

Cyrus Lakdawala

The Petroff

move by move

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About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

Also by the Author:

Play the London System

A Ferocious Opening Repertoire

The Slav: Move by Move

1...d6: Move by Move

The Caro-Kann: Move by Move

The Four Knights: Move by Move

Capablanca: Move by Move

The Modern Defence: Move by Move

Kramnik: Move by Move

The Colle: Move by Move

The Scandinavian: Move by Move

Botvinnik: Move by Move

The Nimzo-Larsen Attack: Move by Move

Korchnoi: Move by Move

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The Trompowsky Attack: Move by Move

Carlsen: Move by Move

The Classical French: Move by Move

Larsen: Move by Move

1...b6: Move by Move

Bird's Opening: Move by Move

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Series Foreword

Move by Move is a series of opening books which uses a question-and-answer format. One of our main aims of the series is to replicate – as much as possible – lessons between chess teachers and students.

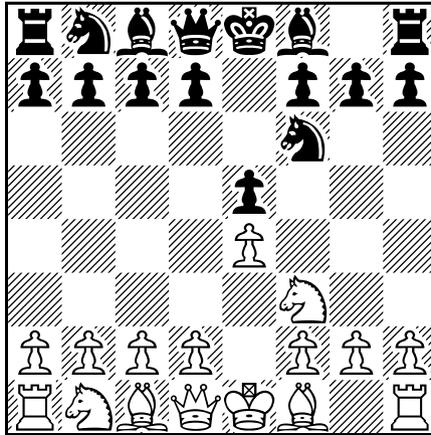
All the way through, readers will be challenged to answer searching questions and to complete exercises, to test their skills in chess openings and indeed in other key aspects of the game. It's our firm belief that practising your skills like this is an excellent way to study chess openings, and to study chess in general.

Many thanks go to all those who have been kind enough to offer inspiration, advice and assistance in the creation of *Move by Move*. We're really excited by this series and hope that readers will share our enthusiasm.

John Emms
Everyman Chess

Introduction

“Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety.” – William Shakespeare



Soldiers of ancient Rome, when on the defensive against the Barbarian hoard, huddled into a tortoise-like defensive formation with shields thrust outward to protect them from the incoming arrows and spears. They called it the 'shield wall'. Petroff's Defence borrows this strategy. "I hate the Petroff. It seems to me that Black only wants a draw, and he usually has memorized long variations that bring him close to his goal. As (GM) Gufeld would say, 'This is not chess!'" wrote IM Jack Peters to me in an email. The name of our opening, to some, signifies stupefying boredom, but only to those who don't relate to it. I remember throwing an anti-Petroff's/Berlin Lopez tirade to some friends at the chess club about 15 years ago (your moody writer throws many such rants on various subjects quite often, to all who are willing to listen) about how "the Petroff's and Berlin Lopez are conspiring to ruin 1 e4?!, until the move is worked out to a forced draw". I raved on, adding that Black's overly respectful interpretations were akin to playing a piano concerto with just one finger, on a single key. Our opening is one of cold-hearted – almost reptilian – pragmatism, where we begin the game with deep deference to White's first move, with the humble objective to merely not lose, rather than win. You may ask: why play in such fashion?

A Petroff-ignorant member of the San Diego Chess Club proclaimed the opening boring and lacking in imagination. I innocently queried him, "You mean like a person who names his dog, "Dog?" He proceeded to claim that defence of the many '+=' positions can be as

joyless as attending a funeral to which I countered with “What if you attend the funeral of an enemy?” But this point of view lacks perspective. In the Petroff’s, we use our imagination, not so much to wrest the initiative, but more to frustrate and neutralize White’s first move advantage and create an unbreachable defensive firewall. The overall goal is not to energize our own positions, but instead, to suppress and deflate the opponent’s vitality – and most of all, his or her hopes of a full point. If every opening has its own distinctive personality, then the Petroff’s is one of introverted humility. A chess opening is defined, not by its thrill-level, but what we want from it. Activity? Solidity? Attacking or counterattacking potential? In the case of the Petroff’s, what we want most of all is to avoid loss. We are willing to suffer 25 or so moves of an opponent’s mild ‘+=' to achieve it. We seek to create a self-sufficient barrier to White’s ambitions. Also, don’t be fooled: Our drably inconspicuous opening can – and often does – quickly erupt into chaos at a moment’s notice. We may have the preference for a quiet draw, but may well receive adventure, whether we like it or not.

When life deals us an unsavoury hand (i.e. the black pieces!) we have two choices:

1. Rebel against reality by playing an ultra-sharp line.
2. Accept the reality and dig in solidly to attain equality in time.

Petroff’s Defence – like the Berlin Ruy Lopez (which appears to be a bit of an infringement of the Petroff-copyright, as the most difficult anti-e4 opening for White to crack), is an example of the latter choice, while openings like Sicilian Najdorf and Dragon, ignore White’s first move advantage and go for the full point with increased chances of a loss. Those who live in the hostile environments, like the Sicilian Dragon or Najdorf, the King’s Indian and King’s Gambit et al., are inured to violence and expect it in virtually every game they play. Petroff’s is a different place, where our opponent chases while we dance, just out of reach. When we win, it is almost always because our opponent overpress.

Petroff’s: The Theoretical Nightmare

Some openings, like the London System and Colle (considered by many as the least adversarial openings in chessdom) are built for utility and thus relatively easy to learn, the way a TV dinner is designed for the divorced man who still hasn’t learned to cook. The theory-intensive Petroff’s Defence is the absolute opposite. The opening is not conducive to those who study by osmosis and blindly absorb theory by going over a large number of database games. So unforgiving is Black’s side that even a seemingly innocently subtle variance in the position can bring immediate pain. Our lines are incredibly involved, one looking similar to the other – yet requiring a different plan. The knowledge and ideas from a chess book do not magically jump off the page and into our minds permanently. We must go through the lines over and over again for this to occur. Through the magic of repetition, our brains begin to construct highly specialized neural pathways, dedicated to remembering even the most specific patterns. It is one thing to memorize our lines, and quite another to distil the knowledge into a coherent middle game plan. However, there is good news as well: one

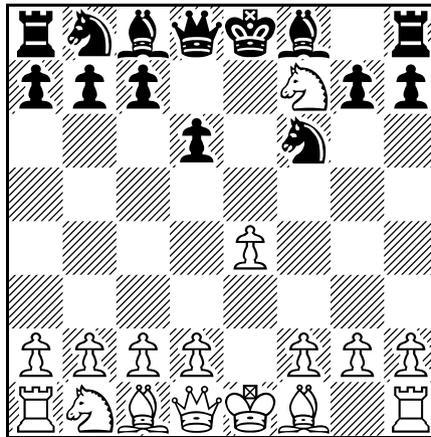
advantage of playing 2...♘f6 over the more traditional 2...♘c6 is that apart from skipping the heavily analysed Ruy Lopez, we don't need to learn any of White's tricky gambits and specialty sidelines, such as the Goring Gambit, the Danish Gambit, the Scotch Game, the Max Lange Attack, et al.

