

Junior Tay

The Benko Gambit

move by move

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About the Author

Junior Tay is a FIDE Candidate Master and an ICCF Senior International Master. He is a former National Rapid Chess Champion and represented Singapore in the 1995 Asian Team Championship. A frequent opening surveys contributor to *New In Chess Yearbook*, he lives in Balestier, Singapore with his wife, WFM Yip Fong Ling, and their dog, Scottie.

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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.

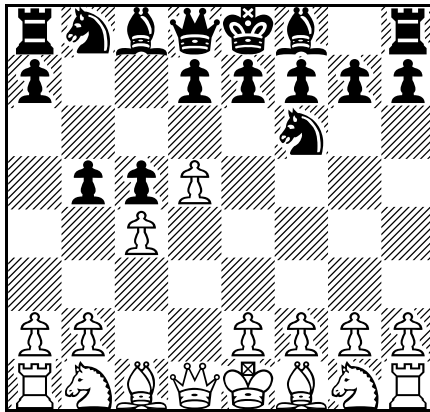
Many thanks go to all those who have been kind enough to offer inspiration, advice and assistance in the creation of *Move by Move*. We're really excited by this series and hope that readers will share our enthusiasm.

John Emms,
Everyman Chess

Introduction

What is the Benko Gambit?

This book is about the Benko Gambit which has served me well for the past 14 years in correspondence chess and over-the-board play. The Benko Gambit (or if you prefer the Eastern European version, the Volga Gambit) arises after the moves 1 d4 ♖f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 b5.



It is named after the American Grandmaster and former World Championship Candidate Pal Benko who popularized the opening by playing it almost without exception whenever the opportunity presented itself, and against all kinds of opposition. Benko published his games and commentary in *Chess Life and Review* frequently and according to his book, *The Benko Gambit* (RHM 1973), he had “as much as announced publicly that anyone can play against me with an extra pawn within a few moves of the opening.”

Why play the Benko Gambit?

1) For the price of a pawn (sometimes even two), Black obtains tremendous queenside pressure and puts White on the defensive early in the game. This may give Black an early psychological edge. In the final round of both the 2003 and the 2009 Cairnhill Open (Singapore), I won two games relatively quickly against a former National Champion and National Master. The first was a Benko Gambit Declined and the second time round, my opponent gave a huge sigh after 1 d4 ♖f6 2 c4 c5, played the insipid 3 e3 to avoid the Benko Gambit and allowed me to equalise very quickly.

2) Black's motifs in the Benko are quite clear cut: pile as much pressure as possible on the queenside, try to find ideal squares for the knights in the vicinity of White (usually b4, c4 and d3), and at the right time, undermine White's centre. Many a time at amateur level, White's pieces are reduced to the first three ranks trying to cope with Black's threats. At club level it is far easier to attack than to defend and thus easier for White to make mistakes early on in the Benko Gambit.

3) When I started playing correspondence chess in the late 90s, I wanted to look for a black opening which computer engines did not assess well. The Benko Gambit was the perfect weapon for me as the engines frequently assessed that White was winning or clearly better in Benko middlegames and endgames which are tenable or even good for Black. These days, the engines view positional factors such as space and initiative more favourably than in the past and are better at assessing compensation for material. GM Larry Kaufman, the co-developer of the powerful *Komodo* chess engine, concurred, stating: "I would even say 'much better' rather than just 'better'. This was not gradual, it pretty much happened with *Rybka 2.3* and *Rybka 3*, and all later programs are similar in this respect."

My Benko passed muster in correspondence play. One of my first high-level CC games was against the Russian Correspondence Chess Champion Sergey Romanov and I fought him to a draw. In 12 Benko Gambit games I was unbeaten and the only one time I played against it with white at correspondence, I got beaten like a drum. The point I want to make is that it is still playable even at master level correspondence chess, even if opponents have months to analyse with so many resources at hand.

