

## 2020 Candidates Tournament Round 5

Ian Nepomniachtchi – Wang Hao  
Annotations by GM Jacob Aagaard

### Petroff Defense [C42]

Ian Nepomniachtchi (2774)

Wang Hao (2762)

FIDE Candidates Tournament (5.4),  
22.03.2020

In order to understand this game fully, there are three concepts I would like to introduce.

1. Plus equal. One player has a slight advantage and will be able to pose the opponent continuous problems throughout the game. Only once the problems have been fully solved the draw will become obvious. A lot of players in the elite aim for this in their opening preparation, but it is not always so easy to achieve it.

2. The four types of black openings. The first type are bad openings. If White knows what he is doing he will get a real advantage out of the opening. Think of the Alekhine. The second type are the ones where one player have to show an inordinate knowledge and Precision in order to achieve equality. Then there is the third type, the one Wang Hao went for, where one player makes some minor concession in order to achieve solidity, with the intention of slowly neutralising the pressure. Finally, we have the critical variations, where Black takes on the danger of losing the game horribly, but if he does not, he will get a fully equal game and often a lot of winning chances. Here we can think of the

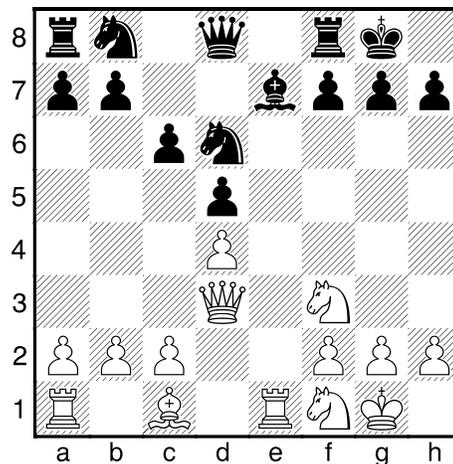
Najdorf. Alekseenko - Vachier-Lagrave today is a perfect example.

3. The principle of the worst placed piece. In simple positions (where there is minimal tactics) this is often an important factor. Improve the worst placed piece and your positions improve.

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.d4 d5 6.Bd3 Bf5**

This is the current trend in the Petroff.

**7.0-0 Be7 8.Re1 0-0 9.Nbd2 Nd6 10.Nf1 Bxd3 11.Qxd3 c6**



Black has achieved a solidity in a symmetrical structure. But his development is a bit behind and White is more active. White will continue

to apply pressure and it will then be up to Black at some point to play a few good moves in order to equalise. In short, both players were heading here and knew what they were heading for. It is quite common that players want to apply pressure with White and are OK trying to neutralise it with Black.

### 12.Bf4 Na6

Almost everything has been played here. Nepomniachtchi plays an obvious novelty, recommended by Stockfish.

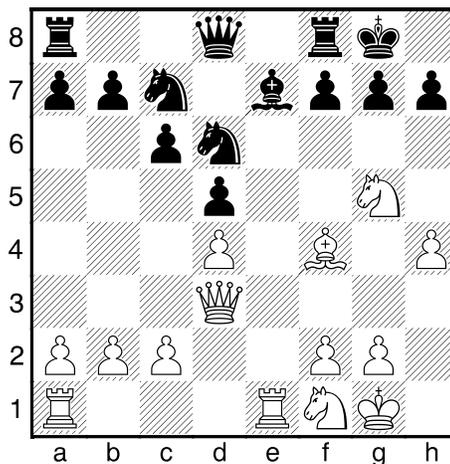
### 13.h4!?N

A generally sensible move.

### 13...Nc7

Black's other natural move 13...Ne4 is met with a nice refutation: 14.Ng3! f5 Without this move it makes no sense to play ...Ne4. 15.Qb3! Qb6 16.c3 White has a nice advantage. He will continue with Ne2, h5, Ne5 with a nice advantage. There are several reasons why White is better. Most obviously that he will be able to play f3, while Black cannot repair the damage done to the e5-square.

