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Novice Nook

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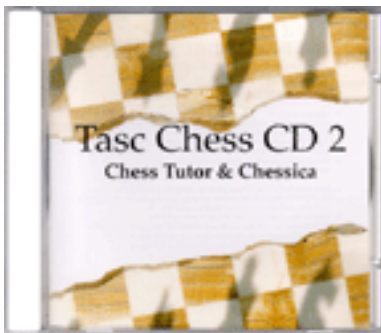
The Underrated Removal of the Guard

IN **MOST ENDEAVORS**, you get the greatest reward from paying the greatest attention to the situations that are most likely to occur. Studying Japanese will probably be more practical than studying Latin if you want to work in the video game industry. In chess, you play 1…e5 in response to 1.e4, you are more likely to face 2.Nf3 than any other second move, so studying defenses against 2.Nf3 is more likely to affect your results than studying what to do against 2.b3.

Similarly, when studying tactics you should study the motifs that occur the most frequently. For example, studying tactical motifs (pins, double attacks, skewers, etc.) is more helpful than studying mates because mates are relatively infrequent (although they offer big rewards!). Among the motifs I think everyone agrees that double attacks and pins are common, and that interference is relatively rare. However there is one tactic that occurs frequently but which many students do not seem to recognize as highly important: Removal of the Guard (and its cousin, the Overworked Piece); some players call aspects of this motif "deflection". Since Removal of the Guard occurs so frequently but is perceived as less frequent, for many players studying problems using this motif will yield a much higher "bang for the buck" in terms of improvement per study time.

Here is a typical situation that occurred in one of my student's games recently which illustrates a common overlooking of Removal of the Guard:
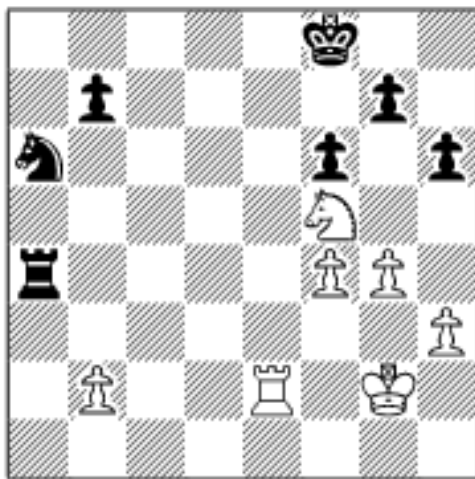
White is to move. The time control was relatively quick, so you should excuse the sloppy play, which is chosen just to illustrate the tactic.

White played **1.Re7?**, using the guidelines "Rooks belong on the 7th rank" and "Put your pieces on better squares with threats, if possible." However, tactics are more important! I immediately saw that this was a common Removal of the Guard situation, as the White Rook is only guarded by the Knight, which is attackable by 1…g6.

White needs to adjust his thinking process. Even in a relatively quick game, he should have said to himself, "Suppose I put my Rook on e7. As always, first I must check for safety! Black cannot capture the Rook since King takes Rook is illegal due to the Knight's defense. But wait! A piece that is guarded by another piece which is subject to capture or attack is likely not defended at all. Suppose he just plays 1…g6 attacking my Knight. Then if I move my Knight, he takes my Rook; if I move my Rook, he takes my Knight." With practice, this kind of safety check should not take more than a few seconds; good players do it "naturally" in a fraction of a second.

But instead of 1…g6, Black made a mirrored thinking error and played **1…Nc5?**. Now in a hurry, White played **2.Kf2?**, not seeing the reply **2…Rxf4+**. After **3.Ke3** Black can no longer reply 3…g6 since his Rook is *en prise*, but instead can play 3…Rxf5, removing the guard in another way! However, he didn't want to "lose a Rook" (beginners often confuse losing a Rook with losing the Exchange), so he played 3…Re4+ and after **4.Kf3** of course did not consider 4…g6 and both players played on happily, unaware of the missed opportunities.

This pair of double-errors is not as uncommon as you might think. I see many student games where both players miss similar opportunities, both on offense or defense. The logic "a guarded piece is not really guarded if the guard can be taken or attacked" is not emphasized in most beginner's books. The Seed of Tactical Destruction is when a piece is attacked, but is only guarded as many times as it is attacked (not "overprotected") – then the disturbance of even one defender might be enough to win material. When I ask beginners who have studied Removal of the Guard to explain to me how they can recognize the tactic, they are sometimes at a loss for

words.

One reason for the difficulty in understanding this motif is due to the fact that there are two similar but different concepts that could be involved. The idea "Removal of the Guard" can mean *either* "capturing it immediately" – as Black missed in the above example by not playing 3…Rxf5, or it can mean "attacking the guard" in such a way that if the guard has to move away from its guarding duties, it leaves the guarded piece vulnerable. An example of the latter concept was the missed 1…g6.