4) The Benko has been played by many of the world's leading players such as Garry Kasparov, Magnus Carlsen, Viswanathan Anand, Veselin Topalov, Vassily Ivanchuk and Fabiano Caruana to name just a few. Two particular incidents stand out for me with respect to the Benko Gambit:

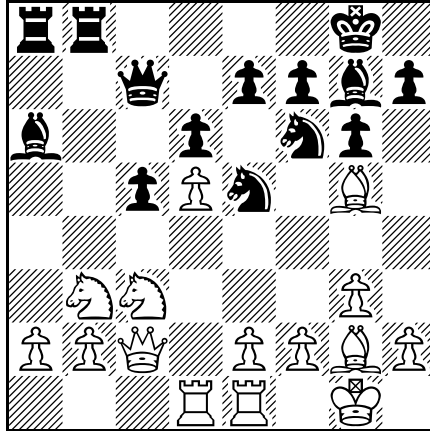
i. In the final round of the 1986 Dubai Olympiad, the Soviets needed to blank Poland 4-0 to overcome Hungary's lead and so claim the gold medals. It was at this juncture that Garry Kasparov resorted to the Benko Gambit and won a tense game against Włodzimierz Schmidt to help secure the top spot for USSR.

ii. Viswanathan Anand shockingly lost the first game of the 2001 FIDE Knockout World Cup to an internet qualifier, the French IM Olivier Touzanne. In a must-win second game, he essayed the Benko Gambit to win in 23 moves and even the score (eventually winning the match on tiebreak).

5) See for yourself the fundamental concepts of the Benko Gambit as applied convincingly by the man himself, Grandmaster Pal Benko, during his heyday.

Firstly, a forceful demonstration of queenside pressure.

A.Segal-P.Benko
Sao Paulo 1973



A typical set-up for Black, placing the king's rook on b8 to exert pressure down the b-file.

17 ♖c1 ♞fd7

Getting ready to unleash the dark-squared bishop's power over White's queenside.

18 h3 ♞c4

Pressing the b2 soft spot. Sometimes Black also has ...♞a3 tricks after going ...♞c4.

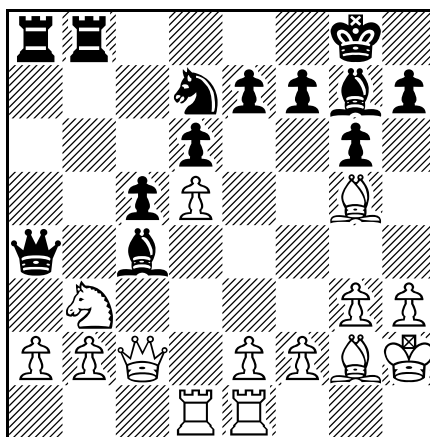
19 ♔h2 ♚b6

Exerting even more pressure on the b-file.

20 ♞e4 ♚b4

Preparing ...♚a4 to weaken White on the a-file as well.

21 ♞ed2 ♚a4 **22** ♞xc4 ♖xc4 **23** ♖g5



23...♚xb3!

A combination to win back the gambited pawn as well as exchange a couple of pieces.

The Benko Gambit: Move by Move

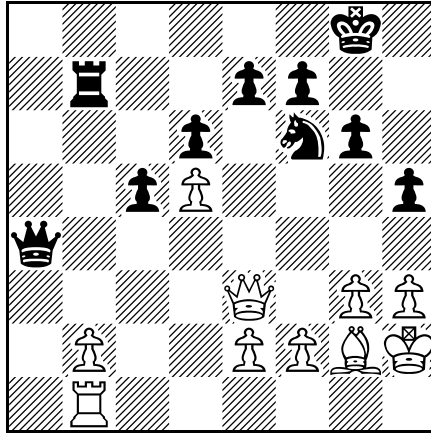
24 axb3 ♟xb3 25 ♚d2 ♟xd1 26 ♜d1 ♟f6

After winning the pawn back, Black usually retains his positional advantage and this is a good example.

27 ♟f4? ♜b8

Hitting the weakness.

28 ♜b1 h5 29 ♟g5 ♟xg5 30 ♚xg5 ♞f6 31 ♚e3 ♜b7

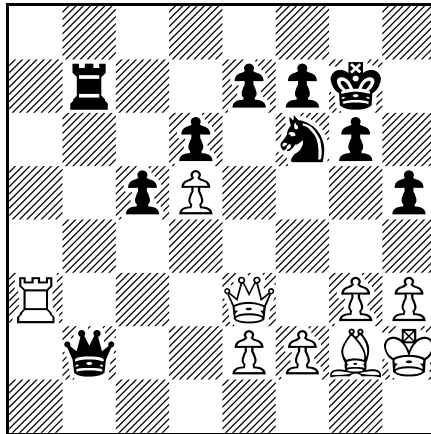


The e7-pawn is usually easier to defend than White's isolani on b2.

