



## Chess Botany - The "Shrub"

In his book, *Think like a Grandmaster*, grandmaster Alexander Kotov introduced the concept of a "tree of variations," or the collection of variations that need to be analyzed. In [part one](#) of this series we examined the "bare trunk." Here we will look at the "shrub."

That's what Kotov called the situation in which one must calculate, not a single long variation, but a number of comparatively short ones. Here, perhaps, the main problem is to identify all the variations worth examining. All the calculations we perform could prove fruitless, all our time wasted, if we neglect to study a strong candidate move at the very outset!

**Smyslov – Gufeld**  
USSR Spartakiad, Moscow 1967

1 c4 Nf6 2 Nf3 g6 3 b4 Bg7 4 Bb2 0-0 5 e3 b6 6 d4 c5! 7 dc bc 8 b5 a6 9 a4 Ne4!?

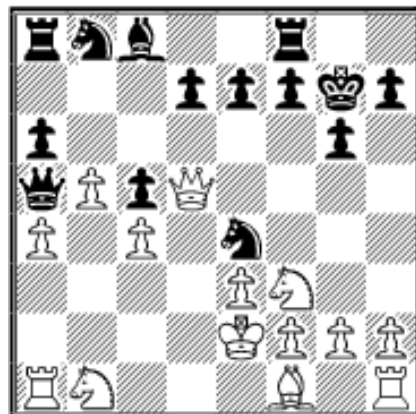
9...Bb7 = was simpler.

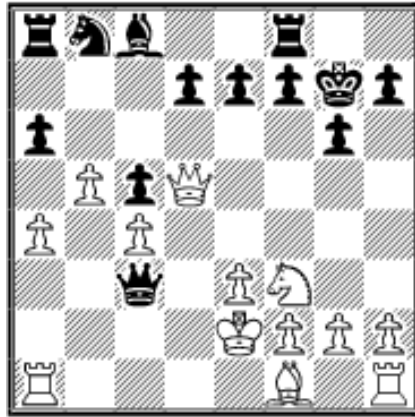
10 Bxg7 Kxg7 11 Qd5!?

With this and his next move, Vasily Smyslov accepts his opponent's challenge to enter irrational tactical complications. On the other hand, after quiet development by 11 Bd3 Qa5 + 12 Nbd2 Nxd2 13 Qxd2 ab! 14 cb d5, with Nb8-d7-b6 to follow, White could not expect an advantage out of the opening, according to Eduard Gufeld.

11...Qa5+ 12 Ke2?!

This was also necessary: after 12 Nbd2 Nxd2 13 Nxd2 ab!, Black is already better. Still, in my opinion, 13 Qxd2 (or 12 Nfd2 Nxd2 13 Qxd2) would have been safer.





1...?

14 Qxa8? Qxa1 15 Qxb8 would be a mistake, which could be strongly met not only by 15...d6! (Black can expect at least a perpetual here – Gufeld), but also by 15...Qb2+ 16 Nd2 d5!, intending 17...Bg4+ or 17...dc (Dvoretsky).

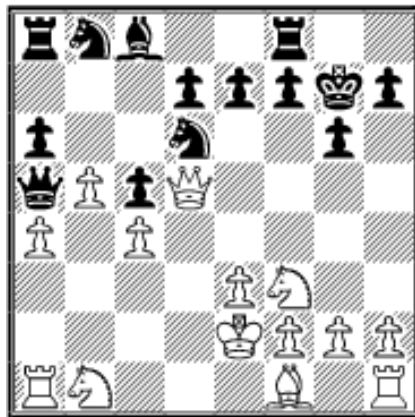
Smyslov had prepared **14 Rd1! Ra7 15 Qxc5**, with an overwhelming advantage (once the rook retreats, White can trade queens by Qd4+).

In the game, Gufeld executed a pretty idea: **12...Bb7 14 Qxb7 Nc6** (meeting 14 bc by 14... Rab8). As will shortly become clear, the combination leads to an approximately even position.

