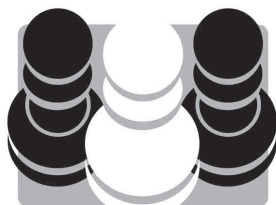


Learn from Bent Larsen

By

Mihail Marin

*To my wife Mariya, who shares my enthusiasm for
the games of one of the most remarkable players ever*



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Preface

Bent Larsen – A missed acquaintance

Coincidence decreed that on both occasions when, using South American terminology, I crossed the “puddle” to visit Argentina, it was to act as a second during World Championship-level events. In 2005, I was Judit Polgar’s second at the World Championship in San Luis, and four years later I accompanied Daniele Vocaturo and our friend and manager, Yuri Garrett, to the Under-20 World Championship in Puerto Madryn.

Even in our modern times, such a long trip can turn out differently than planned, and in 2009 Yuri had to rebook our return tickets from Buenos Aires. Due to the circumstances, I flew back to Europe one day earlier than my Italian friends, which resulted in me missing an episode I would gladly have been part of.

During their last evening spent in the Argentinian metropolis, Yuri and Daniele paid a visit to the Danish legend Bent Larsen. Memory is known to play unexpected tricks sometimes. Being familiar with his numerous pictures in chess magazines since my early teenage years, I was for many years convinced that I had occasionally seen Larsen after I entered the international arena, as I had the fortunate opportunity to do with many other great players from his generation, or even older.

Checking the statistics, I realised that I was wrong. Larsen played his last Olympiad and Interzonal long before I started participating in these events. One way or another, meeting him on that last evening would have been a real blessing. Fate knows its ways and offers compensations for everything. During their long chat, Yuri asked Larsen which books he would recommend to a young and talented player like Daniele. “From the modern ones... there is this book by Marin, in which he analyses the games of several great players.”

Larsen was obviously referring to my book *Learn from the Legends*, but it was with mixed feelings that I listened to Yuri as he was telling me about this episode. The simple fact that Larsen knew my name as a player and author was flattering enough, and his high opinion of my book was more pleasing than words can say. Nevertheless, at the same time I felt that something was wrong from my side: I had never systematically studied the games played by this great player, nor had I written any articles about him.

It was at that moment that I understood that I owed – to Larsen and to chess history – a capital work about him and to let him know about it. Sadly, Larsen passed away less than one year later, and I postponed my endeavour for a whole decade.

The charm of an uncompromising warrior

My latent curiosity, accumulated during the decades when I had only a vague knowledge of Larsen as a player, was fully rewarded when I started studying his games methodically. A mixed feeling of variety, freshness and depth invaded me from the first few games I played through and

analysed over the board, and it never faded away on my long journey examining more than 120 of his best wins.

The more my work advanced, the less I felt able to describe Larsen's style with just a few words: "Is it possible to talk about a style at all? Will a chess player conduct all his games in the same style?" These rhetorical questions launched by Larsen may be a bit pointless in the case of a wide range of players, but they surely cast a light over his own beliefs and faithfully describe his style or, if you wish, his absence of style.

Larsen was a brilliant attacker and tactician, embarking on concrete play at the first given opportunity. As obvious as that may be, Larsen himself wrote that he was not an exclusively tactical player, one openly aiming for complications even at the risk of landing into a worse position. This disclaimer opens new possibilities for understanding Larsen's thinking as a harmonious whole, but also for falling into the opposite extreme. For instance, Polugaevsky writes – contrary to the opinion of most commentators – that Larsen's main strength is his strategic play.

I believe that there is truth in all these statements, but the general portrait still requires some specifications. It is probable that Larsen's main approach was strategic, with tactics intended as a useful tool. However, this tool developed so strongly, and he resorted to it so frequently, that it became one of his possible *modus operandi* – an almost independent part of his global style. Larsen *is* a strategic player, but, to no lesser extent, a tactician, too!