32 ♜c1

White gives up the b2-pawn which would have fallen sooner or later, since Black has ...c5-c4-c3 looming. Indeed, after 32 ♜c3 ♚a2 33 ♜c1 ♜b8 Black can start rolling the c-pawn down the board.

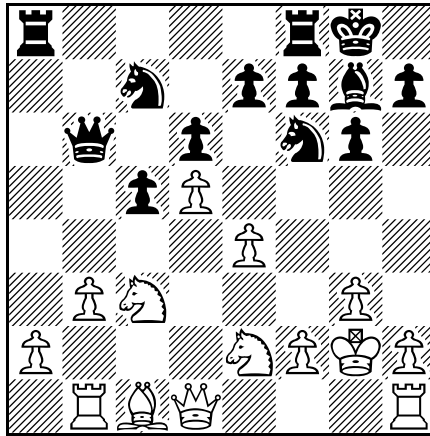
32...♚b3 33 ♜c3 ♚xb2 34 ♜a3 ♞g7



White has zero counterplay and resigned in 14 more moves.

Next, a demonstration of how Benko undermined White's centre and then took over that sector with some powerful piece play.

R.Gross-P.Benko
Aspen Open 1968



14...e6!

Black decided to undermine the white centre with the idea of eradicating it thanks to pressure from the h1-a8 diagonal.

15 dxe6 fxe6 16 ♗e3 ♜c6!

Exerting more pressure on the centre, with the aim of advancing the d-pawn to stress it yet further.

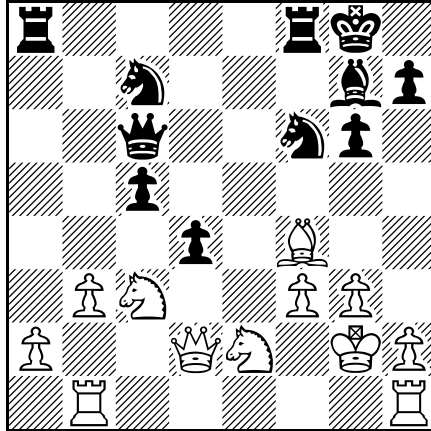
17 ♜d2?

In Benko's own *The Benko Gambit*, he wrote that "White underestimated the danger from Black's advancing mobile centre."

17...d5!

Black already has a huge advantage here, whether White gives up or tries to hold the centre.

18 exd5 exd5 19 ♗f4 d4!



Opening up the long diagonal for Black's queen.

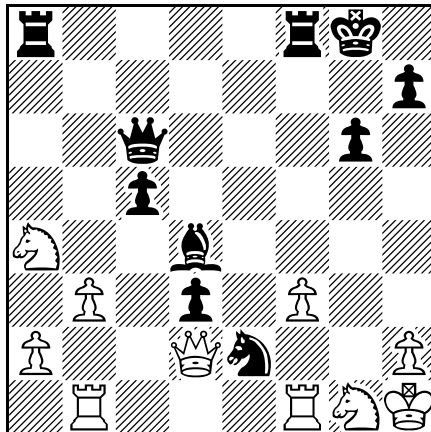
20 ♖a4 ♜fd5

Now the king's rook comes into play as well and the centralized knights do their part to wreck White's kingside structure, since the bishop cannot move away.

21 ♜hf1 ♜e6 **22** ♜f2 d3 **23** ♜g1

23 ♜xd3 is met by 23...♜xf4! when the rook cannot be captured because of the potential queen fork.

23... ♜exf4+ **24** gxf4 ♜xf4+ **25** ♙h1 ♙d4 **26** ♜ff1 ♜e2 0-1



White resigned due to the insurmountable threats.

On this note, we start the book proper. I do hope you will enjoy the examples and commentary from this, my very first chess book, as I have attempted to include, to the best of my knowledge, examples which are currently theoretically relevant, as well as some of my

own games, in particular my correspondence games which always require months of analysis.