Our Pedigree

Any opening endorsed by a World Champion tends to elevate its brand. In the case of Petroff's, we have towering advocates like Karpov, Kramnik and Anand, as well as numerous super GMs. So I can wholeheartedly assure you that our opening is sound!

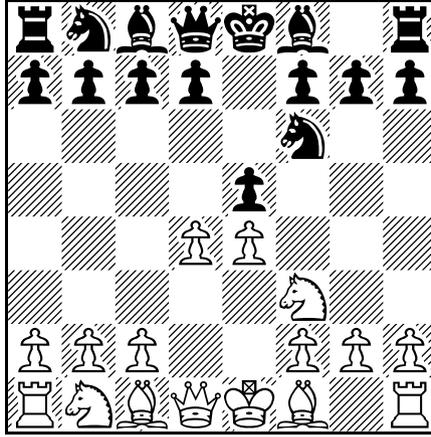
We must acquaint ourselves with the flora and fauna of each opening we study, so here are the critical positions we meet in Petroff's Defence:

Cochrane Gambit



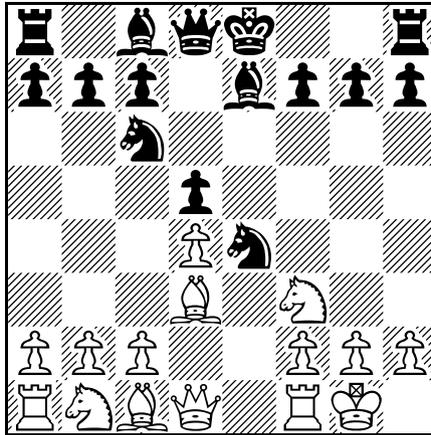
"Truth is beauty," wrote John Keats. If we extend this to chess, then all semi-sound sacrifices and attacks are ugly. I don't know if Keats took time out from his busy poetry schedule to play chess, but if he did, he would most certainly have frowned upon the presumptuousness of the Cochrane Gambit (Keats wrote an unfinished fairy tale- *the Cap and Bells*, mentioning a Princess who "...castled her King with such a vixen look"). White suffers from a selective interpretation, a preconceived belief that he or she has a strong attack, ignoring the possibility that the gambit is borderline unsound if Black knows the theory. White's sacrifice at first glance feels so incomprehensible, that we suspect our opponent of conduct of one playing some game other than chess, where material doesn't matter. White refuses to pay even marginal homage to rationality, while unabashedly embracing chaos. In today's comp-driven chess world, the sacrifice is deemed semi-sound at best.

The Scotch Petroff's



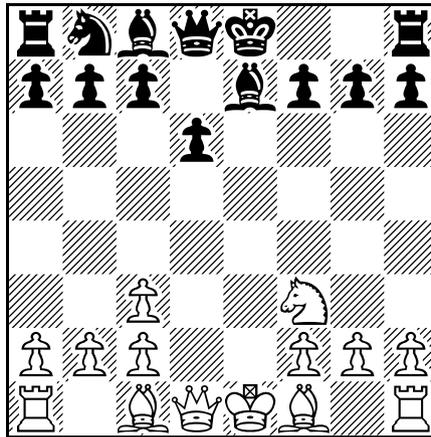
In the Scotch Petroff's, White wants an open game. He or she can have it. But an advantage? Maybe not.

The Old Main Line



Here we arrive at the Old Main Line, perhaps the most theoretically-dense portion of the book, where our lines are indexed, referenced, cross-referenced and cross-cross referenced, until our heads (and our opponents' as well!) spin with data overload. One variation looks much like another, as they blend into an unclassifiable miscellaneity of theoretical confusion.

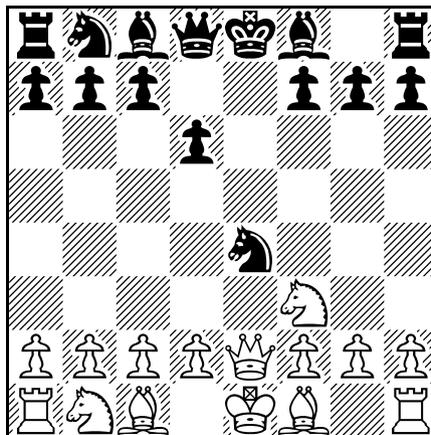
The Shirov Attack



In 2002, GM Alexei Shirov electrified the chess world by defeating GMs Morozevich and Motylev in the Russian versus the World rapid match. He singlehandedly turned a dusty, seemingly harmless line into what is now considered White's main line against Petroff's Defence. The divide comes here. White will either post his or her bishop on the e3- or f4-square. We need to understand the differences and know how to react properly to either plan.

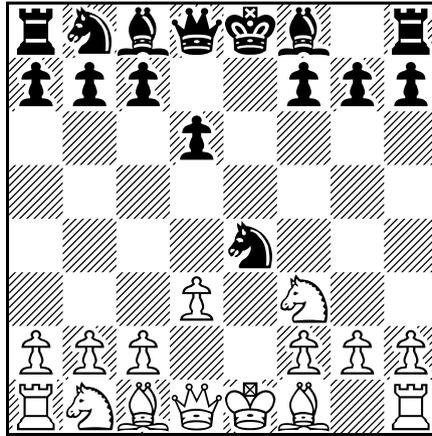
“I Offer a Draw”

One warning to the reader: Petroff's isn't your best choice when you as Black play for the win. If a water colour artist were to paint the mood of the next two diagrams, she would do so with a limited palette of mainly grey tones. The following two diagrams are examples of two very drawish lines White has at his or her disposal:



The Petroff: Move by Move

In this annoying version, we are forced to respond with ...♔e7, after which White forces queens off the board. However, our position isn't quite an exact replica of White's since we are minus a move in the symmetry and must play accurately to equalize.



Sometimes counterfeiters try their luck by playing Petroff's from *White's* side, except a move up. In this position White will play d3-d4 next, insisting upon an Exchange French type of position when we respond with ...d6-d5, in the hopes of reaching an intolerably dull version. If we are happy with a draw, then we have no worries. If we have hopes for a win, the ritual of seemingly eternal sameness can finally end if we play ...c7-c5 at some point and take on an isolani.

Just to show the reader that the Petroff's isn't as wimpy as its reputation suggests, watch how Pillsbury dismantles the great Emanuel Lasker in the following game:

E.Lasker-H.N.Pillsbury St. Petersburg 1895

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘f6

Petroff's Defence is an ideal weapon against an ambitious opponent.

