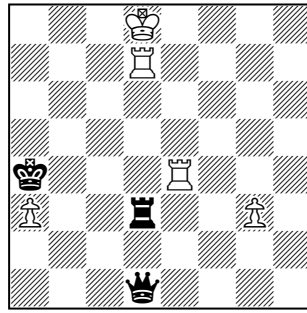
5 - White to play and hold the draw

After this, something short and sweet is in order. 5 doesn't seem to have appeared in the literature before Selman drew attention to it in 1939. Black to play would lose his pawn, 1...Kf6 2 Kh7 or 1...Kh6 2 Kf7. But if White to play chooses the wide side, 1 Kf8, Black will reply 1...Kf6, and now the seventh rank is barred to the White king and Black will win easily. White must go the other way, 1 Kh8, forcing Black to reply 1...Kh6 since 1...Kf6 2 Kh7 will lead to the loss of his pawn as before, and 2 Kg8 Kg6 repeats. By choosing the narrow side, White has forced Black to play to it also.

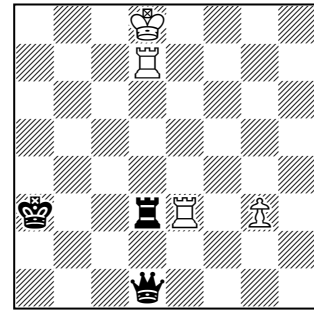
- Second thoughts on asymmetry -



6 - White to play and hold the draw



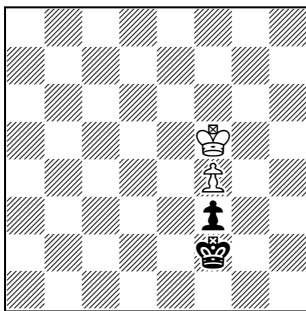
6a - after 6 Re4+



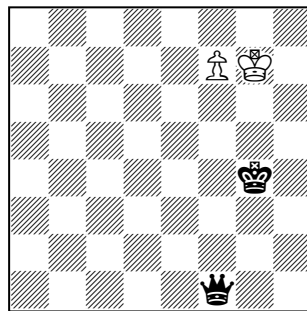
6b - after 7 Re3

6 is a version of a 1969 study by Alois Wotawa. **1 Rc5+** prepares to drive Black to the narrow side, and after **1...Kxd4** (1...Kd6 loses to 2 Rce5 Kc6 3 Kc8, with 3...Rxd4 4 R8e6+ Rd6 5 Rxd6+ Kxd6 6 Re8 d1Q 7 Rd8+ or 3...Kb6 4 R8e6+ and mate next move) **2 Rc7 d1Q 3 Rd7+ Kc4 4 Re4+ Kb5 5 Re5+ Ka4 6 Re4+** we have **6a**. Black must now play to the third rank to avoid perpetual check, **6...Kxa3** (nothing else is better), and the delightful cross-pin **7 Re3** wins material (see **6b**). Had White driven Black to the wide side, Black could have escaped the checks by playing to h3.

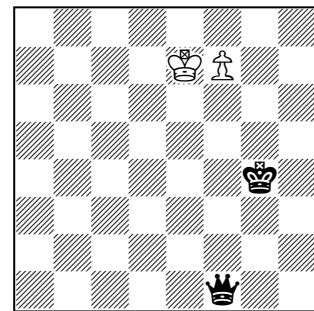
Wotawa's position omitted the pawn on a3, presumably through a printing error though it is possible he was worried that White might have enough material for a routine draw after 1 Rc7 d1Q 2 Rd7+. But even if such a draw should exist, and I don't think it does, it would be anything but clear, and I don't think its existence would detract from the elegant crispness of the line above.



7 - White to play and hold the draw

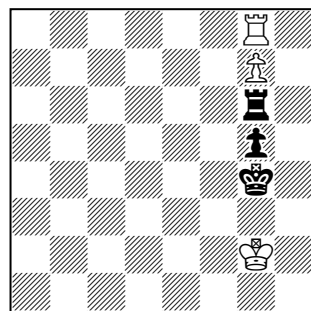


7a - White draws

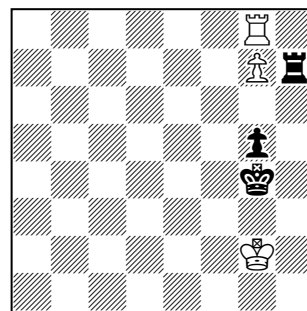


7b - White loses

One way of realising the "asymmetry" theme is to come down to a position with a queen against a pawn on the seventh, because if taking one side leads to a drawing position with an a-pawn or c-pawn, taking the other will lead to a position with an e-pawn or g-pawn where the queen will win. The right first move in a study of this kind tends to be obvious, but 7, from a 1971 study by Christer Jonsson, shows a neat variation on the idea. Correct is **1 Kg6 Kg3** (nothing else is better) **2-3 f6 f1Q 4 f7 Kg4** (again nothing else is better) **5 Kg7** with the standard draw (see **7a**); the Black king is one square too far away. But if 1 Ke6 then 1...Kg3 2-3 f6 f1Q 4 f7 Kg4 5 Ke7 gives **7b**, and after 5...Qe1+ the White king will have to go to f8 sooner or later in order to reach the corner (if 6 Kf6 then 6...Qc3+ 7 Ke7 Qe5+) and Black will have time to bring his king one crucial step nearer.

