

Improve Your Practical Play in the Middlegame

Alexey Dreev

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Key to Symbols used

!	a good move	+—	White has a decisive advantage
?	a weak move	—+	Black has a decisive advantage
!!	an excellent move	→	with an attack
??	a blunder	↑	with an initiative
!?	an interesting move	↔	with counterplay
?!	a dubious move	Δ	with the idea of
□	only move	⊃	better is
=	equality	≤	worse is
∞	unclear position	N	novelty
±	White stands slightly better	+	check
∓	Black stands slightly better	#	mate
±	White has a serious advantage	∞	with compensation for the sacrificed material
∓	Black has a serious advantage		

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Introduction

This book is devoted to typical methods of play in the middlegame. This topic, of course, is not new. Many books have been written on it at different times by authors old and modern. Unfortunately, the content of such books is not always error-free, as I have experienced many times. Therefore the emphasis in my book is on the quality of the examples; all of them have been checked and are deeply analyzed.

When writing a book, many authors try to make an impression by choosing the most striking games and fragments. The reader may therefore get the impression that a game of chess consists only of beautiful moves, combinations, spectacular sacrifices and non-standard solutions. Of course, it does not. There is a lot of beauty in chess, but usually most games consist of 'work in progress'. There are lots of examples of such 'working' games in this book, but beauty is also present.

Of course, the format of the book does not permit coverage of all the methods of play in the middlegame. However, the book has enough material to get acquainted with the most important ones, and, with the help of exercises, to understand the meaning of these methods and learn how to use them in practice.

I hope that after reading this book the reader will increase his or her knowledge of the typical and not-so-typical methods of play in the middlegame, become familiar with ideas of non-standard solutions to practical problems arising during the game and be able to apply this knowledge in his or her own games.



Moves Back

For many players a move back is a difficult decision. Why? How often do you meet people who can easily admit their mistakes and are ready to correct them? In the modern world it is considered that a person should be purposeful, go forward and achieve their goal, but sometimes it turns out to be a waste of time, and we should stop or select a different reference point and goal, in other words start over.

Similarly in chess. Very often, in selecting a specific game plan, we persistently follow this set plan and miss the moment when the situation on the board changes. That is when we need to stop and sometimes radically change our plan of action – to accept a ‘non-standard’ solution, not play by routine.

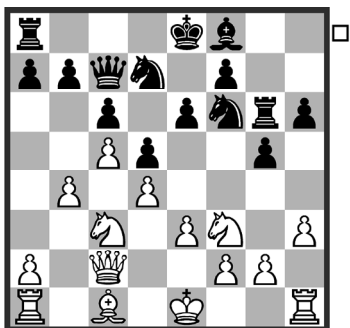
‘Moves back’ belong to such ‘non-standard’ solutions. ‘Moves back’ can be attacking, defensive, and just good. As my coaching and playing practice shows, such moves often fail to appear on our radar. Our task is to explore the situations where these moves are not very obvious, to get used to these moves and, ultimately, learn to use them in practice.

Let’s consider a few examples to begin with. At the end of this chapter you will find some exercises.

Example 1

From Eljanov-Sandipan
Plovdiv 2010

1. d4 d5 2. c4 c6 3. ♘f3 ♘f6 4. e3 ♙g4
5. ♚b3 ♚b6 6. ♗c3 e6 7. ♗h4 ♙h5 8.
h3 g5 9. ♗f3 h6 10. c5 ♚c7 11. ♙d3
♙g8 12. ♚c2 ♗bd7 13. b4 ♙g6 14.
♙xg6 ♙xg6



Position after: 14... ♙xg6

15. ♙b1!

This move is primarily designed to prevent Black's activity on the queenside rather than prepare White's own. Castling makes no sense for White, as his king feels quite safe in the centre. When I was working on this variation, which is in my opening repertoire, I was wondering how to play this type of position. It quickly became obvious that activity on the queenside is premature. Black can meet the b4-b5 break with ...b7-b6 and it turns out that White is not ready to open the position. Much more promi-

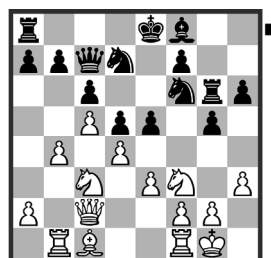
sing is to try to exploit the movement of the black g-pawn which has led to a weakening of the black kingside. But how to do it?