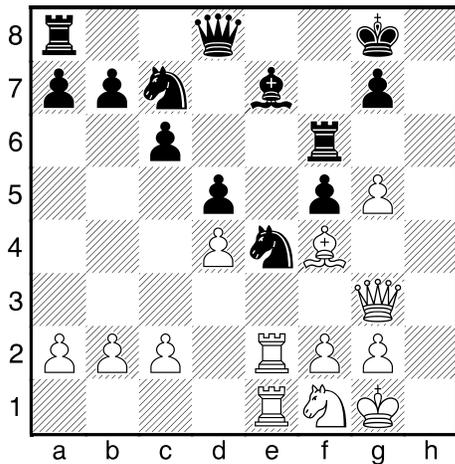
### 14.Ng5!



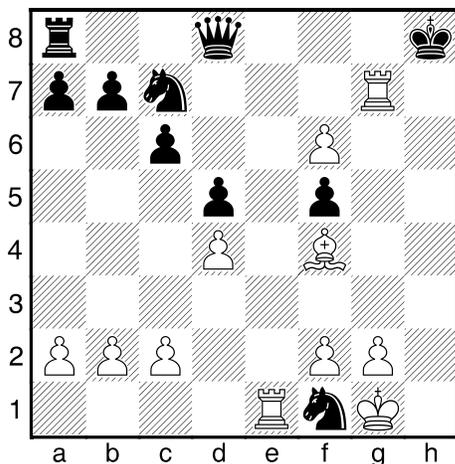
The key idea. Black will have to make a concession of some sort.

### 14...Bxg5

The real alternative was 14...g6 15.Ne3 h6 16.Nf3 h5 17.Re2±; 14...f5?! looks bad, on account of 15.Qg3! , when White has managed to create tactical threats already. 15...Rf6 16.Re2 leads to a big advantage for White. You can easily see things go wrong for Black tactically. There are too many threats. 16...h6?! 17.Rae1! hxg5? (17...Bf8 18.Nf3) 18.hxg5 Ne4



19.gxf6!? This queen sacrifice is not necessary, but it is very compelling. (The simpler 19.Rxe4 just wins a piece.) 19...Nxc3 20.Rxe7 Nxf1 21.Rxc7+ Kh8



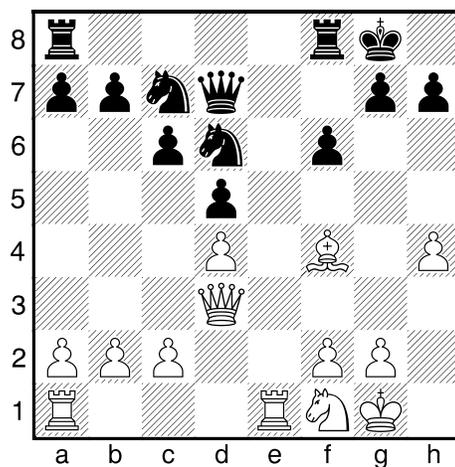
22.Ree7 Threatening mate in three. 22...Ne8 23.Rh7+ Kg8 24.f7+ Kxh7 25.f8Q+ With mate looming.

### 15.Bxc5 f6

The necessary concession.

### 16.Bf4 Qd7

This is a typical scenario in the plus equal mode. White has to work out how he can improve his position and keep up the pressure. The worst placed pieces are the a1-rook and the f1-knight. As Black is planning to play ...Rae8 and exchange rooks, there is little point to playing Re2. So White needs to bring the knight to f5. But which path it takes is not obvious.



### 17.Ng3?!

An inaccuracy of no importance to the course of the game, but it did offer Black a chance to equalise immediately.

The correct path for the knight to f5, was 17.Ne3! , when Black should play 17...Rae8, transposing to the game, as 17...g6?! does not work here. (And 17...Ne4? would leave Black under pressure after 18.f3 Ne6 19.Bh2 Nd6 20.Re2±) 18.h5 and after 18...Kg7 or (18...Kf7 White has 19.Ng4! , when the Black position is crumbling.)