Acknowledgements

I would especially like to thank the following for their help in making this work possible:

IMs Goh Wei Ming, Lim Yee Weng and Miodrag Perunovic for their help in assessing positions and providing key advice.

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Assistant Editor, IM Richard Palliser for his meticulous proofreading and editing (even working at the book on Christmas Day!).

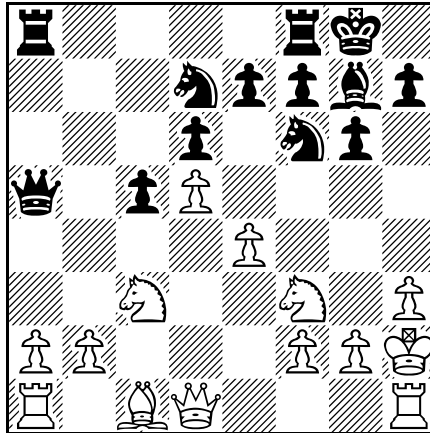
Most of all, I want to thank my wife, WFM Yip Fong Ling, for her constant encouragement, full support and valuable 'time-off' to write my first chess book, a cherished ambition of mine.

Junior Tay,
February 2014,
Balestier, Singapore

there is no chance for Black to play for a win due to the need to blockade White's strong passed d-pawn.

Game 12
A.Mastrovasilis-Ki.Georgiev
Skopje 2012

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 b5 4 cxb5 a6 5 bxa6 ♙xa6 6 ♞c3 d6 7 ♘f3 g6 8 e4 ♙xf1 9 ♚xf1 ♙g7
10 h3 0-0 11 ♚g1 ♞bd7 12 ♚h2 ♚a5



13 ♜e1 ♜fb8

A good alternative is 13...♞b6!? 14 ♜e2 ♞fd7 15 ♜c2 ♞c4 16 ♚e2 ♚a6 17 ♜b1 ♜fb8 18 b3 ♞ce5 19 ♚xa6 ♞xf3+ 20 gxf3 ♜xa6 with good compensation.

14 ♜e2

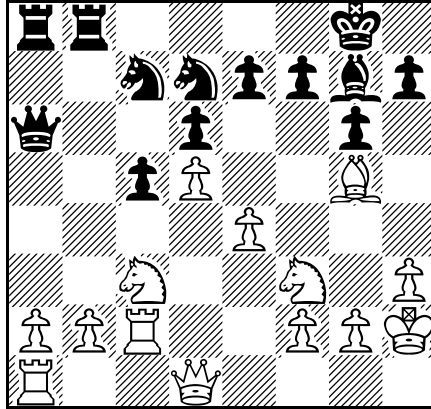
Commencing the standard rook manoeuvre.

14...♞e8 15 ♜c2 ♞c7

15...♜b4!? is a good alternative.

16 ♙d2

16 ♙g5 can be met by the stock pawn sacrifice 16...♚a6!?



For example, 17 ♙xe7 (after 17 ♚c1 ♜b5 18 ♞xb5 ♝xb5 White erroneously hit on the idea of exchanging e-pawns with 19 ♙d2 ♞f6 20 ♙c3 ♞xe4 21 ♙xg7 ♜xg7 22 ♚e3 ♞f6 23 ♚xe7?? only to get his queen trapped after 23... ♝e8 24 ♚c7 ♞xd5 25 ♚d7 ♞f6 26 ♚c7 ♞b7 and 0-1 in D.Stamenkovic-N.Ristic, Vrnjacka Banja 2009) 17... ♞b5! 18 ♚e2 (or 18 ♞xb5 ♝xb5 19 ♚e2 ♞b7 20 ♝e1 f6 and White will have problems extricating that bishop on e7) 18... ♞xc3 19 bxc3 ♝e8 20 ♚xa6 (if 20 ♙g5 ♚a4 with good compensation) 20... ♝xa6 21 ♙g5 ♝xe4 and Black has a typical Benko endgame where White has to guard the a2, c3 and d5 weaknesses.