In practice 15. ♙b2 has been played here, but that is not the best place for the bishop. 15... h5 16. ♗e2 g4 17. ♗e5 ♗xe5 18. dxe5 ♗d7 19. hxg4 ♙xg4 20. ♗f4 ♗xe5 21. ♙xh5 ½-½ Eljanov, P (2761) – Sandipan, C (2641) Plovdiv 2010.

15... ♙e7

Certainly not mandatory, but a highly probable move, and the first computer line. It should be noted that White can use the same plan with other continuations, for example after 15... ♙g8.

Let's consider the immediate 15... e5 which looks natural but isn't fully prepared yet. 16. 0-0!

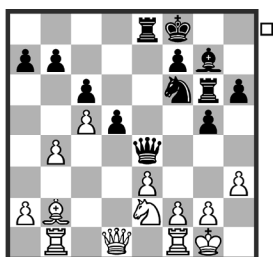


Position after: 16. 0-0!

White needs to castle to fully consolidate his forces. At the same time, he invites his opponent to 'come closer', not fearing the further advance of the black

pawns. Black's activity is premature. Let's check.

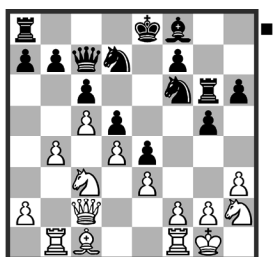
A) 16... ♖g7 17. dxe5!? Straightforward, but clarifies the game. (The unhurried strategy of using the weak point f5 also deserves attention: 17. ♘e2!? e4 18. ♘h2 h5 19. ♘g3±) 17... ♘xe5 18. ♘xe5 ♙xe5 19. ♙b2 ♖f8 20. ♘e2 ♙e4 21. ♙d1 (21. ♖fc1!±) 21... ♖e8 (21... g4 22. ♘f4±)



Position after: 21... ♖e8

22. g4! Provides a powerful outpost on f5 for the white knight. A possible continuation is 22... ♘d7 23. ♘g3 ♙e6 24. ♙d4 ♙e5 25. ♘f5±

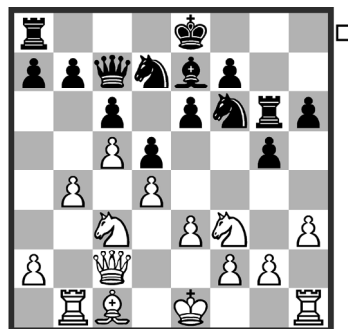
B) 16... e4 17. ♘h2!



Position after: 17. ♘h2!

17... g4 (17... h5 18. f3±) 18. hxg4 ♘xg4 19. ♘xg4 ♖xg4 20. b5! Now the power of the move 15. ♖b1

becomes obvious. Black does not have time to develop an initiative on the kingside. (20. f3?! ♖h4!∞) 20... ♘f6 21. bxc6 bxc6 22. ♙b3 ♖h4 23. g3 ♙c8 24. ♙b7!± Just in time!



Position after: 15... ♙e7

16. ♘g1!!

In my opinion a strong and deep manoeuvre. The point is to capture the centre with pawns and neutralize potential counterplay.

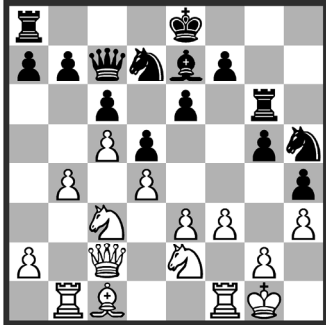
16... h5

Black can't be active in the centre to free up space for his pieces because after 16... e5?! the white knight immediately goes to the excellent outpost on f5: 17. ♘ge2±.

17. ♘ge2 h4 18. f3 ♘h5 19. 0-0±

Then e3-e4, followed by either an immediate f3-f4, or e4-e5 to open lines on the kingside. It is not difficult to see that for this plan White needs the support of his pieces. That is why he didn't hurry

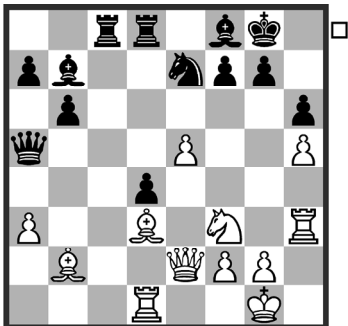
with the development of the bishop to b2.