The following example is based upon a problem in the excellent beginner's text by John Bain, *Tactics for Students*:
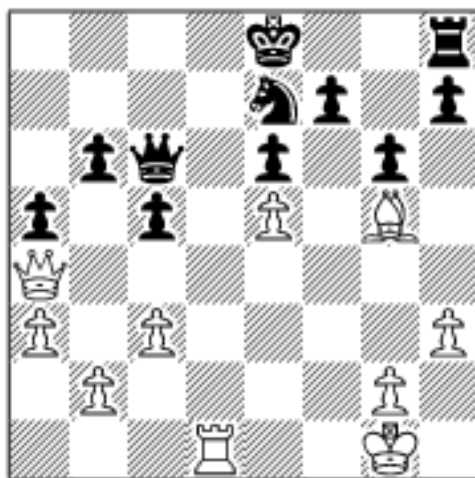
In this "White to play and win" problem there are a couple of wrong possibilities for Removing the Guard: 1.Bxe7? removes the Knight's guard, but loses to 1…Qxa4, as 2.Rd8+ is met by 2…Kxe7. Many of my students try 1.Rd8+ Kxd8 2.Bxe7+ expecting the "automatic" 2…Kxe7?? 3.Qxc6, but of course 2…Kc7 (or 2…Kd7) instead of the recapture is a saving reply. The right answer is to not try so hard and just play **1.Rd8+ Kxd8 2.Qxc6** and the guard is *already* removed as the Knight is pinned! Note that White has other ways to gain the advantage (1.Qxc6+ Nxc6 2.Rd6), but the given win is clearly the fastest and best.

Here is a another example from the venerable *1,001 Winning Chess Sacrifices and Combinations* by Fred Reinfeld:
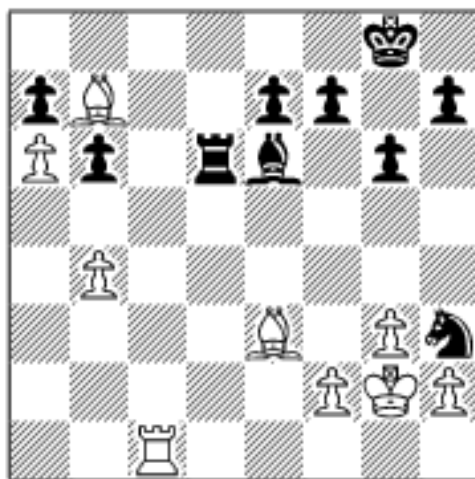
White is to move. The Seeds of Tactical Destruction tell us the Knight is only guarded by the Bishop and is attacked by the King. This is notable because, as stated above, a piece that is attacked, but only defended as many times as it is attacked can be thought of as "potentially inadequately guarded." If we can only get rid of the Bishop before Black finds a way out with …f6 and …Ng5. Hmmm. "If I offer

the trade of Bishops with **1.Bc8** (trying to Remove the Guard), then Black does not have time to trade 1…Bxc8 and then play 2…f6 because his King is on g8 and thus 2.Rxc8 is check and can be followed by 3.Kxh3, so let's see – all Knight moves lose, and doing nothing - say **1…Kg7** to avoid the check - loses to the Removal of the Guard **2. Bxe6 Rxe6 3.Kxh3**, so that's it. White wins a piece!"

Here is another cute one from the same intermediate text:
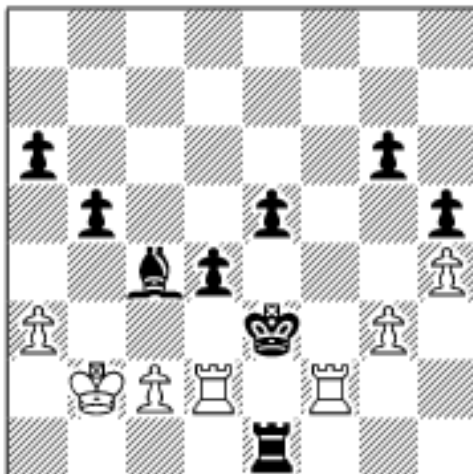
Black, to move, has a good position with more than enough compensation for the Exchange. Here he uses the less common interference theme to remove the guard. Since the Rooks guard each other, preventing them from doing so makes sense, so **1…Be2** removes both guards, creates a double attack, wins the Exchange, and ends all resistance.

The following is another "Removal" with a slight twist:

In the above position, my student is Black. White has just played **17.Qa4**. Now my student calculated 17…Nxc3 (trying to Remove the Guard on the Queen), but figured that after 18.Qxd7 Rxd7 19.bxc3 he is just strengthening d4, so he played 17…a6. Where is the error in his analysis? (Answer at the end of the column).

