

Fight 1.d4 with the Tarrasch!

A Complete Black Repertoire vs. 1.d4



Vassilios Kotronias

Foreword by Matthew Sadler

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By Vassilios Kotronias

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Foreword

In 2013, I received an invitation that both thrilled and worried me: I was asked to take part in the London Chess Classic. Although the double-round rapid format that year wasn't as scary as a full-blown international tournament, I would still end up playing Kramnik and Svidler with both White and Black! I faced two major problems. First, busy with work and training, I had lost track of chess during the summer months and my play was way off the required level. Second, what on earth was I going to play with Black against Kramnik? Kramnik was extremely strong anyway against my normal Nimzo-Indian/Queen's Indian repertory but it was his move-orders that petrified me. Apart from 1.d4, Kramnik might start with 1.♘f3 or 1.c4, all of which might he might use to trick me out of my repertory. I must have spent a precious day sorting through my lines, despairing at the gaps Kramnik might expose, at the effort I would need to correct them, and how stupid I would look if I got caught out!

My goodness, this wasn't going to work! Racking my brains, I thought back to all the lines I had worked on previously as a professional 15 years earlier – might there be something in there that I could use? I suddenly recalled that I had faced this problem against Kramnik 15 years earlier in 1998...and I had approached it then by playing the Tarrasch! As an opening, the Tarrasch has some big advantages:

- (1) It can be played against pretty much anything: 1.♘f3, 1.c4, 1.g3, 1.d4. Play 1...e6, 2...d5 and 3...c5 and you are there! So that was the end of my move order fears!
- (2) It leads most of the time to a typical IQP pawn structure, and it is difficult for the opponent to shape the game into another course.
- (3) Black's pieces naturally enjoy open lines and active posts so it's easy to play the opening moves quickly and successfully!

Too good to be true? Well there are a few minor drawbacks:

- (1) It isn't advisable to use the Tarrasch all the time against weaker players you want to beat. There are quite a few equalizing lines out there that a diligent opponent could prepare if forewarned. I have used the Tarrasch mainly against the very best opponents I have faced, scoring three draws against Kramnik (including one at the London Classic!) and 1 draw against Anand along the way.

Fight 1.d4 with the Tarrasch!

(2) You must enjoy IQP positions and be prepared for the defense of any IQP endings that might arise. I was impressed that in his introduction to the opening, Vassilios already annotates the classic game Flohr-Capablanca Moscow 1935, which I studied intensively before the London Classic (Capablanca games were the other part of my training regime!)

The book you are holding in front of you is exceptional! Tarrasch exponents have been blessed in the past years with some excellent works – Aagaard’s and Ntirlis’ 2011 work in particular – and this book continues this happy trend. It is both a detailed reference manual and a source of inspiration. For example, in the main line 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♖c3 c5 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♗f3 ♗c6 6.g3 ♗f6 7.♗g2 ♗e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.dxc5, I was intrigued to see such interesting analysis of the unusual gambit line 9...♗xc5 as well as the main line 9...♗xc5. I was also very impressed by the work that Vassilios put into the awkward sidelines such as 3.♗f3 c5 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♗g5, discovering a wealth of active possibilities in quiet-looking positions. I am certain that this book will become an essential tool both for experienced Tarrasch players and future aficionados!

Matthew Sadler
September 2019

Tarrasch Repertoire: Part II (b)

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 c5 [D32]

Systems with an early e3

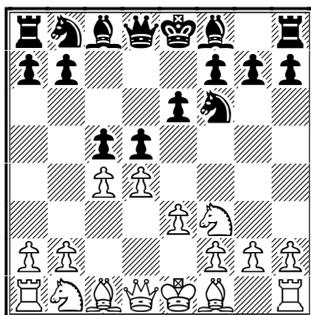
1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 c5

Time has come to deal with the systems involving an early e2-e3, which are the exclusive subject of Part II(b).

4.e3!?

This is a way to play for an advantage with a minimum of risk. White will try to saddle us with a weakness on d5 later on; for the moment he concentrates on sound development.