The grandmaster examined no other possibilities for Black. If in fact there were none, we could stop our calculations here. But, remembering the candidate-move rules, we shall not jump to conclusions.

The amusing **12...Qc3?** pops into our head, but does not inspire confidence. Even the endgame, with 12 Nxc3 Nxc3+ 14 Kd2 Nxd5 15 cd favors White; and 13 Qxa8 instead leaves Black badly off wherever you look: 13...Qxa1 14 Qxe4+–; 13...Qb2+ 14 Nfd2+–; 13...Qxc4+ 14 Kd1! Nxf2+ 15 Ke1 Qc2 16 Na3+–.

However, there is one more combinative resource, this one much stronger: **12...Nd6!**



1.?

Black saves his knight, while preparing either 13... Bb7 or 14...ab. On 13 Qxa8?! Bb7 14 Qa7 Qc7! (threatening 15...Nc8) 15 b6 Qc8, White's queen falls into the trap. The only defense against 16... Nc6 would be 16 Ne5, but then Black gains the upper hand after either 16...Nc6 17 Nxc6 Qxc6, followed by 18...Ra8, or 16...f6 17 Qxb8! Qxb8 18 Nxd7 Qd8 19 Nxf8 Kxf8 (or 19...Qxb6 20 Ne6 + Kf7).

Nor are White's problems solved by 13 Nfd2 ab 14 Nb3 (14 cb Nxb5) 14...Qb4–/+.

There remains only **13 Qxc5**, which is answered by **13...ab 14 cb Nxb5**. Black clearly holds the initiative, while White must fight for equality.

Here at last, it seems, we may end our calculations. The combination I have suggested appears stronger, and is in any case simpler than the one played by Gufeld in the game. In order to come to the best conclusion, it was necessary to examine the whole "shrub," not just some of its branches

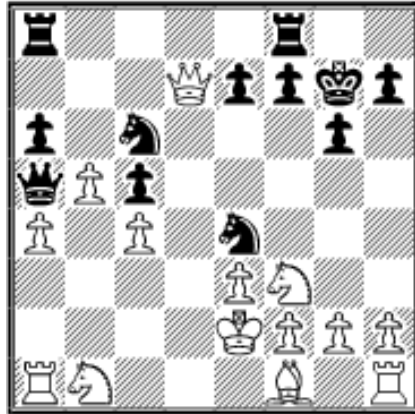
I am going to continue examining this game, noting first of all that it's quite interesting in and of itself; and also because Gufeld's further annotations also require correcting and fleshing out.

**12...Bc8-b7!? 13 Qd5xb7 Nb8-c6! 14 Nf3-d2!?**

For the moment, Smyslov is on the right track. Of course, he could also have taken the second piece, intending to transpose to the game after 14 bc Rab8 15 Nfd2!. But excessive greed – 15 Qxd7 – would cost White dearly: 15...Rfd8!, and despite his enormous material advantage, White's position is indefensible.

I have nonetheless replaced the exclamation mark with which Gufeld rewarded Smyslov's move with a humbler evaluation – and not just because of the possible transposition, either.

Gufeld was correct to note that, after 14 bc Rab8, the capture on d7 loses. But what would happen if White took the pawn on the previous move? As it happens, **14 Qxd7!?** is not a bad alternative.



1...?

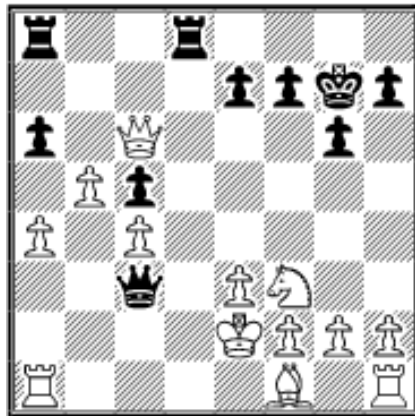
Black has no time to save his knight: the simplest refutation of 14...Nb4? would be 15 Qb7!?, and after the knight retreats, then 16 Qxe7.