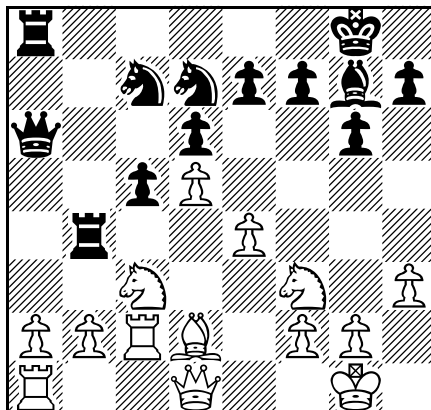
16... ♚a6

Of course, the regular watering spot for the queen.

17 ♚g1

White readies himself for the endgame by putting the king closer to the centre. To be honest, it is quite difficult for him to find an active plan.

17... ♝b4!



Encouraging White to kick the rook with a2-a3. This is an interesting psychological ploy as it gives White the opportunity to offer to return the pawn.

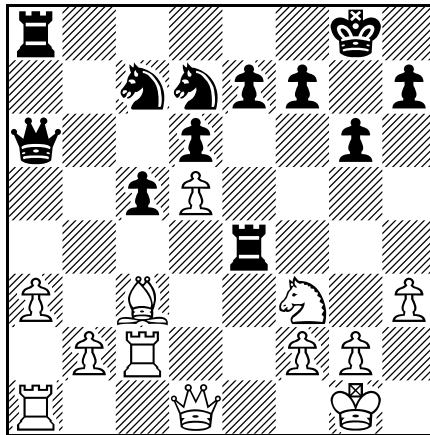
18 a3?!

Accepting the challenge.

Exercise: Can you find a stronger alternative for White to effect the ...♙xc3; bxc3 ♖xe4 exchange? Note that 18 ♖e1 runs into ♗d3.

Answer: White's strongest move is 18 ♖c1! as after 18...♙xc3?? 19 ♙xc3 ♖xe4 20 ♖h6 f6 21 ♘g5 it's all over. Although White can still hold on after the far superior 18...♘e5! 19 ♘xe5 ♙xe5 20 f3 ♗d3 21 ♙h1, under tournament conditions, it is highly likely that he would not be able to defend optimally against the sustained pressure.

18...♙xc3! 19 ♙xc3 ♖xe4



Georgiev's assessment is spot-on. Black has precisely calculated that White doesn't have enough time to launch a kingside attack with the help of the unopposed bishop. Black must calculate extremely accurately when trading his beloved dark-squared bishop for the c3 knight, as this leaves his kingside exposed on the dark squares. Thus, either he must have sufficient defensive cover or his queenside initiative has to be strong enough to prevent White from taking advantage of the bishop's absence.

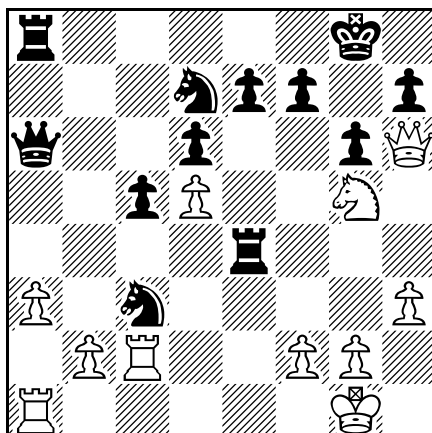
20 ♗d2

Hoping to rush to h6. Instead, after 20 ♘g5 ♖f4! (a nice way to surround the d5-pawn) 21 ♗d2 ♖f5 22 ♖e1 ♖e8 23 ♘e4 ♖xd5 24 ♖h6 f6 White's initiative has fizzled out.

20...♘b5!

The dangerous bishop must be evicted from the board.

21 ♖h6 ♘xc3 22 ♘g5!



22...♘f8!

Question: Why not the more active 22...♘f6?

Answer: Georgiev probably did not want White to obtain some counterplay after 23 ♖xc3 ♗e5 24 ♖f3 ♗b7 25 ♗xf6 exf6 26 ♗xh7+ ♔f8 27 ♗h6+ ♔e8 28 ♘h7 ♔e7 29 ♗h4 g5 30 ♗h6 ♗xd5 31 ♗xf6+.

23 ♖xc3

23 ♖xc3 is met by 23...♗e5 24 ♖f3 f6 25 ♘xh7 ♗h5! 26 ♘xf6+ exf6 27 ♗d2 ♔f7 with a clear advantage for Black.