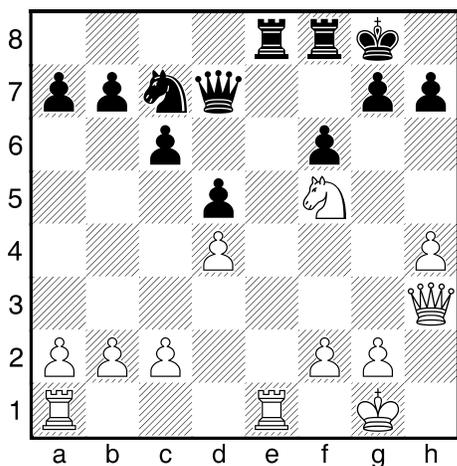
### 17...Rae8?!

Allowing White to occupy the f5-square with the knight.

Black here had a chance to reduce the pressure with 17...g6! 18.h5 Kf7 . White has no serious way to apply real pressure here. As we shall see, Black has a number of chances to defend in this game, but the failure to take the easy ones, means that he will later have to defend difficult positions.

### 18.Bxd6 Qxd6 19.Nf5 Qd7 20.Qh3

Threatening Nh6+, gaining an important tempo to make it possible to apply pressure.

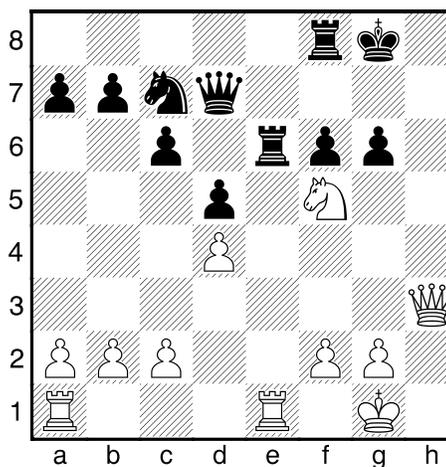


### 20...Kh8!

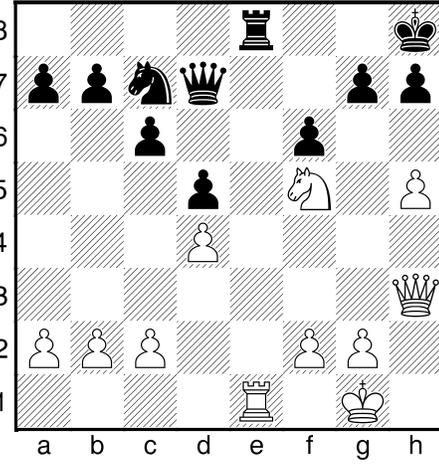
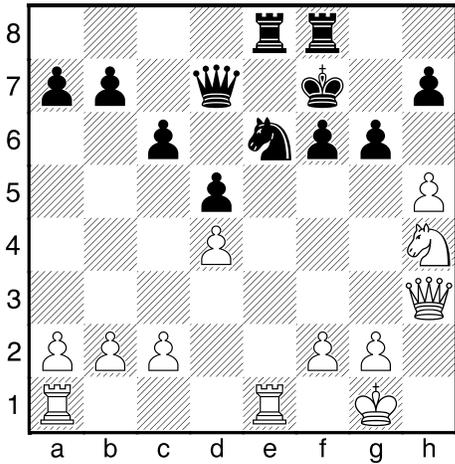
The only move. Nepomniachtchi said he remembered his preparation to around here.

20...Re6 could be considered. Black is

intending to play ...g6 or ...Rfe8. 21.h5! g6 Without this, nothing makes sense. (21...Rfe8 also 22.Re3! does not allow Black to relieve the pressure.) 22.hxg6 hxg6



Black is threatening to take the knight and retreat would relieve the pressure. White has to find a way to increase the pressure. 23.Re3!! Qh7 (23...gxf5 24.Rg3+ Kf7 25.Qh5+ Ke7 26.Rg7+ wins the queen.) 24.Rg3 Rfe8 (24...Qxb3 is met with an intermediate move. 25.Rxg6+) 25.Rf1! Re1 26.Nd6 Qxh3 27.gxh3± Black is under serious pressure with two pawns currently hanging; Black had another option. 20...Ne6? , which is unpleasant for Black after 21.h5 g6 22.Nh4!± Putting pressure on the weak squares g6. The best move is to take on h5, but this has clearly gone wrong. 22...Kf7?! is the critical move.