3 ♘xe5 d6

One of the earliest examples of the Petroff's didn't end well for our side, with the incompetent NN playing the Black pieces against the best player of the era, Gioachino Greco: 3...♘xe4? 4 ♔e2 ♔e7 5 ♔xe4 d6 6 d4 f6? (NN should just forget about the pawn, and try to develop with 6...dxe5 7 dxe5 ♘c6) 7 f4 (Morphy would have played the superior 7 ♘c3!) 7...♘d7 8 ♘c3 dxe5 9 ♘d5 ♔d6? (NN adopts a defiant stance, when he should run, squealing like a frightened mouse, so 9...♔d8 was better) 10 dxe5 fxe5 11 fxe5 ♔c6 (11...♘xe5 loses instantly to 12 ♙f4) 12 ♙b5! ♔c5 13 ♙e3 (the bishop likes to decorate the execution

chamber with bright, cheery colours – in absolute antithesis of the unfortunate trapped black queen’s mood) 13...♔xb5 14 ♖xc7+ ♕d8 15 ♖xb5 1-0, G.Greco-NN, Europe 1620. In this book, I hope to improve upon NN’s handling of the Petroff’s!

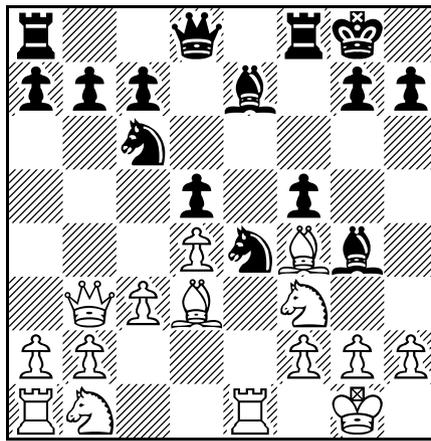
4 ♖f3 ♖xe4 5 d4 d5 6 ♕d3 ♕e7 7 0-0 ♖c6 8 ♗e1 ♕g4! 9 c3 f5

When we don’t fake it and actually play in our style, we reveal our true nature to our opponent. Pillsbury, a natural attacker and the father of the Stonewall Dutch formations from White’s side, would have felt very comfortable with Black’s Stonewall-ish d5- and f5-pawn structure.

10 ♖b3 0-0!

Amazingly, this position is still a main line today, found in Chapter Three.

11 ♕f4!?



Pillsbury’s new-fangled opening confuses Lasker who plays an inferior move. This is the first deviation from current theory. Today, 11 ♖bd2 is normally played.

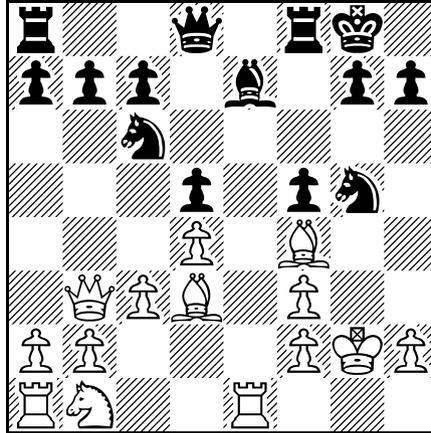
Question: Can White grab the b7-pawn and get away with it?

Answer: No. Please fast forward to Chapter Three to see why not!

11...♕xf3!

Black inflicts serious damage to White’s kingside structure. White’s light-squared bishop doesn’t provide enough compensation.

12 gxf3 ♖g5 13 ♔g2



White's kingside is getting draughty, and the paucity of defenders around his abode does not bode well.

13...♔d7?!

This natural move may not be best since the b7-pawn is now really under attack. Stronger is 13...♘a5! 14 ♖a4 c6:

a) In one ear the voice of reason and conscience whispers, and in the other ear, we hear the voice of greed and irrationality. Then why is it we are so tempted to heed the latter?

15 ♜xe7? ♜xe7 16 ♜xa5 ♘e6 17 ♙d2 ♜h4 (White is grossly underdeveloped with his queen taking vacation on the a5-square while Black threatens to activate his rook into the attack with ...♜f6) 18 ♘a3 ♜f6 19 ♚h1 f4 (White sets up the ...♜h6 threat though even more crushing is 19...♜xf2!) 20 ♜g1 ♜xf2 21 ♜g2 ♜xf3 22 ♙e2 ♜e4 0-1, Richter-Methner, Breslau 1889.

b) 15 ♘d2 b5 16 ♜c2 ♙d6 17 ♙g3! ♜d7 18 h4 ♘e6 is messy and even according to *Houdini*.

14 ♜c2?

In this case, the adverse side effects of the cure may surpass the difficulties of the disease. Lasker, one of the all-time great pawn grabbers, uncharacteristically declines the b7-pawn when he should have taken it.

After 14 ♜xb7! ♘e6 15 ♜xe6 ♜xe6 16 ♙b5 ♘a5 17 ♜xc7 ♘c4 18 ♙xc4 dxc4 19 ♘d2 ♜ac8 20 ♜xa7 ♙d6 21 ♙xd6 ♜xd6 22 ♜e1 ♜g6+ 23 ♚f1 ♜h6 24 ♜e7! ♜ce8 25 ♚e2, Black's threats, like grains of sand in our shoe, are annoying but unable to inflict real damage. I actually prefer White's position, since his king looks safe enough and he has an awful lot of pawns for the exchange. If the c4-pawn falls, then White will have four scary queenside passers.

14...♘e6 15 ♙c1

The bishop awakens to a sense of obligation and duty to his king, and then realizes: "The hell with it! It's every man for himself."

Question: Why did Lasker undevelop like this?

Answer: Clearly the bishop refuses to chip in and do his part for the war effort, but I don't see reasonable options as the bishop does not have a better retreat square. For example:

a) 15 ♖d2 clogs his queenside development.

b) 15 ♖e3? just loses time to 15...f4! and if White gets greedy with 16 ♖xh7+??, 16... ♔h8 17 ♖c1 ♘g5! is curtains, since the h7-bishop hangs and Black also threatens mate, beginning with ...♗h3+.

15...♖d6

Seizing control over the f4-square. It's safe to declare Lasker's opening a spectacular disaster.

16 ♗d2

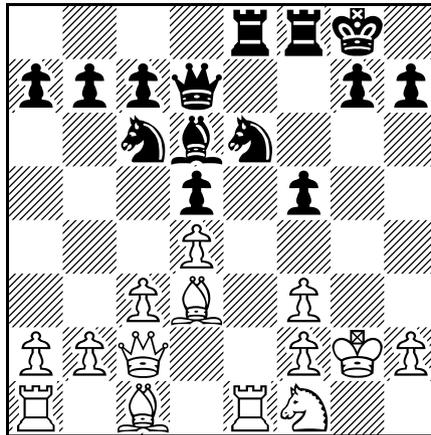
Not 16 ♖xf5?? which fails to 16...♗xf5 when White is unable to recapture, due to the ...♗f4+ discovery.

16...♗ae8

Pillsbury calmly brings in another attacker.

17 ♗f1?