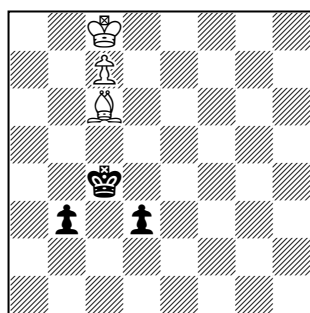


8 - White to play and win

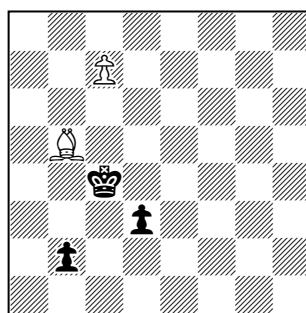


8a - after 3 Kg2

Black to play in **8**, from a 1975 study by Andrew Miller, would lose quickly. White to play can triangulate, but he must do by **1 Kh2 Rh6+ 2 Kg1**. Now, if Black tries **2...Rh7** to avoid returning to **8** then **3 Kg2** gives **8a**, and again Black has no good move. If instead 1 Kf2 then 1...Rf6+ 2 Kg1 Rf7 3 Kg2, and Black will be able to mark time on the rank. As in **5**, White has had to go to the narrow side in order to force Black to go there also.



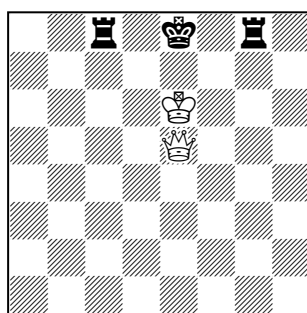
9 - White to play and win



9a - after 1...b2 2 Bb5+ (wK off)

9, a study from 2000 by Jarl Ulrichsen, seems to me to be a full-blooded “Quo vadis, Domine?” and not just an asymmetric, though it has some asymmetric elements as a sub-plot. Suppose, for the moment, that White is allowed to take his king off the board with his first move. If now 1...d2 then 2 Bf3; if 1...b2 then the move corresponding to 2 Bf3 is not available, but White has 2 Bb5+ instead (see 9a) with 2...Kxb5 3 c8Q b1Q 4 Qb7+ and 2...Kd4 3 Bxd3 Kxd3 4 c8Q b1Q 5 Qf5+. This last line would not be available after 1...d2.

So we need a move which doesn't disturb any of this, and the critical line turns out to be 1...b2 2 Bb5+ Kd4 3 Bxd3 Kxd3 4 c8Q b1Q 5 Qf5+. To preserve this line, it is soon seen that **1 Kd8** is the only possibility.



10 - White to play and win

A little sparkler to finish with. 10 is a position from a 1978 study by Khortov. Black to play would lose quickly: 1...Ra8 (1...Rc6+ 2 Kd5+ Kd7 3 Qf5+ Kc7 4 Qf7+ and a rook goes) 2 Qb5+ Kf8 3 Kf6 (threat 4 Qc5+ Ke8 5 Qe7 mate) Rg7 4 Qc5+ and a fork next move. So all White has to do is to triangulate, and there is only one way to do it: **1 Qh5+ Kd8 2 Qa5+ Ke8** (2...Rc7 3 Qd5+ and mate in a move or two) **3 Qe5!** The position with Black to play had been exploited by Prokeš in 1949, but the triangulation was Khortov's.

This is perhaps a more extensive selection than would normally be presented from a new book, but the studies are only just over a tenth of the whole and I don't think it will have harmed the book's commercial prospects. I don't know to what extent the book is intended to be comprehensive - if I could read the text, it would no doubt tell me - but I do notice one apparent omission: the delightfully paradoxical three-move stalemate (*Fairy Chess Review* 6820, June 1946) which I quoted in David Pritchard's obituary in *Variant Chess* 51. Here, the Black king starts on the f-file, but White doesn't drive him to the edge or corner as one would expect; he drives him to the d-file, because he needs to put a bishop beyond him in order to complete the net. If the book goes into a second edition, I hope this will be short-listed for inclusion.

The book is available from Udo Degener, Stephensonstr. 47, D-14482 Potsdam, udo-degener@gmx.de, ISBN 978-3-940531-91-9, and if I have interpreted the flysheet correctly the price is 20 euros (for 646 pages) plus 6 euros for postage to an address outside Germany. It might be added that the printing is first-rate, and I am surprised to find no printer credited (if I had produced work of this quality, I would certainly have wanted to put my name to it). It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the problems which are the book's main subject, since many are of a kind which does not interest me, but in the study field it has certainly convinced me that my previous lack of enthusiasm for the theme was less than justified.