Here the strongest move is: 23.f4! One of the most important attacking techniques is to bring more wood to the fire whenever you can. Black now has to play the very sad (23.Re3 Qd6 24.Rae1 Ng5 holds, although Black is still under some pressure.) 23...gxh5 , when after 24.Re3 Black is unlikely to resist the pressure.

**21.h5!**

Keeping up the pressure and preventing ...g6.

**21...Rxe1+**

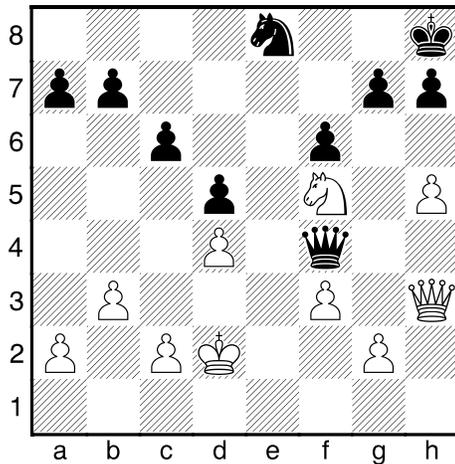
**22.Rxe1**

**Re8**

**23.Rxe8+**

This move seems entirely natural, but a deeper investigation of the position reveals that both kings are currently out of the game and that both players should have aimed at improving them.

Strongest was therefore 23.Kf1! , when after 23...Rxe1+ 24.Kxe1 Ne8 25.Kd2 White has a serious advantage. Against 25...Qf7 White has 26.Qh2! and after 25...Qe6 26.b3!? Qe4 27.f3 Qf4+

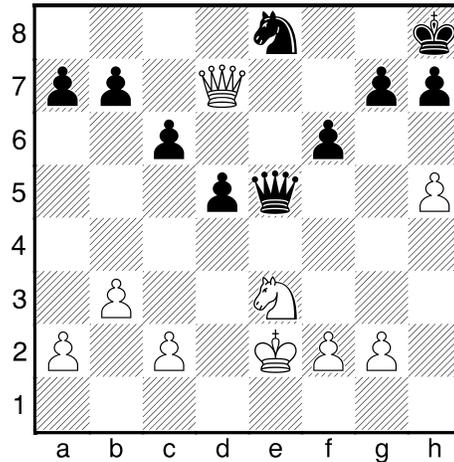


28.Kd3 White is threatening h6 and also Ne3 followed by an invasion of the white queen. 28...Qc7 is therefore forced, after which 29.Ne3± White is ready to increase the pressure. Next comes Qe6 or Qc8.

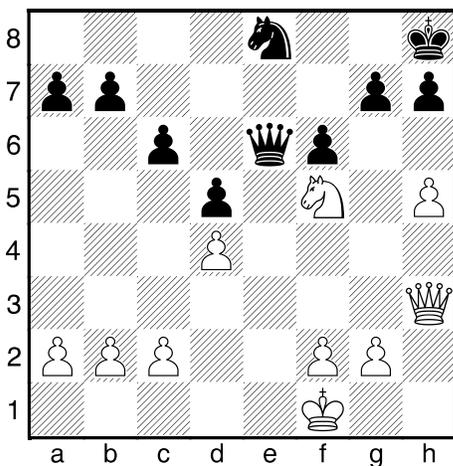
**23...Nxe8 24.g4?**

This move looks entirely natural, but the logic has not changed since the previous move. White is better after

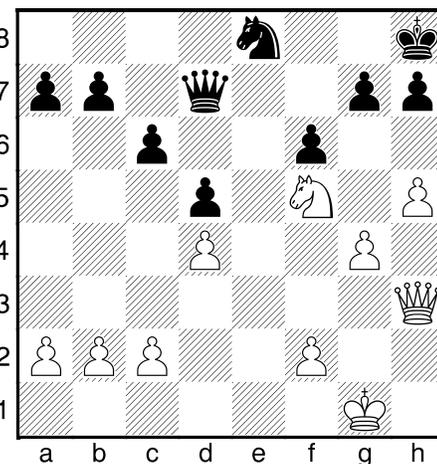
24.Kf1! Qe6 (24...Nc7 does not work. White has 25.Qa3! Kg8 26.Qxa7! and White is on his way towards the full point, although there is a lot of play left.; 24...a5!? is possible though.)