Also, 17 ♗d1 ♗f4+ 18 ♔h1 ♗f6 preparing a hit on the h-file, gives Black a winning attack, but this line still puts up greater resistance than Lasker's choice.



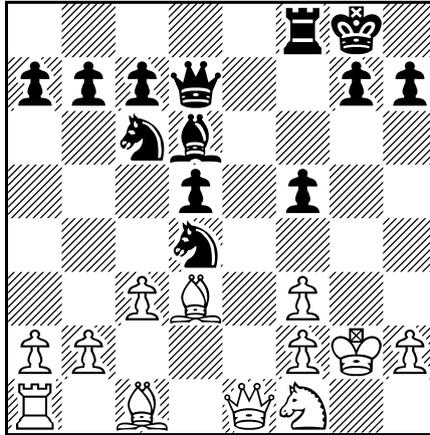
Exercise (combination alert): In miserable positions, we become a person afflicted with cataracts, who can only make out vague forms devoid of all detail or colour. A dejected Lasker's last move was an error in an already wretched position. What did White miss?

Answer: Discovered attack/double attack. Black wins a key pawn with this tactic.

17...♞exd4! 18 ♚d1

The queen nervously attempts to change the subject. Not much choice in the matter since taking the knight drops the e1-rook.

18...♖xe1 19 ♚xe1



Exercise (combination alert): Find the way to sustain Black's attack.

Answer: Annihilation of defensive barrier/piece sacrifice.

19...♞xf3!

White's king won't last long in the forthcoming onslaught.

20 ♚xf3

In such positions, we often wish we could retract our last few key decisions. But now there is no reason to flee, when there is no home to return to.

20...f4!

A previously underground organization is exposed to the light. Now Black's queen is granted entry into the attack via the chronically-weakened kingside light squares. This ensures White's endless cycle of suffering.

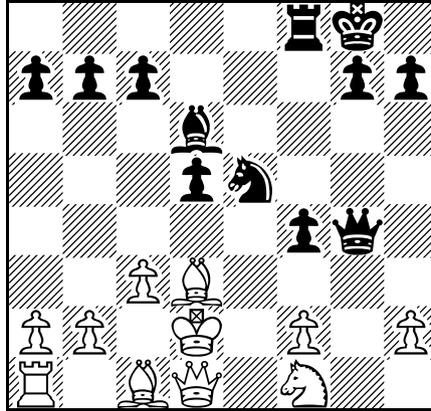
21 ♚d1

Also futile is 21 ♚e2 ♞e5 22 ♙c2 ♚g4+ (irresistible commands leap from the g4-witch's mind, directly into the ensorcelled white king's thoughts, compelling him to leap to her bidding against his will) 23 ♚d2 (even though the king still has a few weary remaining defenders around him, he realizes he is alone) and 23...♞f3+ wins the queen (while for the purists among us, 23...♞c4+! forces mate in eight).

21...♞e5+ 22 ♚e2 ♚g4+

White's king awakens from a terrible nightmare where his sister attacks him with a knife. But unlike a dream, he feels the sting of very real pain from a new scar on his cheek.

23 ♚d2



Exercise (combination alert): This one is easy. Black to play and win a piece.

Answer: Deflection/overloaded defender.

23... ♕xd1+

"I always knew that love would be your undoing," the queen tells White's heartbroken king.

24 ♔xd1

The king's right foot trips over his left.

24... ♞xd3

When you lose something of value and then later regain it, its acquisition is so much sweeter the second time around. White is down two pawns in the ending and remains with a rotten position. Of course Lasker could have resigned here. I'm pretty sure he just sat there, reflecting woefully upon his previous folly, the way a small child just learned that a hot stove burns.

25 ♕e2 ♞e5

Pillsbury refuses to exchange off White's lousy remaining bishop.

26 f3 ♖e8 27 b3 ♞g4+ 28 ♔d2 ♞e3 29 ♙b2 ♞g2 30 h3 ♙c5 31 ♞h2 ♙f2 32 c4 dxc4 33 bxc4 h5 0-1

Summary: Welcome to one of the most solid defences in all of chess: Petroff's Defence.

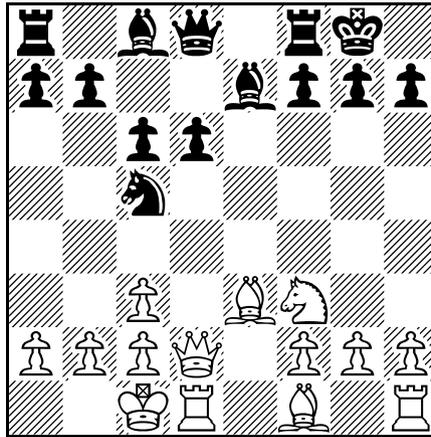
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my editor GM John Emms, and to CM Junior Tay for the final edit. And thanks also to my wise and all-powerful Khaleesi, Nancy, for her proofreading and her constant supply of soothing, piping hot tea.

May our Petroff shield-wall hold eternally against the barbarian invaders who seek to knock it down and enter our realm!

Game 39
C.Deepan-H.Koneru
 Indian Championship, Visakhapatnam 2006

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘f6 3 ♘xe5 d6 4 ♘f3 ♘xe4 5 ♘c3 ♘xc3 6 dxc3 ♙e7 7 ♙f4 0-0 8 ♚d2 ♘d7 9 0-0-0 ♘c5 10 ♙e3 c6



Question: What are some of Black's ideas behind her last move?

Answer: Three potential ideas behind the move:

1. Black opens the possibility of ...♚a5.
2. Black cuts off a future ♚d5, which is normally the route the white queen takes to transfer over to the kingside.
3. Black sets up a potential queenside future pawn storm with ...a7-a6 and ...b7-b5, or ...a7-a5, ...b7-b5-b4, depending on how White arranges his queenside structure.

Question: Why doesn't Black simply develop with 10...♙e6 which adds pressure to the a2-pawn?

Answer: The move is natural but probably inaccurate, since after 11 ♚b1, White will play ♘d4 next, going after Black's valuable bishop.

11 h4

Surprisingly White's natural last move doesn't work well against Black's early ...c6 move order, since Black's queenside play self-generates with alarming speed. "Here this advance is an inaccuracy that passes the initiative into Black's hands," writes GM Maxim Notkin.

Question: Do you believe the move is an error?

