

VARIANT KINGS

Readers who have been with us from early days will recall the articles on “Fairy Kings” by Mark Ridley which appeared in *VC* 17/18/20/21. Mark recently sent me a copy of an updated version which appeared earlier this year in the English-language Serbian problem magazine *Mat Plus Review*.

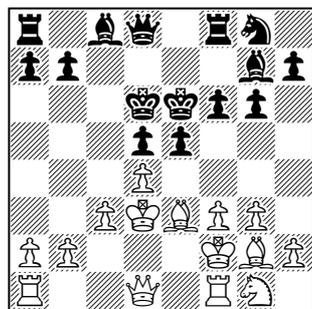
There are several games in the *Encyclopedia* featuring variant kings, but on the whole they are more usually found in problems. Given that the object of play is to capture the enemy king, his move in ordinary chess seems to be about right: he is weak enough for hounding him down in the ending to be practicable, but strong enough for him to be able to play a useful role in helping to round up his opponent. Changing his move is all too likely to upset this delicate balance of power, and this will affect all earlier play for material advantage. If he is strengthened, a bare king may be able to hold out even against K+Q; if he is weakened, the co-operation which allows K+R and perhaps K+P to force a win against a bare king may vanish.

The latter point is illustrated by **Knightrate**, also known as **Mate the Knight**, where the kings are replaced by royal knights and the knights by non-royal kings (castling allowed, and promotion to non-royal king but not to knight). In the ending, N+Q v N is an easy win (a queen can round up an enemy knight on its own), but N+R v N is only a draw (mating positions can be constructed but not forced); N+P v N is basically drawn unless the stronger side can prove otherwise, but there is an obvious “opposition” concept and some of the details are tricky.

A “First Knightmate Open” was held in Cincinnati in 1991, and the game featured in at least one of the “Championships” organized by NOST. *Nost-algia* 330 and 338 printed two game scores, the first being repeated in *Eterosacco* 56, and David Pritchard’s files contain a further three, but they were largely exploratory and only the second *Nost-algia* game strikes me as being

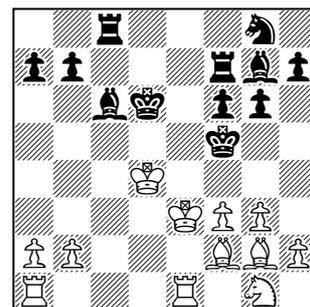
of sufficient interest and quality to justify reproduction here. This was from the First Knightmate Open, played at a time limit of “30/30”, and was won by David Moeser. Notes in quotation marks are by him, as is “?!” to White’s move 28.

1	d2-d4	d7-d5
2	c2-c3	g7-g6
3	Kb1-c2	Bf8-g7
4	Kc2-d3	f7-f6
5	g2-g3	Kg8-f7
6	Bf1-g2	c7-c6
7	f2-f3	Kb8-c7
8	Kg1-f2	Kc7-d6
9	e2-e4	e7-e5
10	e4xd5	c6xd5
11	Bc1-e3	0-0
12	0-0	Kf7-e6



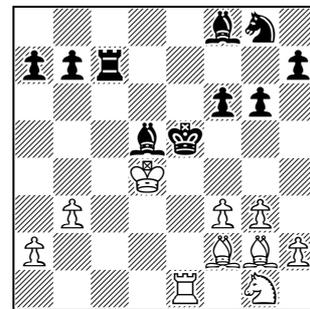
Both players have castled their knights into relative safety (a precaution omitted in some of the other games, usually with unhappy consequences). The fianchetto appears to be standard practice, since if the g-pawn is left at home the risk of a check on h2/h7 by queen or bishop is very strong (the castled knight does not defend this square, and the usual defensive knight on f3/f6 is not available). The advance of the f-pawns, opening diagonals through to the castled knights, is more surprising, but if the f-pawn is left at home, White for example playing g3, Kg2, Kf3, Bg2, and 0-0, the fianchettoed bishop becomes a target because the castled knight does not defend it.

13	Kf2-e2	Bc8-d7
14	Be3-f2	Bd7-c6
15	Ke2-e3	Ke6-f5
16	Qd1-c2	Qd8-e7
17	Rf1-e1	Qe7-f7
18	c3-c4	e5xd4
19	Kd3xd4	d5xc4
20	Qc2xc4	Ra8-c8
21	Qc4xc7	Rf8xf7



22	Ra1-c1	Rf7-c7
23	Kd4-c5	Kd6xc5
24	Rc1xc5	Bg7-f8
25	Rc5-c2	Bc6-d5
26	Rc2xc7	Rc8xc7
27	b2-b3	Kf5-e5
28	Ke3-d4?!	

“May be too defensive.”



David now gives 28..Rc2 29 Re2 (29 Kxd5 Rxf2 30 Re2 Rxe2 31 Nxe2 Kxd5 and Black is a piece ahead) Rc1+ 30 Nh3 Be6+ 31 g4. The consequences of this are not clear to me, but Black’s actual choice appears to ship a pawn without compensation.

28	...	Ke5xd4
29	Bf2xd4	Bd5-f7

“Prevents White from winning a piece with Re8 and Bc5.”

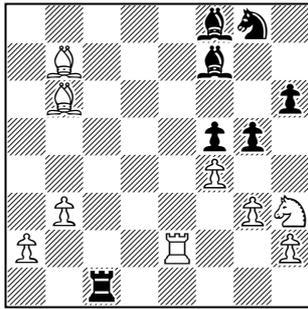
30	Bd4xa7	Rc7-c2
31	Re1-e2	Rc2-c6

Black can temporarily force the White knight into the open by 31...Rc1+, but it doesn’t appear to lead anywhere.