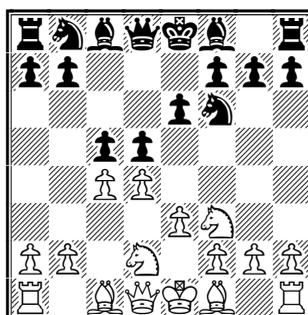
4...♘f6



This is an important position for our repertoire. There are several continuations for White here that we will examine methodically. Putting aside the feeble 5.dxc5?! which will (at best) transpose to positions examined subsequently after the obvious 5...♙xc5=, White has the following moves at his disposal: (A) 5.♘bd2?!, (B) 5.♙d3, (C) 5.a3, (D) 5.cxd5 and (M) 5.♘c3.

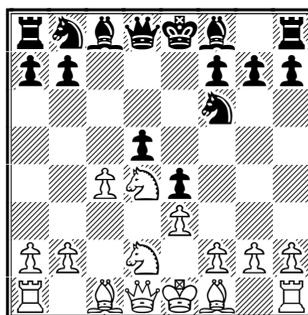
5.♘c3 obeys to the dictum “Knights before bishops” and was the main line in the classification I had made in my original notes. I kept it as our main line, but 5.cxd5 exd5 6.♙b5+! is also very interesting for positional reasons that will be explained in due course. But let us check White’s fifth move options one by one, starting from those that are less dangerous for us:

(A) 5.♘bd2?!



This is a move that cannot be recommended for White. If we realize that this position can arise from the Slav Defense with White on the move and that Black is still fine, then it is obvious that there is something wrong with it. I think it is most logical to take now on d4 in order to saddle White with an isolani, as the ♘d2 is not particularly well placed for it: After 5...cxd4! White has the following possibilities: (A1) 6.♘xd4 and (A2) 6.exd4.

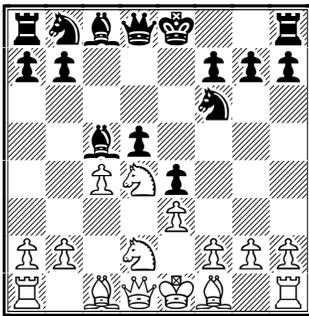
(A1) After 6.♘xd4, trying to avoid the isolani and play a calm symmetrical position, Black should play 6...e5! Then, the forcing sequence 7.♘4f3 e4 8.♘d4



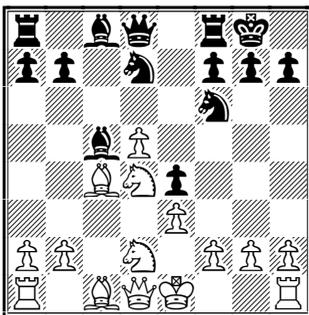
yields a dynamic position, when I like **8...♗c5!?** most, preparing to bring the king to safety and only then start active operations.

Also possible is Gareyev's 8...♗c6, but Black has to be content with a draw arising after 9.♖a4! (9.♗c6 bxc6 10.cxd5 cxd5 11.♗b5+ ♗d7≡ was excellent for Black in Costigan-Gareyev, chess.com 2017) 9...♗d7 10.cxd5! ♗b4 11.♗b5 ♗bxd5 12.0-0 a6 13.♗xd7+ ♖xd7 14.♖xd7+ ♗xd7 15.♗d1 ♗c8 16.♗e2 (16.♗4b3 ♖e6 17.♗d4+ ♗d7= is the same) 16...♖e6 17.♗d4+ =.

If Black chooses **8...♗c5!?** the position is not as easy for White as in the above variation; in fact we can already aspire to a complicated middlegame with good chances of ultimate success:



For example, **9.cxd5 0-0 10.♗c4** (10.♗2b3 ♗b6≡) **10...♗bd7!** (this brave move is better than 10...♗xd4!? 11.exd4 ♗bd7 12.0-0 ♗b6 13.♗b3 ♗bxd5 14.h3 [14.♗b1 h6 15.♗c3 ♗g4∞] 14...h6 15.♗e1 ♗f5 16.♗c4= when White also gets his place in the sun) and it seems that White's intended shot does not work:



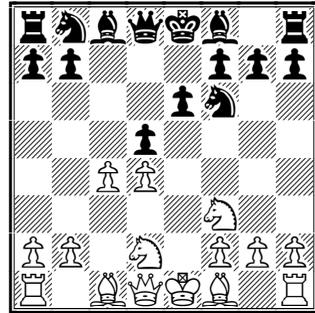
11.0-0 Acquiescing to a slightly worse position is the lesser evil.