Nor does 14...Qb4? work, in view of 15 Qd3! Qb2 + 16 Nfd2 Nxd2, and then: "as you like it" – either 17 Nxd2!? Qxa1 18 bc Qxa4 19 c7±, or 17 Qa3!? Qxa3 18 Nxa3 Nb3 19 Rb1±, or 17 Qc3+!? Qxc3 18 Nxc3 Nb3 19 Rb1 Nca5 20 g4!±.

And 14...Nc3+?! 15 Nxc3 Qxc3 leaves White on

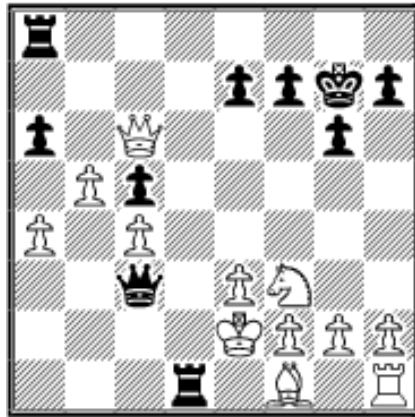
top after 16 Qd1!.

All that's left to try is: **14...Rfd8! 15 Qxc6 Nc3+ 16 Nxc3 Qxc3**



The most natural continuation would be **17 Rd1**. After **17...Qxc4+ 18 Ke1 Rxd1+ 19 Kxd1 Qxa4** + (19...Rd8+?! is weaker: 20 Nd4! Qxa4+ 21 Ke2 cd 22 Kf3±), Black has perpetual check, but no more than that.

White would have had an interesting task to solve after 17...Rxd1?! (instead of 17...Qxc4+).



1.?

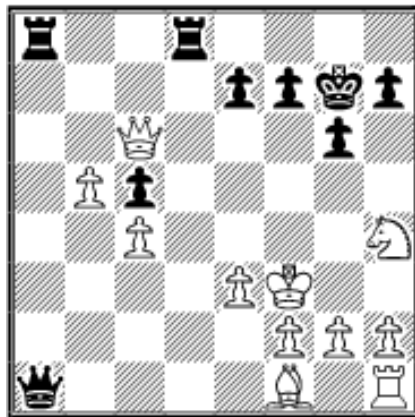
18 Kxd1 seems forced (taking the other rook is impossible, because of mate); if Black responds 18...Rd8+, 19 Qd5 Rxd5+ 20 cd leads to an unclear position, while 19 Nd4 leads to a draw: 19...cd 20 Ke2 Qc2+ (20...d3+ 21 Kf3) 21 Kf3 Qf5+ 22 Kg3 Qg5+, with perpetual check.

But in fact, White is perfectly justified in playing for the win by the far from obvious quiet move 18 Qe4!! This not only stops mate, but also prepares a queen exchange on e5. The continuation might be 18...ab 19 Qe5+! Qxe5 20 Nxe5 Rb1 (or 20...Rc1) 21 ab, when Black has only a rook for bishop, knight and pawn. True, he could win the pinned bishop at f1; but in that time, the knight could stir up serious trouble for him on the queenside.

Let's go back to the diagram before last (after **16 Nxc3 Qxc3**). Seeing that White has a huge material advantage, he could also try a different defensive method, namely: by not wasting time shuffling the rook, he could move the knight instead, thereby freeing the f3-square for his king.

For instance, after 17 Ng5, 17...Qxa1 18 Kf3 would be dubious. However, Black gives perpetual check by continuing 18...Qd3(c2)+ 19 Kf3 Qf5+.

White could avoid this perpetual by controlling the f5-square by 17 Nh4. This is in fact the first recommendation of our computer. But deeper analysis shows that here too, White cannot hope for an advantage – in fact, he must display accurate play in order to stay out of difficulty. Black responds 17...Qxa1 (17...ab is inferior: 18 Ra2! Qxc4+ 19 Kf3 Qxa2 20 Bxb5±) 18 Kf3 ab 19 ab.