Botvinnik adds a third dimension to the portrait: "Larsen can create things which did not exist in chess before." Indeed, many of Larsen's plans, tactics and attacks were unexpected and original. One brief glance at Larsen's games is enough to understand that it would be difficult to compare him with any other player that came before or after him.

Without prior knowledge, there is no genuine creativity nor originality. Larsen was familiar with the rich inheritance of the previous generations, both classical and hypermodern, but he related to it with a critical eye and an open mind. He used this to rehabilitate openings and plans which theoreticians and thinkers had long catalogued as dubious, or he simply opened new ways where long years of practice and analysis seemed to have settled everything.

Both over the board and in analysis, Larsen was an innate and incurable optimist and an uncompromising fighter. These were important parts of his strength, but also causes for occasional weakness. He would firmly believe in his chances to win in equal or even dry positions, and fight until all the hidden resources had been exhausted. Larsen knew how to find ways to create tension and generate active ideas as if out of nothing. Michelangelo famously said: "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." Larsen also freed ideas that only he could see...

Many times, this approach seemed to take him over the border of admissible risk, but in his best games of this kind, analysis proves that he was never in danger during his attempt to unbalance the position. True, there were also less fortunate cases when his optimism and fighting spirit would cause him to lose objectivity and ended in defeat, but Larsen explained that he did not mind this at all. "In my opinion, it is completely pointless to remain undefeated during the whole tournament and take, say, fifth place. (*In those years, round robin tournaments used to include around 20 players – M.M.*) In most of the cases, this is the result of over-cautious play, lacking fantasy. [...] In order to accumulate the needed number of points to take first place, one has to take risks in a series of games..."

All the technical and psychological qualities mentioned above characterized Larsen's play in all three phases of the game. We can notice, though, that his strategic originality was especially obvious in the opening and early middlegame, his tactical skills and accuracy in the late middlegame, while his squeezing chances out of dry stone is most astonishingly encountered in the endgame.

I cannot claim that I have illustrated all the facets of Larsen's style in the chapters below, but I have chosen those which impressed and taught me to the deepest extent. I have left aside a few of his most famous wins, as I could not classify them easily. On the other hand, you can find some of his lesser-known – but no less instructive – games that did fit into the general structure.

The time has come to let Larsen's games complete the detailed portrait of this highly inspiring player.

Mihail Marin
Bucharest, June 2022

Chapter 2

Initiative and Accuracy



Larsen with Donner and Keres

Even though the “ultimate” approved description of Larsen’s style was that of an original strategist, I believe that he mainly excelled in positions where he had the initiative. All his original and frequently mysterious plans seemed designed to catch the opponent on the wrong foot, allowing Larsen to switch to concrete play based on subtle dynamic nuances.

There are two main aspects I have noticed in the games where Larsen held the initiative:

If, during the earlier positional phase, some of his decisions could be discussed or even questioned from a modern perspective, in the dynamic sequences his accuracy was close to perfection.

Tightly connected to this, Larsen displayed amazing and very effective flexibility when having the initiative. Repeatedly moving with the same piece, unexpected retreats, or switches from one wing to the other are the most typical elements corresponding to this idea.

It is worth noticing that even during the strategic struggles – those with an apparent slow and static character – Larsen knew the value of each tempo and felt when he should use the dynamic nuances in order to reach a positional advantage.

The next game, won by Larsen against a reigning world champion at his peak, is a good example.

Anatoly Karpov – Bent Larsen

Tilburg 1980

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.d4 ♗xc4 4.♙d3 d5
5.♗xc5 ♗d7

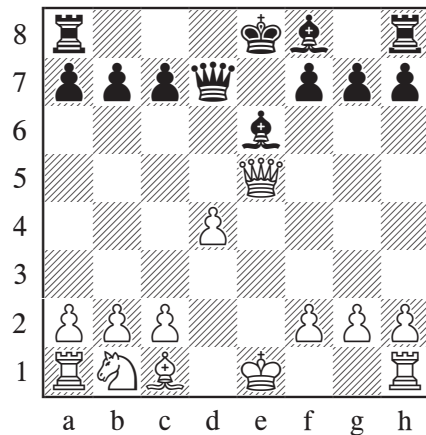
At the time, this was a relatively unexplored variation, but after this game it gradually became topical and has remained so to this day.