Position after: 19. 0-0±

Example 2

From Bareev-Hracek, Pardubice 1994



Studying the game Bareev – Hracek, where Evgeniy played the simple but strong 21. ♘xd4, 1-0 (32), I was interested whether in this position White could wait with the capture on d4 and go 21. ♖g3.

I found here a fantastic idea of protection.

21. ♖g3

Black has to take care not to lose immediately. 22. ♘xd4 is threatened and it seems that the position is already hopeless...

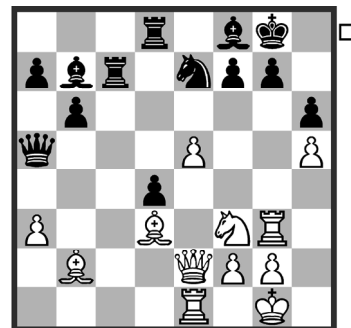
21... ♖c5!

The moves are quite complicated, but the idea is simple: to prevent the capture ♘xd4 at any cost.

22. ♖e1!

It seems that Black has merely postponed defeat for a moment, but after a fantastic ‘move back’, he still has a chance for salvation! Most often it is very difficult to find such moves.

22... ♖c7!!



Position after: 22... ♖c7!!

The idea behind this move is seen in the next variation.

23. ♘xd4

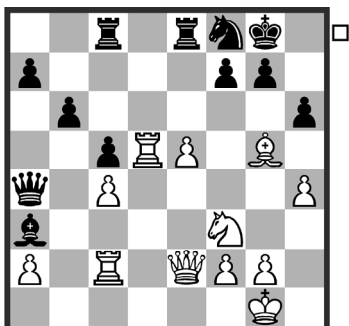
After 23. ♔h2 White keeps the advantage, but it is not winning, and besides, he needs to find this move.

23... ♘d5! **24.** ♕e4 ♘f6!

White's advantage has disappeared.

Example 3

From Carlsen-Mamedyarov
Shamkir 2014

**21.** ♔e3 ♘g6?!

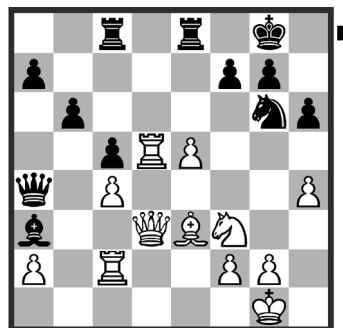
A positional mistake. Despite White's space advantage, Black's position is not worse.

He has different plans available: ...a6 & ...b5 or play a rook to the d-file. As long as the knight on f3 hasn't moved to a more active square on e4 or f5, Black is

all right, and it is not so easy to activate the knight, e.g. ♘d2 is not yet possible due to ...♕xc2.

A) It was better to play 21... ♖cd8!? 22. ♖cd2 (22. ♕d3 ♖d7∞) 22... ♖d7!? 23. h5 ♖xd5 24. ♖xd5 (24. cxd5 ♙c1 25. ♖d3 ♕e4 26. d6 ♙b2 27. ♘d2 ♕c6 28. f4 c4 29. d7 cxd3 30. dxe8=♕ dxe2 31. ♕xc6 e1=♕+ 32. ♘f1 ♕d1=) 24... ♘e6=

B) Also possible was 21... ♘e6 22. h5 ♖cd8 23. g3 a6 24. ♔g2 b5=.

22. ♕d3

Position after: 22. ♕d3

White wants to push h5. If ...♘e7 then ♖d7, while if ...♘f8 then ♘h4 and ♘f5. Here it was necessary to make a 'move back'!

22... ♘f8!

Yes, Black has lost time, but surprisingly his position has not become worse. Black had not only to make a 'move back', but to admit his mistake, a doubly

difficult task where Black unfortunately failed.

Instead, Black continued with the wrong plan: 22... ♖e6? 23. h5 ♘e7

A) 24. ♖d8+ ♖xd8 25. ♚xd8+ ♙h7
26. ♖d2 ♙c1 (26... ♚xc4 27. ♙xh6+–)
27. ♖d7 ♙xe3 28. fxe3 ♘c6 29.
♚f8+– won even more quickly.