With 19...Rd1 or 19...Qe5 20 Qe4 Qf6+ 21 Kg3 Ra1, Black wins the pinned bishop. But perhaps even stronger would be the useful (if somewhat abstract) move 19...h5!?, after which the c5-pawn is taboo, in view of 20...Qf6+ 21 Kg3 Rac8-+, while 20 Kg3 is met by 20...Qe5+

Let's return to the game.

**14...Ra8-a7 15 b5xc6!**

15 Qxa7?! is weaker: 15...Nxa7 16 Nxe4 ab 17 cb Nxb5-/+ (Gufeld).

**15...Ra7xb7 16 c6xb7**



The material balance favors White (rook, bishop and knight for the queen); however, considering the unfortunate placement of White's pieces, Black has full counterplay. Gufeld rejected the variation 16...Nd6 17 g3 Nxb7 18 Bg2 Nd6 19 Rc1 Rb8, leading to equality, in favor of a sharper

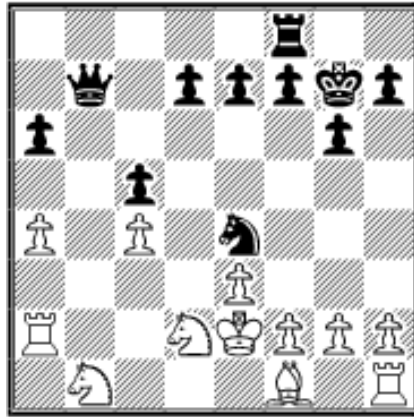


continuation.

**16...Qa5-b4!?**

Here, White should have contented himself with the careful **17 Ra2!**, to which there are several good replies, the most natural of which would be

**17...Qxb7.**



1.?

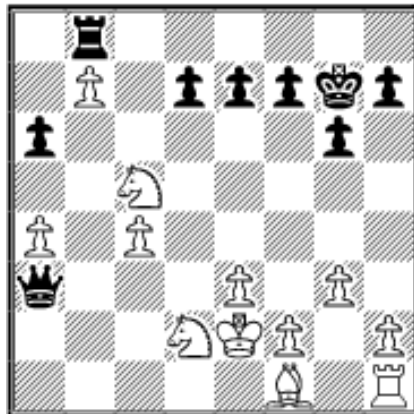
In Gufeld's opinion, **18 Nxe4 Qxb1** (18...Qxe4 19 Nd2! unclear) 19 Nc3 Qc1 20 Kd3! would allow White to consolidate his position with tempo, and ward off the attack. In fact, after **20...d5!** 21 cd (21 Nxd5 Qb1+ 22 Rc2 e6--+) 21...c4+ 22 Kd4 e5 + 23 de Rd8+, Black's attack slams home. So White would be obliged to choose **18 f3! Nd6 19 Kf2**, maintaining equality.

**17 Nd2xe4?**

Smyslov overestimates his own position, sacrificing the exchange to hold on to the b7-pawn. Now the advantage goes over to Black.

**17...Qb4-b2+ 18 Nb1-d2 Qb2xa1 19 Ne4xc5 Rf8-b8 20 g2-g3 Qa1-a3!**

Of course not **20...d6?**, when White could play either **21 Nd7 Rxb7 22 Bg2 Qb2 23 Rb1+-** (Gufeld) or **21 Bg2 Qa2 22 Nxa6+-**.