11.♗e6! looks initially impressive, but after 11...fxe6 12.dxe6 ♖h8 13.exd7 ♗xd7 14.0-0 ♖e8!≡ Black gets tremendous compensation in the form of a powerful kingside attack. I know that it

may sound a bit exaggerated, but if I had this as White in a game, I would feel that my position is already beyond salvation. Computers find nothing better than 15.b4 (15.♗b3 ♗e7 16.♗e2 ♖g6 17.♗d2 ♗h3 18.g3 ♗xf1 19.♖xf1 ♗g4 20.♗xg4 ♖xg4 21.♗c3 ♗ad8 looks lost) 15...♗xb4 16.♗b1 a5 17.a3 ♗d6 18.f4 exf3 19.♗xf3 ♗c5 20.♖e2 b6≡, but even here White is close to total paralysis and I cannot imagine him surviving in the long run.

Returning to **11.0-0**, after **11...♗e5 12.♖c2 ♗xc4 13.♗xc4** (13.♖xc4 ♖e7≡) **13...♖xd5 14.b3 ♗xd4 15.exd4 ♗e6 16.♗b2 ♗fd8 17.♗e3 ♖g5≡**, the position is better for Black, but I expect White to hold it with careful play.

(A2) We will now examine **6.exd4**:



Here, the rather awkward position of the ♗d2 inspired me to recommend the following way of playing:

6...dxc4!?

I like this, to avoid c4-c5 ideas. To be sure, 6...♗c6 7.c5 is not better for White, but he would be able to create a scrappy position after that.

With 6...dxc4!?, we actually hope to get a slight advantage, exploiting the inappropriate (for an IQP position) placement of White's ♗d2. Normally this piece should be on c3 to control the d5-square, but here it will end up on the much weaker square c4.

7.♗xc4 (after 7.♗xc4 ♗c6, White is already struggling for equality) **7...♗c6**

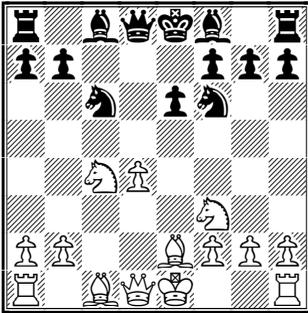
Most flexible, but Black's position already enjoys the luxury of several good moves. For example, 7...♗b4+ 8.♗d2 ♗xd2+ 9.♖xd2 ♗c6 is also possible. In a three-piece IQP position, White lacks serious attacking chances and the d-pawn is more likely to become a weakness.

8.♗e2

After 8.a3 ♗e7 9.♗e3 0-0 10.♗d3 b6 11.0-0 ♗b7∞ Black has gotten what he wanted, with an excellent position to play for a win. The next three moves can be ...♗a8-c8, ...♗f6-d5 and ...♗e7-f6,

Fight 1.d4 with the Tarrasch!

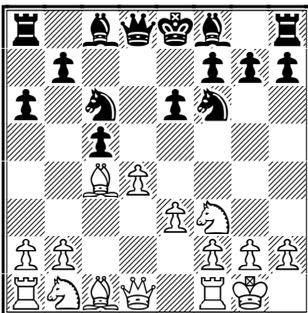
possibly followed by ...g7-g6 and ...f6-g7, completing an artificial fianchetto and enabling the typical maneuver ...c6-e7-f5. White is not worse, because he controls more space, but the position is more pleasant for the second player.



