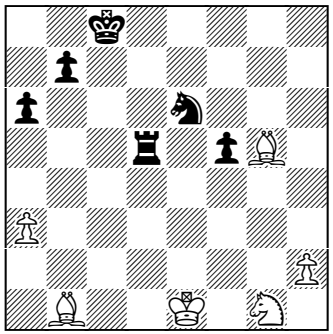
3
W



a-pawn and exchange knight for either bishop. This is still not entirely straightforward.

36	**♗f6**	**♘c5**
37	**♘f3**	**♘e4**
38	**♗g7**	**♖d7?**

The threat of an immediate h-pawn march draws Black into a doomed plan. Better (and in any case the only hope) was 38 … ♖a5, e.g. 39 ♗f8 ♖b5 40 ♗c2 ♖b2 41 ♘d4 ♔d7 42 h4 ♔e8 43 ♗b4 ♖a2 and the a-pawn will be exchanged (*44 a4 a5!? 45 ♗xa5 b5; 44 ♗d3 ♖a1+* and *45 … a5*). Black can then afford to lose all remaining pawns if the knight is exchanged for either bishop (but not for the knight, as ♗+♗+h♙ v. ♖ is usually lost).

While there is much play left to play for, the issues are clear-cut enough that a simple scale of advantage assessment (±?) is not of much use. After 38 … ♖a5, is the position objectively drawn, or is Black lost? On the evidence above it seems it's a draw.

39	**♗e5**	**♖h7**
40	**h4**	**♔d7**
41	**♔e2**	**♔e7**
42	**♔e3**	**♖h5**

Black has set up a fortress of sorts on the K-side, and in the absence of Q-side pawns might have prospects of holding; for example an immediate capture on e4 would yield a tablebase draw. But as it is White wins easily. The finish was 43 ♔f4 b6 44 ♗d4 b5 45 ♗a2 a5 46 ♗b3 b4 47 a4 ♘c3 48 ♗c5+ ♔d7 49 ♗c4 1-0.

* * *

Thus 23 … ♕c3?! creates problems for Black, but with accurate play these problems should not be beyond solution.

Between 'not-a-losing-error' and 'best move', though, there is a great chasm. Best (from **(2)**) must be 23 … ♘c5! ('with a chaotic position', Goh; '∞' Moskalenko *p. 218*; ∞/± (in effect), Williams). Practice indicates that Black stands no worse, e.g. 24 ♕c2 ♕c6 25 ♗g2 d3 (*25 … ♕b5!?*) 26 ♕c4 ♕xg2 27 ♕xc5+= as in the stem game **Calistri–Cornette, Cap d'Agde CCAS Open 2008**, or 24 ♗d2 ♔b8 25 fxe6 fxe6 26 ♔e1 ♕c6 27 ♘h3, when both 27 … ♕f3, as in **Farkas–Weber, Germany-SchemingMind corr 2009** and **Shpakovsky–Stengelin, World corr Ch 36 ½-final-10 2012** (½-½, 38 and ½-½, 41 respectively), and 27 … ♘e4 as in **Hayes–S. M. Williams, England-USA corr 2012** (½-½, 35) are ∞/=.

Conclusion: 16 … ♘a5! equalises. ▶

FW MCDONALD, Neil, *French Winawer* (Everyman 2000)—*see issue 18*.
tWW MOSKALENKO, Viktor, *The Wonderful Winawer* (New in Chess 2010)—*see issue 16*.
TCO-3 NIJBOER, Friso, & VAN DER STRICHT, Geert, *Tactics in the Chess Opening 3*. Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New in Chess 2005. Revised version of 'Winnen met het Frans', 2005. ISBN-10: 90-5691-162-7.
FD-ps PSAKHIS, Lev, *French Defence 3 Nc3 Bb4* (Batsford 2004)—*see issue 18*.
PtF-2 WATSON, John L., *Play the French* (2nd edition) (Cadogan 1996)—*see issue 13*.
AC:tF WILLIAMS, Simon, *Attacking Chess: the French* (Everyman 2011)—*see issue 21*.

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Issue 22 **October 31, 2014** **ISSN 2326-1757**

Into the Labyrinth—II

'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth', says Holmes. For the practical player this leads to simple advice: if all other moves fail, play the remaining one and press the clock. The move played must be best or equal best: let the question of truth be decided on the opponent's time. For theory, though, there's a deeper and more mysterious meaning: in any sharp and theoretically difficult opening, there are many critical junctures with 'only' moves. Once all other paths have been shown to fail, it is indeed often the case that the last remaining choice turns out to be 'true', that is, strong.