White will first remove the counterplay, then start picking out the weak pawns one by one. 29.f4! Qe4 30.c3! h6 31.Qxb7 Qxf4 32.Qxc6 Nc7 33.Qd7 White has a winning advantage. Long term he will advance the pawns on the queenside.; 24.Qa3 is premature. After 24...Kg8 Black is OK.



White has a number of decent moves here. I quite like 25.b3 , just slowly improving the position. White has a real advantage, but it is not clear to me how serious this advantage is. A key point is that the counterplay does not work for Black. 25...Qe4?! 26.Ne3! Qxd4 (26...Qe7 27.Qc8± is very unpleasant.) 27.Qd7 Qa1+ (27...Qe5 28.Qxb7 gives White a winning advantage. Black has too many weaknesses.) 28.Ke2 Qe5



**24...a6?**

In the same way Wang Hao fails to equalise. 24...Kg8! improves the worst placed piece.

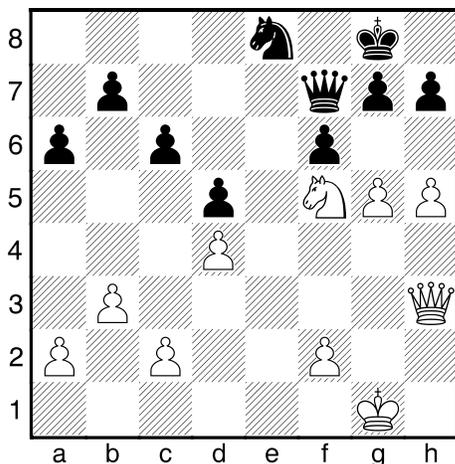
The king, which is not only not contributing, but also in risk for his life in the corner. 25.Qh2 (25.g5 Qf7 is not dangerous. More about this below.) 25...g6! Black is able to push back the knight and thereby equalise. 26.hxg6 hxg6 27.Ne3 Qc7 28.Qh6 Qg7 and it is easy to see a possible draw by repetition arising.; 24...Qe6 25.Qa3 would however be good for White.

### 25.b3?!

Nepomniachtchi explained after the game that he played too rashly here, missing the necessity for playing 25.Kf1! . The key idea is that 25...Kg8 has been prevented. After 26.g5! the Black king is forced back into the corner, which is hardly ideal. The tactical point to justify 25.Kf1 was 26...Qf7? 27.g6!, when the pawn cannot be taken with check, meaning White wins. 25...Qe6 is therefore better. After 26.Qh2 Kg8 27.Qb8 g6 28.hxg6 hxg6 29.Nh4 Qf7 30.Ng2 White retains just a little bit of pressure.

### 25...Qe6

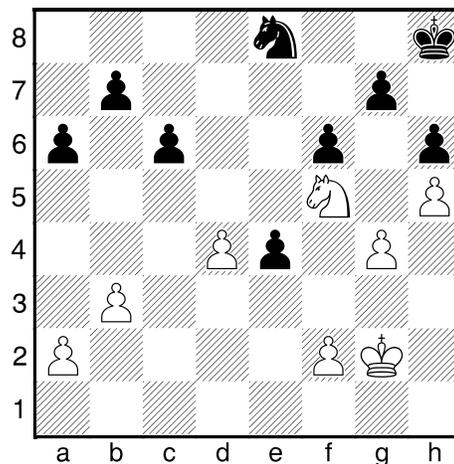
25...Kg8! would have equalised. After 26.g5 Qf7!



White no longer has g5–g6, as the pawn would be taken with check. Instead White would probably try 27.f4 , but after 27...Kf8 Black is fully OK.