8...Qb4+! With the white bishop passively standing on e2, it makes sense to for Black to exchange the dark-square bishops. **9. Qd2 Qxd2+ 10. ♖xd2 0-0 11.0-0 b6=** ♭

Black has comfortably equalized, and perhaps a bit more than that, because *the c6 can maneuver to g6 or f5 more easily in absence of the e7*. To the observant eye, it seems that it is suddenly White who is playing the Tarrasch, meaning that a reversal of roles has occurred: Now it will be White and not Black who will have to be careful to maintain the equilibrium!

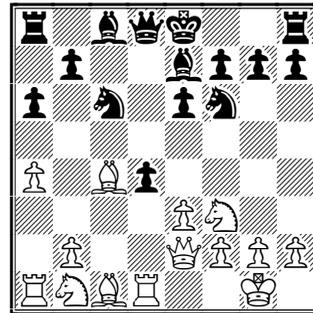
(B) With **5. Qd3**, White gives up the fight for the tempo, and we should of course profit from this. It should be met by **5...dxc4 6. Qxc4 a6 7.0-0** (7.a4 is possible too and is the best move order for those who want to include this move in their set-up) **7...c6** (7...b5 8.Qe2 Qb7 9.a4 b4= is also approximately balanced as Black has kept the option of developing his knight to d7) reaching a quite typical position where Black enjoys good play:



From here, almost everything will transpose to positions analyzed later. For example: **8.a4!?** (instead, 8.c3 b5 9.Qd3 Qb7 10.a4 b4 11.d4 e4 12.Qxe4 ♖c7= is analyzed under the move order 5.c3 c6 6.Qe2 a6 7.0-0 dxc4 8.Qxc4 b5 9.Qd3 Qb7 10.a4 b4 11.d4 e4 12.Qxe4 ♖c7, while 8.a3 b5 9.Qa2 Qb7 10.c3 ♖c7= is analyzed under 5.c3 c6 6.Qe2 a6 7.a3 dxc4 8.Qxc4 b5 9.Qa2 Qb7 10.0-0 ♖c7) **8...Qe7 9. ♗e2?!**

This is not so good, but is the only move I could think of with some independent character. The idea is to bring the rook to d1 or play d4xc5 without allowing the exchange of queens; instead, 9.c3 transposes after 9...0-0 to the positions analyzed under the 5.c3 c6 6.Qe2 dxc4! 7.Qxc4 a6 8.a4 move order.

9...cxd4! The pawn should be taken to put a stop to White's ideas. **10. ♖d1**



10...e5

After this, the game will unavoidably peter out to a draw.

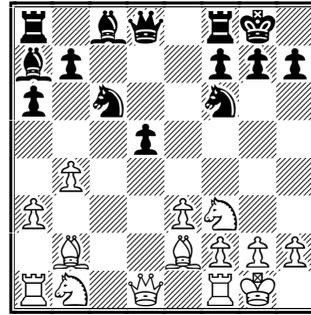
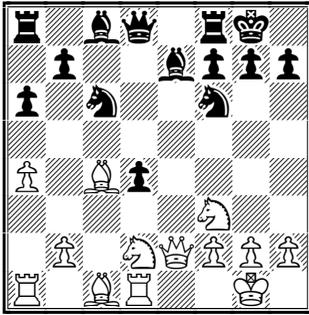
If you are all out for a win, then 10...a5!? is your move. After 11.b3 (11.Qa2 Qd7 12.♖xd4 0-0 13.c3 ♖c7 14.♖d1 b5 15.axb5 axb5 16.Qb1 Qb3 17.♖xa8 ♖xa8 18.Qc2 Qxc1 19.♖xc1 ♖b6= is slightly better for Black) 11...Qd7 12.exd4 ♖c8 13.Qb2 0-0 14.Qe5 ♖c7 15.h3 ♖fd8 16.d2 Qe8∞/♭ the position is complicated but I believe Black's chances to be at least equal because of the long-term weaknesses on b3 and d4.

Back to 10...e5: **11.exd4 exd4 12. Qbd2 0-0** (D)

13.h3!=

The position is completely equal and was given up as a draw in Cordova-Iturrizaga Bonelli, Sabadell 2011.