6.♞e2?!

Karpov does not believe in Larsen’s experiment and goes on a pawn-grabbing adventure.

Theory later developed along the lines of 6.♘xd7 ♙xd7 and 6.0–0.

6...♗xc5 7.♙xe4 dxe4 8.♞xc4 ♙e6 9.♞xe5
♞d7



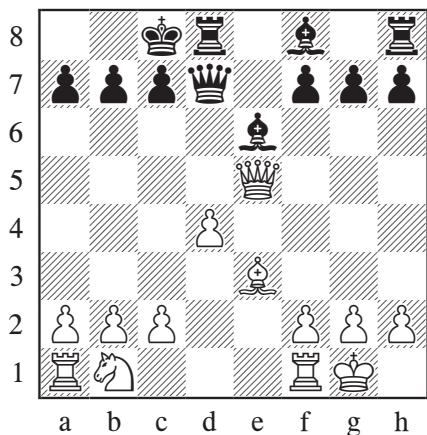
Black has free development and two potentially strong bishops. Abstractly, this should be enough to ensure him adequate compensation for the pawn, but concretely he still needs to work out some specific details.

10.0–0

Karpov did not go into this line empty-handed. The only previous game reaching this position had taken place three months earlier: White played 10.♘c3 0–0–0 11.♙e3 in Unzicker – Rogoff, Amsterdam 1980, allowing 11...♙b4, more or less transposing to the later phase of our main game.

Karpov’s novelty is aimed at preventing the unpleasant exchange on c3.

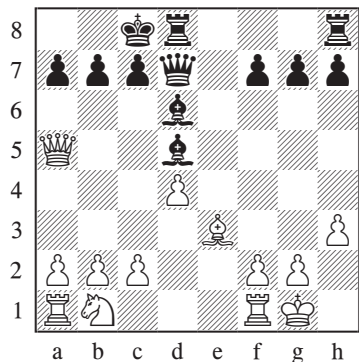
10...0–0–0 11.♙e3



When heading for this position, Karpov was surely aware of the fact that his kingside would be exposed to the bishops' pressure. He must have counted on the fact that Black's slight vulnerability on the queenside would allow him to be the first to create concrete threats. This would, indeed, be the case had Larsen played the natural:

11...♔d6 12.♙a5 ♕d5 13.h3

But not 13.♙xa7? ♙g4 14.f3 ♙h4 with a decisive attack.



White displays some activity, forcing Black to act resolutely, in order to use his lead in development.

13...b6

13...♖b8?! yields White an important tempo for completing his development: 14.♘c3 ♕c4 15.♗fd1±

13...c5 is an interesting alternative, leading

to unclear complications.

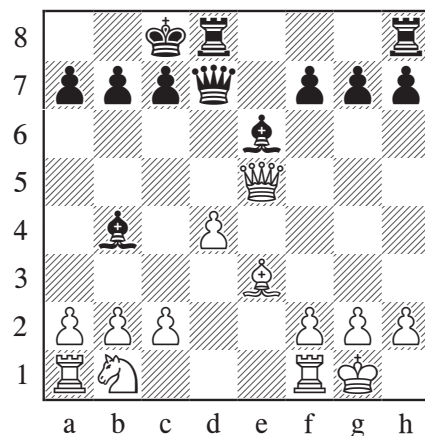
14.♙xa7 ♙c6

This position is not entirely clear, but Black does not have the desired stability in the centre and on the queenside, thus delaying his kingside pawn attack.

Larsen's next move must have come as a cold shower.

11...♕b4!!

Just a blow in the wind at first sight, but this strong move restricts both the white queen and knight. White can already forget about his queenside attack.