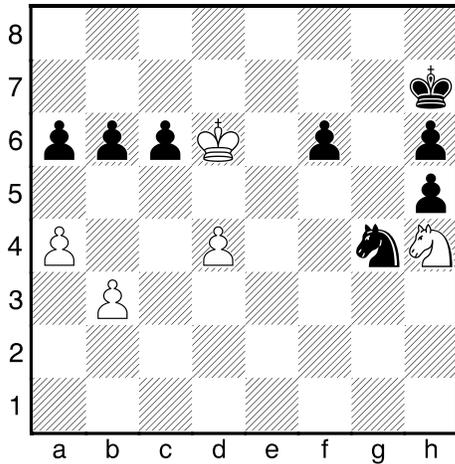
### 26.Ne3 Nd6?!

Both Nepomniachtchi thought that White would be better after 26...h6. Nepomniachtchi had considered playing 27.Qg3 Nd6 28.Qf4 with a slight pressure. Wang Hao had considered the following variation: 27.Nf5 Qe1+ This was Wang's idea. (27...Nd6!? 28.Qe3 Qd7! was also possible. After 29.Qe7 Qxe7 30.Nxe7 Nb5 31.Nf5 Na3 32.c3 Stockfish says that Black draws with any which move, but in reality he will have to play a good deal of decent moves to do so.) 28.Kg2 Qe4+ 29.Qf3 Qxc2 30.Qe3 Qe4+! 31.Qxe4 dxe4



But he felt that the endgame was risky. It is, but Black can hold a draw with extremely accurate play. 32.Kg3 Nc7 33.Nd6 b6 34.Kf4 Nd5+ 35.Kf5! e3 36.fxe3 Nxe3+ 37.Ke6 Nxe4 38.Nf5 Kh7 39.a4 (39.Ne7 f5! 40.Nxf5 Nf6 41.Ng3 b5 42.Kd6 g6 gives Black enough

counterplay on the kingside.) 39...g6 40.Nh4!  
 Keeping the Black king out of the game.  
 40...gxh5 41.Kd6

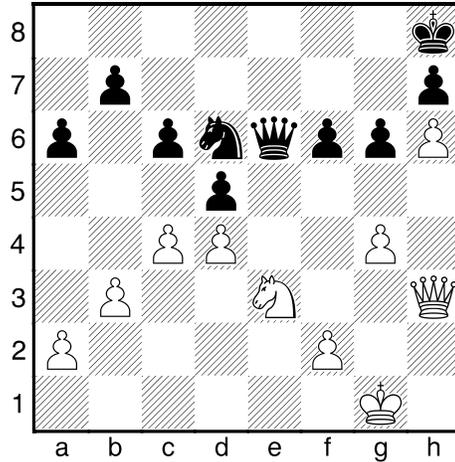


White's position looks very dangerous. For example 41...c5 42.a5! with a breakthrough. 41...Ne5!! This piece sacrifice saves the day. 42.dxe5 (42.Kc7 b5 43.Kb6 bxa4 44.bxa4 Nd3 45.Kxa6 c5 with a draw is another line.) 42...fxe5 43.Kxe5 Kg7 Black draws. If the white king eliminates the kingside, Black will eliminate the queenside.; Although this draws, it is a very straight and narrow path. Much better is for this reason 26...Kg8! 27.h6 g6 with a decent position, based on 28.Qg3 Qd6! and Black is fine.

### 27.h6!

This leads to an advantage quite similar to the games by AlphaZero and later Magnus Carlsen. The latter's coach, Peter Heine Nielsen wrote a nice article about the strategy behind this idea in the latest *New in Chess* magazine. Yesterday Caruana used the same idea of advancing the h-pawn against Nepomniachtchi and missed a chance to win the game at an opportune moment.

### 27...g6 28.c4



### 28...dxc4

If you look at the computer evaluation, you may think that 28...Kg8 29.cxd5 cxd5 30.Qf3 Ne4 31.Qf4 Qd6 32.Qxd6 Nxd6 33.Nxd5 Kf7 equalises. Well, you are both right and wrong. White's best try is probably 34.Kg2! , with ideas such as 34...Nb5 35.Kf3 Nxd4+ (35...Ke6? does not work here because of 36.Nf4+ , but it can be played on the previous move.) 36.Ke4 Nc6 37.f4 Ke6 38.f5+ gxf5+ 39.gxf5+ Kf7 This knight ending is a draw, but Black still have to play some accurate moves to prove it.