32	Ba7-e3	f6-f5
33	f3-f4	Rc6-c7
34	Be3-b6	Rc7-c1+

34...Rd7 would have held on to the b-pawn, but being already one pawn behind Black presumably decided that attacking was the better option. It is however very much a forlorn hope. It is curious how White’s bishops seem much more powerful than Black’s.

35	Ng1-h3	h7-h6
36	Bg2xb7	g6-g5



37 Bb7-g2

This saves White from worrying about ...Rf1 either now or later. In contrast,

37 ... Bf7-h5

and Black's next are surely wrong. The light bishop is needed in defence.

38 Re2-d2 Bh5-g4?

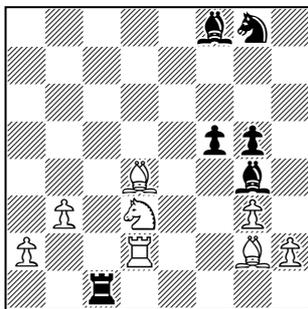
39 Nh3-f2 Ng8-f6

This seems rash and Black will retract it two moves later, but his attack has petered out, and White threatened Bd5+ with various unpleasantnesses to follow.

40 f4xg5+ h6xg5

41 Bb6-d4+ Nf6-g8

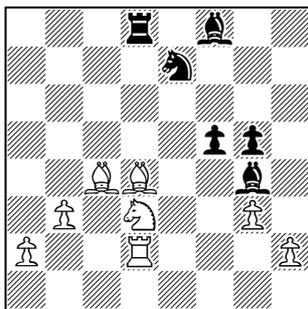
42 Nf2-d3



42 ... Rc1-c8

43 Bg2-d5+ Ng8-e7

44 Bd5-c4 Rc8-d8?



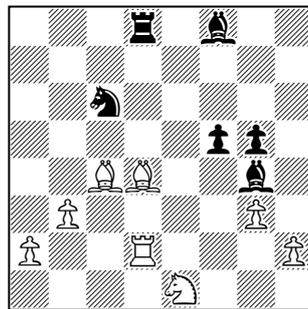
Temporarily pinning the bishop, but after

45 Nd3-e1

the bishop is free again and it is the Black rook which is vulnerable. The

immediate threat is 46 Bf6+ winning it, so Black tried the counter-attack

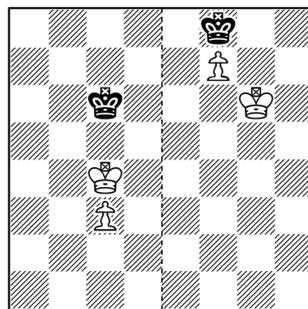
45 ... Ne7-c6.



White now played 46 Bc3 to save his attacked bishop, but both sides were in time trouble (Black's flag was to fall at move 57, White having 1½ minutes left), and I think 46 Bb5+ would have won at least the rook (46...Nb8 47 Ba7 mate, or 46...Na5 47 Bb6+ Nb7 48 Ba6 mate, or 46...Nb4 47 Bc3 mate, or 46...Ne7 47 Bf6+ Ng6 48 Rxd8 and if 48...Bb4+ then 49 Nd3).

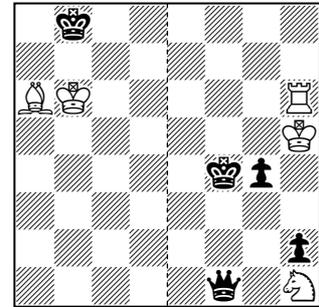
I am going to leave the game here. It is by no means perfect, but it is instructive and I think it fairly illustrates the nature of the variant.

Another variant which has been tried in play is **Sting**, where the king is given the added power of a grasshopper (slides along Q-lines until it meets an obstacle, hurdles this obstacle, and lands on the square immediately beyond). The normal endgame wins with K + Q v K and K + R v K are unaffected, but some results with K + P v K are changed.



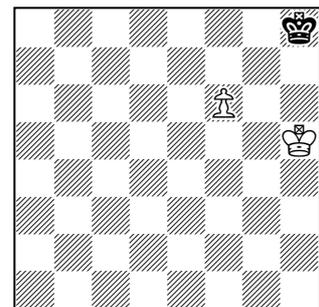
Both these are reciprocal zugzwang in ordinary chess. In Sting, the position on the left remains reciprocal zugzwang, but Black draws on the right even with the move (after 1...Ke7, his king prevents 2 Kg7).

There was a complete if somewhat experimental game in VC 33, and there were some fine problems and endgame studies in VC 31-32. Here are two endgame studies, one simple, the other perhaps less so.



In each case, the kings move as K+G, and White is to play and win. The position on the left is a study version of a problem by Ronald Turnbull from VC 31, that on the right a study by Ronald also from VC 31. The start on the right is obvious, 1 Rf6+ Ke3 2 Rxf1, but Black can fork king and rook by 2...Ke2+ and now things get interesting. Answers on page 139.

Sting, although apparently conceived for use in problems, has proved playable as a game. I am not so sure about **Transmuting Kings**, not in the *Encyclopedia* and so far seen only in problems, where a king in check loses its normal power and temporarily takes the power of the man checking it (so, after 1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4, the "Blackburne's Shilling Game" trap 3...Nd4 4 Nxe5 Qg5 fails because 5 Bxf7 is mate). However, the variant has generated some interesting problems, and the position below may amuse :



White is to play and win both in ordinary chess and with Transmuting Kings. Answer again on page 139.