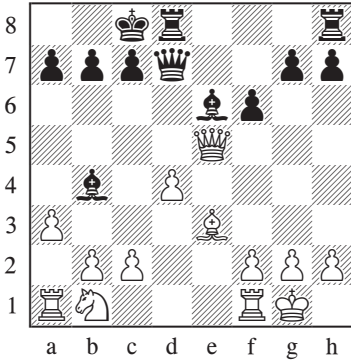
12.♘c3

Coming from Karpov, an outstanding opposite-coloured bishops specialist, this is a surprising positional concession. Caught by surprise, the World Champion must have considered the alternatives even more dangerous. In fact, he was not completely wrong, and the following analysis highlights some of the dangers. For example:

a) 12.a3

Black can drive the white queen away from the fifth rank before returning with the bishop to the attacking position on d6.

12...f6!



Now there are three moves to consider:

a1) 13.♖h5?

This allows Black to gain a few tempos for his attack:

13...♙g4 14.♖h4 g5 15.♖h6

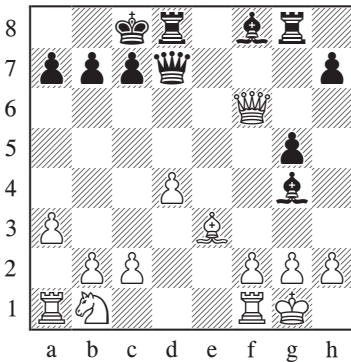
Trying to keep things under control, but the queen alone cannot achieve that.

If 15.♖g3 then 15...♙d6 16.f4 ♖hg8, with a decisive initiative.

15...♙f8!

Gaining time for the attack by chasing the exposed queen.

16.♖xf6 ♖g8



All Black's pieces are ready for the attack.

The immediate threat is ...♙g7 and if:

17.♖e5 ♙d6!

Black can unleash an elegant attacking mechanism, as indicated by Jacob Aagaard:

18.♖e4 ♖de8 19.♖d3 ♙f3!!

With the brutal threat of ...♖g4.

20.♖e1

In the event of 20.gxf3 ♖h3+, the parts played by the rook on g8 and the pawn on g5 are obvious, since 21.f4 gxf4+ mates soon.

20...♙xh2+!

White's poorly-defended king cannot stand such a massive attack.

21.♔xh2 ♖e6 22.♙d2 ♖h6+ 23.♔g1 ♖h1+!

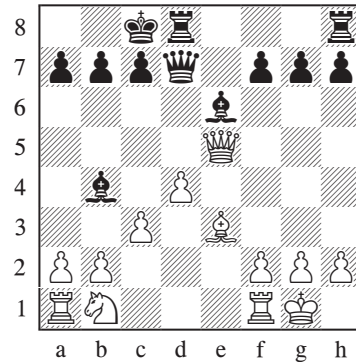
24.♔xh1 ♖h3+ 25.♔g1 ♖xg2#

a2) 13.♖g3 does not slow down Black's initiative: 13...♙d6 14.f4 ♙f5 with fantastic play on the light squares.

a3) The best chance is 13.♖e4! ♙f5 14.♖f3 ♙d6 15.♖e2=, when Black has just enough compensation for the pawn.

b) 12.c3

This consolidates the central pawn but deprives the knight from its most active developing square.

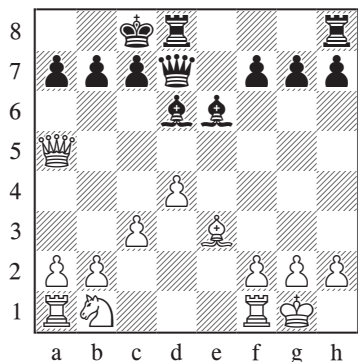


12...♙d6!

With ♘c3 unavailable, Black will enjoy more stability than in the similar line with the pawn on c2 resulting after 11...♙d6.

12...f6 is less accurate because after 13.♖g3 ♙d6 White has 14.♙f4 with a slight edge.

13.♖a5



13...♔d5!

Placing the bishop on an attacking square and consolidating his own queenside too.