Answer: I think the move gives away any hope of an advantage, but I don't believe White stands worse just yet. Alternatives:

a) 11 ♘d4 ♘e4 12 ♖e1 ♜e8 13 f3 ♘f6 14 ♗f2 (White's queen is obviously uncomfortable on the e-file) 14...♘d5 15 ♙d2, M.Sebag-H.Koneru, Ekaterinburg 2006. Black attained equality at a minimum and perhaps even stands better after 15...c5 16 ♘e2 ♙e6 17 ♖b1 b5 since her queenside play looks faster than White's potential kingside assault.

b) 11 ♖b1 ♜e8 12 ♗c1 (threatening the cheapo ♙xc5, at the cost of placing the queen on a safe yet lame square) 12...♗c7 13 ♘d4 a5 14 c4 a4 15 a3 ♙d7 16 ♙e2 ♜ab8 17 g4 ♙f8 18 ♙f3 ♘e4 with dynamic equality, M.Vachier Lagrave-D.Jakovenko, Evry 2008.

c) 11 ♙xc5 (a steep concession as White hands over the bishop pair to rid himself of the pesky knight and to remove Black's control over the d3-square) 11...dxc5 12 ♗f4 ♗a5 13 ♙d3 (intending ♗e4, with a double attack on the h7-pawn and e7-pawn) 13...♙e6 14 a3 ♙f6 with even chances, P.Leko-V.Kramnik, Wijk aan Zee 2008.

d) 11 c4 ♘e4 12 ♖e1 ♜e8 13 ♙d3 ♙f6 14 ♗b4 c5 15 ♗b3 b6 16 c3 ♙b7, Black's knight is an unrepentant pest and Black already looks a shade better, R.Ponomariov-L.Nisipeanu, Bucharest 2013.

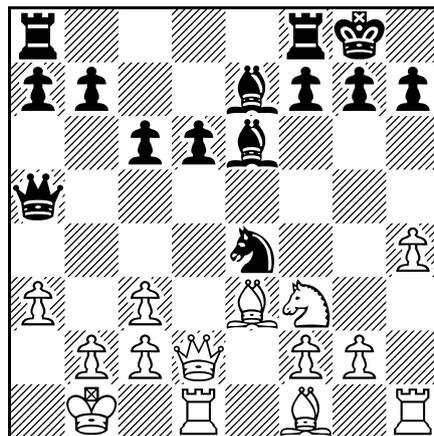
11...♗a5

Black's queen, in conjunction with a coming ...♙e6, produces swift queenside play.

12 ♖b1 ♙e6 13 a3

With hindsight of the game, maybe White should bail out into an even ending with 13 c4 (based on the knowledge, that in the wild, an injured animal will go to great lengths to hide its own frailty) 13...♗xd2 14 ♘xd2, A.Warakomska-M.Goslowski, Warsaw 2014.

13...♘e4



The powerfully centralized knight's energy projects outward, like spokes from a wheel's

hub. Instead, 13...♖a4 is met with 14 ♖g5 ♕f5 15 ♘d3 ♕f6 16 c4! ♜xd2 17 ♞xd2 ♕xd3 18 cxd3 ♞fd8 with an even ending.

14 ♜e1

The queen has no comfortable posts. If 14 ♜d3 ♕f5 15 ♖d4 ♕g6, now White must move his queen again, since 16 h5?? is met with 16...♗xf2 17 ♜d2 ♖xh1 18 hxg6 hxg6 19 ♕f4 ♕h4. Black's knight gets out and he is an exchange up.

14...♕f6

Dangerous sacrifices begin to loom over the c3-pawn.

15 ♕d4

The defenders are awakened, forewarned of the coming ambush attempt by the barking of the f6-dog. Other choices:

a) White can centralise the knight with 15 ♖d4 ♞fe8 16 ♕d3 ♖c5 17 ♖xe6 ♖xd3 18 ♞xd3 ♞xe6 and if any one stands better, it is Black.

b) If White proceeds blissfully unaware with something like 15 h5??, Black meets it decisively with 15...♕xc3! and if 16 bxc3 ♜xa3 is curtains for White, whose king is engulfed by too many threats.

15...♞fe8

Protecting the knight tactically.

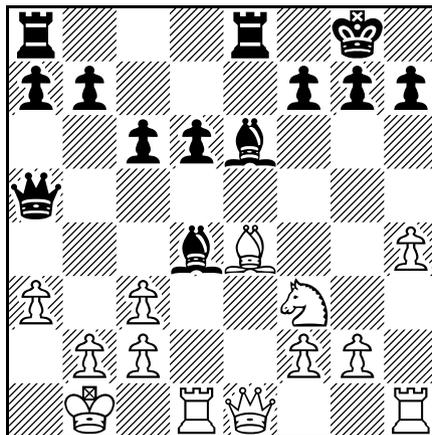
16 ♕d3

Not 16 ♕xf6? ♖xf6 17 ♜d2 (17 c4? ♜c5 White will lose material) 17...♖e4 18 ♜e1 ♕g4 19 ♕e2 d5 which is obviously unpleasant for White, who is under pressure down the e-file, while the c3- and f2-pawns remain sensitive points.

16...♕xd4

After 16...d5, 17 ♖g5! is okay for White and following 17...♕f5 18 ♖xe4 ♕xd4 19 cxd4 ♜xe1 20 ♞hx1 ♕xe4 21 ♕xe4 ♞xe4 22 ♞xe4 dxe4, a balanced ending is reached.

17 ♖xe4?



Exercise (combination alert): A massive fire can merely be the growing continuation of a once tiny spark. The arsonist is held responsible for the totality of the damage – not just for lighting the initial match. White’s last move was a blunder and we sense a newly formed fortuitous geometric conjunction for Black. Find one deadly idea and you inundate White’s position with overwhelming threats. How?

Answer: Double attack.

17...♙c5!

The a3- and f2-pawns warehouse all of Black’s potential, as the bishop issues a pair of not-so-veiled threats. Black intends ...♗b6! next, simultaneously attacking both points.

18 ♖f1

White can go wrong easily:

a) 18 b4?? loses instantly to 18...♗xa3.

b) 18 ♗d2 ♙xa3 is also hopeless for White.

c) 18 ♘g5 h6 19 ♙h7+ ♙h8 20 ♗d2 ♗b6 (with dual threats on the a3- and f2-pawns) 21 ♘xe6 ♙xa3 22 b3 ♗xe6 and Black remains up a clean pawn. This may be White’s best line out of his many unpleasant choices.

18...♙xa3!

The long silence is shattered by a torrent of explosive threats from Black. The piece sacrifice is far stronger than 18...♗b6 19 ♙a1 ♙xf2 20 ♗xd6 when White is still in the game.

19 bxa3 ♗xa3 20 c4

Flashy but futile is 20 ♙xh7+ ♙xh7 21 ♘g5+ ♙g8 22 ♘xe6 ♗xe6 and White is down a pawn with an endangered king.

20...♗b4+

Black had a superior continuation in 20...f5! 21 ♙d3 b5! 22 ♘d2 bxc4 23 ♙xc4 ♗ab8+ 24 ♘b3 (24 ♙b3? ♙xb3 25 cxb3 ♗xb3+ 26 ♘xb3 ♗xb3+ 27 ♙a1 ♗b8 forces mate) 24...d5 25 ♙d3 a5 and there is no good defence to the coming ...a5-a4.

21 ♙c1 ♙xc4 22 ♙d3 b5!

White is unable to trade bishops, since that would open the b-file. Black has a winning attack.