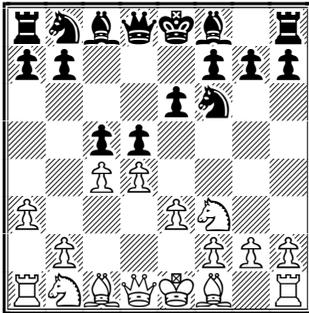
Less clear is 13.Qb3 Qg4! 14.Qe3 Qxf3 15.gxf3! (15.♖xf3 ♖c7! 16.Qxd4 Qe5 17.♖g3 Qh5 18.♖h3 Qxc4 19.♖ac1 Qf4 20.Qxf4 ♖xf4 21.♖xc4



♖ad8≡) 15...♗c7 16.♘d4 ♘d6 17.♘xc6 ♗xc6 18.♖d4!∞ in view of the mutual weaknesses.

Thus, we may conclude that 5.♘d3 in conjunction with 9.♗e2 constitutes no threat for Black. We move on to examine the next lines.

(C) One popular line is **5.a3**:



This begins a well-known fight for a tempo. White wants to tempt his opponent take on c4 before the ♘f1 has already moved.

5...a6!

Following suit is a tested and reliable tactic. By copying his opponent's move, we put the onus on him once again.

At this point White has at his disposal the following continuations: (C1) **6.cxd5**, (C2) **6.♘c3** and (C3) **6.dxc5**.

For those interested in statistical details, **6.dxc5** is the most usual choice in practice, designed to gain space by b2-b4.

(C1) After **6.cxd5**, we reply **6...exd5!** and we are ready to transpose to lines examined later on in Part II (b). This can happen after 7.♘c3 or 7.♘e2. An independent try is the immediate **7.dxc5 ♘xc5 8.b4**, but as one may guess, surrendering the tempo cannot bring White any advantage: **8...♘a7! 9.♘b2 ♘c6 10.♘e2 0-0 11.0-0**

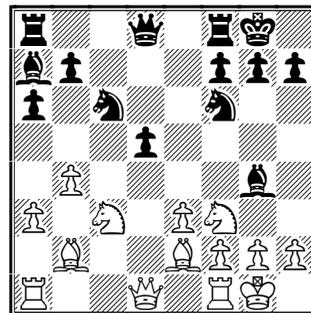
An important position. For those who are not acquainted with such structures, White would like to play the moves ♘b1-d2-b3, ♖a1-c1 here, firmly blocking the d5-pawn and then trying to exchange one knight and settle on d4 and/or c5. However, when the knight leaps to d2, Black can push ...d5-d4, getting rid of the isolani and solving all his problems.

This means that White will have to precede ♘b1-d2 with a move like ♗d1-d3, and the best way to anticipate this is provided by the following reply:

11...♖e8!

This is an excellent, useful move, waiting for the opponent to show his intentions. There is no rush for the development of the ♘c8, because it would allow White to develop the ♘b1 on a more active square than d2.

Weaker is 11...♘g4?! 12.♘c3!, and suddenly it is obvious that Black has been deprived of ...d5-d4 in view of ♘f3xd4. This means that he is reduced to a rather passive stance, waiting for White to carry out the typical b4-b5 advance which would create further weaknesses and unleash the ♘b2. For example:



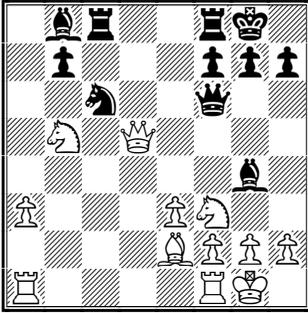
12...♖c8?!

This is not actually the best reply; I have presented it for instructional purposes to show how virulent White's play can be.

Fight 1.d4 with the Tarrasch!