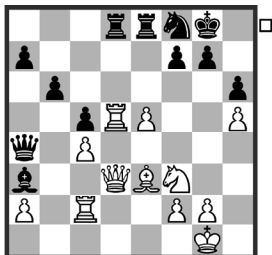
B) 24. ♖d6 was sufficient for a stable advantage, which Carlsen converted to victory: 24... ♙b4 25. ♖c1± 1-0 (47) Carlsen, M (2881) – Mamedyarov, S (2760) Shamkir 2014.

23. h5

23. ♘d2 ♘g6! =

23... ♖cd8! =

After 23... ♖cd8

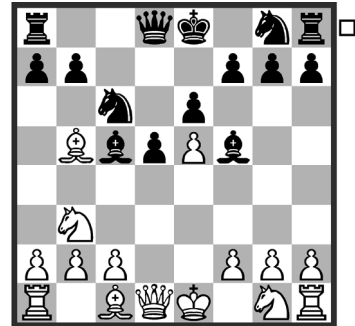


Position after: 23... ♖cd8

if White captures twice on d8, then the c2-rook will be hanging. If 24. ♘h4?? then Black wins after 24... ♖xd5 25. cxd5 ♚xh4+–.

Example 4

From Perunovic-Dreev
Yerevan 2014



8. a4!N

An interesting novelty which my opponent had prepared for this game. This move was a surprise which set me thinking. It seemed that a ‘move back’ here would be appropriate. First, I did not want to give up my bishop for free. Secondly, I was hoping that I would be able to finish development with ... ♘e7-g6, since 8.a4 is not the most important for White in terms of development. But as the further course of the game showed, this move was extremely dangerous for Black, as my opponent predicted.

8... ♙f8

It was better leave the bishop and play 8... ♚b6!, e.g. 9. ♘xc5 ♚xc5 10. c3 ♚b6 (≤ 10... a6 11. ♙e3 ♚e7 12. ♙xc6+ bxc6 13. a5±) 11. ♙e3 ♚c7 12. f4 a6 13. ♙xc6+ ♚xc6 14. ♘f3 ♘e7 15.

♖d4 ♖c7= In principle, Black's position is quite reasonable. White quickly played...

9. a5! a6 10. ♖a4 ♖c7

And now it is not so easy to develop my pieces, for example 10... ♗ge7 11. ♗e2 ♖g6 12. ♖e3 ♗f5 13. ♖b6 ♖b8 14. 0-0 ♖e7 15. ♗ed4±.

11. ♗e2

11. ♗f3!? was interesting: 11... ♖e4 12. 0-0 Δ 12... ♖xf3 13. ♖xf3 ♖xe5 14. ♖f4 ♖e4 15. ♖c3±.

11... ♖xe5

A serious inaccuracy. I had to play 11... ♗ge7, but then after 12. ♖e3!! White is better. (12. 0-0 0-0-0!! 13. ♖e3 d4! 14. ♗bxd4 ♗xe5∞) 12... ♖xe5 13. ♖d2 ♗g6 14. f4 ♖c7 15. ♖b6 ♖c8 16. ♗bd4 ♖e4 17. ♗xc6 bxc6 18. ♗d4 ♗e7 19. ♖c3±

12. ♗bd4

Black has problems with the development of his pieces in all variations.

12... ♖c8

12... ♗ge7!? 13. 0-0 ♖d6 14. ♖e1 e5 15. ♗xf5 ♗xf5 16. ♗f4 ♗fe7 17. ♗d3 ♗g6 18. ♖e3 ♖e7 19. ♖c5 ♖c7 20. ♖b6 (20. ♖xe7 ♗xe7 21. ♖h5 ♖hd8!)=) 20... ♖d6 21. ♗c5 0-0 22.

♗xb7 ♖e6 23. ♗c5 ♖xc5 24. ♖xc5 ♖fc8 25. ♖b6±

13. 0-0 ♖c5 14. ♖e3 ♖d6 15. b4! ♖xd4

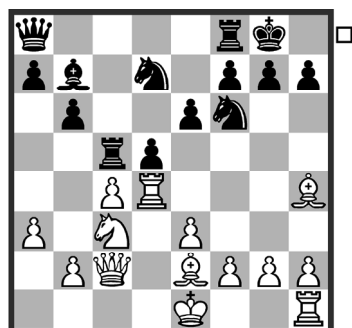
15... ♖xb4 16. ♖xc6+ bxc6 17. ♗xf5 exf5 18. ♖d4±

16. ♗xd4 ♗ge7 17. ♗xf5 ♗xf5 18. ♖c5 ♖c7 19. c4! dxc4 20. ♖g4±

Thus we can conclude that a 'move back' is not always a good one.