23 ♗e1 a5?!

Black cements her advantage with 23...♗a3+! 24 ♙d1 ♗a1+ 25 ♙d2 ♗a5+ 26 ♙d1 d5.

24 ♗xe8+?

After this move, handing Black control over the e-file, the defence lapses into a comatose version, a still living body, drained of spirit and sentience. Matters are not so clear after 24 ♗e3! when White has chances to survive, since his king may now be able to escape to the kingside.

24...♗xe8

Now Black is winning again, since White’s king is unable to pass the e-file.

25 ♗d1 ♗a3+ 26 ♙b1

The king's humiliation is evident from the fact that his eyes refuse to meet his sister's cold stare. It doesn't help that 26 ♔d2 loses quickly to 26...♙xd3 27 cxd3 ♜b2+ 28 ♜c2 ♚e2+ and there goes the queen.

26...♙a2+

"You are charged with perverting God's law," declares the bishop to the b1-prisoner.

27 ♔a1 ♙d5+ 28 ♔b1 b4

Black's simple plan is to play ...♜a2+, followed by ...a5-a4-a3, when the a-pawn soon threatens to promote.

29 ♞d2 ♜a2+

The queen's up and down moods rule the lives of all those around her.

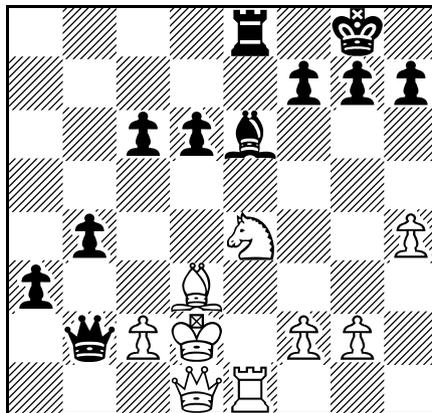
30 ♔c1 a4!

Threat: ...a3 and ...♜b2 mate!

31 ♜e1 ♜a3+ 32 ♔b1 ♙a2+ 33 ♔a1 ♙e6+ 34 ♔b1 ♜a2+ 35 ♔c1 a3

Threatening mate.

36 ♞e4 ♜b2+ 37 ♔d2



Exercise (planning): Black to play and force the win:

Answer: Pawn promotion/discovered attack. The key is to seize control over the c3-square, which in turn wins heavy material.

37...d5! 0-1

After 38 ♞g5 ♜c3+ (the queen asks her younger brother, "And just where do you think you are going, poppet?" as she soon plans to eradicate him) 39 ♔e3 (or 39 ♔c1 a2 and the a-pawn's succession to queen is no longer in dispute) 39...♙f5+, the discovered attack picks off the e1-rook and 40 ♔f3 ♜xe1 ends the game.

Summary: 10...c6 is a dangerous idea. If White isn't careful, our side can generate quick attacks based on ...♜a5, ...♙e6, ...♞e4 and ...♙f6, when all our pieces take aim at White's king.

Game 40
S.Rublevsky-A.Shirov
 Russian League 2006

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘f6 3 ♗xe5 d6 4 ♘f3 ♗xe4 5 ♖c3

So Rublevsky plays the system against its champion. Heritage-wise, my database has Adolf Anderssen playing it against the Johann Loewenthal in a London 1851 match of two 19th century chess giants.

5...♗xc3 6 dxc3 ♘e7 7 ♘f4 0-0 8 ♖d2 ♗d7 9 0-0-0 ♗c5 10 h4

A logical move. White proceeds with his kingside agenda.

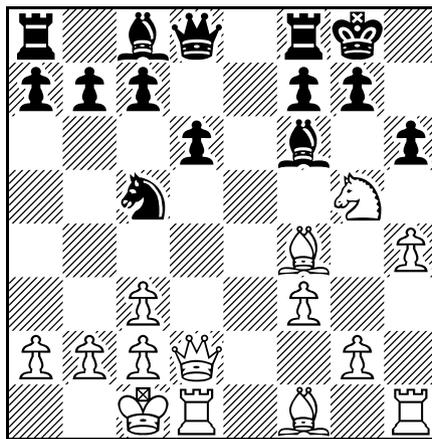
10...♘f6

Black activates his dark-squared bishop, while clearing the e-file. White can also central-ize his pieces with 10...♖e8 11 ♘c4 ♘e6 12 ♘xe6 ♗xe6 13 ♘e3 ♖d7 (13...c6 14 c4 a6 15 ♗g5 b5 16 ♖d3 ♗f8 17 ♖f5?! (17 ♖he1 is even) 17...f6 18 ♗e6 ♖c8 19 ♗d4 bxc4 and I don't believe in White's compensation for the pawn, M.Carlsen-A.Karpov, Moscow (blitz) 2007) 14 ♖d5 ♖c6 15 ♖f5 ♖c4 16 ♗b1 g6 17 ♖h3 h5. Does this position look familiar? Well, it should, since we covered this in V.Anand-V.Kramnik, Wijk aan Zee 2008 (Game 38).

11 ♗g5

We have already seen this idea, over and over in the chapter.

11...h6 12 f3!?



Question: Why did White play his last move?

Answer: Dual purpose:

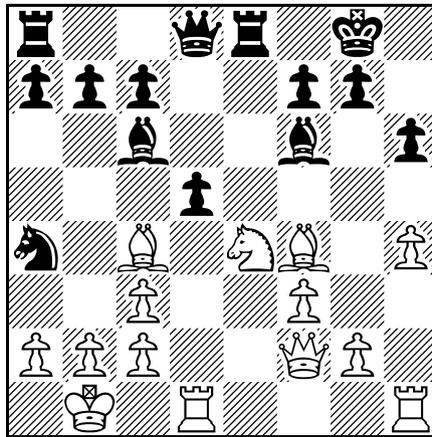
1. White cuts off a future ...♗e4.
2. White prepares a kingside pawn storm with g2-g4 next. Of course, there is a slight

catch: his g5-knight remains hanging! 12 ♖d3 is another incarnation of the piece sacrifice, which really can't be taken:

a) 12...hxg5?? is suicidal after 13 hxg5 ♘xd3+ 14 ♖xd3 ♜e8 15 ♖h7+ ♔f8 16 ♖h4! and Black is crushed, since 16...♗e5 is met with the simple 17 ♗xe5 when Black is unable to recapture.

b) 12...♘xd3+ 13 ♖xd3 g6 14 ♘f3 h5 15 ♜de1 ♗f5 16 ♖d2 ♜e8 17 ♗g5 ♗xg5 18 ♘xg5 ♖f6 19 f3 ♜e5 and Black stood no worse, V.Topalov-E.Bacrot, Wijk aan Zee 2006.

c) Black can also stall with 12...♜e8!? 13 ♔b1 ♗d7 14 f3 ♗c6 15 ♗c4 d5 16 ♖f2 ♘a4!? (or 16...b6) with a right mess.