A cousin of the Removal of the Guard motif is "The Overworked Piece." In this motif one piece is guarding two or more other pieces. When one of those pieces is captured and the "overworked" piece recaptures, it is no longer guarding the other piece. Here is a barebones example:
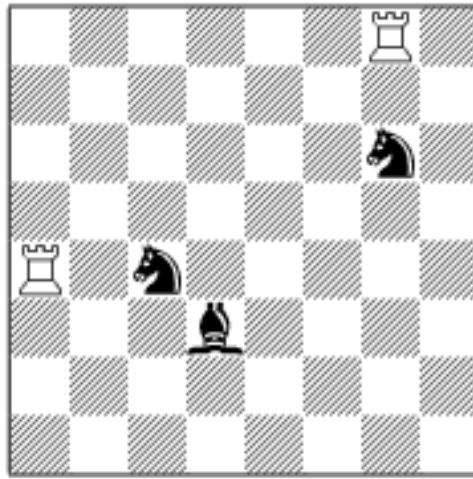
In the diagram White "sacrifices" the Exchange by capturing either Knight: **1. Rxc4** or **1.Rxg6**. But by doing so, it forces the Bishop to abandon its defense of the other Knight, so White ends up winning two pieces for a Rook (e.g. **1…Rxc4 2.Bxc4 Rxg6**), which is usually a winning advantage.

Note that when Novice Nook presents a diagram without Kings, that means it is usually only trying to present a basic concept. Therefore looking for "better" moves like 1.Ra3 does not make any sense, since you don't know where the rest of the pieces are! I sometimes get notes from readers who want to analyze positions that are not legal/complete, but just created to illustrate a point!

There is a kind of blunder which one might call "Voluntary (accidental) Removal of the Guard" in which you forget that a piece is guarding something and voluntarily move it away. It is always good to keep a "mental checklist" of what each piece is doing so that if you move it, you are aware of which things on your list are being affected:
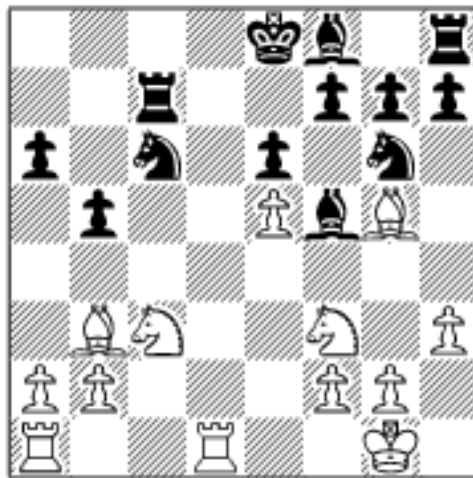
In the above position White has just played **16. Rfd1**, "guarding" his e-pawn by overworking the Knight on c6: it has to defend d8, so it cannot capture on e5. The game was played at a quick time limit, but even so Black's move **16...Ncxe5??**, removing his own guard of d8, was a huge mistake. He should have defended against the threat of 17.g4, developed his Bishop, and castled. However, White was equally mesmerized - or thought Black had recaptured with the other Knight - and played **17.Nxe5?** (instead of 17.Rd8#) **17…Nxe5** (he could have tried 17…f6, but 18.Nxg6 is fini) **18.Rd8#**

A more complex "combination" (Note: a *combination* is just "combining" two or more tactical motifs), including two Removal of the Guards followed by two Discovered Attacks, was presented by Lev Alburt in his recommended work, *Chess Training Pocket Book*:
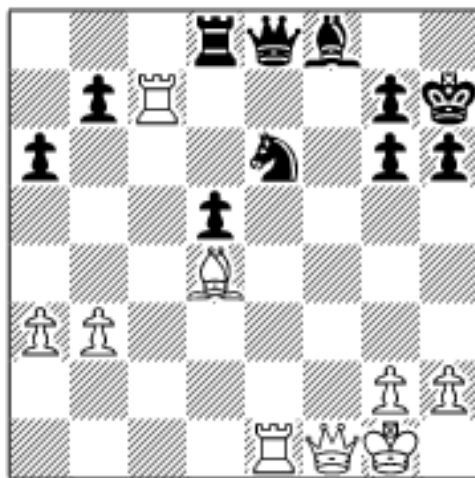
White has a variety of motifs at hand (such as pins), but it is the Removal of the Guard which carries the day: **1. Rxe6!** White plans to destroy all the defenders of g7 and get a "see-saw" check! Notice that the order of moves, as usual, is important. Playing the other Removal of the Guard, 1.Qxf8, barely does not work: 1…Qxf8 2.Rxe6 Qf4! and Black holds on. It is always a good idea to check the order of moves, as it is very possible they make a big difference. After **1.Rxe6 Qxe6**, now **2.Qxf8** does work; the main line is **2…Rxf8 3. Rxg7+ Kh8 4. Rxg6** (note that 4. Re7+ is inferior due to 4…Qf6 when White is not winning nearly as easily) **Rf6 5.Rxf6 Qe1+** (not sufficient, but there is nowhere to hide from the Rook discovery) **6.Rf1+** winning easily. A side line is 2…Qe1+ but then after 3.Qf1 White has won material and has a winning position anyway.

So the next time you study basic tactical motifs, make sure to include Removal of the Guard along with double attack and pins, and in doing so you will cover many of the most commonly occurring situations.

Answer to the problem: Black has **17…Nxc3 18.Qxd7 Ne2+** (this zwischenzug, or in-between move, wins a piece!) **19.Kh1 Rxd7** and Black is just up a Knight. So it is a combination involving Removal of the Guard and a zwischenzug.

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