At any rate the effect appears throughout the Winawer Poisoned Pawn. In the main line of the 13 ♕xc3 variation, Black's 16 … f6 now appears to lose by force, the long-popular 16 … ♗e8 fails to pass the gauntlet of modern engines, and the minor tries (16 … ♕a5+/♔b8/♘ce7) do not suffice. The soundness of the entire Poisoned Pawn rests on one last chance …

* * *

Poisoned Pawn: 13 ♕xc3 line with 16 … ♘a5!

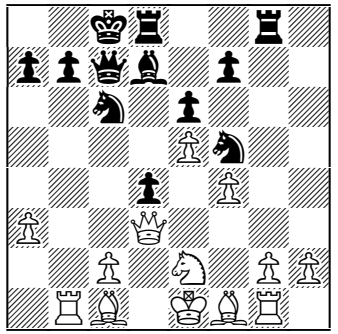
Churkina–Kirsanov
ICCF World Cup C20/pr01 corr 2013
ICCF monthly archive, November 2014

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♗b4 4 e5 c5 5 a3 ♗xc3+ 6 bxc3 ♘e7 7 ♕g4 cxd4 8 ♕xg7 ♖g8 9 ♕xh7 ♕c7 10 ♘e2 ♘bc6 11 f4 ♗d7 12 ♕d3 dxc3 13 ♕xc3 ♘f5 14 ♖b1 d4 15 ♕d3 0-0-0 16 ♖g1**(1)**

16	**...**	**♘a5!**

'Beyond any doubt this move is the most crucial for the evaluation of the whole variation', Neven *ChessBase Magazine 129, March 2009*.

1
B



It was not always so. Timman's article "A French Labyrinth" *New in Chess 97/7 pp. 86-90* did not even mention the possibility, considering only 16 … f6 and 16 … ♗e8, and it was similarly ignored by Watson *PtF-2* and McDonald *FW*.

Despite an extended run in practice, with over a hundred games, 16 … ♗e8? fails to stand up to current engines and simply loses in all variations.

17 g4

The major alternative 17 ♖b4 is still under considerable debate. A full discussion would take us too far astray; suffice it to say that 17 … a6! 18 g4 ♘e3! appears to be fully satisfactory for Black: cf. Goh *ChessPublishing.com, May 2009* and Moskalenko *tWW pp. 218-9*.

17 … ♗a4
18 gxf5!

In **Hjartarson–Nogueiras, World Cup, Belfort 1988** *Informator 45/342 (Nogueiras, Sieiro González)* Black met 18 c3?! with the bold piece sacrifice 18 … ♗c2!? 19 ♕xc2 d3 and succeeded spectacularly after 20 ♕a2 ♕c5 21 ♖g2 ♘e3 22 ♗xe3?! ♕xe3 23 ♖g3? (the losing move; *23 ♕d2∓*) 23 … d2+ 24 ♔d1 ♕f2‡ (0-1, 30).

Here 22 ♘g3! improves: indeed for a while it was thought to be winning, e.g. by Psakhis *FD-ps p. 227* and Nijboer *TCO-3 p. 47*. After 22 … ♖xg4 (Psakhis considers only *22 … ♘xg2+?* and *22 … ♘c2+?*) Nijboer continued 23 ♖f2 ♘ac4 and 'White is probably winning', but several practical tests have shown that Black has full compensation for the piece (∞/=), e.g. **Volokitin–Ganguly, Aeroflot Open, Moscow 2007** *ChessPublishing.com, April 2010 (Watson)* (0-1, 66, after White made the last mistake).

The sacrifice is not even strictly necessary: both 18 … ♘b3 (Goh) and 18 … ♕c5 (Moskalenko *p. 217*) are roughly equal. Not however 18 ♖b2? ♘e3 19 ♗xe3? (*19 ♘xd4∓*) 19 … dxe3‡ since recapturing on e3 is met by a fork on c4.

Psakhis' discussion of this line was the basis for his overall conclusion 'at the present time, as I see it, Black is experiencing major problems in the 7 … ♕c7 variation'.

18 … ♗xc2
19 ♕b5 ♖xg1
20 ♘xg1 a6(!)

The startling 20 … ♗xf5 is marked '!!' by Goh *ChessPublishing.com* (attributing to Rybka; it had earlier been given by Psakhis). The point is that White has nothing better than 21 ♗d2 (*21 ♗e3? a6! ‡; 21 ♘f3? ♗xb1 22 ♕xb1 ♕c3+ 23 ♗d2 ♕xf3 24 ♗xa5∓*), so Black still recovers the exchange as well as the pawn.

This is ingenious, but is it best? After 21 … ♗xb1 22 ♕xb1 ♘c4 Goh gives 23 ♕d3 ♘xd2 24 ♔xd2 ♕c3+! 25 ♕xc3+ dxc3+ 26 ♔c1 ♖d2 27 ♘e2 ♔c7 'with a superior ending for Black' (cf. Williams *AC:tF p. 185*). But there is no need to allow this elementary tactic: much better 23 ♗xc4 ♕xc4 24 ♕h7!±, when White regroups and even seizes the initiative, as in **Dolya–Preuße, WS/M/305 corr 2011** (1-0, 36). Earlier 22 … ♘c6 may be met by 23 ♘f3±/±.