Chances are even, meaning all three results are equally possible!

12...♜b8!?

When we openly advertise our intention to attack without any attempt at concealment of our plan, it is similar to walking up to a pair of police officers and telling them: "I intend to hold up the bank across the street, at exactly 3:50 p.m. today." The police may not have the power to arrest you just yet, but they will certainly do it at 3:51 p.m., the moment you enter the bank and pull the gun.

Question: What is Black's idea?

Answer: Shirov isn't interested in grabbing a piece (which happens to lose!) and plays for his own attack with ...b7-b5, maybe ...a7-a5 and then ...b5-b4.

Question: Can Black get away with acceptance of the piece?

Answer: It's suicidal once again:

a) 12...hxg5?? 13 hxg5 ♗e7 14 g4! and there is no good response to the coming ♖h2. If 14...♗xg5 15 ♗xg5 f6 16 ♗e3 ♘e6 17 f4, White has a winning attack.

b) Logical and strong is 12...♖e6, eliminating the loitering g5-attacker. After 13 ♖xe6 ♗xe6 14 ♖b1 ♗e8 15 ♗f2 ♗d7, H.Lang-A.Matoussi, Dresden 2008, Black threatens ...♗a4. Now if 16 a3 ♗a4 17 ♗c1 b5 18 g4 ♗ab8 (White is unable to play 19 g5?? since Black has 19...♗xc3! 20 bxc3 b4! with a winning attack) 21 ♖a1 bxa3 22 gxh6 a2 (threatening ...♗b1 mate) 23 ♗b2 ♗xb2!, Black wins.

c) The untested 12...♗e8 also looks fine. If 13 ♗d3 ♗d7! (This time Black can maybe take the piece. 13...hxg5!? 14 hxg5 ♗e5 15 ♗h7+ ♖f8 16 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 17 b4 ♖e6 18 f4 ♖xf4 19 ♗xf4 ♗xg5 20 ♗xg5 ♗xg5 21 ♗e4 ♖e7 22 ♗h8 a5 23 ♗f3 ♗e5 and *Houdini* assesses at even. Black is up a pawn but his queenside pieces are tangled up and unable to develop properly) 14 ♖e4 ♖xd3+ 15 cxd3 ♗e7 16 g4 d5 17 ♖g3 d4 18 c4 b5 19 g5 ♗b7 and it's anybody's game.

13 g4 b5

Here he comes.

14 ♗d3 ♗e8

a) Trading minors with 14...♖xd3+?! helps White by creating weakness in Black's camp. After 15 ♗xd3 g6 16 ♖e4 ♗g7 17 ♗e3 ♗b7 18 ♖b1 a6 19 h5 g5 20 ♗a7 ♗a8 21 ♗d4, I slightly prefer White's chances.

b) Black can go all guns blazing with 14...b4! 15 cxb4 a5! 16 ♖e4! (a wise precaution, eliminating Black's c5-attacker) 16...♖xe4 17 ♗xe4 ♗xb4 18 c3 ♗xe4! 19 fx4 ♗xg4 20 ♗dg1 h5. It feels like Black gets full compensation for the exchange, with one pawn, an entrenched g4-bishop and potential e4- and h4-pawn targets.

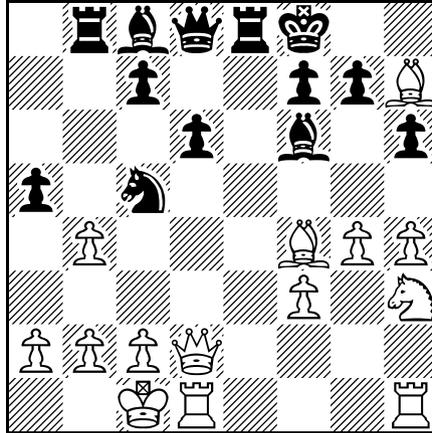
15 ♗h7+ ♖f8 16 ♖h3!?

Threat: g4-g5. Right piece, but perhaps the wrong square! If a single problem is ignored and left to fester, the danger is that the one becomes the many, and it erupts into an infestation. Safer is 16 ♖e4!, since it eliminates Black's powerful knight. Rublevsky clearly underestimated Black's coming attack. In this variation, the attack gets respect and a key attacker is eliminated. After 16...♖xe4! 17 ♗xe4 (now g4-g5 is a serious threat) 17...♗xg4 18 ♗c6 (18 fxg4 ♗xe4 19 g5 ♗e5 20 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 21 gxh6 g6 22 ♗df1 ♗e7 looks okay for Black) 18...♗d7 19 ♗xd6+! cxd6 20 ♗xd6+ ♗e7 21 ♗xd7, White is up a pawn, although the opposite coloured bishops and solid position keep White's edge to a bare minimum.

16...b4!

Shirov is more interested in launching his own attack, rather than playing it safe with a line like 16...♗e5 17 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 18 g5 ♗xh3 19 f4 ♗e7 20 ♗xh3 h5 which is about even.

17 cxb4 a5!



Shirov calculated the consequences of this tricky move with great accuracy.

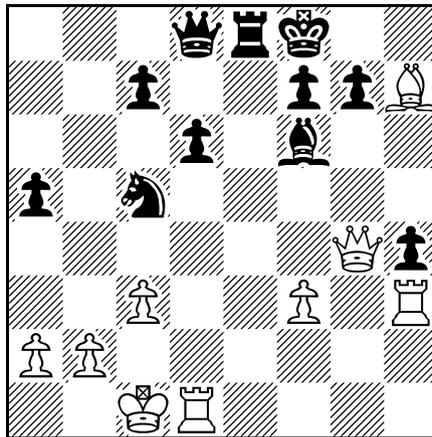
18 g5

The only move. Naturally not 18 bxc5?? ♗xb2+ 19 ♖b1 ♗c3+ winning on the spot.

18...♗xh3 19 gxf6

Let's look at the other bishop capture with 19 ♗xh3 ♗xb4!:

a) 20 c3 ♗xf4! 21 ♖xf4 hxg5 22 ♗g4 gxh4.



Question: How should we assess this position?

Answer: GM Olivier Renet assesses as unclear, while I feel like Black stands significantly better for the following reasons:

1. Black has two pawns for the exchange, so in a sense he is maybe up half a pawn in the material count.

2. The black king is absolutely safe.
3. Black controls the e-file.
4. Black dominates the dark squares.
5. Black's h-pawn is passed and must be watched carefully should more pieces come off the board.

In a single position, two players may have deep faith in their own assessments, which is part of the beauty of the game. However, faith doesn't mean equivalency of the judgment's net worth. In fact, sometimes two players use the same logical reasoning, yet reach opposite conclusions!

b) 20 gxf6 ♖xf6 21 ♙xd6+ cxd6 22 ♖xd6+ ♗xd6 23 ♜xd6 ♝e1+ 24 ♚d2 ♞e5 25 ♚c1! (25 b3?! ♚e7! (White's rook is nearly out of squares) 26 c3 ♚xd6 27 cxb4 axb4 and Black stands better since his b-pawn for now holds back White's two queenside pawns. Also, White must nurse a pair of kingside isolanis) 25...♞e1+ 26 ♚d2 ♞e5 is drawn by repetition.