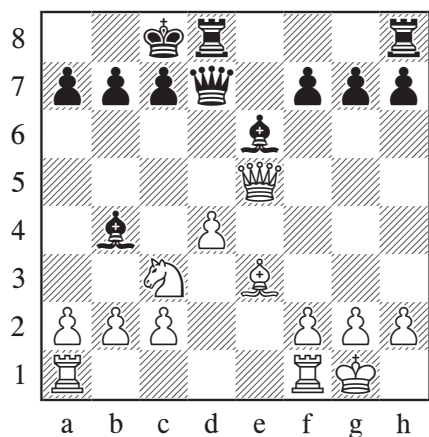
14.h3

Of course not: 14.♖xd5? ♔xh2†!

14...♔b8 15.♗d2 b6 16.♖a6 f5 17.f3 g5

With a dangerous kingside initiative.

Without exhausting the subject, these lines suggest that Larsen's concept was deeper than Karpov's.



12...f6!

Taking full advantage of the bishop's position. Before exchanging on c3, Black forces the queen to move far from the queenside.

13.♖g3 ♔xc3 14.bxc3

A brief glance is enough to reveal that White's extra pawn does not have any meaning, while

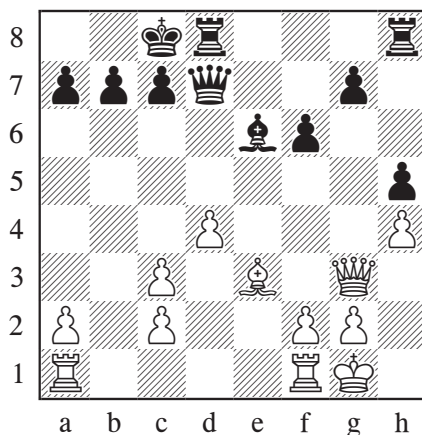
Black's control over the light squares ensures him the more pleasant play. Larsen understood that he could get more than just a blockade on c4 and d5.

14...h5!

This natural move forces White to either allow a dangerous attack or create new weaknesses on the light squares.

15.h4

Karpov decides to avoid the former situation, which could arise after 15.h3 g5. However, he may well have underestimated Larsen's next move, which leads to a very promising version of the latter scenario.

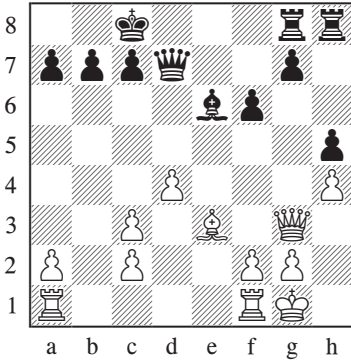


15...g5!

This is the most natural and also the best plan, but it is worth mentioning that Black should act without delay. I would place this move into the same category as 11...♔b4!!.. In a position where the static elements seem to be predominant, Larsen finds the only move offering him an advantage.

Many would consider preparing the thrust, but this offers White a tempo to organize his counterplay:

15...♖dg8



16.♙ad1 g5

16...♙d5 allows 17.♙h3 ♙xh3 18.gxh3. Black is slightly better, but without queens, White's position is survivable.

17.d5!

A thematic, anti-blockading move.

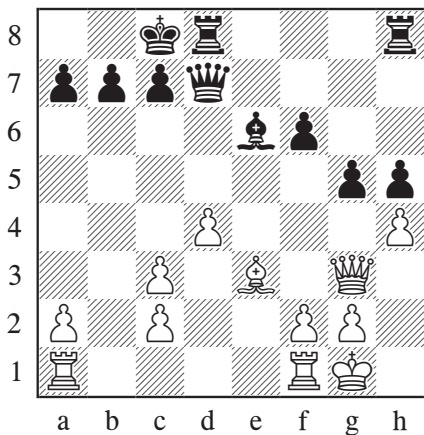
17...♙xd5 18.hxg5!

18.c4? does not work tactically, due to 18...gxh4 19.♙h2 ♙xg2 20.♙xd7 ♙c6† winning material.

18...h4 19.♙h3

White is struggling, but the queen exchange once again makes his life easier.