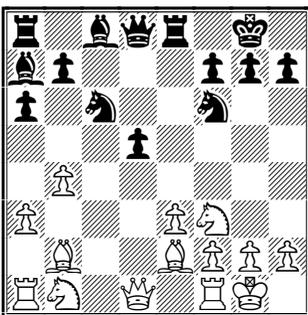
Better is instead 12...♖d6!, preparing to set-up immediately a battery on the diagonal b8-h2 in order to annoy White. In that case, 13.b5?! (13.h3± is best) is rather premature because of 13...♗xf3 14.♗xf3 ♘e5= and Black is doing fine.

Returning to 12...♞c8!?, after 13.b5! a×b5 14.♗×b5 ♗b8 15.♗xf6! ♖×f6 16.♖×d5 Black did not have enough for the pawn in Markus-Marjanovic, Kavala 2009. White has won an important central pawn and his kingside structure is quite solid, preventing any attacks:



Perhaps best would have now been 16...♞fd8!? (rather naive is 16...♖h6?! 17.h3 ♘e5?! 18.♞fd1± as played in the game) 17.♖e4 ♗f5 18.♖h4 ♖b2 19.♗c4 ♘e5 20.♗xe5 ♗xe5 21.♞a2 ♗f6! 22.♞×b2 ♗×h4 23.♗e2 ♗f6 24.♞b4! (24.♗d4?! ♗×d4 25.exd4 ♞×d4 26.♞×b7 g6=) 24...♞d2 but even in that case White gets a long lasting minimal edge by 25.♗g4!±. It is strange that Marjanovic, who has a lot of experience with the Tarrasch, allowed his opponent to carry out this rather obvious and typical idea.

Let us now return to 11...♞e8! and examine the options at White's disposal. I analyzed to some serious depth (C1a) 12.♗d4, (C1b) 12.♗bd2, (C1c) 12.♖c2, (C1d) 12.h3 and (C1e) 12.♖d3!?

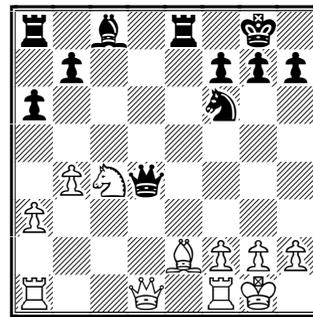


Our main line 12.♖d3!? is actually a move that has never been tried, and yet is the more testing one.

Its point is rather obvious: White wishes to develop without allowing ...d5-d4. Black has an easy ride after the alternatives:

(C1a) The most common has been 12.♗d4, however in that case the simple 12...♗d7! asks White what is his next move. For example, 13.♗×c6 ♗×c6 14.♗f3 (14.♗d4 ♗×d4 15.♖×d4 ♞e4 16.♖d2 d4=) 14...♞c8= and White cannot develop his knight without allowing ...d5-d4.

(C1b) 12.♗bd2 allows Black to carry out that very liquidation by 12...d4 13.exd4 ♗×d4 14.♗×d4 ♗×d4 15.♗×d4 ♖×d4 16.♗c4 when there are two equally strong ways to keep the position is absolute balance:



16...♖a7!?

This principled move, keeping b6 defended, was the only one included in my notes.

Looking at the Mega Database, I found out the simpler 16...♖×d1 17.♗×d1 ♗e6 18.♗d6 ♞e7 19.♗f3 ♗d5 20.♗×d5 ♗×d5 and a draw was agreed in this sterile position in Braun-Hoffmann, Nuremberg 2010.

My analysis after 16...♖a7!? ran as follows: 17.♗f3 ♗e6 18.♗e3 (18.♗a5 ♞ad8 19.♖c1 ♗d5 20.♗×d5 is completely equal after both 20...♞×d5= and 20...♗×d5=) 18...♞ad8=. Black can be satisfied with the result the opening as the position is completely level; on the other hand, as often happens in the Tarrasch when White is cautious, there may not be any winning chances left.

You would of course be right in asking: Is this an opening in which White's position is so solid that he runs no risks of losing at all? I would say no.

