

The Gambit Cartel

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Master Class

“I have a problem.”

Peter watched with some apprehension as his teacher absorbed this news. The old man tipped his head to one side and a flicker of amusement showed in his eyes. “Only just now?”

“Well,” said Peter, “in the next two weeks, anyway. I have White against Steinburner in the final round of the city championships a week from Saturday. He’s a French player. I have no idea how I’m going to get an advantage against him. In fact, ...” Here Peter hesitated for a moment. “... in fact, I’m wondering whether I should change to something solid like the Torre Attack for this game, –”

The master cut him off. “No,” he said gruffly. “You cannot become better at chess by running away from your problems. Changing your repertoire completely out of fear would be worse than not preparing at all. But tell me why you think he is so formidable. Has he swallowed a database?”

Peter nodded glumly. “Pretty nearly,” he said. “This past weekend I watched him analyzing with some of the other players. He seems to have memorized every game Wolfgang Uhlmann ever played. He knows the Winawer French like the back of his hand.” Peter reached out with both hands and laid out 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 Bxc3+ 6.bxc3 Ne7 7.Qg4 on the board. “He castles here,” Peter said. “People were trying to throw all kinds of stuff at his king. He always seemed to find the right time to play ...f5 and nothing worked for White on the kingside.”

The old man nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, this is a known and solid line – though in my youth,” he added, “we used to sacrifice the g-pawn with 7...Qc7, which is sharper.” Peter winced. “Yeah, I studied that a little bit, but it gets really complicated too. The whole Winawer line looks like a lot to learn; I’m pretty sure I will never know as much as Steinburner does about it, and I’m certainly not going to learn it in the next ten days. But I don’t like White’s positions in the Tarrasch, and I just know I’m going to get eaten alive if I play the Advance Variation. So what should I do?”

As Peter spoke, the old man set the pieces back up and spun the board around, giving Peter black. “Peter,” he said gently, “there are alternatives in every opening, chances for both sides to deviate from the well-trodden paths. If you know the sort of position in which you are comfortable, you may deviate early without great risk. Here,” he pushed his e-pawn forward and gestured at the board, “you play the French and I will show you some ideas.”

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5

The master paused for a moment, and then with a twinkle in his eye he picked up his queen’s bishop.

3.Be3



Peter just stared at the bishop. “That’s really weird,” he finally said. “Every move seems strange until you understand the idea behind it,” his teacher replied. “There are ideas here, Peter, or players like Juan Morgado would not have used it. What is Black’s key counter-move in the French, the move with which he fights for the center?” Peter thought for a moment and then nodded. “Okay, I see. Black usually wants to play ...c5, and now that is very likely going to lose a pawn. But ... but doesn’t this just lose material?” He took off the e-pawn.

3...dxe4

The master pushed up his f-pawn one square.

4.f3

“Hey!” Peter exclaimed. “This is sort of like a Smith-Morra, only on the other side of the board. Is this ...” He crinkled his brow, trying to remember names of strange openings, “... um, a Budapest – no, that isn’t right ...”

The old man’s voice, usually raspy, sounded almost youthful as he interrupted Peter’s fumbling. “It is called the Alapin-Diemer Gambit. But it is related to the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit, which is what you are trying to remember.”

“Right,” said Peter, recovering his balance. “But isn’t that refuted?” The

master shrugged expansively. “Refuted! What does that mean? Does it mean that if God plays Himself from here, White loses? I doubt it. But Peter –” here his eyes flashed again “– if you play against God, you will lose no matter which side of this position you are on. This is not the point. You are human. Your opponent is human. What will you play?”

Peter thought for a few seconds and took the pawn. The master recaptured, Peter brought out his knight, and each of them developed a bishop and castled.

4...exf3 5.Nxf3 Nf6 6.Bd3 Be7 7.0-0 0-0

The master made a little noise that might have been a grunt of satisfaction and slid his queen over one square. Peter hesitated, thinking of a queenside fianchetto, then decided to bring his bishop to the same diagonal without weakening his queenside pawns. The old man continued developing and then brought his queen up to the kingside on the e1-h4 diagonal.

8.Qe1 Bd7 9.Nbd2 Bc6 10.Qh4

Peter shook his head in bafflement. He didn’t like the queen up there – it *felt* dangerous – but he couldn’t see anything concrete for White either.

10...Nbd7 11.Bg5

“Tell me, Peter,” said his teacher, “what do you think of this position? How would you evaluate it?” Peter thought about it for perhaps half a minute without saying anything. “I’m probably wrong about this, but I think Black is okay. He has an extra pawn and he just has to be careful not to allow Bxh7+ since the bishop on e7 would hang.”

As he spoke, Peter reached out and nudged up his pawn to chase away the bishop.

11...h6



The old man reached out and took hold of the bishop, but to Peter's astonishment, instead of retreating he came forward and took off the pawn.

12.Bxh6 gxh6 13.Qxh6

"Like I said," Peter admitted with a rueful grin, "I'm probably wrong." He stared at the position for a few minutes, trying to find some active

counter-plan, but there was literally nothing to be found. Finally he tried to make space for his bishop at f8, but the master brushed aside this defensive idea.

13...Re8 14.Ng5 Bf8 15.Bh7+ Kh8 16.Nxf7#

Peter shook his head. "How can you do that? I mean, how can you sacrifice like that with such confidence? Do you just analyze everything down to mate?"

"No," the master replied. "It is a matter of understanding the patterns of attack. Some years ago I began collecting examples of this sort of thing, thinking maybe to write a book. The bishop sacrifice on h6, which I call the *Blitz*, leads to such a family of patterns." He backed up a few moves to the position after 13.Qxh6:



"This is the position I call *house arrest*," he said. "The black king is alive, but he has no moves, no *flight squares*. What does this suggest to you?"