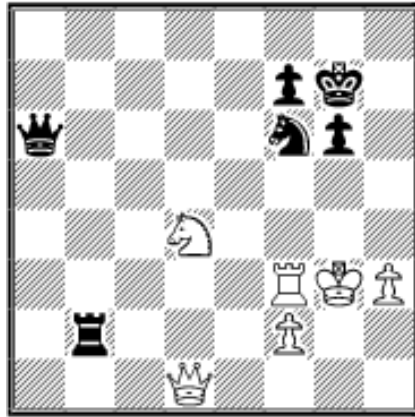
**21 Nc5xd7?**

**21 Nd3 Rxb7 22 Bg2-/+** would last longer. The knight on d7, cut off from White's other pieces, is in grave danger. I present the finish of the game with only light notes (based on Gufeld's commentary).

**21...Rxb7 22 Bh3 Qd6 23 c5 Qd5 24 f3 Rb2** (on 24...Rxd7? 25 Bxd7 Qxd7 26 Rc1, White keeps good drawing chances) **25 Rd1 e6 26 c6** (26 Nb6 Qxc5) **26...Qc4+ 27 Ke1 Qd3! 28 Bf1 Qxe3+ 29 Be2 a5!** (Black prevents the knight's rescue by a4-

a5 and Nb6) **30 f4 f6! 31 c7 Rc2 32 Kf1 Rxc7 33 Nc4?! Rxc4 34 Bxc4 Qf3+ 35 Ke1 Qc3+ 0-1**

In practice, quite often we find positions with an obvious advantage, which can be maintained in any of several variations; but in all of them, the realization of the advantage is very difficult, sometimes altogether impossible. At the same time, the plethora of possibilities conceals just one that would allow us to convert our advantage forcibly into a point in the tournament crosstable. The problem lies in being able to sense that a solution does exist, to concentrate our attention on finding it, and to hack our way through the "shrubbery" that has overgrown the position.



1...?

How does Black realize his indisputable positional advantage?

Lev Psakhis gave an unnecessary check: **59...Qd6+?!**, throwing away the lion's share of his advantage.

**60 Kg2 Ne4** (60...Qd5 would have met the same reply) **61 Qd3 Qe5 62 Qe3**

The line **62 Nc6 Qg5+ 63 Kh2 Rxf2+ 64 Rxf2 Nxf2 65 Qd4+ Qf6-/+** results in a knight endgame with Black having an extra pawn. Defending such an endgame is of course unpleasant, but White could probably have drawn it.

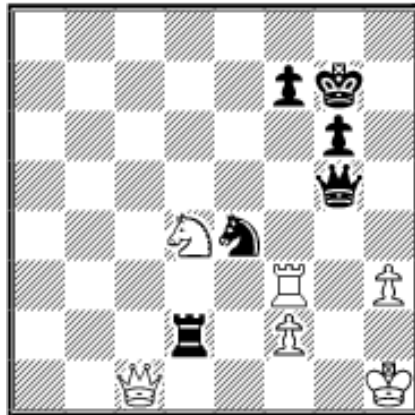
**62...f5**

**62...Qd5!?** is more dangerous, threatening **63...Ng5**, White would respond **63 h4!**.

**63 Ne2!** (now simplification is unavoidable) **63...Kh7 64 Qd4 ½-½**

If Black wanted to get his queen into the attack quicker, it would have made sense to try **59...Qa5?!.** The position after **60 Nb3 Ne4+ 61 Kg2 Qg5+ 62 Kf1 Qe5** looks dangerous for White (**63 Kg2? Rxf2+! 64 Rxf2 Qg3+; 63 Kg1? Nc3; 63 Qd4? Qxd4 64 Nxd4 Nd2+**). However, I see no direct refutation of the move **63 h4!**.

But **60 Kg2** is safer: **60...Qg5+ 61 Kh1 Rd2 62 Qc1** (but not **62 Qa1? Qd5+**) **62...Ne4:**

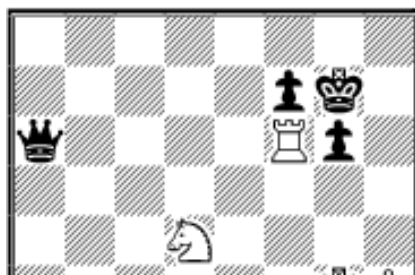


1.?