Conclusion: 20 … ♗xf5? is an error that allows White to seize control.

Shabalov's 20 … ♖d5 *ChessBase News, July 19, 2009* leads to similar positions (slightly improved for Black) after 21 ♕b4 ♗xf5 (or *21 … ♘b3 22 fxe6! fxe6 23 ♗b3±*) 22 ♗d2 ♗xb1 23 ♕xb1±.

21 ♕b6 ♗xb1
22 ♕xb1 ♘b3

All this was long 'known but well forgotten', having been given (without the interpolation of 19 … a6 20 ♕b6) as '∞' by Nogueiras and Sieiro González in 1988.

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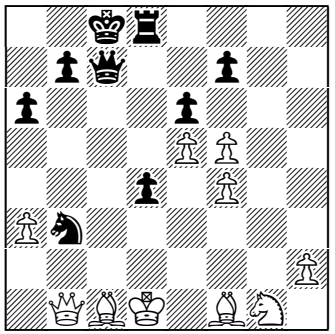
B



23 ♔d1(2) ♕c3?!

A critical choice; for the alternative 23 … ♘c5 see below. After the text move White is temporarily tied up but will eventually be able to regroup, often with exchange of queens. Black will then have no positive prospects—the rook has no entry points—and to salvage a draw will need to eliminate most pawns. The ending ♗+♘+h♙ v. ♖ is usually drawn, offering hope, and a pair of pawns will usually be exchanged on the e- and f-files before queens can be exchanged. Even so, Black is left with an involved and difficult task.

The (never-tried) immediate exchange 23 … ♕xc1+? 24 ♕xc1 ♘xc1 25 ♔xc1 illustrates what Black must try to avoid: White consolidates, e.g. 25 … ♖g8 26 ♘f3 ♖g4 27 f6 ♖xf4 28 ♗e2±±.

24 fxe6

Every exchange aids Black's overall goals, so can White avoid this one? Not by 24 f6?? ♖g8‡, and 24 ♕c2?! ♘a1 25 ♕b2 exf5 gives Black a better version of the game continuation.

In **Þorsteinsson–Liebert, EU/TC9/sf1 corr 2011**, White tried the remaining possibility 24 ♕b2!?, with success after 24 … exf5 25 ♗e2 followed by ♘f3-e1 and ♕c2-d3 and exchange of queens on d3. Black won the h-pawn but was unable to clear the Q-side (1-0, 57). On the other hand exchanging on c1 is still not sufficient, e.g. 25 … ♕xc1+ 26 ♕xc1 ♘xc1 27 ♔xc1 d3 28 ♗d1 ♖d4 29 ♘f3 ♖xf4 30 h4 ♔d7 31 h5±. Here Black faces the additional problem that the ending ♗+♘+e♙ v. ♖ is usually lost.

Instead Black must mobilise the Q-side without delay (after 24 ♕b2 exf5 25 ♗e2) via 25 … b5!, e.g. 26 ♘f3 ♔c7 27 h4 a5 28 ♕xc3+ dxc3+ 29 ♔c2 ♘xc1 30 ♔xc1 b4 31 ♔c2 ♖g8, and Black has enough activity to hold the balance.

24 … fxe6
25 ♕c2 ♘a1!
26 ♕b2 ♖d7!?

Varying on **Smirnov–Arslanov, Russian Team Ch, Dagomys 2009**, where Black collapsed quickly with (in effect) 26 … ♔c7 27 ♗e2 b5? 28 ♘f3±± (1-0, 36). Instead 27 … ♕c6! 28 ♗f3 ♕a4+ 29 ♔e1 ♘b3 (Goh) 30 ♗d1 ♕a5+± survives. The text move, recommended by Williams *p. 186*, covers b7 so that 27 ♗e2 ♕c6 28 ♗f3 may be met by 28 … ♕c4∓, with initiative.

27 f5 exf5
28 e6 ♖c7
29 ♗e2 ♘b3

Now 29 … ♕c6? fails to 30 ♘f3±± (*30 … d3?? 31 ♕h8+*).

30 ♕xc3 dxc3
31 ♗d3 ♖c5
32 ♗g5 c2+
33 ♗xc2 ♖d5+
34 ♔e1 ♘d4
35 ♗b1 ♘xe6(3)

Of course this sequence is not forced, but it's quite reasonable, and it's representative of the themes that appear in all lines; it also tracks a main line of Houdini 3.0. Black has achieved almost all his goals and it remains only to eliminate the