Example 5

From Dreev-Jakovenko
Moscow 2007



This position arose from a 4. ♖c2 Nimzo. Black had played very quickly and had hardly used any time, unlike me, but the next move forced my opponent to think and be ahead of me on the clock.

16. ♖d1!

This preventive ‘move back’ is not obvious! The point is that it is now impossible to play 16... dxc4? due to 17. ♖xd7. At the time 16. ♖d1 was a novelty that I found at the board. It allows White to fight for the advantage without risk or sacrifice. White’s two bishops will start to have an effect as soon as he finishes development.

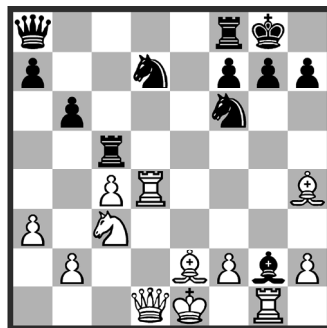
Previously only 16. b4 had been seen: ♖cc8 (16... ♖c7!?) 17. 0-0 dxc4! White needs to sacrifice a pawn. Of course he has compensation, but his position is not very comfortable; he has to be careful to keep this compensation. (17... e5 18. ♖d2 d4 19. exd4 ♙xg2 20. ♖fd1 exd4 21. ♖xd4± 1-0 (9) Bareev, E Efimenko, Z Turin 2006) 18. f3 ♘e5 19. ♙xf6 gxf6 20. ♘b5 ♚b8 21. ♘d6 ♖cd8= 0-1 Kasimdzhanov, R (2690) – Grischuk, A (2715) Moscow 2007.

16... e5

The first move to take into account, and it was played in the game.

A) Maybe the best here is 16... ♙a6, but after 17. cxd5 ♙xe2 18. ♚xe2 ♘xd5 19. ♘xd5 ♖xd5 20. ♖xd5 exd5 21. ♚d4± the position with an isolated pawn is very unpleasant.

B) 16... ♖fc8 17. 0-0 e5 18. ♖d2 d4 19. exd4 exd4 20. ♖xd4 ♙xg2 21. ♖e1± is also good for White.

17. ♖d2 d4 18. exd4 exd4 19. ♖xd4 ♙xg2 20. ♖g1

Position after: 20. ♖g1

20... ♙h3?

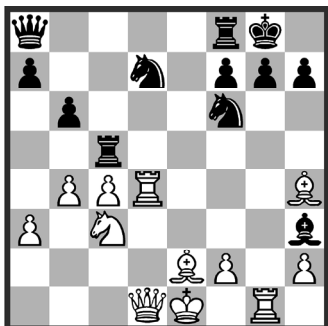
Here I missed a beautiful win.

Some time later I read a comment to this game by a famous grandmaster. He said that after 20... ♖e8 Black kept equal chances, for example: 20... ♖e8! 21. ♖xd7 ♘xd7 22. ♚xd7 ♙f3 23. ♙f6 g6 24. ♖g3 ♙xe2 25. ♘xe2 ♚c6 26. ♚xc6 ♖xc6 27. ♙c3 ♖ce6 28. ♖e3 ♖xe3 29. fxe3 ♖xe3∞. I agree with this, but White has an amazing move here. It has nothing to do with our topic, but proves that the ‘move back’ was correct and gave White the advantage. 21. ♚d2!! The king calmly goes to the safe square c1, while keeping all the advantages of the position – two bishops and an open g-file.

21. b4!

In the game I played 21. ♖d6 ♖c6 22. ♚d4 ♖xd6 23. ♚xd6 ♙e6 24. ♚d4

♔h8 25. f3± 1-0 (45) Dreev, A (2607) –
Jakovenko, D (2710) Moscow 2007.



Position after: 21. b4!