White's position would be critical, were there not a saving combination: **63 Rxf7+! Kxf7 64 Qc4+**, and the king cannot escape perpetual check, since several squares are unreachable for him, in view of the knight fork at e6. Or **63...Kh6 64 Nf3! Nxf2 + 65 Kh2 Ng4+ 66 Kg3 Rg2+ 67 Kxg2 Qxc1 68 hg**, with a drawn ending.

Generally, the first idea that pops into one's head in the starting position is to play for the win of a piece by **Rd2** (either immediately, or after a preparatory **59...Ne4+**). And these kinds of forcing tries should, in principle, be where we begin our calculations. For if one of them leads to the goal, then analyzing the other variations becomes unnecessary.

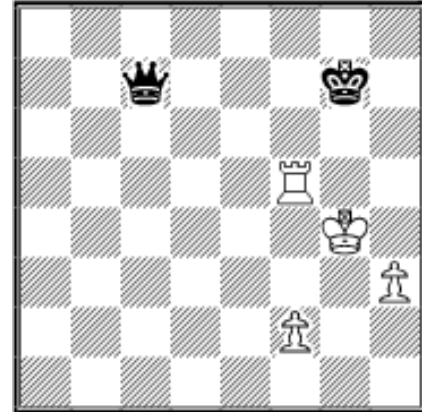
After **59...Rd2?!,** White has just one reply: **60 Rxf6!**



And here, Black plays the in-between check **60...Rd3+!**, ensuring the win of material. But let's not jump to conclusions: the assessment of the position after **61 Qf3! Rxf3+ 62 Rxf3** is unclear. **62...Qd6+** is not dangerous after **63 Rf4**, followed by **64 h4** or **64 Kf3** (Black can't play **63...g5??**)



because of 64 Nf5+). In the line **62...Qa1 63 Nc2 Qg1+** (63...Qe5+ 64 Kg2 Qe4 65 Ne3 is probably drawn) **64 Kf4 Qc1+ 65 Ne3 Qc7+ 66 Kg4 f5+**, White must sacrifice his knight: **67 Nxf5+! gf 68 Rxf5**



The computer database confirms that this endgame is a draw. The assessment isn't self-evident: in a practical game,

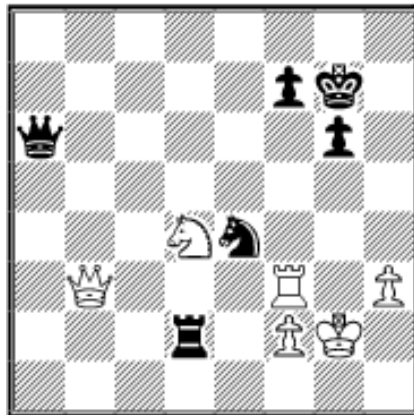
reaching this position through calculation, we wouldn't know how to assess it ourselves. But in any event, we would understand that it could be drawn; so before heading in that direction, it would make sense to look for alternatives.

Now it's time to look at the knight check.

**59...Nf6-e4+! 60 Kg3-g2 Rb2-d2**

60...Qc4 61 Rf4! is not dangerous. And 60...Qb7!? 61 Nb3 (61 Nc6!?) 61...f6 62 Qd4 Rxf2+ 63 Rxf2 Nxf2+ 64 Kxf2 Qxb3 leads to an endgame where, despite his pawn minus, White retains good drawing chances.

**61 Qd1-b3**



It might seem that, thanks to his attack on f7, White gets away scot-free. In fact, his troubles are not over: Black sets up counter-pressure against f2.

**61...Qa6-a7! 64 Nd4-c2**

The line 62 Qc4 Rxd4 63 Rxf7+ Qxf7 64 Qxd4+ Nf6 leaves White a piece down.

**62...Rd2xf2+ 63 Kg2-h1 Rf2-e2-+**

And Black has not only an extra pawn, but a decisive attack.

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