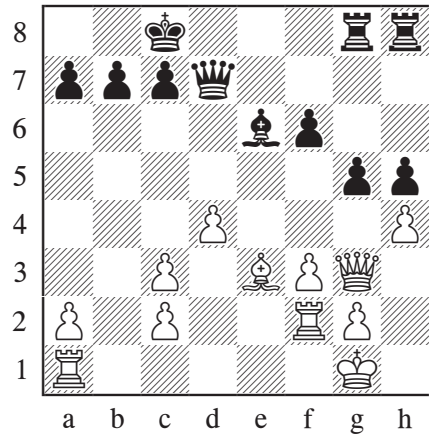
Judging by Karpov's 20th move, we can be sure that he would have used the opportunity to ease his defence had Larsen hesitated with his kingside pawn break. We cannot know whether Larsen foresaw all this, or simply felt that he should break on the kingside at once.



16.f3

Karpov had good reasons to refrain from pawn-grabbing: 16.hxg5 h4 17.♙h2 (17.♙f4 fxg5 is no improvement) 17...h3 18.g3 fxg5 19.♙xg5 ♙df8 20.♙f1 ♙d5 After ...♙g2 the white queen will look simply pathetic. White's extra pawns are of little importance and his king would most likely get into trouble too.

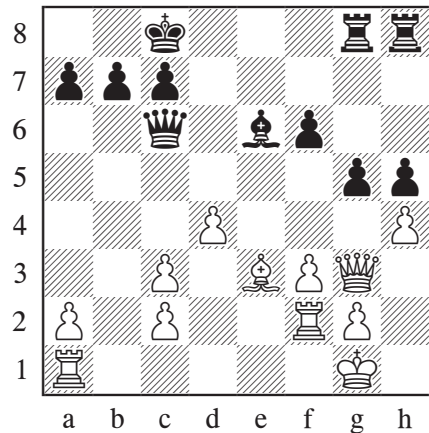
16...♙dg8 17.♙f2



17...♙c6?!

Larsen tries to play across the whole board, but this slows down his kingside attack a bit.

17...g4! would have been stronger, with play similar to the game. If 18.♙e1 ♙d5 and White cannot maintain control over the light squares.

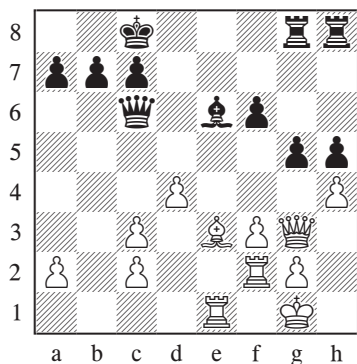


18.♔d2?

This passive move returns the tempo offered by Black's previous move. The mutual inaccuracies at this level were a result of the false belief that the pawn on c3 is important.

Karpov could have used the "free" move with: 18.♖e1!

As witnessed so many other times, development should be the highest priority. Concretely, White should aim to attack Black's only relative weakness, the pawn on c7, without delay.

**18...gxh4!**

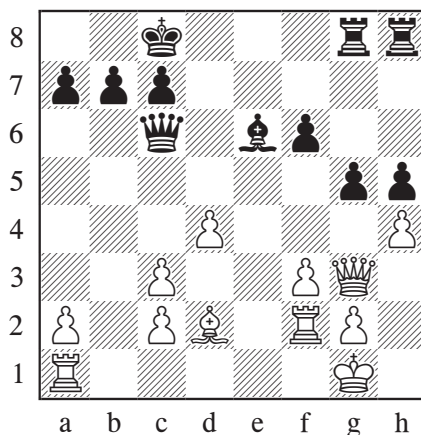
The best way of retaining part of the previous advantage.

18...g4 allows White to activate his newly-developed rook: 19.♔f4! gxf3 20.♖xf3 ♔d5 21.♖h3† ♖g4 22.♗e7 with enough counterplay. For example: 22...♔d8 23.♖e3 ♔xg2 24.♔xc7† ♔c8 25.♔g3 with unclear play.