Peter nodded, remembering previous lessons about checkmate. "When FSA is zero, look for a check," he said. "That's what flight square analysis is all about. But," here he looked perplexed, "the only decent check here is Qg5+, and that would let Black out of house arrest."

The old man nodded. "This is true. But it is only part of the truth. *Look for checks* is helpful advice, but it does not mean all is lost if you do not find them. Instead, look for ways to *create* them. That is what Ng5 does." He moved the knight, out of turn, up to g5 and gestured at White's queen, knight and bishop. "*Three pieces is a mate*. This is a useful thing to remember when you cannot calculate everything. And

soon,” he added, lifting White’s rook to f4 and swinging it over to h4, again without the benefit of any moves for Black, “it will be four pieces.”

Peter sat still, trying to absorb this. After a few moments, he asked, “Can I try it from White’s side? I don’t know whether I’ll be able to make the attack work, but I think it would be good for me to try.” The master spun the board around without a word, put back the pieces he had moved out of turn, and played 13...Re8, just as Peter had in the game. Peter moved up his knight, and the now the old man dropped his own knight on f8 with a chuckle.

13...Re8 14.Ng5 Nf8



“There is another old saying here, from Bent Larsen: *With a knight on f8, you never get mated.* Can you show that Larsen is wrong here?” Peter sat up straight and after a moment’s hesitation sacrificed his rook on f6, but the master shook his head. “If Black takes it, yes, he gets mated. But if he defends more accurately, you will lose the exchange for a pawn,” he said, taking White’s pawn on d4 with

check. Peter interposed his rook, but now the black queen came back: 15.Rxf6 Qxd4+ 16.Rf2 Qh8. Peter realized glumly that his own king and rook were on a poor diagonal: exchanging queens and nabbing the f-pawn would leave him facing the threat of ...Bc5.

“So is the whole sacrificial idea on h6 just unsound?” he asked. The master shook his head. “*Think, Peter,*” he admonished his pupil as he set up the position after 14...Nf8 again. “What is the problem with the line you just tried?” Peter studied the board. “I guess it’s that my d-pawn was hanging with check,” he said. This time he got a word of encouragement. “Good, a good start. Now you are actually thinking. What will you do about this threat?”

Peter shook his head again. “I can’t see anything forcing,” he said. But the master cut him off. “You are thinking the wrong way. You have a plan here, sacrificing your rook on f6. This is not a bad plan, though it is not the only one. But you need to prepare it. So –” Here the old man reached out and tapped the d-pawn “– ask what happens if you defend this. See the move in your mind, and then ask yourself: *How is Black going to stop my plan?*”

Peter leaned forward and calculated, and after a few moments he found

that this way of thinking about the attack cleared his vision. “I see what you mean,” he said. “It’s really hard for Black to stop the sacrifice. He doesn’t have as many useful moves as I thought he did.”

15.c3

The master nodded and then pushed his queen forward one square.

15...Qd7



his eyes, the board looked different, clearer.

Peter hesitated, calculating. “I see,” he said after a pause. “If I take the knight now, you recapture with your bishop and your queen defends f7.” The old man nodded again but said nothing. Peter’s eyes kept wandering down to h7, but the knights defended the square too well. He closed his eyes and heard his teacher’s voice from a few minutes ago: *and soon it will be four pieces.* The idea clicked; when he opened

16.Rf4

This time his teacher just smiled with the corners of his eyes.

16...Ng6 17.Bxg6 Bf8

Peter flinched. “I didn’t see that – I thought Black was just lost here,” he admitted. The master nodded. “He *is* lost. What I am doing now is just forcing you to calculate a little bit. In many cases, when you are winning, your opponent can force you to calculate in order to finish him off. This is one of the ways of putting up resistance. If you do not rise to the challenge ...” He shrugged. “Here, in fact, there are many ways for you to win, so it is not so difficult. Why don’t you work it out,” he added, standing up, “while I print out some homework problems for you?”

Peter nodded and bent back over the board, looking for undefended pieces as he had been taught. The knight on f6 jumped out at once, and a forcing line began to spin itself out in his mind. When the old man came back with some paper in hand, Peter looked up with bright eyes. “I think I’ve found it!” he said. “Show me,” his teacher replied with an encouraging nod.

18.Bh7+ Kh8 19.Qxf6+ Bg7



“This was the only place I really got stuck,” Peter admitted. “But then I remembered what you told me: *Just pick a forcing move and dive in.* And you know,” he grinned, “it really does work!”

**20.Nxf7+ Kxh7 21.Rh4+ Kg8
22.Rh8+ Bxh8 23.Qxh8+ Kxf7
24.Rf1+ Ke7**

“Now I have to keep him from escaping to d8,” Peter said. “Like you’ve taught me: FSA is low, so look for the geometry – the way that the king is connected to his flight squares.”

25.Qf6+ Kd6

“Here I did another FSA in my mind and realized that Qc5 would be mate,” Peter explained. “Then it was just a matter of finding the right path.”

26.Qe5+ Ke7 27.Qg5+ Kd6 28.Qc5#

Peter started to say something, but the doorbell chimed, cutting him off. “Your mother,” his teacher said. Peter nodded and took the handful of papers the master thrust into his hand. “Thanks,” he said. “This has been great. And ...” he added with emphasis, “I just hope Steinburner plays the French!”

Peter’s Homework Problems



A. After **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Be3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.c3 cxd4 7.cxd4 Be7 8.Nf3 Nc6 9.Nc3 0–0 10.Bd3 a6 11.h4 f6**, consider White’s attacking options. Do not be afraid to sacrifice if that is what the position requires. Work out every line, explaining in words what the moves accomplish.