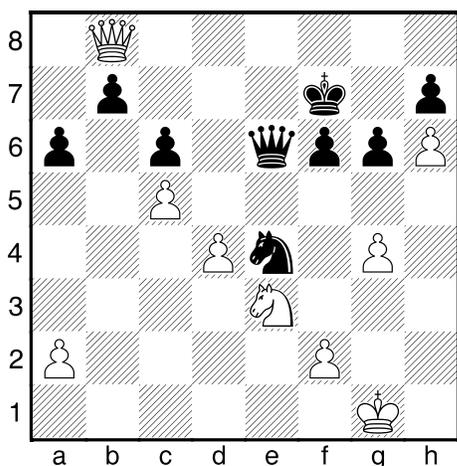
### 29.bxc4 Kg8?!

29...Nxc4? would lose directly to 30.Nxc4 Qxc4 31.Qh2! , where the queen plans to penetrate the black position, while keeping the defence of the h6-pawn up. 31...Kg8 The only move. (31...Qg8 32.Qd6! leads to a direct mate.) 32.Qb8+ Kf7 33.Qxb7+ Ke6 34.Qxh7 Qxd4 35.Qxg6 and White wins.

The best way to neutralise the pressure was 29...Nf7! . The knight is ready to deal with the main problem in Black's position, which is the strong h6-pawn. If White plays Qh2, Black has ...Qd6 with full equality. Thus the most dangerous option is 30.c5! where Black is entirely OK in many ways. The most direct is 30...Qxa2 31.Qh2 Qa1+ 32.Kg2 Qxd4 33.Qb8+ Qd8 34.Qxb7 Qe8 and White has no advantage at all.

### 30.Qh2! Kf7 31.c5 Nb5

Black also had a fantastic active defence with 31...Ne4!? 32.Qb8 (32.Qf4 Ke7! 33.a4 Kd7 also holds. Apparently.)



32...Qxa2!! This is a bit surprising. But White cannot defend f2 conveniently after he picks up the h7-pawn with check. 33.Qxb7+ Kf8 34.Qg7+ Ke8 35.Qh8+ Ke7 36.Qxh7+ Kd8 37.Qh8+ Kc7 38.Qg7+ Kd8 39.Nd1 Qe2 40.Qxg6 Qxd1+ 41.Kg2 Qxd4 and Black survives because of the counterattack against f2.

### 32.Qb8

Black has plenty of problems left to solve. The fact that they can be solved is of much less importance. In the game Wang Hao tried his best and failed.

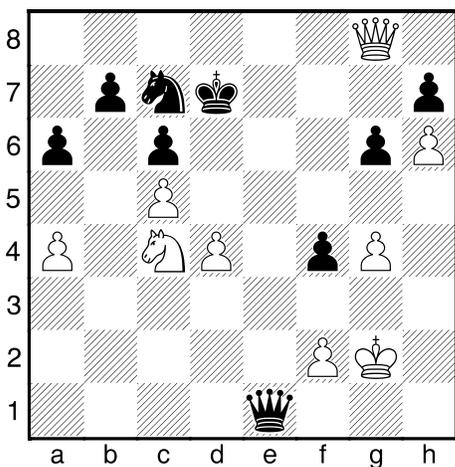
### 32...Qd7?

Finally the pressure leads to a decisive mistake. Black had two ways of saving the game, but both required some accuracy and understanding. Spending the last five minutes of his time, Wang Hao was not able to see in which direction he had to go.

Black had another computer defence after 32...Nxd4!? 33.Qxb7+ (33.Qh8 leaves Black with two defences. The smartass one has a very important illustrative point that I saw in another game yesterday, where it really was the only option available to hold the game. 33...Ke7!! (The human defence is obviously 33...Nf3+ 34.Kg2 Ng5 , defending the h-pawn, whereafter 35.Qg7+ Ke8 36.Qxb7 Qe4+ it is not surprising that Black makes the draw with a combination of counterplay and perpetual check.) 34.Qxh7+ Qf7 35.Qh8 Qf8 Black draws.) 33...Qe7 34.Qxa6 Qe4!! Nepomniachtchi was a true professional, telling the journalists exactly what he was thinking, holding nothing bad. (34...Qxc5 35.a4 is unpleasant for Black, although 35...f5! still offers him counterplay. 36.a5 fxg4 37.Qb7+ Ke6 38.a6 g3! Black has enough counterplay, even though White can still create problems for him.) 35.Qb7+ Ke6 36.Qxh7 Nepomniachtchi believed that there was no way Black could deliver a perpetual with the knight on e3 defending everything. But actually, there are several ways for Black to create the necessary counterplay. ...Qb1+