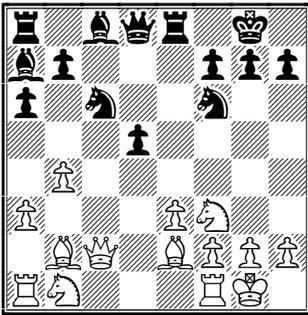
First of all, there are several positions in which the structure allows us to play for the win without any problem. But even in the calmer variations, winning chances are not White's exclusive private property for three reasons:

(a) The first could simply be his *ignorance on how to handle quiet positions*.

(b) The second involves a *must-win situation where White will have to sharpen a quiet position with whatever consequences this may have for him and*

(c) The third one (and it often happens, believe me) is *getting baffled by existing theory and seeking to infuse life in the game by playing "something else"*. This "something else" will more often than not be not so good for White and we should be alert to grasp the opportunities it will offer us. For example, in the position we are now examining, White could be tempted to make one of the following two non-standard moves in an attempt to create some play:

(C1c) The first one is **12.♖c2**, preparing to bring the rook on d1 in order to press our isolani.



This move is, by the way, not dismissed by the machines. A weaker player can easily make such a move. But in this case Black can venture **12...♗g4!** with chances to obtain the initiative. I will give a few lines that confirm this: I looked at (C1c1) **13.♗xa6?**, (C1c2) **13.b5?!**, (C1c3) **13.♗c3!** and (C1c4) **13.♞d1?**.

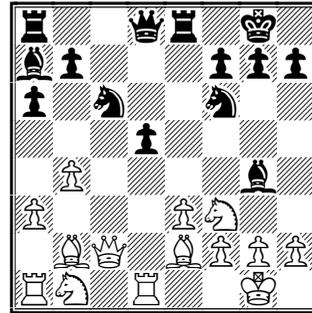
13.♞d1? is actually a typical mistake, weakening f2, but once again I promoted the line for instructional purposes. That said, Black has the more pleasant position after the other moves too:

(C1c1) The greedy **13.♗xa6? bxa6 14.♖xc6 ♞e6-+** is just bad: after taking on f3 followed by ...♗f6-h5, Black will have a lethal attack.

(C1c2) **13.b5?! axb5 14.♗c3** is not something one would find easily, but besides that, it does not equalize fully. After **14...d4 15.♗xb5 dxe3 16.♗xa7 ♞xa7 17.fxe3 ♞xe3 18.♗c4 ♞a5 19.♖f2 ♖e7 20.♞fe1 ♞xe1+ 21.♞xe1 ♖c5 22.♖xc5 ♞xc5** Black has kept his extra pawn and has marginally the better chances.

(C1c3) Switching to the pragmatic **13.♗c3!** is best, but someone who played ♞d1-c2 one move ago, will most probably *not* go for it. After **13...d4 14.exd4!** (14.♞ad1 ♖c7!?) **14...♗xd4** (14...♖c7!? 15.d5 ♗d4 16.♗xd4 ♗xd4) is an attempt to mix things up) **15.♗xd4 ♖xd4 16.h3 ♗xe2 17.♗xe2 ♖e4 18.♖xe4 ♗xe4 19.♗d4 ♗d2 20.♞fd1 ♗b3 21.♞ab1 ♗xd4 22.♗xd4** Black keeps a tiny edge in practical play but objectively the position is a draw.

(C1c4) Let us now see how Black can punish his opponent for **13.♞d1?**:



13...♗e4

Of course the knight leaps forward, eyeing the weakened f2-square. Sacrifices are already in the air.

14.♞d3 The best defense, but it cannot stave off defeat.

Instead, **14.♗bd2? ♗xf2! 15.♖xf2 ♞xe3 16.♖f1** loses brilliantly to **16...♖b8! 17.♞e1 ♖f4!** and White is defenseless against ...♞a8-e8. It is amazing that the best way to win for Black involves two or three quiet moves, and this underscores the helplessness of the white king, which can only watch the enemy troops gathering outside its castle for the final assault.

14...♗f5 15.♖b3 ♗xf2! 16.♞xd5 ♖c8 17.♖c3 f6 18.♗c4 ♖h8 19.♖xf2 ♞xe3 20.♖xe3 ♗xe3+ 21.♖xe3