21... ♖e5

A) 21... ♖c6 22. ♕d3 ♙e6 23. ♙xf6
♜xf6 24. ♙f3±

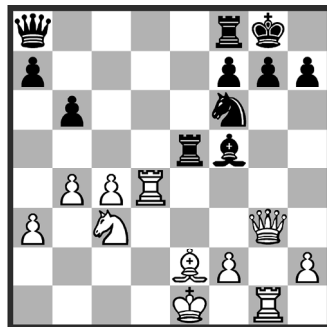
B) 21... ♖cc8 22. ♕d3 ♙e6 23. ♙f3
♕b8 24. ♙g3 ♞e5 25. ♕e3 ♞xf3+ 26.
♕xf3 ♕a8 27. ♕xf6! gxf6 28. ♙h4+±–

22. ♙xf6!

I calculated all the above variations, but didn't find this move. The point of the whole variation is to use the advantage of the two white bishops – and here it is suddenly necessary to give up the bishop pair! This move absolutely did not cross my mind.

The false way is 22. ♕d3?! ♙f5 23.
♙xf6? (23. ♕g3 ♞h5 24. ♕g2 ♕xg2
25. ♖xg2±) 23... ♙xd3 24. ♖xg7+
♔h8 25. ♖xd7 ♖e6 26. ♙d4 f6干.

22... ♞xf6 23. ♕d3 ♙f5 24. ♕g3+–

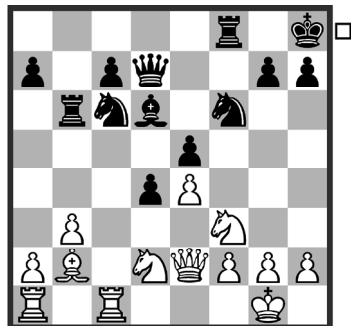


Position after: 24. ♕g3+–

With a double attack.

Example 6

From Dreev-Edouard
Aix-les-Bains 2011



I had already had this exact position
against Edouard a few months earlier.

16. ♞c4

In the first game I continued with 16.
♞e1 and after 16... ♙b4 17. ♞c4
♙xe1 18. ♞xb6 ♙xf2+ 19. ♕xf2 cxb6

(19... axb6 20. ♖c2+–) 20. ♖f5 ♖d6 21. ♘a3 ♖xa3 22. ♜xc6+– White achieved a winning position.

However, in the second game, when we again got this position, I refused to play 16. ♘e1 because of 16... ♘g4!, and in both cases 17.f3 ♘e3 or 17. ♘d3 ♘b4! This leads to a knight exchange that is beneficial to Black, not White. It is better for White to avoid the exchange in order to exert maximum pressure on Black's position.

Ideally, you need to put one knight on c4, the other on d3, and both rooks on the c-file. Then it becomes difficult for Black to hold the position. The knight exchange simplifies the position, and the position becomes unclear. That is why in the second game I first played ♘c4.

16... ♜bb8

And only now

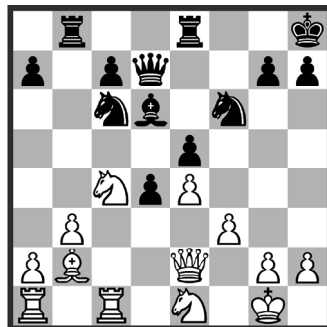
17. ♘e1!

As we can see, the immediate 'move back' is not always good; you must consider the plans of your opponent.

17... ♜fe8

It seems that Black should keep the rook on the half open file, but actually it doesn't matter. Black's basic idea is the knight exchange 18. ♘d3 ♘b4!

18. f3!

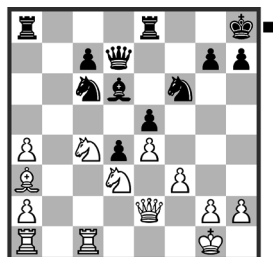


Position after: 18. f3!

The important move. White not only strengthens the e4-pawn and frees his queen from its protection, but also prepares the f2-square for his knight.

18... h6

The idea of opening the a-file for play on the queenside runs into a delicate tactical refutation: 18... a5 19. ♘d3 a4?! 20. bxa4 ♜a8 21. ♘a3!±



Position after: 21. ♘a3!±

Δ 21... ♘a3 (21... ♜xa4? 22. ♘xd6 cxd6 23. ♘b6+–) 22. ♘xa3 ♜xa4 23. ♘c5+–.

19. ♘d3 ♘b4 20. ♘f2