If 18...♖xc3 then 19.♔d2 ♖c6 20.hxg5 h4 21.♖f4 fxg5 22.♖f6 and White has solved all his problems and the position is equal.

19.♖h4 ♔xa2!†

White has managed to avoid immediate kingside problems, but after retrieving the pawn, Black has an advantage on the other wing. The a-pawn could become threatening in the endgame.

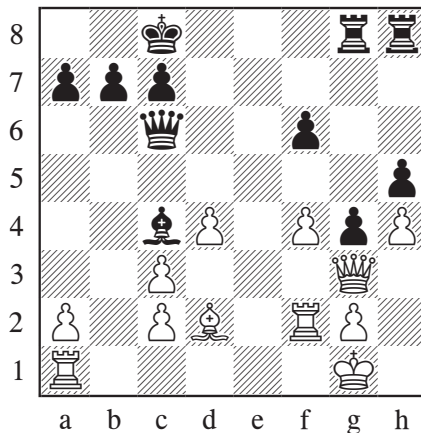
**18...g4!**

Everything returns to "normal" now.

19.f4

A sad necessity.

It is too late for 19.♖e1, as after 19...♔d5 the white bishop is too passive to contribute to White's counterplay.

19...♔c4

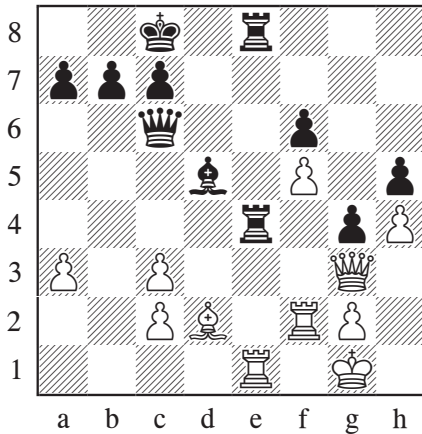
With such unchallenged control of the light squares all over the board, Black's position is strategically won. We cannot know how Larsen would have coped with the technical phase had Karpov defended passively, as the World Champion finally loses his patience.

20.d5

At this level, such a move should not bring anything positive, but 20.♞e1 ♞e8 is no bed of roses either.

20...♙d5 21.f5

Another anti-blockading move but dooming the white f-pawn.

21...♞e8 22.a3 ♞e4 23.♞e1 ♞he8

Black is winning already. The game later simplified to a rook and opposite-coloured bishops ending, with two extra pawns for Black. I shall include the moves, but no more comments are needed:

24.♞xe4 ♞xe4 25.♙h2 ♞c5 26.♙f4 ♞e1
 27.♙d2 ♞a1 28.♞e3 ♞d6† 29.♞f4 b6 30.c4
 ♙xc4 31.♞d4 ♞xd4 32.♞xd4 ♙b5 33.♙h6
 ♞xa3 34.♙g7 ♙d7 35.♞f4 ♞a5 36.♙xf6 ♙xf5
 37.c3 ♙e6 38.♙g3 ♞d5 39.♞e4 ♙d7 40.♙e5
 ♞d2 41.♙f4 ♞xg2 42.♙g5 ♞c2 43.♙xh5
 g3 44.♙xg3 ♞xc3 45.♙e5 ♞c4 46.♞e3
 ♙d5 47.♞a3 ♙e6 48.♙g3 ♙f5 49.♙h6 a5
 50.♙g7 ♙g4 51.♙f6 a4 52.♞e3 ♙f3 53.♙e1
 ♞c1 54.♞e7 ♙h3 55.♙d2 ♞c4 56.♞e3 ♙g2
 57.♙e1 ♞c1 58.♙d2 ♞d1 59.♙c3 c5 60.♞e7
 b5 61.♙e5 a3 62.♞h7 b4 63.h5 b3 64.h6 b2
 65.♞g7† ♙f2 66.♙g3† ♙e3
 0-1

In this game, Larsen's 11th and 15th moves corresponded to immediate concrete and dynamic purposes, but mainly served to gain a static positional advantage.