19...♗xf6

Shirov continues to ignore the fact he has two loose minor pieces, with an almost insulting negligence.

20 c3

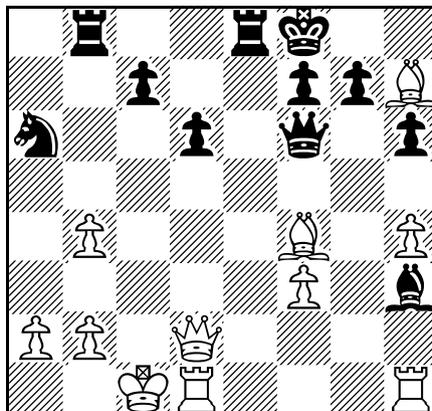
20 ♜xh3 transposes to a position we already looked at in the notes (to White's 19th move) after 20...♞xb4 21 ♙xd6+ cxd6 22 ♖xd6+ ♗xd6 23 ♜xd6 ♝e1+ 24 ♚d2 ♞e5.

20...axb4 21 cxb4

Two black pieces hang simultaneously yet Shirov has everything under control. Inferior is 21 ♜xh3? which is met with 21...bxc3 22 bxc3 ♞b3! and White has no choice but to bail out into an inferior ending after 23 ♙xd6+ cxd6 24 ♖xd6+ ♗xd6 25 ♜xd6 ♝xc3+ 26 ♚d2 ♞a3 27 ♙b1 ♞b8 28 ♚c1, leaving White struggling.

21...♞a6!?

True objectivity is a virtual impossibility for the human mind, which insists on superimposing its stylistic biases upon the data. In this case, strong resolution may be pushed too far, to the very brink of obstinacy.



Question: Isn't this knight completely out of play on the a6-square?

Answer: An idea's worth is not negated by its initial visual perception. I admit it's very risky though. Shirov banks on the fact that he will either sacrifice the knight later on b4, or pry the b-file open with a timely ...c7-c5, which I might add, is not so easy to achieve. A lot safer is 21...♖e6, keeping the knight centralized.

22 a3

Rublevsky hopes to keep Black's knight offside and out of play. After 22 ♖xh3 ♗xb4, Black has a dangerous attack:

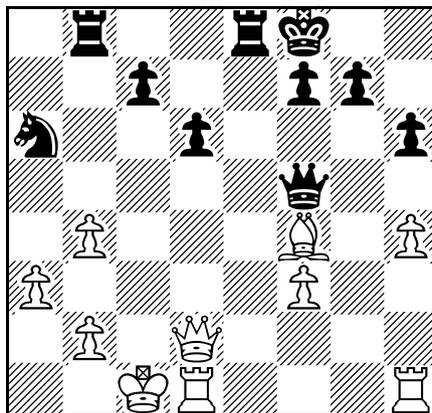
a) 23 ♖b1?? loses to 23...♗e6! with a double attack on the a2-pawn and the h3-rook. Now if 24 b3 (The simplifying trick 24 ♕xd6+?? fails miserably due to a weak back rank after 24...cxd6 25 ♗xd6+? ♗xd6 26 ♖xd6 ♖e1+ 27 ♖d1 ♖xd1 mate!) 24...♗xa2!, White is busted. Note that Black must avoid the greedy 24...♗xh3?? 25 ♕xd6+ and it is White who wins. The bishop's rudeness is a shock to Black's king, as profound as that time when he used a dessert fork for his entree at the State dinner.

b) 23 ♗d4! ♗xa2+ 24 ♖b1 (the only move) 24...♗c3+ 25 ♖c2 ♗xd1 26 ♗xf6 gxf6 27 ♖xd1 ♖xb2 28 ♕xh6+ ♖e7 29 ♕c2 ♖b5 with a very difficult position to assess. My feeling is that it is probably dynamically balanced. Let's go deeper: 30 ♕e3 ♖a8 31 h5 ♖a1+ 32 ♖d2 ♖d5+ 33 ♖c3 ♖a3+ 34 ♖c4 ♖da5 35 ♕f2 ♖a2 36 ♖d3 ♖2a3+ 37 ♖d2 ♖d5+ 38 ♖c1 ♖aa5! 39 h6 ♖h5 40 ♖xh5 ♖xh5 41 ♕e3 f5 42 ♖d2 ♖f6 43 ♕f4 ♖g6 44 ♕b3 ♖h1 and I don't think either side can make progress.

22...♕f5

Principle: *Eliminate an opponent's bishop pair if possible.*

23 ♕xf5 ♗xf5



Exercise (combination alert): The position was approximately balanced, until White's last move. How should Black respond?

24 ♖hg1??

White takes for granted a premise – that his king is safe – which has yet to meet the burden of proof. White was still fine if he played the correct 24 ♖he1.

24...♞xb4!!

Black's knight traffics in a forbidden commodity. Shirov displays a masterly grasp of the position's essential elements.

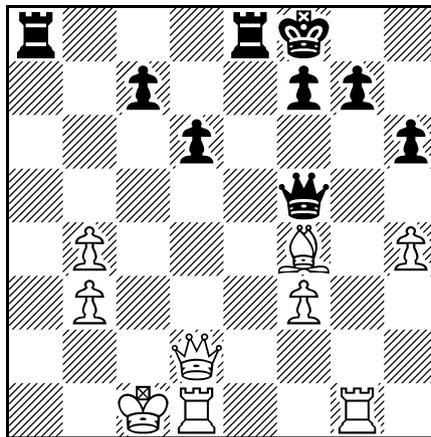
Answer: Piece sacrifice/Annihilation of the defensive barrier. If a powerful person gives you something (Black's once out-of-play knight), then it is very easy for him to take it away if he changes his mind.

25 axb4 ♖a8

Threatening mate on the move.

26 b3

Clearing the d2-square for the king with 26 ♖d4 is met with 26...♞e2! 27 ♖xg7+ (27 ♙xd6+ ♚e8! forces mate) 27...♚e7 and White is unable to deal with the dual a1- and c2-mate threats.



Exercise (combination alert): The white king's chances are equivalent to the sparrow's, who begs the hawk to go vegan and spare his life. Black to play and force the win:

Answer:

Step 1: Lure the king to the b2-square.

26...♞a1+ 27 ♚b2 ♖f6+! 0-1

Step 2: Check on f6, which wins heavy material in all lines. White has a choice of losing moves:

- a) 28 ♖d4 ♖xd4+ 29 ♞xd4 ♞xg1 gives White an easy endgame win.
- b) 28 ♖c3 ♞a2+ and White's king is deflected from his queen.