23...♗e2!

Benko Gambit players love exchanging pieces as this accentuates the weaknesses of the white pawns.

24 ♗xe2 ♗xe2 25 ♘f3

Giving the queen a route back as Black was threatening to go pawn picking.

25...♗b2 26 ♗e1 ♗a7

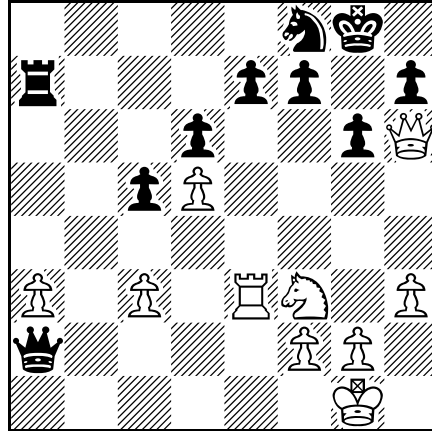
Black is in no hurry.

27 ♗e3?

White attempts to defend laterally and perhaps hoped to use the rook for a last-ditch kingside assault. 27 c4 ♗xa3 was the lesser evil.

27...♗a2!

Once d5 drops, the rest is easy for Black as his central pawns start rolling.



28 ♖g5 ♜xd5 29 ♜f3 e6

The end of the attack. Now the black central pawns take the limelight.

30 ♜h4 f5 31 ♜e3 e5 32 ♖f3 ♜xa3 33 ♜e7 ♜a1+ 34 ♖h2 e4 0-1

F) The Hockey Puck Punt g4

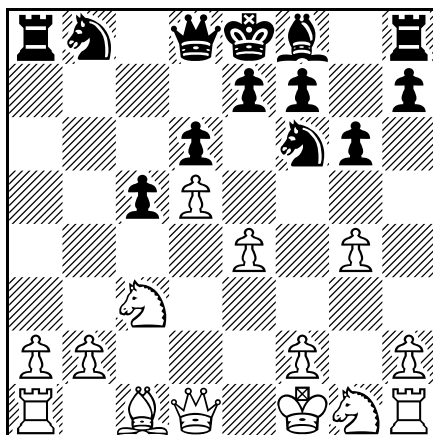
Lastly, we examine the 'hockey puck punt' with g2-g4, which is an attempt by White to gain space on the kingside or to start a brazen kingside hack. Recent grandmaster games show that Black is holding his own here as we'll now see.

Game 13
S.Mamedyarov-O.Abdulov
 Baku 2011

1 c4 ♖f6 2 d4 c5 3 d5 b5 4 cxb5 a6 5 bxa6 g6 6 ♖c3 ♜xa6 7 e4

White can also play in 'Four Pawns Attack style' with 7 f4: for example, 7...♜g7 8 ♖f3 ♜a5 9 ♜d2 0-0 10 e4 ♜xf1 11 ♜xf1 d6 12 e5 ♖e8 13 ♜e2 ♜a6 14 ♜e4 ♖c7 15 ♜f2 ♖d7 16 ♜g1. We've followed J.Murey-M.Hebden, London 1988, where Black could have seized the initiative with 16...f5! 17 exf6 (after 17 ♜e3 ♜b7 Black is calling the shots) 17...♖xf6 18 ♜xe7 ♜fe8 19 ♜xc7 ♜ac8 20 ♖b5 ♜xb5 21 ♜a5 ♜xa5 22 ♜xa5 ♖xd5 with an excellent game.

7...♜xf1 8 ♖xf1 d6 9 g4!?



Question: What's this? Did White accidentally nudge his g-pawn a square too far?

Answer: Aside from proving the g2-square for the king to tuck itself into, 9 g4, if not stopped by Black, will lead to the space-gaining g4-g5 push and perhaps more aggression with h4-h5.