and ...Ne2. 36...Nf3+ 37.Kf1 Nd4 and finally 36...Ne2+ 37.Kf1 and the knight can retract to threaten ...Qh1 mate. But nicest is 37...Ng3+! 38.fxg3 Qf3+ with a draw.

The more human attempt was 32...Qe7, where White could still create problems for his opponent. 33.Nc4 (33.Qh8 Ke6 34.Nc2! is dangerous for Black, but accurate defence hold. 34...Nc3 35.Qg8+ Kd7! (35...Qf7? 36.d5+! Nxd5 (36...cxd5 37.Nd4+ Ke7 38.Qc8+-) 37.Nd4+ Ke7 38.Qb8 Qe8 39.Qxb7+ Qd7 40.Nxc6+ Ke8 41.Qa8+ Kf7 42.Kh1 where White is close to winning, as Black cannot play 42...Qxg4 on account of 43.Nd8+ and 44.Qxd5.) 36.Qb3 Nb5 37.a4 Nc7 38.Ne3 f5! 39.Qg8 f4 40.Nc4 Qe1+ 41.Kg2



41...f3+! Black survives by perpetual check. 42.Kxf3 Qd1+ 43.Ke4 Qxg4+ 44.Kd3 Qf5+ 45.Ke2 Qg4+ 46.Ke3 Qg5+=) 33...Qe1+ 34.Kg2 Qe4+ 35.Kh2 looks bad for Black, but after 35...Qf3! Black has enough counterplay to ensure the draw.

**33.Qh8! Ke6 34.f4! Nxd4**

34...Qxd4 35.Qe8#; 34...Qe7 35.f5+ Kd7 36.Kf2! leaves Black utterly lost. The main threat is 37.hxg6 fxg6 38.Qg7! and the h-pawn queens. And if Black plays 36...g5, he will face down the secondary threat 37.Nc4! when it is at least checkmate. So he has to play 36...gxf5 , when after 37.Nxf5 Qf7 38.a4 Black's position is disintegrating. He cannot allow the knight to land on d6. It will hurt too much.

**35.Qg8+ Qf7**

35...Ke7 36.Qxh7+ and the h-pawn queens.

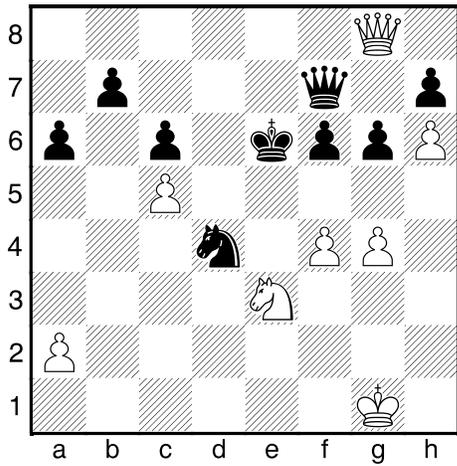
**36.Qc8+ Qd7**

36...Ke7 37.Qxb7+ Kf8 38.Qb8+ Qe8 39.Qd6+ and White picks up the knight.

**37.Qg8+**

At first Nepomniachtchi believed that he was winning after 37.f5+ gxf5 38.gxf5+ Ke7 39.Qh8 , but then realised that Black can defend the pawn with 39...Nf3+! 40.Kf2 Ng5 and Black is not worse at all.

**37...Qf7**



**38.Qd8!**

Wang Hao had missed this move. With the threat of mate on d6, Black has no options left.

**38...Qd7**

38...Nb5 39.a4 also wins a piece.

**39.f5+ gxf5 40.gxf5+ Nxf5 41.Qxd7+ Kxd7  
42.Nxf5 Ke6 43.Ne3**

**1-0**