9...♙g7

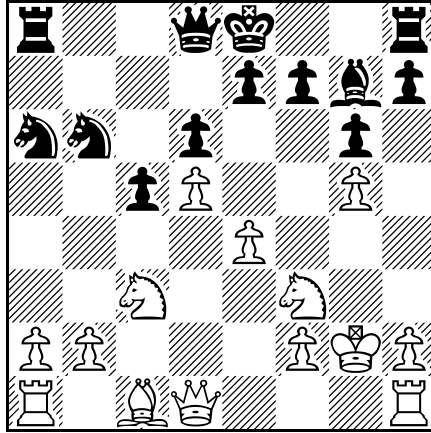
Another option is to put the question to the g-pawn with 9...♚c8: for example, 10 g5 ♖h5 11 ♙g2 h6 12 h4 ♘d7 13 ♘ge2 ♗e5 14 ♖f4 (after 14 ♖g3 ♖xg3 15 fxg3 the e5-knight sits snugly on its unassailable outpost) 14...hxg5! 15 ♖xh5 ♗xh5 16 ♙xg5 ♙g7 17 ♗h3 c4! when Black already enjoyed a great space and developmental advantage in J.Clavijo-E.Real de Azua, Havana 2009.

10 ♙g2 ♖a6!?

Black develops the knight on a6 to give the f6-knight access to d7 if White goes for g4-g5. Also possible is 10...0-0 11 g5 ♖h5 when after 12 ♘ge2 e5 13 h4 f6 14 ♚d3 ♗a7 15 ♚h3 ♗af7 Black had a powerful attack looming on the kingside in M.Vlasenko-E.Solozhenkin, St Petersburg 2005.

11 g5 ♘d7 12 ♖f3 ♖b6

Black aims to play on the queenside with a future ...♖a4 or ...♖c4 foray.



13 ♕f4 ♞c7

Giving the b6-knight even easier access to a4.

14 h4

Amazingly White is playing for mate.

14...0-0!?

Very brave, castling into the attack. Black trusts that White does not have enough firepower to breakthrough on the kingside.

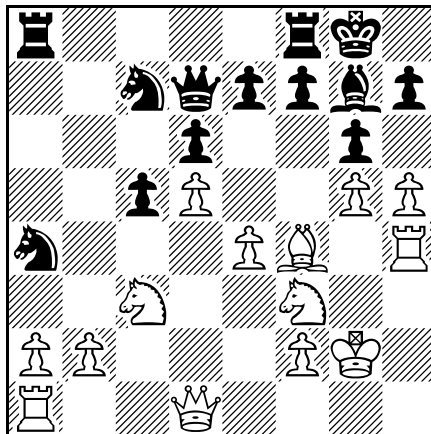
15 h5 ♕d7!

A dual-purpose move, contesting the g4- and a4-squares simultaneously.

16 ♖h4

Preventing ...♕g4+.

16...♞a4!



Forcing matters on the queenside.

The Benko Gambit: Move by Move

17 e5!?

White goes for broke before he is positionally throttled.

17...♞xb2 18 ♚d2 ♞a4 19 ♞e2 ♞b6?!

After 19...♚fb8!, preparing an invasion on b2, White is in serious trouble.

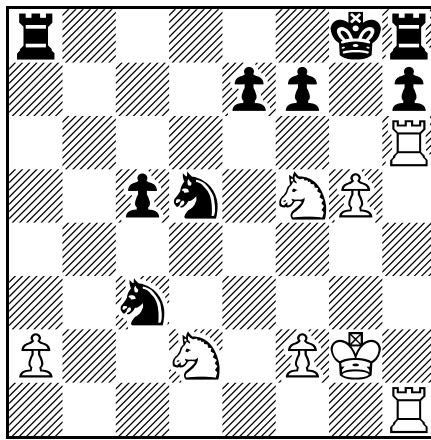
20 ♞c3

White is allowed to restructure his set-up.

20...♞a4 21 ♞e4!

With this strong pawn sacrifice, White is able to lop Black's dangerous pieces off the board and pose some threats to the black king.

21...dxe5 22 ♙xe5 ♚xd5 23 ♙xg7 ♚xd2 24 ♞fxd2 ♞xg7 25 ♚ah1 gxh5 26 ♚xh5 ♚h8 27 ♞g3 ♞d5 28 ♚h6 ♞ac3 29 ♞f5+ ♚g8 ½-½



Here a truce was declared. Black is poised to win the a-pawn as well, but a draw against an opponent nearly 400 Elo points higher is not to be sneered at.